

ΛΕΞΙ Η ΠΗΝΕΛΟΠΗ

(Από Τα Σιωπια Χαρτιά της Πνεύσης) >

Δέν Ύφαινα, δέν Ξηχμα,
ένα γραφό άρχιφα, με φθονα
μάτω άπί τό βάρος τής λέξης
γιατί έμποδίζεται ή τέλεια έκφραση
όταν πιέζει, άπό πόνο τό μέσα.
Κι ένώ ή άπουσία είναι τό θέμα τής ζωής σου
— άπουσία άπί τή ζωή —
μυαμματα βγαίνω στο χαρτί
με ή φυσική όδύνη του σώματος
πού στερείται.

.....

με έχω με λέξεις δά μώλω
τίς μωστές πού με δένουν
με τον συγκεκριμένο έντρα
πού νοσταλγώ
όσο να γίνει σύμβολο Νοσταλγίας ό' Οδυσσέας
και ν' άρμενίζει τις θάλασσες
στοι μαδενός τό νου.

Έτσι φοντες
πως όπ χάνει σε άφι
κερδίζει σε οβότα.

(1976-1977)

Κατερίνα Άρρεζάιμ Ρούμ

THE SCATTERED PAPERS OF PENELOPE
NEW AND SELECTED POEMS



Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION: THE ISLAND OF RETURN

The Greek poet Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke calls the island Aegina the island of return. Only an hour from Athens by boat, the island's port is busy all year round. It is particularly packed in the summer months. In the cafés along the waterfront one finds a cosmopolitan mix of Athenian intellectuals, British beachgoers, Japanese tourists riding in brightly colored horse-drawn buggies and local fishermen taking a break from their nets. Back again for the summer, I walk through town, picking up a newspaper and a few *tirópites* (cheese pies). When I reach the big red house with the green shutters, I call up to Katerina's window. Pushing through the dogs and cats, I make my way to the kitchen where Rodney Rooke, the poet's husband of forty years, is listening to the BBC. I give him the newspaper and take the *tirópites* to the table in the pistachio grove. Katerina comes down the stairs in her flower print dress. She is over sixty-five, but the dark shiny hair flying around her shoulders and her jaunty syn-copated gait make her seem younger. After kisses, she checks the time: before twelve, a coffee, after twelve, a beer. "Let's look over the translations," she says, "but first I have a joke to tell you." One joke leads to another, then there's a tale of some poet or politician who is in trouble and a tricky Greek expression to explain. Finally, there's a pause: "Do you want to hear my new poem?"

Katerina always has poems to share, sometimes a series, sometimes a whole collection. Inspiration is never something she hoards. There is more, lots more of it. Indeed the abundance of papers spread out on her desk is daunting: poems, essays, interviews, her journals and her own translations from Russian, French, and English. Penelope, it turns out, wasn't weaving, but writing. And the absence Penelope felt wasn't simply about Odysseus, but about her own attempt to turn absence into presence on the page. As she writes in one of her best-known poems:



I wasn't weaving, I wasn't knitting
I was writing something
erasing and being erased
under the weight of the word

(*"Penelope Says," translated by Karen Van Dyck*)

Katerina begins to read her new poem aloud. As I listen I am reminded again of the Penelope poem, in which composing a poem is as natural as daybreak:

and I begin again in the morning
with new birds and white sheets
drying in the sun.

(*"Penelope Says," translated by Karen Van Dyck*)

This is the feat of her poetry: making the extraordinary ordinary. Her poems anchor the abstract metaphysics of myth in the rituals of everyday life.

I

When Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke was a year old, the celebrated writer and critic Nikos Kazantzakis stood as godfather at her baptism. When she was four, he taught her how to swim in the Aegean. When she was seventeen, he published her poem "All Alone" in an Athenian magazine with a note saying that it was the most beautiful poem he had ever read. By her early twenties she was already an established poet. During the dictatorship (1967–1974) she and a group of younger poets spearheaded a new kind of poetry that grappled with the confusion and censorship of those years. Meeting regularly with the translator Kimon Friar, they produced an anthology of six young poets, one of the first books to break the self-imposed silence initiated by the Nobel laureate poet George Seferis in response to the colonels' press laws. Anghelaki-Rooke is among the strong women poets who emerged from this experience. Linking the women poets of the previous postwar generation

(Eleni Vakalo, Kiki Dimoula) to those of the generation of the '70s (Rhea Galanaki, Maria Laina, Jenny Mastoraki), Anghelaki-Rooke stands out for the lyrical accessibility of her poetry. Having won the Greek National Prize for Poetry (1985) and the Greek Academy's Poetry Prize (2000), Anghelaki-Rooke is widely considered one of the major poetic voices in Greece today.

Kazantzakis and Anghelaki-Rooke share the important Greek family tie of godfather and godchild. They share their love for the island of Aegina, the sea, and travel. They share a literary tradition from Homer to Seferis. But here the similarities end. The problem that consumed Kazantzakis his whole life, the impossible meeting of body and soul, best illustrated in his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, is never an issue for Anghelaki-Rooke. Her poetry is a poetry of flesh, indiscretion, and the divine all rolled into one. Whereas for Kazantzakis the body is an impediment to spiritual fulfillment, for Anghelaki-Rooke it is a passageway. It is through the body that everything makes sense. As she told the Greek poet Panos Stathogiannis in an interview: "I do not distinguish the soul from the body and from all the mystery of existence . . . Everything I transform into poetry must first come through the body. My question is always how will the body react? To the weather, to aging, to sickness, to a storm, to love? The highest ideas, the loftiest concepts, depend on the morning cough . . ." (For the original Greek see *Helios: The Voice of Three Seas, Special Issue on Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke*. No. 6, June 2004).

The body, myth, history, nature, gender, and language are inextricably entangled concepts in Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry, but usually the body comes first. For her the body embraces a huge expanse of history and experience. As the title of an early poem declares, "The Body Is the Victory and the Defeat of Dreams." The body is not only her own, but contains the outside world, from the streets of the town to nature and beyond. Trees, mountains, and sky are in the gut, in the ears, nose, and mouth, between the toes, in our hair. In one poem a geyser is held between two lovers:



In the heat of Greece
our sternums pressed together
spurted water.
I drank your sweat
along with your kisses
your sigh
in the shade of the shutters.

("Heat," translated by Katerina Anghelaki-
Rooke and Jackie Willcox)

The intermixing of inner and outer worlds at times reaches such a level that the body only exists as the body of another person. And sometimes the other is not even human, but an animal—a moth flapping around a lamp, a dog scratching her fleas in the shade. An erotic conquest is imagined in terms of a spider and her prey; the protection of the human soul, in terms of a polar bear fighting off the cold with her layers of fat.

More often than not the body, someone else's or an animal's, is female or viewed from a feminine perspective. Anghelaki-Rooke's attention to women's experience does not lead to absolute statements about the difference between the sexes, nor is it a nostalgic nod to a mythical matriarchal past. It is a matter of the here and now: "I don't know what will happen in two hundred years, but for now it is difficult for women to express what is going on with their own sex. For men, things are different. They have all of history behind them. . . . They have the luxury of writing about their state, their nation, and their ideas. Women . . . still have a long way to go. In poetry, they have not yet exhausted the topic of gender." (*Helios*).

Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry reads Greek history and myth through the female body, and yet it is not directed specifically at women or at Greek readers. Parallel to the way Irish women poets such as Eavan Boland use the figure of woman to speak about the problems of a people, Anghelaki-Rooke takes her everyday experiences and turns them into allegories of modern life for everyone. Her poetry

can be seen to fit into the tradition of the best of American feminist poetry, alongside Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, where writing the body and rewriting myth are central concerns. Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry, though, is less militant. Her Penelopes and Helens cook dinner for their husbands and suitors with one hand and write poetry with the other. Her brand of feminism is more one of daily practice than politics. It emerges from a culture in which women act differently from men and therefore write differently, a culture in which women are still more tied to the inner spaces of the home. Gender inequality is not so much an existential problem as a practical one.

This common sense approach pervades her view more generally of disability and physical difference. Men, women, dogs, all have their wounds. Women, historically, may have it tougher than men, and dogs and other animals may be even lower on the totem pole, but her point is that exceptions from the norm, any norm, whether socially constructed or painfully real, are a natural part of life. There is nothing freakish or otherworldly about imperfection. Her body, her poetry reveals, is not different just because it is female, but because it almost didn't survive. In a poem she describes her early fight to live:

Instead of a star, a scar shone over my birth.
The pain my uncongealed body suffered
pushed me back into the original darkness.
I crawled on nothingness, my tiny fingers
clutching death like a shiny black toy.

("The Scar," translated by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and Jackie Willcox)

Here she is referring to a childhood illness that left her with a serious limp and a withered arm. The poet is fond of pointing out the historical irony that had she been born six months later, once penicillin had been discovered, she would have been fine. In her poetry the disfigured body is not a radically different body, but rather, as



with the issue of being a woman, an ordinary part of the world and of history that has simply gone less noticed. Her assumption is that if these experiences are discussed more regularly, they will become more acceptable.

The sexual encounter provides a potent way to dissolve the difference between her body and the other bodies. Her infirmities prove quite adequate to the tasks of loving. In fact in one poem her misshapen hand has the upper hand:

She sees her image
as she sits and thinks about her lovers
mentally she caresses their self deception
with her withered hand.

("The Heroine Contemplates Her Hand,"
translated by Karen Van Dyck)

Prosthetic devices, whether crutches or the bicycle she uses to get around Aegina, are useful additions to the body. In one poem, another addition, a dildo helps her understand how male power is not necessarily knowledge:

"So, he knows nothing about me either when he shoves,"
I thought as I stood alone leaning on the window sill. And
the difference between the plastic and the real is only a
somewhat greater resistance to time.

("My Plastic Thing," *translated by Katerina
Anghelaki-Rooke and Jackie Willcox*)

II

Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry can be divided into periods in which her poems are grounded more in autobiography, others in which myth predominates and still others that are meditations on the act of writing itself. There seems to be an almost cyclical pattern to these periods. The poems in her early *Magdalene, the Vast Mammal* (1974) are the first sort with their attention to family genealogy,

while the next two collections, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope* (1977) and the *The Triumph of Constant Loss* (1978), draw loosely on myth for their structure, turning the ancient Penelope into a modern woman poet. In the prose poems of *Counter Love* (1982) we find a self-reflexive moment of thinking about the process of writing followed by a return to the Penelope myth as the structuring principle in *The Suitors* (1984). Autobiography takes over again in *Epilogue Wind* (1990) and *Empty Nature* (1993), though here autobiography doubles as social commentary in the form of a diary about the first Gulf War. Myth then predominates again in *Flesh Is a Beautiful Desert* (1996), while the new poems of her most recent collections, *Matter Alone* (2001) and *Translating Life's End into Love* (2003), focus, in a more self-reflexive way, on what makes poetry poetry and the role of translation in this process.

As her poetry has matured, her concern for language has taken the place of her concern for the body. Language is not only the means, but, increasingly, the topic of her poems. The shift is felt in her two poems about an imaginary place of sadness called Lipiu. (The name uses the root of the word for sadness in Greek, *lipi*, and the Romanian suffix for places, *u*, to recall the fact that the poem was composed in the Romanian city of Sibiu.) The first, "Lipiu," describes the place and the bodies that inhabit it, while the second, "Lipiu Once Again," addresses the language that is spoken there.

You read the trees, the mountains in the original.

You ask: What do I have to say in this language?

("Lipiu Once Again," translated by Karen Van Dyck)

As the poet herself remarked, "All my life I've been saying that I serve poetry. Lately I have begun to see that what I am really doing is serving language. Poetry is the instrument, the medium. I have an almost religious attachment to language. I believe that when I say a phrase in English, I live and perceive reality in a different way than if I say the same thing in Greek" (*Helios*). Whereas her earlier poems tried to capture different kinds of pleasure and



pain in poetry, over the last decade it has been the actual translation of this pleasure and pain into language that has concerned her most.

III

For obvious reasons, Anghelaki-Rooke's work is usually anthologized under titles that focus on the central role of the body in her poetry. Her first chapbook in English used the title of her poem "The Body Is the Victory and the Defeat of Dreams." A retrospective collection in Greek bore the title of another of her poems, "When the Body." Her French translator used the title of the collection *Flesh Is a Beautiful Desert*. I have taken a slightly different tack by choosing for my selection the title from the volume *The Scattered Papers of Penelope*, which puts the emphasis on myth, language, and the particular work of writing as a woman. With this title I want to call attention to how many of Anghelaki-Rooke's best poems, especially her more recent ones, address the issue of writing and experiment with different genres such as the prose poem or the diary entry. I want to stress how her poetry of the body is always also a poetry concerned with issues of gender and language. This title also alludes to my own task of putting into order the scattered translations of Anghelaki-Rooke. As this collection attests, Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry has been translated by some of the best translators of Greek poetry. These translations, however, exist in small press publications, out-of-print journals, poetry festival programs, or sometimes even unpublished in drawers, and are not available to the general reader. My job has been to gather up and then edit these translations together with the poet.

It is one thing to introduce a poet to readers in another language by describing a poetic project in critical terms and quite another to do so by editing a collection of translations, especially one that includes translations that are not all one's own. In the first case one can explain what gets lost in translation. In the second, the translations must speak for themselves. While a critic may relish the linguistic idiosyncrasies of a poet's work and discuss them at length,

translators tend to shy away from them. Certainly the greatest challenge in bringing Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry into English is the rich variety of linguistic registers that are the everyday fare of Greek speakers. Ancient Greek proverbs as well as Byzantine liturgical phrases are still in daily use. Anghelaki-Rooke is a master of Greek's linguistic promiscuity. What to make of her words gathered from all corners of the Greek language as well as from other languages, and from all sorts of texts: literature, history, daily news reports, and advertisements? How does one capture in English snatches drawn from nineteenth-century romantic poets such as Solomos, Porfyras, and Malakasis, from Cavafy, or from her peers of the postwar generations like the lyrical Nikos Karouzos or the more meditative Andonis Fostieris? How to convey the echoes from poems by Rimbaud, Pushkin, Heaney, and Plath that she has translated from other languages? Ultimately what allows Anghelaki-Rooke to succeed in English translation is that, no matter what the source of her language, the dominant tone of her poems is conversational. The wild mix of registers almost always sounds to the reader like everyday speech, as if the poet were telling a joke or a story or relaying a dream she had the night before. In the final analysis it is this apparent ordinariness, I think, that makes her poetry translatable into English and that has made this collection of translations by different translators possible.

But this is not to say that her translators ignore Anghelaki-Rooke's linguistic inventiveness. The translations I have chosen fold into the translatable conversational tone some inkling of the untranslatable complex language-world the poet inhabits. They give the English speaker not only a sense of the seamlessness with which a poem ends and everyday conversation begins, but also a curiosity about where a word comes from and whether it really is a word we know or not.

Let me give one example. In the first "Lipiu" poem she writes:

You arrive in Lipiu without a sigh
only a slight tightening

like love standing
indecisive at the door.
Here you find cloud-stepping poets,
poets with an aptitude for heaven

("Lipiu," translated by Karen Van Dyck)

In Greek the adjective translated as "cloud-stepping" is one Anghelaki-Rooke has made up—*ierovámones* (literally from sacred *iero* and stepping *vaino*). In its structure, however, it recalls the real word *aithervámones* (heaven-stepping), which refers to people who are caught up in their own thoughts, whose heads are in the clouds. By invoking a real word in her made-up one, Anghelaki-Rooke expresses both the absentmindedness and the divinity of poets. The English "cloud-stepping" is an attempt to do the same.

Again I should emphasize that such word games are infrequent and it is their infrequency that gives them their power. Anghelaki-Rooke's linguistic playfulness should be distinguished from that of a long tradition of surrealist and language-oriented poetry in Greece. Hers, for example, is not the intricate punning of Kiki Dimoula, who treats the Greek language like an acrobat balancing whole metaphysical arguments on a part of speech. "Mine," Anghelaki-Rooke clarified in conversation, "is different. If you don't get it, you don't lose much. I am not interested in distorting reality when I play with language."

To produce this collection of translations I went back through her three volumes of collected poems as well as her more recent books and chose the best translations available from each period, making my own when I felt a certain poem was missing or was inadequately translated. I also tried to include different translators when possible. I wanted the different Anghelaki-Rookes conjured by Rae Dalven, Kimon Friar, and Edmund Keeley, some of whom, like old friends, I had become very fond of and found it hard to do without. I was also heartened to realize that a collection of translations by different hands did not preclude the possibility of a recognizable voice. There is something about Anghelaki-Rooke's

poems that teaches their translators to write English in a certain way. At times one even wonders whether her life in many languages means that these poems are already partly thought out in English. Working with the poet, therefore, I could preserve a style by editing the translations and suggesting changes, a collaboration of sorts, at least with the living translators.

The present selection came into its own at a pivotal moment. On Anghelaki-Rooke's table three summers ago when I arrived in Aegina was a pile of her own English translations of her latest collection, *Translating Life's End into Love*. Was this supposed to be a sign that my work was over? Did she no longer need her English translators? Might this turn to English be a part of what "translating life's end into love" means? Could it be a prescient blueprint for how to live without her English husband who then passed away the next fall? Was it also an acknowledgment of the crucial role that translation between Greek and English plays in her own life and poetry? I close this collection with my translation of that book's title poem. It is both the newest of her new poems included here and an appropriate conclusion to a collection of English translations since with it she proposes that poetry itself is a matter of translation—from life's end into love, from love to the page, and from Greek into English.

Karen Van Dyck

