

CAVAFY AND HIS ENGLISH TRANSLATORS

The purpose of this short study is to survey the already existing translations of Cavafy's verse into English, and to comment on the artistic merits of the most serious items in the ever-growing Cavafy bibliography in English, with emphasis on the latest—1975—publication in that genre.

The novelist E. M. Forster is perhaps the first English-speaking writer who "discovered" Cavafy's poetry while this Alexandrian Greek was still alive. In his essay "Pharos and Pharillon" (1923) Forster presented some of Cavafy's poems in his translation, and a year later (July 1924) T. S. Eliot—at Forster's suggestion—published Cavafy's famous "Ithaca" (translated by G. Vallasopoulos) in his epoch-making magazine *The Criterion*.

These early renditions mark the beginning of a long succession of English translations since then, which have culminated in the beautiful bilingual volume *C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

With the exception of the famous European masters Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, Rilke, Lorca, and the contemporary Russians Yeftushenko and Voznesensky, Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) is one of the most published modern poets in English translation.

The first Cavafy book in English was done by Oxford Professor John Mavrogordato, *The Poems of C. P. Cavafy* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1951; reissued in 1971; American edition in New York by Grove Press, 1952), and was introduced by Rex Warner. The Mavrogordato volume contains the 154 later called "published" lyrics of the Greek. These poems, plus 33 hitherto unpublished ones (a total of 187), make up the collection that appeared as *The Complete Poems of Cavafy* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961, and London, The Hogarth Press, 1961), which was translated by Rae Dalven and introduced by the great W. H. Auden. Despite its misleading claim of "completeness", the Dalven edition sold well and appeared as a paperback too. Professor G. Savidis's edition of Cavafy's *Anékdota Poiémata* (Athens, Ikaros, 1968) released the remaining seventy-five lyrics that Cavafy's heirs had in their possession. Twenty-one of these till then "unpublished" poems appeared in the beautiful bilingual volume, *C. P. Cavafy: Passions and Ancient Days* (New York, The Dial Press, 1971), translated and introduced by Edmund Keeley and George Savidis. Professor Keeley and Dr. Philip Sher-

rard also have to their credit the handsome and useful English text, *C. P. Cavafy; Selected Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). The list of Cavafy's renditions into English must be completed with the mention of fine translations of 23 Cavafy poems by Mr. Kimon Friar in his anthology *Modern Greek Poetry* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1973) and elsewhere, as well as versions by professors Konstantinos Lardas and Minas Savvas, plus others, in various magazines of quality in the United States, Canada, and England.

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C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems (451 pages) is an impressive *oeuvre* combining the literary talents and scholarly acumen of three prolific professionals. Modern Greek Professor George Savidis (University of Thessaloniki) did the editing of this book meticulously, wrote the "Editor's Introduction", and provided the "Appendix" and "Notes to the Poems" (pp. 387-436)—something necessary for the understanding of Cavafy's growth as an artist. Princeton Professor Keeley, the American co-translator, wrote the brief "Biographical Note" (pp. 437-441), and co-authored the translation and "Translators' Foreword" with the British Neo-Hellenist Dr. Sherrard. Result of this harmonious international cooperation is the scholarly and artistic success of this book. The chronological arrangement of the texts, the critical apparatus that follows them, the "Bibliographical Note" (primary and secondary sources, plus translations into English), and the "Alphabetical Index of Titles" make this volume a most scholarly textbook for the Cavafy student or admirer. The precision and readability of the translations, on the other hand, will satisfy the most demanding expert of modern verse on either side of the Atlantic, for the Keeley-Sherrard team always yields an English literary medium that is perfectly understood in all English-speaking countries. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for some other versions which tend to be too British, or too American, closely reflecting the local idiom and linguistic idiosyncrasy of their makers. Moreover, Keeley and Sherrard resisted the temptation to imitate the rhyme schemes of Cavafy's earlier lyrics, and the traditionally Greek metrics he employed until he started composing in free (but never loose) verse, as well as his occasional mixture of Hellenistic (cf. "In the Month of Athyr", p. 145) and colloquial or puristic contemporary diction. Instead, they opted for a readable, idiomatic, uniform, and unadorned English linguistic medium which transposes Cavafy's flavor effectively and avoids the pitfalls of a rigid adherence to strict or odd forms and other "un-English" artistic features.

In the latest *Collected Poems* (1975) the editor and the translators have

collected 175 of Cavafy's lyrics out of the almost 230 that make up the whole corpus of his extant verse. Although this collection is more than adequate in presenting (and preserving) the best of Cavafy, the fact remains—as the translators admit—that a particular reader or researcher will have to resort to Dr. Dalven's text in order to locate one dozen or so more poems of the strange Alexandrian. Since Cavafy's stature as an artist would not be jeopardized by the appearance of his unsuccessful or "bad" poems—he is already a modern classic—and since the pieces that have been excluded from this selection amount to almost one-fourth of Cavafy's total output, I would not be surprised if, in the near future, some other translator were to publish a "complete poems", including *everything* that Cavafy had ever composed and cared to save in his drawers. As a matter of fact, Rae Dalven has expressed her intention to prepare such a complete edition. If this materializes, the elegant Savidis-Keeley-Sherrard book will be superseded by the contemplated one, as their 1975 *Collected Poems* easily supersedes their excellent but less encompassing editions of "selections" in 1971 and 1972.

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What is there in Cavafy's poetry that has made so many distinguished English and American artists and intellectuals express unreserved praise for his art? The poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald calls Cavafy "the inventor of a modernity and an Alexandrianism of his own, so pungent and of such sad, dry elevation that his work transcends his language and century". Novelist John Fowles is more lavish: Cavafy "is for me not only the great poet of the Levant, but of all culture in decline—which makes him universal in this century". And the profound scholar George Steiner, referring to the translators' skill in capturing Cavafy's "secret music and learned sadness", concludes that these traits have "influenced other currents in modern poetry". Indeed, W. H. Auden and Lawrence Durrell had mentioned—directly or indirectly—the influence of the Greek poet on their own works, in the recent past. Moreover, it is quite impossible to experience Cavafy's eccentric lyricism and remain indifferent, or to react negatively, to the powerful impact of its uniqueness.

Despite the fact that many of his lyrics are quite dramatic (e.g., "Waiting for the Barbarians"), or quasi-autobiographical (e.g., "The Twenty-Fifth Year of His Life"), or unabashedly homosexual in their eroticism (e.g., "The Bandaged Shoulder"), or mostly historical in allusion and subject-matter, Cavafy's poetry is primarily *contemplative*. The "confessional" element in it—like the wealth of literary and historical details—is a means for the artistic and oblique expression of his view on the human condition. The *self* of the poet is substituted (for dramatic effect) as a dynamic, a Protean *persona* in

cases where the recorded human experience (history, religion, philosophy, and literature) offers no precedents—or at least not specific, known, and telling ones. Despite his candor and confessionality Cavafy never intended to create through his verse a Cavafian hero whose notoriety would be analogous to that of the Byronic Hero, or whose characteristics would be static, fixed, and recognizable at all times. In the same context, Cavafy often composed lyrics such as “Candles”, “The Bank of the Future”, and “Artificial Flowers”, which early critics had labeled “philosophical”, and had contrasted them to others which they had considered “erotic” and “historical”. Nothing is more simplistic and misleading than such a superficial categorization of poems which are always contemplative, and only differ in the manner and artistic means through which the poet articulated his own experience—be it of the flesh, of the mind, or of the soul. Even when we read of Ithaca, or of Julian, or of Antony, or of Thermopylae, we always become exposed to the same sensibility—Cavafy’s—despite the mixture of puristic and demotic, Hellenistic and Byzantine, Pagan and Christian, cynical and noble, past and actuality, and so on, often in one and the same poem. Cavafy’s verse is not *philosophical* in the proper sense of the term, for it offers no new system and espouses no old ones either. At best, the Alexandrian’s humanism (his attitude toward life) can be described as existential of sorts, or proto-existential. But existentialism is not a philosophical system. It is an honestly personal and responsible life style that rejects established dogmas, systems, and norms.

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To form an idea of the quality of Cavafy’s lyrical musings—as well as of the skill of his translators—I will examine two of his poems by comparing different versions in order to ascertain their individual strengths and weaknesses. “Epithymies”, a pre-1905 poem, was translated as “Desires” by Mavrogordato and by Miss Dalven, thus the erotic connotation of the word was not lost. Keeley and Sherrard rendered the title as “Longings”, which is broader and more poetic, perhaps, but less sex oriented. The Greek text is composed in traditional fifteen-syllable lines rhyming a,b,c,a,c,b. Mavrogordato tried to approximate the rhyme scheme and rhythm of Cavafy with the following result:

*Like beautiful bodies dead that had not grown old
And they shut them up, with tears in splendid tomb adorning
With roses at their heads and jasmine at their feet—
Desires are like that, desires that have grown cold
And not been satisfied: never vouchsafed one sweet
Night time of pleasure or one gleam of morning. (p. 13)*

Miss Dalven's version reads:

*Like beautiful bodies of the dead who had not grown old
and they shut them, with tears, in a magnificent mausoleum,
with roses at the head and jasmine at the feet—
that is how desires look that have passed
without fulfillment; without one of them having achieved
a night of sensual delight, or a moonlit morn.* (p. 3)

A comparison of these two translations to the original shows that Dr. Dalven had tried to adhere to Cavafy's vocabulary (cf. mausoleum) but often failed to achieve correctness because of her misunderstanding of the Greek. For instance, the Greek *i éna proi tis feggeró* (=or one of her gleaming mornings) does not mean or imply "or a moonlit morn", where, obviously, Miss Dalven mistook the adjective *feggeró* (=gleaming, shining) for the noun *feg-gári* (=moon). The late Mavrogordato, on the other hand, had rendered the fourth line freely to achieve the cold-old rhyme; and had added the word "adorning" at the end of the first line to make it rhyme with the last one, "morning". The Greek "mausoleum" had been rendered as "tomb", for the same reason, but this term is less specific and has no Alexandrian or Hellenistic flavor. In addition, Mavrogordato had created much more *enjambement* as he arranged his words from line to line than Cavafy had used in this short composition.

Now Keeley and Sherrard have transposed "Longings" in this fashion:

*Like the beautiful bodies of those who died before growing old,
sadly shut away in a sumptuous mausoleum,
roses by the head, jasmine at the feet—
so appear the longings that have passed
without being satisfied, not one of them granted
a single night of pleasure, or one of its radiant mornings.* (p. 37)

Without being verbally imitative of the Greek, and with no attempt at rendering its exact sound pattern, this version does have an inner, slow rhythm of its own; it does not read like free verse without control. The word substitutions have been made imaginatively, creatively; and the overall verbal effect is adequately poetic and comfortably Cavafian at the same time. The term "mausoleum" has been retained, the adverb "sadly" replaces comprehensively the phrase "with tears", and "its radiant mornings" renders splendidly the spirit of the original.

Let us now turn to the concluding stanza of the celebrated "Thermopylae" and compare its four available versions.

- (A) *And again greater honor becomes them
When they foresee (and many do foresee)
That Ephialtes will be there in the end,
And that the Medes, at last, they will get through.*
(Mavrogordato, p. 19)
- (B) *And they merit greater honor
when they foresee (and many do foresee)
that Ephialtes will finally appear,
and in the end the Medes will go through.*
(Dalven, p. 9)
- (C) *And even more honor is due to them
when they foresee (as many do foresee)
that Ephialtis will turn up in the end,
that the Medes will break through after all.*
(Keeley-Sherrard, p. 27)
- (D) *And greater honor still is due them
when they foresee (and many do foresee)
that Ephialtes finally will appear,
and that the Medes, at last, will get through.*
(Friar, p. 138)

The original is written in unrhyming eleven-syllable lines, a common feature in Modern Greek versification. At first glance we realize that all four translators render the second line identically. A minor deviation is the “as many do foresee” of (C) which, though poetic and true to the spirit of the Greek, is less precise than the “and many do foresee” of (A), (B), and (D).

Versions (A) and (B) open a bit formally with the line, “And again greater honor becomes them”, and “And they merit greater honor”, respectively. Both are correct in meaning, but the first is too stiff, while the second is too short and the rhythm becomes uneven. Now, (C) and (D) have a more natural expression in English, with (D) being perhaps the stronger in terms of idiom and rhythm: “And greater honor still is due them”. Line 3 shows the greatest variation: version (A) simplifies the verb of the Greek, (B) and (D) give the exact equivalent, “will appear”, while (C) gives a more colloquial expression, “will turn up”. Also (C), in an attempt to simplify spelling and pronunciation, has the name of the symbolic and universal traitor misspelled as “Ephialtis” —something that may upset classicists who want to recognize Greek names and terms. The last line has been rendered more accurately in (B) and (C) which respect Cavafy’s style. Translations (A) and (D) slightly

deviate from the poet's uninterrupted expression, as they break the line by placing "at last" in the middle of it, within commas. The dramatic effect achieved by this syntactical liberty, however, is not warranted by the contemplative tone of the Greek.

In trying to balance the pros and cons and sum up our observations, we realize that all versions constitute honest attempts at turning Cavafy's dry and stark style and synthetic Greek into a readable and, if possible, poetic English. At least three of these translations are quite competent and make no mistakes. In terms of overall artistic effect, verbal accuracy, idiomatic equivalents, and rhythm retention, versions (C) and (D) are clearly more successful than the first two. Finally, the Keeley-Sherrard team (C) seems to have achieved in this volume an aesthetic and scholarly result comparable in quality to what Kimon Friar has repeatedly achieved in his masterful translations of many Modern Greek literary worthies.

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