

Preface

ENGLISH READERS OF CAVAFY'S POETRY finally have access to his prose work. For although we have had countless translations of Cavafy's poems, this is the first volume of translations of his prose in English, offering glimpses into his journalistic activities, his aesthetic, linguistic and political views and the impact of Victorian culture on his work. This book therefore fills a significant void in Cavafy's published oeuvre and English-speaking readers of his poetry will gain a better understanding of his life and poetics.

Cavafy started experimenting with writing prose as early as 1882 and in these texts we can follow the development of his thought and ideas all the way to 1930 (the year he wrote his last piece). His prose ranges from attempts at short-story writing to mundane pieces on the stock exchange (not included in this volume) and from articles on the Greek language to reflections on aesthetics. We get an insight into the wide range of Cavafy's reading from Shakespeare to Greek folk songs; from Philostratus to Browning and Tennyson. We also get an idea of the variety of authors with whom Cavafy was engaged on a critical level, such as Keats, Baudelaire, Poe and Wilde.

Cavafy enjoys setting up a nexus of parallels and connections involving writers from different traditions. His appreciation of Lucian and the Sophists, whom he described as the aesthetes of the ancient world, is apparent in his prose, where he draws parallels between them and modern aestheticism, arguing that 'they greatly resembled today's artists in their love for the external beauty of works of art. (. . .) They became intoxicated by the sculpting of phrase and the music of words'. In some of his essays (e.g. 'The Last Days of Odysseus' or 'On Browning') Cavafy makes some interesting comparisons between Homer, Dante and Tennyson or between Friedrich von Schiller, Leigh Hunt and Robert Browning, thus pointing to the wider literary context of his own poetry. On the other hand, his creative pieces show his inclination towards the fantastic, the uncanny or the occult and some of them (e.g. 'Garments', 'The Pleasure Brigade', 'The Ships') have been treated by George Savidis as prose poems. Savidis even included them in his edition of Cavafy's 'hidden' poems.

Moreover, Cavafy's prose helps us to appreciate his working methods as a poet, as he often reflects on how his impressions of the outside

World can best be turned into poetry, or what he felt made modern poetry great or flawed. We can also enjoy his self-irony ('How unfair for me to be such a genius and to be neither renowned nor compensated') and appreciate his apt, tongue-in-cheek self-assessment as 'an ultra-modern poet, a poet of the future generations'.

Cavafy cannot be treated as an essayist, as he did not produce many fully-fledged essays; nor can he be regarded as a prose stylist, especially as some of his pieces were mere notes, incomplete and never intended for publication. Though some of these texts were originally written or published in English, Cavafy was, of course, passionately interested in the Greek language. His prose helps us to understand his linguistic views and how he tried to avoid the extremes of the language controversy in Greece. It could be argued that in his prose writing Cavafy is more obviously concerned with the continuity of the Greek heritage (with his pieces on the Sophists, Byzantine poets and Greek folk songs) than in his poetry and that he was outspoken in articulating his anti-imperialist stance towards Britain ('Give Back the Elgin Marbles', 'The Cypriot Question').

In this volume, *Selected Prose Works*, we come to know another Cavafy; one who engages with so many other interests apart from his poetry. Indeed it gives the lie to the judgment of one of his friends, according to which he abjured three activities: giving lectures, granting interviews and writing prose. His friend cannot have been aware that Cavafy had produced some incisive and thoughtful prose pieces, a selection of which you can enjoy here in this fine translation by Peter Jeffreys.

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