

On Cavafy, then and now

Young people don't memorize poetry nowadays. I teach music history but I might as well serve as the philologist in residence for my college classes. How can one understand the musical setting of a poem when any understanding of the poetic nuances is missing? My generation learned to recite Cavafy before any other poet. His poetry, in its unrhymed boldness, communicated unprecedented originality. *Thermopylae*, *The God Abandons Antony*, *Ithaka*, all revealed a poet luxuriating in mythological imagery and historical evocation. Cavafy's poetry evoked a type of antiquity that we could still see, hear, even taste. But instead of a transcendent archaic landscape, he spoke of one enshrined in tainted nobility and decaying grandeur. His stern, unadorned language encouraged us to think differently; the aura of antiquity lay in its symbolic transference and imaginative insights, not the history of our textbooks: "Honor to those who in the life they lead /define and guard a Thermopylae."

And then came college. We discovered the sensuous Cavafy, the clandestine poetry that our teachers had kept unseen. The entryway to what I like to call "the muted" Cavafy, might have been Manos Hadjidakis's setting of "Days of 1903." What robust musical language! We ended up memorizing not only the poetry but all the songs of his *Magnus Eroticus* record. Cavafy wrote about diaphanous erotic landscapes with an extraordinary linguistic boldness. His descriptions of sensual *hedone* transferred as synesthetic aromas onto our young souls; and his innate musicality fed our voracious minds with sensory and spiritual delight: ". . . those lips—I never found them again."

Anniversaries and memorials aim at preserving the memory and legacy of the departed. Like the poet they wish to memorialize, musical settings of Cavafy's poetry also serve as monuments that preserve Cavafy's memory, not only *through* his art but *in* art. They tend to become monuments themselves—and, as musicologist Alexander Rehding has recently asserted, "[e]ach monument casts a trajectory into the future, setting out guidelines for the mode in which the hero is to be remembered."

On this 150th anniversary of Cavafy's birth (and also the 80th of his death), I would like to invite us to commemorate our hero by entering what Odysseas Elytis has called "the second condition of the world." In his *Open Papers*, his semi-autobiographical ruminations on *ars poetica*, Elytis admitted that Cavafy gave him the early "sudden jolt toward poetry." Artists responsible for such transformative experiences reside, as Elytis advocated, in a metaphysical artistic *topos*: "Despite their great differences and occasionally because of them, poets, musicians, and artists, throughout the centuries, do nothing but constitute the second condition of the world. . . . No one is obliged to care about Poetry. But if one does, one is obliged to 'recognize and travel to' that second condition, to walk on air and water both."

Today, more than ever, we yearn for Cavafy's poetry. It teaches us the pleasure of solitude, in a world that screams for exposure; it promotes the fragility of pleasure in a world full of fake cacophony; and it elucidates a mythical world of grandeur and fall, at the same time robust and weak, familiar and alien, attractive and grotesque, much like our own. In our ever-changing world, Cavafy's poetry embodies the melancholy of ruin as well as the promise of desire. Maybe we can exorcize some of today's evil if we start to recite his poetry out loud again. "Δώδεκα και μισή. Πώς πέρασεν η ώρα. / Δώδεκα και μισή. Πώς πέρασαν τα χρόνια."