

Cavafy's Debt

There is a peculiar relation between the words “Cavafy” and “debt.” On the one hand, there are the obvious and voluminous references to what the world of poetry generally (and certain poets specifically) owe to Cavafy: from practically the entire modern Greek poetic tradition, from Karyotakis onward, to the broader sphere of poetry and literature worldwide, from Forster and Auden to Brodsky and Coetzee. The poetic debt owed to Cavafy has become something of a literary topos, even if, curiously, this has not been adequately addressed in the newfangled institution of the “world literature” canon, which has not managed to escape modern literature’s nod to the hegemony of the novel. On the other hand, this literary topos should be contrasted with the fairly common ruminations (even if not quite as widespread) as to how Cavafy’s poetry is indebted to no one, to no other poet or tradition that preceded him or is concurrent with his work. Of course, such judgments, on both sides, are how literary critics pay their dues (and occasionally even their debts), so they cannot serve as departure points for a substantial engagement with Cavafy’s poetics and the world that enabled it or the worlds that continue to activate it – for no poetics exists outside of a history (or histories) of some kind. It’s easy to say that Cavafy was unique; there are grounds for making such an argument, but I don’t know what ground there is for arguing how Cavafy’s uniqueness is unlike any other poetic uniqueness.

I mention all this in order to let it go. If I mean to address any notion of poetic indebtedness at all, this will have to respect an essential aspect of poetry: that it defies calculation. Nothing in the meaning of poetry can be counted (we’re not talking prosody), which is why it is so difficult to determine what is it about poetry that counts as value that defies all measure. In speaking about poetic indebtedness, therefore, I should clarify that I hardly care to talk about poetic influence – a category of criticism that anyway I abhor. But I will address intersections and conjunctures, or more precisely encounters. As I argued recently, the supreme responsibility of literary criticism is to stage encounters, the requisite theatricality of which is most apt to convey the historical exigencies that lean on any manifestation of *poiēsis* in the natural sphere of *human-being*. As the radical creation of form, *poiēsis* is always transformative of the field in which it occurs, and in this sense, performative of the terms of engagement within that field, for no field in history is ever inert or given intact, but rather dynamic – a force-field of space and time, of movement and action, whereby things-as-they-are are altered.

So, rather than speaking of poetic ownership and literary propriety (and therefore, influence), the terrain of Cavafy's debt pertains more to how this poetic event encounters other poetic events in time and across languages, orientations, and geo-cultural spaces. Hence the rather elementary, but ever more profound than it always seems to be, problem of translation. Even if we were to address the issue of Cavafy's debt in the most traditional terms - as simply a matter of general influence on poetry and poetics - we cannot leave the matter of Cavafy's translations uncommented and unproblematized. In the English language alone, the abundance of translations is uncanny (more than fifty different translators in less than one hundred years), and yet very few - and I mean poems, not translators - are adequate to the Greek originals. This is not a matter of opinion. It seems to have been a problem since Cavafy's own ruminations on the translation of his work, as evidenced in his various responses or corrective advice given to his earliest translators, starting with his brother John, and it certainly seems to have preoccupied the full gamut of translators and literati who came into contact with his poetry since E.M. Forster. The crux of the matter points to a quandary: A poet from a minor language, complicated even more by being canonically minor in relation to this language in his lifetime, figures as one of the greatest poets in the entire history of poetry solely (and, of course, necessarily) on the basis of translation, which is nonetheless inadequate.

I am not making some fashionable point about the intrinsic impossibility of translation here - at the very least, because the Cavafy event would not exist without translation. The poet would have vanished along with the rest of colonial-cosmopolitan Alexandrian traces in the imperialist-turned-nationalist sphere of the Eastern Mediterranean in the 20th century, as Edward Said, a genuine Cavafy fan if there ever was one, inimitably documents in his memoir *Out of Place* (1999). Rather, I am staking an argument on something altogether specific: Cavafy's poetry is virtually untranslatable, and this goes beyond the simple axiom that, in the last instance, all poetry is untranslatable. To begin with, the defense of this claim cannot be relegated to the specific nature of the language. In other words, it's not a problem of not knowing Greek, as Virginia Woolf put it, although the resonance of her thought, despite the otherness of the occasion, should remain for us an object of close listening. That is to say, we would have to take very seriously what it means *not* to know Greek (or whatever) in the conventional sense, what it means to inhabit the far side of language, where language as reliable means to knowledge fails and another horizon of knowing opens up. Surely, Cavafy's poetic use of the Greek language is idiosyncratically complex, juxtaposing colloquialisms with archaisms, obsolete phrasings or mere linguistic inventions, and there is no doubt that rendering the multiple registers of Greek in his poetry (historically created but also made idiomatic by his own voice) fails at the point of transfer to another language with its own

historical registers and trajectories. But I am arguing that this failure is not a matter of lack of linguistic expertise; it's not a matter of language in the narrowest sense of the knowledge it takes for one to engage in translation. This is a failure about *poetic* language, which is to say – and I am putting it mildly – of language beyond language, of language that *makes* language, of language that makes an otherwise spoken language *be differently* and thus renders it unrecognizable. This making be, this process of giving language form (*poiein*), has always been for me less a matter of semantic deployment of words, even if in complex and oblique (poetic) fashion, and more a matter of rhythm – which is not, incidentally, to be restricted to metrics or rules of prosody – of rhythm in the simple sense that language always bears a particular sonority (so as not to say outright, musicality), a fact that poetry, as an archaic performative art, has always incorporated at its core, even when it claims to be entirely visual.

This is to say that even this specific argument about translation ‘failure’ at the level of poetic language cannot be exhausted in the usual arguments about poetic difficulty. Cavafy’s poetic language is hardly characterized by poetic obscurity. In other words, he does not present the translatability problems of Mallarmé, Rilke or Paul Celan (to stick with the dominant European languages). If Cavafy is virtually untranslatable, it is rather because the rhythm of his language has rarely been rendered successfully in another. His poetic fame (and influence) is based on his ideas, or perhaps the manner of his ideas. I mean this broadly to include not just his expressed ideas, but also his worldview of sensations and temporalities, his style of irony based on characterization, and in the contemporary world, his images of erotic being. Yet, for a reader of Greek, what makes Cavafy inimitable is an unmistakably idiomatic rhythm of words that are nonetheless ordinary, recognizable in verse as the mark of a historical world, even if not exactly in the way the national language speaks. Occasionally, non-Greek readers speak of tone. In his introduction to Rae Dalven’s translations of Cavafy, W.H. Auden attempts to explain how he came under the Alexandrine’s influence – remember, this is not my interest here – by invoking the transference of “a certain tone of voice, a personal speech” which, in conclusion, more conventionally he calls simply “sensibility.”¹ But Auden withholds further examination of the musical underpinnings of tone, ultimately flattening the very point of his argument by invoking the inimitable in conventionally abstract terms: “I have read translations of Cavafy made by different hands, but every one of them was immediately recognizable as a poem by Cavafy; nobody else could have written it” (viii). In the end Auden argues that what makes Cavafy recognizable in translation is the content – perhaps a specific approach to the content, as I have already

¹ W.H. Auden, “Introduction” to *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven (New York: Harvest, 1961), vii-xv.

mentioned, a manner – and by underlining Cavafy’s lack of preference for simile and metaphor, Auden thus corroborates the standard view of Cavafy as a prosaic poet.

In the Greek world of letters, this now conventional judgment about Cavafy’s prosaic poetry was initiated in the 1920s by Kostis Palamas, whose poetics is certainly incompatible with Cavafy’s, but it is George Seferis, in his classic 1946 essay on Cavafy and Eliot, who famously wonders how this poet of profound sensibility (and perhaps even sensuousness – *euaisthēsia*) could actually be so “dry” (*stegnos*), arguing finally that, as a poet “who thinks with the senses” (*skeptetai me tēn aisthēsē*), Cavafy is nonetheless “the most anti-poetic or a-poetic [poet] I know.”² Seferis’ complexities, or perhaps contortions, in relation to Cavafy make a topic of their own, but what has prevailed in the world of Greek letters is a broad critical repression of Seferis’ ambivalence in favor of this pronouncement, which has proved nearly impossible to overcome. Cavafy’s presumed anti-poeticity in Greek letters is often linked to an understanding that his poetic language is idiosyncratically culled from an array of quotidian idioms, which Forster, who may be said to initiate literary criticism on Cavafy as early as 1919, corroborates as an eyewitness. But, for Forster, this eclectic speech palette of the “Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe” is anything but prosaic:

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. Sometimes the sentence is finished in the street, sometimes the traffic murders it, sometimes it lasts into the flat. It deals with the tricky behavior of Emperor Alexius Comnenus in 1096, or with olives, their possibilities and price, or with the fortunes of friends, or George Eliot, or the dialects of the interior of Asia Minor. It is delivered with equal ease in Greek, English, or French. And despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the matured charity of its judgments, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the universe: it is the sentence of a poet.³

Barring the specific content for a moment, we would recognize here a description of the Proustian sentence (it is known that Cavafy was enthralled by Proust), even if in resplendent Levantine hue. But the Proustian sentence – this unprecedented gift to

² George Seferis, *Dokimes I* (Athens: Ikaros, 1984), 244-45.

³ E.M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharillon* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 91-92.

the French language and to literature as such – is inconceivable without the extraordinary skill of rhythm and the capacity to elevate (even if by stretching without ever breaking) grammatical and syntactical contours to the sensuous precision of a musical phrase. The splendorous pages devoted to the memory of a particular musical phrase (*une petite phrase*) by Monsieur Vinteuil (a character in the novel presumed to gloss Debussy, Fauré or Saint-Saëns) may be configured as an over-the-top demonstration of the novel’s entire writing strategy. We may be talking about a novelist’s language here, but Proust’s writing is what it is because it engages “the language of a poet,” a language that stands indeed “at a slight angle to the universe” – a characterization equally apt to the Proustian sensibility. Parenthetically, in closing this observation, I would argue that what enables Cavafy to possess this acrobatic plasticity in his spoken idiom is his profound knowledge of the multiple registers of the Greek language (and indeed of *katharevousa* specifically, with its capacity for baroque syntax), which in his hands was elevated to a singular art form. That Forster, in the essay quoted above, goes on to identify Cavafy with the demoticist literary movement is evidence of his lack of knowledge, which the poet, with his typical irony, politely indicates (by Forster’s own account).

Having said that, Forster is otherwise correct to recognize “the language of a poet” even in quotidian speech. His view was ignored, however, in the broader literary criticism of Cavafy.⁴ Indeed, this view of Cavafy as the prosaic ironist seems to have benefitted the poet’s international reputation, and little effort seems to have gone into questioning it, until the claim of Daniel Mendelsohn’s recent translations to render the tone and cadences of Cavafy’s poetry, which is the impetus of his landmark effort to translate the entire Cavafy poetic corpus, including repudiated, unpublished, and unfinished texts. Mendelsohn does approach Cavafy’s Greek as a language “whose internal cadences and natural music the poet exploited thoroughly. There is no question that Cavafy in Greek is poetry, and beautiful poetry at that: deeply, hauntingly rhythmical, sensually assonant when not actually rhyming.”⁵ That Mendelsohn only partially succeeds at the task of translating this recognition does not nullify the radical significance of his impetus, which goes against the grain of an iron-clad establishment of Cavafy’s image as a prosaic poet.

⁴ It is worth noting Arnold Toynbee’s letter to Forster in 1924: “I admire the way in which he makes his point by a series of flat colourless statements.” In the same letter, we may find the first judgment that separates Cavafy’s poems into the two groups that have become conventional, “erotic and historical”. See Peter Jeffreys ed. *The Forster-Cavafy Letters: Friends at a Slight Angle* (American University of Cairo Press, 2009), 72. Jeffreys also reminds us of Richard Clogg’s discovery that among the first candidates for the Lectureship in Modern Greek at King’s College, London, which became the Koraes Chair with first occupant being Toynbee, was C.P. Cavafy: “A Greek man of letters ‘de l’école d’Alexandrie... qui est un esprit remarquable, un Monsieur Cavafis’.” (quoted in Jeffreys, 26n).

⁵ Daniel Mendelsohn, “Introduction” to *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2009), xviii.

However, the first to make this breakthrough, and without announcement but the sheer disruptiveness of poetic praxis, is James Merrill, who published only four translations of Cavafy's poems but whose encounter with Cavafy was profound in ways that elucidate the entire range of my concerns here: not just the matter of Cavafy's idiosyncratic rhythm, but those intangible aspects of the Greek language that bear a particular Greek sensibility – I would say, to raise the stakes, a particular *lyric* Greek sensibility in the post-Civil War years – which marks, in a substantial sense, Merrill's own poetics. This is the key encounter I want to stage, and here I can do so only partially. But let me return for a moment to Cavafy and to another signifying range of "Cavafy's debt."

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I quote here another one of Forster's well known reminiscences of Cavafy at a much later phase, in 1951:

Half humorously, half seriously, he once compared the Greeks to the English. The two peoples are alike, he argued: quick-witted, resourceful, adventurous. "But there is one unfortunate difference among us, one little difference. We Greeks have lost our capital – and the results are what you see. Pray, my dear Forster, oh pray, that you never lose your capital." That was in 1918. British insolvency seemed impossible then. In 1951, when all things are possible, his words make one think – words of a very wise, very civilized man, words of a poet who has caught hold of something that cannot be taken away from him by bankruptcy, or even by death.⁶

I reproduce the passage in full because it has led to various interpretations and perhaps misreadings. An interesting evocation of it occurs in the concluding paragraph of Giorgio Agamben's *Means without End* (1995):

E.M Forster relates how during one of his conversations with C.P. Cavafy in Alexandria, the poet told him: "You English cannot understand us: we Greeks went bankrupt a long time ago." I believe that one of the few things that can be declared with certainty is that, since then, all the peoples of Europe (and perhaps all the peoples of the Earth) have gone bankrupt... Every people has had its particular way of going bankrupt, and certainly it does make a

⁶ E.M. Forster, "The Complete Poems of C.P. Cavafy" in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1951), 237.

difference that for the Germans it meant Hitler and Auschwitz, for the Spanish it meant a civil war, for the French it meant Vichy, for other people instead it meant the quiet and atrocious 1950s, and for the Serbs it meant the rapes of Omarska; in the end, what is crucial for us is only the new task that such a failure has bequeathed us. Perhaps it is not even accurate to define it as a task, because there is no longer a people to undertake it. As the Alexandrian poet might say today with the smile: “Now at last, we can understand one another, because you too have gone bankrupt.”⁷

It's not unusual for Agamben to think on the basis of misquotation or mistranslation, although here one wonders about the ease with which a Forster quotation in English can be so radically changed. Certainly, how Agamben quotes Cavafy in the language of Forster not only diverges from the source text but actually inverts the original point. Forster's Cavafy begins with an equation of Greek and English sensibility, which is then meant to be disrupted by the historical condition of “the loss of capital.” Agamben's Cavafy – though in (mis)quotation of Forster's language – begins with a divergence, a lack of understanding, between Greek and English sensibility, which is to be overcome by the common experience of bankruptcy. Agamben's point may be determined by Forster's own remark about British post-WW2 insolvency, which he then takes as a departure point for a narrative of the postwar years all the way to the present (1995) as a procession of an ultimately common fate of sovereign insolvency by different means. To say that “Every people has had its particular way of going bankrupt” sounds a bit like saying everyone has a particular way of using language, but we all have language all the same. It is a relativist phrase, a phrase of equivalence at the very moment of articulating difference.

Interesting as it may be to argue that the common experience of sovereign insolvency forges an understanding between peoples who have gone bankrupt and are thereby (similarly or commonly) disenfranchised, Agamben's remark makes a rather flaccid political point. What may be the political horizon of peoples whose common link is the loss of their sovereignty isn't really articulated here, other than the rather bleak insinuation that there may not be any such people left to undertake the task of overcoming their loss of sovereignty. Forster, on the other hand, for all his colonial sensibility, focuses his thinking, not on the British and their postwar economic troubles, but on the Greek poet.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 142.

It is important to note here that Cavafy's remark, as quoted by Forster, inheres an ambiguity on the very basis of language, which Forster disregards.⁸ "Capital" is word with two different meanings, and it is altogether possible that Cavafy's lament of Greeks having lost their capital refers, just as well, to the loss of Constantinople, the capital of Hellenism, which would then insinuate a warning about the British Empire's possible demise-to-come. According to Forster, the conversation took place in 1918. This places it four years before the Asia Minor catastrophe (1922), which was the nail in the coffin of the historical expanse of Mediterranean Hellenism that Cavafy exemplified, an ironic conjuncture, for Cavafy's poetry is utterly alien to anything prophetic; rather, it means to read historical reality with utmost precision. But this date is also well within range of Greece's sovereign bankruptcy of 1893, which ended the first aspirations for Greek industrial modernization. To this national economic disaster we could add the personal condition of the Cavafy family bankruptcy in the late 1880s, and we cannot ignore Cavafy's well-honed understanding of the permutations of speculative capital, as he was a frequent (and not altogether unsuccessful) trader in speculative commodities in Alexandria's stock market, which he favored as often as he did various joints of ill repute. Forster was well aware of Cavafy's ease with economics as a topic of conversation, so his conclusion should not be so easily dismissed. Whichever way, even if we judge that Forster errs in the direction of one interpretation of "capital" over another, he still holds on, even if unwittingly, to the decisive condition of poetic ambiguity: "words of a poet who has caught hold of something that cannot be taken away from him by bankruptcy, or even by death." Poetic language defies the order of calculation. Which is to say, and for Cavafy's poetry all the more, that even if the discourse of economics is presumed to be an interesting angle of literary analysis, it must be engaged in an altogether other language.

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The word in Greek for "debt" - *χρέος* - occurs only twice in Cavafy's poetry. One of these occasions is famous and it means not debt at all, but rather the other significance of the term in Greek: duty, obligation. It marks the beginning of the poem "Thermopylae" (1901-03): Τιμή σ' εκείνους όπου στην ζωή των/ώρισαν και φυλάγουν Θερμοπύλες./Ποτέ από το χρέος μη κινούντες. ["Honor to those who in their lives/Determined and guard a Thermopylae/Never moving away from duty"]. The other occasion is from a prose poem, "Το Σύνταγμα της ηδονής" ("The Regiment of Pleasure"), written in 1877 and kept hidden: "Don't believe you're bound to any obligation [*υποχρέωσις*]. Your duty [*χρέος*] is to give in, to always give

⁸ Maria Margaronis, in her review of Mendelsohn's translations, mentions this often discussed ambiguity: "Mixing History and Desire: the Poetry of C.P. Cavafy" in *The Nation*, August 3, 2009.

in to your Desires, which are the most perfect creatures of perfect gods. Your duty is to enlist as loyal soldier, with simplicity of heart, when the Regiment of Pleasure passes by with music and banners.” Not a particularly good poem, not because of its prose, but rather because of its unpoetic disclosure of the erotic condition that otherwise permeates some of the best Cavafy poems. Its frankness explains why it was hidden, but its directness may have served as a sort of personal manifesto for the poet, which is why he may have chosen to preserve it even if concealed. Panagiotis Roilos makes an interesting, if not fully thought through, observation that these early hidden prose poems, which he calls sketches of “extravagant” or “inflated lyricism,” are in a sense inversely analogous to the lyrically reticent erotic verses that make up much of the best of the published oeuvre.⁹ Perhaps to call this poem lyrical at all is an abusive invocation of the category of lyric, conventionally speaking, not so much because it is so obviously prosaic, but because it is indeed so extravagantly transparent that it doesn’t even work as allegory, strictly speaking.

In any case, in the invocation of *χρέος* vs. *υποχρέωσις*, we see here, if anything, the opposite of indebtedness – duty opposes obligation in the very same way that an ethical decision opposes a moral command: “All moral laws – badly understood, badly implemented – are nothing and cannot even stand for a moment when the Regiment of Pleasure passes by with music and banners.” This is because hedonistic pleasure, in this poem, is not some sort of decadent pastime, bought or sold illicitly and lived parasitically, but rather an overt and conscious responsibility to the self, a chosen way of life that cannot be gained in the market of exchange, where values are measured by external means, by what society rewards or denigrates. *Hedonē*, the poet tells us, is like life itself, inherited – and, in that sense, inherent – in one’s very being. It’s important, however, that we don’t see this notion of inheritance as a mark of privilege, as entitlement, in the abusive way the term tends to be used nowadays. *Klēronomia*, the common Greek word for inheritance, is best understood here in its literal composition: *klēros* being the accidental element of life, one’s lot in life in the most rigorous sense, which at once bears a law (*nomos*), yet not as transcendental command but as whatever is specifically imparted into one’s being according to *nemein* – the operative verb of *nomos*, which means partitioning, distributing, and indeed allotting. So, although this poem does not deserve the sort of attention most of Cavafy’s poems do – for, as I said, it is unpoetically transparent – it serves as a clear-cut demonstration of Cavafy’s repudiation of the language of debt and indebtedness, marketable valuation and exchange, as a personally didactic manifesto for all of the poet’s subsequent evocations of a life stance in his poetry, not just erotic but indeed, literally, political.

⁹ Panagiotis Roilos, *C.P. Cavafy: The Economics of Metonymy* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 42-44.

A couple of other poems from this era, which Cavafy either kept hidden or repudiated and removed from subsequent circulation, lay out more sharply and with more subtle poetic skill this life stance.

The first is intriguingly titled “The Bank of the Future” (1897):

To make my difficult life secure
on the Bank of the Future, I shall
issue but a handful of draft notes.

I doubt it possesses many assets
and on the first crisis, I’ve come to fear
its payments will suddenly altogether cease.

If economics is the blatant metaphoric language of this poem, its impetus is self-reflexively poetic with a kind of clarity that may be said to go beyond the simple but lithe rhyme: the value of the poet’s life is banked entirely on the basis of poetry; there is no other resource. This life is entirely precarious. It does not lend itself well to the security of time, to investment in some future fruition. It is a difficult life, with doubtful assets, and therefore vulnerable to the minutest crisis. We understand the double entendre of the word *krisis* in Greek – all poetry is always subject to crisis, to judgment and critique, and whether it can yield its wealth or wither is not something one can safely bet on, for, I repeat, poetry – and the poetic life – remains incalculable.

The second poem, written just a month later (February 1897), is one of my favorites of Cavafy’s poetics manifestos. It elucidates precisely this incalculability of poetry and is appropriately titled “Addition”:

If I have good fortune or misfortune I don’t examine.
Except one thing joyfully I always mind –
that in the grand addition (addition I detest)
which bears myriad numbers, I do not count
as one of their many units. In the sum total,
I’m not a number. And this joy is just enough for me.

With its peculiar verse breaks, which strain but do not quite hold on to the 15-syllable line, and an uncommon (in Greek) rhyming scheme (a-a-b-c-b-c), the very structure of the poem doesn’t quite add up. No doubt, an explicit poetic sensibility that resists the violence of depersonalizing calculation or quantification grants this

poem a strong poetic voice, but although the lyric “I” registers an unabashed presence, the poem rejects individualist achievement as much as it rejects inclusion in some impersonal plurality – any kind of aggregate collective: society, nation, culture, group of poets, anthology, literary marketplace, etc. Of course, the most conventional thing to say about Cavafy is that he performs a poetry that refuses numeration and calculation, which is why he so persistently kept its publication outside the marketplace. In the end, the poet speaks of the sufficient pleasure of remaining within one’s own terms, of escaping the heteronomy of being counted and discounted. I would go so far as to say that this includes the erotic world of men, if it were to be seen as a collective. The illicit homoeroticism in Cavafy’s poems is always singular and itinerant; it belongs to the moment as moment – as real eroticism must, after all. It has only become an addition of moments – an enumeration, a collective – in the anthologies of editors and publishers, translators and critics.

But it is important, nonetheless, that in this rejection of calculation, we do not get beguiled by romantic convention and read in this poetic stance some sort of heroic defiance – of bourgeois society, moral propriety, or what have you. With this poem specifically – which, let us recall, Cavafy withdrew from circulation in his folios even though it had been published – we have the rare advantage of the poet’s own critical observations regarding its translation into English by his brother John. Without least hedging and rather sternly, Cavafy corrects John’s option to translate the sentiment of the first verse in terms of not having “the smallest care”: “Once and for all this ‘smallest care’ must be removed. It is something I never said in my poem, I never had the intention to say, and I believe I shall never write. It is a dangerous *statement* [in English]... and a *profession* [in English] that in no way I would want to commit. What I wrote is ‘I do not examine whether I am happy or unhappy’... *I do not examine*, not *I do not care*.”¹⁰ There is, in other words, a perfectly self-aware coolness of mind that refuses to underline an affective investment in the One at the same time that it refuses to accept the privilege of the Many. It seeks to discredit the quantification of life altogether, and it does so regardless of the pressure of any personal care, of the pressures of the Ego upon one’s desire, pressures which in an epistolary moment of kinship the poet acknowledges. It is perhaps impossible not to care whether you are counted or discounted in life, but it’s important nonetheless to learn to live with the sufficient joy of your decision to excise yourself from this numbers game. This is the succinct poetics of this poem.

For this reason, Cavafy’s ironic and defiant play with the language of economics in his poetry cannot be reduced to a metaphoric indication of an illicit and

¹⁰ C.P. Cavafy, *Peza [Prose Works]*, (Athens: Fexis, 1963), 239.

unproductive life, whether erotically or otherwise. This is a great blind spot of Roilos' otherwise painstaking analysis of "the economics of metonymy" in Cavafy. His attempt to link the poetic invocation of economics in Cavafian verse to an economics of desire – essentially homoeroticism and unproductive sexuality, but also a generally unproductive life stance of an Alexandrian aristocratic class in decline – suffers from the facility of an obvious semantic association. Roilos practices a literary criticism that seeks what he calls Cavafy's "anti-economic aestheticism" or "non-productive existence" in poems that treat this as a theme. But because this economics of desire cannot be calculated or measured, its literary analysis cannot be conducted along the lines of a metonymy of economic signs. Cavafy's powerful poetic eroticism cannot be reduced to a literary critical account of eros denied, eros hidden, eros imagined, eros illicitly bought and sold in real life, whereby a personal situation is merely sublimated into art, but rather as eros lyrically fictionalized, in histories of the past and of the present and in *topoi* imagined even when claimed to be remembered, whereby the poetic art itself suffices as life. If there is something to learn from Cavafy's correction of his brother's translation is just that: the decision to disregard personal sentiment and put forward an ironic performative persona that thinks entirely within the terms of the poem alone, even in a poem of personal sentiment enacting a poetics. "To *sound* personal is the point" says James Merrill somewhere, not to *be* personal in one's poems. From Cavafy's scant private notes and hidden poems, we see how much of a struggle this was for the poet – how could it not be? It isn't that he doesn't care; it is that he chooses not to examine – but if there is a great lesson from these traces it is not to read in his poems for the language of evidence: *Πάω άδικα, αισθητικώς. Και θα μείνω αντικείμενον εικασίας· και θα με καταλαμβάνουν το πληρέστερον, απ' τα όσα αρνήθηκα.* "I am dealt an aesthetic injustice. And I will remain an object of speculation. And I will be understood more from what I have refused."¹¹ The poet Cavafy is not indebted to his own life.

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Already by 1975 when James Merrill first wrote about Cavafy, reviewing the Robert Liddell biography and the Keeley-Sherrard translations for *The New York Review of Books*, we see not only how seriously he had encountered the problem of translating Cavafy's rhythms but how profoundly he knew and had thought about Cavafy's poetry as a whole. By the mid-1970s Merrill's personal experience of Greece and the Greek language was already twenty years old and had yielded some exceptional

¹¹ (<http://www.kavafis.gr/archive/texts/content.asp?id=13>) Isn't this the case with another classic manifesto of poetics, the famous poem "Che fece... il gran rifiuto"? – "The one who refuses does not repent. If asked again/ he would still say No. But this great No –/ the right No – wears him down his whole life." Refusal is a decision against the interests of a productive future, but more than that a decision that underwrites a life stance.

poetry, either directly referencing or inspired by Greek worldliness, and with explicit references to Cavafian poetics (Merrill has written a number of important poems under the Cavafian motif “Days of...”). Having made a life there seems to have been, by his own account, linked to a specific mode of being in which the Greek language, verbal and gestural, was elemental. The fact that Merrill himself, in Stephen Yenser’s words, “never claimed fluency, saying always that he had no language for ‘abstractions’”¹² – which the author proceeds then to dispute as an eyewitness – should best be taken as a gesture of good measure, perhaps precisely because of the poet’s love for and immersion in the maelstrom of Greek expression, whose simplest or most quotidian aspects he found to be poetic through and through precisely in their resistance to abstraction. In the memoir accounting for his youthful years living in Europe, Merrill describes first entering a post-Civil War Athens, as “dark, cheaply lighted, [and] full of language... Everyone, from teenaged surrealist to white-haired bootblack, was engaged in dialogue, in fluent speech and vehement gesture. New ideas glowed with the lighting of a fresh cigarette. It hardly mattered that these ‘ideas’, far from originating with the speaker, were often little more than conventional responses picked up in a café or from an editorial. A conventional response so deftly internalized as to set eyes flashing and smoke pouring from lips wasn’t to be scorned: it answered to the kind of poem I hoped to write.”¹³

To Merrill’s poetic aspiration to internalize with passion the freely circulating atmosphere of itinerant life Cavafy was elemental from the outset (arguably since Merrill’s liaison with Kimon Friar at Amherst College in the 1940s), and it goes without saying that, in this relation, the language of Greek is key over and above any other factor. (To speak of the connection between Cavafy and Merrill in the context of ‘queer poetry’, for example, would be insulting all around.) Merrill’s immersion in Greek was profound enough for him to understand the semantic range enabled by the historical expanse that, for instance, made the verb *παιδεύω* to mean “to teach” in ancient Greek and “to torment” in modern Greek, as he observes characteristically in his essay on Cavafy, in order to go on to say: “These shifts [in language] are revealing, and their slightness reassures... The language survives the reversals of faith and empire, and sharpens the dull wits of the barbarian. The glory dwindles and persists.”¹⁴ Merrill understands how Cavafy benefits from the circuitous trajectory of a language through the ages because he envisions and actualizes its ultimate potential, not in order to glorify its indomitable ancestral persistence, nor its

¹² Stephen Yenser, “Old Salt, Old Wine and Questions of Travel” in *James Merrill in Greece*, (New York: Foundation of Hellenic Culture, 1996), 23.

¹³ James Merrill, *A Different Person* (New York; Knopf, 1993), 18.

¹⁴ James Merrill, “Marvelous Poet” *The New York Review of Books*, July 17, 1975.

civilizational pedigree, but in order to draw from it no more than just a dramatic frame for a cross-section of the present, fleeting and marginal as is the life of any person who happens, by accident, to speak this language in a rather inconsequential city whose magical name – Alexandria – has withstood the shenanigans of history.

From this essay on Cavafy, we get a sense that Merrill had applied his attention to the rhythms of Cavafy’s language with the skill of the sternest teacher and yet with the playful astonishment of one who has been touched by the same hand of poetry, an astonishment he celebrates. Merrill’s eventual translation of “Days of 1908” finds in this essay already a virtuosic reading on the basis of rhythm alone. One of Cavafy’s last written poems, “Days of 1908” is one of the lightest evocations of youthful eroticism without the least bit of nostalgia. That it happens to foreground the specific economics of a life in debt – the youth in question lives hand to mouth by petty gambling and small loans – is actually coincidental to our discussion here. In fact, this is mere thematics – the circumstantial clothing of a poetic vision that otherwise inspires and celebrates a lexical nudity. It isn’t merely that the poem celebrates the marvel (*thauma*) of a naked body at the sea shore one summer morning of 1908; it is that even the language of clothing itself carries an uncanny bareness of wording: “*η κανελιά ξεθωριασμένη φορεσιά*” is an extraordinary phrase. “A cinnamon-discolored suit” is how Merrill translates it – “faded cinnamon-colored suit” is Mendelsohn’s phrasing – but even he (Merrill) fails to render, not only the impeccable musicality of the phrase, but the precise resonance of the word *foresiá*, whose reference to any sort of specific piece of clothing is secondary beneath its signification of “dress” in the sense of “costume,” of a kind of theatrical full-body mask, not allegorically intended by any means, but just incidental to the staging, hopelessly quotidian and trivial in the light of this youth’s indigent daily life, but utterly astonishing in the resplendent bareness of the sun-and-sea-drenched body it envelops. The poeticity of “discolored cinnamon dress” is uncannily precise, much as it is at the same time inimitably inventive. No metonymy, no metaphor, no allegory, no symbolism. The poem moves through a simple story on bare rhythm alone – as Merrill says, from the opening masculine rhymes to the “unrhymed fluid feminine endings” of the concluding stanza, which guides the poem unclothed at the shore. “We breathe something of the unconstricted freshness here evoked” Merrill concludes.

* * * *

I cannot but recall here the concluding verse of Merrill’s poem “To my Greek” (*The Fire Screen*, 1969): “The barest word be what I say in you”. James Merrill was an extraordinarily skilled poet who, moreover, brought aspects of his personal life into

poetry in ways that totally shattered the specter of the confessional tradition over American poetry. “If the work of a poet is thought of as an excuse for his life, his life must be thought of as an alibi for his work. In this respect, the example of Merrill paradigmatically presents a model of poetry as ‘anti-confessional autobiography’” says the Greek poet Yiorgos Chouliaras in an assessment of what Merrill’s own account of “knowing Greek” in his poetry might signify.¹⁵ (I mean “knowing” again not in terms of knowing the language alone or language as such, but rather of inhabiting the far side of language where knowing as we know it becomes something else.) But life in Greece in Merrill’s poetry, in all its sometimes exhaustive detail, is not treated any more or any less significantly than any other aspect that the accident of one’s history brings along the way. Perhaps any poet with an acute sense of the poeticity of the accident would have been provoked, but only Merrill could have turned the historic event of the accidental blowing up of his childhood home in 1969 by members of the Weather Underground, who lived in the townhouse and were making bombs in the basement, into an instance of reflection on both the late-1960s American culture he inhabited at the time and an almost cinematic playback of the precious domestic world of an illustrious banker’s family in the 1920s, both worlds being rife with internal contention (“18 West 11th St.” in *Braving the Elements*, 1972). And perhaps only Merrill would have given a memoir of youthful travel to Europe (clearly motivated by a desire to escape American life) the title *A Different Person*, when we come to realize that the naming does not pertain to his desire to be or to celebrate being a different person, in whatever fashion, but rather to his mother’s agonizing efforts to correct his homosexual life by making him expressly a “different person” – difference here being entirely punitive and straight: “My mother’s efforts to make me into a different person had led her to open letters not addressed to her, to consult lawyers and doctors – behavior that appalled her even as she confessed it.”¹⁶

If we take seriously that Merrill is often identified by the quote “Life is fiction in disguise” we’d better assume the full epistemological burden of what “disguise” might mean in the way life is worked by language and made life otherwise. For,

¹⁵ Chouliaras goes on to conclude with a question that resonates with my concerns here: “Without Cavafy and Greece, James Merrill remains inconceivable. Should a Greece of culture also be inconceivable without James Merrill?” See “James Merrill’s ‘Greek’” in *James Merrill in Greece*, (New York: Foundation of Hellenic Culture, 1996), 29.

¹⁶ James Merrill, *A Different Person*, 96. Although certainly a memoir in the most precise sense, this astonishing text is also an opportunity for Merrill to reflect on the totality of his history and his poetry, which after all form an inextricable nexus, thinking backwards and forwards simultaneously, with profound immersion in the most intimate terrains of both consciousness and the unconscious (through a lucidly critical recollection of his psychoanalysis, which was concurrent to this period abroad), as well as a perspicacious understanding of both his personal (family-derived) sociality and his uninhibited encounter with the foreign (language, people, landscape), which is rendered with exemplary poetic precision. This is an all-around masterpiece of the genre.

Merrill's overt autobiographical fictionalization, always performed with life-affirming humor – even in his most sardonic irony, Merrill never gives in to negativity – and, I repeat, with extraordinary poetic skill, surrendered to the play of language in such rigorous fashion that it could be deemed austere if it weren't so persistently committed to celebrating the elemental vitality of self, other, and world all at once. So, the verse “The barest word be what I say in you” announces for the umpteenth time the pleasure of discovering the elements – or perhaps, braving the elements, as the title of one of his poetry collections has it – precisely in the gesture of imbuing the elemental poetic word into an other.

In the poem “After Greece” (from *Water Street*, 1962), the luminous elemental atmosphere Merrill found in Greece of old matter circulating between self, other, and world, which “answered to the kind of poem I hoped to write” – this poem certainly belongs to the visual and psychical landscape of *A Different Person* – is reiterated succinctly in what Yenser has aptly named an “imagist” opening:¹⁷

Light into the olive entered
And was oil. Rain made the huge pale stones
Shine from within. The moon turned his hair white
Who next stepped from between the columns,
Shielding his eyes. All through
The countryside were old ideas
found lying open to the elements.

The framework precipitates an encounter within the psychical world of the poet between his remembrance of travel to Greece and his homebound trajectory, which raises doubts and questions both as to whether there is indeed a home and whether the language of remembrance can indeed evade its tendency to abstraction. This self-doubt activates the precise want that only language can bring forth at the very moment that it shields it:

.....how I want
Essentials: salt, wine, olive, the light, the scream –
No! I have scarcely named you,
And look, in a flash you stand full-grown before me,
Row upon row, Essentials,
Dressed like your sister caryatids
Or tombstone angels jealous of their dead...

¹⁷ Stephen Yenser, *The Consuming Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 76. For the full analysis of the poem, see 75-79.

To name the essential is what a poem seeks if it can measure up to desiring the essential in fleeting life. The encounter with this quandary is intense – and sometimes as grotesque as “tombstone angels jealous of their dead.” So, the poem – Merrill writes, “the system” – “calls for spirits.” Spirit be what it will, in various and mysterious ways, but in the elemental world it is definitely a drink – a drink to bring forth the imbued memory of this old world and a melancholic wish in full cognizance of the impossible tension between the essential thing and its essential word: “May I survive its meanings, and my own.”

One of the motifs of Stephen Yenser’s incomparable analysis of the entirety of Merrill’s oeuvre is to demonstrate in this complex poetics that it is ultimately the awareness of linguistic texture that drives this poetry, in innumerable ways, where the minutest details of the poet’s life can be called upon to enact a number of poetic voices. Merrill is a difficult poet, no doubt – by his account, a difficulty owed “to the need to conceal my feelings and their objects”¹⁸ – but his striving for almost impossible concreteness makes his ‘difficulty’ entirely unlike Mallarmé’s or Valéry’s, or even Ponge’s, to think of a strain of French poets he knew impeccably, whose immersion in the object “language” nonetheless belied an ideational poetics. Yenser quotes from Merrill’s review of Ponge’s *The Voice of Things*, which is worth noting here: “No thoughts then, but in things? True enough, so long as the notorious phrase argues not for the suppression of thought but for its oneness with whatever in the world – pine woods, spider, cigarette – gave rise to it. Turn the phrase around, you arrive no less at truth: no things but in thoughts.”¹⁹ Merrill *thinks* with tireless persistence, in every single poem, on the *things* of language in such unabashedly personal way that we may speak of a continuous process of self-translation. Even in this quotation the translation of the notorious William Carlos Williams motto into the body of Francis Ponge and out into and through the body of James Merrill is characteristic of this process of language thinking through self-translation. (Obviously, it is imperative here to address Merrill’s signature poem “Lost in Translation” but this would have to occupy the space of the entire essay.)

Hence, a poem like “To my Greek,” which at an obvious level is addressed to, and thinking together of, his Greek lover and his love for the Greek language, wrestles with the bare capacity to speak like oneself at all, precisely as one who is in love or is speaking in a foreign language – how much alike they are, these two conditions!

¹⁸ James Merrill, *A Different Person*, 141

¹⁹ James Merrill, “Objects Lessons” in *The New York Review of Books*, November 30, 1972, quoted in Yenser, *The Consuming Myth*, 79.

Hair in eyes, head bent above the strummed
Lexicon, gets by heart about to fail
This or that novel mode of being together
Without conjunctions...
...the sibyl I turn to

When all else fails me, when you do -

The mother tongue!
Her least slip a mirror triptych glosses,
Her automation and my mind are one.
Ancient in fishscale silver blue,
What can she make of you? Her cocktail sweats

With reason: speech will rise from it,
Quite beyond your comprehension rise
Like of blood to a slapped face, stingingly apt

If unrepeatable, tones one forgets

Even as one is changed for life by them...

The bare capacity to speak in love or in the language of the other is preferable to the incapacity to speak to the other in one's mother tongue: "Having chosen the way of little knowledge/Trusted each to use the other." And while, of course, the poem is written in the mother tongue (English), the language it conveys - and uses across the difficulty of trust - is the very language of the other to which it is, after all, addressed: "To my Greek." Let us take seriously here the possessive pronoun, for it recurs, I believe, as a phantom shadow, in the luminous verse that ends the poem: "The barest word be what I say in you" - in you, my Greek, my Greek lover, my Greek tongue.²⁰ "A foreign language frees the speaker" says Merrill in his memoir. One might immediately ask: freedom in what sense? "Freedom to be oneself is all very well; the greater freedom is not to be oneself" answers Merrill.²¹ How Cavafyan indeed!

²⁰ An analysis of this poem, along with interesting ruminations about Merrill's connections to Greece and its language (including Cavafy specifically), can be found in Rachel Hadas' "From Stage Set to Heirloom: Greece in the Work of James Merrill" in her *Merrill, Cavafy, Poems and Dramas* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 31-68.

²¹ James Merrill, *A Different Person*, 128-129.

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I want to conclude this last episode with a self-translation of a poem few pages down from “To my Greek” in the same collection, aptly titled “Last Words”. It reiterates at the opening the optimum of the possessive first person pronoun – “My life” – as it should, for this poem (and this life) is addressed to the same “Greek” – the language, the lover. It ends analogously too: isn’t the part of the self that “looks into your light and lives to tell you so” also the one whose “barest word be what I say in you”?

But I will not presume at this point to do a critical reading of this beautiful little lyric gem. Instead, I will translate it into Greek, or rather, as I said, have it self-translated, as this is the very language that Merrill himself translated it in – rumor has it, in order that his lover could read it, but this autobiographical element cannot by now be excised from the language that makes the poem itself happen. Merrill’s Greek ‘last words’ liberate themselves from the original, as any genuine self-translation should. Probably drafted quickly – trying to decipher the manuscript gives rise to the diabolical idea that it may have even been drafted first in Greek (the fact of the matter is obviously not the issue): there are forgotten verses, which are added at the bottom margins of the page and brought back to the vicinity of the poem by a vague mark of insertion and not even at the right places. (I cannot but notice that they are the poem’s spatial and temporal markers – how apt!) But this quickness of the draft should not be used to account for what seem to be mistakes – *seem to be*, for, even if they are at a Greek reader’s first glance, they yield other dimensions if considered beyond the strict grammar. *Είμαι το πεθαίνοντασ σκυλί* as a rendering of “I am the dog that dies” – the proper Greek that immediately comes to mind is: *Είμαι το σκυλί που πεθαίνει* – can just as well be configured as an instance where Merrill is thinking in terms of ancient Greek syntax, where the participle is brought in the midst of the sentence as qualifier of both subject and object simultaneously. (I cannot help but read the literal translation of the English “I am the dying dog” but this is not the verse – could this have been first drafted in Greek?) The impropriety, if it is one, makes for a striking opening into the rhythm of the poem in Greek, to which – no surprise – Merrill is utterly attentive. So I have kept it, even if with a slight syntactical correction – its oddity remains. As I have tried to incorporate most of the poet’s choices, diverging only where words more appropriate to his poetic sensibility were called for, let us say, I have paid proper attention to Merrill’s Cavafisms.

ΤΕΛΕΥΤΑΙΑ ΛΟΓΙΑ

Ζωή μου, τα ανοιχτόχρωμα
Τα μάτια σου τα πράσινα
Με έχουν φωτίσει με χαρά
Τίποτε δεν υπάρχει που δεν ξέρω
Ή που δεν θα μάθω ξανά και ξανά.
Είναι νύχτα, μεσημέρι, και αυγή
Πεθαίνοντας είμαι το σκυλί
Στης Τροίας τον δρόμο τον βαθύ
Πριν χρόνια, αύριο το πρωί –
Ένα κομμάτι μου με πόνο σκοτεινιάζει
Γίνεται κάτι από μύγες δηκτικές
Στου παιδιού το κεφάλι που πάνω μου κλίνει
Κι ένα κομμάτι μου το φώς σου ατενίζει
Και ζεί να σου το πεί.