

## C. P. Cavafy: The Typography of Desire

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Introductory Notes* by Karen Van Dyck, Karen Emmerich, and James Nikopoulos  
*Syllabus* by Karen Van Dyck

### FINAL PAPERS

<i>The Translation of Punctuation: An Analysis of Three Poems by C. P. Cavafy</i> .....	8
Lytton Jackson Smith	
<i>Beyond Biography: Cavafy's Homoeroticism in Translation</i> .....	24
Elizabeth Wildman Wade	
<i>Saving the Lacedaimonians: Towards a Translation of Cavafy's Languages</i> .....	38
Katerina Stergiopoulou	
<i>Cavafy's Greek (in Translation)</i> .....	73
James Nikopoulos	
<i>Ethics from a Slight Angle: Cavafy's Poetry as Historiographic Metafiction</i> .....	90
Alexis Radisoglou	
<i>Offbeat Echolalia: Merrill's Lessons for the Translator of Cavafy's Poetry</i> .....	106
Andriana Mastor	

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The papers included in this forum stem from a course I taught on Cavafy in the Spring of 2008 under the auspices of the Program in Hellenic Studies and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University. The title *C.P. Cavafy: The Typography of Desire* referred to the dual focus of the course: the exceptional materiality of the Greek texts but also their universal lessons for feminist theory. I had taught a few versions of this seminar at Columbia over the past decade, but this was the first time I felt students understood the importance of how Cavafy's visual poetics related to questions of desire and translation.

What made the textuality of Cavafy's poetry more available and relevant to students this time? Perhaps it had to do with the cultural moment and the increasing priority we give to vision over other senses. Perhaps it was related to my own growing sense, especially with the publication of the enface Oxford edition, that a formal approach, one that paid attention to spelling and typography, was a valid contribution to Cavafy studies. Perhaps it was the opportunity to teach the class with my graduate student Karen Emmerich whose research on how textual practices impact translation has enriched my position greatly over the years. Perhaps it was the equal representation in the class of students who came to Cavafy as poets and artists and those who came as readers and critics, those who knew Greek and those who didn't. For all these reasons and others, no doubt, something clicked. We were able to accomplish a reading of the poems none of us could have done on our own. We became more than the sum of our parts.

To bring this very tactile and performative classroom experience to others is impossible, but we thought we might attempt to show some of the ways our collaborative reading affected our individual writing by posting the syllabus and some of the final papers. As the class had found resources on Cavafy at the University of Michigan website useful, we decided this would be a good home for such a project. I wish to express our gratitude to Vassilis Lambropoulos and Artemis Leontis for embracing this interuniversity collaboration. I am also very grateful to James Nikopoulos who took the initiative to chase down his fellow students and help them revise their papers for publication. Not everyone could meet the deadline, but a good many did. Understandably it was mostly graduate students who put time into revising, but papers by undergraduates were equally strong and interdisciplinary ranging from discussions of Cavafy as urban planner to light designer. I am also extremely thankful to Karen Emmerich for her support of those students who didn't know any Greek at the beginning of the semester. From their final papers it was hard to tell who they were. Finally, I want to thank D. N. Maronitis, who held a seminar on Cavafy the year before I arrived in Thessaloniki on a Fulbright in 1983. The book that came out of that seminar, *Ο Καβάφης και οι νέοι (Cavafy and the New Generation)* contained contributions from many of the students I then had the privilege of studying with and has always been a model to me of how to read Cavafy, as well as of pedagogy.

Karen Van Dyck, Kimon A. Doukas Professor of Modern Greek Language and Literature, Program in Hellenic Studies, Classics, Columbia University

\* \* \*

When Karen Van Dyck asked me to be the teaching assistant for her seminar on Cavafy last spring, I was thrilled. At the time, I was working my way through a dissertation chapter about how Cavafy's idiosyncratic methods of publication and circulation affect the task of the editor as well as the translator of his work. From the title of the course and the fact that it would include students studying Modern Greek as well as those interested in gender and issues of critical difference, I knew it would provide a great opportunity for me to think through some of the issues I was writing about, in the company not only of Professor Van Dyck, but also of a diverse group of bright and motivated students. Indeed, it was that diversity of backgrounds, interests, and levels of ability in Greek that made our class discussions so fruitful and engaging. Our relative handful of students, undergraduate and graduate alike, came from Barnard, Columbia, and CUNY; they were literature majors, women's studies majors, architecture majors, classicists, and creative writers; some were Greek, some spoke and read Greek, some had a solid knowledge of ancient Greek but little or no modern Greek, and some had no Greek of any kind; some had read Cavafy's entire oeuvre, in Greek or in translation, some had encountered him more as a name or a myth than through his poems themselves, and some were only just then encountering him for the first time.

One of my duties as TA was to lead a one-credit weekly session for the four or five students who wanted to read the poems in Greek. Even that smaller group consisted of students with varying levels of knowledge of the language, from native speakers to beginners who struggled through the poems with the help of dictionaries and their peers. That weekly session met immediately prior to the seminar itself, and our unpacking of a particular poem, line, phrase, or even single word often worked its way back into the discussions we had in the larger group. One of the most surprising aspects of the course was how perceptive the students who didn't know Greek eventually became about the grammatical and syntactical structure of the poems, without any more access to the original than what they could glean from descriptions and explanations given by the Greek speakers in the room and from the appearance of the poem on the page.

It is often said—I've said it countless times myself—that Cavafy's poetry defies, or at least resists, translation, because it makes such intricate use of rhythm and rhyme and relies so heavily on the interplay of linguistic registers, on peculiarities of syntax, on the grammatical imagery so famously noted by Roman Jakobson and Peter Colacides. But didn't Jakobson rely on Colacides in much the same way as our non-Greek-speaking students relied on those with knowledge of the language? And in this course, some of the most exciting thinking we did about the poems was spurred precisely by that process of unpacking grammatical and syntactical structures that were available to some portion of the class only as visual material. In fact, having a group of students who were limited to *seeing* rather than *reading* the poems in the original Greek attuned us all, in a remarkable way, to the visual aspect of the poems on the page.

The class became, then, as much a process of desiring to get behind typography as it was a discussion about the relationship between typography and desire. Meanwhile, as we found ways of dealing with the problem of translation, we also put quotation marks around that word: translation became not so much a "problem" as a provocation, or even

an opportunity to discover new ways of approaching the poems—coming at them from a slight angle, to borrow E. M. Foster’s famous description of Cavafy. For their final projects, students were encouraged to attempt translations of a poem or poems, in conjunction with a critical reflection on the texts they chose and on their goals and methods in translating them. Many of the papers and translations presented here reflect the realization that informed outsiders can often achieve things insiders might never even consider—and with a body of work as challenging and heterogeneous as Cavafy’s, the more approaches we have, the better.

Karen Emmerich, Ph.D. candidate, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Columbia University

\* \* \*

The papers collected here serve as an example of how an author-based course can work on many different critical fronts at once. Besides offering an introduction to Cavafy’s poetry and to the best essays written on his work, Professor Van Dyck’s course set out to explore various interrelated issues: the look and sound of Cavafy’s poetry, its synaesthetic technique and how this might be related to sexuality and desire, its diasporic sensibility, as well as its translation and adaption into other languages and mediums. It is fitting that a course that stressed Cavafy’s reception outside of Greece, as much as it did the poet’s own work, would attract attention from such a diverse group of young scholars. Not all of the contributors knew Greek, and yet, as Cavafy himself understood, the outsider’s perspective oftentimes offers one of the most insightful viewpoints.

Each paper is the culmination of translation work performed throughout the semester, evident from the assignments on the syllabus included. In asking us to use translation as a critical method, Professor Van Dyck has done a very great service to the whole notion of translation in general. Translation is too often chided for its limitations, while its usefulness as a critical method is overlooked. In the class we viewed translation as a real-world litmus test for critical interpretations. So though “desire” in the erotic sense does not define the organizational principle of all these papers, the desire to reengage Cavafy from perspectives, that seem to each author to have been neglected, does. These interpretations make their claims according to the philosophy that though translation in practice is a series of exclusionary decisions, it can also be a way of opening up the doors of interpretation. As Cavafy himself writes in his “Constitution of Desire”:

“Μὴ κλείεσαι ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ σου· ἀλλὰ κράτει τὰ παράθυρα ἀνοικτά, ὀλοάνοικτα, διὰ νὰ ἀκούσης τοὺς πρώτους ἤχους τῆς διαβάσεως τῶν στρατιωτῶν, ὅταν φθάνῃ τὸ Σύνταγμα τῆς Ἡδονῆς μὲ μουσικὴν καὶ σημαίας.” ( “Τὸ Σύνταγμα Τῆς Ἡδονῆς,” *TA PIEZA* )

James Nikopoulos, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Comparative Literature, CUNY Graduate Center

## ● C. P. Cavafy: The Typography of Desire ●

Karen Van Dyck



Spring 2008 -- WMST W4300  
Office Hours: T/Th 11-12  
515 Hamilton Hall  
TA: Karen Emmerich

T 2:10-4:00  
[vandyck@columbia.edu](mailto:vandyck@columbia.edu)  
Tel. 854-2189  
[kre2001@columbia.edu](mailto:kre2001@columbia.edu)

This seminar explores the relation of desire to poetry through a reading of the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, the Greek poet of Alexandria who had a profound influence on writers such as E.M. Forster, Lawrence Durrell, W.H. Auden, Marguerite Yourcenar, James Merrill and Joseph Brodsky. To what extent does Cavafy's work offer a queer theory of poetry? What light does it shed on contemporary theories of gender, sexuality, and textuality? Particular attention will be paid to the reception and remaking of Cavafy in Britain and the US in poetry, photography, and other mediums. Throughout the course the issue of translation will be a central concern. Though this course presupposes no knowledge of Greek, students wanting to read Cavafy in the original are encouraged to take the 1-credit tutorial offered simultaneously through the Program in Hellenic Studies.

### MATERIALS

From Book Culture, 536 W. 112th St., tel. 865-1588, also on reserve at Butler Library:

Evangelos Sachperoglou, Anthony Hirst and Peter Mackridge, eds., The Collected Poems with parallel Greek text of C.P. Cavafy, Oxford, 2007

Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, translators, C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems Princeton, 1992

Edmund Keeley, Cavafy's Alexandria, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996

Christopher Robinson, C.P. Cavafy, New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1988

Students taking 1-credit tutorial should also buy: G. P. Savvidis, ed., K.P. Kavafy: Ta poiimata, vol. I and II, Athens: Ikaros, 1992

This symbol ➤ designates the most important article to read for each class, though students should try to cover all the material for every class.

From Courseworks:

All readings marked with an asterisk on this syllabus are available on Courseworks. Also included is the bibliography of Cavafy translations and criticism from CENSUS, Dia Philippides, ed. New Haven Ct.: Modern Greek Studies Association, Occasional Papers 2, 1990, pp. 77-93. \*

From Classics Department:

Loose-leaf translation notebook including poems in original and as many different translations of each poem as possible. Please add new ones as you encounter them.

Online:

<http://www.cavafy.com/>

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/modgreek/wtgc/c.p.%20cavafyforum>

<http://lw.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/galleries/Exhibits/cavafy/cavafy.html>

## REQUIREMENTS

Students will be evaluated on the basis of class participation (30%), one 3-5 page analysis of a poem (20%) due Feb. 19th, an abstract and bibliography for final project (10%) due April 1st, one 10-15 minute oral presentation of final project (10%), and the final project (30%) (10 pages for undergraduates, 12-15 pages for graduates) due May 2<sup>nd</sup> in my box in 617 Hamilton Hall. Students are expected to come to class with prepared written questions and comments on the texts to be discussed. No late assignments will be accepted.

### Introduction/

Overview of syllabus and course. Order of poems: thematic vs. chronological. Hand out thematic list. Description of how Cavafy circulated his poetry. See G. P. Savvidis, "Editor's Introduction," C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, pp. 197-202,\* Gregory Jusdanis, "Cavafy's Method of Distributing His Poetry," in The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 58-63\* and Anthony Hirst, "Note on the Greek Text," C. P. Cavafy: The Collected Poems, Oxford World's Classics, 2007, pp. xxxiv-xxxix.\*

### Week One/ What is Poetry?

"The Ships," in The Essential Cavafy, ed. Edmund Keeley, Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995\*  
 "For Ammonis Who Died at 29, in 610," "Kaisarion," and "Half an Hour." in C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, tr. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992  
 ►E.M. Forster, "The Poetry of C.P.Cavafy," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983. 13-18. Also in Pharos and Pharillon.\*  
 Christopher Robinson, "Part One: Content or Tone of Voice?" C.P. Cavafy, pp. 1-30.

Recommended: Gregory Jusdanis, "Poetry," in The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 64-113\* and "Greek Poetry," Princeton Handbook of Multicultural Poetries, ed. T.V.F. Brogan, pp 162-171.\*

### Week Two/ What is Desire?

C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, tr. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton, NJ:Princeton University Press, 1992, with special attention to "He Swears," "One of Their Gods," "In the Evening," "Comes to Rest," "In Despair," "In the Tavernas," "Days of 1896," "Growing in Spirit" (from now on in the syllabus Cavafy reading comes from this edition.)  
 Yopie Prins and Maera Shreiber, "Introduction," Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry, Cornell University Press, 1998, pp 1-10.\*  
 ►Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Gender Criticism," in Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Studies, eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, pp. 271-302.\*  
 Dimitris Papanikolaou, "'Words that tell and hide': Revisiting C. P. Cavafy's Closets," JMGS, vol. 23, 2005, pp. 235-260. [online through CLIO]

### Week Three/ Poetry at a Slight Angle

C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, tr. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, especially the early poems listed in Part III on page 216 (from now on in the syllabus Cavafy reading comes from this edition.)  
 Peter Mackridge, "Introduction," C. P. Cavafy: The Collected Poems, Oxford World's Classics, 2007, pp. -xxxiii.  
 ►Alexander Nehamas, "Memory, Pleasure and Poetry: the Grammar of the Self in the Writing of Cavafy," Journal of Modern Greek Studies 1. No. 2 (Oct. 1983), pp. 295-319. [online through CLIO]  
 Jakobson, Roman and Peter Colaclides, "Grammatical Imagery in Cavafy's Poem 'Thimisou, Soma...'" Linguistics 20 (Mar. 1966), pp. 51-59.\*  
 Christopher Robinson, "Part II: Poetic Technique" in C.P. Cavafy, pp. 31-63.

In preparation for class pair up with a Greek speaker and choose a poem to analyze formally. Paying particular attention to the questions of instability and unconventionality addressed by Robinson (pp. 8 and 34) and "licentious transgressions" in Jakobson and Colaclides, formulate a line-by-line presentation. You

may choose one of the poems analyzed by the critics we have read or apply their discussion of patterning to another, but choose your poem from the early poems we will concentrate on this week. Make sure you have read Savvidis's notes to the poem you choose in the Keeley and Sherrard translation.

#### **Week Four/ Cavafy and Biography**

- C.P. Cavafy, "Hidden Things" in Keeley and Sherrard and excerpts from "Journal of the Poet's First Trip to Greece" in Peza, ed. Filippou G. Fexi, Athens: Pantazi Fykiri, 1982\*
- Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 113-38.\*
- S.D. Kapsalis, "'Privileged Moments': Cavafy's Autobiographical Inventions," Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora 10, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 1983), pp. 67-88.\*
- Robert Liddell, Cavafy, New York: Pocket Books, 1974 pp. 63-114.\*

Analysis of poem due written up in class.

#### **Week Five/ Cavafy and the Archive** (Meet in Rare Book Room, 6th floor, Butler Library to view first edition of Cavafy's poetry and Hockney etchings)

- Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago, 1998.  
[online through JSTOR]
- George P. Savvidis, "Photographs of C.P. Cavafy, His Family and Home," Grand Street Vol. 2. No. 3, Spring 1983, pp. 127-142.\*
- , excerpt from "The C.P. Cavafy Archive, an Initial Informative Report," Athens 1964.\*
- J. A. Sareyannis, "What Was Most Precious -- His Form," Grand Street Vol. 2. No. 3, Spring 1983, pp. 108-126.\*
- Diana Haas, "Biographical, autobiographical and epistolary material from the archives of C.P. Cavafy: a report on recent research," Molivdo-kondilo-pelekitis 5 (1995/96), 39-49.\*

#### **Week Six/ Cavafy and Eroticism**

- C. P. Cavafy, "Poems 1916-1918," especially "In the Month of Athyr," "The Tobacco Shop-Window," "So Much I Gazed," "Caesarion," "Body, Remember," and "The Next Table." Also especially for talk: "Simeon," "That's the Man," "For Ammonis . . .," "According to the Recipes. . .," "Dareios," "I Brought to Art," "Long Ago," "Pictured."
- Philip Sherrard, "Cavafy's Sensual City: A Question," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, pp. 95-99.\*
- Stephen Spender, "Cavafy: The Historic and the Erotic," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, 89-93.\*
- Margaret Alexiou, "C.P. Cavafy's 'Dangerous' Drugs: Poetry, Eros, and the Dissemination of Images," in The Text and its Margins, eds. Margaret Alexiou and Vassilis Lambropoulos. New York: Pella Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 157-196.\*

#### **Week Seven/ Cavafy and Geography**

- C.P. Cavafy, "Poems 1905-1915," especially "Ithaca," "The City," "The Satrapy," "The God Abandons Antony," and "Alexandrian Kings"
- Francis Golffing, "The Alexandrian Mind," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, 115-126.\*
- Edmund Keeley, Cavafy's Alexandria (1996), chaps 1-6.

#### **Spring break**

#### **Week Eight/ Cavafy, History and Irony**

- C.P. Cavafy, "Poems 1919-1932," especially "Dareios."
- Christopher Robinson, "Part One: Content or Tone of Voice?" C.P. Cavafy, pp. 9-21 (reread).
- C.M. Bowra, "Constantine Cavafy and the Greek Past," The Creative Experiment London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1949, pp. 29-60.\*
- D.N. Maronitis, "Arrogance and Intoxication: The Poet and History in Cavafy," in Eighteen Texts, ed. Willis Barnstone, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972, pp. 117-134.\*

Nasos Vayenas, "The Language of Irony," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, pp. 100-114.\*

Roderick Beaton, "C.P. Cavafy: Irony and Hellenism," The Slavonic and East European Review, vol. 59, no. 4 (1981), pp. 516-528.\*

### **Week Nine/ Cavafy and Translation**

C.P. Cavafy, "The Unpublished Poems"

Edmund Keeley, "The 'New' Poems of Cavafy," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, pp. 46-59.\*

Read through loose-leaf binder on reserve in Classics with translations of Cavafy by various hands

►W.H. Auden, "Introduction," The Complete Poems of Cavafy New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich 1976, pp. vii-xv.\*

Marguerite Yourcenar, "A Critical Introduction to Cavafy," tr. Richard Howard, Shenandoah 32, No. 1 (1980), pp. 3-37. Also in her The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays, pp. 154-198.\*

David Ricks, "Cavafy Translated," Kampos 1 (1993).\*

Abstract and bibliography for final project due in class. See weeks 12-13 at end of syllabus.

### **Week Ten/ Cavafy in England**

W. H. Auden, "Atlantis" (wr. 1941), with "Ithaka" and "The Ides of March" (1919)\*

George Seferis, "Cavafy and Eliot: a Comparison," in The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on his Life and Work, Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983, pp. 60-88.\*

C.P. Cavafy, Fourteen Poems by C.P. Cavafy, trans. Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender, twelve etchings by David Hockney, London: Alecto Ltd. 1967 (in 617 Hamilton).

Lawrence Durrell, "Cavafy," Collected Poems, ed. James A. Brigham, pp. 252-3\* and his translations of Cavafy's poems in Alexandrian Quartet in loose-leaf notebook on reserve in 617 Hamilton.

►Peter Bien, "Cavafy's Homosexuality and his Reputation outside of Greece," Journal of Modern Greek Studies 1990, pp. 197-212. [online through CLIO]

Recommended: Roderick Beaton, "The History Man," Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora 10, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 1983), pp. 23-44.\*

### **Week Eleven/ Cavafy in America** (with Professor Rachel Hadas)

Alexander Kitroeff et. al, "Statement" and "Introduction," Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora 10, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 1983), pp. 5-9.\*

►James Merrill, "In Broad Daylight," Grand Street Vol. 2. No. 3, Spring 1983, pp. 99-107 and "Days of 1964."\* See also Rachel Hadas's appreciation in Poetry Sept. 1995.

Joseph Brodsky, "Near Alexandria" (wr 1982) and "The Bust of Tiberius" (1981) from To Urania (NY 1988) with the essay "Pendulum's Fate" in Less than One (NY 1986)\*

Duane Michals, Ten Poems by Constantine Cavafy. Ten Photographs by Duane Michals\*

### **Weeks Twelve-Thirteen/ Translation at a Slight Angle**

① In preparation for the last two classes choose a poem/group of poems to analyze. Decide on a translating strategy and then translate the poem/s. Returning to the questions of instability and unconventionality addressed by Robinson (pp. 8 and 34), try to think about what a translation at a slight angle could be? What might a gay theory of translation privilege? What might a translation that foregrounds irony entail? What would a translation that took on Cavafy's own publishing practices involve? Make sure you have read Savvidis's notes to the poem/s you choose in the Keeley and Sherrard translation. Go back over readings of your particular poem/s in the critical texts we have read. Be prepared to present your translation and your translating goals to the class. Xerox your translation for the class and include at least three other translations of the same poem.

② Your final papers should include your translations and/or reworkings in other mediums of the Cavafy poem/s you have chosen as well as a critical analysis of how your translations/ reworkings challenge, supplement, ignore or adopt dominant preoccupations in Cavafy scholarship.

## The Translation of Punctuation

### An analysis of three poems by C. P. Cavafy

Lytton Jackson Smith

---

If we were to translate into English the traditional formula *Traddutore, traditore* as “the translator is a betrayer,” we would deprive the Italian rhyming epigram of all its paronomastic value. Hence a cognitive attitude would compel us to change this aphorism into a more explicit statement and to answer the questions: translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?

~Roman Jakobson<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I examine C.P. Cavafy’s uses of punctuation, focusing in particular on three poems connected with the sea: “The City,” “In the Harbour Town,” and “On the Italian Shore.” The sea provides a subtle and resonant image-set within Cavafy’s work,<sup>2</sup> and my reason for grouping these particular poems is to suggest an analogy between Cavafy’s shifting thematics of the sea and what I argue is a semantic role of punctuation within his poems. In addition to important grammatical, rhythmic, and visual functions, punctuation within Cavafy’s poems is used to suspend the resolution of meaning. Functioning dynamically, his various punctuation marks oscillate between poles of connection and separation: any given punctuation mark can act on the one hand as a bridge connecting two separate elements of a poem, and on the other as a barrier that frustrates such connection. This tension creates a space within which the poem makes meaning, in the sense Lyn Hejinian uses in her essay “Forms of Alterity: On Translation”: “In foregrounding language’s formal properties, poetry addresses itself primarily to semantic (rather than syntactic) areas; the work will make sense but it will also call to our attention the fact that

---

<sup>1</sup> “On Some Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Ed. Schulte and Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 151.

<sup>2</sup> Pieris notes that “the sea appears in no less than 47 poems. This is 17% of his total poetic output” (274).

not only the sense but the making of that sense are meaningful.”<sup>3</sup> My essay thus argues for translations of Cavafy that pay close attention to his use of punctuation as a device employed not only to “call our attention to the [...] making of [...] sense” but also to enact an on-going (that is, dynamic and kinetic) process of making meaning.

Translation involves a movement between geographies and a question about exactly what gets moved between geographies. Roman Jakobson’s analysis of the oft-repeated Italian phrase “*traddutore, traditore*” which this essay uses as its epigraph reminds us that translating the sense of a phrase necessarily compromises its sonic aspects. In translating the Italian phrase as “the translator is a betrayer” we betray the paronomasia of the original language, as Jakobson notes. Ironically, in the process of this betrayal, we fulfill the sense of the original: precisely because we betray, we are translator *and* traitor. The meaning of the phrase is thus only fully revealed in the conversation between the Italian and the English phrases. Translation is dynamic, rather than static, and meaning is made not through a movement from source to target language, but by means of a shuttling back and forth between two (or more) languages. Neither/(None) of the languages dominates, and we cannot reach the resolution of a fixed expression. Thus, when we read works “in translation” we are reading them *in the act of* translation rather than as always already “translated.”<sup>4</sup>

Theorizing translation in terms of dynamism—as a shuttle moving back and forth rather than as an arrival at a fixed destination—allows us as readers of works in translation to observe and theorize changes in “formal properties.” Jakobson’s “translator of what messages? betrayer of

---

<sup>3</sup> Hejiniian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 297. Hejiniian is focused, in this part of her essay, on “morphological and phonological” properties of language, and on suggesting that they possess under-acknowledged semantic qualities, especially within poetry.

<sup>4</sup> Taken further, my argument would suggest that we cannot speak of a work as “translated” in the past (and especially not the perfect) tense, but only as “in translation.” While there is not the space in this essay to fully articulate the implications of such an argument, or the reasons for making it, my exploration of Cavafy’s use of punctuation, and the “in translation” of punctuation, hopefully provides some of the reasons for this re-thinking of how we should consider translations.

what values?” uses two question marks in the English where a comma was used in the Italian. While the paronomasia that marks the Italian is not visible in the English, the addition and alteration of punctuation is parallel to the morphological repetitions in “*traddutore, traditore*.” The semantic value of punctuation, and in particular of the repetition of punctuation, becomes visible once one considers the ways in which Jakobson’s punctuation speaks back to the Italian, acknowledging its existence rather than attempting to replace or invalidate it.<sup>5</sup> While the Italian phrase, as a “traditional formula,” may no longer need translating in order for a non-Italian speaker to understand its concepts, the two-way process of translation allows both English and Italian readers to consider how the phrase means, and to become aware of the semantic value of its formal properties. One of the purposes of this paper is to investigate how the movement from a comma to two question marks, for instance, might reveal the meanings of a phrase or poem.

My contention is that the non-resolution of meaning which translation acknowledges is evident not just from examinations of Cavafy’s poetry in translation, but also from a consideration of his idiosyncratic use of punctuation, as in the early prose poem, “The Ships.” In that poem, Cavafy considers the transition from “Imagination to the Blank Page” using the metaphor of ships transporting merchandise.<sup>6</sup> The sea provides an apt metaphor for the creative process because it is simultaneously a conduit through which the materials that furnish the imagination arrive, and also the barrier to knowledge: the sailors who transport merchandise on ships are “forced to throw out a part of the load” when on the rough open sea, and further compromised by the actions of customs agents once they reach port.<sup>7</sup> The sea is thus not a fixed element in Cavafy’s early allegory of creation. Similarly, the perspective from which the poem is

---

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Karen Van Dyck for suggesting to me the way Jakobson’s phrase “speaks back” to the Italian, and for her insightful and productive reading of this essay.

<sup>6</sup> “The Ships,” in *The Essential Cavafy*, 56-58.

<sup>7</sup> Translations from “The Ships,” by Edmund Keeley and Dimitri Gondicas.

narrated is dynamic rather than fixed. For the bulk of the poem the reader shares the merchant sailors' perspective, "mak[ing] mistakes and throw[ing] precious things overboard." Just before the final paragraph the perspective shifts unannounced, and the reader is now separated from the ships, watching them disappear, "distancing themselves forever from us and our cramped harbor." In the concluding paragraph, again unannounced, a temporal gap has occurred. Many years have passed and now those at the harbor (reader included) "are trying to recollect where we heard [the sailors' songs] before" and wondering about the destination of the ships, "—who knows where." That em-dash is as important as it is surprising. Read as a connective punctuation mark, the em-dash reminds the reader that she was once on board the ship (at least imaginatively) and so would be the "who" who "know[s] where" the ships go. Read as a mark that separates two elements, the em-dash announces to the reader that she cannot "know where" the ships have gone. The em-dash is essential to the meaning of the phrase precisely because a reader cannot resolve whether it connects or separates; rather, the punctuation mark remains dynamic, unresolved. Like Jakobson's exploration of the "traditional formula," this punctuation mark remains as it were "in translation" between two polar alternatives, its meaning only fully visible in kinesis and interplay rather than stasis.

Cavafy's approach to the publication of his own work is a further guide to the importance of punctuation within his poetry. He oversaw the typesetting of his poems, including details of punctuation marks, spacing of words within lines, and all other formal and visual aspects of his work. The omission of much of the punctuation and other typographic markers by the most well-known translators of Cavafy into English, Keeley and Sherrard, has at times obscured this aspect of Cavafy's poetry. Paradoxically, though, Keeley and Sherrard's omission of Cavafy's punctuation helps draw our attention to its significance by allowing us to notice the way a poem

functions differently in the absence of punctuation. The recent Sachperoglou edition preserves Cavafy's poems as he wanted them depicted in Greek, including their punctuation. However, his translations take many liberties with punctuation, a decision that affects not only the rhythm and the visual aspects of Cavafy's work, but also their meaning. Some critical writings on Cavafy draw attention to his punctuation: D.N. Maronitis describes a "lack of orthodoxy in punctuation" in Cavafy's poems, and argues that "punctuation in Cavafy is less syntactic (that is to say, it is concerned less with logical sequence) and more phonetic (it suggests, that is, to the person who will read, or better will recite, the poem a wholly binding manner for the expression of the poetic word)."<sup>8</sup> Maronitis' focus is on how the reader receives and reads the poem, and he does not address how Cavafy's unorthodox punctuation affects the semantics of his poems. My intention in the discussion of three "representative" poems that follows is not, however, to attempt a taxonomy of Cavafy's punctuation. No punctuation mark has a fixed role within Cavafy's oeuvre, or even within a single poem, just as each of Emily Dickinson's dashes functions idiosyncratically.

In order to explore the singularity of punctuation and the non-resolution of meaning within Cavafy's works, I attempted three somewhat experimental translations (Appendix A), which retain the original punctuation without attempting to translate their semantic content. Following the model of a homophonic translation, which aims to translate the sounds of the original rather than the sense, my own translations are what might be called "homopunctual." While I responded to the internal rhymes and other formal elements of Cavafy's work, and while I aimed to keep the content of the poems in keeping with themes and imagery Cavafy uses throughout his oeuvre, my interest in producing these versions was in thinking through the ways punctuation constructs—problematizes—relationships between constituent elements of the poems.

---

<sup>8</sup> Maronitis, D. N. "Arrogance and Intoxication: The Poet and History in Cavafy," 129.

Within each of the Greek poems, written at very different points in Cavafy's poetic career,<sup>9</sup> the sea works as a complex metaphor for the failure of knowledge to communicate as well as for the possibility of communication across epistemological, temporal, and chronological gaps. On the one hand, the sea brings ships to a harbour, allowing distant geographies to be bridged: "On an Italian Shore" describes an "Italiote youth"<sup>10</sup> watching the unloading of Peloponnesian goods in Magna Graecia, Southern Italy. On the other hand, the ocean thwarts travel, separating rather than connecting two places: "In the Harbour Town" tells the story of Emes, who dies on a voyage, with nobody knowing "where his home was, within the great pan-Hellenic world"; because knowledge does not travel over the sea, "his parents will forever hope that he is alive." The sea is comprehensible neither as bridge nor barrier, but only in the almost paradoxical conversation between polar potentialities. That is, the sea which separates Emes' corpse from his parents allows him to remain living "forever," at least to them; simultaneously, the sea which connects two geographic places (Emes' origin and destination) has "forever" separated Emes's body from his parents. Similarly, "The City" depicts a speaker and an addressee, one of whom has left or plans to leave "the city" and the other who suggests that the physical act of leaving nonetheless amounts to staying, so that "always in this same city you'll arrive." Taken together, these three poems evidence a continuing fascination in Cavafy's work with the ebb and flow of knowledge, and with how the sea simultaneously conveys and restricts knowledge.

A fuller examination of "The City" will help demonstrate this. The poem appears to be constructed of two stanzas that balance each other, perhaps presenting binaries: here versus there, present versus future. Both are eight lines long, "have an almost identical metrical

---

<sup>9</sup> "The City" is contained within Poems 1905-1915; "In the Harbour Town" in Poems 1916-1918; and "On an Italian Shore" in Poems 1919-1933. Sachperoglou, 29, 89, 155.

<sup>10</sup> Sachperoglou. All translations of Cavafy by Sachperoglou unless stated; I have chosen to follow his translations because they adhere most closely to the structure of Cavafy's Greek.

pattern,” and a similar rhyme scheme.<sup>11</sup> The first and last lines of each stanza rhyme; while technically no rhymes are shared between stanzas, the rhymes beginning and ending each stanza are “almost identical.”<sup>12</sup> The two stanzas almost seem to share a template. However, an examination of the punctuation indicates that the second stanza does not merely replicate the form of the first. The first stanza is largely contained with speech marks, and uses 3 commas and 4 sentences, one of which is a question. The second stanza has 7 sentences, 2 commas, and no speech marks. Both stanzas use one set of em-dashes, in the fourth line and the fourth line from the end respectively. The different use of periods in each stanza is particularly noteworthy, since all the periods in the first stanza coincide with line breaks, whereas periods occur in the middle of lines in the second stanza. How, then, does our awareness of the different punctuation structure in each stanza lead to our recognition of the suspended quality of meaning in Cavafy’s poems?

The functioning of punctuation in Cavafy’s original is, I hope, demonstrated in my homopunctual translation:

A letter: “What historians read in books, they find in the streets.  
 The famous temple the poet mentioned is below the baths.  
 If we excavate the tavernas we will find another city;  
 how others lived—just like us—buried below.  
 Why are we not taking our shovels and looking for treasures?  
 Wherever we uproot this city, wherever we strike our picks,  
 we are sure to find the real meaning of our lives,  
 the artifacts and the promises that belonged to our forefathers.”

---

<sup>11</sup> Savvidis, “Notes to the Poems,” in Keeley/Sherrard, 224.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 224.

What historians read in books, that is all they find in the streets.  
 The famous temple they cherished. The same harbour  
 from long ago. But in these neighbourhoods two youths met;  
 grew older and found themselves more distant than before.  
 But they always lived in the same city. Elsewhere—in another time—  
 they might have said a goodbye, perhaps tearfully.  
 Instead they drifted into different company  
 where they lived other lives, forgetting their city was anything else.

Here, I transpose the reported speech “You said” to the letter mode in order to emphasize the speaker’s sense of certainty. The use of the periods in that first stanza itself suggests a mood of certainty, to the extent that the lone question seems almost a statement, or at best rhetorical, rather than a genuine inquiry. That periods are scattered within the middle of lines in the second stanza suggests either that there is a change of speaker between stanzas or that there might instead be a change in perspective and mood. This latter reading is supported by the fact that the first line of each stanza is very similar in lexical and grammatical content. In the next two lines there are two periods within the line and only an *ano teleia* at the end of the second, as if the speaker is less certain now, trying to convince herself of something. My version of this stanza foregrounds the way punctuation can create a sense of instability. Each sentence ends with a reference to change in time or in the relationship between the “two youths” my interpretation imagines. My aim was to dramatize the conditional quality of the speaker’s situation, which was itself suggested by the change in punctuation between the first and second stanzas. My version does not register the original content of Cavafy’s Greek, but it does highlight one of the ways Cavafy’s poem makes meaning: his use of punctuation nuances his semantic intent and ultimately leaves unresolved the question of whether there are two speakers or one in this poem. Analogously, my homopunctual translation necessarily draws a reader’s attention back to the

Greek poem, and encourages a dialectical conversation between two texts, rather than a teleological movement from source to target.

Punctuation of course remains open to interpretation, like any other semantic or formal aspect of a poem. The poem's use of *dipli pavla* (double dashes, or em-dashes) in each stanza is indicative of this. Each set of dashes frames a fragmentary phrase without explicitly stating its connection to the line or sentence that the dashes interrupt. The dashes literally create a space on either side of the phrase that the reader must "fill" in order to interpret the poem. In my own version, I inserted "just like us" within the em-dashes, raising a question about whether the phrase relates more to "how others lived" or to the fact that those others are now "buried below." The phrase isolated by the dashes could gesture forward or backwards, could be connected to more than one element of the poem and separate from more than one element of the poem. However we interpret the *dipli pavla* here, it is evident that Cavafy is concerned with the ways meaning can remain unresolved and even unresolvable.

Such a concern is also central to the way punctuation functions in "In the Harbour Town," where commas break the sentences into elements, foregrounding the ways the poem makes meaning and leaves meaning unresolved. My own homopunctual translation reads

Ships, expected at the port, on a languid Monday  
just like other Mondays I watched you embark  
on the boat, your eyes already to your arrival.  
During the weeks you have not appeared. The boat  
foundered, detoured. A different island, brighter,  
has found you. The ebb tide keeps carrying away  
our words, my "hurry back," your "watch for me."  
I watch the sea and think of the ship's lookout,  
how he hauls his athletic frame toward the sky.  
Seeing nothing. The ocean empty to our looking  
for the speck on the horizon that means arriving,  
lost in the sailors unloading their haul at the port.

The first sentence of my version creates expectations of “ships” which are to arrive “at the port” through a cumulative structure which references the way each comma in the original adds another layer of information about its protagonist while also complicating the time frame of the poem, introducing a hoped-for future alongside the uncertain present and abandoned past. Not until the sentence has finished can the reader begin to parse the hierarchy of its elements, to combine them into some form of narrative that remains continually under revision as new details are revealed. Punctuation, within both Cavafy’s original and my version of it, separates events and images from one another, and in so doing leads the reader to notice the spaces between them. Even where the factuality of events is clear—that, for instance, there are “sailors unloading their haul at the port”—the relationship between facts and the interpretation of them remains open: what, exactly, is “lost in the sailors unloading their haul at the port?” My version of “In the Harbour Town” does not attempt to convey the story of the original, in which a young traveler’s death on a ship, among strangers, is never communicated to his parents. However, by using Cavafy’s punctuation structure, my version translates a key aspect of his method in constructing the poem

Each type of punctuation mark (comma, period, parenthesis, &c) does not have a fixed semantic function within Cavafy’s work, and “In the Harbour Town” allows us to see the ways in which a period, for example, can connect as well as divide. The first sentence of the poem narrates Emes’ safe arrival in Syria. The following two narrate his illness and his death respectively. Punctuation contains these events within discrete sentences. Each period creates a boundary between one event and the next, leading the reader to first think that Emes’ narrative ends with his arrival, then with his illness, then with his death. These seemingly fixed boundaries highlight the way context affects knowledge: Emes’ parents’ knowledge of him is described in a

separate sentence from his death, and sustains a version of his life in which he lives still, geographically distant as he is syntactically distant. Indeed, any of these sentences could be read as a discrete, sustainable narrative of Emes' life; read discretely, they remind us that our knowledge of Emes depends on the moment at which we encounter him, the ship, in Syria, or in Tenia. Although we as readers are placed in an apparently omniscient position, able to read all the sentences that are the constitutive episodes of his life story, the periods between these episodes do not function only as markers of separation. They also gesture to our lack of knowledge about what occurred between periods: what is not contained in the sentences describing his death and his burial, or in the move backwards in time from his burial to his last hours. The periods are a symbol of what the reader cannot know: to whom did Emes whisper "something about 'home'"?

Each type of punctuation mark thus functions very differently even within a single poem, and we should not expect all periods, or all commas, to function the same way. Just as language possesses a range of semantic possibilities, from homonyms and homophones to paronomasia and rhyme, so too does punctuation. The semantic range of punctuation is at least as diverse as its syntactic range. As important as avoiding a taxonomy of punctuation is avoiding a narrow reading of punctuation as solely semantic, and ignoring its rhythmic and syntactic roles. In the second stanza of "The City," the periods that separate the narrator's thoughts into short sentences create a staccato rhythm as a counterpoint to the more fluent coordinate sentences of stanza one. Nevertheless, throughout this paper I have aimed to highlight a way of reading punctuation that is not generally foregrounded: punctuation as a means of suspending the resolution of meaning. In both my homopunctual translations and my criticism of those versions and of the originals, I have sought to suggest that Cavafy's quite deliberate choice of punctuation markers, and the

elements of the poem they occur between, allows the poem to make meaning and to leave meaning as yet unmade. A poem like “In the Month of Athyr,” where ellipses erase parts of words, offers an example of this dynamic duality. Cavafy is able to express both an apparent meaning of the poem, as a record of writing preserved on a tombstone, and the layers beneath that apparent meaning, the questions created by the absent space the ellipses stand in for.

It is further important to acknowledge that punctuation is not a constant between languages, any more than meaning is. Different punctuation marks exist in different languages, posing challenges for how we translate: is it possible to find an equivalent mark, or do we need to revise the structure of a sentence to achieve the same effect? The Greek *ano teleia*, or “upper period,” is akin to the English semi-colon in usage, but at the start of “The City” it introduces direct speech, which is not permissible with a semi-colon in English.<sup>13</sup> Most translators solve this problem using a colon, but it is important to realize that an important change has been made in so doing. Even where punctuation marks exist in both source and target language, a question remains about whether the effect is the same.<sup>14</sup> As grammatical conventions differ between languages, so does the effect of punctuation on the rhythmic and thematic qualities of a work. The significance of punctuation is all too often glossed over: while Maronitis declares that “naturally I have not changed the punctuation of the poem” in editing it for his article, a footnote acknowledges that “it is altered in the translation.”<sup>15</sup> My reading of these three poems has demonstrated the need for

---

<sup>13</sup> The usage here is likely another example of what Maronitis suggests is Cavafy’s unorthodox sense of punctuation. However, the general point—that punctuation marks that exist in Greek do not exist in English—holds true. One must translate the *ano teleia*, or else accept that it will puzzle English readers in ways that it does not typically puzzle Greek readers.

<sup>14</sup> I do not mean punctuation marks with demonstrably different functions in two languages, as is the case with the Greek *erotimatiko*, which resembles an English semi-colon but functions as an indicator of a question. Rather, I refer to marks common to two languages which seem to function similarly—to denote a sentence ending, for instance—but which might in fact imply very different connotations. It is worth noting that the language used to describe punctuation marks can present translation difficulties, even within English. The American-English “period” and the British-English “full stop” refer to the same typographic mark but might nuance their functions differently.

<sup>15</sup> Maronitis, D. N. “Arrogance and Intoxication: The Poet and History in Cavafy,” 129.

close critical attention to the role of punctuation in affecting how and what the poems can mean. It also reveals the need for translators and translation studies to consider any change to punctuation between source and target language to be as significant as changes to the lexical field and poetic structure of the poem.

Indeed, the relationship between Cavafy's poems and punctuation is particularly important, not only because of the unorthodox way he uses punctuation, but because his poems seem to pre-empt their own translation. David Ricks argues that "Cavafy [...] is a translator in more than one sense,"<sup>16</sup> referring in part to his use of historical phrases and his use of other languages, including Italian. His concern with the movement between places is a form of translation: the physical movement of characters acts as a metaphor both for the dynamic, unresolved meanings of the poem, and for the poems' afterlives in new languages. Translation might well itself be thought of as operating between poles of connection and separation, making communication possible across languages and geographies, while reminding us that something is necessarily surrendered in that journey. That there is not an essential binary of bridge versus barrier, that multiple relationships between disparate places could be coexistent and even coeval, is evident from Cavafy's poems. His aim repeatedly seems to be to unsettle, in the full sense of the word: to keep the poem, and its reading, in motion, even when what it describes seems at first glance static.

Cavafy, then, must remain in translation. Having watched and left "The Ships," we return to re-read it, to notice again and anew the ease with which Cavafy shifts from the perspective of those at the harbour to the perspective of those on the ships. That Cavafy would connect and separate "—who knows where" with an em-dash acknowledges that something has happened in the space of the em-dash while refusing to specify what. A reader can offer hypotheses to

---

<sup>16</sup> Ricks, David. "Cavafy Translated," 88.

complete this gap, suggesting that the em-dash represents the movement from imagination to the (no longer) blank page, or the absence of the ships and sailors now departed; Cavafy's mystery and mastery is to remain silent. His punctuation speaks in his place, leaving his poems dynamic and in process, undertaking, as it were, a journey between geographies and times, between authors and readers—between languages.

### Works Cited

- Cavafy, C. P. *The Collected Poems*. Trans. Evangelous Sachperolgo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Hejiniian, Lyn. "Forms of Alterity: On Translation." *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkely: University of California Press, 2000.
- Jakobson, Roman. "On Some Linguistic Aspects of Translation." *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Ed. Schulte and Biguenet. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Maronitis, D. N. "Arrogance and Intoxication: The Poet and History in Cavafy." *Eighteen Texts: Writings by Contemporary Greek Authors*. Ed. Willis Barnstone. Cambridge: Harvard, 1972.
- Pieris, Michael. "Cavafy and the Sea." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* (October 1989): 273-286.
- Ricks, David. "Cavafy Translated." *Kambos: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 1 (1993).

## Appendix A: Versions of Three Cavafy Poems

### The City

A letter: “What historians read in books, they find in the streets.  
 The famous temple the poet mentioned is below the baths.  
 If we excavate the tavernas we will find another city;  
 how others lived—just like us—buried below.  
 Why are we not taking our shovels and looking for treasures?  
 Wherever we uproot this city, wherever we strike our picks,  
 we are sure to find the real meaning of our lives,  
 the artifacts and the promises that belonged to our forefathers.”

What historians read in books, that is all they find in the streets.  
 The famous temple they cherished. The same harbour  
 from long ago. But in these neighborhoods two youths met;  
 grew older and found themselves more distant than before.  
 But they always lived in the same city. Elsewhere—in another time—  
 they might have said a goodbye, perhaps tearfully.  
 Instead they drifted into different company  
 where they lived other lives, forgetting their city was anything else.

### In The Harbour Town

Ships, expected at the port, on a languid Monday  
 just like other Mondays I watched you embark  
 on the boat, your eyes already to your arrival.  
 During the weeks you have not appeared. The boat  
 foundered, detoured. A different island, brighter,  
 has found you. The ebb tide keeps carrying away  
 our words, my “hurry back,” your “watch for me.”  
 I watch the sea and think of the ship’s lookout,  
 how he hauls his athletic frame toward the sky.  
 Seeing nothing. The ocean empty to our looking  
 for the speck on the horizon that means arriving,  
 lost in the sailors unloading their haul at the port.

## On an Italian Shore

At Torre del Greco,           near the ruins,  
 a guide wanders the streets       ruing his mistakes;  
 how he traveled abroad       only to find Greece  
 waiting for him in the broad       Italian plains.

Maybe today he will leave,       conquer his fears,  
 let a compass guide him.       Nearby are roads,  
 and the expanse       of Italy unrolls  
 just as he has seen       from the Greek tower.

Greek stones;           a tribute given to Italy.

But today a group       is arriving in town,  
 they will want the youth       to show them ruins  
 and tell them stories       of those who remained.

## **Beyond Biography: Cavafy's Homoeroticism in Translation**

Elizabeth Wildman Wade

---

C.P. Cavafy's poetry has been labeled homosexual, gay, and queer for nearly as long as those have been legitimate terms with which to discuss literature. In the United States, particularly, he has been adopted as a proto-spokesman for gay liberation. Reading Cavafy as a gay poet has become a prerequisite for reading him at all. The editors of the *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* write in their statement to their 1983 issue dedicated to Cavafy, "Let it finally be said: Cavafy is neither 'perverse' nor 'obscene' nor 'obsessed' nor even 'erotic.' Cavafy is gay....If Cavafy were not gay, he would not be Cavafy, and if he is to remain Cavafy, in all his lucidity, precision, and integrity, he must be coherently and uncompromisingly gay" (6). They impose an identity on him and his poetry that may be historically and biographically "correct," but that consciously excludes other possible readings of his work. Duane Michals' introduction to *Homage to Cavafy* is less forceful but no subtler:

Constantine Cavafy was a man of great feeling and even greater courage. His poetry was his life. And because he was a man who loved other men, he demonstrated his courage by making public these private passions. He lived then, as we still do today, among those brute people who would literally destroy him both physically and spiritually for the unforgivable sin of loving the wrong person. Despite this vulnerability, he wrote about the truth of himself with painful honesty, and the strength of his art protected him and freed others. I salute his courage and thank him for the gift of his life. (NP)

Cavafy's homosexuality becomes a personal virtue for Michals and others who choose to read his poems through the lens of his personal erotic desire. Michals identifies with Cavafy intensely, crediting him with "courageously" liberating himself and others from repressive

societal norms. He is careful not to label Cavafy with an identity like “gay” or “homosexual,” but he clearly believes that Cavafy’s desire was fixed and was one of his defining features both personally and artistically. For Michals and many others, Cavafy’s poetry is gay because he himself was gay, and they believe this biographical fact manifests itself in his poetry in a powerful way.

The ongoing political struggle for gay rights hinges on Michel Foucault’s definition of the homosexual as a “species” rather than an individual who “chooses” to engage in certain behaviors (and who can, therefore, be taught, convinced, or forced to make different choices). While the iteration of queer identity politics Michals embraces may be admirable and is almost certainly necessary, it is no less restrictive than it was in the nineteenth century, when, according to Foucault, “the homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood...[His sexuality] was everywhere present in him” (qtd. in Sedgwick 281). Once Cavafy was claimed as a gay poet, his sexuality became “everywhere present” in his poetry. As a result, the homoeroticism of many of his poems is often given a simple biographical explanation and not examined as an artistic strategy and resource.

I would like to examine the ways in which Cavafy’s gayness (or queerness) manifests itself beyond his biography, and to attempt a translation strategy that is sensitive to the ways he uses homoeroticism as an artistic and aesthetic tool. The meanings and uses of homoeroticism are not static in Cavafy’s poetry, so I do not propose that the specific analysis I present here can or should be applied to poems I do not explicitly discuss. The overarching strategy of attempting to divorce discussion of homoerotic desire from Cavafy’s biography is, however, a critical approach that I believe has been too long neglected. In this paper, I wish to apply it to various translations of “In Despair.”

Εν απογνώσει

Τον έχασ' εντελώς. Και τώρα πια ζητεί  
στα χείλη καθενός καινούριου εραστή  
τα χείλη τα δικά του· στην ένωση με κάθε  
καινούριον εραστή ζητεί να πλανηθεί  
πως είναι ο ίδιος νέος, πως δίδεται σ' εκείνον.

Τον έχασ' εντελώς, σαν να μη υπήρχε καν.  
Γιατί ήθελε —είπ' εκείνος— ήθελε να σωθεί  
απ' την στιγματισμένη, την νοσηρά ηδονή·  
απ' την στιγματισμένη, του αίσχους ηδονή.  
Ήταν καιρός ακόμη— ως είπε— να σωθεί.

Τον έχασ' εντελώς, σαν να μη υπήρχε καν.  
Από την φαντασίαν, από τες παραισθήσεις  
στα χείλη άλλων νέων τα χείλη του ζητεί·  
γυρεύει να αισθανθεί ξανά τον έρωτά του.

“In Despair”

(He) lost him completely. And now seeks  
on the lips of each new lover  
the lips his own: in the union with each  
new lover (he) seeks to feel himself  
that it is the same young man that he gives himself to him.  
(or: that he himself is young)

(He) lost him completely, as if he never existed.  
Because he wanted—he said— he wanted to be saved  
from the stigmatized, the unwholesome pleasure  
from the stigmatized, shameful pleasure.  
There was still time— as he said—to be saved.

(He) lost him completely, as if he never existed.  
Through imagination, through hallucinations  
on the lips of other young men he seeks his lips;  
he attempts to feel again his love.

“In Despair” is one of several poems that Cavafy wrote in columns, with each line  
divided in two. It is written from the point of view of a man whose (male) lover has just left

him, and the straightforward reading of the typography is that two entities that once fit together are now separating. The grammar of the lines, however, makes it impossible to separate their pieces. Aside from the opening sentence of “He lost him completely,” the rest of the sentences extend across more than one column. Elements are repeated on both sides of the poem, including “new lover” in the first stanza, “he wanted” and “he said” in the second, and “lips” throughout the first and third. The dashes that separate “he said” from the literal enunciation are split between sides in the last line of the second stanza. Typographically, the division between the columns is sensually loose; as one side moves closer, the other side backs away. Despite their visual separation, the two sides of the poem are grammatically and even typographically interwoven and, ultimately, inseparable.

Cavafy uses the singular male pronoun incessantly in the poem to refer to both the protagonist and his lost lover. In some cases, the pronoun’s referent is ambiguous and could refer to either or both. The beginning of the last line of the first stanza, for example, could be literally translated as either “that it is the same young man” (in which case it would refer to the lover) or “that he himself is young” (a secondary reading that would refer to the protagonist). In the last line of the poem (“he attempts to feel [ ] again his love”), “his love” could refer to either the lover’s love for the protagonist or the protagonist’s love for the lover. This fluidity and confusion binds the two parties and the poem’s two pieces even more tightly together, making it impossible to separate them as the typography initially seems to direct us to do. This grammatical union would be impossible to create in a language with gendered pronouns if the two parties in this poem were a man and a woman. The fact that the poem is about same-sex desire allows the protagonist and the lover to blend together grammatically, creating the sensation of infinite doubling that gives homosexual love an intense depth and poetic weight.

Homosexual desire is presented as more painful and dangerous than its heterosexual counterpart in “In Despair.” Traditional (i.e. heteronormative) societal judgments of homosexuality are often present in Cavafy’s poems; in fact, George Syrimis argues that “stigmatized,” “unwholesome,” and “shameful” are words that encode homosexual desire into Cavafy’s poems (“Homosexuality Is...”). “In Despair” is rife with gendered pronouns that make it clear both protagonist and lover are male, so instead of cluing the reader into the homoeroticism of the poem, Syrimis’ “code words” and their negative connotations serve as reminders that the love and desire between the characters is unacceptable in their society and community. Their separation is the result not of waning feelings or of a dramatic falling out, but of the lover’s wish to “be saved / from the stigmatized, [ ] the unwholesome pleasure” of a homosexual relationship. The poem’s typography further emphasizes the societal pressure to end their relationship that the protagonist and his lover experience. The most defined column break is in the second stanza, after “stigmatized” in both lines. The stark separation in these lines seems to be imposed by an external force that does not govern the rest of the poem, just as the lover’s reason for leaving is based on wishing to avoid ridicule and shame in a heteronormative society, not his own feelings. While social pressure often interrupts heterosexual love stories as well, it is usually a personal obstacle for the male and female lovers. Questions of familial consent, class expectations, or internal conflicts involve only the heterosexual love story’s specific figures and change according to the details of each situation. In Cavafy’s poetry, however, social disapproval, condemnation, and oppression are defining features of homosexual desire. The lover in “In Despair” may never find a truly satisfying relationship by pursuing heterosexual romance, but he is guaranteed to escape being ridiculed by his community and society for the very nature of his (homosexual) desire. “In Despair” presents

homosexual desire as categorically stigmatized, oppressed by societal norms that always place those who experience it in precarious positions.

In my reading of “In Despair,” the creative resource of homoeroticism allows Cavafy to blend the protagonist and lover together through the use of ambiguous pronouns and to emphasize the oppressive social stigma placed on those who act on their homosexual desire. I would now like to examine translations of “In Despair” by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Rae Dalven, and Daniel Mendelsohn to see if and how they engage with the idea of homoeroticism as an artistic tool.

“In Despair”

He lost him completely. And he now tries to find  
his lips in the lips of each new lover,  
he tries in the union with each new lover  
to convince himself that it’s the same young man,  
that it’s to him he gives himself.

He lost him completely, as though he never existed.  
He wanted, his lover said, to save himself  
from the tainted, unhealthy form of sexual pleasure,  
the tainted, shameful form of sexual pleasure.  
There was still time, he said, to save himself.

He lost him completely, as though he never existed.  
Through fantasy, through hallucination,  
He tries to find his lips in the lips of other young men,  
He longs to feel his kind of love once more.

—Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (123)

The most noticeable feature of Keeley and Sherrard’s translation is its disregard for Cavafy’s idiosyncratic typography; in fact, all the poems originally written in columns are normalized into traditional stanzas in their translations. While the content still expresses the emotional pain of a break-up, none of the original tension between the lover’s wish to end the

relationship and the impossibility of separating the two sides of the poem is preserved in the translation. Very few of the pronouns are ambiguous; only the possessive “his” in the last two lines “He tries to find his lips in the lips of other young men / He longs to feel his kind of love once more” may be read as referring either to the protagonist or to the lover. (Homo)sexual encounters are called “unions,” which captures something of the all-encompassing nature Cavafy assigns to homosexual desire; however, this reading is significantly hindered by the lack of typographical separation that points to the impossibility of disrupting this particular sexual and emotional union. By erasing Cavafy’s original column typography, Keeley and Sherrard obscure the tension between the lover’s decision to leave and the impossibility of grammatically extracting him from the poem.

Keeley and Sherrard also erase the sense that external pressure forced the lover to end the relationship through their translation of the second stanza as:

He lost him completely, as though he never existed.  
 He wanted, his lover said, to save himself  
 from the tainted, unhealthy form of sexual pleasure,  
 the tainted, shameful form of sexual pleasure.  
 There was still time, he said, to save himself.

Rather than “stigmatized” and “unwholesome,” homosexual pleasure is described as “tainted” and “unhealthy.” While these words can still be said to encode homosexuality, Keeley and Sherrard’s subtle change in diction implies that the lover makes the judgment internally, independent of the societal pressures emphasized in the original. The lover has much more agency in Keeley and Sherrard’s translation than he does in the original, taking action to “save himself” rather than hoping “to be saved.” Keeley and Sherrard describe homosexual desire in Syrimis’ negative “code words” and maintain it as the central theme of the poem, but they do not approach homoeroticism as an aesthetic strategy.

“In Despair”

He’s lost him utterly.                   And from now on he seeks  
 in the lips of every new                   lover that he takes  
 the lips of that one: *his*.                   Coupling with every new  
 lover that he takes                   he longs to be mistaken:  
 that it’s the same young man,                   that he’s giving himself to *him*.

He’s lost him utterly,                   as if he’d never been.  
 Because he wished—he said—                   he wished to save himself  
 from that stigmatized                   pleasure, so unwholesome;  
 from that stigmatized                   pleasure, in its shame.  
 He said there was still time—                   time to save himself.

He’s lost him utterly,                   as if he’s never been.  
 In his imagination,                   in his vain delusions  
 in the lips of other youths                   he searches for *his* lips;  
 He wishes that he might                   feel his love again.

—Translated by Daniel Mendelsohn (8)

Daniel Mendelsohn explores homoeroticism as almost inherently poetic in his translation of “In Despair.” The poem expresses a tremendous amount of longing with beautiful phrases like “He’s lost him utterly, [ ] as if he’d never been” and “Coupling with every new / lover that he takes [ ] he longs to be mistaken.” The poem is charged with despair and, therefore, clearly from the protagonist’s point of view. All ambiguity between the protagonist and the lover is clarified by Mendelsohn’s use of italics to set the lover apart from both the protagonist’s new sexual companions and the protagonist himself:

He’s lost him utterly.                   And from now on he seeks  
 in the lips of every new                   lover that he takes  
 the lips of that one: *his*.                   Coupling with every new  
 lover that he takes                   he longs to be mistaken:  
 that it’s the same young man,                   that he’s giving himself to *him*.

Despite the sensual way phrases and sentences flow across lines, “*his*” and “*him*” punctuate the end of sentences abruptly, indicating the protagonist’s lingering obsession with his former lover.

Mendelsohn portrays the protagonist and the lover as distinct entities that have already been separated. They each have agency in their respective situations, with the lover wishing, as in Keeley and Sherrard, to “save himself” and the protagonist actively “coupling with every new / lover that he takes.” Mendelsohn’s choice of “coupling” as opposed to “union” illustrates the protagonist’s relative independence in his translation; while he may be devastated over the departure of his lover, he never lost a part of himself to him. While social forces are presented as “stigmatizing” and as the driving force behind the lover’s decision to leave, they do not overwhelm the agency of either character. Mendelsohn’s translation presents the characters of “In Despair” as separate agents rather than the intertwined figures of the original.

“In Despair”

He has lost him completely,	And now he is seeking
on the lips of	every new lover
the lips of his beloved;	in the embrace
of every new lover	he seeks to be deluded
that he is the same lad,	that it is to him he is yielding.

He has lost him completely,	as if he had never been at all.
For he wanted—so he said—	he wanted to be saved
from the stigmatized,	the sick sensual delight;
from the stigmatized,	sensual delight of shame.
There was still time—	as he said—to be saved.

He has lost him completely,	as if he had never been at all
In his imagination,	in his delusions,
on the lips of others	it is his lips he is seeking;
he is longing to feel again	the love he has known.

—Translated by Rae Dalven (121)

Rae Dalven, one of Cavafy’s earliest English translators, is perhaps the least invested in a biographical reading of Cavafy’s homosexuality and, therefore, is free to approach “In Despair” and its ambiguity at face value. While Mendelsohn uses italics to distinguish the characters but

also to emphasize their shared gender, Dalven does not address the poem's homoeroticism any more than the content demands. She produces a strikingly literal translation, especially with regard to the poem's pronouns and their ambiguity. She blurs the line between the protagonist and the lover in roughly the same places as the original does; "he seeks to be deluded / that he is the same young lad" comes at the end of the first stanza, and "on the lips of others [ ] it is his lips he is seeking" appears in the third stanza. The first example could be read as either the lover or the protagonist being "the same young lad," while "his lips" could refer to either one's body. In addition to successfully preserving the ambiguity of the gendered pronouns, Dalven captures the balance between external and internal judgments of homosexual desire quite effectively. The second stanza in her translation reads:

He has lost him completely,	as if he had never been at all.
For he wanted—so he said—	he wanted to be saved
from the stigmatized,	the sick sensual delight;
from the stigmatized,	sensual delight of shame.
There was still time—	as he said—to be saved.

The lover is passive in his desire to "be saved," leaving the protagonist in hopes that heteronormativity will subsume him once he separates himself from what inspires his (current) homosexual desire. The "code word" "shame" is most effectively used in Dalven's translation, as the line "sensual delight of shame" implies not only that homosexual desire inspires feelings of shame in an oppressively heteronormative society, but also that this shame is a source of pleasure. Dalven's translations are often considered to flatten Cavafy's eroticism, but her lack of anxiety over questions of sexual identity politics allows her to preserve the ambiguity of "In Despair."

In constructing my own translation, I took what I considered to be the most effective parts of Keeley and Sherrard, Mendelsohn, and Dalven's translations and stitched them together into a

coherent whole. Because these more general translations exist, I could approach my own project with an explicit ideological framework without worrying about obscuring the complexity of the original. Rather than claim my translation as definite or more sensitive to Cavafy's artistic project, I hope readers will treat it as another addition to the cloud of translations that surround Cavafy's work, available to be pulled apart and stitched into future projects.

“In Despair”

He's lost him completely. on the lips of each his lips; new lover that he is the same young man,	And now he seeks new lover in the union with each he seeks to convince himself that he gives himself to him.
--	--

He's lost him completely, For he wished—he said— from the stigmatized from the stigmatized There was still time—	as if he'd never been. he wished to be saved pleasure, so unwholesome pleasure of shame. he said—to be saved.
--	---

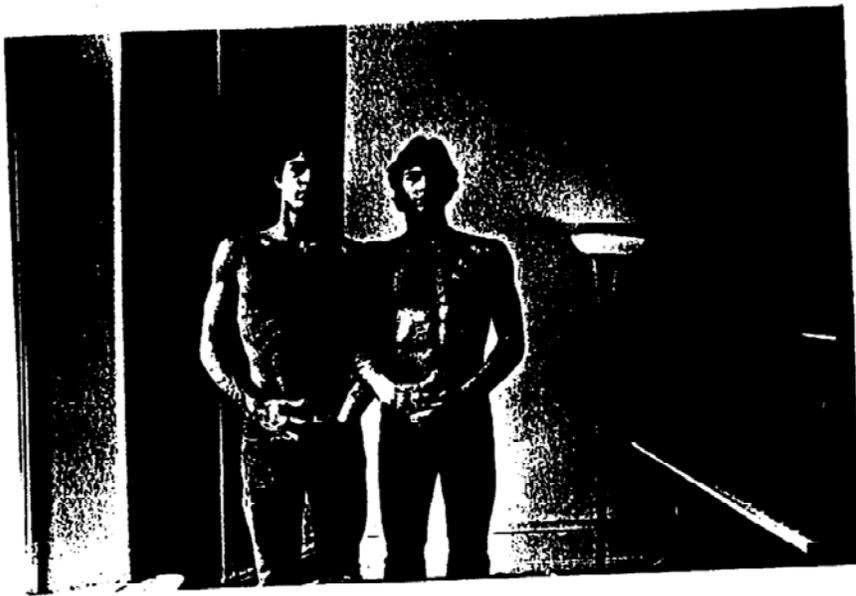
He's lost him completely, Through imagination, on the lips of other young men he seeks to feel	as if he'd never been. through delusions he seeks his lips; his love again.
---	--

My translation stays quite close to the original. I only clarify ambiguities when mandated by the rules of English, such as when I add an explicit subject to the first line. While it is difficult to reproduce Cavafy's unique typography in another language (and without the flexibility of a typewriter), I attempt to stay as close to his visual strategy as possible. I also strive to preserve some the original's repetition, using “seeks” four times throughout the translation, often in close proximity. I draw on Dalven's approach to ambiguous pronouns, though not necessary her exact translation, for the lines “he seeks to convince himself / that he is the same young man” and “on the lips of other young men [ ] he seeks his lips.” Dalven's evocative “pleasure of shame” also appears in my translation, explicitly linking homoeroticism

to the sense of violation that pervades many of Cavafy's poems and George Sýrímis' helpful analysis of them. I also emphasize the lover's lack of agency in the second stanza by combining Mendelsohn's "wished" and Dalven's "to be saved" into a desperate but passive cry for help: "For he wished—he said— [ ] he wished to be saved." Through the grammatical ambiguity between the subject and the object of desire, "In Despair" represents a "union" (Keeley and Sherrard) rather than a "coupling" (Mendelsohn) or an "embrace" (Dalven), directing my choice of word to describe the protagonist's homosexual encounters. My translation of "In Despair" explicitly engages with the artistic implications and strategies that stem from the poem's homoeroticism, filling a gap in the existing collection of translations but not attempting to supplant any of them.

In conclusion, I would like to turn away from translation and toward interpretation. Duane Michals published his *Homage to Cavafy* in 1978, pairing 10 of Cavafy's poems (as translated by Keeley and Sherrard) with 10 original photographs. While he pairs photograph number six with "Understanding," it is also relevant to my discussion of "In Despair." In the photograph, two half naked men stand next to each other in a shadowy room. Most of their physical attributes match, from their height and weight to their jeans and haircuts. They are linking arms, but because any actual physical contact is obscured by shadow, they appear to be conjoined, blending into each other as seamlessly as the protagonist and the lover do in "In Despair." Like most of Michals' photographs from the collection, this one is set in a closed room, signifying the societal difficulty of openly acting upon homosexual desire. Its caption reinforces this and relates repression to heightened eroticism: "There was something between them which they had always sensed, but it would remain unspoken." Like "In Despair," Michals' photograph represents both the overpowering nature and the danger of homoeroticism,

as each individual man threatens to be lost in the union that cannot even be acknowledged aloud. While Michals credits “the strength of his [Cavafy’s] art” with “freeing others” who wish to express their personal homosexual desire, Cavafy’s poetry also demonstrates and teaches artists like Michals how to use homoeroticism as an artistic resource and not merely as a confessional or autographical tool.



Photograph #6, Duane Michals, *Homage to Cavafy*.

### Works Cited

- Auden, W.H. “Introduction.” *The Complete Poems of C.P. Cavafy*. Trans. Rae Dalven. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1961.
- Cavafy, C.P. *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*. Trans. Rae Dalven. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- . *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Ed. George Savidis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *C.P. Cavafy: The Collected Poems*. Trans. Evangelos Sachperoglous. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007.
- . *Cavafy Selection*. Trans. Daniel Mendelsohn. Handout provided by Karen Van Dyck.
- . “In Despair.” Crib translation by Karen Emmerich.
- . *Ev απογνώσει*. *The Cavafy Archive*. Center for Neo-Hellenic Studies, Athens. 1 July,

2008. <<http://www.kavafis.gr/poems/content.asp?id=41&cat=1>>.
- Kitroeff, Alexander, et. al. "Statement." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10: 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1983): 5-10.
- Michaels, Duane. *Homage to Cavafy*. Danbury: Addison House, 1978.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Gender Criticism." *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992. 271-302.
- Syrimis, George. "Homosexuality is..." Handout and translations provided by Karen van Dyck.

## Saving the Lacedaimonians: Towards a Translation of Cavafy's Languages

Katerina Stergiopoulou

---

[N]otons une des limites des théories de la traduction : elles traitent trop souvent des passages d'une langue à l'autre et ne considèrent pas assez la possibilité pour des langues d'être impliquées à *plus de deux* dans un texte. Comment traduire un texte écrit en plusieurs langues à la fois ? Comment « rendre » l'effet de pluralité ? Et si l'on traduit par plusieurs langues à la fois, appellera-t-on cela traduire ?  
Jacques Derrida, « Des Tours de Babel »

The slight angle at which I propose to examine and translate Cavafy is a linguistic, or “Hellenistic” one. I intend to examine a question Jacques Derrida poses in the passage from “Des Tours de Babel” I have used as my epigraph, as well as elsewhere: how to translate linguistic difference, that is, how to translate a text that is in more than one language. And, as Derrida adds, if we succeed, can we call that translation? Besides “Che Fece...Il Gran Rifiuto” of course Cavafy published no other poems incorporating a “foreign” language, though before 1899 he had written many, with lines or titles in Turkish, Latin and French. Especially after 1911, however, he consistently inserted in his poems classical, Hellenistic and Byzantine texts— in the unpublished “Πάρθεν” from March 1921, we even have the incorporation of a demotic song.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> As Xenophon Kokoles also notes, Cavafy had published one poem (“Ούτος Εκείνος”) with a linguistically incongruous title, which was also taken up in the body of the poem itself. After 1911, however, we have, besides the single Plutarchean word “Καισαριων” and the Plutarch lines in “Άγε ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων,” Aeschylus’ epigraph in “Νέοι της Σιδώνας (400 μ.Χ.)”, a citation from Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad* in the poem bearing her name, as well as in “Άννα Δαλασσηνή,” a citation from Julian in the title and text of “Ο Ιουλιανός ορών ολιγορίαν,”

By thus emphasizing the written word (in the form of epic, history, biography, epistle, official decrees, inscriptions, and epitaphs), Cavafy's poetry creates the impression that, as Jusdanis notes, it "contain[s] the archive within itself" (125)<sup>18</sup>. However, in the poems where we see the poet most carefully reading, transcribing and *not* translating—and in which this activity tends to be thematized—Cavafy's translators have paradoxically chosen not to read him and to translate the incongruous linguistic material as though it were written in the same language as the rest of the poem. From the single word "Πολυκαισαρή" in "Καισαρίων" to the seven lines of "Άγε ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων," Cavafy's quotations marks are given in the translations, but the tension between their content and the poem's speaking voice(s) is lost. The linguistic difference (and confusion) prominent in the Greek thus seems to be deemed a less important part of the poems (especially compared to "Che Fece," which is never translated, presumably based on the assumption that the same degree of unfamiliarity will be experienced by both the reader of the translation and the Greek reader) and is not even registered in the translators' notes. Not to translate the Hellenistic or Byzantine Greek would not have provided an adequate solution either; it is doubtlessly true that to a Greek speaker the older Greek text would be significantly less foreign than to an English-speaker— though still foreign enough to warrant a translation by Savvides in the Greek edition's notes.

---

citations from Philostratos in the titles of "Είγε Ετέλευτα" and "Σοφοί δε προσιώντων," as well as in the body of "Απολλώνιος ο Τυανεύς εν Ρόδω," a citation of Sozomenos in the title and body of "Ουκ έγνωσ," and finally, citations from Plutarch in the text of "Εν πορεία προς την Σινώπην" (published 1928) and, in the form of an epigraph attributed to Alexander, in "Στα 200 π.Χ." Cavafy had of course been using classical texts as epigraphs for his poems since much earlier, but, as Kokoles argues, their presence is less disturbing to the poem since is justified by a poetic tradition (39). They are a less integral part of the poem than the title or, of course, any of its lines. Cavafy, however, makes his epigraphs function in a different way, which, moreover, emphasizes the issue of translation and translatability. In "Απιστία," "Ο βασιλεύς Δημήτριος," as well as in "Σοφοί δε προσιώντων" the poem is a modern Greek translation and rereading of the epigraph. These epigraphs are always straightforwardly translated in the translations, thus turning the poem into a repetition or expansion of the epigraph.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jusdanis' close reading of "Είγε Ετέλευτα," in which he locates "series of successive texts extending from the first to the twentieth century, each one framing its predecessor" (127).

Two presuppositions might underlie and justify this translative approach, one bearing directly on Cavafy and his poetic intentions, the other on the Greek language in general. Let us begin with the first one: Cavafy's citations are an extension of his historical method; they are, that is, essentially indistinguishable from a reference to a historical event (or to something that could be construed as a historical event) or to a nonexistent text.<sup>19</sup> His citational practice is thus discussed through and subsumed under the same categories used for poems without such incongruous linguistic material.<sup>20</sup> If we think then that Cavafy's motive for including the 'source text' is transparently historiographical, we can certainly afford not to mark the foreign text in the translation, but instead aim to make its content as clear as possible. Nonetheless we must not forget that despite his penchant for history, Cavafy continues to write and praise poetry (and poetry-making) and that, therefore, for a poet, especially one writing short, often laconic poems, it remains remarkable to include lengthy citations in his poem. This practice also raises a question that so haunts Cavafy criticism, namely that of prose; what happens to a prosaic poem when it actually brings itself to incorporate a few lines, or even one from a chronicle? Seferis tries to save Cavafy's poems from being "merely" versified history<sup>21</sup>, while Italian scholar Filippo Maria Pontani repeats over and over again in his metrical study of Cavafy that his

---

<sup>19</sup> This is an argument advanced by G.W. Bowersock, though not with respect to translation, when he reads Cavafy's quotations as "proof" or verification of historical data, even claiming that some of the Julian poems (reconstructed by Lavagnini and including quotations) were not published because they did not meet Cavafy's "scholarly criteria" (98).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Giannis Dallas, who quickly passes over the citational poems in order to put them in the light of other "reading" poems like "Εν τῷ μνηί Αθύρ," in which the whole poem is based on and supported by lines that are "other text" (inscriptions, for instance), but invented by Cavafy himself nevertheless ("Ο Ιουλιανός και η Διάσταση των Δυο Κόσμων στον Καβάφη," 77).

<sup>21</sup> In his essay on Cavafy and Eliot, Seferis writes, "Όμως νομίζω ότι ποιητής ιστορικός δε σημαίνει βέβαια τον ποιητή που γράφει και ιστορία ή που στιχουργεί την ιστορία, αλλά σημαίνει [...] τον άνθρωπο που έχει την ιστορική αίσθηση" (340).

insertions of incongruous language lead to failed lines.<sup>22</sup> Why would a poet then choose to flirt so intensely and so consistently not only with the danger of “unoriginality,” but also of prose?

The second presupposition that could result in a translator’s decision not to mark Cavafy’s linguistically incongruous citations is that his intertextuality and Greek intertextuality in general are more “natural” than what we find in Eliot or Pound.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the increased frequency of citations from ancient texts is accompanied by an increased use of demotic dialogue and slang<sup>24</sup> in Cavafy’s poems signals for Giannis Dallas not a growing dissonance, but rather the same “naturalness” (110 ff.). These juxtapositions testify, in Dallas’ reading, to Cavafy’s unwavering belief in the continuity of the Greek language, showing us that the poet-historian acts as a witness of our “continuous/unified education” and as an “open window of communication with the tradition” (*Σπουδές στον Καβάφη* 115, my translation). So then, if Cavafy’s “so-called”<sup>25</sup> intertextual writing is “natural” and in a sense politically (or at least didactically) motivated, and if there is no corresponding debate or question in the English language, there is no sense in translating it.

<sup>22</sup> Pontani writes, for instance, that the mixed-language lines from “Απολλώνιος ο Τυαεύς εν Ρόδω” and “Άννα Δαλασσηνή” are “αληθινά οικτροί,” though he acknowledges that Cavafy’s attempt to include the hexameter of Aeschylus’ epigram (i.e. a poetic text) into his fifteen-syllable line is more successful (92).

<sup>23</sup> See Keeley, who argues that Seferis’ work is a less strained version of Pound’s *Cantos* (628-9) and Dallas (“Ο Ιουλιανός και η Διάσταση των Δυο Κόσμων στον Καβάφη” 77). Dallas, moreover, argues that especially in the case of Cavafy, intertextuality is even less intrusive because he has prepared us for it through the false and true historical references in his other poems, the compositions of tomb poems and the inventions of texts to be read (“Έν τω μινί Αθύρ,” “Υπέρ της Αχαϊκής Συμπολιτείας Πολεμήσαντες”) (77).

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in “Ο Ιουλιανός ορών ολιγορίαν,” we have Julian speaking in his Greek, in contrast to the the speaker of the poem, who uses colloquial words or phrases like “αυτόνα,” “κιόλας” and “Μα τι περίμενε λοιπόν,” while also miming a more formal language (“παροτρύνων και οδηγών”). In “Ουκ έγνως” Julian continues to speak his ancient tongue and though the official, punning response by the Christians is also in the same idiom, the voice that speaks the poem is in a strikingly different one, using words like “κούφος,” “γελοιωδέστατος,” “ξυπνάδες,” “πέρασι.” The poems might thus be suggesting in a very palpable way that Julian and his “enemies” live in a different time and do not share a language, though they can see through and manipulate him, much more than he can them.

<sup>25</sup> It is Dallas who prefaces “intertextual writing” (διακειμενική γραφή) with “λεγόμενη,” thus encouraging us perhaps not to speak of different texts, as we should not speak of different languages (112).

Similarly, Edmund Keeley, discussing the related tension between *δημοτική* and *καθαρεύουσα*, writes that since Modern Greek “has had this sort of developing presence for some thousands of years, it offers the poet unusually rich possibilities and the translator unusually awkward choices” (“Problems in Rendering Modern Greek” 628). According to Keeley the translator “who has no such linguistic connotations to work with” cannot create the same sense as the original, cannot or should not “be deliberately artificial in our terms”— as John Mavrogordato sometimes is— because in this way he or she “introduce[s] an alien accent, a blatant approximation of what the Greek poet achieves very subtly, almost *naturally*, given the traditions of his native idiom” (“Problems in Rendering Modern Greek” 632, my emphasis).<sup>26</sup> The only thing the translator can do in order not to violate the “naturalness” when faced with Cavafy’s “mixed” language, is “to make sure he doesn’t evade the other face of the contrast, that is, he must be honestly colloquial and contemporary whenever Cavafy himself was colloquial and contemporary” (632). Of course this also means that the very contrast that Keeley notes as central must be lost.

Petros Colaclides, David Ricks and Kimon Friar implicitly or explicitly take issue with the two presuppositions I have outlined and, insisting on the distinct and irreducible significance of Cavafy’s voices and languages, offer a different reading of the Cavafian practice of citation and demand a translation that does not tilt in favor of transparency and “naturalness.” Colaclides argues that the mixture of colloquialism and archaism contributes to one of Cavafy’s main poetic strategies, namely to foregrounding the individual word regardless of its source (old, new,

---

<sup>26</sup> See also Martin McKinsey for the translation problems posed by the Greek *καθαρεύουσα-δημοτική* distinction. McKinsey discusses solutions that have been offered, such as church English or legalese and notes that “these parlances have only localized applications” and so “[t]o use them in extraneous contexts is to confuse spheres [...] Because of very particular associations, the effect would be distracting, if not ludicrous.” (247). Furthermore, though the distinction between written and spoken language implied by the *καθαρεύουσα-δημοτική* distinction could be observed in English, McKinsey argues that the contrast would still be milder and that “[t]he markers so prominent in Greek, both visible (for example, the dative subscript) and audible (augments and endings), are lost in the transfer” (252).

written or spoken) (144).<sup>27</sup> Such emphasis results in a relentless polyphony, which is, moreover, anti-poetic (though not prosaic) since Cavafy does not privilege words that “belong to the so-called poetic tradition” but instead treats all words as though they were “poetic” words (146, my translation). Like his words, Cavafy’s voices “do not merge (συγχωνεύονται), do not get lost in one another, but retain their autonomy and equivalence” and in this way, his polyphony is also his “παμπουητικότητα” (146, my translation). If the attention brought to the word by the citation is the very engine of Cavafy’s poetic machine, and, by extension, the justification of the risky jump into prose, then identifying citation with historical reference or proof, confusing form with message and translating accordingly will certainly lead us astray.

David Ricks helps us tie Colaclides’ insight to translation. If “questions of translation and translatability are central to [Cavafy’s] poetry,” in which (scenes of) reading and translation are intertwined, and “Cavafy’s modernity resides so essentially in his refusal to reduce the incongruent or even competing idioms of Greek, in all its longevity, to a single idiom,” then intralingual difference is not as dismissible as it may seem when reading the “single idiom” of Cavafy’s translators (86-87, 97). Rather than speak, like Keeley, of an “almost natural” transition between forms of Greek that might warrant a smooth translation, perhaps we should pause on the “almost.” That is, perhaps it is precisely that slight difference between idioms, between quotation and poem, which does not make us cross what we would normally call a linguistic boundary, that is important to maintain in the translation. The modern Greek reader, assuming linguistic continuity, at least within the space of a single poem, is taken aback by the incongruous older Greek; while she might be tempted to skip the passages in “truly” foreign languages (as perhaps the modern English reader might be when faced with Pound’s *Cantos*), the other Greek within

---

<sup>27</sup> Anchored in his reading of “Ας Φρόντιζαν” with its many different words for “knowing,” Colaclides claims, moreover, that often the mix and contrast between idioms is so strong, it might even be the poem’s reason for existence (144).

Greek forces her to interrupt her reading and be troubled because in what she thinks she ought to understand completely, to master, something is off. As Freud teaches us, a slight difference, a minor distortion can be more uncanny and more difficult to dismiss than a great one.<sup>28</sup>

How can we then follow David Ricks' injunction to Cavafy's translator into English to make the words of Plutarch or Julian, when given as such, "stand out irreducibly" without falling into the "artificiality" trap identified by Keeley (97)? How can we calibrate the appropriate degree of interlingual or inter-dialectal historical distance? Kimon Friar, like Keeley, also acknowledges that "by its historical nature" Cavafy's distinct language use "is lost when translated into the English language, whose shorter historical development and lack of dichotomy in regard to the "language problem" does not permit of such amalgamation" (18). Nonetheless, unsatisfied by Keeley and Sherrard's uniform choice for colloquialism in response to this difficulty, Friar suggests a solution:

"In order to transfer into English Cavafis's play between demotic and formal Greek words taken from the long historical development of the Greek language, the translator, I contend, should use an Anglo-Saxon base (for his "demotic") and play it off against polysyllabic words, as in Milton, derived from Greek or Latin (for his "purist" words)." (34-5)

In this way, Friar argues, the translation might achieve "an overall similarity of tone" (35). Pound's many translational experiments with Anglo-Saxon words and meter, undertaken for the purpose of highlighting the spoken quality, directness and vividness of the original (Homer, Sophokles' *Elektra*, even the troubadour Arnaut Daniel), may confirm Friar's intuition, but at the same time alerts us to a specific danger with respect to Cavafy. We must not forget that Pound's turn towards the Germanic base of English was accompanied by an intentional avoidance and distaste for "Shakespearean" and "Miltonian" language; if our modernist ear has accustomed us

---

<sup>28</sup> Freud, in his essay on "The Uncanny," shows that "The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely')" (134).

to automatically perceive such language as overly formal and tired, then the juxtaposition suggested by Friar would perform a disservice to Cavafy who, unlike other modern Greek poets, is often doing more things with his citation or his *καθαρεύουσα* than presenting it as a negative, too-formal counterexample to his *δημοτική*. Our Cavafy translation would thus require a similar “reinvigoration” of Miltonian language, or at least a strategic placement of the more formal language within the text such that it does not seem ridiculous or useless. Finally, though Friar’s strategy might prove most useful when dealing with words or structures of the *καθαρεύουσα*, it is less applicable if a foreignizing effect is the goal when translating Cavafy’s citations. Milton’s language is for the most part understood by the modern English speaker (as is the *καθαρεύουσα* by the modern Greek one); in contrast, the Anglo-Saxon base of English may on the one hand convey higher immediacy/directness, but, being older than the Latin stratum, is also often incomprehensible (as might be Plutarch’s Greek). For this reason, for example, Pound’s translations of Arnaut Daniel tend to be as incomprehensible to an English speaker as the Provençal original.<sup>29</sup> In order then to be faithful to Cavafy’s incongruous language(s), a local translational solution would have to be found in accordance with each idiom’s function in each particular poem, though Friar’s suggestion could serve as a general guideline for the translator.

One way to assess the local significance of the Cavafy’s use of quotations is given by the poet himself, who pairs up thematically poems with incongruous linguistic material /direct citations and poems without it: we can compare “Νέοι της Σιδώνας (400 μ.Χ.) with “Θέατρον της Σιδώνας (400 μ.Χ.),” “Άννα Κομνηνή” and “Άννα Δαλασσηνή” (Anna Comnene’s grandmother) with “Μανουήλ Κομνηνός” (her nephew), “Ιουλιανός ορών ολιγωρίαν” and “Ουκ Έγνως” with “Στα Περίχωρα της Αντιόχειας” (there are of course other Julian poems but these

---

<sup>29</sup> See *Poems and Translations*, p. 481-503; note that the editor of the volume has felt compelled to append a glossary “as a guide to Pound’s [Middle Scots] archaisms in these translations” (1300-01).

stage a dialogue most explicitly), or “Ἄγε ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων” and “Στα 200 π.Χ.” with “Ἐν Σπάρτῃ.” In the rest of my paper I want to perform precisely such a comparison, focusing on the Sparta poems, in order to look at what the incorporation of the “foreign” material accomplishes, how it illuminates Cavafy’s relation to both history and Hellenism<sup>30</sup>, and finally how it can be translated.

The three Sparta poems are located in roughly the same historical time (late third century B.C.) and address, implicitly and explicitly, Sparta’s relationship with the Hellenistic world. My contention is that the three differing points of view presented in these poems bear not only on the debate they explicitly treat, but also on the treatment of the ancient text and the ancient language itself.<sup>31</sup> Rather than proceeding from a fixed belief in the continuity or the discontinuity of the Greek language and Greek culture, Cavafy negotiates and explores through the poems the various types of textual relations open to a Greek writer or speaker: rewriting, incorporating, cutting, absorbing, ignoring. Since this negotiation occurs primarily through the very language he is using, it is imperative in a translation to be attentive to its variations and forms.

“Ἐν Σπάρτῃ” and “Ἄγε ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων” are on the surface more closely bound, not only because they feature the same characters (the Spartan king Kleomenes and his mother Kratesikleia), but also because they derive from consecutive paragraphs in Plutarch’s “Life of Ages and Kleomenes” (XXII. 3-6). As Christopher Robinson convincingly shows, the dialogue between mother and son, as well as past and present, that “In Sparta” portrays is reinforced or

---

<sup>30</sup> It is precisely in citational poems such as “Καίσαριών,” “Ἄννα Κομνηνή” “Νέοι της Σιδώνας (400 μ.Χ.),” “Ο Ιουλιανός ορών ολιγορίαν,” “Στα 200 π.Χ.,” and “Ἄγε ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων” that this relationship is worked out on the thematic and linguistic level; most of them deal with issues of “rightness”: the right religion in the Julian poems, the right definition of the hero with Sidon, the rightful heir in the Byzantium, but also in the Sparta poems.

<sup>31</sup> I would not, however, go as far as to argue, as Gregory Jusdanis does, that such a use of language makes the thing talked about, i.e. “history,” irrelevant, that the poems’ language “signifies not so much an outer reality as it foregrounds itself as an amalgamation of words,” and that the focus on the word “does not transport readers to the thing, but compels them to observe the properties and mysteries of language” (115). Though Cavafy certainly observes and indirectly comments upon the workings of language, it does not seem to me that he is interested in presenting us with “mysteries.”

even carried out by Cavafy's use of distinct idioms. Robinson notes shift in the first two stanzas from "a slightly more formal level of language in the first, with a classicizing ring about it," with words and phrases like "ἤρχονταν," "προς την μητέρα", "φυλάττεται," "λίαν ταπεινωτικόν, ανοίκειον πράγμα", to "the consciously relaxed syntax of the phrase "εἶπε βεβαίως παίνει," and the insertion of the conversational "μάλιστα" and the contraction "νάναι"" in the second stanza (90). In the second half of the third stanza, however, the grammatical and lexical elements previously associated with Kleomenes are taken up by the mother ("ὄθεν," "απαίτησις," "πραγματικῶς," "Σπαρτιάτου") and, bolstered by the heavily-rhymed and iambic second and third lines, build up towards a "positive climax" and a "triumphant" tone in the assertion of Ptolemy's incapacity to understand Spartans. It thus becomes clear that the one who continues the Spartan lineage and language, the one who can be both proud of the past and adaptable to the present (through decisive sacrifice and the use of the demotic) is not at all the hesitating king, the man, but his unnamed mother (91).

In my translation of the poem I tried the distinction between the two idioms in the first two stanzas and maintain the incongruity of the third stanza that merges them. Even though the *καθαρεύουσα* is primarily sensed through grammatical forms in the poem, I chose not to archaize formally my English words since that would make the translation sound more stilted and artificial than the Greek. Instead, following Friar's suggestion, I used more formal, Latin-derived polysyllables. For instance, I chose "dispatch" instead of "send" for "αποσταλεί"; "detained" instead of "held" or "kept" for "φυλάττεται"<sup>32</sup>; "matter" instead of "thing" for "πράγμα";

---

<sup>32</sup> All the translations embellish Cavafy's simple and ambiguous verb; Keeley and Sherrard, Haviaras, Dalven, Theoharis, Barnstone use "held hostage," while Kolaitis opts for "kept in custody." Since the Cavafy's Greek (unlike Plutarch's with its "ὄμηρα") does not specify how she will be held/kept/guarded there (as hostage or as guest—"φυλάττω" after all also means "προφυλάττω, υπερασπίζω" and, additionally, in ancient Greek, "περιμένω"), I wanted to focus on the interruption of her movement, her localization; "detain" can mean both "keep in custody" with political overtones, but also simply "hold back," "make wait."

“approach” instead of “go to” (or only “be about to” as most of the translations have it) for “ήρχονταν”; “pause” instead of “stop” for “σταματούσε.” Finally, I borrowed the phrase “in pledge” (for “για εγγύησιν”) from Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch, which I also used in my translation of the next Sparta poem.

To make the difference with the second stanza palpable, again I resorted to mostly lexical strategies. In the first line I used “caught on to him” for “τον κατάλαβε” since “understood,” employed by most of the other translators, is vague and misses the tone. I chose it over Sachperoglou’s “saw through him” for its greater colloquialism, but also because it echoes the iambic flow of the Greek line, which, though broken already in the next line, is crucial in setting the more oral, demotic key the stanza will follow. I borrowed and slightly modified Haviaras’ second line, the most colloquial of the available translations. Finally, I pulled Cavafy’s “γήρας” back towards the demotic, by translating it as “at her age.” On the grammatical/syntactical level, I used contractions to mimic Cavafy’s own, while in the first stanza I had intentionally avoided them. I also smoothed out the word order in the last two lines by uniting “could be” with “useful,” but kept “still” at the end of the line so that it would not be entirely prosaic.

For the mixed third stanza, I followed the Greek and included in the translation both formal and informal words/phrases (“wherefore,” “apprehending,” “venerable” and “well, she didn’t care,” “upstart,” “hardly possible”). I was, however, primarily concerned with keeping the rhyme in the more demotic second and third lines and with retaining its echo in the fifth line’s formal “πραγματικώς”; it is this accented –ος/-ως sound (repeated ten times, plus one unaccented) that brings the entire stanza and its different registers together, as each part’s introductory word (“Όσο-““όθεν”) also suggests. Since my accent was set to an “a” with “as” and “humiliation,” I decided to retain Keeley and Sherrard’s “upstart” for “χθεσινός” in favor of the more exotic and

prosaic options proposed by the other translators.<sup>33</sup> By then translating “φρόνημα” rather freely as “heart,”<sup>34</sup> I maintained both the rhyme, and the ancient Greek sense of the word, “courage,” which is what the poem admires in Kratesikleia after all. Through words like (the necessary) “Sparta,” “hardly” and “in fact,” but also “apprehended,” “Lagid,” “demand,” “as” and “venerable,” and then “humiliate” and “Lady” I retained some of the assonance prominent in the Greek and compounded it with alliteration, aiming to bind thus inextricably on the level of sound formal and less formal locutions and bring across acoustically, linguistically, Kratesikleia’s thematic triumph.

Εν Σπάρτη

Δεν ήξερεν ο βασιλεύς Κλεομένης, δεν τολμούσε —  
 δεν ήξερε έναν τέτοιον λόγο πώς να πει  
 προς την μητέρα του: ότι απαιτούσε ο Πτολεμαίος  
 για εγγύησιν της συμφωνίας των ν’ αποσταλεί κι αυτή  
 εις Αίγυπτον και να φυλάττεται·  
 λίαν ταπεινωτικόν, ανοίκειον πράγμα.  
 Κι όλο ήρχονταν για να μιλήσει· κι όλο δίσταζε.  
 Κι όλο άρχιζε να λέγει· κι όλο σταματούσε.

Μα η υπέροχη γυναίκα τον κατάλαβε  
 (είχεν ακούσει κιόλα κάτι διαδόσεις σχετικές),  
 και τον ενθάρρυνε να εξηγηθεί.  
 Και γέλασε· κ’ είπε βεβαίως πηαίνει.  
 Και μάλιστα χείρονταν που μπορούσε νάναι  
 στο γήρας της ωφέλιμη στην Σπάρτη ακόμη.

Όσο για την ταπείνωσι — μα αδιαφορούσε.  
 Το φρόνημα της Σπάρτης ασφαλώς δεν ήταν ικανός  
 να νοιώσει ένας Λαγίδης χθεσινός·  
 όθεν κ’ η απαίτησίς του δεν μπορούσε

<sup>33</sup> On the exotic side, Kolaitis has “latecomer Lagid parvenu” and Theoharis, “a Lagid, arriviste,” while on the prosaic side, we have Sachperoglou’s “A Lagid, a king of only yesterday” and Barnstone’s “A king of the new Lagidis dynasty.” Dalven is periphrastically accurate with “a son of Lagus, born only yesterday,” while Haviaras takes the easy way out with “naïve.”

<sup>34</sup> Still, “heart” is closer to “φρόνημα” than Haviaras’ and Dalven’s “pride” since it refrains from interpreting what the “φρόνημα” might be. In that a “φρόνημα,” moreover, suggests, at least to me, a central set of beliefs implemented in and guiding life, Keeley and Sherrard’s, Kolaitis’ and Sachperoglou’s “spirit” seems too weak and intellectual, while “heart” retains the sense of “center” as well as a stronger tie “actuality” (through its attachment to the body).

πραγματικῶς να ταπεινώσει Δέσποιναν  
 Επιφανή ως αυτήν· Σπαρτιάτου βασιλέως μητέρα

In Sparta

He did not know, King Kleomenis, he did not dare—  
 he did not know how to utter such words  
 to his mother: that Ptolemy demanded  
 in pledge for their treaty that she too be dispatched  
 to Egypt and detained there;  
 a most humiliating, unseemly matter.  
 And he would approach her about to speak; and always hesitate.  
 And he would begin to tell; and always pause.

But the marvelous woman caught on to him  
 (besides, she'd already heard some rumors to the effect),  
 and encouraged him to explain himself.  
 And she laughed; and said of course she'd go.  
 And indeed she was glad that at her age  
 she could be useful to Sparta still.

As for the humiliation – well, she didn't care.  
 Certainly, apprehending Sparta's heart  
 Was hardly possible for a Lagid upstart;  
 wherefore his demand could not  
 humiliate in fact a Lady as  
 Venerable as she: mother of a Spartan king.

(Translated by K.S.)

When we move from “Ἐν Σπάρτῃ” to “Ἄγε ὦ βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων” we are not surprised to find Kleomenes' voice absent and the mother's ever more present, as the poem essentially depicts the double— etymological and paronomastic— unfolding of her name. Kratesikleia, the one who, as we know from the previous poem, holds the *κλέος*, and Kratesikleia, the one who as both Cavafy and Plutarch write in this poem, holds back her tears. Her movement, as depicted by the poem, is accompanied or mirrored by a similar movement in or of the poem's language. Kratesikleia no longer takes up her son's hesitating language in order to make it work, but is in a

sense given the closest thing to her own language—if we assume that the language written by Plutarch is her own.

The poem's initial iambic and strongly rhyming lines, in conjunction with the mostly colloquial vocabulary (words like “καυμό,” “τυράννια” and “βάσταξε,” the demotic-song phrase “κλαίει και θρηνεί,” the phrase “όσο και ναναι,” the verb forms of “καταδέχονταν” and “απόδειχνε”) locate us in a demotic tradition; even the more formal “εβάδιζε” in the third line seems to be there for metrical reasons, to keep the iamb going, as Kratesikleia herself keeps going. Adopting Friar's strategy, I translated Cavafy's demotic with Germanic words. So, for instance, I used “weeping and wailing” for “κλαίει και θρηνεί” because both phrases combine synonyms of different intensities; moreover, the Greek phrase is used in Greek demotic songs, as well as in a Good Friday hymn, while the English pair also appears in Bible translations and ballads. For Cavafy's very colloquial description of Kratesikleia's tortures, I intentionally chose “moils,” though it is an unusual and so not exactly colloquial word, since it is usually encountered with “toils” or in the word “turmoil,” as Cavafy's “τυράννια” echoes but is not “τυραννία.” For “καταδέχονταν” I used Haviaras' rendering partly to bring over Cavafy's colloquialism and tone; Keeley and Sherrard's more accurate “deign” does not admit of a modification similar to the demotic ending –ονταν that would make it more colloquial. With “demonstrated” for “απόδειχνε” I move away from Friar's “rule” and perhaps into the domain of awkwardness, but it seemed to me the perfect etymological equivalent for από-δειχνε, with its play on proof (here false), since both words mean “show” but do so by etymologically looking or pointing away. Finally, for the more formal “μεγαλοπρεπής” I used the Latinate sound-alike “majestic.”

I tried, moreover, for the first few lines, to keep the rhyme; my –ing is as insistent as Cavafy’s “i” rhymes, found internally and across lines. Since I additionally wanted to keep the rhyme between Kratesikleia and Alexandria (the old “heart” and the “upstart” of “*Ἐν Σπάρτῃ*”), I was led to eliminate “κόσμος” in the second line by making “allow” reflexive in the first line since that was the only way to have Kratesikleia at the end of the line. At the same time, I created in this way a stronger parallel with the Plutarchean text (and its “μηδείς”) by avoiding the stronger and more definite “the people” which appears in all other translations.

Despite this demotic beginning, the poem gradually gives way to, or goes towards an “older” language, Plutarch’s, giving up its rhyme and meter and succumbing to the historian’s prose. Right before the first word from Plutarch is cited, the poem shifts to the more formal “ασπάζονταν”— itself in fact, a Modern Greek adaptation of the word used by Plutarch (“κατασπασαμένη”). Following upon the heels of the citation of the Plutarchean participles (“διαλούντα” “και συντεταραγμένον”), Cavafy’s “συνελθούσα” seems to be a response to them; such a use of the participle instead of a relative clause uncommon even for Cavafy.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, “επάσχισε” is a demotic verb (πασχίζω) in *καθαρεύουσα* garb and an unusual syntactic position; normally it would be followed by a complement (verb or object) and would mean that Kratesikleia tried hard to.... But here its more passive sense, deriving from the older “πάσχω” is brought forth. In the longer citation we have a thematic mirroring of Kratesikleia’s initial concerns, crystallized in the same word: *δειδίδη*, which echoes throughout the citation (as Cavafy’s rhyme did in the beginning) in “μηδείς,” “μηδέ” and of course “διδώ.”

For my translation of Cavafy’s citations I have used as a basis Sir Thomas North’s sixteenth-century “Englising”—itself an indirect translation from the French translation of the Greek—sprinkled with a few words from the so-called Dryden translation. Though my English is

---

<sup>35</sup> See Μηνάς p. 76-77 and p. 102-105 for an analysis of Cavafy’s use of participles.

certainly less unfamiliar than Plutarch's Greek, it seemed to me, with its estranging spelling and its few false friends, to be the best option for someone unable to invent, as Pound might have been able to, a slightly less comprehensible translation. So, as the poem moves to Plutarch with "ασπάζονταν," I aimed for a more formal word in my translation; the only alternative to "kiss" was "osculate," whose mathematical or humorous connotations seemed inappropriate, while "embrace" for "αγκάλιασε" was not strong enough to convey the extent to which "ασπάζονταν" is out of context in the Greek. I decided on "enclasp," even though it is more formal in English than "ασπάζονταν" is in Greek; since, however, it bears its meaning on its sleeve, I assumed it would not pose any difficulties to the understanding, but rather convey a feeling of defamiliarization, like the rest of "my" Plutarch. I intentionally rendered pleonastically Plutarch's first participle, "διαλογούντα" (second in my translation), in order to include in the poem North's phrase (and false friend) "yerned for sorowe"; the phrase makes little sense unless we understand "yerned" in its older sense of "mourned" and the "for" as "because of." Since North does not give us another characterization or a participle, I borrowed the Latinate "discomposed" from Dryden to prepare for the later, Cavafean participle. For "συνελθούσα" I used again a participial phrase, "fashioning her countenance," deriving from North (who writes that she "facioned her counenaunce"). Finally, though I have modified North's Plutarch translation only slightly for the sake of conciseness, its first word, "Ἄγε" posed a problem. All the translators with the exception of Kolaitis have translated it as "Come"; yet such a rendering makes of Kratesikleia the leader. Though we know from the earlier poem that she indeed is one, it is important here that Cavafy has her ask her son to lead the way, thus already restoring a certain pride to following, to assenting to and reasserting what has been given, which we will encounter again in the poem's last line. Though the sense of "lead" then is necessary for "Ἄγε,"

on the one hand, I wanted to avoid the word “lead” as an Anglo-Saxon word that is, moreover, readily comprehensible, but on the other, I realized that “lead” was the only word that could also be transferred to the later poem “In 200 B.C..” where “ἀγω”-derived words are picked up again. I decided to preface “lead” with Dryden’s unusual translation for “ἄγε,” “Go to,” for the additional reason that it parallels the movement registered in the poem’s last line. Equating leading with a going to an unknown though no less clearly determined, given destination (“το δίδω”), Kratesikleia’s Spartan “heart” asks of her son to be the leader that we already know she is from the previous poem.

When after Plutarch we return to an iambic line, Kratesikleia’s signature word-gesture (“πηαίνοντας”; cf. the “βεβαίως πηαίνει” in “Ἐν Σπάρτῃ”), which proves her usefulness, her life in her old age, is coupled with the Plutarchean “διδώ.” In this case as well I have modified North, substituting “giveth” for “pleaseth.” In Greek, she goes towards what has been given, but not yet had; in a way, that is also Plutarch’s very language, “her” language that she precedes by over two hundred years. Going towards her death— as most critics read the last line— she also goes towards what will guarantee her future, namely Plutarch. In depicting Kratesikleia as taking up what has been given, handed down, the tradition, Cavafy himself is taking up Plutarch’s language; in a sense, its use is also what is argued in the poem, as various solutions are proposed: neglect (first few lines), unmarked borrowing (*ασπάζονταν*), mimesis (*συνελθούσα*), citation, mixture/incorporation on the level of the word (*πηαίνοντας προς το “διδώ”*). But insofar as Kratesikleia’s movement towards the past is also, literally, one towards the future, the “διδώ,” to live again, must also be combined with a “lived” and living language, must in a sense be measured otherwise, become part, as it is here, of a new (iambic) meter (or, in my version, of alliterative verse). Given then the particular way in which this poem unfolds, all of the

translation attempts up until now seem to me to be misguided since by not marking the Plutarchean text or at least, in the last line, the “giveth” that condenses it, they also fail to bring across the second level at which the poem is working.

“Άγε, ω βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων”

Δεν καταδέχονταν η Κρατησίκλεια  
ο κόσμος να την δει να κλαίει και να θρηνεί·  
και μεγαλοπρεπής εβιάδιζε και σιωπηλή.  
Τίποτε δεν απόδειχνε η ατάραχη μορφή της  
απ’ τον καϋμό και τα τυράννια της.  
Μα όσο και νάναι μια στιγμή δεν βάσταξε·  
και πριν στο άθλιο πλοίο μπει να πάει στην Αλεξάνδρεια,  
πήρε τον υιό της στον ναό του Ποσειδώνος,  
και μόνοι σαν βρεθήκαν τον αγκάλιασε  
και τον ασπάζονταν, «διαलगούντα», λέγει  
ο Πλούταρχος, «και συντεταραγμένον».  
Όμως ο δυνατός της χαρακτήρ επάσχισε·  
και συνελθούσα η θαυμασία γυναίκα  
είπε στον Κλεομένη «Άγε, ω βασιλεύ  
Λακεδαιμονίων, όπως, επάν έξω  
γενώμεθα, μηδείς ίδη δακρύοντας  
ημάς μηδέ ανάξιόν τι της Σπάρτης  
ποιούντας. Τούτο γαρ εφ’ ημίν μόνον·  
αι τύχαι δε, όπως αν ο δαίμων διδώ, πάρεισι.»

Και μες στο πλοίο μπήκε, πηαίνοντας προς το «διδώ».

“Go to, o kinge of Lacedaemon”

She was not about to allow herself, Kratesikleia  
to be seen weeping and wailing;  
and, majestic, she walked on, unspeaking.  
Her unruffled shape demonstrated nothing  
of her troubles and moils.  
But even so, for a moment she couldn’t carry on;  
and before boarding the wretched ship to go to Alexandria,  
she took her son into the temple of Poseidon,  
and once they were alone, kissing him she  
enclasped him, the “discomposed one” says  
Plutarch, who “yerned for sorowe.”  
Still her steadfast spirit suffered through;  
fashioning her countenance, the marvelous woman

said to Kleomenes, “Go to, lead o kinge of  
of Lacedaemon, and when out  
we come, lette no man see that we have cried  
or anywise dishonored Sparta.  
For that onely is in our power  
and for the rest, as giveth the goddes, so lette it be.”

And she took her ship, going toward the “giveth.”

(Translated by K.S.)

The third poem in the series—though the first one to be written— “Στα 200 π.Χ.” is the story told from the other side. It starts with an epigraph ignored by the Lacedaimonians who are ignored in it and is the supposed Cavafian celebration of Hellenism and the common Greek tongue from which the Lacedaimonians are excluded through their own stubbornness. This other side refers to an earlier time, Alexander’s, but through its date also gestures toward the more “recent” defeat of the Spartans that led to the infamous treaty with Ptolemy. Christopher Robinson locates in “In 200 B.C.” a series of historical ironies. The most obvious one is that articulated by the poem’s speaker: the Spartans, who did not think it was possible to unite Greece under any leader other than themselves, were proven wrong by Alexander’s conquests which rendered them insignificant. However, the title, situating the boastful Hellenistic speaker in time, adds a further layer of irony; the imminent destruction of the Hellenistic world by the Romans renders the speaker’s pride as misplaced as that of the Spartans. A giveaway perhaps for its misplacement and Cavafy’s “true” beliefs is, as Keeley also notes, the heightened rhetoric of the fifth stanza, with its unusually long list of adjectives (*Cavafy’s Alexandria* 146-47). Finally, the third level of irony identified by Robinson: the Roman conquest will still not “eradicate this triumph of the Greek language” that the poem’s speaker celebrates, as the poem itself, written in Alexandria two thousand years later, attests (15).

“In 200 B.C.” was already written in 1916; Cavafy’s decision to publish it after the other two, and to publish it, moreover, with a title that highlights its historical time (rather than its original title, “Πλην Λακεδαιμονίων”) urges us, I think, to consider all three poems together. If we do, however, this poem’s “message” becomes even more ambivalent and opaque. To begin with, the political union celebrated at the expense or exclusion of the Spartans has already been undone by 200 B.C. because of the temporary alliance between Sparta and Ptolemaic Egypt; moreover, the Spartan “heart” or pride is not defeated at all, given Kratesikleia’s attitude towards the Lagid in “Ἐν Σπάρτῃ.” Furthermore, those who here pride themselves on their “Κοινήν Ἑλληνική Λαλιά” cannot be bothered with the Spartans, who, however, in the earlier poem went towards a word and who were granted by Cavafy the very Koine (Plutarch’s) that this poem in fact lacks. The earliest instantiation of the Koine announces itself in the excerpted Alexandrian epigraph that constitutes not the poem’s epigraph, but its first line; as its two most significant words (“πλην Λακεδαιμονίων”) become absorbed by the poem, however, they lose their quotation marks at the second mention in the first line of the third stanza<sup>36</sup>, and in the single final line, they are “translated” into a very colloquial exclamation. This progression from “pure” Koine to contemporary modern Greek may also show the kind of continuity Keeley and Dallas argue for, but, in mirroring both the conquest boasted of as well as the imminent Roman one, it also reveals the imperialist movement of language. In this way, it enacts the missing part of Alexander’s inscription, which identifies the spoils sent to the Athenians as coming “from the Barbarians who dwell in Asia.” Cavafy omits this in order to (re)write its conclusion, namely that these Barbarians became if not Hellenes, at least Hellenizing.

---

<sup>36</sup> Keeley and Sherrard, as well as Sachperoglou, retain the quotations marks, thus blocking the very movement the poem is trying to record.

If we then think that the loss of this ecumenical Hellenicity is a loss, the irony is on us. While the previous poem tried to negotiate, to figure out a way in which the Koine and modern Greek can coincide, this poem responds that there is no longer a Koine, but there is still Greek, not at all common, though the Koine's descendant; the Lacedaimonians here are those who refuse to move forward, who cling to a silly patriotism and an old language— that is, the Lacedaimonians exclude the bearer of Lacedaimonian “heart” Kratesikleia, but include the Hellenistic speaker and perhaps, as Seferis claims, those in the twentieth century may cling onto a less-than-great past (Seferis' reading) or, in my reading, to something like a Koine and the dream of greater Greece.<sup>37</sup> If the Koine—with all of its older words—is absorbed as the “πλην” is by this modern Greek idiom, Plutarch's language of three centuries later in the other poem, to which that poem courageously ceded, is now overcome as modern Greek affirms its imperium again. As a counterpart to reverence, the appropriating movement of language consumes even the very glorified Koine. In this light, we might say that Cavafy's linguistically uniform translators might have remained faithful to his linguistic vision.

This vision is, however, not one stated, but one arrived at, after, as one of the poem's vaguest and hardest lines to translate puts it, after “την ποικίλη δράσι των στοχαστικών προσαρμογών.” In my translation I tried to keep the tension between the very oral quality of the text, especially in the second stanza, and the various lexically or grammatically more formal words— the Koine in a sense— that pop up, seemingly out of place, perhaps for rhetorical effect. That is, on the one hand we have “κάλλιστα,” “μα φυσικά,” “Αλλωστε,” “Δεν ήσαν... για να,” “Α βεβαιότατα,” “Είναι κι αυτή,” “Ετσι,” “στην τελειωτική την μάχη,” “βγήκαμ' εμείς” and the final “Για Λακεδαιμονίους να μιλούμε τώρα,” while on the other, words like “παντάπασι,” “πολυτίμους,” “περιωπής,” “εσαρώθη,” “μέγας,” “επίλοιποι,” “εν Περσίδι,” “στοχαστικών.” To convey the

---

<sup>37</sup> See Seferis' discussion of “μοραϊτισμός” in his unpublished “Υστερόγραφο,” p. 254-5.

general sense of colloquialism, as revealed also by the paratactic syntactic structure after the first two stanzas or the excessive use of the relative pronoun “*pou*” in the fourth stanza, I have largely followed Keeley and Sherrard’s, but also Friar’s translation, while making local lexical changes.

For instance, for “*παντάπασι*” my “utterly”, though, as an Anglo-Saxon word goes against Friar’s suggestion, seemed to convey better than Keeley and Sherrard’s “completely” the pretentiousness I sense is being attributed to the Spartans in the Greek adverb; Haviaras’ “give a damn” in being too colloquial also misses the tension, the already rhetorical style of the speaker. I have kept Keeley and Sherrard’s “precious” for “*πολυτίμους*” because it condenses the two senses of the Greek adjective (expensive and valuable) and is itself a “precious” word, often used to express contempt, such as that the Spartans—if we assume them to be the ventriloquized speakers—must have felt. Moreover, though I recognize the colloquialism in the phrase “*πολλής περιωπής*,” I chose not to do away with this “precious” word for the sake of an entirely colloquial rendering, as both Keeley and Sherrard and Haviaras do, but instead tried to incorporate a more formal word in an informal sentence structure; though my “contemplation” does not express the same figurative meaning as “*πολλής περιωπής*” (which would perhaps be more accurately translated by Sachperoglou’s “of much distinction”), it gets the general sense across (“it wasn’t worth the trouble”), while retaining the meaning of observation/sight hidden in the Greek word. “*Εσαρώθη*” exemplifies the poem’s central tension; as Colaclides also notes, it is a demotic verb, “*σαρώνω*,” transformed into *καθαρεύουσα*. I chose the more unusual though not unusable “sweep” instead of the conventional “sweep away” to convey this backwards movement; “sweep” by itself, moreover, used to also mean “cut off” or “cut down with a vigorous swinging stroke” and so it struck me as an appropriate verb for a battle. “*Επίλοιποι*” did not offer any “archaic” translational possibilities; I therefore transferred the archaism onto my

translation for “πολύριθμος,” “myriad,” which sounds more dated than “numerous” or “innumerable” that the other translators have offered. Finally, I turned the abstract phrase “στοχαστικές προσαρμογές,” which seems to describe the process of Hellenization, into the equally abstract “speculative adjustments.” “Στοχαστικός” in ancient Greek means either “proceeding by guesswork” or “skillful in aiming at” but in modern Greek it means what it has been translated as, namely cogitative, contemplative, thoughtful, ruminative and so on. I chose “speculative” precisely for the connotation of “conjecture” combined with thoughtfulness (which would accurately describe the reader’s efforts to decipher this word), as well as for its land-related and commercial or financial connotations.

My most daring choice, however, was the translation of “πλην” by “save.” “Save,” like “πλην” is more archaic than the “except” used by the other translators, but remains a usable word. Though I borrowed Sir Thomas North’s translation for the inscription, I preferred “save” over his (perhaps equally archaic) “excepting” because of its ambiguity when it is out of context. I see this ambiguity as that of the poem in relation to the previous two poems; Cavafy is essentially saving the Lacedaimonians firstly by speaking about them here though his speaker does not want to (and by making this historical moment the perfect one to speak of Lacedaimonians, as Keeley points out), secondly by having recorded and repeated Kratesikleia’s imagined speech and thirdly, by having implied that the Lacedaimonian “pride” lies precisely in the ability for adjustment and negotiation of one’s “giveths.”

In the context of my intertextual reading, I kept forms of the verb “lead” where the Greek uses forms of “άγω” in relation to the Lacedaimonians (“να τους οδηγούν,” “χωρίς Σπαρτιάτη βασιλέα γι’ αρχηγό”). I nonetheless encountered a problem with “Νοιώθεται.” This line that forms the third stanza is read by both Robinson and Keeley as expressing Cavafy’s, if not the

speaker's, sympathy for the Lacedaimonians. Indeed in "Ἐν Σπάρτῃ" the Lagid, the Hellenistic Greek is precisely unable to "νιώσει" the Spartan "φρόνημα." While in that poem, however, I used "apprehend," partly for the sake of its formality and partly for its double meaning of "sense" and "catch," the word did not fit this poem's poetic and linguistic economy. The various versions of "understand" and "understandable" used by the rest of the translators also seemed to inadequately express the linguistic/formal strangeness and semantic intimacy of Cavafy's "νοιώθεται." After the speaker has ventriloquized the Spartans' thoughts, he is tempted to feel his way into, to inhabit or colonize more fully their subject position, as he unknowingly finds himself in the very same historical position. To convey this intimacy or complicity, this change in tone, the poem's own "stasis" (hence my translation "stance" to suggest absence of movement in addition to "point of view") before the speaker puts on completely his own arrogant, we might say "Lacedaimonian" mask, I have chosen to abandon both the passive and impersonal third person singular (it/one) as possible renderings for the impersonal passive Greek, and use instead the second person singular as an impersonal: you, we can feel it, can feel our (and our language's) appropriating tendencies coming on, and the quotation marks are gone in the next line.

Finally, I tried to be attentive in my translation to the ways in which the poem's language undermines the very triumph it extols. After the highly rhetorical series of adjectives, some clearly demotic ("περιλάλητη," "περίλαμπρη," "δοξασμένη") and some less so ("νικηφόρα," "απαράμιλλη"), the conclusion "βγήκαμ' εμείς," with its demotic verb and elided vowel is almost a disappointment. For this reason I translated it as "came out," though "emerged" (used by Keeley-Sherrard, Haviaras and Theoharis) would certainly read better in English; yet Cavafy does not say what would be its equivalent. Moreover, the fact that the "Κοινήν Ἑλληνικὴ Λαλιά"

is introduced after the poem's two vaguest and least evocative lines ("Με τες εκτεταμένες επικράτειες, / με την ποικίλη δράσι των στοχαστικών προσαρμογών"), all of whose words belong precisely to that Koine, undermines or at least forms a contrast to its declared power. That these words, which describe the process of making uniform, common, fail to give a clear meaning suggests that commonness does not guarantee understanding and that perhaps no language can be maintained common or static. Looking at the variety of the translations for these two lines only drives the point home; in my translation I have intentionally used only Latinate polysyllables, continuing the rhetorical tone I had set with my similarly polysyllabic and Latinate translations of the adjectives in the fifth stanza.

Στα 200 π.Χ.

«Αλέξανδρος Φιλίππου και οι Έλληνες πλην Λακεδαιμονίων—»

Μπορούμε κάλλιστα να φαντασθούμε  
 πως θ' αδιαφόρησαν παντάπασι στην Σπάρτη  
 για την επιγραφήν αυτή. «Πλην Λακεδαιμονίων»,  
 μα φυσικά. Δεν ήσαν οι Σπαρτιάται  
 για να τους οδηγούν και για να τους προστάζουν  
 σαν πολυτίμους υπηρέτας. Άλλωστε  
 μια πανελλήνια εκστρατεία χωρίς  
 Σπαρτιάτη βασιλέα γι' αρχηγό  
 δεν θα τους φαίνονταν πολλής περιωπής.  
 Α βεβαιότατα «πλην Λακεδαιμονίων».

Είναι κι αυτή μια στάσις. Νοιώθεται.

Έτσι, πλην Λακεδαιμονίων στον Γρανικό·  
 και στην Ισσό μετά· και στην τελειωτική  
 την μάχη, όπου εσαρώθη ο φοβερός στρατός  
 που στ' Αρβηλα συγκέντρωσαν οι Πέρσαι:  
 που απ' τ' Αρβηλα ξεκίνησε για νίκη, κ' εσαρώθη.

Κι απ' την θαυμάσια πανελλήνιαν εκστρατεία,  
 την νικηφόρα, την περίλαμπρη,  
 την περιλάλητη, την δοξασμένη  
 ως άλλη δεν δοξάσθηκε καμιά,  
 την απaráμιλλη: βγήκαμ' εμείς·

ελληνικός καινούριος κόσμος, μέγας.

Εμείς· οι Αλεξανδρείς, οι Αντιοχείς,  
 οι Σελευκείς, κ' οι πολυάριθμοι  
 επίλοιποι Έλληνες Αιγύπτου και Συρίας,  
 κ' οι εν Μηδία, κ' οι εν Περσίδι, κι όσοι άλλοι.  
 Με τες εκτεταμένες επικράτειες,  
 με την ποικίλη δράσι των στοχαστικών προσαρμογών.  
 Και την Κοινήν Ελληνική Λαλιά  
 ως μέσα στην Βακτριανή την πήγαμεν, ως τους Ινδούς.

Για Λακεδαιμονίους να μιλούμε τώρα!

In 200 B.C.

“Alexander the sonne of Philip, and the Graecians, save the Lacedaimonians—“

We can very well imagine  
 how utterly indifferent they must have been in Sparta  
 to this inscription. “Save the Lacedaimonians”—  
 but of course. The Spartans  
 weren't to be led and ordered around  
 like precious servants. Besides,  
 a panhellenic expedition without  
 a Spartan king for leader  
 must have hardly seemed worthy of contemplation.  
 Oh, most certainly (then), “save the Lacedaimonians.”

This, too, is a stance. You can feel it.

And so, save the Lacedaimonians at Granikos;  
 and at Issus after that; and at the final  
 battle, where the formidable army was swept,  
 the army that at Arvela the Persians had gathered,  
 that from Arvela had set out to win, and was swept.

And out of this marvelous panhellenic expedition,  
 so victorious, so illustrious  
 so renowned, so glorified  
 as no other ever had been glorified,  
 unrivalled: we came out;  
 a Greek new world, magnificent.

We; the Alexandrians, the Antiochians,  
 the Selefkians, and the myriad

other Greeks of Egypt and of Syria  
 And those in Media, and those in Persia, and all the rest.  
 With the extensive territories,  
 with the varied action of speculative adjustments.  
 And the Common Greek Speech,  
 we carried it even into Bactria, even to the Indians.

Talk about Lacedaimonians now!

(Translated by K.S.)

This poem's triumph is not the Koine, but its overcoming by a singular idiom. That is the story told by the poem's single-line stanzas. From the hellenistic epigraph claiming to represent a totality (save the Lacedaimonians) to the divided line which both distances itself from and approaches what has been excluded, linguistically struggling between the more formal "στάσις" and "νοιώθεται," to the colloquial final exclamation, what emerges is a singular voice, distinct in tone from everything that has come before it. A voice, moreover, that puts into question everything that has come before it: who are the Lacedaimonians, should we or should we not speak about them, in what language would we, do we speak about them, is the Koine "good"? It is, therefore, imperative to try to bring its difference across in the translation, at least by contrasting it to the other single lines (and not by repeating a line used previously, as Haviaras does). In this way we would begin to render "l'effet de pluralité" that, as we have seen, Cavafy deploys differently in different poems, as he tries to save and question the expressive potentials of his languages, to come to and be led by the "useful," oral language to which he moves (πηαίνει) in his old age, as his not-yet fully explored "διδώ," but also to come to the "tradition" as his not-yet fully explored living language (Derrida 215). His simultaneous movement forward and backward opens up a space between languages, a translation's and translator's space, which Cavafy's translators might enter address even at the risk identified by Derrida, the risk that is of,

in the end, not producing what we would usually call a translation. But then again, Cavafy's poems are not always what we would usually call poems.

### Works Cited

- Bowersock, G.W. "The Julian Poems of C.P. Cavafy." *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 7 (1981): 89-104.
- Cavafy, Constantine. *Before Time Could Change Them: The Complete Poems of Constantine P. Cavafy*. Trans. Theoharis Constantine Theoharis. New York: Harcourt, 2001.
- . *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard. Ed. George Savidis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *The Canon: The Original One Hundred and Fifty-Four Poems*. Trans. Stratis Haviaras. Ed. Dana Bonstrom. Athens: Hermes, 2004.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Trans. Evangelos Sachperoglou. Ed. Anthony Hirst. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *The Collected Poems of C.P. Cavafy: A New Translation*. Trans. Alik Barnstone. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.
- . *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*. Trans. Rae Dalven. New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961.
- . *The Greek Poems of C.P. Cavafy*. Vol. 1. Trans. Memas Kolaitis. New Rochelle: A.D. Caratzas, 1989.
- Δάλλας, Γιάννης. "Ο Ιουλιανός και η Διάσταση των Δυο Κόσμων στον Καβάφη." *Η Ποίηση του Κράματος: Μοντερνισμός και Διαπολιτισμικότητα στο Έργο του Καβάφη*. Επιμλ. Μιχάλης Πιερής. Ηράκλειο: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης. 67-80.
- . *Σπουδές στον Καβάφη: Από την Ανάλυση στην Ανασύνθεση, Επενέργεια και Αφομοίωση*. Αθήνα: Ερμής, 1987.
- . *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Θεολογία στον Καβάφη*. Αθήνα: Στιγμή, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." *Difference in Translation*. Ed. Joseph Graham. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. 209-248.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin, 2003. 121-162.
- Friar, Kimon. "Cavafis and his Translators Into English." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 5.1 (1978): 17-40.
- Jusdanis, Gregory. *The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Keeley, Edmund. *Cavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- . "Problems in Rendering Modern Greek." *Essays in Memory of Basil Laourdas* (1975). 627-636.
- Κοκόλης, Ξ.Α. "«Πάρθεν». Γλωσσική ασυμβατότητα, ποιητική τεχνική και πολιτική εγρήγορση. Θερμοπύλες και Πάρθεν: Ένα πλην κι ένα συν στην ποίηση του Καβάφη. Θεσσαλονίκη:

- University Studio Press, 1985.
- Κολακλίδης, Πέτρος. “Η Γλώσσα του Καβάφη.” *Πρακτικά Τρίτου Συμποσίου Ποίησης: Αφιέρωμα στον Κ.Π. Καβάφη*. Επ. Σωκράτης Λ. Σκαρτης. Αθήνα: Γνώση, 1984. 119-146.
- McKinsey, Martin. “Language Questions: Diglossia, Translation and the Poetry of Nikos Engonopoulos.” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 8:2 (1990): 245-261.
- Μηνάς, Κωνσταντίνος. *Η Γλώσσα του Καβάφη από γραμματική και λεξιλογική άποψη*. Ιωάννινα: Πανεπιστήμιον Ιωαννίνων, 1985.
- Plutarch. *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. 1579. Trans. Sir Thomas North. Intro. George Wyndham. Ed. W.E. Henley. Vols. 4 & 5. New York: AMS Press, 1967.
- . *Plutarch's Lives*. Vols. 7 & 10. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.
- Pontani, Filippo Maria. “Η Μετρική του Καβάφη.” Μτφ. Σωτήρης Τριβυζάς. *Επτά Δοκίμια και Μελετήματα για τον Καβάφη (1936-1974)*. Πρόλογος: Γιώργος Σαββίδης. Εισαγωγή: Massimo Peri. Αθήνα: Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1991. 73-148.
- Pound, Ezra. *Poems and Translations*. Ed. Richard Sieburth. New York: Library of America, 2003.
- Ricks, David. “Cavafy Translated.” *Kampos* 1 (1993): 85-110.
- Σεφέρης, Γιώργος. “Κ.Π. Καβάφης, Θ.Σ. Έλιοτ· παράλληλοι,” *Δοκίμες Α*. Αθήνα: Ίκαρος, 1984, 324-363.
- . “Υστερόγραφο.” *Ο Καβάφης του Σεφέρη*. Επμλ. Γιώργος Σαββίδης. Αθήνα: Ερμής, 1984. 252-258.

### Translations Cited

#### In Sparta

King Kleomenes didn't know, he hardly dared,  
 he just didn't know how to go about telling his mother  
 such a thing: to explain to her Ptolemy's demand  
 that she too would be sent to Egypt, that she would be  
 held a hostage there in order to guarantee thier agreement;  
 such an inappropriate and embarrassing demand.  
 And so he was always about to say something, but he  
 always stopped himself. And he would make a start  
 at telling her, but each time he couldn't finish.

But this remarkable woman knew what was happening  
 (she'd already, after all, heard rumors to the effect),  
 so she encouraged him to say what was on his mind.  
 and when he did she laughed, saying of course she'd go.  
 she was even pleased that at her advanced age  
 she could still be of so much use to Sparta.

As for the humiliation, it mattered not at all to her.  
 It went without saying that the naive Lagides was

in no way capable of appreciating Spartan pride;  
 and as a result his demand could hardly  
 result in the humiliation of a remarkable  
 woman like her, she the mother of a Spartan king. (Translated by **Stratis Haviaras**)

In Sparta

King Cleomenes did not know, he did not dare--  
 he did not know how to put into words such a request  
 to his own mother: that Ptolemy had demanded  
 that she be sent to Egypt also and he held a hostage there  
 as a guarantee of their agreement;  
 a very humiliating, unseemly matter.  
 And he was always about to speak; and he always demurred.  
 And he always started to say it; and he always faltered.

But this superior woman understood him  
 (besides, she had already heard some rumors about it),  
 and she encouraged him to explain.  
 And she laughed; and she said certainly she would go.  
 And indeed she rejoiced that she was able  
 still to be useful to Sparta in her old age.

As for the humiliation--well she was indifferent.  
 Assuredly he, a son of Lagus, born only yesterday,  
 was unable to understand Spartan pride;  
 and so his request could not really  
 humiliate a Great Lady as  
 illustrious as she; the mother of a Spartan king. (Translated by **Rae Dalven**)

In Sparta

He did not know, the king Cleomenes, he did not dare--  
 he did not know how best to frame the words to tell  
 his mother: that the Ptolemy demands  
 as guarantee for their agreement, that she also go  
 to Egypt, to be kept in custody,  
 a most humiliating thing, most inconsiderate.  
 Time after time he meant to speak; but then held back;  
 time after time he tried to tell; but had to stop.

But yet the peerless woman understood  
 (already she had heard some rumors on this point)  
 so she encouraged him to speak his mind.  
 and then she smiled; she said she certainly would go;  
 in fact, that she was happy she could be,

in her old age, of use to Sparta once again.

As for humiliation -- she could not care less.  
 the spirit of a Spartan could not possibly be sensed  
 by that latecomer Lagid parvenu;  
 wherefore his stipulation could not be,  
 in any way, humiliating to a Dame  
 illustrious as she, the mother of a Spartan king. (Translated by **Memas Kolaitis**)

“Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians”

Kratesikleia was not about to allow  
 the people to see her in tears and in mourning;  
 She held herself regally as she walked in silence.  
 In her face, in her self-composure she betrayed  
 Nothing of her overwhelming sorrow and pain.  
 And yet, at a certain point she could no longer hold up;  
 and just before she boarded that shameful ship for Alexandria,  
 she accompanied her son to the temple of Poseidon,  
 and only when they were alone there did she embrace him  
 and cover him in kisses, “in great pain,”  
 Plutarch tells us, “and extremely agitated”.  
 Nevertheless, her powerful spirit labored on;  
 and, regaining her composure, this splendid woman  
 said to Kleomenes, “Come, O King of the  
 Lacedaemonians, when finally we leave this place  
 let no person bear witness to our weeping,  
 Nor to any behavior that may be deemed unworthy  
 of Sparta. Let this be a matter strictly between us;  
 And as for our destiny, let us trust in the gods’ will”.

And she boarded the ship, headed toward that “will”.

(Translated by **Stratis Haviaras**)

“Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians”

Cratesicleia did not condescend  
 to let the world see her weeping and mourning;  
 Majestically she walked and in silence.  
 on her immobile face nothing was betrayed  
 Of her extreme sorrow and her torment.  
 Nevertheless, for a moment, she did not hold back;  
 and before she embarked on the wretched ship for Alexandria,

she took her son to the temple of Poseidon,  
 and when they found themselves alone, she embraced him  
 and covered him with kisses, "in great pain," says  
 Plutarch, and "excessively troubled."  
 Nevertheless her strong character struggled;  
 and having recovered, the admirable woman  
 said to Cleomenes, "Come, O King of the  
 Lacedaemonians, when we go out of here,  
 let no person see us weep or conduct ourselves  
 in a manner that is unworthy of Sparta.  
 Let this remain between us alone;  
 As for our destiny, it will be according to god's will."

And she embarked on the ship, going toward that "will."  
 (Translated by **Rae Dalven**)

"Lead on, O king Lacedaemonian"

Cratisicleia would not condescend  
 to let the people see her weeping and bewailing; so  
 majestic and in silence she walked on.  
 The calmness of her countenance could never show  
 the yearning and the torments of her grief.  
 But even so, there came a moment she felt weak.  
 And so, before she boarded the cursed ship for Alexandria,  
 she asked her son to go with her into Poseidon's shrine;  
 then, when alone with him, embracing him  
 she kissed him tenderly, "while anguishing",  
 as Plutarch says, "and most perturbed".  
 But her strong will prevailed, and soon,  
 her pose regained, this admirable dame  
 turned to Cleomenes, and said: "Lead on, O king  
 Lacedaemonian, so when outside  
 we are, no one shall see us shedding tears  
 or anywise conduct ourselves as if unfit  
 for Sparta. This, at least, is in our hands;  
 the fates, in what the god has willed, abide".

And then she went aboard her ship for what was "willed".  
 (Translated by **Memas Kolaitis**)

In 200 B.C.

"Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks, except the  
 Lacedaemonians . . ."

We can imagine perfectly well  
 how utterly indifferent they must have been in Sparta  
 to this inscription. "Except the Lacedaemonians,"  
 but of course. The Spartans were not made  
 to be ordered about and led by the nose  
 like invaluable servants. Besides,  
 a panhellenic expedition without  
 a Spartan king for leader  
 would not have seemed to them of much distinction.  
 Ah, most assuredly, "except the Lacedaemonians."

This, too, is an attitude. It's understandable.

And so, except the Lacedaemonians at the Granicus;  
 and afterwards at Issos; and at the final  
 battle where the dread army the Persians  
 had massed at Arbela was swept away:  
 which had set out for Arbela for victory, and was swept away.

And out of that remarkable panhellenic expedition,  
 so victorious and so illustrious,  
 so celebrated and so glorified  
 as no other before had ever been glorified,  
 and so incomparable, we were born:  
 a new world of Greeks, a great one.

We, the Alexandrians, the Antiocheans,  
 the Seleucians, and the innumerable  
 remaining Greeks of Egypt and of Syria,  
 and those in Persia, and in Media, and all the others.  
 With our far-reaching empire,  
 our various actions, the result of prudent adaptation,  
 and the Greek Common Language  
 which we brought far into Bactria, even to the Indians.

What's all this talk about the Lacedaemonians now!

(Translated by **Kimón Friar**)

In the Year 200 B.C.

"Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks, except the  
 Lacedaemonians—"

It's very easy to imagine everyone in Sparta

not giving a damn about that part of the inscription:  
 “except the Lacedaemonians”. It’s only natural.  
 The Spartans would never agree to be led about  
 and ordered around as if they were nothing more than  
 a bunch of well-paid servants. In any event,  
 a Panhellenic expedition being organized  
 without a Spartan king as its commander-in-chief  
 would certainly not be something to take too seriously.  
 So then, most assuredly: “except the Lacedaemonians”.

That’s certainly a stance. It’s understandable.

And so, therefore, except the Lacedaemonians, at Granikos  
 and, after that, at Issos and, after that, in the final battle,  
 where the fearsome army that the Persians had assembled  
 at Arvela was totally and completely destroyed:  
 they set out to win at Arvela, but were totally destroyed.

And out of that magnificent Panhellenic expedition,  
 victorious, brilliant in every sense of the word,  
 universally celebrated, and fittingly glorified  
 as none other had ever been glorified before,  
 this matchless expedition, we emerged:  
 a vast, freshly-minted Hellenic world.

We, the Alexandrians and the Antiocheans,  
 the Selefkians, and the diverse sorts of other  
 Greeks, those of Egypt and those of Syria,  
 those of Media and those of Persia, and many others.  
 With our far-reaching territories,  
 and our diverse policies of judicious integration,  
 and the common Greek language,  
 which we carried as far as Bactria, and even to India.

Who gives a damn about the Lacedaemonians!

(Translated by **Stratis Haviaras**)

In the Year 200 B.C.

“Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks except the  
 Lacedaimonians—“

We can very well imagine  
 how they’d have shown complete indifference

to this inscription in Sparta. "Except the Lacedaimonians,"  
 that's natural. The Spartans aren't the sort  
 to be led by others, to be commanded  
 like precious servants. Besides  
 a pan-Hellenic expedition without  
 the reigning Spartan as commander  
 would not have seemed notable at all to them.  
 Yes, certainly, "except the Lacedaimonians."

That too is a position. Quite understandable.

So, except the Lacedaimonians at Granikos;  
 and after that at Issus; and in the decisive  
 battle that demolished the terrifying army  
 which the Persians mustered at Arbela:  
 which set out for victory from Arbela, and was demolished.

And from this marvelous pan-Hellenic expedition,  
 the triumphant, the effulgent,  
 the extolled, the glorified as  
 no other ever had been glorified,  
 the peerless: we emerged;  
 a new Greek world, magnificent.

We; the Alexandrians, the Antiochians,  
 the Selefkians, and the numberless  
 remaining Greeks of Egypt and of Syria,  
 and those in Media, and those in Persia, and all the rest.  
 With our widespread governance of many lands,  
 with a versatile process of judicious adjustment.  
 And the Common Greek Language  
 which we've carried as far as Bactria, as far as the Indians.

As if we'd mention Lacedaimonians now!

(Translated by **Theoharis C. Theoharis**)

## Cavafy's Greek (in Translation)

James Nikopoulos

---

Cavafy's work has been looked at from a culturally specific point-of-view many times, depending on the culture one would choose to ascribe to him, whether this be Alexandrian, diaspora, gay, or Hellenistic. One aspect that has not been addressed enough concerns the extent to which he glorifies the Greek language, and the Greek language alone. For a Greek poet whose English sensibility has been stressed so much, the extent to which his work displays a type of language-specific ethnocentricity leaves quite an impression. When the unnamed speaker of "For Ammones Who Died At 29, in 610" tells the poet Raphael that he is the man capable of writing a few lines in commemoration of the deceased poet of the title, he justifies his judgment by praising the beauty of his Greek. He does not merely praise his poetry or use of language, but he specifies Greek, an important distinction in a poem that heightens the awareness of difference between Egyptian sentiment and foreign languages.

Many writers before Cavafy have used their work to glorify their native tongue. Dante would be the first example to come to mind, as he almost single-handedly resurrected Italian demotic poetry from the ignominy of a minor literature. His influence was felt far and wide, including by those who during the formative years of the Modern Greek nation utilized Dante as an exemplar when championing the use of demotic Greek over *katharevousa*. Writers from Solomos to Kazantzakis used Dante as justification for the demotic cause.<sup>38</sup> Cavafy, however, writing far from the center of the debate in Athens, remained shockingly silent on this issue when looked at in relation to other major Greek writers of his time. His early verse utilizes

---

<sup>38</sup> See Zissimos Lorenzatos. "Solomos' Dialogos," and Peter Bien. *Kazantzakis and the Linguistic Revolution in Greek Literature*.

*katharevousa* often enough, but the work for which he would later become most well known incorporates a more conversational style and hence, shuns the self-conscious formality that accompanies the use of *katharevousa*. Cavafy's handling of the language question was inherently apolitical. In this respect, his discussion of the subject of the Greek language within his poetry can be seen as unique; for, Cavafy never addresses the question of which Greek to use in his poetry. Any and all forms of the language prove useful to his work.<sup>39</sup> With Cavafy then, arises the curious case of a man writing famously from the margins, centralizing the margins in the process, who with not an ounce of political motivation, persistently proclaims the supremacy of the Greek language over any other. His treatment of the subject of his language concerns not so much the place of Greek in a society of Greeks, but the historical significance of the use of Greek by those speaking it in a place where it has long since fallen into the status of a minor language.

The reasons behind the selection of these poems for translation will prove quite obvious. In thinking about this subject, I have chosen a specific angle of translation that does not always manifest itself in the same way. Much has been made concerning the lack of Cavafy translations that faithfully communicate the rhythm, rhyme, and cadence of the original Greek. While much of this cannot be avoided, I have tried to tackle these poems from the belief that the primary aspect of these poems that needs to be communicated across languages is each poem's statements concerning the centrality (and non-centrality) of the Greek language. I have tried to be as faithful, as I see it, to Cavafy's original text, and whatever liberties I have taken in terms of not just word choice, but rhyme and cadence especially, were done with the goal of highlighting this specific aspect of these works. The greatest liberties were taken when I tried to adhere as

---

<sup>39</sup> Cavafy is recorded by Sareyannis to have been disgusted by the debate between *katharevousa* and demotic, declaring that both sides aimed to "throw half our language away." See Roderick Beaton. *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, n. p. 338.

closely as possible to the word order and rhyme scheme of the Greek, an adherence only attempted when I felt that the thematic concerns of the poem required it.

The first translation I have made is, “For Ammones, Who Died Aged 29, in 610.” Its parallel themes of the loss of the fictional poet Ammones and the passing of the Greek language into a subsequent foreign language make it an obvious choice.

ΓΙΑ ΤΟΝ ΑΜΜΟΝΗ, ΠΟΥ ΠΕΘΑΝΕ  
29 ΕΤΩΝ, ΣΤΑ 610

Ραφαήλ, ολίγους στίχους σε ζητούν  
για επιτύμβιον του ποιητού Αμμώνη να συνθέσεις.  
Κάτι πολύ καλαίσθητον και λείον. Συ θα μπορέσεις,  
είσαι ο κατάλληλος, να γράψεις ως αρμόζει  
για τον ποιητήν Αμμώνη, τον δικό μας.

Βέβαια θα πεις για τα ποιήματά του—  
αλλά να πεις και για την εμορφιά του,  
για την λεπτή εμορφιά του που αγαπήσαμε.

Πάντοτε ωραία και μουσικά τα ελληνικά σου είναι.  
Όμως την μαστοριά σου όληνα τη θέμε τώρα.  
Σε ξένη γλώσσα η λύπη μας κ’ η αγάπη μας περνούν.  
Το αιγυπτιακό σου αίσθημα χύσε στην ξένη γλώσσα.

Ραφαήλ, οι στίχοι σου έτσι να γραφούν  
που νάχουν, ξέρεις, από την ζωή μας μέσα των,  
που κι ο ρυθμός κ’ η κάθε φράσις να δηλούν  
που γι’ Αλεξανδρινό γράφει Αλεξανδρινός.

For Ammones, Who Died Aged 29, in 610

Raphael, they ask of you a few verses  
to compose for the epitaph of the poet Ammones.  
Something in very good taste and polished. You will be able,  
you are the appropriate person, to write as befits  
the poet Ammones, our very own.

Of course you will speak about his poems –  
but speak also of his beauty,  
of that refined beauty of his we loved.

Always beautiful and musical your Greek has been.  
 But now we want all of your mastery.  
 Into a foreign tongue our sorrow and our love pass.  
 Pour your Egyptian sentiment into the foreign tongue.

Raphael, your verses like this should be written  
 so they contain you know, something of our life in them,  
 so the rhythm and every phrase demonstrate  
 that an Alexandrian writes about an Alexandrian.

The initial objective of my translation concerned the rhythm and tone of voice of the poem as a whole. On a general level, tone of voice and rhythm proved to be my initial guides with each translation. Here, the elegant verses that Raphael is being asked to compose should be reflected in the query itself, which is the poem. This is reflected in the Greek. The use of many end-stopped lines, which are rather long and yet mostly unrhymed, cause the poem to be read in long breaths that give it a tone of reverence. This becomes especially important upon consideration of the fact that this is a poem of commemoration, not only of the passing of a loved one, but of the felt loss of a natural mode of communication. Perhaps it seems ironic that I chose this as the first of my translations considering the fact that for as much as the elegance of Greek is proclaimed, the reality of Greek as a foreign tongue to these Egyptians, and consequentially to Cavafy as well, comes across perhaps even more forcibly. Despite this, the poem trusts in Greek and specifically in Greek alone. For this reason, I believe that any translation of this poem needs to work against the seemingly predominant trend of seeing Cavafy's poetry, as translated into English, as prosaic.

The first line of my version aims immediately to undo any quotidian element. "Raphael, they ask of you a few verses," though not exactly formal, does not read as effortlessly as, for example, the first line as translated by Keeley and Sherard: "Raphael, they're asking you to write

a few lines . . .” My goal was to do away with such everyday syntax.<sup>40</sup> This is why I have kept the Greek word order in lines such as: “Always beautiful and musical your Greek has been,” and “Into a foreign tongue our sorrow and our love pass.” This last line, the third in stanza three, needed to be left in this order so as to retain the horizontal movement of the original, which begins in line three of the stanza with, Σε ξένη γλώσσα, and ends the stanza with the final passing into the foreign tongue, στην ξένη γλώσσα. I believe this movement to be key to the theme of the poem, as well as one of the stylistic elements that best conveys this elegiac tone of which I have already spoken.

The line that requires the greatest justification is the one previously quoted, the one that begins the penultimate stanza: “Always beautiful and musical your Greek has been.” I am the only translator to have taken this liberty, no doubt because of how clunky it comes across in English. However, I would argue that rather than clunky, the line comes across as a loftier form of poetic syntax. Though English, being an uninflected language, does not allow for a rearrangement of word order the way Greek does, it is not unheard of for such rearranging to be done on behalf of poetic concerns. In his poem commemorating the work of John Milton, “On Paradise Lost,” Andrew Marvel writes, “Or if a work so infinite he spanned, / Jealous I was that some less skillful hand . . .” (Milton, 17-18). Though in English such a rearranging has become resigned to mostly antiquated literary purposes, which is not necessarily the case in Greek, it is nevertheless important to realize that the word order of this line in Greek comes across as less conversational than if a subject–verb–object order had been utilized. I especially wanted to stress this in this stanza as a contrast to the final stanza of the poem, in which the speaker’s point-of-view comes across more forcibly and I believe slightly more conversationally. It represents a

---

<sup>40</sup> Though I will be making many critiques of other translations throughout this paper, I would like to at least acknowledge the fact that without these translations I would not have been able to proceed with my own project. The depth of my indebtedness to previous translators comes across most as I make my claims for difference.

thematic shift, a very slight shift of tone Cavafy often adeptly incorporates into his work. These last lines now place the emphasis concerning the rationale behind the composition of these verses onto a more intimate plane: “so they contain you know, something of our life in them.” I translated the Greek, ἔτσι into the rather obtrusive, “you know” rather than incorporating a more fluid element such as what George Valassopoulo<sup>41</sup> uses in his translation, “in such a manner,” because I wanted it to be obtrusive and conversational. It represents the most forceful intrusion of point-of-view in the poem; therefore, I sacrificed fluidity of movement for semantics.

Two other choices require explanations. I translated αἰσθημα as “sentiment” rather than “feeling,” as it is rendered by Keeley and Sherard, as well as by Sachperoglou, Valassopoulo, and Dalven, because sentiment conveys a type of tenderness and nostalgia, which commemorates both the passing of “our love into a foreign tongue” as well as “their” language into a foreign one. Sentiment has more of a subjective particularity than the more literal translation of “feeling.” Another choice I made, which differs from all the other translators previously mentioned comes in the last line. I used the simple present, “writes” rather than the continuous present, because I want this final act of the poem to be read as something that echoes over time, hence greater emphasizing the elegiac element of the passing of language.

As a point of contrast to what was done in “For Ammones,” I would now like to look at my translation of “Philhellene.”

#### ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ

Τὴν χάραξι φρόντισε τεχνικά να γίνει.  
Ἐκφρασις σοβαρή και μεγαλοπρεπής.

---

<sup>41</sup> For all translations other than Keeley/ Sherard, Dalven, and Sachperoglou, see [Hwww.cavafy.com](http://www.cavafy.com)H.

Το διάδημα καλλίτερα μάλλον στενό·  
 εκείνα τα φαρδιά των Πάρθων δεν με αρέσουν.  
 Η επιγραφή, ως σύνηθες, ελληνικά·  
 όχ' υπερβολική, όχι πομπώδης—  
 μην τα παρεξηγήσει ο ανθύπατος  
 που όλο σκαλίζει και μηνά στην Ρώμη —  
 αλλ' όμως βέβαια τιμητική.  
 Κάτι πολύ εκλεκτό απ' το άλλο μέρος·  
 κανένας δισκοβόλος έφηβος ωραίος.  
 Προ πάντων σε συστήνω να κυττάξεις  
 (Σιθάσπη, προς θεού, να μη λησμονηθεί)  
 μετά το Βασιλεύς και το Σωτήρ,  
 να χαραχθεί με γράμματα κομψά, Φιλέλλην.  
 Και τώρα μη με αρχίζεις ευφυολογίες,  
 τα «Πού οι Έλληνες;» και «Πού τα Ελληνικά  
 πίσω απ' τον Ζάγρο εδώ, από τα Φράατα πέρα».  
 Τόσοι και τόσοι βαρβαρότεροί μας άλλοι  
 αφού το γράφουν, θα το γράψουμε κ' εμείς.  
 Και τέλος μη ξεχνάς που ενίοτε  
 μας έρχοντ' από την Συρία σοφισταί,  
 και στιχοπλόκοι, κι άλλοι ματαιόσπουδοι.  
 Ωστε ανελλήνιστοι δεν είμεθα, θαρρώ.

### Philhellene

Take care that the engraving comes out skillfully.  
 The expression serious and majestic.  
 The diadem preferably somewhat tight:  
 I don't like those loose ones of the Parthians.  
 The inscription, as is customary, in Greek,  
 Not exaggerated, not pompous –  
 So there is no misunderstanding by the proconsul  
 Who is always digging things up and bringing them to Rome –  
 but of course giving due honor.  
 On the other side something quite exceptional,  
 some discus-thrower, youthful beautiful.  
 Above all I advise you to make sure  
 (Sithaspes, by god's name, not to be forgotten)  
 after the titles of King and Savior,  
 to inscribe in elegant characters, Philhellene.

But for now don't start with your witticisms,  
 the "Where the Greeks?" and "Where is Greek  
 here behind Zagro, further past Phraata."  
 So many others more barbarian than us  
 write them, we will write them as well.  
 And in the end don't forget that sometimes  
 sophists come to us from Syria,  
 as well as versifiers, and other vainglorious types.  
 We are not that unhellenized then, I believe.

My translation does not make any choices that are drastically different from those of Keeley and Sherard, Mendelsohn, and Dalven. It can be seen as a point of contrast with the previous translation, because it shows when syntactical liberties can be justified and when they cannot. This poem begins with the line, Την χάραξι φρόντισε τεχνικά να γίνει. Once again, Cavafy employs a word order that is not easily rendered into English. While the placement of the verb at the end of the line is crucial to the poetics in the original, it must be sacrificed in the English, because by reversing the natural subject–verb–object arrangement of English in this instance, as I had done in the previous translation, the result would be something contrary to the overall tone of the poem, which is not elegiac, nor formal.<sup>42</sup> The insertion of the aside reminding Sithaspes not to forget to inscribe the word "Philhellene" is proof of this. It is an informal, conversational aspect of a poem, which reads smoothly in Greek and should read as smoothly in English. The confident perspective of the speaker is as sure of what he wants to convey in the poem as in the engraving he is discussing.

I did, however, make certain decisions as a result of this project's mission. "Digging up" was chosen for σκαλίζει rather than expressions such as "smelling things out," as Keeley and

---

<sup>42</sup> This translational project can in a way be seen as an attempt to nullify the belief that it is Cavafy's "tone of voice," which is what most survives translation, as W.H. Auden's so famously remarked. Rather, I would claim that there are many tones of voices that come across in Cavafy's poetry. See Auden, "Introduction" (xvi).

Sherard translate it, or “poking about” as Dalven does, because there needs to be an action of excavation. This is a poem, after all, which discusses engravings and inscriptions, both actions of carving into something solid. This resonates with the poem’s thematic element concerning the questioning of true Hellenism, whether a true Hellene can be found out in the margins of the Hellenic world, where nevertheless “sophists,” “versifiers, and other vainglorious types” still come. Notice that “sophists” and “versifiers” are tradesmen in language. Since this poem calls into question what defines a Hellene, it bears recalling that to be Greek, since ancient times, has been defined as someone who speaks the Greek language. The Jewish diaspora presents an interesting counterexample. Customs and ritual practices, rather than language, tie together a Jewish diaspora, which had been dispersed across a wide range of national and linguistic boundaries. To be Greek, however, means to speak Greek.<sup>43</sup> Cavafy understood this, and because of this, every utterance of Greek within a nation whose primary language is not Greek, such as the locale of this poem or Cavafy’s own Alexandria, initiates a process of disinterring a Hellenized past from the land, or recalling that at one time Greek arrived in the margins of the Mediterranean as a result of the conquests of Alexander, and in a way, it never fully left.

When in “Philhellene,” the speaker proves that “We” are not unhellenized because sophists and other vainglorious types still come around, the speaker is making his case on two planes. On the first, there is the contrast between the so-called Hellenic types, sophists and versifiers, who are supposedly more refined, and the speaker’s fellow locals. The poem on one level represents these elevated tradesmen in the Greek language as inflated beyond their worth, hence my rendering of *ματαιόσπουδοι* as “vainglorious.” At the same time, however, the poem

---

<sup>43</sup> A case can be made for religion as another defining characteristic of being Greek, especially during the Asia Minor disaster and subsequent population exchange. However, this aspect of cultural identification is a modern conception tied to the concept of the nation. Unlike the Jews, who have always been Jewish in their religious practices, the religious practices of the Greek people historically encompass not just Greek Orthodoxy, but various forms of Christianity, as well as Judaism and the Paganism of the pre-Christian era.

recalls the roots of Hellenic identification, because to be a Greek meant to be a speaker of the Greek language, whether this is in the service of a lofty philosophical pursuit or in a more self-important one, such as that of a sophist.<sup>44</sup> If these types still come to the speaker's home, then they are not so unhellenized. They are not so unhellenized then, both because they are better than these vainglorious types who are Hellenes, and because they are grouped together with these vainglorious types, since they still deem the speaker's home worthy of their visits.

The next translations is the one in which I took the greatest liberties and deviated the most from the paths of previous translators:

#### ΕΙΣ ΙΤΑΛΙΚΗΝ ΠΑΡΑΛΙΑΝ

Ο Κήμος Μενεδόρου,	Ιταλιώτης νέος,
τον βίον του περνά	μέσα στες διασκεδάσεις·
ως συνειθίζουν τούτο	οι απ' την Μεγάλη Ελλάδα
μες στα πολλά τα πλούτη	αναθρεμένοι νέοι.

Μα σήμερα είναι λίαν,	παρά το φυσικό του,
σύννους και κατηφής.	Κοντά στην παραλίαν,
με άκραν μελαγχολίαν	βλέπει που εκφορτώνουν
τα πλοία με την λείαν	εκ της Πελοποννήσου.

Λάφυρα ελληνικά·	η λεία της Κορίνθου.
------------------	----------------------

Α σήμερα βεβαίως	δεν είναι θεμιτόν,
δεν είναι δυνατόν	ο Ιταλιώτης νέος
νάχει για διασκεδάσεις	καμιάν επιθυμίαν.

---

<sup>44</sup> Obviously the delineations between the value judgments of philosophers and sophists being made in this paper are highly reductive. They merely serve to heighten the contrasts already in-play within the poem itself.

On An Italian Shore

Kemos son of Menedoros, Italiote youth,  
 passes his life among amusements,  
 as is the habit for these who from Greater Greece  
 amongst many luxuries are raised.

But today he is particularly, contrary to his nature,  
 pensive and downcast. Near the beach,  
 in deep melancholy he sees them unload  
 the ships with their booty from the Peloponnese.

Greek spoils, the booty of Corinth.

Ah today at least it is not lawful,  
 it is not possible that the Italiote youth  
 should have for amusements any desire.

I must begin my discussion of this poem firstly by contrasting it to the two best-known translations of it beforehand. James Merrill's translation is by far the most beautiful, but it is beautiful to a fault. There is nothing in the Greek that matches the type of literary register of a word such as "disgorges." Keeley and Sherard's translation, an exemplum of lucidity, is however, too keen to sacrifice the complicated syntax of Cavafy's Greek for the clarity of its English. Its most glaring absence involves the lack of space-breaks between the lines, breaks that are crucial to the original. My translation is quite clunky in comparison, but I would argue that the original is one of Cavafy's less fluid poems, and so for a reason. The obtrusive use of spacing and the specific rhyme employed create a jagged poetic landscape that disrupts a smooth reading. Cavafy's rhyme is uneven and bounces diagonally across and down the poem, a type of movement borne along with the aid of the spacing Cavafy uses mid-line. The word order as well, is unorthodox, even by Greek standards. This is why all of the various translations of this poem

rearrange the words from the original to a great extent. Despite this necessity, problems arise when such a rearrangement gives way to a less complicated syntax that is unfaithful to the original.

Before I discuss my choices concerning syntactical issues, let me address the use of the word “Italiote” for *Ιταλιώτης*. Sachperoglou uses “Italiote-Greek,” while Merrill and Keeley and Sherard use “Greek-Italian.” I have chosen the simple Italiote, because I feel any hyphenated expression would ruin the rhythm of the line. Also, Greek-Italian reads too much like a contemporary race category, invoking among other things, the idea of nation. Any idea of nation must be avoided at all costs, not only because it would be anachronistic, but also because this poem speaks to the ease of movement between cultures and the balances of power in the ancient Mediterranean.

In terms of larger choices I made, I must first state that the primary aspect of the poem I tried to convey was the rhyme, because I feel that it is essential to the poetics and theme of the original. This theme is tied to the project of this paper. It involves the use of rhyme and rhythm to either disrupt the flow of the words or move them along more quickly, to either set words apart from each other or link them. This is of course the most basic of statements that applies to all poetry in any language, but in Cavafy translations this aspect is oftentimes elided due to the difficulty of transferring Greek into English. Cavafy’s wordplay links the poem’s themes much more forcibly than the simple meaning of what is being said. When what is being said involves the Greek language, and when the poet is utilizing that language in a highly ornate and structured way in order to convey the poem’s statement about that language, then a great disservice has been done to the poet when a translation foregoes any attempts to create a similar type of pattern. In stanza one, for example, the hard “e” rhyme that will dominate most of the poem begins.

Cavafy rhymes, *τούτο . . . οι, πλούτη, αναθρεμένοι, and νέοι*, effectively linking these young men raised in wealth both thematically and poetically through these rhymes. I have tried to do a similar thing by linking, “these” with “luxuries.” “These” is a risky choice, because it does not identify these young men as clearly as the original does, but I have chosen to sacrifice lucidity for rhyme in the hope that the rhyme is what will make the poem’s connections jump out more clearly. I also realize that “Greater Greece” is not a correct translation of *Μεγάλη Ελλάδα*, but I wanted to once again invoke this hard “e” sound which is lost in the final line of the stanza by using the word “raised.”

In the second stanza rhyme is used once again to connect the primary thematic elements of the poem. Cavafy repeats this hard “e” five times, four of which are perfect rhymes of two words with the same suffixes and two words that are homonyms: *παραλίαν* with *μελαγχολίαν*, and *λίαν* with *λείαν*. I have tried to repeat this by connecting “particularly” with “melancholy” as well as with “booty,” “beach,” and “Peloponnese.” Similar thematic connections are made in the original when in the final stanza *θεμιτόν* is rhymed with *δυνατόν*, further emphasizing the severity of the reaction of this youth to seeing these spoils being unloaded before his eyes. For this reason I used “lawful” and “possible,” invoking not as forceful a rhyme as in the original, but nevertheless one which aims to phonetically tie these two words together.

I realize that as a whole the translation reads almost awkwardly, but as I have already stated, so does the Greek. Predominantly, translators of Cavafy into English have chosen to make his work read as fluently as possible. Any attempt to mimic Greek syntax is oftentimes ignored in favor of a more natural English. This is what Lawrence Venuti calls, “The illusion of transparency,” which aims to give the appearance that the heavy-handed influence of the translator has been kept to a minimum. Such an illusion is achieved, “by adhering to current

usage, maintaining continuous syntax, [and] fixing a precise meaning” (Venuti 1). As has been shown in poems such as “Philhellene,” sometimes such translational decisions are justified. However, in certain instances this illusion needs to be shattered in order to convey as many of the linguistic choices of the poet as can be conveyed in the target language. The result should not highlight the choices of the translator as much as it should those of the poet, even though one could justly argue that such an outcome is theoretically impossible.

“On An Italian Shore” is an example in which a closer adherence to the poetics of the Greek is helpful in conveying the most important thematic aspects, which here relate to the reaction of a young man of luxury to the sight of Greek culture, of which he is a part, being appropriated by another culture, of which he is also a part. His loyalties go both ways. It is a poem about the rough journey over time and space through and across cultures, a journey mirrored in the hazardous road of the poetry across the lines. This comes about in the original because of various methods employed by the poet. In the first line alone one finds two phrases, cut in half by a line-space, further separated by commas after each. The next three lines of the first stanza alone are broken up by an *ano teleia* and line spaces. The beginning of the rhyme of the hard “e” sound bounces along from midline to the ends of lines as a result of the fact that Cavafy split the lines of these stanzas in two, and all of this in the first stanza comprises but a single sentence. This jaggedness continues to an even greater extent in the second line, as the poet makes greater use of commas and repeated rhymes. One must also take into account the sheer number of dependant clauses utilized by the poet, and only then does one realize just how jagged (to repeat my adjective of choice for this poem) it truly is.

Then the poem is interrupted by the banner-like proclamations: “Greek spoils . . . the booty of Corinth.” After such an interruption, the poem’s path smoothes out, allowing for the introduction of a new rhyme that subtly expresses the reaction of the youth, the rhyme of *θεμιτόν* with *δυνατόν*. The last word of the poem, however, alludes back to the drama of the previous stanzas through the use of the same suffix that was interwoven into the rhyming of the hard “e” sound. This is the word *επιθυμίαν*, or “desire,” which I have left as such, unrhymed, because the importance of this word as the final one of the poem is paramount. It is desire, which has been erased. A facile reading, which sees this as merely a transformation of the youth’s mood is not enough, because the poem begins by describing these men of Greater Greece as men of amusements, whose very natures spur them towards the fulfillment of their desires. In losing his desire for amusements, the unspecified youth, who synecdochally represents a generation, loses the dominant characteristic of his identity according to the poem. Such a realization does not come about after one reading, and I would suggest that such an epiphany does not occur to the youth either. The poem is as much about the process of reading through gaps and interruptions to discover the full weight of a mundane situation as it is about the process of unloading the spoils taken from one culture onto the shore of another. Just as Cavafy’s epitaph poems utilize line spacing in order to mimic the investigative process of unearthing the biographical remains of an underrepresented historical figure from the remnants of an inscription, so this poem utilizes spacing, unorthodox rhythms, and uneven rhymes in order to force the reader to connect shattered pieces as one would strain to connect the fragmented shards of ancient pottery. The shards of phrases and pieced-together words that make up this poem represent the insecure process of survival and metamorphosis that not just Greek culture but the

Greek language itself have undergone in their travels amongst the societies that initially brought them to Mediterranean shores and amongst those who would later appropriate it for themselves.

All three of the lyrics discussed represent examples of Cavafy's historical poems, though it has been proven time and again that his work is not so easily compartmentalized as it once seemed. By consistently setting much of his poetry in the past, oftentimes a past when either the language of Greek was still the dominant form of communication in the Eastern Mediterranean or was at least on its way out of dominance, the reader is forced to reexamine the relationship of Cavafy's notion of the Greek language to the culture and identity of which he wrote. By his time, Greek had long sunk into the status of a minor language and only one of a handful spoken in his native Alexandria. Cavafy's appraisal of the Greek tongue represents another aspect of his poetry of a lost Hellenized past, not a nostalgia, but merely a prideful acknowledgement that the language he loved and has now contributed to, was once the most influential one of the Western world. All three of these poems, though, also speak of a Greek that is a foreign tongue, and by specifying the need to use it as he does in "For Ammones," the poet betrays the fragility of the language's position as *the* language of relevance in the society of each poem. A greater emphasis is thereby placed upon the subjective relevance of one's "native" language to the individual. The importance of communicating the various linguistic registers of Cavafy in translations lies in this aspect of Cavafy's relationship to the Greek tongue; for, his mode of glorifying Greek does not involve any monochromatic praise of a stable form of the language, but the uneasy process of transformation language takes in its attempts at survival. This a process Cavafy dramatizes in the movement of his poetry.

### Works Cited

- Auden, W.H. "Introduction." *The Complete Poems of C.P. Cavafy*. Trans. Rae Dalven. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1961.
- Beaton, Roderick. *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Bien, Peter. *Kazantzakis and the Linguistic Revolution in Greek Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Cavafy, C.P. *C.P. Cavafy, The Collected Poems*. Trans. Evangelos Sachperoglou. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *C.P. Cavafy, Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- . *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*. Trans. Rae Dalven. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1976.
- The Cavafy Archive*. Center for Neo-Hellenic Studies, Athens. 1 May 2008 <[www.cavafy.com](http://www.cavafy.com)>.
- Lorenzatos, Zissimos. "Solomos' 'Dialogos:' A Survey." *Modern Greek Writers*. Eds. Edmund Keeley and Peter Bien. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Scott Elledge. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility, A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1995.

## Ethics from a Slight Angle: Cavafy's Poetry as Historiographic Metafiction

Alexis Radisoglou

---

In her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon describes as *historiographic metafiction* “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages,” as a genre, that is, whose “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon 5). While Hutcheon uses the term in a rather specific sense to label a postmodernist brand of historical *novels*, I would wish to expand the concept of historiographic metafiction and mobilise it for a reading of C. P. Cavafy's historical *poems*.<sup>45</sup> My contention here is that the notion of historiographic metafiction not only provides us with a powerful conceptual framework for grasping a number of closely interrelated aspects in Cavafy's historical poems – their strongly narrative and intertextual character, their staging of the poet as reader, their emphasis on marginal and peripheral periods, regions, and figures etc. – but also permits the reader to extract an ongoing “project” from these poems, which in its interventionist character ultimately takes on a political, and ethical dimension, and is not confined to Cavafy's historical poems alone but emerges as a central model for understanding the poet's oeuvre as a whole. A reassessment of Cavafy's poetry

---

<sup>45</sup> There is some controversy, in Cavafy scholarship, about which poems exactly constitute the Cavafian corpus of *historical* poems. My understanding of the term in this paper is based on Roderick Beaton's rather broad definition of the Cavafian historical poem as “*a poem which narrates or mimetically represents actions and/or words (real or imaginary) which are more or less precisely fixed, historically, in place and time, and in which no apparent reference is made to the modern world*” (Beaton 30).

through the prism of historiographic metafiction, in addition, almost inevitably effects a parallel reassessment concerning the *translation* of Cavafy's poems, which – if taken to its logical conclusion – must yield results that represent a provocative departure from traditional models of translating Cavafy.

### **The Text of History as Metafiction**

The deceptively “un-poetic” character of Cavafy's work has often been linked by critics to the strong presence of *narrative* aspects in many of his poems. Indeed, even a cursory reading of Cavafy's work produces an astonishing number of poems that are apodictically narrative in form, something that is particularly true for the bulk of historical poems Cavafy produced during his career. One could cite almost any of the latter as a case in point, but it may suffice here to mention a few of them, such as “Alexandrian Kings,” “Orophernis,” “The Displeasure of Selefkidis,” “Manuel Komninos,” “Aristovoulos,” or “Come, o King of the Lacedaimonians,”<sup>46</sup> to prove how often Cavafy is concerned with relating historical events, with *telling a story* about the past, and how this concern – ineluctably, it seems – manifests itself in the form of narrative. What this suggests, however, in my view, is not so much an individual predilection on Cavafy's side for narrative as such, a deliberate eschewing of the overtly lyrical, as it were, in favour of narrative, but the near-impossibility of moving outside narrative when it comes to representing the past. What Cavafy's historical poems demonstrate, then (and they do so self-consciously, and subversively, as I shall argue below), is the pre-eminence in much historiography of what Roland

---

<sup>46</sup> Quotations from Cavafy's poetry in English are from the translation by Keeley and Sherrard (Cavafy).

Barthes calls “narration as the privileged signifier of the real.” “Narrative structure, which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics),” as Barthes argues, “becomes at once the sign and the proof of reality” (Barthes 18). This emphasis on history *as narrative* and the concomitant refusal to maintain such binary oppositions as “historiography vs. literature” or even “fact vs. fiction,” of course, are a hallmark of historiographic metafiction, a genre which – much like Cavafy’s poetry, as will become obvious soon – in its problematisation *through* writing history *of* writing history has also blurred the distinction between the theory and practice of historiography.

Roderick Beaton, then, is certainly right when he argues that in Cavafy’s historical poems “the transference from history-as-event to history-as-text, on which all our perception of the historical past depends, is placed under the microscope,” but his conclusion that “[h]istory-as-text requires the verisimilitude of being ‘true to experience,’ and here it turns out that the historian needs also to be a poet” (Beaton 44) to me seems to shy away from the far more radical implications of Cavafy’s probing into the nature of the historical record and its production. While for Beaton “writing history” and “making poetry” in Cavafy, rather than being inextricably bound-up with each other, become complementary activities in the constitution of the historical record and in the attempt “to recuperate historical time as experienced time” (42), in my opinion what Cavafy is interested in are not so much such acts of recuperation as the fundamental *presentism* of the historiographer’s task. What Cavafy’s poetry so magnificently explores, then, is the *discursive production of the past* at specific moments in history, and the ways in which this constitution of historical knowledge is inevitably tied up with questions of power and ideology.

The repeated occurrence of forms of narrative, as I have argued above, is one of the main

characteristics in much of Cavafy's historical poetry. What matters here, however, is not the presence of narrative as such but Cavafy's highly self-conscious, and incessant, drawing attention to narrative – or, more precisely, *textual* – configurations of the past in the (real or imaginary) historical sources the poet-historians writing these poems rely and reflect upon. Again, the number of poems for which this applies is truly astonishing, with Cavafy using varying techniques to trigger such effects of self-reflexivity. The unifying element here seems to be the staging of the poet *as reader* of the historical record: Not only, that is, are we allowed to imagine Cavafy himself as the avid reader of history he surely was, devouring everything from Plutarch to Gibbons, but more importantly it is the poet-figures in Cavafy's texts, the speakers of many of his historical poems, the very *writers of history*, that come to us no less as *readers of history*, too. Historiography, in this sense, becomes a fundamentally intertextual exercise.

A simple way of highlighting this intertextual nature of historiography, of course, is the use of a pre-existent written source as an epigraph, as happens, for instance, in "King Dimitrios" or "Julian and the Antiochians." The quotations from Plutarch's *Life of Dimitrios* and Julian's *Misopogon*, respectively, serve as clear indicators of the fact that the poet-historian's knowledge about his subject is mediated through text. The same effect can be achieved somewhat more subtly through the insertion of such pre-existent textual sources into the actual corpus of the poem. Thus, for instance, in "Come, o King of the Lacedaimonians," Cavafy adds a parenthesis that reads, "he was 'in great distress,' says Plutarch, 'badly shaken,'" and the pagan of "If Actually Dead" is said to be sitting "in his shabby room just after reading / Philostratos' *On Apollonios of Tyana*." Both the quotation marks and the explicit reference to Plutarch, as well as the allusion to Philostratos's treatise, once again, foreground the nature of history as text. In "If Actually Dead," the intertextual reference to Philostratos's *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, is also

located in the title of the poem (as, incidentally, is the case with the famous “God Abandons Antony,” another reference to Plutarch). In “Those Who Fought for the Achaian League,” finally, the act of reading historical source material is most explicitly thematised by a postscript to the poem reading, “Written by an Achaian in Alexandria / during the seventh year of Ptolemy Lathyros’ reign”. One could continue at length citing from poems which are constructed by Cavafy in such self-consciously intertextual fashion, but what is more important to emphasise here once again is that the poet-historians in these poems – the *writers* of history, that is – over and over again are presented as *readers* of history, too, that all they ever learn about history has its origin in a multiplicity of *written* sources, be those books, as in “Anna Komnina,” royal decrees, as in “Anna Dalassini,” proclamations, as in “In a Township of Asia Minor,” private essays, as in “Dimaratos,” or a volume of inscriptions, as in “Kaisarion.”

This quintessentially Cavafian figure, the poet-historian-as-reader, in his function within the text thus very closely resembles the “allegories of textual production and reception within the narrative plot” that Hutcheon considers a typical feature of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 84). Both remind the reader of the fact that the world of history is fundamentally a “world of texts and intertexts” (Hutcheon 125), that whatever we know about the past today is only ever accessible to us in and through text. It is important to emphasise, at this point, that neither historiographic metafiction nor Cavafy’s historical poems deny the actual occurrence of historical events or the real existence of historical figures. On the contrary, what, according to Hutcheon, characterises historiographic metafiction – as much as Cavafy’s poetry, I wish to add – is its acknowledging “the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today” (114). This realisation is brilliantly expressed through a typographical shift in Cavafy’s famous poem “Dareios,” in which the eponymous hero of the poem, the historical character

Dareios, becomes transformed during the course of the poem into an italicised *Dareios*, the historical text about him. It is also worth pointing out here that Plutarch, a frequent source of Cavafy's, in the original Ancient Greek often uses the phrase "λέγεται," or "it is said," when making factual statements, something that further "defers," in a rather Derridean sense, the "origin" or "source" of historical knowledge in poems such as "Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians," "The God Abandons Antony," or "Antony's Ending."<sup>47</sup>

The past, then, according to Hutcheon, "is always already irremediably textualized for us [. . .], and the overt intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization" (128). Postmodern or not, the "overt intertextuality" that is to be found in Cavafy's historical poems, too, fulfils precisely the same purpose as that in historiographic metafiction, and the ubiquitous figure of the poet-historian-as-reader in Cavafy's work, as I have demonstrated above, can be considered the embodiment of this insight. What is at stake, consequently, and radically put into question, in both historiographic metafiction and Cavafy's historical poems, is the neat correspondence between the past and its representation in historical texts, the referential relationship, that is, between past *event* and historical *fact*. As the typographical shift in "Dareios" that I have mentioned above so subtly suggests, the "real" Dareios of the past and his textualised, historical self, are not quite the same. This is precisely what I mean when I claim that Cavafy's historical poems are intimately concerned with the *discursive production of the past*. While, then, the Rankean paradigm of history "as it actually was" still reigned supreme in the historiographers' world of Cavafy's time (despite Nietzsche), the Alexandrian poet was already incorporating into his work some early lessons about what Barthes and Umberto Eco call, respectively, "the referential illusion" (Barthes 11) or the

---

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch's use of this phrase was pointed out by Victoria Stearns in Karen Van Dyck's seminar, "The Typography of Desire," at Columbia University.

“referential fallacy” (cf. Hutcheon 145). In this sense, all that historiography can hope to achieve is a convincing production of something akin to Foucauldian “truth effects,” or a sort of “realistic effect” as Barthes conceives of it (Barthes 17). While such considerations do indeed come close to the Derridean mantra of *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, I agree with Alun Munslow that what we find in Barthes – as well as in historiographic metafiction and in Cavafy – “is not so much anti-referentialism as a recognition of referentialism’s boundaries” (Munslow 65).

To question the referential status of the historical text to the past, of course, is tantamount to questioning its very objectivity, and it is this “challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” (Hutcheon 92) that once again unites the practitioners of historiographic metafiction and the Cavafy of the historical poems. What both share is a determined “affirmation of knowledge as perspective” (Foucault, Nietzsche/Genealogy 156): The “situatedness” of historical discourse, the contextualised production of any written record about the past, is a constant point of negotiation in both instances. As Hutcheon writes – and again, we can replace the genre she talks about with Cavafy’s name – historiographic metafiction “self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present” (Hutcheon 97).

This, for a brief moment, brings us back to the question of narrative. Hayden White, in his seminal essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” has argued that “no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*. The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others” (White 84). “*How* a given historical situation is

to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that *he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind*" (85, second emphasis mine). The meaning of any historical narrative thus crucially depends on the particular sort of "emplotment" that is performed by the historian: absence, gaps, and silences – in short: the elements the historian chooses to *exclude* from his text – are as important to the act of signification as what is *included* in the historical narrative.

Cavafy – unsurprisingly, by now – is acutely aware of such mechanisms of emplotment and the consequences these can have. A figure like Kaisarion, so precious to the speaker in the poem with that name, has been all but "written off" of the historical record; "maybe history passed over" Orophernis's death, as the speaker of "Orophernis" ironically states, "and rightly didn't bother to notice / a thing so trivial;" and what can we know about the Sage's death in "If Actually Dead," given that "Damis does not record that in his memoir." Nowhere, however, is Cavafy's keen awareness of emplotment and its implications more obvious than in what is maybe not an historical poem in the strict sense, the rather short piece "Days of 1896." Here, the unnamed protagonist's life-story is emplotted in two radically different ways in the first two stanzas: While the first stanza opens with the words, "He became completely degraded," and closes with the statement, "He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly / if you were seen around with him often," the second stanza affirms, "But this isn't the whole story," "There is another angle; seen from that / he appears attractive, appears / a simple, genuine child of love." What is noteworthy, here, is that the speaker of the poem does not dismiss the first stanza as an untrue, let alone a deliberately falsifying, version of the story: it is "certainly one point of view. Quite understandable," as the speaker of "In the Year 200 B. C." maintains at one point. It is, however, "not the whole story," and there is "another angle" from which it could also

be told. Which “truth” the reader is going to hear, therefore, fundamentally depends on which elements are going to be included in the story, and how these are going to be emplotted in the consequence. It is crucial, though, to note the last two lines of the poem, too. Two important things are happening here: Firstly, Cavafy – or rather: the speaker of this poem – contextualises the two opposing narratives from the first two stanzas within a broader *social* discourse on sexual morals (“But society, / prudish”); and secondly, he offers an explicit, and explicitly subjective, moral evaluation of the latter (“stupid, had it wrong”). In this way, the articulation of (not just historical) narratives, and their inherent truth-claims, are shown to be intimately linked not only to the moral assumptions of the individuals producing them but also, and more crucially, to the various discourses that are prevalent in a particular social context at a specific time.

### **The Politics of Truth**

Barthes, as I have demonstrated above, considers the form of narrative in conventional historiography the “primary signifier of the real,” the central element, that is, in the generation of “truth effects.” Truth, however, as Foucault has argued,

isn't outside power, or lacking in power [. . .]. Truth is a thing of this world [. . .]. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying

what counts as true” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 131).

What becomes suspicious, then, and must be placed under intense scrutiny, are the acts of enunciation involved in the production of historical texts, the contextualised nature, that is, of historical discourse. And, here again, Cavafy’s poetry provides an early example of what later will manifest itself as “historiographic metafiction’s stress on the enunciation” (Hutcheon 168). Like the postmodern genre, so Cavafy’s historical poems, too, are characterised by making elaborate use of one of the prime enunciative signals of speech: quotation marks (cf. Hutcheon 77). Whether – to name but a few poems – in “Dimaratos,” “If Actually Dead,” “In a Township of Asia Minor,” “Anna Dalassini,” “Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians,” or (almost obtrusively so) in “Anna Komnina,” in each case Cavafy draws the reader’s attention to the very “perspective” Foucault urges us to take into consideration, to what I have called above the “situatedness” of (historical) discourse. As these poems demonstrate, then, the articulation of such discourse is never a disinterested activity. The passage from Alexios Komninos’s royal decree that the speaker of “Anna Dalassini” refers to in quotation marks in that poem is shown to be inseparable from Komninos’s very personal desire “to honor his mother.” If this is a rather innocent case of a “politics of truth,” Cavafy also knows how quickly and intimately the latter becomes linked to the often vicious games of power and manipulation that can be observed in the realm of politics, to what Foucault calls “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” (Foucault, *Nietzsche/Genealogy* 150). Anna Komnina’s *Alexiad*, for instance, is a work that comes into being, in the poem that bears its author’s name, only because this “power-hungry,” “arrogant Greek woman” has still not come to terms with her failed attempt at usurping the throne. “In a Township of Asia Minor,” on the other hand, reveals how even a minimal shift in the discursive production of an historical document can serve to align oneself with the political powers of the

day, however much surprisingly they come to the fore. Kaisarion, finally, is turned into something of a “colonial subject” in that he is not only physically eliminated in a “conquered Alexandria” but also, consequently, all but “written off” of the historical record.

Historical discourse, then, is never far from being “a form of ideological elaboration” (Barthes 16). Phernazis, the poet who is “at work / on the crucial part of his epic” about the Persian king Dareios in the poem bearing the latter’s name, creates a piece of writing that is situated at the very interstices of fiction, historiography, and state ideology. For, as the speaker reminds us in a typically Cavafian parenthesis, “It’s from him, Dareios, that our glorious king, / Mithridatis, Dionysos and Evpator, descends.” In this sense, what *Dareios* is concerned with is not really the portrayal of a king whose reign, at the time of writing, lies already more than 400 years in the past. Its purpose is clearly more *presentist* in nature, as the parenthesis suggests, and could be described as the establishment of the current king’s, Mithridates’s, “glorious” genealogy, as a literary embellishment, that is, of the kingdom’s historical prestige at times of war. Cavafy’s hint at the genre of epic, here, a form of literature that has been shown to have had a strong ideological undercurrent throughout its history (cf. Prins and Shreiber), is significant. Barthes has argued, in a section on the historical utterance in “The Discourse of History,” that the articulation of historical discourse is often predetermined by the sort of linguistic “collections” or “lexicons” that an historian chooses to revert to, by the lists of “existents” and “occurents” that become “mobilized and set in combination in his narrative” (Barthes 16f.). “The units of Herodotus, for example, depend largely on a single lexicon, which is that of war,” Barthes contends (17). Such forms of linguistic prefiguration, thus, are closely tied to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that I have identified above as a key process in the production of historical narratives. The “lexicon” of the epic, of course, is that of heroism:

whatever is not deemed to conform to notions of “the heroic” prevalent at the time of writing such an epic, consequently, will find no space for representation. Cavafy seems to suggest the presence of something akin to these Barthesian “lexica” in the first stanza of “Kaisarion.” The metrical rigidity and the use of rhyme in this stanza, which sharply contrasts with the rest of the poem, corresponds to the linguistic conventionalism of the historical source material the speaker in this poem consults, the “volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies.” This is matched on the thematic level: the volume’s “lexicon” seems to consist entirely of “lavish praise and flattery,” all Ptolemies are “brilliant / glorious, mighty, benevolent; / everything they undertake is full of wisdom,” and their women, “all of them, are marvelous.” There are very few words left, it seems, in such a “lexicon,” for someone like Kaisarion, “pale and weary.”

### **Ethics from a Slight Angle**

While I have promised “ethics” in the title of this paper, what may actually be looming large at this stage, I realise, is the spectre of relativism. What is crucial to understand, however, is that acknowledgement of “perspective” and awareness of the “situatedness” and inevitable presentism of historical discourse do not preclude a determined stance. On the contrary, to accept that historiography is always written in the here and now, through incessant acts of textual imposition, means also to accord it a very real significance in the present, to grasp its interventionist, and liberating, potential. Vice, as it were, can be turned into virtue. Foucault, in his avowal of “knowledge as perspective,” celebrates the transformatory character of what he calls “effective history.” This version of historical sense, according to Foucault, “is explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice. Its perception is slanted, being a deliberate

appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering and poisonous traces in order to prescribe the best antidote” (Foucault, *Nietzsche/Genealogy* 157). Alun Munslow, in his *Deconstructing History*, is no less emphatic. The “self-conscious reflexivity” of this Foucauldean paradigm “seeks out that which is avoided and suppressed as well as that which is openly delegitimised and denied. We must constantly seek out that which [. . .] the text is indifferent to – what many historians call ‘the other’” (Munslow 111).

It is precisely this recuperation of a liminal standpoint that lends Cavafy’s historical poems their ethical dimension. And, once again, historiographic metafiction provides the closest analogue to the Cavafian project, for the protagonists of this genre “are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (Hutcheon 114). Cavafy’s historical poems, too, have a Foucauldean avowal of “perspective” inscribed into them, but this perspective is determined by that “other angle” from “Days of 1896,” by the very *slight angle to the universe*, that is, which characterises so much of Cavafy’s poetry. This is why the Alexandrian poet is interested in the liminal periods, regions, and characters in history. “Margins and edges gain new value. The ‘ex-centric’ [. . .] gets attention. That which is ‘different’ is valorized” (Hutcheon 130). Hence, Cavafy’s eye for the defeated in poems such as “Thermopylae;” his sympathy for characters like Orophernes; the re-writing, or alternative emplotment, of long-established narratives, for instance when Horatio’s *Hamlet* is challenged by Cavafy’s “King Claudius;” the way in which “John Kantakuzinos Triumphs” is not about the character in the title but about a nameless person victimised by the eponymous triumph; and, of course, the supreme act of discursive re-instatement that is performed in “Kaisarion,” dragging the eponymous hero of the poem from the very margins of the historical record to the centre of the reader’s attention.

It is at this stage, finally, that the conceptual unification of Cavafy's historical with his *erotic* poems becomes transparent. For what else is performed in the latter, through multiple stagings of frequently explicit erotic encounters, than the discursive recuperation – and liberation – of the homosexual body. The body, as Foucault argues, does not escape “the influence of history,” it is “molded by a great many distinct regimes” (Foucault, Nietzsche/Genealogy 153). In this sense, the discursive exclusion and marginalisation of homosexuals in and through history is violently inscribed on their bodies. It needs “the acuity of a glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses, that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements” (Foucault, Power/Knowledge, *ibid.*) – in short: it needs a Cavafian *ethics from a slight angle* to push such bodies from the margins of discourse to the centre of a poetic universe. Because this is as true for the erotic as for the historical poems, we might want to consider this ethical dimension the unifying element of Cavafy's entire oeuvre.

### **Translating Poetry as Metafiction**

How, then, does all this affect the issue of *translation*? I am aware, of course, that in producing my own narrative about Cavafy's work I, too, have been involved in the very mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that I have described above. Utilising the concept of historiographic *metafiction* to talk about Cavafy's *poetry* has provided me with a “lexicon” that, I believe, has proven helpful in illuminating a number of aspects in Cavafy's historical poems that warrant close attention. This same lexicon, however, has not allowed me to talk much about specifically *poetic* features, something, I acknowledge, that is problematic when it comes to discussing the work of an author who in his poetic praxis is so much concerned with issues such

as rhyme, metre, and versification. Still, it is precisely these elements that are also receding into the background or altogether missing from most of the translations of Cavafy's work into English. I would like to close here, then, with a somewhat provocative question about what has become a sort of "standard translation" of Cavafy's work. Returning once again to the issues of narrative and emplotment, intertextuality, and the act of enunciation in the written representation of history, I ask: What is missing from – or maybe gained? – in a translation of a Cavafian historical poem that transforms Keeley and Sherrard's rendering in the way I have done below?

### **COME, O KING OF THE LACEDAEMONIANS**

Kratisklia didn't deign to allow  
 the people to see her weeping and grieving:  
 she walked in dignity and in silence.  
 Her calm face betrayed nothing  
 of her sorrow and her agony.  
 But even so, for a moment she couldn't hold back:  
 before she went aboard the detestable ship for Alexandria  
 she took her son to Poseidon's temple, and once they were alone  
 she embraced him tenderly and kissed him  
 (he was "in great distress," says Plutarch, "badly shaken").  
 But her strong character struggled through;  
 regaining her poise, the magnificent woman  
 said to Kleomenis: "Come, O king of the Lacedaimonians,  
 when we go outside  
 let no one see us weeping  
 or behaving in any way unworthy of Sparta.  
 At least this is still in our power;  
 what lies ahead is in the hands of the gods."

And she boarded the ship, going toward whatever lay "in the  
 hands of the gods."

(Keeley/Sherrard)

### **ΑΓΕ Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥ ΛΑΚΕΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΩΝ**

Kratisklia didn't deign to allow the people to see her weeping and grieving: she walked in dignity and in silence. Her calm face betrayed nothing of her sorrow and her agony. But even so, for a moment she couldn't hold back: before she went aboard the detestable ship for Alexandria

she took her son to Poseidon's temple, and once they were alone she embraced him tenderly and kissed him (“διαλγοῦντα,” says Plutarch, “καὶ συντεταραγμένον”). But her strong character struggled through; regaining her poise, the magnificent woman said to Kleomenis: “Ἄγε, ὦ βασιλεῦ Λακεδαιμονίων, ὅπως, ἐπὶ ἕξω γενώμεθα, μηδεὶς ἴδη δακρύνοντας ἡμᾶς μηδὲ ἀνάξιόν τι τῆς Σπάρτης ποιοῦντας. Τοῦτο γὰρ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν μόνον· αἱ τύχαι δέ, ὅπως ἂν ὁ δαίμων διδῶ, πάρεισι”.\*

And she boarded the ship, going towards whatever “διδῶ”.

\* Plutarch, *Life of Kleomenis*, p. 28

### Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. “The Discourse of History.” *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981): 7-20.
- Beaton, Roderick. “The History Man.” *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10.1/2 (1983): 23-44.
- Cavafy, C. P. *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *Τα ποιήματα (1897-1918)*. Ed. George Savvidis. Vol. 1/2. Athens: Ikaros, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 139-64.
- . *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Munslow, Alun. *Deconstructing History*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Prins, Yopie and Maera Shreiber, *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics in Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- White, Hayden. “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.” White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. 81-110.

**OFFBEAT ECHOLALIA:  
Merrill's Lessons for the Translator of Cavafy's Poetry**

Andriana Mastor

---

Perhaps all languages are imperfect, as Benjamin would have us believe, forming a piece of the vessel that is pure language or *suprême langage* (in Mallarmé's terminology). Yet it is in their very imperfection that they maintain their uniqueness, their particular flavor. If it is possible to fall in love with a language, it is on its uniqueness, in its quirks, its untranslatability, the strangeness on the tongue, the seeming illogic of the grammar that we dote lovingly. During the first or honeymoon stage of learning a new language, a whole new world, never imagined previously, seems suddenly within one's grasp. It is then that the language is most visible—and most audible—before the language descends into mere usefulness. As a language connoisseur, James Merrill was rather blasé about most languages—French, German, Italian—which he had learned early in life. But Greek (which he heard perhaps for the first time from his Greek-American lover, Kimon Friar) was a whole new experience. He learned Greek from the Greeks themselves in the context of their native country. It was given to him whole by the native speakers, and especially, perhaps, by the effort to communicate with a lover. Eventually he did become quite fluent in Greek, and translated some Greek poetry, including that of Constantine Cavafy. Merrill's sense of the strangeness and richness of his first experiences with Greek enabled him to make extremely sensitive translations into English, as he attempted to register the peculiarities of Greek in his own, "mother" language, English. It is precisely this registering of the impact of one language upon another that, according to Benjamin, makes for a good translation.

In this paper I will look at Merrill's early relationship to the Greek language, as epitomized in "To My Greek," virtually a love poem to the Greek language itself. I will then look at Cavafy's «Εἰς Ἰταλικὴν Παραλίαν» ("On an Italian Shore") and Merrill's translation of this poem, concentrating on the ways in which he allows the strangeness of Greek to impact his English translation, as well as on the erotic nature of his relationship both to Greek and to the act

of translation itself. My sense of the erotic nature of the act of writing is borrowed from Anne Carson's musings on the nature of Eros and writing, which I expand to include the act of translation. Finally, I include two translations of my own, which I have undertaken in the spirit of James Merrill.

### MERRILL'S "TO MY GREEK"

Merrill's "To My Greek" begins as an ode to the "uncrackability" or impenetrability of the new language, Greek, which he is just trying out on his tongue, perhaps in an effort to communicate with his lover:

Dear nut  
 Uncrackable by nuance or debate,  
 Eat with your fingers, wear your bloomers to bed,

Under my skin stay nude. . . . (241)

Here the first two words, "Dear nut," indicate both familiarity and strangeness, as the "dear" indicates that one is addressing a beloved, and "nut," while indicating strangeness, when attached to "dear" implies the loveability of that strangeness. It is also possible to hear the "ear" in dear, thus introducing the love affair with sound which will be played out throughout the poem. The beloved language is an uncrackable nut—an organic image which calls to mind the Benjaminian image of a word in the original language as being a fruit with its skin. In other words, the word and the object signified appear to be seamless. Here, the nutshell, let us imagine a walnut's wrinkled shell, cannot be separated from its nut of meaning. The would-be eater of the nut is prevented from consuming it, yet is not unhappy at this predicament, for he is fascinated by the wrinkles and textures of the shell. He imagines the beloved (language) as being spontaneous, quirky, unconcerned with appearances, *au natural*. The uncrackability of the nut forces the lover to remain in the present tense, fascinated by the shell, instead of in the future moment of the eating when the meaning will become plain. The language lover has also not yet learned the past and future tenses—another excuse to remain in the present moment of pure fascination.

. . . Let past and future

Perish upon our lips, ocean inherit  
 Those paper millions. Let there be no word

For justice, grief, convention; *you* be convention—  
 Goods, bads, kaló-kakó, cockatoo-raucous  
 Coastline of white printless coves

Already strewn with offbeat echolalia. (241)

Here the speaker imagines himself as being in the ground stages of the creation of language, with the biblical tone of the hortatory “Let” and “Let there be no word,” as if he can imagine a world without words for “justice, grief, convention.” The trajectory of these three words forms interesting links, and a world with no word for such words can be a new and perhaps better one. Indeed, such a world can have “goods, bads” instead of good and bad, preferences instead of moral imperatives. For “kaló” (good) and “kakó” (bad) are littered through Greek as prefixes, in which their meaning changes dramatically, depending upon with what they are linked. For instance, *κακοφωνία*, or cacophony, is not necessarily bad—in fact, here the poet seems quite pleased by the cacophony of his two new words, and by the idea that in Greek “good” and “bad” are only one letter apart. While I don’t know if “cockatoo-raucous” is a transliteration of a Greek word or phrase, the poet seems to hear birds in these raucous Greek sounds, the “offbeat echolalia” formed when he tries to imitate the speech of those around him syllable by syllable. The “cockatoo-raucous” effect takes Benjamin’s concept of allowing the original language to affect the target language. Here, the English of “cockatoo-raucous” is so strange that you hear the Greek in it, as it stretches the English language to its limits.

Next the poet simply deposits the new words he has learned translated upon the page—each one rather more appealing and concrete than “justice, grief, convention”—as if the naming of each object were verifiable by taste or touch:

Forbidden Salt Kiss Wardrobe Foot Cloud Peach  
 —Name it, my chin drips sugar. (241)

We are back in the Garden of Eden, but this time the forbidden fruit is a peach, and the knowledge of kaló and kakó gained by its tasting is distinctly sweeter. The poet’s translation of words instead of sentences, as if he has not learned yet how to make links between them in language, can remind us of Benjamin’s assertion that words rather than sentences are the primary element of the translator. As Benjamin says, “For if the sentence is the wall before the language

of the original, literalness is the arcade” (79). Reading this list of names, we feel as if we are being handed the building blocks of language. This new language is a language of eros, in that each word entails a reach of desire. As each of these words, in the Greek, names a longed-for object, the utterance of the word itself registers longing. The translated word also registers the longing, but here the longing is of the English word for the Greek word. The translator chooses “Kiss,” hoping to somehow register the word that is lacking, *philaki*. As Benjamin asserts, the fidelity of a work of translation to the original “reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation” (79). The longing registered in the word itself eroticizes translation.

### PREVIOUS TRANSLATIONS OF CAVAFY: MERRILL’S CRITIQUE

Keeley and Sherrard’s translation of Cavafy’s *Collected Poems* was published in 1975. Upon its publication, Merrill wrote a review of the translation in the *New York Review*. In this review, Merrill discusses their rather dry and simple style of translation in terms of specific poems, pointing out that this style is sufficient when applied to Cavafy’s early poems, many of which are “unrhymed” and “loosely metered,” but less effective in regard to his later poems. For, as he points out, the “mature Cavafy writes a subtle, flexible Greek whose elements—classic, purist, regional, demotic—come together, as Kimon Friar observes, in ‘an artifice suited to and made integral by his temperament’” (*Recitative*, 104). In these later poems, the formal effects, such as sudden rhyme, or the repetition of a particular phoneme, are sporadic, but when they appear, they are usually “of one fabric with the meaning” (105). Yet Keeley and Sherrard gloss over these formal effects, as if they are of no significance. At one point, in frustration, Merrill says, “[a] nagging voice in me wants to say that these sound effects . . . are such a poem’s secret power, and that a translation which fails to suggest them is hardly worth making” (106-7). Merrill himself translated only three of Cavafy’s poem: “The Afternoon Sun (1919), “On an Italian Shore” (1925), and “Days of 1908” (originally written in 1921 but published in 1932). All three of these poems belong to Cavafy’s later period, in which his flexible Greek and formal effects woven in with meaning are very much in evidence. Merrill’s translations of these poems are quite responsive to such effects. Not only do his translations suggest the sound effects of the original, but he allows his mother tongue, English, to be stretched into the limits of strangeness—not quite to the extreme of “cockatoo-raucous”—yet, in its way, approaching such an impact.



physical gap on the page. The half-lines are end-rhymed: *abcdefeg hijhkhkl mn boobdh*. In its pattern of four stresses separated by a caesura, the form bears a resemblance to Old English alliterative meter. Cavafy makes use of this form in eighteen of his poems. One of the earliest examples is his «Εν τῷ μηνί Αθύρ» (“In the Month of Athyr”), in which the protagonist attempts to read an epitaph on an ancient tombstone. His reading entails an effort to link various fragments of phrases and words with effaced letters, which appear in brackets as if supplied in conjecture by the reader, into a coherent text. The spatial gap between the half-lines reinforces on a formal level the difficulty if not impossibility of “reading” the past from a present standpoint, and so can be seen as reifying a temporal gap. In “On an Italian Shore,” the caesura can also signify a spatio-temporal gap, as Kimos attempts to “read” the sacking of Corinth from his standpoint at the shore. The jagged gap that runs through the poem makes the gap between the shores of Southern Italy (likely Sicily) and the Peloponnese come across visually in the poem.

This gap between the half-lines is reinforced by a breaking-up of words into smaller syntactical units. The word for shore used here is *παραλίαν*, which is constituted from *παρα* + *άλιος*, or “by the sea.” The concept of a shore is defined by what it borders, and so its identity is inseparable from the sea. But Cavafy splits the word into two and thus makes the phonemes available to a new chain of meanings. The most striking example of this split occurs in the first line of the second quatrain: «Μα σήμερα είναι λίαν, παρά το φυσικό του,». Here, the word *παραλίαν* is split chiasmically between the two line-halves (*λίαν*, *παρα*) and each element takes on a new meaning— *λίαν* here means “very” or “extremely,” a word marked as being classic or poetic rather than colloquial, and *παρα* here means “contrary.” The line, literally, means “but today he is extremely contrary to his nature,” and the contrariness can be sensed not only in relation to the young man’s nature but also in the contrary twisting of the word *παραλίαν* itself. The sound *λίαν* echoes down the quatrain, from *παραλίαν* in line two, to *μελαγχολίαν* in line three, and, in line four, *τα πλοία με την λείαν* (“the ships with the booty”), thus introducing yet another meaning for the phoneme, as *λείαν* is accusative for *λεία* or “booty.”

The following couplet (pair of half-lines) depicts the words inscribed on the ships’ prows, set with spaces between the letters, which emphasize the separate or bound quality of each. According to Carson, the inscription of letters enacts boundaries, as the Greek alphabet has the “power to mark the edges of sound,” for it “represents a certain aspect of the act of speech,

namely the starting and stopping of each sound” (55). At the same time, in reading these bound letters, Kimos begins to experience the edges of his own identity. The inscription is divided in two by the *άνω τελεία*, which can signal a translation between two terms, for the words on either side, *λάφυρα* and *λεία*, are synonyms. This translation of sorts can show the extent to which sound is “of one fabric with the meaning” for Cavafy, for, as opposed to *λάφυρα*, *λεία* carries the weight of its sound, and all the meanings accumulated by the insistent echoing of the homophonic rhymes. The repetition of this simple, reductive sound serves to imitate the reductive quality of the boundaries being enforced upon the young man, Kimos, as the realities of war force him to assume a more narrowly defined identity. The final sestet is fully rhymed in the scheme *boobdh*. The grammatical, indeed nearly identical *b*-rhyme (*θεμιτόν / δυνατόν*), and the return to homophonic rhyme in the final two words of the poem (*καμίαν επιθυμίαν* or “not a single wish”) lend a stifling quality to the poem’s close, as if a rich, various world of the imagination has been reduced to the poverty of reductive definition.

At the opening of the poem, Kimos Menedorou is identified as a wealthy young Italiote (Greek living in Magna Graecia) who “passes” (*περνά*) life in entertainment. The use of *περνά* for the forward activity of his life signifies the fluidity with which he experiences life, and, indeed, his own self, for, as an ethnic Greek living in a Roman colony, he does not precisely identify with one or the other, nor does he feel a need to do so. But on this day, the day of the poem, spatio-temporal boundaries suddenly close in, for this day shuts him off from the past, just as the shoreline separates him from the Peloponnese, and he becomes suddenly a Greek on foreign land, or even “Greek loot.” This sudden realization of himself as object is a crisis of reading and translation: he reads himself translated onto a ship’s prow. Most likely he reads the words in Latin. The art treasures carried in ships were once the expression of a vibrant society. In being taken across the sea, they are taken out of context, and translated onto another (hostile) shore. Their new significance is only the rubble and ruins of their former fullness. The formal effects of the poem signify this reductiveness. On the other hand, in making manifest the gap between the two shores and in offering new meanings which come from the break-up of the original, the poem itself offers a resistance to assimilation.

### MERRILL'S TRANSLATION, "ON AN ITALIAN SHORE"

Cavafy's sound effects, which are "of one fabric with the meaning," are extremely difficult to convey in English. Yet, as Merrill himself suggests, a translation which fails to suggest them is not worthy of the effort, and so we can look at the ways in which Merrill stretches the English language to suggest Cavafy's Greek. Here is Merrill's translation of "On an Italian Shore":

The son of Menedoros, Kimos, a Greek-Italian,  
fritters his life away in the pursuit of pleasure,  
according to the common practice in Magna Graecia  
among the rich, unruly young men of today.

Today, however, wholly counter to his nature,  
he's lost in thought, dejected. There on the shore he sees  
with bitter melancholy ship upon ship that slowly  
disgorges crates of booty from the Peloponnese.

*Greek booty. Spoils of Corinth.*

Today don't be surprised if it's unsuitable,  
indeed impossible, for the Italicized  
young man to dream of giving himself to pleasure fully. (CP 802)

Here, Merrill faithfully reproduces the form of the original, in that he maintains the half-lines with the caesura as physical gap. He also maintains the measure of six to seven syllables per half-line (with the same or even higher level of consistency as in the original). He does not reproduce the meter of the original, but generally employs a trimeter line. Yet Cavafy does not follow a regular pattern himself, except for a tendency toward four strong stresses per line. Merrill's opening half-line, however ("The son of Menedoros") can be scanned exactly in synchronicity with Cavafy's («Ο Κήμος Μενεδόρου»): u / u (u/) u / u. He does not reproduce the rhyme scheme exactly, but comes quite close to it (*abcdefgc gd-higgji jklmmlng*: *d*- indicates near-rhyme); in fact, he balances the relatively lighter quality of his end-rhymes with a greater frequency of occurrence. He maintains the unrhymed, free quality of the first stanza. As for the insistent homophones which Cavafy introduces in the second stanza, Merrill replaces these with a plethora of words end-rhymed in -ly (unruly, wholly, melancholy, slowly, fully). Although the chain of meanings, which Cavafy enacts with *λίαν* cannot be replaced, clearly, with the phoneme -ly, Merrill's insistent repetition of the lilting syllable does suggest with sound the stifling

reductiveness closing in on the protagonist. Also, the rhyme of lines 12 and 16 (“sees / from the Peloponnese”) has a light or even absurd (Gilbert and Sullivan-esque?) feel, which suggests in English the ironic lightness of the original.

Merrill makes an interesting move which introduces a new level of wordplay into the English. He translates the word *Ιταλιώτης*, which appears in lines 2 and 23, in two different ways. In the first instance, he translates it as “Greek-Italian,” and the hyphenation here suggests a certain equality between ethnicity and dwelling as modes of identity. But in the final stanza, he converts the noun into a past participle, “Italicized.” His conversion of noun into verb (of past action) suggests that a process has somehow been enacted in the poem itself. For Kimos’ double-identity, in stanza one, is changed through the event he witnesses in stanza two, and reemerges in stanza three as a single, passive identity—in other words, he has been labeled, just as the booty from Corinth has been labeled. For “Italicized” can also refer to the lettering on the ships’ prows, which Merrill has set in italics (“*Greek booty. Spoils of Corinth.*”) instead of in spaced lettering. Both methods can signify translation: Cavafy’s from Latin to Greek, and Merrill’s from Greek to English. Both call to mind Benjamin’s robe metaphor, for he says that “the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds,” as the language of a translation is “unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien” (75). Here, Cavafy’s stretched-out letters and Merrill’s wrinkled italics both indicate that the translation is unsuited to its content. This stretching and wrinkling enables us to see the disjunction between a word and what is signified. In addition, Cavafy offers us two words, which refer to the art objects (*λάφυρα* and *λεία*), as does Merrill (“booty” and “spoils”). So the translations already being enacted within the original poem, from Latin to Greek, from Greek (*λάφυρα*) to Greek (*λεία*), are multiplied in their translation into English, so that we are approaching Benjamin’s ideal: interlinear translation. For, even though each of these words is inadequate to the object signified, if one pieces them together, one can approach *l’immortelle parole* or the immortal word.

Another shifty move that Merrill makes is in reference to yet another word which appears twice in the poem, in lines 4 and 23, *διασκεδάσεις*, which Merrill translates consistently as “pleasure.” Yet *διασκεδάσεις*, a modern Greek word, is more precisely (and generally, among other translators of Cavafy) translated as “amusements, diversions, fun,” and it is often used in reference to children. Whereas the word that Cavafy universally uses to denote “pleasure” is

ηδονή, an ancient word used by the Epicureans, which specifically refers to sensual pleasure. It was also used by the third century BCE novelist Heliodoros, for example, in apposition to λύπη or pain, to describe the bittersweet nature of eros (ηδονής δε άμα και λύπης ενεπλήσθην: “at the same time I was filled with pleasure and pain”) (Carson, 84). Cavafy is quite precise in his use of this word to refer to homosexual encounter, for he developed in his poetry a cult of ηδονή as a deviant (or έκνομος, “outside the law”) yet purifying experience, a brief yet intense encounter which acts as inspiration for the creation of art generally, and specifically his own poetry. If Cavafy had intended to suggest such an experience, he most certainly would have used the word ηδονή rather than διασκεδάσεις. Which is not to deny that there is a slightly charged erotic atmosphere here, as indeed in any Cavafian poem whose protagonist is a young man.

But compare a literal translation of the final sestet of Cavafy’s poem,

Oh today certainly it is not permissible  
it is not possible [for] the young Italiote  
to have for entertainment any wish.

to Merrill’s translation:

Today don’t be surprised if it’s unsuitable  
indeed impossible for the Italicized  
young man to dream of giving himself to pleasure fully.

And finally, we may compare both of these to a few lines from another Cavafy poem, «Πέρασμα» (“Passage”), in which the young protagonist gives himself to ηδονή:

And as it is (for our art) proper,  
in his blood, fresh and hot,  
pleasure luxuriates. His body is conquered  
by unlawful erotic intoxication: and his youthful  
limbs give in to it.

Κι ως είναι (για την τέχνη μας),  
το αιμα μου, καινούριο και ζεστό,  
η ηδονή το χαίρεται. Το σώμα μου νικά  
έκνομη ερωτική μέθνη και τα νεανικά  
μέλη ενδίδουνε σ’ αυτήν.

Here we see the Cavafian association of ηδονή with έκνομος as well as the evocation of eros as a

force that enters the body from the outside and conquers (νικά) it, entering the blood and melting the limbs (μέλη). This evocation of eros as a force that acts on specific parts of the body, such as blood and limbs, can remind us of Anne Carson's characterization of eros in lyric poetry as a physiological takeover in which the "moment when the soul parts on itself in desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses" (7). Both Sappho and Archilochos refer to eros as "the limb-loosener" (ο λυσιμελής), and the experience of eros is generally associated with sensations of hot and cold, melting, burning, liquidity, all of which break down the boundaries of the body (7-8). This moment when the soul parts on itself is evoked in the final lines of Merrill's translation, where the self is split into two by the supposed impossibility (the denial of which immediately making it possible) of Kimos to dream of "giving himself to pleasure fully," since two aspects of the self are required for such an action. This splitting of the self as a response to being acted upon by eros does not occur overtly in Cavafy's "On an Italian Shore," but it does occur in «Πέρασμα» a poem about the passage of a youth into the "Noble World of Poetry" (Υψηλό / της Πουήσεως Κόσμο) through homoerotic experience. Perhaps the more explicit intimation of (thwarted) erotic experience in Merrill's translation indicates that Merrill conceived of the act of translation as essentially an erotic act.

## EROS

I am going to borrow Carson's musings on Sappho's Fragment 31 to explain what I mean about conceiving of the act of translation as essentially an erotic act. Merrill's poem, "Days of 1964," an homage to Cavafy at the very least in its title, uses Kleo, the Greek housekeeper, as a figure of eros ("I think now she *was* love"). Kleo, who speaks no English, represents all that is untranslatable from Greek, yet somehow makes it into the poem anyway. Kleo represents the essential loss of translation as well as what is found in the process. I call that process the trajectory of eros, and Sappho's Fragment 31 is a perfect model for it:

[W]here eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. (16)

Anne Carson is here using Sappho to discuss the triangular nature of desire. Fragment 31 is Sappho's famous poem:

He seems to me equal to the gods that man  
 who opposite you  
 sits and listens close  
 to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it  
 puts the heart in my chest on wings  
 for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking  
 is left in me

no: tongue breaks, and thin  
 fire is racing under skin  
 and in eyes no sight and drumming  
 fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
 grips me all, greener than grass  
 I am and dead—or almost  
 I seem to me. (12-13)

It is a poem about “the lover’s mind in the act of constructing desire for itself” (16). For the ecstatic experience of desire the poet undergoes is precisely a result of her reach of imagining herself in the position of the man who sits next to the lovely girl. For eros, she says, “is a verb”—the activity of reaching from the real to the ideal (17). Writing itself is an act of eros, as writer reaches out to reader, meaning conveyed through the gap between them by the medium of the alphabet (108).

The activity of translation can follow the triangular construction of desire as well, as the translator is like Sappho who projects herself imaginatively as a man who listens close to the sweet speaking of the poet she wishes to translate. That moment is an ecstatic moment, no speaking left in her, as the cadences of the beloved language wash over her, and shaking grips her. If she could sit as close to the beloved as that man, who seems equal to the gods, without being annihilated, then perhaps she could speak in a godlike language, one in which the meaning composed is perfect and true. But, in fact, this is never possible, for the gap of eros is in between, and the very reach toward the beloved (language) makes her painfully aware of the edges of her

own self or language. Yet this third component “plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros” (16). Desire would not be desire were it not for the presence of this gap, and so paradoxically lovers and writers require it to be there, for it is in the distance between the lover and the beloved that the imagination comes into play. In terms of translation, at least for Merrill who is in love with the Greek language, there is a moment when, godlike, the translator feels he can capture the meanings and rhythms of the words and syllables precisely. And then the edges of his own language reassert themselves: -ly is not *λίαν*. And yet, it is in that reach of the imagination that new meanings come into play, and so, paradoxically, he also takes pains to make the absence of the gap present, boldly italicizing it, and giving himself to *ηδονή*, in the process finding the edges of his self.

#### MY TRANSLATIONS

I have translated two poems by Cavafy, «Καισαρίων» and «Για τον Αμμονή, που πέθανε 29 ετών, στα 610». I chose to translate these because they are good examples of poems whose formal effects are, in Merrill’s words, “of one fabric with the meaning.” Also, «Για τον Αμμονή, που πέθανε 29 ετών, στα 610» addresses the issue of translation from Egyptian to Greek, and so we can get a sense of how Cavafy himself might conceive of the act of translation. My approach in translating these poems was Merrillian in several ways: I took pains to be faithful to the rhyme scheme in the original, concurring with Merrill’s suspicion that “these sound effects . . . are such a poem’s secret power” and that a translation which fails to register them “is hardly worth making” (106-7). Cavafy employs a rhyme scheme in both of these poems, and the specifics of this scheme in each poem carry its own meaning which is one with the poem itself. As for the content as carried through the syntax and diction of the poem, I have opted for a less literal translation. It is not possible to create a rhyme scheme in English without altering syntax and taking liberties with diction. I also took the opportunity to push the translations in a particular direction, that direction which constitutes the erotics of translation for me: I emphasized those things that drew me to these particular poems in the first place.

**KAISARION**

Partially to study a lost time,  
 partially to while away the hours,  
 last night I cracked open a book  
 of Ptolemaic inscriptions to browse.  
 The fawning, the lavish praise  
 are shared by all. Everyone is luminous,  
 glorified, mighty, illustrious:  
 every venture the most wise.  
 As for the women of that stock, the Cleopatras,  
 the Berenices, they too are marvelous.

When I had fully examined the era  
 I'd have left off reading, but a mention,  
 insignificant, brief, of King Kaisarion  
 suddenly caught my eye . . .

And you arrived with your indefinable  
 allure. History only grants  
 a few lines to your life,  
 so I could freely mould you in my mind.  
 I shaped you sensitive and beautiful.  
 My art endows your face  
 with a dreamy, delightful grace.  
 And so fully did I picture you  
 that late last night, as my lamp  
 was flickering—I let it die out on purpose—  
 I thought you came into my room,  
 it seemed as if you stood before me: how you were  
 in fallen Alexandria,  
 pale and weary, purified in your sorrow,  
 still hoping they will take pity on you,  
 the unscrupulous ones—who whispered *Too many Caesars!*

The first poem, «Καίσαριών», according to Keeley and Sherrard (likely borrowing from Savvidis), follows the rhyme scheme *ababcaadee* in the first stanza. Although they do not record it, the second stanza follows the scheme *baff*. The *b*-rhyme here is a bit looser than in the first stanza, -ωσω (εξακριβώσω) rather than -ασω (διαβάσω, περάσω), but the *a*-rhyme (μικρή) matches line 6 precisely (λαμπροί). The *f*-couplet might be considered a bit loose (Καίσαριώνος / αμέσως). Yet there is undeniably a rhyme structure at play in the second stanza, one that is rather strikingly broken in the breathing space given to us by the extended ellipses that trail off the

stanza. This typographical element, the presence of the ellipses, marks both a formal and semantic shift in the poem, for the following stanza breaks away from the rhyme scheme completely. The only pattern that can be found is the grammatical rhyme μου / μου / σου in lines 19, 25, and 28, but anyone familiar with Cavafy's formal effects knows that, when Cavafy wants to take advantage of this pronomial repetition, he rhymes the "possessed" noun that precedes as well. For example, in «Για τον Αμμονή . . .» we have the rhythmical rhyme (evocative of folk songs) ποιήματά του / εμορφιά του. The third and final stanza is largely unrhymed, occasionally enjambed (e.g., αόριστη / γοητεία and λίγες / γραμμές, lines 15-17), and generally freer in flow.

The poem's semantics is clearly suggested by and inseparable from its form. The first stanza takes place in a very "measured" world. The speaker begins the narrative by giving two discrete reasons for choosing the book he is about to read. First, he wants to «εξακριβώνω», literally, to "uncover" or "inform oneself on" «μια εποχή». Second, he wants to pass the time («την ώρα να περάσω»). Right from the start, the poet sets up a contrast between εποχή and ώρα—the public time of history and the private time of the speaker's leisure hours. The end-stopped lines contribute to a feeling of sharp division between these two kinds of time. The division between the *a*-rhymes and *b*-rhymes reinforces this orderly, distinct world. The grammatical *b*-rhymes (περάσω / διαβάσω / εξακριβώσω) describe the somewhat passive action of the speaker on the collection of inscriptions, whereas the *a*-rhymes describe the collection and its contents (εποχή / συλλογή / λαμπροί / αγαθοεργοί / μικρή). History as the speaker reads it from the inscriptions strikes so much of a single note, as emphasized by the rhythmical list of nearly rhyming descriptive adjectives, that it feels impenetrable, and made up of concepts rather than individuals.

This passive relationship between the speaker and history, and the monotony of history, is radically broken by the introduction of a small thing, a «μνεία μικρή», into the vast sameness of history. The impact of this small mention is registered typographically by the ellipses, and a kind of "time warp" takes place in the following stanza: The lacuna in history allows a figure from the past to enter the present moment through an act of the imagination. Until this point, time has been neatly divided into the continuous present, which lends a feeling of timelessness and incontrovertibility to history, and the aorist tense, the past of momentary action, of the speaker. But in line 20 the speaker-poet's τέχνη or art allows him to break into the present tense of creation with «Η τέχνη μου στο πρόσωπό σου δίνει», and the strong performative quality of

the verb makes us realize that the poet's power to create characters competes with the existential present tense of the historian and surpasses it in its ability to create a unique individual. The speaker himself remains in the past tense of his momentary existence, as he describes the way he let the lamp sputter out. But the end of the poem brings the character of Kaisarion into a kind of timeless conditional, "how you would have been," which ends in a list of adjectives that describe him, in great contrast to the other characters, in his unique qualities. His specific response proves he is made of flesh and blood, "pale" "tired" "ideal in his sorrow" and has emotions in the continuous tense of the present participle («ελπίζοντας»)—even more "present" than Ptolemy's historical present.

In my translation of «Καισαρίων» I tried to follow the spirit of Cavafy's rhyme scheme, although my rhymes are a bit softer than his. My rhyme scheme can be mapped as *abcb-deed-e-e fgg-h ijkli-mmnoepqrsnt*. I tried to imbue the first stanza with a repetitive quality by using a grammatical *e*-rhyme, rhyming the adjectives "luminous / illustrious / marvelous" to give a sense of the monotony of the historical figures being described. (I could have employed internal rhyme as well such as Cavafy does in his adjectives, by using, for instance, "glorious" instead of "glorified," but in English internal rhyme can detract from our ability to hear end-rhyme.) I did my best to squeeze a couplet into the second stanza, so that there would be a feel of a formal structure being broken by the ellipses. In the third stanza I loosened up quite a bit, as does Cavafy, and tried to give a more sculptural feel to the stanza, with, for instance, a highly enjambed transition in lines 15-16 (*indefinable / allure*), and more jagged lines in general. I was sure to be faithful to Cavafy's sudden switch into the present tense in line 20 and couldn't resist the opportunity to use rhyme (*face / grace*) and a lilting trimeter for these two lines (iamb in line 20, a pair of anapests and an iamb in line 21) to call attention to the fact that art or τέχνη is at work here.

My most radical swerve away from a literal translation was in translating the word «εποχή». Like Merrill who translated «Ιταλιώτης» two different ways, I translated «εποχή» as "lost time" in line 1, and as "era" in line 11. I chose to use "lost time" in the first line partially for aesthetic reasons. "Partially to examine an era" is a very uninviting way to begin a poem in English, literal as it may be; it has none of the rhythmic quality of the Greek to pull us in. Also, I wanted to dramatize the most interesting aspect of the poem for me—the play between different kinds of

time. I thought that having lines 1 and 2 end in, respectively, “time” and “hours” would alert the reader to the kind of separation that “partially / partially” points to, that is, public and private time. I also thought that “lost time” might evoke for the reader the sense of a Proustian project of trying to discover an entrance to the past, through the immediacy of the senses, for the purpose of creating literature. Also, in the final lines of the poem, I slightly alter the translation of the past conditionals in lines 26 and 29, «ως θα ήσουν» and «ελπίζοντας ακόμη να σε σπλαχθίζουν», to emphasize the poet’s conjuring of Kaisarion’s presence. This element is present in the Greek but can get clouded in English by wordy constructions such as “how you would have been,” so I simplified this line to “how you were” for a more intimate feel. In line 29 I used “still hoping they will take pity” to give the sense that Kaisarion’s emotions, as reinvoked by the poet, exist in the present moment, the continuous moment of art itself.

#### FOR AMMONIS, WHO DIED AT AGE 29, IN 610

Raphael, will you compose a few verses for us?  
 An epitaph for the poet Ammonis. Please compose  
 something very elegant and gracious.  
 You are the one to do it. Goodness knows  
 Ammonis, who is one of ours, deserves our praise.

You will, of course, honor his poetry—  
 but don’t forget to speak of his beauty,  
 his fragile beauty that we so loved.

Your Greek has always been fluid and musical.  
 But we need all of your mastery now!  
 Our sorrow, our love pass into a foreign tongue.  
 Pour your Egyptian feeling into this foreign tongue.

Raphael, please compose your verses for us  
 so they hold—you know—something of our life  
 so that every cadence, every phrase shows  
 that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.

The second poem that I chose to translate forms a nexus of some typical Cavafian strands: poetry as a memorial, the Greek language as a medium for art, and an interesting address of the issue of translation. It is one of Cavafy’s poems which I consider “lighter” in tone, an effect achieved by the use of the second person in combination with a more repetitive use of

sound. The rhyme scheme is *abbcdeefghaiajak*, and all of the rhymes are grammatical. The use of feminine rhyme for the *b*- (συνθέσεις / μπορέσεις) and *e*-rhymes (ποιήματά του / εμορφιά του) lends a lilting, rhythmical feel to the lines. Also, the repetition and variation in the language, along with the long, rhythmic lines brings us immediately into the seductive, lilting type of poem that we find in, say, «Ιθάκη». For example, lines 6-7 follow a similar structure and diction with slight variations, which end up giving a feeling of sameness to the lines:

Βέβαια θα πεις για τα ποιήματά του —  
αλλά να πεις και για την εμορφιά του,

Here I arranged the lines to make grammatical parallelism even more apparent: conjunction + the verb λέγω in compound form + για + possessive noun. The rhyme and grammatical parallelism of «ποιήματά του / εμορφιά του» leads us to feel there isn't really much difference between the poetry and the beauty of Ammonis, that in fact the same aesthetic considerations go into both of these and perhaps Ammonis's physical beauty *is* his poetry. Indeed, in the following line the speaker repeats and dotes lovingly on «την λεπτή εμορφιά του», emphasizing the sense that we are in an aesthetic world.

The following stanza amounts to a sort of *ars poetica*—for both poetry and translation, or for translation *as* poetry. The speaker praises the poet's beautiful, musical Greek, and imbues his own Greek with these qualities as well. The lilting rhythm of the line (and the poem as a whole) comes from a kind of anapestic rhythm, although with more unstressed syllables than available in English. Most of the stresses fall on *a* sounds (Πάντοτε, ωραία, μουσικά, ελληνικά), and the staccato, internal rhyme of μουσικά and ελληνικά makes the point about the musical nature of Greek. These are the moments in Cavafy, when the formal effects and the meaning so seamlessly are one, that a translator simply must search for beauty and order in the new language. For here we find what poetic *μαστοριά* is to Cavafy: to be able to pour *λύπη* and *αγάπη*, the elemental emotions, into a foreign yet beautiful language.

In my translation of this poem, I altered the syntax and even added an occasional expression that did not exist in the original. I did so in service of following a regular rhyme scheme. I feel that a poem which is about translating emotions and “composing” (να συνθέσεις) a poem, and which in itself follows a rhyme scheme with strong rhymes, deserves to have a translation which attempts to make the same formal-semantic connection. To borrow the Greek word that Cavafy uses here for composing a poem, this poem (among others by Cavafy, most

notably «Εκόμιζα εις την Τέχνη») manifests a very self-consciously “synthetic” conception of art. That is, the poem discusses the synthetic process of art, while formally the poem enacts this synthetic ordering of words and sounds for eye and ear. Cavafy’s dominant rhymes in the poem are the *a*-rhymes and *b*-rhymes—both of which are grammatical and specifically verbal—which emphasize the active quality of composing. The progress of the *b*-rhyme is particularly interesting to follow, as these four verbs encapsulate the entire compositional process: ζητούν, περνούν, γραφούν, δηλούν. The first verb initiates the request or occasion for the poem, the second translates emotion into language, the third translates language into writing, the fourth inheres the poem’s message in rhythm and phrase. In every phrase, no less—«κάθε φράσις»—Cavafy’s injunction for no excess verbiage.

My rhyme scheme is as follows: *ababb- cc-d efgg ahbi*. My *b*-rhyme, “compose / knows / praise / shows,” is most similar to Cavafy’s *a*-rhyme; it is verbal, and includes two of his most significant verbs (συνθέσεις and δηλούν). Admittedly, “praise” is so much of a slant-rhyme that it may not register as rhyme at all, but at least the end-sounds have an orderly feel to them. I hope that the word “compose,” the crux of the poem, by being line-end, enjambed, and masculine-rhymed, catches the reader’s attention. My *a*-rhyme (for us) and *g*-rhyme (foreign tongue) are identical rhymes, which Cavafy doesn’t employ in this poem (unless you count the του of lines 6-7). I borrowed this technique from many of his other poems to give a feel of repetition, which he does more subtly here through repeating words in different positions in a line (lines 7-8, εμορφιά του; lines 11-12, ξένη γλώσσα). In fact, one of the losses that I mourn is Cavafy’s interesting chiasmic construction in lines 11-12 (σε ξένη γλώσσα η λύπη μας κ’ η αγάπη μας περνούν. / Το αιγύπτιακό σου αίσθημα χύσε στην ξένη γλώσσα.), where the foreign tongue is the external element that physically cradles the emotions in the center. Also, I love the equation where from one line to the next “our sadness and love” becomes “your Egyptian emotion,” as if emotion itself were Egyptian, and Greek its formal container.

The most radical changes that I made in my translation are the changes in diction and syntax in the first stanza. I changed the first and second lines, the request, into a direct address. I came to this change through the need to compose a rhyme pattern, but I am pleased with the result. This is one of the cases in translation where the loss of one element (Cavafy’s strong rhyme beginning with the first line) ends in the assertion of another. Sappho’s equivocation at the end of Fragment 31 comes to mind: “greener than grass / I am and dead—or almost / I seem

to me.” She *almost* dies, then develops a relationship with her own self. Here I have managed to forget Cavafy’s sweet speaking for a moment in order to create my own poem in a new language. The gap between Greek and English has left room for me to redefine the speaker in the poem as a slightly more intimate and direct character than the Cavafian one.

The fact that «Για τον Αμμονή, που πέθανε στον 29 ετών, στα 610 μ.Χ.» is about translation makes it an interesting poem to look at in a project on translation. In light of this poem, one may wonder whether Cavafy thought of his own poetry as translation; that is, perhaps he felt he was pouring his own Egyptian emotions into the Greek language. The contact between the elemental aspects of human emotion—love, sadness—and the beauty and ordering of the written language give birth to the poem. We may think of Merrill’s muse, Kleo, who embodies pure emotion in “Days of 1964”: “I think now she *was* love. She sighed and glistened / All day with it, or pain, or both” (220). For Merrill emotion is Greek, and the written language is English. He reads her body for clues about the nature of love, and translates her into English: “(And may Kyria Kleo, / Should someone ever put it [Merrill’s poem] into Greek / and read it aloud to her, forgive me, too.)” As soon as the poet proceeds beyond simply dripping sweet words on the page, as the lover does “To My Greek,” there is a loss in translation, and he must ask forgiveness. Another person of whom Merrill might ask forgiveness is Cavafy. How much distance there is between Cavafy’s «Μέρες του . . .» poems and Merrill’s “Days of . . .” poems. And yet how much is gained. I, too, must ask Cavafy forgiveness, and hope that something has been gained from my translations.

#### WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn, Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.
- Carson, Anne. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Cavafy, C. P. *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Ed. George Savidis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- . *154 Poems*. Trans. Evangelos Sachperoglou. Athens: Tasos Vagenas, 2003.
- Merrill, James. *Collected Poems*. Ed. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.
- . *Recitative*. Ed. J. D. McClatchy. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Karen Emmerich is a Ph.D. candidate in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She is also a translator of modern and contemporary Greek poetry and prose. Recent translations include Amanda Michalopoulou's *I'd Like* and Miltos Sachtouris's *Poems (1945-1971)*, which was nominated for a National Book Critics' Circle Award in Poetry; forthcoming translations include works by Margarita Karapanou and Ersi Sotiropoulos. She is the recipient of grants and awards from the NEA, PEN, and the Modern Greek Studies Association.  
kre2001@columbia.edu

Andriana Mastor holds a B.A. in English from UC Berkeley and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from UCLA, where she studied Ancient Greek and Classical Chinese. Her poems have been published in *Pomegranate Seeds: An Anthology of Greek-American Poetry*. In 2008, Columbia University awarded her the Drenka Willen Prize for Poetry in Translation for her translations of George Seferis and Yiannis Ritsos. amastor@ucla.edu

James Nikopoulos is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate center. His articles have appeared or are forthcoming in *PSA* and *Italica*. He teaches world literature at Lehman College and Italian at Hunter College in New York.  
jnikopoulos@gc.cuny.edu

Alexis Radisoglou received his B.A. in German and Modern Greek studies from the University of Oxford in 2007. He is now a Ph.D. student in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures and at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University.  
ar2622@columbia.edu

Lytton Jackson Smith lives in New York City and is working towards a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he works on 20th/21st century poetries and Anglo-Saxon poetics. His book of poems, *The All-Purpose Magical Tent*, was selected for the Nightboat Prize by Terrance Hayes and published by Nightboat Books in April 2009. He is currently translating the novel *Sendiherrann*, by Bragi Ólafsson, from Icelandic for Open Letter.  
lyttonsmith@gmail.com

Kathryn Stergiopoulou received a B.A. in Literature from Yale University and an M.A. from N.Y.U.'s Draper Interdisciplinary Program, where she wrote a thesis examining the work of Giorgos Seferis as a translator. She is currently in the third year of her Ph.D. at Princeton University's Department of Comparative Literature. Her areas of interest and research include modernist and avant-garde poetics, the theory and practice of translation and twentieth-century continental philosophy. In addition to English and modern Greek she works in German, French and Italian. kstergio@princeton

Karen Van Dyck is the Kimon A. Doukas Chair of Modern Greek Literature and the Director of the Program in Hellenic Studies at Columbia University in New York. She teaches courses on Modern Greek and Greek diaspora literature, gender and translation theory. Her publications

include *Kassandra and the Censors: Greek Poetry since 1967* (Cornell, 1998; Greek translation, Agra, 2002), *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections by Contemporary Greek Women Poets* (Wesleyan, 1998), *A Century of Greek Poetry: 1900-2000* (Cosmos, 2004), and *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New and Selected Poems by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke* (Anvil, 2008; Graywolf, 2009), a Lannan Translation Selection. vandyck@columbia.edu

Elizabeth Wildman Wade studied comparative literature with a focus on Spanish and English at Barnard College. With the support of a Fulbright fellowship, she will soon be starting a master's program in comparative literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City. She is interested in translation theory and the interactions of languages in literature. ewwade@gmail.com