

TNH/COSTAS BEI

illed the orchestra and balcony
litorium to pay tribute to Con-

stantine P. Cavafy and enjoy his poetry. Olympia Dukakis and
Kathleen Turner were among those who participated onstage.

etry was published in newspa-
pers and journals in the last
decades of the 19th century. He
would later repudiate most of
his early published verse by not
including it in the collections he
distributed privately, although
he never destroyed these early
poems or others that remained
unpublished and unfinished.
Cavafy's publishing method was
both idiosyncratic and calculat-
edly clever: partly aesthetic in
his aristocratic disdain for the
vulgarity of mass publishing, but
equally guarded in his choice of
whom to entrust with his daring
homeroetic verses, Cavafy never
brought out an official volume
of poetry during his lifetime, de-
spite offers from various publish-
ers urging him to do so. He
would print out poems in single
broadsheets that he would then
distribute in pamphlets and
clipped folders, often later re-
gathering those he had distrib-
uted in order to replace and sup-
plement the collection with new
or revised poems. Later, sewn
booklets were created contain-
ing some 69 poems. The first
canonical edition of his poems
was published posthumously in
Alexandria in 1935 by his heir
and literary executor Alekos Sin-
gopoulos.

Cavafy traveled abroad only
seldom in his adult life – four
trips to Greece and one to Eng-
land and France– preferring to
stay in Alexandria, the city to
which he was passionately de-
voted and where he could com-
port himself as its self-appointed
flâneur. Although exceedingly
private, Cavafy cultivated a cir-
cle of friends who were avid ad-
mirers of his poems, including
notable writers and prominent
literary critics in Greece, Eng-
land, France, Italy and Alexan-
dria. He also sought out the
company of local painters and
sculptors, and was fond of ob-
serving and interacting with the
young working class Greeks of
the city. He's on record as saying
"I don't understand affection and
hatred except as affection and
hatred for my work." The great
balm for his old age was the ap-
probation of younger poets for
his work, as the lines from his
poem "Very Seldom" make
plain:

*He's an old man. Used up and
bent,
crippled by time and indulgence,
he slowly walks along the
narrow street.
But when he goes inside his
house to hide
the shambles of his old age, his
mind turns
to the share in youth that still
belongs to him.
His verse is now recited by
young men.
His visions come before their
lively eyes.
Their healthy sensual minds,
their shapely taut bodies
stir to his perception of the
beautiful.*

(translated by George
Economou)

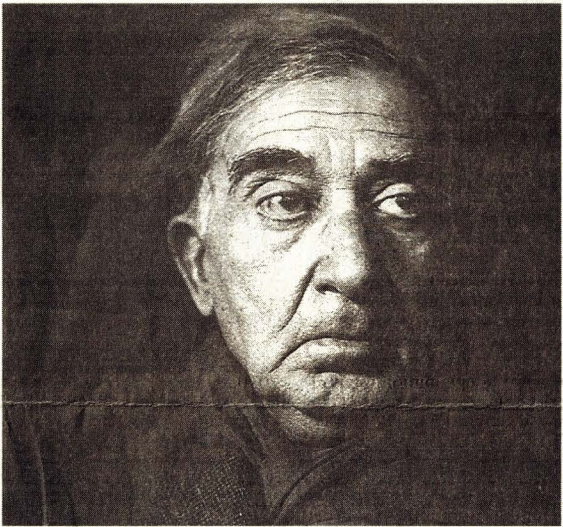
The poem's concluding sen-
timent – new generations of
readers stirred by his perception
of the beautiful – is perhaps an
appropriate note on which to
conclude this brief biographical
overview: we are left with an
image of a poet anticipating his
own posterity as we celebrate
the extraordinary legacy that
Cavafy has bequeathed to the
world of art 150 years after his
birth.

Ten Reasons Why You Should Drop Everything and Read Cavafy R ght Now

By Vassilis Lambropoulos

In 1999 I was hired by the
University of Michigan to hold
the newly-endowed Modern
Greek Chair, a position that has
been shared by the Departments
of Classical Studies and Compar-
ative Literature. When I was
asked about a possible name for
the Chair, without a moment's
hesitation I suggested the name
of the author Constantine P.

Cavafy. I did it because I felt that
Cavafy was the most represen-
tative Greek person (and not just
writer) for the 21st century, and
I do not think I was wrong. His
worldwide reputation has be-
come apparent this year as we
celebrate 150 years since his
birth and 80 years since his
death. From Tokyo to New York
and from Melbourne to Oxford,
this double anniversary has been
honored with lectures, screen-
ings, conferences, concerts, dis-
cussions, and many more events.
Astonishingly, almost every day
during 2013 there has been an
event somewhere around the
world recognizing this great
writer.



But why is Cavafy so widely
admired? Why do we continue
to be fascinated by his work?
Why do we read him much more
than we read other eminent
Greek writers like Kostis Pala-
mas, Nikos Kazantzakis, George
Seferis, Odysseus Elytis, or Yian-
nis Ritsos? Here are ten reasons
why you should drop whatever
you may be doing right now, and
read Cavafy.

1. Cavafy is canonical. You are
not an educated person if you do
not know some of his poems. It's
that simple. Lines from Cavafy's
"The City," "Ithaca," "Waiting for
the Barbarians," "The Windows,"
"Thermopylae," and "The God
Abandons Antony" are known all
over the world. They have en-
tered the English language and
have become standard refer-
ences, just like Shakespeare's "To
be or not to be." If I meet some-
body in Ann Arbor MI, where I
live, and I tell them "Pray for a
road that will be long" or "Those
people were a kind of solution,"
I expect them to know what I'm
talking about and usually they

do.
2. Cavafy is symbolic. His po-
ems create an irresistible array
of symbols, like the city that will
always haunt you, the journey
back to Ithaca, the barbarians
who do not exist, defending
Thermopylae, and the walls that
others build around us. These
are poems that people live with,
poems that help people make
sense of their daily lives. These
symbols are instantly meaning-
ful.
3. Cavafy is sensual. He writes
about beautiful bodies. He sees
something very special in the
beauty of the human body, and
praises it with tremendous phys-
icality. These bodies happen to

be male but their praise is so rap-
turous that any reader can ad-
mire them. The Greek etymology
of hedonism captures his con-
templation of beauty. And there
is something else in his verses
that is utterly Greek: bodies are
naked.

4. Cavafy is epigrammatic.
His poems, which are often very
short, condense in a line or two
a viewpoint, a position, or a cri-
tique. As a result, they are easily
readable and endlessly quotable.
Cavafy is the most quoted Mod-
ern Greek poet. He has been
cited in headlines, speeches,
campaigns, slogans, book titles,
obituaries, you name it. He has
been both recycled and branded.
You feel he has been text mes-
saging us since Homeric times.

5. Cavafy is ironic. He always
looks at people and situations
with a unique combination of af-
fection and skepticism. Whether
he is writing about love, death,
power, identity, or art, he takes
a certain critical distance and
ponders various possibilities and
their consequences. He does not

tell us how things are but how
they may look from different per-
spectives. That is why he remains
open to numerous interpreta-
tions.

6. Cavafy is dramatic. A
highly-effective way in which he
encourages a critical perspective
is by creating a theatrical situa-
tion where different characters
express different viewpoints. He
creates dramatic scenes where
people converse, and we get to
hear their voices, directly or in-
directly. This dialogical technique
leaves it up to us to decide which
side of the argument we want to
take, if any. It represents yet an-
other way to invite readers to
contribute their own interpreta-
tions.

7. Cavafy is Greek. More
specifically, he wrote in Greek.
Even if your Greek is inadequate,
you've got to read him in the
original. You'll be surprised that
you won't have many problems.
(You can also find editions with
an English translation facing the
original.) Cavafy wrote several
verses and poems in inimitable
Greek. You read a line and you
stop and you wonder – Did
somebody really write this? How
did he come up with this stun-
ning vocabulary, syntax, rhythm?
No Greek writer since the ancient
poet Theocritus, who died in 260
BC, has written poetry with such
virtuosity. It's that simple.

8. Cavafy is diasporic. He was
a diasporic Greek who never
lived in Greece. His family came
from Constantinople, he was
born in Alexandria, Egypt, he
grew up in England, and spent
the rest of his life in his native
city. He was also a cosmopolitan
person and a post-colonial intel-
lectual. Due to his inexhaustible
reflection on his diasporic posi-
tion, he portrays a Hellenism
that is not pure but hybrid, not
unified but discontinuous, not
centralized but sprawling. His
Greeks are citizens of the world
who feel at home anywhere.

9. Cavafy is historical. If you
want to explore the incompara-
ble poet, try to move beyond the
symbols we all know and cherish
– Ithacas, walls, candles, voices,
windows, barbarians, and the
like. He did write these poems,
and they are all good, but they
do not represent his greatest
achievement. Try to explore his
more challenging pieces. Some
have names in their title – Hero-
dus Atticus, Caesarion, Demara-
tus, Darius, Myres, Temethus:
Who are these people? Even
more puzzlingly, other poems
have dates in their title – 610,
50 AD, 162-150 BC, 400 AD, 595
AD, 31, BC, 200 BC: What do
they refer to? The best transla-
tions have excellent footnotes
that can enlighten you and put
you in the company of greatness.
Furthermore, in the age of the
internet it is easy to look up most
references.

10. Cavafy is a poet for
friends. Even though he does
not write much about friend-
ship, he is the poet you quote
to your (male or female, Greek
or non-Greek) friends expecting
them to understand. He is the
poet of the dialogue, creativity,
exchange, reflection that come
with friendship. Like a great
friend, he is the poet of ethical
integrity who never moralizes.
Instead of telling you what is
right and what is wrong, he
helps you become a friend's "s
"other self" (what Aristotle
called heteros eautos). To those
of us who think of friendship in
ethical terms, Cavafy will re-
main an incandescent point of
reference. I know from experi-
ence.

Why on earth are you still
reading me instead of reading
Cavafy?

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