

Why Translate?

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Cavafy started writing “For Ammones, who died aged 29, in 610” in 1915 and published it in 1917. This poem, which consists in a dramatic monologue, represents a multi-layered reflection on the topic of our panel today, “Why Translate?” In it, we read the words of a nameless person addressing the poet Raphael who is being asked to write an epitaph for their common friend, the poet Ammones. (Both writers, the one with the Hebrew/Coptic and the one with the Egyptian name, are fictional.) As the speaker proceeds to advise his fellow intellectual about how to compose such an epitaph, we gradually realize that Raphael’s responsibility is daunting.

First, he has to write in Greek, which is to both of them a foreign language. Their daily, and probably native, language is Egyptian. Greek is the language of learning and literature, the register of education and culture. By composing his epitaph in it, Raphael will be translating simultaneously from Egyptian into Greek and from a common to a high idiom. Thus he will be twice removed from his regular means of communication with Ammones as he will be writing about him deploying registers he did not use when talking to him.

The question of Greek has an additional dimension. The date in the poem’s title refers to a major event that my colleague in Classics, Bruce Freier, brought to my attention: “the Emperor Heraclius overthrew the Eastern Roman Empire ruler Phocas and changed the official language of the Empire from Latin to Greek. This is often taken as the symbolic act that created the Byzantine Empire -- although, of course, the residents

of that empire continued to refer to themselves as Romans.” Thus on a symbolic level 610 is the year when the Roman Empire is translated into the Byzantine one and its official Latin is translated into Greek. The poem leaves us to ponder the transmutations of the Greek language in Eastern Mediterranean of the early seventh century.

Beyond Greek, the very use of language in the epitaph is part of the challenging task. First, Raphael will have to refer to the dead man’s poetry. But how can one write poetry on poetry? A poetic articulation (in an original poem) would lose its basic identity if it were re-articulated into more poetry. Can Raphael do justice to Greek poetry by praising it with more Greek poetry? In addition, he will have to refer to the dead poet’s beauty, which attracted the love of his friends. Delicate features must be rendered verbally, sensual radiance must be expressed in words. How is it possible to capture a body in verse?

The list of responsibilities grows as Raphael is asked to translate into poetry his and the other friends’ emotions such as sorrow over the untimely death and lost love. They represent the “Egyptian feeling” that needs to be transposed to Greek verses. Beyond the fact that they are expressed in daily Egyptian, what else is Egyptian about them? Their location (Alexandria)? Their time (610)? Their gender (homosexual love)? We are not told, and we are left to speculate. One thing is clear: the “Egyptian feeling” must be poured into the foreign language like a melting liquid into a mold or an ejaculation into a tongue. Thus we are led to think of translation as an artistic creation and/or a sexual act.

Since we are thinking of artistic creation, we should also note that the poem which Raphael is going to write will itself be artistically translated since it will be

rendered into another medium (that is, cut into a tomb stone) and will be part of a tomb. It will not be an autonomous poem that may be enjoyed by itself but it will be always read in a very specific context (that of a grave) and associated with a particular person whose body, life and work will gradually fade away. It will stand for a dead person. The transposition of the words on the stone will seal the untimely rendering of beauty into death.

Still, the speaker asks Raphael to focus on life, not death. As he says in the last stanza, his verses must capture something of their lives. Beyond the poetry and beauty of the dead person, beyond the “feeling” of the living friends, something greater must be translated in this epitaph, if not in its totality, at least in its intensity: their life together in that city at that time. The demand is grand on those “few verses” that will be etched in hard stone on the tomb of Ammones whom soon nobody will remember: they must constitute a translation of a moment in time, place, language, gender, ethnicity, friendship and so much more – they must render something totally unique and unrepeatable, a shared way of life.

Note that Cavafy does not give us Raphael’s epitaph but only dramatizes a scene of instruction with his friend’s suggestions. The emphasis is on the process, not the outcome. (We do not even know whether Raphael wrote a poem.) Furthermore, it does not offer a theory of translation but only a very specific, highly complex instance of it. Every translation is unique because it is totally contingent upon specifics like those mentioned here.

The entire poem is a reflection on the demands and varieties of translation. In its short span, emotions, experiences, words, rhythms, bodies are constantly transposed into

another register and medium so that some kind of justice may be done to some kind of original. Clearly Raphael has the basic skills that the job requires, such as “elegant and musical” Greek, and he can produce “something polished and in good taste.” But the ultimate demand is not for the most faithful translation but for the best fit. The task is not to translate something primary into something secondary/derivative but “to compose” (as the opening line says) a piece that “befits” (ὡς αρμόζει). This composition should not benefit somebody or something but it should fit together two things: what is our own/δικό μας and what is foreign/ξένο. The task is not to translate an original into a faithful copy since there is already so much translation going on in several directions. It is to fit together, to harmonize (αρμόζει), the inside and the outside, the familiar and the foreign, in a way that will enable everyone understand “that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.” That is the highest goal of translation.

But who then really is an Alexandrian? What conclusion will the poetic rendition help us reach? The poem refuses to name one. To be an Alexandrian is not an origin, a center, an identity. It is itself the hybrid product of many translations. One becomes Alexandrian precisely by engaging in multiple translations and by treasuring their fit, not their faith. Cavafy’s poem is itself a great example. It represents a translation in that it renders in Greek what the anonymous speaker is telling Raphael presumably in Egyptian. Thus Cavafy (the author signing this poem) has done to the advice of the speaker what the speaker is advising Raphael to do: he has rendered it in fitting Greek, thus proving himself a true Alexandrian. That is exactly why, when we read Cavafy, we realize “that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.” We also realize that the designation

refers not to an essence but to a communal ethos permeated, in Foucault's words, by "an aesthetics of existence" practicing a "stylization of freedom" (*The Use of Pleasure*).

In 610, just nine years before the Persian capture of Alexandria, and not too long before the final Arab conquest (which mark the start of the historical downturn of the city's fortunes), the anonymous speaker of the poem reaffirms the Alexandrian ethos of living in translation. He is standing at a threshold – between eras, between cultures, between languages, between the living and the deceased, between bodies and texts. These are some of the thresholds where translation fits and flourishes.

[CPC began his professional life as a learned journalist and a translator well-versed in renderings from English, French, and Italian into Greek. With his co-ethnics he spoke Greek with a slight British accent while he heard Arabic at work (he was a public servant) and French in intellectual circles.]

ΓΙΑ ΤΟΝ ΑΜΜΟΝΗ, ΠΟΥ ΠΕΘΑΝΕ
29 ΕΤΩΝ, ΣΤΑ 610

Ραφαήλ, ὀλίγους στίχους σέ ζητοῦν
γιὰ ἐπιτύμβιον τοῦ ποιητοῦ Ἀμμώνη νὰ συνθέσεις.
Κάτι πολὺ καλαίσθητον καὶ λεῖον. Σὺ θὰ μπορέσεις,
εἶσαι ὁ κατάλληλος, νὰ γράψεις ὡς ἀρμόζει
γιὰ τὸν ποιητὴν Ἀμμώνη, τὸν δικό μας.

Βέβαια θὰ πείς γιὰ τὰ ποιήματά του —
ἀλλὰ νὰ πείς καὶ γιὰ τὴν ἔμορφιά του,
γιὰ τὴν λεπτὴ ἔμορφιά του ποὺ ἀγαπήσαμε.

Πάντοτε ὠραῖα καὶ μουσικὰ τὰ ἑλληνικά σου εἶναι.
Ὅμως τὴν μαστοριά σου ἔδληνα τὴ θέμε τώρα.
Σὲ ξένη γλῶσσα ἡ λύπη μας κ' ἡ ἀγάπη μας περνοῦν.
Τὸ αἰγυπτιακὸ σου αἶσθημα χύσε στὴν ξένη γλῶσσα.

Ραφαήλ, οἱ στίχοι σου ἔτσι νὰ γραφοῦν
ποῦ νάχουν ξέρις, ἀπὸ τὴν ζωὴ μας μέσα των,
ποῦ κι ὁ ρυθμὸς κ' ἡ κάθε φράσις νὰ δηλοῦν
ποῦ γι' Ἀλεξανδρινὸ γράφει Ἀλεξανδρινός.

FOR AMMONES, WHO DIED AGED 29,
IN 610

Raphael, they want you to compose a few verses
as an epitaph for the poet Ammones.
Something polished and in good taste. You
can do it, you are the appropriate person to write
as befits the poet Ammones, our very own.

You must, of course, mention his poems—
but you should also speak about his beauty,
his delicate beauty that we loved.

Your Greek has always been elegant and musical.
But we're in need of your entire skill now.
Our love and our sorrow pass into a foreign tongue.
Pour your Egyptian feeling into the foreign tongue.

Raphael, your verses must be written in such a way
that they contain, you know, something in them of our lives,
that both cadence as well as every phrase denote,
that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.

C.P. Carafy: Collected Poems
tr. E. Sachperoglou
(OUP 2007)