Real and Imaginary History in Borges and Cavafy

JORGE LUIS BORGES and Constantine Cavafy are from major cities on the periphery of western letters—Buenos Aires and Alexandria. It is the periphery for us in Europe and America, and they, aware of their outsiders’ vantage, awaken us—for they are writing for the world and not only their own nationals—to the life of the Argentine and of Alexandria. But in addressing the world, they also sweep back through history, and through intrahistoria as Unamuno terms it,1 to the everyday weaknesses and glittering moral exempla of smaller monarchs, to Rio de la Plata outlaws, to deviates in taverns on the Nile. They follow adventurers into Byzantium and travel in the Greek satellite kingdoms of Hellenistic and Roman Greece, to the cities of India, to the terror and virile beauty of the frontier pampas, to Arabian Africa of the thousand tales. Though they manipulate their personages with constant sleight-of-hand, with irony, humor, and the most intricately balanced paradoxes, their historical figures have the same verisimilitude as the characters they place in modern suburbs of Buenos Aires or Alexandria. As solitary outsiders they use widespread historical and imaginary geographies to obliterate the dividing lines of past time and national boundaries.

Borges (1899-) and Cavafy (1863-1933) are poets, and Borges is also a short-story writer (though he is the first to dispute the difference

1 The Spanish philosopher, poet, and novelist Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) developed the notion of intrahistoria in a book of essays, En torno al castismo (Madrid, 1895). He contends that history (historia) deals with the superficial chronicles of great events. He is interested in the intrahistory (intrahistoria), which is the texture of culture defined by the people, by the history of everyday life and people.

between his ficiones and his poems). Cavafy’s poems are normally anecdotal stories which, as Auden writes, survive translation,2 for the tone, the tale, the gnomic barb remain sharp even in another tongue. While Borges and Cavafy are major, original stylists, their poems and stories can be summarized, paraphrased, and retold orally. This is characteristic of parable and myth. As if to elude rhetoric, they deliberately eschew great archetypal figures in the characters of their work. Or if the figure, at first glance, appears to be of great dimension we soon perceive their interest in the other side: the weaknesses that humanize the great and cause their downfall, the indecisions that make a character plausible, the vices that arouse pathos and rearrange conventional morality.

So Borges the librarian and Cavafy the clerk and antiquarian seek out underworld personalities, the gaucho bandit and clandestine homosexual. They deal with deposed heroes and flawed royalty, with King Demetrius of Macedonia (not Alexander the Great but his stepbrother) or with Ibn Hakkan al-Bolhari—former mighty king whose armies have been routed and who seeks protection in a labyrinth over the sea. “I prefer minor characters,” Borges writes.3 In both writers the aim of exploring personal memory, immediate ancestors, history or mythology, is to reach similar human equations: man is always man, great or low, real or mythical, Greek or Argentine, and victim of the same laws of love, treachery, and mortal time. Borges, profound and spoiling, likes to unfold, one by one, the contrasting layers of his creations, each negating and affirming the other. Cavafy leads his people into layers of history and similar traps, where failure is the sly companion of aspiration. Thus the young Nero is deceived by the Delphic Oracle when he is told to beware of the seventy-third year. He fatally believes it is his own and not that of Gallus, the rebel general drilling his army in Spain, “the old man in his seventy-third year.”4

Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863, then a highly cosmopolitan yet remote center of diverse cultures. There, as in Borges’ ruminations, Christian, Moslem, and Jew came together. In earlier Alexandrias, the port city was the background of pagan hedonism, stoicism, mystery

3 Richard Burgin, Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges (New York, 1970), p. 56. Borges writes “but really I prefer minor characters or if not, if I write about Spinoza or Emerson or about Shakespeare and Cervantes, they are major characters, but I write about them in a way in that makes them like characters out of books, rather than famous men.”
religions, of the Neoplatonism of Philo and Plotinus. The diverse Panhellenic world was bound together by the *Mousion*, an extraordinary library-university, which E. M. Forster describes as the great intellectual achievement of the dynasty. In the *Mousion* the calendar we use today was devised, and the astronomical findings of Ptolemy were codified. It is there we find Euclid on the one hand and texts of Alexandrian mysticism on the other; the first systematized literary, grammatical, and historical scholarship after Aristotle; and the Palatine Anthology—the largest single collection of Greek lyrics.

In the tradition of the *Mousion*, Cavafy found his intellectual formation. It is coincidental that Borges also schooled himself around a *mousion* by the river Plata. As he recalls in his "Autobiographical Essay," he read and wrote five hours a day for nine years in a branch of the municipal library where he worked; and later at the university he was able to order his erudition and lecture on "Swedenborg, Blake, the Persian and Chinese mystics, Buddhism, gauchesco poetry, Martin Buber, the Kabbalah, the Arabian Nights . . ." In their writing both authors go persistently to the immediate or far past to find masks and metaphors for modernity.

They do not, however, use the past to remove us from the present but rather to remove us from illusory perspectives which cause us to distinguish past and present. As we shall see, Cavafy’s world meanders along the Mediterranean into Asia Minor and to India, from Homer, Zeno, and Plotinus (also friends to Borges) to late Byzantine emperors, desert barbarians, and to immediate memories of friendships and events of twenty or thirty years earlier.

Cavafy’s native tongue was Greek, and he wrote in demotic Greek (*dimotiki*), skillfully inserting strands of ancient and purist Greek (*katharevousa*) where it suited his purpose. He loved the Greek language, it was for him one of the triumphs of Greek civilization, and as Peter Bien has pointed out, "he saw the Greek language, from ancient to modern times, as one diverse but unified entity full of riches for the poet, and he refused to accept the arbitrary exaltation of one period or style as an inflexible standard."8

Here he differs from Borges, who wrote "a foreigner’s French," and English with "eighteenth-century mannerisms." He writes, "I have to cope with Spanish and so am only too aware of its shortcomings" (*Aleph*, p. 217). It was, he reveals, his "unavoidable destiny." On the other hand, he says, "English is a language I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright" (*Aleph*, p. 258). So Borges, with perhaps more nostalgia than irony, feels alien even to the Spanish language that he makes splendid and intricately lucid.

Indeed, no other writer—with the possible exception of Kafka in German—manages, with relentless logic, to turn language upon itself, to reverse himself time after time within a sentence or paragraph, and effortlessly, as it were, come upon surprising yet inevitable conclusions. Unlike Cavafy, who went to earlier periods of his language to give rich complexity to a poem, Borges stretches the syntactic shape of Spanish to give a poem or story intricate, honeycombed layers of meaning.

Though their means are different, the linguistic effects are related: in each case, to the normal language is added another stylistic strand expressing the author’s extreme, idiosyncratic originality. A new literary language is invented. Cavafy creates his from historical Greek tongues, Borges from the languages and literatures of Western Europe with which he is deeply involved. Borges consciously infuses the Spanish language with stylistic and thematic qualities of English authors in particular, those whom he records as having become his "habits": Chesterton, Hawthorne, Conrad, Kipling, and Lane’s *Arabian Nights*.

This involvement in foreign languages both authors have in common to an unusual degree, even in the chronology of their education. At an early age, Cavafy and Borges left their native countries and went with their families to Europe. At fourteen Borges went to Geneva, and five years later to Spain. At nine Cavafy went to England where he remained for seven years. He was so familiar with the English language that he is reported to have spoken Greek "with a slight British accent until the day he died."9 Both men returned to their native cities in their twenty-second year, with the main languages and literatures of Western Europe in their permanent possession. Borges became highly skilled in Latin—and Anglo-Saxon, which he later taught; Cavafy, of course, in ancient Greek. But here too their geographical and historical areas overlap. In each case the people of the Greco-Roman world, particularly the minor figures, command their major interest. By their intimate treatment of the minor and the flawed, they humanize the past, removing it from the normal rhetoric and abstraction of chronicle and history. Above all, they intentionally confuse past and present in order to bring everything into the light of one time spectrum.

Cavafy is the first major writer of our century to re-create a historical

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past and use this as an instrument for revealing modern man. It was E. M. Forster who spread the word in England immediately after World War I. He gave the insider’s news, as it were, to a coterie of the enlightened. Forster introduced Cavafy’s work to Eliot, Toynbee, and Lawrence, among others. And not the least affected was himself. 

There has been much speculation about the extent to which Pound and Eliot were indebted to Cavafy for their own ventures into antiquity, the Middle Ages, and exotica. They had the foreign-language knowledge of earlier literatures and were prepared to alter the tradition of poetry in English by going to new sources in the past. Cavafy provided an example. And among the ways that Eliot and Pound radically changed poetry in English was the re-creation of ancient personae from the Mediterranean basin.

In discerning affinities between Cavafy and Eliot and Pound, however, we should also note the very different ways they used the past. Cavafy was a Greek exploring what he considered a unified Greek world, incorrectly fragmented by the shadows of ignorance that time has placed over and between historical periods. By contrast, Pound and Eliot were foreigners discovering remote periods, which they believed should become part of a new awareness of the past. Yet even with Eliot’s austere clarity and Pound’s vigorous chitchat in foreign tongues, their exploration of history and myth is basically a product of literature and the then current ventures into anthropology and myth by Sir J. G. Frazer and Jessie L. Weston. The American poets borrow dashes of color, make a Provençal prince curse or Dante walk the fire-watch rounds in wartime London. Together in The Waste Land—Eliot as creator and Pound as editor and il miglior fabbro—they construct an anthology of the past, which, from Sappho’s fisherman to the drowning Phoenician sailor, provides an ancient screen against which everything in the wasteland of modern life takes place.

In reality, Eliot and Pound re-create a past to show us that there was a past, to contrast ages, but not to make the past present—and this despite Eliot’s frequent meditations on time past and present or Pound’s lively depiction of Chinese, Ancient Greek, and Anglo-Saxon figures. The time gap is not obliterated but emphasized through eroticism. This is not a defect in Eliot and Pound; simply another approach.

By contrast Borges the portentoso (from Buenos Aires) and Cavafy the Alexandrian are participants in their time-worlds, in their two pasts: the personal and the historicistic-mythic. Again and again Borges states that he, as author, must not move away from his characters. Cervantes, he writes, could finish Don Quijote because in the end he became Don Quijote. This does not mean that an author’s duty is to write autobiography in a poem or fiction. But it does demand that the author participate in some way in the personae he creates, that they become an extension of some multiple vision we associate with the author—that is, not the biographical author but the author’s cumulative personality in the created work.

So Cavafy projects his own dilemma of personal hedonic sensuality and a doctrine of social temperance into the conflicts of Ianthis, a Jewish athlete and artist of Alexandria of the first century A.D. This is the Alexandria that earlier had produced the Septuagint, the first translation of the Old Testament into Greek for the benefit of the Alexandrian Jews, who had largely forgotten how to read the original Hebrew Scriptures. The poem “Of the Jews (A.D. 50)” is a clear metaphor for Cavafy’s homosexuality and a disapproving society and the resolution he found in yielding completely to sensuality.

TON EBAION (30 M.X.)

Ζωγήφος καὶ ποιητής, δρομός καὶ διασκόρπος,
αὐτὸν Ἐβαίον Ἐβραῖον, ὁ Ἰάνθις Ἀρταμιών.
Ἄπο αἰσθήσεων τίθεν τὴν Ἐβαίονος.

"Η τιμιότερης μου μέρας εἶναι ἐκείνη
pó τὴν αἰσθητὴν ἀνάχαιτην ἄριστη,
pó ἐγκατάλειπτον τὸν ὀρᾶμα καὶ σκληρὸν ἐλληνικὸ,
μὲ τὴν καβαλήρα προσέλθω
αἱ τέλεια καμαρέων καὶ ἐφορά ἄφαρα μέλη.
Καὶ γένομαι αὐτὸς νοῦ τό ἡτοι
πάντα νὰ μένω τῶν Ἐβραίων, τῶν ἱερῶν Ἐβραίων, ὁ ὀλὸς;"

"Ενθριμμέ Δῆλος ἡ δῆλος του. ού Πάντα
νὰ μένω τῶν Ἐβαίων, τῶν ἱερῶν Ἐβαίων —"

"Ομοίω δὲν ἔμενε τοιούτος διάδοχος.
Ω Ἰάνθις τῆς Αλεξανδρίας
δρομοπότεν τοὺς παῖδις τῶν ἱερῶν."

(CP, p. 184)
Comparative Literature

(Painter and poet, runner and discus thrower, beautiful as Endymion: Ianthis, son of Antony, From a family close to the synagogue.

"My noblest days are those when I give up the search for sensation, when I desert the bright and stark Hellenism, with its masterly fixation on perfectly shaped and perishable white limbs. And become the man I would always want to be: a son of the Jews, of the holy Jews."

His declaration was very fiery. "Be always of the Jews, the holy Jews."

But he didn't stay that way at all. The Hedonism and the Art of Alexandria possessed him as their child.)

Cavafy's homosexuality, which is treated in another essay, is to the poems of Cavafy what violence, brutality, and bravery are to Borges. In each case an elemental obsession of the author is developed in the writing. Borges confesses that because he is not personally brave, he values what he misses. Normally asexual in mood, Borges reveals the sexuality of violence in his repeated interest in knives and stabbing:

"To me there is a real intimacy in the knife; in fact, in one of my poems, the last line runs: 'and across my throat the intimate knife.' Firearms, of course stand for marksmanship rather than courage. Fistfighting seems both harmless and undignified to an Argentine, while knife dueling has what Dr. Johnson said of the lives of sailors and seamen—"the dignity of danger" (Aleph, p. 281). When Borges deals with violence, he normally places his characters in a time frame some twenty or thirty years earlier. The event falls within his memory, and even though it may be pure invention, it is presented as part of the speaker's personal history. Cavafy's love poems are also drawn from personal history, although, as we see in the analogical treatment of Ianthis in "Of the Jews (A.D. 50)," Cavafy also likes to project his passions into ancient figures.

Cavafy's practice of re-creating ancient history indistinguishable from the present is characteristic of modern Greek authors. We find it in Angelos Sikelianos' poems and poetic dramas, in Odysseus Elytis' Sun the First and Yannis Ritsos' Romiosyni. The late George Seferis in Mythistorina creates an Odysseus who is a Greek of all times, whether on an ancient trireme or a modern caïque braving dangerous winter waters between islands of the Dodekanese. Nikos Kazantzakis' epic poem The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel continues the voyages of Odysseus after his return to Ithaka.

When we consider Joyce's use of the same Homeric story in Ulysses, despite the intricately structured ties with each book of the Homeric poem it is clear that Bloom and Molly are Dubliners and have nothing to do with their Aegean counterparts. Joyce uses backdrops of the past to manipulate events and personages in the present, as Stuart Gilbert has pointed out in elaborate detail. But The Odyssey in Joyce is basically a few stage props for moving characters around Irish streets and giving linguistic fun and puns to their lips. His use of a Greek past is at the other extreme from Cavafy and Borges, for nothing specifically Greek comes through or is intended to. The past is not made present, for there is scarcely an awareness of past in Ulysses. Joyce's focus is elsewhere: on archetypal patterns and mythic implications in man's actions—no matter how routine and even trivial they may be. So Bloom's quest and return are not an imitation, or even distortion, of Ulysses' ancient voyage home. Rather, Bloom and Ulysses both point to a universal, timeless condition: man wandering, blundering, driven along an uncertain destiny to his home.

When Cavafy and Borges treat Homeric legend, their lines intersect and depart. We may compare Borges' "The Maker" and Cavafy's poem "Ithaka," Both are key works.

Borges moves his central figure, in this instance Homer, about in time, transforming his character. At one moment Homer is Odysseus and then, as Borges notes in the commentaries to The Aleph and Other Stories, Homer the Maker becomes Borges the creator, losing his sight and thereby gaining new memories of the past and the means to make new myths. In the first part of the story, the Maker is Odysseus. In lines that remarkably resemble Cavafy's Odysseus, Borges speaks of a young adventurous Odysseus: "Eager, curious, unquestioning, following no other law than to enjoy things and forget them, he wandered over many lands and, on one side or the other of the sea, looked on the cities of men and their palaces. In bustling marketplaces or at the foot of a mountain whose hidden peak may have sheltered satyrs, he had heard entangled stories, which he accepted as he accepted reality, without attempting to find out whether they were true or imaginary" (Aleph, pp. 155-56). But then as he ages, Odysseus becomes Homer—or Borges moving into "the slow twilight" of blindness—and the beautiful world begins to leave him, the night loses its multitude of stars, the ground becomes uncertain under his feet. His blindness is erected about him gradually like the walls in Cavafy's poem "Walls." The builders—


like the builders in Kafka's parable—construct the walls unknown to the speaker.

"Αλλά δὲν δικαιο ὅτε κρότον κινήσει ἡ ἡμέρα
"Ἀναπαράγει μή τελέσαι ἀπὸ τὸν κόλπον ξοῦ.

(CP, p. 2)

(But I never heard the sound of the builders.
Imperceptibly they shut me out of the world.)

There is a conspiracy of seclusion. And when the speaker recognizes that he is going blind, he shouts, unashamed. Mixing humor, irony, pathos, Borges writes: "he cried out; stoic fortitude had not yet been invented, and Hector could flee from Achilles without dishonor."

But then the aging, contemplative, resigned Homer-Borges emerges. For blindness endows him with memory of history and mythical geographies.

I shall no longer look upon the sky and its mythological dread (he felt), nor this face which the years will transform. Days and nights passed over these fears of his body, but one morning he awoke, looked (without astonishment now) at the dim things around him, and unexplainably felt—the way one recognizes a strain of music or a voice—that all this had already happened to him and that he had faced it with fear, but also with joy, hope, and curiosity. Then he went deep into his past, which seemed to him bottomless, and managed to draw out of that dizzying descent the lost memory that now shone like a coin under the rain, maybe because he had never recalled it before except in some dream. [Alep, p. 156]

Borges' fable ends with a recognition that his voyage takes him to love and danger, Aphrodite and Ares. Black ships roam the seas in search of a loved island—but the gods will not save shrines or ships. It is his destiny to sing of them for man's hollow memory. But as for the end, Borges says we are ignorant. "These things we know, but not what he felt when he went down into his final darkness" (Alep, p. 157).

Yet elsewhere Borges does respond to the enigmas of blindness, age, and death. In the commentary to "The Maker," he says: "Eleven years after writing 'The Maker,' I seem to have recast my fable—without being aware of it—into a more narrowly autobiographical poem called 'In Praise of Darkness.'"

In "In Praise of Darkness," "Elogio de la sombra," Borges reconciles himself to old age and darkness. Old age, la vejez, "the name others give it," may be the time of happiness, he writes, for the animal is or is almost dead. Man and the soul remain.

Siempre en mi vida fueron demasiadas las cosas;
Demócrito de Abdera se arrancó los ojos para pensar;
etiempo ha sido mi Demócrito.
Esta penumbra es lenta y no duele;

Stay por un mano decline
y a parece a la eternidad.13

(There were always too many things in my life;
Demócrito of Abdera tore out his eyes in order to think;
time has been my Democritus.
it flows down a mild slope
and looks like eternity.)

Now darkness has mitigated time, and though his friends now do not have faces and books do not have letters, the darkness has restored memory, that is, the essential memory. Women are now what they were and the few things worth reading from the past he keeps rereading in his memory. Finally, he can forget everything. All the echoes, the real words, the words, the love, the things. "I arrive at my center," he writes, "to my algebra and my key, / to my mirror . . . Soon I will know who I am."14 In darkness is self-knowledge. He wants what is the sin of Adam, Oedipus, of every rebel, peaceful or in wrath: to know oneself. It is clear that the voyage of Odisseus, the arrival naked and blind at the dark island before death, is a voyage toward wisdom, peace, to the self-acceptance and knowledge that Borges seeks. In a word Borges has entered into his solitude. He remembers some gold coins—but in his fables and conversations, he is content to be alone, to be alive in himself. He writes:

But no, I can be alone for quite a long time, I don't mind long railroad journeys, I don't mind being alone in a hotel or walking down the street, because, well, I won't say that I am thinking all the time because that would be bragging.

I think I am able to live with a lack of occupation. I don't have to be talking to people or doing things. If somebody had gone out, and I had come here and found the house empty, then I would have been quite content to sit down and let two or three hours pass and go out for a short walk, but I wouldn't feel especially unhappy or lonely. That happens to all people who go blind . . .

I could or I might not be thinking about anything. I'd just be living on, no? Letting time flow or perhaps looking back on memories or walking across a bridge and trying to remember favorite passages, but maybe I wouldn't be doing anything. I'd just be living.15

When Cavafy uses the Homeric myth, as in the poem "Ithaka," we see the spirit of the young Cavafy. And like Borges' "The Maker," the poem is clearly a parable. It tells the reader how to make his life—how Cavafy, identifying with Odisseus, can recall adventure and sensual experience. He uses legend, rather than history, but a legend so deeply part of the Greek mind that the two categories merge. To the Greek, Odisseus and Alexander are hardly of opposing categories of imagina-
tion and history. Rather, they lean on each other for completeness as Noah and Moses do in the Bible. For cultural purposes, for the Greek self-image, as it were, history and legend complete and reinforce each other, and each new archeological find—from the labyrinth at Knossos to the bull-horn mountains overlooking Delphi and Nestor’s Palace—points to the interdependence of history and myth.

**ΙΘΑΚΗ**

Σά βρες στον παγκόσμιο για την ίδια, να είχες νάνα μακρός ο δρόμος, γεμάτος περιπέτειας, γεμάτος γιόγισες. Τόυς Λαιτρυγανάς και τόυς Κύκλωπας, τόν θυμωμένο Ποσειδώνα μη φοβάσαι, τέτοιο στον δρόμο σου τούτου σου δέν θα βρείς, αν μεν’ ή σκέψεις σου άρηλη, αν εκείνη αυταφάνης το πεύκα και τό σάμα σου διέλθει. Τόυς Λαιτρυγανάς και τόυς Κύκλωπας, τόν άγριο Ποσειδώνα δέν θα συναντήσεις, αν δέν τούς καθιστής μή στίχνα ψυχή σου, αν ή ψυχή σου δέν τούς στίχεις έμπρός σου.

Να είχες νάνα μακρός ο δρόμος. Πολλά τα κολοκαριά πρωί τα είναι πού με τι εχθρόνεται, με τι χειρά θα μπάινας σε λίμνας πρωτεουδομένως; να σταματήσεις σ’ εμπορικά Φοινικακά, και τις καλές πραγματέας θ’ αποκοιμήσεις, σεντίρα και κοράλλια, κεραμιδία κ’ έμνα, και ήδονα μαραθικά κάθα λογίς, δια μπερμά πιο δόξα ήδονα μαραθικά σε πόλεις Αιγυπτιακές πολλά σε νές, να μάθεις και να μάθεις αν τούς σπουδιαρμόσ.

Πάντα στον νόση σου νάχει την ίδια. Το φθάσαν έκει εάν’ ο προηγμένος σου. ‘´Αλλα μή βιώσει το ταξίδι άπολοι. Καλλίτερα χρόνα πολλά να διακόπτεις και γέρος πία ν’ αρέσει στο νυφής, και φρόνεις μή δα κέρδισης στον δρόμο, μή προσδοκώντας πλούτι να σ’ δώσει ή ίδια.

‘Η ίδια σε έδωσε τ’ αρχή ταξιδίων. Χορές σώλος δέν δέν σέβονται στον δρόμο. ‘´Αλλα δέν έχει να σ’ δώσει πιά.

Κι αν πυρηνικά τεν βρέχεις, ή ίδια σέν σε γέλασε. ‘Ετις σοφοί πού έγνως, μή τόσο πετρά, ήδη θα το κατάλαβες ή ίδια σέ να μασούν.

(ΓΡ, pp. 66, 68)

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(As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laiistrongians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
you’ll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laiistrongians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensuous perfumes of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you’re old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithaka mean.)

When Odysseyseus reaches the island of Ithaka, the island is poor. Yet it has not cheated him. With his experience, with his wisdom, he knows what Ithaka means. It is his past. The island gave Odysseus a memory and the voyage to Phoenician markets, Egyptian cities, sensual perfumes and fine things, summer mornings on the wild seas. As for the dangers, the Laiistrongians, Cyclops, wild Poseidon will not harm him if his spirit is elevated, if he himself does not create these dangers in his soul. For Cavafy the poem is unusually optimistic. Odysseus is near the end of his life. He has been rewarded both with the eventful voyage itself

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and the knowledge and memory of the voyage. In other poems—the majority—the past looms as both rich and painful; for while Cavafy obscures distinctions of past and present by going back in time—in his room, alone, drunk with a memory of that past—there is in the return an implicit act of desperation. For the need to relive an earlier experience suggests that the present is less rich than it should be, that future time is nothing—in effect, that the thread of hope, which requires a notion of futurity, is missing. Loss haunts him. The excellent poem “The Afternoon Sun” speaks of the room of love as now an office for agents, tradesmen, and companies. That experience, preserved for the present in a poem, ended when at

... Ἀνάγνωσμα ὡς τέσσερα, εἴμης χαροθέε
γιὰ μιὰ ἑδομάδα μόνο... Αλλιπώνον,
ἢ ἔδεισε ἢ φοίνη ἢ γενεάντοις.

<CP, p. 180>

... Four o'clock in the afternoon we separated
for a week only... And then—
the week became forever.

Joy and despair pervade the poems: joy and ecstasy identified with a recollection of a sensual love experience in the past; despair tinged everything as historical figures are revealed as victims of their own weakness, futilely driven to acting out their roles. Despair is most decisively apparent when the action is focused on a recognition of a present with future impossibilities, with a future blackened by unredeemed death. In the famous poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (CP, p. 30), the theme of despair or hopelessness is considered with allegorical humor. The barbarians are coming. We will change our lives, we will prepare, we will practice our speeches and put on our best robes. But then word comes that the barbarians are not coming, that indeed there are no more barbarians. We can do nothing now, he writes. They were some kind of solution. Elsewhere Cavafy looks for light and then turns away. He is distressed by the impotence and weakness of age and what further light may reveal to him. Even in an early poem like “The Windows,” a note of pessimism, remarkably like a Kafkan parable, is already there:

ΤΑ ΠΑΡΑΘΥΡΑ

Σ’ αυτές τές σκοτεινές κάμερες, πού περιτ
μέρας βραδινό, ές φάκα κόκοτ εργασιών
γιὰ νά βρει τά παράθυρα. — Όταν άνοιξε
ένα παράθυρο οὕτω παραγόμενο. —
Μά τά παράθυρα δεν βρίσκοισαι, ἢ δὲν μποροῦ
νά τάβημαι. Καί καλλίτερα Ισούς νά μην τά βρεῖ.
Ἰσούς τά ρύθμα οὕτω μην τά τυπάναι. Ποιός ξέρει τί κανονίσμα θά πράγματα θά δείξει.

<CP, p. 24>

In these dark rooms where I spend
depressing days, I pace about in circles
looking for the windows. When a window
is opened it will be a consolation.
But the windows don’t appear, or I can’t
find them. And maybe it’s better not to find them.
The light may be a new tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will show . . .

Or again, in “The City,” Cavafy declares that when you have destroyed your life in one city, you must have no hope of going elsewhere to begin again. You will always arrive back in this same city.

Γιὰ τά άλλα — μή μπάκεις—
δεν έγιν πλοίο γιὰ σέ, δεν έγιν εδώ.
"Ετσι ποι τά ζώα σου μπάκες εδώ
στόν κόσμο τούτον τά μικρά, σ’ ολην τήν γη τήν κόλπα.

<CP, p. 50>

(Don’t hope for any other—
There is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you have destroyed your life here
in this small corner, you’ve ruined it in the whole world.)

Both authors use earlier geographies and times to present their story. I have indicated that in Cavafy, myth and history come together. And this is central to Cavafy’s historical preoccupation. In Borges myth and history also come together, but the attitude toward the re-created reality is more complex. Both authors invent “historical” realities. Cavafy tells us of the intrahistoria of Seleucid monarchs as seen by a peddler, of happenings in the suburbs of ancient Antioch. Borges gives us the details of the ancient Babylonian lottery, the enigmas and danger of this ancient passion for gambling. But in Borges we have an element of dream, of phantasmagoria, of hoax. Borges likes to invent a reality, make it extravagantly unlikely, and then, detail by detail, impress us with its truthfulness. He will even insert names of personal friends, such as Rodriguez Monegal, a Uruguayan companion,17 until the imaginary is tantalizing, immediate. As Barrenechea points out,18 Borges’ unreality is as real as his reality, and these two sides of his vision reinforce, rather than exclude, each other. Borges writes: “My feeling is that first sentences should be long in order to tear the reader out of his everyday life and firmly lodge him in an imaginary world. If an illustrious example

17 Rodriguez Monegal has written, among other books, a volume on the work of Borges, Borges, par lui-même (Paris, 1970).
be allowed me, Cervantes apparently felt the same way when he began his famous novel.10

Yet as soon as he has established the imaginary world he uses every resource to prove that the imaginary world is real. He wishes, as did Quijote, to make Sancho also believe fantasy. What he accomplishes by fusing real and imaginary worlds is to give us both as one, as he gives us past and present time as one. The real is shadows, the other dream. By exalting the imagination he also questions assumptions of everyday reality.

V. S. Pritchett comes upon a remarkable literary source for the background of the dream element in Borges’s Calderón de la Barca.20 Calderón’s La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream) is to big a topic to be dealt with here. Yet natural affinities—such as this or an obvious one with Chuang Tzu’s dreamer who thought he was a butterfly21—may mean more than direct influence, than what René Wellek calls the “foreign trade” of exported literary influence. And we may circle back to Cavafy through these same elements of dream, uncertainty, and the Alexandria of multiple beliefs and disbeliefs (so much like our own day), in a poem by the late Alexandrian pagan Palladas, who witnessed antiquity being destroyed by the new Christian zealots:

Δρα μη θανόντας το δεικτα ξύμω μένον,
Ελληνες ανθρώ, συμβολάς πεπολτικόντας
ανάρω εκλείποντα νομις τ’ ελλα
ντ’ ξύμω μείζον τ’ θεώ τεθνήκοντα.22

(Is it true that we Greeks are really dead
and only seem alive—in our fallen state
where we imagine that life is a dream?
Or are we truly alive and is life dead?)

No writer in the Palatine Anthology, from which these lines come, is closer to Cavafy than Palladas, the fourth-century poet from Alexandria. Cavafy recalls Palladas because of the common despair of a “fallen state,” because of the evocation, in a few words, of the demise of a long

historical period, and of the ultimate confusion and uncertainty that lead one to confuse dream with life, life with death.

Finally, Cavafy and Borges come together philosophically and in their attitudes to a past, to fame, to courage, to death, in Cavafy’s poem “The God Abandons Antony.”

ΑΠΟΛΕΙΠΕΙΝ Ο ΘΕΟΣ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΟΝ
Εάν ξαφνικα, άρα μεγάλητε, άκουσθι
άδρατος θάνατος τά περιπέ
με μονακτικῆς ξύμων, με φωτείς—
τον τόπον σου πον έκλεισε πάντα, το έρημο σου
ποι άπεξιναι, το σχόλια του τόυς σου
ποι βράζον δε λαλείς, με δοξαλές οργής.
Εάν έτοιμος αύ καιρό, αύ διαρροί
διασχέσει την, την Αλεξάνδρα ποι φέμε.
Πρό πάντων μή γελάσατες, μή πες ποις ήθαν
έναν έναρ, μή διαπερθήκαν η άκοι σου
μάχες ηλιάτης τέτοιος μή καταδείκθη.
Εάν έτοιμος αύ καιρό, αύ διαρροί
ον ποί ταίριζε σε ποι άκληθοις μη τέτοιο πόλη,
πλησίασα εσηπρές τού παράνοο,
κι διαπερημένης μή συγκέντρως, άλλ’ έξη
μή τού τοπίο το παρακάλεσα
κι αποκεφαλία την, την Αλεξάνδρα ποι φέμε.

(ΑΠ, p. 60)

(When suddenly at midnight you hear
an invisible troupe going by
with exquisite music, voices—
don’t mourn your luck that is slipping away, your work
gone wrong, the plans for your life
that have all proved to be illusions.
As if long prepared, as if full of courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria who is leaving.
Above all, don’t fool yourself, don’t say it was
a dream, that your ears deceived you.
Don’t stoop to such empty hopes.
As if long prepared, as if full of courage,
as is right for you who are worthy of such a city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with emotion, but not
with the pleas and whining of a coward,
hear the voices—your last pleasure—
the exquisite instruments of that secret troupe,
and say goodbye to her, the Alexandria you are losing.)

Here is the evocation of a great figure, Antony. Yet in keeping with
the practice of Borges and Cavafy to seek man’s frailty, the humanity

10 Burkin, p. 121.
21 See Arthur Waley, Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China (New York, 1939), p. 32. The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu lived in the third century B.C.
In a parable about death he wrote: “Once Chuang Chou dreamt that he was a butterfly.
He did not know that he had ever been anything but a butterfly and was content
to hover from flower to flower. Suddenly he woke and found to his astonishment
that he was Chuang Chou. But it was hard to be sure whether he really was
Chou and had only dreamt that he was a butterfly, or was really a butterfly, and
was only dreaming that he was Chou.”
22 Greek Anthology, X, 82.
that makes a historical personage credible, Antony is depicted as one who now must no longer fool himself with empty hopes. His courage—and courage and cowardice are the breath of half of Borges' writing—lies in listening to the music of Alexandria, in acknowledging the Alexandria he is losing, in accepting stoically the death which will confirm the reality of earlier failure.

Borges treats the matter of the heroic figure, made life-size as he confronts impending death, in "Poema conjectural," "Conjectural Poem." The poem concerns Francisco Laprida (1786–1829) the leader of a division of forces in Argentina, who was killed defending himself while trying to escape from a trap of gauchos under the enemy caudillo Jose Felix Aldao. It is not Caesar attacking, and yet it is.

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Yo que anhelé ser otro, ser un hombre
de sentencias, de libros, de dictámenes,
a cielo abierto yaceré entre cíneas,
pero me endosa el pecho inexplicable
un júbilo secreto. Al fin me encuentro
con mi destino sudamericano.
A esta ruínos tardes me llevaba
el laberinto múltiple de pasos
que mis días tejieron desde un día
de la niñez. Al fin he descubierto
la recóndita clave de mis años,
las uertas de Francisco de Laprida,
la letra que faltaba, la perfecta
forma que supo Dios desde el principio.
En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo
mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo
se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea. 23

(I who longed to be someone else, a man of judgments, of books, of decrees, will lie outside between the swamps; but a secret joy somehow swells my chest. At last I face my South American destiny. I was led to this ruinous afternoon by an intricate labyrinth of steps that my days wove from the day of my childhood. At last I've discovered the recondite key of my years, the fate of Francisco de Laprida, the missing letter, the perfect form that God knew from the beginning. In this night's mirror I reach my unsuspected true face. The circle's about to close. I wait to let it be.)

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24 Dalven, p. 216.
communication. And though blind, he looked intently at you, almost through you. Yet it was also apparent, perhaps characteristic of one who can visually perceive only shadows and a bit of light through the surrounding circle of darkness, that he kept his head tilted to one side.

The second incident concerns Cavafy. A few years ago the set designer Andreas Nomikos, from Alexandria, spoke to me about Cavafy. As a child he saw Cavafy a number of times. His father was an intimate friend of the poet. The day before Cavafy died, Nomikos’ father visited the poet in the Greek hospital in Alexandria. He beckoned the elder Nomikos to his bed. Then with a pencil he slowly drew a large full circle on a napkin. The Plotinian circle was complete.

These anecdotes, about authors of moral anecdotes, concern an angle of vision and the circle. Maybe they will help us in dealing with the last subject, the life of their work.

I have noted that Cavafy and Borges “make” historical and imagina- tive geographies to recall personal and public history. In the cumulative personae of their work, they work out the complexity of their obsessions; and in evoking immediate past, distant past, history, myth, and dream as one single present reality, they unify time.

Both authors accept with resignation, however, the temporal and spatial limitations of man. They use all their devices to outwit divisive time and geography. Cavafy lives to the end exploiting personal and historical memory of real and imaginary events; he lessens the despair of the voyage because of his involvement in the fictions he creates, in short, through his poems, which he would not publish during his life. Borges is resigned in a more whimsical and philosophical way. He so thoroughly describes his introspective meditations on death that a certain objectivity and distance prevail. To be sure, it is art, the poem or the story, that has allowed him temporary mastery of his life. He can view with more equanimity the dénouement of an illusionary existence.

Yet even equanimity before death is a paradox, for Borges is not one-sided, and while at one moment he comes to terms with death, at another, the epiphany of darkness is one of terror and humiliation before illusion. The narrator in the last lines of “The Circular Ruins” says, when death finally comes to end his dream, “in terror, in humiliation, he understood that he, too, was an appearance, that someone else was dreaming him.” Borges steps back again behind another mirror—of the artist. Borges of “Borges and I” is not one biological man but all the scribbles he has put on paper or the words he has dictated all his life.

While alive, the poets work through memory and history. In them the past is alive, redeemed, operating in the present. But the ultimate redemption of the past is in their writing. Cavafy published only a handful of poems, early in life, and then, year by year, scrupulously, pre-