

Stephane Charitos
Director, Language Resource Center
Columbia University

In a small European Colony circa 2013 A.D. Reflecting on the crisis while reading Cavafy.

Κι όσο στον έλεγχο τους προχωρούνε,
βρίσκουν και βρίσκουν περιττά, και να παυθούν ζητούνε·
πράγματα που όμως δύσκολα τα καταργεί κανείς.
Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.

Θα γίνουν
τα ίδια πράγματα, θα ξαναγίνουν πάλι —
η όμοιες στιγμές μας βρίσκουνε και μας αφίνουν.
Μουστονία

I often think of my father now that he’s gone. And I think of the conflicted feelings he bore in equal measure for the land of his birth: love for a Greece that had been and bitterness for the Greece it had become.

I think of him every time the inhuman policies of austerity send the country into new unplumbed depths of social and economic depression. In my mind, I can see him, lifting his eyes from the newspaper, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead and saying to no one in particular: *“Την καταστρέψανε την χώρα.”*

Who the “they” was, was anyone’s guess. It was the unscrupulous politicians willing to pay any price in order to cling to power and gorge at the public banquet table. It was the bootlickers and the hangers-on who would flatter and fawn over them in the hope of securing some meager scraps for themselves. It was the dishonest businessmen for whom no deal was too crooked, no transaction too shady to turn down. It was the self-proclaimed “experts” who ruled over petty fiefdoms that were as corrupt as they were insignificant and whose arrogance was equaled only by their ignorance. It was the obsequious middlemen, the pseudo-intellectuals, and the professional careerists who polluted the national landscape. It was, in short, all the people who had made him slowly but surely shun the country he loved.

Memory of a late summer afternoon spent playing in the gardens in front of the National Museum and of an old man telling my mother in unaccented and perfectly cadenced French while his companions nodded their agreement, “Joli pays, madame. Joli pays, mal habité.”

Like so many before him, at one point he had left. Not so much to seek a better life abroad (he did find that as well), but rather to escape the drudgery of life in a society ruled by immutable laws that, to all intents and purposes, rewarded incompetence and indolence and sanctioned ability and industry.

But an unexpected set of circumstances had made it necessary for him to return. It was however a difficult homecoming. Neither accepted back into a world he had repudiated, nor welcomed into a new one by those who would always wonder why he had come back, he was, and would always remain, an outsider in his own country – misunderstood and spurned even by those who knew him best. And so he retreated to the haven of the familiar – home, family, work – while continuing to cast a philosophical yet sardonic look on a country that was slowly decaying around him.

“Κανα τα πάντα για να φύγω απ’ αυτήν την καταραμένη χώρα, και όμως πάλι εδώ ήρθα για να πεθάνω. Pars, mon fils, pars. Et ne reviens jamais.”

I still hear these words, spoken in a voice tinged with both fatalism and bitterness, as we sat together years ago overlooking the hustle and bustle of modern-day Athens.

So, when the time came, I left Greece.

But Greece never left me.

Wherever I went, whatever path I chose on what was to become a long personal journey (“δρόμος, γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις”), Greece kept calling out to me; a modern-day Penelope weaving its web of memories around me; a Siren whose beguiling songs and melodies kept luring me back to its shores however much I strived to ignore their enticement. Ithaca does have its charms.

This seduction took on many shapes – from the elegant music of Hadjidakis to the smoke-filled honesty of the old rempetika, from the stark beauty of Greece’s austere landscapes bathed in that incomparable light to the unflappable and garrulous nature of the Greeks themselves. But perhaps more than anything, it was poetry, and the poetry of Cavafy in particular, that bound me to Greece. Not to Greece itself (whatever can that be?), but to a certain, personal Greece – one associated with my earliest memories.

To this day, every time I read his poetry, I am invariably transported back to that time when my parents took us, my brother and me, on annual pilgrimages to a distant world full of prim old ladies gathered in fusty salons filled with cherished mementos of a bygone era. While pinching our cheeks and stuffing our mouths with sugary treats, they prattled endlessly about the time when they had lived “there” – Κωνσταντινούπολη, Θεσσαλονίκη, Αλεξάνδρεια, τα Ιεροσόλυμα – and of a glory that had once been but no longer was.

In this mannered world, my brother and I were treasured trophies (“σε ζακουστόν αγώνα το βραβείον”). Prized possessions to be ritually displayed for a seemingly endless flow of parents, relatives, and other acquaintances who came to inspect us as we stood solemnly in the watchful eyes of taciturn, mustachioed ancestors – ancestors who, with their canes, hats and austere three-piece suits, seemed to have stepped out fully-armed (“Με λόγια, με φυσιογνωμία, και με τρόπου/ και εξαιρετη θα κάμω πανοπλία”) from the crumpled pages of some ancient family history book.

It was a world suffused by unfamiliar tastes and smells – το μαχλέπι, η μαστίχα, η κανέλα, το λιβάνι, το μύρο – that seemed as wonderfully exotic as it was foreign to the little square-headed Europeans that we were. A mystical world in which golden-haloed Saints stared at us with stylized eyes from behind clouds of fragrant smoke while heavily bearded priests in radiant vestments chanted from the Psalter and the assembled faithful pressed us with loud cries of: “το σταυρό σας, κάντε το σταυρό σας.”

*Εκεί σαν μου, μες σ’ εκκλησία των Γραικών·
με των δεισιματών της τες ευωδίες,
μες τες λειτουργικές φωνές και συμφωνίες,
τες μεγαλοπρεπείς των ιερών παρουσίες
και κάθε των κινήσεως τον σοβαρό ρυθμό —
λαμπρότατοι μες στων αμφίων τον στολισμό —
ο νους μου πραινεί σε τιμές μεγάλης της φυλής μας,
στον ένδοξό μας Βυζαντιισμό.
Στην Εκκλησία*

But more than serving as a nostalgic bridge to a personal world now largely defunct, Cavafy’s carefully chiseled poetry, with its delicate balance of genuine empathy for those courageously facing up to their predicaments without illusions mixed with ironic mockery for those – particularly the powerful – whose arrogance feeds a hubristic sense of delusion, also taught me to be sensitive to those haunting historical moments when, in the words of Brad Leithauser, “the manifestly doomed do not yet recognize their fate.”

Greece is currently experiencing such a moment, and as it teeters on the brink of utter disintegration, its tragic situation might just have provided Cavafy with ample fodder for a melancholic reflection on the fragility of life in the public eye as well as the tenuous nature of social and economic institutions. I, for one, cannot help but think he would have delighted in focusing, in a characteristically terse poem, on the irony that binds George Papandreou’s confident public pronouncement “λεφτά υπάρχουν”, uttered even as the wheels were coming off the country’s finances, to Andreas Loverdos’ expressive “δεν υπάρχει σάλιο” professed less than three months later.

But rather than wondering how Cavafy might have used Greece’s current crisis to feed his poetic imagination, it might be more appropriate to ask ourselves what allegorical light, if any, his poetry might be able to cast on these troubled times as the aftermaths of the financial crisis of 2008 continue to engulf a country, which now faces the probability of a sixth year of continued recession (but can it even be called a recession at this point?). And in particular, it might be appropriate to wonder if, to paraphrase Cavafy, we Greeks are not today facing the possible loss, not just of our capital, but of our country as a whole.

“But there is one unfortunate difference between us [the British and the Greeks], 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.” — C.P. Cavafy to E. M. Forster, 1918

In three short years, an entire country has come undone, plunging its population into a generalized state of precariousness and uncertainty. Not since the dire years of the Occupation and the subsequent Civil War have so many Greeks felt their livelihoods threatened by forces over which they have so little control, and not since the dark days of the colonels’ dictatorship has so many believed that others were autocratically deciding both their fate and the fate of the country.

But to me, as well as to many of the other Greeks I know, what seems so incomprehensible is how quickly our fortune has failed us (“την τύχη σου που ενδίδει πια”). Only yesterday it seems we were being celebrated throughout Europe. Our economy was booming with annual growth rates well above the EU average. Our standard of living, largely boosted by cheap loans gladly made available by our European friends, was improving by leaps and bounds. The Euro football championship of 2004 and the success of the Olympics later that same year had cast us as amiable and endearing winners. We were, to put it tersely, riding high.

Yet in a few short years, celebration has turned to condemnation, and accusations have replaced praise. Instead of exalting our virtues, the world’s press now churns out endless stories replete with the failings of these “unholy Greeks” and their ostensibly genetic capacity for lying, scamming, double-crossing, and cheating in order to take advantage of their upright, hard-working yet gullible Northern neighbors (“κ’ επέισθη με των Ελλήνων τ’ άθεα τα λόγια”).

Catastrophe, it seems, had befallen the nation and, finding it unprepared – intoxicated by the heady wine of easy credit and enthralled with the illusion of the easy life ahead – had swept everything away before it.

*Άλλη καταστροφή, που δεν την φανταζόμεθαν,
εξαφνική, ραγδαία πέφτει επάνω μας,
κι ανέτοιμους — πού πια καιρός — μας συνειπαίρεινε.
Τελειωμένα*

Still, one can ask in fact: where were the guardians as the looming catastrophe drew near? Where were our politicians, the watchmen tasked (“σαν άγρυπνοι φρουροί”) with lighting the warning beacon alerting us to the dangers lurking on the horizon? Had they fallen asleep on the roof of the house of Atreus? Were they too busy satisfying their almost infinite appetite for self-delusion, these champions of pleasure of ours (“οι ανδρείοι της ηδονής”)? Were they too drunk on their own sense of self-importance (“υπεροφίαν και μέθην”) to be attentive to their public duties? Or perhaps, over the years, they had simply come to believe that they – and by extension, we – were somehow indispensable, unique, and noteworthy, forgetting in the process the lesson in humility that History teaches: no one is so important that they cannot be replaced at a moment’s notice.

*“Όμως δεν θα μας γελά
το Απαραίτητος, το Μόνος, το Μεγάλος.
Και απαραίτητος, και μόνος, και μεγάλος
αμέσως πάντα θρίσκειται κανένας άλλος.”
Όταν ο Φύλαξ Έδε το Φως*

Even today, despite being confronted with the calamitous outcomes of a tragedy that has shaken the country to its very roots, these aged souls bound to decaying bodies desperately continue to cling to their privileges more concerned it seems with protecting their entitlements and the trappings afforded by a public life than with oblivious to the unprecedented assaults this is wrecking upon the weak, the sick, the old, and the poor and the vulnerable. Curbing to their own failings, blind to the glaring fact that this “great crisis” (“η μεγάλη κρίσις”) took hold and developed under their watch, these modern-day, mock Anthonys refuse to be mindful of the message sent and take their leave.

*Μες στα παλιά τα σώματά των τα φθαρμένα
κάθονται των γερόντων η ψυχές.
Τι θλιβερές που είναι η πτωχές
και πώς βαρύνονται την ζωή την άθλια που τραβούνε.
Πώς τρέμουν μην την χάσουνε και πώς την αγατούνε
η σαστισμένες κι αντιφατικές
ψυχές, που κάθονται —κιωμοκραγικές—
μες στα παλιά των τα πετιοά τ’ αφανισμένα.
Η Ψυχές των Γερόντων*

But what else can be expected of those tattered deities, who, paralyzed by fear and indecision here, by and large, relinquished the responsibility of making decisions to others while they scurry around anxiously, either to protect the corrupt networks on which their power is based, or to try to shift the blame for the looting of the country away from themselves and their cronies. “Μαζί τα φάγαμε,” they bleat. “We’re all in this together. If someone failed, then we all failed.”

*Άλλ’ όταν η μεγάλη κρίσις έλθει,
η τόλμη κι η απόφασίς μας χάνονται·
ταράττεται η ψυχή μας, παραλύει·
κι ολόγυρα απ’ τα τείχη πρέχουμε
ζητώντας να γλυτώσουμε με την φυγή.
Τρώες*

From the beginning of the crisis, as soon as they realized with dread the depth of the chasm that had opened beneath our collective feet, our politicians have been happy to cast themselves with a supporting role in a play which, they claimed, was being written elsewhere.

In any case, we were told, what could they do? Our collective fate was being decided elsewhere (“Στην Ρώμη δόθηκε ο χρησμός· είναι εκεί η μοιρασιά”). All they could do was wait, assembled in the public forum, for the verdict to be rendered by those who would be deciding for us in faraway capitals. “Let us wait for the Europeans. When they finally arrive, they will tell us what to do. Until then, what is the point of legislating? Let us rather prepare ourselves to dazzle them with the pomp and pageantry they deserve. Perhaps then, they will be merciful.”

Today, there is no longer a need to gather in the public forums and wonder whether the Europeans are coming and what solution they have in store for us. They have come. The Troika is here. Every new day it seems brings its lot of inspectors and experts; modern proconsuls empowered by a barbaric and arbitrary, scrutiny, and monitor every facet of our lives and mercilessly enforce the new oracular pronouncement of fiscal austerity and budgetary discipline.

*Για κάθε τι,
για το παραμικρό ρωτούνε κ’ εξετάζουν,
κ’ ευθύς στον νου τους ριζικές μεταρρυθμίσεις βάζουν,
με την απαίτησι να εκτελεσθούν άνευ αναβολής.
Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.*

They have come to set things right, they have come to set things right. Things are not as they should be there (“Ότι τα πράγματα δεν βαινουν κατ’ ευχην στην Αποικία/δεν μέν’ η ελαχιστη αμφιβολία”). The time has come for an unscrupulous and to implement radical reforms, we are told. The time for annihilation is upon us. We must mend our ways and change.

Of course, change will not come cheaply. Sacrifices will have to be made. Properties will have to be sold, salaries slashed, taxes raised, services cut, belts tightened. Someone will have to pay.

*Παραιτηθείτε από την κτήαν σας εκείνη·
η κατοική σας είναι επικινδύνος·
η τέτοιες κτήσεις ακριβώς βλάπτουν τες Αποικίες.
Παραιτηθείτε από την πρόσδοον αυτή,
κι από την άλληνα την συναφή,
κι από την τρίτη τούτην: ως συνέπεια φυσική·
είναι μιν ουσιώδεις, αλλά τί να γίνει·
σας δημιουργούν μια επιβλαθή ευθύνη.
Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.*

But they will decide for us, these foreign deities, who will pay and who must shoulder these most-needed sacrifices. They will diagnose the ills that plague our society and determine for us what can be saved and what must be surgically amputated to stop the spread of the rot. They will choose, in their infinite wisdom, who is to be saved and who condemned. And after having performed this most difficult – but oh so necessary – duty, after having reshaped the colony in their image, they will retire these great Reformers (“οι Αναμορφωταί αυτοί”), leaving behind a smoking heap of ruins and a new “order.”

*Θα είναι ή ώρα οι θεοί να εργασθούνε.
Έρχονται πάντοτε’ οι θεοί. Θα κατεβούνε
από τες μηχανές των, και τους μεν θα σώσουν,
τους δε θίασια, ζαφνικά θα τους σηκώσουν
από την μέση· και σαν φέρουνε μια τάξι
ή αποσυρθούν.
Η Επέμβασις των Θεών*

“Ubi solitudo facimus, pacem appellat.” After all, a wasteland is a solution of sorts, I suppose.

But some good might still come from all of this misery. Perhaps, there is a silver lining in the disaster that is being visited upon us. Catastrophes not only radically change the familiar course of events; they also have a revelatory function. By violently disrupting the customary operations of an established order, they remove the patina that custom and habit have deposited and bring to light the contradictions inherent within existing institutional and social structures.

After all that has happened since 2009, it is hard to believe that things can continue as before, however much our great political Pretenders (the diminutive version of the great Reformers) would like to think so. The crisis, and the way it has been, and is being handled, has caused a tectonic shift in the local political landscape: both discrediting old politicians as well as the political system as a whole, and laying bare for all to see the deeply-rooted systemic divisions that have always structured Greek society: class, culture, gender, political orientation.

No matter how much the government tries to sell the message that we are all in it together, that everyone must do his or her share to right the ship of state, that unless we all pull together we will most certainly go bankrupt, more and more people recognize this discourse for what it really is: rhetorical window-dressing. A sham that tries to distract from the massive and unprecedented assault taking place upon the most vulnerable segments of a society in a bid to extract as much as possible from them to repay for the looting of the country while the wealthiest remain largely unscathed, their assets safely tucked away in offshore tax havens. “Μαζί τα φάγαμε,” – perhaps. But one thing is for certain, “χώρα θα πεινώσουμε.”

We are not going bankrupt. We are already bankrupt – morally bankrupt. Any policy that blames the many for the sins of the few is a morally bankrupt policy. Any policy that calls for the many to be held hostage to the egoism of the few is a morally bankrupt policy. Any policy that promotes “solutions” that leave no room for hope is a morally bankrupt policy.

If there is reason to still harbor some hope for the country though, I think it is to be found in the fundamental decency of the average citizen – a decency that has resisted all the efforts of domestic politicians, the local media, and international observers to stigmatize them as nothing more than a pathological cohort of genetic liars, corrupt cheats, dishonest swindlers, sleazy beggars, and pervasive tax-dodgers.

In spite of losing their jobs, seeing their rights eroded away, and having their pensions slashed and their taxes raised in order to feed the austerity Moloch, many still persevere to try to do what is right – follow the rules, pay taxes, make pension contributions, lead respectable lives – undeterred by the fact that they are being systematically and cynically stigmatized in order to distract attention from the failings of the privileged few.

That, and their resiliency - a resiliency that has allowed them to endure despite the fact the odds are stacked against them. Even though the social fabric is strained to the point of fraying completely in the face of the developing humanitarian crisis, civility has not yet completely disappeared from our midst. Most still refuse to yield to the call of bigoted nationalism. More and more people are starting to organize themselves spontaneously to resist the imposed “solutions.” Scores are banding together in order to provide compassionately those services the Reformers have deemed superfluous and unnecessary.

*αλλά με λύπη κιάλας κ’ ευσπλαχνία·
γενναίοι οσάκι είναι πλούσιοι, κι όταν
είναι πτωχοί, πάλ’ είναι μικρόν γενναίοι,
πάλι συντρέχοντες εις μόνον γένον·
πάντοτε την αλήθεια ομολούντες,
πλην χωρίς μίσος για τους ψευδομένους.
Θερμοπύλες*

The soup kitchens, the homeless shelters, the free medical clinics, the barter networks, the communal gardens, the “can’t pay, won’t pay” campaigns, the guerrilla electricity reconnection services: all these spontaneous efforts are small links in the chain of solidarity that binds us together as a community. A chain that has yet to be shattered and that gives me hope that, maybe, the country will not be lost after all.

Maybe, just maybe, the great Reformers will remember that they too had once been Greek (“κι αυτοί ήταν Έλληνες”) and that Ithaca should not be sold and privatized. And maybe, just maybe, when the journey comes to an end, as all journeys must, Ithaca will still be there to welcome us.