

Cavafy: 166 Poems



Translated with an Introduction by
Alan L. Boegehold

“A translation that closely matches the poet’s own style.”

CHARLES R. BEYE, Professor Emeritus of Classics, CUNY

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ON THE COVER

The image is a Byzantine marble bust of Valentinian II (Flavius Valentinianus), emperor of Rome from 375 to 392, half-brother to Gratian. He ascended the throne at the age of four, and died at twenty-one by hanging—officially a suicide, but many think his former general Arbogast, with whom Valentinian had had a falling out, may have had a hand in his death.

Valentinian was caught up in the struggle between the powers of the Catholic Church (in the person of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan) and a desire to keep pagan Roman traditions alive (strongly advocated by Valentinian's mother Justina, and Aurelius Symmachus, the Roman prefect). But as Valentinian was only eleven at the time, he finally acquiesced to Ambrose's insistence and many pagan temples were despoiled.

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Foreword

Constantine Cavafy was the most improbable, as he remains among the greatest, of modern Greek poets. “He wore a straw hat and stood at an angle to the universe,” said E.M. Forster. He spoke Greek with a noticeable British accent, had no eye for landscape, and lived next door to a brothel in Egyptian Alexandria, a city full of ancient Hellenic ghosts, many of which he brought uncannily to life. The youngest son in a stifflingly respectable mercantile family, he was also a passionate homosexual who treasured his brief encounters for decades, the ultimate apostle of personal nostalgia, before immortalizing them in verse that veered disconcertingly between the sentimental and the ironic, the mandarin and the vernacular.

Deceptively simple and with hardly a metaphor in sight, his poetry nevertheless presents an enormous challenge to any modern translator (and since his international discovery in the mid-twentieth century there have been plenty of them). Alan Boegehold has several rare advantages for the task. He is a fine classicist, to whom Cavafy’s forays into the Hellenistic and Byzantine past present no problems. His familiarity with the Greek language, both ancient and modern, makes him sensitive to subtle nuances that many would miss (no accident that he’s an expert on Greek gestures).

Above all he catches that atmosphere and tone unique to Cavafy, an odd blend of world-weariness, irony, propriety, passion and nostalgia found in no other poet, and does so in a minimalist translation bare-boned like its original, that never wastes a single word. His introduction, perfect for anyone who comes to Cavafy for the first time, is the work of a devotee who has been living with this elusive and obstinate poet for years. The highest praise I can give Boegehold’s versions, as a fellow translator, is that they will undoubtedly spur many readers to tackle Cavafy’s original Greek, something that would surely delight the old Alexandrian in whatever afterworld he and his straw hat may have ended up.

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Acknowledgements

I began to translate Cavafy's poems one summer when for one reason or another Julie and I found ourselves in other people's houses in the late afternoon waiting for supper. The impulse came from my dear πλατσανάκη George d'Almeida, artist, poet, and propulsive agent. Once I had started, encouraging spirits appeared along the way. An undergraduate whom I had directed to "Ithaca" (this would have been Rae Dalven's translation) told me later the reading had changed her life. At a neighbor's wedding and at a memorial service for a beloved friend, that was the one poem family members requested. Virgil Burnett drew a Fury in ink and (as Pas de Loup Press) printed "Footsteps" on Bristol board and then published translation and drawing in *Margins*.

Poetry evenings and nights at Sylvia Moubayed's were inspiring: there Edwin Honig encouraged me to think of publication. Stuart Blazer's observations were always encouraging. Faith Sandstrom caused my version of "Orophernes" to appear in *Celator*. Judith Binder has been a force for the good in most of my adventures in poetry. Sam Abrams has improved various efforts with accurate queries. Once when I read some pieces at the Providence Athenaeum, Michael Harper attended and patted me on the shoulder as he left (I try not to think he was saying, "Nice try, kid").

I sent some versions to James Merrill (whom I came to know thanks to John and Edith Camp) after he had published three translations in *Grand Street*. I said that if he had it in mind to do the whole I would stop. He wrote back saying that he would not and that I should continue. Bob Strassler made an effort to have my versions published in England. Ernst and Annette Schmidt invited friends and colleagues to their home in Tübingen to hear me read some versions aloud. Robert and Barbara Rodgers gave me an opportunity to read and talk about Cavafy at the University of Vermont. My colleagues in the Department of Classics at Brown University, especially William Wyatt, Adele Scafuro, and David Konstan, and now recently Elsa Amanatidou, have always been ready to read and provide informed comment. I was also given space in the *Brown Classical Journal* for a few versions and "Caesarion" appeared in our departmental 70th birthday tribute to Michael Putnam. Ruthann Whitten has been a help at every stage. Natalia Vogeikoff-Brogan gave good, prompt advice when it was needed. Charles R. Beye brought my work to the attention of Ann Rosener, who published eleven of the poems in her *In Simple Clothes, a livre d'artiste*, with three etchings by William Brice.

Lucia Athanassaki pushed me to try Elytis and Seferis as well, and so did Angelos Matthaiou, who, when he learned that I was translating Cavafy, presented me with an armful of relevant texts. Charis Kalliga used my translation of her poems in *Minoa Akra*. Becky Sinos provided me with relevant background music for a reading on the Amherst College radio, and some relevant questions as well. Diskin Clay and Dia Philippides gave me critical bibliographical help. Despina Mylonas, almost from the very start, read every single translation at least once, and improved them all. Mike Keeley, to whom I sent a whole batch, read them critically and gave me authoritative advice. With Peter Green over the years I have learned about Cavafy and Greece both then and now. Jim Ottaway, George Huxley, Ron and Connie Stroud, and Jane Chaplin have each in one way or another given me heartening encouragement, as have Lindley, Alan, David, and Alison. Hunter Lewis, publisher of Axios Press, has instructed me in various ways, most recently by directing my attention to Cavafy's values. And indeed I owe my whole exploration of modern Greece to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, and these days especially to the Gennadius Library, and always to JEMB

A word about my approach to translating Cavafy: He composed in various modes, sometimes combining “purifying,” i.e., old-fashioned Greek and demotic, the language in general use today, in a single poem, sometimes using rhymes, but more often not. I have tried to approach his spare, not to say bony, style, eschewing poetic locutions, and by using fewer rather than more words to convey his meaning.

I have read and learned from other translations, chiefly those of the following: Rae Dalven, Edmund Keeley, Philip Sherrard, George Savides, Memas Kolaitis, James Merrill, Peter Green, Sam Abrams, Diskin Clay, Evangelos Sachperaglou, John Mavrogordato, Avi Sharon, Glenn Bowersock, Stratis Haviaris,, Theoharis Theoharis, Aliko Barnstone, Robert Elsie, Filippo Maria Pontani.

For readers who are looking at Cavafy for the first time, I list a few favorites, both my own and those of readers generally: “Ithaca,” “Waiting for the Barbarians,” “King Demetrios,” “The City,” “Footsteps,” “Alexandrian Kings,” “Ides of March,” “Young Men of Sidon.”

Cavafy's Values

The Greek poet Constantine Photiades Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863 and died there in 1933. His poems, those that he circulated in his lifetime and those that he did not, have become more and more widely read and influential since his death, thanks to the subsequent publication in book form, first of 154 poems that he had acknowledged and approved, and after that a number of others, some finished, some renounced, and some unfinished. New translations from Greek into English, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Russian, and other languages continue to appear.

The details of his life, work, and publication practices are available in an increasing number of studies. A good place to start is the online catalogue, called "Ambrosia," of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and the British School at Athens, where close to 200 entries are listed under the poet's name. The purpose of the present essay is to introduce Cavafy's work into a series of books that in varying ways touch on values.

My own approach to the poet here is personal and without pretensions to an overview of what has been thought, written and said about him over the past hundred years and more. The opinions I record in the following pages are those of an appreciative reader and translator. They concern principally Cavafy's sense of the worth of various things, as expressed in his poems.

Throughout the poems there is a keen appreciation of loss, both recent and in the distant past. A recent loss, often enough a lover, when irrecoverable, when repossessed only by memory, becomes, once it is a poem, possibly more valuable than the object of loss ever could be. Losses suffered by figures from antiquity are evaluated paradoxically and in the end recognizably on a scale consonant with the poet's judgement of the object's true worth.

A high evaluation of "courage" and "wisdom" is also constant and unfailing. "Beauty" (mostly as it is to be found in young men and in the constructions of art and poetry) is an absolute. In addition, Greek Orthodox Christianity and Hellenism, the latter understood as an irreducible core of "being Greek," appear as prominent ideals. "Courage" in the examples he provides is the will and ability to act appropriately, no matter what the cost. "Wisdom" is what informs a precise calibration of appropriate response in a given set of circumstances.

Where "beauty" is to be considered, process becomes apparent: The excitement of a love affair or a historical moment or a recognition can become beauty in a poem. Process varies when the poet brings Greek Orthodox Christianity or Hellenism into the light. He may create a scenario where recognition of one or the other as an ideal caps the poem. Elsewhere the ideal is to be deduced as being an absolute from how it is shown being misunderstood. At other times, he will adumbrate a yearning for the fulfillment that full commitment can bring.

His use of paradox and irony requires of a reader or listener a perception of the absolute in question even when, or especially when, it is not named. Comprehension comes to a reader or listener as Cavafy reveals how that absolute loses its identity, its integrity, when misapprehended. It is also helpful to have in mind that Cavafy assigns little value to many things that worldly people desire, things like imperial power, wealth, grand buildings, extensive gardens, military victories, jewels, noble or royal forebears, and popular regard. (This last, his biographers say, he wanted very much, but what his poems reveal is his own amused appreciation: see, e.g., "That's He.") In poems where such

grandeurs are particularized, he may evaluate them by use of a paradox or an ironical summation.

Sometimes the spirit of Qoheleth, the Assembler or Preacher, as the author of *Ecclesiastes* in the Old Testament is known, seems to be a presence in Cavafy's poems. The Preacher starts his enigmatic tract from Hellenistic Judaism with the words (as given in the *Septuagint*) ματαιότης ματαιότων, usually translated into English as "vanity of vanities," "vain" meaning "empty" and "valueless," "futilely chasing the wind." He consigns much of what the world strives for to this "vanity" and I have found it illuminating to read some of Cavafy's poems with the Preacher's evaluation in mind.

An early poem, "Monotony," sounds like *Ecclesiastes* 1:9. There, the Preacher says: "What has been done is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun." (Revised Standard Edition, 1952). Cavafy's speaker says: "The same things will happen, will happen again. Identical moments both find us and leave us." He could be doing a riff on the Preacher's lament.

The Preacher in exhortation sometimes prescribes and at others proscribes, using a tone like that of the speaker in Cavafy's "Ithaca," both of them preaching rules for a good life. The Preacher says for instance at *Eccl.* 9:7: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do." Cavafy in his preacher's voice tells his readers:

Stop at Phoenician exchanges,
acquire their fair, worked pieces, and
diamonds and coral, electrum and ebony,
and voluptuous scents of every kind,
voluptuous scents, as many as you can.
Go to many Egyptian cities.
Learn and learn from their scholars.

The Preacher says eat drink and be merry: all else is vanity. Cavafy says try it all and at the end you will come to know the value of what you have done, no matter what you thought when you started. In "Two Young Men" Cavafy does not preach but he does particularize the Preacher's prescription:

and when they were through the costly drinks
and when it was now near four o'clock
they surrender, happy, to love.

Throughout Cavafy's poems, both those he chose to publish in his lifetime and those he did not, "dignity" is a notable characteristic, especially in its sense, "an appreciation of value and its weight." The word is cognate with Latin *dignus*, an adjective that labels what is right, appropriate, proper, valued. The Latin sentence *non sum dignus* means "I am not the appropriate person." The sense of *dignus* is expressed in Greek by the adjective *axios* (ἄξιος) and in the following pages my aim is to show where Cavafy instructs his readers by various means, sometimes by exhortation but at other times indirectly, as to what is proper, what is appropriate and therefore valuable in life.

Cavafy's own low evaluation of most worldly things is a positive and rational position, not negative and not cynical, but at the same time not always congruent with his appetites. His assignments of high value are plain to see. Consider "courage" and "wisdom" for example in his two poems about Kratesikleia. They are both unambiguous exaltations of that queen mother, if not of her son. In both poems, Kleomenes, a fierce warrior and noble leader as represented by Plutarch in his *Life of Kleomenes*, is in thrall to his potent mother. She, Kratesikleia, was to be surrendered to Ptolemy as a hostage, and Kleomenes, party to the agreement from the start, could not bear to open the subject. But she found him out and easily said yes: there was no way she could be demeaned ("In Sparta").

Could she know that in due course she and her son's children would be put to death by a Ptolemy,

the children before her eyes? Perhaps not, but in that world, she had to know it was a possibility. Cavafy knew: the closing of “Come O King of the Lacedaemonians,” is pregnant:

“Changes of fortune apply
as God provides.” And she went aboard
proceeding to what “God provides.”

Her dignity and humanity and self-discipline are of a regal nature, a loftiness of spirit that a whole world might well wish to emulate. Chief among her excellences are “courage” and “wisdom.” Her look down the nose at a parvenu may be a shading taken from contemporary attitudes of society in Alexandria.

An indirect word of advice closes “Anna Dalassini”: There Alexios Komnenos praises his mother, Anna, for various good qualities and especially because she never felt the need to ask or specify what was hers and what was her son’s. The last line of the poem is a quotation from Anna Komnena’s citation of the bull by which Alexios made his mother in effect empress (*Alexiad* 3.6): “ ‘mine or yours,’ this cold expression was not said.” The question, “What’s mine and what’s not mine” has a long philosophical lineage antedating Alexios by a thousand years and more: Socrates in Plato’s *Republic* 462c wonders if an integral state would have as citizens all who agreed on “what is mine” and “what is not mine,” while Aristotle questioned the integrity of the sense of “all” in such a formulation (*Politics* 1261 b 18). Alexios found his answer in total submission. Cavafy approves.

Anna Dalassini was strong, courageous and wise, and her son, Alexios, yearned to have her take command. So at least Anna Komnena represents their relationship. As you read Cavafy on Kratesikleia and on Anna Dalassini, you might easily turn to thoughts of his mother, Harikleia, widowed mother of seven boys, all of whom she loved and doted on, most perhaps Constantinos, her seventh and last. She called him “Thin One” using English, and he called her “Fat One,” likewise in English. In greatly reduced finances and a correspondingly lower level of living arrangements, she maintained her dignity and a place in Alexandrian society. This is not to say that Kratesikleia and Anna Dalassini were composed as conscious tributes to a particular mother or to motherhood in general, but it is notable that the prominent women in Cavafy’s poems are mothers, and they are sympathetic figures.

There are in addition to those regal women the grieving mothers: In “Faithless,” Thetis cries in bewilderment at a god’s manifest injustice. Apollo himself had promised her son, Achilles, life, and was that god who killed him. In “Prayer,” a drowned sailor’s mother prays in vain for his safe return, and in “Aristoboulos,” Alexandra grieves and rages and despairs at the murder of her beautiful son.

Harikleia died in 1899, by which time she had lost two sons, one to death and one to prolonged absence. A loving son could share her grief as well as grieve for himself and his own loss.

“Dignity” comprehends the gravity, the importance of propriety. Its enactment requires abnegation over and over again. “*Che Fece . . . il Gran Rifiuto*” ratifies the decision of a poor soul, thought to be Crispinus, who once was made pope, but who after a few short months renounced that elevation and demoted himself. Dante, in *Inferno* 3.60 has been led by his guide, Vergil, to the place of punishment. There he recognizes a person whom he judges guilty of cowardice. He describes the man’s travails as follows (here in Longfellow’s translation):

I looked and I beheld the shade of him
Who made through cowardice the great refusal.
Forthwith I comprehended, and was certain
That this the sect was of caitiff wretches
Hateful to God and to his enemies.
These miscreants, who never were alive,

Were naked and were stung exceedingly
By gadflies and by hornets that were there.
These did their faces irrigate with blood,
Which with their tears commingled at their feet
By the disgusting worms were gathered up.

Why did the man say no? Because of cowardice, says Dante. But Cavafy says it is because he had an accurate sense of who he was. He knew himself and what was appropriate for himself. He had to suffer for his choice, but it was the right choice. And so for Cavafy he is a model for courage and wisdom. The evaluation is made clear in the title of the poem: Cavafy deleted from Dante's formulation the damning judgment, *per viltà*.

In "Greek from Old," the city of Antioch personified boasts of having all the things a city might want:

Antioch is very proud of her splendid buildings,
pleasant streets, and all around her
wonderful countryside and the great numbers
resident there; she is proud to be the seat
of glorious kings; proud she has artists
and wise men and the deeply rich
and prudent merchants . . .

Antioch, Cavafy says at the close, is proud beyond all else of being related to Greece. But what exactly is the connection? Argive colonists from Greece founded Ione once upon a time in honor of Inachos's daughter. But Io is a myth: Zeus fancied her. Hera was jealous. Zeus turned the beautiful girl into a heifer. Hera created a gadfly to drive the poor cow over two continents, until finally she was released and died, possibly somewhere near the Antioch that was to be. This story, not told but introduced as context by the names in the last line, is an ancient illustration of what justice is not. It is as well a mythic expression of the psychological lability of pagan gods. One such adventure out from many of Zeus's forays does not constitute a substantive basis for an ancestral connection. The irony is compounded: Antioch is proud of things that are in sum vanity, and to top that, the thing they are proudest of is a myth.

Here is an instance of Cavafy's "pedestal without a statue," as George Seferis amplified an earlier critic's metaphor (*On the Greek Style*, "Cavafy and Eliot" 147–149). The poem also shows an aspect of Cavafy's vision of Hellenism. These outlying communities in their need will seize what they can. Compare "Philhellene," "In Church," "On an Italian Shore," and "People of Poseidonia."

An analogous example is "To Antiochos Epiphanes," where a young man would gladly offer as thanksgiving for a Macedonian triumph:

the lion, and the horses, the Pan made of coral,
the elegant palace, the garden in Tyre,
and all else you gave me, Antiochos Epiphanes.

On the bedrock of Cavafy's evaluation, the boy would give vanities for the Greeks to win a battle. The battle in question, a crushing defeat for Hellenism, was, as Cavafy notes in closing, a "hideous ending."

But let us turn to other vanities, to jewels, first those not present in the poem, "Of Colored Glass." John Kantakouzenos and his bride Irene wore for their coronation at Vlachernai bits and shards of colored glass for jewels. The poem's speaker finds nothing improper here.

. . . Nothing

mean, no disgrace, I would say,
in these pieces made of colored glass.
Instead they are like a grievous protest
against injustice, the wretched destiny
of the two being crowned.

They are emblems of what it befit them to have
of what it was wholly right that they have

Jewels in Cavafy's poems elsewhere can signal futility. Think of the two consuls and the praetors in
"Waiting for the Barbarians":

Why did our two consuls and praetors
come out today with their red embroidered togas?
Why the bracelets with so many amethysts
rings with emeralds that flash and shine?

They attire themselves for imposing grandeur, to alert their barbarians to their potency. But there are
no barbarians.

Compare "Alexandrian Kings":

Caesarion stood in front
dressed in pink silk
garland of hyacinths at his breast
belt a double row of sapphires and amethysts
shoes tied by white ribbons
embroidered with rose-colored pearls.
He was named greater than the little ones.
He was named King of Kings.

The children are bejeweled. Jewels are one of the props by which the people are to recognize their
royalty. Cavafy presents a fabulous scene: brave titles, grand appointments, and a cheering crowd.
Those who make up that crowd, however, know: they don't believe a word. But it's a lovely day, and
aren't the figures in the pageant fun to watch.

and still the Alexandrians ran to the fun
enthusiastic and cheering
Greek Egyptian even Hebrew
enchanted by the beautiful sight
although Yes, they knew what it was worth,
what empty words were these kingdoms.

Cavafy here shows himself to be the historian that he sometimes thought of himself as being. He
informs his readers where Herodotus, in an analogous situation, did not. The Greek historian more
than two millennia before had wondered (1.60) how on earth Athenians, who were known to be so
clever, could ever have fallen for Peisistratus' trick. Peisistratus had dressed up a big country girl in
an Athena costume, put her in a chariot, taught her some moves, and had her proceed through the Attic
countryside, urging people to accept Peisistratus on his return from exile. Cavafy's insight is
enlightening, for it lets us see those long ago farmers in the Attic countryside, canny and practical.
They assessed what could be done and what could not, and they said yes. They might even have
laughed as they did so.

But to return to that coronation at Vlachernai, Cavafy could be saying, "Since the act of ruling is in itself a vanity, the jewels that advertise it are also a vanity. Why not then false jewels?"

"The Shop's" tells of a jeweler who displays some of his wares for sale and keeps safe and secret his own special creations, which are jewels that represent flowers:

. . . roses made of rubies
lilies of pearl, violets out of amethysts.

As a responsible retail merchant, he sells excellent wares, but they are not what he truly loves. His passion, his obsession is for a special tour de force: he takes what is beautiful in nature and turns it into something artificial. A rose, a lily, a violet becomes thereby a stone decoration. Does Cavafy celebrate beauty here? Or does he consign the jeweler's work to "costume?" Is artifice for Cavafy really superior to nature's wonders? It is possibly so. When do we ever find him wholly immersed in the beauties of our physical universe?

Jewels as adornment, while in essence vanity, serve also as costume, and costume can point as signpost to reality. This may happen when Demetrios in "King Demetrios":

took off his golden raiment and
threw his purple shoes away.

He had been a king, and famous for his gorgeous apparel, and beyond that he had been recognized and hymned a few years before as a god at Athens. But a time came when the Macedonians lost faith, and Demetrios understood what it was appropriate for him to do. Plutarch (*Life of Demetrios* 44) disparagingly sees him as an actor, leaving the stage. Cavafy, however, approves: Demetrios is not only divesting himself of his kingship, he is relinquishing his "divinity" as well.

To take up a few more of Cavafy's costumes, there is the awful cinnamon-colored suit that the boy of "Days of 1908" takes off when he goes for a swim. Naked, he appears beautiful, as he truly is. And in "Picture of a 23 Year Old Young Man Done by a Friend of the Same Age, Amateur," attire is important enough to start the poem.

He finished the portrait yesterday noon.
Now he examines details: he did him in gray
unbuttoned garb, dark gray,
no waistcoat, no cravat, but with a pink
shirt, opened, for something to show
of the beauty of his breast and his throat.

Compare the notorious boy in the loges ("At the Theater"): His careful dress is a vital element of his allure, as is that of the love-dazed boy in "On the Street." There is also the young man who was bought for two suits and some silk handkerchiefs in "Flowers White and Pretty, How Very Right They Were." The poor boy in "Days of 1909, '10, and '11" and rich Orophernes have something in common: the boy's taste for a nice shirt and necktie and Orophernes' pleasure in turquoises as adornment signal a bad end in both poems.

The conventional Seleucid Demetrios in "The Seleucid's Displeasure" provides another example: he lives by the hypocrisies that he feels have helped him to survive, and so he offers Ptolemy, his fellow kinglet, who has come to Rome to beg, what he regards as the requisite costume.

For this the Seleucid Demetrios was upset
and offered Ptolemy right off
scarlet raiment, a shiny crown, precious jewels,
many servants and attendants,

his most expensive horses
for Ptolemy to present himself at Rome
as he ought, a Greek monarch
of Alexander's line.

But the Lagid Ptolemy perceives what is truly appropriate. He accordingly chooses a costume of his own and presents himself to the Romans in one that proclaims his beggary. This slant, as often, is in contradistinction to that in the poet's source, in this case, Diodorus Siculus 31.12, where Demetrios's magnanimity is admired. Again, Manuel Komnenos in the poem named for him, dresses himself as a monk. He has begun to think about the life hereafter. Cavafy closes his poem with a straight-faced blessing, in which he gives Manuel's costume its due:

Happy all who believe
and like Lord King Manuel end
dressed most simply in their belief

An honorary decree might be thought of as a costume. Cavafy presents us with a supple official who is directing an associate how to revise the text of an honorary decree. The city's official praise, full of superlatives, had been cut into stone to celebrate the victor in a battle. The battle was at Actium, and the locals in this town had optimistically styled Antony the victor. Octavian, presumed to be vanquished, was therefore set down in the decree as "pernicious," and "comic copy of a Caesar" as well. Fortunately, however, each of the two names, Antony and Octavian, took up the same space when inscribed. All that had to be done, in view of the actual outcome of the battle, was to switch names wherever they occurred in the text. ("In A Town in Asia Minor"). The wonderful virtues and achievements ascribed to the honorand receive thereby a proper evaluation. They are mere words that flutter about the shoulders of a man who has won a battle. These like fake jewels are a proper reward for victory in a battle, even a battle by which an empire has been won. "The king is dead, long live the king." Yes, but Cavafy also gives us an official who understands value. The wellbeing of his town is precious and words of praise for a victory in a battle can be productive.

The stirring features of church functions, they too can be thought of as "costume." In "At Church," Cavafy's speaker lists as what he loves most about church things that a Hellenistic philosopher might have classified as "indifferent" (ἀδιάφορα).

I love church, its seraphim
silver appointments candlesticks
pulpit icons lights.

These things are not good. They are not bad. They are simply "indifferent." And in this, they have, like costume, no value in themselves. Here, assembled as details in a list, they constitute a profile of inappropriate response.

Cavafy likewise counsels appropriate response by way of Mark Antony as Antony's time runs out. It is the time Shakespeare imagined when he had Antony saying, "Call to me all my sad captains." (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act III, scene 13). In "The God Leaves Antony," the title a quote from Plutarch, *Antony*, the scene is Alexandria, the time 31 BCE. Antony has lived virtually as a king, and kings were at the time represented as having been invested with their majesty by a god. For Antony the god would have been Dionysos. But now his god is passing audibly away from him and out of Alexandria. Cavafy can unhesitatingly recommend grace and rational acceptance of that departure, because he knows the true value of kingship, assumed divinity, riches and power. Does he feel sympathy for Antony, that great riotous soldier and lover? Yes, he may, and that is why he wants Antony (and us) to measure appropriately the dimensions of his loss.

A sense of propriety and correct behavior under stress had to be an important control in the life of a male homosexual brought up in a genteel Alexandrian Greek family. But the physical act of making love, no matter whether between lovers of the same or opposite sex, or when autoerotic, turns the notion, dignity, into an irrelevance. Any attempt to connect that notion with the act would change the “love” of love-making into something else: theatrics, possibly, or hypocrisy, or grim duty, or martyrdom. But for a homoerotic male of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a Judeo-Christian world, love-making often had to be enacted as a criminal enterprise: secret, coded, fearful.

While no one would want to think of dignity when making love, which brings on an abandonment of self-consciousness, evocations of such acts, cast as poetry, have invested them over the course of millennia with dignity and grace. The distillation by poetry is wholly proper and appropriate. And Cavafy in his erotic poems reaches that poetic distillation when remembering what in the eyes of the majority was an improper passion. “The Chandelier” illuminates as metaphor homoerotic sensibility, desire, and situation in society. “Afternoon Sun” creates a scene that any two lovers in the world could want to commemorate. “Bandaged Shoulder,” which Cavafy did not allow to be published in his lifetime, comes close to exaltation and at the same moment debasement. And in that structured abandonment there is truth and dignity.

“Before the House” tells of a self-induced climax, but so discreetly that it is not easy to be sure of an exact meaning. This same consummation can be divined in other poems such as “One Night,” “For Them to Come,” “Grey,” “Half Hour” and “Body Remember.” Cavafy found the act of composing poetry physically arousing, especially when his poetry had a memory as its prompt. There situation and circumstance are recorded in words and phrases that attest rapture and at the same time transmute an electrical/chemical reflex into a lasting aesthetic experience. The reflex itself, wished for, consummated, not consummated, is poetry now, hence beautiful, appropriate, and enshrined.

An indirect admonition closes “The City,” one like that in Horace, *Epistles* 1.11.27: *caelum non animam mutant, qui trans mare currunt*. “They change their sky not their spirit, people who run away across the sea.” Cavafy’s tone is darker than Horace’s silky remonstrance, and he may be counseling himself as well as his readers. Both poets are providing useful, practical advice. They tell us that there is an appropriate way to live in a place, namely to perceive how we live there: a change of abode has no value in itself.

A different but complementary instruction for living, “Proceed with caution,” ends with: “Take and read that message when it is offered you,” an urgent and futile appeal to Caesar on the last day of his life (“The Ides of March”). The poem begins:

Be afraid, my soul, of grandeurs
and if your love of glory
you cannot overcome
pursue it with doubt and caution:
the more you go on,
test and attend the more.

George Seferis observes that this is the only poem in which Cavafy addresses his soul (Savvides, *Ο Καβάφης του Σεφέρη*, p. 190). Plutarch (*Life of Caesar* 65) tells the story behind the poem: Caesar was unable to read the message that might have saved his life, because the crowd was pressing him too hard. “On the Way to Sinope” touches on the same theme. In both poems, readers know or can guess the outcome, one that neither Caesar nor Mithridates could ask for. “Theodotus” also presents Caesar and the reader with a mistrust of temporal security.

Cavafy often used an instrument of comic writing, namely paradox. The aim was to provoke a smile and with that smile an openness to instruction. Witness “Ithaca” again, and “Waiting for the

Barbarians” and “Alexandrian Kings” and “Footsteps” and “King Demetrios.” In these poems a scene unfolds, in telling detail, in “Alexandrian Kings” it is glowing detail. At close a lesson caps the poem against one’s expectation: it is a paradox. “They Should Have Concerned Themselves,” a bleak look at how some personnel of a local political organization are evaluated, is a slightly rougher example of comic writing, and not one that employs paradox. The projected bosses cannot be said to have much in the way of value. “The Beneficence of Alexander Vala” is a pointed footnote to Cavafy’s overall assessment of those who rule.

Cavafy’s surprises figure in his two poems about Nero. In “Nero’s Limit,” the Emperor reposes comfortably, not at all disturbed by god’s warning that he is to fear the number seventy-three. He is after all only forty-three years old. But at the end of the poem, Cavafy reminds readers that in Spain Galba, a general seventy-three years of age, is assembling and training an army. A Roman biographer closer to Nero’s time, gave the Emperor enough serenity even in his last moments to preen: “What an artist dies with me.” (*Qualis artifex pereo*. Suetonius, *Nero* 41) Also in “Footsteps,” a second version published as one of the 154, and not much changed from an earlier version entitled “Footsteps of the Eumenides,” Cavafy is close to positing a universal; he is warning that there is a punishment for murderers: the Furies are on their way.

“Young Men of Sidon, 400 AD” shows Cavafy at his most provocative. What are we to understand from a confrontation, a young aesthete facing up to the ghost of an ancient poet, in an atmosphere strongly suggestive of a hothouse? The date in the title has its own resonances. Civilization is under siege. As the poem begins, perfumed young men sit in a hall, enjoying poetry readings by an actor they have hired. The actor, after reading poems by other earlier poets, comes to a four-line epigram, attributed to the Athenian tragic poet, Aeschylus. The epigram in its entirety runs as follows: “This grave-monument of wheat-bearing Gela covers Aeschylus, an Athenian, son of Euphorion. The Marathonian grove might tell of his famous valor and so too in full awareness, the bushy-haired Mede.”

While the actor is still reading, a young man jumps up and interrupts. He challenges Aeschylus directly. How can the poet talk about his soldiering and not about the tragedies he composed? One senses that Cavafy could happily have been with those young men in the hall, listening to that poetry from olden times, breathing in a garden’s fragrance, and the spurs of the young men. His young protagonist is a kindred spirit in one dimension, an unworldly aesthete, the *litterateur* who would die for art. Cavafy could love the young man’s fire and approve his stance but at the same time perhaps find him comic. How could this perfumed young man, this connoisseur of letters evaluate the contributions of a soldier, one who, let it be added, helped to save western civilization in one of the earliest key battles against Persia? Are there conditioning stories to help a reader appreciate Cavafy’s lively scene? Well, for one thing, the Athenian claim that Marathon helped save western civilization was a favorite theme in Attic oratory but Cavafy as historian and clear-eyed reader could have doubted the perfect validity of that claim. There is also the question of authorship. Did Aeschylus himself compose that epitaph? Some believe he did not. It may be enough to say that Cavafy was smiling when he wrote this poem. The poet, Fernazes, shows in another contest that a poet’s mind is on his poetry, no matter that he is being given news that means the end of his civilization as he knows it (“Dareios”).

Cavafy was often, but not always, an ironist. Irony is implicit in the perspective when he sets up a scene or situation in which characters behave in a way they believe to be wholly proper or realistic, but which Cavafy knows, and his readers know, is improper or unrealistic. There is the Syrian student for instance, who announces that he can taste all the carnal pleasures and thereafter by means of self-discipline and study relinquish them and become an ascetic. But the vigor of his assertion is sapped by his qualification. He enters a possibly stormy sea dragging what he conceives to be a lifeboat behind

him. Will that lifeboat save him? Cavafy permits us to doubt (“The Dangers”).

Julian, a Roman emperor (361–363 ce) later surnamed Apostate, became, in his opposition to Christianity, a figure of enduring interest for Cavafy. Julian once laconically presented himself as a competent critic of Christianity. In “You Do Not Comprehend,” a Christian, as competent critic of Julian, rebukes him with a brief punning response: Julian read, to be sure, but did not understand.

Christians too can reveal shallowness, arrogance, and misdirection. In “A Great Train of Priests and Laity” Julian is dead. A Christian displays all too human pleasure as he gloats on the consequent discomfiture of his pagan neighbors. In tone, he could be a distant cousin to that monk who growls in Robert Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.” The Christian closes with a pious hope: “Let us wish most reverent Jovian well.” We readers know that Jovian, Julian’s immediate successor as Emperor, soon decreed a general freedom of worship that would not please our self-satisfied narrator.

Compare “Priest at the Serapeion”: The Christian son’s agony is real while his Christianity is flawed. In “The Saving of Julian,” Cavafy, as the historian he could be, questions the historicity of a Christian account. In “Julian Observing Too Little Esteem,” a Christian takes Julian at his own word and reminds him that Greeks believe in their old adage, “Nothing too much.” In “Julian and the Men of Antioch,” Cavafy, speaking in the voice of a contemporary of Julian’s, asks how anyone could possibly expect the men of Antioch to prefer Julian’s posturing to Christianity, a system of belief and practice that does not interfere in any way with their pursuit of pleasure.

But Cavafy is not always ironic: In “Myres” he creates a pagan young man from long ago, full of love and human feelings, who is excluded from his dear friend Myres’s obsequies, as they are being performed by Myres’s family and fellow Christians. His pain and puzzlement are genuine. The situation instructs. There is no place for irony. The speaker is profoundly aware of the power of Christian belief. Readers will recognize Myres’s inability to enter into a truly loving relationship.

The speaker in “Symeon” also discovers the power of Christianity. He is an influential poet, living in Syria in the fifth century ce. He is accustomed to being asked to appraise and judge the work of other poets of the day, but now he has seen Symeon Stylites. Symeon was an ascetic who lived all by himself on a pedestal which he finally raised to a height of sixty feet from the ground. Christians came from all around to gain inspiration from Symeon’s witnessing, and it was in the midst of such a crowd that our speaker, a pagan, recently found himself. Now he finds it hard to think about ranking contemporary poets. He has been unsettled by his experience.

“At Church” is a good example of inappropriate response. The speaker is alert, perceptive, capable of getting outside of himself and at the same time misdirected. He dwells not on God but on the glories of Hellenism, which is, like Christianity, an absolute with ambivalent attributes throughout Cavafy’s poems. Cavafy was not a church-goer in his lifetime, and when he lay dying he refused last rites at first. He did, however, at last agree to receive them before he died.

Jews get a sympathetic hearing in the few poems in which they play a part. When they are doing wrong it is not because they are Jews; it is because they are not being true to their teachings. Eurion wrote a history that would last, and moreover, or most important, he was beautiful (“Eurion’s Grave”). Ianthes Antoniou in “Of the Jews” wanted passionately to be a Jew, and said so repeatedly, but the Alexandrian life claimed him at last. Herod mourned the drowned Aristoboulos, and so did Alexander his wonderful, grieving, helpless, raging mother. Alexander Jannaeus and his Queen Alexandra have all the appearances and appurtenances of success, and yet they must tell themselves that they are pees of the Greek monarchs around them, and in so doing they reveal that they are not. They cannot finally be themselves. Cavafy does not even hint at the ghastly slaughter of his fellow Jews that Alexander supervised and enjoyed at another time. Josephus (*Jewish War* 1.4.6) provides details.

Cavafy finds one Jew, Eurion, good and beautiful, and another, Ianthes, fallible, in that he fell short of what it meant to be a Jew. Aristoboulos was a victim, and his princess mother as well. Alexander

Jannaeus could easily have been portrayed less sympathetically.

As for “Hellenism,” again and again a character in one of Cavafy’s poems wants to be Greek. Some base their claim on a myth, some had it and lost it, some have it but misconstrue it. Still there remains at the end a quality, a sense of being Greek that is an absolute, no matter what extravagances or hopes or fears accompany it. And it is something precious and real.

To sum up, Cavafy honored courage and wisdom, and found inspiring examples in all phases and times of the Greek past, which he knew as well as any historian, and the Greek present, in which he languished, suffered, worked, made love, and consecrated himself to poetry and beauty. The seemingly peculiar angle from which he viewed the world was in part due to a healthy philosophical assessment of most things most people want. He had also the sort of humor that enabled him to laugh at himself, as in his confessional “Morning Sea”:

Let me stand and let me look for a little at nature
morning sea and cloudless sky
bright violet-blue and lemon banks
beautiful all and grandly lit.
Let me stand here and let me fool myself that I see them
(I did for a second really when first I took my stand)
and not here too my fantasies
my recollections, the images of pleasure.

Poems

Walls

Without regard, compasssion or shame,
they built around me great high walls.

And I sit here now and despair.
No other thought: my fate eats me.

Because I had so many things to do outside.
Alas, when they were building the walls
how could I not pay attention?

But I never heard noise from the builders, not a sound.
Without my notice they closed me in from the world outside.

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