

Where Are the Greeks?

Revisiting Cavafy's "Philhellene"¹

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First published in 1912, the poem "Philhellene," a dramatic monologue set in the Roman period, transports us to recognizable Cavafian territory. The precise location is left undefined, but clues are provided: "behind Zagros, out beyond Phráata"; that is, somewhere in ancient Media, in what is today Iran. The speaker, very likely the ruler of this minor fiefdom himself, is giving instructions to a courtier on the design of a coin.

PHILHELLENE

Make sure the engraving is done skillfully.
The expression serious, majestic.
The diadem preferably somewhat narrow:
I don't like that broad kind the Parthians wear.
The inscription, as usual, in Greek:
nothing excessive or pompous -
we don't want the proconsul to take it the wrong way;
he's always smelling things out and reporting back to Rome -
but of course giving me due honor.
Something very special on the other side:

¹ This fragment is offered for the Cavafy Forum for the same reason most of it was edited out of the introduction to my book on *Hellenism and the Postcolonial Imagination*: the bulk of it deals, as the rest of the book does not, with the confrontation between British Hellenism and modern Greece in the early twentieth century. Historicizing Cavafy's "Philhellene" in both its ancient and modern contexts means locating it and the character it depicts directly over this seismic fault. The global turn I take in the final third reflects the broader aims of the book's introduction, which asks the question: "As [hegemonic culture] migrates through the filaments of global trade; as it is received, sifted, assimilated and redeployed by individuals and societies in the provincial outlands of empire, what sorts of changes does this culture, 'metropolitan' culture, undergo? How is its meaning altered or deferred in the colonial or neo-colonial periphery?" A version of this piece was presented at the 2009 MGSA Symposium in Vancouver.

perhaps a discus-thrower, young, good-looking.
 Above all I urge you to see to it
 (Sithaspis, for God's sake don't let them forget)
 that after `King' and `Savior',
 they add `Philhellene' in elegant characters.
 Now don't try to be clever
 with your `where are the Greeks?' and `what Hellenism
 here behind Zagros, out beyond Phráata?'
 Since so many others more barbarian than ourselves
 choose to inscribe it, we'll inscribe it too.
 And besides, don't forget that sometimes
 sophists do come to us from Syria,
 and versifiers, and other triflers of that kind.
 So we're not, I think, un-Hellenized.²

Like so many of Cavafy's creations, this Philhellene inhabits the uncomfortable borderland between East and West, Hellene and barbarian. His detailed instructions to the courtier Sithaspis make it clear which way - East or West - he leans, though this was apparent even from the poem's title. Determining which way Cavafy himself leans in his attitude toward the character is harder to pin down - and here too we are in familiar Cavafy territory. The ruler's apparently refined "Hellenic" temperament shows through in his concern for the quality of the coin's engraving, and in the visual and verbal messages he wants his coin to convey. The Philhellene's cultural sophistication, however, is ultimately cast in doubt by his seeming contempt for the actual representatives of Greek culture - sophists, poets, and other such "triflers" - who occasionally find their way to this remote outpost of Hellenism at the boundaries of the Roman Empire. A lover of Greek culture? In the end, we may find ourselves wondering if "Philistine," rather than "Philhellene," might not be the best title for the poem.

A number of critics have made this apparent self-contradiction a key to their

²In the Keeley-Sherrard translation. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 38.

understanding of the poem. In their accounts, the Philhellene comes across as something of an imposter, convicted – as not unusual in Cavafy – by his own words. G.P. Savidis, for example, refers to the "bastardized" Hellenism of this "kinglet of mixed barbarian descent" (*mixovárvaros vasilískos*).³ Sonia Ilinskaya refers to "the degeneration of Hellenistic civilization itself, worn thin [...] in those branches of it that reached into the eastern provinces."⁴ Edmund Keeley, writing in *Cavafy's Alexandria*, is the most severe in his judgment of this "kinglet" deep in the Middle East. For Keeley, the Philhellene is at best an instance of "unlettered aspiration," and at worst, of "cultural affectation and imitation."⁵ He is, in a few words, a "parody of the Hellene he aspires to be," a "barbarian pretender."⁶ Still, not all readers have taken so dim a view of the king's claim to civility. In David Ricks' version, the Philhellene's "aesthetic discernment" regarding the coin's design gives him "sufficient claim to be 'not unhellenized.'"⁷ And Alekos Sengopoulos, writing not long after the poem's publication, suggests that the poet himself views the king sympathetically (*sympatheí*; quoted in Savidis, 2:265).

What makes Sengopoulos's comment of signal interest, aside from its early date (1918), is that the text from which it comes is thought likely to have been dictated by the

³ Savidis, *Short Essays*, 1:204

⁴ Ilinskaya, *Cavafy*, 195-196.

⁵ Keeley, *Alexandria*, 34 and 33.

⁶ *Ibid*, 106 and 34.

⁷ Ricks, "Browning," 143.

poet himself.⁸ If this is indeed the case, the question we may want to ask is where Cavafy's imaginative sympathies with this suspect "friend of the Greeks" lie. Three possible points of identity and fellow feeling suggest themselves (perhaps even a fourth, if we credit the family anecdote that places the origins of the Cavafy family was not on Greek soil but Iran, from somewhere "on the Perso-Armenian border."⁹ We have already touched on the first of these three points: the king's appreciation for skilled craftsmanship, his preference for something "choice" on the reverse side - qualities that link the king to Cavafy's own intermittent Parnassian inclinations - together with the insistence on verbal restraint and simplicity ("nothing excessive or pompous"). The king's formula for coin-making, in this respect, differs little from Cavafy's formula for making a poem. Another likely point of identification and sympathy is the king's awareness of his geographical remoteness from anything Greek. As a cultivated Greek living in Egypt, Cavafy too had a keen sense of cultural displacement, of being located "beyond Phráata," far from the metropolitan centers of culture and power: in the Philhellene's day, Rome and the Eastern Mediterranean; in Cavafy's day, not so much Athens as the two great metropolises of Europe, London and Paris.

But I would like to focus here on the third possibility; namely, that the Philhellene's remoteness may have spoken to Cavafy's sense of himself not only as a Greek of the diaspora, but as a *modern* Greek: the remoteness of a Greek born two and a

⁸ The young Sengopoulos was Cavafy's close friend and future heir. Savidis considers Sengopoulos an unlikely source for the kinds of insights one finds in his comments on this and other poems (*Short Essays* 2:250).

⁹ Malanos, *Cavafy* 2, 80.

half millennia after the Classical Age, and the civilization that gave meaning to the term Hellenism. If, that is, the Philhellene's spatial coordinates - "here behind Zagros, out beyond Phráata," - are translated into temporal ones: "here in the twentieth century, after hundreds of years of foreign domination and racial and cultural intermingling" - the poem can be read as on some level being about modern Greek belatedness - and a problematic relatedness. After all, the questions the king puts on the lips of his skeptical courtier - "Where are the Greeks" and "What Hellenism here?" - were questions not unfamiliar to modern Greeks ears. They were the very questions that Western Europe had been asking of the modern inhabitants of the Helladic peninsula at least since 1835, when the German historian Fallmerayer presented his theory on the Slavic origins of the modern Greeks to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. And they are questions many a Western visitor to Greek soil continued to ask well into the twentieth century, when confronted with a Levantine population that looked, spoke and behaved far different from the ideal Hellenes of their imagination. Was the fictional figure of the Philhellene to some degree shaped by the poet's awareness, as a Westward-looking Greek of the early twentieth-century, of these widespread European perceptions and doubts?

Cavafy records having first written "Philhellene" in 1906; coincidentally, 1906 was also the year a young Virginia Woolf took her one and only trip to Greece. The poem was first published in 1912; in the spring of that year, the young historian Arnold Toynbee was completing a six-month residence in Greece. Woolf's impressions of the modern country and its people are reflected chiefly in the story "A Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus," written shortly after her return to England. Arnold Toynbee recorded his own reactions to the modern Greeks in his letters to his mother; these have recently been

discussed by the historian Richard Clogg.¹⁰ The responses of these two young British intellectuals to what Woolf calls "the old riddle of the modern Greek and his position in the world today"¹¹ would not have been exceptional for their time.

In Woolf's short story, a group of English tourists makes an excursion up the slopes of Mt. Pentelicus (modern Pendeli) on the outskirts of Athens. In the colonialist spirit of the day, they are said to take to their Attic surroundings "as if the land were theirs" (64). They are somewhat less taken, however, with the land's modern inhabitants. Galled that this "dusky, garrulous race" going by the name of "Greek" does not understand the language of the ancients (as taught at the elite public school Harrow), the excursionists dismiss the modern people as "barbarians": a "spurious people" who "parodied the speech and pilfered the name of the great" (64). As Artemis Leontis observes in her discussion of the story, its narrative voice is distanced from these attitudes by touches of irony, and by the "epiphany" at the story's conclusion, in which a Greek monk appears as the transhistorical embodiment of Hellenism. Yet for all the story's narrative ironizing, the views Woolf attributes to her characters closely echo her own remarks in the diary she kept during the trip, in which, as David Adams points out, a "sharp disappointment with modern Greeks is the most striking feature" (186). There, Woolf shares her characters' linguistic disillusionment with the Greeks, who "do not understand Greek of the age of Pericles"; nor, she records, do they possess what she

¹⁰ For a fuller account of their sojourns, see Leontis, *Topographies*, 107-112, Adam, *Colonial Odysseys*, 184-189, and Clogg, *Anglo-Greek Attitudes*, 8-14.

¹¹ Woolf, *Stories*, 65.

considers classical features, but are rather "dark & dusky."¹² She is keen to differentiate between the "pure bred races" of the past and the "mongrel" race she finds populating the modern country (340).

There is even less room for ambiguity in the letters Arnold Toynbee wrote home during his extended stay in Greece five years later. The word the twenty-two year old Toynbee chooses to describe the modern descendents of Sophocles and Plato is "dago," a term of disparagement originally applied to people of Latin origin, but here more generally suggesting someone of southerly origin and darkish skin.¹³ For Toynbee, however, the word's implications are as much cultural as racial. The dago as a type, according to the young Englishman, "is a parasite - he can only grow under the shadow of a vigorous civilization - his nature is unsuccessful imitation" (cited in Clogg 13). If once it was the rest of the world that "adopted Hellenism second hand; now [the Greeks] themselves take everything secondhand from Europe" (10). The Greeks, Toynbee goes on even more devastatingly, "are the hangers-on of Europe, and come to us for their models in everything - and their best is always a second rate imitation of our second best" (9). Toynbee's letters to his mother develop a cultural critique of the modern Greeks that is more sophisticated - though no less problematic - than the linguistic and epidermal reservations we find in Woolf.

These early and obscure writings tell us little about the mature achievements of

¹²Woolf, *Passionate Apprentice*, 328; cited in Adams, 187.

¹³ Toynbee wasn't alone among English visitors to Greece in using this term. See Roessel, *Byron's Shadow*, 245, 319.

either author, but they do tell us much about the nature of Western Hellenism, and the sorts of cultural and racial assumptions it encoded at the turn of the last century. That such assumptions were absorbed and unreflectingly reproduced by two of the best young minds of the era suggest how pervasive they were, how fundamental to the West's construction of the Hellenic. I include these two instances of British "mishellenism" (Toynbee's inversion of "philhellenism") here for the particular light they cast on Cavafy's "Philhellene," which on some level, as I suggested earlier, likewise has as its theme the "riddle of the Modern Greek, and his position in the world today." This parallel is brought home by the uncanny degree to which the remarks of Woolf and Toynbee about the Greeks are echoed in critical comments about the Philhellene. For convenience I take my examples of the latter from Keeley's *Cavafy's Alexandria* (1976), the fullest treatment of the poem in English. Keeley, while conceding that the Philhellene embodies "a Cavafian propensity for the Hellenic way of life, with its emphasis on artistic skill, elegance, the young and beautiful, and Greek language" (106), portrays the king above all as an emblem of Hellenistic desire, an image of someone on the outside looking in. Where Arnold Toynbee characterizes the modern Greeks as a case of "unsuccessful imitation," Keeley sees the Philhellene as an instance of "unlettered aspiration" (34) and "cultural affectation and imitation" (33). Where for Virginia Woolf the Greeks "parodied" the speech of the ancients, Cavafy's Philhellene parodies its attitudes (Keeley 106). If Toynbee's dago Greeks are "hangers-on" - a "spurious people" in Woolf's words - the Philhellene for Keeley is a "barbarian pretender" (34); in effect, both modern Greek and Philhellene "pilfer" the name "Hellene" and debase the classical Greek ideal.

Of course, one doesn't need to be either a semi-Westernized inhabitant of turn of the century Greece or a semi-Hellenized inhabitant of ancient Media to be the object of such disparagement: terms like "parody," "hanger-on," and "pretender" belong to the lexicon of imperial first-worldism. In the heyday of European world hegemony, such labels were liable to be applied to any person or society of the periphery that came to modernity late, usually through the medium of colonialism, and that sought to absorb some of the core culture's power and prestige. (Toynbee makes the same global leap when he likens the "dago" of modern Greece to the irksome "babu" of South Asia [Clogg 10].) The Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, who grew up at nearly as great a remove from the European metropole as Cavafy's Philhellene, is keenly aware of these cultural attitudes and corresponding vulnerabilities. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Walcott refers to cultural "purists" from the North (his historical examples include the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope and historian James Anthony Froude) who were likely to belittle West Indian culture as "imitation," to view it as a form of "degenerative mimicry" consisting at most of "echoes" of the real thing, "unoriginal and broken."¹⁴ Walcott's poem, "The Sea Is History" (1979), takes such first-world skepticism as its starting point. "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?" the poem begins, "Where is your Renaissance?"¹⁵ Presumably addressed to the Caribbean itself - or to the poet as its representative - these questions are substantially the same questions that Cavafy's Philhellene imagines on the tongue of his courtier: "Where are the Greeks?" and (literally) "Where are the Greek things?" Such are the questions, loaded and largely

¹⁴ Walcott, "The Antilles," 76, 67 and 68.

¹⁵ Walcott, *Poems*, 364.

rhetorical, the metropole poses of those who dwell outside its charmed circle when the latter - whether of mixed barbarian, mixed Romaic, or mixed Caribbean descent - begin to aspire "to rise above their appointed role in history" (Keeley 105).

Such finality of cultural judgment is much harder to achieve today. The late twentieth-century's "posting" of various foundational discourses - modernist, structuralist, colonialist - has immeasurably complicated our understanding of the inner life and outer workings of culture, and has forced theorists to take another look at the sorts of derivative cultural practices embodied by Cavafy's "kinglet of barbarian descent." In these latter days, the idea of originality, so key to metropolitan constructions of the Modern, is itself no longer to be taken for granted. Secondhand borrowings, cross-cultural thefts, imitation, translation - such processes are understood to be intrinsic to the way cultures consolidate, mutate, and evolve; so that Rei Terada can subtitle her 1992 book on Walcott's poetry *American Mimicry*, explaining that "[M]imicry tips the hand of its nonoriginality and implies the nonoriginality of that which it mimics."¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* was instrumental within the postcolonial field in shifting the paradigm of intercultural exchange away from a visually-based model to a verbally-oriented one. In place of the mimetic paradigm that prevails in the characterizations of the Philhellene - cultural mimicry as a kind of gestural aping - Bhabha asks us to think of mimicry as a process of cultural translation: "a way of imitating," but with a "displacing sense";¹⁷ to recognize, that is, the inevitable transvaluation that occurs when cultural material moves across linguistic and political

¹⁶Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry*, 1.

¹⁷Bhabha, "Third Space," 210.

borders. Transposed to a new context, culture does not “mean” in the same way; it services different needs, acquires a different intonation. The far-flung recipients of the West's "alien cultural forms," writes sociologist Ulf Hannerz, "[tamper] with them in such a way that the resulting new forms are more responsive to, and at the same time in part outgrowths of, local everyday life."¹⁸ To dismiss these "minor" versions of the metropolitan as mere bastardization or parody is, according to Hannerz, "deeply ethnocentric" in that it "denies the validity and worth of any transformation at the periphery of what was originally drawn from the center."¹⁹ In other words, where a Western observer might see “unsuccessful imitation,” a more or less unreflecting and foredoomed attempt to produce a provincial simulacrum, someone more attuned to local circumstance might detect motive and design behind the periphery's seeming failed mimicry of metropolitan forms. The history of cultural forms, as Arjun Appadurai has written, “is about their circulation across regions ... and their ongoing domestication into local practice.”²⁰ Viewed in this light - as a process of translation involving “resistance, irony [and] selectivity” (7) - the periphery's borrowings from the core culture can be understood as active rather than passive, creative rather than “degenerative” or obsequiously submissive to the latter's “authority, prestige, familiarity, and widespread currency,” to quote from Patrick Colm Hogan.²¹

In terms of Cavafy's poem, how might the insights and hindsight of postcolonial

¹⁸Hannerz, “ Scenarios for Peripheral Cultures, ” 124.

¹⁹Ibid, 109.

²⁰Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 17.

²¹Hogan, *Empire and Poetic Voice*, 1.

and postmodern criticism lead us to a fresh understanding of the Philhellene, and of the intercultural mix he embodies? - a reading that allows us to see the king's cultural performance as something other than an instance of "bastardized" Hellenism, a degenerate echoing of the real thing? We can begin by asking how Hellenic culture fits into the geopolitical fabric of the Philhellene's world: what immediate pressures it is responding to, what local ends it serves. A notable feature of this world is the looming presence of the Roman Empire, represented in the poem by the annoying proconsul, a sort of imperial intelligence officer who's forever "smelling things out." The semi-independence of this remote kingdom in modern Iran - a partial sovereignty it performs through the minting of a coin - appears to be contingent upon its not arousing the suspicions of distant Rome. Moreover, the passing mention of Parthia in line four of the poem highlights another historical reality: that more near at hand, just over the eastern horizon, lay the Parthian Empire - a formidable opponent, over several centuries, first of the Hellenistic Greek dynasties and later of imperial Rome. (Classicist Derek Williams refers to "the long-standing rivalry between Rome and Parthia," each of which, he explains, "coveted the other's nearer provinces [without] finding the strength to hold them."²²) Ultimately, the picture that emerges from Cavafy's poem is of a small buffer state occupying an uncomfortable middle-ground between two great hemispheric and occasionally warring powers. In view of this precarious (and literal) in-betweenness, cultural independence - like political independence - would be anything but a given. Here Greece as transcultural ideal plays a crucial role. The Philhellene, by identifying himself and (through its coinage) his state with Greek culture rather than with the

²²Williams, *Romans and Barbarians*, 10.

temporal powers of Rome or Parthia, strikes something of an "unaligned" course between the two opposed superpowers. In a curious reversal, a distinctly global element - Hellenism, the world culture of its age - is pressed into service as part of a local culture's staking of a cautious autonomy. To be sure, the Hellenism practiced by the Philhellene - pragmatic, locally inflected - will not be the same Hellenism as distilled in fifth-century Attica, nor for that matter as practiced at what Keeley identifies as "the center of the Hellenized world": the Eastern Mediterranean defined by Alexandria, Antioch, Beirut, Seleucia (*Alexandria*, 106-107). No matter how profound or shallow the Philhellene's Hellenism - and profundity was never central to Cavafy's conception of Hellenism - nevertheless it will have served its purpose in this small-time monarch's attempt to sustain a habitable middle-ground between two powerful empires. In another context, Cavafy refers to a particular instance of Hellenization in the late antique Middle East as "a means to arrive";²³ here we might more accurately speak of it as a local culture's "means to survive."

²³Sareyiannis, *Scholia*, 120-121.

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