C.P. Cavafy: Byzantine historian?*

Anthony Hirst

"Many poets are just poets. Porphyras, for example, is just a poet. Not Palamas. He has written some short stories. As for me, I am a poet-historian." This is Cavafy, holding forth in the Grammata bookshop in Alexandria, at some point in the last decade of his life; his words as recorded by Lechonitis (1977: 19-20). Cavafy continues, "I could never have written a novel or a play; but I hear inside me a hundred-and-twenty-five voices telling me that I could have written history. But now it's too late."

"Poet historian" translates ποιητὴς ἱστορικός, where ἱστορικός might be construed as "historical", rather than "historian", and the phrase translated "historical poet", on the analogy of "historical novelist". There can be little doubt, though, that in the context Cavafy meant "poet-historian", both poet and historian, since Porphyras who is "just a poet" is contrasted, first, with Palamas, who is a poet and short-story writer, and then with Cavafy himself, who is a "poet-historian". But it seems that Cavafy claims to be only a potential historian, for he implies that he had not written history: "I could have written history. But now it's too late." And making a similar remark on another occasion (again in the Grammata bookshop) he was more specific about this: "I had two propensities. To make poems and to write history. I didn't write history and it's too late now." [1]

---

* This paper is based on a broader investigation of Cavafy's Byzantine poems undertaken as Hannah Seeger Davis Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University, 1999/2000. Earlier versions of the paper were read at The Queen's University of Belfast, King's College London, and at the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Princeton; in its present form it has benefited from the comments of the audience in each of these places.

[1] Recorded by Eftychia Zelita (who ran the bookshop) on 8 April 1929; quoted by Malanos in Lechonitis 1977: 20.

We may be thankful that Cavafy chose to "make poems" rather than to "write history", but we may wonder whether he wasn't, perhaps, deceiving us a little here, whether he didn't, after all, write history, but in his poems. This would go some way towards explaining the paradox of the "poet-historian" who wrote poetry but not history.

Roughly half of all Cavafy's poems are set in the remote past, or make substantive allusions to historical persons or events. And the potential ambiguity of the phrase ποιητὴς ἱστορικός prompts us to ask whether, in his historical poems, Cavafy writes like a historian or like a historical novelist. There are, certainly, poems in which he gives us historical fiction – imaginary characters placed in specific historical contexts. Many examples could be given, including Byzantine ones.

Cavafy's concern with historical accuracy in his poems is well documented;[2] and I think we can assume that he did not want to write, even in his poems of historical fiction, anything which simply could *not* have been the case, in other words, that he respected the facts of history. But sometimes it is where the facts are lacking that the opportunity for poetry arises. The classic case in Cavafy's work is the poem "Caesarion". Addressing the doomed young king across two millennia, which imagination reduces to the width of his room, the poet says,

> In history a few
> lines only are to be found concerning you,
> and so more freely did I shape you in my mind.
> [...]
> And so completely did I imagine you
> That late last night [...]
> [...]
> I thought you came into my room.[3]

I spoke carelessly of the *facts* of history, and here Cavafy corrects me, for history consists of words, not facts: "in history" there are only a few "lines" about Caesarion. Beyond the

---

[2] See, for several examples, Bowersock 1981: 94-8.

[3] All translations of Cavafy's poetry are my own.

physical (archaeological) remains of the past, we have only the *words* of history. History is a matter of interpretation, a series of competing constructs which historiographers presents to us, constructs which we selectively assimilate, and simplify, or elaborate, as we combine them. Professional historians are obliged to assimilate as comprehensively as they can, to weigh the often contradictory words of history, and to make their new constructions answer to what they judge to be the balance of the evidence. And so we must ask whether there are poems in which Cavafy engages with the words of history in the manner of a historian, poems in which he makes his own contribution to historiography, thereby justifying his self-description as "poet-historian". Here, though, I am concerned only with Cavafy's possible contribution to Byzantine history, his credentials as a Byzantine historian, and only in the context of three poems, all concerned with members of the Comnenian dynasty: "Manuel Comnenus", "Anna Comnena" and "Anna Dalassena".

Before proceeding, let me note one significant way in which the poet has greater freedom than the historian: it is in the matter of voice, in the identity of the speaking persona. When we read a work of history, we assume (and we must be able to assume) that, where the author is not explicitly quoting or paraphrasing another text, what we have in front of us are the author's considered opinions; we must be able to assume, in other words, that the voice is the voice of the person named as author on the title page. The poet, though, even the "poet-historian", is not bound by the same conventions. He is not obliged to announce his quotations or enclose them in quotation marks (though sometimes Cavafy does so). He need not declare his sources (though again Cavafy sometimes does so). And more importantly, we cannot assume that the voice in a poem, and the opinions it expresses, are the voice and opinions of the author. The critical convention of referring to the speaker or voice in a poem as "the poet", sometimes with a capital P, acknowledges this dilemma. There are poems such as "Caesarion" where the self-referentiality ("my art gives to your face / a dreamlike appealing loveliness") makes it difficult to distance the speaker at all from the author, C.P. Cavafy. Then again, there are many poems in which the speaker is quite explicitly differentiated from the author. Take Cavafy's poem "A Byzantine nobleman, exiled,

composing verses": though the text is an unframed monologue, the title tells us who is speaking. "Manuel Comnenus", the first poem I want to consider in detail, proves to be something of a puzzle in this respect; and the question of voice also arises in the discussion of the other two poems.

Here is "Manuel Comnenus", first drafted in 1905, but not published until 1916, in a translation that sticks closely to the Greek and has little pretension to poetry:

> The emperor Lord Manuel Comnenus
> one melancholy day in September
> sensed death nearby. The astrologers
> (the paid ones) of the court were blathering
> that he would still live for many more years.
> But while they were speaking, he
> remembers old pious customs
> and from the monks' cells orders
> ecclesiastical garments to be brought,
> and he puts them on and rejoices that he presents
> the modest aspect of a priest or monk.
>
> Happy all those who believe
> and like the emperor Lord Manuel meet their end
> dressed in their faith most modestly.

The only possible ultimate source for this poem is the chronicle of Nicetas Choniates, and my analysis will demonstrate that Cavafy worked directly from the Byzantine text.

The poem gives us the impression of a man in calm control of events: the emperor ignores the astrologers' assurances that he has many more years to live, orders ecclesiastical garments and dies a dignified, pious and contented death. But what Choniates stresses is the extent to which the emperor *was* influenced by the astrologers, and in consequence ignored the evidence of his declining health, ignored the Patriarch's advice to find a suitable protector for his son (ten years old at the time), and made no provision for the monastic garb customary for a dying emperor. When, in the bathhouse, he finally realized his life was draining away like the water, "he briefly discussed his son Alexios with those in attendance, and foreseeing the events that would follow his death, he intermixed his words with lament-

ations". When the emperor then "asked for the monastic habit", nothing could be found in time but "a black threadbare cloak". It was much too short, and "tattered", and it "left the knees bare"; and those who saw the emperor dressed in it were moved to reflect on the "wretchedness of the body".[4]

The impression one gets from Choniates is of the sudden and undignified end of a foolish old man, whose vanity and credulity had allowed death to catch him unprepared, a man overtaken by events, not in control of them as Cavafy's emperor appears to be. No one reading Choniates' account in place of Cavafy's would be likely to conclude, "Happy all those who meet their end like the emperor Manuel".

Cavafy must have known that some of his readers would resort to Choniates; and a survey of critical comments on the poem shows that many of them have indeed done so. What, then, is the poet-historian doing writing a poem which, when compared to its source, appears to be untenable as history? It appears, in fact, to belong to the popular Byzantine genre of hagiography. And yet, according to Lechonitis (1977: 32), Cavafy described this poem as ἐντελῶς ἱστορικόν ("entirely historical").

Though many commentators have noted the discrepancy between Cavafy's and Choniates' accounts of the death of Manuel Comnenus, none has offered a satisfactory account of it. Discussion has focused instead on the last three lines of the poem, the comment which seems to stand outside the narrative. There has been a long-running debate about whether Cavafy is being ironic here, considering that Manuel Comnenus was better known for his lechery than his piety.[5] Only readers ignorant of Choniates and totally uninformed about the emperor Manuel are likely to read the last three lines of the poem as a sincere and pious tribute to a pious emperor. Christidis has suggested (1958: 61) that these lines express the envy of a non-believer; and

---

[4] Choniates' account of the emperor's death is brief, and I give only a single set of references to cover these and subsequent quotations: CFHB 11: I, 220-2; tr. Magoulias 1984: 124-5. Quotations in English are from Magoulias' translation unless otherwise noted.

[5] For the views of several parties to the debate, see Haas 1996: 436-9. See also Hirst 1995: 44, 46-7.

according to Savidis (in Cavafy 1991: I, 146), their "tone depends on whether or not we accept Cavafy's devotion to Christian Orthodox religion". Elsewhere Savidis put it rather differently (1985-7: I, 23), suggesting that "the question, in the end, is whether or not one accepts that the cassock makes the priest", and he adds that he believes Cavafy did accept it. There have been a number of readings in this vein, all proposing that Cavafy is here acknowledging the importance of conformity to the socially sanctioned outward forms of religion.

All the interpretations I have mentioned are, in my view, attempts to solve a false problem: they follow from the mistaken assumption that the voice in the poem is Cavafy's.

Let us look more closely at the relation between the poem and its source. Choniates' account of the death of Manuel Comnenus contains three principal statements about the emperor's death. Choniates introduces the subject by informing us that "the emperor first took ill before the month of March in the then current thirteenth indiction" – before March 1180, that is; and, after referring to the resolution of a doctrinal dispute in May, he adds, ὁ δὲ αὐτοκράτωρ ἐπιστάντος τοῦ Σεπτεμβρίου τὸ ζῆν ἐξεμέτρησεν, "the emperor, when September had come, reached the end of his life" (my translation). The first three lines of the poem follow the three-part grammatical form and semantic progression of this statement: subject (the emperor); adverbial phrase ending with the word September; and predicate referring to the emperor's death:

> Ὁ βασιλεὺς κὺρ Μανουὴλ ὁ Κομνηνὸς
> μιὰ μέρα μελαγχολικὴ τοῦ Σεπτεμβρίου
> αἰσθάνθηκε τὸν θάνατο κοντά.

In the third line, however, Cavafy adopts the spatial metaphor of Choniates' second statement, οὐ παρεδέχετο ὁπωσοῦν ὡς ἤγγικεν τὸ τελευτᾶν, but he reverses its meaning: Choniates' "he would in no way accept that the end had approached" (my translation) becomes "he sensed death nearby". And yet, what Cavafy is articulating is the situation of Choniates' third statement, his account of that moment, in September, when the emperor finally "realized" (γνούς), in the bathhouse, "that his hopes of life had been erased and were flowing away like the

water and that the appointed day was now inescapable" (my translation). Cavafy's aorist verb αἰσθάνθηκε ("he sensed") corresponds to Choniates' aorist participle γνούς, each denoting the act or moment of realization rather than a state of knowing. Clearly, Cavafy has thoroughly absorbed Choniates' three statements and, through a radical and extremely skilful condensation, combined them in a single sentence.

Cavafy's second sentence, "The astrologers / (the paid ones) of the court were blathering / that he would still live for many more years", also integrates separate statements from Choniates. The first is that the emperor was convinced that "another fourteen years of life were to be given him" (my translation). The astrologers, who have not yet been mentioned, are obviously the source of this conviction, for the second relevant statement is that the astrologers "boldly told [the emperor] that he would soon recover from his illness and shamelessly predicted that he would level foreign cities to the ground".

It is in the poem's third sentence, with its switch from past tense to present, that Cavafy's divergence from Choniates becomes unmistakable. It is now evident that the time span has been dramatically compressed, the events of several months in Choniates reduced to that "one melancholy day in September". The third sentence begins, "But while they were speaking, he / remembers old pious customs / and from the monks' cells orders ecclesiastical garments to be brought". In Choniates there is no suggestion that the astrologers were speaking at the time that the emperor realized he was dying and asked for the monastic habit; and Cavafy's version of the emperor's request and his description of what ensued are very different from those of Choniates. The phrase "from the monk's cells" is rather odd; and it would have been redundant had Cavafy stuck more closely to Choniates' μοναδικὸν σχῆμα ("monastic habit") instead of substituting the less precise ἐκκλησιαστικὰ ἐνδύματα ("ecclesiastical garments"). This latter phrase tacitly acknowledges, perhaps, that what was actually provided was not the monastic habit, but just a ragged short black cloak; while the former, "from the monks' cells", pointedly deviates from its equivalent in Choniates, where the black cloak was procured ὁθενοῦν, "from somewhere or other" (my translation), an expression which

betrays the haste and confusion of the moment. The poem begins to look like a deliberate cover-up.

That the emperor remembered the old pious custom is merely implicit in Choniates; and it is Choniates himself who recalls, and draws our attention to, the piety involved in the custom. The black cloak is brought, the attendants remove the emperor's soft imperial garments and dress him "in the coarse garment of the life in God transforming him into a spiritual soldier with a more divine helmet and a more pious breastplate". Cavafy undoubtedly recognized that Choniates was alluding to St Paul's metaphor of the "armour of God" (Eph. 6.13), for where Choniates speaks of a "more pious breastplate", St Paul speaks of Christians "having dressed themselves in the breastplate of faith", ἐνδυσάμενοι θώρακα πίστεως (I Thess. 5.8), while Cavafy refers to those who die like the emperor, ντυμένοι μὲς στὴν πίστι των, "dressed in their faith".

Choniates' purpose in his scriptural digression is not, I think, to accord the emperor Manuel the proper deathbed pieties, setting aside for a moment his critical stance towards him, for the tone is, surely, ironical. He draws out the symbolism and the supposed spiritual efficacy of the change to the monastic garb in order to provide a sharp contrast with the emperor's actual appearance and its effect on those around him: "the tattered garment, which neither reached to the feet nor covered the whole body, left the knees bare so that no one who witnessed the scene remained without fear as he reflected on human frailty at the end of life and the wretchedness of the body". And it is here that Cavafy's deviation from Choniates is most marked, for in the poem the emperor actually "rejoices" at his appearance.

Manuel's appearance is characterized as σεμνήν, translated above as "modest". This is one of the few instances where Cavafy's actual vocabulary leads us back to Choniates, who speaks metaphorically of the emperor dressed θώρακι σεμνοτέρῳ ("in a more pious breastplate"). It is striking that a word which appears in the source in the comparative turns up in the poem in the other two degrees: in the absolute σεμνήν, and prominently, as the last word of the poem, in the superlative, as the adverb σεμνότατα. As Diana Haas points out (1996: 432), σεμνός has changed its meaning since Byzantine times. Then it meant "awe-inspiring", "dignified" or "pious"; now its usual meaning is

"humble" or "modest". But Haas is rash, I think, to insist that in Cavafy it is used in its modern sense. Cavafy uses σεμνήν and σεμνότατα in precisely the context in which Choniates uses σεμνοτέρῳ. Choniates speaks of the "more pious breastplate"; Cavafy speaks first of the emperor's appearance in ecclesiastical garments as σεμνήν, and secondly of those who like the emperor Manuel meet their end "dressed in their faith" σεμνότατα. We must at least allow the possibility that the word borrowed from Choniates has brought with it its Byzantine meaning. And I shall shortly advance a positive reason for reading ὄψι σεμνήν and σεμνότατα as "pious appearance" and "most piously". However, the tension which must remain between the Byzantine and modern meanings reflects the ironic contrast in Choniates between the emperor's supposedly "more pious" garb and his distressingly humble appearance in the tattered cloak.

In the past I suggested that the problem of the last three lines of the poem would disappear if we thought of them as spoken by some courtier or cleric close to the emperor.[6] Now, though, I am inclined to see the whole poem as a dramatic monologue; and I am prepared to suggest the identity of the speaker.

There is an important sub-plot in Choniates which is not, on the face of it, reflected at all in Cavafy's poem, but which might, nonetheless, provide the key to the poem. I have already referred in passing to the Patriarch; let us now look more closely at his role in the story.

During the early stages of Manuel's final illness, Patriarch Theodosius advised him "to search for someone who would steadfastly cleave to his son, the successor to the throne". The emperor evidently ignored this advice until it was too late, but when he realized he was dying "he briefly discussed his son Alexius with those in attendance", and his son was the focus of his sudden but now ineffectual concern about what would happen after his death. Following this implicit acknowledgement of the wisdom of the Patriarch's earlier advice, the Patriarch himself appears on the scene (if indeed he was not already among those in attendance), and gets the dying emperor to sign a renunciation of astrology:

---

[6] Hirst 1995: 47; 1998: 111.

> Αλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῆς ἀστρονομίας ὑποθήκη τοῦ πατριάρχου βραχύν τινα χάρτην ὑπεσημήνατο πρὸς τὴν ἐναντίαν δόξαν μεθαρμοσθείς.

Manuel then asks for the monastic habit, is dressed in the nearest approximation that can be found in the little time available, and dies (more or less) as a Christian emperor should.

The Patriarch is the one character in the drama, as Choniates presents it, who might be supposed to feel some satisfaction in the circumstances and the manner of the emperor's death. His satisfaction would have been tempered by his continuing anxieties about securing the succession, but, nevertheless, he had at the very last minute achieved a significant victory, vanquishing the astrologers and reclaiming the emperor for the church. And we learn from Choniates' account of the brief and chaotic reign of Manuel's son Alexius II that Manuel, presumably on his deathbed, had entrusted both his son and the state to the Patriarch.[7]

If it seems too bold to say that the speaker in the poem *is* the Patriarch, let us at least allow that the voice in the poem presents the drama from the Patriarch's perspective. In Choniates we see the astrologers and the Patriarch competing for the emperor's attention. In Cavafy, though, it is the emperor himself who provides the opposite pole to the astrologers, while the Patriarch is not mentioned at all. The poem passes over in silence the fact that almost to the end the emperor remained under the influence of the astrologers, implying instead that he had never paid them much attention. From the triumphant Patriarch's point of view there would be little point in rehearsing the sorry events of the previous months. Contempt for the astrologers is confined to the verb "were blathering" and the epithet "paid", which alludes to what would have irked the Patriarch most about them – their receipt of imperial patronage.

The poem's supposedly problematic second paragraph, which contrasts so sharply with the distress of those who witnessed the emperor's death in Choniates, would do nicely as an expression of Patriarchal satisfaction. And if we now detect a certain clerical smugness in these lines, this may be entirely ap-

---

[7] CFHB XI: I, 253-4, tr. Magoulias 1984: 142.

propriate; furthermore we now have good reason to give the last word its Byzantine meaning: "Happy all those who believe / and like the emperor Lord Manuel end their life / dressed in their faith *most piously*."

Viewed in this way, the end of the poem is no longer problematic. Its meaning does not depend on whether we accept, with Savidis, Cavafy's adherence to orthodox Christianity or to the view that the cassock makes the priest. Nor need we argue with Christidis about whether these lines betray the envy of a non-believer. Cavafy's own views on religion in general or the efficacy of deathbed repentance in particular – whatever those views were – are not at issue in the poem, which is, as Cavafy said, ἐντελῶς ἱστορικόν ("entirely historical"), in the sense that it articulates a point of view which belongs within the historical situation it describes. And it is entirely historical in a further sense, since it operates entirely from within Choniates' text, being constructed almost entirely out of elements of that text, paraphrasing and condensing statements made or implied by Choniates. At the same time, though, through a change of perspective, it presents an account of the death of Manuel Comnenus which is, on the face of it, radically at variance with the source.

Cavafy could have reiterated Choniates' fine irony in juxtaposing the intended effect of donning the monastic habit with the emperor's actual pathetic appearance in the tattered cloak. I am sure that Cavafy appreciated this irony (and I would hazard a guess that this was the germ of the poem), but he saw, I imagine, the possibility of a more original approach, developing a perspective latent within Choniates' narrative, that of the Patriarch, who would certainly have wanted to gloss over the realities of the dying emperor's appearance and distress. It was vital to the Patriarch's interest that the emperor died "dressed in [his] faith most piously". Had the Patriarch read Choniates' account the next morning in, let us suppose, the Constantinople *Daily Mail*, he would have been appalled, and would have done his best to have it suppressed. The poem *is* hagiography, but the hagiographer is not Cavafy.

In creating this poem through a selective but extremely fine-grained reworking of Choniates, Cavafy emerges as a skilful poet; but, in exploiting a perspective merely implicit in

Choniates, he reveals himself to be at the same time a historian, drawing out the implications of a Byzantine text. One can now reread Choniates' account of the death of Manuel Comnenus paying more attention to the role of the Patriarch, who indeed figures more prominently in the pages that follow.

Had Cavafy been writing history as a historian, he would have been obliged to tell us what he was doing. As a poet, and a difficult modernist poet at that, he can leave us to find out. The clues are there.

* * *

We move on now – *on* in the chronological sequence of Cavafy's poems, but *back* in historical time – from the death of Manuel Comnenus to the writings of his aunt, Anna Comnena. Cavafy's poem "Anna Comnena" was first drafted in August 1917, just over a year after the publication of "Manuel Comnenus", but printed for the first time only in December 1920.

The first of its three paragraphs is a couplet with a potentially subversive rhyme:

> Στὸν πρόλογο τῆς Ἀλεξιάδος της θρηνεῖ,
> γιὰ τὴν χηρεία της ἡ Ἄννα Κομνηνή.

There is no other rhyme in the poem; and this is tongue-in-cheek poeticism, for the opening couplet conveys the poem's most prosaic statement:

> In the Preface to her *Alexiad*
> Anna Comnena laments her widowhood.

In the second paragraph Cavafy strings together some phrases associated with Anna's expression of her grief, mixing quotation and paraphrase:

> Her soul is in turmoil. "And
> with floods of tears," she tells us, "I bathe
> "my eyes..... Alas for the storm-waves" of her life,
> "alas for the reversals." Grief burns her
> "to the bones and marrow and the rending of the soul".

Cavafy has mined several passages in Anna's Preface for these phrases, but it will be enough to give, in Elizabeth Dawes' translation, the passage which is chiefly at issue in the poem:

> Verily, my grief for my Caesar and his unexpected death have touched my inmost soul, and the wound has pierced to the profoundest depths of my being. All previous misfortunes compared with this insatiable calamity I count literally as a single small drop compared with the Atlantic Ocean [...]: they were, methinks, but prelude to this, mere smoke and heat to forewarn me of this fiery furnace and indescribable blaze; the small daily sparks foretold this terrible conflagration. Oh! thou fire which, though unfed, dost reduce my heart to ashes! Thou burnest and art ever kept alight in secret, yet dost not consume. Though thou scorchest my heart thou givest me the outward semblance of being unburnt, though thy fingers of fire have gripped me to the marrow of my bones, and to the dividing of my soul.[8]

In the face of this, Cavafy's laconic "Grief burns her" is both witty and malicious; yet at the same time it is almost charitable to the imperial historian, drawing a veil over the real extravagance of her language. Had he wanted to, Cavafy could have made a much stronger case against the excesses of Anna's style and sentiments. But he has not finished with this passage. In the third and final paragraph of the poem comes what one might have described as a direct attack on Anna Comnena, but for the presence of one word which puts all the rest in doubt. That word is μοιάζει ("appears to be"):

> Ὅμως ἡ ἀλήθεια μοιάζει...
>
> But the truth appears to be that only one grave
> sorrow did this power-loving woman know;
> one profound regret was all
> (though she may not admit it) this arrogant Greek lady had,
> that she did not manage, for all her cleverness,
> to obtain the empire; but it was seized
> almost from within her grasp by the impetuous John.

---

[8] *Alexiad* Praef. 4 (CSHB: I, 10), tr. Dawes 1928: 4.

Although Cavafy is no longer quoting Anna here, obviously he is still engaging with her words, for Anna has told us, in no uncertain terms, what she considered the most significant grief of her life: compared to the loss of her husband, all other sorrows were as a drop to an ocean, a spark to a conflagration. And Cavafy does not directly contradict her. He does not say the truth *is* otherwise, only that the truth *appears to be* otherwise. This word μοιάζει signals a historian's guarded judgement; and it introduces what is, essentially, the less guarded judgement of another historian, Charles Diehl.[9]

According to Timos Malanos (1957: 344), Cavafy's "Anna Comnena" was "written after reading the monograph of Charles Diehl" and there is every reason to suppose that Malanos is right. He is referring to Diehl's "Anne Comnène" included in the second series of *Figures Byzantines*, published in 1908.

Diehl voices his reservation about Anna's veracity in the context of the very passage from her Preface which is at issue in Cavafy's poem. He says that "The death of Bryennius [Anna's husband] was, *if she is to be believed*, the great tragedy of her life"[10] (my emphasis). This is fairly mild; but some three pages later Diehl comes to a conclusion that is altogether incompatible with Anna's assertion about her grief for her husband: "for Anna Comnena the birth of a brother was the great misfortune of her life."[11] Here we are fairly close to Cavafy's poem, which suggests that Anna's only deep sorrow was that she did not obtain the Empire, which was taken from her "by the impetuous John", that is, the same younger brother Diehl refers to, who became emperor on the death of their father Alexius in 1118.

Anna Comnena was, as Diehl supposes she saw it, twice deprived of the throne. Born in 1083, she was the eldest child of Alexius Comnenus, who had assumed the throne two years before, and in her infancy she was betrothed to Constantine Ducas. Constantine was the son of Michael VII, deposed by

---

[9] Beaton suggests (1983: 39) that Gibbon's judgement is in question here. Gibbon (1994: III, 69) and Paparrigopoulos (1925: IVb, 29) both cast doubt, in general terms, on Anna's veracity, but my analysis shows that it is primarily Diehl whose views are implicated in the poem.

[10] Diehl 1908: 36, tr. Bell & de Kerpely 1963: 183.

[11] Diehl 1908: 39, tr. Bell & de Kerpely 1963: 185.

Nicephorus Botaneiates, who was in turn deposed by Alexius. At first Alexius acknowledged Constantine's right of succession, and thus as a small child Anna had every expectation of eventually becoming empress. But in 1088 her brother John was born, and three years later, when Anna was eight, Alexius changed the succession, making John his heir in place of Constantine, thus destroying his daughter's hopes. In 1094, before the marriage of Anna and Constantine had been celebrated, Constantine died; and in 1097 Anna married Nicephorus Bryennius.

Anna's mother, Irene, preferred her son-in-law to her own son John, and "the two women", as Diehl tells us, "resolved to oust the legitimate heir", and "soon, thanks to [their] intrigues, Bryennius was all-powerful at the palace".[12] However, they never succeeded in persuading Alexius to make Bryennius his heir, and while Alexius was dying John had himself proclaimed emperor. Despite the urging of Anna and Irene, Bryennius refused to challenge his brother-in-law. This is how Diehl sums up the situation after the death of Alexius:

> Anna's plots had failed: her brother was emperor. For the proud princess this was a terrible and unexpected blow. For many years she had lived in the hope of inheriting the Empire. She considered the throne legitimately and essentially hers, she thought herself superior to her detested younger brother. Now all her dreams had crumbled. The audacity of John Comnenus and the hesitancy of Bryennius had overturned at a single stroke the whole edifice of intricate schemes so cleverly constructed by Anna and Irene.[13]

In this passage there are a number of phrases closely related to expressions in Cavafy's poem. "The proud princess" ("l'orgueilleuse princesse") is reflected in Cavafy's ἡ ἀγέρωχη αὐτὴ Γραικιά ("this proud" or "haughty Greek Lady"); the "edifice of intricate schemes so cleverly constructed" ("l'édifice de machinations si savamment construit") is reflected in Cavafy's ὅλην τὴν δεξιότητά της ("all her dexterity" or "cleverness"), despite which she did not manage to obtain the empire; and "Anna's plots had failed" ("les intrigues d'Anne avaient échouées") is

---

[12] Diehl 1908: 40, tr. Bell & de Kerpely 1963: 186.
[13] Diehl 1908: 43-4, tr. Bell & de Kerpely 1963: 189.

reflected in Cavafy's δὲν κατάφερε ("she did not manage" or "did not succeed").

Diehl's phrase "the audacity of John Comnenus" might be related to Cavafy's phrase, "the impetuous John", but for both authors the ultimate source here is Choniates, as we shall see.

Cavafy's phrase μιὰ λύπη μόνην καιρίαν ("only one grave sorrow") recalls and challenges Anna's assertion that in comparison to her grief at the death of Bryennius all her other misfortunes were as a drop to an ocean, but in its form this phrase echoes a phrase of Diehl's: "ce rêve unique et tenace" ("this one tenacious dream"). The context in Diehl makes the connection clear:

> It was because she believed herself qualified to reign, by right of seniority, that as long as Alexius lived she plotted, agitated, and used all her influence to push forward her husband [...] with the aim of recovering the power that she considered herself unjustly deprived of. This was the constant goal of her ambition, the justification for all her acts; this one tenacious dream filled her whole existence – and explains it – up until the day when, having finally failed to attain her goal, she understood that she had, at the same time, wrecked her life.[14]

Cavafy simply adjusts the perspective. Diehl writes here from the earlier perspective, before the final frustration of Anna's "goal" and "dream"; while Cavafy, viewing the situation from a later perspective, speaks not of her "dream, unique and enduring" but of her "grief, unique and grave".

The perspective, in another and broader sense, is still that of Charles Diehl, since the basic statement in the third paragraph of Cavafy's poem – that Anna's only grave sorrow was that she failed to gain the empire - reflects Diehl's opinion. But, whereas in Diehl's text this view is expressed in a forthright and unqualified manner, Cavafy sets a question mark against it with the introductory phrase: "the truth appears to be that...". Cavafy, in effect, presents a paraphrase of Diehl's view, not as the truth, but as the view which the balance of the evidence favours.

---

[14] Diehl 1908: 39, tr. Bell & de Kerpely 1963: 185.

To be sure, Cavafy's poem suggests, and suggests quite strongly, that Anna was not being truthful when she declared that her grief for Bryennius far outweighed all the other sorrows of her life; but with "the truth appears to be", the poem retains an element of ambiguity. But there is a more radical ambiguity in the tension between two particular words - both of them adjectives: φίλαρχη ("power loving") applied to Anna, and προπετής ("impetuous") applied to her brother John. Both are derived from Paparrigopoulos' discussion of the reign of Alexius in his *History of the Greek Nation.*

Paparrigopoulos says (1925: IVb, 109) that Anna "was distinguished not only by her education but also by her lust for power" (the Greek word is φιλαρχία). Then, merely echoing Choniates, Paparrigopoulos goes on to say that the empress Irene "basely slandered" her son John, describing him to Alexius as "impetuous and dissolute" (προπετῆ καὶ ἀκόλαστον). The two expressions are contextualized in radically different ways. "Distinguished by her lust for power" is Paparrigopoulos' own opinion of Anna, part of an unframed statement; but "impetuous and dissolute" is the empress Irene's opinion of her son, as related by Choniates, who characterizes it as slander (CFHB 11: I, 5). In Cavafy, however, "power loving woman" and "insolent John" are part of the same sentence.

The last three lines of the poem are a form of reported speech: they give us the content of Anna's supposed thoughts, the content of her one regret as Diehl sees it. However, by including Irene's word προπετής, which undoubtedly represents Anna's view as much as her mother's, but giving no indication that this is a quotation, Cavafy subverts what is essentially Diehl's view. In effect, he gives Anna the last word.

This is the technique of a poet, and a modernist technique – comparable, in its small way, to the multiple perspectives in Picasso portraits, or the collage of voices in Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos.* And yet in Cavafy's "Anna Comnena" the result of this poetic strategy is to draw attention to a problem in historiography: the incompatibility between Anna's *Alexiad* and Choniates' *History,* as it emerges in the writings of a more recent historian.

What we have in Cavafy's "Anna Comnena" is a text which locates itself within a historical debate and, though it seems to

lean in one direction, does not finally come down on that side, but remains suspended in its own unresolved tension; and in consequence is able to go on reverberating in our minds, justifying its existence as a poem.

* * *

In turning to the third poem, "Anna Dalassena", we again move both forwards and backwards: forwards in Cavafy's career (the poem was published in 1927), back in history, to 1081, to the beginning of the main period of Comnenian rule. There had been the earlier, brief and isolated reign of Isaac I Comnenus who was proclaimed emperor in 1057, but abdicated two years later. Isaac had tried to persuade his brother John to accept the throne, but John refused, to the great and enduring frustration of his ambitious wife, Anna Dalassena, who, like her granddaughter Anna Comnena, appears to have felt herself cheated of empire. There are many parallels in their lives; but there is one all-important difference: Anna Dalassena ultimately achieved her ambition, when, in February 1081, her sons, in league with the Palaeologi, deposed Nicephorus Botaneiates, and her third son Alexius became emperor. Some months later, as he was about to depart on what was likely to be a protracted military campaign, Alexius transferred full imperial authority to his mother. And it is the edict, the χρυσόβουλλον or Golden Bull, by which the transfer was effected, which is the starting point of Cavafy's poem "Anna Dalassena".

It is a poem which has clearly perplexed many readers. "Is it a poem or a joke?" exclaimed an exasperated Palamas. Ftyaras made some comment about the poem's simplicity. "No," rejoined Palamas, "the simplicity is nothing more than meagreness" (Ftyaras 1983: 545). Even Christidis, who provides us with a splendidly innocent reading, finds it lacking. Cavafy, he says (1957: 55-6),

> makes a respectful obeisance before the noble, aristocratic lady. It is impossible, however, for us to get a picture of Anna Dalassena from this poem. We have, we might say, a few words, carved on a tombstone, which summarize in general terms the virtues of the deceased. [...] In this condensed poem we do not find that

> indefinable something which would give it the stamp of superior quality [...]. We admire the "very clever Lady Anna Dalassena", we are clearly put in mind of her greatness, but it is not possible for us to grasp the breadth of her character.

Christidis at least knows what he wants from the poem; as does Nasos Vayenas. Asked to select Cavafy's "weakest poem", Vayenas (1983: 400) picked "Anna Dalassena". He finds that it is "purely historical", and like Palamas and Malanos (1957: 229) before him, considers it scarcely poetry. He contrasts it unfavourably with other poems in which the poet is "so moved by the historical episodes" that "their historicity recedes" and we feel that "the actions have been transferred to our own historical moment, and enacted in front of us". In "Anna Dalassena", he says, "no such thing happens; and thus the temperature of the verse is low and the final result feeble."

We now know what does *not* happen in Cavafy's "Anna Dalassena": the character of the empress is not adequately conveyed; and the historical episode is not brought to life. But perhaps something else is going on. The poem does not really refer to a historical *episode*, or to anything that could be described as an action, except perhaps the *issuing* of the Golden Bull. Nor, despite its title, is it really a poem about a historical personage. It is, rather, a poem about a text[15] – not, however, the text which it appears to be about.

On the surface "Anna Dalassena" is indeed a simple poem. It tells us that in the Golden Bull which Alexius Comnenus issued to honour his mother, whom the speaker describes as "very clever" and "remarkable in her works and ways", there are many encomiastic expressions. "Here", the speaker says, "let us transpose from them one sentence, beautiful and noble"; and then the speaker (here revealed to be not so much a speaker as a writer) sets down the "beautiful and noble sentence", which is for us, the readers, the last line of the poem:

> Οὐ τὸ ἐμὸν ἢ τὸ σὸν, τὸ ψυχρὸν τοῦτο ῥῆμα, ἐρρήθη.

---

[15] Compare Jusdanis 1987: 125.

Literally: "Not the mine or the thine, that cold word, was spoken"; more idiomatically: "Neither of those cold words 'mine' and 'thine' was spoken."

The sentence is described as "beautiful" and "noble". This is an ethical as well as an aesthetic judgement. This sentence suggests, certainly, a generous and unselfish relationship between two people, a relationship that might well be described as "noble", but a relationship not uncommon between family members. In the Golden Bull it illustrates the emperor's assessment of his relationship with his mother. "It is well known," he says, "that one soul animated us, physically separated though we were, and by the grace of Christ that happy state has persisted to this day." The "beautiful sentence" follows. It is not, in fact, a complete sentence, but only the first part of a sentence which continues: "and a matter of still greater import is that her prayers, of great frequency throughout her life, have reached the ears of the Lord and have raised me to my present position of sovereign."[16]

The Greek adjective εὐγενικός has roughly the same range of meanings as the English "noble". In Cavafy's poem, the feminine form εὐγενική is rhymed, quite pointedly I suggest, with a *noble* (in the sociological sense) family name, Δαλασσηνή. It is all very well, we might reflect, for members of a rich and powerful family to hold all things in common.

Did Cavafy realize that this beautiful sentence was not original to Alexius? I think that by the late 1920s Cavafy's reading in Byzantine literature was wide enough to make it likely that he did. The core of the sentence, " 'mine' and 'thine', those cold words", comes from a sermon of John Chrysostom on St Philogonius. Echoes of it turn up again in Saints' lives and monastic foundation documents, and by the twelfth century it had perhaps become proverbial; but it was used primarily in reference to communal monastic life.[17] Its appropriation by a rich and noble family may be a further dimension in the irony implicit in the rhyming of εὐγενική with Δαλασσηνή.

---

[16] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 157), tr. Dawes 1928: 83.

[17] PG 48: 749a; compare Noret 1982: 138 and Petit 1900: 73. I am indebted to Dirk Krausmüller (Queen's University of Belfast) for identifying the allusion in the Bull and providing these references.

So much for ethics, for the nobility of sentiment, but what about aesthetics? Is the sentence "beautiful" considered as a line of verse – for this is what, in Cavafy's hands, it has become – or does it suffer, rather, from an *excess* of poetic effects? It is certainly a most extraordinary sentence. This line transposed from the Golden Bull contains a triple internal rhyme occurring at regular intervals: οὐ τὸ ἐμόν | ἢ τὸ σόν | τὸ ψυχρόν, and another internal rhyme between the initial Οὐ τὸ and τοῦτο. Add to these the fourfold repetition of the unstressed syllable το, and the striking alliteration in the last two words, ρῆμα, ἐρρήθη. Last but not least, this line is an accentual dactylic hexameter.[18] It is hardly surprising that this sentence caught the eye of so sensitive and ingenious a craftsman as Cavafy; but is he really holding it up for us to admire, as a poetic *objet trouvé* ? There is, I think, no immediate answer. Our answer must depend on how we interpret the poem as a whole.

In order to get a clearer idea of what Cavafy is up to in this poem we need to examine in some detail its relation to its source, which proves to be not merely, indeed not primarily, the Golden Bull itself, but the pages of the *Alexiad* which surround the Bull, for the Bull has only survived because Anna Comnena inserted the text of it into her account of her father's reign.

There is something a little offhand about the poem's statement that "in the Golden Bull [...] there are *various* encomiastic expressions" (διάφορα ἐγκωμιαστικά); and in fact there are not very many of them. Alexius refers to Anna Dalassena as his "saintly mother", his "saintly and most deeply honoured mother", and his "holy mother",[19] but apart from these essentially conventional expressions the praise is all implicit – in the descriptions of her devotion to her son, her abilities and her experience – as indeed it is merely implicit in the sample Cavafy inserts in his poem. The real encomium of Anna Dalassena is found not in the Bull itself but in the pages which Anna Comnena devotes to her grandmother immediately

---

[18] As both David Holton and Peter Mackridge observed when they heard earlier versions of this paper.

[19] Ἡ ἡγιασμένη μήτηρ (*Alexiad* 3.6; CSHB: 157), τῇ ἡγιασμένῃ καὶ πανεντιμοτάτῃ μητρί (ibid.: 158) and ἡ ἁγία μήτηρ (ibid.: 159), tr. Dawes 1928: 83-4.

after the text of the Bull. And, what is more, Alexius' praise of his mother is more explicit, as we shall see, in the opinions attributed to him by his daughter than in the Golden Bull itself.

Anna herself uses the adjective ἐγκωμιαστικός which in Cavafy's "Anna Dalassena" characterizes elements in the Bull, but she uses it denote to something which a historian, and specifically she herself, should avoid:

> Another person might yield here to the conventional manner of panegyric [*lit.* to encomiastic rules: νόμοις ἐγκωμιαστικοῖς], and laud the birthplace of this wonderful mother, and trace her descent from the Dalassenian Hadrians and Charons, and then embark on the ocean of her ancestors' achievements - but as I am writing history, it is not correct to deduce her character from her descent and ancestors, but from her disposition and virtue [...].[20]

While Anna does not dwell on her grandmother's provenance or ancestry, she certainly oversteps the boundaries between history and encomium, for she continues: "To return once again to my grandmother, she was a very great honour, not only to women, but to men too, and was an ornament to the human race." A few lines later we read that "in sobriety of conduct she as far outshone the celebrated women of old, as the sun outshines the stars"; and then that "her character as outwardly manifested was such as to be revered by angels, and dreaded by the very demons."[21] Anna has already made the exaggerated and slightly absurd claim that her grandmother "was so clever in business and so skilful in guiding a state, and setting it in order, that she was capable of not only administering the Roman Empire, but any other of all the countries the sun shines upon."[22]

My purpose in citing these passages goes beyond the wish to demonstrate that Cavafy could have found the concept of ἐγκωμιαστικά ("encomiastic phrases") – and indeed the word itself – in the *Alexiad*, or that ἐγκωμιαστικά are more plentiful in the text of the *Alexiad* which surrounds the Golden Bull than in

---

[20] *Alexiad* 3.8 (CSHB: I, 163), tr. Dawes 1928: 86.
[21] *Alexiad* 3.8 (CSHB: I, 163-4), tr. Dawes 1928: 86-7.
[22] *Alexiad* 3.7 (CSHB: I, 160-61), tr. Dawes 1928: 85.

the Bull itself, for in these passages (and others to be adduced) we can find the source of almost everything in Cavafy's poem.

What the poem tells us about the dowager empress is that she was λίαν νοήμονα ("very clever") and ἀξιόλογη στὰ ἔργα της, στὰ ἤθη ("remarkable in her works and ways"). These two phrases summarize a whole constellation of epithets and statements in the *Alexiad*.

Before she introduces the Golden Bull, Anna relates that Alexius sometimes said of his mother that "without her intellect and judgement the affairs of the empire would founder",[23] and Anna herself says of her grandmother that "besides being clever she had in very truth a kingly mind".[24] After giving the text of the Bull, Anna refers again and again to her grandmother's intellect. She was "clever in business" and "skilful in guiding a state", "a woman of wide experience" who "knew the nature of many things"; she was "very keen in noting what should be done and clever in carrying it out".[25] Alexius, Anna tells us, "was convinced" that "in knowledge and comprehension of affairs" his mother "far surpassed all men of the time."[26] Anna herself, in her final comments before she leaves the subject of her grandmother, speaks of Anna Dalassena's "absolute superiority of intellect" (τὸ ἀκροφυέστατον τοῦ φρονήματος).[27] Given the plethora of testimony in the *Alexiad* to Anna Dalassena's mental powers, and especially the several synonyms of "clever" applied to her – φρενήρης, δεξιοτάτη, εὐμήχανος, ὀξυτάτη, δεινή – Cavafy's line "the very clever Lady Anna Dalassena" seems positively insolent in its brevity.

But what of the next line, "remarkable in her works and ways"? Significantly, Anna Comnena also deals first with her grandmother's intellect and her experience and ability in statecraft, in *Alexiad*, Book 3, Chapter 7; and then, in the first half of Chapter 8, she turns to her character and virtuous deeds. We have already seen some of the extravagant generalizations about her character: she was "an ornament to the human race";

---

[23] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 155), my translation.
[24] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 156), tr. Dawes 1928: 82.
[25] *Alexiad* 3.7 (CSHB: I, 160-61), tr. Dawes 1928: 85.
[26] *Alexiad* 3.7 (CSHB: I, 162), tr. Dawes 1928: 86.
[27] *Alexiad* 3.8 (CSHB: I, 165), my translation.

"her character as outwardly manifested was such as to be revered by the angels". Furthermore, "in [her] undertakings and ideas" she would have "cast into the shade" all "those of old times of either sex distinguished for virtue".[28] With the phrase, "in [her] undertakings and ideas", τοῖς ἐπιχειρήμασι καὶ τοῖς ἐνθυμήμασι,[29] we are close to Cavafy's phrase, "in her works and ways", στὰ ἔργα της, στὰ ἤθη. "Remarkable in her works and ways" according to Cavafy's poem; and outshining, according to the *Alexiad*, all the great men and women of antiquity who were famed for their ἀρετή – not "virtue" in a narrow sense but excellence of every kind. "Remarkable" indeed! As with "very clever", we must suspect a studied and subversive understatement on Cavafy's part.

The earlier poem "Anna Comnena" involves an unmistakable, if equivocal, attack on the integrity of the author of the *Alexiad* when she "laments her widowhood" in extravagant and histrionic terms. In "Anna Dalassena" there is no explicit comment on the same author's equally extravagant praises of her grandmother, but we do know from other poems something of Cavafy's attitude to praise and flattery of royalty. Take "Caesarion", for example. The vision of the beautiful and doomed young king which visits the middle-aged poet in his dimly lit room one night in the winter of 1914, is not what concerns us here. It is what leads up to this vision which may help us to see what the same poet is doing, some years later, when he composes "Anna Dalassena".

There is a parallel between what happens in the first two paragraphs of "Caesarion" and what happens in "Anna Dalassena", a parallel obscured, at first sight, by the autobiographical style of "Caesarion": "Partly to verify a date [...] last night I picked up a collection of inscriptions." But the poet found, that "the abundant praises and the flatteries were all the same". His response (boredom) is clearly implied: "When I'd

---

[28] *Alexiad* 3.8 (CSHB: I, 165), tr. Dawes 1928: 87 (modified).

[29] There is a third term, in a different category and ludicrously redundant: καὶ ταῖς πρὸς ἄλλους συγκρίσεσιν, "and in comparisons with others". Dawes slightly improves the sense by a loose translation: "for her actions, ideas, and conduct, as compared with others".

managed to verify the date,[30] I would have put the book aside"; but then he comes across the one thing (apart from the date he needed) which is of value to him in the book, "a reference, brief and insignificant, to King Caesarion", which "immediately attracted [his] attention". The speaker in "Anna Dalassena" has also been reading. Clearly, though he does not tell us, he has been reading the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena; and, since he has obviously been reading the part which contains the text of the Golden Bull, he will have come across a great deal of repetitive praise and flattery, not of several Ptolemaic kings and queens but of one Byzantine empress, Anna Dalassena. He gives no explicit indication of having read Anna Comnena's encomium to her grandmother, but it is, as we have seen, cogently, if flippantly, summarized in the lines "the very clever Lady Anna Dalassena, remarkable in her works and ways". Although the speaker refers to the "various encomiastic expressions" in the Golden Bull, this summary, as we have seen, is firmly grounded in the encomiastic passages of the *Alexiad*, rather than in the very few encomiastic phrases in the Bull itself; and the very terseness of the summary implies a dismissive and impatient attitude towards the prolixity and excesses of the original. But then, as in "Caesarion", there is the one thing that attracts the speaker's attention; and again it is a verbal object, not "a reference, brief and insignificant" but "a sentence, beautiful and noble". Whereas in "Caesarion" the "reference" is the spark that kindles the poet's imagination to recreate the long-dead youthful king with an erotic immediacy, "Anna Dalassena" does not take us beyond the "sentence". The speaker simply presents it and leaves it to resonate.

The underlying perspective, though, is that of "Caesarion", of the sceptical poet, bored with the praise of royalty; but the motions that the speaker/writer goes through in "Anna Dalassena" are those of author of the *Alexiad*. We have already seen that the parenthetic description of Anna Dalassena

---

[30] This translation, which agrees with those of Beaton (1983: 32-3) and Ricks (in *Modern Poetry in Translation* n.s. 13 [1998] 10), has been challenged, but it is hard to see what Cavafy could have meant by "to verify an epoch", still less how one could succeed in doing so at a particular point in time: Όταν κατόρθωσα τὴν ἐποχὴ νὰ ἐξακριβώσω.

in lines 3-4 is grounded in the *Alexiad*. If we abstract that, what is left of the first five lines is this:

> In the Golden Bull which Alexius Comnenus issued
> to honour his mother conspicuously
> there are various encomiastic expressions.

Everything here can be traced back to the *Alexiad*. The concept of ἐγκωμιαστικά has already been shown to derive from Anna, and we know of this particular Golden Bull of Alexius Comnenus only because she included it in the *Alexiad*. All that remains to be accounted for is the second line, "to honour his mother conspicuously".

To characterize the Bull as being issued "to honour" Alexius' mother is a little strange. The purpose of the Bull was not to honour Anna Dalassena, though it certainly does that, but to transfer to her the entire responsibility for the management of the Empire. The focus on honour, though, derives from Anna Comnena. Having set down the text of the Golden Bull, she says,

> These, then, were the words of the Golden Bull. And one might marvel at my father the emperor for the honour to his mother they convey [...].[31]

Cavafy's expression νὰ τιμήσει τὴν μητέρα του ("to honour his mother") is simply a reworking of Anna's phrase τῆς εἰς τὴν μητέρα τιμῆς ("for the honour to his mother"). The voice is essentially Anna's.

We can also find in Anna, the idea that the Golden Bull honoured Alexius' mother ἐπιφανῶς, "conspicuously". Before she comes to the text of the Golden Bull, Anna has already spoken in general terms of her father's wish "that his mother rather than himself should take the helm of state".[32] When the Norman threat to the empire obliged Alexius to leave the capital, he was able to realize his ambition. As Anna recounts,

---

[31] *Alexiad* 3.7 (CSHB: I, 160), my translation.
[32] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 156), tr. Dawes 1928: 82.

> Now, bringing out into the light the scheme dear to his soul, he transferred the governance of the empire to his mother and to her alone, and by means of a Golden Bull made his intentions manifest to all. [33]

We have two parallel phrases here which are condensed, I suggest, in Cavafy's adverb ἐπιφανῶς: the first is εἰς φῶς [...] ἐξάγων ("bringing out into the light"), and the second, εἰς προῦπτον πᾶσι κατέστησεν ("made manifest to all").

It is now clear that at least in lines 1-5 of "Anna Dalassena" we are dealing with a reworking of selected expressions from the *Alexiad*. The voice is and is not that of Anna Comnena; it is and is not Cavafy's. It is Cavafy debunking Anna, far more subtly and effectively than in the poem explicitly devoted to her. In "Anna Comnena" he quoted and then questioned the truth of Anna's words. Here, without mentioning her at all, he assumes her voice, he mimics her; and the mimicry is a mockery – an outrageous parody, whose extreme condensation collapses three chapters of the *Alexiad* into a few words, deflating the younger Anna's extended and extravagant praise of her grandmother.

But what of the remaining three lines of the poem, or rather lines 6 and 7 which introduce the "beautiful sentence" of the last line:

> here let us transpose from them
> one sentence, beautiful and noble [...].

This too may be seen as a parody of Anna's own procedure in the *Alexiad*. Between her first reference to the Golden Bull, as the means by which Alexius "made his intentions manifest", and her transcription of the text, she inserts an aside on the duties of the historian, in which she indicates that she is not transcribing the text of the Bull exactly as she had it in front of her, but omitting "the embellishments of the scribe". [34]

Whatever these embellishments may have been, Anna's omissions were probably minor. But Cavafy, taking up the idea of omission, still, as it were, playing at being Anna, transcribing

---

[33] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 156), my translation.
[34] *Alexiad* 3.6 (CSHB: I, 156-7), my translation.

as she herself transcribes, performs what is from the historian's point of view a *reductio ad absurdum*, not only ignoring the substance of the Golden Bull (the transfer of power), but dispensing with the entire text of the Bull, except for the single sentence which has caught his imagination as a poet (and which in any case is not original in the Bull, but derives ultimately from Chrysostom). He has, we might say, cut through the Golden Bullshit to reveal the single pearl in the dungheap of imperial flattery and pomposity. From all those pages of the *Alexiad* (Book 3, Chapters 6-8) that sentence of eleven words, οὐ τὸ ἐμὸν ἢ τὸ σόν, τὸ ψυχρὸν τοῦτο ῥῆμα ἐρρήθη, is, it seems, for Cavafy, all that is worth preserving. Perhaps not a pearl of great price, but an intriguing one; and there it lies, in its new setting, this miniature poem finalized around New Year 1927, which proved to be Cavafy's final poetic (and brilliantly ironic) comment on Byzantium.

* * *

I think that what emerges from the examination of these three short poems in relation to their sources amply justifies Cavafy's claim to be a poet-historian. But in the light of these poems we must insist on the hyphen, for the poet-historian is a hybrid. As poet-historian, Cavafy flouts the expectations which both his contemporaries and later critics have of poetry; and, while, in the careful scrutiny of sources and the weighing of evidence, he maintains a historian's standards, in his reconstructions of history and his critiques of historiography he moves beyond the modes of expression legitimate for a professional historian. Cavafy the poet-historian extends the range of both poetry and history. And some of the resulting poems will only yield their riches of wit and sophistication when we approach them not merely as attentive readers of poetry, but also as equally if not more attentive readers of history.

References

Beaton, Roderick (1983). "The history man", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10.1/2, 23-44

Bell, Harold & de Kerpely, Theresa (trs.) (1963). Charles Diehl, *Byzantine empresses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Bowersock, G.W. (1981). "The Julian poems of C.P. Cavafy", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 7, 89-104

Cavafy, C.P. (1991). Κ.Π. Καβάφης. *Τὰ Ποιήματα*. Νέα ἔκδοση τοῦ Γ.Π. Σαββίδη (2 vols.). Athens: Ikaros

Christidis, V.F. (1958). Β.Φ. Χρηστίδης. *Ὁ Καβάφης καὶ τὸ Βυζάντιο*. Athens [?]: Viochart

Dawes, Elizabeth A.S. (tr.) (1928). *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

Diehl, Charles (1908). *Figures byzantines: deuxième série*. Paris: Armand Colin

Ftyaras, Konstantinos (1983). Κωνσταντίνος Φτυαράς. "Τὸ 1928 ἢ 1929 στὴν Ἀλεξάνδρεια", *Χάρτης* 5/6, 545-7

Gibbon, Edward (1994). *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. Ed. David Womersley (3 vols.). London: Penguin Books

Haas, Diana (1996). *Le problème religieux dans l'oeuvre de Cavafy: les années de formation (1882-1905)*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne

Hirst, Anthony (1995). "Philosophical, historical and sensual: an examination of Cavafy's thematic collections", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 19, 33-93

Hirst, Anthony (1998). "Two cheers for Byzantium: equivocal attitudes in the poetry of Palamas and Cavafy", in: David Ricks and Paul Magdalino (edd.), *Byzantium and the modern Greek identity*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing

Jusdanis, Gregory (1987). *The Poetics of Cavafy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Lechonitis, G. (1977). Γ. Λεχονίτης. *Καβαφικὰ αὐτοσχόλια.* Δεύτερη ἔκδοση, ἀκριβὲς ἀντίγραφο τῆς πρώτης μὲ μικρὲς ἀλλαγὲς καὶ προσθῆκες τοῦ Τίμου Μαλάνου. Athens: D. Harvey & Co.

Magoulias, Harry J. (tr.) (1984). *O City of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press

Malanos, Timos (1957). Τίμος Μαλάνος. *Ὁ ποιητὴς Κ. Π. Καβάφης: ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ ἔργο του.* Ἔκδοση συμπληρωμένη καὶ ὁριστική. Athens: Difros

Noret, Jaques (ed.) (1982). *Vitae duae antiquae Sancti Athanasii Athonitae.* Leuven: Leuven University Press

Paparrigopoulos, Konstantinos (1925). Κωνσταντῖνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος. *Ἱστορία τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ ἔθνους,* 5th ed. (6 vols.). Athens: Eleftheroudakis

Petit, Louis (1900). "Le Monastère de Notre Dame de Pitié en Macédonie", *Izviestiia Russkago Arkheologicheskago Instituta v Konstantinopolie* 6, 1-153

Savidis, G.P. (1985-7). Γ.Π. Σαββίδης. *Μικρὰ καβαφικά* (2 vols). Athens: Ermis

Vayenas, Nasos (1983). Νάσος Βαγενᾶς. "Κατάλοιπα τῆς παρνασσικῆς συμπεριφορᾶς", *Ἡ λέξη* 23, 400-1

Princeton University