
The Special World of Cavafy's Poetry: from Symbol to Reality

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the literary theme of nostos, as it was handled in post-Homeric poetry, especially the nostos of Odysseus concerning "the sweet day of return" and the pangs of nostalgia. The occasion in this essay is C. P. Cavafy's well known poem "Ithaka." It shows how the central emotion of nostos has been altered in leading works of post-classical poetry and replaced with a quest for the post-Ithaka voyage of Odysseus ending for Dante in the Purgatorium and for Tennyson in unspecified transatlantic explorations. Nor was Kazantzakis an exception to this altering of nostos when he had Odysseus' last move end with his death on the iceberg. The post-Homeric rejection of Ithaka as the center of nostos and of Odysseus' voyage has dominated the "Ulysses theme." It also transformed the hero's post-Ithaka adventures by placing the legendary hero outside the original Greek perimeter.

Cavafy undertook to "repatriate" Odysseus by re-introducing the idea of nostos in a number of poems, all centered on a selective and original poetic intuition related to the quest of hedone, whereby the classical virtue of andreia was now recast and made central to a new "brave man of pleasure." The pursuit of hedone is expected to take place as the end of the hedonic voyage in the environment of a universalized conception of Ithaka. In essence it is a Grecian response to nostos promising new vistas of the splendors of the Mediterranean. Such was Cavafy's celebrated repatriation of Odysseus to his native land as fulfillment of an enriched idea of nostos.

I. Cavafy, the Alexandrian Poet

Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) lived and died in Alexandria. Today he is recognized as one of the major poets of the 20th century. Naming the recently endowed professorship of Greek Studies in the Department of Classics of the University of Michigan the Cavafy Chair is therefore an excellent choice and a just recognition.

Cavafy's personal life was rather uneventful, typical middle class, and almost pedestrian, except for the poet's inner turmoil and his exceptional genius. The monotonous life in Alexandria in the 19th century and the young poet's frustrated ambitions, probably account for the mediocre quality of his early poems. Born in 1863 of Greek parents - his mother tongue was English, a language his governess taught him. The family enrolled him at an early age in a private school in England. He returned with the family to Alexandria where he finished the last year of high school. He never had the benefit of college education but became an ardent reader of history and literature.

The loss of the family's social standing in the Greek parochial community after the father's early death and decline of his once flourishing business, brought in their wake a confluence of events that affected the young poet so deeply as to cause a prolonged crisis in the form of a threefold predicament: self-alienation, depression due to unfulfilled aspirations, and erotic ambivalence. Years later, when financial difficulties forced him to seek employment, he accepted a position as a clerk with the Irrigations Service in Egypt then run by the English administration. He became an alcoholic for a while and was tormented with guilt over his covert homosexuality. His early sporadic publications of poems show dependence over a long period on fashionable European and English literary styles, especially symbolism. While the period of crisis lasted, he found it impossible to rid himself of the strong urge to escape. The mood of darkness of soul was powerfully expressed in his 1894 poem "The City" (Η πόλις). Although neither Alexandria nor the Mediterranean world is mentioned in the poem, both loom largely in the background of the theme. This modern Alexandrian-Greek was ready for a voyage, more exactly an escape, but there was no Ithaca in sight. He felt condemned to spend his life as self-alienated prisoner of the city he denounced as his own. When the day of conciliation to his Alexandria and the emancipation from dependence on foreign literary styles came, Cavafy was able to speak in his authentic voice. He was on his way to become a first-rate poet.

E.M. Forster, who met Cavafy in Alexandria during the first World War and made his poetry known in England, wrote of Cavafy in his book *Pharos and Pharillon* (1924) the following: "A Greek gentleman, in a straw hat,

standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe." After the poet's death in 1933, Lawrence Durrell immortalized him in his *Alexandrian Quartet* as "the wise man of the city."

II. The themes of my lecture

I will focus on two topics: Cavafy's choice of poetic topography and the raising of sensuousness to the heights of a virtue: ἀδρεια, courage.

No two poems of Cavafy's early period form a more antithetical pair than the "Polis" (1894/1910) and "Ithaca" (1910/1911). By date of composition they were written 16 years apart. By way of publication date, however, they are separated only by one year.

POLIS'

You said: "I'll go to another land, go to another sea.
Some other city will be found, better than this.
Each one of my endeavors is a written verdict;
and my heart—like the dead—lies buried.
My mind, how long will it remain in this decay?
Wherever my eye turns, wherever I gaze
I see my life's black ruins here,
where I spent, and spoiled and ruined so many years."

Other places you'll not find, you'll not go to other seas.
The city will always follow you; the streets you'll walk
will be the same. In the same neighborhood you'll grow old,
and in the same houses, your hair will turn white.
Always in this same city you'll arrive. Don't hope for other places.
There is no ship for you, there is no road.
Just as you spoiled your life here,
in this small corner, you ruined it everywhere on earth. (A15)

Let us now turn to its counterpoint:

ITHACA

As you set out on the journey to Ithaca,
wish that the road will be long,
full of adventures, full of learning.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclopes,
5 angered Poseidon, do not fear,
you will never meet with such things on your way,
if your thought can stay high, if an exquisite
emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians, the Cyclopes,
10 the fierce Poseidon, you will not encounter,

unless you carry them inside your soul,
if your soul doesn't raise them up before you.

Wish that the road may be long.
Many may be the summer mornings
15 when with what joy, what delight,
you will be entering harbors never seen before;
to stop at Phoenician trading posts
and purchase the attractive merchandise,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
20 and sensual perfumes of every kind,
as many as you can of sensual perfumes;
to go to many Egyptian cities
to learn and learn from the knowers.

Always keep Ithaca before your mind.
25 Arrival there is your mission.
Yet do not hurry the journey at all.
Better that it last many years;
and be quite old when you drop anchor at the island,
rich with all you will have gained during the voyage,
30 not expecting Ithaca to give you riches.

Ithaca gave you the beautiful journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out to go.
Ithaca has nothing else to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca did not deceive you.
35 Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
you will by now have understood what Ithacas mean. (A 23)

Note now how different the two poems are in theme and intent. The first impression is that they were not written by the same hand. The "Polis" reads like a dirge song lamenting the ruination of the persona's life. It almost projects the anticipation of the inevitable burial of one's own self. We hear the poet gradually receding into the dark corner of a "no-exit" situation. We can empathize and understand what depression can do to a sensitive person.

After many years and many poems mostly elaborations of the morbid predicament of self-imprisonment and hopelessness ("Trojans" [Τρώες] "Windows" [Παράθυρα], "Candles" [Κεριά], also "Finished" [Τελειωμένα]) and others, the poet would occasionally let his imagination indulge the bitter-sweet imagery of a few past moments of stolen pleasure brought back in lonely recollection ("Voices" [Φωνές], "Desires" [Επιθυμίες]), he finally found the way to the exit, and in 1910 he wrote the enchanting and oft-quoted "Ithaca," actually his last poem of the symbolist period.

A new world suddenly opened before him. It was a bold run to freedom, a move from the no-polis to the open horizons beyond, to Ithaca.

The poem addresses every reader, inviting us all to embark on a journey to a life free of restraints and fears, full of promises and pleasures, to see and enjoy the splendors of a world, presumably the Mediterranean. However, make no mistake. Ithaca has only the reality of a poetic universe. Be that as it may, the journey's magic is tempting and inviting, but not available to the *persona* of the "Polis." He is beyond redemption, being full of Laistrygonians and Cyclopes, forever fearful of angry Poseidon. And now for the big question: How does one get ready for the voyage? The answer is hidden within the poem: You will not encounter these terrifying things especially

if your thought can stay high, if an exquisite
emotion touches your spirit and your body...

If..., what a tantalizing "if"! The miserable *persona* of the "Polis" is forever excluded, never having experienced "an exquisite emotion." I think the full answer is given in another poem, "I Went," [Ἐπήγα, A 59] written in 1905 but for special reasons, related to the poet's fears, it did not get published until 1913! :

I didn't bind myself. I let go completely and went.
To the sensual pleasures that were half-real,
half-turning in my mind,
I went into the luminous night.
And drank from the strong wines just as
The brave men of pleasure drink.

The Greek text reads: ἀδρείοι της ηδονής. The expression has a glorious antecedent. It goes back to Plato's *Laches* at 191e 4-7. Socrates: "Now all these persons are courageous, but some have courage in pleasures and some in pains, some in desires and some in fears. And some are cowards under the same condition, as I should imagine." We know what Plato meant when he defined courage as a virtue, as knowledge of what to fear and what not to fear, and recognized as one of the four cardinal *aretai*. But neither Plato's *andreia*, i.e., being skilled not to succumb to desires or pleasures, nor the other virtue, *sophia*, is what Cavafy understands as the needed preparation for the voyage to begin. Where Plato recommended resistance to pleasure, Cavafy urged the opposite, pleasures of the strong sort, which is what he means by the Greek expression "the strong wines of *hedonē*." If so, the *persona* of the "Polis" is a coward, as there are many sorts of cowards in this life, condemned never to come close to the *sophia* Cavafy promises in his "Ithaca." The splendors of the poet's Mediterranean world are beyond the reach of cowards, for they have either shunned or distorted the hedonic experience.

But before I go on with the full significance of the "brave men of pleasure," I should stop to relate a few pertinent things about the cowards,

the failures of life, the outcasts of *hedonē*. I will cite three examples, two from the well-known poems, the 1898 "Waiting for the Barbarians" (Περιμένοντας τους Βαρβάρους, 1898/1904) and the 1910 "The God Abandons Anthony" (Απολείπειν ο θεός Αντώνιον (1910/1911), which is also the first non-symbolist poem; also one less known, "From the School of the Renown Philosopher." (Απο την σχολήν του περιωνύμου φιλοσόφου. Β 28). Now for the first case, the barbarians. Let us listen to what the "citizens" of this decadent city, cowards that they are, say:

...Why isn't anything happening in the senate
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Again:

Why did our emperor get up so early
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Also.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas

And:

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

And the refrain in each case echoes the same:

Because the barbarians are coming today...

When the citizens hear that there are no barbarians, they exclaim in despair:

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution. (Keeley and Sherrard trs.)

These citizens, if citizens indeed, don't have to be defeated or conquered. They are already cowards, emasculated, politically marginalized, non-hedonic, with no saving virtues of any kind. They can neither legislate nor act. Why should the barbarians even bother with such people even if they existed?

Let me turn briefly to the marvelous "The God Abandons Anthony" 1910/1911 (A 20).

At midnight when suddenly you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,

work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive- don't mourn them uselessly:
as one long prepared, and full of courage,
say goodbye to her, to Alexandria who is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and full of courage,
as is right for you who were given this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion,
but not with the whining, the pleas of a crowd;
listen - your final pleasure - to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing. (Keeley & Sherrard)

Alexandria, absent in "Ithaca" is now before us in full dress. But where is the brave man of pleasure? The event takes place at midnight right in the heart of the city. Anthony has his last chance to prove his loyalty to Eros. But he cannot respond. The deep emotion never occurred. After Actium he became an imperial failure, a coward, and despite his bragging when the circumstances were favorable, he was but a thief of *hedonē*. Cleopatra, on the other hand, lived up to the erotic standards of her city; her coward lover could not. In fact, Anthony never really set out on a voyage to Ithaca. He had opted for power and glory. Still, he believed that he was born the son of Dionysos-Eros. He had frivolously named his obedient slave Eros, the servant who refused to execute the master when the end was near.

The poem depicts a spectacular hedonic failure. The Roman Anthony surrendered to the Roman Octavian wishing to die a Roman death. He never quite learned what it meant to die as a brave man of hedonic courage. This brand of virtue was Greek, not Roman. It never crossed the Adriatic sea. Ithaca was not available to Anthony or any of his likes.

But what about Ithaca and *wisdom, sophia*? We now come to the pathetic case of the disoriented student of philosophy, the nameless *persona* in the poem "From the School of the Renown Philosopher" (B28):

For two years he studied with Ammonius Sakkas,
but he was bored by both philosophy and Sakkas.

Then he went into politics.
But he gave that up. The Prefect was an idiot,
and those around him solemn, officious nitwits:
their Greek- poor fools- barbaric.

After that he became
vaguely curious about the Church: to be baptized

and pass as a Christian. But he soon
let that one drop: it would certainly have caused a row
with his parents, ostentatious pagans,
And right away they would have stopped-
Something too horrible to contemplate-
their extremely generous allowance.

But he had to do something. He began to haunt
the corrupt houses of Alexandria,
every secret den of debauchery.

Here he was fortunate:
he'd been given an extremely handsome figure.
And he enjoyed the divine gift.

His looks would last
at least another ten years. And after that?
Maybe he'll go back to Sakkas.
Or if the old man has died meanwhile,
he'll find another philosopher or sophist:
there's always someone suitable around.

Or in the end he might possibly return
even to politics- commendably remembering
the traditions of his family,
duty toward the country,
and other resonant banalities of that kind. (Keeley and Sherrard trs.)

This spectacle of failure is simply unbeatable. The chain of false pleasures forms a vicious circle. Corruption has infiltrated every fiber of the persona's soul, turning the faculty of desiring into a many-headed monster destined to devour itself. Again, Ithaca is nowhere in sight. The failure is total and the loss inconsequential. There is another case worth mentioning, where a beginning was made but flawed from the very start. The persona in the poem "Myris: Alexandria A.D. 340" ("Μύρης Αλεξάνδρεια του 340 μ.Χ." B.74), after making a promising start, guilt and repentance finally got the best of him. Anyway, Myris died young, and a coward at that. He drowned somewhere during the early stage of the journey before catching a glimpse of an Ithaca. The Christian ethic declared victory on the persona's deathbed. Myris' pagan friend has surreptitiously entered the home of his deceased companion in their wild parties:

... I stood in the corridor. I didn't want
to go further inside because I noticed
that the relatives of the deceased looked at me
with obvious surprise and displeasure
.....

I stood and wept in a corner of the corridor.
And I thought how our parties and excursions
wouldn't be worthwhile now without Myris...
...and I thought how I'd lost forever
his beauty, lost forever
the young man I'd worshiped so passionately.

.....

We'd known of course that Myris was a Christian
know it from the very start.
When he first joined our group the year before last.
But he lived exactly as we did:
more devoted to pleasure than all of us...

.....

He never spoke of his religion.
And once we even told him
that we'd take him with us to the Serapeion.
But - I remember now -
He didn't seem to like this joke of ours.
And yes, now I recall two other incidents.
When we made libations to Poseidon,
he drew himself back from our circle and looked elsewhere.
And when one of us in his fervor said
"May all of us be favored and protected
by the great, the sublime Apollo"-
Myris, unheard by the others, whispered: "not counting me."

The Christian priests were praying loudly
for the young man's soul.
I noticed with how much diligence,
how much intense concern
for the forms of their religion, they were preparing
everything for the Christian funeral.
And suddenly an odd sensation took hold of me:
indefinably I felt
as if Myris were going from me:
I felt that he, a Christian, was united
With his own people and that I was becoming
a stranger, a total stranger. I even felt
a doubt come over me: that I'd been a stranger to him.
I rushed out of their horrible house,
rushed away before my memory of Myris
could be captured, could be perverted by their Christianity. (Keeley & Sherrard)

III. Repatriating Odysseus: the new brave man of pleasure

In January 1894, before the writing of the "Polis," he wrote a poem "The Second Odyssey," a poor imitation of Tennyson's "Ulysses." It was literally unsalvageable, but the theme suited his escapist mood as he was while

picturing himself as a post-Ithaca Odysseus. Let me indulge your patience and cite a few pertinent lines:

Second Odyssey and greater
than the first. But alas
without Homer, without hexameter.

The poem ends with the following flat verses:

When the shores of Ithaca
gradually faded from his sight
and he sailed west full speed
toward Iberias, on to the Herculean Gates
35 away from all that was the Aegean Sea,
he felt he lived again, that
he cast off the hateful bonds
of things known and familiar.
And his adventurous heart
40 rejoiced frozenly, emptied of love.

One must give Cavafy credit for not publishing the poem. The text, survived somehow in his own handwriting. None of the component elements of "The Second Odyssey" survived in the 1910 "Ithaca." By 1910 he was ready for what turned out to be his first original transformation of the Odyssey theme. I could put it a bit stronger and say that his was perhaps the most interesting conception of the mythical voyage since Homer.

When he wrote "Ithaca," Cavafy was forty-seven years old. He had just entered the mature phase of his creative life. Cavafy's poetic imagination has now rediscovered the landscapes and seascapes of the Mediterranean world. Odysseus has returned as a symbol taking on a striking non-temporal quality with universal appeal. The theme went beyond the announcement of the exodus from the psychological predicament of the poet's self-alienation. The new exit, though vaguely resembling the one in Plato's myth of the cave, was not designed for the philosopher who exits and returns to bring the message of the sun to the prisoners inside the cave. The Platonic mission of the philosopher and the kingly mission of Homer's Odysseus are both gone. A brand new voyage has taken their place: the beginning of a totally different journey, where the power of sensuality defines its own *nostos*.

The reader is not expected to start with Odysseus's plans after his return to Ithaca, as is the case with the literary motif that has dominated the major conceptions of Odysseus in the history of the Ulysses theme. To be sure, Cavafy undertook the repatriation of Odysseus, but as a literary act that differs radically from what other great poets had done with the post-Ithaca voyage. Dante and Tennyson, to mention two influential versions of

the post-Ithaca Ulysses, took the ancient hero out of the Greek environment. Dante put him in the Inferno while Tennyson took him out of the Mediterranean world.

Cavafy had two tasks to perform with this motif. First to bring his hero back under the Grecian sky and, having done that, to universalize the concept of the brave man of pleasure by recasting Odysseus as a symbol of a new *andreia*. The first was not difficult, but the second called for a radical reworking of the idea of a voyage, one with an open-ended *nostos*, and also the redefining of *andreia* as one of the four classical cardinal virtues. Right away we notice that the poem "Ithaca" does not mention the Homeric hero. It addresses anyone who is willing to try his/her wings as a free hedonic voyager.

Two items need identification to grasp the thematic richness of Cavafy's "Ithaca": (a) the transformation of the classical hero's epic identity, and (b) the promising splendors of the new space. The importance of Cavafy's originality lies in the way he sought to restore the Odysseus in all of us in the domain of sensuality. Both items have serious cultural and political implications. I will discuss them in conjunction with a brief review of three types of transforming the Homeric Odysseus and the Hellenic idea of *nostos* in Western literature. The first major transformation came with the medieval Dante, the second with the English Romantics,² and the last with the Alexandrian-Greek poet Cavafy.

The series of the transformations of the figure of Odysseus is not my theme. They have already been explored in Stanford's book, *The Ulysses Theme*. I will only make a few stops and relate three select moments in the grand changes of the myth of Odysseus and tie them to my topic. My first stop is the major transformation that came with the closing of the Middle Ages: The Odysseus of Dante, Ulysses, as we find him pictured in the *Inferno*.

IV. Dante's Ulysses

Dante moved Odysseus from the natural world to the subnatural realm of the *Inferno*. Faithful to the early Christian symbols, he simply denied the Greek hero the possibility of salvation, a twist the modern Europeans were glad to ignore. Briefly put, a serious fight had been going on for centuries in epic and lyric poetry, including prose, if reference be allowed to Joyce's *Ulysses*, over the body and the soul of Odysseus. Homer's account of Odysseus and the legends about the last days of the hero require no further comment. The later ancient poets, Greek and Roman, worked with the tradition, regardless of moral evaluations, as is the case of Virgil. It was Dante who exiled Odysseus to the Inferno, far below the Mediterranean, never to return, forever deprived of *nostos*.³

We find Ulysses in Canto XXVI.⁴ Ulysses is now in the inferno burning in eternity with no *nostos* and no Ithaca. The soul of the hero has been indicted in accordance with the Christian dogma concerning the punishment of sin. Virgil's harsh judgment had already set the pace for the indictments that were to follow.

A few verses will suffice to drive the point home. Dante shows at the same time a certain degree of compassion and justice when he asks Ulysses about his *last voyage*. Ulysses replies that nothing could stop him from listening to his zeal "to explore the world and search the ways of life..." We read that Dante had Ulysses pass the pillars of Heracles – forbidden by the gods for men to do so – and follow "the track of Phoebus". Ulysses sailed southward along the coast of Africa, where the Carthaginian had long ago explored, until a whirlwind struck his ship and sank it. It all ended there:

When I from Circe broke at last,
Who more than a year by Gaeta (before
Aeneas had so named it) held me fast,
Not sweet son, nor revered old father, nor
The long-due love which was to have made glad
Penelope for all the pain she bore,
Could conquer the inward hunger that I had
To master earth's experience, and to attain
Knowledge of man's mind, both the good and bad.
But I put out on the deep, open main
With one ship only, and with that little band
Which chose not to desert me.⁵

Such was the motive. Clearly, Dante's Ulysses did not stay home after the sack of Troy. He became instead the wandering explorer of the unknown world and died before he got very far. The novelty in the wandering type of voyage does not concern us here, but the fact that Dante took Odysseus out of the Mediterranean world and soon after that out of the natural world at large, is very significant. Odysseus is found guilty of excessive pride and unquenchable desire of knowledge not given to man to satisfy. Dante's indictment of Odysseus is moral and political, a thesis that sets Dante and Homer worlds apart. Ulysses's *hubris* is beyond the reaches of faith, hence beyond Christian salvation. This is also a cultural judgment. Later on, during the Renaissance, Dante's way of looking at Odysseus will be gradually abandoned, and what was repudiated as sin will become a source of inspiration. What is important to our theme is that the Church had no room for the humanism of the pagan mind and no compassion for the Promethean spirit. The joy of knowledge was allowed only with the blessings of the faith. The hedonic splendors of the Mediterranean world had lost their glorious appeal while most of its cultural monuments were being

abandoned and reduced to ruins. The Renaissance came with no promise of resurrection. The world of Odysseus was gone.

V. The Romantic Odysseus

The Romantics simply restored him back to the surface of earthly activities, this time with a mission outside the classical setting to explore the trans-Atlantic regions. Numerous variations of this theme were elaborated in late medieval and modern literature, but it was the nineteenth century romantics, Tennyson in particular, who took Odysseus out of the Mediterranean sea never to return to his Ithaca. But Cavafy, the Alexandrian Greek, transformed the post-Ithaca voyage of Odysseus in 1910 and had him return to the Mediterranean and its splendors. Ithaca became an open-textured end of the nostos: the hedonic voyage. Many years later, in 1938, another Greek poet, Nikos Kazantzakis, published his epic, *The Odyssey, A Modern Sequel*, and did the extreme opposite with Odysseus; he completed and terminated the romantic voyage beyond the Mediterranean; Odysseus dies on an iceberg in the South Pole.

The romantics relied on an old Greek legend, the prophesy of Teiresias, that Odysseus was destined not to die on his own island. After his return to Ithaca, Odysseus departed again and, as Teiresias's prophesy had announced, he kept wandering to find the place of his final rest somewhere in Greece. The romantics found the legend more exciting and in accord with the spirit of their time; they took Odysseus not only out of the Mediterranean world but also decided to absolve him of Dante's indictment that had made the Atlantic an agent of damnation.

The first post-Dantean romantic Ulysses appears in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem written in 1833, about seventy lines long. The following lines from his "Ulysses" suffice to reveal the new motive:

This gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

The curse of Dante is now then gone. The power of new knowledge was on the rise. The conquests of the Elizabethan era of the worlds beyond the shores of the Atlantic called for a new Odysseus, unrelated to the Mediterranean, and free of the classical devotion to his little Ithaca. Odysseus, or rather Ulysses, now belongs to the New World. He cannot return to an old Greco-Roman sea, the greater portion of which had been conquered by the warriors of a different faith, yet still confined between the pillars of Hercules and the shores of Lebanon and Egypt. What matters here is that Tennyson's Ulysses bears no Grecian marks. His soul is without *metron*.

A brand new world to be conquered, tamed, and turned into transatlantic colonies has replaced Ithaca. This is one aspect in Tennyson's Ulysses the early Cavafy did not suspect when he was imitating the British Muse.

VI. Cavafy's Everyman Odysseus

Cavafy's own, the symbol, is more human, more hedonic, more believable, and closer to us. Yet, there is another side to the poetic vision: the *power of the open nostos*. The first thing we must note is that the goal of the *nostos*, the very end of the journey, be it of Odysseus or any other hero representative of this literary genre, if taken to stand for the high moment of human aspiration, is a complex topic. Seen as a symbol, it may be seen as co-extensive with the pursuit of an ultimate goal or purpose of a life. Small wonder then that *nostos* became of great interest to philosophers and theologians who used the concept symbolically, as is the case with Plotinus and the Church Fathers. The latter especially sought to replace the *nostos* in Homer with the heavenly end of salvation: the return to God. Aside from the theological use to which the Christian tradition put it as a symbol, the changes the concept underwent in modern poetry and how the idea of the end of the journey was redefined, remains a topic of considerable interest in the philosophy of literature.

The journey hoped for, when Cavafy wrote "The City" in August 1894, intimated the escape in light of the romantic motif of an "Odyssey," once the romantic Odysseus of Cavafy and Homer's Odysseus parted company Alexandria had to be invested with the meaning of an inverted Ithaca. Cavafy's "everyman," the Odysseus in all of us, urges the reader to listen to the sirens, to share the lotus, to yield to Circe, to submit to Calypso, to pursue the pleasures that the voyage promises to offer to any person willing to become a *andreios tes hedones*. But the hedonic adventure cannot start without the skills of the redefined virtue of courage. How else is one expected to come close to *sophia*? If there is no conceivable Ithaca neither is there a point to asking for political *aretē*.

The world of Homer is gone, but so is the world of Dante and that of Tennyson. There is nothing left but the return to the Mediterranean in hope of finding there the splendors it once possessed. An Italian poet, Pascoli, made a valiant effort to do just that in his 1904 poem *Ultimo viaggio*. He too went back to Teiresias' prophesy but with a painful twist. He brought Odysseus back to the Mediterranean world only to have him revisit all the places where he wandered after the sack of Troy. On the ninth year after his return to Ithaca, Pascoli's Odysseus leaves again but not for a new world. He must go back to the places he once made his stops, from Calypso's

island to the land of the Laestrygonians. This he does, but what he found collectively in all of them were parts of a vast *nekropolis*. Everything had died or vanished, even the goddess Calypso. The only thing left for the aged Odysseus was the ultimate rest of Nirvana. With Pascoli the return to the Mediterranean was a walk to the cemetery.

Did Cavafy know about Pascoli? I have no knowledge. What is important is that Cavafy's *dramatis persona* in his "Ithaca" rediscovered the Mediterranean world and found it to be what it once was and now had become: a sensuous Alexandria. Though not exactly an Ithaca, it proved to be where our Ithacas are spawned. Any spot is good enough to spawn an Ithaca, good enough to visit and stay in hope of gaining in hedonic wisdom until the day would come to understand the meaning of the voyage. And who knows, perhaps some day hedonic wisdom may give birth to an offspring, to the political virtue suitable to human beings at last free of fear, free of wars, no longer given to the abuse of power and the distortions of the human mind. Perhaps Cavafy was right. Whether the sprawling expanse of the globalized cosmopolis of consumerism can provide the right environment for the voyage of the new brave men of pleasure, is a terrifying prospect. I confess to be unable to fathom its darkness. The fear this prospect generates is more than any available conception of *andreia* can handle. Measureless fear can paralyze even the best of the virtuous. Perhaps we might be forced to mumble the last verses of Cavafy's "Barbarians," even in our sleep:

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Endnotes

1. The translations are mine unless otherwise indicated in parentheses.
2. Stanford, W.S. [1963] 1968. *The Ulysses Theme, A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Theme*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press): "...Odysseus has been moved from a classical to a romantic environment" (p. 175).
3. See Stanford, ch. xiv.
4. In *The Ulysses Theme*, Stanford calls Dante's portrait of Ulysses "the most influential in the whole evolution of the wandering hero" (p. 178).
5. Milano, P. (ed) 1947. *The Portable Dante*, edited, and with an Introduction by Paolo Milano (New York: The Viking Press), "Inferno," tr. by Lawrence Binyon, p. 141, verses 91-102.