Cavafy: Selected Poems
Translated by Manolis

Reviewed by Lily Iona MacKenzie

The poems chosen for *Cavafy: Selected Poems* comprise almost half of the total 200 poems in Cavafy’s complete works and give an overview of some of his main themes: nostalgia for lost youth, the passage of time, our failed attempts to be masters of our own fate, and the ways in which the past lives on in the present. While Constantine P. Cavafy is referred to as one of the most important Greek poets of the modernist era, he was actually born in Alexandria and lived most of his life outside of Greece, including many years in England. His English was so good that many of his early poems were written in that language. However, his family roots were in Constantinople (now Istanbul), whose origins were a Greek colony once known as Byzantium. In Cavafy’s poems, his Greek heritage dominates, though he “remained virtually unknown in Greece until late in his career” (150).

His most powerful poems focus on how past events live on in the present, bringing the Hellenic past into today and using specific events as lessons for his readers to gain from. Several lines in his poem “Monotony” convey a major theme in his work: “The same things will happen, they / will happen again—, / the same moments will find us and leave us. // A month goes by and brings another month. / It’s easy to see what’s coming next; / those boring things from the day before” (27). It seems humans are destined to revisit, and be revisited by, events from the past. We can’t seem to avoid these visitations.

Another theme is that while things change in the world, they also don’t change, especially human nature and our attempts to seek something better elsewhere. In his poem “The City,” the poet quotes an unidentified person who feels his life will be better if he can only move to another city. Cavafy responds, “You will always / arrive in the same city. Don’t even hope to escape it, / there is no ship for you, no road out of town” (19). We can’t elude our limitations or ourselves, no matter how strenuously we try.

Cavafy also writes of the gods’ unreliability and the harm that comes from believing too much in their words. In the poem “Betrayal,” the first one in the collection, Apollo speaks at Thetis and Peleus’ wedding and blesses their firstborn son, Achilles: “Sickness will never touch him / and he will enjoy a long life . . .” (13). Of course, Achilles was killed at Troy in his prime. When Thetis questioned why Achilles had been killed “in the prime of his youth,” the old men “answered that Apollo / himself went down to Troy, / and there he helped the Trojans killed [sic] her son” (13). This poem sets the tone for the remainder of the book, conveying the need to distrust not only humans but also the gods, because death will find everyone. All we have are these bright shining moments, as when the speaker in the poem “Sensual Delight” states “Joy and myrrh of my life, the memory of hours / when I found and lived sensual delight as I desired it. / Joy and myrrh of my life, I, who resisted / all enjoyment of routine erotic love” (77).

“The Horses of Achilles” continues the theme of unavoidable loss. In it, the poet describes Achilles’ immortal horses being “outraged” by Patroklos’ death. Even these immortal animals can’t
escape the sorrow caused by living amongst humans and experiencing with them their grief over losses: "You whom death cannot ambush, who will never grow old, / you are still tormented by disaster" (17).

Cavafy also warns his readers to “Beware of grandeur, oh soul, / And if you can not overcome your ambitions, / pursue them with hesitant precaution. / And the more you go forward, the more / inquiring and careful you must be” (23). The speaker goes on to urge the reader to seek wisdom in writers like Artemidoros, a second-century Greek author who wrote about dream interpretation. The potentially famous man being addressed must heed such words. He says, “don’t fail to stop; don’t fail to postpone / every speech or task; don’t fail to turn away the various people who greet you and bow to you / . . . let even the Senate wait . . .” (23). In the next poem, “Theodotos,” Cavafy continues to caution his reader about the downsides of power and noteworthy achievement, how ephemeral it all is. He asks, “and how superior – what does it mean superior? / are you going to feel, when in Alexandria, Theodotos / brings you, on a blood-stained tray / the head of a despondent Pompeius” (25).

One of the strongest emotions these poems convey is longing: for an idealized past, for a world that has never existed, for a love that was never realized, for beauty. In a few poems, Cavafy captures something of these things he longs for. Humans may not have permanent tenure on this earth, but poems of this calibre do. ✎

A Canadian by birth, Lily Iona MacKenzie has taught expository and creative writing, the humanities, and English, at the University of San Francisco (USF) and other Bay Area colleges. Her poetry, critical and personal essays/articles, travel pieces, and short fiction have appeared in numerous U.S. and Canadian publications. Her poetry collection All This was published in October 2011, and her novel Curva Peligrosa will be published later this year. http://lilyionamackenzie.wordpress.com

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