

# Cavafy, Vos, Dangor: A belated reply to Phil van Schalkwyk



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The influence of the Alexandrian Greek poet Constantin Cavafy on South African literature in English has received some attention, but his impact on Afrikaans letters merits further investigation. The present article partly fills that gap by examining a small body of poetry and fiction by Cas Vos and Achmat Dangor. It draws on an article by Phil van Schalkwyk to show what it might mean to write in the manner of Cavafy. Thereafter, it discusses Vos's translations into Standard Afrikaans within his context. Achmat Dangor wrote his Cavafian poetry in a Vernacular Afrikaans. The article considers how writers and poets such as Mark Twain, David Dabydeen, Richard Rive and Adam Small have responded to the challenges and implications of writing in non-standard varieties of English and Afrikaans. Because irony and parody characterise Dangor's initial debt to Cavafy, this piece also considers these devices. It then moves to a detailed analysis of the relevant poems by Dangor, including comparisons with the poems by Cavafy they evoke, and then to work by Dangor on Cavafy in Standard English in which he reflects on why Cavafy has influenced him. It argues that Dangor discarded a literary vernacular medium for Standard English because of the former's implicit distinction between 'ordinary' (inarticulate, authentic) and 'extra-ordinary' (articulate, unauthentic) patois speakers. It concludes that Dangor's switch to Standard English may have resolved a personal dilemma, but leaves unanswered many questions about the literary use of a patois.

**Keywords:** Cavafy; Dangor; Vos; vernacular languages; translation; irony; parody.

## Introduction

In his article "'Op de wijze van Kavafis": Die voorbeeld van die digter uit Alexandrië', Phil van Schalkwyk observes that I note Constantin Cavafy's influence on poets such as William Plomer and Mike Nicol, but that 'Afrikaans literature is not accounted for in Field's (2014:2) research' (*die Afrikaanse letterkunde word egter nie in Field [2011] se ondersoek verreken nie*).<sup>1</sup> The extent of Cavafy's and George Seferis' impact on South African literary and political culture is evident from Lara Buxbaum's report on a South African celebration of Cavafy marking 130 years since his birth and 80 years since his death. She mentions Stephen Gray, Don MacLennan, Wopko Jensma, Douglas Livingstone, Keorapetse Kgotsile, George Bizos, Renos Spanoudes and Irene Stephanou. Surprisingly, she omits Achmat Dangor. I take Van Schalkwyk's point, and respond by commenting on Cas Vos's contribution to this topic through his *Fragmente uit die Ilias* (2014) and his Cavafy translations in *Voor-bode* (2015), and by examining a few of Achmat Dangor's poems from *Bulldozer* (1983) and *Private Voices* (1992), and short stories from *Strange Pilgrimages* (2013a) which have Cavafy as a reference point.

Van Schalkwyk makes an insightful contribution to a complex issue: what it might mean to write in the manner of Cavafy. He notes several features: the proselike quality of his poetry; a self-contained poetic persona at times distant from itself; retrospective narrators; speakers who experience regret or social exclusion because of their culture, religion, language or sexual orientation, who may be on the margins of great events, or who observe actual or imaginary historical figures during significant events. Vos and Dangor's poetry display some of these features intermittently.

Van Schalkwyk observes that 'Cavafy's work lends itself well to a study of the idiolectal aspects of a writer's identity' [*Kavafis se werk sig besonder goed leen tot 'n studie van idiolektiese skrywersidentiteit*] (2014:2). In Small's poetry, a Vernacular Afrikaans (VA) sociolect became his idiolect, whereas for Dangor a VA sociolect became a temporary idiolect. Confining ourselves to voice, form and subject matter (2014:2) in Cavafy's poetry, these aspects include a 'suggestion, as much rhetorical and aesthetic-dramatic ... of how the speaker (or anyone) might ideally carry themselves in a

1. All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

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specific predicament' [*'n suggestie, sowel retories as esteties-dramaties ... van hoe die spreker (of enige mens) hom ideaal in 'n bepaalde situasie ... sou kon handhaaf*] (2014:3) and the cultivation of an inner voice. Cavafy's poetry offers a guide to ethical behaviour which his protagonists acknowledge but do not always live by, and this failure is more often a cause of regret rather than condemnation in poems such as 'Thermopylae' (Cavafy 1989:9) or 'Priest at the Serapeum' (Cavafy 1989:139).<sup>2</sup>

## Van Schalkwyk

Van Schalkwyk notes Cavafy's 'intellectual control over (personal) experience or subject matter and poetic language' [*verstandelike beheer oor (persoonlike) ervaring of onderwerp én digterlike teks*] (2014:3). He also refers to the 'narrative continuity' that links not only those poems which deal with 'an experience in the personal past, but also the poems in which an historical vignette is foregrounded or an imaginary dialogue of historical figures is rendered' [*'n verhalende inslag, nie net dié wat handel oor 'n ervaring in die persoonlike verlede nie, maar ook die verse waarin 'n historiese vinjet na vore gebring word of 'n versoonde dialoog van historiese figure aangebied word*] (2014:6) in, for instance, 'Sculptor of Tyana' (Cavafy 1989:33), 'An artisan of wine-mixing bowls' (Cavafy 1989:112) and the 'Days of ...' poems (Cavafy 1989:77, 142, 144, 152, 169). One can add mythological vignettes and dialogues or interactions with mythological figures. In this respect, because of their extensive biblical and Western cultural references, Vos and Small have more in common with Cavafy than Dangor here.

Cavafy's work, says Van Schalkwyk (2014), is 'characterised by an exceptionally slow evolution and struggle in respect of two main issues, namely his poetic craft and his sexual identity' [*gekenmerk deur 'n besonder langsame evolusie en worsteling ten opsigte van twee hoofkwessies, naamlik sy digterskap en seksuele identiteit*] (p. 3), and 'two main themes, which are often closely intertwined: the historical, particularly in relation to ancient Greece, and the personal, with a central focus on the longing for past homoerotic experiences' [*twee hooftemas, wat dikwels nou verpleg is: die historiese, veral met betrekking tot antieke Griekeland, en die persoonlike, met as sentrale fokus die verlange na verlore homoërotiese ervarings*] (p. 3). The latter is not quite true. Most of Cavafy's historical poetry attends to the post-Alexandrian Hellenistic worlds of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties, to Greeks living in colonies or under Roman rule and to the impact of Christianity on Hellenism. Where 'mainland' Greece is a subject, for instance, in 'In the year 200 BC' (Cavafy 1989:167) or 'Going back home from Greece' (Cavafy 1989:272), it is clearly no *heimat*. Nor is there such an easy distinction between the historical and the personal. As Edmund Keeley (1995:50) points out:

Cavafy's erotic poems, whether set in ancient or contemporary Alexandria, are coloured by the same tragic sense that we find in what he himself designated as his historical or philosophical poems (categories, along with the erotic, that, he reminds his reader, often merge).

2. Unless stated otherwise, all translations and titles refer to Rae Dalven's translation (Cavafy 1989).

In addition, Cavafy was 'a writer's and poet's poet' [*'n digter vir digters en skrywers*], was 'exceptionally well read' [*besonder wyd gelese*] (Van Schalkwyk 2014:1) in the Greek and Roman classics, and through his poetry he explored not only the limits of expression, but also the limits to the expression of same-sex desire in his own life and times, and those of the Hellenic world as an ascendant and rule-bound Christianity imposed more rigid, ascetic codes. Cavafy was also a creature of his own time, and he relied on more recent historians and classicists such as Gibbon's *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), Bevan's two-volume *The house of Seleucus* (1873, 1902) and Mahaffy's work on the Ptolemaic dynasty (Liddell 2002:119–121). Most of Small's and Dangor's poetry is set in the present. Where Vos draws on the eras of Mozart, Beethoven and Keats (1756–1827), and Vos and Small on the Old and New Testament, Dangor's literary references and allusions to Nizami, Homer, Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Salman Rushdie contribute more to his works' social imaginary.

## Vos

*Voor-bode* (Vos 2015), Cas Vos's ninth published poetry collection, contains translations from Greek into Afrikaans of three of Seferis' and 15 Cavafy's poems.<sup>3</sup> A more scholarly, and less political engagement than Dangor's, Vos has included poems from the Cavafy 'canon' and those that were 'hidden'. Cavafy scholars use these two categories, along with a third, 'refuted', to categorise Cavafy's attitudes towards his work as a whole. *Voor-bode* also contains two extremely useful essays that summarise much of Cavafy's scholarship available at that time (Vos 2015:129–132). In 2014, Vos published translations into Afrikaans of excerpts from the *Iliad*, along with an Afrikaans summary of all 24 books, and in 2007 he and Dirk Human co-edited *Liefde is die grootste: Oor erotiek en seksualiteit*. Its first three contributions deal with those topics in the pre-Christian and Christian worlds of the Near East, and therefore speak indirectly to a notable Cavafy theme – how in his view Christianity suppressed polytheism and homoeroticism – which, in much of his poetry set in antiquity, he codes as cosmopolitan Hellenism. The corollary of that order is that in Cavafy's homoerotic poems set in his contemporary Alexandria or Athens, many of his subjects and characters are socially and economically marginal figures who are out of place and time.

It is a truism that every translation is an interpretation and, ideally, a faithful, ethical approximation of evasive meanings that seeks, for instance, to reconcile competing demands in the source- and target-language of word order and word-placings, the weight of earlier translations, and all of the possible, overlapping literal, idiomatic and figurative meanings. While Vos has translated Cavafy into Standard Afrikaans, Dangor wrote much of his Cavafy-inspired poetry in a VA, and changed the settings so that they were compatible with VA. This is not the place to compare their renderings of

3. In Vos's collection, they appear in the following order (Cavafy 1989): 'The tobacco-shop window' (p. 78), 'Return' (p. 43), 'Of the shop' (p. 47), 'The city' (p. 27), 'An old man' (p. 7), 'Candles' (p. 8), 'The Ides of March' (p. 29), 'Salome' (p. 245), 'Aristoboulos' (p. 89), 'Expecting the barbarians' (p. 18), 'Footsteps' (p. 15), 'Nero's term' (p. 84), 'Voices' (p. 4), 'Hidden things' (p. 268), 'Ithaca' (p. 36).

Cavafy because their aims are so clearly different. However, there is room for a more modest assessment of their projects based on some of Vos's own comments in the introductory essays to his *Fragmente uit die Ilias* (Vos 2014), and Dangor's views on patois. Of interest here is Vos's discussion of Sheila Cussons' collection *Die swart kombuis* because it refers to Greek mythology. Vos states that 'the title poem must be read along with the two other "kitchen" poems, "The yellow kitchen" and "Hera's kitchen", to arrive at a complete meaning" [*'moet die titelgedig saam met die twee ander 'kombuis'-gedigte, 'Die geel kombuis' and 'Kombuis van Hera', gelees word om volledig tot sy reg te kom'*] (2014:34–35)].

Because several of Vos's own poems are about or dedicated to academics, theologians, artists, musicians and poets, the thematic arrangement of his poems and the translations invite comment. The poems in Section IV are about confessional love, about bodies in close, strenuous contact, about lovers apart and about art and exchange value, and it contains three Cavafy's poems. Vos's 'Psychotria elata' (2015:47), about the predetermined, random penetration and pollination by a humming bird of this 'hot lips' plant, precedes Cavafy's 'Die tabakwinkelvenster' (Vos 2015:48; Cavafy 1989:78) and 'Kom terug' (Vos 2015:49; Cavafy 1989:43). With its irregular scansion and aabb... rhyme scheme, 'Psychotria elata' has a doggerel-like quality, and is meant to be gently humorous, and the sequence acknowledges the metonymic power of body parts in both of Cavafy's poems, but it also encourages a reading that focuses on the 'hit-and-run' nature of the encounter, and diverts attention from the forms of covert communication and the tension between desire and danger in these two poems. Following imagined correspondence between Mozart and his wife Constanze, and between Keats and Fanny Brawne, Vos returns to himself through a poem based on Genesis 32:22–31, in which Jacob struggles or wrestles with an angel. As a sequence of close encounters Vos seems to offer successively higher levels of engagement that begins at an organic, animal level in 'Psychotria elata' and ends with the spiritual submission of 'Gedig vir my engel' (Vos 2015:56). This makes 'Die tabakwinkelvenster' second-most primitive. However, Section IV concludes on an aestheticist note with Cavafy's 'Van die winkel' (Vos 2015:57; Cavafy 1989:47), rejecting the organic and the spiritual. Like another early poem 'Artificial flowers' (Cavafy 1989:210), it valorises the artificiality of art over nature and human relationships. In the latter, a highly skilled jeweller will not sell his finest work – roses of rubies, lilies of pearl, violets of amethysts – which neither the organic original nor knowledge based on investigation can surpass. Customers are offered inferior, more functional items such as chains and rings. This artist is 'against nature' for his work is superior to it, and he is against society for he does not need other people. Love of the love of art for art's sake is sufficient.

Section V contains the same proportion of Cavafy poems, but sets up a different pattern as it moves through opposites until the last element: dusk and dawn; material poverty and

spiritual richness versus material wealth and inner emptiness; an excess of art versus moderated nature; garden versus city; trapped in repetition versus departure; regret versus possibilities; finally, preparations for death. Cavafy's 'Die stad' (Vos 2015:69, Cavafy 1989:27) may be read through contrasts between garden and city, revitalising and constraining repetition, and between stasis and movement. In Vos's poems, that movement is Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden and the evening before his and another's reluctant departure from Portofino. If 'Die stad' speaks to the inability to find pleasure, 'n Ou man' (Vos 2015:72, Cavafy 1989:7) reflects on years wasted by not seeking it. Surrounded by bustling café life, Cavafy's speaker knows that his subject regrets that temperance and moderation governed his life when he was young, energetic, attractive and articulate – and is the opposite of 'Understanding', whose mature, reconciled speaker now comprehends the link between fulfilled, guiltless desire and creativity (Vos 2015:73, Cavafy 1989:8):

What needless repentances, how futile...  
But I did not grasp their meaning then.  
Deep in the dissolute life of my young manhood  
the designs of my poetry took shape,  
the scope of my art was being plotted.

Cavafy's 'Kerse' (Vos 2015:73, Cavafy 1989:8), a more open-ended meditation on possibilities, follows 'n Ou man'. In this early poem from 1899, the speaker compares his life to candles that have burnt out, that are still smoking and that are burning. Anxiety replaces regret, for he is concerned that the line of blackened candles is quickly lengthening. The final three poems of this section present a speaker who comes to terms with death through the beauty of Mozart's music, who accepts death by rejecting his fear of it, who accepts death because there is an afterlife in which he will reunite with his beloved. In Cavafy's poetry, we seldom find an afterlife – whether Christian or polytheist – and expressions of irreparable loss are more frequent.

Departing from the established pattern, Section VI begins with six of Cavafy's poems set in historical or mythological antiquity, but ends with a return to the *status quo* through another early, 'philosophical' poem. Those first six poems, united by themes of death and prophecy, are translations of 'The Ides of March', 'Salome', 'Aristoboulos', 'Waiting for the barbarians', and two poems about the death of the emperor Nero: 'Footsteps' and 'Nero's deadline' (Vos 2015:78–85; Cavafy 1989:29, 245, 89, 18, 15, 84). They set the tone for most of Vos's own poems in which he explores medical procedures, death and decay, political conflict, followed by a poem about childhood visits to family graves. Cavafy's 'Stemme' (Vos 2015:109; Cavafy 1989:4) concludes this section by summarising the speaker's ability to hear the idealised and 'beloved' voices of the dead in dreams and conscious memory, and presumably Vos's desire to do the same.

The last section contains two Cavafy's poems, 'Verborgenheid' (Vos 2015:118; Cavafy 268) and 'Ithaka' (Vos 2015:122–123; Cavafy 1989:36–37). On the translator's obligations, his



introduction to *Fragmente* raises points that he seems to have ignored in *Voor-bode* (Vos 2014:39):

The distance between the cultural-historical context of the original poem and the text of the translation must always be taken into consideration. This requires the translator to engage, as far as is humanly possible, with the cultural-historical situation of the original text. [*Die afstand tussen die kultuur-historiese konteks van die oorspronklike gedig en die teks van die omdigting moet altyd in ag geneem word. Dit vra van die omdigter om so ver dit menslike moontlik is, kennis te dra van die kultuur-historiese situasie van die oorspronklike teks.*]

By including 'Verborgenhede', an early work that Cavafy chose not to publish during his own lifetime, Vos has not shied away from Cavafy's gay subject matter. However, a comparison with the Cavafy poems that Vos cites in his *Fragmente* suggests that cultural historical context is important or perhaps accessible when it is mythological, but less so when the subject matter is the effect of repressed homosexuality on life and art, to which this doubly 'hidden' poem silently speaks.

## Dangor

Dangor's VA is not, strictly speaking, Cape Vernacular Afrikaans (CVA) because his speakers are in Cape Town and Fordsburg. By way of a working definition, VA is a fictional or literary variety of Afrikaans that evokes CVA; it is an imagined 'colloquial language' [*omgangstaal*] (Willemse 2016:80) based on actual language use; in its imagined social world, it 'has many speakers among Cape Town's working class, including Cape Muslims and/or people of colour but also some whites' [*het...talle sprekers uit die Kaapstadse werkersklas, onder wie Kaapse Moesliems en/or bruin persone maar ook wit persone*] (Hendricks 2016:5).

From *Bulldozer* (Dangor 1983) in VA to *Private Voices* (Dangor 1992) in Standard English, the language of Dangor's poetry has changed dramatically, but the subject matter has remained consistent for both collections contain several poems about cities: the destruction of District Six in Cape Town, and the speaker's impressions of great cities. In an interview that *Staffrider* published in 1990, he too reflects on the limits of expression when he tells Andries Oliphant why he worked in poetry, and short and long fiction. Poetry 'suited the terse and pointed style ... to convey the realities ... [he] observed'; he could exploit 'the immediacy of the form to write about things as ... [he] saw them' (Dangor 1990a:31). He decided to use a 'township patois or lingua franca' (Dangor 1990a:32) because he was living in places without libraries or books. He 'picked up some of the language spoken in these areas', and 'attuned ... [his] ears' to the ambient, 'oral forms of storytelling' (Dangor 1990a:32). He did not want to 'literally transfer the oral forms into writing' (Dangor 1990a:32). Indeed, using a standard definition of patois from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'the dialect of the common people in a region, differing fundamentally from the literary language' (Dangor 1991:872), he may have felt this was impossible. Instead, he aimed to selectively 'interpret' or refashion the patois so that he could capture

'the experience embodied in the language' (Dangor 1990a:32). Ironically, some of this fiction now forms part of the corpus of the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English* (1991) used to exemplify actual meanings.

Controversially, Dangor (1990a) found poetry in patois 'somewhat restrictive ... especially when exploring philosophical and theoretical matters' (p. 32). Two contradictory indicators of this dissatisfaction are that many of the patois poems in *Bulldozer* are meant to be spoken because they have addressees, and several have Standard English titles. In effect, they are less likely to be lyrical and they required a Standard English framework. Later he turned to prose when he sought to 'develop a more contemplative attitude to writing' (p. 31), though he still incorporated vernacular expression in prose works such as *Z Town Trilogy* (Dangor 1990b), *Kafka's Curse* (Dangor 1992) and *Bitter Fruit* (Dangor 2001). Personal reasons may also have played a part. The first-person narrator of his short story 'Goodbye, goodnight' (Dangor 2013a) reads the Bureau of State Security's file on himself, which is in Afrikaans. Addressing his readers and his fictional self, he associates the death of this own Afrikaans with his mother's death, and confesses that 'I'm going to have to translate as I read through the file, otherwise my brain won't process the information' (Dangor 2013:55). By the early 1990s, he felt he could explore deeper matters using Standard English for poetry, and that he could write more thoughtfully in prose.

Focusing on his early, 'unsatisfactory' published patois poetry, two questions arise:

- How might one distinguish poems in a refashioned vernacular with 'philosophical and theoretical' concerns from those without this feature?
- Why might Dangor have felt this approach was 'restrictive'?

Two cautions.

Firstly, I pose questions and answers as possibilities; my answer to the first question relies on inductive reasoning; the answer to the second question is more speculative. Secondly, both questions and answers require me to assume that Dangor has in mind two types of imagined speakers of his refashioned vernacular. There are the 'ordinary' and the 'extra-ordinary' speakers. As studies of censorship debates show (Durant 2010:141–142), the 'reasonable' or 'ordinary' reader or speaker is a complex, context-specific construct often laden with assumptions and prejudices.

The literary use of vernacular is beset with currents of complicity and resistance between writer, publisher and intended or actual readerships. In the 'Explanatory' to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain informs his readers that he will use a combination of racial and regional markers to distinguish several dialects and subdialects his characters will use. Without this advisory, 'many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding' (2003:48). One may infer at least four points from Twain's dry humour: (1) Literary recreations

of dialect may be subtle, but they are not necessarily historically accurate; (2) readers must want to hear imaginatively the differences as they read them on the page; (3) in imagining these differences, readers commit to a range of assumptions or prejudices about the writer, narrators and speakers; (4) as Huck and Jim's debate in Chapter 19 about the origins of the universe, which pits the theory of evolution against intelligent design, the story may challenge those assumptions while continuing to use vocabulary that 'fits' the characters.

Twain has in mind an 'eye-dialect strategy' (Bowdre in Willemse 2016:75), in which 'a spoken language-variety acquires written form through an informal orthography' [*'n gesproke taalvorm met 'n informele ortografie skriftelike gestalte kry*]. This, Willemse (2016:75) stresses:

... is not a precise phonetic transcript, but an idiosyncratic creation by the writer to place emphasis on the deviant pronunciation of his characters. Eye-dialect needs the standard language ... and often in the process simultaneously implies inferiority and social exclusion [... *is nie in presiese fonetiese transkripsie nie, maar 'n idiosinkratiese skepping van die skrywer om die klem op die afwykende taalsuitspraak van sy karakterspreker te laat val. Oogdialek het ... die standaardtaal nodig ... en dikwels daarmee saam betekenis van minderwaardigheid en sosiale uitgeslotenheid dra*].

Both Richard Rive and the Guyana-born poet David Dabydeen have objected to the use of vernacular forms, particularly when they preserve economic inequalities and social exclusion. Rive, according to his biographer, regarded CVA as:

... a debased and demeaning language, as was Cape 'Coon' culture, encouraged by the apartheid authorities and writers such as ID du Plessis in order to assert the ethnicity and distinctness of the 'coloured race'. (Viljoen 2013:189)

Dabydeen also recognises that its valorisation may be a form of subjugation. The first and last stanzas of his 'Coolie Odyssey' are firstly the postcolonial intellectual's bitter reflections on the Western European metropolitan intellectual's exploitation of the oral turn, which is partly fantasised immediacy and authenticity and lastly the metropolitan intellectual's waning, partly polite but distant interest (Dabydeen 1988:9, 13):

Now that peasantry is in vogue,  
Poetry bubbles from peat bogs,  
People strain for the old folk's fatal gobs  
Coughed up in grates North or North East  
Tween bouts o' living dialect,  
It should be time to hymn your own wreck,  
Your house the source of ancient song:  
Dry coconut shells cackling in the fireside  
Smoking up our children's eyes and lungs,  
Plantains spitting oil from a clay pot,  
Thick sugary black tea gulped down.

...

We mark your memory in songs  
Fleshed in the emptiness of folk,  
Poems that scrape bowl and bone  
In English basements far from home,

Or confess the lust of beasts  
In rare conceits  
To congregations of the educated  
Sipping wine, attentive between courses –  
See the applause fluttering from their white hands  
Like so many messy table napkins.

Small affirms non-standard varieties of a language. In his Afterword to the revised 1973 edition of *Kitaar My Kruis*, he writes that 'Kaaps is a *language*, a language in the sense that it supports the whole fate and destiny of the people who speak it' [*'Kaaps is 'n taal, 'n taal in die sin dat dit die volle lot en noodlot van die mense wat dit praat, dra*] (1987:83).<sup>4</sup> Cloete (2012:128) extends this Romantic-organic approach when he argues that:

Small's appropriation of the 'language of apartheid' must not necessarily be construed as a consequence of a political 'false consciousness'... but rather as the inescapable moral-political context for redefining the question of the possibility of 'being human' in apartheid South Africa.

Like Small, Dangor acknowledges the more far-reaching deprivation of those around him who speak mainly or only non-standard varieties. Unlike Small, he did not use his poetry to proclaim its value. Instead, he refashioned a patois to transcend what he regarded as local restrictions on literacy and formal education so that his 'ordinary' speakers could express ideas or arguments which he believed they could not normally articulate. For Dangor, then, how might one distinguish the poems in his 'extra-ordinary' refashioned vernacular from those poems written in the 'ordinary' refashioned version?

The 'extra-ordinary' element here consists of ironic and parodic allusions to the *Odyssey*, to poems by Nizami, Homer, Cavafy, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, and to *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. In VA, Dangor's narrators and poetic voices approach Cavafy's poetry ironically and parodically. For the purposes of this article, Frederic Jameson's (1991) and James Scott's (1985) understandings of these terms are helpful. Irony in Jameson's critique of postmodernism is 'the supreme theoretical concept and value of traditional modernism and the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive' (Jameson 1991:259). In 'Capitalism', he argues, among irony's many effects is its 'penetration even of middle-class lived experience by this strange new global relativity of the colonial network' (Jameson 1991:412). In Scott's study of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance', irony is a mode through which peasants describe and criticise far-reaching socio-economic changes over which they have little power (Scott 1985:162, 168, 350). In that context, irony is an act of fatalistic, defensive masking (Scott 1985:286). If this applies to the metropolitan middle class, and accounting for Dangor's allusions to ancient Persia, and colonial India and Egypt, both should also apply in some measure to the indigenous or nationally oppressed elements of the middle class of settler-colonial states such as South Africa.

4. My thanks to Prof Steward van Wyk of the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands, U.W.C. for this translation.

In parody, Jameson (1985) sees homage mediated by accentuated deviation 'from a norm which then reasserts itself, in a not unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of ... wilfull eccentricities' (pp. 15–16). Parody affirms the value of the original. As Dentith (2002) points out, parodic deviation only works if the audience recognises the original or is sufficiently familiar with the salient stylistic or discursive features being evoked (p. 39). However, it is impossible to predetermine parody's cultural politics. Postcolonial 'writing back' may be a form of insurgent parody (p. 29), while Menippean satire, which offers 'a learned parody of learning, or indeed a philosophical parody of philosophy, by means of a comic, self-parodying narrator', may be deeply conservative (pp. 47, 49). Transferred to a South African context, Jameson, Scott and Dentith speak to self-conscious expressions of ambivalence in a postcolonial elite's relationship to the Western literary canon, in the simultaneous valorisation and mockery of colonial masters and imperial culture by slaves and former slaves, in clever talk and impatience with it and in a turn to fatalistic humour even post-liberation.

In *Bulldozer*, Dangor (1978) does not write in the manner of Cavafy. Instead, like the speaker of Cavafy's poem 'Ithaka' who advises Odysseus to 'always have Ithaka in mind' (p. 47), Dangor writes with Cavafy in mind, exemplifying Jameson's ironic incursion. A relatively long poem by Dangor's standards, 'Odyssey' (pp. 65–66) is about 'Doela [Abdullah] ... from Kholvad/who defended his honour' (p. 65) through revenge against British imperial power in India. Entreated by his family to surrender for their sakes [*gie op/vi' onse sakes*] (p. 65), he fled to South Africa, first landing in Delagoa Bay (now Maputo Bay). References to Guam and Goa do not literally mean that Doela arrived via these places. They evoke an additional, Portuguese imperial network and the capacity of several other Dangor protagonists to shift between 'racial' categories, particularly where a person categorised as 'person of mixed race' in South Africa could successfully pass for 'white' by adopting a non-Aryan Portuguese, Italian or Jewish whiteness. As Dangor's (1997) short story 'Kafka's Curse' (pp. 5–142) suggests, the punishment for this transgression may be metamorphosis. In 'Odyssey', Doela married in Cape Town, lived in Schotschekloof, but believed he was superior to those around him because he could claim direct family connections to the Indian subcontinent. As punishment for this hubris, and for opposing the government, he would spend 10 years on Robben Island (Dangor 1983:66):

Ten years on  
Robben Island,  
we warned him,  
you cannot  
stand against  
the Government,  
they are too powerful.  
Hell, that's history not so?  
[Tien jaar op  
Robbeneiland  
ons het hom gewarn,  
jy kannie teen die

Government staan,  
hulle is té powerful.  
Junnie, dis history né?]

At the end of a long journey, Doela does not seek Ithaca. Instead, unlike Homer's and Cavafy's Odysseus in 'Ithaka', for whom it is more means-to-self-consciousness than destination, Doela's Ithaka is closer to Tennyson's 'Ulysses' and Cavafy's 'A second Odyssey' – a prison and a search for death (Cavafy 1877).

'Die nuwe order' [*The new order*], also in *Bulldozer* (Dangor 1983:87), contains Dangor's first reference to Cavafy's poem 'Since nine o'clock ...' (Dangor 1983:88). He returns to the poem in *Bitter Fruit* (2001:211) and the short story 'A strange pilgrimage' (2013b:139–148). Cavafy's speaker reflects on how long he has been silently reminiscing, then on how and why he reminisced, before he discloses the content of those memories: the private and public spaces through which he recalls bodily sexual pleasures, and troubles that affect his family. Dangor's epigraph is the last two lines of Cavafy's poem: 'Half past twelve. How the time has passed/Half past twelve. How the years have passed' (Cavafy 1989:88).

As with his other poems of reverie such as 'Caesarion' (Cavafy 1989:80), Cavafy compresses preceding years and centuries into hours. By contrast, Dangor's male speaker addresses the object of desire, a woman. He complains that 'dis halfpast twelve' (1983:87), and he and his desires have so aged as to be forgotten [*n vergete lus*]. Outside young women and men dance, and 'oh youth/is pure/horniness' [*o jeugdigheid/is onvervlekte/jagsgeid*] (Dangor 1983:87). His poem too contrasts private and public spaces, but where Cavafy's staged reverie on the betrayal and murder of this doomed androgynous youth shifts between present and past, Dangor's is all in the present and future.

Dangor has created an ironic and unstable connection. The ironies inherent in the contrasts between epigraph, voice and content keep Cavafy in mind, but deliberately undermine any attempt to write 'in the manner of Cavafy'. To emphasise that outcome, Dangor's final stanza reworks the last two lines of Yeats's 'The second coming'. His 'what rough beast .../Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?' becomes 'watse skolliebees/slinger Jerusalem heen/vir sy geboortenis?' (Dangor 1983:87) This ending could not be further from Cavafy's capacity for sustained anti-climax and melancholy. The tight control over erotic demand and supply that Panagiotis Roilos (2009) finds in many of Cavafy's poems, in Dangor must have its release.

Cavafy (1989) wrote five 'Days of ...' poems: '1903' (p. 89), '1901' (p. 162), '1896' (p. 165), '1909, 1910 and 1911' (p. 175) and '1908' (pp. 196–197). All describe the fading beauty of young men who for reasons, such as vanity, poverty or social pressure, survived precariously through gambling, hustling, borrowing, pimping and prostitution. Cavafy's speakers look back from the vantage point of several years and their own wealth and relatively secure social standing.



Those resources enabled them to participate in these young men's worlds as *flâneur*, client or scopophilic, though without any hint of awareness that their transactional relationship has contributed to this pain and exploitation (Cavafy 1989:175):

I ask myself if in the days of antiquity  
glorious Alexandria possessed a more superb-looking youth,  
a lad more perfect than he – who had been wasted:  
Of course, no statue or painting was ever done of him;  
cast into the filthy old ironmonger's,  
quickly, by heavy labour,  
and by common debauchery, so wretched, he was destroyed.

In Cavafy's poetry, Daniel Mendelsohn (2003) suggests, antiquity or death may preserve beauty, but in the present it always decays.

There are moments when Dangor approaches this affect in 'Dae van 1973' (1983:93) and 'Dae van 1977' (102), though he remains committed to the intimations of apocalypse evident in 'Die nuwe order'. Both refer to a time when Dangor identified with Black Consciousness (Dangor 2004), but only '1977' addresses that topic directly. Both share Cavafy's sense of urban spatial and moral enclosure, but only '1977' is about transactional sex. Set in District Six in a hot room on a hot day, with a storm brewing around Table Mountain [*brou Tafelberg die/wolke van 'n storm*] (Dangor 1983:93), 'Dae van 1973' looks at the relationship between desire, faith and social pressure. From that perspective, it has more in common with those 'autobiographical' Cavafy's poems in which the speaker recalls the places where he and the object of desire at that time shared highly charged sexual encounters, and those historical poems in which an ascendant, rule-bound monotheism confronts a doomed, sensual polytheism.

Unlike Cavafy's homoerotic *oeuvre*, in 'Dae van 1973' the two lovers are man and a woman united by an erotically charged, nonphysical intimacy that Dangor seems to derive from two sources: the 12th Common Era (CE) *Story of Layla and Majnun* (Nizami 2011) and Mohandas Gandhi's 'brahmacharya experiment' (Adams 2012). Like Cavafy, the male speaker acknowledges that the relationship is sinful, but justifies it by referring to an earlier, sensual polytheism. The speaker of Dangor's poem describes the couple as 'Adam and Eve/in Hanover Street' [*Adam en Eva/in Hanoverstraat*] (Dangor 1983:93).<sup>5</sup> With a parodic nod to *The Rubaiyat*, the woman's honeyed sweat is as forbidden as the red wine that they may not drink [*rooi soes die wyn/wat os nie mag drink 'ie*]. The call to prayer [*bang*] reminds them that they must part; he can hear the 'severe, measured tread' [*skerp, uitgemete stappe*] of the blessed, and he can see 'the purity of the faith/on their faces' [*die helderheid vannie geloof/op hul gesigte*]. In this moment out of time interrupted by the time of the eternal (Dangor 1983:93):

The hour of prayer  
hangs like centuries  
over our thoughts,

you don't want  
me to touch you.

[*Die gebedsuur  
hang soes eeue  
op os gedagte,  
jy wil nie hê  
ek moet aan jou raak nie.*]

For the present, the speaker's respect for his lover prevents him from acting on his desires. Many of Dangor's speakers and main protagonists are male and Muslim, with uneven religious adherence, and the lovers share this faith. In the distance, a storm is brewing around Table Mountain, a threat from the gods – now plural and pagan – for this pair of 'sun-worshipping sinners' [*son-versotte sondaars*] (Dangor 1983:93), who will experience release and punishment in quick succession. Here Dangor writes in the manner of Cavafy, who often evokes an ancient world of polytheism and a range of sexual practices that Christianity did not permit.

'Dae Van 1977 (Winter in Fordsburg)' is the last poem in *Bulldozer* (Dangor 1983:102). It too recalls a relationship between a man and woman; the tone is sarcastic, triumphalist and denigrating; there is no inhibiting force this time; and the sexual discourse is far more overt and sexist than the fraught, checked intimacy of '1973'. It opens with a young black woman's response to the gaze of the *flâneur* or potential client: 'Are you checking me out?/do you want a piece?' [*'Wat kyk jy/wil jy 'n stuk hê?*'], she asks. It closes with his response: 'Hey girlie!/stop rubbing your arse/against me' [*'Hey meid!/hou op jou sterre/soe teen my skuur*']. Between her call and his response, the speaker first describes the woman, whom he already knows, and then addresses her in his thoughts (Dangor 1983:102):

Your eyes glow  
like dull sparks  
debaucheries from the  
cold fire  
of our dreams.

You jewel  
my black flamingo  
with the false  
pink hair,  
dance  
your long slim legs  
were the image  
of my black  
consciousness.

Now you dance  
your wretched dance  
and dream your hollow-eyed dreams  
a dead star that in fits and starts  
drifts through the cosmos.

[*Jou oëe gloei  
soos dowwe vonke  
uitspatsels uit die  
koue vuur  
van ons droeme.*

*Jy skat  
my swart vlamink  
met die vals*

5. Hanover Street was an important economic and cultural hub in District Six. Under 'grand apartheid', almost all of the buildings were demolished and a new street plan was imposed on the area.

pienk hare  
 dans  
 jou lank slank biene  
 was die beeld  
 van my swart  
 bewustheid.

Nou dans jy  
 jou ellendige dans  
 en droem jou leeg-oeg drome  
 'n dooie ster wat stamp-stamp  
 deur die kosmos drifl

The speaker recalls their shared sexual history and acknowledges his continuing desire, but now criticises this object of desire. Part-autobiography, part-Cavafy, Dangor converts Black Consciousness into a garish, burnt-out sex worker with a hint of morbidity.

It is only much later that Dangor's voices and narrators consciously reflect on Cavafy's hold. Their speakers or protagonists are well read and cosmopolitan. In the terms that I used earlier, they are 'ordinary' speakers because the expression, literacy and experiences of the narrator, focaliser or poetic voice are all mutually compatible. 'Alexandria' is one of an 11-part cycle 'Africans Abroad', which, in turn, prefigures the first part of *Strange pilgrimages*. In the poem 'Alexandria', the speaker faces up to 'what you called my truth': disillusionment over the contrast between that city's Cavafian myth and its modern reality, and his own homophobia. He finds contemporary Alexandria 'so seedy, / not the city its great poet described', to which his companion responds: 'Your problem is your homophobia / ... It [Alexandria] is Egyptian, a city of men/ ... Yes think of the city as a man,/his vanity feint' (1992:52–53).

Dangor's arrangement of the short stories in *Strange pilgrimages* shows how he keeps Cavafy in mind. In the title story, the main protagonist, who shares Mandela's birthday, tries to cope with his midlife crisis and the failure to act on desire by turning to T.S. Eliot, Cavafy and Joseph Conrad – three modernists whose work epitomises Jameson's irony of late capitalism:

He had woken up on his fortieth 'birthday', reciting under his breath, with a kind of resigned horror, lines from T.S. Eliot's poem ['The lovesong of Alfred J Prufrock']: 'I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled' ... he tried that day to drive Eliot's ghost from his mind by muttering aloud lines from Cavafy's poem: 'Half past twelve. How the time has gone by. Half past twelve. How the years have gone by'. There, with subliminal beauty, without T.S. Eliot's cynicism, the sudden realisation that he was growing older. Oh the horror of it all. (Dangor 2013:140; [emphasis original])

Here Dangor's (1989) voice is ironic in its powerlessness over time, morality and the body, and parodic in its self-mocking literariness. These are also voices or protagonists who in Cavafy's poems, such as 'The glory of the Ptolemies' (p. 35), 'The grave of the grammarian Lysias' (p. 48) or 'The grave of Eurion' (p. 50), conduct their lives according to the requirements of a culture that slowly separates from its roots. This trend follows the fortunes of Hellenism in Cavafy's

historical imagination. Those protagonists also capitalise on the space between old and new political orders to reflect on the consequences of their actions. They may be figures on the margins of power as a result of exile, or because of leadership changes in Cavafy's poems 'King Demetrius' (p. 26), 'Satrapy' (p. 28), 'Philhellene' (p. 39) or 'The displeasure of the son of Seleucus' (p. 63). In *Bitter Fruit*, a morally and politically compromised Silas Ali plays a crucial, delicate, covert role that ensures completion of the TRC's final report. His 'reward' – a diplomatic posting to Samara (2001:230) – is surely the equivalent of Cavafy's satrapies!

## Conclusion

Where Cavafy developed a distinctive idiolect, Small and Dangor, in their early poetry, have both used a sociolect as an idiolect. For Small, recognising and valorising that sociolect in an inhumane society might make its users human, but not necessarily real. The inevitable consequence of Dangor's distinction implicitly expressed during South Africa's interregnum between 'ordinary' and 'extra-ordinary' patois speakers, made his poetic voices from the early 1980s inarticulate if 'ordinary' or unauthentic if 'extra-ordinary'. He seems to have resolved this dilemma by switching to Standard English. In this medium, he and his new 'ordinary' speakers were comfortable and authentic, probably because they were the same people. For Small and Dangor, choices about the means of expression affect the ways they create, affirm and undermine a collective voice that their eye-dialects interpellate as 'coloured' and working class. Cavafy explored the limits of expression and sexual self-expression, and Vos, Small and Dangor have all acknowledged these challenges while operating within different political, literary, sexual and religious settings. Vos and Dangor contended with the challenge of how to express themselves through the translation and adaptation of Cavafy's poetry. In Vos's case, his context – a literal weaving together of literary strands – adds an extra layer of interpretation.

The ways in which a writer signifies 'nonstandardness' may deviate from the content and form of actual users, so that to be recognisable it could be false. Twain, Small and Dangor have all fostered 'eye-dialects', and all have contributed to that misrepresentation and standardisation. According to the Dangor of *Bulldozer*, *Private Voices* and *Strange Pilgrimages*, some of his speakers and voices use inappropriate language and display 'extra-ordinary' knowledge. We know this because in the former he changed the language of native speakers from District Six and Fordsburg so that he could make them say what he thought that they were really thinking and feeling, and to the extent that language enables and limits thought, Dangor clearly implies that patois speakers have limited ability to convert feeling into thought, or to articulate higher order intellectual concerns. This is also an inference to be drawn from Vos's hierarchy of organic-animal coupling to spiritual submission. In *Private Voices* and *Strange Pilgrimages*, Dangor retains the earlier literary allusions, but this time through self-consciously literary characters who think in Standard English. Like many of Cavafy's contemporary or autobiographical (not mythological or Hellenic) speakers and protagonists, they are



cosmopolitan or worldly yet alienated subjects who form, says Jameson, 'a coexistence of ... sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction ... is in reality a passage of ships in the night' (1997:412). Thus, the distance between frustrated lover, *flanêur* or client, and the object of scopic or physical desire keeps Cavafy in mind. The privacy of these inner voices evokes the title of Dangor's 1992 poetry collection, and suggests that the community that his VA offered was unsatisfactory or unsustainable. To date, Dangor has not commented on his language use in *Private Voices* and *Strange Pilgrimages*. Therefore, one cannot confirm that he is now satisfied. For the time being, we can only infer that the change reflects a search for something less unsatisfactory, more appropriate, more 'ordinary' that keeps a different Cavafy in mind.

Phil van Schalkwyk's article whetted my curiosity and encouraged this research. So too, did the 2017 Adam Smallfees in Pniel. I hope this reply generates further research and debate about 'Cavafrikaans' in any language.

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The author declares that no competing interests exist.

### Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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