

firmly in the tradition of the Hellenistic and the fashionable Roman attitude toward the love of boys.

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William A. Percy

### CAVAFY, CONSTANTINE P. (1863–1935)

Leading poet in modern Greek.

Cavafy was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in a merchant family that had long been prominent under the Ottoman Empire. His father died when he was seven and his mother took him to England where they remained for seven years. In 1887 the Cavafy export business collapsed and the family returned to Alexandria, moving to Constantinople in 1882. Here the poet had his first love affair—with a cousin, George Psilliary. In 1885 Cavafy returned with his mother to Alexandria, where he found work in the Department of Irrigation. He remained there for over thirty years. As a young man he led an active street life, some of which is recorded in his poems. When his mother died in 1899, he moved to an apartment over a brothel in the Rue Lepsius. His only known long-term relationship was with Alexander Singopoulos, whom he made his heir.

The canon of Cavafy's works is small, consisting only of about 150 lyrics—though these have been supplemented after the writer's death by several score of unpublished and rejected works. In subject matter his poetry ranges from historical episodes of Hellenistic and Byzantine times to scenes of modern life. The historical poems reveal his sense of kinship with the earlier phases of the Greek diaspora, together with the fin-de-siècle interest in late or "decadent" stages of civilization. His more personal poems in the latter

mode are poignant reflections on the fleeting joys of youth, especially in the homoerotic sphere. Such poems as "In the Street" (1916), "Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old" (1927), and "The Mirror in the Front Hall" (1930) present a comprehensive picture of the urban gay man's world that is easily recognizable today: street cruising, one-night stands, pressures to remain closeted, regret at growing older, ethnic and social contrasts, and nurturing friendships. The cosmopolitan city of Alexandria in which these poems are set is now completely transformed, but Cavafy's vision of it stands as an incomparable metaphor for the awareness of spiritual exile that is a key component of modernist sensibility.

Though concise, Cavafy's lyrics have an extraordinary staying power, an indefinable aura, which largely survives the translation process. In the Greek originals their subtle infusion of the inherited literary language with elements of the spoken vernacular has made them an important stylistic influence. Cavafy has achieved a considerable international reputation, thanks in part to such advocates as W. H. Auden, E. M. Carpenter, Lawrence Durrell, and Marguerite Yourcenar.

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