

Stathis Gourgouris

Poiein – Political Infinitive\*

Currently, there is much discussion about the demise of poetics in literary studies with the charge that the invasion of interdisciplinarity is pushing the field away from its object. This is misguided in the way it conceptualizes interdisciplinarity. It forgets that, if it is to be worthy of its name, interdisciplinarity requires, *by definition*, the double work of mastering the canonical *and* the modes of interrogating it. Interdisciplinary training is first of all disciplinary training. It means to take the disciplinary logic to its limit in order precisely to interrogate the construction of the limit. It is thus a transformation of this construction – yes, a *deconstruction*, if you will, so long as the (inter)disciplinarity of deconstruction itself is never reducible to its canon.

In this respect, it goes to the heart of the work of poetics. As transformation, the double work of interdisciplinarity is quintessentially poetic. It is a gesture of *poiein*, by which I mean not merely the art of making but the art of forming (thereby, within the domain of history, transforming). The poet as *homo faber* is the outcome of a Modernist aspiration to shake the sublime burden of the Romantic artist; both notions are themselves historical markings of modernity, no more no less. The most ancient notion of *poiein*, present in Homer – even if not an arbiter of this ambiguity between forming and making – pertains primarily to working on matter, shape, or form, and only secondarily to abstraction, whereby it might suggest availing or producing forms. It is especially interesting to consider that the root reference to creativity (*dēmiourgia*) is instrumentalist. As opposed to a *poiētēs*, a *dēmiourgos* is one whose work derives its primary meaning from the public sphere – the word itself provides the evidence: *dēmos* + *ergon* – covering a range of action from being a seer to being a doctor. The notion is reversed in the modern world, arguably because of the Christian investment in the notion of creation out of the absolute. In Plato, one might say (even though in *Timaeus* you find both notions intertwined) that *dēmiourgos* is in effect a *worker*, one who commits an *ergon*; the poet is a shaper, one who shapes forms. For Plato, of course, shaping forms is always, in the last instance, misshaping, de-forming. Hence his alarm for the poet as a shaper who (trans)forms morals – an entirely political, not ethical, decision, which leaves no other place for the poet but exile from the city.

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From a modern point of view then, *poiein* is characteristically a notion of creative action – of creative/destructive action, it goes without saying – despite the fact that *dēmiourgein* is the verb that, in its Latin derivation (*creatio*), has taken over the range of signification. The struggle between what we can, abusively, call “private” and “public” poetics has not resolved, historically, the social demands posed by the idea of the poet as a shaper of forms. The force of Plato’s political prejudice has been astonishingly long lasting and crucial in the formation of modernity. The transformative power of *poiein*, first of all as a social-imaginary but also as artistic (poetic, strictly speaking) force, is consistently underplayed in favor of a certain analytic relation to knowledge, a philosophical *scientia* which, having fully engaged the permutations of *technē*, has formed the backbone of the pseudo-rationality that animates the instrumental logic of capitalist globalization. I say this because poetry continues to remain intransigent and socially significant in largely pre-capitalist modes of life, even while capitalist logic is raging infrastructurally (economically, technologically, even politically in some cases) at an extraordinary speed and scale. In this respect, philosophically speaking, my understanding of *poiein* must be entwined with a notion of *prattein*, so long as we don’t signify the latter as an instrumental(ist) process, precisely so as to counter the permutations of *technē* as the primary agent of the production of knowledge and the making of history.

A great – if not widely known – poem by C. P. Cavafy stages this predicament inimitably. Because its internal argument is profoundly theatrical, I submit it here in its full staging, despite the length, in my translation:

*Dareios*

Phernazis, the poet, is at work  
on the decisive part of his epic:  
how Dareios, son of Hystaspis,  
took over the Persian kingdom.  
(From him descends our glorious king,  
Mithridatis, Dionysos and Eupator.)  
But this requires philosophy; Phernazis must analyze  
the feelings Dareios must have had.  
Arrogance, maybe, and intoxication? Not really – perhaps  
a certain insight into the vanities of grandeur.  
The poet profoundly contemplates the matter.

But his servant disrupts him, rushing in  
to announce the grave news.  
The war with the Romans has begun;  
most of our army has crossed the borders.

The poet is struck speechless. What a disaster!  
How can our glorious king,  
Mithridatis, Dionysos and Eupator,  
bother about Greek poems now?  
Imagine! In the middle of a war, Greek poems!

Phernazis is torn with anxiety. What misfortune!  
Just as he'd made certain, with his *Dareios*,  
to distinguish himself, to silence fully  
his envious critics.  
What setback, terrible setback to his plans.

And if only a setback, it wouldn't be bad.  
Is there now any safety in Amisos?  
The town is hardly fortified,  
and the Romans are enemies striking terror.  
Do we, Cappadocians, really have a chance  
with them? Can it ever come to be?  
Are we now to go against the legions?  
Great gods, protectors of Asia, do help us!

But throughout this distress, throughout the despair  
stubbornly flashes the poetic idea:  
it is most likely, yes – arrogance and intoxication,  
arrogance and intoxication *Dareios* must have felt.

A mindful reading of “*Dareios*” would preceive another staging of the controversial argument underlying one of Cavafy’s better known poems, “*Young Men of Sidon (400 AD)*” written in the same year (1920). There, Cavafy stages a scene where a young Sidonian poet disrupts a poetic memorial of Aeschylus, railing against the tragedian’s decision to glorify in his epitaph his achievements as a soldier and not as a poet. In “*Dareios*,” Phernazis figures perhaps as a more thoughtful respondent to the classical Greek poetic tradition – both scenes representing a social-imaginary that remains Greek in a world where the last vestiges of a Greek way of life are about to vanish. Phernazis’ task is to write an epic, monumental, poem about the same Persian expedition that became the cause for Aeschylus’ heroics in the battle of Marathon, which he selected to memorialize in his epitaph. In dramatizing the Persian point of view, Phernazis, an imaginary Persian with Greek *paideia*, echoes the Aeschylean poetic gesture as well. Cavafy stages this crossroads with inimitable historical savvy. While Phernazis labors at the poetic representation of an ancient invasion, his own Persian polis (substantially hellenized in the Alexandrian era) finds itself under attack by the invading Romans, a people whose capacity to assimilate Greek modes was commensurable to the exactitude with which they extinguished them.

In this particular framing, the poet of the great past is at war in the present. The quandary resides in whether one should go on writing Greek poems in times of war, a matter of concern to the Athenian Aeschylus as well as to the Persian Phernazis, though the differential nature of history always demands a unique response. Before reality strikes – indeed, striking the poet speechless – Phernazis perceives *poiein* as a philosophical matter. He takes the shaping of form, which in this case significantly concerns the shaping of historical form (a recasting of an event from the standpoint of its internal psychological motive), as a matter of analysis. Here, “writing Greek poems” is hardly a predicament. The act is taken to be a matter of technique, of emulation achieved by analysis – indeed, an act of literary criticism by virtue of poetic/pedagogical heritage alone, an emulation of the canonical (of Aeschylus himself, let us say), which Phernazis executes not by virtue of *poiein* but by virtue of *technē*. The consciousness of “writing Greek poems” becomes possible only because of the war, because present history disrupts the exercise of making poetry out of past history. There is a fabulous folding over of this predicament by the fact that Cavafy himself is characteristically fond of making poetry out of past history, except for the crucial twist in the fold of this particular poem, where the act of poetically re-making history is conducted by an imaginary poet, a poet of poetic invention.

As he comes to the consciousness of his predicament and his act, Phernazis experiences at once a double insight: the poverty of philosophical thinking, of analysis, in the act of poetry and – simultaneously, for this insight is dialectical – the intrinsic affinity of poetry with reality itself, with the radical historical present. The astonishing realization is, of course, that reality itself is poetic – or, from another point of view, that reality is itself the force of *poiein*. Thus, Phernazis comes to realize that his own question as to whether it is prudent to be writing Greek poems in times of war is but an academic question and thereby dismisses its premise. The dilemma, poetry or war, is false. Poetry cannot be understood except in relation to life itself; it is not a matter of technique, a vocation one puts aside to fight in a war. Even at war, *as a warrior*, the poet is at work. It is by being at work on reality, shaping reality into form, that the poet encounters the fine predicaments of his art. “Arrogance and intoxication” is what Phernazis himself might be said to experience in wrestling with this reality, in wrestling with the poetic reality of this reality. He solves his poetic quandary because he grasps, intuitively perhaps, that the way to get into the psychic world of Dareios founding the Persian kingdom which now he (Phernazis) inhabits – several centuries later, centuries of hellenization, now at the precipice of its total catastrophe – is not by imagining what history must have felt like then but what history feels like now, in the radical present time of the poem. The writing of the poem exists in utter *co-incidence* with the making of history. To write Greek poems is thus posed as a question of reality, and his poetic quandary is solved. To write Greek poems has nothing to do with writing them in a specific form, in the Greek language, as elements of a Greek

poetic-political imaginary. Rather, it becomes a matter of being attuned to the elusive details of history-in-the-making. It is to understand that making history is the most profound meaning of *poiein*.

This is why the poet should not be equated with the historian, even when a poem is indeed a bona fide historical document, a text that produces actual historical knowledge. Even if we accept (as I do) that the most precise historical writing must, at some level, be poetic, there is no equation because even the most poetic historical writing, the writing that does indeed *produce the past*, does not (as it should not) obliterate the narrative frame of deciphering the world. And although, surely, poetry does also narrate, the force of *poiein* pertains to a radical sense of the present, as something, if not boundless, then indeterminately bounded and perhaps even ‘interminably’. When I link *poiein* to history-in-the-making, I understand it precisely as shaping matter into form in such a way that the form itself becomes the cipher for the utterly elusive meaning of its own (trans)formation.

This shaping does not really have a precise temporality; hence, traditional methods of historiography cannot grasp it. Its working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, which would not spare even itself. (The cliché notion of a poem always being at work on itself, on making itself into a poem, should be understood here as an elemental force of *poiein*.) The duration of shaping matter into form, as Henri Bergson would have it, occurs in (or as) a radical present. This is a paradoxical condition, but that is why its boundaries exceed the capacity of both narration and symbolization (indeed, discipline), and can only be considered graspable in a performative vein. The energy of *poiein* is theatrical: literally, to form is to change form (including one’s own). It is an infinitive force, in a strange way an attribute of the infinite, yet not pertaining to space but to action in space – a force that forms and yet, grammatically, bears language’s many forms. The political substance of *poiein* is thus not just signified by its constitutively transformative power, which would be a mere abstraction, but by the fact that, since its ancient meaning, it pertains to humanity’s immanent (even if perpetually self-altering) encounter with the world.

Stathis Gourgouris is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California-Los Angeles and President of the Modern Greek Studies Association.