

SOME NOTES ON THE CAVAFY FORUM

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I was honored by the Cavafy Chair's decision to treat my brief article as a 'position paper' on the state of Cavafy research, while it was largely an elaboration of Andreas Kitsos-Mylonas' observation that "Any text on C.P. Cavafy answers only to its own prejudice regarding the work, and to the remorse generated by the fact."

I seriously doubt that I am qualified to evaluate the current state of Cavafy research internationally, and if I attempted such a lofty task I might have phrased a few things differently. Nevertheless, I stand by Kitsos-Mylonas' statement (I made a point of including my own text in this category) and urge the Cavafy Chair to translate and post the full text of his seminal essay.

I felt equally honored by the voluminous response my text generated, and enheartened by the validation of its positions in the responses, either directly or unwittingly. (I was intrigued by some speculations on my agenda for writing this article, and thought it strange that no-one assigned an agenda to the Cavafy Chair for publishing it.) In any case, the Cavafy Chair was gracious enough to permit me a brief commentary on the responses. I ask the reader's forgiveness for itemizing and for sometimes repeating the obvious:

1. There are as many interpretations of Cavafy as there are readers, and no reader's personal insight and appreciation is more or less valid than anyone else's. A scholar or a critic, however, has to follow established procedure for explicating the interpretation deriving from his insight, and should consider all pertinent evidence available (textual and external). If one ignores such evidence, only to cut Cavafy down to a manageable size that will fit his personal theory, is doing a disservice to the man and his work -- not to mention scholarship.
2. The Cavafy Archive has welcomed all bona-fide researchers wishing to examine its contents since 1969, and I would not be the one to change this policy. I should note, however, that all the evidence relevant to the positions of my article has already been published, from multiple sources and by multiple editors.
3. Placing cultural content in context is the crux of interpretation. In our case, we have to take into account multiple contexts: that of the writer, that of the reader (either past or present), and that of the translator, who has already interpreted the original for our benefit (or so we hope). That is why some translations or readings of Cavafy strike us today as hopelessly outdated, and why some innovative viewpoints which may strike the modern reader as far-fetched, even heretical, may prove to be relevant to future sensibilities.
4. There are also multiple Cavafys to consider: one is the person, as informed by biographical and historical data. Another is the public poet, as evidenced by the works he chose to publish. Another is the private poet, as evidenced by the works he chose to

preserve but not publish. Yet another is the amalgamation we appreciate as ‘Cavafy’, consisting of all his works and the commentary it generated. (This is but a sample; there are certainly more.)

5. It is facile to consider ‘Cavafy’ as a static entity, now that we have a more or less complete overview of his life and works. Cavafy, however, was blessed with a relatively long lifespan, during which he evolved both as a person and as an artist, proving some of our generalizations as oversimplistic, forced or tenuous. Of course there is much truth in the appreciation of Cavafy as a historical, sensual, modernist, homosexual, diasporic or Christian poet, and so forth (or any combination thereof); but these viewpoints are partial, and do not encompass the totality of his work. I tried to argue that the single characterization of Cavafy that still credibly applies to his entire work is the one supplied by the man himself: “Hellenic” (not “Hellene” or “Hellenizing”).

6. In my article, I carried the argumentation for variegated viewpoints on Cavafy *ad absurdum* with Cavafy as a smoker, tennis-player, dancer, etc. (though, in my provincial way, I wouldn’t be surprised if the field of Smokers’ Studies acquires academic legitimacy in the future). I thought that that my mention of Cavafy as a “terrific dancer” was a giveaway: though the characterization is justified by the evidence, it was a self-depreciating reference to Mel Brooks’ *Producers*, where the demented Franz Leibkind (the playwright of “Springtime for Hitler”) collars Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom (the play’s producers) and says “You know... not many people knew it, but ze Fuhrer was a terrific dancer”.

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