

Abandonment, Stage Five

by Jack Cargill

Plutarch, in his *Life of Antony*,
tells of how, about the middle of the night
before the final battle, “was heard”
– by whom he does not specify –
instruments and singing as of a bacchanal
departing from the gate of Alexandria,
and says that “people who reflected”
– again unspecified – thought that
Antony had been abandoned
by Dionysus, the god he emulated.

Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*
peoples this perception with nameless soldiers,
on guard duty in Alexandria’s streets
on the portentous pre-battle night,
and *hautboys*, the stage directions say,
are to be heard “as under the stage”.
One soldier opines that the god
whom Antony had loved and who
now leaves him, is Hercules.

Cavafy, despite entitling his poem
“The God Abandons Antony”
and despite the hearer of the music
being in this version Mark Antony himself,
bids him to bear as if with fortitude
the departure, not of the god, but of
“the Alexandria that is leaving” –
the city itself, Cavafy’s own beloved home.

Larry McMurry introduces his 1968 collection of essays on Texas with a six-page meditation he calls "The God Abandons Texas", in which he cites all three predecessors' stories. He claims to like Cavafy's treatment best, but takes Shakespeare's Hercules as being Antony's departing god. He then proceeds to wonder who is the god whose numinous presence he sees leaving Texas.

From one god to another,
to city, then to state, the abandonment
deepens and widens, and don't we feel it
ever deeper, ever wider, now?
For all the current talk of God,
of prayer, of spirituality, don't we see
everywhere the triumph of the crassest
and the cruelest in our national culture?
If any god watched over us,
would he stay with us in our sanctimonious,
blood-stained pieties? Hear them?
Hautboys, as under the stage....

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Notes from the Editor:

Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC, when he took Egypt from the Persians. An autonomous Greek colony, Alexandria was modeled in several respects on Athens. Its founding citizens were recruited from all over the Greek world. Residing in the city were also numerous non-citizens of Egyptian, Jewish, or other ethnic origin. Alexandria soon became one of the grandest cities of the Mediterranean world. Later, with over a half million inhabitants, a hub in the luxury trade between India and Rome, it became the second city of the Roman empire. In the 1950s the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (who was born in Alexandria) put an end to the Greek community in Alexandria when he evicted from Egypt all persons of European racial origin.

Marc Antony, born in 83 BC, was a Roman statesman and general. After distinguishing himself as a cavalry commander in Palestine and Egypt, he joined Julius Caesar in Gaul and subsequently held various public offices in Rome. In 48 BC he served in Greece. When Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC, Antony tried playing a delicate game but was soon threatened by the emergence of Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus); the two locked in combat for the leadership of the Roman empire. In 41 BC Antony met Cleopatra (of Macedonian origin, the ruler of Egypt, and already the mother of a child by Julius Caesar) and spent the following winter with her in Egypt. Cleopatra gave birth to twins, but he married Octavian's sister, apparently for political purposes. In 37 BC he returned to Egypt and Cleopatra, who the following year gave birth to their third child. She joined Antony in his military campaign against Octavian in 31 BC. When Antony's forces lost, he and Cleopatra returned to Egypt. Marc Antony committed suicide in Alexandria as Octavian was entering the city. Cleopatra then killed herself, famously with an asp, leaving her four children orphaned.

Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and biographer, lived from ca. 50 to 120 AD. He spent much of his life in Athens, but visited Egypt and Italy, where he lectured and taught in Rome. For the last 30 years of his life, he held the office of priest at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. He wrote a romantic biography of Marc Antony, presenting him as a great general with unusual powers of leadership and personal charm, destroyed by his own weaknesses. It is, however, likely that military considerations sealed Antony's downfall.

Constantine Cavafy is considered by many to be the most original and influential Greek poet of the 20th century. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1863, the last of nine children of Greek parents who had come to Egypt from Constantinople (Istanbul). His father, who had earlier established a business with his brother in England, died when Cavafy was 7 years old. Two years later his mother took the children to England, where his older brothers attempted to run the family business but failed. By the time Cavafy was 16, they had lost the family fortune, and the family returned to a life of genteel poverty in Alexandria. By this time Cavafy had come to feel at home in the English language and was familiar with English literature. He spoke Greek with a slight English accent all his life, and his first verse was written in English. He attended a Greek commercial school in Alexandria. In 1882, before the British bombardment of Alexandria, the family moved to Constantinople for three years. In 1885, he became a correspondent for an Alexandrian newspaper and in 1888 started working at the Egyptian stock exchange. At the age of 29, Cavafy became an employee of the Irrigation Service of the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, where he continued to work for the next 30 years - while also working as a broker at the Egyptian stock exchange. He lived with his mother until her death in 1899, then with his unmarried brothers -- and, for most of his mature years, alone. He died at the age of 70 of cancer of the larynx in 1933. Cavafy never offered a volume of his poetry for sale during his lifetime. He distributed his poems to his friends in pamphlets he himself had printed or in offprints clipped together. Due to his distaste for the kind of rhetoric fashionable during his lifetime, he was not fully appreciated by the literati of Athens until some time after the publication of the first collection of his poems in 1935. Cavafy was devoted to Hellenism, had an esoteric but brilliantly alive sense of history, and created a rich unified mythic world in his poems.

Larry McMurtry, an American writer of novels, screenplays, and essays, won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for the movie "Brokeback Mountain" in 2006. McMurtry was born in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1936 and grew up on a ranch outside of Archer in that state. His father and eight of his uncles were cowboys and ranchers, and much of his fiction is set in "the Old West" or in contemporary Texas. McMurtry graduated from North Texas State University in 1958, received an MA from Rice University in 1960, and published his first novels while an English instructor. In 1966 he wrote The Last Picture Show, on which the movie of the same title was based, and in 1970 he opened a chain of bookstores called "Booked Up". He won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel Lonesome Dove in 1986.

hautboy - a sort of oboe