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Main content

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Among the several ways of looking at Alexandria, one is represented by Edmund Keeley's critical book, *Cavafy's Alexandria*, which condemns the city as "squalid." Another approach, even less generous and far less literal, is that of Lawrence Durrell, whose notions of the city's history, politics, linguistics, ethnography and topography are permeated with unconcealed ethnic and religious hostilities. These attitudes were certainly not shared by Constantine Cavafy, who is repeatedly appealed to by Durrell in the text as a kind of authority. Crucial in Cavafy's work is acceptance of the ordinary mundane physical reality of the city, without which precisely those emotions would be absent that provide significance or meaning. The same fidelity to the world is at the center of Tsirkas' *Drifting Cities*. Both were writing for the kind of reader who prefers to be told something based upon sensitive observation, rather than something merely imagined.

There are several ways of looking at cities like Alexandria. One is represented by an opening passage in Edmund Keeley's critical book, *Cavafy's Alexandria*, a passage that unfortunately seems to have escaped the notice of Alexandria's city planners. "Aware of the poet's point of view," says Keeley, "I find it difficult to move through the streets of today's Alexandria without feeling the presence of Cavafy's ghost, especially the threat of its mockery. During my last visit there," he writes in 1976,

arriving from Greece, I tried to make myself believe that the ugly reality I was seeing masked the presence of another city, more real in its way, a city open to those who could bring to it an imaginative vision, a mythical sensibility, if you will, akin to Cavafy's and exemplified in English letters by E. M. Forster and Lawrence Durrell. But the mask, the surface reality, was so unlike literary images I brought with me, so immediate and harsh in its effect, that it frustrated any imaginative projection.

Shutting his eyes to the glamour that its own dazzling literature has always been able to cast over Alexandria, Keeley attempts to look at one small seaside fragment of the city near the Cecil Hotel with a detachment akin to that of a documentary camera. "Today's Alexandria," he says,

strikes one first of all as squalid, if you walk along the esplanade leading to where the wondrous ancient Pharos used to stand (now Fort Kayet Bay [sic] grotesquely restored as a museum celebrating the Egyptian navy), you will encounter odors and sights that will amaze you--if none of the palaces and monuments that amazed Cavafy's exiles. The wall at your side rises just high enough to block all but the most cunning attempts to find the sea beyond, but not enough to conceal the spread of laundry-bannered tenements along the harbor's curve ahead. And the smells you breathe, cut only sporadically by a pinch of sea-salt, are of refuse not quite ripe enough to pass for garbage and of urine too spotty for official concern. The principal monuments in that part of town--the statues...

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