

The Cavafy Sense, the Cavafy Sensuality
By Katie Hartsock

After I finished reading Constantine Cavafy's canon for the first time, I was overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed by his intelligent humanism; that distinctive combination of a sharp understanding of and relation to history, a unique Greek flavoring of all material, and his honest but never gratuitous portrayal of the power and folly of desire. This is a blurring of grandiose abstracts, I know, but even now, after years of reading Cavafy, I am still overwhelmed.

I know of few moments as poignant as when, in "The Horses of Achilles," Zeus asks them, "What are you doing down there, / among woebegone humanity, the plaything of fate?"¹ Cavafy achieves ultimately prophetic tones in "The Ides of March," "Ithaca," and "The City." He expresses the blend of culture and desire he presently experiences by invoking the past, as in "The Tomb of Iases";

. . . Traveler,
if you are an Alexandrian, you will not condemn. You know
the rushing torrent of our life; what ardor it has; what supreme pleasure.

What attracts me to Cavafy so profoundly is the basis of a certain beautiful logic from which all his poems stem. Whether exposing the fallible instinct to parade before inferiors as in "Expecting the Barbarians," or seeking a cosmic reason for lovers' separation in "Before Time Changes Them," Cavafy exhibits a provocative sense, a historical sensuality, in his work.

Yet this is not an essay about Cavafy's achievement, which need not be further established. This is a speculation—how may poets continue to describe their worlds in a

¹ All quotes are from Rae Dalven's translation.

similar way? Another reason I am overwhelmed when I read Cavafy is that his acute and sincere intelligence is a trait which is painfully lacking in most contemporary poetry. To be musical and logical, to move closer to a relevant truth by referring to the past, to be frank and not exploitive regarding desire and the body; these are characteristics I miss in many currently practicing poets. As soon as I read Cavafy, I knew that, as a poet, I had encountered a voice which I yearned to emulate. First, I believe that it is possible to work on a poem under Cavafy's influence and yet make it singular. Consider this prose poem (with a Cavafy-conscious title) by Khaled Mattawa:

Days of 1933

A man walks down a street and sees a young woman. He turns around and follows her. He does this for a while surprised by the unexpected return of youth. In the depot he loses her among the crowds. A train arriving from the country, farmers, sacks of mangoes, ducks, and chickens. It's been many years since the last time he ended up here, since he felt happy to be in a crowd. But soon he begins to feel foolish and old because every day farmers bring their mangoes and chickens to Alexandria, and everyday a young woman boards a train and is never seen again.²

Mattawa's description of a quotidian situation allows him to portray "the unexpected return of youth" without it seeming cliché, just as Cavafy can render grandiose ideas by balancing them with seemingly plain environments. Mattawa, also like Cavafy, beautifully creates the sad imperfect emotions of old age. Yet he does not allow himself to end somewhat pathetically on that notion, but rather he finishes on a timeless and engaging scene. After reading this piece I felt similarly to the way I do after reading Cavafy; wholly satisfied with the insightful vision and explanation, but also still left with a sort of restless ache for the world that produces these sights.

² Mattawa, Khaled. Ismailia Eclipse. Sheep Meadow Press, New York; 1995.

And my question most relevant to my work; how can I do it? My classical background usually allows me to appreciate Cavafy more than someone without one, but how can I transcend that knowledge basis into a knowledgeable writing of a poem? These poems strive to honor but certainly not strictly copy Cavafy. I address themes about which I feel strongly, but Cavafy would probably agree with me that trying to name them outside of the poem lessens their effect. The only notes I wish to make is that the two penultimate poems, "Paradise Alley" and "For Him Without Him", try to describe lovers' situations as a type of cosmic epigram, as Cavafy achieves in his third-person lovers' poems. Also, the last poem, "Mimesis," is probably the most outwardly un-Cavafy-like poem in that it partially celebrates a happy love, a kind of poem Cavafy never wrote, at least so far as we have seen. However, I believe that it is written in confluence with Cavafy's method. In all pieces I have tried to converse with Cavafy through my way of understanding his sense, his sensuality.

Song of the Dunghill Cock

Rise, you beasts! Wrench your eyes open!

The purple sky I see will be blue to you,
and the dawn is hushing night's air away—

yet you sniff in the straw, turn over
into more dark behind your eyes in your stalls,
or warm bedrooms, where you remain oblivious.

Every morning I climb this mound, my red
talons prancing, and I pick and peck out
all the goodness still there, then I call!

Long ago the god told my fathers to clamor,
to rouse and wake you, but oh you love no weight,
you love lax limbs and sleep, uninspired.

I sense his hair streaming golden beyond the chariot,
I sneeze at the dust wheeling over clouds,
and I hear the nimble hooves you forget.

The sky is purple and it will be gone,
the dawn is chanting away the chills;

Here he is! Only I rise with him.

Memento Mori

Antony has lost at Actium.
The queen demands the asp
to escape Octavian's hand.
He would showcase her in his triumph,
her feet in chains and sandals stained
from the dust of the Via Sacra and old lovers.

There is, she remembers now, one thing
she would have liked to see—the reminding.
In his own triumphs, Caesar said he almost laughed.
Standing behind the general in the chariot,
a slave will dangle a laurel wreath
right over Octavian's head,
and whisper in his ear all the parade long,
“*Memento mori, memento mori.*” The snake
is in her hands. It is an Etruscan tradition she loves;
amidst the spoils he presents to the patrimony
and illustrious name of Rome, he,
the general, must listen to a slave
repeating, *remember you will die.*
The asp slithers up her chest, licks her neck;
it could be the kiss of any conqueror.

Private Achilles

Hubris is in the eye of the commander.
A soldier squats on the man-tall tires of a tank,
claims he will not move.
The general points his gloved finger
at the allied battlefield deities,
impatient and feeling defied.
The soldier retorts, *However, however.*
He will not move
until he is returned to his woman,
or until his mother descends from the clouds
to call him coward unless he rejoins.
There are no clouds.
The general saddles his hands on his holsters
and grumbles to the horizon,
“Oh, these men you’ve given me.”

Aiolos to the Winds

My charges, I shall bag you up no more, stuffed
in the skin of nine-year-old ox, for any heroes
hateful to the immortals. Those wretched oar-men
who thought you silver and gold—no treasure
would have rammed them into its own storm.

And the fabulous laggard, dozing at the helm!
Why fall asleep so close to the goal, kinsmen
in sight, tending fires by the homeland shores?
He could have told his men what you were;
captains ought to save sailors from themselves.

He wasn't ready to dock. Some anticipation
of domesticity closed his eyes; a bed on the ground,
dependable dinners. This man wants to shoot stags
on an empty stomach. He's accustomed to customs;
he lands, he makes lovely stories, he sails.

I will be more careful with my favors. I gifted you,
guised you as plunder. It's easy to help wanderers
who drift to this blessed island I seldom wish to leave.
I should have told him some tales of happy stasis.
He blows now to no normal men, no eaters of bread.

The Natural Look

*"Just look at the colors the shapely earth raises up;
 . . . Just like color in the paintings of Apelles."
 -Propertius, Elegies 1.2*

So the poet persuaded his mistress to resist
 dresses, myrrh, make-up; the allure of artifice.
 Do not think me cheaper, he wrote, for lauding
 naked love and you,
 or reverting to art to explain.
 He arranged apples in her palms as she slept,
 plaited her hair to his ideas.
 We do like to highlight ourselves,

lay a frame around our nature.
 My photographer friend and I hike
 through aureate afternoons,
 as thin shadows of trees stencil the hills
 and inedible berries stain dirt.
 She rectangles her thumbs and forefingers
 before her eyes and scans,
 clicks her tongue
 as she tosses her net on light.
 It's difficult to be somewhere beautiful
 and convince yourself you don't want proof

of yourself. Lovers with car keys
 or pocketknives carve into trees
 abbreviated assurances of their eternal.
 We persuade ourselves
 that we will last longer
 by tracing a finger over the cuts.
 I think about words, she about color,
 and on our faces we wear the wild civility
 of the natural look—
 trying to look like we don't try at all.

On a rock that smells like water,
 whose forehead is a moon over stream,
 people have scraped words, satiric and lonely.
 A question also is posed,

“Why do people write on rocks?”
by an artificer almost aware of herself.

Paradise Alley

Above a shop of deviate pleasures
lived her first real lover.
He drove a mail truck most days
and painted in the evenings.
They swirled their heads
together most nights;
smoke stealing out the window-screens,
and green brushstrokes on her belly.
She had to move, and misunderstood
what distance does.
She goes out of her way
now when she's in town
to drive down the avenue
past the secretive gray brick building,
whosever lights are curtained
behind the second floor windows.
There is no sign but she stops.
And also that shop—
she's never seen it open,
been able to go in.

For Him Without Him

As a sapling on a new moon night
feels the growth and gleam of its twigs and bends
with no light or eyes around. Wearing his t-shirt
with her green silk scarf and amber necklace, she can
change the color of her eyes; although it looks the same
to her, she looks for the difference he would tell.
When she undresses, he must be with her but he is not
and she is restless, and all the rest of her too restless
for even her touch if it is not his.
She is an inelegant tree as she timbers
into bed by herself,
and her beauty echoes for him.
She asks that old probable question:
Do I make a noise?
And isn't that silly?
Of course she does.

Mimesis

I fear tragedy as we almost sleep,
around me his arms, or around him mine.

I fear the Fates for those who, busy being blissful,
are marked for tragedy. I couldn't say why.

I appeal to Aristotle—"Assume he and I are doomed.
You say tragic characters are of a higher value than comedic;
could this be a consolation?" Aristotle appears, in all earnestness.

He tells me he likes that picture of me and Plato at the Parthenon
in Berlin; the old man's solemn bust missing a nose,

his eyes wise and lifeless, as I am open-mouthed smiling

like a frolicsome nymph feeling her ass pinched, exclaiming, "Oh!"

Aristotle tells me to remember my face and listen to the Beach Boys.

"*Pet Sounds* is *aristos*, and 'Good Vibrations' is the embodiment,
yes," he said, "I said, embodiment of Friday night blossoming,
a first sight theme song, a saw playing itself in your head."

He would have included them in Poetics, these beach boys, as
none knew how to surf, and the only one who could swim, drowned.

"But first, my cow-eyed lady"—he loves those Homeric epithets—

"do listen to 'Don't Worry.'" Aristotle does not hit an attractive high note
as he pitches, "*Oh, what she does to me, when she makes love to me
and she says, Don't worry, baby, everything's gonna turn out fine.*"

My love turns over and I nuzzle my nose into his chest.

O his perfect armpit hair, how I adore it! He asks me
what my mumbles mean; am I laughing, or not?

