

“I WANT TO GO TO ANOTHER LAND”. A.E. STALLINGS AND THE POETRY OF EXILE

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This paper examines three versions of Cavafy’s poem, “The City”, by the American poet, A.E. Stallings. Stallings, since 1999 resident in Greece, has often addressed issues of home and exile. Her different versions show not only a development in her attitude towards translation but also a growing awareness of the universality of Cavafy’s great poem on exile.

“Voglio andare in un’altra terra”. A.E. Stallings e la poesia dell’esilio

Questo saggio esamina tre diverse traduzioni della poesia “La città” di Kavafis da parte della poetessa americana A.E. Stallings. La poetessa, residente dal 1999 in Grecia, si occupa da tempo del tema dell’esilio. Le diverse versioni dimostrano non soltanto una riconsiderazione del modo di tradurre, ma anche una crescente consapevolezza dell’universalità di questa grande poesia sull’esilio.

“They all seem like contemporaries to me”

In this essay I wish to examine three different versions that the American poet A.E. Stallings has produced of Cavafy’s poem “The City”, since they provide fascinating insight into her approach to translation and also into her development as a writer. As a translator she is best known for her work on ancient authors, work that has undeniably influenced her own poetry. She has, for example, referred to her long engagement with the works of Lucretius as an essential part of her poetic education: «I have also learned a lot from it, reading authors much more closely and thoroughly than I would ever have done otherwise. A sort of do-it-yourself PhD, I guess. I do think translating Lucretius changed me – converted me, really. It was hard to spend that long in his company and not be won over» (Byrne w.p.).

There is something very revealing in the way she talks about being in the ‘company’ of the ancient author. In similar fashion, in an essay she wrote about

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contemporary Greece for *Poetry* magazine, she talks about an encounter with a Greek poet:

I meet with a poet I am translating. As with many Greeks, his forefathers hail from Asia Minor, tossed here on the waves of misfortune. He himself grew up in a village in Boeotia, for which he has little nostalgia (“freezing in winter, boiling in summer; unpleasant all year round”). As with many Greeks he is embroiled in a never-ending lawsuit – this one with his brother over some property in the village left to them by their father. The legal system is a mess, the judges are “bribe eaters”. His view of the current political situation is black: “It is bad,” he says, “to be an honest man where felons rule” (“Austerity Measures”: w.p.).

She then reveals that the poet is Hesiod. We sense that this is not just a rhetorical trick, with the purpose of showing that nothing changes in Greece; Hesiod (active between 750 and 650 BC) is truly alive to her. This sense of an intimate relationship with the writers she is working on undoubtedly contributes to the vitality of her renderings of their works.

Although a striking number of her poems are about the dead (the word “Underworld” provides the title for the opening section of her first collection, *Archaic Smile*), there is nothing morbid or even depressing in her concern with the subject. One is reminded of Eliot’s declaration in “Little Gidding”, that «the communication/ Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living» (51). Stallings has said that «Poetry is a conversation with the dead and unborn. In this way one never feels lonely or unappreciated just because one has a small, select readership in the present» (Byrne w.p.). She engages in conversation with the writers of the past – and it is a lively and animated conversation. We never have any sense of her as a «ruin-bibber, randy for antique», to use Larkin’s words (29), quite simply because she does not think of these writers as antique: «I would say I am excited by Pindar and Ariosto, Larkin and Hesiod, Cavafy and Housman. They all seem like contemporaries to me» (Gyls w.p.).

Indeed, she has stated that when she first encountered the classical poets at university, they «seemed fresher and more modern than most of the contemporary poets I was reading in journals in the late eighties and early nineties. It was a revelation, for instance, that a poet like Catullus was writing about contemporary (and raunchy) things in contemporary Latin diction, but in tight, elegant metrical forms» (Byrne w.p.). It was this that opened her eyes to the possibilities offered by the forms of poetry: despite the convention whereby these forms are often referred to as ‘closed’, she clearly sees them as opening up all sorts of opportunities: «Rhyme often leads you to write things that surprise you. A meter may help you tap into a forgotten emotion» (Murchison w.p.).

Her own openness to the possibilities offered by metrical forms has led her

to reject what was (and still is) the customary choice of many contemporary translators of poetry – free verse, that is, no matter what the form of the original text may be:

Some of the lack of boldness in translation in the past fifty years or so has been a lack of technical boldness, of even attempting to get across the meter, rhyme sounds, puns, etc., of the original. After all, free verse represents a rather slim subset of poetry over the millennia. Can all poets of all times and languages really have sounded like mid-American, mid-century free verse poets in the plain-speaking tradition? ("Translation, Rhyme & Reason": w.p.).

In a deliberately provocative "Manifesto" on the Poetry Foundation website she put it even more strongly: «Translators who translate poems that rhyme into poems that don't rhyme solely because they claim keeping the rhyme is impossible without doing violence to the poem have done violence to the poem. They are also lazy» ("Presto Manifesto!": w.p.).

"To leave the city"

Certainly no-one can accuse Stallings of such laziness, although some might see a certain inconsistency in her decision to translate two non-rhyming poems, Lucretius's *De Rerum Naturae* and Hesiod's *Works and Days*, into rhyming ones. However, she makes convincing arguments for the particular choices (rhyming fourteeners in the former, «non-strictly-heroic couplets» [*Works and Days*, 50] in the latter) in her Translator's Note to each volume, pointing to the need to compensate for the loss of the metrical effects of the lines in the ancient languages.

When it comes to translating poets closer to our own day, she shows a similar sensitivity to the music of the original texts. From her remarks in interviews and essays Cavafy seems to be the Greek poet with whom she feels the greatest affinity. Her earliest comments on him are to be found in a blog-post on the Poetry Foundation website, January 2008, where she answers a query about why most translations of his works sound like «prose broken into lines – well-written, sensitive, insightful prose, but prose nonetheless» ("More Cavafy": w.p.). Stallings replies that it was not until she tackled the original Greek of "The City" that she became «fully aware of [...] its elegant parallelisms and chiasmus (land/shore; ship/road). I was surprised to find the poem rhymes, and not only does it rhyme, but it has a curious rhyme scheme (which I have since stolen for one of my own poems about leaving a city)» ("More Cavafy": w.p.)¹.

¹ In an essay (*Yale Review*, 2010) on Daniel Mendelsohn's two volumes of translations of

She is referring to her poem, “On Visiting a Borrowed Country-House in Arcadia”, which was first published in *Poetry* magazine in June 2007, but which did not appear in book-form until the publication of *Olives* (2012). Curiously she does not mention her own translation of “The City”, which had appeared as the fourth poem in a sequence entitled “Exile: Picture Postcards” in *Hapax* (2006), but instead, perhaps out of modesty, quotes a version of it by David Mason, which, like her own version, maintains Cavafy’s rhyme-scheme.

What particularly intrigues her is the envelope effect of the rhymes between the first and last lines of the two stanzas. As she puts it: «The rhyme scheme that appears to go somewhere only to end up where it started is not decoration – it is central to the theme of the poem» (“More Cavafy”: w.p.). The same effect is crucial to her own poem about leaving a city, which has nine stanzas, as opposed to Cavafy’s two. Perhaps to make sure that the effect is not missed, she draws attention to the scheme with a deliberately bathetic rhyme in the opening stanza, which opens with the line, “To leave the city”, and closes with “Then say something shitty”. This earthy tone evolves in the course of the poem into something far more serious and more moving, until we reach the impressive climax of the final stanza; here she actually discards the envelope effect, and instead concludes with a fully serious couplet that uses the same rhyme as the opening stanza, this time to explain the salvific effects of Nature:

Not because it is pristine or pretty,
But because it has no pity or self-pity.
(*Olives*: 19)

This, of course, is far removed from the bleak negativity of Cavafy’s poem, which denies any possibility of escape from the city – or, indeed, any possibility of change at all.

In her translation of the poem (which she labels as “After Cavafy”), she remains faithful to its tone and form. As already indicated, it is the last in a sequence of four poems, with the wry title, “Exile: Picture Postcards”. The first three poems are sonnets about her own feelings as an American expat in Greece. The first, “Athens, August”, is un-rhyming, while the other two, “Mornings, I Walk Past the First Cemetery of Athens” and “Bouzouki”, consist of four tercets and a rhyming couplet (which in one case is placed at the centre of the poem) – a scheme which may deliberately echo another famous sonnet about alienation in an urban setting, Frost’s “Acquainted with the Night”. In

Cavafy she explores the Greek poet’s musical effects even more thoroughly; it is her longest and most illuminating essay on Cavafy.

"Athens, August" she depicts the city in its summer emptiness and «blinding silence», when «Even the days of the week have fled for the islands» (*Hapax*: 54). In the second sonnet she describes the "First Cemetery", paradoxically giving fresh life to the personifications of classical poetry («every day the grey Dawn comes / To the Proto Nekrotapheío, and sweeps the crumbs / Of night from tombstones», *Hapax*: 54). The last sonnet, "Bouzouki", best encapsulates her sense of non-belonging: «I understand / Most of the sung words, recognize the tune, / But there's an element I'll never get, // That isn't born in me» (55). The poems lead in very naturally to her translation, "The City, after C. P. Cavafy", which seems to take up the imagery of powerless stasis and entombment from the first two sonnets, and the sense of bleak inevitability written into the very music of the third poem («...in whose songs / The hands of lovers always rhyme with knives»: 56):

You said, "I'll go to another land, I'll go to another sea.
I'll find another city. One that is better than this.
Here my every effort is sentenced to fruitlessness,
And here my heart's entombed, as if it were a cadaver.
How long will my mind loiter in this wasteland? For wherever
I turn my eyes here, whatever I look upon,
I see the black wreckage of my life, all the gone
Years I frittered away, destroyed, wasted utterly."

But you will find no other lands, no other seas discover.
This city will pursue you. The same streets, you will follow.
You will grow old among the neighborhoods that you know now.
Among the same houses, you will turn gray. Forever
You are coming to this city. Do not expect another.
For you there is no ship. There is no road for you
For as you've wrecked your life in this small corner, so too
You have wrecked your life the whole world over.
(*Hapax*: 56)

Despite the apparent disclaimer of "After C. P. Cavafy", the poem is a faithful translation². One effect of the original that she did not maintain was the repetition of the same rhyming words to open and close each stanza (singular in the first stanza, plural in the second), a feature that was instead maintained by Mason, although he conflated "land" (γη) and "sea" (θάλασσα) into the single word "shore", perhaps in an effort to preserve iambic pentameter. Stall-

² To add a disclaimer of my own: I can only make this judgement by comparing it with other versions, since my own Greek is rudimentary, to say the least.

ings, instead, accepts the inevitable lengthening of the lines, returning to the concision of pentameter (although markedly trochaic) only in the bleak final line. In a well-judged effect, the envelope rhyming words of the second stanza, “discover” and “over”, echo the striking (and somewhat sinister) rhymes of the central couplets of both stanzas, “cadaver” and “wherever”, “Forever” and “another”. This is not an effect borrowed from Cavafy, although he does have another almost exactly repeated rhyme in the sixth and seventh lines of each stanza. Stallings has clearly paid close attention to Cavafy’s rhyming effects; in her comment on the poem she says:

Some of the rhymes are actually denser than full rhyme – they are rime riche, homophones – so that “tha menei” (“shall remain”) almost magically turns into “thameni” (“buried”); some are more like full consonantal rhymes – “tha gurnas” (“you will wander”) turns into “tha gernas” (“you will grow old”) (w.p.)³.

As always with Stallings, her interest is not only in the technicalities of these aural devices but in what they contribute to the overall effect of the poem. Cavafy’s poem clearly speaks to her on many levels and it is no accident that she has returned to it, as she continues to explore the theme of exile and displacement. To use her own words:

Well, I’m an expat. It’s one of the great poems, and I’ve spent a lot of time reading and thinking about it. It is a strangely particular and universal poem at the same time. For instance, the Greeks, if you’re talking about *The City*, that’s Constantinople – that’s the city. But I think it’s just one of the great poems about how wherever you spend time, the time is spent. And I’m particularly fond of poems that end in negation, and Cavafy is the king of that (Pierce w.p.).

Byronic Cavafy

Her second version of the poem is a much freer one, and comes as the final stanza of her first long poem in ottava rima, a canto contributed to the volume *A Modern Don Juan*⁴. This book, edited by Andy Croft and N.S. Thompson (2014), brings together cantos by fifteen contemporary poets recounting the adventures of Byron’s eponymous hero in the 20th and 21st century. The only instruction given to each poet was that the cantos had to be written in ottava rima, as in Byron’s original work.

³ She explores this aspect more thoroughly in her *Yale Review* essay.

⁴ An earlier poem in ottava rima is, interestingly, the seven-stanza poem “The Cenotaph”, on a visit to the First Cemetery of Athens.

Stallings has indicated how the writing of this canto provided her with her first opportunity to extend her subject-matter into contemporary politics. This should come as no surprise, given that she is married to a journalist, John Psaropoulos, and she has frequently indicated that he is her first reader. During the years of the debt crisis in Greece, he was one of the leading reporters for Al Jazeera, and it was inevitable that she should have found herself writing about the situation as well. She did so in extended essays for *The Hudson Review* and *Poetry* magazine, and talked about it in several interviews. However, it was the commission for *A Modern Don Juan* that first opened her eyes to the possibility of bringing this topic into her poetry:

I started writing about that because I had some work commissioned. There was an anthology called *A Modern Don Juan*. A bunch of writers were asked to do a canto of *Don Juan*, to update it. And since Byron is often quite political and about the times, it seemed a good opportunity to talk about what was happening in Greece, in this kind of light, Byronic rhymed verse, because it had the pedigree, the DNA (Pierce w.p).

Her Canto is set in Athens in 2013. She draws a picture of the city under austerity measures and combines it with celebrations for the sesquicentennial of Cavafy. The plot is admittedly slight; it involves Don Juan being invited to the house of a former lover and being greeted there by her beautiful daughter; as the narrator candidly admits, «It's like a scene straight out of *Mamma Mia*» (*A Modern Don Juan* 237). However, what really counts is the evocation of contemporary Athens and its political troubles. She demonstrates true Byronic flexibility in her ability to move, for example, from straightforward satire (particularly brilliant is her updating of Byron's ballad "The Isles of Greece" as "The Trials of Greece") to lyrical evocation of the city at dusk (with an echo of Byron's Hesperus stanzas in Canto III of *Don Juan*).

At the conclusion of the poem, after her hero has been attacked by Golden Dawn thugs, the 'austere' music of Cavafy's poem seems to come upon him as a second assailant:

XLV

And now the music's singing in his ear –
He cannot move, as though tied to a mast–
Except he's on the pavement. It's so clear,
A poem, perhaps, he'd heard, far in his past,
It's not austerity, but it's austere,
The sirens sing, an ambulance drives past.
His anonymity, he thinks, protects him,
And then the music comes inside and wrecks him:

XLVI
*I'll find another land, another shore,
 There has to be a better place than this –
 That's what you said, and what you've said before,
 When one by one dreams died, or went amiss.
 And so the years rolled by, score after score,
 It's not too late, you say, to seek your bliss,
 But you've failed everywhere once you have failed.
 All roads are dead-end roads. All ships have sailed.
 (A Modern Don Juan: 240)*

It provides the perfect ending to this poem, as it brings together Byron and Cavafy, in the merged music of their different songs – music that «comes inside and wrecks him». She condenses Cavafy's two echoing stanzas into a single tightly packed octave, with a final epigrammatic couplet. This music is obviously very different from that of Cavafy's original poem and to a certain extent the poem relies upon our knowledge of the haunting counterpoint of Cavafy's two stanzas to achieve its full effect; for that reason, as the poem comes to an end, we have a bleak (and fitting) sense of something left lingeringly unsaid, as in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci". It is as if we too have been abandoned on the cold hill side.

Being inside a Cavafy poem

Stallings has continued to pursue the epigrammatic mode as she has expanded her range of political concerns. When the debt crisis gave way to the refugee crisis, she found herself more and more closely involved with what she has defined as a humanitarian emergency. Inevitably this has fed into her poetry. As she points out, this does not imply any break with her classical interests:

It has been making me think a lot about the importance of asylum in ancient literature. Aeschylus's *Suppliant Women*, which might as well be called "The Asylum Seekers," is about women who have sailed to Greece from Egypt. The chorus talks about the women's headscarves and appearance, their language, all the same fears and racism that you can hear now ("AE Stallings and Adrienne Kalfopoulou in Conversation": w.p.).

The crisis has found powerful expression in a number of her recent poems, including the unsettling poem in ABBA quatrains, "Empathy", whose last stanza reads:

Empathy isn't generous,
It's selfish. It's not being nice
To say I would pay any price
Not to be those who'd die to be us.
(*Like* 41)

Much of the epigrammatic force of this stanza lies in the way the two clichéd expressions ("would pay any price", "who'd die to be us") have been shown in the course of the poem to be literally – and tragically – true.

Epigrams, as she explains, are the most effective way of dealing with matters so tremendous and dolorous: «I wanted them to be sharp. [...] Something that had distance, irony. The reality was too overwhelming for a sonnet. These are real people. The situation is bad enough that you don't have to *poetify*» (Haven. "Crossing Borders": w.p.).

The most powerful of these epigrams is a simple couplet, with a dispassionately bureaucratic title: "From an autopsy report of an unknown drowning victim, Ikaria": «Female. Nine years old. Found wearing a blouse, / And a pair of sweatpants patched with Minnie Mouse» (*Like*: 100).

But perhaps her most bleakly effective poem is the one that concludes the sequence, "Refugee Fugue", which bears the lengthy title, "APPENDIX A: USEFUL PHRASES IN ARABIC, FARSI/DARI, AND GREEK (found poem, from the *Guide to Volunteering in Athens*, as updated for March 17, 2016)", which gives a very realistic sense of what the newly arrived immigrants encounter in their dealings with the authorities («Sorry, it has run out / We do not have it now / New shoes only if yours are broken / Wait here, please / I will return soon...» (*Like*: 104). Amid these circumstances it is not surprising that she found herself returning to Cavafy:

What I have felt sometimes is that I am *inside* a poem, particularly inside Cavafy poems, where exiles from Syria and other places are speaking. I find myself going back to and translating Cavafy poems that talk about this Levantine, Cavafyian world we are inhabiting here ("AE Stallings and Adrienne Kalfopoulou in Conversation": w.p.).

As she admits, it was actually hearing a young Syrian man say to her "I want to go to another land" that triggered her third version of "The City", which was published in the journal *Sub-Tropics* in 2016:

"I want to go to another land. I want to cross the border,"
The young man out of Syria said. "I'm tired of being stuck.
Sure, Greece is nice enough if you can get a job: good luck.
I'm afraid to apply for asylum here. I'll end up in the street,

With no place to go, nowhere to lay my head, nothing to eat.
 I was working on a degree in English literature in Damascus.
 And now, what's to become of us? Nobody ever asks us.
 No one cares. Europe is dysfunctional disorder."

But you can't get to another land, you're never going on.
 This is your future, where so many others are unemployed.
 The smugglers will sell you lies, their faux passports are void.
 Your Arabic is native-speaker, naturally; you speak
 Excellent English. But to these skills, best add demotic Greek.
 Here among this urban squalor, maybe, you'll grow gray,
 If they do not deport you back to Turkey, if you stay.
 Time waiting is time running out, youth spent's forever gone.
 (Pierce w.p.)

This clearly is "after Cavafy", rather than a translation. The shape of the poem remains the same, with the same returning envelope rhymes, although "sea" has been replaced by the more politically loaded word "border". For the envelope rhyme of the second stanza, she returns to one that she had used before ("upon", "gone"). In the earlier version "gone" was used as an attributive adjective, applied to the word "years"; this time it is "youth spent" that is "forever gone".

Whereas in Cavafy's poem the two voices are unspecified, which gives the poem its sense of universality, in this version the first speaker is clearly identified; his voice is sharp and distinctive, ranging from the colloquial naturalness of 'nice enough' and 'good luck' to the highly literate tones of 'dysfunctional disorder'. We can believe him to be one of the numerous educated Syrians who fled the civil war in their country in the hope of finding a better life. The answering voice of the second stanza is deliberately less distinctive; this would seem to be the voice of officialdom, responding flatly, realistically – and crushingly. Although the speaker is not defined, the situation is clearly enough that of Athens in the second decade of the third millennium. It is only in the last line that the voice assumes something of the epigrammatic universality of Cavafy's poem, very much in keeping with Stallings's description of it: «one of the great poems about how wherever you spend time, the time is spent» (Pierce w.p).

"Translation is about crossing borders"

Cavafy has found numerous admirers and translators in the English-speaking world, many of them poets, such as W.H. Auden, James Merrill, Robert Pinsky,

Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, David Mason, Tony Barnstone, and Don Paterson. Stallings has expressed her admiration of many of these versions and has even talked about the desirability of the publication of a *Cavafy by Many Hands*; if such a volume were to appear, one of these hands would undoubtedly have to be hers, since the Greek poet clearly continues to resonate strongly with her. It is to be hoped that she will translate more of his poems, as she appears to feel as close and personal a bond with Cavafy as she did with Lucretius and Hesiod.

By concentrating on the variations she has played on his most famous poem, I hope to have given some indication of the way she has tested the strength of this bond, while continuing to develop and extend her range. These variations demonstrate not only the universal power of the original text but also her own suppleness and her ability to adapt to new situations and circumstances, many of which are foreshadowed in Cavafy's poems. She is steeped in the troubled history and literature of the Mediterranean and also actively responsive to the current crisis. As she has said: «Translation is about crossing borders» (Haven w.p.). There is no-one on the literary scene today whose works show a greater awareness of the vital necessity of our being able to do so, both in the most literal sense and in the figurative sense of being able to extend our imaginative sympathies to 'those who'd die to be us'.

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