

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

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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 of <sup>written about him</sup> ~~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 <sup>insignificant</sup> ~~magnificent~~ 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 <sup>/hunger,</sup> 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 man*. Immoderate and outlandish behaviour is a kind of gimmick. It helps. So does advertising. And poets, prophets, heresiarchs... and raving lunatics 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 <sup>smacking</sup> too much of <sup>"bazaar"</sup> Canaar/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 *sciamaiches* 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

illusions 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 <sup>nerve</sup> ~~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 <sup>Poliorcestes</sup> ~~Pehorcestes~~ because he was adept at conquering cities. (He proved to be a great commander both by land and <sup>on</sup> ~~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 ~~precisely~~ scholastic and unloving mind says ~~that~~ Demetrius justified the words of Plato "that great natives produce great vices as well as virtues", <sup>and</sup> 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? ~~No~~ 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 referant. 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? /Like Rilke, Mayakofsky 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 <sup>degree,</sup> certain 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 couldn'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, 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 <sup>lines</sup> of Wilfred Owen rising from the bloody mud of Flanders, ~~and, like~~ <sup>apparitions pointing an accusing finger at killer-men - at us.</sup> 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~~<sup>must</sup> be something definite and undisplaced to react against. Cavafy was there, sitting in his own little, closed world singing his personal themes in <sup>an</sup> 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 as ~~many~~



~~if you may know~~ 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 as~~ 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 composes 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



Whom no adventurer can delude.  
 To rise thus high is not a little thing  
 So much achieved is indeed true glory."

Even the underlying arrogance of the poem is not embarrassing and we forgive also the implied discrimination against the non-poets! After all it is not Cavafy who is saying it ... but Theocritus for Cavafy! His method, however, even by this one example becomes clear. He is non-didactic. He doesn't eulogise. He is a pragmatist philosopher recording poetically a transient mood. He records it so accurately, so laconically that it becomes permanent. By stripping the whole dialogue of all the contingent or accidental details which usually encumber life he shuts out reality and <sup>raises</sup> ~~raises~~ it to the dignity of the Platonic Idea. It is precisely this capacity of Cavafy to project his own sensibility indirectly through another character and give it thus extraneous substance that brought him primarily to the notice of the poets and established him in the poetic conscience as the "Poet's poet". It was through them and not, as ~~is~~ usually happens despite them, that he achieved the measure of international popularity he has achieved.

\* \* \* \*

#### THE MAN

"He is old now, bent and spent,  
 Ravaged by time and excess."

These are the opening lines of his poem VERY SELDOM. <sup>It</sup> ~~It~~ portrays an old man preoccupied with his miserable state but also musing about

the role he plays in the life of youth. He is old but:-

"Those now young murmur his own verses.  
 Before their sparkling eyes his own vision flicker.  
 Their healthy, voluptuous minds  
 Their shapely, well-knit bodies  
 Are moved and stirred  
 By his own view of beauty."

He wrote this when he was forty-eight. About someone else but, as usual, about himself. He was inaccurate both about the description of the old man and the inebriating effect of his poetry. A narcissist here, but only of the mind. At that age he was still well preserved, he was slim and looked about ten years younger - excess hadn't begun to tell yet - and his poetry was almost completely unknown. But confident of his work he was staking his claim for a place in the continuing parade of youth. He loved youth and loved the passion of life with an intensity that only those who have not tasted it fully and *roundly* appear to manage.

I do not propose to tell the story of his life. But something has to be said even if only to allow for a greater understanding of the man and for completer participation in his poetry. When we meet him as a young man cutting a neat figure in the cosmopolitan society of Alexandria a few years after the British occupation, he looks handsome, distinguished and appears promising. The future of Egypt and of himself ~~is~~ in making a go of things, appeared settled. But ... there is the woodworm of a 'but' in both cases. His air was aristocratic, his movements deliberate, rather con-



strained, his conversation smooth and knowledgeable. He could use at least four languages fluently and his brain was well-stocked with literature, historical knowledge and the current trivia which serve so admirably at social functions. He was darkish with a longish face and a fine head of black hair with a wave in it. His nose was large, his chin rather pointed and his mouth full and well-shaped. But the most striking feature were his eyes - large, mobile of magnificently brown colour, gazing upon the world with a mixture of wonder and calculation as if ready to give a rational universe the lie but only when his interest was aroused otherwise, withdrawn behind his pince-nez glasses, disturbed, fugitive. At the same time they covered up something and protected him from something. In old age the protectiveness and secretiveness of his eyes lent him a forbiddingly sour expression. Vulnerable in everything he turned his eyes and the pursing of lips, into a shield.

He was born in Alexandria on April 17 1863. His father born in Constantinople settled in Egypt in 1850 and built up an important ~~mercantile concern~~ <sup>business export concern</sup> dealing in cotton, grain, and ~~silks~~ <sup>skins</sup>. This was part of a wider export business with its seat originally in Constantinople but later transferred to Egypt with branches in London, Manchester and Liverpool under the name of Cavafy & Sons. The family was weighty and important. It had no sensational pedigree although it had produced two or three bishops - but in the orthodox as in the Catholic Church Bishops represent the dead end of a line; <sup>so they</sup> must remain celibate and of necessity issueless - and at least one Governor of the Rumanian city and province of Jassy then

under the Turks. Cavafy's father did well for himself and was decorated by the Khedive Ismail <sup>of Egypt</sup> for his services in developing the export trade of his adopted country. But he lived in style - a merchant mogul always in the heart of affaires with an impressive establishment, servants, carriages and what not, with nurses and governesses for the sons which his devoted, aristocratic, prolific Constantinopolitan wife was producing regularly every two years; (nine in all, one a girl, who ~~died~~ <sup>died alone</sup> with a boy, ~~died <sup>died</sup> in infancy). But when he died he left "very little" as the poet recorded later in his "Genealogy". He mentions the fact with regret. It is an implied criticism of his father. Naturally one cannot choose one's parents but neither does one choose one's offsprings. ~~(Perhaps the poet's criticism might have been reciprocated by the father... if he only knew.)~~~~

The father died when young Constantine Cavafy was eight years old. Two years later his mother left Egypt with her sons and settled in England. At first, for nearly 1½ years, they stayed in London at No.15 Queensborough Terrace, W.2., and then moved to Liverpool to a house in Balmoral Road. The business was flourishing but in 1877, for no reason that one can find readily explicable, the firm of Cavafy & Sons was dissolved and two years later the mother with six of her sons returned to Egypt.

C.P. Cavafy spent the years from 9 to 16 in England. At home he was speaking English and French with his governesses and tutors, Greek with his mother and Italian (occasionally) with his neighbour. In England he felt instantly at home - England has this unique and



inexplicable fascination to new-comers - more so as he felt at home in English. Here he had his first formal schooling. He didn't particularly like it. He was one of many and the "many" for some reason he could not understand, were objectionable and intrusive. Having had private tuition where he himself was the central and indispensable figure of all learning activities, naturally, and I say the word deliberately, he resented this new "dispensation" and tried to find compensation in precosity. He constantly demanded of his teachers more Greek and Latin. He wanted to learn history, literature. to show that he was above the other children. It was a formative period and for himself decisive. He was no longer closeted with and fussed over by his mother (he was her younger child). School had demands on his time and so did friends though he was not gregarious. Thus he was suddenly pushed on to the world and tried to find his balance. And as one of his biographers penetratingly remarks: "He spoke English like an English-boy and that flattered his intelligence. He avoided contact with the many and that satisfied his egoism. He cultivated an outlook which prepared him to think of himself as an English aristocrat: i.e. a man of leisure <sup>through</sup> ~~but~~ never short of money; cultivated but without decrees or diplomas; withdrawn and silent but with a storehouse of wisdom in his head."

By the time he returned to Egypt an Anglo-Greek boy of sixteen and a half, he was fashioned. The above observations were to apply to him more or less for the rest of his life. He was never rich from now on but never gave the impression of not being so. His well-bred manners remained impeccably patrician. He

became a man of the widest culture and could express it in several languages but never succeeded in having letters after his name. Eventually, of course, an imperishable word was added: Poet.

While in Liverpool he noticed the love and protectiveness of a strong vigorous boy for a younger one. He was not now so close to his mother and tenderness was more reserved. Did he pine for a transference of emotions ... He didn't know. He recorded it.

Back in Egypt he enrolled in the "Hermes Lyceum" to study commerce but instead devoted most of his time to the classics. Before he finished his studies the Egyptian anti-foreign but liberatory movement which has remained known in history as the Araby Pasha rebellion - the first of a series of Egyptian nationalist uprisings - broke out. The Cavafy family, like thousands of other Europeans, fled. This time they went to Constantinople to Mrs. Cavafy's father one of the pillars of the Greek community there. And while the Egyptian drama with its rebellion, religious fanaticism and excess was answered by the British cannonade and British take-over which became involuntarily the instrument of hammering a nation out of a geographical unit, C.P. Cavafy was exploring Constantinople learning about his family, about this legendary imperial city, about the Greek language, the great works of the new Greece from Digenis Akritas to Kóvharo's Erotokritos and down to his time, feeling the beat of history still marching on the shores of the Bosphorus<sup>u</sup> as it marched unceasingly during the previous sixteen centuries<sup>^</sup> and reading<sup>u</sup> about that history. With his perception of the essential and the durable he saw the crude Ottoman power for what it was and the



real significance of Constantinople resting on something more important - on culture. It was the culture which grew up and matured after Alexander's world shake-up and went on changing, embellishing, transforming itself and standing for a thousand years the guardian of thought and of human values up to the Turkish conquest, when the Renaissance took over:- (the Hellenistic-Byzantine civilisation). It was still intact. It held together and animated the many hundreds of thousands of Greeks who constituted the bulk of the population of Constantinople at the time with Phanari and the Orthodox Patriarchate at the centre. Up to then Cavafy <sup>a Greek, was literally,</sup> ~~was~~ a man without a country. Now he found one. Not a physical but a spiritual one - the Greek world or that part of it, which stretched from the first Ptolemies of Egypt and the <sup>Seleucids</sup> ~~Seleucids~~ down to the Crusaders. He was to remain loyal to it.

To his British-trained mind with its ingrained love of poetry and literature was now added a new discipline - history - and another love - humanity. This was deepened by his own personal tragedy or what he chose to make <sup>a tragedy</sup> ~~of~~ his weakness or according to others of his vice - homosexuality. The tendency was there for years. He realised it and fought against it. Now at 20, he gave in to it - to the act of fellatio and passive, in his case ardent, homosexual intercourse. He 'abandoned' himself completely to this passion. His family returned to Alexandria, his brothers first, then his mother. But he stayed in his grandfather's home studying during the day and out into the disreputable districts <sup>of Constantinople</sup> ~~at~~ <sup>at night.</sup> ~~It~~ <sup>was not difficult to</sup> find what he was after. The East senses these conditions <sup>un-</sup>erringly and reacts to them instantaneously one way or another.

Besides he was beautiful and there was a feminine delicacy about him. He ran risks and eventually discovered that what he thought a secret between himself and whoever happened to be the participant was becoming known. He was being "categorised" and pointed out in the streets.

He returned to Alexandria a man now. His brief-case loaded with manuscripts, verses, comments, translations etc., and himself with remorse. For a while the change did him good. But soon he was back at his nocturnal wanderings in the malodorous quarters of the city. It is his tragic odyssey. He dared not acknowledge it, for it carried a stigma and tried hard, desperately hard to overcome it. He kept making resolutions; he wrote down meticulously his thoughts and his resolutions. He must control himself... He must stop! We hear him telling himself. He succeeds. For a while he feels free, and a new man. But then comes the word: "Succumbed." It has a ring of finality about it. We feel the atmosphere becoming heavy. But the resolution recurs. Will-power asserts itself again and again. It lasts days, weeks sometimes months but at the end of each cycle there is that fatal, mocking word "Succumbed", followed by the date written with a weary acceptance of the inevitable. He did not try to justify it like Andre' Gide and he did not consider it a social asset - it was, definitely not so in his day. Since he wanted to be otherwise <sup>re. a heterosexual</sup> and tried hard, even to the point of having tutorials - so I understand - at the hands of an accomplished Italian "lady" but was physiologically and psychologically incapable of it he accepted it as part of his life. With his passion cured, or at least



subdued, by age, he could recollect its essence in his poetry. Gone were the indignities, the extortions, the blackmails and the occasional brutalities which savaged his soul; only the evocation of fulfilled pleasure remained.

Return often, beloved sensation  
 Return and take me with you -  
 When the body's memory wakes again  
 And the old desire fires anew the blood;  
 When lips and skin remember  
 And hands feel as if they touch again.  
 Return often and take me at night  
 When lips and skin remember ...

In tranquility he recollects far off days. They are so far off, they are hardly remembered. The title FAR BACK.

I should like to relate this memory  
 But it has faded now ...  
 Hardly a print of it remains -  
 It lies far back in time  
 In the strains of youth's first music.  
 The skin? ... It was like jasmine-petals ...  
 That August evening, - was it really August? -  
 When ...  
 I dimly recollect the eyes ... those eyes  
 They were, I think, blue  
 Ah yes, blue; a deep sapphire blue.

Even in a far from perfect translation one can sense the intensity of his feelings; the tremulous sensuality of his recollections as they emerge from the crucible of memory. One has to go a long way to find a similar quality in verse ... perhaps back to Sappho, Sappho of Lesbos. Both establish themselves in relation to most of the rest of us in a different kind of truth which despite all its contradictions is no less real or artistically satisfying.

The more he was goaded by passion to roam and search at night and crying like <sup>lo</sup> ~~le~~ of Aeschylus -

Again the fevered spasm hath seized me

And the stroke of madness smites!

Again that fiery sting torments me ...

the more he tried to excuse it, to justify it, at least to himself. He sought for precedents. Coursed through Greek literature. What were Orestes and Pylades the avengers, Achilles and Patroclus<sup>Cass</sup> the warriors, Harmodios and Aristogeiton the tyrannicides, Phidias and Agorakritos the artists and so many others, if not lovers? But were they? On further reading and research he found that this could not be so. It was a convenient assumption, nothing more. If it was so why should Pericles have stopped the public crier from broadcasting around that young Alcibiades had fled with a friend in order not to brand the boy a catamite? And why should Aristophanes decry the practitioners of this kind of love? And why the terms despicable, depraved and unspeakably shameful - There was no solace there. The illusion, shared by many, that the classical Greek world was "based on the acceptance of homosexuality" as a London editor stated



some time ago, is not supported by any evidence. Pederasty and <sup>homosexual</sup> ~~perverse~~ <sup>relations</sup> there were, as there are everywhere at every time. They were not persecuted if based on consent but neither were they upheld let alone extolled or encouraged. To read in every recorded instance of male friendship homosexual relation is, of course, wrong. How can one have true friendship except with one's own sex. A heterosexual lover will find friendship with the opposite sex disturbed and thrown off balance by sex itself, always intruding, always there waiting, nervous expectant. Friendship in that case means union. Not so in the first case. So one can say that male friendship as recorded in classical literature though it did not necessarily exclude sexual relationship in no way did it also imply it.

Cavafy realised that and his apologia was never written. He sought once again to escape from this condition by coming to Europe - Paris, London. He was thirty-five. Travel and new interests, mostly cultural, helped him to get control of himself. But not for long. He was soon back in Alexandria, back to his old haunts. He could not break his fatal bond with this city because he could not break it within himself. He tells us so in THE CITY.

"You said:

"I will go to another land, I will go to another sea.

Another city, better than this, must somewhere be found.

Here my every effort doom has ringed it round

And my heart is - like a corpse - buried inside me.

How long will my mind reside in this decay?

Wherever I turn my eyes, wher'ever I turn my gaze

The black ruins of my life confront me here.

The maze

Of years gone by, wasted, destroyed utterly."

You will find no new land, you will find no new sea.

The city will dog your footsteps. You will

Visit the same streets; the same neighbourhoods

You will roam. In the same houses

You will find yourself grow old. Wherever

You go you will always to this city arrive.

As for that other place, the far away

Place, hold no hope.

For you, there is no ship, there is no road.

As you have ruined your life in this little corner

Of earth, all over the world you have it wrecked completely.

A passionate cris de coeur? Yes! Also a cool statement of fact.

The language struggles with its own nature to express this prosaic thought in poetic fantasy. It succeeds. It quickens perception to the point of growth. We all realise - and we can blame no one else but ourselves - that whatever we do, wherever we go we always carry within us our own private particular brand of Hell. To know this is to understand better Cavafy's poetry. This <sup>is</sup> the reason why ~~it has~~ <sup>the above is</sup> ~~not~~ mentioned.

\* \* \* \*

Cavafy died in Alexandria on April 29 1933. He lived exactly seventy years (the apparent 12 days difference is due to the change



of calendar. <sup>from the Julian to the Gregorian)</sup> His life was almost equally divided between the 19th and 20th centuries. But he belonged to neither. Everything about him is not somehow what it seems or what it should be.

He was intellectually a virile man who lacked masculine virility. He was a Greek but he felt at home with western Europeans. What went on in Greece did not particularly interest him except what concerned his art. Wars? What of them? Greece's more lasting contribution to the world was her thought, not her battles, he observed. Absurd of course. For without the latter to save or gain liberty there could be no free thought. He lived physically in Alexandria but he inhabited spiritually a vast area stretching from Rome to the Zagros mountains of Persia. Product of the 19th century he felt a throwback to an ampler, more cultured and better balanced earlier age - that of the Hellenistic Kingdoms. He was casual but his casualness was the product of meticulous care. His criticisms appeared to be kindly - they were devastating.

He was fascinated by history and, had he wished it, he could have become a notable historian. But he ~~chose~~ <sup>chose</sup> creative and not re-creative and interpretative work and ~~it in~~ <sup>expressed it through</sup> a more durable medium - verse ... and good verse lives longer than stone monuments. He started writing poetry early. He found that he was not capable of easy composition and that the Greek language was not for him a tool which he could easily handle. Inspiration was difficult. Therefore he had to work, harder and harder, to discard, polish, destroy, correct write and rewrite till he achieved what he thought was perfection. It was slow and laborious effort but <sup>he</sup> could not be de-

flected. Most of his early work he destroyed or rejected. He was nearly forty by the time he felt confident that he had perfected his art, found the themes suited to his mood, and the form which his language permitted them to be cast. Recognition was slow and grudging. He was an innovator. None felt sure enough about him to praise or condemn. But a few perceptive individuals began to notice him.

He could see no beauty in the sea, the colour of dawn or the budding rose. Not even in the arresting symmetry of a Grecian column. In any case these have been done and over done by other poets. He fixed on something else, more correctly on three things:- a) on the unexplored inner workings of man and the uncharted area where he comes into contact with the reality of his fantasies or, obversely, with his own view or fantasy of reality; b) on his own journey through the night when his barge winds its stygian way between faces now spoiled, glowing eyes now dull, vigorous bodies now obese and pin-points the fugitive memory in a shaft of light (sometimes these memories appear on paper like colourful, quivering moths pinned there, still alive, still <sup>fluttering</sup> <sup>striving</sup> to free themselves from that inexorably perpetual <sup>paper-</sup> imprisonment); and lastly and maybe more importantly on episodes from the footnotes of history, the wry smile of one, the sour virtue of another, the fatuous self-importance of a third.

All these have been turned into beautiful sonnetts mostly short ones (Only a few, very few, extend to more than one page in the first collected edition of his work).

Cavafy must be read not for his music or his rhythm and never,



unless of course in public, aloud. He must be murmured, or gently intoned. Not once but many times over ... and in small segments. His treasures have to be unlocked and laid out carefully one by one. Each has its own individual brilliance when studied and held up to the light. Coming to him from other poets after a surfeit that is of poetry, we realise at once an extraordinary quality. We cannot grasp his whole range at once. We have to do it gradually. He has not only to be read - as his entire output can be contained in an average volume of about two hundred pages this represents no great difficulty - but felt, mused over and pondered over. And as with rare, potent wine taken in moderation the pleasure is double - in sipping and in the warmth that follows - so with him. The vistas grow. What was commonplace, with better acquaintance, becomes profound. Meaning deepens, for Cavafy is a supremely articulate artist who uses words very sparingly and just enough of them to convey his thoughts and sensations or to draw a portrait. Two or three lines, a couple of brush strokes and a world opens up or a personality emerges.

Half-past twelve. How the time has passed.

Half-past twelve. How the years have passed!

Commonplace? The question remains. But is it? Another question is superimposed. OR,

Lucky are those who believe,

And like the Emperor Mr. Manuel

End their days in the garment of faith.

Another puzzle. Significant or just a whimsy? Unanswered. We have

to read him and ponder over him, to find out.

On the subject of his versification enough has been written already not to require adding to. It is irregular but its irregularities are highly variable; <sup>there is it is never</sup> ~~that never produce~~ monotony. The point that principally emerges, however, is that Cavafy's singular mode of expression and his concentrated imagery require a certain re-adjustment of the readers method of approaching poetry; also a modification of apprehension. We enter, with him, the sphere of poetry because of the poetic feeling in his work not because it conforms to any known pattern or form of that art. He sings for instance:

Honour to those who have an aim in life  
 And opt to guard Thermopylae.  
 From duty they will never stray;  
 Honourable and upright in everything they do  
 They are kind and compassionate also.  
 Generous when rich and when poor  
 No less so; they do their best,  
 Extend a hand to all they can;  
 Truth always comes from their lips  
 But bear no hatred for those who lie.  
  
 Greater honour still is their due  
 When they foresee (and many of them do)  
 That, traitor Ephialtes will at last appear  
 And the Medes will march over them from the rear.



This is another example of Cavafy's work. It is, in my view a rounded, complete sonnet, one of leashed power and as individual in taste as a thimbleful of absinthe.

What of the formative influences ... the masters behind him? Surely he must have patterned himself on some one? Again the subject has been discussed and investigated at length. But the conclusions vary. Browning and Swinburne have been mentioned, with some, though tenuous, justification. Also Oscar Wilde. Hopkins and Bridges and the whole range of French poetry from André Chenier down to Mallarmé excluding, perhaps two or three of the obvious romantics. It is true that his knowledge of English and French literature was very extensive and went deep. But so was, later on, his knowledge of Greek literature and history. Undoubtedly he must have been influenced by all these. Is there any dominant influence? I doubt it ... and we are not likely to know conclusively until his personal papers are published. My view, for all it is worth, is that Cavafy was not influenced by any single poet and thinker but by many. I believe he was more driven, shaped, and guided than influenced - in that order.

DRIVEN by his inner compulsion to express his raging feelings and tumultuous thoughts in a medium which corresponded to his personality - restrained, tidy, without vagueness or loose ends. In other words the compulsion to express his individual self in his individual way.

SHAPED, I believe primarily, by the place he lived - Alexandria. The carnal, multinational city lorded over by Europeans whose

interests were money, social polish and pleasure. It was (i.e. the European) an artificial community amidst an underprivileged and resentful population. Inevitably rootless. Behind this actuality, Cavafy saw however the capital city of two-thousand years earlier, the city of the Ptolemies, of Cleopatra, of the Library and the Museum, <sup>a</sup> the city of thinkers, philosophers, poets, grammarians, <sup>artists</sup> <sup>by the</sup> ~~archeologists~~ and scientific investigators. Here wrote Callimachus, Apollonius, ~~Thodius~~, lived for some time Theocritus, all poets, Zenodotus who edited Homer, Euclid who fathered Geometry, Apollonius of Perga of the Conic Sections, Eratosthenes and Claudius Ptolemy geographers, the Egyptian priest Manetho, the Jewish writer Philo, the many other Jewish scholars who translated the Bible into Greek and for the first time made available the literature of one people to another. A city where cultures met and fused and which opened out into the vaster Hellenistic world, perhaps the only civilisation which created no inferior and superior, discriminated against none on account of who he was - (where he came from, what language he spoke or what god he worshipped) - at least no absolute division on those lines - and tried to live under the aegis of a culture - the Hellenic culture. That old Alexandria whose social structure was not very different to his own but was the leading city of this putative universal world, became his artistic home. He was in his own words "enfranchised" there.

GUIDED - perhaps the choice of word here is wrong. Read and <sup>with</sup> near inspired may be better. But the word stays. Here, a couple of verses from Plato:



Thou wert the morning star among the living,  
 Ere thy fair light had fled;  
 Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus giving  
 New splendour to the dead (P.B. Shelley).

and

You are looking at the stars my star,  
 Oh! Were I the skies  
 To gaze upon you with thousand-myriad eyes.

Now one from Asclepiades third century B.C.

Why hoard your virginity. Ther'll not be found  
 A man to love you when you're under the ground.  
 Love's for the living; for when we are dead  
 It's dust and ashes. Come, let's go to bed.

And now

Cavafy:

Our days to come stretch before us  
 Like a row of little church candles alight -  
 Golden, warm, straight little candles.

Our days past are all behind, a sad  
 Row of burnt-out candles;  
 Those near us still wreathed in smoke -  
 Cold, melted, bent little candles.

I don't like to see them. Their sight pains me  
 And grieve their former light to remember.  
 I look ahead, my candles all alight and bright.

I don't want to turn, and see (and shudder)  
 How quickly the dark row lengthens  
 How quickly the burnt-out candles multiply.

There is a continuity here. Perhaps a deepening of the current also. For me, the connection between Cavafy and Classical Greek poetry is fairly obvious. And in certain particulars his is more in the stream than mainland Greek poetry, which has been influenced and its course altered by the post-medieval Greek folk poetry. There is however a vast difference. The classical spirit is buoyant, combative, soaring. It can flash with stark brilliance, can caress like gentle breeze, or spiral away into infinity. Coming in touch and fused with the oriental spirit during the Hellenistic age it became gentler and earthier; it accepted mortality. Cavafy tranquilizes this spirit of mortality and gets above it by abstracting fear (mental genuflection) from it. It is the spirit of autumnal power - vigorous, unafraid, unblinker, before decay sets in. It is man, in his moment of greatness.

Before leaving him I want to say this: Cavafy asked big questions. He did not expect big answers. In his mind's eye everything came down to recognisable human proportions. What if a man is great or powerful! We must see what he really is like. A Hollywood actress has said that there is "no great man in his bath". I think she was right. Cavafy did not see them stripped and in a moment of physical impotence. He saw them whole with their essential impotence. The Cartesian geometric plain tilts, one's angle in relation to the universe (Forster's phrase) changes and what comes into focus is



something different from what is commonly accepted. Let us take Julius Caesar. We know how Shaw sees him - a great, ruthless man of Shavian wit. And Shakespeare? Like a massive monument ... under whose shadow Rome lived in "awe", men scampered to find solace or a quiet grave. His "perish Caesar" comes to us like the instant collapse of an <sup>empire.</sup> ~~emperor~~. Shakespeare, of course, knew too much, to love or show love for Caesar. How Cavafy? He sees him as a self-important man with a retinue walking about the streets. The greater the number of attendants, the bigger the man. The greatness of power is usually measured by its attendance. The self-important man talks to the crowds or harangues them. Never listens to them. He is always busy. He cannot be bothered with trifles. But there is an Artemidorus. He has something important to say. The attendants, always the attendants, push him aside. Vain, pompous, Caesar made his own prison himself in his entourage. The earth-shaker who could go, look around and win a victory just by looking around, emerges a man no less silly, weak and arrogant than the rest. Caesar loses his awe for us, and once power whatever it is, loses its intrinsic quality, its capacity to dazzle, it loses its potency. It is on the way out. Such view is liberatory. Cavafy liberates. He helps in the shedding of illusion.

~~Before sitting down I am going to read his poem on Caesar - in~~

The Ides of March, ~~first in Greek and then in English.~~

## THE IDES OF MARCH

Soul! Beware of your needs 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.

