

A Note on Translating *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy*

Reflections on the translation of literary texts typically point to *both* absolutes and negotiation, but the latter word applies even more when it comes to collaborative work. In the case of Greek poets translated into English, however, results have admittedly benefited from the ways that individual talents and perspectives intersect. In this particular project the dynamic has included a native speaker of Greek and an English poet.

A collaboration might still settle more easily into a rhythm, as it were, when dealing with a single poet; but the same cannot be said when different voices and eras are brought together in one book. Every time, the entire process is necessarily restarted. Further, these *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* converse with various aspects of a singular voice, and when a poetic text operates 'in the manner of' another, it comes to the reader as well as the translator with a rich nexus of literary associations and textual incitements – often including the collective tendencies of poetic groups or movements. The alchemy, of course, is forever changing: the retracing of inspiration, the sharing of reference, can only lead to a variant self.

Apart from the idiosyncrasies of Cavafy's language, the poems translated also reflect the language of their time, from the beginning of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st. Similar 'inflections' of the period are enacted in English, insofar as these add to the reading experience rather than detracting from it. Beyond this point, the challenge is one of recognizing unique elements of style within a larger effort at similarity, during which the poet from Alexandria is 'personalized' by each of his fellow poets. To use an analogy from music production and mastering, it is all too easy to 'up' Cavafy in the mix; to listen for Cavafy's voice, and not to the other voice reading Cavafy.

Where translations already exist, as in the case of the poems by Seferis and Ritsos, the new versions here respond not just to the Greek original but also to a series of choices previously made; the palimpsest of sensibilities includes translators working across the years. Retranslation becomes a *gaze held*: it is noteworthy not simply in the sense of a different emphasis, or of 'scope for improvement'.

In a bilingual edition, mirrors are already in place. A more conscious and tactile reading experience is stirred as two languages try to say the same thing. Shapes and intentions can be compared, as (a)symmetries are intimated by the reader. Especially in *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy*, the dialogue between poets more readily echoes that between poets and their translators or critics. Then it becomes felt in both of the pages facing each other.

Latinised versions of names have generally been avoided unless necessary; and where there appears to be inconsistency in some transliterations, this is based on accepted convention (*Yorgos* Sarandaris but *George* Seferis). Intertextual references to titles, phrases or names *from* Cavafy do at least initially take into account the frequencies encountered in existing English translations. When, as is the case with Ilias Margaris, the new poem is itself an assembly of excerpts and fragments, then such an original necessitates experiment: *a gathering of translations* is therefore what realizes 'Compiling Verses from Cavafy'. Here, wherever possible, the publication dates of the original poems and a chronological order of translations align. More often however, the deciding factor in the selection of lines has been either the availability or the quality of a rendering.

At the same time, it is perhaps apt that in the final stanza of what is possibly the most derivative of the Cavafy-inspired endeavours collected in a chapbook that appears more than eighty years after the poet's passing, the voice of Cavafy himself returns – and a new translation of the 1897 poem 'Addition' has found a place.

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‘Compiling Verses from Cavafy’

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