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THE GREEKS OF ART AND THE GREEKS OF HISTORY[1]

Given its prominence in C.P. Cavafy's poetry, it is understandable that the role of history has consistently attracted a lot of critical attention. More often than not, this attention produces commentaries which reveal the poet's impressive familiarity with primary and secondary sources. At the same time, his historiographic consciousness deserves even more scrutiny, steeped as it is in geographical awareness and philosophical reflection. In addition to being interested in evidence and testimony from the past, Cavafy is preoccupied with the contrapuntal relationship of history and art, time and beauty, reality and imagination. The historicity of personal experience, collective identity, cultural articulation, and political institution inspire him to probe the meaning of the past by dramatising transitional moments of empires on the edge. In order to take a closer look at his historiographic consciousness, I will discuss at some length a poem he never completed, "Ptolemy Euergetes (or Kakergetes)," composed in February 1922 and first published in the unfinished poems which Renata Lavagnini edited as *Atele poiemata 1918–1932* (Athens: Ikaros 1994). Since this edition includes earlier drafts, I am going to draw on them as well both because they do not contradict the latest one and because we do not have a definitive text. However, I am not going to offer an interpretation but rather, with the poem's support, reflect on historical understanding and its emblems.

The occasion of the piece is a closed reading in the Alexandrian palace, a reading by a court poet to a small, limited audience which includes the king, Ptolemy VIII the Euergetes/Benefactor II (c.182–116 BC). We are in vintage Cavafian territory familiar to us from several poems that deal with interpretive issues, such as "Young Men of Sidon (AD 400)," "Dareios," "The Enemies," and "If Dead Indeed," to name but a few. The poet remains nameless since he has not made a name for himself. Though he is welcome in the palace and arestos/agreeable to its circles, he is neither dektos/acceptable to the famous Museum (which was established by Ptolemy I Soter, 367-282 B.C., the founder of the

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1 This paper was first presented at the conference "New Perspectives on Cavafy" which was held on November 22, 2003, at University College London. The author is grateful to the organiser, Dr. Dimitris Papanikolaou, French Department, for inviting him to participate.

Ptolemaic dynasty) nor well known at the intellectual center of Athens. Thus this is a rather charged occasion since the poet is presenting his work before his best, maybe his only, audience and needs to perform as well as he can. He must make a favorable impression and please the court if he wants to remain a pleasing writer.

The hero of the poem read on this occasion, probably a symposium, before the Greek king is an earlier Greek king, the Spartan Agesilaos II (c.445–359 BC). The poem focuses on an early episode of his forty-year reign, the abandoned Asian campaign. During the early years of the Spartan hegemony (404–371 BC), which followed the Athenian defeat and the end of the Peloponnesian War, the Greeks of Asia Minor supported the viceroy Cyrus, brother of the Persian king Artaxerxes II, who in 401 made a bid for the throne. When Cyrus failed, the Greeks, fearful of reprisals, asked Sparta for help. The Spartans saw this as an opportunity to present themselves as defenders of all Greece against foreign oppression, and not merely victors in a prolonged civil war, so in 396 BC they dispatched their new king to Asia Minor with a large army of Spartans and mercenaries. Determined to establish a clear parallel with the Trojan War, Agesilaos went to Aulis to sacrifice a deer to the gods as Agamemnon had done. He was the first king to be sent to liberate the Greeks from Persian suzerainty. However, a year later the cities of Thebes, Athens, Corinth, and Argos led a revolt against Sparta, which was forced by indecisive developments to recall Agesilaos home in 394 BC despite his initial successes. It is conceivable that, had the Spartans mounted a pan-Hellenic expedition under their leadership, they could have focused Greek energies on the Persians, and avoided renewed civil hostilities. But they were too obsessed with their hegemonic power and goals to mobilise the nation and unite it in an anti-Persian front.

The subject of the poem is not the expedition itself but the *aisthemata*/emotions and *gnomes*/opinions it stirred in Greece. The composition depicts neither the launch nor the military successes in Asia Minor but the reactions in the mainland, which had been ravaged by the fierce war (431–404 BC) between Athens and Sparta. Thus it seems to avoid the historical facts themselves, probably assuming some familiarity on the part of the audience, and takes on a more speculative task as it praises the Greeks back home for their unanimous enthusiasm.

The poet's performance concludes successfully as the court audience, probably the king as well, praise him warmly for his work until the ruler raises an objection. Not for nothing has the king acquired the nickname *Physcon*/Potbelly: he is obscenely fat and languid, and at the end of another huge meal the reading has almost put him to sleep. Yet he also studied literature, loves to argue, and probably goes often to the Museum, from which the court poet is excluded, to take part in scholarly debates, earning for himself another nickname, *philologos*. Plutarch refers to people *mahomenoi*/fighting with him

through the night on issues of language, verse and history, in which he considered himself learned. He has also been working on his voluminous *Hypomnemata*, an encyclopedic compilation ranging from biography and history to ethnography and geography. So Physcon emerges momentarily from his somnolence to raise an objection that reflects some vague knowledge based primarily on a recollection from the time when he studied Greek history as a youth. In his slumber, he has caught a historical discrepancy and decides to point it out.

The king praises the poet by calling him "wise" but notes that his verses, though "very good," have neglected historical truth by including inaccuracies and producing exaggerated claims. His intervention brings about an embarrassing moment: is this an innocuous remark which hopes to correct the record but leaves artistic merit intact or does it threaten to turn the performance into a disaster? Can the author afford to appear ignorant of Greek history or is he in danger of losing the favor of his indispensable audience? How serious is the slumbering king's challenge? Does the poet need to respond or can he let the remark slip as the audience dissolves? One thing is certain: the verses have moved from the stage of their original composition to that of performance and now to the third one of interpretation. This is as common as it is precarious in Alexandria, the world capital of explication, where texts are everywhere analysed, edited, stabilised, canonised, and disseminated.

Realising that the reception of his performance has shifted from artistic quality (which was approved) to historical truth (which is questioned), the poet attempts to return to the initial framework by telling his king, whom he calls "glorious," that his criteria are *epousiode*/non-essential. Instead of trying to correct the historical record, he contests the very ground of the debate by calling it irrelevant. To his enterprise as a writer, the matter of history is immaterial. The situation in the court intensifies as this exchange takes a marked agonistic turn.

Ptolemy is willing to amplify. To prove that the poem's references to Greek unanimity are baseless, Ptolemy cites three incidents: when king Agesilaos went to Aulis, the Thebans insulted him and did not allow him to sacrifice; while the Spartans were advancing in Asia Minor, the Athenian general Conon commanded the Persian fleet and partly manned it with Greek rowers; and the combined Theban, Corinthian and other revolt in the mainland forced Agesilaos to abandon his promising campaign, return home, and engage in more fratricide. How can the author characterise such overwhelming evidence as irrelevant? The king quotes from the poem and challenges him to prove that the Greeks willingly joined the expedition, exhibiting their pride, patriotism, and heroism.

It is important to note that Ptolemy has no criticism for the literary accomplishment, which he praises in earlier drafts of Cavafy's poem, but is disturbed by its historical

license: How can the piece celebrate harmony of feelings when there were so many public actions to the contrary? This depiction of Greek opinion during the Asia Minor campaign does not fit the record. It might be wonderful to believe that when the Greeks had a unique opportunity to rid Asia Minor of the Persian Empire they went to war with unqualified unanimity, but the bitter truth is that, while the Spartans were advancing victorious, other Greeks did all they could to undermine their efforts. Instead of learning a lesson from the Peloponnesian War and overcoming their differences, they resumed ethnic infighting with renewed vigor.

Everybody at the symposium must now be clearly startled to hear the drowsy king cite entire lines which apparently made more than a passing impression on him. Even more startled is the author whose verses have been now not just recited but quoted against him. Adept in the skills of commentary, the king has upstaged the poet. How can he respond? By making for his craft the strongest defense he can: the "Greeks of Art" should not be confused with those of history because they are emblematic ones, and so they are bound to feel as their maker wants them to feel. Therefore historical evidence cannot invalidate their views. This approach refuses to observe the norms of history. Astonishingly, it refuses to observe the standards of the court as well. The nameless poet who made a living satisfying the taste of the court, when challenged by the philologist king to an agon about the accountability of poetry, defies all risks and rises to the defense of his art, standing up for the "Greeks of Verse": poetry can obey only its own rules as it creates its own coherent universe. Thus it claims for itself freedom of action – freedom as a dramatic (rather than plastic) practice. Hence the dramatic form of Cavafy's poem which does not just narrate but enacts the ancient poet's affirmation of freedom as he moves from virtuosity of performance to performative virtue.

The contest seems to have reached an impasse. It is hard to see how a compromise can be found between the competing values of history and art, the worlds of reality and imagination. Both the king's adherence to facts and the poet's advocacy of verses can claim better access to the truth of the past. And the two interlocutors can use each other's personal predicament to discredit their favorite view, turning court dependence against the poet and physical degeneration against the ruler. Ptolemy is "scandalised" as much by the poetic claim as by the poet's annoying persistence. He never liked the Alexandrians anyway since they supported his brother, Ptolemy VI Philometor, in 163 BC and made Euergetes rule in Cyrene until his brother's death in 145 BC, so he attempts to end the contest by dismissing them collectively as "incurably light." Maybe they have become like that, maybe that has been their *ethos* all along. These are the people characterised as mocking, ironical, and scoffing in another unfinished poem in the Lavagnini volume, "The Dynasty," written a year later (November 1923) and originally called "The Family of Physcon".

Since the king's insult was not unexpected, strong, or personal, the poet could have let the sleepy ruler exit with a sense of victory in a discussion that had escalated into a debate. But the agonistic impulse does not allow him to yield, and instead inspires him to run to the defense of his fellow citizens by reminding Ptolemy that, as the leader of the Alexandrians, he is equally susceptible to an ethos of lightness – or, we might add, heaviness, as his physical condition testified in every move.

In his last words, the king does not get angry. Responding, as provoked, on the personal level, he concedes that to some degree he too is an Alexandrian but also proclaims his Macedonian heritage, which he characterises as pure and unmixed. Suddenly, swept by pride, the king exclaims in a marvelous Cavafian apostrophe that the great Macedonian genos/lineage is full of *andreia*/bravery, *drasis*/action, and *sophrosyne*/prudence. It is an exclamation full of admiration for the old kingdom, nostalgia for the gone glory, and sadness for the current decline. It exalts a different agonistic environment, that of action rather than rhetoric. It offers an affirmation of history, this time not through the clarification of facts but the creation of excellence which action inspires. Finally, it also represents a stray thought, a missed connection, the wrong turn of a hazy mind. This pure descendant of the Macedonians can hardly finish his sentence as his eyes are heavy from *polyphagia*, *polyposia*, and *polysarkia*. His irrepressible slumber brings the exchange, and the poem, to a close.

Since we have witnessed a competition without a resolution, it is tempting to look for a winner: which side does the poem take? From the start, it is hard to determine where to search for an answer. For example, we can examine Cavafy's personal circumstances as, at the moment of composition in February 1922, he is looking forward to the expiration of his contract in his "hateful" job at the end of March, when he will finally be able to devote the rest of his life exclusively to poetry. Following his resignation in December 1921 from the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, where he worked for thirty years, we can imagine that he would empathise in many respects with the ancient poet who, as the debate with the king reveals, truly believed in art but was forced to sell his wares in that most un-Greek of institutions, the court, in order to make a living.

We can look at the national scene in February 1922 as the Greek army is marching in the Turkish interior toward Ankara and its fateful defeat. To the Greeks, the campaign to Asia Minor in 1921 had as its goal the liberation of Ionian cities and invoked such precedents as the Trojan War and Alexander's expedition. The following year, when the situation at the front was deteriorating and the looming catastrophe was alarming many Greeks, the modern Alexandrian poet presented an ancient Alexandrian poet working on another Greek expedition (the Spartans') in the same area (Asia Minor) with the same goal (liberation from eastern oppression), the same conscious resonance (Trojan War) and in the wake of a national schism (like the one between Royalists and

Venizelists in 1916–17), an expedition which, after initial successes, was abandoned (like Agesilaos') because of fraternal fighting in the mainland.

However, surviving drafts show that the limited importance of historical events is further diminished as the composition centers on the question of interpretation, specifically, the legitimacy of history and art as its sources. Should the poem's claims about Greek opinion during the Spartan campaign be evaluated historically (in terms of their external accuracy) or aesthetically (in terms of their internal consistency)? Questions that dominated the hermeneutic center of the ancient world continue to exercise their fascination as philosophy tries in vain to adjudicate the mimetic quarrel.

Since these arguments are coming from the receiver and the composer respectively, they permutate into claims about the interpretive priority of reader and writer which refer not only to Ptolemy and his poet but to Cavafy and us as well. Can we question his poetry on grounds like those of Euergetes, in fact by appealing to both ancient and twentieth-century history? As he has done in several other poems, Cavafy dramatises with tremendous awareness the potential claims of history on the reception of poetry, including his own. Experienced readers can hear in Ptolemy's indignation the voice of Cavafy who strove so painstakingly for historical accuracy and, as successive commentators have admitted, managed to get all his facts right. They can also hear in the poet's pride the voice of Cavafy who always defended the capacity of poetry to create its autonomous world.

In addition to reader and writer, the interlocutors are ruler and ruled, which places interpretation in the framework of power. Besides matters of epistemological and chronological priority, appraisals of interpretive validity are affected by power relations which directly influence truth claims. The king's opinion in a court context carries tremendous weight, affecting not only reception but poetic production itself. Correspondingly, the poet's defiance suggests the possibility of resistance. Related considerations need to take into account alternative institutional settings, from the ancient Museum to the modern literary magazine in Alexandria where reputations and discourses were established and dismantled periodically.

This leads to the more general question of where the text ends and context begins or, through alternative articulations, whether there is no outside-the-text or simply no "text." Taking the latter approach first and assuming that there is no such thing as a text-in-itself, should the court environment, with its specific norms of literary production and consumption, be considered as defining context, only the performative reading, or the work's historical subject alone? But then how much of that environment can a court poet afford to jettison before losing his very function and finding himself courtless?

Taking an intertextual approach may be more productive, especially when it comes to a poet with several interconnected projects. We can benefit from an examination of

Cavafy's dazzling layering of quotes, comprised of both real and imaginary passages, where so many techniques of understanding are tested within the poems themselves. We can benefit from thematic comparisons since Cavafy studied the dynasty of the Lagides for at least thirty years, from the unpublished "The Hospitality of Lagides" (1893) till the unfinished "The Dynasty" (1923). We can benefit from a close parallel reading of a poem also composed in February 1922, "Those who Fought for the Achaean League." That poem incorporates an imaginary quote, an epigram composed by a nameless writer in 110–109 BC during the rule (116–80 BC) of Ptolemy IX Soter II, also known as Lathyrus/Chickpea (who also appears in the aforementioned unfinished 1923 poem "The Dynasty), elder son of Euergetes, also known as Physcon. The epigram comments on the defeat of the Greek League by the Romans in 146 BC. That poem could support the conjecture that the Ptolemy poem is taking place sometime after the defeat which launched the Latin occupation of the Greek world; after the accession of Euergetes to the throne as a single ruler following the death of his brother Ptolemy VI Philometor; and after political turmoil caused many distinguished intellectuals to flee Alexandria, confirming another Ptolemy nickname, Kakergetes/Malefactor. Both poems could be seen as contrasting a heroic past to the shameful present, a united people to a divided one, and of course the action of history to the mere story-telling of literature.

Beyond this angle, when the king directs attention to the Alexandrians, he challenges literary meaning with a broader, culturalist view that portrays the poem as a product of its time and place. In turn, when the poet moves to the same level, he portrays the king's view too as such a product. Nobody is immune from the Alexandrian ethos. Creativity is conditioned by its time and place and cannot transcend them.

The culturalist view facilitates the introduction of another factor, collective identity. Earlier references to Agesilaos' expedition contrasted the Greeks and the Persians but also suggested that the contents of the former were also under negotiation. As the debate moves to the present, the essence of Greekness becomes more complicated. For example, is Macedonian more Greek than Alexandrian? Is Alexandrian more eastern than Macedonian? Where are the Romans? Who are the barbarians? What is the true spirit of Hellenism? Correspondingly, can composition and interpretation be authentically Greek or is all understanding, like identity, syncretic?

It is not just a matter of interpretation. Macedonians distinguish themselves in action and prudence while Alexandrians in literature (like the poet and his colleagues at the Museum) and excess (like the king and his dynasty). Which stance represents Greek values better, valor or pleasure? Again, not a choice that many Cavafian figures find easy to make. Many might even prefer to reject its terms altogether as respectively archaic and epicurean in favor of moral hybridity.

Surely the contrast is meant to foreground a sense of decline, comparing ancient glory to current corruption and the painful belatedness that follows every classicism. Instead of flattering continuity, the poem ridicules the Hellenic pretenses of worthless authors, court sycophants, and rotten leaders. As the second century B.C. was drawing to a close, an entire world was coming to its pathetic end with the Roman conquest, and just as was happening in 1922 to the Greek presence in Asia Minor despite irredentist delusions promoted by servile artists.

And yet the poem is not that harsh on literary aspirations and does not necessarily identify them with present poverty. Interpretation is not a unique Alexandrian virtuosity or predicament. Verses in earlier drafts refer to the captivating launch of the campaign to Asia Minor. The Spartans, who had just won the Peloponnesian War, were determined to invest this ambitious project with double authority: in terms of identity, with the ethnic authority of a pan-Hellenic enterprise even though only Spartan and mercenary soldiers were participating; and in terms of history, with the mythical authority of an enterprise that was about to repeat and extend the Trojan War some nine centuries later. In order to achieve this double authority, those Spartan men of action engaged in grandiose literary interpretation: they attempted to re-enact the pan-Hellenic launch of the Trojan War as told in the epic and dramatic traditions by conducting sacrifices in Aulis. Having admired the "Greeks of Verse," they aspired to become such Greeks themselves.

However, long before the early 4th century BC, no city was allowed to interpret the epic tradition so violently as to claim it for itself and, despite their supremacy, the Spartans were not going to become an exception. As Plutarch tells the story in the *Life of Agesilaos*, just when the king, playing Agamemnon, crowned the deer and ordered his own seer to proceed, the Beotian leaders interrupted the ritual, forbade him to violate their local customs and, as Cavafy puts it, "insulted" Agesilaos. The fleet left with the king interpreting the interruption of his performative interpretation as a bad omen for the expedition and becoming despondent over a humiliation that was going to reverberate around the Greek world. At the point when we are tempted to side with history, the irreconcilable disagreement between the Spartan and Theban leadership in 396 BC reminds us that history too can draw directly on literature.

Had Ptolemy not sunk into his long-delayed sleep, the poet could have responded to his last retort that his Macedonians are equally emblematic. Though the nation constituted ethnically, historically, and geographically a composite entity, a cultural admixture, in the philologos' version they represent the Greeks of History. Both art and history produce their own invented Hellenes, each with their distinct legitimacy. These Greeks may not be factual but are very real to the extent that they become objects of belief, attack, or emulation. Neither are they all of the same value since their impor-

tance depends on the concrete ways in which people shall relate to them and refashion them.

Who can decide, then, whether Ptolemy VIII was a Benefactor or Malefactor, a Physcon or philologos? The Alexandrian poet remained nameless so that he could serve easier as a persona. To put his concern in our terms, what are the feelings and opinions of the Greeks reading in 2003 a poem written in 1922, which describes a debate in the 140s BC regarding the meaning of a contemporary poem dealing with events of 396 BC, events which included a debate regarding the meaning of epic poems, probably from the 8th century BC, narrating the launch of the Trojan War in the 13th century BC? And what are the feelings and opinions of non-Greek readers? And where does it all leave us? Which side does the text, or context, or pretext, truly take? Or is it all a mere exhibition of intertextual virtuosity? The poem appears to raise a number of fundamental overlapping questions: what does it mean to write, to read, to rule, to be late, to be Greek, and who has the authority to decide these issues?

Cavafy is a deeply anti-utopian poet who scorns all eschatological hope. Hence his ethics is based on human dignity rather than divine redemption. A dialectical approach, seeking a resolution or reconciliation of opposites, cannot do justice to his philosophy of history. His poems unfold dramatically on the stage of history as if in a secular *theatrum mundi* which recalls Shakespearean reflections on "the poles and forts of reason" (Hamlet 1.4.28). This stage is populated by syncretic identities, exemplified by hybrid Greeks in multiple roles. From the Trojan war to post-classical, Hellenistic, medieval, and modern ears, Greeks have been collecting dimensions of meaning which do not always cohere. The drama of their public appearance draws also on the historical sense saturating Greek tradition where a combined sense of continuity and rapture, success and failure, respect and rejection mold an irreverent awareness of ethico-political responsibility. The agonistic stance shared by leaders and poets, giants and nobodies, ancients and moderns is disclosed in a living conversation and contestation which all of Cavafy's readers are invited to join. Their spirited interactions inspire tremendous faith in creativity, both artistic and interpretive. Despite historical contingencies, social constraints, and human weaknesses, spurred by agonistic aspirations and critical attitudes, the capacity to create new worlds and horizons continues to flourish. Wise actors on the stage of history are distinguished by an ethics of stoic understanding and prudent integrity. Accepting the serious limitations of all endeavor, they retain a noble faith in humanity's ambition to perform a worthy deed. As Ptolemy succumbs to sleep, and the poem Cavafy devoted to him reaches a bitter conclusion in the silence enveloping the symposium, we are left with a majestic glimmer of memorable hope in the ability of intelligence to rise to critical self-awareness, as it did briefly during the appreciation of some negligible verses at the promiscuous court of a decadent kingdom.