POETRY

C. P. CAVAFY

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

Poetry as we know it today—that is, its main genres of short lyric, elegy, pastoral, narrative, or didactic poem—was born around the third century B.C. in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. So was, some 2,000 years later, one of the greatest poets of our century, Constantinos Phanariotis Cavafis, or C. P. Cavafy, as his name is rendered in English.

Some 2,000 years ago Alexandria—founded by Alexander the Great, conqueror of all that became known as the Hellenistic world—was that world's pre-eminent city. Apart from being the seat of power of the ruling Ptolemies, it was the locus of the spiritual, cultural, and scientific life of the entire Hellenistic world, stretching from Egypt to India and from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. What held together a world so large for so long was not troops but *Magna Lingua Grecae*—the great Greek language. Strictly speaking, the Hellenistic empire was a cultural rather than a political reality.

Compared to the epic and drama of the so-called archaic and classical periods of Greek history, the literature of the Hellenistic period dealt in relatively small forms. However, as is the case with every evolution, the smallness was the smallness of compression and condensation. The net result of such a process is an extraordinary intensity and durability.

Something similar, although in a far more diverse manner, occurred in the spiritual make-up of the Hellenistic world, as its polytheist metaphysics was pared down to philosophy. Always a marketplace of ideas, Alexandria by the first century B.C. was a virtual county fair of creeds, cults, doctrines, and faiths. Translated into social terms, polytheism meant tolerance.

That could not last. Politically, the curtain fell upon Alexandria when the Hellenistic empires were supplanted by the Romans. Spiritually and culturally, the end came when Rome herself went monotheistic, i.e. Christian. Alexandria died and lay buried. Until 1864, that is, when the wife of a well-to-do merchant in that city gave birth to her ninth child. He was christened Constantinos.

The name suits the poet remarkably well. There is perhaps no better word to describe the mode of his existence and his thematic concerns than constancy. He lived most of his life in the same city, held the same job (at the Egyptian Ministry of Irrigation), and, in his poems, addressed the same subjects. One might be tempted to suggest that he had only two subjects: the past of Alexandria, and his own. On closer inspection, they may amount to the same thing.

Cavafy called himself a "historical poet." This means, for one, that he identified completely with the place of his birth, with its place in history, and with its insignificant, indeed shabby, present. Alexandria and its Hellenistic realm (the eastern Mediterranean in particular) were for him what Yoknapatawpha

County was for Faulkner, Dublin for Joyce, New England for Robert Frost. He knew everyone and everything that had transpired there between 300 B.C. and, say, A.D. 600 thoroughly. Characters and events of that period—and not the most illustrious among them—were what the bulk of his poems addressed. However, Cavafy is not a poet of the heroic past, of the Greek cultural patrimony. As one of his critics aptly remarked, it is impossible to put his poems into high-school textbooks. The trouble is not so much his subject matter (although I imagine it is that, too) but his tonality.

For Cavafy was a historical poet not in the thematic or factual sense only. The term "historical" in his case has to do, above all, with his diction. This calls for some explanation.

Virtually every poet in this century appears to be extremely concerned with the possible existence of some sardonic reader who just might smirk and scowl at the poet's raptures and reveries. Every poet therefore tries to forge a diction that will shield him from the charge of emotionalism.

There are several strategies available here. The common one is the use of irony. By poking fun at oneself, a poet, as it were, pulls the rug from under his critic's feet. That, however, is dangerous, because irony is a reductive metaphor: It wins you laughs but lowers your plane of regard. The next time you want to produce an epiphany (not to mention obtain a revelation), you have to start your climbing upward from the rung the laughs you won have lowered you to. Plenty of good poets have driven themselves into the ground with their sense of humor.

The other option is objectivity. It is awfully hard to forge, still harder to sustain. Inclined that way, a poet often borrows terminology and pitch from either science or medicine. In the end, though, dispassionate or clinical diction bores the readers just the same, for they justly take it either for posturing or another kind of rhetoric.

Cavafy, I believe, made a discovery. His reading of chronicles, annals, ancient authors, and inscriptions gave him not only an idea of tonality but the realization that whether a man reviews the past of his nation or of himself, he uses the same mental faculty, he applies the same prism. Hence, his poems dealing with the history of Alexandria and the Hellenistic realm have the poignancy and intensity of intimate self-scrutiny. Likewise his intimate, personal works addressing the vicissitudes of homoerotic love display, for all their autobiographical nature, the detachment of a historian.

His was a highly uneventful life. He never, for instance, published a book of his poetry in his lifetime. He circulated his poems in the form of pamphlets or broadsides among those few whose judgment he was prepared to reckon with. It appears as though he had no ambition or was very finicky. But, then, he may have been right. Few things are less palatable than praise from an inferior intelligence.

Perhaps the same goes for criticism. Shortly after his death in 1933, a prominent critic reviewing the first edition of Cavafy's work likened his poems to pedestals with the statues gone. That had to do, I imagine, with the fact that Cavafy's poems are indeed stripped of any poetic paraphernalia;

there is nothing ornate about them, nothing visually stimulating or metaphorically striking. He uses the simplest epithets, such as "beautiful," "young," "good"; the same goes for verbs and nouns.

Yet an expression like "beautiful face" invites the reader to use his own imagination, to fashion that face according to his own notion of beauty. In other words, the poems result in their reader's complicity. A statue on the pedestal confines your imagination to its features; its absence awakens your imagination and makes you build it. This way, Cavafy's Alexandria becomes your own.

One of Cavafy's favorite themes was the tug-of-war that took place between the culture of Greek polytheism and Christian monotheism during the first six centuries of our era. To Cavafy, that period's main hero is the Emperor Julian, known as the Apostate, who, having ascended to the throne as a Christian, tried to return his empire to polytheism. There are about half a dozen poems about him in Cavafy's corpus, as well as many others treating in an absolutely remarkable fashion the fateful choice that humanity believed it had to make at that time.

What our poet from Alexandria shows us some 2, 000 years later is that the choice was unnecessary. That man's metaphysical potential was (and is) substantial enough to accommodate or fuse two systems of belief. That by making that choice, humanity hopelessly robbed itself of enormous riches to which it was entitled.

In a world splitting more and more at its ecclesiastical and ethnic seams, there is hardly a better cure for the vulgarity of the human heart than the voice of this poet from Alexandria promising a better civilization, still available.

Ionic

That we've broken their statues,
that we've driven them out of their temples,
doesn't mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they're still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure,
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills.

Waiting for the Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Thermopylae

Honor to those who in the life they lead
define and guard a Thermopylae.
Never betraying what is right,
consistent and just in all they do
but showing pity also, and compassion;
generous when they are rich, and when they are poor,
still generous in small ways,
still helping as much as they can;
always speaking the truth,
yet without hating those who lie.

And even more honor is due to them
when they foresee (as many do foresee)
that in the end Ephialtis will make his appearance,
that the Medes will break through after all.

Kaisarion

Partly to throw light on a certain period,
partly to kill an hour or two,
last night I picked up and read
a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies.
The lavish praise and flattery are much the same
for each of them. All are brilliant,
glorious, mighty, benevolent;
everything they undertake is full of wisdom.
As for the women of their line, the Berenices and Cleopatras,
they too, all of them, are marvelous.

When I'd verified the facts I wanted
I would have put the book away had not a brief
insignificant mention of King Kaisarion
suddenly caught my eye. . .

And there you were with your indefinable charm.
Because we know
so little about you from history,
I could fashion you more freely in my mind.
I made you good-looking and sensitive.
My art gives your face
a dreamy, an appealing beauty.
And so completely did I imagine you
that late last night,
as my lamp went out—I let it go out on purpose—
it seemed you came into my room,
it seemed you stood there in front of me, looking just as you would have
in conquered Alexandria,
pale and weary, ideal in your grief,
still hoping they might take pity on you,
those scum who whispered: "Too many Caesars."

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

A Byzantine Nobleman in Exile Composing Verses

The frivolous can call me frivolous.
I've always been most punctilious about
important things. And I insist
that no one knows better than I do
the Holy Fathers, or the Scriptures, or the Canons of the Councils.

Whenever he was in doubt,
whenever he had any ecclesiastical problem,
Botaniatis consulted me, me first of all.
But exiled here (may she be cursed, that viper
Irini Doukaina), and incredibly bored,
it is not altogether unfitting to amuse myself
writing six- and eight-line verses,
to amuse myself poeticizing myths
of Hermes and Apollo and Dionysos,
or the heroes of Thessaly and the Peloponnese;
and to compose the most strict iambics,
such as—if you'll allow me to say so—
the intellectuals of Constantinople don't know how to compose.
It may be just this strictness that provokes their disapproval.

The Bandaged Shoulder

He said he'd hurt himself against a wall or had fallen down.
But there was probably some other reason
for the wounded, the bandaged shoulder.

Because of a rather abrupt gesture,
as he reached for a shelf to bring down
some photographs he wanted to look at,
the bandage came undone and a little blood ran.

I did it up again, taking my time
over the binding; he wasn't in pain
and I liked looking at the blood.
It was a thing of my love, that blood.

When he left, I found, in front of his chair,
a bloody rag, part of the dressing,
a rag to be thrown straight into the garbage;
and I put it to my lips
and kept it there a long while—
the blood of love against my lips.

One of Their Gods

When one of them moved through the marketplace of Selefkia
just as it was getting dark—
moved like a young man, tall, extremely handsome,
with the joy of being immortal in his eyes,
with his black and perfumed hair—
the people going by would gaze at him,
and one would ask the other if he knew him,

if he was a Greek from Syria, or a stranger.
But some who looked more carefully
would understand and step aside;
and as he disappeared under the arcades,
among the shadows and the evening lights,
going toward the quarter that lives
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,
with every kind of intoxication and desire,
they would wonder which of Them it could be,
and for what suspicious pleasure
he had come down into the streets of the Selefkia
from the August Celestial Mansions.

The God Abandons Antony

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who were given this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion, but not
with the whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen—your final delectation—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.
