

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
Vol. 29 - n. 1 - 1997

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Real and Imaginary History in Borges and Cavafy

JORGE LUIS BORGES and Constantine Cavafy are from major cities on the periphery of western letters—Buenos Aires and Alexandria. It is the periphery for us in Europe and America, and they, aware of their outsiders' vantage, waken us—for they are writing for the world and not only their own nationals—to the life of the Argentine and of Alexandria. But in addressing the world, they also sweep back through history, and through *intrahistoria* as Unamuno terms it,¹ to the everyday weaknesses and glittering moral exempla of smaller monarchs, to Rio de la Plata outlaws, to deviates in taverns on the Nile. They follow adventurers into Byzantium and travel in the Greek satellite kingdoms of Hellenistic and Roman Greece, to the cities of India, to the terror and virile beauty of the frontier pampas, to Arabian Africa of the thousand tales. Though they manipulate their personages with constant sleight-of-hand, with irony, humor, and the most intricately balanced paradoxes, their historical figures have the same verisimilitude as the characters they place in modern suburbs of Buenos Aires or Alexandria. As solitary outsiders they use widespread historical and imaginary geographies to obliterate the dividing lines of past time and national boundaries.

Borges (1899-) and Cavafy (1863-1933) are poets, and Borges is also a short-story writer (though he is the first to dispute the difference

¹ The Spanish philosopher, poet, and novelist Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) developed the notion of *intrahistoria* in a book of essays, *En torno al casticismo* (Madrid, 1895). He contends that history (*historia*) deals with the superficial chronicles of great events. He is interested in the intrahistory (*intrahistoria*), which is the texture of culture defined by the people, by the history of everyday life and people.

between his *ficciones* and his poems). Cavafy's poems are normally anecdotal stories which, as Auden writes, survive translation,² for the tone, the tale, the gnomic barb remain sharp even in another tongue. While Borges and Cavafy are major, original stylists, their poems and stories can be summarized, paraphrased, and retold orally. This is characteristic of parable and myth. As if to elude rhetoric, they deliberately eschew great archetypal figures in the characters of their work. Or if the figure, at first glance, appears to be of great dimension we soon perceive their interest in the other side: the weaknesses that humanize the great and cause their downfall, the indecisions that make a character plausible, the vices that arouse pathos and rearrange conventional morality.

So Borges the librarian and Cavafy the clerk and antiquarian seek out underworld personalities, the gaucho bandit and clandestine homosexual. They deal with deposed heroes and flawed royalty, with King Demetrios of Macedonia (not Alexander the Great but his stepbrother) or with Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari—former mighty king whose armies have been routed and who seeks protection in a labyrinth over the sea. "I prefer minor characters," Borges writes.³ In both writers the aim of exploring personal memory, immediate ancestors, history or mythology, is to reach similar human equations: man is always man, great or low, real or mythical, Greek or Argentine, and victim of the same laws of love, treachery, and mortal time. Borges, profound and spoofing, likes to unfold, one by one, the contrasting layers of his creations, each negating and affirming the other. Cavafy leads his people into layers of history and similar traps, where failure is the sly companion of aspiration. Thus the young Nero is deceived by the Delphic Oracle when he is told to beware of the seventy-third year. He fatally believes it is his own and not that of Galba, the rebel general drilling his army in Spain, "the old man in his seventy-third year."⁴

Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863, then a highly cosmopolitan yet remote center of diverse cultures. There, as in Borges' ruminations, Christian, Moslem, and Jew came together. In earlier Alexandrias, the port city was the background of pagan hedonism, stoicism, mystery

² *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. and notes Rae Dalven, introd. W. H. Auden (New York, 1961), p. vii.

³ Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1970), p. 36. Borges writes "but really I prefer minor characters or if not, if I write about Spinoza or Emerson or about Shakespeare and Cervantes, they are major characters, but I write about them in a way that makes them like characters out of books, rather than famous men."

⁴ *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, tr. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 62; hereafter cited in the text as *CP* with page number. With the exception of "Ithaka" the translations from Cavafy are mine.

religions, of the Neoplatonism of Philo and Plotinos. The diverse Panhellenic world was bound together by the *Mouseion*, an extraordinary library-university, which E. M. Forster describes as the great intellectual achievement of the dynasty. In the *Mouseion* the calendar we use today was devised, and the astronomical findings of Ptolemy were codified. It is there we find Euclid on the one hand and texts of Alexandrian mysticism on the other; the first systematized literary, grammatical, and historical scholarship after Aristotle; and the Palatine Anthology—the largest single collection of Greek lyrics.

In the tradition of the *Mouseion*, Cavafy found his intellectual formation. It is coincidental that Borges also schooled himself around a *mouseion* by the river Plata. As he recalls in his "Autobiographical Essay,"⁵ he read and wrote five hours a day for nine years in a branch of the municipal library where he worked; and later at the university he was able to order his erudition and lecture on "Swedenborg, Blake, the Persian and Chinese mystics, Buddhism, gauchesco poetry, Martin Buber, the Kabbalah, the Arabian Nights . . ." In their writing both authors go persistently to the immediate or far past to find masks and metaphors for modernity.

They do not, however, use the past to remove us from the present but rather to remove us from illusory perspectives which cause us to distinguish past and present. As we shall see, Cavafy's world meanders along the Mediterranean into Asia Minor and to India, from Homer, Zeno, and Plotinos (also friends to Borges) to late Byzantine emperors, desert barbarians, and to immediate memories of friendships and events of twenty or thirty years earlier.

Cavafy's native tongue was Greek, and he wrote in demotic Greek (*dimotiki*), skillfully inserting strands of ancient and purist Greek (*katharevousa*) where it suited his purpose. He loved the Greek language, it was for him one of the triumphs of Greek civilization, and as Peter Bien has pointed out, "he saw the Greek language, from ancient to modern times, as one diverse but unified entity full of riches for the poet, and he refused to accept the arbitrary exaltation of one period or style as an inflexible standard."⁶

Here he differs from Borges, who wrote "a foreigner's French," and English with "eighteenth-century mannerisms." He writes, "I have to cope with Spanish and so am only too aware of its shortcomings" (*Aleph*, p. 217). It was, he reveals, his "unavoidable destiny." On the

⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (New York, 1970), p. 245; hereafter cited in the text as *Aleph* with page number.

⁶ Peter Bien, *Constantine Cavafy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 43.

other hand, he says, "English is a language I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright" (*Aleph*, p. 258). So Borges, with perhaps more nostalgia than irony, feels alien even to the Spanish language that he makes splendid and intricately lucid.

Indeed, no other writer—with the possible exception of Kafka in German—manages, with relentless logic, to turn language upon itself, to reverse himself time after time within a sentence or paragraph, and effortlessly, as it were, come upon surprising yet inevitable conclusions. Unlike Cavafy, who went to earlier periods of his language to give rich complexity to a poem, Borges stretches the syntactic shape of Spanish to give a poem or story intricate, honeycombed layers of meaning.

Though their means are different, the linguistic effects are related: in each case, to the normal language is added another stylistic strand expressing the author's extreme, idiosyncratic originality. A new literary language is invented. Cavafy creates his from historical Greek tongues, Borges from the languages and literatures of Western Europe with which he is deeply involved. Borges consciously infuses the Spanish language with stylistic and thematic qualities of English authors in particular, those whom he records as having become his "habits": Chesterton, Hawthorne, Conrad, Kipling, and Lane's *Arabian Nights*.

This involvement in foreign languages both authors have in common to an unusual degree, even in the chronology of their education. At an early age, Cavafy and Borges left their native countries and went with their families to Europe. At fourteen Borges went to Geneva, and five years later to Spain. At nine Cavafy went to England where he remained for seven years. He was so familiar with the English language that he is reported to have spoken Greek "with a slight British accent until the day he died."⁷ Both men returned to their native cities in their twenty-second year, with the main languages and literatures of Western Europe in their permanent possession. Borges became highly skilled in Latin—and Anglo-Saxon, which he later taught; Cavafy, of course, in ancient Greek. But here too their geographical and historical areas overlap. In each case the people of the Greco-Roman world, particularly the minor figures, command their major interest. By their intimate treatment of the minor and the flawed, they humanize the past, removing it from the normal rhetoric and abstraction of chronicle and history. Above all, they intentionally confuse past and present in order to bring everything into the light of one time spectrum.

Cavafy is the first major writer of our century to re-create a historical

⁷ C. P. Cavafy, *Selected Poems*, tr. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 92.

a past, to contrast ages, but not to make the past present—and this despite Eliot's frequent meditations on time past and present or Pound's lively depiction of Chinese, Ancient Greek, and Anglo-Saxon figures. The time gap is not obliterated but emphasized through exoticism. This is not a defect in Eliot and Pound, simply another approach.

By contrast Borges the *porteño* (from Buenos Aires) and Cavafy the Alexandrian are participants in their time-worlds, in their two pasts: the personal and the historico-mythic. Again and again Borges states that he, as author, must not move away from his characters. Certavantes, he writes, could finish *Don Quijote* because in the end he became Don Quijote. This does not mean that an author's duty is to write autobiography in a poem or fiction. But it does demand that the author participate in some way in the personae he creates, that they become an extension of some multiple vision we associate with the author—that is, not the biographical author but the author's cumulative personality in the created work.

So Cavafy projects his own dilemma of personal hedonic sensuality and a doctrine of social temperance into the conflicts of Ianthis, a Jewish athlete and artist of Alexandria of the first century A.D. This is the Alexandria that earlier had produced the Septuagint, the first translation of the Old Testament into Greek for the benefit of the Alexandrian Jews, who had largely forgotten how to read the original Hebrew Scriptures. The poem "Of the Jews (A.D. 50)" is a clear metaphor for Cavafy's homosexuality and a disapproving society and the resolution he found in yielding completely to sensuality.

TΩΝ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ (50 Μ.Χ.)

Ζωγράφος και ποιητής, δρομείς και δισκοβόλος,
σάν 'Ενδυμίων έμορφος, δ 'Ιάνθης 'Αντανίου.
'Από οικογένειαν φίλην τής Συναγωγής.

« Η τιμότερός μου μέρες είν' εκείνες
πού την αιθαλιική αναζήτησιν άφνω,
πού έγκαταλείπω τον ώραίο και σκληρόν ελληνισμό,
μέ την κυρίαρχη προσήλωσι
σέ τέλεια καμαριένα και φθαρτά άσπρα μέλη.
Και γένομαι αυτός πού θα ήθελα
πάντα να μένω τών 'Εβραίων, τών Ιερών 'Εβραίων, δ υίός ».

'Ενθερμη λαν ή δήλωσής του. « Πάντα
νά μένω τών 'Εβραίων, τών Ιερών 'Εβραίων — »

'Ομοιος δέν έμεινε τοιαύτος διάλου.
'Ο 'Ηθονισμός κ' ή Τέχνη τής 'Αλεξανδρείας
άφροσιωμένο τους παιδι τόν είχαν.

(CP, p. 184)

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past and use this as an instrument for revealing modern man.⁸ It was E. M. Forster who spread the word in England immediately after World War I. He gave the insider's news, as it were, to a coterie of the enlightened. Forster introduced Cavafy's work to Eliot, Toynbee, and Lawrence, among others. And not the least affected was himself.

There has been much speculation about the extent to which Pound and Eliot were indebted to Cavafy for their own ventures into antiquity, the Middle Ages, and exotica.⁹ They had the foreign-language knowledge of earlier literatures and were prepared to alter the tradition of poetry in English by going to new sources in the past. Cavafy provided an example. And among the ways that Eliot and Pound radically changed poetry in English was the re-creation of ancient personae from the Mediterranean basin.

In discerning affinities between Cavafy and Eliot and Pound, however, we should also note the very different ways they used the past. Cavafy was a Greek exploring what he considered a unified Greek world, incorrectly fragmented by the shadows of ignorance that time has placed over and between historical periods. By contrast, Pound and Eliot were foreigners discovering remote periods, which they believed should become part of a new awareness of the past. Yet even with Eliot's austere clarity and Pound's vigorous chitchat in foreign tongues, their exploration of history and myth is basically a product of literature and the then current ventures into anthropology and myth by Sir J. G. Frazer and Jessie L. Weston. The American poets borrow dashes of color, make a Provençal prince curse or Dante walk the fire-watch rounds in wartime London. Together in *The Waste Land*—Eliot as creator and Pound as editor and *il miglior fabbro*—they construct an anthology of the past, which, from Sappho's fisherman¹⁰ to the drowning Phoenician sailor, provides an ancient screen against which everything in the wasteland of modern life takes place.

In reality, Eliot and Pound re-create a past to show us that there was

⁸ Rae Dalven discusses the role of E. M. Forster in introducing Cavafy to English and American writers in her Biographical Note in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*. E. M. Forster was stationed in Alexandria during World War I. He dedicated the second edition of his *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1938) to Cavafy.

⁹ Jane Pinchin has recently completed the most thorough examination of the impact of Cavafy upon English and American letters in her dissertation *It Goes on Being Alexandria Still: C. P. Cavafy and the English Alexandrians*, Columbia University, 1973.

¹⁰ In the Notes on the "Waste Land," Eliot writes, referring to Sappho's fisherman, that his may not be Sappho's exact lines (line 221 of *Waste Land*). The poem he is referring to is actually not by Sappho. It appears in the Palatine Anthology under Sappho's name, but is omitted by Lobel and Page in their text. False attribution to an author in the Palatine Anthology, as in the case of Plato, Simonides, Theognis, Anakreon, Sappho, is very common.

(Painter and poet, runner and discus thrower, beautiful as Endymion: Ianthis, son of Antony, From a family close to the synagogue.

"My noblest days are those when I give up the search for sensation, when I desert the bright and stark Hellenism, with its masterly fixation on perfectly shaped and perishable white limbs. And become the man I would always want to be: a son of the Jews, of the holy Jews."

His declaration was very fiery. "Be always of the Jews, the holy Jews."

But he didn't stay that way at all.

The Hedonism and the Art of Alexandria possessed him as their child.)

Cavafy's homosexuality, which is treated in another essay,¹¹ is to the poems of Cavafy what violence, brutality, and bravery are to Borges. In each case an elemental obsession of the author is developed in the writing. Borges confesses that because he is not personally brave, he values what he misses. Normally asexual in mood, Borges reveals the sexuality of violence in his repeated interest in knives and stabbing: "To me there is a real intimacy in the knife; in fact, in one of my poems, the last line runs: 'and across my throat the intimate knife.' Firing of course stand for marksmanship rather than courage. Fisticuffing seems both harmless and undignified to an Argentine, while knife dueling has what Dr. Johnson said of the lives of sailors and seamen—'the dignity of danger'" (*Aleph*, p. 281). When Borges deals with violence, he normally places his characters in a time frame some twenty or thirty years earlier. The event falls within his memory, and even though it may be pure invention, it is presented as part of the speaker's personal history. Cavafy's love poems are also drawn from personal history, although, as we see in the analogical treatment of Ianthis in "Of the Jews (A.D. 50)," Cavafy also likes to project his passions into ancient figures.

Cavafy's practice of re-creating ancient history indistinguishable from the present is characteristic of modern Greek authors. We find it in Angelos Sikelianos' poems and poetic dramas, in Odysseus Elytis' *Sun the First* and Yannis Ritsos' *Romiosyni*. The late George Seferis in *Mythistorima* creates an Odysseus who is a Greek of all times, whether on an ancient trireme or a modern caique braving dangerous winter waters between islands of the Dodekanese. Nikos Kazantzakis'

¹¹ Willis Barnstone and Stephanie Bunker, "Sappho and Cavafy: Time, Sexuality, and Overheard Conversation," to appear in *The Charioteer*.

epic poem *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* continues the voyages of Odysseus after his return to Ithaka.

When we consider Joyce's use of the same Homeric story in *Ulysses*, despite the intricately structured ties with each book of the Homeric poem it is clear that Bloom and Molly are Dubliners and have nothing to do with their Aegean counterparts. Joyce uses backdrops of the past to manipulate events and personages in the present, as Stuart Gilbert has pointed out in elaborate detail.¹² But *The Odyssey* in Joyce is basically a few stage props for moving characters around Irish streets and giving linguistic fun and puns to their lips. His use of a Greek past is at the other extreme from Cavafy and Borges, for nothing specifically Greek comes through or is intended to. The past is not made present, for there is scarcely an awareness of past in *Ulysses*. Joyce's focus is elsewhere: on archetypal patterns and mythic implications in man's actions—no matter how routine and even trivial they may be. So Bloom's quest and return are not an imitation, or even distortion, of Ulysses' ancient voyage home. Rather, Bloom and Ulysses both point to a universal, timeless condition: man wandering, blundering, driven along an uncertain destiny to his home.

When Cavafy and Borges treat Homeric legend, their lines intersect and depart. We may compare Borges' "The Maker" and Cavafy's poem "Ithaka." Both are key works.

Borges moves his central figure, in this instance Homer, about in time, transforming his character. At one moment Homer is Odysseus and then, as Borges notes in the commentaries to *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Homer the Maker becomes Borges the creator, losing his sight and thereby gaining new memories of the past and the means to make new myths. In the first part of the story, the Maker is Odysseus. In lines that remarkably resemble Cavafy's Odysseus, Borges speaks of a young adventurous Odysseus: "Eager, curious, unquestioning, following no other law than to enjoy things and forget them, he wandered over many lands and, on one side or the other of the sea, looked on the cities of men and their palaces. In bustling marketplaces or at the foot of a mountain whose hidden peak may have sheltered satyrs, he had heard entangled stories, which he accepted as he accepted reality, without attempting to find out whether they were true or imaginary" (*Aleph*, pp. 155-56). But then as he ages, Odysseus becomes Homer—or Borges moving into "the slow twilight" of blindness—and the beautiful world begins to leave him, the night loses its multitude of stars, the ground becomes uncertain under his feet. His blindness is erected about him gradually like the walls in Cavafy's poem "Walls." The builders—

¹² Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York, 1958).

like the builders in Kafka's parable—construct the walls unknown to the speaker.

*Ἄλλὰ δὲν ἀκουσα ποτὲ κρότον κτιστῶν ἢ ἤχον.
*Ἀνεπαισθητῶς μ' ἔκλεισαν ἀπὸ τὸν κόσμον ἔξω.

(CP, p. 2)

(But I never heard the sound of the builders.
Imperceptibly they shut me out of the world.)

There is a conspiracy of seclusion. And when the speaker recognizes that he is going blind, he shouts, unashamed. Mixing humor, irony, pathos, Borges writes: "he cried out; stoic fortitude had not yet been invented, and Hector could flee from Achilles without dishonor."

But then the aging, contemplative, resigned Homer-Borges emerges. For blindness endows him with memory of history and mythical geographies.

I shall no longer look upon the sky and its mythological dread (he felt), nor this face which the years will transform. Days and nights passed over these fears of his body, but one morning he awoke, looked (without astonishment now) at the dim things around him, and unexplainably felt—the way one recognizes a strain of music or a voice—that all this had already happened to him and that he had faced it with fear, but also with joy, hope, and curiosity. Then he went deep into his past, which seemed to him bottomless, and managed to draw out of that dizzying descent the lost memory that now shone like a coin under the rain, maybe because he had never recalled it before except in some dream. [*Aleph*, p. 156]

Borges' fable ends with a recognition that his voyage takes him to love and danger, Aphrodite and Ares. Black ships roam the seas in search of a loved island—but the gods will not save shrines or ships. It is his destiny to sing of them for man's hollow memory. But as for the end, Borges says *we are ignorant*. "These things we know, but not what he felt when he went down into his final darkness" (*Aleph*, p. 157).

Yet elsewhere Borges does respond to the enigmas of blindness, age, and death. In the commentary to "The Maker," he says: "Eleven years after writing 'The Maker,' I seem to have recast my fable—without being aware of it—into a more narrowly autobiographical poem called 'In Praise of Darkness.'"

In "In Praise of Darkness," "Elogio de la sombra," Borges reconciles himself to old age and darkness. Old age, *la vejez*, "the name others give it," may be the time of happiness, he writes, for the animal is or is almost dead. Man and the soul remain.

Siempre en mi vida fueron demasiadas las cosas;
Demócrito de Abdera se arrancó los ojos para pensar;
el tiempo ha sido mi Demócrito.
Esta penumbra es lenta y no duele;

fluye por un manso declive
y se parece a la eternidad.¹³

(There were always too many things in my life;
Demokritos of Abdera tore out his eyes in order to think;
time has been my Demokritos.
it flows down a mild slope
and looks like eternity.)

Now darkness has mitigated time, and though his friends now do not have faces and books do not have letters, the darkness has restored memory, that is, the essential memory. Women are now what they were and the few things worth reading from the past he keeps rereading in his memory. Finally, he can forget everything. All the echoes, the real swords, the words, the love, the things. "I arrive at my center," he writes, "to my algebra and my key, / to my mirror . . . Soon I will know who I am."¹⁴ In darkness is self-knowledge. He wants what is the sin of Adam, Oedipus, of every rebel, peaceful or in wrath: to know oneself. It is clear that the voyage of Oydseus, the arrival naked and blind at the dark island before death, is a voyage toward wisdom, peace, to the self-acceptance and knowledge that Borges seeks. In a word Borges has entered into his solitude. He remembers some gold coins—but in his fables and conversations, he is content to be alone, to be alive in himself. He writes:

But no, I can be alone for quite a long time, I don't mind long railroad journeys, I don't mind being alone in a hotel or walking down the street, because, well, I won't say that I am thinking all the time because that would be bragging.

I think I am able to live with a lack of occupation. I don't have to be talking to people or doing things. If somebody had gone out, and I had come here and found the house empty, then I would have been quite content to sit down and let two or three hours pass and go out for a short walk, but I wouldn't feel especially unhappy or lonely. That happens to all people who go blind . . .

I could or I might not be thinking about anything, I'd just be living on, no? Letting time flow or perhaps looking back on memories or walking across a bridge and trying to remember favorite passages, but maybe I wouldn't be doing anything, I'd just be living.¹⁵

When Cavafy uses the Homeric myth, as in the poem "Ithaka," we see the spirit of the young Cavafy. And like Borges' "The Maker," the poem is clearly a parable. It tells the reader how to make his life—how Cavafy, identifying with Odysseus, can recall adventure and sensual experience. He uses legend, rather than history, but a legend so deeply part of the Greek mind that the two categories merge. To the Greek, Odysseus and Alexander are hardly of opposing categories of imagina-

¹³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires, 1969), p. 155.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁵ Burgin, pp. 20-21.

tion and history. Rather, they lean on each other for completeness as Noah and Moses do in the Bible. For cultural purposes, for the Greek self-image, as it were, history and legend complete and reinforce each other, and each new archeological find—from the labyrinth at Knossos to the bull-horn mountains overlooking Delphi and Nestor's Palace—points to the interdependence of history and myth.

ΙΘΑΚΗ

Σὰ βρεῖς στὸν πηγαμὸ γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,
 νὰ εὐχεσαιο νάναι μακρὸς ὁ δρόμος,
 γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.
 Τοὺς Λαιστρυγῶνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,
 τὸν θυμωμένο Ποσειδῶνα μὴ φοβᾶσαι,
 τέτοια στὸν δρόμο σου ποτὲ σου δὲν θὰ βρεῖς,
 ἂν μὲν ἡ σκέψις σου ὕψηλὴ, ἂν ἐκλεκτὴ
 συγκίνησις τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ σῶμα σου ἀγγίζει.
 Τοὺς Λαιστρυγῶνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,
 τὸν ἄγριο Ποσειδῶνα δὲν θὰ συναντήσεις,
 ἂν δὲν τοὺς κουβανεῖς μὲς στὴν ψυχὴ σου,
 ἂν ἡ ψυχὴ σου δὲν τοὺς στήνει ἐμπρὸς σου.

Νὰ εὐχεσαιο νάναι μακρὸς ὁ δρόμος.
 Πολλὰ τὰ καλοκαιρινὰ πρωῒα νὰ εἶναι
 ποὺ μὲ τί εὐχαρίστησι, μὲ τί χαρὰ
 θὰ μπαίνεις σὲ λιμένας πρωτοσιδωμένους·
 νὰ σταματήσεις σ' ἐμπορεῖα Φοινικικά,
 καὶ τὲς καλὲς πραγματεῖες ν' ἀποκτήσεις,
 σεντέφια καὶ κοράλλια, κεχριμπάρια κ' ἔβενους,
 καὶ ἡδονικά μυρωδικὰ κάθε λογῆς,
 ὅσο μπορεῖς πρὸς ἄφθονα ἡδονικά μυρωδικὰ
 σὲ πόλεις Αἰγυπτιακὲς πολλῆς νὰ πᾶς,
 νὰ μάθεις καὶ νὰ μάθεις ἀπ' τοὺς σπουδασμένους.

Πάντα στὸν νοῦ σου νύχεις τὴν Ἰθάκη.
 Τὸ φθόσιμον ἐκεῖ εἶν' ὁ προορισμὸς σου.
 Ἄλλὰ μὴ βιάζεις τὸ ταξεῖδι διόλου.
 Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλὰ νὰ διαρκέσει·
 καὶ γέρος πιά ν' ἀράξεις στὸ νησί,
 πλούσιος μὲ ὅσα κέρδισες στὸν δρόμο,
 μὴ προσδοκῶντας πλοῦτι νὰ σὲ δώσει ἡ Ἰθάκη.

Ἡ Ἰθάκη σ' ἔδωσε τ' ὥρατο ταξεῖδι.
 Χωρὶς αὐτὴν δὲν θάβγαίνεις στὸν δρόμο.
 Ἄλλα δὲν ἔχει νὰ σὲ δώσει πιά.

Κι ἂν πτωχικὴ τὴν βρεῖς, ἡ Ἰθάκη δὲν σὲ γέλασε.
 Ἔτσι σοφὸς ποὺ ἔγινες, μὲ τόση πέτρα,
 ἤδη θὰ τὸ κατάλαβες ἡ Ἰθάκη τί σημαίνουν.

(CP, pp. 66, 68)

(As you set out for Ithaka
 hope your road is a long one,
 full of adventure, full of discovery.
 Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
 angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
 you'll never find things like that on your way
 as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
 as long as a rare excitement
 stirs your spirit and your body.
 Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
 wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
 unless you bring them along inside your soul,
 unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
 May there be many summer mornings when,
 with what pleasure, what joy,
 you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
 may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
 to buy fine things,
 mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
 sensual perfume of every kind—
 as many sensual perfumes as you can;
 and may you visit many Egyptian cities
 to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
 Arriving there is what you're destined for.
 But don't hurry the journey at all.
 Better if it lasts for years,
 so you're old by the time you reach the island,
 wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
 not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
 Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
 Without her you wouldn't have set out.
 She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
 Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
 you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.)¹⁶

When Odysseus reaches the island of Ithaka, the island is poor. Yet it has not cheated him. With his experience, with his wisdom, he knows what Ithaka means. It is his past. The island gave Odysseus a memory and the voyage to Phoenician markets, Egyptian cities, sensual perfumes and fine things, summer mornings on the wild seas. As for the dangers, the Laistrygonians, Cyclops, wild Poseidon will not harm him if his spirit is elevated, if he himself does not create these dangers in his soul. For Cavafy the poem is unusually optimistic. Odysseus is near the end of his life. He has been rewarded both with the eventful voyage itself

¹⁶ Translation reprinted by permission of Edmund Keeley.

and the knowledge and memory of the voyage. In other poems—the majority—the past looms as both rich and painful; for while Cavafy obscures distinctions of past and present by going back in time—in his room, alone, drunk with a memory of that past—there is in the return an implicit act of desperation. For the need to relive an earlier experience suggests that the present is less rich than it should be, that future time is nothing—in effect, that the thread of hope, which requires a notion of futurity, is missing. Loss haunts him. The excellent poem “The Afternoon Sun” speaks of the room of love as now an office for agents, tradesmen, and companies. That experience, preserved for the present in a poem, ended when at

... Ἀπόγευμα ἡ ὥρα τέσσερις, εἶχαμε χωρισθεῖ
γιὰ μιὰ ἑβδομάδα μόνο . . . Ἀλλοιμονον,
ἡ ἔβδομάς ἐκεῖνη ἔγινε παντοτινή.

(CP, p. 180)

(. . . Four o'clock in the afternoon we separated
for a week only . . . And then—
the week became forever.)

Joy and despair pervade the poems: joy and ecstasy identified with a recollection of a sensual love experience in the past; despair tinged everything as historical figures are revealed as victims of their own weakness, futilely driven to acting out their roles. Despair is most decisively apparent when the action is focused on a recognition of a present with future impossibilities, with a future blackened by unredeemed death. In the famous poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (CP, p. 30), the theme of despair or hopelessness is considered with allegorical humor. The barbarians are coming. We will change our lives, we will prepare, we will practice our speeches and put on our best robes. But then word comes that the barbarians are not coming, that indeed there are no more barbarians. We can do nothing now, he writes. They were some kind of solution. Elsewhere Cavafy looks for light and then turns away. He is distressed by the impotence and weakness of age and what further light may reveal to him. Even in an early poem like “The Windows,” a note of pessimism, remarkably like a Kafkian parable, is already there:

ΤΑ ΠΑΡΑΘΥΡΑ

Ἐ' αὐτὲς τὲς σκοτεινὲς κἀμαρες, ποὺ περνᾷ
μέρες βαρύνες, ἐπάνω κάτω τριγυρνᾷ
γιὰ νᾶβρω τὰ παράθυρα.— Ὅταν ἀνοίξει
ἓνα παράθυρο θάναι παρηγορία.—
Μὰ τὰ παράθυρα δὲν βρίσκονται, ἢ δὲν μπορῶ
νὰ τᾶβρω. Καὶ καλλίτερα ἴσως νὰ μὴν τὰ βρῶ.
Ἴσως τὸ φῶς θάναι μιὰ νέα τυραννία.
Ποιὸς ξέρει τί καινούρια πράγματα θὰ δειξέι.

(CP, p. 24)

(In these dark rooms where I spend
depressing days, I pace about in circles
looking for the windows. When a window
is opened it will be a consolation.
But the windows don't appear, or I can't
find them. And maybe it's better not to find them.
The light may be a new tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will show . . .)

Or again, in “The City,” Cavafy declares that when you have destroyed your life in one city, you must have no hope of going elsewhere to begin again. You will always arrive back in this same city.

Γιὰ τὰ ἀλλοῦ — μὴ ἐλπίζεις—
δὲν ἔχει πλοῖο γιὰ σέ, δὲν ἔχει δόδο.
Ἔτσι ποὺ τὴ ζωὴ σου ρήμαξες ἐδώ
στὴν κόχη τούτη τὴν μικρή, σ' ὄλην τὴν γῆ τὴν χάλασες.

(CP, p. 50)

(Don't hope for any other—
There is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you have destroyed your life here
in this small corner, you've ruined it in the whole world.)

Both authors use earlier geographies and times to present their story. I have indicated that in Cavafy, myth and history come together. And this is central to Cavafy's historical preoccupation. In Borges myth and history also come together, but the attitude toward the re-created reality is more complex. Both authors invent “historical” realities. Cavafy tells us of the *intrahistoria* of Seleucid monarchs as seen by a peddler, of happenings in the suburbs of ancient Antioch. Borges gives us the details of the ancient Babylonian lottery, the enigmas and danger of this ancient passion for gambling. But in Borges we have an element of dream, of phantasmagoria, of hoax. Borges likes to invent a reality, make it extravagantly unlikely, and then, detail by detail, impress us with its truthfulness. He will even insert names of personal friends, such as Rodríguez Monegal, a Uruguayan companion,¹⁷ until the imaginary is tantalizing, immediate. As Barrenechea points out,¹⁸ Borges' unreality is as real as his reality, and these two sides of his vision reinforce, rather than exclude, each other. Borges writes: “My feeling is that first sentences should be long in order to tear the reader out of his everyday life and firmly lodge him in an imaginary world. If an illustrious example

¹⁷ Rodríguez Monegal has written, among other books, a volume on the work of Borges, *Borges, par lui-même* (Paris, 1970).

¹⁸ Ana María Barrenechea, *Borges, the Labyrinth Maker* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 126-28.

be allowed me, Cervantes apparently felt the same way when he began his famous novel."¹⁹

Yet as soon as he has established the imaginary world he uses every resource to prove that the imaginary world is real. He wishes, as did Quijote, to make Sancho also believe fantasy. What he accomplishes by fusing real and imaginary worlds is to give us both as one, as he gives us past and present time as one. The real is shadows, the other dream. By exalting the imagination he also questions assumptions of everyday reality.

V. S. Pritchett comes upon a remarkable literary source for the background of the dream element in Borges: Calderón de la Barca.²⁰ Calderón's *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*) is to big a topic to be dealt with here. Yet natural affinities—such as this or an obvious one with Chuang Tzu's dreamer who thought he was a butterfly²¹—may mean more than direct influence, than what René Wellek calls the "foreign trade" of exported literary influence. And we may circle back to Cavafy through these same elements of dream, uncertainty, and the Alexandria of multiple beliefs and disbeliefs (so much like our own day), in a poem by the late Alexandrian pagan Palladas, who witnessed antiquity being destroyed by the new Christian zealots:

Αρα μὴ θανάτῳ τῷ δοκεῖν ζῶμεν κόπον,
 Ἐλλήνεσ' ἀνδρες, συμφορᾷ πεπτωκότεσ'
 ονειρῶν εἰκάζοντες εἶναι τὸν βίον;
 ἢ ζῶμεν ἡμῶν τοῦ βίου τεθηγκότεσ'.²²

(Is it true that we Greeks are really dead
 and only seem alive—in our fallen state
 where we imagine that life is a dream?
 Or are we truly alive and its life dead?)

No writer in the Palatine Anthology, from which these lines come, is closer to Cavafy than Palladas, the fourth-century poet from Alexandria. Cavafy recalls Palladas because of the common despair of a "fallen state," because of the evocation, in a few words, of the demise of a long

¹⁹ Burgin, p. 121.

²⁰ V. S. Pritchett, "Don Borges: *The Aleph and Other Stories*," *The New York Review of Books*, Jan. 28, 1971, p. 10.

²¹ See Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York, 1939), p. 32. The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu lived in the third century B.C. In a parable about death he wrote: "Once Chuang Chou dreamt that he was a butterfly. He did not know that he had ever been anything but a butterfly and was content to hover from flower to flower. Suddenly he woke and found to his astonishment that he was Chuang Chou. But it was hard to be sure whether he really was Chou and had only dreamt that he was a butterfly, or was really a butterfly, and was only dreaming that he was Chou."

²² *Greek Anthology*, X, 82.

historical period, and of the ultimate confusion and uncertainty that lead one to confuse dream with life, life with death.

Finally, Cavafy and Borges come together philosophically and in their attitudes to a past, to fame, to courage, to death, in Cavafy's poem "The God Abandons Antony."

ΑΠΟΛΕΙΠΕΙΝ Ο ΘΕΟΣ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΟΝ

Σὺν ἔσφρα, ὦρα μεσάνυχτ', ἀκουσθεῖ
 δῆματος θιάσος νὰ περνᾷ
 μὲ μουσικὲς ἐξαισιες, μὲ φωνῆς —
 τὴν τύχη σου ποὺ ἐνόησε πιά, τὰ ἔργα σου
 ποὺ ἀπέτυχαν, τὰ σχέδια τῆς ζωῆς σου
 ποὺ βγήκαν ὅλα πλάινες, μὴ ἀνοφέλετα ὀρηγίσεις.
 Σὺν ἔτοιμος ἀπὸ καιρῶ, σὰ θορραλῶς,
 ἀποχαιρέτα τὴν, τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρεια ποὺ φέγγει.
 Ἴπρὸ πάντων νὰ μὴ γελασθεῖς, μὴν πεῖς πῶς ἦταν
 ἓνα ὄνειρο, πῶς ἀπατήθηκεν ἢ ἀκοιή σου
 μάταιες ἐλπίδες τέτοιες, μὴν καταδύγῃς.
 Σὺν ἔτοιμος ἀπὸ καιρῶ, σὰ θορραλῶς,
 σὺν ποὺ ταυιάζει σὲ ποὺ ἀξιώθηκες μιά τέτοια πόλι,
 πλησίασε σταθερὰ πρὸς τὸ παράθυρο,
 κι ἄκουσε μὲ συγκίνησιν, ἀλλ' ὄχι
 μὲ τῶν δειλῶν τὰ παρακάλια καὶ παράτονα,
 ὡς τελευταία ἀπόλασαι τοὺς ἰχθους,
 τὰ ἐξαισια ὄργανα τοῦ μουσικοῦ θιάσου,
 κι ἀποχαιρέτα τὴν, τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρεια ποὺ χάνεις.

(CP, p. 60)

(When suddenly at midnight you hear
 an invisible troupe going by
 with exquisite music, voices—
 don't mourn your luck that is slipping away, your work
 gone wrong, the plans for your life
 that have all proved to be illusions.
 As if long prepared, as if full of courage,
 say goodbye to her, the Alexandria who is leaving.
 Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say it was
 a dream, that your ears deceived you.
 Don't stoop to such empty hopes.
 As if long prepared, as if full of courage,
 as is right for you who are worthy of such a city,
 go firmly to the window
 and listen with emotion, but not
 with the pleas and whining of a coward,
 hear the voices—your last pleasure—
 the exquisite instruments of that secret troupe,
 and say goodbye to her, the Alexandria you are losing.)

Here is the evocation of a great figure, Antony. Yet in keeping with the practice of Borges and Cavafy to seek man's frailty, the humanity

that makes a historical personage credible, Antony is depicted as one who now must no longer fool himself with empty hopes. His courage—and courage and cowardice are the breath of half of Borges' writing—lies in listening to the music of Alexandria, in acknowledging the Alexandria he is losing, in accepting stoically the death which will confirm the reality of earlier failure.

Borges treats the matter of the heroic figure, made life-size as he confronts impending death, in "Poema conjectural," "Conjectural Poem." The poem concerns Francisco Laprida (1786-1829) the leader of a division of forces in Argentina, who was killed defending himself while trying to escape from a trap of gauchos under the enemy *caudillo* José Félix Aldao. It is not Caesar attacking, and yet it is.

Yo que anhelé ser otro, ser un hombre
de sentencias, de libros, de dictámenes,
a cielo abierto yaceré entre ciénagas;
pero me endiosa el pecho inexplicable
un júbilo secreto. Al fin me encuentro
con mi destino sudamericano.
A esta ruinosa tarde me llevaba
el laberinto múltiple de pasos
que mis días tejieron desde un día
de la niñez. Al fin he descubierto
la recóndita clave de mis años,
la suerte de Francisco de Laprida,
la letra que faltaba, la perfecta
forma que supo Dios desde el principio.
En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo
mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo
se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea.²³

(I who longed to be someone else, a man
of judgments, of books, of decrees,
will lie outside between the swamps;
but a secret joy somehow swells
my chest. At last I face
my South American destiny.
I was led to this ruinous afternoon
by an intricate labyrinth of steps
that my days wove from the day
of my childhood. At last I've discovered
the recondite key of my years,
the fate of Francisco de Laprida,
the missing letter, the perfect
form that God knew from the beginning.
In this night's mirror I reach
my unsuspected true face. The circle's
about to close. I wait to let it be.)

²³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, ed., introd., and notes Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, 1972), pp. 82-84.

Both Antony and Francisco learn who they are. It makes death neither better nor worse. But they have no choice but to seek their own identity, to know their own past, where reality, aspirations, hope, despair merge in the complex, multiple reality that has been their lives. They recognize, to use the Borgean terms, "the intricate labyrinth of steps" *before the circle closes*.

In these pages we have glanced at what the poets do with earlier periods, at some intellectual and emotional preoccupations of their personae, and finally we have come to the question of the disappearance and persistence of their personae—in art and in life—that is, to the matter of death and survival. A few personal reminiscences may tell us something about these last matters: about the authors' peripheral vision and the circle of darkness.

The first reminiscence concerns Borges and is less grave. As a background to a personal observation of Borges, we may remember E. M. Forster's description of Cavafy:

. . . A Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe. His arms are extended, possibly. "Oh, Cavafy . . ." Yes, it is Mr. Cavafy, and he is going either from his flat to the office, or from his office to the flat. If the former, he vanishes when seen, with a slight gesture of despair. If the latter, he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence—an immensely complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw. Sometimes the sentence is finished in the street, sometimes the traffic murders it, sometimes it lasts into the flat. It deals with the tricky behaviour of the Emperor Alexius Comnenus in 1006, or with olives, their possibilities and price, or with the fortunes of friends, or with George Eliot, or the dialects of the interior of Asia Minor. It is delivered with equal ease in Greek, English, or French. And despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the matured charity of its judgments, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the universe: it is the sentence of a poet.²⁴

My reminiscence concerns several dealings I had with Borges in the years 1965-67. In 1967 Juan Marichal at Harvard asked me to organize a poetry reading for Borges in New York at the Poetry Center, to find good translations, readers, and so forth. At a small gathering after the reading, Borges was speaking in paradoxes, energetically, with humor and erudition about some of his favorite subjects: Norse history, minor figures in Anglo-Saxon battles, Antonio Machado (El Bueno)—whom he perversely called "El Malo," only to go on, more perversely, to prove that "El Bueno" was really Manuel (Antonio's brother) by reciting with admiration some well known lines from Antonio. Then he discoursed at length on the Greek and Islamic worlds of Asia Minor. He spoke with such smiling conviction that one could not wish for more lucid

²⁴ Dalven, p. 216.

communication. And though blind, he looked intently at you, almost through you. Yet it was also apparent, perhaps characteristic of one who can visually perceive only shadows and a bit of light through the surrounding circle of darkness, that he kept his head tilted to one side.

The second incident concerns Cavafy. A few years ago the set designer Andreas Nonikos, from Alexandria, spoke to me about Cavafy. As a child he saw Cavafy a number of times. His father was an intimate friend of the poet. The day before Cavafy died, Nonikos' father visited the poet in the Greek hospital in Alexandria. He beckoned the elder Nonikos to his bed. Then with a pencil he slowly drew a large full circle on a napkin. The Plotinian circle was complete.

These anecdotes, about authors of moral anecdotes, concern an angle of vision and the circle. Maybe they will help us in dealing with the last subject, the life of their work.

I have noted that Cavafy and Borges "make" historical and imaginative geographies to recall personal and public history. In the cumulative personae of their work, they work out the complexity of their obsessions; and in evoking immediate past, distant past, history, myth, and dream as one single present reality, they unify time.

Both authors accept with resignation, however, the temporal and spatial limitations of man. They use all their devices to outwit divisive time and geography. Cavafy lives to the end exploiting personal and historical memory of real and imaginary events; he lessens the despair of the voyage because of his involvement in the fictions he creates, in short, through his poems, which he would not publish during his life. Borges is resigned in a more whimsical and philosophical way. He so thoroughly describes his introspective meditations on death that a certain objectivity and distance prevail. To be sure, it is art, the poem or the story, that has allowed him temporary mastery of his life. He can view with more equanimity the dénouement of an illusory existence.

Yet even equanimity before death is a paradox, for Borges is not one-sided, and while at one moment he comes to terms with death, at another, the epiphany of darkness is one of terror and humiliation before illusion. The narrator in the last lines of "The Circular Ruins" says, when death finally comes to end his dream, "in terror, in humiliation, he understood that he, too, was an appearance, that someone else was dreaming him." Borges steps back again behind another mirror—of the artist. Borges of "Borges and I" is not one biological man but all the scribbles he has put on paper or the words he has dictated all his life.

While alive, the poets work through memory and history. In them the past is alive, redeemed, operating in the present. But the ultimate redemption of the past is in their writing. Cavafy published only a handful of poems, early in life, and then, year by year, scrupulously, pre-

pared a collection of poems he would not publish. Yet in the reports of those who know "The Old Poet,"²⁵ there is agreement that Cavafy knew perfectly well what the poems were worth, who the poems were. He was the poems: something he had made to exist outside and apart from himself, and he knew they would survive. In this, happily, he was correct. For both Constantine Cavafy and Jorge Luis Borges, all the true and imaginary places, events, and personages of the past are a matter of ink on a page. Permanent shadows. Through their art the past is erased as simple past, yet has not passed away from us. The past is now, on the page.

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²⁵ "The Old Poet" is the name Lawrence Durrell gives to Cavafy in the volumes of *The Alexandria Quartet*.