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To: Vassilios Lambropoulos <vlambrop@umich.edu>
Subject: Waiting for the Poseidonians...

Waiting for the Poseidonians...

En megali elliniki apoikia
Martiai kalendai

Happy St. David's day, Vasili, and thanks for stretching the terms of eligibility for contributors to your Cavafy sesquicentennial so as to accommodate a poseidonian Welshman -- anellinistoi den eimetha, tharro.

Possible answers to your question "What does Cavafy mean today?" proliferate exponentially in consequence of what Elytis famously called "to passe-partout Kavafi", the ready adaptability of his verses to all kinds of purposes. For years, journalists, politicians, cartoonists and advertisers (os einai to synitheio tous, oi apaisioi) have been bending Cavafy's words to their squalid ends, whether lampooning the hapless Glucksbergs (Aleksandrinoi vasileis) or the Pope Emeritus (allazei foresia ki aperxetai), or advertising airlines and duty-free goods (oso boreis pio affthona idonika myrodika). Xenophon Kokolis documented the early manifestations of "Cavaphis vulgatus" in 1983 (Xartis 5-6). At a more exalted level, literati have also been having an intertextual field-day with Cavafy's poems, and I wonder if the practice hasn't now gone global, courtesy of J.M. Coetzee, inter al. Even ten years ago at the LaTrobe Greek Poetry Evenings here in Melbourne, the Cavafy gig attracted an exceptionally large audience of non-Greeks, and the speakers included high-profile anglo-Australian poets reading their Cavafy-inspired poems. Jackie O. and Oprah.com have also done their bit (na ta leme tora!).

In any case, I suspect that Cavafy probably now has more readers in languages other than Greek. And one might imagine a senescent cavafian poet (a la "Poly spanios") gloating at the globalisation of "the share in youth that still belongs to him"; but he might well also regret (as might we Neohellenists) that more of his readers are not taking the trouble to learn Greek (that vehicle of fame) in order to enjoy "his perception of the beautiful" in the original. A fortiori if they are lapsed or delinquent Hellenophones of the diaspora -- after all, Cavafy has given the Greek diaspora the most striking poetic expression of its worst nightmare: Poseidoniopoesis (linguistic dehellenisation).

While we're waiting for the Poseidonians, your question might prompt those of us still reading the poems in Greek to ponder whether "What Cavafy means to us today" matches what he means to those Cavafy-fanciers who are totally reliant on translations. Translations of Cavafy into English alone are legion and of uneven quality. Over 33 years of teaching Cavafy in both Greek and English, I developed a quick diagnostic test (the "anthropia" test) by which to form a first impression of each new translation of the Cavafy canon into English -- I'd turn straight to the poem "John Cantacuzene prevails" and the rendering of the rhetorical questions in lines 12-13: "Eidame prokopi / apo to fersimo tis, eidame anthropia?" Colloquially "prokopi-anthropia" are a tautological pair (cf. both Babiniotis and Triandafyllidis Institute dictionaries), and I take the sense of these verses to be "Did her antics get us anywhere, did they avail us?" The agitated soliloquist of the poem is clearly fond of tautology and is working up to one worthy of folksong: "Tous rimaksen o Kantakouzinis, tous rimakse o kyr-lannis!". So all the translations I've seen of "anthropia" as "compassion" and "humanity" miss both the sense and the style of "What Cavafy means to me" in the original -- to this day I still await "mia metafrasi tis anthropias" for these lines. This is but one small example of what could easily turn into a nitpicker's picnic, with inevitable implications for the big picture of "What Cavafy means". However, my purpose is not to belittle the laudable work of many of Cavafy's translators; rather it is to suggest that you probably need to recast your question in the plural -- cf. "what Ithakas mean". Sarah Ekdawi deftly coined the term "Polycavafy" in reviewing recent translations into English, but the issue of multiple interpretative starting-points and destinations is clearly not confined to reading translations of Cavafy -- quot lectores, tot Cavaphides. Oh dear, another relativist free-for-all looms -- just as well the journey's the thing, eh?

Let me try to make amends for trashing your question with a final jeu d'esprit in honour of my national patron-saint Dewi Sant (icon attached), whose feastday falls today: a delicious Poseidonian moment is regularly re-enacted by my mellifluous compatriots in Cardiff (another sizeable Greek colony, even mentioned in rebetika). Some fifty-thousand non-Welsh-speaking rugby fanatics gather at the Millennium Stadium and ritually (but uncomprehendingly) intone the last line of their national anthem: "o bydded i'r hen iaith barhau" (o long may the old language endure), bereft - o symfona! - of their linguistic patrimony. Under such auspices, little wonder these gatherings so often end in tears...

Hwyl!

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