

## After Reading C.P. Cavafy's "Ithaca": A Sort of Translation

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As a boy and a young man in Berlin in the early 1930s my father had one ambition: that was to be a poet. The language in which he thought and in which he wrote the poems of his adolescence was German. After 1938 that path was closed off to him – or he chose not to follow it. He did not become a poet, in any language, and, with a single exception, he never composed poetry in any language. That exception is the poem here published, 'After reading C.P. Cavafy's "Ithaca": a sort of translation'. The words "after" and "sort of" in his title (in English) make it clear that AW's poem is no mere translation; and, as can be seen, the poem itself is based formally on the Greek at the same time as it is inspired by and draws on the Greek sources of Cavafy's poem and, even more, the Jewish sources of AW's own experience.

I have printed AW's version of 1972, as he printed it out on a computer some years later, with no changes other than minor typographical corrections, mainly of vocalisation of the Hebrew. In the last line of the fifth stanza, where the first word is מִיפָּה, AW had suggested in brackets at the side reading שֶׁל יִפֶּת, with a question mark (the play on words between יִפָּה, beauty, and יִפֶּת, Japhet, appealed to him; cf. his article in the Seeligman Volume, 1983, in whose title in the original Hebrew AW makes a play on the name Japhet). But because of the query I have not adopted this. On the other hand, in the very last line of the poem, I have inserted a change which AW had made: the second word of the last line reads here הַנֶּכֶר, foreign lands; AW's printed version reads דְּרָכְךָ, your path. But AW had changed that in the margin, and this time without any query. The change is a clear improvement.

In my English version I have not tried to reproduce all of AW's Biblical and other allusions, nor to reproduce the rhythm of his Hebrew. My intention has been to do no more than offer a plain translation for those without Hebrew.

D.J.W.

When you go up out of Egypt	בצאתך ממצרים ובשובך מבבל
and when you return from Babylon	גם זאת תהי תפלתך:
Let this too be your prayer	הארך נא דרכנו.
Lengthen for us our path	במדבר תן חלקנו
Give us our portion in the desert	וקננו מחכמת עם נכר.
And grant us of the wisdom of a foreign nation	

When you go up out of Egypt  
and when you return from Babylon  
Do not fear, my son, my beloved  
Amalek shall not smite you  
The curses of Balaam and the laugh of Goliath  
Shall not frighten your pure soul

בצאתך ממצרים ובשובך מבבל  
אל תירא נא, בני אהובי:  
עמלק לא יכך.  
של בלעם הקללות וצחוק גולית  
את נפשך הטהורה לא יפחידו.

Your pure soul  
As long as you do not defile it  
With the fashioning of idols  
of vanity and emptiness  
Amalek and Edom and Philistine  
The creatures of your soul, the base

את נפשך הטהורה:  
כל עוד לא תטמאה  
בעיצוב אלילי הַבֵּל וְשֹׂא  
עמלק ואדום ופלשת  
ייצורי נפשך — השפלה.

Do not fear in your going out of Babylon  
Let your path be long  
To rejoice and be happy  
In praise and in glorification  
Of your coming to far-off ports

אל נא תירא בצאתך מבבל.  
ארוכה נא תהי דרכך:  
לשוש ולשמור  
בהלל ובשבח  
בואך לנמלים רחוקים

When you come to the cities  
of Ashkenaz and Sefarad  
To a place of rest where you shall sojourn  
When you sit in the tents of Japhet your brother  
In your blood shall you mix, into your flesh absorb  
Of the beauty of the entire world

בואך לערי אשכנז וספרד.  
למקום מנוחה שם תלין.  
בשבתך באהלי יפת אחיך,  
בדמדך תמזוג, לבשרך תספוג  
מיפה העולם כולו.

When you go up out of Egypt  
and when you leave Babylon  
Enrich yourself with the riches of the nations  
Long is the path  
Long the wisdom of Japhet  
And her price is far above rubies

בצאתך ממצרים ובלכתך מבבל  
ברכוש הגויים תתעשר:  
ארוכה היא הדרך  
ארוכה חכמת יפת.  
ורחוק מפנינים מכרה.

When you dwell in Babylon  
and when you set out on the path  
Let not Zion depart from your heart  
Is not Zion your lot

בשבתך בבבל ובצאתך לדרך  
ציון מלבך לא תמוש:  
הלא ציון גורלך ולמען שוב שם נוצרת.  
אך רוץ לא תרוץ — ארוכה היא הדרך

and to return there were you not created  
But nay do not run — For the path is long

Long two thousand years, and more.	ארוכה שנות אלפיים, ועוד.
And wise, and with the white hair of your old age	וחכם, ובשיבת שער זקנתך.
And rich with the wisdom of the world	ועשיר בחכמת העולם
At the end of time you shall present yourself	לקץ הימין לגורלך תעמוד
for your destiny	על אדמה עניה אומללה
Upon poor and wretched earth	

In Zion, the arid, the desolate, the holy	בציון הצייה, השממה, הקדושה
It is she who gave you to a brilliant exile	היא, היא, לגלות מבריקה נתנתך.
Only thus, destroyed, did she	רק כך, חרבה, נידודיך קידשה היא.
hallow your wanderings	לא עוד לך נתנה, כי אין עוד לה לתת.
No more does she give you,	בחכמת הנכר תעשרנה, אתה.
for she has no more to give	
With the wisdom of foreign lands	
<i>you</i> will enrich her.	

(ביום שבת קודש פרשת חקת, ה' בתמוז תשלי"ב, 17.6.72)

אדי וסרשטיין

(On the Holy Sabbath, Portion Huqqat, 5 Tammuz 5732/17.6.72)

Addi Wasserstein

[Translated from the Hebrew by David J. Wasserstein]

## IΘAKH by Constantin Cavafy

Σὰ βγείς στὸν πηγαῖμὸ γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,  
 νὰ εὐχεσαι νᾶναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος,  
 γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.  
 Τοὺς Λαιστρυγῶνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,  
 τὸν θυμωμένο Ποσειδῶνα μὴ φοβάσαι,  
 τέτοια στὸν δρόμο σου ποτέ σου δὲν θὰ βρῆς,  
 ἂν μὲν ἢ σκέψις σου ἕψηλή, ἂν ἐκλεκτὴ  
 συγκίνησις τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ σῶμα σου ἀγγίζει.  
 Τοὺς Λαιστρυγῶνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,  
 τὸν ἄγριο Ποσειδῶνα δὲν θὰ συναντήσεις,  
 ἂν δὲν τοὺς κουβανείς μὲς στὴν ψυχὴ σου,  
 ἂν ἢ ψυχὴ σου δὲν τοὺς στήνει ἐμπρὸς σου.

Νὰ εὐχεσαι νᾶναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος·  
 Πολλὰ τὰ καλοκαιρινὰ πρωῒα νὰ εἶναι  
 πὺρ μὲ τί εὐχαρίστησι, μὲ τί χαρὰ  
 θὰ μπαίνεις σὲ λιμένας πρωτοειδωμένους·  
 νὰ σταματήσεις σ' ἐμπορεῖα Φοινικικά,  
 καὶ τὲς καλὲς πραγμάτειες ν' ἀποκτήσεις,  
 σευτέφια καὶ κοράλλια, κεχριμπάρια κ' ἔβενους,  
 καὶ ἡδονικά μυρωδικὰ κάθε λογῆς,  
 ὅσο μπορεῖς πρὸ ἄφθονα ἡδονικά μυρωδικά·  
 σὲ πόλεις Αἰγυπτιακὲς πολλὲς νὰ πᾶς,  
 νὰ μάθεις καὶ νὰ μάθεις ἀπ' τοὺς σπουδασμένους.

Πάντα στὸ νοῦ σου νᾶχεις τὴν Ἰθάκη.  
 Τὸ φθάσιμον ἐκεῖ εἶν' ὁ προορισμὸς σου.  
 Ἄλλὰ μὴ βιάζεις τὸ ταξεῖδι διόλου.  
 Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλὰ νὰ διαρκέσει·  
 καὶ γέρος πιά ν' ἀράξεις στὸ νησί,  
 πλούσιος μὲ ὅσα κέρδισες στὸν δρόμο,  
 μὴ προσδοκῶντας πλοῦτη νὰ σὲ δώσει ἢ Ἰθάκη.

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

Κι ἂν πτωχικὴ τὴν βρεῖς, ἢ Ἰθάκη δὲν σὲ γέλασε.  
 Ἔτσι σοφὸς πὺρ ἔγινες, μὲ τόση πείρα,  
 ἦδη θὰ τὸ κατάλαβες ἢ Ἰθάκες τί σημαίνουν.