

Cavafy's Alexandria

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Constantine Cavafy [Κ. Π. ΚΑΒΑΦΗΣ] is considered **1** of the **greatest Greek poets**. Most knowledgeable people list Cavafy as one of the **finest European poets** of the 20th century. He has been translated in countless languages, with many editions in English. A new translation of his appears every few years. This is unprecedented for a Greek poet.



The last of 9 children, Cavafy was born in 1863 in **Alexandria, Egypt** to a prosperous Greek family. His mother, Haricleia descended from one of the aristocratic families of Constantinople who had settled there in 1680 from **Chios**. His father, Peter John became one of Alexandria's leading merchants acquiring an enormous fortune. After his father's death, however, when the poet was only 7 years old, the family fortune was lost through mismanagement. Cavafy, the child of grand bourgeois, grew up in **poverty**, aware, however, of being socially fallen. At the age of 29, he took a position as a clerk in the Department of Irrigation. He died of throat cancer on 29 April **1933**, on

his 70th birthday.

In Cavafy's lifetime, Alexandria was one of the **4 most important centers of Hellenism**, along with, **Constantinople**, Athens, and **Smyrna**. Greeks, along with other foreigners, had been encouraged to settle there in the 19th century by the Ottoman viceroy Mohammed Aly who wanted to modernize Egypt. Alexandria attracted sizable communities of foreigners. By 1917, the **30,000 Greeks** was most visible ethnic group, in a city of 435,000. The Greeks came to Alexandria largely from the **Hellenic diaspora**, and dispersed from there throughout the Near East and the Balkans.

When Cavafy strolled through the streets of Alexandria, he felt that he was walking through a Greek city. There were Greek churches, schools, book stores, cafes, restaurants, newspapers, magazines, and voluntary organizations. It was a wealthy and educated community that **supported culture** both in Egypt as well as Greece. Some of the great cultural benefactors of Greece came from Egypt. **Alexandria** became synonymous with culture, arts, cosmopolitanism, and commerce.

This is why Cavafy never wanted to move to Greece. He felt perfectly at home in this center of Hellenism, seeing himself as a member of the diaspora rather than of mainland Greece. When in his old age he was invited by a friend to move to Athens, Cavafy refused. "*Mohammed Aly Square is my aunt,*" he responded; "*Rue Cherif Pacha is my first cousin and the Rue de Ramleh is my second. How could I leave them?*" It is these that he turned into art, as the poet of "***In the Same Place***" who looks out onto his neighborhood:

"I created you in joy and sorrow./ And you have turned into sentiment for me."

Another reason Cavafy preferred Alexandria to Athens is that the Egyptian city represented for him the great period of Hellenism that was inaugurated by **Alexander the Great**. It was he who founded Alexandria in **331 BC**, a city that became one of the most splendid in the ancient world and the nucleus of **Roman Egypt**. The lighthouse on the **Pharos** islet in the harbor stood for many as a beacon of culture and the **Library**, the grandest of the ancient world, was a symbol of the city as a **hub of learning and education**. Ancient **Alexandria** was a mix of races, religions, and nationalities. So too was **Cavafy's Alexandria**.

Cavafy was acutely interested in this type of **cultural fusion** that was characteristic of Alexander's **Hellenistic Empire**. Alexander the Great encouraged Greek immigration to the East and fostered interethnic marriages. Many of Cavafy's poems deal with this theme of **cultural and racial fusion**. The speaker "***In a Town of Osroini***" boasts: "*We are a mix here: Syrians, Greeks, Armenians, Medes.*"

The poem "***In the Year 200 BC***" calls this assortment "***the great new Greek world.***"

National Geographic's
Millennia World Cultural Capitals
0000 - Alexandria of Hellenic Egypt
1000 - Cordoba of Islamic Spain!
2000 - New York of multiethnic USA!

*“We the Alexandrians, the Antiochians,
the Selefkians, and the countless
other Greeks of Egypt and Syria,
and those in Media, and Persia, and all the rest:
with our far-flung supremacy,
our flexible policy of judicious integration,
and our Common Greek Language
which we carried as far as Bactria, as far as the Indians.”*

Cavafy also understood that Hellenism was threatened after so many centuries of ethnic, racial, and cultural blending. In the poem, “**Poseidonians**”, he explores the fate of the inhabitants of a Greek colony in south central **Italy**, who **had forgotten** their Greek tongue and culture after centuries of mingling with Tyrrhians, Latins, and other foreigners. The only connection to their ancestors was a **Greek Festival** they celebrated with “*beautiful rites, lyres, flutes, contests, and crowns*”. At the festival’s end, they always talked about their old customs and repeated their Greek names, which **only a few of them understood now**.

Waiting for the Barbarians

Cavafy, Constantine P. (1904)

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are to arrive today.
Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?
Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
What laws can the Senators pass any more?
When the barbarians come they will make the laws.
*Why did our emperor wake up so early,
and sits at the greatest gate of the city,
on the throne, solemn, wearing the crown?*
Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
And the emperor waits to receive their chief.
Indeed he has prepared to give him a scroll.
Therein he inscribed many titles and names of honor.
*Why have our two consuls and the praetors come out
today in their red, embroidered togas;
why do they wear amethyst-studded bracelets,
and rings with brilliant, glittering emeralds;
why are they carrying costly canes today,
wonderfully carved with silver and gold?*
Because the barbarians are to arrive today,
and such things dazzle the barbarians.
*Why don't the worthy orators come as always
to make their speeches, to have their say?*
Because the barbarians are to arrive today;
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.
*Why all of a sudden this unrest and confusion?
(How solemn the faces have become).*
*Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?*
Because night is here but the **barbarians have not come**.
And some people arrived from the borders,
and said that **there are no longer any barbarians**.
And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.

ΚΑΒΑΦΗΣ, Κ. Π.

*“because they remembered that they too were **Greeks**
they too citizens of Magna Graecia once upon a time;
but how they'd fallen,
what they'd now become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
excluded--what a catastrophe!—
from the Hellenic way of life.”*

One of the reasons for Cavafy’s extraordinary popularity in Greece, the **United States**, and the entire world is that he understood the conditions of **life in the late 20th and early 21st century**. He knew 100 years earlier that by turning to the history of his native city, he would find parallels to our own modern society: **imperial systems, globalization, transnationalism, multiculturalism**.

Cavafy’s genius lay in showing how Hellenism flourished in this ancient world and how ordinary people tried to hold on to this way of life and to this form of identity in the ensuing centuries.

*Nobel Laureate Seferis wrote that Cavafy is a difficult poet
because you need to know history to understand him.
We have come to appreciate Cavafy because we know that, by
writing about the ancient world, he is really writing about us.*