

MODERN GREEK STUDIES

(AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND)

Volume 11, 2003

A Journal for Greek Letters

Pages on C.P. Cavafy

Published by Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd
PO Box 127 Blackheath NSW 2785
Tel (02) 4787 5848 Fax (02) 4787 5672

for the Modern Greek Studies Association
of Australia and New Zealand (MGSAANZ)
Department of Modern Greek
University of Sydney NSW 2006 Australia
Tel (02) 9351 7252 Fax (02) 9351 3543
E-mail: Vrasidas.Karalis@modern.greek.usyd.edu.au

ISSN 1039-2831

Copyright in each contribution to this journal belongs to its author.

© 2003, Modern Greek Studies Association of Australia

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means
electronic, mechanical or otherwise without
the prior permission of the publisher.

Typeset and design by Andras Berkes

Printed by Southwood Press, Australia

MODERN GREEK STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND (MGSAANZ)

ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑ ΝΕΟΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ ΑΥΣΤΡΑΛΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΝΕΑΣ ΖΗΛΑΝΔΙΑΣ

President: Michalis Tsianikas, Flinders University
Vice-President: Anthony Dracoupoulos, University of Sydney
Secretary: Thanassis Spiliadis, La Trobe University, Melbourne
Treasurer: Panayota Nazou, University of Sydney, Sydney

MGSAANZ was founded in 1990 as a professional association by those in Australia and New Zealand engaged in Modern Greek Studies. Membership is open to all interested in any area of Greek studies (history, literature, culture, tradition, economy, gender studies, sexualities, linguistics, cinema, Diaspora, etc).

The Association issues a Newsletter (Ενημέρωση), holds conferences and publishes two journals annually.

MODERN GREEK STUDIES
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

Editors

VRASIDAS KARALIS & MICHAEL TSIANIKAS

Book Review Editor

HELEN NICKAS

Text editing: **Katherine Cassis**

MEMBERSHIP TO MODERN GREEK STUDIES ASSOCIATION

plus ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION for two issues

Individual: AUS \$45 US \$35 UK £25 €35 Institutions: AUS \$70 US \$65 UK £35 €45 (plus postage)

full-time student/pensioners: AUS \$20 US \$30 UK £20

(includes GST)

Address for all correspondence and payments

MGSAANZ

Department of Modern Greek, University of Sydney, NSW 2006 Australia

Tel (+61-2) 9351 7252 Fax (+61-2) 9351 3543

E-mail: Vras@arts.usyd.edu.au

The periodical welcomes papers in both English and Greek on all aspects of Modern Greek Studies (broadly defined). Prospective contributors should preferably submit their papers on disk and hard copy. All published contributions by academics are refereed (standard process of blind peer assessment). This is a DEST recognised publication.

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.

CONTENTS

SECTION ONE: PAGES ON CAVAFY

C.P. Cavafy	Cavafy's Commentary on his Poems	7
	Poems, Prose Poems and Reflections	18
James D. Faubion	Cavafy: Toward the Principles of a Transcultural Sociology of Minor Literature	40
Vassilis Lambropoulos	The Greeks of Art and the Greeks of History	66
Peter Murphy	The City of Ideas: Cavafy as a Philosopher of History	75
Μιχάλης Τσιανίκας / Michael Tsianikas	Πρισματικές φωτοθυμίες στον Καβάφη: ΜΕ αφορμή το ρήμα “γυαλίζω”	103
Vassilis Adrahtas	Cavafy's Poetica Gnostica: in Quest of a Christian Consciousness	122
Anthony Dracopoulos	Reality Otherness Perception: Reading Cavafy's <i>Myris</i> : <i>Alexandria, A.D. 340</i>	134
Tim Buckley	Echoes and Reflections in Cavafy and Callimachus	146
Vrasidas Karalis	C.P. Cavafy and the Poetics of the Innocent Form	152

SECTION TWO: GRAECO-AUSTRALIANA

Toula Nicolacopoulos–George Vassilacopoulos	The Making of Greek-Australian Citizenship: from Heteronomous to Autonomous Political Communities	165
Leonard Janiszewski–Effy Alexakis	California Dreaming: The ‘Greek Cafe’ and Its Role in the Americanisation of Australian Eating and Social Habits	177
George Kanarakis	The Theatre as an Aspect of Artistic Expression by the Greeks in Australia	198
Patricia Riak	The Performative Context: Song–Dance on Rhodes Island	212
David H. Close	The Trend Towards a Pluralistic Political System under Kostas Simitis, 1996–2002	228
Eugenia Arvanitis	Greek Ethnic Schools in a Globalising Context	241

Dimitris Vardoulakis	Fait, Accompli – The Doppelgänger in George Alexander's <i>Mortal Divide</i>	258
Steve Georgakis	Sporting Links: The Greek Diaspora and the Modern Olympic Games	270

SECTION THREE: SPECIAL FEATURE

Katherine Cassis	Getting Acquainted with Giorgos Sarantaris (1908–1941)	279
George Sarantaris	Poems 1933 (selection) – Translated by Katherine Cassis	289

SECTION FOUR: COSMOS

Ihab Hassan	Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust	303
Paolo Bartoloni	The Problem of Time in the Critical Writings of Jorge-Luis Borges	317
Rick Benitez	Parrhesia, Ekphrastic and the Cassandra Dialogue in Aeschylus' <i>Agamemnon</i>	334
Thea Bellou	Derrida on Condillac: Language, Writing, Imagination, Need and Desire	347
Andrew Mellas	<i>Monstrum/Mysterium Tremendum</i> in <i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> : Re-mythologising the Divine	358

SECTION FIVE: BOOK PRESENTATION

	LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	375
--	----------------------	-----

ANTHONY DRACOPOULOS

The University of Sydney

REALITY OTHERNESS PERCEPTION: READING CAVAFY'S MYRIS: ALEXANDRIA, AD 340¹

α

One of the greatest virtues of Cavafy's poetry is its "openness"; its ability to engage diverse readers and to accommodate different reading needs, practices and expectations. Approximately a century after the first serious review of his poetry,² his work continues to challenge critics to discover it anew, promising the adventure of yet one more new reading. This pivotal trait of his work is connected with the fact that a large number of his poems are grounded on the axis of a variety of binary oppositions: old – new, inside – outside, public – private, essence – appearance, latent – manifest, presence – absence. It is these polarities, these competing views of common, even mundane incidents of life, that, over Cavafy's long period of reception, have led a number of critics to pursue the recovery of an ulterior meaning behind his poems, either by choosing one of the two poles of comparison, or by even attempting to transcend the compared poles by creating a third level of signification.

A case in point is the poem *Myris: Alexandria, AD 340*,³ a poem which, as the title indicates, is about an imaginary character by the name of Myris, who died in 340 AD. At a literal level, the poem is quite simple. After being informed of Myris' death, his anonymous pagan friend visits Myris' house to pay his last respects. There, he is confronted by an alien aspect of Myris' personality, which is signified by the strong Christian ambience of the funeral: the priests who "έλεγαν προσευχές ενθέρμως" (p. 178) [said prayers fervently] (p. 118) and the presence of a few old women who "χαμηλά μιλούσαν για / την τελευταία μέρα που έζησε / στα χείλη του διαρκώς τ' όνομα του Χριστού, / στα χείλη του βαστούσ' έναν σταυρό" (p. 178) [were talking with lowered voices / about the last day he lived: / the name of Christ constantly on his lips / his hand holding a cross.] (p. 118) The anonymous friend, we are told, knew from the beginning that Myris was Christian, but, up to that point in time, he had no reason to believe that his friend's religious persuasion played an essential role in his identity. Despite their different reli-

gious beliefs, Myris was sharing a way of life committed to the pleasures and joy of an Alexandrian aesthete:

Μα ζούσεν απολύτως σαν κ' εμάς.
 Απ' όλους πιο έκδοτος στες ηδονές·
 σκορπώντας αφειδώς τό χρήμα του στες διασκεδάσεις.
 Για την υπόληψη του κόσμου ξένοιαστος,
 ριχνόταν πρόθυμα σε νύχτιες ρήξεις στες οδούς
 όταν ετύχαινε η παρέα μας
 να συναντά αντίθετη παρέα (p. 179)

But he lived exactly as we did:
 more devoted to pleasure than all of us,
 he scattered his money lavishly on amusements.
 Not caring what anyone thought of him,
 he threw himself eagerly into night-time scuffles
 when our group happened to clash
 with some rival group in the street. (p. 119)

When in Myris' house, the overwhelming Christian signification of Myris' identity together with a series of thoughts and recollections associated with the experience of loss make the pagan friend wonder whether he ever knew the real Myris. He even recalls three incidents, which, although at the time they went unnoticed, had in fact clearly demonstrated his friend's Christian beliefs:

Μάλιστα μια φορά τον είπαμε
 πως θα τον πάρουμε μαζί μας στο Σεράπιον.
 Όμως σαν να δυσαρεστήθηκε
 μ' αυτόν τον αστεϊσμό: θυμούμαι τώρα.
 Α κι άλλες δυο φορές τώρα στό νου μου έρχονται.
 Όταν στον Ποσειδώνα κάμναμε σπονδές,
 τραβήχτηκε απ' τον κύκλο μας, κι έστρεψε αλλού τό βλέμμα.
 Όταν ενθουσιασμένος ένας μας
 είπεν, Η συντροφιά μας νάναι υπό
 τήν εύνοϊαν και την προστασίαν του μεγάλου,
 του πανωραίου Απόλλωνος – ψιθύρισεν ο Μύρης
 (οι άλλοι δεν άκουσαν) «τη εξαιρέσει εμού». (p. 179)

[...] once we even told him
 that we'd take him with us to the Serapeion.
 But – I remember now –
 He didn't seem to like this joke of ours.
 And yes, now I recall two other incidents.
 When we made libations to Poseidon,
 He drew himself back from our circle and looked elsewhere.
 And when one of us in his fervour said:
 "May all of us be favoured and protected
 by the great, the sublime Apollo" –
 Myris, unheard by the others, whispered: "Not counting me." (p. 119)

The poem develops the juxtaposition between the two aspects of Myris' identity on a number of levels. Besides the obvious contrast represented by the Christian relatives and Myris' friend, there is the internal struggle of the latter who, in his attempt to come to terms with the alien aspect of Myris' identity, oscillates between doubt and affirmation, memory and external reality. At a third level, there is the tension that was probably experienced by Myris himself, because of his participation in the life of two opposing world systems. All three are further reinforced by the historical setting of the poem, which is carefully placed by Cavafy in 340 A.D. The date situates the action "in a time of great political and religious upheaval: civil strife between the sons of Emperor Constantine the Great, resulting in Konstantios' victory, and religious clashes between the supporters of Arios and Athanasios in Alexandria, resulting in the latter's banishment to Rome." (Cavafy, 1975: 186) This tension is perpetuated through the poem but remains in the end unresolved.

Depending on what critics believe is at stake in the development of the poem's polarities,⁴ they have positioned themselves along various points of a continuum that connects the two poles. According to C. Robinson, for example, "the opposition between Christianity and paganism is a symbol of the exclusion and alienation of the lover⁵ from the beloved's family and environment, and hence, ultimately, from the beloved himself. The fact that the action is set in the dying years of paganism emphasises that the lover is the loser." (Robinson, 1988: 108) A second group of critics have, justifiably in the context of other Cavafian poems, aligned themselves with Myris' friend. One of the primary advocates of this reading, I. A. Sareyiannis, suggests that the poem is an episode of a greater drama which is being played between "the internal truth and external reality, which collide without hope of reconciliation. [...] the poet implies that the narrator knew about Myris, what is, or at least what we feel to be, more true [...]" (Sareyiannis, 1973: 102).⁶ More recent interpretations have tended to be broader in nature, in an

attempt to overcome the structural tension built by the poem. M. Pieris, for instance, suggests that the poem does not decide in favour of either version. Because of its abrupt ending, "it is up to the reader to ponder on the real victor between [...] the typical insensible function of the general social environment and the deeper essence of the communication between two people". (Pieris, 1983: 692)⁷

The entrapment of the critics in the rhetoric of the dilemma is not entirely unjustifiable. On the contrary, it is the structure of the poem itself which facilitates it, primarily because the poem encourages the reader to approach it from the point of view of Myris' friend. As readers, we tend to identify with him, because the poem is like a confession and a parable. We closely follow his dilemma and sympathise with his anxiety. As a consequence, we accept his testimony as accurate, because we have no reason not to believe him. He was there. He heard. He saw. Likewise, the pseudo-historical context of the poem makes us behave towards the storyline in a manner similar to how we would read a historical text, that is, by believing that it corresponds to a certain reality. Because of this identification, the poem creates the impression that its interpretation is connected with the dilemma faced by the narrator and thereby with an attempt to turn the absence of Myris' essence into a presence. This is why a number of critics have approached the poem from the point of view of the narrator and have thus tended to consider the two different aspects of Myris' identity in isolation, as two conflicting, hostile and incompatible realities. This approach, however, is not validated by the poem for two main reasons. Firstly, because the poem does not offer any solid basis for choosing one of the two versions of Myris, since it finishes without resolving the tension it creates. Secondly, because, as the poem unfolds, the narrator, by failing to construct a comprehensive image of Myris, is proven to be unreliable. It would not, from this perspective, make sense to approach the poem on the basis of the factual evidence that is brought forward by an eyewitness whose credibility is questionable.

A more inclusive reading would perhaps reject the point of view of the narrator in favour of that of Myris. It may be that for both the narrator and the Christian relatives, the different aspects of Myris' identity cannot be reconciled, but from the point of view of Myris, they could coexist either antagonistically, symbiotically or complementarily, as they exist in the poem itself. His reality could either be uniform or comprise contradictory elements, which enable him to function differently in different aspects of social life. The unresolved tension, however, does not justify such a reading either, since any attempt at the poem resists situating the true "essence" of Myris.

Those critical approaches which aim to reconstruct Myris' elusive "essence" seem, therefore, to be asking the poem to answer a question that it never intended to answer. We should instead step back and look at what the poem does say about its own logic, its

process of construction, about the poem as writing. How does it construct the signs of absence and doubt? On what has the narrator relied for his initial view of Myris and what exactly makes him doubt the validity of this view? Reformulating our interrogation of the poem in this way means that we concentrate not on who the real Myris was, but how we have come to know what we think we know. The issue thus becomes not one of “essence” but one of perception; not what is reality but how we perceive it and whether we can ever perceive it in its entirety.

β

Let's start with the question of the narrator's initial perception of Myris as a hedonist who is even “more devoted to pleasure” (p. 119) than his pagan friends. This view obviously does not lack substantiation. The narrator has known Myris for approximately two years. His view has been constructed on the basis of their shared experiences and his senses. He saw him, heard him, and touched him. However, as the poem unravels, this view is proven inaccurate and untrue. His vision had deceived him. The real Myris escaped him because he was beyond his experience. This sense of suspicion and doubt towards sensory and experiential perception and knowledge of reality, developed by the poem, should not be taken to mean that the senses and experience are completely wrong and, consequently, useless. If this were indeed the case, the poem would have made the choice on our behalf by completely discrediting the pagan aspect of Myris' personality; but it does not. The narrator does not, by the end of the poem, substitute his version with another. He certainly leaves the Christian house surrounded by a cloud of doubt, but the reason for his departure is to protect his initial view and not to replace it:

Πετάχθηκα έξω απ' το φρικτό τους σπίτι,
έφυγα γρήγορα πριν αρπαχθεί, πριν αλλοιωθεί
απ' την χριστιανοσύνη τους η θύμηση του Μύρη. (p. 180)

“I rushed out of their horrible house,
rushed away before my memory of Myris
could be captured, could be perverted by their Christianity.” (p. 119)

By placing one version, which doubts itself, against another, which does not, the poem certainly builds an uneven comparison, giving the impression that it favours the Christian aspect of Myris' identity. However, the validity of this version is also questionable. The poem neglects to mention that the Christian relatives have also relied on their senses and

experiences to construct their own version of Myris. It also neglects to mention that they do not have access to the evidence that is available to the narrator. They may suspect Myris' hidden identity, since they are watching the visitor-narrator “με προφανή απορίαν και με δυσαρέσκεια” (p. 178) [with evident astonishment and displeasure] (p. 119), but they are certainly not aware of it to the degree that he is. The Christians do not hold the key to the true Myris. If, as readers, we consider the hedonist version of Myris to be inaccurate, primarily because of the unreliability of the constituting sensory evidence, there is no point in accepting the Christian version as more valid, since this is also grounded on the same structural parameters. Similarly, if the narrator's vision had provided him with unreliable images in the past, why does he now allow the images of the Christian relatives, which have also been constructed on the same type of evidence, to undermine his initial impression of Myris? Or, if he cannot believe his eyes now, why did he accept his visual images as true in the past?

The significance of senses in the perception and constitution of reality is thus not totally refuted, since both versions of Myris, as well as the doubt about the information they provide, emanate from these. The senses may be useful and problematic. They provide a grounding for perception but also undermine that very grounding. They can potentially function in a self-correcting fashion, but this is a matter of chance rather than an essential and inherent trait of their function. Senses, therefore, are not completely erroneous. They do, however, constitute a deficient, even distorted, version of reality, because some sensory information, which is essential for a more comprehensive perception, fails to register its importance. Either it is not available to the senses, or it is considered by the perceiving agent as secondary.

These observations naturally beg the question of why certain sensory data are not considered important by the perceiving agents at the moment of their perception. We saw that the narrator had on three occasions witnessed manifestations of Myris' Christianity, but ignored them as secondary and negligible information. His view of Myris had therefore been constructed by bringing together fragmented images and impressions of Myris' behaviour. From these impressions he had created an image for the whole. It seems that three interrelated factors played a decisive part in the underestimation or misjudgement of data, which, had it been considered, would perhaps have contributed to the construction of a different image of Myris.

The most significant was the context of their association. Myris' hedonistic side could only be properly manifested in the moments of their shared social outings, moments of fun and entertainment. In their time together, the members of their group had no reason to dispute the identity of Myris, since they would see him behaving like them. The context of the group's action encouraged them to pay primary attention to certain behavioural

patterns and, at the same time, to overlook what seemed secondary or alien to the conventionally accepted image of Myris' behaviour. So, even though, as acknowledged by the narrator, they knew from the beginning that Myris was Christian, they did not seriously consider this fact, because in their outings that aspect of their friend's identity remained inactive. The context of association therefore determined significantly the way they saw Myris. A second factor was the cultural background of the group. The constituent elements of its member perception, such as their general convictions, views on life, and their former experiences, stemmed from a specific cultural, religious and social context – that of paganism – which decisively influenced what they saw. They would “see” only what was meaningful within their world. Like the narrator, they were obviously “not very familiar” (p. 118) with the Christian religion. They, therefore, lacked the necessary background that would enable them to perceive such aspects of Myris' personality which did not subscribe to their view of the world. A third important consideration was the consensual view of the group. It is implicit in the poem that each member of the group had constructed a similar view of Myris on the basis of similar premises. The acceptance, or at least the lack of contestation, of this view formed a kind of silent consensus as to what they perceived as the real Myris.

Because of these factors, there was no reason for the narrator to question his view of Myris. When, however, he is confronted by the image of a completely different reality, he sees the same things that he had seen in the past in a new context and from a different perspective. Attending as he does the funeral preparations, he stands at the edge of a different world and concentrates his attention on it in a way he has never done before. Fleeting, he overhears the aged women expressing their perception of Myris, a perception so different from his own. He momentarily transcends his usual positioning and looks at himself from a distance. It is not accidental that this moment of doubt and self-awareness takes place when he has to deal with the gravity of loss and death; at a moment of crisis when he is more susceptible to challenge. It is, however, the overwhelming inter-subjective agreement of the Christian relatives that is the main cause of this crisis. Consensus, therefore, not only confirms a subject's view of reality but it also undermines it, problematises it, and for this reason, on its own, could be just as unreliable as the senses.

γ

Read from this perspective, the poem suggests that one's perception of reality is determined by the senses and experience, the cultural, religious and social context of one's origin, the social and private context of action and the consensus or inter-subjective agreement of the group one belongs to. On the basis of our senses, we perceive impressions

of reality and otherness. We form our view of the real by paying particular attention to some of these impressions, while ignoring others as negligible or of less importance. As a result, we come into contact with a segment of reality which we mistakenly assume to be the whole. The context in which we perceive reality together with our pre-existing knowledge and our views on life play a significant part in rating these impressions. We see what we have learned how to see, but also what we expect to see. Consequently, every perception of reality will be to some degree partial, incomplete and imperfect.

The individual realities find common points of contact, only when their parameters of perception coincide or share some similarities. What could be called or what is usually taken for "objective reality" from the perspective of a group of individuals, for example the group of Myris' friends, is in effect an inter-subjective construct of reality, which results from the consensus of the members of the group. This consensus may derive from the fact that we learn, within the context of a relative cohesive social group, to perceive the world in a similar fashion. In other words, if the members of the group with which we are associating see the world in a manner similar to ours, then we accept that the world is indeed as we see it, although it is possible that we all have a mistaken or inaccurate representation of it. We perceive reality in a specific fashion, but we are not in a position to claim with absolute certainty if reality is in fact the same as our perception of it. This is why subjective or inter-subjective perceptions of the real could be disputed or even altered by different perceptions of it. Conflicting representations, however, cannot always be resolved with reference to reality, because the experiential evidence that grounds each representation may have different meaning from within the perspective it is proposed.

There is no doubt that the poem problematises and destabilises ways of perception and communication that we usually take for granted. More importantly, it challenges the possibility of legitimising what one considers to be real and by extension, the uselessness of engaging in a discussion which would hope to achieve a solid knowledge of the essence of reality. If there is no ultimate reality to get to, any attempt to judge how close one's perception of the real is to what might be the real is an impossible task. This is why Myris' view of himself is not included in the poem. This is why the poem perpetuates the narrator's doubt by ending abruptly. And this is why it is constructed from the point of view of Myris' admirer. What therefore seems to drive Cavafy in this particular poem is not an aspiration to reveal the truth about Myris, nor to construct a more accurate account of perception. These observations, relativist as they sound, are in line with Cavafy's views on the issues of truth and representation as they are expressed in his *Ars Poetica*:

"[...] care should be taken not to lose from sight that a state of feeling is true and false, possible and impossible at the same time, or rather by turns. And the poet –

who, when he works the most philosophically, remains an artist – gives one side: which does not mean that he denies the obverse, or even – though perhaps this is stretching the point – that he wishes to imply that the side he treats is the truest, or the one oftener true. He merely describes a possible and an occurring state of feeling – sometimes very transient, sometimes of some duration.” (Cavafy, 1963: 40–42)

Consequently, Cavafy establishes binary oppositions not in order to eliminate or to assert the superiority of one of the two poles of comparison, but in order to demonstrate the impossibility of choosing one or the other. The dilemma which is so carefully built by the poem is thus a pseudo-dilemma. It exists only to offer a journey for self-reflection. *Myris* thus seems analogous to Cavafy’s earlier poem *Ithaka*, where the destination exists for the purpose of accumulating life-long wisdom and experience:

Η Ιθάκη σ’ έδωσε τ’ ωραίο ταξίδι.
Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θάβγαίνεις στον δρόμο.
Άλλα δεν έχει να σε δώσει πια.

Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δεν σε γέλασε.
Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
ήδη θα το κατάλαβες η Ιθάκες τι σημαίνουν. (p. 53)

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have discovered by then what these Ithakas mean. (p. 29–30)

From this perspective, the critical approaches which are caught up in the problematic of the dilemma, justified as they might be by the ploys of the Cavafian discourse, even when they suggest that the choice is up to the reader, seem to miss the point.

But where does this problematic leave us? And where does it leave Cavafy? Does he believe that reality in fact escapes from us because of the imperfect means we use to perceive it? Are we trapped in a subjective reality and by extension incapable of perceiving the wholeness of reality? His response is to create a textual reality which engrafts his own problematic on the story of the poem and has as its theme these questions. In so doing, he

questions the processes with which we come into contact with the outside world in order to understand the limits of these processes. A number of propositions which can be deduced from the poem such as: appearance does not always coincide with reality, our world is not the world, our view of the other is not the other, to name just a few, do not constitute answers in the normal sense of the word. Rather, they highlight the complexity of the question. Because the poem focuses on the the question rather than attempting to offer an answer, it leaves us with an open-ended didacticism as elusive in its totality as the totality of Myris' identity. The more you ponder these questions, the more you can say about the poem. By resisting pinpointing Myris, it resists thus the permanence of a (fixed) meaning of reality and otherness, and consequently the permanency of its own meaning. The meaning of reality, "otherness", and by extension, the meaning of the poem itself, will remain wanting, as does our perception of the other, even when we think we know the other enough to fall in love with it. Meaning, from the point of view of the poem, seems to be lost in the lacunae of perception, in the difference of perceptions, or even in the various perceptions of difference.

It is not a coincidence that this type of knowledge is derived from the divided world of Christians and pagans; a world with opposing or conflicting world-views, which is analogous to the multi-ethnic society of Cavafy's Alexandria and *mutatis mutandis* to the modern fragmented society in general. Because its society is cut into smaller relatively autonomous spheres with their own functional rules, it lacks a generally accepted and shared system of references. As a result, it offers not only different experiences to different individuals, but it also calls on the individual to function differently in different spheres of social and private life, even to use in these spheres values which are drawn from conflicting contexts. It is a world uncertain of its values, which encourages subjectivism and scepticism and is thus inherently subversive of the taken-for-granted reality of more traditional societies. It offers the possibility of experiencing otherness, and for this reason it negates the experience of wholeness. Otherness implies movement to different locations of viewing. The individual is able to see reality from a various points of view and, therefore, to develop an understanding and knowledge which is different to the "static" point of view of a more traditional society with a commonly shared system of knowledge. One has perhaps won a more comprehensive knowledge, but has lost the certainty offered by the illusion of truth. As a consequence, the individual will have access to aspects and versions of reality and for this reason will know it only in fragments and never in its entirety.⁸

From this perspective the poem does not simply thematise perception, but the problem of poetic perception and representation. It may be considered a self-referential poem,⁹ a poem about poetics, which describes the angst of the subject of writing in his failure to grasp the wholeness of reality. "The terrible news" (p. 118) is not simply that

Myris is dead, but that a uniform and commonly shared symbolic language with which individual subjects could perceive and represent reality and also communicate with certainty about the content of their discourse and actions has disappeared from Cavafy's contemporary world. Myris is perhaps this wholeness that is irretrievably lost. Cavafy, as a poet, seems to experience it as a personal loss. The realisation of this loss unavoidably means that the poet no longer has the option of recovering it. This is why he makes Myris' friend leave. The poet–narrator finally chooses to maintain his own version of Myris, his own version of reality, even if this has been mortally contaminated by the venom of doubt. To hold Myris in his memory with the blindness of love or as he has portrayed him with his art: “ωραίο και συναισθηματικό” (p. 98) [good-looking and sensitive], “ιδεώδη” [ideal] with “μιαν ονειρώδη συμπαθητική εμορφιά” (p. 98) [a dreamy, appealing beauty] (p. 58), “να χαίρεται, και να γελα, και ν’ απαγγέλει στίχους / με την τελεία του αίσθησι του ελληνικού ρυθμού” (p. 178) [enjoying himself, laughing, and reciting verses / with his perfect feel for Greek rhythm] (p. 118).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Angelatos (2000)

Δ. Αγγελάτος, «Μύρης: Αλεξάνδρεια του 300 μ.Χ.», ερμηνευτική πρόταση για την (καβαφική) διπλότητα του Έρωτα”, στο Μ. Πιερής (επιμ.), *Η Ποίηση του Κράματος*, Ηράκλειο: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης, 2000

Cavafy (1963)

Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Ανέκδοτα Πεζά Κείμενα*, εισ. και μετ. Μ. Περίδη: Αθήνα, εκδ. οίκος Φέξη, 1963

Cavafy (1975)

C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, (edited by G. Savidis, translated by E. Keeley & P. Sherrard), London: The Hogarth Press, 1975.

Cavafy (1990)

Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Άπαντα Ποιητικά*, Αθήνα: Ύψιλον, 1990

Ilinskaya (1983)

Σ. Ιλίνσκαγια. *Κ.Π. Καβάφης. Οι Δρόμοι προς τον Ρεαλισμό στην Ποίηση του 20ου Αιώνα*, Αθήνα: Κέδρος, 1983.

Keeley (1977)

E. Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria. Study of Myth in Progress*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1977

Pieris (1983)

Μ. Πιερής, «Το «μέσα» και το «Έξω» στην Ποίηση του Καβάφη», *Χάρτης* 5–6, Απρίλιος 1983, σσ. 679–694.

Robinson (1988)

C. Robinson, *C.P. Cavafy*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1988

Sareyiannis, (1973)

I. A. Σαρεγιάννης, *Σχόλια στον Καβάφη*, Αθήνα: Ίκαρος, 1973

Savvidis, (1985)

Γ.Π. Σαββίδης, *Μικρά Καβαφικά Α*, Αθήνα: Ερμής, 1985

Rozanis (1979)

Στ. Ροζάνης, *Μεταμορφώσεις*, Αθήνα: Δωδώνη, 1979

Xenopoulos (1963)

Γρ. Ξενόπουλος, «Ένας Ποιητής», *Νέα Εστία*, 872, 1 Νοεμβρίου 1963, σσ. 1443–1449

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Alfred Vincent, Vrasidas Karalis and Patricia Aliferis for their useful comments and suggestions.
- 2 I am referring to the well-known article by G. Xenopoulos entitled “A Poet”, published in 1903 in *Panathinaia*, republished in Xenopoulos, 1963: 1443–1449.
- 3 I have used the translation of E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, Cavafy: 1975 and the original text from Cavafy, 1990.
- 4 The major interpretations concern the essence of Myris’ identity and the level of communication in a dichotomised world.
- 5 Despite Robinson’s claim, the relationship between the narrator and Myris remains ambiguous. The evident erotic attraction of the narrator to Myris, as indicated by the expression “τον νέον που λάτρευα παράφορα” (p. 178) [the young man I’d worshipped so passionately] (p. 118), falls short of a reciprocal attraction or a love affair.
- 6 In a similar fashion, E. Keeley believes that “The conflict becomes, in the concluding stanza, a struggle between the influence of Christian ritual performed by attendant priests “praying loudly / for the young man’s soul” and the influence of that lost passionate life the two lovers had shared – a struggle, if you will, between Christian mystery and worldly memory. [...] The preservation through remembrance of that lost passionate life in its purity, untouched by doubt or alien influence, seems to be the ultimate act of faith for an Alexandrian hedonist of the Cavafian persuasion.” Keeley, 1977: 137–138.
- 7 For further attempts to overcome the structural polarities of the poem, see also Ilinskayia, 1983: 269, Rozanis, 1979: 139–160 and Angelatos, 2000: 95–102.
- 8 To stretch the point even further, let’s assume that the narrator could have access to all possible manifestations of Myris’ character in both his personal and social life and that he was participating, like Myris, in both the Christian and pagan world. Even in this case, it is quite unlikely that he would have developed a holistic view of Myris. The narrator would not, for example, know with certainty whether Myris’ intentions or thoughts corresponded to his actions.
- 9 G.P. Savvidis lists the poem in his Cavafian catalogue of poems about poetics with no commentary. (Savvidis, 1985: 310)