



# current issue

## Issue Five

### **An Interview with Edmund Keeley**

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Any English reader interested in Greek literature inevitably comes across Edmund Keeley. The director of the Hellenic Studies Program at Princeton University until seven years ago when he retired has done much to make Greek poetry known. His exemplar translations of Kostantinos Cavafy, George Seferis, Agelos Sikelianos, Giannis Ritsos and Odysseas Elytis helped to establish a reputation in English speaking countries of the great Greek poetry of the 20th century.

Keeley arrived in Greece as a young boy when his father was appointed to the American consulate in Thessaloniki. That was in 1936, when the clouds of the second World War had started gathering over Europe. His parents sent him to the German school, because it was considered the best academic institution for non-Greek speakers. "Greek school was not thought of very highly," Keeley recalls, "but I wish I had gone there. I would have learnt Greek much better. I can read and speak, but I write like an *yperetria* (house maid)." The German school was favourably disposed toward National Socialism: "The indoctrination was subtle, and most parents evidently did not know it was going on, otherwise they surely would have taken their children out of school—at least, I hope they would have. But some of what was going on was certainly obvious, e.g., the Hitler youth movement. The indoctrination was hardly under the auspices of Metaxas, the Greek dictator, though his local representatives probably didn't object to it, and sometimes there were parallel *Neolea* events."

Besides translations, Keeley has published seven novels ("all, but one, set in Greece; Greece is my landscape"), as well as several books of criticism (Cavafy's *Alexandria and Modern Greek Poetry: Voice and Myth*, among others), history (*The Salonica Bay Murder: Cold War Politics and the Polk Affair*), and, more recently, a book on translation with, he deplores, the unimaginative title *On Translation: Reflections and Conversations*. As his most important non-fiction book, Keeley regards *Inventing Paradise: The Greek Journey, 1937-47* (published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the U.S. in 1999 and in Athens the following year). "This is the book that attempts to introduce all the Greek poets and intellectuals who were the most important for foreign readers and visitors and should be better known now in the immediate pre-war years and the years following." He is a former President of American PEN and has been much involved in International PEN activities over the years.

I ask Keeley whether he believes that what is lost from Cavafy's language in translation is vital. Cavafy mixed *katharevousa* (formal language) with everyday language and the Alexandrian idiom, achieving a distinctly personal style, instantly recognisable to the Greek reader. It is impossible to translate the different levels of language, Keeley concedes: "Trying to be literal and portray Cavafy's oddness by using odd words in English does not suffice: you end up with odd English, not with Cavafy. The eccentricity in Cavafy is legitimate because it's part of the tradition; quirky English is nobody's

language. It is a forced and unnatural solution to use 'Latinated' English in translating Cavafy." The translation has to read well in the target language.

One can, of course, try Vladimir Nabokov's method. Nabokov translated Pushkin using extensive footnotes to explain what intricacies of the text are lost in translation. But the ingenious irony, the classical simplicity and the originality of Cavafy's ideas, Keeley believes, compensate the English reader for the loss of poems' idiom.

With Seferis, the translation problem is rather different: "Seferis makes use of historical depth of Greek language. It's impossible to get that kind of nuance in English." Keeley brings an example from *Mythistorama*: there is the verse "we had been waiting for the *agelos* for three years." *Agelos* is a very difficult word, because it can mean different things and Seferis made sure that you cannot deduce from the context exactly what it is. "In the first edition, we translated it as *messenger*, like the *agelos* of the ancient Greek tragedy. But it was not so much a reference to ancient Greek drama as to a 'primordial' drama. So, we changed it to *herald*, because Philip Sherrard, with whom I collaborated and who was converted to Orthodoxy, was convinced that *agelos* referred to an annunciation. Seferis does have an annunciation in mind - but a purely Christian annunciation would be too limiting. So, in the final edition, we translated it as *angel*, which is the word closest to the original - and let the reader do what he can with it."

A translator necessarily depends on an active reader's imagination when he translates great poetry. Sir Thomas of Urquhart was adamant that his translation improved and augmented *Rabelais*. But, the case of the *Logopandecteisian* Scot aside, the translator is a servant of the original. "When Kazantzakis said that Kimon Friar's translation of his *Ulysses* was better than the Greek original," Keeley observes, "that comment maybe says as much about his own poetry as it does about the translation of it; though it is charming that Kazantzakis can be so positive about a translation - unlike many poets, who have serious problems with their translators."

Keeley's first meeting with Seferis took place when he was writing his PhD dissertation on the English sources of Cavafy and Seferis. Eventually, Keeley came to question studies of influence between writers since such studies invariably emphasize the influences rather than what is original in each author: "As Seferis put it, 'even the lion is made of lamb flesh'. What counts is the assimilation, what goes on in the stomach."

Keeley remembers telling Seferis how he admired Sikelianos, a major Greek poet, whom Keeley planned to translate. But his assertion that Sikelianos is a great poet, while Yeats is greater in comparison, upset Seferis. "Seferis told me: 'What does that mean? For me, Sikelianos is the greater poet and Yeats is second in comparison. Because I am Greek and Sikelianos is *the* great poet in my tradition.' After that I stopped making comparisons. Both Sikelianos and Yeats are great. Who's to say who is greater? Each tradition has its great authors."

As the years went by, Keeley turned away from criticism and concentrated first on teaching creative writing and then translation, "so that I could talk about the poetry I liked." Princeton, in Keeley's undergraduate years was dominated by the text-based approach which did not dwell on the historical, social and political context of the work - e.g. New Criticism teachers like R.P. Blackmur. That was a critical limitation, Keeley contends. Although there are merits in a close-reading approach, Keeley is now in favour of a more mixed approach.

Modern French theory is not very appealing to Keeley - although here it's the writer, not the critic speaking: "I have come to the belief, which is a self-preservation prerogative for me personally as an author, that theory of the Derrida and Foucault kind is deadly for the creative writer. Writing is difficult as it is and if one starts thinking about the subcontext in every word or phrase, then I find it impossible to carry on. And the same holds for much post-criticism in general, be it post-structuralist, or post-colonial, or post-modern. All these are obviously of keen interest to critics and philosophers of criticism; but they are not very helpful to practising creative writers, at least not to this one. The writer has to focus on getting on with his work, from sentence to sentence to the book."

Keeley's life has been spent between Princeton and Athens, the two places that he calls home. But the passion of Edmund Keeley's *psyche* is undivided: he is a lover of literature, to which he has devoted his life.

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