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Eros and History

The significance of Cavafy's poetry today still rests in the two subject areas he handled unlike any other poet in the twentieth century--eros and history. In a poetry that reads like a historical narrative extending from the Hellenistic (4th to 1st centuries BCE) to the Roman (1st century BCE to the 4th century ACE) and the late Byzantine periods (11th to the 14 centuries ACE), he created a history concerned more with what might have been rather than the more factual conventional historical narrative of what was. In an objective voice filled with irony, ambiguity and psychological overtones, his oeuvre of 154 poems peopled by stigmatized and marginalized young men struggling to come to terms with their national, religious, and sexual identities by disregarding social conventions and declaring their freedom, Cavafy was among the first of twentieth century poets to openly speak of homosexual love and even to declare that it was a condition of birth rather than one developed later in life. A poet of the Greek diaspora writing in Alexandria, Egypt from the margins of the Ottoman Empire, Cavafy's work has always been and remains an ambivalent historical, philosophical and sensual poetry open to multiple interpretations.