

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 5 (2013)

Hellenism Unbound



Self-Fashioning in C. P. Cavafy's "Going back Home from Greece" and "Philhellene"

Evgenia Sifaki

doi: [10.12681/syn.17430](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.17430)

Copyright © 2013, Evgenia Sifaki



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Self-Fashioning in C. P. Cavafy's "Going back Home from Greece" and "Philhellene"

Evgenia Sifaki

Abstract

C. P. Cavafy's dramatic monologues "Going Back Home from Greece" and "Philhellene" are approached by way of their form: the genre of the dramatic monologue that the Greek poet adopted and adapted from Victorian sources, which delimits and historicises the poetic utterance by staging it in a dramatic frame. Drawing on a theory of Michel Foucault, the two texts' discursive context of Hellenism is construed as part of their speakers' binding *situation*, the social and historical environment (i.e. the literary representation of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods) that is shown to both condition and enable their respective utterances. Furthermore, it will be argued that the speakers' attempts to assert and/or construct their identities involves a complex, tense process of subjection and simultaneous resistance to restraining definitions inherent to the discourse of Hellenism that have persisted throughout the latter's long history, such as its self-constitutive, inexorable, division between Greek and barbarian.

This essay exploits and explores the prevalent critical assumptions about how C. P. Cavafy, in his mature poetry, utilised and experimented with the Victorian legacy of the dramatic monologue, that is, poetic texts whose utterance is framed and contextualised by a dramatic situation (social and/or historical) and performed by a 'speaker' who is other than the poet, "generally addressing an audience (though this itself may be an ambiguous entity), accompanying his or her speech with appropriate gestures, varying intonations, and a range of theatrical strategies" (Pearsall 19). Special critical attention has been given to Cavafy's affinity with Robert Browning.¹ Indeed, the characteristic usage of syntax and punctuation that

Cavafy inherited from Browning (and then developed into his distinctive idiom) is fully enmeshed in the complex, multi-voiced structure of his poetry as well as the dramatic construction of his speakers' subjectivities, which are always directed outwards, always dependent on signals of communication, such as questions, requests, appeals, and so on.

Both texts studied here, "Going Back Home from Greece" (published in 1914) and "Philhellene" (1912), constitute literary representations of the Hellenistic and Roman periods that Cavafy eminently privileges over earlier periods of Greek civilisation. Hellenism as discourse (founded on the division between Greek and barbarian) haunts both poems and as an ideal it is implicitly charged with the symbolic conflation of Greek land and the legacy of classical Athens, at least in the case of "Going Back Home from Greece" (Clay110-11).² At the same time though, the two texts' meticulous concern with signifiers of Hellenism is linked to instances of Greek cultural practices that are historically specific; i.e., these poetic texts invite us to investigate to what purpose and effect they represent Greek philosophers or artistic imagery in particular historical frames. The focus here is on the *labour* involved in the two speakers' efforts to assert or establish a significant link with some aspect of the Hellenic legacy, as they themselves understand it, and its outcome.

So the critical questions this essay sets out to investigate are: How the dramatic monologue as a genre dramatises the provisional and precarious nature of subjectivity, which here depends on its relations and negotiations with aspects of Hellenic culture (which Cavafy either locates in or projects onto the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman worlds). Also, vice versa, how the poetic utterance, which is construed as pseudo-historical, partial, and subjective in these two cases, problematises conceptualisations of Hellenism by producing subtle or potential nuances and variations, ambiguities or even gaps in the meanings of words and phrases that are used by the two speakers in order to name themselves or compare and differentiate themselves from others: "Greeks like us," behaving in a "properly Greek" way (*ελληνοπρεπής*), Hellenised (*ελληνίζων*) or Hellenified (*ελληνοποιημένος*), un-Greek (*ανελλήνιστος*), barbarian or philhellene.

The ‘subject’ of the dramatic monologue

As a fictional representation of the act of a speaker, the dramatic monologue inevitably directs attention to the question of the speaker’s identity, which is thus by definition the central theme of the poem. Yet during the 1980s and 1990s, the study of the dramatic monologue was affected by the so-called postmodern assault on the premise of the autonomous, sovereign subject (Byron 25) and, as a consequence, critical interest has been redirected to the question of how the subjectivity of the speaker is constructed as opposed to investigating how his ‘character’ is revealed, consciously or unconsciously. Most relevant for this essay is, first, Isobel Armstrong’s sophisticated, “neo-Hegelian” reading, according to which the dramatic monologue is a “double poem” whose poetic utterance functions as subject and object at once (13). It is comprised of a subjective, lyric, psychological expression, which, by means of dramatisation, re-emerges as a symptom of history and hence an object for scrutiny. The subjective and objective aspects of the utterance co-exist in constant struggle for meanings, each fighting to impose its own different, conflicting, ideological and epistemological terms. I partly draw on Armstrong’s model for my reading of “Philhellene,” though her identification of the poetic subject with the lyric subject risks pointing to an ‘inner,’ a-historical self that is certainly absent in the Cavafy texts studied here.

Even more usefully, critics of the genre have employed and experimented with performativity theories, focusing, as Warwick Slinn puts in, on “the reciprocal and discursive means by which normative structures and personal subjectivities are shown to invade and constitute each other through [performative] acts of speaking” (28). Cornelia Pearsall uses performativity theory to challenge the more familiar, traditional approach to the genre, the assumption that these poems produce meaning largely by means of dramatic irony. She argues that dramatic monologues are indeed “speech acts” in the sense developed by J.L. Austin: “they articulate a speaker’s goals, but the monologues themselves also come to perform these goals in the course of the monologue, by way of the monologue” (20). Pearsall is right, since several monologists (and I will argue that Cavafy’s king in “Philhellene” is among them) have been misread as a result of our tendency to reduce them to objects of

the poet's irony and even satire. Yet her view poses a challenge: how to take dramatic monologues and their performance seriously without overlooking the complex forms of irony that pervade the poetry of both Browning and Cavafy.

In order to take on this challenge and investigate further the performative formation of the speakers' subjectivity-as-process in Cavafy's monologues, I propose to draw on Michel Foucault's elaborations in the *The History of Sexuality*, where power, discursive and dispersed in institutional, cultural and also private practices, is understood to actually *produce* the subjects it simultaneously afflicts. This much quoted thesis has, in its turn, set off theoretical efforts in the direction of a re-conceptualisation of subjectivity and agency. Indicatively, Vincent Colapietro recently emphasised the co-existence of subjection and agency in Foucault. True, no individual exists beyond the mechanisms of power but then again subjects enmeshed in regimes and relations of power retain the ability to resist, refashioning themselves (24). This Foucauldian thesis is fruitfully represented and illustrated by the tense, polyphonic structure of the dramatic monologue, which delimits and historicises its poetic subject, namely, its speaker and his utterance, but (crucially) without reducing them to a mere crystallisation of a historical moment. Some of the most famous of these speakers of Browning as well as Cavafy's "Philhellene" have indeed been read as representatives of their historical setting and both poets have been celebrated justly for their ability to condense long chapters of history in few lines of poetry. But I argue that such readings, valuable as they are, are incomplete. For example, the Cavafy monologues studied here are challenging the discursive context without which their utterances would not have been made possible in the first place. Or else they are trying to have an impact, to make a personal case, against the legacy of Hellenism to the extent that the latter relegates them to a terrain of the barbarian but, at the same time, they are (ironically) dependent on the very social structures and discourses they are set to oppose and indeed transform. So their utterances are articulated, precisely, on a delicate juncture of subjection and resistance. This approach may be different but it is not incompatible with Armstrong's analysis of such texts as sites of struggle for and between 'subjective' and 'objective' positions and ways of understanding. I argue that Cavafy's use of irony in composing his dramatic monologues 'translates,' as it were,

into poetic terms the 'aporetic' nature of the Foucauldian 'situated' subject, who depends 'objectively' for his or her very subjectivity and agency on his or her defining historical and discursive context.

“Going Back Home from Greece”

The setting of “Going Back Home from Greece” is a boat in the Eastern Mediterranean. Sailing in it are two Syrian-Greek ‘philosophers,’ returning to their home in Syria from the land of Greece (or maybe Attica) ³ still under the resounding impact of whatever they encountered there, which, it is clearly insinuated, must have been disturbing. (I take it they felt or were made to feel strangers there). The image of the boat at sea typically operates metaphorically to suggest an in-between, liminal or indecisive space that reflects the unhinging of identity experienced by the two friends. The merit of this text is that, by positioning two Greek-Syrian figures mid-way between Greece and Syria (between cultural centre and periphery), frustrated as a result of their journey to Greece and arguing over their identity, it regenerates and revitalises the question of identity as well as the question of the relation between centre and periphery. It is worth quoting this poem in full:

Well, we're nearly there, Hermippos.
Day after tomorrow, it seems—that's what the captain said.
At least we're sailing in our seas,
the waters of Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt,
the beloved waters of our home countries.
Why so silent? Ask your heart:
didn't you too feel happier
the farther we got from Greece?
What's the point of fooling ourselves?
That would hardly be properly Greek.

It's time we admitted the truth:
we are Greeks also—what else are we?—
but with Asiatic affections and feelings,
affections and feelings
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

It isn't right, Hermippos, for us philosophers
to be like some of our petty kings
(remember how we laughed at them
when they used to come to our lectures?)
who through their showy Hellenified exteriors,
Macedonian exteriors (naturally),

let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
a bit of Media they can't keep back.
And to what laughable lengths the fools went
trying to cover it up!

No, that's not at all right for us.
For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
We must not be ashamed
of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honor it, take pride in it. ⁴

The relief brought about by their going away from Greece ought to be underlined as a pointer to the latter's significance. Greece is never made available to the reader; despite references to it as the place of cultural origin as well as a geographical area, it is rendered alien and unavailable, effectively absent. However unspecified though, or maybe as a result of its elusiveness, "Greece" still symbolises the authoritative discourse that constitutes the two Syrian-Greeks as Greeks and at the same time excludes them as its peculiar 'other,' on the basis of a relation of the 'authentic' to 'inauthentic.'

The poem's anonymous speaker addresses his friend, Hermippos, whose evocative silence has been correctly read as a sign of objection to the former's awkward statement, that thankfully their travel to Greece is now over because they do not belong there, and thus provoked him to unfold his argument more forcefully (Clay 110; Pieris, "We are an Amalgam" 302). Having been marked out as other to Greece's Greekness and having thus suffered discrimination, the speaker fights back, as it were, by initiating a process of reconsidering and re-defining his identity that matches a parallel process of reclaiming Hellenism for himself: "We are Greeks" he says, "what else," though they have "Asiatic affections and feelings, / affections and feelings / sometimes alien to Hellenism" and, in addition to that, they have "Syrian and Egyptian blood in their veins," of which they should be proud (12, 13-15, 29). The two figures in "Going Back Home" are certainly Greek by education and culture but their lineage is obscured and open to conjecture.

Both Cavafy texts studied here make up sites of struggle and contestation for meanings and identities that challenge the sanguine image of fusion and harmonious synthesis conveyed by the idea of cultural amalgamation. They are more aptly accounted for in terms of the notion of "syncretism" as expounded by Vassilis Lambropoulos: "Rather than seeking the space where differences are

conflated or celebrated, [syncretism] examines both unities and dispersals, investigating the interrelation among competing forces as they converge temporarily at particular times and on particular terrains” (227).⁵ This exposition of syncretism elucidates the strategic nature of alliances and rivalries in the poems analysed here, as well as several other Cavafy poems, which, when juxtaposed, illuminate but often ironise each other as well. It is worth comparing, for example, “Going Back Home” with the “Epitaph of Antiochos, King of Kommagini,” which implies that people other than Greeks may have contributed to the advances of Hellenic civilisation in the Hellenistic period (Beaton 525; Keeley 175). Also with “In a Town of Osroini,” where Cavafy himself uses the term amalgam (κράμα), in order to designate a community of homosexual young men from different ethnic backgrounds. As Pieris maintains, “In a Town” establishes cultural mixture as a value equal to the classical ideal (“We are an Amalgam” 306). But we should not underestimate the fact that such alliance is also strategic, in that it emerges from these figures’ common sexuality, implicitly but clearly setting them apart and against hostile ‘others.’

It is worth paying more attention to the fact that in “Going Back Home” the speaker’s delivery is fraught with tension and uncertainty. Is he telling us that as true Greeks the two friends ought to admit that they are not truly Greek? Is he saying that origin is irrelevant to identity and that Greeks are identified by their superior ethos? There is an element of improvisation here: as if we are following someone’s effort to dislocate, relocate or refashion himself on the basis of the facts and sources at his disposal and also to define the life appropriate to him. The speaker’s peculiar version of Hellenism is described in a roundabout way as an ethical attitude (honesty and dignity) or proper conduct. He clearly advocates a “properly Greek” *manner*; certainly not an essentialist quality. The adjective *ελληνοπρεπής* (translated “properly Greek” by Keeley and Sherrard) may be construed as a simile, since it denotes a form of conduct that is ‘like that of a true Greek,’ and as such it both conjoins and retains the separation of comparable but different entities, here the categories Greek and non Greek. Keeley’s insightful identification of the Greek character in Cavafy with “the virtue of seeing yourself for what you are” (108) needs to be further qualified and discussed, because acting ‘in

a way proper to a Greek' is not to be taken for granted, not even by those who are Greek by birth; rather, it is a goal that the philosopher-speaker ventures to achieve.

Still, the speaker continues to stubbornly refuse to denote the concepts he deploys and only allows us to infer the meaning of "properly Greek" by setting it against its own constructed 'other,' those "petty-minded" and ridiculous Oriental kings "who through their showy Hellenified exteriors,/ Macedonian exteriors (naturally), / let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then/ a bit of Media they can't keep back" (20-23). So the "Hellenified exterior" is the 'other' against which the speaker in his turn discriminates. (Evidently, even "Greeks like them," whose conceptualisation of Greekness has expanded to welcome Asian qualities, continue to need their 'barbarians').

One such pathetic Oriental king, accused (by the poem's narrator who is not necessarily identical to the poet) of having adopted Greek language and dress for the exclusive purpose of showing off, is found in Cavafy's "The Prince from Western Libya," who "assumed a Greek name, dressed like a Greek / and all the time he was terrified he would spoil / his reasonably good image / by coming out with barbaric howlers in Greek" (15-19). This distinction, between acting "properly Greek" and pretending Greekness is apparently pervasive in the poet's *oeuvre*, as Cavafy scholars have shown.

In this context, I propose also to examine the intertextual relationship of "Going Back Home" with a passage from its own discarded first draft, which, in ironic contrast to the former's emphasis on the difference and incompatibility of Greek and barbarian, reveals, albeit indirectly, the close society and interaction of "properly Greek" philosophers and Hellenified barbarians and the ensuing difficulty of sharply demarcating and separating the two categories. The discarded lines elucidate Hermippos's response that was repressed in the final version. The auditor in this type of monologue is generally silent, but usually his responses are incorporated in and suggested by the utterance, so his 'voice,' however modified or distorted, serves to counter the speaker's delivery and to orient it at the same time. In this case, the auditor's side of the conversation was almost completely silenced in the final draft of the poem. Quoted below are the lines from the poem's "variant,"

as Cavafy calls it (in English), where the speaker is answering an implicit objection by Hermippos, regarding his attitude towards the Hellenified barbarians:

I know this very well. You don't need to tell me!
I will not be speaking thus, when teaching
again the day after tomorrow. A teacher of Hellenism
dominated (enslaved, rather)
by a devotion to Greek thought
I will not be the one to curtail Hellenisation (*τα ελληνίζοντα*)
(even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know how).⁶

The above lines complicate and obscure the contrast between “properly Greek” and “Hellenised” (which is used as a synonym to “Hellenified”) because both categories rely and depend on similar procedures of training and education. The despised ‘other’ the speaker desires to distinguish himself from is in fact his own student--his own ‘creation.’ Greekness is emphatically linked with processes of learning and education; still, an education in Greek language and letters appears insufficient where the question of *ethos* is concerned.

Returning to the final version of the poem: do the final lines, “We must not be ashamed/ of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins; /we should really honor it, take pride in it” (29-30) provide the resolution to the critical question of these figures’ identity? Certainly the speaker has (performatively) appropriated, affirmed and turned to his own advantage the allocation to the presumably inferior category of racial and/ or cultural hybrid, which was the very cause of his initial frustration and had triggered the monologue in the first place, and this is no small achievement. Nonetheless, while the ending of the monologue may offer some form of closure for its protagonist (his tone insufficiently confident and moralising), the reader is left to wonder why teaching Greek in the East is a futile exercise for some, i.e., certain Eastern aristocrats, and not for others. Cavafy uses a complex form of dramatic irony (and in this he resembles his precursor, Browning) to compose a question for the reader’s benefit without resolving it definitely and in this sense the poem remains subtly, even cunningly, open-ended.

Another helpful way of approaching “Going Back Home” is trying to unravel its meaning of philosophy. It is precisely because its speaker and his auditor are philosophers that they can act “properly Greek”; their Greekness results from their philosophical qualification. When the speaker uses the pronoun “we” he refers to

philosophers, not all Syrian-Greeks. Also, Hermippos is named after, and hence invokes, a third-century B.C. philosopher and biographer. Yet since they work as paid teachers, they are also sophists. We are familiar with Cavafy's penchant for the Second Sophistic (Dallas, *Cavafy*); but here it is worth distinguishing between philosopher and sophist and not collapse the one into the other. Cavafy's careful choice of words should be given careful attention.⁷

My comparison of philosopher and sophist relies on two assessments: Pierre Hadot's *What is Ancient Philosophy?* and Alexander Nehamas's *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Both concur that all different schools of philosophy in antiquity, in all periods, Classical, Hellenistic and Roman, aim at the interweaving of philosophical discourse and philosophical way of life. Traditionally, those who develop a discourse that is apparently philosophical but does not spring from their experience and who do not try to connect it with their life are called, according to Plutarch, "sophists" (Hadot 174). At the same time, the philosophical way of life demands the care of the self, namely, the process of the creation of the philosopher's self, the end of which is a rather unapproachable ideal of wisdom.⁸ This notion of the "care of the self," bound with self-reflexivity (and the subject's capacity to treat his/her own self as an object), was discovered and appropriated by Foucault and subsequently affected his whole theory of the subject. This did not entail a regression to the idealist assumption of an absolute, essential core of being (Flynn 534, 538-539). As Nehamas also explains, Foucault construed the care of the self not as a process leading to the discovery of who one really is but as a process of self-management including invention and improvisation leading to who *one can be*, a process analogous to an artistic creation: "For creativity, too, is always historically situated. ... Creation demands rearranging the given; innovation requires manipulating the dated. Lives, seen aesthetically, are no different: the artistic creation of the self, as both Montaigne and Nietzsche testify, must necessarily use the materials with which one is always and already faced" (Nehamas 178).

In "Going Back Home" we witness an instance from the philosopher-speaker's effort to reconsider and reorganize the "materials with which he is faced," the materials at his disposal which also constitute him (Greek education, Syrian

emotionality, historical setting and discourses, philosophical training), so as to change or reinvent himself. The task he faces is how to reuse and recombine these ingredients so that the end product, his reinvented self, is acceptable to him so as to be proud of it. His ultimate aim is to be Greek but to be Greek differently and to contest the Greek mainland's claim to cultural centrality. His Hellenism cannot be accounted for within a discursive field dividing people into authentic and inauthentic Greeks. To reclaim Hellenism, he has to undermine this system so as to open up a new space for himself; acting properly Greek is thus a description of a self; but the philosopher's self is always an open-ended process.

The “Philhellene”

The “Philhellene,” arguably the most *Browningsque* of Cavafy's monologues, has been fruitfully compared to Browning's *The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's Church* by Keeley, David Ricks and recently by Maria Tombrou. Its protagonist is another Eastern monarch who configures himself with reference to Hellenism and is usually considered an example of a barbarian impostor with false pretensions to partaking in Greek culture, just like “The Prince from Western Libya” or the “petty kings” with “Hellenified exteriors” mentioned in “Going Back Home from Greece.”

An exception to this generally accepted interpretation is Martin McKinsey's recent reading; he actually identifies the figure of the Oriental monarch with Cavafy himself and accordingly reads the ‘barbarians’ and their predicament as an allegory for the fortunes of modern Greeks, who were, in Cavafy's time, regularly exposed to the scorn of Western and in particular English visitors. Such allegorical reading, enticing as it may be, underestimates the complications of the dramatic monologue as a genre and is obviously reductive (where barbarian, read modern Greek and where Greek, the Western European whom the modern Greek apes albeit unsuccessfully). Nevertheless, it indirectly raises the pertinent question of the place and function of the poet's voice in the dramatic monologue. It has been argued that if readers manage to dispose of their tendency to imagine poet and speaker as mutually exclusive entities and construe them instead as merely voices in the text, then it will be easier to accept that these voices may be kept separate or may blend in the same utterance or be different and the same at once (Martin 110). The philhellene king is

not Cavafy, but the poet's voice inevitably reverberates in a poetic utterance that is after all about poetics, about the making of a work of art.

With respect to Cavafy's monarch, Tombrou argues that his pride and his grandiose, Greek-styled self-image are ironically exposed as inappropriate to his status as a minor ruler of a provincial kingdom within the Roman Empire. Despite his aestheticism, he cannot help revealing that he is in point of fact "un-Greek" (*ανελλήνιστος*), pompous, and shallow (800-803). This kind of reading is erudite and supported by evidence in the poem; but also incomplete because it is exclusively 'judgemental' and 'objective,' in that it underestimates the subjective perspective and action of the monarch, the fact that Cavafy allows him to make a case for himself. Unlike the prince from Western Libya, the Philhellene speaks for himself, which means that Cavafy endows him with voice and subjectivity. Part of the irony of the poem is that an articulate speaker with manifest ongoing identity issues submits to the label of the barbarian. He also calls himself, audaciously, a philhellene, denoting, on the one hand, a non-Hellene and, on the other, someone who is not a barbarian, since in order to be a philhellene he has to be by definition educated in Greek letters and hence be not 'un-Greek' (*ανελλήνιστος*). So like the speaker of "Going Back Home" he, too, hovers between distinct identity categories and ventures to redefine himself, struggling with the asymmetrical conceptual structure of Greek vs. barbarian.

The term "objective" reading of poetry used above is borrowed from Armstrong, who uses it to designate readings that tackle the poetic utterance as object. As already mentioned, according to Armstrong, the dramatic monologue, a "double poem," may be read, in the first place, as a poetic subject's expression (indeed, lyric expression) inviting a subject-centred reading; both Browning's bishop and Cavafy's monarch are expressing their psychological condition, their aestheticism, eroticism, narcissism, will to power, and so on. But the concurrent dramatisation of their utterance gives it new content and introduces the possibility of interrogation and critique, inviting the "objective" reading (12). "Objective" or "analytical" readings "draw attention to the epistemology which governs the construction of the self and its relationships and to the cultural conditions in which those relationships are made" (13). Importantly though, the objective reading is simultaneously

affected by the ironising and deconstructing provocations of the subject-centred one. In what follows, I will try to include the subject-centred reading that is missing, I think, from the predominant critical analyses of the “Philhellene.”

Cavafy’s monarch is giving instructions to Sithaspis, his courtier (who functions as the silent auditor), for designing and producing a new coin. He starts describing the coin he has visualised with considerable confidence and authority, which is reflected in the first series of end-stopped lines (1-15) interrupted only by the surge of emotion in the parenthesis that aims to emphasise his attachment to Hellenism. The coin will have to balance modesty with majesty so as not to offend or threaten the Roman governor. On one side it must present a portrait of the monarch himself, accompanied by the inscription of the words “king” and “saviour” (which, though a sign of arrogance, probably refer to common practice); also—and this will distinguish *this* king from the others—the artist must add the inscription “Philhellene” under the portrait. On the other side of the coin should be a typical image of a Greek youth, an athlete, maybe ready to throw a discus:

Make sure the engraving is done skilfully.
The expression serious, majestic.
The diadem preferably somewhat narrow:
I don’t like that broad kind the Parthians wear.
The inscription, as usual, in Greek:
nothing excessive, nothing pompous—
we don’t want the proconsul to take it the wrong way:
he’s always nosing things out and reporting back to Rome—
but of course giving me due honor.
Something very special on the other side:
some discus-thrower, young, good-looking.
Above all I urge you to see to it
(Sithaspis, for God’s sake don’t let them forget)
that after “King” and “Savior,”
they engrave “Philhellene” in elegant characters. (1-15)

The coin is understood first as the trace of the speaker’s desire and purpose: he wishes to be identified with the legacy of a ‘higher’ civilisation or, as Dallas argues, he aims to proclaim his political allegiance with his contemporary (‘Hellenic’) Syria in order to gain political advantages (“Cavafy’s Coins” 20); in either case it is a means of pursuing power and enhancing his authority. The image on the coin also discloses implicit homosexuality, given that images of naked Greek youths within the corpus of Cavafy’s poetry are usually associated with his erotic poetry and that

the speaker instructs specifically the figured athlete should be “very special,” “young,” and “good looking.” Importantly, the monarch’s aestheticism is revealed in his meticulous care about every potential detail of the coin’s inscription. In fact, according to Ricks, the Philhellene’s “aesthetic discernment” regarding the coin’s design suffices to support his claim to be “not un-Greek” (143).

The speaker is apparently interrupted by the auditor’s question, which reminds him of (or interpellates him to) his place in history as barbarian: he and his people have no relationship to Greece. Whether the question has been actually posed by the auditor or is imagined and anticipated by the speaker makes no difference to its function, which is to bring in the poem the division of people into Greeks and barbarians, the powerful discourse that both confines the speaker into the inferior latter category and provides him with the means to resist and transform its constricting definitions through a distinctive and productive utilisation of the notion of philhellenism. The king proceeds to defend his decision against Sithaspis’s intervention, but his emotional agitation (intimated by the series of enjambments in the second half of the poem) replaces his previously confident and complacent tone. He is now prompted to give a fuller though angry and somewhat disjointed (he seems to be improvising here) articulation of his aspiration to relate to “things Greek”— his *philhellenism*—which constitutes the climax of the poem’s movement:

Now don’t try to be clever
with your “where are the Greeks?” and “what things Greek
here behind Zagros, out beyond Phraata?”
Since so many others more barbarian than ourselves
choose to inscribe it, we will inscribe it too.
And besides, don’t forget that sometimes
sophists do come to us from Syria,
and versifiers, and other triflers of that kind.
So we are not, I think, un-Greek. (16-24)

Whether Sithaspis will obey the monarch or not is irrelevant here. The important fact is that the coin projecting his self-image is already discursively configured by the language of the speaker. Similarly to “Going Back Home from Greece,” in “Philhellene,” original, essential ‘Greeknness’ is absent: “Syrian sophists,” “versifiers,” and other “triflers” occasionally bring along to the country of the Oriental Monarch (located somewhere close to today’s Iran) second and third-hand

mediations of the language and texts. What he has set out to assert in this monologue is his right to make use of the multiple meanings and functions of Hellenism—and expand them—by leaving his own trace in the history of his land in the form of a Greek inscription on a coin. His scornful but ironic way of referring to “sophists and other triflers” may be read as an act of opposition, an answer to certain other actors in Cavafy’s poetry, who spurn figures like him as irredeemable “barbarians,” such as the speaker of “Going Back Home” or even the ironic narrator in “The Prince from Western Libya.”

An exclusively “objective” reading is in danger of identifying too readily with the auditor’s sarcasm, and dismisses the king as a merely pompous and pretentious character, someone pathetically trying to rise above his status. It discards the speaker’s desire as a symptom of the times, an example of the fact that a Greek education used to confer social status, and uses his utterance as a means to moralise against pretensions to grandeur. This approach though must be based on the tacit assumption that the critical reader’s mastery of culture, as well as his or her position in history authorise him or her to distinguish the real philhellene from the fake. But would not that imply that the monarch’s alleged *Greeklessness* is a necessary precondition for the reader to reaffirm his or her superior knowledge?

At this point, it is useful to recall Armstrong’s insightful remark, that so-called “objective readings” do not always produce “metacommentary with clean hands entirely in charge of the grounds of the debate” (15). A “subject-centred” reading, sensitive to the speaker’s longing and performance allows for his perspective to function as the opposition to the “objective” reader. Why should the reader assume he can distinguish between those who ‘really’ have access to Greekness, are capable of ‘knowing’ it and have the right to ‘love’ it and those who do not? Maybe the oriental monarch *has to be Greekless*, so as to confirm the Westerner’s assumption of a superior knowledge of Greece. The double poem not only provokes different readings simultaneously, the one constantly ironising and troubling the other, it implicates the reader and exposes the biases and politics of the historically distant, ‘knowledgeable,’ “objective” position of reading. So, further investigation of the double poem’s structure may contribute to the understanding of Cavafy’s manifold irony that has been shown to be a central feature of his poetry, first by Vayenas

(1979). Notably, this text generates a certain amount of irony at the expense of a certain type of reader.

The occasion and precondition for the monologue in the “Philhellene” may be the ordering of the coin, but its speaker, the Oriental monarch, seeks to achieve much more than merely fulfil a state requirement; the dramatic encounter with Sithaspis sets in motion an articulation of his self-perception that gradually becomes a process of continuing self-reflection and transformation. By means of the monologue, he quasi-literally constructs and images himself as the coin, an ‘object,’ that is both functional and artistic, both ordinary and unique to him, that arrests his personal desire and, moreover, testifies to his aesthetic sensitivity and creativity. Thus the coin allegorises “the artistic creation of the self” in the Foucauldian sense that Nehamas has expounded, a creative process demanding “rearranging the given [and] manipulating the dated” (178), as the monarch deploys and depends on a common cultural practice but, subsequently, boldly appropriates and personalises it. When he is forced to apologise for imitating the higher civilisation of the Greeks, thus unacceptably or impossibly trespassing the boundaries of his position as barbarian, he defends his conception of *philhellenism* as a form of connecting link, a bridge, yoking together the two incompatible entities, Greek and barbarian, a means whereby a kind of transportation and transformation of self is achieved.

This essay does not claim that all dramatic monologues are the same and that it may be possible to formulate a reading strategy that would apply equally successfully to all of them. Rather, I have argued that functional (as opposed to technical) features of the genre, namely its showing up of subjectivity as inevitably enmeshed in the normative discourses it is struggling to resist or its management of two and more different voices performing at the same time within the same utterance, have consequences that should not go unnoticed. Cavafy’s dramatic monologues represent the construction of the self as performative action, a process of repetition and utilisation of concepts, styles and deeds that involves (on the part of his speakers) a certain amount of deliberate or unconscious modification and revision of standard, inherited discourses and practices. During this process concepts such as ‘acting in a properly Greek way,’ ‘Hellenised,’ ‘Hellenified,’

‘philhellene,’ or ‘un-Greek’ appear fluid, changeable and in danger of lapsing into one another because they are used by fictional speakers striving (not fully or always successfully) to assert, advance or transform themselves both within and against the confines of the standard and normalising discursive contexts that define them in the first place. The first speaker manages to assert an expanded and positive self-definition as more than just a Greek, a Greek with additional Asiatic qualities, which nevertheless rests rather uncomfortably with his parallel scorn of other Asians (barbarians). The second speaker tries to break through the confinements of ‘barbarism’ and empower himself by naming himself “Philhellene,” by projecting and imprinting his image in traditional Greek fashion, imagery and “elegant characters”; thus he grapples, daringly and innovatively, with the puzzling configuration of the ‘barbarian philhellene.’

This paper was delivered at the workshop of the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies, Princeton University, in February 2013. I would like to thank all the participants for the exciting and useful discussion. I owe special thanks to Alexander Nehamas for reading my manuscript and making very valuable comments, and more generally for his encouragement. Also, I would like to thank Diana Haas and Nassos Vayenas for reading an older draft of my analysis of Cavafy’s “Philhellene” and for their constructive criticism.

¹ The question of Cavafy’s affinity with Browning was first addressed by Glafkos Alithersis (1934), in his *Cavafy [Καβάφης]*, Alexandria. However, it was Edmund Keeley who established the fact of Browning’s influence on Cavafy and opened the way for the further investigation of that influence. See also Ricks and Tombrou. Tombrou’s article includes a useful listing of all the relevant bibliography up to 2003. Cavafy’s own essay “On Browning” was only made widely available in 2003, published by Michalis Pieris.

² The term “discourse” is used mainly in Foucault’s sense, meaning a set of tacit regulations and rules that govern what can be uttered and thought at any historical moment; hence they make possible only certain utterances, which are related between them and define a field (e.g., gender, nationality, illness, and so on).

³ Based on manuscript evidence, Giorgos Savidis maintains that Cavafy had considered using Attica instead of Greece (243). This detail supports Clay’s hypothesis that in this poem Greek civilisation is symbolically albeit implicitly identified with the legacy of the classical period and the classical ideal.

⁴ The translations of Cavafy's poems are by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

⁵ See also Dallas ("I still have to" 78-89). Dallas does not distinguish clearly between the notions of amalgam and syncretism and regarding "Going Back Home from Greece" he assumes a harmonious fusion of cultural differences; yet his critical analysis of other poems in this chapter reveals the complexity of cultural alliances and combinations more generally in Cavafy.

⁶ My translation from Savidis (243).

⁷ I suggest that it is possible to trace a dilemma or tension between the positions of the philosopher and the sophist in several poems by Cavafy. For example, regarding "Demaratos," Katerina Kostiou has already investigated the compound identity of its narrator as trainee sophist and orator with a propensity for philosophy.

⁸ Each school has its own practices for the care of the self, such as practical thinking and memory exercises, exercises of the body, self-examination, the keeping of diaries, and so on. Hadot presents them analytically for each school, in his chapter on "Philosophy and Philosophical Discourse."

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Beaton, Roderick. "Irony and Hellenism." *Slavonic and East European Review* 59. 4 (1981): 516-28.
- Byron, Glennys. *Dramatic Monologue*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Cavafy, C.P. *Collected Poems*. Rev. ed. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Clay, Diskin. "The Silence of Hermippos. Greece in the Poetry of C. P. Cavafy." *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 3 (1977): 95-116.
- Colapietro, Vincent. "Situation, Meaning and Improvisation: An Aesthetics of Existence in Dewey and Foucault." *Foucault Studies* 11 (2011): 20-40. rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/foucault-studies. 21 April 2011.
- Dallas, Giannes. "Cavafy's Coins (B). Aspects of Cavafy's Poetics." [«Τα καβαφικά νομίσματα (B). Απόψεις μιας καβαφικής ποιητικής»]. *Porfiras* 63 (1992): 7-27.
- . *Cavafy and the Second Sophistic [Ο Καβάφης και η Β'Σοφιστική]*. Athens, Greece: Stigmi, 1984.

- . “I still have to touch him up a bit.” *Latest Studies on Cavafy*. [«Ολίγο θα τον ξαναγγίξω». *Υστερα Καβαφολογικά*]. Athens, Greece: Iridanos, 2009.
- Flynn, T. R. “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 82. 10 (1985): 531-40.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Hadot, Pierre. *What is Ancient Philosophy ?* Trans. M. Chase (2002). Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Keeley, Edmund. *Cavafy’s Alexandria*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Kostiou, Katerina. “The Narrator’s Identity, the Historical Verdict and Cavafy’s ‘Demaratos.’” *Identities in the GreekWorld (from 1204 to today)*. [«Η ταυτότητα του αφηγητή, η ιστορική ετυμηγορία και ο Καβαφικός ‘Δημάρατος’». *Ταυτότητες στον ελληνικό κόσμο (από το 1204 έως σήμερα)*]. Athens: European Society of Modern Greek Studies, 2011. http://www.eens.org/EENS_congresses/2010/Kostiou_Katerina.pdf. 15 January 2011.
- Lambropoulos, Vassilis “Syncretism as Mixture and as Method.” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 19. 2 (2001): 221-35.
- McKinsey, Martin. Where are the Greeks? Revisiting Cavafy’s ‘Philhellene.’” *C.P. Cavafy Forum. Window to Greek Culture: University of Michigan Department of Modern Greek*, 2010. www.lsa.umich.edu/modgreek/windowtogreekculture/cpcavafyforum. 15 January 2011.
- Martin, Loy D. *Browning’s Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1998.
- Pearsall, Cornelia. *Tennyson’s Rapture. Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Pieris, Michalis, ed. C. P. Cavafy. *Prose Works (1882-1931) [Κ.Π. Καβάφης, Τα πεζά (1882-1931)]*. Athens, Greece: Ikaros, 2003.
- . “‘We are a Mixture Here’: Remon as Image of Charmidis.” [«‘Είμεθα ένα κράμα εδώ’: Ο Ρέμων ως εικόνα του Χαρμίδα»]. *The Poetry of Amalgamation [Η*

ποίηση του κράματος]. Ed. Michalis Pieris. Iraklio, Greece: Crete UP, 2000.

Ricks, David. "How it Strikes a Contemporary: Cavafy as a Reviser of Browning." *Kambos: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 11 (2003): 131-52.

Savidis, Giorgos. *C. P. Cavafy's Unpublished Poetry (1882-1922)*. [Κ. Π. Καβάφη, *Ανέκδοτα*]. Athens, Greece: Ikaros, 1968.

Slinn, E. Warwick. *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2003.

Tombrou, Maria. "Cavafy and Browning" [«Καβάφης και Μπράουνινγκ»]. *Nea Estia* 153. 1756 (2003): 787-809.

Vayenas, Nassos. "The Language of Irony. (Towards a Definition of the Poetry of Cavafy)." *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 5 (1979): 43-56.