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Taking Chances

CAVAFY

No grand, sweeping statements such as "I hear America singing" by Walt Whitman nor "Wherever I travel Greece wounds me" by George Seferis

No metaphors or similes. No surrealistic and overpowering images such as "I no longer know the night" by Odysseas Elytis.

He promoted no cause such as "This earth is theirs, and this earth is ours" by Yiannis Ritsos

He didn't adhere to any particular literary school. His poems were not in any particular meter and he didn't have a unifying theme such as William Carlos Williams' Paterson.

Whether the poems are erotic or historic they are spare and rarely longer than a page or two.

His poems could appear bookish. "Myres: Alexandria in 340 A.D." seems a dry recitation of Christian practices, and yet, in the end it is about estrangement.

We know that because he tells us. No symbol, no metaphor. In elegant, prose-like fashion we are told. "[P]erhaps I had been fooled by my passion, had always been a stranger to him."

I think that is what is so admirable about Cavafy. He subtly takes such chances. When a jazz musician improvises, the listener waits to hear if the musician can negotiate the twists and turns of the harmony and rhythm of the song and come up with a solo that is meaningful and fits the song's structure. So too with Cavafy. At first glance some of his poems strike us as basic and understated, but then we realize that from an ancient historical event or chance sexual encounter he has constructed something that is moving and universal.

Cavafy's poetry mirrored his personal life. Singular and obscure with occasional bouts of furtive passion. "[I]n that common, vulgar bed I had the body of love." (One Night).

All of his life was lived in obscurity: A member of a small minority--Greek in Alexandria, Egypt. A petty civil service job. Lived with his family and then alone. A homosexual in a traditional world who ventured out to anonymous encounters.

Many poems concern forgotten historical events and yet we honor him eighty years after his death, new translations are published every year or so and poems such as Ithaka and Waiting for the Barbarians have entered the canons of the most recited and revered poems of the 20th century.

When my daughter was married there was a point where we paused from Marvin Gaye and dancing the *kalamatianos* and I gave a toast to her and my wonderful son-in-law. On that warm Massachusetts June night, in 2011, I said: "May there be many a summer morning when, with what pleasure, what joy, you come into harbors new to your eyes...."

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