

Preface to a Collective Pedagogical Document

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During the first week of July 2019, in a context that now seems to belong to a whole other world, my Greek colleague Takis Kayalis and I organized and presided over the 3rd International Cavafy Summer School in Athens. The Cavafy Summer School is sponsored yearly by the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation, host of the archive of the great Alexandrian poet Constantine P. Cavafy, which is now fully digitized and freely available to the public.¹ More than anything, the school is an intensive workshop for collective thinking out loud, involving full-day sessions for a week, where invited faculty conduct a seminar in the morning and students (graduate or post-doctoral) respond with their own short papers in the afternoon. The cohort is expressly international, and, apart from the compromise of conversing in “global English,” the perspectives brought to the table are diverse both in terms of geography and of discipline.

1. The Digital Collection of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/>.

Essential to the overall Cavafy Summer School project, as Dimitris Papanicolaou (University of Oxford) and I initially conceived it, is not to proceed from some sort of philological and/or historical expertise on C. P. Cavafy, whether on the part of the invited speakers or the participating students. On the contrary, what is sought after, and indeed has been achieved to a large extent, is an open forum of exchange of ideas and mutual learning in which the object “Cavafy”—which is by all accounts a phenomenon that surpasses the poet and his own biohistorical space—becomes the catalyst for disrupting orthodoxies of interpretation all around.

Following the two years when the topics were “Cavafy in the World” (2017) and “Cavafy and Antiquity” (2018), this time we gathered to address “Cavafy’s Orientations.” The impetus was indeed to consider the Cavafy phenomenon in the broader context of the “Orient” in full cognizance of the complex signification of the term as was established by Edward Said’s groundbreaking intervention *Orientalism* (1978). As is well known but nonetheless bears repeating given the continuous misinterpretations, Said’s book was not about “the East” but about “the West” with the essential proviso that neither of these terms refers to spaces that exist as such, in some “naturally” historical fashion. Rather, the point of departure of the entire study was that both “East” and “West” are social-historical constructions, each one on its own and yet both together and in antagonism, which have come to bear enormous metaphysical weight that has affected, in altogether material terms, real people in real social and historical circumstances.

Furthermore, Said showed how Orientalism, as a bona fide nineteenth-century academic discipline with a formidable apparatus for producing knowledge, eventually became an interpretive rubric for a range of cultural and political structures and objects beyond “the Orient” per se, including how meaning is imposed from external positions of authority; how real historical structures and objects are transcendentalized (and, therefore, dehistoricized, robbed of their materiality), or exoticized (made to bear an otherness that locks them into strict and unchanging boundaries for the benefit of those who get to determine what they are), or, by the same token, deauthorized (deprived of their capacity to determine themselves, rule themselves, represent and interpret themselves, and thus change as they wish—that is, preside over their own historical trajectory).

It is worth recording here Said’s avowed enthusiasm for Cavafy’s poetry, which was well known to those who knew him personally but only scantily documented in the public record—a few pages devoted to Cavafy in the posthumous book *On Late Style* (2006). Apart from the unique insight

in these pages to include Cavafy's poetics in his broader argument about late style—very apt, indeed, given Cavafy's intransigence in relation to whatever might be deemed canonical, which matches the broader range of late-style poetics—Said was fascinated by Cavafy because of a mutual affinity in response to the colonial, imperial, postcolonial, cosmopolitan sensibility of Egyptian life. It's fair to say in retrospect that for Said, despite his specific poetic proclivities, Cavafy's orientations were fascinating precisely as intransigent and anticanonical responses to the contradictions of empire—*anticanonical* here having an additional Greek meaning that covers the full range of Cavafy's poetics and erotics: an investment in what is deemed unruly and abnormal.

With this in mind, we certainly chose to work with an understanding of exploring and challenging the complex signification of orientation as a rubric of having a sense of place and a sense of direction, all based in the archaic investment in the fascination of where the sun rises—a strange planetary conceptualization that organizes a sense of direction in real material terms, even if these turn metaphysical very quickly in the history of human societies. The religious significance of facing east, let us not forget, is pagan in origin. In this respect, the use here of the term *orientations* suggests a set or a variety of parameters—at the very least, a compass for understanding and a map for enabling interpretation against the grain. Given the object of study, this also means a certain attitude in the adventure of reading: reading not just a poet and his poems, but a whole nexus of meanings that this poet animates and mobilizes beyond his own specific historical/geographical space.

This means that “Cavafy” is not a given, even though there is by now a perfectly bounded and defined oeuvre. “Cavafy” is a space of signification (meaning) to be achieved by what are in essence interminable readings—and translations, literally and metaphorically. In this light, the methodological rubric became two-pronged: one, poised literally on Cavafy's orientations: geographical/social/cultural/historical and all their intersections (for example, geocultural), but, of course, also sexual—the term *sexual orientation* (a very recent term) is worth pondering in this context; two, becoming alert to Cavafy's directions: directions to Cavafy(land)—a space of poetic invention that encompasses a huge range of meaning beyond the world of poetry per se.

From this standpoint, “Cavafy's Orientations” is not about Alexandria—certainly not restricted to Alexandria, the famous fetish. No doubt, the figure of Alexandria plays a great role in this discussion both as a real place and

as a construction that emerges from Cavafy's poems. The essays collected here are exemplary in contextualizing and indeed accentuating Alexandria without at all orientalizing Alexandria. Even more, what emerges in the specific focus on Alexandria, when this occurs, is the city's own permeating significance in the colonial and imperial discourses of Europe, a kind of mythical/discursive effect in which Cavafy was central.

It is from this latter perspective—following this framework for thinking out loud and not adopting it as a preconceived set of principles—that an examination and discussion of Cavafy (and the Alexandrian world) took place in the broader practice of thinking about nationalism, colonialism, and empire from the standpoint of the present. One initial consideration was the double context of the Orientalism and colonialism of Cavafy's day and the postcolonial subtext of his international reputation today. While there may be a definite historical nexus there, there is nothing self-evident as to how the terms of this nexus might be related or whether the contemporary study of Cavafy internationally gains or loses from a retrospective elucidation of the colonial conditions in which his work was born. Soon we all realized that we had arrived together at a sort of unorthodox point of convergence: Cavafy's whole poetic enterprise, but also his way of life and how this came to affect the production and orchestration of this oeuvre, was indeed very much embedded in the contradictions of the colonial/imperial sphere his life chanced upon, in a much more organic sense than it has been articulated in the typical biographical accounts of the philological industry that reveres a specific sort of Cavafy.

Very much departing from the narrow debate, within the realm of Greek literary criticism, as to whether Cavafy belonged to (and could be claimed by) the national canon or was instead a Hellenic diaspora poet, which ultimately explains his contemporary transnational reputation in the realm of so-called world literature, the discussion elicited by and confronted in these essays addresses the enormous and contradictory complexity of how Cavafy's significance was forged in the cultural upheaval precipitated by the colonial practices of the British Empire in that far corner of the Southeastern Mediterranean where Alexandria is situated. As is evident in every essay that follows, the colonial conditions of poetic production proved essential in our reading, but what they signify is very complex and hardly determinable by theories of colonialism or postcolonialism.

Again, the nexus may be familiar, but it is also unorthodox and peculiar. One might well wonder, for example, how colonial conditions of poetic production in this case are linked to Cavafy's peculiar modernist produc-

tion/distribution of poetic pamphlets that quintessentially resist the global market. In other words, the last thing we were interested in was to conduct “a colonial or postcolonial reading” of Cavafy, whatever that means. On the contrary, elucidating the colonial and imperial significance of the world in which Cavafy existed enables us to disrupt the academic ease of such formulaic gestures. Surely, all a priori theoretical positions regarding the Cavafy phenomenon are there to be taken to task. This includes positions that might be called strictly philological, or specific to the canon, or abstractly theoretical/philosophical, whether this pertains to Modern Greek literature, or languages and literatures of the region, modernist literature, postcolonial literature, or even literature as such.

Finally, this set of essays—and the gesture of collecting them here—provides insight into something that is rather uncommon in the publication of literary criticism or critical thinking, more generally. Rather than being simply a collection of essays by different thinkers on a shared object of study, this dossier provides the written documentation of how such different thoughts, initially expressed together in a specific context, were reconceptualized and reconfigured according to the discussions that took place as a response to their performance in the classroom. So, although each essay bears an author’s signature, the thinking-work is the outcome of everyone’s questions and speculations, very much the distillation of an extraordinary week of collective inquiry and argumentation as is the most enabling way to envision the pedagogical experience.²

2. In this light, it is essential for me to mention here for the record the names of people involved in the seminar: Marigo Alexopoulou (University of Glasgow), Victoria Diamanti (University of Ioannina), George Evgenios Douliakas (Leiden University), Tatiana Faia (University of Lisbon), Roger Field (University of Western Cape), May Hawas (American University in Cairo), Christina Kostoglou (University of Ioannina), Roberto Salazar Morales (University of Versailles), Nada Ibrahim (American University in Cairo), Tonia Tzirita (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), Melina Tzortzi (University of Ioannina), Panayiotis Xenophontos (University of Oxford). I also need to mention Nabil Ahmed, a young filmmaker from Cairo who was invited to show and discuss his work in the context of the seminar, as well as Marianna Christofi and Angeliki Mousiou from the Onassis Foundation, who are the heart and soul of the Cavafy Summer School program.