“Poetry is what gets lost in translation”
Robert Frost

The Interminable Journey of Translating Poetry

In this chapter I shall discuss the difficulties of translating poetry in general, giving at the same time a brief overview of historical approaches to the translation of poetry and, finally, I will propose translatological tools.

Translating poetry effectively and accurately is regarded to be virtually impossible. It is generally accepted that poetry translation involves more difficulties than any other form of translation. Although texts of economic, legal, technical or any other scientific nature can be rendered into another language accurately and efficiently, this is not the case with poetry. As long as all the elements in the technical and specialized texts are rendered faithfully and the message is conveyed precisely, translation, and even literal translation, is possible. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to render the subtle meanings and the cultural and aesthetic connotations hidden in literary works. As a result, some translators tend to be faithful in style whereas others focus exclusively on the correct choice of words.

Even the elements of other forms of literature such as prose and drama can be conveyed more effectively into another language creating a distinction between poetry on the one hand and prose and drama on the other. W.H. Auden, in his introduction to Rae Dalven’s translation of The Complete Poems of Cavafy, states that “he has always believed the essential difference between prose and poetry to be that prose can be translated into another tongue but poetry cannot” (Rae Dalven 1961: vii).

1 It should be noted that the specific statement is just attributed to Frost. We do not have any written evidence of it. Particularly, Frost wanted to give his definition of poetry.
Obviously, no feature of the original can be reproduced accurately into the target language. This distinction is even more striking in the bibliography where we find that the issue of poetry translation is separately examined.

Undeniably, the translatability or untranslatability of poetry remains an enigma that the translator attempts to resolve. I would like to highlight some of the most important and general problems translators of poetry have to confront. Undoubtedly, the list is not exhaustive, taking into account the fact that particular problems arise from the specific features of each poem which are not applicable in all cases, but here I will restrict myself to the most indicative ones. Moreover, even more problems tend to arise during the actual process of translation.

Before doing so, it is worth noting that no two languages are ever totally equivalent\(^2\); grammatical incompatibilities, phonetic, lexical and syntactic differences, textual indeterminacies, structural and hence aesthetic dissimilarities always exist. What is more, every language is bound to a particular culture with its specific notions which are evidently expressed through literature and its own history which changes over the generations.

This issue is further strengthened in the case of Greek with its long linguistic tradition. Carne-Ross mentioning specifically the case of ancient Greek literature emphasizes: “Faced with a different organization of language, a great many idioms which

\(^2\) Eugene Nida in his essay “Principles of Correspondence” (in Venuti 2001: 126) observes: “Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence.” Similarly, Werner Winter in his essay “Impossibilities of Translation” also emphasizes that languages can never be identical despite any possible similarities between them coming thus to the conclusion that consequently “there is no completely exact translation” (Winter 1961: 69). However, Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of the Translator” (ibid: 17) stresses that “Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.”
approach familiar experience with an unfamiliar strategy, a set of key words – particularly in Greek – for which there are no precise, or constant, equivalents, the translator’s work begins many stages further back than with a modern language” (1961: 4). For this reason Richmond Lattimore in his paper “Practical Notes on Translating Greek Poetry” emphasizes that “He (the translator) must use all his talents, his understanding of the language and of the meaning of his original and his own skill in verse, to make a new piece of verse-work which represents, to him, what the original would be, might be, or ought to be, must be in English” (in Brower 1959: 49).

Moving on to the difficulties involved, I would like first to enumerate the ingredients of a poem as Paul Selver cites them in his book The Art of Translating Poetry (Selver 1966: 21):

1. Its actual contents or subject matter;
2. Its rhythmic structure;
3. Its verbal effects, including such features as musical qualities, subtleties of style, and so forth.

These ingredients actually pose the biggest obstacle to the translators. Whether a translation will be regarded as a success or failure depends largely on the extent to which they have been transferred or reproduced in it.

I shall then begin with the problem of sounds and cadence confronting the translator with difficulties that cannot always be fully overcome. Sounds make poetry translation even more difficult due to the particular meaning, the music, attached to them. Specifically, alliteration limits the strength of translation. There are many cases where the translators have to sacrifice both sound and cadence in order to keep to meaning.
Another difficulty concerns the morphological differences between two languages. The difference in length from one language to another is a common pitfall. Although English tends to be an officially more concise language, there are many nuances in Greek whereby translation demands the use of extra words or syllables because apparently the length and accent of words are different; English is mainly monosyllabic whereas Greek is polysyllabic and conversely in English, especially in American English, words usually carry a secondary accent or two accents as opposed to the words in Greek which are stressed only once no matter their length. The translator must also deal with the absence or presence and number of genders. Especially, the fact that there are three genders in Greek and none in English can be regarded as a disadvantage.

The translators of poetry must also confront the problem of style, and by extension of vocabulary and syntax. What differentiates poetry from prose is that the translator of prose has a plethora of synonyms to use in order to translate a specific word. However, in the case of poetry any word\(^3\) is multidimensional since it cannot stand on its own but it is closely connected with the other words of the poem. Nouns are one part of speech in which usually there can be general agreement. However, nouns do have more than one meaning or, indeed, alternate meanings in different contexts creating ambiguity and thus posing further hazards for translators. But adjectives are an utterly different matter, for here the translators are confronted with a wide variety of choices. Moreover, the noun-adjective compounds which are completely unnatural to English but are found

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\(^3\) G.H. Lewes (as quoted in Selver) observes “In the Life of Goethe” (Selver 1966: 11): “For words in poetry are not, as in prose, simple representatives of objects and ideas: they are parts of an organic whole – they are tones in the harmony; substitute other parts [...] Words have their music and their shades of meaning too delicate for accurate reproduction in any other form; the suggestiveness of one word cannot be conveyed by another.”
excessively in Greek are also hard to translate\textsuperscript{4}. The translator must also choose whether he has to be faithful to the original’s word order. The morphology of the Greek language permits a flexible word order and as a result the use of complex metrical patterns posing further difficulties to the translators.

The highly rhymed poems constitute another hindrance for the translator of poetry, not to mention for the translator of English where it is harder to find rhymed poems than in most languages. In this case the translator should answer the question of how important it is to keep to poet’s rhyme and how necessary it is to find rhymes in the target language to match the rhymes of the original. The same applies in the case of metre where the translator has to decide whether the poems in metre have to be in metre too when translated, taking into consideration that metre is not natural in all languages. The issue of metre is even more important since metre sets the tone and mood of the whole piece. The translator should also take into consideration the purposes for which both rhyme and metre have been used.

Tense and particularly aspect, which abound in the Greek language, are other difficult features that the translator of poetry has to confront and particularly the translator of Modern Greek. Peter Mackridge (as quoted by Ricks in his paper “Cavafy Translated” 1993: 93) says on defining aspects: “Aspects in Modern Greek concerns not the location of the action or state in time, but the speaker’s attitude to its temporal distribution or contour.” The grammar of a language resembles its structure. As a result, it is inevitable that the grammar varies from language to language.

\textsuperscript{4} Richmond Lattimore (ibid, 50) successfully remarks that “Greek welds words where English has to string them.”
Another common pitfall for translators is the tendency to over-, or indeed undertranslate. The translators may translate because of their love for a specific poet and their intention to make him and his work known in the target language. When this is the case, they can easily fall into the trap of magnifying and exaggerating the details of the original such as the words, the metaphors even the tone. As a result, the translated text is packed with unnecessarily obscuring or glossy nuances which look completely foreign not only to the target language but also to the text itself especially if the poet’s intention was to produce a flat and bald piece. Peter Newmark in his book “Approaches to Translation” observes (Newmark 1981: 7): “Translation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language. Each exercise involves some kind of loss of meaning, due to a number of factors […] The basic loss is on a continuum between overtranslation (increased detail) and undertranslation (increased generalization).”

We could say that all the previous problems are of linguistic character. Yet in translating poetry the extralinguistic factors pose some problems too. By the term extralinguistic factors, I refer to the cultural and thematic notions that have to be conveyed into the target language, taking into account that the readers may not be acquainted with the author’s cultural, historical or even religious background. There are many cases when verses present interpretative difficulties limiting the translation particularly when either the target language or the translator is not capable to represent them.

The transfer of metaphors, similes and imagery still pose a great difficulty to the translators. Indisputably, no matter how skilled the translator is metaphor cannot survive
intact because no two languages match completely. As a result, the translator is called to transfer it to the target language finding a dynamic equivalent without damaging the latter. Especially when the translator has no such equivalent linguistic means to create the same effect, the problem becomes insoluble. The issue of whether he can add an image of his own as an equivalent one for the target language then arises. It is at this point that translating becomes a challenging task.

Roy Harris remarks that “If languages were structurally isomorphic, then any dullard would translate Racine” (Harris 1989: 70) implying that translation would have become monotonous, losing its artistic character. For Harris there is no such thing as the lack of the equivalent linguistic equipment. Actually, “Poor translations are the fault of incompetent translators, not a consequence of the inherent unavailability of the translational enterprise” (ibid: 70). Harris concludes giving the definition of translation as follows: “The “art” of translation is basically a matter of finessing the difficulties which arise from the fact that not all languages have all the equipment” (ibid: 70).

Last but not least, I would like to stress that, principally in the case of poetry, the successful transfer of vocabulary, images and metaphors does not guarantee a faithful translation. What is normally difficult is adapting the metrical structure of a source text. However, Nasos Vayenas stresses that what differentiates poetry from prose is not the metre but the rhythm as the words are linked both emotionally and rhythmically. Indeed, it was Valéry who first drew the accurate distinction between poetry and prose comparing poetry to dancing and prose to walking; a metaphor adopted too both by Seferis in his “Essays” and Nasos Vayenas in “Poetry and Translation”: “Poetry is a kind of dance;
prose is and should be a form of walking that leads us somewhere […]” (Vayenas 1989: 16).

Specifically, Vayenas emphasizes that the translator’s task is to transfer a poem into the target language remaining faithful to its emotional meaning; namely, reproducing not only the thought but also the emotion arising from the poem. Thus, an essential requirement for a translation to be successful is to reproduce the same emotive impact on the reader as the original did.

The transfer of the message does not simply involve the transfer of the meaning, but also the transfer of the context, the grammatical constructions, the idiomatic expressions, the tone, the cultural elements etc within which an idea is expressed. It is irrefutable that even the most competent translators will be forced, at some point, to overlook some elements of a poem for the sake of other more important elements. Here the scholars assessing poetry translation must also identify whether, or to what extent, the translator has fulfilled the functions enumerated in Chapter 1 taking into account, at the same time, the fact that their complete fulfillment is almost impossible5. Holmes in his paper “The Future of Translation Theory: A Handful of Theses” notes that “Definitions of translation which postulate only correspondence in meaning as essential are not valid definitions, since demonstrably not all texts generally accepted as translations conform to such a requirement. The same belief holds true for definitions postulating only correspondence in function or for that matter correspondence in form. Such definitions are in reality no more than codifications of time, place, and/or text-type-bound norms of

5 Gontcharenko too, after proposing his aforementioned three levels, recognises the impossibility of their simultaneous implementation forcing the translator to focus at least on one of them.
an individual or a smaller group, mistakenly elevated to the position of universal translation laws” (1988: 101).

The problem that emerges is whether this partial completion stems from the translator’s inadequacy or weakness to carry out his work satisfactorily or whether it is inevitable since the translator is frequently obliged, because of the nature of some poems, to promote their cognitive function overriding the aesthetic one or vice versa. Particularly, in his essay “The Servile Path” concerning his translation of “Onegin”, Nobakov stresses “In my translation I have sacrificed to total accuracy and completeness of meaning every element of form in order to save the iambic rhythm, the retention of which assisted rather than impaired fidelity” (in Brower 1959: 97).

Winter summarizes the most important problems faced in rendering poetry as follows: (a) metre; (b) rhyme and (c) sound following the same hierarchy. He claims that since a sacrifice is more or less inevitable, the translator should preserve metre over rhyme and rhyme over sound, implying thus the lower ranking positions will have to be neglected. (Winter 1961: 76-77).

We should also take into consideration the conditions within which a translation was produced. By the term “conditions” I particularly refer to the historical, political or cultural conditions prevalent at the time of the translation. As Lattimore observes: “No translator, however, can escape being colored by his own time, and it is wrong to try too hard to cut free from this influence” (1959: 54).

Whatever the case is, the strengths and limitations both of the target language and the translator affect the translation to a large degree. David Connolly, in his article “Rewriting the Poem: Stages in the Translation Process: Factors and Constraints”,
mentions that “Translation in general may be a science and a craft, but the translation of poetry is also an act of creative writing (or creative re-writing) and requires art, talent and inspiration. It is a combination of these factors which perhaps explains why the translation of a poem is never finished and why the translator has eventually to stop somewhere” (Connolly 2002: 25).

In the same context, Peter Newmark (ibid: 17) remarks that “The translator’s craft lies first in his command of an exceptionally large vocabulary as well as syntactic resources – his ability to use them elegantly, flexibly, succinctly. All translation problems finally resolve themselves into problems of how to write well in the target language.”

Similarly, Eugene Nida in his paper “Translating Means Translating Meaning: A Sociosemiotic Approach to Translating” observes that “the amount of loss or alteration, which takes place in the process of translation depends largely upon two factors: first the type of text (for example, highly personal lyric poetry in contrast with a manual describing how to put a machine together) and second, the genius of the translator, who must not only understand what is written in a text, but even more of what is not written” (Nida 1985: 124).

Based on the previous observations on the one hand and the Reception Theory which recognizes the importance of the role of the reader on the other, I take a step further to suggesting a translatologically-orientated approach, when it comes to the translation specifically of poetry translation:

i. semantic accuracy (what the text says),

ii. stylistic accuracy (devises used in the text),

iii. pragmatic accuracy (emotional impact on the readership)
iv. translation’s function and future in the target language (i.e. to work as a poem, not a translation).

However, we should not dismiss the translation of poetry as “impossible”. On the contrary, translation has advanced and enriched civilizations by breaking down barriers of time, place, language and cultural differences. I do believe that as long as the translator applies the correct translatological tools, as I will later show, poetry translation is a feasible task. The evidence of masterly created translations indicates that a skilled translator can achieve a high-standard translation with the majority of the source text’s features kept intact and only a partial semantic and stylistic loss.

Now I would like to move some examples of different choices made by the translators of Cavafy. Just to inform you that I will focus on the choices made by John Mavrogordato, Rae Dalven and Edmund Keeley& Philip Sherrard. I particularly focus on these translations because they are regarded to be the most indicative ones.

I must also point out that the original aspect of Cavafy’s tone; the mixture both in his vocabulary and in his syntax, of demotic and purist Greek is untranslatable. In English there is nothing comparable to the crisis in Greek language between demotic and purist (or katharevousa). There is only Standard English on the one side and the regional dialects on the other, and it is impossible for a translator to reproduce this stylistic effect. As a result, this idiom is lost when translated into the English language.

Moving on to the translators’ techniques, John Mavrogordato was far more observant of the verse forms, lineation and other technical effects. As he mentions in his note to his translation of the “Poems by C.P.Cavafy, he tried to keep his versions as literal as possible, translating line for line, and as far as possible word for word,
representing the rhymes and the rhyme-patterns of the original. According to Kimon Friar, Mavrogordato has attempted the almost impossible task not only of keeping to Cavafy’s meters but also to his specific rhyme schemes or orders. He is also forced to paraphrase in order to keep to meter and rhyme.

On the other hand, Rae Dalven has not attempted to preserve the rhyme. Her version is mostly free of error, having wisely relied on the previous translation of Mavrogordato. In the notes to her translation of “The Complete Poems of Cavafy”, she states that she has tried to preserve the effect of Cavafy’s language, pointing out that in English there is nothing comparable to the purist and demotic in Greek and therefore it is impossible for a translator to present this blending of the two. It is not always possible, she says, to keep the same number of syllables in a line without adding words or syllables since many Greek words are longer than their English equivalents.

In the note to their translation, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard explain that they have attempted an equivalent discipline instead of straining to rhyme the poems that are strictly rhymed in Greek. They settled for privileging matter over form.

David Ricks in his paper *Cavafy Translated* published in 1993 states that Keeley and Sherrard tend to forgo rhythmical effects and even effects of lineation and punctuation and attempt to concentrate instead on structure, selection, idiom, meaning and point-of-view. As Friar points out in the introduction of his book Modern Greek Poetry, they are writing essentially in prose and in interpreting the poems for the reader of English they sometimes expand on a compressed original-in part because they have forgone the use of rhythm as meaning. They have the tendency to overstress the colloquial in Cavafy to the point where it borders on slang.
In his preface to his book, Modern Greek Writing, David Ricks, while discussing translating literature quotes Christopher Middleton, a poet-translator “an anthology consisting of translations is not the same sort of thing as an anthology of originals. Its limits are, to a degree, the limits of translatability.”

Let us take the following line from “Caesarion”. The poem begins ἐν μέρει για να ἐξακριβώσω μια εποχή, which is literally translated by Mavrogordato “Partly to verify a period descriptions” (in order to rhyme with the inscriptions). Rae Dalven’s translation is literal as well: “Partly to verify an epoch”. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard at first translate the line “Partly to verify the facts of a certain period” and then “Partly to throw light on a certain period” both of which seem to me unnecessarily explicatory and run counter to their general tendency toward condensation, although such paraphrasing does occur in their translations.

In the last line of the poem, the adjective «φαύλοι» becomes in Mavrogordato “the baser sort”, which is quite explanatory, in Rae Dalven “the wicked”, in Philip Sherrard and Edmund Keeley’s first translation “the bastard”, indicating their tendency to overstress the colloquial even when it is not needed, and in their second one “the scum”.

According to the Oxford Greek-English Learner’s Dictionary, the adjective «φαύλοι» means the depraved, profligate, corrupt, or vicious as in the phrase vicious circle which means φαύλος κύκλος.

In “Ithaka”, the poet advises the modern Odysseus to take his time in getting to Ithaca, to stop at various Phoenician markets και τές κυλές πραγμάτειες ν’αποκτήσεις. The eleven syllables of this iambic pentameter with feminine ending, with its play of short and long syllables and words, with its thrice repeated “es” word endings in a row
dwindling into a final “eis” with its orchestral play of the end stops k, p, t, is reduced by the translators Keeley and Sherrard to four abrupt monosyllables “to buy fine things”. These sound foreign not only to the specific line but also to the entire poem, and they are quite uncavafian. Moreover, the words chosen by the translators are not the words Cavafy intended.

He could have selected the word πράγματα, which means things, but he chose πραγμάτειες, which are “goods, merchandise.” He did not choose αγοράσεις, the equivalent of the word “buy” either, but αποχτήσεις, which is more formal and colloquial and means “to acquire, to obtain.” Mavrogordato makes his translation a passable tetrameter: “and must acquire good merchandise.” Whereas, Dalven’s translation is a little bit flat: “and purchase fine merchandise.” In this example, Keeley and Sherrard, not only have they made no attempt to reproduce any of the homonymous rhymes, but no attempt to reproduce any of the rhythmical and orchestral effects. Another example is Keeley and Sherrard’s choice for the word reach, when the poet speaks of the time when Odysseus will eventually αράξει, which is stronger and better than their having Odysseus eventually reach the island. In this case, they have chosen not to translate with precision where Cavafy’s word is better in context than that deliberately chosen by the translators. On the other hand, both Mavrogordato and Dalven opted for the word anchor, which totally depicts Cavafy’s image.

Another example is the translation of the title «Ενας νέος, της Τέχνης του Λόγου – στο 24ο του έτος». Dalven translates it as “A Young Man Skilled in the Art of the Word” but inexplicable she omits the information “in his 24th Year”. It is interesting to note that the age of the young man is nowhere revealed in the poem and we know that the specific
age carries additional dual importance firstly because Cavafy was very particularly about the exact age, which is evident in similar poems such as «Δύο Νέοι, 23 εώς 24 Ετών», «Για τον Αμμόνη, που πέθανε 29 ετών, στα 610», «Κίµων Λεάρχου, 22 ετών σπουδαστής Ελληνικών γραµµάτων (εν Κυρήνη)» and secondly because, as Friar informs as, anyone beyond the age of 29 seemed undesirable to him. Mavrogordatos translates it the best as “A Young Artist in Words is His Twenty-fourth Year”. However Mavrogordato does not keep Cavafy’s preference for keeping the year in numerals. Keeley and Sherrard translate it as “A Young Poet in His Twenty-fourth Year”. Although they follow Mavrogodato’s spelling they go so far as to describe the young artist as a young poet for which the there is no such evidence. The young man could have been the writer of a prose. It is an interesting fact because Keeley and Sherrard’s preoccupation was just to bring over Cavafy’s specific words and phrases making no attempt to reproduce any of Cavafy’s approximate or homonymous rhymes, rhythmical or orchestral effects.

The examples, one can draw, are numerous. However, in the interest of time, I have just mentioned these indicative ones. I would like to conclude by quoting Keeley who claims that "the art of translation is inevitably an art that involves distortion, an art that normally survives only through compromise in the face of sometimes impossible choices [...] And given the limitations imposed on the translator from the outset, the practice of it, when successful, deserves more respect than it usually receives, whether in the world of letters or of commerce. It is an absolutely necessary and occasionally beautiful enterprise, and there can be much pleasure in it for both the practitioner and the reader”.

I wish all of you a marvellous journey to the Ithaka of translation.