

Illness, Disease and Death in the Poems of Constantine Cavafy

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By

Iakovos Menelaou

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To Christina Amelia Menelaou

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PREFACE

In the Greek-speaking world not everyone knows much about poetry. However, almost everyone knows Cavafy. His poetry is part of the national curriculum in secondary education and pupils, or students are exposed relatively early to the magic of his poems. He is a poet widely read and discussed outside Greece too, and the analysis of his poetry never reaches an end. Yet there is always something new to say.

Cavafy's preoccupation with the fragility of the human condition, and his attention to illness, disease and death, old age, alcohol consumption and homosexuality continue to attract and challenge the reader. In turning anew to these themes, this book draws on the medical humanities to provide a new and integrated framework. As we are going to see, the medical humanities provide us with a new perspective and Cavafy's poetry can be the object of investigation not only of scholars in literary studies and world literature, but also a tool of interpretation for medical practitioners and researchers in the history of medicine.

This book breaks new ground in Modern Greek studies and the medical humanities. A reading of Cavafy's poetry through the medical humanities is a new approach that sheds light on many of his poems and provides a new framework for discussing some of the most celebrated aspects of his work. Cavafy's poems exhibit a broad awareness of medical theories and views of his time, and in turn his writings have a lot to offer the field of literature and medicine.

The introduction includes some biographical information that shows Cavafy's preoccupation with health issues and medical theories in general and also a brief historical survey of the medical humanities. It also defines 'additive' and 'integrated' medical humanities.

Chapter 1 surveys that death is a prevalent subject in Cavafy, concentrating on death as a result of illness. In Cavafy, death as a result of an unspecified illness attacks everyone: from strong military men to the young.

Chapter 2 revolves around the view of old age as a disease. Cavafy, in a number of poems, presents old age not as a life stage, but as a condition. In that respect, Cavafy reflects Jacob Hutter's view, as expressed in the latter's treatise *That Old Age Is Itself a Disease*, and ancient authors' views that old age is a disease.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Cavafy presents dependence as a specific condition rather than a vice or custom. Cavafy explores the consequences of drinking on the individual and shows his knowledge of theories that viewed drinking as a condition, like Thomas Trotter's theory in his treatise *An Essay, Medical, Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness*.

Chapter 4 explores Cavafy's homoerotic poems through Richard von Krafft-Ebing's influential book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing asserted that homosexuality is a mental illness accompanied by certain symptoms. Cavafy explores this view in his poetry, even if he does not agree with it.

The conclusion argues that Cavafy's poetry has a lot to offer the field of medical humanities.

INTRODUCTION

1. Cavafy's obsession with health and well-being

The medical humanities may still be seen as an emerging field. Especially in Greece, the medical humanities could expand and offer much more in the future. Even for poets well-discussed and analysed, the medical humanities could give further meanings and interpretations that have not been discovered before; and such a case *par excellence* is Cavafy. Cavafy was born in Alexandria, in 1863; his mother, Harikleia, had wanted a daughter with the name Helen. Thus, when Cavafy was born, the seventh son of the family, it was not easy for her to accept it.¹ Perhaps Constantine is the masculine equivalent of the name Helen, as the two names have the same name day.² His mother dressed him for a long time in girlish dresses, a practice typical of those days. He died of cancer of the larynx seventy years later, in 1933, in the same city and on the same day. A tracheotomy had caused him to lose the ability to speak and he had to communicate using paper and pencil.³

Apart from this ordeal with his health, as Vassiliadi observes, Cavafy was exposed to the event of death very early. Cavafy experienced a prolonged period of bereavement, as his mother died in 1899 and by 1902, he had lost several of his relatives including some of his brothers. His father had died in 1870, when Cavafy was

¹ Sonia Ilinskaya, *Κ. Π. Καβάφης: οι δρόμοι προς το ρεαλισμό στην ποίηση του 20ού αιώνα* (Kedros: Athens, 2006), 26.

² Robert Liddell, *Cavafy: a biography* (second edition, Duckworth: London, 2000), 23.

³ Ahuvia Kahane, 'Cavafy's last act: death, martyrdom, and the problem of bearing witness to the past', *Classical and Modern Literature*, 23 (2003), 143-160. See also Ιλίνσκαγια, *Καβάφης*, 26.

only seven.⁴ His mother's death was an event that especially shocked Cavafy.⁵ George, the eldest brother, died in 1900 of a chronic illness,⁶ while the death of his last brother, John, in 1923, was another shock for the poet, as he had been a valued companion throughout his life.⁷

In the letters Cavafy sent to his brother John, it seems that illness was a very common theme. Cavafy's decision to write about illness-related issues to his brother is a strong proof of his preoccupation with illnesses and probably his interest in medical theories of his days. For example, Cavafy writes about their mother's illness in 1883 and the health issues of their brother, Alexander. Cavafy also told John that he was worried about his eyes; an anxiety he shared with Forster too.⁸ It is also interesting to note that Cavafy kept a full record of Alexander's last illness with medical details: the doctors' opinions differed and Cavafy had the responsibility of making the decisions. In regard to this responsibility to trust a doctor, either Christomanos or Vlavianos, Cavafy wrote in a letter of September 1905: 'The idea that —if both were maintained— he would have to pay about £1 doctors' fees per day, and perhaps more would make him complain awfully, and would

⁴ Martha Vassiliadi, '«Για τα σκουπίδια κατευθείαν»: νοσολογία, πάθη και πληγές κι ενσώματες ταυτότητες στον ερωτικό Καβάφη', http://www.eens.org/EENS_congresses/2010/Vassiliadi_Martha.pdf, 1-9 [accessed 3 October 2015]. See also Dimitris Daskalopoulos-Maria Stasinopoulou, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κ. Π. Καβάφη* (Patakis: Athens, 2013), 17.

⁵ Michalis Pieris, 'Βιογραφικό διάγραμμα', *Εισαγωγή στην Ποίηση του Καβάφη: επιλογή κριτικών κειμένων* (Crete University Press: Heraklion, 2006), 3-12.

⁶ Liddell, *Cavafy*, 102.

⁷ Michalis Peridis, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη* (Ikaros: Athens, 1948), 114.

⁸ Liddell, *Cavafy*, 39. Also, from March 1926 to January 1927, Cavafy and Forster exchanged four letters all referring to Cavafy's eye inflammation; in Peter Jeffreys (ed.), *The Forster-Cavafy Letters: friends at a slight angle* (The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, 2009), 92-95.

upset him much, it was an intricate position; and decisions had to be made on the spot, and I did for the best.’⁹

During the nineteenth century, Alexandria was in economic renaissance and Cavafy’s father was one of many Greek traders. Cavafy lived initially in prosperity: the family enjoyed a life of luxury with a big house, a French governess, English nurse, Greek servants, Italian coachman and Egyptian porter. However, this prosperity declined and was gradually replaced by financial problems after the death of the father. In 1872, the family moved to England, where they stayed for about six years. When they returned to Alexandria in 1878, after the fall in the family fortunes, Cavafy was already fifteen years old; he had gone to schools in England and learnt fluent English, with an interest in literature. After his return to Alexandria, Cavafy continued his studies there, while in 1882 the family moved again, this time to Constantinople. The poet’s stay in Constantinople was crucial, as he seems to have become aware of his homosexuality. In addition, during his stay there, we see his first attempts at poetry. In 1885, Cavafy returned to Alexandria with his mother and his brothers, Alexander and Paul. He started working in different professions until 1892, when he became a permanent employee at the Irrigation office until 1922.¹⁰ During these early years, Cavafy wrote some poems which refer overtly to the ageing process which he had not yet undergone like ‘Ένας Γέρος’ (1894).

In 1907, Cavafy moved to his flat in the ill-famed Rue Lepsius.¹¹ There, he wrote a great part of his poetic corpus.¹² It is also interesting to note that his house was very near the Greek

⁹ Liddell, *Cavafy*, 107. There is also evidence, through Cavafy’s correspondence with Forster, that illness-related issues troubled Cavafy a lot. In a letter of 4th August 1922, Cavafy writes about Dr Delta’s illness (in Jeffreys (ed.), *The Forster-Cavafy Letters*, 48).

¹⁰ Pieris, ‘Βιογραφικό διάγραμμα’, 3-6. See also Ιλίνσκαγια, *Καβάφης*, p. 25 and Liddell, *Cavafy*, 33-35.

¹¹ Liddell, *Cavafy*, 179.

¹² Pieris, ‘Βιογραφικό διάγραμμα’, 8.

hospital.¹³ This may have given him the inspiration for several of his poems which are illness-related and will be discussed in this book. Cavafy himself said that he could not find a better place to live: 'Where could I live better? Below the brothel caters for the flesh. And there is the church which forgives sin. And there is the hospital where we die.'¹⁴

It is interesting to see the term Cavafy uses for the flesh's desires: 'Caters for' which is not a word expressing a satisfaction of fleshly pleasures and desires, but rather a word showing care and cure at some point. It shows a kind of pathology which links with the way Cavafy described homoeroticism in his poetry, as a mental and pathological condition.¹⁵ Indeed, in these words, Cavafy does not seem to see intercourse only as a pleasure, but something beyond that; something which is analogous to a medical condition and needs cure.

In 1914, Cavafy met Forster and in 1917, he met Aleco Sengopoulo, who later would be his executor. In 1922, he resigned from his job and focused on the completion of his poetic oeuvre. From 1930, Cavafy experienced health problems with his larynx; two years later he was diagnosed with cancer and he went to Athens for treatment.¹⁶ It was hard for Cavafy to accept this, while after a tracheotomy he was not able to speak at all.¹⁷ Going back to Alexandria, his condition worsened until he finally died.¹⁸ That was a really hard period for Cavafy, but according to Rika Sengopoulo, the only day Cavafy cried was the day he entered the Greek hospital

¹³ Peridis, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη*, 97.

¹⁴ Liddell, *Cavafy*, 180.

¹⁵ Katerina Ghika translates Cavafy's words as follows: 'Ο οίκος ανοχής θεραπεύει τις ανάγκες της σάρκας.' See *E. M. Forster-K. Π. Καβάφης: φίλοι σε ελαφρή απόκλιση*, ed. Peter Jeffreys-tr. Katerina Ghika (Ikaros: Athens, 2013), 62.

¹⁶ Pieris, 'Βιογραφικό διάγραμμα', 9.

¹⁷ Daskalopoulos-Stasinopoulou, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κ. Π. Καβάφη*, 156-158.

¹⁸ Pieris, 'Βιογραφικό διάγραμμα', 9-10.

in Alexandria, April 1933.¹⁹ As Sengopoulo writes, when they found his bag to take to the hospital, the poet wept and said: ‘Αυτή τη βαλίτσα την αγόρασα πριν 30 χρόνια, ένα βράδι βιαστικά για να πάω στο Κάιρο για διασκέδαση. Τότες ήμουν υγιής, νέος και όχι άσχημος’ (I bought this bag 30 years ago to go to Cairo, one night in a hurry for entertainment. Then I was healthy, young and not ugly).²⁰

Cavafy was highly interested in issues related to health and well-being. The comparison between youth and old age and health and illness shows that he was well aware of relevant issues. As Papanikolaou has emphasised, Cavafy had a lively interest in medical theories and treatises of the nineteenth century about homosexuality,²¹ but his interests in medical discourse were not confined to that. As Peridis informs us, Cavafy read a lot and was a man of culture and spiritual cultivation; his poetic talent had much to do with his wide knowledge. He mainly studied poetry and history, but he was also good in languages, as he knew English, French and some Italian. He was a person of wide horizons, apparent from his table talk.²² As Pinchin declares, Cavafy was a company-loving person, whose love for good conversations delighted his visitors and those who went to Alexandrian coffee shops with him.²³ Bonamy Dobrée, a British critic and Cavafy’s visitor, describes Cavafy’s conversations as follows:

I have met an Alexandrian-with all that implies. Implication, that word is important when thinking of Mr. Cavafy, for his poems are

¹⁹ Alekos Karapanagopoulos, *Ο Κ. Π. Καβάφης Ήταν Χριστιανός;* (Dodone: Athens-Ioannina, 1993), 27.

²⁰ Daskalopoulos-Stasinopoulou, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κ. Π. Καβάφη*, 167. My translation of all the Greek quotations.

²¹ Dimitris Papanikolaou, ‘Ο Καβάφης στον 21^ο αιώνα’, *The Books Journal*, 4 (2011), 50-57.

²² Peridis, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη*, 62-63. Pinchin also informs us about Cavafy’s studies in history, before the writing of certain poems in Jane Lagoudis Pinchin, *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1977), 51.

²³ Pinchin, *Alexandria Still*, 77-78.

like his conversation, his conversation like Alexandria, and Alexandria is all implication... He may talk of the Alexandrian tram-service, of the Ptolemies, of the use of a certain word in seventeenth-century English: one scarcely knows what is that one has talked to Mr. Cavafy about... both his talk and his poems leave you with a flavour, something you have never quite met before, a sound that remains in the ear...²⁴

Thus, it would not be a surprise if Cavafy read and knew about well-established medical theories of his days. In his personal library (of which our record is incomplete), there were treatises on different topics, while science sources were not absent from his personal collection: these included essays by Freud and books by Darwin, like the *On the Origin of Species*.²⁵ Most relevantly for our study, we are told of various treatises on medicine and psychiatry sent to him with dedications by the authors in the last years of his life.²⁶ Although we do not have many details about titles and other information, this suggests that medicine in a broad sense was one of Cavafy's interests. As we shall see in this book, he incorporated relevant medical discourses in a significant number of poems.

It is very important to note, that Cavafy's (much older) first cousin was a distinguished medical practitioner in London. John Cavafy, with whom the poet kept in communication, died in 1901 and his lengthy obituary was published in *The British Medical Journal* on 11 of May.²⁷ Thus, Cavafy had a source on medical issues in his own family. John Cavafy graduated from the University of London, with a first-class degree in Medicine and then his MD. He became a member of the Royal College of Physicians. He was also appointed Demonstrator in Histology and elected Assistant Physician

²⁴ Bonamy Dobrée in Pinchin, *Alexandria Still*, 78.

²⁵ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008).

²⁶ Peridis, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη*, 67, 75.

²⁷ Daskalopoulos-Stasinopoulou, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κ. Π. Καβάφη*, p. 46 and Liddell, *Cavafy*, 96.

and then Lecturer in Comparative Anatomy and Medical Registrar, Physiology and Medicine at St George's.²⁸

John Cavafy was the author of several articles. For example, in one of his articles dealing with locomotor ataxy, he describes the case of a patient who suffered from 'bilious attacks,' vomiting and epigastric pain, constipation, slow micturition, and loss of sexual potency. This patient, in John's account, had before his marriage, been given to sexual excesses.²⁹ As we will see, sexual excesses are something common in Cavafy's homoerotic poems. In some other articles, John deals with the contagiousness of erysipelas,³⁰ and the remedial actions of alcohol.³¹ Again, as we will see, the issues of contagiousness and alcohol —here as addiction— appear in a certain number of Cavafy's poems.

As Antonakopoulos writes, after the death of his father, from 1874 to 1876, Cavafy lived in London with his family and it is very possible that the adolescent Cavafy was influenced by his older cousin's enthusiasm and wide range of interests. Although salicylic acid had been used before for the treatment of rheumatism, it was John who identified that salicylates reduce fever. Cavafy's admiration for his cousin is apparent in his 'Genealogy,' in which he describes his cousin as a very wise man. John's articles had been published in *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, while in

²⁸ Anonymous author, 'Obituary', *The British Medical Journal*, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2400973/pdf/brmedj08455-0050b.pdf>, 1178. [accessed 14 May 2016]

²⁹ John Cavafy, 'A case of sciatic nerve-stretching in locomotor ataxy', *The British Medical Journal*, 2: 1093 (1881), 928-929.

³⁰ John Cavafy, 'Cases of facial erysipelas with low temperature', *The British Medical Journal*, 1: 1213 (1884), 599-600.

³¹ John Cavafy, 'Failure of salicin and success of cold packing in a case of rheumatic hyperpyrexia', *The British Medical Journal*, 1: 852 (1877), 510 and John Cavafy, 'On the treatment of ringworm of the scalp', *The British Medical Journal*, 1: 1121 (1882), 939.

1881 he became honorary secretary to the section of skin diseases.³²

Even though there is no evidence of works by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Thomas Trotter and Jacob Hutter on Cavafy's shelves—whose theories, as we shall see in the following chapters, may be used to interpret several poems—Cavafy's reading was not confined to the books he owned (and which have now been dispersed). Not a rich man, he read books belonging to his brothers and friends and books from public libraries in Alexandria, in addition to keeping up with foreign periodicals in reading rooms.³³ In his correspondence with Forster, there is further evidence that Forster sent Cavafy various books.³⁴ Cavafy's thirst for learning, in combination with his deep knowledge of his contemporary ideas, make certain that Cavafy read about medical theories of his time and infused them in his poetry.

In any case, it is hard to believe that Cavafy was not aware of Krafft-Ebing's theory on homosexuality, along with the broad thrust of Hutter's theory on old age and the debate ensuing from Trotter's theory on alcoholism. Especially on the last two, even if it seems unlikely that he read the original sources, Cavafy was very likely engaged with the sort of the nineteenth century debates they contributed to medical and literary periodicals dealing with these theories—that he read assiduously— or perhaps heard about these views from a friend or a relative, like his cousin John. Thus, the connection of certain poems with these theories that will be attempted in this book, is a new addition to Cavafy's studies and draws out aspects of the relevant poems that have perhaps been insufficiently discussed.

Debates in these three health-related areas—as homosexuality, old age and alcoholism were seen—evidently interested Cavafy. The identification of homosexuality, old age and

³² G.N. Antonakopoulos, 'A member of the Cavafy family in 'The Lancet'. The life of Dr. John G. Cavafy (1838-1901)', *Deltos*, 41 (2011), 27-39.

³³ Peridis, *Ο Βίος και το Έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη*, 64-65.

³⁴ Jeffreys (ed.), *The Forster-Cavafy Letters*, 49, 52.

alcoholism with diseases, each with a set of symptoms, suggests that Cavafy was well-informed about medical views of his day. The symptoms and the overall pathological process revealed in several poems drives us to read these poems in connection with relevant theories.

It is important to see Cavafy's interest in these studies, related to diseases, through a discussion he once had with Sareyannis. In discussing different meanings of the Greek word 'αδύνατον,' Cavafy gives as an example a visit he once paid to a sick boy's house:

Ευρέθηκα κατά τύχη κάποτε σ' ένα σπίτι λαϊκό, την ώρα που έβγαине ο γιατρός, που ήρθε για να δει ένα άρρωστο παιδί. Ο γιατρός επέμενε στην πόρτα πως έπρεπε να γίνει εγχείρηση. Μα η μητέρα διαμαρτύρετο και του είπε 'Γιατρέ μου, είναι αδύνατον, γιατί το παιδί είναι πολύ αδύνατο'. Πρόσεξε, Γιάννη, τη λεπτή διάκριση: Αδύνατον-impossible. Αδύνατο-faible.³⁵

(Once, I went by chance to a modest house, at the time the doctor, who had come to see a sick boy, was leaving. On the doorstep, the doctor insisted that an operation was needed. However, the mother protested and told him 'Doctor, it is impossible, because the child is very faible'. Pay attention, Gianni, to the slight difference: Αδύνατον-impossible. Αδύνατο-faible).

The above statement shows Cavafy's obsession with medicine and illnesses in two ways: firstly, through the fact that Cavafy uses an example like a visit to a sick person to explain to his interlocutor the different meanings of a word in Greek; and secondly, through his claim that he went to this house by chance, which is not convincing.³⁶

³⁵ I. A. Sareyannis, *Σχόλια στον Καβάφη* (Ikaros: Athens, 2005), 42.

³⁶ By chance is also the excuse given by the poet in the poem 'Συμεών' to explain to his friend his visit to Symeon's pillar: η τύχη το 'φερε – κάτω απ' του Συμεών τον στύλο (C. P. Cavafy, *Κρυμμένα Ποιήματα: 1877;-1923*, G. P. Savidis (Ikaros: Athens, 2013), 104-105).

Cavafy's obsession with illnesses appears in some of his unpublished notes:

Είναι μια αντίθεση στους πλούσιους νέους που είναι ή αρρωσιάρηδες και /φυσιολογικώς/ βρώμικοι, ή [[τότε]] με πάχητα /και/ με λίγδες απ' τα πολλά φαγιά, και τα πιωτά/, και τα παπλώματα.³⁷

(There is a contrast between the rich young men who are either sick and /naturally/ filthy or [[then]] with fatness /and/ dirt from the many foods, and the drinks/, and the duvets).

and also:

Μπορεί να έχει σπ[ου]δ[αιότητα] που δεν την ον[ομάζει], αλλ' ενστικτωδώς την αισθ[άνεται] και η ανθρ[ωπότης] και όταν υγιάνεις και συ.³⁸

(Maybe there is an importance that is not named, but instinctively humanity feels it and you feel it too when you are healthy).

Cavafy's notes frequently revolve around issues of health, showing his preoccupation with illnesses, which is reflected in his poetry. In the first note above he makes a comparison, concluding that wealthy young men are physically imperfect to the point even of seeming sick. Even if this is a metaphor, rather than a literal reference, it is interesting to see that Cavafy uses this characterisation to present this comparison. In the second note, Cavafy clearly mentions the importance of health for any human.

Cavafy's obsession with illness and medical theories of his days is also apparent in some of his other prose writings. In a paper titled 'Το κοράλλιον υπό μυθολογικήν έποψιν' (1886), the poet writes about the supposed healing properties of coral:

³⁷ C. P. Cavafy, *Ανέκδοτα Σημειώματα Ποιητικής και Ηθικής (1902-1911)*, ed. G. P. Savidis (Hermes: Athens, 1983), 43.

³⁸ Cavafy, *Ανέκδοτα Σημειώματα Ποιητικής και Ηθικής*, 65.

Έτεροι υμνούν την θεραπευτική επιρροήν ην ο λίθος ούτος εξησκει επί των ασθενειών του στομάχου, της αιμορραγίας, της οφθαλμίας, και του σεληνιασμού· αν και κατά τον αρχιεπίσκοπον Κύπρου Επιφάνιον τα τελευταία δύο νοσήματα ιατρεύοντο ου μόνον υπό του κοραλλίου, αλλά και υπό του τοπαζίου και ιάσπεως.³⁹

(Some praise the therapeutic impact this stone has on illnesses of the stomach, bleeding, ophthalmia, and madness; although, according to the Archbishop of Cyprus Epiphanius, the last two illnesses were cured not only by coral, but by topaz and jade).

Of coral, Cavafy agrees that it could be beneficial for a series of illnesses, such as stomach-ache, bleeding, ophthalmia, even madness.

Interestingly, in the opening lines of the above note, Cavafy writes that in 1883 corals had attracted the interest of London residents: 'Η καλώς διωργανισμένη και πλουσία έκθεις κοραλλίων κοκκινοχρόων, μελάνων και λευκών, ήτις τω 1883 εφέιλκυσε την προσοχήν των κατοίκων του Λονδίνου.'⁴⁰ Moreover, what Cavafy writes in his note about the therapeutic attributes of stones for patients with ophthalmia is verified in a 1863 source: according to a document written by the priest of Saint Andreas in Melapedian monastery, they kept a stone —sapphire— in the monastery, because it was useful and healing for people who had problems with their eyes, and especially ophthalmia patients.⁴¹ Since antiquity stones have been used for several diseases, and as Galen declares stones were the second most effective medicine after natural sources. Stones were mainly used for conditions of the eyes or the

³⁹ C. P. Cavafy, *Τα Πεζά*, ed. Michalis Pieris (Ikaros: Athens, 2010), 27-28.

⁴⁰ Cavafy, *Τα Πεζά*, 27.

⁴¹ Stamatoula Zapanti, 'Ημπολύτιμος λίθος ως θεραπευτικό μέσο', *Deltos*, 24 (2002), 44-46.

mouth.⁴² Cavafy was very likely to have read contemporary and ancient sources on the therapeutic use of stones.

In another short piece, *‘[Ημερολόγιο από την αρρώστια και τις τελευταίες ημέρες του Μικέ Θ. Ράλλη],’* Cavafy writes in detail about his friend Mikes Ralli’s typhoid:

Εις απάντησιν με γράφει δύο γραμμάς ο Τόττης—ότι ο Μικές είναι άρρωστος από την Τρίτη βράδυ με θέρμην...

(As a reply, Tottis writes to me two lines—that Mikes is sick since Tuesday evening with fever...)

Ο ιατρός του ήτον ο Μοσχάτος. Τον είπα είναι τρέλλα να εμπιστεύεται εις αυτόν.

(His doctor was Moschatos. I told him that it is madness to trust him).

Με λέγουν ότι ο Μικές ήτο χειρότερα. Τον βλέπω και τω όντι με φαίνεται πολύ abattu. Θέρμη περισσοτέρα. Εκάθητο εις τον καναπέ του sitting-room. Προσεπάθησε να με ομιλήση, αλλά οργήγورا εκουράσθη. Παρεπονείτο ότι είχε πονοκέφαλον. Τέλος μετά ημίσειαν ώραν τον είδα τόσον καταβεβλημένον ώστε τον κατέπεισα να πάγη εις την κάμαράν του και να έμβη εις το κρεβάτι του.

(They told me Mikes was worse. I saw him and indeed he looks very abattu. Higher fever. He was sitting on the sofa of the sitting-room. He tried to talk to me but got tired quickly. He complained that he had a headache. Finally, after half an hour I saw he was so exhausted and convinced him to go to his room and lie on his bed).

⁴² Dimitrios Chr. Koutroumpas, ‘Η φαρμακευτική χρήση γαιών, πετρωμάτων και μεταλλευμάτων κατά τον Γαληνό της Περγάμου’, *Deltos*, 43 (2014), 17-30.

Έκαμαν κονσούλτο με τους ιατρούς Τσαγκαρόλαν και Βαλασόπουλον, και αυτοί ενέκριναν την κούραν και απεφάνθησαν ότι πάσχει από albuminerie.

(They had a consultation with the doctors Tsagarolas and Valasopoulos, and they approved the treatment and decided that he is ill of albuminerie).

Με αυτό τω όντι κατέβη ο ιατρός Μάκης. Τον ηρώτησα, και με απεκρίθη «He is in a very, very bad state-typhoid state», και εφαινέτο ως να μη έτρεφε ελπίδας καλλιτερεύσεως.

(Presently, Doctor Makis came down. I asked him, and he replied, «He is in a very, very bad state-typhoid state», and it seemed that he did not have any hope of getting better).

Εκείνος δε διά τας τελευταίας 3 ημέρας κάθε ημέραν είχε δύο, τρεις αιμορραγίας.

(For the last three days and every day he had two, three bleeds).⁴³

Health issues were very important to Cavafy and this is evident in the way he encourages his close friend to find another doctor, as, according to him, he would be mad to trust a doctor like Moschatos. In addition, he describes in detail his friend's symptoms—especially fever, fatigue and headache, while after a consultation with the doctors he asserts that his friend has albuminuria. However, in the next lines of this writing, Cavafy writes that his friend's state had worsened significantly, as he finally had typhoid; this was accompanied in the last three days by bleeding. Again, the detailed description gives us the impression that Cavafy had an interest in medicine.

In the diary of his visit to Greece, in June 1901, Cavafy asserts at the very beginning, that 'this is intended to be a diary of

⁴³ C. P. Cavafy, *Απαντα τα Πεζά*, ed. Giorgos F. Fexi and Giorgos Papoutsakis (Ekdoseis Mermiga: Athens, 1963), 253-258.

occurrences, not of impressions and ideas.⁴⁴ Indeed, in this diary, written in English, Cavafy seems to be very obsessed with his health, and returns again and again to his well-being. Reading this diary, one could assume that his priority was to keep himself in good health:

I was unwell towards noon, slightly better afterwards, and I felt after a few hours on board much better.

We had some bother with the Sanitary formalities. They would not allow us to get on board unless we had first passed through the Port Sanitary office, and declared whether we came or not from plague stricken districts.

Health better.

Awful sun, going to Delos. I was afraid of getting a sunstroke.

I was back at Phalerum at 1.20 p.m.; but I felt unwell and did not lunch. I was better in the evening.

Stayed at the hotel all the morning. Rather unwell. Better now, but will not go to town.

Stayed in the hotel in the morning. Lunched. Felt unwell at 3 p.m. Decided on not going to town. Much better now. Will dine.

Not being very well still, I did not lunch.

Felt much better in health yesterday afternoon and evening; and quite well this morning.

All during the day I felt as well as I ever was; but towards 8 p. m. I began to feel an oppression on my stomach, and I passed a «nuit blanche» suffering from terrible colics and vomiting all the time. I do not know to what ascribe this; probably it was due to a glass of water that I drank at Zacharato's, and that had a stale taste.

⁴⁴ Cavafy, *Απαντα τα Πεζά*, 259.

Yesterday I stayed indoors all day, as I did not feel quite up to going out. I dined off a plate of soup and 2 eggs in my room.

As I did not feel quite well, I did not lunch. I had a copious tea at 3 — eggs, bread and butter.

At 8 we went to dinner. The dinner tables are spread out on the square opposite the hotel. I did not dine however as my stomach was out of order, owing to the enormous quantity I drank during the day. I felt parched all day and I am sure I must have drunk 15 glasses of water.⁴⁵

Reading the above lines from Cavafy's diary, one sees his permanent, even obsessive fear over his health; he is always worried about health issues and tries to protect himself in different ways. During his stay, he asserted that he felt unwell several times, while on one occasion he claims that he drank water which made him vomit and on another occasion the alcohol consumption of the previous night had caused him a stomach disorder. In another part of this diary, he says that he is afraid of sunstroke, because of the sunny weather in Delos, while he is also very careful with his nutrition. Every time he feels unwell, he associates this with his nutrition and stays in the hotel to protect himself.

As Boletsi asserts, Cavafy frequently stops his narrative in order to note the temperature: in total there are thirty-one mentions of the temperature and several other references to weather conditions. According to Boletsi, the poet writes that he suffers because it's very warm, but he suffers more as he had forgotten his thermometer:⁴⁶ 'It's very warm. But as I have packed up the thermometer, I can't state any figure.'⁴⁷ Boletsi continues by saying that Cavafy is obsessed with the temperature and the way the weather and certain moments affect his body and mood.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cavafy, *Άπαντα τα Πεζά*, 259-302.

⁴⁶ Maria Boletsi, 'Η θερμοκρασία της ειρωνείας στον Κ. Π. Καβάφη', *Το Δέντρο*, 193-194 (Athens, 2013), 83-88.

⁴⁷ Cavafy, *Άπαντα τα Πεζά*, 292.

⁴⁸ Boletsi, 'Η θερμοκρασία της ειρωνείας στον Κ. Π. Καβάφη', 85.

Focusing on these pieces of information, one can see clearly Cavafy's obsession with his health and health issues in general. An obsession, however, and a medical interest that has never been explored in Cavafy, as has happened with other poets like Alexander Pope (1688-1744) who also had such an obsessive concern. Thus, health can be used as a hermeneutic for reading Pope's poems, since his poor health is frequently reflected in his poetry. As Nicolson and Rousseau write, Pope was seriously concerned about his health. Pope had several health issues, like progressing asthma and kyphoscoliosis, while his eyesight was bad and he developed a cardiac condition. In addition, Pope's weight was far below normal and he suffered from piles.⁴⁹

Like Cavafy, in his letters to friends, Pope frequently wrote about his poor health; for example on one occasion, he speaks about his rheumatism in his shoulder that caused him pain. In a letter to another friend (Thomas Sheridan), Pope complains about his eyesight, while writing to Baron Bathurst he says that the bath he tried together with some other remedies did not help at all with his headaches. 'I am in the condition of an old fellow of Threescore, with a Complication of Diseases upon me; A constant Headake; ruined Tone of the Stomach; the Piles; a Vomiting & Looseness; & an Excess of Wind,' Pope writes. In another letter to Martha Blount, the poet complains about the strong pains caused by kyphoscoliosis. Like Cavafy, Pope was very preoccupied, and at some point, overcautious, over his health, as in a letter to Henry Cromwell he apologises for not meeting him, but his 'continual Illnesses prevent that.'⁵⁰

Nevertheless, while for Pope this anxiety over his health was a result of existing illnesses, as he did indeed suffer several serious maladies, with Cavafy that is not the case. Apart from his experience with cancer, nearly at the end of his life, in most cases

⁴⁹ Marjorie Nicolson and G. S. Rousseau, *'This Long Disease, my Life': Alexander Pope and the sciences* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1968), 52, 57, 69.

⁵⁰ Nicolson and Rousseau, *'This Long Disease, my Life'*, 21, 28, 31, 34.

his anxiety and concern are not based on anything sure and substantial, but rather on his own obsessive assumptions. His fear mainly derives not from existing and severe conditions, but on the contrary from a random fear over his health; it seems that he was a kind of hypochondriac. As Belli asserts, poets express their emotions to the reader and make their pain a universal statement.⁵¹ This is the case for Cavafy, who —beyond that— expresses his fears and concerns over his health and well-being too. It is also interesting that poetry can become the ideal tool for the representation of the experience of ill, as a certain number of Cavafy's poems do.⁵²

2. The distinction between disease and illness

We have seen from his private documents that Cavafy the man had an almost obsessive interest in health-related issues and medical theories of his day. We should now address some broader terminological questions, the subject of much discussion in the field of the medical humanities, which have relevance to certain poems by Cavafy. What is 'disease'? What is 'illness'? And what is 'sickness'? Are these three words synonyms? And of course, how do these words relate to Cavafy? For most people, in common speech the three words mean much the same thing: a person or even an animal in an ailing condition.

Although it is hard to clarify the main difference between these three words in daily communication, for the medical humanities the distinction is of high importance. And it is crucial to note that they are three different and distinct terminologies with different characteristics. Hofmann and Boyd describe the terms in detail. As Hofmann declares, the triad 'disease, illness and sickness' has often been applied to bring out medical, personal and social aspects respectively of human lack of well-being. Disease is a health

⁵¹ Angela Belli, 'The impact of literature upon health: some varieties of cathartic response', *Literature and Medicine*, 5 (1986), 90-108.

⁵² Sarah Nance, 'An economy of illness: the poetics of women in pain', *Literature and Medicine*, 36: 1 (2018), 164-189.

problem that consists of a physiological malfunction resulting in an actual or potential reduction in physical capacities; it is an organic phenomenon independent of subjective opinions or experiences and of social factors. It is epistemically measurable by objective methods.⁵³ A disease is a pathological process and is characterised by the fact that it can be objectively described.⁵⁴

By contrast, illness is subjective and may be interpreted as an undesirable state of health. It consists of subjective feelings, like pain and weakness. Illness is the subjective state of an individual experiencing symptoms; epistemically it can only be directly observed by the subject and indirectly assessed through the individual's reports.⁵⁵ Illness is personal and can exist where no disease can be found; the patient in such cases may offer the doctor nothing to end up with a diagnosis.⁵⁶

Finally, sickness is the external and public mode of lack of health and relates to the position of a sick person in society. It is in essence a social status, reflecting a distinction between the patient (or sick person), and a society that is supposed to recognise and sustain him or even sometimes reject him.⁵⁷ Sickness is a social identity: it is the poor health of an individual defined by others with reference to the social activity of that individual. It is an event located in society and is epistemically assessed by measuring levels of performance with reference to expected social activities. The above distinction between disease, illness and sickness has become very common in medical sociology, medical anthropology and philosophy of medicine and was first applied by Andrew Twaddle in

⁵³ Bjorn Hofmann, 'On the triad disease, illness and sickness', *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy: a forum for bioethics and philosophy of medicine*, 27/ 6:1 (2002), 651-673.

⁵⁴ Kenneth M Boyd, 'Disease, illness, sickness, health, healing and wholeness: exploring some elusive concepts', *Medical Humanities*, 26 (2000), 9-17.

⁵⁵ Hofmann, 'On the triad disease, illness and sickness', 652.

⁵⁶ Boyd, 'Disease, illness, sickness, health, healing and wholeness', 10.

⁵⁷ Boyd, 'Disease, illness, sickness, health, healing and wholeness', 10.