

REVISITING THE CAVAFAEAN CITY

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*If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented
architecture.*

—Oscar Wilde

I MODERNISM AND THE CAVAFAEAN CITY

Ever since Charles Baudelaire first located "modernité" in the urban environment, the concept of the city has justifiably assumed a symbolic significance as the representative experience of modernity and has had considerable value for writers and thinkers in a number of diverse fields seeking to understand the complexities of the new era.¹ The modern metropolis is indeed the site which exemplifies the control of man over nature, the space where not only the technological aspects of modernity become visible, but also where all modern psychoses manifest themselves; where the subject realises its fragmented selfhood and where time becomes faster and discontinuous. Change, new products, consumerism, alienation, noise, pollution, loneliness, unfulfilment and a sense of void are all fostered by city living. Works of modernism convey this experience, but also depict ways of surviving the contradictions of city living, its comforts and discomforts, its remedies to old problems and its limitations.

This is certainly applicable to the Greek poet C. (Constantine) P. Cavafy, who was born in The City² and became the Greek city poet par excellence by situating the themes of his poetry in Alexandria, the city in which he spent most of his life. The connection between Cavafy and Alexandria, a cosmopolitan metropolis during the poet's era, has been well documented by a number of critics. In one of the first essays written about Cavafy in English, at the beginning of the 20th century, E. M. Forster captures the poet and the city as follows:

Modern Alexandria is scarcely a city of the soul. Founded upon cotton with the concurrence of onions and eggs, ill built, ill planned, ill drained—many hard things can be said against it, and most are said about its inhabitants. Yet to some of them, as they traverse the streets, a delightful experience can occur. They hear their own name

proclaimed in firm yet meditative accents—accents that seem not so much to expect an answer as to pay homage to the fact of individuality. They turn and see a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a single angle to the universe. His arms are extended, possibly: 'Oh, Cavafy...!' Yes, it is Mr. Cavafy, and he is going either from his flat to the office or from his office to the flat. If the former, he vanishes when seen, with a slight gesture of despair. If the latter, he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence—an immense complicated yet shapely 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.... it is the sentence of a poet.³

In Greek literary history, the "man with the straw hat" occupies a unique place not simply because of his eccentricities as an individual and writer, but more importantly because of his work. He seems to have anticipated techniques of writing and a problematic about writing and representation which anticipates modernism and, in some cases, post-modernism. In relation to the city and urban living in particular, his position is also unique. He occupies a position between two major artistic trends. On the one hand, there is pre-Cavafean romantic worship and idealisation of nature, and a certain "etho-graphic"⁴ prose (ἠθογραφία), which Cavafy detested. On the other, there is the post-Cavafean group of Greek modernists who react to the detachment of the individual from nature by seeking, at every opportunity, to escape from the enclosed space of the city to the wide horizons of the countryside. Their attention shifts, for short periods of time, from the noise of the city to the deafening silence of the natural landscape and the Aegean. Their relation to nature is restored temporarily, although their experience of it is pre-determined by their "urban vision".⁵

In Cavafy's work, detachment from nature is a fact of life. For him, there is no hope of returning to a supposedly harmonious relationship with the natural environment. He is unable or unwilling to develop a substantial relationship with nature. Big modern cities are considered to be the "norm", the "natural" space of the contemporary individual, and as a result, his poetry persistently moves among the city streets, the streets of the "enclosed space",⁶ and the internal space of the psyche. Among Cavafy's 154 published poems, there is only one that specifically deals with nature. However, even here, Cavafy is not preoccupied by the natural landscape, but by memories and images, which, in the context of his work, are memories and images of the city:

'Morning Sea'

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.
 The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,
 the shore yellow; all lovely,
 all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this
 (I actually did see it for a minute when I first stopped)
 and not my usual day-dreams here too,
 my memories, those sensual images.⁷

II THE WALLS OF THE CITY, SENSUALITY AND THE FRAGMENTED EXPERIENCE

But what type of city is it and how is it represented in Cavafy's poetry? A great number of critics have argued that his city is primarily sensual, erotic, and hedonistic. "Most of his erotic poetry", writes Philip Sherard, "speaks of episodes and relationships in contemporary Alexandria.... Indeed, all the poetry which Cavafy wrote that is located in contemporary Alexandria deals with erotic themes to the exclusion of all others."⁸ There is no doubt about the validity of the first part of the observation. The coffee shop, the tavern, the bar, the darker part of a shop is Cavafy's preferred site. "Here the love affair begins, or ends; here the rendezvous succeeds or fails, here the ephebe enters or does not enter, here the protagonist waits, drinks, remembers, makes poetry."⁹ These are the parts of the city where eros and poetry are worshipped. It should be noted that for Cavafy it does not matter whether these experiences of love were real or imagined, lived or relived through memory. In every case they were experienced. As demonstrated by the following poem, the imaginary is as important as the real, because it can offer powerful sensations and emotions:

Walking yesterday in an outlying neighbourhood,
 I went by the house
 I used to go when I was very young.
 There Eros with his wonderful power
 Laid hold of my body.
 [...]
 And as I stood staring at the door,
 Stood lingering outside the house,
 My whole being radiated
 The sensual passion stored up inside me.¹⁰

This strong connection between city and eros does not, however, mean that Cavafy's treatment of the city is exclusively erotic. This is certainly

true for poems which are located in Cavafy's Alexandria, but is not the case for all poems which explore the topic of the city in general. Beyond this sensual, erotic city, there are, in Cavafy's work, other, perhaps more interesting versions and dimensions of the city. In the rest of this article, I will explore one of these dimensions, that is the fragmentation and alienation of modern urban living, using as a starting point one of Cavafy's early poems, entitled 'Walls':

With no consideration, no pity, no shame,
they've built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind—
because I had so much to do outside.
When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed!
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they've closed me off from the outside world.¹¹

The walls here do not, as in the ancient *polis*, offer protection to the individual.¹² They seem to divide life into two parts: inside and outside the city.¹³ Contrary to expectation, to be inside, in this case, does not mean to have the security, familiarity and comfort of one's own space. Nor does it mean to *be in*, in the sense of *not being left out*, because to "be in", to be a part of a community, implies in this sense to have power. However, the poem's narrator is powerless. Everything seems to have happened without his consent and more importantly without his realisation of the events around him. The world was changed by forces beyond the narrator's control and immediate sensory perception and consequently s/he is robbed of the opportunity to react or voice an opinion.

Paradoxically in this case, *to be in* is *to be out*, that is, unable to experience life in full because the city and its walls constitute a barrier which limits the possibilities of experience. One assumes that the narrator can experience life fully within the confines of the city walls, but that is not enough. Life within offers a limited experience. "I had so much to do outside" the voice complains. Besides the dichotomy between inside and outside, the poem indirectly establishes a dichotomy with respect to time and by extension between the life before and after the erection of the walls. In the pre-walls period, one had, or at least believed that one had the option of experiencing life in full. It is not important whether the individual actually accessed life beyond the area on which the walls now stand. What is important is that one perceived oneself to be freer because the possibility was available. Now, this option has been taken away. According to Cavafy, the walls in this early modern period

eliminate the possibility of wholeness or totality. Modern experience, by extension, will not be a whole experience but a fragmented one. Individuals will endlessly seek the whole, but will only have access to the part. From the moment that life is fragmented, there will always be something missing, the "other" that the individual seeks and never finds.

This fragmentation, rupture and compartmentalisation of modern life has obviously overwhelming consequences for all aspects of life: selfhood and subjectivity; personal and social relationships; perception and understanding; knowledge and epistemology; interpretation and meaning; representation and artistic creation. Let us remain, however, within the context of the poem, by focusing on the consequences on the individual. In the most extreme scenario, the individual who is enclosed in a confined space, who is city- or house-bound, or simply bound to one's comfort zone, gradually turns into an *inner person*. S/he is not simply more aware of the distinction between inner and outer self, but in so being, turns inward, becomes introverted and by extension withdrawn, reclusive, reserved, timid, reticent. In contrast to the *outer person*, the person of action, who is extroverted, unrestrained, outgoing, the former continuously navigates through his/her inner world, internalises external life and lives more in this imaginary inner realm than in the real world. The individual faces not only a fragmented external reality, but also the distinction between inner and outer reality. The poem concentrates on the point of view of the person who is enclosed within the walls. It leaves the reader to ponder on the reverse image of the individual who is left outside the walls of the city, a situation which is perhaps even worse or more dramatic than the first. In both cases individuals confront, from their own perspectives, a similar situation: modern life leaves them with a sense of void. It seems that life in the *here and now is always incomplete and that life is always somewhere else, somewhere beyond one's own actual experience of life.*

III DEALING WITH FRAGMENTATION

If this is indeed one of the major consequences of modern urban living and of modernity in general, then how does the poet cope with or represent reality, when reality and self are fragmented? Firstly, let us note here that for Cavafy there is no escape from the predicament of modern society. As he writes in 'The City':

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one

[...]

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.

This city will always pursue you.¹⁴

It is evident that from the moment the city becomes what it is in the modern world, there is no going back to a previous type of hypothetical 'harmonious whole experience'. This is why Cavafy's poetry lacks the nostalgia for a pre-modern 'wholeness', nor does it lament a lost happiness, as is the case with other modernist writers. His world, undoubtedly, is a fallen world, his man a fallen man, his city a fallen city; but there is no nostalgia for a time when faith and authority were intact, when 'oneness' was still alive, albeit as a false consciousness. In the cases where the poet refers, as he often does, to the past, he does so in order to create analogies to contemporary situations or to indicate that history repeats itself, rather than to claim or to ground the validity of a specific point of view.

Cavafy deals with the problem of fragmentation in three broad ways. The first is analogous to T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative" or "mythical method". In his well known essay on *Hamlet*, Eliot suggests that

the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.¹⁵

This central idea has been explored, in relation to Cavafy's poetry, by George Seferis. Despite my reservations regarding the applicability and effectiveness of this method to Cavafy's work generally, Seferis' essay has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the poet's appeal, the ability of his work to accommodate different reading needs, practices and expectations; and in particular its ability to present itself as if it is written in the present. According to Seferis, "this method is not only adumbrated, but is systematically employed by Cavafy long before the appearance of Ulysses and Joyce, and long before Yeats also."¹⁶

In broad terms, Seferis argues that, within the context of modern society, communicating personal experiences and emotions is problematic, primarily because the world view of the writer (through which these experiences or emotions are presented) is unlikely to correspond with the world views of diverse reading groups. Within the context of fragmentation, even in cases where there is some correspondence between the world view of the poet and that of the readers, this is likely to be coincidental. Effective communication therefore requires locating a common thread or conceptual framework that is shared by

both the poet's world view and the different philosophies of the diverse reading groups. According to Seferis, the Cavafean use of history plays exactly this role. A specific historical episode or character could potentially frame the poetic theme in a context which is accessible and as a result fragments of history become the vehicle of conveying this theme to diverse reading groups. The Cavafean use of history is therefore the means of overcoming the obstacle of fragmentation by transforming personal experiences into universal ones. With this method, Cavafy establishes "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity"¹⁷ and consequently he is able to 'objectify' his experiences and emotions.

Another important technique, implicit in Cavafy's treatment of the city, is to approach fragmentation from a realistic perspective. If one cannot represent wholeness, the only option is to represent reality as it is: fragmented and compartmentalised. The poet himself seems to acknowledge this fragmentary representation of reality in one of his self-referential poems entitled 'I've Brought to Art', where he concedes:

I've brought to Art desires and sensations:
 Things *half-glimpsed*,
faces or lines, certain indistinct memories
 of unfulfilled love affairs.¹⁸ [emphasis added]

Cavafy does not believe that there is any point in attempting to find a solution to the problem of fragmentation by constructing a new philosophical system which will enable us to move beyond the different points of view and to comprehend reality in its wholeness. Nor is he interested in locating a privileged position of viewing reality, that is, the best position in comparison to other available points of view. For him, the world is multi-subjective, polyphonic and multi-dimensional. Consequently he describes reality from a variety of perspectives, which, while often mutually exclusive, are nevertheless valid from within their own contexts. This is why the Cavafean city is a land of fragments, fragmented images, half seen or half experienced and this is why we meet in his work: moments of time exposed to contradictory forces and signified by different philosophical systems; dilemmas, mainly moral and aesthetic, but also dilemmas about writing itself which are presented in order to demonstrate the complexity of a particular problem rather than to solve it; polyphonic representations of specific stories which cannot be reduced to a single point of view but rather perpetuate the tension of different meanings. By transforming the ontological question of "what is" into the epistemological question of "how do we come to know reality", Cavafy offers his readers the option

of either adopting a specific position of viewing reality, knowing that this is not its essence but only one amongst many, or a panoramic view of a number of positions. From this latter perspective one can have a better understanding of the real, but again not its essence, because that, within the context of the modern world, is unattainable.

Finally, the third Cavafean method relates to new experiences which are only made possible in the context of city living. Despite its associated problems, urban living offers a number of previously unavailable experiences: strolling through the streets, losing one self among the crowds, observing and listening to others, remembering and more importantly reliving or imagining experiences in one's mind as if they were real.¹⁹ These experiences signify a new way of experiencing and viewing the world. For Cavafy, city space is empty space. It is there but it does not exist. It functions only as the screen against which the individual projects aspects of his/her life. It is through one's involvement that these spaces are instilled with life, meaning and emotion and that inanimate spaces are transformed into spaces of one's own.²⁰ It appears then that modernity and the city contribute to the main problems of the contemporary individual, but also offer the context to their solutions. Because the world is divided into semi-autonomous social spheres, real life cannot provide fulfilment and gratification and therefore leaves the individual empty and always wanting. Detached aesthetic appreciation of every day incidents and their re-composition in one's mind is proposed by Cavafy as a way of dealing with this sense of void and unfulfilment intensified in the context of modernity. In this, art and poetry can play a significant role:

Let me submit to Art:

Art knows how to shape forms of Beauty,
almost imperceptibly *completing life*,

Blending impressions, binding day with day.²¹ [emphasis added]

Art and Poetry are not simply a place of solitude and refuge for both poet and reader. They cannot annihilate fragmentation but can alleviate its burden by completing the incomplete experiences of modern life. Cavafy therefore overturns the Platonic exclusion of the poet from the polis. The poet is needed in the city because s/he can provide a place of comfort through articulating and completing new life experiences. From this perspective, to let oneself flow into the undulating crowds of the city, among beautiful bodies and faces of love, in the alleys, the cafes, or the dark rooms is not simply to pass time or to have a good time. It is to explore and articulate what is not yet seen and expressed and therefore to surrender to the poetic.

NOTES

- 1 David Corbett, "The Third Factor: Modernity and the Absent City in the Works of Paul Nash, 1919-36", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 3 (September 1992), pp. 458-474; see also Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds), *Modernism 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin, 1976) and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origin of Cultural Change* (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).
- 2 This is how the Greeks still refer symbolically to Constantinople, today's Istanbul.
- 3 E. M. Forster, "The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy", in Denise Harvey (ed.), *The Mind and Art of C. P. Cavafy. Essays on his Life and Work* (Athens: Denise Harvey and Company, 1983), pp. 13-14.
- 4 The term refers to a major trend in late 19th century Greek prose which aimed to represent the customs, traditions and ethos of Greek countryside.
- 5 I am borrowing the term from Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology. The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 159.
- 6 I. M. Panayiotopoulos, *Τα Πρόσωπα και τα Κείμενα* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις των Φίλων, 1982), pp. 89-102.
- 7 C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (trs) (London: The Hogarth Press 1975), p. 42. The alienation of modern individual from nature expressed in this poem is not an isolated incident in Cavafy's work. 'Morning Sea' was published in 1915. More than ten years before that, Cavafy had also expressed his preference for artificial over natural flowers. See the poem entitled 'Artificial Flowers' in C. P. Cavafy, *Άπαντα Ποιητικά* (Αθήνα: Ύψιλον, 1999), p. 261.
- 8 Philip Sherrard, "Cavafy's Sensual City: A Question" in Denise Harvey (ed.), p. 94.
- 9 Mathew Gumpert, "Freedom Within the Margin: The Café in the Poetry of Cavafy", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 9 (1991), p. 216.
- 10 Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 67.
- 11 Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 3.
- 12 It should be noted here that, in the original language, the title of the poem undoubtedly refers to the walls of a city. In Greek, there exist two different words: "τείχη" and "τοιχος", which refer to city walls and house walls respectively.
- 13 This is the first of a series of binary oppositions which permeate Cavafy's mature poetry: City/Nature; Inside/Outside of the House; Appearance/Reality; Spiritual/Physical; Self/Other, etc.
- 14 Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 22.
- 15 T. S. Eliot, *Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co., 1934), p. 7.
- 16 George Seferis, *On the Greek Style* (London; Sydney; Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1967), p. 137.
- 17 Seferis, *On the Greek Style*, p. 136.
- 18 Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 84.
- 19 Another striking example of this imaginary living is the poem 'Kaisarion', where the poet creates in his mind the image of King Kaisarion: "There you stood", he writes, "with your indefinable charm [...] and so completely did I imagine you / that late last night, [...] I thought you came into my room, / it seemed you stood there in front of me [...]" (Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 58).
- 20 See for example the poem 'In the Same Space': "The setting of houses, cafés, the neighbourhood / 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." (Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 122, emphasis added).
- 21 Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 1975, p. 84.