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Being Greek is an idea

Why do we read Cavafy? What can a civil servant, a part-time poet, tell us about life today? I appreciate many things in Cavafy's verse. I admire his skill, his exquisite understanding of tone. I am moved by his reflections on time's tragic march and the forbidden love of his inner life.

But I read Cavafy most of all because he reminds me that being Greek is an idea, not a bloodline. In the age of Chrysi Avgi, the cosmopolitan Alexandrian offers another better "nationalism." Returning to Greece, Cavafy's philosophers exclaim (in the translation of Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard), "We simply can't be ashamed / of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins / we should really honor it, delight in it."

Hellenism is inclusive, multilingual, ever-changing. The Lacedaimonians can stay at home in Sparta. Alexander did not need them. But we today need Cavafy more than ever. The golden dawn is rising; let true Greeks hope its dusk comes soon.

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