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Andrea Estrada

Daniel Mendelsohn: “Cavafy at the Margins: Geography, History, Desire”

Born into the thriving Greek community in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1863, poet Constantine Cavafy is considered one of the most influential and beloved Greek literary voices of the 20th century.

To mark the 150th anniversary of his birth, the government in Greece has designated 2013 as the Year of Constantine Cavafy, and UC Santa Barbara is sharing in the commemoration with award-winning author, essayist and Cavafy expert Daniel Mendelsohn to giving the First Annual Argyropoulos Lecture in Hellenic Studies.

Mendelson's lecture, "Cavafy at the Margins: Geography, History, Desire," will begin at 1 p.m. on Saturday, October 19, at the Karpeles Manuscript Library, 21 W. Anapamu St. The event is open to the public, and admission is free. A reception with Mendelsohn will follow the talk.

"We've decided to have a lecture every year on modern or ancient Greek culture, and we're starting out with a real star," said Helen Morales, newly appointed to the Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies. "Daniel Mendelsohn is one of the most stimulating and imaginative authors and speakers at work today."

The author of seven books, Mendelsohn recently published a new English translation of Cavafy's poems, including previously unpublished works that were discovered in

the Cavafy archive in Athens in the 1960s and translated into English for the first time by Mendelsohn.

"Daniel is both a real expert on Cavafy, and he's a brilliant speaker," noted Morales. Cavafy was selected as the inaugural topic for the Argyropoulos Lecture in Hellenic Studies in part because of his importance to Greek culture and identity, she said.

"But also because like all great poets, from Homer to Tennessee Williams, Cavafy has such an ability to make the historical personal, that he still speaks powerfully to us today," Morales explained. "This talk will be of interest to anyone who has ever felt love or loneliness, and who has ever wondered about cultural memory and identity."

Said David Marshall, dean of humanities and fine arts: "For over a decade the Argyropoulos endowments in Hellenic Studies have enriched both the university and Santa Barbara communities with programming related to the art, architecture, music, culture, philosophy and history of Greece. Daniel Mendelsohn's lecture and the poetry of Constantine Cavafy exemplify the vibrancy and relevance of Greek culture today."

Since her appointment to the Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies in 2012, Morales has made it one of her missions to bring classics and classical scholarship to contemporary audiences. Her own research focuses on Greek literature written under the Roman Empire. She also has published on ancient mythology, and is the author of the forthcoming "Pilgrimage to Dollywood — A Country Music Road Trip Through Tennessee" (University of Chicago Press). The volume, which explores ancient ideas about pilgrimage through the modern pilgrimage sites of Graceland and Dollywood, is part of a series titled "Adventure Trails: Culture in Travels."

"One of the things I'm committed to is exploring how ancient Greek ideas, values and practices can helpfully inform modern concerns," Morales said. "Some of our most pressing questions — what should we do when our own citizens become terrorists, or how best to live — were asked thousands of years ago by Greek philosophers and playwrights, and their discussions can illuminate ours."

The debt of Western society and beyond to ancient Greece is immeasurable and part of our cultural grammar, Morales continued. "One of the things I'm keen to do as the Argyropoulos Chair is both to recognize the debt to the past and the ongoing legacy of Classics, but also to showcase what is new and interesting about Greek culture

today," she said.

The Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies was established in 2001 with an endowment from the Argyropoulos family. The gift to UCSB's College of Letters & Science is designed to help ensure that knowledge of Greek culture — past and present — will be preserved and shared with future generations.

Morales is the second faculty member to hold the chair. The first was Apostolos Athanassakis, a professor in the Department of Classics and a specialist in Greek poetry and classical linguistics. He retired from the UCSB faculty in 2011.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.