ALEXANDRIAN SPHINX

The Hidden Life of Constantine Cavafy

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

We don't know how often Constantine actually visited the archaeological zone surrounding Pompey's Pillar. To get there, he would have had to enter what to him would have been a forbidding and somewhat threatening neighborhood. From the tram he would have seen fewer and fewer Europeans on the streets and more Muslim Egyptians. If he wanted to go beyond the pillar to the catacombs, he'd have had to make his way on a narrow dirt road past men dressed in gallabias drinking tea and smoking water pipes. Vegetable and fruit sellers would be beckoning with good deals, their carts standing by open water pools left by the night's rain. In this neighborhood, the city would have appeared to him much poorer and he would have heard only Arabic. In other words, the visit to these catacombs would have compelled him to confront the paradoxes of life in his city.

Constantine knew very little Arabic.[1] We have a record of his rudimentary knowledge in the journal he kept during his mother's illness. On January 28, 1899, when he returned from an afternoon of errands, his mother remarked how "flavorless" the house was without him. And when she said the very same thing to the "wretched" Ahmed, he responded in Arabic, which

Constantine transliterated in Greek.[2] But he could not carry out a conversation in this language. We have no evidence that he had any Muslim friends or that any of his lovers were Arab Egyptians. Nor can we say with any certainty what his attitude was toward the Muslim Egyptian residents of the city. His coworker Ibrahim el Kayar remembered that while Constantine was charming and effusive with his British colleagues, he was "laconic with us about anything outside our work." He was "taciturn. He showed great reserve, above all to us his Egyptian colleagues, and usually had no conversation with us, perhaps out of disdain."[3] Most likely, he never even visited the house of an Egyptian, as Alexandria was segregated along class, racial, and religious lines.

In order to grasp Constantine's relationship to Alexandria's Arabs, it is useful to consider how Greeks of his class regarded their place in this largely Muslim society.[4] In her memoirs about her childhood in Alexandria, Penelope Delta, the future fiction writer and the sister of Antonis Benaki, who owned a large villa on Rue Rosette that Constantine often visited, learned enough Arabic to speak with the servants.[5] Only her younger sister Argini acquired the language with any fluency. The Benaki children, like other upper-middle-class offspring, grew up with little knowledge of the local language. As a result, the young Penelope, who often spoke French at home, was astonished that during her trip to Paris, she was able to comprehend for the first time in her life conversations of people strolling on the sidewalk.[6] Not surprisingly, she felt more at home in Paris than in her native city.

At the same time, many upper-class Greeks, like the city's other Europeans, were multilingual. Constantine and his brothers were fluent in English and proficient in French. The children of the elites spoke English or French. In many cases, they knew these languages better than Greek.[7] Penelope, for her part, hated

texts written in purist Greek, finding them dull in comparison to her English and French novels. As a child, she often wondered why she had to learn written Greek at all. Her French teacher, Mademoiselle Dufay, never encouraged her to read Greek.[8]

Europeans congregated largely among themselves and stratified nationally with the English dominating the ethnic hierarchy, followed by the Italians, Greeks, French, and other minorities. The famed cosmopolitanism of Alexandria was limited to Europeans of the middle and upper classes. Few if any took any interest in Islamic culture. An exception was Penelope's brother, Antonis, who began to purchase Islamic art to add to his treasures in Greek antiquities. In 1925, along with his cousin Alexandre Benaki, the historian Christophoros A. Nomikos, and M. S. Lagonikos, he organized the first ever exhibition of Islamic art in Alexandria, featuring work they owned.[9] When Antonis Benaki moved to Athens in 1927, he brought his vast collection with him, eventually exhibiting the various works in the extraordinary neoclassical villa his father had built in the vicinity of the royal palace, which he converted into the Benaki Museum three years later.

The interest of these men in art from the Islamic world was rather uncommon. On the whole, Greeks and other wealthy Europeans kept a social and cultural distance from native Egyptians.[10] Many expressed open racial hostility toward the fellahin (peasants, laborers), often referring to them as "*arapides*" (blacks).[11] Penelope narrates an example of this prejudice involving her uncle Stamatis. Coming out from a store, he was about to put on his hat when a gust of wind blew it on the ground. A "little black man" rushed to pick up the hat and give it to its owner. But instead of expressing gratitude, Stamatis shrank back lest the Arab touch him, and then he let the Good Samaritan keep his hat.[12] "We 'whites' had the greatest contempt for the fellahin. We considered them almost like beasts," Penelope writes. She remembers her fa-

ther striking their gardener for "being insolent," who then had to kiss his hand and jacket. Incredibly she believed that the Arabs had to accept all the humiliations in order to gain self-confidence and rise against the Europeans.[13]

Egyptian Greeks[14] like Penelope and Constantine drew a mental barrier between Europeans and the bulk of the Egyptian population, which they considered a separate race, as can be seen in the following episode from Constantine's life. The poet was in a café with his friend Makis Antaios, a member of the Grammata group of writers and editors and an ardent supporter of his poetry, when at a nearby table he saw two English sailors in each other's arms, kissing. At that point, he motioned to Makis to stay because "things would become interesting." Later in the evening, after the departure of the English sailors and seeing only "*arapades*"[15] around them, Constantine grew uneasy. When Makis asked him if "*arapades*" could become "*attrayants*" (attractive), he responded, "It should not happen, Antaio, it should not happen." And then "disgusted" from the "nonsense" around him, misquoting his famous poem ("I have looked so much"), he added: "I thus observed ugliness and am disgusted by its sight."[16] Without further context, we don't know the age of the Arab men, what they were doing, or whether they were Copts or Muslims. Constantine's reaction to the Arab men, however, does not foreclose the possibility that he may have had Arab lovers, especially in his youth.

When Greeks referred to fellahin as "*arapades*," they actually brought together five separate groups into one category: city dwellers, fellahin, nomads, inhabitants of Nubia, and protected minorities such as the Copts.[17] They did not see or care to understand the subtle differences among the indigenous population of Egyptians.[18] Although they were collectively unified by their ethnicity and religion, they were stratified by class.[19] On the top tier

were the wealthy cotton exporters and factory owners, like the Benaki family. The majority of the population, however, worked as retailers and white-collar workers.[20] Greeks of all classes were very much attached to their own community and rarely married non-Greeks even if the latter were Orthodox Christians.[21] This sense of ethnic introversion is best expressed by a letter Penelope Delta received from the Greek politician Ion Dragoumis, who arrived in Alexandria in 1905 to serve as Greek vice-consul.[22] Like many Greek dignitaries, he was welcomed by the Benaki family.[23] "I like the atmosphere of your house because it does not exhibit anything Levantine or cosmopolitan," he wrote.[24]

While Dragoumis was graciously received at the Benaki residence, this was not the case for non-Greeks. Penelope described her community as being "splendid, rich, closed to foreigners who tried nevertheless to gain access."[25] A very limited number of these "foreigners" did manage to gain entry, among them consul generals, directors of banks and large department stores, a few Jewish visitors, and even fewer Syrians "whom we contemptuously called Levantines."[26] She remembers how generously the community gave to its own, having established schools, hospitals, and churches. For this reason, she could not imagine the existence of other, nonaffluent Greeks. All Greeks seemed prosperous, she writes, with "money flowing in the streets."[27] They lived in a world unto itself. At times they came out of their enclaves to sponsor collective celebrations, such as the annual Lenten carnival that represented the highlight of the social calendar, especially in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Under the direction and sponsorship of the Synadino and Zervoudaki families, a parade of costumed celebrants formed around Mohammed Ali Square, which then proceeded past Rue Chérif, down Rue Rosette, until it reached the city hall. Contemporaries spoke of thousands of merrymakers, elaborate and ostentatious

floats, and lavish uniforms that together cost more than thirty thousand Egyptian pounds.[28]

We can get a glimpse of the charmed life led by elite Greeks by looking at the social activities of Constantine's brother Paul. A member of the Sporting Club,[29] he regularly took part in athletic events there, in addition to attending society weddings, literary readings, dinners, theater, recitals, the Queen's Jubilee receptions at the British consulate, and Fourteenth of July celebrations at the French consulate. Paul's social calendar from the 1880s was full. In those days, members of the Cavafy family still counted as part of the elect Greek circle and were invited to the most exclusive weddings. Just in 1889 alone, the year Aristides was married, Haricleia and her sons attended at least eight weddings in the most illustrious Alexandrian houses, including those of the Benakis (for their daughter Alexandra), the Menasces (for their daughter Celine), and the Apostolidis (for their son Constantine).[30]

Constantine, for his part, took comfort that up to the 1890s the Cavafys could still lay claim to the cachet of Alexandrian gentility. Indeed, during the trip to Athens in 1901, he and Alexander behaved as if they still occupied the same top rank as the other first-class passengers on the steamship *El Kahira*. Constantine often ran into old acquaintances on board and talked to them with the self-assurance of a person who felt himself their equal. On the second day on board, for instance, he came upon Mr. Helmi, "a tobacco merchant of Cairo. Rather pompous. But he bowed to me today, though not introduced, and seems desirous of making my acquaintance."[31] While waiting for the quarantine period on Delos, he spoke with Mme. Roucho about "the old times when we were neighbors in the Okella Spanopoulos in 1886, 15 years ago!"[32]

In the 1880s and '90s, the Cavafys could still count on the

prestige of the name and their residual status as well-connected Anglo-Greeks to compensate for their social decline. But with each decade, this dissembling must have been more and more difficult. In Athens that summer, despite keeping up appearances, Constantine felt removed from the illustrious circles of his day. On July 16, having come down to the sea at Phaleron, he and Alexander dined with four distinguished men: "All these were young men 'de la haute'; consequently conversation was of society and its doings, of that Greek 'upper ten thousand' which has many different 'groupements' (Athens, Alexandria, Constantinople, London, Marseilles, etc.) but is so closely bound together by marriage and social ties that all the important events and the leading names of one 'groupement' are thoroughly known to the other."[33] The shame of his family's gradual financial disintegration and the fear of being excluded from upper-class social circles help explain why Constantine dreaded scandal and avoided ostentatious displays of homosexuality. He did not want to end up a social pariah like Oscar Wilde. Constantine's niece Eleni Coletti believed that her father and uncle felt insecure and embarrassed over their social decline. "In Alexandria," she claimed, "anyone who loses his fortunes drops down socially," adding that her uncle suffered from the "complex" of a fallen aristocrat.[34]

The affluence of the Greek community was exemplified by George Averoff, who, after his death in 1899, left a fortune twice as large as that of the richest textile baron in Manchester. As the dynamic president of the Greek *koinotita* (community) since 1885, he helped endow schools and cultural institutions both in Alexandria and in Greece, where, among other projects, he provided funding for the first modern Olympics held in Athens in 1896.[35] His funeral on August 3, 1899, was a public event for European Alexandrians. The city came to a standstill for the cortege, which stretched seven kilometers from the city center to Ramleh.

At its head rode the police, followed by consular guards, then students from Greek schools, representatives of the city guilds, the governor, members of the city council, the Patriarch, religious dignitaries of all confessions, and then ordinary Alexandrians.[36] Every Greek in Alexandria would have wanted to see and, in turn, be seen at this moment of great spectacle and pride for the community. The Greeks attending Averoff's funeral had many reasons to boast about their accomplishments. In a couple of decades, they had created their own separate society with cafés and newspapers and numerous institutions—schools, hospitals, orphanages, a cathedral, and many other churches. Their schools, according to Athanasios Politis, were the envy of the city's other European communities.[37] Surprisingly for such a mercantile group of people but crucially for Constantine, Greeks had also developed a lively literary culture, of which he would emerge as its foremost representative.

The Greek population in Egypt continued to grow until well into the 1930s. In 1897, there were 38,208 Greeks; in 1907, 62,794; in 1917, 56,731; and in 1927, 99,794. In Alexandria itself, the Greeks were the dominant foreign group, with a population of 25,393 in 1917. By 1937, four years after the poet's death, the Greeks numbered 37,000 and boasted four primary schools for boys and four for girls and two high schools for boys and two for girls.[38] When Alexander A. Boddy visited the city in 1899, he found the Greeks so numerous that Alexandria felt to him like a suburb of Athens, with many omnibuses bearing Greek letters and numerous shops with Greek names.[39] Eight years later, the overall population of the city stood at 332,246, of which 24,602 were Greeks, 15,916 Italians, 8,190 British, and 4,304 French.[40]

There is no doubt that the middle- and upper-class Greeks of Egypt flourished during Constantine's lifetime. They and other Europeans owed their prosperity to treaties known as the Capitulations, which exempted these foreign nationals from local laws and taxation. Originally signed by the Ottoman Empire with Venice and France in 1535, they were extended after 1855 to citizens of other European powers (including Greece), with which the sultan enjoyed diplomatic and commercial relations. These treaties granted extraterritorial rights to Christians, freeing them from legal and tax obligations to the state, until they were abolished in stages between 1922 and 1937.[41] For instance, they guaranteed that trials of European criminals were conducted in the consular offices of the respective countries rather than in Egyptian courts. Moreover, Europeans, but not Egyptians, were allowed to carry guns and knives, often licensed by their own consulates. And the consulates themselves preserved the right to station ships in the harbor in case they were needed for emergencies. In a sense, these treaties had the indirect effect of distancing the Europeans from Muslim and Coptic Egyptians and encouraging them to see themselves as part of their own separate communities.[42] This meant that the Greeks of Egypt did not need Ottoman passports, since their legal status existed outside the Ottoman state. Rather than seeking formal ties with the Egyptian administration, they felt closer to Greece judicially and politically.

In addition to the legal and political barriers, cultural walls divided Greeks from Muslim Egyptians. For the Greeks, along with other foreigner residents of Egypt, considered themselves part of the Levant, a constellation of urban centers stretching from Thessaloniki to Istanbul, Smyrna, Beirut, and reaching Alexandria.[43] Since they identified their cultural and economic interests with this greater diaspora, Egyptian Greeks were

strong supporters of free trade and looked toward Athens, Istanbul, Marseilles, Paris, and London, rather than Cairo or Upper Egypt, as places to visit and emulate. And they depended on Greek consuls, and increasingly on Britain, to protect their commercial enterprises and way of life.[44]

Their political loyalties to the Greek kingdom, their cultural attachments to the Greek community of Egypt, and their international economic outlook blinded the Greeks to the Egyptian nationalism spreading at the end of the nineteenth century, one fed by peasants and intellectuals who resented the extraterritorial privileges of the Europeans, Britain's oppressive policies, and the fear of being left behind by the changes of modernization. Enjoying their social, economic, and political benefits, the Greeks, like other Europeans, did not sufficiently understand that their entitlements were a source of anger for Egyptians. The Greeks, in other words, were not sufficiently sensitive to their own fragile status in a society that was becoming increasingly more nationalistic.[45] Countless poor Egyptians lived in simple mud huts and dressed in rags. And their children were often thin and diseased, and had swollen stomachs. More often than not, the foreigners who visited the few ancient ruins had to pass by and witness their dire situation.[46] But like the Europeans who had settled in Alexandria before them, the Greeks learned to ignore the predicament of ordinary Egyptians. It's as if foreigners and Egyptians were living in two separate cities. In reality, however, the luxury and sensuality of the Corniche was geographically not far removed from either the slums or the middle-class residential districts of Egyptians. After all, Alexandria was primarily a Muslim city.

Economic and political resentments, festering for decades, exploded openly in the third quarter of the nineteenth century as the Egyptian state faced bankruptcy. The expansion of the economy, which had brought the Europeans to Egypt, was in

part made possible by taxation of the peasants. At the same time, the state borrowed heavily to bankroll building projects, irrigation systems, and military expeditions into Sudan. For instance, Khedive Ismail (1830–95) financed through debt the building of the museum in Cairo, the National Library, and the Opera House, which commissioned Verdi to compose *Aida* in 1871. But with the end of the American Civil War, as noted earlier, cotton prices plummeted by 25 percent along with state revenues. As a result, the public deficit in 1879 stood at ninety-three million Egyptian pounds, an amount Egypt could never pay back, forcing the government to divert huge financial resources to service it.[47]

Khedive Ismail had no choice but to declare bankruptcy and accept French and British control of his government in 1876, six years after the death of Peter John Cavafy and one year prior to the return of Haricleia and her sons from England. This foreign intervention reinforced the greatest dilemma Egyptian leaders faced since Mohammed Ali: how best to use Western technological know-how and money in order to win independence. The surrender of the Egyptian economy to British and French experts exacerbated the national sense of humiliation while increasing the number of foreigners employed by the Egyptian government. In 1882, for instance, one thousand Europeans worked in the administration, constituting only 2 percent of the workforce but drawing nearly 16 percent of the payroll.[48] At this time, thousands of Egyptian young men, trained in the new schools, were competing directly for jobs with children of the Europeans, such as the Cavafy sons.[49]

Egyptian military officers also grew increasingly resentful that their advancement was blocked by the continuing presence of Turks in the upper echelons of the Egyptian army. Their complaints coincided with the frustration among the general fellahin.

Members of both classes became receptive to the calls of an assertive nationalism and to the slogan of "Egypt for Egyptians." Ahmed Bey Arabi (1841–1911), as a son of peasants and also one of the disaffected colonels, came to represent the growing dissatisfaction over European control of Egypt.[50] He mobilized a formidable movement that challenged the authority of the new Khedive Tawfiq, who had assumed his position on June 25, 1879, after the Ottoman Sublime Porte forced the resignation of his father, Ismail. Arabi accused Tawfiq of succumbing to European political pressure, instigated rallies around the country, and organized a huge demonstration in Alexandria in September 1881. Ordinary Egyptians hailed him as their savior from their own corrupt rulers and the influence of the Europeans, believing that the departure of the Europeans would relieve them of their huge debts.[51]

For their part, European residents of Egypt began to fear for their lives and foreign powers worried about their financial and political interests. The situation became very tense and unpredictable when on June 11, 1882, a riot broke out in Alexandria following a fracas between an Egyptian and a Maltese. Mistaking this as a political protest, Greeks and Maltese began to fire at the brawlers below them from their windows and balconies. As news spread about this attack, Muslim Egyptians, armed with wooden sticks, assaulted Europeans throughout the city.[52] A mob raged in the streets with some shouting "Death to Christians." Despite efforts by Arabi to contain the mayhem, the country descended into chaos, leading to the deaths of 250 Egyptians and 50 Europeans.[53] In the ensuing days, panic spread around the city, compelling foreigner residents to abandon Alexandria out of fear of an insurrection both against them and the khedive. The port filled with European vessels taking away their nationals. By June 17, 1882, close to twenty thousand had fled.[54] Meanwhile,

French and British warships had docked in the harbor to end the uprisings and protect foreign residents and property. An attack on the city was imminent. The situation for the Cavafy family was precarious, as Constantine wrote at the time, and the family luckily escaped on June 26.

The British wanted to bring Alexandria under control by firing immediately into the city. The French, however, reluctant to undertake such severe measures, drew up their anchors and sailed away. Left alone, the British warships began to bombard Alexandria on July 10, 1882, destroying parts of the waterfront and city center. This act of violence had the desired result of forcing the rebellious Arabi to cease his insurrection. With Khedive Tawfiq publicly supporting the British actions, the Ottoman state declared Arabi a rebel, sentencing him to death. Facing the opposition of the Egyptian government and the overwhelming firepower of the Anglo-Indian army, Arabi surrendered on September 15, 1882. His death sentence was commuted, however, and he was allowed to seek exile to Ceylon.[55] Writing about the end of this "mock" trial to Constantine, John expressed his dismay that a man who instigated so many crimes was allowed to go "scot-free." He characterized the commutation of his death sentence a "height of folly, not to say, cruelty" (December 4, 1882).[56]

The Arabi revolt had come to an end with Britain firmly in control of Egypt, and with Khedive Tawfiq as legal ruler of the state. Arabi had underestimated British determination to protect both the European residents and the British interests: access to the Suez Canal and the repayment of Egyptian government debt.[57] (Arabi remained a hero in the Egyptian imagination until 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser presented himself as a modern Arabi to launch his own revolution against foreign rule.) The hegemony that Britain gained over Egypt, however,

emboldened Greeks like the Cavafy brothers along with other Europeans to believe that Britain would guarantee their protection well into the future. To be sure, having exercised authority over Egypt, with an occupying army of five thousand and about five hundred officials, Britain secured Alexandria as an outpost of Europe and Greece in Egypt.[58] For its part, the British government understood the crucial role played by Greek merchants as intermediaries between their colonial rule and the Egyptian population. Thus, authorities strained to pacify the situation in order to enable the quick repatriation of the foreign residents. Among those returning expatriates were the three Cavafy brothers, Peter, Aristides, and John, in August 1882.

Haricleia and Constantine remained in Istanbul until 1885. As discussed in chapter three, their financial state had deteriorated and they began to rely on monthly remittances from the three brothers in Alexandria. In addition to their economic miseries, they had no house to return to. When the British bombarded Alexandria, they destroyed a significant part of the city center, including the grand residence on Rue Chérif that Peter John Cavafy had rented in 1860. The Okelle Debbane on Rue Machmoud Pacha el Falaki, to which Haricleia moved after the family's return from Britain in 1877, also sustained damage.[59] The residence on 32 Boulevard Ramleh, where the family moved in 1879, was only partially damaged and they were able to save many of their possessions.[60]

In his letter to Constantine of August 7, 1882, John wrote, "You cannot imagine what a sad sight the old house was to me when I saw it for the first time." He complained about hordes of flies and excessive heat. Almost a month later, he asked Constantine to remind their mother that the application for an indemnity for the damages to their house "must be in Peter's name in conformity with the contract." The issue of this dispensation

had become a daily obsession of the family, since the uprooting of Haricleia and the remaining sons depended on it. John, therefore, often provided updates regarding this matter, referring specifically to two public commissions named in Britain to consider the issue.[61] Obviously, the brothers in Egypt were responding to the anxious inquiries from family members still in Istanbul. Although few of these letters survive, we have one sent by Alexander on June 4, 1883, while he was visiting his aunt Amalia Kallinous in Pera, to his mother in Yeniköy. Although Alexander's intent was to let his mother know that Paul was not seriously ill, he also informed her of news from Aristides in Alexandria that "we will receive the money. Patience."[62]

John openly revealed his pro-British sentiments to Constantine and his letters no doubt reflected the relief of the entire Greek community at the arrival of the British forces. He was satisfied that the sultan had declared "Arabi and his followers rebels" and hoped this move would allay the "fanaticism" of the troops (August 12, 1882).[63] Not surprisingly, given his realization that Britain guaranteed Greek interests in Egypt, he expressed support for the British policy of "annexation" of Egypt. "The war is now over," he wrote, and then described the "disarmament" of the rebels at various locations.[64]

The issue of the compensation for the foreign residents of Alexandria who suffered damages by the riots and bombardment continued to preoccupy British policymakers. Eventually they forced Khedive Tawfiq to apportion four million Egyptian pounds in compensation to these individuals, an action that added to the public debt and the sense of national shame.[65] Overall, nine thousand indemnities were paid to those foreigners who could claim damaged property.[66] In effect, Egyptians paid for the damage caused by the British to their own city. Almost all of John's letters made some reference to this issue. In May 1885, he alluded to

rumors regarding the positive resolution of this matter. "Heaven will it so? And thus allow me to embrace you all in ease as I do now in imagination" (May 2, 1885).[67] On August 23, he wrote with much relief that they were about to receive their payment of £17,500.[68] He sent his mother £140 for their transportation and noted that the brothers were looking to rent a house on the Boulevard de Ramleh and were shopping for furniture. With great anticipation, Haricleia, Alexander, Paul, and Constantine returned in October 1885. They must have been able to salvage some of the old furniture from the house on Boulevard Ramleh because Constantine claimed to have inherited pieces in his possession. The family was still able to afford at least two servants.[69] But Haricleia still harbored delusions of grandeur and liked the idea of naming the whole building where their apartment was located "Okella Cavafy."

A question that preoccupied Constantine's contemporaries concerned his own understanding of the political upheavals he experienced in his youth and witnessed as an adult. How did he define his own place in Egypt? Did he possess a national identity? Upon his return from Istanbul in 1885, it appears he refused or neglected to apply for a British passport (he would have been covered up until this point under the official naturalization document issued to Haricleia in 1877 that listed himself, Peter, and John) and acquired or "returned" to his Greek citizenship that year.[70] As noted, he saw himself more as an Egyptian Greek (*Egyptiotis*) rather than as a Greek citizen. This latter point must have been reinforced during his visits to Greece in 1901, 1903, and 1905, when the locals would have highlighted his "Egyptian" identity, as indeed happened during his 1905 trip to Athens to visit his ill brother Alexander. The attending physician said that he "cared [for?] another Egyptian at the Evangelismos [hospital] from typhoid fever."[71]

At the same time, Constantine came to identify Great Britain as a protector and guarantor of his economic interests and personal security in Alexandria. To be sure, he knew that his father's original fortune was created through the export of cotton to Britain. His years in England and Anglo-Greek identity surely complicated his view of the British Empire. And the modest life he enjoyed in Alexandria as a civil servant depended on British hegemony in Egypt. But this did not make him a mindless supporter of British imperialism. Malanos did hear him criticize British policies on numerous occasions.[72] As a son of parents who hailed from the Greek community of Istanbul, he shared a common historical and cultural legacy with Egyptian Arabs in the Ottoman Empire and a history of common exploitation.[73] Moreover, being a poet, a homosexual, and an observer of the power of empires in antiquity, he sometimes identified with the plight of Egyptian peasants struggling against British injustice. And in his many poems on the ancient Mediterranean, he brought attention to ethnic and racial mixing. In "Return from Greece" (1914), the unnamed speaker addresses his companion, Hermippus, on their voyage back home from Greece, saying that Greece is no longer the center of their world. "We too are Hellenes," he asserts, but with "Asian affections and emotions."

Although he did not publicly express any political sympathies for Egyptian nationalism or rail against British imperialism, he occasionally treated these subjects in some of his unpublished poems. In 1908, one year after he moved to Rue Lepsius and the year Paul left for France, he composed what was for him an atypical poem, "June 27, 1906, 2:00 p.m.," which he never published. Although its subject—a young man of seventeen and an object of the speaker's erotic gaze—did not depart from the poet's usual thematic repertoire, the boy's ethnicity and religion did. For the first and only time, he explicitly depicted a Muslim youth

and wrote an unambiguously political poem, jotting down the young man's name in pencil on the lower part of the page: Yousef Housein Selím.[74] Of course, the young men whom he evoked in his poems set in modern Alexandria may conceivably have been Arabs. But they were not identified as such; the poet emphasized their idealized youth and beauty rather than ethnicity or race. In contrast, the young man of this poem had a Muslim name. Departing further from his usual practice, Constantine composed the poem in the manner of a ritual lament, a mode of poetic expression going back to Homer's *Iliad*, specifically Andromache's dirge for the dead Hector and Achilles's lamentation for his friend Patroclus.[75]

The poem refers to the public executions of four Egyptian peasants accused by the British authorities of involvement in the notorious Denshawai Affair, a watershed in the rise of Egyptian nationalism and the general effort to gain independence from Britain. In June 1906, a group of British officers arrived at the Delta village of Denshawai to shoot pigeons, an act angering the villagers who had kept their own birds nearby. A fire erupted and the villagers, thinking that the foreigners had been the cause, attacked the officers with wooden clubs. Terrified by the ensuing violence, the officers shot at the crowd, killing a local woman. The villagers for their part were so agitated by this murder that they counterattacked, causing the officers to flee. As they ran back to the camp, one of them died of sunstroke. When a villager tried to help the fallen officer, the British comrades, thinking he had killed their compatriot, beat the Egyptian to death. The British officials, meanwhile, feeling that this was a premeditated attack, tried the fifty-two villagers in a special court, which condemned four to death by hanging and others to be flogged publicly.

This brutal act, widely covered in the press, provoked general

anger in Egypt and even among some circles in Britain. Many condemned the collective punishments and even Lord Cromer, the consul general of Egypt, who was in Britain during the event, found the measures excessively severe and resigned after the public outcry. These civic punishments seemed to have permanently inflamed the Egyptian population against the British occupation. For the first time since the Arabi rebellion, countless Egyptians became politically aware of their dependent status and turned to protests and violence.[76] This was especially true of the fellahin population, still heavily impoverished.[77] There was a growing sense among Egyptians that economic dependence on foreigners contributed to a national weakness that permitted Britain's unchallenged brutality in Denshawai.

Constantine too was outraged by the injustices meted out in the village. Although he rarely referred to actual events in his mature poems, in this instance, he sided with the victims of empire. He showed his solidarity with the Egyptians by adopting the voice of Selím's mother. The poem is narrated in the third person but clearly its sympathies lie with the Muslims of the village:

When the Christians brought out for hanging
the innocent, seventeen-year-old boy,
his mother, near the scaffold,
crawled on the earth, beating herself
under the ferocious, midday sun,
sometimes she howled and bayed like a wild wolf
and sometimes, the martyr, exhausted, she wailed—
"I only had you for seventeen years, my child."
And when they led him up the scaffold
and hooked the rope to throttle him,
the innocent boy of seventeen years

who dangled pitifully in the empty space,
in the seizures of his dark anguish
his adolescent body, handsomely formed,
his mother, the martyr, was rolling in the dust
but she no longer bewailed his years;
"Only seventeen days," she wailed,
"You were my treasure for only seventeen days, my child."

The first line refers to Christian violence, as if we are looking at the world from the villagers' position. And when the authorities haul the young man to the scaffold, the speaker seems momentarily taken by the beautifully apportioned adolescent body, much as the Greek warriors were entranced by Hector's naked corpse in the *Iliad* and the sailors mesmerized by the dangling body of Billy Budd in Melville's novella. But his attention quickly turns to the mother who reels on the dusty ground below, wailing that she had had her son for only seventeen years/days. Thus, although for one moment the speaker allows himself to identify erotically with the beautiful victim, his eyes never swerve from the horrors Selím's mother has to witness; and he cites words from her lamentations and shows her crawling on the earth.

Missing here is the Cavafian historical detachment of the later poems and the chilling irony usually directed at historical figures, such as that found in "Aristobulos," a poem written in 1916 and published two years later, about the eponymous prince of Judea. At the instigation of his mother and his sister, and in order to prevent the prince's possible succession to the throne, Kind Herod I ordered his drowning, even though Aristobulos was the brother of one of his wives, Mariamme, and had been recently appointed by Herod himself as high priest. Predictably, Constantine has the palace "in tears" and King Herod, the arch hypocrite, "inconsolably laments" at the "accidental drowning."

Alexandra, Aristobulos's mother and Herod's mother-in-law, publicly weeps. But when she withdraws to her chambers, she curses the "criminal king" for his betrayal and castigates herself for not catching on to palace intrigues and thus allowing her plans for succession to be thwarted. As a member of the royal household, she has to bear "their lies," not being able to rush out and inform the people of her son's murder. In "Aristobulos," Constantine coolly analyzes the duplicities and power struggles in Judea with the disinterested attitude of a historian.

In "June 27, 1906, 2:00 p.m.," however, the speaker can't separate himself from the pain and horror of the public execution, the mother's wailing, and the son's frail body hanging from the scaffold. The poem stands as a unique document in the Cavafian corpus and a testament to his outrage at the injustices committed by the British against the fellahin. The two-year gap between the event itself (1906) and the date of composition (1908) shows how preoccupied Constantine was with the subject. In the meantime, he may have gotten to know the Arabic poems that had been composed about Denshawai, considering his own text as a contribution to this tradition.[78]

Ultimately, he chose not to publish "June 27, 1906, 2:00 p.m.," as was the case with countless other poems. We have no way of knowing the reasons for this decision. Perhaps this text was a formal experiment in the ritual lament that had not succeeded in his eyes. Given his perfectionism, he may have found it weak, if not sentimental. At the same time, he rarely wrote about contemporaneous events. After all, he preferred distant historical periods to the barbarism of British colonialism and the suffering of his contemporaries. This was his aesthetic stance toward the world and toward the grief and anguish of others. It was also a personal preference to avoid the messiness of life's toil, the path he usually took in his private relationships. Quite conceivably,

being a British civil servant, he might have feared retribution from his superiors. He had the example of Mahmud Tahir Haqqi, who, having written a novel about Denshawai, was repeatedly harassed by the authorities until he resigned from his position in the civil service.[79]

But Constantine continued to follow the repercussions of this affair, having gathered a stack of newspaper cuttings regarding a similar political debacle four years later: the murder trial of Ibrahim al-Wardani, who was indicted and confessed to the murder of the Egyptian prime minister Butrus Pasha Ghali. During his trial, al-Wardani accused Ghali, a Copt, of being more British than the British but above all for having acted as one of the two Egyptian judges who oversaw the Denshawai case. Constantine then added a lengthy note in Greek in which he wrote that "the Egyptian people showed sympathy for Wardani, pitying the individual—at least a greater part of them—rather than approving the act."[80] He then went on to record that after the execution "of the unfortunate young man," demonstrations took place all over Egypt: "Poems were written in praise; students of various higher studies wore black ties in mourning; people gathered around his grave, giving emotional speeches; and friendly hands brought beautiful flowers."[81] Constantine was so taken by these events that he saved the issues of the Alexandrian newspaper *La Réforme*, which described the progress of the Wardani case, from his arrest to the trial and eventual execution. On May 12, 1910, the newspaper chose to highlight a long letter from Emmanuel Benaki on the cotton commission rather than on Wardani. But two days later, the trial was the lead story with the headline "Wardani Condemned to Death." And on June 28, the newspaper headlined his execution. It cited his final words as "Je crois en Dieu de qui vient la liberté" (I believe in God from whom comes freedom).[82]

This long preoccupation with the Denshawai Affair shows that Constantine was neither a mindless mouthpiece of his ethnic group nor a passive admirer of British imperialism. He clearly sided here with the exploited peasants of Egypt. As an intellectual, poet, historian, and homosexual, he gained insights into the racial mixture of history from his study of ancient Alexandria and thus could step back and judge these acts of injustice. In the latter part of his life, he wrote a few articles that indicate his more nuanced understanding of Greeks in Egypt and the relationship between Greek and Egyptian intellectuals and writers. In an unpublished piece (1929) on the endeavors of the literary magazine *Lanterne Sourde*[83]—newly established to promote Arab-Egyptian writing in Europe—he characterized the goal of the periodical as quite valuable. While he recognized the significance of this specific focus, he himself wished to bring attention to other writers who were "racially non-Egyptian," such as "Greeks and Syrians," who were "nevertheless children of Egypt, because here they grew up, lived, and many were born."[84] The Greeks of Egypt, he continued, inevitably produced works "of this environment." Being familiar with the "Egyptian way of life" and "Egyptian way of thinking," as well as coming into contact with "Arabic-speaking colleagues," these writers were in the position to offer "beautiful ideas" and "initiatives."

In another article published a year later in Alexandria, he encouraged Arabic-speaking Greeks of Egypt "to introduce contemporary Arabic literature of Egypt to the Greek reading public."[85] It seems that he was aware of these texts, since in a letter, dated May 9, 1928, to Stavros Stavrinos, the editor of the *Semaine Égyptienne* (an important literary journal founded in 1926 and in print until 1951), he referred to the special issue the journal was planning on the Egyptian writer Ahmed Rassin. He wrote that whenever he sees "an article by Ahmed Ras-

sin in the *Semaine Égyptienne*, I rush to read it, knowing that it would be charming and interesting." While acknowledging that he could only read Rassin's work in French, he was certain that a talented author would write just as brilliantly in Arabic.[86] And in a conversation recorded by Eftychia Zelitas on February 2, 1928, he praised a celebration taking place in Cairo for three Egyptian poets. He did refer, however, to the much smaller market for Greek books in Egypt: Greek poets having three million potential readers, while Egyptian writers had twenty-four million. Although he was invited to participate in this event, he declined, probably because he had ceased traveling outside Alexandria by this time. He did send a letter of appreciation, which was read during the proceedings.[87]

His interest in Arabic poetry and his intense scrutiny of the Denshawai Affair demonstrate that, at the very least, Constantine remained equivocal with respect to the British Empire. When in 1914 Alexandria was brimming with British soldiers, he kept his distance, never expressing his support nor striving to get to know any British regulars or officers apart, of course, from E. M. Forster.[88] No military figure is known to have ascended the stairs to his flat on Rue Lepsius.[89] He never marched with the crowd, abandoning himself to the excitement of the moment, but remained an Anglophile, devoted to progress.[90]

He followed with intense interest the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and Greece's entry into World War I, and read attentively about the country's victories. And he was disturbed by what the Greeks call the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which led to the destruction of Smyrna in August of 1922 and the forcible exchange of population between Greece and Turkey in 1923. Following an aborted march by Greek armed forces into Anatolia, Turkish troops under the command of Kemal Atatürk pushed back, routing the Greeks. Atrocities were committed by both sides. Thousands died, with many Greeks jumping into the sea from the quay

of Smyrna to save themselves. In order to prevent any further conflict between the two countries, the foreign powers imposed a mandatory exchange of populations under the Treaty of Lausanne by which 1.3 million Christians (ethnic Greeks) had to abandon Turkey and about three hundred thousand Muslims (ethnic Turks) had to leave their homes in Greece for Turkey.

Needless to say, these were trying times for the Greeks of Egypt. Yet Constantine never directly mentioned this cataclysm in his correspondence with friends. But in September 1922, when Polys Modinos visited him in his apartment, he found Constantine slouched in his chair, silent and nearly morose. Then, as noted earlier, the poet whispered to him: "What a horrible thing is happening to us. We are losing Smyrna, we are losing Ionia, we are losing the gods." And then not able to continue, he began to sob, tears sliding down his furrowed face.[91] Modinos could not understand why Constantine equated the expatriation of Greeks from Smyrna with the departure of the pagan gods. Constantine was clearly moved by the expulsion of Greeks from territory where they had lived for millennia. Yet the reference to Ionia and the exodus of the ancient deities indicates that for him the loss of Asia Minor was tragic in terms of both its human and cultural toll. In an early poem, "Ionic" (printed in 1895, rewritten in 1905, and published in June 1911), he mourns the flight of the gods from Ionia. That we smashed their statues, he writes, that we drove them from their temples does not mean that the gods have died. "O land of Ionia, they love you still, / their souls still remember you." And in the sunrise of an August morning, "an ethereal adolescent form . . . makes its way across the hills." In this poem, the gods of Ionia still hover over the landscape, perhaps because Greeks continue to live there, their memory evoked however indistinctly. But after 1922, Constantine says that these pagan ghosts have withdrawn forever.

Try as they may, later commentators, such as the poet George

Seferis, sought to unearth references to the Asia Minor Catastrophe in Constantine's poems, such as "On Behalf of Those Who Fought in the Achaean League." Written in 1922 about a struggle in 146 BCE by Greeks against Roman forces, it speaks about men who "fought and died nobly," not fearing those who conquered everyone before them. If this poem contains any reference to the events of 1922, it is indirect. Constantine was not a poet of contemporary politics. He wrote about battles in antiquity, wars between empires, and the stratagems of emperors trying to stay in power. But like Jane Austen, who lived during the tumultuous times of the French Revolution without writing about them, he chose not to turn World War I, the Egyptian struggle for independence, or the Asia Minor Catastrophe into poetic subjects. He never ceased repeating that "current events did not really interest" him, at least as subject matter for his poems.[92] As he confessed to Timos Malanos, although he followed with much anxiety news about the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, often stepping out of the house in the evening to get the latest news from the front, he never wrote a single poem about these events. "I am not a patriotic poet," he added.[93]

He was, of course, criticized for not writing about the cataclysmic events in Greece during his time. Malanos unkindly says that, while the whole city was preoccupied with World War I, Constantine was investigating the proper vestments that Caesarion, the son of Cleopatra, would have worn.[94] Moreover, in the spring of 1897, Malanos adds, when "all of Greece and, with it, Greek Alexandria" were following the atrocities on Crete during the war of independence against the Ottoman Empire, Constantine seemed untouched, worried more about an upcoming trip to London and Paris with John.[95] While Malanos's comments may be overstated, it is true that Constantine did not refer to the violence on Crete in any of his personal notes that have survived.

Nor did he volunteer to join the war effort as other young Greek men from Egypt did in 1897.[96] Michalis Peridis, who met Constantine around the end of 1914, writes that, although the poet was not ideologically driven, he did follow political developments in Greece and often kept cuttings from newspapers in his desk. He left behind a stack of articles relating to the Balkan Wars of 1912–13.[97]

It is safe to conclude that Constantine was interested in Greek politics and followed events in Greece from his safe harbor of Alexandria. He was a liberal humanist, more sexually than politically progressive, fervently believing in individual autonomy.[98] He did say to Malanos in 1924 how "horrible it is for someone not to be able to use his body as he likes."[99] Unlike Penelope Delta, obsessed with the Balkan Wars and besotted with the nationalist Ion Dragoumis, or her father, Emmanuel Benaki, who moved to Athens to enter politics, Constantine kept his sense of national identity complex, playful, and hard to define. He expressed this vagueness by saying mischievously that he was not "Greek" but "Hellenic" and certainly not one "who imitates Greeks."[100] Rika Sengopoulos, who knew Constantine better than most people around him, called him a "true Greek of Egypt."[101]

An important question, however, is whether he truly understood political developments in Egypt. Did he comprehend the implications for Greeks of the slogan "Egypt for Egyptians"? To be sure, 1922 marked a sharp ideological divide between Greeks of Egypt and their Muslim neighbors. While Greeks were mourning the loss of life in Asia Minor, some Egyptian political parties sent messages of congratulations to Turkish nationalists.[102] That very year, Muslim Egyptians also celebrated their freedom from British rule.[103] Decades earlier, they had begun to express their widespread dissatisfaction with British imperialism.[104] For some time, intellectuals had been accusing the British government of

keeping the country in a state of ignorance to justify the occupation.[105] They spoke openly of "Egyptianism," a national identity spanning from Pharaonic times to the present.[106] Needless to say, this nationalism did not include foreign communities, such as the Greeks, because Egyptians saw the Europeans as part of an exploitative system.[107] It is not surprising then that the Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 to rescue Muslim youth from the corruption of European dominance.[108] At the heart of his protest was the conviction that Egyptians had little control over their country.[109]

At the age of sixty-five, Constantine was probably not aware of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nor did he fully appreciate the inner logic of Egyptian nationalism or understand that he and his Greek community were not part of its narrative for the future of Egypt. We can compare his disinterested attitude toward Egyptian nationalism and the plight of the peasants to the astute judgments of another Greek writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, who traveled through Egypt in 1927 and, as noted, visited Constantine in Alexandria. Of course, Kazantzakis was an outsider and could observe political developments in Egypt from a fresh perspective. A Marxist and world traveler, he realized that Egypt, along with the colonized nations of Africa and Asia, were ready to overthrow the "colonial structure."[110] Kazantzakis met intellectuals in Cairo who discussed with him the nationalist turmoil in their country. In his conversations, he concluded that Egypt, like many other nations of the continent, was ready for a nationalist revolution.[111] Constantine, however, did not seem to be aware that Muslim Egyptians, gaining the confidence to run their own affairs, no longer needed foreigners. He was blindsided by the emerging nationalist currents, like most of the city's Europeans.

In 1928, the year of the founding of the Muslim Brother-

hood, Constantine was enjoying the spread of his popularity in Egypt, Greece, and Europe. Laudatory articles were appearing in Egyptian and Greek magazines by leading critics[112] along with condemnations and even a parody of his work by Malanos in May. In April, a favorable article appeared in Paris. He printed a number of poems while republishing others. In February, as previously noted, the editors of *Lanterne Sourde* invited him to give a talk on Egyptian poetry in Cairo, while in May, he was asked to write an article in Cairo's *La Semaine Égyptienne*. And in September, *The Criterion* of London published two poems translated by George Valassopoulo, and Karl Dieterich issued in Leipzig his anthology of modern Greek poetry, *Neugriechische Lyriker*, which included twelve poems by Constantine. In November, the Parisian *Libre* printed a translation of "You Didn't Understand," while in Greece another parody of his poetry appeared. A month later, the "Amis de l'Art" of Alexandria organized a poetry reading of various Francophone poets of the city where two Cavafy poems were read. At year's end, he counted the publication of nine poems. By all measures, it was for him an annus mirabilis, one that saw encomia and satires, articles and translations, all indicating the poet's ever-spreading fame. At an age when he was slowing down socially, even refusing to travel to Cairo to give the talk to the *Lanterne Sourde*, he did not seem to pay extraordinary attention to political developments in Egypt.

At the same time, he seems to have forgotten the deeper lessons of the 1882 Arabi rebellion, his family's flight to Istanbul, the British bombing of Alexandria, and the consequent destruction of his house and personal possessions. His commanding knowledge of historical change and the power struggles in antiquity did not provide him with insights into the social transformations taking place around him. Or perhaps his allusive, nonreferential writing, where the city was transformed into sensations, streets

remained indistinct and names half-remembered, prevented him from detecting the tremors of history outside of his apartment. It is quite possible that his modernist poetics got in the way of his capacity to grasp the anti-colonial struggle. The man who dreamed of becoming a historian did not always draw the necessary lessons from his favorite métier.

Ultimately Constantine was most happy, free, and true to himself in the Alexandria of his creation. He tried realism in verses he later renounced and in others he never printed, poems like "Sham-el-Nessim," which appeared in 1892 but which he later rejected. Written in a mixture of demotic and katharevousa and with varying patterns of rhymes, it deals with the annual Egyptian springtime festival and refers specifically to the Alexandrian neighborhoods Khabari, Mex, Muharram Bey, Mahmoudiya, and Ramleh that are filled with celebrants. Similarly, the short story "In Broad Daylight," which he wrote around 1895/96, is also set in contemporary Alexandria.

Of course, Constantine was literal in his journals. His descriptions of Athens during his first trip in 1901 were very thorough and exact. As we have seen, he wrote about the places he visited, the archaeological sites, the streets, names of hotels, squares, and cafés. The names and the people are obviously real. But in his mature poetry, he was reluctant to write about modern Alexandria, the place on the map. Unlike Joyce's Dublin, Constantine's city floats in his poems less as a real community with traffic signs, markets, cafés, dirt, gutters, than as an idealized, anonymous realm where not even the young men have names. The poem titled "In the Street," for instance, does not identify the street at all, nor the "attractive" young man who saunters by. He is twenty-five years old but looks twenty, "pale" with "brown eyes" who yet has something "artistic in his dress" as he makes his way down the street, "hypnotized by the unlawful" pleasure

he had just experienced. We do not know whether the café of "At the Entrance of the Café" (1904?/1915) is the Billiards Palace or the Café Al Salam or just an imaginary place. In the same way, the idol who appears at the café door, sculptured beautifully by Eros, does not resemble anyone specifically. The men in general, in their dreamy, distant beauty, are always anonymous; not a single one in modern Alexandria bears a name: no Mohammed, no Petros, no Henry.

Even the privation is not real—"Naked feet, unheard of in your verses," the English poet D. J. Enright quips in his poem "To Cavafy, of Alexandria."[113] Poverty exists insofar as it forces young men to wear tattered clothes or enter a life of ill repute. In "One Night," the speaker remembers the poor and sordid room above a suspect tavern where from the window he could glimpse the narrow and dirty alley and hear the voices of workers playing cards. But on this vulgar, ordinary bed, he felt "the body of love." And years later, writing about this experience in his "solitary house," he becomes "intoxicated again." Similarly, in "Below the House," a man enters a distant neighborhood and comes to a house where, in his youth, he made love. As he stands outside it many years later, that memory of pleasure "beautifies" the entire neighborhood. "Nothing ugly remained there." Were these two houses real or a creation of Constantine's imagination? We do know that when he returned from Istanbul, Mohammed Ali Square had been converted into a "bazaar of love" and there were many male brothels he could visit.[114] In his thirties, he frequented one at the corner of El Attarine and Selím Gobtan and pointed it out to his friend Vasilis Athanasopoulos when they had passed by it in 1917.[115] If either of these poems do refer to this establishment, they contain no signposts for us. Similarly, in the unfinished poem "News in the Paper" (1918), the speaker is caught up with events of a salacious murder while taking the

tram. Disturbed by the moralizing tone of the article regarding "corrupted morals," he mourns to himself, for he remembers the time he spent with the victim the year previously in a place that was "half hotel, half brothel." Again, Constantine does not locate it, nor name the newspaper, nor tell us which tramline the speaker takes.[116] Sareyannis says that he "did not wish his poems to be tied to a specific reality and he tried by every possible manner to obscure the apparent manner of their birth."[117] His refusal to describe the actual Alexandria stemmed from an aesthetic stance rather than from a lack of talent, as some contemporaries had claimed. He understood that the source of his work's emotional energy lay in evocations, dreams, allusions, and feelings rather than in realist descriptions. "For me," he said once to Eftychia Zelitas, "unmediated impression does not lead to work. The impression must first wear out, to turn false on its own through time, rather than for me to falsify it."[118] He expressed as much in his poem "Understanding" (1915/1917), where the speaker confesses that "in the dissolute life of my youth, the designs of my poetry took shape, the territory of my art took form."

Constantine's poetic Alexandria was a place and, at the same time, a no-place, a utopia in the literal sense, a fusion of suggestions, glances, half-glimpsed faces, and incoherent gestures unburdened by the distractions of car horns, street smells, or the hum of the crowd. He captured his city in poems like "In the Evening" (1916/1917), where the speaker, weighed down by memories from his youthful past, steps out onto the balcony, to clear his head and catch a glimpse of the city he loves, "a little movement in the streets and in the shops." To a certain extent, Alexandria existed as an abstraction in his poetry, a blank canvas that he could "shape more freely in his mind," as he said of the prince Caesarion, the forgotten figure of Hellenistic history. This is why he chose to stay there his entire life. As he wrote on

April 28, 1907, "I have grown accustomed to Alexandria, and even if I were rich, most likely I would remain here. [. . .] Because it is like a homeland, because it is connected to my life's memories."[119] In its insubstantiality, his Alexandria often threatened to dissolve into thin air, to depart, as he put it in the sublime "The God Abandons Antony"—"say goodbye to Alexandria that is retreating" (1910/1911). But he lured it back with allusions and incantations. He needed his Alexandria near him after all. He craved a home that was oblique and silent, one that neither imprisoned him with its significance nor constricted him with its denotation.