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The Memory Tree

**A Cavafian poem for Mohammed Abdelbar, circa 2005,
A fisherman from Damietta, Egypt in Mousata, Kefalonia**

**Black is the color of my love's hair
And black his sloe-shaped eyes
Black is his skin and black his moods
Laconic his replies**

**Black is the sea on which he sleeps
A boat his trundle bed
Nets neatly spooled his pillows
Dreams folded in his head**

**Black is the shade of the memory tree
On which I leaned to rest
To cool down from burning thoughts
A handkerchief to fan myself
With which to bid adieu
As his sail dipped beneath the waves
And disappeared from view**

**Black is the pen
With which I sketch
His reed-like body's stretch
As he cast the nets that bound me
And pulled me to his breast
And black the seas that separate ways
Eventually suggest**

**I placed an orchid by his picture
The photo seemed to laugh
As out of the orchid's petals
Voices whispered "black, black, black."**

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Pensé de Midi: Camus, Cavafy, and Chahine Meditations

Albert Camus, French-Algerian, Constantine Cavafy, Greco-Egyptian, and Youssef Chahine, Syrian-Greco-Egyptian, are linked in my mind in their outsider relationship to their native countries while simultaneously celebrating Mediterranean life as a type of quintessential ideal of cosmopolitanism. The mix of cultures that excite Cavafy and Chahine in Alexandria, or the various Algerian cities by the sea that Camus feels a kinship to, are Mediterranean cities that have survived their long history.

All three artists create meditations on history, as they attempt to wrest their personal history from the larger turbulent framework. The three, as well, despite significant critical acclaim, are characterized by a stubborn singularity and privacy of vision that infuriates some constituency or other. In the case of Cavafy and Chahine, the Alexandria they depict in their creative mixing of the city's long history, celebrates diversity over racial, religious, or sexual purity and promotes tolerance and freedom of expression. Secret lives become manifest, excitement made greater by transgression, a covert means of liberty in a repressive society. To create the myth of tolerance by which your work might be accepted and enjoyed in a society that is otherwise parochial is itself the best result an artist can achieve. It is a warp that opens up inner space allowing for the possibility that the viewer and the reader out of sheer longing will meet you half way.

Alexandria created the mindset for both poet and filmmaker. It is inconceivable that Cavafy would have been given such latitude in early twentieth century Athens and incredible that Chahine was able to thrive in mid to late twentieth and early twenty-first century Egypt given the rise of religious orthodoxy. In both instances, the forgotten history of the city Cavafy and Chahine recall makes it possible to find a fit for their aesthetic vision based on the past that teases and irritates the present with behavior once tolerated now considered taboo. Alexandria's Mediterranean context, its Greek foundations and history, the city's mixing of different cultures and religions allowed for a Cavafy or a Chahine to emerge.

Camus' case is more problematic. Called upon to take a political stance as a newly awarded Nobel Prize recipient by an Algerian student (in Sweden) at a press interview, a day after receiving the award regarding Algerian independence (1957), Camus refused to support Algerian independence because of the bloodbath it would unleash against French Algerians like himself and his family and/or the new forms of tyranny it might create for the native Algerians—"I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice"—became the infamous response of Camus, viewed as heartless toward the Algerians who also had mothers, after all. The Mediterranean character he cherished in his native Algiers with its polyglot cities was on its way to extinction.

Critics have castigated him for his refusal to support the Algerians in their war of independence. Contemporary secularist Algerian writers however are claiming Camus' position, as Emily Apter (1997) points out, some at the risk of their own lives "as a reaction to the current climate of anti-westernization and religious censorship," she

claims in disbelief. She herself designates Camus as “a traitorous proponent of French Algeria” and is incredulous that he has even a shred of credibility. As she adds, “for critics steeped in postcolonial perspectives, Camus’ name triggers not only a deplorable record on the Algerian War that rightly caused him friendships on the left” but also attacks him for “his systematic nullification of Arab characters”(506).

Camus’ writing convinces and seduces readers nonetheless by creating a unique style and mood, jazzy and muted, characterized by what Marc Blanchard (1997) terms “*pudeur*” or modesty in French. Camus is privileged by history itself, which gives us a record of the impact he has made on a diversity of readers around the world and by his continued relevance even to Algerian intellectuals.

In our time, nationalism has fueled new levels of violence worldwide. In Greece, the Golden Dawn political party functions like a paramilitary group in its attacks on immigrants and migrant workers. In fact the European Union seems to have generated more virulent nationalism since its formation and has managed as an entity to split from its poorer Mediterranean members whose sovereignty has been threatened by destabilizing economic conditions. In light of the current ongoing crisis, it is worth revisiting and remembering Camus’ *Midi*.

The Mediterranean as its own civilizational unit of cities by the sea not more than 20 miles inland along the Mediterranean coast came to embody an alternative interactive lifestyle created by the commerce along its ports and the ease of interaction between peoples. The bloody nationalisms that led to World War I and World War II forced artists and intellectuals to revisit the Mediterranean context as an example of a more placid and serene way of life. An early formulation of Camus’ *Pensé de Midi* was evident in the aftermath of the First World War in the “Return to Order” movement, which sought to reinforce a Mediterranean classical tradition in reaction to World War I and Prussian militarism. The Mediterranean Academy Project to be founded on the Cote d’Azur by Wedjeveld (Amsterdam), Mendelsohn (Berlin), and Ozenfant (Paris) embraced many of the values that had created great art and architecture during Antiquity and the Renaissance (Ita Heinze-Greenberg 2002).

Albert Camus’ *Pensé de Midi* was shaped in part by such early efforts, yet in tone and feel, his Mediterranean is not theirs. In an essay entitled, “The New Mediterranean Culture,” Camus writes, “Politics are made for men not men for politics.” Camus’ championing of a new Mediterranean civilization is crystallized in *The Rebel*, in an even purer philosophical form, yet in this lecture, delivered at the Algiers Maison de la Culture, April 1937 and published in the first issue of the review, *Jeune Méditerranée*, he looks at the humanizing qualities of cities by the sea:

What we claim as Mediterranean is not liking for reasoning and abstractions, but its physical life...for it is not classical and well-ordered, but diffuse and turbulent, like the Arab districts in our towns or the Genoan and Tunisian harbors. The triumphant taste for life, the sense of boredom and the weight of the sun, the empty squares at noon in Spain,

the siesta, this is the true Mediterranean and it is to the East that it is closest...The most basic aspect of Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from this historically and geographically unique encounter between East and West (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 193).

Camus' depiction of the Mediterranean in the essays, "Nuptials at Tipasa," "The Wind at Djemilla," "Summer in Algiers," "The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran," "The Sea Close By," "Helen's Exile," "A Short Guide to Towns without a Past," more generally the role of the sea and sun in *The Stranger*, and finally the place given the Mediterranean in "The Myth of Sisyphus," *The Rebel*, and his posthumous novel, *The First Man*, introduces a counter-narrative to the historical reality of his time and its totalitarian mind-frame. Rather than history, which seems to offer a catalogue of long-term struggles and wars, he focuses on the day, the season, the place. He writes in "A Short Guide to Towns without a Past":

As for the picturesque, Algiers offers an Arab town, Oran, a Negro village and a Spanish district, and Constantine a Jewish quarter. Algiers has a long necklace of boulevards along the sea...I recommend the sensitive traveler, if he goes to Algiers, drink *anisette* under the archway around the harbor, go to La Pecherie in the morning and eat freshly-caught fish grilled on charcoal stoves; listen to Arab music in the little café on the rue de la Lyre...have lunch at Padovani's...visit the Arab cemeteries to find calm and beauty there...go to smoke a cigarette in the Casbah on the rue de Bouchers, in the midst of spleens, livers, lungs, and intestines that drip blood on everything (the cigarette is necessary, these medieval practices have a strong smell).

...the best way to speak of what one loves is to speak of it lightly. When Algeria is concerned, I am always afraid to pluck the inner cord it touches in me...But at least I can say that it is my true country, and that anywhere in the world I recognize its sons and my brothers by the friendly laughter that fills me at the sight of them. Yes, what I love about the cities of Algeria is not separate from their inhabitants (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 145-147).

Camus extols everyday life with its simple beauty and necessary rhythm in Mediterranean towns. His testimony bears weight because he is Algerian, despite his French roots. The specific feel and smell of the Mediterranean that he depicts were sensations forged in him as a child living in poverty in the neighborhood of Belcourt. He writes in the Preface to *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (1958):

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with light...Poverty kept me from thinking that all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything...for me the greatest luxury has always coincided with a certain bareness.

It is one of the recurring themes of Camus that power corrupts and poverty purifies. In "The First Man," an autobiographical novel that recreates his life as a fatherless child

raised by his deaf, hard-working and silent but loving mother, his tyrannical controlling energetic grandmother, along with his brother and mute deaf uncle, as well as the larger family of aunts and uncles that forms a world for the boy, not to mention his group of friends and his beloved teacher, he showers all the love that memory can muster. This world and its endless sky, sea and sun, its fragrant trees, where one order of fries shared by the group of friends on the beach, a swim, a game of football, reading, or hunting with his uncle and the dog, offers up a paradise. He was twenty-five when he left for France already formed by his experiences in a space where he felt less alien than he did in Paris.

In "Helen's Exile," Camus roots his Mediterranean ethics in the ancient Greeks, who he yanks away from the Occident, stating, "It is improper to proclaim today that we are the sons of Greece."

Greek thought always took refuge behind the conception of limits...Our Europe, on the other hand, off in the pursuit of totality is the child of disproportion...at the dawn of Greek thought Heraclitus was already imagining that justice sets limits for the physical universe itself, 'the sun will not overstep his measure; if he does the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out'. In a drunken sky we light up the suns we want. But nonetheless the boundaries exist, and we know it (134-135).

In his biography of Camus, Olivier Todd observed that, "Camus saved the honor of intellectuals who were caught up in a drift toward totalitarianism." It is perhaps this drift that some Algerian writers are also fighting today. Camus who sees history as "no more than a fleeting and cruel shadow," gives voice to those who rebel against history and live life despite it. He writes in *The Rebel*, "We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, lucid action, the generosity of the man who understands."

In his poem, "Ithaca," Constantine Cavafy uses similar symbolism to present the journey to Ithaca:

But you must always keep Ithaca in mind.
The arrival there is your predestination.
Yet do not by any means hasten your voyage.
Let it best endure for many years,
until grown old at length you anchor at your island
rich with all you have acquired on the way.
You never hoped that Ithaca would give you riches.

Ithaca has given you the lovely voyage
Without her you would not have ventured on the way
She has nothing more to give you now.

Poor though you may find her, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Now that you have become so wise, so full of experience,
you will have understood the meaning of an Ithaca.

Trans. Kimon Friar (1973)

Cavafy, despite the sea-faring imagery in one of his most famous poems, was a traveler as a result of distress not pleasure. His biography is spare: Born in Alexandria (1863), belonging to a prosperous and large Greek merchant family from Constantinople, and member of the Greek community in Alexandria. His life and work reflect the downward trajectory of Greeks in Asia Minor, as well as the changing economic landscape worldwide, as Germany sought its place among empires and European nations embarked on an endless cycle of wars that were to devastate humankind. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the general race to carve up collapsing empires east and west had a direct affect on the Cavafy family enterprise. Cavafy's family moved to England two years after his father died in 1872, to join his father's brother who was managing the firm Cavafy & Co. (dissolved 1876). They returned to Alexandria in 1877, unable to withstand "the Long Depression" (1873), the first fully international economic crisis.

The family left Alexandria again in 1882, during the outbreak of the Anglo-Egyptian war. In Constantinople, Cavafy, now nineteen, got to know his large family and returned to Alexandria with his mother in 1885. Except for a few trips to Athens, London and Paris, Cavafy rarely left Alexandria. The family is important in the life of Cavafy. It is what gives him stability, acceptance and an "Ithaca" to return to. He is never without some family member to provide a loving anchor that makes his furtive erotic encounters exotic forays sufficient in their brevity to be contained as poems. The family history suggests stability even within the context of economic upheaval and political change. The familiar aspect of his life with its fixed parameters and consistent focus is reflected in the insular yet flaneur quality of his poetry with its Baudelaire-like synthesis of the transient adventure and its transition into the permanent form of the poem.

Cavafy was also shaped by Aesthetic Decadence and the Art for Art's Sake Movements, which gave him a context as a homosexual and a freedom to develop his poetic persona with a boldness that would have been unthinkable, for instance, on the Greek mainland. He was fluent in English and French and had been influenced by Baudelaire and Wilde and no doubt the Symbolists. Aesthetic Decadence empowered him to maintain an elite view of art but a bohemian view of work. His art was his hobby not his vocation. It was his passion, written for the few, but he earned an income by holding a civil service job as a clerk in the Department of Irrigation, augmenting his earnings by speculating on stocks (he and his brother, had a seat on the stock exchange), and gambling.

Issuing his first published chapbook of 14 poems in 1904 in a privately printed edition of 100 copies, Cavafy manifested an astute understanding of posterity as an ultimately classical enterprise with idealizing features. While his milieu was small, it wasn't insignificant and it has expanded internationally at a rate unrivalled by any poet writing in the Greek language. Initially he was embraced by a group of Greek poets in Alexandria who began to publish his poetry in their journal, entitled *Nea Zoe* (New Life) and also interacted with the mixed milieu of Egyptian and European artists in Alexandria that came to know his work. The notable painter, Mohammed Nagi (1888-1956), included him in the mural, "The School of Alexandria" (1938-1948) among Egyptian and

European artists. This massive mural (8 meter by 3) that hangs in the main meeting hall of the governorate of Alexandria and took Nagi ten years to finish celebrates the Mediterranean nature of Egyptian culture and includes not only a portrait of Cavafy but Ungaretti among the mix of political, religious, and historic figures of Greek and Egyptian heritage.

Apropos early critical reception—if one is to regard how Cavafy avoided fame vis-à-vis his contemporaries—is the virulent reaction of George Theotokas in his manifesto *Free Spirit* (Elefthero Pnevma) published in 1929 in Greece: One of the central messages of his manifesto is: "If poetry is to live it must return to youth"(64). Theotokas went even further to discredit Cavafy and the reputation he had begun to acquire as an "avant-garde" poet. He states:

Mr. Cavafy is an end and the avant-garde [*protoporia*] is a beginning. The only influence he can exercise on a younger generation is a negative one. By hastening the end of an age of Greek letters, he perhaps helps in the birth of a new age (65-66).

In fact, Theotokas devotes six pages to discrediting Cavafy's vision, which he compares to "an infectious boil that finally burst and released all its puss"(69). George Seferis telling comment in his famous essay on Eliot and Cavafy, that had he been younger when he encountered Cavafy, he would have loved him less and had he been older, he would have loved him more, is a more personal response to the issue of rejuvenation in the aftermath of the Asia Minor disaster. Theotokas and Elytis, in particular, seemed to resent Cavafy's rising reputation as they struggled to forge a European identity, while feeling the sting of anonymity on the world stage. Odysseus Elytis was to view Cavafy in a similar manner to Theotokas, though less aggressively, in his essay "Chronicle of a Decade," but more surprisingly, he held a similar view of Seferis as "an old man." Asia Minor was not as far away as Elytis suggested especially if he shared Theotokas' vision of future poets owning their own planes! The "generation of the thirties," "fresh from the kisses of girls and holding Theotokas' *Free Spirit* under [their] arm," (Elytis 285) resisted Cavafy's memory-laden poetry, his erotic preference for young men (made acceptable by the Aesthetic Decadents and their use of ancient Greek culture as sanction). Far from the mainland, however, Cavafy had the freedom to reject a narrow ethnic model of Greekness. One could be Greek elsewhere, after all, on one's own hybrid terms.

Cavafy's poetry consists of two types of poems, ones distilling his own personal, illicit erotic memories, fugitive encounters that took place in the side streets, cafes, rooms of the city; the other, being meditations on the rich ancient history of Alexandria, a celebration, in fact, of the characters who survive the vicissitudes of history and have seen conquerors come and go. Alexandria remains a central protagonist in both.

Let me provide two examples of the two types of poem that demonstrate what I mean. The first poem, "In the Evening" was originally entitled, "Alexandrinos," meaning, "Alexandrian":

It wouldn't have lasted long anyway—
the experience of years makes clear.
Even so, fate did put an end to it a bit abruptly.
It was soon over, the wonderful life.
Yet how strong the scents were,
what a magnificent bed we lay in,
what pleasure we gave our bodies.

An echo from my days given to sensuality,
an echo from those days came back to me,
something of the fire of the young life we shared:
I picked up a letter again,
and I read it over and over till the light faded away.

Then, sad, I went out to the balcony,
went out to change my thoughts at least by seeing
something of this city I love,
a little movement in the streets and the shops.

Trans. Edmund Keeley (1994)

The poems that recall these fugitive encounters have a certain reticence in detail, yet they recollect a city full of mundane and modest pleasures. John Rodenbeck writes in his “Alexandria in Cavafy, Durrell, and Tsirkas”(2001), “There are thus no utopias, erotic or otherwise in Cavafy. Cities and their physical reality seem to represent, in fact, two things: the cultural and biological dynamics that have always limited and determined the shapes of human lives; and the ephemerality of all merely physical things”(150). He takes issue with the racist portrayal of Alexandria in Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*, he also criticizes Edmund Keeley’s book, *Cavafy’s Alexandria*, as “prejudiced and mean-spirited”(142). Keeley’s otherwise useful text and his fine translations of Cavafy’s poetry is marred, according to Rodenbeck by his “ungovernable disdain for everything he sees, which deprives him of the privilege of learning anything about what it is, but has also had an immeasurably negative effect on the very act of seeing it”(143). Describing Alexandria as “squalid,” Keeley can’t see any connection between “the surface reality” and “the literary images.” He writes, “All conflict between illusion and reality vanishes in the stench of narrow unwashed streets overflowing with the murky drift of the poor, pushed on by pyjama-clad hawkers and ambitious urchins”(1995, 4-5).

Most of the beloved protagonists in Cavafy’s poems are poor. Here are some examples: “Nearly thirty, he had never worked a full year, at least not at a legitimate job/ Sometimes he earned enough to get by.”(“Days of 1896,” Keeley 42). Another poem begins, “I’m broke and practically homeless.” (“To Have Taken the Trouble,” Keeley 47); yet another, “He was out of work that year/ so he lived off card games, backgammon, and borrowed money...His clothes were a terrible mess...Your perspective has preserved him/ as he was when he took off, threw off those unworthy clothes, that mended underwear, / and stood stark naked, impeccably handsome, a miracle—.”(“Days of 1908,” Keeley 51).

Cavafy like Baudelaire was able to see beneath the patina of poverty. In the historical poems, as well, he picks protagonists from all walks of life. His dramatic personae are of modest means but proud to be Alexandrian. In a poem entitled, "Going Back Home from Greece," two young men, Greeks from Asia Minor, returning home, circa third century B.C., yet no doubt reflecting the poet's contemporary situation, admit they are happy to be leaving the motherland:

Why so silent? Ask your heart:
Didn't you too feel happier the farther we got from Greece?

It's time we admitted the truth
We are Greeks also—what else are we?—
but with Asiatic affections and feelings
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

It isn't right Hermippos, for us philosophers
To be like some of our petty kings

.....
who...let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
.....

For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.

We must not be ashamed
Of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honor it, take pride in it.

(Keeley 52-53)

Cavafy like Camus celebrates diversity and mixing. It is sad in fact to think that in the last decade of his life, the world poised itself once more to escalate hostilities in a frenzy of nationalism and ethnic cleansing. Cosmopolitanism had become a slur, a means of attacking foreigners on one's shores as undesirable Others or degenerates.

As surely as Camus is loyal to his lived reality, Cavafy is loyal to his city and its people, who are wryly philosophical as they witness the changing regimes. In the poem entitled, "Alexandrian Kings," the Alexandrians turn out to see Cleopatra's children be declared kings "before a brilliant array of soldiers." After a description of their gaudy attire and the lands they would rule, the poet adds:

The Alexandrians knew of course
that this was mere words, all theater.

But the day was warm and poetic
the sky a pale blue,
the Alexandrian Gymnasium
a complete artistic triumph,
.....
and the Alexandrians thronged to the festival

full of enthusiasm, and shouted acclamations
in Greek, and Egyptian, and some Hebrew,
charmed by the lovely spectacle—
though they knew of course what all this was worth,
what empty words they really were, these kingships.
(Keeley 28)

“The vanity of grandeur,” as Cavafy terms it in the poem, “Darius,” pales before the excitement of erotic love, which erases history to create an eternity of the present. When these moments become an exquisite yet painful memory, it is to the city itself that the poet returns for consolation. He looks out of the window of his balcony, or at “the luminous blue of the morning sea and cloudless sky” (“Morning Sea” Kimon Friar, *Modern Greek Poetry*) to be reminded that he is not deprived of love. It is reflected in the city that he loves. Cavafy did not find Alexandria poor. Alexandria gave him the journey. This is not to say that he did not feel constrained. In the poem, entitled, “Hidden,” he suggests to the reader:

From acts of mine that passed the most unheeded
and from my writings which I most obscured—
there only will you sense out who I was.
Perhaps, however, it’s not worth your while
to try to know me with such toil and trouble.
Sometime—in a society more perfect,
some other person made as I was made
is certain to appear, and he will act freely.
(Kimon Friar 142)

The intimacy the poet has with an audience, which he projects into the future, is fostered by his insular style and the confiding tone, which is laconic, yet generous, never vilifying the object of his gaze. He is kind to his protagonists.

This same quality can be seen in the work of Youssef Chahine who died in 2008 at the age of 82. He is without a doubt Egypt’s leading filmmaker and arguably the most important filmmaker in the Arab world. Born in Alexandria in 1926 to a Syrian father and Alexandrian Greek mother, he was educated in a Catholic Lycée, then at the prestigious Victoria College. With fifty films to his credit and a career that spans 57 years, he is acclaimed as one of the world’s great filmmakers. He received his first international prize as an actor for his performance in *Cairo Station* (1958), a film he directed, playing a cripple with an erotic fixation on a working girl hawking drinks at the station, whom he murders. He has introduced the major actors of the Arab world, among them Omar Sharif who he discovered and cast in the film, *Blazing Sun* in 1954. As Joseph Massad writes in his essay, “Art and Politics in the Cinema of Youssef Chahine”(1999):

For his mastery of cinematic style, the diversity of his range, and his wide appeal both to the intelligentsia and the masses, he can be veritably called

the doyen of Egyptian and Arab cinema and a teacher to new generations of directors (78).

He overcame censorship to make films about corruption in the government, the Algerian war, religious and political figures, introduced homosexual protagonists in an increasingly parochial and intolerant environment, which his films criticized. His politics follows no steady party line. He said, “I make films first for myself, then for my family, then for Alexandria, then for Egypt. And if the Arab world likes them *ahlan wa sahan* (welcome) and if the foreign audience likes them—they are doubly welcome”(*Al Jadid Magazine*).

His style of mixing genres—the musical, newsreels, love story— and the stark juxtaposition of the personal with the political creates a surreal effect, a layered palimpsest that confuses audiences, who are expected to educate themselves about events they do not understand. The Mediterranean context is crucial to his work, particularly in the autobiographical Alexandria trilogy, *Alexandria... Why* (1978), *Egyptian Story* (1982), and *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989). The trilogy traces his life from his boyhood to more or less the present of the last film, *Alexandria Again and Forever*.

Alexandria is to Chahine’s films, as central as it is to Cavafy’s poetry: Both real and idealized, it is never sentimentalized. Eros and beauty fight to win their moment, to triumph over the mess of history. In an interview with a young journalist, Ahmed El Attar, from *Euromed Café*, Chahine said:

Alexandria in the years, 1930, 1940, 1950, was a true cosmopolitan city. There were citizens of the whole Mediterranean basin, Italian, Greek, French, etc. One spoke three or four languages and the city was in constant movement. A true exchange and real cooperation was part of our daily life and the Other was not a mystery.”

The Alexandria trilogy never loses sight of this Alexandria. The first part of the trilogy, set against the pending invasion of the Nazis at al’-‘Alamayn, where they will be rebuffed by the British, the young Chahine, named Yehia in the film, is a college student mesmerized by American films and Shakespeare, attempting to pursue his destiny against the backdrop of war and the British occupation, as well as his family’s changing fortunes. His social context includes Arabs, Jews, and Christians, who are all affected by the political backdrop, as they stubbornly try to pursue their individual lives. His friends, Sara, an Ashkenazi Egyptian Jew and Ibrahim, an Arab of humble origins who is arrested as a communist, are lovers who are separated by the changing fortunes. They produce a child, but Sara’s family leaves for Palestine, where her brother, who was once part of Yehia’s circle, joins the Zionists.

Another love affair occurs between the maternal uncle of Yehia’s best friend, an anti-British Egyptian aristocrat and a British soldier from Dover, who he intends to kill, only to fall in love with him, on the eve of his going to the frontline at al’-‘Alamayn, where he will be killed in battle. The family of Yehia attempts to make ends meet,

sacrifices to send Yehia to Pasadena, California to study acting. All try to deal with their changing fortunes as best they can. The humor couching the rage at the occupation, yet the comic timing, as the characters discuss who their next caretaker government will be, reflects the same bemusement as Cavafy's Alexandrians waiting for the barbarians.

There is nothing heavy-handed in Chahine's story telling, he reveals the poignancy and irony of situations. The stories treat major and minor protagonists with love. Stark juxtapositions are established from the outset as the credits are showing, the Mediterranean sea as backdrop, people enjoying the beach, boys fishing off the jetties, then interrupted by actual archival footage of the European war coming to Egypt's doorsteps.

The second part of the trilogy, *Egyptian Story*, shows Yehia at fifty, already a well-known director, yet frustrated over his lack of recognition abroad, angry at the censorship of his scripts by the Egyptian government, and about to have a heart attack as he leaves for London to have a bypass operation. While he is under the anesthesia, a surreal fantasy begins. The blockage is depicted as a repressed child trying to kill him. The child in star-trek like attire, carrying lit crystal-like kryptonite, is put on a trial as is his whole family, school teachers, and finally Yehia himself as a full-grown man, is accused of self-centeredness by his family, in turn. The clot is removed (young Yehia vacuumed out), then reunited with Yehia the adult as they merge into one.

The film incorporates archival footage of the British occupation of Egypt, the French occupation of Algeria, the Cannes Film Festival, Ou'm Khalhoum at the Cairo Opera House, creating a historical framework. While young Yehia accuses the director Yehia of preaching, the films' strength is that they do not preach. Individuals are portrayed sympathetically even erotically. An erotically charged encounter with a young Scottish chauffeur the evening before his operation, introduces Chahine's irrepressible, yet blocked desires, all metaphors, as well, for the blockage in his heart. Humor provides the icing that compensates for the bitter liquor Chahine serves in his film torte. Liberty and freedom of expression are the artist's oxygen and his/her goal. So much of the narrative of the trilogy deals with holding on to what vestiges one could of one's rights.

In the third part of the trilogy, *Alexandria Again and Forever*, Chahine plays himself. He is about to make *Hamlet*, yet in the midst of filming, he goes to Alexandria to begin a script on Alexander the Great. The scenes of the sea from his open window and balcony present a serene view of the city. As he gets a call that his wife has been in a car accident, he also receives word that Amr, his protégé, has won the Berlin Silver Bear award for best actor in *Alexandria Why?* Actor and director go to Berlin to accept the prize, after which they break into a dance routine reminiscent of Gene Kelley to Nat King Cole's "Walking my Baby back Home." The extremely handsome, Umar 'Abd al-Gilil who plays Amr is also the object of the director's infatuation. A dance scene between the two men is handled with innuendo and tact, suggestive and full of longing, in the manner of Cavafy, yet Hollywood parody of Kelley and Fred Astaire, which frames the way two men might dance together Western-style. Upon his return, his supportive wife tells him to forget Amr, as does everybody else, but he can only see Amr as Alexander. He begins

research on Alexander and looks to find Stelios, a Greek obsessed with Alexander, who believes his tomb is under the Greek café, Athenaios, in Alexandria. More surprising, Alexander the Great becomes a musical. Alexander is also a parody of the director's obsession with Amr and Stelios' obsession with Alexander. The number, of a man elevated to demi-god, as the director has elevated his actor, "if you could see him through my eyes," Chahine sings.

Filming is interrupted by a hunger strike, which he joins, of all of Egypt's film industry, protesting censorship and the absence of democracy. During the 1987 strike (which actually took place), he discovers Nadia, a young actress, and becomes infatuated with her and starts seeing her as the Cleopatra of his film. Their discussions provide insight into his framing of Alexandria and of himself as an Alexandrian.

Nadja asks him, "You write in English?" He answers, "The dialogue is in Arabic...it is wittier. French for love scenes, English for precision, and coming from Alexandria, I get by in Greek, of course." "Why, of course," she asks? "Alexander the Great decided so, have any objections?" The strike ends with a compromise and he begins to visualize Antony and Cleopatra, with himself as Antony and Nadia as Cleopatra.

In a final scene, Stelios takes him to the tomb of Alexander underneath Atheneos Café. The last coffin contains Amr as Alexander, a massive drill from above ground pierces through, killing Amr/Alexander. He has exorcized his idols. The final scene includes all of Egypt's major actors, whom the filmmaker scans lovingly, as they end the strike, plead for democracy, and proclaim their love for Egypt.

In this complex, layered and entertainingly surreal film, Chahine uncovers a plain truth—that people love their idols, whether they are gods, emperors, or actors and then they strike them down! In a scene with Nadia, as they walk during the feast of Ramadan, he is goaded into a Saidi dance, which he performs with surprising agility. He is challenged by an opponent and they fight/dance with the sticks traditional to the Saidi dance. Nadja notices his admiration of his handsome antagonist and says to him, "You worship actors." He responds "simple words on paper become emotions." It is beside the point though true. True because the premise holds even when it is reversed: emotions become words. The synthesizing process is what makes poetry. It brings out sympathies and correspondences between things and collapses differences, unlike analysis that separates and pulls apart. It is an erotic process.

A Mediterranean synthesis, akin to the process that occurs in art took place historically: Diocletian, for instance, accepted the Persian god, Mithra as protector of the Empire. Earlier Roman emperors adopted Greek culture and religion, Greeks themselves adopted and learned from Egyptian culture. Byzantine rule Hellenized and Orientalized Venice. It is this capacity to assimilate difference, but not lose one's distinct identity that distinguishes Mediterranean civilization. The emperors were conquered, as well, by the places that they conquered.

At this point in history the fate of the Mediterranean seems dire: A way of life that has survived thousands of years is facing insurmountable economic challenges, civil strife, religious and racial conflict coupled with a sense of national betrayal of people by their governments. It is important not to forget the synthesis and hybridization of cultures that the Mediterranean achieved. P. Hordon and N. Purcell (2000) point out that the continuity of Mediterranean history over three thousand years is “the result of the paradoxical coexistence of a milieu of relatively easy sea-born communications with a quite unusually fragmented topography of micro-regions in the sea’s coastlands and islands.” Common characteristics between the people of the Mediterranean were the direct result of human interaction between many micro-regions over a long stretch of time. The history of the Mediterranean, they conclude, suggests “intensification” and “abatement” rather than rise, decline and fall. Inter-connectivity, in fact, is seen as the basis of survival of the Mediterranean region (5).

Abatement and intensification reflect above all an economic law of nature. Poverty according to Herodotus was the Greek’s lot, but a virtue that made them independent. It is hardly viewed so today. Yet many artists and philosophers have claimed it as the basis of their artistic independence. Greed has always been portrayed as a vice but is pursued by those in a position to do so as if it were a virtue. Camus, Cavafy, and Chahine do not conceal the fractured Mediterranean picture (most bleak in Chahine’s final film, *Chaos* 2008) but also choose to remind their readers and viewers that despite changing fortunes, the long-forged instincts of Mediterranean peoples have enabled them to survive the vicissitudes of history and to seize their moment in the sun. It is one resource they possess in abundance.

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