

13 Translating a Canonical Author

C. P. Cavafy

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Afterlife

Focusing on a canonical author is an immensely productive way to teach students how to translate by showing them how to base their translation practice on research. The works of Homer, Dante, Proust, Rilke, or Césaire raise the question of reception in relation to many different critical approaches and illustrate many different strategies of translation and adaptation. The very issue of intertextuality that questioned author-centered courses after Roland Barthes's proclamation of the author's death (1977) reinstates them when the emphasis falls on translation. Confronted with a host of retranslations and multimedia adaptations, all bound in myriad relations to the receiving culture, students cannot rely on the intentional fallacy to control the possibility of endless interpretation. Translation, Walter Benjamin (1923a) reminds us, involves the afterlife of the work, not the author's life. Teaching canonical works with attention to the history of their survival enables students to move away from fixed notions of authorship and invention. Translation becomes a hermeneutic practice worthy of study in its own right, where learning how to interpret is indistinguishable from learning how to translate into different media.

These points form the basic rationale of my course on C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933), a poet of the Greek diaspora who lived in Alexandria and profoundly influenced many prose writers, poets, and artists, from E. M. Forster and Marguerite Yourcenar to James Merrill and Duane Michals. Presupposing no knowledge of Greek, the course is taken primarily by upper-level undergraduates in Modern Greek Studies, Comparative Literature, and Gender Studies. Students read widely in English translations of his poetry, but they are also immersed in works inspired by it. The course is organized both chronologically and thematically, according to the issues that have informed his reception. We begin by considering general questions about translation and world literature, devote a series of meetings to Cavafy's thematic preoccupations, and end with case studies based in Britain, Egypt, and America. Cavafy becomes the experimental ground for different practices: translations that inscribe interpretations through styles and discourses; commentary that engages social-historical issues such as diaspora, sexuality, and the postcolonial; and adaptations that reflect the constraints of particular media

and the artistic concerns of the adaptors. Translation is thus construed with latitude to encompass various forms of cultural production, interlingual as well as intersemiotic.

Readings

At the first class I distribute a set of materials relating to Cavafy's poem "Ithaka": a printed version of the Greek text, a manuscript version in Cavafy's hand, a printed version with his corrections, and ten different translations, mostly English, but also French and other languages the students may know. Students take turns reading aloud the first three lines. The discussion usually begins with their questions about why certain words and phrases are repeated in the English translations while others are not. Why, they ask, is "Ithaka" spelled with a "k" sometimes and at other times with a "c"? Why does one translator use "pray" and another "hope?" Students wonder whether some words are more translatable than others, but they gradually see that the difference in different translations is rather a sign that translations are interpretations. Variation can point to a crux in the source text, a certain ambiguity or undecidability, but it can also illuminate the role that a translation plays in its own context, its intervention into the receiving culture. Are certain translations more modernist or more classicizing, more feminist or more gay, more English or more American? And this question in turn opens up a larger discussion about how reading translations can contribute to the study of world literature. Even before we review the syllabus, students have begun to grapple with the difficulty of establishing any one text as original or authoritative. They never fail to ask, Which Greek text did the translators translate? Translation is the door that opens this Pandora's box.

We then situate Cavafy scholarship in relation to work in comparative literature and translation studies by addressing three central questions: What is an original? What is world literature? What is translation? These introductory sessions set in motion the contrapuntal relation of primary to secondary sources that continues throughout the course. Students read English versions of Cavafy's poems, essays that examine his work, and theoretical texts. The task is to explore how these forms of writing present different modes of interpretation and supplement or comment on each other, questioning the boundary between primary and secondary. From the start students think about how they are going to intervene in a body of critical literature with their own translations. Later in the semester, as a result, when they have to submit a proposal for their final translation project, the readings and class discussions have equipped them with a catalogue of ways of thinking critically about existing scholarship and translations.

To introduce the question of what is an original, we read Cavafy's poem "In the Month of Hathor" alongside introductions and afterwords by various editors and translators (Keeley and Sherrard 2009: 387–91; Peter Mackridge's introduction in Sachperoglou 2007: xi–xxxix; Yourcenar 1980). The poem describes the difficulty of deciphering an epitaph and, more broadly, the other, whether a lover, a culture, or a historical period. Full of brackets and blanks that create a white

space down the center of the page where time has eroded the gravestone, the Greek typography is handled in drastically different ways by different translators, who in effect suggest different originals to the Anglophone reader. Daniel Mendelsohn foregrounds it—“Amidst the erosion I see ‘Hi[m] . . . Alexandrian’” (2012: 70)—while Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard ignore it. Content rather than the form delivers the message of illegibility in their translation. We then consider Cavafy’s idiosyncratic distribution of his poetry as hand-sewn pamphlets containing different poems for different readers (Jusdanis 1987: 58–63), whereby students see that even in the age of mechanical reproduction originals are contested matters. Finally, we observe how the history of Greek epigraphy and textual editing impacts the original by reading David Damrosch (2003: 147–69) on the uncertain transcription of a poem in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

To develop the question of what is world literature, I use Cavafy’s prose poem “The Ships” (2010). In this meditation on poetry as translation from the imagination to the page, the passage between place and language is fraught with the challenges of the sea—what is thrown overboard, what is confiscated by customs officials, and what survives the journey. As literature is worlded, it is subjected to historical vicissitudes that intensify the already precarious nature of its existence within national boundaries. We interrogate E. M. Forster’s introduction of Cavafy to Anglophone cultures as the Anglicized cosmopolitan (Forster 1983). This interrogation is then deepened with essays by Gayatri Spivak (1983; 2003) that help to frame Cavafy’s work and its translation in the terms of comparative literature and postcolonial theory.

For the final introductory question—What is translation?—we read Cavafy’s poem “For Ammonis Who Died at 29, in 610,” in which a poet is asked to perform an act of translation by pouring his Egyptian feeling into a foreign tongue. We relate it to W. H. Auden’s essay on Cavafy in which he insists that “a tone of voice, a personal speech” is “immediately recognizable” in every translation (Dalven 1961: viii). How can a translation possibly communicate the source text in an untroubled manner? We question this fundamentally romantic conceit by pairing Auden with Lawrence Venuti’s historicist manifesto, “How to Read a Translation” (Venuti 2013: 109–15). Translation studies, we learn, can show how to read a translation as a transformation, relatively autonomous from the source text. It reveals not only how a belletristic approach to translation is often fixated on the source author but also how the discourse of world literature erases the source text in favor of the forms and practices in which it is circulated.

The course now takes up Cavafy’s thematic preoccupations by tracking his development through different periods, from his early, more formalist poems to his prose writing (prose poems, book reviews, journals) to his mature collections and his unpublished and unfinished poems. I pair poems from each period with critical and theoretical essays that reflect a main concern in Cavafy scholarship: poetic craft, biography, eros, the archive, geography, and history. On biography, for example, we examine Cavafy’s claim in his poem “Hidden Things” that “from my most unnoticed actions,/my most veiled writing—/from these alone will I be understood” (Keeley and Sherrard 2009: 361). We read his English-language

journal of his first trip to Greece against Robert Liddell's biography, mindful of what Kapsalis calls "autobiographical inventions" and what Foucault theorizes as the "author-function" (Cavafy 1982; Foucault 1977; Kapsalis 1983; Liddell 1974). To read psychoanalytically or with a Marxist, feminist, or deconstructive perspective creates different authors. If translation is a form of reading, we ask, can we think of it in terms of translator-functions?

When discussing the importance of geography we look at poems where Cavafy establishes his affinity for a Hellenistic Alexandria in decline. We contrast the claustrophobia of "The City"—"You will always end up in this city./ Don't hope for things elsewhere./ there is no ship for you, there is no road" (Keeley and Sherrard 2009: 51)—with the upbeat openness of "Ithaka." Notions of translation as an extra-national zone (Apter 2006: 3–22) and as a diasporic practice (Edwards 2003: 1–15) help to complicate Keeley's assumption of Alexandria as a mythic place where the exile returns home to stay, an interpretation that acts as a geographical counterpart to his domesticating translation strategy (Keeley 1996).

On the archive we read about Cavafy's library, collections, and photographs (Haas 1995; Savidis 1964; 1983). To interrogate the collector's obsessive compulsion and connect it to the work of the editor and translator, we read Derrida (1998a) on "archive fever." The pathos of memory and desire in the name of an uncertain posterity, main themes in Cavafy's mature poetry but also problems for collecting and translating, is then critiqued through an examination of the materiality of the poem. We analyze how the fetishism of the archive is replaced by the creative act of refashioning in Cavafy's "Caesarion" when the boy from the history book—after ellipses and a stanza break—suddenly appears in the poet's room. The poem as a caesarean birth on the page undermines nostalgia. Students read my translations of Yannis Ritsos's poems about the contents of Cavafy's study, applying to translation what Ritsos learns about words as objects and their placement on the page.

To study the theme of eros, we read Margaret Alexiou's 1985 essay on the "dangerous drugs" in Cavafy's poetry while considering various queer approaches (Papanikolaou 2005; Sedgwick 2010). Keith Harvey (1998) helps us to think through the cultural and historical specificities of queering Cavafy, especially the Americanness of camp discourse in translation. Yet not every American translator takes this route. Rae Dalven's laconic translations are certainly attributable to a modernist poetics, but might they also harbor vestiges of Victorian prudishness? Why does she choose "covert" (Dalven 1961: 97) instead of "veiled" (Keeley and Sherrard 2009: 361) in her translation of "Hidden Things," "house of depravity" (143) rather than "of ill fame" (Mavrogordato 1951: 164) in "Two Young Men, 23 to 24," "excited ourselves" (94) rather than "aroused" (Keeley and Sherrard 2009: 183; Theoharis 2001: 104) in "To Remain?" But it is Mendelsohn's repeated choice of "boy" to replace "young man" or "ephebe" that establishes a palpable connection to post-Stonewall gay culture, moving us in a very different direction.

In the final part of the course, in anticipation of the students' own presentations, we consider cases of how Cavafy's poetry is reworked in various kinds of media in specific countries. The aim is to trace the similarities and differences among

the interlingual translations and the intersemiotic adaptations in different cultural contexts. We map out the history of the strategies deployed by the translators we have so far been discussing, from Mavrogordato and Dalven to Keeley and Sherrard to Theoharis and Mendelsohn, including the poet James Merrill's distinguished versions (Merrill 2001). Students read commentary on the translations (Emmerich 2011; Friar 1978; Ricks 1993), and, taking their cue from these readings as well as our previous discussions, they come to class prepared to analyze the translators' verbal choices. Some students take an extra step to connect a translation to a critical work that cites it, drawing out how translator and critic share or hold competing agendas. Students learn to do the work that commentators for the most part avoid: the actual nitty-gritty reading of a translation as an interpretation.

The adaptations move the course into new areas of research. We examine how Lawrence Durrell integrates translations into his Alexandria-based novel *Justine* (1957), how Auden's poem "Atlantis" adapts Cavafy's "Ithaka," and how homoerotic visual interpretations are constructed in David Hockney's etchings (1967) and in Constantine Giannaris's biopic, *Trojans* (1990). How do different media, we ask, enable different kinds of critiques? The cultural appropriations are probed by pairing specialized articles with theoretical essays. Hala Halim (2013: 56–225) questions the colonial blinders of Cavafy's British legacy, while Vicente Rafael (2009) helps us to conceptualize how differently Cavafy is received in America, the new empire, and how translations navigate the repressive force of American monolingualism. Are adaptations, we ask, less sure than translations of their relation to the source text and therefore more attentive to thematic connections? Why do the poets Joseph Brodsky and Mark Doty title their homages to Cavafy "Near Alexandria" (1992) and *My Alexandria* (1993) respectively? Are American adaptations more insecure about their relation to the source culture than those produced in Britain or in Egypt?

Assignments

Students are assigned activities that help them not only to develop an incisive understanding of the readings in poetry, theory, and criticism but to marshal those readings in devising their own translations. They write weekly responses to various prompts formulated by the instructor, analyze a poem or group of poems that takes up critical preoccupations presented in the readings, and produce a final project that involves translating Cavafy's work into a medium of their own choice, whether linguistic or critical, theatrical or visual.

The prompts are based on the readings, asking students to reflect more deeply on a topic or to complete a pertinent exercise. Which bilingual edition of Cavafy's poetry, they might be asked, is the best to use for the purposes of this course, taking into account the editors' introductions? Other prompts have them comparing the representations of sexuality or the linguistic registers in two or more translations of the same poem, linking their findings to the translators' agendas or historical moments. Students who can work with the Greek texts—and are inclined toward linguistic experiments—might be invited to write a homophonic translation of

a poem, reproducing the sound of Greek in English to demonstrate what they learned from Cavafy's intralingual homophonic rhymes. In another exercise, they examine how the homo-iconic counterspace between lovers in Duane Michals' photographs (1978) mirrors the typography of the poems he adapts. Students post their responses before the next class so they can comment on each other's work.

The analytical assignment is designed to compensate for the students' uneven linguistic background by enabling them all to consider the relations between the source texts and the translations. Students without Greek are asked to team up with a Greek speaker whom they use as an informant in order to write their own formal analysis of one of Cavafy's early poems. The collaboration influences the outcome for both Greek and non-Greek speakers, but students are asked to write up their own analyses. Paying particular attention to points of unstable identity and grammatical transgression addressed by Jakobson and Colaclides (1966), Nehamas (1983), and Robinson (1988), students formulate a line-by-line treatment. They read the notes on their chosen poems by Keeley and Sherrard (2009) and by Economou and Deligiorgis (2013), since both discuss the formal features of the source texts. In the end, students learn how to argue an analysis of a translation on the basis of textual evidence and scholarly research.

The final project creates an occasion for students to synthesize the knowledge and skills they have acquired by working with Cavafy's poems and various theoretical and critical materials. They must take a particular interpretation, whether derived from a published critical work or formulated by themselves, and create a translation or adaptation that inscribes it in the source text. Students analyze one or more poems of their own choosing, devise a strategy of translation or adaptation, and then produce their project. They think about how their handling of formal and thematic features might be shaped by various considerations, ranging from Cavafy's idiosyncratic publishing practices to the predominance of irony and multilingualism in his poems to gay translation theories to current debates in comparative literature. They submit an abstract and then give an oral presentation of their project and their goals. Their final submissions include their translation or adaptation of Cavafy's poetry as well as a critical analysis of how their project adopts, challenges, supplements, or ignores dominant preoccupations in Cavafy scholarship. These submissions are evaluated in terms of how effectively they realize and illuminate the hermeneutic project the students set for themselves.

In recent iterations of the course, students developed methods that were innovative as well as conventional. A student examined poems of linguistic excess that treated themes like arrogance and intoxication and translated them into English through a poetics of vanity. Another translated poems into the Klingon language from the television program *Star Trek*, while yet another adapted them—in Japanese—to the classical Japanese dance-drama known as *Kabuki*. The many cues for set design, lighting, and scene blocking in Cavafy's poems inspired a student to create maquettes for theatrical performance. Another took the punctuation and the visual presentation of the poem on the page as the interpretive framework for his translation (Smith 2008). A student without Greek analyzed six different translations of "Ithaka," using tracing paper to create a

palimpsestic translation of her own that indicated where the versions coincided and diverged. Arguing against Auden's insistence that Cavafy's "tone of voice" is recognizable in English, the student found that what was most distinctive lay in those moments when the translators dissented rather than agreed.

Canonical authors provide fertile ground in translation courses for a very basic reason: many translations are available to compare. Multiple retranslations enable the reconstruction of a long and rich history of critical reception and translation practice. They tell us about changing literary taste, academic canons, and cultural institutions in the receiving situation even as they highlight the different traditions, interpretations, and evaluations that endow the source text with significance in its originary culture. Because translations, as Jakobson (1959) indicated, can be intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic, we can see how they interpret source texts by deploying different strategies (homophonic or semantic, domesticating or foreignizing, modernist or queer) in different media (pictorial, photographic, audiovisual, and musical). They help us to realize, in a particularly compelling way, that the death of the author is the life of the reader, the translator, the adaptor . . . and the work.