

The New Criterion

Features

April 2009

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). Eric Ormsby was born in Atlanta, raised in Miami, and now lives in Montreal, where he is a professor in the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. His Poetry has appeared in most of the major journals in Canada, England and the U.S., including *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Descant*, *Parnassus* and *The Oxford American*. In recent years he has been a regular contributor of essays and reviews to *The New Criterion*, as well as to *Parnassus*, *Books in Canada* and *The Yale Review*. His first collection of poems, *Bavarian Shrine and other poems*, appeared in 1990 and won the QSpell Award for 1991. In the following year he received an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award for "outstanding work as a poet." His 1992 collection entitled *Coastlines* was a finalist for the QSpell Award of that year. A third collection, *For a Modest God: New and Selected Poems* appeared in 1997 with Grove Press in New York. His work has been anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* as well as in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. A fourth collection of poems, entitled *Araby*, appeared in 2001 with Signal Editions (Montreal). A collection of essays, most originally published in *The New Criterion*, will appear in Fall 2001. As a scholar, Ormsby specializes in medieval Islamic theology and philosophy and regularly contributes articles to academic journals in that field. He has travelled widely in the Islamic world as a researcher and a consultant. He is married, with two sons, and lives with his wife Irena, an architectural historian in Montreal.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 27 April 2009, on page 4

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