

" . . . scarce the water
 . . .
 and the tree alone
 . . . / . . . / . . .
 sparse the earth beneath your feet
 so that you have no room to spread your roots
 and keep reaching down in depth
 and broad is the sky above
 so that you read the infinite on your own

THIS WORLD

This small world the great!"¹

Dear graduates:

Our hope is that successive generations of young graduates like you will continue like you did to sustain and enrich "this world" of Hellenism, "this small world the great." Its future is in your hands. Take good care of it and Godspeed.

¹Abridged excerpt from the translation of *The Axion Esti* by Edmund Keeley and George Savidis.

On Poetics: The Ostensible/Real Dichotomy

JOHN CHIOLES

WORKS OF CULTURE AND IDEAS THAT EXPLORE NEW GROUND seem to operate with an ostensible subject matter and a real subject matter. Often, as with Plato's dialogues, the ostensible is foregrounded and serves as shadow (or desire) for the enduring force of the real that remains in the background. *The Phaedrus* is thought to be about love; but it is really about composing in words and publishing, the "writerly project." One is the ostensible, the other, the real — both very important to the incisive development of the dialogue.

This dichotomy I take to be the anarchic spirit at the center of theory. Love/desire/lust is the contradiction, the non-being of the writerly world. The debunking of the rules in the scientific syllogism is Paul Feyerabend's understanding of anarchy in his seminal work on the philosophy of science, *Against Method*. Performing an action that is in direct opposition to the rules is a necessary condition for a radical view of reality. Any theory whose objective is to replace its predecessor must take a radical step against method. It must establish an ostensible grid before the real subject matter begins to emerge as a part of a radical, negative methodology. To prove a theorem requires arbitrary awareness of that *which is not* in the theorem. In that very arbitrariness is precisely where the anarchic spirit begins. Theory, as such, is a scientific construct which models and privileges reality. Aristotle did not leave us with a theory of art in his *Peri Poietikis*. That would be too tall an order for the philosopher who could not theorize art into a science.

The term theory has been loosely used by various disciplines in the last three centuries. But it was not until the last two decades that it has caused terror-like turmoil in literary studies. And, nowadays, it is used even more loosely than ever. As concerns literary theory, then, in this late "neo-decadent post-modernist fin-de-siecle" period of ours, a notion of poetics can only be one of a kind, useful for the one poet,

*A "dialogue" with Gregory Jusdanis' recent book, *The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History*, (Princeton, 1987).

and surely a dead end. If we attempt to make a poetics into a theory of literature, we accomplish nothing more than the propriety of placing yet one more academic endnote. Most works which purport to be theoretical will not survive the onslaught of their own making: they operate as if order is the world, ignoring the anarchic spirit at the heart of theoretical impulse, at the center of art. The onslaught of Structuralism, semiotics, reception theory, deconstruction are all religious-dramatic movements "invented" to fill the emptiness of the academy, all of them theories that amount to a "magic theatre" that has no clue of what the fuss is about in being radically against method. Their "inventions" are of the obvious, of order itself as world, and, of course, of literature itself clinched in theory.

(Let me hasten, lest there is a misunderstanding, to open a parenthesis: Jusdanis' *The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History* will not have any difficulty in surviving. His work stands on firm ground, despite the charged atmosphere in his subtext that suggests he swallows whole current literary theory, unsuspecting. Those who have never concerned themselves with literary theory will not understand why he stands on firm ground or how he has managed to explode the *inside* of the house of cards of Euro-American research scholarship — as concerns Cavafy and his age. Jusdanis' book will survive because he is breaking new ground. And he is doing it in the grand style of classic scholarship, the likes of which — with all its grace and beauty of style — the Greek academic world has not seen since Sikoutris' great work on Plato's *Symposium* several decades ago. So, others will add to what Jusdanis has done, but they will not subtract from it. . . . Here I will close the parenthesis to continue to set up the argument for the dialogue with this remarkable book.)

For purposes of discourse, then, I should like to forge a distinction between classical poetics and modern aesthetics. Aristotle's overriding concern in his "About the Making of Poetry," commonly known as *The Poetics*, is with wholes and not with parts, with the structural principles of artifacts and not with ethical issues or the collective psyche. He clearly wants to tell Plato that poetics is something other than socio-political acts. And so he proceeds to look at the whole, then to destructure it, examine the parts and piece them together again, and finally celebrate its wholeness once more. The content as such is taken care of by mythos and archetype, lying as it does outside the realm of making. Content entails choice, and that is another matter; Aristotle has no rules for choice; he can speak of good, better, best — always as it pertains to man's ethical understanding of his world — but not much more outside the realm of making. The buzz words, "mimesis" and "catharsis" have more to do with the making of a whole than with

ethical and political choice of a mythos. Subsequent centuries in our own era have invested these terms with category status more to force poetics into aesthetic theory than anything else.

Modern aesthetics, beginning with Kant (we need not go back to Baumgarten), becomes one of the categories of systemic philosophy, thus clearing the way for aestheticism, the "art for art's sake" approach, which the bourgeoisie century and the subsequent romantic evolution willed indelibly to us. Kant presented us with the negative and positive relationship of the aesthetic realm to that of science, morality, and utility, then proceeds to distinguish the aesthetic from the other realms, to establish with a sense of finality the fundamental and profound differences in our perception of these realms. For that which we perceive in what is true and good, in what is pleasurable and useful, differs in its essential character from our perception of art, from the aesthetic experience. Thus, the well-known dictum: "aesthetic pleasure is disinterested satisfaction."

The "art for art's sake" movement of personal perfectibility and the mirror-image as an idea of ourselves — the stuff of the eighteenth century — affected the romantic poets in a way that is often suspect. The romantic revolution's demands on a poet's life were extremely complex. Socio-culturally, the poet was perceived as the lonely, alienated, *angst*-ridden figure who often drove himself to extremes. The egocentric predicament, the loneliness of the creator, and the like, pertaining, say, to Keats, Shelley, or Byron, has contributed in raising the dust storm in literary theory against artistic autonomy, or what is perceived as artistic autonomy. Firstly, the "deliberately prolonged adolescence" of the romantic poet does not make him an autonomous deity in the act of creation — no matter what the poets themselves said (which is no doubt different from what they believed, being neither adolescent nor naive); second, why bother to wage battle against this notion when every serious thinker knows that combatting, yet one more time, the straw-man of metaphysics is a banality of little consequence; and thirdly, does this "autonomy notion" warrant the reactionary, diametrically opposite position that poetry is a public act and nothing of the poem belongs to the poet more than it belongs to you and me?

We have come full circle; but I am not sure if we have returned to classical poetics. If Homer and Aeschylus performed public acts and produced works for which they did not wish to be known as creators, then perhaps Plato's notions on art have become preeminent. But it is not clear that classical poetics assigns the same authority to the making of a poem, any more than to the table-maker and the poet. How much more unclear that is in our own age which has yet to survive modern aesthetics and is too busy reacting ("being thrown violently

against the opposite wall”), before it has properly countered the revolution of the romantics, which, as Jusdanis correctly points out, is still with us. And, of course, it will stay with us if our main thrust continues to be reactionary. All our attempts to speak of poetics will have only historical value and will obtain for brilliant modern curiosities such as Cavafy — and not much else. Aesthetics will continue to be the key behind the door (most often ajar) of the majority of Western poets, whether we like it or not. And Jusdanis’ own definition of poetics (“ . . . I take poetics to mean a theory of literature that seeks a methodical knowledge of the principles underlying it.”) will not be of much use to us, insofar as we may try to attribute such poetics *a priori* to the poet — nor will it be terribly useful as a prescriptive method for the composing of poems, but perhaps it will be useful for the making of tables, unlike aesthetics which could not even do that much. As for the fossils of “new criticism” who still believe that aesthetics can teach, they are still perpetuating the same old self-deception. At least Jusdanis’ poetics has about it the sinewy strength of a syllogism that carries no illusions, that knows its limitations, and understands its model-making nature. Still, here too, in the *implications* of poetics, there is a problem of self-deception.

Jusdanis’ suggestion — it may in fact be a position — that literature is solely a public activity raises a number of thorny issues. The many and varied dismissals of the corrosive attitude of the romantics poets cannot be sufficient to justify placing this position in their stead; nor can the claim of a return to the principle of classical poetics justify Jusdanis’ suggestion. In fact, if we are to oppose the romantics in this fashion, we will succeed in foregrounding the vagaries of the marketplace in a way Cavafy never even dreamed of when he spoke of fearing minor compromises. This new attitude seems to me to be the product of a marketplace world come of age and accepted in the academy. The maker of a table, in a true socialist (read democratic) society, has in mind the good of the many while he still remains (in perhaps a dialectic way) the maker of the artifact. His counterpart in a marketplace world will make his table to suit his purchasing public — never thinking of himself as the maker in any way that is significant — thus turning the table-making into a purely public activity, as the television sitcom producer or the Madam of “The Little Whorehouse in Texas.” In other words, when Cavafy admits to changing fashions in literature, I am not at all sure he opens the door, as widely as Jusdanis suggests, to reception theory.

What does it mean to use the linguistic model of Jakobson? Its intent is to objectify, round out the object, yank it away from the subject.

lend the subject no greater privilege than any other modifier of the object: subject equals poet, object equals poem, other modifiers equal audience (addressee), context, code, and contract. Now the object which exists *out there*, fully rounded, umbilical cord to the subject relatively severed (“relatively” so that we may account for the one-sixth connection that the poet has over the poem), is free to be appropriated as a cultural entity, a virtual organism. In other words, where psychoanalytic criticism has always feared to tread (shying away from psychoanalyzing a poem or a character in it because it is not a rounded *out there* organism), Jakobson’s method steps into the breach.

Does Jusdanis accept Jakobson’s method? He does in his introductory chapter. Fortunately, however, his sensitive scholarship and often brilliant critical insights lead him to supercede Jakobson’s dicta and forge toward his own more mature and inventive methodology. Had Jusdanis suggested at the beginning that no part of the “umbilical cord” of the poem is ever severed, but that in the model-making technique of the theoretical thought about literature we create a second, “adoptive,” and anarchic life for the object, how would the rest of his work have been affected? Not in the least. For at no time in the breakdown he borrows from Jakobson and adapts in POET, AUDIENCE, POETRY, LANGUAGE AND WRITING, TRADITION, AND WORLD — each constituting a chapter in his book — does he take up with any serious intent Jakobson’s strictures, to say nothing of Abram’s 1953 categories. Of course, so far as poetics is concerned, both Abrams and Jakobson are engaged in inventing the obvious. (Even the philosopher who fashioned Western culture’s first poetics was aware that he was “inventing the obvious” and proceeded to work with category breakdowns in often simplistic format, reasoning, one assumes, that a deconstruction technique does not warrant anything more than philosophy’s simple inductive logic.) Jusdanis is too honest a scholar not to see through the jargon of the moment; hence, he proceeds wisely without either Jakobson or Abrams.

In subsequent chapters, this book presents to the world a set of principles which have been arrived at modestly, with considerable creative thought that is well cushioned (and often hidden) in careful scholarship. Jusdanis’ disclaimers that he is not engaged in critical analysis is a smokescreen; for he has given us the one seminal work of criticism that we have on Cavafy in any language. He may not wish to be aware of it, but no doubt he suspects that being a scholar is easy (indeed, almost an insult to be called one with the advent of the 1960s), but to think creatively with scholarship as a tool — that is another matter. It is on this basis that Jusdanis must be read and criticized. It is also on this fulcrum that he falters. In his zeal to obscure creative thought,

he often confuses the ostensible with the real in his argument. On the one hand, he wishes to use current literary theory — which he does only half-heartedly as a method for his search, if with admirable restraint of its jargon — while, on the other, he hounds every text of Cavafy's to ferret out every scrap and morsel that will fit a critic's "pre-ordained" definition of poetics. When he suggests that Cavafy's poetics (or a critic's perception of such) cannot be ambiguous, he is not being honest with himself. The real business here is critical analysis; the ostensible is scholarship. At the level of critical readings, not only is ambiguity present, it is a necessary condition. The desire for traditional clarity at the level of the "readerly project" should not be confused with scholarship, the ostensible. The desire for the non-ambiguous is not only un-obtainable, it is bad model-making, what the whole batch of "centuries of Aristotelian critics" foundered on. So Jusdanis should not express surprise that critics have not addressed Cavafy's poetics unambiguously; for his, too, is an ambiguous clarity (if dangerously "pre-ordained"), a feat which only he could bring to such effective fruition as a virtual critical breakthrough.

And, it must be said, he will come in for a good deal of criticism precisely because his is a true critical breakthrough. Can we, though, rely on the experts to be cautious and look to the wealth that is in this book? Or are we going to be treated to its "external" errors? True, he has ignored some work done on Cavafy's "poetics" — such as it is. And he has chosen to accent some (imagined?) rivalries between "schools" of Cavafy (but is there really enough respectable work for there to be schools?) He has done this by citing the works of critics with a particular bent, and pointedly ignoring others who are not in that camp. And, yes, some of the works he repeatedly cites are downright bad — but they are not important to his argument. No, it was not necessary to ignore Yourcenar or Anton. It is an ill-advised move on his part. But perhaps he did not suspect he was going to write as well as he did. For it is said, the greatest revenge against real or imagined enemies is to write well. And that Jusdanis did in spades, as the saying goes, which makes his external transgressions so minor they hardly exist. If we are to get to the goldmine that this book is, we must at least allow it its quirks — if we otherwise refuse to understand the solid good reasons for them. Will this book be read in Greece where it is needed most? One hopes. One waits.

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