

The title of our entertainment. Wine-dark. It's wonderful.

It caught your attention, it brought you here, it rightly made you think there will be a lot of Homer.

It provides the dominant *metaphor* for this evening, which is to be a voyage through Greek poetry. And you are going to hear some passages which *literally* describe voyages.

Other main factor affecting choice was the need to relate the readings to the objects in this museum, objects you can see immediately afterwards.

Artefacts, poems dealing with the scenes depicted, or describing artefacts (as famously Homer in the Shield), celebrating the craftsman.

## SLIDE

Given that so many objects we have were grave-goods in some sense of the word, you won't be surprised that Death, bereavement and consolation will be important.,

Another main theme is that of friendship. The original idea and the detailed planning of the whole evening have grown out of friendships that have been ripening in the past six years of my engagement with Greek poetry; and several of my poems were suggested by friends.

That's one of the reasons why I don't want you to think of this evening as a performance, and why we would rather you did not applaud after each item or even after each group.

The categories are not mutually exclusive.

One of these new friendships in particular has brought sadness in bereavement, because Colin Austin, who read Sophocles for me in February, and had accepted my invitation to be one of the readers this evening, died in August.

I hope, though, that feelings of loss will shade into consolation when Colin's daughter comes to read a few of his Greek poems.

The readers are going to be:

**Teesta Austin,**

**Anastasia, who has a Ph. D in archaeology,**

**Christos Tsirogiannis (another Greek archaeologist who is just *beginning* his Ph. D),**

**Michael Carroll (Dublin and Oxford to do a Ph. D in Aeschylus (he will be changing the slides**

**Alderik Blom, Holland, St John's and Anglo-Saxon, Norse and now Oxford**

**Myself**

**And two people planted among you.**

We start our 'voyage' with a poem about our metaphorical voyage of exploration. It was written in Alexandria

## SLIDE

exactly one hundred years ago by Cavafy, and it was the first of his poems to be published in England.

The title gives it all away.

## SLIDE

Literally and metaphorically, we are heading for Ithaca.

In fifty minutes from now, you'll realise just how marvellously appropriate it is.

Anastasia and Christos will read it all, and in this case, the translation is complete. We really want you to take the ideas and the mood on board.

Our voyage is also a voyage in the fourth dimension,  
A voyage through time,  
And our second port of call, while not very far from Alexandria,  
Takes us back 1800 years

## SLIDE

The passage is very brief, but it is intended to make several vital points:

AG poetry doesn't have to be in the Attic dialect, nor in metre;

Aesop wasn't the last author of fables; the Greek language is a seamless whole.

Anastasia and Christos pronounce the words as if they were written yesterday and they can understand them almost as easily as we do Shakespeare, even though they were written no less than 2000 years ago

I don't think you'll need a translation if I point out a few key words on this first page,

Wise, house, rock, rain, rivers and wind

And invite you to remember the rhythms of The Three Little Pigs.

The NT is of course full of great poetry that we have only in Greek:

Parables, beatitudes, I Corinthians 13, The Book of Revelation and so on

## SLIDE

We come next to Greek poetry in praise of the good life, so called,

Symbolised in this mosaic in the next Gallery.

We shall travel backwards another 150 years

## SLIDE

to a prose poem, according to recent scholarship, written directly in Greek,  
which opens with a *Carpe Diem* passage

worthy of the great poets of the Renaissance,

who knew the sadness of the motif:

Eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die.

Tasso's pleasure garden is the saddest part of the whole poem.

As you can read, the work was always known as the Wisdom of Solomon,

But think of the first ten chapters as great poetry belonging to the whole of the ancient world.

## SLIDE

We'll stay with Wisdom literature, so called,  
But go back another 100 years,  
To a work written in Hebrew (lost completely for 2000 years),  
Translated into Greek by the author's grandson,

For most of which the Greek is our fons et origo.

I'm going to ask the two archaeologists  
to read a passage in praise of the craftsmen  
specifically smiths and potters,

Who produced the objects you're going to look at afterwards.

Another leap of 100 years

## **SLIDE**

And we reach 250 BC, and we're back in Alexandria.

This was the time when the whole of the Hebrew Bible was translated (closely, but not slavishly) into ordinary spoken Greek,

in the translation of the 70, the Septuagint,

made in Alexandria in the third century BC,

a text which had the same familiarity and status for educated Jews in the first century  
as the King James Bible did for the Victorians.

There would have been no Sirach, no Solomon,

no *New Testament* in Greek,

without the vocabulary and syntax of the *Old Testament* in Greek..

It's only at this point in the proceedings that we have to face up to the different ways of pronouncing Greek.

You've heard with your own ears how completely at home Anastasia and Christos are with the language of the Bible,

But, alas, in the Greek literature of earlier centuries, the language still made a fundamental distinction between long and short syllables,

And the metre of earlier poetry depends on quantity.

And we're now going to switch, dramatising the shift half way through the extract.

You'll recognise it if I tell you that this means 'shadow of death'.

Christos will read the first half, exactly as you might hear it next Sunday in the Greek Orthodox Church on the other side of the road from St John's. The second half will be read by me, substituting sounds that might have been more recognisable to the native speakers of Greek who gave instruction to Lucretius and Virgil.

(I won't go into detail, but in essence we will all be using the values for the vowels and diphthongs that scholars have reconstructed for Athenian speech in the fifth century BC, but making compromises with two processes that must have been well advanced in the year 0 and already underway in in third-century Alexandria, that is, touching in the accented syllables with light dynamic stress and pronouncing the three aspirated plosives as fricatives.

Let us now praise famous men. Or Wisdom praise of.

*Montage of busts from Cast Gallery?*

So in syntax and in sound, you are to imagine yourself as being in Alexandria in classical times, the international megalopolis, recently founded by a Macedonian who was taught by Aristotle, the seat of the first great Library, the place where ancient texts were collected, edited, annotated, marked with rudimentary accents, to provide the texts that we now know (there is hardly anything we read today for which the main source is earlier).

The experience of reading there is most seductively visualised by Lord Leighton in 1880. Smile at him, but notice that the *Odyssey* is not being improvised in a palace by a blind bard, nor being declaimed in the square by a guild-member, but read aloud in a medium-sized room about the size of this gallery, from a scroll which the citizens could buy from a bookshop in a reliable text.

We are all Alexandrians, for all of us, too, Ancient Greek is not just a second, but probably a *fourth* language.

Now, the Alexandrian scholars and litterati who revered and preserved the poetry of a glorious past also wrote their own poetry, sophisticated miniatures, epigrams. And for the next few minutes we're going to read poems from a new anthology, made by a Californian friend, which I hope you'll all dash out and buy tomorrow: it seems to me a perfect introduction to the Greek Anthology (and to Catullus and Martial).



A number of these are small-scale poems about small-scale artefacts, settings in gold or a precious or semi-precious stone, as in the these three example from three yards away.

The poet is Posidippus, the first is gently erotic, the second a celebration of art (a meta-poem, as they say) XVII, XIX

*One composite of two lovers, one composite of two bracelets, necklaces, rings, whatever*

Others are touchingly tender portraits, of older women, in humble occupations (like the tamiê or Eurikleia), such as this one, still Posidippus;

*The vase of woman with distaff for first part and one of maidens in a frieze for second.*

As you can see this poem is still faithful to the origins of the genre (an epigram is something written on something, an inscription, often an epitaph

Many of them still retain the conventions of the epitaph on a tomb, perhaps were really written for a real death, and we can illustrate these with some stelai and funerary monuments, not for gods or heroes or emperors, but children or wives etc.

P. 38, I, II, III (those by a woman poet, Anyte, one of the earliest).

Or, steering back to the voyage on the wine-dark sea, here are two, with appropriate images, for drowned sailors, buried very near the shore, the first by one of the more resonant names, Asclepiad, p. 77, I

*One Lansdowne ship (?). The Snodgrass image.*

The second again by Posidippus., p. 94, IV.

Posidippus is a poet particularly associated with Colin Austin (who contributed decisively to an edition of a new group of poems discovered only as late as the 1980s). Colin wrote epigrams himself, and the most characteristic examples are inspired by, and refer to, a painting by his wife Mishtu (like this one), the text and image being combined in a personal Xmas card for his many friends.

As I said, Colin should have been one of the readers tonight, but he lost the last battle with cancer in August, so I have asked his daughter to read us five of his poems, while we look at his wife's pictures, each pairing seeming to me in perfect sympathy with Alexandrian art and poetry.

1996 Girls and winter solstice

1997 Orpheus and lyre (4 lines)

[2000 Ganges source]

2002 Birds of Paradise

2005 Waterfall

2006 Dream Music

Colin bore his succession of illnesses with amazing fortitude, in a spirit which is captured in two short poems by Leonidas, whose birthplace was Tarentum, modern Taranto in the heel of Italy

XI and XII

*Images of old man, bent, with staff, perhaps, and one genuine inscription.*

Leads us to the values celebrated by Crates, the cynic, associated with xxxxxx, chosen by Schofield.

*Man with staff facing Pat with Rucksack*

## WHERE SAPPHO?

From a poem chosen by Chair of Classics to a passage suggested by Chair of English.

Horses in interaction with men, finest things in black figure, horses ridden, horses in procession, horses in chariots, horses in conversation.

Iliad. Place in poem. Patroclus killed by Hector. New armour and shield. Flaxman.

Ecphrasis to begin and end all ecphrases. Go forth to kill Hector and drag his body (vase).

Here is the link.

So good we'll do twice, with titles and images, with text for you to see how I handle the metre.

Now for Homer in the poem I've got to know in the original as I swore in about 1952 that I would (My plays draw on sixteen of the 24 books). Focussed not only on the wily hero, and his *peripeties* but on the women who loved him, and will give you three of these heroines revealing their very different kinds of personality and love in the words given them by blind Melesigenes.

Athene pleads for nostos to Ithaca.

Voyage: boat building, raft-building, provisioning, setting out, steering serenely by the stars.

Rather than attempt the wrecking of that raft, we'll glance at Aeschylus and the wreck of another hero returning from the Troy, 650-73.

Nausikaa's delicate proposal, don't throw bouquets at me.

Penelope's sad confession, shortly before the climax.

From here to Cavafy again. You have travelled there, you took a long while, you saw Egyptian towns and Phoenician art, you've arrived with much experience, you can see what all these Ithacas mean.

I'll read the end (to show the interpenetration).