

## Cavafy in America

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The title of this paper might provoke some quizzical expressions: I had better begin with the reassuring, or disappointing, fact that I have no biographical surprises to spring. The present topic is not "Cavafy: the American years" (as it might be, "Rimbaud in Cyprus"). Yet there have been noteworthy forms of poetic commerce between Cavafy and American verse, as I hope to show.

These transactions run in both directions. There is certainly one American poet to whom, as we shall see, Cavafy appears to owe something. (It is a grievous deficiency in Cavafy scholarship, when we compare it to the resources that we possess for modern poets in other languages, that no annotated edition exists to provide brief details of his literary borrowings.<sup>1</sup>) But the ways in which Cavafy has in turn been read by American poets also deserve our attention. The ideological polarities and interpretative vagaries of the responses to Cavafy's *œuvre* are, to be sure, of interest in themselves.<sup>2</sup> But this is especially true where they take the form of new poems of lasting value. Such poems are, of course, few; yet a survey of the whole field of consciously post-Cavafian poetry can tell us, in a way that we cannot other-

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References to Cavafy's collected poems (Κ.Π Καβάφης, *Ποιήματα* (ed. G.P. Savidis, 2 vols., Athens 1981) are made by the letter C followed by volume and page number.

<sup>1</sup> Sadly, such editions of modern Greek poets are few and far between, though the late G.P. Savidis's edition of K.G. Karyotakis, *Τα ποιήματα (1913-1928)* (Athens 1992) goes some way to supplying a model, albeit with only brief annotation.

<sup>2</sup> Not, it has to be said, of overwhelming interest; but, for example, the debate summarized in Vassilis Lambropoulos, "The violent power of knowledge: the struggle of critical discourses for domination over Cavafy's 'Young Men of Sidon, AD 400'", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10 (1983) 149-66, has piquant moments.

wise learn, something about what it was that the Alexandrian poet “brought to Art”.

Such is the conception behind Nasos Vayenas’s recent anthology, *In Conversation with Cavafy*, which weighs in at well over three hundred pages.<sup>3</sup> This volume presents in Greek translations, with brief introductions for countries in which poetic interest in Cavafy has taken a sustained form, poems from all over the world which make some kind of open reference or homage to the Greek poet or his work or, often, the two together. The overall picture it presents is a striking one. Not only has the influence of Cavafy’s poetry diffused itself even further than that of Borges and Pessoa, he has become to his successors a pre-eminent icon of the poet, and this despite an uneventful life such as a Mayakovski or a Mandelstam were tragically not granted to lead.<sup>4</sup> And from Edmund Keeley’s selection of sixteen poems from the United States since 1963, it is clear that Cavafy has enjoyed something of a vogue among his fellow-practitioners across the Atlantic for years.<sup>5</sup>

There’s a surprise here. We think of Cavafy, on his own authority, as a “poet of old age”; but we also think of him as being, *par excellence*, a poet of the Old World. Indeed, when the United States is fleetingly mentioned in a poem by Cavafy, it is only to evoke the greatest possible and most painful kind of separation. “Before time could change them” begins:

They were extremely sad at their parting.  
It wasn’t what they wanted; it was the circumstances.  
The need to make a living led one of the two  
to go off far away – New York or Canada.<sup>6</sup>

All this might seem to suggest that Cavafy saw little to take from America, and that, in turn, modern American poets might find few enough affinities with him. But this is not the case. A

<sup>3</sup> Nasos Vayenas (ed.), *Συνομιλιώντας με τον Καβάφη* (Thessaloniki 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.19-35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-59. In this paper I have deliberately confined myself largely to poems which fall outside Keeley’s selection. Regrettably, the anthology does not contain the originals of the poems, but the index of references on p. 367 may be employed.

<sup>6</sup> C 2.39.

comparison with Cavafy's relation to poetry from the British Isles will be illuminating here.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most decisive factor which has led to Cavafy's so taking root in English letters has been the fact that, following a conscious and highly fruitful strategy (in many ways, a strategy which suited him better than the following of Eliot suited Seferis), Cavafy drew in his poetry on the work of many English poets, and above all that of Browning.<sup>8</sup> In Cavafy's historical poems, as a consequence, the English reader recognizes as familiar a voice with the ring of Browning – a learned and ironic voice which does not eschew the quiet pleasures of pedantry. (Indeed, this fact is of no little assistance to the English translator of Cavafy.<sup>9</sup>) It is also true, however, that Cavafy's erotic poems have no particularly strong predecessors in nineteenth-century English poetry: while undoubtedly important for Cavafy, William [Johnson] Cory's *Ionica* (1860) or Oscar Wilde's poems of Greek love are pallid by comparison.<sup>10</sup> It is no surprise, then, that English-language versions of Cavafy's sensual poems are often unsatisfying.<sup>11</sup> Yet an American predecessor of Cavafy, Whitman, may be seen as one of his inspirations.

The presence of Whitman in Greece is a diverse one, even if mention of him is likely to take our minds first to the wild Sixties atmosphere of Lefteris Poullos's "American bar in Athens", to the erotic fever of Andreas Embiricos, to the drum

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<sup>7</sup> A selection (again, in Greek translation) in Vayenas, *Συνομιλώντας με τον Καβάφη*, pp. 243-65 ; forthcoming discussion by me in "Ο Βρετανικός Καβάφης", *Πρακτικά της Η' Επιστημονικής Συνάντησης του Τομέα ΜΝΕΣ* (Thessaloniki 2001).

<sup>8</sup> The point was made polemically by Glafkos Alithersis, *Το πρόβλημα του Καβάφη* (Alexandria 1934), and developed significantly by Edmund Keeley, "Constantine Cavafy and George Seferis and their relation to poetry in English", DPhil thesis, Oxford 1952; some further remarks are to be found in Ricks, "Ο Βρετανικός Καβάφης".

<sup>9</sup> If I may speak from personal experience: see the versions in *Modern Poetry in Translation* n.s. 13 (1998) 9-12.

<sup>10</sup> On the Wilde connection see Sarah Ekdawi, "The erotic poems of C.P. Cavafy", *Κάμπος* 1 (1993), 23-46; Cory, who lies behind Cavafy's "Ionic" (*Ποιήματα*, 1.53), requires further investigation.

<sup>11</sup> So I argued in "Cavafy translated", *Κάμπος* 1 (1993) 85-110; later versions have done little to change my mind.

taps of Nikos Engonopoulos, or to the pantheistic free verse of Sikelianos's *Consciousnesses*.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite their radical differences of form and temperament, there is no doubt that there is some connection between the bearded American prophet and the stiff-collared Alexandrian. Poetic affinities do not always come where they are expected: they may even provoke a degree of unease in the younger poet who must concede the affinity. A celebrated case, one pertinent to our argument: Hopkins's recognition (1882) that "I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession."<sup>13</sup>

The first scholar to discern Cavafy's affinities to Whitman was Edmund Keeley in his doctoral thesis of 1952; oddly, Keeley later retreated from what he seems to have felt to be an over-imaginative comparison, and Whitman takes up no more than a footnote in *Cavafy's Alexandria*, where his "vague indirect eroticism" is seen as having little connection with the Greek poet's work.<sup>14</sup> Yet surely Cavafy will have been familiar with the figure, and indeed the work, of Whitman, whose fame in England, and indeed in France, grew apace from the 1860s.<sup>15</sup> From the outset, devotees of "Greek love" found in Whitman's poetry a homoerotic vein quite without smut or prurience, and the self-taught American came to find his name invoked by Hellenists as, so to speak, a natural exponent of the Hellenic spirit: John Addington Symonds, for example, that tireless advocate of Greek love, rejoices in the rebirth of Platonic ideals in the robust frames

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<sup>12</sup> Lefteris Poullos, "Αμέρικαν Μπαρ στην Αθήνα", *Ποιήματα 1,2* (Athens 1975), pp. 71-2; Andreas Embiricos, "Οι Μπεάτοι ή της μη συμμορφώσεως οι Άγιοι", *Οκτάνα* (Athens 1980), pp. 101-3; Nikos Engonopoulos, epigraph to the collection *Η επιστροφή των πουλιών*, *Ποιήματα*, vol. 2 (Athens 1977), p. 37. For earlier bibliography see G.K. Katsimbalis, *Ελληνική Βιβλιογραφία Ουώλτ Ονίτμαν* (2nd ed., Athens 1963).

<sup>13</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (Oxford 1970), p. 154; see also pp. 311-16 for George Saintsbury's review (1874) of *Leaves of Grass*.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria* (revised edition, Princeton 1996), p. 206, n. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Blodgett, *Walt Whitman in England* (Ithaca, NY 1934).

of the youths who populate the Utopian American's poems.<sup>16</sup> As Cavafy concludes a poem of slumming: "The mind turned to Plato's Charmides."<sup>17</sup>

And indeed Whitman is not always so far from the Cavafian brand of sensualism, in particular in his sequence – significantly with a Greek title – *Calamus*. (It invokes the pen, of course, with the autoerotic implications often close to the surface in Cavafy.) Whitman's scenes give us an idea why the erotic Cavafy has lodged so firmly in the American poetic mind: it's not so easy to say why, but the authentic proto-Cavafian touch is to be seen in, for example, "A Glimpse" (1860) where the scene is much like that of "At the café entrance" or "There to remain":

A glimpse through an interstice caught,  
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the  
stove late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated in a  
corner,  
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching  
and setting himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,  
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and  
oath and smutty jest,  
There we too, content, happy in being together, speaking little,  
perhaps not a word.<sup>18</sup>

If this is the scene on a small scale, Cavafy's larger setting of a sensual Alexandria itself owes something to Whitman's mythologized Manhattan (again, significantly associated with a Greek word):

#### CITY OF ORGIES

City of orgies, walks and joys,  
City whom that I have lived and sung in your midst will one day  
make you illustrious,

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<sup>16</sup> John Addington Symonds, *Walt Whitman. A study* (London 1893), pp. 67-86; for the wider climate see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY 1994). Charmides is named in connection with Whitman by Saintsbury: see n. 13 above.

<sup>17</sup> C 1.76.

<sup>18</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems* (ed. Francis Murphy) (Harmondsworth 1975), p. 163; cf. C 1.54, 2.8.

Not the pageants of you, not your shifting tableaux, your  
 spectacles repay me,  
 Nor the interminable rows of your houses, nor the ships at the  
 wharves,  
 Nor the processions in the streets, nor the bright windows with  
 the goods in them,  
 Nor to converse with learned persons, or bear my share in the  
 soirée or feast,  
 Not these, but as I pass o Manhattan, your frequent and swift  
 flash of eyes offering me love,  
 Offering response to my own – these repay me,  
 Lovers, continual lovers only repay me.<sup>19</sup>

Looking for the proto-Cavafian touch here, our eye lights not so much on the processions or spectacles, or the diverse street life, or the looks of desire, as on the respect for learning: “Nor to converse with learned persons” seems to prefigure “Ithaca” in this ingredient of its Utopianism.<sup>20</sup>

But the differences of scale and style between the two poets should not prevent us from noting just how much Whitman – before Cavafy, and surely impressing him with this – is a poet not just of self-confession but of self-concealment. The germinal role this may have played in the poetry of Cavafy is intimated in the last part of “When I read the book” (1867), which even deploys a Cavafian kind of parenthesis to brace the poet against his putative misreaders:

(As if any man really knew aught of my life,  
 Why even I myself I often think know little or nothing my real life,  
 Only a a few hints, a few faint clews and indirections  
 I seek for my own use to trace out here.)<sup>21</sup>

This self-preoccupation, intense and at the same time tentative, is surely connected with Cavafy, and above all in such a poem as the unpublished “Hidden”:

From what I did and what I thought  
 let them not seek to find just who I was.

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<sup>19</sup> Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> C 1.24.

<sup>21</sup> Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, p. 43.

There was an obstacle transforming  
my actions and my mode of life.  
There was an obstacle preventing me  
time and again when I was on the point of speaking.  
My most unnoticed actions  
and of my writings those which were most veiled –  
there only will they get a sense of me.  
In any case, perhaps it's hardly worth  
the time and trouble of learning about me.  
Later – in a society made more perfect –  
someone else made like me  
will surely make his appearance and act freely.<sup>22</sup>

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Cavafy, then, bears certain affinities with Whitman which at the very least deserve closer exploration. And just as the Greek poet seems to value and develop the very American idea of poetry as a matter of an improvisatory search for the self, so too have American poets repeatedly taken up such threads from Cavafy when they seemed somehow to be present there more freshly than in any source in their own literature. But it appears that, poetically speaking, the good ship Cavafy first arrived on American shores on a date we can give precisely, 1941, and that when it did so it was through an English poet who was to become an American.<sup>23</sup>

W.H. Auden had known something of the poetry of Cavafy since the 1920s when as an Oxford undergraduate he was introduced to the Greek poet's work in versions by the great Hellenist R.M. Dawkins.<sup>24</sup> Dawkins's translations were never published, and it is easy to imagine the somewhat conspiratorial air that a gathering of a select few to read the works of the Greek poet on

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<sup>22</sup> K.P. Kavafis, *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα (1882-1923)*, ed. G.P. Savidis (Athens 1982), p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> By contrast – how it would have irritated Cavafy! – a large selection from Palamas's work had by then been translated in American editions; for a list, see Dia M.L. Philippides, *CENSUS of Modern Greek Literature* (New Haven 1988), p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> W.H. Auden, "C.P. Cavafy", in his: *Forewords and Afterwords* (London 1979), pp. 333-4 (333).

Greek love would have had.<sup>25</sup> But Cavafy's influence was not confined to such circles: notably, in 1924 a translation of "Ithaca" appeared in T.S. Eliot's review, *The Criterion*.<sup>26</sup> It is to that poem, which had clearly been lodged in his mind, that Auden replied with a poem of his own seventeen years later. For reasons which remain the subject of dispute, the English poet had taken the decision to leave "the little coign" in which he found himself and to exile himself in the larger possibilities of America. When he embarked for America, Auden evidently "carried within his soul" the Cavafian "Ithaca" and made a memorable re-writing of it in his poem "Atlantis".<sup>27</sup> The poem sets out just like its Cavafian model: "Being set on the idea/Of getting to Atlantis...", and it loses no opportunity in making its first landing, at the start of stanza 2, at a distinctively, and slyly identified, Cavafian destination which again invokes "Ithaca" (and, behind that, Whitman's "City of Orgies", as we have seen):

Should storms, as may well happen,  
                   Drive you to anchor a week  
 In some old harbour-city  
                   Of Ionia, then speak  
 With her witty scholars...<sup>28</sup>

From that point the poem moves on, in each of its first six stanzas, to a different destination: barbaric Thrace, sensual

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the first poem in English to pay tribute to Cavafy [William Plomer, "To the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy, On his *Ποιήματα* (1908-1914)", *The Fivefold Screen* (London 1932), p. 57], indeed in the Greek poet's lifetime, makes no allusion, even a veiled one, to homosexuality. A vivid, though partisan, description of the social climate is to be found in Richard Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment* (London 1990).

<sup>26</sup> *The Criterion* 2 (July 1924) 431-2.

<sup>27</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London 1976), pp. 245-6. See the discussion by Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London 1999), pp. 166-7, who argues that Auden first knew the poem from a French translation by Marguerite Yourcenar, whom he had met in New York. It seems to me unlikely that Auden had not encountered the poem earlier; but in any case his seizing on the poem to mark his own passage to a new country is evident.

<sup>28</sup> Ionia is most vividly evoked in "Orophernes" (C 1.33-4).



Carthage or Corinth, frozen tundras, and finally a mountain peak from which Atlantis – evidently some kind of hinterland rather than an island – may be seen. Auden has taken care to make his destinations, and the *Weltanschauung* associated with each, deviate from Cavafy's: Ionia promotes scepticism; Thrace a *nostalgie de la boue*; Carthage and Corinth an Epicurean stance; the frozen wastes the Stoicism of a Captain Scott. The final destination is, however, a poetic vision not un-Cavafian in its formulation. Even if the addressee collapses at the last col, having seen Atlantis gleaming below, but unable to descend, he is told that he

should still be proud  
Even to have been allowed  
Just to peep at Atlantis  
In a poetic vision.

The Cavafian echo is two-fold. First, to a poem to which Auden later paid tribute, "The first rung".<sup>29</sup> There the apprentice poet Eumenes worries about reaching the first stage of poetry and is, seemingly, consoled by Theocritus with the admonition that where he has reached is already something of which to be proud.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Cavafy pervasively develops the idea of poetry's consisting of, and needing to console itself with simply being, evanescent "moments of vision".<sup>31</sup> At this point in Auden's poem, the apprentice poet is quietly told to "Give thanks and lie down in peace,/Having seen your salvation." The echo of Luke 2.29 is again significantly Cavafian, and Auden knows it: just as it was characteristic of an Eliot in early middle age to adopt the

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<sup>29</sup> Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, p. 337.

<sup>30</sup> C 1.101; the poem may be more slippery than it appears: David Holton, "Cavafy and the art of self-deception", *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 5 (1989) 143-62 (153).

<sup>31</sup> This is of course the title of a volume by Cavafy's great contemporary Hardy (1917); for the Paterian origins of Cavafy's poetic visions see S.D. Kapsalis, "'Privileged moments': Cavafy's autobiographical inventions", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10 (1983) 67-88.

voice of Simeon, so the adoption of an older voice was integral to Cavafy's vision of his poetic self.<sup>32</sup>

But, as the last stanza of Auden's poem makes clear, what we have here is more than a merely artistic *Nunc Dimittis*, and it is here that the English poet newly arrived in America diverges most radically from the Cavafian model that has haunted him:

All the little household gods  
     Have started crying, but say  
 Good-bye now and put to sea.  
     Farewell, dear friend, farewell: may  
 Hermes, master of the roads  
 And the four dwarf Kabiri  
     Protect and serve you always;  
     And may the Ancient of Days  
 Provide for all you must do  
     His invisible guidance,  
 Lifting up, friend, upon you  
     The light of his countenance.

This final stanza is not necessary for the development of the poem, which could more naturally and symmetrically end with stanza 6, and would have done so as a very free version of Cavafy's "Ithaca". But Auden sought something rather different. With characteristic ingenuity Auden sets his final stanza on its path with an evident echo of "The footsteps", in which the "little household gods" anticipate the fall of Nero; he follows this up with the scene, again a Roman one, of "The God abandoning Antony".<sup>33</sup> Yet, having embraced the Lares, Hermes and the Kabeiroi, Auden then moves on to a Jehovah who is notable for his absence in Cavafy's published poetry. The ending of the poem, which first appeared in a periodical of Christian orientation, is indicative of Auden's recent return to the Anglo-Catholicism in which he had been reared. In other words, the seemingly casual but in fact consistent exploratory stance of Cavafy's "Ithaca" has been used by Auden as a stalking-horse,

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<sup>32</sup> T.S. Eliot, "A Song for Simeon" [1928], *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London 1963), pp. 111-12. Cavafy's physical appearance is dwelt on by many of his poetic successors, cf. Vayenas, *Συνομιλωντας με τον Καβάφη*.

<sup>33</sup> C 1.38, 1.20.

just one of several stances; all of which are in the end quietly subsumed and transcended by an ending which is, it may be feared, somewhat redolent of the hymnal.

If "Atlantis" is both the most celebrated and the most elaborate of Auden's encounters with Cavafy – and a Cavafian inspiration forms, as with many poets, a guide to an important rite of passage for a successor – that does not mean that Auden turned away from the Greek poet in his American period, even if a couple of the most adroit cases of allusion are glancing in their nature and only speculatively identified by the critic. Just as Cavafy's historical poems in the wake of the First World War and the Asia Minor Campaign, without overtly alluding to either, formed an important commentary on these events, so too Auden's reactions to the terrible decade of the 1940s have recourse to Cavafian motifs. In "Under Sirius", for example, the overarching Christian worldview is most un-Cavafian, yet the figure of the late poet Fortunatus, hoping against hope for personal and collective salvation in – even, through – the decline of the Roman empire, may seem to echo the predicament of the late Hellenistic poet Phernazes in the poem "Darius". The lines which reveal the affinity are characteristically adroit:

And you yourself with a head-cold and upset stomach,  
Lying in bed till noon,  
Your bills unpaid, you much advertised  
Epic not begun...<sup>34</sup>

It is the fact that the genre is that so unhappily essayed by Phernazes (and derided by Cavafy) that clinches the similarity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, pp. 417-18; C 2.18-19.

<sup>35</sup> In Cavafy's mind will have been Palamas's *Η Φλογέρα του Βασιλιά* (1910), a highly intelligent poet's cherished yet all but unreadable epic. For contrasts of the handling of Byzantine themes in the two poets see Panagiotis A. Agapitos, "Byzantium in the poetry of Kostis Palamas and C.P. Cavafy", *Κάμπος* 2 (1994) 1-20 and Anthony Hirst, "Two cheers for Byzantium: equivocal attitudes in the poetry of Palamas and Cavafy", in: David Ricks and Paul Magdalino (edd.), *Byzantium and the Modern Greek identity* (Aldershot 1998), pp. 105-17.

A further, yet more speculative case, one of Auden's finest poems, is "The Fall of Rome", of which the dénouement, while different in form and tone, fits the template of Cavafy's "Nero's deadline":

Altogether elsewhere, vast  
Herds of reindeer move across  
Miles and miles of golden moss,  
Silently and very fast.<sup>36</sup>

Though Cavafy would probably have given his smiling assent to Auden's celebrated admission that "poetry makes nothing happen", Auden himself was clearly impressed by the idea, given vivid formulation in Cavafy, that the true poet sees whatever impends, however insignificant or far away it may seem.<sup>37</sup>

The last example I shall take from Auden, one from the latter part of his career (1968) returns us to a more wholesale borrowing from Cavafy: though the poem is not to my mind an entirely satisfying one, the strategy of its making is quint-essentially Cavafian and might with profit be pursued by other poets who wish to stand on his shoulders. Indeed, the first part of "Rois Fainéants" tracks "Alexandrian Kings" so closely that we might properly say that the poem not only imitates Cavafy in a general sense but belongs to that classic genre of "imitation" whereby Johnson's *London*, for example, moves Juvenal's first Satire from first-century Rome to eighteenth-century London.<sup>38</sup> (Or indeed as Edgar Lee Masters, using the same edition of the *Palatine Anthology* as Cavafy, and in the very same decade, produced his *Spoon River Anthology* of Greek sepulchral motifs transported to middle America.)<sup>39</sup> This art of re-creation is one followed by Cavafy in many ingenious and unobtrusive cases: to

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<sup>36</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, pp. 257-8.

<sup>37</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 197; C 1.17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 603-4; C 1.71.

<sup>39</sup> Both poets used J.W. Mackail's bilingual *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (London 1890): see Valerie Cairnes, "Originality and eroticism: Constantine Cavafy and the Alexandrian epigram", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 6 (1980) 131-56, and Leonard Unger (ed.), *American Writers*, Supp. 1, Part 2 (New York 1979), p. 461.

take just two, both "Philhellene" and "Tomb of Lysias the Grammarian" are very compressed versions of Browning, shifted from the older poet's favourite locale and period, the Italy of the Renaissance, to Cavafy's familiar territory of the Hellenistic East. The borrowings are indisputable but deliciously covert.<sup>40</sup> So the strategy of "Rois Fainéants", irrespective of the reworked subject matter, is an authentically Cavafian one: the scene is shifted to the opposite end of Europe, and by the greater part of a millennium, from the end of one dynasty at the hands of the Roman Empire to that of the end of the Merovingian dynasty which will be supplanted by the Holy Roman Empire. And both poets present the death-throes of an older culture not in the generalities of a Spengler or a Toynbee, but from ground level.

The first part of "Rois Fainéants" ends, as I have said, at the same point as the Cavafian model, albeit with a markedly less urbane populace:

So from dawn to dusk they made their triumphal progression,  
While war-horns dindled the heavens, silken banners  
Flapped in the wind, and the rapt tribes shouted away.

But in the second part of his poem Auden markedly – and in my view incautiously – deviates from the unspoken violence of Cavafy's poem, which never tells us that the princelings will meet their end. The last line in particular is an odd one: all the virtues of Cavafian obliqueness seem to have been sacrificed.

But when darkness fell and their special outing was ended,  
Off they were packed again to their secluded manors,  
Closely watched day and night to prevent the danger  
Of their escaping or talking too much to a stranger,  
With nothing to do but affix their seals to charters  
They had never been taught to read, and supplied with plenty  
Of beef and beer and girls from which, as was intended,  
They died young, most before they were twenty.

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<sup>40</sup> C 1.37, 1.43; cf. two poems from Browning's *Men and Women* (1855), "The Bishop orders his tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" and "A Grammarian's Funeral, shortly after the revival of learning in Europe" respectively.

May we not justly call them political martyrs?

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However that may be, Auden brought the poetry of the United States to a sustained encounter with the work of Cavafy, and this even before the first translation of Cavafy's collected poems (by John Mavrogordato, 1951) had appeared. Interestingly, however, I have found no marks of Cavafy in the poetry of the Fifties to which Auden stood as so widely influential a mentor. The spur to a renewed encounter with Cavafy on the part of poets in America seems to have been made by Auden, as a patron this time, in his preface to Rae Dalven's new translation of 1961 (still in print) – though the American edition of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* must also have had a role to play.<sup>41</sup> Before coming on to some of the American poets, it may be worth a glance at two admirers of both Auden and Cavafy who found themselves political exiles in America and thus peculiarly attuned to a strain which receives memorable expression in Cavafy.<sup>42</sup>

The Nobel Prize-winners, the Polish-Lithuanian Czesław Miłosz and the Russian Jew Joseph Brodsky both found themselves in America, "in exile, versifying", as the Cavafian title has it – and much preoccupied with what Cavafy had to say about the poet in these straits.<sup>43</sup> In his powerful lectures published as *The Witness of Poetry*, Miłosz brings his discussion to an end with a consideration of Cavafy's Phernazes, not least in the light of what such a poet (the real one and the fictional one) has to tell us about a world of shifting empires and changing borders – a Lithuanian can never forget that the Jagiellonian Empire was, like Byzantium, a great one.<sup>44</sup> Carrying these thoughts a stage further, in a poem written not much later (1986) Miłosz seems to reproach himself with falling for the same

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<sup>41</sup> See Rae Dalven, "An unsought for calling: my life as a translator from Modern Greek", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 8.2 (1990) 307-16.

<sup>42</sup> See most fully the unpublished poem, "Exiles" (1914; a more idiomatic English title would be "Over the water"): *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα*, pp. 163-5.

<sup>43</sup> C.2.21.

<sup>44</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983), pp. 111-14.

dreams of an epic work which had tantalized Phernazes. "Tomorrow at the latest I'll start working on a great book/In which my century will appear as it really was", the poem "Preparation" begins, only to end ruefully with the sense of incapacity, the conquering of the poet's "arrogance and intoxication": "I haven't learned yet to speak as I should, calmly"<sup>45</sup>

Brodsky was a devotee of both Auden and Cavafy, and his last years were occupied with translating Cavafy (presumably from Russian cribs) into Russian verse.<sup>46</sup> It would not be like Brodsky to allow too many direct Cavafian echoes into his poetry, but one example from his American period is illustrative, both of his preoccupation and of his very different tone. In "The Bust of Tiberius" (1981) we have (somewhat after the model of Auden's "Rois Fainéants") a poem founded on the structure and manner of a Cavafy poem, in this case "Orophernes" – with the difference that Brodsky, more bitter in his nature and more tending to expose the bestialities from which Cavafy averts his pen, chooses for his theme not the beautiful though failed young prince of Asia Minor but the repellent Roman emperor.<sup>47</sup>

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Not surprisingly, both of these émigré poets feel in their marrow the significance which Cavafy must have for the modern poet as citizen: like Seferis before them, they are ever mindful of "the statelet/of Commagene which went out like a little lamp", as Seferis expresses it in one of his poems which draws most richly on Cavafy.<sup>48</sup> The American-born poets, by contrast, seem for the most part to engage in conversation with the Cavafy of the sensual poems.

Here pride of place, for a sustained and informed interest in Cavafy taking up the baton passed from Auden, goes to the late James Merrill. A friend of Auden, he spent a total of many years

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<sup>45</sup> Miłosz, *Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (Harmondsworth 1988), p. 418.

<sup>46</sup> See also his essay, "Pendulum's song" in *Less than one* (New York 1986), pp. 53-68.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *To Urania* (New York 1988), pp. 71-3.

<sup>48</sup> Giorgos Seferis, *Ποιήματα* (Athens 1982), p. 213.

in Greece: of all Cavafy's American successors it was Merrill, with his fluent Greek (he is in fact the only poet discussed here who read Cavafy in the original) and a metrical dexterity emulous of Auden, who was most likely to leave us poems truly in the Cavafian manner.<sup>49</sup> This is certainly achieved in his few Cavafy translations (including the short story, "In Broad Daylight"): the version of "On an Italian shore", if a touch more tricky than the original, has great subtlety and lightness of touch.<sup>50</sup> Merrill's lightness in fact usually maintains him at a discreet distance from the Cavafian models, and seeing several titles "Days of..." the reader might be disappointed to find that the Cavafian affinities are few.<sup>51</sup> The opening lines of one such poem, however, show us just how crafty Merrill could be in setting out to dash the expectations of the reader expecting Cavafiana:

DAYS OF 1964

Houses, an embassy, a hospital,  
Our neighborhood, sun-cured if trembling still  
In pools of the night's rain. . .  
Across that street that led to the centre of town  
A steep hill kept one company part way  
Or could be climbed in twenty minutes  
For some literally breathtaking views,  
Framed by umbrella pines, of city and sea.

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<sup>49</sup> On Merrill's interest in Greece (which went back to 1959), see the tribute by Rachel Hadas (herself the author of a Cavafian poem: see Vayenas, *Συνομιλώντας*, pp. 158-9) in *Poetry* 96.6 (September 1995) 334-8.

<sup>50</sup> James Merrill, translations of C.P. Cavafy: "On an Italian shore", *Grand Street* 6.2 (Winter 1987) 125; "In broad daylight", *Grand Street* 2.3 (Spring 1983) 99-107. See also his essay, "Unreal citizen", *Recitative: Prose by James Merrill* (San Francisco 1986), pp. 96-108.

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. "Days of 1935" in *Selected Poems* (Manchester 1996), pp. 72-81 (note also the poem's un-Cavafian length). An exception to the rule of discretion is a sprightly poem, "After Cavafy", *New York Review of Books* 41.13 (14 July 1994), an imitation of "Waiting for the Barbarians" as a satire on the American fear of Japanese commercial takeovers followed by disappointment as the Japanese sought European investment. The trouble is that the poem has dated badly: before long the Asian tigers turned bearish; whereas Cavafy's poem is endlessly adaptable in itself.



Underfoot, cyclamen, autumn crocus grew  
Spangled with a fine sweat among the relics  
Of good times had by all. If not Olympus,  
An out-of-earshot, year-round hillside revel..<sup>52</sup>

The relaxed iambics and tribute to a sensual city might seem Cavafian, but the gap between the time recalled and the date of publication (1966) is much smaller than the gap is in Cavafy's "Days" poems (we shall contrast an example from Mark Doty later), and the *al fresco* setting of free love strikingly different from the confined spaces of Cavafy's erotic poems ("The tobacconist's window", perhaps with a debt to *Madame Bovary*, may serve as an example).<sup>53</sup> Merrill is well aware of this, as also of the fact that he takes a locale, Athens, disdained by Cavafy; and he seems in fact playfully to launch his poem with a cheeky allusion to Cavafy's bitterest rival, Palamas – in place of the ancient sculptures which fill the Attic soil with an Olympus which grows like wild flowers, Merrill presents us with the used prophylactics of courting couples on Lycabettus.<sup>54</sup>

Less circumspection is shown by another poet of an academic cast, Daryl Hine, whose poem about a unsatisfactory rough trade lover, "What's his face" (1975) begins with a playful allusion to "The God abandoning Antony": "The god that is leaving me perhaps has left/Already; bereft of his presence I breathe lighter."<sup>55</sup> The god in question is nameless, like that of Cavafy's powerful poem "One of their gods"; his mercurial appearances also recall the end of "Sculptor from Tyana" and the unofficial but aesthetically fulfilling shrine that the sculptor makes for a Hermes evidently modelled on a young lover; yet the lover's departure has smashed his image and left his shrine abandoned

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<sup>52</sup> Merrill, *Selected Poems*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>53</sup> C 1.85.

<sup>54</sup> The poem of Palamas, which Merrill is most likely to have picked up from C.A. Trypanis, *Medieval and Modern Greek Verse* (Oxford 1951), p. 182, is the sonnet to Athens from "Homelands" (1895): Kostis Palamas, *Ἄπαντα* (16 vols., Athens n.d.) 3.15. It should be noted that Palamas was an acute critic of Cavafy (see notably *ibid.* 12.173-4), who did not hesitate to call him (through gritted teeth) "a poet of considerable originality" (*ibid.*, 14. 252).

<sup>55</sup> Daryl Hine, *Resident Alien* (New York 1975), p. 52.

as in the setting of "Ionic".<sup>56</sup> Like Auden's "Atlantis", then, Hine's poem knowingly draws on more than one Cavafian source; yet the poem's twenty-seven lines don't in the end add up to more than a rather laboured conceit: the power behind Cavafy's delicacy lost, what remains is fussiness.

That, however, is far from the worst desecration that can be visited on Cavafy's poetry by a successor. A particularly shameless example is to be found in Edmund Field, who goes so far as to preface his three decades-worth of collected poems with a tribute to Cavafy as, in a way, the "onlie begetter" of his own work: "When I discovered the poetry of Cavafy – almost immediately after I began writing – I recognized at once that this was my master."<sup>57</sup> Yet the poetic fruits are of the feeblest. One poem from 1992 is given the title, "Waiting for the Communists" and subtitled (just in case we didn't catch the reference) "after Cavafy's 'Waiting for the Barbarians'". The poem tracks the original closely, simply updating it to the post-1989 situation and concluding:

Because it's evening and the communists haven't come.  
And some people just back from abroad say  
that there aren't any communists anymore, maybe never  
were.

Oh my God, no communists? Now what's going to happen?  
You've got to admit they were the perfect solution.<sup>58</sup>

Auden ingeniously, if imperfectly, adapted "Rois Fainéants" by moving his Cavafy model to a later epoch: Field simply truncates that poem of Cavafy's which has most deeply impressed itself on public discourse by tying a poem which, for all its Roman furniture, is of all seasons to one circumstance, and by reducing Cavafy's irony and long view to sheer irresponsibility

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<sup>56</sup> C 1.73, 1.41, 1.53.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Field, *Counting myself lucky: New and selected poems* (San Francisco 1992), prefatory page.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

and moral blindness.<sup>59</sup> A Cavafian reading of politics is bound to be more interesting than a political reading of Cavafy.<sup>60</sup>

But worse, if anything, is the poem with which Field ends his collection, again by way of tribute to Cavafy, and indeed titled "After Cavafy".<sup>61</sup> It all too evidently rewrites "The first rung" from an old man's point of view: a tearful old poet complains to the Muse about the limited achievement of and recognition for his few slim volumes, and is consoled with the Muse's words which end the poem:

Wipe your tears, old man.  
You have taken a step  
on the difficult ladder of poetry,  
and even getting to the first rung  
is an accomplishment the gods all praise.  
Feel good about that, with my blessings,  
for on this path,  
there is no failure.

It is a travesty to claim that this poem is, in any respect other than mere chronology, *after Cavafy*: the sentiments expressed are those not of the discerning and often mordant *maestro* but of the Muse as agony aunt.

A more thoughtful and deeply felt exploration and reworking of Cavafian themes has been made by a much-praised contemporary poet who has given us not simply individual poems of recognizably Cavafian inspiration but who, like Field, has set the Greek poet's seal on an entire volume. The book in question is Mark Doty's *My Alexandria*.<sup>62</sup> Its elegiac character is pronounced (the English edition's cover presents us with the toppled bust of a young man evocative of Hadrian's Antinous), and the scenes which the poet relates in highly confessional mode take place in Boston between 1981 and the time of writing. (The relative length of the retrospect is Cavafian in spirit.) One such

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<sup>59</sup> "Communist", unlike "barbarian", is an objective label, thus undermining the entire framework of Cavafy's poem.

<sup>60</sup> I follow here a line of thought that runs through Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Field, *Counting myself lucky*, p. 174.

<sup>62</sup> Boston 1995; I cite the English edition, London 1995.

poem which exploits a Cavafian model is "Days of 1981", narrating a fleeting affair in the past. The difference from the Cavafian setting, other than geographical, is crucial. Many are the Cavafian ephebes who have untimely deaths, but the causes (presumably consumption in many cases) are left somewhat vague. In Doty's poetry, by contrast, the 'wound from a frightful knife' is no longer old age but the scourge of AIDS. The lover recalled in the poem in question is some untalented sculptor (a self-mocking allusion to Cavafy's poems), and we have the strong sense that what the narrator "came to possess quite by chance" (Cavafy's "Days of 1903") was not eros alone but a lethal virus.<sup>63</sup> The shadow of a diagnosis comes to darken the whole collection.

This is a serious way to adapt Cavafy's motifs without doing them more violence than time itself has done them; and it seems a quite legitimate form of updating. There are, of course, dangers for any later poet in harnessing Cavafy to any poetic of his own, and the more openly this is done, the riskier the procedure. I can't help feeling this about a poem from the same book, "Chanteuse", in which the body of the text goes so far in its central section as to quote from Cavafy. Doty recalls the Boston of the past as an Alexandria he is now coming to lose, and he tries to stay himself against confusion by recalling the end of a Cavafy poem:

Cavafy ends a poem

of regret and desire – he had no other theme  
than memory's erotics, its ashen atmosphere –  
by going out onto a balcony

*to change my thoughts at least  
by seeing something of this city I love,  
a little movement in the streets,*

*in the shops.* That was all it took  
to console him, some token of Alexandria's  
anarchic life. How did it go on without him,

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<sup>63</sup> Doty, *My Alexandria*, pp. 7-10; C 1.80, 1.92.

the city he'd transformed into feeling?<sup>64</sup>

The final allusion is evidently to "In the same space"; but more prominent, because italicized, is a recollection of "At eventide". In that poem the narrator reads and re-reads an old letter without finding solace, which is only brought by the reassuring bustle of the streets visible from the balcony: in Doty's response, the narrator is able to draw strength from reading Cavafy's poem as well as recalling the (transvestite) chanteuse who personifies Alexandria and its music heard for the last time in "The God abandoning Antony".<sup>65</sup>

The reservation that one has about this passage of Doty lies in the claim that Cavafy "had no other theme than memory's erotics". The parenthesis is verbose and pedantic compared with the Alexandrian's mastery of the timely bracket, and the statement demonstrably false. Admittedly, Doty's formulation is a careful if unlovely one ("memory's erotics" is not the same as "erotic memories"), but it does seem to present a Cavafy of just one mood or key. By contrast, it is one of the most attractive and elusive features of Cavafy's collected poems that they contain a whole range of moods and styles, by comparison with which the quiet and melancholy garrulousness of Doty will seem limited. And while Cavafy is an intense observer of both the personal and history – the latter being, as we have noted, rather neglected in the American reception of his work – his poems are slippery enough for it to be scarcely useful to think of them as personal history.

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That Cavafy the historical poet has not been entirely ignored in America is, however, clear enough from the last post-Cavafian poem I shall examine here, which is also the most recent (and, as it happens, the only one to have been written by a woman). Caroline Kizer's poem, "The Oration" bears the subtitle, "after Cavafy": this might make one suspect that it uses a single poem as a stalking-horse and tracks it closely (as in two poems by

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<sup>64</sup> Doty, *My Alexandria*, pp. 21-5.

<sup>65</sup> C 2.81, 1.87.

Auden discussed earlier), yet no single model presents itself to the reader. In fact “after” here is really shorthand for *à la manière de*.<sup>66</sup> Cavafy’s preoccupation with the transition from paganism to Christianity pervades his *œuvre*, not just for its interest as perhaps the grandest of historical themes, but also because the question of religious choice affords endless permutations in the processes of practical reasoning – or self-deception.<sup>67</sup>

The speaker of Caroline Kizer’s poem begins by announcing that “The boldest thing I ever did was to save a savior.” The poem falls into three parts: in the first, an orator, a man of means but of unspecified religious or ethnic background, pleads for the life of (a never-named) Christ and saves him even on the approach to Calvary, despite Christ’s mutterings of reluctance. In the second section, the orator returns home with relief, only to learn later that Christ egged on the crowd against him once again by claiming to be the son of God and was crucified. The poem concludes thus:

A violent thunderstorm woke me to a sky full of lightning  
 So I rushed out in the rain, forgetting my cloak,  
 And found him dead and alone except for a handful of women  
 Weeping and carrying on. Well, it taught me a lesson,  
 To mind my own business – Why, the crowd might have turned on  
 me!  
 Still, I have to be proud of my eloquence.  
It was the speech of my life.

Certainly Cavafian is the idea of taking an unfamiliar angle on a world-historical event: perhaps the neatest example is the pedlar of “In Alexandria, 31 BC”.<sup>68</sup> But, though Cavafy was capable of quiet challenges to Christian piety, I doubt whether he would ever have taken a ground-level view of the Passion itself.<sup>69</sup> That said, “The Oration” does appear to have taken

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<sup>66</sup> *The Threepenny Review* 20.2 (Summer 1999) 26.

<sup>67</sup> The classic case is “Tomb of Ignatius” (C 1.77).

<sup>68</sup> C 2.41.

<sup>69</sup> For a rebuttal of an over-pious reading of Cavafy, see Hirst, “Two cheers for Byzantium”, 111, and more fully, “C.P. Cavafy, Byzantine historian?”, *Κάμπος* 8 (2000) 000-000. But, interestingly, direct challenge to Christianity was more in the line of Palamas: see Anthony Hirst, “The

cues from no fewer than three Cavafian models. (And such a drawing on several poems at once is a technique reminiscent of Cavafy in his astute borrowings from Browning.)

The first of these is the radical if imperfectly finished re-writing of *Hamlet* in the early unpublished poem, "King Claudius".<sup>70</sup> It was a brilliant stroke to rewrite the plot from the point of view of a loyal courtier of Claudius, for whom Hamlet – never named in the poem, as Christ is never named in "The Oration" – was simply a maniac; just as Christ, to this bystander, "was mad of course". There is a dry radicalism to Cavafy's treatment which Caroline Kizer has sought to emulate with reference to perhaps the only story better known than Hamlet's.<sup>71</sup>

A second unpublished poem which seems to set the terms of "The Oration" is the much later "Simeon" (1917), itself a riposte to Tennyson's "St Simeon Stylites".<sup>72</sup> "Simeon" presents us with substantially the same structure: a young man is engaged in a finicky literary discussion; then he admits to being indisposed, somehow shaken by the sight the previous day of Simeon atop his pillar; finally, he reverts to literary gossip. The effete speaker of "The Oration" too can't but return to a sense of his own rhetorical distinction. But the most tangible borrowing in "The Oration" is the group of women "weeping and carrying on" at the *Pietà*. The phrase of disdain exactly recalls that used by Myres's friend at his funeral in "Myres: Alexandria AD 340". Myres's

appropriation of Biblical and liturgical language in the poetry of Palamas, Sikelianos and Elytis", PhD dissertation, King's College London 1999.

<sup>70</sup> Cavafy, *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα*, pp. 113-19.

<sup>71</sup> Compare the *bon mot* of Oscar Wilde being viva'd in New Testament Greek and being told at some point in the Passion narrative that he can stop now: "Oh do let me go on... I want to see how it ends." (James Sutherland (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (Oxford 1975), p. 383.)

<sup>72</sup> The poem, together with Cavafy's note in English on it, is conveniently to be found in *Passions and Ancient Days* (tr. and ed. Edmund Keeley and G.P. Savidis) (New York 1971), pp. 501-3, 67-8; brief discussion in David Ricks, "Simpering Byzantines, Grecian goldsmiths, et al.: some appearances of Byzantium in English poetry", in: Robin Cormack and Elizabeth Jeffreys (edd.), *Through the Looking-Glass: Byzantium through British eyes* (Aldershot 2000), pp. 223-35 (225-7).

pagan friend enters the house of the dead Christian (by a vivid defamiliarization which Caroline Kizer has followed by putting the word "savior" in lower case, the word "Christian" is used obsessively in the poem) to find the womenfolk mourning and praying.<sup>73</sup>

To invoke "Symeon" and "Myres", however, is to prompt thoughts about some lost opportunities in "The Oration", some aspects of it which show it not to be of Cavafy's water. In the first place, the poem, by contrast with the Cavafian models, is a monologue which fails to exploit the dramatic possibilities of monologue, the pressing sense of an interlocutor's presence which is so astutely used by Cavafy (and by Browning before him) in his explorations of states of mind and forms of words which are crucially influenced by others.<sup>74</sup> Again, the opening line of "The Oration", "The boldest thing I ever did was to save a savior" is not actually needed for the setting and only sets out the poem's agenda too clearly – the same, interestingly, holds for Cavafy's early "King Claudius" – in a way which, again, dilutes the dramatic possibilities.<sup>75</sup> Above all, the subversiveness of the poem's attempt to find a different onlooker than the Gospel's centurion (Mt 27.45) who says with soldierly bluntness, "Truly this was the son of God" is less *unsettling* to the reader, less subversive in a far-reaching way, than the outcome of either "Simeon" or "Myres". At the end of both those poems, the reader really finds it hard to say what the future holds for the narrator – what conversions of heart, what backslidings. Myres's friend is gripped with the fear, a fear never quite spoken, that Christianity may be true, and it is the terror of separation in the next life as well as in this, that drives him from the house.

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<sup>73</sup> C2.74-6.

<sup>74</sup> See classically Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (Chicago 1985; first published 1957).

<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the lapse of time covered by the speaker's reminiscences isn't quite clear in "The Oration": the first line ("I ever did") suggests that the event lies far in the past and can be recollected in tranquillity; but the progress of Christianity would make it hard for the speaker not to know, or to affect not to know, the name of Jesus.



Here, then, has been a small sampling (a further fourteen poems of Cavafian inspiration are anthologized by Keeley) of what Cavafy brought to the art of American poetry, provoking new poems in a country which, through Whitman, had perhaps helped to stimulate some of his own.<sup>76</sup> It is probably fair to say – and it is said in no spirit of nationalism – that more of the various facets of Cavafy's work have been responded to by British poets (for these purposes, including Auden) than by their American peers; but Cavafy's status as a mentor to the American successor-poet is secure. What is more, the dissemination of his work has grown over the years to the point that it has touched the wider American culture. "Ithaca" has been read at umpteen commencement ceremonies, giving an ironic twist to Cavafy's line, "adolescents now say aloud his verses"; and the poem was indeed read – in a customized version! – at Jackie Onassis's funeral.<sup>77</sup>

Yet the assimilation of Cavafy by American poetry can never be complete, as the assimilation of great poets by later poets, even great ones, can never be complete. And I would like to end by reverting to an aspect too often neglected. One of the most important ways in which Cavafy might have a renovating effect on American poetry would be, not variations *on* his poetry – variations which we have seen to be of greatly varying force and scope – but translations *of* it. For it is not least through translations that we can see whether Cavafy's poetry is (in Pound's phrase) "news that stays news". It is heartening that the current US Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky has included within the body of one of his collections a version of Cavafy's "An old man" – a strikingly faithful version, which preserves, and even tightens by a notch, the bleakly formal rhyme scheme of the original which shuts up the old man in its prison bars.<sup>78</sup> The justness of tone is evident from the opening lines:

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<sup>76</sup> See n. 5. Martin McKinsey's "In a large Cambridge bookstore: After Cavafy", *Point Tainaron* (Toronto 1997), pp. 27-8, takes itself less seriously than some of these poems, and is the better for it.

<sup>77</sup> C 1.49.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Pinsky, *The Want Bone* (New York 1990), p. 43.

Back in a corner, alone in the clatter and babble  
An old man sits with his head bent over a table,  
And his newspaper in front of him, in the café.

The reader who turns to this version will find something which is unmistakably Cavafian without sacrificing anything of its Americanness – Cavafy in America indeed.

King's College London