

When he arrived in Alexandria in 1915, E.M. Forster was already an established British writer. He soon met Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933), who is now considered the most important figure in twentieth-century Greek poetry. At that time Cavafy was living in relative obscurity. This text is from a partially unpublished MS in E.M. Forster's hand, probably the draft of a portion of a BBC talk given not long after John Mavrogordato's translation of Cavafy appeared in 1950. The document is from the E.M. Forster archives in King's College Library, Cambridge.

...I have left the most important to the last, and must now give you a hasty account of Cavafy. All his poems are short, (...) and in the time I knew him he published each one on a separate sheet and handed them one by one to his friends. It was said that he disliked a completed volume for the same reason Pope Julius II disliked completing his tomb. It never occurred to him that I might like his work or even understand it, for it was written in Demotic and I had only a few scraps of Public School Greek, and I remember the delight to us both, one dusky evening in his flat, when it appeared that I was "following." When he was pleased he'd up and light a candle and he would cut cigarettes in half and light them and bring offerings of mastic with little bits of bread and cheese, and his talk would sway over the Mediterranean world and over much of the world within. It was the talk of a Greek but Greece for him was not territorial. It was rather the influence that has flowed from the Greek race this way and that through the ages, and that (since Alexander the Great) has never disdained to mix: the influence which has made Byzantium a secular achievement. Racial purity bored him, so did political idealism, and he could be very caustic about the claims of the tight-lipped little peninsula overseas. He was most certainly not an Athenian. He was an Alexandrian. The civilisation he respected was a bastardy in which the Greek strain prevailed, and into which, age after age, outsiders would push to modify and be modified. If the strain died out – never mind: it has done its work, and it might have left, far away upon some Asian upland, a coin of silver, stamped with the exquisite head of a Hellenic king. Pericles, Aristides, Themistocles – those schoolroom tyrants: what did they know of the extension which is still extending, and which sometimes seemed (while Cavafy spoke) to connote the human race.

Thus he spoke, thus he wrote. That diffused extended Greece is the subject of many of his poems, and it is coloured by such private emotions as he considered interesting. He is not an ethical poet. For instance cowardice and courage are equally interesting because he sees in both of them opportunities for sensation. What he values in life is the power to snatch sensation, to triumph over the moment, even if remorse ensues. Perhaps that physical snatching is courage: it is certainly the seed of exquisite memories, and it is possibly the foundation of art, and song given to an ageing man in a dusky flat for perceptions he would otherwise never have known.

This attitude towards sensation and its importance to the artist recalls Proust; but the temperament differs. Cavafy is never embittered, never the invalid. He is thought to have lived and in his way – and to me in other ways – he is an example.

Forster concludes his text with a poem by Cavafy, reproduced here as translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton University Press, 1992).

THE GOD ABANDONS ANTONY

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



Photo, Carlos Freire

Constantin P. Cavafis, poète. Décédé à Alexandrie, le 28 avril 1933.