

"Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass" by Manuel Savidis



C.P. Cavafy

Manuel Savidis is the curator of the Cavafy Archive in Athens, Greece

C. P. Cavafy (1863-1933) is one of the major poets of modern Greece. The appeal of his poetry has only strengthened over time, both in Greece and abroad: he is certainly the modern Greek poet translated more often and in the most languages. He was a complex person but a deceptively simple poet, and the apparent simplicity of his poetry (which was crafted painstakingly over the course of decades), is the reason why Cavafy is so easy to translate, and so hard to translate well.

Like all major works of art, Cavafy's poetry serves as a looking-glass. Over the years, we have had portraits of Cavafy as a sensual, political, historical or ironical poet, and so forth, depending on the scholar's point of view and the various academic approaches which were prevalent at any given time. Some of these portraits were quite insightful, at least in part -- the part of the poetry. The part of the poet's life, whatever its value for the poetry, has remained unexamined to large extent, either because the scholars omitted to sift through the ample documentation of Cavafy's life, or because they chose to ignore facts which contradicted their theories.

Cavafy as a public persona and a poet was one thing; Cavafy, the man, was quite another. Anyone claiming insight into the man based solely on a reading of his poems is bound to be trumped by the factual evidence. The mental image most of us have of Cavafy is that of an elderly homosexual, composing verse in a candle-lit room. It is a romantic and possibly comforting image, and probably accurate for the last years of his life. But before he was old, Cavafy was young; before homosexual, he was bisexual; and he had electric light installed in his home for a number of years.

The more recent academic slants on Cavafy focus on his qualities as a syncretic, diasporic or gay poet. Of course they are worthwhile viewpoints, too, as will be the viewpoints which will emerge in years to come. Since their emphasis is on ideology, the interpretation of history and sexual orientation, they have to be informed by the biographical and historical data in order to be comprehensive and persuasive.

Cavafy would scoff at most modern characterizations of himself. He knew full well how slippery these terms are, and how their apparent meaning evolves in time. Can we seriously apply the term 'diasporic' with all its modern connotations to a poet who flourished almost a century ago, who felt that the diaspora

was the norm while the concentration of uppity Greeks in the tiny Modern Greek State was an aberration? 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.

Cavafy's sexuality evolved over the years, along with his personality and his poetry. Although his erotic poems are almost exclusively homosexual, Cavafy spent most of his adult life trying to avoid the tag of a 'gay poet'. He tried to be remembered solely as a poet, with no modifiers, with the possible exception of 'Greek' -- a word which defies simple translation. The various terms used over the centuries to describe a common people along a shifting historical continuum -- 'Hellene' and its derivatives (Hellenic, Hellenistic), 'Roman' (Romios), 'Greek' (Graecus) -- carry their own semantic and emotional baggage and were used very carefully by Cavafy in his poems and prose, in a masterful display of historical precision and scholarship.

The study of Cavafy as a Greek (or Modern Greek) poet has been sorely neglected, and understandably so; such an approach would provoke nationalistic tremors in Greece, while most scholars abroad cannot distinguish between 'Greekness' and 'Hellenism', as used by the poet. Then there is always the question of common terminology that unconsciously divides and confuses academia: when a modern Greek uses the term 'Greek' he naturally refers to 'Modern Greek'. When a non-Greek uses the term 'Greek' he refers to 'Ancient (or Classical) Greek.'

Cavafy himself gave us the initial diagnostic tools for examining his work, dividing his poems into discrete categories. That does not mean that we have to stop there and content ourselves with his categorisations, only that we should consider them carefully. After doing so, we can proceed to the more peripheral aspects of his poetry. And if we start to try to explain him using personal rather than literary criteria, there are plenty more to choose from than his sexual orientation: one was his life-long passionate smoking habit, which ultimately killed him. Cavafy was a practicing smoker longer than he was a practicing homosexual. How did that influence his poetry?

Other aspects of Cavafy's life remain largely unexamined but, nonetheless, they shaped his personality, and therefore his poetry. He was an avid tennis player, at least until the age of 45 (are we ready to read 'Waiting for the barbarians' as the work of a tennis player? Can we amend our mental image of Cavafy to include him in white shorts, toiling after a ball at the San Stefano Club grounds under the Egyptian sun?) Cavafy was also a public servant; a drinker; an inveterate gambler and, by all accounts, a terrific dancer. He was also shortsighted, and short of stature; he was a seventh son. Take your pick and draft your thesis. Or, better still, read his poems again.

The late Andreas Kitsos-Mylonas put it best in an article written in 1983, on the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death: 'Any text on C.P. Cavafy answers only to its own prejudice regarding the work and the remorse generated by the fact'. Present text included.

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