

The Rhetoric of Dilemma and Cavafean Ambiguity

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Abstract: In his article "The Rhetoric of Dilemma and Cavafean Ambiguity" Anthony Dracopoulos examines the techniques of expression developed in Cavafy's poem "Young men of Sidon." By the beginning of the twentieth century, Cavafy, like other modernist poets, had become acutely aware of the human inability to grasp essence in its entirety and developed various techniques of expression to accommodate the polyphony of perspectives and the ambiguity inherent in modern society. The article argues that Cavafy structures a number of his poems in the form of binary oppositions or dilemmas. However, contrary to expectation, this form of expression does not aim to privilege one side over the other but rather, to engage the reader in a journey for the search of meaning. His poems inhabit an in-between zone and the resultant ambiguity constructs a topography that remains suspended to attempts at resolution and reduction.

Anthony DRACOPOULOS

The Rhetoric of Dilemma and Cavafean Ambiguity

In ordinary usage "ambiguity" usually has negative connotations. It refers to expression that lacks clarity or is open to interpretation, expression that essentially lacks definiteness, much like the evasive discourse of a seasoned politician. In modern literature, however, ambiguity is viewed as a positive attribute. Since W. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, this systematic lack of definiteness is recognized as a literary device that contributes to the openness of a text and by extension its capacity to accommodate diverse or multiple readings. By intensifying the challenge of making sense, this technique encourages and even demands reader participation and consequently offers an aesthetic pleasure analogous to the intensity of this challenge. For this reason it has often been associated with other techniques of polysemy, such as irony and allegory. Ambiguity could also be considered as a method of dealing with, while simultaneously contributing to, the profound crisis of meaning exacerbated by the fragmentation of modern societies and the restrictions inherent in a single point of view. It can be said to "dramatise the irremediable uncertainty of our human knowledge in relation to reality [and] to call into radical question the validity of the relations between appearances and the reality they profess to represent" (Rimmon-Kennan 226). In the present study, I explore the technique of dilemma as a device of ambiguity and openness in the work of the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy and focus on the following poem as a point of departure:

"Young Men of Sidon (A.D. 400)"

The actor they'd brought in to entertain them
also recited a few choice epigrams.

The room opened out on the garden
and a delicate odour of flowers
mingled with the scent
of the five perfumed young Sidonians.

There were readings from Meleager, Krinagoras, Rhianos.
But when the actor recited
"Here lies Aeschylus, the Athenian, son of Euphorion"
(stressing maybe more than he should have
"his renowned valour" and "sacred Marathonian grove"),
a vivacious young man, mad about literature,
suddenly jumped up and said:

"I don't like that quatrain at all.
Sentiments of that kind seem somehow weak.
Give, I say, all your strength to your work,
make it your total concern. And don't forget your work
even in times of stress or when you begin to decline.
This is what I expect, what I demand of you-
and not that you completely dismiss from your mind
the magnificent art of your tragedies —
your *Agamemnon*, your marvelous *Prometheus*,
your representations of Orestes and Cassandra,
your *Seven Against Thebes* — merely to set down for your memorial
that as an ordinary soldier, one of the herd,
you too fought against Datis and Artaphernis." (*Collected Poems* 76)

"Νέοι της Σιδώνας (400 Μ.Χ.)"

Ο ηθοποιός που έφεραν για να τους διασκεδάσει

απήγγειλε και μερικά επιγράμματα εκλεκτά.

Η αίθουσα άνοιγε στον κήπο επάνω
κ' είχε μιαν ελαφρά ευωδία ανθέων
που ενώνονταν με τα μυρωδικά
των πέντε αρωματισμένων Σιδωνίων νέων.

Διαβάστηκαν Μελέαγρος, και Κριναγόρας, και Ριανός.
Μα σαν απήγγειλεν ο ηθοποιός,
«Αισχύλον Ευφορίωνος Αθηναίον τόδε κεύθει—»
(τονίζοντας ίσως υπέρ το δέον
το αλκήν δ' ευδόκιμον», το «Μαραθώνιον άλσος»),
πετάχθηκεν ευθύς ένα παιδί ζωηρό,
φανατικό για γράμματα, και φώναξε

"Α δεν μ' αρέσει το τετράστιχον αυτό.
Εκφράσεις τοιούτου είδους μοιάζουν κάπως σαν λιποψυχίες.
Δώσε — κηρύττω — στο έργον σου όλην την δύναμί σου,
όλην την μέριμνα, και πάλι το έργον σου θυμήσου
μες στην δοκιμασίαν, ή όταν η ώρα σου πια γέρνει.
Έτσι από σένα περιμένω κι απαιτώ.
Κι όχι απ' τον νου σου ολότελα να βγάλεις
της Τραγωδίας τον Λόγο τον λαμπρό —
τι Αγαμέμνονα, τι Προμηθέα θαυμαστό,
τι Ορέστου, τι Κασσάνδρας παρουσίες,
τι Επτά επί Θήβας — και για μνήμη σου να βάλεις
μ ό ν ο που μες στων στρατιωτών τες τάξεις, τον σωρό
πολέμησες και συ τον Δάτι και τον Αρταφέρνη." (*Apanta Poiitika* 121)

Despite its simple, story-like narrative, the poem deals with a significant issue of poetics: the relationship between poetry and life. While the issue of the artist's role and position in society dates back to Plato, it gained a new momentum during Cavafy's lifetime as a result of the autonomous aesthetic and the dogma of "art for art's sake." After the Kantian entrenchment of aesthetics as a separate sphere, poetry, along with many other forms of art, was gradually severed from life, perceived as an independent and autonomous world whose value depended on factors intrinsic to the work itself. From this perspective, poetry's value stems from the fact that it can offer a unique aesthetic experience that cannot be replicated or derived in the same manner from any other form of art. Therefore poetry's primary aim is not to serve needs which are foreign to its nature, but to comply with its own laws in order to convey this unique experience. Consequently, the poet's ultimate purpose should be to create poetry and by extension to abstain from placing his/her work at the service of social, political, religious, ethical, and other expediencies, knowing full well that other fields of inquiry serve these areas more effectively. As might be expected, the prevalence of a relatively autonomous aesthetics did not resolve the problems associated with the function of poetry, or for that matter the poet's role in society. On the contrary, more than ever before, poets recognized and struggled with the contradictions and the consequences of autonomy. While accepting the need to serve their art, they also acknowledged that only an egocentric and irresponsible artist would choose isolation in an ivory tower, ignoring the problems and issues of their epoch. The dilemma remained: does art have greater significance than life?

This is the dilemma of "Young Men of Sidon." Cavafy's poem seems to offer at least two possible answers to the dilemma. On the one hand, Aeschylus's opinion, as well as that of the actor, reflects to a certain extent the classical Greek view on this topic. Life is more significant than art; *politeia* is the paramount public good. Obviously, the young Sidonian presents a different opinion. The contribution to the battle, "as an ordinary soldier, one of the herd" ("μες στων στρατιωτών τες τάξεις, τον σωρό") has less importance than Aeschylus's plays. This does not necessarily suggest that the young man dismisses the significance of *politeia* or that he overlooks a person's contribution to public life. Rather, this contribution is assessed with different standards. One soldier less would minimally influence the

outcome of the Battle of Marathon. An Aeschylus less would significantly reduce the cultural capital of the Western world. Even if we acknowledge that Aeschylus's contribution in battle was significant, this contribution, unlike his art, would probably not have exceeded the timeframe of his era. The young man of the poem stood to gain less from Aeschylus's participation in the battle than from his art. As Aeschylus's tragedies, according to the Sidonian youth, contributed enormously to the public good, the scales inevitably tilt to the side of art.

But, is there only one answer to this question? Could the poet have convincingly provided a single answer at the time of writing? Was it an easy question for Aeschylus? Would he, for example, have been able to refrain from taking part in the battle? Would he have deserted his friends and *demos* for the sake of his art — an art which one day would become part of the Western world's cultural capital? What would Cavafy have done, had he been in Aeschylus's position? Does he agree with the young Sidonian or with Aeschylus? What is his position exactly and how does it guide his writing? Inevitably the dilemma posed by the poem became also a dilemma for its readers, who took the poem's meaning to be identical with Cavafy's position. In the history of the poem's reception, a number of critics have argued that Cavafy's views are reflected in Aeschylus's patriotic stance, while others in that of the young man. Critics such as Gregorios Xenopoulos have argued that: "Cavafy ... in this episode wants to show that Aeschylus included in his epigram only what he had to include, and that only sweet-smelling youths, gentle, degenerate and 'mad about literature,' ignorant of other reasons and impervious to every kind of valour, like the 'vivacious young man' of Sidon could criticize him for betraying his art and being faint-hearted. This is what Cavafy is saying. Anyone who reads the opposite has not understood the poem. Or, if Cavafy had the contrary in mind, then he did not handle the topic well" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Ο Καβάφης ... μ' αυτό το επεισόδιο, θέλει να δείξει ότι ο Αισχύλος στο επίγραμμα του έβαλε μ ό ν ο εκείνα που έπρεπε να βάλει, κι ότι μόνο μυρόβλητοι νέοι, τρυφηλοί, έκφυλοι και φανατικοί για γράμματα, ανίδεοι μ' άλλους λόγους και άσχετοι προς κάθε είδους α λ κ ή ν, σαν τον «ζωηρό» της Σιδώνος, — μπορούν να τον μέμφονται για λειποψυχία και...προδοσία της τέχνης του. Αυτό βγαίνει. Όποιος θα 'βγαζε το εναντίο, δεν θα είχε καταλάβει το ποίημα. Ή, αν είχε το εναντίο στο νου του κι ο Καβάφης, τότε δεν χειρίστηκε καλά το θέμα" [3]). Others, such as Timos Malanos argue that "the poet aims at two things: [a] to render with the means of his art, the atmosphere of a specific historical period and [b] to express his personal ideas ... the young man's words were essentially Cavafy's words" ("Ο ποιητής επιδιώκει δύο πράγματα: Να ξαναδώσει με τα μέσα της τέχνης του την ατμόσφαιρα μιας ορισμένης ιστορικής εποχής, και συνάμα...να εκφράσει τις προσωπικές του ιδέες ... Τα λόγια που είπε (το παδί) ήταν τα λόγια του Καβάφης;" [80-83]).

These differing views cannot be resolved solely with reference to the poem, since the poem itself is used as evidence for both interpretations. Interestingly, despite the critical dissent, all approaches rely on the same interpretive principle. They all implicitly believe that behind the poem there is a single voice — the narrator, Cavafy — who either agrees with the "Young Sidonian" or with Aeschylus. The emphasis, however, on one of two sides of the "pendulum" pins the poem down to one single meaning and consequently ignores something exceptionally important: that is, the path between the two antithetical views. A further consequence of the critics' perspectives was that the value and effectiveness of the poem were unavoidably linked directly with Cavafy's perceived position on the dilemma. If one were to suppose that Cavafy agrees with the young man, then why would he align himself with the "decadent" youth, given the stark contrast between the youth and Aeschylus? In his influential essay on Cavafy's poetics, the main proponent of this thesis, George Seferis writes:

The only pure lines, the truly balanced ones are: "Give, I say, all your strength to your work, make it your total concern. And don't forget your work even in times of stress or when you begin to decline." One can feel Cavafy's entire life weighing upon these lines ... Unfortunately these lines are expressed by a Sidonian youth, who seeks to contest against a force that makes him appear "lighter than a bale of hay," constantly chattering, constantly resorting to one cliché after the other, not seeming to have a feel for literature ... Thus the three balanced lines ("Give — I say — to your work") stumble along with the youth and sink ... The unfortunate part is that the poem would stand to gain if they were missing. It is a pity.

Οι μόνοι απόφοιοι σίχοι, οι μόνοι αυθεντικά στερεωμένοι είναι Δώσε — κηρρύπτω — στο έργον σου όλην την δύναμι σου, όλην την μέριμναν, και πάλι το έργον σου θυμήσου μες στην δοκιμασίαν, ή όταν η ώρα σου πια γέρνει. Αισθά- νεται κανείς όλη τη ζωή του Καβάφη να βαραινεί σ' αυτούς τους σίχους ... Αλλά δυστυχώς είναι βαλμένοι στο στό- μα εκείνου του Σιδώνιου που γυρεύει ν' αναμετρηθεί με μια δύναμη που τον κάνει να φαίνεται πιο αλαφρύς από τ' άχερο που φλυαρεί και που δε μοιάζει να νιώθει πολλά από γράμματα ... Έτσι και οι τρεις στερεοί σίχοι (Δώσε — κηρρύπτω — στο έργον σου...) παραπατούν μαζί με τον νέον και βουλιάζουν...Αυτό είναι το άσχημο θα κέρδιζε το ποίημα αν έλειπαν. Είναι κρίμα. (446-47)

However, the opposite interpretation would also make the poem ineffective. If Cavafy agrees with Aeschylus and aims to criticize the view expressed by the Sidonian youth, the poem again is founded on an untenable comparison, for it is so evident that Aeschylus would prevail, that the contrast becomes completely redundant. Why would the poet make the young man challenge Aeschylus when the battle is already lost? Could the poem be read differently to account for these inconsistencies? In considering this question we must consider the function of the dilemma, since, as we have seen, this is the cornerstone of the poem's structure. As with any dilemma, the reader of the poem is faced with an A or B type of option and is therefore forced to seek its resolution. Because the two sides of the dilemma claim exclusivity, that is, if one is correct, then the other could not be valid, the reader is encouraged to weigh all pieces of evidence which support one side against those which support the other, in order to choose one of the alternatives. However, the poem's composition is such that it can support both. Pieces of information which in one instance seem to support one position can from a different perspective support the opposite. The poem does not assist us to ascertain Cavafy's position — primarily because of its peculiar ironic undertone. If we accept that the phrase, "a vivacious young man, mad about literature," reflects the poet's ironic stance towards the actor, then it would seem that Cavafy inevitably agrees with Aeschylus. If, however, the phrase, "more than he should have," reflects the poet's ironic stance towards the actor, then Cavafy agrees with the young man and the poem seeks to promote this position. Yet again, if we accept both phrases as ironic, then Cavafy disagrees with both. The nature of irony leads us into the realm of uncertainty. The more an ironic utterance is successful, the greater the degree of uncertainty.

Depending on where and how one looks for an answer, it is possible to find evidence which supports either side. The presence of opposing views therefore invites the reader to choose one of the two while simultaneously rendering this choice impossible. Ambiguity by its nature operates in the field of hesitance, that is, in a field where we cannot possibly know if the author or narrator mean one thing literally and the other ironically or vice versa. Consequently, "Young Men of Sidon" is a poem which instead of providing the reader with the "keys" to solve the dilemma, insists on cultivating its ambivalence. It gives us keys to both doors, but in the end we realize that we are unable to open either. By promising a distinct choice and simultaneously frustrating this promise, the poem does not reveal a preference for one side over the other. From the moment that it is confined merely to presenting two different points, the poet's position is put into question. His voice is naturally there, behind the words, but withdraws at key points of the poem, where a few extra words or phrases could give away his preference for one of the two positions and ultimately secure the poem to the certainty of meaning. He is present yet absent at the same time. Present, because the poem offers certain evidence which supports one side of the dilemma and absent, since it simultaneously provides evidence which can substantiate the other. But why does Cavafy not want to provide a clear answer to the dilemma? Notably, in a number of his poems, Cavafy expresses a preference for the fleeting moment, the moment of hesitation, the hidden, the half-seen, the dim light. In "The Windows," for instance, he writes: "the windows aren't there to be found — / Or at least I can't find them. And perhaps / It's better if I don't find them. / Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny. / Who knows what new things it will expose?" (*Collected Poems* 11) ("Μα τα παράθυρα δεν βρίσκονται, ή δεν μπορώ / να τάβρω. Και καλλίτε- ρα ίσως να μην τα βρω. / Ίσως το φως θάναι μια νέα τυραννία. / Ποιός ξέρει τι καινούρια πράγματα θα δείξει" (*Apanta Poiitika* 30). Certainty, from this perspective, could even be dangerous. What would happen to the adventure of reading if we were in a position to reach a definite and final answer? What would happen if the "barbarians" (Cavafy, *Collected Poems* 14-15) finally arrived and enforce their own will and meaning? Although in Cavafy's poetry this moment never arrives, it exists as a necessary threat and as a challenge. It is a challenge because without it there would be no reason to read and

reread. It is a threat since arriving at a definite conclusion would signal the "curtain call" to reading. This is why the Cavafean meaning always lies dormant, hiding away in murky shallow waters. Reading and interpretation continue to exist on the basis of the paradoxical notion that we continue to search for meaning knowing only too well that we will never reach its apocalyptic truth.

Cavafy's unwillingness to provide a clear answer may relate to the dichotomy of the poem's dilemma. Provision of a definitive answer or clear position would suggest that he had overcome the dilemma of the writer torn between the need to remain exclusively loyal to his craft or to be a responsible citizen. The poet is trapped between the two positions, by the "indigestible" knowledge that form and aesthetics cannot be a panacea for social problems. Cavafy consciously preserves the dilemma because the poem's object is not what he himself believes but rather the grueling experience of the conundrum of being a poet in the modern world of specialization. Perhaps this is also why he persists in revisiting the same issue in a number of his poems (*Collected Poems* 78, 150). It seems pointless therefore to search for Cavafy's position in the poem since the poet is not interested in supporting one thesis above another, but in drawing out different views on the one issue. As in the poem "Ithaka" (*Collected Poems* 29-30), where the destination exists in order to offer experiences and knowledge, the dilemma in "Young Men of Sidon" acts as the opportunity which sparks the priceless adventure of reading. Cavafy refuses, or at least refrains from solving the enigma, because this is not as important as the question itself. Any suggestion of an answer is fleeting and precarious, because its significance is only that it functions as a guide, or an incentive for the reader's personal adventure of searching for meaning. When the act of reading becomes a dynamic process, that is, when the reader is engaged in the complexity of the issue at hand without being offered a clear solution or answer, then it is likely that s/he will reach a better understanding, or, as the etymology of the Greek word for reading (*ἀνάγνωσις*, *ana-gnosis*) implies, a better knowledge. But, what type of knowledge can the poem offer us?

The poem entices the reader to choose one of the answers and therefore to operate within the parameters set by the dilemma. As a result, it blurs the discrepancy between the reader's efforts to determine Cavafy's position and the attempt to interpret the poem. By dissociating these two possibilities, the poem could be encountered differently. One need not select one meaning over the other, recognizing that no character is subordinate to any other. From this perspective, the actor does not play "second fiddle." His role is not simply to provoke a reaction from the Sidonian youth and to contribute to the articulation of the dilemma. In playing his role, he adds "colour" to his voice, and by stressing the phrase "his renowned valour" takes a stance on the actual dilemma. It appears, then, that in the same period, around 400 AD, we have two differing views on the relationship between art and life: that of the young man and of the actor. However, the poem, while its title may indicate otherwise, has not only a synchronic but also a diachronic dimension. It comprises at least three — even more than three if one takes into account each moment of reading — chronological points: Aeschylus's, the youth's, and the period in which the poem was written. The poet's reluctance to favor one position over the other could therefore be attributed to the awareness that the relationship between art and life may have different resolutions within one age, as well as over different periods of time. Such answers, together with what we perceive as representing the truth, are not stable over the course of history. They alter as does the context within which they are meaningful. The ambiguity of the poet's position therefore implies a significant shift from the question of "what is" (the primary question through which the critics approached the poem) to the question of "how we come to know that which is."

Within this perspective, the poem stands, as it were, "on its own two feet." There is no need for sophist reasoning to justify factors which even at first glance seem to render its structure problematic. There is no need for the reader to deal with the unresolvable question of why the poet contrasts an insignificant youth with Aeschylus's greatness. Nor is it necessary to justify the superiority of one view at the expense of another, since this is not the poem's aim. Each character is assigned a functional role, and more importantly, the functionality of the poem itself is contingent on Cavafy's decision to perpetuate the ambiguity. This reading of the poem is supported by the poet's own views on the issue of truth and the validity of a claim. In an article on Shakespeare, Cavafy notes: "I appreciate great men's observations more than their conclusions. Great minds observe with precision and caution; they present the positive and negative aspects of an issue and it is up to us to draw a conclusion ... I do not

mean to represent writers as totally indecisive. This would be an exaggeration. I simply want to say that I am not fond of excessive dogmatism. The above I wrote as an introduction to Shakespeare's beautiful verses on life. While reading them, a few days ago, I saw that the author raises a number of issues without imposing a specific view on us" ("Εκτιμώ περισσότερο τας παρατηρήσεις των μεγάλων ανδρών παρά τα συμπεράσματά των. Οι μεγαλοφυείς νέες παρατηρούσι μετ' ακριβείας και ασφαλείας, όταν δε μας εκθέσωσι τα υπέρ και τα κατά ενός ζητήματος δυνάμεθα ημείς να ποιήσωμεν το συμπέρασμα ... Δεν εννοώ με αυτά να καταστήσω τους συγγραφείς αναποφάσιστους όλως διόλου. Το τοιοῦτο θα ἦτο υπερβολή. Θέλω μόνο να εἶπω ὅτι δεν αγαπῶ την υπερβολικὴν δογματικότητα. Τα ἄνω ἔγραφα ως εισηγησιν ωραιωτάτων στίχων του Σακεσπήρου περί ζωῆς, οὐς ἀνέγνωσα προ ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν και εν οἷς ο συγγραφεύς μας λέγει πολλά χωρίς οριστικῶς να μας ἐπιβάλλη τι" (Cavafy, *Peza* [30]). A poet preoccupied with the validity and "applicability" of his poems to as many situations as possible, who views truth with distrust and recognizes that something which may be regarded as true in one period of time may be outdated in another, is quite likely to weave a plurality of meanings into his work (Cavafy, "Poems" 31). Such a poet will seek forms of expression that avoid dogmatism; he will function in the realm of what is possible, rather than in that of what is.

Cavafy's refusal to take sides in "Young Men of Sidon," his tolerance of otherness, and his awareness of the fluidity of truth over time should not be regarded as a mask for the absence of meaning, nor be confused with extreme relativism or indecisiveness. The recognition that a certain idea is valid within its own context does not necessarily mean that the individual will remain irresolute or unable to take a stance on different issues, especially those which influence the lives of others — issues which according to Cavafy require "action" ("Poems" 29). Rather, it points to a more complex realm of understanding in which meaning exists in the polymorphy and polyphony of multiple perspectives. Within this context, to have options means to maintain an open and critical perspective on interpretation and understanding on the basis that reality or truth is never absolute. It also implies that meaning will be fragmented; diffracted by the different "points of view" which, even when combined, cannot constitute its totality. Cavafy's ambiguity, clearly the result of his skepticism as to "truth," reduces objectivity to observation and our view of a given reality to the fluidity of "one point of view."

The use of dilemma and the resultant ambiguity of the poem engage the reader in a game of revelation and concealment. The revelation, however, is not in the discovery of "the truth," but in the realization, and possibly acceptance, of the existence of different, even conflicting truths. When confronted with a dilemma, the reader is confronted with the possibility of different answers. From a Cavafean perspective, none of those answers are false, since each represents the viewpoint of a particular character. By the same token, however, no perspective or answer is complete, since it overlooks the concurrent existence of other points of view. Therefore the Cavafean use of the dilemma constitutes a strategy of plurality which offers the reader a total sum of answers, each aiming to solve the dilemma in the same manner: all meanings are "in part" correct. As a result, the reader can choose as many aspects of the truth as s/he believes are relevant or as many as s/he is able to discover in the poem. Alternative solutions do not decide the issue between different meanings, but point to that larger, encompassing alternative between meaning and its absence. From this perspective, the Cavafean binary oppositions — Aeschylus and the youth, old and new, inside and outside, public and private, presence and absence, appearance and reality — which are often regarded as contributing to the ambiguity of his poetry, do not necessarily constitute a clash or incongruity. They are mere possibles in a world of plurality. They represent two extreme sides within a range of possible positions. Ambiguity in the Cavafean case is therefore not simply caused by the poems themselves. It results from the expectation with which the reader approaches his poetry, the expectation to find absolute answers and singularity where only plurality and polyphony exist.

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