Bintoudis, Christos

From a world in progress to an inclusive society : the case of Cavafy

Neograeca Bohemica. 2023, vol. 23, iss. [1], pp. 138-145

ISSN 1803-6414 (print); ISSN 2694-913x (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/NGB2023-23-7
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79634

From a World in Progress to an Inclusive Society. The Case of Cavafy

Christos Bintoudis https://doi.org/10.5817/NGB2023-23-7

In memory of Michalis Pieris

In 1946, the Nobel laureate poet George Seferis, in his study *C. P. Cavafy, T. S. Eliot; Parallels*, described Cavafy as a "poet of old age" and noted:

> [...] *με τον Καβάφη συμβαίνει τούτο το εξαιρετικό· ενώ με τα ποιήματα της νεότητάς του, και της μέσης ηλικίας του κάποτε, φαίνεται αρκετά συχνά μέτριος και χωρίς ιδιοσυγκρασία, στα ποιήματα των γερατειών του δίνει την εντύπωση πως ολοένα εφευρίσκει καινούργια πράγματα, πολύ αξιοπρόσεχτα. Είναι «ποιητής του γήρατος».*[1]

> [...] *this extraordinary thing happens with Cavafy; while with the poems of his youth, and sometimes of his middle age, he seems quite often mediocre and without temperament, in the poems of his old age he gives the impression that he is constantly inventing new things, very remarkable. He is a 'poet of old age'.*[2]

From that moment, this expression has become almost proverbial and has been cited by leading scholars of the second half of the 20th century who sought to further illuminate Cavafy's more mature work, as well as the evolution of his poetics based on an interpretative approach, the work in progress, which bore the stamp of the Anglo-American modernism and in particular of James Joyce. It is no coincidence that in the same essay, Seferis uses this exact expression to describe both Cavafy's poetic method and his own interpretative method that he, as a reader of Cavafy's work, uses in his study about Cavafy:

> *Η προσωπική μου ιδέα είναι ότι από μια ορισμένη στιγμή και πέρα – τη στιγμή αυτή την τοποθετώ στα 1910 περίπου – το καβαφικό έργο πρέπει να διαβάζεται και να κρίνεται όχι σαν μια σειρά από χωριστά ποιήματα, αλλά σαν ένα και μόνο ποίημα εν προόδω – ένα «work in progress», όπως θα έλεγε ο James Joyce – που τερματίζει ο θάνατος.*[3]

1 Seferis (⁷1999: 324).
2 Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.
3 Seferis (⁷1999: 328).

> *My personal idea is that from a certain moment on – I place this moment around 1910 – Cavafy's work must be read and judged not as a series of separate poems, but as a single poem in progress – a 'work in progress', as James Joyce would say – to which death puts the end.*

Seferis's methodological approach has been a point of reference for some of the most important studies about Cavafy in the last seventy years. Moreover, his analysis led to the promotion of the so-called aestheticization of Cavafy's poetic thought,[4] to which the Nobel Prize-winning poet alludes or clearly refers to in several passages of his essay: phrases like Cavafy "senses time", or "Caesarion [...] is a key to the way in which Cavafy feels", or "it is, I think, difficult to deny that this is exactly the type of Cavafy's sensibility: a brew of undiluted feeling, learning and thought", or "the question is not which books the poet reads, but whether he can infuse himself in the materials from which his poems are made", undoubtedly draw from the poetic universe of T. S. Eliot and from a poetics that refers to the modernist conception of art and in particular of poetry.[5] Finally, one of the most famous expressions of the bibliography about Cavafy with which Seferis closes his essay should be mentioned: "outside of his poems, Cavafy does not exist".[6]

As already mentioned, the aestheticization of the Cavafian thought by the critic Seferis found important supporters throughout the second half of the 20th century who delivered excellent studies following this interpretative 'line' and highlighting the work-in-progress character of Cavafy's poetry. There are many examples, and I will limit myself to mentioning only some of the most well-known and indicative of Cavafy studies today. I will begin with the groundbreaking bibliographic and philological study by G. P. Savidis, *Οι καθαφικές εκδόσεις*, published in 1966 in Athens. Savidis with his research identified the method with which Cavafy worked on his own texts (as well as the 'bizarre' way in which he printed them), and he revealed the process of a work in progress by organizing the poetic texts of the period 1897–1918 in a thematic order (chosen by Cavafy himself before his death) and ordering the rest of the recognized poems of the period 1919–1933 in a chronological manner.[7] The results of his scientific research led to the two-volume standard edition of 1963, which, with some minor corrections and adaptations in later editions, remains insurmountable to this day.

4 See Roïlos (2016).
5 Seferis ([7]1999: 330, 342–343).
6 Ibid., 362.
7 Savidis (1966).

Edmund Keeley's seminal study, *Cavafy's Alexandria. Study of a Myth in Progress*, published by Harvard University Press in 1976,[8] should also be included in the same context. The American scholar in his book highlights the evolution of the motif of Alexandria within Cavafy's work, distinguishing four different but concentric forms/phases: starting with the "Real City", he moves to the "Metaphorical", then to the "Sensual" to end up in the "Mythical Alexandria". This course, which aestheticizes the symbol of the city and, by extension, the environment in which Cavafy's poetry and thought move and from which they are inspired, leads, according to Keeley, to a "universal perspective" of his poetic work and to a tragic perception of human life; at the same time it confirms Seferis's approach according to which Cavafy's work after 1910 is distinguished by the "unity of the fundamental form" which is in fact its most important characteristic. In other words, it is a work in progress that, in its path, aestheticizes the poet's thought, making it appear a poetic experience or, to use a phrase from Cavafy, "hypothetical".[9]

Paola Maria Minucci's study, entitled *Costantino Kavafis*, published by the Castoro-Nuova Italia in 1979, is also based on the same approach of Seferis. In her book, the scholar and translator of the Greek poet highlighted the stylistic and narrative development that Cavafy's mature poetry presents and in which romantic, parnassian and symbolistic influences of his younger period are progressively 'assimilated' in a completely creative way; however, they now appear filtered by the experience of realism leading to a Cavafian poetry that culminates with the texts of the period 1911–1921. Minucci, referring in particular to the poetic structure of Cavafy's erotic images, observes that "from the evocative-biographical form in which the vague love emotions of the initial period are expressed [we move] to an increasingly objective description of the context in which the emotion is included. In the end, following a process of narrative depersonalization, he reaches a repeated transposition in situations and experiences that Cavafy himself defines as 'hypothetical'."[10]

As it can be easily understood from the above examples, Cavafy's work presents an evolutionary process that bears all the characteristics of a work in progress. However, this approach could be enriched if we take into consideration a series of other elements that are revealed through a global reading of the Alexandrian poet's work: the development of Cavafy's poetry and poetics is therefore not limited, as we will see immediately, to artistic issues (whether

8 Keeley (1976).
9 See the famous note of Cavafy, *Philosophical Scrutiny*, in Pieris (ed.) (2003: 256–260).
10 Minucci (1979: 95).

they are aesthetic, lexical, philological, or narrative) but it also extends to some aspects closely linked to its content.

An example concerns the gradual expansion of the group of characters found in Cavafy's poetry: a linear, chronological reading of the poems clearly reveals that Cavafy is gradually trying to add or include in his work characters that belong to more and more age groups (from old men who sit alone at the noisy end of the café[11] or stand «inside their worn, tattered bodies»[12] and their mind «turns / to the share in youth that still belongs» to them, their verse «is now recited by young men»,[13] to ambitious young poets who complain to Theocritus about their idyll[14] or the ones that remember a phrase of Lucian,[15] most of them very young, 23 to 24 years old «all joy and vitality, feeling and charm»[16]), to different historical periods (ancient, Hellenistic, medieval, modern and contemporary) but also to various social classes and groups (from royal and divine mythological heroes, to Roman and Byzantine emperors, up to everyday and anonymous citizens who belong or are placed in the ancient, Hellenistic, medieval, modern and contemporary era), thus creating a poetic 'society' that bears all the characteristics of a process of inclusion. From this development or enrichment, and especially in the more mature period of Cavafy's poetry, neither the question of genders is excluded (since in the poems we meet both men and women of different social backgrounds), but not even gay characters who, in my opinion, complete the mosaic of the society of inclusion that Cavafy tries to create through his work. I believe these elements enrich the interpretative approach of the work-in-progress, launched many decades ago by Seferis, which leads Cavafy to an increasingly objective conception of human life.

In this poetic process of inclusion, I think there are two poems that constitute truly crucial moments: on the one hand, *Ithaka* of 1911, which also signals the poet's turn towards more universal lyrical experiences, and on the other *Myres: Alexandria, A.D. 340* which in my opinion represents the culmination of this Cavafian trend of inclusion.

Starting from *Ithaka*, a very important poem for this process of inclusion that develops in the poetry of Cavafy, it should be noted that the journey of this

11 Kavafis, *Ένα γέρος* [*Ena jeros*], in Savidis (ed.) (⁶1999a: 102).
12 Kavafis, *Οι ψυχές των γερόντων* [*Oi psyches ton geronton*], in ibid., 104.
13 Kavafis, *Πολύ σπανίως* [*Poly spanios*], in ibid., 53.
14 Kavafis, *Το πρώτο σκαλί* [*To proto skali*], in ibid., 105.
15 Kavafis, *Ούτος εκείνος* [*Outos ekeinos*], in ibid., 49.
16 Kavafis, *Δύο νέοι, 23 έως 24 ετών* [*Dyo neoi, 23 eos 24 eton*], in Savidis (ed.) (⁶1999b: 64–65).

modern Ulysses can be considered only ostensibly as a completely personal development that leads to a solitary individualism. In fact, at the beginning of the journey, our anonymous and modern solitary character is presented in this way:

Σα βγεις στον πηγαιμό για την Ιθάκη,
να εύχεσαι να 'ναι μακρύς ο δρόμος,
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.[17]

As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.

However, the journey, the movement, and the experiences that this modern Ulysses collects on his way lead him, with such precision, to the realization of the journey's futility, revealing, one would say, almost a failed journey:

Η Ιθάκη σ' έδωσε τ' ωραίο ταξίδι.
Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θα 'βγαινες στον δρόμο.
Άλλα δεν έχει να σε δώσει πια.

Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δε σε γέλασε.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

The point of arrival, in fact, is also the moment in which the promise of riches that had fueled the drive to the journey is definitively denied. This is only part of the interpretation of the closing of *Ithaka*, because during the poem, which coincides with the journey described in it, an important shift happens that concerns the true meaning and the objective of the journey. I am referring to the evolution that Cavafy marks in his poem passing from the initial singular (Ithaka) to the final plural (Ithakas):

17 Kavafis, *Ιθάκη* [*Ithaki*], in Savidis (ed.) (⁶1999a: 29).

Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
ήδη θα το κατάλαβες οι Ιθάκες τι σημαίνουν.[18]

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

In this way, however, the initial solitary traveler of the poem («as you set out for Ithaka») eventually becomes part of an entire community of travelers who, continuing their journey, arrive at the same place: that of awareness/Ithaka. Furthermore, the journey to Ithaka does not aim simply and only at healing the wound created by the definitive loss of Alexandria and the ancient world (which in the corpus is being preceded by the poem *The god forsakes Antony*) but at the same time it gives the individual the opportunity to realize that she/he belongs to a group, to a community, and to share a common destiny with other people. So, if this is the case, I think that the Cavafian journey to Ithaka should be read not as a simple landing on a state of personal fulfilment or the achievement of individual happiness, or whatever else one wants to see behind the Homeric symbol, but as an inclusion of our anonymous character in a group, and therefore in a community, through which the modern Ulysses identifies himself with all the other solitary travelers. I think that this observation allows us to argue that, from a philosophical point of view, Ithaka is nothing more than the moment in which the individual is transformed into a collective, at the same time realizing a (philosophical) procedure of inclusion of the whole human society: any path one wishes to follow. However individual, solitary and personal it may seem, in the end all travelers arrive at the same and identical collective space in which all humans meet, creating a true poetic society of 'mixture' and inclusion.

The second text that I find important for the evolution of the poetics of inclusion that I am describing here is undoubtedly *Myres: Alexandria, A.D. 340*, written in April 1929. Unlike the chronologically and geographically abstract *Ithaka*, in this poem the narrative is placed in a specific historical moment and in a specific setting (funeral of Myres, Alexandria, 340 A.D.). However, if we think carefully, the plot is placed at a transitive and liminal moment between the world of the living and that of the dead. I believe this 'transition motif' offers the poem a very particular character also for my argument.

Myres could be considered Cavafy's poetic manifesto for the process of inclusion. This poem is not only the point in which the structural, lexical, stylistic

18 Ibid.

and narratological elements of Cavafy's past are assimilated in an exemplary way, but now completely mixed and absorbed, as Minucci shows in her study, but it is also the moment in which Cavafy presents a 'plural' and complete poetic society, rare indeed even for our poet: therefore there are men and women of different ages attending the funeral (besides the young protagonist and the companion of the deceased we meet «Some old women near me spoke in subdued voices / about the last day of his life»); there are priests of the high clergy («four Christian priests»), as well as lay people who belong to different social classes, and relatives of the deceased; there are obviously Christians present but also our 'pagan' narrator who would like to have taken Myres to the Temple of Serapis; finally there are heterosexual people, but also a gay one, that is the narrator and Myres's companion.

I believe that this process of inclusion that can be observed through a global reading of the Cavafian corpus makes the work of the Alexandrian poet current up to our days; and perhaps it could also explain, at least in part, the enormous dissemination of his poetry in various countries of the world. I therefore consider that the constant attention of Cavafy towards this multilateral inclusion procedure constitutes for his poetry one of the most important and current components that have, among other things, helped him to go through the entire twentieth century. On the other hand, Cavafy himself, in one of his famous and ironic autobiographical notes that was published while he was still alive, had declared in the third person: "Cavafy selon mon avis est un poète ultramoderne, un poète des générations futures" ("Cavafy, in my opinion, is an ultramodern poet, a poet of future generations").[19] In fact, Cavafy is not simply, or not only, the most important modern poet of the 20th-century modern Greek literature; and his work is not simply, or not only, a continuous but abstract effort to construct a work in progress in exclusively artistic terms. I believe, based on my reading presented in this paper, that it would be more appropriate to speak of a slow, tireless, careful, and complex work in progress that aims at the creation of a 'better society' that is founded, starting from 1910 onwards, specifically on the concept of inclusion.

Bibliography

Keeley, E. 1976. *Cavafy's Alexandria. Study of a Myth in Progress*. Cambridge, MA.
Minucci, P. M. 1979. *Costantino Kavafis*. Firenze.
Pieris, M. (ed.) 2003. *K. P. Kavafis. Ta peza (1882?–1931)*. Athina. [Πιερής, Μ. (επιμ.) 2003. *Κ. Π. Καβάφης. Τα πεζά (1882;–1931)*. Αθήνα.]

19 Kavafis, *Sur le poète C. P. Cavafy*, in Pieris (ed.) (2003: 313).

Roïlos, P. 2016. *K. P. Kavafis. I oikonomia tou erotismou.* Athina. [Ροϊλός, Π. 2016. *Κ. Π. Καβάφης. Η οικονομία του ερωτισμού*. Αθήνα.]

Savidis, G. P. 1966. *Oi kavafikes ekdoseis (1891–1932). Perigrafi kai scholio. Vivliografiki meleti.* Athina. [Σαββίδης, Γ. Π. 1966. *Οι καβαφικές εκδόσεις (1891–1932). Περιγραφή και σχόλιο. Βιβλιογραφική μελέτη.* Αθήνα.]

Savidis, G. P. (ed.) ⁶1999a. *K. P. Kavafis. Ta poiimata (1897–1918). Vol. 1.* Athina. [Σαββίδης, Γ. Π. (επιμ.) ⁶1999a. *Κ. Π. Καβάφης. Τα ποιήματα (1897–1918). Τόμος Α΄.* Αθήνα.]

Savidis, G. P. (ed.) ⁶1999b. *K. P. Kavafis. Ta poiimata (1919–1933). Vol. 2.* Athina. [Σαββίδης, Γ. Π. (επιμ.) ⁶1999b. *Κ. Π. Καβάφης. Τα ποιήματα (1919–1933). Τόμος Β΄.* Αθήνα.]

Seferis, G. ⁷1999. K. P. Kavafis, T. S. Eliot; paralliloi. In *Dokimes. Vol. 1: 1936–1947*. Athina, 324–363. [Σεφέρης, Γ. ⁷1999. Κ. Π. Καβάφης, Θ. Σ. Έλιοτ· παράλληλοι. Στο *Δοκιμές. Τόμος Α΄: 1936–1947*. Αθήνα, 324–363.]