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**In a small European Colony circa 2013 A.D.
Reflecting on the crisis while reading Cavafy.**

Κι όσο στον έλεγχό τους προχωρούνε,
βρίσκουν και βρίσκουν περιπτά, και να παυθούν ζητούνε.
πράγματα που όμως δύσκολα τα καταρρέγει κανείς.
Ἐν μεγάλῃ Ἑληνικῇ αποκίᾳ, 200 π.Χ.

Θα γίνουν
τα ίδια πράγματα, θα ξαναγίνουν πάλι —
η μοιάς στηγμές μας βρίσκουνε και μας αφίνουν.
Μονοτονία

I often think of my father now that he's gone. And I think of the conflicted feelings he bore in equal measure for the land of his birth: love for a Greece that had been and bitterness for the Greece it had become.

I think of him every time the inhuman policies of austerity send the country into new unplumbed depths of social and economic depression. In my mind, I can see him, lifting his eyes from the newspaper, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead and saying to no one in particular: "Την καταστρέψανε την χώρα."

Who the "they" was, was anyone's guess. It was the unscrupulous politicians willing to pay any price in order to cling to power and gorge at the public's banquet table. It was the bootlickers and the hangers-on who would flatter and fawn over them in the hope of securing some meager scraps for themselves. It was the dishonest businessmen for whom no deal was too crooked, no transaction too shady to turn down. It was the self-proclaimed "experts" who ruled over petty fiefdoms that were as corrupt as they were insignificant and whose arrogance was equaled only by their ignorance. It was the obsequious middlemen, the pseudo-intellectuals, and the professional careerists who polluted the national landscape. It was, in short, all the people who had made him slowly but surely shun the country he loved.

Memory of a late summer afternoon spent playing in the gardens in front of the National Museum and of an old man telling my mother in unaccented and perfectly cadenced French while his companions nodded their agreement, "Joli pays, madame. Joli pays, mal habité."

Like so many before him, at one point he had left. Not so much to seek a better life abroad (he did find that as well), but rather to escape the drudgery of life in a society ruled by immutable laws that, to all intents and purposes, rewarded incompetence and indolence and sanctioned ability and industry.

But an unexpected set of circumstances had made it necessary for him to return. It was however a difficult homecoming. Neither accepted back into a world he had repudiated, nor welcomed into a new one by those who would always wonder why he had come back, he was, and would always remain, an outsider in his own country – misunderstood and spurned even by those who knew him best. And so he retreated to the haven of the familiar – home, family, work – while continuing to cast a philosophical yet sardonic look on a country that was slowly decaying around him.

"Ἐκανα τα πάντα για να φύγω απ' αυτήν την καταραμένη χώρα, και όμως πάλι εδώ ήρθα για να πεθάνω. Pars, mon fils, pars. Et ne reviens jamais."

I still hear these words, spoken in a voice tinged with both fatalism and bitterness, as we sat together years ago overlooking the hustle and bustle of modern-day Athens.

So, when the time came, I left Greece.

But Greece never left me.

Wherever I went, whatever path I chose on what was to become a long personal journey ("δρόμος γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις"), Greece kept calling out to me; a modern-day Penelope weaving its web of memories around me; a Siren whose beguiling songs and melodies kept luring me back to its shores however much I strived to ignore their enticement. Ithaca does have its charms.

This seduction took on many shapes – from the elegant music of Hadjidakis to the smoke-filled honesty of the old rembetika, from the stark beauty of Greece's austere landscapes bathed in that incomparable light to the unflappable and garrulous nature of the Greeks themselves. But perhaps more than anything, it was poetry, and the poetry of Cavafy in particular, that bound me to Greece. Not to Greece itself (whatever can that be?), but to a certain, personal Greece – one associated with my earliest memories.

To this day, every time I read his poetry, I am invariably transported back to that time when my parents took us, my brother and me, on annual pilgrimages to a distant world full of prim old ladies gathered in fusty salons filled with cherished mementos of a bygone era. While pinching our cheeks and stuffing our mouths with sugary treats, they prattled endlessly about the time when they had lived "there" – Κυνοσταντινούπολη, Θεσσαλονίκη, Αλεξάνδρεια, τα Ιεροσόλυμα – and of a glory that had once been but no longer was.

In this mannered world, my brother and I were treasured trophies ("σε ξακουστόν αγώνα το βραβείον"). Prized possessions to be ritually displayed for a seemingly endless flow of parents, relatives, and other acquaintances who came to inspect us as we stood solemnly under the watchful eyes of taciturn, mustachioed ancestors – ancestors who, with their canes, hats and austere three-piece suits, seemed to have stepped out fully-armed ("Με λόγα, με φυσιογνωμία, και με τρόπους/ μια εξαιρετική κάμη πανορμία") from the crumpled pages of some ancient family history book.

It was a world suffused by unfamiliar tastes and smells – το μαχλέπι, η μαστίχα, η κανέλα, το λιβάνι, το μύρο – that seemed as wonderfully exotic as it was foreign to the little square-headed Europeans that we were. A mystical world in which golden-haloed Saints stared at us with stylized eyes from behind clouds of fragrant smoke while heavily bearded priests in radiant vestments chanted from the Psalter and the assembled faithful pressed us with loud cries of: "το σταυρό σας, κάντε το σταυρό σας."

Ἐκεί σαν μπω, μες σ' εκκλησία των Γραικών.

με των θυμασμάτων της τες ευδίες,

μες τες λεπτούργης φωνές και συμφωνίες,

τες μεγαλοπρέπεις των τερένων παρουσίες

και καθε των κινήσεως τον ασθαρό ρυθμό —

λαμπρότατοι μες στων αμφιών τον στολισμό —

ο νους μου τηρίνει σε τιμές μεγάλες της φυλής μας,

στον ένδοξο μας Βυζαντιναμόδιο.

Στην Εκκλησία

But more than serving as a nostalgic bridge to a personal world now largely defunct, Cavafy's carefully chiseled poetry, with its delicate balance of genuine empathy for those courageously facing up to their predicaments without illusions mixed with ironic mockery for those – particularly the powerful – whose arrogance feeds a hubristic sense of delusion: also taught me to be sensitive to those haunting historical moments when, in the words of Brad Leithauer, "the manifestly doomed do not yet recognize their fate."

Greece is currently experiencing such a moment, and as it teeters on the brink of utter disintegration, its tragic situation might just have provided Cavafy with ample fodder for a melancholic reflection on the fragility of life in the public eye as well as the tenuous nature of social and economic institutions. I, for one, cannot help but think he would have delighted in focusing, in a characteristically terse poem, on the irony that binds George Papandreou's confident public pronouncement "λεφτά υπαρχουν", uttered even as the wheels were coming off the country's finances, to Andreas Loverdos' expressive "δεν υπάρχει ούτιο" professed less than three months later.

But rather than wondering how Cavafy might have used Greece's current crisis to feed his poetic imagination, it might be more appropriate to ask ourselves what allegorical light, if any, his poetry might be able to cast on these troubled times as the aftermaths of the financial crisis of 2008 continue to engulf a country, which now faces the probability of a sixth year of continued recession (but can it even be called a recession at this point?). And in particular, it might be appropriate to wonder if, to paraphrase Cavafy, we Greeks are not today facing the possible loss, not just of our capital, but of our country as a whole.

"But there is one unfortunate difference between us [the British and the Greeks], one little difference. We Greeks have lost our capital – and the results are what you see. Pray, my dear Forster, oh pray, that you never lose your capital." — C.P. Cavafy to E. M. Forster, 1918

In three short years, an entire country has come undone, plunging its population into a generalized state of precariousness and uncertainty. Not since the dire years of the Occupation and the subsequent Civil War have so many Greeks felt their livelihoods threatened by forces over which they have so little control, and not since the dark days of the colonels' dictatorship have so many believed that others were autocratically deciding both their fate and the fate of the country.

But to me, as well as to many of the other Greeks I know, what seems so incomprehensible is how quickly our fortune has failed us ("την τύχη σου που ενδίδει πα". Only yesterday it seems we were being celebrated throughout Europe. Our economy was booming with annual growth rates well above the EU average. Our standard of living, largely boosted by cheap loans gladly made available by our European friends, was improving by leaps and bounds. The Euro football championship of 2004 and the success of the Olympics later that same year had cast us as amiable and endearing winners. We were, to put it tersely, riding high.

Yet in a few short years, celebration has turned to condemnation, and accusations have replaced praise. Instead of exalting our virtues, the world's press now churns out endless stories replete with the failings of these "unholy Greeks" and their ostensibly genetic capacity for lying, scamming, double-crossing, and cheating in order to take advantage of their upright, hard-working yet gullible Northern neighbors ("κ' επεισθή με των Ελλήνων τ' αθέα τα λόγια").

Catastrophe, it seems, had befallen the nation and, finding it unprepared – intoxicated by the heady wine of easy credit and enthralled with the illusion of the easy life ahead – had swept everything away before it.

Αλλα καταστροφή, που δεν την φανταζόμεθαν,

έξωφυκή, ραγδαία πέπτει επάνω μας,

κι ανέτομους – πού πα τακρός – μας συνεπάρνει.

Τελειωμένα

Still, one can ask, must ask in fact: where were the guardians as the looming catastrophe drew near? Where were our politicians, the watchmen tasked ("σαν άγρυπνοι φρουροί") with lighting the warning beacon alerting us to the dangers lurking on the horizon? Had they fallen asleep on the roof of the house of Atreus? Were they too busy satisfying their almost infinite appetite for self-delusion, these champions of pleasure of ours ("οι ανδρεῖοι της ηδονῆς")? Were they too drunk on their own sense of self-importance ("υπεροψίαν και μέθην") to be attentive to their public duties? Or perhaps, over the years, they had simply come to believe that they – and by extension, we – were somehow indispensable, unique, and noteworthy, forgetting in the process the lesson in humility that History teaches: no one is so important that they cannot be replaced at a moment's notice.

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Όταν ο Φύλακας Είδε τα Φως

Even today, despite being confronted with the calamitous outcomes of a tragedy that has shaken the country to its very roots, these aged souls bound to decaying bodies desperately continue to cling to their privileges more concerned it seems with protecting their entitlements and the trappings afforded by a public life than with curbing the unprecedented assaults the crisis is wrecking upon the weak, the sick, the old, the poor and the vulnerable. Oblivious to their own failings, blind to the glaring fact that this "great crisis" ("η μεγάλη κρίση") took hold and developed under their watch, these modern-day, mock Anthonys refuse to be mindful of the message sent and take their leave.

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