

SOME GREEK WRITERS, THEIR MEMORY, THEIR POLITICS, THEIR ART IN THE 1980S

Rhea Galanaki

Foreword 2006

Although undated, this text was probably put together in the late 1980s, in Edmonton, Canada, a short time after a last trip to Athens in 1987. It was hand-written, from notes, and I clearly meant to write further drafts. However, I abandoned the project, and the lined sheets of yellow notepaper lay almost twenty years in a file titled “Greek writers.”

In the winters of 1981-2, 1983-4, and 1986-7 I lived in Nafplion, but travelled frequently to Athens where I imbibed the exhilarating atmosphere of a society that had thrown off the dead hand of conservative politics and elected a socialist government. I was keen to learn how my own generation of writers, who had come to maturity during the awful period of the army dictatorship (1967-1974), were doing in this new dispensation, particularly women writers. As a Canadian who had grown up during the Sixties, I was obsessed with the theme of the relationship between art and politics in the life and work of people who had been challenged by both.

Except for the chance encounter with Rhea Galanaki in a bookstore, I made no note of how I came to meet these particular writers. Except for Katarina Anghelaki-Rooke, I did not see them again after the interviews. In the winter of 2006, when I “Googled” each of them, I learned that Nasos Vayenas had become a Professor of Literary Theory and Criticism at the University of Athens and published as recently as 2004; that Rhea Galanaki had achieved a very notable success with her novel, *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989), which has been translated into several languages, and that she was short-listed in 1999 for a European Literature Prize, and, because I still visit her, I know that Anghelaki-Rooke’s distinguished international career as a poet, translator and lecturer is secure. As for Jenny Mastoraki, however, the traces are fainter. It seems she has continued to write, judging from some fragments of prose poetry published in an American journal in 1997, and an authoritative critical study of contemporary Greek women poets published in the US in 1998, which includes accounts of the poetry of Galanaki and Mastoraki, theorizes their work as “feminine survival strategies” for recognizing how meaning is

“lost, disfigured and denied.” It is not clear whether this study is concerned with work produced after the 1980s.

2018: Another Google search yields information about a 1999 publication, *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections by Contemporary Greek Women Poets* by Karen Van Dyck, editor and translator. A review hails “the appearance in English translation of collections of poems by four of Greece's leading poets,” including Jenny Mastoraki and Rhea Galanaki. I am no longer in contact with Anghelaki-Rooke. In 2006, Rhea Galanaki won Reader's Choice Award of the National Book Center of Greece and in 2015 published *Η άκρα ταπείνωση*. Εκδόσεις Καστανιώτη. (*Absolute Humiliation*. Kastaniotis Press)

Google yielded this, posted 2015: Nasos Vayenas is a poet living in Exarchia, Athens' inner city where troubles erupted in December 2008. This is an area ‘down-at-heel, dirty, and loud, without public spaces or a single strip of green’ yet what sets it apart is its history and people as this is the site of the Athens Polytechnic University where the 1973 student protests took place in a series of events that brought the eventual downfall of the military junta (1967–74)

An Interview with Greek poet, Rhea Galanaki, in Patras, in 1985

In a nutshell, I would say that the past does not exist in art except as a mirror of creative self-knowledge.

[in *Mahaira-Odoni, Eleni (2010). "Historical Poetics in Modern Greece: Reflections on Three Writers"*]

The last time I saw Rhea Galanaki she took me to see the construction site of the villa-like home she and her husband Ilias are building on the outskirts of Patras. She was in a bad mood: much had gone wrong in the building (for example, the windows had been installed backwards, ruinously admitting water from the recent torrential rains) and she seemed to be having serious misgivings about the whole project. Because Ilias is a full-time instructor in Medicine at Patras University, responsibility for supervising the sub-contractors had fallen on Rhea; I could sense her chagrin at being torn away from her own work.

Galanaki has been writing poems since she was eight-years-old. She wrote them in a copy book she called *The Red Rose* and in a diary she wrote through high school. She knew she wanted to study literature – who knows, maybe even to write it herself – but under the pressure of her left-wing friends and, to be fair, her own compelling need to understand the meaning of current events, she studied history instead. A lot of years passed before she said to herself, ‘No, do what you want – literature.’ In the meantime she wrote alexandrines “on the side, very clandestine, using references from ancient history” to criticize the Junta, and submitted them to an anti-Junta magazine “as an act of resistance.” They were published but after a couple of issues the magazine was closed down.

After the fall of the Junta in 1974, she passed some twenty poems on to a friend at a publishing house, under the title *Full of Joy* (1975). It was noticed favourably. Not that it was experimental, “just two or three lines to each verse, each verse independent of the others,” nor stylistically cohesive, composed as it was of some epigrams, some alexandrines, “things from Greek mythology,” and a third-person narrator. One thousand copies were printed. “Of course I wasn’t paid and I don’t even know if they’ve been sold.” In any case, the publisher closed down two years later.

Another small collection, *The Diggings* (“the archaeology of the self”) appeared in 1979, dedicated to the memory of a friend who had killed herself. This had made a very strong impression on Galanaki and she began to read in psychoanalysis and literary theory, especially surrealism. But her lines were still short, “almost like haiku.” These too were well-received and she won a very positive review from one of the best-known younger critics, a man she had never met. She emphasized the importance of this: critics will almost never review a book of someone they don’t know. There was no word from the feminist literary world, however.

In 1980, Galanaki published *The Cake*, a radical departure at last. She was now writing much longer lines; in fact the whole book of sixty pages was one long story with each page a “paragraph.” In retrospect, she sees this work as coming out of the “opening up” of her life. After a desperately-arranged second marriage, the death of an infant and a suicide attempt, she had landed in Patras with Ilias. “My life was getting better and I wasn’t so closed. I had time and I

wasn't afraid to write. I had been frightened to write. There is a kind of disorder not only in government but in oneself and turned inwards. But now I wasn't so afraid to speak with a new kind of language, something more avant-garde, something expressing myself as a woman. I wasn't trying to write in a feminist style – I don't think there is such a thing – but I was writing about love between a man and a woman, a woman and her child. I think that maybe under the 'cake' (a woman's thing) there is a baby....The big break was that in the last 'chapter,' 'Now Myself,' I use the first person."

This new poetic "egotism" and the withdrawal to Patras after a turbulent decade in Athens speak to Galanaki's current self-possession. In 1976, she had dropped her membership in one of the Communist organizations and never resumed it. "It is so far from literature." Her feminism is self-taught from journals and books, and she has never joined a women's group. Life in Patras is very pleasant, very calm. She and Ilias have a small circle of friends from the university and together run a small film club and bar. There is always the sea from the window. What would be the point of living in Athens, as a teacher, say, in a suburban school "where everything is very conservative and the students are bored with their lessons." Granted, there is the "contradiction" of a feminist poet dependent on her husband's salary. "But the important thing for a writer is to do what you want and to make a living from it, not to do just any job." She is being paid for a screenplay, an adaptation of *The Bacchae*, and has been paid recently for an Introduction to a book about the poet Odysseus Elytis. But she's also done some radio commentaries and not been paid, and had worked two months on a magazine article for which she had to demand to be paid.

The working conditions of the Greek writer are far from professional. Publishing contracts exist but royalties are payment to the writer for what *she* has advanced to the publisher. "I paid my publisher 30,000 drachmas for my last book, he put in 30,000, and at 10 per cent royalty schedule he has paid me back 15,000 so far. Everybody does this. The publishers say it is because poetry is expensive to publish and not enough people buy it." Some writers don't even earn royalties but are paid in copies of their book. The socialist PASOK government has made a practice of buying up books but there are no grants to writers and Galanaki guesses there are maybe twenty writers who make their living from writing in Greece. "The Greek language does not have a big audience; it is impossible to have an edition larger than one thousand copies and

you can't live on that, even if you sell them all. Greeks are not intellectuals. Outside Athens and Salonika no one reads.”

Relations between writers and critics are problematic. “Ideally, the writer and critic should have the same language, culture, ideology and formation because otherwise you are not read well.” Galanaki has been “lucky” in her critics and has been impressed by how much they get out of her texts. Some writers make a habit of cultivating the critics – going out for dinner with them, for instance – but Galanaki disapproves. She doesn't even hang out with other writers – “all the jealousy and competitiveness!” – preferring the company of political friends.

“My fourth book, *Where the Wolf Lives* (1982), is written in two big chapters. The first, ‘The House,’ is about my childhood, and the second, ‘The Apartment,’ is about the years I lived in Athens during the dictatorship. Actually, there are three buildings: the big house where I was born, a small apartment in the centre of Athens, and the prison. I write about a girl in the apartment who receives a letter from the prison. It is written ironically, this letter, about the wonderful life ‘inside,’ the ceremonies, the dinners, a sarcastic utopia. Her reply is all about the events of everyday life told through fairy tales.

“What I am trying to express is not only what happens but all the fantasies and the thinking about events. The relation between fantasy and event. The events that interest me are those which have tortured us. I also play with the language. Because I had changed my life I had changed my language.”

How has the daughter of the Cretan bourgeoisie found her way to a Peloponnesian construction site? Galanaki's life has dramatically encapsulated the salient events of her generation, from the disintegration of the old patriarchal family authority, to the anti-Junta struggles of the student Left, and finally to the formation of the Greek women's liberation movement. For the moment, she has come to rest on this stony, olive-treed slope above the Gulf of Corinth. But, you get the feeling, only for the moment.

Our first meeting was fortuitous. I had dropped in at the women's bookstore in Athens to enquire of the owner if she knew of any English-speaking women writers of my generation (the "generation of 1968" as I thought of us) who might be interviewed. It just so happened that just such a person was standing there, visiting from Patras, the poet Rhea Galanaki. I invited Galanaki to have a coffee, and, after I had explained my project – how to understand the intersection of writing and politics in recent Greek history – she invited me to Patras to do the interview.

I visited twice: here was a "soul sister," I felt, whose life was somehow intensely familiar to me, even in translation. Even her apartment seemed familiar, with its wooden bookshelves, the art posters, the folk embroideries, the record collection. She spoke sometimes haltingly but her passion was immaculate: from under a mass of dark hair she fairly scowled at me as she impressed on me how inevitably her life and her art coincide.

Galanaki was born in 1947 in Heraklion, Crete, where both her parents worked as medical doctors. In spite of the fact that her mother had a profession, the family was in every other way stultifyingly conventional. Although her father eventually lost all the money he had heavily invested in a Greek soap manufacturer who was driven out of business by Proctor & Gamble, Galanaki grew up in a very comfortable home with two live-in maids, and with private schooling and language lessons. Her father was very much involved in the local branch of the liberal Centre Union party, but "as a person he was not at all liberal; in the family he was a pater familias." Twice a day, at meal times, the family was required to meet around the dining table where her father expounded his doctrines of Cretan nationalism. "I was never a Cretan nationalist. I early on disagreed with everything my father thought."

Her mother, in spite of her education, believed "the woman should be subservient to her husband" and always took her husband's part in his quarrels with his daughter. There was much to quarrel about. Her school was co-educational but Galanaki was not allowed to speak to the boys or to go walking with them, and was to be home every night by 8:30. By contrast, her brother was allowed to have a girlfriend, and was permitted to go away on school excursions. Later, he was given a car and sent to England to study engineering. It was thought sufficient that

Rhea be sent to university in Athens – “the worst university in Greece, maybe in the world” – with the understanding that she would return to Heraklion to teach in high school, meet a man with a property in olive trees and settle down “in a very ordinary marriage.” All the girls she went to high school with, with one exception, did marry and were now raising children in Heraklion, “polishing their silver and setting out their crystal. My destiny was quite different, however.”

The softening influence in this rigid household was Galanaki’s maternal grandmother, who lived with them. She was a very simple, uneducated woman raised in a village; she was not sent to school. Later she learned the alphabet and how to write her name, and eventually could read children’s books. “She was the kind of grandmother who cooked and sewed for us...I loved this woman.”

Galanaki was also lucky in her schooling, where her language and literature studies were superior to anything she encountered at university. Literature was her passion, perhaps inevitable in a provincial city. “I think that for sensitive people who live in provincial towns the only way they can cultivate their sensibility is with literature. It’s not so easy to be a painter, for instance, because painters are crazy people, too strange for small cities. Perhaps if I had grown up in Athens, I would have become a painter.”

In 1965, Galanaki went to Athens to study history and archaeology in the Faculty of Philosophy. At first she lived with a family – “I agreed to anything to get out of my parents’ home” – and then with a daughter of a family friend, “like an arranged marriage.” At the university, her education was in the hands of professors who modelled their pedagogical style on authoritarian nineteenth-century German precepts. “One professor had us write out twelve pages of the syntactical rules about *one* sentence. Unbelievable. We had to write in a very strict *katherevousa* [purist style]. I felt like a soldier in an army school.” This was far from the longed-for life of independence she had imagined for herself. But her world was about to be turned inside-out.

Galanaki had joined the campus-based Union of Cretan Students. All of them were away from their families for the first time and they hung out together, going to the theatre and cinema,

gathering to eat and drink and talk. They were great friends and felt an intense solidarity with each other in what may be called their own “culture of resistance,” reading Soviet novels, listening to Theodorakis’s music, and admiring the British cinema of Lindsay Anderson and his film of student dissidence, *If*, although they didn’t care for the Beatles or the French New Wave. “We decided rock was the music of capitalism and a corrupt West and that *Jules et Jim* was decadent and petit bourgeois.” She was in love with Niko, a boy from her Heraklion high school, now a law student and member of the Communist Party’s youth group. Her own politicization remained half-hearted: under Niko’s tutelage she had read some “expositions of dialectical materialism” but she argued with them, insisting on her right to come to her own conclusions. She and her buddies were “romantic”: “I thought liberty and equality were good things” but she did not think it was “necessary” to be organized on the Left.

Then suddenly she was called to account. “Niko and I were arrested after being at a student demonstration – I don’t remember against what – and were written about in the newspapers. The police in Heraklion showed the report to my father, and he became like an animal. He threatened to cut off the money he was sending me and to separate me from Niko, who was a Communist, too young, too poor. In the middle of one of our arguments, the Colonels’ April 1967 coup d’etat happened. Niko and I decided to elope.

“This was very difficult. There were two things we were running from, my father and the Colonels, who were hunting Communists. Then my father gave his permission for us to marry (I was only nineteen and not of legal age) and so we went down to Crete. Father withdrew his permission, and so off Niko and I went again, to elope. This was a very basic moment in my life. There was no other way to be away from the power of the father than to be with another man, a husband. I was very angry with my father: he had wanted to know if I was a virgin, he wanted to tell the police about Niko. I wrote him a letter saying I didn’t want him as my father anymore. When he received it, he came immediately to Athens, but I had disappeared.”

Seven months after their marriage, Niko was arrested as one of the leaders of an underground student organization which had published an underground newspaper from his and Rhea’s house. Rhea had no formal link with the group (“but I lived with these boys, gave them my watch for a

bomb...”) although she longed to. They explained to her that it was important to have legal supporters as well as illegal militants. Once Niko was arrested, however, Galanaki decided to take the plunge and on the very evening of her own arrest she had a clandestine rendezvous with a girl from the organization. As she was not officially a member at the time of her arrest, she could tell the police nothing of interest. They kept her a week (she was not tortured) and then released her, probably to put a “tail” on her to see where she would go, who she would visit. She was very careful.

“Niko and the boys were very badly tortured for two months in the police security building - it’s now a hotel. I went every day to bring him some food but I wasn’t allowed to see him but once, at Easter, from a doorway. He was very pale and very brave. In November 1968, their trial began on the day of my twenty-first birthday. The group – about twenty students including one girl – were charged in a military court with the underground newspaper activity as well as some illegal proclamations. The prosecutor asked for death but the judge gave them twenty-one years.” Niko was released in an amnesty in 1975 but he and Galanaki never lived together again.

At the time of these events, dissident students and young anarchists in North America and Europe (and elsewhere) were growing up under the influence of an extraordinary political, social and cultural upheaval which converges in my memory’s eye in the events of the spring and summer of 1968: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia, the student-worker strikes in Paris. We felt that we were part of some great social-historical machinery propelling the immediate future to revolution; I could not have imagined that there was any young person on the planet who did not feel similarly propelled. But in Greece in those years, within the confines of a nation sealed tight by military law and administration, youth struggled and agonized and mourned without much reference to the turbulence beyond their borders. Outside, we felt ourselves to be in solidarity with them, convinced as we were that the Colonels’ coup d’etat was CIA-inspired, moved as we were by the banned music of Theodorakis, stunned as we were by the implications of Costa-Gavras’s film, *Z*.

But whether this was important or even known to the Greek students is another question.

According to Galanaki, they didn’t know what was going on outside Greece let alone among

hippies and anarchists. Scraps of information, about the Black Panthers and the anti-war movement in the USA, about student activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit or Dany le Rouge in France, about the women's liberation movement in the UK, slipped in through BBC news, Penguin paperbacks, tourists, and foreign newspapers "but generally we didn't have objective information." It was wonderful to learn about these things – "I still think it was wonderful" – but the occupation at the Polytechnic was still five years away and in the meantime the nascent New Left and women's movement put their agendas aside. In the struggle against the dictatorship, it was necessary for "independent lefts" to ally with Stalinists, women with men; given the prevailing censorship and, even on the Left, the sexism, the ideas of women's liberation had somehow to be deduced from Engels' *The Family, Property and the State* and some pamphlets about Alexandra Kollontai.

The *practice* of some kind of sexual revolution was available, however. "Now we criticize the sexual revolution but then it was very important. The Pill was available without a prescription. The first one I took was my friend's. She said, 'Here, take this, it's very good.' Two years later it was withdrawn from the market, it was much too strong. I think we were like laboratory animals." Abortion was illegal but it was easily obtained from doctors and didn't cost too much. "After Niko went to jail, I had other lovers. We had the feeling that the coup d'état had disordered everything, our lives, our studies, our relationships. We were living on the margin but it was liberating for me as a woman. I was alone and living on very little money but all of us on the margin were very close and took care of each other. I very much needed tender relations with men and with friends. We all demanded sexual pleasure and we were not conservatives in bed."

Then came the shock of the Polytechnic. The power of it – the crowds, the police, the tear gas and fires, the torn-up roads and overturned buses, the pathetic barricades, the tanks with their blinding headlights, the empty bullet casings rolling around in the streets for days after, the deaths – separated Galanaki from her earlier life. This was war, she decided, and, not caring if she died, she joined an underground resistance group. Her job was to find "safe houses" for people on the run. She took them to their rendezvous points and delivered messages. "It wasn't much but it was something." Only a few months later it was all over, the Colonels were in jail, her friends were free, and she was safe.

Where does Rhea Galanaki, poet, come from? In the first place, she comes from the “big home” in Heraklion, the privileged childhood – the little Rhea huddled with servants, helping herself to chocolates, as she peers into the salon where Mother is entertaining. There are grandmother’s fairy tales. Her father’s funeral. From such moments she has inherited “nostalgia and hatred.”

From the apartment in Athens she has learned “freedom and depression.” Here in a space without family she is free to explore friendship and erotic love and solitude. But it is also a space which condemned her to poverty, loneliness, and bare walls (“at home in Heraklion we had lemon trees and jasmine plants”).

She also learned the city and that is another kind of home: friends and conversation. But in her life it also represented inhospitality. For example, in her last book there is a fragment, “Going Into the Country,” in which a drive with friends out of the city into the countryside merely provokes fantasies about her lover in prison and throws up reminders of the Junta based in Athens – a carload of police, a billboard of propaganda, a box of matches with the ubiquitous Junta logo. Paradoxically, perhaps, the very intensity of these friendships, forged within the pain and danger of the dictatorship, lent them a kind of ephemerality. There were brave actions and kind acts and the conviction that one would die for a comrade but “no one thought there was a long period of time for us.”

She says now that “we were very privileged to have this experience” but its influence on her as a writer seems less beneficial. The fact of the matter is she was mostly silent, made mute by the din of “ideology and dogma” in the resistance, struggling to find the key that would open her to another kind of language, scarcely understanding that art, too, is a “praxis.” “In those times there was not much space for art, and the artist should be a social artist or nothing. I accept that for other kinds of writing but not for poetry.” She argues that art goes deeper than into mere events, it must be nourished by “fantasy, psychoanalysis, love and hate,” all those epiphenomena that lie outside the immediate event or act.

In any case, the language of the Left, picked up from social realism and reiterated by two generations of anti-fascist militants, has been debased. “There are so many words, words, words about ‘society’ and ‘social’ and ‘socialism’ that I can’t stand them anymore. They have no depth.” Nor has the installation of a socialist party into government brought about the revolution dreamed of by students in their underground cells and basement prisons and waterless island exiles during the Junta period. Of course, it’s better to have [social democratic party] PASOK in power instead of the Right but what was all that dying for? To put a bureaucracy in power? To have your heroes immortalized on a postage stamp and the Minister of This-and-That lay a wreath at the Polytechnic gates? “The events of the Junta period pushed us to be revolutionaries, not party men. I think the real revolutionary can never find a situation that is as good as he dreamed it.”

Galanaki’s wariness of organized political activity has inhibited her from taking part in feminist militancy as well but feminist *ideas* have been an inspiration. She has read feminist theory voraciously, taken from it the very positive value of “solidarity between women,” and is now pushing it in directions that interest her – how ideology is passed through linguistic structures, for instance, and how women writers must construct their own myths of femininity in an age where women – still daughters of the patriarchy – are having new experiences and constructing new cultures. “In every woman who writes there is a big ‘pushing for death.’ She is no longer a traditional woman and in her experience there is a freedom but there is also a loss, a death.”

It is at this point of our conversation that I fear we no longer understand each other so well because it is here where I ask her how a poet such as she, who was young during the best and worst of public times, can have repudiated the Muse of revolution, and in her answer is disclosed the specificity of the Greek experience. It is not my experience, this yearning for the ‘luxury’ of time just to think and write. I, and my generation in North America, have had all the time in the world, and we chafe against the confines of civic orderliness and personal pleasures. But for Galanaki, the demand to have a personal space where she can construct her poetry in calm, introspection and privacy is not revolutionary but radical. Politicians, left as well as right, have typically resented the assertion of artists for this autonomy, have wished to deploy them in the

service of the Program, believing (naively or cynically) that literature has a direct and salutary effect on public events. But it is not literature they want, says Galanaki, it's propaganda.

Of course literature and politics are "related": writing is an act, even an action, and are not so nearly separated as purists would like. "I think all our life and the things we have done come into our writing – the way we think and write is marked by our political, sexual, social and domestic life. We can't 'go out' of them." But this is a far cry from putting one's writing at the service of a party or state organ. Galanaki detests what she calls 'social literature,' giving as an example the poetry of Soviet writers; she can't bear the lies. After all, it's a "law of communication" that "all language is false from everywhere, from the Left, from the Right, from the government, from all power. The poet has to find the sincere language."

For this reason she insists that she is still trying to be a revolutionary but this time a revolutionary of language (a revolution that does not change language, its meanings and forms, has not taken place) and with language. She is aware that her admission that she cannot write "for things that happen outside of me – I can only express *my* relation with things, it is the 'ego' that makes the text" – makes her vulnerable to charges of "bourgeois" romanticism but she doesn't care. She argues now that such criticism is part of a whole system of power which she wants nothing to do with. "I'm interested in the relation of the body and the ego with the 'out.' This 'out,' or environment, can be revolutionary" but that is not poetry's interest. "Art needs time." Time to receive, to assimilate, to synthesize. "We write with everything we know in our life, with what we love and what we hate, with weakness and with strength. I find contradictions very interesting."

Myrna Kostash

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