How it strikes a contemporary: Cavafy as a reviser of Browning

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"I only knew one poet in my life: / And this, or something like it, was his way" – the opening words of Browning's celebrated poem (which provides my title) in which, with particular subtlety, the tensions between the poet's interior creative life and his myth-making public are exposed.[1] There are rather few major modern poets of whose biography we know so relatively little as Cavafy's; almost none – Yeats? Eliot? Pessoa? – around whose personality such a mystique has grown up.[2] The Cavafian physiognomy – the large nose, the thick-rimmed glasses, the tight collar – itself figures in poetic tributes from several continents, as a substantial recent anthology in Greek translation, *In conversation with Cavafy*, shows; but the ways in which Cavafy's poetic personality developed from his pre-

[1] Robert Browning, *Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1981), 1, pp. 605-7. A Greek translation of this poem by Anthi Leousi, at the head of another three (none of which gives a good impression of Browning's forms), has recently appeared in *Νέα Εστία* 1756 (May 2003) 747-86.

[2] The only biography, as opposed to memoir from an individual's angle, is still Robert Liddell, *Cavafy* (London: Duckworth 1974). (More recently, Dimitris Daskalopoulos and Maria Stasinopoulou, *Ο βίος και το έργο του Κ. Π. Καβάφη* [Athens: Metaichmio 2002] is rich in further information presented annalistically.) Part of the reason is the aversion of Greek literati to the genre of biography (and indeed autobiography): Roderick Beaton, *Waiting for the angel* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2003), the first biography of Seferis, comes more than thirty years after this central figure's death. It might be argued, in fact, that the thinness of biographical criticism in Greece has inhibited the discussion of topics such as those explored in the present paper, in which a long-standing poetic relationship is addressed.

decessors, and his English-language predecessors especially, have been less fully explored than one might expect.[3] At the same time, an absorbing chapter in the history of Browning's after-life has been relatively neglected by comparison with, say, the question of Pound's relationship to the English poet.[4]

My discussion here will be somewhat provisional (it is part of a book in the making, *Cavafy reader and read*), but I still hope to come up with some new lines of thought. These are, of course, informed by a sense of where colleagues have gone before, and among these must be singled out Edmund Keeley, whose Oxford DPhil thesis of half a century ago contains some valuable pages on the topic.[5] I periodically tax Professor Keeley with the fact that almost none of this material has ever appeared in print, with the exception of some brief but useful comments in a conference paper for Cavafy's fiftieth anniversary. In the same volume we find a brief contribution by Aris Berlis drawing some illuminating parallels between two of my exhibits ("The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" and "Philhellene"); and the knock-down case of Browning's influence on Cavafy, the poem "Protus", has received a fuller discussion by Joseph Fontana in a paper in *Studies in Browning and his Circle*. (To view Cavafy as being in some sense in Browning's circle is itself a congenial thought.)[6] Finally, a brief and thought-provoking survey by

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[3] Nasos Vayenas (ed.), *Συνομιλώντας με τον Καβάφη* (Thessaloniki: Kentro Ellinikis Glossas 2000).

[4] On which Pound himself is the most stimulating source: see, notably, *How to read* (London: Desmond Harmsworth 1931), p. 42.

[5] E. L. Keeley, "Constantine Cavafy and George Seferis and their relation to poetry in English" (unpublished dissertation, University of Oxford 1952), pp. 99-134, 156-65. For a handy summary of the earlier and later bibliography on the question see Maria Tobrou, "Καβάφης και Μπράουνινγκ", *Νέα Εστία* 1756 (May 2003) 787-809.

[6] Edmund Keeley, "Καβάφης και Browning", *Πρακτικά Τρίτου Συμποσίου Ποίησης. Αφιέρωμα στον Κ. Π. Καβάφη* (ed. Sokratis Skartsis, Athens: Gnosi 1984), 355-62; Aris Berlis, "Ο 'επίσκοπος' του Robert Browning", ibid., 349-54; Joseph Fontana, "Browning's 'Protus' and Cavafy", *Studies in Browning and his Circle* 14 (1986) 16-21.

Maria Tobrou of the Greek poet's creative borrowings from Browning has just appeared and is likely to engender further discussion among a Greek literary public in which English poetry is now much more widely studied than it was either in Cavafy's time or in that of Seferis and the other early Cavafy critics.[7]

But in some ways perhaps the most salutary contribution on this whole topic was the first: a few pages in Glafkos Alithersis's book, *The problem of Cavafy*, published in 1934, a year after the poet's death. There Alithersis gleefully produces Browning's poem "Protus" from *Men and Women* and takes it to be proof that the late Alexandrian poet was nothing more than a weakly imitative epigone of the fertile Englishman. The chance to dance on the newly dug grave is not missed.[8] The allegation is of a familiar type, much in the spirit of Robert Graves's reported remark that Elytis was simply Eluard with a Greek accent. So is Cavafy (the Cavafy of the historical poems, at any rate) nothing more than Browning-and-water? Or does a closer look at Cavafy's treatment of his English-language poetic inheritance in fact show the more clearly just how original a poet he is?

It would be surprising if I did not think the latter (though to trail my coat just a little, I have doubts about Cavafy's sensual poems, some of which could be seen as tamely Wildean).[9] But here is a quick road map to a topic rich enough for an entire book; for I have space to discuss only a handful of poems.

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[7] Tobrou, "Καβάφης και Μπράουνινγκ". This article, based on an essay for a graduate course convened by myself, makes some use of material presented by me there: I do not, for that reason, cross-refer to this useful discussion.

[8] Glafkos Alithersis, *Το πρόβλημα του Καβάφη* (Alexandria: Ekdoseis Spyros A. Grivas 1934), 48-55.

[9] There is a valuable discussion by Sarah Ekdawi, "The erotic poems of C. P. Cavafy", *Κάμπος: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 1 (1993) 23-46; see also her "Days of 1985, '96 and '97: the parallel prisons of C. P. Cavafy and Oscar Wilde", *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 9 (1993) 297-306.

I shall begin with the two celebrated cases mentioned above, in which it is universally acknowledged that the Cavafy poem is modelled on a scenario provided by Browning: first, "Orophernes" versus "Protus", then "Philhellene" versus "The Bishop Orders His Tomb".[10] These pairs of poems may properly be seen as doublets: the later poem of each pair is a painting on a new canvas with a different palette; it is an arrangement for different instruments or a transposition into a distant key – such metaphors come to mind.

If this, however, were the sum of Cavafy's debt to Browning some of the critical ill temper associated, say, with Seferis's borrowings from Eliot, might be understandable.[11] We might just tire of hearing yet another chamber work arranging Browning's full orchestra. Indeed, it is crucial to our understanding of this phenomenon that Cavafy, who was nothing if not a reviser of his own work, could not rest content with the cunning adaptation of Browning's scenarios and came to find less obtrusive ways of employing material which we can only more speculatively read as deriving from Browning. Some such examples I have drawn attention to elsewhere and will not rehearse here. (Perhaps the neatest one conceptually is the way in which Cavafy begets from "A Grammarian's Funeral" not one but two tiny epitaphs, "Tomb of Ignatius" and "Tomb of Lysias the Grammarian" – each with a clear verbal inheritance, allowing for the traversing of languages, from the original. This is not cloning, but the working out of poetic heredity in a new environment. And if the products are bonsai versions of the original, they are none the worse for that.)[12]

The final pair of poems I will discuss is "Sculptor from Tyana" and Browning's most famous dramatic monologue,

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[10] K. P. Kavafis, *Ποιήματα.* Φιλολογική επιμέλεια Γ. Π. Σαββίδη (Athens: Ermis 1981), 1.33-4, 37; Browning, *Poems* 1.704-5, 413-15.

[11] Timos Malanos, *Η ποίηση του Σεφέρη και η κριτική μου* (Athens: Prosperos 1982).

[12] David Ricks, "Ο Βρετανικός Καβάφης", *Θέματα Νεοελληνικής Φιλολογίας. Μνήμη Γ. Π. Σαββιδη* (Athens: Ermis 2001), 270-7.

"My Last Duchess": a clinching example of how audaciously Cavafy is able to turn the tables on a Browning poem.[13] In so saying, I mean anything but to say that Cavafy wipes the floor with it. That is what revisionists do – they produce arguments for things we know to be untrue, usually in the historical sphere. There has perhaps to be a little bit of the revisionist in the best poets: think how unjust Wordsworth and Coleridge were to Pope, or Cavafy was to Tennyson.[14] But the sort of poetry which is of enduring value is not revisionist but re-visionary: by a process which is, characteristically, associated with meticulous textual revision, the later poet re-envisions the predecessor's subject.[15] Such a poem may in a deeper sense be a reply to the earlier poet than a poem which is more obviously a reply or retort. But the proof of this will be in verbal detail.

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Let us begin with "Orophernes", a poem of 1915:

> This one here who on that tetradrachm
> seems to have a smile on his face,
> a handsome delicate face,
> this one is Orophernes, son of Ariarathus.
>
> As a child he was driven out of Cappadocia
> from the great ancestral palace
> and sent to grow up
> in Ionia and forget himself among strangers.

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[13] *Ποιήματα*, 1.41-2; Browning, *Poems* 1.349-50.

[14] See conveniently Gregory Jusdanis, "Cavafy, Tennyson and the overcoming of influence", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 8 (1982-3) 123-36.

[15] This has of course been the overriding preoccupation of Harold Bloom's criticism, as followed, rather too dutifully, by Jusdanis (note 14). For a model study of a modern author's revision of his own œuvre, see Philip Horne, *Henry James and revision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990).

Ah, those exquisite nights of Ionia
when, fearlessly and in the Greek manner quite,
he came to know pleasure in its fullness.
In his heart, abidingly Asiatic;
but in his manners and his conversation, Greek,
decked with turquoise jewellery, Greek in his garb,
his body odorous with the scent of jasmine,
and of all the handsome youths of Ionia
the handsomest he, the most ideal.

Later, when the Syrians came in
in Cappadocia, and made him king,
he hurled himself into his kingly state
to find a new mode of bliss with every passing day,
to gather up rapaciously the gold and silver,
to warm the cockles of his heart and boast
at the sight of all that wealth piled up and glistering.
As for devotion to country, as for exercise of power,
he hadn't the faintest idea what was going on around him.

The Cappadocians soon unseated him;
and he found himself in Syria, in the palace
of Demetrius enjoying himself and idling.

One day, however, his chronic torpor
was jolted awake by unaccustomed reflections:
he remembered that on his mother's side, the house of
Antiochus,
he too was a scion of the Syrian crown,
practically a Seleucid.
He roused himself a while from lust and inebriety,
and feebly and bemusedly
started to set a scheme in train,
to see to things, to plan things out,
and failed miserably and was brought to naught.

His end will have been recorded somewhere, and then lost;
or maybe history passed it over,
and rightly; maybe she disdained
to record a matter so inconsequential.

This one who on that tetradrachm
has left the grace of his handsome youth,

> a light shining from his poetic beauty,
> an aesthetic memory of a lad of Ionia,
> this one is Orophernes, son of Ariarathus.

Cavafy's poem, though not a long one, is long by his standards, and it is his only one of roughly the same proportions as the relevant Browning poem. The point of departure, a coin collection, is the same; the protagonist is a comparably attractive figure from a dynasty in decline, whose ultimate fate remains impenetrable; and, having acknowledged the inadequacy of historical enquiry to the capturing of the individual personality, the speaking voice returns to the indelible visual impression of a coin. Yet, even if "Orophernes" uses "Protus" as a ground, and shows a full familiarity with Browning's manner, no-one other than the envious voice of an Alithersis could reasonably describe it as School of, or *à la manière de*, Browning.[16] There are three principal respects in which Cavafy has deviated; they may for convenience called structural, tonal, and ideological.

"Orophernes" inherits a shape from Browning, but where "Protus" circles round to the brute fact of history as encapsulated in the doomed but brutal head of John the Pannonian, with a final exclamation more or less disclaiming the power of mere words to capture the past, Cavafy instead returns to the original coin of Orophernes. The newly added phrases show, instead of an aspect of history, an individual's retrospect, in which appearances have a power of poetic generation. Orophernes's liquid name and patronymic now come to stand for a whole lost civilization, in quite a different spirit from Browning's poem.

One of the most important cues Cavafy took from Browning, as we shall corroborate in all of the poems discussed in this paper, is the English poet's preoccupation with transitional or liminal periods of history; but one of the key ways in which Cavafy revises Browning is in taking a different stance towards history. The clearest, and no doubt the most crucial, case of

[16] Discussion in Fontana, "Browning's 'Protus' and Cavafy".

Cavafy's revisionary impulse is in relation to Gibbon, and his often voluminous notes in his copy of the *Decline and fall* have been collected to our benefit.[17] Again, in the most clearly documented case of Cavafy's professed antagonism towards a respected senior, his unpublished poem "Symeon" takes on Tennyson's "St Simeon Stylites" essentially because Cavafy believes a modern Western poet to have inherited from Gibbon a blind spot to something someone of Orthodox culture can see.[18] Now the changing history of modern Greek responses to the Byzantine past is a complex one, and it would be facile to acclaim some anti-Occidentalism in Cavafy; yet it is quite clear that, compared with his English predecessors, Cavafy adopts a very different stance to the post-classical Greek-speaking world.[19] Browning's essentially Gibbonian stance (not that Gibbon's stance is itself other than highly complex) pervades his poem from the title.[20] Poor Protus's problem is that he is really Hystatus – his whole life is a *prothysteron* – and he meets his end (perhaps) in a barbarous place, Thrace, and a semi-barbarous mode of life, the monastic. A rather sharp though subtle distinction is drawn between the ever-captivating and authentic form of his lovable "baby face" in the opening lines and the more questionable presentations of him that follow: "While young Greek sculptors, gazing on the child, / Were, so, with old Greek sculpture, reconciled" (ll. 20f.). Followed as these are by the authors of court panegyric, these sculptors

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[17] Diana Haas, "Cavafy's reading notes on Gibbon's *Decline and fall*", *Folia Neohellenica* 4 (1982) 25-96.

[18] See on the general issue Diana Haas, *Le problème réligieux dans l'œuvre de Cavafy* (Paris: Sorbonne 1996); discussion of "Symeon" in David Ricks, "Simpering Byzantines, Grecian goldsmiths, et al.: some appearances of Byzantium in English poetry", in: Robin Cormack and Elizabeth Jeffreys (eds.), *Through the looking-glass: Byzantium through British eyes* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000), 223-36.

[19] See recently David Ricks and Paul Magdalino (eds.), *Byzantium and the Modern Greek identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1998).

[20] David Womersley's introduction to Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1996) adumbrates complexities lost on some Byzantinists.

seem subject to a false consciousness.[21] In Browning's poem, both power and weakness shift in a northward direction: Protus to "some blind northern court" or in Thrace, John the Pannonian occupying the throne. Cavafy, by contrast, shifts the reader's attention to the land of Ionia, as the home of "Greek love" *par excellence*. In this country of the mind evoked by John Addington Symonds and other Victorians formative of Cavafy's version of Greek love, the old pagan impulses can never be eradicated by a semi-barbarous theocracy: they remain available for the modern poet to celebrate.[22] Where the hapless Protus is a mere innocent victim of history as written by male scribes and annotators, and perpetrated by actors such as John the Pannonian, to whom the only response can be the half-admiring, half-shuddering "What a man!", Orophernes is both complicit in his own downfall and at the same time the victim of a stern Clio. History passes him by, "και, με το δίκιο της": the personification leaps out, to produce a female presence both hostile to Orophernes and curiously forgiving of him.[23]

Cavafy, then, generates a transposition of Browning's material into a different historical epoch, as indeed he does in all the poems of this type. The new period presents some broad analogies, true; but Cavafy is too good a historian not to know that history does not repeat itself; and he knows, before Eliot so formulated it, that his theft from Browning must be "welded into a new whole of feeling utterly different from that from

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[21] I concede that other readings are possible: for commentary on the poem see *The poetical works of Robert Browning*. Vol. 5: *Men and Women*, ed. Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995), p. 394. The editors' assessment of the verse form is highly germane to Cavafy's technical development: "The couplets are so muted that one may well remember the poem as being in blank verse."

[22] For a recent general survey, see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1994).

[23] Personifying History so lightly yet powerfully is an unusual move; compare, in a quite different context, Alan Shapiro's poem "Mud dancing", in *Covenant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991), pp. 15-16, where a Frau History is apostrophized, with electrifying effect.

which it was torn".[24] Cavafy's new whole of feeling, here as elsewhere, consists essentially of an inversion of Browning's – I choose the word advisedly, given Cavafy's preoccupation with sexual inversion, a topic he handles here rather more circumspectly and less sententiously than he does in some of the sensual poems, or than some revisionist historians do in their work.[25]

The structural and ideological departures, then, of "Orophernes" from "Protus" are considerable; and so is the shift of tone. Browning's heavily enjambed heroic couplets, with their irregular paragraphs and jagged parentheses, are an ideal medium for playing off the false rhetoric of imperial discourse against the exigencies of history; and they also provide the sudden twists and turns of a dialogue with an unseen interlocutor. Cavafy's poem, though also iambic, has a looser movement, and a different sound-palette quite in harmony with its subject. It is a setting in a minor key, or in the Ionian mode. The scathing colloquialisms of which Orophernes bears the brunt in the body of the text are wiped away by the lenient coda. Whatever our final assessment of it, to call such a poem imitative of Browning would be wholly inadequate.

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Structurally, Cavafy has taken Browning's approach, but his own stamp is everywhere present. "Orophernes" is an inversion of "Protus" like a photographic negative; where Browning ends with the bold chords or discords of a scherzo, Cavafy gives a diminuendo. But the analogies are unmistakable, even though of verbal connection there is little or nothing. Cavafy allows himself a little more verbal borrowing when his scenario is produced at a still greater historical, geographical and cultural

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[24] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London 1977), p. 125.

[25] The late John Boswell's *Christianity, social tolerance and homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980) is a *locus classicus* of contention.

distance, as it is in "Philhellene" (1912) when compared to "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at the Church of Saint Praxed's":

> See to it that the inscription is most artfully done.
> Expression: serious and dignified.
> The diadem by preference on the narrow side:
> those great wide Parthian ones are not to my taste.
> The inscription, as is customary, in Greek;
> free of exaggeration, free of grandiosity –
> lest it provoke any unpleasantness with the pro-consul,
> who's always digging for dirt and tattling to Rome –
> but suitably honorific.
> Choice matter on the obverse:
> some handsome young discobolus.
> Above all, I enjoin you take close note
> (Sithaspes, for heaven's sake, let this not be forgotten)
> that after the legend King and Saviour,
> there be engraved in elegant characters, Philhellene.
> And look, don't set to pleasantries
> like "What Greeks?" and "What Greek
> here beyond Zagros, on the far side of Phraata?"
> Since any number of people yet more barbarous than ourselves
> inscribe it so, so let ourselves inscribe it.
> And in the end do not forget that periodically
> we are visited by sophists from Syria,
> by versifiers and other ineffectual types.
> That being the case, we are not unhellenized, I fancy.

Browning's poem is a justly celebrated one, and Cavafy's poem demands attention as an exceptionally intelligent response to it. Ruskin's praise of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" in *Modern painters* might have been calculated to appeal to Cavafy, who, like Proust, was deeply influenced by this greatest of Victorian cultural critics and who wrote on him (in Cavafy's case, in the form of marginalia) with scrupulous care:[26]

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[26] See Stratis Tsirkas, "Ο Καβάφης σχολιάζει Ράσκιν", *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης* (Athens: Kedros 1971), 222-65.

> I know of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,– its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into so many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work.[27]

It is hard to imagine an assessment that gets so close to the heart of Cavafy's project as a historical poet to sum entire periods of history in a small compass, and to do so with an eye to all the contradictory and competing facets of a given age. All of the moral characterizations above have purchase on "Philhellene" (with the crucial shift to Greek as the culture-language), yet in a way which requires careful discussion. Indeed, the close attention with which such a doyen of Hellenistic history as Glen W. Bowersock has chosen to devote to Cavafy's work is the clearest possible sign that his poems have something to tell the historian.[28]

Cavafy, of course, characteristically boils down the efflorescence of the dying bishop's language into a more compact form still, and, what is more, the configuration of his dramatic triangle is different: the Philhellene's interlocutor is not a set of ungrateful and rapacious natural sons at a deathbed; instead, it is a long-suffering courtier. Again, the rival in the shadows is, not the dead Gandolf, but the Roman pro-consul (though Cavafy must clearly enjoy the mention of Rome as a tendril which leads back from his poem to the one that inspired it). And, though there is an object of erotic attention like the bishop's late mistress, the "tall pale mother with her talking eyes", Cavafy gives this in the form of the discobolus encapsulated in art. The respective protagonists are alike refreshing in their lack of sentimentalism, and both are conscious of how the written word can provide them with an authority which is, be-

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[27] Conveniently in Browning, *Poems* 1.1093.

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

cause of its very concision, no longer "a little brief authority", no longer at the mercy of their own frailties or the disloyalty of others. Cavafy's principal verbal borrowing brings this out: where the the bishop pleads for his tomb to be inscribed (l. 77) with "Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's very word, / No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line", the Philhellene asks for:

> Η επιγραφή, ως σύνηθες, ελληνικά·
> όχ' υπερβολική, όχι πομπώδης [...]
> Κάτι πολύ εκλεκτό απ' το άλλο μέρος.

This aesthetic – if merely aesthetic – discernment on the part of the Philhellene gives him just a sufficient claim to be "not unhellenized"; and corroboration is provided by his attention to the avoidance of Asiatic excess in headgear, in the spirit of Horace's "Persicos odi, puer, apparatus".[29]

The two protagonists, then, share something in the way of temperament, though it maps out differently on different periods. What they will also share is a historical fate. The bishop is painfully though hazily conscious of what the faith in which he no longer believes threatens for his after-life: he seems, by contrast, quite unaware of how his type of prince of the Church in the early sixteenth century will be swept away by the puritanism of the Tridentine Counter-Reformation of which Ranke's *History of the Popes* is still such a vivid evocation. Similarly, the Philhellene is properly anxious about the precariousness of his own position as the ruler of a buffer state, but much less conscious of how (as darkly hinted at in so many of Cavafy's poems) his whole culture, an inconsistent thing easy to poke holes in, but with its own modalities, will be wiped away by the Arab conquests.[30] If Browning's satire is broader (perhaps reflecting a contemporary target in the Oxford Move-

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[29] Horace, *Odes* 1.28.1.

[30] See especially "Αιμιλιανός Μονάη, Αλεξανδρεύς, 628-655 μ.Χ.", *Ποιήματα* 1.80.

ment), Cavafy's is, taken in the context of his work, darker as well as drier in tone.

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It will be agreed, I hope, that these exhibits provide compelling testimony to Cavafy's ingenuity in re-setting Browning's dramas in new costumes. Were the Greek poet to repeat the method again and again in his collected poems, we might colourably accuse him of a relative lack of ambition – in effect, the gravamen of Malanos's general charge.[31] But his collection of men and women, of dramatis personae, is richer and often less easy to link conclusively with a precursor from Browning. Saving the neatest example for last, I turn to a Cavafy poem, "Sculptor from Tyana" (1911), which is just as deeply, but much more unobtrusively, related to a Browning predecessor – indeed, and this is the audacious thing, perhaps the most celebrated of Browning's poems, "My Last Duchess".

> You'll have heard I'm no tyro.
> I see my share of stone.
> Back home, in Tyana, I'm quite well known.
> And here too I've had a good many statues
> commissioned by senators.
> And let me show you
> a few without further ado. Notice that Rhea:
> august, primordial, austere.
> Notice that Pompey. Marius,
> Aemilius Paulus, Scipio Africanus.
> To the best of my abilities, true copies.
> Patroclus (I shall be touching him up a little later on).
> There, by those bits of yellow
> marble, is Caesarion.
>
> And lately I've been taken up for quite some time
> with the making of a Neptune. My concern

[31] Timos Malanos, *Ο ποιητής Κ. Π. Καβάφης* (Athens: Govostis 1933).

is above all his horses, how to shape them.
They must be light as if
their bodies and their feet are visibly
not treading earth but racing over the sea.

But here's the piece dearest of all to me,
on which I worked with feeling and with the greatest care;
this one here, on a hot summer's day,
my mind ascending to the realm of the ideal,
this one here in my dreams, young Mercury.[32]

We have seen how Cavafy's historical Orophernes (or rather, the viewer of his coin) provides a discreet but distinctively homoerotic variation on the viewer of the coin of Browning's fictional Protus; and how the floridly but illicitly heterosexual bishop in Browning is remoulded as the somewhat camp Philhellene. Cavafy is not a tireless proselytizer (or, usually, a tiresome one) for the love that dare not speak its name; and if he had merely produced a gallery of homosexual men as an alternative to the Browning version, with a reworking of the old scenarios in this fashion, he would be less than the poet he is. Instead, by pursuing a line of thought present in all the poems we have looked at so far, he goes further in using an exploration of the relationship between artist and patron to stake a claim in his own relationship with Browning.

In revising the English poet to make his own way, Cavafy may be understood to be carrying out a number of gambits, not mutually exclusive, as correctives. Among these one might include the following types of redressing of the balance: close attention to epochs neglected by English (as indeed by earlier modern Greek) poets, Browning included; a fairer, more discriminating assessment of certain periods of history; a plainer style seeming to demand less annotation (for though Cavafy does, I think, benefit from annotation, and scandalously lacks it in the rich form of our various Browning editions, he does,

[32] This version first appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* n.s. 13 (1998) 9.

admittedly, require it less than his senior); greater concision (in effect, taking Ruskin's generous assessment of Browning and acting on it more ruthlessly); the wider tonal possibilities afforded by freedom with line lengths and rhyme schemes; and, yes, a view of the world from a homosexual angle. But where all these can be blended most happily is in reflection in verse on a theme which so consistently preoccupied Browning, the relationship between artist and patron.

We know this question to have been of acute personal interest to Cavafy: so keen was he to avoid any connection between his œuvre and commercial publishing that he chose the eccentric but not impractical method of distribution he did. Nor is this to be understood as akin to the scruples of Hopkins: it is more in the nature of a lordly refusal to be patronized. (Being lionized was quite a different matter.) Browning's most sinister drawing of the patron-client relation comes, it will be agreed, in "My Last Duchess": Frà Pandolf, a man of the cloth, is allowed, so the Duke informs us, the space of a single day to sketch the Duchess from the life; and in painting this most vivid of portraits (in the end, the Duke's self-portrait), Browning has quiet sympathy, not only for the ill-fated Duchess herself, but also for the artists Frà Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck who begin and end the poem.

Now Cavafy's poem is not a detective story in the same way, though it is a psychological study, and the question might be asked, what connection it has with Browning's at all. Our first two pairs of poems have not posed us this problem, but here one might ask where the tangible connection was. That we have two dramatic monologues richly revealing of the motives of the speaker in each case is not to say that the earlier poem necessarily reveals something directly about the latter (or vice versa). But it does here.

Great patrons, even more than great collectors, are jealous of their possessions. Neither the infant Protus nor, probably, the hapless Orophernes, can have had much to do with the coins that commemorated them for (a largely undiscerning)

posterity; but the Bishop at least attempted (not doubt without success) to see that a fitting monument was built, and the Philhellene likewise with his coin (again, probably without any long continuance of his rule). But the Duke of Ferrara was so anxious that the unfortunate woman whom he believed to have made a work of art by the very conferment of his title might enjoy the affections of another that he turned her into a work of art in the normal sense. And any thief who had tampered with any of the Duke's physical possessions might have expected short shrift. So it is wonderful to see with what insouciance Cavafy makes off with the poetic swag here: "Neptune... / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity" has been purloined from the end of Browning's poem, and out of the Duke's possession, to make the Neptune (Poseidon) of the third section of Cavafy's poem, where the sculptor describes to us, not so much the rarity of the motif, as the rare challenge of the artistic process.

Prompted by this to acknowledge that there is a close and verifiable relationship between these two great poems, what may we see as its further ramifications?

The formal aspects of "Sculptor of Tyana", which I have attempted to preserve in my version, certainly have their origin in Browning's poem; but where the latter generates nervous energy through the tension between the four-square heroic couplets and the winding, often ambiguous and frequently unsettling syntax, Cavafy chooses to unravel the couplet form (I take the verb from Palamas, who, was, through gritted teeth, respectful of Cavafy's surreptitious and original verse technique).[33] Instead, in iambic lines of slightly varying length, and with the appearance and intermittent disappearance of rhyme, a freer form, in typographically discrete sections, conveys the attitude of an artistic speaker who emerges in the end emancipated from the constraints of patronage.

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[33] Kostis Palamas, *Άπαντα* (Athens: Biris n.d.), 12.306.

And when we speak of constraint, we must attend to an aspect of Browning's dramatic monologues which has classically been described by Robert Langbaum, but which has been less developed in Cavafy criticism (largely because of the neglect of Browning): the presence of the silent interlocutor.[34] The pressure point running through a poem of this kind lies between the speaker and interlocutor, and through hearing one half of the telephone conversation we are set to guessing at the power relations that prevail. The telephone is a useful analogy because one of the things the poet can most fruitfully develop is the sense of the varying distance between speaker and interlocutor.[35]

Such a social distance is all too evident in the words of the Duke, who speaks to the Count's emissary *de haut en bas* (and, for that matter, a Count is no Duke). That might be expected, but, as we can see, the Duke's talk is shot through with a courtliness of a slightly minatory kind. The poem is so rich that it admits of many interpretations (to argue that the protagonist is simply a Bluebeard who unwittingly confesses his crime would be a distortion), but what encapsulates his concealed menace is the phrase towards the end, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir." This is the tone of the man whose home is his castle, whose home is a castle, and who doesn't want anyone wandering off, even if they do so in the numbed and stumbling manner of the unfortunate emissary, now he knows the nature of the negotiations he has entered into. A sign that the emissary's attention, which might have started to wander once the Duke began what looked as if it would be some maudlin recollections of his last (not his late!) duchess, has been transfixed, is beautifully captured some lines earlier, when the Duke tugs the discussion back to business: "I repeat, / The Count your master's

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[34] Robert Langbaum, *The poetry of experience* (2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985).

[35] The relationship between poetry and technology has been a fruitful preoccupation of Hugh Kenner's criticism, notably in *The Pound Era* (London: Faber 1972).

known munificence..." There is a distinct raising of the voice here, not a mere recapitulation of the matter in hand.

In all this, both the *objet d'art*, the murdered Duchess, and the artist himself, Frà Pandolf, have been supplanted by the patron, and Claus of Innsbruck is enlisted at the end merely in a gesture of display and connoisseurship. Cavafy's deviation from the poem is at its most subtle in looking at things through the other end of the telescope. His sculptor speaks for the artist, and for the artist as exile. The Duke can summon artists from where he will and dismiss them without notice. Cavafy's sculptor is socially a fish out of water in Rome, very much a *Graeculus esuriens*. His initial approach is socially gauche salesman's patter (would you buy a used car from him?), nervously provincial – the (no doubt *nouveau-riche*) customers he is addressing may be taken by his prior work for senators but are most unlikely to be able to place Tyana on the map. They are no doubt suitably impressed by the quintessentially un-Cavafian figures of a dumpy Rhea or the Republican heroes suitable for a pompous colonnade, less interested in the beauty of Patroclus and Caesarion (here of course in bit parts from other Cavafy poems); they probably start to glaze over during the sculptor's vivid attempt to describe his technical challenges over Neptune; and he's lost them completely once he starts to point to his Mercury.

A poor bit of business, then, but an artist whose love of his work has taken him away, in just a few lines, from all pressures of patronage into a mystical and private world suitable to his origins in the birthplace of the mystic Apollonius.[36] It is as if, with the due change of orientation, Browning's Pandolf, who has been silenced apart from a mute picture we can see only through the Duke's words, has been given a voice. And this brings us to the second lesson the Greek poet has taken – but certainly not copied – from "My Last Duchess": the crucial role played by spatial disposition. Both poems are choreo-

[36] See especially "Απολλώνιος ο Τυανεύς εν Ρόδω", *Ποιήματα* 2.48.

graphed so that the present speech and gestures of the speaker, and the implicit responses of the interlocutor (possibly plural in Cavafy's case) are set in a moving context. There is stage business, and both poets direct it with some care.

"My Last Duchess" begins *in medias res*, with the portrait. "Will't please you sit and look at her?" suggests a rather peremptory seating of the emissary before the portrait, perhaps with a firm grip on the shoulders. The two find themselves in a private alcove, as the quietly authoritative bracketed phrase "(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I.)" suggests. Fixed there for the bulk of the poem, the two men leave at the cue, "Will't please you rise?", and the curtain on the old tragedy is drawn. At the end of the poem, the two men will go downstairs to join the company, in varying states of mind; but not before the Duke has called attention to an equally perfect, but inhuman, work of art: "Notice that Neptune."

Cavafy craftily inverts this perambulation through a ducal palace. We start at the entrance to the sculptor's atelier, with the conventional introductions and brandishing of credentials (it may of course be that the clients have enquired about the unfamiliar accent of the speaker). We proceed to a large gallery with some monumental copies ready for sale (Cavafy takes the verb "Notice" from the end of "My Last Duchess" and places it with Rhea), before proceeding to two works in progress, and then on to a work of great scale and ambition, but no doubt at an earlier stage. At the end of the poem we have come to the artist's inner sanctum: it is if he too draws a curtain to reveal, not just something he would surely never sell (any more than the jeweller in the poem "From the shop" would sell his best pieces), but an object he worked on intensely, and which so evokes erotic experience, and the complete though fleeting possession of a body that could in the right hands be transmuted into art.[37] Where the Duchess's title was inalienable, and yet

[37] "Του μαγαζιού", *Ποιήματα* 1.50 and discussion in Anthony Hirst, "Philosophical, historical and sensual: an examination of Cavafy's

her death warrant, the sculptor's model (perhaps a street boy of Caravaggio) was both anonymous and mercurial, yet given life, like the artist himself, for ever.[38] The Duke, surprisingly, has nothing to say of the next world, even as a conventional reflex ("my late Duchess"; "God rest her soul"; a crossing himself): Cavafy's sculptor has been able to dream up, not only a beautiful youth, but belief in a god that had for late Romans become as conventionalized as Rhea at the start of the poem. If Frà Pandolf's attempt to capture the innocence of the Duchess as a Madonna could not save her, the sculptor's hand has given an anonymous model the gift of eternal life; where Pandolf had but a day to model the Duchess from the life, the Greek sculptor was able to conceive his masterpiece on a particular day and to work on it lovingly and at his leisure.

What is so salutary about all this is that Cavafy sets his poem beside his predecessor's so respectfully: this is an answer, not a riposte, let alone a swipe. But it is one that allows itself a final little joke. The Duke's language is pervaded by "I" and "my", right through to the last proprietorial "me" at the end, which chillingly places his stamp on a bronze as earlier on flesh and blood. The sculptor of Tyana is himself free with first-person verbs, initially with the social awkwardness of a new-comer to the capital, at the end with the bold freedom of the creator; but the poem's last words, as we wait for the rhyme to answer θερμή, escape to another realm with Hermes, Ερμή. This taking up of a cue in the form of a mere phoneme, makes the Greek poet's dialogue with Browning's poem a much more intriguing sort of thing than Imaginary Conversations usually are.[39]

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thematic collections", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 19 (1995) 33-93 (55-8).

[38] Compare "Ενας θεός των" ("One of their gods"), *Ποιήματα* 1.73 and discussion in David Ricks, "Cavafy and the Body of Christ", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 27.1/2 (2001) 19-32.

[39] That Cavafy's jokes can be this elaborate is attested by the Alexandrine that ends the poem "Για τον Αμμόνη, που πέθανε 29 ετών στα 610" ("For Ammonis, who died at 29 in 610"): see David Ricks,

"Well, I could never write a verse – could you? / Let's to the Prado and make much of time." The engaging speaker of Browning's poem which supplied the title for this essay concludes disarmingly, having in fact shown us that he is a poet *malgré lui*: the happiest of creatures as the poet *manqué* is the most wretched. Browning, like Cavafy, has attracted a host of commentators, many of them learned and acute; he has also put generations of poets fruitfully on their mettle: "Hang it all, Robert Browning!", Pound expostulates in the second *Canto*.[40] But the case of "Sculptor from Tyana" is as subtle and pleasing an example as I know of a poetic theft, whether from Browning or anyone else. It is a theft proudly but quietly acknowledged by what we may properly call an allusion to "My Last Duchess", inserted with the same pride as a *Fecit*.[41] In his mid-twenties when Browning died full of years and poems, Cavafy, with all his serious work before him, knew the older poet to be a classic, and, struck by his contemporary, the Greek poet's own classic poems have drawn new life from the master.

"Cavafy's Alexandrianism" in: Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk (eds.), *Alexandria real and imagined* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming 2003).

[40] See discussion in David Ricks, *The Shade of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), p. 142.

[41] For some discriminations, with reference to recent discussion, see Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 1-6.