

From The Darkrooms of Philology

by Dr. Dimitris Papanikolaou

‘Θα βρίσκονται ακόμη τα καυμένα πουθενά’.

‘Ω, ναι, βρισκόμαστε στου Γ.Π.Σ. το υπόγειο...’.

Γιώργος Ιωάννου, A comment on the poem ‘Ο ήλιος του απογεύματος’, 1983.

I accepted the invitation to participate in this public forum because I consider Manuel Savvidis’s text symptomatic of that particular way of thinking about Literature, Culture and Scholarship in Greece, which I oppose through my work and personal politics.

However, in what follows I will focus exclusively on what Manuel Savvidis writes about Cavafy and (homo)sexuality. Since my most recent work (some of it published or presented in various forums, some unpublished and still in progress) engages with ‘Cavafy and the discourses of sexuality’, I feel particularly targeted by Savvidis’s comments. As I actively participate in what Savvidis describes as the ‘recent academic slant on Cavafy [focusing on] his qualities [!] as a [...] gay poet’, I suppose I need to explain why this is not an academic aberration but a pressing concern for Cavafian scholarship. I have structured my thoughts around the phrases of the original Savvidis text that I found particularly problematic (Savvidis’s phrases appear in italics).

1) *‘C.P. Cavafy is one of the major poets of modern Greece’.*

Let us be clear about this from the beginning. Mr Savvidis’s article is not about homosexuality, biographism, criticism, nor even about poetry. It is, simply and bluntly, about the title ‘major Greek poet’. It echoes a genealogy of critical texts that, in their effort to position C.P. Cavafy at the centre of the Greek canon, tried anxiously to obliterate his stubborn, persistent, self-expository and relentless queerness. It is the same anxiety that led major critics such as Dimaras and G.P. Savvidis to argue that Cavafy mainly engaged in masturbation and seldom, if ever, had sex; that his inheritor Singopoulos may have been his biological son; and that in his earlier life Cavafy had relationships with women.

In a similar vein, what is Mr Savvidis's text asking us to do, if not to restore the (canonical) order by reconstructing an (almost) asexual, smoking and tennis-playing Greek Cavafy?

2) *'Cavafy as a public persona and a poet was one thing; Cavafy the man was quite another'*.

I marvel at the boldness of this statement – and the implications it may also have for a particular mode of conduct that separates one's public affairs and (critical) politics from one's personal identity. But could anyone really tell us where 'Cavafy the man' starts and 'Cavafy the poet' ends? Especially in the case of a Cavafy constantly writing, rewriting, compiling, arranging, distributing, discussing and playing games with his poetry? Poetry becomes for Cavafy an elaborate workshop of the self – one that is there to show us in particular how misguided we are when we talk about 'Cavafy the poet' as opposed to 'Cavafy the man'.

3) *'Before old Cavafy was young, before homosexual he was bisexual'* [one also wonders: and before bisexual? Heterosexual, maybe?]. And: *'Cavafy was a practising smoker longer than he was a practising homosexual'*.

Does Manuel Savvidis realize how bluntly patronizing, insulting, homophobic and simply naïve these comments are? Has the rhetoric of the first phrase, which manages to equate homosexuality with the passivity and frailty of old age, while also presenting it as the fall from an ordinary heterosexuality, completely escaped the curator of the Cavafy archive? As for the second phrase, just wonder if it ever makes sense to talk about 'practising heterosexuals' and then you understand the problem.

4) *'His erotic poems are almost exclusively homosexual'*.

Cavafy did not only write (almost obsessively) about homosexual love. More intriguingly, he wrote about the homosexual as a type, a person, a biography, a desiring subject. He did that in settings contemporary to his time, or borrowed from

the past – the latter being an elaborate reflection of the former. This is exactly what historicizes him as a subject and more specifically as a subject of homosexual desire. Cavafy lived at the crossroads of and interacted with the 19th century discourses which, in Foucault's well-known formulation, mapped the homosexual as 'a personage, a species', a person whose homosexuality was conceived as a permanent characteristic 'shamelessly inscribed on his face and on his body, as a secret that always gives itself away.'

5) *'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.'*

Let me reply politely with a very simple axiom: Behind every single critic who insists that there are no gay literature and no gay writers (but simply Literature and Writers, capitalized), lies a polemicist trying to imply that there is only straight literature really – or, better, that literature, by its nature, ought to be straight.

[Incidentally, a recent article by Christopher Robinson shows how Cavafy can be seen as sharing exactly the same 'sensibility' and 'sexuality' that orders the poetry of the later poets Mark Dotty and Cathal O'Searcaigh, both self-identified as gay.]

6) *'Cavafy spent most of his adult years trying to avoid the tag of a 'gay poet'.*

Well, if this was his aim, he adopted the wrong strategy, really. No wonder he failed so abysmally.

More seriously: Cavafy neither tried to avoid, nor could he ever have been tagged as gay. Gay as a term for homosexuality comes into extensive use after Cavafy's death. This is not just a pedantic point: Cavafy, I have to repeat, comes at precisely the moment when queer identities get stabilized into homosexual subjectivities. This is why he himself used an array of epithets to describe the homosexual, while he painstakingly chronicled in his poetry the ways homosexuality was becoming an identity narrative.

On the other hand, his texts were extensively used by subsequent generations of homosexuals, artists, writers or readers, in their effort to stabilize and express an

identity. ‘Gay Cavafy’ is a retrospective term that also addresses exactly the importance of the Cavafian text as an Urtext of much of contemporary gay identity. In conclusion, it is only through firmly situating Cavafy’s work within the discourses that nominate, get hold of, put in check, and eventually stabilize the homosexual self in the 19th and 20th century, that we can return to ponder the famous 1983 editorial in the *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*: ‘Cavafy is neither “perverse” nor “obscene” nor “obsessed” nor even “erotic”. Cavafy is gay.’

7) For the record: I intend eventually to apply to see the yet unpublished material held in the Cavafy archive for my research. For all the reasons stated above, I hope there will be no problem in allowing me access.

8) And a final personal note, just to ‘prove my own prejudice’:

Before I was young and outspoken I was younger and silent; before I decided to engage with queer theory as a Modern Greek lecturer, I was a postdoctoral researcher working on Cultural Studies. Somehow, during that ‘before’, I found myself organizing a conference panel on Queer Cavafy; the panel was dismissed by a (practising heterosexual) Greek poet who was attending, as ‘just an academic gay bar’ – a comment I overheard. I made sure I put this phrase in my list of things I have vowed never to forget. And I started working on Cavafy and sexuality.

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