

The Greek Poet Cavafy and History

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PREFATORY NOTE

Many people, including important scholars, have written about Cavafy's work. Much has been examined and analysed yet the study of Cavafy remains inexhaustible for it has been impossible to measure the vast range of his interests. His work amounts to a whole culture in itself.

I believe that the worldwide appeal of his work derives mainly from his poems of historical interest (in the broad meaning of the term), those that have some direct or indirect relation to history; that is to say, not only the historical poems but also those poems which Cavafy scholars call pseudo-historical, seemingly historical or created from history, as well as those characterized as didactic, symbolic or allegorical. Cavafy uses these poems as a magic carpet to take us to selected places of historical time, unfolding and illuminating half-hidden aspects of the dark game called human adventure, and revealing – often by simple but subtle hints – the predetermined, fatal development of his heroes' behaviour and of man in general, by poetical inference and by synecdoche.

Cavafy's sensual-erotic poems, in spite of their daring mood, their originality and their great suggestive power, are addressed, as is natural, to the sensitivity of a smaller circle of readers so they were not to exercise the same influence. However, these poems can also be seen as a recording of a private story, that is, for the most part, as events and feelings recorded in a past time, where their evaluation is made.

With the five chapters of this book, of which the first two were published for the first time in the periodicals *Néa Sínvopa* and *Néa Eστία*, I would like to offer a small contribution to the study of the historical (always with the broad meaning of the term) as well as of the so-called didactic or symbolic poems of Cavafy, hoping that I may add something to the understanding of his work which is small in size but astonishingly rich in multiple and complex meanings.

CHAPTER ONE

A JOURNEY INTO HISTORY WITH CAVAFY

More than half of Cavafy's poems are directly or indirectly related to history. They refer to a historical event, to a historical epoch, or simply move in a historical atmosphere. His main characters are real or fictitious persons, but always plausible, placed in some historical environment which can be ascertained or, even if chronologically unidentified, is plausible and probable ("Waiting for the barbarians"). Cavafy's inclination towards historical topics began early, as is seen in the publication of his unpublished poems. He first dealt with Byzantine themes, probably influenced by his time in Constantinople. These poems have not survived. The poet returned to Byzantine themes much later, when he was mature.¹ As time went by and as Cavafy mastered his poetic art, his historical poems became more frequent and more complete. His last known poem, which was published posthumously ("In the suburbs of Antioch"), is one of his most dramatic compositions. Cavafy himself used to say shortly before he died that he wanted to write some twenty-five other poems, most of which were certainly historical, if we judge by their frequency after the year 1919.

It is, I think, beyond doubt that Cavafy's presence in Greek literature started to become known with those of his poems which have been called philosophical-didactic (many of which have as a source of inspiration the mythological or historical past), such as "Thermopylae", "Waiting for the barbarians", "The God abandons Antony", "Ithaca", "Trojans" etc. That is why these poems have been called pseudo-historical.² If his hedonistic-sensual poems created a scandal, although he supplied the public with them gradually, with great attention and caution, as Sareyannis³ states, they caused his fame to spread in wider circles. Thus Cavafy's main contribution was established thanks to poems inspired by history. In these poems his really original poetic sense of times and people is expressed. In this sector Cavafy is unique. He "brought to art" (his own expression) a new dimension of time lived. He converted history into poetry.

According to a persisting opinion (which has also been adopted, it seems, by George Seferis⁴), the poet is a single whole: his poems and his

themes intermingle and complement each other, no matter whether they are called historical, didactic or hedonistic. For this reason, according to the above opinion, such a division is not tenable. Cavafy simply makes his perversion travel into history, as Timos Malanos ascertains, or he tries to put his young men into the dialectic of history.⁵ However, if we take into consideration that Cavafy himself had drawn up thematic catalogues of his poems,⁶ such division is permissible and allows a fuller study of his work, although sensuality and didacticism are not absent from many of his poems which are called historical.⁷

Cavafy had a European education. He had an excellent knowledge of the English language – which was almost his mother tongue – in which he wrote most of his private notes, and, knowing the French language equally well, he was in contact with the literary movements predominant in the West at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. After serving Romanticism without great success (*cf.* his first composition in which the influence of Dimitrios Paparigopoulos is apparent), he came under the influence of the Parnassians, who were particularly fond of historical themes. His poetic art, however, in its final, its definite stage, was formulated under the direct influence of Symbolism in combination with the aesthetic theories of Edgar Allan Poe and of Charles Baudelaire, as has been shown by recent literary research.⁸ Cavafy used major elements of the symbolic poetic method, even of the philosophy of composition supported by Poe, in his historical poems, thus extending in historical time the unaltered human characteristics and the personal passions which Symbolism wanted to imply by the use of symbols and not through explicit utterance. Parnassian poets are restricted to somewhat cold, perhaps prettified historical subjects, just as Cavafy was before his development (as George Savidis observed, referring to the poem “The death of the Emperor Tacitus”⁹). The mature Cavafy dramatized history: he made it alive with historical or imaginary persons, who are recognizable to us as familiar human beings, full of weaknesses and passions, that is to say, the people of all epochs.

It is true that in the depths of most of Cavafy’s historical poems a bitter truth, a precept, and, in some of them, a sensual conception of the motivations of life can be discerned. In this respect Cavafy remains essentially uniform. It has been stressed by many scholars that Cavafy’s themes are concerned with periods of decadence, such as the Hellenistic, the late Roman, and the Byzantine period (just a little earlier than the fall of Constantinople). He does not present figures of leaders in the days of their prime. If this happens occasionally, as when he speaks of Caesar, Nero or Alexander Jannaeus, the impression is deceptive, the decline is

under way, the fall is certain.¹⁰ The poet, in an artful way, introduces us to this certainty of which the hero is still unaware. Those scholars who seek a psychological background for this eclectic preference of Cavafy for the periods of decadence refer either to the degradation of his formerly well-to-do family or to corresponding national failures (the disaster in Asia Minor, for instance)¹¹ or even to his well-known deviation from normal sexual life and the fear of social seclusion.

Without denying the influence of the experience of the poet in the choice of his themes and his symbols, it would be better to note that, as far as aesthetic need is concerned, the poet prefers as a background to his poems those transitory historical situations where anything can happen. As Giannis Dallas very aptly states, "We are dealing with a poet who inserts himself into the cracks and the gaps, especially at the crossroads of historical time, who tackles the most sensitive points, so that their echoes can be heard in our own day."¹² On the other hand, Cavafy's aesthetic and philosophical conceptions, which were definitively formulated before 1905, as is obvious from various prose texts, notes and comments, lead him consciously to choose historical themes where with relative ease he could develop the atmosphere of uncertainty, of the "non-definitive", of the fluctuation of situations, elements which belong to the school of the Symbolists. The poet's persistence with Hellenistic and more particularly with Alexandrian themes has a direct relation to his life in Alexandria. At the end of the nineteenth century there prevailed in this city a mixture of people and cultures analogous to that which prevailed in the time of the Ptolemies. There is no doubt that his identity as a citizen of Alexandria, which had been the main city in Hellenistic times, had aroused in him an interest in related areas and times, the Seleucids, Antioch, etc. As his biographers and commentators assure us, Cavafy had a complete knowledge of the history of ancient times. Sareyannis states that "He knew very well all the Greek writers, the history of the Greeks, Hellenistic and Roman, the life of the ancients and whatever else substantial had been written on these topics during his time." He also tells us that the poet himself told him that in that time he felt free. "I have already made it my own", he said. Cavafy especially liked Plutarch, knew almost the entire text by heart and often when he spoke would quote sentences from it.¹³ Cavafy lived both during his own time and during the time of ancient Alexandria where the re-echoes of events from the neighbouring Hellenistic kingdoms reached him. So it is not difficult to understand that the poet, with minimal poetic devices, with certain small but important details, presents the atmosphere of that epoch so persuasively. He has an existentialist consciousness of historical time. "Time is ourselves", he

notes in his comments on Ruskin.¹⁴ In this way he can transfer himself with surprising ease into the historical past.

We must not overlook, however, Timos Malanos' testimony that the poet preferred to place his characters in the Hellenistic era,¹⁵ for, as he used to say, "this era is more immoral, more free, and allows me to move my characters about as I wish". What Cavafy meant by that (if, of course, Timos Malanos rendered Cavafy's words with accuracy) is exactly what we see in his work: a liberal composition of wisdom and hedonism, of cynicism and of good taste, empathy and tolerance, which the poet places comfortably in the Hellenistic years in the environment of a contradictory, mixed and tolerant society which is just like our society.

In this connection, I must note that the disentangling of history from ethics is a conception parallel to the disentangling of art from ethics, a theory that constituted the vanguard of aesthetic concepts at the end of the nineteenth century. The slogan *l'art pour l'art* was not unknown to Cavafy. On the contrary, he affirms it categorically in his comments on Ruskin.¹⁶ A matter of primary value for art is "the bonum", i.e., beauty, good taste, aesthetic completeness, according to the theories of Poe, of Baudelaire, of Pater, and of others. Cavafy knows these theories and follows them. He classifies himself in the category of the "aesthetes". The word "aesthete" appears in his poems twice (finally in his poem "According to the prescriptions of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians"), the word "aesthetic" five times, the word "beauty" twenty-two, the word "fairness" four times, etc.¹⁷

But the meaning of beauty is not understood by Cavafy only as a hedonistic concept. He attributes to it a philosophical and humanistic profoundness which will perhaps surprise those who are used to the derogatory meaning that the term "aestheticism" has acquired in our days.

In the same comments on Ruskin (which constitute, as Stratis Tsirkas stresses, an important aid for the comprehension of the philosophical and moral theories which the poet had formulated since 1896¹⁸), Cavafy himself remarks: "To view the *bonum*, purity of heart is not indispensable. The *bonum* is a vast mercy which ignores the small discriminations of the just and of the unjust." And he added: "Writing these words, I express myself about the 'purity of heart', which the tone of the writer [Ruskin] indicates and not about the broad comprehension [conception] of the two words, which excuses, justifies and contains, because it comprehends."

Cavafy's historical themes, even when they are marked by hedonistic suggestions, are approached by him just in this manner: with understanding and forgiveness, that is to say, with "infinite mercy", a term which constitutes one of the classic terms of tragic poetry. Moreover, Cavafy's

dramatic profoundness and theatricality have been noticed and examined by many of his scholars.¹⁹

From this point of view the poet's attitude becomes essentially moral but always within the frame of aesthetics. He judges without criticizing (even when he is sarcastic) when addressing our feelings and our intellect, leaving to us the task of interrelating things and coming to a conclusion. The poet of "Thermopylae" understands, however, that not all people are born to defend their Thermopylae to the bitter end. The hasty adjustment to the unforeseen developments of events by some Cavafian personas, the opportunistic search for the most appropriate ruler, that is, for one who has the greatest chance of prevailing, does not take place because of sheer corruption, because of vulgar political a-moralism, but is due to the need for survival under difficult circumstances. It is not possible for all to defend Thermopylae. And this the poet understands with clemency. His irony is used more to stress the dramatic antithesis among the characters and the events that men have not the power to control. In Cavafy's comment on Ruskin, referred to above, there is a full correspondence with his "Thermopylae" lines: Those who ordered themselves to guard Thermopylae are

Just and decent in all their deeds,
yet also given to pity and compassion

and yet they act

always speaking the truth,
yet without rancour for those who do not.

The curious thing is that Seferis finds these lines loose. I cannot understand why.

In the poem "In a township of Asia Minor" the movement of adjustment is made in a timely and efficient way. The poet makes us smile bitterly for the way in which the inhabitants of this insignificant town have the time to change the name of the victor in the prepared congratulatory resolution that was intended for Mark Antony when unexpectedly the victor is Octavian. (How intensively this poem reminds us of the congratulatory telegrams of our time sent by various organizations to dictators and other mighty men!) Only the name of the victor changes, the poet tells us. And then a cataclysm of titles, praises, and flattery follows, which had been prepared for the other person. The poem ends by ascertaining that in spite of this (insignificant?) change, the rest "all fits brilliantly". Decline, of course, humiliation, but it is also a way of

surviving in times of persecution, when the defeated have no other choice. It is not only the mean citizens who are ridiculed but also the tyrant who accepts the pompous titles.

In another poem with a similar mood, “John Cantacuzinus triumphs”, we see the anguish of a nobleman of the last Byzantine years caused by his wrong political choice and its expected disastrous consequences now that the opponent has overcome. The mistake for which he blames himself has no relation to ideologies. The mistake is that he was not able to distinguish the most probable winner in time. He is only trying to save his own ancestral “belongings”. His disturbance and anxiety come somewhat close to our sympathy. He was compelled by the circumstances to join one or other of the two opposing parties and his choice was wrong.

Finally, we see in the poem “They should have cared” an anonymous young man who is financially ruined and who attempts, without scruples and prejudices, to attach himself to any of the three aspiring governors, knowing that

All three of them are equally harmful to Syria.

But, a ruined man, why is it my fault?

I am only trying, wretched me, to patch things up for myself.

Our anti-hero adds, using the poet’s lines to justify his attitude which is so well-known and understandable to the position-seekers of all ages.

The poems I referred to above were published by Cavafy in 1926, 1924, and 1930, *i.e.*, within the last nine years of his life when old age was advancing and his “hypothetical experience” about which scholars’ talk had developed and matured into a direct, timely, synthetic and realistic conception of human affairs, expressed by diachronic symbols of unrivalled felicity.

Let us go back to the “fluctuation” of the times and of the themes which the poet prefers.

On many occasions, the events he describes, in artfully transferring us to the time these events take place, have not been finally evaluated; their future is still at stake. Even when the outcome of the events is not hinted at, at the end of the poem, as for instance,

... After all, as it was natural,
the terrible defeat came rapidly at Pydna,

we know from history that the game has been lost and this exactly corresponds to the deeper essence of vanity that Cavafy's poetry suggests to us without mentioning its name.

This theme constitutes the most artistic development of the basic motif that is found for the first time in the poem "Trojans":

Our efforts are those of men trapped in failure,
our efforts are like those of the Trojans,

but also in the poem "The City", where the idea of the inability of man to change his fate prevails, and in the poem "The God abandons Antony", where the notion of the Stoic acceptance of defeat is prominent. Similar is the atmosphere of destruction that lurks in "The Footsteps", in "The Ides of March", and in "Nero's Delay", according to Seferis's perceptive analysis.

As time went by, Cavafy proceeded, it seems, under the influence of Symbolism in his depiction of a more fleeting form of reality placed not after but a little before the fatal end. In this category must be grouped the poems "In Sparta", "Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians", "To Antiochus Epiphanes", and "Alexander Jannaeus and Alexandra". We are always in the same atmosphere we experienced initially in the "Trojans", where

We achieve something;
we regain our confidence somewhat and we start again
to have courage and good hope.

Except that in this advanced form of his poetry Cavafy no longer needs to refer to useless efforts to justify his poem. Vanity comes by itself from our knowledge of history, which the poet presupposes. For this reason the finer and more profound of his historical poems are addressed primarily to recipients who are well informed, who have a sensitivity analogous to his, who are able to see historical time in its dramatic and poetic dimensions. The poet, however, achieves something more: he awakens this sensitivity in us.

Let us have a look, for instance, at "Aemilianus Monai, Alexandrian, AD 628–655", one of the best-known poems of Cavafy's middle period (1916–18). He deals with the inner life of a young man who lived, as the title states, between AD 628 and 655. The person is imaginary. On the first level the central character relates his attempts by whatever means necessary to construct a hypothetical panoply in order to protect his

inwardness (his “vulnerable parts”) from human viciousness. And the poet asks himself:

Has he ever made this panoply?
 In any case, he did not wear it for a long time.
 When he was twenty-seven, he died in Sicily.

Nothing else, or rather, something else, apparently insignificant, gives a profound quality to the poem and allows for all kinds of extensions. The title: “Aemilianus Monai, Alexandrian, AD 628–655.” Our hero is an Alexandrian. In the year AD 642 Alexandria as well as the entire formerly Hellenistic East were conquered by the Arabs. A whole civilization, which lasted for about one thousand years, was forever lost. Aemilianus Monai, fourteen years old at the time of the catastrophe, dies in Sicily, that is to say, after some years in exile, at the age of twenty-seven. In this disaster, in this total ruin, a young man, a refugee among strangers, tries to discover and save his inner quality, his identity. His premature death thwarts his development. All this is suggested by the least of means, by a unique frugality: the title of the poem with three words and two numbers. The reader of course should at least be informed about what happened in AD 642 and what the significance of that event was in history. Otherwise he will lose the dramatic quality and complete meaning of the poem, which is the eternal antithesis, at times heroic and at other times not, but almost always lonely and hopeless, the antithesis of man (more particularly of the individual) in all times and places, against a hostile environment and adverse circumstances (*cf.* also “Caesarion”).

Another significant group of Cavafy’s poems is the one that deals with the early Christian centuries, when the struggle between the new and the old religion was still in progress. The poet wrote six poems quite early on, between the years 1892 and 1898, which he later assigned to the thematic chapter “The Beginnings of Christianity”. Of these poems only one has survived, “Julian at the mysteries”, which remained unpublished.²⁰ Later on a whole series follows, during his mature years, starting with the poem “Ionic” of 1911, in which a fervent invocation to the ancient gods is made,²¹ “The tomb of Ignatius” (1917), in which, as in “If actually dead”, the double identity of the Christian or “Christianizing” and the pagan appears, to “In the suburbs of Antioch”, which is his last poem. Here we feel again that no final decision has yet been taken. We see it, we feel it, we experience it in poems like “Myris, Alexandria, AD 340”, where in a few verses the atmosphere of that transitory epoch is skilfully condensed. The two religions coexist and compete with each other in everyday life. Julian, supreme in the camp of the pagans, although sometimes he also is

obliged to appear as “Christianizing” (“Julian in Nikomedeia”), is sneered at and mocked by the poet, not by the poet’s own words but by the Christians of his own time, as a dangerous political opponent. When Cavafy calls Julian “vacuous” or “the silly ass” (“You did not know”), we feel that the sneer is not his own but derives from Julian’s enemies, among whom it is not certain that the poet is also included (see also “Tonic”). The Christians, not at all in a Christian way, are glad about Julian’s sufferings and defeats, just like modern local party bosses. They are reported to have said about him that when Apollo’s temple and statue were set on fire in Antioch, from where Julian had ousted the holy relics of the martyr Vavylas “the main thing is that he burst”. This is Cavafy’s last poetic phrase in his last known poem.

Julian was not successful at his aims. His attempts to restore the ancient gods were, as in the “Trojans”, condemned in advance. The poet leaves us to learn about it from history. He himself deals only with the time in which the struggle was continuing. We, knowing the historical result, feel somewhat like prophets, like wise people who hear the sound “of the approaching events”. We see the future of that epoch which is the past of our epoch. And this is one of the secrets of the indefinable “magic” that scholars discern in Cavafy’s historical poems.

Notes

- 1 G. P. Savidis, *The Cavafian Editions* (1891–1932), *Ταχιδρόμος*, Athens, 1996, p. 106, note 6.
- 2 G. Seferis, *Essays*, 3rd edition, Ikaros, Athens, 1974, vol. i, p. 435.
- 3 I. A. Sareyannis, *Commentaries on Cavafy*, Preface by George Seferis, Introduction by Zisimos Lorenzatos, Ikaros, Athens, 1964.
- 4 G. Seferis, *op. cit.*, p. 395.
- 5 G. Dallas, *Cavafy and History*, Hermes, Athens, 1986, pp. 12, 134; T. Malanos, *The poet C. P. Cavafy*, 3rd ed., Diphros, Athens, 1957, pp. 76–77.
- 6 G. P. Savidis, *op. cit.*, p. 137. On p. 63 a letter from Cavafy to the poet N. Lapathiotis appears, dating from the year 1922, in which Cavafy states: “I may want (in the future) to make a classification of poems consisting only of historical ones, for instance.”
- 7 For Cavafy’s didacticism, see E. P. Papanoutsos, “The Didactic Cavafy”, in *Palamas, Cavafy, Sikelianos*, Ikaros, Athens, 1971, pp. 122–232.
- 8 See, *inter alia*, a complete analysis by Renata Lavagnini, in her article “A short story by Cavafy”, periodical *Το Δέντρο*, 6, pp. 618–628.
- 9 G. P. Savidis, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- 10 G. Seferis, *op. cit.*, pp. 348–352.
- 11 Seferis draws a parallel between the poem “Those who fought for the Achaeon League” and the disaster of 1922 (G. Seferis, *op. cit.*, p. 330).

- 12 G. Dallas, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- 13 I. A. Sareyiannis, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- 14 S. Tsirkas, *The Political Cavafy*, 4th edition, Kedros, Athens, 1982, p. 259.
- 15 T. Malanos, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- 16 S. Tsirkas, *op. cit.*, 252.
- 17 X. A. Kokolis, *Word Index of the 154 Poems of C. P. Cavafy*. Hermes, Athens, 1976.
- 18 S. Tsirkas, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
- 19 I. A. Sareyiannis, *op. cit.*, p.51; M. Meraklis, in *Λέξη* (1983, Cavafy Issue), pp. 334–347, where the author stresses Cavafy’s theatricality and in particular the presence of “gesture” in his poems, according to Bertolt Brecht’s theories.
- 20 Diana Haas, “‘The Beginnings of Christianity’, A thematic chapter of Cavafy”, *Χάρτης* (1983), (Cavafy Issue), p. 589.
- 21 See the correspondence of Cavafy’s poem “Ionic” with K. Palamas’ untitled poem in the “Lines in a well-known sound” section of his collection *Ασάλευτη Ζωή* (Life Immovable), which starts:

The axe and hammer of the priest black-robed
struck down the holy idols of the temples.

CHAPTER TWO

ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* AND CAVAFY

That is why in fact Poetry is a more philosophical and a more serious business than History. (Aristotle, *Poetics*)

I

I am of the opinion that the relation between Aristotle's *Poetics* and Cavafy's poems, which traditionally are called historical, has not been given enough attention, while, on the other hand, much emphasis has been placed on other affinities and relations as, for instance, with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre.¹ Only I. Sareyannis hints, very hastily, at Cavafy's relation with the classical theory of *catharsis*, referring, however, not to Aristotle's *Poetics* but to his *Politics* (line 134a 11–15).² In all the works of the many and important Cavafy scholars who have dealt in particular with the historical poems, there is no corresponding reference, unless it has escaped my attention.³

The first, however, who made a direct comparison and juxtaposition of Poetry and History is the great philosopher of Stageira, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*. He compared poetic diction with historical narration and arrived at his impressive conclusion, which is contrary to the Platonic perception that Poetry excels in terms of perception and Philosophy. It is obvious that the above statement must be of great Poetry and more specifically Cavafy's poems of this category in which History constitutes the initial reason and the raw material for poetic creation.

Why Aristotle thought in this way and what his motivation was in making this comparison is a matter for examination. Ioannis Sykoutris⁴ maintains that when Aristotle speaks about history he also has in mind mythology, which the ancients did not separate from it; they considered the incidents that mythology refers to as equally credible. The tragedians derived their themes from mythology in order to elaborate them poetically. Thus we can explain the comparison of the two categories, of history and poetry, which according to Sykoutris would otherwise be incomprehensible, since the former is science and the latter is art.

This view of Sykoutris does not seem to be reinforced by the text of the *Poetics*, for Aristotle takes as an example of history only events that are contemporary with his own time, that is to say, Alcibiades' deeds, which did not constitute the theme of a tragedy, rather than some mythological tradition. On the other hand, as is accepted today and as it seems Aristotle implied, historical analysis is both objective and subjective, that is to say, it is the past, but as the historian sees and interprets it and not something which is fixed and does not give rise to controversy.⁵ Moreover, this comparison becomes interesting if we accept that both history and poetry aim at the revelation of truth. They are, therefore, and remain, at least from certain aspects, two comparable categories, not only for Aristotle but also for our contemporary conceptions.

In the passage of the *Poetics* which is of interest to us and which is quoted below, Aristotle deals with dramatic poetry as it had been performed up to his days in the Attic theatre. Generally speaking, Cavafy's historical poems are short tragedies that borrow their themes from the historical past. They can therefore be examined and studied according to the rules of Aristotelian poetics, which are mainly concerned with dramatic poetry, and this is exactly what I am going to attempt here.

II

In chapter 9 of the *Poetics*, after having dealt with the definition of tragedy, the unity of the myth etc., Aristotle concludes:

It is clear from what has been said that the poet's task is to tell not what is happening but the sort of things that might be expected to happen, things that according to likelihood and necessity, can happen. For the distinction between the historian and the poet is not whether they give their accounts in verse or prose (for it would be possible for Herodotus' work to be put into verse and it would be no less a kind of History in verse than it is without verse) but they differ in this: that the historian narrates what happened whilst the poet tells the sort of things that can happen. That is why Poetry is a more philosophical and more serious business than history: for Poetry deals more with universals, History with particulars. "Universals" means the sort of things that according to likelihood and necessity a certain kind of person tends to say or do and this is what Poetry aims at, putting in names afterwards; 'particulars' means what Alcibiades, for example, really did or what happened to him.⁶

Further below, in chapter 15, Aristotle repeats and expands:

Likelihood and necessity should be sought by the poet not only in the plot of the myth but also in the characters so that what somebody says or does, should be within the limits of likelihood and necessity.

Taking as an example Herodotus' *History*, which could be equally well written in verse without becoming a poetical work, Aristotle certainly does not only have in mind the plain and almost crude historiography that "the father of History" represents. He refers to him as an example because Herodotus was, up to then, the most famous historiographer or because, as Sykoutris⁷ remarks, he wrote in the Ionic dialect, that is, in the dialect that is close to Homeric poetic language, or even because his narration has something of the multicoloured myth and the epic grandiloquence that Thucydides lacked, and for that reason his comparison with the poets was justified.

Regardless, however, of the example that he uses, it is obvious that Aristotle means that the historian, whatever he does when he writes as a historian, cannot disengage himself from events. The poet, on the contrary, even when he concerns himself with historical themes, is in a privileged position because he is free to distance himself from events or from things that are believed to be actual events. It is therefore legitimate to recreate them or throw light on them according to "likelihood and necessity", according to the nature of human affairs. The same thing is allowed to him and imposed on him, as far as the temperaments and characters are concerned, as long as his eyes are turned towards the "universal", that is to say, towards the eternal human characteristics. The poet does not remain a mere recorder or even interpreter; he becomes a creator, a "maker", according to the etymology of the word.

III

We see then Cavafy applying in the most faithful way the principles of Aristotelian poetics as they have been mentioned earlier, seeking in his historical poems with patience and scrutiny the probable and the necessary, at times indirectly and at times in a most obvious and clear way, as for instance in his poem "Darius", of which I quote the opening and the last lines for the reader's convenience:

The poet Phernazis is writing
the important part of his epic poem.
How Darius, the son of Hystaspis,
took over the kingdom of the Persians.
(From him descends our glorious king Mithridatis,

Dionysos and Eupator). But here
 philosophy is needed; the poet has to analyse
 the feelings Darius must have had.
 Perhaps arrogance and intoxication; but no – rather
 a kind of insight into the vanities of grandeurs.
 The poet thinks deeply on the matter.

But he is interrupted by his servant who enters
 running, and announces the important news:
 The war with the Romans has begun
 Most of our army has crossed the borders.

.....

But in all his nervousness, all the turmoil,
 the poetic idea comes and goes persistently.
 The most likely, of course, is arrogance and intoxication;
 Darius must have felt arrogance and intoxication.

The poet Phernazis is, of course, an imaginary person,⁸ whom Cavafy places in a certain place, at the court of the King of Pontus, at Amisoss, and at a definite historical moment, at the beginning of the Mithridatic Wars. Except for the historical frame, the war and the names of the kings, all the rest is Cavafy's invention, it is, in other words, "poetry putting the names afterwards". In this case the name of Phernazis "is put" afterwards (see quotation from the *Poetics*, 1451b/10, above).

But the most significant element in this poem, a real invention, which marks it out as one of the most beautiful and most reflective of Cavafy's poems, is its construction in two successive stories in which the one contains and presupposes the other. In the first story, the external one, we have our poet, Cavafy, invisible, placing his own imaginary poet, Phernazis, with every possible exactitude in the environment and the atmosphere of a historical period and animating him with his possible and natural thoughts, aspirations and worries. In the second story, the internal one, we see Phernazis trying to use his imagination in order to record in the epic poem which he is writing, Darius's probable feelings on his accession to the throne ("arrogance and intoxication" or understanding of "vanity"?). Both these stories, which Cavafy with his superb art includes in the same poetic form, he processes according to the Aristotelian "likelihood or necessity", something that Phernazis declares clearly, stating that philosophy is needed so that he can analyse Darius's probable feelings, the feelings that Darius would have had.

It is implied in the mingling of the two stories, although the poet does not state it, that Mithridates himself would have the same feelings when

declaring war on the Romans, and, by extension so would all haughty kings and rulers of all times under similar circumstances. Furthermore, any court poet, like Phernazis, would feel the same displeasure when finding himself in a similar position and would have to combine his art with the wish to please the ruler.⁹ Contemplating what usually happens, the poet succeeds, thanks to the suggestive method which fits poetry well, in reducing the events, persons and feelings of his invented history to diachronic symbols which move us aesthetically because they promote our feelings towards the “universal”, in other words, towards the eternally true.

IV

When Cavafy refers to events that history has recorded, he does not elaborate particularly on their description, except for those cases in which only the narration of what happened, without comment, suffices to give the desired dramatic emotion, to inspire “mercy” and “fear”, as for instance in the poems “In Sparta”, “Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians”, and, among his earlier poems, in “King Demetrius”.¹⁰ The rule for him, however, is to use history, including genuine or invented episodes towards which he is inclined more particularly,¹¹ as a frame, composing at their margins a secondary, “minor” story, which depicts with clarity not the events themselves but the atmosphere, the morals and the characters of that period.

Among the poems of this category, of particular importance is the poem “In Alexandria, 31 BC”. In only five rhyming couplets, the poet finds space enough to present to us with extraordinary vividness, at the margin of the conflict between Antony and Octavian, a pedlar from the outskirts of Alexandria who hawks his wares through the streets, in the crowds of the large city celebrating after a false piece of news that Antony is winning at Actium.

This faithful depiction of the historical atmosphere, of these small details which mark a bygone period, the poet does not achieve by accident but only after serious historical study and continuous research into the sources. He himself confesses this process with clarity in the opening lines of “Caesarion”:

Partly to verify the facts of a period,
partly to pass an hour or two,
last night I took up and read
a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies.¹²

In this historical setting, which is handled with so much dexterity that it leaves us in no doubt about its genuineness, the poet comments on the feelings of his main characters, applying “likelihood or necessity” to the analogous circumstances in the same way that the poet Phernazis followed, according to Cavafy’s description, in order to make clear Darius’ feelings and thoughts. Thus the poet succeeds in communicating to us directly the psychological reactions of the sick King Philip of Macedonia, as if he knew of them first hand. In the poem “The battle of Magnesia”, where the Seleucid Demetrius contrasts with Ptolemy he is equally successful as he is in portraying “The displeasure of Seleukidus”, the noble ambitions and the frustration of the same king in “Demetrius Soter, 162–150 BC”, the cares and the remorse of Demaratus in the poem of the same title,¹³ the fears and the repentance of an anonymous Byzantine nobleman in “John Kantakuzenus triumphs”, and the opinion of Apollonius about the right aesthetic education in “Apollonius of Tyana in Rhodes”.

Furthermore, in “Caesarion”, the poet himself explains how he created the romantic figure of Cleopatra’s unfortunate son, and then he depicts the character in front of our eyes, with subtlety, emotion, and unrivalled power of suggestion:

Ah, you came with your indefinable charm.
 Since so little is known about you from History,
 I could fashion you more freely in my mind.
 I made you handsome and sensitive.
 My art gave your face
 a dreamy, appealing beauty.
 And so completely did I imagine you
 that late at night
 as my lamp went out – I let it go out on purpose –
 I thought you entered my room,
 it seemed you stood there before me, looking as you would have
 in conquered Alexandria,
 pale and tired, ideal in your sorrow...

V

In another remarkable category of poems related to artistic creativity, either of the plastic arts or the literary (composition of epitaphs), Cavafy follows the same method, that is to say, he presents the artist as trying alone or with the help of instructions, to achieve the most wise, the most appropriate composition according to tradition and circumstances. In the poem “Philhellene” we read:

Pay attention that the engraving is artistic.
 The expression serious and stately.
 The crown had better be rather narrow;
 I don't like those broad Parthian ones.
 The inscription, as usual, in Greek;
 not exaggerated, not pompous –
 lest the proconsul, who is always poking about
 and reporting to Rome, misconstrue it –
 but nonetheless of course dignified.

Similar is the suggestion he makes to the poet Raphael in the poem “For Ammonis, who died at 29 in the year 610”:

Raphael, they are asking you to compose
 a few verses for an epitaph of the poet Ammonis.
 Something very artistic and tasteful. You can do it,
 you are the right man, to write fittingly
 for the poet Ammonis, one of our very own.

In “The retinue of Dionysos” we see Damon, the craftsman (“there is no one more capable in the Peloponnese”, the poet tells us), carving the retinue of Dionysos in Parian marble, placing first the god, then Intemperance, closely followed by Intoxication and then all the rest of the company, the Satyrs, and the singers, in the right order. The sculptor of Tyana, in the poem bearing the same title, confesses:

And now for some time I have been busy
 making a Neptune. I am contemplating
 how to mould the horses in particular.
 They must be made so light that
 their bodies, their feet, must show clearly
 that they do not touch the earth, but run over the sea's waters.

What else does Cavafy do in these poems but to investigate what is fitting, what is indispensable for the right expression and for the best possible artistic creation which survives the times only if it harmonizes with the “necessary” rules that govern the sense of the beautiful?

VI

In Cavafy's didactic poems, as they have been named, the same method prevails with more emphasis. In this category are grouped some of his best-known poems, such as “The City”, “Waiting for the barbarians”, “The

Satrapy", "Walls", "Trojans", and others. Many of these poems, however, can be characterized, according to Seferis' definition, as "pseudo-historical" because the poet moves in a historical environment often of an unidentified date. So, the moral seems to derive from the past, but it is projected into the present (since the present tense is used, as for instance, "Our efforts are like those of the Trojans..."), and of course it extends into the future.

But what is a moral? According to the dictionary, a moral is a rule for life obtained through experience. Here then, we have rules for life verified by time. By logical consequence, nowhere else are the meanings of likelihood and necessity more present than in the so-called didactic poems of Cavafy, which first contributed to his establishment as a poet. All scholars, first of all Gregorios Xenopoulos, recognized in those poems a rare poetic power combined with philosophical profoundness, in spite of the reservations that have always existed about the merit of didactic poetry. The perfect knowledge of human affairs enabled the poet to chisel verses that became part of our language, such as "There's no ship for you, there is no road", "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?", "Say goodbye to the Alexandria you are losing" etc. These are well-known lines which many quote when appropriate circumstances call for it.

Of course there is no greater honour for a poet than the incorporation of his lines into the everyday language of a people. And I do not think that any other modern Greek poet, apart from Cavafy, ever had such fortune.

VII

Did Cavafy know Aristotle's *Poetics*? It is not known whether Aristotle's works were in Cavafy's library. We can, however, with some certainty conclude that as it is certain that he had an excellent knowledge of ancient literature, it was not possible for him to be ignorant of this fundamental work of Aristotle, which is so closely related to the tragic poetry in which Cavafy had immersed himself with so much diligence. (See his rejected poem "Ancient Tragedy", written before 1900.)

Whether he was aware of the Aristotelian *Poetics* or not, there is no doubt that Cavafy's historical poems (within the broader meaning of the term) are in full harmony with the rules that Aristotle laid down in the ninth chapter of his *Poetics*.

And something more: Cavafy's historical poems surpass the distinction between history and poetry, which distinction, at first sight, is so evident. They merge these two categories and from their mingling they give us a new dimension of time lived, a dimension which in modern Greek literature and perhaps even in world literature appears for the first time.

Notes

- 1 M. Meraklis, "Brechtian Cavafy", *Four Essays on C. P. Cavafy*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 1986, pp. 33–49, where there are references to G. P. Savidis and Petros Kolaklidis.
- 2 I. A. Sareyannis, *Commentaries on Cavafy*, Preface by George Seferis, Introduction by Zisimos Lorentzatos, Ikaros, Athens, 1964, pp. 73 and 74.
- 3 Brecht himself, however, in his classic theoretical work *Little Instrument for Theatre*, refers more than once to Aristotle's *Poetics* (paragraphs 4 and 12).
- 4 Aristotle, *Poetics*, Intro. by I. Sykoutris, Academy of Athens, pp. 68, 76.
- 5 See *History and its Methods*, Encycl. de la Pleiade, MIET, Transl. E. Stephanaki, p. 404.
- 6 Here is Aristotle's original text:
 Φανερόν δε εκ των ειρημένων και ότι ου το τα γενόμενα λέγειν, τούτο ποιητού έργον εστί, αλλ' οία αν γένοιτο, και τα δυνατά κατά το εικός ή το αναγκαίον. Ο γαρ ιστορικός και ο ποιητής ου τω ή έμμετρα λέγειν ή άμμετρα διαφέρουσιν (είη γαρ αν τα Ηροδότου εις μέτρα τεθήναι, και ουδέν ήττον αν είη ιστορία τις μετά μέτρου ή άνευ μέτρων), αλλά τούτω διαφέρει, τω τον μεν τα γενόμενα λέγειν, τον δε οία αν γένοιτο. Διό και φιλοσοφότερον και σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ιστορίας εστί· η μεν γαρ ποιήσις μάλλον τα καθόλου, η δ' ιστορία τα καθ' έκαστον λέγει. Έστιν δε καθόλου, μεν, τω ποίω τα ποία άττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ή πράττειν κατά το εικός ή το αναγκαίον, ου στοχάζεται η ποιήσις ονόματα επιτιθεμένη· το δε καθ' έκαστον, τί Αλκιβιάδης έπραξεν ή τί έπαθεν. (Accentuation modernized).
- 7 *Poetics*, p. 78, note 3.
- 8 K. Delopoulos, *Cavafy's Historical and Other Characters*, Greek Literary and Historical Archives, Athens, 1980, p. 111.
- 9 Court poets exist even nowadays depending not on kings, of course, but on various regimes, interests or ideologies. Some of the committed poets could very well be compared with Phernazis.
- 10 Aristotle remarks that when mercy and fear derive from this complexity of things, it is preferable and worthy of a better poet (*Poetics*, ch. 14, 1453b, 1–5).
- 11 M. Meraklis, *op. cit.*, pp. 21, 22.
- 12 If we knew which this collection was, we could possibly find the starting points for at least some of Cavafy's epitaph poems.
- 13 In "Dimaratos" we see an analogous introduction to the theme as in "Darius" but with the intervention here of a young sophist who undertakes within the frame of a rhetorical exercise to sketch Dimaratos' character. In this poem, however, the main stress is not on the intermediary but on Dimaratos, whereas in "Darius" the main stress of the poem remains on the intermediary, that is, on Phernazis.

