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Complete Plus

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in English

translated by
George Economou
with
Stavros Deligiorgis

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The cover design of this book makes use of a detail from a 1929 photograph of C. P. Cavafy, which is be found in the Cavafy Archive.

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Introduction

Translation should embody an act of thanks to the original. It should celebrate its own dependence on its source. It concentrates scruple and trust, however recreative or anarchic its instincts. It is an informing craft which, sometimes enigmatically, reveals within or adds to the original what was already there—particularly where the text has been translated, imitated, adapted a hundredfold.

—George Steiner

In the eighth of his *Twelve Poems for Cavafy* (*Dodeka Poiemata yia Kavafy*, 1974) entitled ‘Misunderstandings,’ the Greek poet Yiannis Ritsos assures his readers that the older, deceased Alexandrian poet is clearly out to entangle us in his singular complexity. By now, almost four decades later, this complexity, often conveyed through a poetic medium that seems on its surface relatively simple, defines and sustains his preeminent status among poets of the last one hundred and fifty years. Ritsos spoke of the man in order to speak of the poet, as if they are indissolubly bonded, just as we habitually do despite the hard fact of knowing the poet alone survives and succeeds the man. The complexity we share with Cavafy endures in the complexity of his poetry and our engagement with it.

That we know so very little about his life compared to those of many other poets of his own and other periods—Robert Liddell’s slim 222-page *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* has occupied a lonely spot in the poet’s bibliography for years—can neither be denied nor redressed by special narratives suited to persons of other times and places. A totally voiceless Cavafy, depicted in the 1996 biographical motion picture *Kavafis* by Yiannis Smaragdakis, constitutes what is perhaps the most remarkable and memorable feature of the film. The character Cavafy throughout, from childhood to deathbed, says nothing, not a word. Even when one of the friends of his youth cries out in exasperation, “Ma yiati then milas; Pos mboris nase toso krifos;” (*So why don’t you speak? How can you be so secretive?*) this cinematic Cavafy, symbolically true to his real life original, tells him and ultimately all of his fellow players nothing, though the words of the poet, tellingly, can be heard in the voice-over recitations of his poems in a number of scenes.

Although the biographical approach to Cavafy’s poetry has been something of a dead-end, the bibliographical and textual focus on Cavafy’s unique way of self-publishing his poems and on subsequent approaches

to arranging and editing them has been a necessary and rewarding, if, at times, extravagant undertaking. The task of editing Cavafy's some 250 poems, comprising the 154 poems he collected and published himself during his lifetime, usually referred to as the *Collected* or *Published Poems*, and the two other groups of poems, twenty-two of which are categorized as *Uncollected* or *Unpublished*, never having been gathered and printed under the poet's living eye, and a number of early poems written between 1886 and 1898 that Cavafy "rejected," has demanded the unremitting attention of eminent scholars for the last several decades. Somewhat reminiscent of the editorial history of Emily Dickinson, the editing and publication history of Cavafy, primarily concerning the *Collected Poems*, has not been without some controversy, particularly on the issue of editorial intervention. As Anthony Hirst contends, "Cavafy left very little for subsequent editors to do. If only they had been content to do very little instead of undoing the poet's meticulous work!"

If in editing Cavafy scholars have managed to overlook some of his choices as self-editor, and thus some of his decisions as a writer as well, they have found much to say about his collecting and ordering poems in the seven thematically arranged publication packets for private circulation. Though every effort of scholarly criticism, just as every effort at translating the poetry, surely contributes something of value to our common enterprise, the fervent examination of these gatherings, at times pervaded with speculations about what guided Cavafy in assorting them, not to mention the search for clues to the meaning of individual poems consequent to these groupings, run the risk of over-privileging ongoing unstable contexts and of compartmentalizing his life's work after it was finished. Cavafy himself made a notable remark concerning these collections in a 1922 letter to a friend, "How can I speak for the future?" His pertinent question about this uncertainty, along with the fact that he also made five chronological gatherings, argue for preferment of the long view over continuing attention to such aspects of the poetry, which can also prove unproductive if driven by an impulse to compensate for the scant biographical material.

Let us pursue grounds more relative than this: the poetry's the thing. At the head of the 162 poems in this book, whose contents include the 154 *Collected Poems*, presented by the year and within each year's order of composition and/ or first printing, and seven of the *Uncollected Poems* interspersed chronologically among them, stands 'Ode and Elegy of the Street,' the only editorial choice here that infringes upon Cavafy's

wishes to repudiate twenty-seven of his earliest poems. Conscripted as an overture to the story of Cavafy's poetry, 'Ode and Elegy of the Street' offers a portal through which we may enter the wide-open world of a young poet's receptivity to the possibilities before him. Between the opening and closing of the windows and doors in the morning and evening of his day, an extraordinary assembly of poems will eventually make its entrance, poems that will be disposed through a diversity of subjects and will take a lifetime of work to explore. It should not come as a surprise that in the first few pages that follow these introductory verses, the numerous poems to come that are rooted in Greek culture and history from antiquity to Byzantium are announced by 'Achilles' Horses,' 'Sarpedon's Funeral,' 'Thermopylae,' and 'Perfidy.' The poems 'Prayer,' 'Candles,' 'An Old Man,' and 'The Souls of Old Men,' strike the elegiac notes of loss and regret that will be confronted and uniquely contested in the future, while 'Walls' and 'The Windows' represent the aura of self-imprisoning states of mind and social conditions from which there is no escape though there must some day be one. And the poem 'The First Step,' in describing the beginning of a commitment to art, foreshadows a lifelong progress from an intern on the first rung of poetry's ladder to a master with a consummate grasp of the empowerment of poetry and a dramatic command of a diversity of characters, historical, fictional, perhaps even personal through whom to give it voice.

Viewing the body of Cavafy's poems as a whole rather than continuing to speculate on the relevance of the thematic collections to his development as an artist, a fair though by now narrow interest of those still concerned with the contours of its progress rather than with its final state, we should attend to the poet's further remarks in the letter quoted above that the entire body of his work is not separated into "Special Collections" and that the earlier thematic arrangements had become subject to change. Thus, though when we look through the table of contents of almost any book of Cavafy poems we still recognize their fundamental organization around the familiar divisions of philosophical, historical, and erotic poems, we are also obliged to recognize and respond to the interpretive opportunities that other dynamics at work within those allocations present. One of these dynamics, which I call 'Eros, Memory, and Art,' originated in my 1981 review essay on Cavafy of that title in *The American Poetry Review*, coupled with Cavafy's own sense of himself as primarily a historical poet, helps to explain the unusual degree of overlapping of theme and approach that occurs throughout his

oeuvre. One of the fundamental ways in which this works may be seen in 'Craftsman of Wine Bowls,' a poem linked to several others through a historical event, the Battle of Magnesia (190 B.C.) and its aftermath. While it is a common trait of many of Cavafy's historical poems to form a constellation of poems dealing with a single incident that has been carefully excised from history's seamless garment, the contextual parameters of some of them expand exponentially when viewed through the lens of Eros, Memory, and Art. Thus, a poem like 'Craftsman,' which begins by illustrating the combination of the personal and political, the private and public, spheres that frequently intersect in Cavafy's poetry, the artisan-speaker, working on commission by a great family, insinuates his individual celebration of his love as he simultaneously experiences the eroding effects of time upon his memory of that love. By dating his personal loss by the battle that marks the great political loss that came with the onset of Roman dominance in the Hellenized East, the craftsman-persona inadvertently unveils an ironic historical context that is more meaningful to the reader than to himself. Relative chronological proximity to the battle provides him with his poignancy, chronological distance provides the reader with his ironic perspective. One more step back from (or into?) this hall of mirrors kind of perspective, gives the final Cavafian twist, the proposal that the poet himself keeps company with his reader and his fictional artisan, that they are each and all participants in their own immediate situations that are subject to partially understood historical forces and full of passion and loss. Though pathetic, and often tragic, these situations have been intermittently dignified by art's attempt to record their intensity and sincerity.

Craftsman of Wine Bowls

On this wine bowl of pure silver—
 made for the house of Herakleides,
 where grand style and good taste rule—
 observe the elegant flowers, streams and thyme,
 in whose midst I set a handsome young man,
 naked, amorous, with one leg still
 dangling in the water.— O memory, I prayed
 you'd be my best assistant in making
 the young man's face I loved the way it was.
 A great difficulty this proved because
 about fifteen years have passed since the day
 he fell, a soldier, in the defeat at Magnesia.

With its first version written in November of 1903, a revision in July 1912, and the final version and printing in December of 1921, 'Craftsman of Wine Bowls' significantly occupies stations across two richly creative decades of the poet's career. Coincidentally, in 1903 at the beginning of this formative period in which the first draft of 'Craftsman' was composed, Cavafy wrote an untitled work in English prose, now known as *Ars Poetica*, that was not published until 1963, thirty years after his death, in which he assayed his work and role as a poet. His remarks in the following passage about two of his early poems, written in the same period, suggest the kind of poetic thinking that might have helped inspire the dynamic that energizes 'Craftsman of Wine Bowls.'

If even for one day, or one hour I felt like the man within
'Walls,' or like the man of 'Windows' the poem is based on a
truth, a short-lived truth, but which, for the very reason of its
having once existed, may repeat itself in another life, perhaps
with as short duration, perhaps with longer.

Notably, poems from this general period such as 'Comes to Reside,' 'Their Beginning,' 'Very Seldom,' 'Getting It,' and 'One Night' establish, each in its own way, the importance of the artist's role in the struggle to preserve love and the beloved against defacement "by Time's fell hand." Poems like these, dealing with the poet's desire to memorialize in his work an individual or experience, invariably recalled for their erotic significance and for which he cares deeply, launched the possibility for the extension and integration of Cavafy's perception of the relevance of Eros, Memory, and Art to poems that would be written in the years to come. In 1930-31, two years before he died, Cavafy composed and printed two poems that give supremely conceived and executed expression to this major creative force in his writing: 'The Mirror in the Vestibule,' with its consummately refined symbolic image of the poet as an eighty-year old mirror in the house of poetry proudly and joyfully reflecting the perfect beauty that appears, if only fleetingly, before it; and 'According to the Recipes of Ancient Greco-Syrian Magicians,' in which the poet Cavafy, neatly subsumed in the undiluted common denominator of an "aesthete," seeks the knowledge of past masters—can one doubt Shakespeare was one of these ancient magicians—in order to find his own way to realizing the end of the quest to which he has dedicated his life in art.

That this quest fully embraces as well as fundamentally emanates from Cavafy's sense of himself as a historical poet, or as Daniel Mendelsohn has

recently suggested a poet-historian, can be easily observed by a reading of the complete list of the titles of his poems, and then substantially confirmed by a reading of the poems themselves. If poetry at its ground level quintessentially records our humanity, Cavafy's poetry gives us a history of our humanity through the singular perspectives his life afforded him. He belongs to that select group of poets who most directly draw us into living the lives of others, from the private, often obscure individual to the public luminary, from the anonymous to the eponymous. Memory, upon which stories of desire and the art of their telling depend, whom the craftsman apostrophizes in the name not only of his own effort but also of all of Cavafy's efforts before and after, is not, as the ancients saw it, the mother of his muses, but is herself his one and only muse.

Nourished by the long, interlaced narratives of Greek literature, culture, politics, and language, the historical poems clearly comprise the largest single group of poems Cavafy produced and manifestly represent the powerful inspiration of this muse, even when modified by the various familiar themes and approaches from his work as a whole that at times blend with them. But there is another significant dimension to her effect on him, which is to be found in how his writing reflects his special understanding of the poetry that has preceded him, those recipes of old, and his ability to write out of it, preferring to work with resonances of it rather than signatures of its influence. Nowhere does this fine modulation of his voice sound than in the numerous poems that show how carefully he read and subtly alluded to the amatory poets of ancient Greece, primarily those of the renowned *Greek*—also known as the *Palatine Anthology*.

Ironically, Cavafy's only mentions of love poets from the *Greek Anthology* by name come in two poems that have nothing directly to do with love: Meleagros, in 'Symeon' as a better poet than the fictional Syrian Lamon, and again in 'Young Men of Sidon (400 A.D.)' along with Krinagoras and Rhianos, poets recognized for their eroticism, whose epigrams along with others constitute the program a professional actor has been hired to perform at a literary salon. Some critics have viewed this poem, especially its second half, in which one of the young men of Sidon passionately states his expectations of a literary artist, "Give—say I—all you have to your work,/ all your care, and keep your work in mind/ even during hardships, even as your time winds down./ This is what I expect and demand of you," as a passage of significant autobiographical import, notwithstanding the fact that the speech is actually an apostrophic address to the long departed Aeschylus, taking him to task for having

composed his own epitaph exclusively as a tribute to his having fought in the Battle of Marathon. Though we are probably used to thinking of him as a complicated rather than a crafty Cavafy, perhaps in thinking about this poem we can conceive in it an intriguing invitation for us to imagine him, a child of the Greek diaspora himself, joining the company of the young men of Sidon in serious regard of their cultural heritage, having already apprenticed himself to the pastoral poet Theokritos, who appeared as a character in his poem 'The First Step' more than two decades before.

A different, equal at the least, order of interest arises when we respond to the invitation to consider the ways in which the poetry identified by the naming of a few of its makers actually affects Cavafy's writing, abandoning the admittedly often engrossing *explication de tête* in favor of *explication de texte*. To begin with, the compass of Cavafy's references to sexual attractions and actions matches that of the *Greek Anthology*, from lovers' rivalries and disagreements, for example, in 'Kimon, Son of Learchus, Age 22, Student of Greek Literature (in Cyrene)' and 'Lovely White Flowers So Well-Suited' to the recognition of time's destructive effect upon a beloved's or love object's beauty, usually but not always noted humorously with a vengeance by the poets in the anthology, a theme appropriated and stood on its head by Cavafy's counteracting exertions to preserve that beauty through memory and art. Between these come numerous poems that, it is important to stress, reflect not imitations but intimations of their parallels in the epigrams of the poets collected in the *Greek Anthology* and elsewhere: a passionate love that turns cool ('Before Time Could Change Them'), love celebrated for its uncompromising commitment or expertise and the power of Eros ('In the Dives—,' 'Days of 1901,' 'He Came to Read'), the importance of drinking, at times hard, during affairs and encounters ('I Went,' 'Half and Hour,' 'Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old'), frustrated and unfulfilled love ('Desires,' 'On the Stairs,' 'The Afternoon Sun,'), love as fantasy and in dreams ('In the Theater,' 'Return,' 'When They Stir in Your Mind,' 'I've Gazed So Much,' 'Remember Body,' 'The Boring Village'), the use of *ekphrasis*, the description of visual and plastic arts, to highlight or enhance the aura and nature of love ('The Retinue of Dionysus,' 'Sculptor from Tyana,' 'At the Café Door,' 'Portrait of a Twenty-Three Year Old Painted by his Friend of the Same Age, An Amateur'), the eroticism of the gods ('One of their Gods'), and failed renunciations of love ('Dangerous Matters,' 'He Swears').

A short list of poets whose study could have activated this wide range of resonances might include Anakreon, Archilochos, Alkaios, Asclepiades, Dioskorides, Glaukos, Hedylos, Kallimachos, Meleagros, Philodemos, Poseidippos, Simonides, Straton, and the many anonymous poets whose epigrams were also collected in the anthology. But it is possible Cavafy's acquaintance with four of these poets may involve specific connections beyond the broad field of poetic interactions just considered. His characteristic antiheroic stance and theme may owe something to Archilochos and Kallimachos—to the former, the mercenary Iambic poet of Paros who wrote about how he blithely abandoned his shield under a bush during a battle with some wild Thracians, and to the latter, who, like Cavafy, moved to Alexandria as a young man and, unlike Cavafy, became a publicly renowned literary figure in his own time, and engaged in one of the great literary debates of antiquity, arguing for the superiority of the lyric over the epic. Demonstrative of Cavafy's dedication to this position ("I loathe the serial poem," Kallimachos begins one of his epigrams) is the fact that the longest poem he ever wrote is 91 lines long, the early 'King Claudius' (1899), which he wisely withheld from publication during his lifetime, leaving the honor of longest poem (70 lines) to 'Myres: Alexandria, 340 A.D.,' the magisterial dramatic monologue he wrote thirty years later. The third poet, Straton (fl. 125 A.D.), who compiled a famous anthology of homoerotic epigrams that eventually became part of the *Greek Anthology*, wrote a poem that offers a striking resemblance to Cavafy's finest poem that involves cruising and chance erotic encounters, 'He Asked About the Quality' (see also, 'On the Stairs,' 'In the Street,' 'The Tobacco Shop Window'). In my translation of Straton's poem, originally published in my Modern Library book of 2006, *Acts of Love*, which I quote below for the purposes of comparison, I changed the point of view from the first person to the third, retained here to complement the other similarities between the two poems.

Earlier in the day, he happened to pass
the store where they make garlands and saw a boy
weaving flowers with berries, and found himself moved.
He approached and asked about their quality,
and then, somewhat more quietly, for how much
would the boy sell him his garland. The boy blushed
redder than his roses and, bending his head,
told him to leave fast, lest his father see him.
As a pretense he bought a wreath and went home,
crowned his gods, and begged them to answer his prayer.

If this comes closer to source and analogue status than the other echoes of the old poets, there is also an unusually vivid similarity, separated by a profoundly different psychological sensibility, between the final lines of Cavafy's 'The Bandaged Shoulder,' a work he kept back with his other "unpublished" poems, and one of the anonymous epigrams in the anthology, in which the speaker crowns his beloved with ribbons after he's won a boxing match and gives "his bloodied-up face three kisses,/ but sweeter than myrrh it tasted to me."

Finally, the poem 'Gray' offers an important adversative illustration of Cavafy's response to his reading of the anthology poets. The resonance attunes us first to the principal image of an aging beloved's face, only the face in the sources is an unsightly, wrinkled one, usually described with cruel glee in revenge for the former beauty's haughty refusal to reciprocate the would-be lover's affection. These pungent lines by Archilochos, written during the middle of the seventh century B.C., "Gone's the bloom from your soft skin, your furrow's/ withered too, the ... of foul old age is taking its toll,/] and the sweet loveliness has bolted from your longed for face," may well have set a model for later poets to follow, though some epigrams on this theme are tempered with ironic humor. But for Cavafy the image of the beloved and his once beautiful—doomed to be "broken down"—face has become instead an object to be preserved against time by memory.

Gray

Looking at a pale gray opal
I remembered two beautiful gray eyes
that I saw; must have been twenty years ago...

.....

We were lovers for a month.
Then he took off, for Smyrna I think,
for a job there, and we never saw each other again.

They'll have lost their look—if he lives—those gray eyes;
that beautiful face will have broken down.

Memory, keep it the way it was.
And, memory, whatever you can of that love,
whatsoever you can, bring back to me tonight.

Invoking Memory, just as the craftsman does in the consummate expression of Eros, Memory, and Art, the nameless persona of this poem, like the speaker of 'Far Away,' who struggles to recall the eyes that were "deep dark blue, sapphire blue," stakes his case for remembrance on "those gray eyes" that he saw decades ago. While poems like 'Aboard Ship' and 'So They'll Come—' also depict the effort to recall and retain the image of the beloved, poems like 'Melancholy of Jason Cleander, Poet in Commagene, 595 A.D.,' in which an imaginary speaker in the distant past focuses on his own stressful, debilitating aging, a theme that resonates with numerous poems in the *Greek Anthology*, and hints somberly that the anodyne might be found in the art of poetry, and 'In Despair,' in which the persona hopelessly strives to regain a beloved who is lost to him altogether through liaisons with others, lay out what such seekers are up against in the starkest of terms, as in the refrain-like "never found again" in 'Days of 1903.' But in his apostrophe to Memory, the speaker in 'Gray' takes the first step towards restoration by his attempt to close the twenty-year separation of the lovers, denoted by the full line of periods, which also connotes the look on the page of many of the ancient lyrics by bringing to mind their irreparable lacunose state. If Art does not appear explicitly to play a role in this contest against time, as it does in 'Craftsman of Wine Bowls,' perhaps it is potentially there in 'Gray' nonetheless, virtually embodied by the poem itself.

A number of Cavafy's poems that involve imaginary poets and writers living in a fairly broad historical period beginning with the Hellenistic epoch and continuing well into the Christian era of the Byzantine Empire may also have been patterned on the poets from the age of Justinian in what is known as the Cycle of Agathias Scholastikos in the *Greek Anthology*. These poets, the best known of which was Paulos Silentiarius, were Christian and often held positions of importance, but also wrote erotic poems richly loaded with invocations of the pagan gods in the style and in emulation of the language of their predecessors, though, as W. R. Paton observes in the preface to his 1916 Loeb Classical Library edition of the anthology, they "wrote in a language which they did not command, but by which they were commanded, as all who try to write ancient Greek are." The challenges of writing in Greek for these fictional individuals and, in some cases, their contemporaries, are variously addressed in the poems 'He's the Man,' 'For Ammonis, Who Died at 29 in 610,' 'A Byzantine Noble, In Exile, Versifying,' while the young writer of 'Theatre of Sidon (400 A.D.)' boasts about his "extremely audacious

verses” in the Greek language and the speaker and intimate friend of the poet in ‘Temethus, Antiochian: 400 A.D.’ haughtily explains Temethus’ use of the pseudonym Emonides for his beloved, both without a hint of how demanding those tasks might have been.

Contrasting with the perspective in his historical poems that touch upon the diverse demands of speaking and writing in Greek and partaking of Greek culture in the Hellenized world, none of which is more poignant than the almost comical ‘A Prince from Western Libya,’ are numerous poems that indicate Cavafy’s abiding interest in the writers of the literary movement during the first three centuries of our era known as the Second Sophistic, though when he first mentions them in his unpublished essay ‘A Few Pages on the Sophists’ (1893-97) he simply refers to them as the “later Sophists whose lives were passed down to us by Philostratus and Eunapius.” In expressing his great sympathy for the generally despised sophists but particularly for the figures who now constitute the more fully recognized and better appreciated Second Sophistic, Cavafy was somewhat ahead of his time in his desire to counteract their bad luck and the poems he wrote that were influenced through his study of them confirm that he regarded their work “as a treasure trove of poetic material,” as he specifically described *The Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus in his 1892 published essay on John Keats’ poem ‘Lamia.’ Perhaps the observation he makes later in the same essay that “Poets fashion their own perceptions upon which they then build; they are entitled to delight in the reworking of material with full freedom,” aptly defines his own artistic relationship with his sources, particularly those that comprise the cultural, historical, and literary legacy of his Greek identity.

While a number of poems like ‘The God Abandons Antony,’ ‘He’s the Man,’ ‘King Demetrius,’ ‘But Wise Men Apprehend What Is Imminent,’ ‘Apollonius of Tyana in Rhodes,’ and ‘Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians’ connect with important figures in the Second Sophistic such as Lucian, Plutarch, and Philostratus through the use of direct quotations as titles, epigraphs or as part of the poetic text, and others like ‘Demaratus’ and ‘Sophist Leaving Syria’ explore activities of aspiring sophists, Cavafy affirms a special place of primacy for the most admired, renowned, prosperous, and influential individual of the Second Sophistic, Herodes Atticus, by devoting an entire poem to him.

Herodes Atticus

What a glorious rave is this for Herodes Atticus.

Alexander of Seleucia, one of our better sophists,
having gotten to Athens to lecture,
finds a deserted city, because Herodes
had gone to the country. And all the young men
had followed him there to hear him.
So then the sophist Alexander
writes Herodes a letter,
asking him to send back the Greeks.
Subtle Herodes answers directly,
“I’m coming, too, along with the Greeks.”—

How many lads now in Alexandria,
in Antioch, or in Beirut
(tomorrow’s Greek-trained orators),
when they gather at elite banquets
where the talk is sometimes about fine sophistry,
and sometimes about their exquisite love affairs,
distracted they suddenly fall silent.
They leave the glasses near them untouched,
and muse over Herodes’ fortune—
what other sophist was so deserving?—
Whatever he wishes and whatever he does
the Greeks (the Greeks!) will follow him,
neither to criticize nor to discuss,
nor to choose any more, just to follow.

Surely the irony of his writing a poem completely devoted to a sophist famous for his role in building aqueducts, stadiums, and theaters but who is represented in the literary record by a single extant speech as opposed to the voluminous surviving works of the other sophistic authors he referred to and quoted was not lost on Cavafy. Taking a cue from an episode in *The Lives of the Sophists* of Philostratus, the twentieth-century Alexandrian poet gives the famous second-century Romanized Athenian luminary the rave review he deserves for his leading role in the *paideia* of Greeks who are not merely Greeks “in an ethnic sense” but “learning how to *become* Greeks in the full, cultural meaning of the word,” as Tim Whitmarsh puts it in his book *The Second Sophistic*. It is in this sense that Alexander and Herodes used the word “Greeks” in their exchange of letters in the

poem. If Cavafy's incorporation of writings by the sophists in his work offers us further insight into his involvement with his historical heritage, his distinctive emulation of one of their most important forms of public performance, declarations in fictitious or historical persona of narratives, many of whose themes dealt with the Persian War and the conquests of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great, meant to preserve the cultural identity of Greece, represents a deeper and more significant relationship with the phenomenon of the Second Sophistic. Cavafy, in effect, became one of them, but with a profound difference in point of view and purpose that the intervening centuries inevitably shaped. In carrying on their initiative, he did so by writing the many poems that explore the legacy of the past through pictures, large and small, of the lives of imaginary and historical characters that reveal its complexities and contradictions with pathos and irony.

The full extent of Cavafy's wide and deep appreciation of the Second Sophistic's devotion to culture and art, however, may also be perceived from point to point in the echo of a detail that he had once noted in Philostratus that the sophist Polemon rode in a chariot "with silver-mounted bridles," in the poem 'Facing the Statue of Endymion,' in which the fictitious speaker announces, "In a white chariot drawn by four/ milk-white, silver-harnessed mules/ I've arrived at Latmus from Miletus," all the way to the poet's praise for its commitment to the grandeurs of lifestyle and understanding of Art, an existential state expressed in perfect pitch by the second stanza of the poem: "I sailed in a purple trireme from Alexandria/ for sacred rites—sacrifices and libations—to Endymion./ Look, the statue. Thrilled, I now take in/ Endymion's renowned beauty./ My slaves empty baskets of jasmine; auspicious/ cheers awaken the pleasures of ancient times."

Although Cavafy's inspiration to build and rework numerous of his own poems such as 'The Retinue of Dionysus,' 'Sculptor from Tyana,' and 'Philhellene,' among others, some of which are set in later periods, further demonstrates the importance of this "advanced artistic disposition" for him, the esteem in which he held it provided him with a means of connecting it with his own time. For, as he continues in his commentary on the Sophists, they lived solely and passionately for the sake of Art and their worship of it "should endear them greatly to those of us who presently occupy ourselves with the Word." Spanning over approximately a thousand and a half years later to the days during which Cavafy began his artistic career, this correspondence not only helps define

the purview from which he made poetry that contained and continued, in the language of the Greek diaspora, the diverse facets of the classical tradition as it was studied and interpreted in nineteenth-century Great Britain, but also admonishes us to pursue our intuitions and perceptions of the ways in which his singular complexity enabled him to freely build a poetic vision that stands apart and on its own. The influence of the Victorians and the Decadents, of writers like Robert Browning, John Addington Symonds, Arthur Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Lionel Johnson and so many others has been and continues to be the subject of intense critical scholarship and has spoken and will speak better for itself, as do numerous studies of other aspects of Cavafy, than I can here. Yet it would be negligent not to consider Cavafy's link to the poet whose work profoundly influenced that of his own as well as the preceding and subsequent generations. Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* was not so shocking to him, Cavafy wrote in a 1907 unpublished note to himself, and indeed he found that compared to his own range of actual and imagined sensuality the French poet's was quite limited. If he was not exactly willing to be Baudelaire's *semblable*, he was indeed his *frère* in following in the footsteps of "the first true city poet" whose example "of the self as an antiheroic or problematic presence" (in the words of Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson in *Poems for the Millennium*, Vol. 3) he was to take as a foothold from which to write many of his poems. Though cities from the past like Antioch and Ptolemaic Alexandria provided him with settings for various poems, both historical, sensual and as composites of the two, his own Alexandria was the city the beauty of "whose masses, of poor young men" that so greatly pleased and moved him, as he avers in the personal note that immediately follows the one on Baudelaire. Though one can follow the course of the poems Cavafy wrote on this subject over the years, culminating with the great poem 'Days of 1908' that crowns them, a poem (dated May 1918) that might have most fittingly represented the city in the terms marked out by the effect on him by Baudelaire was one of those Cavafy began but never finished. The text that follows below has not been included with the translations of the poems in this book because I have chosen not to translate the elements of a never fully realized poem in Greek, especially when those elements consist of several unfinished and partially contradictory drafts, variants and marginalia. I have preferred, rather, to refashion those elements into a poem finished by me, an available hand educated for its execution, I hope, by my dedication during the last several years to the study and translation of Cavafy's poetry. While I do not claim my poem represents

how Cavafy would have finished his preliminary workings of it, I will claim that my fully realized poem in English presents a text more true than traitorous to the poetic potency of its fragments.

The Newspaper Story

Dejected, reading the newspaper while riding the tram:
he came across an apparent crime in the Police Blotter,
a crime that had taken place the night before
between ten and eleven. The murderer had not yet been found.
The newspaper story, quite justly,
abhorred the murder, but righteously
showed its utter contempt
for the victim's degenerate way of life,
for that individual's depravity.

He read all about it, the contempt ... and grieving in silence,
remembered an evening between ten and midnight a year ago
they had spent together in a room
(the only time—barely knowing each other by sight)
in a half-hotel, half brothel. Never—not even
in the street—did they ever meet again.
It described the wound in detail
and surmised blackmail must have had something to do with it.
The contempt ... and he, grieving in silence,
remembered the sweet lips and the white, exceptional
sublime flesh he hadn't kissed enough.

Dejected, he read the story in the newspaper.
The body was discovered at about eleven at night
near the docks. It was not definite after all
that a crime had been committed,
a slight chance it was an accident, wasn't intentional.
The newspaper expressed some pity, but righteously
showed its indignation and contempt
for the victim's degenerate way of life.

The unidentified reader (and the barely distinguishable person who gives voice to his thoughts) in the poem, evidently in some way at odds with society and out of step with its mores, over the wall of whose shoulder we can perhaps read not only the immediate story in the newspaper but also those of a world of worlds, has he, with his passionate patience, created

freely enough to entangle us in the wait for the advent of one who will create even more freely?

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I have been fortunate to know Stavros Deligiorgis ever since we met, *by adventure*, going on forty-five years ago at a conference in Kalamazoo, where both of us gave papers on Chaucer. We have kept our long friendship alive and lively through more ways than I can enumerate here, but will specify that a mutual love of poetry and the art and practice of translating it has been at the center of its gravity, one of the forces behind its longevity. Working together on this book of translations of poems by Cavafy did not happen by chance but is an outcome of this long and loyal friendship. Having benefited from his critical reading and advice when I was working on two previous small collections of translations from Cavafy, I asked him for his assistance once again. His generous and intense application of his superb command of all of the Greek language to this book, his keen detailed reading and re-reading of the versions of Cavafy's poems in it, not to mention his understanding of the very few times I decided, perhaps at my peril, not to take his advice, has proved so essential to my sense of its fulfillment that I made a proposal, to which he agreed, that his name be added to the cover and the title page. We both laughed heartily at his closing remark, "So they can have someone to blame?" The mark of his intelligence and learning inheres in many parts of this book, and once again I thank him, as I did twelve years ago, for teaching me the great Pythagorean lesson, KOINA TA TΩN ΦΙΛΩΝ.

—George Economou

for Rochelle

The Poems

Ode and Elegy of the Street

Footsteps of the first passer-by,
the first vendor's lusty cry,
the first opening of windows
and of doors—these are the songs
that morning streets sing.

The tread of the last passer-by,
the last vendor's last cry,
the closing of doors and windows,
these you hear are elegy's sounds
that belong to evening streets.

(1896)

Walls

Thoughtless, pitiless, indecent,
they put up high, thick walls around me.

And now I sit here and despair.
I think of nothing else: this condition just eats me up—

I had so many things to do outside.
How did I not pay attention when they were putting up the walls?

But of their building I never heard a noise or sound.
I hadn't a clue they were closing me off from the world outside.

(1897)

An Old Man

Some way inside the noisy coffeehouse
an old man sits bent over a table,
a newspaper before him, all alone.

And contemptuous of his desolate old age
he thinks about how little he enjoyed the years
when he was strong, articulate, and handsome.

He knows how much he's aged, feels it, sees it.
And yet the time he was young seems like
yesterday. How brief the span, how brief the span.

And he ponders how Forethought tricked him,
and how he always trusted it--what a fool—
that liar who said, "Tomorrow. You've lots of time."

He recalls impulses he held back, how much
joy he sacrificed. Every missed chance
now mocks his mindless good sense.

...But so much thinking and remembering
makes the old man woozy. And he falls asleep
leaning on the coffeehouse table.

(1897)

Achilles' Horses

When they saw Patroclus killed,
who had been so valiant, and strong, and young,
Achilles' horses began to weep,
their deathless nature offended
by having to look upon this work of death.
They tossed their heads and shook their long manes,
they pounded the earth with their hooves, and mourned
Patroclus whom they saw lifeless—wiped out—
mere flesh now—his spirit lost—
defenseless—without breath—
thrown back from life into the big Nothing.

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal
horses and felt sad. "At Peleus' wedding,"
he said, "I shouldn't have acted so rashly;
better for us not to have given you,
my unlucky horses! What were you doing down there
anyhow with that miserable human race, destiny's plaything.
You for whom neither death nor old age lie in wait,
fleeting disasters torment now. Men have entangled
you in their ordeals."—Yet they kept shedding
their tears for death's eternal
havoc, those two noble animals.

(1897)

Prayer

The sea took a sailor down to her depths.—
His mother, unaware, goes and lights

a tall candle before the Virgin Mother
for his quick return and for good weather—

and ever towards the wind she cocks her ear.
But while she pleads and says her prayer,

the icon listens, sad and solemn,
knows the son she awaits will never come.

(1898)