

# *Ithaka*

*C. P. Cavafy*

*1911*

The first version of “Ithaka” was probably written in 1894. Cavafy revised the poem in 1910, and it was first published in 1911. The first English translation was published in 1924, and there have been a number of different translations since then. The poem can be found in Cavafy’s *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis, Princeton University Press, 1980.

“Ithaka” is an unrhymed poem of five stanzas that employ conversational, everyday language. The narrator, probably a man who has traveled a lot, addresses either Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s epic poem the *Odyssey*, or an imaginary modern traveler or reader. The narrator tells the traveler that what is really important is not Ithaka, the island home that was the goal of Odysseus’s years of wandering, but the journey itself. It is the journey that must be fully enjoyed at every moment, using all the resources of senses and intellect, because the goal itself is likely to be disappointing.

Cavafy enjoys a reputation as one of the finest of modern Greek poets. “Ithaka” is one of his best-known poems and is considered to express his outlook on life.

## *Author Biography*

Constantine Peter Cavafy was born on April 17, 1863, in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a Greek citizen,



the ninth and last child of Peter (an importer and exporter) and Hariklia Cavafy. His parents had settled in Alexandria in the mid-1850s. After his father died in 1870, Cavafy's mother moved the family to Liverpool, England, where her two eldest sons managed the family business.

From the age of nine to sixteen, Cavafy lived in England, where he developed a love for the writing of William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and Oscar Wilde. The family business did not prosper, and the family was compelled to move back to Alexandria in 1880. Two years later, Cavafy's mother and some of his eight siblings moved again, to Constantinople. It was in Constantinople that Cavafy wrote his first poems.

In 1885, having received little formal education, Cavafy eventually rejoined his older brothers in Alexandria and became a newspaper correspondent for *Telegraphos*. In 1888, he began working as his brother's assistant at the Egyptian Stock Exchange. Within four years, he became a clerk at the Ministry of Public Works. Cavafy remained at the ministry for the next thirty years, eventually becoming its assistant director. He retired in 1922.

Although he began publishing poems in 1896 and continued to do so until 1932, a year before his death, it was a long time before Cavafy received much literary recognition beyond Alexandria. In his lifetime, he did not offer a single volume of poetry for sale. He printed pamphlets of his work privately and distributed them to friends and relatives. Only in his later years did he become sufficiently well known for Western visitors to seek him out in Alexandria.

In 1926, Cavafy received the Order of the Phoenix from the Greek government. In 1930, he was appointed to the International Committee for the Rupert Brooke memorial statue that was placed on the island of Skyros.

On April 29, 1933, eleven years after leaving the ministry, Cavafy died of cancer of the larynx.

The first collected edition of his poems was published in 1935 and first translated into English in 1948. In subsequent years, Cavafy became recognized as one of the foremost Greek poets of the twentieth century.

## Poem Text

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,

full of adventure, full of discovery.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them: 5  
you'll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement  
stirs your spirit and your body.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops, 10  
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when, 15  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time:  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony, 20  
sensual perfume of every kind—  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind. 25  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way, 30  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.  
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled 35  
you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas  
mean.

## Poem Summary

### Stanza 1

"Ithaka" begins with the poet addressing the reader directly in the second person, as "you," and offering a piece of advice. The character addressed is not identified. He could be Odysseus, the hero of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, but the poet is also addressing any reader of the poem.

The poet states that as the traveler sets out on his journey, he must hope that it is a long one, full of adventure and discovery. The destination of the journey is Ithaka. Ithaka is the island off the western coast of Greece to which Odysseus returned after the Trojan war. Odysseus's journey was a long and difficult one. It was ten years before he was able to rejoin his wife Penelope in Ithaka. However, Ithaka in this poem can also be understood as the

destination of any journey, and it can be further understood metaphorically as a journey through life.

In line 4, the poet mentions two of the obstacles that Odysseus encountered in the *Odyssey*. First are the Laistrygonians, who were half-men and half-giants, who devoured many of Odysseus's crew. Second are the Cyclops, who were giants with just one eye, placed in the middle of their foreheads. One of the Cyclops, Polyphemus, took Odysseus and his men prisoner and ate six of them before Odysseus escaped with the remaining six men.

In line 5, the poet mentions another of the forces that obstructed Odysseus's return. This is Poseidon, who was the Greek god of the sea. He is referred to as angry because in the *Odyssey* Poseidon was angry that Odysseus had blinded Polyphemus, who was Poseidon's son.

In the *Odyssey*, each of these three types of beings are powerful and seek to delay or destroy Odysseus. But, in line 5 of "Ithaka," the poet bids his reader not to be afraid of them. In lines 6 and 7, he explains why. If the traveler keeps his thoughts "raised high," he will never encounter any challenge resembling those monsters. The poet is implying that it is always necessary to be optimistic and hopeful.

Lines 8–11 repeat the same idea with one variation. This time, the poet explains that Laistrygonians, Cyclops, or Poseidon will not appear as long as the traveler's spirit and body are stirred by a "rare excitement." In another translation of the poem, this phrase is rendered as "fine emotion"; yet another translation uses the phrase "noble emotion." The idea is that in order to ensure that he is not waylaid by monsters, the traveler must always continue to experience the thrill of being alive.

Lines 12 and 13 add a caveat: such beings will only appear if the traveler summons them up from within his own soul, if he allows them to dwell inside him.

## Stanza 2

The poet returns to the hope expressed in line 2 of the first stanza, that the traveler's journey (whether that of Odysseus or any reader of the poem) is a long one. He hopes, in line 2, that there will be many summers when the traveler feels joy on the journey, when he sees places he has never seen before.

The poet then imagines various places where a person might stop, such as a Phoenician trading station. Phoenicia was the coastal district of ancient Syria and is now the coast of modern Lebanon. Its

ports were centers of trade in the ancient world. The poet states that many beautiful things may be purchased there, including precious stones such as mother of pearl and coral, and every kind of perfume. The poet also hopes the reader may visit Egyptian cities and learn from the scholars who live there. In the ancient world, Egypt was a center of learning, especially its capital city, Alexandria, which was one of the largest cities in the world and contained the largest library.

## Stanza 3

The first line of this stanza contains another piece of advice. Odysseus, or any traveler on a journey, must always keep Ithaka in mind, because it is his or her final destination. The traveler will certainly arrive there. But, says the poet, do not hurry the journey. It is better if the journey lasts for years, so that the traveler is old by the time he reaches home and also wealthy from all he has accumulated on his travels. Then, he will not expect Ithaka to make him rich.

The poet states that it is enough that Ithaka was the reason for making the journey in the first place. Without it, Odysseus or other voyagers would never have started. When Odysseus finally does arrive, the city has lost its charm for him; he finds less pleasure in being there than what he had hoped for and imagined.

## Stanza 4

The poet reemphasizes the message of the previous stanza. If the traveler, having arrived home in Ithaka, finds it to be a poor place, it does not mean that Ithaka has been deceptive. The traveler has not been fooled because he will have become wise and full of experience. He will therefore know what is meant by Ithaka, and by all destinations—all Ithakas—that people strive to reach. The implication is that he will have learned that the prize is all in the experience of the journey, not the final destination.

## Themes

### Life as a Journey

The theme of the poem may be summed up in one phrase: it is better to journey than to arrive. Life should not be wasted in always contemplating the goal of one's endeavors or in building up hopes and schemes for the future but in enjoying the journey. An obsession with the final goal can blind a

## Topics for Further Study



- Compare and contrast Cavafy's "Ithaka" with Lord Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses." In what ways are the two poems similar and how do they differ?
- Read the sections of the *Odyssey* in which the Laistrygonians and the Cyclops appear. What do you think these creatures represented to Cavafy? Why did Cavafy choose to mention these, of all the obstacles that Odysseus encountered, in his poem? Write an essay explaining your choices.
- It is often said that "life is a journey, not a destination." What is meant by this phrase and what meaning might it have in your own life?
- Write your own poem to a modern Odysseus, or any traveler, giving him what you think is the most appropriate advice for his journey. Use the form of Cavafy's poem, including the use of the second person, as a guide.
- Describe a recent achievement of your own in any field of endeavor, splitting the account into two sections: the process (the journey) and the completed task (the destination). Decide which was more valuable to you, the journey or the destination. Can you think of an occasion where you did not achieve your intended goal but still found value in the process of trying to achieve it?

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person to the real business of living, which is to enjoy every minute that is available.

There is also the hint that life can be disappointing. The goals people strive for, their Ithakas, may not yield what they hoped for. Therefore, it is better not to have expectations. The poet counsels that there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: Ithaka may be poor, with nothing to give. Perhaps, he also implies that a person should not have lofty ideals or strive to realize perfection in life, whether for oneself or for society (as a political activist might, for example).

Yet, it is human to have ambitions and expectations, to strive to achieve. As the poet states in stanza 3, without having an "Ithaka," a goal, in

mind, there would be no reason to act at all, no reason to embark on the journey of life.

The poet has a recipe for enjoying the journey that involves the cultivation of a certain habit of mind. The whole person—body, mind, spirit, even soul—must be fully engaged in the life it is living. A person must keep his or her "thoughts raised high," which means that the mind must not give in to melancholy or disappointment or the sordid aspects of life. The poet may also have in mind the contemplation of art, which leads the mind to the higher levels of the human spirit, rather than allowing it to sink to the depths of which it is capable.

Another prerequisite for happiness on the journey is what the poet calls "rare excitement." This might be explained as a certain attitude to the experiences that life produces. A person must cultivate the ability to respond to situations and experiences as if they were entirely new and fresh, never before seen, and therefore an object of wonder and delight. The opposite would be to respond in a tired, mundane way, influenced by habit and custom.

The last part of the recipe for a fulfilling journey is to enjoy the sensual aspects of life ("as many sensual perfumes as you can"), to value beautiful things (symbolized by the precious stones), and to cultivate the intellect. The latter is suggested by the advice to learn and "go on learning" from the scholars in Egypt. The way this is phrased is significant. A person can never say that he or she has learned enough. Learning is an ongoing process with no final end in sight.

The advice given here could be summed up as the need to use everything that a human being has been given to perceive, enjoy, and understand the world. The aim is to live in the actualities of the present moment, not in the imagined future.

### The Odyssey

Cavafy puts all this advice in context by setting it against the background of the *Odyssey*, one of the world's great travel narratives. He reverses the meaning of the *Odyssey* while at the same time advancing a psychological interpretation of some of its episodes.

In Homer's epic poem, Odysseus always longs for home. He does not enjoy his long journey, which is full of perils. Even the sensual delights and the prospect of immortality offered him by the enchantress Kalypso mean nothing to him. He continues to look to his home in Ithaka for peace, security, and love.

In “Ithaka,” however, the reverse is true: it is the journey that is valued; the destination is dismissed as of no importance. The first lines of the poem clearly show the ironic way Cavafy treats the *Odyssey*:

As you set out for Ithaka,  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.

This is the opposite of what Odysseus was hoping for. He wanted a quick voyage home, not one full of adventure.

Cavafy also suggests that the monsters Odysseus encounters are all creations of the human mind. Scholars identify the land of the Laistrygonians with Sicily’s West Coast and the land of the Cyclops with an area near Naples called the Phlegrean Fields. In “Ithaka,” however, the dwelling places of these monsters are not physical places but states of mind. If a man follows the poet’s prescription for happiness, such personal demons will not arise in his psyche. The human mind has the power to create them and to dissolve them.

## Style

### Metaphor

Although the island of Ithaka will always be associated with the homeland of Odysseus, in this poem, Cavafy uses the place name in an additional sense. Just as the journey to Ithaka is a metaphor for the human journey through life, so Ithaka is a metaphor for all destinations. It represents all the goals and ideals that humans strive for, all the expectations of a reward to be received in the future for actions performed in the present. This metaphorical meaning of Ithaka is clear not only from the context in which the word is used but also because the last line refers to Ithaka not in the singular but in plural, “Ithakas.”

### Repetition

Apart from this overarching use of the journey as a metaphor for human life, Cavafy uses little figurative language. The language has a conversational flavor, and the poem employs the rhythms of natural speech. Cavafy’s main rhetorical device in the poem is repetition. In the first stanza, the poet repeats the names of the characters from the *Odyssey*—Laistrygonians, Cyclops, and Poseidon—in order to emphasize how they may be avoided. The repetition of “as long as” in lines 7

and 8 of stanza 1 is echoed by the repetition of “unless” at the beginning of lines 12 and 13. The effect suggests that the traveler needs repeated reinforcement before he is ready to hear and absorb the message the poet offers.

A similar effect is gained by the repetition in the second stanza of “sensual perfume” in lines 21 and 22. It helps to drive home a theme of the poem, that fulfillment lies in the sensual experiences of the moment, not an imagined goal in the future.

## Historical Context

### Modern Greek Literature

When Greece was under Turkish rule in the eighteenth century, Greek literature virtually disappeared. It was awakened following the Greek War of Independence (1821–1827). As Greek national pride grew, there was a strong movement amongst writers to use the demotic form of the Greek language. Demotic is the popular form of Greek used by the ordinary person. However, there were also many writers who passionately believed in the preservation of the classical literary language. The controversial debate continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Many Greek intellectuals argued that using the demotic language was the only way to preserve Greek literature and develop Greek culture. But, feelings ran high on both sides. In 1903, university students rioted in Athens when a translation of the *New Testament* in demotic Greek was serialized in a newspaper. More riots followed several years later when Aeschylus’s ancient Greek trilogy the *Oresteia* was performed in demotic Greek. The Greek government did not recognize the demotic form of the language until 1917, and only then was it taught in schools.

Cavafy aligned himself for the most part with the movement for demotic Greek, which is the language used in “Ithaka.” He was a contributor to the magazine of a youth group called *Nea Zoe* (*New Life*), which existed to promote demotic Greek literature. Cavafy’s poetry appeared in *Nea Zoe* for a decade. However, Cavafy also valued the purist, or classical form of the language, which was part of his family and class heritage.

### Alexandria

Alexandria is a cosmopolitan city with a long history. Not only is it the city where Cavafy wrote “Ithaka,” it is probably one of the unnamed



## Compare & Contrast

- **Ancient Times:** A thousand years before Alexandria is founded, a small Egyptian town called Rhakotis exists at the same site. Alexander the Great founds Alexandria in 331 B.C.

**Cavafy's Lifetime:** In the nineteenth century, Alexandria grows in size, wealth, and importance as a port city. But, in 1882, the British fleet bombards it. This marks the beginning of British dominance in Egypt, which lasts well into the twentieth century.

**Today:** Alexandria is the second largest city and the main port of Egypt. It has a population of four million and is the most ethnically and culturally diverse of the Egyptian cities.

- **Ancient Times:** Homer and the later poets and dramatists of ancient Greece become the foundation of the Western literary tradition.

**Cavafy's Lifetime:** Contemporary Greek literature is little known outside the borders of Greece.

**Today:** Cavafy enjoys a worldwide reputation as one of Greece's finest poets. The Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis also has an international reputation, and two Greek poets, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, are winners of the Nobel Prize in literature.

- **Ancient Times:** Civilization exists on Ithaca in 2700 B.C., as shown by pottery fragments. This is fifteen hundred years before Odysseus is said to have ruled the kingdom. The kingdom of Odysseus probably includes the neighboring island of Kefalonia as well as Ithaca.

**Cavafy's Lifetime:** In 1864, Ithaca finally breaks free of British rule and unites with Greece. This initiates a period, lasting up to the 1930s, in which the island is systematically excavated. In 1930, a female mask of clay with Odysseus's name engraved on it is found in Louizos cave in Polis. In another excavation, at the Aetos area, archeologists find ruins of ancient temples, everyday articles and objects of worship from the ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries B.C. Many different types of coins from the fourth and third centuries B.C. are also found, some of which refer to Odysseus as well as to various gods.

**Today:** Ithaca has a population of only two thousand people, but it offers the tourist familiar with the *Odyssey* many attractions, including the bay of Dexia (Homer's harbor of Phorkys, where the Phaeacians left the sleeping Odysseus on the beach); a ruined site known locally as Odysseus's Castle, and the Plateau of Marathia, where Odysseus's loyal servant Eumaeus kept his swine. A statue of Odysseus stands in the village of Stavros.

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Egyptian cities referred to in the poem as a seat of learning in ancient times.

Alexandria did not exist in the time of Odysseus or Homer (who wrote about events several centuries in the past). It was built in 331 B.C., on the orders of Alexander the Great. After Alexander died, the Ptolemies ruled Egypt for several generations, and this was a glorious period in the history of the city. It was known for its architecture and as a center for natural sciences, mathematics, and literary scholarship. In 250 B.C., the state-supported library contained four hundred thousand volumes, the largest collection in the ancient world. Cavafy

wrote a poem, "The Glory of the Ptolemies," in praise of that period in the history of the city.

In Cavafy's lifetime, Alexandria had largely lost the glories of its past. After it was bombarded by the British in 1882, it fell primarily under British control. The Greek community there was in decline, although E. M. Forster, the English novelist who lived in Alexandria during World War I (he was also a friend of Cavafy), was still able to write in his *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922) that whatever elements of modern culture could be found in Alexandria were due to its Greek community.

## Critical Overview

"Ithaka" has long been recognized as one of Cavafy's finest poems, and one that expresses his outlook on life. It was first admired by T. S. Eliot, who published the first translation of "Ithaka" into English in his literary periodical *Criterion* in 1924. Since then, almost every writer on Cavafy has had something to say about the poem, which has appeared in at least four different English translations, each of which contains subtle differences.

Jane Lagoudis Pinchin, in *Alexandria Still*, evaluates the different translations of the poem, including the first published translation, by George Valassopoulos, and the translations by Rae Dalven and John Mavrogordato. Pinchin prefers Mavrogordato's version of the last line of the poem ("You will have understood the meaning of an Ithaka") to Dalven's version ("You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean"). Pinchin comments, "Dalven *does* sound a bit impatient with her dim voyager."

Edmund Keeley, in *Cavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress*, points out that Cavafy "turn[s] the myths of history around to show us what may lie behind the facade most familiar to us."

C. M. Bowra comments briefly that the poem is "a lesson on all long searches." He also notes that in this and certain other poems of Cavafy, the "instructive, moral note is never quite absent . . . and gives them a certain stiffness and formality."

Peter Bien argues that the theme of "Ithaka," that the process is more important than the goal, sounds affirmative but is in fact a tragic view of life. He states, "Though affirmative in spirit, it is at the same time rigorously pessimistic, for it denies as illusory all the comforts invented by man: eternity, order, decorum, absolute good, morality, justice."

For C. Capri-Karka, in *Love and the Symbolic Journey in the Poetry of Cavafy, Eliot, and Seferis*, the poem "presents sensual pleasure as the center of man's existence." Using passages from other poems by Cavafy, Capri-Karka suggests that the precious stones and other fine things that the poet urges the voyager to collect are symbolic of erotic pleasure.

"Ithaka" has resonated with readers and scholars for generations. It was read aloud at the funeral of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1994.



*Odysseus encounters Sirens on his journey home to Ithaka*

## Criticism

### Bryan Aubrey

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the range of possible meanings implied by the term Ithaka and compares the poem to Tennyson's "Ulysses" and W. H. Auden's "Atlantis."*

It is often said that human beings live mostly in the past or in the future, but never the present. As individuals, humans spend much of their available mental energy analyzing, dissecting, and often regretting the past, or planning, dreaming about, and often fearing the future. An observer from outer space, were such a being privy to the workings of the human mind, might be baffled as to why these denizens of planet Earth exert themselves and attempt to work their will upon events that do not in fact exist, since the past has vanished into nothing and the future is only an idea in a myriad of separate individual minds.

Well aware of this tendency, the narrator of "Ithaka" attempts to persuade Odysseus, or any modern voyager on the sea of life, to abandon the



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memory."*

mirage of living in the future. He seeks to persuade him of the richness of the present moment, the "now" of immediate sensual experience. Everything else is likely to disappoint and is in a sense unreal, a mere mental construct not grounded in true experience.

Yet, "Ithaka" does not strike the reader as a joyful poem. In spite of its approving nods to the marvels to be found in the Phoenician trading port and to the pleasure to be gained from the moment the voyager enters a harbor he has never seen before, it seems tinged with melancholy and world-weariness. In the narrator's tone, there is something of the wistfulness, the regretful wisdom of the old that looks back on pleasures lost or not taken and now forever beyond reach. One can almost hear the narrator saying he wished he had valued more highly that "rare excitement," those precious stones, those sensual perfumes, when he himself was young.

What are "these Ithakas" of which the narrator holds such a low opinion? The more the term is pondered, the more it expands into multiple levels of meaning. For the narrator, Ithakas would seem to be all the things that people invent to postpone real living, defined as being in the sensual moment, looking neither forward nor backward. All Utopias or paradises that people dream of attaining or building are types of Ithakas. Ithakas too are philosophies that build metaphysical systems about the origins and goals and higher purposes of human life. They are, one suspects the narrator would say, mere stories, clever inventions, that take men and women away from the real stuff of life, the immediate experience of being alive in the flesh, now, sensitive to beauty, with five senses receiving in every moment the fullness that life has to offer.

This is not a worldview that has much time for religion either. If there is nothing of value other than the immediate sensual experience, then it would seem that the kind of moral code that religions prescribe is not applicable. Equally unnecessary would be the variety of religious beliefs in an afterlife, since an afterlife would surely qualify as another Ithaka—something longed for at the end of a journey.

The idea for expressing such thoughts by means of the *Odyssey* might have been suggested to Cavafy by a passage in Dante's *Divine Comedy* or by the poem "Ulysses," by Victorian English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In Canto XXVI of Dante's *Hell* (Book I of the *Divine Comedy*), Dante depicts Ulysses (Odysseus) as being restless and dissatisfied after his return to Ithaka. Domesticity does not satisfy him, so he rounds up his old comrades and sets sail for one more round of exploration and adventure. After seeing many more wonders, his ship finally goes down in a storm, and he is drowned. Dante places Ulysses in Hell because he advised others to practice trickery and fraud. He was, after all, known in the *Odyssey* as the crafty Odysseus, and it was he who devised the stratagem of the Trojan Horse and also advised the Greeks to steal the sacred statue of Palladium on which the safety of Troy depended.

Tennyson took up this theme of the eternal explorer in "Ulysses," which was one of two poems he wrote based on the *Odyssey*. (The other was "The Lotos-Eaters.") Tennyson's Ulysses, like Dante's, has discovered to his cost what the narrator of Cavafy's "Ithaka" urged: the journey is always much more rewarding than the destination:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The reality of Ulysses' life back home in Ithaka seems hardly worth the many years of voyaging that it took him to get there. "She [Ithaka] has nothing left to give you now," said the narrator of "Ithaka," and here is the proof. Ulysses is fed up. He is an adventurer by nature, and he cannot sit still in peace and contentment for long. The journeying is all.

The parallel with "Ithaka" is a close one, but there is a difference. In Tennyson's poem, Ulysses is motivated by a desire for knowledge rather than sensual experience. He desires "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." Although Cavafy's narrator does indeed value the store of learning to be found



amongst the scholars in Egyptian cities, the emphasis in the poem is more on sensual enjoyment than intellectual endeavor. This is not so prominent in Tennyson's poem, although one can imagine the narrator of "Ithaka" applauding the declaration Tennyson gives to his ancient mariner: "I will drink / Life to the lees." This shows that, as the wise old narrator of "Ithaka" promised, he has understood the meaning of all Ithakas. The voyage is the thing. Destinations disappoint.

If Tennyson may have been an influence on Cavafy's poem, Cavafy's "Ithaka" has in its turn worked its influence on another twentieth century poet who admired his work, W. H. Auden. Auden's poem "Atlantis" follows the same idea as "Ithaka," although the destination is not Odysseus's island but the mythical lost civilization of Atlantis. Auden adopts the same form Cavafy used for "Ithaka," employing a narrator to directly address the traveler in the second person, offering advice and instruction. Edmund Keeley, in his book *Cavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress* defines this form, which Cavafy used several times in his poems of this period, as "didactic monologue."

Like Cavafy's advice about Egyptian scholars, Auden's narrator advises his ancient traveler to consult the "witty scholars" if storms drive him ashore in Ionia. (He offers no tips, however, on how to avoid stirring up the anger of Poseidon.) More relevant is the third stanza of Auden's poem, which advises the traveler what he should do if he is forced ashore at Thrace. This region east of Macedonia was home of the worshippers of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy:

If, later, you run aground  
Among the headlands of Thrace  
Where with torches all night long  
A naked barbaric race  
Leaps frenziedly to the sound  
Of conch and dissonant gong;  
On that stony savage shore  
Strip off your clothes and dance, for  
Unless you are capable  
Of forgetting completely  
About Atlantis, you will  
Never finish your journey.

Here is the "rare excitement," the sensual enjoyment, that Cavafy's narrator advises his Odysseus to seek, in which thoughts of the destination are swallowed up in the immediacy of the moment. One can almost see the narrator of "Ithaka" smiling his approval. And yet it would probably be a wry smile, tinged with regret. The tone not only of "Ithaka" but of many other Cavafy poems suggests not the ecstasy of such moments but an awareness that they

must always pass and live on only in the memory. It is this that gives many of Cavafy's poems a touch of melancholy, of yearning for what once was or might have been: "My life's joy and incense: recollection of those hours / when I found and captured pleasure as I wanted it" ("To Sensual Pleasure").

This "incense" is the equivalent of the "sensual perfume" of "Ithaka." It does not stay. Ithaka beckons, although Ithaka has nothing to offer that can match it.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Ithaka," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

### **Roderick Beaton**

*In the following essay, Beaton discusses the treatment and effect of time in Cavafy's poems.*

Solemnly asked his opinion of his own work, C. P. Cavafy towards the end of his life is said to have replied, 'Cavafy in my opinion is an ultra-modern poet, a poet of future generations.' History has proved him right, but the tone of the reply also reveals an important ingredient of the unique poetic voice that is Cavafy's: a gentle mockery of all pretension, even that of the poet interviewed about his own work, and a light-hearted concealment of his true self at the very moment when he appears about to lay his cards on the table. 'Cavafy,' he says, not 'I,' as if 'Cavafy' were someone different.

Cavafy's poetry is distinguished by many subtle forms of irony, and also by an intriguing self-effacement in poems that purport to tell of personal experience and feeling. The subject matter of his poems is equally unusual. Approximately half of what that he published in his lifetime (consisting of 154 fairly short poems) and a similar proportion of those published posthumously, are devoted to subjects taken from Greek history, chiefly between 340 BC and AD 1453, while the remainder deal more or less explicitly with homosexual encounters against a backdrop of contemporary Alexandria.

Cavafy's uniqueness has posed a problem for critics, for whom he continues to exercise a profound fascination. To many his erotic poetry is a disreputable appendage to more 'sublime' poetry dedicated to the Greek past, but Cavafy's uncompromisingly 'historical' treatment of that past has also disconcerted many. And those critics who have not chosen to ignore the erotic poems have been hard put to identify the source of powerful emotion, felt by many readers, in response to poems from which all reference to love is lacking, and the sordidness and triviality of the sexual encounters evoked are freely confessed.



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original."*

The common denominator between Cavafy's two principal preoccupations, the distant Greek past and contemporary homosexual experiences, is time, which plays a major role in both types of poem. Often it appears that the true subject of the erotic poems is not the experience described so much as its loss to the passage of time. Time takes away and alienates all real experience, but through art the poet can sometimes regain it in the creation of a poem, though what is regained is both more and less than the original. More, because, as the poet frankly says in several of these poems, he is free to touch up reality in the imaginative act of writing; less, because, no matter how 'perfect' an experience can become thus imaginatively recreated, it is only imaginary, the real thing remaining lost to the past. This sense of 'lost to the past' is central, too, to Cavafy's historical poems, in which he juxtaposes vivid pictures of flesh-and-blood, fallible human beings with a chillingly historical sense of how remote they are, and how futile are these people's preoccupations now.

In their treatment of time, *all* Cavafy's poems can be said to belong to this third type, into which he once said his work could be divided, namely 'philosophical' poetry.

**Source:** Roderick Beaton, "Cavafy, C. P.," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, 2d ed., edited by Lesley Henderson, St. James Press, 1995, pp. 249–50.

### C. Capri-Karka

*In the following introduction to her dissertation, Capri-Karka discusses "Ithaca" as a turning point in Cavafy's work, one where the poet began to be more open about his personal life—specifically, his homosexuality.*

"Ithaca" is considered not only central for the theme of the journey but also the "brain" of Cavafy's whole work—if one can extend here the symbolism used by Stuart Gilbert for the ninth episode, of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is for this reason that Cavafy is referred to by many critics as "the poet of 'Ithaca.'" The poem works on two levels: on the most immediate, Cavafy emphasizes sensual pleasure and celebrates the journey from harbor to harbor; on the more general level, one can see the poem as a condensed expression of Cavafy's view of the world. To use Rex Warner's words for it, "what is emphasized in 'Ithaca' is the immense value of individual experience rather than the strained pursuit of an ideal or the heights and depths of cataclysmic events."

"Ithaca," published in 1911, marks a turning point in Cavafy's poetic development, as pointed out by I. A. Sareyannis, G. Seferis and G. Savidis. The poet himself drew a line separating his work "before 1911" from the rest. The publication of "Ithaca" coincides with Cavafy's decision to start speaking more freely about himself. Actually, as we know from the poet's personal notes, published only recently, Cavafy had come to terms with his homosexuality, or had been "liberated," as he put it, as early as 1902, but recognizing the power of prejudice he did not dare to reveal the truth until much later; and when he did, it was a very gradual process. Poems unequivocally identifying his erotic preferences appeared only after 1918. Several of the poems written before 1910 were not published until many years later and some were not published at all during the poet's lifetime.

Of the poems that he did publish before 1910 very few can be considered erotic, and they are usually symbolic or deal with abstractions ("Longings," "Voices"). Another group of poems published during this period is related to the symbolic journey in the sense that they express an unfulfilled desire for escape and a journey. They are cryptic and symbolic; the predominant mood is one of fear, frustration and despair, but it is hidden under a restrained tone and a laconic style that translations cannot fully convey. They deal with various forms of imprisonment, frustrated hopes for escape and liberation, external and internal conflicts, etc. In the "Walls," the protagonist finds himself imprisoned with no chance of escape. In the "Trojans" and "The Windows" there is some hope of liberation, but it does not last long. In these poems, Cavafy presents man cut off from the world, alienated and isolated by walls, besieged like the Trojans, fearing invasion from outside as a constant threat, and with only one desperate thought: escape.

This desire for an escape, a journey to another place and a new beginning is expressed in the first stanza of "The City," but in the second the journey turns into a nightmare as the persona realizes that the city, like the Furies, would pursue him wherever he goes.

A comparison of these poems, published before 1910, to those also written during the same period but published much later or not published by the poet at all reveals the agonizing process of gradual liberation that Cavafy had to go through before he could set out on his journey to Ithaca.

The date for Cavafy's personal or private liberation is set, as already mentioned, at 1902, on the basis of a note written in 1902 by the poet saying "I have been liberated." However, an examination of his poems suggests that this is an arbitrary date and that his change in attitude, both private and public, was very gradual and extended over a period of several years.

One may actually wonder why Cavafy, who according to his biographers was a homosexual from a very early age, was "liberated" only at the age of forty. The answer must be found in his background, which was classical Greek and Christian. The poet once said that he never had any metaphysical tendencies, but, as his biographer R. Liddell remarks, Cavafy "was not enough of a materialist to be without fear of the unknown." Growing up and living in a family and a society that functions within certain laws and convictions results in a conditioning of the individual that cannot be easily dismissed. One can logically reach a decision, but erasing from the subconscious the accumulated fears, guilt and insecurity is a very slow and painful process, especially when it takes place under the constant persecution of a society not ready to accept the change. It is true that Cavafy grew up in Alexandria, where the mixture of races, nationalities and religions created a certain neutrality, but the moral principles of his immediate environment were more restrictive. Had he lived in Greece, he would probably never have been liberated. The anguish involved in this process cannot be conceived by modern generations which have grown up in a more permissive society where the old values have lost much of their meaning.

One can find many indications of the fact that Cavafy still carried his subconscious burden of guilt in poems written long after 1902 and published after 1911 or not published at all, such as "He Swears" (written in 1905 and published in 1915). These indications gradually disappear in his



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later poetry. This does not mean of course that these poems do not represent significant steps toward liberation, as Cavafy became more and more explicit about his erotic tendencies. A number of poems written mostly before 1902 and dealing with historical or esthetic subjects contain some carefully worded hints about the poet's sexual preferences. For instance, within the context of esthetic abstractions are included expressions of admiration for Greek gods or heroes considered as prototypes of male beauty. One can mention in this group "Before the State of Endymion," "One of their Gods," "Sculptor of Tyana," "The Glory of the Ptolemies," "Ionic," and "Orophernes," all published in the period between 1911 and 1918.

Much more explicit and very significant for the evaluation of the way in which Cavafy really felt at that time are some of the poems written during the same period but never released for publication by the poet during his lifetime. In "Strengthening the Spirit," for instance, we find the first expression of the idea on which "Ithaca" was built, that "pleasures will have much to teach" man and that "law and custom" must be violated. In "Hidden Things," on the other hand, he describes his predicament of this period, the fact that he cannot "act freely" and that his writings are "veiled." The unpublished poem "On the Stairs" (1904) is an example of his fears, his hesitations and frustrations. Although he did have affairs at that time, he could not get rid of his anxiety and his feeling of persecution. In a less

oppressive society the encounter would probably have led to an adventure; instead it led to a poem, and even that he did not dare publish. Later in his life he did write and publish poems about encounters between strangers that did result in affairs ("The Window of the Tobacco Shop," "He Asked about the Quality").

Written in 1905–1908 were also a few exquisite erotic poems which leave no doubt about "the form of [sensual pleasure]" but which were written in an elevated style without explicit details and were published in 1912–1917. Included in this group are the poems "I Went," "One Night," "Days of 1903" and "Come Back."

With the publication of "Ithaca" in 1911 Cavafy established the theoretical framework into which one can fit all of these previous poems as well as those that follow. He declared that the final destination of the journey is not important; what is important is sensual pleasure, that the journey should be full of joy, adventure and sensual delights. The poem's symbolism covers a much wider area than that of the journey. It implies that there is no goal in life, that personal experience is more important and that life is its own justification.

In the decade that followed "Ithaca," Cavafy wrote many of his most affirmative erotic poems. He had overcome his inhibitions and was at peace with himself; and although his difficulties with society were not entirely over, he expressed himself more freely. His life and his poetry during this period seem to be more or less an application of the principles spelled out in "Ithaca." He was traveling "from harbor to harbor" enjoying with "rare excitement" the sensual pleasures of the journey and transforming them into art. The predominant mood in these poems is one of fulfilment and glorification of the senses.

This decade starts with "I've Looked So Much. . ." (1911), in which he tells us that his vision overflows with beauty, and continues with "Ithaca," expressing the euphoria of the adventure. Even the symbolic poem "The God Abandons Antony" (1910), which represents the end of the journey, is the summing up of a life rich with happy experiences. The symbolic departure from a harbor in "In the Street" (1913) is also represented as a strong intoxication with pleasure. Another departure is presented in "Returning [Home] from Greece" (1914), in which the literal departure is at the same time a symbolic one, as the protagonist abandons the principles that Greece represents (classical restraint) and sails toward Alexandria and

its more uninhibited way of life. The adventurous wandering from harbor to harbor is emphasized or implied in poems like "Passing Through" (1914), "Body, Remember. . ." (1916) and "Gray" (1917). In "Passing Through" the protagonist abandons himself to a life of pleasure, his body overcome by "forbidden erotic ecstasy." Also in "Body, Remember," the protagonist's indulgence in past pleasure is nothing else but a happy recollection or his journey from harbor to harbor. And the poem "Gray" contains the justification of his preference for many harbors.

Some of the above poems, as well as a few others written during the same decade, are journeys to the past. In this period, Cavafy is not an old man who recollects his distant past and for whom memory is a therapy. The poet vividly recalls happy moments even of a recent past, as for instance in "To Sensual Pleasure" (1913), where he feels the need to celebrate the journey and the fulfilment as he departs from a harbor. After "Walls" and the claustrophobic feeling and imprisonment of his early period, it is natural for him to write poems like "Body, Remember" and "To Sensual Pleasure" in order to reaffirm an uninhibited eroticism. It is this kind of affirmation that he describes in the poem "Outside the House" (1917), in which the view of an old building brings back joy and sensuous memories—the spell of love transforms the house and its environment into a magic place.

Very characteristic of Cavafy is his preference for transient affairs. As W. H. Auden writes, "The erotic world he depicts is one of casual pickups and short-lived affairs," but the poet refuses to pretend that he feels unhappy or guilty about it. Rex Warner, stressing the poet's realism and acceptance of life, notes that "if we are to take the poet's own word for it, love affairs of a disreputable character were a source of immense inspiration." Other critics, like George Seferis and Edmund Keeley, express a different point of view. Seferis sees in Cavafy's poetry an "unresurrected Adonis," and Keeley writes that sterility, frustration and loss are the prevailing attributes of actual experience in Cavafy's contemporary city. They both see him "condemned" to such ephemeral affairs. In my view, however, sterility for Cavafy is irrelevant, and transience means renewal. He believed that prolongation of a love affair would result in deterioration. This becomes clear in poems such as "Before Time Altered Them," "Gray," etc. Peter Bien, discussing in the context of "Ithaca" Cavafy's belief in the value of individual experience, observes



that the acceptance of life as its own justification on the one hand “constituted Cavafy’s own freedom and enabled him to be strangely animated and ‘yea-saying,’” and on the other it meant denying “as illusory all the comforts invented by man: eternity, order, decorum, absolute good, morality, justice.” He concludes that this outlook, though “affirmative in spirit . . . is at the same time rigorously pessimistic.” It is true that Cavafy belonged to a generation which grew up with these values, and in my view the process of his liberation was for this reason a gradual and painful struggle. He was tormented by remorse, dilemmas and conflicts. Once “liberated,” however, he can no longer be considered a pessimist. He was not an idealist who was deprived of the comfort offered by the old values. Order, decorum, morality were not really comforts for him but rather the source of his oppression and isolation, and denying them must have been accompanied by a kind of relief. This view is based on the poet’s previously unpublished work, which appeared only recently, and more particularly on the poem “Hidden Things,” in which he envisions a “more perfect society.”

On the subject of pessimism I would say: Cavafy has before him a reality which he sees and expresses in the most [dry] manner. This reality (of memory, of old age, of lost pleasure, of deceit), whether raw, dry, or whatever, cannot be called pessimistic.

According to G. Lechonitis, Cavafy himself has denied that his poems were pessimistic.

A large number of poems of this period can be characterized as “journeys to the past” in which Cavafy travels back in time “mixing memory and desire,” in Eliot’s phrase. The attitude is again for the most part positive, as the poet recollects happy memories: as in “Body, Remember,” “Long Ago,” etc. Sometimes the poet travels back not to his own past but through history to recreate portraits of historical or pseudohistorical figures. His historical poems are for the most part objective and realistic and are set predominantly in the Hellenistic period because, as he explained himself, this period “is more immoral, more free, and permits me to move my characters as I want.” His purpose often is to uncover human motives, which he does with irony and political cynicism.

Of the several historical poems that Cavafy has written, of special interest to this study are those in which the poet weaves “homosexual suggestions into the historical context.” In poems such as “Orophernes” or “Caesarion,” he selects as his subjects minor historical figures who appeal to him. What fascinates him with Orophernes is the youth’s ex-

ceptional beauty, while he identifies with Caesarion, who was one of the persecuted of history. In the “Glory of the Ptolemies” the first thing the king asserts of himself is that he is “a complete master of the art of pleasure.” In “Favor of Alexander Balas” the protagonist boasts about the fact that he is the favorite of the Syrian king and shows an excessive arrogance by declaring that he dominates all Antioch.

Sometimes, however, his voyage back to history is an ingenious device for speaking about homosexual love in a dignified manner by using an objective correlative from history. This is particularly true about his several epitaphs (“Tomb of Ignatios,” “Tomb of Lanis,” “In the Month of Athyr,” etc.). A young man’s epitaph is a dignified portrait, far back in the distance of time. The austerity of the form and the archaic language that Cavafy uses add to this effect.

During this decade, Cavafy was not unaware of the possible dangers and complications of uninhibited hedonism. But these complications appear only in very few poems of this period and mostly after 1917 (“Tomb of Iasis,” “The Twenty-fifth Year of his Life”).

In the decade 1920–1930 the complications and unpleasant situations increased as Cavafy was growing older. Art was therapy for him, a redeemer of time; he continued his voyages to the past evoking intoxicating memories. Since the fleeting moment was the essence of his life, he wanted to make it immortal through his art.

In this last decade and until his death, Cavafy wrote an increasing number of sad poems describing sometimes in realistic detail unpleasant or painful situations. The journey from harbor to harbor in the poems “In Despair” (1923), “In the Tavernas” (1926) and “Days of 1896” (1925) takes a different, unpleasant turn. In the first two of these poems the journey is not a beautiful adventure but rather an effort at adjustment after a sentimental setback. In the third, “Days of 1896,” after the social degradation of the protagonist and the loss of his job, his wandering from harbor to harbor is more of a drifting than a delightful voyage.

Some of the poems of this period are journeys to the past and have a more or less therapeutic purpose for the aging poet, like “To Call up the Shades” (1920), “I Brought to Art” (1921)—where art plays a complementary role in life—or “On the Ship” (1919), in which the poet travels back to the past to revive the memory of a young man as he looks at a pencil portrait.



# What Do I Read Next?



- Homer's *Odyssey* is considered by many to be the first great adventure story in Western literature, and its influence on poets and writers throughout the centuries cannot be overestimated. Although there are many translations of the epic, the version by Robert Fitzgerald, first published in 1961, has been highly acclaimed.
- If Cavafy is modern Greece's best known poet in the English-speaking world, Nikos Kazantzakis is its best known novelist. His *Zorba the Greek* (1952) is the story of a Greek workman who accompanies the narrator, a young writer, to a mine on Crete and becomes his best friend and inspiration. Zorba is considered by many to be one of the great characters of twentieth century fiction.
- *Voices of Modern Greece* (1982), edited by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, is an anthology of major poets of modern Greece. The editors selected poems that translate most successfully into English and are also representative of the best work of poets such as Cavafy, Angelos Sikelianos, George Seferis, Odysseus Elytis, and Nikos Gatsos.
- *Modern Greek Poetry* (1973), edited and translated by Kimon Friar, is a larger anthology than that of Keeley and Sherrard and is indispensable for anyone wanting to understand the full range of modern Greek poetry.

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Some other poems of this period are spiritual journeys of a different kind in which the purpose of the poet is to emphasize his erotic preferences. In "Picture of a 23-Year-Old Painted by his Friend of the Same Age, an Amateur" (1928), he assumes the role of a painter and after giving shape to a handsome young man ("He's managed to capture perfectly / the sensual [tone] he wanted") he lets his mind wander to the "exquisite erotic pleasure" this youth is made for. The same thing happens in

"In an Old Book" (1922), where the poet, looking at a watercolor portrait, imagines that the youth in the picture is destined only for homosexual love.

In most of the sad poems of this period there is an acceptance and even some possible consolation. The memory of the lost lover "saves" the protagonist of "In the Tavernas," while in "In Despair" the abandoned lover seeks new experiences, trying to recapture the old sensation. Only in very few poems does despair reach what one might call "the 'Waste Land' feeling" because, in contrast to earlier poems, there is a serious emotional involvement. The situations that led to this feeling include prematurely terminated affairs ("Kleitios' Illness," 1926), one-sided love ("A Young Poet in his Twenty-fourth Year," 1928) and the death of a lover ("Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340," 1929; "Lovely White Flowers," 1929).

Cavafy admits in his poetry the dangers of excess, but since he places sensual pleasure at the center of existence he defies the consequences. Although in some epitaphs and other poems he implies that excess kills, in his "Longings" he twists the subject the other way around, suggesting indirectly that suppression of desire is also equivalent to death.

Even in this period in which, the sad poems predominate, however, Cavafy wrote some poems of affirmation and fulfillment ("He Came to Read," 1924; "Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old," 1927).

The gradual change in attitude in Cavafy's erotic poems—from imprisonment and attempts at escape in the early period, through the affirmation of the journey from harbor to harbor on the way to Ithaca, and to the complications of the journey in the last decade—is summarized also in the words and phrases that the poet uses in describing similar situations. One example is the reference to a brothel as the "ill-famed house" in the unpublished "On the Stairs" but as the "house of pleasure" in the 1915 poem "And I Lounged and Lay on their Beds." Also, the narrator in "The Photograph" (1913) abhors the idea that the young man who was photographed leads a "degrading, vulgar life," while in "Sophist Leaving Syria," written in 1926, he admires Mevis, "the best looking, the most adored young man/in all Antioch," because selling his body he gets the highest price of all the young men leading the same life.

In the poems before 1910 homosexual love is not mentioned explicitly. Between 1919 and 1920 it is referred to as "illicit pleasure" ("In the Street;"

"Their Beginning," 1915). But in the last decade, after 1920, it is described as an "exquisite erotic pleasure" ("Picture of a 23-Year-Old Painted by his Friend of the Same Age, An Amateur"; "Theatre of Sidon [A.D. 400]," 1923). In the latter poem he explains further what kind of pleasure he has in mind, using in an ironic tone the everyday vocabulary on the subject: the "[exquisite erotic] pleasure, / the kind that leads toward a condemned, a barren love." The same kind of ironic and almost provocative tone is used in "In an Old Book," where he says that the young man whose water-color portrait he is describing "was not destined for those / who love in ways that are more or less healthy" but was made for "beds / that common morality calls shameful."

Finally, in "Days of 1896," written in 1925, which is a clear defense of homosexuality, he almost creates a new terminology in order to justify the young protagonist after he has realistically presented him as being *déclassé* and an outcast. He takes the word "pure," which has Christian connotations, and gives it a different meaning: the flesh is pure not when it is intact, immaculate, but only when one does not betray it by resisting his desires. Thus, he reverses the traditional moral code by placing sensuality above honor and reputation, instead of honor and reputation above sensuality.

In contrast to his contemporary Greek poets, who were predominantly romantic, Cavafy, following the opposite direction, developed a laconic, objective and almost antipoetic style. This is acknowledged by all of his critics. In his erotic poems, however, most critics trace an element of sentimentality. Timos Malanos finds his late erotic poems inferior in their explicitness and sentimentality. Edmund Keeley and Kimon Friar also discuss this sentimentality; Friar writes that "occasionally . . . a surprising sentimentality intrudes." Peter Bien, referring to this excess of emotion, comments that most of the erotic poems "show remarkable control; and it would be entirely misleading to dwell on Cavafy's occasional lapses." Cavafy was a very severe editor of himself, destroying hundreds of poems every year. In my view, his use of emotion was not accidental. Since in all of his other poetry he appears as an enemy of sentimentality, he apparently thought that an erotic poem should not be written in a dry style, and only in his love poems did he permit himself to be occasionally sentimental, when he wanted to express an extremely strong feeling. Some of these poems, especially of the last decade,

when complications of love were his themes, are portraits of unique pathos and tenderness. For instance, "A Young Poet in his Twenty-fourth Year," although referring to an "abnormal form of pleasure," is a superb study of one-sided love. Also, "Lovely White Flowers," undeniably sentimental, is an exquisite poem praised as one of Cavafy's best by Seferis, I.A. Sareyannis and Robert Liddell.

The perfection of Cavafy's art was a long, complex and tortuous process. This "fastidious poet who handled words as if they were pearls" went through many stages of severe self-editing in order to find his unique tone. This straggle to perfect the form paralleled the agonizing process reflected in the content of his poetry, as Cavafy was subject in his personal life to endless fluctuations, dilemmas and crises until he reached his complete liberation and adjustment.

Cavafy's journey in Alexandria may have turned out to be more complicated than he had predicted in his "Ithaca," but he dared to say the truth about human erotic experience with an unprecedented intensity.

Of the 153 poems collected for publication by Cavafy himself and the seventy-five that appeared recently, those dealing directly with the journey on the literal level are not many but include some of his most significant statements ("Ithaca," "The God Abandons Antony," "Returning [Home] from Greece"). The great majority of the other poems of Cavafy are indirectly related to the journey, as defined in the first section, on the symbolic level only by the fact that they are erotic.

As Cavafy grew older, he moved from a cryptic or allegorical form of expression on this subject to a more open and frank one. On this basis it is convenient to divide his work into three periods: before 1910, 1910 to 1920, and 1920 to 1932. This chronological division will be followed in the discussion of the poems related to the journey because it permits a better insight into the poet's changing attitudes on the subject. The chronological order will be based on the date on which each poem was written rather than that on which it was published, because it is more interesting to follow the poet's own development rather than the change in the public image he chose to project, although the latter will also be discussed.

**Source:** C. Capri-Karka, "Introduction," in *Love and the Symbolic Journey in the Poetry of Cavafy, Eliot, and Seferis*, Pella Publishing Company, 1982, pp. 19-28.

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## Further Reading

Auden, W. H., “Introduction,” in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, translated by Rae Dalven, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.

Auden acknowledges that Cavafy has been an influence on his own writing and discusses the distinctive tone of voice in Cavafy's poems that makes his work instantly recognizable.

Forster, E. M., *Two Cheers for Democracy*, Penguin, 1965.

Forster was a personal friend of Cavafy and admired his work. This book contains a very readable essay on Cavafy's poetry and gives insight into the man as well. (The essay was omitted from American editions of this book.)

Liddell, Robert, *Cavafy: A Critical Biography*, Duckworth, 1974.

This is the only biography of Cavafy in English. It gives a detailed and sympathetic account of his difficult life, discussing his relationships with his six brothers and demanding mother, his homosexuality, and the mundane office job in which he worked for most of his life.

Ruehlen, Petroula Kephala, “Constantine Cavafy: A European Poet,” in *Nine Essays in Modern Literature*, edited by Donald E. Stanford, Louisiana State University Press, 1965, pp. 36–62.

Ruehlen argues that Cavafy should be considered a European poet, in the sense that he is culturally and emotionally within the Western tradition. Ruehlen argues that the two criteria for calling a poet European are maturity and comprehensiveness.