

C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 451.

Translating poetry is a hazardous business because the translator's private sensibilities—not to mention the genetic qualities of his language—are inevitably imposed upon the texts he is translating. He is forced to choose among alternatives all of which are regrettable. If he decides to be literally accurate, he most often becomes unidiomatic in the new language; if he attempts to simulate the prosody or rhyme scheme of the original, he is forced into literal inaccuracies; yet if he neglects these formal aspects he may lose the very element that transforms a discursive statement into a work of art. These problems, and others, are well illustrated in the three major attempts (so far) to translate Cavafy into English. John Mavrogordato (1951) bravely employs strictness of form and rhyme, with consequent artificiality, grammatical hiatuses, and distortion of sense:

Rubies like roses, pearls made into lilies,  
And amethystine violets. As his will is,

He made, and sees them fair . . .

Rae Dalven (1951) is a literalist, striving to reproduce Cavafy word by word, line by line, even though this sometimes distorts the English. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (1957) follow Dalven in eschewing rhyme in favor of sense, but their desire for accuracy does not betray them into unidiomatic or incomprehensible English. They seem to follow what is probably the best rule in this game where every rule is inadequate: «How would Cavafy have expressed himself if he had been writing in English?». Lastly, Keeley and Sherrard—or, more accurately, their fine publishers—do honor to Cavafy by placing the Greek originals next to the translations as though to say with humility: We are doing the best we can, but you really should read the Greek—and here it is.

Each reader must decide for himself which type of translation he prefers, since the reader's own sensibility is necessarily a factor in the total aesthetic experience. However, even if we grant this unavoidable subjectivity, there are certain more-or-less objective ways that we can talk about the merits or demerits of a particular version. Confining myself to the two translations currently in print, in the United States, I shall try to elaborate a comparison by means of some specific examples.

The final stanza of *Κερίά* illustrates Rae Dalven's literalness as compared to Keeley and Sherrard's freedom:

Δὲν θέλω νὰ γυρίσω νὰ μὴ διῶ καὶ φρίξω  
τὶ γρήγορα ποὺ ἡ σκοτεινὴ γραμμὴ μακραίνει,  
τὶ γρήγορα ποὺ τὰ σβυστὰ κερία πληθαίνουν.

vs. 11-13

I do not want to turn back, lest I see and shudder—  
how quickly the somber line lengthens,  
how quickly the burnt-out candles multiply.

Dalven

I don't want to turn, don't want to see, terrified,  
 how quickly that dark line gets longer,  
 how quickly one more dead candle, joins another.

Keeley-Sherrard

In line 11, Dalven employs the stilted «dest» while K-S avoid it, at the price of altering the syntax. In line 13, K-S, again taking liberties, create a strong, active line in English and a fresh image («dead candle»), none of which is in Cavafy, but which perhaps Cavafy would have liked as an English *equivalent for* (as opposed to *reproduction of*) his original Greek.

Another example is even more striking. Here is the ending of *Méρες τοῦ 1896*:

... Μὰ ἡ κοινωλία ποὺ ἦταν  
 σεμόντυφη πολὺ συσχετίζε κουτά.  
 vs. 20-21

But the community that was  
 so puritanical made stupid comparisons.  
 Dalven

But society,  
 totally narrow-minded, had all its values wrong.  
 Keeley-Sherrard

Dalven narrows *κοινωλία* to only one of its possible meanings, as though Cavafy had used the word *κοινότης*. K-S allow us to add the nuance «high society» or «respectable people». In the final line, Dalven remains impeccably close to dictionary definitions but K-S, borrowing Mavrogordato's «had all its values wrong», not only convey the sense more clearly, but convey it with more emotion and energy. They also attempt to deal with «aspect» (ὁ τρόπος τοῦ ρήματος), the translator's despair. The verb is of course *συσχετίζε*, not *συσχετίσε*. K-S's English unmistakably indicates a habitual, generalized narrowness in society. Dalven's «made stupid comparisons», beside the fact that it only glances the meaning instead of hitting it squarely, is ambiguous in its aspect.

So far, I would conclude that we gain more from K-S's freedom than we lose, especially since the Greek text is always present for those who worry about translators' liberties. However, freedom obviously has its dangers. The danger of literalness (paradoxically) is incomprehensibility; by clutching at the body of the word, we may allow the word's soul to slip through our fingers. The danger of freedom is a lapse in sensibility. K-S are occasionally guilty of this, since they are human beings, not angels. An example occurs in one of Cavafy's finest poems, and surely one of the most difficult to translate: Τὸ 31 π.Χ. στήν Ἀλεξάνδρεια. The peddler asks, Τί εἶναι ἡ τρέλλα αὐτῇ; K-S render this, «What the hell's going on here?» bringing into the poem a vulgarity totally foreign to its stateliness. Dalven's «What is this madness?» is better.

On the other hand, this same poem, in its totality, will illustrate my feeling that Keeley and Sherrard's translations, on balance, are unquestionably better than Dalven's. The poem is short enough so that we can examine most of it, line by line:

Ἀπ' τὴν μικρή του, στὰ περίχωρα πλησίον, κόμμη

1

From his tiny village, close to the suburbs, . .  
Dalven

From his village near the outskirts of town, . .  
Keeley - Sherrard

Dalven's word «suburbs», though literally possible, gives an entirely wrong connotation to the modern reader, for whom the suburbs are the richest part of town rather than the poorest.

ἔφθασεν ὁ πραγματευτής. Καὶ «Λιβανὸν!» . . . 3

the trader arrives. And «Frankincense!» . . .  
Dalven

the peddler arrives. And «Incense!» . . .  
Keeley - Sherrard

The dictionary defines *πραγματευτής* as (1) merchant, tradesman, (2) peddler. Dalven has used the wrong definition, given the poem's context; K-S have used the right one. Dalven's «frankincense», an archaism perhaps justified by the poem's setting in 31 B.C., nevertheless once again creates the wrong connotations for the modern reader, who knows the word only from Christmas carols like *The First Nowell*, or directly from Matthew 2.11, and therefore associates it with the extraordinary, precious gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Jesus, whereas in the poem we have the commonest, cheapest object —incense— offered for sale by a miserable peddler.

στοὺς δρόμους διαλαλεῖ. Ἄλλ' ἡ μεγάλη ὄχλοβοή, 5

He cries on the streets. But the great clamor of the mob,  
Dalven

he hawks through the streets. But with all the hubbub,  
Keeley - Sherrard

Dalven's new sentence destroys Cavafy's syntax completely. The Greek employs a simple inversion accurately conveyed by K-S: «And 'Incense!' 'Gum!' . . he hawks through the streets». To make matters worse, «He cries on the streets» as a discrete sentence tends to mean «he is weeping on the streets»; moreover, it is less idiomatic than «He cries in the streets» and in any case does not render *διαλαλεῖ*, which is precisely «he hawks», «promulgates», «cries out». At the line's end, Dalven's «clamor of the mob» is analytical and etymological, whereas K-S's «hubbub» is probably closer to the actual meaning of the word *ὄχλοβοή*.

κ' ἡ μουσικὴς, κ' ἡ παρελάσεις . . . 6

the medley of music and the parades . . .  
Dalven

the music, the parades . . .  
Keeley - Sherrard

Dalven is determined to respond to Cavafy's plural *μουσικὴς*, but does so gauchely, once again with very little sensitivity to the normal connotations of English words.

When we say «medley» we think of «a musical composition made up of passages, usually incongruous, from various other compositions» (Webster's Dictionary). But Cavafy does not mean this at all. As the next word makes clear, the celebration involves numerous parades, each with its own band — a musical situation exploited, as is well known, by Charles Ives. K-S avoid the problem by employing the singular «music» and hoping that the context will do the rest. Dalven's literalness guarantees a misreading; K-S's freedom at worst allows it, at best challenges the reader to interpret correctly.

Τὸ πλῆθος τὸν σκουντᾷ, τὸν σέρνει, τὸν βροντᾷ.

7

The crowd jostles him, pulls him along, knocks against him  
Dalven

The crowd shoves him, drags him along, knocks him around  
Keeley - Sherrard

K-S stay closer to Cavafy's parallelism whereas Dalven weakens it by inserting «against» between the verb and its object. Furthermore, K-S's three monosyllables add to the effect, and the internal slant-rhyme «shoves-knocks» reflects Cavafy's σκουντᾷ-βροντᾷ.

Κι ὅταν πιά τέλεια σαστισμένος, τί εἶναι ἡ τρέλλα αὐτῆ; ρωτᾷ,

8

And then when he is perfectly befuddled, «What is this madness?»  
he asks.

Dalven

And when he asks, now totally confused, «What the hell's going  
on here?»

Keeley - Sherrard

Dalven's «then when» is not very imaginative English, nor does «then» translate πιά adequately; K-S's «now», though less literal, comes closer to the meaning and makes a more euphonious line. Furthermore, K-S's line reproduces the syntax and thus the meaning, whereas Dalven's full stop at the end of the line once again destroys Cavafy's syntax completely, since line 8 in its entirety is a complex subordinate clause whose main clause is in lines 9-10. Thus Dalven repeats the error we have already seen above in lines 5-6. The problem is two-fold. Not only do we lose Cavafy's meaning; we also lose one of the chief technical virtues of this poem: the tension between, on the one hand, the perfectly rhymed couplets (a form which normally involves end-stopped lines) and, on the other hand, the enjambment whereby, despite the rhyme, we proceed to the next line without a grammatical break. To continue: Dalven's «perfectly befuddled» translates τέλεια σαστισμένος according to the dictionary, but K-S's «totally confused» is less prissy, rendering in normal idiomatic English an expression which is normal and idiomatic in the Greek. K-S's lapse in «What the hell's going on here» I have already discussed.

ἓνας τοῦ ρίχνει κι αὐτουνού τὴν γιγαντιαία ψευτιά

9

τοῦ παλατιοῦ — ποῦ στὴν Ἑλλάδα ὁ Ἀντώνιος νικᾷ.

10

One of them hurls at him also the gigantic lie  
of the palace — that in Greece Antony is victorious.  
Dalven

Someone tosses him the huge palace lie:  
that Antony is winning in Greece.  
Keeley - Sherrard

Dalven, always more literal, includes  $\kappa\iota\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\nu\omicron\upsilon$  whereas K-S, always more interested in the quality of the line in English, omit it. Dalven's «lie/of the palace», word for word from the Greek, creates a very poor enjambment, while K-S's «palace/lie» carries us naturally and strongly across the end of line 9 to the strong beginning of line 10. K-S's «is winning» retains the imperfective aspects of the Greek verb, implying correctly that the battle is not yet over (a nuance which is important, since it makes the palace's deliberately false information not quite so bad as if they had said Antony had won). Dalven's «is victorious» is perfective in aspect; it means that Antony «has won», and might have been stated more strongly (though still incorrectly) with those two monosyllables as counterparts to the thumping  $\nu\alpha\tilde{\alpha}$  of the original. Dalven loses on all counts, since she awkwardly inverts the natural word order (which would be: Antony is victorious in Greece) in the interests of a strong ending, and then gives us a weak ending. But neither version reproduces the effect created by Cavafy's perfectly rhymed couplet.

The two translations of this particular poem are representative. I have repeated the analysis using several other poems, e.g. «Waiting for the Barbarians» and «The City», and have discovered roughly the same problems. Dalven, though more literal, displays all the faults of literalness, and cannot always be relied upon to display the corresponding virtues because she is too careless about aspect, about levels of diction, about syntactical structure, etc. If she were impeccably accurate we could forgive her generally bad ear for English idiom and be pleased to have a reliable albeit prosaic counterpart for Cavafy's Greek. But she gives us neither accuracy nor lovely English. Keeley and Sherrard struggle to root out the true meaning of Cavafy's lines, realizing that a free equivalent in English is better than a word-for-word rendering. They are also much more attentive to the way the poem will sound and work in English, and their command of English as a literary medium is superior. However, whereas Dalven does not offer the virtues of her defective literalness, K-S do occasionally — rarely — show the defect of their liberality — namely, a lapse in taste. Our only true recourse is Cavafy himself, in Greek. But for those anglophones who cannot read him in Greek, Keeley and Sherrard's *Collected Poems* is by far the best substitute.

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