

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsou

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The “Poetic Subject” as “Subject of Semiosis” in C. P. Cavafy’s “Going back Home from Greece”

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Abstract

This paper proposes to investigate the ambiguous usage, fluidity and, arguably, re-signification of words and phrases related to discourses about Hellenism, in C. P. Cavafy’s dramatic monologue “Going Back Home from Greece”. The poem is set in the Hellenistic period that Cavafy eminently privileged, and is performed by a fictional “speaker”: a Greco-Syrian philosopher involved in an effort to articulate and renegotiate his identity. The dramatic monologue as a genre “stages”, as it were, the discursive formation of its speaker’s (the poetic subject’s) subjectivity-as-process and here this speaker is construed as a “subject of semiosis”, namely as both active participant in and as effect of the social and ideological activity by which a culture produces signs. Special attention is paid to Cavafy’s persistent use of the trope of simile, which is used to yoke together and hence forge similarities between separate entities (Greek and non-Greek), while never totally erasing their differences.

Keywords

Cavafy , dramatic monologue , Hellenism , subjectivity , poetic subject , simile

Subjectivity and Semiosis

This essay presents a reading of C. P. Cavafy's dramatic monologue, "Going Back Home from Greece" and focuses specifically on the formation of the poem's poetic subject, the "speaker" of the poetic utterance. It is part of a broader project regarding the discursive construction of the poetic subject in Cavafy's dramatic monologues, which investigates the potential relevance of contemporary theories about subjectivity (that developed in the context of post-structuralism) to a further understanding of the nature and function of Cavafy's monologues, in poetic texts such as "Going Back Home from Greece", "Philhellene", "Myris; Alexandria 430 A.D", "The Sculptor of Tyanea", "In the Outskirts of Antiochia", and others. The main critical question addressed in this study is whether the speakers of such monologues, the dramatic monologues or subjects of the poetic utterance, constitute typical products or symptoms of their cultural and historical context, that is, fictional representatives of the historical era within which they are dramatically situated, or whether their performance may be indicating or including a factor of individual agency, provoking and effectuating change, namely, a transformation of the self and its environment by means of language use.

Here my reading of "Going Back Home from Greece" complements and expands, by way of recourse to semiotics, an argument I have developed elsewhere, regarding the formation of this poem's speaker's subjectivity-as-process (Sifaki, 2013). Any attempt to expand on the issue of subjectivity via semiotics, however, inevitably raises the question as to whether an investigation of a "subject of semiosis" may be destined to result in actually depriving him or her of subjectivity altogether. Because, as Ronald Postner sums up, in the context of structuralism and post-structuralism the concept of the subject was fundamentally problematised: "To Saussure and Hjelmslev, senders and recipients of a discourse (i.e., the sign interpreters or subjects of semiosis) were only of interest insofar as they utilized codes and could turn them into discourse." Lacan claims that "we speak of a subject only at those points where we would otherwise encounter a gap in the chain of signifiers", while Kristeva also "speaks of the subject merely as a meaning process". Yet "according to Derrida and De Man, the subject is embodied in the multiplicity of his/her readings of a discourse" and "Foucault and Baudrillard campaign against the submission of people to [structuralist] codes by repudiating the code as fiction." (Postner, 2011, p. 22). Moreover Foucault, in later writings such as *The Use of Pleasure* (1987) and *The Care of the Self* (1988), re-opens the possibility of a re-emergence of agency, enabled and constrained at once by dominant discursive fields. As Stuart Hall puts it (in terms profoundly pertinent to the reading of dramatic monologues), Foucault engages with the subject's "relation to the rule Often, in this work, the ... technologies [of the self] are most effectively demonstrated in the practices of self-production, in specific modes of conduct, in what we have come from later work to recognize as a kind of *performativity*." And Hall continues with the useful observation

that Foucault here is pushed “towards a recognition that [...] the ‘decentring’ of the subject is not the destruction of the subject, and [that] the ‘centring’ of discursive practice cannot work without the constitution of subjects” (Hall, 2000, p.25). My contention is that the dramatic monologue, by posing as its foundational condition *the situated speaker*, anticipates, precisely, a Foucauldian mode of “subjectification”: Cavafy’s monologists “are in a process of challenging the discursive context without which, however, their utterances would not have been made possible in the first place.” Or else, “Cavafy’s use of irony in composing his dramatic monologists ‘translates’, as it were, into poetic terms the ‘aporetic’ nature of the Foucauldian ‘situated’ subject, who depends ‘objectively’ for his or her very subjectivity and agency on his or her defining historical and discursive context” (Sifaki, 2013, p. 33).

The Victorian Dramatic Monologue

Several scholars agree that Cavafy adapted the dramatic monologue from Victorian sources: his special affinity with the 19th century English poet Robert Browning is well documented, but he was also familiar with the poetry of Tennyson, Swinburne, Wilde, and others (see Keeley, 1996; Ricks 2003, Tombrou, 2004). The origins of the genre can be traced back to the ancient times (Sinfield, 1977) but the particular version Cavafy experiments with developed historically during the Victorian period in contradistinction to the Romantic lyric and contesting the latter’s assertion of an interminably expansive, autonomous self (Tucker, 1985); it consists of a literary representation of a speaker who is inexorably bound to a dramatic situation, that is, his consciousness, performance and speech are presented as socially and historically situated and delimited. Dramatic monologues represent theatrical scenes; they are addressed to an auditor who is “silent”, in that his or her part in the communication process is not directly heard but surmised by the reader, since the silent auditor invariably conditions and orients the speaker’s delivery. It has been traditionally assumed that such poems produce meaning by means of dramatic irony, based on a tacit understanding between poet and reader, at the expense of the speaker, whose knowledge is necessarily constricted and conditioned by the poem’s historical frame (Langbaum, 1957; Sinfield, 1977). This approach has been only recently challenged by critics who employ theories of the performative; I am particularly indebted to Cornelia Pearsall who claims that “each speaker is keenly aware of the potential effects of his or her discourse (not all of which can be controlled) and through it seeks to accomplish highly complex aims” and argues persuasively that we have spent too much effort judging these speakers instead of trying to understand them. Drawing on J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory, Pearsall shows how such poems “articulate a speaker’s goals, but the monologues themselves also come to perform these goals in the course of the monologue, by way of the monologue” (Pearsall, 2006, p.20).

“Going Back Home from Greece”

In the case of “Going Back Home”, the speaker, an anonymous Greco-Syrian philosopher of the Hellenistic period, is involved in an effort to persuade the silent auditor, his friend Hermippos, also a philosopher, of the need to dis-identify from the cultural authority of mainland Greece. His goal (which he performs in the course of the monologue by way of the monologue) is thus no less than a re-negotiation of crucial aspects of his identity.

“Going Back Home” is one of Cavafy’s many poems that constitute literary representations of the Hellenistic and/or the Greco-Roman periods and exploits the latter’s multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character. (Unlike other of his poems this one is not clearly dated.) Ancient Syria at the time is a fascinating place but despite Cavafy’s good sense of history it is questionable whether he clearly differentiated between Syrian culture during the Seleucid regime and that of the later Greco-Roman period. The former had had great impact on local cultures but had not dispensed with ethnic segregation altogether. As the historian Nathanael Andrade explains:

The Seleucid regime opted to confer Greek citizen status upon ethnic Greeks and did not accept Near Easterners as Greeks, even if they had adopted certain elements of Greek culture. [During the Roman period, on the contrary,] the authoritative frameworks of the Greek poleis of Syria determined their Greek group affiliations, and they produced fields of signification that interwove Greek and local symbols [...] Within such fields of discourse and performance, the inhabitants of Syria collapsed the boundaries between the discreet categories of “Greek”, “Syrian”, “Roman”, and “Iranian” in ways that enabled citizens to express Greek identifications with Near Eastern symbols and Near Eastern symbols and Near Eastern forms of identification with Greek ones. That is, the Greek poleis of Syria recast Greek signs as Syrian and Syrian signs as Greek (Andrade, 2009, p. 6).

Significantly then, Cavafy chooses to explore the use of signifiers relating to Hellenism by projecting his concerns onto a historical period when the use of such signifiers was exceedingly fluid and flexible. “Going Back Home” figures dramatic characters that have been customarily identified in Cavafy scholarship as representations of the Greek diaspora but, given Andrade’s account above, I doubt whether this categorisation is in fact accurate.

The poem’s setting is a boat in the Eastern Mediterranean and the two Greek-Syrian friends are sailing in it, returning to Syria after having travelled to Greece. They are thus positioned mid-way between Greece and Syria, between cultural centre and periphery. Following is the text quoted in full:

Well, we’re nearly there, Hermippos.
Day after tomorrow, it seems—that’s what the captain said.
At least we’re sailing in our seas,
the waters of Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt,

the beloved waters of our home countries.
 Why so silent? Ask your heart:
 didn't you too feel happier
 the farther we got from Greece?
 What's the point of fooling ourselves?
 That would hardly be properly Greek.
 It's time we admitted the truth:
 we are Greeks also—what else are we?—
 but with Asiatic affections and feelings,
 affections and feelings
 sometimes alien to Hellenism.
 It isn't right, Hermippos, for us philosophers
 to be like some of our petty kings
 (remember how we laughed at them
 when they used to come to our lectures?)
 who through their showy Hellenified exteriors,
 Macedonian exteriors (naturally),
 let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
 a bit of Media they can't keep back.
 And to what laughable lengths the fools went
 trying to cover it up!
 No, that's not at all right for us.
 For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
 We must not be ashamed
 of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
 we should really honor it, take pride in it.
 Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

Their departure from Greece is clearly a source of relief for the speaker, a fact that sparks the argument between the two friends and thus triggers the monologue. Obviously "Greece" here does not merely refer to a geographical area; it connotes cultural origin and is heavily symbolically charged with the ideal of classical civilisation (Clay, 1974). In the context of the latter, the idea of Hellenism is inseparable from a discursive field organised around the bipolar, hierarchical, opposites of Greek vs. barbarian, a binary that haunts all discussions about Hellenism. I argue that the speaker's delivery in "Going Back Home" is produced both within and in reaction to this powerful discourse, which forces him to occupy a peripheral, inferior, position with respect to an indigenous Greek, a discourse that defines him as a Greek in the first place but a non-authentic one for that matter, a racial and/or cultural hybrid. The asymmetrical power structure of

Greek vs. barbarian is, precisely, the dynamic context within which the interplay of signifiers related to Hellenism generally in Cavafy's poetry must be placed and investigated. Such signifiers are words like Greek or Hellene; someone conducting himself in a "properly Greek" manner (ελληνοπρεπής) as opposed to one Hellenified (ελληνοποιημένος) in "Going Back Home"; Hellenization (τα ελληνίζοντα), a word we find in a discarded draft of "Going Back Home", where the speaker admits that he, as passionate devotee and teacher of Hellenic thought will never obstruct Hellenization in the East, despite his scorn of "Hellenized barbarians"; being a philhellene as opposed to un-Greek (ανελλήνιστος), in the masterful dramatic monologue "Philhellene"; being Hellenic (Ελληνικός) as opposed to both Greek and Hellenised. Cavafy uses the word Hellenic as a noun to refer both to himself and the Antiochos, in "Epitaph of Antiochos, King of Kommagini"; and, of course, barbarian, a word we find in several poems.

The combination of Foucault's theory of discursive power with basic parameters of semiotics has been undertaken already effectively. I take on here from Katya Mandoki, who has demonstrated that power in Foucault "is an effect of verbal and non-verbal illocutionary acts, which are always and in every case semiotic" (Mandoki, 2004, p. 106) Also, I am indebted to Andrew Garnar, who has expounded the pragmatics of Charles Sanders Peirce by means of reading Foucauldian "power" into it and reminds us that, according to Peirce, "symbols and other signs are inherently vague, their meanings always indefinite. It is through the operation of power [Garnar argues persuasively] that the meanings of symbols are constrained." It follows, then, that "by mobilizing the vagueness [that is inherent in any sign] standard interpretations can be challenged. This challenging can open the possibility for different, and hopefully better, interpretations." (Garnar, 2006, p. 357) The speaker of "Going Back Home", empowered by his resistance to the dominant discourse that relegates him to a terrain of an inauthentic Greek is in a process of, precisely, problematising and challenging the standard meanings of signs related to Hellenism.

The speaker begins fervently with a striking and rather paradoxical pronouncement in the first stanza; he insists that he and his friend ought to admit their estrangement from Greece because that is the "properly Greek" (ελληνοπρεπές) thing to do. Can such a statement be uttered non-ironically? Is he telling us that as true Greeks the two friends ought to admit that they are not truly Greek? Is he reducing Greekness to an ethical attitude (honesty and dignity) or proper conduct? He is clearly advocating a "properly Greek" *manner* and not an essentialist quality. Then he further elaborates on the differences between the two Greco-Syrian friends and mainland Greeks by asserting an expanded notion of Greekness, a Greekness including "Asiatic affections and feelings,/ affections and feelings sometimes alien to Hellenism"; but these in their turn are immediately differentiated from the affections and feelings of other Asians, such as the "petty" Oriental kings, who labour in Greek language, letters and manners in vain, solely for the

purpose of showing off, achieving merely a “Hellenified” exterior. But in what way is their “Hellenified (ελληνοποιημένο) exterior” different to “properly Greek” (ελληνοπρεπές) conduct? And why would a Greek education work for some people and not for others in the East? Are the Asian kings pathetic because of their false pretensions to Greekness or are they pitiable because of their low self-esteem, because they regard their Asian identity inferior and try to suppress it? This ambiguity is not resolved by the final lines of the poem “We must not be ashamed / of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;/ we should really honor it, take pride in it”, because here, once more, the two friends’ (potential) ability to take pride in their “Syrian and Egyptian blood” is once more attributed to their Greekness (“For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won’t do”); moreover, it may be argued that the phrase “Greeks like us” (the kind of Greeks they are) is also quite unclear and so the text persists to its very end to probe the question as to what precisely the word “Greek” signifies in this poem.

It is worth investigating further the signifying function of the adjective ελληνοπρεπές (that is translated “properly Greek” by Keeley and Sherrard). I suggest it may be construed and analyzed as a simile; according to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “a simile may be marked not only by ‘like’ or ‘as,’ but also by many other comparative markers, including verbs such as ‘resemble,’ ‘echo,’ and ‘seem’, connectives like ‘as if’ and ‘as though’ and phrases such as ‘the way that’”. From this perspective it seems likely that simile encompasses analogy, rather than being a discrete form of comparison” (p. 1149). Acting “ελληνοπρεπώς», “properly Greek” or “behaving in a way proper to a Greek” may be expounded as “behaving in a way analogous to a Greek”, “behaving in a way a Greek would have behaved”, or “in a way a Greek ought to behave”. In any case, it implies a form of learned conduct that is not to be taken for granted, not even by those who are Greek by birth; rather, it is a goal that the philosopher-speaker ventures to achieve and working toward this goal is a process that effectively alters his identity, since similes, like metaphors “are tropological agents, altering the identity of the object or person to which they refer” (Pearsall, 2008, p. 35). “Going Back Home” exemplifies Pearsall’s theory, according to which the trope of simile bears special relevance to the genre of the dramatic monologue. The simile points to a process of transportation and transformation from one identity to another but it simultaneously retains and calls attention to the division and differences between the two (see also Brogan, 1986). The injunction to act in “properly Greek” fashion involves a strained conjunction of comparable but different entities, non Greek or Syrian and Greek, or the dynamic but always incomplete process of “non-Greek” acquiring “Greek” qualities.

The speaker uses comparisons relentlessly, positing both resemblances and differentiations, both blatant and subtle. He is both like and unlike mainland Greeks, a Greek with Asiatic affections and feelings, both like and unlike Asians, not authentically Greek but “properly” Greek and not pretend Greek. At this point, it is important to not forget

the interdependence of language and action explored and emphasised by Pierce, which is why his work conjoins so productively with Foucault's elaborations on power and also with theories of the performative. Peirce proclaimed that "the meaning of a symbol [the word] consists in how it might cause us to act.' So the meaning of a word resides in what it leads us to do. Meaning is to be found in action. This should not be understood merely in the sense of causing some mechanical motion. Instead, the 'how' must 'refer to a description of the action as having this or that aim.'" (Garnar, 2006, p. 356). The continuous trying out of signs searching for the meaning of Greekness and its "others" is not used by the speaker merely to describe his identity as compound or multi-layered identity; it is part of a complex and arguably precarious open-ended process of performatively configuring and re-configuring his position as speaking and acting agent; a semiotic process that produces the meaning of himself through his experimental relating of signs to each other.

The Oriental component of the two friends' identity is increasingly emphasized in the course of the poem's movement and it is finally confidently asserted. Certainly "the speaker has (performatively) appropriated, affirmed and turned to his own advantage the allocation to the presumably inferior category of racial and/ or cultural hybrid, which was the very cause of his initial frustration and had triggered the monologue in the first place: this is no small achievement" (Sifaki, 2013, p. 37). As a result he has also successfully undermined Greece's claims to cultural predominance. His revised version of Hellenism cannot be accounted for within a discursive field dividing people into authentic and inauthentic Greeks. "To reclaim Hellenism for himself he has had to undermine this system so as open up a new space for himself" (Sifaki, 2013, p. 39).

Nevertheless the speaker's position rests rather uncomfortably with his emphatic scorn of other Asians (barbarians), which indicates that he, too, needs an "other" in order to define himself. Thus the poem remains cunningly open-ended. Cavafy's use of dramatic irony here is highly complex; it is not used to undermine the delivery of the speaker by exposing its inconsistencies; rather, by means of irony, the delivery of the speaker raises questions for the sake of the reader, regarding the meanings of Hellenism and more generally the dependence of any discourse and ideology on historically produced subject-positions. But the poem itself, though highly suggestive, does not give answers to the questions it raises in any definite and final way. There is, as any reader of Cavafy knows, an abundance of different actors in his corpus of dramatic poetry (not necessarily dramatic monologues) tackling the issue of Hellenism, which offers a range of subjective perspectives and several of his readers have tried to discern the poet's own consistent ideology in between the lines of his many personages. Maybe we should allow, instead, each one of Cavafy's actors to conduct and perform his utterance without necessarily struggling to discover the authority of the poet's voice inside or against it.

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