

This book was published on the occasion of "Cavaty's World," an exhibition jointly organized and exhibited at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, The University Museum of Art, and the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, all at the University of Michigan, from February 21 through May 5, 2002.

This book was generously funded by the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, the Foundation for Modern Greek Culture, the Greek Ministry of Culture, President Lee Bollinger of the University of Michigan, and the Constantine A. Tsangadas Trust of the Rackham Graduate School of the University of Michigan.

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ISBN: 960-201-154-8

«...what these Ithakas mean.»
Readings in Cavafy

«...ἡ Ἰθάκες τί σημαίνουν.»
Αναγνώσεις στον Καβάφη

Editors

Artemis Leontis, Lauren E. Talalay and Keith Taylor



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΛΟΓΟΤΕΧΝΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΟ ΑΡΧΕΙΟ
HELLENIC LITERARY AND HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

ΑΘΗΝΑ 2002 ATHENS

There is a well-known photo of Cavafy looking the part of the perfect Greek gentleman, sitting not entirely at ease on a divan in his apartment in Rue Lepsius. The scene brings to mind Giorgio de Chirico's painting *The Return of Ulysses* (1968), in which the center of the artist's flat is filled with the Homeric hero rowing ashore. We look at the demure Cavafy, the clerk and stockbroker, and think of Cavafy's own Odyssean poem, "Ithaka," perhaps the greatest poem of the twentieth century, and somehow these images are ineluctably superimposed on each other.

We look at a second photo—this one a still life of Cavafy's apartment filled with heavy-set furniture of the "Victorian" age, a family legacy. The scene, with its surface of quiet domesticity, evokes another de Chirico painting, *Furniture in the Valley* (1966), the chairs and wardrobes of the artist relocated to an Arcadian valley with classical temple and broken column in the background, an homage to the displacement of cosmopolitan families, like his own, and like Cavafy's—"homeless" families who worked in the service of diplomacy or global trading firms—whose belongings were forever being relocated somewhere else.

Born in Alexandria (1863), raised in London (1872-79), resident for a time in Constantinople (1882-85), returning finally to Alexandria (1885), Cavafy's life anticipated the fortunes of the modern Greek merchant diaspora, sliding from the comfortable wealth of the British cotton trade into the genteel poverty of Alexandria. Alexandria in the twentieth century will be remembered by posterity for one thing: it was where Constantine

Cavafy lived. Yet Cavafy at midlife had mixed feelings about a city that, after all, the Ottomans only recently had brought back to life as a free port, all its ancient splendor long gone. "I'll go to another country, go to another shore, find another city better than this one . . ." protests the poet exiled from the great centers of his youth. "How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?" Yet the balance of Cavafy's poetry is a retort to self-pity, and a lesson in how to live outside of the glittering center. When the poet complains of how "wherever I turn, wherever I look, I see the black ruin of my life," his daimon tells him "you won't find a new country, won't find another shore." London is too expensive and Constantinople too impolitic. Instead "this city will always pursue you. You'll walk the same streets, grow old / in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in those same houses . . ." The judgment of the daimon is unequivocal: "You'll always end-up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere."

What advice for a poet! Don't hope for things elsewhere. Cavafy took this to heart, perhaps because he thought that the damage was already done: "there's no ship for you, there's no road. Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner, you've destroyed it everywhere in the world." But, of course, the opposite was true. Cavafy did not waste his life. How many of the celebrated writers of his day does anyone remember now? The judgment of time cares nothing for contemporary reputation. The obscure Alexandrine who distributed mimeographed copies of his poems to his friends in the end won the heart of the world forever.

He did this by recasting his city. He created a continuum between its checkered modernity and its ancient days, setting the furniture of his own time in a timeless classical frame. He invented a Hellenic kosmopolis, neither old nor new—filled with beauty and disappointment, art and longing, sensuality and political illusion. He submitted the city of his own day to Art: "The setting of houses, cafés, the neighborhood that I've seen and walked through years on end: I created you while I was happy, while I was sad, with so many incidents, so many details" ("In the Same Place," 1929).

In the end Alexandria became Cavafy's, as much as Athens became Plato's and London became Dickens's.

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