

# The New Criterion

## Features

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## Waiting for the grammarians

by [Eric Ormsby](#)

On the *Collected Poems* and *The Unfinished Poems* of C. P. Cavafy, newly translated by Daniel Mendelsohn.

No doubt it would have delighted C. P. Cavafy, probably the greatest—and certainly the most enigmatic—of modern Greek poets, to know that some sixty years after his death on April 29, 1933, the two dozen or so poems he left unfinished would emerge into the light, lovingly assembled from scattered drafts through the painstaking efforts of his editors. If Greek lyric poetry begins in the seventh-century BC with the poet Archilochus, one of whose long and splendidly smutty poems was recovered from the

papyrus wrapping of an Egyptian mummy in the 1960s, it seems fitting that Cavafy, his modern successor of sorts, should benefit from the same erratic hand of contingency—fitting too because, for Cavafy, the remote Alexandrian past was characterized by nothing so much as simultaneity; it formed a secret continuum with the flitting present moment. (He would have approved of Faulkner's remark, "The p ...

**Eric Ormsby's** latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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