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Training in Cerebral Emotions

"Cavafy is in my opinion an ultra-modern poet, a poet of future generations. Complementing his historical, psychological and philosophical value, the sobriety of his impeccable style which occasionally approaches the laconic, his steady enthusiasm which trains the cerebral emotions, his correct phrasing, the result of aristocratic ease, his light irony, are all elements which future generations, pressed on by the progress of new discoveries and by their subtle cerebral mechanisms, will appreciate even more."

Cavafy was wont, now and again, to pronounce on his own poetry and poetics, sometimes in the third person, as if he were someone else. These are his own words, written close to the end of his life, in 1930, in French, allegedly (no proof remains) upon the request of a French newspaper for a few comments on his work. It may be, as his editor notes, a stunningly correct prediction, through one must add, not lacking in irony.

Writing from the future he imagined (or one of them), I cannot unequivocally attest to the improved subtlety of our cerebral mechanism, though we have certainly made enormous strides when it comes to mechanisms of many kinds. Responses to Cavafy in literary criticism, translation, music and art over the last few decades have given greater amplitude to Cavafy's queerness, by which I mean not only his precociously overt homoerotic lyrics, but also what E.M. Forster famously named the "oblique angle" at which this poet stood relative to what are considered self-evident historical or social or poetical judgments and norms. This obliqueness is not a kind of objectivity or impersonality, but rather an estranging and often intimate immediacy created by the address in his lyrics. Cavafy's poems--whether historic, erotic or philosophical in theme-- will not let their readers occupy a safe and future distance from their claims. Thus they continue to train us in the arduous pleasures of "cerebral emotions" and in thinking as if we were someone else.

text cited:

C.P. Cavafy, "Sur le poète C.P. Cavafy" in Michael Pieris, ed., *Prose (1882-1931)*. Athens: Ikaros, 2003. p. 313.