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On the significance of Cavafy today

A week ago I buried my mother. It was an 89 year journey for this woman of the Greek Diaspora. Angelina left her small island of Ereikousa in 1950 and traveled to the island of Manhattan. Ereikousa floats more or less right where the Ionian Sea meets the Adriatic Sea. Oceanographers say it is precisely at 39 degrees latitude north and 19 degrees longitude east. Ereikousa was as unsophisticated as Alexandria was cosmopolitan 100 years ago. My illiterate mother loved to be read to and deeply appreciated Greek lyrical poets. Curiously, she resonated with Cavafy's "tone of voice," his has unique, barren lyricism especially the poems about loss and death. Before she left Ereikousa, my mother had buried 12 of her siblings.

On the Saturday morning of my mother's death, I woke up before dawn as I typically do. Usually I go to the gym or take care of stupid professional matters. But this morning I was preparing for her death. I brewed Greek coffee and feeling disoriented I knew I had to read something. Reading strangely organizes and soothes me. When I was a child it was my mother's touch which soothed.

What I choose to read under stressful life conditions is perhaps like being given a Rorschach inkblot test. Last Saturday, I found the poems of Cavafy that deal with Christianity. I read "There when I enter the church of the Greeks," and I recognized that this poet, like me, is not much of a Christian Orthodox. I understand much about the deep psychological need for religion, the psychoanalytic insights into the illusion of religion, and the frequently unleashed fundamentalism of religion, but this morning I needed someone who knew about decay and broken attachments and did not romanticize them.

Cavafy's poems provided me with what religion sometimes does for others. That is, an emotional holding in the liminal space that I found myself in. Cavafy does this often for me. Yes, Cavafy is a Diaspora poet but he is also a poet of transition. Given that we all cannot deny the ultimate transition - death, I should think he is a perfect poet. This "Greek gentleman in a straw hat," as E. M. Foster wrote, "standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe," is a kind of a solution .