

The Transcultural and the Individual in Cavafy: A Brief Response

By Vrasidas Karalis

The extremely important point in Mr Savidis' article is that it is defending Cavafy's historical specificity as an individual and a human being. This grounding element of historicity should never be lost from sight and should never be left outside our scope when Cavafy's work is approached and interpreted.

However, the facts of Cavafy's life alone are not enough to interpret or even contextualise his poetry (Mr Savidis is well aware of that too). Cavafy himself knew it too: "*From all I did and I said / let no one try to find out who I was...*". Poetry as both form and context can not be reduced to the specificities of historical data; when we talk about Cavafy's poetry we are talking about our own experience of reading his work and not about his experience in the process of writing or even indeed of living it. So any approach to the symbolic universe of poetry is simply bound to contradict factual evidence since the latter does not express its implied meaning which is a matter of reconstruction and therefore highly theoretical.

The Promethean idea that by an act of direct intuition we will know the real Cavafy (after having known all the factual information about his life) is rather too romantic and implies a sentimental understanding of the act of writing. The real person, or the total person, was the experience of Cavafy the individual alone, and all that people after him are talking about are the traces of that "Cavafy" as left and articulated in his work, poetry diaries, notes etc.

Furthermore, each one of us configures the material according to our principles of perceptual understanding; the "real" Cavafy was Cavafy's own business; it is the transcendental signifier embodied exclusively by the man himself and belonging to his own immediate experience. We are talking about the absence of the real Cavafy and the way we relate to his "translated" existence through our own perceptual schemata.

So the fact that Cavafy was a smoker does not bear the same importance as his being a homosexual because not a single verse in his poems talks about the pleasures of smoking. On the contrary, the homosexual landscape is dominant which means that for

him it meant a lot and that he wanted his poetry to be infused with that aspect of his life and not with his smoking habits.

The same applies to him playing tennis which must have been very important as a social activity in his colonial middle-class milieu. However it never became a poetic event opening a horizon of meaning for his readers. Playing tennis could have been a very important guide to the appreciation of Marcel Proust or Gore Vidal because of the sexual energy it exudes (the best homosexual pick-up beats are tennis courts, as we see in some of Vidal's novels).

In Cavafy's poetry such mind-scapes seem totally non-existent whereas the descriptions of closed areas, beds, clothes, male bodies and the rest (with all their sensual associations) seem of paramount importance. Consequently, we can't talk about them without using meta-textual references in an attempt to establish the "truth" about them as correspondence between facts and statements.

Poetry constructs its own "truths" through the dynamic interplay of external incidents and their translation into imaginative topoi. Furthermore, such interplay is later translated through cultural mechanisms which define the reception of the work by its readers under their own conditioning. If I may use an ancient Greek expression, criticism does ερμηνεύει but μεθερμηνεύει texts.

However, we should misinterpret the homosexual issue; when we are talking about this we are referring to the *homosexual* as a dimension of experience articulated in his poems. When we study them, we are not interested in establishing a correlation between his practices and their expression in his poems. This belongs to the biographer, the psychoanalyst or to the police. We study the homosexual as a dimension regulating our understanding of his poems; if Cavafy was homosexual or behaved in a way that society would call homosexual, this is another story, not of immediate concern for our appreciation of his work. (Do we read Elytis as a heterosexual poet? Is Elytis a heterosexual poet with all the associations of patriarchal dominance, phallocentrism and exploitation of the female body that this entails?). The man, that is the personal specificity of Cavafy, exists only to the extent and the degree that has been encapsulated in his poems. All the rest is mere conjecture or working hypothesis.

Certainly we accept the provision that we should over-sexualise the interpretation of his poetry. However, sexuality as poetic material is not sexual. It functions cognitively: it imparts information about sensibility and locates the poet within the continuum of his life, otherwise ineffable, confusing and contradictory.

Yet, we must admit that the connecting thematic thread of the vast majority of his poems is the problematisation of homosexuality. As we claimed elsewhere, the great libidinal god of the phallus is spectacularly absent from his work. The fact that something which is so desired is so obviously hidden makes Cavafy's work so interesting; and I would suggest that we can replace the phallus with anything else in order to understand the multilayered structuration of his poems. Furthermore my impression is that when Cavafy called himself "Hellenic and not Greek" he meant "homosexual" in the Victorian sense of Hellenic Love or L' Amour Grecque. Yet, these are questions to be discussed like those of his Hellenic identity, or the Arab other, or the Europeanising orientalism.

Was then Cavafy *really* Greek? Can't he be considered as an Arab poet who wrote in Greek or a European colonialist who employed Greek in order to construct a "false" identity for the city or the country in which he lived? And finally what do we mean with the notion of the "poet"? What did he exactly do that makes him a poet for us today? Is it simply the fact that he made verses out of his readings and sexual adventures?

I believe that at last we must problematise such taboo ideas and discuss them afresh under the perspective of the ambiguities they are made of. Because when we claim that Cavafy was a Greek poet and we think that Seferis was a Greek poet too, we are definitely talking about different Hellenicities and a different perception of poetry also. The so-called essence of poetry and Greek-ness is much debated these days, so we must be patient in order to reach first a consensus about their meaning.

These are only questions –and we don't have to give them any answer. But to my perception, Cavafy was and still is the poet of homosexual desire, since bisexuality also never appears in his poems. All other elements of his life are the building blocks of his poetic ecology, the abode where we can find the most essential differentiating characteristics of his life.

The fear of losing the actual human being as an active agent in history is the deep concern in Mr Savidis' article; this is noble and laudable. But we can't see his poetry as a

running commentary or a corresponding series of footnotes to his life; the poet Cavafy individuated a form of Greek language which was the expression of a certain collective behaviour; the form of a collectivity against which his poems must be situated. The abundance of information and the wealth of conflicting detail of documentation do not allow the reduction of his poems to the specificities of his life.

Cavafy's marginality makes him interesting for us today. It is a pity to level him down to the common denominator of his age without engaging his work in a meaningful and challenging dialogue with the questions of our age. The more we complexify Cavafy's work, the more interesting and relevant we make him for our age and its cultural anxieties. And I see Mr Savidis' article as a direct expression of these anxieties as experienced by Greek intellectual life.

Diaspora Greek scholars must liberate Cavafy from such phobic identities and see him and his work within the wider context of a fluid world in which all concepts of ethnicity, identity, tradition and culture are seen as questions and not as givens. In the transcultural condition of thinking, the national easily becomes ethnic and the local can be deemed provincial. So Diaspora Greeks must de-nationalise Cavafy and discuss his individual adventure within his society; the Alexandrian society of a multilingual, multireligious, multiethnic mosaic, like the "κράμα" he talks about in his poems. It is the societal identity that matters and not national denomination, or religious belief. They also have to search not for the "*real Greek Cavafy*" but for the symbolic universe expressed by Cavafy in his poems, if they want to continue his work without becoming provincial.

(© Vrasidas Karalis, 2006)