

BOOK REVIEW

Selected Prose Works. By C. P. CAVAFY. Translated and annotated by Peter JEFFREYS. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010. Pp. xix + 163. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-472-05095-6.

Despite the numerous translations into English of C.P. Cavafy's poetry that have appeared in recent years—no less than seven in the last decade alone—Cavafy's prose output has been ignored by translators. Peter Jeffreys has stepped in to fill this void. The result is an admirable compilation of a notoriously idiosyncratic body of work. Among the forty pieces included in this volume one finds essays and reflections on such diverse subjects as The Elgin Marbles to Shakespeare to Lycanthropy, written both in English and Greek. Jeffreys provides enough notes to allow the reader to contextualize each piece, and his translations of Cavafy's Greek are accomplished and clear.

Thus the goal of introducing the non-specialist to heretofore neglected work has been achieved. However, as the one who has taken upon himself the responsibility of introducing Cavafy's prose to a larger English-speaking audience, Jeffreys also takes on the responsibility of explaining it. To be more precise, Jeffreys is left with the unhappy task of trying to justify the presence of what is essentially mediocre work by one of the twentieth century's greatest poets.

That this is a task the book feels obliged to perform comes across clearly in the introduction, in which the reader is presented with what amounts to a series of excuses for why the Alexandrian's prose is so inferior to his poetry. My problem is not that Jeffreys does this, for it needs to be done. Any reader of Cavafy's poetry expecting to come across the same caliber of thought and style in these pieces as one habitually finds in the poems will be strongly disappointed; therefore some explanation is in order. My problem then is not the presence of a defense but how Jeffreys goes about formulating it.

The Introduction begins by pinning the blame on necessity:

Cavafy's Greek readership expected a peculiar style of learned journalism that consisted of a formulaic blend of encyclopedic diletantism in-

terspersed with choice translations of foreign authors and foreign journalists.

Many of these pieces are journalistic, thus Cavafy had to keep an eye firmly fixed on the requirements of the job, but to pin the blame on an expected readership is an inadequate explanation for lackluster work, especially when one considers that many of these pieces were either never published or remained fragments. Jeffreys continues in this vein in the following sentence:

The fact that the literary preferences of late nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle readers diverged greatly from those of the early twentieth century and post-World War I era—the period during which Cavafy found his mature poetic voice—surely induced Cavafy to view his early prose as unfashionably dated and even embarrassingly pretentious.

It is as though the zeitgeist is more to blame for a writer's immature work rather than the author's immaturity itself.

Jeffreys' comments also speak negatively of Cavafy's use of *katharevousa*—the artificial language that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a view towards “cleansing” modern Greek of its foreign impurities. He writes:

As nearly all prose during this period was written in puristic Greek, Cavafy had to display his journalistic mastery of this cumbersome idiom for the public while simultaneously satisfying his more private creative impulses, attempting in the process to craft a lucid, effective and learned prose.

It is true that Cavafy progressively moved away from *katharevousa* in his writing, both in his prose and his poetry, but Jeffreys implies that Cavafy's early use of it was a kind of necessary evil, as though forced against his will to cultivate an unwanted idiom. Cavafy, however, is not like the many Greek writers of the twentieth century who argued against the unnatural language. He is even recorded to have been disgusted by the debate between *katharevousa* and demotic, stating that both sides aimed to “throw half our language away.”¹ Jeffreys himself

¹ See Roderick Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature* (Oxford 2004) 338 n. Beaton's note also mentions a review Cavafy never published in his lifetime of the second edition of H. Pernot's *Grammaire du Grec Moderne* (1917), in which Cavafy makes his most overt comments on the “Language Question.” This review can be found in the standard edition of Cavafy's prose: Πιερίης, Μιχάλης. Κ.Π. Καβάφης: Τα Πεζά

admits that Cavafy did not consider *katharevousa* to be such a horrible thing. The lead note to the essay, “Professor Blackie on the Modern Greek Language,” reads: “John Stuart Blackie, Professor of Greek at the University of Edinburgh, was, like Cavafy, favourably disposed towards the purist ‘katharevousa’.”

Professor Jeffreys’ best means of defending these pieces is also the most obvious. As he writes, the prose “remains fertile ground for furthering our critical understanding and evolving appreciation of the poet.” Thus, whenever possible, the notes seek to connect the piece at hand to Cavafy’s verse. For example, we learn that the essay, “Coral from a Mythological Perspective,” testifies to Cavafy’s lifelong interest in ancient mineralogy, which can be seen in the poems “Indian Image” and “The Footsteps” as well as in the prose poem “The Ships.” Why Jeffreys would fail to mention that coral also appears in perhaps Cavafy’s most famous poem, “Ithaka,” I do not quite understand.

Despite these flaws, there is much that deserves praise here, especially considering the lackluster material Jeffreys is presenting. The defense he offers may be flawed, but the spirit behind it is commendable. Overall, for those seeking that quintessential Cavafy voice, the prose works are sure to disappoint. However, anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Cavafy’s development as a thinker and as a writer will surely find much to his liking in this volume.

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(1882–1931) (Athens: Ikaros, 2003). The review is not included among Jeffreys’ translations.