

Athens, Days of 1972

Early December 1972, Fourth Grade at the Lyceum. Blue uniforms, blue elastic hair ribbons, starched white collars, blue knee-high cotton socks, white tennis shoes—an all-girls' school in Athens, at the height of the Junta. Seated on wooden desks, two-at-a-time, in rows of four. The boys from the other shift—the school is shared with the all-boys' school of the neighborhood—have left short, scandalizing messages on the wooden surface of the desk. Not for me, I am too serious (and dangerous) for that. My mother teaches at the school. They are left for Rania, my desk-mate, a girl from “Northern Epirus” as Albania was called then. A repatriated refugee. I am fourteen years old, I don't know what “repatriated refugee from Northern Epirus” means, I don't care. She lives in a small apartment with parents, older sister, and an uncle who is a priest. Definitely not my kind of material. Nevertheless, she tries to hide the message as I try to read it. I try to find traces of the boy on my side of the desk. Nothing. I know that her uniform is shorter than mine, that she is allowed to shave her legs, that she wears shoes with heels to school...But I wear miniskirts outside of school, and I have a pair of real Ray-Bans, Aviators, that shade my poetic eyes. Everybody knows that. Why am I not getting any clandestine messages, then? “Panourgía!” comes the interpellation from the philologist, shatters my thoughts, I get flustered. “Tell us, my child, what does Cavafy mean when he says: ...By now you know what these Ithacas mean...? What is he trying to convey to us, his readers?” Oh, I know this, Madame, I say. I know it. He means, throughout the entire poem, that what we are looking for is not at the end of our journey; that we need to be looking at what is around us the whole time, not just at the end. He means that if we only look at the end we will find our deaths and we will have missed, out, our entire lives. She looks at me without saying anything. Did I say the right thing? I am wondering. Is this what she wanted? “But what is this journey?” she asks. This is child's play, I am thinking. Why doesn't she ask me about the “other” Cavafy poems? Like “Days of 1903”—newly set to music by Manos Hadjidakis, comes through the voice of Dimitris Psarianos, oh, the poetic eyes, the lips, the lips that I lost and never found again. I was just listening to it last night...And I have read the entire Cavafy, why isn't she asking about something else, another poem! Something i n t e r e s t i n g! She marks a grade for me in her grade book.

“Tell us, you, the new one from Gerakion Lakonias” she addresses now a new girl who has appeared in our class and who introduces herself that way; “tell us about Thermopylae, what does Cavafy mean when he says: ...Honor to those who have taken it upon themselves to guard Thermopylae...What are the Thermopylae that he alludes to?” The philologist, a young and very beautiful woman, comes from a long military family, is married to a high-ranking officer of the Junta, and wants to explore with us the beauty of Greek literature. The girl from Gerakion Lakonias starts telling the story of the Battle of Thermopylae. The philologist gets obviously impatient and dismissive. She interrupts the girl, she is not getting from her the response that she wants. She turns to Diana (Artemis is her name, but she wants to be called Diana) “Would you, at least, be able to tell us what Cavafy means with the line...Because it is night and the barbarians didn’t come...these people were some kind of a solution...How can barbarians be a kind of a solution? What is this solution?” Diana responds in that trembling voice of hers that you never know if it is because she’s constantly frightened (rather unlikely) or if she has a constant cold, “I don’t know, Madame, I was wondering myself, I wanted to ask you.” The philologist dismisses all of us—we are all useless, incorrigibles, impossible to educate, how are we going to amount to anything in our lives if we can’t understand what Cavafy means in his Thermopylae?

On Saturday there is a “cultural event” initiated by our philologist and sponsored by the school and the municipality in conjunction with the Ministry of National Education and Religions. It is time that they “listen to the needs of the ephebes” they have said, so they have called for such a cultural event. We have been invited to read poetry, play music, and to express ourselves freely and with impunity. Anything, anything that we want to say they will listen to with great interest, they have said. We have planned to play music and sing songs from the Megalos Erotikos, the Hadjidakis record that includes the Cavafy poem “Days of 1903” along with other music, other songs; we will read poetry, what is not censored, at any rate; and we will ask for more material, more poetry, more modern prose, different selections from the Ancient Greek Grammatology.

We go to the movie theater where the event is going to take place. Other spaces, other faces—miniskirts, platform shoes, long hair, bell bottoms. It’s cold. December in Athens. There are students from other area schools, too. Music is played, songs are sung, poems are read, and the time comes for the discussion. A boy that I don’t know, from another school, walks to the microphone. He is tall and lithe and handsome with a dreamy sympathetic beauty, long wavy dark hair falling on his pale forehead, two beautiful grey eyes. He almost shaves. He thanks everybody, he is being

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very careful (later I find out that he is a member of the underground School Youth of the Communist Party and about to graduate in June)—We want more education, he says. We want a different education. It's good to read *Antigone*, but it would be very good to read *Prometheus Bound*, too. *Lysias* is good, but we should also be reading *Plato*. *Cavafy* and *Vizyinos* and *Solomos* are good and worthy poets but we would like to be reading some more recent ones; some whose poetry would speak to us. (Seferis hadn't died yet).

There it was! *Cavafy* as part of a counter-canon that I couldn't even recognize. Because, of course, how could I recognize a counter-canon that had not been spoken yet, that included the ironic, sardonic, homoerotic lover of a decadent Greece, along with the national poet who had found poetic beauty in the lowly worm, and the melancholy self-atoning mad Thracian author of *Arais*, *Marais*, *Koukounarais* and of his mother's sin.

It was a few more years, four to be exact, before I could admit publicly that I do, did even then, really, truly know, in my heart and in my gut, *Cavafy's* radical poetics, a poetics that cuts like knife through any certainty and comfort. It took the taunting of *The Great Cavafyist* himself, D.M., who berated me in public for having put *Cavafy* and *Seferis* in the same sentence...*Mademoiselle*, you are not only taking us to another register, you are taking us to another universe...He said, with that knowing contumelious and scornful twinkle that is the resident of His eye. Then, within the hollowed rooms of the Cultural Center, college student by that time, I mustered the courage to say to Him and publicly that there was nothing canonical about *Cavafy*, even when considered from within the decentered canon presented by the Party or the woefully centered one presented by Him and the other (nominally) progressive scholars.

And so, through *Cavafy*, I came to feel what I knew from *Marx*—that critique isn't worth anything unless it is first self-critique. And it is so that I get what these *Ithakas* mean, why the *Barbarians* are some kind of a solution, and that *Ephialtes* is the quintessential fellow countryman of mine.

Who cares about the *Lacedaimonians*, anyway?

Poems (all translations mine):

Ithaca, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Thermopylae*, *Kaisarion*, *For So Long I Gazed*, *Gray*,

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In 200 BC

Neni Panourgía, Bard College and Columbia University

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