

# A cosmic poet: C.P. Cavafy's global and digital legacy under the Onassis Foundation

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*This paper explores the Onassis Foundation's transformative impact on C.P. Cavafy's legacy by bridging traditional literary heritage with contemporary digital culture. Through strategic digitization, global events, and social media campaigns, the Foundation has expanded Cavafy's reach, reframing him as both a cultural asset and a networked figure for contemporary audiences. This study examines how an institutional approach shapes perceptions of Cavafy's work, balancing authenticity with celebrity-making, and considers the implications for Modern Greek literature's visibility on the global stage.*

**Keywords:** C.P. Cavafy; Onassis Foundation; digital archive; Modern Greek literature; cultural globalization

## Introduction

In a bid to secure a place within the competitive world literary scene, Greece has long turned to C.P. Cavafy as its most promising contender.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-twentieth century, Cavafy has represented modern Greek literature on the international stage, a role that has extended into the digital era. Before the rise of digital culture, small literary traditions depended on translators, publishing houses, journals, and critics to gain visibility in the shifting economy of literary affairs. The critic Pascale Casanova has famously described this process in her book *The World Republic of Letters* as one of competition amongst small literary fields which seek to distinguish themselves

1 I am indebted to the Research Centre for the Humanities (2022) and the Onassis Foundation Scholarship ID: R ZR 002-1/2021-2022 for supporting my research into the new digital directions of C.P. Cavafy's legacy. I am grateful to Vassilis Bibas (n. 24); to Marianna Christofi, Onassis Archives Manager; and to Angeliki Mousiou, Cavafy Archive Researcher (2017-2024), for facilitating my research on the poet and his archive.

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transnationally through their most cherished authors and the elite actors supporting them. In the digital world, Simone Murray argues, similar dynamics persist. Despite ‘redrawing the contours of contemporary celebrity authorship’,<sup>2</sup> digital culture is still orchestrated by the brokerage of influential voices and institutions. If this is a freer, more participatory space, where new technologies are setting the rules of the game, traditional elite stakeholders, like print-born journals and established publishers, continue to dominate and shape the contemporary literary sphere.<sup>3</sup>

To encounter a canonical author like Cavafy beyond the printed book and within a multimodal present is to witness how canonicity is sustained when drastic changes in communication channels come about. Much is at stake in this transference, for it determines the global standing of smaller literatures in a fast-paced environment, with an appetite for consumption and a short-term memory. Popular reception is ever-changing, and we might think of Greek authors long appreciated beyond the borders of Greece — for example Seferis, or Kazantzakis— who have yet to reap the symbolic benefits of widespread approval in the digital realm. But for Cavafy, the passage from print to digital has been felicitous, granting the poet augmented authority and visibility.

This paper examines how Cavafy’s posthumous entry into the digital sphere has been closely tied to a significant cultural force, the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Onassis Foundation. Founded in 1975, the Foundation has played a pivotal role in adapting Cavafy’s enduring reputation to the global digital landscape. Although it is by no means the sole institution interested in Cavafy’s work, the Foundation surpasses the Greek state and national organizations in terms of the resources and strategic vision dedicated to his legacy. As a result, the Foundation has become a gatekeeper of Cavafy’s future, influencing how his work circulates in the world: which directions engagement with his poetry takes, which communication channels are entrusted to carry this conversation forward, and how the relationship between the long-gone writer and new audiences is shaped.

This is not to suggest that the Foundation endorses prescriptive readings or a particular thematic focus —quite the opposite. I argue in this paper that the Foundation’s impact is rooted in its acquisition of Cavafy’s archive and in an expansive cultural agenda which includes social media initiatives and the broader cultural ecosystem grandly called the Onassis Cosmos.<sup>4</sup> The Foundation’s reinvention of Cavafy leverages both digital platforms and global outreach. Simultaneously, however, it engages with the poet’s material legacy —such as his manuscripts and handwriting— while making the location of Athens a hotspot for Cavafy-related activity. This paper suggests that Cavafy’s renewed prominence is decisively framed by the Foundation’s balancing of the old and the new, the material and the digital, the local and the global.

2 S. Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: reading, writing, and selling books in the internet era* (Baltimore 2018) 5.

3 Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 131.

4 <https://www.onassis.org/>.

## The Cavafy Archive: here and elsewhere

In 2012, the Onassis Foundation acquired one of the most treasured assets in Greek letters: Cavafy's archive. Since then, the poet's literary and personal papers and manuscripts have seen unprecedented popularity. Once a private collection accessible to only a select few, the archive has now become, in line with the Foundation's mission, 'an archive open to all'.<sup>5</sup> Notably, this transition occurred amidst the Greek recession, a time when celebratory cultural events stood in stark contrast to widespread social disenfranchisement.<sup>6</sup> An Onassis campaign that marked the acquisition by displaying Cavafy's verse on Athenian public transport sparked strong reactions, highlighting how deeply entwined cultural life was with the crisis.<sup>7</sup> The 'crisis lens' became a critical staple for academics, writers, artists, and journalists, both in Greece and abroad, with Cavafy —a national icon— serving as a conduit for reflecting on the European Union's struggles, the breakdown of grand narratives, and Greece's complex relationship with centres of power.

At the same time, private cultural foundations gained influence in Greece during the crisis years. The Onassis Foundation, a powerful force in Greek soft power and cultural diplomacy, sought to support a vibrant contemporary art scene in Athens when government funding was scarce and the country's image in need of modernization.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the Foundation has embraced 'digital and cutting-edge culture,'<sup>9</sup> a focus that aligned well with Greece's gradual recovery. With the crisis narrative receding, the cultural sector shed that period's constraints. The eyes of the world were no longer trained on Greece and its challenges, which meant that the modern Greek field's struggle to stay relevant and globally present was reactivated on different grounds. Free from the embattled crisis arena, the Cavafy Archive was swiftly integrated by the Onassis Foundation into a dynamic digital landscape. Its digitization was completed in 2019, and it has since travelled far and wide; it acquired a brand name (no longer Cavafy's archive, but the Cavafy Archive), a strong social media presence, and, eventually, a permanent 'home'.

The Cavafy Archival Collection re-catalogued Cavafy's original manuscripts and digitized them in the form of facsimiles on a dedicated website that is annotated and bilingual. In 2023, a physical 'home' for the archive opened its doors to the public. The Foundation invested in the renovation of a building at the centre of Athens,

5 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive>

6 For a brief history of the archive's ownership see: <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/cavafy-archive>

7 See D. Plantzos, 'Perverse fragments: citing Cavafy in crisis-stricken Athens,' *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 1.2 (October 2015), 195–205.

8 R. Sulcas, 'Building a hub for new art "under the shadow of the Acropolis,' *The New York Times*, 7 January 2022. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/arts/design/athens-greece-contemporary-art.html>>

9 O. Kolokytha, 'Private cultural foundations as actors of soft power in times of austerity,' *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power* (London 2023) 336–44 (339).



Fig. 1. Cavafy Archive, Frynichou Street 16B, Plaka, Athens. | Stelios Tzentzias for the Onassis Foundation

creating a ‘tailor-made space’ that would ‘reflect the ambience’ of the poet’s home in Alexandria;<sup>10</sup> a velvet curtain at the entrance welcomes visitors into an intimate setting where Cavafy’s belongings or replicas of those are neatly displayed (Fig. 1). Shortly after the opening, a special edition of the Athenian newspaper *Lifo* and a brochure by the Archive, both available in print and digital formats, delved into every aspect of the archive’s design: its curation principles, architectural vision, spatial configuration, and even its lighting. These publications consistently emphasized the archive’s transnational openness and accessibility, signalling that Cavafy’s legacy merits the attention of general audiences. Nonetheless, access to the original manuscripts of the archive remained somewhat controlled. Scholars may consult Cavafy’s originals in the Reading Room, located at the far end of the archival home, only if they demonstrate that the accessible digital copies do not fulfil their specific research needs. These restrictions complicate the status of the originals, which are both deemed no longer essential for in-person consultation due to digitization and preserved as valuable artefacts, diligently safeguarded against material decay.

If the Cavafy Archive aims to preserve Cavafy’s manuscripts through the archive’s protected situatedness, what is the relationship between these sacred holdings and their digitized versions? The digital transition has reconfigured the relationship between the

10 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/the-new-cavafy-archive-building-on-frynichou-street-in-plaka>

original and the copy, reactivating the age-old question of the artwork's 'aura'—a term adopted by Walter Benjamin to denote authenticity in the age of mechanical reproduction. High-resolution digital replicas of Cavafy's manuscripts are widely accessible, not only through the Archive's curated website but also via the Foundation's dynamically managed social media channels. Followers can share these images directly from the Archive's accounts to their own, amplifying Cavafy's reach and invigorating interest in the original manuscripts.

In defence of the copy as evidence of the original's resonance, Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe have written of the proliferation of the aura of the work of art through its digital replication. Copies, they argue, depending on their quality, are evidence of the original's 'fecundity' and constitute an essential part of its trajectory.<sup>11</sup> Images of Cavafy's manuscripts have evolved into shareable online artworks, co-opted in posts, stories, and reels, captioned by personal views and musings, or transformed into new, user-generated videos and artworks.<sup>12</sup> The transformation of the poet's archive from a largely inaccessible manuscript collection to a coveted national treasure relies on an interplay: between the Foundation's 'official' sharing and the 'unofficial' distribution power of social media, which engineer sociality through a 'self-perpetuating logic of making the popular more popular,'<sup>13</sup> for example through grouping, which relies on demographic targets and user data to link users and to promote content. The resulting hype around these digital replicas lends cultural weight to the original manuscripts, extending their reach beyond experts and researchers. By bridging the gap between specialist scholarship and fandom, Cavafy's digital copies guarantee continued attention to the physical originals housed in the Archive.

To encourage further experimentation and engagement with Cavafy's singular personality, the Foundation has created Cavafy Script, a downloadable font based on the poet's handwriting.<sup>14</sup> While Cavafy's handwriting has previously appeared in facsimile form in books, this tool allows anyone to adopt the poet's distinctive penmanship. The gimmickry of the feature suggests a certain commodification of a highly individual aspect of Cavafy's writing life—a striking choice given his intimate publishing approach, where he produced small, makeshift collections of his poems, sometimes in manuscript form, to disseminate to select individuals. Ironically, it is the allure of Cavafy's *manière d'être* and the rarity of his originals that Cavafy Script brings to life. Handwriting is unique as a fingerprint or an identity card, a feature

11 B. Latour and A. Lowe, 'The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its facsimiles', in T. Bartscherer and R. Coover (eds), *Switching Codes: thinking through digital technology in the humanities and the arts*, (Chicago 2011) 275-97 (280).

12 F. Dimirouli, 'Digital Cavafy: teaching poetry through connective media,' in Peter Jeffreys and Dimitris Tryphonopoulos (eds), *Approaches to Teaching the Works of C.P. Cavafy (MLA Approaches to Teaching series)*, forthcoming 2025.

13 Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 18.

14 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/cavafy-script>.

‘expressive of character and a physical trace of the author’s presence’.<sup>15</sup> By offering Cavafy’s handwriting in a user-friendly format, the font fosters a fascination with his persona, already amplified through other visual elements, such as his portraits. Once confined to book covers and art exhibitions, these now adorn the archive’s walls and circulate online, enhancing the legendary aspects of Cavafy’s identity.

If the Foundation’s initiatives and digital connectivity have made the archive accessible worldwide, its physical presence in Athens has strengthened the poet’s connection to the Greek capital. Cavafy is widely known as an Alexandrian poet; he only visited Athens a few times and had a complex relationship with its cultural scene. Despite this, and despite the restoration of Cavafy’s house in Alexandria which the Foundation undertook with the Hellenic Foundation for Culture,<sup>16</sup> the most prized holding in Cavafy’s afterlife is permanently housed in Athens. The archive is powerfully promoted by location tracking, which geotags social media users’ posts about visits to the archival space or the many educational, artistic, and academic events organized about the poet. As a result, the more deterritorialized the archive has become, the more firmly lodged it is in the Athenian territory. This reflects the archive’s ambition to serve as an Athens-based space fostering global encounters: in the Foundation’s language, an ‘international cultural heritage hub that welcomes all city residents, researchers, and global visitors.’<sup>17</sup> The Foundation’s website and social media regularly promote an active calendar of events, while the Archive’s ‘international committee for a global Cavafy’ involves scholars from Greece and abroad in its research-focused efforts and events.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the annual Archive’s International Cavafy Summer School is led by Greek and international academics, drawing a small but diverse student audience from a similarly international pool. This crossroads between the local and the global is facilitated by additional digital functionalities, for example through live streaming or broadcasting of Cavafy masterclasses—which bring invited speakers of varying institutional affiliations to Athens—on the Onassis Foundation’s YouTube channel.

The archive, rooted locally yet with a global outlook, bridges the gap between treasured originals and digitally shared copies, offering events for experts alongside tools for generalist engagement. This approach has solidified its role as the primary disseminator and curator of Cavafy’s legacy. The interplay between the physical archive and its digital immateriality extends the longstanding interest in the poet into an open-ended conversation, revitalizing his popularity and affirming him as the leading figure in Greek studies. As I argue in the next section, this orchestration through new media gains effectiveness as part of a broader cultural vision with global aspirations—the Onassis Cosmos.

15 S. Morgan, ‘Material culture and the politics of personality in early Victorian England,’ *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17.2 (2021) 127-46 (143).

16 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/cavafys-house-in-alexandria>

17 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive>

18 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/cavafy-archive-academic-committee>

## The Onassis Cosmos: Cavafy as a way of life

The Cavafy Archive's multifarious activity, focused solely on this single poet, is just one aspect of the umbrella trademark of the 'Onassis Cosmos'. This cultural universe encompasses numerous cultural and educational activities, including those of the Onassis Stegi—a 'roof' for the arts, both metaphorically as a cultural hub and literally as a striking building with a neon-lit façade on one of Athens's busiest avenues (Fig. 2). The Cavafy Archive serves as a vital part of this Athens-centred yet globally oriented world, shaping how Cavafy's work is interpreted and valued internationally through its cultural programming.

The Onassis Cosmos hosts a vast cultural landscape, including film screenings, theatre and dance performances, music festivals, DJ sets, art exhibitions, lectures, podcasts, scholarships, and educational workshops.<sup>19</sup> A key strength of this variety is the Foundation's dual role as a leader in Greece's contemporary art scene and a globally connected institution. This global outlook is evident in the high-profile personalities invited to participate in events and performances (among them, the actor Tilda Swinton and the musician and composer Nick Cave). The harnessing of celebrity to strengthen local credentials and augment institutional prestige echoes and complements the international ambitions of the Cavafy Archive. The Onassis Stegi regularly invites prominent advocates of Cavafy's work, like the poet's translator Daniel Mendelsohn, best-selling author and Editor-at-Large of *The New York Review of Books*.

The Onassis Cosmos, in both its themes and official language, diverges from the traditionalist focus of other national institutions. Its mission to 'create the conditions, explore the ideas and trigger bold discussion that shape and shake society' is largely expressed in its commitment to identity politics, activism, and human rights. The Foundation's support for LGBTQIA+ initiatives, including Pride activism and campaigns like 'I am positive', which aims to remove the stigma around HIV, illustrates this direction.<sup>20</sup> Seeking to lend voice to those who have been silenced, the Onassis Cosmos is a hospitable space to previously overshadowed perspectives on Cavafy's work. The aspect of his work that dwells on same-sex love has been historically effaced in Greece. Internationally, authors grappling with the AIDS crisis have been turning to Cavafy since the 1980s, finding in his poetry a queer lineage that speaks to contemporary struggles. These intertextual events boosted Cavafy's reputation amongst artistic circles in the United States but remained counter-cultural until recently. While the Onassis Cosmos' identity-focused events are not directly linked to Cavafy, the central place that queer experience has in its agenda leaves its mark on a poetic heritage previously subject to social and political limitations. This opens new interpretive directions of the poet's work, in line with evolving perspectives on identity.

19 <https://www.onassis.org/>

20 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/lgbtqia/>





Fig. 2 Onassis Stegi Building | Stelios Tzetzias for Onassis Stegi

In its alignment with identity politics, the Foundation appeals to wider and younger audiences through inclusive, non-parochial aesthetics. This is a delicate endeavour: a cultural powerhouse with near-monopolistic influence and sole custodian of an invaluable archive for both Modern Greek studies and the nation, the Foundation asserts that it does not ‘own’ the archive—people do. Its role, according to Director Antonis S. Papadimitriou, is to ‘protect’ and ‘safeguard’ it for the public.<sup>21</sup> The Foundation’s rhetoric of equity and accessibility permeates its cultural agenda, blending urban aesthetics with memorable slogans. ‘Culture is not just art; it’s a way of life,’ declares the guiding maxim of Onassis Cosmos. ‘All we have is words/all we have is worlds,’ reads Tim Echells’ neon installation, prominently displayed on the Onassis Stegi building, which has become an urban landmark. The collective ‘we’ of the installation seems to address both locals and tourists, who capture and share images of the site, signalling their own interest in cultural activity.

21 Antonis S. Papadimitriou, the Foundation’s Director, in an interview for the Athenian newspaper *Lifo* (794) 7 October 2023, 14–18 (16).



As a cornerstone of Athenian cultural life, the Onassis Cosmos, open to both the physical and digital world, to the expert and the *flâneur*, mirrors the cosmopolitan aspirations of the city itself and recalls tourist campaigns that abandon the stereotypical imagery of golden shores and antiquities to promote Athens' alternative cultural scene today. On an Aegean Airlines flight, a passenger travelling to Greece and absent-mindedly flicking through the company's *Blue Magazine* can find an eight-page feature on the Cavafy Archive and its new lodgings, as well as an interview with Daniel Mendelsohn about Cavafy, amidst high-fashion ads and guides to the city's tourist attractions and culinary offerings. The article celebrates a 'worldwide revival of interest' in Cavafy, describing him as 'cosmopolitan, historical, political, queer, modern, hedonistic, Alexandrian . . . a literary giant whose name resonates with people of all different orientations'. Just below, Papadimitriou, the Foundation's Director, is interviewed for the piece. He emphasizes Cavafy's appeal, saying: 'Cavafy has become an everyman's poet . . . the things that Cavafy expresses are not just addressed to an audience of enthusiasts, but to a much wider audience.'<sup>22</sup> This extensive tribute by an inflight magazine sends a clear message: for those with an interest in cultural tourism, Cavafy's archive is a must-visit in Athens.

Elsewhere, hints of an intention to create a trendy, Instagrammable archive can be discerned in Papadimitriou's plans for a life-size sculpture of the poet outside the archive space in Athens where 'people can photograph themselves'.<sup>23</sup> This proposed sculpture is not just physical but also immaterial, as each engagement with Cavafy's heritage transcends the moment to live on in social media. In interactive environments of online sociality and identity plasticity, the reconfiguration of Cavafy from bookish authority to viral personality betrays less about engagement with his work and more about users' self-presentation as cultured participants. In this way, Cavafy has evolved into more than 'a global and constantly expanding field';<sup>24</sup> he has become a signifier of a lifestyle and identity that is virtual and networked.

The Cavafy Archive thrives within a digitally connected landscape shaped by the Onassis Cosmos social media. On platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), Cavafy is immersed in digital activity that is community-oriented, barrier-breaking, international, and young. At the time of writing this paper, in 2024, The Onassis Foundation's YouTube channel has 79.1K subscribers, while the Onassis Stegi's Instagram and X accounts have 155K and 33.9K followers, respectively. The Onassis Foundation has recently launched its own Instagram account, which counts 16.3K followers.<sup>25</sup> These channels frequently feature content about Cavafy, the

22 K. Anesti, 'Culture: C.P. Cavafy', *Magazine*, November-December 2023, 104-11 (104-5).

23 Papadimitriou interview, 18.

24 V. Lambropoulos 'Πώς ο Καβάφης έγινε από συγγραφέας πεδίο', *Avgi*, 4 January 2014. ([https://www.avgi.gr/tehnes/80369\\_pos-o-kabafis-egine-apo-syggrafeas-pedio](https://www.avgi.gr/tehnes/80369_pos-o-kabafis-egine-apo-syggrafeas-pedio)).

25 All social media figures and images were kindly shared in October 2024 by Vassilis Bibas, Social Media Manager at the Onassis Foundation.



Fig. 3 Cavafy manuscripts on rooftops, Athens Surreal for the Onassis Foundation

archive, and related educational and cultural activities, engaging with other popular accounts as well. For instance, the @CCavafy handle on X, which shares images of Cavafy's manuscripts to its 14.1K followers, is 'followed' by the Onassis Stegi.

In 2024, the Foundation partnered with the AI-powered studio Athens Surreal on a campaign celebrating Cavafy's birth and death anniversary.<sup>26</sup> Athens Surreal, known for

26 <https://www.athens-surreal.com/>

its ‘AI and/or Human generated surreal images’ integrated Cavafy-related objects into the cityscape of Athens. For example, his iconic glasses —replicas of which are displayed at the archive— appeared in augmented images within dream-like Athenian planes, alongside digital renderings of his manuscripts layered over rooftops (Fig. 3).<sup>27</sup> This animation of Athens through Cavafy’s spectral presence generated 1.5 million impressions online within days, demonstrating the impact of a crossroads between creative experimentation with AI, digital reach, and audiences’ investment in Cavafy’s legacy.

Beyond Athens and digital access, the Foundation casts its net wide in terms of geography. While the Onassis Stegi serves as its main hub, the Onassis Foundation USA and Onassis LA also produce cultural content.<sup>28</sup> The former, with a robust social media presence (@OnassisUSA) raises awareness about Greek culture in New York, one of the world’s cultural capitals, making the Onassis Foundation brand recognisable to audiences abroad. In line with the Foundation’s LA branch mission to make ‘the local global, and the global local’, Cavafy was called upon once again to be a cultural ambassador when the ‘Archive of Desire’ festival, inspired by the poet’s work, was organised in New York. The festival swiftly made international headlines, amassing more than 2.7 million impressions on social media during its run and for a few months after.

### The Festival: crafting cosmopolitan celebrity

The Greek Ministry of Culture declared 2013 Cavafy Year to mark the sesquicentennial of the poet’s birth. The Onassis Foundation joined the celebrations organized by universities, societies and cultural institutions worldwide, hosting events about the poet’s work in Athens, Oxford, New York, Mexico, and Chile.<sup>29</sup> These events signposted the Foundation’s stakes in the global directions of Cavafy’s future shortly after the acquisition of the archive, but were only the budding moment of the foundation’s decisive takeover and are listed as ‘the first activities’ on the Archive website. A decade later, in 2023, the Foundation commemorated the anniversary of the poet’s birth with a major festival that decisively internationalized the landscape of the poet’s reception, and whose title drew attention to the digitized archive as well as to the sensual content of Cavafy’s work. The week-long, New York-based ‘Archive of Desire’ boasted the participation of personalities such as Laurie Anderson, Nick Cave, Julianne Moore, and Rufus Wainwright, all part of an ‘interdisciplinary kaleidoscope’ that aimed at ‘refracting . . . the poet, as well as the man Cavafy’.<sup>30</sup> The festival resonated across the cultural world: it was

27 <https://www.onassis.org/news/the-onassis-foundation-collaborates-with-athens-surreal-on-a-campaign-for-the-anniversary-of-the-birth-and-death-of-c-p-cavafy>

28 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/onassis-new-york> and <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/onassis-los-angeles>

29 <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/cavafy-archive/cavafy-archive-activities-2013a>

30 <https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/cavafy-festival>



Fig. 4 Waiting for the Barbarians Concert, Archive of Desire Festival in New York | Beowulf Sheehan for the Onassis Foundation

promoted through colourful billboards across the streets of New York and curated by Paola Prestini, the artistic director of the National Sawdust (described by *The New York Times* as ‘the city’s most vital new-music hall’)<sup>31</sup>. The events reached full-capacity and were held at locations as vast, eminent and prestigious as St Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, where Laurie Anderson performed ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ (Fig. 4).

In a *Financial Times* article, Peter Aspden covered the festival, cryptically praising Anderson’s delivery of ‘Cavafy’s bombshell of a final couplet’ from *Waiting for the Barbarians*<sup>32</sup>, sending the reader on a quest for the poem’s last lines, which reveal that the ‘barbarians’ will not be arriving despite all the anticipation. The article surveyed various festival events, including a mural by Nick Cave and Bob Faust on the National Sawdust building in Brooklyn (Fig. 5) and a performance at ONX Studio featuring AI-generated images inspired by Cavafy’s poetry. Aspden did not fail to note how unusual the scope of the festival was:

It was, by the standards of commemorations of foreign poets who have been dead for nearly a century, a major affair: more than 80 artists, working in multiple art forms across 10 venues, paying homage to a figure of whom many admit they had scarcely heard.

31 <https://www.nationalsawdust.org/about>.

32 Peter Aspden, ‘Onassis Foundation’s quest to spread the words of C.P. Cavafy’, *Financial Times*, 10 May 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/a6ffa125-e6a5-4357-85b7-9181e1a82ff4>



The article's title, 'Onassis Foundation's quest to spread the words of C.P. Cavafy', turned the spotlight not only on the event but also on the Foundation's overarching mission. Through this and other media coverage, a triadic pattern emerged: a 'foreign' poet, a momentous New York event, and an orchestrating Foundation urging the world to pay attention to Cavafy's work but also to its own cultural sponsorship. The festival demonstrated how decisively Cavafy's and the Foundation's brands have become intertwined, a connection amplified by the prestige of the New York cultural stage and the scale of the festival's digital exposure.

In the same *FT* article, Afroditi Panagiotakou, the Foundation's cultural director, explained that the festival aimed to 'raise some sense of curiosity' about Cavafy rather than make him instantly viral. Still, she seemed to acknowledge, going viral has its advantages: 'We live in an age where there are quotations everywhere—in social media, out in the world' she said, adding that 'when you create an open event, with a pop aspect, about poetry, you also create quotes for Instagram.' The idea of Cavafy as a networked poet, taken out of the confines of the archival home, and as a result outside of the confines of the book, the manuscript, and the local territory, signals a particular approach to literature: one that recognizes that texts often exist alongside gestures of celebrity-making, as well as extra-literary agents who are inspired by the original but whose pursuits have little to do with the scholarly study of texts or with

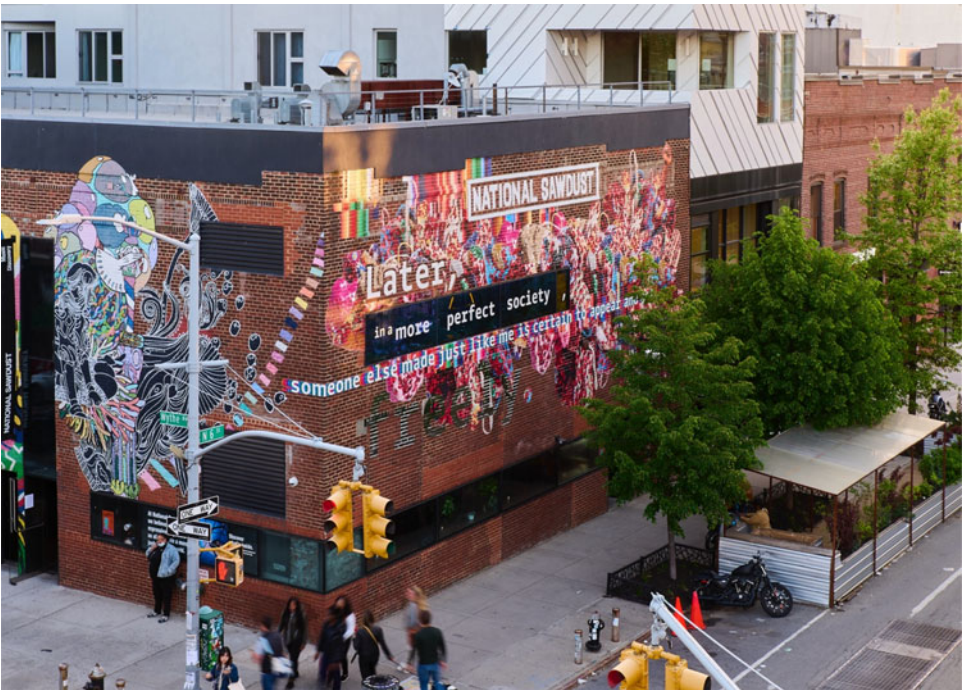


Fig. 5 Lit, 2023 A Facility Artwork by Nick Cave and Bob Faust. Inspired by the work of C.P. Cavafy, National Sawdust, New York | Zachary Schulman for the Onassis Foundation

reading at all. Poetry may be discovered at the end of this route, through its reception by those already famous, through word of mouth and through the urban and digital hype around the poet's name.

In his poetry, Cavafy was preoccupied with questions of futurity. In 'The Bank of the Future', somewhat bleakly, he explores the possibility of diminished 'returns' of an artist's investment in posterity. In contrast, the poem 'Very Seldom' is more hopeful. Here, an ageing poet 'used up and bent/crippled...' finds solace in 'the share in youth that still belongs to him.' His verse is now 'recited by young men, / his visions come before their lively eyes.' And this is the real measure of success, that new generations 'stir to his perception of the beautiful'.<sup>33</sup> Almost prophetically, this is the real victory of Cavafy's resurgence. Through a synergy of digital media, strategic marketing, and the Onassis Cosmos popular appeal, the Foundation engages young audiences with Cavafy-related content—at a scale that few twentieth-century, non-Anglophone poets have enjoyed so far.

This is no longer just about literary appreciation. The extensive coverage of the festival suggests that we are not contending with a poet merely respected by the standards of traditional literariness, but with a star author in the making.<sup>34</sup> Theorists of celebrity culture have long argued that we must disabuse ourselves of notions of pure authorial achievement contrasted to superficial celebrity status. Popular culture is increasingly recognized for its diverse constitution, as 'heterogeneous and open to multiple readings.'<sup>35</sup> This is especially true today, as technology and algorithms boost the currencies of stardom which, in turn, reframe the traditional categories of poet and poetic reception. The festival's posters, murals, and recitals survive differently in time through posting, sharing, and blogging to countless virtual participants. Cavafy's reputation benefits from this shifting market, in which the value of his shares constantly increases. Without the dynamic circulation of a poetic corpus, which fuels popularity and activates conversations in live environments, even longstanding authorities risk fading from the public eye and with it, also put at risk their chance of enduring literary survival.

## Conclusion

The Cavafy Archive, marketed by the Onassis Foundation as local attraction and global heritage, epitomizes an institutional approach that seamlessly integrates materiality with digitality, blending national prestige with international reach. Through this dual engagement, Cavafy's legacy has been remediated in environments more participatory

33 C.P. Cavafy, 'Very Seldom,' *Collected Poems*, tr. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, ed. G. Savidis (1975) (Princeton, 1992).

34 See e.g. the celebratory 'Reanimating Cavafy, a poet of 'future generations' whose time is now' for the *New York Times* by Anastasia Tsioulcas, 4 May 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/04/arts/dance/constantine-p-cavafy-archive-of-desire.html>

35 Joe Moran, *Star Authors: literary celebrity in America* (London 2000) 3.



than ever; drawing in Athenians and New Yorkers, archival visitors and digital creators alike, the poet's prominence as Greece's foremost literary figure has been reaffirmed and magnified. While Cavafy's longstanding canonicity underpins this development, the institutional clout of the Onassis brand has played a pivotal role, strategically leveraging archival heritage and digitization to create new audiences for Cavafy's work—many among the younger, social media-savvy generations.

The buzz that institutional patronage and new media technologies create around Cavafy as a fetishized asset might raise eyebrows amongst poetry's close readers. With the Foundation as the primary custodian of Cavafy's work, there is a risk of over-curation, where the poet's image may be shaped predominantly by an all-encompassing vision, potentially constraining more organic, community-driven engagements with his work or grassroots initiatives that could diversify his cultural impact. Equally, some may see the trend of celebrity-making in Cavafy's name as divergent from traditional literary values. However, it is undeniable that the Foundation's agenda has strengthened the global standing of modern Greek literature within the competitive hierarchy of world cultures. Without this digital sharing and engagement, the aura surrounding Cavafy's work might risk fading. As Lowe and Latour suggest, 'the intensity of the search for the original depends on the amount of passion and the number of interests triggered by its copies. No copies, no original.'<sup>36</sup>

Pascale Casanova has argued that world hierarchies are marked by inequity, where linguistic and cultural marginality pose barriers to international visibility; she emphatically describes the emergence of works from non-dominant literary traditions on the global stage as 'miraculous.'<sup>37</sup> Cavafy's work, which has long defied these odds with more translations in other languages than any other modern poet, faces the challenge of sustaining this reputation in a digitally connected world—a task the Onassis Foundation has embraced through a strategic combination of digital outreach and cultural branding. Ultimately, the Foundation's stewardship of Cavafy's legacy exemplifies a model for transferring national heritage into a globalized, digital framework. In so doing, it illustrates how literary futures are now forged in an in-between space: where poetic language meets audiovisual culture, where printed books intersect with social media users' habits, and where the closed realm of scholarly erudition opens up to the boundless sphere of digital activity.

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36 Latour and Lowe, 279.

37 P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge MA 2004) 12.

*theory of literary value. Her work, published in leading journals such as PMLA and MLA, has also focused on E.M. Forster's work related to interwar Alexandria, the role of Anglophone cultural journals in political discourse, literature's uses for propaganda, and, more recently, the rise of digital poetics in the public sphere.*