

A Music of Hautboys

Plutarch, Shakespeare, Cavafy, Eliot

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*And all the way (a horn!) from fjord to fjell his baywinds obooes
shall wail him rockbound ...*

— James Joyce

*Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies ...*

— Charles Baudelaire

*If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,
Can never stand as god, is ever wrong ...*

— Wallace Stevens

THE TRAGEDY OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA is a play of astounding harmony and dissonance, of balance and imbalance, of contrary worlds and values. This set of balances is even audible in the prosody. Without having laboriously tested the idea, I doubt any other Shakespeare play, any verse play at all, has anything like its quantity of enjambments, has used the device to set up and subvert the balance of the line with such intensity and purpose. Bold use of the device can be found elsewhere, in *The Tempest*, for example, where Caliban's abrupt and disruptive run-ons ("You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language," 1.2.519-20) where the clumsy elision at the end of the first line stumbles into the premature caesura of the next, creating a haunting, broken music that challenges the authority and order of the play.

But in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the very first speech establishes this pattern of a line, a Nile, that overflows its banks:

PHILO

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy's lust.

(1.1.1-10)¹

Without a single end-stop, these sinewy lines bend like bulrushes, turn on their axles, and burst their buckles. As each line overflows into the next, the rhythmic propulsion of the whole play and its massive underlying harmony is set in motion. The same property of harmony and dissonance; and boldly enjambed verse, is audible throughout, most notably in the major speeches of Antony and Cleopatra themselves, often end-loaded with verbs. Even the measured Caesar, by the end of the play, seems to have caught a milder version of the bug:

If they had swallowed poison, 'twould appear
By external swelling, but she looks like sleep,
As she would catch another Antony
In her strong coils of grace.

(5.2.339-342)

It may seem risible to make a play that spans the known world and centers on a crucial episode of classical history hinge on such a small technical device but it is, after all, as Giorgio Agamben makes clear, the very thing that distinguishes poetry from prose—the *possibility* of enjambment—and I want to consider the play with regard to the music of poetry.²

Though there's little that's English about *Antony and Cleopatra*, where better to look for the full gamut of English poetry, and for one of its pinnacles. Voltaire boasted of having only found a few jewels in the dunghill of Shakespeare's oeuvre, a kind of provocation thrown out later by Tolstoy and Bernard Shaw. But sticking with Voltaire, even the word "dung" is used as a jewel at the beginning of the play and at the end: Antony's "Kingdoms are clay: our duncy earth alike / Feeds beast as man" (1.1.35-6) is echoed by Cleopatra, contemplating suicide and death "Which sleeps and never palates more the dung, / The beggar's nurse and Caesar's" (5.2.7-8).

1 All quotations from the play are taken from William Shakespeare: *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, reissued 1998), pp.1001-1036.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.109. ". . . [T]he possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose" is a thesis Agamben approves, and which leads him to the curious paradox that "it follows that the last verse of a poem is not a verse," p. 112.

It is a world of slime, mud, clay, and of “immortal longings.” In *All for Love*, Dryden seems to have intuited the importance of this imagery, but overdoes it in Serapion’s first speech:

Here monstrous phocae panted on the shore;
Forsaken dolphins there with their broad tails,
Lay lashing the departing waves: hard by them,
Sea horses floundering in the slimy mud,
Tossed up their heads, and dashed the ooze about them.

Dryden brings his accustomed skill to the ordered end-stops as to the enjambments, and read without the looming precedent of Shakespeare there’s much to admire in these lines.

In Shakespeare’s play, the earthly is continuously set against the transcendent, and the four elements are in continual combat: “I am fire and air,” as Cleopatra with harrowed grandeur claims at the play’s end. The ordered French literary mind of Voltaire’s generation would have been hard-pressed to apprehend this breadth; though with Baudelaire, who said of Paris “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or,” it’s a different story. Mud figures extravagantly in the opening of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Le tombeau de Charles Baudelaire” as the proper medium of the poet:

Le temple enseveli divulgue par la bouche
Sépulcrale d’égout bavant boue et rubis . . .

But with all three French authors, mud and pearl, mud and gold, even mud and rubies are seen in opposition, whereas for Shakespeare mud itself is generative and precious.

The critic J.F. Danby speaks perceptively of “deliquescence” as a characteristic of the play. We could also add liquefaction, though that’s almost a cliché in critical studies concerned with its imagery. In the first lines where Philo complains that Antony has “o’erflowed the measure” and then dwells on the “stale of horses, the gilded puddle,” a baroque description of the horse piss that Antony was prepared to drink on campaign, we are introduced to both spiritual and bodily fluids. Antony’s first sonorous speech “Let Rome in Tiber melt...” would have the solidest thing in the world turn to liquid; but even the vaporous and aerial is subject to both solidification and liquefaction: “Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish, / A vapour sometime like a bear or lion” As the speech resumes, Antony finds the definitive image of the indefinite:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought,
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

(4.14.9-11)

His next speech concludes with the prospect of suicide: “there is left us / Ourselves to end ourselves.” The indistinctness of water in water seems to lead to the dissolution of the self in the parallel

repetition of “ourselves.” Antony’s self, throughout a name to conjure with—as even Caesar says “in that name lay / A moiety of the world” (5.1.17-18)—is simultaneously actual and historical, mythical and mercurial, shape- and role-shifting. The recursive is an emphatic feature of the play throughout and culminates in Antony’s own penultimate lines: “a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished.” (4.16.59-60) with its vaunting alliterations balancing and tilting over the line.

Without a single end-stop, these sinewy lines bend like bulrushes, turn on their axles, and burst their buckles.

That image of water in water is the kind of circular, self-referential trope that’s often heard in the early poems of Valerio Magrelli (“as though a cloud where to assume / the shape of a cloud”), and I can’t help wondering if he’d read the play in translation. He could of course have found a parallel route to these images, for they are lyrical meditations on how the self perceives the self, where the play has similar concerns from a dramatic perspective.

These images of liquefaction are sometimes, however, reversed as we see in Antony’s boast before his suicide: “and o’er green Neptune’s back / with ships made cities” (4.15.58-59), so perhaps it’s better to speak of the constant metamorphosis of the four elements—from Cleopatra’s description of Antony “his delights / Were dolphin-like, they showed his back above / The element he lived in” (5.2.87-89) to her final speech “As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle.” (5.2.306)

Like mud and clay, water is a generative force: “a courser’s hair”—the hair of a horse that was meant to turn into a snake when added to water—and Nilus’s mud which generates life, are just two examples that are images of mutability but also of seething fertility.

The whole play is like an ingenious Renaissance fountain that uses the hydraulic head of a Roman viaduct to jet streams of water at the same time that one filled receptacle tips its contents into the next. The naval battle of Actium is one such moment in Antony’s career as a Roman general. But the crucial tipping point is perceived, after a final illusory victory for Antony, as a ghostly music, in a stage direction: “Music of the hautboys is under the stage.” These sounds, described by the First Soldier as “Music i’ th’ air,” by the Third as “Under the earth,” take shape in the divination of the Second Soldier:

’Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,
Now leaves him.

The hautboy is an early version of the oboe, from the French *hautbois: high (-pitched) wood*, a reed instrument used elsewhere to announce important entrances (as of Duncan in *Macbeth* I.vi). It may be kin to the “scrannel pipes” in Milton’s “*Lycidas*,” but in this scene it is how Shakespeare *hears* and translates a passage in North’s Plutarch. If the “Flourish” which interrupts Philo’s first speech, quoted above, is a Roman and military fanfare, this music is of another kind, hedonistic but eerie: the oboe has replaced the trumpet. The scales have turned against Antony, and the Alexandrian revelries are over. It is as though Shakespeare has externalised the phrase “his courage deserted him” by embodying it in the god of war who “Now leaves him.”

The relevant passage in North’s Plutarch reads:

Furthermore, the selfsame night within little of midnight, when all the city was quiet, full of fear and sorrow, thinking what would be the issue and end of this war, it is said that suddenly they heard a marvelous sweet harmony of sundry sorts of instruments of music, with the cry of a multitude of people, as they had been dancing and had sung as they use in Bacchus’ feasts, with movings and turnings after the manner of the satyrs; and it seemed that this dance went through the city unto the gate that opened to the enemies. Now, such as in reason sought the depth of the interpretation of this wonder, thought that it was the god unto whom Antonius bare singular devotion to counterfeit and resemble him, that did forsake them.

Shakespeare’s reworking of this passage is wonderfully concise—one stage direction and three brief comments, and yet it contains all that he needed: a music that melts away into the air or the earth, from a heavenly or an infernal source, and reduces North’s “marvelous sweet harmony of sundry sorts of instruments” to the singular reedy scrannel piping of hautboys.

Centuries later, the Egyptiot Greek poet Constantin Cavafy (1863–1933) heard this haunting music in both Plutarch and Shakespeare, and replayed it in one of the two poems he dedicated to Mark Antony. Cavafy’s poems span four thousand years of Greek and Mediterranean culture from 2000 BC to the early nineteenth century. Those with an ancient setting treat that period as though it were the present on which the future (even if already past, even if we already know it) inexorably hangs. Some operate in three distinct time zones. Two Italian past tenses are named *passato prossimo* and *passato remoto* (recent and distant past); Cavafy’s imagination has added a third tense which might be called *passato antiquo*, and some of his poems triangulate between a recent event that sparks an earlier memory which in turn is illuminated by another event in ancient history. This antique past tense suffusing his work often employs the present tense:

a typical opening “Phernazis the poet is at work / on the crucial part of his epic. . .” (“Dareios”) or “The ageing of my body and my beauty / is a wound from a merciless knife” (“Melancholy of Jason Kleander, Poet in Kommagini, A.D. 595,” translations by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard).

All of these past tenses, however, are lit with a prohibited homoerotic passion: “His erotic tendencies, / condemned and strictly forbidden / (but innate for all that) were the cause of it. . .” (“Days of 1896,”). That deft parenthesis sweeps aside the enduring and blighting theories that homosexuality can be “cured” still held today by, among others, the victorious Brexit candidate and national treasure Anne Widdicombe.

Cavafy, after spending a part of his youth in Liverpool, was said to have spoken Greek with a vestigial English accent. So perhaps we can imagine him with an Egyptian Scouse accent, like that of the great striker Mo Salah. He was certainly well read with respect to Shakespeare, as apart from the Antony poems, one of his longest poems is a revisionary reading of *Hamlet* in which Claudius is presented as a gentle and peaceable monarch whom the murderous and unhinged prince falsely accuses. But while it deftly opens up a reversed set of sympathies, it’s also susceptible of another reading in which the credulous speaker is unable to discern the hidden sequence of events which the Elizabethan play reveals. Cavafy is as aware as T.S. Eliot that “History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues,” most likely far more aware, as for no poet has ancient history been so much the living present.

Eliot is another poet who employs this brief, haunting passage in Shakespeare. “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,” in common with much of *Poems 1920*, is an echo-chamber or honeycomb of allusions. The echoes in the poem are from *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Merchant of Venice* as well as, en passant, that other Venetian play *Othello*, and Eliot has transposed the action from Alexandria to Venice. In addition to the Jamesian epigraph, the final stanza’s rhetorical question “Who clipped the lion’s wings / And flea’d his rump and pared his claws?” is, as R.C. Turner has argued, a reference to Jonathan Swift’s ironic praise of Grub Street hacks in *The Tale of a Tub*.³ The second stanza is a stylish reworking of the hautboys episode:

Defunctive music under sea
Passed seaward with the passing bell
Slowly: the God Hercules
Had left him, that had loved him well.

Eliot has fashioned a music that’s at once solemnly elegiac

³ Richard C. Turner, “Burbank and Grub-Street: A note on T. S. Eliot and Swift,” *English Studies* 52:1–6 (1971), 347–348, online at www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00138387108597434.

and discreetly mocking, and the pluperfect tense accords with the sense of an irretrievably lost grandeur seen from the perspective of a squalid present. It's a characteristically Eliotic maneuver: the culture and inhabitants of the present are reduced with respect to the past—a guttering candle—so that the direction of time's arrow is always *rallentando* and downwards.

Here Antony's impending defeat is used as an encompassing image of the decline of the West even as the sun rises in the east in the next stanza: "The horses, under the axletree / Beat up the dawn from Istria / With even feet." The last phrase is itself another cunning echo, this time from Horace 1, 4, 13: "pallida mors aequo pulsat pede." The entire poem insists on decline and descent and diminishment, from Burbank in the first stanza crossing "a *little* bridge / *Descending* to a *small* hotel" then at the arrival of the vulpine Princess Volupine: "They were together, and he *fell*" (my italics). The crucial preposition in the second stanza, quoted above, is "under," picking up the Shakespearean direction "under the stage," and again it's sounded in the third stanza's "under the axletree." That stanza ends with a further reference to the play: "Her shuttered barge / Burned on the water all the day." This alludes to Enobarbus's speech "The barge she sat on like a burnished throne / Burned on the water," and possibly threads the burning with ominous desire and frustration: the barge has become the site for a sordid sexual encounter. Of course this is only a reader's inference as everything is veiled or shuttered until, that is, the next three stanzas where the poem descends into a visceral and vicious series of anti-Semitic tropes in describing the Bleistein who shares with Burbank a double-billing in the title. At this point, the descent of man is figured in his ape-like mode of perambulation "A saggy bending of the knees" while his eye "Stares from the protozoic slime": "The smoky candle end of time // Declines" before rats and Jews and furs are bundled together in a crude finale with the repeated preposition "underneath":

On the Rialto once.
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs. The boatman smiles

Only Princess Volupine, having presumably disposed of the tedious Burbank, *ascends* "To climb the waterstair" and entertain Sir Ferdinand Klein, and in this case the climbing, we may guess, is social and financial. All of the names have significance: Bleistein meaning "leadstone," hence base metal, Klein is German for small (again), and perhaps even the name Burbank is resonant. Luther Burbank was a commercially successful American botanist who cultivated the Russet Burbank potato, now the main ingredient of McDonald's French fries. He was also a eugenicist who advocated involuntary sterilization and promoted anti-miscegenation laws and racial segregation. Different

rules, then, for humans than for tubers, and for the various hybrid species of fruit he cultivated. It may be an extra irony of the poem that an advocate of racial purity should “fall” for a probably “foreign” and Jewish aristocrat who has an unclear association with Bleistein, a Chicago/Viennese Jew, perhaps a pandar or business associate. Such is the miscegenated corruption of contemporary Venice in the poem’s infernal descent: a case study in prejudice. The reader is caught between admiration for the subtle way Eliot has marshalled all these echoes and dismay at the ends to which they’re made to serve.

As it happens, an essay by the Greek poet George Seferis,⁴ which seeks to establish the affinities and connections of Cavafy and Eliot (not mutual influence, which he discounts, though they did know of each other’s work) overlooks this point of convergence though he gives another—Dante’s phrase “colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto” (“he who through cowardice made the great refusal”) in reference, supposedly, to Pope Celestine V. The account he gives of Cavafy is brilliant and illuminating, so it discomforts me that I see the two poets he wants to bring together as so much at odds in their historical visions.

Cavafy’s Alexandria is a melting-pot of peoples: Syrians, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Egyptians, and none of his poems seeks to exclude any group whatsoever. He might prefer a hedonistic Greek approach to physical pleasure, but there are also sympathetic considerations of Christian morality. And the one-way, downward gradient from glory to squalor that characterises Eliot’s stance is alien to Cavafy’s complex and intimate relations with the past and the present.

“The god forsakes Antony,” written in 1911 is, Peter Mackridge explains, “the earliest of the poems explicitly set in Alexandria that he [Cavafy] later allowed to enter his ‘canon’ of approved poems.”⁵ Here another triangulation occurs, as Cavafy situates himself between Plutarch and Shakespeare, more between than after, as his imagination has been nourished, unlike Shakespeare’s, at the source in ancient Greek.

I quote the poem in Sherrard and Keeley’s translation, the best I could find:⁶

4 George Seferis, *On the Greek Style*, translated by Rex Warner and Th. D. Frangopoulos (1976; reprinted Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2000), pp.119–165.

5 C.P. Cavafy, *The Collected Poems*, translated by Evangelos Sacherperoglou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.xii.

6 From C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, revised edition, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. By George Savidis. Translation copyright © 1975, 1992 by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

The God Abandons Antony

At midnight, when suddenly you hear
an invisible procession going past
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly:
as though long prepared, and full of courage,
say goodbye to her, to Alexandria who is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, that your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As though long prepared, and full of courage,
as though natural in you who've been given this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with emotion,
but not with regret, the whinings of a coward,
listen—your final pleasure—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.⁷

This double source of Plutarch and Shakespeare has often been noted in Cavafy's poem, so rather than dwell on it, I only want to underline the obvious but crucial deviation of Cavafy. Plutarch's Antony is abandoned by Bacchus; Shakespeare's by Hercules (perhaps a guess at "the god unto whom Antony bare singular devotion"); and Cavafy's hero by an invented female deity, Alexandria. The city itself has assumed a feminine identity. Greek gender for city—*πόλη*—is feminine, as also in the Romance languages, so perhaps it's natural to fashion a goddess rather than a god out of Alexandria, especially in this case where the unmentioned queen and counterpart is Cleopatra. All three have chosen gods appropriate to the different facets of Antony's character.

North's Plutarch's "marvellous sweet harmony" is here rendered (twice) as "exquisite music" and seems to carry an echo of the swan song, whereas, as we've seen, Shakespeare's music is of bare unaccompanied oboes. The poem has a slow processional denouement, so that the final line, which almost repeats the 8th, but substitutes in the English, that follows the Greek, 'losing' for "leaving," loss for departure. To an English ear it can't help evoking the sea shanty "So Fare Thee Well, My Own True Love" with its line "It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me," a song it might be a bit far-fetched to believe Cavafy had heard in his youth, though one version goes back at least as far as 1885. In this case, though, it is the town that is leaving, floating away on the air, and not the sailor.

⁷ From C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, revised edition, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. By George Savidis, p. 16. Translation copyright © 1975, 1992 by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

An interesting contrast, given my starting point, is the absence of any radical enjambment in Cavafy. This, with a few exceptions, is a characteristic absence in his poems. Despite his often extended sentences, Cavafy tends to break them in unostentatious fashion, along the grain or according to the phrasal pause. It's consistent with what the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, in his essay on Cavafy, notes as the Alexandrian's habitual poverty of expression: simple adjectives, clear exposition, a scarcity of metaphor and simile.⁸ He argues that these qualities make Cavafy eminently translatable. Without Greek, I've no way of knowing if this is true, but the force of Sherrard's and Keeley's translations, which have made Cavafy into a major English poet, inspire confidence and tally with Brodsky's observation. A reader with knowledge of ancient and modern Greek would likely be better placed than I to piece together this aural mosaic, but even those without can hear the way Plutarch's "marvellous sweet harmony" (as North would have it) has travelled north, west and south again, over the centuries, and been transposed for ghostly oboe, then become "exquisite" music in Alexandria, "defunctive" music in Eliot's Venice, and been heard throughout the Magna Grecia, from the Nile and then far beyond to the Avon and the Thames. ■

8 "... as early as 1900–1910, he began to strip his poems of all poetic paraphernalia — rich imagery, simile, metric flamboyance, and . . . rhymes." Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 55. Apropos of music, Brodsky's description of the timbre of Cavafy's poems is also persuasive: "that implacable note of ennui which makes Cavafy's voice with its hedonistic-stoic tremolo sound so haunting." *Ibid.*, p. 67.