

Cavafian Catoptromancy

by Dr. Peter Jeffreys

Το κάτοπτρον δεν μ'απατά, ειν' αληθής η θέα,
δεν είναι άλλη ως εμέ επί της γης ωραία.

The mirror is not deceiving me, the image is true,
no other girl on earth is as beautiful as I.
“Dünya Güzeli”

The vain remarks uttered by Cavafy's folkloric Odalisque Dünya Güzeli as she gazes into her mirror surely resonate with Cavafy scholars who at times find themselves wondering about their own academic reflection. I therefore take some comfort in Mr. Savidis's injunction to gaze into the Cavafian mirror since I have been engaged in this very act of scholarly scrying for some time. To be sure, the very notion of approaching Cavafy through Alice's capricious looking-glass is at once a mischievous tease and a sobering corrective for literary critics. Mr. Savidis very shrewdly throws down the gauntlet in his essay “Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass” by challenging critical assumptions and reminding us how much more there is to learn about Cavafy—both the man and the poet. Cavafy, we are told, is deceptively simple yet infinitely complex: in short, a paradox. Mr. Savidis equates Cavafy's poetry to a looking-glass in which, it is assumed, we may see what we wish to see or, in keeping with the tradition of magical catoptromancy (mirror divination), divine what we wish to know.

There is much truth in this assertion, and critics are guilty of a certain amount of scholarly narcissism as they attempt to fashion Cavafy in their own ideological image and likeness. Thus we have been presented with various reflections of Cavafy: there is Cavafy the depraved hedonist, the decadent aesthete, the symboliste, the urbaniste, the realist, the anti-imperialist, the Byzantinist, and even the Christian pietist. More recently Cavafy has become a model for Neo-hellenic syncretism, the master-voice of the diaspora, and a poster-boy poet for queer theory. Cavafy's face increasingly appears in many mirrors. That we have witnessed so many images of Cavafy emerge over the years is largely due to the poet's own clever and somewhat cunning manipulation of his readers. Those trying to peg his Hellenism, for instance, find themselves facing a host of

contradictions, largely because Cavafy approached Hellenism as a linguistic and social performance, a radical concept he borrowed from Lucian. Perhaps, as Mr. Savidis states, Cavafy would scoff at most current appropriations of his poetry, and thus all the “slippery terms” applied to him are best viewed with a certain degree of cynicism.

But (to echo our poet) what would we do without these categories, for they are a kind of critical solution; as such, they cannot be so easily dismissed. The three labels that come in for immediate criticism in Mr. Savidis’s essay are those defining a syncretic, diasporic and gay Cavafy. I wish to address the latter two categories, as the first—Cavafy’s hybridity—is so central to most recent critical theorizing in Neo-hellenic studies that an adequate treatment would require a more detailed response. Mr. Savidis raises an important issue regarding the use of the term “diasporic” which, as he rightly notes, meant something quite different a century ago when the Alexandrian diaspora produced great literature and literary criticism in the Greek language. This should be viewed in marked contrast to the notable literary and scholarly achievements produced by the Greeks of the United States diaspora which are primarily in the English language. The Alexandrian cultural achievement remains a unique diasporic phenomenon, one that most certainly will not be replicated elsewhere. Cavafy was acutely aware of the vulnerability of diaspora Hellenism and elegizes Alexandria’s halcyon days in his unfinished poem “The Sixth or Seventh Century” (1927):

Interesting and moving is
 Alexandria in the sixth century or early seventh,
 before the arrival of the mighty Arabs.
 She speaks the Greek language still, officially,
 perhaps without much life but, as is becoming,
 she still speaks our language.
 Inevitably she will lose her Hellenism,
 but she still manages to hold on to it as much as possible.

It is not unnatural if, sentimentally,
 we thus regard this period,
 we who now have brought
 the Greek language back to her soil.

(Cavafy 1994: 255—my translation)

Cavafy catches us in the net of his proleptic irony here by pausing to mark the high tide of Alexandrian Hellenism which would tragically ebb with Nasser and nationalization.

That his poetry would stand at the literary apex of this historic period once again shows Cavafy's remarkable sense of himself as a participant in history and as a poet possessed of an uncanny understanding of historical patterns. Indeed, Cavafy reminds us with sentimental but sobering words that the perilous plight of the diaspora—its rise and decline—constitutes a vicious cycle.

Cavafy remains highly relevant to today's Greek diaspora. A prime example of this may be found in the poem "Poseidonians" (1906) which raises the intriguing question for the implied diaspora reader of whether the loss of the Greek language documented so dramatically in the poem is being repeated here in America where, at countless annual Greek festivals, music and dancing are ritualistically kept alive while the knowledge of Greek has degenerated into monosyllabic murmurings:

The Poseidonians forgot the Greek Language
after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrhenians, Latins, and other foreigners.
The only thing surviving from their ancestors
was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites,
with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths.
And it was toward the festival's end
to tell each other about their ancient customs
and once again to speak Greek names
that only a few recognized. ...

(Cavafy 1992: 192)

If anything, Cavafy's poems resonate profoundly with today's third and fourth-generation Greek-Americans for whom chauvinistic definitions of Hellenism hold little appeal and whose residual ethnicity is slowly dissolving into a cultural void. Thus we can and should apply the term "diasporic" to Cavafy in both its unique Alexandrian sense as well as in its more ominous contemporary sense. Cavafy dramatizes the historic plight of diaspora Hellenism without the strident propaganda that "*paideia*" advocates have been promoting so ineffectually for decades. His poems prick the conscience of his readers and gently prod them into contemplating identity issues; they deftly problematize history and advocate a realistic cultural poetics which remind rather than reproach.

The most controversial statement in Mr. Savidis's essay has to do with his criticism of Cavafy as a "gay" poet: "As for the term 'gay,' anyone who has read Cavafy's poetry will agree that it does not do justice to the sensibility and sexuality

expressed therein.“ Here we are glad to have Alice’s mirror close at hand, for only on the other side of the looking-glass may we discern whether Cavafy actually “spent his life trying to avoid the tag of gay poet,” as Mr. Savidis avers. One could quibble that this “tag” did not technically exist in Cavafy’s lifetime, as the category of “gay poet” is a rather recent concept. Certainly Cavafy went to great lengths to protect himself from libelous gossip, even though his homosexuality was an open secret. It is however doubtful if Cavafy could have anticipated the extent to which he has become a model for gay poets and writers, a factor not unrelated to his present international appeal and global popularity. Cavafy’s “tag” it would seem has served him well both in terms of book sales and the critical attention lavished on his poetry.

When addressing the topic of Cavafy’s homosexuality, one feels a bit like Alice approaching the Red Queen—walking backward in order to walk forward. The first gay libations were offered by E.M. Forster and continued by W.H. Auden, James Merrill and most recently by Gore Vidal, tributes which have placed Cavafy in the gay pantheon. In the field of Greek Studies, Cavafy’s homosexuality remains pivotal to appreciating his “slight angle.” Sixteen years ago, Peter Bien examined Cavafy’s homosexuality and reputation outside of Greece, exposing silences and re-framing the complex issue for an English-speaking readership. In a more recent article, Dimitris Papanikolaou creatively explores Cavafy’s closets, applying “Queer Theory” in a most convincing and imaginative manner. These two essays serve as important touchstones for the issue: for it is the “gay” Cavafy who presently attracts and generates the most interesting readings of his work. It is therefore highly unlikely that any revelations about Cavafy’s bi-sexuality, smoking habits or tennis technique, fascinating as they may well be, will ever produce a critical reception approaching that of Cavafy’s gay readership. A casual glance at the Cavafy entry in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* illustrates the poet’s unique status as a gay icon: “The poetry of Cavafy in one sense constitutes a coming-out story . . . Cavafy has written some of the greatest homoerotic poetry of all time” (Christensen 149, 151). In order then for Mr. Savidis to prove his point that the term gay “does not do justice to the sensibility and sexuality expressed” in Cavafy’s poems, he will have to do more than produce cigarettes and tennis balls, objects unlikely to inspire substantially new readings of Cavafy’s work.

The controversy surrounding Cavafy's sexuality has always been problematic and most likely will remain so for some time. One cannot ignore how intrinsically connected Cavafy's homosexuality has been to his critical reception and artistic reputation. Timos Malanos's notoriously homophobic assessment of Cavafy "monotonously chewing over the confession of his perversion" (Malanos 144) set the polemical tone early on. Cavafy's erstwhile rehabilitation by Stratis Tsirkas, who went as far as to blame British imperialism for Cavafy's introverted condition, created a host of other problems, not the least of which was the sanitizing of Cavafy's decadent aesthetics in order to establish contexts for political readings. The result of this attempt to legitimize Cavafy for the "left" has been an absurd distortion of his poetics which has culminated in the misleading categorization of Cavafy as a "realist" poet, a notion that still holds sway and which seriously misrepresents Cavafy's prevailing aestheticism and decadent gay sensibility. That Cavafy in his final years was writing poems about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and the Emperor Justinian walking headless through his palace indicates the persistence of decadent themes, and it will take many new readings of the poet to correct the present interpretative imbalance. It would seem then that the gay slant on Cavafy not only does fuller "justice" to the poet's authentic sensibility, but it is only just beginning to accomplish an overdue hermeneutical revision of his critical reception.

Whether Cavafy was once attracted to women remains a sort of riddle without an answer. One finds little poetic evidence of a sexual interest in women beyond the imitative and derivate heterosexual posturing of his early compositions. This is not to say that Cavafy was incapable of celebrating female beauty; he had an interest in powerful and beautiful women who suffered tragic fates (Salome, Ramanakti, Alexandra the Judean Queen, Anna Komnene, Kratisikleia, Zenobia), a fixation not uncommon among gay men. Although Cavafy never addressed his sexuality at length outside of his poetry, he did leave behind a few revealing comments. One involves a strange exchange with E.M. Forster in 1917 on the issue of "depravity" (i.e. homosexuality) of which we have only Forster's paraphrase: "[George] Valassopoulo was over this afternoon and told me that since I saw you something occurred that has made you very unhappy; that you believe the artist must be depraved: and that you were willing he should tell the above to

your friends” (Forster 259). Cavafy’s view of “depravity” is clarified by direct comments he recorded on the subject: «Δεν ξεύρω αν η διαστροφή δίδει δύναμιν. Κάποτε το νομίζω. Αλλά είναι βέβαιον ότι είναι η πηγή μεγαλείου»./“I’m not sure if perversion gives one strength. Sometimes I think so. But it is certainly the source of greatness.” (Cavafy 1983: 29).

Semantically, both in English and in Greek, the words “perversion/διαστροφή” closely mirror the words “inversion/αναστροφή,” related terms signifying homosexuality in the pejorative lingo of the period. This raises an interesting question regarding mirror images. What happens to the perverted/inverted gaze when it is caught in the looking-glass? Cavafy dramatizes such a scenario in his poem “The Mirror in the Front Hall”:

The luxurious house had a huge mirror
in the front hall, a very old mirror,
bought at least eighty years ago.

A very handsome boy, a tailor’s assistant
(on Sundays an amateur athlete),
stood there with a package. He gave it
to one of the household who took it in
to get the receipt. The tailor’s assistant
was left alone, waiting there.
He went up to the mirror, looked at himself,
and adjusted his tie. Five minutes later
they brought him the receipt. He took it and went away.

But the old mirror that had seen so much
during a life of many years—
thousands of objects and faces—
the old mirror was all joy now,
proud to have embraced
total beauty for a few moments.

(Cavafy 1992: 169)

The old mirror may be read as a metaphor for the old poet in whose eyes were reflected numerous beautiful faces. Simultaneously looking in and peering out, Cavafy presents us with an erotics of the mirror. Interestingly enough, the glass neither distorts, perverts or inverts; rather it truthfully reflects and affirms Cavafy’s homoerotic aesthetic of male beauty.

In closing, one cannot let pass the opportunity to comment on a central assertion of Mr. Savidis's essay: "The part of the poet's life, whatever its value for the poetry, has remained unexamined to a large extent whether because the scholars omitted to shift through the ample documentation of Cavafy's life or they chose to ignore facts which contradicted their theories." The greatly anticipated publication of this ample documentation—Cavafy's "family memoranda, diaries, and family and personal correspondence" (Haas 44)—and its promised availability on CD-ROM (Savidis 2000: 333) are enticing and encouraging prospects. Like Alice, we remain "curiouser and curiouser" and hope that Mr. Savidis's intriguing looking-glass challenge prefaces the imminent availability of this archival material. Then and only then might we finally put down our magic mirrors and take a full undistorted and demystified look at our poet.

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