

## Cavafy's Timelessness Through the Motive of Reminiscence-Loneliness

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**Abstract:** We chose the poems “Since nine o’clock” by K. P. Cavafy and “The sun encircled the thousand minarets...” by Theofanis. L. Panagiotopoulos (from the poetry collection “Black Nobel”, published by Odos Panos editions, April 2019); our aim is to highlight the timelessness of reminiscence-loneliness through the poetic work of a classic and a modern creator. The two poems will be examined, according to the principle of intertextuality, both in terms of style and thematology. Emphasis will be placed on the time that passes, on loneliness and its expression through images, on the elements of latent eroticism and on the dimension between fantasy and reality. Worksheets and photocopies of the two poems will be used as supervisory tools. The two poems will be analyzed by highlighting images and key phrases. The influence of K. P. Cavafy on the style of Theofanis L. (T. L.) Panagiotopoulos will also be discussed, concluding with the demonstration of continuity through time.

**Key words:** time, reminiscence, Cavafy, loneliness, Panagiotopoulos

### 1. Introduction

K.P. Cavafy has been timeless both in his ideas and his style. According to E.P. Papanoutsos:

“No poet of our time has grasped the dramatic essence of life, its tragic and comic dimension, with such immediacy and fearlessness, as Cavafy. No-one exposes it to us with such sharpness, as crude and therefore as shocking as he does” (Papanoutsos, 1971, p. 219).

His influence on contemporary creators is remarkable. It can be used in school teaching, by means of “intertextual reading and interpretation: a parallel approach of two texts in order to demonstrate first the relationship between them and then to interpret it” (Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2007, OEDB).

Specifically, a “web of texts” is created (K. P. Cavafy: “Since Nine o’ Clock” & T. L. Panagiotopoulos “The sun encircled the thousand minarets”) around a common theme-link: reminiscence - loneliness.

At the course of Modern Greek Literature, such work can be applied to students of the C Gymnasium Class in a small class of 10 students in a high school of a small island. Aim is to highlight the timelessness of reminiscence-loneliness through the work of a classic and a modern creator.

The two poems will be examined in terms of style and subject matter with emphasis on the following: a) rendering of the time that passes, b) depiction of loneliness through images, c) elements of latent eroticism (love with youth, aversion to old age), d) dimension between fantasy-reality.

Worksheets and photocopied leaflets containing the two poems and information about the two poets will be

given to students. Two teaching hours (45' minutes each) will be needed.

According to the method of group teaching, two working groups are created with five students each. The two poems will be examined and analyzed (intertextuality) by highlighting images and key phrases. The influence of K. P. Cavafy on the style of T. L. Panagiotopoulos will also be discussed.

## 2. Presentation-Analysis of the Two Poems

### Since Nine O'clock (Group A)

K. P. Cavafy

Half past twelve. The time has passed quickly  
since nine, when I lit the lamp  
and sat down here. I sat without reading  
and without talking. Talk to whom,  
being in this house utterly alone.

The eidolon of my young body  
-since nine, when I lit the lamp-  
came and found me here and reminded me  
of closed perfumed rooms and past delights -  
what daring delights!  
And it revived before my eyes  
streets by now unrecognizable,  
squares alive with people that are no more,  
and theatres and cafés that used to be.

The eidolon of my young body  
came also bringing memories of sadness;  
family **mournings**, separations,  
feelings of my relations, feelings  
of those that died, so little appreciated.

Half past twelve. How the hours have passed.  
Half past twelve. How the years have passed.  
(translation by Kostas Wootis, Ireland, 2017)

"Since Nine o'clock" is a poem of reminiscence, where we find the most popular themes of Cavafy's confessional poems. Passage of time, loneliness and loves of the past are harmoniously intertwined in a composition that begins in a low voice and hesitantly and, finally, ends in a sudden expansion that captures the reader's thought.

"In the poetry of Konstantinos Cavafy, almost nothing belongs to present. Like the lens of a diligent photographer, the poet reconstructs one by one the objects of his scene in a simple but essential language and in a simple way, without defying details that by adding them to our image, will enhance the reaction he wants to provoke" (Ioannidis, 2018, p. 59).

"Half past twelve. The time has passed quickly  
since nine, when I lit the lamp  
and sat down here. I sat without reading

and without talking. Talk to whom,  
being in this house utterly alone”.

The poem begins with the clock showing twelve and a half, when the course of the mnemonic recall has already been completed. Thus, the poet, in order to share his reasoning with us, tells us what mediated since nine, when he was alone in his house.

The lack of companionship — given emphatically by the poet (alone) — and the lack of willingness to read, give him the opportunity to be left in the memories of the past. For Cavafy, after all, the moments of solitary reminiscence are a key feature of his solitary life and at the same time an ideal framework for the creation of his poetic work.

The eidolon of my young body  
-since nine, when I lit the lamp-  
came and found me here and reminded me  
of closed perfumed rooms and past delights -  
what daring delights!

Since nine that the poet lights the lamp, he brings in front of him the image of his new body. These two images/verses (*The eidolon of my young body/since nine when I lit the lamp*) are repeated twice in the poem, emphasizing by repeating important semantic points. The lit lamp indicates that reminiscence takes place with the conscious participation of the poet and is not a dream or fantasy. On the other hand, the image (*eidolon*) of his young body, which the poet brings back to his mind, expresses his constant desire to remember himself free from the wear and tear of time, when in his complete youth he still had a share of the pleasures life has to offer. With the help of his youthful body, which is connected to all the positive and negative experiences of the past, the poet begins a nostalgic flashback. Closed scented chambers were the first stop; there the poet had the opportunity in his youth to experience that bold pleasure, which has since remained a constant source of inspiration and satisfaction for him.

“And it revived before my eyes  
Streets by now unrecognizable,  
Squares alive with people that are no more  
and theatres and cafes that used to be”

Then, the streets of his city, Alexandria, which have now completely changed, pass before his eyes. The once crowded malls, theaters and cafes he used to frequent, are now closed. Passage of time has changed, not only the poet, but also his city. The places that were then part of his daily routine have now been lost, along with the carefree and voluptuous years of his youth.

“The eidolon of my young body  
Came also bringing memories of sadness;  
Family **mournings**, separations,  
Feelings of my relations, feelings  
Of those that died, so little appreciated”

The image of his youthful body, however, not only reminds him of the pleasure and fun, but also brings with it the sad events of his life. Losses of family members, separations with loved ones, and of course the feelings of those who died, which he had not appreciated enough when he still had the opportunity. Feelings of love for

relatives and friends that were taken for granted and never received the appreciation they deserved. The poet, looking back on his past and remembering what once offered him pleasure and what caused him sorrow, does not attempt a useless account, as he knows that all this has passed irrevocably. What he realizes is how quickly his youth passed, how quickly he found himself alone in his house, without being able to do anything more than to remember and miss. For him it does not matter if the joys or the sorrows are more burdensome, but the fact that the years he could live with the courage he always wanted ("and past delights-what daring delights!") have passed. The meaning of life, for Cavafy, is identified with youth. What is of real value is to experience the years of youth in all their fullness, before it is too late.

The couplet that closes the poem, although it looks like the end of a purely personal account, is nothing but the poet's exhortive message to his readers. In a discreet but extremely effective way, Cavafy reminds us that there is nothing static in life. Everything passes and passes faster than we would like to believe.

"Half past twelve. How the hours have passed.  
Half past twelve. How the years have passed".

**"...The Sun Encircled the Thousand Minarets"** (Group B)

Theofanis L. Panagiotopoulos

The sun encircled the thousand minarets  
And I too wander in the verse tales.  
I walk alone — the voice of one crying out in the wilderness  
the palm trees look like earthly gods - chosen guests -  
in the isolated body of the Desert...  
I walk alone and face you  
to bathe your statuesque body  
- it recalls 'that of Prometheus-  
your chest heals  
an endless squirming inside me.  
I walk alone and get lost in the bars  
lads rock with arrogance  
middle-aged Arabs suck hookah  
in the many smokes I mold you  
with a white sheet  
like the stranger of the Gospel.  
Able to haunt my life.  
I walk alone and reach the house  
the chamber is a silent Clytemnestra  
Pain is her only child.  
(I have been walking alone for a long time.)

The poem comes from the poetic collection "Black Nobel" (published by Panos Street edition, 2019) of the poet and writer Theofanis L. Panagiotopoulos, a creator of the modern generation. This is a "Cavafic" poem. Recently, a photocopy was given - without the name of the author — to a group of students and when they studied it, they considered it to be a poem by K. P. Cavafy. Reminiscence and loneliness are pervasive in this "walking" poem.

"I walk alone", emphasizes the poet-narrator.

But while walking alone, he encounters images and experiences. Thus, he faces the desert, a landscape that

suits his own mental desolation. This becomes more emphatic with repetition ("the voice of one roaring in the wilderness", "the palm trees resembling earthly gods — chosen guests — in the deserted body of the desert"). He "sees" a beloved-desired person "bathing the statuesque body". This person dominates his mind and soul, so he tries to trick his loneliness ("I get lost in the bars") among substitutes for the desired person.

"lads rock with arrogance  
middle-aged Arabs suck hookah"

However, the desired person still dominates within him, but not as he probably is in reality, but in an idealized form, as he shapes it:

"in the many smokes I mold you  
with a white sheet  
like the stranger of the Gospel.  
Able to haunt my life".

The poet-narrator moves between fantasy and reality. And reality is the lonely chamber that awaits him.

"I reach the house  
the chamber is a silent Clytemnestra..."

We reasonably wonder why "silent Clytemnestra"? In mythology we know that Clytemnestra killed her husband, King Agamemnon, when he returned from the war. Does this "silent Clytemnestra" slowly devour the soul of the poet-narrator?

Sure, loneliness is painful for him ("Pain is her only child"), but he seems to have reconciled with her ("it's been a while since I've walked alone").

### 3. Comparison-Review of the Two Poems (Group A + Group B)

After analyzing each poem individually, a comparison-examination is made about how the basic concepts they deal with are rendered and expressed in the two poems. Time begins from a different starting point. In K. P. Cavafy it is the time of night ("Half past twelve. The time has passed quickly, since nine, when I lit the lamp..."), while in T. L. Panagiotopoulos it is the time of the sun ("The sun encircled the thousand minarets...").

Reminiscence is associated with memories and pleasures and is expressed with rich imagery. The memories in both poems are full of eroticism (K. P. Cavafy: "The eidolon of my young body (...) came to me and reminded of closed perfumed rooms and past delights-what daring delights")

T. L. Panagiotopoulos: "Or I see you bathing the statuesque body  
-reminds of that of Prometheus-  
your chest heals  
an endless squirming inside me"),

while they also focus on images from an everyday life that has passed irrevocably.

The concept of the ideal in terms of youth also holds a dominant position (K. P. Cavafy: "... the eidolon of my young body...")

T. L. Panagiotopoulos: "Or I shape you with a white sheet  
like the stranger of the Gospel.  
Able to haunt my life").

Both poems close with the acceptance of reality

(K. P. Cavafy: "Half past twelve. How the hours have passed.

Half past twelve. How the years have passed".

T. L. Panagiotopoulos: "Or I arrive home

the chamber a silent Clytemnestra

(I have been walking alone for a long time))

The two poets "converge" in ideas, style and meanings. Therefore, the Cavafy influences, which T. L. Panagiotopoulos has received, are recognized both in the subject matter of his poem and in the language and the images, as the poem "The sun circled the thousand minarets" is written in a mixture of vernacular and scholar language ("the palm trees look like earthly gods", "your sternum sings", "lads", "white shroud", "I arrive at home"), and its images are reminiscent of Alexandria and the East in general ("minarets", "Palm trees", "desert", "middle-aged Arabs suck hookah"), as is the case in many poems by K. P. Cavafy.

#### 4. Conclusion-Proposals

Through the analysis of the two poems, an attempt was made to demonstrate the continuity through time: a) the subject of reminiscence-loneliness and b) the way it is rendered through style, language and imagery. At the invitation of the writer and poet Theofanis L. Panagiotopoulos to the school — and on the occasion of the co-examination of "Since nine o' clock" and "The sun circled the thousand minarets..." — the two working groups of students undertake to prepare short interviews (5–7 questions) on the "Cavafic" part of his work. In this case, the students will have already been given a booklet, which will include a short biography of T. L. Panagiotopoulos and the poems from the section "ODOS KAIROU/KAIROU STREET" (the "Cavafic" poems) of the "Black Nobel" poetic collection.

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