Returning to Ithaca

XX January 2013
Flaxman, The Shield of Achilles
Postcards of Alexandria
c. 1900 AD
Cavafy, *Ithaka*
(1911)

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery,
Laestrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
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.
Laestrygonians, Cyclops,
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,
   with what pleasure, what joy,
   you enter harbours 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,
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.
    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,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous 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 you.
    Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.
Πᾶς οὖν ὁστὶς ἀκούει μου τοὺς λόγους τούτους καὶ Ποιεῖ αὐτοὺς ὁμοιωθήσεται ἀνδρὶ φρονίμῳ, ὁστὶς φιλοδόμησεν αὐτοῦ τὴν οἰκίαν ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν.

καὶ κατέβη ἢ βροχὴ καὶ ἤλθον οἱ ποταμοὶ καὶ ἔπνευσαν οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ προσέπεσαν τῇ οἰκίᾳ ἐκείνη,
καὶ οὐκ ἔπεσεν, τεθεμελίωτο γὰρ ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν.
καὶ Πᾶς ὁ ἀκούων μου τούς λόγους τούτους καὶ μὴ Ποιῶν αὐτοὺς ὀμοιωθῆσεται ἄνδρι μωρῷ, ὡστὶς φικοδόμησαν αὐτοῖ τὴν οἰκίαν ἐπὶ τὴν ἅμμον.

καὶ κατέβη ἡ βροχὴ καὶ ἤλθον οἱ Ποταμοὶ καὶ ἔπνευσαν οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ Προσέκοψαν τῇ οἰκίᾳ ἐκείνη,
καὶ ἔπεσεν,
καὶ ἦν ἡ Πτῶσις αὐτῆς μεγάλη.

(Matthew, 7. 24ff.)
For the ungodly said, reasoning with themselves, but not aright,
Our life is short and tedious,
And in the death of a man there is no remedy:
Neither was there any man known to have returned from the grave.
For we are born at all adventure:
And we shall be hereafter as if we had never been:
For the breath in our nostrils is as smoke,
And a little spark in the moving of our heart.
(...)
And our name shall be forgotten in time,
And no man shall have our works in remembrance,
Come on therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are present.

(...)

Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and ointments:
And let no flower of spring pass by us:
Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered.

(Wisdom of Solomon, ch. 2)
Praise of craftsmanship
(c. 150 BC)

So every carpenter and workmaster,
That laboureth night and day:
And they that cut and grave seals,
And watch to finish a work.
The smith also sitting by the anvil,
And considering the iron work,
The vapour of the fire wasteth his flesh,
And he fighteth with the heat of the furnace:
The noise of the hammer and the anvil is ever in his ears,
And his eyes look still upon the pattern of the thing that he maketh.

He setteth his mind to finish his work,
And watcheth to polish it perfectly.
So doth the potter sitting at his work,
And turning the wheel about with his feet,
Who is always carefully set at his work,
And maketh all his work by number.

(Wisdom of Sirach, ch. 2)
A poem from the ‘Translation of the Seventy’
(c. 250 BC)

Κύριος ποιμαίνει με, καὶ οὐδὲν με ύστερήσει.

εἰς τόπον χλόης, ἐκεῖ με κατεσκήνωσεν,
ἐπὶ ὕδατος ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψέν με,
τὴν ψυχήν μου ἐπέστρεψεν.

ὡδήγησέν με ἐπὶ τρίβους δικαιοσύνης
ἐνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ.

ἐὰν γὰρ καὶ Πορευθῶ ἐν μέσῳ σκιᾶς θανάτου,
οὐ φοβηθῆσομαι κακά, ὅτι σὺ μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔι,
ἡ ράβδος σου καὶ ἡ βακτηρία σου, αὕται με παρεκάλεσαν.
Timanthes carved a Persian half-stone gem
Of lapis lazuli, and sold
This piece with starlike flecks of gold
Then to Demylos. Next from him
Dark-haired Nikaia got it, and for this
She traded him a tender kiss. (gf)
Distaff & Spindle
Leonidas of Tarentum  
(c. 250 BC)  

Often she shook off evening and morning sleep,  
The old woman Platthis, so she could keep  
Poverty far distant; grizzled and grayed,  
To distaff and to spindle, spinner’s aide,  
She sang until the dawn around the place  
Of the long course of Athena,
moving with grace,
Twirling in wrinkled hand on wrinkled knee
Enough thread for the loom; lovely was she,
At eighty years the Acheron perceiving,
Who, beautiful, was beautifully weaving. (gf)
Anyte
(c. 300 BC)

ἀντί τοι εὔλεχέος θαλάμου
σεμνῶν θ’ ὑμεναίων
μάτηρ στᾶσε τάφῳ
tὸδ’ ἐπὶ μαρμαρίνῳ
παρθενικὰν μέτρον τε τεῦν
καὶ κάλλος ἔχοισαν,
Θερσί, ποτιφθεγκτα
δ’ ἐπλεο καὶ φθιμένα.

In place of wedding songs and bridal room,
Your mother set upon this marble tomb
A maiden with your grace and form instead,
So, Thersis, we could greet you though you’re dead. (gf)
There is a town called Haversack, in the midst of wine-dark Delusion, fair, fruitful, filthy, possessing nothing. No fools of a parasite sail there, no one lusting after the buttocks of a tart. Thyme it produces, garlic, figs and bread – things men don’t then fight each other for – nor are they equipped to go for cash or fame. (ms)
That man seems like a god, sitting near you, listening to you while you talk and laugh so sweetly – it makes my heart flutter.
For when I see you, I can’t talk, my tongue freezes, my flesh burns, I am blind, my ears throb, I sweat, shiver and go pale and feel as if I am dying.
Flaxman, *The Shield of Achilles*
Automedon and Alcinous yoked the horses; Automedon grasped the whip in his right hand and leapt on to the chariot.
Behind him came Achilles, armed, gleaming like bright Hyperion. He called to his father’s horses:
'Xanthus, Balius, famous offspring of Podarge, find another way to bring your charioteer back safely, not leave him dead like Patroclus.'
Then Xanthus of the swift feet spoke; he bowed his head, his mane streamed down to the ground, and the goddess, white-armed Hera, gave him speech.
‘We shall save you this time, Achilles, though your doom is near, caused not by us but by a god and by Fate. Not we but Apollo caused Patroclus’ death.
‘We run like the west wind, but you are fated to be defeated in fight by a god and a mortal.’ He spoke, and the Fates stopped his speech.
Then swift Achilles spoke to him:
‘Xanthus, why do you foretell my death?
You need not. I know I must die here,
far from my father and mother.
‘But still I shall go on until the Trojans have enough of war.’ He spoke, and with a cry he drove his horses on among the foremost.
Nostos
The gods sat down in council, among them Zeus the thunderer whose power is the greatest.
Athene began to speak to them, recalling Odysseus’ ordeal; it grieved her that he was still held captive in the house of the nymph.
My heart is torn for Odysseus; far from his friends he suffers on the island of a goddess, daughter of Atlas.
She keeps that luckless man, trying to make him forget Ithaca. But he longs to see his own hearth-smoke rise: or else die.
You do not care, Olympian; yet did he not give you offerings by the ships, on the plain of Troy? Why, Zeus, so harsh to him now?
O Father, if he may go home, let us send Hermes to Ogygia, to tell the nymph our resolve that Odysseus is to leave.
Hermes, go to the nymph and tell her our fixed resolve: Odysseus is fated to go home to his people and his father’s land.
Hermes obeyed, fastening on the golden sandals that carry him over land and sea as swift as the wind.
“Zeus commands you to send him away at once: he is not fated to die here, far from his friends, but to return to friends and home.”
He began to fell trees; the work went quickly. He cut down twenty and trimmed and smoothed them all and trued them up to a straight line.
He drilled and pegged them together. As a carpenter builds the hull of a freight ship, so broad of beam did Odysseus build his raft.
Then he attached the rigging fixing it expertly in place, and levered the raft to the sea. On the fourth day his work was done.
On the fifth day fair Kalypso sent him off from the island giving him wine, water and food and a mild following wind.
Odysseus gladly spread his sail and seated at the helm steered his raft skilfully.
Sleep never closed his eyes as he gazed at the Pleiades, Boötes, and the Great Bear which some men call the Plough.
For Kalypso had told him always to keep the Great Bear on his left as he sailed across the sea.
Nostos
When they came to the ship and the sea
the young men stowed everything away.
They spread a rug and sheet in the stern
so that Odysseus could sleep soundly.
Odysseus boarded too and lay down in silence. The rowers took their seats loosed the ship and began to row and at once he fell into sweet sleep, never stirring, like the sleep of death.
The ship sped on with this god-like man who had suffered much in war and on the perilous sea but now he slept, forgetting all his travails.
In Ithaka there is a harbour which the Phaeacians knew. They rowed in, bore Odysseus out with rug and sheet and laid him on the sand, still sleeping.
Odysseus woke up in his own land but did not know it, for he had been away from it for so long.
Groaning, he struck his thighs with the flat of his hands and said: ‘Alas! To the land of what people have I now come?’
So now you know “what those Ithakas mean”.
Πάντα στον νού σου νάχεις την Ιθάκη.
Το φθάσιμον εκεί είν’ ο προορισμός σου.
Αλλά μην βιάζεις το ταξείδι διόλου.
Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλά να διαρκέσει.
Και γέρος πιά να αράξεις στο νησί.
Πλούσιος με όσα κέρδισες στο δρόμο,
Μη προσδοκώντας πλούτη να σε δώσει η Ιθάκη.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
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,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Η Ιθάκη σ’έδωσε το ωραίο ταξίδι.
Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θάβγαινες στον δρόμο.
Άλλα δεν έχει να σε δώσει πιά.

Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δεν σε γέλασε.
Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
’Ηδη θα το κατάλαβες η Ιθάκες τι σημαίνουν.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous 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 you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.
If thou be made the master of a feast, lift not thyself up.  
But be among them as one of the rest;  
Take diligent care for them, and so sit down.  
And when thou hast done all thy office, take thy place,  
That thou mayest be merry with them.

(Sirach, ch. 32)