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Coming home, coming out: Achmat Dangor's journeys through myth And Constantin Cavafy

By Roger Field

Abstract

Despite his international status, the impact of Constantin Cavafy's poetry on South African letters has gone largely unnoticed. This article draws attention to the range of Cavafy's influences on local poets, writers, critics and cultural activists, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, but directs most of its attention to two early short stories by Achmat Dangor, 'The Homecoming' and 'Waiting for Leila', and his most recent novel *Bitter Fruit*. In all of these works Dangor refers directly and indirectly to Cavafy's poetry, his sexuality, his evocations of place and his use of Greek mythology, particularly in one of his most famous poems 'Ithaka'. The article also addresses Dangor's ambivalence towards Cavafy, particularly the disjuncture between Cavafy's ironic, apolitical modernism, modernism's appeal to Dangor, his desire to produce accessible protest literature and his need to justify recourse to the classics in Africa.

Keywords: Cavafy, Dangor, poetry, short stories, homosexuality, mythology, Cape Town, Alexandria, influence, modernism

The impact of the Greek poet Constantin Cavafy (1863-1933) on South African literature has received relatively little attention to date. Among Coetzee scholars, it is common knowledge that he drew the title and aspects of the plot of *Waiting for the Barbarians* from one of Cavafy's two best-known poems (Attridge 68-69; Attwell 8-9; Boletsi; Dovey 208, 421-422). Less well known is the fact that around the same time in *Waiting for Leila* Achmat Dangor drew on 'Ithaka', the other of Cavafy's two best-known poems, and incorporated the image of Cavafy himself, and that before both of them, William Plomer, Robert Greig, Mike Nicol and others had reflected on Cavafy in poetry and prose.¹ Twenty years after *Waiting for Leila*, towards the end of *Bitter Fruit*, Dangor returned to Cavafy, but not before an earlier part of that novel had asked and answered a question implicit during the intervening years: what have Cavafy and Greek mythology to do with the literature of Africa? Firstly, though few Cavafy poems have a mythological background, the question remains relevant because in *Waiting for Leila* Dangor drew on his poem with the most familiar mythological pretext. Secondly, Cavafy is widely identified as a gay man and gay poet, and Dangor incorporates these images of Cavafy into *Waiting for Leila* and *Bitter Fruit*. Thirdly, and more broadly, if the assumption that countries north of the Sahara are not 'African' is worth challenging, then there is no reason to exclude Cavafy from the corpus of 'African' literature or to overlook his impact on South African literature.

There are, as Kapsalis suggests, many Cavafian 'autobiographical inventions' (67). Since Cavafy's sexuality and use of Greek mythology are important aspects of Dangor's appropriation, it is useful to explore them in more detail. Cavafy spent most of his life in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where a sizeable and largely self-sufficient Greek community had established itself, though it comprised a very small proportion of Egypt's total population. He was born into a prosperous family of merchants that lost most of its wealth during his childhood. Socially he was on the edges of a society in which his family had previously enjoyed a comfortable position. Many of Cavafy's speakers are politically, economically or culturally liminal, and he lived on the margins in several other ways. He belonged to an ethnic and cultural minority within a British colony and later a newly independent state. Despite Alexandria's reputation for sexual tolerance, for most of his life he could not live openly as a gay man. At that time, irrespective of their age, unmarried children remained at home, and during those years he relied on the bought complicity of domestic servants to camouflage nocturnal visits to a brothel in which he rented a room. His sexual partners tended to be destitute Greek adolescents and young men brought over from mainland Greece to work in Greek-owned shops and businesses (Liddell 68). In an (auto)biographical reading of his sexuality in poems such as 'I Went' and 'He Swears' he wrestles with social convention and sexual repression; 'Desires' or 'As Much As You Can' become expressions of hidden desire; 'In the Street' and 'Transit' articulate the pleasures of a newly discovered but secret sexuality; 'Days of 1903' and 'Body, Remember' reflect on past sexual experiences. By contrast, there are relatively few poems with a mythological setting, and most of these are early works. Titles such as 'Trojans', 'Treachery', 'The Horses of Achilles' and 'Ithaka' suggest that familiarity with Greek mythology, particularly the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, will assist with their interpretation, but this does not mean that Cavafy's approach to myth was consistent. Sometimes, says Roderick Beaton, in poems such as 'Ithaka' he converts historical or mythical material into 'moral allegory' (24), but in others such as 'Treachery' he "demythologizes" myth' by demonstrating that it is impossible to find in it morality or moral guidance (30). Understanding the Dangor texts considered here requires familiarity with Cavafy and his poetry and knowledge of mythology, but we should not expect its consistent application. Cavafy is a poet of an other, hidden or overlooked Africa, and if his subject matter does not make his poetry any less African there can be no objection to the use, celebration and interrogation of sexuality and Greek mythology in South African literature. On this basis I will argue that Dangor has undertaken a journey through Cavafy, sexuality and myth because he could not reach one without the others.

In *Bitter Fruit*, use of classical mythology ranges from home to lecture-hall. In the home of the central family of Silas, Mikey and Lydia Ali, Dangor's narrator plots and satirizes their dysfunctional relationships:

There is a sudden silence in the bathroom. Is his father listening? Odysseus eavesdropping, suspicious of Telemachus's loud musing about Penelope? Intellectual shit. Father is downstairs staring soulfully into his bowl of cereal.. .(29)

Here the family is a site of oedipal transgression and the odyssean ideal of filial and conjugal commitment. At university Mikey's English lecturer, Miss Anderson, fails to stimulate debate with the proposition: "'Homer's *Odyssey* is the basis of the modern novel'". Her efforts are '[w]asted on these spoiled post-apartheid hedonists', who mock her

'fervour' for the classics. Homer's frequent repetition of 'rosy-fingered dawn', they say, is "cliched", and if she defends his "Eurocentric" imagery by claiming that he is European, they reply that "the Greeks are darkies like us" (27-28). Less interested in consistent argument than in undermining her, by default their point about Greek ethnicity leapfrogs over the negative moment of Sartre's dialectic in the introduction to *Black Orpheus*. There he anticipates

the dawn with fingers of rose, this dawn of Greek and Mediterranean culture, torn by a black thief from the sacred Homeric poems, and whose delicate princess fingernails are suddenly subjected in slavery by a Toussaint Louverture to press and burst the triumphant parasites of the Negro sea; the dawn which suddenly rebels and transforms itself, pours the fire as the savage weapon of the whites, a bolt of flame, weapon of scholars, weapon of the executioners, and blasts with her white fire the great black Titan who lifts himself intact, eternal, to rise to the assault of Europe and the Heavens. (Sartre 38)

Through negritude and the principles of the French Revolution, Sartre affirms the colonised's right to appropriate and interrogate the colonizer's cultural and political foundations. Sartre, says Mudimbe in *The Idea of Africa*, demonstrates that 'the desire of the Negro for difference, though established as a denial of the thesis of white supremacy', will 'self-destruct in the name of dialectics' (44-45). This is the substance of Dangor's argument in *Bitter Fruit*. The narrator asserts that Homer must have been European, for '[n]o African could ever describe daybreak with delicate, Homeric beauty ... pink-fingered, a glowing nymph dispersing night's shadows before her. Not even Leopold Senghor at his most sentimental' (117). This appears to render the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* out of place in Africa. However, there are several reasons why Dangor's fiction suggests that the classics are at home in African and South African literature. Homer was both 'darkie' and 'European', and this speaks to the interstitial or marginal quality of many characters in Dangor's fiction. The colonised's use of the classics makes them common narrative and thematic property, and they are key plot drivers in his work as a whole. The oedipal myth's significance for Dangor is evident in 'The Devil', a short story about an attempt to kill Mandela, and in *Bitter Fruit* an armed Mikey accidentally encounters Mandela, the father of the nation, before he kills his biological father.

A brief exploration of Cavafy's South African reception by critics and poets before *Bitter Fruit* may also indicate why Cavafy is significant for Dangor. In the early 1930s, William Plomer praised Cavafy's gentle, laconic irony, but noted that his work was not widely available in English. It would be 40 years before Plomer's poem 'A Casual Encounter' publicly acknowledged their shared homosexuality by recalling an anonymous but intense sexual experience that would have been at home in Cavafy's corpus (Coleman 5)². Also during the 1970s, South African literary journals published a variety of articles, translations and meditations on his poetry. In 1971, *New Coin* published a translation by Costas Zaverdinos of 'Darius'. The Cappadocian poet Phernazes reacts to the news that Cappadocia is at war with the Roman Empire. Phernazes, who is composing an epic on the military achievements of Darius of Hypastes, had intended 'To point out the facts, to completely shut-up/His critics and the invidious opposition'; he wanted to use his epic against other poets vying for royal favour. Initially the news distracts him, but 'for all his

plight and agitation/The poetic idea still persists'. Robert Greig's article appeared in *Critique* two years later, and is the first South African analysis of Cavafy's international standing, style and use of language, subject matter, sexuality and irony. On the language issue Greig points out that Cavafy combined 'demotic' and 'pure' Greek, a particularly contentious practice at that time (23). Greig includes five poems: 'Waiting for the Barbarians', 'In the Harbour Town' and 'Caesarion' all speak to moments of political and personal irony, deception and anti-climax, while 'In the Street' and 'In the Wine Taverns', reflect on the memory of same-sex desire and pleasure. Four of these reappeared in *Izwi* that year. Whatever his subject matter, Greig argues, Cavafy displays 'a willingness to write about things as they are, a tolerant acceptance refined by an acute, unostentatious intelligence' (27).

There is a Cavafy of personal politics. The act of reading Cavafy's poetry, Greig believes, requires acceptance of 'certain moral-metaphysical-aesthetic codes'. This acceptance, he stresses, 'is demanded, very subtly', forcing the reader 'to submit to a critique of his [sic] normal standpoints, presumptions and responses' (25). If he is correct, then part of what makes Cavafy's work both attractive and difficult is the reader's belated recognition that she has questioned her own assumptions about what is good, true and beautiful. A Cavafy of big ideas and politics has also emerged. Mike Nicol attributes his exposure to and interest in Cavafy to Greig's article. His own poem, 'After Cavafy', refers to 'Waiting for the Barbarians' and appeared in *Quarry* 77: 'Certainly by 1976 the revolutions were under way in Mozambique and Angola, the bush war was raging in then Rhodesia and, in the latter part of the year, there were uprisings across South Africa. It is likely that these are the events that influenced the poem.. .Nowadays,' he continues, 'the barbarians are not just inside the gates, but inside us. So Cavafy's poems and his imagery have certainly been a constant lens through which I've viewed (and written about) the world' (Nicol: personal communication). Both his and Cavafy's poems make it clear that the speaker's society expects the barbarians, acknowledges that they have penetrated the speaker's ideological and emotional world, but there is never conclusive evidence that they exist:

It is night again and perhaps they have come.
Tomorrow in the rose-beds there will be
Strange footprints. But the dogs do not bark
And if they have come it will be weeks
Before we know ... (Nicol 'After Cavafy' 16)

The cosmopolitan setting of many of his poems makes it appropriate that interest in Cavafy should have transcended apartheid divisions. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, through its cultural evenings and readings based on themes such as 'poetry and control', 'class and struggle' and 'exile', Cape Town's South Peninsula Fellowship, an educational, cultural and political project of the Trotskyite Unity Movement, exposed its largely coloured secondary school members to a wide range of 'world' poetry and music that included Cavafy, Yannis Ritsos and Mikis Theodorakis (Viljoen, Chisholm 18). The Fellowship inserted Cavafy's 'Ithaka' into an approach to education, literature and politics that was simultaneously liberationist and elitist (Chisholm 1-2, 21), with sometimes ironic consequences. Local poets like Adam Small who used code-switching were excluded because they were 'seen to entrench ethnic identity rather than challenge it' (Viljoen),

whereas Cavafy's combinations of 'pure' and 'demotic' Greek in individual poems, a feature frequently lost in translation, entered the Fellowship's canon. Assuming that Dangor had access to some of these sources and/or contact with some of these poets, a range of reasons for Cavafy's influence present themselves. This does not mean that he was comfortable with all of them.

Dangor appears to have started *Waiting for Leila* in the mid-sixties while living in District Six, Cape Town (Barnett). In its initial, long form, it won the 1979 Mofolo-Plomer prize for fiction. Since only works unpublished as a complete entity were eligible, he edited it down into 'something publishable' (Christiansen, Martin). Dangor's and Cavafy's views on political activism differ substantially, but in this instance they wrote under similar conditions. While Dangor lived on Hanover Street (Christiansen), District Six's most frequently photographed and illustrated thoroughfare and a metonym for its diversity, Cavafy's flat in Alexandria's *Rue Lepsius* stood above a brothel and close to hospital and church (Haag 60). Both, therefore, could watch the passing show during the twilights of their respective locales. In addition to 'Ithaka' and its mythological pre-and post-texts, Dangor draws in images of Cavafy and Alexandria, the persona and city whose mythology Lawrence Durrell, E.M. Forster and Cavafy himself have played such a large part in constructing (Durrell, Haag, Keeley). Despite this, Dangor says very little about Cavafy in interviews after *Waiting for Leila*. There are several possible reasons for his reticence. Interviewers may have taken their cue from early reviews, and these did not mention Cavafy. That he and Coetzee used Cavafy at the same time could have cast doubt on his originality. Cavafy was gay: though Dangor's later work such as *Bitter Fruit* condemns homophobia and presents coming out sympathetically, in the 1970s he may have felt ambivalent about discussing fictional representations of homosexuality. There is some evidence for this in Dangor's claim that he wrote *Waiting for Leila* against the backdrop of his disenchantment with Black Consciousness (BC) and a gradual realignment with the broad-front politics of the ANC. At a time when the majority of BC- and ANC-oriented organizations condemned homosexuality as decadent, deviant and 'white', any point on that transition would have encountered prejudice. Perhaps Dangor did not wish to encourage questions about what was attractive in a poet who represented so much of what a politically committed South African writer should avoid.

Dangor also transformed Cavafy's sensual masculinity into the socio-political. He says that his personal political journey was simultaneously 'a general South African odyssey' (Oliphant 32). George Bizos would make a similar claim in his autobiography, *Odyssey to Freedom*. In this reading, the *Odyssey* is a long and difficult national journey towards the ultimate goal of a true (political) home. However, if we examine 'Ithaka' more closely, less settling messages about political journeys, homes and the national liberation project emerge (Knecht). The speaker of 'Ithaka' reminds Odysseus that his return to the island is predetermined but will be difficult, and points out that the factors inhibiting his journey are as much internal and subjective as they are external and objective:

Setting out on the voyage to Ithaka You must pray
that the way be long, Full of adventures and
experiences. The Laistrygonians, and the

Kyklopes, Angry Poseidon - don't be afraid of them; You will never find such things in your way, If only your thoughts be high, and a select Emotion touch your spirit and your body. The Laistrygonians, and the Kyklopes, Poseidon raging - you will never meet them, Unless you carry them in your soul, If your soul does not raise them up before you. (Trans. Mavrogordato 47- 48)
The speaker encourages Odysseus to delay arrival because the challenges and pleasures *en route* are more important and rewarding than the 'poor' political kingdom he will eventually reach.

You must pray that the way be long; Many be the summer mornings When with what pleasure, with what delight You enter harbours never seen before; At Phoenician trading stations you must stop,

You must go to many cities of Egypt,
To learn and still to learn from those who know.

Ithaka has given you your lovely journey. Without Ithaka you would not have set out. Ithaka has no more to give you now.

Poor though you find it, Ithaka has not cheated you. Wise as you have become, with all your experience,
You will have understood the meaning of an Ithaka. (Trans. Mavrogordato 48)

Transferred to post-liberation South Africa, 'Ithaka' suggests that a lifetime spent gathering knowledge through experience and introspection, the acquisition of hero status through self-refinement (Rankine 59) and reflections on the liberation struggle will be more significant than taking and retaining the political kingdom. This prospect of a future imperfect continuous supports Loren Kruger's *avant la lettre* assertions that the short story 'Waiting for Leila', with its interrogations of linear time and teleological narrative, displays the qualities of a 'post-anti-apartheid text' (121).

Nine years after *Waiting for Leila's* publication, Dangor told Andries Oliphant that he had been struck by the *Odyssey's* multiple levels of narrative and combinations of 'narrative poetry and mythology', and that through it and Camus he had encountered 'the outsider figure in Western literature'. To counterbalance Meursault's alienation, Dangor had to find 'a social and communal basis' and remove 'many foreign elements' incompatible with what he 'should be writing as a South African' (32), hence his reference in 'Waiting for Leila' to two opposing approaches to literature: 'Inventory of my riches. Miscellany of books. (James Matthews lying on top of T S Eliot: an obscene embrace)' (16). It is my argument here that behind Dangor's recognition of the conflict between them stands Eliot's 'mythical method', which offers a way - albeit problematic - of integrating mythology and the experience of modernity. In a 1923 review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot offered this explanation of his 'method':

In using the myth [of the *Odyssey*], in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (*Ulysses*, Order and Myth)

The immediate problem with the notion of a 'continuous parallel' is its ambiguity: it could be a consistent analogy with a single, unfolding myth, or an unbroken series of analogies with several myths. Given the significance of madness, mythology and popular expression in these two short stories, it is worth considering two approaches: whether, following Frederic Jameson, in its self-conscious departures from the generally recognized features of another well-known story such as the *Odyssey* or Cavafy's 'Ithaka' we have modernist 'parody', or whether reproduction of proliferating, fragmented discourses in 'The Homecoming' and 'Waiting for Leila' makes them postmodern 'pastiche' (Jameson 16-17). Even if they did not use these terms, early responses were aware of these options. Censors and literary critics perceived an uneasy relationship between signifiers of order and those that suggested its opposite, and realized that if 'Waiting for Leila' was not in itself a statement about destruction and resistance, then an organizing principle was difficult to detect. For the Directorate of Publications 'Waiting for Leila' consisted of 'disconnected and seemingly unrelated images, recollections, dreams and realities strung together to present a picture of the "dismantling" of District Six' (5). Recognizing elements that had worked elsewhere as a metanarrative but that did not cohere into an organizing principle, Peter Wilhelm saw 'Waiting for Leila' as 'a dense and symbolic narrative' with 'an eerie and unsatisfactory blurring of motivation' (87). This partly explains why several critics have been puzzled and frustrated by 'The Homecoming' and 'Waiting for Leila'. Allusions to the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the Minotaur and Cereberus are clear enough, but 'Waiting for Leila' lacks the narrative or thematic consistency they feel should accompany the presence of so many mythological allusions. As if reflecting on some of these difficulties, in *Bitter Fruit* Moulana Ismail Berhadien tells Mikey that '[n]othing confuses a story as much as characters with shifting identities' (178).

Other problems with Eliot concern ideas about history, gender and class. The '[Western] mythical method' subjects the experience of modernity to a 'cyclical, synchronic pattern' (Beaton 27) that denies the possibility of the goal-directed history on which narratives of national liberation, whether BC- or ANC-oriented, rely. This was not Cavafy's situation or approach. His poetic personae and characters may regret change, but they do not resist it and do not always take refuge in myth. The masculinity expressed in Cavafy's work differs substantially from Eliot's or Pound's masculine poetry or the tendency of Negritude and Black Consciousness to essentialize gender. Cavafy's Odysseus is distinctly 'postwar, postheroic' (Rankine 44). Faced with a contradiction between the rich possibilities of myth and the political problems associated with one of its most influential proponents, Dangor adopts a strategy which Patrice Rankine finds in his study of the mythological dimensions of Ralph Ellison's work: he does not invoke classical mythology to reject it (84), nor in using those myths that modernism has deployed does he elevate myth above the culture or

popular history (123) with which his narrators and characters identify. Instead, he gives equal weight to modernism, 'folk forms and tradition' and their interaction (32) in a local political context.

In 'The Homecoming', Nicholas Dassault left South Africa on a scholarship, but without any academic ambition or commitment. During eight or nine years of 'carefree' (73) wandering in western and eastern Europe and the Levant, he has worked countless oddjobs and learnt 'five European languages, but [has] not one degree' (69). Eventually he is deported from Turkey and flown home (73-74). Parodying the *Odyssey*, Dassault's attempt to reach the country from which Odysseus's homeward journey began precipitates the return he has avoided for so long. "'Took a train from Troy to Ithaca, died in his sleep on a wooden bench.'" Something he wrote or read, long ago' (70), he hums on the journey from Johannesburg to Newclare station. What he really wants is never to return, to live in a state of nomadic oblivion. Drawing on Cavafy's suspicion of heroics, preference for anticlimax, his explorations of personal and political compromise and lack of originality, Dassault settles for no 'hero's welcome' (69). In 'Waiting for Leila' Samad, the figure who is and is not Odysseus, repeats these lines (41).

Cavafy's reputation rests partly on the ways in which many of his speakers blur boundaries between historical, biographical, autobiographical, erotic and fictional discourses, in effect his 'incessant proliferation of elliptical selves' (Kapsalis 67-69). In the fiction examined here, Dangor aims to achieve this through free indirect discourse, which combines direct and indirect discourse. By assuming that 'narrators can also function as experiencers', it accounts for 'the possible ambiguity between narrator's and character's points of view' (Bray 39); it alerts us to the potentially 'problematic relationship between any utterance and its origin' (Rimmon-Kenan 113). It may also accommodate 'a character's preverbal perception or feeling' (111). By telling us exactly what Dassault hummed as the train proceeds from Johannesburg to Newclare station, and by placing it in quotation marks, the narrator asserts control of the character's thoughts, speech and actions (Lynch 175-176), but when Dassault alights from the train, we encounter the statement: 'And here was his Ithaca' (Dangor Homecoming 70). As a thought that could be narrator's, character's or both, and that responds directly and ironically to the last three lines of Cavafy's poem quoted above, its homelessness and evasion of responsibility performs Dassault's desires and emotions.

The roots of Dassault's desire for homelessness and a state of mobile non-being lie in childhood experiences, particularly the convergence of several themes found in this and later Dangor works. These themes include the destruction of multiracial communities; a young boy who is powerless to intervene; the death of a childhood friend or relative; the rituals associated with extended family gatherings; betrayal and revenge. In 'The Homecoming', these make up the bulk of the story and explain why Dassault cannot settle down, why 'freedom took 3rd class journeys to nowhere', why 'quietude, and the ability to be your own master, were found in a void, without decisions, without the application of will' (80), and why travel offers an escape from memory rather than its accumulation. These experiences also explain why *per contra* Eliot despite several similarities between Dassault and Odysseus - both were 'driven to wander far and wide', 'saw the cities of many people

and learnt their ways', 'suffered great anguish' and failed to save comrades because the latter's transgressions 'brought them to their doom' (Homer 3) - myth can offer neither moral guidance nor 'shape and a significance' (Eliot) and why, at the end of the story, Dassault defers homecoming and buys a one-way ticket to Cape Town.

District Six is one of the main settings of 'Waiting for Leila'. Like Alexandria, as Haag's study suggests, it is a 'city of memory', and of 'a thousand nations' (Dangor, 'Leila' 2). It is also largely abandoned and partly destroyed by 'grand apartheid' policy. 'Waiting for Leila' tells the story of Samad, whose obsession with Leila keeps him in District Six though the rest of his family has moved to Johannesburg. Born with a caul that sets him apart as different, doomed and 'gefoetered' (troubled, marked) for life (23), freed from the strictures of reason, stigmatized, and close to 'the divine or supernatural' (Valentine 201), he wanders around the District, buying illegal liquor and angering the few remaining residents with his ravings. The story and Samad's identity shift between three periods and two regions: the Cape of the late 1960s to late 1970s (when he is Samad) and during Dutch colonial rule (when he is Ali), and a world of classical mythology within which there are rapid movements between texts and narratives.

Samad coerces Suleiman the Dhukkum³ into summoning the ghost of his ancestor Benjamin the Malaccan, whom the Dutch colonial authorities tortured and killed for his acts of resistance (Dangor, 'Leila' 17). Since Samad has a 'fertile imagination' and can 'conjure up ghouls and djinns', but not the 'real, living beasts' (5) with whom the Dhukkum communicates, in this context it is appropriate to regard Samad's mental state as a narrative device, rather than a pathology (Valentine 201). Samad becomes the voice and agent of Benjamin's son Ali, and in this guise swears vengeance against the 'Meester' who has tortured Benjamin, 'given' his mother Amina to the Dutch East India Company gardener, and raped 'his' Leila before passing her on to his own 'halfbreed bastard sons' (Dangor, 'Leila' 17). Drawing on the stories of Theseus and the Minotaur, and Orpheus and Cereberus, Ali undertakes a dangerous journey past 'bull-faced watchdogs' through the dark to rescue her, but finds her 'quivering' at the prospect of the 'bastard' son's 'enormous sex' (21). As Ali strangles the son and his penis goes limp, she betrays him by calling out to her 'Meester' for protection against her liberator. Ali is captured, punished and imprisoned on several subsequent occasions. Samad/Ali retains his love for Leila, but develops a violent hatred for domination by the phallus and those involved in transactional sex. This sets in place the conditions for his revenge attacks on phallic symbols and past and current sex-workers.

In this longer short story, Dangor continues to draw on and play with Cavafy's 'Ithaka'. He adds its pre-text, the *Odyssey*, its pre-text the *Iliad* and, partly through Cavafy's poetry and the image of Cavafy, re-presents homosexuality with a polarity that ranges from sympathy and identification to outright hostility and disgust. Like Penelope, Samad waits for Leila, the love of his life, but she will marry a wealthier, more respectable and pretentious suitor, 'Gamat die Arapie' (20).⁴ Samad is variously an 'anti-Odysseus' (Kruger 141) and *the* Odysseus. He arrives drunk and uninvited at the mosque to make his claim on her; later he sneaks into the wedding celebrations to take his revenge against 'Gamat' whose eye he pokes with 'an uncut fingernail' (Dangor 'Leila' 20). At that moment, he is Odysseus

blinding the Cyclops Polyphemus, and a 'fugitive from Poseidon's anger. Struck his monstrous son with an unclean finger in the eye' (21), though unlike Homer's Odysseus who consciously 'de-names' and 're-names' himself 'Nobody' (136), Samad/Ali cannot control his own identity. The prostitute Calypso rescues Samad from a beating by the wedding guests. She derives her name from 'the provocative manner in which she swung her hips' (18), but behaves like her namesake in the *Odyssey*. She loves Samad deeply, but he attacks her physically (19) and can think only of Leila. Hence the 'mortal agony' (25) of Calypso's embrace, and Samad's increasing disenchantment, frustration and restlessness. Dangor incorporates the image of Cavafy along with his poetry. The narrator expressly locates Dr Alexis Ulysses Giordes, drug lord and owner of a gay brothel not unlike those Cavafy himself frequented (Haag 41-42; Liddell 67-68), within the corpus of Cavafy's poetry, and assigns to him one of the many autobiographical personae that Kapsalis (87-88) detects in Cavafy's poetry: Giordes has 'the appearance of one of those benignly perverse Alexandrian characters that one meets in the poems of Constantin Cavafy' and he has 'an expression of immeasurable grief. A look of pain so pure, that Samad had the urge to embrace the unfortunate man', but is put off by his squint (Dangor, 'Leila' 28, 35-36). Later, Samad will see Giordes stand before a mirror with tears streaming down his face as he recites a Cavafy poem (Dangor does not tell us which one) in Greek, and he will experience both disgust at this self-pitying emigre from radical Egyptian nationalism and sympathy for his 'incalculable grief' (39).

In the building where Calypso lives but does not work, Giordes and Honey, a former nurse and now Giordes's lover/drug mule, restore Samad's health. Samad is already filled with 'disgust' that Honey is not a woman but a "'blerry moffie'" (26)⁵. After saving him from a Mexican standoff with a 'squat Oriental sailor' (30), Samad discovers that beyond the door he is forbidden to open is a gay brothel - 'a long dark corridor flanked on either side by what appeared to be cordoned-off catacombs rather than rooms' (30). He drives out the occupants from what he regards as an underground refuge for hybrid forms, hidden, dirty desire, and death. Only Giordes's associate Dr Felix duBuKemp, whom Samad silently names 'Judas face' (38), remains. Later, during a return trip to an even further devastated District Six, Samad visits the ruins where 'Aunt Minnie's smokkelhouse'⁶ once stood and recalls the 'catacombs where Suleiman the Dhukkum had harboured so many miscreant spirits' (59), this time evoking the syncretic religions practised in the catacombs below Alexandria (Haag 16). For Samad, little will survive of District Six except traces of bad syncretism and unfulfilled, unacceptable desire.

The continued destruction of District Six enables the brothel's occupants to hide their crimes and to leave quickly and simultaneously. Giordes takes them to *Ithaca*, his 'palatial house above False Bay' (33) with its 'gentle atmosphere of order and civilization' (56) - a gloss at odds with Cavafy's poem. Still Samad harbours dreams of revenge. Later Calypso, DuBuKemp, Honey and Giordes all leave *Ithaca* simultaneously on various missions: Giordes and Honey for Upington to arrange a drug deal; DuBuKemp for Ceres to visit his estranged parents; Calypso to rescue a homeless woman in District Six, here compared to a sacked Troy (47). Despite the insistence of several Cassandras, what the destroyers of District Six and the residents of *Ithaca* do not know is that like Agamemnon in the

Agamemnon, they will 'kak and betaal' (46), and that those who return to the house will become inhabitants of the *Iliad's* Troy.

The story-telling mode in 'Waiting for Leila' fluctuates between omniscient collective and first person narrators, and Free Indirect Discourse. All this makes possible the separation and convergence of politics, memory and desire in the life stories of Honey and DuBuKemp. Honey, whose real name is John, recounts the death of his farm worker father, their eviction and journey from Upington to Cape Town where acceptance of rape and sex work - first his mother's and then his own - becomes a survival strategy (42-45). While Honey's story unfolds primarily in the first person, in DuBuKemp's case the narrator keeps us at a distance by drawing our attention to two contrasts. One contrast operates between the allusions to pastoral bounty associated with the name of the town Ceres, in fact the centre of a profitable deciduous fruit agribusiness in the Cape, and the fruit industry's impoverished seasonal workers: 'if one is white', one remembers the town of Ceres by making 'a determined effort to forget' the poverty of the town's "'coloured'" residents 'and the accusing stares in those bleak and desolate faces'. The other contrasts establish an opposition between the pleasures of rural life and DuBuKemp's relationship with this father: one 'remembers one's childhood there with a different kind of bitterness' (54). We discover its origins when he recalls the brutality with which his father, who had close contacts with the apartheid regime's security apparatus, disowns him for his sexual and emotional choices and his political beliefs. Driving from Ceres back to *Ithaca*, DuBuKemp resists the temptation to kill himself by driving too fast. Sensing the connections between Samad's alter-history as the vengeful Ali and the *Agamemnon*, DuBuKemp decides to harness Samad's condemnation that he too is a "'blerry moffie'" in order to 'bleed to death, slowly, like an ancient Greek hero' (56).

As Honey and Giordes approach *Ithaca*, Giordes remembers his youth in Alexandria, a city 'not of Africa, nor of the East or Europe. A hybrid city that had blended a host of different religions, languages and cultures into something unique' and subtle where 'a hidden wink embraced a hundred forgiving and conciliatory favours, asked and given', where a 'mere gesture encompassed a multitude of corruptions' (56), and so different from Africa with its stark contrasts and racial consciousness. Yet it is the ambiguous body of Honey, trapped in racial consciousness, which seals the lucrative drug deal with 'the East', enabling Giordes to become the Odysseus of Cavafy's 'Ithaka'. He too has stopped at the 'Phoenician trading stations' to buy 'good merchandize ... And sensuous perfumes of every kind' (Trans. Mavrogordato 47). This can only be a momentary and ultimately fatal satisfaction, for *Ithaca*, in which Giordes invests the pleasures of this Odysseus's journey, his own memories of Alexandria, and his identification with Cavafy, becomes a Troy that the Greeks will destroy.

Samad has been left alone in *Ithaca* with its treasured Greek wine and ancient Greek artifacts, including an 'immense phallus, vividly veined, symbol of generation' (Dangor, 'Leila' 47). During this time, his ancestor/alter ego Ali escapes from his Robben Island prison and reaches the shore in a ship which Poseidon, ever in pursuit of Odysseus and those who aid him, has turned to stone (53). Like the fate of the Phaeacians in Book 13 of the *Odyssey*, this represents punishment for offering hospitality to those whom the gods

wish to destroy. In a state of drunken rage and despair induced by an unexpected and literally disilluioning encounter with Leila, he becomes 'Agamemnon at the gates of Troy' (47). But Samad does not kill 'Gamat die Arapie' (Paris), or claim Leila (Helen). Instead he destroys the artifacts and wrecks Giordes's house, because he identifies these symbols of classical and modernist Greek culture with the Dutch colonists who stole 'his' Leila and turned her against him. This is only possible if the narrator glosses over the difference between the 'Aryan' appropriation of Greek mythology that made the latter a symbol of western cultural imperialism and Eliot's 'mythical method' on the one hand, and Cavafy's 'oriental', 'postwar, postheroic', self-refining and introspective Odysseus on the other. When Honey and Giordes return, they find the stem of Giordes's ancient phallic symbol 'nailed to Honey's door ... Giordes' sanctuary defiled. Ancient, leather-bound books strewn about the floor, deathmasks defaced. An ancient sword penetrated a pimply portrait of Giordes's favourite poet Constantin Cavafy' (58). There is chaos: DuBuKemp insults Honey, who attacks him, Samad and Calypso; DuBuKemp saves Samad by killing Honey; Samad repays DuBuKemp by killing him; *Ithaca* goes up in flames, incinerating Calypso, DuBuKemp, Giordes and Honey. Only Samad/Ali survives.

The closing sections fail to provide an aesthetically or politically satisfactory conclusion. The list of items they seek to combine - slave revolts, the arrest on 'unrest-related' charges of schoolchildren, Samad's imprisonment and murder trial, Gamat die Arapie's indifference to the political implications of his job driving a bulldozer in District Six, his disassociation from the children and his realization that his wife Leila always 'belonged to something wilder, untameable' [sic] (66) - is extensive and contains the story's main political point. Perhaps the original unpublished version integrated them more satisfactorily, but in their current form they read as last-minute political add-ons that discredit literature that aspires to 'a social and communal basis' (Oliphant 32), and constitute the type of grand gesture which Cavafy's poetry avoided.

At a time when South Africa's whites-only parliament feared 'the decadent ghosts of the ancient Mediterranean' (Retief 102) would undermine white power and patriarchy, Cavafy's South African reception, particularly in Cape Town, tells a story of multiple refractions and raises intriguing questions about the city's cultural politics and the flows and blockages in the traffic of ideas about art, language, sexuality and politics. The reasons for interest in Cavafy prior to Coetzee and Dangor include the pleasure of expressing one's sexuality and remembering transgressive sexual experiences in a puritanical country, reflections on creativity and the artist's role and allegiances in a time of conflict, thoughts about language politics in a culturally and linguistically diverse society, covert and overt forms of resistance, meditations on the relationship between history and irony, and the ideal image of the poet. Perhaps these very features discouraged Dangor from addressing the Cavafy factor in interviews. Simultaneously, sure of its radicalism and elitism, the South Peninsula Educational Fellowship saw in Cavafy a linguistic and political purity and orthodoxy that his own cosmopolitanism, code-switching and homosexuality denied.

A brief comparison between Coetzee's and Dangor's treatments of Cavafy is useful here. Commenting on the history of 'Waiting for the Barbarians', Beaton describes it as a poem which we are all but compelled to interpret 'as a metaphor for *contemporary* civilization'

(25), whatever that civilization's qualities. For instance, in his introduction to *Doubling the Point* David Atwell's main point about *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that 'fiction has become an arena in which historical discourse and fictionality begin to compete for authority' (9), but he also acknowledges in parentheses that by virtue of its generality this Cavafy poem easily lends itself to the moment, in this case 'the South African government's policy of "total strategy," which was developed in the late 1970s to counter growing insurrection and international isolation' (89). Beaton's point also strengthens Attridge's argument that Coetzee's novels 'offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as ... already canonized' (68). Dangor's references to T. S. Eliot, James Matthews, negritude, Sartre and a wealth of mythological allusions show that he too was canon-conscious. Where Coetzee uses the canon to opt for a comfortable 'universality' that avoids the real, Dangor combines canonicity with a more activist local politics, and does not always manage to balance the 'foreign' and what he 'should be writing as a South African' (Oliphant 32), with erratic results.

Within 'The Homecoming', ironic comment on the *Odyssey*, free indirect discourse references to 'Ithaka', and Dassault's childhood traumas demythologize the myth on which the story relies, and expose the trap in which Eliot's 'mythical method' holds consciousness. In 'The Homecoming' and 'Waiting for Leila', Dangor develops and associates the idea of Cavafy and sometimes-incompatible readings of 'Ithaka' with communities and individuals on South Africa's margins. In the latter story negative gay stereotypes such as the hysterical coloured moffie, the unstable anti-establishment Afrikaner, and the sensual and subtly corrupt Levantine undermine valorization of marginality. 'Waiting for Leila' is not an instance of Jameson's postmodern pastiche or the expression of a postmodern condition. The frequent, unannounced shifts between different myths and their pretexts are the product of Samad/Ali's fragmented and unstable consciousness functioning as a modernist narrative device.

This interpretation of 'Waiting for Leila' exposes two intriguing contradictions. One is that the reading of 'Ithaka' within the text contradicts the reading of 'Ithaka' that facilitates Kruger's 'post anti-apartheid' argument. The other is the main character's hostility towards syncretism while a modernist syncretism of popular expression, mythology and resistance to oppression is the story's founding principle. Dangor's early and most recent published fiction make a signal if uneven contribution to that small body of South African literature that explores classical and twentieth-century Greek history, culture and mythology. In African and South African literature, Cavafy and Greek mythology are at home because Dangor had to travel through each one to reach the other.

NOTES

1. Cavafy-related work published after *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Waiting for Leila* (for example Meihuizen, Potter, Style, Watson) is equally significant, but is beyond the scope of this article.
2. My thanks to Professor Kathleen Coleman for permission to refer to her paper before publication.

3. 'Dhukkum': 'a Malay magician or doctor' (Branford 77). I have relied on the *Dictionary of South African English* for definitions of words in Cape Vernacular Afrikaans; the dictionary uses this short story for its examples of their use.
4. 'Gamat die Arapie': Gamat: a 'comic Malay figure ... If used of a coloured Malay person, then usu. derisive or offensive' (Branford 100); 'Arapie': 'a Muslim with "Arab" aspirations'. (Kruger 120).
5. 'Moffie': 'homosexual, sometimes a male transvestite' (Branford 202).
6. 'Smokkelhouse': shebeen (Branford 298).

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