

On Reading Cavafy: The Man or the Poetry

by Anthony Dracopoulos

/And if the soul/
/is ever to know itself/
/it must gaze/
/into the soul:/
/the stranger and the enemy, we have seen him in the mirror/

~George Seferis

There is a critical tradition, in Cavafy's reception, which favors a strong connection between the biographical and historical context of the poet, and his poetry. Resting primarily on a "monologic" premise, these critical approaches purport that Cavafy's characters reveal the poet's own position on a given topic. This tradition is echoed by Manuel Savidis' in "Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass". While acknowledging the role of subjective parameters in interpretation and that his own approach to Cavafy is also subject to these parameters, Savidis nevertheless claims that to be "comprehensive and persuasive" any reading or interpretation must be informed by relevant biographical and historical data. The emphasis on biographical and historical data to validate new interpretations suggests that to develop an "acceptable" understanding and appreciation of the text, one must know the author. This could not be Savidis' intention for if it was, it would imply that to understand "Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass" one would have to know the man Savidis. Additionally, it would suggest that a reader with no or limited knowledge of Cavafy's biography and historical context would not be able to understand or appreciate his poetry. Yet, as evidenced by Cavafy's reception outside Greece, this is by no means the case.

Also central to Savidis' article, is the proposition that the man, Cavafy, needs to be researched more methodically and comprehensively and that this research will shed new light upon his poetry. Clearly both observations point to the same thing: Cavafy's archives are essential to understanding both the man and the poetry. As curator of Cavafy's archives in Athens, Savidis raises a number of lesser known facts about Cavafy's

life and suggests the possibility of new readings on the basis of this information. “Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass” certainly whets the curiosity of the Cavafean reader and renews interest in the poet’s archives.

The two points, however, are not necessarily interdependent. To be curious about the life of a poet such as Cavafy is not surprising, particularly considering the eccentricities of the man and the significant number of stories, portraits and impressions published about him and his life in Alexandria. After all there was a hand pushing the pen and that hand belonged to an individual. However, interest in the individual belongs to the realm of biography and not necessarily to the study of poetry. The experiences of the man unavoidably influence the poet, but precisely how and to what degree is impossible to determine. We cannot expect to have access to the impact or consequences of another’s experiences, when often we cannot comprehend the depth and complexity of our own. It is not possible to know precisely how certain events were internalized, processed or even resolved by a writer. Consequently, there is no simple causal effect between personal experiences and their poetic manifestation.

From the perspective of this tradition, to resort to “factual” or external evidence is also significant in dealing with the elusiveness of poetic meaning. The need for external evidence seems to derive from the conviction that biographical and historical data is less prone to interpretation than the words of a poem and can therefore provide the necessary foundation on which to build a sturdy and secure interpretation. But is it so? Is it possible to assemble data, to measure it against itself and to build an “objectified” story? Can data be examined objectively; unencumbered by one’s point of view, philosophical and ideological framework? Cavafy’s reception, and indeed the reception of many poets, suggests that it cannot. If we accept that a reader unavoidably approaches Cavafy’s work through a number of pre-conceived ideas and views on life and art (and that this is perhaps a significant factor for the increasing number of interpretations of his work), then we must also accept that we approach “factual” evidence in the same fashion.

Evidence and experience are always meaningful within some cultural context and by extension only available to us in the realm of language and textuality. They do not have a

presence prior to signification and as such are always open to interpretation and difference. This is why often, critical disagreements on the meaning or the significance of specific literary works cannot be resolved on the basis of either the poems themselves or external evidence, as both are subject to interpretation and integral to the disagreement itself.

All this should not be taken to mean that external evidence is irrelevant, but that it should also be treated with the same caution as the words of a poem. Alone it cannot guarantee the validity of an interpretation. Of course readers are not absolutely free to find whatever they wish in a poem. There is something in the poetic text that confines the number of possible or acceptable interpretations. And this is the words themselves and the conventional agreement, arbitrary as it may be and open to new significations in the history of their use, about the meaning of those words. In broad terms, western critical communities abandoned belief in a single, correct interpretation long ago, but have not eliminated the possibility of misreading. Most misreadings, however, are misreadings of texts and poems not of a poet's life. They are the result of inattentiveness to the poem and as such they subject to criticism, rejection or correction by the critical community.

But where does this reasoning leaves us in terms of Cavafy and reading poetry? Since we are looking for some ground, more solid than that offered by the slippery words of the poem, let's start from something that is indisputable. In comparison to other Greek modernist poets, Cavafy's reception has given rise to an exceptionally large number of interpretations. More than a century after the first significant review of his poetry, Cavafy's work continues to challenge critics to discover it anew, promising the adventure of yet another new reading. This gives rise to a number of issues worthy of further exploration.

At first glance, one could argue that Cavafy's reception is due to the diverse subjective and inter-subjective parameters through which readers approach his poetry. But why hasn't the same thing happened and to the same extent with other Greek modernist poets? If indeed reading Cavafy is as if one reads through the looking glass, then what is it in the

Cavafean text that allows different readers to discover in it different themes and what makes his work so amenable to different expectations?

What other evidence beyond the poet's biography and historical context, can be derived from Cavafy's reception that go towards informing the broader issue of how poetry is read and appreciated. Firstly, the ever increasing number of interpretations suggests that the wholeness of a poetic work remains unattainable. Much has been written about Cavafy's work, yet, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, something always remains unsaid. Secondly, the large number of readings suggests that, at any given point in time, meaning is polymorphous, multileveled and heterogeneous. The existence of diverse viewpoints, which have inevitably led to different meanings, illustrate that meaning is unstable and subject to change. In light of this, the diverse interpretations of Cavafean poetry could be approached differently. Rather than dwelling on whether they are right or wrong on the basis of historical and biographical "facts", perhaps we could pay more attention to whether they increase our understanding of his work, question established critical "certainties" or inspire the reader to new thinking about poetry and life. When they do, even those that are "weak", in the sense that they are not exhaustive nor take into account the plethora of available evidence, can be 'useful'. The issue is not to secure Cavafy's work in the certainty of meaning, but to maintain its relevance by continuing to seek in it, answers to contemporary questions and issues. Even more importantly, in an image oriented culture with a plethora of less challenging and immediately gratifying ways of spending one's time, we should seek new ways of reading which will make poetry relevant.

After all, in the poet's own words:

/Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.../
/And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you/
/Wise as you will have become, so full of experience/
/You will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean./

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