

12 Greek Poems after Cavafy

edited by
Paschalis Nikolaou

translated by
Paschalis Nikolaou
& Richard Berengarten

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU has previously co-edited *Translating Selves: Experience and Identity between Languages and Literatures* (Continuum, 2008). He lives in Corfu, where he is Lecturer in Literary Translation at the Ionian University.

RICHARD BERENGARTEN is a poet who lives in Cambridge. His most recent Shearsman volume is *Notness: Metaphysical Sonnets* (2015). His co-translations from Greek include books by Antonis Samarakis and Nasos Vayenas.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green, BRISTOL BS16 7DF

Registered Office: 30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(*this address not for correspondence*)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-449-9

English translations © Paschalis Nikolaou and Richard Berengarten 2015
Introduction and notes © Paschalis Nikolaou 2015

Greek poems © the individual poets, their Estates and publishers

Cover image, 'Marginalizacija, 38' © Nina Todorović 2015

The right of the various authors and translators of this work to be identified as the authors thereof has been asserted by them, or by their legal representatives, in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cavafy's legacy, both in Greece and internationally, has greatly benefited over the decades from the philological attentions of a large number of scholars. Though some of them are already featured or mentioned in this book in their other capacities – those of poet or translator – thanks are especially due to Peter Mackridge, David Ricks and Josephine Balmer for their watchful eyes and valuable critical comments. Further thanks are due to Nina Todorović for the cover image from her 'Marginalization' series (2010-2011; see: www.ninatodorovic.com); and to the translators whose work features in the English arrangement of Ilias Margaritis' 'Compiling Verses from Cavafy' on p. 23 and their publishers. Yannis Ritsos' 'The Poet's Space' first appeared in the April-May 2005 issue of *The London Magazine*, then edited by Sebastian Barker.

The press' website hosts 'A Note on Translating *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy*' along with detailed credits, at this URL:

<http://www.shearsman.com/ws-shop/category/805-chapbooks/product/5527-paschalis-nikolaou---12-greek-poems-after-cavafy>

The website of the Cavafy Archive, currently under the auspices of the Onassis Foundation, includes a wealth of material by and on the poet.

See: www.cavafy.com/www.cavafy.gr

Περιεχόμενα / Contents

<i>For, and After, Cavafy</i>		4
1916	Μάριος Μέμνων (Τίμος Μαλάνος) Marios Memnon (Timos Malanos)	8 9
1939	Γιώργος Σαραντάρης Yorgos Sarandaris	10 11
1960	Άγγελος Παρθένης Angelos Parthenis	12 13
1963	Γιάννης Ρίτσος Yannis Ritsos	14 15
1963	Γιάννης Βουλής Yannis Voulis	16 17
1971	Γιώργος Σεφέρης George Seferis	18 19
1977	Ζήσης Οικονόμου Zisis Oikonomou	20 21
1992	Ηλίας Μάργαρης Ilias Margaris	22 23
2001	Νάσος Βαγενάς Nasos Vayenas	24 25
2003	Διονύσης Καψάλης Dionysis Kapsalis	26 27
2013	Κυριάκος Χαραλαμπίδης Kyriakos Charalambides	28 29
2015	Δημήτρης Κοσμόπουλος Dimitris Kosmopoulos	30 31
<i>Notes to the Poems, Poets and Translations</i>		32

For, and After, Cavafy

Across the following pages C. P. Cavafy (1863-1933) is *expressed again* by poets writing in the same language as his own. Spanning one hundred years – including in this frame the last twenty of the Alexandrian poet's life – these *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* are also illustrations of an unmistakable voice as it is being shadowed. Together, they locate a kind of echo-chamber within Greek letters, which includes the attitudes forming within the culture along with the modulations in critical reception over the course of decades.

'World literature' has long admitted the poet's continuous presence. Perhaps nothing confirms it as decidedly as do those frequent appearances, in so many different languages, of poems *à la manière de*, 'in the manner of', Cavafy. This is a poet whose relatively slight output – the 'canon' of 154 poems surrounded by fragments and notes, including the 'unfinished', 'unpublished', 'repudiated' poems, plus the journal entries and brief opinion pieces – has been intensely examined. The attention also extends to the few translations the poet produced between 1884 and 1895, of parts of works by Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Baudelaire and Dante. In Greece as well as in other countries, all this material has now been variously edited, (digitally) archived, reprinted (including in the poet's handwriting), republished, paired with paintings and photographs, translated and retranslated. In English alone there have been over half a dozen book-length translations in the first decade of the 21st century. Such repeated viewings are usually – if not exclusively – reserved for the dramatists and poets of the classical past. Cavafy's perceptive conversations with that past, in which peripheral episodes and (pseudo)historical personages come alive in all the constancies and contradictions of human thought and desire, have certainly played a role in his popularity. In poems like 'A Prince from Western Libya' (1928) or 'Myres: Alexandria, 340 A. D.' (1929), the reader communes with an enduring consciousness, an antiquity truly inhabited yet all the while linking to current experience and mores: *we compare ourselves*. As chosen or designed by Cavafy, these well-appointed moments, phrases and emotions attain universal relevance. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this reason for revisiting the poet is also the aspect of Cavafy's method that is most readily copied.

The apparent simplicity of Cavafy's construction is another common explanation for 'excessive results' when it comes to both translation and imitation. After all, this a poetry first understood in

story-telling capacity: describing settings and events, and teeming with characters, and their actions and dialogue. These elements are accented even in renderings that strike a better balance between semantic content and the very many poetic and subtle rhythmic effects that Cavafy – unlike some of his translators – never disregards. And yet: the primary impact of most of his poems depends on a narrative drift transmitted nearly intact in other languages and far more clearly observed than Cavafy’s meticulous fusions of 19th and early 20th century poetic forms, or his distinctive merging of the demotic and purist strands of the Greek language, which were still very much competing in his time. (Even so, these exactly constitute the unprecedented newness picked up and amplified by the early Greek imitations and parodies.)

Those core decisions Cavafy made in Alexandria at the turn of the previous century have travelled well across linguistic boundaries, allowing for degrees of engagement: an *œuvre* concentrated enough and sufficiently uniform in tone to be savoured by the experienced reader of poetry in a single volume, and in full; and no less so, in snippets, whether quoted by magazine articles or glimpsed among the electronic aphorisms relayed by the user of social media – who may never have even read a complete poem by Cavafy. And, as happens with only the greatest of achievements in art, here is a style recognizable enough across cultural space to enable further meaning-making: a *literary register* routinely inflecting the voice of poets, entirely suited for adaptation or recycling at the hands of a wide range of international artists.

When it comes to a bilingual presentation of poems written for and after Cavafy by his fellow poets in Greece, what perhaps matters first is the sheer scale of what has been left out. Two existing Greek anthologies, *Παρωδίες Καβαφικών Ποιημάτων* [Parodies of Cavafy’s Poems] and *Ελληνικά Καβαφογενή Ποιήματα* [Greek Cavafy-inspired Poems], both edited by Dimitris Daskalopoulos, together hold no less than 358 such works; and exhaustive as the investigation in these volumes may be, they both stop at the start of the new century, covering the years 1917-1997 and 1909-2001 respectively. So English readers would be right in sensing that the twelve poems translated here represent certain peaks within a very long chronicle. The intervals between the years of publication listed on the contents page are indeed loud – and wildly populated. A narrative more philological in nature emerges through these selections, indicative as they are of wider dialogues between poetic voices, forms and movements. In this sense perhaps *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* also exists as a *brief* Century of Greek Poetry.

Production of Cavafy-inspired poetry in the Hellenic world precedes the writing that occurs in other languages (experienced in all its breadth in another anthology, *Συνομιλώντας με τον Καβάφη* [Conversing with Cavafy] edited by Nasos Vayenas in 2000; containing more than 150 foreign poems translated into Greek). This is only natural, since, despite some preliminary encounters – most notably the publication of ‘Ithaca’ in T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion* in July 1924, translated by George Valassopoulo – the first book-length edition of Cavafy’s poetry by John Mavrogordato appeared in English in 1951, a full eighteen years after the poet’s death. By then, Cavafy’s work was commonly praised. However, given the initially mixed if not downright adverse reception of Cavafy’s dramatic new style by Greek literary critics and journal editors, not to mention poets of the stature of Palamas, in the first two or three decades his fellow poets responded almost to a climate of denigration, and through numerous ventriloquisms. Most of these pieces have little more than topical value: their lines are often the verbal equivalents of newspaper cartoons (of which there were also several) – elongating features accurately enough to mock the man and views behind a style deemed to be pretentious or unpoetic. Meanwhile Cavafy’s ‘slight angle to the universe’ becomes celebrated, his genius championed by E. M. Forster and others. Indeed the shift in Greek literary attitudes towards the poet was also brought about through the ‘many returns’ of his work from abroad, including those *gains* of translation. At a certain point, Greek and foreign-tongued Cavafy-inspired poems began to harmonise, as they eagerly extended and relocated the gaze and energies of the originals. It is now hard to imagine that there was a time when the recipient of irony was the poet himself.

Which of these many Greek-speaking works should themselves also exist – or bear repeating – in English? This question has been partly decided through a borrowed shape: that of *12 Poems for Cavafy*; the small book Yannis Ritsos produced half a century ago, in 1963. Beginning from a title exactly resonating the closeness of poetries ‘for’ and ‘after’, the current selection both parallels and offsets that earlier sequence, in which a literary voice – and a life – has already been absorbed, told through another.

Here, through one of his poems extracted from that sequence, Ritsos is joined by eleven others. The new collation stretches chronologically from 1916, from one of the earliest significant imitations by Timos Malanos, to 2015, with an as-yet-unpublished poem by Dimitris Kosmopoulos which coincides with its first translation into English. Between these two, and leaving aside the very early, more culturally bound parodies, which poets have long

outgrown – a part of literary history acutely recalled, however, in the poem by Parthenis, alongside Cavafy's ambiguous relationship with his critics, and Malanos in particular – the other places are taken up by poems that are not only significant in themselves but also frequently in meaningful dialogue with one another. Their makers range from names familiar to foreign readers, like Ritsos or Seferis, to as yet unknown voices such as those of Voulis, Oikonomou and Margaris that now cross the border into English together with Cavafy's. But for no author included here are these merely occasional poems or chance encounters: the work of all twelve has maintained a long and diversely held dialogue with that of Cavafy, and in many cases continued in these poets' critical writings, as with Seferis and Vayenas.

Indeed the main intention, even in a small selection of Cavafy-inspired poetry, has to be a true record of the variety and experiment, the harmonies as well as discordances, that Cavafy's poetry *inspires*. In this sense, *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* comprises titles where a well-known tone is trained on further scenes from history and myth or later events ('Alexander of Macedon', 'Gorse', 'At Chandragupta's Palace, 305 B. C.', 'Three Horses, Olympic Prizewinners', '16 March 2015, 6 p. m. '); those near-rewritings, variations on themes and inter- or metatextual reflection ('From the Greek', 'The Grammarian's Melancholy'); the biographical after-images where the poet's own life provides the drama ('C. P. Cavafy', 'Cavafy Writes to Malanos', 'The Poet's Space', 'The Suitcase'); and even direct quotation as experiment ('Compiling Verses from Cavafy'). The observing reader will of course soon realise – not least via the notes on each individual title that come at the end of this selection – that some poems occupy more than one of the groupings briefly listed here. For these are poetic compositions where elective affinities and wakefulness to the nature of creativity, *empathy* and *borrowing* both entangle with and explain each other.

Whether these poets and poems channel or address Cavafy, their inclusion in this anthology answers to more than an attempt to convey a part of Greek literary history and expression. Their place is earned at the moment they can also exist as poetry in English. Imitative ways into and out of Cavafy are of course already a form of translation, overlapping with a most active, critical reading. *Actual* translation, translation into another language, needs to communicate, as well, this part of their poetry.

PN
Corfu, March 2015

Μάριος Μέμνων (Τίμος Μαλάνος)

Ο ΜΑΚΕΔΩΝ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ (1916)

Του κ. Κ. Π. Καβάφη

Αλέξανδρος ο Μακεδών αρρώστησε μια μέρα·
οι φίλοι του – οι αυλοκόλακες κι οι τέτοιοι –
γράμμα του στέλλουν και τον ειδοποιούν
πως ο ιατρός του Φίλιππος σκοπεύει
να τον δηλητηριάσει.

Ο Αλέξανδρος που ήξευρε το τι αυτά σημαίνουν,
γιατί τα τέτοια σπάνια στους βασιλείς δεν είναι,
κι είχε στον φίλον του μεγάλη εμπιστοσύνην,
απάντηση δεν έδωσε σε κείνους που – δήθεν –
τον αγαπούσαν κι ήθελαν να τον σώσουν.

Όταν λοιπόν μετά ήλθε κοντά του ο Φίλιππος,
τον είδεν, ησύχως, να διαβάζει την *Ιλιάδα*.
Σιγά στον ώμο τον χτυπά προσφέροντας
στον βασιλέα το ιατρικό σε κύπελλον.
Τότε εκείνος μισογερός – μισοχαμογελώντας –
το πήρεν εις το χέρι του, κι ενώ στα χείλη
αφόβως το πλησίαζεν
(σ' αυτές τες περιστάσεις, να πρέπει η τόση πίστις;
στον Φίλιππον έδιδε το γράμμα να διαβάσει.

Marios Memnon (Timos Malanos)

ALEXANDER OF MACEDON

For Mr. C. P. Cavafy

One day, Alexander of Macedon fell ill and
those close to him – court attendants and the like –
sent him a letter to warn him
that his physician Philip intended
to poison him.

Since situations of this kind are hardly rare for kings
Alexander, being well aware of what was going on
and having complete trust in his friend,
sent no reply to those who – apparently –
loved him so dearly and wanted to save him.

Later, when Philip came to see the king
he found him sitting calmly reading the *Iliad*
and tapping him lightly on the shoulder
offered him the goblet of medicine.
Whereupon the king, half-leaning, half-smiling
took it in one hand and, utterly fearlessly,
brought it to his lips
(in circumstances like these, should one be quite so trusting?)
and with the other gave Philip the letter to read.

RB/PN