

Professor Kalliopi Nikolopoulou
Associate Professor of Comparative Literature
University at Buffalo

Receiving Cavafy, the Poet of Reception

Variation 1: Seferis's Cavafy and the Question of Nature

No matter how we imagine our Cavafy—a belated Byzantine, a Phanariot scholar, a hedonistic Alexandrian, a multicultural Greek of the periphery, a poet of civilizational decline, or a mythologist of history—we come up against one clear aspect in his otherwise complex portrait: Cavafy practices a poetry of reception. Revisiting obsessively the past in order to obtain an image of the present, his mind thinks, feels, and articulates itself in terms of epochal analogies.

Cavafy is certainly not unique in turning to history for inspiration and themes. World poetry is replete with retroactive glances, and poets everywhere have always addressed their artistic predecessors. But Cavafy seldom draws on the figures or works of poets past. Rather, he is preoccupied with historical personages of other sorts: emperors, generals, statesmen, and even anonymous hoplites. With him, history is neither a temporary moment of inspiration nor an occasional citation attesting to the poet's erudition; it is a topic worth thinking for its own sake. Indeed, history furnishes the mode of thinking for poetry: it constitutes Cavafy's poetics.

This is of utmost importance, because it is this choice of mode that dictates Cavafy's famously cerebral style, a style that divided critics between those who hailed it for its philosophical depth and those who critiqued it for its antilyrical dryness. The source of his style, in other words, is to be found in the poet's choice of orientation, when early on he paused at thought's most decisive—Herculean perhaps—crossroads: Which way to take, history or nature? (This I believe to be the first and most essential question any creative mind is called to answer; and the answer reveals the nature and the signature of each artist.) To this originary creative dilemma, Cavafy answered "history," thus taking the side of belatedness from the very beginning, committing himself to tradition,

transition, and self-consciousness rather than to spontaneous birth. It is this very choice that molded his sensibility and sharpened his scholasticism.

Nature would remain the prohibited other of Cavafic poetry. Its insistent absence renders it ironically that great barbarian, the only *real* barbarian that had to be kept far away from the gates. It also is the unconscious other of contemporary criticism, which elsewhere extols the poet for precisely his interest in the heterogeneous, the cosmopolitan, the multicultural, the other. Irremediably Hegelian, our post-Hegelian age of difference obeys a strange dialectic of homogenization, in which everything is eventually absorbed by culture. Everything is not only denaturalized but denatured; nature is always already history and culture.

Thus, in the theoretical embrace of Cavafy's "slanted" relation to the nation, to native custom, and even to demotic language qua authentic popular expression, a much-needed political critique of nationalist excess transforms itself, at the limit, into a metaphysical discomfort with everything of the order of *phusis* (nature is, after all, at the root of "native," "national," "innate"). Too hastily (or should I say too naturally?), our era identifies such discomfort with political progressivism, forgetting perhaps that the domination of nature and its systematic dismissal from our lives do not serve the antihumanist philosophical turn that our era also favors. Similarly, the currently ubiquitous imperative to read for what remains repressed in a text, to listen to a book's silent twin, is itself easily bypassed in cases where the silent text does not dovetail with our major ideological values or concerns.

Yet the reception of a poet so deeply philosophical and historical as Cavafy must be most especially aware of its own historicity and unspoken assumptions. It would be revealing, for instance, to look not only for the aspects Cavafy reflects flatteringly of our visage. To search why we conspire with his exclusion of some things, because this exclusion—whether fueled in him by respect, oblivion, or hostility—befits us now. Such questions would oblige us to rethink our present moment and to face up to its ephemerality: Having constructed the ephemeral as our central historical category, are

we *really* prepared—has any culture ever been adequately prepared—to accept our finitude, our future historical irrelevance and potential erasure? Furthermore, could it be that our seduction by the ephemeral, though reflected in Cavafy's poetry, lacks an important ingredient the poet still had? The melancholy, that tinge with which he not only jadedly accepted the existing condition, but also registered subtly its aberrance?

I have been led to this kind of reading through George Seferis's two essays on Cavafy: "Κ.Π. Καβάφης, Θ.Σ. Έλιοτ· παράλληλοι" (1946) and "Ακόμη λίγα για τον Αλεξανδρινό" (1962). I turn to Seferis's reception *now* not despite, but because of, its "anti-Cavafic" elements. Seferis's double-take on Cavafy ends up being, for me, the most generous and historically subtle reading of the poet, as it is also prophetic of the interpretive gestures and inversions that Cavafy's poetry asks of its future audiences: Cavafy's insistence that the past is absolutely modern makes him both timely and untimely, both relevant and poignantly anachronistic.

Contemporary criticism does justice to his timeliness, but what would it mean to attend to his untimeliness as well? The "anti-Cavafian Cavafism" of Seferis, as Vassilis Lambropoulos called it, manages such a double reading. It is, in fact, an agon of a diasporic poet to grasp and to stand up worthily against another of his kind—an agon that showed me in how many different keys Cavafy's taciturnity speaks. But it also spoke to my own present concerns as to how to approach a figure whose reception seems to occasion instant divisions. For a dispassionate writer, Cavafy seems to produce in his readers an immediate need either to wholeheartedly praise him over and against all other "non-philosophical" poets or to wholeheartedly reject him for his aloofness and to escape into the "more accessible" poetry of others. In this respect, I find Seferis's caution salutary:

Να φυλαγόμαστε, όχι μόνο από τη δική μας ροπή να παρασυρθούμε στα πράγματα που μας αρέσουν, αλλά και από το να παίρνουμε πάντα τοις μετρητοίς την επιφανειακή σημασία των λόγων ή των διαλεκτικών τεχνασμάτων του Καβάφη.

(We must guard ourselves not only against our own tendency to be distracted by those things we like, but against taking at face value the

surface meaning of Cavafy's words or his dialectical tricks. [all translations my own unless noted])

Of the many things that struck me in Seferis's reading, I will focus on some details that touch on the above-mentioned issue of nature. First, concerning the nature of the oft-repeated designation of Cavafy (and his poetry) as "Alexandrian," Seferis appends an interesting restriction:

Όλοι μας ονομάζουμε τον Καβάφη *Αλεξανδρινό*. το επίθετο θα χρειαζότανε αρκετό ξεκαθάρισμα, νομίζω· αλλ' αν υπάρχει, και για μένα, το αλεξανδρινό στοιχείο στον Καβάφη, ασφαλώς είναι τούτο: ο απατηλός γέρος της αλεξανδρινής θάλασσας, που ολοένα ξέφευγε, αλλάζοντας μορφές—ο Πρωτέας όπως τον έγραψε ο Όμηρος.

(We all call Cavafy "Alexandrian"; the adjective could use some clarification, I believe. But if there is for me too an Alexandrian element in Cavafy, it is certainly this one: he resembles the deceitful old man of the Alexandrian sea who was constantly eluding the grasp, always changing his shape—the Proteus of Homer.)

Snatched from the comfort of his irreducible singularity at the periphery of an empire, Cavafy is recast as part of an unexpected and major tradition—not of the declining Byzantium, but of Homer. And he is recast not even as a poet within that tradition, but as one of its earliest elemental creatures, the mythical "Old Man of the Sea" who refuses his mantic powers by shape-shifting, eludes those who pursue him, and answers only to the ones capable of capturing him.

The dry grammarian has just become a rippling wave, the desert melted into the liquid sea. With this brush stroke, Seferis can be said to re-emphasize the Hellenism of a poet often celebrated for transcending nationalist provinciality—though it is worth noting that Cavafy's self-definition as a Hellene (and not a Greek) does not necessarily undo the "national" despite its rejection of the boundaries of the nation-state. Indeed, Seferis reminds us that the national (what is of nascence—Hellenic or otherwise) is much more dynamic and self-proliferating than any strictly political thinking of nature can imagine. No nation's culture is completely synonymous with its borders, yet this does not mean that we should overlook the deeply ingrained ways of thinking that characterize one people rather than another. Like Cavafy, Seferis did not consider Hellenism to be

coterminous with Greece, and both poets thought of Hellenism as an identity that paradoxically contains an openness to cultural admixture with others as one of its "native" traits. Here we must recall the great German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, who in fact thought of the ancient Hellenes as precisely the people who reached the national—namely, their own sense of identity—via the adaptive appropriation of the foreign. Nietzsche later repeated this Protean element through which his Hellenes—long exposed to foreign influences—gathered their introspective powers and sought to transform those influences in ways that suited their inner needs.

Cavafy is Proteus, slipping through his many forms: dull, contrived, a slow learner, an old man almost from childhood—all these are characterizations Seferis tries at some point. But slowly and persistently, Seferis comes to capture in some sense his elusive target. He understands his ancestor's depth, the courage and the discipline to drive poetry to its limit (prose), and he eventually appreciates Cavafy's own homecoming to himself—to his naturalness, to being true-to-himself, which means of course being Protean without an effort. Cavafy reached the inborn, his Ithaca, by way of a long and convoluted route. But *that* he reached it (as does the wayward traveler of his "Ithaca") should also be an interesting detail for an age that has made of exile too exalted and yet too quotidian a predicament at the same time.

In admitting his lack of an immediate affinity for Cavafy or for a poetry that is contrary to his own nature, Seferis refuses to gloss over the frustrations with which the Cavafic text confronts him. Thus Cavafy is honored in being acknowledged as difficult (if also irksome), as he is also demythologized: Seferis dares to voice a realization about Cavafy that might remain to our day a taboo—namely, that Cavafy's difficulty consists not so much in the meaning of the poem as in the poem's formal path and in its texture. A historical lexicon (like the one the young Cavafy dreamed of writing) could well guide any literate reader to the meaning of a poem; but what is indeed difficult to fathom is the stern consistency with which the poet rejects the lyrical temptation of beauty, imagery, or musicality. This monkish bookishness and the parsimoniousness to anything

living: these constitute the difficulty of the Cavafic poetic universe, not the philosophical content, which often shines rather clearly thanks to this economic precision.

It might sound strange that I would find Seferis's reading more generous and grateful than that of readers who immediately sing Cavafy's encomium. Still, I think that there is something deeper in Seferis's double gesture that is not reached by the critic who judges anything difficult or unpopular necessarily praiseworthy *an sich*, and even makes it the yardstick with which to beat everything else into submission. Speaking against this Procrustean attitude of criticism that homogenizes in the very moment of pronouncing differences—an attitude that earlier had served to expel Cavafy from Greek literary reception for not being as imagistic as Dionysios Solomos—Seferis admonishes:

Ωστόσο είναι πολύ επικίνδυνο να μετρούμε έναν ποιητή μ' έναν άλλο ποιητή. Αν αγαπούμε τον Σολωμό—και είμαι αφοσιωμένος φίλος του Σολωμού—πρέπει να τον γυρεύουμε στο έργο του και σ' εκείνους που κέρδισαν από το έργο του. Όχι εκεί που δεν υπάρχει. Σολωμός δεν υπάρχει στον Καβάφη. Ο Καβάφης ανήκει σε μια άλλη παράδοση. Μια παράδοση κολοσσιαία και πολύ πιο αλαζονική από την άλλη, την καταφρονεμένη, που ο Σολωμός, σε μια ορισμένη στιγμή, μόνος προσπάθησε να ξανατιάσει, με τα δυο του χέρια, που λύγισαν. Η παράδοση του Καβάφη—η λογία παράδοση—μεταφέρει μια τρομακτική σε όγκο γραμματεία· όμως σε χίλια τόσα χρόνια, αν βάλουμε κατά μέρος τους εκκλησιαστικούς υμνωδούς, δεν μπόρεσε να κάμει ποίηση μήτε όπως ο Σολωμός αλλά και μήτε όπως ο Καβάφης—δεν μπόρεσε να μεταδώσει αισθήματα.

(It is, however, very dangerous to measure one poet against another. If we love Solomos—and I am devoted to Solomos—we must look for his work in those who gained from it, not elsewhere where he does not exist. Solomos does not exist in Cavafy. Cavafy belongs to another tradition, a colossal tradition far more arrogant than the other [demotic] one, the despised one that Solomos at one time tried to raise up all alone, with his two hands that bent with the task. Cavafy's tradition—the scholarly tradition—carries with it a terrific volume of texts. However, in its thousand or so years, if we set aside the church hymnodists, this tradition could not bring forth poetry, neither as Solomos nor as Cavafy did—it could not communicate feeling.)

This simple admonition holds today as well, only with its parameters reversed. In making Cavafy a univocal, surrogate symbol of rootless multivalence, while relegating

generations of poetry from Solomos to Elytis to a pleasing rustic simplicity, we are perhaps listening only to one of the many chords of history.

But on the contrary, Cavafy's notion of history asks us to hearken to as many chords as possible; even more, to acknowledge and mark the dissonance produced when, in the name of foregrounding one repressed truth, we inevitably repress others. For instance, how can we sustain the progressive cosmopolitan Cavafy (provided we even agree that cosmopolitanism is inherently progressive when—as now—it produces CEOs more than it ever produced revolutionaries) alongside the staunch archaist who had only contempt for the *then*-living expressions of Greek language and custom? With what alchemical formula do we transform Cavafy's "arrogant," "scholarly" tradition solely into a progressive antiprovincialism, while also deeming as retrogressive similarly anachronistic gestures today? (See, for example, the tendency by "progressives" to label all contemporary critics of the oversimplification of Greek grammar as "reactionaries.") Here lies the paradox of Cavafy's untimeliness: archaic in his own time, contemporary for the future. But the question Cavafy then poses for us is: Do we have his courage now to stand for the dead forms and manners when we are exhorted to be relevant in both form and content? Can we insist on our own *katharevousa* now—and by this I do not mean the actual "purified" Greek form of speech, but any form of critical, philosophical, or artistic language that remains at the periphery of today's intellectual marketplace? That 2013 is an official Cavafy year in Greece inevitably brings this cosmopolitan into the Greek national orbit, whatever this orbit may signify these days, provoking such questions. I imagine how the poet may have answered some of these, and remain personally haunted by his aged and wrinkled face, and that aristocratic brow curved imperceptibly behind his glasses, glancing at us now with a subtle mix of disdain and sympathy.

Concluding these brief reflections, I return to the notion of nature that prompted them and that led me to Seferis as well. Nature was the very system of reference through which Seferis reviewed the longstanding literary division between Cavafy and the rest of modern Greek poetry. What separated Cavafy from the "native" Greeks was not so much

the chosen language (katharevousa versus demotic), nor even the historical or mythic personages selected for poetic elaboration (Ptolemy or Pompey versus Aeschylus or Orpheus), but the larger system of reference: a poetics of history versus nature, of artifice versus spontaneity. But this line of division is also the one along which Seferis stages a great meeting between the two camps, and in this *dürftiger Zeit* ("lean years," in Hölderlin's terms), we need to share our poets in common at least as often as we need to distinguish among them.

Indeed, as soon as Seferis reaffirms the stark division between Greece's two literary paths—Solomos and Cavafy, the physiocrat and the historian—he brings the image of the earth as a ground of their meeting: "Αυτοί είναι οι δυο αντίθετοι δρόμοι που ακολουθούν ο Σολωμός και ο Καβάφης· όμως η γη είναι σφαίρα, και ίσως να έχουν συναντηθεί κιόλας" (These are the two opposite paths that Solomos and Cavafy follow; but the earth is a sphere and perhaps they have already met). On the earth's sphere, where the East is always someone else's West, opposites can meet—the Heptanesian can encounter the Phanariot, and even though we should not expect a reconciliation, a certain Heraclitian complementarity will be restored. I take this simple image of Seferis with all its literal, but also literary-historical and poetic richness: Γη, the Earth, "oldest of the gods," as Sophocles once called her, hosts everyone in it more generously than any nation, polis, or supranational federation. Earth as nature, and not as merely history or cultural construction, is larger than the human beings who inhabit it; it has lived before them—and who knows—one day might even continue to live without them. History, as Aeschylus had taught Seferis, is perhaps first and foremost natural history. In this sense, those pagan half-siblings of Cavafy might offer him and us the necessary recalibration to think anew our excluded categories, which appear so naturally "useless" to us now.

Seferis closes his lecture with verses from Cavafy's "Κατά τες συνταγές αρχαίων Ελληνοσύρων μάγων" (Following the Recipe of Ancient Greco-Syrian Magicians) that he considers as some of the most splendid expressions in the Greek language. Appropriately, these verses communicate nothing more than the defeat of the human not by history, but by nature itself:

"Ποιο απόσταγμα να βρίσκεται από βότανα
γητεύματος," είπ' ένας αισθητής,
"ποιο απόσταγμα κατά τες συνταγές
αρχαίων Ελληνοσύρων μάγων καμωμένο
που για μια μέρα (αν περισσότερο
δεν φθάν' η δύναμς του), ή και για λίγην ώρα
τα είκοσι τρία μου χρόνια να με φέρει
ξανά."

(Said an aesthete: "What distillation from magic herbs
can I find—what distillation, following the recipe
of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians—
that will bring back to me for one day (if its power
doesn't last longer) or even for a few hours,
my twenty-third year.")

Here Cavafy speaks not only the Hellenistic, the mixed, the peripheral, the synchronic, but the all-too-central and transhistorical human pain for what nature takes without renewing—the immemorial fear that the resurrected god of spring who brings everything else to life will not grant this return to the human being.

If Seferis's generosity is to hold up to his colleague the mirror that Cavafy did not so often look into himself, Cavafy's generosity to us is to warn us—through his own fissures, ironies, omissions, as well as his fragility and untimeliness—that if we ever stop preparing for the barbarians, we may have become them unbeknownst even to ourselves.

Notes

Seferis's essays can be found in Greek at *The Official Website of the Cavafy Archive* (www.kavafis.gr/kavafology/articles/list.asp). The first essay has been translated as "Cavafy and Eliot—A Comparison," and appears in George Seferis, *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. Rex Warner and T. D. Frangopoulos (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966). The full text of Cavafy's poem also is available at *The Official Website of the Cavafy Archive* in both Greek (www.kavafis.gr/poems/content.asp?id=70&cat=1) and English translation (www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=78&cat=1), which I have quoted here.

On the distinction between Greek (mainlander), Hellenic (diasporic), and Hellenified (philhellenic) in Cavafy, see Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Hölderlin's understanding of the "national" as a people's inner spontaneity exceeds the utilitarian category of nationalism, and pertains to our current anxiety of how to practice openness to others without risking precisely through such practice the deflation to the same. See Friedrich Hölderlin, "Letters to Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff," in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

Nietzsche discusses the Greeks' appropriation of the foreign in his early essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

Variation 2: Ένα παραμύθι για ποιητές

Μια φορά κι έναν καιρό,
 μετά τους ποιητές, τους επιστήμονες,
 τους στρατηγούς και τους εμπόρους,
 έφτασε μια νέα τάξη ανθρώπων περιούσια—
 Αυτοί που από το άβατο ακρωτήριο
 της ιστορίας ατενίζοντας πίσω τους
 προς όλους τους ταπεινούς
 έκριναν τη μνήμη όνειρο και το όνειρο ενοχή,
 αυτοί που δεύτερο πήραν βάπτισμα
 και λέγονταν "οι Άλλοι."

Στέκονταν όρθιοι στην αιχμή του βράχου
 σαν πόζα για τον γνωστό πίνακα του Friedrich·
 μόνο δεν κοίταγαν κατά τη θάλασσα
 που εξάλλου δεν τους συγκινούσε πια,
 ως είχαν πολύ σπουδαιότερα καθήκοντα
 από ρομαντισμούς και χασομέρια.
 Με την πλάτη λοιπόν στην τρικυμία,
 άπτεροι άγγελοι στέλναν απανωτά
 τηλεγραφήματα του χρόνου:
 σπαράγματα έργων,
 τετραγράμματα που δεν προφέρονταν—
 Επαναστατικά (ήταν η λέξη) σημεία και τέρατα.

Όχι, δεν ήταν ποιητές, και είχαν πάρει όρκο
 ποτέ μην πέσουν θύματα ριψοκύνδινων οραματισμών,
 δίφορων χρησμών η αντιφατικών συμβόλων
 (μόλο που τους άρεσε επίμονα το πολυσήμαντο
 και γενικά η κάθε λέξη που σήκωνε το πρόθεμα πολύ-
 όσο βαρύ κι αν έπεφτε στον ώμο της.)
 Ούτε φιλόσοφοι ήταν, γιατί το θράσος του έρωτα
 και η άτακτη σοφία περιφρονούν ευσέβειες,
 —Άλλωστε ο Σωκράτης κι ο Rimbaud ήταν ατίθασοι ερωτύλοι
 δύσκολα κανείς τους εμπιστεύεται τα τιμαλφή του—
 Και τελικά στην άκρη του γκρεμού
 η πίστη είναι πιο χρήσιμη απ' το κουράγιο.

Κοιτώντας πίσω τους, το βλέμμα βλοσυρό,
 μιγμένο μ' ένα σεξ απίλ των βραδυνών δελτίων,
 κομπά γυαλιά τούς χάριζαν μοναδική αυθεντία
 —φουτουριστικά προσωπεία για μύστες του υποψιασμού—
 Πτυχές ουδέτερες οι σιλουέτες τους όριζαν
 τα σύνορα συμπεριφοράς του καλλιτέχνη από τον τραπεζίτη.
 Έτσι απαθείς κι απόρθητοι, αυτοί οι πρώτοι αληθινοί

τηρούσαν ιεροτελεστία καθολικής αναθεώρησης.

Είπαν ότι οι μύθοι στέρεψαν για το καλό μας,
 ότι γενιές ολόκληρες ήταν φαντάσματα,
 ότι η σιγουριά του ήλιου είναι έγκλημα.
 Είπαν ακόμη πως ο άλλος Άγγελος,
 τούτος που είχε φτερά, ο αλαφροΐσκιωτος,
 ψέμματα έλεγε για τις βαριές του κόσμου αρμονίες,
 πως άβολος πια ακούγεται ο Σμυρνιός
 στη νοσταλγία του για καιρούς χωρίς χάσμα,
 καμμένα χρώματα και τέτοια αλλόκοτα.
 Όσο για τον πελαγινό,
 πώς τόση επιείκεια με τ' ουρανού τα χρώματα;
 Πώς είχε πλέον δικαίωμα στο ξάστερο συναίσθημα;

Μόνο εσένα αφήσανε αστέρι παρακμής,
 φάρο της Αλεξάνδρειας να λάμπεις
 μεσ' από τ' ανύπαρκτά σου ερείπια.
 Το ηττοπαθές μουρμούρισμά σου
 έπαρση αιώνιας αλήθειας έγινε.
 Μήπως κατάλαβαν
 πόσο η θεία ειρωνία σου τούς λύγισε;
 Πώς της ροής άθεοι πιστοί σε σμίλευσαν
 αδιάλλακτο είδωλο, παντοτινό?

Εσύ που πόθησες ταξίδια πιο πολύ απ' τον γυρισμό,
 που τη χλιδή την έγγραψες χωρίς φόβο και πάθος
 —πνεύμα της ερήμου οριζόντιο—
 που έσβησες με υπομονή τη φύση από τη σκέψη
 όπως σαρώνουν οι νοικοκυρές
 φύλλα ξερά πάνω απ' τα λεία μάρμαρα.
 Ω ποιητών ποιητή
 —ύψιπολις· ἄπολις
 Μεσσίας εξ' Ανατολών που ήξερε να στρέφει
 τ' οξειδωμένο, πολυπόθητο κλειδί της Δύσης—
 Μόνο εσύ μπορούσες να μας σώσεις
 απ' την αυτόχθονη μοίρα μας.

Γι' αυτό και πάλι εξόριστος,
 μοναχικός θα κάθεται στο πόστο του
 φύλακας των πυλών και των ορίων
 ν' απαγορεύει είσοδο
 στους λαθραίους και τους αλαφροΐσκιωτους,
 τους ειδωλολάτρες και τους αισιόδοξους:
 τους σύγχρονους βαρβάρους και σφριγηλούς εφήβους

που πάντα θα ονειρεύεται κρυφά.
Όλους αυτούς που γίνανε *μια κάποια λύσις!*

Εσύ φταις
που δεν πρόκειται να πας στην Περσεφόνη.
Εσυ λησμόνησες την τελευταία σου κατοικία
όταν φτωχή στον γυρισμό τη βρήκες την Ιθάκη.
Γι' αυτό οι κριτές αρνήθηκαν
να σε σκοτώσουν στη στροφή
του λυκόφωτος.
Σαν δεισιδαίμονες κρατούν την εξορία σου φυλαχτό
ως κολακεύει αφάνταστα τη ζήλεια μας για πόνο.
Μα εσύ κι αυτό το αγνόησες·
χωρίς Ιθάκη κανείς ταξίδι δεν τολμά,
η Ιθάκη, είπες, πάντοτε ας είναι στο μυαλό μας.
Εμείς το σφάλμα σου το συγχωρούμε
και το ξεχνάμε από τις τελετές της δόξας σου.

Κι έτσι σ' ένα έρημο πάνθεο
ποιος ξέρει πόσα ελεγεία έγραφε
για τη μοναξιά του
πόση νοσταλγία ένοιωθε για τις ανοιχτές πληγές
των συναδέλφων του,
πόσο ήθελε άραγε να βγει απ' τον βασιλικό λαβύρινθο
προς ένα ξέφωτο πρωτόγνωρο,

Όπου ο τελευταίος των Σειληνών
συζήτηση άρχιζε για την αχρειότητα της σκέψης.
(Λίγοι το θαύμα τούτο πίστευαν στα μάτια τους.)
Και των ηρώων τα πόδια λουσμένα στο φως
και των ποιητών οι σίχοι κορδέλες μετάξι έλαμπαν
—Όλο χαλκός το διάστημα—
κι ο γέρος χειρονομούσε έντονα,
πιωμένος με γλυκό φαρμάκι,
με κορυβαντικούς αυλούς
να παίζουν στις ρυτίδες του,
εκεί, εκεί
στην άλλη ζωή, την υψωμένη.