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## Constantinos Cavafy: conscious intuition

### ABSTRACT

The voice of Konstantinos Cavafy (1863-1933) is impregnable. Not only for his thrifty portion of dream delivered to us, but for the secret shadow translucent as a whisper: the last being of the children of an aristocratic family that then fell, the employment at the Ministry of Irrigation in Alexandria, Egypt, homosexuality, the fascination for English-speaking literature, being secluded and, finally, the discovery, as a sort of anonymous emergence of the light of his flying cards. Like a round of coffee or a recess of history, a line on the glass.

### RIASSUNTO

La voce di Konstantinos Kavafis (1863-1933) è impren-  
dibile. Non solo per la sua parsimoniosa porzione di  
sogno consegnataci, ma per l'ombra segreta traslucida  
come un sussurro: l'essere ultimo dei figli di una famiglia  
aristocratica poi decaduta, l'impiego presso il ministero  
dell'Irrigazione ad Alessandria d'Egitto, l'omosessualità,  
il fascino per la letteratura anglofona, l'essere appartato  
e, infine il rinvenimento, come una sorta di emersione  
anonima della luce delle sue carte volanti. Come un giro  
di caffè o un recesso della storia, una linea sul vetro.

KEY WORDS: *poetry, myth, symbol,  
intuition, conscience, literary  
criticism.*

The voice of Constantinos Cavafy (1863-1933) is impregnable. Not only for his thrifty portion of dream delivered to us, but for the secret shadow translucent as a whisper: the last being of the children of an aristocratic family that then fell, the employment at the Ministry of Irrigation in Alexandria, Egypt, homosexuality, the fascination for English-speaking literature, being secluded and, finally, the discovery, as a sort of anonymous emergence of the light of his flying cards. Like a round of coffee or a recess of history, a line on the glass:

«From what I have done and from what I have said / don't try to understand  
who I was. / They were an obstacle and they changed / my way of acting  
and living. / They were an obstacle that often blocked me / when I was  
about to speak. / From my less obvious actions / and from my most secret  
writings - / they'll only understand me. / But maybe so much effort and

care / to get to know me isn't worth it. / In the future - in a better society - / someone else like me / of course there will be and will act freely» (*Secrets*).

Despite the vast knowledge and fine care of his texts in Italian and the reading of poets like Vittorio Sereni who took over his «carnal religion<sup>1</sup>» or of sleepy Alexandria and never readier to shine than the young Ungaretti he met in the boulevard cafes, even today his poetry, thanks to the care of Maria Paola Minucci (*Tutte le poesie*<sup>2</sup>, Donzelli), has been published in full, taking as reference the critical edition of Iorgos Savvidis.

In the speech at the end of the volume, the scholar notes that the beginning of Cavafy's poetry is influenced by the romantic influence, the insisted symbolism, which consists of a sutured linguistic gestation of vernacular and refined spelling:

«If Cavafy moves, initially at least, in a symbolist area and with Parnassian experiments, he will soon end up overcoming both of them, personalizing and «dramatizing» certain of their formal modules, choosing an unequivocally his own path and in many cases a precursor of the turning points and new orientations of poetry. [...] Cavafy starts from poetic exercises close to the expressive ways and romantic tests of the Athenian School. The lyrics of this period are often characterized by the use of an insisted symbolism which is nevertheless significant because it shows, above all in the lexicon, where he moves his first steps. Attention to form is perhaps the most important element of these texts. We find confirmation of this in an English letter to friend Anastasiadis, where however we also read that his trust in rhyming and in fixed metric schemes is already accompanied by the fear of being too subjected to their rules, with the risk of distorting the contents of the poetry, reducing its «suggestive» effects. That is, it's clear how its adherence to Parnassian metric canons is a critical adherence and at the same time how, in underlining the «suggestive» value of in some of his poems, he relates to a pre-symbolist and symbolist poetic conception».<sup>3</sup>

If this is a symbolist dialogue, exacerbated by a sort of oxymoronic eccentricity, it relates to the history and the antiquity buried and secret («Many poems written / in my heart; and those buried songs are very dear to me»), with the impossibility

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Sereni V. (a cura di) (1971): Giorgos Seferis, Kavafis e Eliot: paralleli. In *Poesia, prosa, traduzioni*, note e bio-bibliografia di Filippo Maria Pontani. Torino: Utet, pp. 547-584.

<sup>2</sup> Kavafis C. (2019): *Tutte le poesie*. a cura di Paola Maria Minucci. Roma: Donzelli.

<sup>3</sup> Minucci P. M. (2019): *I canti sepolti e le pagine bianche della storia*. in Kavafis C. cit., pp. 690-691.

and urgency of rereading, through the Audenian *tone of voice*, which as Montale wrote «consists in realizing that the Hellenum of that time corresponded to the *homo europaeus* of today; and in being able to immerse yourself in that world as if it were ours<sup>4</sup>».

His peculiar voice, therefore, dissociates himself from all definability but becomes a paradigm suspended between glory and decline («Of the future the wise intuit / what is approaching. Their hearing, / sometimes, in hours of intense study, / is shaken. The secret outcry reaches them / of the facts that come close. / And they listen to it with devotion. Outside, on the street, however, the people hear nothing»), primordiality and empirical instinct («They closed me out of the world and not me I noticed it»):

«which passes through times and civilizations, places, languages, cultures, without moving a millimeter. [...] The secret or hidden heart of these poems is something that can only be alluded to, not a voluntarily hidden personal truth. It will be then for one of those contradictions or those reversals that give rise to poetry, that this poet of the most intimate secrecy voted, all the more in maturity, in telling the story of distant eras (Greek classicism, Hellenism, age Byzantine), of characters lost in time, of stories and myths that appear, however, stripped of any neoclassical or humanistic guarantee. In short, one poet of the other and of the others, primarily by virtue of a formidable capacity for identification».<sup>5</sup>

The chameleonic election of reality, the burning of the displacement as a reminiscent call of ellipses («You'll not find other places, you'll not find other seas. / The city will follow you. You'll go wandering the same / streets. In the same neighborhoods you will grow old, / and you will turn white between these same houses. / You will always arrive in this city. For other places - do not hope - / there is no ship or road for you. / The life you have wasted / in this narrow hole, in all the land there you have wasted»), as uncertain and hard insatiability, he looks at the ancient and feels the ineffable subtraction nailed:

«In the grip of fear and suspicion, / with a troubled mind and fear in our eyes, / we get agitated thinking about how to do / to avoid the now certain

<sup>4</sup> Montale E., cit., in Montani F., (1961): *Introduzione a Kavafis, Poesie*. Milano: Mondadori. p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Galaverni R., *Mito Kavafis la voce più nascosta*. "La Lettura - Corriere della Sera". 29 dicembre 2019.

danger / that terrible looms threateningly. / But we are wrong, this isn't  
 what awaits us: / the news was false (misunderstood or misinterpreted).  
 / Another disaster, unsuspected, / sudden, violent falls on us, / catches us  
 unprepared - there is no more time - it overwhelms us».

Cavafy's poetry encompasses a non-inert stasis («A monotonous day follows / another monotonous, identical day. / The same things will still happen - / equal moments that come and go. / One month passes and another arrives. / What comes is easy to imagine / they are the same boring things as yesterday. / And in the end tomorrow no longer seems like tomorrow»), it seems to be placed in the solitude that is threatened but by crossing it and offering it, folding in an extreme greeting, in a ritual of exiled courage that brings the soul back to the farewell, History to the fact contained in a segment of oblivion: «An indefinable punishment torments him / punishment for his great weakness. / His instruments are empty, he feels it / yet the soul is full of music. / He tries in vain to express his agreements / secrets, with effort and obstinacy; / his most perfect harmonies remain / within him, mute and suffocated. / The crowd is enthusiastic and admires / how much he criticizes and despises». (*Timòlaos of Syracuse*, 1894). Strangeness isn't a refuge, it's an option to fight.

In *Ithaca*, Cavafy performs its *itinerarium cordis* inside its imaginary room which extends to the outside, Paola Maria Minucci says, «the grafting of the present on the mythological past and evident is clearly stated with the choice of the title. The myth of Ithaca has traditionally coincided with the nostalgia for the homeland, the journey and the journey back to one's origins, to one's home, but here the Ithaca of Cavafy and almost the opposite, Ithaca isn't so much the destination to be reached as rather the journey itself<sup>6</sup>».

In *Trojans*, dualistic deployment then finds absorption. It's the least point of the present fits into the memorial dimension and this rests again on the previous point. Past and present become the terminus of a fate that happens, trying to preserve our shining dignity, despite the joyful and hard passage of time, despoiling and distancing, the subtle narrowness of life and its precarious and grandiose event: «But our defeat is certain. Up there, / on the walls, the lament has already begun, / the mourning of affections and memories of the past. / Priam and Hecuba weep bitterly for us».

The fact, the event, the meeting, the magma of inscriptions, bas-reliefs, lost and unknown points reveal fragility as subtle as dust, the single drama (Aristobulus, for example, and then Caesarion, Nero's thoughts after the Delphic oracle, the epitaph of Lanis, guarded in the lasting domestic image and the impetus of the life of Iassis) that unites a firm uncertain uncertainty, describe a possibility of duration in the contingency, the epoch that is revealed because it has passed and not completely passed

<sup>6</sup> Minucci P. M. cit. p. 703.

away, because close to singing, to the voice, to the genesis of an ancient rite and desire. As in *Oroferne*, whose close resembles a solemn termination of purpose: «Its end was written / who knows where it got lost; / or history has left it out, / and rightly so: insignificant detail, / not worthy of mention. / The face that is here on the tetradrammo / and I leave you a sign of the beautiful youth, / a light of his poetic grace, / a sensual memory of the boy of Ionia, / and the face of Oroferne, son of Ariarate ».

This subtle horizon doesn't shine only because it shows what is submerged, it does not shine only for the detail of that day, it doesn't just become a myth of a glorious era («they are the characters or minor or cultured, with painful irony, at the moment in to whom luck seems to be about to abandon them, inert victims in the face of the uncertainty and fragility of their destiny<sup>7</sup>»), but tries to keep the meridian hours of every imaginative metamorphosis, where the fall, the death, the frangible fragment, the defeat they represent the edge of splendor, the memory of something that has been lived in fullness and remains as a near regret, a bittersweet sound and a surviving happiness.

The time of composition is obedience, exact description, condensation of time and place, act and method, to find an objective correlation that gives shape and rest, breath and transposition, as if the event were present, it can quiver, loose nostalgia and the amazements.

Revisiting to understand, mentalize the aspects of reality in order to be lacking, clash with the disfigurements of the present and become one's own genesis eye: «The room was poor and vulgar, / hidden above the equivocal tavern. / From the window you could see the alley, / dirty and narrow. From below / workers' voices came / playing cards having fun. / And there on that miserable and squalid bed / I had the body of love, I had the lips / sensual and pink of the drunkenness - / pink of such a drunkenness that even now / as I write, after so many years! / only, in this empty house, go intoxicating me again ».

Perceiving the void, even knowing that it's interwoven with presences, corners, glimpses, life that is redeemed and handed over, touches the memory of lips and skin, sapphire distances, worn pleasures and haunted tops: «The image of my young body, / from nine, when I turned on the lamp, / came back awakening the memory / of closed and perfumed rooms / and of past pleasures - what daring pleasures! / And he brought me before his eyes / streets that had become unknown, / places full of movement now closed, / and theaters and cafes of the past. / The image of my young body / returned with memories of pain: / family mourning, separations, / feelings of mine, feelings of the dead, / feelings held in so little regard».

The past image hijacked in the present becomes an imperishable sculpture, like the sea in the morning which destines the illusion and the shadow of memory in an endless becoming:

<sup>7</sup> Id., cit., p.705.

«I do my job carefully and I love it. / But today the slowness of composing discourages me. / It's the fault of time. It gets darker / and darker. There is wind and rain. / I want more to see than talk. / Now I look at this painting, / a handsome young man who has lain down / next to the fountain, exhausted from running. / What a beautiful guy; the divine noon / kidnapped him to put him to sleep. - / I keep looking at it like this, for a long time. / And again in art, I find rest from the effort of art».

It isn't what is annihilating that interests him, but his legacy, the path that opens up to the Apollonian dance of memory and the mirror. It isn't a widowed face, it's a face devoted to full absence, as Josif Brodskij writes:

«By combining sensuality and history, or rather by establishing an equation between them, Cavafy tells his readers (and himself) the classic parable of Eros, lord of the world. On Cavafy's lips the story sounds convincing, all the more convincing because in his historical poems the decline of the Hellenic world dominates, a situation that he, as an individual, reflects in miniature or reflects in many mirrors».<sup>8</sup>

In *Poetica* the Greek poet writes:

«[...] let us consider the vanity of human things, which is a clearer way to express what I have called «the lack of value of any attempt and the inherent contradiction of any human manifestation». [...] Most men must act, and as much as it produces vain things, the impulse to act and the relative obedience to it aren't vain things, because this is consistent with nature, with their nature. Their actions produce works that can be divided into two categories, works of immediate utility and works of beauty. The poet realizes the latter. Since human nature aspires to beauty expressed in different forms - love, order in its environment, landscape - it serves its need. A work done in vain and the brevity of human life can declare all this useless; but as we don't know the connection between the later life and the present life, perhaps this too can be disputed. However, the error lies mainly in this identification. The work is not in vain if we leave out the individual and consider man. Here there is no death or at least safe death: the consequences are perhaps immense; here there is no shortness of life, but an immense duration. So the absolute vanity disappears, at most only a relative vanity can remain to

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Brodskij J. (1987): *Il canto del pendolo*, Milano: Adelphi. Citato in Brullo D., «Tutte le poesie» di Kavafis sono un inno all'antichità. "Il Giornale". 27 dicembre 2019.

the individual, but when the individual separates himself from his work and considers only the pleasure or benefit that this has provided him for a few years and then the great importance for centuries and centuries, even this relative vanity disappears or decreases by far».<sup>9</sup>

The Eros of Cavafy is waiting for shadows. It seems to appeal to them with its subtle ink harmony. Intimacy, pleasure, pagan silence of secrets, the encounter of radiance with its darkness, the design of the beloved up to the spasm become a sigh as long as the duration of the night: «And with their sound for a moment they emerge / sounds from the first poem of life - / like music, distant, which is lost in the night».

Or: «I have looked at beauty for so long / that my sight is full of it. / Body lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs. / Hair as taken from Greek statues; / always beautiful, even if disheveled, / and fall, a little, on the white forehead. / Faces of love, as my poetry wanted them ... in the nights of my youth, / secretly met in my nights ...».

Mystique of flesh and desire, furtive and illicit as a young loss. Details, looks, colors, life that flees and affects infinite and engraved pleasure and then write to live again and again: «The cute face, a little pale; his brown eyes, as if circled; / twenty five years, but it shows twenty ; / something artistic in dressing / - the color of the tie, the shape of the collar - / walks aimlessly in the street, / still stunned by the illicit pleasure, / by that illicit pleasure enjoyed».

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, then, the historical relocation affects the life-blood of an eternal contemporary who destines the blood to an inlaid and ambiguous memory: the emperor, the Senate, the consuls, the praetors in red toga, the barbarians are passages of time in time, like alternating corollaries of silence and word, questions and scenes, agreement-disagreement, in a strange human throw that capitulates before the enemy presents himself<sup>10</sup>:

«The use of narration, historical or otherwise, the dialogical form, the tendency to flesh out language and content are all signs of a departure, of a detachment from the personal and ideal emotional sphere towards the concrete, human reality of the other person in which meet again and get to know each other. The story and the story allow him to internalize the emotions of others, and together to externalize his own. Reflection in the other is an obligatory passage for self-awareness, an awareness of oneself

<sup>9</sup> Kavafis C., *Τα πεζά* (1882;-1931) [Le prose (1882?-1931)] (2010): a cura di M. Pieris. Atene: Ikaros, 2003. 2010, p. 257.

<sup>10</sup> Simić C. *Some Sort of a Solution: Charles Simic reviews 'The Collected Poems' by C.P. Cavafy*, translated by Evangelos Sachperoglou and 'The Canon' by C.P. Cavafy, translated by Stratis Haviaras, in *London Review of Books*, vol. 30, n° 6, 20 marzo 2008, pp. 32-34.

through the encounter with the other. In a broader sense, almost socio-political I would say, and attributable to the same process, Cavafy talks about the present, and sometimes also about the future, talking about the past».<sup>11</sup>

Those passages are drunken life that recalls, grants itself, looks at the density of the sublime moment of Poetry, as something that passes: the city, the boys, the evening. Something returned, kept in a narrow passage of oneself, lived in detail to make itself transitory majesty and dazed and phantasmic memory, to look for a window on the world and where, finally, the body shows itself, isolating itself, becoming, in essence, a body-memory: «In these dark rooms, where I spend / dark days, I go back and forth / looking for windows. - If a window / opens it will be a comfort. - / But the windows are not found, or I don't know / find them. And perhaps it's better not to find them. / Perhaps the light will bring new torments. / Who knows what new things it will show».

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<sup>11</sup> MINUCCI P. M. cit. p. 697.