

Other Countries, Other Shores

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A beautiful piece of writing by the Turkish Noble prize winner Orhan Pamuk on one of my favorite poets and also a favored poet for the singer Leonard Cohen. That is C.P.Cavafy, a man who belonged to a minority within a minority but wrote some of the 20th century's greatest love poetry and revived an interest in classical Greece and Rome. ahmed.

By ORHAN PAMUK

We love poets for the things their poems lead us to imagine; but equally, we love them for how we imagine their lives to be. Confusing poets' lives with their work is an illusion as old as the tradition of confusing words with objects. But in fact it is for the sake of this illusion that we feel such a strong need for poetry, for novels, for literature. There are some poets whose work we read with their lives in mind, and what we know of those lives ensures that their poetry leaves a more enduring impression. C. P. Cavafy is, for me, just such a poet. Like Edgar Allan Poe, like Franz Kafka, Cavafy makes no explicit reference to himself in his best and most stirring work; and yet, with every poem we read, we cannot help thinking of him.

I think of him as an old man wandering the familiar streets of an aging city. I think of him as a lover of books living as a member of a minority within a minority. I think of him as a lonely, provincial man who is fully aware of his provinciality, and who turns that knowledge into a kind of wisdom.

Cavafy was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1863, to a Greek family of wealthy drapers and cloth merchants. (The word kavaf, now forgotten even by Turks themselves, is Ottoman Turkish for a maker of cheap shoes.) The Cavafys were originally from Istanbul's Fener neighborhood, where the city's rich and politically influential Greek families lived. Later, they moved to Samatya, a fishermen's neighborhood, and then immigrated to Alexandria, where they lived as members of the Orthodox Christian minority among the Muslim majority. At first, their business activities in Alexandria proved successful, and they lived in a large mansion staffed with English nannies, cooks and servants. In the 1870s, after the death of Cavafy's father, they moved to England, but then returned to Alexandria following the collapse of the family business. After the Arab nationalist uprisings of 1882, they left Alexandria again, this time for Istanbul, and it was in this city, where he was to spend the next three years, that Cavafy wrote his first significant poems and felt the first stirrings of homoerotic desire. In 1885 the family, now impoverished, returned to Alexandria once more, to the very city he wanted to leave behind.

The return: It is the saddest part. It is the source of the sorrow that permeates his unforgettable poem "The City," which I have read again and again in Turkish and in English translation. There is no other city to go to: The city that makes us is the one within us. Reading Cavafy's "The City" has changed the way I look at my own Istanbul.

For those who lead a provincial life, life and happiness are always to be found elsewhere, in another city, in another country. But for us provincials, this other place is perpetually out of reach. Cavafy's wisdom is in the dignity and introspective sensibility with which he approaches this sad truth. And finally, with the same linguistic restraint and philosophical simplicity, he concludes by revealing that we have wasted our lives in that city. We come to realize that we have all been wasting our lives, and that the problem lies not in being provincial, but in the very nature of life itself. Great poets can tell their own stories without once saying "I," and in doing so, lend their voice to all of humanity.

Kierkegaard once said that the unhappy person lives either in the past or in the future. There are many old men in Cavafy's poems; not trusting in the future is, for him, another kind of wisdom. So he fashions for himself a new past, one based on books, history and Greek mythology. Some of the narrative poems he based on the myths of ancient Greece are so intense and powerful that reading them feels like reading a particularly eventful novel.

I was in Alexandria a year before the events now known as the Arab Spring began. I went to visit Cavafy's house, which has been turned into a museum. His actual family home was destroyed by British cannons. They had used a different house for the museum. It was a Friday. Everyone was at the mosque for prayers. The pavements were empty. The only people in the museum were tourists. The shuttered shops, the handful of old pine trees, the run-down buildings, the narrow streets, the squares, all helped me realize that versions of the Istanbul of my childhood still survive in cities all over the Mediterranean. I love Cavafy's poetry not just as a reflection of his exemplary life, but also for the landscape it depicts, for its crumbling buildings, and because I immediately identify with the texture of Mediterranean life.

Every now and then I reread some of Cavafy's poems, all of which fit comfortably in a slim volume. A longtime friend once published a selection in Turkish, working from Edmund Keeley's translations, and took his title from the poem "Waiting for the Barbarians." For many years thereafter, whenever we met, we greeted each other with the same joke: "How are you?" "Oh, you know – waiting for the barbarians." What we meant was that – from a political perspective – we were, as usual, expecting even darker days ahead. Those darker days did actually come, and after the nationalist uprisings in Egypt, Alexandria's Greek minority abandoned the city altogether. But the final twist in this brilliant, storylike poem suggests an entirely different ending. Cavafy will

never cease to surprise and move his readers.

“The City” by C. P. Cavafy

You said: “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead.
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?
Wherever I turn, wherever I happen to look,
I see the black ruins of my life, here,
where I’ve spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally.”

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.
This city will always pursue you. You will walk
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,
will turn gray in these same houses.
You will always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere:
there is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you’ve destroyed it everywhere else in the world.

*Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.
From C. P. Cavafy’s “Collected Poems” (Princeton University, 1992).*

Orhan Pamuk won the 2006 Nobel in literature. His books include the novel “The Museum of Innocence” and the memoir “Istanbul.” This essay was translated by Ekin Oklap.