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**Historical Poetics in Modern Greece:  
Reflections on Three Writers**

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## ABSTRACT

In his *Poetics* Aristotle underscores the interaction between poetry and history by assigning to poetry the task of dealing with the universal while history delves in the particular. The writers Thanassis Valtinos, Rea Galanaki and the poet C.P. Cavafy have created an imposing body of Modern Greek literary works built on the intimate relationship between history and literature. For each writer the choice of particular historical instances serves a very different purpose. Valtinos grapples with the condition of the common man/woman whereas Galanaki focuses mostly on the existential parameters of exceptional women's lives. For C.P. Cavafy, poetry, the ultimate universal, validates his own self-exploration by means of particular historical narratives.

## Historical Poetics in Modern Greece: Reflections on Three Writers

The recourse to history for creating literary products has anchored much of the most notable 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek fiction and poetry writing. Several names come readily to mind: among poets, Solomos, Kalvos, Cavafy, Sikelianos, Palamas, Elytis, Ritsos, Anagnostakis stand out. Fiction writers prove equally ready to rely on historical resources for narratives that plumb the psyche of individual characters at particular times and in specific situations. In writers like Papadiamantis, Kazantzakis, Venezis, and later, Tsirkas, Kotzias, Fragkias, Valtinos, Lymperaki, Zei, and Galanaki –to name just a few-- the historical intersects with the personal in a constant search to understand the human condition.

Does the infusion of literature with history produce a felicitous or symmetrical relationship between the two genres? And, if according to Aristotle, “poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular<sup>1</sup>”, how does fiction fare? Finally, what is the task of the novelist or poet who draws from history in order to produce a cultural artifact? The discussion here will address some of these questions by proceeding from a preliminary set of assumptions to a brief exploration of the work of two contemporary Greek fiction writers, Thanassis Valtinos and Rea Galanaki. Afterwards, a quick review of C.P. Cavafy’s well-documented use of history will conclude with a hypothesis concerning some of his best-known work.

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To start with, dipping into history or venturing into well-charted historical territory is, of course, far from an exclusively Greek technique for literary inspiration. Dozens of writers of extremely diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds have distinguished themselves in this domain. One thinks here of the South American novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges; of Milan Kundera’s or Hermann Broch’s works or of John Dos Passos’s frame-to-frame, multi-layered, yet individually focused narratives. More recently, Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*, riveted and thrilled both readers and movie audiences. Last but not least, the two latest Nobel prizes in

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a37-b7, in S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. With a Critical Text and Translation of *The Poetics*. New York, 1951, p. 35

literature – last year, to Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio and to Herta Müller in 2009— have lent additional gravity to a literature that struggles to counter the weight of historical events which tends to erase people “who don’t exist because they leave no trace of their passage.”<sup>2</sup>

Marguerite Yourcenar and Jean-Paul Sartre probably provide the best formulations on the imperative need to illuminate history through literature and the power of language. In her end notes on her ‘autobiographical’ masterpiece on the emperor Hadrian, Yourcenar describes her task:

Take a life that is known and completed, recorded and fixed by History (as much as lives ever can be fixed), so that its entire course may be seen at a single glance; more important still, choose the moment when the man who lived that existence weighs and examines it, and is, for the briefest span, capable of judging it. Try to manage so that he stands before his own life in much the same position as we stand when we look at it.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Ernesto Sábato, another novelist and script writer of the 1974 scenario for Buñuel’s “The Exterminating Angel,” implies that, without fictional narratives, modern life is practically incomprehensible. “In a bureaucratic world, abandoned by philosophy and splintered into thousands of scientific specialties, the novel remains to us the last observatory from which we can embrace human life as a whole.”<sup>4</sup>

In a completely different linguistic mode, Sartre explains that the reason he undertook his monumental study of the life and work of Gustave Flaubert was the search for “*l’universel singulier*”—the singular universal, a particular man whose uniqueness shared a universal human situation:

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<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Hawes, “The Price of Colonialism”, on Le Clézio’s *Desert*. *The New York Times Book Review*, Sunday August 30, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, “Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, in *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Translated by Grace Frick. (New York, 2005), 320-21.

<sup>4</sup> See, Milan Kundera, *The Curtain, An Essay in Seven Parts* (New York, 2007), 83.

The fact is that a man is never an individual; it would be better to call him a singular universal: totalized and at the same time universalized by his era, he re-totalizes it by remaking himself within it as a singularity.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the particularity of each consciousness feeds on the totality of the human condition; each life, even a well-documented one, resembles a narrative that could be endlessly reiterated in order to understand its contours, its twists and turns and the choices made. Another way to clarify this dialectical relationship between the particular and the universal is to think of individual words in their intrinsic reference to a language as a whole, or what Sartre means by a writer's "style." Every word must accord with a larger linguistic universe and each sentence must contain the whole of the chapter or the book, just as for a painter or a musician, each mark on the canvas or the page must be conversant with the work of art as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

When language, the vehicle for literary artifacts, fails to grasp reality the text collapses, unnerved and lifeless. In one of his recent works, a scenario on the life of Dionysios Solomos, Thanassis Valtinos gives us the frustration of a translator faced with a tortuous task.

"Verses...translated from the Italian...I tried to translate them. It is difficult to carry over the anxiety of reality from one language to another, especially through a third language. And the attempt to use words is a new failure every time."<sup>7</sup> ( My translation)

Failure or not, language remains literature's only weapon against the leveling, all-subsuming sweep of "official history" or History. Greek writers have probably felt the 'weight of History' more than other Europeans. One reason may lie in the intellectual and psychological imperative to ground a national identity in the rapidly changing political and geographical landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the war of independence. The need to forge a common identity went hand in hand with fatalism about events that were

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'idiot de la famille*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1971, Vol. I), 7. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> See, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations X*. (Paris, 1976), 138.

<sup>7</sup> Στίχοι... μεταφρασμένοι απ' τα ιταλικά .... προσπάθησα να τους μεταφράσω. Η αγωνία των πραγμάτων δύσκολα περνάει από μια γλώσσα σε μία άλλη, ιδιαίτερα μέσω τρίτης. Και η προσπάθεια να χρησιμοποιήσει κανείς τις λέξεις είναι κάθε φορά μια καινούργια αποτυχία. "Θανάσης Βαλτινός, *Άνθη της αβύσσου*. [Flowers of the abyss] (Athens, 2008), 14 and 76.

meant to happen and were best left unexamined. For example, personal narratives about major national traumas like the Asia Minor campaign remain rare, in contrast to the literature generated by the Greek civil war which, it has been said, left the writing of the “official history” lagging behind.<sup>8</sup>

The Greek novel has taken a long time to come alive *precisely because* of the nationally imposed weight of “official history” which stifled the will to understand individual lives. In the broader European context, the rise of the novel presupposed the Age of Enlightenment and the cultivation of Individualism. In turn, this intellectual climate solidified the notion of a linearly evolving history propelled by consciously individualistic actors.<sup>9</sup> But Ottoman occupied Greece missed out on all these socio-cultural currents. In fact, it still frequently betrays a passive acceptance of untoward events that are ritualistically attributed to the malice of outsiders. Personal responsibility, a hallmark of modernity, is still a secondary value in a culture that operates with a cyclical view of history and sees itself in the light of epic heroes fighting and falling, helpless against the tricks of Fate.

The novel, therefore, is premised on the evolution and personal growth of characters toward a future, albeit always constrained by a given socio-cultural situation. In Sartre’s words, “[modern] literature...is the movement whereby at every moment man frees himself from history; in short, it is the exercise of freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Echoing Sartre, Susan Sontag praises Nadine Gordimer’s Nobel winning literature for being “...a treasury of human beings *in situations*, stories that are character driven.” Then Sontag explains, that for her, “Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is the zone of freedom. Literature was freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, Όλγα Σέλλα, «Εμφύλιος με όπλο τη λογοτεχνία». *Η Καθημερινή*, [Olga Sella, “The Civil War Fought with Literature”], Kathimerini, 1/11/ 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See, Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Cambridge, MA, 1971. And, Louis Kampf, *On Modernism: The prospects for Literature and Freedom* (Cambridge MA, 1967), 285-6.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (New York, 1966), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. (New York, 2007), 209-10.

If the novel is “an ideal vehicle for both space and time,”<sup>12</sup> how do Greek novelists handle it?

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Fictional narrative and the historical hurdles of a nation-in-the-making interweave most of the literary output of Thanassis Valtinos. With very few exceptions, like *Deep Blue Almost Black*, or *Woodcock Feathers* (*Φτερά Μπεκάτσας*), occasional short stories or the Solomos scenario *Άνθη της Αβύσσου* (*Flowers of the abyss*), his fiction inhabits vast historical spaces stretching over painful time periods. The Balkan wars, the Asia Minor campaign and the “catastrophe”, the civil war or the Cyprus invasion, produce brutal stories of despair, often via movie-style dialogues, first-person and alternate gender ruminations, in a complex style that swings from curt, relentless reporting to sparse lyricism. The textual insertion of newspaper-clippings, interviews and “Dear Abby” columns (*Αγαπητή κυρία Μίνα*) in the pompous language that dominated the press of the 1950s and ‘60s harks back to John Dos Passos’ literary techniques in the *USA* cycle. Moreover, his stories, long or short, mold time and slide freely in and out of it without relaxing the tension between the topical and the universal.<sup>13</sup> The use of public data for satirical, yet sympathetic psychological explorations of characters during particularly harsh periods of Greek history, such as the Metaxas dictatorship or the colonels’ junta, also brings out the ironies of living in a country trying to hold on to its past glories while also scrambling to move toward a modern future.

Against this problematic of war-ravaged lives, Valtinos depicts two defining themes of the modern Greek historical profile through several works. The first theme concerns the tragic post-civil war neglect suffered by the Greek countryside and the concomitant social problems: depopulation, illiteracy, isolation, aversion for the farming life and even locally sanctioned lawlessness, as in cases of famous vendetta kidnappings and killings. Directly related to this theme is, secondly, the story of Greek emigration, particularly to Australia and America. The toil of life as “other” in unknown and unknowable lands, the daily humiliations and the anxiety for the future of concrete

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213

<sup>13</sup> On Valtinos’s handling of temporality, see Δημήτρης Δασκαλόπουλος, «Ανακύκλωση (και ανακύκλωση) της Ιστορίας: η περίπτωση του Θανάση Βαλτινού» [Dimitris Daskalopoulos, “Recycling (and Recircling) History: The case of Thanassis Valtinos”] in *Porfyra* No.103 (April-June 2002), 21-24.

individuals are handled in compelling narratives that are surely the envy of any skillful social anthropologist or historian.<sup>14</sup> Sensual, poetic and sparse, Valtinos's excursions into each historical period release heart-wrenching personal minutiae, instantly recognizable for their sadness and truth. For example, in a handful of short stories in *Εθισμός στη νικοτίνη (Nicotine Addiction)*, he manages to cover a vast social and political array of characters at a loss, struggling daily under harsh conditions and against History: the Greek mobilization in defense of Cyprus; having to beg 50 drachmas for cigarettes after a desperate taxi ride from a province to an Athens hospital; the civil war; the national 'rift' (ο διχασμός), a countryside vendetta and an abduction.

Much like his movie scripts for *Days of '36*, *Journey to Kythera* and *Journey through the Fog*, Valtinos's fiction presupposes history and a living memory of traditions but its aim remains the creation of art, i.e., of narratives, not of rhetoric, or didacticism. By making use of both cyclical (repetitive) and linear ('freely' chosen) senses of history, Valtinos molds moving and disturbing characters by salvaging their lesser lives from the all-leveling effect of "official history". In this, his philosophy agrees thoroughly with that of Rea Galanaki, the other contemporary Greek novelist whose fiction has reached deeply into Greek history.

In explaining her views on History in the context of her renowned novel, *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha*,<sup>15</sup> she says:

It would please me if the reader, alongside his own indisputable perception of History, would concede that there is not just a single historical version but several views of the same event, allowing for some divergence. In addition, if for some specific reasons one view takes hold and dominates over a period of time, this

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<sup>14</sup> Included here are: *Η κάθοδος των εννιά* (Κέδρος, 1978) [*The descent of the Nine*]; *Στοιχεία για τη δεκαετία του 60* (Athens, 1989) [*Data from the Decade of the sixties* (Northwestern U. Press, 2000)]; *Συναξάρι Ανδρέα Κορδοπάτη*, B. 1 (1990) & Βιβ. 2 (Athens, 2000) [*The Lives of Saints by Andreas Kordopatis: Books 1 & 2*]; and *Ορθοκωστά* (Athens, 1994) [*Orthokosta*]. This last work, on the two-sided atrocities during the Greek civil war, created much controversy among historians and literary critics. For a critical overview, see, Vangelis Calotychos, "Writing wrongs, (Re) Righting (Hi)story?: "Orthotita" and "Ortho-graphia" in Thanassis Valtinos's *Orthokosta*. In, [genesis.ee.auth.gr/Gamma/8/10-calotychos.htm](http://genesis.ee.auth.gr/Gamma/8/10-calotychos.htm) (on line publication from the University of Thessaloniki.)

<sup>15</sup>Rea Galanaki, *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha*. (Athens, 1989).

does not mean that it is the only possible one or that it is irrefutable. *Probably, literature begins from this point on.*<sup>16</sup>

Even so, the past, i.e., historical time and place/space, is at all times to be rendered with meticulous detail in order for the author to produce characters of emotional impact. “I would venture a definition,” she states: “for the writer, history is the human drama within a very specific and, at the same time, symbolic relationship of place, time and language.”<sup>17</sup> Galanaki, a novelist of largely biographical fiction, considers emotion as her fundamental guide in choosing a subject and its relationship to “the infinite points of the past.”<sup>18</sup> But unlike Valtinos who chooses to make small lives count, Galanaki picks mostly exceptional figures, even sensational ones -- as in the story of the abduction of Tasoula Kefaloyanni.<sup>19</sup> The biography of Ismail Ferik Pasha becomes a vehicle for plunging into the emotionally charged moments, agonizing soul-searching and deep sorrow experienced by the hero of this unusual (hi) story of double identity and dual allegiance.

Galanaki seems to confirm her commentators by saying that for her this work was a ‘return’ to Crete, her native land. The theme of *nostos* (νόστος -return) looms central in the story of Ismail. In her latest work, *The Fires of Judah, The Ashes of Oedipus* (Φωτιές του Ιούδα, Στάχτες του Οιδίποδα), she revisits the literary history of Crete as well as its ragged geographical setting.<sup>20</sup> In previous works, *The Century of Labyrinths* (2002) and *Silent, Deep Waters* (2006), Crete was again the epicenter of her

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<sup>16</sup> “Και θα μου άρεσε αν ο αναγνώστης, κοντά στην αδιαφιλονίκητη δική του αντίληψη για την Ιστορία, δεχόταν ότι δεν υπάρχει μία και μόνο ιστορική εκδοχή, αλλά περισσότερες απόψεις για το ίδιο γεγονός, έστω και με μερικές αποκλίσεις. Επίσης ότι, αν για κάποιους ειδικούς λόγους μία άποψη επιβάλλεται και κυριαρχεί για ένα χρονικό διάστημα, τούτο δεν σημαίνει πως είναι η μόνη δυνατή, η μόνη αναντίρρητη. *Ενδεχομένως ότι, απ’ αυτό το σημείο και μετά, αρχίζει η λογοτεχνία.*” Ρέα Γαλανάκη, ‘Επιλογικά σχόλια στο μυθιστόρημα «Ο βίος του Ισμαήλ Φερικ Πασά»’ in *Βασιλεύς ή Στρατιώτης: Σημειώσεις, Σκέψεις, Σχόλια για τη Λογοτεχνία*. [Rea Galanaki, “Post-script Remarks on ‘The life of Ismail Ferik Pasha’” in *King or Soldier: Notes, Thoughts and Comments on Literature*.] (Athens, 1997), 24. My emphasis and translation.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>19</sup> Ρ. Γαλανάκη, *Αμίλητα, βαθιά νερά: η απαγωγή της Τασούλας*. [R. Galanaki, *Silent, Deep Waters: The Abduction of Tasoula* (Athens, 2007)]

<sup>20</sup> See her interview with Mary Papagiannidou «Η δασκάλα και ο βοσκός»[“The Teacher and the Shepherd”] in *BHMA* on Line, Nov. 1, 2009.

narratives. The concept of *nostos*, the longing for return, therefore permeates the narrative's action while also being part of the author's cognitive geography. Even in novels unrelated to Crete, i.e., in *I shall sign as Loui* (1993) and in *Eleni or Nobody* (1999), the lives she reconstructs from history span long distances, spilling over Greek national borders into culturally and geographically "other" spaces. But in these cases the yearning for return goes beyond the quest for belonging to a cultural or geographical milieu; it now acquires an interior, introspective dimension --the search for a lost or strayed identity and a purpose for living.

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The exploration of loss, *dépayement*, and social degradation are hardly the subject-matter of history. Literature, quickened in history, becomes an invaluable tool for grasping the complexity of the human psyche. "The novel", Susan Sontag tells us, "is an ideal vehicle, both of space and time." But she goes on immediately to clarify that time "is not essential for poetry because poetry is situated in the present" and even when poetry tells a story, "Poems are not *like* stories."<sup>21</sup> This may seem like a cryptic statement but it makes a lot of sense when we consider the (hi) stories of a poet like Constantine Cavafy.

Cavafy (1863-1933) has been quoted repeatedly as a self-described "historical poet."<sup>22</sup> The claim seems more than justified by the number of poems that refer to the Greek mythical world, Hellenistic times, Roman historical figures, and the Byzantine era. However, the use of history in Cavafy seems to be the opposite from that of the novelists discussed above, or of any novelist for that matter. The genius of Cavafy, it seems here, lies not in re-telling us a (hi)story for strictly didactic purposes or for the content of the story itself --although, admittedly, he did write a handful of poems that Yourcenar calls "lessons": she places "Thermopylae", "The First Step", "The City" and "Ithaca" in this category<sup>23</sup>. For Cavafy, the main purpose of the historical poems is to give form and to create art through the exploration of his own psyche. His scrutiny of the past and of times

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time*, 215-16.

<sup>22</sup> Among many commentators on this statement, see Yourcenar's *Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy (1863-1933) suivie d'une traduction des poèmes*, by Marguerite Yourcenar and Constantin Dimaras (Paris, 1978), 16. See also, G. Lechonitis, *Καβαφικά αυτοσχόλια*, 2nd ed. (Athens, 1977), pp. 19-20, in G.W. Bowersock, "The Julian Poems in C.P. Cavafy". In *The Official Cavafy Archive*. n. 2

<sup>23</sup> Yourcenar, *Présentation critique...* p. 22.

long gone terminates at the present moment of self-absorption and writing. The toil that goes into the composition of a poem is not channeled to contemplating the future of a developing character. Instead, in poem after poem we witness a *nostos* ministering to the present, in the face of loss, disasters, mourning, degradation, longing, and thwarted desire.

This self-conscious suspension of time uses the past in order to speak for the poet's emotions, memories and desires in the present. Oftentimes, this is done in a willfully deceitful manner that Cavafy uses like an actor's mask by employing poetic symbols. According to C. Dimaras, these symbols should not be considered real.<sup>24</sup> He points at three of Cavafy's poems in order to illustrate his point. In "For the Shop", in "Aimilianos Monai" and, especially, in "Temethos, Antiochian, A.D.400", the poet resorts to code language to tell us that what he says is not what he really means and warns us not to be fooled about the real object of that poem:

we the initiated—  
his intimate friends—we the initiated  
know about whom those lines were written.  
The unsuspecting Antiochians read simply "Emonidis."<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in "For the Shop", the precious items of "his taste" and "desire" are kept hidden, not for sale—like Cavafy's more beautiful and precious poems:

He'll leave them in the safe,  
examples of his bold, his skillful work.

In "Temethos", the symbolic adoption of an armor to hide the true nature of a man alludes to the poet's own techniques of dissimulation through the conscious choice of language and comportment:

Out of talk, appearance, and manners  
I will make an excellent suit of armor;

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<sup>24</sup> See C. Th. Dimaras, "Cavafy's Technique of Inspiration," in *The Official Cavafy Archive*. See also Alexander Nehamas's discussion in "Cavafy's World of Art", and J.A. Sareyannis, "What was most precious—his Form" (1944) in this *Archive*.

<sup>25</sup> Excerpts from all three poems below, in, C.P. Cavafy: *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (Princeton, 1992)

and in this way I will face malicious people  
without feeling the slightest fear or weakness.

They will try to injure me. But of those  
who come near me none will know  
where to find my wounds, my vulnerable places,  
under the deceptions that will cover me.

So boasted Aimilianos Monai.  
One wonders if he ever made that suit of armor.  
In any case, he did not wear it long  
At the age of twenty-seven, he died in Sicily.

Another commentator who knew Cavafy personally, J. A. Sareyannis, stresses that Cavafy, in view of his homosexuality, was extremely calculating about releasing his poems to designated recipients and tried hard to get them out in indirect and almost devious ways that wouldn't immediately point to him. His natural timidity was probably exacerbated by the impact of the Oscar Wilde trials for, if Cavafy's own proclivities were to be exposed, his carefully constructed public persona and the very fabric of his life would collapse in a puritanical city like Alexandria.<sup>26</sup>

The foregoing are only some of the reasons why Cavafy's work took a long time to be recognized for what it really is, i.e., truly universal<sup>27</sup>, "super-modern and [still] for future generations."<sup>28</sup> The on-going stream of literature generated by his language, his historicism, his sensuality, his aestheticism or his philosophy of art constitutes a perfect paradigm of the felicitous relationship between the particular and the universal. This is not the place to review those contributions to Cavafy's profile. Instead, I would like to consider one of his most elegant and famous poems in the light of his dissembling

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<sup>26</sup> J.A. Sareyannis "What was most precious... See also Sarah Ekdawi, "Days of 1895, 96 and 97: The Parallel Prisons of C.P. Cavafy and Oscar Wilde," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, Year 9, University of Minnesota, 1993. p. 297

<sup>27</sup> Διονύσης Καψάλης, «Ο Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης, Ποιητής Παγκόσμιος» [Dionysis Kapsalis, Constantine Cavafy, The Universal Poet"] *Kathimerini*, 06/15/2003.

<sup>28</sup> Δ.Ν. Μαρωνίτης, «Απολίτιστα Μονοτονικά: Καβαφικά (2) [ D.N. Maronitis, "Kavafika 2,"] *Vima*, 11/02/ 2003

strategies as illustrated in the three poems above.

The poem “In the Month of Athyr” (1917), according to Z. Lorentzatos, is Cavafy’s masterpiece. It is “unique, literally unrepeatable” and “after it, there’s nothing like it”. It is “truly one of the pieces that ‘he brought to art’ («εκόμισε εις την τέχνην»)<sup>29</sup>.

The poem goes,

I can just read the inscription      on this ancient stone.  
“Lo[r]d Jesus Christ.”              I make out a “So[u]l.”  
“In the mon[th] of Athyr”      “Lefkio[s] went to sleep.”  
Where his age is mentioned    —“lived to the age of”—  
the Kappa Zeta shows      that he went to sleep a young man.  
In the corroded part I see    “Hi[m]... Alexandrian.”  
Then there are three badly mutilated lines—  
though I can pick out a few words,    like “our tea[r]s,” “grief,”  
then “tears” again,              and “sorrow to [us] his [f]riends.”  
I think Lefkios                  must have been greatly loved.  
In the month of Athyr      Lefkios went to sleep.

(Με δυσκολία διαβάζω    στην πέτρα την αρχαία.  
«Κύ[ρι]ε Ιησού Χριστέ». Ένα «Ψυ[χ]ήν» διακρίνω.  
«Εν τω μη[νί] Αθύρ»      «Ο Λεύκιο[ς] ε[κοιμ]ήθη».  
Στη μνεία της ηλικίας    «Εβί[ωσ]εν ετών»,  
το Κάππα Ζήτα δείχνει    που νέος εκοιμήθη.  
Μες στα φθαρμένα βλέπω    «Αυτό[ν]... Αλεξανδρέα».  
Μετά έχει τρεις γραμμές    πολύ ακρωτηριασμένες·  
μα κάτι λέξεις βγάλω —    σαν «δ[ά]κρυα ημών», «οδύνην»,  
κατόπιν πάλι «δάκρυα»,    και «[ημ]ίν τοις [φ]ίλοις πένθος».  
Με φαίνεται που ο Λεύκιος    μεγάλως θ’ αγαπήθη.

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<sup>29</sup> Νίκος Μπακουνάκης, «Ο Θάνατος του απολιτικού. Ο Ζήσιμος Λορεντζάτος και ένας προσωπικός απολογισμός». Κριτική βιβλίου [Nikos Bakounakis, “The Death of the Apolitical. Zissimos Lorentzatos and a Personal Account”. Book review.] *To Vima*, February 8, 2004. See also, Ζήσιμος Λορεντζάτος, *Μικρά Αναλυτικά στον Καβάφη* [Z. Lorentzatos, *Mikra Analytika ston Cavafy*], Athens, 1977, 13-14

Εν τῷ μηνί Αθύρῳ ὁ Λεύκιος εκοιμήθη.)<sup>30</sup>

Lorentzatos does not develop his argument further than stating that Cavafy scholars have not stressed sufficiently the poet’s handling of Roman history.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Daniel Mendelsohn goes into a meticulous textual analysis of “the erotics of the lost” and, in an equally admiring tone, pronounces this poem a perfect example of “the power of poetry” mediated by the conflation of four novel elements in the narrative. What we have here, claims Mendelsohn, is not the contemplation of a dead body but rather of a text, worn, hard-to read and mutilated. So, instead of describing a body, Cavafy “strings words”. Instead of looking at a body, he reads words. Rather than describe desire, Cavafy offers language. Finally, and most importantly, instead of “speaking of loss, Cavafy speaks of love.”<sup>32</sup>

This series of concentrated substitutions, driven by a textual economy that reads horizontally as well as vertically, raises an obvious question. Who is this Lefkios? Or Leucios (Λεύκιος)? -- to stick to the Greek term, for reasons that will become obvious below.<sup>33</sup> Extant research on Leucios points to an entirely imaginary character. Cavafy is, therefore, said to be addressing a fake tombstone and a concocted inscription.<sup>34</sup> The question then is, why would he do that? Surely he must have been aware of the quintessential uniqueness of this particular poem; if so, is he once again hiding and protecting his personal connection to someone from the potential prejudice and/or calumnies of the “un-initiated”?

I submit that the answer is most probably “yes” and shall propose three reasons why. First, to start with the name, we are dealing with the Greek version of a Latin name: Leucios is the equivalent of Lucius. The most important Lucius in Roman history was Lucius Aelius Verus Caesar (101-138 A.D.) adoptive son of the Emperor Hadrian in 136

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<sup>30</sup> Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. I have added the column spaces as in the original Greek.

<sup>31</sup> Λορεντζάτος, *Μικρά Αναλυτικά...*[Lorentzatos, *Mikra Analytika...*], 25-6

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, “Cavafy and the Erotics of the Lost” in *The Official Cavafy Archive*.

<sup>33</sup> I agree entirely with Walter Kaiser that the translation of names in the Keeley-Sherrard edition respects modern Greek pronunciation by doing an injustice to the English language. See Walter Kaiser, *Review of C.P. Cavafy*, in *The Official Cavafy Archives*.

<sup>34</sup> See, Κυριάκος Ντελόπουλος, *Καβάφη, Ιστορικά και άλλα πρόσωπα* [Kyriakos Delopoulos, *Cavafy: Historical and Other Characters*], (Athens, 1980), 230.

A.D. and most probably his lover. While successor-designate, Lucius fell ill and died, a few months before Hadrian himself. But Lucius was buried in Rome, near Hadrian, by the next Caesar, Antoninus, in the mausoleum now known as Castel Sant'Angelo. Therefore, there is no reason to think that the mutilated inscription on the worn tombstone, presumably somewhere close to Alexandria, would have anything to do with Lucius.

However, Lucius became Hadrian's favorite only *after* Antinous (or Antinöos), his truly beloved Bithynian youth, drowned in the Nile in 130 A.D. The story, famous for centuries, has been the subject of several studies<sup>35</sup> and of many statues and heads of Antinous that grace major European museums. It has also inspired at least one modern major poet, Fernando Pessoa of Portugal (1888-1935). Pessoa wrote "Antinous" in 1915 in perfect Edwardian English and published a definitive version in 1918.<sup>36</sup> Although Pessoa and Cavafy never met, they seem to have shared many similarities in upbringing, choice of themes, sexual orientation and intellectual interests. Moreover, they had a common friend, E.M. Forster, another writer with very similar interests and life choices, who may have acted as an intermediary, informing each man of the other's work. Cavafy had close contacts with Forster from 1916 to 1918 and it is conceivable that Forster may have brought him Pessoa's English manuscripts.<sup>37</sup>

Whether Cavafy was influenced by Pessoa on the subject of Antinous or not, it seems unlikely that he, "the poet of history", who lived just up the river Nile from Antinopolis would not be aware of the story and the legend of Antinous. However, Victorian mores probably prevented him from referring to Antinous directly and dictated the need for using the persona of Lucius to mask the real subject of the epitaph. Thus, the second reason for thinking this poem might be about Antinous is the importance of the

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<sup>35</sup> Most notably, Marguerite Yourcenar's, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (Paris, 1954; New York, 1963). See also, Royston Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous*, London, 1984 and Anthony Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome* (New York, 2009) 286-294.

<sup>36</sup> See George Monteiro, *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-century Anglo-American Literature.*, Lexington, KY, 2000, XVII and XIX. And, Φερνάντο Πεσσόα. Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Τα εξαίσια όργανα του μυστικού θιάσου*. (Εισαγωγή, σχόλια, μετάφραση Γ. Σουλιώτης[FernandoPessoa. C.P. Cavafy *Ta exaisia organa tou mystikou thiasou*. Edited and translated by G. Souliotis] Athens, 2009. See also, *Fernando Pessoa: Αντίνοος*. Εισαγωγή-Μετάφραση Κ. Λάνταβος. Αθήνα, 2007 [K. Lantavos, trans., *F. Pessoa: Antinoos*. Athens, 2007]

<sup>37</sup> See, George Savidis, "Cavafy and Forster" in *Mikra Kavafika*, Athens, 1985. Also, for a detailed study of the Cavafy-Forster relationship see, Peter Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions: Hellenism and Orientalism in the Writings of E.M. Forster and C.P. Cavafy* (North Carolina, 2005).

latter's legend and its proximity to Cavafy's own concerns. Sarah Ekdawi quickly dismisses the possibility that the subject of "In the Month of Athyr" is the 'deceased Alexandrian Christian, Lefkios'. However, to record an epitaph in a Christian era does not necessarily make the deceased a Christian, especially when his identity has to be concealed, either in real or in plasmatic/poetic (hi)story. Antinous was deified upon his death and his cult straddles paganism and Christianity. Antinopolis, a city built in his memory and to his glory by Hadrian, soon became an important Coptic Christian city, Ansena, the site of a visit by the Holy Family and of several Christian martyrdoms.<sup>38</sup> In a way, the cult of Antinous parallels Cavafy's cult of poetry which bridges Hellenistic hedonism with his own Alexandrian universe, past and present.

Finally, concerning this issue, why would an epitaph that seems to have been carved about a Christian in a Christian era, mention the month of death in its ancient Egyptian version? Indeed, in her conclusion Ekdawi acknowledges that Cavafy employed clever ruses to hide his intended meanings. As she states,

In his use of three Victorian strategies for writing about sex --epitaphs, codes and the classics—Cavafy, like Wilde before him, often contravenes Victorian literary propriety.<sup>39</sup>

History can also be 'bent' in order to convey the emotion that the poet wishes to communicate; so can religion, for that matter. In the last analysis, despite his apparent religiosity, Cavafy worshiped Alexandria and all things Alexandrian above all else. Everything about this city, especially its past, including his own earlier days and social status, was the topos that defined his psychic, physical and intellectual horizon and nurtured his universality. By identifying himself as «ελληνικός» i.e., not Greek but *of* Greece and *of* Greek -- be it descent, language or (Hellenistic) revival-- Cavafy sidestepped the issue of his strict adherence to a religion, even though he seems to have followed much of the church's ritual.<sup>40</sup> At the same time he never concealed his

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<sup>38</sup> See "Ansena/Antinopolis" in *Wikipedia*.

<sup>39</sup> See Sarah Ekdawi, "Cavafy's Mythical Ephebes" in *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry*. Edited by Peter Mackridge. Portland, OR, 1966. 40 and 43.

<sup>40</sup> "Cavafy once said to Stratis Tsirkas, *Είμαι κι εγώ Ελληνικός. Προσοχή, όχι Έλληνα, ούτε Ελληνίζων, αλλά Ελληνικός*. T. Malanos, *Περί Καβάφη* (Alexandria, 1935), p. 56." Quoted by G.W. Bowersock, "The Julian Poems of C.P. Cavafy", in *The Official Cavafy Archive*, n. 43. Regarding Cavafy's 'non-partisan' attitude

preoccupation with an ambivalent historical character like Julian the Apostate who straddled paganism and Christianity and probably provided the poet with a paradigm for his own lifestyle in the context of an ‘eternal city’ like Alexandria.<sup>41</sup> It seems highly unlikely that within that Alexandrian myth and its pagan and deeply erotic reverberations there would be no place for Antinous. All the same, Cavafy did not have to be explicit about his writing: “The poet”, says Michael Walzer, “needs fellow citizens, other poets and readers of poetry who share with him a background of history and sentiment, who will not demand that everything he writes be explained. Without people like that, his allusions will be lost and his images will echo only in his own mind.”<sup>42</sup>

Lastly, a third reason for suggesting that “In the month of Athyr’ is probably about Antinous is the fact that, “[On T]he first of the month of Athyr, the second year of the two hundred and twenty-sixth Olympiad [...],” Antinous drowned in the Nile, a probable suicide.

This is how Marguerite Yourcenar opens her well-researched narrative on Antinous’s tragic death.<sup>43</sup> The phrase apparently originates in the *Historia Augusta*, and in several collections of Greek and Latin inscriptions cited in her endnotes. Cavafy’s exact and double repetition of the phrase “In the Month of Athyr” seems too much of a coincidence.

Just before going to Alexandria, Hadrian and Antinous had traveled through Syria and Jerusalem –the Roman-era Seleucia. This area had been burnt by Trajan, the previous Emperor, but was subsequently rebuilt and restored by Hadrian.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, to speak of Seleucia as a lively region with a thriving marketplace is to refer obliquely to Hadrian’s works and time. The scene described in Cavafy’s “One of their Gods” (*Ένας Θεός των*),

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to religion, see Sareyannis, “What Mattered...” also, Edmund Keeley, “The Universal Perspective,” in *The official Cavafy Archive*. n. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Much has been written on Cavafy’s ambivalence on religion. See, Diana Haas, *Le problème religieux dans l’oeuvre de Cavafy: les années de formation, 1882-1905*. Paris, 1996.; G.W. Bowersock, “The Julian Poems...”; and Peter Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions...*, ch. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Walzer, “Philosophy and Democracy” in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*. Edited by Derek Matravers and Jon Pike. New York, 2003, 363.

<sup>43</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, p. 195 and 303.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 184 ff.

another 1917 poem, has often been associated with the figure of Antinous strutting through the market of Seleucia on his way to the neighborhoods of the night. A rudimentary internet search yields several sites which delve on this poem, with the consensus pointing to Antinous as the poem's subject. Whether this is right or wrong, in terms of the actual events, this conclusion is probably correct: Hadrian and Antinous did travel through the region shortly before the youth's death. Dipping into real Roman history, Cavafy speaks achingly of a young man's beauty and follows him with longing and a *frisson* about his intentions and his lofty identity—a subject of much daydreaming (ερέμβασαν) among passers-by, including the poet himself. Cavafy, of course, knows that this is 'one of their gods,' but once again he keeps that precious bit of knowledge to himself:

When one of them moved through the marketplace of Selefkia  
just as it was getting dark—  
moved like a young man, tall, extremely handsome,  
with the joy of being immortal in his eyes,  
with his black and perfumed hair—  
the people going by would gaze at him,  
and one would ask the other if he knew him,  
if he was a Greek from Syria, or a stranger.  
But some who looked more carefully  
would understand and step aside;  
and as he disappeared under the arcades,  
among the shadows and the evening lights,  
going toward the quarter that lives  
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,  
with every kind of intoxication and desire,  
they would wonder which of Them it could be,  
and for what suspicious pleasure  
he had come down into the streets of Selefkia  
from the August Celestial Mansions

(Όταν κανένας των περνούσεν απ' της Σελευκείας  
την αγορά, περί την ώρα που βραδυάζει,  
σαν υψηλός και τέλεια ωραίος έφηβος,  
με την χαρά της αφθαρσίας μες στα μάτια,  
με τ' αρωματισμένα μαύρα του μαλλιά,  
οι διαβάται τον εκύτταζαν  
κι ο ένας τον άλλο να ρωτούσεν αν τον γνώριζε,  
κι αν ήταν Έλληνα της Συρίας, ή ξένος. Αλλά μερικοί,  
που με περισσότερα προσοχή παρατηρούσαν,  
εκαταλάμβαναν και παραμέριζαν·  
κ' ενώ εχάνετο κάτω απ' τες στοές,  
μες στες σκιές και μες στα φώτα της βραδυάς,  
πηδώντας προς την συνοικία που την νύχτα  
μονάχα ζει, με όργια και κραιπάλη,  
και κάθε είδους μέθη και λαγνεία,  
ερέμβαν ποιος τάχα ήταν εξ Αυτών,  
και για ποιαν ύποπτην απόλαυσί του  
στης Σελευκείας τους δρόμους εκατέβηκεν  
απ' τα Προσκυνητά, Πάνσεπτα Δώματα.)<sup>45</sup>

I have two minor observations about this and two other translations of this poem. I think that by translating *τη χαρά της αφθαρσίας* “as joy of being immortal” (Keeley/Sherrard), or “of immortality” (Mendelsohn), or “of incorruptibility” (Valassopoulo, in the Cavafy Archive Canon), an important link to “In the Month of Athyr” is lost or, at least, blunted: what we have there, *μες τα φθαρμένα*, “among the worn out pieces,” is the opposite of *αφθαρσία*. I would argue that by switching to the ‘joy of being *imperishable*’ in “One of Their Gods” and to ‘among *the decay*’ in “In the Month of Athyr” would sharpen the contrast between the two poems and would actually bring them even closer together.

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<sup>45</sup> Translated by E. Keeley and Philip Sherrard. The verb ‘to wonder’ does not contain the passive-participatory meaning of daydreaming implied by ‘ερέμβαν.’

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Clearly, it is not the subject-matter of these poems that makes them masterful. Language mediates the distance between history and art, be that fiction or poetry, and makes the topical beautiful, moving and universal. As Rea Galanaki has observed, “In a nutshell, I would say that the past does not exist in art except as a mirror of creative self-knowledge.”<sup>46</sup> Writers are probably not very different from other Greek intellectuals or artists who harbor a certain ambivalence toward history –at once huddling securely inside it while also struggling to break out of it, in search of imaginative transcendence. True art – the kind practiced by the writers above – embraces History, and the search for imaginative transcendence maps out the road to self-knowledge and universal resonance.

By its very nature, poetry and, in broader terms, the making of art (*poesis*) entails the distillation of hi-story into memory. In turn, the reproduction of memory celebrates beloved states of mind, real or imagined, that acquire a reality and a materiality of their own by means of the artifact. The work of art crystallizes a particular historical moment and a situational state of mind that, whenever remembered, affords the creator boundless gratification, no matter how distant the original thrill. Tombstones, chronicles and diaries -- vehicles selected by the three writers above -- serve as props for artifacts that rekindle memory in order to revisit the thrill of experiences of days long gone, *especially* in the face of an adverse present reality.

Beyond a mere appeal to emotion, historical memory must lead back to the present and satisfy a twofold requirement in order to become creative: first, it should reconcile the writer with his own situation. In this case, C.P. Cavafy’s quest astounds by his artful weaving of a personal story with threads spanning centuries and events, true or imagined. Secondly, emotion of-and-through remembrance must be able to command broad and universal resonance by its grasp of crucial elements at play. Both Thanassis Valtinos -- focused on Everyman -- and Rea Galanaki -- probing the lives of extraordinary personae -- fulfill the prerequisites for making historical memory a precious tool in the search for self-awareness.

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<sup>46</sup> «Σχηματικά θα έλεγα ότι το παρελθόν δεν υπάρχει στην τέχνη παρά μόνον ως καθρέφτης δημιουργικής αυτογνωσίας.» Βλ., Βασιλεύς ή Στρατιώτης [*King or Soldier*], p. 104. My translation.

It has been said that “One of the incidental results -- perhaps one of the causes -- of the bourgeois revolution has been the growth of sociological self-awareness.”<sup>47</sup> As suggested earlier, Greece and, by extension, Greek literature took a long time to wake up to a ‘bourgeois revolution’ confident enough to usher in modernity and the novel as its principal innovation. By illuminating different aspects of individualism and the self, Valtinos, Galanaki and Cavafy bring us closer to grasping the role of history in the search for self-awareness. Theirs is a unique place among paradigms of literary modernity.

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<sup>47</sup> Louis Kampf, *op.cit.*, pp.147-8.