POET OF ALEXANDRIA

"Cavafis est avant tout un Alexandrin, et souvent, par sa forme et ses souvenirs, un Byzantin. Je ne vois personne à qui le rattacher". (Edmond Jaloux)

Yesterday walking in a quarter
Rather remote, I passed under the house
I used to enter when I was very young.
There on my body Love had taken hold
With his marvellous strength.
And yesterday
When I passed along the old street
Immediately beautified by the magic of love
The shops, the pavements and the stones,
And walls, and balconies, and windows,
Nothing left there was ugly.

As I was standing and looking at the door,
And standing, and lingering under the house,
My whole substance began to give back
The sensuous emotion it had stored'.

The stored sensualities that Cavafy recollected in the precision of his verse are the most enthralling side of his poetry. From the taverns and the brothels of Alexandria he draws the material of the erotic poems. Like one of the gods that the people of Sclueia saw at dusk making his way—

among the shadows and the evening lights...
to the place that lives only at night
with orgies and drunkenness
and every kind of lust and debauchery,'(*)
so Cavafy's most personal poetry finds its
way into the city, the city that is shown vividly in Justine, the city of "those little cafés where Baltazar went so often with the old poet of the city". Like the Jew he describes in one of the historical poems he succumbs to

'The Hedonism and the Art of Alexandria'.

But despite the nature of the subject matter in these poems he exercises a strong control over these sensations; they are caught dryly perhaps—
'The consummation of their lawless pleasure
Was done. They rose up from the mattress;
Hurriedly dressed themselves without speaking.'

But profundity is there as well, together with an unexpected and sudden assertion of emotion—
'But for the artist how his life has gained.

Tomorrow, the next day or years after
will be written
The lines of his strength that here had
their beginning.'

Cavafy does not underestimate the poetic value of such experiences. He follows the advice he gives to the poet of When They Azeaken and cherishes the visions of his loving whenever he comes to him, by night or in the intense noon heat,
'So much I gazed on beauty gazing
My vision is full of it full of beauty'.

Despite resolutions to avoid the quest for pleasures, despite a determination to avoid the glance of a lover at the entrance to a café or while looking into a tobacco-shop window, hedonism triumphs;
'whenever the night comes
With its own domination,
Of the body that wills and wants, to
that same
Fatal enjoyment, lost, he goes again.'

These indulgences that the poet recalls, these moments that are caught by Cavafy in the precise clarity of his lyrics are partly imagined, partly actual. They are remembered by picking up an old letter or by recognizing at the next table in the casino a youth whom he has loved long ago. The moods of the poet are either introspective or sensuously nostalgic and they are the atmosphere that Mr. Lawrence Durrell draws upon in his recent novel Justine. The melancholy provinces of the brain "which the old man (Cafavy) saw as full of the black rains of his life" are both the material of the novel as they were the province of the most personal poetry of the Alexandrian poet. Cavafy tells us that

'Under the dissolute living of my youth
Were being formed the intentions of my poetry.'

It was Justine that sent me to Cavafy's poetry, for his spirit had hung like one of his ghosts of Love above the novel. But Mr. Durrell was concerned with the unhappy quadrangle of lovers and the erotic poems of the Greek were of immediate importance. Cavafy, for the novelist, was rather an ironist who so naturally, and with such finesse of instinct took his subject matter from the streets and brothels of Alexandria. The four characters of Justine, when the story is told, have left the city, fleeing their own tragedy; but the poet had warned them that

'The city shall ever follow you.
In these same streets you shall wander,
and in the same purlieus you shall roam,
and in the same house you shall grow
grey...

There is no ship to take you to other lands, there is no road.
You have so shattered your life here, in this small corner,
that in all the world you have ruined it.'(*)

Such was the power of the city of Alexandria. Constantine Cavafy himself never left there after 1899; he led a secluded existence among his books and legends that gave him the subject matter for the majority of his poetry. It is this other aspect of his verse that I want to look at now: it is as different in treatment as in subject from the more personal lyrics.

"Many poets are exclusively poets," said Cavafy, "but I am a poet-historian. I could never write a novel or a play; but inside me I have a thousand voices that tell me I could write history". Even here, and even although the attitude seems coldly impersonal, the cities, scenery and legends of history emerge in terms of his own mind. He may stand aloof from his subject, but the angle from which he looks down is eminently individual. "The poet", says Mr. E. M. Forster, "is incapable of seeing straight". So, while Horace and Shakespeare view the battle of Actium in its cosmic, heroic grandeur, Cavafy sees it through the eyes of a small village who have composed a congratulatory message to Anthony upon his victory. They find they have to change the name to Octavius, but otherwise the "whole text fits exactly".

In one of his historical poems before 1912, Tiberinae, the opening and close have the authentic touches of Cavafy's imagination—

'And again greater honour becomes them When they foresee (and many do foresee)
That Ephialtes will be there in the end,
And that the Medes, at last, they will get through.'

But otherwise, despite the nobility of its tone, it is too abstract and we miss the concentrated thrill and the intensely personal vision. His early method was to draw from history a lesson that he saw as universal and eternal. In the Ides of March he warns all great men to listen carefully to the voice in the crowd. In The God Abandons Antony