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Cavafy, Seferis and the Philosophy of Tango

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Abstract

Exploring the multiple mediations between poetry and music this paper focuses on Cavafy's and Seferis' autobiographical texts. It proposes to rethink the two poets' selective affinities through their different perceptions of music: based on a comment on Cavafy's poems by the modernist Seferis, Cavafy's imaginary landscapes will be compared and revisited through the unconventional philosophy of tango.

Keywords

Literature and Music, C. P. Cavafy, George Seferis, Tango, Borges

1. Introduction

If we had to single out two Greek poets that shaped poetic modernity, and I dare say not just in the Greek language, we could not fail to mention the most easily and frequently translated Constantine Cavafy, the Alexandrian who, living far away from the Greek mainland, silently transplanted into his 154 poems a new vision of lyricism at the beginning of the previous century.

Many years later, the Nobel Laureate George Seferis, from a different starting point, would manage to "turn" Greek poetry towards a path that led beyond its strict boundaries, one open to the daring of Anglo-Saxon modernity. As a poet who was both diplomat and refugee at the same time, Seferis travelled widely, all the time mourning the fate of his homeland, Asia Minor, and intensely experiencing the fate of contemporary Greece from the end of World War I to that of the military junta in 1974.

You may now be wondering whether the two poets have anything else in common beyond being both numbered among the canon of greats in Greek literature. Since, what could Constantine Cavafy, who was born in 1863, never tra-

velled and wrote in a strange language, peppered with idioms and Katharevousa, have in common with George Seferis? How is the Alexandrian to be connected with George Seferis, who was born in 1900 and brought Greek poetry in line with the adventure of the modern world?

The answer is simple: there is no direct connection! On the basis of this principle, what I will attempt to present today is the relationship of both poets to music and how this relationship, sometimes unexpected and unpredictable, leads to oblique readings of both the Cavafian corpus and the Seferian attitude.

It would perhaps be a cliché to call to mind how much poetry converses with music and how dependent music is on poetry in a nearly osmotic relationship. Perhaps it would be equally cliché to begin with reference to the theory of synesthesia in art—this strange quality that orders, or rather mysteriously disorders, the senses, giving sounds taste and colors smell, words shape, or as Cavafy (2013) wrote in 1891 following Baudelaire's thought, "aromas inspire me as music does, as rhythm does, as beautiful words do". Music nourishes poetry, just as poetry nourishes music, and this continuous, eternal exchange between the fine arts gives birth to verses and songs, notes and words, simultaneously exercising our collective subconscious in a tradition that has difficulty in separating the poetic text from its music (e.g. Seferis's "Hidden bay" from the music provided by Theodorakis or Mallarmé's, "Afternoon of a Faun" from the music of Debussy).

And not just poetry but all of the literature always leaves space for music whether intentionally or otherwise. After all, literature borrows from music not just to enrich its narrative but also to imitate musical structures verbatim, taming its verbal inspiration to follow different paths: a text may be divided into movements analogous to those of a sonata or symphony (allegro, andante) and may make use of a leitmotiv or imitate the technique of contrapunto, swiftly alternating between different perspectives.

However, beyond these two sides of music in literature—the thematic (the portrait of the artist, music as catalyst and passion) and the formal (musical structure as applied poetry and narrative), that have to do with conscious choices on the part of the author or poet, there is another category into which music forces itself subconsciously (Arroyas, 2001). This is the category of autobiographical texts, daily records or personal letters, where the relationship with music, whether essential or superficial, is intertwined with daily life and orders the writings of the *ego* in an almost natural, leisurely way.

Autobiography, that is to say, the diary but also correspondence by letter, hybrid spaces *par excellence* where all literary genres are allowed: confession, introspection, self-defense, self-analysis, permit and/or often facilitate dialogue with music. In this rather untamed field of literature, where there is no specific subject matter or a particular story to narrate, what becomes the object of the activity of writing is the *ego* itself, the art of the self, its "technologization", as Foucault (1988) would say. And just as Schumann (1860) advises pianists in his

seventy instructions to rest from study by reading poetry, in the same way, authors often reveal in their personal writings their secret fermenting process through music. In these cases, where the poets do not just happen to listen to music but to make it, their perception is always widened beyond their personal encounter with the miracle of art and touches another sphere. As Roland Barthes (1977) says, "There are two musics […]: the music one listens to, the music one plays. These two musics are two totally different arts, each with its own history, its own sociology, its own aesthetics, its own erotic; the same composer can be minor if you listen to him, tremendous if you play him (even badly)—such is Schumann".[1]

2. Seferis and Music

2.1. Seferis and Classical Music

In the category of those who don't play but listen to music, as if stubbornly, and carefully record their every contact with its strange world is Seferis. Besides being a remarkable poet, Seferis is also an impressive writer of essays and letters. He belongs to the rare class of Greek intellectuals that with great insistence systematically exercises himself in the charms of epistolography and autobiographical writing. On the one hand, the turbulent era of wars and population exchanges imposes the introspection upon him presupposed by letter-writing and keeping a diary, and at the same time he freely opens himself to the art of self-observation.

"A refugee from the age of 13", as he frequently confesses himself, having studied in both Paris and London, and afterwards a diplomat throughout his entire adult life, Seferis is acquainted early on with the geography of separation (Seferis & Katsimbalis, 2009; Seferis & Malanos, 1990). To his gaping national and personal traumatic memory of the Asia Minor Disaster (1919-1922) are added uninterrupted separations and goodbyes that seem to heal only through writing. As a refugee and nomad himself, he inserted into the nature of his letters every phase of his poetic formation and personal development.

And since the achievement of personal evolution is always filtered through the prism of love, what will determine and ultimately shape Seferis' musical perception is his youthful erotic relationship with an older woman, Lucia Fotopoulou, an innovative music critic, exceptionally cultivated and brave for the petty bourgeois manners of Athens (Beaton, 2003). Lucia (he called her "princess Lou") would initiate Seferis into the universe of modernism in music and would significantly influence his musical preferences. When he was assigned to London, Seferis benefited from the rich musical atmosphere of the British capital. In his correspondence from the years 1931-1934 he methodically develops his impressions of the symphonies and concertos he has attended.

Seferis was a careful listener: he abandons himself to the sounds he hears in an unaffected way, trusting his senses. The letter allows him to classify his feelings

[1]See Buch (2015) for further information about Barthes' relationship to music.

while interpreting every acoustic imprint of the music, whether of a significant symphony or a mundane song that the maid was humming. Having surrendered to his loneliness, Seferis learns to listen to the silence and to absorb reality through various interrelated acoustic stimuli. One would say that at this time (he has just presented his second collection of poems, *Cistern*, to a rather uneasy audience) he devoted himself with child-like enthusiasm to classical music in an attempt to find some comfort for the physical intimacy he was missing.

> I enjoyed the orchestra much more yesterday. Despite the fact that Schubert's slow romantic rhythm was tiring for me, I found things that I was seeing almost for the first time: the feeling that holds the pulse of a warm body, with infinite details in the slightest hue, a velvet that you feel like you are touching […]. As for my musical condition, I am precisely at the point where one is ready to uncover the otherworldly quartets. How pitifully illiterate I am […]. And one question: listening to the orchestra, I observed that the strings are played by brunettes and the wind instruments by blondes. Why is that (Seferis, 2020)?

As the youthful poet's nights fill with music, Seferis the letter-writer and amateur music critic observes the particularities of each musical composition, he notes the particular characteristics of each and discovers, sometimes with humour and other times with bitterness, his own inadequacy. When he acquires a gramophone that he can use in his daily life, the distance that he feels that separates him from high quality music will be overcome: "[…] Yesterday I bought a phonograph and the first plates of Frank's Symphony in ré mineur […] It is the only way for me to be musically educated in my inexcusable state of ignorance" (Seferis, 2020).

Oscillating between experiencing music at social receptions and symphonies in packed auditoriums on the one hand and immersing himself in reflective listening in solitude and the silence of the night on the other, Seferis openly confesses in his letters his inability to love Bach, to not love Wagner, to admire Ravel and Stravinsky. However, every time that he describes himself in his everyday life he insists on the music that accompanies him. He returns to this detail as if, by enumerating the various kinds of music that surround him, he will be able to describe the sensation of the moment.

> […] Sometimes in my small room, in front of my most imperfect, red gramophone, I feel as though I am an alchemist from a past age. […] I take up phrases from the beginning, trying to train my ear to recognize various instruments, to observe what is happening and how the motifs change, and in any case, what connection they have to that living person that created them and to music […] (Seferis, 2020).

This musical training aids him in understanding the secret rhythm of his own poetic language, to seek out the simplicity that he finds in Bach and to reject the unbounded sentimentalism of the romantics (Seferis, 2020; Tambakaki, 2011).

On the other hand, his life is full of noises that come and go; as every life; it fills with sounds that are not always welcome. And the amateur music critic does not hesitate to incorporate and describe in every detail even those noises in his personal narrations:

> Sunday, 8 May [1932]
> At 8 my housemaids' phonograph woke me, and after that, the vacuum cleaner did not leave me [in] peace, a regular drill boring through my head every morning. I've had to deal with the vacuum for a while now, but the phonograph is some new torture. They've landed on some song from a musical. They obsess over it like a piece of candy. The old woman wakes with it and the young woman sleeps to it. I am trying to comprehend their musical functions. With the pieces I buy, they've written me off as crazy. I mean the simplistic ones, such as: Frank's Symphony or the Dances of Granada. They find them most unusual (naturally, when I am about to play the Sacre or Satie's Gymnopédie, I lock the door twice) […] (Seferis, 2020).

2.2. Jazz and Tango

Hence, the poet doesn't just listen to Ravel and Stravinsky; he doesn't only love the cerebral geometry of the geniuses of his age. When after some time he fell passionately in love again, trespassing the ethical norms of high society and provoking his powerful father's rage (this was Seferis' love for Marika Londou, whom he called "Maro"), in his unpleasant transfer to Korytsa, Albania, Seferis found his most pleasant company in the red gramophone that played the golden jazz of the 20s and 30s over and over again:[2]

> Sometimes I am overwhelmed by terrible nostalgia. The other night I had such an episode that I lay down on the whisky with my phonograph that got the whole neighborhood up on its feet with Negro voices. I almost felt black myself. The song was saying, "a mountain of sorrows that stands before me". I reflected on the black slave trade, their horrific suffering and alienation. The only sensibility that I accept is theirs (Seferis & Seferi, 1989).

Aside from jazz and his beloved African (that's how he referred to Louis Armstrong) that kept him company during that difficult winter in Albania, Sefe-

[2]According to Tambakaki (2011) jazz constitutes an absence of sorts in Seferis' listening habits: "Seferis was introduced to jazz music in Paris, however, it was in London where he acquired a passion for it, as he would state thirty-five years later: 'I was thirty-two or thirty-three years old when I became passionate about jazz. I used to tell myself, you discovered the importance of Bach –of the great Bach– at the same moment you discovered the importance of jazz'". See also Seferis & Seferi (1989): "Writing, what has become of it, offers me no gratification, nor does it attract me anymore. I seek other means of self-expression. If I were younger, I would make jazz." Miller (1945): "Seferiades looked at me with that warm Asiatic smile which always spread over his face like nectar and ambrosia. 'Do you know that piece?' he said, beaming with pleasure. 'I have some others, if you'd care to hear them,' and he pointed to a file of albums about a yard long. 'What about Louis Armstrong, do you like him?' he continued. 'Here's a Fats Waller record. Wait a minute, have you ever heard Count Basie—or Pee Wee Russell?' He knew every virtuoso of any account; he was a subscriber to 'Le Jazz Hot' I soon discovered" (Efstathiadis, 2011).

ris develops a rather ambiguous relationship with tango, as well.[3] Initially hostile to its unbearable sentimentality, susceptible to its repetitive melodies, the poet nevertheless does not remain entirely indifferent to its sounds. Perhaps because it dominates at social gatherings, perhaps because it is associated with the obligatory extroversion inherent in his profession, the poet abhors its lyricism but never fails to mention to Maro every time the musical reminiscences that fill the moments when he writes to her: "last night the radio that regularly annoys me was playing a tango/melody from the last carnival" (Seferis & Seferi, 1989).

Tango, being through and through a product of southern Argentina, a banner from the darkest underworld of the end of the century breaks the rules and invades the high society of Buenos Aires. From there, the beloved dance of sailors would travel and hold sway in Europe, preserving its original themes of love and death, betrayal, deceit, despair and loss. In Greece during the interwar period tango would reach its zenith with Sophia Vembo, Danai Stratigopoulou, Kleon "Attik" Triantafyllou[4] and Eduardo Bianco, and its verses often hastily translated from French and Italian would reproduce the passive lyricism of love songs, the "Margarita syndrome" (the lady with the camelias), as Seferis (2020) called it, a recipe rather foreign to his introversion

Even then, though, the poet is unable to not include their insistent music in his own acoustic environment. When he decides, during the same dark period he spent in Korytsa, to reread Cavafy's poetry in an attempt to understand the Alexandrian's strange voice, perhaps in order to degrade him, but perhaps also to sincerely approach his unusual linguistic idiom, inexplicable to Seferis' demotic sensitivities, he will compare Cavafy to a tango and will confess to Maro how foreign that is to his personal idiosyncrasy.[5]

> I've begun Makrygiannis and Cavafy. I still don't know what I will take away from these people. It's quite a coincidence for me to be simultaneously studying two figures so different to each other. Nevertheless, it's strange how much one affects the other in my mind, as I reflect on them. Both of

[3]In the context of derogatory remarks about tango, we should mention that Mitsos Papanikolaou (1940, 1980) in his critique of N. Lapathiotis' intricate and musical iambic verse of fifteen syllables makes a demeaning comment regarding the "tango-like" poems of other poets: "The invention, while implemented by Mr. Lapathiotis, was beautiful. Later, however, different rhymesters imitated said whimsical rhythm to write tango-like poems making the poet himself despise and abandon it."; See also Stratis (1995, 2011) who mentions that Lapathiotis composed and published "Nostalgia Tango" (1935) which was set to music by M. Mertikas, while there are indications of the existence of yet another tango based on Jean Moreas' verse.

[4]Despite his comments concerning tango's "unbounded sentimentalism", Seferis appears to have been a regular at Attik´s famous "Mandra", an outdoor yard that served as a popular music scene in Athens, in the 1930s (Seferis & Seferi, 1989).

[5]See also Seferis (2011) where he uses again the parallelism between Cavafy's poetry and the tango, this time in a different context: "However, to be completely honest, I must add that I have recalled an erotic poem by the Alexandrian, at least once. It was a warm summer and a popular local tango was playing over the speakers at Syntagma Square. In that moment, the words of a cavafian poem came to my mind, to place themselves into that melody: 'He lost him entirely. And now he's searching/on the lips of every new lover […]/the lips of his beloved'; And if I also think about the poem 'Beautiful, White Flowers as They Went So Well', I surmise almost that the speakers of Syntagma Square are not such a bad critic, after all."

> them could be viewed as national emblems rather than state figures. The one from the people's core, as he progresses through the life of his newly liberated country, he feels more and more like a foreigner, and in the end they incarcerate him […]. The other, straight out of the aristocracy of the Phanariots, driven by an erotic passion that coerces him into close contact with rogue people he thus ends up acquiring the tone of a popular (not folk) song, like certain tango verses: He lost him entirely. And now he's searching/on the lips of every new lover or beautiful, white flowers, that so matched…, etc. Really now, tell me, don't they sound like first cousins with the line "The time has come for me to tell you to forget me" (Seferis & Seferi, 1989)?[6]

Seferis is making reference here to two famous poems by Cavafy, "In Despair" (1922-23) and "Beautiful, White Flowers as They Went So Well" (1929). In the first poem, two lovers are driven apart under the pressure of social stigma, and the narrator laments his lost love. In the disarming simplicity of the second poem that narrates the story of a betrayal (a young homosexual couple breaks up when one of the two deserts the other to follow a wealthy lover but then suddenly dies and the protagonist forgives him in a last gesture of mutual atonement) Seferis detects a sacrilegious sentimentality and sloppiness: how is it possible to convey in such simple, almost simplistic, verses the fatefulness of death and love?[7]

On his shabby coffin
beautiful, white flowers
with his beauty and
When at night he went-
something absolutely vital-
they used to go together:
that dismal black café,
he laid some flowers,
as they went so well
his two-and-twenty years.
he happened to have some business,
into the café where
a dagger in his heart,
where they used to go together.

(Cavafy, 2013)

[6]Apart from this tango, Seferis (2020) also mentions Eduardo Bianco's 1932 popular song, "Thelo mama mou enan androuli [Mum, I want a boyfriend]" (Mamá Yo Quiero un Novio, 1928), written by Paul Menestrel and sung by Stella Greka, a song that seems to cause him despair: "Why that night in Faliro were three phonographs at the beach playing 'I want my boyfriend'? Lord, why is your unsearchable Will so discomfortable at times?"; See also Seferis' correspondence with Katsimbalis in 1932 where he confesses his dissent from the culture of frivolous popular songs: "I wonder: why all this effort? I don't mean the success and the applause. What I'm trying to say is will there ever be a person who will find these concoctions, which can hardly be called songs, of any help?" (Stasinopoulou, 2000).

[7]It is worth mentioning that one of the harshest contemporary critics of Cavafy repeats the parallelism drown by Seferis and correlates Cavafy with the vulgar tangos using an equally ironing tone. See Koustourelis (2013, p. 33): "Just like on the stage of a variety show or a play of political satire, where the strictly political sketches give way to melodramatic confessions, frivolous songs or dance acts, Cavafy embellishes his parade of historical poems blending together completely dissonant tones. Bittersweet interludes, such as 'Kimon, son of Learchos'; laic romances, such as 'Beautiful, White Flowers as They Went So Well'; gasping rhymes whose ornamented caesuras remind us of tango figures."

The tango that Seferis is referring to here is one of Nikos Gounaris' hits from 1936, set to music by Gr. Konstantinidis and verses by D. Evangelidis.[8] And if we consider that the most widespread recipe for a successful tango of the day was the stable repetition of motifs and themes related to erotic betrayal, inglorious love or even a romantic death, perhaps then Seferis, the poet of the Strophe and the Cistern, the man who wanted to modernize Greek poetry by bringing it more in line with Anglo-Saxon modernism, was not at all mistaken to not endure the homoerotic suffering of the Alexandrian Cavafy; he was not at all mistaken to categorize it within the extensive compassion of Argentinian tango.

3. Cavafy and Tango

Cavafy was no longer living when Seferis made this derogatory parallel, and who knows whether this observation would've amused him or seemed untimely, or perhaps he would've taken it as comradely rebellion. For the Alexandrian who loved the candlelight and never owned a radio or telephone,[9] music was the opposite of silence. And, as he wrote in one of his youthful poems, "Impossible Things", "the loveliest music/is the one that cannot be played/", the music that is not cheapened by unworthy ears, but circulates in the blood like an imagination and a dream, just as Cavafian passions (Cavafy, 2013).

As we can see from both the poetic and prose texts, Cavafy's relationship with music was experiential to the least degree. Music appears at revelatory moments in his poetry, such as when Dionysus' troupe abandons Antonios with "exquisite music playing" (1910) or in the famous poem "Voices" (1904), etc.[10] Nevertheless, it is obvious that Cavafy does not belong to either of Barthes' categories, neither to those who listen or those who play music. However, as a true child of his era and class, he was surely able to form an opinion on musical performances that he accidentally attended in Alexandria or in his travels in Paris or London.[11] Introverted in a different way to Seferis, Cavafy never confronts the specter of his musical competence. This doesn't mean, though, that music left him unaf-

[8]See Koufou (2011: p. 136): "The song 'Kourastika na s' agapo [I am tired of loving you]' is a melody written in 3/4 time signature whose lyrics describe the emotional power of a tango: it's time for me to tell you/that you are going to lose me/it would be pointless to cry/a tango is enough to make you forget me. It was released in 1936, written by D. Evaggelidis, set in music by Gr. Konstantinidis, and sung first by Louiza Poselli".

[9]See Catraro (1970): "A good verse moved him far more than any music or painting. Anyway, he never went to concerts or art exhibitions, unless he was bound to attend by the sacrosanct obligations of friendship"; and Peridis (1944): "He was possessed, without a doubt, by an obsession with originality. There can be no other explanation as to why he removed from his home not only the phone and the radio but also electricity altogether. In its place he put candles and kerosene lamps. Their pallid light along with the bachelor's loneliness created a heavy atmosphere, where the memories of the youth drowsed off."

[10]X. A. Kokolis (1976) cites four mentions of the word "music" in the poems "Voices", "The God forsakes Antony", "In Alexandria, 31 B.C.", "Alexander Jannaeus, and Alexandra".

[11]See Grammenos (2019): "Cavafy must have been informed about many things: the myth of Loegrin, Wagner's life, in order to write a negative critique about the play of Puccini's Bohemes [sic], which he saw in a theater in Stadiou street in 1901." However, one could say that these two sole mentions of musicians or music plays corroborate the contrary: the fact that the poet's interest in music was limited, if not non-existent.

fected or unmoved. In one of his early autobiographical prose texts from 1889, he describes with disarming simplicity a summer evening on the shores of the Bosphorus:

> One summer evening, one of those frenetic nights in August when the heat is most felt when indoors, I decided to go to Kalinderi in order to breathe some fresh air […].
> Suddenly the silence was shattered. A large boat appeared sailing in the direction of Therapeia in which a group of people were singing. They sang beautifully. Not of course according to all standards of music—the simple peasants who were in the boat possessed no notion of the theories of the Conservatoires, nor did their ancestor the Thracian Orpheus who could enchant stones with his music. The song which interrupts—or should I say accompanies—the silence of the summer evening is one of the things I love best. This is natural music. It is the true music of the soul, I think, just as the frigid noise of the salon piano is the music for agitated nerves.
> Laugh if you wish, or shed a tear,
> all things in life are false,
> all lies, all shadows.
> If any single truth remains,
> it is the cold, barren soil
> to which all sorrows go, and all our joys.
> I felt a tremendous emotional reaction. I was expecting a cheerful song about youthful exploits, full of happiness and life, one of those valiant songs which the fertile and vibrant shores of the Bosphorus produce. Instead of this I heard in these simple and unpolished verses—the invention of some rural poet's Muse—a bitter lament about the vanity of all things, that most ancient complaint of suffering man, "all lies, all shadows"[12] (Cavafy, 2010).

Even in this note Cavafy restrains the more humane and perhaps least lofty element "that most ancient complaint of suffering man", his inability to resist his unknown fate, the frustration and omnipotence of death. One finds whatever resides inside and Cavafy, face to face so frequently with his own internal Cyclopses and Laistrygones, here overtly fashions his fundamental fear of decay, abandonment and time. Music is presented as truest and most authentic, not only because "simple peasants" sing it, but also because he faintly hears it unfolding in the background of the absolute summer silence.

3.1. Cavafy's Perception of Music

Yes, perhaps Seferis was right. Cavafy, as a Phanariot and fallen bourgeois,

[12]See also the poet's note (Cavafy, 2003): "A night on the Calinder is an old article which I have retouched. I am rather satisfied with its diction, over which I have taken many pains. I have tried to blend the spoken with the written language and have called to my help in the process of mixture all my experience and as much artistic insight, as I possess in the matter —trembling so to speak, over every word". Also, see Christianopoulos (2010).

makes a distinction for natural music and rejects "the frigid noise of the salon piano as the music for agitated nerves".[13] And to be sure, as a socialite in Alexandria, at least in his early youth, he must have breathed in the atmosphere and pleasure of the popular Greek music, which told of unfulfilled love and looked towards futile returns. Because this Cavafian mise en scène of ephemeral, dark desires sets in motion Cavafy's fundamental poetic mechanism: nostalgia and remembrance.

And what could suit the philosophy of tango better than nostalgia and remembrance? What more poetically effective tool to energize the popular, urban melancholy that laments as it wanders down dark alleys and poorly lit roads? How is this poetics of "the twilight" (crepuscule) to be defined,[14] as Seferis degradingly calls it, singling out as the most characteristic element of its technique an unconditional surrender to cheap stereotypes of the sun setting and love extinguishing?

From this point of view, Cavafy, who rejects ordinary love and displays his heroes against a backdrop of ill-reputed brothels and suspect taverns, certainly has something of the "commercialized erotic thematic of tango": is it his popular characters that move within an illegal universe? Is it his "poor materials" that bring to mind the poor rhythmic elements that discourage Seferis? In any case, it is a fact that the Cavafian love poems, "the small scenic episodes, the quick dramas that unfold in the miserable rooms of the same life" (Koutsourelis, 2013), can be included, without much effort and in rather bad faith, among the symptoms of tango-mania that afflicted Greece during the interwar period:

> Our composers felt this joy of tango and renewed their productive efforts along its familiar models. […] The smallest thing that they learned of, that happened either to themselves or to acquaintances and friends of theirs…was immediately transformed into tango. […] And woe to you if you happened to be within range of their activity in a tavern, dancing hall or cabaret and you opened your mouth to sigh or to say one of those words included in the repository of recipes for tango. Whatever you said would, after ten minutes at the most, be the title of a new, most delightful tango. As you know, there is a tried and true recipe for tango. One of the composers revealed it to me. And I quote it here for you because in all likelihood, you will need it at some point:
>
> You take the words: "heart-evening", "eyes-pieces", "I lost-I forgot", "I'm disgusted-I'm mad" (pairs which rhyme in Greek), and some others. You

[13]For additional information about psychological disorder caused by piano music, see also Episkopopoulos, 1989; Polichronakis, 2011.

[14]See Seferis' (2011) (Stasinopoulou, 2000) opinion: "Why is it that the twilight attracts certain poets more than any other time of the day? Certain poets who linger (literally). The dawn is far more tragic, but intense. I imagine this annoys them. At dusk there is a decomposition of sorts which simplifies. Nowadays, in Greece, this tendency is represented by the songwriters of tango (crepuscule) and those who seem and are indeed inferior to them, the authors.". The poet's opinion may be related with a successful tango of that period, titled "Crepusculo" ("To souroupo mou gelousan [At dusk a gleam in your eyes]") which was released in 1934, set to music by Eduardo Bianco and lyrics by Giannis Tsamados.

> put them next to each other in a line, as you please, mix well and after a few "whys", a few "lips" and just as many "I loves", you've got yourself a tango (Mamais, 2001).

If we exclude the more childish of the rhymes invented by the author of the *Free Press*, Cavafy, who "never found them, ever again—all so quickly lost…/the poetic eyes, the pallid/ face… in the gloaming of the street…" for his critics, appears to create his characters with the same cheap materials used in a popularist, melancholy tango (Cavafy, 2013). However, as Borges notes, tango is more than just that.

3.2. The Philosophy of Tango

Initially, a purely male affair, a dance of the common working classes, tango acquired a romantic reputation when one of the ill-reputed neighborhoods of Buenos Aires moved to Parisian salons. This is what Borges (2016) tells us in four lectures that he gave in 1965 and were published for the first time in Spanish in 2016 and in French in 2018. Insistently passing over the mythologized, "exotic" eroticism that determined the history of tango in Europe, Borges suggests a different, more ethnocentric typology. In this view, tango indeed came from the outlaw borders of cities and brothels, but it was articulated as an urban poem, which in its roots has something of the heroic character of epic, something of the bravery of simple people: "tango and the milonga are a direct expression of something that poets have often tried to state in words: the belief that a fight may be a celebration" (Borges, 1984; Salas, 2000; Loukos, 1998; Dimou, 2001).

Beyond Borges' love for the masculine game of violence, beyond the constant semiotics of love and death, we find a powerful poetic mode here that engages with the narrative of mortality and of the irreversibility of time. For the poet who has seen "boys who know another dance, the dance of knives, dancing over a yellow sunset" (Borges & Piazzola, 1965; Kokolis, 2008), tango is not just a "melancholy thought that can be put to dance" but the urgent movement of sudden danger, a fateful conflict, popular heroism that sees life as a round of death (Borges, 2018).[15]

And perhaps this round of death, with its passive lyricism, was not foreign to Cavafy. For the poet who systematically drew his material from the common, working class of bourgeois Alexandria, bloody conflicts in poorly lit alleys and the marginalized ranks of smalltime crooks with loose morals make up his fundamental narrative canvas (Veloudis, 1981). And if we could freely compare the atmosphere of the popular tangos that Borges mythologizes, we might say that Cavafy also shapes a world that lives and moves at the edges, outlaws by choice, like the compadres [the tough guys] who get into knife fights in the alleyways at

[15]Contrary to Borges, Sabato understands the melancholic tone of the tango through its most common setting, that of the brothel: "In the brothel […] the other's body is just an object and the contact with it, in and by itself, does not help in overcoming the limits of loneliness […]. This is one of the mechanisms that can explain the tango's sorrow, which is often combined with disappointment, rage, threat, and sarcasm" (Salas, 2000).

the port that the Argentinian poet refers to.

In this connection, aside from the "tango-ish" poems of the 154 poems of the canon that Seferis located, there is another category of erotic poems, primarily from Cavafy's last creative five-year period, which could be included in or at least aligned with, the classic thematic of tango.[16] These are the poems with heroic young men who break the laws, whether because they disregard the high morals of society, or because they fall in love with strange, dark places in the city. They get into fights and then separate forever. In these poems, as much as one discerns (as does the difficult Seferis) the feeling of a cheap melodrama, it is impossible not to identify the characters of the poetic narrative with the ideology of inverted and unconventional ethics.

In this way, in the poem "Item in the Paper" that Cavafy (2013, 1994) wrote in 1918, the themes of fighting, murder and coercion alternate with erotic remembrance and the motif of an irreversible separation. Undermining high lyricism and replacing it with a kind of poetry that is written with "the poor materials" of prose, Cavafy here paints a purely urban scene: on a tram, a man reads in the paper about the murder of a former lover of his.

A reference had been made, as well, to blackmail.
And here again the newspaper emphasized
its complete and utter contempt for depraved,
for disgraceful, for corrupted morals.
Contempt… And grieving inwardly he
recalled an evening from the year before
which they had spent together, in a room
that was half hotel, half brothel: afterward
they didn't meet again—not even in the street.
Contempt… And he recalled the sweet
lips, and the white, the exquisite,
the sublime flesh that he hadn't kissed enough.
Melancholy, on the tram, he read the item.
At eleven at night the corpse was found
on the jetty. It wasn't certain
that it was a crime. The newspaper
expressed its pity, but, as usual,
it displayed its complete contempt
for the depraved way of life of the victim.

Uncovering both spaces (as the tram journeys through the city) and time ("an evening from the year before") with evenly balanced motions, Cavafy places his

[16]According to Dimou (2001), "the main theme that dominates tango is love and everything that goes along with it: betrayal, deception, adultery, abandonment, repentance and apology […], hatred together with a thirst for vengeance. […] The neighborhood, the slums are also mentioned often and with them the tenement (usually inhabited by prostitutes), a window, the infamous houses —cabarets or brothels—the usual types of each neighbourhood, the 'compadrón' or 'compadrito', the wayward or miserable 'milonguita', etc".

hero in a fluid scene. The intensity of loss and despair is compounded over the course of the journey on the tram. The present mingles with the past, and the protagonist laments his lost lover, he honors the beloved body "that he hadn't kissed enough".

In this category of poems that deal with murders, crime and wounded heroes,[17] aside from the "Item in the Paper", we find the even bolder "Crime" (1927) and "Company of Four" (1930). In these, Cavafy invents a code of ethics for the absolution of crime precisely because this code promotes a kind of male solidarity that is founded on the "bond of pleasure".

The money that they make
now and then they fear
that they might go to jail.
has a power that
and make into something
certainly isn't honest:
that someone will get hurt,
But look, you see how love
can take their filthy money
gleaming, innocent.

(Cavafy, 2013)

It would perhaps be exaggerated to attempt to locate similarities between the Argentinian tangos of the compadritos and gauchos, recalled in Borges' memory, and Cavafy's incomplete poems.[18] Aside from the rhetoric of nostalgia and pervasive illicit eroticism, the urban landscape and the highly ritualized neighborhoods (brothels, cafes, taverns), there is something in the dramatization of erotic desire (and this is what Seferis detected), which is at its core "popular", i.e. of the people. And this popular expression, outside of all linguistic and cultural norms, automatically brings the function of poetic emotion to life, and reveals an experience to us that is not our own, and yet, paradoxically and even magically, it does belong to us.

This is what Oscar Wilde said of Chopin's music and what Borges paraphrases in one of his famous labyrinthine thoughts, referring to tango:

> I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears (Wilde, 2010).[19]

And so, just as tango for Borges alludes to an "imagined past that tragically gives us the impression that death finds us in a battle at the corner of the street",

[17]For more about these poems see Haas (2000) and Pieris (1998-1999).

[18]About Cavafy and Borges, apart from the essays of Nasos Vagenas, see also Aranitsis 1980 and Kefala 2006.

[19]See also Borges (1984): "We read in one of Oscar Wilde's conversations that music reveals to each of us a personal past which until then we were unaware of, moving us to lament misfortunes we never suffered and to feel guilt for acts we never committed. For myself, I confess that I cannot hear 'El Marne' or 'Don Juan' without remembering exactly an apocryphal past, at one and the same time stoic and orgiastic, in which I have thrown down the challenge and, in silence, met my end in an obscure knife fight. Perhaps this is the tango's mission: to give Argentines the conviction of having had a brave past, of having fulfilled the demands of bravery and honor."

in the same way, in Cavafy's poetry we find this sense of borrowed, and yet personal, despair over "the Alexandria that is vanishing" and the ideal voices that "sometimes speak to us in our dreams".

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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