

Making History Personal: Constantine Cavafy and the Rise of Rome

by Bruce W. Frier¹

Toward the end of his life, Constantine Cavafy observed: "I have two capacities: to write Poetry or to write History. I haven't written History, and it's too late now. Now, you'll say, how do I know that I could write History? I feel it."²

How should one understand this remark? Did Cavafy ever actually regret a path not taken?

Such a thought is, quite frankly, hard to credit. Still, a very large proportion of Cavafy's surviving poems are set against an historical backdrop, above all the history of the ancient Greek diaspora: the numerous historic city-states of Greece, Magna Graecia, Asia Minor; the sophisticated metropoleis of Alexandria and Antioch, and the Levant; and the Hellenized kingdoms and provinces of a later age. Almost a sixth of his poems center on one particular epoch of their history: the confrontation between the independent Hellenistic kingdoms and the rising might of the Roman Republic, a confrontation that began in earnest in 200 BCE with the outbreak of the Second Macedonian War and ended in 30 BCE with the annexation of Ptolemaic Egypt.³ The 45 or so poems in question were written across the entire span of Cavafy's adulthood, from 1893 to 1932. This is a subject to which he often returned, one he constantly reworked and re-imagined, exploring diverse angles and unexpected points of approach. Substantial reading was involved: chiefly Polybius, Plutarch, and Cassius Dio among ancient authors, but also works of secondary

¹ I am happy to acknowledge my deep obligation to many of my colleagues, first and foremost to the faculty of the Michigan Modern Greek program Vassilios Lambropoulos (who originally suggested this project) and Artemis Leontis; then also to my colleagues Traianos Gagos, Elaine Gazda, David Potter, and Ruth Scodel, and to Beau Case, our departmental Field Librarian, for his help in tracking down books. In addition, I am particularly grateful to Glen Bowersock for some really helpful advice both as to content and about pertinent scholarship.

² Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 123 (citing Timos Malanos); compare Beaton, "History Man" (1983). For an overview of Cavafy's attitude toward history, see Dallas, *Καβάφης και Ιστορία* (1974), esp. 183-206 on "The Cartography of Historical Experience," Cavafy's shifting historical interests over the decades.

³ The most accessible secondary source for this historical period is Astin et al., *CAH*² 8 (1990), esp. Habicht, "Seleucids"; and Crook et al., *CAH*² 9 (1994). Secondary sources for Antony and Cleopatra are mentioned below.

scholarship. In "Caesarion" (1918),⁴ for instance, he casually mentions "a collection / of Ptolemaic inscriptions" that he was reading one night "[i]n part to ascertain a certain date / and in part to while away the time."⁵

True, Cavafy was no historian in the strict sense. He had little or no interest in history's elaborate, overdetermined tapestry of causes, nor even for probing much behind the story told in his sources. He was not a crafter of master narratives.⁶ But neither was he a mere dabbler. There is good evidence, for instance, that he deliberately sought historical accuracy, or at least verisimilitude, even in small details: in January, 189, at the Macedonian capital Pella, a vase of roses on Philip V's dice table ("The Battle of Magnesia," 1913); or the pink silk garment worn by a Ptolemaic king in 34 BCE ("Alexandrian Kings," 1912).⁷ Furthermore, when Cavafy did invent—and many of his characters and anecdotes are, of course, free found in their entirety or in large part—he did so in a manner that renders them broadly plausible, and usually so even to "experts."

To judge from his poems, Cavafy cared deeply, albeit in his own fashion, about history. The question is, why?⁸ Surely at least a portion of the answer, and doubtless the largest portion, was provided by Edmund Keeley, the great Cavafy scholar, who observed that Cavafy used history in order to create his own very distinctive poetic voice:

⁴ All translations in this article come from Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) and *Unfinished Poems* (2009). The dates of composition and publication are also taken from these two books, and ultimately from the Cavafy publications by George Savidis and Renata Lavignini. Following the normal conventions for Cavafy, I have accepted the division of his work into four broad groups: published (154 poems), unpublished (74), repudiated (published but later withdrawn) (27), and unfinished (30). However, this division is only approximate, given Cavafy's eccentric notions about publication. On Mendelsohn's translation, see Kalogeris, "Sensuous Archaism" (2009).

⁵ On the book, see below. Cavafy's familiarity with ancient numismatics is documented in Geroulanos et al., *Münzen und Poesie* (2006), esp. 30-39; but, as it emerges, some of the coins that he refers to are his own poetic inventions, *ibid.* 25. See also Franke, "Katalog" (2007). On Cavafy's use of coins for metapoetic purposes, see Roiolos, *Economics* (2009) 172-195.

⁶ Thus, he tends rather unreflectively to accept the view (which goes back to Polybius) that after 200 BCE Roman imperialism was the prime motivating force in the conquest of the Mediterranean—a view still dominant among scholars, see, e.g., Habicht in Astin et al., *CAH*² 8 (1990) 324-387, esp. 382-387. Revisionist views have deemphasized Roman aggressiveness; see, e.g., Gruen, *Hellenistic World* (1984); Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy* (2006).

⁷ Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 123-124, with other examples; Liddell also notes that Cavafy "was not open to correction as a true scholar must be, but clung obstinately to an idea ..." Still, his love of historical detail emerges clearly enough in his (largely critical) notes on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*: Haas, "Reading Notes" (1982).

⁸ One answer to this question was given by Cavafy himself: the Hellenistic period appealed to him because it "is more immoral, more free, and it allows me to move my *personae* as I wish." Malanos, *Ποιητής* (1957) 77, 148, quoted by Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 10. But as Anton goes on to observe, this explanation is at best partial.

The typical citizen of Cavafy's mythical city—his generic hero, if you will—is ... something more than the proud, hedonistic, artistic, Philhellenic, occasionally learned, occasionally intolerant and cynical protagonist that we s[ee] in the epitaphs and related poems; though he continues to manifest many of these attributes, he also reveals political shrewdness, a capacity to see things for what they are, an aptitude for play-acting, a love of spectacle, some cunning in the face of those who control his destiny, some insight into the arrogant ways of men and gods, and just possibly some understanding of Cavafian hubris and the various avenues to disaster, earned and unearned.⁹

In Cavafy's historical poems, this intensely urbanized protagonist—a man who, in truth, resembles nothing so much as Richard Lanham's *homo rhetoricus*¹⁰—is forced to confront and cope with events that rattle the underpinnings of his political and intellectual world; and he does so, more or less, with aplomb.

1. The Hellenistic Kingdoms and the Rise of Rome

Cavafy's earliest surviving poems dealing with the clash between Rome and the Hellenistic world date from 1893 to 1898. They share a common theme: the relationship (usually, the inferior relationship) of Roman culture to the long Greek literary tradition.¹¹ In "A Displeased Theatregoer" and "The Lagid's Hospitality" (both 1893), sophisticated third- or second-century Greeks comment dyspeptically on the derivative nature of Terence's comedy¹² or the dearth of philosophical patronage at Rome. In "Alexandrian Merchant" (also 1893), a homesick Greek

⁹ Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 100.

¹⁰ Lanham, *Motives* (1976) 1-35 ("The Rhetorical Ideal of Life"). A fine illustration is Cavafy's fin-de-siècle acceptance of anti-natural decadence in "Artificial Flowers" (1903, unpublished) "Give me artificial blooms"; compare "In Stock" (1912), of jewelry: "Roses from rubies, pearls into lilies, / amethyst violets." See Jusdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 33-37 (also noting the early poem "Morning Sea"); Jeffreys, "English Aesceticism" (2006); Vassiliadi, *Décadence* (2008). See "Imenus" (1915/1919): "the pleasure that's attained unwholesomely and in corruption ... produces / a sensual intensity, which good health does not know ..."

¹¹ This position is part of a larger literary program, Cavafy's "reintroduction of epigrammatic and dramatic modes that had remained largely dormant since Hellenistic times": Keeley and Sherrard, *Cavafy* (1992) 280. See esp. *Classical and Modern Literature* 23.2 (Ruth Scodel, ed.; 2003), on "Cavafy and Classical Poetry"; the papers in this volume establish Cavafy's profound debt to Hellenistic literature. Other poems, only their titles preserved but surely belonging to this group, are "Hellenizing Patrician" (1893) and "Cato Angered" (1893); see Haas, "Reading Notes" (1982) 93 with note 175.

¹² Terence's comedies date to the 160s, during the heyday of Roman expansion. Cavafy slyly refers to Julius Caesar's famous description of Terence as *dimidiatus Menander* ("half-pint Menander").

seller of "rancid barley" at Rome describes the city as "the kingdom of sheer / profit"; he "thirsts" for the broad boulevards of Alexandria and the taste of Samian wine. But the more ominous side of this cultural relationship emerges in "The Tarentines Have Their Fun" (1898), set in the Greek colony of Tarentum in 282 BCE. As the story goes, a Roman ambassador, who had come to this southern Italian Greek city seeking reparations, was mocked for his boorish ways by a rowdy popular assembly, and a Tarentine speaker urinated on his toga. The Roman drew up his toga and replied: "You will wash out this robe with much blood."¹³ The ending of Cavafy's poem changes the metaphor, but is almost as portentous: "And each barbarian toga as it leaves / seems to be a storm-cloud, threatening."¹⁴

The most subtle and interesting of these early poems, however, is the sonnet "Horace in Athens" (1897, repudiated), where the great Augustan poet is pictured reclining in the luxurious bedroom of a refined Athenian hetaera. He is dressed entirely *à la grecque* and speaks to her in lightly accented Attic Greek.¹⁵ A Roman, he has been wholly overthrown by Greek culture; as Horace himself would put it, *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* (*Epistles* 2.1.156: "Captive Greece took captive her rude conqueror"), an apothegm on which this poem is a virtual commentary. Yet Horace's lover listens to him in ostensibly authentic admiration, "and stupefied, she sees new worlds of Beauty / within the passion of the great Italian." The poem is filled with complex ironies—too complex, perhaps, for ready comprehension by the lay audience even of Cavafy's day.¹⁶ Cavafy hints, for instance, that the cultural complexity reaches beyond just the Roman/Athenian dichotomy. Despite his slight accent, Horace's Greek "is Attic of the purest strain," yet "His fingers are adorned with many gems, / and he wears a snow-white silk himation

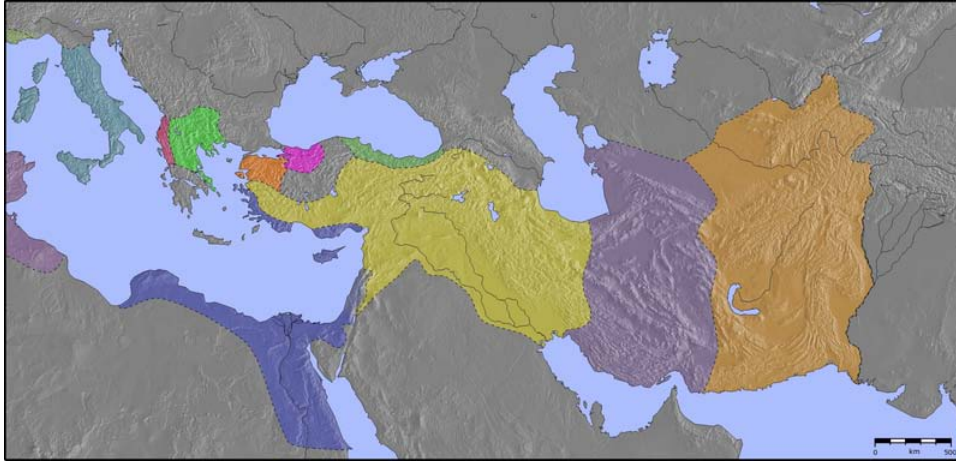
¹³ The incident is recounted in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 19.5 (Cavafy's likeliest ancient source); also Appian, *Samnite Wars* 7.2; Cassius Dio 9 frag. 39.6-8 and Zonaras 8.2.

¹⁴ David Potter suggests to me that the cloud-togas in this poem derive from the image of storm clouds in the West (i.e., the Hannibalic War) in a famous admonitory speech delivered at Naupactus in 217 (Polybius 5.104.10); the speech, quoted in a footnote below, is the basis of "Agelaus" (1932, unfinished).

¹⁵ This incident is invented and dateless, but Horace was in Athens in 45-44, at the age of 20 or so, ostensibly to study philosophy: Horace, *Epistle* 2.2.43-45. But Cavafy seems to invoke a later trip (unknown but certainly not improbable), when Horace's poetic reputation was already established.

¹⁶ "Horace in Athens" is the only one of these early poems that Cavafy ultimately repudiated, although doubtless for stylistic reasons, as Aretmis Leonis suggests to me: "It's written in rhyming Katharevous, which is probably the reason why he rejected it. The rhymes are a bit heavy handed too (*domation imation ... Lation ... Oration; kalou ... Italou*) though the language is otherwise quite musical. For some reason he didn't have the inclination to rework it into a demotic form, or he reworked the material in other poems." In any case, it is important to note that Romans of Horace's day regarded the affectation of Eastern dress and manners as highly offensive. The entire poem was loosely inspired by a famous ode of Horace (*Odes* 1.5), *Quis gracilis puer*; Cavafy replaces the graceful young man with Horace himself and Pyrrha with the elegant hetaera Leah.

/ picked out in scarlet, in the eastern fashion”—an orientaling touch that recurs in the hetaera’s unexpectedly Jewish name, Leah. In short, the setting is not neoclassical, but contemporary to the Hellenistic world of Horace’s day.¹⁷



The Hellenistic World in 200 BCE:
Ptolemaic Empire in blue, Seleucid in yellow, Macedonian in light green
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hellenistic_world_200BC_blank.png

These early efforts were either not published in the poet’s lifetime, or were published and later repudiated; in hindsight, Cavafy may well have regarded them all as a false start. But they already raise a problem. The Hellenistic world was, at the outset of this historical era, the actual center of the Mediterranean, its cultural and social and political hub, and much of Cavafy’s historical poetry presumes acknowledgment of this fact. As the anonymous speaker of “In 200 B.C.” (1916?) boasts, from Alexander the Great’s conquests there had emerged a world “crowned with victory, everywhere acclaimed, / famed throughout the world, illustrious / as no other has been illustrious, / without any rival: we emerged, / a new world that was Greek, and great..” It is a preposterously hubristic claim—one already made elsewhere in Cavafy’s poetry specifically for Ptolemaic Alexandria at the end of “The Glory of the Ptolemies” (1896/1911) and for Seleucid Antioch in “Greek Since Ancient Times” (1927, unfinished)—but Cavafy nonetheless invites his readers to accept the claim, on some level, as plain truth.¹⁸ Cavafy shares this view with, and may have derived it from, the Greek historian Polybius (ca. 203–120 BCE).¹⁹

¹⁷ “Horace in Athens” is not considered by Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions* (2005), but should have been.

¹⁸ See also, for classical Greece, “The Satrapy” (1905).

¹⁹ See Walbank, *Polybius* (1972). Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 145-148, argues that “the weight of adjectives ... and the fulsome tone of praise ... raise suspicions of some irony on the poet’s part.” But the irony he refers to is

The rise of Rome was, from this perspective, an unexpected but successful attack by the periphery on the center, with a resulting cartwheel in the political balance of the world. However, it was and is far from clear that the cultural imbalance was similarly upended by Roman conquest.

Cavafy continued actively experimenting with his ancient materials: emphatic pro-Hellenism statements like "Epitaph" (1893), "Sculptor from Tyana" (first draft 1893), and "The Glory of the Ptolemies" (first draft 1896); and generalized warnings against political hubris like "Darius" (first draft 1897?), "Theodotus" (before 1911), and "Ides of March" (1906). However, arguably it is only in the first decade of the new century that Cavafy found his own distinctive "historical" voices, in poems like "Orophernes" (1904), "Poseidonians" (1906), and "The End of Antony" (1907); and especially from 1910 onward (as Cavafy neared 50), these voices then emerged in their fully mature form with justly famous poems such as "The God Abandons Antony" (1910), "Maker of Wine Bowls" (first draft 1903; final version 1912), and "Alexandrian Kings" (1912).²⁰

By this date, "The Glory of the Ptolemies" (its final version dates to 1911) had doubtless acquired, in Cavafy's mind, a decidedly ironic resonance. Indeed, he had transformed his fundamental viewpoint entirely: no longer the culture clash between the Hellenistic world and Rome, but rather, far more prominently and problematically, the clash of politics, diplomacy, and war, and their immediate harsh consequences for morale in the Hellenistic East. From about 1900 until the end of his life in 1933, he would write and publish or circulate some 40 poems concerned in one way or another with the political ascent of Rome in the Mediterranean. While these poems hardly constitute a formal cycle,²¹ they do demonstrate his deep and unflagging interest in the subject.

When these poems are rearranged in the chronological order of the events they describe, they tell a grim story of seemingly inexorable conquest. The world of the great Hellenistic kings was, at the outset, both supremely self-confident and averse to sacrifice or making hard choices:

largely results from the poem's dramatic date and its atmosphere of complacency—a different issue. See Pinchin, *Alexandria Still* (1977) 40-42.

²⁰ On Cavafy's artistic development in this crucial period, see esp. Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995); Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) xxvi-xxxvi.

²¹ They were described as a cycle by Yourcenar, "Critical Introduction" (1939/1980) 166-167. Vassilios Lambropoulos suggests to me that they are better described as a cluster or constellation or field of inter-related poems, or even better (following Gilles Deleuze) as a loose-knit "assemblage."

"The Glory of the Ptolemies" (1896/1911), "Greek Since Ancient Times" (1927, unfinished), "In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C." (1928), and "In the Year 200 B.C." (1931). Prescient warnings about the mounting threat from the West went entirely unheeded in this smug environment: "Agelaus" (1932, unfinished).²²

The decisive Roman military victories over Philip V of Macedon at the battle of Cynoscephelae in 197, over Antiochus III and the Seleucid Empire at Magnesia in 190, and over Perseus of Macedon at Pydna in 168 are the direct subject of "The Battle of Magnesia" (1913) and "For Antiochus Epiphanes" (1911?/1922). Cavafy's main theme in both poems—and the sole explanation he offers for the defeats—is the inability of the great Hellenistic kings to cooperate in common defense against a common foe.²³ The first poem shows Philip V choosing to feast despite the news of his rival's disastrous defeat at Magnesia: "He remembers how they mourned in Syria, the agony / they felt, when Macedonia their motherland was smashed to bits.— / Let the feast begin. Slaves: the music, the lights!" In the second poem, set in 169, Antiochus IV Epiphanes is too terrified even to respond aloud when a young Antiochene passionately implores him to aid Perseus and the Macedonians, since "Some eavesdropper might / go and repeat something— Anyway, as expected, / at Pydna there swiftly came the horrible conclusion."²⁴

There follows a long series of poems describing what Cavafy interprets as dislocation and despair at all levels of the Hellenistic world as it comes to grips with the new political and military reality. What initially seems odd about these poems is that they shift attention northward, away from Egypt, to the vast Seleucid Empire (stretching, in the early second century BCE, from Palestine and eastern Anatolia clear to Persia). By contrast, the Ptolemies, whose dynastic

²² "Agelaus" derives directly from a famous speech at a conference in Naupactus, 217, as rendered in Polybius, 5.103-105 (e.g., 104.10-11: "For if once you wait for these clouds that loom in the west to settle on Greece, I very much fear lest we may all of us find these truces and wars and games at which we now play, so rudely interrupted that we shall be fain to pray to the gods to give us still the power of fighting in general with each other and making peace when we will, the power, in a word, of deciding our differences for ourselves."). On the importance to Cavafy of 200 BCE, see Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 455: "a moment immediately preceding the culminating Roman defeats of Hellenistic Greek monarchs, and therefore a date that marks the imminent absorption of the Greek world by Rome." There is a similar hint of warning in "Poseidonians" (1906), a moving lament on the gradual loss of Hellenic identity among the Greeks of Magna Graecia; Poseidonia (Paestum) was transformed into a Latin colony in 273 BCE for having penalty sided against the Romans during the Pyrrhic War (280-275 BCE).

²³ See Pinchin, *Alexandria Still* (1977) 44-49, who, however, somewhat misunderstands the nature, and underestimates the extent, of Roman imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean. Still, neither here nor elsewhere does Cavafy blame the Hellenistic defeat on the Romans, who were, after all, just acting like Romans.

²⁴ Both incidents are entirely fictional, mainly illustrating Cavafy's own diagnosis of the situations. On "For Antiochus Epiphanes," see my conclusion.

troubles might have given Cavafy as much inspiration, are, with few exceptions, mentioned only in passing.

For this poetic dislocation to the north, there are two apparent explanations. First, the decay of the Seleucid realm was far more precipitous: only two or three generations from "The Battle of Magnesia" (set in 190/189) to "Should Have Taken the Trouble" (set in 125-123) and "Antiochus the Cyzicene" (set in 113). Second, it is evident that Cavafy was deeply attracted by Edwyn Robert Bevan's *The House of Seleucus*, published in two volumes in 1902.²⁵ Bevan's *Seleucus*, a fluent and open-minded narrative that proceeds directly from ancient sources and is not excessively argumentative as scholarship, was in Cavafy's library, and he clearly found it most appealing.²⁶ The immediate inspiration for many of Cavafy's poems on this period can readily be located in Bevan's history, even if Cavafy also made some use of such primary sources as the Greek historians Polybius, Diodorus, Appian, and Cassius Dio.

Two of Cavafy's poems are ostensibly elegiac responses to the Hellenistic military reverses, but both also find subtle ways to describe the larger consequences of defeat. In "Maker of Wine Bowls" (1903/1912), an artisan is fashioning a silver krater on which he places "the face of the youth I loved," who had died fifteen years before in "the defeat at Magnesia" in 190. As it happens, this cup is being "made for the home of Heracleides, / where great elegance always is the rule." Cavafy's Heracleides is certainly the unsavory Finance Minister of Antiochus IV

²⁵ Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902). The earliest of Cavafy's powerful Seleucid poems were written directly after this book's appearance: "Maker of Wine Bowls" (first draft 1903) and "Orophernes" (1904); the latter poem also provides the clearest direct connection to Bevan, see below. Bevan has a splendid account of the Battle of Magnesia (108-111).

²⁶ Bevan's two-volume *House of Seleucus* is not in the 2003 inventory of Cavafy's surviving library: Kampini-Iatrou, *Βιβλιοθήκη* (2003); but it was still there in 1940 or 1941 when Michael Peridis saw it (quoted in Kampini-Iatrou, 154), and a sales slip shows it was subsequently sold by Cavafy's heir (138). (For help on all this, I am grateful to Manuel Savidis, curator of the Cavafy Archive in Athens, who, however, warns: "It is not safe to date his purchase and reading of the books in any way. Chances are he got them as soon as they appeared, but there is no shred of evidence in the Cavafy Archive supporting this.") In his note on "Of Demetrius Soter (162-150 B.C.)," Cavafy cites Bevan as a principal source, see Haas, "Σχόλια" (1983) 103. Elsewhere, in his "Commentary" (2003-2004) 13, he also refers the reader to Bouché-Leclercq's *Histoire des Séleucides* (1913-14), cf. 1.312-337; but that reference is clearly more generic. As to the Ptolemies, Cavafy did have Mahaffy, *Ptolemaic Dynasty* (1899), but Mahaffy, though sharing characteristics with Bevan, is shorter, far less narrative, and marked by a rather anti-Hellenic tone; see the review by Goodspeed, (1900). Bouché-Leclercq, *Lagides* (4 vols; 1903-1907), is a likelier source; Cavafy cites it for "Alexandrian Kings" ("Commentary" 10), but Bouché-Leclercq's account of the event (vol. 2, 277-279) leaves no clear trace in the poem. Bevan's book on Egypt, *Ptolemy* (1927), probably appeared too late for Cavafy to consider. The first four volumes of Pappas' history of the Greeks (*Ιστορία*, 1865-1872), which Cavafy owned and used, is too brief on the Hellenistic kingdoms (in volume 2) to have been a significant source for the Seleucid poems.

Epiphanes, who, in fact, became the Seleucid king exactly in 175. Heracleides was subsequently ousted from office by Demetrius Soter in 162, but he survived to play an instrumental role in Demetrius' overthrow and death in 150.²⁷

Similarly, "Those Who Fought on Behalf of the Achaean League" (1922), which begins with an elegant epigram on the Greek warriors who died fighting against Rome in 146, concludes with the laconic postscript: "Written in Alexandria by an Achaean: / in the seventh year of Ptolemy, the 'Chickpea.'" This king is Ptolemy IX, styled Lathyros ("Chickpea"), and the year is 111/110.²⁸ Cavafy leaves it mysterious how an anonymous Achaean poet wound up a generation later in Alexandria, but this was a period of swift economic and social decline, and consequent dislocation, for the ancient Greek homeland.²⁹

After their victory in 146, the Romans dissolved the Achaean League and razed the ancient city of Corinth, from which the general Mummius famously sent to Rome huge quantities of Greek sculpture. In "On the Italian Seashore" (1925), a dissolute young man from Magna Graecia witnesses this booty arriving in Italy. "But today he is extremely (contrary to his nature) / broody and dejected," watching "in deepest melancholy" as the trophies of war are unloaded from Roman ships.

These poems provide a backdrop for others dealing with the tangled affairs of the Hellenistic dynasties in the mid-second century. In "Envoys from Alexandria" (1915), set in 164, ambassadors from two Egyptian rivals (the perpetually feuding brothers Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII) ask the Delphic oracle for help in resolving their quarrel over the throne. The priests want gifts, of course, but they procrastinate because they are reluctant to take sides, until, fortuitously: "At Rome the oracle was handed down" through a settlement imposed by the Senate.³⁰ The events leading up to this settlement are described in "The Seleucid's Displeasure" (1910). Ptolemy VI Philometor, after being expelled from Egypt by his younger brother, traveled to Rome and successfully importuned the Senate to restore him. According to Diodorus Siculus (whose

²⁷ Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 132, remarking that Heracleides and his brother "had obtained [Antiochus'] favour in the vilest of ways." Appian, *Syrian Wars* 46, implies a sexual liaison.

²⁸ Amid the recently published unfinished poems there is another written the following year ("The Dynasty," 1923) that also makes fun of Ptolemy's nickname.

²⁹ Haag, *Alexandria* (2004) 111-113, speculates that the poem reflects Cavafy's unease about fragile situation of foreigners in Egypt in 1922, as a consequence of the nationalistic Wafd revolution in 1919-1920.

³⁰ Although Cavafy's story is fiction, the Ptolemies, and particularly Ptolemy VI, did enjoy close relations with Delphi: Dempsey, *Delphic Oracle* (1918) 174-175; Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle* (1956) 371-372.

account Cavafy may have known only through Bevan), Ptolemy, accompanied by a eunuch and three slaves, obtained lodging in a shabby garret. The Seleucid prince Demetrius, long held as a hostage in Rome and by consequence deeply cynical about Roman actions,³¹ nonetheless pressed Ptolemy to accept clothing and a crown befitting his station; but the Egyptian pretender declined. Cavafy preserves the broad outlines of the story, but supplies from Bevan what Diodorus omits: Ptolemy's reason for refusing Demetrius' generosity is tactical, in that he prefers to appear before "the Senate / as an ill-fortuned and impoverished man, / that with greater success he might beg."³²

Silver tetradrachm of Demetrius I Soter
(<http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/seleucids.htm>)



Demetrius, in turn, is the protagonist in "Of Demetrius Soter (162-150 B.C.)" (1915), one of the deepest and most sharply drawn of Cavafy's poems on this period.³³ As in the elegies discussed above, this lengthy poem has a "before and after" design, but one that is structured quite differently. Following a one-line introduction undercutting any possible suspense ("His every expectation turned out wrong!"), Cavafy portrays Demetrius in his long years as a hostage at Rome, yearning to return to a Syria that he only vaguely remembers; he hopes to "end the shame that since the time of the Battle / of Magnesia had ground his homeland down." But after he successfully escapes from Rome in 162 and claims his throne, the reality turns out otherwise.

³¹ E.g., "That they [the Hellenistic monarchs] have, at bottom, / become the servants of the Romans, in a way, / the Seleucid knows; and that those people give / and take away their thrones / arbitrarily, however they like, he knows." Cavafy's direct inspiration for these lines may be Polybius 31.2.7 and 10.7.

³² Diodorus, 31.18.1-2; Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 189, who states that Demetrius was not allowed to "spoil a calculated stage effect"; see Green, *Alexander to Actium* (1990) 442: "ostentatious poverty." Valerius Maximus, *Memorabilia* 5.1.1, observes that the Senate eventually provided Ptolemy with suitable accommodations; Bevan, although citing the passage, omits this report, as does Cavafy. Polybius, 31.10, recounts a separate visit to Rome by Ptolemy VIII in 163.

³³ Liddell, *Cavafy* 175: "Demetrius is the one heroic figure in an unheroic world, and he has an understanding that goes beyond his own personal problems to comprehend the collapse of his world." Sometime before his death in 175, Seleucus IV, Demetrius' father, had sent Demetrius as a hostage to Rome; Demetrius was then about 10 or 12 years old. On Demetrius' reign, see Habicht, "Seleucids" 356-362; Ehling, *Untersuchungen* (2008) 130-153. While a hostage at Rome, Demetrius was only a prince and an heir apparent. On the poem, see Pinchin, *Alexandria Still* (1977) 48-49, observing how "Cavafy compresses the time dimension."

Confronted with Rome's overwhelming and malignant influence,³⁴ Demetrius comes to realize that: "It's not possible for them to survive, the dynasties / that the Macedonian Conquest had produced." Yet even "in his black discouragement, / there's one thing that he still contemplates / with lofty pride: that even in defeat / he shows the same indomitable valor to the world."³⁵ Here, perhaps, is the real touchstone of Cavafy's distinctive "historical" perspective: from history, we can learn fortitude in the face of crushing odds, and thereby arrive at a humane faithfulness to ourselves and to others, a kind of interior honor.³⁶

For Demetrius at the end of his life, Syria has become "the land of Heracleides and of Balas." The reference, left unexplained, is clearly derogatory: Heracleides for whom the "Maker of Wine Bowls" was working, and Alexander Balas, the putative son of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (ruled 175-164). In 153/152, Heracleides persuaded the Roman Senate to recognize the claims of Balas,³⁷ and two years later Demetrius was defeated and killed in battle by Balas, with external support from Rome, Egypt, and Pergamon. The depraved rule of Balas, although brief (150-146), provides the basis for Cavafy's fine and highly ironic poem "Favour of Alexander Balas" (1916?), in which an anonymous narrator, smugly describing himself as "the most exalted of young men" in Antioch, boasts of his connections and claims that, were he not deterred by his own fastidious elegance, he could easily have fixed the outcome in the chariot race he lost.

³⁴ But this is not explicit in the poem, and Cavafy actually lays more stress on Syria's moral decline. Somewhat similar is Gruen, *Hellenistic Monarchies* (1984) 666-667. But the dominant view assigns pivotal backstage responsibility to Rome: Habicht, "Seleucids" 361-362.; Ehling, *Untersuchungen* (2008) 147-148.

³⁵ The poem is largely based on Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 188-211, though Cavafy has omitted Demetrius' considerable successes in reuniting the Seleucid Empire. Referring to Demetrius' final battle, Bevan concludes the chapter: "Showing no sign of surrender, he sank at last full of wounds, dying worthily of the race of fighters from which he sprang (150)." In his note on "Demetrius," Cavafy indicates that this sentence (based on Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.2.4) was the starting point for his poem; cf. Haas, "Σχόλια" (1983) 103

³⁶ This theme returns more pointedly in "The God Abandons Antony" (considered below), on which Cavafy commented: "The poem teaches us that we must look disaster in the face with dignity." Cavafy, "Commentary" (2003/2004) 9.

³⁷ Polybius, 33.18.10 (who alleges charlatanry by Heracleides); Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 209-210; Green, *Alexander to Actium* (1990) 440-441.



Silver tetradrachm of Orophernes II of Cappadocia
(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orophernes_of_Cappadocia.jpg)

Far less fortunate is “Orophernes” (1904), whose unhappy life is narrated at some length. Cavafy starts from a silver tetradrachm with Orophernes’ head on obverse. The tetradrachm, illustrated in Bevan,³⁸ depicts in idealized form an “Asiatic” young man with a finely proportioned face and elaborate ringlets, suggesting considerable sophistication and good looks—an image plainly sufficient to enchant Cavafy, who writes of “a smile on his face, / on his beautiful, refined face.” Cavafy thus employs this artifact to facilitate what is, in essence, an overheated response, a technique—what one of my colleagues has termed “erotic archaeology”—that he will also employ, to greater effect, in “Caesaron” (1914), as we shall see. The remainder of the poem describes, more or less straight out of Bevan,³⁹ the morally rootless life of this Anatolian princeling: Orophernes’ indolent youth spent in luxurious exile in Ionia; his recall by Demetrius Soter as a pretender to the throne of Cappadocia; his harsh and debauched rule, and subsequent overthrow; his exile at Antioch and abortive conspiracies against Demetrius. Cavafy comments dryly on Orophernes as the inconsequential embodiment of his age: “His death must have been recorded somewhere and then lost. / Or maybe history passed it by, / and very rightly didn’t deign / to notice such a trivial thing.”

³⁸ Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) Plate III no. 1 (before p. 125). The British museum has a fine exemplar: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_tetradrachm_of_orophern.aspx. This coin might also have been known to Cavafy via Wroth, *Catalogue* (1899) 34. On the poem, see esp. Dallas, “Δύο Οψεις” (1983); also Roilos, *Economics* (2009) 191-195. On the coin, Salveson, “Tetradrachm” (2002); also Pontani, “Fonti” (1940/1991) 58. This superbly executed portrait, of which only a handful of exemplars survive (most if not all from Priene; see Polybius 33.6), is regarded as one of the finest in all Hellenistic coinage.

³⁹ Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 157, 205-209. See esp. Diodorus, 31.32-34; also Polybius, 33.6. Orophernes II, putative son of Ariarathes IV Eusebes the king of Cappadocia (ruled 220-163), was sent into Ionian exile because Ariarathes preferred his younger brother for the throne; and Orophernes thus became a pretender and a pawn in Seleucid politics. Cavafy omits the cause of Orophernes’ Ionian exile. On the poem, see Capri-Carka, *Love* (1982) 44-45 (citing Cavafy’s own professed ambivalence regarding Orophernes).

And yet there remains for Cavafy one obdurate counterweight: the coin, forever recording "the charm of his lovely youth, / a glimmer of his poetic beauty, / a sensitive memento of an Ionian boy." Cavafy's willingness to claim, even for such a thoroughgoing rascal, a kind of redemption through charm and physical loveliness,⁴⁰ sounds a theme that echoes, of course, in many of his poems on his contemporary Alexandrians as well; one thinks particularly of "Days of 1896" (1925). Orophernes, lacking any of Demetrius' interior honor, instead requests to be accepted for his exterior attractiveness alone. Cavafy, who displays no reluctance whatsoever in accepting this second-best alternative, accomplishes a similar redemptive feat in "That's How" (1913; unpublished). A young man, his face known only from an "obscene photograph, which is secretly / sold in the street," leads, no doubt, a "debased, sordid life," but: "given all of this, and more, to me you remain / the face that comes in dreams, a figure / fashioned for and dedicated to Greek pleasure— / that's how you are for me still and how my poetry speaks of you."

The Hellenistic polity reaches its rock bottom in "Should Have Taken the Trouble" (1930), one of Cavafy's last poems.⁴¹ The anonymous narrator, a young Antiochene who claims an extensive education, has become "practically homeless and broke" even though he considers himself "totally / qualified to be of service to this country, / my beloved homeland, Syria." The date is 125-123 BCE, in the midst of furious, ultimately futile squabbling among the surviving Hellenistic kingdoms. Toward the end of the poem, the narrator weighs his three options: to work for the current king Alexander Zabinas (ruled 128-123), a pretender whom the Ptolemies had put forward as their candidate in the midst of chaos following catastrophic events in 129, the loss of Mesopotamia to the Parthians and the death of the last great Seleucid king, Antiochus VII Sidetes; or possibly for "his archrival, Grypus," Antiochus VIII Grypus the nephew of Sidetes, who was crowned as a teenaged pretender in 125 and finally defeated Zabinas in 123 (Grypus' troubled reign lasted on-and-off until his death in 96); or maybe even John Hyrcanus, the Helle-

⁴⁰ Indeed, Pinchin, *Alexandria Still* (1977) 51, argues that the redemption goes even further: "A taste of nobility in the midst of the ridiculous, a taste of inept heroism, Hellenism."

⁴¹ On this era, see Meyer, *Hellenismus* (1925) 272, who writes of the defeat and death (at the hands of the Parthians) of Antiochus VII in 129, that it was "the catastrophe of Hellenism in continental Asia and at the same time of the Seleucid Empire." As Habicht, "Seleucids" 373, observes, the princes of this period "were not much more than *condottieri*, fighting against their cousins, against the growing and increasingly aggressive power of the Jews, against the Nabatean and Ituraean Arabs, the Greek cities in Syria and Phoenicia, and the local dynasts. The final agony of the Seleucids had begun."

nizing but anti-Seleucid Maccabean king of Judea (ruled 134-104).⁴² Although the narrator's "conscience isn't troubled by the fact / that I'm so completely indifferent to my choice," he is deeply unhappy with all his possibilities, since: "All three of them harm Syria just the same." "The almighty gods should have taken the trouble / to create a fourth man, who was good. / With pleasure I'd have gone along with him." The mood of this poem was brilliantly captured by Marguerite Yourcenar in 1939, on the eve of World War II: "A perspective without illusions, but not desolate even so: we should hesitate to call it bitter, yet it is certainly bitterness and rigor that we discover under the imperceptible curve of a smile."⁴³

The full consequence of the Seleucid decline is drawn in "Antiochus the Cyzicene" (1920, unfinished), set early in that king's tumultuous reign (114-96), and probably shortly after he seized Antioch in 113. The poem depicts a kingdom reduced to "barely ... half" its former dimensions, which "once began, the historians say, / at the Aegean and went right up to India." Now it is beset "with the little kingdoms, with John Hyrcanus, / with the cities that are declaring their independence"; and yet the king has no time except for frivolities: "Let's have a look at those puppets, / the animals he's brought us."⁴⁴

Hellenistic World in 90 BCE
(<http://www.e-grammes.gr/maps/90.jpg>)

The political reality, then, was firmly set by the twilight years of the second century. Four other poems deal with the suc-



⁴² The tangled politics of this period are described by Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 247-253, in a chapter titled "The Last Convulsions."

⁴³ Yourcenar, "Critical Introduction" (1939/1980) 169.

⁴⁴ The puppet anecdote comes from Diodorus 34/35.34, the source cited by Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 253 ("[T]he Syrians were soon disillusioned. ... [A] bold and splendid hunter, ... he was ... far more keenly interested in mimes, conjuring tricks, and ingenious mechanical toys than the affairs of state.") Cavafy appears to have consulted Diodorus directly: "Shortly after Antiochus Cyzicenus gained the throne he lapsed into drunken habits, crass self-indulgence, and pursuits utterly inappropriate to a king. ... He practiced also how to manipulate puppets, ... He was, moreover, addicted to hunting at odd and unseasonable hours, ... [a]nd since in grappling with brute beasts he was reckless, he frequently put his own life in extreme peril." This is a model instance of how Cavafy mined historical sources for his poetry. The contempt is obvious already in the source; what Cavafy adds is historical context and a sense of the sour hostility that contemporaries doubtless felt toward Cyzicenus. On Antiochus IX Cyzicenus, see Ehling, *Untersuchungen* (2008) 217-230; on this poem, Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions* (2005) 96-97.

cessor kingdoms in the late-second and first centuries BCE. Two concern the tangled affairs of the royal families in Israel: "Alexander Jannaeus, and Alexandra" (1929)⁴⁵ and "Aristobulus" (1916).⁴⁶ The other two concern the Black Sea Kingdom of Pontus, which, for a while, posed the last significant military threat to Roman rule in Asia Minor: "On the March to Sinope" (1928), set just before the political assassination of King Mithridates V Euergetes (ruled ca. 150-120) in his capital city Sinope; and "Darius" (<1897?/1917), about the assassinated king's far more eminent son, Mithridates VI Eupator known as Mithridates the Great (ruled 120-63), who waged a protracted series of wars with Rome before his ultimate defeat and suicide in 63.

In this last poem, the poet Phernazes (a Cavafian invention) is composing an epic poem on the Persian king Darius, from whom the Pontic kings claimed descent; tacit flattery of Mithridates is obviously intended. Darius, of course, had launched the disastrous invasions of Greece in 492-490. The poet speculates on Darius' likely emotions: "arrogance and intoxication, perhaps; but no—more / like an awareness of the vanity of grandeur." But suddenly he hears of Mithridates' invasion of Roman territory, an act he recognizes as sheer hubris: "The Romans are most fearsome enemies. / Is there any way we can get the best of them, / we Cappadocians?"⁴⁷ And this realization solves his problem in reconstructing the motives of Darius: "far more convincing, surely, are arrogance and intoxication; / arrogance and intoxication are what Darius would have felt." Although the dramatic date of the poem is not clearly given, most probably Cavafy is alluding to Mithridates' invasion of the Roman province of Asia in 89 BCE, which resulted in the massacre of some 80,000 Roman citizens.⁴⁸

Out of all this history, Cavafy draws what may resemble, at first glance, a lesson of unflinching realism and dignified acceptance of political consequences that cannot be averted. The

⁴⁵ On this poem, see Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976)142-144.

⁴⁶ Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 402-405, has a full commentary; see also Schäfer, *Gedichte* (2007) 241.

⁴⁷ Why does Phernazes say: "we Cappadocians"? The poem is set in Amisus in the Black Sea kingdom of Pontus, where Mithridates ruled; and the king exercised only transient influence over central Anatolian Cappadocia. Probably Cavafy just made a mistake. However, David Potter points me to *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*³ 742, an inscription from Ephesus dating to ca. 87/86 when that city was in revolt from Mithridates; there he is strangely described as "the King of Cappadocia." See also Mitchell, "Search"; and Strabo 11.8.4, who says "as far as the Cappadocians and especially those who live in the direction of the Euxine sea, whom they now call Pontici." On the inscription, which Cavafy may have known, see McGing, *Foreign Policy* (1986) 128-129.

⁴⁸ On the Mithridatic Wars, see McGing, *Foreign Policy* (1986); Green, *Augustus to Actium* (1990) 558-563. On "Darius," see Jusdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 57-58, 172-174. It may also be that allusion is to the outbreak of the Third Mithridatic War in 73 BCE; see Schäfer, *Gedichte* (2007) 280-281, who notes that Amisus, the Pontic city where Phernazes is writing, was captured by the Romans in 71.

regretful irony that pervades his entire commentary on the death throes of the Hellenistic monarchies helps to establish this lesson. But if the Hellenistic world had surrendered on the political and military fronts, it was in fact far from defeated either socially or culturally. Many historical poems, which lie beyond the scope of this essay, bespeak an enduring pride in the Greek identity, particularly within the Hellenistic littoral, a pride that continued into the Roman Empire. Particularly poignant examples are "Philhellene" (1906),⁴⁹ "Coins" (1920), "Epitaph of Antiochus, King of Commagene" (1923?),⁵⁰ "The Potentate from Western Libya" (1928), and "Tigranocerta" (1929, unfinished), in which non-Greek grandees adopt, or struggle to adopt, Greek ways and learning as markers of their civilization, often thereby incurring the scorn of "true Greeks."

In "Homecoming from Greece" (1914), however, more complex feelings are displayed, even in its ironic title. An Alexandrian, returning home from the Greek motherland, expresses due contempt for the Hellenizing barbarians ("remember how we'd laugh at them"), but nonetheless admits that the Greek identity of Alexandrians like himself has now become inextricably mixed "with loves and with emotions / that now and then are alien to Greek culture." He concludes with a surprising exhortation: "Of the blood of Syria and of Egypt / that flows in our veins, let's not be ashamed; / let us revere it, and let us boast of it." This poem, with its vision of a distinctive "Hellenistic Greek" identity emerging out of the ruins of the Hellenistic kingdoms,⁵¹ remained unpublished during Cavafy's lifetime.⁵²

Why, then, was Cavafy so fascinated by the course of Rome's rise to hegemony? A likely answer, perhaps, is that the Hellenistic military and political defeat was a crucial first step in

⁴⁹ For a sensitive postcolonial analysis of this poem, see McKinsey, "'Philhellene'" (2009). It is clear that these poems are more sympathetic to Hellenizing barbarians than some scholars have supposed.

⁵⁰ The subject of this poem is uncertain, but, as Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 433-434, argues, Antiochus I Theos (ruled 70-38 BCE), famed for his grandiose funerary monuments in Greco-Persian style, is the likeliest candidate. Others prefer a later Antiochus, although no king of Commagene entirely fits the poem.

⁵¹ A line from "Homecoming" (εἴμεθα Ἕλληνες κ' εμεῖς — τι ἄλλο εἴμεθα; —) that Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 323, translates "we too are Greek—what else could we be?"— "is more accurately rendered "we too are Greek—what else are we?—." Compare the similar questions in "Philhellene": "Where are the Greeks?" and "What's Greek / here, behind the Zágros, beyond Phráata?" (My thanks to Artemis Leontis.)

⁵² On Cavafy's "Orientalizing Hellenism," see Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions* (2005) 88-114 (89-90 on this poem) and *Forster-Cavafy* (2009) 9-15; also Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 108-109, 173-175, where this poem is tied to "Epitaph of Antiochus." Cavafy himself elsewhere expresses personal views similar to those of the poem's narrator: Cavafy, *Tá Πεζά* (2003) 152, with Pieris's comment at 364-365. Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 528-529, advances a heavily ironic interpretation of "Homecoming," arguing from the cool silence of Hermippus whom the garrulous narrator addresses; but this view seems exaggerated, although clearly the narrative is not to be taken entirely at face value. See also Beaton, "Irony" (1981) 521-527; Capri-Karka, *Love* (1982) 63-64; Leontis, in Leontis et al., *Ithakas* (2002) 97.

the formation of his "generic hero," as Keeley described him. For what comes after defeat, and after the acceptance of defeat, is the reemergence of a new, more opportunistic citizen, able to absorb the bitterest blows with a certain detachment, or even an amused eye for revelations about the inadequacies of his new masters, and above all a growing confidence in culture as a more than adequate replacement for political self-determination.

Totally typical of this new attitude is the "Sculptor from Tyana" (1893/1903): a Cappadocian artist, probably working at Rome, who cheerfully accepts all manner of commissions from Roman senators: statues of Greek gods and heroes, or distinguished Roman generals, or even of the doomed Caesarion, Julius Caesar's putative son by Cleopatra and the last of the Ptolemies.⁵³ This is the earliest of the three poems in which Cavafy not only mentions Caesarion, but gives him unanticipated emphasis; the other two are "Alexandrian Kings" (1912) and "Caesarion" (1914), both considered at length below. It is clear that Cavafy's interest in the unfortunate Caesarion was of far greater duration and depth than the introduction to "Caesarion" implies. Cavafy even intuits, in "Sculptor," the existence of an ancient cult of Caesarion—a possibility that, as we shall see, has recently come to seem not entirely unimaginable.

But poems like "Sculptor from Tyana" suggest a still deeper explanation of Cavafy's interest in the later Hellenistic period. It is hard to imagine a poetic *persona* that remains, on the surface, less cognizant of contemporary events than Cavafy's. He seems rarely even to notice the larger course of history sweeping forward around him. Cavafy's principal output stems from 1910 onward and overlaps with events of gargantuan significance for him and other diaspora Greeks: not least, the First World War and its aftermath, including the mass expulsion of the Greek population from Turkey. And closer to home, within cosmopolitan Egypt, Cavafy's development as a mature poet was bracketed by two major nationalist uprisings against foreign domination: Col. Ahmed Urabi's revolt in 1879-1882, put down by a calamitous British naval bombardment of Alexandria (Cavafy's family had packed him off to Constantinople for the duration), and the 1919 Revolution against British occupation led by Saad Zaghloul and the Wafd

⁵³ Cavafy obviously has his sculptor come from Tyana because of the Cappadocian city's connection to Apollonius of Tyana, one of his heroes: see Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 388-389, and Bowersock, "Apollonios" (1983/2009). Mendelsohn (389-390) argues that Caesarion "stands out [from the other commissioned statues] as something of an anomaly among this gallery of great Romans," but "represents, in his parentage and his very person, the failed dream of a truly Greco-Roman political and dynastic unity." Still, it is unlikely that Cavafy himself had any faith in the latter; see below on "Alexandrian Kings." On Caesarion's parentage, see also below.

Party, initially suppressed by fusillades but in the end partially successful. This tangled history of rising nationalism, which directly endangered the Greek diaspora on many fronts including Alexandria, is conspicuously absent from Cavafy’s poetry, with the solitary exception of the unpublished “27 June 1906, 2 P.M.” (1908) on the British execution of a young Egyptian whom Cavafy regarded as innocent—a poem that remains altogether an outlier.⁵⁴ While Cavafy was not, could scarcely have been, indifferent to the larger pattern and implications of these events, they go missing in his poetry, which handles them, at best, extremely obliquely.⁵⁵

What emerges, however, from the poems on the Roman Republic’s conquests is a more general concern with the effects of imperialism on the Greek inhabitants of the Levant, and, in particular, at least an implied exploration of the effects of British presence in Egypt and in the Middle East more broadly. There is little sign that Cavafy harbored strong anti-British sentiments, or even that he resented British rule; and certainly we cannot be required to read an anti-British allegory into his historical poetry, or to infer that he was urging some specific course of action upon the Greek diaspora.⁵⁶ Correspondingly, Cavafy’s treatment of the late Hellenistic world should not be read as anti-Roman *per se*; he is not critiquing Roman imperialism, but accepting it as a fact, but then going on to think, almost exclusively, about its implications for the residents of the Hellenistic East. The views that Cavafy actually does express in his poems are therefore not conventionally political, though political nonetheless: an oblique poetics of imperialism, although always from a post-colonial perspective.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ On the tumultuous history of this era, see the chapters by Donald Malcolm Reid and M. W. Daly in Daly, ed., *Modern Egypt* (1999) 217-251; on the politically charged “Dinshawai incident” in 1906 which led to the hangings of four Egyptian villagers, p. 243 (an “icon of Egyptian nationalist mythology and British imperialism”). On Cavafy in Constantinople, see Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 32-48; on his 1921 retirement from the British bureaucracy in reliance on compensation promised by the Zaghoul government, 179.

⁵⁵ In conversation with Yannis Sareyannis, Cavafy was adamant that he “did not want his poems to appear linked with definite actuality,” and he rejected the view that “Those Who Fought on Behalf of the Achaean League” (1922) had been directly “inspired by the Asia Minor disaster”: Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 193, quoting Sareyannis. See, nonetheless, Haag, *Alexandria* (2004) 109-113 on this poem.

⁵⁶ Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 78-94. Cavafy’s political stance remains disputed. Modern views are summarized by Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions* (2005) 69 n.77 (p. 175): “The debate was defined by Tsirkas and Malanos. Tsirkas went to great lengths to show how anti-British Cavafy was, a fact which Malanos disputed. Liddell begrudgingly takes a middle path ...” Reference is to Tsirkas, *Καβάφης*² (1971), Malanos, *Καβάφης* (1957), and Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 78-94, 130; see also Risva, *Pensée Politique* (1981).

⁵⁷ Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 95: “his sympathies are consistently with the underdogs, the victims of history rather than its manipulators.” But this attitude is made problematic by his simultaneous indifference to Egyptian natives. For a fascinating examination of cosmopolitanism in colonial and post-colonial Egypt, see Starr, *Cosmopolitan Egypt* (2009).

2. The End of the Ptolemies

Cavafy wrote six poems (that we have) on the events leading to the dissolution of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the final Roman annexation of Egypt.⁵⁸ It is a story that was not only often retold in antiquity, but also frequently recounted by subsequent authors both academic and literary—a story so widely known, in short, that, unlike with the decline of the Seleucid Empire, Cavafy had no need to supply expository background.⁵⁹ The Roman general Antony's seduction by the resourceful Egyptian queen Cleopatra VII, his eventual defeat in 31 by his rival Octavian at the naval battle of Actium, and the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra in 30—all of this was cultural currency long before the age of cinema. Cavafy instead adopts a roundabout strategy, homing in on details of crucial events. Again, it is helpful to look at the six poems not in the order of their composition, but in the chronological order of the events described.

"Alexandrian Kings" was written in 1912. It concerns the Donations of Alexandria in 34 BCE, one of the pivotal moments leading to the final conflict between the erstwhile allies Antony and Octavian. Briefly, through the treaty of Brundisium in 40, Antony had been left in effective control of the Roman provinces in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 34, using Cleopatra's funds, he won a significant victory over Armenia. But instead of returning to Rome, Antony celebrated a colorful "triumph" in Alexandria. A short time later, he and Cleopatra held a public ceremony in the Alexandrian Gymnasium,⁶⁰ during which they distributed vast expanses of the East to Cleopatra and her children, including Ptolemy XV Caesar, called Caesarion (born in 47 and widely reputed to be the natural child of Julius Caesar⁶¹) and her three children with Antony:

⁵⁸ On the historical background, see Pelling, "Triumviral Period" (1996). For this period, Cavafy appears to have relied mainly on ancient Greek sources (esp. Plutarch and Cassius Dio), not secondary sources.

⁵⁹ Thus, he left unfinished two bitterly satiric poems attacking the decadence of the later Ptolemies: "Ptolemy the Benefactor (or Malefactor)" (1922) and "The Dynasty" (1923). Both are too broadly written.

⁶⁰ The Gymnasium, famed in antiquity for its beauty and huge size, has not been located, except that it lay along Alexandria's main east-west thoroughfare (Strabo, 17.1.10); see Fraser, *Alexandria* (1972) 28-29; Burkhalter, "Gymnase" (1992). As Cavafy was doubtless aware, Octavian, after defeating Antony and Cleopatra, held his own victory ceremony in the Gymnasium, with masses of apprehensive Alexandrians in attendance: Plutarch, *Antony* 80.1.

⁶¹ On the evidence, see Heine, "Cäsar" (1969/2009), and Benne, *Marcus Antonius* (2001) 127-130, and Schäfer, *Kleopatra* (2006) 87-93, summarizing the modern debate; also Roller, *Cleopatra* (2010) 69-74. Most ancient sources, reflecting contemporary polemic, are cautious as to Caesar's paternity: Nicolaus of Damascus, *Augustus* 20; Suetonius, *Caesar* 52.2 (noting, however, the close physical resemblance); Plutarch, *Caesar* 49.10, *Antony* 54.4; Dio, 47.31.5. Heine points out that the correct form of Caesarion's name was Ptolemy XV Caesar. His fre-

Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene (twins born in 40), and Ptolemy Philadelphus (born in 36). These inflammatory gifts were extremely unpopular in the Western Mediterranean (now under Octavian's sole control) and provided one pretext for the final rupture between Antony and Octavian.



Map of the Donations of Alexandria
(http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~klio/maps/rr/donations_of_alexandria.jpg)

Cavafy describes the Donations by conflating two sources: Plutarch's *Life of Antony* 54.4-6⁶² and Cassius Dio 49.41.1-3. In his account, Cavafy views the Donations from the perspective of the Alexandrian crowd, who "came out in droves / to have a look at Cleopatra's children"; but Cleopatra and Antony, who presided on golden thrones over the actual event, are altogether omitted (as is their daughter Selene), and the donations are instead made by a mysterious "they."⁶³ The juvenile Alexander (aged 6) is named "king / of Armenia, of Media, of the Parthians," and Ptolemy (aged 2) is to be "king / of Cilicia, of Syria, of Phoenicia"; here Cavafy follows Plutarch, *Antony* 54.4-5.

But for Caesarion he switches to Dio, 49.41.1: "Him they declared greater than the boys: / him they declared King of Kings."⁶⁴ In fact, however, on Dio's own account Caesarion was actually named co-ruler with Cleopatra (styled "Queen of Kings"⁶⁵) over Egypt and Cyprus; and

quently attested use of the honorific titles Philopator Philometor almost certainly represents another claim to descent from Caesar.

⁶² In citing Plutarch, I use the chapter numbering in the more accessible Loeb edition: Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives* IX (1920), rather than the more standard scholarly numbering found, e.g., in Pelling, *Antony* (1988).

⁶³ In a commentary on this poem, Cavafy noted that he had deliberately minimized the role Cleopatra played in the Donations: Haas, "Reading Notes" 34, citing Savdis's publication (inaccessible to me).

⁶⁴ As to Caesarion, Dio is the only source for this title, unless a Latin inscription from Delos (*CIL* 3.7232) is correctly restored to read "King of Kings, son of Cleopatra," probably referring to Caesarion. See Hölbl, *Ptolemaic Empire* (2001) 255 n.107. Pelling, *Antony* (1988) 250-251, on Plutarch, *Antony* 54.7, rightly rejects Plutarch's conflicting claim that *Antony's* sons were both proclaimed Kings of Kings. The title evidently picks up the ancient Persian "Shahanshah": Griffiths, "βασιλεύς βασιλέων" (1953), and Huß, "König" (1977), and *Ägypten* (2001) 739-740 – probably anticipating a planned but unexecuted Parthian campaign, Kienast, *Augustus* (1982) 53.

⁶⁵ See the denarius issued by Antony in 32 BCE, with a reverse bearing Cleopatra's bust and the inscription: CLEOPATRAE REGINAE REGUM FILIORUM REGUM: Crawford, *Coinage* vol. I (1974) 539, no. 543.

we know from other sources that Cleopatra had already made Caesarion her co-regent much earlier, probably already in 44 (when Caesarion was still an infant) soon after Caesar's death. The real force of the Donations was undoubtedly Antony's proclamation of Caesarion as Julius Caesar's legitimate son and heir (Dio 49.41.2: γνήσιος),⁶⁶ a rebuke to Octavian who had only been adopted in Caesar's will; but Cavafy omits this proclamation entirely.

Cavafy has, then, radically abbreviated and reconfigured the transmitted accounts of the event, and it is also evident that he did so principally in order to emphasize Caesarion. For example, the costumes of the children Alexander and Ptolemy are described at length in Plutarch (*Antony* 54.5); but Cavafy closes his eyes to them in favor of a lavish description of Caesarion:

Caesarion was standing well in front,
attired in rose-colored silk,
on his chest a garland of hyacinths,
his belt a double row of sapphires and amethysts,
his shoes laced up with white
ribbons embroidered with pink-skinned pearls.

Though he took its details quite seriously, all this spectacular portrayal is Cavafy's free contrivance; Caesarion's dress is not described at all in ancient sources, for this occasion or otherwise.⁶⁷ The depiction's purpose can only be guessed at, but probably emerges, as we shall see, in Cavafy's later poem "Caesarion" (1918).⁶⁸ In any case, Cavafy's perspective is that of the Alexandrian onlookers, who, although they recognize that the ceremony is "empty words,"⁶⁹ nonetheless delight in "a triumphant artistic achievement, / the courtiers' elegance exceptional, / Caesarion all grace and beauty / (Cleopatra's son, of Lagid blood)"; while the putative paternity of Ju-

⁶⁶ This claim of legitimacy (evidently repeated in Antony's letters to the Senate: Suetonius, *Caesar* 52.2, and Dio, 50.1.5; and perhaps also in his will: Dio, 50.3.5) has occasioned perplexity, since Julius Caesar was married to Calpurnia both before and after he allegedly fathered Caesarion (Suetonius, *Caesar* 21.1, 81.3), and in any case a marriage with Cleopatra would hardly have been legitimate in Roman law; see, e.g., Grant, *Cleopatra* (1972) 166-167; Schäfer, *Kleopatra* (2006) 91-92. But legitimacy under Egyptian law can hardly be meant. Despite Roller, *Cleopatra* (2010) 167-168, there is no likelihood that Cleopatra was a Roman citizen.

⁶⁷ See Mahaffy, *Empire* (1899) 481: "[N]ot one word of [Caesarion's] appearance, of his habits, of his betrothal in marriage to any princess, is recorded." Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 123, quotes Cavafy: "I dressed him in pink silk because at that time an ell of that sort of silk cost the equivalent of so-and-so many thousand drachmas."

⁶⁸ As was observed above, Cavafy also displays interest in Caesarion as early as "Sculptor from Tyana" (1893/1903).

⁶⁹ As Pelling, *Antony* (1988) 249, shows in his note on chapter 54, the Donations were in fact largely without consequence for the donees, a point emphasized in Dio's account as well.

lius Caesar is conspicuously ignored. This pleasure-loving crowd seems entirely composed of Cavafy's "generic heroes."⁷⁰

Historians have long debated whether the Donations of Alexandria should be taken seriously, and, if so, what Antony's motive was in making them. Some have concurred with Cavafy in seeing them as pure theater.⁷¹ But others have taken the Donations more seriously; arguing that they would at least have appealed to Alexandrians notorious for their "hostility ... to the political and military intervention of Rome in Egyptian affairs."⁷² It is even possible to see in them a largely unexecuted attempt to create a wholly new political artifice, a "Romano-Hellenistic Orient" that would reconcile the political and military might of Rome with the cultural legitimacy of the last surviving Hellenistic kingdom.⁷³ "Alexandrian Kings" implies, what we should anyway have anticipated from other evidence on his political views, that Cavafy reacted with considerable skepticism to the patent unreality of such a solution to the "Hellenistic problem." The wolf does not run with the cat.

Octavian's crushing defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium might seem to have spelled the end of such pageantry; but not so. "In a Municipality of Asia Minor" (1926) is a cynical poem in which an imaginary Greek city, presumably lobbying for benefactions, redirects a proclamation written to celebrate Antony's anticipated victory, so that, with only the slightest change of wording, it now celebrates Octavian, "'so richly worthy of encomia, / and of the narration of his deeds at length / in the Greek tongue, both in verse and prose: / *in the Greek tongue*, which is the bearer of renown,' / etcetera, etcetera. It all fits brilliantly."⁷⁴ The Alexandrians

⁷⁰ Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 93: "a comprehensive portrait of the typical Alexandrian 'man in the street' of the first century B.C.: ... more responsive, more easily entertained, but—when it comes to insight about the character of politics—only slightly less cynical than our third-century Alexandrian" (in "From the School of the Renowned Philosopher," 1921).

⁷¹ Pelling, in Bowman et al., *CAH*² 10 (1996) 36-48, esp. 40-41 ("It was all show ... [b]ut ... it doubtless went down well in Alexandria."), virtually paraphrasing Cavafy.

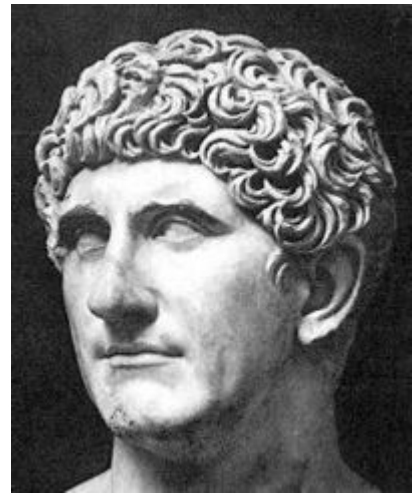
⁷² Fraser, *Alexandria* (1972) 127; see also Schäfer, *Kleopatra* (2006) 178-183.

⁷³ Will, *Histoire Politique* (1982) 545, accepted by Green, *Alexander to Actium* (1990) 674-675. See also Grant, *Cleopatra* (1972) 161-181; Benne, *Marcus Antonius* (2001) 28-53, 112-130; Hölbl, *Ptolemaic Empire* (2001) 242-244; Roller, *Cleopatra* (2010) 99-100; and, exhaustively, Schrapel, *Reich der Kleopatra* (1996), esp. 273-276 on Caesarion. Compare Haag, *Alexandria* (2004) 46-47: a "realizable, if ambitiously far-reaching, design for a new Hellenistic empire based on Alexandria." On Cleopatra's dynastic politics, see Bingen, *Hellenistic Egypt* (2007) 57-79.

⁷⁴ On this poem, Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 440, quotes C. M. Bowra: "He shows the fundamental indifference of the ruled to their rulers. No doubt he had observed this in Egypt." But this misses the point entirely. See also Jurdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 131-132. A general atmosphere of subservience is indicated by Dio 51.19.

show similarly sly good humor in "The Year 31 B.C. in Alexandria" (1917/1924). An incense peddler, come from the countryside to hawk his wares in Alexandria, is overtaken by celebrations, "the tremendous stir, / and the music, and parades." When he inquires, "someone tosses him the palace's gargantuan lie: / that victory in Greece belongs to Antony." This poem is based upon a report in Dio (51.5.4-5) that Cleopatra, fearing that after her crushing defeat at Actium her return to Alexandria would be obstructed by her enemies, "crowned her brows with garlands as if she had actually won a victory, and had songs of triumph chanted to the accompaniment of flute-players," all to buy herself time in which to dispatch the opposition. But again in this poem Cavafy fails to mention Cleopatra, lest her glamorous name, riveting audiences through the ages, overwhelm his primary subject, the mischievous frivolity of the Alexandrian common people.

Bust of Mark Antony, from the Vatican Museums
(http://schools-wikipedia.org/wp/m/Mark_Antony.htm)



In two poems, "The End of Antony" (1907) and "The God Abandons Antony" (1910), Cavafy deals with the last two days of Antony's life in 30 BCE, as Octavian's forces closed in on Alexandria and he was forced toward suicide. The poems make an arresting contrast. "The End of Antony," an unpublished poem, is based on a passage of Plutarch (*Antony* 77.3-4). In Plutarch's account, Antony, moribund as a result of a botched suicide attempt, had been drawn up on a litter into Cleopatra's mausoleum in Alexandria. The Queen began to wail uncontrollably, but he "stopped her lamentations" and calmly "advised her to consult her own safety ... not to lament him for his last reverses, but to count him happy for the good things that had been his, since he had become most illustrious of men, had won greatest power, and now had been not ignobly conquered, a Roman by a Roman."⁷⁵ Cavafy follows much of this account closely, but, once again, he sidelines Cleopatra, described only tangentially as "madame with her Oriental flailings"; it is mainly the sobbing of "the slave-girls with their barbarous Greek" that awakened "the lofty pride within his

⁷⁵ As Pelling, *Antony* (1988) 305-306, observes, this speech, which is "doubtless imaginary," is modeled on other much admired last words in which heroic figures "remember[] their *good* fortune as they die." Dio 51.10.9 does not record a final speech by Antony.

soul" so that "it all seemed strange to him, indifferent, / everything he'd blindly worshipped until then— / all his frenetic Alexandrian life—."⁷⁶ It is reasonable to presume that Cavafy was fascinated by the clash of cultures in Antony's soul, and that he has deliberately chosen to accentuate this conflict rather than the farewell address to Cleopatra.

Three years later, in his justly celebrated poem "The God Abandons Antony,"⁷⁷ Cavafy has altered and greatly deepened his thinking. The poem is based on another passage of Plutarch (*Antony* 75.3-4), in which, during the middle of the night before Octavian's occupation of Alexandria, a raucous throng of Bacchantes, emitting "harmonious sounds from all sorts of instruments ... and the shouting of a throng, accompanied by cries of Bacchic revelry and satyric leavings," passed through the city (described by Plutarch as "quiet and depressed through fear and expectation of what was coming") and out the gate towards Octavian's army. This throng was interpreted, by those "who sought the meaning of the sign," as an omen "that the god to whom Antony always most likened and attached himself was now deserting him." The god is Dionysos, with whom Antony had identified himself at least since 39;⁷⁸ Plutarch had previously described other earlier omens to the same effect (60.2-3).⁷⁹

Cavafy completely re-imagines the final omen. First, Cavafy has all but eradicated Plutarch's "Bacchic revelry."⁸⁰ Although, as in Plutarch, the primary emphasis is still on the eerie sound of the procession, the throng itself is no longer discernible, but instead "an invisible procession" of an "initiate crew"—a mysterious band perceived not through the eyes, but entirely through the ears, its "exquisite music" to which one "listen[s] with deep emotion" as "a final en-

⁷⁶ Cavafy carefully distinguishes between Cleopatra—still Greek despite her "Oriental flailings"—and "the slave-girls with their barbarous Greek": Haas, "Σχόλια" (1983) 32-34. But Cavafy himself had little trust in pure bloodlines as a guarantor of cultural superiority; see, for instance, "Ptolemy the Benefactor (or Malefactor)" (1922, unfinished).

⁷⁷ Cavafy's title (Απολείπειν ο θεός Αντώνιον) is ancient Greek, from Plutarch, *Antony* 75.4 (breathings omitted and accents slightly altered).

⁷⁸ See Pelling, *Antony* (1988) 208-209, on "Antony at Athens, 39-38"; Hölbl, *Ptolemaic Empire* (2001) 290-293.

⁷⁹ Roman sources may have seen the god's desertion as a form of *evocatio*; see Pelling, "Triumviral Period," (1996) 63. I see no evidence that Cavafy's poem was influenced by Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* IV.iii.

⁸⁰ In the penultimate line, however, Cavafy refers to the "the exquisite instruments of that initiate crew" (Mendelsohn), τα εξαίσια όργανα του μυστικού θιάσου. In classical Greek, μυστικός θιάσος has decidedly Bacchic overtones ("a revel associated with the mysteries"; Plutarch describes the band as a θιάσος), overtones that have largely disappeared in modern Greek ("strange procession," Keeley and Sherrard, *Collected Poems*, 2009, 61). Cavafy frequently plays on such competing linguistic registers.

tainment."⁸¹ This music is heard, not by Alexandrians, but by Antony himself. The poem proceeds rather as though Antony's Super-Ego were admonishing him to take courage in the face of adversity, to "go without faltering toward the window" and drink in the "exquisite instruments" of the passing throng; but the poem is phrased so broadly that, were it not for its title, the same exhortation might have been directed toward any Alexandrian confronting the reality that he must eventually, at least through death, lose the beloved hurly-burly of the city.⁸² In Cavafy's narrative, there is, in fact, no longer any distinct omen to be construed.⁸³ Rather, the "invisible company" that passes below Antony's window is, in a way, Alexandria itself, an "Alexandria, who is leaving," or alternatively an "Alexandria, whom [he is] losing," even as his life ends. Both city and man are thus agents in this process of mutual separation: the city proceeds ineluctably onward, away from him, while from his window Antony bids it "farewell."⁸⁴ Cavafy's presentation leaves it indeterminate whether the "God" of his title, who abandons Antony, is intended (as some have thought) to be the eponymous deity of Alexandria, substituted for Plutarch's Dionysos.⁸⁵ Perhaps, instead, Antony's acceptance of his fate is, within a larger framework, only an epiphenomenon of the withdrawal of divine favor. In any case, the broader mes-

⁸¹ Compare Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 376: "Of special interest here is the emphasis on the faculty of hearing as the vehicle for apprehending the true significance of what is taking place, a connection that strongly links this poem to 'But Wise Men Apprehend What is Imminent,' the first in this series of four poems about the wise man's preparedness—or lack thereof—for the uncertainties of life." See my conclusion below.

⁸² This Super-Ego device recurs in several of Cavafy's poems from this period, most notably "Ithaca" (written a month earlier in 1911); see Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria* 37, 40-41; Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 300-338. Haag, *Alexandria* (2004) 68-69, also compares "The City" (1894, published in 1910), with much the same message. Of some interest here are two poems drawn from Roman politics: "Ides of March" (1911) and "Theodotus" (1915). Both concern the vicissitudes of the late Republican civil strife and counsel against over-confidence or *hubris*; and, oddly, both feature Greeks interacting with Roman politicians: Theodotus, a minister of Ptolemy XIII Philopator, who betrayed and beheaded Pompey following his defeat at Pharsalus in 49; and Artemidorus, who unsuccessfully attempted to alert Julius Caesar about the conspiracy in 44. Both make use of the Super-Ego perspective.

⁸³ As I read the poem, Antony actually anticipates the music; in the poem's first half, the music is only imminent ("When ... there comes the sound"), but Antony then hears it in fact as he moves toward the window. This accords with the program in "But Wise Men Apprehend What Is Imminent" (1896), discussed below. I'm grateful to Ruth Scodel for discussing this interpretation with me.

⁸⁴ The exhortation to avoid "the entreaties and the whining of a coward" contrasts sharply with Antony's self-pitying complaints in Plutarch's life (e.g., *Antony* 75.1-2, 76.3-77.3)—an observation made by Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 329. But, as Anton also notes (318), reality is of slight consequence here. Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 41, captures the poem's deeper point: "[W]hat ... defines this kind of city and those worthy of knowing it is the ability to see things for what they are, honestly and courageously, even when what one sees is the inevitable loss of all else that the city has come to represent[,] ... to face the reality beyond the window without self-deception and without hope, but with the courage to feel deeply the last exquisite manifestation of the divine life you are losing."

⁸⁵ Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 6, believes, not implausibly, that Alexandria replaced Dionysos. However, Cavafy himself later stated that his poem was set at the moment "during which the god Dionysos forsakes him (invisible troupe)": Cavafy, "Commentary" (2003/2004) 9.

sage is clear enough. As E.M. Forster said of Cavafy himself, "But so much is certain—either life entails courage, or it ceases to be life."⁸⁶

In Cavafy's poems that deal, in one way or another, with Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean, few actual Romans are mentioned: no arrogant generals, no rapacious governors, although in fact the Roman Senate dispatched many such. Cavafy seems attracted chiefly to those Romans of the late Republic, such as Horace or Antony, who, although they remain distinctively "Roman," nonetheless, at least in Cavafy's portrayal, have become thoroughly imbued with the culture of the Hellenistic East.⁸⁷ But Antony's situation is no longer as in "The End of Antony," where, in his final moments, his *Romanitas* emphatically reasserts itself in confronting the conventional Egyptian theatrics of grief. To be sure, in the later poem Antony's hesitation in accepting his fate might be interpreted somewhat similarly; why, for instance, does he require such repeated self-admonition? His temptation was to lament his own choices, "the plans you made for life, / which turned out wrong," and to blame these choices, or his own weakness of will, for his ultimate defeat. (In fact, the judgment of ancient historians, like Plutarch, runs much along this line.⁸⁸) But in the second half of the poem Antony successfully fights against this temptation as "one who's long prepared, like someone brave, / as befits a man who's been blessed with a city like this."⁸⁹ In this respect, Antony is correctly regarded, so Cavafy suggests, not as one led astray from a better (more Roman) course by the allure of the luxurious East. Instead, in his very succumbing to the enticements of Alexandria he has proven himself worthy of the city; and even as the end nears he is reinvigorated by the luxuriant sounds of the Alexandria he loves so much.⁹⁰ (The seductress Cleopatra has, of course, entirely vanished from this process.)

⁸⁶Forster, "Cavafy," in *Alexandria* (2004) 249.

⁸⁷ But Benne, *Marcus Antonius* (2001) 99-112, argues that Antony was no more Philhellenic than other contemporary Roman statesmen; in any case, this "character flaw" was clearly accentuated by Octavian's propaganda.

⁸⁸ See the *synkrisis*, 3.3: "Antony ... was often disarmed by Cleopatra, subdued by her spells, and persuaded to drop from his hands great undertakings and necessary campaigns ..."

⁸⁹ So Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 10. But this mistranslates *αξιόθηκες*, a verb crucial to the poem. Correct already was Forster, *Alexandria* (2004) 82, who renders the line: "like to the man who was worthy of such a city"; even better is Sachperoglou's "as befits you who were deemed worthy of such a city," *Collected Poems* (2007) 35. Keeley and Sherrard, *Cavafy* (1975), originally rendered the line "as is right for you who were given this kind of city"; in the revised edition (2009) 61, correctly amended to "as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city." I am grateful to Vassilios Lambropoulos for confirming this point.

⁹⁰ Durrell, *Alexandria Quartet* (1962) 17: "[N]one of us is properly to be judged for what happened in the past. It is the city which should be judged though we, its children, must pay the price."

"The God Abandons Antony" bears interesting comparison to "In Evening" (1916), in which Cavafy depicts himself, at twilight, regretfully reading and re-reading a letter that he had long ago received from a lover now lost to him. As he gradually becomes resigned to the separation that "Fate" has effected, Cavafy moves, like Antony, to the windows of his chamber:

And I went out onto the balcony, melancholy—
went out so I might clear my head by seeing at least
a little of this town I love so well,
some little movement in the street, and in the shops.

Alexandria's vibrancy brings Cavafy solace and renewal, a willingness to accept what he lacks the capacity to change.⁹¹ This is, to be sure, a powerful image. Yet in this later poem there is no sense of the inner conflict that had beset Antony as he contemplated the ruins of his ambition. Not for an instant does Cavafy represent himself as having to query his resolution to accept Alexandria as the ultimate touchstone of his own life.⁹²

"Caesarion" (1914), the final poem in Cavafy's "cycle," concerns the last Ptolemaic Pharaoh.⁹³ After the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian, now absolute ruler in Egypt, dealt efficiently with their surviving offspring. Cleopatra's three young children by Antony he handled decently, but Caesarion (now 17 years old) was a putative heir to Julius Caesar and hence a potential rival to Octavian. Cleopatra had sent the boy south, perhaps hoping that he might be smuggled to India. But Caesarion was betrayed by his tutor, captured, and executed a few weeks (at most) after his mother's death. As the philosopher Areius Didymus, a confidant of Octavian, had observed at the time, "It's not good to have too many Caesars"—an epigram Cavafy smoothly adapts as the climax of his poem.⁹⁴

Otherwise, however, the details of Caesarion's end are ignored within the poem itself; important is only the boy's certain doom. Cavafy sets the scene carefully: of an evening, he is

⁹¹ Cavafy clearly associated "The God Abandons Antony" with his own apartment balcony: Haag, *Alexandria* (2004) 4 (quoting Forster; and see page 3 illustrating the balcony); and see 70, where the two poems are compared.

⁹² Compare Durrell, *Alexandria Quartet* (1962) 18, describing Alexandria: "A drunken whore walks in a dark street at night, shedding snatches of song like petals. Was it in this that Anthony heard the heart-numbing strains of the great music which persuaded him to surrender for ever to the city he loved?" It is worth remembering that Cavafy lived upstairs from a brothel: Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 52-53.

⁹³ On the structure, style, and content of this poem, see Robinson, *Cavafy* (1988) 81-86.

⁹⁴ Cavafy's source is Plutarch, *Antony* 81.2; Areius is punning on Homer, *Iliad* 2.204. On Areius, see Fraser, *Alexandria* (1972) 490. On Caesarion's execution, see Schäfer, *Kleopatra* (2006) 249-250.

perusing a collection of Ptolemaic inscriptions all stuffed with fulsome praise of the various male and female monarchs, when he happens upon "a tiny, / insignificant reference to King Caesarion ...". This collection probably is, or at least closely resembles, the 1897 book by the German scholar Max Lebracht Strack.⁹⁵ Exactly why the mention of Caesarion catches Cavafy's notice is unclear, but of course he was previously interested in Caesarion; and the Caesarion inscriptions in Strack's collection are in fact few in number and confined to a single page.

The epiphany that follows is utterly singular:

Ah, there: you came with your indefinite
charm. In history there are only a few
lines that can be found concerning you;
and so I could fashion you more freely in my mind.
I fashioned you this way: beautiful and feeling.
My artistry gives to your face
a beauty that has a dreamy winsomeness.
And so fully did I imagine you
that yesterday, late at night, when the lamp
went out—I deliberately let it go out—
I dared to think you came into my room,
it seemed to me you stood before me: as you must have been
in Alexandria after it had been conquered,
pale and wearied, perfect in your sorrow,
still hoping they'd have mercy on you,
those vile men—who whispered "Surfeit of Caesars."

This passage moves well beyond the "Caesarion all grace and beauty" of "Alexandrian Kings." The earlier Caesarion was already largely a product of Cavafy's fervid imagination; but there the emphasis was on dress and external elegance, as Caesarion would have been seen by the Alexandrian crowd. Here it is Caesarion's imagined face that transfixes Cavafy, who has freely

⁹⁵ Strack, *Ptolemäer* (1897) 219-275, with Caesarion at 272; although this volume was not in the 2004 catalogue, Cavafy may have borrowed it. Compare Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 405: "Etienne Combe, the last European director of the library in Alexandria from which Cavafy would borrow books, recalled that the poet would borrow collections of inscriptions such as those mentioned in this poem." Other possible sources are scouted by Pontani, "Fonti" (1940-1941) 61. On the poetic technique in this poem, see Dimaras, "Technique" (1983).

bestowed upon it "a dreamy winsomeness." Ancient images of Caesarion—or at least those that would have been known to Cavafy—are in the conventional, highly stylized Egyptian tradition, with modest Greek borrowings and nothing, as it seems, to support Cavafy's inventions.⁹⁶ Only recently have more naturalistic (though still idealized) portraits come to light, identified, albeit insecurely, as depicting Caesarion. If these identifications are correct (to be sure, a robust "if"), they might suggest, what Cavafy had perhaps already intuited, the existence of an enduring cult in honor of Julius Caesar's natural son and the last of the Ptolemies.⁹⁷



**Bronze statue recently identified as Caesarion,
from Herakleion Archaeological Museum, Crete
([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMI -
Bronzestatue.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMI -
Bronzestatue.jpg))**

But for Cavafy the absence of such material evidence is a positive thing, since his imagination ("My artistry") is therefore unconstrained by incorrigible reality.⁹⁸ His resulting re-creation is unmistakably a highly erotic fantasy, a sort of homosexual adaptation of the Pygmalion story. The "beautiful and feeling" image of Caesarion is so fully envisaged that he seems to enter Cavafy's dar-

⁹⁶ The principal images are from the walls of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera and the Temple of Horus at Edfu; for images, see Goudchaux, "Strategy" (2001) 138-139; Ashton, *Last Queens* (2003) 52-53; Roller, (2010) 113-114. Several large sculptures or sculpture fragments, all Egyptianizing and not very securely identified, also survive: e.g., Walker and Higgs, *Cleopatra* (2001) 172-175 (a basalt head and torso from Karnak; a colossal granite head from the harbor of Alexandria; a sandstone stele from Coptos); Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome* (2005) 144-145, 148. See generally Ashton, *Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture* (2001) 96-99.

⁹⁷ Much the most sensational is an extraordinary bronze statue recently found at Ierapetra and now in the Archaeological Museum of Herakleion, Crete (with marble copies in Rome and Budapest), identified by Paolo Moreno as a portrait of Caesarion: <http://www.arsetfuror.com/r12Antico15.htm>; for color images of the statue, see Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki, *Herakleion* (2005) 386, and <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMI - Bronzestatue.jpg>. This poignant statue depicts a gloomy young man wrapped in a cloak, clearly deceased; the workmanship is superb. See also the fine marble portrait bust, possibly of a youthful Caesarion, in the Nasjonalgalleriet of Oslo: illustrated in Green, *Alexander to Actium* (1990) 677 fig. 213 ("very probably"); another image in Phillip Matyszak, *The Sons of Caesar: Imperial Rome's First Dynasty* (2006) 75 fig. 12. And Claude Rolley, "Kleopatra's Kinder" (2006) 164-175 (168-173 on the Boy from Cap D'Agde, discovered in 2001 off the coast of Languedoc, a boy aged 6 or so; and 173-174 on seal ring impressions from Paphos, a young adult). Other possible portraits are canvassed by Roller, *Cleopatra* (2010) 175, 177.

⁹⁸ Jusdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 9-13, rightly stresses Cavafy's anti-Romantic stance in "Caesarion." However, this observation does not explain Cavafy's choice of Caesarion as a subject.

kened chamber (the guttering lamp is a particularly fine touch) and to stand before his creator in the guise he had at the moment of Octavian's conquest, just before his death at the hands of "those vile men." Over the decades, a swarm of ghosts crowded into Cavafy's apartment, particularly after dusk:⁹⁹ the image of an old lover, recollected as "handsomer" than in a pencil sketch ("Aboard the Ship," 1919); dead friends or lovers, reappearing in dreams or thoughts ("Voices," 1894); a close friend, who had died at the age of 19 but who, for those who knew him, lingers in "their souls, / and memories, and hearts" ("To Stephanos Skilitsis," 1886, unpublished); even a younger avatar of Cavafy himself, come to remind the aging poet "of shuttered perfumed rooms / and of pleasure spent," but also of "deaths in the family; separations; / the feelings of my loved ones, the feelings of / those long dead which I so little valued" ("Since Nine—," 1918).

Perhaps most closely comparable to "Caesarion," however, is the brief and uncirculated "In the Theatre" (1904, unpublished), in which Cavafy, bored by the play itself, notices in a box a young man of "queer beauty, and ... spoilt youth," about whom he has heard some item of particularly lurid gossip. Cavafy's reaction is electric:

and my thoughts and my body were stirred.
And whilst I gazed enchanted
at your weary beauty, at your weary youth,
at your discriminating attire,
I imagined you and I depicted you,
in just the way they'd talked about you, that afternoon.

This plainly erotic envisioning of a modish libertine can perhaps be regarded as a sort of dress rehearsal for "Caesarion," although, of course, the later poem lacks the prurience of "In the Theatre," where the subject's physical beauty precedes and triggers the poet's daydream rather than being the product of it. But the exhausted mien of the two young men is quite similar, as is the sense of doom that, albeit for different reasons, surrounds each.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ See Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) xxxv-xxxvi.

¹⁰⁰ See Robinson, *Cavafy* (1988) 84, on "the theme of the youth as victim." On this poem: Papanikolaou, "Words" (2005) 246-249.

Nonetheless, the transfer of such yearning to a virtually unknown historical figure is a far more arresting instance of "erotic archaeology." As Edmund Keeley observes,¹⁰¹

The poem has a double thrust in its re-creation of history: the poet's attempt to solicit sympathy for this doomed—and generally ignored—victim of a political "progress" beyond his control, and the poet's implicit statement about the characterization of the Ptolemies that he discovers in the inscriptions mentioned in the opening stanza. The evocation of Kaisarion's pathetic last hours—signalling the cruel end of the Ptolemaic line—in effect places the unreservedly glorified history of the inscriptions in proper perspective.

This is helpful in refocusing our attention not only on the more general structure of the poem itself, but also on its broader relationship to the history of the Ptolemies and on the "moral" that Cavafy wished to draw from that history.

But Keeley may be less convincing when he goes on to claim that: "it is the poet's intense personalization of his historical material that dominates the poem, excessively for some tastes, since the rhetoric is colored not so much by the pathos of Kaisarion's predicament as by the poet's uninhibited involvement in his late evening vision." At any rate, this may miss Cavafy's more subtle point. With "Caesarion," as ten years previously with "Orophernes" and the decay of the Seleucid dynasty, Cavafy evidently associates his own preoccupations as a homosexual poet with his perception of how the Hellenistic world was politically marginalized as a result of Roman conquest. There is, he implies, or at least suggests, a broad parallel between these disparate phenomena, one that he can then use in order to bring his own marginalized sexual *persona* into alliance with his marginalized social and political *persona*.¹⁰² As Keeley indicates, the result may not be to every reader's taste, but that is another matter entirely.

At long last, in the poems of Cavafy, there comes a moment where the recollections (or pseudo-recollections) of his poetic *persona* meld almost seamlessly with the records (or pseudo-records) of historical figures, notwithstanding the disparity between the two genres in subject,

¹⁰¹ Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 96-97.

¹⁰² See Jusdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 104-110, on marginality as essential to Cavafy's modernism.

form, and tone.¹⁰³ Cavafy once claimed that he was driven toward the past by "125 voices inside me telling me I could write history."¹⁰⁴ In his historical poems, we may surmise, Cavafy has listened attentively to all these clamoring voices, and has then appropriated them for himself and his art. The past is not lost to us. The past is not alien, a foreign country; but only ourselves, if seen through different eyes. History lies, not behind us, but beside and before us, illuminating our pathways and guiding our footsteps forward. Still, it is very much our own responsibility to light this lamp in the first place, and to keep it always glowing.

Conclusion: Making History Personal

There is substance to Robert Liddell's observation that Cavafy's "best historical poems are generally the re-creation of an atmosphere, or the poetical expansion of a character from a line or two of an ancient text, or a deduction from a face on a coin."¹⁰⁵ But this observation should not be understood either as suggesting that Cavafy's historical forays were mainly casual exercises, or as undermining the ultimate seriousness of his broader inquiry. On the contrary, Cavafy's very perseverance, over decades, indicates the intensity of his concern.

As I have suggested in this paper, Cavafy's historical poems, taken individually, may perhaps best be viewed as the products of a fairly intense hermeneutical research program.¹⁰⁶ Although he usually takes his sources pretty much at face value, he actively interrogates them in the process of creating poetry. Only rarely does a poem slavishly follow its primary or secondary source; almost always there is a distinctive admixture of Cavafy's own invention—something most obvious in poems like "Alexandrian Kings" (1912), where the deliberate confla-

¹⁰³ This melding is put very well by Kalogeris, "Sensuous Archaism" (2009): "Cavafy's great gift is for compressing historical narratives into dramatic monologues that illuminate a shifting epoch, or for getting at the obsessions (sexual, political, aesthetic) that drive a life in one implacable direction: both predicaments are viewed as traps set by the psyche or by the Parcae, and Cavafy's tenderness is in his level, unwavering attention to the way that lives unfold and empires expire."

¹⁰⁴ Sachperoglou, *Collected Poems* (2007) xxv, quotes Cavafy's self-commentary in Lechonites, ed., *Αντοσχόλια* (1977) 19-20: "I am a *poietes historikos* [historical poet or poet-historian]; I would never be able to write a novel or a play, but I feel 125 voices inside me telling me I could write history." In a helpful footnote, Sachperoglou adds George Seferis's comment: "I don't think *poietes historikos* means a poet who also writes history or who versifies history; if the word 'poet' has any meaning at all, it means someone who possesses a historic sense."

¹⁰⁵ Liddell, *Cavafy* (1974) 125; compare Catsaouni, "Cavafy" (1983).

¹⁰⁶ See Beaton, "History Man" (1983) 43: "... Cavafy's historical poems are ... the testimony to a rational confrontation between the creative imagination, whose sphere is the present moment, and the consciousness of the past as always beyond the reach of that moment."

tion of two ancient sources is accompanied by Cavafy's calculated addition of plausible detail in order to emphasize the themes that he considers important. At times this addition may be largely ephemeral, a shift in viewpoint or an expanded description; at other points, however, Cavafy engages in more heroic construction of his own distinctive poetics, such as occurs, for instance, in "Caesarion" (1914) or in "Maker of Wine Bowls" (1903/1912), where Cavafy sounds his great central themes of the fragility of beauty and of the poet's power and duty to preserve it.¹⁰⁷ But the broader crux is that reconstruction of Cavafy's hermeneutical dialogue with his sources is crucial to fully comprehending his historical poems. Although even the most esoteric poems (such as "Orophernes," 1904) may appeal to naïve readers simply through Cavafy's forceful presentation, their profundity is, in most instances, enormously enhanced through careful historical analysis, just as Cavafy evidently intended.

If we turn now to the wider contest of the historical "cycles" that these individual poems comprise, it becomes relatively easy to see how Cavafy used the poems in order to fashion a bridge from his own world—mainly, the contemporary city of Alexandria—backward to the specific periods of the past that, for one reason or another, caught his attention.¹⁰⁸ The poems associated with each of these "islands" of history do, for the most part, form a unified and harmonious whole, even if they do not necessarily rise to the level of a "cycle." But Cavafy's larger process has two further aspects, one negative and one positive. On the one hand, Cavafy artfully constructs, for instance, an elaborate (and largely fictitious) cultural continuity between early twentieth-century Alexandria and the Greco-Roman East, while virtually omitting both the preceding feats of Alexander the Great and of the founders of the great Hellenistic dynasties, and the subsequent millennium of Arab occupation—periods, for Cavafy, of little or no personal interest.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the intimate ties he creates with the past enable him, as we have seen, to comment on his own time—in particular, on political or social issues he was otherwise loath to discuss directly—through the oblique lens of historical experience.

¹⁰⁷ Jusdanis, *Poetics* (1987) 8-15, 89-95, 107-108.

¹⁰⁸ This is also true for the "cycle" on Julian, see above all Bowersock, "Julian Poems" (1981/2009), and "New Cavafy" (1996/2009); and that on Apollonius of Tyana, see Bowersock, "Apollonios" (1983/2009). As to the third century BCE, Cavafy's attention seems captured mainly by Plutarch's *Life of Cleomenes*, and a bit by his *Life of Demetrius the Besieger* ("King Demetrius," 1906).

¹⁰⁹ See Keeley, *Alexandria* (1976) 88, who notes the exception: "Fugitives" (1914), in which a handful of ninth-century Greeks struggle to maintain Greek culture in Alexandria; see also Pinchin, *Alexandria Still* (1977) 69-70.

Although Cavafy is scarcely alone among modernist poets in making heavy use of history (one thinks of T. S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound, or Bertolt Brecht, or Derek Walcott), he is unique in that editions of his poems are almost invariably accompanied by editorial commentaries explaining his historical references—this for the obvious reason that not only is his subject matter regularly abstruse even to the classically educated (not one in a thousand of whom, I wager, could correctly identify Orophernes), but knowledge of that subject matter is frequently required in order to make much more than hazy sense of his poems. Daniel Mendelsohn's splendid new translation of Cavafy's poems comes equipped with a particularly lengthy commentary, so long, in fact, that some reviewers have complained about its size.

My feeling, however, is just the opposite: that even Mendelsohn's commentary is still not extensive enough, at least when it comes to probing the layers of meaning that Cavafy built up around his historical poems. A good example is "For Antiochus Epiphanes," a poem that Cavafy began in about 1911, but finished and published only in 1922. In an extravagant gesture, a male favorite of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (perhaps the fictional Emonides mentioned in "Temethus, Antiochene: 400 A.D.," 1925), on whom the king has lavished many gifts, offers to part with all of them if the Macedonians, under King Perseus, can only prevail in their struggle with Rome. Fairly obviously, he is pleading with Antiochus to intervene on the side of Perseus. But the timorous Seleucid King, mindful of his family's prior travails with Rome and fearing Roman spies, gives no response, and is content simply to await "the horrible conclusion" at the battle of Pydna, where the Roman army decisively defeated a far larger Macedonian force, with devastating consequences for the entire Hellenistic East.¹¹⁰

As it concerns the Seleucids, the history underlying this poem is readily explained.¹¹¹ The year is, in all likelihood, 169 or 168, as the Third Macedonian War between Rome and Perseus (171-168) came to a crisis. Perseus had repeatedly sought help from Antiochus,¹¹² who

¹¹⁰ See just P. S. Derow, in Astin et al., *CAH*² 8 (1989) 315-319. Bevan, *Seleucus II* (1902) 133, describes Antiochus' attitude toward Rome as "scrupulously deferential," a phrase that might be the starting point for the present poem.

¹¹¹ Mittag, *Antiochus IV* (2006) 159-181, 209-213.

¹¹² E.g., Polybius 29.4.8-10 (in Winter, 169/168, Perseus' envoy urged Antiochus IV "not to neglect this opportunity, nor think that the arrogance and oppression of the Romans were confined to himself, but to recognize clearly that if he did not at present also come to his assistance, either, as was best, by putting an end to the war, or, if not, by helping in it, he would soon experience the same fate"); an offer of a last-ditch alliance was rejected (Livy 44.24.1-7). Perseus had also vainly solicited help also in 171 (Polybius, 27.7.15). Perseus' marriage in 178 to Laodice, the daughter of the previous Seleucid king, may have aroused suspicion at Rome, and it certainly provided one propa-

nonetheless remained ostensibly loyal to Rome throughout the war. His caution is easily understood; it was only a few years previously that he had finally paid off the heavy war indemnity his father and then his brother remitted to Rome after the disastrous battle of Magnesia. Further, Antiochus himself had formerly been a political hostage at Rome. Finally, the Senate's suspicions of Antiochus are well documented. Although the incident with the young Antiochene is Cavafy's free invention, it is consistent with recorded history.

While this history suffices, the resulting poem may then seem unexpectedly thin. Why did Cavafy find this invented situation so intriguing, enough to bring him back to the poem more than a decade after its first draft? The probable answer is that Cavafy was fully aware of two additional facts—both also well known to ancient historians—that lie beyond the perimeter of the poem itself and that serve considerably to deepen its irony. First, although Antiochus IV was in point of fact highly averse to challenging Roman policies, he had been more than ready to take advantage of Rome's engagement with Perseus in order to pursue his own gain elsewhere. During 169/168, Antiochus was so successful in his war with Ptolemaic Egypt that his armies approached the walls of Alexandria. Antiochus' preoccupation with his Egyptian war would doubtless have precluded aid to Perseus even had he been so inclined, but it also illustrates Cavafy's frequent point about the failure of the Hellenistic kingdoms to attain unity against a common foe.



Antiochus IV and Popilius Laenas, by Augustyn Mirys (1700-1790)
http://www.art.com/gallery/id--c24842/polish-art-prints_p2.htm

Second, Cavafy's mention of the battle of Pydna is more than just casual. The immediate outcome of the battle was calamitous not only for Rome's military enemies, but even for

gandistic pretext for the Third Macedonian War (see Livy, 42.13.3; Appian, *Macedonian Wars* 11.2). On the causes for the war, see Gruen, *Hellenistic World* (1984) 408-419.

its constant friends, and above all for Antiochus. Directly following Rome's victory at Pydna, in one of the most notorious incidents of Roman history, the legate Gaius Popillius Laenas approached Antiochus in a suburb of Alexandria and coldly handed him a copy of the decree of the Senate ordering him to desist at once from his campaign against Egypt. Polybius narrates: "But when the king, after reading it, said he would like to communicate with his friends about this intelligence, Popilius acted in a manner which was thought to be offensive and exceedingly arrogant. He was carrying a stick cut from a vine, and with this he drew a circle round Antiochus and told him he must remain inside this circle until he gave his decision about the contents of the letter. The king was astonished at this authoritative proceeding, but, after a few moments' hesitation, said he would do all that the Romans demanded. Upon this Popilius and his suite all grasped him by the hand and greeted him warmly."¹¹³ The Romans had no legal right to make such a demand, nor did they even offer a pretext. As Christian Habicht puts it: "The Senate simply no longer bothered to conceal the fact that Rome now had the power to dictate her will. ... Roman policy at this time was imperialistic; it did not allow for meaningful negotiations, for mutual acknowledgement of legitimate political goals, for compromise; there were demands on one side and obedience on the other."¹¹⁴

There can be no doubt that Cavafy himself was cognizant of this historical background, and little doubt, either, that in his poem he sought to incorporate it by reference. Recapturing the rich irony of Cavafy's historical poems is very much the obligation of a proper critic. In an important early programmatic poem ("But Wise Men Apprehend What Is Imminent," 1896), Cavafy picks up on a saying attributed to the first-century CE philosopher Apollonius of Tyana, that: "The gods perceive what lies in the future, and mortals, what occurs in the present, but wise men apprehend what is imminent."¹¹⁵ For wise men, Cavafy interprets this aphorism to mean that:

¹¹³ On "the day of Eleusis," see Polybius, 29.27 (quoted: 29.27.4-6, with the commentary of Walbank: "The ultimatum given to Antiochus was famous."); Livy, 45.12.3-8; Justin, 34.2.1-2; Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 66 (350-351); Cicero, *Phil.* 8.23; Velleius, 1.10.1-2; Valerius Maximus, 6.4.3; Plutarch, *Moralia* 202f-203a; Porphyry, *FGrHist* 260 F 50; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 34.24; Zonaras, 9.25. Alluded to in *Daniel* 11.24-30. With further discussion and bibliography, Mittag, *Antiochus IV* (2006) 214-224. Even for Gruen, *Hellenistic World* (1984) 658-660, who tries to mitigate the incident, nonetheless "The 'day of Eleusis' lives in infamy" (658).

¹¹⁴ Habicht, "Seleucids" (1990) 345.

¹¹⁵ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 8.7.9 ("For the sage will not wait for the earth to send up its exhalations, or for the atmosphere to be corrupted, in case the evil is shed from above; but he will notice these things when they are impending, not so soon indeed as the gods, yet sooner than the many. For the gods perceive what lies in the future, and men what is going on before them, and wise men what is approaching.") The perception of human wisdom as intermediate between omniscience and ignorance is drawn from Plato: *Lysis* 218B; *Symp.* 204A; *Phae-*

"Their hearing, / sometimes, in moments of complete / absorption in their studies, is disturbed. The secret call / of events that are about to happen reaches them. / And they listen to it reverently. While in the street / outside, the people hear nothing at all." In his early collection, Cavafy set this poem in relation to others depicting his subjects' success, or lack of success, in discerning what was about to happen in the world around them: Julius Caesar, elated by his victories, but failing to comprehend the portent of Pompey's gory beheading ("Theodotus," 1911), and then also ignoring a final warning on the very day of his assassination ("Ides of March," 1906); Antony successfully interpreting the "exquisite music" of an "invisible procession" ("The God Abandons Antony," 1910); and we may add the Emperor Nero's smug failure to grasp the meaning of a Delphic prophesy ("Nero's Deadline," 1915), among other poems.¹¹⁶ The "wise men," the *sophoi*, are those individuals "who foresee the coming of dreadful things. They do not panic, nor do they implore; they understand, stand, defend and, one suspects, even die. They are the courageous still."¹¹⁷

John Anton remarks that: "Cavafy never seems to have doubted the belief that the man of wisdom is a better judge of actions than the common man. By opting for a wisdom that includes rational judgment as a guide and test of values, while illuminating the demands of the desires, he moves out of the shadow of Romanticism as well as that of symbolism."¹¹⁸ It is against this background, I think, that we today must approach Cavafy's historical poetry. Cavafy is justly famed for his success in creating a sort of surface candor, with little metaphor or apparent artifice. My colleague Ruth Scodel has observed that: "Cavafy, unlike much Hellenistic poetry, is immediately accessible. The difficulties of Hellenistic poetry are a barrier right from the start: its language is difficult, the allusions are many, the social context is not always familiar, the narrative structures seem peculiar. Cavafy, in contrast, is easy on the surface ... [its] implied narratives ... not demand[ing] deep learning to make an immediate impression."¹¹⁹ However, as Scodel immediately goes on to note, Cavafy's apparent openness is, at the very least, deceptive. In fact, what he wrote is learned poetry, informed by the rich Hellenistic traditions that Cavafy re-

drus 278D. See Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 319-320. On the background to the composition of this and the other Apollonius poems, see Bowersock, "Apollonios" (1983/2009) 154-158.

¹¹⁶ See Mendelsohn, *Collected Poems* (2009) 374-375. This poem should also be read in relation to "Finished" (1910), which stresses the final futility of striving to "avoid the certain / danger that threatens us so terribly."

¹¹⁷ Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 258, citing also "Thermopylae" (1901).

¹¹⁸ Anton, *Poetry and Poetics* (1995) 319.

¹¹⁹ Scodel, "Preface" (2003) 2.

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discovered and restored to life. It is poetry that commands and repays the sort of intense concentration that Cavafy recommends for life in general: "complete absorption" in the study of detail and a reverent anticipation of the "secret call of events that are about to happen."

Appendix: Cavafy Poems on the Rise of Rome

| | Dramatic Date | Date of: Composition | Publication | Status |
|---|------------------|-------------------------|-------------|---------|
| Early Poems: The Culture Wars (5 Poems) | | | | |
| The Tarentines Have Their Fun | 282 | 1898 | | Repub. |
| The Lagid's Hospitality | 221-205 | 1893 | | Unpub. |
| A Displeased Theatregoer | ca. 170-160 | 1893 | | Unpub. |
| Alexandrian Merchant | II/I BCE? | 1893 | | Unpub. |
| Horace in Athens | ca. 43? | 1897 | | Repub. |
| The Hellenistic Kingdoms and the Rise of Rome (35 Poems) | | | | |
| The Glory of the Ptolemies | III BCE? | 1896/1911 | 1911 | Publ. |
| Poseidonians | III/II BCE? | 1906 | | Unpubl. |
| Greek Since Ancient Times | III/II BCE? | 1927 | 1927 | Publ. |
| Agelaus | 217 | 1932 | | Unfin. |
| In 200 B.C. | 200 | 1916? | 1931 | Publ. |
| In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C. | 200 | 1928 | 1928 | Publ. |
| The Battle of Magnesia | 190 | 1913 | 1916 | Publ. |
| Maker of Wine Bowls | 190/175 | 1903/1912 | 1921 | Publ. |
| Epitaph of a Samian | 175-164 | 1925 | | Unfin. |
| For Antiochus Epiphanes | 170-169 | 1911?/1922 | 1922 | Publ. |
| Envoys from Alexandria | 164 | 1915 | 1919 | Publ. |
| The Seleucid's Displeasure | 164 | 1910 | 1916 | Publ. |
| Orophernes | ca. 157 | 1904 | 1916 | Publ. |
| Of Demetrius Soter (162-150 B.C.) | ca. 150 | 1915 | 1919 | Publ. |
| Favour of Alexander Balas | 150-146 | 1916? | 1921 | Publ. |
| On the Italian Seashore | 146 | 1925 | 1925 | Publ. |
| Those Who Fought on Behalf of the Achaean League | 146/110 | 1922 | 1922 | Publ. |
| Ptolemy the Benefactor (or Malefactor) | 145-116 | 1922 | | Unfin. |
| Should Have Taken the Trouble | 125-123 | 1930 | 1930 | Publ. |
| On the March to Sinope | 120 | 1928 | 1928 | Publ. |
| The Dynasty | ca. 116? | 1923 | | Unfin. |
| Antiochus the Cyzicene | 113 | 1923 | | Unfin. |
| Alexander Jannaeus, and Alexandra | 103-76 | 1929 | 1929 | Publ. |
| Epitaph | II/I BCE | 1893 | | Unpubl. |
| Homecoming from Greece | II/I BCE | 1914 | | Unpubl. |
| Coins | II/I BCE | 1920 | | Unpubl. |
| Potentate from Western Libya | II/I BCE | 1928 | 1928 | Publ. |
| Philhellene | I BCE? | 1906 | 1912 | Publ. |
| Darius | 89 | <1897?/1917 | 1920 | Publ. |
| Tigranocerta | 69 | 1929 | | Unfin. |

| | | | | |
|--|-----|-----------|------|-------|
| Theodotus | 48 | <1911 | 1915 | Publ. |
| Ides of March | 44 | 1906 | 1910 | Publ. |
| Epitaph of Antiochus, King of Commagene | 38? | 1923? | 1923 | Publ. |
| Aristobulus | 35 | 1893/1903 | 1911 | Publ. |
| Sculptor from Tyana | 30? | 1893/1903 | 1911 | Publ. |

The End of the Ptolemies (6 Poems)

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------|----|-----------|------|---------|
| Alexandrian Kings | 34 | 1912 | 1912 | Publ. |
| In a Municipality of Asia Minor | 31 | 1926 | 1926 | Publ. |
| The Year 31 B.C. in Alexandria | 31 | 1917/1924 | 1924 | Publ. |
| The God Abandons Antony | 30 | 1910 | 1911 | Publ. |
| The End of Antony | 30 | 1907 | | Unpubl. |
| Caesarion | 30 | 1914 | 1918 | Publ. |

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