Vilnius University Press

Contents lists available at Vilnius University Press

Literatūra
2025, vol. 67(3), pp. 108–121

ISSN 0258-0802 eISSN 1648-1143
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15388/Litera.2025.67.3.7

“Nothing but Gratitude…”. Plutarch, Cavafy, Shakespeare, Brodsky*

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Abstract. This article examines Joseph Brodsky’s poem *I Entered the Cage Instead of a Wild Beast…* in the context of intertextual and cultural traditions spanning Plutarch, Shakespeare, and Constantine Cavafy. The focus lies on the theme of gratitude as it evolves from Plutarch’s *Life of Antony*, through Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, into Cavafy’s reinterpretations, and finally Brodsky’s autobiographical poetry. The study applies reception theory and intertextual analysis to highlight how Brodsky’s verse redefines the ancient theme of dignity in defeat as a modern affirmation of gratitude.
Keywords: Plutarch, Shakespeare, Cavafy, Brodsky, intertextuality, gratitude, reception.

„Vien tik dėkingumas...“: Plutarchas, Kavafis, Shakespeare’as ir Brodskis

Santrauka. Straipsnyje, remiantis plačiu intertekstiniu kontekstu, nagrinėjamas Josifo Brodskio autobiografinis eilėraštis *Aš įėjau į narvą vietoje žvėries...*, sukurtas 1980 m. gegužės 24 d., poeto keturiasdešimtojo gimtadienio proga. Eilėraščio pabaiga, kurioje autorius netikėtai pasirenka dėkingumą kaip egzistencinę nuostatą, aiškinama remiantis Plutarcho, Williamo Shakespeare’o ir Konstantino Kavafio kūryba. Tyrimu siekiama parodyti, kad Brodskio tekstas yra šiuolaikinis atsakas į ilgą literatūrinę tradiciją, apmąstančią pralaimėjimo, orumo ir gyvenimo prasmės temas.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: Plutarchas, Shakespeare’as, Kavafis, Brodskis, intertekstualumas, dėkingumas, recepcija.

Introduction

This article is written as an attempt to explain the striking conclusion of Joseph Brodsky’s programmatic poem *I Entered the Cage instead of a Wild Beast…*, written on May 24, 1980, the day of the poet’s fortieth birthday.

* The author acknowledges Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, where part of this research was initiated during a visiting researcher stay in 2022.

Received: 20/08/2025. **Accepted:** 03/11/2025.

I let my vocal cords issue every sound except howling;
I switched to whisper. Now I am forty.
What can I say about life? That it turned out long.
Only with sorrow do I feel solidarity.
But so long as they haven't sealed my mouth with clay,
From it will issue nothing but gratitude.

(Brodsky, 1980, pp. 23–25, translated by Joseph Brodsky in collaboration with George L. Kline)

At the heart of this poem lies a final affirmation of gratitude. Brodsky lists the episodes of his life with striking neutrality, refraining from separating achievements from failures. The unexpectedness of this ending prompts us to seek the cultural and literary contexts that make such a resolution intelligible.

Our inquiry situates Brodsky's poem within a larger intertextual chain that spans many centuries: Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and two poems by Constantine Cavafy – *The End of Antony* and *The God Abandons Antony*. We do not treat intertextuality here as a static presence of quotations or allusions embedded within a writer's consciousness, but rather as a dynamic dialogue, a movement of thought across texts and epochs. Brodsky's voice, in this reading, emerges as the latest participant in a long and complex conversation about defeat, dignity, and the meaning of existence.

The figure of Antony, mediated first through Plutarch and then reframed by Shakespeare, offered Cavafy both material for poetic transformation and a lens for reflecting on his own Alexandrian identity. In turn, Cavafy's vision became indispensable for Brodsky, who found in it not only a model of poetic form but also a philosophy of gratitude as the only way of understanding. In this diachronic chain, the figure of Antony is first constructed by Plutarch as a demonstration of dignity vis-à-vis inevitable loss, reframed by Shakespeare as a tragic subject of love and self-theatricalization, re-spiritualised by Cavafy into an Alexandrian poetics of dignity and splendour, and finally internalized by Brodsky as a modern autobiographical stance of gratitude.

This article examines the specificity of intertextuality and reception, as demonstrated by a sequence of texts linked in both chronological and semantic terms. Throughout this article, the term *intertextuality* is used to denote the textual dialogue among the authors – quotation, allusion, structural echo – and *reception* to describe the historically situated acts of rereading through which later writers revalue the same motif for their own cultural moment.

Put differently, intertextuality concerns the immanent relations between texts; whereas, reception concerns their cultural afterlives. The following works will be considered: *The Life of Antony* from Plutarch's (45–125 CE) *Parallel Lives*; two poems by Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933), *The End of Antony* and *The God Abandons Antony*, both of which engage in dialogue with Plutarch and partially quote his text. Furthermore, Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* emerges as a significant intermediary in the dialogue with Plutarch and also serves as an interlocutor for Cavafy. The biographical poem by Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), which, I propose, is directly connected to Cavafy's work, concludes this chain (Brodsky, 2003, vol. 3).

A close reading of this textual sequence thus brings to light distinctive features of intertextuality and the dynamics of reception, particularly when viewed through the lens of reader-response theory. Furthermore, it illustrates how a 'model reader' (in Umberto Eco's sense) can evolve into a writer and creator (Eco, 2000).[1]

Plutarch and Cavafy: Points of Convergence

It is difficult to determine exactly how many of Cavafy's poems present direct responses to or paraphrases of Plutarch's texts. Eleven poems in his main corpus quote Plutarch directly (Pontani, 2018, pp. 657–669, 662),[2] but many more are indirectly related to his work (Paschalis, 2020, p. 641). This section attempts to uncover the reasons for Cavafy's particular attraction to Plutarch and to identify certain stylistic and linguistic affinities between these two Greek authors.

Plutarch occupies a singular place in the history of world literature. His reception in Renaissance Europe was decisively shaped by Jacques Amyot's French translations – specifically, *Lives* in 1559 and *Moralia* in 1572. Amyot's versions not only reintroduced Plutarch to a broad readership but also played a formative role in the development of early modern French prose.

Building on Amyot's work, Sir Thomas North published his English translation, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, in 1579. Though based on the French rather than the original Greek text, North's version became a cornerstone of Elizabethan literary culture. It was from this translation that William Shakespeare drew heavily for several of his Roman plays, notably, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. In many cases, Shakespeare borrowed entire speeches from North almost verbatim (Martindale, 2004, p. 75).

Although *Parallel Lives* had circulated in Latin excerpts and adaptations during the Middle Ages, it was Amyot and North who firmly established Plutarch as a literary and historical authority during the Renaissance.

From the 16th through the 17th century, Plutarch became the most widely read ancient author in Western Europe. For generations, the classical past was viewed predominantly through his eyes. His *Parallel Lives* not only inspired Renaissance humanism but also served as a principal source for Shakespeare's historical imagination – by shaping *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*.

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[1] Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979), p. 11: *Ogni testo è un prodotto sociale che implica una cooperazione tra autore e lettore. Ma il lettore a cui si rivolge il testo non è un lettore empírico, bensì un lettore "modello", ovvero una sorta di principio organizzativo delle mosse interpretative che il testo prevede*. (*Every text is a social product that implies a cooperation between author and reader. But the reader addressed by the text is not an empirical reader, but rather a 'model reader' – a kind of organizing principle for the interpretive moves that the text anticipates.* Translated by F. E.).

[2] The list of Cavafy poems, inspirated by Plutarch, is as follows: *Ο Βασιλεύς Δημήτριος* (*King Demetrius*, 1906), *Μάρτιαι Ειδοί* (*The Ides of March*, 1911), *Απολείπειν ο θεός Αντώνιον* (*The God Abandons Antony*, 1911), *Αλεξανδρινοί Βασιλείς* (*Alexandrian Kings* 1912), *Ο Θεόδοτος* (*Theodotus* 1915), *Εν τω Μηνί Αθύρ* (*In the Month of Athyr*, 1917), *Καισαρίων* (*Caesarion*, 1918), *Εν Σπάρτη* (*In Sparta*, 1928), *Εν πορεία προς την Σινώπην* (*On the March to Sinope*, 1928), *Άγε, ώ βασιλεύ Λακεδαιμονίων* (*Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians*, 1929), *Στα 200 π.Χ.* (*In 200 B.C.*, 1931).

S. S. Averintsev, who devoted his first monograph to Plutarch (Averintsev, 1973), sought to uncover the secret of Plutarch's enduring literary fame by questioning the boundaries of his oeuvre and the nature of his individuality. Averintsev's monograph carries the subtitle *On the Place of a Genre Classic in the History of the Genre*. He observes that, as a rule, the classic is not a typical representative of a genre but rather a clear outsider who transcends the genre's boundaries. Quoting Goethe, "Everything perfect in its kind must transcend its kind",[3] he asks:

> *If we turn from generalities to the specific case of Plutarch, the question keeps arising: suppose Plutarch's biographies were written in exactly the same way as those of some anonymous Hellenistic author – why then did Parallel Lives remain among the books copied and read, while the works of NN were forgotten?* (Averintsev, 1973, p. 6).

Averintsev compares his approach to studying Plutarch to tracing the outline of a silhouette against a background – which is an attempt to define the character of Plutarch's 'otherness'. He arrives at a paradoxical conclusion: Plutarch's traditionalism is only apparent. His characteristic use of a biographical form for philosophical and psychological sketches rooted in political history is a unique phenomenon, and it directly contradicts the genre's tradition. At the heart of Plutarch's style lies the tone of "intimate, relaxed conversation, a living voice, a visible gesture" (Averintsev, 1973, p. 10).

Plutarch himself seems keenly aware of the enigmatic charm of his writing. In the often-quoted introduction to the *Life of Alexander* from *Parallel Lives*, he emphasises the importance of vivid detail over exhaustive biography, since such detail best reveals a person's character:

> *For it is not histories that we are writing, but lives; and the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the best discoveries of virtue or vice in men. Sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters than battles with the slaughter of tens of thousands, or the greatest arrays and sieges of cities* (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 1919, p. 225).

Thus, Plutarch becomes a genre-defining classic precisely by violating the genre's unity and destabilizing its conventions – bringing a domestic tone into political discourse. In his hands, biography becomes a crossroads of various discursive forces, a kind of metaphor in itself.

Constantine Cavafy

Constantine Cavafy is one of the central figures in world poetry. In 1935, after the death of the 'Alexandrian' (as Greek readers called Cavafy, who lived his whole life in Alexandria), 154 poems were published, securing his fame. Notably, Cavafy published almost

[3] Goethe, 1948, p. 426: "Alles Vollkommene in seiner Art muß über seine Art hinausgehen, es muß etwas anderes,Unvergleichbares werden" (*Everything perfect in its kind must go beyond its kind, it must become something different, incomparable*. Translated by F. E.).

nothing during his lifetime, although it is hard to find a poet who moved so deliberately and systematically toward his future success. As V. N. Toporov wrote, "Cavafy began to restore that great arc – from Homer to Callimachus – which had been broken once, and to construct its continuation" (Toporov, 2000, p. 491. Translated by F. E.).

Cavafy, however, was far more drawn to the Hellenistic period than to Classical Antiquity. According to his friends, he constantly read Plutarch and the *Palatine Anthology*: "He especially loved Plutarch; he practically knew him by heart and often quoted him in conversation, somewhat proudly noting the chapter from which the quotation came" (Sareyannis, 1983, p. 110). Many of Cavafy's finest poems are based on Plutarch's work (Pontani, 1991, pp. 51–70, 189, 235).

Cavafy's Greek is striking – this is a personal idiom shaped by an educated, cosmopolitan Alexandrian. He is likely one of the few modern Greek poets for whom absolute freedom of linguistic expression is characteristic. He seems to simply ignore the notorious Greek *language question*. Cavafy's Greek can be called *panchronic* – he freely blends quotations, easily incorporating them into his own writing while combining archaisms with innovations. A similar boldness and freedom characterises his treatment of history.

This attitude is reminiscent of what scholars have noted about Plutarch's language as well. The famous biographer's language was rich in its variety, spanning a range from literary language to slang. As Andrew Bowie noted in 1979:

> "*Plutarch's essays are not written in a uniform or consistently elevated style, nor are they simply 'popular'. On the contrary, they use a variety of registers – from high literary language to colloquial speech and even slang*" (Bowie, 1979, p. 1).

Brodsky noted that, in his historical poems, Cavafy uses what Keeley calls 'common' metaphors, i.e., metaphors based on political symbolism (Brodsky, 2000, p. 489).

In addition to linguistic idiosyncrasy, a unique tone, and the use of biography as a political metaphor, both authors share an attachment to *chronotope* (to use Bakhtin's term) (Bakhtin, 1975; 1981). Each, for different reasons, spent his life in the same city and, in their texts, each moved through his native space along the axis of time. The provincial Chaeronea and the cosmopolitan Alexandria play an essential role in the works of both of them, creating a context that is constantly shifting, yet recognizable and endlessly significant. It is worth noting that critics often compare Cavafy to Plutarch, despite the very different nature of their diction.

We have deliberately excluded Brodsky from this chain of texts at this stage – and we will return to him later. Cavafy's influence on Brodsky is less a matter of style than of stance: from him, Brodsky absorbed a poetics of historical reflection, restraint, and acceptance. Much has been written on this subject. We shall limit ourselves to one quote from T. V. Tsivian's article *Cavafy and Brodsky*, where she discusses the connection of the two poets with certain cities – Cavafy with Alexandria, and Brodsky with St. Petersburg:

> *It would be imprudent to intrude into another's inner world, especially when its owner can no longer defend himself. And yet, when Brodsky writes about Cavafy's city, it is impossible not to think that Brodsky too had his own city. If Cavafy chose Alexandria*

> *to remain in, then Brodsky was imposed (or assigned) the opposite choice. Perhaps the image of another city – one experienced through recognizable details and specific signs, drawn not only from personal experience but also from literature and from that special kind of text in which a city speaks through its streets, buildings, bridges, rivers, canals – and clouds – is superimposed, in some way, on Alexandria as received through Cavafy* (Tsivian, 2000, p. 271. Translated by F. E.).

The God Abandons Antony – A Close Reading

The first texts in the sequence under consideration are two excerpts from Plutarch's *Antony*, from *Parallel Lives* (Plut. *Ant.* 77.3–4; 75.3–4). We will intentionally break the chronological order and begin with the passage describing Kleopatra's grief when she believes that Antony died:

> *And when she had thus got him in and laid him down, she rent her garments over him, beat and tore her breasts with her hands, wiped off some of his blood upon her face, and called him master, husband, and imperator; indeed, she almost forgot her own ills in her pity for his. But Antony stopped her lamentations and asked for a drink of wine, either because he was thirsty, or in the hope of a speedier release. When he had drunk, he advised her to consult her own safety, if she could do it without disgrace, and among all the companions of Caesar to put most confidence in Proculeius, and not to lament him for his last reverses, but to count him happy for the good things that had been his, since he had become most illustrious of men, had won greatest power, and now had been not ignobly conquered, a Roman by a Roman*.

Plutarch describes the moment when, following Cleopatra's false report of her suicide, Antony attempts to kill himself. His loyal servant refuses to finish him off, choosing instead to commit a suicide. Antony falls on his sword, bleeds heavily, but survives. Desperate, he is hoisted by ropes into Cleopatra's quarters, where he dies in her arms. It is one of Plutarch's most dramatic scenes, with a cinematic vividness characteristic of his narrative style.

Shakespeare, who, as mentioned above, read Plutarch in translation (Martindale, 2004, pp. 75–95), is said by critics to have changed virtually nothing in the scene, producing one of his most brilliant tragedies – *Antony and Cleopatra*. In doing so, he greatly amplified Plutarch's fame. As is often the case with successful receptions, readers were inspired to return to the original source; certainly, the case of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* made the readers reread Plutarch. Today, Plutarch's *Antony* is perhaps his best-known *Life*.

Mark Antony – who was a man of great courage and military prowess, an experienced politician, and a charismatic figure – is also rash, inconsistent, and self-indulgent. He loves banquets, overindulges, drinks, pursues women, and is vulnerable to various passions. It seems that Plutarch, among his many authorial personae, chooses here the role of moralist, showing us the downfall of a man who becomes a slave to passion and forsakes the Roman ideal of virtue. Yet in line with Averintsev's earlier observations, the reality is far more complex: when describing the life of Antony, the philosopher Plutarch comes into conflict with the moralist Plutarch – and this dialectic is what makes him a genius.

Antony's final words – *Ῥωμαῖος ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίου κρατηθείς* ("a Roman vanquished by a Roman") – appear to restore him to the fold of Roman virtue and legality, reaffirming his loyalty to Roman ideals. These words are echoed by Shakespeare: "a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished", and repeated nearly verbatim by Cavafy: "Ρωμαίος από Ρωμαίο νικημένος" (*a Roman defeated by a Roman*).

Yet Plutarch again shifts the focus, making things even more complex. In both his text and Shakespeare's, the constant undercurrent is the tragic, irresistible, and simultaneously ennobling love between Antony and Cleopatra – along with the spellbinding charm of the queen herself (described as possessing 'infinite variety' by Enobarbus in Shakespeare) and the seductive luxury of Egyptian Alexandria. In Cleopatra and Alexandria, there is a beauty absent from Rome:

> *For her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her; but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused about her behaviour toward others, had something stimulating about it. There was sweetness also in the tones of her voice; and her tongue, like a many-stringed instrument, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased* (Plut. *Ant.* 27. 2).[4]

Although Shakespeare, following Plutarch, alters little and adds nothing of substance, he adjusts the emphasis and lighting, and, as a result, *Antony and Cleopatra* becomes – alongside *Romeo and Juliet* – one of the greatest love stories ever told. The history of the play's reception – its numerous stage productions, film adaptations, and artistic representations – testifies to this: Cleopatra often eclipses Antony as the central figure.

Thus, the reception history of *Antony* demonstrates the power of the *model reader* (in Umberto Eco's sense) to influence a text's fate by reshaping its subsequent perception. Shakespeare proved to be an exceptionally intelligent reader. Upon rereading both Plutarch's *Life* and Shakespeare's tragedy, it becomes clear that – while changing almost nothing – Shakespeare nevertheless tells a different story.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra vs. Plutarch's Cleopatra

Let us now turn to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 4, Scene 16, lines 42–61:[5]

> **ANTONY**
> I am dying, Egypt, dying.
> Give me some wine, and let me speak a little.

[4] ὡς οὐ τὸ κάλλος αὐτὴν ἐποίει θαυμάζειν οὐδ᾽ ὥστε πλήθει καταπλῆξαι τοὺς ἰδόντας, ἀλλὰ τὸ συνεῖναι πρὸς αὐτὴν ἐνεῖχε τι τερπνόν, καὶ ἦν ἐν τῷ σχήματι μετὰ πειθοῦς λόγου καὶ τοῦ τρόπου, ὃς ἔφερεν ἀπ᾽ αὐτῆς εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους, τι ἐρεθίζον. ἡ δὲ φωνὴ μετ᾽ αὐλῶν τινων ἦν, ἧς τῇ γλώσσῃ ἐχρῆτο καθάπερ ὀργάνῳ πολλῶν ἤχων ἁρμονίαν εὐπετῶς μεταβάλλουσα εἰς ὅ τι ἐβούλετο (Plutarch (1919). *Plutarch's Lives*, Vol. 7, transl. B. Perrin. Loeb Classical Library 99. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

[5] Shakespeare, William. 1995. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Edited by John Wilders. Bloomsbury.

CLEOPATRA
No, let me speak, and let me rail so high
That the false hussy Fortune break her wheel,
Provoked by my offence.

ANTONY
One word, sweet queen. Of Caesar seek your honour, with your safety. O!

CLEOPATRA
They do not go together.

ANTONY
Gentle, hear me. None about Caesar trust but Proculeius.

CLEOPATRA
My resolution and my hands I'll trust,
None about Caesar.

ANTONY
The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at, but please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes,
Wherein I lived the greatest prince o' th' world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to
My countryman; a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished.
Now my spirit is going; I can no more.

Comparing Plutarch's passage with Shakespeare's version, one senses a shift in emphasis and a change in Cleopatra's characterisation. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is far more restrained in her grief – she is prouder, and more regal.

She does not weep, tear her clothing, or claw at her face in anguish – as she does in Plutarch's text. When Antony urges her to seek protection from Caesar, she coolly replies that this is hardly compatible. And when he advises her to trust Proculeius, she declares she will rely only on her own hands – which is an allusion to her eventual suicide.

Earlier, we have already noted that Shakespeare changes little in Plutarch's text. Even in the passage we are discussing now, the change is not radical – but it is rather a matter of emphasis – highlighting different aspects of the character. All of the qualities Shakespeare emphasises in Cleopatra – such as her quick thinking, courage, dignity, fearlessness, her ability to assess the situation and make an optimal decision without succumbing to despair – are already present in Plutarch. But it is Shakespeare who places Cleopatra at the centre of the story, whereas, for Plutarch, Antony remains the principal figure.

Cavafy's *The End of Antony*

Having outlined the early modern and Shakespearean mediation of Plutarch, we can now turn to the author who, more than any other modern poet, made Plutarch's Alexandrian material speak again – Constantine Cavafy.

In 1907, Cavafy wrote his poem *The End of Antony*, based on the same passage from Plutarch. Ultimately, Cavafy was dissatisfied with the poem and never published it. It appeared in print only in 1968.

The End of Antony[6]
But when he heard the women weeping,
lamenting his sorry state—
madam with her oriental gestures
and her slaves with their barbarized Greek—
the pride in his soul rose up,
his Italian blood sickened with disgust
and all he had worshipped blindly till then—
his passionate Alexandrian life—
now seemed dull and alien.
And he told them "to stop weeping for him,
that kind of thing was all wrong.
They ought to be singing his praises
for having been a great ruler,
so rich in wordly goods.
And if he'd fallen now, he hadn't fallen humbly,
but as a Roman vanquished by a Roman.

(Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard).

This poem, closely tied to Plutarch, diverges significantly from Shakespeare's version. Formally, Cavafy follows Plutarch quite precisely. However, he essentially removes Cleopatra from the scene – she is no longer important to him, or perhaps she even irritates him. He withholds her name, referring to her only as *κερά* ('madam' or 'mistress'), with a note of disdain, by using a vulgarised folk version of the name. Cavafy emphasises her eastern extravagance – *με ανατολικές χειρονομίες* ("with oriental gestures"). Then come the *δούλες* (slave women) with their *barbaric Greek*, which grates on Antony's ears. The word *χάλι*, which describes what the slaves are mourning, carries a colloquial, even slightly vulgar tone – it is a Turkish loanword, rendered here as 'misfortune', but closer to 'trouble'.

Plutarch's complex narrative mode, as is typical of his style, overlays multiple interpretive planes: Antony and Cleopatra's love leads to their self-destruction; life becomes a feast on the edge of ruin. He condemns them – and yet he also admires them. In both Plutarch and Shakespeare, Antony dies thinking of Cleopatra, doing everything he can

[6] Κ.Π. Καβάφη, *Το Τέλος του Αντωνίου*: „Αλλά σαν άκουσε που εκλαίγαν οι γυναίκες/ και για το χάλι του που τον θρηνούσαν,/ με ανατολίτικες χειρονομίες η κερά,/ κ' οι δούλες με τα ελληνικά τα βαρβαρίζοντα,/ η υπερηφάνεια μες στην ψυχή του/σηκώθηκεν, αηδίασε το ιταλικό του αίμα,/

κα[ι] τον εφάνηκαν ξένα κι αδιάφορα/ αυτά που ώς τότε λάτρευε τυφλά —/ όλ' η παράφορη/ Αλεξανδρινή ζωή του —/ κ' είπε «Να μην τον κλαίνε. Δεν ταιριάζουν τέτοια./ Μα να τον εξυμνούνε πρέπει μάλλον,/ που εστάθηκε μεγάλος εξουσιαστής,/ κι απέκτησε τόσ' αγαθά και τόσα./ Και τώρα αν έπεσε, δεν πέφτει ταπεινά,/ αλλά Ρωμαίος από Ρωμαίο νικημένος". (Κ. Π. Καβάφης (1993). *Κρυμμένα Ποιήματα.* Ed. Γ. Π. Σαββίδης, Ίκαρος, Αθήνα, p. 90).

to ease her fate. There is no suggestion in either text that her 'oriental gestures' offend or irritate him – he dies with her name on his lips.

Cavafy's *The End of Antony* is his own reading of Plutarch – one he eventually rejected by not publishing the poem. Anyhow, this reading led him to one of his most striking texts: *The God Abandons Antony*. In that poem, too, Cavafy performs a reduction – narrowing the focus to a mystical episode of Dionysus leaving the city. We will now turn to that poem.

The God Abandons Antony

In 1911, Cavafy published one of his most famous poem, *The God Abandons Antony*. He continued reading Plutarch and now turned to a passage two chapters earlier. Let us follow his example.

Plutarch, *Antony*, 75.5:

> *During this night, it is said, about the middle of it, while the city was quiet and depressed through fear and expectation of what was coming, suddenly certain harmonious sounds from all sorts of instruments were heard, and the shouting of a throng, accompanied by cries of Bacchic revelry and satyric leapings, as if a troop of revellers, making a great tumult, were going forth from the city; and their course seemed to lie about through the middle of the city toward the outer gate which faced the enemy, at which point the tumult became loudest and then dashed out. Those who sought the meaning of the sign were of the opinion that the god to whom Antony always most likened and attached himself was now deserting him*.

This passage describes a mysterious event witnessed by Alexandrians in 30 BCE. On the night before Octavian's troops entered besieged Alexandria – which Antony was still defending – they reportedly heard an invisible procession: music, revelry, and the shouts of satyrs and bacchants. Interpreted as a divine omen, it signified that Dionysus, Antony's lifelong patron deity, was abandoning him.

This scene is unique in Plutarch's *Lives*, elevating the narrative to a metaphysical register and reflecting Plutarch's affiliation with the Delphic cult – he was, after all, a priest at Delphi.

In Plutarch's text, Antony is repeatedly associated with Heracles, but, after arriving in the East, he is linked more often with Dionysus:

> *When Antony entered Ephesus, women dressed as bacchantes led the way, along with men and boys dressed as satyrs and fauns; the whole city was adorned with ivy and thyrsi, lyres, flutes, and pipes played everywhere, and the citizens called Antony 'Dionysus the Beneficent'* (Plut. *Ant.* 24. 1–2).

In *The God Abandons Antony*, Cavafy returns to the Plutarchan text, but again applies reduction – condensing the dramatic source into a focused poetic moment: the mystical departure of Dionysus from besieged Alexandria. The poem is not a full retelling but rather a stylized evocation, one that deliberately omits narrative elements in order to prompt

the reader to return to the original source – this is a rhetorical strategy characteristic of Cavafy. As Umberto Eco notes, "*Every narrative must inevitably be elliptical, for though the narrator constructs a world with its events and characters, they cannot say everything about it. They hint, and ask the reader to collaborate by filling in the blanks*" (Eco, 2000, p. 13. Translated by F. E.).

Even the title *The God Abandons Antony* resists exact translation into English, since it uses the ancient Greek infinitive form – thus making its paratext explicitly citational.

Let us now present the poem in English translation:

The God Abandons Antony
When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion, but not
with the whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen—your final delectation—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.
(Translated by Keeley and Sherrard)

In this diachronic chain, the figure of Antony is first constructed by Plutarch as an ethical and political exemplar, reframed by Shakespeare as a tragic subject of love and self-theatricalization, re-spiritualised by Cavafy into an Alexandrian poetics of losing well, and finally internalised by Brodsky as a modern autobiographical stance of gratitude in defeat.

Cavafy's Poetic Dialectic and *The God Abandons Antony*

In abandoning his earlier poem *The End of Antony*, which closely followed Plutarch, Cavafy ascends to a higher level of abstraction in *The God Abandons Antony*. This elevation is characteristic of his mature style. One general rule applies to reading Cavafy: his poems are accessible even to an uninitiated reader – but the more educated and reflective the reader is, the more Cavafy offers. Those familiar with the historical context, the intertextual allusions, and the Hellenistic milieu uncover far deeper layers of meaning.

The God Abandons Antony likewise carries a strong sense of intentional ambiguity – or, more precisely, suggestive omission – a pause, an absence, which intensifies its emotional power.

It is not clear who addresses Mark Antony in the poem. Perhaps it is the author himself. Perhaps it is a divine voice. It cannot be Dionysus – he is leaving the city with his *thiasos* (retinue) – but even that is left uncertain. The dominant presence in the poem is the invisible music, the mystical procession fading into the night.

This motif – that of music at night – is recurrent in Cavafy. It appears at the end of his early poems *Φωναί γλυκείαι* (1894) and *Φωνές* (1904), both playing on the double meaning of *φωνή* (‘sound’ and ‘voice’ in Greek):

> **Familiar voices… but where are they now?**
> Some long since dead, others lost
> as though they too were dead.
> Sometimes they return in dreams,
> or rise up in the mind’s quiet,
> stirring our thoughts, awakening
> the poetry of a vanished life —
> like music at night, they fade away...

Cavafy often concludes his poems with didactic but paradoxical final lines. *The God Abandons Antony* is no exception. God is leaving, Alexandria is slipping away, but the poet tells us: do not mourn – rejoice. You were chosen to dwell in this incredible city. You were given the miracle of Alexandria. Dionysus is withdrawing, but you – you still hear his music.

There is no future, no salvation, no redemption. But there is a past – and the radiance of what once was. *And for that, one must be grateful*.

Cavafy’s Dual Antony: A Comparison of Two Poems

It is striking how radically Cavafy’s interpretation of Plutarch diverges in *The End of Antony* and *The God Abandons Antony*. In *The End of Antony*, the hero rejects the luxurious, Eastern, emotional culture of Alexandria and reclaims his Roman identity, finding the strength to “die worthily by the hand of a Roman”. whereas, in *The God Abandons Antony*, there is no mention of Cleopatra, of Eastern sensuality, or of shame. Instead, the poem evokes the Shakespearean tone: Antony has known the height of earthly joy. His time is ending, but it ends amid the echo of divine music. He is reminded not of disgrace, but of what he once possessed. Here, Alexandria itself becomes the symbol of that past splendour – hated, beloved, lost, immortalised.

In his essay *On Cavafy Side*, Brodsky remarks:

> “*Cavafy did a very simple thing. There are two elements which usually constitute a metaphor: the object of description (the “tenor”, as I. A. Richards called it), and the object to which the first is imagistically, or simply grammatically, allied (the “vehicle”).*

> *The implication which the second part usually contains provides the writer with the possibility of virtually endless development. This is the way a poem works. What Cavafy did, almost from the very beginning of his career as a poet, was to jump straight to the second part: for the rest of that career he developed and elaborated upon its implicit notions without bothering to return to the first part, assumed as self-evident. The "vehicle" was Alexandria; the "tenor" was life*" (Brodsky, 2000, p. 483).

Joseph Brodsky: *I Entered the Cage instead of a Wild Beast…*

What in Plutarch appears as dignity vis-à-vis inevitable loss, in Shakespeare becomes a drama of affect and reputation, in Cavafy is turned into a lesson in how to accept abandonment without humiliation, and in Brodsky is redirected toward thanksgiving as the only viable existential response.

The poem *The God Abandons Antony* has been translated to Russian by Gennady Shmakov, a friend of Brodsky. In line with reader-response theory, each translator offers a unique interpretation. The differences are not just stylistic but deeply semantic, which is a consequence of the poem's intentional elliptical structure.

The translation by Gennady Shmakov was edited by Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky's poetics can be felt throughout in the translation of Shmakov: Brodsky was deeply influenced by Cavafy, and, in translating him, the voices often resonate – Brodsky's tone can overpower Cavafy's. In an interview, Brodsky said:

> "*If traces of [Cavafy's] influence are found in my poetry – that's the highest compliment I could be paid. But I don't think the influence is as strong as people say… One cannot be under the influence of Cavafy. You can love him, but you can't use him as a model – because he's inimitable*" (Polukhina, 2008, p. 25).

In my view, the ideal *transposition* of *The God Abandons Antony* into Russian is not any of the translations – but rather Joseph Brodsky's own poem *I Entered the Cage instead of a Wild Beast…*

Written when Brodsky was forty, it is, without question, the most Cavafian of all his poems. It follows Cavafy's poetic structure perfectly – it is an autobiographical enumeration of experiences that ends in a didactic, paradoxical, and moving conclusion.

> **I Entered the Cage instead of a Wild Beast…**
> I entered the cage instead of a wild beast,
> burned my nickname into the bunk with a nail,
> lived by the sea, played roulette,
> dined in tails with devils,
> from a glacier I surveyed half the earth,
> drowned three times, got slashed twice,
> abandoned the country that raised me.
> Those who forgot me could fill a city.
> I wandered steppes haunted by Hun cries,
> wore fashions long out of style,
> sowed rye, tarred granaries,

and drank everything but dry water.
I let into my dreams a gunmetal gaze,
chewed exile's bread down to the crust,
gave my voice every sound but a howl,
then went silent. Now I'm forty.
What do I say of life? It's long.
Only with grief do I feel solidarity.
But until they stuff my mouth with clay,
it will be filled with gratitude.

(Translated by Joseph Brodsky in collaboration with George L. Kline)

Brodsky's poem echoes *The God Abandons Antony* in its structure, tone, and purpose. It, too, suddenly moves from lived experience to metaphysical gratitude, with a stark honesty and grace.

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