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Dignity and Immortality

Of the many distinctions possessed by the work of Constantine Cavafy is its contemporariness; how well it continues to speak to and resonate with readers. There is no doubt that much of this continuing, even growing, resonance is a product of the pertinence of substantive themes that are explored in his work: questions of alienation, desire, identity, and time. What, however, enabled Cavafy to so acutely prefigure so many of our own dilemmas? Taking the rapidity of historical change as one defining dimension of modern life and the boredom and unchanging repetitions of the everyday as another, we see that Cavafy was intensely subjected to both. He was not only displaced, in terms of geographic location but also in terms of cultural and economic position, multiple times but he also lived most of his days according to the repetitive rhythms and boredom of life as a civil servant. Faced with these twin burdens, we find that Cavafy neither surrendered to alienation nor retreated to a life of nihilism. Instead, he directed his focus to thought, to a life of human creation and meaningful existence. Cavafy presents us with not only his poems but also with a model for how to seek dignity and immortality in modern times; to think, to create, to search for truth. In today's societies, replete with cynicism, the abandonment of any fidelity to anything beyond ourselves, and the preference for comfort over autonomy and creation, Cavafy needs to serve as a reminder of what is truly human about us. Cavafy today presents us with the task of imagining a society that does more than wait for the barbarians.