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*Pages on C.P. Cavafy*

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MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

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Το περιοδικό φιλοξενεί άρθρα στα Αγγλικά και τα Ελληνικά αναφερόμενα σε όλες τις απόψεις των Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών (στη γενικότητά τους). Υποψήφιοι συνεργάτες θα πρέπει να υποβάλλουν κατά προτίμηση τις μελέτες των σε δισκέτα και σε έντυπη μορφή. Όλες οι συνεργασίες από πανεπιστημιακούς έχουν υποβληθεί στην κριτική των εκδοτών και επιλέκτων πανεπιστημιακών συναδέλφων.

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## C.P. CAVAFY (1863–1933)

### CAVAFY'S COMMENTARY ON HIS POEMS

Translated by Andrew Mellas

#### SELF-ENCOMIUM

I do not sympathise with the opinion of those who assert that the work of Cavafy, by being a work apart and not belonging to any of the known schools, will forever remain, so to speak, a singularity of poetry that will never find imitators.

Imitators – for the most part truly shallow – I discover already and not only amongst the Greek poets. Rare but striking samples of the influence of Cavafy have been ascertained more or less everywhere; the natural consequence of every work of worth and progress.

Cavafy, in my opinion, is a hyper-modern poet, a poet of the future generations. Aside from his historical, psychological and philosophical worth, the frugality of his expression, which occasionally touches laconism, his weighed enthusiasm which appeals to intellectual emotion, his proper diction, the result of an aristocratic nature, his gentle irony, represent elements that future generations will esteem even more, prompted by the progress of discoveries and the refinement of their intellectual mechanisms.

The rare poets like Cavafy will then seize a primary place in a world that will think far more than it does today. With these facts, I maintain that his work will not simply remain closed inside libraries as a historical record of the development of Greek literature.

#### CAVAFY'S SELF-COMMENTARY

As a general rule, the great writers and poets wrote their best works at a young age, before old age. I am a poet of old age. The livelier events do not immediately inspire me. It is needed for time to pass first. Afterwards, I remember them and am inspired.

Many poets are only poets. Porphyras, for example, is only a poet. I am a poet-historian. Never could I write a novel or a play; but I feel inside of me 125 voices telling me that I could write history. But now it is late.

### 1 FOOTSTEPS

Nero belonged to the family of Aenobarbuses and later came into that of Claudius by adoption.

### 2 MONOTONY

It appears a pessimistic poem but it is not, because the poem is partial. It is not about luck, the fate of humanity, but about the luck and fate of some people.

### 3 THE RETINUE OF DIONYSIOS

Damon may be a good craftsman, yet he has as the only goal in his life that of becoming financially independent, in order to be able to, living life prosperously, be engaged in politics.

### 4 THAT IS THE MAN

In antithesis to the Tyanean sculptor, the unknown Edesseean appears a bad poet (versification), who following a tiring attempt does not feel exultation, but despondency and who works simply from ambition, for the "That is the Man" of Lucian's *The Dream*.

### 5 THE CITY

The man who has ruined his life will attempt in vain to live it again better, more ethically. The city, a fantastical city, will follow him, will overtake him and will await him with the same roads and the same suburbs. The poet, of course, does not deal with generality in the poem in question but partiality, as otherwise often themes are treated in isolation or in exceptional circumstances.

### 6 THE SATRAPY

The poet does not necessarily imply Themistokles or Demaratos but neither a political person, because in that case the thesis of the poem would have just been proved. The implied person is entirely symbolic, whom it is necessary rather to accept as a craftsman or even a scientist who, after failures and disappointments, abandons his art and takes the road for Susa and Artaxerxes, that is to say he changes his way of life and finds with another means the opulence (and this a success), which however is not capable of satisfying him. The verse in parentheses is noteworthy: the day you let go and give in,

which forms the basis for the whole poem, through intimation because the hero became easily disheartened, because he magnified the events and rushed to take the road for Susa.

#### 7 THE IDES OF MARCH

A poem referring to the murder of Julius Caesar and to its preceding events. Ides of March = the first decameron of March.

See Plutarch – *Life of Julius Cesar*.

#### 8 GOD FORSAKES ANTONY

It refers to the epoch during which the defeated Antony is besieged by Octavius in Alexandria (see Plutarch: *Life of Antony*) and the moment during which the god Dionysus forsakes him (invisible troupe). The poem teaches us that we must look disaster in the face with dignity.

#### 9 TYANESE SCULPTOR

The scene of the poem in Rome and the existence of the statue of Caesarion amidst the statues give us the chronology, that is to say a few years A.D. or immediately B.C. From the words of the sculptor and although he seems an arrogant person and not a modest one, we understand that it concerns a craftsman endowed with a mastery of art (horses galloping over water) and with a creative imagination (the young Hermes).

#### 10 THE DANGEROUS

Myrtias – an imaginary person – is led astray by pleasures, something not Christian, but justifies his weaknesses hoping, as one who becomes Christian, that in time he will find again his ascetic, his austere Christian spirit.

#### 11 THE GLORY OF THE PTOLEMIES

A purely historical poem comprises a hymn of the Ptolemies. It is noteworthy that the haughtiness (jactance) of Lagides, who does not hesitate, compares himself to a Selefkid, so as to call him laughable with his common lechery.

#### 12 ITHACA

The meaning of this poem is simple and clear: man in his life pursuing one goal (Ithaca) acquires experience, knowledge and occasionally good things higher than the goal per se. And when it is time, he reaches the end of his attempts and finds "Ithaca" poor, below his expectations; however Ithaca did not fool him because:

*Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
You'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*

This poem having not been so clear it would then not be without purpose to draw our attention to verses 18-26. The reader will note a manifest mention of perfumes, which here undoubtedly symbolise sensual enjoyment. Those who know the tone of Cavafy know well that the poet rarely makes use of emphasis and so when we encounter it it surely signifies something. It did not happen by chance or from misguided lyricism. Indeed the remembered lines contain a double emphasis referring to a phrase at the beginning of the poem: "as long as a rare excitement touches your soul and body".

### 13 HEROD ATTICUS

An historical poem of the Hellenic-Roman epoch. The poet as a contemporary of that epoch exclaims with the first verse: "What glory this for Herod Atticus!" but both Herod and, even more so, Alexander of Seleucia are unworthy of even the smallest admiration. But in that epoch all the intellectuals are jealous of Herod, who acquired the admiration of the Hellenes! The epistle of Herod referred to is historical.

### 14 PHILHELLENE

Some petty eastern monarch of Mesopotamia is vainglorious but not a dolt, because although it signifies that the Hellenes who come to his court are dregs, yet he wants to exploit the fact in order to show that he finds himself in communication with the Hellenic world.

### 15 ALEXANDRIAN KINGS

A work of fantasy chiefly interesting because the Alexandrian public, which was thronging and shouting acclamations as if in a theatre, ends up psychologising. The smart Alexandrians were not taking seriously the titles given to the small royal princes.

See Plutarch, *Life of Antony*,  
A. Bouché-Leclercq, *History of Lagides*.

### 16 VERY RARELY

The title constitutes a commentary on the poem. The duration, that is, of a work of art, which moves generation after generation, is not a hallmark of chanceful art, but exceptionally good art, that is of an occurrence which presents itself "very rarely".

## 17 TOMB OF THE GRAMMARIAN LYSIAS

Even if the words: comments, texts, technology etc. lend the poem a humorous tinge, yet it is evident that it concerns a grammarian of important worth, such that its dead is entombed in the official area of the library. The hero is a fantastical person.

## 18 TOMB OF EVRION

The memorial was made from syenite stone, that is to say, from a precious stone originating from the red banks of Assouan, as is called today the ancient Syene of Upper Egypt. Alaverchs or Aravarchs were the overseers of the Jewish Community of Alexandria, such that the hero Evrion (an imaginary name) is presented to us as a sufficiently strange intersection (croisement) of races.

## 19 CHANDELIER

The small room is the life of the individual, which is ruled, almost held hostage, by a certain vice and is simultaneously empty, because in there the only vice with its terrible fire (flares up, roasts, flame, complaint, impulse) has burned up, has effaced every obligation, every responsibility, every advisability of the individual.

## 20 THEODOTUS

A symbolic poem of clear thought – (a poem of meditation, as very successfully characterised by A. Polites). It refers to the slaughter of Pompey under Theodotus. Do something, says the poet, attempt to become great, but do not step on corpses. The symbol (Julius Caesar) is found in the first part of the poem, the poet leaves it to the second part where the poet addresses himself to all.

Alexandria signifies happiness, success.

See: Plutarch, *Life of Julius Caesar*.

## 21 BUT THE WISE PERCEIVE THINGS ABOUT TO HAPPEN

The poet limits the foresight of the wise to the near future. They foresee or rather they infer only the “things to come”.

## 22 MORNING SEA

See: Studies of Alkes Thrylou, Vrismitzakes.

## 23 OROPHERNES

An historical poem and the Dimitrios referred to in it is the same of “The Displeasure”.

Noteworthy is the antithesis between the first four verses, through which the beauty of Orophernes is extolled, the final five, which give a beautiful aesthetic impression and the body of the poem through which what the hero is like is described, namely trivial.

#### 24 THE BATTLE OF MAGNESIA

Philip the V, the last Philip, king of Macedonia will not postpone the celebration because Antiochos was destroyed in Magnesia. He does not forget that down there, in Syria, they did not bat an eyelid when Macedonia, their mother, became rubbish defeated by Rome. Everyone in his place! These things Philip “maintains”, while on the contrary, as is known, he is secretly preparing for a new struggle against the Romans.

See: Saregiannes' related study – New Art.

#### 25 MANUEL COMNENOS

An entirely historical poem.

#### 26 THE DISPLEASURE OF SELEUCIDES

A clearly historical poem. Seleucides Dimitrios finds himself in Rome as a hostage, during which period arrives there as a supplicant Ptolemy Philometor. The same Seleucides becomes later the king of Syria under the name Dimitrios the Saviour.

#### 27 FOR AMMONIS WHO DIED 29 YEARS OF AGE AT 610

Mention is made concerning imaginary persons of Egypt who recognise the Hellenic.

#### 28 IN THE MONTH OF ATHYR

Lefkios dies at age 26 years in the month of Athyr, that is to say around September or October.

#### 29 TOMB OF IGNATIUS

Formerly the heathen Kleon and now the Christian Ignatius, and also a reader, that is to say, semi-clerical.

#### 30 CAESARION

See: Plutarch – *Life of Antony*.

“The scum who were whispering the ‘Too many Caesars’”

The poet calls Areius and the other advisors of Octavius scum. Areius was not wrong politically in parodying the Homeric line: “It is not a good thing to have too many

masters; one master suffices” to show to almighty Octavius that it would not be sensible for two Caesars to live at the same time.

### 31 OF THE JEWS (50 AD)

See: Renan, *History of the People of Israel* – final volume.

### 32 OF DIMTRIOS SAVIOUR (162 – 150 BC)

See: A. Bouché – Leclercq, *History of the Seleucides*.

### 33 IF ACTUALLY DEAD

If actually dead: Eusebius employed, used the phrase when writing against a certain Hierocles, whose work has been lost. Hierocles wrote during the Christian Era and contended that Apollonios also performed miracles. Damis and Philostratos wrote the life of Apollonios of Tyana. During the time of Justin – 6th century AD – a heathen, but even an insignificant and cowardly man, dreams of a return of Apollonios, who will revive the ancient religion.

### 34 YOUNG MEN OF SIDON (400 AD)

The academic Mr Gr. Xenopoulos, reprinting this poem in the “Nea Estia” – 1st issue of January 1930 – wrote: “...It is perhaps one of the least “artistic” and surely one of his more contemplative. That is why it requires some interpretation. Who does not know that famous epigram of his – as you believe at least – supposed to be written by Aeschylus himself at his grave? In this, the great Athenian forgets entirely that he was the poet of the “Persians” and does not remember except that he battled against them with bravery at Marathon. About one century after Christ (400 BC – 400 AD), at the pleasure-loving Sidon, some perfumed youths are having fun. At their symposium an actor is reciting, amongst other things, the self-epitaph of Aeschylus. This makes one of those youths, “mad about literature”, to rise up, to become indignant and to reprehend the poet who lacked spirit. Because he regards it as “discouragement” that he forgot, in his final hour, his greatest action, – that of his genius – in order to remember one so much lower... Cavafy then, with this episode, wants to show that Aeschylus put in his epigram only that which he had to put, and that only perfumed youths, pleasure-loving, degenerates and “mad about literature” – ignorant of other reasons and imperious to every kind of valour, like the “vivacious young man” of Sidon, – can reprehend him for lacking spirit and... betrayal of his art. This comes out. Whoever would extract the contrary, would not have understood the poem. Or, even if Cavafy had the contrary in his mind, then he did not make good use of the theme.”

Mr Xenopoulos referred to Cavafy in his above commentary, but at the same time to the interpretation of Mr. G.A. Saregiannes published in the "Alexandrian Art" issue of December 1927.

Mr Saregiannes, amongst other things, writes: "This definition of himself, Aeschylus would have written as an old man and, possibly, after one of his defeats at the theatre. Thus he was saying directly to Sophocles and Euripides: "What significance have the plays for which you boast? I fought at Marathon – something which you chits did not do". This psychological analysis, – anecdotal it seems to me – Cavafy gives to us in his verse: "in times of testing or when your hour draws near".

At the end of his interpretation, Mr Saregiannes says: "The peculiar stance which Cavafy takes towards the ancient world in the "Young Men of Sidon" clearly seems dramatised here. I wonder if many will love the ideal youth who with all vigour, but also education, judges with curiosity and without being enslaved by tradition? The problem is also national..."

I am obliged to say that from a related conversation with the poet I obtained the impression that he shares the view of Mr Saregiannes. Perhaps – perhaps because this interpretation appears to him wider and gave to his poem meaning and nationalistic, patriotic worth. We must not forget that Cavafy was a fanatical nationalist. There is not one struggle that he regards as superfluous for the service of Hellenism.

Very rightly, I think, Mr M. Spieros characterises the poem in his study of the Cavafyan work: "The more poetic expression of the close relation of art to life Cavafy expressed with great poetical power in his excellent poem: 'Young Men of Sidon'. Art, he tells us there, has to be so closely linked with life, to be identified so much with it, such that the emotion it evokes will not be lacking the more intense impression of life, for example the emotion which a soldier feels on the battlefield". (Periodical "Kyklos" 1st year – No. 3–4, 1932).

I also sought on this matter the opinion of the specialist on Cavafyan matters Mr Timos Malanos, who said to me that he does not agree with Mr Xenopoulos' interpretation and gave me in writing his own which contains the following:

"I think that with the poem 'Young Men of Sidon (400 AD)', the poet pursues two things. To give again through the means of his art the atmosphere of a certain historical era and, at the same time, to utilise this era in order to express his personal ideas. In this instance he chooses 400 AD, because idolatry dies in that century. The young men of the poem are aesthetic youths, without any particular patriotic zeal, more individuals and, surely, from the so-called "heathens", who, in the years of Christianity, still persist in living and feeling "Hellenic".

They gathered to have fun. But the actor which they invited also recited for them various choice epigrams: Meleagro, Crinagora, Riano. Up to here, no objection. Suddenly however, when the actor, continuing, recited to them also the known self-epitaph of Aeschylus, “a vivacious young man”, says the poet, “mad about literature, springs up and, loudly criticises Aeschylus who preferred to stay in the memory of posterity simply as a fighter at Marathon, forgetting entirely that he was also a great tragic poet.

Certainly we should not forget, if we want to understand the poem, that this young man is an invented, imaginary person. And, in addition, this does not concern a simple child, but a young man of letters, as we would say today. Precisely this characteristic gives him the right to have an opinion on the issue. Moreover, this is why out of the five young men, only he spoke. But the words he said were the words of Cavafy. After these, neither continuity, nor contradiction. In this way the poet took us mentally on a journey fifteen centuries back so that he could create, with the help of Eunapios, the five perfumed young Sidonians and become the instigator of the oration:

*Give – I say – all your strength to your work,  
all your care, and again remember your work in trials,  
or when your time draws near.*

There exists no doubt that the thoughts the above three lines contain, the young man of the poem would have even said without Cavafy, and even still if it was not the imaginary young man but another who had truly lived in 400 AD. I want to say that Cavafy's viewpoint would surely have had followers in those years.

In any case, for the perfect apprehension of the poem, the following enlightening detail is indispensable. Known in Cavafyan circles is the excessive, the almost pathological weakness of Cavafy for his work, which, for that restless egocentric man stood for him at the same time, as often he himself said in his speeches as the surest refuge of forgetfulness.

### 35 A BYZANTINE RULER, EXILED, COMPOSING VERSES

This concerns Nikephoros Votaniatis, emperor of Byzantium.

### 36 THE FAVOUR OF ALEXANDER VALAS

This concerns Alexander Valas, king of Smyrna.

### 37 DEMARATOS

The poem shows that Demaratos is not a traitor. Deep in his conscience he rejoices when he learns that the Hellenes become victorious.

## 38 TO ANTIOCHOS EPIPHANES

Antiochos Epiphanes, king of Syria. His father was Antiochos the Great who was defeated in the Battle of Magnesia, and his brother Seleucos the Philometor whom Epiphanes succeeded.

Perseus, the last king of Macedonia, was defeated at Pydna by the Romans.

## 39 THEATRE OF SIDON (400 AD)

Those who wore grey were Christians.

See: Eunapios – *The Lives of Philosophers and Sophists*.

## [A NOTE BY THE POET ON PESSIMISM]

Many times it has been said that the work of Cavafy is full of pessimism. However, if one studies the poems of Cavafy carefully, one will find that this pessimism is much less than whatever they may think; even “Monotony”, about which someone wrote that it is a record of pessimism, and even “City”, poems undoubtedly pessimistic in themselves, but it must be taken into consideration that they were not written as representative of a general state of humanity – but a partial one (partiels). Something on this theme Mr. Polites has already written in *Semaine Egyptienne*. “Monotony”, “City” – we could also refer to other poems – aim at the circumstances of certain individuals, not at general circumstances. The life of certain people, either out of their culpability or out of circumstances, becomes such where “one monotonous day is followed by another monotonous day”. “Anyone can easily guess what lies ahead; all of yesterday’s boredom. And tomorrow ends up no longer like tomorrow”. But Cavafy does not mean that the life of all people is such – only some and as a phenomenon of life he regards it worthy of becoming the theme of the poem. In “City” he does not mean that whoever ruined their life cannot mend it elsewhere. But there exist individuals who when they ruin their life in a small corner, “they have ruined it on all the earth”. There exist individuals for which there are no ships, no roads elsewhere. “City” is a partial occurrence. There exist various poems such as “Satrapy”, “Ides of March”, “Theodotos” which at first reading, at an off-hand reading, seem pessimistic and which we have no doubt are regarded as such by those who diagnosed pessimism in the work of Cavafy. But the Cavafyan poems demand the greatest of attention to be judged, either literarily, or philosophically. “Satrapy” e.g. at first reading appears a terribly pessimistic poem – but if you are mindful of the eighth verse “the day you let yourself go and yield” it changes complexion. It leaves a slit open. The position of the traveller for Susa possibly was not as full of despair as they thought it.

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Possibly he rushed to go to Artaxerxes. Possibly the base conditions, pettiness and indifference would have passed with time. The more we focus on the eighth verse, the more the pessimistic tinge of the poem is lost.

We pass to "Ides of March". This also can seem a pessimistic poem. But when we are mindful of lines 2, 3, 4, 5 and the advice: "At once get to know the serious writings of Artemidoros", it ceases to be a pessimistic poem entirely and becomes an admonitory poem. The semi-advice given cannot be said to be pessimism: "and overcome your ambitions if you cannot". "Theodotos" appears a very pessimistic poem. Yet very little pessimistic, when one is mindful of only one word in the second line: "careful". Neither the victory is condemned, nor the pursuit of glory which the politics trumpet and which the votes ratify, but simply a recommendation is made. Be "careful" how you acquire these things – not stepping over corpses.

## POEMS, PROSE POEMS AND REFLECTIONS

Translated by Vrasidas Karalis

### THE VESSELS

From Imagination to the Paper. It's a difficult passage, the sea is dangerous. At first glance, the distance looks small, and yet, despite all, the journey is so long, and sometimes so harmful for all the vessels that attempt it.

The first damage is caused by the extremely fragile nature of the goods that the vessels carry. In the markets of Imagination most and the best things are made of delicate crystals and transparent ceramics and, despite the extreme care of people, many break on the way, and many more break when they bring them on land. And every similar damage is irreparable, because it's irrational for the vessel to go back and purchase identical goods. There is no possibility of finding the same shop that sold them. The markets of Imagination have luxurious superstores which do not last long. Their transactions are brief, they liquidate their merchandise quickly and are instantly dissolved. It's extremely rare for a vessel on its return to find the same exporters with the same stock.

Another damage is caused by the capacity of the vessels. They depart full of cargo from harbours of affluent continents, and then, when they are mid-sea, they are forced to throw part of their cargo out in order to save the whole. As a consequence, no vessel ever succeeds in bringing over the treasures it has received intact. What is rejected is certainly produce of lesser value, but occasionally it happens that the sailors in their extreme haste make errors and throw valuable items out into the sea.

And yet at the moment they arrive at the white papery harbour new sacrifices are requested again. The customs officers arrive and examine each product and ponder if they will allow unloading; they decline permission for another product to disembark; and from certain loads they accept only limited quantities. Each place has its laws. Not all vendibles have free entrance and smuggling is strictly forbidden. Wine imports are forbidden since the continents from which these vessels come produce wine and spirits from grapes grown and matured under stronger temperatures. The customs officers do not want at all such beverages. They are not appropriate for all tastes. On the other hand, there is a

company in this land which has the monopoly of wines. It produces liquids with the colour of wine and the taste of water and you can drink them all day without getting tipsy in the least. It is an old company. It enjoys great prestige and its shares are always over-priced.

But again, let's feel pleased when these vessels dock at the harbour even after all such sacrifices. Because in the final analysis, with some invigilation and great caution, the number of broken or rejected items diminishes during the journey. In addition, the local rules and customs regulations are, on the one hand, in many ways tyrannical and, on the other hand, not completely adverse so that a large part of the cargo is eventually unloaded. Furthermore, customs officers are not infallible, and various items of the forbidden kind come through in deceitful boxes which declare something different on top and contain something else inside, and some exquisite wines are imported for selected banquets.

Something else is sad, really sad. That is, when some enormous vessels pass by with coral decorations and ebony masts, with fully blown huge white and red flags, replete with treasures, but which do not even approach the harbour either because the cargo they transport is illegal or because the harbour is not deep enough to accept them. And they keep sailing on. Fair wind blows through their silk sailcloth, the sun shines on the glory of their golden prow and they leave calmly and majestically, they depart for ever away from us and our narrow harbour.

Fortunately, such vessels are extremely rare. We don't even see two or three like them in our whole life. Furthermore, we forget them instantly. The more brilliant the sight of them is, the faster its oblivion comes. And several years later, if one day – as you are sitting idly, looking at the water or listening to silence – accidentally return in our auditory memory some enthusiastic stanzas, initially we don't recognise them and we force our memory to remember where we heard them before. After much effort, the old recollection is awoken and we remember that these stanzas are from the song sung by sailors, handsome as the heroes of the Iliad, when these great, magnificent vessels were passing by and were sailing onwards going – who knows where to.

(1896?)

## THE CAT

*The cat is odious to common people.  
Magnetic and secretive, she consumes  
Their superficial mind; and so they don't appreciate  
her graceful manners. [.....]*

[.....]

[.....]

*But the cat's strength lies in her pride.  
Her freedom is her blood and nerves.  
Her looks are never humble.  
In her ever hidden passions,  
In her cleanliness, in the calmness  
And the beauty of postures, in the temperance*

*Of indications how much subtle purity of emotions  
Is found. When cats are in reverie or asleep  
they are surrounded by visionary detachment.  
Maybe then around them do wander*

*Spectres of days of yore. Maybe phantasy  
Takes them back to Boubastis; where their altars  
Flourished and were crowned by Ramseses' worship  
And all their moves were omens to the priests.*

(±1897)

## IN FRONT OF JERUSALEM [b]

*Now they arrived in front of Jerusalem.  
Obsessions, rapacity, and covetousness  
Even their knightly haughtiness  
Were instantly expelled from their soul.  
They arrived now in front of Jerusalem.  
In their ecstasy and in their wonderment  
They forgot their disputes with the Greeks  
They forgot their hatred against the Turks.  
They arrived in front of Jerusalem now.  
And the Crusaders the bold and invincible  
The tempestuous in all their marches and incursions,  
Are diffident and nervous and feel unable to  
Advance further; they tremble like little kids,  
And like little kids, they cry, they all cry,  
Staring at the walls of Jerusalem.*

(1888-1892?)

## SECOND ODYSSEY

Dante: "Inferno, Canto XXVI"  
 Tennyson: "Ulysses"

*Second great Odyssey  
 Maybe greater than the first. But, alas,  
 Without Homer, without hexameters.*

*His paternal home was small  
 Small was his paternal city,  
 His whole Ithaca was small.*

*Telemachus' affection, Penelope's  
 Faith, his father's old age,  
 His old friends, the love  
 Of his devoted people,  
 The happy repose at home  
 Entered like rays of joy  
 The heart of the sea-farer.  
 And like rays they vanished.*

*Within him*

*The thirst for the sea arose.  
 He detested the air of the land.  
 His sleep at night was haunted  
 By spectres of the West.  
 He was taken by the nostalgia  
 Of journeys and of morning  
 Arrivals to harbours where,  
 With so much joy, you enter for the first time.*

*Telemachus' affection, Penelope's  
 Faith, his father's old age,  
 His old friends, the love  
 Of his devoted people,  
 And the peace and the repose  
 At home all made him feel bored.*

*And off he went.*

*And when Ithaca's shores  
 Were fainting gradually before him  
 And he was sailing full mast westwards  
 Towards the Iberians, towards the pillars of Hercules –  
 Away from every Greek sea –  
 He felt that he was alive again, that  
 He shook off the oppressive bonds  
 Of things familiar and homely.  
 And his adventurous heart  
 Was rejoicing icily, devoid of love.*

(January 1894)

## NEWSPAPER REPORT

*It even mentioned something about blackmail.  
On this, the paper stressed again  
its full contempt for the wretched,  
most obscene, corrupt morals.*

*Contempt. . . And he, silently weeping,  
remembered one night, last year,  
they spent together, in a room  
partly motel partly brothel: after—  
they never met again — not even in the street.  
Contempt. . . And he remembered  
the sweet lips and the white, the fabulous  
the divine flesh he didn't kiss enough.*

*He read, melancholically, the news on the tram.*

*At eleven midnight the body was found  
at the wharf. It was not certain  
if it was murder. The paper  
expressed its pity, but, being moral,  
emphasized its full contempt  
for the most depraved life of the victim.*

(May 1918)

## IT MUST HAVE BEEN THE ALCOHOL

*It must have been the alcohol I drank that night  
or that I felt sleepy, being tired all day.*

*The black wooden pillar with the ancient bust  
vanished from my eyes: the door to the dining room,  
and the red armchair: the small couch as well.  
In their place, a street in Marseilles emerged.  
And my soul freely, without timidity,  
appeared there again and was walking,  
in the form of a beautiful and voluptuous adolescent—  
of a debauched adolescent: let this also be said.*

*It must have been the alcohol I drank that night,  
or that I was sleepy, being tired all day.*

*My soul was relieved, my burnt soul  
constantly shrinking under the burden of years.*

*My soul was relieved and I imagined myself  
in a picturesque street of Marseilles  
in the form of that joyous, dissolute adolescent  
who himself felt no shame for anything, unquestionably.*

(February 1919)

#### AT THE WHARF

*Intoxicating night, darkness, at the wharf.  
And then in the small room of a motel  
for hustlers – where we surrendered completely to our morbid passion;  
for hours, to “our own” love –  
till the windows glittered with the new day.  
This very night is similar to that  
and revived for me another night of the remote past.*

*Moonless, pitch black  
(as it suited us). Of our meeting  
at the wharf: very far away  
from the cafes and the bars.*

(April 1920)

#### AFTER SWIMMING

*Both naked; they just came out from the sea at the Samian  
beach; from the enjoyment of swimming  
( a burning summer day).  
They delayed dressing up, they felt sorry to cover  
[they delayed dressing feeling pleasure  
staring at the erotic parts of the body]  
the beauty of the well-shaped nudity  
so harmoniously completed by their beautiful faces.*

*Ah, the ancient Greeks were really tasteful,  
representing the enchantment of youth  
without inhibition, naked.*

*Poor Gemistos is not altogether wrong  
(let him be suspected by Sir Andronikos and the patriarch)  
who wants and preaches a return to paganism.  
Certainly, my holy faith is always venerable-  
but to a certain degree Gemistos is well understood.*

*Amongst the youth then,  
George Gemistos’ teaching was truly influential*

*and he was extremely wise and superbly eloquent:  
an advocate of Hellenic education also.*

(June 1921)

#### THE BIRTH OF A POEM

*One night when the resplendent light of the moon  
overflowed my room. . . imagination, stealing  
something from life: a very trivial something –  
a past incident, a distant pleasure –  
which brought back a special image of the flesh,  
its own special image on an erotic bed. . .*

(February 1922)

#### THE PHOTOGRAPH

*Seeing the picture of his partner  
his beautiful, youthful face  
(lost now; – the picture  
had the date ninety two),  
was taken by the melancholy of the ephemeral.  
What consoles him however is that  
he didn't let – they didn't allow any stupid shame,  
to be an obstacle or make their love ugly.  
For the “debauched” and the “perverts” of the imbeciles  
never bothered their erotic aesthetics in the slightest.*

(August 1924)

#### REMORSE

*Talk about this remorse so that it will be appeased,  
the benevolent certainly, but dangerously biased.  
Do not accuse yourself about the past and suffer so.  
Don't give so much importance to yourself.  
The crime you committed is much less serious  
than you think: indeed far less.  
The virtue that brought you this remorse today  
was latent in you even back then.  
There it is: an incident that suddenly  
returns in your memory and explains  
the cause for an action which looked  
not quite laudable, and yet it is now justified.  
Do not trust your memory, completely;  
you forgot so many – various trivialities –  
that sufficiently exonerated you.*

*And do not believe that you knew the victim  
so well. He must have had joys, you ignored;  
those dreadful wounds you think you inflicted  
(being ignorant of his life) were probably  
not even scratches.*

*Do not trust your erratic memory.  
Appease the remorse which is always  
to the point of distortion, biased against you.*

(October 1925)

### CRIME

*Stavros shared the money with us.  
The best chap of our company  
smart, strong, incredibly handsome.  
The ablest; although, besides me  
(being twenty then), he was the youngest.  
I gather he wasn't twenty three yet.*

*Three hundred pounds was the loot we made.  
Quite rightly, he kept half of it.*

*But now, eleven o' clock at night, we plan  
how to sneak him off tomorrow morning,  
before the police discovers the crime.  
It was not petty; burglary with aggravated consequences.*

*We were hidden underground.  
In a very safe basement.  
After the measures were decided for his escape,  
the other three left me and Stavros behind  
agreeing that they would return at five.*

*A torn mattress on the floor.  
Both exhausted, we collapsed. And with the psychological  
distress and the exhaustion  
and the anxiety for his morning  
escape – I suddenly realised: I hadn't thought at all  
that it was probably the last time we would sleep together.*

*It was found in the papers of a poet.  
It has a date: but illegible.  
One can be hardly seen; after nine, and then  
one; the fourth number looks like nine.*

(July 1927)

## OF THE SIXTH OR THE SEVENTH CENTURY

*It is really interesting and moving  
 Alexandria in the sixth century or in the early seventh  
 before the arrival of the almighty Arabism.  
 She certainly still speaks Greek, officially;  
 maybe without much vitality, but yet, as it is proper,  
 she still speaks our language.  
 She will be lost from Hellenism inexorably  
 but still holds as much as she can.*

*It is not unnatural if so emotionally  
 we look back at that age  
 we who brought back today  
 the Greek language to her soil.*

*[It is not unnatural if so emotively  
 I look at that period*

*I myself a Greek poet – a Greek belonging to her  
 I who created my Hellenic work on her soil.]*

(December 1927)

## ABANDONMENT

*He was extremely tasteful and extremely clever,  
 and a young man of very high social class,  
 in order to take, it would be silly,  
 his abandonment the tragic way.  
 On the other hand, when his friend told him “we shall be in love  
 for ever” – both the one who said it  
 and the one who heard it knew how conventional it was.  
 It happened after the movies, and in the ten minutes  
 they spent in the bar, that night desire  
 was burning in their eyes and their blood  
 and they left together; and so, that “for ever” was said.*

*On the other hand, that “for ever” lasted three years.  
 Quite often, it lasts less.*

*He was extremely tasteful and extremely clever  
 in order to take this affair tragically;  
 furthermore, he was gorgeously handsome – both looks and body –  
 so that his body narcissism not to be hurt at all.*

(May 1930)

## A COMPANY OF FOUR

They make their money  
 Smart guys however  
 ways to escape  
 Apart from their smartness  
 Because two of them are united  
 The other two are united  
 Very well dressed  
 such handsome men;  
 and their car  
 they miss nothing.

They make money  
 sometimes afraid  
 to escape jail.  
 such strength that takes  
 and transforms it

None of them wants  
 for himself, selfishly;  
 with greed and crudity;  
 if the one brings less  
 They keep their money  
 they will be well dressed,  
 to make their life  
 such handsome men,  
 and then, that's their system,

[

without knowing it, I took them out of life  
 and brought them to Art, to make it beautiful]

(March 1930)

certainly not honourably.  
 all four find  
 arrest.  
 they are extremely strong.  
 by the bond of pleasure.  
 by the bond of pleasure.  
 as it suits  
 theatres and bars  
 and they occasionally travel

certainly not honourably,  
 not to be stabbed,  
 But Love has  
 their dirty money  
 into the most shining purity.

that money  
 none of them counts  
 they never care  
 and the other more.  
 shared so  
 and able to spend,  
 tasteful, as it suits  
 and to help their friends  
 to forget what they gave.  
 they are idealised  
 so that now here they are

## [I HAD MY SOUL ON MY LIPS]

There was nothing romantic  
 when he told me "Maybe I'll die"  
 He said it in jest. The way that  
 a twenty three year old boy would say it.  
 And I – twenty five years old – took it lightly.  
 Nothing (fortunately) in this of some pseudo-emotional poetry  
 for elegant (and silly) ladies to be moved  
 who sigh for nothing.  
 However, when I walked out  
 the door of the house  
 I had the idea that it was not a joke at all.

*He might as well die. And with such fear  
I ran up the stairs, it was on the third floor.  
And without exchanging any words,  
I kissed his head, his eyes, his mouth,  
his chest, his hands and his every, every limb;  
so I thought – as the divine verses  
of Plato say – that my soul came up onto my lips.*

*I didn't go to the funeral. I was sick.  
All alone mourned for him innocently,  
over his white coffin, his mother.*

(1918?)

## I

I never lived in the country. I didn't ever visit rural areas not even for short periods of time, as others have done. And yet I have written a poem praising the countryside and I write that my verses are indebted to it. The poem is of little importance. It is also the most insincere thing ever made; a complete lie.

But now something crosses my mind, – is this real insincerity? Doesn't art always lie? Or even better, when art lies the most, isn't that when it also creates the most? When I wrote those verses, wasn't this an achievement of art? (that the verses are not perfect perhaps is not a consequence of the absence of sincerity; since how many times do we fail although we have the most sincere idea for assistance?) At the moment I made those verses didn't I have artificial sincerity? Didn't I imagine in such a way that it was as if I had really lived in the countryside?

5-7-1902

## II

I feel a special quality in me. I have the conviction that if I had wanted to I would have become a great doctor, or lawyer, or economist, or even a mechanic. However I would need two things – time to study and the will to abandon literature. Now is this a deception of the mind? Do I overestimate my ability? Or is this a natural thing that happens with every *litterateur* – I mean a special strength possessed by every *litterateur*. All these practical things seem easy to me. It is true that, despite my conviction, I recognise that without time, enough time, I would be unable to be a very successful man in practical life. But then – after I dedicate the time – I fall perhaps into the general category; by spending time, every man, even with moderate mental skills, could be successful. Or not...; and what makes me superior is the feeling that I would need far less time. This does not hinder me from realising that I would never become a successful man of practical careers because it is impossible – unless with an effort which would almost break my soul – to uproot from

me this “hankering” for literature. And now something else crosses my mind. Perhaps my very capacity – which is manifested in how easy practical careers look to me – springs from literature, from incessant thinking from that “sharpening” of the imagination. If I would make an effort to deny imagination, without any bad consequences, maybe then I would waste my abilities and a practical career would give me the same difficulties as for common people. But no, I don’t believe this. The ability exists. My weakness – or the strength if we suppose that artistic work does matter – lies in the resolve not to deny literature, or maybe more correctly, the libidinous “agitation” of imagination.

18-8-1902

### III

Do perhaps Truth and Falsehood exist? Or is there only New and Old? – and Falsehood is simply the old age of truth?

16-9-1902

### IV

Frequently I observe how little significance people attribute to words. Let me explain. A simple man (with simple I don’t mean stupid: but not distinguished) has an idea, he castigates an institution or a general perception; he knows that the great majority thinks against it; therefore he remains silent, thinking that there is no reason to speak out, since nothing is going to change by talking. That’s a great mistake. I myself act differently. I reject for example the death sentence. With any opportunity given, I declare it, not because I think that since I say so states will abolish it tomorrow but because I am convinced that by saying so I contribute to the triumph of my opinion. Indifferent if no one agrees with me. My word won’t be in vain. Perhaps someone else will repeat it and then it will reach the ears of people who will pay attention and be encouraged. It may also be that from those who disagreed one will remember it now – under more propitious circumstances in the future, and together with the assistance of other circumstances, to be convinced or to be shaken in his adverse opinion. – So and in other social issues and in others where Action is most important. I know that I am a coward and I can’t do it. Therefore I only talk. But I don’t think that my words are redundant. Someone else will act on them. But my many words – of me the coward – will facilitate action. They clear the way.

19-10-1902

### V

It crossed my mind tonight to write about my love. And yet I am not going to do it. How strong prejudice is. But I freed myself from it; but I think of the enslaved under whose

eyes this paper may fall. And I stop. What cowardice. But let me note one letter – T – as a symbol of this moment.

9-11-1902

## VI

Who knows what ideas of lust dominate the composition of most literary works! Lustful *solitaires*, ideas that distort (or transform) perception. And how often in many novels (especially English), the ones condemned by critics, – some parts furthermore where they are puzzled because it seems that the author is deliberately malicious – emanate from the compulsive work that the author dedicated, as he was composing, to an impression or in a state of lustfulness. The impression is so strong – and occasionally extremely poetic, extremely beautiful! – that it is identified with the word whose birth it followed. So the writer even reading them after months is unable to correct or change anything, since together with the reading of the words the image of the old impression is recalled and so he becomes something like “colour-blind” towards an aspect of his work.

12-11-1902

## VII

I don't know if perversion gives strength. Sometimes I think so. But it is certain that it is the source of grandeur.

13-12-1902

## VIII

Monks see things which we don't see; they see visions from the supernatural world. They sharpen their soul through solitude and meditation and temperance. We dull it through socialising, absence of meditation and pleasure. That's why they see what we can not see so well. When somebody is alone in a room he hears the clock ticking clearly. But when more people enter and start talking and moving around, he hears nothing. But that clock-ticking does not cease being audible.

## IX

It takes time to discover the defects of long poems. The first feeling inspired by long poems when they are published is admiration, and, until admiration wanes or changes, even the most observant of critics can not see their defects. This is due to the strange critical ability of man who can not judge anything but under the condition of not admiring it.

## X

A young poet visited me. He was very poor, he lived by his literary work and it seemed to me that he was saddened by the wealthy house I live in, the servant who brought us tea, and my clothes made by a good tailor. He said: "What a horrible thing it is for anyone to have to struggle hard to make his living, chasing subscribers for your journal, buyers for your book".

I didn't want to leave him in his deception and I told him certain things, like the following. "Your position is unpleasant and hard – but what a hefty price I had to pay for my little luxuries. In order to enjoy them, I deviated from my natural course and I became a public servant (how stupid) and I wasted and spent numberless precious hours every day (to which you must add the hours of exhaustion and languor that follow them). What damage, what damage what betrayal. Whereas he the poor one never loses an hour; he is always there, a faithful dutiful child of Art.

How many ideas when I am at work – a beautiful idea, a rare image, ready as complete surprising verses cross my mind and I am forced to neglect them – because I can't be slack when working. And then when I return home, after recovering a little, I struggle to recall them but they are gone for good. Quite justly. It is as if Art is telling me: "I myself am not a slave so that you can dismiss me when I arrive and call me back when you want. I am the greatest Lady of this world. And if you denied me – you traitor and petty man – for your pitifully beautiful house, for your pitifully beautiful clothes, for your pitifully good social class, well then, be satisfied with them (although you can't be) and in the rare moments when coincidentally I arrive and you happen to be ready to receive me, you should be out at the door waiting for me, as you should have been doing every day all day long".

*June 1905*

## XI

Like a good tailor who makes clothes that fit excellently one man (maybe two); and a coat that can fit two or three – so am I, my poems can fit, are made "to fit" in one case (or perhaps in two or three). This comparison is slightly humiliating (but only superficially); but I find it successful and consoling. If my poems don't have general applicability, they have partial. This is not insignificant. So they have their truth guaranteed.

*9-7-05*

## XII

What makes English literature cold for me, is – beyond some deficiencies of the English language – the – how should I say it? – conservatism, the inability – or even the unwillingness – to separate themselves from the accepted norms and the fear that they will

conflict with morality, pseudo-morality, because this is the way we must understand morality which pretends to be ignorant.

During these last 10 years how many French books – both good and bad – have been written which examine and take bravely into consideration the new stage of Eros. It is not new; only it has been neglected for centuries under the superstition that it was madness (science says that it is not) or crime (logic denies this). No English book, as far as I know. Why? because they are afraid that they will clash with prejudices. And yet, even amongst the English this Eros exists, as it exists, and existed – in all nations, amongst very few people of course.

Oct. 1905

### XIII

The miserable laws of society – results neither of hygiene nor judgement – diminished my work. They imprisoned my expression; they obstructed me from bringing light and emotion to those who are made like myself. The difficult circumstances of life forced me to struggle to become a perfect speaker of the English language. What a pity! If I dedicated – if circumstances allowed, if the French language was equally useful – the same endeavours to French, perhaps in that language – because of the easiness of pronouns that hide and reveal would have given me – I would have been able to express myself in a more unconstrained way. In the end, what can I do? I am wasted, emotionally. And I will remain an object of conjecture; and they will understand me better, from what I have denied.

15-12-05

### XIV

What a deceitful thing Art is when you want to be sincere. You sit and write – mostly by conjecture – about feelings and then long after you doubt if you are not mistaken. I wrote the “Candles”, “The Souls of Old Men” and the “Old man” about old age. As I am older or middle-aged, I discovered that my last poem didn’t contain the right assessment. I think that the “Souls of Old Men” is still accurate. But when I will be 70 years old maybe I will find them false also. I hope and believe the “Candles” to be safe.

Descriptive poetry – historical events, photographing (what an ugly word!) of nature – are maybe safe. But what a petty and short-lived thing.

1906

### XV

Sometimes I think and perceive difficult concepts and relations and consequences of things and I have the idea that no other person is able to think and feel all these like

myself; this makes me “uncomfortable”. Because immediately something else crosses my mind; how unfair, for myself to be such a genius and yet neither being heard by anyone, nor being rewarded. And then the idea that I may deceive myself and that there are many other people who conceive equally great and correct thoughts comforts me. What a thing this Self-interest or the Desire for Rewards! How comforted I feel by the idea that I am equal to many others; instead of being superior and being deprived of my reward.

3-1-07

## XVI

Without enthusiasm – and in enthusiasm I include rage – humanity can not function. When swayed by enthusiasm, however, it doesn’t function well. Enthusiasm must wear off, so it can work effectively, but even then – in complete sobriety – humanity makes works that spring from moments of enthusiasm. Whoever is greatly enthused can’t do good work; whoever is never enthused can not either.

24-1-07

## XVII

I have grown accustomed to Alexandria by now; and even if I were wealthier, I would have stayed here. And yet, it causes me great discomfort. How difficult, how burdensome our small city is – what lack of freedom.

I would have stayed here (although I am not sure again if I would have stayed at all) because it is like a motherland, being associated with the recollections of life.

But for a man like me – so different – a great city was needed.

London, for example. Since..... P.M. left I always think of that city.

28-4-07

## XVIII

Another work – any work for living, not so heavy or so long as to consume all of his time – is a great advantage for artists. It “refreshes him”, it elevates him, it almost offers him rest. This at least happens with some artists.

13-5-07

## XIX

I read about Baudelaire tonight. And the writer of the book I was reading was slightly scared [epater] by the *Flowers of Evil*. It is some time since I last read the *Fleurs du Mal*. From what I remember, they are not so fearsome, so crushing. And it seems to me that Baudelaire was enclosed within a very narrow circle of pleasure. Unexpectedly last night;

or last Wednesday; and so many other times I lived and did and phantasised and silently enacted some stranger pleasures.

22-9-07

XX

I like and I am moved by the beauty of ordinary people, of the poor young men. Servants, labourers, petty clerks in commerce, shop assistants. This is their reward for what they miss. Constant work and movement make their bodies lean and symmetrical. They are almost always slender. Their faces – either white when their work is inside the shop or always suntanned when outside – have an appealing poetic colour. They are an antithesis to the wealthy youngsters who are either sickly and by nature dirty or otherwise with lots of fat and grease from much eating and drinking and their quilts; you feel that in their swollen and haggard faces the ugliness in the rapacity and avarice of themselves and of their fathers, of their inheritances and of their usury, is revealed.

29-6-08

XXI

Upon the impression, or slightly after, you make the poem. The impression – [erotic] or sensual or intellectual – was imposing and strong and sincere; the poem (not necessarily because the impression was such; but by a fortunate coincidence) became good, strong and sincere. And then time passes. That impression –because of the intervention of other circumstances ignored until then or because of the evolution of the object or of the individual who caused it – looks rather shoddy and ludicrous. Necessarily you think so at least; and now of the poem it created. But I don't know if it is appropriate now. Why should I transpose the poem from the atmosphere of 1904 to that of 1908? (Thankfully, the poems are mostly cryptic; so they can accept some additions in them of – related – emotions or emotional states.)

11-7-08

XXII

I know that if somebody wants to be successful in life, he must inspire respect and needs seriousness. And yet it is so hard to be serious and I don't appreciate seriousness.

Let me explain myself more clearly. I really like seriousness; but only for ½ an hour or one or two or three hours of seriousness every day. Sometimes, frequently of course, seriousness almost all day.

But on the other hand, I love jokes, hilarity, irony or even witticisms, the so called “humberging”.

But is not appropriate.

It makes business difficult.

Because mostly you have to deal with hypocrites and ignoramuses. They are not always serious. Their faces have an animalistic seriousness; how can they say jokes?; they don't understand. Their very serious faces are nothing but a mirage. Every thing is problematic and hard for their illiteracy and their stupidity, and that's why, like oxen and like sheep (animals have very serious figures), seriousness encompasses their features.

The funny man is generally held in contempt; or at least he is not taken significantly into consideration, he does not inspire enough confidence.

This is the reason why when I am dealing with people I try to show a serious face. I have discovered that it makes my affairs much easier. Within me I laugh and say jokes constantly.

26-10-08

### XXIII

The time of the year I love is summer. But the real summers of Egypt or Greece – with their strong sun, the triumphant noons, with the exhausting August nights. I can say but that I work better (artistically I mean) during summer. Summer forms and sensations give me many impressions; but I haven't taken to writing them down immediately or translating them into artistic work. I say immediately because artistic impressions sometimes remain unused for a long time, they generate other thoughts, they are transformed through new influences and when they have crystallised into written words, it is not easy to remember, which was the time of the initial occasion, whence the written words truly originate.

### XXIV

My life goes through libidinous undulations, through erotic conceptions – occasionally realised.

My work tends towards thinking.

Rightly so perhaps.

And then, my work is like that vase I have talked about. It takes different interpretations.

And my sexual life has its own expression – dark only for the imbeciles. If broadly expressed, perhaps it wouldn't be a sufficient artistic field for me to inhabit. Maybe its nature does not allow it to be good enough for me.

The ancients worked like me.

I work like the ancients. They wrote history, they philosophised, they wrote dramas of mythological tragicality – love-stricken – so many of them – exactly like me.

20-6-10

## XXV

What horrible things these new philosophical ideas about cruelty and the right for superiority of the stronger and of the presumably purifying function of the struggle for the elimination of the humble and the weak etc. But since we must live in a society, since civilisation is a result of this, since through this we managed to survive and resist the hardest adventures of life that surrounded humanity in its beginnings – what these insane things mean about cruelty and power etc. If we truly practised them we would see that they would bring us directly and more quickly to our annihilation. A strong man will destroy directly or indirectly ten weak people; but an even stronger person will devour him also; here; another ten weak and so forth. Only strong people will remain. Some of them will be less strong. And they will be – after the elimination or the oblivion of the previously weak – themselves weaker; they should be eliminated also. Until only the strongest will remain or the few of equal strength. But how are they going to live like that? Not cruelty; but Meekness, Compassion, Forgiveness, Kindness (and all these, of course, prudently and without exaggeration) are the real Power and wisdom.

10-9-10

## XXVI

We work virtuously for those who come after us. To prepare a discipline de vie, a new arrangement for it; perhaps even more usefully, so that their own life may perhaps be longer.

April 1911

## XXVII

— vv— vv—v  
 — vv— vv—v  
 — v—v v—v

More or less, there was something like this. So I noted it the other day on the cigarette box, from where I copy it here.

Weakness is art's strength.

When I wrote it I thought – a prosodic rendering of a song by two youths passing by – that I have done something good. I didn't do a thing. The sound was not a very important thing, as I see now; but the voices were beautiful and enchanting. And they made me go to the window and then their voices became even more beautiful, because both youngsters – twenty two or three years old – were visions of beauty.

What bodies, hair, faces, what lips! They stopped for a little and then went off; and I, the artist, thought that I had achieved something by collecting, by preserving an echo. In reality and moderately preserving nothing. Because poetry, which I consider a very petty

thing, is in all possibility useless. The only poetry that passed before my eyes the other day and reached my ears was the beauty of the two boys. Only if something from that memory is preserved when the forms return to my memory and my recollection brings it back to a rare moment of poetic creative emotion, only then may it leave in my art something from its brief passage, as it did the other day.

17-10-11

### THOUGHTS OF AN AGED ARTIST

The artist has grown old. He is eighty. He is somewhat puzzled by the fame of his prose, his poems and by old age. His strong internal conviction and the approval of people contribute to the blunting of his judgement. But it is not altogether obtuse. He senses that under the official admiration of the many, there is a slight detachment of the few. His works are not admired so much by some of the younger. Their school is not his school and their style is not his style. They think and, above anything, they write differently. The aged artist reads and studies conscientiously their works and finds them inferior to his own and thinks of the new school as inferior, or at least not superior, to his own. He believes that, if he wanted to, he could write in this novel way. But of course not immediately. He would need 8 to 10 years in order to absorb the spirit of the new style – and now the time of his death draws closer.

There are moments when he feels contempt for novelties. What importance do they have? A small number of youngsters who somehow do not like him! But a million others admire him. He feels that he is counterfeiting himself. This is the way he himself started. He was one amongst about fifty youngsters who established a new school, wrote in a different style and changed the opinion of millions who honoured some previous and certain aged artists. They made his victory easier by dying. From them the aged writer concludes that literature is a futile endeavour with its changing vogues. Certainly, even the work of those youngsters will be temporary like his own – but this is no consolation to him.

In the flow of his thoughts and reveries he notices with bitterness that the Enthusiasm and the Poetics of every writer, when they grow old by 40 or 50 years, start looking bizarre or ridiculous. They perhaps – this is the great hope – cease being bizarre or ridiculous when they get old by 150 or 200 years – when instead of being *démodé*, they will be antiques.

He is possessed by a certain doubt about the absolute or abstract value of his many criticisms. Those writers whom he criticised and replaced when he was young, perhaps he criticised because he didn't understand them – not due to the absence of genius but

perhaps because the power of understanding is corrupted by contemporary circumstances or probably vogues. The exterior of his criticism was quite similar to the criticism of contemporary youths against him today. He hasn't changed my mind – at least about most of them. He still rejects most of those past artists today as he did 60 years ago. But this is not the undeniable proof that his rejection is correct. It only proves that, psychologically, he still is the same youngster he was back then.

*November 1900 (?)*

#### BRIEF NOTE ON TRANSLATING C.P. CAVAFY

The preceding translations are in their essence not simply attempts to turn one linguistic structure into another but at the same time essays towards completing their meaning. Most of these works were written by Cavafy with the implicit intent never to be published; moreover, the prose notes were written as a kind of personal commentary, as discussions with himself in his attempt to define his art by defining his selfhood. So, most of these reflections and poems were exercises in self-definition; and, therefore, they represent attempts on behalf of Cavafy to situate himself not simply within his social class but within the economic structures of his sexual and existential self-perception.

By writing these notes in a kind of private language, Cavafy addressed issues which could not be discussed in the public discourse of his poetry. In their cryptic language, in incomplete statements and sometimes crude and low-class vulgar diction, Cavafy objectifies his opinions about crucial aspects of his own perception of reality and constructs the semantic fields of his poetic idiom. Some of the issues emerging, which probably should be the starting points of re-orientation for the study of his work, are the relationship between art and reality, sincerity and insincerity, sexual subjectivity and social construction and finally what constitutes poetic value as opposed to what invalidates, or falsifies, poetic expression. At the most fundamental level, however, Cavafy's unpublished works frame the territory of symbolic construction for his subjectivity and address the foundational issue of how social discourses form human subjectivity in general.

At the same time, these private notes reveal an individuated conscience that pays the price of its difference; Cavafy does not simply address certain issues in order to legitimise himself as a homosexual – or, more accurately, the homosexual in him; he takes for granted that homosexuality (or whatever other term we may use for it) is the source of “grandeur”, as he stresses. His language does express this grandeur-feeling of being an outsider as a conscious choice for living. Cavafy does not suffer from the fear of belonging to a group or to the master-narrative of an ethnic collectivity. Despite the intense discussion about his “national” identity, Cavafy's identity is by all means mainly sexual and erotic. He belongs to the tradition of the 19th century German and British cult of the Hellenic gentleman who perceived himself in terms of cultural practices instead of ethnic or religious denominations.

This is also expressed through his irregular and sometimes surprising language, which denies any uniformity and coherence based on oral tonalities and almost musical patterns. In the last private note, Cavafy wrote down the prosodic translation of a song he heard being sung by two beautiful young men in the streets. This shows the gradual emergence of phonocentric practices in

his poems; as he matured as a poet, Cavafy abandoned the bookish character of his early works and discovered the free and irregular undulations of the human voice, especially in the margins of his society.

Such phonocentric quality renders the changes in the human voice by collating patterns of speech from different situations and social environments. Cavafy's linguistic registers are anarchic and idiosyncratic following his own personal transformation from the affected and high camp dandy of his youth in the upper aristocracy of multicultural urban centres of the East to the bankrupt public servant of his middle years who had to make compromises by descending to the lower class for recognition, sexual gratification and to satisfy his innocent passion for voyeurism.

Cavafy started writing in archaic formulaic and parochial Greek similar to the high-class Victorian style used in English after the 1850s by Lord Tennyson and ended with the disjointed tonalities of the late Thomas Hardy participating thus in what the latter called "the ache of modernity". After World War I, Cavafy's diction was further simplified to incorporate the oral frequencies of everyday tunes and songs. His diction sometimes becomes really coarse and vulgar, framed by sentences that recall the rotundity of classical models and the elevated lexical imagination of Byzantine hymns. Such paradoxical language stresses the privilege of orality and foregrounds the extremely pictorial character of his poems. *Ut pictura poesis* is the central principle of Cavafy's poetic language; and his modernism lies in the grafting into the Renaissance-Neoclassical tradition of imitative representation the new sensations and perceptions within and about writing that emerged during 19th century post-romanticism.

I tried to render this complex symbiosis of high and low registers, the oral and the scriptable, the verbal and the painterly into irregular and somehow ungrammatical English; I was guided by the original and not by any sense of uniformity and a normative approach to his language. Cavafy's language is so subversive that it has to annoy and puzzle instead of being graceful and proper. His anomalous language shows that something exceptional happened in the mind of the author whose work, after his death, still radiates through a heterogeneous and singular language. This singularity I tried to make visible in the preceding translations.

Finally, Cavafy's texts, as given to us in his private notebooks, are full of substitutions, elisions, modifications, erasures and expansions. They give a rare glimpse into the verbal laboratory of his craftsmanship and indicate the intense conflict between the poet and his medium; a medium inhabited by a heterosexist and inauthenticating ideology which Cavafy himself with his very existence opposed and denied. Another intention of the translation is to show the existential discomfort articulated by the poet within his own medium – a discomfort manifested in his encrypted symbolisation and ironic ambivalence towards his own material. Essentially, in these notes Cavafy tried to understand himself as a homosexual and struggled to establish the self-validating articulation of his own life. This was clearly the language of a self-constituted individual and not of a culture or class; and, furthermore, of an individual who transformed the dysphoria of his position into the positive re-invention of his self. And by achieving this, Cavafy opened the way to nearly post-modern perceptions and representations of subjectivity which explains his relevance and intellectual potency to this day.

(Vrasidas Karalis)