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Boletsi, M.; Van Alphen, E.; Jirsa, T.

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Reading Irony through Affect: the Non-Sovereign Ironic Subject in C.P. Cavafy's Diary

Maria Boletsi

Abstract

This essay probes the intersection of irony and affect. Contrary to approaches to irony as an intentional strategy and to the ironist as a detached sovereign subject, this essay foregrounds a kind of irony that issues from a vulnerable subject and from transmissions of affect that exceed the speaker's intention. This irony unravels through a close reading of the diary that the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933)—a master of irony—kept from his first trip to Athens in 1901. Revising previous approaches to Cavafy's irony, the essay reads his diary as an ironic text that yields a non-sovereign ironic subject. While the diary consists of dry, factual information and commonplace descriptions, blocking access to the author's personal experience, its language is haunted by embodied forms of knowledge that draw attention to text's *other*: the poet's body. Irony emerges when the detached mode of writing is disrupted by manifestations of bodily demands and affective forms of knowledge that thwart the writing subject's desire for control. Proposing the figure of the *reluctant ironist*, the essay shows how irony springs from repressed physiological forms of knowledge that disrupt a text's regulatory mechanisms and the speaker's integrated self.

If the problem of the human act consists in the relation between language and the body, it is because the act is conceived [...] as that which problematizes at one and the same time the separation and opposition between the two. The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the 'mental' and the domain of the 'physical,' breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language.

SHOSHANA FELMAN, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*



Irony and affect are not obvious bedfellows. Following its common understanding as the intentional transmission of a meaning or attitude opposed to what is stated, irony is often associated with the intellectual detachment of a sovereign subject (the ironist). Revisiting irony through affect theory, in this essay I draw attention to a kind of irony that issues from a vulnerable subject and from textual transmissions of affect. Irony can be produced through linguistic acts that need not be governed by a speaker's intention. It can spring from the desire to inhabit competing truths or attitudes or from the textual repression of physiological forms of knowledge that threaten to derail a text's regulatory mechanisms. It can come about when stated facts and positions are haunted by what the subject represses or ostensibly rejects; or when the subject's desire to control language is counteracted by language's subjection to affective operations and embodied forms of knowledge that challenge the integrated self. The subject emerging from these processes can be designated as a *reluctant ironist*. Marked by a non-identity of the self to itself, the reluctant ironist is dispossessed, marked concurrently by belief and non-belief, knowledge and ignorance, self-identity and self-alienation, control and its relinquishing.

To consider irony through affect, I turn to a poet who has become a significant figure in world literature, not the least owing to his unique sense of irony: Constantine P. Cavafy (1863–1933), a diasporic Greek that lived in Alexandria, Egypt. The numerous studies of Cavafy's irony only consider his poetic texts and often attribute his irony to a detached sovereign subject: a 'poet-observer' able to stand above the situation a poem sketches and to assume an overarching (and ironically charged) view of history. By contrast, I turn to a non-literary prose text by Cavafy, which I read as an ironic text that yields a non-sovereign ironic subject: the diary that the Alexandrian kept from his first trip to Greece in the summer of 1901. Read as an ironic text, the diary becomes much more than a source about Cavafy's life: it offers an alternative entrance to Cavafy's poetics of irony and, more generally, to the interrelation of irony and affect, as well as irony and intentionality. My approach does not offer a formula that decodes Cavafian irony as a singular phenomenon. Nor does the kind of irony I draw attention to cover the entire spectrum of irony in his work. Cavafy's writing accommodates different forms of irony produced through various textual strategies. Nevertheless, tracing this text's irony invites a reconsideration of the ironic operations in many of his writings and, in broader terms, a rethinking of the (ironic) subject as precarious and relational. My reading proposes the figure of the 'reluctant ironist': this figure draws attention to an irony that emerges between the intentional and the unintentional, and from forms of

dispossession that compel us to consider the role of the body in the production of textual irony.

The diary contains hardly any intimate, confessional thoughts: it consists mostly of tedious, commonplace descriptions and factual information about the poet's activities that block access to the author's subjectivity or personal experience of his trip. Its language, however, is haunted by repressed, embodied forms of knowledge. My reading centers on the faint textual manifestations of such knowledge through affective transmissions that draw attention to text's other: the poet's body. Although the text posits a subject in control of language and of its environment, at times this control falters. Irony emerges when Cavafy's detached mode of writing is disrupted (perhaps involuntarily) by textual traces of bodily demands and affective ways of knowing that thwart the subject's desire for control.

Irony and Affect

In its most basic understanding, irony involves a *substitution*: that “of the unsaid (called the ‘ironic’ meaning) for its opposite, the said (called the ‘literal’ meaning)” (Hutcheon 12). In approaching irony through affect, however, I focus on the *contiguity* and interaction of the said with the unsaid, following Linda Hutcheon's casting of irony as a trope that can concurrently accommodate opposites and that calls attention to what happens “between (and including) the said and the unsaid” (12). Ironic meaning is “inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally ‘interact’” (12). Therefore, probing irony's workings is not about establishing the final truth of an utterance or unraveling the ironist's true intentions. Irony “undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier: one signified’ and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational, and differential nature of ironic meaning-making” (13).

The game of irony, Hutcheon notes, commonly involves the ironist—“the one who intends to set up an ironic relation between the said and the unsaid”—and an “interpreter,” who “attributes” and “interprets” irony (11). Even though in this essay I explore irony in relation both to the subject (the “I” of the text) and the reader/interpreter, the kind of irony I delineate does not presuppose an *intentional* set-up of “an ironic relation between the said and the unsaid” by an ironist in whom the text's irony originates. The writing subject, in other words, is not external (and thus unsusceptible) to the text's ironic operations. Irony participates in (re-)constructing a subject that writes

and is simultaneously written by the text.¹ The text's ironic performance is not dependent on the surmise of an intention external to the text. Irony, as I will show, may emerge from affective operations that exceed the writing subject's (stated or implied) intention and reveal the limits of the subject's mastery of the text. Consequently, my focus is not only on the semantic operations of irony—i.e., how irony unhinges the text's "semantic security," generating multiple meanings (Hutcheon 13)—but also on irony's intertwinement with embodied knowledge. Irony can be produced at instances where language is haunted by the body—a repressed other entering the scene of writing through affective intensities that escape the subject's regulatory attempts.

The relation of irony to affect has not gone unnoticed by theorists. Contrary to the conventional view of irony as a "mode of intellectual detachment,"² there is, Hutcheon argues, an indisputable "affective 'charge' to irony" that could "account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distant detachment to passionate engagement)" (15). Irony may sometimes signal a "withdrawal of affect"; but although it is thought to engage "the intellect rather than the emotions," it can provoke strong emotions and emotional engagement (Hutcheon 14–15; Walker 24). Such a linking of irony and affect, however, tends to consider "emotions" as a product or consequence of irony, taking irony itself as a stable starting point in this process: *first* there is irony, which *then* provokes an affective response. My inquiry will postulate a reverse movement: not from irony to affect, but from affect to irony. Irony, I argue, can spring from a text's affective transmissions.

It may be clear that such a course of inquiry is not in search of what Wayne Booth called "stable irony" in a text: a device that is "intended but covert, stable and localized" (7). Booth's well-known notion of stable irony is firmly grounded in the speaker's intention: it is irony as "deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood" by others as such (5). This intentionality also governs the receiver's actions, since a statement containing stable irony is "intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface," which are nevertheless "fixed," since "once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions" (6). Stable irony thus presupposes

1 Here I take my cue from Roland Barthes' analysis of the writer's situation in relation to the writing in his well-known essay "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" (136–144) and from Alexander Nehamas' account of the formation of the subject in Cavafy's poetry (1983).

2 Schoentjes presented in Hutcheon 14.

an intentional ironic subject in control of speech and a reader/receiver who acts in a predictable and calculable manner to decode a predetermined ironic meaning.

Contrary to this approach, the kind of irony I am concerned with does not issue from a stable position of control—that of a subject outside of language—but from a precarious self and from linguistic instability. The ironic subject I delineate is a site of conflicting desires and implicated in the ironic operations of its utterances in ways it cannot anticipate. Even when the subject chooses one attitude or ‘truth’ over another, this choice is haunted by what the subject suppresses or is forced to reject. The avoided ‘truth’ is not erased. It becomes a site of desire that returns to haunt the text. This process yields an ironic subject that I term *reluctant*—marked by its attraction to the rejected position and its hesitation to obliterate it. What is rejected still exerts force over the subject, who is ‘made’ and ‘unmade’ in and by language. The reluctant ironic subject exemplifies a form of dispossession that acknowledges both that language is never one’s own and that the self is never fully present in writing. This ironic subject is able to say ‘I believe and I do not believe,’ ‘I know and I do not know’ or ‘I want to be and I want to be (other).’ Thus, reluctant irony also opens up to physiological forms of knowledge that are sidestepped by intellectualist approaches to irony: it draws attention to the body as “the blindspot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said” (Butler 11). The embodied and affective aspects of the ironic performance, with regard both to the ‘I’ of the text and the reader, take center stage in my approach.

The link between irony and emotions is not missing from discussions of Cavafy’s irony.³ To be sure, critics have often ascribed irony in Cavafy—especially in historical poems written after 1911—to a distant poet-observer who has an overview of history, allowing him to ironically reflect on the limited perspectives of characters and expose their folly or ignorance. He *knows* what other characters—victims of tragic irony—are blind to.⁴ This ironic attitude is perceived as “cold,” grounded in aloof intellectualism.⁵ Theorizing the critical potential of ironic detachment in Cavafy, Yiorgos Veloudis compares (what he

3 George Seferis famously discussed the inseparability of intellectual thought and feeling or sensation in Cavafy, noting that Cavafy’s thought “feels” (154) and his poems “draw emotions from a void” (158).

4 In her survey of approaches to Cavafy’s irony, Katerina Kostiou refers in a footnote to the “widely accepted view of criticism that the ironic creator is an observer” that “often poses as a traveler or is able to elevate himself and observe from above” (241; my translation from the Greek).

5 Vrisimitzakis presented in Kostiou 241.

sees as) Cavafy's intentional ironic distancing with the defamiliarization effect in Brecht's epic theatre (55). He thus proposes approaching Cavafy's irony as part of an "industrial," rationalist, modernist aesthetics (56).⁶ Nevertheless, the undeniable affective charge of Cavafy's poetic language has forced critics to address a critical conundrum: the question of how Cavafian poetry can transmit intense feelings or emotions through a language that sounds prosaic, intellectualist, factual (Vagenas 350). Nasos Vagenas has attributed the affective force of Cavafy's poetry to his use of irony. According to him, the specificity of the poet's irony lies in the combination of verbal and dramatic irony: Cavafy's poetry generates emotions through the contrasts that the combined energy of verbal and dramatic irony creates.⁷ Sensual experience in Cavafy, Vagenas argues, is produced by a "transformation of thought into feeling."⁸ An emotion or sensation that moves us (*συγκίνησης* / *sygkinesis*) is "condensed in an intellectual expression," which, upon its contact with the reader, is "decompressed" and drags the reader in, effecting catharsis (355).

Vagenas' account of the intertwinement of thought and feeling in Cavafy's irony is certainly useful, yet my approach to this intertwinement rests on a somewhat different premise: i.e., that the production of irony often proceeds not from thought to feeling, but *from affect to thought*. Irony can be generated when a textual element grasps the reader unexpectedly: this experience signals an affective intensity that may lead to a thought or feeling when processed by the reader. As an avid reader of Cavafy's poetry, I am struck by the impact that his dry, prosaic poems have on me on a physical, visceral level. This experience—a kind of shock-effect—often takes place before the process of interpretation is consciously set in motion, but is nevertheless inextricable from the kind of thinking his poems trigger. His poems, to put it with Brian Massumi, shock us to thought: they appeal to our sensory faculties, causing affective responses that stimulate our intellect and interpretive impulse.⁹

6 The kind of irony Veloudis compares to Brecht's theater is one of the different forms of irony in Cavafy that Veloudis discusses (54–55).

7 With verbal irony, Vagenas refers to the common definition of irony as conveying meanings or feelings contrasted with the meaning of the uttered words. Dramatic irony is plot-related and generated by situational contrasts that reveal that reality is different from what characters thought or expected (353).

8 Here Vagenas quotes T. S. Eliot in the context of a discussion of George Seferis' approach to Cavafy (352). All quotes from Vagenas' text are my translations from the Greek.

9 "Shock to thought" refers to the title of a book on affect in Deleuze and Guattari's work edited by Brian Massumi: *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. See also van Alphen 22.

This approach presupposes a notion of affect as distinct from feeling or emotion. Feelings, as Teresa Brennan notes, can be defined as “sensations that have found a match in words” (5). By contrast, affects, following Gilles Deleuze, have no predetermined content, but can be seen as energetic “intensities”; responses “on the surface of the body as it interacts with other entities” which can produce feelings, emotions and thoughts.¹⁰ For Deleuze, such sensations force us “to engage involuntarily” and become a “catalyst for critical inquiry or thought” (van Alphen 23). In Deleuze’s words, affects capture “impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think” (1964: 61). Affects “are not simply effects of the body but veritable critical entities that hover over the body and judge it” (1998: 124). These “critical entities,” Elspeth Probyn writes, “arise out of a violent collision of mind and body” and signal “a particular combination of thought and body in which a distinction between the two is no longer important” (80–81).

Affects thus have a physiological impact but their origin is social, because they arise through someone’s interaction with other people, objects or elements in an environment—including an artwork or a literary work (Brennan 3; van Alphen 23). The social nature of affects implies their ‘contagiousness’ from one body or entity to another and questions the autonomy of individual bodies. Affects, Moira Gatens argues, expose “the breaches in the borders between self and other” and testify to the ways the body is “always already wholly implicated in its milieu” (115).

Seeing affect as a form of thought destabilizes the opposition between thought and feeling or sensation. This offers another entrance to the aforementioned conundrum in Cavafy’s poetry, i.e., the question of how his poetry’s affective charge issues from and is produced by a prosaic, factual language. If affect *triggers* thought, the critical thinking associated with Cavafy’s irony is not at odds with the affective content of his language; it is prompted by affective intensities released by formal elements.

As I turn to the affective dimensions in Cavafy’s writing, I subscribe to Eugenie Brinkema’s proposal for “reading for a formal affectivity” that focuses on the ways “affects inhere in textual and visual forms” (116). According to Brinkema, affects are bound up with specific forms. ‘Reading’ the structures of affective forms in texts requires an approach to sensation not only “as felt by moved bodies, but as wildly composed in specific cinematic, literary, and critical texts” (xvi). Thus, close reading and formalist analysis enable us to study affects in their manifold particularities rather than treat affect “in the singular,

10 Deleuze presented in van Alphen 23.

general, universal” and as beyond or outside of language (xv). My reading of Cavafy’s diary centers on such formal manifestations of affects—textual traces of an embodied knowledge that, like a ghost, is and is not there in the text.

Revisiting irony and affect in Cavafy through his prose—and non-literary prose for that matter—is an unorthodox choice, considering that studies of Cavafian irony solely focus on his poems. Cavafy is considered to have failed as a prose stylist as he was not able to create a “poetic prosaics” that could parallel his “prosaic poetics,” as Peter Jeffreys puts it (2010: 197).¹¹ Taking this failure for granted, critics have refrained from close analytical work on Cavafy’s prose. Even though studies of his creative prose have appeared, Cavafy’s non-fictional prose remains largely ignored.

Resisting the reception of Cavafy’s prose as a failed venture to do something he only achieved poetically, I assert the rhetorical and formal complexity of many of Cavafy’s prose texts. In this context, his diary is not just an (auto-)biographical document: the conflicts and desires its language stages invite a different approach to Cavafy’s poetics of irony. To be sure, my reading does register a certain *failure* in this text: a failure to do what it sets out to do. As I will show, the diary fails to comply with the author’s stated intention to provide a purely factual account of his trip. This failure, however, is what warrants an approach to its language as ironic: irony stems from the text’s insubordination to what it claims to be doing. What appears as the truth or central intention of the text is contradicted, deconstructed, interrupted, and haunted by other truths that are in excess of the text’s rational construction. Being receptive to these other truths requires attentiveness to the text’s affective workings rather than only to its representational or propositional content.

“A Diary of Occurrences,” but Not Quite

In the summer of 1901, Cavafy made his first trip to Greece with his brother Alexander. The trip lasted about seven weeks in total, during which they stayed mostly in Athens and had a “thoroughly urban” holiday, as Robert Liddell describes it in the poet’s biography, taking walks, spending time in cafés and theatres, visiting acquaintances and relatives, and doing sightseeing (Liddell 103). He kept a diary of this trip in English with entries on 51 different dates

11 Most samples of Cavafy’s prose belong to the early phases of his career. Between 1891 and 1897 he experimented with journalistic prose and he also wrote a few prose poems between 1894 and 1897, but eventually gave up on prose “as a creative mode of expression” (Jeffreys 2010: 193).

(sometimes with more than one entries on the same day), spanning from a couple of lines to a couple of pages each. This, as the poet wrote in the first sentence, was “intended to be a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas” (1963: 259). Cavafy’s statement chimes with the expressive mode of his poetry; as many critics have noticed, Cavafy’s poems do not deal with the emotional impact of an event explicitly but register the event in its naked factuality, through “objective,” “rational,” and “impersonal” representations that keep the language free from the involvement of the self and minimize sensuousness or lyricism (Nikolareizis 111, 113). The event by itself creates a framework that triggers a sensation or emotional impact (116–17). Nevertheless, the diary’s first sentence is followed by a disclaimer:

This is intended to be a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas. It may however become the reverse; it is in the nature of diaries to turn out quite the opposite of what is expected or intended. (1963: 259)

By calling the initial statement of intention into question, the second sentence separates this intention from the performativity of language and concedes the author’s inability to fully control what language does, even in autobiographical writing. If this “diary of occurrences” ends up conveying more than facts, this parallels the paradox in Cavafy’s poetry I previously delineated: his poetry’s ability to trigger emotions and sensations experienced as a ‘shock-effect’ through a factual, detached language.

Does this text, then, become more than “a diary of occurrences”? Putting Cavafy’s opening statement to the test, we can probe the intertwinement of facts and sensations, and of representational and affective language in the diary—an intertwinement that also marks irony in Cavafy’s poetry. By suggesting language’s ability to do or mean other than what it says, the diary’s opening sentences can, in fact, be read as a rudimentary self-reflexive description of irony, seen as language that conveys the opposite of what it says. However, contrary to conceptions of irony as the intentional transmission of a meaning opposed to the stated, here the same process is suggested as flowing from language’s insubordination to the writing subject’s explicitly stated intention. How is this diary of occurrences haunted by its repressed others—“impressions and ideas,” but also visceral sensations, bodily excesses, affects that rub against the factual language and unsettle it? My reading focuses on such forces that ‘thaw’ the diary’s cold, distanced recording.

Cavafy’s diary has not attracted much scholarly attention, since its reception was conform with the author’s intention: it has not been read as more than a

“diary of occurrences.”¹² In his biography of the poet, Liddell summarizes the events mentioned in the journal, but also notes that Cavafy is “of course” “recording ‘occurrences’ not impressions,” and so “it is unfair to quote from this pedestrian journal” (105).

The few impressions the diary registers are brief, dull, and almost hopelessly cliché. Thus, the poet finds the island of Delos “pretty to look at” and “the bay most picturesque,” while “the coast opposite Patras” “is picturesque” too (Cavafy 1963: 262, 297). Upon his arrival in Athens, he notes that it is “a very very pretty town” and that Pireaus is “a very nice little place.” Their hotel (Hotel d’ Angleterre) and the food are “excellent” and “the officers and soldiers look all they should be” (263). The “leading buildings” he sees in Athens—“National Bank, Bank of Athens, Boulè, Theatre, University”—are all “fine” and the same epithet, “fine,” epitomizes his only stated impression from his visit to the Archaeological Museum (263–64). For his visit to the Acropolis he uses equally nonspecific superlatives: “the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, the Propylaea, the view of Athens from the Acropolis, the Museum of the Acropolis. Sublime, sublime!” (265). When he does not feel like describing what he saw, he writes “I shall not enter into a long description—but I will generally mention that all we saw were things of grace, grandeur, or interest” (266). This self-ironic comment, which also hints at the banality of (the English) language, has an unmistakably comical effect. The generic epithets convey nothing of the specificity of the places he sees and of the poet’s experience of, or emotional response to, these places. Liddell disparagingly ascribes the banality of the descriptions to Cavafy’s lack of “visual sense” (104).

Whereas impressions are scarce, the frequent recording of facts and figures borders on the obsessive. Arrival and departure times are diligently noted and the duration of activities is often recorded down to the minute (e.g., “the passage [from the ship to Delos] lasted 8 minutes,” Cavafy writes on June 15; 1963: 261). Daily happenings, places he visits, and people he meets are consistently listed, and the precise descriptions of his everyday routes would allow us to draw them on a map, as the following passage from July 21, 1901 showcases:

On leaving him [Xenopoulos] I walked down to the Rue du Pirée and through several of the streets leading out of it, one of which brought me to the Rue Sophocle, from which I reached the Rue du Stade and the

12 Liddell, for example, dismisses Cavafy’s suggestion that his diary might do more than just register facts by concluding: “But it did no such thing” (102).

Place de la Constitution. I had my hair cut, Οδός Νίκης [*Nikis Street*], and then sat at the Café of the Place de la C. I was with Lestos. I returned to Phalerum (from the Homonoia Station) at 8 p.m. (287)

In fact, in his July 31 entry he does draw a map of the streets of Patras in the diary, because, as he writes, he could not “find a plan of Patras” and was afraid that “none exists” (295). His excessive recording of trivial facts and his attempts to (even literally) ‘map’ the urban landscape and thus secure an overview of it, betray a need to control and master surroundings in which he may have felt like a foreign presence. Sketching a map of Patras allows him to assume an eagle’s eye view of the city rather than feel lost or subsumed in it.

The nearly neurotic recording of facts, bereft of any signs of the poet’s affective immersion in his environment, is the formal imprint of a struggle for control through language. For the poet of the Greek diaspora in Alexandria who had never set foot on Greece until then, Athens and other Greek sites he visited would have been measured against his mental image of Greece, as mediated by his readings, other people’s oral accounts, and visual material. This mental image, however, could not have included the experiential, sensorial dimension of physically being in these places. The generic descriptions convey a sense of restraint by a subject that struggles not to let his surroundings disorient him and disrupt his sense of self or, perhaps, his imagined relation to Greece. The foundering of this attempt, however, is prefigured in the diary’s opening sentences. Cavafy’s stated intention—to write “a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas” (Cavafy 1963: 259)—betrays, then, the anxiety of losing control, of allowing language to do more than record facts, of letting the affective charge of encountered things upset the subject’s civil, rationally regulated account. His second sentence—“it may however become the reverse” (259)—prepares us for the breakdown of this attempt by acknowledging the risk of this not happening: in his effort to eliminate such a risk, he also names it and invites it.

If generic epithets suppress affective transmissions, are there textual elements where this blocking out of the sensorial falters? Nowhere is Cavafy’s obsession with figures more blatant than in his recording of temperatures throughout his trip. He constantly pauses his recounting of daily happenings to interject the temperature on several moments during a day. In a relatively short diary that covers seven weeks, there are 31 temperature recordings and many more references to weather conditions, especially the unbearable heat. On July 27, one day before leaving Athens, he notes that he suffers from the heat, but seems to suffer even more from the fact that he cannot measure the

temperature: "It is very warm. But as I have packed up the thermometer, I can't state any figure" (292).

The preoccupation with the weather already starts during his travel at sea on his way to Athens. "Awful sun, going to Delos"—"We were back on board (awful sun on our return too) at about 10:45," he writes on June 15 (261). Upon arriving in Athens, the heat and "the absence of shade in the streets" are mentioned as "the only disadvantage" (264). The following examples offer a taste of the poet's preoccupation with the matter:

16 June 9 a.m.: "Yesterday afternoon it was very warm. The thermometer in my cabin showed 81, but after sunset it fell to 78; at 10 p.m. it was 77 and this morning at 7, 76. By 8:30 it showed 77." (262)

21 June: "Thermometer yesterday was 75 in early morning, towards noon 78, in the evening 75. Today towards noon 76, at 6 p.m. 75." (267)

9 July: "Thermometer at 79. It rained towards noon. And again at 4 p.m. Phalerum is not cooler than town. Thermometer showed this morning 78 in both places." (279)

These temperatures hint at the immense impact of the heat on Cavafy's body and on his experience of the trip. When he records a "tremendous" heat on July 30 with his thermometer showing 91 degrees, we vicariously feel his relief when on July 31 he writes that "today the weather is much cooler" (295). His pleasant descriptions of the Athenian surroundings are constantly interrupted by the discomfort caused by the heat. His references to the weather and the temperature index a fight against a meteorological force he cannot control. Apart from the physical strain, what he cannot deal with is the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the weather. "What an unstable climate!" he exclaims on July 8, during a rainy day amidst the heat of the summer (279). He almost feels personally betrayed by the heat in Phalerum, because he did not expect this area to be warmer than Athens:

21 July: "The thermometer shows this morning 82. I never imagined Phalerum was such a *hoax* so far as cool weather is concerned. I have noted that up to now every day I go to town I find it either cooler or not warmer than Phalerum." (288; emphasis added)

The word "hoax" almost anthropomorphizes the weather as an agent playing tricks on the poet, messing with his expectations.

The temperature recordings simultaneously actualize and break down Cavafy's intention to record facts. Temperatures are of course facts *par excellence*. Yet their excessive and frequent recording creates cracks in the diary's factual discourse, allowing the body to enter the writing: the experiential dimension of occurrences and their impact on the body, which the diary's language represses, returns as the haunting excess of this repression—an excess literalized in the image of the poet's body sweating incessantly under the Athenian sun.

The temperature recordings can be read as an attempt to monitor these bodily secretions and control them in language. However, their repetitiveness opens a linguistic gateway through which “bodily physiological processes” that “push for admission to consciousness” may enter (Brennan 149). The sweat drips on the diary, as it were, disrupting the poet's intention to keep it factual, neat, dry. These recordings become sites of friction between a sovereign, almost disembodied subject position and a vulnerable, corporeal subject pulled by environmental and physiological forces. As a result, they signal the text's failure to fully regulate a disordered body.

If the diary projects the subject trying to insulate itself from its environment, looking from a distance, mapping, and objectively recording, this account is haunted by the alternative narrative of a body in discomfort. The temperatures are not the only formal traces of this discomfort; his struggle with the heat is topped by a recurring feeling of being “unwell” throughout the trip—ranging from slight indisposition to severe sickness. This “unwellness” is in fact the starting condition of his trip. It overcomes Cavafy soon after he leaves Alexandria:

Yesterday at 5 p.m. I left Alexandria by the Khedivial Company's s/s “El Kahira.” Alexander left too. I was unwell towards noon, slightly better afterwards, and I felt after a few hours on board much better. (259)

This is the first of several references to bodily indisposition, the nature of which is left unspecified: it is usually described with the vague epithet “unwell,” paralleling the generic epithets for places. Almost all references to his bodily condition are negative. The only positive references are statements of him feeling *better*, which function solely in relation to a previous state of feeling “unwell.” For example, on June 21, after a walk, he writes: “Afterwards I felt unwell and came and remained at the hotel” (266). On Sunday July 7 he did not lunch because he “felt unwell” (278). On July 12 he writes again: “Yesterday I was unwell almost the whole day” (281). Getting slightly more specific, on July 17 he notes that he had a headache the day before but

still kept an appointment, after which, however, his “headache was worse” (285). A day later, on July 17, he “felt ill” and had no lunch (286). The following day he reports being “[b]etter in health” (286). Again, on July 19, he “[f]elt unwell at 3 p.m.,” but at 7 p.m. he felt “[m]uch better” (287). Yet this does not last long, as in the next day’s entry we read: “Not being very well still, I did not lunch” (287). The next day, July 21, he does not fail to report his health’s improvement: “Felt much better in health yesterday afternoon and evening; and quite well this morning” (288). However, on July 26—one day before his departure from Athens—he becomes indisposed again: “I did not feel quite well,” he notes, but he also reports that later the same day he feels “very well” again (292).

Like the temperature recordings, these brief reports on his health are strictly factual, repetitive, and follow a formula: each report is recognizable by the use of the adjectives “unwell” and (when there is improvement) “well” or “better.” They inform us on Cavafy’s state as though seen by an outsider, without offering access to the psychological or emotional impact of this “unwellness.”

The persistent return of these references—just as in the case of the temperatures—and their impersonal tone have a strange effect: the reader is grasped by a language that, we sense, wants to convey something other than information, yet stubbornly refuses to do so by blocking any empathic identification with the subject suffering. There is, however, one instance in the diary where the regulated linguistic formula conveying unwellness is somewhat loosened.¹³ On July 23 Cavafy writes:

towards 8 p.m. I began to feel an oppression on my stomach, and I passed a “nuit blanche” suffering from terrible colics and vomiting all the time. I do not know to what to ascribe this; probably it was due to a glass of water that I drank at Zacharato’s, and that had a stale taste. (289)

The specificity of this description allows us to imagine the poet vomiting through the night. Cavafy breaks his pattern of imprecise references to discomfort by offering the only graphic (albeit still laconic and factual) representation of unwellness and its impact on him—he does, after all, write that he was “suffering.”

¹³ There is another instance in which Cavafy specifies that his unwellness is stomach-related, but the language in that instance is much less vivid: during a stay in Patras, he notes that his “stomach was out of order” (295).

Descriptions of places in the diary, as we saw, are aesthetically pleasing, but offer little more than what one would find in postcards or travel guides. The references to the heat and unwellness are the only traces of another, less ‘touched-up’ account of the poet’s experience. The implicit evocations of sweat and explicit reference to vomit, which stimulate our olfactory sense, are contrasted with the ‘sanitized’ sketches of touristic sites, which only stimulate the visual sense. The former references allow us to relate to the poet’s experience of the trip as a spiral of suffering, recovering, then feeling unwell, again and again. “Disordered flesh,” Brennan argues, is often a site of repression or “withheld knowledge” (155). What kind of knowledge, then, could these bodily emissions of a “disordered flesh” yield?

The Poet’s Disoriented Body

There is an ironic contrast between the poet’s body, so vulnerable to environmental conditions and infections as he enters Greece from Africa, and the disinfection process he and other passengers on the ship undergo before reaching the Greek mainland, aimed at blocking the import of exotic diseases from Africa. While on board, he recounts the two-day quarantine and disinfection process on the island of Delos—during which they had to have their “dirty linen” “purified”—and describes the process as a “farce” (261). This disinfection as we move from Africa to Greece (and Europe), metaphorically mirrored in the diary’s ‘sanitized’ language, is countervailed by the poet’s body coming under attack by its environment throughout the trip, owing to the heat, the food, the water or poor sanitary conditions in certain places.

The literal and metaphorical oscillation between sanitization and contamination, health and sickness, hints at an incompatibility between the poet and the Greek (or, specifically, Athenian) space. It is as if two foreign bodies—the city of Athens and the poet—partly reject each other. Cavafy’s artificially charming but empty descriptions of places may be a clumsy attempt to overcompensate for this mismatch, but they in fact reinforce it. The same mismatch is (unintentionally) reflected in the image of the poet vomiting, expelling elements he could not digest.

The writing ‘I’ does not acknowledge this incompatibility. Minimizing his personal involvement and expelling intimate impressions and emotions from the diary is perhaps one way of suppressing this knowledge: the ‘I’ is usually in a position of seeing without being seen. But if the diary does not allow us to ‘see’ much of Cavafy, the above incompatibility becomes more palpable through another account of Cavafy’s presence in Athens, in which the poet turns into

the object of someone else's gaze. During his trip, Cavafy got to meet Grigorios Xenopoulos, a novelist, playwright, journalist, and leading figure in the literary scene in Greece at the time. Two years later, in 1903, Xenopoulos recorded his impression from that encounter in a well-known article about Cavafy in *Panathinaia* magazine, in which he introduced the poet to the Greek literary scene.¹⁴ He found Cavafy to be "deeply dark, like a native of Egypt [...] with the attire of an elegant Alexandrian, slightly Anglicized" (Xenopoulos n.pag.). The contradictions in Xenopoulos' description betray his inability to pin down the poet: he found him "most polite and worldly" and with "delicate" manners even though his speech was "almost pompous and exaggerated" and his "politesse and pretentious manners" were contrasted with the "modest simplicity and shy naïveté and kindly awkwardness of our men of letters" (n.pag.).¹⁵ The pronoun "our" suggests Xenopoulos' perception of Cavafy as an outsider. Sympathetic as it may be, Xenopoulos' description of the poet is exoticizing. The eminent Greek saw Cavafy as a strange alloy of influences and mannerisms foreign to the Athenian literary scene: a civilized barbarian, an Egyptian "native," Anglicized, and Greek but not quite.¹⁶ And if Xenopoulos' description was overall positive, most of his Greek contemporaries rejected Cavafy as a misfit in a literary establishment ruled by national poet-figures such as Kostis Palamas or Angelos Sikelianos.¹⁷

Cavafy's out-of-placeness vis-à-vis the Greek but also the European literary and cultural scene has often been discussed, albeit mostly "in the name of preserving a conception of the solitary and unaccountable genius" as James Faubion observes (40). Cavafy was the child of a well-off Constantinopolitan family in Alexandria, who in his early youth saw their family fortune disintegrate and ended up working for thirty years as a clerk at the Irrigation Office in Alexandria under the British. As "a trilingual bourgeois déclassé," he was not "subaltern," but he was part of "a *colonised* cultural elite" (52; emphasis added). He was

14 In his diary, Cavafy also gave his impression of Xenopoulos from this first meeting: "A very nice man. He said he admired my poems, and I said I admired his 'contes.' And I sincerely do" (July 15; 1963: 284).

15 My translation from the Greek.

16 Martin McKinsey also reflects on Cavafy's foreignness during the poet's stay in England. To many of the British he came in contact with, Cavafy, "for all his superior learning and his European manners" was "at best a Levantine, at worst a 'wog'"; in the streets of London or Paris, he was a "civilized barbarian" (108).

17 The so-called "eighties generation" in Modern Greek literature, represented by figures such as K. Palamas and G. Psycharis, generally rejected Cavafy. Apart from a few exceptions, his acceptance by critics and his influence on Greek poets started late in his life and mostly after his death. See for example Vitti 1982: 35–7; Vitti 1978: 295; Dimaras 455–57.

“sociologically destined,” Faubion argues, to hold the position of “the spatial, temporal and geographical kilter [...] at which every colonised subject—thus provincialised and objectivised—stands from the colonising metropolis: out of place; out of date; out of sight” (58). As a member of the Greek diaspora in Alexandria, Cavafy, in fact, found himself both in the periphery of the British Empire and of Greece. His position as a “spatial, temporal and geographical kilter” is also reflected in Xenopoulos’ confused reaction, even though in this case the center of reference was Athens and not London. The diary also conveys Cavafy’s disorientation: the poet’s body is out of kilter, ill-adjusted to its Greek surroundings, upset by bodily emissions that disrupt the textual adherence to civility, decorum, and what Xenopoulos called “delicate” manners.

The Poet’s Vomit, or, (R)ejecting Aesthetic Disinterestedness

The vomit-reference, to which I return here, can be seen as a nodal point in the diary. There, Cavafy’s account of his trip, which discourages the reader’s affective engagement, turns into something different. Based on the few impressions of places, the poet seems to absorb everything without getting too close; towns or sites are generically cast as “pretty,” “picturesque,” “fine,” “grand” or “sublime.” Cavafy’s judgements seem modeled after Kant’s notion of aesthetic judgement as stemming from the subject’s *disinterestedness*. According to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, judgements of beauty are based neither on pure cognitive perception nor on emotion, but on a distanced kind of pleasure that leaves the subject’s desire for the object out of consideration. Aesthetic judgement is not “founded on any interest” since “interest vitiates the judgement of taste and robs it of its impartiality” (Kant 129, 54). Aesthetic experience requires an attitude of “psychical distance” of the subject from the object of contemplation, which, in Edward Bullough’s words, “is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one’s own self” (461). Aesthetic judgements in Cavafy’s diary appear as a caricatural, artificial, and thus ironic staging of this dispassionate disinterestedness, yielding (regardless of what Cavafy’s intentions may have been) a virtual parody of Kant’s aesthetic judgement. In other words, the subject’s detachment here produces not just *disinterested*, but *uninteresting* aesthetic judgements that preclude the reader’s vicarious participation in the poet’s trip.

In the face of this detachment, the allusions to negative experiences and discomfort (hellish heat, sweat, unwellness, headaches, vomiting) call attention to the failure of any attempt to conceive the subject of aesthetics as disengaged from the body and its surroundings. The image of vomit is pivotal to this operation of the text. *Disgust*, Winfried Menninghaus argues, is the “absolute other”

of aesthetics: it negatively defines modern aesthetics, which were founded in the eighteenth century “based on prohibition of what is disgusting” (7). “Disgust,” Brinkema adds, “haunts aesthetics; it not only must be disciplined, but it gives shape to the nascent philosophical discipline” (125). But where does the threatening dimension of disgust lie and how does this dimension manifest itself in the diary’s vomit-scene?

Kant addresses the threat of disgust to aesthetics in the following terms:

There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic pleasure, hence artistic beauty: namely, the ugliness arousing disgust. For in that strange sensation, resting on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it were pressing us to consume it [zum Genusse aufdrängen]. (Kant qtd. in Menninghaus 104)¹⁸

Kant’s addition to previous approaches to disgust, Menninghaus notes, is that “disgusting entities in themselves ‘press us to consume’ them.” Thus, “the defense-reaction of disgust does not only involve the proximity and presence of something repellent; rather, it is also the correlative of an intruding act of consumption” (104). Menninghaus elaborates this:

only to the extent that there is consumption—sexual, gustatory, olfactory—there can also be disgust: [...] in order to experience something as disgusting, it must first have entered—however partially—our sense of smell or taste; it has to be “taken in” or “consumed” before being judged as totally unenjoyable. (104–105)

Here we can locate the threat that disgust poses to Kant’s aesthetics: because it requires consumption by the subject, the disgusting “annul[s] the reflecting distance and disinterest of the imagination” (Menninghaus 105). Disgust, however, does not only preclude the subject’s exteriority to the object. It combines proximity with distantiation from the object, since the object is ejected, and thus also *rejected*. In “the field of disgust” for Kant, “the reality of consumption (‘intake’) turns into the convulsive rejection of itself” (105). Vomiting concretizes this insight, since, as Sara Ahmed aptly notes, it “involves expelling

18 Menninghaus’ quote from Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* follows but also modifies Werner S. Pluhar’s translation. Menninghaus points out that the passage in Kant to which this quote also belongs is to a large extent a reprise of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn’s earlier views on disgust.

something that has already been digested, and hence incorporated into the body of the one who feels disgust" (94).¹⁹

What is then incorporated and ejected in Cavafy's diary and in the vomit-scene? Cavafy's vomiting, of course, did not—certainly not consciously—stem from disgust to something he saw, tasted or smelled. He speculates that his condition may have been caused by bad water. Thus, vomiting was likely the body's reflex to a germ or other infectious agent. Nevertheless, imagining the scene may evoke disgust *in the reader*, especially since the vomit-reference—the only repulsive concretization of Cavafy's unwellness—is starkly contrasted with the diary's 'sanitized' language. The reference thereby turns into an affectively charged image that activates the reader's visual, olfactory, and aural senses, shaking her out of the tediously charming descriptions she had been lulled into. If the diary's language prompts a reading attitude based on detachment (corresponding with the writing subject's disinterested position), the intake of the vomiting scene into the diary's body 'contaminates' this language, pressing the reader to *consume* the diary through affective immersion rather than safe distance.

This "pressure to consume," as we saw, typifies disgust. But given the combination of proximity (intake) and distantiation (expulsion) accompanying disgust, this consumption is also likely to lead to a (r)ejection. The vomit-scene exteriorizes the haunting other of aesthetics in Cavafy's diary: the other as a body immersed in its environment, overcome by pleasure, discomfort, even disgust, incongruous with the postcard-like depictions. The diary's aesthetically pleasing impressions are ejected, as it were, in the vomit-scene. The "very very pretty" sites acquire a funny taste or smell, as they run into the text's other, the poet's body, that returns to *reject* the narrative in its own way. Along these lines, and despite Cavafy's initially stated intentions, no element entering the diary is safe or fully controlled by a sovereign self: it runs the risk of being pushed out through the body's involuntary 'revolt.'

For Kant, the "model of vomiting" functions literally but also metaphorically, as an "attempt [...] to expel an idea that has been offered for consumption" (qtd. in Menninghaus 105). Here, this idea is Cavafy's statement that "this is intended to be a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas" which offered an initial reading guideline for consumption (Cavafy 1963: 259). His disclaimer—that it may also "become the reverse" (259)—is metaphorically performed in the vomit-scene, where the reader is compelled to 'reverse' the initial statement she was called to internalize, expel it, and redirect her

19 Ahmed draws here on Rozin and Fallon (27).

attention to Cavafy's undermining disclaimer: a disclaimer that already contained the infectious agent contaminating the diary's factuality. Ahmed relates the feeling of being disgusted to a form of dissent "that seeks to challenge 'what is'" while also showing "how dissent cannot be exterior to its object" and "is always implicated in what is being dissented from" (99). Along these lines, the arousal of disgust in the vomit-scene may prompt the reader to challenge the diary's status as merely factual, and the distanced reading this status entails, and pursue another, more immersive, reading.

The kind of dissent Ahmed relates to disgust, based on a simultaneous intake of and critical distance from an object, also brings us closer to understanding the kind of irony the diary accommodates. The dissent Ahmed describes, it seems to me, is not necessarily dependent on the subject's conscious intention but involves an involuntary movement of (critical) distancing. Rejection and critique, after all, cannot easily happen at will when the object is internalized rather than exterior to the subject. The diary's opening statement and its disclaimer perform a kind of irony whereby the text (r)jects a stated truth without the writing subject being fully conscious of, or intending, this rejection, even though it senses that the text might (involuntarily) revolt against this 'truth.'

Irony's Temperature

Reading the diary as an ironic text, the reader can reach an alternative knowledge by being open to the affective transmissions that the text's self-censoring operations try to subdue. Irony can be found in textual sites that show this repression not to be complete. "The senses and the informational channels of the flesh," Brennan argues, "are intelligent, aware, and struggling either to subdue or communicate with a slower, thicker person who calls itself I" (140). Brennan defines this "slower" I as "the self who knew but did not know it knew" as opposed to a "faster" self "who presents itself as the knowing subject" (140). The opening sentences of Cavafy's diary present a self that intends to control the narrative yet senses that he cannot fully do so—a self that *knows but does not know that he knows* that the diary's intended content will be haunted by this repression. The sweating implied in the temperature recordings introduces bodily secretions that culminate in the vomiting scene, where this repressed knowledge spills over, as it were, on the diary's pages, demanding to be consumed by the reader and dragging her from a position of observation to an affective engagement with the text.

As a result, the text's irony does not emanate from what Brennan calls a "faster" I, a "knowing" and sovereign subject exterior to the writing, but from textual manifestations of a struggle between a faster and a slower 'I'—a

struggle the opening sentences register and prefigure. Even though I took these sentences as implicit guidelines for the diary's reader, they are first and foremost a self-addressed exchange between the writing subject's "faster" and "slower" selves, given that a diary is not usually destined to be consumed by other readers (even though in this case it was). Irony here is not the outcome of the speaker's intentional "transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented" (Hutcheon 11), but what flows from the breach of the subject's intention, through the text's transmissions of something other than occurrences. It manifests itself in the tension between the diary's seemingly factual, disinterested language and its haunting other—a body ill-adjusted, familiar and foreign, enjoying and suffering, consuming and (r)ecting. The affective charges that facts and figures unexpectedly leak, raise the temperature of Cavafy's irony, just like the temperature on that thermometer the poet monitored so obsessively.

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