

MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND)

Volume 10, 2002

A Journal for Greek Letters

*Pages on Dionysios Solomos*

Published by Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd  
PO Box 127 Blackheath NSW 2785  
Tel (02) 4787 5848 Fax (02) 4787 5672

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ISSN 1039-2831

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Typeset and design by Andras Berkes

Printed by Southwood Press, Australia

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(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)**

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*The editors would like to express their gratitude to Andras Berkes  
for his heroic efforts to make this journal readable.  
This issue is dedicated to Véronica and Andras.*



**PROF. P. D. MASTRODIMITRIS**

University of Athens

**C.P. CAVAFY AND THE BELOVED CITY**

The presence of the city in Cavafy's poetry was noticed quite early and, to a certain extent, has been analysed from many different perspectives. Michalis Peridis' observations in his book *Ὁ Βίος καὶ τὸ Ἔργο τοῦ Κωνστ. Καβάφη*<sup>1</sup> are still of special importance and there we can, for the first time, read of the affinity between Cavafy and his literary ancestor, the Alexandrian poet Callimachus. Of special interest are Edmund Keeley's book *Cavafy's Alexandria* with its characteristic subtitle "Study of a myth in progress"<sup>2</sup> and Manolis Gialourakis' *Στὴν Ἀλεξάνδρεια τοῦ Καβάφη*<sup>3</sup> where we can see a detailed historical background of modern Alexandria. Stratis Tsirkas' book *Ὁ Καβάφης καὶ ἡ Ἐποχὴ του*<sup>4</sup> follows the same direction and analyses Cavafy's poetry with relevance to its sociological presuppositions, in a fairly exhaustive way.

From an aesthetic point of view, Giorgos Seferis' observations, mainly in his essay "Something more about the Alexandrian"<sup>5</sup>, locate with sensitivity central problems of his poetical consciousness within the urban environment, where he was shaped. Many of Seferis' observations show an exceptional accuracy in defining Alexandria's aesthetic, psychological and historical function, and they can be applied more generally to an understanding of the whole concept of city life as poetical material in Cavafy's poetry.

In this short essay we will try to isolate the different functions of the city as a symbol within Cavafy's poetry, avoiding certain associations and interpretations which might be considered too bold and sometimes unjustifiable. No doubt, we could propose many interpretations of Cavafy's poetry. But at the same time, it is also important to remain within the parameters of the poetry itself, without proceeding to irrelevant conclusions which do not emerge from his own verses. The city as a symbol and as a reality may find many interpretations, according to our point of view. Here, we will attempt a first approach to the problem, based mainly on his own poems and on the information offered by Cavafy himself, selecting at the same time whatever is more relevant to our study.

If we study Cavafy's poetry in a systematic way, and here we shall limit ourselves to the corpus of his 154 mature and "accepted" poems, we might say that the city appears in a twofold manner. Firstly, as a symbol in philosophical poems (according to the poet's own

classification) and secondly, as a scenic background in his sensual and historical poems. Actually, in the first case, Cavafy never uses the city in an allegorical way. Even if his poem happens to be purely symbolic, the specific use of the city retains the solidity of a concrete entity. As we shall see, Cavafy saw the coexistence of human beings in the cities in the light of a new kind of behaviour. To him, the concentration of people into the cities led of itself to a new way of living with others.

Cavafy looks into this new way of coexistence in his great and multidimensional poems such as “The City” (1910), “The God forsakes Anthony” (1911), or even the “Walls” (1896) and “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904). Here, although the city appears to be the scenic background, it still preserves a strong symbolic character outside time and place. We can see the same thing in poems like “Satrapy” (1910), “The Trojans” (1905), “The Windows” (1903), “Monotony” (1908), or “An old Man” (1897), even maybe in “Ithaca” (1911). In these poems, Cavafy has stripped all his cities of every topical and chronological attribute. For him they are mainly ways of living and thinking. We can understand this quite clearly in his poem “Ithaca”:

*visit hosts of Egyptian cities  
to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.<sup>6</sup>*

Cavafy, of course, didn’t have in mind any particular Egyptian city, at least before Alexandria’s predominance over his other symbols. Egyptian cities, like the “Phoenician markets”<sup>7</sup>, are stages in an evolution and in an imaginary journey through human life.

We can claim the same for poems like “Satrapy”. While at the outset we have the impression that this is a description of Athenian democracy, the juxtaposition itself of the two political systems, of a democratic city and of a tyrannical satrapy, removes any historical content and transforms it into a timeless symbol. This type of symbol will be dominant in two other important poems: “The God forsakes Anthony” and “The City”. Particularly in the first, the impression is that it refers to Alexandria and Mark Anthony, as Cavafy himself assures us. But the whole atmosphere of the poem, the gradual intensification of feelings and their absolute climax at the last verse, changes the historical frame into a universal scenery, into an ideal place, which exists within every human being and refers to every form of behaviour.

In this poem, we proceed gradually to the complete abstraction of the distinctive historical content of the word and to its reduction into a timeless unit. On the other hand, the didacticism of the poem makes this transition even more intense. The use of the second person singular, as when we admonish and urge somebody, adds something more impersonal to this context:

*As if long prepared for this, as if courageous,  
as it becomes you who are worthy of such a city;  
approach the window with firm step,  
and listen with emotion, but not*



*with the entreaties and complaints of the coward,  
as a last enjoyment listen to the sounds,  
the exquisite instruments of the mystical troupe,  
and bid her farewell, the Alexandria you are losing.*<sup>8</sup>

The transition from the concrete to the abstract is completed in the most symbolic and, at the same time, most allegorical of Cavafy's poems, which bears the characteristic title "The City". This poem has already provoked some of the most controversial interpretations. As all of his poems, it may function on different levels.

At a primary level, its main structure is based upon the dialogue between the poet and an undefined debater who seems to be a universal character without any personal features. But all the differentiating features, the frame of action, the place and the forms of behaviour, the forms of thinking and the types of argumentation are given by the invisible and omnipotent environment of the city. This universal character lives there, reacts there and is defeated in exactly the same place.

Most of Cavafy's poems have as background this special urban environment which we find in the poem "The City":

*You will find no new lands, you will find no other seas.  
The city will follow you. You will roam the same  
streets. And you will age in the same neighborhoods;  
and you will grow gray in these same houses.  
Always you will arrive in this city. Do not hope for any other—  
There is no ship for you, there is no road.  
As you have destroyed your life here  
in this little corner, you have ruined it in the entire world.*<sup>9</sup>

From a philosophical point of view, Cavafy considers the city as a place of confinement and of imprisonment for the human body and consciousness. This confinement goes together with the feeling of a total rejection and of a total alienation of human sensibility from the very place where it lives and acts. And finally, this isolation is completed with a strong feeling of deadlock which dominates the reality of the city.

We might suppose that this feeling refers to Cavafy's personal impasse, as we can see it in the poems "Walls" (1896) and "The Windows" (1903). The difference between the dates of writing of these two poems indicates a completely different attitude towards his existential impasse. In "The Walls" we see a desperate surrender and passiveness in which the walls are built by some anonymous and impersonal strangers far beyond the poet's powers:

But I never heard the noise or the sound of the builders.  
Imperceptibly they shut me out of the world.<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, seven years later, in the poem “The Windows” the poet himself resigns from every effort, refuses any way out, because of fear and indecision:

*But the windows are not found, or I cannot  
find them. And perhaps it is better I do not find them.  
Perhaps the light will be a new tyranny.  
Who knows what new things it will show?*<sup>11</sup>

This poem shows in a unique manner the way that Cavafy perceived the urban environment. Are the “windows” a way out to the city or maybe an escape from it? This is the central question. To this question Cavafy gives an answer seven years later with the poem “The City”. In fact, it is an escape from the city, although it is condemned from the beginning, since “*this little corner*” includes the whole earth. Everywhere, there is only deadlock and depression:

*Every effort of mine is a condemnation of fate.*<sup>12</sup>

As a symbol, the city always has a negative meaning in Cavafy’s poetry. It is the place where the individual suffers and suffocates but can never escape. Human beings are trapped within the city, become parts of its structure and carry everywhere its tragedy. Cavafy transposes the center of balance from the individual psyche to the urban way of living, which imposes alienation from our own selves. When Cavafy adopts a symbol, he wants most of all to present a new aspect of the actual reality. Therefore, the city, as a symbol and as a symbolism, depicts the self-alienation of human beings, the break of contact between the environment and their own self. On the other hand, it is of special importance that Cavafy wrote most of his symbolist poems before 1911, with the exception of “As much as you can” (1913), and “Theodotus” and “But wise men perceive approaching things”, which were written retrospectively in 1915.

After that and through a transitional period, from 1911 to 1915, Cavafy abandons symbolist and philosophical poems of this sort and focuses on his sensual and historical poems, where the city appears to be the scenic background. From this perspective Cavafy goes from the city to the cities and he looks at them as concrete presences within time and place, with their own peculiarity, their own characteristics and their special local colour. Now, the oriental and the Egyptian cities play a major role; mainly Antioch, Sidon, Jerusalem, Constantinople, but also the Greek cities of Athens and Sparta in three of his poems, Rome herself sometimes, and the crown of all, Alexandria. In most of his poems from 1915 to his death in 1933, Cavafy sees the oriental cities under a different light. He does not transform them into abstract ideas but he tries hard to recreate, as much as possible, their peculiar atmosphere. In his poem “Alexandrian Kings” (1912), there is an exhaustive, almost naturalistic, portrayal of Caesarion’s vestment which contributes greatly to the representation of the whole atmosphere of the city:

*The Alexandrians surely perceived  
that all these were theatrical words.  
But the day was warm and poetic,  
the sky a lucid, azure blue,  
the Alexandrian Stadium  
a triumphant achievement of art,  
the superb splendor of the courtiers,  
Caesarion all grace and beauty  
(Cleopatra's son, blood of the Lagidae)  
and so the Alexandrians rushed to the ceremony,  
and they grew enthusiastic, and they cheered  
in Greek and in Egyptian and some in Hebrew,  
enchanted by the gorgeous spectacle—  
Knowing full well the worth of all these,  
what hollow words these kingships were.<sup>13</sup>*

Within this scenic background, in which rhetorical figures and apostrophes recreate in a realist manner historical actuality and human psychology, Cavafy chooses a specific episode to focus upon. Around this episode he weaves a whole world of details, through which we can conclude the characteristic ways of living in that particular age. Nevertheless, none of these poems holds any kind of universality. Cavafy locates his object and then presents it faithfully in its own place, giving sometimes more importance to the place itself.

We see this lucidly in his sensual poems, like “One Night” (1915) or “To Remain” (1919). Particularly in the first, and of course we can observe the same thing in all of his other poems, Cavafy tries with a almost naturalistic precision, which reminds us of Charles Baudelaire’s Paris, to reconstitute a full moment of the city life. However, the most important of all is to specify as much as possible the exact position of objects within the general city environment. As has already been observed, he focuses himself on seemingly trivial details, on sounds, on light reflections and through these proceeds to the last verses of his poem, where his own personal experience holds the ultimate position:

*The room was poor and squalid,  
hidden above the dubious tavern.  
From the window you could see the alley  
filthy and narrow. From below  
came the voices of some workmen  
playing cards and carousing.<sup>14</sup>*

Within the limits of an impersonal and undifferentiated urban life Cavafy places his own personal experiences with their own sentimental dimensions and their particular nuances. We might say that his purpose is to give emphasis, through the impersonal description of the

city life, to the distinctive realisations of a private life and the way that this life rendered later its relationship with the urban environment in artistic form.

In the historical and sensual poems of his last period (1919-1933), Cavafy broadens and deepens the effectiveness of the techniques presenting the city environment as aesthetic material. And through history he introduces rhetorical expressions and types of social intercourse which show city life to its full extent. But, Cavafy keeps stressing the importance of the personal experience within the impersonal environment. Characteristically enough, Cavafy adopts certain quite exceptional historical personages in the general feeling of their era, and above all the emperor Julian the Apostate.

In Cavafy's poems, Julian is presented either as a caricature accompanied by ironical comments, – "Julian seeing indifference" (1923) –, or as an enemy of Antiochian life style, – "Julian and the people of Antioch" (1926) –, or as the stupid sophist of the poem "Understood not" (1928), or as the politician of the "Julian in Nicomedeia" (1924), or even finally as the sacrilegious antichristian of Cavafy's last poem "In the suburbs of Antioch" (1933). In most cases, Julian challenges the inhabitants of a city and their particular lifestyle. Against them, Julian opposes his personal attitude and his own individual way of living. Cavafy juxtaposes here the city environment, as the carrier of a tradition and of a lifestyle, with a personal response which came to interrupt them both. We can see this very clearly in his poem "Julian and the people of Antioch":

*Was it ever possible that they should renounce  
their lovely way of life; the variety of their  
daily amusement; their magnificent theater  
where a union of the Arts was taking place  
with the amorous tendencies of the flesh!  
To renounce all these, to turn to what after all?  
To his airy chatter about false gods;  
to his tiresome self-centred chatter;  
to his childish fear of the theatre;  
his graceless prudery, his ridiculous beard?*<sup>15</sup>

From these sarcastic and amusing comments, it is worth looking closer at the verse against "his childish fear of the theatre". For the ancients, the theatre was a place of social interaction. It emerged in the cities and took on its artistic form and content within the city life. Julian, by renouncing theatre, renounced a particular way of living, which was accepted by Cavafy. The people of Antioch in Cavafy's poem were in this way protecting their own codes of social intercourse against Julian.

In the same place, Antioch, we find the opportunistic figure of the poem "They should have cared" (1930):

*I am almost reduced to a vagrant and pauper.  
This fatal city of Antioch  
Has consumed all my money;  
this fatal city with its expensive life.*<sup>16</sup>

Here, we can see a metamorphosis of the Cavafian city; instead of being a place where people act together, it is transformed into a place of moral devaluation, because of the relationships developed there. To Cavafy, the concept of the “fatal city” bears a slightly ironical aura. However, through the same irony we discern an almost critical attitude: it is because of these “fatal cities” that human beings lose their character and their personality.

In almost all of his historical poems, referring to Antioch and Alexandria, Cavafy bestows on the urban environment a *dissolving* nature – a nature which is able to decompose the integral personality of the individual. Here the city, as a historical and as a scenic background, functions in a de-humanising way. What preserves the individual’s distinctive nature is still his incorporation in the cultural tradition of his native town. We can see it in poems like “In the suburbs of Antioch”, where Cavafy uses the first person plural instead of the first or the third singular:

*We were bewildered at Antioch on learning  
of the latest doings of Julian.*<sup>17</sup>

The use of the first person plural gave to Cavafy a sense of unity and at the same time of collective identity which is usually missing in his isolated characters. Maybe, on the other hand, one of the most important problems of Cavafian studies must be the analysis of this interchange of persons, even from a grammatical point of view, and its placement within the evolution of his themes. This particular way with which Cavafy puts his heroes into the urban environment and addresses his readers helps us to understand his own poetical evolution and to see the form through which he manifests his human identity.

His last poem shows clearly this development and completes it. It shows the way that Cavafy passed from the city as a symbol and as a historical tradition to the city as the very identity of the individual. Cavafy represented and experienced the identification of the city and the individual in Alexandria. In one of his poetical notes he wrote: “I got used to Alexandria and even if I was rich I would stay here. But, nevertheless; how much it depresses me. What a distress, what a burden this little town is – what a lack of freedom.”<sup>18</sup>

Cavafy presents a curious ambivalence of feeling towards his own city. His attitude is twofold. Seferis in his essay (mentioned at the beginning of this paper) stresses: “...in Alexandria I found a capital still speaking Greek, but a capital close to the borderline...”<sup>19</sup>. Maybe this sense of being close to the borderline is a basic element of Cavafy’s attitude towards cities on the one hand and towards the historical tradition of Alexandria on the

other. This is another subject for discussion. However, for Cavafy himself Alexandria was something more than the depressing city of the present or the great capital of a multifaceted tradition. It was simply the place where he lived, the surroundings which “have become all feeling for me”<sup>20</sup>, his own personal identity. Alexandria represents a way out from the private isolation to the greater cycle of the collective consciousness:

*And melancholically, I came out to the balcony—  
came out to change my thoughts at least by looking at  
a little of the city that loved,  
a little movement on the street, and in the shops.*<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Μιχάλης Περίδης, *Ὁ Βίος καί τό Ἔργο τοῦ Κωνστ. Καβάφη*, Ἰκαρος (1948), p. 1414 and p. 258 where the bibliography can be found.
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- 4 Στρατῆς Τσίρκας, *Ὁ Καβάφης καί ἡ Ἐποχή του*, Κέδρος, Ἀθήνα, 1958.
- 5 Γιώργος Σεφέρης, *Δοκιμές*, Α, Ἰκαρος, 1981, pp. 364-450.
- 6 *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven, with an introduction by W.H. Auden, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. New York, 1961, p. 36.
- 7 *ibid*, p. 36.
- 8 *ibid*, p. 27.
- 9 *ibid*, p. 27.
- 10 *ibid*, p. 17.
- 11 *ibid*, p. 13.
- 12 *ibid*, p. 27.
- 13 *ibid*, pp. 40-41.
- 14 *ibid*, p. 60.
- 15 *ibid*, p. 137.
- 16 *ibid*, p. 163.
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- 18 Κ. Π. Καβάφη, *Ἀνέκδοτα Σημειώματα Ποιητικῆς καί Ἠθικῆς, (1902-1911)*. Παρουσιασμένα ἀπό τόν Γ. Π. Σαββίδη. Ἐρμῆς, Ἀθήνα, 1983, p. 40. (= Γ. Π. Σαββίδης, *Μικρά Καβαφικά*, Β, Ἐρμῆς, Ἀθήνα, 1987, p. 115.)
- 19 Γιώργος Σεφέρης, *Δοκιμές*, p. 367.
- 20 Cavafy, *Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- 21 Cavafy, *Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.