



## The Meaning of “Voyage” and “Sea” in Kavadias’ Poetry

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of this project is to offprint the value of the meaning of “voyage” and “sea”, in Kavadias’ work. This poet featured the charm of the sea and the need for a “voyage” and transformed it into a work of art which had a meaningful impact and effect on his work. His poems became widely spread and known, thanks to Greek composers, who created melodies of his poems, and thereafter the melodies became widely spread as well. Today, his poems still play a significant part in poetry and singing. Apart from being a poet, he was a sailor, and the poems are based on the life of a sailor during his period. Stories of his, real or a matter of fantasies, inspired by other sailors and poets (Lorca) in which two of his bigger loves dominate, the sea and travelling. As a sailor, he visited many ports and discovered many cultures. This project, apart from the analysis of his work regarding the “sea” and “voyage” as the poet had lived them, follows a travelogue as Kavadias saw it, which tells about all the places he had travelled to, described, and lived while travelling. Methodology: Analysis of texts of the work of the poet with keywords “sea” and “voyage”.

*Keywords:* Kavadias, poetry, voyage, sea, Mediterranean Sea.

### 1. Introduction

Nikos Kavadias had numerous voyages, and in this way, he had the opportunity to see the hidden beauty in every part of the world, and as a person who made the sea his own home, hymned the sea and voyaging without hiding and eluding the hardships of being a sailor. The work of the poet is detached into 3 poetic accumulations (even though he wrote more poems), the *Marabou* of 1933, the *Fog* of 1947, and the *Traverso* of 1975 which was published after his death.



Picture 1. The voyage in the Mediterranean inspired by the work of Kavadias

## 2. Voyage / Peiraeus / Spain

The journey of his life starts at the place he lived most of his years before he started his career as a sailor, in Peiraeus. The first poems were written and are mentioned in most of Peiraeus and Athens. “Captain Fletcher”, “Black and White” and Federico G. Lorca. The “Federico Garcia Lorca” “weds” the story of Spain with the one of Greece, as it’s a political and anti-war poem, in which Kavadias mourns the death of Lorca and shows the similarities of the Spanish civil war with occupied Greece. Distomo and Kaisariani are mentioned in the poem.

*“Kopeles ap’to Distomo, ferte nero kai ksidi  
ki apano sti forada sou demenos staurota  
sire gia keino to sterno stin Cordoba taksidi  
mesa ap’ta dipsasmena tis xorafia ta anoixta”*

## 3. Sea / woman

In “Fata Morgana” the sea is compared to a woman. According to legend, Morgana Le Fei, a witch, and half-sister of King Arthur had a fantastic palace in the middle of the sea. Therefore, a phenomenon was named that occurs on the sea, when the atmospheric air is hot and the air on the surface of the sea is cold, acts as a refractive lens. Therefore, it creates an “illusion” that oftentimes was deadly for the sailors, as it would drive them off course in their attempt to reach the shore. The sea, just like a woman, form an illusion that drives you but also deceives you.

*“To ksero pos I fesi mas einai asximi poli.  
I falasa ti gefira me kimata gemizi,  
ki egw lipame monaxa pou den mporo na pw  
Se kapion, kati pou poli frixta me basanizi”*

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<sup>1</sup> Poetic Collection “Marabou” – “Ένας δόκιμος στη γέφυρα έν ώρα κινδύνου”.

As someone who knew the possible risks that one may confront on a voyage, he required safety, and in this poem, safety is provided by a knife. In the last rows of the poem, the poet invoked death and particularly, suicide. Loneliness and the hardships of his voyage, cloud his thoughts and redirect him to self-destructive thoughts which would have no return.

In the poem, “One Knife” Nikos Kavadias imprinted it on a white paper, while he was on his voyage. The knife depicts both the dangers of the voyage and the safety it provides.

*“Apano moue xo pantote sti zoi mou sfigmeno  
ena mikro afrikanikon maxeri*

*(...)*

*Ki afou kanenan den miso ston kosmo na skotoso  
Fovame mi kamia for a to strepsos ston eauto mou ...<sup>2</sup>*

#### 4. Travel / Loneliness / Death

The realistic presentation of the sailors while on their voyages is presented in the poem “Our Prow”, one life, without ease. Where death, because of loneliness, and the monotony of the voyage, drowned them, just like the waves of the sea can drown everyone. In this particular poem, he empathizes with death, comparing beds to coffins (“ta ksilina krebata mas sta plagia kolita, ... feretra pou ksexastikan kai minan anixta”).<sup>3</sup>

He presents loneliness and silence as elements that give an “end” to human life (“Panta basileue sigi fanateri eki mesa... san to roloi, mes sti sigi, oi xtipi ton kardion.”<sup>4</sup>). The only thing that gave a sense of time on the voyages was a bell as described in the following rows (“Ki ekobe mono ti signi o xtipos tis kampanas... pou pnigotan mes sti voi tou agera h ton neron.”<sup>5</sup>), as the sailors couldn’t comprehend how the days, hours, and minutes were passing. Parallely in the special poem, he expresses his passion for the sea and communication and the unique relationship he has with the sea on his never-ending long voyages.

*“Stin plori auti katastrepsa ton iremo eauto mou  
Kai skotosa tin triferi pediatiki psixi. Omos pote de m’afise to epimono oneiro mou  
Kai panta I falasa pola mou lei, otan axi”.<sup>6</sup>*

Regardless of all the disadvantages and hardships of a sailor’s life, the desire for journeying encourages the poet to continue his voyages, as the sea is the primary source of his inspiration and his dream.

#### 5. The sea as a means to escape day-to-day life.

The poem “Kafar”, begins with the below couplet.

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<sup>2</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Marabou*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Marabou*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, page 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, page 43.

(“Na zis stin idia politia pantotina kai na ‘xeis ton anaxoriseon ti mania”).<sup>7</sup>

The poet, while in a fugue state, where the shore is pushing him away, he constantly creates in his mind, the need for the sea and traveling. Life on the shores is empty and without meaning, and that’s why he’s attracted by the sea.

#### 6. The voyage and romances.

The journey “North Cross”<sup>8</sup> unfolds, but his co-worker warns him, that it won’t happen for long. The row (“s’alous paralilous fa ‘xis mpi”)<sup>9</sup> describes the suicide of his co-worker, because of his inability to endure the pain of missing his romantic partner. The romantic disappointment of the sailor (poet) is depicted on a tattoo (“Kouliko sto stifos sou tatou... pou oso ki an to kais de leei na sbisi”)<sup>10</sup> which was done often by sailors as a reminder of the romantic experiences they had lived. Women depict an important role in Kavadias’ poems, whereas romantic disappointments and unfulfilled loves were unavoidable situations because of the voyages. The poem has a tragic ending because the co-worker takes his own life (“pane xronia tora pou koimasai...”).<sup>11</sup> The poet most likely shares and implies about his romantic memories that trouble his mind and give him heartbreak. The deaths at the ports and the romances, contribute to the most loved topics of the poet. The sea is the main reason that brakes apart the love of a sailor and the love of a woman. These feelings are so overwhelming that oftentimes lead to suicide.

#### 7. The voyage and the sea as the main reasons for loss

In the poem “Kuro Siwo”, the voyage and the sea are the main reasons for loss and abandonment. Decisive is the mention of the voyage to the South, which includes a destination full of dangers and traps (“Proto taksidi etixe naulos gia to noto... malaria”).<sup>12</sup> A destination that disorients the sailors, where the power of the sea plays a tragic “game” with their lives and creates the illusion that they can win. The poet combines the voyage to the south with the psychical and physical hardship. The poem’s title is named after a strong nautical current, which goes against human power and the capabilities of technology. The Kavadian voyage highlights the fight of a human’s power against the sea’s power, where the winner is usually the sea.

#### 8. The sea, interacts with the shoreline, and affects the psychism.

The shore is depicted as an unfulfilled love “ma oute foustani sti steria ki oute ena mantili”<sup>13</sup>, the happiness, entertainment, relief, and rest are all but memories. Every “voyage” is a challenge for his own mind. The love that the captain needs to feel, and the unavoidable departure, break his heart (Petrides, short memo in the poem “Pikria” of Nikos Kavadias, 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Marabou*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> The poem has a storytelling construct. The poet tells us the life of a co-worker, in the period where he embarks with a truck. Maybe, this personality is the poet himself.

<sup>9</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Fog*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, page 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, page 32.

<sup>12</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Fog*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, page 16.

The poem “Cambay’s water” portrays a quick romantic moment which is being depicted at a port, in the bay of Cambay. The voyage hid promises of love which were very hard to keep up (“ki as lipsis xilia xronia fa se perimeno”).<sup>14</sup> The poet refers to the phenomena of nature, which are compared to the emotional states of the sailors. In this specific poem it is noted with the row (“pou ‘nai folo kai katakokino san aima”),<sup>15</sup> the phenomenon of the climax of the moon to show that a boat continues its journey, and the shadow it leaves behind troubles the sailor.

It is important to note that all three poems that we analyzed, have been made into melodies, by Thanos Mikroutsikos and were brought to fame. Because of these melodies, the presence of Nikos Kavadias is eternal (Kavadias, *Fog*, 1995)

#### 9. Sea / Voyage / Schism

The love for the sea and the voyage oftentimes creates a schism that the sailors feel between their lives on the sea, and at the shore.

“Ksexasa keino to mikro koritsi apo to Amoi... gia to kormi sou, pou edioxne, to fovo tou fanatou.”<sup>16</sup>

The sea and the voyage, both hide and alienate the poet’s experiences and memories from the time he was at shore and also his personal and unfulfilled loves, with the love for escapism to the sea through voyaging. His memories at the shore are also the poet’s “revival”. The next row

“O,ti agapousa arnifika gia to pikro sou axili:”<sup>17</sup>

proves that the voyage was the poet’s lover and regardless of how much he wants to experience life at shore, he won’t exchange them with the ones on the sea. His dilemma of whether to choose life at the shore or sea (“Katakaimene, I falassa misai tin prodosia”),<sup>18</sup> makes him feel betrayed both to himself and to the sea, which is his «home». The poem had prophetic feedback, as the sailor imagines his forthcoming death inside the ship where he lived most of his life. Life is cut short in the vast and never-ending sea (“Gero, sou prepei monaxa to sidero sta podia, dio metra karavopano, kai aristera timoni”).<sup>19</sup>

As death takes his life into its hands and chooses its demise, there is no schism left, only redemption. The sea works as a shelter when there are hardships, as the poet often chose to pick it and prioritize it, for both his poetry and his real life.

The poem “Pikria”, is one of the last poems Nikos Kavadias wrote before his death. He returns to the narrative poetry of “Me”, to give his poetry more sentimentality.

This poem was also made as a melody by Thanos Mikroutsikos and was brought to fame.

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<sup>14</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Fog*, publisher Agra, 1995, page 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, page 15.

<sup>16</sup> Nikos Kavadias, *Traverso*, publisher Agra, 1992, page 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, page 36.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, page 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, page 37.

## 10. Conclusion

Nikos Kavadias is one of the biggest personalities that has influenced Greek culture and poetry. Regarded as a poet of the sailors, a lover of the sea, of voyaging and traveling, of escapism and romance. He chose to live his life at sea, to which he references in all his poetry.

He reinforced the charm of “voyaging” without hiding the hardships and the dangers, which sailors confronted while they were on ships, the battle facing illness and the unforeseen circumstances of the sea, the life of sailors which is full of loss and loneliness, unfulfilled loves and memories, as well as the schism that sailors lived between their life at the shore and sea. He imprinted on paper everything that the sailors couldn’t tell us. Regardless of that, the sea was the prime motive for voyaging and creation.

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