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Cavafy among the Modernists

Vassiliki Kolocotroni

Let me start by counting the ways in which I disorientated myself in preparing my approach: I thought I would get to grips with Cavafy in the context of my thinking about modernist Hellenism as a distinct phase or aesthetic repertoire. I immediately stumbled. At first glance, certain Cavafian motifs, such as the eroticism of the young boy, may be seen to “epitomiz[e] the spirit of decadence,” placing Cavafy squarely within the literary tradition of the late nineteenth century, as Gregory Jusdanis (1987: 37) has argued, lending itself to a queering that belongs in a pre-twentieth century closet – however weaponised that space might have become since. Then there are other issues: though “Hellenism” by definition points us in the direction of temporality, the construction of a past, a legacy, issues of access to it, and so on, it is clear from even a cursory reading of approaches to the “Cavafy phenomenon,” that Cavafy’s Hellenism is a matter of place as much as of time. The settings of the poetry are a case in point, but we also know from E. M. Forster’s account that Cavafy was keenly aware of the eccentricity of his position:

Half humorously, half seriously, he once compared the Greeks and the English. The two peoples are almost exactly alike, he argued; quick-witted, resourceful, adventurous. “But there is one unfortunate difference between us, one little difference. We Greeks have lost our capital – and the results are what you see. Pray, my dear Forster, oh pray, that you never lose your capital.”

That was in 1918. British insolvency seemed impossible then. In 1951, when all things are possible, his words make one think – words of a very wise,

very civilised man, words of a poet who has caught hold of something that cannot be taken away from him by bankruptcy, or even by death. (Forster 1965 [1951]: 248)

Cavafy's pithy remark assumes extra resonance when read alongside one of T. S. Eliot's pronouncements from 1919, from a review for *The Athenaeum* of a recent history of Scottish literature, which (surprise, surprise) he found a rather presumptuous affair:

When we assume that a literature exists we assume a great deal. We do not suppose merely a "history," for there might be a history of Tamil literature; but a part of History, which for us is the history of Europe. We suppose not merely a corpus of writings in one language, but writings and writers between whom there is a tradition. ... We suppose a mind which is a ... a greater, finer, more positive, more comprehensive mind than the mind of any period. [...] It is not always recognized how fierce and fatal is the struggle for existence between literatures. [...] A powerful literature, with a powerful capital, tends to attract and absorb all the drifting shreds of force about it. [...] [A] provincial capital [...] is the matter of a moment; it depends on the continuous supply of important men; the instant this supply falls off, the metropolis, even if suffering from a like poverty, gains the ascendant. And then the important men turn to the metropolis. (Eliot 1919: 680, 681)

This is Eliot to a T. What I just called resonance is also of course an agonistic relationship. One might wonder, then, why we would want to force Cavafy into a field that has been (and arguably

still is) defined by a Eurocentric, or as Bakhtin would call it, centripetal bias. Couldn't we simply shed that particular dusty coat, and start centrifugally from a Cavafian corner? Or refuse the interpellation altogether? But I thought that would be to leave modernists (including Eliot himself) at the mercy of such Olympian pronouncements and that terrible fallacious shorthand "High Modernism" (capital h, capital m) intact. That's not to demonise Eliot – he was a formidable poet, though too partisan a critic, building a reputation and a power base that was reinforced by the retroactive institutionalisation of "Modernism" (capital M) by a particular post (or cold)-war academic ascendancy. Modernism is a retrospective phenomenon in that respect, but also exactly for that reason, a minefield, a site of cultural and ideological contestation. For that very reason, then, I thought it would be a challenge to set Cavafy loose among the modernists, and I picked exactly those whose association with Cavafy and (undisputed) modernism has served as his visiting card by proxy in certain circles.

Where would that leave Cavafy's other "visiting card," his Alexandrianism and its attendant feature, "lateness"? Do these coordinates circumvent the problem of his modernity? Should we still validate those mappings, accept that cultural geography as our main critical orientation? The "New Modernist" project of expanding the field under the rubric of "planetary" (see Friedman 2015) or "global modernisms" (see Ross and Lindgren 2015; Wollaeger and Eatough 2012; Wright 2002) provides a critical context for this approach, whereby Cavafy emblematises the outlying, literally eccentric, lone modernist out of synch, "standing motionless at a slight angle to the universe," as Forster's famous snapshot has it (1923: 91), timeless ironist *extraordinaire* (see Beaton 1981; Vayenas 1979). What is at stake in that logic of eccentricity? What is at stake in the myth-making around a poetics that resists concrete designations? I can't think of another poet or writer whose census entry, as it were, is as mangled, under erasure.

“Alexandrian” is a convenient compromise in that respect, but it’s hard to think of analogues – one wouldn’t ever expect to see Woolf described as a “London novelist” or Mallarmé as a “Paris poet,” for instance. Cavafy’s Hellenism (as cultural, political, geographic, psychological and linguistic designation, as well as aesthetic mode) compounds the issue, as it is usually approached as a marker of a deep authenticity, a rootedness and embodiment, a near-nativism or autochthony in fact, which by rights should force us to inflect his modernism very differently, than let’s say Pater’s or Swinburne’s or Eliot’s or Woolf’s or Forster’s or Pound’s or H.D.’s modernism might be inflected by *their* Hellenism.

“Hellenism” itself is an impossibly broad-brush term of course, that cannot accommodate the many uses, registers, discourses, institutional frames, implied audiences, codes, truth claims, genres that only uneasily or reductively may be seen to comprise “it” – and incidentally this is where I disagree with Martin McKinsey’s premise, namely that Yeats, Cavafy and Walcott, as he puts it, “took a *fixed currency* – Hellenism – and assigned it a local value.” (McKinsey 2010: 174; emphasis added) The critical shorthand of Victorian Hellenism usually stands for the various versions of classical scholarship practiced in the ancient universities (Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were given a new impetus by the dashing archaeological discoveries of the time and were cross-fertilised by other developing knowledges such as anthropology, psychoanalysis. That set of discourses, with or without a queer coding (which we now, in our moment, strategically treat as an integral, salutary feature) is qualitatively different from the general cultural Hellenomania of the period, with its theatrical, kitsch, popular repertoire; indeed to collapse these distinct registers and practices into the undifferentiated referent of Hellenism is to elide the political and ideological stakes (and deep social divisions) that are never suspended or defused by such hegemonic

practices (however well-meaning). Then the Edwardian Hellenism of Eliot's, Ford's, Forster's, Lawrence's, Woolf's dalliances in the early-to-mid 1910s is a further, distinctive moment beset by ancient hauntings and their *frisson*. There is both pathos and bathos in the Edwardian variety, and at the thematic level at least, a fixation still with gothic forms and semi (or wholly) occult animisms – and I'm leaving aside for a moment the additional fun fact that in most cases (with the notable exception of Joyce), Edwardian Hellenism, perhaps even more so than its Romantic and Victorian sources, was actually Italianate. For Forster, David Roessel (2002: 320) notes, "Greece was not amenable to the saving "eternal moments," which occur in Italy"; or, quite simply, in H. D.'s words, "We had Greece, having Italy." (Cited in Roessel 2002: 160) In fact, the flavour and stylistic signature of decadent, Victorian and Edwardian Hellenisms is so strong that any modernist iteration might be stunted or absorbed by it. That's at least one way of interpreting Ezra Pound's retrospective comment in 1942 (1973: 294): "It was my intention that there should have been two classes of Imagists: Hellenists and modernists."

The Greekness of Cavafy's "Hellenism" throws up other methodological difficulties: as many scholars have argued (see, among others, Calotychos 2003; Gourgouris 1996; Leontis 1995), Hellenism's relationship to "Greece" (that is, modern Greece, its geographies, peoples, languages) is deeply ideological to say the least, and at various historical flashpoints highly politically charged, semi- or fully colonial (see Gallant 2002; Kolocotroni and Mitsi 2008). While this context for Cavafy's work has been mined and illuminated amply (from the earliest accounts, and in openly politicised ways – such as by the then communist Nicolas Calas (as "M. Spieros") in the early 30s, to Stratis Tsirkas and George Seferis, on opposing sides of the war for Greece and "Greekness," in the late 40s and beyond), the term "Hellenism" in the English language still claims an a- or supra-political licence, with politics as an optional extra, as it were,

bonus material for the true aficionado, who may be interested in homing in on the local contexts and historical specificities of so-called reception. Though the applicability of Hellenism for uncovering and understanding processes of gender and colonial politics has substantial critical pedigree, it can also be formulaic, as if its terms could be fixed in time and lent meaning with every hellenizing gesture. Hellenism may have a corpus but is not necessarily a lingua franca, then, or one goes to Hellenism for different reasons. That Cavafy became the case in point for a Hellenism that “talked back” or ventriloquised freely, as a kind of *genius loci*, (see Forster 1923; Keeley 1976; Liddell 1948) is a phenomenon with its own interpretative baggage. Examples of such framings include Cavafy’s Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, long a critical staple and only recently contested and nuanced more fully (see Halim 2013), his self-fashioned belatedness, along with the motif of racially hybridic but continuous, transhistorical Greekness (see Orfanidis 1997). That estranging, disorientating and arguably orientalisating gaze is itself a reflex of Hellenism, as much as, if not more so, than the desiring, vampiric gaze that animates and de-animates at will Cavafy’s Greek and Egyptian beautiful ephebes.

Now that I got that out of my system, I turn to modernism, though not as a formal compass, but as a question asked in and of its century. In my use of the term I’m sympathetic to Alain Badiou’s method in his series of lectures titled *The Century*, in which he tries to “think” the twentieth century, through its political and aesthetic subjectivities, and its “passion for the real.” (2007: 32-37; 48-57) I will try to think Cavafy into the modernist century by tracing some of the lines of flight that his writing and thinking open up. In the time that remains, I will sample instances of his own and others’ recognition and misrecognition of his position vis-à-vis the question of modernity, starting with the idea of the future, the concept of a new style, the courage in recognizing and seizing one’s moment of truth. The modernism I will be in pursuit of here,

then, is neither strictly thematic or formal, but an agonistic attitude and a daring, which does not always have a satisfactory answer or happy outcome. In the process, I will consider briefly Cavafy as a curator and collector of words, and I will take a peek into a couple of modernist closets for good measure.

In an interview for the Alexandrian journal *Screen (Οθόνη)*, published in October 1926, Kostis Palamas, the veteran man of Greek letters, by then an academician, and poetic antagonist, was asked for his opinion of Cavafy: “I don’t think he lacks wisdom ... But as a poet? ... I don’t know, perhaps I’m mistaken... His writings seem more like reportage. It’s as if he is reporting on the centuries!” (Cited by Boukalas 2014: 34; my translation) The dismissive tone aside, Palamas has a point. Cavafy has favourite centuries, but also a singular readiness to report from, intervene in, ventriloquize and haunt many pasts, historical, mythic, legendary, personal. Intro- and retro-spection are signature orientations in his writing and more often than not coterminous. His persona, self-fashioned to a large extent, is poised in a seemingly permanent backward look, at times ruminating on historical wrong turns, at times actively photobombing a crucial scene. Cavafy had contempt for photography as an analogue for attempts to recreate past worlds, perhaps because of its pretension to impersonality, but was clearly partial to, and adept at, scene-making, and the set-piecing of both public and private histories and events (see Athanasopoulou 2014). In that sense, his historical reportage is both philosophical and theatrical, in the manner perhaps of the eighteenth-century “didactic tableaux” of Enlightener Denis Diderot, so admired by those other great “reporters on the centuries,” Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein. Both instanced in their account of their technique Diderot’s “hieroglyphs,” in which could be read “at a single glance ... the present, the past and the future, that is, the historical meaning of the

represented action” (Barthes 1977: 73), and I think a case could be made for Cavafy as a hieroglyph-maker à la Diderot too. Though he never made that particular connection (with Diderot), we know Brecht read Cavafy with enough attention to adapt one of his poems of didactic scene-making at a crucial historical moment. According to George Savidis (2011: 130), Cavafy wrote “Trojans” (“Τρώες”) three years after Greece’s humiliating defeat in the Greco-Turkish war of 1897, while Brecht “noticed” the poem in June 1953, during the popular uprising in East Berlin. Cavafy’s signature cautionary wisdom sets the scene simply at the very start (2013: 16): “Our efforts those of the ill-fortuned; / our efforts are the efforts of the Trojans.”¹ Brecht’s scene-making relies on poignant detail to convey an all-too human but vain short-sightedness in the face of catastrophe or obsolescence (Brecht 1987: 445):

READING A LATE GREEK POET (ca.1953)

At the time when their fall was certain -
 On the ramparts the lament for the dead had begun -
 The Trojans adjusted small pieces, small pieces
 In the triple wooden gates, small pieces.
 And began to take courage, to hope.
 The Trojans too, then.

The politics involved in invoking the Trojan analogy in both poems (and moments) merit close attention (see Fiedler 1973; Varopoulou 1999 for brief accounts), but for my purposes here it is interesting to consider the German poem as the work of editing on Brecht’s part, a version of what might happen to Cavafy when placed among modernists later in the century. The invocation to a “late Greek poet” in any case forms part of Cavafy’s reception, and complements other recognizable versions, such as the remnant of a deeply situated late Hellenism that refuses

to vacate its sites; as honorary Victorian; as Parnassian, *symboliste*, or steeped in English and French decadence and mining both deeply (see Ekdawi 1993; Jeffreys 2015; Politou-Marmarinou 1984; Vasiliadi 2018), though not always deferentially.² For Peter Jeffreys, to whom we owe the portrait of Forster's Cavafy (Jeffreys 2005), as well as the detailed account of his productive involvement with British aestheticism and English and French decadence, he "remains an important conduit for channelling his own century, which was, properly speaking, the nineteenth." (Jeffreys 2015: 121) To George Seferis, critical friend and epigone, he was "the Alexandrian," the last exponent of the Greek scholarly tradition, or "the point where a tradition of the dead 'consumes' itself in life." (1981: 364; my translation) A grudging modernist in Eliot's shadow, Seferis interpellated Cavafy as a historical poet through a set of forced parallels with Eliot's influential pose of disaffected detachment, adding his own wilful interpretation to Eliot's misattribution of the "mythical method" as a corrective to history to fellow modernists Yeats and Joyce.³ Then for Nicolaos Calamiris (soon-to-become "Nicolas Calas," cosmopolitan Surrealist *extraordinaire*) writing as "M. Spierros" in the Athenian demoticist literary magazine *Kyklos* in 1932, Cavafy was the bourgeois poet of failure *par excellence*, for whom "the future does not exist." (Calas 1982: 51) Yet to the Futurist F. T. Marinetti, who met him in Alexandria in 1930, he was presented as a kindred spirit. Let me zoom in on this last vignette for a first literal placement of Cavafy among the modernists: The encounter is recorded to differently nuanced effect by Marinetti himself (in the Turin *Gazzetta del popolo* on 2 May 1930, and then in *Il Fascino dell' Egitto* (1933), his account of an emotionally charged, nostalgic visit to his native Alexandria), and by Atanasio Catraro (1970), the Italian journalist of distinguished Greek-Triestine ancestry, admirer, translator and writer on Cavafy, who introduced Marinetti and was present at the meeting in Cavafy's house:

MARINETTI: “And you, Cavafy, are a futurist . . . You’re a man of the Past, Poet, but up to a certain point. I can see you haven’t been impressed by the beauty of machines (motorcars, for instance) and that you still use verbs and commas and full stops, and despise electric light. All that has no great importance. You’re a man of the past in form, but from what I can discover in your poems, I come to the conclusion that you are a futurist. You have universal ideas, you recreate old times perfectly and enchantingly in our own time; in short, you have broken with the rotten poetic world of the tearful romanticism of the nineteenth century and its themes – which were fit for a barrel-organ. Do I understand you, or am I mistaken?”

CAVAFY: “Your idea is really wonderful, dear Marinetti. But it seems to me that I am far from futurism.”

MARINETTI: “[gesticulating impatiently]. . . Whoever is in advance of his time in art or in life is a futurist.” (Catraro, cited in Liddell 1974: 203-4)

Marinetti’s own account is more recondite. After the setting of the scene in the poet’s house, with its significant details (the red velvet furnishings, the Sudanese servant’s ornate trousers, the paintings on the wall positively dripping passéism), discussion turns to serious matters:

Both chewing, he like an Arcadian shepherd boy, I like a rally driver in a race, we begin a discussion on the Poetry of tomorrow. Cavafy lauds the Futurist Movement, but declares cleaner his own “symbolic interpretation of historical phases applied to the poor diurnal life.” He adds: “That interpretation must be verbalised without the old metres and without rhyme, in free verse.” I reply

that free verse can be surpassed and simultaneism can be reached through the words in freedom [*parole in libertà*] that express best our great machine civilization of speed. (Marinetti 1933: 131-32; my translation)

They go on to talk about Greek poets and writers, playwrights, advances in the world of the stage, about Psycharis and the struggle over demotic Greek, on which Cavafy expounds passionately, and the many Italian words that pepper the modern Greek vocabulary. He is then persuaded to recite for his guests “God Abandons Antony,” which Marinetti reproduces in his account in Catraro’s translation. Marinetti stages his departure in highly cinematic ways:

Taking my leave after an hour, I ran in the car to enjoy the mimosa- perfumed penumbræ in the Antoniadis Garden.

Full moon. Nightingales. In the ecstatic atmosphere the colonnade in the sky drips with an ethereal milk. From time to time a dull roar and thuds: they are demolishing the ancient villa, replete with memories, to throw together an ultra-modern one to accommodate visiting European sovereigns. Rumble of motorcars laden with ancient marbles. At times the funereal collapse of the stone walls evokes the cheerful explosion of grenades.

The Mahmudieh Canal is full of liquid moons, nostalgic like the ultra-modern and ancient free verses of the Greek poet of Alexandria, Constantine Cavafy. (Marinetti 1933: 137-38; my translation)

Though Marinetti could hardly claim Cavafy as his convert, an improbable simultaneity is effected poetically through the mediation of the nightingale as emblematic lyrical symbol, under a full moon, in a fragrant garden, only for the metamorphosis to be dashed by the violent

intrusion of a present and a modernity that can no longer accommodate the solitary voice. The projection of the Cavafian liquid moons on the water compounds the ambiguity of the Futurist's salute: for a man who had made his name by public exhortations such as "Let's Murder the Moonshine" (1909) and "We Abjure Our Symbolist Masters, the Last Lovers of the Moon" (1911-15), this final flourish is studied in its ambivalence: at once fond farewell and demolition job.

All this makes for an unusually slippery subject of literary historical positioning. That Cavafy (like that other nineteenth-into-twentieth-century modern W. B. Yeats) straddles eras is the least of it: unlike Yeats's, Cavafy's self-curated *oeuvre* is more palimpsestic than linear. The critical consensus in dating Cavafy's "maturity" from 1910-11 (Daskalopoulos 2013; Ilinskaya 1983; Seferis 1981; Tsirkas 1987) is in itself ambivalent, as it is based more on the poet's signature, that is, the assertion of his agency and responsibility as a published poet than the development of his style as such. Key poems Cavafy selected for publication in his own bespoke collections (and in the Alexandria journals *I Nea Zoi* and *Grammata*) from 1910 and on were written in the 1890s. At a crude level, then, we have the interesting challenge of dating critically the poems ourselves. In that sense, Cavafy's own collections are rather remarkable in preserving the poet's style as was, sampling it much in the way an anthology would, but also monumentalising it. The "younger" and "older" poet coexist in the poems, as if time could be stilled, or to co-opt one of my favourite managerial neologisms, as if his art could be future-proofed, safe even under the scrutiny of retrospection – consider in this light Cavafy's note from 1906:

What a deceptive thing Art is when you want to exercise sincerity. You sit and write – out of speculation often – about sensations, and then with time you

doubt if you were not deluded. I wrote the “Candles,” “The Souls of Old Men” and the “Old Man” about old age. As I approached old or middle-age, I found that my last poem did not contain the right assessment. I still think that the “Souls of Old Men” is accurate. But when I am 70 years old maybe I will find it false also. I hope “Candles” are safe.

“Descriptive” poetry – historical events, photographing (what an ugly word!) of nature – may be safe. But what a small and short-lived thing it is. (Onassis Cavafy Archive, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F09-0009 (201); my translation)

For Cavafy, style or “Art” (in this tellingly old-fashioned invocation) is clearly a matter of both genetic and generational care: that is, both the reworkings and transpositions necessary to hone a craft and an instrument that will suffice or speak the truth of the artist’s moment (such that would necessitate the rewriting of poems like “The Funeral of Sarpedon” from the purist, nineteenth-century *katharevousa* into twentieth-century *demotic* Greek), but also the anticipation of the work’s obsolescence, its future irrelevance. As the unpublished “The Bank of the Future” (1897) suggests, Cavafy looked rather askance at the prospect of a poetic reputation of serious and lasting import:

To make my hard life more secure
I’ll issue too few drafts, for sure,
on the Bank of the Future.

Its capital is open to conjecture.
And I’ve begun to fear that in a downturn

It might no longer yield any return. (My translation)⁴

And here is Forster from 1920, on “The Consolations of History” (1967: 184): “We must take a larger view of the past than of the present, because when examining the present we can never be sure what is going to pay.” But Cavafy mixes his tenses, as it were, differently: his at once cautious and precocious, modest and monumentalising doubting stance might account for his fitful, highly self-conscious assumption of control over the work, which always at some level contains (like a watermark of sorts) a sense of anticipation of its reception in the form of a self-dramatizing reflexivity that mixes humility with high camp: see, for instance, this note from 1900 (when Cavafy was 37 years old):

The artist has grown old. He is eighty. He is somewhat puzzled by the fame of his prose, his poems and by old age. His strong internal conviction and the approval of people contribute to the blunting of his judgement. But it is not altogether obtuse. He senses that under the official admiration of the many, there is a slight detachment of the few. His works are not admired so much by some of the younger generation. Their school is not his school and their style is not his style. They think and, above anything, they write differently.

The aged artist reads and studies conscientiously their works and finds them inferior to his own and thinks of the new school as inferior, or at least not superior, to his own. He believes that, if he wanted to, he could write in this novel way. But of course not immediately. (Cavafy 2003b: 37; trans. Vrasidas Karalis)

It may be that Marinetti's attempt to recruit Cavafy was not as fanciful as one might think at first glance – though to mix it up a bit one could say that Cavafy could only be an “anterior-futurist” – in the sense of the *futur antérieur*, that presumptuous, tentative, avant-gardistic tense that the Surrealists made their own. This is one way in which one might approach Cavafy's idiosyncratic futurism: the conviction that the future will prove him right. Speaking in the third person, the poet reiterates the assessment almost thirty years later, this time claiming an emphatic (though paradoxical) modernity for his work and its legacy:

Cavafy, in my opinion, is a hyper-modern poet, a poet of the future generations. Aside from his historical, psychological and philosophical worth, the frugality of his expression, which occasionally touches laconism, his weighed enthusiasm which appeals to intellectual emotion, his proper diction, the result of an aristocratic nature, his gentle irony, represent elements that future generations will esteem even more, prompted by the progress of discoveries and the refinement of their intellectual mechanisms. (Cavafy 2003a: 7; trans. Andrew Mellas)

In other words, though modernity is invoked here, it is coterminous with the poet's future reputation (his afterlife guaranteed). At this point, the poet *has* aged and the world is still not ready for him. To go back to my questions: the contortion that interests me here is not so much the self-dramatizing tenor of the Cavafian precocious or actual old man (see Liddell 1948: 191, 196), a persona with an established modernist pedigree (see Eliot's “Gerontion,” for instance), but this reflexive gesture that seems both to assert and resist the work's modernity. In the 1900 note, distinguishing mere “vogue” and “novelties” from the vigour and perennial newness of poetic integrity, Cavafy associates the impulse to “make it new” (per Ezra Pound's famous edict)

with the impetuosity of the few youths who remain impervious to his fame. If one didn't know the date anomaly, that is that Cavafy at 30 is imagining perhaps himself, perhaps another like himself as veteran poet at 70 or 80, one would immediately think of Yeats's famous melancholy lines from his 1928 "Sailing to Byzantium" ("That is no country for old men. [...]"), and perhaps the modernist staple too of art against time, the necessary lack of synchronicity, the jarring effect or shock of modernity. Yeats, of course, was not *born* modern – he *became* one, through his own efforts and desire to keep up with "the young," but also the ministrations of the self-anointed moderniser of all things poetic, Ezra Pound. The younger man privately despaired of ever weaning Yeats off of what he called "the cuckoo clock of traditional British metric," writing to a friend in the 30s that if Yeats "knew a fugue from a frog" he might have transmitted sense instead of confusing his readers (cited in Rees 1975: 589-90), but he is credited for bringing on the older poet's modernity by insisting that he "concretize" any abstractions. And Pound was precise with his praise – the last two lines of "Closing Rhymes", a lyrical coda to *Responsibilities* (1914) marked for him the exact moment when Yeats turned modern:

While I, that reed-throated whisperer

Who comes at need, although not now as once

A clear articulation in the air,

But inwardly, surmise companions

Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof,

— Ben Johnson's phrase — and find when June is come

At Kyle-na-no under that ancient roof

A sterner conscience and a friendlier home,

I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,

*Those undreamt accidents that have made me
 — Seeing that Fame has perished this long while,
 Being but a part of ancient ceremony —
 Notorious, till all my priceless things
 Are but a post the passing dogs defile.*

(Yeats 1916: 81)

The caesura of the penultimate line (“Notorious,...”) and the vowel sounds in the last that almost force you to hear/say “pissing” rather than “passing” – in fact the striking final image contains the “pissing” in all but cinematic sound – constitute the formal *wrench*, one might say, that doesn’t spell crystalline perfection, but its exact opposite: a forced, pathetic pratfall from “ancient ceremony” to the court of modern opinion, and an abject one at that. The temporality set into motion by this turn is of relevance too, as it suggests a before and after, a shedding of a kind of pride and a rallying of different energies. Conceived thus, the caesura as turn, epochal break, supreme, crucial moment, or *Kairos*, that ancient word with its connotations of opportunity seized (or squandered) for decisive action, has good modern pedigree – from the Imagist haiku to Eisensteinian montage and the epiphanies of Joycean and Woolfian characters – and in its association with a strong potentiality of being and a radical conception of time as the time of freedom and truth, I think it may help us calibrate Cavafy’s modernity too.

Cavafy’s caesura-moment according to long-standing critical consensus happens “on or about” 1910 (per Virginia Woolf’s famous dating of the moment when “human character changed”). Interestingly enough, what that moment inaugurates is (according to the Cavafian critical idiom, at least) not Cavafy’s modernity, but his “maturity,” a kind of truth and a public acceptance of a private passion – in Yeatsian terms, a notoriety; in Cavafian terms, “an exercise

in sincerity.” The two are not unrelated: notoriety and sincerity both suggest a strong self-conscious and self-critical aspect that was attributed by (the notoriously dogmatic critic) Clement Greenberg to modernist art, but in the case of Cavafy the art of sincerity is both a strategy and a shot in the dark, daring display and deception at once.

Perhaps Cavafy is protesting too much then when he worries about the “deceitfulness” of art: perhaps what’s happening here is that old game of “dodge” that Harold, one of Forster’s typical characters, plays to fend off his noon-day demons in the 1903 story “Albergo Empedocle” set against a Hellenic-Italian backdrop:

“Acragas, Acragas,” chanted Harold, striving to rescue one word from the chaos. The effort was too much for him, and he gave another yawn.

“Really, Harold!” said Mildred [the fiancée], laughing. “You’re very much exhausted.”

“I’ve scarcely slept for three nights,” he replied in rather an aggrieved voice.

“Oh, my dear boy! I’m very sorry. I had no idea.”

“Why did not you tell me?” said Sir Edwin. “We would have started later. Yes, I see you do look tired.”

“It’s so queer. It’s ever since I’ve been in Sicily. Perhaps Girgenti will be better.”

“Have you never slept since Naples?”

“Oh, I did sleep for an hour or so last night. But that was because I used my dodge.”

“Dodge!” said Sir Edwin. “What ever do you mean?”

“You know it, don’t you? You pretend you’re someone else, and then you go asleep in no time.”

“Indeed I do not know it,” said Sir Edwin emphatically. (Forster 1971: 9)

Forster repurposes the word almost a half century later in his 1951 introduction to “The Complete Poems of C. P. Cavafy” (Forster 1965: 244): “All the poems are short. They are learned, sensuous, ironic, civilized, sensitive, witty. Where’s their centre? Courage enters, though not in an ordinary nor a reputable form. Cavafy appreciates cowardice also, and likes the little men who can’t be consistent or maintain their ideals, and can’t know what is happening and have to dodge.” Cavafy’s curation of his work does have an air of the “dodge” about it; at the very least, there are distractions, or as J. A. Sareyannis put it (1983: 125-6), a “rare diplomatic dexterity”:

I remember that, as a young man, I would be annoyed by the perpetual publishing and republishing of the tiresome poem “Candles” – and by seeing Cavafy allow this republishing to take place. Much later on, I realized what an important screen this was. Behind the curtain of the “Candles,” Cavafy hid and fortified his entire work. In his whole lifetime he never gave out one of his “dangerous” poems more than once to the general public and to periodicals. His poems were published slowly, a drop at a time, until the public had become immune to their poison and no longer had the strength to be shocked, to react, to cry scandal.

For me this raises a question: is it “diplomatic dexterity” or the liberated performative utterance, the queering or un-queering where the crux of the modern gesture lies? In his pioneering work, Dimitris Papanikolaou puts Cavafy’s dodging techniques, curtains, screens and all, centre stage

(2005: 237): “Cavafy used his open secrets and performative silences to frame his poetry within a multidimensional discourse of power/knowledge related to sexuality (his own, as well as that of his writings and characters). This framing [...] did not simply “manage” the step by step unveiling of sexuality, but, instead, produced it.” For Papanikolaou (238), this “constant negotiation of hiding and telling” “unifie[d] the poetic material” and was “a conscious strategy on Cavafy’s part” to boot. In that sense, Papanikolaou finds Sareyannis’s comment particularly revealing, suggesting, as he puts it, “that Cavafy’s whole publishing project was undertaken in order to hide the erotic poems, eventually turning all poetry into a closet.” (244) This reading of the canon as closet has interesting formal implications too, as it draws our attention to a spectrum of related tropes and topoi in Cavafy’s work, such as the various versions of the “idiorhythmic” (see Barthes’s adoption of the Greek term; 2013: 6), protected spaces where the senses, alerted, can create alternative, suddenly intelligible, and re-collectable worlds, for instance “In Stock” (“Του Μαγαζιού”) (1912; pub. 1913), “In an Old Book” (“Σ’ ένα Βιβλίο Παλιό”) (1892; pub. 1922), or prose poems such as the unpublished “Garments” (“Ενδύματα”) (ca.1894-97) (Cavafy 2010: 80; trans. Peter Jeffreys):

I shall place and safeguard the garments of my life inside a chest or in a bureau made of precious ebony.

The blue garments. And then the red, the most beautiful of all. And later the yellow. And finally the blue once again, but these much more faded than the first.

I shall preserve them with reverence and much sorrow.

When eventually I wear black clothes, and live in a black house., inside a dark room, I will on occasion open the chest with happiness, with yearning and with despair.

I will look upon these clothes, and will remember the great celebration – which by then will be completely finished. [...]

Jeffreys approaches “Garments” as an “aesthetic parabl[e] à la Baudelaire” (Cavafy 2010 : 156), but I hear echoes of Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” too: “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,/ Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes...”(Rimbaud 1984: 103) Similarly, with “the great celebration,” a trace perhaps of Rimbaud’s “feast” in *Une saison en enfer*: “Jadis, si je me souviens bien, ma vie était un festin où s’ouvraient tous les cœurs, où tous les vins coulaient. [...]” (Rimbaud 1984: 163) Whether I’m right or wrong, much fun can be had in decoding some of these scenes, as Cavafy so obviously directs our gaze in these tableaux; what interests me here, however, is to what extent these readings may be answers to the simple question of Cavafy’s *modernism*, and the challenge of where to place him, looking which way and to what effect. In that sense, “queering Cavafy” presents us with some interesting conundrums: Is courage or “daring” modern? Is it more modern than the closet? Is the closet supra-temporal or is it a period-specific site? Is Cavafy resisting the turn? And what happens to the modern(ist) potential of the “poetics of the closet,” when the closet becomes a glass cas(g)e, or a pedestal? How else would we approach the showcasing of Cavafy’s “In an Old Book” in the third issue of *Argo*, vehicle of the Alexandrian “Union of Greek Youth” in 1923 (followed by the equally unabashed “To Stay” (“Να Μείνει”) in issue 1-2 1924)? Or is the homoerotic Cavafy programmatically fronting a self-declared journal of literary youth a sign of the *journal’s* modernity rather than the poet’s? What had happened to the closet by then? Were the journals where Cavafy was published previously a closet? To answer some of these questions I need to go into the various closets and rummage around. I take with me a dictionary, a few deceptively daring modernist works and a couple of crucial moments of sincerity.

From 1891 to 1917, Cavafy compiled a corpus of 561 mainly demotic Greek words and expressions, with accompanying citations, which he intended as a supplement to an existing resource he consulted often. In a prefatory note (dated 1917-18 by Savidis), he explains (Cavafy 2003a: 277; my translation):

The origin of this small collection of words was the wish to supplement a Dictionary that I used frequently and which I found very useful. [Namely, Dehèque's *Dictionnaire Grec Moderne-Français* (1825)] The eminent scholar who had compiled it included in his work many demotic words, more than any other lexicographer I could recall. His dictionary, as I said, was very useful to me, so I decided, every time I found a beautiful or expressive word that was not included in it, to copy it on a piece of paper and cite the phrase in which it appeared, and to insert the piece of paper in the Dictionary, so that my helpful book would become even more helpful. [...] So my work proceeded over a number of years, until the Dictionary was filled with papers which started falling out and disappearing. I then decided to compose this notebook and gather my words, for my own use and the use – if they so wished – of my friends.

Cavafy's dictionary is a treasure trove. The entries range from the noun "Ἀββατεία" ("abbatia" or abbey, which Cavafy renders in Greek as "κοινόβιον"/commune) to the verb "ψήνω," literally to roast or bake, but included here in its idiomatic use as "to seduce," accompanied by a citation from demoticist Alexandros Pallis's 1903 translation of the *Iliad*. The citations serve us now as another oblique look at Cavafy's reading, further evidence of his range and eclecticism. The

latter is a feature on which he prides himself, but also a coordinate of the free and safe space that Cavafy created with his carefully curated idiom. In that sense, the reference to the usefulness of the enterprise for him and his friends suggests more than a gesture of amateur scholarship.

Cavafy corals words from the Greek common tongue, as is his wont consistently in his career, often with a folklorist's eye and ear, elevating them through literary citation to the level of a resonant, unpoliced practice, and perhaps most strategically, foregrounding the *mixed/hybridic* elements of foreign borrowings and spoken and written, formal and informal registers. It's a surprisingly neglected work, and worthy of closer analysis; what interests me here, though, is one particular thread, and I'm using the metaphor advisedly: the two entries that caught my eye, "tact" ("τακτ") and "ceiling" ("πλαφόν", a modern Greek borrowing/transliteration of the French *plafond*) (Onassis Cavafy Archive GR-OF-CA CA-SF01-S02-F06-0011 (248 and 249) are both from the translation into Greek of a short play by the prolific aesthete and aesthetic philosopher Vernon Lee (alias of Violet Paget). *Ariadne in Mantua: A Romance in Five Acts* was published in 1903 and translated into Greek by "Stephanos Pargas," alias of Nikos Zelitas, editor of the Alexandria journal *Grammata* and its related short-lived publishing house. An excerpt from Lee's *Ariadne* in Pargas's translation was published in *Grammata* (issue 4, 1911), along with his note on the piece by way of interpretation but also paean to the "barbarous heroism of a life that gives free rein to its passions," or simply "Life" pitted against "Social Discipline" (Pargas 1911: 155; my translation). The same issue of *Grammata* led with Cavafy's "Song of Ionia" ("Ιωνικόν") (1891/1905; pub. 1896/1911). Lee's short drama is set in sixteenth-century Mantua and is the story of an impossible love between the young Duke and the "courtesan" Magdalencum-Ariadne, who helped him escape from Ottoman captivity (and forced conversion), and who later reappears in his life as the proto-aesthete, musical young man "Diego," who once again

saves his life, this time from catatonic melancholia. The Duke is forced into a marriage of convention with Hypolita and the bond with “Diego,” inexplicable and expressed through song and a deep-set memory, is broken. Diego never reveals her true identity to the Duke. On the day of his wedding, Magdalen/Ariadne/Diego drowns. The labyrinth of the original Ariadne tale appears as the maze motif on the ceiling of the resplendent palace, an emblem of the mental imprisonment that both unites and keeps “Diego” and the Duke apart. The words Cavafy cites in his dictionary are well chosen (though neither “Greek” nor beautiful); “tact” is one of those subtly meaningful words that belong in the language of the closet, one could argue. It certainly speaks discretion and a kind of diplomacy or even dodge. It appears in the first Act of the play, when Magdalen’s/“Diego’s” subterfuge is exposed by the Cardinal, who nevertheless proceeds with outlining the delicate mission to the cross-dressing woman who is about to lead the Duke out of the maze of his depression (Lee 1903: Act One):

The Cardinal: [...] “Signor Diego, you are a woman—”

Diego starts, flushes and exclaims huskily, “My Lord —.” *But*

the Cardinal makes a deprecatory movement and continues his sentence.

“and, as my honoured Venetian correspondent assures me, a courtesan of some experience and of more than usual tact. I trust this favourable judgment may be justified. The situation is delicate; and the work for which you have been selected is dangerous as well as difficult.”

This genteel and knowing tonality is echoed in the other choice Cavafy makes: Pargas’s French-Greek version of Lee’s “blue and gold ceiling,” points both to an aestheticist palette, but also to the representation of the maze motif, emblem of the drama’s unspoken secret (Lee 1903: Act Three):

The Duke: “Thou askedst me once, dear Diego, the meaning of that labyrinth which I have had carved, a shapeless pattern enough, but well suited, methinks, to blue and gold, upon the ceiling of my new music room. [...] I have often wished to tell thee; but I could not. Tis only now, in some mysterious fashion, I seem myself once more, able to do my judgment’s bidding, and to dispose, in memory and words, of my own past. My strange sickness, which thou hast cured [...] had somehow played strange havoc with my will and recollections. I could not think; or thinking, not speak; or recollecting, feel that he whom I thought of in the past was this same man, myself.

The Duke pauses, and leaning on the parapet, watches the long reflections of the big stars in the water.

But now, and thanks to thee, Diego, I am another; I am myself.”

The gothic theatrics and language of “strangeness,” “sickness,” “sameness” and “otherness” are readily queered, but there is also a double dodge here, as Lee’s dramatic masquerade can be read as a gesture of “lesbian cross-writing,” Gay Wachman’s term for the practice whereby a writer “transposes the otherwise unrepresentable lives of invisible or silenced or simply closeted lesbians into narratives about gay men.” (2001: 1) A cognate critical move would be to consider Lee’s “masque” as a “camp” gesture, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has usefully defined in her essay on “Cavafy, Proust, and the Queer Little Gods” (2010: 20):

[we should think of camp] not in terms of parody or even wit, but with more an eye for its visceral, operatic power: the startling outcrops of overinvested erudition; the prodigal production of alternative histories; the “over”-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, lost, or leftover cultural products; the richness of affective variety; and the irrepressible, cathartic fascination with ventriloquist forms of relation.

Lee's masquerade of androgyny has classic literary pedigree – most obviously in this case it part-ventriloquizes Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, but proleptically too points to that other famous modernist androgyne, Woolf's Orlando. This very much tallies with Sedgwick's account, but what interests me is not the originality (or lack of) of the treatment per se but the way Cavafy deploys Lee's world (and word). His selection amounts to a performative act of citation, creating through the bricolage of the dictionary a strategic inclusiveness, and a kind of community too. As Barthes puts it in an early aside in his notes for a series of lectures on the "idiorhythms" of communal lives, *How to Live Together* (2013: 18): "that several languages should be conveyed in and by our own idiom is a good thing." For our purposes, any reference to Lee, a cross-dressing, transcultural Victorian lesbian, recently re-discovered by queer theorists, may dictate retroactively a knowing reading on Cavafy's behalf. A triangulation with Pargas's promotion of the work in *Grammata*, where it shared space both with Cavafy's poetry and other sensational cross-writings such as Pierre Louÿs's pseudo-Sapphic 1894 *Chansons de Bilitis* (*Songs of Bilitis*), is telling too. It is notable in its own right that the 1911 Greek translation of the *Songs of Bilitis* for *Grammata* (by Viron K. Paschalides) predates the first English one by fifteen years; its appearance over four issues suggests at the very least a resonance of tone and perhaps a programmatic alliance too.

But I persist in asking: does that resonance or alliance aid or avert the cause of modernism? Is it in fact a centrifugal late ripple of the Decadent wave, already heavily stylised by the early-1900s? I cannot go into this conundrum fully from a literary historical or genetic perspective here, but the presence of Lee as a hinge figure among Cavafy's sources is worth noting, at the very least as adding an intriguing ambivalence to his late nineteenth-century orientation. Following Robinson (1976) and Weeks (1985), Papanikolaou folds these Decadent

survivals into the fabric of the “modernization” of sexuality and the new sexological discourses through which, he argues, Cavafy achieves the “knowledge of a new/modernist sexual self.” (2014: 138; my translation) Yet that development comes with difficulties for us, as it is driven by a futurity that is imagined still in the form of a masquerade. Louÿs’s Sapphisty is a case in point: though dedicated to “Girls of the Future Society,” his pseudo-translation of erotic songs supposedly composed by a contemporary of Sappho was intended for an audience of “a select literary circle of men including Stéphane Mallarmé, André Gide, [...] and Henri de Régnier who told Louÿs that ‘Reading Bilitis threw me into erotic transports that I am going to satisfy at the expense of my lawful spouse.’” (Engelking 2005: 62) Whether viewed as a “male pornographer” (Schultz 2001: 378) or “male sympathizer,” (see Latimer 2005 and Engelking 2005),⁵ Louÿs’s “lesbophilia” is typical of French literature of the mid- to late nineteenth century, and part of the repertoire of writers as established as Balzac, Zola, Mendès, and perhaps most notably, Baudelaire, for whom, as Walter Benjamin noted (2006: 119), the lesbian was “the heroine of *la modernité*. In her, one of Baudelaire’s erotic ideals – the woman who signifies hardness and virility – has combined with a historical ideal, that of greatness in the ancient world.” Yet, as Benjamin points out (122), “It would be wrong to assume that Baudelaire ever thought of championing lesbians publicly in his writings. [...] To him, social ostracism was inseparable from the heroic nature of lesbian passion. ‘Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes’ were the last words that Baudelaire addressed to lesbians.”

In a sense, then, one could argue, we are at the outskirts or periphery of modernism still, tactfully titillating erotic palates, meaningfully gazing at ornate ceilings, hoping to *épater* the Alexandrian bourgeois. But, meanwhile, if we look back at an angle at the metropolis, we might see how

camp and androgynous theatrics and poetics shadow the early steps of a modernism that has yet to fully convert or dare speak its name.

Picture this: T. S. Eliot is 23 and spending the academic year 1910-11 abroad in Paris. On 11 May 1911, Gabriele D'Annunzio's mystery play, *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, set to music by Claude Debussy, choreographed by Léonide Massine, of Ballets Russes fame, and starring Ida Rubinstein, a Ballets Russes star, premieres at the Théâtre du Châtelet, with Eliot in attendance (see Hargrove 1997). Eliot was "ecstatic" about Russian ballet (Richardson 2013: 159) but also obsessed with the St Sebastian figure (see Jones 2009; Revely-Calder 2016). He was not the only one – Thomas Mann hailed the "Sebastian figure" in *Death in Venice* as the emblem of Apollonian beauty and of "heroism born in weakness," (Revely-Calder 2016: 44) and there was already an established "Sebastian devotion" among late-Victorian and early-twentieth century writers such as Pater, Wilde, Symonds, and Proust (see Kaye 1999a; 1999b). The performance, along with the set of Dutch and Italian Renaissance Sebastians Eliot studied in Brussels, Bergamo and London (see Hargrove 2006), helped generate a poem, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," which he showed the fellow American poet Conrad Aiken in 1914 before suppressing it as "morbi[d]," "very forced in execution," "strained and intellectual" (Eliot 2015: 1142). The letters to Aiken offer an interesting gloss: While Eliot writes that his stay in Paris occasioned "one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city," specifically about the poem, he adds a disclaimer: "there's nothing homosexual about this – rather an important difference perhaps – But no one ever painted a female Sebastian, did they? So I give this title *faute de mieux*." (cited in Marx 2011: 25) This may well be a loaded comment, implying that, as Lucy Macdiarmid puts it (2001: 88), "women can't be poets because they can't

suffer quite as effectively, or erotically, as men.” Either way, the female element is redundant in the poem’s drama, the insularity of the contorted, self-tormenting body.

To ramp up the game of strange, highly un-Seferian, parallels, I would refer us to the twin poem to St Sebastian, also pulled by Eliot just before publication. Eliot later recalled writing “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” “[t]hat unfortunate fragmentary poem [...], which I very much regret not having destroyed at the time” in 1912 or 1913. (2015: 1156) There’s fairly solid evidence to suggest that it was partly inspired by the Ballets Russes’ 1911 Paris production of Fokine’s *Narcisse*, starring the incomparable Vaslav Nijinsky, whose famously distinctive eyes may be referenced in the poem, alongside the moniker “Dancer to God,” which apparently Nijinsky had adopted (see Bernstein 1976; Richardson 2013). Like St Sebastian, this stunning, slippery poem is full of echoes of Eliot poems to come (from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to *The Waste Land* to “Ash-Wednesday” and beyond:) “Come under the shadow of this grey rock / Come in under the shadow of this grey rock / And I will show you a shadow different from either / Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or / Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock: / I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs / And the grey shadow on his lips.” The ratified, accomplished modernism they speak is inflected by its struggling, metamorphic agony and highly camp, downright dirty mythical method that mixes the mystical with the “priapic” (Eliot’s term), compromising both: “Then he had been a young girl / Caught in the woods by a drunken old man / Knowing at the end the taste of her own whiteness / The horror of her own smoothness / And he felt drunken and old. // So he became a dancer to God / Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows / He danced on the hot sand / Until the arrows came.”

The Christian register (suggested by the reference to the historical Saint Narcissus, an early patriarch of Jerusalem and desert hermit), is glossed strangely, violently here, passioned in sadomasochistic terms similar to those at work in St Sebastian, whose agony mirrors that of Narcissus. The conflation is not original, though; strangely enough it appears in a text that possibly Eliot, and certainly Cavafy, knew, namely Eugène Marsan's "The Agony of Narcissus," translated from the French by Vyron K. Paschalidis for *Grammata* 9-10 (1911), the issue that led with Cavafy's "Ithaca." In that short piece, Marsan, member of the Long Moustaches Club, follower of the anti-dreyfusard, nationalist, royalist, xenophobe Charles Maurras and writer of "elegant erotic fiction," (Wellek 1967: 58) images Narcissus in a cautionary tale of effeminacy, masochism and sodomy. His final erotic agony is described vividly (Marsan 1911: 313; my translation from the Greek):

And in the lake drown the delicate limbs of Narcissus, his amber flesh, his numb hands, his golden hair he washed in the water like froth, drown, his distant gaze, his last breath, the ivory tips of his ears, his rosy mouth, his graceful voice silenced. Narcissus dies enslaved by the grass, crucified on the reeds by the waves that pierce his flesh with chilling arrows...

Here the conversion of mythical into saintly figure is a violent one – Narcissus is raped by a Satyr – in one of those pagan "panics" that much less graphically feature in Forster's prose too. Read against Cavafy's *Narcissi*, Marsan's homophobic cooption of decadentism and Eliot's agonising, frustrated insular conversions seem wildly overwrought and not yet modern. Yet an element of caution appears in Cavafy too: In "Tomb of Lanes," the Adonis and Narcissus of the earlier draft are changed to a Hyacinth, and the very logic of mythical conversion is resisted – in one of Cavafy's "gran rifiuti," though present in the poem as invocations. In "Tomb of Iases,"

the mythical ravaging turns into death by dissipation, though its ravishing moments are longingly recalled. And then there is another, more inscrutable Cavafian Narcissus, “dancer to God:” Saint Simeon Stylites, the Syriac ascetic saint who achieved notability for living 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar, whose story so moved Cavafy; as he put it (in English) in a reading note in his copy of Gibbon’s *History of the Roman Empire*: “This great, this wonderful saint is surely an object to be singled out in ecclesiastical history for admiration and study. He has been, perhaps, the only man who has dared to be really *alone*.” (Onassis Cavafy Archive GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F10-0015 (1885) Cavafy’s poetic rendition was written in 1917 and left unpublished:

Simeon (1917)

I know them, yes, those new poems of his.

All Beirut is passionate about them.

I’ll take a careful look at them another day.

Today I cannot, since I’m rather upset.

Certainly he’s better versed in Greek than Libanius.

But even better than Meleager? I don’t believe so.

Ah, Mebes, so what of Libanius! and so what of books!

and all such trivialities! Mebes, yesterday I was –

quite by chance it happened – at the foot of Simeon’s pillar.

I slipped in among the Christians

who were praying silently and worshipping,

and kneeling down; but since I’m not a Christian

I didn't have their serenity of mind –
 and I was trembling all over, and suffering;
 and I was horrified, upset, deeply distressed.

Ah, don't smile; thirty-five years, just think –
 winter, summer, night and day, thirty-five
 years he's been living atop a pillar, martyring himself.

Before we were born – I'm twenty-nine years old,
 and you, I daresay, are younger than I –
 before we were born, imagine it,
 Simeon went up onto the pillar
 and ever since he's stayed there before his God.

Today I have no head for work. –
 Except for this, Mebes: better if you say
 that, whatever the other sophists say,
 I myself acknowledge Lamo
 as first among the poets of Syria.

Vasiliki Dimoula (2019: 157) reads the poem in a recent essay on Cavafy's engagement with Christianity as a "discourse of nonpleasurable pleasure and perverse eroticism," and finds in the absence of any physical description of Simeon's body a "censuring," a Gibbonian "implicit critique" of the saint's "voluntary martyrdom." (163) Yet the idiorrhymic set of intertexts I have proposed suggests a different reading: Cavafy here breaks free from the Victorian (Tennysonian or Eliotic) abjection to create one of those Brechtian, or Diderotian didactic

tableaux I mentioned briefly at the start. *Pace* Gibbon (and Dimoula), Cavafy frames an almost Kafkaesque or Melvillesque untimely, uncanny figure (I'm thinking of Kafka's "Hunger Artist" and Melville's "Bartleby"), within the uncomprehending gaze of a self-conscious, worldly critic. Perhaps there's self-projection behind this intransigent, recalcitrant stance, an assumption onto an anti-pedestal for the poet. If so, Cavafy may be rejecting here those whose vicarious aesthetic concerns have blinded them to the true faith of poetry as suffering and a kind of solitary truth. In fact, I would go as far as to say that in this "gran rifiuto" Cavafy is absolutely modern, heroically so, though we still have to accept that this is a gesture he holds back, perhaps storing it along with so much else for the future.

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¹ Unless otherwise stated, translations of Cavafy poems are Daniel Mendelsohn's from his recent edition of the complete poetry (Cavafy 2013).

² On the matter of deference, see Cavafy's comments on the "conservatism" of English literature: "For me, that which makes English literature cold – besides some deficiencies of the English language – is – how shall I say it – he conservatism, the difficulty – or the unwillingness – to stray from the established, and the fear of offending morality, the pseudo-morality, since this is what we should call a morality that feigns naiveté." [October 1905] (Cavafy 2010: 133); or the taking down of Baudelaire a peg or two: "It's been some time since I re-read the *Fleurs du Mal*. From what I remember, it isn't that shocking. And it seems to me that Baudelaire was enclosed within a very limited range of sensuality. Suddenly last night; or on the previous Wednesday; and on many other occasions, I lived and acted and fantasised, and silently devised pleasures even stranger." [22 September 1907] (Cavafy 2010: 136) For Roilos, "[t]he comparison between British (or for that matter French) decadent writers and Cavafy should

not be pursued any further; despite any possible apparent similarities, Cavafy's poetry remains highly idiosyncratic' (Roilos 2009: 9).

³ For detailed critical readings of Seferis's Eliot-Cavafy parallels, see Gourgouris 1996 and Kayalis 1998. For a different assessment of Seferis's mediation of Cavafy through Eliot and its influence, see Gifford 2007.

⁴ For a suggestive deployment of the poem in terms of poetic and political relations of indebtedness and legacy, see Gourgouris 2013.

⁵ Latimer (2005: 77) notes that Claude Cahun, the French Surrealist photographer, writer, and gender fluidity pioneer, held the book in such high esteem that she tried her hand at an English translation. Engelking (2005: 63) discusses the case of Natalie Clifford Barney, who "first sought out Louÿs in 1901 for help publishing a lesbian novel she had written in French, and the following year asked him to help her edit her *Cinq petits dialogues grecs* (*Five Little Greek Dialogues*) which she, in turn, dedicated: 'To Monsieur Pierre Louÿs by "a girl of the future society.'""