he shows there is no occasion for regret, but rather one for courage and thankfulness for the past:

'Like a man for long prepared, like a brave man, like the man who was worthy of such a city, go to the window firmly, and listen with emotion and not with the prayers and complaints of a coward.' (*)

That is one of his most successful poems of this kind. Another with the instinctive moral note is *Ithica:* however disappointing it may be when you finally arrive at your ideal, the way there will have been worth it all:

'Ithica gave you your fair voyage. Without her you would not have ventured on the way, but she has no more to give you.

And if you find Ithica a poor place, she has not mocked you.

You have become so wise, so full of experience, that you should understand by now what these Ithacas mean.' (*)

At the same time as Cavafy was writing these poems with the explicit moral conclusion he was presenting situations that seem at first completely impersonal and objective. King Demetrios is abandoned by the Macedonians, and so

'He went away And took off his golden robes, And threw away the shoes from off his feet. The shoes all purple-dyed. In simple clothes He dressed himself quickly and fled away— Doing just like any play actor. Who, when the play comes to an end, Changes his wear and goes away.'

Cavafy soon fashioned this insidious way of making his point into a more deep and complex technique, shown at its best, perhaps, in *Waiting for the Barbarians: here all the town has prepared to receive the barbarians and it is described with gentle irony and malice, until at the end it is announced that they will not be coming and the crowds disperse; Cavafy adds in a quiet, conversational way—

'And now what will become of us without Barbarians?— Those people were some sort of a solution.'

In *Alexandrian Kings* the poet takes a subject that Plutarch had also treated. But Cavafy avoids focussing has attention upon Cleopatra and Antony and concentrates it upon their children and upon the crowd who have come to watch the investiture of the little princes with high-sounding titles. The crowd

'ran to see the show and grew enthusiastic, and applauded in Greek, in Egyptian, and some in Hebrew, bewitched with the beautiful spectacle, though they knew perfectly well how worthless, what empty words were these kings makings.' (*)

But Cavafy more often left the beaten paths of history to explore times and places that might often pass unnoticed. He may decipher the cracked inscription on a tomb of a young man who died in the month of Atyr, and his poem is broken into half-lines as he makes out the words.

Among these smaller episodes of history, Cavafy especially likes those events that have an element of paradox or contradiction. He rarely tells a story, for his interest lies at the core of a situation which is most worthy of close attention and sympathetic understanding. The craftsman of bowls is carving upon a silver dish the body of a boy and he prays for help to make the representation of his old lover as fine as possible;

'Much difficulty faced My work because Fifteen full years have gone Over me since the day He fell, a soldier, in the Magnesian defeat.'

Between the historical poetry and the personal lies much of the most charming of Cavafy’s work. Its dominant quality is the precision of the flashes of insight and of their expression. He is a realist by nature and what most interests him is the actual play of life. “He might so easily have fallen into paradox for its own sake and concentrated on amusing eccentricities. But he did not do this. He was always sane and in touch with life, because he was concerned not with the vagaries of human nature but with its mysteries.” (C. M. Bowra)

Constantine Cavafy tried both the world and seclusion and his poetry draws its strength from either or both of these existences. He saw that life entails courage and the ability to learn. But equally he did not despise the small men who perhaps do little more than the poet who after two years had only written one idyl. He was comforted by Theocritus:

'Where you have come is not a little way; This much that you have done is a great glory.'

Cavafy was born in 1863 and died at the age of seventy. His poems were circulated among his friends on printed sheets of paper later bound in a folder. He wrote a neat and purposeful hand; the language might be Greek, English or French. A photograph will show his penetrating eyes, heavy eyebrows, large nose and an impassive mouth. It is this figure that Mr. Forster met in la rue Lepsius: “a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe. His arms are extended, possibly . . . Yes, it is Mr. Cavafy, and he is going either from his flat to the office, or from his office to the flat. If the former, he vanishes when seen, with a slight
gesture of despair. If the latter, he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw”.

As of the sentences, so of the poetry. Unexpected conclusions, unforeseen attitudes towards a tomb, a king or a landscape. Cavafy is, as Monsieur Jaloux says, a poet who defies comparison with any other. He is always inimitably himself. Whether at the tomb of Eurion, meditating upon the loss of features which were the semblance of Apollo, or contemplating a stranger in Antioch:

'An unknown Edesien—a stranger in Antioch— writes copiously. There, at length the final lay is ended. This makes eighty-three poems in all. But so much writing, so much versification has fatigued the poet, and so much attention to Grecian phraseology, and now the least wit tires him.

One thought, however, at once rouses him from his prostration the exquisitely that Lucian verse heard in his sleep.'

NOTE: Cavafy’s collected poems have been published by the Hogarth Press in the translations of Professor John Movagharoo and they are the only edition available. They often lack the essential magic that is such an important aspect of the poet and which has been captured with greater success by Mr. George Valassopoulos. His renderings of those poems he has translated have not been published. Where possible I have used them and followed the quotation with an asterisk in parenthesis. I should like to thank both Mr. Valassopoulos for the use of his translations and Mr. E. M. Forster for loaning them to me, together with other interesting material about the poet.