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Thoughts on C.P. Cavafy

In a speech honoring Robert Frost, John F. Kennedy said that "The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state." In my view, there is no poet to whom this applies more than C.P. Cavafy. Whether you are reading one of his historical, sensual or philosophical poems, the lesson is always the same: after all battles against society and time have been lost ("the Medes will break through after all"), what remains is the authenticity of your thoughts, hopes and experiences, and the modest satisfaction of having been true to yourself.

Cavafy may be the greatest Greek poet, and his work lends itself more than any other's to being shared with "xenoi." His verse translates elegantly into other languages, retaining much of the restrained, mystical tone of the original Greek. Each poem is a unique calling card with a devastatingly accurate and profound insight into life's journey, often inspired by the Hellenistic past.

The themes of journey, destination and nostalgia - nostalgia in the Homeric sense - central to so much of Cavafy's poetry have special resonance for me, and I suspect for many Greeks of the diaspora. Regardless of how far we travel, how deep the roots we put in our adoptive countries and how much we succeed, love and are loved, we all understand too well the meaning of "You won't find a new country, won't find another shore./This city will always pursue you." We seek the Alexandrias of our dreams, while trying to avoid the path to Sousa, and all the time longing for Ithaca.

Once I heard that you should commit to memory one piece of music and one poem, so that if you ever lose all your possessions, family and friends, you will still have something to yourself. I have a lot of music memorized, but only few poems. Not surprisingly, they are all by Cavafy. If I had to keep only one, it would be "The God Abandons Anthony."