

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

November 20, 2008

Speakers: Martin McKinsey and Karen Emmerich

Topic: Issues in Transpunctuation; Punctuating Space in Modern Greek Poetry

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Kathryn Stergiopoulos (Princeton), Ipek Celik (NYU), Maria Boletsi (Leiden/Columbia), Helen Dimos (Columbia) Tom LeClair, Gerasimus Katsan (Queens College), Christos Romanos, Nikos Laaris (Manhattan School of Music), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia)

Summary of Presentation: Martin McKinsey, Issues in Transpunctuation

McKinsey's talk examined selected passages from fiction writers including Zyrana Zateli and Yiorgos Ioannou in order to address the question of how punctuation functions in translation. His primary focus was on the run-on sentence, a common construction in the Greek prose texts he chose to discuss. His reflections on this issue stemmed from his experience as a translator, and more particularly with a project he had undertaken as a Fulbright scholar to translate contemporary Greek short stories. This project focused on short fiction from the 1980s and early 1990s, and McKinsey found that a number of common threads united this diverse group of works. First, unlike works from the 1970s and before, they manifested a decided lack of interest in politics. Second, many of these works touched thematically on the death of the old ways, often embodied in the death of a beloved figure from childhood. Another prevalent theme was a diffuse sense of existential nausea, which McKinsey suggested was in some way linked to the primary focus of his talk: the preponderance of run-on sentences in this loose assortment of texts. These writers, whose work was marked by what McKinsey termed a "post-political urban Angst," often used run-ons, perhaps in order to convey an edgy urgency in keeping with this new focus on urban life and the experience of an increasingly European youth.

McKinsey mentioned a number of writers, including Dimitris Nollas, Zyrana Zateli, Yiorgos Skambardonis, Dimitris Sotiriou, and Maria Mitsora, but his analysis focused on two passages, one by Zateli, and one by Yiorgos Ioannou, a representative of an older generation. The passage by Ioannou came from *Good Friday Vigil*, and he looked both at the Greek and at an English translation by Peter Mackridge and Jackie Willcox. Ioannou's text includes a number of extremely long sentences, including ones that are over a page long. McKinsey pointed out that Mackridge and Willcox had chosen to keep this punctuation intact, while he would have broken up the sentences into more conventional English prose, while also trying not to disrupt too much the flow of the language, which simultaneously invokes the moving stream of the Good Friday procession being discussed in the text and the building sexual tension of a scene unfolding in a hotel room. McKinsey then discussed a passage from Zateli's first book, *Last Year's Fiancée*, and his own translation of this passage. McKinsey's approach to this passage was to "clean up" its punctuation, while leaving other aspects of the text unchanged.

Using these two passages, McKinsey then raised some more general questions about what the translator does in such situations. He notes that the run-on was neither unique to one

writer, nor characteristic to all Greek writing; it was neither personal idiosyncrasy nor just a linguistic trait. He concluded that something in the history or nature of written Greek made it easier for Greek fiction writers to employ sentence structures that are less tolerated in English. Following Dimitris Tziovas, he identified one possible cause of this as an element of “residual orality” (in Walter Ong’s terms) in Greek writing: perhaps the Greek language has never fully made the transition from a rhetorically based system of punctuation to a grammatically based one. In fact, in Greek grammars, the notion of a run-on sentence does not seem to exist; McKinsey thus modified his claims concerning the prevalence of the run-on in Greek prose, to say that these texts are beset by sentences that, when rendered faithfully into English, result in run-on sentences in English. The question becomes, then, to what extent the translator wants to retain this element, at the expense of alienating English-language readers.

#### Summary of Presentation: Karen Emmerich, Punctuating Space in Modern Greek Poetry

Emmerich’s talk examined the punctuation of space and the use of space *as* punctuation in the texts of several Greek poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and raised questions about how the spatial reading of poetic texts affects the task of translation. In Greece, as elsewhere, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a shift in poetry away from conventional, prose-based modes of either syntactical or rhetorical punctuation towards lightly punctuated, even radically unpunctuated styles of writing. This shift aligns fairly neatly with the simultaneous shift away from conventional stanzaic forms into free verse composition. If meter no longer determines when a line ends, this allows poets to use the line break as a form of rhetorical punctuation, “following the breath” rather than being driven by metrical necessity. The next step, which we see in Greece as elsewhere, is to begin to use space, layout, punctuation, and typography for visual purposes, as elements of poetic composition that can only be registered visually.

Emmerich presented a number of examples of this dual move towards unorthodox uses both of punctuation and of the space of the page or spread. She looked first at C. P. Cavafy’s “In the Month of Athyr,” one of the most visually idiosyncratic poems by perhaps the most comprehensive punctuator of all modern Greek poets. In this poem, there is a unique confluence of form and content: the brackets and ellipses make manifest the gaps in the text the speaker of the poem is reading, and draw our attention to the interpretive work in which the speaker is engaging, while the gap in the middle of the poem visually performs the difficulty of interpretation that the poem is ultimately about. Emmerich then turned to two poets who may have inherited this visual/semantic use of spaces or gaps from Cavafy, but in doing so have left behind almost every other form of punctuation. While Rhea Galanake’s *Where does the wolf live?* (1984) and Maria Laina’s *Punctuation Marks* (1979) both talk about punctuation, they use very little of it. The main character of Galanake’s prose-poetic text is named Pavla, the Greek word for the en dash, but the book doesn’t contain a single dash; instead, its text is punctuated by gaps and spaces. Laina’s collection displays similar gaps, but Emmerich focused on a poem or series of poems that use geometrical shapes as titles. She offered a reading that demonstrated how its visual aspect—including the shapes of letters and stanzas and the visual relationship between the geometrical shapes and the lines that precede and follow—affects the reader’s experience and interpretation of the poem.

Emmerich then used these examples, as well as one last example, involving the multiple editions of the poetry of Eleni Vakalo, which differ in visual and bibliographic rather than lexical ways, to discuss two major problems facing the translator. The first is how to deal with the visual aspects of a text. How much does the visual matter? Which, or how many, visual elements do we want or need to retain in order to make a translation successful? Are there poems for which the visual aspect is at least as important as the nominal meanings of the words themselves? The second is the problem of bibliographic variation. Laina's poem is significantly different in the two editions produced: in the first edition, the three stanzas are all on the same page, while a later edition prints them on separate pages; Vakalo's work, too, differs substantially in visual terms from edition to edition. Which version does she translate, and why? Is the decision made on aesthetic, interpretive, or even legal grounds? If the translation rights reside with a particular publisher, is the translator obliged to adhere to the spacing and layout of that edition? And even for texts that have only one edition, one printing, is spacing really a part of the text? Is it *always* part of the text? Does that make it also part of the work? If so, where do we draw the line?

Both Emmerich and McKinsey suggested in their separate talks that the questions they each raised tend to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but that more theoretical thinking about these issues might help translators in their work and might ensure that whatever decisions translators make are made consciously rather than by default.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: Are there people who are writing about these issues?

E: The only person I've come up with is this one guy, who translated *Tristram Shandy* into Portuguese, and he's the only person who's actually written about these typographical and visual aspects and how challenging they are for the translator. Sterne actually wrote to his publisher and said, you're not even allowed to change a comma, if you do it will be your child, not mine, and you'll have to take responsibility for it forever afterward. In *Tristram Shandy* he's making all of these jokes about the marbled pages, and if you're doing that on pages that aren't marbled that gets lost. So the translator wanted to print the book on marbled pages, and the publisher of course said he was crazy, they couldn't afford marbled pages. For the most part, though, people are talking about the visual or the bibliographic within one linguistic tradition, or doing comparative work, thinking about how what's happening visually in France relates to what's happening in England, but no one's really talking about the challenges to translation that they present.

Q: As a poet, I've found that even when you change a font size the appearance of the poem will change entirely. And so perhaps the poets give their manuscripts to the publisher, and even if the least possible compromise is made, something will change in that transfer.

E: If you give something to a publisher, that publisher is going to set in whatever font and size he or she wants, of course. And then the question becomes where you situate intentionality, whether that is going to be the determining factor when you're translating, or whether you have to go to some other factor.

Q: There is a solution to that: if you really don't want to compromise with a publisher, you can always find a way of setting the text yourself.

Q: It's interesting how what your discussion about what we should look at but maybe are not looking at in a way clarifies one of the things that Martin was talking about in terms of the case-by-case treatment of these issues. Even though you didn't quite come out and say it, I got a sense that at some level, Mackridge and Willcox's decision to translate Ioannou keeping these long, run-on sentences, given the nature of the passage, kind of works. You were going to sit there and break it up, right? But perhaps there was enough of a formal reason, what Karen's talking about with the Laina, that if there's enough of a formal reason in there to go, okay, that might work, you'll let it go. Whereas in the Zatei, you didn't see that there was any real reason why it had to be this way. Those aren't really ethical or value judgments, but it's a question of if we can make an argument or support why we're making this particular choice. If you think about what really makes us move as translators, a lot of times it's shame.

Q: Martin said at one point that there could be compensation, that if you broke something up in one place, you could compensate for it elsewhere. I was wondering, who are you compensating, if there has to be an equilibrium there?

M: I'm not sure exactly how serious I was when I said that. But there is this sense that you can go through and sort of add up the punctuation in a passage in the original and try to have an equivalent amount, in a way, of punctuation in the translation as well.

Q: But thinking in terms of compensation, maybe we could try to move away from the question of whether or not the translation is going to be a real literary text. I think what Karen's asking us to do is to say, given the text and the complicated history of who does what to whom, maybe our obsession with intentionality is misplaced. If you go through Karen's process of how many people have had a hand in making the text, we can't say that the author or the translator is fully responsible. Though I get the feeling that she's mapping out something that still needs to go on a case-by-case basis, but that it might allow us to not do something as a translator because we're worried that somebody will not think our text is literature.

E: And then there's the example of Elytis and *To Axion Esti*, the parts of the text that are center justified and broken down the middle with the decorative flower. The man who set it is I think no longer living, but this was apparently put in by the typesetter, not by Elytis, but it's become a part of the text, and that concern with typography then leaches into Elytis's later work when he actually does begin to use typographical elements in a really important way. But again, it's hard to think about a translation of that piece that doesn't use that typographical setup on the page, even though it's not Elytis's. So does the intentionality of the author have to be necessarily the determining factor?

Q: I know that when Jeff Carson translated Elytis, Elytis wrote to him and asked for a cassette of Carson reading the translations, he didn't ask to see it.

Q: The same thing is true of Broumas's translations, too. The only way he would deal with the translations is if she would sit on a stool next to him and read out loud.

Q: And with Carson, they had made an appointment for Elytis to call him up on Paros and speak to him about the translations, and Carson was very nervous. Then Elytis called and said to him, Wonderful! Very good, thank you, and that was that.

Q: If we think about the question of what is the purpose of translation, Benjamin would say that the purpose is definitely not to serve the reader, but it's also not to serve the original. I think serving the reader in the translation, if it ends up being servile to the reader, not challenging the reader to break out of his or her way of looking at texts, that shouldn't be the goal. And I would say that in terms of Martin's presentation, behind these syntactical choices, behind the long sentences, there are decisions that don't necessarily have much to do with the oral tradition, but are conscious choices that have something to do with the narrative of the text, and that the translator should deal with them as such. Maybe they're even mistakes, but then they're mistakes in the original.

Q: Can I just build on that? Martin said that it's probably because of the psychological effects of urban life, unedited long sentences, this hyper element—and doesn't the translation have to reflect that, if it's the intention of the author to give this kind of hyper urban life and reflect that in the Greek sentence, doesn't the translator have to be loyal to that?

M: Again, one uses one's own language for whatever expressive potential it has, and I suggested that it's a widespread phenomenon in Greece. In other words, that's a potential of the Greek language. Does it have the same expressiveness in English? So someone like James Joyce takes out all the punctuation in Molly's monologue at the end of *Ulysses*, and there's a scandal about whether or not he meant to put in the apostrophes or not. So a writer is using the expressive qualities of the language. Now what if those are not expressive qualities in the target language?

Q: But then again, can the target language find a different kind of expressive uses. For instance, Sotiris Dimitriou's *N' akouo kala t' onoma sou*, and the translation into English. His language is very idiomatic, and uses these northern dialects, and the translator used these British dialects and produced the effect of similar foreignness of the language. It's hard for Greek readers to read, and it's similarly hard in English.

M: But this is a problem of dialect, and each dialect has some associations, I don't know what dialects Leo Marshall used.

Q: What he did was to create a kind of amalgam of British dialects, so that one was recognizable as any one local dialect.

Q: But the question is, what is a run-on sentence or a particular kind of spacing, to the Greek language or culture, what is that relationship and how to you make an equivalent relationship in translation? So the question is how would you try to find the equivalent expressivity of the long sentence?

E: It's also an issue of marked and unmarked language. A run-on sentence, if there is no such thing in Greek, then it's not marked, whereas in English it is marked, and so it becomes

intentional in a way that it's really not in the original. If you translate in sentence fragments, it has a certain kind of meaning, the same way it would with a dialect, if you're translating in Cockney. And this might also speak to Benjamin in some sense, whether you're translating a particular literary text or whether you're translating a mode of being in a language. Which if you want to be responsible to that text, or if you want to be responsible to Greek, those are choices you're always making, and if you can't have them both, maybe you think having people want to read Ioannou in English is more important than being faithful to the mode of being in Greek, at a certain moment in time.

Q: I would just point out that in Greek, a run-on is also not normal, and is marked language I a sense.

Q: My sense of Zatei is that she's being messy all the time, in her Greek, and you shouldn't give her a break by cleaning her up.

Q: There's also, then, the notion of the editorial function of the translator, that most American publishers wouldn't publish this kind of text, unless it does get cleaned up. Again, I think it's interesting how Karen's laid out all these different people, and then the issue of how there just aren't as many people doing that in Greece, there isn't the same kind of system, or people who are getting Ph.D.s in textual studies, you don't have as many people into theory.

E: Yes, because Greek editorial theory is born really recently, when people start talking about these issues, there have been a handful of conferences and the proceedings have been published, and that's basically the entire corpus of editorial theory in Greece. It's something that's sort of a hot topic, and that will undoubtedly work its way back into the way that people are editing posthumously in Greece as elsewhere.

Q: I'm wondering what Roland Barthes would say, about the focus on the violence on the text by these external factors, he would probably say that all these issues of authorship and violence are much more fluid, that there isn't a moment where the text leaves your hands for foreign hands, but in writing one is continually dealing with the violence of precursors. There's a more fluid notion of the way in which the writing that is yours was never actually yours to begin with, and the compromises that lie in the selection of the material throughout. It might be useful to think about the whole process from the beginning, relativizing the things that you've been focusing on in a much longer duree of interventions, issues of ownership, and violence that have been internalized the author. I don't know where that would lead.