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Literary Alexandria

THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA has enjoyed two periods of international literary glory. The first began near the end of the fourth century BC and was originally based upon the largesse of the Ptolemies. The brilliance these rulers initially attracted was to endure in Egypt for more than eight hundred years, diminishing gradually to twilight and extinction, but meanwhile shedding a radiance that still illuminates literature world-wide. The second period, much briefer, can be dated roughly to the years between 1905 and 1952. Among the many important writers identified with Alexandria during these years, the greatest is undoubtedly C. P. Cavafy, a native son who wrote modern verse in the language and quite frequently in the spirit and on the subject of the Ptolemies.

Just as there is a debt to Alexandria wherever a pipe-organ is played or an Archimedes screw is used, whenever a Western-style atlas or calendar is consulted, wherever medicine, astronomy, grammar or geography are taught, or whenever a problem in mechanics or geometry is solved, so there is also a debt wherever a Western or Western-influenced novel, poem, play or opera is written, read, recited, performed, examined by a critic, catalogued by a librarian, investigated by a scholar, or even enjoyed by one reader or an audience. These debts began to accumulate some 25 years after the founding of the city by one of the sons of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander III, known to history as Alexander the Great.

At Alexander's death in June 323 BC, the Macedonian Empire he had put together was inherited by Philip Arrhidaeus, his feeble-minded and illegitimate half-brother. In November 323, after bargaining shrewdly to obtain the position, Ptolemy Lagidus ("Son of Lagus"), one of the most distinguished of Alexander's Macedonian generals, arrived in the kingdom of Egypt—where

Alexander had been recognized as Pharaoh seven years earlier—to act as Philip's governor. Ptolemy was widely believed, in fact, to be another of Alexander's half-brothers, his mother having allegedly been married off by Philip II to Lagus, an obscure courtier, during the first month of her pregnancy.

Within the next year (322 BC) Ptolemy had extended his personal power over Cyrenaica, where names like *Tolmeita*, the modern appellation of the ancient town of Ptolemais, still testify to Ptolemaic power and whose capital city, Cyrene, was one of the oldest and most aristocratic of all the Hellenic colonies. In 317 Philip Arrhidaeus was murdered by Olympias, Alexander's tough-minded mother, who was murdered in turn by her even tougher-minded stepson-in-law, Cassander. Six years later Cassander likewise murdered Alexander IV, the thirteen-year-old son posthumously born to Alexander by Roxana, his Central-Asian wife, as well as Roxana herself and another of his widows. Cassander having thus put paid to the Empire, Alexander's former generals and governors fought among themselves for mastery over its remnants. By 305 Ptolemy had won, lost, then partially won again from his rivals a stretch of territories that ran from North Africa up into the Greek mainland. He now followed the lead of the other Macedonian strong-men and had himself declared a king.

Two years earlier, in 307, a remarkable refugee had arrived in Alexandria from Athens, which for nearly two hundred years had been the undoubted cultural capital of the Mediterranean world. This distinguished exile was Demetrius of Phalerum, known for his scholarship and writing—he was the editor of a collection of Aesop's fables and the author of a study of Homer, as well as of numerous political, oratorical, and literary works—but most famed for his statesmanship. He had governed Athens throughout the previous ten years on behalf of Cassander, but had been forced to flee when the city was captured by Demetrius Poliorcetes, a rival of Cassander, but also an enemy of the Ptolemies. It was therefore natural that Demetrius should have taken refuge in Egypt.

Born in 345 to a poor family in the city's ancient port district,

not far from what is now the main runway of the old Athens Airport, Demetrius had acquired his higher education as a student in the philosophical school centered around a gymnasium in a grove of trees outside the city's southeastern walls. Dedicated to Apollo Lykeios (*lykeios* means perhaps "Wolf-Slayer" or "Light-Bringer"), the grove was called the Lykeion and gave this name to the school, which came to be known throughout subsequent centuries by this name in its Latin form—*Lyceum*. This proper noun would become so prestigious that it has supplied in turn an English common noun as well as common nouns meaning specifically "secondary school" in all the other major European languages (e.g., *lycée*, *liceo*, *Lyzeum*).

The Lyceum was originally made famous by Aristotle, who had strolled along its shaded paths lecturing to students for twelve years, from 335 until the death of Alexander the Great, his most famous pupil, in 323. Demetrius had been too young to hear Aristotle speak, but he had listened to the lectures of Theophrastus, Aristotle's immediate successor, and had used the library in a nearby temple of the Muses, a *mouseion*—our word *museum* is the Latin form of the same word—where Aristotle's own books were kept and could be consulted. A fellow pupil, three years younger than Demetrius, had been Menander, destined to become the most prominent practitioner of New Comedy thanks to four plays adapted from his work by the Roman playwright Terence, from whom all important modern comedy is directly descended. (One of Menander's plays was found almost complete on rolls of Egyptian papyrus in 1958 and proved to be disappointingly inferior to Terence.) Another pupil in the Lyceum at the time was Epicurus, Menander's intimate friend and classmate—they did their military service together—who would become the founder of an ultimately more enduring philosophical school than Aristotle's.

Though they could not have known it, Menander and Epicurus represent the only two areas of intellectual endeavor—comedy and philosophy—in which Athens was to retain cultural supremacy during the next century and a half, the years up to 145 BC. Except in these two fields, she was to be eclipsed by

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Alexandria, where the best minds gathered around a great new Mouseion, a study center connected with a library that was to become by far the largest in the ancient world. And the foundation of these two new institutions was probably due in large part to Demetrius.

A limestone statue of him stands next to Pindar's seated figure among the eleven statues of Hellenic poets and philosophers in the exedra of the Serapeum in the Memphite Necropolis at Saqqarah. Discovered in January 1851, it was carved by a pupil of Lysippus called Dionysos or Dionysiades, almost certainly before 283 BC, while Demetrius was still alive. It may therefore have been a portrait. Though the statue is so damaged that no physical characteristics of Demetrius of Phalerum are discernible, it is still possible to make out the herma of Serapis, the Greco-Egyptian god that had been made the center of a new cult by Ptolemy I, on which his standing figure leans.

What the statue symbolically celebrates is Demetrius' second career, as a consultant to Ptolemy I on religious and cultural affairs in Egypt, during which he also became known as both a composer and collector of hymns. He almost certainly collaborated with two of Ptolemy's other experts, the Egyptian Manetho and a Greek from Eleusis, where famous chthonian mysteries were observed, in devising the cult of Serapis. He credited the god, in any case, with having saved him from blindness, and the devotion shown in his own hymns to Serapis was apparently real.

Demetrius' patron, Ptolemy I, was a man of more than a little cultivation and was himself the author, for example, of a history of Alexander's campaigns that was much admired by later historians. The Macedonian élite had been reading, speaking, and writing Greek for three generations. They had thus already taken part in what has been called "the Greek Literate Revolution," the radical cultural change that had occurred during the previous century within the Hellenic states of the Mediterranean. Nowhere else in the ancient world had literacy become the norm among educated adults, displacing tradition, memory, and "inspiration" as the acknowledged foundation of wisdom, learning, and intellectual creativity. Only

thanks to such a cultural revolution could a man like Ptolemy have even begun to conceive the idea of being an author.

What this Macedonian general was clearly after when he set up the Mouseion and the Library was to recreate, on the basis of literacy, a new cultural empire, one that would transcend those barriers that had been impervious to Alexander's military might. Ptolemy's interests extended over the entire ancient Hellenic world, stretching from the Atlantic to Central Asia, but concentrated especially on historic centers of Hellenic culture—Sicily, for example, as well as Caria and Ionia—where the attainment of high civilization actually antedated the pre-eminence of Athens. It was his wealth, his will, and the impetus they supplied that created the Hellenistic era, a cultural epoch precisely coterminous with the dynasty of the Ptolemies themselves.

The date the Mouseion was founded or even precisely where it stood within Alexandria are still matters of conjecture. Among its earliest recruits, though, was Euclid, author of the textbook on geometry that would remain standard all the way down to the twentieth century. It was Euclid who told Ptolemy I that such a subject is equally demanding for everyone, even kings, and that there is no "royal road" to geometry. Another early recruit was Herophilus of Chalcedon, an anatomist specializing in the brain and the nervous system.

By 285 BC in any case, both the Mouseion and the great Alexandrian Library were well established. In that year, at the age of eighty-two, Ptolemy I decided to share power with his favorite son, likewise named Ptolemy, born in 308, deliberately overlooking an older Ptolemy, his son by an earlier marriage. The younger Ptolemy was made co-ruler despite the pleas and arguments of advisors like Demetrius, who paid the price of his advocacy after the old king's death, three years later, when Ptolemy II assumed sole power. Demetrius was exiled to Upper Egypt and forced to commit suicide there, according to a widespread report, with an asp.

The prestige of the Mouseion was signaled in 270 when it managed to recruit Strato of Lampsacus from Athens, the last real scientist working there, where he had been the successor of Theophrastus and had served as head of the Lyceum for eighteen

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years. And it is probable that Strato brought with him Aristotle's library from the original Mouseion, which ancient accounts say was purchased by Ptolemy II for the Alexandrian Library.

It should be emphasized that the basis of all research at the Mouseion was the written word. Therefore there was no distinction made between those intellectual pursuits that we persist in separating into distinct and exclusive categories naively designated by terms like "scientific or technological" and "literary or humanistic." A case in point is Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 276–195), the third director of the Library, who was also the greatest geographer of antiquity. A man of immense ingenuity, he was the first to calculate the circumference of the globe and was correct to within perhaps as little as fifty miles. Eratosthenes described himself as *philologos* ("lover of words"), however, and was equally at home with poetic texts. His geography was used two centuries later by Strabo, who also reports him to have remarked that "the aim of the poet was not to instruct, but to give pleasure."

As a repository of the written word, the Library was thus vital to the Mouseion and distinguished in its own right. Its first director was either Demetrius of Phalerum himself or Zenodotus of Ephesus (serving until 245 or later), followed by Callimachus of Cyrene or perhaps Apollonius Rhodius, Eratosthenes, Aristophanes of Byzantium, and Aristarchus of Samothrace (until 145). "What institution," asks Gilbert Murray, the renowned classical scholar, "ever had such a row of giants at its head?" What Murray meant can be gathered by looking at cultural history.

Zenodotus, for example, had the task of gathering the written versions of the work of all the Greek poets from Homer onward and revising them to create editions that were not corrupted by omissions or additions. He carried out this job with the help of two other men, both poets, Lycophron of Chalcis and Alexander of Aetolis, who were responsible for comedy and tragedy. Lycophron became famous later for the learned obscurity of one of his poems, *Alexandra*, sometimes known as *Cassandra*. Zenodotus' particular achievement was the creation of a purified text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And the reason why such an achievement was important is that these works of Homer, increasingly taught

from written texts, rather than by rote, were already the center of Hellenic education, would become the center of Roman education, and would thus remain the center of all important education throughout the classical world until their displacement several hundred years later by the Bible.

Callimachus of Cyrene (b. c. 310 BC), the most celebrated poet/critic of his time, supposed by many to have been the Library's second director, is reported to have said that it possessed some 490,000 papyrus rolls. His directorship may be disputed, but he was undoubtedly the creator of the Library's catalogue, running to 120 papyrus rolls, the so-called Tables, listing outstanding authors, with their works classified under eight headings. From these lists of classic writers (*kanones*) comes our idea of a literary "canon." And from the Library's practice of publishing standard editions of works in this canon comes our own notion of standard or definitive editions. Many of his hymns have survived and his *Lock of Berenice*, an elaborate compliment to Berenice II, wife of Ptolemy III, exists in a well-known Latin translation by Catullus. Well known in English is William Corey's translation of his epigram on a fellow-poet, Heraclitus of Hallicarnassus, the title of whose collected poems was *Nightingales*:

The told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales awake:
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

Callimachus was one of the antagonists in a legendary literary quarrel. The other party is supposed to have been the poet Apollonius, a native-born Alexandrian, sometimes called "Rhodius" because he lived for many years on the island of Rhodes. It is Apollonius, not Callimachus, who is now believed by most scholars to have been the second head of the Library; and the quarrel—if there was one—may have arisen out of clashes within

its walls. At any rate, the publication of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, a four-part *epyllion* or miniature epic retelling the adventures of Jason, is alleged have inspired Callimachus to utter his best-known aphorism: "A big book is a big pain" (*mega biblion mega kakon*).

What Callimachus may have had against *Argonautica* is difficult to say, since it exemplifies admirably the best of those qualities that Alexandrian literature has bequeathed to international culture. Millions of readers throughout the past twenty-three centuries have found it neither too big—it is a fraction of the length of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*—nor boring. Replete with ornamental learning, romance, irrational events, and plenty of sex and violence, which he handles with cinematic rapidity, the world Apollonius creates might have been fabricated precisely to satisfy the literary taste of our own time.

Elegance, conciseness, allusiveness, high polish, learning, and sophistication were already hallmarks of Alexandrian poetry, which was directed precisely at the new readership created by the Greek Literate Revolution and was intended to be read, not recited. Like all his contemporaries among the Alexandrian literati, Apollonius is deeply and consciously un-Homeric. His Jason is not a semi-divine hero, but an ordinary mortal and far less skilled as a warrior than as a lover. Confident that his readers already know their Euripides and are thus well aware that the story of Jason and Medea ends in hatred and tragedy, he tells us only the first part of the tale, showing us their *amours*. His similes are as cunning as Homer's, but typically take us into a realm only hinted at in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*—the world of women. A good example of his qualities is this passage describing how Medea falls in love (translation by Richard Hunter):

Eros came unseen through the bright air, moving busily like the gadfly which attacks young heifers... He crouched down low at Jason's feet, fitted the arrow-notch to the bowstring and stretching the bow wide in his two hands shot straight at Medea. Her spirit was seized by speechless stupor. Eros darted back out of the high-roofed palace with a mocking laugh, but his arrow burned deep in the girl's heart like a flame. Full at Jason her glances shot, and the wearying pain scattered all prudent thoughts from her chest; she could think of nothing else, and her spirit was flooded with a sweet aching. As

when a woman heaps up twigs around a burning brand—a poor woman who must live from working wool—so that she might have light in her dwelling at night as she sits very close to the fire, and a fierce flame spurts up from the small brand and consumes all the twigs, just so was the destructive love which crouched unobserved and burnt in Medea's heart. At one moment her soft cheeks were drained of colour, at another they blushed red, the control of her mind now gone.

Among the many other poets on the payroll of Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III, the most notable for long-term influence is certainly Theocritus, a Sicilian by birth, who spent many years on the island of Kos as well as in Alexandria. Kos, off the coast of Caria, close to the old Ionian heartland of Hellenic culture, was part of the Ptolemaic empire—it had in fact been Ptolemy II's birthplace—and fostered a thriving school of poetry. On nearby Samos, which owed its freedom to Alexander, there were other poets active. Theocritus' best known works are his *Idylls*, "little pictures," that pulled together a number of Hellenic strands to create the beginnings of a new genre—"pastoral" poetry.

A rather boring and flat-footed history of "pastoral" and its influence is frequently traced in the line that leads so obviously from Theocritus to Vergil, then through the Middle Ages to the formal "pastorals" produced by scores of poets throughout the past five or six centuries since—the likes of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ronsard, Spenser, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Frost and Derek Walcott, the Nobel laureate for 1992, whose Vergil-inspired eclogues are among the best ever written. During the Romantic period, however, as can be seen in Klopstock, Wordsworth, or Leopardi, this same line gave rise quite naturally to something far more interesting, the meditative-descriptive lyric, the poetic category that accounts for about 90 percent of modern poetry. Through pastoral drama, moreover, exemplified in Tasso's *Aminta* (1573) and Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* (1590), Theocritus' *Idylls* also became the ancestor of tragi-comedy and thence of melodrama, the category to which most of our new productions for stage and screen belong.

Less frequently acknowledged has been the influence of Theocritus' major technical innovation: his *Idylls* were recognized as a

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new genre not because of their subject matter or “form,” which were hardly unique, but because they embodied a new poetic voice, belonging neither to epic and nor lyric nor yet to tragedy or comedy. Rather than being the utterance of a Muse, of the poet himself or herself, or of a dramatic persona, this new voice was, in effect, the voice of the poem itself, full of wisdom and gusto, but unsentimental, ironic, elevated, and detached—the same kind of voice, in other words, that animates much of the most distinguished part of modernist poetry: the work of Cavafy, say, or of the Imagists or of Frost, Stevens, or Eliot.

Not all of Theocritus’ *Idylls* even qualify as “pastoral,” and the most famous of them indeed has nothing at all to do with sheep, shepherds, or the countryside. Its main speakers are two expatriate wives from Syracuse who have settled in Alexandria under Ptolemy II (translation by Barriss Mills):

GORG0: Is Praxinoa at home?

PRAXIN0A: Gorgo!
Of course I’m at home! Darling
how long it’s been. It’s a wonder
you got here at all. Eunoia,
get her a chair. And put
a cushion on it.

GORG0: It will do
very well as it is.

PRAXIN0A: Do sit down then.

GORG0: I’m a helpless thing, Praxinoa.
I barely got here alive
through all the crowds and chariots—
big boots and men in soldiers’ cloaks
all over the place, and the road
going on for ever. You really
live too far out.

PRAXIN0A: It’s that crazy
husband of mine. He comes
out here to the end of the earth
and buys a shed, not a house,
just so we won’t be neighbors—
out of sheer spite, the brute!

And so on. Leaving Praxinoa’s baby at home in charge of a nanny, the two ladies take her little girl and the maid Eunoia and

fight their way through dense crowds to the palace of Queen Arsinoe, where there is a festival of Adonis going on, with a wonderful singer. Any reader who knows a modern Middle Eastern metropolis will find something familiar in this playlet, in which, as E. M. Forster says (quoting Praxinoa on the tapestries in Arsinoe's palace), "the figures seem to stand up and move; they're not patterns, they're alive."

During the later years of the reign of Ptolemy III there were fewer literary stars in residence, but there was no diminution in the quality of work carried on or the investment continually made in the Mouseion itself or the Library. Ptolemy III is said to have acquired, for example, the Athenians' official copies of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides by borrowing them, sending back copies, and keeping the originals, thus forfeiting a bond amounting to more than half a ton of silver.

Apollonius (or Callimachus) was succeeded as head of the Library in about 235 BC by Eratosthenes of Cyrene, the geographer and *philologos*, who had been tutor to Ptolemy IV before his accession. Outliving his former pupil, Eratosthenes starved himself to death in old age (c. 195) after losing his sight and, apparently, any further interest in life. Although later writers made extensive use of his works, they have all virtually disappeared.

He was succeeded by another former pupil, Aristophanes of Byzantium, a grammarian, who is famed for having introduced accents into the transcription of Greek, thus making a written grammar of the language possible. The first written grammar of Greek—or any other language—was produced by one of the pupils of his successor, Aristarchus of Samothrace. Only sixteen pages long, it remained standard for some thirteen centuries. The author of this grammar, Dionysius of Thrace, declares that the criticism of poetry is the "the noblest part" of the discipline he describes, a doctrine he undoubtedly learned from Aristarchus.

Not to be confused with Aristarchus of Samos, the renowned astronomer, who lived 150 years earlier, Aristarchus of Samothrace was the greatest critic of antiquity and the founder of a school of criticism that, in effect, has not yet died. The texts of Homer we use today, for example, are those that he created, on the basis of

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the labors carried out by his predecessors. Aristarchus did such basic work as dividing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into twenty-four books each, a step without which all subsequent study would have been enormously impeded. His directorship of the Library coincided with one of the stormiest periods in Ptolemaic history, the unfortunate reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor, whose side he appears to have taken in the civil strife that marked the times. There are, in any case, at least two versions of the end of his life. In one of these versions, he starved himself to death, as Eratosthenes had done, in about 157 or 156 BC: in the other, he died after being forced to flee to Cyprus in 145 BC when Ptolemy VII, Philometor's brother and rival—by all accounts a monster—succeeded to the throne. In revenge for previous slights, he allowed Alexandria to be pillaged and sacked.

At all events, the most creative days of the Mouseion and the Library, both in science and in literature, were over, as were the days of Ptolemaic wealth and power. Rome had intervened in Eastern Mediterranean affairs, always on behalf of Egypt, since 197 BC; and in 167 a Roman ambassador had turned back a Syrian invasion of Egypt by mere threat of the Senate's displeasure. Annexation of Egypt was not proposed until a century later. Pompey made Syria a Roman province and Ptolemy XI, known as "The Fluteplayer," sent Egyptian troops to help him take Palestine, which had once been a Ptolemaic possession. By 30 BC, when Octavian contrived the murder of Ptolemy Caesar, Julius Caesar's eighteen-year-old son by Cleopatra VII, it was all over.

Or was it? Because the Romans themselves, in the midst of their own literary Golden Age, were enthusiastically carrying out the most momentous cultural appropriation that has ever taken place anywhere in the world. They conducted the wholesale transfer of the major elements of Hellenic religion, myth, legend, philosophy, literature, manners, customs, and plastic arts to Roman setting and their translation into a Roman idiom, through which they have come down to us. Every educated Roman knew Greek literature and, in consequence, the Greek language, often to the point of being virtually bilingual. Pompey the

Great, was murdered, for example, as he read Greek poetry, and Julius Caesar's last words as recorded in Shakespeare—"Et tu, Brute?"—are only a Latin approximation of what ancient authorities report he really said, which was in Greek: "*Kai su, teknon?*" "You too, son?" The writers of ancient Rome's Golden Age wrote in Latin, of course, but saw their task as fundamentally involving naturalization of the Greek culture in which they had been educated.

Where and how did they learn their Greek? Not in Athens. Of the six great poets of the Golden Age after Lucretius—Catullus, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius—only three were briefly students there. Nor in Alexandria, which had ceased being attractive for study, though all six of them were steeped in the literature and in the literary attitudes of Alexandria. They learned their Greek at home in Italy, to begin with, but from teachers who used Alexandrian texts and Alexandrian critical techniques. From that point they went on to write poetry based on Alexandrian models and inspirations.

Vergil and Horace attended the same Epicurean school in Naples—a city founded by Greeks, where the Hellenic heritage has been consciously sustained to this day—and Catullus had earlier been a friend of their major teacher, Philodemos, a Palestinian who wrote elegant epigrams in the Alexandrian manner. Vergil's *Eclogues* would have been literally inconceivable without the inspiration of Theocritus, while his *Aeneid* echoes Homer much less than Apollonius. Horace praises Sappho and Alcaeus among his Hellenic models, but is influenced far more generally by the Alexandrian epigrammatists. So is Catullus, who uses the hendecasyllables of the epigrammatist Phalaecus and for the special tribute of translation singles out only two poets: the immortal Sappho, and Alexandrian Callimachus. And as Pound reminds us in his hair-raising *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, it was Callimachus and Philetas who were the acknowledged inspiration of Propertius.

We are their direct cultural heirs. And therefore all of us, whether we know it or not, have within us something of ancient Alexandria.

II

The large-scale sponsorship of intellectual endeavor begun by the first two Ptolemies and signaled in the Alexandrian Mouseion and Library was taken up and extended by the third Ptolemy, who founded the Alexandrian Serapeum, the home of a second great library. Through these institutions, the will and generosity of the Ptolemies changed the course of Western culture. But Ptolemaic Alexandria also provided inspiration and opportunity for more independent kinds of literary labor, outside officialdom, which have likewise exercised influences running right down to our own time.

Alexandria was the political and cultural capital of realms that under the first four Ptolemies included not only Egypt, but also Cyrenaica, Cyprus, Kos, Samos and other Aegean islands, portions of the Asian mainland itself, and parts of Syria and Palestine. While acting as a magnet for artists and intellectuals living in its own Egyptian hinterland or in other parts of this maritime empire, it also drew men and women from everywhere else in the Mediterranean. Some came merely as tourists. Thousands of others had been recruited by the Ptolemies, however, or had been independently attracted by the new city's commercial prospects and came to settle down as permanent residents.

Menander, the great comic playwright, had been a student at the Lyceum in Athens with Demetrius of Phalerum and might therefore have been expected to have been an early beneficiary from Ptolemaic largesse. The only extant fragments of his work, in fact, have all been found in Egypt. But his accidental drowning in the harbor at Piraeus took place before the foundation of the Mouseion or the Library; and he seems never to have even visited the city. An esteemed older rival however, Philemon of Soli, far more successful than Menander as a comic playwright, spent the last years of his lengthy and highly productive life (360–263 BC) in Alexandria. Having outdone Menander repeatedly in competitions, he proceeded to outlive him as well, dying of laughter at the age of 97, it is said, when he saw a donkey eating figs. Three of Philemon's plays have survived in Plautus' Latin versions, in which they were read by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

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Philemon's work owes little or nothing to any Alexandrian influence, and he may have been retired by the time he first visited the city. During these same early years, however, a group of poets was emerging on the islands of Kos and Samos who were to create a style of poetry that would later be recognized as distinctively Alexandrian. This Alexandrian mode is typified by epigrams or brief personal lyrics centered on love, wine, literature, and art.

The eldest of this school was Philetas of Kos, born sometime before 320 BC, a lexicographer as well as a poet. Philetas lived in Alexandria, where the future Ptolemy II, who was born on Kos, became his pupil. So did Theocritus, the most influential of all the Alexandrian poets, who came to the city from Sicily and later retired to Kos. Even more admired than Philetas, however, was Asklepiades of Samos, the acknowledged leader of the younger generation, who is credited with having invented the most typically Alexandrian literary form, the erotic epigram, exemplified in the following (translation by Kenneth Rexroth):

Didyme waved her wand at me,
I am utterly enchanted.
The sight of her beauty makes me
Melt like wax before the fire. What
Is the difference if she is black?
So is coal, but alight, it shines like roses.

With two colleagues, Hedylus of Samos and Posidippus of Pella, Asklepiades published a collection of epigrams called *The Heap of Grain*, which set a stylistic standard that was to prevail for more than a thousand years. Posidippus was the author of a little poem that obviously became popular in Alexandria, since it was quoted hundreds of years later, and a copy of it was found among the papyri that survived the final destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum in AD 391 (translation by Edward Lucie-Smith):

On sea and land alike
Direct your prayers towards
This temple of the Queen
Goddess Arsinoé.
She gives safe passage and

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In the mid-winter storms
Pours oil upon the waves
For those who pray to her.
It was Callicrates,
Her admiral, who built it
Here—high, facing toward
The West Wind on the Cape.

The queen-goddess referred to here is Arsinoe, the strong-minded consort of Ptolemy II, who was worshipped both before and after her death as Arsinoe-Philadelphus-Aphrodite. Among several temples built to honor her, the most famous stood on the cape or headland named for the West Wind—Zephyr—which overlooked the sea a few kilometers east of Alexandria. The place is now called Abu Qir. The site of Arsinoe's temple, which disappeared long ago, is occupied by Qaitbay's fifteenth-century fort, but the name of Cape Zephyrion has been preserved at Abu Qir in a well-known seafood restaurant. A poem by Hedylus describes the wonderful mechanical toy contrived by the Alexandrian inventor Ktesibius, who specialized in hydraulics, as an ornament for the same shrine: a large wine-jar with a tap, surmounted by a statue of the Egyptian god Bes, which played a trumpet when the tap was opened.

The last great poet of the Ptolemaic empire was Meleager of Kos. Palestinian by birth, brought up in Tyre (Sur), he is generally regarded as the finest epigrammatist of the Alexandrian Age. In the first decade of the first century BC, he assembled the critical anthology known as *The Garland*, containing lyrics by at least forty-seven poets—all the major lyric poets down to his own time—with 130 of his own epigrams. Such collections were popular in Ptolemaic Alexandria. Widespread literacy among Greek-speaking men and women was accompanied by an unaffected love of literature, even among the otherwise uneducated, and fragments of similar anthologies have been found among papyri. Meleager's was certainly the most important, however, and though his original *Garland* itself is now lost, it became the basis of all later anthologies.

The city also saw literary activity in the Greek language outside the Greek community. The standard Greek translation of the Old

Testament that is known as “the Septuagint,” for example, was created by scholars drawn from Alexandria’s large Jewish population. They worked during several generations, beginning their labors perhaps as early as the first Ptolemy. Hebrew had long since been displaced in importance as a living language and the Septuagint was almost certainly created for the use of the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria, Cyrenaica, and Asia Minor. From the Latin *septuaginta*, meaning “seventy,” the name *Septuagint* is often indicated by the Roman numeral LXX and has given rise to the legend that the work of translation was done by some seventy-odd scholars working simultaneously in seventy *sukkoth* or “booths.” What is more likely, however, is that the name simply refers to this Greek version’s having been approved for non-ritual use by the Sanhedrin, the body of seventy-one priests, scribes and elders who were both the supreme court of justice and the highest governing council for Alexandrian Jews.

A copy of the Septuagint remains the most ancient complete text of any version of the Old Testament now known to be extant. The Septuagint is the version of the Old Testament that is quoted in the New Testament—which was, of course, entirely composed in Greek. And it is presumably the version of the Old Testament that was used by the earliest Christians, including the Apostles, as it still is by the Greek Orthodox Church today.

The Jewish scholars seem to have finished most of their translations before the beginning of the first century BC. The book of Ecclesiastes may not have been translated until as late as AD 100, however, and by that time the scholars’ work had come to include not only materials originally composed in languages other than Hebrew, but also materials of fairly recent date. A number of such materials, collectively called *Apocrypha*, are not recognized as “sacred and canonical” by some Protestant churches and are not included in Authorized Versions of the Bible, though they are often read. Among them is the Book of Wisdom, which was composed in Greek by an Alexandrian Jew between 100 BC and AD 40. Influenced by pagan Stoicism and Platonism, the author is presumed to have been attempting to counter the Epicurean tendencies said to be visible elsewhere in the Apocrypha.

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Under Cleopatra VII, the last real ruler (51–30 BC) of an independent Egyptian kingdom, Alexandria was still able to claim something of its old intellectual pre-eminence. Only an Alexandrian astronomer would do, for example, when Julius Caesar wanted a new calendar, which he commissioned shortly after he arrived in the city in 48 BC. Promulgated in Alexandria two years later, the Egyptian version survives as the Coptic calendar, while its Roman version, the Julian calendar, was used throughout Europe until 1582, in England and America until 1752, and in Russia until 1929.

During the first few days after his arrival Caesar also found time to beget the first of Cleopatra's sons, the future Ptolemy XIV Caesar, born on 23 June 47 BC and nicknamed "Caesarion" ("Little Caesar") by the Alexandrians. Shortly afterwards the young queen followed her middle-aged lover to Rome. She was unpopular with the Roman élite, who rightly distrusted her politics; and her gifts to influential men—she presented books to Cicero, for example—were accepted, but failed to win their approval. Despite the surrounding hostility she stayed in Rome with Caesarion until Caesar's assassination in 44 BC.

Cleopatra's most famous liaison, her eleven-year love affair with Mark Antony, the subject of the first French tragedy, two great English plays, and no fewer than seventy operas, brought her three more children—the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, and their brother Ptolemy Philadelphus. Yet it also had its intellectual side: ancient sources testify that Mark Antony made her a present of the great library of Pergamum, which had been assembled by her forefathers' old rivals, the Attalids, consisting of 200,000 parchment volumes. Added to the books in the Serapeum, they were undoubtedly destroyed, either in the Jewish Revolt of AD 115–117 or in the Christian riots of AD 391, when the rebuilt Serapeum was dismantled and smashed, stone by stone, once and for all.

In 30 BC the city fell to Octavian, Julius Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son, who had Caesarion murdered, allowed Antony's young children by Cleopatra to reign for a month, then annexed what was left of the Ptolemaic empire to Rome. The new temple

just off the waterfront that Cleopatra had been building for Antony became the Caesareum, an enormous shrine dedicated to the deified Julius Caesar. The two obelisks brought from the ruins of Heliopolis that were erected in front of this building by Roman engineers in 10 BC. are the “Cleopatra’s Needles” of New York and London, which have nothing at all to do with any Cleopatra.

Under Roman rule, Alexandria became no more than the chief city associated with one of the Emperor’s larger and more lucrative personal properties. Imperial patronage could still be obtained, but it was available only in Rome. Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher who attempted to create an amalgam of Judaism and Platonism, thus amusingly records a visit he made in AD 40 as head of an unsuccessful delegation to the mad Emperor Caligula. Leonidas of Alexandria, an astrologer as well as a poet, moved permanently to Rome from Egypt in the middle of the first century AD, where he was patronized by three Emperors.

Roman writers whose presence was inconvenient at home might, on the other hand, sometimes find themselves exiled to Egypt. The first Roman prefect, for example, was Vergil’s friend, the gifted soldier/poet/statesman Gallus, who was forced by Octavian to commit suicide for reasons that remain unknown. A manuscript of elegiac verses by Gallus is now the oldest manuscript of literary Latin on record, a single sheet, exquisitely inscribed, that was discovered by archaeologists of the Egypt Exploration Society at Qasr Ibrim. A century or so later the satirist Juvenal was ordered in old age to take command of troops stationed at Aswan, in the obvious confidence that he could not survive a blazing Nubian summer.

Something of Alexandria’s cosmopolitan sophistication continues, however, in the mocking humor of another Roman official, the long-lived Lucian of Samosata. Lucian wandered from his homeland in Syria through Greece, Italy, and Southern France, trying the professions of sculpture, rhetoric, and philosophy before settling in Egypt as a Roman bureaucrat near the end of the second century AD. Writing in Attic Greek, he is best known for his satirical dialogues and fantastic tales, which have spawned many imitations.

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The tradition of Alexandrian learning was meanwhile represented by the celebrated astronomer Claudius Ptolemy—no relation to the old royal family, which had been extinguished before he was born—a native son, who invented the science of trigonometry and improved methods of determining positions by reference to latitude and longitude. Using observations that had been carefully written down for just such a purpose by Alexandrian predecessors two centuries earlier, he developed the geocentric model of the universe during the second century AD that was to remain standard until Copernicus. His major astronomical work entered medieval Europe in the form of Latin versions of the Arabic translations, called *Almagest* (Arabic definite article *al* + Greek *megisté*, “greatest”), of his original Greek. Likewise standard for centuries, Ptolemy’s *Outline of Geography* remained unquestioned even after 1492, when Columbus discovered America. He also wrote one famous epigram. Robert Bridges’ translation successfully imitates the metre of the original:

Mortal though I be, yea ephemeral, if but a moment
I gaze up into the starry domain of heaven,
Then no longer on earth I stand: I touch the Creator,
And my lively spirit drinketh immortality.

Towards the end of the second century two new intellectual phenomena emerged in Alexandria, which had never been famous for philosophy: Christian learning and Neo-Platonism, two modes of thought that were destined to battle, embrace, then battle again. The founder of the Catechetical School, where Christianity was systematically taught, was a converted Stoic, while the founder of Neoplatonism was a lapsed Christian, who numbered at least one Father of the Church among his pupils. The greatest and most famous of the Neoplatonists was probably Plotinus, born in Asyut in about AD 205, who made many converts among the upper classes in Rome and whose works are still read with pleasure and profit. The last of these pagan philosophers to teach in Alexandria was the beautiful and learned Hypatia, who could claim a Christian bishop as her most out-

standing pupil. The fate she suffered in AD 415 was perhaps typical of what was happening in the city: herself the daughter of the last recorded member of the Mouseion, which was apparently still functioning toward the end of the fourth century, she was hauled from her chariot by a Christian mob and dragged to the Caesareum, which had been converted into a church. There she was stripped naked and torn to pieces.

To believe that the whole country had become Christian, however, would be wrong. For awhile, indeed, there was a pagan cultural revival, connected in part with a kind of nationalism. Palladas, a pagan teacher of literature in fourth-century Alexandria, for example, has left us 150 poems, including this wry comment on monastic life (translation by Peter Jay).

If solitaries, why so many?
So many, how are they then sole?
O crowd of solitaries
Feigning solitude!

Palladas did not find life easy, however, and the last decade of the fourth century must have been particularly trying. Only the pagan temple complex at Philae, built up by generations of patrons, was allowed—for political reasons—to continue functioning as a pilgrimage site until AD 543, when the Emperor Justinian finally sent an expedition up the Nile to put it out of business.

The Mouseion had already ceased to exist and both the great Libraries had perished. The creative energy that had originally informed Alexandria and produced its characteristic kind of literary life had likewise long since departed—for the New Rome, the imperial city of Constantinople. In this new capital, whence the statues from Philae had been taken and where Egyptian porphyry continued to distinguish the monuments of the Emperor from all others, a semblance of Alexandrian culture would be sustained, sometimes with difficulty, until 1204, when the city was sacked by Venetians and Crusaders. They imposed a barbarian occupation that lasted fifty-five years and disrupted literary life irrevocably.

III

To the Arabs who entered Alexandria as conquerors in AD 641, nearly a millennium after its foundation, the capital of the Byzantine province of Egypt was still impressive, though geographical, political, and spiritual upheavals had left little tangible evidence of much Hellenistic glory. The Royal Palace, the Mouseion, the Serapeum, the Sema, which had enclosed the body of Alexander, and the tombs of the Ptolemies had long since disappeared. So had the two great Libraries—contrary to what would be imaginatively claimed by Arab propagandists for the Ayyubid régime writing some six centuries later, who would invent a tale that had the Muslim victors using pagan manuscripts to heat water for their baths.

The city continued to enjoy something of its historic independence, however, as late as the reign of Ibn Tulun (868–884), who restored the only monument surviving from the reign of the Ptolemies: the huge lighthouse on the island of Pharos just offshore, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, which had lost its two top stories. Despite subsequent damage in several earthquakes, there was enough of the lighthouse still functioning in 1326 to make it worth a visit by Ibn Battutah, the famous medieval traveler, who saw the interior of its great square lower story.

When Ibn Battutah returned to Alexandria in 1349, however, he found the building ruinous and abandoned. An epidemic of plague the previous year—the Black Death, which was to recur in 1381—may have left no one alive who could man it in any case. And in October 1365 the city suffered a catastrophic blow: a devastating surprise attack, after a century of relative peace, by the Knights of Rhodes and their allies under the leadership of Peter of Lusignan, King of Cyprus. Landing from Venetian and Genoese ships, 12,000 of these Crusaders sacked the city, put every major building to the torch, and carried off 5000 people, who were variously held for ransom, enslaved, or put to death.

The fortress built a century or so later (1479) by Sultan Qaitbay out of the remains of the ancient lighthouse had little to defend. There was some reconstruction after the Ottoman

Conquest (1517), but even as a port the city declined, being gradually displaced by Rosetta (Rashid), which ultimately acquired a population several times Alexandria's. When a French expeditionary force under the ambitious young General Buonaparte arrived in Alexandria in 1798, it found a moribund and ramshackle coastal settlement surrounded by the remains of monumental walls, but inhabited by fewer than 6000 people.

The city's revival began under Muhammad Ali (1769-1849), nominally the Ottoman Sultan's Viceroy, but in fact almost an independent ruler, founder of the dynasty that was to reign over Egypt until 1952. Alexandria became the home port of his new navy, the largest in the Eastern Mediterranean. When its further expansion was halted by European intervention in 1841, however, the city's real fortunes had already come to rest on the cotton trade, which attracted investors from other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1849, for example, two brothers belonging to a well-known Constantinopolitan Greek family founded a firm called Cavafy Brothers, with branches in London and Liverpool, specializing in the importation of Egyptian cotton and the exportation of Manchester textiles. Peter, the younger of the two brothers, became a British citizen the following year and brought his fifteen-year-old wife and her baby son to England. They lived in Liverpool until 1854 or 1855, then moved to Muhammad Ali's new Alexandria. Here Peter founded another branch of Cavafy Brothers. It flourished to such an extent during the next few years that it became the firm's central office, while he fathered seven more sons, of whom the youngest, named Konstantinos, was born in 1863.

Though not yet the country's summer capital, Alexandria was already its second largest city; and by the end of the decade it would have a population officially approaching 220,000, of whom a quarter, more or less, would be European. Settling in Rue Sherif Pasha (now Shari` Salah Salim), the most fashionable street in the city, Peter Cavafy maintained his family in a lavish style that was deemed excellent for business. When he suddenly died in 1870, however, his widow found herself in such financial

difficulties that she was forced to take her brood to England, where the two eldest sons became managers of the London and Liverpool branches of Cavafy Brothers.

Konstantinos was seven. Throughout the next nine years, while his two brothers completed the ruin of the family's fortune with bad speculations, he became steeped in English ways, so thoroughly that his oldest Greek friends later wrote to him in English and addressed him as "Constantine P. Cavafy," the version of his name he eventually preferred and under which he became world famous. As "Constantine," he returned with his mother and five of his elder brothers to Alexandria in 1879, after Cavafy Brothers had been liquidated. He was then enrolled in a course of commercial training, with tutors at home for studies in English and French.

The British invasion of 1882 began with a devastating bombardment of Alexandria and the Occupation that followed ended the profitable mediating monopoly of the Ottoman-Greek commercial community. Since Cavafy Brothers no longer existed, however, there was nothing to prevent Cavafy's mother from fleeing with all six of her Alexandrian sons to Constantinople, where they took refuge with her father, a diamond merchant, who had a large house in the charming suburban summer resort of Yeniköy. Three sons returned to Alexandria, as soon as conditions would permit, to earn money to support their mother and the remaining three sons, including Cavafy, who had stayed behind in Yeniköy. In his grandfather's old wooden house on the Bosphorus, Cavafy wrote—in English—his first poetry. He also read Dante in the original and, of course, Greek poetry, in ancient, modern purist, and demotic dialects.

His education was completed, after his return to Alexandria in 1885, by seven years of reading in Latin, French, and English literature. Unable to study law, as he apparently hoped, he was employed as a correspondent for the Greek-language Alexandrian newspaper *Telegraphos* and assisted his brother Aristidis, who was a broker in the Alexandria Bourse. In 1892 he entered the Egyptian bureaucracy as a provisional clerk in the Ministry of Public Works. His languages—ancient and modern Greek,

Latin, English, French, Turkish, Italian, and Arabic—made him “useful,” according to the official records, though his having become a Greek citizen meant that he could never be appointed to any of the permanent positions in the Ministry, which were reserved for Egyptian or British citizens. He received regular promotion, however, and was allowed to supplement his meager salary by devoting whole afternoons to business on the side as a cotton broker.

In 1908, after the deaths of his mother and of three of his brothers and the emigration of the remaining two—one went to Cairo, the other to Paris—he moved into a flat at 10 Rue Lepsius, where he lived for the last twenty-five years of his life. It gradually became almost a pilgrimage site. The ground floor housed a lively and hard-working brothel. Noting in addition the proximity of a church and a hospital, Cavafy used to point out that he lived in a neighborhood where the claims of the flesh, the spirit, and the after-life could all be amply satisfied.

Cavafy retired from the Ministry of Public Works on 1 March 1922 and died on 29 April 1933, celebrated as a poet not only in the Greek-speaking world, but also wherever English literature is read: the roll-call of his admirers includes not only the Greek Nobel laureate George Seferis, but also E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Anthony Burgess, while the list of those who have acknowledged his poetry as a major influence on their own work is nobly headed by W. H. Auden. His last gesture, which might be explained by the Greek text of the little poem quoted below, was to draw a circle on a piece of paper and plant a single dot in its center.

He was buried in the Greek cemetery in Alexandria. There is a commemorative plaque in Arabic and Greek on the wall of 10 Rue Lepsius, now Shari` Sharm al-Shaykh, where his old flat is maintained by the Greek Consulate as a Cavafy museum.

Cavafy wrote several hundred poems, but preserved only the best. During his lifetime a few appeared first in two thriving Greek-language literary journals of early twentieth-century Alexandria, *Nea Zoe* and—after 1911—*Te Grammata*; others he had printed in booklets, pamphlets or broadsheets for private dis-

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tribution. Only after his death were published collections offered as such for sale to the public.

The settings of the works published while he was alive range in place from Alexandria to Constantinople or Antioch, and in time from the fourth century BC to the fourteenth AD—from the heyday of Ptolemaic glory to the threadbare reign of John VI Cantacuzino, who was crowned Emperor in 1347 wearing jewels of colored glass—then, overleaping five centuries, to the cosmopolitan Alexandria of his own time. The present is linked to both a Christian and a pagan past by elements that all three have in common. In a poem like the following, for example, the historical setting might be either BC or AD (my free translation).

INTERVENTION OF THE GODS

Now this will be done and then that, until
At a certain point our ways and deeds will
Be such and such. Living for here and now,
We'll strive to cope the one way we know how,
Trying harder the more we muck things up,
Thus making total chaos. Then we'll stop.
Then's the time when the gods will intervene,
As they always do. Down from their machine
They'll come. And some of us they will not touch;
Others—suddenly, skyward—they'll dispatch.
And after they've made order they'll retreat.
And then this man will do one thing and that.
One something else and likewise other men
Their things. And we'll start all over again.

One such element, of course, is the Greek language. Cavafy wrote in the Greek of educated Alexandrians of his own time, but always kept the option of purist alternatives, which echo the forms and meanings of classical Greek. Even linguistically, his work thus recapitulates the history of the Hellenistic culture that is identified with the city where he was born. His poems resemble, with their brevity and conciseness and their particular thematic concerns, the epigrams of Ptolemaic Alexandria, but they are also unmistakably as “modernist” as the work of Eliot or Ezra Pound.

A second unifying element is a sense of the world as a kind of

theatre in which the most enduring objects are two immaterial qualities—cultural pride and sexual passion. They endure because their results etch themselves into memory. The degree to which they matter, the seriousness and intensity with which even the recollection of them is faced, is not conveyed by attempts at eloquence, but rather by the kind of monumental awkwardness we see in a Cézanne still-life. While Cavafy's disdain of rhetoric distinguished his work from that of Greek contemporaries, his unclassical indifference to grace or to the appearance of *insouciance* likewise make his poetry very different from that of the Hellenistic masters. One little poem about Alexandria declares (in my translation) that

On the actual site
Of a house, above all, of landmarks, a block of flats,
which I see when I go for a walk, year after year,
I have brought you into being, both in joy and in sadness:
with so many circumstances, so many mundane things.
And you have become—perfectly—changed into feeling for me.

IV

Second in fame only to Cavafy among modern Alexandria's literary sons is Giuseppe Ungaretti, born in Alexandria in 1888, nearly a generation later. Ungaretti's parents were Italian peasants from Lucca: his father had come to work on the Suez Canal and earned enough to set up a bakery in the district of Muharrim Bey. However, he had suffered injuries and hardships that would lead to his long and painful death in 1890, when Ungaretti was only two. He and his brother Constantino, eight years older, grew up in the same district, "in a ramshackle house with a courtyard and chickens and a garden with three fig trees brought from Lucca." The influence of his Sudanese nanny is recorded in a poem of 1915: "From the Sudanese wet-nurse who brought me up/ I sucked the sun that had scorched her."

In 1904 Ungaretti was enrolled in the *École Suisse Jacot*. There he met Muhammad Shihab, his closest friend for the next nine years. He read Leopardi, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche,

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and began to write poems in French. At about this time he also met two French engineers who lived in the suburb of Maks: Jean Thuile, who was a novelist, and his brother Henri, a poet, who was the author of a published sonnet sequence, dedicated to his dead wife, that Ungaretti was to keep by his side throughout the next sixty-five years.

“They spoke to me of a port, a submerged port,” Ungaretti wrote later,

that must have preceded Ptolemaic times, proving that Alexandria was a port even before Alexander, that even before his time it was a city. We know nothing about this. My city destroys itself and annihilates itself from instant to instant. How can we find out about its origins if nothing at all survives—even of what happened a moment ago? We know nothing about it; there is no other sign of it than the port preserved in the depths of the sea—that sea which is the only document handed down to us from every age of Alexandria.

This submerged port became Ungaretti’s private symbol for the Italian culture he felt innate in himself long before he ever saw Italy at first hand.

Leaving school in 1905, Ungaretti wrote political pieces, literary articles, and short stories for publication in local papers that no longer exist, such as *Il Messaggero Egiziano*, and translated Edgar Allen Poe. During this period, an important friendship developed with the Italian novelist Enrico Pea (1881–1958), who had been brought to Alexandria as a boy, and was then working as marble cutter and living in a warehouse that had become a gathering place for anarchists. Ungaretti does not seem to have been introduced to Cavafy or to have read his work, though by 1911 he and Shihab were frequenting a café to meet Greek friends who included the editors of *Tè Grammata*, the recently founded review in which Cavafy was to publish many of his poems.

In 1912, armed with letters of introduction to Charles Péguy and Georges Sorel, editors of *Cahiers de la quinzaine*, and a manuscript of Pea’s to be delivered to publishers in Florence, Ungaretti left Alexandria for Paris, where he was to study law. His departure is recorded in a poem called “Levante,” published in 1919 (my translation).

The Massachusetts Review

LEVANTE

La linea
vaporosa muore
al lontano cerchio del cielo

Picchi di tacchi picchi di mani
e il clarino ghirigori striduli
e il mare è cenerino
atrem dolce inquiete
come un piccione

A poppa emigranti soriani ballano
A proa un giovane è solo
Di sabato sero a quest' ora
Ebrei
laggiù
portano via
il loro morti
nell'imbuto di chiocciola
tentennamenti
di vocoli
di lumi

Confusa acqua
come il chiasso di poppa che odo
dentro l'ombra
del
sonno

LEVANT

The line
of clouds expires
on the far circuit of the sky

Clackety-clack of heels, clackety-clack of hands
and the clarinet tootles shrilly
and the sea ashen
quivers
like a pigeon

On the poop-deck emigrant Syrians are dancing
At the prow is a young man by himself
On Saturdays evenings at this hour
Jews
back there
carry away

