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Unfinished & Uncollected

Finishing Cavafy’s Unfinished Poems

followed by

Uncollected Poems & Translations

George Economou

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For Rochelle,
Always and All Ways
All-American

The Unexamined Ethnic Life
Is Not Worth Living.
Finishing Cavafy’s Unfinished

“It could well be that there is no really felicitous solution to the editorial challenges these texts present to the would-be translator.”
—Karen Emmerich, “‘Impossible Things’: Editing and Translating C.P. Cavafy’s Unfinished Poems,” *Arion* 17.3 (Winter, 2010), 122.

The following poems, based on diverse drafts and sketches preserved in the Cavafy archive and published along with proposed reconstructions in the superb collection entitled *ATELI PIIMATA* (Unfinished Poems) edited by Professor Renata Lavagnini of the University of Palermo (Athens: Ikaros Press, 1994), present as poetry in English versions of poems that have not been fully realized in their original Greek. In my effort to render them as poems in English, I have relied upon an approach of trans-composition, which combines the work of translator and poet in a collaborative process with Cavafy that I have previously described as *un métissage de l’écriture*. The balance between these two kinds of work within the approach to each poem necessarily differs according to the textual complexity of each of Cavafy’s unfinished poems. The more drafts, variants, and marginal comments and corrections in the condition of an original, the greater the possibilities the poet’s work will play a major role in the refashioning of its elements into a finished poem in English. In all of my versions, however, I have felt free to follow a poet’s instinct rather than the conventional demands of a translator’s craft. Though I make no claim they represent how Cavafy would have finished his preliminary or ongoing workings of them, I will insist that they remain true rather than traitorous to the poetic potential inherent in their unfinished states.

*George Economou*
The Newspaper Story

Dejected, reading the newspaper while riding the tram: he came across an apparent crime in the Police Blotter, a crime that had taken place the night before between ten and eleven. The murderer had not yet been found. The newspaper story, quite justly, abhorred the murder, but righteously showed its utter contempt for the victim’s degenerate way of life, for that individual’s depravity.

He read all about it, the contempt… and grieving in silence, remembered an evening between ten and midnight a year ago they had spent together in a room (the only time—barely knowing each other by sight) in a half-hotel, half brothel. Never—not even in the street—did they ever meet again. It described the wound in detail and surmised blackmail must have had something to do with it. The contempt…and he, grieving in silence, remembered the sweet lips and the white, exceptional sublime flesh he hadn’t kissed enough.

Dejected, he read the story in the newspaper.

The body was discovered at about eleven at night near the docks. It was not definite after all that a crime had been committed, a slight chance it was an accident, wasn’t intentional. The newspaper expressed some pity, but righteously showed its indignation and contempt for the victim’s degenerate way of life.
It Must Have Been the Drinks

The house is closed and nobody’s coming,
it’s about ten and you’ll reappear
the way you were, the way you are, unchanged.
Avoid the mirror—remember, as you were and still are.

Must have been my drinking in the evening,
must have been my nodding off, I’d been tired all day.

The black wooden column’s fading away,
with its archaic capital, and the dining room door,
the red arm-chair and the small divan.
A street in Marseille’s coming in their place,
and my set-free, unshrinking soul,
relieved of the weight of years,
reappears and moves there,
with the form of a sensitive, sensuous youth—
a dissolute youth: let us say this as well.

Must have been my drinking in the evening,
must have been my nodding off, I’d been so tired all day.

I can’t imagine him still alive and old.
No matter what life’s done to him,
in the poem he remains as he was
when I knew him in that back street
in Marseille one blissful night,
in the frame of a happy, dissolute youth,
where he knows no shame, no, not he for sure.
And Above All Cynegirus

Being from a prominent Italian family
and in his early twenties,
in the custom of the wide world of Greek culture,
he came to Smyrna to learn all about rhetoric
and to become proficient in its discourse.

So today he hears, without paying
the least attention to him, the famous sophist
who talks about Athens, who gesticulates
and, loaded with enthusiasm, does the story
of Miltiades and the glorious battle of Marathon.
He thinks about tonight’s drinking party
and his imagination conjures up a tender face,
beguiling lips he can’t wait to kiss.…
He thinks about the good time he’s having here.
But his money’s running out, and in a few months
he’ll return to Rome. And he remembers
the debts he’s piled up there. That he must go back
to the dreadful rut of playing the deadbeat,
of scrounging up the means to live as he deserves
(he is from a prominent Italian house).
Now for the will of old man Fulvius,
ah, if he could only see it. Just know
how much he’s getting from that dirty old man
(two, three years, how long can he last!).
Will he leave him half, a third? True enough,
he’s already bailed him out of debt twice.

The sophist overcome with emotion,
on the verge of tears, tells about Cynegirus.
Antiochus Cyzicenus

The people of Syria tolerate him:
just as long as nobody stronger turns up.
And what “Syria”? It’s almost half-gone,
with its mini-kingdoms, with John Hyrcanus’ invasions,
with the cities that have declared independence.

From the time the country began, historians say,
it stretched from the Aegean all the way to India.
From the Aegean all the way to India! But hold on.
Let’s take a look at these puppets
and the animals he has brought us.