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The Socratic Revolt and Cavafy*

JOHN CHIOLES

He is a mythologist with an astonishing feeling for history . . . One is never quite sure when one reads him whether a youth who works in a poor blacksmith's shop in contemporary Alexandria will not turn up in the evening at one of the dives where the subjects of Ptolemy Lathyros are holding their revels, or if the favorite of Antiochos Epiphanes has not in mind to discuss with the King the outcome of Rommel's operation on Libya. Surrounded with tombs and epitaphs—it is Cavafy I am speaking of—he lives in a huge cemetery, where with torment, he invokes endlessly the resurrection of a young body; of an Adonis who, as the years pass, seems to change and become vilified by a love . . .

THIS IS THE POET SEFERIS speaking in his "Letter to a Foreign Friend."¹ As maker of myths Cavafy conveys an ethical world which is consistent with the entire sweep of Greek philosophy. Seferis might have also added that "knowledge in memory" develops the feeling for history, turns the poet into mythologist, but is also responsible for the release of the idea in poetic expression. To be sure these are qualities which are attributable to Socrates, that special Socrates of dialectical thinking, of discourse as the life force in existence. Mythmaking, historicizing, the critique of an ethical idea—these are the tools of Cavafy's poetry. And they are also the tools of discourse in Socrates' own brand of philosophizing—particularly in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates struggles to develop his dialectic art through the mystery of Eros as life force. This takes the philosopher in the area of myth and history, and, most importantly, in the area of poetry.

*This is the second part of a longer work on Cavafy. The first part under the title "Eros and Revolution in the Poetry of Cavafy" appeared in the last issue of *JMH*.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the translations are from C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, ed. G. Savidis (Princeton, 1975).

¹George Seferis, *On the Greek Style*, p. 175.

II

The impulse of Greek philosophy is societal; it is a social philosophy that pervades the whole history of Greek culture. Even Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is ultimately rooted in *nous*, where all intelligible substance, potential and actual, becomes immediate actuality in the human mind, the *nous theos* and first principle. Both Maimonides and Aquinas borrow this Hellenic first principle, but remove it entirely from *nous*, away from the society of mankind. This violent strain between the hardness of Hellenism at one end, and the world as perceived by the sentimentality of the Judeo-Christian tradition at the other, is in Cavafy everywhere visible. The period of transition: the Hellenized Jew or the Christianized Hellene is uppermost in his compassionate but ironic treatment in two masterful poems, "Of the Hebrews" and "Myris: Alexandria A.D. 340." They are both late works, 1919 and 1929, respectively; and they exhibit the poet's three concerns: the philosophical, the historical, and the erotic, with the historical being most jolting, for he depicts each receding era as lingering long enough to watch its own death, as Judaism and Hellenism are shown to linger, depicted by the ephemeral and frail beauty of young men. Philosophy in these poems is equated with irony, the tragic irony at the abyss between appearance and reality.

In the language of irony Socrates is, of course, the first and seminal teacher. Each of the Platonic dialogues yields an ostensible subject-matter and a real subject-matter. It is the anatomy of discourse, the ironic mode, where, for Socrates, true philosophy resides. For Plato, it is also the anatomy of art, though he is careful not to say so. For Cavafy, so many of the detailed threads in the fabric of his poetry arise from, deepen, and ultimately return to inform the Socratic position itself that a mere influence is hardly the issue. Wallace Stevens may be said to have Plato as an influence. I believe that Constantine Cavafy as persona in his poems moves in psychic competition with the mythic Socrates as persona in the Platonic dialogues.

The *Phaedrus* takes up the issue of dialectical thinking as its real subject-matter, but in order to reach it the ostensible one is made to serve as sifting agent and purveyor to the process. The ostensible subject-matter is Eros, chosen for its complexity, its component of subjective and objective love. In other words, Plato brings to bear the most rigorous examination of the working of dialectics, on the one hand, while taking Eros through the paces of a seemingly incidental, intense accounting with the most refined of philosophical techniques: *dialektike*, on the other. This dialectic art, an opposition to the Sophists' rhetorical games, is offered by Socrates as the basis for the art of discourse, and by Plato only incidentally (though hardly by accident) as the basis for the art of writing. What, then, does Eros (love) have

to do with here? And why is it implicated in all this rigorous philosophical thinking? The same question may be asked, with exactly the same weight, of Cavafy's poetry.

The great conflict in the *Phaedrus* comes when we realize that to know properly we must tame those things that are self-moving and in perpetual motion and those things that must be mastered and moved by us because they lie in virtual rest. Things that move of themselves (the soul) must converge with what remains at rest (objects). This opposition is understood through the conflict between Eros and Thanatos (death), where Eros becomes the love of living discourse, prolonging the life instincts, countering the written and dead speeches (of the Sophists) which invite the death instincts. What Socrates acts out in living discourse is an erotic dialectic; and, though many-faceted and complex, it is still a dialectic of a life-giving principle. In its initial expression, in Socrates' first Eros speech, it manifests itself in a hysterical, near-lustful way; this is an impetuous Socrates in erotic recollection. By the second Eros speech where things are properly gathered and divided according to the dialectical art, we begin to sense the vital near-divine force of Eros, both as a purveyor to the process of knowing and as life-giving motion via memory toward a future. The combined Eros speeches provide the answer to what Eros is doing at the center of such philosophical activity. For Cavafy, the philosophical activity is identical to that of Socrates; his dialectical art is the way he uses history: to glean from it a truth beyond the event. Eros, though seemingly autobiographical, moves out of lust and into the other two forms (historical and philosophical), in a similar motion of transcendence as that of Socrates. And just as Socrates never quite disowns from his development the first erotic impulses, no matter how "evaluative" he is of them later, so Cavafy never abandons those searing moments in poems that sometimes appear too transient in content.

The governing metaphor in this dialogue about the dialectic art as distilled through Eros is the one with the charioteer and his horses. Allow me to quote the passage from John Stuart Mill's translation (with minor changes):

We formerly distinguished the soul into three parts, two of them resembling two horses, the third a charioteer. One of these horses we said was good, the other vicious. The better of the two is an upright noble animal, a lover of honour, sensible to shame, and obeying the word of the driver without the lash. The other is crooked, headlong, fiery . . . Now, the charioteer is inflamed by love and desire, has a vision of the beloved; the tractable horse holds himself back, and restrains himself all he can from attempting

any sensual enjoyment, but the other, setting whip and rein at defiance, struggles and pants, proposing illicit intoxicating love.

Socrates tells us that in the dialectic art the charioteer always struggles toward attainment; his epiphany comes when he is borne back to the memory of the true nature of beauty and both horses are heeled to comply in facing head on that memory, unwaveringly. The point that Cavafy does not miss (though philosophers often do in speaking of ideal morality in Plato) is the one about the unruly, lustful horse. Without him, his sheer sensual prowess, we could not come to the epiphany of memory. And so Socrates, although winking while he skirts the issue, never quite banishes that particular horse from the perfect charioteer's team. Cavafy is perhaps more honest; he never quite allows himself to forget the true value of that horse. And so if I may return to a few lines from another team, "The Horses of Achilles":

When they saw Patroklos dead
the horses of Achilles began to weep . . .

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal horses and felt sorry.

"Better if we hadn't given you as gift . . .
among pathetic human beings . . .
you're free of death, you won't get old,
yet ephemeral disasters torment you.
Men have caught you in their misery."
But it was for the eternal disaster of death
that those two gallant horses shed their tears. (1897)

To follow the syllogism is perhaps gratuitous. The erotic power of horses is here invested with an outrage in the face of death. While in Homer no consciousness is permitted to the personification of these horses born to the West Wind, in Cavafy, having passed through the poet's sensitive reading of Socrates, we know and mark the tragedy of our ephemeral lives, as do the immortal horses, Eros personified.

Eros to Greek culture was itself the stamp of the culture. It was the road going *in the other direction*, not so much to counter reason, achievement, or progress (though it did some of that well enough), but rather to safeguard these movements, to see to it that they did not go too far. Eros for Plato served the function of sweeping the slate clean of the necessary detritus of repression, left behind by *Logos* and reason in their movement toward progress. Cavafy abounds in the sadness, the lonely road, of travelling in the other direction.

Socrates approaches Eros from a number of different moments, examining each for its gathering and categorizing weight at his dialectical level of unity of the subjective with the objective realities. But what he is also demonstrating is that the individual consciousness is faced with a "negative world," and Eros is the one way of attaining freedom within it—through an ethical mastery of its negativity. The metaphoric and sometimes real exploration of Eros in the *Phaedrus* pits subjective consciousness against its mirror image, where the attainment of Eros relies on an ethical perception of all aesthetic structures that have to do with beauty and love. The pre-logical impulses of Eros are carefully balanced with cognition. Such an achievement occurs through memory—a true recollection of beauty and purification in the Orphic domain; it is a place where the soul surrenders to what is good in Eros, after it has passed through its darker spots. Hegel's view on the subject shows a supreme attempt to merge the Enlightenment's development of Reason with Plato's Eros; his notion of self-consciousness goes at least part of the way. But the subsequent "thinkers of consciousness," down to Derrida, have understood freedom in too limited a fashion, and have mainly enlarged upon master-slave perceptions. The modern West's understanding of the issue of freedom, due to our full surrender to, and welcoming of, most forms of repression, comes forth to us through sado-masochistic mirrors, reflecting for the most part the closed circle of an absolute duality in the Judeo-Christian religion. That is why Freud is concerned about our inability to cope with Eros apart from its destructive force. He recognized at once that Eros as freedom can undo the closed circle of our culture that is rooted in *Logos* and repression. Cavafy's irony, his apostrophic smile, reveals that he too knows.

Precisely because Cavafy's view of freedom entails such a vast "letting go," his homosexual poems cannot be seen as paradigms of the master-slave mirror. His is a special form of transcendence, answerable only to Eros, to Recollection, and philosophy through *mythopoesis*. This notion of myth-making, using language as history and culture as a transvaluation of the surviving, pre-logical images, may be how the poet can escape the closed circle. Cavafy among the modern poets, fortunate enough to move toward *mythopoesis* through the special authority of his language and culture, may be the only one who quietly and calmly breaks that closed circle.

III

Cavafy's *Ars Poetica* consists of a series of notes to himself, written in English in his personal shorthand. I should like to quote two of his notes here:

I should remark that all philosophers necessarily work largely on guesswork—guesswork illustrated and elaborated by careful thought and weighing of causes and effects, and by inference. I mean knowledge of other reliable experience . . .

Very often the poet's work has but a vague meaning; it is a suggestion: the thoughts are to be enlarged by future generations or by his immediate readers: Plato said that poets utter great meanings without realizing them themselves . . .

To have written in this manner in a few notes on how to proceed on re-writes of his work shows that he barely distinguished between poet and philosopher. He kept the old innocence and unity intact: poetry and philosophy have always been the mirror image of each other in the Greek world. Earlier in his notes he speaks of "guesswork" for the poet; then, predictably, he substitutes philosopher for poet, not for corroboration, to show how the philosopher works, but to show that the activity is not different, one to the other. There is a note of humility, too, in his observation of Plato having said that poets "utter great meanings without realizing them"; and yet there is ever so gentle an irony here, at himself and at Plato, too. One can almost imagine Cavafy in the presence of his English visitor and friend E. M. Forster, who in *Pharos and Pharillon* recalls the Alexandrian poet: ". . . he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw . . ." Here it is clear that irony is part of Cavafy's personality: how he would view himself, Forster, and Plato—poet and philosopher.

These notes to himself, the philosopher-poet, provide us with unique evidence that he thought deeply about the most far-reaching consequences of the dichotomy of Eros and Death. He understood his work as a terrible provocation to the Socratic myth: the very assumption that the winged horses are susceptible to mastery, where the charioteer must be aided in this divine, non-sensual love instinct, even though he be drenched to his very limbs with the lust side of Eros. The pre-logical impulse to overcome dying, to master nature's decay through memory and love, precedes both creative intuition and scientific thought—so Socrates is already too rarefied. In this way Cavafy demands both sides of the moon: the provocation of the myth and the myth itself, the arrival of the barbarians and "the good life." If at the end of all that there is tragedy, then he is merely tracing history's penchant for it, the simple need.

Out of need the barbarians were masochistically welcomed: new blood in the erotic principle. Thus the Romans were functional, likewise the Goths after them. They countered the movement of the soul toward stagnation and death. And as Marcuse puts it: "It is the *failure* of Eros, lack of fulfillment in life, which enhances the instinctual value of death." For a time the barbarians brought with them the pleasure instinct which kept forever being forgotten by the achievement instinct; and so, alienation was checked, ending up as rejected pessimism by the barbarian's pleasure drive. In Plato's understanding, this flooding of the soul with the dichotomy of achievement and pleasure manifests itself fully in the perfect balance of the two: the charioteer lent the right amount of moral judgement to each of the horses so that the lowly one (pleasure) would not drag down the other (achievement), the soaring one. The balance, of course, could be achieved by the dialectic art, by discourse and philosophy. But the barbarians came to be necessary when the world became unmanageable, in the dire condition of decay, groping for the death instinct.

Cavafy's "Expecting the Barbarians," a major achievement in modern poetry, points in all these directions, yet it functions as a masterpiece, one of a kind.

Because night has fallen and the Barbarians have not come.
And some people have just got back from the frontiers
Who say there are no more Barbarians.

And now, without the Barbarians, what is to become of us?
After all, they would have been a kind of solution. (1904)

Inevitably, the perimeters of Cavafy's poetry does not extend to bringing the Barbarians onto his stage of ideas. He stops at the outskirts of history.

In the loose living of my early years
the impulses of my poetry were shaped,
the boundaries of my art were plotted . . . ("Understanding," 1918)

The poet's artistic survival, which must surely coincide with his psychic one, relies on the aesthetic perimeters of Eros, a full release of self and a surrender to the formal rigors of his art. So that, the young men of his erotic poems are recognized in *mnemosyne* and have about them a full life of the senses, of the street, of the city, the café, the bed they inhabit, while at the same time they possess the mystery of distanced perfections in immutable form; while their boundaries are

plotted in the pleasures of memory.

In "Understanding" he knows that the boundaries of his art implicate the manifestations of Eros; and that, not only in the sexual discretions of his youth, but in the more complex choosing of Eros over the sentimentality of reason and its religious counterpart. Cavafy's choice is inevitable if he is to inform his perception of philosophy, if he is to step back from history as to be properly ahistorical and thereby locate the truth of history. He did not admire the sharp intelligence of historians like Gibbon, who for Cavafy, never perceived "the road going in the opposite direction." Within the boundaries of Cavafy's art are the Socratic myth's winged souls as horses in motion. They are opposites in perpetual struggle. Their unity comes and goes, but fulfilling and seemingly effortless when fully achieved:

WHEN THEY ROUSE THEMSELVES

Try to protect them, poet,
however few these are that can be stilled
These visions of your Eros.
Place them, half-hidden, in your diction.
Try to nurture them, poet,
when they rouse themselves in the brain
at night, or in the heat of noontime. (My translation, 1916)

Cavafy's softly articulated success in that unity is bested here only by the simplicity of form through which he achieves it. In his synthetic vision the Greek tongue is shepherded to the memory that it has always housed aesthetic value. But the matter of investing the language with *moral* value in poetry is something original with the Alexandrian poet. At his hands Greek is forced to remember that its pinnacle lies outside Judeo-Christian ethics—that philosophical, historical, and erotic notions are in their pure state in the tongue that gave rise to them as precepts.

The poet's ironic language—smiling at history, at idea, at the future, no matter the angle of perception—is filled with unexpected shocks of symmetry and rigor in a poetry that is on the surface asymmetrical. A verse will begin in virtual street language and will be uncannily rounded off in a word or phrase from the deepest recesses of the classical world, and yet will remain unobtrusive and perfectly fitting as a balanced composition on a canvas might be. "They Should Have Taken the Trouble" (*As Phrontizan*, 1930) abounds in such examples.

We have always characterized this technique by observing the simplicity of the end result, like grammarians. It is usually claimed that the poet uses a mixture of demotic and formal language. But that is

the least of it, and cruelly unedifying to the "Greekless reader." The mixture of demotic and puristic (or the *koine* versus the written language of earlier eras) presents no untranslatable barrier, no more and no less than most languages are said to be untranslatable in poetry. But in fact, Cavafy's language is untranslatable because at its poetic best it contains an ironic transvaluation of its own history. And the true unity of that history with its subject-matter (which is self-moving Eros along the whole spectrum) spells out the poet's simple shock of perfection: this is achieved through the expert use of *continuity*, of the historical *oneness* of the Greek language. And, of course, it is due to that unity of historical oneness, subject-matter, and evolving Greek language that we are even able to have 'satisfactory' translations of the poets' *denotative* meanings, which at least convey the experience, though without the historical texture. In this sense, we may also presume that translation presents a problem with the transmission of the cultural sense of Eros as well.

The full transcendence of Eros through the fragments of the charioteer with his team of horses, through the unearthing of the history of the language—and thence of a whole culture—by memory, *that* seems to remain out of reach for the translator. It is a pity, because this unearthing exists almost visibly in his verse, as does everything else in Cavafy. And, although the average Greek reader may himself be reached in no more than muted recognitions, still, he cannot escape the utter joy—that curious hedonistic voyeurism into history—at reading his poetry. Nor may this be said of any other Greek poet, in quite the same way, after Homer. Even though the late Euripides has searing experiential moments, he writes in a dramatic genre that is subtly different from the poetic art.

Of course, in English sometimes the case has been stated differently. I believe, in the ethic of the English language, denotatively, a certain near-Eastern sentiment rears its head, tipping some of the poems toward our sense of the sentimental: always the same type of poem, erotic with transient emotions of lust, without an expanded history of the youth or a discernible philosophical position. Like Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* (with certain feelings of shame), there is a rush of voyeurism in "Lovely White Flowers" or "The Mirror in the Front Hall." Nevertheless, they are poems which transcend their apparent limitations, not only through the texture of the language, but through the depiction of powerful realities of the narcissistic or homoerotic sensibility. Several commentators—Marguerite Yourcenar and Edmund Keeley, the most thoughtful of the Cavafy critics, among them—have complained about the inferior quality of these poems. I think not. Perhaps we are too hasty in seeing them as the poet's lapse, a slumming

in the underbelly of autobiography. I take that whole area of his poetry to be the realistic and ephemeral moments which are added to the larger mosaic of Eros as a governing principle. True, these moments exploit sentiment in a certain sense, but individual human nature for Cavafy is terribly implicated in such exploitation, nor is his own persona excluded from such irony. Of course, the fact that all those poems lead to a cumulative tragedy of loss, to the true rending mystery of loss, does not make each one of them successful, perhaps. Still, though there are degrees of success in his poems, I believe the erotic ones (those not necessarily deepened by history's insights but surely infused with the shock of the everyday reality of Eros) are not to be relegated as inferior. These poems may in fact serve as the imagistic sustenance, in the larger mosaic, of the ones we consider great.

Finally, it would be absurd to say that the homosexual content in Cavafy's poetry limits in any way the poet, any more than it does Sappho, or Anacreon, or W. H. Auden. Equally absurd would be to maintain, with the Victorians, that what Socrates is advocating with Eros is some sort of ideal "Platonic friendship," so called. The gap needs to be closed in the two wrong-headed directions, both for Cavafy and for Socrates. To be sure, both have an area of lust as a *rite of passage*, and both use the impulses that led to lust as a means of understanding the world, as a means to a life-giving force, a pleasure instinct by which to counter death; and, yes, both point ultimately to ideal, virtually divine landscapes of love, emanating always from lust; but that is the direction of the rarefied dialectical syllogism in philosophy as well—though the crude first step is still implicated in the process, never disowned. Cavafy may have originally withheld the pronouns that show gender in his poetry as a concession to the then current morality; but in fact that in itself became a forceful aesthetic device of great beauty and constraint in his earlier pieces. His exploration of Eros is just as attractive as Socrates' and uniquely universalized without being prurient. It is not answerable to any kind of morality in any sense. And the effect on consciousness, of any persuasion or creed, is inevitably profound. In that protensive effect lies the silent course of Cavafy's revolution: where consciousness may make life choices and be consoled in those choices by the highest ethic in poetry and philosophy.

Kazantzakis and the Cretan Hero*

ELIZABETH CONSTANTINIDES

KAZANTZAKIS' BIRTHPLACE, the island of Crete, has from the fifteenth century to the present day played a special role in the history of Greek literature. After the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks it was Crete, then under Venetian rule, that became the center of Greek culture. Stimulated by their contacts with the West, notably Renaissance Italy, Cretan authors produced works of the first rank, especially drama, narrative poetry, and pastorals. After the fall of Crete to the Turks in 1669, many Cretans fled westward, among them the most prominent and learned, and on the island itself the production of high literature came to a sudden end. Yet even from the period of cultural darkness that followed we have inherited from Crete, as from other parts of Greece, a rich store of folk songs of all types. Unique to Crete, however, are a large number of poetic narratives detailing various historical events, especially the uprisings, revolts, and heroic efforts of the Cretans to shake off the Turkish yoke. Many of these songs deal with the events of the Revolution of 1821 and of the major uprisings of 1866 and 1896. There are even recent songs about the German occupation during the Second World War.¹ The persistence in Crete of the heroic song, orally composed, recounting the brave deeds or death of a leader, using traditional forms of expression, passed on from one generation of bards to another, has led some modern scholars to compare these Cretan narratives to the heroic poetry of antiquity, particularly

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All references to Kazantzakis' texts are to the Greek editions. The translations of the passages quoted are mine except for the final quotation, which is taken from Bien's translation.

¹The largest collection of Cretan historical songs is found in Kriaras, pp. 7-184. For recent historical narratives see Detorakis, pp. 75ff. and Mavrakis, pp. 254-60. The most detailed version of the deeds of Daskaloyiannis, mentioned below, is 1034 lines long and was composed in 1786 (see Laourdas, p. 13).