

## Denying Julian

*Cavafy's Julian Poems*

By Curt Hopkins

### Introduction

I do not like analyses in a short story or a novel. I prefer the dry description of events, unadorned, without comments. That is why I much like description of manners . . . This way I can draw conclusions on my own. The short story or the novel should permit us to draw our own conclusions. — Constantine P. Cavafy

I do not object to analysis to the extent the modern Greek poet Cavafy did. What I do object to is the all-too-common phenomenon of an academic or a radio critic or a newspaper book reviewer telling me what a poet was *thinking*.

This kind of behavior is particularly objectionable because the poet in question is invariably long dead and therefore thoroughly incapable of defending himself or herself from victimization at the hands of these table-tapping literary mediums. So, as I map out my journey to understand the “Julian poems,” I will insult neither your intelligence nor their author’s memory by telling you what Cavafy was *thinking*.

## **The facts are these**

Between 1896 and 1933, the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote 12 poems about the Roman emperor Julian, known as the Apostate. That is the *what* of the matter and the *what* is easy enough. It is the *so what* that demands something more.

It is my belief, after living with the poems for some time, that the Julian poems are the chronicle of both abandonment and acceptance. Cavafy denies Julian, with his promises, in order to accept the present. He accepts the present because that is where all pleasure is found, even the pleasure he takes in regarding loss. To accept the present is to accept the Cavafy that is and value him over the Cavafy that might have or “should” have been.

## **The promise of paganism**

At first blush, the choice of Julian, the emperor raised Christian who turns back to the worship of the pagan gods, seems to the modern mind as a choice between the limitations of Christianity and the freedom of the pre-Christian world. Cavafy was a homosexual and the Christian world, arguably in scripture and certainly in mores, condemned the homosexuality he only seemed to come to terms with in middle-age, before the composition of all but one of the Julian poems.

And, indeed, as G.W. Bowersock notes in his essay, "The Julian Poems of C.P. Cavafy," Cavafy did adore Greek paganism.

But a closer look at Julian shows us a pagan more moralistic, mirthless and rigid than all but the worst of the Church leaders of Cavafy's time; not a pagan, a *theurg*, whose ecstasy is replaced, as cellulose with minerals in a piece of petrified wood, with philosophy. To choose Julian would not be to choose a Neronian world of sensual abandonment, a Satiricon (neither of Petronius nor Fellini), but to choose a ruin. Julian is Rome with the pain stripped off, a theoretical Rome with the untidy elements, those that made it so recognizably human, eliminated.

“(L)ike Julian, Cavafy longs for the return of the ancients, of their pleasure,” said another modern Greek poet, George Seferis, a one-time acolyte of the older poet, in his journals. “But not like that puritan who is dedicated to an ideological cause.” In other words, not like Julian.

Regarding Antioch, the location or subject of a third of the Julian poems, Bowersock says, “The city was a profoundly important symbol for him: its people were immoral, but their life was delectable. And they were Christian.” It was, that is, a Greek city. There was no need to go back to the pagan world to reclaim the Greek; the Greek was the immortal part, the gods were just an excuse for statuary.

All 12 of the “Julian poems” are about not just Julian, but Christianity. Cavafy holds up in one hand a return to paganism, via Julian, and in the other, Christianity itself, in terms of the emperor's encounters with it. The paganism is consistently found wanting.

Christianity, for all its contradictions, contains its own salvation. So, to choose Julian would also sacrifice those salvational elements as they related to his own life: the tools of self-awareness and adjustment, of acceptance and worship, which Cavafy, as a devoted Christian and a homosexual, used to resolve his own internal contradictions, or at least to live with them.

It is my belief that by denying Julian in these poems, Cavafy is choosing the living present over the irretrievable past; the modern paint, cheap and tacky as it is, over the ruins of marble. He is choosing Christianity with all its contradictions but with a pulse, over a perfect, and perfectly dead, past, where sensuality is theoretical abundant, but practically impossible. Julian is a symbol for the futility of revisiting the past with a concretizing mission. The past is for remembering, for voluptuous encounter with loss.

Cavafy's language is not the Greek of the Golden Age, but a mix of the artificial, literary "purist" Greek mixed with the "demotic," the speech of the street. His tongue was to classical Greek what Antioch was to classical Greece: a vital, effective mess; a mix of the sacred and the profane, the antique and the undeniably contemporary. Alive.

If his language were not Homer's, why should his life be?

## **The irreclaimable past**

Part of Cavafy's acceptance of the present is historical, as well as personal. Until the ascendancy of Rome, the Greek city-state was the reigning "fact on the ground." After that, the Alexandrian empire and its offspring states controlled the Mediterranean. Until the ascendancy of Rome, Greek polities, in their various incarnations, were in a very real way, relevant.

Coupled to that political power was an unprecedented cultural one. Even through the time of Roman rule, Hellenism was the reigning culture. Architecture, sculpture, poetry, drama and rhetoric were all recognized and valued expressions of the Greek genius, worthy of emulation.

But once the descendants of Alexander were brought into Rome's orbit, the political power of Greece was broken. Although the power of Greek culture endured, it did so without the very real underpinnings of gold and swords. Especially swords. The city-state, that building block of the Greek nation, became in large part the irrelevant backwater, the pleasure pen, the castrato singing for the pleasure of whole men.

Cavafy lived and created knowing that the power that made him possible would never belong to Greece again. He wrote in a language loved by many but respected by few.

W.H. Auden, in his preface to Dalven's translations, says of Cavafy, "His Panhellenic world is politically powerless, and in it, therefore, politics are regarded with cynical amusement." He then asks, "Will the feeling (of patriotism) survive if that nation should become poor and of no political account and aware, also, that its decline is final, that there is no hope for the return of its former glory?"

One Greek academic, Prof. Vassilios Lambropoulos, said to me, "This kind of a claim is not one a Greek poet would make." Manuel Savidis told me he believed Cavafy's sense of Greek political realities extended much further than the end of the Alexandrian kingdoms.

Cavafy was a Constantinopolitan Greek by descent and my guess is that he considered himself to be the true heir of the Greek world. This world had nothing to do with classical Greece: it was the evolution of the Roman Empire into Byzantium.

Perhaps in the same way that Christian Antioch was as Greek a city as pagan Athens, Cavafy's politically circumscribed Greece was no less itself than when the ships of the Athenian Empire ruled the Aegean.

But if so, why in his poems does Cavafy visit and revisit the moments that punctuate the end of Greek political power? In poems like "In a Township of Asia Minor" he contrasts city-states against the power of Rome. In "Of Demetrius Soter, 162-150 B.C." he bewails the loss of political power. "This Syria — scarcely looks like his own country." And in

“Envoys from Alexandria,” he announces, resigned, “The oracle was pronounced in Rome; the division took place there.”

If he did believe that Greek political relevance had not ended with Rome, it is difficult to understand why he would put so much poetic capital into an exploration of its apparent ending.

In her book on the city, Alexandria Still, Jane Lagoudis Pinchin noted that, “Along with an attention to forms and subjects from the classical past, Ptolemaic Alexandria developed a reaction against the idealization of the classical period.” Perhaps Cavafy was also influenced by his city’s poetic attitude to ancient Greece.

In the Julian poems, the emperor is determined to resurrect the religion of the classical gods after the advent of official Christianity, and is determined to fail in doing so. By denying Julian his support, Cavafy seems to be choosing, again, the diminished, but authentic and alive, present of Greece, rather than a sterile dream of an irreclaimable past.

Cavafy’s personal poems are full of acceptance of the losses of the personal past. They seem almost to glory in it. “An echo of the days of pleasure, / an echo of the days drew near me...” and “Faces of love, exactly as my poetry / desired them...”

Cavafy’s loves, as described in his poetry, parallel the life of his nation. He does not try to arrest the loves of his life, to petrify them so they may be possessed forever. And if he

would not do that to something so close to him, as close to him quite literally as his skin, why would he do the same to an abstraction, however loved? Why would he side with the fantasists who would rebirth the dead gods, who would wave the flag of a dead state?

You see, of the loves, he has the memories, and of the state, he has the language.

Language is many things. But one of them is memory, the memories of a people, the implicit history of a thousand thousand histories.

But more to the point, I think, is the fact that a thing's continued survival does not always take the form it did before. As much as he may recoil from the "souls of old men" in "bodies, wasted and aged," they nevertheless inhere the imprints of a thousand touches and the memories of a thousand kisses. His own, in fact. By the same token, as noted before, Antioch is Greece in a way a resurrected pagan state never could be. It carries the spirit, as the street does the real language of Homer. It is "immoral to a point — and possibly to a great degree" but it is "much talked about."

The present is a foreign country. It is a place where we are constantly on the verge of having our visas revoked. Cavafy spent three decades as an employee of the Egyptian Ministry of Irrigation. Due to being a Greek, not an Egyptian, his entire work life was as a provision employee. But he chose not to live in Greece, as defined politically on a map, nor to become an Egyptian citizen. Alexandria, Egypt, was home, was the Greece of the present, where things were a mess, inelegant but alive.



The past, on the other hand, was perfect. In the past, everyone was eternally alive and long dead. No one was making the painful transition from the one to the other, leaving in their wake grieving family and lovers and friends. As much as the past is a consolation, and a fertile field to gather the ideas that make poetry, you can not live there. You can live only in the present. And the present is a foreign country.

### **Neither fish nor fowl**

In “Julian at the Mysteries,” Cavafy outlines the emperor’s fantasy or hallucination of a visit to the pagan underworld, based on a possible, though not proven, historical event, that of Julian’s initiation into the mystery of Eleusis.

In this visit Julian suddenly sees “spiritual forms emerging / before him with glories and large lights.” In “an instinct of his devout years” he crosses himself and the figures recede. When he remarks on the power of the gesture, “(t)he Greeks looked furtively at each other” and scoffed.

Only when they saw you making  
the basest boorish sign  
their noble nature was disgusted  
and they went away scorning you.

This poem with its ““You may say such things if you like to the Bishop of Nicomedia / and you may say them to his priests” mirrors that of a later poem, “Julian Seeing

Indifference.”

“(H)e could write to the High Priest of Galatia to his heart’s content, / or to others such as these.”

The picture of Julian in these poems is of a “jack of all trades, master of none,” of a man “neither fish nor fowl,” not a Christian anymore, and not a real pagan. A hybrid or half-breed accepted by neither side. It further emphasizes the way the past turns mythological. A living present can be a contradiction, but a belabored past becomes a griffon or a mermaid, something rank and unnatural and dangerous.

In the untitled, unpublished poem known as “First Matthew, first Luke,” Cavafy underscores this beauty and reality of the present. In it, a young, well-off man is awaiting the visit of a friend. It is a matter-of-fact scene in which any of us might easily replace the young man with ourselves. In it, the young man picks up a book to kill time while he is waiting for this friend to arrive. It is an argument by a sophist against Christianity, supporting Julian’s edict against the teaching of the Greek classics by Christians.

The tone is dismissive. The sophist does not even warrant a name, nor does his book, which the young man had “idly chosen.” In the face of the simple joy of waiting for a friend in the present, Julian’s sententious edict and his wheezing, pompous defender, pale. At the end, unthreatened and at ease, this presumed Christian “only smiled.”

The only other overtly philosophical poem in the series contains the same dismissive tone. In “Understood Not,” the speaker snorts, “As if the most ludicrous man / had annihilated us, with his ‘I condemned.’” Julian could not in the end, condemn. A condemnation needs the power of the present. But Cavafy’s speakers could, and did, though not without a little pity latent in the interstices.

One of Julian’s cardinal flaws, in Cavafy’s portraits of the man, seems to be his apprehension of the nature of the present. The past is a concept, but the present is a physicality. The only non-mental component of the past is where it, in fact, remains in the present. When, “In the Suburbs of Antioch,” the Christians are forced to disinter the martyr Babylas from the environs of a temple of Apollo, “truly the temple showed beautiful improvement.” It burns to the ground. Tear the present out of the past at your peril.

### **Salvation, acceptance, salvation**

Cavafy struggled to accept both his sexuality and his faith. When he finally did so, he was over 50 years old. Acceptance came late to the poet and it might be this struggle, and his aloneness in it, that led him to his affection for the early figures of the church. One such figure was Athanasius, the principle figure in another unpublished poem, called after the main figure in it.

Athanasius and two companions are fleeing on a rickety craft up the Nile, attempting to

avoid a pursuing authority. Julian had enacted laws that effected the practice of Christianity, most of which were less about destroying the religion outright than rendering it a harmless cipher in the Roman religious plurality he was attempting to resurrect. However, benignity was not always the case, as the pursuit of Athanasius indicates. (Julian's representatives were not chasing the man to engage him in reasoned discourse, it can be presumed.) The poem makes it seem unlikely that he and his companions would succeed in their flight. But, as Athanasius prayed, his companions supernaturally felt the death of Julian.

Where was the salvation? Although it worked out for Athanasius, it seems to be less the depiction of a miracle than an illustration of Athanasius's acceptance, both of his likely fate, and his obligation to fight that fate in the face of certain failure. That moral posture toward the unlikelihood of success seems to be the fulcrum of Athanasius's salvation. Perhaps in this same way Cavafy accepted the losses of his own life, of life in general, and the demands of both his faith and his sexuality, as well as of the historical changes of the world.

Salvation is stressed a number of times in the Julian poems. In another unpublished poem, "Julian's Rescue," the emperor's later injunction, "Let there be oblivion of that darkness" in contrast to his childhood history. When the emperor was six years old he was saved from the slaughter of the relatives of the deceased emperor Constantine, who had made Christianity "official," by Christian monks. Cavafy notes, always scrupulously honest, that this was a Christian story, but he defends it as not necessarily less true

because of that. After all, one of the ingrained impulses of a Christianity truly lived is that of the very non-classical quality of empathy.

With one fell swoop, “Let there be oblivion of that darkness,” Cavafy paints a picture of a man turning from that foundational element of his upbringing and coming out the poorer for it in that *very* classical value, his honor.

### **Ridicule**

Cavafy’s picture of Julian’s experiment of historical resurrection is not one that ridicules it from afar. It is also one that ridicules it close up and contemporaneously. “Julian Seeing Indifference” is one of the poems in the series that paints the emperor’s undertaking as frankly embarrassing to the people of his time. Julian’s, the people say, was “a new church, / as ridiculous in conception as in application.” Pull the gods from their heaven, says the comedian. If they can be laughed at, they *deserve* to be laughed at. In Cavafy’s poems, in both the poet’s and the emperor’s presents, Julian, and his gods, are laughed at.

His honor is further impugned in “Julian in Nicomedia,” a poem about the emperor as a youth. His praises for the Greeks and enthusiasm for their gods is considered “aimless” and, after a spell of crypto-proselytizing, he is sent back to the pulpit to read Scripture. Not just ridiculous, but hypocritical and weak as well, this Julian.

“Nicomedia” is tied to “Indifference” by its appositive phrasing. It is a bit of a risk, attempting to analyze the prosody of a poet read in translation.. But Cavafy writes a formally simple poetry, usually in verse, often rhymed. He never uses metaphor, instead, like the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, employing more easily-translatable semantic organizing principles, like repetition, parallelism and appositive phrasing. So, the “Aimless and perilous things. / The praises for the ideals of the Greeks” of “Nicomedia” puts one very much in mind of the “a system of a new church / as ridiculous in conception as in application.”

## *I*

The unpublished poem “Hunc deorum templis” recounts the story from the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus of a blind woman’s pronouncement on Julian’s fate as he enters the city of Vienne in southern Gaul.

“Then an old woman, who had lost her sight, on inquiring who had entered and learning that it was the Caesar Julian, cried out *that he would repair the temples of the gods.*”

The Latin phrase from which Cavafy drew the title of this poem is actually “hunc deorum templa reparaturum.” But in manuscript he persisted all but once in using this title.

“Hunc decorum templis” is one of the few of the Julian poems in which the implicit *I* of the poems becomes explicit. This *I* questions the old woman. Did she make her statement

in fear that Julian would do as she saw, or in delight at the prospect. He hopes the former, but believes the latter, and calls her a “wretch” for it. Using the first-person singular, he says, “did you speak it with pain, / as I would like to think, or did you say it — you wretch — with joy?”

It does not seem a terribly brave leap to say in return that the *I* of the poems in this poem reflects the *I* of the author of the poems. Why else use it? That is not to suggest it was first person singular-aforethought. Rather, that the emotion of the speaker resonated so strongly with the poet that his *I* and the speaker’s *I* merged.

There is only one other place in the Julian poems where the investment of the poet is as evident, though the pronoun *I* is not employed. That is in the poem “Pegasius, the bishop.” This episode, like “Nicomedia,” treats Julian’s crypto-paganism prior to his becoming emperor. But unlike that poem, the young Julian finds, as the two walk around the temple of Athena, a like-minded soul, in Pegasius. But they must, still, take care not to be obvious.

They looked upon the statues with desire and with tenderness —  
But they conversed tentatively,  
With innuendoes, in *double-entendres*,  
With phrases full of protection  
For they were unsure of each other  
And feared exposure

In the “hedonistic” poems of sensuality and temporary relationships, Cavafy uses similar language. “The visions of your loving. / Set them, half hidden, in your phrases” the poet says to himself. In “He Asked About the Quality,” the poet uses similar language.

He asked about the quality of the handkerchiefs,  
and what they cost, in a choked voice  
almost faded by longing.  
and the answers came in the same vein,  
distracted, in a low voice,  
containing a latent consent.

In “Pegasus” it is almost possible to see Cavafy’s compassion for Julian’s fear and uncertainty. But the payoff to each scenario is different, and Cavafy’s choice, his belief in which subterfuge produces a more beautiful result, seems clear; the one he denied, the other embraced.

### **A conclusion, like all conclusions artificial**

Cavafy is not a poet of the body, he is a poet of the indentation left in the mattress that the body leaves behind. His so-called “hedonistic” poems do not describe the bodies of lovers, but caress the surfaces of loss those bodies produce. To accept Julian would be to deny loss, which, in Cavafy’s poems seems less an idea than a palpable thing. And to deny loss would be to deny the actuality of the present in which those losses exist and can be sensually regarded. To accept Julian is to deny the present as it is, whose flower is life



and whose fruit is loss.

As I noted at the beginning, Cavafy said that he preferred stories without analysis. Just present the people, say where they go and what they do and with whom they do it.

Explanation runs up against a desire to change. “Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements...from the whole work,” said the late American critic Susan Sontag. It is to reduce a living complexity to a simple set. It is to reduce something living, untidy and present, to a perfection, with all its messiness cleaned up. It is to exchange the living for the dead.

In simpler language, the actual present, with its manifold apparent flaws, including loss, including judgments, is the only possible present. To receive its gifts, salvation and the senses, you must accept its transitory nature, embrace it, which Cavafy does. He is old. He has left lovers in the past. But love, and loss, are his current companions, companions that Julian would take away and replace with mere ideas.

So Cavafy, I think with some regret, denies Julian. And so should we all.

Author Curt Hopkins, who lives in Eugene, Oregon, has published poetry and prose in NYC's Good Foot magazine, New Orleans' Exquisite Corpse, SPSM&H, Asian American Times, Timberline, Bluelawn, DADA, Catalyst, Emergency Horse, Big Talk and elsewhere. His plays have been produced at the New City New Playwrights Festival, Northwest Playwrights Festival, The Marsh, Doc's Clock and other venues. As a journalist, he has written for Newsweek, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Bay Guardian, Reuters, National Post and others. He is a founding member of the Big Time Poetry Theatre, a West Coast U.S. performance group, and the Committee to Protect Bloggers.