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in focus

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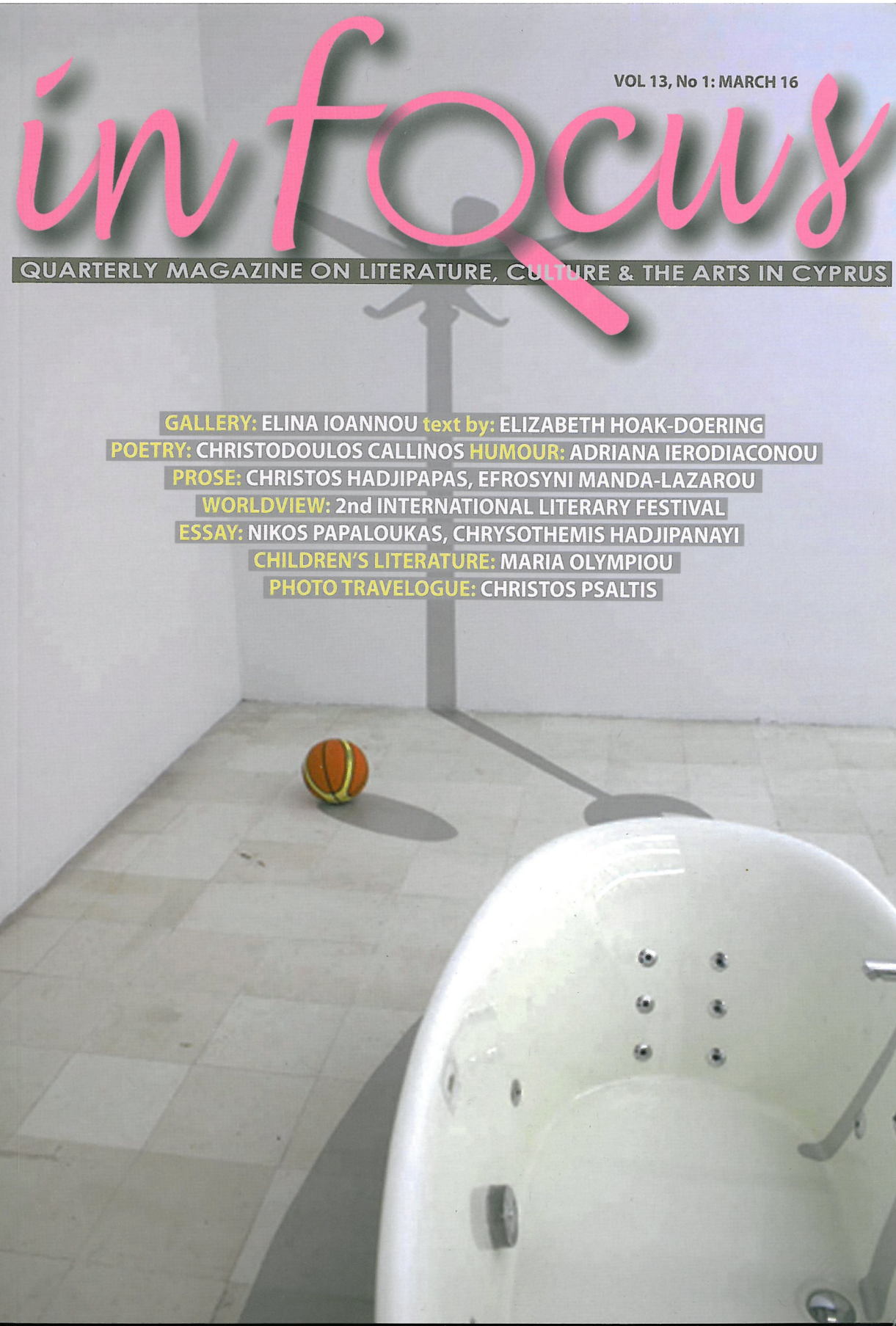
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FROM PAINTING THE TANGIBLE TO PAINTING THE INTELLIGIBLE

by Nikos Papaloukas

The history of modern western art conventionally begins in the 15th century with the Renaissance or with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. After the capture there was a transfer of development from the Eastern Roman Empire to the western world, as yet still free of the Ottomans. In my personal opinion, the Renaissance had begun with the creation of the Platonic Academy in Florence after the first sack of Constantinople.

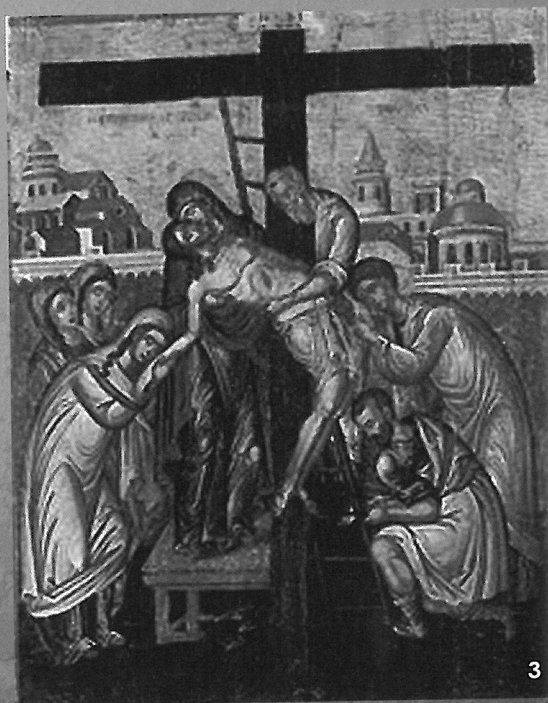
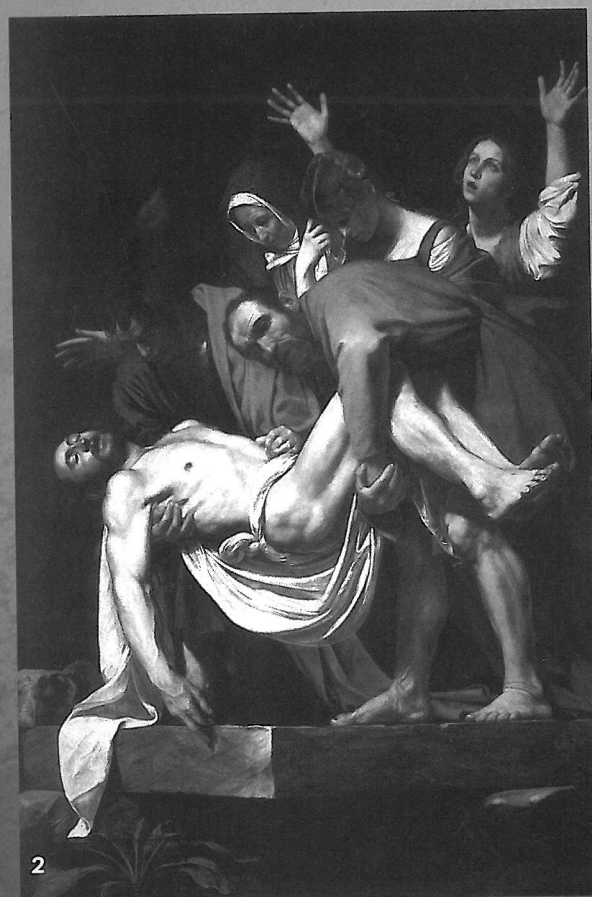
During the Renaissance the concept of a geocentric system still prevails. Man is the centre of the world with the result that everything revolves round him and his "potential". Man in the Renaissance had an aversion for the divine because it recalled his dark past, and, by extension, every metaphysical concept. He rejected what he could not verify from experience and experiment and confined his power of conception and reality itself to what for him could be measured, verified by experiment and was tangible by means of his senses.

In painting a method of representation developed which expressed this concept of the world and would prevail until the end of the 19th century. Of course there are exceptions, such as the case of Domenikos Theotokopoulos.

1. Leonardo da Vinci: "The Last Supper" 1498

In Leonardo da Vinci's work "The Last Supper" of 1498, we ascertain those characteristics which define the painting and the conception which exists about painting for a period of more than 400 years (ill. 1).

For the shaping of the pictorial space we have a fixed source of light. This light is diffused over the objects and delineates them in light and shade. The objects are depicted sculpturally by the method of chiaroscuro. The composition is defined by vertical horizontals and vanishing points and is static. Man is placed in the centre of the composition since the concept of a geocentric system still prevails. It is a style of painting which essentially imitates sculpture, aspiring to the illusion



1. Leonardo da Vinci: "The Last Supper" 1498
2. Caravaggio: "The Entombment of Christ" 1602-3
3. Unknown artist: "The Descent from the Cross", late Byzantine iconography.

of a three-dimensional Euclidean space. Painting has moved away from its property of interpreting the visual data of the surrounding space and transferring it to two dimensions.

The figure of Galileo then appears on the scene, an Italian physicist, mathematician, astronomer and philosopher. His ideas about a heliocentric system become known. This has the result of disturbing the peaceful, static nature possessed by the works of the Renaissance and the anthropocentric method of composition, since the Earth, and by extension man, ceases to be the centre of the cosmos. Mannerism and Baroque are successors to the Renaissance in art.

2. Caravaggio: "The Entombment of Christ" 1602-3

The ideas of Galileo disturb the calmness and static qualities which characterise the method of composition in the works of the Renaissance (ill. 2).

Man moves from the centre of the composition since he ceases to be the centre of the cosmos. Movement and dramatisation are aimed at. Movement is achieved by the diagonal method of composition and dramatisation is made possible by strong contrasts of light and shade. The emotional and subjective prevail over the rational and objective of the Renaissance. Morphoplastically, however, the concept of the pictorial space does not change. The general characteristics remain the same. There is a fixed source of light which is diffused over the objects and delineates them sculpturally in light and shade. Everything is depicted within a Euclidean geometry.

What changes is that the figures are portrayed "realistically" and express states and feelings. There is no idealisation of situations and things, something which the painting of the Renaissance sought after. Christ is depicted "realistically", loses his divine nature and is presented only with his human nature. (With the work "The Entombment of Christ" by Caravaggio we have literally the entombment of every metaphysical concept from western art and there is no predestination and purpose.)

3. Unknown artist: "The Descent from the Cross", late Byzantine iconography.

A combination of perspectives is used for the depiction – vertical, frontal and Euclidean. The concept of space is something broader than that which can be verified empirically, measured or perceived by means of the senses (by what Euclidean geometry imposes). In Byzantine art there is greater morphoplastic freedom despite the limitations which the theology of the icon imposes.



4. Raphael: "The School of Athens" 1510-11. Fresco.



5. Dominique Ingres: "The Embassy of Agamemnon" 1801.



6. Paul Cezanne: "The Card Players" 1892-5

As regards the style, there is restraint in the rendering of the theme and in the expression of feelings. The pain and the drama are treated with dignity. Christ and the other figures in the composition are depicted arrayed in their divine nature. The surrounding space is transformed with man. Everything is depicted in as it was before the Fall and at the same time in the future age.

The Ancient Greeks considered hearing and sight the superior senses and linked sight in particular with the intellect. This tradition, which makes sight superior to the other senses, giving it a metaphysical extension, continues with the Fathers of the Church. In the art of Byzantine iconography a pictorial space is created which, through visual perception, is directed to the sense of sight and through the sense of sight to the intellect. In this way the icon acquires intellectual meaning and metaphysical extension. The light does not follow the "natural determinism" which the classic concept of physics imposes. The figures and the surrounding space are not depicted "realistically". Everything is transformed and altered by means of an "unbegotten light", as the Fathers of the Church describe it, thus attaining their metaphysical purpose. Byzantine iconography, faithful to the eschatological message of the Church, depicts historical figures, the saints, in their divine state before the Fall and at the same time in a future age.

Despite subjugation by the Ottomans, art did not lose its metaphysical perspective.

4. Raphael: "The School of Athens" 1510-11. Fresco.

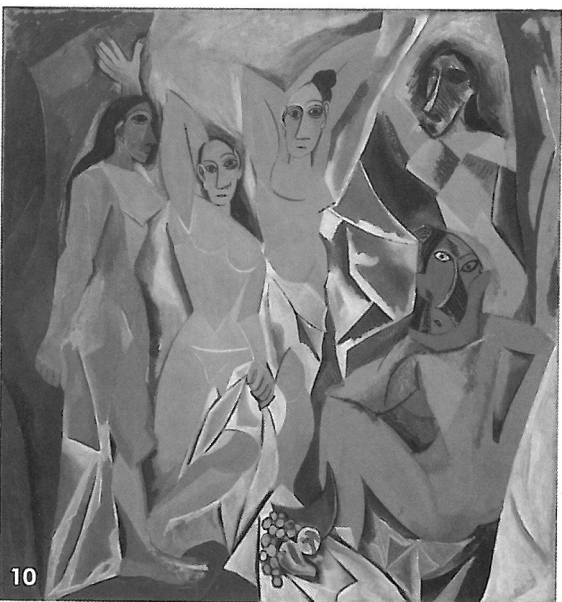
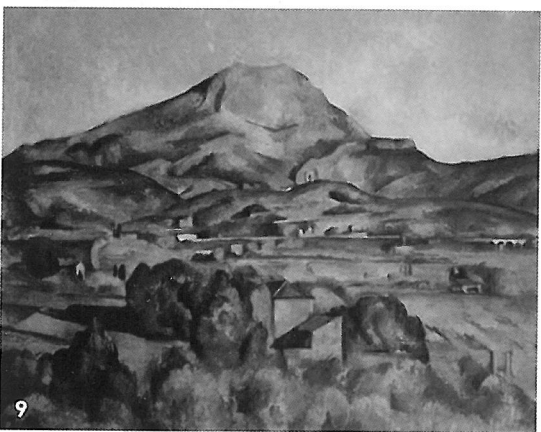
In western art the system of representation, which had begun with the Renaissance, finds its theoretical principles and its scientific base in Descartes and then in Newton.

Descartes is a French mathematician, positive scientist and philosopher. He prescribes a normative conception of reasoning. He limits the meaning of Reason to rational forms, measurable and empirically verifiable. Thus he takes away from Reason its purpose of giving meaning to the cosmos. Odysseas Elytis has said, referring to the Greek language, "For what we don't know, let the words reveal it to us."

Isaac Newton is an English mathematician, astronomer, alchemist, philosopher and theologian. His theory of the universe assigns everything to a predetermined place and motion i.e. it functions mechanically. Time follows a linear course. Everything evolves successively. In the work of Raphael we can discern that these ideas find their application in paint-

ing (ill. 4). Everything is placed successively in a previously given setting. Things have a specific position. They can be verified and counted. Euclidean geometry lends itself to this purpose.

The movements which follow in western art – rococo, classicism, romanticism, realism – do not differ essentially from this entrenched concept of the cosmos. One movement succeeds the other in an effort to allow the emotional to prevail over the rational or objectivity over subjectivity. The system of depiction, however, remains the same.



7. Vincent van Gogh: "The Starry Night" 1889.

8. Paul Gauguin: "Two Tahitian Women on the Beach" 1891.

8. Paul Gauguin: "Mont Sainte-Victoire" 1895

10. Pablo Picasso: "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" 1907

5. Dominique Ingres: "The Embassy of Agamemnon" 1801.

In the 18th century, with the Enlightenment, there was a development of the same concept of the cosmos. The man of the Enlightenment identifies mystery with magic and with superstition and takes faith in the divine as human weakness. Apart from function there is no meaning and purpose in the broadest sense. Ideologies come to cover the absence of interpretation and metaphysical perspective of the cosmos, which becomes more and more tangible. The ideologies, however, are systems which aspire to explain the functioning of the cosmos, which they take as becoming without prospect and purpose. They remain unrealised and with them the need of man to be fulfilled as a complete personality, psychosomatically and intellectually. It appears that from the distinction which Parmenides made between "becoming" and "being", the Italian Renaissance and the French Enlightenment concerned themselves only with "becoming".

In art, the romanticism and realism which follow, despite their apparent differences, essentially do not manage to escape from the specific conception of things and the previously established system of representation. (ill. 5)

The break with the established method of conception comes at the end of the 18th century with Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne (ill. 6,7,8,9)

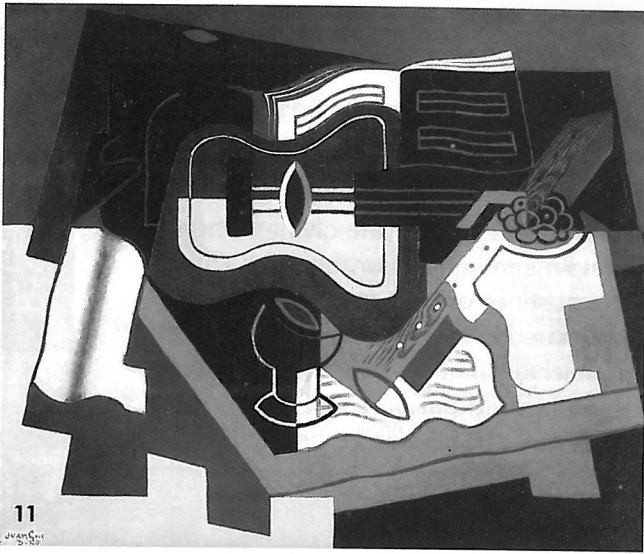
6. Paul Cézanne: "The Card Players" 1892-5

In the works of these three painters the composition is created by the combination of large and small patches of colour. We have the appearance of chromatic planes. Representation is sought in stereometric blocks. Shape and colour assert their autonomy. Figures lose their anatomical "authenticity". Vertical and frontal perspective is used. Renaissance perspective is rejected.

In Van Gogh (ill.7) the modelling is done with brush strokes of colour and tension, explosiveness and spontaneity dominate.

In Paul Gauguin (ill.8) the modelling is done with large flat areas of colour. Decisiveness characterises the composition and serenity prevails. In his work there is also something which we can characterise as primitive.

In Paul Cézanne (ill. 9) the modelling is done with large brush strokes of colour which, because of their size, can be characterised as planes. Depiction is sought in stereometric blocks such as cylinder, cone, cube and sphere. Restraint, discretion and reasoning prevail. Cézanne devotes a lot of time to the completion of his works. He has his own view of the cosmos and is faithful and dedicated to this.



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In the "Philebus", Plato considers that the pure and unalloyed is characteristic of the beautiful. Elsewhere, in a definition which he gives of a work of art, he says that a work of art is made up of parts which constitute a whole, a living organism, and that this living organism is beautiful in itself thanks to its component parts and not necessarily because it depicts something. With their work, these three artists fulfill Plato's views.

From modernism and after, art appears to cover the absence of meaning and perspective and the need for metaphysical statement in the western world.

At the beginning of the 20th century important developments occurred. In 1906 Albert Einstein announced the Theory of Relativity. According to the new theory, space and time are understood as a continuum of space-time. With the speed of light all things converges in the present, that is to say that they can take place in the present. This means that situations past-future, in front-behind, up-down, right-left, are con-

11. Juan Gris: "Guitar and Clarinet" 1913

12. Pablo Picasso: "Still Life with Mandolin" 1913.

13. Emmanuel Panselinos: "The Last Supper" 1290.

ventions which the human mind can transcend. What is important, beyond the theory itself, is that experience and the senses are not now sufficient on their own to interpret the cosmos but the intellect is imperative. Man as an intelligent being can interpret and give meaning to the cosmos. The creator is free to interpret the world and to give meaning to his works beyond the conventions which classical physics impose.

A year later, 1907, Pablo Picasso presents his work "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (ill. 10). In this work we see there is a multi-focal approach and a combination of perspectives. The whole composition is treated frontally while the table at the bottom is depicted panoramically. At the bottom right there is the back of a seated figure and at the same time the head is shown frontally. The creator moves around in the space and sees the objects from different visual angles and does not hesitate to depict each time the most recognisable aspect of the objects. The figure on the left stylistically harks back to a kouros of the archaic period, the second figure from the left to a Cycladic figurine and the head on the upper right to an African mask. We see, that is, that the creator moves in space and also in time.

The specific work is important because it opened new paths in painting. Without this we could not have subsequently seen works like Juan Gris' "Guitar and Clarinet" 1913 (ill. 11) and Pablo Picasso's work "Still Life with Mandolin" 1913.

11. Juan Gris: "Guitar and Clarinet" 1913.

12. Pablo Picasso: "Still Life with Mandolin" 1913.

13. Emmanuel Panselinos: "The Last Supper" 1290.

Thanks to this we reassess Byzantine works (ill. 13) and we do not reject them because they cannot be included in a concept of the cosmos or a system of representation. The fact that they do not follow a specific perspective is not considered a weakness.

I close by saying that in his book "Art and Beauty in the Aesthetics of the Middle Ages" Umberto Eco says that it is not medieval man who does not have aesthetics but that we have aesthetics which are too limited to appreciate works of that period.

Translated by Christine Georghiades

Nikos Papaloukas studied graphic design and painting at the Aristotelion University of Thessaloniki. He has presented his work in individual and group exhibitions, and was featured in *In Focus* Vol. 12, No.3, in August 2015.

Christian Reception in the Poetry of Cavafy

By Chrysothemis Hadjipanagi

Either self-referential or implicit testimonies of Cavafy's biographers on his stance vis-à-vis matters of faith and other manifestations of religious life, at times interpreted through the prism of occasional or fragmentary or even obsessive criteria, contain the element of an external superficial semiology. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that intratextual signifieds be probed in the context of an unprejudiced review of at least some pertinent poems from both his early and mature poetic output.

Firstly, in his poem "In church", there is from the first verse an explicit confession not of faith to God but a blissful expression of love for the church, the house of his faithful, by synecdoche the liturgical area for the gathering of the Graeci, arranged according to the internal ceremonial decoration of Byzantine church building. The first-person form of the verb, "I love the church" can in no way render the poet a cold observer as falsely inferred by some. There is no resemblance, in this regard, between him and that volatile, feisty student of Ammonios Sakkas, the Christian-bred Alexandrian Neoplatonist for whom the church is nothing but a parodic curiosity of his calculating hypocrisy, according to another Cavafian poem¹.

After the cautionary three-verse stanza, the introductory verse of the second stanza categorically declares: "Whenever I go there, into the church of the Greeks", the effect of his entry and of his nostalgic ecclesiastical methexis being emphasized in the poem's last two verses: "my thoughts turn to the great glories of our race/to the splendour of our glorious Byzantine heritage". And this glory is, obviously, not to be understood without the glorifying invocation of the sacred and the holy of Greeklife and Christianlike Orthodoxy, as set out in the five intermediate verses: the aromatic incense, the polyphonic chanting and the priests with the Byzantine magnificence of their schema, emblematic adornment

1. See the third stanza of the poem "From the school of the renowned philosopher". Cavafy, *Ποιήματα (1919-1933) Β*, editing by G.P. Savvides, Ikaros 1963, pp. 28-29.

of their gold-threaded vestments. For obvious historic reasons, Cavafy differentiates both verbally and conceptually the Greek nationals from the Greek Orthodox Graeci as the latter, a bridge linking the Ancient Greek world to the Byzantine one, attest the ontological continuity and, at critical junctures of tribulation, the national awakening of Hellenism through its racial origin and Orthodoxy, as brought out by the Greek homelands of the East.

But let us see who his own saints are, those with whom he chooses to converse poetically in the poems of the Canon as well as in his unpublished and unfinished poems, revealing aspects of their sacred martyrdom and their remarkable devout existence. Again, without Cavafy theologizing or hymning with Synaxarian tones and ecclesiastical heirmoi, we capture one of the impulses of [his] poetry, where the boundaries of [his] art were laid down²: delving into the pages of ecclesiastical history, of sacred tradition and paternal teachings, he poetically recasts the most captivating moments of the life of some of the saints and ascetic

hosiomartyrs of our Christian calendar. Let us begin with his unpublished poem "Simeon"³, composed in July 1917. These are two characteristic stanzas: "I slipped in among the Christians/ praying and worshipping in silence/ there revering him. Not being a Christian myself/ I couldn't share their spiritual peace – / I trembled all over and suffered;/ I shuttered, disturbed, terribly moved./ Please don't smile; for thirty-five years – think of it – / winter and summer, night and day, for thirty-five years/ he's been living and suffering on top of a pillar./ Before either of us was born (I'm twenty-nine, you must be younger than I am),/ before we were born, just imagine it./ Simeon climbed up his pillar/ and has stayed there ever since facing God.

Cavafy had early manifested an interest in the lives of the Saints, as demonstrated by his extensive comment on Gibbon⁴: "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. [...] People came from the farthest West and from the farthest East,

2. See the poem "Understanding", *C. P. Cavafy Ποιήματα (1896-1918)* A, editing by G.P. Savvides, Ikaros 1963, p. 64.

3. See C.P. Cavafy, *Αθημοσίευτα Ποιήματα (1822-923)*, editing by G.P. Savvides, Ikaros, Athens, 1968, pp. 175-177.

4. See D. Haas, *Cavafy's Reading Notes on Gibbon's "Decline and Fall"*, *Folia Neohellenica*, 1982, pp. 66-67.