

Cavafy as a Reader of Browning: The Role of Art in Their Poems

Yue Wang
King's College London
yue_wang_yolanda@163.com

Abstract- *In this paper, a comparative analysis of four poems by Robert Browning and C. P. Cavafy will be provided. It first compares 'Protus' and 'Orophernes', and then analyses 'My Last Duchess' and 'Sculptor from Tyana' in the same way. Through the analysis, it aims to figure out the role of art in their poems. It discusses how Cavafy is influenced by Browning in this topic, and where he diverges from the predecessor.*

General Terms- Literature Review, Comparative Literature

Keywords- Robert Browning; C. P. Cavafy; Art

1. INTRODUCTION

The affinity between Cavafy's poems with Robert Browning's has long been discussed. Cavafy's 'Orophernes' (1915) was even criticised by Glafkos as 'nothing more than a weakly imitative epigone of the fertile Englishman' because of its obvious similarity with Browning's 'Protus'. The link between Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and Cavafy's 'Sculptor from Tyana', on the other hand, is difficult to be detected at first glance. Still, there are elements in them that demonstrate that Cavafy is inspired by Browning. This essay compares these two pairs of poems by Browning and Cavafy. It discusses how Cavafy appears as a reader of Browning in the respect of art.

2. BETWEEN 'PROTUS' AND 'OROPHERNES'

The similar structure and theme of 'Protus' and 'Orophernes' are what first invite readers to speculate that Cavafy has been inspired by Browning's poem. Both poems start and end with a figure on the coin. The speaker in Browning's poem is attracted by the baby face of Protus, a fictional emperor who ends a dynasty. The main body of the poem is a revision of the life of Protus, while the last stanza comes back to the rough-hammered head of John the Smith, who overthrows the reign of Protus. 'Orophernes' employs a same structure. Both the first and last stanza focus on the coin carved with the head of the king of Cappadocia, Orophernes, while the main part revises the life of him. The geographical setting of these two poems may also be the same. Although Browning's Protus is a fictional figure whose background is not clearly stated, the first two lines of the poem, which say '[a]mong these latter busts we count by scores / [h]alf-emperors and

quarter-emperors', seem to indicate the Byzantine Empire, where 'there were often two or three emperors in Constantinople' after the fall of the Western empire. Orophernes, the king of Cappadocia, also lived in a similar place in Greek world. Apart from these aspects, the role of artistic works in the two poems is worth observing, as they are both inspired by the coins.

2.1 Art as the Storage of History and Beauty

In both poems, art works as a way to store historical memory. The speaker in 'Protus' chooses to read through the life of the young emperor because he 'loves a baby face, with violets there / [v]iolets instead of laural in the hair' (5-6). Among the almighty emperors, the baby seems to be more real and lively. The works produced later 'make his graces prompt as blossoming [o]f plentifully-watered palms in spring' (28-29), but 'whoso mounts the throne' (30) would be treated like this. While other works are lost, what stays true over the hundreds of years and still invites the viewer to the ancient world is the innocent baby face. This point is also suggested by the 'rough-hammered head' of John the Smith in the last stanza. As '[a] blacksmith's bastard' (37), John the Smith is not as delicate and elegant as Protus, yet the poem still ends with the praise saying '[w]hat a man' (57). In 'Orophernes', the speaker also revises the king's life after seeing the 'beautiful, delicate face' 'appears upon the tetradrachm with a hint of smile on his face' (1-3). After the long account of history, he returns to the same coin, and ends the poem with similar sentences as the beginning. While the king's end 'was recorded somewhere and then lost' (41), what remains true is his figure on the coin. The artistic works therefore become a storage of remote history.

A more important function of art shown in the two poems, however, is to store the beauty of mortals. Even if Protus is deposed and leads a humble life later, his 'baby face' on

the coin would be remembered forever. As Fontana suggests, it is possible that if Protus remained to be an emperor, he would 'have disappointed the philosophers and artists his youthful beauty inspired'. It is because he is removed from the throne in his best age that he can leave the most beautiful image to the world. Hawlin suggests that 'Protus' reflects an argument about idealism and naturalism, that the contrast between the 'glowing, romantic, and high-flown' emperor Protus in the first half and 'the brutal realities of John the Pannonian and Protus's ignominious later career' demonstrates the gap between 'seeds of creation' and what people really see. However, although the sculptures and other artistic works inspired by Protus are all lost, what people can see are not only the rough-hammered head of John the Smith, but also the coin with the baby's face. As long as the coin exists, the beauty of Protus would not be solely an ideal. It still shines through the history when the speaker is inspired by it and reads through history.

2.2 Cavafy's Ionic Idealism

The coin in Cavafy's 'Orophernes' not only stores the beauty of the king, but represents the poet's Ionic idealism. The beauty of Orophernes is undoubtedly well recorded by the coin, which 'left the grace of his handsome youth, a light shining from his poetic beauty, an aesthetic memory of a lad of Ionia' (46-48). Regardless of his failure in being a king in Cappadocia and in the endeavour to gain the Syrian crown, he is still 'the handsomest' and 'the most ideal' (17) one among the Ionian youths as shown on the coin. What kept in the coin is therefore not only the beauty of Orophernes' face in general sense, but the Ionic beauty which Cavafy appreciates. Ionia in Asia Minor is portrayed by Cavafy as 'almost a paradise on earth' which 'provided the richest soil for the Greek tradition and the Greek way of life before Athens and the mainland came to dominate the world of Hellenism'. As a figure who has been shaped by 'the Hellenism of Ionia' in his 'manners, dress, language, and the erotic technique', Orophernes' Ionic traits would also live with his beautiful face carved on the coin.

The sensuous image in 'Orophernes' is where Cavafy diverges from Browning. There is a hint of erotic sense in 'Protus'. In saying '[w]hile young Greek sculptors gazing on the child [b]ecame, with old Greek sculpture, reconciled', Browning implicitly indicates the young emperor's homoerotic attraction, but he then goes on with the history without further discussion on this aspect. Cavafy, on the contrary, develops this theme in his poem and 'explicitly identifies the "Greek way" with an ultimate knowledge of sensual pleasure'. Orophernes is 'decked with turquoise jewellery' and 'odorous with the scent of jasmine' (14-15). In 'exquisite nights of Ionia', 'fearlessly and in the Greek manner quite', he 'came to know pleasure in its fullness' (9-11). Even when he has been removed from the throne, he still lives with 'lust and inebriety' (36). Therefore, after the account of his life, the image of

Orophernes in the last stanza becomes 'an aesthetic memory of a lad of Ionia' (48), a legacy of the remote Ionic ideal.

While the coins in the poems suggest the beauty of the kings, they suggest the viewers to rethink about history at the same time. One is unlikely to blame Protus for 'end[ing] a period [o]f empery beginning with a god' (8-9) when he sees the baby face on the coin. In this way, this artistic work invites the audience to reread the history, and to consider if he is only a victim of history. In the case of Orophernes, even though his life seems to be a failure through reading the depiction, his image on the tetradrachm is still delicate and with 'poetic beauty'. As shown on the coin, he is more like an embodiment of the Ionic ideal rather than a removed king who has fallen into erotic pleasure. His beauty recorded by the artistic work suggests that even a figure like him who seems to be full of political failure would still have characteristics to be praised in other aspects.

3. BETWEEN 'MY LAST DUCHESS' AND 'SCULPTOR FROM TYANA'

The affinity between 'My Last Duchess' and 'Sculptor from Tyana' is not as obvious as it is in the first pair. Although both poems are monologues, the setting of 'My Last Duchess' is in the sixteenth-century Ferrara, while the monologue by Cavafy takes place in the town of Tyana within the Roman province of Cappadocia. The gap of time and the geographical differences make it difficult for readers to link them together. Still, it can be seen that when the guest in 'Sculptor from Tyana' is introduced to the workshop, Cavafy uses the same technique as Browning does in his poem, that is to '[introduce]' a viewer or a visitor to a place that resembles the room of a museum or private collection and [provide] a guide for it'. The Duke in 'My last Duchess' also introduces the portrait to the visitor in this way. Apart from this technique, the figure Neptune is also mentioned in both poems. The Duke collects a bronze of Neptune, while the sculptor has 'been taken up for quite some time' (15) making the sculpture for the god. As for the role of art in this pair of poems, it is also related to the eternity of beauty. The artistic works here are used to keep beautiful things forever. Furthermore, the relation between patrons and artists, between creators and connoisseurs shown in the two monologues, is worth exploring.

3.1 Art Stands for Eternity

As in the first pair, art in 'My Last Duchess' is employed to endow eternity to the beauty of mortals. What is different, though, is that the Duke's intention is to possess the beauty of the Duchess in the portrait, while the Duchess as a living being is not important. The original of the Duke is Alfonso II, whose wife Lucrezia died at the age of seventeen and '[i]mmmediately tongues wagged and rumours multiplied and suspicions were voiced'. The Duke

in the poem does not explain the death of the Duchess directly, but in saying that 'I gave commands, [t]hen all smiles stopped together' (45-46), he seems to indicate that he has murdered her. He invites Fra Pandolf to paint the portrait that he would call 'a wonder' (3), but his description of it is deprived of admiration. Rather, his jealousy can be easily detected. He seems uncomfortable as the 'depth and passion of [the Duchess'] earnest glance' (8) is not due to '[h]er husband's presence only' (14) when the Duchess is alive, and is unhappy that the Duchess 'liked whatever [s]he looked on, and her looks went everywhere' (23-24). His jealousy 'may be more properly termed an egoist's overweening desire for possessiveness', and he is 'an egoist who is either unwilling to content himself with a normal degree of possession or, physically incapable of attaining it, exacts the last measure of obedience to his will for exclusive ownership'. Since the Duchess as a living being cannot satisfy the Duke's possessiveness, he would rather change her into an object. In fact, he tends to treat the Duchess as an object even before her death, and this explains his anger when there are traces that the Duchess is attracted by other. In saying that '[t]he depth and passion of its earnest glance, [b]ut to myself they turned (since none puts by [t]he curtain I have drawn for you, but I)' (8-10), the Duke indicates that he can only be contained by total possession. Art in the poem is a way he employs to hold complete control of one's beauty.

In 'Sculptor from Tyana', what lives eternally in art is the sculptor's Greek world. When the sculptor is introducing his works to the guest, his attitude towards the sculptures are obviously different. He quickly goes through the Roman figures 'Marius, Aemilius Paulus, Scipio Africanus' (9-10) which are 'commissioned by senators' (5). For the statue of Patroclus, he 'shall be touching him a little' (12). The sculpture of Neptune is what he has 'been taken up for quite some time' (15), while the one 'dearest of all' to him is Mercury, which he 'worked with feeling and with the greatest care' (22). It can be noticed that he puts more emphasis on the figures of Greek mythology and the Roman ones are not that cared about. The one he pays most attention to is Mercury, a typical logo of Greek myth who had 'few temples' in archaic Greece because 'every household was his temple, and also one of the gods who 'have the most associations with sexuality'. This god is therefore a best symbol for Cavafy's Hellenism. Even the choice of Roman figures are those 'who were famous both for their Philhellenism and for their conquest of the Hellenistic kingdoms'. The mention of Caesarion seems to be an irony, as Caesarion is 'the last of Ptolemies, the son of Julius Caesar, and 'was put to death by the Emperor Augustus'.

Even though the sculptor makes a living in Rome where people rarely pay attention to his hometown, he still saves the Greek civilization of Tyana in his works. The choice of the place Tyana may have purpose. Tyana is the birthplace

of the philosopher Apollonios who 'appears a number of times in Cavafy's poetry'. Nehamas suggests that in Cavafy's 'Apollonios of Tyana in Rhodes' (1925), Apollonios' choice of 'a gold and ivory statue' in a small temple rather than 'a statue of common clay in a large temple' indicates 'the distinction between the valuable materials of true art, addressed to select audience, and the vulgar stuff of the contemptible works that please the rest of the world'. This idea can be taken to understand the sculptor's effort in the sculptures of Neptune and Mercury. Even if they are not appreciated by the majority of Rome, the great care put into them by the sculptor still makes them true art, and the Greek ideal in them would live forever.

3.2 The Works of Greek Figures

The works of Neptune in the two poems have more interpretations. In saying that '[n]otice Neptune, though, [t]aming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, [w]hich Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me', the Duke in 'My Last Duchess' seems to identify himself with the powerful god. The term 'taming the horse' also 'further [intimates] how he had tamed and killed his last Duchess'. Instead of keeping beauty eternally, the bronze of Neptune is more like a symbol of the Duke's complete domination over the family. Still, if a reader 'accepts such an assertion of ducal power as an adequate motive for Browning's forceful monologue', he would make the similar mistake as the Duke who 'attempts to trim his complex, curious self to a simpler mold than he deserves'. From the perspective of an outsider, the bronze thus may be regarded as the Duke's misinterpretation of himself. In 'Sculptor from Tyana', on the other hand, 'it is as if Cavafy dramatizes the character of Claus of Innsbruck working on the Neptune commissioned by the Duke', yet in both poems the speakers 'although proud of it, do not concentrate on it but rather on what becomes the object of intense scrutiny and involvement on their part'.

The aspect of art that can hardly be seen in the first pair is the role of the artists and creators on the one side, and the patrons and connoisseurs on the other. Duke of Ferrara, whose original is 'a patron of the arts, painting, music, and literature', also appears to be the patron of Fra Pandolf and Claus in the poem, while the sculptor in Cavafy's work is the artist producing sculptures according to the requirements of patrons. Still, it can be seen in the two poems that it is the artist who endows the artistic works life. The patron seems fail to do so even if the work is assigned by him.

In 'My Last Duchess', '[w]hereas Browning perceives an antithesis between plastic art and life itself, the Duke of Ferrara projects an analogy'. As a possessive collector, the Duke regards works of art as inanimate objects which are used to satisfy his desire for total control. The artist Fra Pandolf may say that '[p]aint [m]ust never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along her throat' (17-19). This statement, from an artist's perspective, may

solely indicate that the beauty and liveliness of a life cannot be perfectly expressed by art. For the Duke, however, the saying posts a threat on his property. He therefore chooses to murder the living creature and keep the portrait of her, which he takes as a way to own the beauty forever. What seems ironical here is that while the Duke intends to store the beauty of a life in art and thus possesses it forever, he ends the life of the real person. The Duke's desire for eternity can also be seen in the poem through the emphasis he puts on his 'nine-hundred old name' (33). It is therefore reasonable to consider that the Duke is keen to have an heir for the title. The irony thus appears again when he murders the woman who is capable of giving birth to an heir. This ironical sense is strengthened when one takes his original into consideration. The prototype of the Duke, Alfonso II, ended up to be the 'last of the Este line'. Despite the effort he takes, he fails to reach eternity. The Duke, as a collector of artistic works, does not give life to art. On the contrary, his behaviour only leaves him static objects deprived of life. Furthermore, his possessiveness in fact also influences his objectivity as a connoisseur. His jealousy makes him unable to appreciate the portrait in a professional way, while '[w]ith the phrase "thought a rarity," he attempts to substitute the placid detachment of the connoisseur for the mingled frustration and wonder that have motivated the rest of his speech'.

The Sculptor from Tyana, on the other hand, speaks from the stance of an artist. Unlike the Duke who can 'summon artists from where he will and dismiss them without notice', the sculptor is under 'pressures of patronage' and facing customers who 'are no doubt suitably impressed by the quintessentially un-Cavafian figures'. Even under such a condition, the artist does not lose his love for the Hellenistic culture. His speech starts with 'the social awkwardness of a new-comer to the capital', but ends 'with the bold freedom of the creator'. He lists the works that are more likely to interest the guest without further information, but when it comes to the sculptures he works on with great care in his leisure time, he seems to immerse into his own world, and uses more words to describe what the guest may not understand. The poem ends with Mercury, who comes into his dream in 'a hot summer's day' when his mind 'ascending to the realm of the ideal' (23-24). By the end of the monologue, the speaker has already been led astray by his own ideal. Compared to the Roman heroes, the passion he shows in describing Neptune and Mercury gives life to them, even though no one in the place he works appreciates them. Jusdanis suggests that 'although Cavafy recognizes the impotence of the artist and the social ineffectiveness of art, he does not see art's moral predicament as the direct result of its self-chosen segregation'. Art may be isolated from the objective world and exist by itself, and the sculptor's care put into his works makes the Greek ideal in them shine forever. While Browning's Duke implicitly desires for physical eternity,

that is to have an heir, Cavafy's artist gives spiritual eternity to his Greek world through his works. As in the first pair of poems, there are also erotic senses shown in the works of art in 'My Last Duchess' and 'Sculptor from Tyana'. When Browning's Duke is introducing the portrait to the envoy, he cannot hide the sexual sense in his speech:

Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, 'Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat.'
[...]
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. (13-31)

One of the reasons for the Duke to invite Fra Pandolf to do the work may be that a monk would not post threat to his property, the Duchess. However, Fra Pandolf in the Duke's imagination still says words with sexual implication, even if there is possibility that the painter as a monk has not thought in this way at all. The Duke becomes calm again when the topic turns to the bronze of Neptune, which may because the god does not have a sexual sense. Furthermore, apart from the 'sexual connotation in "forward" and "blush"', the lines themselves 'carry the burden of the Duke's sexual feeling'. He is annoyed by her 'blush' and 'forward' speech' driven by others' small favours. The Duke's hatred in 'My Last Duchess' therefore 'is intimately tied to [...] a sexual desire which cannot tolerate the very quality in its object which elicited the desire in the first place'. In Cavafy's poem, the erotic sense is from the figure Mercury, who is closely related to Hellenism and eroticism. Mercury in Greek mythology 'fantasizes sexuality, telling us about a sexuality easily carried and graciously fantasized in the most overt way, to the point of shamelessness'. With the erotic sense he carries, Mercury becomes the symbol of Hellenism, and is most cared by the sculptor.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, art in both the two pairs of poems functions as a way to store beauty eternally. The coins in Browning's 'Protus' and Cavafy's 'Orophernes' let the fictional emperor's baby face and the beautiful face of the king of Cappadocia shine over hundreds of years. They also work as a storage of historical memory. The beauty shown on the coins invite the viewers to reconsider the failure of the kings, and rethink about history. In the second pair, art is employed by Browning's Duke in 'My Last Duchess' to

satisfy his possessiveness and own the Duchess as an object forever, while the sculptor in Cavafy's 'Sculptor from Tyana' gives eternity to the Greek culture through putting his great passion and care into the sculptures of Greek figures. As a collector and connoisseur of art, the Duke ironically turns a beautiful life into an inanimate object. His desire for eternity can also be seen in his implicit will for an heir, though he seems to fail in both giving life to art and to his title. The sculptor, on the other hand, achieves to give eternity to the Greek world with his love and passion, even if he is under the pressures of patronage and works for patrons who cannot appreciate the Greek culture.

What also appears to be notable in the four poems in question is the erotic element. Browning implicitly indicates Protus' homoerotic attractiveness in saying that the young Greek sculptors 'reconciled' with 'old Greek sculptures' in seeing Protus' beauty. Cavafy, on the other hand, develops this sense in his 'Orophernes', where the king's 'Greek way' of life is detailed. The coin also becomes a storage of this 'Greek way' when the speaker sees 'an allure of his lovely youth' on it. In 'My Last Duchess', the Duke's description of the portrait and the behaviour of the Duchess is erotic. His jealousy is therefore also related to his sexual desire, which leads him to hide the Duchess in the painting behind the curtain. In 'Sculptor from Tyana', the figure Mercury is related to eroticism in Greek mythology, and is therefore a symbol of the Greek way of life. This explains the sculptor's preference for it.

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Author's Biography



Yue Wang
Comparative Literature MA
King's College London