

## Translation as a vital force: Alicia Stallings on poetry and translation

*Interview for iTi with Irene Loulakaki-Moore*

Alicia Stallings was born and raised in the US. Since 1999 she lives in Greece with her husband the journalist John Psaropoulos and their two children. She studied Classics in the US and Oxford, is a frequent contributor of poems and essays to *Poetry* magazine among others, and currently directs the Poetry Program at the Athens Centre.

Stallings has published three books of poetry: *Archaic Smile* (1999), *Hapax* (2000) and *Olives* (2012). Her work received accolades from the time of her first publication *Archaic Smile*, for which she won the Richard Wilbur Award. She is the recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and in 2011 was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship or “Genius Grant” for the originality and potential of her creative work. Alicia stands out amongst her peers as a virtuoso who employs poetic form with flexible and creative verve. In an era when creative writing workshops are offered in abundance by universities, institutions and even publishing houses, readers begin to suspect that it is one thing to produce routinely and quite another to have something pertinent to say. More rare still is it to find both qualities in one person.

Thus it is intriguing when a consistently original poet puts her finger deeply in the nest of translation as well. In 2007 Stallings published her English rendering of Lucretius’ *The Nature of Things* with Penguin Classics. The work is a labour of many years and produces Lucretius in English rhyming fourteeners, which make a flowing and greatly enjoyable text.

In the interview that follows, Alicia Stallings gives her perspective on issues that concern translators today, such as the importance of creativity and scholarship in translation, the form/content dilemma, the significance of decision-making in the translation process, the impact of translation in the target-language literature, author-translator collaborations and many more. She also lets us in on her new translation projects, something we certainly look forward to read.

- Alicia, in one of your interviews you have admitted that your ‘first stabs at translation were of Catullus poems’ because in the late eighties and nineties you found the classical authors ‘**fresher and more modern**’ than a lot of contemporary poetry. How is that so?

**They spoke directly to me over the millennia. I don’t think American poetry was in great shape, at least in the literary journals, in the 80s and 90s. I was not excited or inspired by what I was reading. Catullus spoke in a direct, contemporary (for him) idiom about love, dinner parties, friendships, sex. And he did so in strict meters. Even when obscene, he wrote with elegance. He’s never dull.**

- Chronologically, your translation of *De rerum natura* appears in the heart of your poetic production. In Greece important poets like Karyotakis were influenced by Lucretius. Do you feel a particular poetic affinity with this work?

**I do feel that I was changed, converted if you will, by Lucretius. I came to Lucretius through Virgil (my interest in the Georgics), but I think I have more of an affinity or sympathy with Lucretius. I don’t know that he has affected me poetically exactly, more intellectually I think, but the simple act of translating a long, didactic-epic work does teach you something about longer-form poems, and I have been experimenting with longer poems.**

- In your translation of Lucretius you take form quite seriously. In one of your interviews you said that for you “rhyme is not an ornament but a method of composition”. Wasn’t that making your work extremely difficult, given the fact that you had to stay close to the content of the original? –and can you expound further on this distinction which you draw?

**People who do not write in meter and rhyme (rhyme being a particularly contentious issue in English) often think that the poet has thought up what he/she**

**wants to say, and then versifies it, almost like self-translation. But meter and, even more so, rhyme, is a way of finding out what you want (or what the poem wants) to say. Rhyme is a form of discovery.**

- A famous translation scholar, André Lefevere, maintains that ‘scholars should translate, and translations should be considered works of creativity *and* scholarship’.<sup>1</sup> As a classical scholar and a poet what do you think: is scholarship and creativity of equal importance in translation?

**Yes, I agree that translation is scholarship, and certainly creative. A translator has to almost rethink, re-imagine, what the poet had in mind to make it clear and a poem in his own language. A literal trot of a poem, for instance, might make translationese-y gestures that stay vague and noncommittal. As a literary translator, you have to make decisions, right or wrong. In the act of making a decision, you see clearly what the crux is, even if you don’t know the solution.**

- In your interviews you’ve spoken a lot about the relation between the translations you are doing and your own original work. You have said that you consider translation ‘a salutary exercise’ and that you see “translation as “a strange act of self-effacement, as opposed to the self-assertion of writing a lyric poem.”<sup>2</sup> As a poet-translator, have you ever regarded translation is an antidote to “the anxiety of influence”?

**Oh, yes, certainly. I’m not much concerned with the anxiety of influence, to be honest, or contemporary angst about “originality”. My favourite quotation about translation is Rexroth’s: “translation saves you from your contemporaries.”**

- Would you include a translated poem or set of poems in a collection of your own?

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<sup>1</sup> Lefevere 1992: 92

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.valpo.edu/vpr/v12n1/v12n1prose/stallingsinterview.php>

**I have slipped in a Cavafy poem into a sequence in *Hapax*. I suppose I might. Or maybe I would do what Rachel Hadas has done, and do a separate volume of assorted translations.**

- There has been a long discussion in Greece concerning free verse versus strict forms. Occasionally some go so far as to say that translation is partly to blame for the prevalence of free verse in Greek letters. Would you say that the prevalence of free verse reveals a decline in the quality of poetic production?

**Well, I would agree that certain kinds of translation are partly to blame, also in America, for a flatness of diction and style. Free-verse translations of poets has given American writers a flattened sense of the originals, and you see people imitating *translations* of poets who were actually much more textured and, yes, formal (such as Cavafy). There are superb free verse poems and banal formal poems, I don't think either "superior", but to dispense with all the formal tools of poetry is certainly to limit yourself and the poem; basically the only tool you are left with to distinguish yourself from prose is the line break. Of course, in formal poetry, the line does not "break"—it is integral, but the syntax can enjamb, with great force and effect.**

- In the past we have seen translations form serious impacts on the target language literary system, as in the case of Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Kayam, or in the many translations of Pound. Because of this many people today, especially in Greek letters, imitate the appropriative manner in which Pound, for instance, was translating. Do you think translation can have such an impact on a literature today?

**Translation is often a vital force in transforming poetry. Sometimes it's a formal development (iambic pentameter comes into English from translating Italian hendecasyllables; blank verse is invented to translate Virgil; the sonnet comes in through Italian, the Eastern ghazal is enjoying a vogue in American verse, etc.)**

**Sometimes it is about introducing different subject matter or treatments. Auden writes beautifully about the interesting issue of being “influenced” by a poet you cannot read in the original in his introduction to Rae Dalven’s Cavafy. Anyway, yes, I think translation continues to have an impact.**

- About living and working in Greece: for the modernist poets, leaving and working in Europe was an essential part of adding an international reception to their work. As a poet who lives and works in Greece do you find that this is still true today?

**I suppose I am not too concerned about an “international reception”—just with finding sympathetic readers. I do find that living in Greece for an American poet has the advantage of one’s not being too enmeshed in the professionalization of poetry (M.F.A. programs and workshops and all the attendant po-biz) in the U.S.**

- Your poetry is in dialogue with Greek literature and art. Some of the titles of your most read collections, or poems point directly to your classical education. Have you ever tried to write in Greek?

**No, I wouldn’t dream of writing in Greek, unless it were just as practice for my Greek. I do think that, with very few exceptions, a poet should stick to her mother tongue in her own work.**

- You speak Greek quite fluently, have you been tempted to translate your own poems?

**That’s kind of you—I usually feel pretty tongue-tied in Greek, though I understand well enough. No, I wouldn’t dream of translating my own poems.**

- What do you think of the relationship between author and her or his translator? Do such relations provide guarantees of accuracy or do they tend to produce oppressive relations?

**I prefer to translate dead poets precisely because I feel too much interference is hampering to the translator. I have never really “collaborated” which would be a different issue; trust would obviously be utmost. It can be helpful, I suppose, to ask the author questions. And certainly if I simply got something “wrong” I would want to know! But the poem should also stand alone, I think, without the poet’s explanations.**

- Are you working on another translation at the moment?

**In theory, I am working on Hesiod’s “Works and Days.” I also recently did a translation of the new Sappho “brother” poem for the TLS. I am also supposed to be doing some translations of contemporary Greek poets for an anthology on Greek poetry and the crisis.**