

GREECE: The journey to *Ithaca*: Cavafy's readings of the human soul

by A. Makrinos

Where Homer decided to halt and put a full stop, it is difficult and dangerous for anyone else to wish to continue. But it is in the difficult and dangerous tasks that great craftsmen are successful.

C. P. Cavafy on *Ithaca*.

Constantine Petrou Cavafy was born into a rich Greek family on 29 April 1863 in Alexandria, a city with high numbers of Greek population at the time. Cavafy's parents originated from Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and moved to Alexandria in 1855. Cavafy was the ninth and last child. In 1870, his father died and two years later, Cavafy moved together with his family to England where he was educated and learnt excellent English. After five years in Liverpool and London, in 1878 he returned to Alexandria and finished his studies in the famous Greek college "Hermes". In 1882, because of the explosive political condition in Egypt, Cavafy's family moved to Constantinople. However, three years later they returned permanently to Alexandria.



The poet lived all his life in Alexandria apart from short trips in 1897 to Paris and London and four visits to Greece (1901, 1903, 1905, 1932). In 1892 because of financial problems Cavafy was forced to take a job in the Egyptian Government's Irrigation Office where he was employed for more than 30 years.

His life in Alexandria was monotonous and lonely. Initially he stayed with one of his brothers but later on he lived alone. In the last years of his life he enjoyed the appreciation of his Alexandrian friends but overall he preferred loneliness and isolation. He never studied in a university but his personal studies (mainly of History) enabled him to acquire deep knowledge of French and English literature. He spoke English, French and Italian. His acquaintance with the cosmopolitan centres of his time (London, Constantinople, Alexandria) equipped him with significant life experience. In the summer of 1932, he was diagnosed with larynx cancer and he then visited Athens in order to be treated; although he stayed in Greece for four months, his condition worsened and finally he died in a hospital of Alexandria on his birthday, 29 April 1933.

Cavafy was an eccentric, strange and difficult character. Throughout his life he remained eclectic and ascetic as he struggled to reconcile with his sensuous eroticism and his homosexuality. He frequently felt tormented by the guilt of a conservative and hostile society which was incapable to accept his eroticism and a Christian religious background which was not compatible with his passions. Loneliness and isolation were the main features of his everyday life and they are transformed into melancholic pessimism and sometimes desperation in his poetry. Cavafy felt that he had to preserve his humanity by resisting whatever causes the moral decline of the human being and by preserving his heroic dignity against failure and death.

He is often characterised as the "poet of the old age" because he has produced his masterpieces and acquired his distinct poetic features after he has reached the age of maturity. He was not born a poet, he became one. He managed to find his poetic voice after 1911 and he printed his poems in a few copies which he offered only a few friends without ever publishing them in a collection. The complete works of Cavafy (154 poems in total) were published for the first time in 1935 under the title *Poems*; later on an edition of his repudiated, hidden and unfinished poems has also been prepared. Cavafy is a dramatic poet who summarises in his 280 poems the anxiety of the human soul when faced with the greatest obstacles of life: loneliness, isolation, sorrow, despair, danger, corruption, destruction of love, vanity, old age and death. His poetry is centred on the human being. His protagonists do not bleed and are not crashed by the difficulties but preserve their dignity and bravery and face failure with courage.

Whilst producing poetry, Cavafy wrote a lot but published little. Although he is influenced by romanticism



Greek stamp with Cavafy (1983)

and symbolism (especially in his early poems), his writing is original and possesses classical quality. His verse is free, iambic without rhyming; his language is the demotic Greek of the people of Alexandria with colloquialisms. His style is prose, with clarity of expression and precision and without complicated decorative elements (adjectives or figures of speech). Other features of his poetry are his irony, his didactic and reflexive tone, the building of dramatic atmosphere, the use of symbols and the theatricality of his settings. Most of his themes are taken from the Greek historical past (especially from the Hellenistic and Roman periods but also from Ancient Greece and Byzantium) and the real world (a part of these experiences originate from his homosexuality). His protagonists are either real or fictional and the unknown details of their lives stimulate Cavafy's poetic imagination.

His inspiration is triggered by the world of memories; Cavafy usually takes from the “drawers” of his mind an image or a set of memories and transforms them into a poetic idea. He has divided his poems into historical, allegorical (philosophical) and erotic but this categorisation is conventional; most of the poems belong to several of those categories.

Cavafy's work was initially received in Greece with scepticism. There have been many reactions and strong criticism by established intellectuals such as Psycharis¹ or Palamas² because his poetry opposed the conventional poetic rules in Athens at the time and the movement of demoticism.³ Cavafy became known in Greece because of Gr. Xenopoulos⁴ who praised him in an article in the magazine *Panathinaia*. Since then, modern Greek poets, musicians and other artists have been influenced by Cavafy's poetry and refer to him as their teacher. He is considered to be one of the most important Modern Greek poets with international recognition and his work has been translated in more than 200 languages all over the world.

Ithaca was written in 1911 and was published in the Alexandrian magazine *Grammata*. The first version of the poem was written in 1894 and was entitled *The Second Odyssey*. It belongs to the category of mythological-didactic poems and Cavafy draws inspiration from Homer's *Odyssey*, Petronius' *Exhortatio ad Ulissem*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Tennyson's *Ulysses*. The central idea of the poem is that people setting out for a purpose in their life acquire knowledge and experience which are superior to this cause.

ΙΘΑΚΗ¹ (1911)

Σὰ βγείς στὸν πηγαμιὸ² γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,
 νὰ εὐχεσαι νᾶναι μακρὸς ὁ δρόμος,
 γεμάτος περιπέτειες,³ γεμάτος γνώσεις.⁴
 Τοὺς Λαιστρυγόνες καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,
 τὸν θυμωμένο Ποσειδῶνα μὴ φοβᾶσαι,
 τέτοια στὸν δρόμο σου ποτέ σου δὲν θὰ βρεῖς,
 ἂν μὲν' ἢ σκέψις⁵ σου ὑψηλὴ, ἂν ἐκλεκτὴ

ITHACA (1911)

When you set out on the journey to Ithaca,
 pray that the road be long,
 full of adventures, full of knowledge.
 The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
 the raging Poseidon do not fear:
 you 'll never find the likes of these on your way,
 if lofty be your thoughts, if rare emotion

¹ **Ioannis Psycharis** (1854-1929) was a philologist of Greek origin, author and promoter of Demotic Greek. His most well-known work is *My Journey* (1888) which established him as the mentor of the Demotic side in the Greek language question.

² **Kostis Palamas** (1859-1943) was the Greek poet who composed the Olympic Hymn. He was a central figure of the Greek literary generation of the 1880s and one of the co-founders of the so-called New Athenian School.

³ **Demoticism**: a linguistic movement which favoured the use of Demotic Greek in all levels of written and oral speech and its adaptation as the official language of the Greek state.

⁴ **Gregorios Xenopoulos** (1867-1951) was a Greek novelist, journalist and author of theatrical plays. He was the founder and editor of the *Nea Estia* magazine which is still published and he became a member of the Academy of Athens in 1931.

συγκίνησις⁶ τὸ πνεῦμα⁷ καὶ τὸ σῶμα⁸ σου ἀγγίζει.

touches your spirit and your body.

Τοὺς Λαιστρυγόνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,
τὸν ἄγριο⁹ Ποσειδῶνα δὲν θὰ συναντήσεις,
ἂν δὲν τοὺς κουβανεῖς μὲς στὴν ψυχὴ¹⁰ σου,
ἂν ἡ ψυχὴ σου δὲν τοὺς στήνει ἔμπρός σου.

The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
the fierce Poseidon you'll not encounter,
unless you carry them along within your soul,
unless your soul raises them before you.

Νὰ εὐχεσῶ¹¹ νᾶναι μακρὸς ὁ δρόμος.
Πολλὰ τὰ καλοκαιρινὰ πρωῒα νὰ εἶναι
ποῦ μὲ τι εὐχαρίστηση, μὲ τι χαρὰ
θὰ μπαίνεις σὲ λιμένας¹² πρωτοειδωμένους.¹³
νὰ σταματήσεις σ' ἔμπορεῖα¹⁴ Φοινικικά,
καὶ τὲς καλὲς πραγμάτειες¹⁵ ν' ἀποκτήσεις,
σεντέφια καὶ κοράλλια, κεχρὶμπάρια κ' ἔβενους,¹⁶
καὶ ἡδονικά¹⁷ μυρωδικὰ κάθε λογῆς,
ὅσο μπορεῖς πιὸ ἀφθονα ἡδονικά μυρωδικά·
σὲ πόλεις Αἰγυπτιακὲς πολλὲς νὰ πᾶς,
νὰ μάθεις¹⁸ καὶ νὰ μάθεις ἀπ' τοὺς σπουδασμένους.

Pray that the road be long;
that there be many a summer morning,
when with what delight, what joy,
you'll enter into harbours yet unseen;
that you may stop at the Phoenician emporia
and acquire all the fine wares,
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensuous perfumes of every kind,
as many sensuous perfumes as you can;
that you may visit many an Egyptian city,
to learn and learn again from lettered men.

Πάντα στὸν νοῦ¹⁹ σου νᾶχεις τὴν Ἰθάκη.
Τὸ φθάσιμον²⁰ ἐκεῖ εἶν' ὁ προορισμὸς σου.
Ἀλλὰ μὴ βιάζεσαι²¹ τὸ ταξεῖδι διόλου.
Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλὰ νὰ διαρκέσει·
καὶ γέρος²² πιά ν' ἀράξεις στὸ νησί,
πλούσιος²³ μὲ ὅσα κέρδισες στὸ δρόμο,
μὴ προσδοκῶντας πλούτη νὰ σὲ δώσει ἡ Ἰθάκη.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your final destination
But do not rush the voyage in the least.
Better it last for many years;
and once you're old, cast anchor on the isle,
rich with all you've gained along the way,
expecting not that Ithaca will give you wealth.

Ἡ Ἰθάκη σ' ἔδωσε τ' ὠραῖο ταξεῖδι.
Χωρὶς²⁴ αὐτὴν δὲν θᾶβγαινες στὸν δρόμο,
Ἄλλα δὲν ἔχει νὰ σὲ δώσει πιά.

Ithaca gave you the wondrous voyage:
without her you'd never have set out.
But she has nothing to give you any more.

Κι ἂν πτωχικὴ²⁵ τὴν βρεῖς, ἡ Ἰθάκη δὲν σὲ γέλασε.
Ἔτσι σοφὸς²⁶ ποῦ ἔγινες, μὲ τόση πείρα,
ἦδη θὰ τὸ καταλάβεις ἡ Ἰθάκη²⁷ τί σημαίνουν.²⁸

If then you found her poor, Ithaca has not deceived
you
As wise you've become, with such experience, by now
You will have come to know what Ithacas really
mean.

Translated by E. Sachperoglou in C. P. Cavafy *The Collected Poems* Oxford World's Classics, Oxford 2008.

Comments:

1-3 **Σὰ βγεῖς... γνώσεις:** These verses have a central position in the poem. Ithaca symbolises our personal journey of life. The poet uses the 2nd person singular to give advice and make his poem didactic. Line 3 is directly linked to the Homeric story of the return of Odysseus to Ithaca after the Trojan War. This return was *full of adventures, full of knowledge*. Compare these lines with the following passage from the *Odyssey*:

Homer, *the Odyssey* 1.1-5

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε,²⁹ Μοῦσα πολύτροπον,³⁰ ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη,³¹ ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον³² ἔπερσε.³³

Question

Read the passage from *the Odyssey* 1.1-5 and compare it with the first lines of *Ithaca*. What are the similarities and the difference of the Homeric hero Odysseus with the Cavafean hero (the reader)?

πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα³⁴ καὶ νόον ἔγνω,³⁵
πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ³⁶ πάθεν³⁷ ἄλγεα³⁸ ὄν κατὰ θυμόν,³⁹
ἀρνύμενος⁴⁰ ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον⁴¹ ἑταίρων.⁴²

These first verses of *Ithaca* stimulate our imagination and urge the reader to visualise the Homeric world of the past and our own world of the future.

4-5 **Τοὺς Λαιστρυγόνας... Ποσειδῶνα:** in *the Odyssey* the Laestrygonians and the Cyclops Polyphemus are the mythical monsters which fight Odysseus and his companions and obstruct their return to Ithaca. Polyphemus is blinded by Odysseus and asks for revenge from his father, Poseidon the god of the sea. Poseidon employs bad weather and rough sea to destroy Odysseus' hope of return. In *Ithaca* the Laestrygonians, the Cyclopes and angry Poseidon lose their Homeric meaning and are transformed into universal symbols. They represent the obstacles that we face in our lives and that prevent us from achieving our goals. Note that these symbols are repeated in lines 9-10.

13 **Νὰ εὐχέσαι...ὁ δρόμος:** Repetition of line 2. With this repetition Cavafy reverses the Homeric myth. In Homer, Odysseus prayed for a fast return to Ithaca whilst Cavafy's advises us to pray for a long trip which will offer knowledge and experience. For Cavafy's Odysseus it is the journey that counts, so the poet wishes that the journey is full of adventures. However, the Homeric hero wishes to see even the smoke from Ithaca and then to die. Odysseus in Homer faces material obstacles, Cavafy's hero faces his own fears.

Homer, *the Odyssey* 1.55-59

...δύστηνον⁴³ ὄδυρόμενον⁴⁴ κατερύκει,⁴⁵
αἰεὶ δὲ μαλακοῖσι⁴⁶ καὶ αἰμυλίοισι⁴⁷ λόγοισι
θέλγει,⁴⁸ ὅπως Ἰθάκης ἐπιλύσεται.⁴⁹ αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεύς,
ἰέμενος⁵⁰ καὶ καπνὸν ἀποθρόσκοντα⁵¹ νοῆσαι
ἦς γαίης, θανέειν ἰμείρεται...⁵²

16: **Λιμένας πρωτοειδωμένους:** the poet wants to underline the joy and beauty of the first time we experience something in life.

17 **σ' ἐμπορεῖα Φοινικικά:** the Phoenicians have developed a maritime, trading culture that spread across the Mediterranean during the period 1550-300 BC. Cavafy uses them as the symbol of the sensuous pleasures, the pleasures of the body.

18-21 **καὶ τὲς καλὲς...ἡδονικὰ μυρωδικά:** the poet tries to stimulate our senses with the "precious stones" and the "hedonistic perfumes" that we should experience in life; these verses are an invitation to us and to himself to taste the life of senses as intensely as possible.

22-23 **σὲ πόλεις Αἰγυπτιακὲς... σπουδασμένους:** Ancient Egypt is the symbol of knowledge and learning; Cavafy's beloved city was famous in antiquity for its Library which gathered an immense number of books in combination to renowned researchers, who studied, discussed and commented on the ancient authors (like Cavafy). The repetition of the word *và μάθεις* (to learn) underlines the significance of knowledge. Egypt symbolises the world of the mind.

24-25 **Πάντα...προορισμός σου:** These verses advise us not to forget our personal Ithaca, our destination. Many times people forget their target in life and Cavafy advises us that we must always keep our mind the reason of our trip. It is again underlined that it is better if the journey is long because of the experience gained along the way.

30-31 **μὴ προσδοκῶντας ...ταξειῖδι:** Ithaca has nothing to offer us anymore; the purpose of our life seems empty after we have achieved it. There is certain pessimism in this message which does not however reach the point of surrender. The true value of Ithaca was the "wondrous voyage". For Odysseus it is the purpose (Ithaca) that defines the significance of his being but for the Cavafian hero it is the journey and the experience and knowledge acquired that make our life worth living.

36 ἦδη...τὶ σημαίνουν: the implication is that Ithacas are the targets, the ambitions and the dreams we have in life.

Questions and Tasks

1. Compare line 1 to lines 23-24 and analyze their meaning.
2. Do you think that Cavafy's message in *Ithaca* is optimistic or pessimistic and why?
3. What is the role of knowledge in human life according to the poet?
4. Explain why the poet uses the article ἡ in singular with the plural Ἰθάκες in the last line of the poem.
5. "Cavafy advises the reader through his symbols". Discuss.

Sources

1. The edition used here is: C. P. Cavafy *The Collected Poems*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford 2008.
2. The official website of the Cavafy archive with update bibliographies, photos, manuscripts, letters, notes, etc. in Greek: <http://www.cavafy.gr> and in English <http://www.cavafy.com>
2. Bibliography and Discography on Cavafy: <http://cavafis.compupress.gr/public.htm>
3. Information about Giannis Smaragdis' film *Cavafy*(1996): <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115849/>
4. The Kavafis project: <http://www.kavafis.eu/>

Images

Cavafy 1900, portrait

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/Cavafy1900-portrait.jpg>

Greek stamp with Cavafy 1983

<http://cavafis.compupress.gr/cavafy54.htm>

The manuscript of Cavafy's *Ithaca*

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/galleries/exhibits/cavafy/homer.html>

Cavafy Museum in Alexandria

¹ Ἰθάκη, ἡ: of uncertain etymology. Perhaps it originates from the Phoenician word "Utica" (*colony*); another view suggests it is related to a nickname of Prometheus. A third view relates the first component of the word (-i) to the Phoenician word for the "island" whilst the second part is without explanation.

² πηγαίμος, ὁ (gen. -ου): going somewhere, the route to a certain destination.

³ περιπέτεια, ἡ: a sudden change of fortune (ancient Greek); adventure (modern Greek). The poet is aware of both meanings.

⁴ γνώσις, ἡ, (gen. -εως): (from the verb γινώσκω) knowledge, wisdom.

⁵ σκέψις, ἡ, (gen. -εως): (from the verb σκέπτομαι) perception by the senses, consideration, reflexion, thought.

⁶ συγκίνησις, ἡ, (gen. -εως): (from the verb συγκινέω) emotion.

⁷ πνεῦμα, τὸ (gen. -ατος): spirit.

⁸ σῶμα, τὸ (gen. -ος): body.

⁹ ἄγριος, -α, -ον: wild.

¹⁰ ψυχὴ, ἡ, (gen. -ης): the soul of a man; in Homer, only a departed soul, spirit, ghost which still retained the shape of its living owner.

¹¹ εὐχομαι: to pray.

¹² λιμὴν, ὁ (gen. -ένος): a harbour.

¹³ πρωτοειδωμένος, -η, -ον: participle from πρῶτα (first of all, in the first place) and εἰδωμένος (from the verb ὁράω, to see).

¹⁴ ἐμπορεῖον, τὸ (gen. -ου): a trading place

¹⁵ πραγμάτεια (gen. -ας): a trade, ware.

¹⁶ ἔβενος, ὁ (gen. -ου): very hard black wood;

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- ¹⁷ ἡδονικός, -α, -ον: sensuous, delightful, pleasant (from the word ἡδονή, ἡ: pleasure, enjoyment, pleasure).
- ¹⁸ νὰ μάθεις – from the verb μανθάνω, to learn.
- ¹⁹ νοῦς, ὁ (gen. –νοῦς): mind
- ²⁰ φθάσιμον, τὸ: the arrival (from the verb φθάνω: to come before, to reach).
- ²¹ βιάζω: to force, to constrain, to carry by force (ancient Greek), to rush (modern Greek).
- ²² γέρος, ὁ (gen. –ου): an old man (from the ancient Greek γέρον, ὁ (gen. –οντος).
- ²³ πλούσιος, -α, -ον: rich, wealthy (from the noun πλοῦτος, ὁ); see also next line.
- ²⁴ χωρίς, (preposition): without.
- ²⁵ πτωχικός, -ή, -όν: poor (from πτωχός, -ή, -όν).
- ²⁶ σοφός, -ή, -όν: wise.
- ²⁷ ἡ Ἰθάκης: Cavafy starts with the article in singular nominative (ἡ) and continues with the noun in plural nominative (Ἰθάκης) in order to show that there is not only one purpose in the people's minds but many.
- ²⁸ σημαίνω: to signify, to mean.
- ²⁹ ἐννέπω: poetic form of ἐνέπω, to tell, to describe, to relate.
- ³⁰ πολύτροπος, -η, -ον: much-travelled, wandering, turning many ways, versatile, ingenious (from πολὺς, τρέπω).
- ³¹ πλάζομαι: to wander, to go astray; πλάγχθη is epic passive aorist without augment.
- ³² πτολίεθρον, τὸ (gen. –ου): a city; diminutive of πτόλις, but used like πόλις.
- ³³ πέρθω: to wage, to ravage, to sack, to destroy.
- ³⁴ ἄστυ, τὸ (gen. –εος): a city, town.
- ³⁵ γινώσκω: to know; ἔγνω is 3rd person singular, indicative, active, second aorist.
- ³⁶ πόντος, ὁ (gen. –ου): the sea, esp. the open sea, the high sea.
- ³⁷ πάσχω: to suffer or to be affected by anything whether good or bad πάθεν is second aorist without augment.
- ³⁸ ἄλγος, τὸ: pain whether of body or mind, sorrow, grief, distress.
- ³⁹ θυμός, ὁ (gen. –ου): the soul, the life, breath, heart (from the verbθύω).
- ⁴⁰ ἄρνημαι: to receive for oneself, gain, earn, carry off as a prize; defect. Dep. used only in present and imperfect, lengthened form of αἴρωμαι
- ⁴¹ νόστος, ὁ (gen. –ου): a return home or homeward, travel, journey (from the verb νέομαι).
- ⁴² ἑταῖρος, ὁ (gen. –ου): epic and Ionic for ἑταρος, ὁ (ἕτης), a companion, comrade or companion in arms.
- ⁴³ δύστηνος, -ος -ον: wretched, unhappy, unfortunate.
- ⁴⁴ ὀδύρομαι: to bewail, mourn for, lament.
- ⁴⁵ κατερύκω: to hold back, detain.
- ⁴⁶ μαλακός, -η, -ον: soft, gentle, mild.
- ⁴⁷ αἰμύλιος, -ος -ον: flattering, winning, wily (see also αἰμύλος).
- ⁴⁸ θέλω: to charm, enchant, spell-bind.
- ⁴⁹ ἐπιλανθάνω: to make to forget.
- ⁵⁰ ἰέμενος: to send, send away, let go, dismiss (pres. part. passive of ἵημι).
- ⁵¹ ἀποθρόσκω: to spring or leap off from, rise from.
- ⁵² ἰμείρω: to long for, yearn for or after, desire.