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Blowing 150 candles (and making a wish) on Mr. Constantine Cavafy's birthday

More than four decades ago, for a teenager in Greece trying to navigate life at the intersection of personal loss and national tragedy, Cavafy meant the beginning of poetry. Today, when we find ourselves at similar crossroads, Cavafy means that a new world, with a glimmer of hope, has to begin with poetry again.

In poems that record quests of the mind ("Ithaca", "Waiting for the Barbarians"), of the body ("Longings", "Days of 1903"), of the soul ("The god abandons Anthony", "Che fece...il grand rifiuto"), and explorations of our travails in the public arena of history, Cavafy bores decisively through the bedrock of petrified thought, habit, and custom to touch the delicate nerve of the essential in life. And he touches it, indeed, by only using the essential in language. He elicits the burning, explosive energy of the visceral and he manages to harness it and to contain it in the coolest space of thought, to transform it into the most elegant, distilled form of artistic expression. Simply put, in his canon, Cavafy has formulated the " $E=mc^2$ " of poetry: the code that contains, and unleashes in our minds, the energy of a universe.

It is also good to remember that for a nation whose mettle has been put once more to the test, Cavafy's standing in the world points to a very heartening fact: that underneath all the baseness of our days, a stream of creative energy runs quietly and is connected, in unseen ways, to other streams that have run through our national topography way back. These streams carried tiny specs of gold down long stretches in the undistinguished vastness of their bottom sand. At certain turns, those specs of gold bind together and they turn into big shining nuggets that dazzle the world. As when the Japanese poet, on an Athenian hot summer night, stood at the foot of the Acropolis in awe of the spot-lighted architecture of the Parthenon; as when the saxophone player, in New York, blew his horn sweet and powerful, in the musty atmosphere of the subterranean club, to Homeric jazz inspirations about "Wine Dark Sea" and "Nausikaa"; or, as when the American poet of renown exclaimed, many years ago, to an inquiring young man: "In poetry, Cavafy is all!"

Manhattan, March 29, 2013