«...what these Ithakas mean.»
Readings in Cavafy

«... Ίθάκες τί σημαίνουν.»
Αναγνώσεις στον Καβάφη

Ενός Καβάφη

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΛΟΓΟΤΕΧΝΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΟ ΑΡΧΕΙΟ
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ΔΥΝΑΜΩΣΙΣ

"Όποιος τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ποθεῖ νὰ δυναμώση
νὰ δην ἀπ’ τὸ σέβας κι ἀπὸ τὴν ὑποταγή.
Ἄπο τοὺς νόμους μερικοὺς θὰ τοὺς φυλάξει,
ἀλλὰ τὸ περισσότερο θὰ παραβαίνει
καὶ νόμους κ’ ἐθικὰ κι ἀπ’ τὴν παραδεγμένη
καὶ τὴν ἀνεπαρχοῦσα εὐθύτητα θὰ δην.
Ἄπο ταῖς ἐποιεί πολλὰ θὰ διδάχθῃ.
Τὴν καταστροφικὴ δὲν θὰ φοβᾶται πράξιν
τὸ σπίτι τὸ μισὸ πρέπει νὰ γνησιῶθῃ.
"Ετσι θ’ αναπτυχθῇ ἐνάρετα στὴν γνώση.

[1903]

GROWING IN SPIRIT

He who hopes to grow in spirit
will have to transcend obedience and respect.
He will hold to some laws
but he will mostly violate
both law and custom, and go beyond
the established, inadequate norm.
Sensual pleasures will have much to teach him.
He will not be afraid of the destructive act:
half the house will have to come down.
This way he will grow virtuously into wisdom.

Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard
When we examine Cavafy's art and appeal, we should never overlook the fact that he writes in Greek—not ancient, medieval, or modern but plain Greek, the Greek of reflection and deliberation.

"Empowerment" is an eminent example of this language. Its ten lines incorporate an entire philosophical vocabulary: dynamis, pneuma, pothos, parabasis, ethimon, paradoigma, euthyteta, hedone, didaskalia, phobia, katasrophe, praxis, anaptyxis, arete, gnosis, etc. This vocabulary draws on, and resonates with, the long history of Greek—the language of the Presocratics, the Epicureans, the Church Fathers, the Byzantine scholiasts, the Enlighteners, the Postmarxists. Despite the historical frequencies of its diction, the text does not advance an argument for continuity, linguistic or other. It constitutes a poetic meditation on the vernacular of philosophy.

Cavafy's Greek is not diachronic but precise or, to use his word, upright. It is able to name ideas and principles as they emerge in human consciousness and become issues for consideration. As such, it is a critical language: it assesses foundational claims. It is also able to recall and activate the history of those claims through various schools of thought, faith, and polities. In a sense, for those engaged in the Western tradition, this language needs no translation: its exact vocabulary operates on a shared level of abstraction. Cavafy can be always read in the original. In another sense, this language can sustain almost any translation: its exacting vocabulary in the end makes each new rendition its own.

For example, a contemporary rendition of "Empowerment" would produce a poem dealing with knowledge, power, law, justice, subjection, transgression, paradigm, desire, and pleasure—a stunning array of notions and precepts debated in the postmodern world. And yet different renditions, equally faithful to the original, would produce a poem closer to Modernist, Victorian, classical, or other worldviews. This is not because the text is open to many interpretations but because it is composed in Greek—the philosophical idiom that, over the centuries, remains perfectly accessible and thus refuses to become a translation issue.

The twentieth century generated all kinds of extravagant, mystical claims regarding Greek by thinkers who approached it in originary terms. Cavafy understands it very differently—as a capacity rather than a source. He illustrates his view in this poem on the violent power of virtuous knowledge. Greek, he proposes, is the capacity to think destructively and grow creatively. It is the admixture of goodness and excellence, merit and might, beauty and prowess found in arete and resulting in dynamis. In seeking the empowerment of pneuma, Cavafy restores the spirit to its Greek meaning: a cosmic wind breathing life.

Greek is a breeze of thought—the wind that blows philosophy into language.

EMPOWERMENT

He who his [vital] spirit desires to empower,
Must move beyond reverence and subjection.
Some of the laws he will heed,
But mostly he will transgress.

Laws and customs, and beyond the paradigmatic
And inadequate uprightness he will move.
From pleasures, much he will be taught.
He will not fear the catastrophic praxis;
Half the house must be demolished.
Thus he will grow virtuously into knowledge.

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