

## Cavafy in his Working Life

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Τι συμφορά, ενώ είσαι καμωμένος  
για τα ωραία και μεγάλα έργα  
η άδικη αυτή σου η τύχη πάντα  
ευθάρρυνσι κ' επιτυχία να σε αρνείται

In "Η Σατραπεία", written in 1905, sixteen years after he first became an employee in the British Civil Service in Egypt, Cavafy reflects on the misery of a life in which routines and petty duties ("συνήθειες και μικροπρέπειες") stand in the way of great works, perhaps even works of Art. And yet, Cavafy's own working life appears to have been neither intolerably onerous nor devoid of usefulness for his artistic enterprise. In fact, one might even say that it gave him the time, the money and the inclination to write, since he only worked half-days, obviously did not find the work exhausting, and had no real financial worries. Furthermore, The job had certain perks and practical benefits: it seems that Cavafy occasionally filched office supplies (paper and maybe even paperclips) and also acquired various clerical skills that were to prove useful to him in his poetic practice.

The only account we have of Cavafy at work is extremely unreliable, albeit moderately entertaining. This is the interview given to the somewhat credulous Manolis Halvatzakis by Ibrahim El Kayiar, in 1964. Ibrahim El Kayiar was a junior Egyptian employee, whose line-manager was Cavafy himself. He was taken on at the age of twenty-two in 1914, when Cavafy was 59, and worked under Cavafy's direct supervision until 1922, when Cavafy retired. The two men seem to have had very little in common.

El Kayiar complains that Cavafy was a most pedantic boss who used, as he put it, to 'penelopise' his work, correcting and recorrecting every last comma. This, of course, would not surprise us. According to El Kayiar, Cavafy used to spread papers all over his desk, in order to make it appear that he was busy, and then lock his office door from the inside. One would have thought that this rather defeated the object. On one occasion, El Kayiar and a

workmate managed to observe Cavafy through the key-hole, and beheld inspiration at work: Cavafy, wearing an ecstatic, other-worldly expression, raised his arms to heaven and then began to scribble furiously. One rather wonders how this key-hole peepery was done. Presumably, Cavafy had considerately removed the key from the lock, after locking the door, and the key-hole itself was approximately the size of a ship's port-hole.

Before leaving El Kayiar and his fantasy world, I would like to mention another of his anecdotes that initially puzzled me. It is well known that Cavafy's English was excellent, if not perfect. On one occasion, however, Cavafy apparently made a very basic mistake, which his English superior corrected, within earshot of the ever-attentive El Kayiar, as follows: "A tall man, Mr. Cavafy, not a long man". I believe that, if indeed the incident took place, Cavafy was laughing in his sleeve, because it showed that he was more conversant than his boss with English literature. The "long man", of course, appears in *The Pickwick Papers*. The following snippet refers to carrying guns safely: " 'I think you had better', sir, said the long gamekeeper, or you're quite as likely to lodge the charge in yourself as in anything else.' " Sound advice, indeed.

In his *Memorandum about the Cavafy Family*, written in 1903, when he was forty, and well before he met the somewhat trying El Kayiar, Cavafy gives the following, slightly fanciful summary of his career:

"The present writer worked for some time as a journalist in Alexandria, then as a broker on Change [the Alexandrian stock exchange], then as a clerk in the Third Circle of Irrigation. Travelled to Constantinople, London, Paris and Athens; visited Marseille, Smyrna, Corfu and Patras, and several places in England. Has achieved very little in practical life. His ambitions are other."

In the same year, on one of the aforementioned trips to Athens, Cavafy met Xenopoulos, and somehow managed to create the impression that he was, in fact, a merchant.

From an early age, Cavafy aspired to be a writer. His talent was recognized by his six elder brothers, who offered various kinds of practical support, sometimes acting as copyists and even illustrators of his early work (Aristides Cavafy), translating it into English and most probably helping out with early printing costs (John Cavafy) and giving the young Constantine an allowance (John and Alexander Cavafy). As Cavafy later told Rika Sengopoulou, however, his brothers were unable to support him financially on a permanent basis. He was forced to take a job.

We know that for Cavafy and his brothers, the preferred option would have been to follow in their father's footsteps, and become merchants. It is clear that they regarded this career as the only truly suitable one for men of their family background and social standing. They were prevented from following this direction, however, by the fact that Peter John Cavafy failed to leave them any capital. Without capital, they could not establish themselves as merchants. They therefore had various other, less certain avenues open to them: to work with their uncle in the family business (as the eldest two, George and Peter, were to do, with disastrous consequences); to invest or speculate with what remained of their father's money, in order to increase it substantially (Peter tried this and lost it all), or to marry girls with large dowries (George, who may have been homosexual, refused; Paul, who was definitely homosexual, tried but failed; Aristides succeeded, but lost all the money; Alexander succeeded, but rather late in life, when he was 45 and already a company director; and poor John had two unhappy love-affairs - the first beloved died; the second left - but never married). Failing all these possibilities, the brothers could find work in fairly humble positions (they spoke two or three languages apiece but had no formal qualifications), which is what they all eventually did. It is interesting to note that because of their expectations, based on Peter Cavafy's wealth and prominence, the boys had been educated much as rich girls would have been, in languages and the arts. They had accomplishments, rather than marketable skills, although Cavafy himself had spent a year at business school, where he presumably learnt basic book-keeping.

All the Cavafy brothers shared a certain disdain for the only kind of work for which they were really suited: clerical work. This disdain, though tempered with a certain pity, is reflected in Cavafy's own comments about clerks, and also witnessed in the malicious description of Cavafy by his fellow-clerk, El Kayiar, as a snob who preferred the conversation of his English bosses to that of his colleagues – though one quite sees why.

It seems likely that Cavafy was more unhappy about having to go out to work at all, than with the job itself. The despairing tone of "Η Σατραπεία" can be heard again in two poems from the same period, "Όσο Μπορείς", which speaks of being unable to make for oneself the life one wants, and "Τρώες", which compares our efforts in life to the hopeless efforts of the Trojans. If these poems in any way reflect Cavafy's own life at the time, he seems to have found his circumstances something of a trial.

The scattering of direct references to clerks and office work in Cavafy's poems are instructive. "ΣΤΟ ΠΛΗΚΤΙΚΟ ΧΩΡΙΟ" (of 1925) describes an office worker, counting the days before he can take a break in the city. His work is stultifying; his youth and beauty are being wasted; his erotic dreams remain unfulfilled. This is one of only two poems in which the word "υπάλληλος" is used. The other is "Ο Καθρέπτης στην είσοδο" (of 1930), where the beautiful clerk-cum-delivery-boy (perhaps reminiscent of the telegraph boys who doubled as rent boys in Oscar Wilde's London) straightens his tie in an antique mirror in the hall, while waiting with a parcel. The fact that he has a tie worth straightening may well take us back to the boy in "Days of 1909, '10 and '11", who exchanges sex for pocket-money when he wants a nice tie.

Whether or not Cavafy had direct experience of rent boys who worked as clerks in the hours of daylight (and the only thing we really know about his private life is that he kept it private), he certainly read the English and French newspapers (we know this, because he sometimes kept clippings), and thus he is almost certain to have known about the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1899. This was when a London house, 19 Cleveland Street, was uncovered as a male brothel, frequented by various members of the British aristocracy.

The brothel was discovered when one of its underage sex-workers was investigated in another connection: in addition to delivering telegrams, he was also supplementing his earnings by means of petty theft. This is the context for an early review of Oscar Wilde's 'Picture of Dorian Gray', and I have argued elsewhere for Cavafy's prolonged artistic engagement with Oscar Wilde. The review in question excoriates Wilde as follows: "Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style, but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals'. Given that so many of Cavafy's poems have textual, rather than demonstrably autobiographical, sources, I think it at least possible that the rent boys he sometimes describes may not be drawn from life.

To return to Alexandrian clerks: in "Ρωτούσε για την ποιότητα" (another poem of 1930), the clerk with an 'insignificant job' ("θέση ασήμαντη") is earning a pitiful 8 Egyptian pounds per month, "με τυχερά", which Keeley and Sherrard translate as "with bonuses", but which I suspect may mean "with gambling winnings". It is surely not without relevance, here, that Cavafy's own starting salary, in 1892, was only 7 pounds per month (although by the time he retired in 1922, this had risen to £50). Once again, the defining characteristics of the impoverished office-worker in the poem are youth and beauty.

All these poems were written after Cavafy had retired, and show a marked sympathy for the underpaid, over-worked pen-pushers with such limited freedom to exploit their youth, taste for beautiful things and sexual potential. This sympathy, however, is that of an observer, and very definitely not a social equal.

Cavafy's patrician attitude to work finds a parallel in his refusal to sell his poetry for money. Acceptable supplementary sources of income for the gentleman include gambling and playing the stock-market, both activities that require some money in the pocket or in the bank. An ordinary clerk, as opposed to a gentleman clerk, can gamble but not invest; thus selling sexual favours replaces buying shares in this humbler scheme of things. Furthermore, a gentleman clerk who writes poetry does so at his own expense; he does not

prostitute his art by offering it for sale. Apart from the odd piece of filched office paper, Cavafy bore all the expenses of materials and printing himself.

In the context of art that is not for sale, I would like to turn now to the poem, "Του Μαγαζιού". It has been suggested, not entirely convincingly, that "Του Μαγαζιού", which refers to two kinds of jewels, the beautiful, secret artificial flowers that the jeweller hides in his safe, and the "περίφημα στολίδια" that he sells, correspond to Cavafy's published and unpublished poems, including the handful of love-poems kept in the file labelled "Πάθη". I find it a little hard to believe that Cavafy would have dismissed any (or all) of the recognized or canonical poems as "περίφημα στολίδια", of less value than the unpublished poems. It has crossed my mind, however, that the exceptional pride Cavafy took in his transactional writings, drafting and keeping copies of personal as well as work-related letters, and his cultivated handwriting which was, after all, basically what he sold to his employers, may correspond in some sense to the marketable products 'of the shop'. Much of Cavafy's work, in the pre-technological and rather far from paperless office, consisted of hand-copying official documents

The recently-published letters between Cavafy and E. M. Forster contain the only instance I have come across of the sale of a poem by Cavafy in the poet's lifetime. I think the fact that no response to the letter I am about to quote has been preserved may indicate Cavafy's polite lack of interest. It is also worth mentioning that, according to his biographers, Forster lost more than one friend by trying to foist money on them. Fortunately, if Cavafy was at all insulted, he seems to have refrained from saying so.

1<sup>st</sup> August 1925.

My dear Cavafy,

Many thanks for your letter of July 10<sup>th</sup>. I must write to Valassopoulo too. After going through his translation of 'Darius' with Furness, I submitted it to 'The Nation', and it has been accepted with enthusiasm and by return of post! They offer £3 / 3 / 0, to which I have said that you agree – I hope I am right in so saying – and have told them to send you the cheque direct. I don't know when the

poems will appear. Here, you see, is a little source of income! Do cultivate it. Do select another poem (preferably a historical one) and get V[alassopoulo] to translate it at once. It is important to keep your name before the public, now that interest has been aroused.

Yours ever,  
E.M. Forster.

I do not know whether Cavafy ever received the cheque, or any others like it, but as you can see, payment was solicited by a well-meaning friend, and not sought by the poet.

I would like to make a couple more points about Cavafy's finances. In order to secure his fairly lowly position in the civil service, it appears that Cavafy first accepted unpaid work there, possibly as a kind of traineeship, in 1889. This was apparently common practice at the time (and still continues in Modern Egypt, where it is not uncommon to pay for the privilege of a job). By then, he already had some work on the stock exchange, through his brother Aristides. This work continued until Aristides died, in 1902, and helps to explain why Cavafy's savings and investments appear to exceed his earnings in the Irrigation Office for the whole of this period. During his mother's lifetime, Cavafy received a monthly allowance from her of about £3; when she died, his brothers John and Alexander took over the payments, which increased to £4 and then £5, but stopped in 1905, when Alexander died. Thus it was not until 1905 that Cavafy, then aged 42, assumed full financial responsibility for himself - and this is the year in which he wrote "Η Σατραπεία".

Finally, it is significant that Cavafy's thirty-year part-time working life in the civil service, together with his other sources of income, enabled him to take early retirement, so that from 1922 until his death in 1933, he was a full-time poet. And this is the occupation entered in his last passport: poet.

Since Cavafy worked all day (or at least all morning) with documents, one might have expected to find references to paper or papers (χαρτί - χαρτιά) in the poems, instead of which we find playing cards (χαρτιά). This is not altogether irrelevant: cards are used to supplement incomes, and Cavafy himself indulged in a little

gentlemanly gambling, keeping precise records of his winnings and losses. He even devised and noted down a set of rules for himself, under the title, "R[ule]s", beginning, "Never play when I have an *ennui* on my mind. I do not bestow enough attention, and I lose invariably". So we should not be surprised to find the unemployed hero of "Days of 1908", which is incidentally the last poem in Cavafy's last (unfinished) collection, making a living from cards, having turned down a lowly job in a "χαρτοπολείο" (paper-seller's), with the insulting salary of three pounds per month. Again, 'paper-seller's' does not sound like a randomly-selected shop. Perhaps there is even a submerged pun here on making money from cards as opposed to paper (χαρτιά - χαρτί).

By far the most tantalising reference to "χαρτιά", however, comes in one of the poems Cavafy was working on at the time of his death. This poem, published in its various drafts in *Ατελή Ποιήματα*, is called "Εγκλημα" ("Crime"), and reads almost like a scenario for a crime thriller. I believe that this may not be unconnected with the fact that Cavafy was reading detective fiction during his last year, and almost certainly not for the first time.

"Εγκλημα" is about a gang of thieves. These characters, unlike the other poor and slightly seedy youths of the completed, published poems, belong well and truly to the criminal underworld. Their ring-leader has just committed aggravated burglary, and doled out some of the loot to them. By common consent, he keeps the lion's share. The actual amount (£300) is mentioned, and clearly intended to be impressive. The thieves are now holding a counsel of war: they have to find a way of getting the ring-leader to a place of safety. Once they have agreed a plan, the ring-leader and the poem's speaker are left alone together. They are young lovers. The poem now appears to be reaching a typical Cavafian conclusion: this is to be their final night together. But the poem then continues for another four lines, set out as a separate verse-paragraph:

Μες στα χαρτιά ενός ποιητή βρέθηκε αυτό.  
Έχει και μια χρονολογία, μα δυσανάγνωστη.  
Το ένα μόλις φαίνεται μετά εννιά, μετά  
ένα ο αριθμός ο τέταρτος μοιάζει εννιά

This is the only reference that I have come across in Cavafy's poetry to actual papers, and it is a very poignant one. The poem was indeed found among a poet's papers, and the closing lines, in which the word "αυτό" can have no other referent than the poem itself, read like a post-modern joke from beyond the grave: *this* was found among a poet's papers.

Let us turn now to the real "poet's papers", and what Cavafy did with them. Among these papers are a set of little hand-made paper folders that contain the drafts of the 30 poems he was still working on at the time of his death, including "Εγκλημα". Although he had earlier joked about "125 voices" telling him he could have written history, when Cavafy stated, on his deathbed, that he had 25 poems still left to write, he was speaking almost literally. The 30 folders, described and photographed by Lavagnini for her masterly edition of Cavafy's "Ατέλη Ποιήματα", also contain Cavafy's notes on sources. Each folder is clearly labelled with the title of the poem it contains, and all but two are dated. This appears to be typical of the orderly, even meticulous, way in which Cavafy stored his work.

Finished but unpublished work was placed in clearly-labelled folders. One such folder, marked "Poems Written in Katharevousa", contained early, completed poems Cavafy was hoping to rework in more Demotic language. Another, marked "Πάθη" (Passions), contained manuscript fair copies from a thematic sequence that Cavafy decided to refrain from publishing during his lifetime. This folder is accompanied by a running list, made while Cavafy was working on the poems, as can be seen from a published facsimile, which clearly shows crossings-out and corrections. The "Πάθη" poems were published by George Savidis in "Ανέκδοτα Ποιήματα", in chronological, not thematic, order.

Certain other manuscripts are individually tagged with labels reading, "Not for publication but may remain here". It is not clear whether this group of manuscripts was originally found in a separate folder, but it seems quite likely that the word 'here' actually refers to such a folder, now lost.

Cavafy's papers include extensive catalogues recording dates of composition and rewriting of his poems. These records span the years 1891-1925, that is, most of Cavafy's creative life, but come to be replaced, between 1925 and the poet's death in 1933, by a more rough-and-ready running list, included by Lavagnini with the unfinished poems, to which it clearly refers. Cavafy also left behind full lists of the recipients of his printed collections, which even include family members living in the same house as him at the time. Other evidence, in the form of letters, shows just how carefully he controlled the dissemination of his poetry.

In all this cataloguing, labelling and filing, one clearly sees the civil servant at work. More telling still are the reports Cavafy wrote about his poems, some of which even begin with the words, "The position regarding this poem is as follows..." . These reports were planned in advance, as part of what he called an 'Emendatory Work'. Here is his description, written in 1903, after 14 years as a civil servant, of how he intended to carry out evaluations and emendations of his poems to date:

My method of procedure [...] may be either by taking up the poems one by one and settling them at once, - following the lists and ticking each on the list as it is finished, or effacing it if vowed to destruction; or by considering them first attentively, reporting on them, making a batch of the reports, and afterwards working on them in the sequence of the batch: that is the method of procedure of the Emendatory Work.

In this extended, untitled document, first published by Perides, who gave it the title "Ars Poetica", in 1963, the poet's voice is entirely subsumed in that of the civil servant.

I have touched on a few of the ways in which Cavafy's working life may have influenced his writing life, providing him not just with subject-matter for a handful of poems, and occasionally the paper to write them on, but also with a methodology for systematically preparing and preserving his own poetic records. And so, for all his carping about having to go out and earn a living, Cavafy seems, in

fact, to have derived considerable, if unexpected, benefits from his years in the Third Circle of Irrigation.