

CONSTANTINE P. KAVAFIS

C.P. CAVAFY : Poets' Poet - 1863-1933

(Lecture on the centenary of his birth) - ~~Conway Hall,
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~~LADIES & GENTLEMEN~~

I think it only fair to say that in this essay, today, thirty years after Cavafy's death, there is nothing which has not already appeared in some form or other in the many sketches, critiques, reviews and biographical and literary studies ^{written about} of him. There is, in other words, very little of independent research except for a couple of suggestions and views by persons who had known him and haven't as yet rushed to print, which helped to fill up some ^{insignificant} ~~residual~~ lacunae in my knowledge of the poet. Much, of course, about Cavafy remains to be published. The post-Wolfenden climate of toleration which is spreading, (if that is the appropriate word for climate) may help. We can only hope. The centenary celebrations by stimulating interest will undoubtedly do so.

The difficulty, however, is to start. One has to, somehow. Usually this dilemma is resolved by a platitude or an assertion. But when the subject is a poet of concentrated intensity - a cool, immaterial intensity which we still feel to be growing - and a man darting from "one dark corner to another", the matter is not so easy. In the first place the effervescent artist has not yet settled into a definite pattern to be examined as an 'empirical fact', and in the second, the man persists in remaining protected by darkness -

only one part of his world has been unveiled, the most unattractive.

Also there is nothing about him, word or deed, upon which one can fasten, in order to explore and record. Rainer Maria Rilke may state that:- 'I am my own legislator and King; none is above me, not even god'; Kazantzakis may dramatise his passage through life as "a bloodstained line from cradle to grave" and proclaim himself 'free' because he fears nothing, expects nothing, believes in nothing. By the same token St. Anthony may feel himself supreme because he does not succumb to woman and Francis of Assisi that he is above discomfort, illness or ^{/hunger,} because he fears God, expects salvation, believes in truth. At the other end of the scale we hear the tired soul of Baudelaire crying out 'Anywhere out of the world'.

Meaningless or theatrical, these postures and utterances have, however, the quality of drama. They attract our attention even while we dismiss their absurdity and theatricality. They manage to establish their own precarious foothold in history and enable even the onlooker to make that his point of departure in investigating the ^{behind them.} ~~man~~ Immoderate and outlandish behaviour is a kind of gimmick. It helps. So does advertising. And poets, prophets, heresiarchs... ^{and} ~~occasionally politicians~~ are usually their own best public relation officers. They project themselves upon the screen of popular imagination and stake their claim to the consideration of the future. But, Cavafy was incapable of histrionics. Anything in the form of the big lie, the big catching lie, about himself would have been rejected by his fastidious mind as barbaric. Or if not barbaric as something ^{smacking} ~~of~~ ^{bazaar} ~~of~~ behaviourism where the most vocal

is usually the most noticeable. One can almost hear him say with his customary affectation; 'Such things do not appeal to me. They are cheap. For the others, yes. Not for me'.

He gives us a glimpse in THE BEST YOU CAN.

And if you cannot fashion your life
The way you like it at least
Try and do the best you can.
Do not cheapen it
By too much contact with the crowds
By too much to-ing and fro-ing and chatter.

Do not cheapen it
By dragging it constantly around
Parading and exposing it
To the daily, idiotic routine
Of handshakes and halloes
Till it becomes something strange and alien
To you, something of a burden.

But if he did not boast or indulge in impressive *sciamachies* it does not mean that, as a poet, he thought any less of his prowess. He could not, true, shout like Rilke, or Kazantzakis, bare his soul like Baudelaire, he considered even Aeschylean Prometheus tiresome and ... so virtuous; but, for himself he could accept no peer. At least he imitated none. He believed in the daemonic~~al~~ power of his intellect. It had the ability, even early on in life, to tear through whatever were the layers of

illusion/ to the bare bone of substance or to the hardest core of illusion. His achievement as an artist lay chiefly in the fact that he disciplined the frenzy of his mind and confined it into an art form as severe and complete as a chiselled, glittering marble tomb - at least at first acquaintance! Because after the first, there is invariably the second more intimate and more correct acquaintance.

"I never work from immediate impressions" he was fond of saying. "With me the impression, the experience must get old become something else, become, in a way false, by itself without my helping it to become false".

At the age of fifty he could distill a fresher and falser reminiscence of the ^{reverse} ~~reverse~~ passion of his youth.

I never held back, never restrained myself.

I let go completely and went;

I went into the dazzling night,

And to enjoyments half real, half imagined

which obsessed my mind

Abandoned myself.

And I drank of the strongest wines

As only

The valiant of pleasure drink. (I WENT)

This is a sample of his art; it has its own idiosyncrasy - a significant one. Another thing about it, equally significant, is the viewpoint.

E.M. Forster in a delightful passage on Cavafy in his book PHAROS and PHARILLON published in 1923, describes him as a "Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe." This is an immortal phrase often quoted and it is both Forster and Cavafy, observer and observed rolled into one. It may be that E.M. Forster simply described the way Cavafy entered his field of vision. He always carried a walking stick - an expensive one! - and when still he had the habit of bending his knees forward arching his back and throwing his head backwards with the stick as the hind leg of the tripod. He thus did stand at an angle to the Cartesian plain! But I believe Forster's expression goes deeper. Cavafy always, or more or less always, looked at reality from a slightly different angle. This is not like saying that his view was jaundiced or that he had a pet, philosophical way of looking at things ... seeing them either upside down or down-side up. But like the animals who are more sure-footed at night in comparison with us, because they keep their eyes on the horizon than directly in front of them, perhaps his angle of observation enabled him to see things a bit more clearly. In any case he saw in a unique way; neither through the prism of prejudice nor through the distorting mirrors of specialised theories or a 'regulated' world-outlook.

His oblique glance fell on Demetrius. Not the Christian saint but the most famous warrior from amongst Alexander's successors. He was nicknamed the ^{Po-hiorcetes} ~~Po-hiorcetes~~ because he was adept at conquering cities. (He proved to be a great commander both by land and ^{on} ~~the~~ sea; he built massive warships, invented the first machine guns shooting

up to two hundred arrows simultaneously propelled by the unwinding of robes made from women's hair). He was intrepid, handsome, generous and a great lover. Plutarch, with his ~~scholastic~~ scholastic and unloving mind says ~~that~~ Demetrius justified the words of Plato "that great natures produce great vices as well as virtues"; describes him as "amorous, intemperate, warlike, munificent, sumptuous in his way of living, overbearing in his manner." This is as it may. But what of Cavafy?

Does he take any one facet of the man to uphold, denigrate, moralise? ~~Yes~~ He takes only one moment: the supreme. The moment when a man faces an ultimate decision and the way he reacts to it. And says:

When the Macedonians abandoned him,
 And showed their preference for Pyrrhus
 King Demetrius (magnanimous Demetrius)
 Did not behave
 (So the saying goes)
 Like a King at all.
 He went off, discarded his robes of gold
 And threw away his purple royal shoes.
 Then speedily dressed himself in simple
 poor clothes and stole away quickly.
 He behaved like the actors do;
 When the show is over
 Change clothes and depart.

All of a sudden new light is shed on Demetrius. The conqueror

is sharply delineated, he becomes frail - he becomes a man. He is not made of the stuff the bull-dozers of history are made of who plough their way and remain to the end ... bulldozers, either destructive, rudely useful and efficient or just senseless and irresistible forces. He engages our sympathy. We see him without awe, take his measure and ~~at the same time we~~ see power for what it is - flamboyant, burdensome, but essentially stagey. Take the props away ... "The Macedonians abandoned him ... "Hitler or Stalin abandoned" ... what then? We can speculate and maybe we can learn. So we take our own measure too. Cavafy helps. And I must add this now in case it is omitted later on:- An acceptable humanism breathes through his work. We feel better knowing him.

Perhaps these two poems, the one esoteric, or KAVAFIC the other Historical - Enigrammatic, - in neither case is the description accurate - can be made the two poles between which his thoughts and moods oscillate. If so then we find an indirect way of approaching the man, understanding him and feel for his poetry. Basically Cavafy was a man of the world who led a 'closed' public life; a sort of monkish boulevardier. He lived for practically all his life in Alexandria but inhabited the pagan world of the Hellenistic Kingdoms. He was of his time and out it. What was immediately before him he saw through a window-pane. What was remote and buried, he saw with all its brittle charm and significance. The immediate was raw and largely chaotic - what receded assumed individuality and content. His moods were vague but his fancies realistic. And he wrote in an idiom, in a rhythm and a style all his own. His self

was his supreme and, I believe, his only referent. Society existed in so far as its conditions weighed upon him and its caprices wounded him. He had very little of what was original to say but he had an impeccably original way of saying it. That, and a self-control which we feel it seething with strong passions underneath even when, and apparently because of his deep understanding of our human condition, he manages to achieve Olympian dissociation.

Perhaps I should say that in approaching Cavafy we find that his vocabulary is limited, his subject matter invariably commonplace; his language, one can say, pie-bald, his rhythm graceless and his inspiration monotonously pedestrian. These are one's first reactions. They have been mine. And yet if anyone were to make a list of ten of the most prominent European poets of our century, even of half a dozen, Cavafy's name will be among them. What is it that made this man shoot to the front rank of modern poetry? ^{Is it because} /Like Rilke, Mayakovsky and T.S.Eliot, Cavafy discovered new tensions, expanded the domain of poetry? That and something more ...

W.H. Auden is on record, acknowledging the influence of Cavafy on his own writing. The spirit of Cavafy permeates or more accurately envelops like filmy climate the whole of Durrell's disturbingly beautiful Alexandrian quartet. Seferis lauds him as the creator of a new poetic world and compares him here with the author of The Waste Land - a world which mirrors the ennui, hedonism and sophistication of modern man and modern man's rediscovery of mortality. His influence on contemporary thought has been enormous and is growing.

If what was said earlier about his language, etc., were true even to a ^{degree} ~~small extent~~, the question still remains. How are we to account for the prominence he has achieved?

"The world doesn't fear a new idea" says D.H. Lawrence. "It can pigeon-hole any idea. But it can't pigeon-hole a real new experience." The emphasis is on the real. And anyone going to Cavafy for the first time meets with a real new experience. He may not like it but he cannot ignore it for it is an EXPERIENCE.

How well do I remember the passionate arguments I had with some of my contemporaries thirty years ago, at the time of Cavafy's death. There were among them some who were his devotees. I was not one of them. Cavafy didn't and wouldn't speak to me. I liked more stirring poetry. Something that partook of the elemental, which spoke directly to me and produced that undefinable emotion which we call ^{transport} ~~transport~~, whether it was the poetry of Solomos, Palamas, Sikelianos, the overwhelming verse of Shakespeare, the luminous thought of Shelley, the intoxication of Byron or the movingly eloquent ^{cries} ~~cries~~ of Wilfred Owen rising from the bloody mud of Flanders. ~~still like~~ ~~appreciate~~ ~~pointing an accusing finger at killer-men - that~~. I still love this poetry perhaps more now. Cavafy appeared by contrast, prosaic, fastidious, withdrawn, constricted and whatever universal meaning he could attain it was circumvented by the unprepossessing quality of his verse and the predictably individual reality of his vision. I thought him affected, precious and a bit of an intellectual mountebank. At best, a clever, terse writer of epitaphs or something similar like inscriptions or little poetic

homilies. I even questioned the fact of his being a poet at all. Such, of course, are the clear but often erroneous reactions of youth. But in order to have definite reactions there ~~must~~^{must} be something definite and undisplaced to react against. Cavafy was there, sitting in his own little, closed world singing his personal themes in unmistakably individual tone and in his own even, pleasant voice. He could not be ignored.

Rejection was easy. But somehow the experience of his poetry was ineradicable. He could not be ignored. I returned to it years later. The changes I found in Cavafy (or were they in myself?) were enormous. I returned to him again and again and the more I read him the more I found to read, to enjoy and understand. Greek poetry was to me up to that point a colourful, mobile phantasmagoria - a ship in full sail on dark-blue waters, an eagle wheeling in the sky caught by the last rays of the sun, a silver balloon adrift, impressive and rather remote. Cavafy's poetry struck me suddenly as something different: a mirror or rather a hall of mirrors where one can see himself and what happens to be around him, in an endless series of reflections, vanishing into a tremulous infinity - himself yes, but not quite himself as there are so many reflections of him, each one a bit different.

With this new awareness Cavafy's poetry took on, as far as I was concerned, a new significance. His austere style became a disciplined art learned straight from Plato; his plain language, the almost tortured search for the right word irrespective of whether it was purist, demotic, classicist or medieval, (the Greeks ~~are~~

~~we have~~ have several forms of language) in order to express precisely what he wanted, no more and no less; his rhythm became sinewy - what was thought graceless was only its overtrained, the over-masculine vigour and its inspiration. And the cold exterior formerly so forbidding, dissolved into a warmth of beauty and humanity extending in endless vistas of perceptibly varying nuances and glitteringly rippling alternations of light and shade in all directions.

The man then, emerges through his poetry, fully matured, ~~not~~ the particularly complex and enigmatic personality he was thought to be, but in his individual reality fully developed - He emerges ~~clearly~~ and clearly drawn like a pen and ink portrait. Everything about him falls into place. We recognise the poet who composed exquisite sonnets, the man feeling for man. We catch his distinctly original tone of voice and in the perfect balance of his personal vision and imagery and their fusion with the precise word, the extent of the new poetic dimension.

Unfortunately it is impossible to transpose fully his rich imagery, or reproduce the effects of his style and mood which in Greek are as studiously and felicitously arranged as in a mosaic. An artist, he knew the true value of his artistic medium. Poetry must not be trifled with if it is to remain, at its best, the queen of arts. Shown once a bulky tome by his contemporary Palamas he commented: "If one were to mix up a lot of his verses and then draw accidentally a few out of a bag and read them out would he recognise them as his ... So much work. Such bulk!" Perhaps he was

right. His view of poetry is expressed in the poem THE FIRST RUNG.

The young poet Eumenes to Theocritus

Unburdened himself one day.

'For two long years I ceaselessly write

And have completed but one single idyll.

It is my only finished work.

Alas, I see it now how very tall

Is Poetry's ladder.

And from the first rung where now I stand

Poor me, I shall reach no higher."

Answered Theocritus:

"Your words are out of tune,

Utter blasphemies.

If, as you say, you are on the first rung already

You should feel proud and be content.

To rise thus high is not a little thing,

So much achieved is indeed true glory.

Even this first rung is a long way up

From the common world.

Only when you become a citizen of the city of ideas

In your own right, and only then

Can you reach it.

To enter that city is indeed difficult,

Enfranchisement exceptionally rare.

In her market square

You find legislators

THE IDES OF MARCH

Soul! Beware of your moods for grandeur.
And if ambition you cannot escape or stifle
Pursue it with reluctance and circumspection.
More careful and alert you must always remain
the further you advance, the higher your path winds.

And when you reach the top, Caesar at last;
when, that is, you take on illustrious form
become a man renowned,
then, above all, remember
while walking about the streets
- an august master upon whom all gaze -
followed by your attendants,
if someone from the crowd approaches,
some Artemidorus, holding a piece of paper,
mumbling fast "Read this quickly,
here is important news of great concern to you"
do not fail to stop; leave for another day
work and speeches; push aside
those in front of you, cut through the
bowing and scraping chorus
(you can see them all later on); let even
the Senators wait
for you must read, without delay,
the serious warnings writ by Artemidorus.

