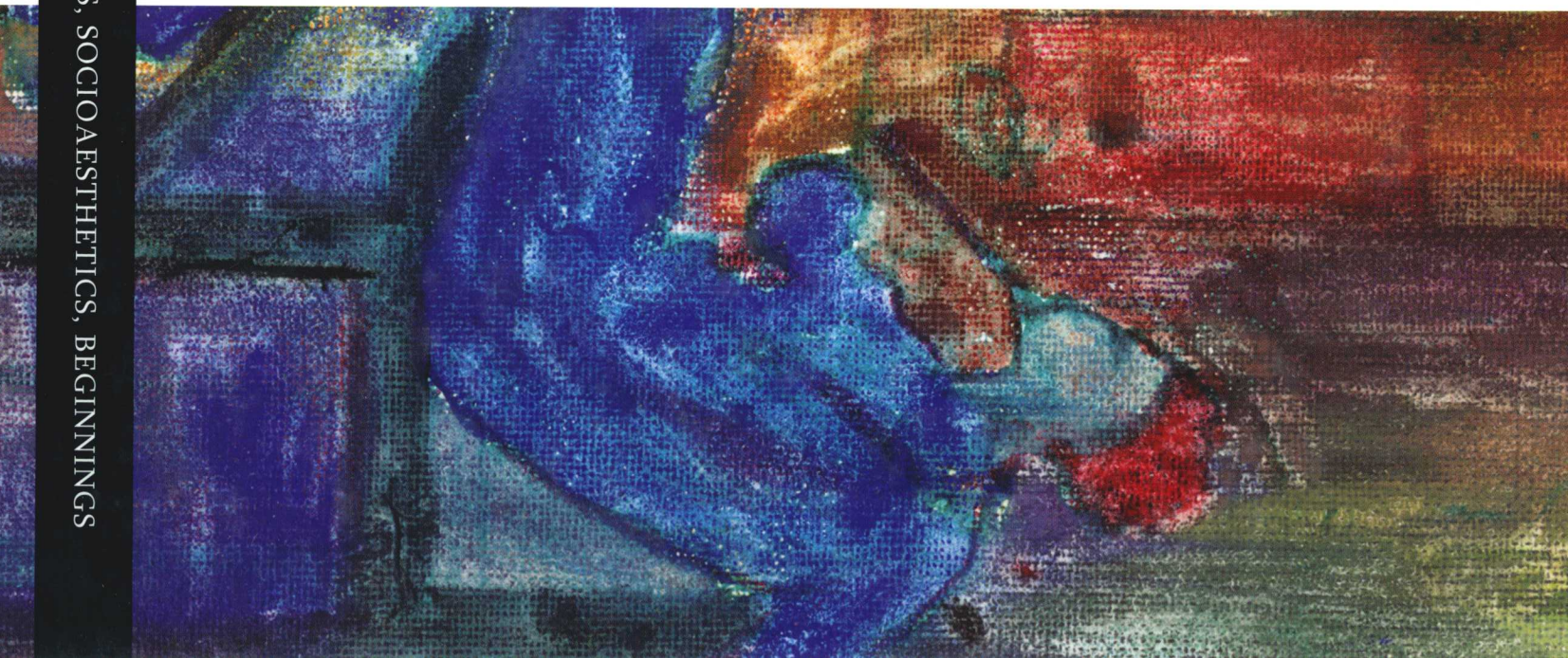
CULTURAL POLITICS, SOCIOAESTHETICS, BEGINNINGS

IMAGINATION and *LOGOS*:

Essays on C.P. Cavafy

edited by Panagiotis Roilos



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CULTURAL POLITICS, SOCIOAESTHETICS, BEGINNINGS publishes books on sociocultural history, anthropology, literature, and critical theory, focusing on European—mainly Greek—traditions across historical, geographic, or disciplinary boundaries.

IMAGINATION
AND
LOGOS

ESSAYS ON C. P. CAVAFY

Edited by

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Department of the Classics, Harvard University
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2010

For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

—εἰς μνήμην

Foreword

Cultural Politics, Socioaesthetics, Beginnings promotes groundbreaking research within the fields of sociocultural history, anthropology, literature, and critical theory, focusing on European—mainly Greek—traditions across historical, geographic, or disciplinary boundaries. The series aims to fill a major gap in the diverse disciplines covered under the rubric "Hellenic Studies," as well as in their interaction with kindred (both technical and anthropologically-oriented) fields, by according special emphasis to methodology and the scrutiny of older and current scholarship's methodological paradigms. Furthermore, the series encourages a rigorous but wide-ranging philological approach to texts, to the technicalities and complexities of their transmission, and to their socioaesthetic contexts—an approach that draws on technical fields of scholarly investigation. Many of the books published in this series dynamically bring together the technical and methodological perspectives of scholars from different disciplines; others provide specialized technical or comparative investigations of (often underexplored) aspects of cultural politics, of linguistic, social, and historical anthropology, of art, literature, and philology. The series seeks to foster the study of the *synchronic* and *diachronic* production of cultural (including visual and literary) discourses as *sêmata* constantly interacting with wider nexuses of sociopolitical praxis.

Imagination and Logos*: Essays on C. P. Cavafy* marks a breakthrough in scholarship on the work of Konstantinos Kavafis, by bringing together novel research perspectives of scholars very rarely encountered as a forcefully coherent group within the covers of a single book: critical theorists, philologists and critical editors (including Latin literature specialists), anthropologists, comparatists, and scholars of English and American literature. Published in an era when both scholarship and broader, general interest in the work of Kavafis have witnessed a particularly intense boom—not to mention the proliferation of translations of his poetry, including the remarkable Oxford translation by Evangelos Sachperoglou (2007)—this book offers an insightful, cross-disciplinary synthesis of methodological vantage points, as it explores not only the intricate work itself

of this highly influential Greek poet, but also his status as a cultural phenomenon, grafted onto different sociopolitical contexts and cultural traditions from North America to South Africa.

Dimitrios Yatromanolakis
May 2010
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Preface

Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis (C. P. Cavafy, 1863–1933) has influenced a very large number of poets and prose writers of diverse aesthetic and ideological backgrounds around the world. This book, with its chapters written by scholars in different disciplines, attests to the lasting relevance of the Greek poet's work for several research fields: critical theory, gender studies, comparative literature, anthropology, classics. Reflecting a variety of hermeneutic and scholarly approaches in accordance with the individual methodological, theoretical, or ideological orientations of their authors, these chapters constitute an innovative interdisciplinary corpus of complementary investigations into the intertexts, reception, and poetics of Cavafy's work.

Most of the chapters published here are expanded and revised versions of refereed papers first presented at a two-day international conference on Cavafy that I organized at Harvard University in December 2007. Other chapters were commissioned specifically for this book. The two notes appended at the end of the volume preserve (with a few bibliographical additions) their original character as orally delivered papers.

I owe special thanks to Kathleen Coleman, John Duffy, Albert Henrichs, Paola Marrati, Elaine Scarry, Marc Shell, Diana Sorensen, Richard Thomas, Helen Vendler, and Dimitrios Yatromanolakis.

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Ioannis Roilos generously offered the use of his painting *Ὁ Καπνιστής* (*The Smoker*) for the cover of the book, which was imaginatively prepared by Eric Mulder; I thank both of them for their creative help. My thanks also go to Ivy Livingston, a most helpful and skillful compositor; to Melanie Stowell, for her careful copyediting of the book; and to Teresa Wu, for her patient help in a number of practical matters.

Finally, I wish to record my special indebtedness to Hal Sedgwick, the husband of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for his unstinting support. Eve's landmark chapter—which to a great extent preserves its nature as an oral presentation delivered at the conference on Cavafy at Harvard University in December 2007—is one of the very last pieces she was working on during the last weeks of her life, and one she was particularly eager to bring to completion. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pioneering work in critical theory and gender studies has inspired a great number of scholars and thinkers in the humanities and social sciences. Dedicating this book to her memory is the least that can be done to express my appreciation for her legacy as a thinker, scholar, and exemplum of academic *êthos*.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
Stemnitsa, Arcadia

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Cavafy, Proust, and the Queer Little Gods

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

For a few years now I've been working on a book on Proust. Now working on a book on Proust is a wonderful place in which to spend some years. If I'm going to be overly confiding, as apparently I am, I've placed a lot of trust in Proust's well-known, antidepressant effect—especially nowadays in a global situation where dread, paralysis, and a newly intimate shame of citizenship seem to exert so much the opposite pressure.[1] And so far, *A la recherche du temps perdu* has worked well in this respect. My attention, in these re-readings of Proust, was attracted to a feature of his writing that is oddly easy not to notice, though I've come to think of it as integral to the buoyant sense of possibility that traverses even the bleakest or saddest of his meditations. That is, how populated the Proustian universe is with gods; how saturating and at the same time promiscuous his sense of divinity seems to be. These beings, drawn from various cultures and located at various points on the axis between the human and the transcendent, turn up sometimes in fabulous set-pieces, but far more often in asides or even all but subliminally in the innumerable passages that they can make sound conventional, euphuistic, or just French. I'll have more to say about their various functions later, but among the ontologically exceptional beings, besides plain vanilla gods and goddesses, that the divinity-field comprises in Proust are giants, phantoms, sirens, devils, demi-gods, fairies, Nereids, Oceanides, witches, Norns, monsters, nymphs, peris, shawabti, sorceresses, Danaids, Furies, fire-spirits, magicians, Arabian rocs, ghosts, genii and djinns, Sphinxes, sibyls, dry-

I want to thank Panagiotis Roilos for having conceived and organized this timely and genuinely fascinating conference. I cannot even remember when or how I started to read translations of Cavafy's poetry—probably thirty years ago or more. But Panagiotis's original invitation, in the spring of 2007, to participate in this conference offered something like a madeleine moment to me, one that I have not yet figured out all the resonances of, but that seems to open up something like an *Arabian Nights*' treasure of suggestion.

[1] "Antidepressant poetics" is a rubric I heard from Jonathan Flatley (personal communication), and from there it has gone on to a long, productive career in my head.

ads, household gods, river-gods, druids, Pythian priestesses, Parcae, Brahmas, prophets, and angels—to name only a few.

So by the spring of 2007 I'd spent quite a long time teaching, writing, and puzzling about these Proustian little gods (as I thought of them), when my email brought me Panagiotis Roilos's invitation to try and shoehorn some work on C. P. Cavafy into the ridiculously overcommitted agenda of my next several months. That the invitation was irresistible became (mystifyingly) clear long before I realized why: simply (I finally saw) because my sense of these odd beings in Proust, both the initial sense of their qualities but also the peculiar feelings of tenderness and intimacy with which I had always seemed to regard them, must have flowed directly from a wellspring of stored-up and half-remembered encounters with the lyrics of Cavafy.

I even found myself grappling to remember a particular, indicative poem, one that turned out, when found, to be "The Footsteps":

> Eagles of coral
> adorn the ebony bed
> where Nero lies fast asleep—
> callous, peaceful, happy,
> in the prime of his body's strength,
> in the fine vigor of youth.
>
> But in the alabaster hall that holds
> the ancient shrine of the Aenobarbi
> how restless the household gods—
> they tremble, the little Lares,
> and try to hide their insignificant bodies.
> They've heard a terrible sound,
> a deadly sound coming up the stairs,
> iron footsteps that shake the staircase;
> and now faint with fear, the miserable Lares
> scramble to the back of the shrine,
> shoving each other and stumbling,
> one little god falling over another,
> because they know what kind of sound that is,
> know by now the footsteps of the Furies.[2]

What kind of poem was this to find lodged in one's mind under such circumstances? I think its combination of horror and funniness must have helped

[2] In this chapter I use Keeley and Sherrard's translation (Cavafy 1992).

it embed in the walls of memory. Funniness, or I could even say cuteness, since it's easy to imagine a Disney cartoon of the trembling Lares shoving each other and stumbling, one little god falling over another in their discombobulated race for the actually nonexistent door of the shrine. The poem underlines the physicality of all these gods, and also their respective scales: Lares, the protective domestic gods, as miniature representations of the human figure, Furies, as projections of it so outsize they can only figure metonymically, by sound. In fact, the smallness of the Lares seems already internalized in their psychology, if the line "they try to hide their insignificant bodies" more than borders on their hiding the insignificance *of* their bodies—as though the shame of being small had demoralized them even before fear itself did.

The one poem, then, dislodged and decondensed from memory, already begins to sketch the dimensions of a complex divinity-scape. It's a pagan environment that features not only more gods than one, but more than one level of god. And in fact to be a god means different things for Lares than for Furies, rather as being a fictional character is a different thing in Spenser from what it is in Charlotte Brontë: that is, the difference in ontology between them isn't that one is more or less real than the other. It's to be sought rather in their qualitatively different histories, the different representational strategies and needs that brought them into being, their incommensurable scales and idioms, the different kinds of use available to be made of them. Thus, not only are the Lares local and vulnerable and the Furies scouringly invincible; but unlike the Furies, the Lares in Cavafy's poem display subjectivity. Lares can not just be vanquished but also be placed, as here, in untenable or false positions—while the Furies, so closely aligned with an absolute ethical enjoinment, are only barely not an allegorical abstraction, and the more chilling for that. And the Lares' localness, while it attaches them to a particular historical house—the Aenobarbi—as well as to the physical house where Nero lies asleep, attaches them just as firmly to the intimate spatiality of the shrine: a little house within a house, but one oriented toward its missing fourth wall, like a dollhouse, a diorama, a hearth, or a puppet theater.

As Cavafy's poem "The Footsteps" expanded in my mind, like the Japanese paper flowers unfolding in water in *Du coté de chez Swann*, ramifying around it the whole nimbus of its association with other images and moments in Cavafy, I was able to see in how many ways—and with what complexity—the religious ecology of each of these two writers' worlds seemed responsive to the other. Near-contemporaries in a proto-modernist European moment, when the polarity between assertive skepticism on the one hand, monotheistic Judaeo-Christian belief on the other, might have seemed to dominate or even to constitute the landscape of relations to divinity, both Proust and Cavafy found forms

of access to such relations, where the entire issue of belief was subordinated to other issues of performativity and relationality.

For Proust, writing about the France of his own lifetime, the divinity field, while it seems to have a basically Plotinian orientation, is a kind of ahistoric, free-floating, kaleidoscopic intertextuality that magically keeps all these ontologically intermediate kinds of beings in play at once. The landscape of divinity for Cavafy, on the other hand, is the precipitate of very distinctly imagined, dynamically historicized processes and events. In the Eastern Mediterranean cultures of classical and late antiquity, and in the ebbs, flows, and especially the tidepools of Roman *imperium* and the diasporic culture of Greece, Cavafy recognized a field of historical change and heterogeneity in which (and from which) a highly differential field of divine relation could be explored.

In fact, maybe it's doing no more than recapitulate a generic difference between the lyric and the *roman fleuve,* if we find ourselves moving between Proustian divinity and Cavafian divinity as if between a cloud and its precipitates. Clearly, as we'll see, in any literary circumstance a kind of Ovidian condensation is going to be built into the meaning and function of the pagan gods. And as in Proust, so in Cavafy, relation to these little gods is a way of figuring and mediating, together, both sexuality and vocation. But Cavafy's lyrics offer a series of close-ups on the workings of such divine condensation. In particular, Cavafy's in love with the way divine relations work through very specific performative utterances, such as invocation or prayer, set, like gemstones, in a more or less elaborated peri-performative surround.

Let me start with a short discussion of the Proustian divinity-scape. It's hard to convey through a few examples how this vast and eclectic field, the unsystematized proliferation of ontologically intermediate beings loosely attached—at once inside and outside—to places, persons, families, substances, ideas, music, buildings, machines, emotions, and natural elements, feels as one immerses oneself in reading Proust. Surprisingly pervasive, surprisingly easy to lose sight of, the divinity-field characterizes the vital atmosphere of Proust-reading more than its landmark moments. Often very attaching, neither omniscient nor omnipotent, local rather than omnipresent, these beings lack the somber sublimity of monotheistic deity. Theirs is not the dimension of "laws" or "truths" or of Truth or the Law, even though it is possible to read Proust as if those were his chief subjects.

Sometimes the invocation of these gods sounds like a kind of throwaway erudition, a sublimed version of the honking mock-heroic cant that emanates from the narrator's friend Bloch. Sometimes it sounds like a fine French gallantry, where every woman is a goddess and most men too. Often it makes a

shimmering play of capturing as if in motion the very processes of condensation and precipitation that animate any imaginative project of writing. As when

> I suddenly discerned at my feet, crouching among the rocks for protection against the heat, the marine goddesses, ... the marvelous shadows, sheltering furtively, nimble and silent, ready at the first glimmer of light to slip behind the stone, to hide in a cranny, and prompt, once the menacing ray had passed, to return to the rock or the seaweed over whose torpid slumbers they seemed to be keeping vigil, beneath the sun that crumbled the cliffs and the etiolated ocean, motionless lightfoot guardians darkening the water's surface with their viscous bodies and the attentive gaze of their deep blue eyes. (II, 689)[3]

As almost unimaginably heterogeneous as Proust's divinities may be, a lot of them seem to cluster around the notion of what's called a *daimôn* in Greek, *genius* in Latin, and the obviously but obscurely related *jinni* in Arabic. Over many centuries of transmission and displacement, these terms have come to indicate varied, even contradictory kinds of being—think of how *daimôn* stands for both a malevolent demon, on the one hand, and on the other the tutelary spirit that repeatedly materializes to warn Socrates of hidden danger. The Neoplatonists, like Proust, have a special interest in such spirits, especially in their guardian or tutelary functions. Centrally, in Plotinus, building on Plato, each individual in each new incarnation, whatever its spiritual level, has an accompanying *daimôn* or genius who represents the next higher spiritual level. "The *Timaeus*," Plotinus writes, "indicates the relation of this guiding spirit to ourselves: it is not entirely outside of ourselves; is not bound up with our nature; is not the agent of our action; it belongs to us as belonging to our Soul."[4]

In Proust the *daimôn* is often designated by its Latin name as a *genius*. The Latin phrase *genius loci*, or "spirit of the place," is the only form in which English-speakers still hear "genius" used in this sense: a spiritual familiar, like the "guardian" shadows in the passage I just quoted, who both animates from within and stands as somehow distinct from the place or person to whom it belongs. Often combining the guardian, very local function of the *lar* with the tutelary function of a *daimôn*, these beings may manifest themselves only for the blink of an eye, or may develop a sustained and modulating presence. To psychologize, their ontology is thus somewhat like that of the internal object in Melanie Klein: in

[3] I quote from Scott-Moncrieff and Kilmartin's translation (Proust 1992–1993).
[4] Plotinus 1969: 188.