

Cavafy's Anomaly by Gregory Jusdanis



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The real scandal in Cavafy is not his homoeroticism but his wholesale revision of poetry, language, identity, and tradition. E. M. Forster captured Cavafy's authentic deviancy when he characterized the poet as leaning at a slight angle to the universe. Neither perpendicular nor parallel to life, he slants and slopes and we tilt with him as we read his verses, like riding on a skateboard.

It is easy to be taken away by Cavafy's unzipped sexuality, to look for his revolutionary portrayal of love and attraction among men, and identify this as the main reason for his wide appeal. No one can deny that Cavafy explores this forbidden love, as he often called it, with uncommon courage and self-reflection. As with all his subjects, Cavafy approached the erotic obliquely, by focusing on details. His vivid portrait scenes, set either in ancient or modern Alexandria, illustrate the involuntary twitch of an eyelash, the moistness of breath, the afternoon sun warming a damask bedspread. Few poets have explored with such deftness the finger-touch immediacy of desire or its philosophical and aesthetic permutations. Cavafy gives us both, the tug of an illicit glance one catches at a street corner and the transformation of this non-verbal exchange into art.

But is this all? Are we reducing Cavafy to erotic desire? Can this account for his global influence? Let us step back for a moment and see at how unlikely his current international standing must have been to a critic in Cavafy's lifetime. That Cavafy has spawned so much interest today seems really a miracle. While Cavafy may have been persuaded of his own genius, cultural, political, and social circumstances worked against the wider recognition of his talents. First of all, he lived and wrote in Alexandria, a cosmopolitan city no doubt, but hardly considered by Europeans a center of poetic discourse. He never had a following or a large audience in Greece, the only place where he could conceivably have made his mark, given his language. To be sure, everything he wrote about seemed to ensure a hostile reception in Greece.

While most Greeks were enthralled by demoticism, Cavafy embraced an eclectic discourse and often cited words or entire passages from classical and Byzantine Greek texts in his poems. His work seemed to stem from a learned poetic tradition, at a time when the country was celebrating the popular heritage. As such, Cavafy never acquired the status of national poet, a title he could never have acquired, even if he had aspired towards it. Neither did his work lead to a school of poetry like Karyotakis's had. Moreover, instead of writing about the pinnacle of classical civilization, fifth and fourth century Greece, he turned instead to its decline. On top of this was his blunt treatment of homoeroticism. Why would Greek readers have wanted to read poems, which seemed written in an archaic language, and which dealt with decadent late antique society? If you had been an editor of an Athenian literary magazine in 1910, would you have published his poetry? It is a wonder that Cavafy became known at all.

Few favorable winds pushed his work overseas either. The prejudices against "minor" languages, like modern Greek, were as gusty at his time as they are today. Furthermore, there was little interest in multiculturalism, world literature, or globalization to promote the reception of his oeuvre. Neither did his work fall into the category of the exotic, the colonial, black, or the African. What helped in Cavafy's case, as it had Greek culture in general, was a still vibrant and influential philhellenism and classicism. But the classical world he offered, Hellenistic and late antique Greece, was not in favor in his time. Indeed, Cavafy prefigured the current scholarly turn to this period by many decades. It was not until the 1960's that classicists discovered the world of late antiquity and began to revise received notions of the classical world.

We can safely say that, from the perspective of a critic or bookseller in Alexandria at the turn of the twentieth century, the chances of Cavafy's extraordinary appeal today must have seemed remote. In Cavafy's case, one would have to believe in poetic justice, the traditional idea that value and quality will be discovered in the end. That everything seems to have worked against him makes the result so extraordinary. This is why the real scandal in Cavafy's work lies less in its uncloseted sexuality than in the manner with which he overturned reigning social, historical, and poetic conventions.

Let us start with literary history itself. Cavafy did not rise from the demotic current of Greek poetry that had been recognized by his time as the national tradition. Tracing its sources to the Renaissance romance, 'Erotokritos' and the popular songs, it had been given full aesthetic expression by Solomos, the national poet of Greece. Although this school struggled with the learned discourse through the nineteenth century for literary supremacy, it had by Cavafy's time claimed the victor's laurels.

Cavafy never really participated in this tradition even in his early, romantic, verse that he largely rejected in middle age. To a certain extent, he wrote against it, taking a distance from its content and form. Contemporaneous readers, therefore, expecting the lyrics of Cavafy's arch-rival, Kostis Palamas, would have been disappointed by Cavafy's hybrid verses that belonged neither to the demotic nor the learned (katharevousa) branches of language and poetry. His bald, austere language seemed bare of any metaphors. It took considered, measured steps, rather than dancing ecstatically.

Cavafy did not fulfill reader's expectations of what poetry should be in rhyme, meter, and subject matter. Indeed, he did not see in his verses a reflection of their social reality. That he wrote in far-off Alexandria, without making the requisite repatriation, did not help matters either. If one of the aims of national literature was to provide a mirror for the Greek self, Cavafy's work at that time could have been considered neither national nor poetry. It was a slap on the face of national virtue.

There was real impudence in Cavafy's decision to avoid the newly-built house of Greek poetry. In a sense, he rejected the language of the nation and the customs of nation-building at a time when the project of defining Greekness was still in progress. We have not really appreciated the consequences this strategy had on his reception in Greece. By walking past the dominant poetic tradition, Cavafy had in effect ostracized himself from it. This explains the coolness his work initially found in Greece and the scorn poured on it by the most dominant movement of Greek literature in the twentieth century, the Generation of the 30's. These poets must have astutely recognized both the destructive power of his work and its aberrant nature.

Of course, other poets, like Kostas Karyotakis, worked outside of this demotic tradition. Writing after WWI, Karyotakis gave voice to a melancholic, urban spirit, in juxtaposition to the Aegean-worshipping Generation of the 30's. But Karyotakis nevertheless used the vernacular, the then accepted medium of poetry and he wrote about contemporaneous Greek society. Cavafy did neither. This is the reason perhaps why he never spawned a school of Greek poetry as Karyotakis had. Cavafy's Greece seemed out of time, out of space, and out of touch.

To be sure, the new nation, following the success of the early Greek modernizers in connecting the future of Greece with its classical heritage, wished to bask in the brightness of this inheritance. The country was proud of its past and keen to exploit it for national gain. The Acropolis, after all, having been cleared of any post-classical structures, projected an ideal of fifth-century purity it ironically never had at the time of Pericles. Yet Cavafy refused to be dazzled by the gleam of the newly scoured Pentelic marble. Rather than celebrating the Greek miracle, he wrote

about the time of decadence. Although he used Homeric motifs in his early poems, he never returned to them. Here again we have not sufficiently understood the scandal in his position. It is hard for us to believe now with the triumph of identity politics, globalization, and diaspora, that Cavafy represented a Greece so antithetical to how most of his contemporaries had imagined it ? cool beauty, Apollonian surface, eternal source.

By returning to a time when Hellenism seemed a distant cultural ideal, Cavafy was breaking cultural taboos that were much more disturbing than pictures of young men surreptitiously caressing in a clothes shop. It was, of course, shocking to his readers to see a Greece peopled with pederasts. But let us not forget that these individuals were also proud of their Macedonian names, the Arabian blood, their Syrian accents. Not only were they not afraid of ethnic mixing, they also boasted of it. Could one picture Greece of 1900 as a national, racial, and religious cauldron? Yet, this is what Cavafy offered his readers: a centerless and heterogeneous Hellas.

If we are not disturbed by this image of Greece, it is because we are to a certain extent using the language and images that Cavafy helped fashion for us. Of course, Greece has changed much in the intervening years. And Cavafy's poetry has enabled us to understand these transformations.

This may partly explain the reason for his vast popularity today across the globe as attested by the countless translations, scholarly studies, and artistic interpretations. If one of the roles of literature is to defamiliarize reality, then we can say that Cavafy succeeded in doing so. He made the strange look normal and the normal strange. He did so not only of sexuality but also of history, language, poetry, and national image. If we find Cavafy familiar today, we should not be disappointed, however. Wise as we have become, we use his metaphors and words to understand ourselves.

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