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## **The Motif of Travelling in Greek Poetry in the Interwar Period**

### **Abstract**

The cosmopolitan travelling of Greek poetry begins with the emblematic work of Cavafy *Ithaka* (1910). However ‘travelling’ will vary its meaning in the following decades and will become the turning point for realizing the despair and the irreversible loss of the ideal by the so-called generation of the 1930s whose sense of tragic doom will cement the topos of the ‘lost native land’ in Greek literature. In its wanderings during the interwar period Greek poesy shows us ‘travelling’ (act equal to separation from/acquisition of new space and time) as sadness, but also as an adventure and infinity (N. Kavvadias); as an action, that is pointless (*The City*, C. Cavafy), and yet obtains absolute dimensions as a bearer of knowledge and wisdom (*Ithaka*, C. Cavafy), while in the end in G. Seferis’s verses the voyage reaches its total disembodiment, but also its transformation into something new – into an individual/ ancestral memory (obviously the only possible island of salvation), into a transcendent immortality of a universal human consciousness.

**Key words:** Greek poetry; travelling; Nikos Kavvadias; Constantine Cavafy; Georgios Seferis.

### **Мотивът за пътуването в гръцката поезия през междувоенния период Резюме**

Космополитното пътешествие на гръцката поезия започва още от емблематичното произведение на Кавафис *Итака* (1910). Мотивът за пътуването обаче ще променя своето значение в следващите десетилетия и ще се превърне в повратна точка за осъзнаване на отчаянието и безвъзвратната загуба на идеала за така нареченото поколение от 30-те години на ХХ в., чието усещане за трагичност затвърждава топоса за ‘изгубената родина’ в гръцката литература. В своето скитане сред дебрите на поетичния модернизъм гръцката лирика ни показва ‘пътуването’ (акт равносилен на отделяне от/придобиването на пространство и време) като тъга, но и като приключение и безбрежност (Н. Кавадиас); като действие, което обезмисля само себе си в безизходния скептицизъм на К. Кавафис от *Градът*, но и като действие, което добива абсолютно измерение като носител на панацеята от знание и мъдрост (*Итака*), за да стигнем до пълното му обезпелтяване при Г. Сеферис, но и същевременно до трансформирането му в нещо ново – в индивидуална/родова памет (очевидно единствения възможен остров на спасение), в имажинерно безсмъртие на едно универсално човешко съзнание.

**Ключови думи:** гръцка поезия; пътуване; Никос Кавадиас; Константинос Кавафис; Георгиос Сеферис.

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The cosmopolitan travelling of Greek literature begins with the emblematic work of Cavafy *Ithaka* (1910)<sup>2</sup>. This very poem marks the beginning of an adventure which seeks the escape from one place to another, the discovery of new cities, new harbours and the beauty of nature – a voyage that is interrupted by temporary stops of passionate love and sublime aesthetic delights and that is to become finally one with the big journey to the otherworld.

The spirit of the modern 20<sup>th</sup> c. social and intellectual life stands out particularly in the creative attempts of Greek poets after 1920. The moral breakdown caused by the First World War, reinforced by the drama of the Asia Minor catastrophe (1922-1923), contributes to the formation of an antiheroic, individualistic and pessimistic psychology. The contemporary Greek feels that he lives in a defeated country without ideals, laughed at, abandoned and open to all winds. At that time cosmopolitanism pops out as an ideal of life and art in Greece. During the interwar period, it is perceived as a disposition for an adventurous wandering in the post-war city and as an enjoyment of every delight and pleasure that megalopolises offer. Anxiety, despair and along with this a flight to the modern, surprising side of life characterize the poetry that is being created in that period<sup>3</sup>. Poets after 1915 get inspired by and differ themselves from the symbolist generation of the 1890s (the so-called first symbolist wave in Greek poetry). Driven by the advice of literary critics to create verses on the basis of ‘feeling’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘musicality’ Greek neo-symbolists declare a priori their affinity to problems with a pure symbolist origin. At the same time, they want to renew Greek measured speech bringing it into contact with everyday life in the cities that get modernized after 1920<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, Greek symbolism from purely lyrical commences to get cosmopolitan, descriptive, fantasist. This third phase of the reception of symbolism in Greece (according to the classification scheme proposed by Costas Trypanis)<sup>5</sup> takes place between 1915 and 1925 and is defined as the phase of the Greek cosmopolitan poets. Kostas Ouranis (1890-1953), Angelos Dhoxas (1900-1985), Orestis Laskos (1907-1992), Caesar Emanouil (1902-1970), Alexandros Baras (1906-1990), Nikos Kavvadias (1910-1975) are among the artists who in the turbulence of the interwar years discover the fascination of the Road (“I resemble the old wrinkled sailors,/ who stay on the Dutch harbours/...But the old sailors, motionless, still under the lighthouse/ will contemplate with an extinguished pipe/ the ships departing into the infinity”, *Nostalgia*, Kostas Ouranis)<sup>6</sup>. The leading poetical themes are summarized as melancholy, boredom, nostalgia, cosmopolitanism, sensualism, aestheticism – key

<sup>2</sup> Trypanis, C. *Greek poetry (from Homer to Seferis)*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 683.

<sup>3</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Εισαγωγή στη νεότερη ποίηση*. Αθήνα, 1990, σ. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Ibid.*, σ. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Trypanis, C. *Greek poetry*, p. 652.

<sup>6</sup> The translations of the poems in the article are done by the author, F. Christakoudy. This translation is based on the edition: Ουράνης, Κ. *Ποιήματα*. Αθήνα, Εστία, 2009. [«Μοιάζω στους γέροντες ναυτικούς με τις ρυτιδωμένες/ και τις σφιγγώδεις μορφές, που είδα στην Ολλανδία,/...κι όμως οι γέροι ναυτικοί, ακίνητοι στους φάρους,/ με τη μεγάλη πίπα τους σφισμένη πιά στο στόμα/ προς τα καράβια που φύγαν εκοίταζαν – ακόμα...», *Νοσταλγίες*]

words describing Greek neo-symbolism at that time<sup>7</sup>. The Greek cosmopolitan poets are divided into two groups: those who really lived as cosmopolitans such as Kostas Ouranis, Angelos Dhoxas, Nikos Kavvadias and, secondly, the poets (who spent long hours in Athens cafés) dreaming of distant voyages abroad, long journeys to Vladivostok and the unknown Africa, but who never actually left Greece – such are Orestis Laskos, Alexandros Baras, Caesar Emanouil.

In the interwar period Greek literature adopts trends from the development of French poetry that have found their reflection in the contemporary evolution of the country – during these years Athens has turned into a megalopolis and progresses technologically. Greek literature opens itself towards new themes – poets scornfully reject the ‘straw flute’ of Lambros Porfyas (1879-1932)<sup>8</sup> and turn their back on nature, striving to explore the wonders of the modern city. French poetry has been acquainted with the image of the modern city ever since Baudelaire’s poesy (*The Swan, Spleen*, etc.), but Greek poetry starts to discover it only with the new generation of neo-symbolist poets from the interwar period. Referring to Angelos Dhoxas’s poem *Montmartre* Kostis Palamas (1859-1943)<sup>9</sup> will say: “Amidst the music of your verse are revealed dancers freely adjusting their steps to a dance that is unknown to us, but that brings us genuine joy”<sup>10</sup>.

In front of the Greek reader unfolds a magical world of shining and mysterious European and world cities, vast harbours, railways, bars, yachts, strange words like ‘bistro’, ‘mansard’, ‘aperitif’. Athens listens to jazz and advertisements of trans-ocean voyages appear on the boulevards, while asphalt covered streets lead to dazzling cinemas. Thus in a few years to the history of the Neo-Greek poetry is added a new chapter that “begins with the modern, let’s call it, symbolism, and ends with the poetic cosmopolitanism”<sup>11</sup>. It has found its most marvellous expression in the verses of Kostas Ouranis: “A life that is better we can begin/ Instead of weathering like a cut spearmint/ Let’s open our sails like those sailors who/ By losing their country discovered a whole world.” (*When shall we open our sails*)<sup>12</sup>.

Indeed, Kostas Ouranis is the author who made Greek cosmopolitan poets famous. He possesses a genuine lyrical talent that draws inspiration from his real or imaginable trips such as we see them in his best-known collections of poems *Spleen* (1911) and *Nostalgia* (1920). But it is Nikos Kavvadias who transformed that trip into a one of its kind warm human welcome, into a gentle embrace that cuddles the reader with the softness of salt water and melting southern skies.

<sup>7</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Προβολές Α*. Αθήνα, 1965, σ. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Lambros Porfyas (1879-1932) is a major representative of the first symbolist generation of the 1890s. His collections of poems bear the equivocal titles *Shades* (1920) and *Lyrical voices* (1934).

<sup>9</sup> Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) is a central figure of Greek literary life and, particularly, of the Greek literary generation of the 1880s, being one of the cofounders of the so-called New Athenian School (or Palamian School, or Second Athenian School) along with Georgios Drosinis, Nikos Kambas, Ioannis Polemis.

<sup>10</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Προβολές Α*, σ. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Ibid.*, σ. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ουράνης, Κ. *Ποιήματα*, 2009. [«Μπορούμε ακόμα μια ζωή να ζήσουμε καινούρια,/αντίς να μαραζώνουμε σαν τον κομμένο δυόσμο:/ Φτάνει να κάνουμε πανιά σαν τους θαλασσοπόρους/ που, μια πατρίδα αφήνοντας έβρισκαν έναν κόσμο!», *Πότε θ’ανοίξουμε πανιά* - my translation]

Kavvadias is a true poet of his time. His verses are innovative, the tone of his poetry corresponding to the requirements of the époque for different thematic and expression. Called the poet of the sea, he is among the most loved and read cosmopolitan authors, but his name has been left out of the official histories of Greek literature (Linos Politis and Mario Vitti have not included information about Nikos Kavvadias in their *Histories of the Greek Literature*)<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, his lyrical world of fantasy conquers readers' imagination – the collection of poems *Marabu* (1933) is a favourite among Greek sailors and until recently, they knew whole verses from it by heart. Filled with exotic names of harbours and people, his writings sound familiar to the Greek soul. People who grew near the sea, Greeks have tied their lives with the deep blue of the water expanse, being eternally fascinated with its endlessness – ever since Homer's Odysseus until the Odysseus of Kazantzakis, who finds out that the most convenient harbour for his spirit is the vastness of the South Pole! The maritime pilot Nagel, the stoker from Djibouti, the English captains – all Kavvadias's heroes look at us in a childish innocent way, sad and tired, but filled with humanism, nostalgia and genuine kindness, so far from us, but so close at the same time, with their everyday worries and woes, with their small, but not easily gained joys.

The human drama in this poetry unfolds itself in front of our eyes by means of a subdued narration without unnecessary rhetoric. The vibrant colours and aromas – intertwined by the laws of synaesthesia into an as unforgettable as humanly perceptible and empathic image – are obvious though. To the smell of Willy's hashish is added the heavy smoke of the tobacco pipe of pilot Nagel Harbor, to the perfume of the Far Eastern spices – the breeze of the evergreen Indies....

The neo-symbolist sounding of the verses gets us back to the source of creative impulses for that whole generation of poets from the 1920s and even the 1930s. For them the voyage is a vibrant energy equal to self-realization. That energy has its brilliant expression in Kavvadias's verses from the French titled poem *Mal du départ*: "I will rest an idealist and a worthless lover/ of the long trips in the open blue seas"<sup>14</sup>.

Colombo, Algeria, Djibouti, Marseilles, Singapore, Port Said, the Port of Aden, Alexandria and many other toponyms are not markers of a deliberately sought exoticism in the poetry of a traveller at heart as Kavvadias, but are those traps of time and *terra firma* in which infinity embodies itself in love, passion, jealousy, in deadly fights of harsh and life-hardened people with their fate. These numerous geographical names become a symbol of the memorable rendezvous with the beauty of life at sea. The

<sup>13</sup> *Ιστορία της νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας*. Αθήνα, Εκδόσεις Οδυσσεύς, 1978; Πολίτης, Λ. *Ιστορία της νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας*. Αθήνα, ΜΙΕΤ, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Καββαδίας, Ν. *Μαραμπού*. Αθήνα, Άγρα, 2011. [«Θα μείνω πάντα ιδανικός κι ανάξιος εραστής/ των μακρισμένων ταξιδιών και των γαλάζιων πόντων...», *Mal du départ* - my translation].

poetry of Kavvadias is a lyrical creation of raw materials that give us the feeling of unprocessed ore – it is so true, so unvarnished, so filled with authentic compassion. And that is so because he chooses exactly the water expanse to represent the absolute fusion of the human and the divine. It is only there at sea where individuals discover, when battling for survival (sometimes even paid with death), the true values of human life – friendship, solidarity, affection. Kavvadias is a sailor, but also a dreamer, a traveller and a worshiper of the good side in the human soul.

The work of Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) also leads us into a more and more fragmentary and lonely world where the universal moral categories are under question. Travelling as a beginning and an end, as separation and acquisition, as transgression and regression has marked with all the force of a wide philosophical and historical substratum his lyrical poetry. We could not possibly leave unmarked the ever-growing influence of Cavafy over the poets working in Athens in the 1920s. C. Cavafy began writing his poetry ever since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., but he received little recognition at that time because his style differed largely from the then mainstream Greek poetry. It is only after the Asia Minor catastrophe that his pessimistic, individualistic and filigree verses touched the heart of the Greeks and thus the crucial historic events contributed to the retarded reception of his work. His poetry became more and more influential and widely recognized after the publication of his first full collection of poems in 1935 done by Rika Sengopoulou. The writings of the lonely and strange Greek poet from Alexandria in Egypt had its huge impact on the young authors whereas his *Ithaka* turned into a symbol for that whole generation of modern ‘cosmopolitan’ poets –the meaning of life for them was no longer hiding in reaching the dreamed shore and fulfilling one’s ideals, but in the voyage itself: “When you depart some time for Ithaka, / pray that your road is far, / filled with adventures and knowledge...”<sup>15</sup>.

The poem *Ithaka* was written in October 1910 and was published for the first time in 1911 in the magazine *Grammata* (*Γράμματα*) in Alexandria. It belongs to the philosophical and didactic works of Cavafy and stands in Greek literature as one of the most impressing examples for the reception of symbolism – the ten year wanderings of Homer’s Odysseus, who sets sail for his homeland, is a basis for the plot of this masterpiece that has raised Ithaka to a universal cognitive symbol, to its pluralisation and metaphorization (“perhaps you’ve already find out the meanings of Ithakas...”<sup>16</sup>). The work focuses in itself all the peculiarities of Cavafy’s style – realism, suggestivity, gradual abandoning of the rhyme through the years and usage of the *vers libre*, affinity of his metrical language, that combines extravagantly the characteristics of *katharevousa* and *dimotiki*, to that of the prose.

<sup>15</sup> Καβάφης, Κ. *Τα ποιήματα*. Αθήνα, Gutenberg, 2015. [«Σα βγείς στον πηγαϊμό για την Ιθάκη,/ να εύχεται νάναι μακρύς ο δρόμος...», *Ιθάκη* - my translation].

<sup>16</sup> Καβάφης, Κ. *Ibid.* [«ήδη θα το καταλάβεις η Ιθάκες τι σημαίνουν», *Ιθάκη* - my translation].

The ‘prosaic verses’ of Cavafy reveal new psychological horizons unknown to Greek lyrics till now, launching as well a specific Greek version of symbolism. As regards the thematic of his work the Great Alexandrian does for the Greek literature what Baudelaire does for the French – he depicts with a realistic sometimes even satanic tone the modern individual with his tyrannical sensitivity, sublime aestheticism, his feeling of tragic doom and loneliness. A classic example in this semantic direction is his poem *The City* where Cavafy shows travelling as an action of self-denial and undermines the whole notion of a possible change with his hopeless scepticism. At the same time through his poetics, Cavafy introduces in Modern Greek poetry what Eliot preaches for – the naked expression, the techniques of conveying everyday speaking, the careful search for simple words in which the poetical mysteries crystallize<sup>17</sup>.

During the 1920s, Cavafy’s cultural tradition and poetical credo are successfully adopted in continental Greece. Therefore, in the 1930s it comes time for a new revival of Greek lyrical poetry. Hence, commence the poetic searches of Georgios Seferis (1900-1971) whose work is destined to change Greek poesy. Kostas Karyotakis’s (1896-1928)<sup>18</sup> influence continues to be sensed during the 1930s but the verses of his imitators lead nowhere. The change in the literary climate comes only when Seferis publishes his first collection of poems *Strophe* (1931) (*Στροφή*, which translates as ‘turn’). The poetic Renaissance related to his name has its root stock on one side in the modern concepts of European literature and on the other side in the literary work of two minor poets – Teodoros Doros (1895-1954) and Nikitas Randos (1907-1988) who first introduced in Greek poetry the writing on the basis of the subconscious elements not controlled by the logic<sup>19</sup>.

The collection of poems *Strophe* is a cornerstone in the development of Modern Greek poetry. The affinity of Seferis’s work to Mallarmé’s and Valéry’s creations is obvious; both poets have conquered the imagination of the young artist and have become models according to which he initially seeks to shape his writings. This poetic volume marks the beginning of the fourth and last wave of symbolist poetry that affects the Greek world of poetic arts, but at the same time, its verses speak more and more persistently of an artistic transition to the aesthetics of surrealism (nevertheless that in 1924 Seferis expressed his disapproval of the new literary credo). Not much later through his work *Mythistorima* (1935) (*Μυθιστόρημα* meaning ‘novel’/‘mythical history’ – even the titles become polysemantic) – positioned in the centre of Seferis’s poesy not only chronologically, but in terms of

<sup>17</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Εισαγωγή στη νεότερη ποίηση*, σ. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Kostas Karyotakis is considered one of the most representative Greek poets of the 1920s who after his suicide had a significant influence on later Greek poets introducing in Greek literature the fashion for melancholic and sardonic verse, known as *karyotakism*.

<sup>19</sup> Trypanis, C. *Greek poetry*, p. 694.

its themes and form as well, he reaches the culmination of thoughts and tendencies developed in his early period. His next lyrical creations would rather originate from than deviate from this centre. *Mythistorima* represents also his most important collection of poems with regard to the relationship between Seferis and contemporary English poetry. It is written at the time when Seferis was engulfed by T. S. Eliot's poesy. The work is a narrative poem, which comprises of 24 poems whose number reflects the numbers of the Greek alphabet. Seferis himself has said that both history and myth, on an equal basis, take part in his verses. Speaking with the voice of the collective 'we' in *Mythistorima* he will lament over the desacralization of the holy space 'native land', he will mourn over the lack of ideal and the non-existent pilgrimages will represent the topos of a new profane reality lacking life and eternity.

In this collection of poems stand out the most important topics for his work – the antique and the Neo-Greek tradition as well as their crossing point with the European culture; the melancholy that arises from the fate of Hellenism and the nostalgia of the people belonging to the Greek diaspora who have lost their homeland. In the eighth poem corresponding to the Greek letter *H*, the poet, who has emerged in the epic discourse of the lyrical 'we', exclaims: "but what do our souls search, travelling/ on the decks of decayed ships/...bound with non-existent pilgrimages..."<sup>20</sup>. The enjambments underline the feeling of scatteredness and separation. But could the trip lead us anywhere – it looks already quite impossible "in a country that is neither ours,/ nor yours"<sup>21</sup>. Only separation exists and as the laws of higher mathematics prove even the minor distance looks insuperable. We 'knew' (the imperfect tense functioning as conditional highlights the non-feasibility of the action), that "the islands are beautiful/ somewhere here.../ a minor distance"<sup>22</sup>. Travelling in all the cardinal directions – north, east, south, west does not lead anywhere, but at least hides in itself one truth – the truth that Seferis's Odysseus will not forget (*Θ/ 9 poem*). In the winding chimeras of words, *memory* stands as the only possible salvation, as a universal stone of alchemy – "those who will live some time here, where we end/ [...] let's not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels"<sup>23</sup>.

Seferis is the poet who speaking with the voice of the collective 'we' in *Mythistorima* will chant the loss of the ideal, giving a voice to the regrets of that whole generation of the 1930s, who have lost their homeland. Kavvadias will never choose a collective 'we'. He depicts the personal drama of the human being on the borderline of modernity. The relation between Seferis and Kavvadias resembles

<sup>20</sup> Σεφέρης, Γ. *Ποιήματα*. Αθήνα, Ίκαρος, 2014. [«Μά τί γυρεύουν οι ψυχές μας ταξιδεύοντας/ πάνω σέ καταστρώματα κατελυμένων караβιών/...δεμένες άθελα μ' ανύπαρχτα προσκονήματα», *H'* - my translation].

<sup>21</sup> Σεφέρης, Γ. *Ibid.* [«...μέσα σε μιά πατρίδα πού δεν είναι πιά δική μας/ ούτε δική σας», «*H'*» - my translation].

<sup>22</sup> Σεφέρης, Γ. *Ibid.* [«Τα ξέραμε πώς ήταν ωραία τα νησιά/ κάπου έδω.../ ένα ελάχιστο διάστημα», *H'* - my translation].

<sup>23</sup> Σεφέρης, Γ. *Ibid.* [«Εκείνοι πού κάποτε θά ζήσουν εδώ πού τελειώνουμε/...άς μή μάς ξεχάσουν, τίς αδύναμες ψυχές μέσα στα ασφοδίλια...», *ΚΔ'* - my translation].

that one between Palamas and Cavafy. Only the generation of the 1920s started to understand the verses of Cavafy. Only as time passes and big historic dramas concede their way to the tiny human plights Kavvadias will touch the heart of the Greek and world audiences.

Thus in its wanderings through the depths of Greek modernism Greek literature shows us ‘travelling’ (act equal to separation from/acquisition of new space and time) as sadness, but also as adventure and infinity (Kavvadias), as an action, that is pointless, but that also obtains absolute dimensions as a bearer of knowledge and wisdom (Cavafy) and in the end, in Seferis’s verses, the voyage reaches its total disembodiment, but as well its transformation into something new – into an individual/ancestral memory (the only island of salvation), into a transcendent immortality of a universal human consciousness.

Let us once again remind ourselves of the thought that “separate literatures take part in the European modernistic community, but alternate in their own way its schemes”<sup>24</sup>. The pallet of Greek neo-symbolist poets is undoubtedly very rich – in the space of the bright south the monotony and unfriendliness are balanced with radiant landscapes and the joyful breath of the sea. The pessimism, prevailing in the writings of the authors of the 1920s and 1930s, is a reflection of the socio-political crisis that followed the wars from the beginning of the century and the Asia Minor catastrophe. At the same time the wave of cosmopolitan poets, creating fantasist visions, and global reformers of the Greek literary space like Cavafy and Seferis confirm once again the heterogeneity of phenomena related to the implementation of the modern poetic discourse in the southeast European area.

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<sup>24</sup> Кирова, Л. *Югоизточноевропейски феномени*. София, АИ „Проф. Марин Дринов”, 1999, с. 226.