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For Greeks Like Us

Ας την παραδεχθούμε την αλήθεια πιά:

είμεθα Έλληνες κ' εμείς – τί άλλο είμεθα;
[«Επάνοδος από την Ελλάδα» 1914]

Despite the easy and perhaps by now cliché characterizations of Cavafy's poetry as promoting an idea of Hellenism that is "cosmopolitan," "diasporic," "diachronic" or "diverse," what remains important and compelling about his work today is the way he incorporates and grapples with a complex vision of individual identity within the larger fabric of cultural, historical, linguistic or aesthetic meanings, either through his own poetic persona or some historical figure. Cavafy typically focuses on the experience of an individual exploring his identity within the complicated and contradictory interstices of, firstly, his immediate situation and, secondly, Hellenism itself. But Cavafy's approach to Hellenism is paradoxical in that, on the one hand, he strives for a perception of Hellenism that extends far beyond the versions promulgated by the Modern Greek state, while on the other hand sometimes exhibits the same sorts of essentializing nationalistic sentiment. In «Ποσειδωνιάτα» for example, the inhabitants of Paestum lament that they have "fallen" because they have forgotten the Greek language and live "removed – oh misfortune! – from Hellenism" (Dalven, 265). One's understanding of the meaning of Hellenism here depends on how sarcastically one reads the «ώ συμφορά!» of the last line: is Cavafy truly lameting along with them, or is he mocking their sense of loss? Other poems, such as «Φιλέλλην», also adopt a rather sarcastic tone regarding the tenuousness of identification with Hellenism, while still others, such as «Επάνοδος από την Ελλάδα» demand the recognition of a kind of absolute Hellenic identity, even if that identity is critical of mainstream notions. Adamant in his own sense of Hellenic identity, the speaker is dismissive of those who affect only one prescribed version:

Δεν μας ταιριάζει, Έρμιππε, εμάς τους φιλοσόφους
να μοιάζουμε σαν κάτι μικροβασιλείς μας [...]

Α όχι δεν ταιριάζουνε σ'εμάς αυτά.

Σ' Έλληνας σαν κ'εμάς δεν κάνουν τέτοιες μικροπρέπειες.

Nevertheless, the preference for the "eastern" version of Hellenism here can seem no less "prescribed" and doctrinaire in its disapprobation of the identity it criticizes. Sarcasm is double-edged, and one can surmise that Cavafy is always suspicious of any singular vision of Hellenism. The meaning of Cavafy today, then, is in both his broad approach in the exploration of the many different versions of Hellenism and the possibility for the individual to find a place within it.