

Ricks, David

## From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites : Cavafy's debt to Tennyson

*Neograeca Bohemica*. 2010, vol. 10, iss. [1], pp. 21-33

ISBN 978-80-260-3414-8

ISSN 1803-6414

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/142347>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson

DAVID RICKS

With the single exception of Browning, no modern poet overshadowed Cavafy as Tennyson did, and we can document this relationship with unusual clarity and richness, because we possess not just the relevant poems of Cavafy but some critical comments written in parallel. It is noteworthy, however, that neither of the two poems of Cavafy most obviously and tensely indebted to Tennyson was included in his collected poems, and we shall explore the implications of this in some detail.

For the young Cavafy, Tennyson was the Poet Laureate of the colonial power and of the land of his, however scratchy, education; but he was also a poet who had devoted his copious energies to two strands which would preoccupy Cavafy. The first was his recourse to the *Odyssey* myth, which would stimulate Cavafy to 'Ithaca', his best-known poem; the second was an attempt in 'St Simeon Stylites' to capture the spirit of (certainly medieval, and perhaps all) Christianity, against which Cavafy, late in his career, wrote a quiet but firm riposte in his 'Simeon'.

Cavafy's rejected poem, 'Second Odyssey' (1894, but only published a century later) both expresses a debt to Tennyson (who had died in 1892) in the epigraph and is evidently under its thrall – yet it can help us reach a much better understanding of the celebrated 'Ithaca'.

### *Second Odyssey*

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI  
Tennyson, 'Ulysses'

*A second Odyssey, a great one,  
and greater than the first, perhaps. And yet, alas,  
without a Homer, without hexameters.*

*Small it was, his ancestral home,  
small, his ancestral town,  
and that whole Ithaca of his was small.*

*Telemachus' devotion, the fidelity  
of Penelope, his father's venerable age,  
his old friends, a devoted*

David Ricks

*populace's love,  
the happy rest of home  
entered as rays of joy  
the heart of the seafarer.*

*And then, as rays do, set.*

*A thirst*

*awoke within him for the sea.  
He came to hate the air on land.  
His sleep at night was troubled  
by visions of Hesperia.  
Nostalgia seized him  
for journeys, and for morning  
landings at harbours which,  
with what joy, you reach for the first time.*

*Telemachus' devotion, the fidelity  
of Penelope, his father's venerable age,  
his old friends, a devoted  
populace's love,  
and peace and rest  
at home – he tired of them.*

*And he left.*

*When Ithaca's shores  
grew faint before his eyes  
and he set his course with full sail for the sunset,  
for the Iberians, for the Pillars of Hercules –  
far from any Achaean sea –  
he felt he lived once more, that  
he had cast aside the weary bonds  
of known domestic things.  
And his venturesome heart  
was coldly gladdened, void of love.*

In puzzling out (as Joyce was to soon to do) just how to produce a modern Odysseus, Cavafy could not ignore the two most powerful post-Homeric guises of the hero to that date, Dante's and Tennyson's. His excogitations ran in parallel tracks: first, in a never-published journalistic essay, to bring to the Greek reader's attention the versions by Dante and Tennyson of a myth they are gripped by; and, more searchingly, in an attempt to insert

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

his own poetic re-reading of the myth in between their versions and that of Homer – again, in a text he never published.

It's important to stress that, though Cavafy has nothing really new to say about Dante's telling of Ulysses' last voyage in *Inferno XXVI*, the mention of the patriarch Dante is not merely camouflage for a parricidal attack on the metropolitan father Tennyson – as we shall see. At the same time, Cavafy cannot be numbered among those many Modernists for whom Dante assumed a central place; and it is perhaps symptomatic that both of his manifest allusions to the Florentine, this poem and 'Che fece . . . il gran rifiuto' come relatively early in the *Divine Comedy*, allowing the inference that he never got as far with the work as Seferis later did. At any rate, Cavafy praises Dante's account in rather conventional terms, and doesn't seem to get down to business until he comments on Tennyson:

*To the English poet lesser praise is due, since he had the primary material at his disposal. But he has worked on the latter as an experienced craftsman. Tennyson's Odysseus is more sympathetic than Dante's Odysseus. He is more human in Tennyson's version; in Dante he is more heroic.*

The form and idiom of Cavafy's poem, in iambic hendecasyllables, might unkindly be called Parnassian, in the sense that Hopkins used it of middle-of-the road Tennyson; might even be called sub-Tennysonian (or indeed sub-Dantean). But there is more to it in that, as we shall see: within the slightly hollow classicism of the poem there is a real effort to get to grips with the material. That effort, however, is hampered by a grievous, though easily remediable, strategic failure in the poem's setting. Like 'King Claudius' from the same period, the poem begins with a gauche and needless opening section, bathetic in itself and in fact blurring the poem's true engagement with the theme, which is not without shrewdness. There is no need to lament the fact that Homer does not narrate Odysseus' last journey, and that as a consequence no authentically Greek version of the story thus exists. This is partly because the anticipation of the journey, following Tiresias' prophecy in Book XI, is richly present in the *Odyssey*; it is also because Cavafy does not in fact react against the Western versions of Ulysses by re-Hellenizing him to any significant extent – let alone by, as a truly though dottily revisionist account might do, producing a Greek poem, in dactylic hexameters, which would rebut the negative aspects of Ulysses as seen by tradition in the West.

By the same token, the mention of Dante and Tennyson in the epigraph is utterly Cavafy's mature technique, where none of the moderns he engages with are ever mentioned by name. The aide-mémoire might be needed by the middlebrow audience for Cavafy's never-published article on the topic, but not by that fit audience though few to which his poetry aspired: the audience, say, for 'Simeon', had it been published. It is easy for a critic seeking to salvage the poem to remove the bibliographical reference. Equally easy is the removal of the opening section, and once it is removed, the poem becomes a quite different poem, with its bitterly abrupt beginning: 'Small it was, his ancestral home'. We are taken directly into

the mind of Odysseus, and the whole of the rest of the poem can be read as free indirect speech, not a narrative of his feelings from an outside perspective. Just as we do in 'King Claudius's radical rewriting of *Hamlet*, we experience this speaker from the inside.

This shift to the third person contains the germ of what it is – an uneven but in some ways powerful performance with some sharply intelligent ingredients. Dante's Ulysses addresses the visitor to Hell with an undiminished mastery of narrative that leaves the hearer struck with awe, not least through the embedded set-piece speech to the companions which – out of context – is utterly noble and shows that wrestling with incompatible ideas which is of abiding interest to Cavafy. Tennyson's Ulysses too is still the possessor of all the rhetorical power he once boasted, even if the audience of mariners is doubtless imaginary, and his prospects of really departing as unlikely as a Lear's dreams of regaining his kingdom. Against both models which foreground nobility, Cavafy distinguishes his Odysseus for a jaded coolness of temper. It is ennui, not heroism, that drives him: he voices no recollections of the companionship shared in the Trojan War – or of any companionship – and he seeks, not to transgress the will of his Maker, or to sink his weary soul into oblivion, but simply to slip the wearisome bonds of the domestic by his last existentialist voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The geographical reference is one of the three elements that ties the poem to Dante as well as to Tennyson, and for Cavafy it derives its significance only when related to the earlier lines, 'His sleep at night was troubled/by visions of Hesperia.' The words evoke a sense painfully present in Cavafy's own emulous mind: how can a modern Greek poem lay claim to the Homeric heritage in the face of the power of Dante the classic and Tennyson the recently dead? Such a tension is, of course, present, in the converse form, even in Canto XXVI, where Virgil undertakes to address Ulysses and Diomedes on Dante's behalf, 'for perhaps, since they were Greeks, they would disdain thy speech'. Without Greek, Dante yet conjures up a Ulysses whose inherited qualities of evil, as widely present in the western tradition, are embraced by something larger.

The other Dantean substratum in 'Second Odyssey' is the lines about the reunion with son, father, and wife, which, with a little reordering, closely track *Inferno* 26.94ff: 'ne la dolcezza di figlio, ne la pieta/del vecchio padre, ne 'l debito amore/lo qual dovea Penelope far lieta' ('not fondness for a son nor duty to an aged father, nor the love I owed Penelope which should have gladdened her'). It could be argued, in keeping with Cavafy's wider perspective, that the folding of Penelope between son and father reduces her significance in much the way that her sole appearance in 'Ulysses' is the dismissive 'matched with an aged wife'. But Cavafy also draws out the significance of Dante's Ulysses' easily unnoticed suggestion of Penelope's discontent so as to transfer to his Odysseus that same rapid setting of the sun of optimism. Furthermore, the presence in Dante and Cavafy of the Laertes evidently dead in the Tennyson's version contributes to the sense that 'Second Odyssey' is a poem about middle age, not old age, and makes its element of impatience the more visible. What is, however, particularly subtle about Cavafy's taking up of Dante's lines is the fact that he then repeats them later, generating at once a deep sense of ennui

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

and a subtle parody of Homeric formulas which suggests the limitations of such formulas and the way of life they stand for as something to live by.

And we have finally that clue in Dante about the way in which Ulysses' thirst for knowledge of the world is still unslaked, that world embracing 'e delli vizi umani e del valore'. The mention of vices cuts against and undermines the noble speech made to the companions. (And it is an element, of course,

entirely absent from Tennyson, where, in addition, Circe is not mentioned.) It may be that it is by the thread of those words of unwitting self-condemnation (whose implications are not spelled out) that Dante's conviction of the hero's damnation hangs. (The formal cue for Ulysses' plight, his treacherous stratagem of the Wooden Horse, has been occluded from the reader's mind by this point through the sheer force of Ulysses' own narrative.) What Cavafy's Odysseus remembers with nostalgia, by contrast, is not have 'drunk delight of battle with his peers' but the delight of arriving in new ports.

I have argued that 'Second Odyssey' would be a considerable poem were the epigraph and opening lines removed: it would cunningly embrace certain elements in Dante and Tennyson (and Homer behind them; which is true too of Tennyson's Greek-saturated diction), but astutely reject others to produce a quintessentially modern Ulysses whose core motivation is post-Baudelairean *ennui*. Why, then – or rather how? – did Cavafy reject this potentially excellent poem? The prime reason must surely be an unwillingness to put forward a poem whose predecessors are so readily discoverable, and whose idiom, competent and better as it is, is a relatively impersonal one.\* (eliphothoun) But I think a more fundamental reason may be the incompatibility within a single poem of certain strands in it that Cavafy chose to farm out to separate poems. Most pressingly, how is the warm nostalgia for ports once reached for the first time, an Epicurean sentiment in 'Ithaca', compatible with the loveless warming of the heart at the end, which seems to bring us close to an Nietzschean *Übermensch*, or at any rate to a polar explorer?

As so often with Cavafy, a poem rejected is not necessarily evacuated. And we can see that the more famous 'The City' (1910) addresses the same human feelings in an idiom which takes its force precisely from its abstraction from all named geographical realities or mythical protagonists. The work of confining the restless protagonist (here addressed in the second person) is performed by the merciless rhyme scheme alone, along with the repetitions that now have nothing of a Homeric provenance. A Cavafy who was initially gripped by the force of Tennysonian rhetoric finds his way round it, not in conflict with it, by eschewing those very features which were already leading the naive to enlist 'Ulysses' into the service of school speech days. *Any* city in 'The City' can be as stultifying as the 'little isle'; *any* sea can be as confining as the 'Achaean sea' compared to the wide ocean; *every* man can be, perhaps is, his own restless Odysseus, whose heart is not warmed by lovelessness but '– like a corpse – buried'. In the claim that 'there is no ship for you, no road', our suspicion that this was true for Tennyson's solitary Ulysses is borne out in a modern idiom that requires no mythological apparatus.

Despite its generally Tennysonian idiom, ‘Second Odyssey’ does not quarry ‘Ulysses’ for phrases as, say, ‘King Claudius’ does *Hamlet*, to the later poem’s profit. But there is one phrase from ‘Ulysses’ which reappears in free translation: ‘My mariners,/Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me—/That ever *with a frolic welcome* took/The sunshine and the thunder’ is transmuted into: ‘at harbours/which *with what joy* you reach for the first time’. The change of context is crucial: Tennyson’s Ulysses imagines in his (imaginary) companions that glad devotion to service for which they are not much noted in the *Odyssey* and thus generates a powerfully ironic element in his poem; ‘Second Odyssey’, slipping at this point into the second person, seems to establish the arrival at new harbours as something which rightly provokes joy in any human spirit, even one as jaded as the Odysseus unhappily back in Ithaca. The little phrase, *me ti charan* (with just the loss of the final high-register final consonant) was to find its way into ‘Ithaca’, justifying the claim that the later poem is indeed a version of the earlier. It is of course a demythologizing version, in which a specifically Epicurean outlook forms the poem, and in which even the ‘Egyptian cities’ don’t necessarily evoke Menelaus’ voyage which he narrates in *Odyssey* 4. Yet its demythologizing vein, with its particular sensuous frisson, may better be understood if read ‘Ithaca’ as a poem which escapes Tennyson obliquely, through Tennyson (as well, of course, in a host of other ways).

Cavafy admired Shakespeare for his being able so powerfully to articulate competing world-views, even by a single character in a single scene. The Greek poet, given his attested preoccupation with Tennyson, can’t have failed to identify and admire the same point in the way that different poems set side by side carry out the same task. ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832), though written, unlike ‘Ulysses’, before Arthur Hallam’s death, may be read as a pendant to the later poem, with which it shares, not just Odyssean allusion but a tense relation of inversion. ‘Courage’, he said, and pointed toward the land’: an unnamed Ulysses launches the poem; but this is succeeded in the voice of those who eat the lotus and reject his high claims. What is particularly subtle is that the Lotos-Eaters in fact share the lack of interest in home, hearth and marital bed which afflicts Ulysses and the ‘little isle’ (124). We can take the discussion further by a close look (yet another look) at ‘Ithaca’:

*When you set out for Ithaca,  
pray that the way be a long one,  
full of adventure, full of acquired knowledge.  
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,  
angry Poseidon, have no fear of them,  
such things on your way will not be yours to encounter,  
if your thought remains elevated, if a select  
emotion touches your spirit and body.  
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,  
fierce Poseidon, will not be yours to encounter,*

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

*if you are not dragging them along in your soul,  
if it is not your soul setting them before you.*

*Pray that the way be a long one.*

*May there be many a summer morning  
on which with what gratification, with what joy  
you enter harbours for the first time seen;  
to halt at Phoenician trading stations  
and purchase the fine merchandise,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
and voluptuous perfumes of every kind,  
as great an abundance as you can of voluptuous perfumes;  
to go to many an Egyptian city,  
to learn and to learn from lettered men.*

*Always in mind keep Ithaca.*

*Arrival there is your destination.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better it last for many a year;  
and for you to cast anchor on the isle now an old man,  
rich with all you gained along the way,  
not expecting riches to be the gift of Ithaca.*

*Ithaca gave you the lovely journey.*

*But for her you would not have gone your way.  
But she has nothing to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not gulled you.*

*Wise as you now are, with so much experience,  
by this time you will have understood what's meant by Ithacas.*

This poem cunningly stations itself between 'Ulysses' and 'The Lotos-Eaters', neither exhorting the addressee to seek a newer world nor lulling him to rest and not to wander more. Ithaca will not be a place long sought only to be rejected; nor will it be dismissed as merely petty. No oath will be sworn to travel on or to stay put: instead a quiet prayer to travel slowly is the core of the poem. Rather than sinking themselves in a lushly described natural setting, as Tennyson's Lotos-Eaters do, the voyager in Cavafy is called to immerse himself in culture, with the produce of land and sea taking on a meaning which governs sensual body and wise spirit. There is a world of difference (even if this be a lexical coincidence) between the Lotos-Eaters' dream of dreaming and dreaming 'like yonder amber light,/'



Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height' and the repeated 'voluptuous perfumes (myrodika)' which form the core of 'Ithaca'. (Though Tennyson's phrase, 'To hear each other's whispered speech' at least contains sensual overtones).

The differences between the two poems crystallize in Tennyson's last section, where the Lotos-Eaters give voice to an open doctrine of Epicureanism: 'Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,/In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined/On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind'. Now 'Ithaca' too is explicitly Epicurean, in that the existence of mythical figures, and especially Poseidon, is rejected; and it will readily be agreed that such an outlook better fits the Cavafian corpus than that of 'Second Odyssey'. Even the affinity between the 'hollow Lotos-land' and 'poor' Ithaca is striking: accompanied by, or following, experience of the senses, this lack of substance to the destination can be ignored. But side by side with this philosophical Epicureanism which the two poems hold in common there is a certain energy to the Cavafian journey, centred on the bright morning, by contrast with the perpetual afternoon of Lotos-land, which refuses to share in listlessness, let alone melancholy: the cornucopia of experience holds more than that. Where the Lotos-eaters disdain the race of 'men that cleave the soil,/Sow the seed and reap the harvest with enduring toil,/Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil', Cavafy's poem, appropriately enough from a poet of mercantile ancestry, prides the providence and sound commercial judgement of the traveller. Life is full of meaning, as is poetry. The Lotos-eaters sum up their past history, the sack of Troy, as voiced in poetry (for us, in Homer) as 'Like a tale of little meaning though the words are strong' (164). It is as if there is a contest of genres, with the lyric of the Lotos-eaters' song triumphing over epic – at any rate, no epic other than a Lucretian one. But 'meaning' (*semainoun*) is nothing less than the last word Cavafy leaves us with.

Cavafy's engagement with Tennyson in 'Second Odyssey' was readjusted by a quite different sort of engagement in 'Ithaca'. But this was not to be his last overt reckoning with the English poet.

### *Simeon*

*I've seen his latest poems, yes;  
Beirut is wild about them.  
I'll take a proper look at them some other day.  
I can't today: I'm a little out of sorts.*

*He is indeed a better Grecian than Libanius.  
But one step up from Meleager? I think not.*

*Oh Mebes, what of Libanius! and what of books!  
and what of petty matters! . . . Mebes, yesterday I found myself  
-- as luck would have it – at the foot of Simeon's pillar.*

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

*I squeezed in with the Christians  
at their silent prayer and worship  
and devotions; except that, being no Christian,  
I lacked their spiritual tranquillity –  
and I started trembling all over and feeling dreadful;  
and I started to shudder and shake and find it all too much.*

*I can see you smiling! Think of it, though: thirty-five years,  
winter, summer, night, day, thirty-five  
years atop a pillar, bearing living witness.  
Before we were even born – I'm twenty-nine,  
and you, I take it, younger –  
before we were even born, imagine it,  
Simeon made the ascent to the top of his pillar  
and ever since has stayed there face to face with God.*

*I don't feel up to work today.  
But Mebes, I won't object to its being said  
that, whatever the other sophists say,  
yes, I acknowledge Lamon  
is Syria's leading poet.*

The poem was written in July 1917, and there would be no striking reason to assume a relationship with Tennyson's poem – given the fame of this greatest of stylite saints and Cavafy's now long-established interest in the complex historical transition from paganism to Christianity – unless we possessed some marginal comments in Cavafy's copy of Gibbon. These date back to 1899 and show how, from back then, a fuse had been lit: Cavafy was intent to redress the balance, poetically and historically. He writes (as often, in English):

*I have met with only one poem on Simeon Stylites, but it is in no way worthy of the subject.*

The poem of Tennyson, though it contains some well-made verses, fails in tone. Its great defect lies in its form of a monologue. The complaints of Simeon, his eagerness for the 'meed of saints, the white robe and the palm,' his dubious humility, his latent vanity, are not objectionable in themselves and may be [sic] were necessary to the poem, but they have been handled in a common, almost a vulgar manner. It was a very difficult task – a task reserved, perhaps, for some mighty king of art – to find fitting language for so great a saint, so wonderful a man.

These are terse but sweeping criticisms with wide implications. ‘Well-made verses’ is not – for Cavafy – grudging admiration; yet ‘St Simeon Stylites’ is such as to arouse in the younger poet some of those criticisms voiced by the Victorians who didn’t so much see *through* Tennyson as *beyond* him. Think of Hopkins’ definition, provoked by Tennyson, of the ‘Parnassian’ in poetry; think of Bagehot’s scruples about ‘ornate art’ with its ‘want of simplicity. Nothing is described as it is, everything has about it an atmosphere of *something else*’; think, most cuttingly, of Arnold on Tennyson’s ‘want of intellectual power’.

Now much of the point of Tennyson’s poem (which is too long to quote here) is in the febrile imagination of the saint, his florid imaginings of a place in paradise; so the charge of luxuriance would seem to lack purchase, unless, as Cavafy almost certainly thought, the poem’s length (220 lines) is itself a mark of inferior craftsmanship. But it can’t be said that Tennyson doesn’t make the most of the amplitude of the poem: winding through its subtle paragraphing are the whole range of moods which have marked Simeon’s all-too-human progress through the seasons, from self-aggrandizement to apostolic plainness. Cavafy’s objections lie elsewhere.

Tennyson gleaned his knowledge of the saint from Gibbon’s caustic account, but above all from William Hone’s *Every-Day Book* (1826–7: a work of strong Protestant stripe): he did not profess a historically informed knowledge of Simeon and apparently with some embarrassment later conceded that he had out of sheer ignorance imparted the poem with a Northern colouring, rather than a Syrian one. In fact, however, there is no obvious Western colouring or clear anachronism – things Cavafy would have been sure to seize on. And yet it is true that Tennyson’s Simeon is a generic saint of a generic age of superstition, as timeless as a painting of the Temptation of S. Antony. For a culture devoted to the saints like Greek Orthodoxy, such an enterprise, even if not seen as actually impious, can in the end be no more than superficial.

For it is not unreasonable to read the whole of Tennyson’s poem as a versification of a Gibbonian outlook, in which the endurance of the saint arouses more repugnance than it commands imagination. In the very year of its writing, 1833, the first steps of the Oxford Movement were to set in motion a religious culture which took the saints seriously once more; but Tennyson’s entire poem is permeated with the old Protestant outlook, however expressed. Cavafy’s own view, as expressed in his comments, does not implicitly criticize Tennyson as impious or infidel (the less flattering sides he attributes to Simeon are ‘not objectionable in themselves’) but as lacking in imagination:

*This great, this wonderful saint is surely an object to be singled out in ecclesiastical history for admiration and study. He has been, perhaps, the only man who has dared to be really alone.*

...

*The glory of Simeon filled and astounded the earth. Innumerable pilgrims crowded round his column. People came from the farthest West and from the farthest East,*

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

*from Britain and from India, to gaze on the unique sight – on this candle of faith (such is the magnificent language of the historian Theodoret) set up and lit on a lofty chandelier.*

For Cavafy, then, Simeon is a glory of 'our glorious Byzantine age'; but he is also, as the Odysseus of 'Second Odyssey' was, a figure of existential daring. Neither tribute entails assent to Christian belief (in relation to which Cavafy's works and life are alike ambiguous); but a degree of imaginative assent is demanded of the poet who wishes to do the theme justice.\* Cavafy provides that imaginative assent through a dramatic monologue voiced by one of the visitors to Simeon's pillar; and, as with Tennyson's poem, this is a monologue which forms one half of a dialogue. But the Greek poet's dialogue is a mirror image of its model.

Now in his orotundity, stridency and sheer rambling length, Tennyson's Simeon is a speaker who scarcely brooks interlocutors other than his God (first addressed, albeit in a ritual formula, in line 7, and frequently thereafter), and for large tracts of the poem we might almost overlook the fact that the poem contains them – until the last part, at which the dying saint calls on the faithful for aid and promises them his own. Reading back from that, we notice that the poem's long flow is in fact punctuated by a number of such references, showing that Simeon, though far above other men physically, keeps a keen eye on them and has an eye to the figure he cuts before them. (See especially lines 131–42: 'Good people, you do ill to kneel to me. . .') Most notably, of course, he is keenly aware of those naysayers who turn up among the faithful and call on him to leap, in just the time-hallowed manner of those who turn up at an apartment-building siege, or of course at the Crucifixion: 'Fall down, O Simeon' (97). It is Cavafy's stroke of genius to take us from the top of the pillar to the bottom, in what we fashionably call 'history from below', and to make his observer of Simeon, not one of the faithful, nor a casual hooligan but a quite different social type.

At the same time, Cavafy is intent to maintain much the same chronological framework, hence the fact that the only lines of his poem which come close quoting Tennyson's are those which specify the date at which we find ourselves: 'thrice ten years. . . Rain, wind, frost, heat, hail, damp, and sleet, and snow'. S. Simeon (390–459) spent a total of thirty-seven years atop a succession of successively higher pillars. Tennyson may or not place him at the very end of his life (possibly not, given the saint's expressed impatience in lines 17ff that he has not yet died; but lines 84ff specify twenty-two years as the years of 'pillar-punishment'); Cavafy, we may be sure, situates him towards the end, but not quite at it.

'St Simeon Stylites' in its (partly) comic treatment of history and its exposure of vanity gets perhaps as close as Tennyson did to the Browning manner; and for that reason it is hardly surprising that it attracted Cavafy's interest. But where Cavafy's relation to Browning is less antagonistic, the Greek poet evidently means to meet Tennyson's poem on its own ground and to contest its historicity. No better way could be found than, first

of all, to label the poem plain 'Simeon': the saint before his canonization, before history has made up its mind; while keen minds are yet unresolved as to the great choice between paganism and Christianity. Cavafy's poem disarms us by its oblique entry into the topic. We find ourselves in a discussion between two young men of Antioch in 454 or so. (The name of the interlocutor, Mebes, reappears as that of an expensive male prostitute in Antioch in the canonical poem, 'Sophist on his Departure from Syria'.) It's a literary discussion, with the speaker, an arbiter elegantiarum, evidently used to being asked to give literary pronouncements. His main criterion of worth is the correctness of a man's Greek, and his recent benchmark evidently the late pagan sophist Libanius, the tutor of Julian the Apostate; though it is to the Hellenistic poet Meleager that he attributes real Hellenic polish.

But at that point the effete young man turns from literary gossip, as there's something he wants to get off his chest. He claims to have found himself at Simeon's pillar, as if ashamed to admit he sought it out, even as a curiosity. Now Simeon's station was a considerable way outside the city, a place for pilgrims but hardly for the weary *flâneur*: something he isn't (yet) letting on has drawn our speaker there. (As if one might visit the Infant of Prague out of idle curiosity.) And once there the atmosphere of intense piety, seen from its midst, and not from the great cultural distance that separates Tennyson from southern and eastern popular religion, starts to have an intense physical effect. The result? An awed sense that for a man to have spent half his life so intently communicating with something – something which perhaps unwittingly our speaker calls God – dwarfs the petty affairs of a literary life of one whose literary and erotic clock is ticking away with frightening speed. It takes some guts to admit this, as the interlocutor's worldly reaction shows.

This is a conversion poem, but we do not witness the conversion, only a crisis that may, beyond the poem, precipitate it. Does the man convert, late but not too late, like the hero of 'Tomb of Ignatius'? It is too early to say; for to cover his blushes, compose himself and return to routine he reverts at the end to the mode of ex cathedra literary judgement; in such a way, though, as to suggest that Lamon ('one-eye') is the best contemporary poet in weary tones. (Victor Hugo, hélas!) Tennyson brilliantly stages the process of saint-making, but Cavafy's sense of interiority makes a wonderful answer to a powerful precursor.

'Simeon' is a poem of high merit, but Cavafy, by this stage in his career, evidently shunned direct treating with Tennyson in this way. But the poem was not lost: in fact its intensity of scene where the narrator is surrounded by the Christian faithful found its way into the most overtly emotional of all Cavafy's poems: 'Myres, Alexandria A.D. 340'. Given that 'St Simeon Stylites' was just one of the poems which Tennyson wrote in response to the death of Arthur Hallam, a death which kept him on the turn from Christianity, it is not unfitting that 'Myres' should have found its form through a sustained dialogue with him.

I used the phrase 'Cavafy's debt to Tennyson' in my title. But I hope I have made it

*From Ulysses to S. Simeon Stylites: Cavafy's debt to Tennyson*

clear that things are not that simple. It was brave and bold of the Greek poet to challenge two admirable, indeed imposing, poems by a dead poet he admired – and in both cases to find expression as memorable as that which he seeks to overturn. It is enough to make one question the distinction between major and minor literatures.

