# Cavafy Translated*

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I don't wish to begin with logic-chopping, or by preening myself on my choice of title. It will become quite evident that, following a procedure which some might regard as old-fashioned, I have no intention of getting in the way of the poetry. But I should explain why I have given this title to my paper.

Why not, for example, "Translating Cavafy"? An essay I published on translations of Cavafy's most important contemporary and rival was called "Translating Palamas". But I am anxious to avoid that phrasing here in order to avoid giving the impression that I speak as a practitioner: for I have published no translation which purports to be more than exegetical. The modern Greek poems translated in my little study, *The Shade of Homer*, appear without the Greek original for economic reasons only; the translations I made of the Escorial *Digenes Akrites* and the lay of Armoures face the text in a Loeb-like manner, and are designed gradually to be effaced by the reader who becomes more familiar with the original. In other words, it will be no part of my procedure here to trump the versions of Cavafy I examine by unveiling superior versions of my own making. For a rather successful example of this approach, I refer to a recent article by Walter Arndt.[1]

Again, why not "Cavafy in Translation"? My reason for avoiding this is that the "in translation" label tends to suggest a

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* I am grateful to audiences in Cambridge, Aberdeen, Belfast and Boston for their comments on this paper. Their eagerness to enter a dialogue about Cavafy and his translations encourages me to present here a tentative paper minimally revised from the original lecture text; I have kept footnotes few.

[1] Walter Arndt, "Verse-to-verse translation: postulates, problems, and the *sine qua non* of talent", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* [henceforth *JMGS*] 8.2 (October 1990) 325-43. (This issue contains a number of articles concerned with translation from Modern Greek.)

second-best product – a bit like those shop labels that indicate a reduction on a slightly damaged purchase. The work "in translation" is expected to present itself with apologies, "Classics in Translation" being the classic example. If you can't read the august Oxford blue hardbacks, then you must shamefacedly bed down with the colourful paper covers from Englewood Cliffs.

More promising than either of the above titles, perhaps, would be "Cavafy Translator". Although Cavafy's own translations date only from his early years and are of merely biographical interest, the fact that Cavafy – in a broader sense – *translates* so much of English literature into Greek poetry will undoubtedly have some bearing on his translation into – I had almost said, *back into* – English. Cavafy spent much of his childhood in England; he was fluent in English (as in French), and when expressing himself on subjects which demanded a high degree of abstraction apparently found it easier to do so in English: witness his notebooks on poetics and ethics. But the roots of his poetry itself are those of a late Victorian. I have shown elsewhere that, when Cavafy reads Homer and produces his highly individual poetic responses, this Homer is Pope's; or, again, that his approaches to mythological *exempla* are by way of the very words of Matthew Arnold or George Grote. Most far-reaching, and long-debated, is the influence on Cavafy of Browning – and to this I shall return at the end. So the special esteem Cavafy enjoys in the English-speaking world is not the mere product of chance or of puffing by E.M. Forster and a mafia of Kingsmen: it is, in part, because when English-speakers read Cavafy they respond to something which is not entirely unfamiliar.

I think the question of Cavafy and translation goes further than this, however. The point is not simply that, for historical reasons, the translator of Cavafy into English enjoys certain advantages. Nor is it that Cavafy is among the modern Greeks the *grant translateur* that Seferis set out more openly to be. It is that, in a broad sense, questions of translation and translatability are central to his poetry. The development of these issues is complex, and I shall adduce one or two examples shortly; but their origin is not, I think, far to seek. Cavafy's Alexandria was a trilingual society in which fluency in Greek, French and English was not unusual. (I say "Cavafy's Alexandria" advisedly: if there are Arabs in this world, they

are more or less part of the furniture, or else Hellenic in their cultural preferences. The view widely held in Greece that much of Cavafy's poetry is anti-imperialist, indeed a coded protest against British rule in Egypt, hardly squares with this – any more than it does with the larger historical fact that it was Cavafy's Greek community, looted and evicted by Colonel Nasser, that suffered as much as anyone from the overthrow of Empire.) At any rate, it is not surprising that living in more than one language generates in Cavafy a peculiar self-consciousness about the process of communication.

The classic example – a typographical *tour de force* – is the poem "Εν τῷ μηνὶ Ἀθύρ" ("In the month of Athyr"), in which the speaker tries to make out a fragmentary inscription which begins with a reference to this ancient Egyptian month which will mean nothing to almost all readers. The supplements made by the speaker to the gaps in the words on the stone appear in square brackets: in other words, this is a poem which *ex hypothesi* cannot exactly be read aloud. By the end of this tiny poem, however, the reader in the poem and the reader of the poem have discovered the central human fact: that the inscription is an epitaph set up by friends of the deceased Leukios. Through this process of barely achieved communication, the hitherto meaningless phrase "in the month of Athyr" has been invested with meaning.

Perhaps a couple more examples will illustrate how far-reaching the notion of translation is for Cavafy's poetry. In the poem "Infidelity" (1904), for example, Apollo is shown to have lied to Thetis when he said Achilles would live long. His θεῖον ἀψευδὲς στόμα, in the words of the Aeschylus epigraph, did not speak a human language of guarantees and promises: in other words, the tragic outcome is the result, in effect, of a mis-translation. Again, in "King Demetrius" (1906) an epigraph from Plutarch's life of Demetrius Poliorcetes relates how he abdicated and fled in disguise "like an actor". The word used is the ancient ὑποκριτής, and it has a senatorial disdain. All Cavafy does in his poem is translate the epigraph, with one bracketed addition which praises the king's magnanimity for acting like an actor, ἠθοποιός. This latter word ("a maker of character") was an invention of nineteenth-century Greece, with the feeling that the theatre – the classical theatre, at any rate – was now an established part of society, and that actors ought to

be dignified with a title that did not also mean "hypocrite". Cavafy's entire reinterpretation of history here, in that case, relies upon a translation. Finally – to allow myself one more example – in the poem "For Ammones, who died at 29 in 610" (1917) we have a more developed and internal sense of translation as a process operating within the artist himself as a means of, in turn, communicating more fully and faithfully a particular emotion. An Alexandrian called Raphael is being asked to write an epitaph for the dead man:

> Your Greek is always fine and musical.
> But now we want all of your virtuosity.
> Into a foreign tongue our grief and love will pass.
> Pour your Egyptian feeling into the foreign tongue.

There are of course many other poems that dwell on the problems of communication across linguistic or cultural barriers: poets hope they can find a language acceptable to their patrons or public; Hellenized Easterners worry about, or assert, their knowledge of the culture-language, Greek; Jews and pagans, or Christians and pagans, wonder how far they share a language, or if an apparent shared language masks incompatible outlooks. Obtrusive lexical items, rather than constituting the exoticism sometimes wearying (to some of us) in the poetry of Elytis, typically have that prominence to show that they are bones of contention between two different parties or passions. Cavafy's poetic language, in other words – or, his language as a frame for uneasily cohabiting idioms – exemplifies the relativity of values which we know to have preoccupied him. The poet, aware of what it is to translate, shows us the predicaments of those who cannot reduce what they wish to say to comprehensibility.

Cavafy, then, is a translator in more than one sense. But the title of this paper is "Cavafy Translated" to emphasize the further fact, in the first place, that he has – many times – been translated; and this puts him in an unusual position among modern Greek poets. His collected poems have been translated into English four times, French and German more than once, and into at least ten other European languages.[2] It is instructive to

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[2] See the invaluable work of Dia M.L. Philippides, *Census of Modern Greek Literature* (New Haven 1990).

contrast the fortunes of Cavafy and the sole modern Greek poet generally agreed to be his equal, Dionysios Solomos. Like Cavafy, Solomos was fluent in more than one language; and, like Cavafy, he was conscious of the problems of translation at more than a technical level. But consciousness became crippling self-consciousness as Solomos strove to reconcile not just the Italian language in which he had been educated and the Greek in which he aspired to write, but also the two halves of his ancestry: a nobleman of Venetian descent and a Greek housemaid. With gifts that a Coleridge would have envied, Solomos embarked on a course of life which makes Coleridge's look single-minded. Poetically, the end result was all too often desperately macaronic: even single verses are unable to reconcile two fallen languages in the search for a paradisal one. And even in the handful of masterpieces that escaped this curse, Solomos remains largely untranslated and perhaps untranslatable.

When we say "Cavafy Translated", by contrast, we mean not just that he has been translated; we may adduce a further sense of the word "translate": "to remove the dead body or remains of a Saint, or, by extension, a hero or great man, from one place to another" (OED). In his poem "The Funeral of Sarpedon" (1908), Cavafy relates just such a process, in part translating from Pope's Homer. And we may say that the same has happened to him. In an age which likes to think of World Music, Cavafy is indisputably part of World Poetry. It is not only that he is part of the range of reference of Auden, Borges, Brodsky, Milosz, Montale – it is that some of his most characteristic features have been translated into poetry in English. Examples, at once palpable and polished, are to be found in the work of Mr James Merrill; but one is just as likely to open any old poetry magazine and find some poem called "Days of 1989" or whatever. Bless him, he is translated.

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But how well? What I shall be doing in the main part of this paper is to look at two celebrated poems, comparing several versions in each case. Although I have my own preferences, I want to avoid knocking-copy and instead concentrate on diagnostic cases of difficulty in translating from Greek to English. I shall begin with the poem "Νὰ μείνει". Before I do so,

it is perhaps worth identifying the translators by thumbnail sketches so that we have some idea of what they are translating into. John Mavrogordato, who completed his version in 1937 and finally saw it published in 1951, was an Englishman of Chiot extraction who became Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Literature at Oxford. (It is perhaps worth noting that he is the only one of the translators to have published much poetry of his own.[3]) The late Rae Dalven was of a family from the now extinguished Jewish community of Ioannina; her translation, which appeared in 1961, was recommended for publication by W.H. Auden and was prefaced by him.[4] Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard are both prolific authors on modern Greek subjects, and have produced together some standard translations; Keeley is a professor of Creative Writing at Princeton, while Sherrard has been an independent writer for some years. Their translation of Cavafy first appeared in 1975, and in a thoroughly revised edition in 1992. Finally, Memas Kolaitis, who lives in California, is a native of Alexandria who knew Cavafy; his translation of Cavafy's complete poems appeared in 1989.

NA MEINEI

Ἡ ὥρα μιὰ τὴ νύχτα θἄτανε,
ἢ μιάμισυ.
Σὲ μιὰ γωνιὰ τοῦ καπηλειοῦ·
πίσω ἀπ' τὸ ξύλινο τὸ χώρισμα.
Ἐκτὸς ἡμῶν τῶν δυὸ τὸ μαγαζὶ ὅλως διόλου ἄδειο.
Μιὰ λάμπα πετρελαίου μόλις τὸ φώτιζε.
Κοιμούντανε, στὴν πόρτα, ὁ ἀγρυπνισμένος ὑπηρέτης.

Δεὶ θὰ μᾶς ἔβλεπε κανείς. Μὰ κιόλας
εἴχαμεν ἐξαφθεῖ τόσο πολύ,
ποὺ γίναμε ἀκατάλληλοι γιὰ προφυλάξεις.

Τὰ ἐνδύματα μισοανοίχθηκαν – πολλὰ δὲν ἦσαν
γιατὶ ἐπύρωνε θεῖος Ἰούλιος μῆνας.

Σάρκας ἀπόλαυσις ἀνάμεσα
στὰ μισοανοιγμένα ἐνδύματα·

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[3] See John Mavrogordato, *Elegies and Songs* (London 1934).

[4] See Rae Dalven, "An unsought for calling: my life as a translator from Modern Greek", *JMGS* 8.2 (1990) 307-15.

γρήγορο σάρκας γύμνωμα – ποὺ τὸ ἴνδαλμά του
εἴκοσι ἕξη χρόνους διάβηκε· καὶ τώρα ἦλθε
νὰ μείνει μὲς στὴν ποίησιν αὐτή.

## TO REMAIN

It must have been one o'clock at night,
Or half past one.
In a corner of the wine-shop;
Behind the wooden partition.
Except the two of us the shop quite empty.
A paraffin lamp hardly lighted it.
The waiter who had to stay up was asleep at the door.

No one would have seen us. But anyhow
We had become so excited
We were incapable of precautions.

Our clothes had been half-opened – they were not many
For a divine month of July was blazing.

Enjoyment of the flesh in the middle
Of our half-opened clothes;
Quick baring of the flesh – and the vision of it
Has passed over twenty-six years; and now has come
Here in these verses to remain.

(*Mavrogordato*)

## TO REMAIN

It must have been one o'clock in the morning,
or half past one.
In a corner of the tavern;
behind the wooden partition.
Aside from the two of us the shop was completely deserted.
A kerosene lamp scarcely lighted it.
Dozing, at the doorway, the waiter dead for sleep.

No one would have seen us. But already
we had excited ourselves so much,
that we became unfit for precautions.

Our clothes were half opened – they were not many
for a divine month of July was scorching hot.

Enjoyment of the flesh between
our half-opened clothes;
quick baring of the flesh – the vision of what
occurred twenty-six years ago; and has now come
to remain among these verses.

(*Dalven*)

## COMES TO REST

It must have been one o'clock at night
or half past one.
A corner in the wine-shop
behind the wooden partition:
except for the two of us the place completely empty.
An oil lamp barely gave it light.
The waiter, on duty all day, was sleeping by the door.

No one could see us. But anyway,
we were already so aroused
we'd become incapable of caution.

Our clothes half opened – we weren't wearing much:
a divine July was ablaze.

Delight of flesh between
those half-opened clothes;
quick baring of flesh – the vision of it
that has crossed twenty-six years
and comes to rest now in this poetry.

(*Keeley and Sherrard*)

## TO DWELL

It must have been past midnight, one o'clock,
or half past one. A corner of the wineshop;
behind a wooden partitioning.
Except the two of us an empty shop.
A lamp of kerosene gave scanty light.
A dead tired waiter by the door, asleep.

No one could see us. Anyway
we were both so excited that
we were beyond all cautiousness.

Our clothes half-opened now – not many, since
it was in the divinely searing mid-July.

The joy of flesh, between
the casual half-opened clothes,
the flesh quick bared – whose image crossed
these twenty-six full years, and has now come
to dwell in this my poetry.

(*Kolaitis*)[5]

This poem, completed in 1919, is perhaps the most sexually explicit of Cavafy's collected poems; but while it is obvious what is going on here, the poem is also one of the hardest to translate – starting with the very title. It is a characteristic technique of Cavafy to set an elliptical title as a fuse that burns slowly till the end of the poem situates it in a sentence which gives it meaning. This basic ring-form is clear enough from all four versions: we grasp the point that a fleeting moment of sexual experience is in some way saved from loss in the poem itself. But this is just the basic point, and the Greek is in fact considerably more refined.

Perhaps the most difficult feature of modern Greek, for the foreign learner, is the fact that the verbal system contains not just tenses but aspects. Let me quote what Peter Mackridge says in his magisterial but mercifully non-technical study, *The Modern Greek Language*: "Aspect in MG concerns not the *location* of the action or state in time, but the speaker's attitude to its temporal distribution or contour."[6] Such a thing is elusive for the translator. When Mavrogordato and Dalven plump for the title "To remain", that is a correct rendering of μένω, but not, I think, of the word in context. Cavafy's point is not that the image or vision will *abide*, for we have here the perfective aspect of the verb, the implications of which are rather different: νὰ μείνει.

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[5] Text in C.P. Cavafy, *Ποιήματα* (ed. G.P. Savidis, Athens 1980), vol. 2, p. 8. Translations from the following: John Mavrogordato, *Poems by C.P. Cavafy* (London 1951), p. 107; Rae Dalven, *The Complete Poems of C.P. Cavafy* (London 1961), p. 94; Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, *C.P. Cavafy, Collected Poems* (revised edition, London 1992), p. 97; Memas Kolaitis, *The Greek Poems of C.P. Cavafy as Translated by Memas Kolaitis* (New Rochelle, New York 1989), vol. 1, p. 99.

[6] Peter Mackridge, *The Modern Greek Language* (Oxford 1985), p. 104f.

Now in English there does not seem to be a way of using the words "remain" or "stay" in such a way as not, primarily, to suggest duration and a continuous process. In other words – and this is of course very common in translating Greek verbs into English – we shall require completely different verbs in English depending on which aspect is used in Greek. In Cavafy's poem, the phrase of the title is not exactly a statement about the persistence of poetry; it does not anticipate a vista in which "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/ Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme." (Though it is true that Cavafy, perhaps echoing this, does conclude another poem with the verse: Οἱ στίχοι οἱ δυνατοὶ ποὺ ἐδῶ ἦταν ἡ ἀρχή των: "The powerful lines whose origin was here".) So νὰ μείνει is not exactly "to remain": indeed, if we translate it thus we get the sense of the ending quite wrong. Dalven ("to remain among these verses") makes it sound wearily resigned: a mere relic of the experience now has a paper existence. (It has the ring of "a photograph was found among the deceased's effects.") Mavrogordato, by contrast, manages to make the same verb sound too ringing by changing Cavafy's word order and saying "here in these verses to remain".

Both Keeley and Sherrard and Kolaitis are cognizant of the dangers here, but their renderings too present problems. Closest to the sense of the Greek, if you isolate the phrase, are Keeley and Sherrard with "comes to rest". But the rendering has disadvantages. In the first place, we lose in the title the sense of a final clause; and the use of the indicative verb without a subject comes as a shock in itself. You can't imagine Frost entitling his famous poem that explains its title, "Had to be versed in country things". To make the best of Keeley and Sherrard's rendering one would, I think, have to go for the participle and say "coming to rest" in both the title and the final verse. One does not want, however, to suggest, through the associations of the word "rest", the impression that in this poem poetry is seen as taming the raw experience – it isn't. At the same time, I hope it won't be considered a wholly facetious remark that, in view of the poem's story-line, one might wish to avoid the word "come" altogether.

Doubtless aware of these difficulties, Kolaitis does better, I think, with "To dwell". (Actually, "to lodge" is very close to the sense of the final sentence – the image of the experience, as it were, wanders like a ghostly UFO for twenty-six years before

coming to rest in the poetry. On the other hand, "To lodge" would be an unpromising title at best.) "To dwell in this my poetry" perhaps makes a felicitous pun on *dwelling on*, which the reader is doing; but a title "To dwell" suggests that the subject of the poem, what it is trying to re-define, is some idea of "dwelling". The Greek title "Νὰ μείνει" is, by comparison, curiously elliptical, even neutral: it suggests a puzzle to be made out rather than an idea to be defined. Indeed, one infers that the poem could only have been written first, with the extraction of the title coming later – exactly the opposite of Cavafy's early work, in which he will start with a title (e.g. "Ides of March") and work from there.

Cavafy's title phrase is at any rate desperately hard to capture, but not because the word is in itself in any way problematic in meaning. The best I can suggest, before passing on to other problems, is to take a leaf out of Pound's *Canto LXIV:*

> and that certain images to be formed in the mind
> to remain there
> ...
> to remain there, resurgent EIKONEΣ.

"To remain there": this takes away the too strong sense of remaining; and this is perhaps as close as we are going to get.

As we have seen, even this poem's title – especially its title – presents acute difficulties. Kolaitis is perhaps the translator who has responded most successfully here; and he is the most determined of the four translators in attempting a close approximation to the formal features of the original. James Merrill, in a review of Keeley and Sherrard, has worried that they too often neglect "formal effects [...] indispensable to meaning".[7] Of this, Kolaitis cannot be accused; but it is unlikely that his work will find favour with those who teach university courses: his decisions are often bold enough to grasp the attention of those who come to Cavafy without Greek, but he will not serve as a crib. Kolaitis's philosophy of translation is that it is a recreating of the original in all its dimensions; and he reacted grumpily to one favourable review, which suggested that he had

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[7] James Merrill, review in *New York Review of Books* 22.12 (17 July 1975) 12-17.

presented us with a persuasive reinterpretation of Cavafy, saying that he aimed higher than that![8]

The form that must be captured, in the case of the poem in question – and it is the dominant form in Cavafy's poetry in general – is a basically iambic line which comes in uneven lengths.[9] This is best done, surely, by Kolaitis. Above all, the final verse, an iambic pentameter, must have the ring of formality and finality that both Keeley and Sherrard and Kolaitis succeed in giving it. For it is the interaction between versification and meaning in Cavafy that is one of his greatest achievements not only as a poet but as a teacher of poetry.

I say so because one of the things for which the translator must have a feeling – though it is asking too much for his translation to have the same authority in the target language – is the extent to which Cavafy is a model and a master for nearly all the worthwhile Greek poets of this century – as well as being the most quoted of all modern Greek authors in everyday speech. A translation that fails to convey this general authoritativeness – over and above its responsiveness to meaning in individual poems – is not entirely a success. Despite the pervasive influence of Cavafy, it is not certain that any one version of those we have has stamped its mark as *the* version; and, to use one rule of thumb, we find no Cavafy in Charles Tomlinson's *Oxford Book of Verse in English Translation*. The main reason for this, however, has not, I feel, been any failings in the attainments of the translators, but the effect of a certain time-lag in poetic generations. By the time that Cavafy's collected poems appeared posthumously in 1935, the modern poetic idiom in English had been captured by Eliot and Pound: any translation of Cavafy would have to adopt an idiom rather unlike that of modernist verse.

Keeley is most conscious of this problem, but in a way which I can't help feeling defeatist. He concludes an essay on "Problems in rendering Modern Greek" with the following declaration which we may use as a stalking-horse in what follows:

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[8] The review, a helpful one, was by Henry Gifford, *Times Literary Supplement* 24-30 August 1990, 887-8.

[9] Peter Mackridge, "Versification and signification in Cavafy", *Μολυβδο-κονδυλο-πελεκητής* 2 (1990) 125-43.

> The examples of Cavafy and Seferis seem to indicate a like strategy for the translator confronting the complexities of Modern Greek: aim for a language as free of poetic diction, as free of arbitrary echoes or influences, as close to the language men actually speak in our time as that of the best contemporary verse in the translator's target language [...] the art of translation is inevitably an art that involves distortion, an art that normally survives only through compromise in the face of the impossible. Somewhat out of step with current doctrine, I tend to see translation as a fairly negative – if still a necessary and occasionally beautiful – enterprise: an effort always to minimize differences rather than to force what may pass for similarities. But whatever inevitable damage the translator may do to his source, he must try his very best not to do damage to his target language by distorting or wrenching its poetic possibilities; and the surest way of avoiding this quick route to failure is by creating a style that aspires to be as natural and as contemporary in the terms of his own tradition as the poets he renders are in the terms of theirs.[10]

There is much in this credo with which I find myself unable to agree; but we will be well advised to take it seriously, coming as it does from a distinguished practitioner of the art of translation. I don't know what might be meant by describing translation as a negative enterprise, unless by that we mean that we must get in first with an at least accurate rendering of a work that someone else might translate worse. Again, Cavafy's innovation was not that he renounced poetic diction: it was that he blended the poeticisms of the nineteenth-century poetry – Greek and English – on which he had been reared with quite other elements. And the influences on Cavafy must often be given their full weight in an English rendering, for 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. Where Cavafy alludes to Plutarch or Julian in their own words, the translator into English must make these words stand out irreducibly. Where Cavafy is most obviously adapting the idiom of Browning, the translator must

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[10] Edmund Keeley, "Problems in rendering Modern Greek", in *Μελετήματα στὴ Μνήμη Βασιλείου Λαούρδα – Studies in Memory of Basil Laourdas* (Thessaloniki 1975), pp. 627-36 [quotation from pp. 635-6].

quarry Browning for borrowings or analogies. This will impart, at ground level, the flavour required.

Most clearly of all, this applies to the overall form and idiom. Our attention has so far been directed in the case of "Νὰ μείνει" to these aspects; and they provoke the making of a general distinction between the translations, which I believe holds good for each volume as a whole. Mavrogordato preserves a general formality which tracks Cavafy's word order except where to do so would involve great acrobatics in English. With a less professional knowledge of Cavafy's English models than possessed by Keeley – the valuable material on Browning in the latter's Oxford doctoral dissertation has not, I am sorry to say, been published – Mavrogordato has yet an instinctive closeness to the tone which makes his rendering still, to some readers, the best. (This is less perhaps a matter of native talent than one of background: with a broad literary education and a familiarity with the principles of verse-making, Mavrogordato can always produce at least a simulacrum of poetry even where his grasp of the original is somewhat superficial. The same may be said, for similar reasons, of the translations from Solomos that appear in Romilly Jenkins's book on that poet. In general these older translators are free of the worst lapses because they rely on a taste which is something to fall back on where inspiration fails.)

Of Dalven's translation we can only say that – despite one or two felicities – it is unclear whether it embodies principles with which one could coherently take issue: though we should be grateful for the fact that it has introduced many readers to Cavafy, it does not, it seems to me, offer anything distinctive. When it comes to Keeley and Sherrard and Kolaitis, by contrast, we are faced with two radically different approaches. We may have a preference for the one over the other, but to assert that only one of the two types has a reason for existing is to be at cross-purposes in the way we so often are when we talk about translation. Keeley and Sherrard's method is often what one could call translation by glossing: they tend to forgo rhythmical effects and even effects of lineation and punctuation – in his attention to which Cavafy has no equal among Greek poets – and attempt to concentrate instead – yes, instead – on "structure, selection, idiom, meaning, and point-of-view". The latter formulation I take from a helpful essay by the late Kimon Friar.

As Friar points out, Keeley and Sherrard are writing essentially in prose; and in interpreting the poems for the reader of English they sometimes expand on a compressed original – in part because they have forgone the use of rhythm as meaning.[11] Such a translation has its honourable place – perhaps most appropriately side-by-side with the Greek, as in the original edition of Keeley and Sherrard. Whether it is always sufficiently arresting as poetry to stand on its own is something on which not all readers seem to agree.

Kolaitis has taken more risks: he will be rapped over the knuckles for the strangeness of his word order, and his lexical choices ("hedonic", "panhellenium") will make the reader start. Often enough, moreover, we are reminded of the fact that the target language is not this translator's first. This one tends to think of as a crippling disadvantage, but to it Kolaitis owes some of his successes: there can be something beguiling about an idiom teetering on the edge of incorrectness, as the English poems of Demetrios Capetanakis showed in the Forties. But what I mean to point out is not merely this exotic flavour but the fact that it is in some way true of Cavafy himself. Seferis's pioneering essay on Cavafy pointed out how, on the strictest interpretation of modern Greek usage – relatively little as this may have been codified at the time compared with English – some of Cavafy's expressions were strange and even solecistic; Seferis's estranged friend Timos Malanos recalled, in what is still the best study of Cavafy, that the poet was insistent in keeping to incorrect pronunciations for which he had an aesthetic preference. And Cavafy's prose notebooks in English are both expressive and stilted in a way which is true of some of his best poems. All this to show that the best translation will not necessarily be that which draws least attention to its own idiom.

Which is not to say that there will be no ground rules. In a recent article, Peter Bien quotes from some avowedly gay translations of Cavafy: their line is that Cavafy's message is essentially one of liberation and that it must be clad in a

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[11] Kimon Friar, "Cavafy and his translators into English", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 5.1 (Spring 1974) 17-40 [quotation from p. 25].

contemporary garb – gay bars and the like.[12] Now it is true that it is only recently that Cavafy's erotic poems have been much discussed except among the converted; and in Greece the influential interpretation of Seferis sometimes seemed almost to be pushing the question into the realm of the merely biographical. But there was always left a tone of voice in Cavafy, a certain substratum to which the most maladroit translators could do no harm – as Auden pointed out. (The same could be said of Seferis, but with less truth: the foreign reader gets an impression of his gravity, his responsiveness to the modern world and his deep and subtle recourse to mythology – but more intimate and sometimes lighter echoes of, for example, Greek folk poetry are entirely lost.)

That Cavafy's tone of voice goes into English, however, is a curse as well as a blessing. For it can lull us into the thought that all, or nearly all, of Cavafy's Greek maps out against English – while in fact considerable freedoms will be needed. We have already seen this from a look at the title of "Νὰ μείνει". It is easy enough to confirm from an apparently trivial example later in the poem, where literalism prevails in all four versions. Mavrogordato has "Our clothes had been half-opened – they were not many." But the Greek lacks this second pluperfect: the aorist indicates a sudden event like the negligée plunging to the floor in a James Bond movie. (Here Kolaitis too goes astray.) Nor can you in English speak, as Mavrogordato and Dalven do, of clothes being half-opened: they are half-undone. Keeley and Sherrard and Kolaitis do better with "half-opened clothes", but this you would really use of a door. Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender, in a version not quoted here, go far off on a tangent with the rendering "through half-torn clothes".[13] This sounds extremely exciting – scenes from the life of the late M. Foucault? – but suggests a realm of activity outside that of this poem. The preposition again is hard to render, but "in the middle of our half-opened clothes" can hardly be right, nor "between our half-opened clothes" – we shall have to have "through", graphic as it is.

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[12] Peter Bien, "Cavafy's homosexuality and his reputation outside Greece", *JMGS* 8.2 (1990) 197-211.

[13] In Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Love Poetry* (Harmondsworth 1985), p. 370f.

More centrally, however, we come up against the total imagery of the poem, and how far, over and above the bare description, this is transferable into English. It is clear enough that the poem operates with a basic contrast between the dimly lit setting and the moment of illumination that occurs. This sort of staging and lighting is common enough in Cavafy, and it is undoubtedly connected with his obsession with portrait photographs as a way of preserving one's successive selves.[14] But this point is harder to detect in our English translations, principally because the word ἐξαφθεῖ, when translated as "excited", loses its etymology from a verb meaning "ignite" – here Keeley and Sherrard are certainly closer with "arouse" – and we thus lose the picture of a scene in which a sexual blaze produces the light with which poetry can attain a retrospect. The subjects' excitement lights the room as the kerosene lamp cannot. The ultimate result of the quick exposure of the flesh, steeped for years in poetic developing fluid, is a permanent record of the experience.[15]

In the modern efflorescence of Greek poetry, every worthy poet has been an etymologist: all of them seek the truth latent in the words of the oldest western language. But what offers the poets opportunities does, as Keeley says, gives the translator "unusually awkward choices". In the case just mentioned the phrase "a divine July" is easy to ignore in English: it is a typical example of a difficult adjective in Cavafy. One of the most consistent patterns in the revision of his work is the pruning of epithets. Those that survive will not in that case be merely ornamental – but they are not always easy to put into English. Only Cavafy, for example, could privately rehabilitate the moribund epithet ποιητικός and endow it with new meaning. Here the word θεῖος is an excellent case in point. It is, on the one hand, a banal colloquialism ("simply divine"). As Embiricos observes in his novel *The Great Eastern*: "Πράγματι ὁ καιρὸς

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[14] For Cavafy's photograph portraits see Lena Savidi (ed.), *Λεύκωμα Καβάφη 1863-1910* (Athens 1983).

[15] On the question of Cavafy and photography, it has to be said that the picture doesn't come out very clearly in the recent article by Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, "The photographic dimension in some poems of Cavafy", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 17.2 (1991) 87-95. Much more helpful to read in conjunction with Cavafy's poem is the (indebted?) poem by Thom Gunn, "The Miracle" in *The Passages of Joy* (London 1982), p. 55.

ἦτο θαυμάσιος. Ἕνας καιρὸς ἡδονικός, καί, ὅπως λέγουν, θεῖος." ("Truly the weather was wonderful. Sensual weather, and, as they say, divine.")[16] At the same time, July is "divine" in Cavafy's poem in a deeper way: the month is *divus* because of Julius Caesar, and it represents a sort of divine agency under whose benign presence a fleeting moment of illumination will survive and transcend the vicissitudes of the seasons, passing like a comet across twenty-six years to its next sighting in the poem.

The poem, then, is a re-enactment and a celebration of what it is for an experience to be translated into words; and for that reason we should attend with care to the rendering of the final verse. Cavafy uses the word "poetry", not "verses", or – as we might most naturally expect – "poem". Our attention is drawn not so much to the finished product – though the rhythm of the last verse, as we have observed, has a certain finality – as to the making of the poem. The experience is lodged not so much in a single poem as in a process of making which we cannot suggest in English by saying, for example, "poesy" rather than "poetry". And the process, though it has personal roots, is not one limited to a particular person: Kolaitis's "To dwell in this my poetry" is over-proprietorial. (Keeley and Sherrard provide easily the best rendering of the poem's ending.) For Cavafy's view of poetic inspiration is that it is something essentially arbitrary. The poet Phernazes has a poetic idea that comes and goes insistently: that, rather than his own persistence, is that gives him insight into the protagonist of his epic, Darius, in the poem of that name. In "Νὰ μείνει" we end with a paradox: the poetry is here, achieved; but it is the very process of making out of surprising elements that the poem celebrates. Can a translation perform the same thing in turn?

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I will pass on more briefly to a second poem, "Ἰωνικόν", which I give in Greek and in three translations:

> Γιατὶ τὰ σπάσαμε τ' ἀγάλματά των,
> γιατὶ τοὺς διώξαμεν ἀπ' τοὺς ναούς των,

[16] Andreas Embiricos, *Ὁ Μέγας Ἀνατολικός* vol. 1 (Athens 1990), p. 48.

διόλου δὲν πέθαναν γι' αὐτὸ οἱ θεοί.
Ὦ γῆ τῆς Ἰωνίας, σένα ἀγαποῦν ἀκόμη,
σένα ἡ ψυχές των ἐνθυμοῦνται ἀκόμη.
Σὰν ξημερώνει ἐπάνω σου πρωὶ αὐγουστιάτικο
τὴν ἀτμοσφαίρα σου περνᾶ σφρίγος ἀπ' τὴν ζωή των·
καὶ κάποτ' αἰθερία ἐφηβικὴ μορφή,
ἀόριστη, μὲ διάβα γρήγορο,
ἐπάνω ἀπὸ τοὺς λόφους σου περνᾶ.

IONIC [three versions, all under the same title]

Because we have broken their statues,
Because we have turned them out of their temples,
They have not died, the gods, for that, at all.
O land of Ionia, you, they love you still,
And you they still remember in their souls.
When an August morning dawns over you
Through your atmosphere passes an ardour from their life;
And sometimes an aerial youthful form,
Indefinite, with swift transition,
Passes upon your hills.

(*Mavrogordato*)

That we've broken their statues,
that we've driven them out of their temples,
doesn't mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they're still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure,
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills.

(*Keeley and Sherrard*)

Because we broke their marble images,
because we drove them from their shrines,
in no way dead are now the gods.

Oh, land of Ionia, 'tis thee that still they love,
'tis thee their souls remember still.
When breaks on thee an August morn,
the vigor of their life flows through thine air;
and sometimes an ethereal ephebic form,

indefinite, and with swift feet,
passes above their hills.

(*Kolaitis*)[17]

The first thing to which I would like to draw attention is the way in which the poem as it stands is a case of self-translation. The form given here dates from 1911, but the first version, with the title "Θεσσαλία", appeared before 1898 as one of the published poems Cavafy later rejected. Cavafy characteristically carried out linguistic changes in his poems, but such changes reflect more than changing views on the Language Question alone. The process can be most illuminatingly documented, perhaps, in the poem "Η κηδεία τοῦ Σαρπηδόνος": Cavafy, over a thirty-year period, loosens his blank verse, prunes epithets, substitutes synonyms closer to everyday speech. The result is that, just as the poem can be called in some extended sense a translation of Homer, it is also a modern poet's translation of himself into a more adequate idiom.

In the case of "Ἰωνικόν", the title is a clear change from the original one. Why Thessaly was chosen has always been a puzzle to me: perhaps there is a vague nationalist feeling relating to the disaster of 1897; but Cavafy never visited the place, and it is not clear what it meant to him. The title "Ionic" is by contrast a pregnant one. It is, in the first place, less a geographical allusion to the shores of Asia Minor than a cultural reference to the civilization which had flourished there, and with which Cavafy felt a strong affinity. This may be documented from the poem "Orophernes", where Ionia stands for a whole sensual way of life at the spatial intersection of Europe and Asia; in "Ionic" it also stands for a way of life at the temporal intersection of the Christian world and the pagan – though the time at which the poem is spoken, and the identity of the speaker, are not the clearest of matters, as we shall see. At any rate, the words "Ionian" and "Ionia" are to set off a train of thought roughly comparable to that provoked by Matthew Arnold's evocation, at the end of his lectures on translating Homer, of "the pure lines of an Ionian horizon, the liquid clearness of an Ionian sky".

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[17] Text in Cavafy, *Ποιήματα*, vol. 1, p. 53. Translations by Mavrogordato, Keeley and Sherrard, and Kolaitis *opp.citt.*, pp. 43, 34, 34.

In other words, Cavafy's poem expresses an attitude to life which has a geographical tag: the technique is very unlike that of the much-travelled Seferis, whose poem "The King of Asine" describes a real landscape with actual topographical details which are not solely or even primarily metaphorical. Connected with this is the fact that Cavafy's title is not "Ionia" but "Ἰωνικόν". In Greek one can use that bare and suggestive adjective to mean anything Ionian. The suggestions here are of Ionian dialect, perhaps as something with a colouring older than Attic; of Ionian architecture or music; more broadly, of a whole idiom or aesthetic. The poem itself, the reader infers, will exemplify the aesthetic features of the label which identifies its origins.

Let us look briefly, then, at the formal features of this tiny poem which need to be got over into English.[18] The poem falls into two parts, each of five verses. The first makes the claim that the gods have not died, the second provides the evidence that this is so; between the two we have a chiastic balance of 3-2-2-3 in the clauses. But a second, less obvious means of shaping the poem is provided by the three verses that end with oxytone stresses, each emphasizing the more or less solid and abiding presence of the gods: θεοί, μορφή, περνᾶ. The technique, it is interesting to note, is the exact inverse of that used in the fragment of dialogue which appears in Pound's *Canto CXIII*, where it is feminine endings that express the same affirmation:

> The Gods have not returned. "They have never left us."
> They have not returned.
> Cloud's processional and the air moves with their living.

Cavafy in like manner asserts that the gods take visible if not tangible form, and the poem ends with a curious sort of evanescent firmness which he cultivated in some of his best poems. As we have seen, "Νὰ μείνει" ends not with the solider-sounding "this poem" but with "this poiesis". Or again, the little, equally symmetrical poem about poetic inspiration, "Φωνές" ("Voices") describes the voices in the final verse as Σὰ μουσική, τὴν νύχτα, μακρυνή, ποὺ σβήνει. "Like music, far

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[18] For a helpful approach to questions of form and meaning in Cavafy, see Christopher Robinson, *C.P. Cavafy* (Bristol 1988).

away, at night, dying away": the final verb is poised around persistence and disappearance. So too in "Ἰωνικόν" the final verb περνᾶ is a firm-footed verb whose meaning, nonetheless, is "to pass on". (And to what?)

This tentative note is hard to get in English, so full as it is with monosyllables; and it would be unsporting to find fault with our translators for falling short here. And while one might hope to compensate by sticking as closely as possible to Cavafy's word order, I do not see how in English we could make the verb the last word of the poem without a sort of wrenched artificiality quite alien to it – that is, unless we introduce some new phrase and say, e.g., "is to be seen above your hills, passing by". In any case, the parallel we have between the two uses of the word περνᾶ in the Greek, once as "pass through/ permeate", once as "pass by/ go on", does not readily transfer. Mavrogordato preserves "passes... passes" but at a cost: neither use is really natural; and Kolaitis's solution is barely English. But Keeley and Sherrard give the end of the poem what seems to me quite a concise and distinguished ring. The problem is not so much that we lose the verbal echo περνᾶ-περνᾶ as that the god is seen as necessarily in winged flight. This image becomes too specific and perhaps too suggestive of an angel with a message to convey: in Cavafy's poem the god bears no message beyond his own apparent existence.

But even if we cannot reproduce all the other formal features it is vital, surely, to produce a metrical form which has the same ring as Cavafy's original. The poem is entirely iambic, but the line-lengths vary in a way perhaps more apparent on the page than to the ear, but which contributes to the overall tone. For once again we have a poem poised between certainty and uncertainty. The initial firm denial that the gods are dead is justified, not by certain proof, but by something which happens irregularly, indistinctly, fleetingly, and in no more than a transitory way. So too the firmness of the opening blank verse eleven-syllable lines is adjusted by the unevenness of the lines that follow, until we reach once again the qualified firmness of the final verses. The line-lengths in fact go as follows: 11 syllables, 11, 12, 15, 11, 15, 15, 12, 10, 10. It is as if the line-lengths increase with a sort of yearning emotion and almost overflow the bounds of Ionian propriety; and one particular aspect of Cavafy's versification here deserves mention, as it is,

apart from anything else, one of the most culturally rooted and elusive features of modern Greek poetry, presenting great problems for the translator. It is the use of the so-called "political verse", the iambic fifteen-syllable line.

Just as the origin of rhyme in the West is shrouded in mystery, so is it with the political verse in Greek. We find it used as a metrical constituent in Byzantine hymnography; what is certain is that it is already dominant as a verse form by the twelfth century. Since then the great bulk of verse in Greek has been written in this metre or in variations on it. (Not just written, too, for the political verse is also the dominant metre of folk poetry.) Now it seems to me that Cavafy, being just as suspicious of this staple metre as Pound is of the English iambic ("Too much iambic will kill any subject matter"), uses it just as sparingly, and commonly as an instrument of irony. When Cavafy's speakers use the verse, even intermittently, it is because they are hectoring, sententious, sentimental, or merely glib; when he uses it *propria persona*, as here, it is because he wants to set it against other, plainer ways of speaking. In this poem the sixth, and especially the seventh, verses have the emotional ring; but this is then, not rescinded, but *placed* by the final, more measured verses.

This shift of tone is not fully evident from Keeley and Sherrard's translation. Mavrogordato does better overall here; but Kolaitis is surely right to go for "thee" of Ionia. This is a matter not just of tone but of conviction; for the poem is, in my view, a mixed case, between the sententious, time-free poems of Cavafy's early career and the historically rooted dramatic monologues which are perhaps his greatest, and certainly his most translatable, achievement. In this poem, much of the conviction comes from the fact that what is given voice to is not solely the poet's thought, or a timeless gnome, or a boasting about the eternally divine properties of the Greek world and by extension of its poetry, but what might at first sight appear to be a historical setting. The initial verbs appear to indicate a recent event, and a strong sense of complicity, as well as the wistfulness of certain ancient epigrams on the fall of paganism. That is why we need "thee" for Ionia (the speaker still preserves traces of the pagan reverence for place); that is why we need the word order of Kolaitis. If it weren't for these elements we might feel that the poem was a piece of pure romanticism denying the

death of the gods, a theme we can trace in many Greek poets of modern times. What we have here is more convincing because the ultimate focus is not on an abstraction – the gods in the plural, contrasted with an ungrateful human race – but with a single humanoid form.

The difficulty for the translator is to preserve this sense of reverence while giving the language the plainness that it has in the Greek. So Kolaitis's "ephebic" misses the mark, as the word is so much the property of Wallace Stevens (if not of Harold Bloom!). The phrase μὲ διάβα γρήγορο is more difficult: Mavrogordato's "with swift transition" has the best ring to it; Keeley and Sherrard's "in rapid flight" is closer to the idiom of the Greek but, as I have remarked, too much suggests a winged god – even, perhaps, a god fleeing a fallen world; Kolaitis's version just isn't English. The final words too are tricky: I'm not sure that it isn't only Keeley and Sherrard who produce something adequate here. Cautiously, I venture my own proposal:

> and sometimes an ethereal youthful form,
> indistinct, swift in its passage,
> is seen to make its way across thy hills.

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I don't want in my concluding section to be too pedantic, to grade the versions. As a matter of fact, I have deliberately chosen poems which do not (like the rhymed poems particularly) demand virtuoso treatment. My reason for ignoring this category was not just a principle of charity: it was to dispel what I feel to be a heresy on the part of the indefatigable Kimon Friar, to the effect that the problems in translating Cavafy are "basically technical ones". What I have tried to show is how far, even in poems with a certain plainness of language and word order, Cavafy is presenting us with delicate touches that resist translation. Cavafy as ironist adds still further touches, but I have not dwelt on these, not just because – with Keeley – I believe them to have been over-played by contemporary critics, but – a related point – because it is precisely the ironic mode which has now become so familiar in English-language poetry. It

is by contrast Cavafy's verse of deeply felt, if tentative, statement, that can fall flat in translation.

It has been my purpose, then, to take two poems which might well seem insubstantial in English, and to see how our translators have fared. Left out of account as, in my view, less problematic have been the poems on historical themes. Less problematic, not because the Greek itself will be easier to render – here too it is an amalgam for which there are not always analogues in English – but because here we have models to work with. Though Cavafy's tone of voice is indeed different from that of both Browning and Pound, we must expect a translator of the historical poems fully to have absorbed both. The knock-down case here is to be made with reference to the poem "Protus" from *Men and Women*. I defy anyone to read the poem and deny that Cavafy spent much of his poetic career refining and reforging this mode.

"Protus" was first cited by a hostile contemporary critic of Cavafy anxious to demonstrate that he was nothing but an epigone of Browning; and it is clear that Browning has paved the way for Cavafy not just in subject matter but in idiom. The exact consciousness of the literary and other sources of history; the teasing withholding of firm fact; the sense of sympathy for the frail or minor historical personage (often regarded as a Cavafian invention); the half-archaic, half-colloquial diction – all these are characteristic of Cavafy's historical poems. To adapt a famous dictum of T.S. Eliot, Cavafy learned more from Browning than most men could learn from a lifetime in the National Library of Greece.

In Cavafy's poetry itself, when we read it in translation, it is perhaps Mavrogordato who gives us the strongest impression of a debt to Browning, not so much because he sets out to do so as because this is the natural sphere within which he moves: his idiom most bears the mark of this nurture. At his best, Kolaitis, in turn, gives us something which in its strangeness, its syntactic inversions and its exotic words, is not always unfaithful to Cavafy's strangeness. Keeley and Sherrard, finally, are scrupulously faithful to the paraphrasable sense, and where plainness is required often rise to it with a felicitous arrangement of words; but they do not always – even in their revised edition – show us a Cavafy who is a master of hard-won syntactical and metrical effects. If there is a lesson here, it might be this. Now that we have a number of translations whose

main aim and claim has been fidelity, there might now be room for a freer, more ambitious response to Cavafy's poetry, one which embraces influences from English rather than keeping them at arm's length. Only then shall we able to say that Cavafy himself – as opposed to his themes, his predilections and his more evident mannerisms – has been truly translated into English.[19] In the meantime, the reader without Greek is in the more than usually happy position of being able to use the existing translations in a by no means unavailing search for their common target.

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[19] See, for an excellent example, the translation "An Old Man", by Robert Pinsky, in *The Want Bone* (New York 1990), p. 43.