

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies  
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Speaker: David Ricks  
Topic: Greek Poets' Tributes to Cavafy

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Abstract:

Over time, C. P. Cavafy (Alexandria 1863-1933) becomes more not less dominant over his Greek poetic successors; but the modes in which that sway operates, and the consequences for his *epigoni*, seem to be less overtly discussed than one might expect. In this paper a range of variously anxious or assured poetic ripostes, ranging in time from the end of Cavafy's life to fifty years after his death, are presented in the hope of prompting discussion of such matters. All poems will be quoted in English translation.

Summary of Presentation:

Cavafy's mystique as the modern poet's poet is perhaps without peer; his reputation has been quietly rising as other poets of the time fall out of favor. There are now so many translations of Cavafy, particularly into English, that anything one might say about them is immediately out of date. The larger project to which Ricks's talk belongs is titled *Cavafy. Reader and Read*, and it examines Cavafy's readings in poetry—Shakespeare, Dante, Tennyson, Browning—and then looks forward to other poets' readings of his work. One indication of Cavafy's very broad impact is *Sinomilontas me ton Kavafi* (In conversation with Cavafy, 2000), a sizeable volume of poems from many languages that are in conversation with Cavafy. In his presentation, Ricks looked at a dozen Greek poems written explicitly as tributes to Cavafy; he divided them into four triads of poems, to give an idea of range of responses. All 12 poems, which range in date from 1933 to the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, specify Cavafy by name, or allude indisputably to his person. The triads are: 1) poems responding to Cavafy as a near-contemporary, which tend to see him as the voice of diachronic Hellenism; 2) poems that address the relation between his sexuality and his oeuvre; 3) poems that are existential in character, emphasizing loneliness of this or any poet; 4) poems that are chronologically further from Cavafy's time, and address him in more oblique ways. The first three correspond to some extent to the disputed categories of historical, sensual, and philosophical poems.

One notable fact that makes Cavafy different from almost every Greek poet of the time is that not a single one of his poems contains a dedication to another Greek poet. Given the strong tradition of dedicating poems to other writers, this is a strikingly independent-minded element of Cavafy's work. Likewise, not one Cavafy title or epigraph in the collected poems contains the name of an actual poet. This indicates his stance of independence with regard to his precursors, and also might have something to do with his inability to create decent

literary heirs in his own immediate circle. Palamas, on the other hand, was generous with his time and advice, and many poets emerged out of his “school”; this is in stark contrast to Cavafy’s own practice, which depended on reticence, even secrecy and concealment. For that reason, it’s hard to recognize clear lines of influence when it comes to Cavafy, or to settle on certain groups of poets who obviously manifest a debt to him; Cavafy’s influence is far more oblique, in keeping with the poetry itself.

Ricks started with a poem “To the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy, on his Ποήματα (1908-1914),” written by William Plumer in 1932, the only poem written for Cavafy from abroad during his lifetime, and one that Plumer later cut out of his collected work. It could be seen as something of a gaffe to dedicate a sonnet to Cavafy, and one that talks about Attica, a very un-Cavafian locale. These same failures mark the three first poems Ricks spoke of. In his “C. P. Cavafy,” Nicolaos Calas, writing as Nikitas Rantos, is trying to dethrone Palamas, in protest against his poetic messianism which had made him an advocate of the Great Idea, and of Venizelos. The Levant in Calas’s poem bears the mark of Cavafy’s mixed culture, but though his poem is concise, it’s flowery in its description, something Cavafy steered clear of. A similarly brief but even more un-Cavafian tribute comes in 1939, by Miltiades Malakasis, in a poem that addresses Cavafy himself, and is written in the standard quatrains that Cavafy also eschewed. It is perhaps the only rhyming poem dedicated to Cavafy. You don’t have to write every tribute in the style of the poet you’re addressing, but the idiom of this poem creates a very different atmosphere, references many of Cavafy’s poems, but also refers to the Vestal Virgins, which seems wrong on two fronts: because of its Roman echoes and also because Cavafy never would have referred to women in this way. One interesting thing is the refusal to describe Cavafy as an effete or effeminate poet. We also have Yiorgos Sarandaris’s “C.P. Cavafy,” which was distributed in a Cavafian manner, as a single sheet circulated in January 1939. This is cognate of Calas’s poem; both give a general sense of the political stormclouds of the period. Sarandaris’s reference to perfumes also hints more clearly at a sensual aspect, and thus helps us transition into the second group.

The first in this group is another poem titled “C. P. Cavafy,” by Tasos Leivaditis, writing at the time when Stratis Tsirkas’s study of Cavafy and made him more acceptable to left-wing readers than he had been previously. It addresses a problematic characteristic of many of Cavafy’s poems, namely the tension between purity and impurity, and the end of the poem recalls “Days of 1901.” The subtlest reference to Cavafy comes in the poem’s penultimate line: “he would return,” *epestrefe*, recalls Cavafy’s poem of that title. But the poem isn’t *simply* Cavafy: since Leivaditis mentions sins and *simplegmata* (complexes), he obviously still thinks that Cavafy has to be afflicted with this in order to be able to write about it. We can see this as a sign of a struggle in the heart of the Greek left about how one can read and accommodate Cavafy. A fresh, and in some way revisionist account, comes from Alexandros Mitzalis, an almost unknown poet, “Constantine Cavafy: Alexandria at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” Like a number of these tributes, this one is hectically allusive, jumbling categories together. For one, it suggests that poetry is a kind of therapy, that it keeps you from having to give in to erotic side. But the end of the poem, the series of exclamations about what’s so great about Cavafy’s poetry, reminds us of the young man praising Aeschylus in “Young Men of Sidon.” From Yannis Ritsos we have something more complex, in the first poem in his anniversary volume from 1963, *12 Poems for Cavafy*, “The Poet’s Desk.” The poems by Leivaditis and Mitsanis made no link between the poet writing the tribute and the one receiving it, but Ritsos blurs that distinction: his poem contains lots

of information culled from biographical recollections of Cavafy, but is more to be seen as a self-portrait of Ritsos, in a sense. It is closer to the confessional mode in its un-Cavafian emphasis on sin. Only reading and writing through Cavafy could Ritsos find a way to express his well-known homoerotic element, but the emphasis on sin and absolution remains foreign to Cavafy's work.

Ritsos sees Cavafy's reception as a social act, as well as a form of erotic act, in this poem. A stark contrast would be the poem "Walls" by George Vafopoulos, which is self-aggrandizing through reference to Cavafy's work, and belongs to the third category outlined above. Another poem in this category, Nikos Engonopoulos's "Concise Biography of the Poet Constantine Cavafy," is written in the style of a rebetika song, which might sound alien to the world of Cavafy but actually is not: it's the type of music the men of his contemporary set would have enjoyed listening to, and also echoes the tone of poems like "Beautiful White Flowers." Engonopoulos, in his subtitle, indicates that we both share but must also be cautious in claiming a share of Cavafy's poetic isolation. Nikos Karouzos's "Non Multa sed Multum" displays a problem that sometimes arises in tributes to Cavafy: namely, the poem breaks into two, and while you get some kind of Cavafian strain, you also get a preoccupation with Dionysios Solomos at the end, with a ringing 15-syllable line and a compound epithet—just the sort of thing Cavafy made sure to cut out of his poems. If Cavafy had been Karouzos's editor, the poem doubtless would have stopped at the reference to Phernazis.

The fourth category is of poems that present a more distant and oblique stance on Cavafy; the first two address him directly and the last adopts his voice. The first is "To Constantine Cavafy" by Costas Montis, from Cyprus, and we should note the affinity Cypriot poets have with Cavafy because of the experience of decline. Montis's poem takes Cavafy to task for ignoring the Nile, for never writing anything about it. It also uses Cavafy's own words against him: "your Alexandria," evokes "The Gods Abandon Antony," and the last line echoes the last line of "In the Same Place." Montis sees something to reject in Cavafy, and yet also sees something to respect. The second poem is also by a Cypriot poet, Kyriakos Haralambides, who has used Cavafy in recent collections as a heavy stick with which to beat Seferis, who dominated Haralambides's early production. He draws on Cavafy's multicultural identity to shed light on the condition of Cyprus—and it is not a touchy-feely multiculturalism, but a sense that only Cavafy can express some of the pain that is felt by a poet from an occupied country, a place that should be part of a Levant but was chopped in half. It would be a large and serious project to read Haralambides's later work together with that of Cavafy. The last poem takes up an intimate biographical element, treating the time when Cavafy was getting unsuccessful treatment for cancer in Athens. Yannis Varveris's "The Poet Cavafy in Athens" was written for the 1983 anniversary. It is a conversational poem written in Cavafy's voice, discussing the afterlife of Cavafy's work through his own eyes and voice, though not his own voice linguistically. Granted a single night in modern Athens, Cavafy hopes for a reconciliation with his estranged friend Timos Malanos in Omonia square, home of concord but also of illicit love. The poet feels frustration in never having fully grasped Athens, having just been a tourist, and is granted one last chance to do that.

In conclusion, Ricks noted that most poems written for Cavafy could be fit into one of these four categories, and that the fourth is likely the most interesting. He also noted that he had

only used poems that make a direct reference to Cavafy, and that given Cavafy's own indirection, perhaps those poems that offer more indirect tributes might be the most successful ones.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: We might also consider the fact that there are certain words that seem to be Cavafian, and the mention of such a word can permeate a poem, like *efialtis*—if it appears in a poem it redefines that poem.

A: Yes, and one of the dangers here was pointed out by Seferis, that even in journalese, Cavafian phraseology is very common. I bet if you scanned through a year of op-ed pages, you'd find Cavafy quoted every day in at least one of the columns. That shows Cavafy's dominance, but also shows the dangers of people thinking they know the work when they really don't. This is a particular danger with the work of a poet who didn't write much, that people think they can master it. What the most critical poetic successors are trying to do is to open up areas of Cavafy we might have been taking for granted or allowing to sleep. I think Varveris does this very successfully, while Vafopoulos does it calamitously, because he just takes bits and pieces and can't make a new poem out of it. Clearly lots of the things I've drawn attention to here are similar to what happens with Anglo-American poets who write with reference to Cavafy: they get fixated on particular things in the work and perhaps ignore other aspects. And Cavafy's greatest oddity as a poet is the strange mixture of things that are in there. Cavafy doesn't take the easy option, but lets the different categories of poems interpenetrate. That makes him attractive to later poets, but also dangerous: it's easy to stuff a poem for Cavafy with too much material taken directly from his poems. Ritsos, for one, doesn't do that at all.

Q: I'm struck by how unapologetic you are about using the categories of historical, sensual, and philosophical for breaking down your own typology. I also noticed that the poem by Rantos that you presented plotted a geography that involved being out at sea, which is something very different from what you would expect from Cavafy the poet of the closed space; then in Engonopoulos we returned to the poetry of the closed interior space. So I could imagine other categories to look at these poems through, including the notion that Cavafy is tied to certain ideas about geography, space, and so on.

A: I think that's right, and another way of slicing and dicing is what sorts of Hellenism the post-Cavafian poet is writing out of. When Cavafy was coming to be known, the fact that he was an Alexandrian poet wasn't necessarily going to make him popular in Athens. Depending on what indigenous tradition you come out of you might feel like you belong with Cavafy in different ways. Czeslaw Milosz, for instance, thought he had a special insight into Cavafy because he grew up in Lithuania, in a borderland, part of a really large empire that doesn't exist anymore; Milosz felt that the Poles have something to say about Cavafy that the Brits simply don't.

Q: That's why I liked the poem by Montis, criticizing him for not writing about the Nile. I put myself in the category of people who can be faulted for using Cavafy to beat Seferis on the head, presenting Seferis as the poet who looks right past the Turkish Cypriots on Cyprus.

But you can also say the same thing about Cavafy, even though people tend to use him as the multicultural stick with which to beat Seferis.

A: It's part of that same debate, though I hadn't seen it in that way. In the old days people used to get embarrassed about the fact that Cavafy's poems are homosexual, and now you get the same trend happening with multiculturalism.

Q: I'm wondering about the categories. In some way the first three categories are more about certain themes, certain things being brought out, whereas the last category seems to be about tone rather than about anything thematic.

A: I suppose if pushed I would say that if the poem is thematically awry you'll never get the tone right anyway.

Q: When you get into some of the details like the oddness of the word *epestrefe*, so much of what translators of Cavafy have done is to think about whether they want to deal with semantics or with form. In some ways, people who are really in Cavafy's debt are not even referring to him, necessarily, but are in some way taking the page as a place that is typographically interesting. Laina and Dimoula are not going to ever say, "Thanks, Cavafy," but they will take very little ways of rearranging articles and making grammar work for them in new ways. How does that come into your project?

A: That certainly will come in at a later point. To get a tractable amount of material for an occasion like this I wanted to stick with poems that do something Cavafy didn't do, just because he was too mean-minded, which was to write poems for other people. I don't see this so much in Mastoraki or Galanakel. Laina is quite a Cavafian poet in many respects, but does it in ways that go under the radar. Any tribute is a high-wire act, because you're making a formal announcement that you have some kind of connection with the poet. But that's even greater in the case of a woman poet doing it, given the unresolved question of whether Cavafy could be considered a misogynist poet. I wouldn't use that word, I would consider it crude, but the female experience is entirely alien to Cavafy's work.

Q: But he has wonderful Veronikes and so on. There are powerful mothers all the way through, doing very interesting things. "Kaisarion" is about a slash and a birth, it presents a very feminine poetics.

A: But it can be difficult for heterosexual poets to write heterosexual poems in the style of Cavafy. Aslanoglou fits the general type of eroticism that he's writing about in an oblique kind of way. People have a much more crude or frozen sense of what Cavafy was like than they do with other poets. They care about him, they've seen more pictures of him, unlike Solomos where we only have one picture. With Cavafy there's always this danger of assuming bits and pieces we've picked up coalesce into something we can "know," and thinking that Cavafy maps onto Alexandria in some way, that if we know Alexandria then we know Cavafy. This is a danger I find in the British poems, there's a touristic sense of Cavafy. But Cavafy doesn't really offer a solid sense of Alexandria; there's an Alexandrian myth, in a Keeleyian sense, but if you want a real sense of Alexandria you wouldn't necessarily go to Cavafy.

Q: I like your categorization very much. In Greece we have the bad habit of categorizing poets according to generation, and I'd like to get a sense of how you think the different generations have reacted or responded to Cavafy, if you have a big enough sample to see whether different generations have stronger voices in certain of the categories you outlined. Also, do you have a sense of how the future generation of poets will read Cavafy? And a point of reference with how the non-Greeks read Cavafy?

A: There's no doubt that Cavafy's influence washes over successive generations, and though the generations are certainly an artificial construct, they're also subscribed to in large part by the poets who belong to them. One thing to say is that many of the best things written about Cavafy are the negative ones: Timos Malanos's book, a few casual comments by Palamas, which were some of the most important things ever said about him; they're seen as criticisms, but they could also be seen as grudging compliments. Palamas could see where things were headed, whereas Dimaras couldn't. The 30s weren't really ready for Cavafy. The left has a problem with Cavafy. I would have thought the danger of the current generations is overkill: for almost any poet writing today, Cavafy and Karyotakis will be his main models, which means that it's hard to get away from the crowd, and Cavafy could be overfamiliarized in later generations. As to other traditions, I would say that American poets broadly don't attend to the historical Cavafy, while English ones don't attend to the erotic Cavafy; there's a sort of transatlantic division of labor there. More current American poetry is about personal experience anyway, so you tend to gravitate toward that aspect, while part of the British interest even now remains one of cultural affiliation, since Cavafy lived in England and under the British Empire.

Q: I wanted to suggest a distinction between poems that write about Cavafy explicitly and poems that are more performative in using formal elements that echo his. I was wondering about how these iterations are not just influenced by Cavafy's poems but are also affect the Cavafian performance as well, in terms of mutual influence. In other words, how do they affect the performance and reception of Cavafian poems in different periods? I was also wondering if you came across examples from prose or visual arts or other media.

A: This question of the iconography of Cavafy is interesting. He's much more represented than most other writers of that period. There are many pictures of Cavafy, had himself photographed a good deal, and we have a sense of his different guises, which are consciously worn. But he's also been the object of artistic portrayals both during and after his life, in illustrated editions, films and so on. He attracts that sort of interest in a way that's different from most other Greek writers, and it's not just that he's more famous; there seems to be something in his physiognomy. As for your first question, about the two-way street, in this presentation I've drawn most attention to the ways that the poets are deluged by Cavafian influence and either emerge huffing and puffing to the surface or fail to and sink. But the most sustained poetic responses to Cavafy certainly do affect our reading of him: you're not going to read Cavafy the same way if you've read Ritsos, because by holding up the exercise of this extended 12-part self-portrait also provides an interesting tool for opening up Cavafy, the same way a critical essay would. Cavafy's own critical writing in prose is not very good, but he's a very good critic in poetry; the critique he carries out in Tennyson is extremely good, though you only get little bits of it in the collected poems. You're right to draw attention to the fact that these things go both ways. Montis's poem is a very easy-to-grasp

but trenchant example of that; it raises the enormous issue of what happened to Egypt in Cavafy's work.

Q: I was thinking about the comparison to Milosz, what happened to Egypt and vanishing empires. The poems from the early 40s, in which we get Milosz the eyewitness, are very unsparing in how he plays off the private, the quiet, against the dreadful things that are happening. And in his writings on illness as well. Cavafy seems to be a much more elusive poet in every sense. After Cavafy's death you do have the shrinkage of the Greek world, the end of Greek Alexandria. In a Milosian tradition, you would have later poets testifying to that. Do people use Cavafy in '52 or '55 to reflect on the end of the Cavafian world?

A: That's a very interesting way of looking at it. The poets who take the perspective of eyewitnesses on the events are the non-Greek ones. There's a pair of interesting poems by D. J. Enwright, from just before Nasser comes to power, published in 1951 or '52. Enwright later discarded the poems because he thinks they were too gross a co-option of Cavafy. He writes another one later about his dislike of Singapore, a place where all the things Cavafy liked to write about can't be written about, because it's too hygienic. In Greece, though, it's a sub-literary thing, you get references in newspapers to the idea of the lost fatherlands, possible using Cavafian phraseology. But the only Greek poet who does this is Haralambides, in his book *Metahistoria* pretty much every poem is an attempt to wrestle with the tragedy of the partition of Cyprus, and the fact that this is the last nail in the coffin for the greater Hellenism. But people don't come up with this when the Greeks are driven out of Egypt.

Q: I have a non-academic question: was Cavafy ever analyzed in a psychological way? I read something about him being a kind of social psychologist, and what you said earlier about his poetic determinism made me think that he was determining what to see and describe and what he wanted to exclude, the Arabs for instance.

A: Was Cavafy ever on the couch? I think the answer must be no, but we don't know very much about his life. Maybe Cavafy had a son; it's the sort of thing people like to discuss, but we don't know anything about it. We know a lot more about his working life.

Q: I meant more whether his writings were analyzed under a psychological lens.

A: Malanos's first book is a fairly ungenerous commentary on the various syndromes that we see in Cavafy's work, so people have read him psychologically to some extent, but that's the part of the book that isn't terribly useful. As to exclusion, his general poetic process is to work by exclusion, which is how we end up with just 154 poems. He was rigorous in his selection procedure, and the poems generally end up shorter, not longer. We see this in many of his responses to Browning, where he does in 10 lines what Browning did in 200. So his method of writing is one of exclusion rather than aggregation. One thing that enrages me about the Oxford is that they have more than one poem on a page, to save paper. It's a terrible way to present them.