

Forms of Cosmopolitanism

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THE GREEK POET YANNIS RITSOS, in his *Twelve Poems for Cavafy* (1963), wrote of the Greek Diaspora poet Constantine P. Cavafy: “Many claimed him, many fought over him ...”^[1] This has only become truer this past year with the hubbub surrounding Cavafy’s 150th birthday. Cavafy was promenaded around for a vast array of purposes last year as seemingly every institution jockeyed to honor him. Some events were extremely public, such as the extravaganza at Town Hall in New York City on November 18, in which Kathleen Turner and Olympia Dukakis read poems while writers, translators, and critics from Orhan Pamuk and Mark Doty to Edmund Keeley and Daniel Mendelsohn added their commentary with flashy visuals (poems appearing on the screen behind them as they talked). There was a much awaited finale (a sign in the foyer warned the audience of male frontal nudity) by the choreographer of the Athens 2004 Olympics Dimitris Papaioannou in which a naked youth borrowed a third leg from the choreographer himself in an intricate mediation on parts and wholes, Eros and disability. Other such

events included panels like those at the Onassis Foundation House of Arts and Letters in Athens on November 4 with the title, “What Happens when Cavafy Enters Mass Media?” or again on December 10, “Cavafy in Our Time.”

In the midst of celebrations around the poet and his work, Hala Halim took the canon to task with *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, challenging the particular Anglo-Saxon ownership of Cavafy’s legacy. Her fascinating debunking of a colonial Alexandrian cosmopolitanism is long needed. More specialized happenings included the evening organized around Halim’s book at the NYU Humanities Initiative on November 11, a panel event in which both Halim and I participated, and an article by Dimitris Papanikolaou that appeared in the fall issue of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* with the title “Days of those made like me: retrospective pleasure, sexual knowledge, and C. P. Cavafy’s homobiographics.” For my part, I marked the anniversary with a visit along with my students to Columbia University’s Rare Book Room to see the translations Stephen Spender and Nikos Stangos made for Hockney’s small print run of Cavafy etchings — the unacknowledged subtext of the grand Town Hall event — the gay canon that has been the predominant Cavafy in the English language for some 50 years now.

This public and private whirlwind of birthday events actually resonates with Cavafy’s own fascination with dates. They epitomize the space where monumental and minor meet. Some institutions found ways to bridge the distance. For example, the Onassis Foundation managed to promote both the public and private Cavafy with its wide range of initiatives. On the one hand, its bold move to buy Cavafy’s papers turned the Foundation into a key player in the fight to claim his legacy. Its logo for the Cavafy Archive shows the Onassis flagship floating in one lens of Cavafy’s ubiquitous round spectacles. On the other hand, this sort of branding was only the public face of a much quieter time-intensive project to create new ways of teaching Cavafy as well as to digitize the archive.



What is it, I wonder, about our increasingly cosmopolitan, multicultural and multilingual cities, whether New York or Athens, that needs a poet like Cavafy? What are the best ways to learn and go on learning from his poetry? How can we reconcile public legacies with the privateness of literature?

As we mark the anniversary of this seminal Alexandrian poet, I want to consider what is missing from accounts of Cavafy and cosmopolitanism that focus on public history, rather than the more private experience of reading poems.

Days of ...

Cavafy entitles many poems with the phrase “Days of ...” followed by the year: “Days of 1901” or “Days of 1908.” Months also are significant. History and dates mattered to this Greek living and writing at the edge of Europe in Alexandria in the first decades of the 20th century.

Sometimes dates are hard to read. In Cavafy’s tombstone poems they quite literally disappear before the reader’s eyes, a white break that runs down the center of the poem mimicking the erasure of time on the worn surface of the stone. One such poem, “In the Month of Hathor,” reprinted here in Daniel Mendelsohn’s translation, begins:

With difficulty I read upon this ancient stone.
 “O Lo[r]d Jesus Christ.” I can just discern a “So[u]l.”
 “In the mon[th] of Hathor” “Leuciu[s] went to his re[s]t.”

Looking at the original, even without knowing Greek, the illegibility is evident. Spaces and brackets gesture to what has been left out. (The bilingual Oxford World’s Classics edition is useful for this purpose.) The poem continues:

Where they record his age “The span of years he li[ve]d”
 the Kappa Zeta is proof that he went to rest a youth.

Amidst the erosion I see “Hi[m] ... Alexandrian.”

The month of Hathor refers to the Egyptian goddess of tombs and sensuality. Kappa Zeta (KZ) is the Greek number 27. Dates signal the fleetingness of time, of love, but also the cosmopolitanism of Alexandria with its mix of gods and languages. They create the sense of Alexandria at the crossroads of East and West, at the interstices of Ancient, Hellenistic, Byzantine, and Modern times. The choice of the Egyptian “Hathor” instead of the usual Greek “Athyra” in Mendelsohn’s translation makes the amalgam all the more available to the English-speaking reader.

Years, months, even hours in Cavafy’s poetry connect the past and the present. They do extra work and demand the same of the reader. Papanikolaou in his *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* article reminds us that Cavafy first circulated “To Remain,” one of his most openly homoerotic poems, in July 1918, thus echoing the date of the original encounter in the poem “in divine burning July [...]” Here it is in Spender’s and Stangos’s translation:

It must have been have been one or one-thirty
 after midnight.

 In a corner of the wine-shop;
 behind the wooden partition.

Except for the two of us, the shop was completely deserted.
 An oil lamp scarcely burning.
 The waiter who had been awake,
 slept now at the door.

No one would see us. But
 we were so excited anyway
 we couldn't take precautions.

We partly undid our clothes - there weren't many
 as it was in divine burning July.

Enjoyment of flesh through
 half-torn clothes;

quickly bared flesh; apparition
 twenty-six years passed; and now returned
 to remain in this poetry.

And then there are the historical poems. If we don't know that Caesarion was executed in 31 BCE, then the historical irony of "Alexandrian Kings," with its retelling of the honors and kingships bestowed on Caesarion in 34 BCE, is lost. This history with its ruthless cutting out of Cleopatra's son as the heir to Julius Caesar's throne is formally encoded in another Caesarion poem in which the young boy's "coming out" of history into the poet's study is recreated through a break in the typography of the poem, the perforation of five ellipses, a literal caesarian birth on the page. The repetition of dates and interlacing of historical figures throughout the Cavafy canon, much like rhyme and meter, reorganize our expectations and make possible implausible connections.

Hi[m] ... Alexandrian

History, especially post-colonial history, is crucial to the alternative archive Hala Halim has created in her *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanisms*. She reads the famous Alexandrian triumvirate of Cavafy, E.M. Forster and Lawrence Durrell for the parts of their stories that owe more to Egypt than England. All the same, I didn't recognize in Halim's book the Cavafy that I have lived and taught for over 25 years. Her discussion of Bernard de Zogheb's libretto *La Vita Alessandrina* was a revelation and made me eager to read the projected companion volume on the Arabic sources of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism. The fact is that in the English-speaking world we have been overly schooled in the British colonial reception that Halim is out to dislodge.

Yet I also wonder if my lack of recognition has something to do with the broad-stroke approach entailed by such an ambitious rewriting. Like so many of the big public events Halim's book leaves the poems, for the most part, unread. Though Halim tells us Cavafy is cosmopolitan, it is difficult to attend to the forms of this cosmopolitanism when the

terms of her discussion emphasize ethnicity and cover such an expanse — individual chapters on Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell, as well as a final longer chapter on Zogheb. This approach makes it possible to talk about “him” as an “Alexandrian” in the poem with which I began, but not to consider what it means that the “him” that is “Alexandrian” is only partially legible in the text — “hi[m].” This would require a much different kind of attention and more time.

The title of Halim’s chapter on Cavafy, “Of Greeks, Barbarians, Philhellenes, Hellenophones and Egyptiotes,” suggests that such complications are not her main concern. She is interested in reading Cavafy and his poetry, as she puts it, “in an ethnic key.” The usefulness of attending to the mixed affiliations of time and place is undeniable, especially for a cultural history of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism. But surely the point Cavafy makes through his poems about being Greek in Egypt is that one must incorporate and thereby defend the mix and slippage of identity *formally* — in the look and sound of the poem, not simply as a political mandate. To be an Alexandrian is to be Greek, and Barbarian, and Philhellene, Hellenophone and Egyptian, but also the spaces and commas in between. To pin down the degree of chauvinism or tolerance — more Anglophile, more Philhellene, pro- or anti-Islam — is only interesting if one can show the material modes of cosmopolitanism in the poems — what the philosopher Alexander Nehamas has called Cavafy’s “grammar of self.”

I participated in a panel at NYU with Halim, which was both a timely opportunity to ask her some questions about her approach, as well as a serendipitous moment at that point in the semester for my students, who were looking at the making of Cavafy in England. My first question to the author addressed the aesthetic imagination of her archive. How do the poems make the mix and slippage happen? If, as she points out, Cavafy’s “diasporic affiliation” allows us “to go beyond binaries in favor of a more cosmopolitan attunement to otherness and other textualities,” what exactly is the textual nature of these other textualities? How are ethnicity and belonging acted out in Cavafy’s poetry and its intertexts? And how might this mark off Alexandrian cosmopolitanism from identity politics or what Stanley Fish snidely labels “boutique multiculturalism”?

This is a more descriptive approach to Cavafy that many of his own poems — certainly the ones Halim uses to parse out ethnic tensions — can be read as resisting. In those that show Greeks with the other, oppositions are repeatedly transformed and dissolved. While on the surface Cavafy’s unpublished poem “Coins” positions Indian and Greek on opposite sides of the coin, a closer reading reveals the Indo-Hellenic *mélange* in which the two sides spin into one. The awkward transliteration of Indian kingships in the first few lines — “Coins with Indian epigraphs./ They are of the most powerful monarchs./ of Evoukratidáza, of Stratága./ of Menandráza, of Eramaiáza” — is not there to prove the true and proper Greek spelling of the kings’ names at the end: “Ermaios, Eukratides, Straton, Menander.” Such an interpretation misses how the names for places and people lipogramatically intertwine: the foreign Indian way of pronouncing the kingdom and the more familiar Greek name of the ruler share letters and rely on each other. It also ignores the irony that the Greek reader in the poem, not a Hellene but *Graikos*, an ordinary Greek, would stop abruptly “face to face” with the king’s image on “the good

side” of the coin, and feel himself reflected in the king, as if the familiarity of the Greek name and of knowing Greek could erase all hierarchies of race, class and religion. Here, as in the phrase “Hi[m] ... Alexandrian,” cosmopolitanism blurs any clear-cut definition of ethnic identity: it is more about living between languages and the act of reading and misreading and reading again.

Multilingualism as a way to inhabit the space between nationalities is even more memorably invoked in Cavafy’s most famous tombstone poem, “For Ammonis, who Died 29 Years Old, in 610.” Again the poem puts forward the place between languages and translation as modes for understanding cosmopolitanism. The poet Rafael is asked to pour his Egyptian feeling into a Greek epitaph for the dead poet Ammonis. The explosive imperative Cavafy uses for “pour” or “spill” — “Χύσε” (híse) — carries the sexual connotation of coming. He seeks to make a poem and to make love merge, creating a new kind of Alexandrian citizenship for what Keeley aptly called the sensual city:

Into a foreign tongue our sadness and love pass.
Spill your Egyptian feeling into a foreign tongue.

Rafael, your verses should be written
so they have, you know, our life inside,
so the rhythm and each phrase show

All of Cavafy’s poems are about blurring distinctions — between memory and desire, history and the present, the self and the other — and the place where this happens is the language on the page. Through punctuation, typography, homophonic rhymes, and different linguistic registers, the ancient binarism of Greek and Barbarian is replaced by an amalgam — Hellenistic, Byzantine, Ottoman, Phanariot, and most importantly, Alexandrian.

In one of the prose texts Halim cites, “On the Intellectual Affinity of Egypt and the West,” Cavafy remarks that Greek intellectuals from Egypt were “reared in the Egyptian environment” and “produce works that possess something of that environment.” This isn’t about being Greek or Egyptian, but about dissolving one into the other and how this happens in language. Alexander’s empire has long ago lost its moorings and learned to rely for its self-definition on the middlemen, the dragomen, the translators and interpreters. To separate out ethnicities and pit East and West against each other ignores the poetics. For Cavafy, to write Alexandrian verse in Alexandria as an Alexandrian is a matter that “the rhythm and each phrase show.”

The Barbarians

The problem, in other words, is that any reduction of Cavafy to identity politics, any emphasis on ethnicity and the question of who is admitted or excluded, is radically challenged by the poems themselves. Even the poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” with its oft-quoted message that identity is formed in relation to the other and its focus on the

us and them is as much about language and how we express our fragile cosmopolitanism as it is about who is or isn't a barbarian. If we follow the logic of the poem with its call and refrain through to its final synthesis in the last two lines, we can see how the geographical space of the poem acts out cosmopolitanism as a practice of living between languages and inhabiting the sounds of the other.

The poem builds with brick-like stanzas, asking why the city and its government have stopped functioning, and repeating the reason as the barbarians' arrival. The poem goes back and forth until we reach the final response with its surprising revelation that there are no barbarians, followed by a long dash and two final lines that merge question and answer and close the poem like a capstone with a question that is an answer:

Because night fell and the barbarians didn't come.
And some returned from the borders,
and said that barbarians no longer exist.

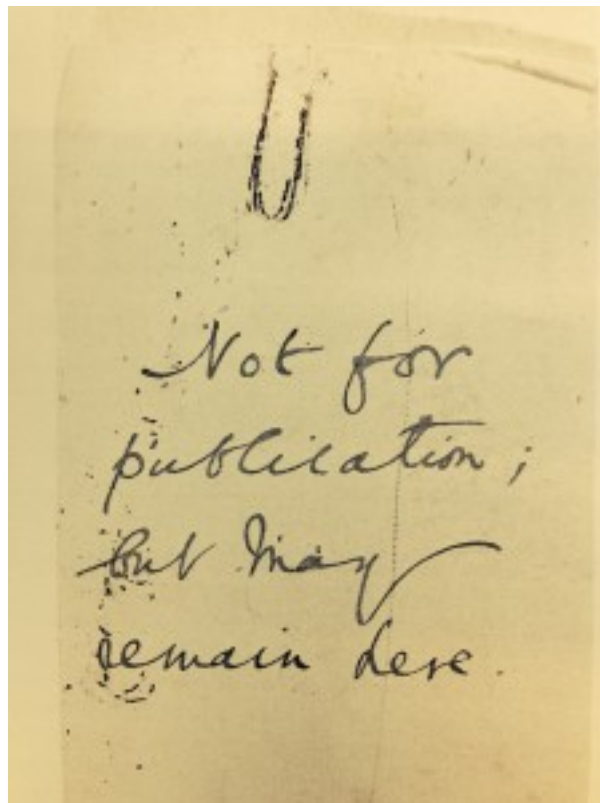
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And now what will we become without barbarians.
Those people were a kind of solution.

The Barbarians (*Oi varvaroi*), as we know, were the others, but, as we also know, they were called that because they spoke incomprehensibly (*var-var-var*). To be a barbarian was not so terribly different from what an American means today when he or she says: "It's Greek to me!" Sure, the foreigner helps us to understand ourselves, but it is the foreign as dress, habits and language and the materiality of otherness, its rules and the pressure it puts on what is familiar, that gives us a way to manage and understand ourselves; without its palpable difference, how are we to know ourselves as ourselves, the poem asks. Yet the point of how the poem unfolds is that the barbarians are only different if they are *far away*. If you go to the border, as the Greeks do in this last stanza, at least "some" of them — and this is true of any of us who live among others in cosmopolitan cities like Alexandria — you will find that the foreign language no longer exists as such. The *var-var-var* doesn't sound foreign anymore, and what is left, which is what is inevitably always left on the page at the end of a poem by Cavafy, is the fact that reading in terms of specific ethnicities isn't possible. The barbarians become *anthropoi*, people. The most damning critique of identity politics is found in the final line — "And what will we do without barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution" — because the barbarians are no longer barbarian, but simply people. The foreignness, their different habits, the incomprehensible *var-var-var* is no longer there. By bringing the foreign sound into the Greek language, they have become us. And if they are us, then they can no longer be a solution for our concept of ourselves as greater than or less than the other.

Barbarity is always relative and under erasure when language is elastic and multilingual. Like alchemy, Cavafy's poems turn one thing into another — the Indian script into Greek letters, Egyptian feeling into a foreign tongue, Barbarian into Greek and vice versa. Difference is overcome and accommodated on two sides of the same coin, in the liquid flow of translation, in the homophony of the border.

It is, therefore, telling that Halim, who writes at length about the Greek-versus-Barbarian dichotomy, never gets around to discussing this poem. It is as if canonical poems that can stand up to strong alternative readings aren't as helpful or at least as efficient in displacing the Anglocentric myth of Alexandria. She tends to draw on Cavafy's journalistic prose pieces and his non-canonical poems where the messages are more clearly set out. She refers to poems that support her argument about identity and excludes poems that have a less essentialist concept of the cosmopolitan. There is no doubt that the poems in the canon need the non-canonical poems for the kind of important cultural study Halim is doing, but they also talk back through their form. This is the part Halim leaves out. Her point that some of the "hidden" poems on Egyptian themes like "Dünya Güzeli" had political reasons for being excluded from the canon is important, but not enough. Certainly ideology informs why Cavafy didn't publish a large portion of his poems during his lifetime: their open homosexuality and, as Halim newly shows, their anti-Islam sentiment. (His archive is full of careful notes in English that read, "Not for publication but may remain here.")



This of course corroborates her point about Cavafy's complicity in constructing an Anglocentric Alexandria). But I think it is important not to limit the discussion about what does and doesn't see the light of day to content. Aren't these poems also "repudiated," "hidden," and "unfinished" because they weren't ready as poems? Because they couldn't stand up to the kind of multivalent reading he imagined his poems having?

Surely the problem for Cavafy is that the poems, in order to be his poems and unlike his prose pieces, had to be able to endure the test of time and do the work that spoke to

history. They had to have a density that couldn't be paraphrased. They had to be poems like "Waiting for the Barbarians" that, even at their most didactic, resist reduction.

Into a Foreign Tongue

How do Cavafy's Anglo Saxon translators — so obviously influential in creating an English Alexandria — handle these formal issues? And if translation is always an interpretation, why did she choose to use Theoharis Theoharis's translations? These questions, which I also put to Halim at the NYU panel, are crucial to understanding why, during this anniversary of Cavafy's legacy, it is so important that we focus not just on public modes of reception, but on a deeper, private engagement with the poems themselves.

If one wanted to sum up the kind of English translations available to a critic writing in English — leaving aside the early attempts of Cavafy's own brother and John Mavrodordato — one might tell the story as follows. First Rae Dalven gave us a Modernist translation with its introduction by Auden and emphasis on voice, though still at times Victorian in its prudishness. Then Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard brought us Cavafy as poet-historian with a conversational style and notes that made accessible to an American audience the complicated, ironic story of a Hellenic past. We can then jump to Mendelsohn's two-volume version including the unfinished poems since it is the first gay translation, fulfilling the early ambitions of the Spender and Stangos project. George Economou takes up the mantle of James Merrill who only translated a few poems but gave us our first sense of what a formally experimental Cavafy might look like. In the big story I brush over Theoharis Theoharis, like Avi Sharon and countless others, as translations that went largely unnoticed because they didn't distinguish themselves. They were adequate recompilations of other translators' solutions, a composite in Theoharis's case that then tended to over-explain and annotate, not just the history poems, but the philosophical and love poems as well.

I imagine the decision on Halim's part to use this translation was dictated mainly by the fact that Theoharis's was the first (until Mendelsohn's came along) to include the unpublished poems she wanted to discuss. But again, as with her focus on the non-canonical at the expense of the canonical, she chose to use a translation that weighed the argument down on the side of paraphrase. In contrast to Keeley and Sherrard's rendition of "A Prince from Western Libya" which, like the original, is idiomatic and to-the-point — "This was why he limited himself to a few words/ terribly careful of his syntax and pronunciation," — Theoharis's is belabored: "And that is why he circumscribed his speech,/ afraid and careful in grammar and pronunciation." Could his translation be a way of justifying her descriptive approach — telling more often than showing? Did Theoharis's translation support her approach of mining poems for their social history?

Halim's disciplinary training in Comparative Literature enables her to ask questions about genre and the canon in the Cavafy chapter. This is true in her other chapters as well. Of Forster she asks whether the history section takes precedence over the guide part

of his book on Alexandria “on account of the author’s canonicity as novelist — guide book writing being considered a lesser genre than history writing.” And she addresses the narrative structure of Durrell’s *Alexandrian Quartet*. But such issues repeatedly take the back seat to her concern with how ethnic groups are represented. On Durrell she concludes: “I do not wish to deny the *Quartet*’s modernist experimentalism but to urge that this too be read within the framework of a belated permutation of colonial discourse.”

In a sense what I am asking of this book isn’t fair — it’s something only really possible in a panel discussion or in a classroom. Close reading is what you can do on a panel with a few faculty, like the evening we spent at NYU, or with 15 students over a semester, as in my Cavafy seminar at Columbia. This is where you can engage scholarly projects like Halim’s, follow up on her leads, and argue and keep on arguing. This is where you can finally see what is hard to read in the eroded stone and therefore worth spending the unspectacular time it takes to sit and ponder: “hi[m] ... Alexandrian.” As I look back over this Cavafy year, my new year’s wish is that we will treat time as seriously as he does and spend more of it reading poems and translations of poems *critically*, rather than marketing a set of adjectives that we think describe this poet “at a slight angle to the universe.”

If we return to the scene of the last days of 2013 and all the birthday celebrations, we can now see how the quieter events help us pay attention to the forms of cosmopolitanism, move us away from identity politics and more thematic approaches — the Greek, British, Egyptian, or Gay poet — and move us instead into another place where the intimacy of poems on the page can unravel and complicate our understanding of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism.

[1] Translations mine, unless otherwise identified