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Το περιοδικό φιλοξενεί άρθρα στα Αγγλικά και τα Ελληνικά αναφερόμενα σε όλες τις απόψεις των Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών (στη γενικότητά τους). Υποψήφιοι συνεργάτες θα πρέπει να υποβάλλουν κατά προτίμηση τις μελέτες των σε δισκέτα και σε έντυπη μορφή. Όλες οι συνεργασίες από πανεπιστημιακούς έχουν υποβληθεί στην κριτική των εκδοτών και επιλέκτων πανεπιστημιακών συναδέλφων.

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TIM BUCKLEY

ECHOES AND REFLECTIONS IN CAVAFY
AND CALLIMACHUS

Cavafy (1863–1933) and Callimachus (c.305–240 BC) can be usefully compared on geographical, stylistic and intellectual grounds. Both poets in spite of connexions with England and Cyrene in North Africa respectively are quintessentially Alexandrian, and this Alexandrian inheritance is something more than a shared milieu. A certain lapidary, backward-looking and controlled style binds the two poets, and the debt that Cavafy owed his much earlier Alexandrian colleague has been noted by Peridis and others (e.g. Liddell 1974: 12 and 121, Chatephotes 1973: 27–34; Keeley 1976: 81–84 analyses Cavafy’s use of the epitaph-form without specific reference to Callimachus).¹

What I propose to discuss here is a thematic and structural relationship between Cavafy and Callimachus. Whether this relationship suggests a conscious reworking by Cavafy of Callimachus, a half-conscious reminiscence, or a natural affinity between two poets is something I leave to the reader’s judgement. The poems to be examined are Callimachus’ *Epigram II* (AP xii 43, 28 Pfeiffer) and Cavafy’s *Ετσι* (Ανέκδοτα Ποιήματα strangely translated as ‘The Photograph’ in Keeley and Savidis 1972: 36–7) from 1913.

Epigram II

I hate the cyclical poem, nor do I enjoy
the road that carries the crowds this way and that;
I loathe too the promiscuous lover, nor do I drink
from the public fountain. I detest everything vulgar.
Lysanies, you sure are handsome, handsome – but before
this is clearly stated, an echo returns with “and some-one else’s.”

Ετσι

In this obscene photograph secretly sold
(the policeman mustn’t see) around the corner,
in this whorish photograph,

how did such a dream-like face
make its way? How did you get in here?

Who knows what a degrading, vulgar life you lead;
How horrible the surroundings must have been
when you posed to have the picture taken;
what a cheap soul you must have.
But in spite of all this, and even more, you remain for me
the dream-like face, the figure
Shaped for and dedicated to Hellenic love –
that's how you remain for me
and how my poetry speaks of you.

Both of these poems embody an unsatisfactory or thwarted reciprocity. In Ετσὶ Cavafy states that his poetry speaks about the figure in a pornographic photograph just as the figure 'remains for him'. The nature of the photographed figure's persistence is ambiguous, and casts doubt on the poem as a whole, even while sounding a note of triumph analogous to that of Horace's 'exegi monumentum' (Odes III, 30). On the one hand, the persistence of photograph and poem may be that of an edict or monument, which by virtue of its material endurance and visibility communicates or reinforces an ideology for all time. On the other hand, the persistence may be that of an unwanted reminder or piece of incriminating evidence, implicating the subject of both poem and picture in a 'vulgar' (πρόστυχη) demimonde. It rather depends on what we imagine as remaining – the 'face of the dream', which Cavafy explicitly nominates, or the εξευτελισμένη ζωή, which though not named at this point, is difficult to displace from the reader's mind.

In the case of *Epigram II*, the reciprocity is built into the structure of the final elegiac couplet. Though there is considerable debate about the precise configuring of the echo (Gow & Page 1965: 156–7, Wilkinson 1967: 5–6, Hopkinson 1988: 87, Koenen 1993: 87–8, Cameron 1995 391–3), it is clear that the words “έξεις καλώς” ‘you sure are good-looking’ create the unwanted echo άλλος έξει ορ άλλον έξει – ‘another has him’ or ‘he has another’, both having much the same sense. These final words, whatever their precise form, cap the poem, but are by Callimachus’ characterisation a piece of aural detritus. Whatever common sense tells us, the poem’s capping words do not *prima facie* belong to the poet.

Consequently, though both poems end with the most neatly turned conclusions, it is perhaps mistaken to see this neatness as indicative of some state of equilibrium that each

poem reaches in its complete form. Certainly formal perfection need not entail emotional poise.

Seen in this light, we might better regard the final lines as the irritant that provokes each poem, or the splinter that each poem attempts to extract. In less metaphorical terms, we see moving back through each poem a process of transmutation, turning an *essential* problem into an *aesthetic* one. Cavafy's persona, and more importantly his poetry, is by the poem's end inextricably bound to the cheap figure in the photograph. The strategies adopted by the poet at the outset of the poem can be seen as a direct reaction to this ambiguous state. Cavafy effectively tears the photograph in two, disassociating as far as possible its ideal and vulgar elements, even though this attempt is ultimately bound to fail, as we see in the line "μα μ' όλα αυτά, και πιότερα, για μένα μένεις". Nevertheless, it seems that having realised that the bonds between himself and the figure are not of a kind that can be dissolved, the best solution Cavafy can hit upon is to create a schism in the photograph itself so as to insure that only its 'ideal' qualities attach to him. Similarly, Callimachus' own words turn against him by the epigram's end, and meaning is wrested from the poet's control. He maintains the integrity of his persona only by lopping off or excluding the popular and the vulgar through a series of aesthetic judgements that make up the first two couplets of the epigram.

In both instances an essential difficulty – the relativisation of the poet's role – is reduced to an aesthetic problem – the confrontation of vulgarity. The persona is shown at the end of this process (i.e. the beginning of the poem) in its integral state, capable of recoiling from whatever might impinge on it, and reducing itself to an impenetrable gaze. In Callimachus' case, this impenetrability is apparent from the first word of the epigram: *εχθαίρω*. The overtly combative strategies adopted in the first four lines of the poem are indeed so severe, and so different to the subjective disintegration of the final couplet, that some have even questioned whether the two sections belong to the same poem or even the same poet (e.g. Gow & Page 1965: 157). In Cavafy's case, the impenetrability is precisely that of a voyeur. He exists at this point only as the possessor of the photograph.

Rather than see the transformation of this integral state as a gradual loss of control documented by the poem as it proceeds, it seems to me reasonable to see the process as being a retrograde one, working back from an impasse to a more satisfactory state. Whether through possession, criticism or the betaking of himself from the mundane, each poet asserts a control which, by the poem's end, we feel to have been a reaction to an intolerable situation.

I have so far made two observations that in my opinion hold good for both poems: one, that the poems represent states of unsatisfactory reciprocity; and two, that they reveal a logical sequence that runs backwards through their texts, whereby a problem of

the poet's essence is ameliorated and made a problem of the poet's judgement. It remains now to describe how these two points might be related, and to show that the inverted sequence of thought (i.e. the structural) is a function of the poem's material (i.e. the thematic).

Once a thwarted reciprocity is admitted to be central to *Epigram II* and *Έτσι*, it is natural to see some kind of reciprocity operating in the structuring of a back-to-front movement in the poems. But in establishing a relation between reciprocity and inversion, we must pay attention to the specifics of mechanical reproduction in each poem – the photograph and the echo.

The situation presented by Callimachus' epigram is the simpler of the two. Just as the echo literally returns to the hearer, and so creates meaning (a meaning, it must be said that is hardly welcome to the persona presented by the poet), the poem itself creates its meaning precisely in having two sets of dynamics: the forward impulse of the text, and the logical movement back through it, from an ontological impasse to an aesthetic solution. Echo is therefore not merely the instrument of wit in the poem, but is the underpinning of the poem *in toto*. More than serving an aesthetic purpose, it is its *raison d'être* – another mirroring of the movement from the aesthetic to the ontological.

For Cavafy, the photograph is the model of communication to which he imagines his poetry must conform. Given Cavafy's thorough familiarity with classical and post-classical Platonism, an examination of the photograph in terms of that philosophical position will not be out of place.

Two quite different strands of Plato's thought are brought into play by photography. The first is Plato's treatment of texts in the *Phaedrus* – regarding the photograph primarily as a record which cannot be altered or respond to its viewer/reader; the second is Plato's treatment of *eidola* (i.e. reflections, pictures and shadows) in the *Republic*.

Like texts, graphic representations remain frozen, unable, as Plato has Socrates argue in the *Phaedrus* (275d 4–8), to answer for themselves, or to do anything but remain in their frozen poses. Socrates' statement is worth quoting:

“writing ... in truth resembles painting. You see the products of this art stand there as if they are alive, but if one asks them something, they are utterly dumb. The same applies to [written] words...”

We may note that visual reproduction is the standard by which written reproduction is measured, and it is their static nature that condemns both. Cavafy's final line almost reads like a modern paraphrase of this idea (though it has other resonances as well): *έτσι* “για μένα μένεις και σε λέγουν ποιήσι μου”. By this reading, the poem and the photograph are mirror images of each other. But whereas the echo of Callimachus' poem

is a dynamic process of reflection, the reflection of two frozen *graphai* is a rather different proposition.

As well as being a document frozen in time, the photograph is also to some extent a reflection, a presentation of reality. It belongs to the class of objects described in *Republic* VI as images, which encompasses shadows, reflections and imitative artistic productions (509e8–510a3). To some extent, the photograph is a hybrid that shares characteristics with all three of these things, resembling in its mode of production the shadow, and in its final form the reflection and the work of art. Objects of this class do not have any true being of their own, but are simulacra, no more than representations of existing things. In short, they have an aesthetic but not an ontological value.

And so the photograph stands as the double of Cavafy's poem in two ways: firstly, by resembling its static and impassive textual nature; and secondly, by standing as the double of its aesthetic nature, and presenting a reflective surface to which the poem speaks. In a manner broadly comparable to that of the epigram, Εἴτωι both describes and embodies a reflective pattern.

I noted at the outset that Cavafy and Callimachus shared 'backward-looking' tendencies. At that point I merely wished to stress their shared interest in the past – a past that in both cases has as much room for the forgotten and insignificant as it does for the heroic.² Though the poems discussed here do not reveal this pre-occupation directly, they are backward-looking in a rather different sense, but one that is a natural consequence of an intense interest in attaching oneself to and embodying the personae of an obscure past. The two poets who pre-eminently spoke through the dead (we recall here their shared interest in epitaphs) seem to have had a fine feeling for the limits that ideally would be imposed on intercourse with the living.

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NOTES

- 1 I am pleased to acknowledge my debt to Prof. Mastrodimitris' article in the previous *Modern Greek Studies* for leading me to the relationship between Callimachus and Cavafy, but have been unable to locate a copy of Peridis' *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κ. Καβάφη*, Athens, 1948.
- 2 The outstanding example in Callimachus' works of the treatment of an obscure past is *Hecale*, a hexameter poem that seems to have described a night spent by Theseus in the hut of a talkative old woman.