"A faint sweetness in the never-ending afternoon"? Reflections on Cavafy and the Greek epigram*

David Ricks
King's College London

Cavafy invested a great deal in a well grounded claim to be a continuator – or, better, a reanimator – of the Alexandrian tradition, as conveniently bottled for posterity in the *Greek Anthology*.[1] The increasingly open homoerotic strain in his work, however, owes little or nothing to the much more risqué Book XII of the *Anthology*, the so-called *Musa Puerilis*.[2] A more developed textual relationship is found in Cavafy's reworking of the sepulchral epigrams of Book VII. An oblique response to the Great War, these are more unobtrusively original than Edgar Lee Masters's updatings in his *Spoon River Anthology* (1915).[3] That enduringly popular book was based on – as Cavafy was influenced by – J. W. Mackail's *Select epigrams from the Greek Anthology*, first published in 1890. Mackail's volume has a somewhat post-Pre-Raphaelite character (he was Burne-Jones's

* I am grateful to members of the audience at the University of Cambridge and at King's College London, and especially to Sir Michael Llewellyn Smith, for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[1] See recently David Ricks, "Cavafy's Alexandrianism", in: Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk (eds.), *Alexandria, real and imagined* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004), pp. 337-51.

[2] So, rightly, Christopher Robinson, "Cavafy, sexual sensibility, and poetic practice: reading Cavafy through Mark Doty and Cathal Ó Searcaigh", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 23.2 (2005) 261-79 (277, n. 2). It is a commonplace that some of Cavafy's unpublished poems, more recently supplemented by his unfinished poems, have a greater degree of candour, or at any rate explicitness, in the treatment of such themes.

[3] See summarily Ricks, "Cavafy's Alexandrianism" and references there.

son-in-law and William Morris's biographer), vividly expressed in the frontispiece, which shows a pale young woman – more English rose than Greek violet – engaged in gathering flowers.[4] And this preoccupation with the florilegium metaphor generates the last words of Mackail's preface to his volume, and the title of this paper: "a faint sweetness in the never-ending afternoon".[5] Does such flowery language fit the case of Cavafy?

Despite some valuable earlier contributions on the subject, starting with the shrewd insights of Timos Malanos, Cavafy's affiliation to the *Greek Anthology* (hereafter *AP*) requires further attention; and what appears here is only a first step, with reference to some particularly salient examples not discussed in the fullest account we have, by Valerie Caires as long ago as 1980.[6] In each case, we shall find that, far from producing the, so to speak, reproduction furniture of so many modern poems inspired by the *AP* – and, for that matter, of translations from it – Cavafy always provides a further turn of the screw, so that the new poem not only embeds the kernel of a corresponding ancient epigram or epi-

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[4] My citations of Mackail are from the third (and last) revised edition (London: Longmans 1911). On Mackail's place in scholarship and culture, see the article by Cyril Bailey, revised by Richard Smail, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), vol. 35, pp. 492-3; further assessment in Christopher Stray, *Classics transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998), esp. pp. 242-6.

[5] Mackail, *Select epigrams*, p. 90. For Mackail's revaluation of the Alexandrians, and its consonance with Cavafy's (and indeed Eliot's) poetic, see briefly Ricks, "Cavafy's Alexandrianism", which discusses a number of important poems passed over here.

[6] Timos Malanos, *Ο ποιητής Κ. Π. Καβάφης*, 3rd ed. (Athens: Difros n.d.), esp. pp. 148-51, 155-62; Valerie Caires, "Originality and eroticism: Constantine Cavafy and the Alexandrian epigram", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 6 (1980) 131-56. For exhaustive reference see Dimitris Daskalopoulos, *Βιβλιογραφία Κ. Π. Καβάφη (1886-2000)* (Thessaloniki: Kentro Ellinikis Glossas 2003). The very useful study by Marianthi Palazi, "Cavafy's funerary epigrams and the tradition of the *Greek Anthology*" (MA dissertation, King's College London 1996) remains unpublished.

grams, but represents a second-order meditation on a poetic he values and vies with.[7]

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As the reticence of the Greek epigrammatist "is especially prized" – to quote Pound on the Chinese short poem in 1915 – it will not be out of place to begin with one of Cavafy's deliberately driest poems, "Tomb of Lysias the Grammarian" (1914).[8] We may hold it up against the type of (fictional) sepulchral epigram it is based on, to show how further layers of history and poetry, harnessed by poetic adventurousness of a cryptic kind, make of the successor-poem something more complex than its ostensible model. A literary-historical warning always important in relation to Cavafy may be repeated: his dealings with the distant Greek past must be seen as consciously mediated by the refractions – indeed, at times the refractoriness – of all the literature that has followed in its wake.[9]

Let us hear what the two poems have to say:

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[7] An interesting contrast with Cavafy's poetic is formed by the elegant, traditional translations of the scholar Simos Menardos's *Στέφανος* (Athens: Sideris 1924); valuable for its conspectus of English-language modes of translation in Cavafy's time and beyond is Peter Jay (ed.), *The Greek Anthology and other Ancient Greek epigrams: a selection in modern verse translations* (London: Allen Lane 1973).

[8] Ezra Pound, "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance", a translation first published in *Cathay*, now in *The translations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Hugh Kenner (London: Faber 1953), p. 194. The epigram is accompanied by a translator's note of equal length, concluding: "The poem is especially prized because she [the speaker] utters no direct reproach." Cavafy's poem is cited from K. P. Kavafis, *Τα ποιήματα* (2 vols., ed. G. P. Savidis, Athens: Ikaros 1981), 43 All references to Cavafy's poems hereafter appear by his name with volume and page number only.

[9] I have tried to make this point with reference to Cavafy's Homer in *The Shade of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), pp. 85-118.

TOMB OF LYSIAS THE GRAMMARIAN

As close as can be, on the right as you enter, to the library
of Berytus we buried learned Lysias,
grammarian. The place is meet.
We laid him near those things of his which he recalls
even there, maybe – scholia, texts, analyses,
variant readings, all that commentary in volumes of Greek usage.
Plus, this way, his tomb will be visible to and given due honour
by us as we go on through to the books.

Your most authentic memorial, Theodorus, is not on your tomb,
but in the thousands of pages of your books,
in which, snatching them from oblivion, you redeemed
from destruction the labours of the thoughtful votaries of the Muses.
(*AP* 7.594)[10]

A scholarly poet, Cavafy can't have dissented – say, with the sarcasm of Yeats's poem "The Scholars" (1919) – from the somewhat stiffly expressed sentiments of this epigram by Julian, Prefect of Egypt.[11] Indeed, the idea that real scholarship outlasts the humdrum life that produced it can't have been other than congenial. But, as so often, Cavafy injects a new note of ambiguity, which in this case derives from re-reading such ancient epigrams through a celebrated later poem, Browning's "A Grammarian's Funeral" (1855). Apart from the title, the affinities of content and perspective are striking – and I've discussed elsewhere Cavafy's subtle capacity to transpose Browning's settings to locales and

[10] For the collocation of the two poems, see Malanos, *Καβάφης*, p. 159. All versions from *AP* and from Cavafy are my own; none claim any other value than expository.

[11] W. B. Yeats, *Collected poems* (London: Macmillan 1978), p. 158, with the poem's famous conclusion: "Lord, what would they say / Did their Catullus walk that way?"

periods both more congruent with his elective Hellenism and less familiar to the reader.[12]

"A Grammarian's Funeral", set by its subtitle "Shortly after the revival of learning in Europe", is an elusively complex account of the scholarly life, seen through the eyes of the pupils and associates of a celebrated grammarian as they bear his corpse to the summit of an Italian Renaissance hill town, away from the ignorant, pedestrian lives of those who will have none of the new learning.[13] The dead grammarian is a veritable athlete, an ascetic of learning, whose eremitic life of self-mortification and abnegation has its own grandeur, just as his desire "not to Live but Know" is an echo of the Aristotelian ideal with which the *Nicomachean Ethics* culminate.[14] What is most striking about Browning's grammarian is that in him a whole way of life has been based on the eschewing of metaphysics and a commitment to knowing the world through tough earthly and textual minutiae; above all, those of the Greek language. As the famous lines go:

> While he could stammer
> He settled *Hoti*'s business – let it be! –
> Properly based *Oun* –
> Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De*...

The poem's odd, jaunty stanzas, as they move through its 148 lines, have the ring of a march, and deliberately so; just as the student body which announces, "This is our master, famous, calm and dead, / Borne on our shoulders" has all the hallmarks of a German student fraternity. For all his respect for the heroes of German scholarship such as Friedrich August Wolf, Browning

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[12] David Ricks, "How it strikes a contemporary: Cavafy as a reviser of Browning", *Κάμπος: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 11 (2003) 131-52.

[13] Robert Browning, *Poetical Works, vol. 5: Men and women*, ed. Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2002), pp. 454-62 (good notes). Some unease with the ambiguities of the poem is expressed in a valuable article by A. D. Nuttall, "Browning's Grammarian: accents uncertain", *Essays in Criticism* 51.1 (2001) 86-100.

[14] *EN* x.vii.

allows real doubts about his grammarian to creep into the poem, even through the words of his loyal students – as we can see by completing the lines just quoted: "Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De*, / Dead from the waist down."[15] With all the fervour of the old Schoolmen, an Angelic Doctor at their head, yet without hopes of a hereafter, the unnamed, and doubtless forgotten, grammarian has led a life of renunciation which aridifies with the silt of knowledge rather than watering with the living word. Yet Browning's subtitle seems to indicate that such personal sacrifice yet has a historical value because of the grammarian's contribution to the world as we have it: though he scarcely tasted life, he has helped us to – not least through his providing a piquant subject allowing full rein to comic realism.

Cavafy's poem is tiny and flat-looking by comparison: a useful, but of course inadequate, analogy for his relation to Browning might be the Reduced Shakespeare Company. And, as we shall see in other examples later, the change of historical setting amounts to more than, so to speak, the mere transposition of a key. In "Tomb of Lysias the Grammarian" we find, to begin with, a difference of voice: instead of a lusty song rather raucously celebrating the joys of scholarly fraternity – on what may be a rare day away from the lecture-room or library – with no apparent addressee outside the band of brothers, we have a quieter interchange between what seem to be an older student and a new student in the intellectual centre of Berytus; nor do we know how long Lysias has been buried there. We also, of course, have the restoration of the subject to the concision of the ancient Greek epigram: Cavafy wishes to incorporate in his poem the indispensable layers of historical experience drawn attention to by Browning, but in a manner which is thoroughly Alexandrian in its working by reduction rather than accumulation.

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[15] Here the figure of the Revd Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, and supposed model for Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, comes to mind. Pattison's *Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1889) celebrate feats of ascetic scholarship such as Browning himself respected: see the poet's letter cited in *Poetical Works*, p. 455.

Lysias's monument is in the most fitting place because it is right by the entrance to the library: even in death he will continue to live, as it were, over the shop. His truest monument will not be his books alone, but the relation – which the poem will in the end reveal to be an awkward one – between his books and his place of burial. The poem's opening words give a sense of immediacy: some corporate body has buried Lysias in a place to which many will be requiring directions: the great library of a school with a special reputation in the law. Yet Lysias is not addressed by name like Theodore, and "τον σοφό Λυσία, / γραμματικόν" could legitimately be translated "Professor Lysias", almost "Herr Doktor Lysias". The involvement of those who buried the professor continues with seeming affection: "we laid him"; but a glance at the derivation in Cavafy's own drafts of the phrase that follows is illuminating. Where is "there"?

For Browning's grammarian and his followers, discreet but firm deniers of a hereafter, the scholar's final resting place will be a height above which – and behind which – there is nothing. Cavafy's "even there, maybe", by contrast, could mean "in the tomb" or "in Hades". "Tomb of Lysias the Grammarian" in fact subsumes and supersedes the material of one of the most celebrated of Cavafy's unpublished poems, "The rest I shall tell the dead down in Hades" (1913). In this poem with Sophocles's Ajax's famous words as the title, the sceptical sophist ends by commenting: "if they talk of such things there, if it concerns them now".[16]

Theodorus – to look at things one way – disappears altogether behind the works of the greater writers he rescued from oblivion; or – to look at things another way – remains sturdily present to posterity in the editions he left. Lysias is, by contrast, foregrounded as, conceivably, a sentient being beyond the grave; and yet he really does appear to have been submerged by the settling of Hoti's business and all that. A catalogue of second-order material ("comment" as Browning has it), with nothing of the

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[16] K. P. Kavafis, *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα (1882-1923)*, ed. G. P. Savidis (Athens: Ikaros 1968), pp. 155-6.

Muse about it, and pretty tedious for the poor students, washes over the grave of the crabbed professor. Even his subject, propaedeutic to the more lucrative study of the law, is unlikely to have held a strong appeal for his pupils.[17]

The last two lines, moreover, make a sly addition: "plus" (επίσης) betrays a sense of mockery, as the *amour propre* of this no doubt legendarily pedantic instructor is exposed. One is irresistibly reminded of Bentham's remains, placed – at his express wish – in a prominently displayed case in University College London "in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought".[18] Do the students – as the poem's last words reveal them to be – really venerate the tomb, or are they having a quiet snigger over it? Lysias's historical fate is poignant: unlike his 5th-century B.C. Athenian namesake the orator, many of whose speeches survive as the model for pure Attic style, his name is lost and his whole milieu wiped away by the Arab conquests. It's less a faint sweetness than a sour aftertaste.

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In stepping beyond Browning's poem, and some of its problems of interpretation, Cavafy stepped back into the late antique world and a mode of Greek epigram that on a hasty reading looks two-dimensional. The part of Browning's Grammarian's biography that does not resurface is his early forays into poetry.[19] Lysias is a more prosaic figure, seemingly never touched by the Muse; and the books of Greek verse which Theodore preserved for posterity

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[17] Their finicky intelligentsia mentality comes out vividly in "Simeon": Kavafis, *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα*, pp. 175-6, with my discussion, "Cavafy and the body of Christ", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 27.1-2 (2001) 19-32.

[18] In Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 4: North* (London: Penguin 1998), p. 272. Cavafy might possibly have seen or known of this (most un-Greek) eccentricity during his childhood in London.

[19] As Jack and Inglesfield point out (Browning, *Poetical Works*, p. 455), these lines are easily overlooked.

are replaced by Cavafy with "books" in the most material sense, the set texts which the student needs today. But Cavafy filed away the Grammarian's early life for use in our next poem, also from 1914, which again seems to be based on a solid but not very enterprising ancient model:

> Paterius well-spoken and amiable has fallen to the lot of the tomb:
> dear son of Miltiades and of sorely grieved Atticia,
> offspring of the land of Cecrops, of the noble line of the Aeacids,
> full of knowledge of Roman law and of wide learning,
> bearer of all the brilliance of the four virtues;
> a youth of charm, snatched away by Fate's portion,
> just as a radiant sapling is uprooted by a violent wind,
> having attained the twenty-fourth year of life;
> and he leaves his dear parents mourning and a grief never to be forgotten. (*AP* 7.343)

TOMB OF EURION

> In this elaborate monument
> entirely of syenite,
> covered with so many violets, so many lilies,
> handsome Eurion is buried.
> An Alexandrian lad of twenty-five.
> On his father's side, of an old Macedonian line;
> of alabarchs his mother's lineage.
> He studied philosophy with Aristoclitus,
> rhetoric with Parus. At Thebes he made a study of the sacred writings. The Arsinoite nome was the subject
> of a history by him. That at least will last.
> But what we have lost is what was most precious – his form,
> which was the very vision of Apollo.[20]

The parallels between the two young men are clear enough: they may be summed up by saying that each has the perfect curriculum

[20] Cavafy 1.44.

vitae. Perhaps what most piqued Cavafy's interest, however, was the culturally mixed identity of both Paterius and Eurion: the former is of pure Attic descent but of Roman education, the latter of mixed Greek and Jewish descent (the alabarchs were Jewish magistrates). Yet the deviation of Cavafy's poem from its probable model is striking.

Part of this deviation, of course, lies in form: the ancient epigram, as relatively rarely, is in hexameters, which helps to account for the poem's slightly "repro" character; though it suits the archaic Attic references and the Homeric allusion of the sapling.[21] Cavafy's poem, by contrast, with its full but unpredictably occurring rhymes in lines of uneven length and frequent enjambment, has a more improvisatory air which is very far from lapidary. And the contemplation of the dead one is already a challenge because of an air of uncertainty which Cavafy has used to unsettle the genre of the poem on Paterius. That poem begins and ends with his parents: they gave him the best of birth and education, and his death leaves them bereft. "Tomb of Eurion", by contrast, gives due weight to the diversely distinguished ancestry of the young man's parents, yet it is clearly voiced neither by them nor on their behalf, as the *AP* poem reticently but unmistakably is. What was lost in Eurion was not parental investment, even investment of hope: it was, the last lines tell us, something elusive and not the possession of the parents in any case. In fact, the parents, for these other bereaved ones who voice the poem, even get in the way.[22] The poem's ending is in every way a breach of convention.

Look again at the syntax of the poem's opening: Eurion is buried by the luxurious and unavailing detail of the tomb, as "είναι θαμένος" grimly acknowledges. Eurion the bearer of the

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[21] Most famously, *Iliad* 4.482-7. It is so characteristic of Cavafy to eschew such nature imagery, for all its deep roots and long ramifications in Greek tradition.

[22] So too "In the Month of Hathor" (Cavafy 1.78) which encapsulates Cavafy's most subtle responses to the precariousness of the ancient past: see briefly David Ricks, "C. P. Cavafy", in: Anthony T. Grafton, Glenn W. Most and Salvatore Settis (eds.), *The Classical Tradition: a guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007, forthcoming).

name is buried here, yes, but the *handsome* Eurion *is* buried by all this clutter. ("Smothered in" would only just over-translate "covered in".) The lines that follow give due weight to his birth and all-round education, which embraces the pagan scriptures of Egypt and a historical work on that rich culture which will be of durable value. But what will last seems to interest the speaker but little, as he dwells – in a last couplet which definitively breaks with what can most naturally be read as paraphrase of the words on the tomb in lines 4 to 10 – on what was lost. For all we know, Eurion's history of the Arsinoite nome will last in the way "a good PhD" will last – yet this cannot be enough to stand for "a man born with thy face and throat, / Lyric Apollo".

The phrase, of course, is Browning's, from "A Grammarian's Funeral".[23] There it was clear that the grammarian's life had essentially been one of renunciation. Cavafy's poem is reticent about whether Eurion, like Ammones the Alexandrian (as I have discussed elsewhere) ever wrote poems himself – but his Apolline appearance was the most precious thing about him: "τίμιο", we may say, even in the sense of Precious Blood.[24] The poem's opening lines look initially like a slight variation and elaboration on the classic "Here lies", the lines that follow like an elaboration and qualification of the words on the tomb itself. (On a first reading, the violets and lilies could be seen as sculpted ornaments on the tomb: by the end, we think of them as a real and sickly presence, not only unable to conjure up, but positively obstructing, true vision.) But with the appearance of the grieving accents of a first-person plural voice in the last two lines, the poem severs all connection with the tomb and its verbal or even its corporeal contents. A vision of Apollo cannot be repeated, and memory (μνήμη) cannot be reconciled with the monumental (μνημείον). Once

[23] Lines 33-4; I note the theft in D. Ricks, "Ο βρετανικός Καβάφης", in: *Θέματα νεοελληνικής φιλολογίας. Μνήμη Γ. Π. Σαββίδη* (Athens: Ermis 2000), pp. 270-7.

[24] Savidis's glosses in his edition (e.g. Cavafy 1.120) correctly hold Cavafy to use "τίμιος" as synonymous with "πολύτιμος", but this should not exclude, in a place of heightened rhetoric, such as the ending of "Tomb of Eurion", further resonances.

again, then, Cavafy draws on the poignancy of ancient epigram only to add a new kind of poignancy, a faint sweetness very much his own confection.

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The tomb as the enemy of learning; the tomb as the enemy of beauty. What about the Simonidean tradition of epigram: the tomb as monument to valour? This too is not absent from Cavafy; though it is handled with particular care, the consequence above all of his determination to liberate a sense of Greek cultural belonging from the ardours of any particular vein of nationalism. The *locus classicus* is this poem from 1922:

> WHO FOUGHT FOR THE ACHAEAN LEAGUE
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> Valiant ye who fought and fell in glory;
> the everywhere victorious never fearing.
> Blameless ye, if Diaeus and Critolaus erred.
> When Hellenes seek to boast,
> "Such are our nation's men", they'll say
> of you. So high shall be your praises.
>
> Written in Alexandria by an Achaean;
> in the seventh year of Ptolemy Lathyrus.[25]

Compare Simonides (*AP* 7.254):

> Hail ye, champions who won through war great glory,
> sons of the Athenians, excellent in horsemanship,
> who for your homeland of fair dances lost your flower of youth
> doing battle against so many of the Greeks.

Simonides on the battle of Plataea celebrates a moment when, as so many saw it in retrospect, Greeks (Athenians, Lacedaemonians

[25] Cavafy 2.31.

and Tegeans) triumphed over barbarians – and over their worse selves in the form of the medizing Greeks.[26] Though perhaps less so than Marathon and Salamis, Plataea lent itself to a place in the nationalist mythology which could see the Great Idea as a re-run of the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks. Writing as the Asia Minor Campaign drew to a disastrous close, Cavafy identified a mode of great reticence, which could recreate the heroic plainness of Simonides without appropriating it to a questionable modern campaign or to an authorial voice suspicious of grand rhetoric.

Rather than taking a conflict from Greece's heyday, Cavafy, by a characteristic stroke, chooses the moment of the extinguishing of free Greece. The body of the epigram is addressed to the fallen of the Achaean League in their last campaign against the Romans. What is radically new in generic terms is the element of reproach against the dead generals, the donkeys who led these lions.[27] Critolaus, *strategus* of the League in 147-146 B.C., either poisoned himself or lost his life escaping over the salt marshes after defeat by the Roman general Metellus at Scarpheia near Thermopylae; Diaeus succeeded him as *strategus*, rashly sallied forth from besieged Corinth and, defeated by L. Mummius, fled to Megalopolis and there took poison.[28] But the reproach against them is here a laconic one – though perhaps the more devastating for that – and the poem quickly moves, in verses 4-6, to praise of the dead. Such praise is expressed in an idiom which, over the

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[26] On the Achaean League, by contrast, the curt assessment by George Grote, *A History of Greece* (12 vols., London: Dent n.d.), vol. 12, p. 301, is for Cavafy likely to have been influential: "The Achaean league [...] developed itself afterwards as a renovated sprout from the ruined tree of Grecian liberty, though never attaining to anything better than a feeble and puny life, nor capable of sustaining itself without foreign aid." For the Greek poet's recourse to this work, see David Ricks, "Cavafy the poet-historian", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1988) 169-83.

[27] The bearing of this Great War allusion on Greece's Asia Minor Campaign needs no explanation: see Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Ionian Vision*, 2nd ed. (London: Hurst 1998).

[28] See Malanos's summary of Cavafy's sources (notably Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos), *Καβάφης*, pp. 356-9.

poem's six lines, moves in dignified fashion from a relatively formal and lapidary style (marked especially by learned aorist participles) to a simpler idiom with a flavour of colloquial speech.

This might almost suggest the breaking out of the chiselled language of a monument into the voice of popular acclaim. But this is not so: the poem's last two lines show that it is a private *cri de coeur* committed to paper in exile in Alexandria by an anonymous veteran of the Achaean League. The reading of the body of the poem is completely reframed by the presence of the last two lines; though they can be read in more than one way. One can take the last two lines as being an authorial scholium or, so to speak, museum label: by its presence the historically based but time-transcending Simonidean type of epigram rendered (over-?) familiar by anthologies is de-monumentalized, shown as originating in contingencies of event and allegiance. An epitaph, even one celebrating timeless virtues of Hellenism, has to be written somewhere, and by someone: in this case, far from the theatre of action, but by one whose origins are in the land where the tragic dénouement has occurred.

A different reading, which I tentatively prefer, is to take the last two lines, not as an authorial comment from Cavafy, but as a cryptic statement by the Achaean himself. As a *Fecit* he signs his poem, not with his name, but with the place, his allegiance, and the date. A historical parallel, of which Cavafy would have been well aware, is with the Jacobites "over the water", or – with more topical sharpness – with the White Russians.[29] Here, doubtless in reduced circumstances, a man of the *ancien régime* – and, perhaps, one of the thousand and more Achaean leaders held in Italian provincial towns for seventeen years (167-150 B.C.) following the Battle of Pydna (168 B.C.: the subject of the succeeding poem, "To Antiochus Epiphanes" which strengthens this

[29] One would be tempted to detect the pale figure of the murdered Tsarevich (17 July 1918) behind Cavafy's "Caesarion" (completed 1918), at least as part of the "familiar compound ghost" Caesarion represents – were it not for the fact that the Cavafy poem, first written in 1914, is a tribute to his power to prophesy the impending.

supposition) – scratches out his epigram.[30] The date is given with precision, perhaps exhibiting the exile as counting the days; but also perhaps to indicate the unfriendliness of the surroundings. Hence, too, maybe, the anonymity: Ptolemy IX Lathyrus had another twenty-nine years to reign, and he did so with a, however duplicitous, pro-Roman tendency which might have made one of strong Achaean allegiances unwilling to trumpet them abroad.[31] At any rate – as George Seferis was quick to see – all this makes "Who fought for the Achaean League" one of the most penetrating artistic responses to the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922, even if it was written before the sack of Smyrna.[32] And that gives Cavafy's specification of Alexandria here a further poignancy: far from the theatre of action, disdainful of the leaders, the author is yet bound up with kith and kin. A quiet but more than faint bitterness is all-apparent.

The Simonidean type of epigram was not, of course, incapable of revival in 20th-century poetry: to look no further, there is Housman's "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" (1917) and Hugh MacDiarmid's furious retort (1935).[33] More pertinently still, we have Kipling's *Epitaphs of the War 1914-1918*. A contrast with the famous "Common Form" from that sequence is telling: "If any question, why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied."[34] Such a direct approach, powerful coming as it comes from a father himself mourning the loss of his son, was, we need hardly

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[30] See conveniently Brian McGing, "Subjection and resistance: to the death of Mithradates", in: Andrew Erskine (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), pp. 71-89.

[31] McGing, "Subjection and resistance", p. 78.

[32] For a cautious discussion of Seferis's interpretation see Roderick Beaton's acute study, "The history man", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10.1-2 (1983) 23-44.

[33] A. E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Allen Lane 1988), p. 138 (see too p. 491); Hugh MacDiarmid, "Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries", *Selected Poems*, ed. David Craig and John Manson (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970), p. 100.

[34] Rudyard Kipling, *Selected Poems*, ed. Peter Keating (London: Penguin (1993), pp. 168-75 (172).

emphasize, alien to Cavafy. (To Cavafy the poet, that is: his table talk about politics no doubt had as much animus as any Greek's in that turbulent period.) And for a Greek poet to have been able to dust down the textbook-bound form to illuminate not one but two historical periods was a considerable achievement. Such a preoccupation with the relation between poetry and patriotism is dramatized on an even larger canvas, and with even more controversial results, in the fourth and last poem to be examined here.

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YOUNG MEN OF SIDON
(A.D. 400)

The actor they had engaged for their diversion
recited among other things some select epigrams.

The dining-room opened out onto a garden;
and in it a delicate odour of flowers
blent with the perfumes
of the five scented youths of Sidon.

Meleager, Crinagoras and Rhianus were read.
But when the actor came to recite,
"Aeschylus son of Euphorion, Athenian, lies hid"
(giving perhaps excessive emphasis
to "proven valour" and "grove at Marathon")
at once sprang to his feet a lively lad,
mad about literature, and shouted:

"Pah! I don't care for that quatrain one bit.
Expressions of that sort strike me as tantamount to cowardice.
Put all your might – I tell you solemnly – into your work,
your every striving, and in turn recall your work
in time of trial, or when your time sinks to its end.
Such are my expectations of you, my demands upon you.
And not to dispel completely from your mind
the glorious Style of Tragedy –
that Agamemnon, that wonderful Prometheus,
that presence of Orestes, of Cassandra,

> that Seven against Thebes – and for your memorial to set forth
> *merely* the fact that in the soldiers' ranks, the throng,
> you too did battle against Datis and Artaphernes."[35]

The lines quoted come from this epigram preserved in the ancient life of Aeschylus (Mackail 3.13):

> Aeschylus son of Euphorion, Athenian, lies hid
> under this tomb, having died in Gela rich in wheat;
> of his proven valour the grove at Marathon may tell,
> so too the long-haired Mede who learned it well.[36]

Cavafy's is a much-discussed and much misunderstood poem, which shows us not just Cavafy as reader but his circumspection about what reading is: what is it to be an authentic reader?[37] The poem – completed in 1920, so written, like the last one, during the Asia Minor Campaign – is a powerful but oblique commentary on the times, but on more than that. Once again, we have several historical strata which need carefully to be distinguished – and they exist in a single poem, not, as in *AP*, stratified cumulatively by the process of reception itself – though we should remember that for Cavafy attention to a palimpsest is less a dispassionate stratigraphical study than the opening of old wounds.[38] Working

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[35] Cavafy 2.16.

[36] Mackail, *Select epigrams*, p. 153 (see too p. 362); with discussion by G. P. Savidis, "Cavafy versus Aeschylus" in his *Μικρά καβαφικά*, vol. 1 (Athens: Ermis 1985), pp. 361-79.

[37] For a conspectus of earlier critical views – rich in their variety, but for the most part impoverished in their engagement with the poem – see Vassilis Lambropoulos, "The violent power of knowledge: the struggle of critical discourses for domination over Cavafy's 'Young men of Sidon, A.D. 400'", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10.1-2 (1983) 149-66. Missing is the most important response, Manolis Anagnostakis's poem, "Νέοι της Σιδώνος, 1970", *Τα ποιήματα, 1941-1971* (Athens: Stigmi 1992), p. 167; one of his important differences is that the flower children he reproaches are of both sexes.

[38] As was pointed out by Karl Malkoff some time ago, "Varieties of illusion in the poetry of Cavafy", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 5.2 (1987) 191-205, excessive emphasis on Cavafy as ironist gives us a trun-

back in time, we have an author writing in Alexandria at the height of a campaign to recover places sacred to the Greek mind from foreign conquerors. We then go back 1,520 years to Sidon, a city of great Hellenic culture doomed to be overrun by un-Greek invaders. The poems which the young men read extend painlessly back through high points of the Hellenistic and early Roman erotic epigram, but then seem to hit a bump 856 years along the road with an epigram on the death of Aeschylus, tragedian and veteran of Marathon, dead at Gela in Sicily.

"Young men of Sidon" divides into two halves of thirteen lines, though Cavafy has craftily concealed this from an initial reading by breaking the first half into three shorter sections. The first half gives us the setting and its subsequent disruption. The atmosphere is indeed one in which "a faint sweetness in the never-ending afternoon" is seductively present. Sidon still offers its gilded youth a form of a traditional symposiastic setting; and the Greek tradition offers such young men, whatever their ethnic origins, access to the canon of beauty. That the beauty may cloy is hinted at by the chiming rhymes of "ανθέων"and "νέων", but its elements are not in themselves inauthentic: any garland of epigrams, however selectively culled, would probably embrace the authors mentioned.[39] The young men are, yes, viewed with a little of the older poet's condescension for their liberally applied after-shave (no doubt echoing Horace's *Odes* I.v: "quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa / perfusus liquidis urget odoribus") – yet perfumes, "μυρωδικά", are not a thing Cavafy's poetry ever asks us to renounce.[40] The problem essentially comes with the outsourcing

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cated version of the poet. Were it not for its Irwin Howe ring, there would be a place for an essay on Cavafy with the title, "The agony and the irony".

[39] This fact is bizarrely ignored by Evangelos Papanoutsos's hyper-patriotic reading summarized by Lambropoulos, "The violent power of knowledge"; because Papanoutsos had a large influence as an educational policy-maker in Greece, this is of no small importance.

[40] Most famously of course in "Ithaca", which builds on Baudelairean *parfums*.

of reading, which should be a mentally and physically involving activity, to an actor.

Some of us have suffered so acutely, hearing Cavafy's poems read by actors, that it is nice to see this "prebuttal". Here a credibility gap between the performer and the material yawns, even if the bracketed comment – no doubt reflecting a consensus of the effete young connoisseurs – restricts itself to only mild criticism. At all events, the transition from literature to life, in the exacting form of battle, has proved a challenging one – a challenge for which just one of the young men is ready, even if not equal. Mad about literature, the youth expresses in the second half of the poem a Cavafian poetic which falls short only in its expressive means of the doctrine Cavafy seems to have held himself. But to fall short in expressive means is, for Cavafy, to fall a very long way short.

It is much in the young man's favour, whatever his manners, that he takes literature seriously: so seriously that he engages with it to the point of apostrophizing Aeschylus himself. His instinct that the famous quatrain is in some sense inauthentic is not wholly off the mark, if we reflect that material from Aeschylus's *Vita*, as from other ancient Lives, is often such; and if we note that the epigram, to whose Aeschylean authorship only Athenaeus attests, does not in fact appear in *AP*. The young man's gloss on the epigram is of course tendentious, substituting the straw men Datis and Artaphernes (compare Diaeus and Critolaus in "Who Fought for the Achaean League") for the doughtier-sounding "long-haired Mede". And his disdain for the democratic values of the polis has a sub-Nietzschean ring of which we know Cavafy to have disapproved.[41] This is only exacerbated by his preachiness, marked by the word κηρύττω. Above all, his dogged emphasis on the *oeuvre* as the mark of a man is vitiated, both by the inexperience of life which makes his claims about trials and age implausible, but still more by his inability to find anything of critical interest to say about the works he so values: all he can do is exclaim in the

[41] This is a strand in his *Ανέκδοτα σημειώματα ποιητικής και ηθικής (1902-1911)*, ed. G. P. Savidis (Athens: Ermis 1983).

star-struck manner of a Tolkien buff. Is this fervent young man, in fact, nothing more than a fan of Aeschylus? Is this professedly exacting reader simply part of that nullity we call a readership?

Cavafy's poem of course refuses to comment, any more than it asks us to pile in on the young men for having a poetry soirée when they could be pumping iron at the palaestra. However we read its moral stance, there can be no doubt that one of things the poem sets out to expose is just how alive the words of the ancient epigram still are, able to cut through the merely literary to something more important still.

* * *

Cavafy, then, did not simply add to the number of authentically Greek epigrams (though he did that too: examples could of course be multiplied).[42] He re-imagined the Greek epigram in the light of all the history, not least the history of poetry, that had intervened.[43] This is a very different thing from the evanescent flavour that Mackail's formulation cited in my title seems to allow the ancient epigram, and by extension modern attempts to revive it: from this formulation (admittedly, one which distorts Mackail's broader outlook) one might deduce that the only modern destiny of the ancient epigram could be nothing but a half-life.[44] More polemically, and not long after Cavafy's death, Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (1939) seemed to write off the whole genre:

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[42] So Malanos, *Καβάφης*, p. 188. For such poems see, at a minimum (and excluding some by no means contemptible non-canonical poems), Caires, "Originality and eroticism" and Ricks, "Cavafy's Alexandrianism". A vigorous and learned post-Cavafian foray into the more mordant vein of ancient epigram is Nasos Vayenas's prize-winning collection *Στέφανος* (Athens: Kedros 2004).

[43] On Cavafy's most unusual recourse to the corpus of Christian epigram (neither Mackail nor Jay includes a single poem by Gregory Nazianzen), see Ricks, "Cavafy and the body of Christ", pp. 21-2

[44] In fact, Mackail's perspective is not without subtlety, as I have argued in "Cavafy's Alexandrianism".

And for a thousand years they went on talking,
Making such apt remarks,
A race no longer of heroes but of professors
And crooked businessmen and secretaries and clerks
Who turned out dapper little elegiac verses
On the ironies of fate, the transience of all
Affections, carefully shunning an over-statement
But working the dying fall.[45]

MacNeice's accusation, like other western refusals to see "late Greek" culture as anything more than decline, would have piqued Cavafy; but it can, I trust, have little purchase on this modern Greek poet's ingenious and subtle appropriations from the ancient Greek epigram.

[45] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber 1998), p. 30. As I have argued in "Simpering Byzantines, Grecian goldsmiths et al.: some appearances of Byzantium in English poetry", in: Elizabeth Jeffreys and Robin Cormack (eds.), *Through the looking-glass: Byzantium through British eyes* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000), pp. 223-35, MacNeice's view is representative.