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## Eros and Revolution in the Poetry of Cavafy

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JOHN CHIOLES

HOMER IN HIS *ILIAD* lingers for a few verses to take in the response of Achilles' horses to the death of his beloved Patroklos. The moment is marked in time, in love, and violence. After another great war, not in mythic but in real time, not far from Troy, Queen Atossa has a dream in Persepolis, depicted by the Athenian tragic poet, Aischylos, in his *Persians* in 472 B.C. Memory of the dream shows a team of two beautiful women in terrible strife, now harnessed like horses both, with Xerxes, the Queen's son, as charioteer. The one dressed in rich Persian robes, the other in Doric severity; the one is Asia, the other Europe. In their wild feud, they snap the yoke and the chariot, in speed, throws the charioteer, who begins to tear off his clothes in shame. A century or so after, Plato in his dialogue *Phaidros* has Socrates depicting the soul in a complex mythic metaphor of charioteer and two horses with Eros as the motivating center. A few decades later, Alexander sheds tears over the death of his horse Boukephalos. Some two millenia after all that, the Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy measures once more the tears of the horses of Achilles over the death of Patroklos against the unstated Eros and the violence that dismal and fickle humans have implicated these poor, once divine, now only beautiful, animals. The erotic power of horses in mythmaking, the memory of beauty, and the revolutionary road toward cognition and comprehension of life through Eros are some of the informing aspects in Cavafy's poetry that I shall consider.



Something they said beside me  
made me look . . .

and I saw that lovely body which seemed  
as though Eros in his mastery had fashioned it . . .  
(*At the Café Door*, 1915)

Memory, keep them the way they were.  
And, memory, whatever you can bring back of that love,  
whatever you can, bring back tonight . . .  
(*Grey*, 1917)

And for some time now I've been busy  
working on a Poseidon. I'm studying  
his horses in particular: how to shape them exactly . . .

But here's my favorite work,  
created with the most care and feeling.  
This one—it was a hot summer day  
and my mind rose to ideal things—  
this one came to me in a vision, this young Hermes.  
(*Sculptor of Tyana*, 1911)

The whole of Greek culture has hovering at its summit the notion of *mnemosyne*; this sense of memory (a 'remembrance of things past'), this sweet vulnerability (an Achilles heel), is also the thorn on the side of reason, that mysterious other side of Aristotle's *nous* (mind conspiring with the senses) in perpetual potentiality. For, memory has cognitive qualities: it insists on its special privileges to knowledge and demands that present reality be invaded by a mixture of loss and joy of pre-logical Eros now transcended to a need for survival. The survival itself is of mind in cognition (while going about it

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise stated, the translations are from C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, ed. G. Savidis (Princeton, 1975).

business of knowing) in re-cognition. All this is made possible amid the intimate calling-forth of Eros by Recollection. The taboo images that recede in private histories are recovered, and through them the mind (always answering to societal reality) is sufficiently deflated as to have its survival insured by those previously buried images, taboo though they may be. In the *Phaidros* they are the unspeakable desires tempered by moral choice. Such images have about them the cumulative strain of expansion. Being the matrix of Eros and memory, these images insinuate themselves in becoming a vital component of the dialectic of ideas as well as the dialectic of history. In a manner of speaking, this may be what Cavafy had in mind in suggesting that his poetry showed ". . . three areas of concern: the philosophical, the historical, and the erotic (or sensual)."

In the passages quoted above, the poet's images of *mnemosyne*, inasmuch as they are philosophical, historical, and erotic, are the Eros principle in the larger sense which encompasses all three of Cavafy's concerns. The Alexandrian poet places careful, unconcealed weight on the matter; the Western mind in post-classical times has hovered in "religious" thought, disguising it as Reason or Enlightenment. Now, faced as we are with this seemingly anachronistic, but very much of the twentieth-century Alexandrian, we must follow his implications; we have no choice but to accept the ethical structure of Plato's *Phaidros*, no less Freud's subsequent understanding of the issue of Eros, as well as Heidegger's Socratic idea of bringing forth from concealment and into the clearing. These are the thoughts toward which the poet guides us, which may in turn serve as guide to our understanding of him.

Cavafy wages his revolution with *mnemosyne* and Eros shaped into the weapon of mythic reality, a region of experience where, in recognizing the world, he transforms it into sentient mind. Observe the movements of a simple poem:

#### IN THE SAME SPACE

The setting of houses, cafés, the neighborhood



that I've seen and walked through years on end:  
I created you while I was happy, while I was sad,  
with so many incidents, so many details.

And for me, the whole of you has been transformed into  
feeling. (1929)

"... has been transformed into feeling" (*aisthematopoiethikes*), a single word whose dimensions are untranslatable, resonates across the history of the Greek language to convey the self-perpetuation as a landscape of Eros mingled with mind. In early Plato a prime character of culture was the free self-development of Eros. Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization*, while evaluating Freud's achievement, tells us that subsequent Western thought has absorbed Eros into Logos (by which Marcuse means Reason), thereby creating culture out of the repression of the former. Of course, it has taken Freud's full imagination to unearth Eros from the rubble of repression only to show us how deeply it is buried, how painful and destructive it is, and the degree of depth to which it should perhaps remain buried. Cavafy is not quite so pessimistic, on the contrary. He knows that if he wages a revolt with *mnemosyne* as the spark, he will recover an understanding of the nature of loss. And with Eros' moral purpose as revealed by Greek culture, he will survive. The poet's sense of Plato's ethical world is powerfully intuitive, complemented in modern thought only by Heidegger's imaginative understanding of the classical mind. It is the nature of loss which gives Cavafy the emotional power to grapple with Logos and force from it the collapsed and subsumed Eros. Wonderment, poignant states, little defeats, small triumphs—they are all moments of an historical reality: the recovery of Eros, its understanding in the whole spectrum of Greek culture, and its proper use for the survival of the mind. Real loss occurs during those tragic moments when it seems as if bringing forth the precious commodity from concealment will not be possible. The poet's "Trojans" begins, "Our efforts are those of men prone to disaster;/ our efforts are like those

of the Trojans." And in the fourth stanza he continues:

... when the big crisis comes,  
our boldness and resolution vanish;  
our spirit falters, paralyzed,  
and we scurry around the walls  
trying to save ourselves by running away. (1905)

What makes the tragic moment particularly cataclysmic, resembling only late Euripides of the ancient tragedians, is that Cavafy has rendered Logos by itself quite impotent in dealing with survival; so that, the poems which conclude in a tragic jolt, imply at once the remedy. Nor is the remedy some kind of romantic optimism: simply, an understated impulse to recover the missing links that will supply the will to move toward sentient mind.

For Cavafy "the same space" (from the poem quoted earlier) constitutes a consciousness and its object. This motif is repeated in a number of important poems, such as "The City," "Walls," and "Windows." His subjective world, with all its sadness, achieves a virtual impossibility in the modern world: an unpoliticized (and therefore unmenacing) moral purpose toward the Object. The same tedious space that we inhabit is usually seen either as indifferently utilitarian, or alternately filled with *ennui* or oppressive and fraught with *angst*. But here, Place, an Object, becomes interior landscape fraught with feeling: substance (city streets, walls, windows) is broken down, dismantled and made to perpetuate itself as spirit; all of it for love of the Subject who "created it" out of so many little joys and sorrows, so many chance occurrences, so much detail. Cavafy has brought forth from "concealment" and into "the clearing" of the soul the process of Socratic transubstantiation (not in its Christian form that Kazantzakis thought so much of, the original sense of transubstantiation as exemplified by *aisthematopoiethikes* above), achieved through the principle of recollection conjoined with Eros. In that process the mirror of nature reveals unconcealed love, an Eros



that turns nature itself into a force, one that develops and reveals itself for the sake of the Subject, not so much that it may be mastered, but that it may co-exist as memory-Eros-mind in moral harmony. Here, memory (recollection) is a doctrine of cognition; Eros is philosophy and the maker of culture; and mind is ethical purpose.

Such is the depth perspective that makes the simple appeal of Cavafy's poems so lingering, so didactic without intending to teach, so lasting an influence in the mind where originally only a feeling was perceived. Such, too, is his particular revolt against history as events, against philosophy as categories of reason, against poetry that represses Eros. Beyond poems such as "In the Same Space," "Walls," or "The City," Cavafy has infused his entire work with this kind of energy of idea. There hardly seems to be a single poem that does not contain it. Some, as has George Seferis, think he is writing one long poem; in fact, he may be said to be re-thinking, re-discoursing, re-writing his revolt in a myriad of different fragments etched in Eros and mind, like Plato's search for "the good life" in his moral philosophy—which for Plato was *all* philosophy, as it must have been the case for the Alexandrian poet as well.

Reason in the Western tradition had for Cavafy obscured the balanced principles of "the good life." Eros foundered against the near-religious supremacy of reason, bringing about an indeterminate pessimism in his contemporaries. This he abhorred in his notes, posthumously termed his *Ars Poetica*. He objected to "the vanity of human things" in philosophies of negativism. Through his particular perspective on language and the history of Hellenism he could diagnose the malaise of his contemporaries (such as Swinburne or Oscar Wilde) and offer as remedy his apostrophic stance, an ironic smile, distanced not by alienation, which he rejects outright, but a firm revolt against the two prevailing religions in the West: reason, on the one hand, and theistic sentimentality toward death on the other. Both these "religions" together had brought on the malaise. If Nietzsche shows a similar bent, he props his thought up against particular Teutonic neuroses. Cavafy's claim of not

being a Greek but belonging to the Hellenes (by which he meant he belonged to a Greek diaspora since the time of Alexander) gives him a connection to history, to ideas and art, that is subtly different from the Western European—or even the Greek mainlander's—connection. Nietzsche knew little of apostrophic stances and he intuited even less, since he rejected the Hellenistic tradition and never saw it as a continuity to Greek culture, or to the Eastern Empire (though ruled by Rome), preferring to understand it as a failure of nerve, an unworthy follow-up to classical achievement. He was, of course, projecting his own age into it, no less than his own predicament, as Cavafy surely agrees by implication in the *Ars Poetica*. It is, then, against the near-religious fascination with reason that the Alexandrian poet wages his revolution. Cavafy's recovery of Eros away from the romantic claws of Thanatos (Death: the coupling opposite to Eros) stands as a singular triumph which reveals itself in enduring irony, the smile of wisdom in the apostrophic stance. The revelation lingers as slow erosion, beginning at the moment the enigmatic smile makes the face of the thing remembered freeze in permanent *apostrophe* (a "turning away"), etched in memory. The slow erosion here is of Thanatos, an erosion of death in order to recover things that die, a recovery of time and the history of persons: Eros takes its place to guard against needless fascination with the death instinct, nurturing instead a will to pleasure and an aesthetic manifestation of ethical mind. Each youth in Cavafy's poetry subjects himself to superimposition on an archaic marble *kouros* (his likeness in beauty) where, in perfect transparency, he recovers from history his essential Eros, becoming in turn a contemporary person with a history for survival. Once that is done, the youth's fixity in apostrophic stance is inevitable; his love partakes both of the sensual and the intellectual, both of lust and of divine Eros, all aimed at survival with the pleasure ethic and the work ethic (as Cavafy develops this notion in his notes) in harmony:



## I'VE LOOKED SO MUCH

I've looked on beauty so much  
that my vision overflows with it.

The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.  
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,  
always lovely, even uncombed,  
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.  
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them  
. . . . in the nights when I was young,  
encountered secretly in my nights.

(1917)

## I WENT

I didn't restrain myself. I gave in completely and went,  
went to those pleasures that were half real,  
half wrought by my own mind,  
went into the brilliant night  
and drank strong wine,  
the way the champions of pleasure drink.

(1913)

Each figure here is fixed in an edifying smile, yielding as much of mystery and of enigma as *mnemosyne* will allow. And the poet stands beside his hero's *apostrophe*, peering out in utter calm, infinitely patient at the slow revolution he is enacting with Eros at the center; repression is banished to the outskirts; and now memory takes its place as the floodlight of history. The philosophy which Cavafy wants as guide in this revolution is none other than his own persona as Socratic stance, at once the midwife and the sepulchral guardian, querying things that come to be and those that pass away.

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NOBEL LAUREATE GEORGE SEFERIS  
AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE GREEK  
TRADITION

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JOHN E. REXINE

I only met the late George Seferis once at his home overlooking the Olympic Stadium in Pangkrati in 1969 when I was in Greece with a study group from my university. I was, of course, aware of the tension that existed between Greece's first Nobel Prize laureate and the military junta that was ruling Greece at that time. Little did I realize that later on that year in the Spring, Seferis who had published nothing in Greece as a political protest against the military regime, would speak out against the military junta by declaring:

We have all learned, we all know, that in dictatorial regimes the beginning may seem easy. Yet tragedy waits at the end, inescapably. It is this tragic ending that consciously torments us, as in the ancient choruses of Aeschylus.<sup>1</sup>

His protest was never printed in Greece but broadcast to the world over the BBC. It is probably no coincidence that, according to the correspondence published by his sister, Ioanna

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<sup>1</sup>*Time* (April 4, 1969).