

Demetrios P. Tryphonopoulos
University Research Professor
A/Dean in School of Graduate Studies
Professor in Department of English
Secretary, Ezra Pound Society
University of New Brunswick

A wordsmith

I have been teaching poetry at Canadian universities for a quarter of a century. When my students--once they've heard me talk without stop about Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore and H.D. and so on--ask me the inevitable question about who my favorite poet is, my answer is, of course, Constantine Cavafy: and I go on to tell them, without having being asked, that the reason they do not know him is that he had the great misfortune and the great fortune at the same time of having written in Greek. Were he to have written in English (as he could and did early on), I add, he would have been better known and appreciated than any of our great English modernists. But what is it in Cavafy that I appreciate most? What's his significance for me? Well, he is most remarkable as a incomparable wordsmith. I find his irony, his antiquarianism, his hedonism, his stylistic inventiveness, his sense of rhythm very appealing; but what I find compelling is his language, the idiosyncrasies of his vocabulary, his syntax and rhetoric--a language or rather languages that bewitch me, that transport me to those distant and yet familiar Hellenistic and Byzantine and Alexandrian moments whereby I overhear his distinctive voice rendering, for example, a "luminous detail" discovered in Plutarch in a mixed-language combining the supple demotic or vernacular speech of turn-of-the-century Alexandria with the prosaic Katharevousa, the artificial, synthetic official language with its inflections to the entire Greek tradition. It's a flat but oddly melodic language, flat, elaborate and yet precise, ironic and poignant, powerfully evocative of time and place: Μέ ροῦχ' ἀπλά / ντύθηκε γρήγορα καὶ ξέφυγε. / Κάμνοντας ὁμοια σὰν ἠθοποιος / ποὺ ὅταν ἡ παράστασις τελειώσει, / ἀλλάζει φορεσιά κι ἀπέρχεται. (Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΔΗΜΗΤΡΙΟΣ 1916).