



allegorical scene

Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1955

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C.P.Cavafy: Anthonism

Intermezzo

The word *intermezzo* is mainly understood as musical terminology. The “archaeology” of this word is rich from the Renaissance to today. It describes a piece of music, which inserts itself into the middle of a musical performance and stirs up feelings that are almost unfathomable. The 19th century, in particular, enriched it with a more lyrical and intrusive character, making it more surprising and almost independent from the rest of the work to which it is belonging. Mendelssohn inspired the famous Shakespearean *Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Brahms attached more emotion to it; and Puccini made use of an *intermezzo* in his opera *Madame Butterfly*, which introduced a new dimension into his work, pleasant and traumatic. Perhaps no other *intermezzo* is so intrusive and enigmatic as that of Shostakovich in *String Quartet 15*, which lasts a little more than a minute. What, then, is the essence of *intermezzos*? Are they just for fun and relaxation? Are they different from the rest of the work that they are contained in? I believe they represent the essence of a distilled and “organic” music, full of freeing lyricism, that accompanies a profound transformation which transcends everything and from which a totally new situation will arise. This new situation is going out of control, as if the music itself is revealing the force of a musical “matter” which could be almost touched like an object.

Here inevitably we encounter the poetry of Cavafy. His “musical” moments always raise the reader’s interest suddenly, not only when they

directly refer to musical outbursts but in particular when “voices” — an interesting type of music in Cavafy’s case — are heard, when things are changing or “passing” to something else. As proof we could refer to many of his poems in which “passing” is a strong and repetitive point of reference in the context of a dramatic change. The poem *Passage* suffices as an example:

*Εκείνα που δειλά φαντάσθη μαθητής, είν’ ανοιχτά,
φανερωμένα εμπρός του. [...]
Κ’ έτσι ένα παιδί απλό
γένεται άξιο να το δούμε, κι απ’ τον Υψηλό
της Ποίησης Κόσμο μια στιγμή περνά κι αυτό —
το αισθητικό παιδί με το αίμα του καινούριο και ζεστό. (Α: 86)*

Anthonism

The above poem captures a common topos in Cavafy. To proceed by listing poems or verses where Cavafy uses the word “passage” or other synonymous words would be to engage in pointless archival tedium. We need only refer to another peculiar “passage”, this one aesthetic and sensual, expressed in the poem “When stimulated” (A: 81), which is also pivotal for the approach taken here:

*“Προσπάθησε να τα κρατήσεις, ποιητή,
όταν διεγείρονται μες στο μυαλό σου,
την νόχτα ή μες στην λάμψη του μεσημεριού”.*

There is almost always a moment in the poetry of Cavafy in which something suddenly starts, out of control, like *intermezzo*, after the flow of events is interrupted. It is as though the flow of one rhythm stops and another one begins. This observation, which applies to most of his poems, underlines the fact that precisely the art of Cavafy furtively captures the unique moment when something becomes something else. And because this moment is rather rare — not because it occurs infrequently but because the subject meets with it only by chance, or often after a lengthy conscious or unconscious process — within Cavafy’s poetry it has a «collectible», tactile and «hard» significance (“Η τιμότερές μου μέρες είν’ εκείνες / που την αισθητική αναζήτησιν αφίνω, / που εγκαταλείπω τον ωραίο και σκληρόν ελληνισμό», B: 9). Art for him is nothing but this “stimulation” in the mind or the body, in the evening or at noon, when you can feel as

if touching a shiny aesthetic object: the hedonic joy of touching. Perhaps the most famous poem by Cavafy, after the “Ithaca” and the “Barbarians” is “God forsaking Anthony” (Απολείπειν ο θεός Αντώνιον):

*Σαν έξαφνα, ώρα μεσάνυχτ', ακουσθεί
αόρατος θίασος να περνά
με μουσικές εξαίσιες, με φωνές—
την τύχη σου που ενδίδει πια, τα έργα σου
που απέτυχαν, τα σχέδια της ζωής σου
που βγήκαν όλα πλάνες, μη ανωφέλετα θρηνησεις.*

[...]

*Σαν έτοιμος από καιρό, σα θαρραλέος,
σαν που ταιριάζει σε που αξιόθηκες μια τέτοια πόλι,
πλησίασε σταθερά προς το παράθυρο,
κι άκουσε με συγκίνησιν, αλλ' όχι
με των δειλών τα παρακάλια και παράπονα,
ως τελευταία απόλαυσι τους ήχους,
τα εξαίσια όργανα του μυστικού θιάσου,
κι αποχαιρέτα την, την Αλεξάνδρεια που χάνεις (Α:20).*

Here we are involved with a “stimulation,” an aesthetic “erection” in the course of historical events. This historical “erection” is not ultimately about the particular historical figure (Anthony), and illustrates Cavafy’s engagement with this idea in most, if not all, of his poems.

It is just the final moment that history reveals herself as an ultimate “presence” (not *re*-presentation) manifested in a final, almost erotic delirium; history becomes the “blood and body” of the subject. The presence of Dionysus, which recalls the sacred ritual of wine, serves only to emphasize the “stimulation” which is the somatization of history as the last religious-erotic ritual. It is as though the wine (οινό-πνευμα (and other distilled drinks¹ in Cavafy’s poetry) produces the miracle. Furthermore this is a quite subversive moment, when Dionysus is not only abandoning Anthony but also the city, going back to his wildness, marching backwards, becoming city-less.

Anthonism is a persisting theme in Cavafy’s poetry (this is not a surprise for an excessively persistent and “obsessive” poet) and becoming a “contaminating” syndrome, absorbing totally the subject to something that is uncontrollable revelation: the poet Fernazis too was affected by the same syndrome:

*“Όμως μες σ’όλη του την ταραχή και το κακό,
επίμονα κ’η ποιητική ιδέα πάει κι έρχεται” (“Δαρειός”, B: 19);*

or again in *Caesarion*, where a hedonic enlightenment and fleshy revelation is experienced in the middle of the night, after a significant reading engagement and finally “abandonment” to something which is out of control:

*Και τόσο πλήρως σε φαντάσθηκα,
που χθες την νύχτα αργά, σαν έσβυνεν
η λάμπα μου —άφισα επίτηδες να σβύνει—
εδάρρεψα που μπήκες μες στην κάμαρά μου,
με φάνηκε που εμπρός μου στάθηκες. (A: 70).*

Let’s discuss further here the notion of “abandonment”. In the poem “God forsaking Anthony”, the poet does not say that god is “abandoning” Anthony but that he “leaves him behind” (απολείπειν). Cavafy prefers the oldest verb and leaves us with the impression that Anthony is pushed backwards to face what he really is or better was. The verbal archaeology here (απο-λείπειν) reveals the “archaeology” of the psychological construction of a subject through time, and by pushing it in “backwards” is forcing it to realise that passing now means watching towards the past, while everything is un-done in front of his eyes. According to Cavafy we could then argue that looking properly is watching backwards really, no other option available to human experience. And yet again the subject lives in a limbo, in between, as we can read in “Θάλασσα του πρωϊού” (A:52):

*Εδώ ας σταθώ. Κι ας γελασθώ πως βλέπω αυτά
(τα είδ’ αλήθεια μια στιγμή σαν πρωτοστάθηκα).
κι όχι κ’ εδώ τες φαντασίες μου,
τες αναμνήσεις μου, τα ινδάλματα της ηδονής.*

Where Cavafy exposes that what he will be seeing is what he saw in a moment in the past (“I really did see them for a moment, soon after I had stopped”). It was a sudden, unexpected and unconscious revelation, which makes him believe that he is in a position to experience it in the future. The ambiguity of the whole idea about how and what I can see and experience lies between “ας σταθώ – πρωτοστάθηκα»: although the subject has already stopped he is about to decide to do so in the forthcoming now. The point here is that the subject is unable to control anything: he saw some

natural landscapes really but he has to “pretend”, “make-believe” (“And let me pretend I see all this”) that he is seeing them now.

Clearly, the subject is overcome by all sort of uncontrollable experiences and paradoxically the outcome of this intensive situation, because it is so intensive, could manifest itself as hedonism. The same is happening regarding Anthony’s experience: the “abandonment” to the events, overcoming him, will at the end bring aesthetic pleasure and hedonism. This is something that transcends Cavafy’s poetry. Let’s mention here another poem, «Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει» (B: 40), where the subject is “abandoning” itself to an overwarming hedonism:

*Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει. Εἶν’ ανοιχτά
δυο, τρία βιβλία· ιστορικοί και ποιηταί.
Μα μόλις διάβασε δέκα λεπτά,
και τα παραίτησε. Στον καναπέ
μισσοκοιμάται. Ανήκει πλήρως στα βιβλία —
αλλ’ εἶναι εἴκοσι τριῶ ετών, κ’ εἶν’ ἔμορφος πολὺ·
και σήμερα το απόγευμα πέρασ’ ο ἔρωσ
στην ιδεώδη σάρκα του, στα χεῖλη.
Στη σάρκα του που εἶναι ὄλο καλλονή
η θέρμη πέρασεν η ερωτική·
χωρίς αστεῖαν αιδῶ για την μορφή της απολαύσεως*

In order to “have” something it is essential to be “abandoned” to it, and, in the process, to lose it. You can’t “have” something when you are possessing it. To possess something is to experience its “being” which is the real substance of “having” and this is what could reveal an ultimate hedonism when the being («ἦσαν») could become tangible having («φέρε με»):

*Μνήμη μου, φύλαξέ τα σὺ ως ἦσαν.
Και, μνήμη, ὅτι μπορείς ἀπὸ τον ἐρωτὰ μου αὐτόν,
ὅτι μπορείς φέρε με πίσω ἀπόψι” (A: 88)*

At that particular moment that the subject is exposed at that decisive abandonment, usually as a surprise, comes also the hedonism of experiencing freedom, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out: “Freedom does not exist if it is not absolute and can not be absolute if it comes as result of any causality or [...] as an understanding as a result of a causality. Because it is

the thing itself which may be absolute and not the cause of it; the presence and not the substance; it is the existence and not the being » (Nancy, 1988: 138). Although this is something that goes behind any rational description in Cavafy's poetry too is always expressed as a quest and pro-ject of freedom:

*Δεν εδεσμεύθηκα. Τελείως αφέθηκα κ' επήγα.
Στες απολαύσεις, που μισό πραγματικές,
μισό γυρνάμενες μες στο μυαλό μου ήσαν,
επήγα μες στην φωτισμένη νύχτα.
Κ' ήπια από δυνατά κρασιά, καθώς
που πίνουν οι ανδρείοι της ηδονής. (“Επήγα”, Α:59)*

Freedom in essence is only experienced in an extreme situation, almost out of space and time, as “abandonment” to something that happens suddenly — in the middle of the “illuminated night” (Τσιανίκας, 2007). The hedonic pleasure also is nothing else but a symptom of a sudden experience, unchallenged, unchecked, real and tangible. Authentic hedonism is free because it is defined by itself only as the absolute “other” which surprises us, so identical to our body yet so radically different from it. The experience of something like that makes the subject *ec-static*:

*Εν εκστάσει βλέπω νυν
του Ενδυμίωνος την φημισμένην καλλονήν.
Ιάσμων κάνιστρα κενούν οι δούλοι μου· κ' ευοίωνοι
επευφημίοι εξύπνησαν αρχαίων χρόνων ηδονήν (...)*

In the «Constitution of Hedonism» (2003: 168) Cavafy states that “when hedonism arrives, do not turn your back to it, because this is the time to accept it as a “heritage” that was given to you without you asking for it: as life is a heritage and you did not do anything to earn it as reward, so heritage should be considered Hedonism”. The real and most important “heritage” then, is not something that binds you to something else; but rather what is liberating you; because it is bringing to you a free and not negotiable “gift” that gives you the highest pleasure and satisfaction. In the same way words, languages and sentences are bringing to you the pleasure of using something so personal and yet so impersonal because is part of “your” heritage.

This is actually why Cavafy indicates great weakness for the sophists who lived in the «intermediate» space of languages, who, according to

Cavafy, they were keeping their distance from the big philosophical ideas of the day from one hand and the prosaic reality of the other: “They were like the artists of our days because they developed the love for the external beauty of the artistic objects. The idea could be very important; it could be simple to understand. But its expression ought to be perfect. They were drunk with ‘sculptural’ expression and the music of words» (2003: 238-239).

Finally this is the way to understand also the liberating sexuality in Cavafy’s poetry, when the language itself expresses feelings and hedonic sounds, almost detached from the speaking/writing subject: the language is speaking disconnected by the order of the conventional “I” and enjoy the hedonism of freedom. Then we could assume that all Cavafy’s poems, verses and words, expressing an overflowing and almost artificial hedonism is just a metaphor exposing the moment of experiencing the freedom, a “uproar” of forthcoming events. Here we join again the anthonism described above:

*Η ακοή αυτών κάποτε εν ώραις σοβαρών σπουδών
ταράττεται. Η μυστική βοή
τούς έρχεται των πλησιαζόντων γεγονότων.
Και την προσέχουν ευλαβείς. Ενώ εις την οδόν
έξω, ουδέν ακούουν οι λαοί. (A: 17)*

The “wise” person can hear approaching events, when the common mob hears nothing: “αυτών κάποτε εν ώραις σοβαρών σπουδών ταράττεται.» Most importantly, the “wise” do not react, do not get upset, because what is happening is objective and inevitable and so they simply «listen to the secret uproar [and] watch piously”: nothing else. The same happens in the poem “God forsaking Anthony”:

*πλησίασε σταθερά προς το παράθυρο,
κι άκουσε με συγκίνησην, αλλ’ όχι
με των δειλών τα παρακάλια και παράπονα,
ως τελευταία απόλαυσι τους ήχους,
τα εξαίσια όργανα του μυστικού θιάσου [...]*

“Σαν έξαφνα, ώρα μεσάνυχτ’ ακουστε!»: If you do not experience hedonism as a surprise, then hedonism it is not. In “One Night” (A: 55), a strong hedonic past experience, in a sordid room, while popular rhythms sound from afar, years later — but as it is now — the experience emerges suddenly, but totally transformed:

*Η κάμαρα ήταν πτωχική και πρόστυχη,
κρυμμένη επάνω από την ύποπτη ταβέρνα.
Απ' το παράθυρο φαίνονταν το σοκάκι,
το ακάθαρτο και το στενό. Από κάτω
ήρχονταν η φωνές κάτι εργατών
που έπαιζαν χαρτιά και που γλεντούσαν.
Κ' εκεί στο λαϊκό, το ταπεινό κρεββάτι
είχα το σώμα του έρωτος, είχα τα χείλη
τα ηδονικά και ρόδινα της μέθης —
τα ρόδινα μιας τέτοιας μέθης, που και τώρα
που γράφω, έπειτ' από τόσα χρόνια!
μες στο μονήρες σπίτι μου, μεθώ ξανά.*

This is the result of re-enacting the experience and facing the most subversive hedonism by using “hard” words: «raunchy», “suspect”, «unclean» “rose members», “drunkenness», «solitary house»: physical pleasures throughout. Thence springs sensual language, simulating the physical with words. This is the “last” opportunity, a “window” to receive your freedom as a gift: “Απ' το παράθυρο φαίνονταν το σοκάκι». The same “window” of opportunity was offered to Anthony too: “πλησίασε σταθερά προς το παράθυρο».

This poetry has no value or meaning beyond its literal words. Its value results from its “musical” texture, as a sudden intermezzo, as “having” something in the end: «Είχα το σώμα του έρωτος, είχα τα χείλη». The physical acquisition brings you the joy of ex-istence and the pleasure having/possessing something. In the “Days of 1896” (II: 57) — numbers are also voluptuous in Cavafy’s poetry — the pleasure of numbers “wakes” days of old, clear sounds: for this reason in another relevant poem, while an old experience is full of shame and psychological trauma, years later it emerges totally different, if someone could look at it from the point of view of the “body”. To be accurate here, the passage from one situation (psyche) to the next (body) is captured as a “third” position, where the body and flesh are considered as “pure”:

*Μια άποψις άλλη υπάρχει που αν ιδωθεί από αυτήν
φαντάζει, συμπαιθής· φαντάζει, απλό και γνήσιο
του έρωτος παιδί, που άνω απ' την τιμή,*

*και την υπόληψί του έθεσε ανεξετάστως
της καθαρής σαρκός του την καθαρή ηδονή.*

Almost the same is happening again in «In the dull village», where “αναμένει” becoming “αναμένη” (there are other similar example: “κόμμη -κόμμη”, B:41, “με τάξι-μετάξι”, A: :50):

*στο πληκτικό χωριό όπου αναμένει —
έπεσε στο κρεβάτι απόψι ερωτοπαθής,
όλ' η νεότης του στον σαρκικό πόθο αναμένη,
εις έντασιν ωραίαν όλ' η ωραία νεότης του.
Και μες στον ύπνον η ηδονή προσήλθε· μέσα
στον ύπνο βλέπει κ' έχει την μορφή, την σάρκα που ήθελε (B: 47).*

In the poem «Hedonism», which is even more relevant here, reveals the “objective” and “hard” experience of love by using the verb «keep»“κράτησα”):

*Χαρά και μύρο της ζωής μου η μνήμη των ωρών
που ήύρα και που κράτηξα την ηδονή ως την ήθελα.
Χαρά και μύρο της ζωής μου εμένα, που αποστράφηκα
την κάθε απόλαυσιν ερώτων της ρουτίνας.*

Finally in the poem «Tyana Sculptor» (A: 42), a sculptor shows off all his works, but the one that stands out for him is an exciting Hermes, which again evokes an ecstatic intermezzo on a hot day:

*Μα να το έργο μου το πιο αγαπητό
που δούλεψα συγκινημένα και το πιο προσεκτικά·
αυτόν, μια μέρα του καλοκαιριού θερμή
που ο νους μου ανέβαινε στα ιδανικά,
αυτόν εδώ ονειρεύομουν τον νέον Ερμή.*

Cavafy is the intermezzo, the in between space, which is liberating the soul from itself, detached from its self; this duplication is an act of freedom and ultimate pleasure. The paradox in Cavafy’s poetry is that this is also the moment where matter and sensation are meeting each other producing real, sculptured “things” and the poet touching, showing or distributing them as a pedlar. In that way, any object could be the beginning of a transforming experience in life.

The word “Cavafy” after all means a merchant who manufactures or sells second-class shoes. This is what makes him such a practical, tangible,

folksy artist, who makes things with his hands. Thence arises in his poetry the abundance of hands, physical stimulation, voices, material experiences, marketability of flesh, and events, fabrics and of course the pedlar:

*Απ' την μικρή του, στα περὶχωρα πλησίον, κόμη,
και σκονισμένος από το ταξίδι ακόμη
έφθασεν ο πραγματευτής. Και «Δίβανον!» και «Κόμμυ!»
«Άριστον Έλαιον!» «Άρωμα για την κόμη (B: 41).*

This is why Cavafy was able to conceive a poem about Ioannes Katakouzinos and Eirini Andronicus and «their artificial stones» (B: 44); the «Nice flowers and white to fit too» (B: 78-79). He immerses the poem in a materialistic environment of clothes, money, handkerchiefs and many other objects. From there comes the «Of the shop» (A: 50), a poem almost objectified, made with words that have no meaning other than what they declare:

*Τα ντόλιξε προσεκτικά, με τάξι
σε πράσινο πολύτιμο μετάξι.
Από ρουμπίνια ρόδα, από μαργαριτάρια κρίνοι,
από αμειψύστους μενεξέδες. Ως αυτός τα κρίνει.*

Cavafy in the middle of his poetic engagement understands that he has to stand up to a big challenge: how to perform this “exquisite” anthonism by surrendering to the “uproars” of words. He resorts to the most original and productive method, that of analepsis (ανά-ληψη): there is no doubt that this is his favourite method, describing the same experience again and again until something completely different arises; by giving away everything; by accepting to be abandoned to anything; by “object-making” everything, beginning with the body.

We can see it expressed in the poem «In the same place» (B: 80). Repetition, as ana-lepsis, can achieve the maximum aesthetic outcome:

*Οικίας περιβάλλον, κέντρων, συνοικίας
που βλέπω κι όπου περπατώ· χρόνια και χρόνια.
Σε δημιούργησα μες σε χαρά και μες σε λύπες:
με τόσα περιστατικά, με τόσα πράγματα.
Κ' αισθηματοποιήθημες ολόκληρο, για μένα.*

Anthony also will manage the final aesthetic “stimulation” as analepsis: «as long prepared, as if courageous.» The aesthetic analepsis and

its hedonic integration could not be accomplished if they had not before been “captured” in the mind and the body. The same analeptic experience applies for “Ithaca”, which you will not find unless you already have it in your mind.

It is thus revealed as the astonishing “other” of what was already known before. “In café’s entry” (A: 54), amidst a conventional routine, a sudden look is enough to reveal a Platonic revelation:

*“Κ’ είδα τ’ ωραίο σώμα που έμοιαζε
σαν απ’ την άκρη πείρα του να τώκαμεν ο Έρωας —
πλάττοντας τα συμμετρικά του μέλη με χαρά·
υψώνοντας γλυπτό το ανάστημα.”*

Hypo-anthonism

Inevitably, anthonism has its opposite: sometimes the process is “negative” and the negative-anthonism (not anti-anthonism) follows the inverse path. The subject reveals itself going backwards, without any profound alteration, decomposing itself only, which is no less revealing. “Waiting for the Barbarians” captures such a negative *to* “anthonism”: here is the excitement of the coming of the barbarians who, in the end, having abandoned us, are not coming and perhaps never existed. We have here an ageing world, “finished”, waiting for the catalytic coming of a sudden and unspecified change, which cannot occur due to the absence of analeptic maturity, there is nothing there to be reworked, revoked, re-enacted by the subjects themselves or the community concerned. As a result the subject will fester in an almost permanent state of ennui.

It comes not as surprise then when so many poems of Cavafy insist upon expressing ennui. He “studied” and understood its place in the school of French symbolism brilliantly as if it were his own device — which it assuredly is not. The poem “Monotony” (A: 22) for instance, describes an ongoing ennui, without the possibility of escape: it seems impossible here for something “sudden” to happen which could dramatically change the burdensome situation:

*Μήνας περνά και φέρνει άλλον μήνα.
Αυτά που έρχονται κανείς εύκολα τα ειμάζει·
είναι τα χθεςινά τα βαρετά εκείνα.
Και καταντά το αύριο πια σαν αύριο να μη μοιάζει.*

Here, the relevant subject does not have the strength, courage or intellect to reverse the situation, or even the theatrical art to reinvent the situation as analepsis. And yet all these poems are there, in the corpus of Cavafy's poetry, to prepare the reader for a forthcoming anthonism perhaps in the next poem. But in the mid time some subjects are going through the "passage" from one stage to the next (as it was explained at the beginning of this essay), which could be achieved after intellectual and /or emotional maturity. The poem "Έν οδώ» describes the situation:

*Το συμπαθητικό του πρόσωπο, κομμάτι ωχρο·
τα καστανά του μάτια, σαν κομένα·
είκοσι πέντ' ετών, πλην μοιάζει μάλλον είκοσι·
με κάτι καλλιτεχνικό στο ντύσιμό του
— τίποτε χρώμα της κραβάτας, σχήμα του κολλάρου —
ασκόπως περπατεί μες στην οδό,
ακόμη σαν υπνωτισμένος απ' την άνομη ηδονή,
από την πολύ άνομη ηδονή που απέκτησε.*

The young person is twenty five years old but it looks like twenty. He is missing five years of maturity and uncertainty and this is why he is waking like half asleep and he is feeling that his pleasure is «άνομη». With a little bit more of maturity, freedom and courage he is going to upgrade his hedonistic (not "άνομη") pleasure to a totally perfect ("καθαρή") one. Is there any possibility for this young man to do so? Yes and his most credible chance will arise from the fact that he has something artistic in his looking ("κάτι καλλιτεχνικό στο ντύσιμό του"). If this is something which could be described as hypo-anthonism we can claim then that there should be the opposite situation of a hyper-anthonism and in particular when something dominant is occurring, bringing the force of the uncontrolled "other" in our lives.

Pathantonism

The unexpected always arises in Cavafy's poetry, at times with excitement and stimulation but at others finding the subject totally unprepared, experiencing a sudden terror. The poems "Trojans", for example, expresses it clearly:

*Είν' η προσπάθειές μας σαν των Τρώων.
 Θαρρούμε πως με απόφασι και τόλμη
 θ' αλλάξουμε της τύχης την καταφορά,
 κ' έξω στεκόμεθα ν' αγωνισθούμε.
 Όμως η πτώσις μας είναι βεβαία. Επάνω,
 στα τείχη, άρχισεν ήδη ο θρήνος.
 Των ημερών μας αναμνήσεις κλαιν κ' αισθήματα.
 Πικρά για μας ο Πρίαμος κ' η Εκάβη κλαίνε.*

We do not cry, but “the memories and feelings are crying”: and this make the situation even more uncontrollable, beyond any possibility to do something about it, when in other words the unknown, the “other”, becomes the subject of any forthcoming event.

How is this done? What kind of «Freudian» alchemy is this, that permits the «other», the “ancient” self, to replace human initiative? In Cavafy’s poetry this happens all the time and the way he expresses these important situations was mistaken for a lack of proper knowledge of Modern Greek: consider what G. Seferis or G. Savidis were saying about the structure of his sentences or the interpretation of the meaning of his words. With Cavafy the opposite is actually happening, and the language, as the great other, reveals what a talking subject is not capable of achieving. This is why so many times in Cavafy’s poetry “voices” simply speak and reveal, usually in the middle of the night:

*Κάποτε μες στα όνειρά μας ομιλούνε·
 κάποτε μες στην σκέψη τες ακούει το μυαλό.
 Και με τον ήχο των για μια στιγμή επιστρέφουν
 ήχοι από την πρώτη ποίησι της ζωής μας —
 σα μουσική, την νύχτα, μακρυνή, που σβύνει (« Voices “, A: 95).*

So the «other» suddenly could arise in our life, beyond the “I”, as an intermezzo, in the night and reveals something which comes as a revealing, outside experience for the subject:

*Το είδωλον του νέου σώματός μου,
 απ' τες εννιά που άναψα την λάμπα,
 ήλθε και με ηύρε και με θύμισε
 κλειστές κάμαρες αρωματισμένες,
 και περασμένην ηδονή— τι τολμηρή ηδονή!*

*Κ' επίσης μ' έφερε στα μάτια εμπρός,
δρόμους που τώρα έγιναν αγνώριστοι,
κέντρα γεμάτα κίνησι που τέλεψαν,
και θέατρα και καφεενεία που ήσαν μια φορά! (Α: 63).*

This is the way that will give access to something more unexpected. The poem “This One” (Ούτος Εκείνος) reveals with absolute clarity the “passage” of “I” from the dominate subject to the “other” as the real, most powerful one. This is the moment when the greatest antonism occurs, suddenly, after the “I” experiences a tedious revelation of not being itself:

*Άγνωστος — ξένος μες στην Αντιόχεια — Έδεσσηνός
γράφει πολλά. Και τέλος πάντων, να, ο λίνος
ο τελευταίος έγινε. Με αυτόν ογδόντα τρία
ποιήματα εν όλω. Πλην τον ποιητή
κούρασε τόσο γράψιμο, τόση στιχοποιία,
και τόση έντασις σ' ελληνική φρασιολογία,
και τώρα τον βαραινει πια το κάθε τι —
Μια σκέψις όμως παρενθής από την αθνημία
τον βγάξει — το εξαίσιον Ούτος Εκείνος,
που άλλοτε στον ύπνο του άκουσε ο Δουκιανός
("Ούτος εκείνος», Α: 45).*

Reading the poem carefully makes us identify a few items that have been hidden in the poem, which reveal much more than is obvious at first glance. The first element is that the poet is “unknown.” The bespoken ignorance is not only the fact that he was not known in Antioch, but also, and more significantly, that he is “unknown” (and unrecognizable) to himself: in particular, like all writers, he does not know why he writes.

Secondly, he is writing in a foreign language: “tension in Greek phraseology.” This is not literally the case: the poetic language is always “unknown” to all poets, as though foreign, which comes to us as a surprise: suddenly. Finally, it seems that everything is once again happening at night, the suspected location of the “hard” and unexpected Freudian revelation: “For ‘I’ is someone else. [...] That much is clear to me: I am a spectator at the blossoming of my own thought: I look at it and listen to it: I make a sweep with the baton and down in the depths the symphony begins to stir” (Rimbaud) Hedonism is always close by.

The context of dreaming (“enypnio”: inside, in the middle of sleeping, like an intermezzo) in which Lucian’s glimpse is so significant, revealed as a foreign voice. It is almost the Dionysian desire again (to remember here Anthony) which erupts suddenly in the night again, and leads to the discovery that “This one [is] the Other.” («Ούτος, Εκείνος»).

The “id” as “the other thing” arises almost always from all the poems of Cavafy and reveals the unknown after a long oblivion. The “other-one” is so subversive that it manifests itself physically: the body and the skin remembers, not the specific social subject, as we read it in the poem («Ἐπέστρεφε» Α:56):

*Ἐπέστρεφε συχνά και παίρνε με,
αγαπημένη αίσθησις επέστρεφε και παίρνε με—
όταν ξυπνά του σώματος η μνήμη,
κ’ επιθυμία παληά ξαναπερνά στο αίμα·
όταν τα χείλη και το δέρμα ενθουμούνται,
κ’ αισθάνονται τα χέρια σαν ν’ αγγίζουν πάλι.
Ἐπέστρεφε συχνά και παίρνε με την νύχτα,
όταν τα χείλη και το δέρμα ενθουμούνται...*

Now we can understand that it is the «other-one» that dominates our lives: the «trivial» writings of Artemidoros, not taken into account by the arrogant “I” of Julius Caesar; the poem “Finished” (A19), placed by Cavafy next to the previous one, when a sudden disaster falls upon us and “μας συνεπαίρνει»:

*«Μέσα στον φόβο και στες υποψίες,
με ταραγμένο νου και τρομαγμένα μάτια,
λνώνουμε και σχεδιάζουμε το πώς να κάμουμε
για ν’ αποφύγουμε τον βέβαιο
τον κίνδυνο που έτσι φρικτά μας απειλεί.
Κι όμως λανθάνουμε, [...]
Άλλη καταστροφή, που δεν την φανταζόμεθαν,
εξαφνική, ραγδαία πέφτει επάνω μας,
κι ανέτοιμοις — πού πια καιρός — μας συνεπαίρνει”.*

In the poem «Dangerous» is also highlighted the fact that the young student thinks he can control his behaviour “fortified with theory and

study”, when in fact other factors will decide for him. In the poem «Noesis» (A: 64) the artistic subject finds that he could not control his juvenile behaviour and this in fact resulted his artistic expression to take shape slowly and unconsciously as a secret source:

*Τα χρόνια της νεότητός μου, ο ηδονικός μου βίος —
πώς βλέπω τώρα καθαρά το νόημά των.
Τι μεταμέλειες περιττές, τι μάταιες
Αλλά δεν έβλεπα το νόημα τότε.
Μέσα στον έκλυτο της νεότητός μου βίο
μορφώνονταν βουλές της ποιήσεώς μου,
σχεδιάζονταν της τέχνης μου η περιοχή.*

And here we are facing again the fundamental notion of “abandonment” we have discussed at the beginning of the essay. Let’s consider for example the poem “Εκόμισα εις την τέχνη»:

*Κάθομαι και ρεμβάζω. Επιθυμίες κ’ αισθήσεις
εκόμισα εις την Τέχνην— κάτι μισοειδωμένα,
πρόσωπα ή γραμμές• ερώτων ατελών
κάτι αβέβαιες μνήμες. Ας αφεθώ σ’ αυτήν.
Ξέρει να σχηματίσει Μορφήν της Καλλονής•
σχεδόν ανεπαισθήτως τον βίον συμπληρούσα,
συνδύζουσα εντυπώσεις, συνδύζουσα τες μέρες (B27).*

Concluding here let’s try a more general observation, going back to the medieval European culture and literary tradition. Dante constitutes the greatest intermezzo of the European consciousness. Not only because his poetry reflects have his own middle age as well as that of Europe, but also because everything in it happens in between heaven and earth. It is the experience of the journey, between its beginning and end, which reveals all sort of surprises. Dante revealed the intermediate and transforming trembling in the human body and real flesh.

Although controversial, we could argue that his subjects primarily suffer not from mental passions but from physical, bodily, tangible tournaments. He puts the body under immense stress but he refuses to acknowledge that only the liberation of the body will deliver the pleasure of the soul and not another life, beyond the clouds. While Dante was pointing out this important "point", Italy was developing various intermezzi in music, who

knows, perhaps to demonstrate another way of celebrating the importance of the passage from one stage to the next: full of enthusiasm, freedom and pleasures. Dionysus probably is not far away. In a sense the music is bringing back what it was missing so badly after centuries of all sort of suppressions.

Cavafy (and obviously other poets and artists) comes to bring the human flesh close to the earth and soil: amongst ourselves, our cities, our histories, where it truly belongs. Paraphrasing here the famous platonic line, in *Alcibiades* («ἀρ' οὖν, ὦ φίλε Ἀλκιβιάδη, καὶ ψυχὴ εἰ μέλλει γνῶσεσθαι αὐτήν, εἰς ψυχὴν αὐτῇ βλεπτέον, καὶ μάλιστα' εἰς τοῦτον αὐτῆς τὸν τόπον ἐν ᾧ ἐγγίγνεται ἡ ψυχῆς ἀρετῇ, σοφίᾳ, καὶ εἰς ἄλλο ᾧ τοῦτο τυγχάνει ὁμοιον ὄν;»)

Cavafy tells us that if the soul wants to truly know itself it has to look at real flesh. And this is not by suffering and tormenting ourselves, as the Dante tradition would like to tell us, but by adopting the hedonism and all pleasures of concrete revelations, as when touching precious objects including word-objects. This is the majestic way from which real “bodies” of knowledge will be revealed in a radiant manner. Even death is celebrating the sensual body and this is a quite brave claim to do. For this reason, in the poem “Iasis’ Tomb” (A: 75), Iasis himself is asking to inscribe on his tombstone that his whole life was full of hedonism and pleasures. His beauty was admired by everybody in Alexandria :

*Κεῖμαι ὁ Ἰασῆς ἐνταύθα. Τῆς μεγάλης ταύτης πόλεως
ὁ ἔφηβος ὁ φημισμένος γιὰ εμορφιά.
Μ' εθαύμασαν βαθεῖς σοφοί• κ' ἐπίσης ὁ ἐπιπόλαιος,
ὁ ἀπλός λαός. Καὶ χαίρομον ἴσα καὶ γιὰ
τὰ δύο. Μα ἀπ' το πολὺ νὰ μ' ἔχει ὁ κόσμος Νάρκισσο κ' Ἐρμῆ,
ἡ καταχρήσεις μ' ἐφθειραν, μ' ἐσκότωσαν. Διαβάτη,
ἀν εἶσαι Ἀλεξανδρεὺς, δὲν ἴα επικρίνεις. Ξέρεις τὴν ορμὴ
τοῦ βίου μας• τι θέρμην ἔχει• τι ἡδονὴν ὑπερτάτη.*

The hedonic Alexandria is the place of intimate mystagogy among sages and promiscuous people: like an intermezzo. Cavafy's Alexandria emerges as the living flesh of poetry in the middle of the Mediterranean but also in the middle of amazing cultural changes, when the hedonic way of life will give way to the hegemony of life after death:

*Κ' εξαίφνης με κυρίευσε μια αλλόκοτη
εντύπωση. Αόριστα, αισθάνομουν
σαν νάφευγεν από κοντά μου ο Μύρης•
αισθάνομουν που ενώθη, Χριστιανός,
με τους δικούς του, και που γένομουν
ξένος εγώ, ξένος πολύ• ένοιωθα κιόλα
μια αμφιβολία να με σιμώνει: μήπως κι είχα γελασθεί
από το πάθος μου, και παντα τού ήμουν ξένος.—
Πετάχθηκα έξω απ' το φρικτό τους σπίτι,
έφυγα γρήγορα πριν αρπαχθεί, πριν αλλοιωθεί
απ' την χριστιανοσύνη τους η θύμηση του Μύρη.
(“Myris, Alexandria 340 AD”, B: 76)*

Perhaps hyper-anthonism is here to remind us that we are always foreigners not only to Myris — or any Myris — but also to ourselves: this is the real and surprising revelation, which is waiting for us, suddenly, in the middle of the night, before departing Alexandria as a new hedonic variation of a very ancient pleasure.

Note

- ¹ For example: «Η συνοδεία του Διονύσου» (A:29), «Επιγήα» (A:59), «Εύνοια του Αλεξάνδρου Βάλα» (B:23).

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