Classic Poetry Series

Constantine P. Cavafy

- poems -

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Constantine P. Cavafy (April 29, 1863 – April 29, 1933)

Constantine P. Cavafy, also known as Konstantin or Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis, or Kavaphes was a renowned Greek poet who lived in Alexandria and worked as a journalist and civil servant. He published 154 poems; dozens more remained incomplete or in sketch form. His most important poetry was written after his fortieth birthday.

Biography

Cavafy was born in 1863 in Alexandria, Egypt, to Greek parents, and was baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church. His father was a prosperous importer-exporter who had lived in England in earlier years and acquired British nationality. After his father died in 1870, Cavafy and his family settled for a while in Liverpool in England. In 1876, his family faced financial problems due to the Long Depression of 1873, so, by 1877, they had to move back to Alexandria.

In 1882, disturbances in Alexandria caused the family to move again, though temporarily, to Constantinople. This was the year when a revolt broke out in Alexandria against the Anglo-French control of Egypt, thus precipitating the 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War. Alexandria was bombarded by a British fleet and the family apartment at Ramleh was burned.

In 1885, Cavafy returned to Alexandria, where he lived for the rest of his life. His first work was as a journalist; then he took a position with the British-run Egyptian Ministry of Public Works for thirty years. (Egypt was a British protectorate until 1926.) He published his poetry from 1891 to 1904 in the form of broadsheets, and only for his close friends. Any acclaim he was to receive came mainly from within the Greek community of Alexandria. Eventually, in 1903, he was introduced to mainland-Greek literary circles through a favourable review by Xenopoulos. He received little recognition because his style differed markedly from the then-mainstream Greek poetry. It was only 20 years later, after the Greek defeat in the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), that a new generation of almost nihilist poets (e.g. Karyotakis) would find inspiration in Cavafy's work.

A biographical note written by Cavafy reads as follows:

"I am from Constantinople by descent, but I was born in Alexandria—at a house on Seriph Street; I left very young, and spent much of my childhood in England. Subsequently I visited this country as an adult, but for a short period of time. I have also lived in France. During my adolescence I lived over two years in Constantinople. It has been many years since I last visited Greece. My last employment was as a clerk at a government office under the

Ministry of Public Works of Egypt. I know English, French, and a little Italian."

He died of cancer of the larynx on April 29, 1933, his 70th birthday. Since his death, Cavafy's reputation has grown. He is now considered one of the finest European and modern Greek poets. His poetry is taught at schools in mainland Greece and Cyprus, and across universities around the world.

E.M. Forster knew him personally and wrote a memoir of him, contained in his book Alexandria. Forster, Arnold Toynbee, and T.S. Eliot were among the earliest promoters of Cavafy in the English-speaking world before the Second World War. In 1966, David Hockney made a series of prints to illustrate a selection of Cavafy's poems, including In the dull village.

Work

Cavafy was instrumental in the revival and recognition of Greek poetry both at home and abroad. His poems are, typically, concise but intimate evocations of real or literary figures and milieux that have played roles in Greek culture. Uncertainty about the future, sensual pleasures, the moral character and psychology of individuals, homosexuality, and a fatalistic existential nostalgia are some of the defining themes.

Besides his subjects, unconventional for the time, his poems also exhibit a skilled and versatile craftsmanship, which is almost completely lost in translation. Cavafy was a perfectionist, obsessively refining every single line of his poetry. His mature style was a free iambic form, free in the sense that verses rarely rhyme and are usually from 10 to 17 syllables. In his poems, the presence of rhyme usually implies irony.

Cavafy drew his themes from personal experience, along with a deep and wide knowledge of history, especially of the Hellenistic era. Many of his poems are pseudo-historical, or seemingly historical, or accurately, but quirkily, historical.

One of Cavafy's most important works is his 1904 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians". In 1911, Cavafy wrote Ithaca, inspired by the Homeric return journey of Odysseus to his home island, as depicted in the Odyssey. The poem's theme is that enjoyment of the journey of life, and the increasing maturity of the soul as that journey continues, are all the traveler can ask for.

Almost all of Konstantinos Kavafis' work was in Greek; yet, his poetry remained unrecognized in Greece until after the publication of his first anthology in 1935. He is known for his prosaic use of metaphors, his brilliant use of historical imagery, and his aesthetic perfectionism. These attributes, amongst others, have assured him an enduring place in the literary pantheon of the Western World.

Historical poems

These poems are mainly inspired by the Hellenistic era with Alexandria at primary focus. Other poems originate from Helleno-romaic antiquity and the Byzantine era. Mythological references are also present. The periods chosen are mostly of decline and decadence (e.g. Trojans); his heroes facing the final end.

Sensual poems

The sensual poems are filled with lyricism and emotion; inspired by recollection and remembrance. The past and former actions, sometimes along with the vision for the future underlie the muse of Cavafy in writing these poems.

Philosophical poems

Also called instructive poems they are divided into poems with consultations

to poets and poems that deal with other situations such as closure (for example, "The walls"), debt (for example, "Thermopylae"), and human dignity (for example, "The God Abandons Antony").

Museum

Cavafy's Alexandria apartment has since been converted into a museum. The museum holds several of Cavafy's sketches and original manuscripts as well as containing several pictures and portraits of and by Cavafy.

Other references

C. P. Cavafy appears as a character in the Alexandria Quartet of Lawrence Durrell.

The Weddings Parties Anything song 'The Afternoon Sun' is based on the Cavafy poem of the same title.

The American poet Mark Doty's book My Alexandria uses the place and imagery of Cavafy to create a comparable contemporary landscape.

The Canadian poet and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen memorably transformed Cavafy's poem "The God Abandons Antony," based on Mark Antony's loss of the city of Alexandria and his empire, into "Alexandra Leaving," a song around lost love

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Filmography:
Cavafy, a biographical film was directed by Iannis Smaragdis in 1996 with music by Vangelis. A literary form of the script of the film was also published in book form by Smaragdis.

Other references:
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A Byzantine Nobleman In Exile Composing Verses

The frivolous can call me frivolous.
I've always been most punctilious about
important things. And I insist
that no one knows better than I do
the Holy Fathers, or the Scriptures, or the Canons of the Councils.
Whenever he was in doubt,
whenever he had any ecclesiastical problem,
Botaniatis consulted me, me first of all.
But exiled here (may she be cursed, that viper
Irini Doukaina) , and incredibly bored,
it is not altogether unfitting to amuse myself
writing six- and eight-line verses,
to amuse myself poeticizing myths
of Hermes and Apollo and Dionysos,
or the heroes of Thessaly and the Peloponnese;
and to compose the most strict iambics,
such as—if you'll allow me to say so—
the intellectuals of Constantinople don't know how to compose.
It must be just this strictness that provokes their disapproval.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Great Procession of Priests and Laymen

A procession of priests and laymen—
each walk of life represented—
moves through streets, squares, and gates
of the famous city, Antioch.
At the head of this imposing procession
a handsome white-clad boy
carries the Cross, his arms raised—
our strength and hope, the holy Cross.
The pagans, lately so full of arrogance,
now reticent and cowardly,
quickly slink away from the procession.
Let them keep their distance, always keep their distance from us
(as long as they do not renounce their errors).
The holy Cross goes forward; it brings joy and consolation
to every quarter where Christians live;
and these God-fearing people, elated,
stand in their doorways and greet it reverently,
the strength, the salvation of the universe, the Cross.

This is an annual Christian festival.
But today, you see, it is more conspicuous.
The empire is delivered at last.
The vile, the appalling Julian
reigns no longer.

For most pious Jovian let us give our prayers.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Prince from Western Libya

Aristomenis, son of Menelaos,
the Prince from Western Libya,
was generally liked in Alexandria
during the ten days he spent there.
As his name, his dress, modest, was also Greek.
He received honors gladly,
but he did not solicit them; he was unassuming.
He bought Greek books,
especially history and philosophy.
Above all he was a man of few words.
It got around that he must be a profound thinker,
and men like that naturally don't speak very much.

He was neither a profound thinker nor anything else—
just a piddling, laughable man.
He assumed a Greek name, dressed like the Greeks,
learned to behave more or less like a Greek;
and all the time he was terrified he would spoil
his reasonably good image
by coming out with barbaric howlers in Greek
and the Alexandrians, in their usual way,
would make fun of him, vile people that they are.

This was why he limited himself to a few words,
terribly careful of his syntax and pronunciation;
and he was driven almost out of his mind, having
so much talk bottled up inside him.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Young Poet In His 24th Year

Brain, work now as well as you can.
A one-sided passion is destroying him.
He's in a maddening situation.
Every day he kisses the face he worships,
his hands are on those exquisite limbs.
He's never loved before with this degree of passion.
But the beautiful fulfillment of love
is lacking, that fulfillment is lacking
which both of them must want with the same intensity.

(They aren't equally given to the abnormal form of sensual pleasure;
only he is completely possessed by it.)

And so he's wearing himself out, all on edge.
Then—to make things worse—he's out of work.
He manages somehow to borrow
a little here and there (sometimes
almost begging for it) and he just gets by.
He kisses those adored lips, excites himself
on that exquisite body—though he now feels
it only acquiesces. And then
he drinks and smokes, drinks and smokes;
and he drags himself to the cafés all day long,
drags the weariness consuming his beauty.
Brain, work now as well as you can.

Constantine P. Cavafy

According To The Formulas Of Ancient Grecosyrian Magi

"What distillate can be discovered from herbs
of a witching brew," said an aesthete,
"what distillate prepared according
to the formulas of ancient Grecosyrian magi
which for a day (if no longer
its potency can last), or even for a short time
can bring my twenty three years to me
again; can bring my friend of twenty two
to me again -- his beauty, his love.

"What distillate prepared according
to the formulas of ancient Grecosyrian magi
which, in bringing back these things,
can also bring back our little room."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Addition

I do not question whether I am happy or unhappy.
Yet there is one thing that I keep gladly in mind --
that in the great addition (their addition that I abhor)
that has so many numbers, I am not one
of the many units there. In the final sum
I have not been calculated. And this joy suffices me.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Aemilianus Monae, Alexandrian, 628 - 655 A.D.

With words, with countenance, and with manners
I shall build an excellent panoply;
and in this way I shall face evil men
without having any fear or weakness.

They will want to harm me. But of those
who approach me none will know
where my wounds are, my vulnerable parts,
under all the lies that will cover me. --

Boastful words of Aemilianus Monae.
Did he ever build this panoply?
In any case, he did not wear it much.
He died in Sicily, at the age of twenty-seven.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Alexander Jannaios And Alexandra

Full of their success, thoroughly satisfied,
King Alexander Jannaios
and his wife Queen Alexandra
move through the streets of Jerusalem
with musicians in the lead
and every kind of pomp and circumstance.
The work begun by the great Judas Maccabaios
and his four celebrated brothers
has now been concluded brilliantly,
work relentlessly carried on
among so many obstacles and dangers.
Nothing unseemly remains now.
All subservience to the haughty monarchs
of Antioch is over. Clearly
King Alexander Jannaios
and his wife Queen Alexandra
are equal to the Selefkids in every way.
Good Jews, pure Jews, devoted Jews above all.
But, as circumstances require,
also skilled in speaking Greek,
even on familiar terms with Greeks and Hellenized monarchs—
as equals, though, let that be understood.
The work begun by the great Judas Maccabaios
and his four celebrated brothers
has indeed been concluded brilliantly,
concluded in the most striking way.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Alexandrian Kings

The Alexandrians were gathered
to see Cleopatra's children,
Caesarion, and his little brothers,
Alexander and Ptolemy, whom for the first
time they lead out to the Gymnasium,
there to proclaim kings,
in front of the grand assembly of the soldiers.

Alexander -- they named him king
of Armenia, Media, and the Parthians.
Ptolemy -- they named him king
of Cilicia, Syria, and Phoenicia.
Caesarion stood more to the front,
dressed in rose-colored silk,
on his breast a bouquet of hyacinths,
his belt a double row of sapphires and amethysts,
his shoes fastened with white
ribbons embroidered with rose pearls.
Him they named more than the younger ones,
him they named King of Kings.

The Alexandrians of course understood
that those were theatrical words.

But the day was warm and poetic,
the sky was a light azure,
the Alexandrian Gymnasium was
a triumphant achievement of art,
the opulence of the courtiers was extraordinary,
Caesarion was full of grace and beauty
(son of Cleopatra, blood of the Lagidae);
and the Alexandrians rushed to the ceremony,
and got enthusiastic, and cheered
in greek, and egyptian, and some in hebrew,
enchanted by the beautiful spectacle --
although they full well knew what all these were worth,
what hollow words these kingships were.

Constantine P. Cavafy

An Old Man

At the noisy end of the cafe, head bent
over the table, an old man sits alone,
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he's aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.
So brief an interval, so brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,
how he always believed - what madness -
that cheat who said: "Tomorrow. You have plenty of time."

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost
now mocks his senseless caution.

But so much thinking, so much remembering
makes the old man dizzy. He falls asleep,
his head resting on the cafe table.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Anna Comnena

In the prologue to her Alexiad,
Anna Comnena laments her widowhood.

Her soul is dizzy. "And with rivers
of tears," she tells us "I wet
my eyes... Alas for the waves" in her life,
"alas for the revolts." Pain burns her
"to the the bones and the marrow and the cleaving of the soul."

But it seems the truth is, that this ambitious woman
knew only one great sorrow;
she only had one deep longing
(though she does not admit it) this haughty Greek woman,
that she was never able, despite all her dexterity,
to acquire the Kingship; but it was taken
almost out of her hands by the insolent John.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Anna Dalassené

In the golden bull that Alexios Comnenos issued
to prominently honor his mother,
the very sagacious Lady Anna Dalassené --
distinguished in her works, in her ways --
there are many words of praise:
here let us convey of them
a beautiful, noble phrase
"Those cold words 'mine' or 'yours' were never spoken."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Apollonius Of Tyana In Rhodes

Apollonius was talking about
proper education and conduct with a young
man who was building a luxurious
house in Rhodes. "As for me" said the Tyanian
at last, "when I enter a temple
however small it may be, I very much prefer
to see a statue of ivory and gold
than a clay and vulgar one in a large temple".--

The "clay" and "vulgar"; the detestable:
that already some people (without enough training)
it deceives knavishly. The clay and vulgar.

Constantine P. Cavafy

As much as you can

And if you can't shape your life the way you want,
at least try as much as you can
not to degrade it
by too much contact with the world,
by too much activity and talk.

Try not to degrade it by dragging it along,
taking it around and exposing it so often
to the daily silliness
of social events and parties,
until it comes to seem a boring hanger-on.

Constantine P. Cavafy

At the Café Door

Something they said beside me
made me look toward the café door,
and I saw that lovely body which seemed
as though Eros in his mastery had fashioned it,
joyfully shaping its well-formed limbs,
molding its tall build,
shaping its face tenderly,
and leaving, with a touch of the fingers,
a particular nuance on the brow, the eyes, the lips.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Before The Statue Of Endymion

I have come from Miletos to Latmos
on a white chariot drawn by four snow-white mules,
all their trappings silver.
I sailed from Alexandria in a purple trireme
to perform sacred rites—
sacrifices and libations—in honor of Endymion.
And here is the statue. I now gaze in ecstasy
at Endymion's famous beauty.
My slaves empty baskets of jasmine
and auspicious tributes revive the pleasure of ancient days.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Before Time Altered Them

They were full of sadness at their parting.
That wasn't what they themselves wanted: it was circumstances.
The need to earn a living forced one of them
to go far away—New York or Canada.
The love they felt wasn't, of course, what it once had been;
the attraction between them had gradually diminished,
the attraction had diminished a great deal.
But to be separated, that wasn't what they themselves wanted.
It was circumstances. Or maybe Fate
appeared as an artist and parted them now,
before their feeling died out completely, before Time altered them:
the one seeming to remain for the other always what he was,
the exquisite young man of twenty-four.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Body Remember

Body, remember not only how much you were loved
not only the beds you lay on.
but also those desires glowing openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembling for you in voices-
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it's all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too-how they glowed,
remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices.

Constantine P. Cavafy

But Wise Men Perceive Approaching Things

Because gods perceive future things, men what is happening now,
but wise men perceive approaching things.

Philostratus, Life of Apollonius of Tyana, VIII, 7.

Men know what is happening now.
The gods know the things of the future,
the full and sole possessors of all lights.
Of the future things, wise men perceive
approaching things. Their hearing

is sometimes, during serious studies,
disturbed. The mystical clamor
of approaching events reaches them.
And they heed it with reverence. While outside
on the street, the peoples hear nothing at all.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Caesarion

Partly to verify an era,
partly also to pass the time,
last night I picked up a collection
of Ptolemaic epigrams to read.
The plentiful praises and flatteries
for everyone are similar. They are all brilliant,
glorious, mighty, beneficent;
each of their enterprises the wisest.
If you talk of the women of that breed, they too,
all the Berenices and Cleopatras are admirable.

When I had managed to verify the era
I would have put the book away, had not a small
and insignificant mention of king Caesarion
immediately attracted my attention.....

Behold, you came with your vague
charm. In history only a few
lines are found about you,
and so I molded you more freely in my mind.
I molded you handsome and sentimental.
My art gives to your face
a dreamy compassionate beauty.
And so fully did I envision you,
that late last night, as my lamp
was going out -- I let go out on purpose --
I fancied that you entered my room,
it seemed that you stood before me; as you might have been
in vanquished Alexandria,
pale and tired, idealistic in your sorrow,
still hoping that they would pity you,
the wicked -- who whispered "Too many Caesars."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Candles

The days of the future stand in front of us
Like a line of candles all alight----
Golden and warm and lively little candles.
The days that are past are left behind,
A mournful row of candles that are out;
The nearer ones are still smoking,
Candles cold, and melted, candles bent.,
I don’t want to see them; their shapes hurt me,
It hurts me to remember the light of them at first.
I look before me at my lighted candles,
I don’t want to turn around and see with horror
How quickly the dark line is lengthening,
How quickly the candles multiply that have been put out.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Che Fece

For some people the day comes
when they have to declare the great Yes
or the great No. It's clear at once who has the Yes
ready within him; and saying it,
he goes from honor to honor, strong in his conviction.
He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,
he'd still say no. Yet that no-the right no-
drags him down all his life.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians

Kratisiklia didn't deign to allow
the people to see her weeping and grieving:
she walked in dignity and in silence.
Her calm face betrayed nothing
of her sorrow and her agony.
But even so, for a moment she couldn't hold back:
before she went aboard the detestable ship for Alexandria
she took her son to Poseidon's temple,
and once they were alone
she embraced him tenderly and kissed him
(he was "in great distress," says Plutarch, "badly shaken").
But her strong character struggled through;
regaining her poise, the magnificent woman
said to Kleomenis: "Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians,
when we go outside
let no one see us weeping
or behaving in any way unworthy of Sparta.
At least this is still in our power;
what lies ahead is in the hands of the gods."

And she boarded the ship, going toward whatever lay "in the
hands of the gods."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Craftsmen of Wine Bowls

On this wine bowl—pure silver,
made for the house of Herakleidis,
where good taste is the rule—
notice these graceful flowers, the streams, the thyme.
In the center I put this beautiful young man,
naked, erotic, one leg still dangling
in the water. O memory, I begged
for you to help me most in making
the young face I loved appear the way it was.
This proved very difficult because
some fifteen years have gone by since the day
he died as a soldier in the defeat at Magnesia.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Dangerous Things

Said Myrtias (a Syrian student
in Alexandria; in the reign of
Augustus Constans and Augustus Constantius;
in part a pagan, and in part a christian);
"Fortified by theory and study,
I shall not fear my passions like a coward.
I shall give my body to sensual delights,
to enjoyments dreamt-of,
to the most daring amorous desires,
to the lustful impulses of my blood, without
any fear, for whenever I want --
and I shall have the will, fortified
as I shall be by theory and study --
at moments of crisis I shall find again
my spirit, as before, ascetic."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Darius

The poet Phernazis is composing
the important part of his epic poem.
How Darius, son of Hystaspes,
assumed the kingdom of the Persians. (From him
is descended our glorious king
Mithridates, Dionysus and Eupator). But here
philosophy is needed; he must analyze
the sentiments that Darius must have had:
maybe arrogance and drunkenness; but no -- rather
like an understanding of the vanity of grandeurs.
The poet contemplates the matter deeply.

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

The poet is speechless. What a disaster!
No time now for our glorious king
Mithridates, Dionysus and Eupator,
to occupy himself with greek poems.
In the midst of a war -- imagine, greek poems.

Phernazis is impatient. Misfortune!
Just when he was positive that with "Darius"
he would distinguish himself, and shut the mouths
of his critics, the envious ones, for good.
What a delay, what a delay to his plans.

And if it were only a delay, it would still be all right.
But it yet remains to be seen if we have any security
at Amisus. It is not a strongly fortified city.
The Romans are the most horrible enemies.
Can we hold against them
we Cappadocians? It is possible at all?
It is possible to pit ourselves against the legions?
Mighty Gods, protectors of Asia, help us.--

But in all his turmoil and trouble,
the poetic idea too comes and goes persistently--
the most probable, surely, is arrogance and drunkenness;
Darius must have felt arrogance and drunkenness.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days Of 1896

He became completely degraded. His erotic tendency,
condemned and strictly forbidden
(but innate for all that) , was the cause of it:
society was totally prudish.
He gradually lost what little money he had,
then his social standing, then his reputation.
Nearly thirty, he had never worked a full year—
at least not at a legitimate job.
Sometimes he earned enough to get by
acting the go-between in deals considered shameful.
He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly
if you were seen around with him often.

But this isn't the whole story—that would not be fair.
The memory of his beauty deserves better.
There is another angle; seen from that
he appears attractive, appears
a simple, genuine child of love,
without hesitation putting,
above his honor and reputation,
the pure sensuality of his pure flesh.

Above his reputation? But society,
prudish and stupid, had it wrong.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days of 1901

The exceptional thing about him was
that in spite of all his loose living,
his vast sexual experience,
and the fact that usually
his attitude matched his age,
in spite of this there were moments—
extremely rare, of course—when he gave the impression
that his flesh was almost virginal.

His twenty-nine-year-old beauty,
so tested by sensual pleasure,
would sometimes strangely remind one
of a boy who, somewhat awkwardly, gives
his pure body to love for the first time.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days of 1903

I never found them again -- the things so quickly lost....
the poetic eyes, the pale
face.... in the dusk of the street....

I never found them again -- the things acquired quite by chance,
that I gave up so lightly;
and that later in agony I wanted.
The poetic eyes, the pale face,
those lips, I never found again.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days of 1908

That was the year when he stayed
Without work, for a living played
Cards, or backgammon; or borrowed and never paid.

He was offered a place at a small
Stationer's, three pounds a month. It didn't suit him.
It was not decent pay at all.
He refused it without hesitation;
He was twenty-five, and of good education.

Two or three shillings he made, more or less.
From cards and backgammon what could a boy skim;
At the common places, the cafés of his grade,
Although he played sharply, and picked stupid players.
As for borrowing, that didn't always come off.
He seldom struck a dollar, oftener he'd fall
To half, and sometimes as low as a shilling.

Sometimes, when he got away from the grim
Night-sitting, for a week at a time or more,
He would cool himself at the baths, with a morning swim.

The shabbiness of his clothes was tragical.
He always wore the same suit, always displayed
A suit of cinnamon brown discoloured and frayed.

O summer days of nineteen hundred and eight, I recall
The picture of you, and out of it seems to fade,
Harmoniously, that cinnamon suit discoloured and frayed.

The picture of you has preserved him
Just as he would take off, would fling down
The unworthy clothes, the mended under clothes,
And remain all naked; faultlessly beautiful; a wonder.
Uncombed and lifted up his hair was;
His limbs a little sunburnt
From the morning nakedness at the baths and on the beach.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Desires

Like beautiful bodies of the dead, who had not grown old
and they shut them with tears, in a magnificent mausoleum,
with roses at the head and jasmine at the feet --
that is how desires look that have passed
without fultillment; without one of them having achieved
a night of sensual delight, or a moonlit morn.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Envoys from Alexandria

They had not seen, for ages, such beautiful gifts in Delphi
as these that had been sent by the two brothers,
the rival Ptolemaic kings. After they had received them
however, the priests were uneasy about the oracle. They will need
all their experience to compose it with astuteness,
which of the two, which of such two will be displeased.
And they hold secret councils at night
and discuss the family affairs of the Lagidae.

But see, the envoys have returned. They are bidding farewell.
They are returning to Alexandria, they say. And they do not ask
for any oracle. And the priests hear this with joy
(of course they will keep the marvellous gifts),
but they also are utterly perplexed,
not understanding what this sudden indifference means.
For they are unaware that yesterday the envoys received grave news.
The oracle was given in Rome; the division took place there.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Exiles

It goes on being Alexandria still. Just walk a bit
along the straight road that ends at the Hippodrome
and you'll see palaces and monuments that will amaze you.
Whatever war-damage it's suffered,
however much smaller it's become,
it's still a wonderful city.
And then, what with excursions and books
and various kinds of study, time does go by.
In the evenings we meet on the sea front,
the five of us (all, naturally, under fictitious names)
and some of the few other Greeks
still left in the city.
Sometimes we discuss church affairs
(the people here seem to lean toward Rome)
and sometimes literature.
The other day we read some lines by Nonnos:
what imagery, what rhythm, what diction and harmony!
All enthusiasm, how we admired the Panopolitan.
So the days go by, and our stay here
isn't unpleasant because, naturally,
it's not going to last forever.
We've had good news: if something doesn't come
of what's now afoot in Smyrna,
then in April our friends are sure to move from Epiros,
so one way or another, our plans are definitely working out,
and we'll easily overthrow Basil.
And when we do, at last our turn will come.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Far Off

I should like to relate this memory ...
but it is so faded now ... scarecely anthing is left --
because it lies far off, in the years of my early manhood.

A skin as if made of jasmine ...
that night in August -- was it August? -- that night ...
I can just barely remember the eyes; they were, I think, blue ...
Ah yes, blue; a sapphire blue.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Following the Recipe of Ancient Syrio-Greek Magicians

Said an aesthete: "What distillation from magic herbs
can I find—what distillation, following the recipe
of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians—
that will bring back to me for one day (if its power
doesn't last longer) or even for a few hours,
my twenty-third year,
bring back to me my friend of twenty-two,
his beauty, his love.

What distillation, following the recipe
of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians, can be found
to bring back also—as part of this return of things past—
even the little room we shared."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Footsteps

On an ebony bed decorated
with coral eagles, sound asleep lies
Nero --- unconscious, quiet, and blissful;
thriving in the vigor of flesh,
and in the splendid power of youth.

But in the alabaster hall that encloses
the ancient shrine of the Aenobarbi
how restive are his Lares.
The little household gods tremble,
and try to hide their insignificant bodies.
For they heard a horrible clamor,
a deathly clamor ascending the stairs,
iron footsteps rattling the stairs.
And now in a faint the miserable Lares,
burrow in the depth of the shrine,
one tumbles and stumbles upon the other,
one little god falls over the other
for they understand what sort of clamor this is,
they are already feeling the footsteps of the Furies.

Constantine P. Cavafy

From The School Of The Renowned Philosopher

For two years he studied with Ammonios Sakkas,
but he was bored by both philosophy and Sakkas.

Then he went into politics.
But he gave that up. That Prefect was an idiot,
and those around him, somber-faced officious nitwits:
their Greek—poor fools—absolutely barbaric.

After that he became
vaguely curious about the Church: to be baptized
and pass as a Christian. But he soon
changed his mind: it would certainly have caused a row
with his parents, ostentatious pagans,
and—horrible thought—
they would have cut off at once
their extremely generous allowance.

But he had to do something. He began to haunt
the corrupt houses of Alexandria,
every secret den of debauchery.

In this fortune favored him:
he'd been given an extremely handsome figure.
And he enjoyed the divine gift.

His looks would last
at least another ten years. And after that?
Maybe he'll go back to Sakkas.
Or if the old man has died meanwhile,
he'll go to another philosopher or sophist:
there's always someone suitable around.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Greek from Ancient Times

Antioch is proud of its splendid buildings,
its beautiful streets, the lovely countryside around it,
its teeming population;
proud too of its glorious kings, its artists
and sages, its very rich
yet prudent merchants. But far more
than all this, Antioch is proud to be a city
Greek from ancient times, related to Argos
through Ione, founded by Argive colonists
in honor of Inachos' daughter.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Grey

Looking at an opal, a half-grey opal,
I remembered two beautiful grey eyes
I had seen it must have been twenty years before . . .

For a month we loved each other
Then he went away, I think to Smyrna,
To work there; we never saw each other again.

The grey eyes ---- if he lives ---- have lost their beauty;
The beautiful face will have been spoiled.

O Memory, preserve them as they were.
And, Memory, all you can of this love of mine
Whatever you can bring back to me tonight.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Half an Hour

I never had you, nor will I ever have you
I suppose. A few words, an approach
as in the bar yesterday, and nothing more.
It is, undeniably, a pity. But we who serve Art
sometimes with intensity of mind, and of course only
for a short while, we create pleasure
which almost seems real.
So in the bar the day before yesterday -- the merciful alcohol
was also helping much --
I had a perfectly erotic half-hour.
And it seems to me that you understood,
and stayed somewhat longer on purpose.
This was very necessary. Because
for all the imagination and the wizard alcohol,
I needed to see your lips as well,
I needed to have your body close.

Constantine P. Cavafy

He Came to Read

He came to read. Two or three books
are open; historians and poets.
But he only read for ten minutes,
and gave them up. He is dozing
on the sofa. He is fully devoted to books
but he is twenty-three years old, and he's very handsome;
and this afternoon love passed
through his ideal flesh, his lips.
Through his flesh which is full of beauty
the heat of love passed;
without any silly shame for the form of the enjoyment.....

Constantine P. Cavafy

He vows

Every so often he vows to start a better life.
But when night comes with her own counsels,
with her compromises, and with her promises;
but when night comes with her own power
of the body that wants and demands, he returns,
forlorn, to the same fatal joy.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Hidden

From all I've done and all I've said
let them not seek to find who I've been.
An obstacle stood and transformed
my acts and way of my life.
An obstacle stood and stopped me
many a time as I was going to speak.
My most unobserved acts,
and my writitings the most covered --
thence only they will feel me.
But mayhaps it is not worth to spend
this much care and this much effort to know me.
For -- in the more perfect society --
someone else like me created
will certainly appear and freely act.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Hidden Things

Let them not seek to discover who I was
from all that I have done and said.
An obstacle was there that transformed
the deeds and the manner of my life.
An obstacle was there that stopped me
many times when I was about to speak.
Only from my most imperceptible deeds
and my most covert writings--
from these alone will they understand me.
But perhaps it isn't worth exerting
such care and such effort for them to know me.
Later, in the more perfect society,
surely some other person created like me
will appear and act freely.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I Went

I was not bound. I let myself go completely; went
To those indulgences, half actual,
And half were turned about in my own brain;
Went into the illuminated night;
And drank strong wines, as when
The champions of pleasure drink strong wine.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I´ve Looked So Much…

I’ve looked on beauty so much
that my vision overflows with it.

The body’s lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,
always lovely, even uncombed,
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them
…in the nights when I was young,
encountered secretly in those nights.

Constantine P. Cavafy

If Actually Dead

"Where did the Sage withdraw to, where did he disappear?
After his many miracles,
the renown of his teaching
which spread to so many countries,
he suddenly hid himself and nobody knew for certain
what happened to him
(nor did anybody ever see his grave).
Some reported that he died at Ephesus.
But Damis does not record that in his memoir.
Damis says nothing about the death of Apollonios.
Others said that he disappeared at Lindos.
Or maybe the story is true
about his assumption in Crete,
at the ancient sanctuary of Diktynna.
But then again we have that miraculous,
that supernatural apparition of his
before a young student at Tyana.
Maybe the time has not yet come for him to return
and show himself to the world again;
or maybe, transfigured, he moves among us
unrecognized—. But he will come again
as he was, teaching the ways of truth; and then of course
he will bring back the worship of our gods
and our elegant Hellenic rites."

These were the musings of one of the few pagans,
one of the very few still left,
as he sat in his shabby room just after reading
Philostratos' On Apollonios of Tyana.
But even he—a trivial and cowardly man—
played the Christian in public and went to church.
It was the time when Justin, known as the elder,
reigned in total piety,
and Alexandria, a godly city,
detested pitiful idolators.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In 200 B.C.

"Alexander son of Philip, and the Greeks except the Lacedaemonians--"

We can very well imagine
that they were utterly indifferent in Sparta
to this inscription. "Except the Lacedaemonians",
but naturally. The Spartans were not
to be led and ordered about
as precious servants. Besides
a panhellenic campaign without
a Spartan king as a leader
would not have appeared very important.
O, of course "except the Lacedaemonians."

This too is a stand. Understandable.

Thus, except the Lacedaemonians at Granicus;
and then at Issus; and in the final
battle, where the formidable army was swept away
that the Persians had massed at Arbela:
which had set out from Arbela for victory, and was swept away.

And out of the remarkable panhellenic campaign,
victorious, brilliant,
celebrated, glorious
as no other had ever been glorified,
the incomparable: we emerged;
a great new Greek world.

We; the Alexandrians, the Antiocheans,
the Seleucians, and the numerous
rest of the Greeks of Egypt and Syria,
and of Media, and Persia, and the many others.
With our extensive territories,
with the varied action of thoughtful adaptations.
And the Common Greek Language
we carried to the heart of Bactria, to the Indians.

As if we were to talk of Lacedaemonians now!

Constantine P. Cavafy

In a Township of Asia Minor

The news about the outcome of the sea-battle at Actium
was of course unexpected.
But there's no need for us to draft a new proclamation.
The name's the only thing that has to be changed.
There, in the concluding lines, instead of: "Having freed the Romans
from Octavius, that disaster,
that parody of a Caesar,"
we'll substitute: "Having freed the Romans
from Antony, that disaster,..."
The whole text fits very nicely.

"To the most glorious victor,
matchless in his military ventures,
prodigious in his political operations,
on whose behalf the township ardently wished
for Antony's triumph,..."
here, as we said, the substitution: "for Octavius Caesar's triumph,
regarding it as Zeus' finest gift—
to this mighty protector of the Greeks,
who graciously honors Greek customs,
who is beloved in every Greek domain,
who clearly deserves exalted praise,
and whose exploits should be recorded at length
in the Greek language, in both verse and prose,
in the Greek language, the vehicle of fame,"
et cetera, et cetera. It all fits brilliantly.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Alexandria, 31 B.C.

From his village near the outskirts of town,
still dust-covered from the journey in,
the peddler arrives. And "Incense!" "Gum!"
"The best olive oil!" "Perfume for your hair!"
he hawks through the streets. But with all the hubbub,
the music, the parades, who can hear him?
The crowd shoves him, drags him along, knocks him around.
And when he asks, now totally confused, "What's going on here?"
someone tosses him too the huge palace lie:
that Antony is winning in Greece.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In an Old Book

Forgotten between the leaves of an old book—
almost a hundred years old—
I found an unsigned watercolor.
It must have been the work of a powerful artist.
Its title: "Representation of Love."

"...love of extreme sensualists" would have been more to the point.

Because it became clear as you looked at the work
(it was easy to see what the artist had in mind)
that the young man in the painting
was not designated for those
who love in ways that are more or less healthy,
inside the bounds of what is clearly permissible—
with his deep chestnut eyes,
the rare beauty of his face,
the beauty of anomalous charm,
with those ideal lips that bring
sensual delight to the body loved,
those ideal limbs shaped for beds
that common morality calls shameless.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Church

I love the church: its labara,
its silver vessels, its candleholders,
the lights, the ikons, the pulpit.

Whenever I go there, into a church of the Greeks,
with its aroma of incense,
its liturgical chanting and harmony,
the majestic presence of the priests,
dazzling in their ornate vestments,
the solemn rhythm of their gestures-
my thoughts turn to the great glories of our race,
to the splendor of our Byzantine heritage.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Despair

He has lost him completely. And now he is seeking
on the lips of every new lover
the lips of his beloved; in the embrace
of every new lover he seeks to be deluded
that he is the same lad, that it it to him he is yielding.

He has lost him copmletely, as if he had never been at all.
For he wanted -- so he said -- he wanted to be saved
from the stigmatized, the sick sensual delight;
from the stigmatized, sensual delight of shame.
There was still time -- as he said -- to be saved.

He has lost him completely, as if he had never been at all.
In his imagination, in his delusions,
on the lips of others it is his lips he is seeking;
he is longing to feel again the love he has known.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Sparta

He didn't know, King Kleomenis, he didn't dare—
he just did not know how to tell his mother
a thing like this: that Ptolemy demanded,
to guarantee their treaty, that she too go to Egypt
and be held there as a hostage—
a very humiliating, indecorous thing.
And he would be about to speak yet always hesitate,
would start to tell her yet always stop.

But the magnificent woman understood him
(she had already heard some rumors about it)
and she encouraged him to come out with it clearly.
And she laughed, saying of course she would go,
indeed was happy that in her old age
she could be useful to Sparta still.

As for the humiliation—that didn't touch her at all.
Of course an upstart like the Lagid
couldn't possibly comprehend the Spartan spirit;
so his demand could not in fact humiliate
a Royal Lady like herself:
mother of a Spartan king.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In the Boring Village

In the boring village where he works—
clerk in a textile shop, very young—
and where he's waiting out the two or three months ahead,
another two or three months until business falls off
so he can leave for the city and plunge headlong
into its action, its entertainment;
in the boring village where he's waiting out the time—
he goes to bed tonight full of sexual longing,
all his youth on fire with the body's passion,
his lovely youth given over to a fine intensity.
And in his sleep pleasure comes to him;
in his sleep he sees and has the figure, the flesh he longed for...

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Harbor

Emis - young, twenty-eight-
reached this Syrian harbor in a Tenian ship,
his plan to learn the incense trade.
But ill during the voyage,
he died as soon as he was put ashore.
His burial, the poorest possible, took place here.
A few hours before dying he whispered something
about 'home', about 'very old parents.'
But nobody he called home
in the great pan Hellenic world.
Better that way; because as it is,
though he lies buried in this harbor,
his parents will always have the hope he's still alive.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Month Athyr

I can just read the inscription on this ancient stone.
"Lo[r]d Jesus Christ." I make out a "So[u]l."
"In the mon[th] of Athyr' 'Lefkio[s] went to sleep."
Where his age is mentioned—"lived to the age of"—
the Kappa Zeta shows that he went to sleep a young man.
In the corroded part I see "Hi[m]…Alexandrian."
Then there are three badly mutilated lines—
though I can pick out a few words, like "our tea[r]s,"
"grief,"
then "tears" again, and "sorrow to [us] his [f]riends."
I think Lefkios must have been greatly loved.
In the month of Athyr Lefkios went to sleep.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In the Same Space

Environment, of house, of city centres, city quarters
Which I look upon and where I walk; years and years.

I have created you in the midst of joy and in the midst of sorrows;
With so many circumstances, with so many things.

And you have been made sensation, the whole of you, for me.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In the Tavernas

I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I didn't want to stay
in Alexandria. Tamides left me;
he went off with the Prefect's son to earn himself
a villa on the Nile, a mansion in the city.
It wouldn't have been right for me to stay in Alexandria.
I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I live a vile life, devoted to cheap debauchery.
The one thing that saves me,
like durable beauty, like perfume
that goes on clinging to my flesh, is this: Tamides,
most exquisite of young men, was mine for two years,
and mine not for a house or a villa on the Nile.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Interruption

We interrupt the work of the gods,
hasty and inexperienced beings of the moment.
In the palaces of Eleusis and Phthia
Demeter and Thetis start good works
amid high flames and dense smoke. But
always Metaneira rushes from the king's
chambers, disheveled and scared,
and always Peleus is fearful and interferes.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Ionian

Just because we've torn their statues down,
and cast them from their temples,
doesn't for a moment mean the gods are dead.
Land of Ionia, they love you yet,

their spirits still remember you.
When an August morning breaks upon you
a vigour from their lives stabs through your air;
and sometimes an ethereal and youthful form
in swiftest passage, indistinct,

passes up above your hills.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Ithaca

When you set out for Ithaka
ask that your way be long,
full of adventure, full of instruction.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - do not fear them:
such as these you will never find
as long as your thought is lofty, as long as a rare
emotion touch your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - you will not meet them
unless you carry them in your soul,
unless your soul raise them up before you.

Ask that your way be long.
At many a Summer dawn to enter
with what gratitude, what joy -
ports seen for the first time;
to stop at Phoenician trading centres,
and to buy good merchandise,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensuous perfumes of every kind,
sensuous perfumes as lavishly as you can;
to visit many Egyptian cities,
to gather stores of knowledge from the learned.

Have Ithaka always in your mind.
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years,
so that when you reach the island you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to give you wealth.
Ithaka gave you a splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka hasn't deceived you.
So wise you have become, of such experience,
that already you'll have understood what these Ithakas mean.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I've Brought To Art

I sit in a mood of reverie.
I've brought to Art desires and sensations:
things half-glimpsed,
faces or lines, certain indistinct memories
of unfulfilled love affairs.
Let me submit to Art:

Art knows how to shape forms of Beauty,
almost imperceptibly completing life,
blending impressions, blending day with day.

Constantine P. Cavafy

John Kantakuzinos Triumphs

He sees the fields that still belong to him:
the wheat, the animals, the trees laden with fruit;
and beyond them his ancestral home
full of clothes, costly furniture, silverware.

They'll take it all away from him—O God—they'll take it all
away from him now.

Would Kantakuzinos show pity for him
if he went and fell at his feet? They say he's merciful,
very merciful. But those around him? And the army?—
Or should he fall down and plead before Lady Irini?

Fool that he was to get mixed up in Anna's party!
If only Lord Andronikos had never married her!
Has she ever done anything good, shown any humanity?
Even the Franks don't respect her any longer.
Her plans were ridiculous, all her plotting farcical.
While they were threatening everyone from Constantinople,
Kantakuzinos demolished them, Lord John demolished them.

And to think he'd planned to join Lord John's party!
And he would have done it, and would have been happy now,
a great nobleman still, his position secure,
if the bishop hadn't dissuaded him at the last moment
with his imposing hieratic presence,
his information bogus from beginning to end,
his promises, and all his drivel.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian and the Antiochians

<i>Neither the letter C, they say, nor the
letter K had ever harmed the city.... We,
finding interpreters... learned that these
are the initial letters of names, the first
of Christ and the second of Konstantios.
</I>

Julian, Misopogon (The Beard-Hater)

Was it conceivable that they would ever give up
their beautiful way of life, the range
of their daily pleasures, their brilliant theatre
which consummated a union between Art
and the erotic proclivities of the flesh?

Immoral to a degree—and probably more than a degree—
they certainly were. But they had the satisfaction that their life
was the notorious life of Antioch,
delectably sensual, in absolute good taste.

To give up all this, indeed, for what?

His hot air about the false gods,
his boring self-advertisement,
his childish fear of the theatre,
his graceless prudery, his ridiculous beard.

O certainly they preferred C,
certainly they preferred K—a hundred times over.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian in Nicomedia

Things impolitic and dangerous:
praise for Greek ideals,
supernatural magic, visits to pagan temples.
Enthusiasm for the ancient gods.
Frequent talks with Chrysanthios.
Speculation with Maximus, the astute philosopher.
And look what's happened. Gallos is extremely worried.
Konstantios has become suspicious.
Julian's advisors weren't at all prudent.
The matter, says Mardonios, has gone too far,
the talk it has aroused must be stopped at all cost.—
So Julian goes to the church at Nicomedia,
a lector again, and there
with deep reverence he reads out loud
passages from the Holy Scriptures,
and everyone marvels at his Christian piety.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian Seeing Contempt

"Observing, then, that there is great contempt for the gods
among us"—he says in his solemn way.
Contempt. But what did he expect?
Let him organize religion as much as he liked,
write to the High Priest of Galatia as much as he liked,
or to others of his kind, inciting them, giving instructions.
His friends weren't Christians; that much was certain.
But even so they couldn't play
as he could (brought up a Christian)
with a new religious system,
ludicrous in both theory and application.
They were, after all, Greeks. Nothing in excess, Augustus.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Kaisarion

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

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

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

Constantine P. Cavafy

Long Ago

I'd like to speak of this memory…
but it's so faded now…as though nothing is left—
because it was so long ago, in my early adolescent years.

A skin as though of jasmines…
that August evening— was it August?—
I can still just recall the eyes: blue, I think they were…
Ah yes, blue: a sapphire blue.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Longings

Like the beautiful bodies of those who died before growing old,
sadly shut away in sumptuous mausoleum,
roses by the head, jasmine at the feet -
so appear the longings that have passed
without being satisfied, not one of the granted
a single night of pleasure, or one of its radiant mornings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Manuel Comninos

One dreary September day
Emperor Manuel Komninos
felt his death was near.
The court astrologers -bribed, of course- went on babbling
about how many years he still had to live.
But while they were having their say,
he remebered an old religious custom
and ordered ecclesiastical vestments
to be brought from a monastery,
and he put them on, glad to assume
the modest image of a priest or monk.

Happy all those who believe,
and like Emperor Manuel end their lives
dressed modestly in their faith.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Melancholy Of Jason Kleander, Poet In Kommagini, A.D. 595

The aging of my body and my beauty
is a wound from a merciless knife.
I'm not resigned to it at all.
I turn to you, Art of Poetry,
because you have a kind of knowledge about drugs:
attempts to numb the pain, in Imagination and Language.

It is wound from a merciless knife.
Bring your drugs, Art of Poetry—
they numb the wound at least for a little while.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Monotony

One monotonous day is followed
by another monotonous, identical day. The same
things will happen, they will happen again --
the same moments find us and leave us.

A month passes and ushers in another month.
One easily guesses the coming events;
they are the boring ones of yesterday.
And the morrow ends up not resembling a morrow anymore.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Morning Sea

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,
the yellow shore; all lovely,
all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this
(I really did see it for a minute when I first stopped)
and not my usual day-dreams here too,
my memories, those images of sensual pleasure.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Nero's Term

Nero was not worried when he heard
the prophecy of the Delphic Oracle.
"Let him fear the seventy three years."
He still had ample time to enjoy himself.
He is thirty. More than sufficient
is the term the god allots him
to prepare for future perils.

Now he will return to Rome slightly tired,
but delightfully tired from this journey,
full of days of enjoyment --
at the theaters, the gardens, the gymnasia...
evenings at cities of Achaia...
Ah the delight of nude bodies, above all...

Thus fared Nero. And in Spain Galba
secretly assembles and drills his army,
the old man of seventy three.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Nero's Turn

Nero was not worried when he heard
the prophecy of the Delphic Oracle.
"Let him fear the seventy three years."
He still had ample time to enjoy himself.
He is thirty. More than sufficient
is the term the god allots him
to prepare for future perils.

Now he will return to Rome slightly tired,
but delightfully tired from this journey,
full of days of enjoyment --
at the theaters, the gardens, the gymnasia...
evenings at cities of Achaia...
Ah the delight of nude bodies, above all...

Thus fared Nero. And in Spain Galba
secretly assembles and drills his army,
the old man of seventy three.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of Coloured Glass

I am very moved by one detail
in the coronation at Vlachernai of John Kantakuzinos
and Irini, daughter of Andronikos Asan.
Because they had only a few precious stones
(our afflicted empire was extremely poor)
they wore artificial ones: numerous pieces of glass,
red, green, or blue. I find
nothing humiliating or undignified
in those little pieces of colored glass.
On the contrary, they seem
a sad protest against
the unjust misfortune of the couple being crowned,
symbols of what they deserved to have,
of what surely it was right that they should have
at their coronation—a Lord John Kantakuzinos,
a Lady Irini, daughter of Andronikos Asan.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of the Jews (50 A.D.)

Painter and poet, runner and discus-thrower,
beautiful as Endymion: Ianthis, son of Antony.
From a family on friendly terms with the Synagogue.

"My most valuable days are those
when I give up the pursuit of sensuous beauty,
when I desert the elegant and severe cult of Hellenism,
with its over-riding devotion
to perfectly shaped, corruptible white limbs,
and become the man I would want to remain forever:
son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

A most fervent declaration on his part: "...to remain forever
a son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

But he did not remain anything of the kind.
The Hedonism and Art of Alexandria
kept him as their dedicated son.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of The Shop

He wrapped them carefully, neatly
in costly green silk.

Roses of ruby, lilies of pearl,
violets of amethyst. As he himself judged,

as he wanted them, they look beautiful to him; not as he saw
or studied them in nature. He will leave them in the safe,

a sample of his daring and skillful craft.
When a buyer enters the shop

he takes from the cases other wares and sells -- superb jewels --
bracelets, chains, necklaces, and rings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On an Italian Shore

Kimos, son of Menedoros, a young Greek-Italian,
devotes his life to amusing himself,
like most young men in Greater Greece
brought up in the lap of luxury.

But today, in spite of his nature,
he is preoccupied, dejected. Near the shore
he watched, deeply distressed, as they unload
ships with booty taken from the Peloponnese.

G r e e k l o o t: b o o t y f r o m C o r i n t h.

Today certainly it is not right,
it is not possible for the young Greek-Italian
to want to amuse himself in any way.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On the March to Sinopi

Mithridatis, glorious and powerful,
ruler of great cities,
master of strong armies and fleets,
on the march to Sinopi took a route
through a remote part of the country
where a soothsayer lived.

Mithridatis sent one of his officers
to ask the soothsayer how much more wealth,
how much more power, he'd accumulate in the future.

He dispatched one of his officers,
then continued his march to Sinopi.

The soothsayer withdrew into a secret room.
About a half an hour later he came out
troubled, and said to the officer:
"I wasn't able to clarify things very well.
Today is not a propitious day—
there were some murky shadows, I didn't understand them fully—.
But, I think, the king should be content with what he has.
Anything more will prove dangerous for him.
Remember, officer, to tell him that:
for God's sake to be satisfied with what he has.
Fortune changes suddenly.
Tell King Mithridatis this:
it's extremely rare to come across anyone like his ancestor's companion,
that noble companion who wrote in the earth with his lance
those timely words that saved him: ‘Escape, Mithridatis.' "

Constantine P. Cavafy

On the Outskirts of Antioch

We in Antioch were astonished when we heard
what Julian was up to now.

Apollo had made things clear to him at Daphni:
he didn't want to give an oracle (as though we cared!),
he didn't intend to speak prophetically, unless
his temple at Daphni was purified first.
The nearby dead, he declared, got on his nerves.

There are many tombs at Daphni.
One of those buried there
was the triumphant and holy martyr Vavylas,
wonder and glory of our church.

It was him the false god hinted at, him he feared.
As long as he felt him near he didn't dare
pronounce his oracle: not a murmur.
(The false gods are terrified of our martyrs.)

Unholy Julian got worked up,
lost his temper and shouted: "Raise him, carry him out,
take him away immediately, this Vavylas.
You there, do you hear? He gets on Apollo's nerves.
Grab him, raise him at once,
dig him out, take him away, throw him out,
take him wherever you want. This isn't a joke.
Apollo said the temple has to be purified."

We took it, the holy relic, and carried it elsewhere.
We took it, we carried it away in love and in honor.

And hasn't the temple done brilliantly since!
In no time at all a colossal fire
broke out, a terrible fire,
and both the temple and Apollo burned to nothing.

Ashes the idol: dirt to be swept away.

Julian exploded, and he spread it around—
what else could he do?—that we, the Christians,
had set the fire. Let him say so.
It hasn't been proved. Let him say so.
The essential thing is—he exploded.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On the shop

He wrapped them carefully, neatly
in costly green silk.

Roses of ruby, lilies of pearl,
violets of amethyst. As he himself judged,

as he wanted them, they look beautiful to him; not as he saw
or studied them in nature. He will leave them in the safe,

a sample of his daring and skillful craft.
When a buyer enters the shop

he takes from the cases other wares and sells -- superb jewels --
bracelets, chains, necklaces, and rings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

One Night

The room was penurious and common,
Hidden over a disreputable tavern,
The alley could be seen from the window,
Unclean and narrow. From below
Came the voices of a few workmen
Who were playing cards and having a good time.

There on the vulgar on the humble bed
I had the body of love, I had the lips,
The sensuous, the rosy lips of wine,
Rosy with such a wine, that even now
Here as I write, after so many years,
In my solitary house, I am drunk again.

Constantine P. Cavafy

One of Their Gods

When one of them passed through the market place
of Seleucia, toward the hour that night falls
as a tall and perfectly handsome youth,
with the joy of immortality in his eyes,
with his scented black hair,
the passers-by would stare at him
and one would ask the other if he knew him,
and if he were a Greek of Syria, or a stranger. But some,
who watched with greater attention,
would understand and stand aside;
and as he vanished under the arcades,
into the shadows and into the lights of the evening,
heading toward the district that lives
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,
and every sort of drunkenness and lust,
they would ponder which of Them he might be,
and for what suspect enjoyment
he had descended to the streets of Seleucia
from the Venerable, Most Hallowed Halls.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Philhellene

Make sure the engraving is done skillfully.
The expression serious, majestic.
The diadem preferably somewhat narrow:
I don't like that broad kind the Parthians wear.
The inscription, as usual, in Greek:
nothing excessive, nothing pompous—
we don't want the proconsul to take it the wrong way:
he's always nosing things out and reporting back to Rome—
but of course giving me due honor.
Something very special on the other side:
some discus-thrower, young, good-looking.
Above all I urge you to see to it
(Sithaspis, for God's sake don't let them forget)
that after "King" and "Savior,"
they engrave "Philhellene" in elegant characters.
Now don't try to be clever
with your "where are the Greeks?" and "what things Greek
here behind Zagros, out beyond Phraata?"
Since so many others more barbarian than ourselves
choose to inscribe it, we will inscribe it too.
And besides, don't forget that sometimes
sophists do come to us from Syria,
and versifiers, and other triflers of that kind.
So we are not, I think, un-Greek.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Picture of a 23-year-old Youth Painted by His Friend of the Same Age, an Amature

He finished the painting yesterday noon. Now
he studies it in detail. He has painted him in a
gray unbuttoned coat, a deep gray; without
any vest or any tie. With a rose-colored shirt;
open at the collar, so something might be seen
also of the beauty of his chest, of his neck.
The right temple is almost entirely
covered by his hair, his beautiful hair
(parted in the manner he perfers it this year).
There is the completely voluptuous tone
he wanted to put into it when he was doing the eyes,
when he was doing the lips.... His mouth, the lips
that are made for consummation, for choice love-making.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Pictured

My work, I'm very careful about it, and I love it.
But today I'm discouraged by how slowly it's going.
The day has affected my mood.
It gets darker and darker. Endless wind and rain.
I'm more in the mood for looking than for writing.
In this picture, I'm now gazing at a handsome boy
who is lying down close to a spring,
exhausted from running.
What a handsome boy; what a heavenly noon
has caught him up in sleep.
I sit and gaze like this for a long time,
recovering through art from the effort of creating it.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Poseidonians

The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language
after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrhenians, Latins, and other foreigners.
The only thing surviving from their ancestors
was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites,
with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths.
And it was their habit toward the festival's end
to tell each other about their ancient customs
and once again to speak Greek names
that only few of them still recognized.
And so their festival always had a melancholy ending
because they remebered that they too were Greeks,
they too once upon a time were citizens of Magna Graecia;
and how low they'd fallen now, what they'd become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Priest at the Serapeum

My dear old father,
who always loved me the same;
my dear old father I lament
who died the day before yesterday, just before dawn.

Jesus Christ, it is my daily effort
to observe the precepts
of Thy most holy church in all my acts,
in all words, in all thoughts.
And all those who renounce Thee
I shun.-- But now I lament;
I bewail, Christ, for my father
although he was -- a horrible thing to say --
a priest at the accursed Serapeum.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Remember, Body...

Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds on which you lay,
but also those desires which for you
plainly glowed in the eyes,
and trembled in the voice -- and some
chance obstacle made them futile.
Now that all belongs to the past,
it is almost as if you had yielded
to those desires too -- remember,
how they glowed, in the eyes looking at you;
how they trembled in the voice, for you, remember, body.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Return

Return often and take me,
beloved sensation, return and take me --
when the memory of the body awakens,
and an old desire runs again through the blood;
when the lips and the skin remember,
and the hands feel as if they touch again.

Return often and take me at night,
when the lips and the skin remember...

Constantine P. Cavafy

Sensual Pleasures

My life's joy and incense: recollection of those hours
when I found and captured pleasure as I wanted it.
My life's joy and incense: that I refused
all indulgence in routine love affairs.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Since Nine O'Clock

Half past twelve. Time has gone by quickly
since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp
and sat down here. I've been sitting without reading,
without speaking. Completely alone in the house,
whom could I talk to?

Since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp
the shade of my young body
has come to haunt me, to remind me
of shut scented rooms,
of past sensual pleasure - what daring pleasure.
And it's also brought back to me
streets now unrecognizable,
bustling night clubs now closed,
theatres and cafes no longer here.

The shade of my young body
also brought back the things that make us sad:
family grief, separations,
the feelings of my own people, feelings
of the dead so little acknowledged.

Half past twelve. How the time has gone by.
Half past twelve. How the years have gone by.

Constantine P. Cavafy

So Much I Gazed

So much I gazed on beauty,
that my vision is replete with it.

Contours of the body. Red lips. Voluptuous limbs.
Hair as if taken from greek statues;
always beautiful, even when uncombed,
and it falls, slightly, over white foreheads.
Faces of love, as my poetry
wanted them.... in the nights of my youth,
in my nights, secretly, met....

Constantine P. Cavafy

Sophist Leaving Syria

Eminent sophist, now that you are leaving Syria
with plans to write a book about Antioch,
it's worth your mentioning Mevis in your work—
the famous Mevis, unquestionably
the best looking, the most adored young man
in all Antioch. No one of the others
living his kind of life, no one of them gets paid
what he gets paid. To have Mevis
just for two or three days, they often give
as much as a hundred staters. I said in Antioch;
but in Alexandria as well, in fact in Rome even,
you can't find a young man as attractive as Mevis.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Supplication

The sea took a sailor to its depths.--
His mother, unsuspecting, goes and lights

a tall candle before the Virgin Mary
for his speedy return and for fine weather --

and always she turns her ear to the wind.
But while she prays and implores,

the icon listens, solemn and sad,
knowing that the son she expects will no longer return.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Bandaged Shoulder

He said that he had hurt himself on a wall or that he had fallen.
But there was probably another reason
for the wounded and bandaged shoulder.

With a somewhat abrupt movement,
to bring down from a shelf some
photographs that he wanted to see closely,
the bandage was untied and a little blood ran.

I bandaged the shoulder again, and while bandaging it
I was somewhat slow; because it did not hurt,
and I liked to look at the blood. That
blood was a part of my love.

When he had left, I found in front of the chair,
a bloody rag, from the bandages,
a rag that looked in belonged in garbage;
which I brought up to my lips,
and which I held there for a long time --
the blood of love on my lips.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Battle of Magnesia

He's lost his old fire, his courage.
Now his tired, almost decrepit body
will be his first concern. And the rest of his life he'll spend
without worrying. So Philip says, anyway.
Tonight he's playing a game with dice;
he's in a mood to amuse himself.
Cover the table with roses. What if Antiochos
was defeated at Magnesia? They say
the bulk of his brilliant army was totally crushed.
Maybe they're stretching it a bit; it can't all be true.
Let's hope so anyway. Because though enemies, they do belong to our race.
But one "let's hope so" is enough. Perhaps even too much.
Of course Philip won't put off the festivities.
However much his life has worn him out,
one blessing remains: his memory is still intact.
He recalls the extent of their mourning in Syria, the kind of sorrow they felt,
when Macedonia, their motherland, was smashed to pieces.
Let the banquet begin. Slaves! The music, the lights!

Constantine P. Cavafy

The City

You said, "I will go to another land, I will go to another sea.
Another city will be found, a better one than this.
Every effort of mine is a condemnation of fate;
and my heart is -- like a corpse -- buried.
How long will my mind remain in this wasteland.
Wherever I turn my eyes, wherever I may look
I see black ruins of my life here,
where I spent so many years destroying and wasting."

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

Constantine P. Cavafy

The First Step

The young poet Evmenis
complained one day to Theocritus:
"I've been writing for two years now
and I've composed only one idyll.
It's my single completed work.
I see, sadly, that the ladder
of Poetry is tall, extremely tall;
and from this first step I'm standing on now
I'll never climb any higher."
Theocritus retorted: "Words like that
are improper, blasphemous.
Just to be on the first step
should make you happy and proud.
To have reached this point is no small achievement:
what you've done already is a wonderful thing.
Even this first step
is a long way above the ordinary world.
To stand on this step
you must be in your own right
a member of the city of ideas.
And it's a hard, unusual thing
to be enrolled as a citizen of that city.
Its councils are full of Legislators
no charlatan can fool.
To have reached this point is no small achievement:
what you've done already is a wonderful thing."

Constantine P. Cavafy

The God Abandons Anthony

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

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Grave of the Grammarian Lysias

Very close to you, as you enter on the right, in the Beirut
library, we buried the sage Lysias,
the grammarian. The spot is beautifully right.
We placed him near those things of his that he perhaps
remembers even there -- scholia, texts, grammars,
scriptures, numerous commentaries in tomes on hellenisms.
This way, his grave will also be seen and honored
by us, when we pass among the books.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Horses of Achilles

When they saw Patroklos dead
—so brave and strong, so young—
the horses of Achilles began to weep;
their immortal nature was upset deeply
by this work of death they had to look at.
They reared their heads, tossed their long manes,
beat the ground with their hooves, and mourned
Patroklos, seeing him lifeless, destroyed,
now mere flesh only, his spirit gone,
defenseless, without breath,
turned back from life to the great Nothingness.

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal horses and felt sorry.
"At the wedding of Peleus," he said,
"I should not have acted so thoughtlessly.
Better if we hadn't given you as a gift,
my unhappy horses. What business did you have down there,
among pathetic human beings, the toys of fate.
You are free of death, you will not get old,
yet ephemeral disasters torment you.
Men have caught you up in their misery."
But it was for the eternal disaster of death
that those two gallant horses shed their tears.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Ides of March

Fear grandeurs, O soul.
And if you cannot overcome
your ambitions, pursue them with hesitation
and caution. And the more you advance,
the more inquisitive, careful you must be.

And when you reach your peak, Caesar at last;
when you assume the form of a famous man,
then above all beware when you go out in the street,
a conspicuous ruler with followers,
if by chance from the mob approaches
some Artemidorus, bringing a letter
and says hastily 'Read this immediately,
these are grave matters that concern you,'
do not fail to stop; do not fail to push aside
all those who salute and kneel
(you can see them later); let even the Senate
itself wait, and immediately recognise
the grave writings of Artemidorus.

Greek Original:

Μάρτιαι
Ειδοί
Τα μεγαλεία
να φοβάσαι, ω
ψυχή.
Και τες
φιλοδοξίες
σου να
υπερνικήσει&
#962;
αν δεν
μπορείς, με
δισταγμό και
προφυλάξεις
να τες
ακολουθείς.
Κι όσο
εμπροστά
προβαίνεις,
τόσο
εξεταστική,
προσεκτική
να είσαι.

Κι όταν θα
φθάσεις στην
ακμή σου,
Καίσαρ πια·
έτσι
περιωνύμου

ανθρώπου
σχήμα όταν
λάβεις,
τότε κυρίως
πρόσεξε σαν
βγεις στον
δρόμον έξω,
εξουσιαστής
περίβλεπτος
με συνοδεία,
αν τύχει και
πλησιάσει
από τον όχλο
κανένας
Αρτεμίδωρος,
που φέρνει
γράμμα,
και λέγει
βιαστικά
«Διάβασε
αμέσως τούτα,
είναι μεγάλα
πράγματα που
σ'
ενδιαφέρουν»,
μη λείψεις να
σταθείς· μη
λείψεις τους
διαφόρους
που
χαιρετούν
και
προσκυνούν
να τους
παραμερίσει&
#962;
(τους βλέπεις
πιο αργά· ας
περιμένει
ακόμη
κ' η Σύγκλητος
αυτή, κ' ευθύς
να τα
γνωρίσεις
τα σοβαρά
γραφόμενα
του
Αρτεμιδώρου.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Mirror in the Hall

The rich house had in the hall
An enormous mirror, very old;
Bought at least eighty years ago.

A very handsome boy, assistant at a tailor’s
(On Sundays an amateur athlete),
Was standing there with a parcel. He handed it
To someone of the house, and he took it inside
To fetch the receipt. The tailor’s assistant
Was left alone, and waited.
He went up to the mirror and began to look at himself
And put his tie straight. After five minutes
They brought him the receipt. He took it and went away.

But the old mirror which had seen, and seen,
In the many years it had been
In existence, thousands of things and faces;
The old mirror was glad now
And was proud to have received upon itself
That entire beauty for a few minutes.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Retinue of Dionysos

Damon the craftsman (none better
in the Peloponnese) is giving the last touches
to his Retinue of Dionysos
carved in Parian marble: the god leading
in divine glory, with power in his stride;
after him, Intemperance; and beside Intemperance,
Intoxication pours out the satyrs' wine
from an amphora wreathed in ivy;
near them, Sweetwine, the delicate,
eyes half-closed, soporific;
and behind come the singers
Tunemaker and Melody and Reveller—
the last holding the honored processional torch
which he never lets die—and then Ceremony, so modest.
Damon carves all these. And as he works
his thoughts turn now and then
to the fee he's going to receive
from the king of Syracuse:
three talents, a large sum.
Adding this to what he has already,
he'll live grandly from now on, like a rich man,
and—think of it—he'll be able to go into politics:
he too in the Senate, he too in the Agora.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Satrapy

What a misfortune, although you are made
for fine and great works
this unjust fate of yours always
denies you encouragement and success;
that base customs should block you;
and pettiness and indifference.
And how terrible the day when you yield
(the day when you give up and yield),
and you leave on foot for Susa,
and you go to the monarch Artaxerxes
who favorably places you in his court,
and offers you satrapies and the like.
And you accept them with despair
these things that you do not want.
Your soul seeks other things, weeps for other things;
the praise of the public and the Sophists,
the hard-won and inestimable Well Done;
the Agora, the Theater, and the Laurels.
How can Artaxerxes give you these,
where will you find these in a satrapy;
and what life can you live without these.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Town

You said: “I’ll go to another land, to other seaways wandering,
Some other town may yet be found better than this,
Where every effort of mine is a writ of guiltiness;
And my heart seems buried like a corpse. My mind---
How long is it to be in this decay confined?
Wherever I turn, wherever I lift my eyes,
The blackening ruins of my life arise,
here I have spent so many years spoiling and swquandering.”

“You’ll find no other places, no new seas in all your wanderings,
The town will follow you about. You’ll range
In the same streets. In the same suburbs change
From youth to age; inn this same house grow white.
No hope of another town; this is where you’ll always alight.
There is no road to another, there is no ship
To take you there. As here in this small strip
You spoiled your life, the whole earth felt your squanderings.”

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Windows

In these dark chambers here what weary days
I spend, walk up and down as in a maze
To find the windows.----Only to unclose
One of these windows will be some relief.---
But somehow windows this room hasn’t got,
Or I can’t find them. Perhaps I’ better not.
Perhaps the light would be another grief.
What fresh surprises ther might be, who knows?

Constantine P. Cavafy

Theatre of Sidon (400 B.C.)

Son of an honorable citizen—most important of all, a good-looking
young man of the theatre, amiable in many ways.
I sometimes write highly audacious verses in Greek
and these I circulate—surreptitiously, of course.
O gods, may those puritans who prattle about morals
never see those verses about an exceptional kind of sexual pleasure,
the kind that leads toward a condemned, a barren love.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Their Beginning

Their illicit pleasure has been fulfilled.
They get up and dress quickly, without a word.
They come out of the house separately, furtively;
and as they move off down the street a bit unsettled,
it seems they sense that something about them betrays
what kind of bed they've just been lying on.
But what profit for the life of the artist:
tomorrow, the day after, or years later, he'll give voice
to the strong lines that had their beginning here.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Theodotus

If you are truly one of the select few,
watch how you acquire your power.
However much you are glorified, however much
the cities in Italy and in Thessaly
acclaim your achievements,
however many decrees in your honor
your admirers may have issued in Rome,
neither your joy nor your triumph will last,
nor will you feel like a superior -- what do you mean superior? -- man
when in Alexandria, Theodotus brings you,
upon a bloodstained tray,
the head of the wretched Pompey.

And do not rely on the fact that in your life,
circumscribed, regulated, and prosaic,
there are no such spectacular and terrifying things.
Perhaps at this very hour, Theodotus is entering
the well-appointed house of one of your neighbors --
invisible, bodiless --
carrying such a hideous head.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Thermopylae

Honour to those who in their lives
are committed and guard their Thermopylae.
Never stirring from duty;
just and upright in all their deeds,
but with pity and compassion too;
generous whenever they are rich, and when
they are poor, again a little generous,
again helping as much as they are able;
always speaking the truth,
but without rancor for those who lie.

And they merit greater honor
when the foresee (and many do foresee)
that Ephialtes will finally appear,
and in the end the Medes will go through.

Constantine P. Cavafy

They Should Have Provided

I have almost been reduced to a homeless pauper.
This fatal city, Antioch,
has consumed all my money;
this fatal city with its expensive life.

But I am young and in excellent health.
My command of Greek is superb
(I know all there is about Aristotle, Plato;
orators, poets, you name it.)
I have an idea of military affairs,
and have friends among the mercenary chiefs.
I am on the inside of administration as well.
Last year I spent six months in Alexandria;
I have some knowledge (and this is useful) of affairs there:
intentions of the Malefactor, and villainies, et cetera.

Therefore I believe that I am fully
qualified to serve this country,
my beloved homeland Syria.

In whatever capacity they place me I shall strive
to be useful to the country. This is my intent.
Then again, if they thwart me with their methods --
we know those able people: need we talk about it now?
if they thwart me, I am not to blame.

First, I shall apply to Zabinas,
and if this moron does not appreciate me,
I shall go to his rival Grypos.
And if this idiot does not hire me,
I shall go straight to Hyrcanos.

One of the three will want me however.

And my conscience is not troubled
about not worrying about my choice.
All three harm Syria equally.

But, a ruined man, why is it my fault.
Wretched man, I am trying to make ends meet.
The almighty gods should have provided
and created a fourth, good man.
Gladly would I have joined him.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Those Who Fought for the Achaean League

Valiant are you who fought and fell gloriously;
fearless of those who were everywhere victorious.
Blameless, even if Diaeos and Critolaos were at fault.
When the Greeks want to boast,
"Our nation turns out such men" they will say
of you. And thus marvellous will be your praise. --

Written in Alexandria by an Achaean;
in the seventh year of Ptolemy Lathyrus.

Constantine P. Cavafy

To Call up the Shades

One candle is enough. Its gentle light
will be more suitable, will be more gracious
when the Shades arrive, the Shades of Love.

One candle is enough. Tonight the room
should not have too much light. In deep reverie,
all receptiveness, and with the gentle light—
in this deep reverie I will form visions
to call up the Shades, the Shades of Love.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb of Evrion

In this tomb—ornately designed,
the whole of syenite stone,
covered by so many violets, so many lilies—
lies handsome Evrion,
an Alexandrian, twenty-five years old.
On his father's side, he was of old Macedonian stock,
on his mother's side, descended from a line of magistrates.
He studied philosophy with Aristokleitos,
rhetoric with Paros, and at Thebes
the sacred scriptures. He wrote a history
of the province of Arsinoites. That at least will survive.
But we've lost what was really precious: his form—
like a vision of Apollo.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb of Iases

Iases here I lie. To whom this proud
City for youth and beauty gave much fame.
The learned wise admired me, and the crowd
Of simpletons. From both I had the same

Joy. But the Hermes and Narcissus fashion
Wasted and killed me. Traveller, you will not blame,
If Alexandrian. You know the passion
Of our life here, the pleasure and the flame.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb of Ignatos

Here I'm not the Kleon famous in Alexandria
(where they're not easily dazzled)
for my marvelous houses, my gardens,
for my horses and chariots,
for the jewels and silks I wore.
Far from it—here I'm not that Kleon:
his twenty-eight years are to be wiped out.
I'm Ignatios, lector, who came to his senses very late;
but even so, in that way I lived ten happy months
in the peace, the security of Christ.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb of Lanis

The Lanis you loved, Markos, isn't here
in this tomb you come to weep by, lingering hours on end.
The Lanis you loved is closer to you
when you're in your room at home and you look at his portrait—
the portrait that still keeps something of what was valuable in him,
something of what it was you used to love.

Remember, Markos, that time you brought in
the famous Kyrenian painter from the Proconsul's palace?
What artistic subtlety he used trying to persuade you both,
the minute he saw your friend,
that he absolutely must do him as Hyacinth.
In that way his portrait would come to be better known.

But your Lanis didn't hire out his beauty like that:
reacting strongly, he told him to portray
neither Hyacinth nor anyone else,
but Lanis, son of Rametichos, an Alexandrian.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Trojans

Our efforts are those of the unfortunate;
our efforts are like those of the Trojans.
Somewhat we succeed; somewhat
we regain confidence; and we start
to have courage and high hopes.

But something always happens and stops us.
Achilles in the trench before us
emerges and with loud cries terrifies us.--

Our efforts are like those of the Trojans.
We believe that with resolution and daring
we will alter the blows of destiny,
and we stand outside to do battle.

But when the great crisis comes,
our daring and our resolution vanish;
our soul is agitated, paralyzed;
and we run around the walls
seeking to save ourselves in flight.

Nevertheless, our fall is certain. Above,
on the walls, the mourning has already begun.
The memories and the sentiments of our days weep.
Bitterly Priam and Hecuba weep for us.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Understanding

The years of my youth, my sensual life --
how clearly I see their meaning now.

What needless repentances, how futile....

But I did not understand the meaning then.

In the dissolute life of my youth
the desires of my poetry were being formed,
the scope of my art was being plotted.

This is why my repentances were never stable.
And my resolutions to control myself, to change
lasted for two weeks at the very most.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Very Seldom

He's an old man. Used up and bent,
crippled by time and indulgence,
he slowly walks along the narrow street.
But when he goes inside his house to hide
the shambles of his old age, his mind turns
to the share in youth that still belongs to him.

His verse is now recited by young men.
His visions come before their lively eyes.
Their healthy sensual minds,
their shapely taut bodies
stir to his perception of the beautiful.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Voices

Ideal and beloved voices
of those who are dead, or of those
who are lost to us like the dead.

Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;
sometimes in thought the mind hears them.

And with their sound for a moment return
other sounds from the first poetry of our life --
like distant music that dies off in the night.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Waiting for the Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.
Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.
Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.
Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.
Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.
Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Walls

With no consideration, no pity, no shame,
they have built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind -
because I had so much to do outside.
When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed!
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside world.

Constantine P. Cavafy

When they are roused

Try to guard them, poet
However few they are that can be held.
The visions of your eroticism.
Set them, half hidden, in your phrases.
Try to hold them, poet,
when they are roused in your mind
at night, or in the noon glare.

Original Greek:
Οταν
διεγείροντα&
#953;
Προσπάθησε
να τα
φυλάξεις,
ποιητή,
όσο κι αν
είναι λίγα
αυτά που
σταματιούντ&
#945;ι.
Του
ερωτισμού
σου τα
οράματα.
Βαλ'τα,
μισοκρυμένα,
μες τες
φράσεις σου.
Προσπάθησε
να τα
κρατήσεις,
ποιητή,
όταν
διεγείροντα&
#953; μες το μυαλό
σου
την νύχτα ή
μες την λάμψι
του
μεσημεριού.

Constantine P. Cavafy