

Rising to Fame: C.P. Cavafy's Journey to Worldwide Recognition

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In 2008, the Oxford World's Classics series published a collected edition of C.P. Cavafy's poems.¹ This publishing event represents Cavafy's privileged status within the contemporary canon but masks the long and contested history of his rise to worldwide recognition. Cavafy was first known as a literary curiosity of the Greek diaspora who aspired to national significance from the margins of Alexandria, but only secured a central place in mainstream Greek literary life after many years of fluctuating cultural reception. In parallel, Cavafy's readership slowly expanded across Europe and the rest of the globe, culminating in his establishment at the end of the century as the most well-known and celebrated writer of Greek origin worldwide. This article explores some key moments in those two rising trajectories, by focusing on a number of examples from the Anglophone world, while also considering the poet's place in the Greek context.

Cavafy's residence in Alexandria facilitated his gradual ascension to the pedestal of the world literature canon. During the interwar period, a mixed circle of European artists, authors, and intellectuals in the city were attracted to his unique poetic voice and impressed by his extraordinary personality to such an extent as to become his ardent supporters and admirers.² As a result, from the 1920s onwards, Cavafy became increasingly famous outside the world of Greek letters. Changing aesthetic criteria, cultural trends and translations did not impact upon his influence on foreign writers;³ acknowledging this success, W.H. Auden praised Cavafy's 'unique tone of voice' as

¹ C.P. Cavafy, *The Collected Poems* trans. by Evangelos Sachperoglou, ed. by Anthony Hirst, intro. by Peter Mackridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Zisimos Lorentzatos gives a brief account of Alexandria through the ages and concentrates on Cavafy's time, when the city was a crossroads for commerce and other financial activities which brought with them social and cultural growth. Referring to the interwar period he writes: 'The war of 1914-18 multiplied Cavafy's personal contacts with foreigner journalists or authors who resided there temporarily' ('Introduction' to G. Saregiannis, *Scholia ston Kavafi* (Athens: Ikaros, 1973), p. 26).

³ For Cavafy's reception in various countries and his influence on poets of different style and cultural register see N. Vagenas, ed., *Sinomilontas me ton Kavafi. Anthologia xenon kavafogenon poiimaton* (Thessaloniki: Kentro Ellinikis Glossas, 2000).

inherently translatable,⁴ and Joseph Brodsky saw his didactic and unembellished poetic diction as resistant to the corrupting effect of transference into another language.⁵

However, as often happens with the cumulative processes that secure a privileged place for a writer in the literary hierarchy, Cavafy's critical acclaim and subsequent popularity were not solely related to his creative achievement. Contradicting George Seferis's claim that 'outside his poetry, Cavafy does not exist',⁶ the poet's reception departed from a strictly textual appreciation to include fictionalizations of his mercurial persona, as well as a growing preoccupation with his unusual character and eccentric lifestyle. In addition to his writing, the poet's image was appropriated by other authors, critics, artists and institutions. This cultivated a mythology around his name and, in turn, came to influence the way that his poetry was read and evaluated.

By shifting attention from the work of art to the agents involved in the construction of Cavafy's fame, this article considers the paratextual production of Cavafy's personality as a major—albeit not always systematically examined—part of his cultural and textual reception. The field of celebrity studies is relevant here, because of its sensitivity to image projection, imagined relationships, and audience consumption.⁷ The need to address the contribution of social networks and affiliations to the circulation of a work of art, partially through the value attached to its creator, builds on the supposition that celebrity is as much about attribution as it is about achievement. Rather than encouraging a retreat from the poetry, an analysis of the conditions within which the privileged status of the poet is generated provides a different strategy for returning to it. According to Pierre Bourdieu, an understanding of the social context, 'far from reducing or destroying it, in fact intensifies the literary experience'. Additionally, it serves

to abolish the singularity of the 'creator' in favour of the relations which made the world intelligible, only better to rediscover it, at the end of the task of reconstructing the space in which the author finds himself encompassed and included as a point.⁸

⁴ W.H. Auden, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. by Rae Dalven (New York: Harvest, 1961), pp. xv-xxiii (p. xvii).

⁵ Joseph Brodsky, 'On Cavafy's Side', review of *Cavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress*, by Edmund Keeley, *The New York Review of Books*, 17 February 1977, 32.

⁶ Giorgos Seferis, *Dokimes*, 3rd edn (Athens: Ikaros, 1974), I, 362 [«έξω από τα ποιήματά του ο Καβάφης δεν υπάρχει»]. And in a slightly different but suggestive phrasing: 'Outside his poems Cavafy is of little interest' (I, 344) [«έξω από τα ποιήματα του ο Καβάφης πολύ λίγο ενδιαφέρει»].

⁷ See Ulinka Rublack, 'Celebrity as Concept: An Early Modern Perspective', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2011), 399-403 (399). According to Rublack 'celebrity studies examine who projects what images and also explore the imagined relationship audiences establish as consumers of celebrity figures'.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (London: Polity Press, 1996), p. xix.

In the context of Bourdieu's thought, the author as creator becomes a 'point' of insight into the consumption and production of symbolic goods at a specific time and a specific place. Authorial 'singularity' plays a role similar to the one certain critics ascribe to celebrity status: that of directing attention to the person as a means to better understand the power and complexity of 'the mechanisms by which...fame is generated and spread'.⁹

The discussion is therefore focused on the formation of literary canons in relation to the cultural milieu within which both the artist's symbolic presence and the work's dissemination of meaning function simultaneously. Viewing Cavafy's work and the position he occupies in the cultural field as complementary refocuses the spotlight on the singularity of his persona as a means to address more effectively the literary appropriations and cultural projections from which it emerged.

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As set out in Robert Liddell's article 'Cavafy', first published in 1945, the poet was already a widely discussed controversial figure in Alexandria's social and intellectual life during the decade following his death:

He is quarrelled over, commented and discussed in a way that would have delighted him. Who is not writing about Cavafy? Even those who know no Greek have opinions about him, which they are not unwilling to publish. There is a Cavafy legend; he encouraged it himself. Many people will give you imitations of him, some will recite scandal about him, others will draw caricatures of him on the back of a menu or a cigarette-box. Waiters in Greek restaurants will often add their descriptions of him.¹⁰

Liddell's lively account foregrounds a truism: Cavafy himself contributed greatly and in many ways to his own hype. A master of cultural politics, he remained conscious of the public's intrusive curiosity and thirst for literary gossip, and readily cultivated the grounds for intriguing commentaries on his temperamental behaviour and unconventional habits.

The artist's anxiety in relation to image-making also figured as a recurrent theme in those of Cavafy's poems that deal with the issues of reception and literary recognition. The poem, 'Hidden Things', was written in 1908 when he was not yet widely known.¹¹ In it, he

⁹ Simon Morgan, 'Celebrity: Academic 'pseudo-event' or a useful concept for historians?', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2011), 95-114 (98).

¹⁰ Robert Liddell, 'Cavafy' in *Personal Landscape: An Anthology of Exile*, ed. by Robin Fedden (London: Poetry London, 1945), pp. 100-07.

¹¹ On this issue see C. Th. Dimaras, *Istoria tis Ellinikis Logotechnias*, 6th edn (Athens: Ikaros, 1975), pp. 455-56, and Ch. L. Karaoglou, *I Athinaïki Kritiki kai o Kavafis* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 1985), pp. 19-20.

cautions the reader against attempts to uncover the private life of the person hidden behind the words:

From all I did and all I said
let no one try to find out who I was.
An obstacle was often there
to stop me when I'd begin to speak.
From my most unnoticed actions
my most veiled writing—
from these alone will I be understood.
But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,
so much effort to discover who I really am.
Later, in a more perfect society,
Someone else made just like me
Is certain to appear and act freely.¹²

At the same time as the poem describes the futility of seeking to unveil the truth about the writer from his most explicit writings, it also draws the reader into a paradoxical game of interpreting intentions. The first person narration creates the impression of confiding a secret, while the content militates against taking heed of poetic intimations which, the reader has been warned, are not to be trusted as genuine.

During his lifetime, Cavafy chose to publish his work privately and carefully controlled its reception. Along with his alleged temperamental behaviour and distrustful character, his own reticence augmented the intrigue of his self-constructed persona in the public sphere, rather than limiting his influence to specific literary areas.¹³ Over the years, a web of promotions and publications was spun around Cavafy's work, with no shortage of biographical conjectures and fictionalized depictions evolving around his personality.¹⁴ These appeared as the self-fulfilling prophecy of a poet who thought of himself as 'ultra-modern', bound to be 'further appreciated by future generations', and who exhibited great

¹² C.P. Cavafy, 'Hidden Things,' in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, trans. by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. by G. Savvidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

¹³ Many of Cavafy's visitors and acquaintances were men of letters, who commented on the strong impression Cavafy made on them, and produced accounts of his extraordinary personality. A characteristic case is Giannis Saregiannis who gave a vivid depiction of the poet's temperament and manners: 'When with people he did not know very well, he was cautious, excessively polite, and inquisitive; if the discussion was serious, he expressed his views but with reservation [...] He supplemented the art of public relations with a kind of wise compliment [...] He was a true maitre [...] He surprised us with his gestures, with the richness of his thought and its expression [...] He was driven away by his own speech [...] only then he let go of his armor, his reservations, the fear of facing the consequences, the tyranny of vagueness, and his obsession to please everybody and be liked by all [...] He was himself a very egocentric man. Nothing attracted him spontaneously to the souls of others, he had no such curiosity [...] He was only seeking inspiring themes and compliments [...] He developed a rare diplomatic mastery' (*Scholia ston Kavafi*, pp. 38-49).

¹⁴ See, for example, the following works (respectively, a critical portrait, a biography, and a novel): Timos Malanos, *O poiitis K. P. Kavafis* (Athens: Difros, 1957), Robert Liddell, *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1974), Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandrian Quartet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962). For more information, see D. Daskalopoulos, *Vivliografia K. P. Kavafi* (Thessaloniki: Kentro Ellinikis Glossas, 2003) and the web site <<http://www.kavafis.gr/>> [accessed 17 October 2013].

concern about the construction of his public image at the moments when he seemed to be most protective of it.¹⁵

In 1919, E.M. Forster was the first influential foreign author to write about Cavafy with an eye on a British audience. The focus of his critical essays was divided between an emphasis on the poet's personality and an evaluation of his work. Forster portrayed Cavafy as 'a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe' speaking in sentences 'full of parentheses that never get mixed, and of reservations that really do reserve'.¹⁶ This image was accompanied by a reading of his poetry through the lens of a liberal political ideology, which presented Cavafy's artistic and personal 'otherness' as socially promising and politically enabling.

Forster assigned to Cavafy the role of artist-as-prophet, inaccessible to the masses but ideologically essential to the progress of civilization. By doing so, he was the first of a series of European modernists to present Cavafy's literary treatment of ancient Greece, the Hellenistic era, Byzantium, and Rome as fertile ground for those seeking new directions in literary innovation through a revision of established tradition. For Forster, Cavafy was a refreshing alternative to 'the tyranny of Classicism' through his poetry's disdain for 'Pericles and Aspasia and Themistocles and all those bores'.¹⁷ In his essays, Cavafy became the Greek-Alexandrian antidote to the Grand Hellenic narrative, which would alleviate the burden of Classicism in England.

Apart from the British author's genuine appreciation of Cavafy and his work, Forster's contribution to the poet's fame was also indirectly related to his own status as cultural promoter. The discovery of an unusual artist in a faraway country and the presentation of this discovery to an unknowing audience as path-breaking and original was a way for the discoverer to act as mediator. Bourdieu's conceptualization of the 'power of consecration' is exemplified by Forster's power to legitimize Cavafy as a poet worthy of international attention.¹⁸ This provides an additional argument against the understanding of literary influence as a one-sided relationship. By simultaneously reflecting on the

¹⁵ C.P. Cavafy, 'Sur Le Poète C.P. Cavafy' (1930) in *Ta Peza 1882-1931* (Athina: Ikaros, 2003), p. 313.

¹⁶ E.M. Forster, 'The Poetry of C.P. Cavafy' in *The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy* (Athens: Harvey, 1983), pp. 13-18.

¹⁷ Forster, 'The Poetry of C.P. Cavafy', p. 16.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, referring to the notion of 'consecration', writes: 'The ideology of creation, which makes the author the first and last source of the value of his work, conceals the fact that the cultural businessman (art dealer, publisher, etc.) at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the 'creator' by trading in the 'sacred' and the person who, by putting it on the market, by exhibiting it, publishing or staging it, consecrates a product which he has 'discovered' and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource; and the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work' ('The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods' in *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 74-111 (p. 76)).

promoted artist's aspirations and the promoter's personal project, the bond between the appropriated and the appropriator benefits both parties involved.

Following Forster and 'inheriting' the Cavafy of his critical essays, Lawrence Durrell crafted a fictional character based on the poet in his novel *The Alexandria Quartet*. This cemented Cavafy's image as a hallmark of Alexandria, enhanced his legendary status, and added a new dimension to his idealization. Through his novel Durrell appealed to a readership's familiarity with the historical person to which his Cavafy character corresponded. Darley, the *Quartet's* protagonist, upholds an active interest in the poet, which motivates him to seek out 'the new Cavafy manuscript' in order to 'get a look at the handwriting of the old poet'.¹⁹ He also appears to be translating Cavafy's poetry and lecturing on it during a well-attended event in Alexandria described as a cultural 'blood bank' for 'a dignified semi-circle of society ladies'.²⁰ The fictional exploitation of archival material, lectures, and translations can be seen as a form of literary 'Cavafology', which mirrors the actual circulation of the poet's work and image in the Alexandrian cultural milieu. Durrell transformed Cavafy from a historical subject into a fictional hero, portraying him as 'the old man' whose spirit was 'impregnating' the streets of Alexandria.²¹ The poet's verse provided the medium through which the intertwined identities of the city and its inhabitants were extensively explored, enriching the romanticized narration of the *Quartet's* post-imperial adventure. The poet was coopted to reinforce the literary value of depictions of exotic space and his presence became, in turn, imprinted with the qualities of the in-between, the mysterious, and the elusive.

Durrell and Forster modeled Cavafy according to their own ambitions and literary needs for different reasons. But both chose to favour poems with historical or philosophical themes over more explicitly erotic ones. Their choice determined, to a certain extent, the grounds on which Cavafy's reputation was founded during the period of high modernism. For most of his foreign admirers, Cavafy was at that time an Alexandrian with a cosmopolitan touch, a cultural figure without national boundaries, rather than a Greek poet or a writer of poetry associated with homosexuality.

In an altogether different social context, the moral climate was better suited to allowing different aspects of the poet's work to shine through: at a crucial moment for identity building, Cavafy became an important figure for the post-Stonewall riots gay liberation movement in the States. A generation of artists and poets focused on Cavafy's

¹⁹ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (London: Faber, 1962) pp. 357-358.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²¹ *Idem.*.

erotic poetry as an expression of homosexual desire and experience. As Mark Doty notes, gay writers who adapted Cavafy's 'Days of...' series of sensual poems from the sixties onwards were attempting to create their own tradition: 'Practically every gay and lesbian writer in English has a poem called 'Days-of-Something-or-Other.' We want to claim our allegiances; we want to stand in a line. Lineation is lineage!'²² 'Lineage' here is not so much a sense of temporal succession as it is a conscious linking of one artist's voice and position to another's. In this way, an individual artist becomes a point uniting voices in history and a movement looking to create a collective identity.

Anglophone reception of Cavafy in both Britain and the States ran uninterrupted from the 1920s onward, but frequently surpassed the literary sphere. David Hockney's etchings and Duane Michals' photography were seminal instances of the appropriation of Cavafy's work and image in extra-literary areas. In 1994, Cavafy's poem 'Ithaca' was recited at Jackie Kennedy Onassis's funeral. The publicity and live coverage of the funeral created unprecedented demand for the poet's work. In response, Verso Books announced in the *New York Magazine* the distribution of free copies of the poem to Cavafy-hungry readers as 'a bookseller's homage to Cavafy, Tempelsman, Mrs. Onassis, Forster, Durrell et al'. The publishing house was placing itself within a genealogy of 'longtime Cavafy enthusiasts (along with E.M. Forster, Lawrence Durrell, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot)',²³ thus forming a continuum of English speaking authors and agents with their own cultural version of Cavafy.

Under similar circumstances almost a decade later, Cavafy's 'Waiting for the Barbarians' was recited at Edward Said's funeral as a tribute to the critic's long time admiration of the poet. The reading received extensive media coverage. It was the same poem that had lent not only its title but also 'one aspect of its sociopolitical dynamic' to Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee's 1980 novel and subsequently to Philip Glass's 2008 opera of the same name.²⁴ Not only had Cavafy's work been revived through translations and read in different languages, but cultural currency was accumulating under his name as his value was affirmed through a diverse set of practices and through the mediation of individuals who were themselves celebrities with a strong public presence.

²² Mark Doty, *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, ed. by Christopher Hennessy (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 87.

²³ Letter by Peter Soter, Verso Books, Manhattan, to *New York Magazine*, *New York Magazine*, 20 June 1994.

²⁴ Derek Attridge, 'Oppressive Silence: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon', in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century 'British' Literary Canons*, ed. by Karen R. Lawrence (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 212-38 (p. 215).

The reality of the social and extra-literary agents involved in constructing literary reputation is forcefully encapsulated in the memoir of James Merrill, the American poet and ardent admirer of Cavafy. In a note concerning Kimon Friar's career as a translator of Greek poetry into English, Merrill casts an outsider's eye over the production of the modern Greek literary scene:

Once the first 'definitive' anthology had appeared, full of big names like Cavafy and Sikelianos, Seferis and Elytis, he [Kimon Friar] couldn't resist undertaking the thirty-thousand-line *Odyssey* of Kazantzakis. That alone took seven or eight years. Looking up dazed from the task, he saw a new generation of poets. They clamored like dogs round a stag at bay. How could they dream of international renown without being read in English, and who could they trust to bring this about if not Kimon? Critical articles, further anthologies, medals and honors from a government keenly aware of the steps leading to those two Nobel prizes [...]²⁵

Merrill underlines the political dimension of the Nobel prizes awarded to Elytis and Seferis and by extension addresses the broader politics involved in prestigious prizes and international awards. His pragmatic view exposes the social factors that play a significant role in the literary game. For him, poetic influence is a process requiring a willing and entrusted promoter, the mediation of translation, the desirability of institutional recognition, and the connection of all the above to national strategies for artistic achievement. The dynamism of the phrase 'new generation of poets' is undermined by their cynical comparison to 'clamoring dogs' gathering around the American translator. Merrill's disenchanted perspective diagnoses the ways in which a small country clings to its most cherished literary voices. But it also highlights his participation in the patronising tendencies exhibited by other literary institutions when confronted with a marginal literature's efforts to gain standing on the international scene.

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In Greece, Cavafy's reception had followed quite a differed course, from which the poet emerged as a hotly contested phenomenon. His appearance on the Athenian literary scene at a relatively mature age initiated a sort of crisis: from the early twenties, throughout the thirties, and after the poet's death in 1933, the reactions to his work often oscillated between cautious appreciation and rejection. Greece's predominant modernist group, 'the Generation of the Thirties', used poetic diction that was at odds with the prosaic form and

²⁵ James Merrill, *A Different Person: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1993) p. 27.

universalism of Cavafy's work in an attempt to create a new collective identity and national mythology associated with fresh beginnings and innovation.²⁶ The poet's spatial and poetic distance from the literary scene of mainland Greece was perceived negatively through its apparent indifference to national cultural rejuvenation. Giorgos Theotokas, a prominent member of the group, compared him to a 'meteor' travelling alone and thus most likely to fade out and die before making any impact.²⁷

This reaction has been understood as a dismissal of Cavafy's 'mixed language' by fervent supporters of the 'demotic' and as an ideological defence of the 'idolatry of the ancients' (to which Cavafy did not subscribe).²⁸ However, it would be an omission not to consider the cultural politics at play. Cavafy was an imposing presence to the young poets competing for a central place in the Greek literary canon. For his part, Cavafy viewed the Athenian poets as 'romantics' whose 'lyrical exultations' had nothing in common with his own measured verse.²⁹ Confronted with a series of deprecating, and even aggressive, early reviews of his work, his reactions remained deliberate and cautious, intensifying his mystique and enriching the discourse on his art.³⁰

Despite these early tribulations, the initial cautiousness and hostility of the Athenian establishment started to swiftly subside at the same time as Cavafy was gaining recognition abroad. The vast production of scholarship on his work and its prominence in the Greek educational curriculum established the poet as 'high art' worthy of the attention of the most prestigious academic and educational circles. Invested with a glory partly 'imported' from abroad, Cavafy was now enjoying a growing internal reputation, which placed him firmly in the national canon.³¹ His emblematic status for the broader public survives until the present day, and has appeared with renewed force during the current financial crisis. In Greece and internationally, social media and journalism have frequently alluded to his poetry in order to recount the country's misadventures.³² Angst, anger, and

²⁶ 'Cavafy is an end and avant-garde is a beginning. Two contrasting and incongruous worlds. The only influence Cavafy exerted on a lively new generation is a negative influence [...] Mr Cavafy is the culmination of the death impulse in Greek poetry' (Giorgos Theotokas, *Eleuthero Pneuma* (Athens: Ermis, 1973), pp. 65-67).

²⁷ Giorgos Theotokas, *Eleuthero Pneuma*, p. 65.

²⁸ Liddell, 'Cavafy', p. 101.

²⁹ Dimitris Daskalopoulos and Maria Stasinopoulou, *O Vios kai to Ergo tou K. P. Kavafi* (Athens: Metaixmio, 2013), pp. 157-158.

³⁰ For a detailed account of such reactions see Ch. L. Karaoglou, *I Athinaïki Kritiki kai o Kavafis*.

³¹ For Cavafy's strong presence in successive generations of Greek poets see D. Daskalopoulos, ed., *Ellinika Kavafogeni Poiimata (1909-2001)* (Patra: Panepistimio Patron, 2003).

³² In the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, the former editor-in-chief Theo Sommer, criticizing the handling of the Greek crisis, quoted in whole Cavafy's poem 'In a large Greek colony, 200 B. C.', urging his readers to benefit from its reading. (Von Theo Sommer, 'Griechenland nach den Kürzungen—ein Gedicht', *Zeit Online*, 17

occasionally hope, have been expressed by employing his poetry to criticise everyday reality, seek explanations, or find solace. The poet's work has been invoked as a means to comment on the harsh reality facing the Greek people, a use that brings aesthetic utterances into the realm of the ideological. Similarly to the manner in which Cavafy became iconic for the gay liberation in the sixties, Cavafy's image has been manipulated to mobilise political action: for communication, for protesting, for declarations of solidarity.

The public's cultural familiarity with Cavafy has been used not only to process traumatic political events but also to lend authority to corporate or social institutions. For example, the poet's image was printed on Greek lottery tickets to celebrate the anniversary of his birth. Furthermore, in October 2013, the Onassis foundation launched a project that published fragmented verses alongside an illustration of the poet on Athenian public transport. The verses were deliberately selected for topical relevance but created controversy by their isolation from their original poetic context.³³ Such selective use of Cavafy is common practice and indicates widespread recognition of his work, whereas, at the same time, affirms the cultural power of a nation's investment in, and reinforcement of, its most symbolic figures. In this respect, Cavafy is comparable to James Joyce, whose work and life is inherently associated with his position as an 'outsider' and an exile but who is also a celebrated figure for Irish mainstream culture, especially in education and the tourist industry.³⁴ Claiming a 'genius' as one's own evokes a sense of national pride that is unaffected by whether a work is read in a dedicated manner by the entire population or not. Cultural impact may even gain precedence over poetry itself. For both the Greek and Irish mainstream, the work of art may be secondary to the power exerted on national mythology by the cultural influence of their most famous artists.

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By locating the production of Cavafy's image within both the Greek and the Anglophone context, this article has provided a comparative overview of Cavafy's rise from the margins of Hellenism to the epicentre of the international literary scene. From symbol of liberalism to Alexandrian eccentric, and from gay icon to national Greek poet, the diversity of

September 2013, <<http://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2013-09/griechenland-kavafis-austeritaet>> [accessed 17 October 2013].

³³ 'What happens when Cavafy enters the means of mass transport', *Onassis Cultural Centre*, 4 November 2013, <<http://www.sgt.gr/en/programme/event/1588>> [accessed 10 November 2013].

³⁴ See, for example, John Nash, *James Joyce and the Act of Reception: Reading, Ireland, Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Cavafy's depictions rejects any notion of a single, legitimised cultural perspective that is limited to an impenetrable field of literary value. Instead, Cavafy's rise to fame exposes literary tradition in its national variations, as an area where great works and charismatic personalities coexist in terms of institutional recognition and public approval.

Cavafy's productivity as a subject for a discussion of literary celebrity is underlined by the recent transcultural events and celebrations which took place in his honour in 2013. The eightieth anniversary of Cavafy's death and the hundred and fiftieth of his birth saw academic symposiums, poetry readings, theatrical performances, recitals and concerts, radio and television programs, special issues of magazines and journals, books on the poet's life and work, as well as many other cultural events and activities in Greece and abroad. The 'Cavafy Year' acts as a further reminder of the range of social relationships and institutional mechanisms involved in the construction of literary reputation—a concept naturalized to the extent that it conceals its processes of production.

This extra-literary environment, resting on the symbolic capital that Bourdieu defines as 'a degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, or honour [...] founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition,'³⁵ might be seen as a factor distracting readers from the poetic work itself. But Cavafy's figuration through systems of cultural exchange does not imply that the voice of the author has altogether vanished without leaving a trace. Unexpected readings, unconventional uses, and even conflicting views of the poet's art and image illuminate the cultural politics at play behind the construction of an authorial persona in a variety of different contexts on the international literary scene. But they also give new momentum to interpretation. By making Cavafy's poetry accessible to vast communities of readers, the powerful discursive practices employed in legitimizing his fame on a large scale continue to provide the grounds for varied cultural re-readings and re-writings of his work.

The canonical poet is a sub-category of a famous personality, which underlines both the impossibility of examining the public interest directed toward him independently of the oeuvre and the insufficiency of addressing the work while disregarding the poet's position as a culturally symbolic figure. Even in instances when 'fame' is not explicitly addressed, it is an essential concept to consider in discussions of the construction and circulation of authorial singularity and achievement. Up to the present day, Cavafy's status is constantly producing symbolic value, mostly because of the diversity of its reception and the openness of its transformations. As a celebrity he reminds us of the contradictions

³⁵ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 7.

inherent to literary works, and calls for a reexamination of the social practices applied in consuming works of art.