

C.P. Cavafy

The Canon. The Original One Hundred and Fifty-Four Poems,

Translated from the Greek by Stratis Haviaras. Edited by Dana Bonstrom. With a foreword by Seamus Heaney, an introduction by Manuel Savidis and a frontispiece by Dimitri Hadzi, Athens: Hermes Publishing, 2004 (217 pp.)

One of the main reasons usually put forward to justify new translations of previously-translated canonical texts is that readers' sensibilities, not least their perception of poetry and language, change from generation to generation, therefore requiring new translations. Such is the reason put forward by Manuel Savidis in his Introduction for this new English translation of Cavafy's canonical poems by novelist, poet and scholar, Stratis Haviaras.

It is less easy, however, to justify new translations of the work of C.P. Cavafy in this way when the last fifty years has seen no less than six translations of Cavafy's canon in the English-speaking world prior to this one by Haviaras. The English-speaking reader's perception of poetry and language has probably changed little since the first English translation of the entire canon by John Mavrogordato in 1951 or by Rae Dalven in 1961, and certainly not since the translation by Keeley and Sherrard in 1975, which, it would be true to say, has become the standard version by which Cavafy is generally known in the English-speaking world. And in the last fifteen years alone, we have had three further translations of the entire canon: by Memas Kolaitis in 1989, Theoharis C. Theoharis in 2001 and Evangelos Sachperoglou in 2003. A new one, by Daniel Mendelsohn, has already been announced for publication in 2005.¹

There are, of course, other reasons for attempting a new translation of an already much-translated work. One reason may be the new translator's dissatisfaction with the previous translations and his belief that he can do better. Another may be to present his own interpretation of the author's work, as we should not forget that every translation is first and foremost a reading and perhaps the closest form of reading possible. Connected with this may be the translator's wish, through translation, to appropriate the author in his own language, to make him his, for translation is not simply

1. Also notable (for various reasons) are the translations of selections of Cavafy's poetry by George Valassopoulos, Lawrence Durrell, Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender, James Merrill, Konstandinos Lardas, Kimon Friar, George Khairallah, Desmond O'Grady, Anthony Hirst, R. M. Dawkins and, not least, the poems 'Englished' by Cavafy's brother John and published by Ikaros in 2003.

a transfer from one language and culture into another, but also a form of personal conquest. A further reason may simply be the wish on the part of the translator to measure his skill against the work or the author in question.

Haviaras tells us in his Translator's Preface that 'This translation [...] was inspired by the occasion of the one hundred fortieth anniversary of his birth and the seventieth anniversary of his death, in 2003,' though he explains that he had begun to 'translate' Cavafy in his mind thirty years earlier. And he justifies his new translation, not in terms of changing perceptions of language and poetry, but in terms of his ability to approach the poems as a poet writing in both languages. It should be remembered that, though born in Greece, Haviaras has lived and worked half his life in the US and has maintained a constant dialogue between both languages and cultures. 'Without these years of preparation,' he says, 'shuttling between Greek and English in both subject matter and craft, it would have been impossible for me to address Cavafy's sense of rhythm, use of language and the particularity of his vocabulary; his inventiveness, tone and searing irony.'

It is not feasible here to attempt a detailed criticism of this new translation or a comparison with the previous ones. Such an undertaking would demand that evaluative criteria for poetry translations be first established followed by an analytical comparison of the translations with each other and with the original. It is perhaps worth noting in passing that critical evaluations of translations of Cavafy into English are becoming something of a genre themselves with studies by Friar (1978), Raizis (1980), Arndt (1990), Ricks (1993), Korda (1994), Hirst (1998) and Connolly (1998).

Briefly, however, mention might be made of certain standard problems that every translator of Cavafy has to deal with and that possibly act as indicators of the success or failure of the translation. Perhaps the most difficult problem, because it is virtually impossible to reproduce in English, is the mixture, in both his diction and syntax, of demotiki and katharevousa, together with his use of what Heaney calls 'bewitching registers.' A second major problem for the aspiring translator is Cavafy's versification and, in particular, his use of rhyme. Most translators simply ignore it. Haviaras has maintained a general metrical consistency and has preserved several of the early poems in rhyme, ignoring it, reasonably so, only where the poems would not survive, what he calls, the strain of 'rhymification.' Cavafy's other formal concerns include his subtle use of enjambment and his mode of establishing rhythm and emphasis through repetition, his arrangement of lines and often idiosyncratic punctuation and his repeated use of certain key words, all of which go to make up his unique poetic style. And not to be

forgotten, of course, is that the translator has to produce a text that functions as a poem in its own right in translation. These, then, are some, though not all, of the evaluative criteria on which any translation of Cavafy must be judged and on which Haviaras' translation can be judged one of the more successful.

Despite or perhaps because of all these technical problems for the translator, translations of Cavafy's poetry are the best possible counter to the well-known platitude that poetry is what is lost in translation. Cavafy's is a poetry that survives (and thrives) in translation. But why is it that Cavafy's poetry works so well (at least in English) even in often prosaic and uninspired translations? Auden writes in his Introduction to Dalven's translation that every translation he had read, no matter by whom, was immediately recognisable as a poem by Cavafy and he attributes this (inadequately, he admits) to Cavafy's peculiar tone of voice, to his personal speech. Heaney, in his Foreword to Haviaras' translation, attributes it to the sheer interest of the content of Cavafy's poems, his treatment of which, he says, is enough to convince a non-Greek readership of his genius. Though Heaney too, like Auden, makes reference to Cavafy's voice and explains: 'Content may be where these poems begin, but they cannot attain their end without this voicing.'

Let's hear something of this "voicing" by Cavafy alongside Haviaras' voicing in English. The Alexandrian poet writes in his poem "For Ammones...":

*... οι στίχοι σου έτσι να γραφούν / που νάχουν, ξέρεις, από τη
ζωή μας μέσα των, / που κι ο ρυθμός κ' η κάθε φράσις να
δηλούν / που γι' Αλεξανδρινό γράφει Αλεξανδρινός.*

which Haviaras renders as follows:

*...take care to compose your verses in such a way / that they reflect
- well, something of our life in them, / so that their rhythm, so that
each and every phrase reveals / that he who writes for an
Alexandrian is Alexandrian, too.*

With this new translation of the Alexandrian poet, Haviaras proves himself, I think, to be a true Alexandrian.

*David Connolly
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*