

OBSERVATIONS ON CAVAFY'S HISTORICAL METHOD: THE EROTIC POEMS

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This paper examines the erotic poems of C. P. Cavafy, which, based on the historical period to which they refer, can be divided into two main categories. The first part of the paper focuses on the Antiquity-inspired erotic poems and their particular features, a close examination of which reveals interesting aspects—and more subtle distinctions—of the world model these poems portray. The second part of the paper examines Cavafy's erotic poems that take place in the poet's time, revealing Cavafy's stance towards the paradigm of his era. The comparison between those contemporary poems and the erotic poems inspired by the Antiquity helps arrive at some conclusions regarding Cavafy's historical method. The discussion focuses on the correlation between past and present, demonstrating the social orientation of Cavafy's erotic poetry in both dimensions of historical time and, hence, the unity of his oeuvre.

In this paper I examine the historical method of Cavafy based on his erotic poems. By “erotic poems” I mean those poems of Cavafy's corpus, which refer—either explicitly or implicitly—to an erotic relationship, as well as those that exude hedonism/eroticism, as is the case, for instance, with Cavafy's Alexandrian epitaphs, which will be discussed below. It is appropriate to clarify from the outset that the analysis will not delve into grammatology issues, such as the ancient and/or modern sources of inspiration of Cavafy's erotic poems, nor into genre-related issues (mixing of genres), or into particular terminology issues, such as the distinction between erotic “epitaphs” and “eulogies”.¹ Instead, the research focus is placed on highlighting the poet's historical perspective through his erotic poems, as the title of the paper suggests.²

1. For an overview of these issues and a discussion of the related bibliography, see Athanasopoulou M. (2010). See also note 5 here.

2. The bibliography on the historical Cavafy is extensive. The major contributions are listed in Athanasopoulou A. (2016); for Cavafy's historical method, in particular, refer to Chapters 2 and 3. For a bibliography in English, see indicatively the fundamental works of Beaton (1983)

Based on the historical period they refer to, Cavafy's erotic poems can be divided into two main categories:

1. Erotic poems inspired by the Antiquity, and
2. Contemporary erotic poems, i.e. poems referring to the poet's time.

Cavafy's oeuvre also includes:

3. Poems on poetics with no specified time and place, in which *eros* has provided the source of poetic inspiration and in effect constitutes the theme of the poem.

Here, I will focus on the first two categories of Cavafy's erotic poems. The examples I have chosen to examine come from the corpus of the recognised poems, the so-called *Canon*. However, I have also studied the *Hidden*, *Unfinished*, and *Repudiated* poems, i.e. the entire corpus of Cavafy's poetic work to base my argument.³

1. The Antiquity-inspired erotic poems take place in the Ptolemaic and post-Ptolemaic era, roughly speaking: from the height of the Hellenistic period in the 4th century B.C. (with two major turning points in its course: the rise of the Romans and the advent of Christianity), until the end of the era marked by the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 7th century A.D. The geographical coordinates of this world in Cavafy's poetry are basically defined by three symbol cities:

– **Alexandria**, the metropolis of the "great new [= multicultural] Hellenic world", *ελληνικός καινούριος κόσμος, μέγας*, that emerged as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great; see indicatively the poem "In the Year 200 B.C.", wherefrom the verse in quotes (for its full meaning see the last two stanzas of the poem).

and Ricks (1988), and of course Keeley's book, *Cavafy's Alexandria* (1996; ¹1976), which remains a seminal study in Cavafy scholarship. For the subject examined in this paper, see also Jusdanis (1987) and in particular Roilos (2009). I thank Prof. Panaghiotis Agapitos for suggesting the last two books. The most recent study on Cavafy's (homo)eroticism is the monograph of Papanikolaou (2014).

3. The English translations of Cavafy's *Canon* are cited from the standard edition Keeley-Sherrard (1992). The excerpts from the *Unfinished* poems are cited from Mendelsohn (2009). The quotations of specific verses from Cavafy's poems include also the text in Greek for reasons of precision.

– **Rome**, the metropolis of a new emerging power and, hence, of the decline of the Alexandrian kingdoms as a result of the *Pax Romana*; see, for instance, the poem “Of Dimitrios Sotir, 162–150 B.C.”

– **Antioch**, or more generally “Syria”, a region which in Cavafy generally coincides with the area of Asia Minor (Ionia), the ancient cradle of Hellenism, and at that time the main theatre of antagonism between “heathens” (pagans), Christians, and Jews for ideological and political dominance, but also the starting point of the Arab conquest of the Mediterranean, which put an end to the Greek (Byzantine) presence in the region. See the poems on Julian the Apostate, on Apollonius of Tyana, the “Jewish poems”, but also the *Unfinished* poem, entitled “Of the Sixth or Seventh Century [A.D.]”, which refers to the “mighty Arabism”, *κραταιός αραβισμός*.⁴

At first glance, Cavafy's erotic poems that belong to this long historical period are similar to each other, which gives the impression that they constitute an integrated and homogeneous group. However, as I will demonstrate, the group of the Antiquity-inspired erotic poems of Cavafy can be divided into two subgroups—plus one intermediate—that have subtle but hardly negligible differences between them. I shall call the first subgroup “**Alexandrian**” and the second subgroup “**A.D.**” erotic poems. The intratextual indicators that allow us to distinguish between these two groups of poems are the following:

1.1. The “**Alexandrian**” erotic poems always mention explicitly the name *Alexandria* or *Alexandrian*, and in most cases are structured as *epitaphs*: they refer to the death of prominent young lovers, who are praised for their beauty and love of beauty (the keyword being *αισθητικός* that combines all fine arts), for their eroticism/hedonism, their edification, in short, for their excellence—physical, spiritual, and moral—as befits the classical model of the handsome and virtuous man (*καλός καγαθός ανήρ*).⁵

This group comprises the poems: “Tomb of Evrion”, “Tomb of Iasis”, “Tomb of Lanis”, but also the poem “For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610”, which takes place in the 7th century A.D., at the end of the era of Hellenic

4. The poem is cited in Lavagnini (1994: 255); transl. in Mendelsohn (2009: 30). Alexandria falls in the hands of the Arabs in 642 A.D. Egypt was then a province of the Byzantine Empire.

5. On the association of these “Alexandrian” poems with the Greek epigram and the *Palatine Anthology*, see Kazazis (1976), Caires (1980), Ricks (2007), Ioannou (1985: 88–103). On the distinction between “epitaphs” and “eulogies” among Cavafy's erotic poems, see Tsirimokou (2000).

Alexandria, heralded by the Arab conquest of Egypt (with the corresponding historical transformations in the text). Of course, this group of poems is not limited only to erotic epitaphs; elements of the Alexandrian way of life can also be found in other, non-erotic poems of Cavafy.⁶ All these poems praise in fact the *Hellenic* way of life, namely the Hellenic pleasure (*ἡδονή*), the Hellenic ethos of *φιλοκαλία*, the Hellenic culture, and last but not least, the Greek language. For Cavafy, these elements make up the “Alexandrian” world model, but in a wider perspective constitute also the foundation of the Western civilization.

In order to provide a tangible idea of this cultural paradigm, I quote the poem “Tomb of Evrion”, which summarises the features that according to Cavafy one should possess to be called a “Hellene” (*ελληνικός*):

Tomb of Evrion

In this tomb—ornately designed,
the whole of syenite stone,
covered by so many violets, so many lilies—
lies handsome Evrion,
an Alexandrian, twenty-five years old.
On his father’s side, he was of old Macedonian stock,
on his mother’s side, descended from a line of magistrates.
He studied philosophy with Aristokleitos,
rhetoric with Paros, and at Thebes
the sacred scriptures. He wrote a history
of the province of Arsinoites. That at least will survive.
But we’ve lost what was really precious: his form—
like a vision of Apollo.

As we can see, the poem attributes to Evrion the main qualities of the ideal Alexandrian: youth, aestheticism (evident in the decoration of the tomb), mixed origin (in this case Greco-Roman), erudition (philosophy, rhetoric, history, sacred scriptures), and above all, divine beauty (“like a vision of Apollo”).

6. See, for example, “The Glory of the Ptolemies” (on Alexandria), “Greek from Ancient Times” (on Antioch), “Tomb of the Grammarian Lysias” (on Greek education), “Epitaph of Antiochos, King of Kommagini”, which contains the emblematic verse “he was that best of things, Hellenic” (*υπήρξε το άριστον εκείνο, ελληνικός*), as well as the poem “In the Harbor-Town”, which defines the vast territory of the multiracial Alexandrian kingdom with the phrase “the great Panhellenic world” (*το μέγα πανελληνιον*); cf. “In the Year 200 B.C.”, which includes a similar declaration (*ελληνικός καινούργιος κόσμος, μέγας*).

It should be noted that the poems of this group are dominated by a sense of belonging to a circle of friends, a tight-knit multicultural community, as can be seen from the use of the collective pronoun “we”. In fact, the most recognisable feature of these Antiquity-inspired “Alexandrian” poems are the poetics and ethics of the *mixture*, as stated clearly in the line “We’re a mixture here” (*Είμεθα ένα κράμα εδώ: Σύροι, Γραικοί, Αρμένιοι, Μήδοι*) from the poem “In a Town of Osroini”.⁷

1.2. Before we proceed to the second subcategory of Cavafy’s erotic poems inspired by the Antiquity, it is imperative to refer to **an intermediate group of poems**, which we could call “ποιήματα του μεταίχμιου” and are of crucial importance for this transition.⁸ Cavafy’s erotic poems that belong to this category are: “In the Month of Athyr”, “Dangerous Thoughts”, “Of the Jews (A.D. 50)”, “Tomb of Ignatios”, and especially “Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340”.

A common distinctive feature of these poems is that Christianity runs through them as a new cultural element. More precisely, it is the Judeo-Christian ideology that blends in as a catalyst of change in the paradigm of the “Alexandrian” world and way of life, transforming the classical *unity* of body and soul into a *split*, in which the body is marked negatively, as corrupt and sinful, while the soul is treated metaphysically (its salvation is decided in the Hereafter).⁹

Reading this group of poems that lie at the threshold between two eras (B.C. and A.D.), i.e. between the Alexandrian model of a multicultural and tolerant society and the religiously and politically polarised society of the new era, one can conclude that in fact these poems form a continuum that begins with *tolerance* (e.g. “In the Month of Athyr”), goes through *identity crises*, more or less profound (cf. “Dangerous Thoughts”, “Of the Jews (A.D. 50)”, “Tomb of Ignatios”), and finally ends up in complete

7. See the analysis of the poem in Papanikolaou (2014: 272–285). See also the comments about the poem in Apostolidēs (2003: 138–141). Interesting views on the “poetry of the mixture” and the subject of interculturality in Cavafy can be found in Pierēs (2000). Of particular interest for the topic discussed in this paper are the contributions of V. Karalēs, D. Haas, G. Dallas, D. Angelatos, X. Kokolēs, M. Pierēs, and Ch. Karaoglou.

8. On the concept of the “threshold” or “middle ground” (*μεταίχμιο*), a general feature of Cavafy’s poetics, see Pierēs (1992) and Paschalēs (2015).

9. On the religious theme in Cavafy, see Haas (1996) and Haas (2000a). On the “Jewish poems”, in particular, see Polyviou (2013) and Athanasopoulou M. (2016).

alienation (the emblematic example here being the poem “Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340”, which essentially belongs to the new era).¹⁰

It is not possible to examine thoroughly each of these poems in this paper. I will focus on their distinguishing features. The pagan and the Christian element coexist in the poem “In the Month of Athyr”, as evidenced by the “heathen” name of the month (*Αθύρ*) and the explicit reference to “Lord Jesus Christ” on the tombstone. However, the word “soul” (*ψυχή*) mentioned in the poem, though common in both the Platonic and Neoplatonic/Christian vocabulary, clearly verges towards its Christian meaning, given that the lamentation of Lefkios’s friends, as emotional as it may be, *is devoid of any allusion to hedonism*, an element invariably present in the “Alexandrian” erotic epitaphs we examined earlier. Here is the poem:

In the Month of Athyr

I can just read the inscription on this ancient stone,
 “Lo[r]d Jesus Christ.” I make out a “So[u].”
 “In the mon[th] of Athyr” “Lefkio[s] went to sleep.”
 Where his age is mentioned—“lived to the age of” –
 The Kappa Zeta shows that he went to sleep a young man.
 In the corroded part, I see “Hi[m]... Alexandrian.”
 Then there are three badly mutilated lines –
 Though I can pick out a few words, like “our tea[r]s”, “grief,”
 then “tears again, and “sorrow to us his friends.”
 I think Lefkios must have been greatly loved.
 In the month of Athyr Lefkios went to sleep.

The poems “Dangerous Thoughts”, “Of the Jews (A.D. 50)”, “Tomb of Ignatios” reveal progressively the *intensification* of the identity crisis of the protagonists as a result of the paradigm shift. In the poem “Dangerous Thoughts”, the phrase “in part a heathen, in part Christianized” (*εν μέρει εθνικός, εν μέρει χριστιανίζων*: v. 4) still shows mixed identity, however body and soul are clearly separated in the poem, the body being intended for “sensual pleasures”, while the soul, the spirit, for “ascetic” contempla-

10. These poems, among others, are also examined in chronological order of writing by Haas (2000a), who arrives at similar conclusions, albeit without grouping the poems as proposed here. This is also the case with other studies in Cavafy scholarship related to the topic. In my opinion, the grouping of Antiquity-inspired erotic poems based on their *distinguishing features* provides a key to the interpretation that can help us understand Cavafy’s *historical perspective* at the time of writing, i.e. the correlation between past and present, which is the aim of this paper.

tion of the divine. The most tell-tale sign of the shift is probably the verse "I won't fear my passions like a coward" (*εγώ τα πάθη μου δεν θα φοβούμαι σαν δειλός*: v. 6), which indicates that the erotic passion is now perceived as a distressing fearful experience. I am quoting the poem:

Dangerous Thoughts

Said Myrtias (a Syrian student
in Alexandria during the reign
of the Emperor Konstans and the Emperor Konstantios;
in part a heathen, in part Christianized):
"Strengthened by study and reflection,
I won't fear my passions like a coward;
I'll give my body to sensual pleasures,
to enjoyments I've dreamed of,
to the most audacious erotic desires,
to the lascivious impulses of my blood,
with no fear at all, because when I wish –
and I'll have the will-power, strengthened
as I shall be by study and reflection –
when I wish, at critical moments I will recover
my spirit, ascetic as it was before."

In the poem "Of the Jews (A.D. 50)", instead of the (multiracial) company of friends, family now emerges as the locus of identity and, more importantly, as the centre of what is socially acceptable ("My most valuable days", "son of the holy Jews"— *οι τιμιότερές μου μέρες, των ιερών Εβραίων ο υιός*: v. 4, 10). Moreover, for the first time here Hellenism acquires ambivalent implications ("the elegant *and severe* cult of Hellenism"— *τον ωραίο και σκληρόν ελληνισμό*: v. 6). Finally, the concept of mortality—the fear of death—settles firmly at the centre of the unity of body and soul, the flesh, which was once dominated by the immortality of eros ("with its overriding devotion / to perfectly shaped, *corruptible* white limbs"— *με την κυρίαρχη προσήλωσι / σε τέλεια καμωμένα και φθαρτά άσπρα μέλη*: v. 7–8). The text of the poem follows; it goes without saying that the passage enclosed in quotes presents greatest interest, as it reveals the perspective of the dramatic persona in crisis, rather than the unequivocal certainty of the narrator-commentator in the closing verses (a wishful thinking?). For the identity crisis of Ianthis himself, particular attention should be drawn to verse 9 ("and become the man I would want *to remain forever*"), which is repeated twice placing the emphasis on the *pure* identity of "a son of the Jews, the holy Jews":

Of the Jews (A.D. 50)

Painter and poet, runner and discus-thrower,
 beautiful as Endymion: Ianthis, son of Antony.
 From a family on friendly terms with the Synagogue.

"My most valuable days are those
 when I give up the pursuit of sensuous beauty,
 when I desert the elegant and severe cult of Hellenism,
 with its over-riding devotion
 to perfectly shaped, corruptible white limbs,
 and become the man I would want to remain forever:
 son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

A most fervent declaration on his part: "... to remain forever
 a son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

But he did not remain anything of the kind.
 The Hedonism and Art of Alexandria
 kept him as their dedicated son.

We are not far from the crucial step finally taken in the poem "Tomb of Ignatios", where the dramatic persona clearly denies one identity (twice in the text, with increasing intensity: "Here I'm not the Kleon famous in Alexandria", "Far from it—here I'm not that Kleon" — *Εδώ δεν είμαι ο Κλέων που ακούσθηκα / στην Αλεξάνδρεια [...], Άπαγε· εδώ δεν είμαι ο Κλέων εκείνος*: v. 1–2 and 6), to adopt a different one: "I'm Ignatios, lector, who came to his senses very late" (*Είμ' ο Ιγνάτιος, αναγνώστης, που αργά συνήλθα*: v. 8), possibly gripped by eschatological fear, as the last verse implies ("in the security of Christ"), which is quite different from the *ευδαιμονία*, as perceived by the Ancients. It should be added that this particular epitaph is entirely structured as a first-person narration (which suggests that there are no longer friends or the sense of community). In addition, for the first time reference is made to a class distinction: *property* (see v. 3–5), which apparently takes the place of the once praised (and now denied) hedonism of the "Alexandrian" erotic epitaphs, in which no such distinctions are present, as the verse in parenthesis alludes (v. 2). Here is the poem:

Tomb of Ignatios

Here I'm not the Kleon famous in Alexandria
 (where they're not easily dazzled)
 for my marvelous houses, my gardens,
 for my horses and chariots,

for the jewels and silks I wore.
Far from it—here I'm not that Kleon;
his twenty-eight years are to be wiped out.
I'm Ignatios, lector, who came to his senses very late;
but even so, in that way I lived ten happy months
in the peace, the security of Christ.

Concluding with "Myris", the lengthiest poem in Cavafy's *Canon*, I will quote only the closing verses to emphasise the insurmountable *rupture* that has taken place intratextually over Myris's dead body as a result of the "war of memories", if I may say, between the heathen lover and the Christian relatives of Myris about what he really was: a heathen *or* a Christian.¹¹ From this perspective, one could claim that Myris's *dead body* symbolises the end of the era of syncretism and tolerance, as explicitly evidenced from the "odd sensation" of alienation that took hold of the heathen lover who felt *his* memory of Myris "perverted by *their* Christianity" (I have highlighted the critical verses):

Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340

[...]

The Christian priests were praying loudly
for the young man's soul.
I noticed with how much diligence,
how much intense concern
for the forms of their religion, they were preparing
everything for the Christian funeral.
And suddenly an odd sensation
took hold of me. Indefinably I felt
as if Myris were going from me;
**I felt that he, a Christian, was united
with his own people and that I was becoming
a stranger, a total stranger. I even felt
a doubt come over me: that I'd also been deceived by my passion
and had always been a stranger to him.**
I rushed out of their horrible house,
rushed away before my memory of Myris
could be captured, could be perverted by their Christianity.

11. It is worth noting that, apart from religious polarisation, the poem also alludes to other elements of social discrimination, such as the class distinction: Myris's family is wealthy, as the heathen lover points out from the outset (v. 9–12). The scholarship about the poem is extensive. I limit myself to a few observations to base my argument, without proceeding to a detailed examination of the poem and of the related studies.

1.3. The consequences of this gradual but radical shift in the paradigm from the ethics of the *mixture* to the ethics of *purity* (religious, ethno-racial, class, gender), as illustrated in the above mentioned poems, are dramatic and can be seen clearly in **the "A.D." erotic poems**. These poems, which can be placed conventionally around A.D. 400 (a date that often appears in the title of Cavafy poems),¹² reveal quite blatantly the alienation and degradation that has occurred after the decline of the Alexandrian world model of tolerance and synthesis, a decline which in the historical poems of Cavafy takes place, roughly speaking, between 200 B.C. and 400 A.D. Two milestones mark the beginning and the end of this process of decline of the Hellenic world and its values: the rise of Rome and the establishment of Christianity.

The factors involved in this cultural and, subsequently, moral degradation are, on the one hand, *the Realpolitik of the mighty*: the political ruthlessness and lack of morals of "the guys in Rome", fuelled by the feud for power and the civil conflicts among the local leaders of the Hellenistic dynasties in the East,¹³ and, on the other hand, *the religious intolerance and dogmatism*: an emblematic figure in this respect being Julian the Apostate (4th century A.D.), probably the most controversial, if not detestable character in Cavafy's poetry in the opinion of many scholars. Commenting on Cavafy's obsession with Julian the Apostate, Keeley (1996: 122) observes that "Julian's attitude towards crucial aspects of Greek culture [...] were clearly at odds with Cavafy's conception of the truly Hellenic", and rightly points out that "Julian's conflict with the Antiochians provided the poet with a subtle means for dramatizing certain significant distinctions even among those devoted to things Greek" (or Christian).¹⁴ In short, Julian's attempt to restore "by law" the ancient spirit and ethos during his short but severe regime (361–

12. Discussing the fact that Cavafy uses this chronology three times in his poems in a period of six years, Savvidēs (1985: 295) notes that this is "a noteworthy repetition", referring also to Saregiannēs, according to whom this repetition "indicates the imminent entry of the Barbarians on the historical stage".

13. See, as a characteristic example, the poem "Of Dimitrios Sotir, 162–150 B.C.", wherefrom the phrase "the guys in Rome". This poem of course is part of a constellation of historical poems around the critical conflict between the Hellenic world and the new order of things imposed by the Romans. For Cavafy's related poems, written between 1911–17 and 1923–33, i.e. during the era of Venizelos and the "National Schism" in Greece in the broader context of the imperialist WW I and its impact especially on Asia Minor and the Middle East, see indicatively Keeley (1996: 114 ff.), Savvidēs (1985: 346–353) and Dallas (1986).

14. The scholar especially focuses on "the intolerant paganism" and the "puritanical authoritarianism" of Julian, as opposed to the "tolerant and elastic" early Cristianity (Keeley 1996: 120, 121). Cf. Savvidēs (1985: 152), who includes also, I think, "the notorious Christians of Antioch" in his argument of intolerance, as opposed to "the spirit of Hellenism" (*ibid.*: 96).

363 A.D.) had exactly the opposite effect: it facilitated the establishment of the *severe* Cristianity and, hence, the definite decline of the spirit of Hellenism.¹⁵

From this historical perspective, one can argue that in Cavafy's poetry the shift from dates "B.C." to dates "A.D.", and from Alexandria to "Syria" (Antioch, Beirut, Sidon, and other cities in Asia Minor) is neither merely geographic, nor merely chronological, it is *cultural*.¹⁶ In this brave new world, "the careers available — especially the public ones — are normally ruled by cynicism, influence peddling, and corruption. Survival in this world is usually a matter of making ends meet with whatever attributes one possesses and without undue concern for moral absolutes or standard virtues" (Keeley 1996: 118–119).

Characteristic poems from Cavafy's *Canon* that reveal this shift in the paradigm are: "The Retinue of Dionysos", "Philhellene", "Orophernis", "From the School of the Renowned Philosopher", "To Have Taken the Trouble", and others. To these one should include for their erotic content the poems: "Imenos", "Theatre of Sidon (A.D. 400)", "Temethos, Antiochian, A.D. 400", "Kleitios' Illness", "In the Tavernas", "Sophist Leaving Syria". As we can see, the poems are not few, which suggests that Cavafy was deeply concerned with this shift.

The distinguishing features of this group of "A.D." poems are:

(a) the fact that the sensual pleasure (*ηδονή*) has become corrupt (*νοσηρή*) and covert (e.g. "Imenos", "Theatre of Sidon (A.D. 400)", "Temethos, Antiochian, A.D. 400");

15. See indicatively, as a starting point of this development, the poem "Julian and the Antiochians" in comparison with Cavafy's final "Julian poem", entitled "On the outskirts of Antioch", the last poem of the *Canon* published after the poet's death. It is worth noting that poems referring to Julian are included not only in the *Canon*, but also in Cavafy's *Unpublished* and *Unfinished* poems, which indicates the poet's constant concern about this historical figure. See the editors' comments about Cavafy's "Julian poems" in these editions. See also Bowersock (1981).

16. "Syria, and the city of Antioch in particular, seemed to function for the poet as new mythic country, developed in detail during these years to present a possible analogy to the poet's mythical Alexandria" (Keeley 1996: 115). In this way, as the scholar aptly observes, Cavafy "could convey the historical moment and all it implied *simply by a date into the title*. And he could signal *the special way of life* relevant to the poem's drama *merely by placing the name of his mythical city before the date*" (Keeley 1996: 136; emphasis mine). Obviously, this technique enabled Cavafy to depict the historical and cultural context of his poems with "strict economy" (*ibid.*).

(b) the adulteration of eros and/or of art by money and politics (e.g. “Sophist Leaving Syria”, “Orophernis”);¹⁷

(c) the fact that the erotic relationship is no longer mutual and lasting till death, as we saw in the Alexandrian epitaphs, but short-lived and insecure; it becomes in fact a love *triangle*, with the factor of power—the third person—making it automatically unbalanced, unequal and insincere (e.g. “In the Tavernas”).

(d) Finally, and more importantly, in the erotic poems that refer to this particular period, homosexuality for the first time in Cavafy’s historical poems acquires negative connotations. Whereas in the “Alexandrian” erotic poems (B.C.) homosexuality was completely acceptable to society at large, it moves now underground, downgraded to the taverns and brothels and devoid of any aesthetic or spiritual substance. Thus, for instance, the anonymous young protagonist of the poem “From the School of the Renowned Philosopher”, *having abandoned philosophy*, “began to haunt / the corrupt houses of Alexandria, / every secret den of debauchery” (v. 15–17). In other words, the lovers who in the “Alexandrian” poems used to be the best of the young, are now becoming social outcasts (pariahs).

I quote here the poem “In the Tavernas” that summarises the new socio-cultural situation, revealing the degradation of love from a *relationship* to a thing, an *asset*, and consequently the degradation of the lover himself, as indicated from the first line:

In the Tavernas

I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I didn’t want to stay
in Alexandria. Tamides left me;

17. An interesting analysis of the dual aspect of the coinage in “Orophernis” (aesthetic / political) has been proposed, among others, by Dallas (1987, 1992). The interplay of art, eros and *agora* is a central issue in Cavafy’s poetics and has been discussed by many scholars. I refer the reader to the chapter “Έρωας, τέχνη και αγορά στην ποίηση του Καβάφη” [Eros, art and market in Cavafy’s poetry] in Mackridge (2008: 213–235), in which the scholar examines all Cavafian erotic poems, regardless the era they refer to. See also Pierēs (2001, 2008) and especially Roilos (2009), who offers a thorough analysis of the socioeconomics of art and desire in Cavafy’s oeuvre and era. The most recent contribution on the subject is that of Panikolaou (2014), who focuses mainly on the contemporary erotic poetry of Cavafy. It should be noted, however, that all these studies do not make the necessary in my opinion methodological distinction between Antiquity-inspired and contemporary poems, which is essential for understanding Cavafy’s historical method, based on the ironic comparison (and not mixing) of the two epochs, as we will see below. For Cavafy’s technique, see in detail Athanasopoulou A. (2016: 90–126, 239–242).

he went off with the Prefect's son to earn himself
a villa on the Nile, a mansion in the city.
It wouldn't have been right for me to stay in Alexandria.
I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I live a vile life, devoted to cheap debauchery.
The one thing that saves me,
like durable beauty, like perfume
that goes on clinging to my flesh, is this: Tamides,
most exquisite of young men, was mine for two years,
and mine not for a house or a villa on the Nile.

It is characteristic that the lover-narrator *abandons* "Alexandria", i.e. the Alexandrian/Hellenic way of life (the negation is repeated twice in active and passive voice: "I didn't want to stay / in Alexandria"— Δεν ήθελα να μένω / στην Αλεξάνδρεια εγώ: v. 2–3; "It wouldn't have been right for me to stay in Alexandria"— Δεν έκανε να μένω στην Αλεξάνδρεια εγώ: v. 6), and moves to decaying Beirut, where he has been downgraded to "a vile life, devoted to cheap debauchery" (Μες σ' ευτελή κραιπάλη / διάγω ποταπώς: v. 8). Tamides, his lover, left him for the extravagances and riches of the Prefect's son; hence, the love triangle, the ephemeral nature of the relationship and, above all, the relegation of eros to a transaction are more than obvious in the poem.¹⁸ The only thing that can keep the "most exquisite of young men" (τον πιο εξάισιο νέο) alive in the protagonist's mind is the *memory* of their prior affection (see the last verses of the poem).

To sum up, the main difference between the B.C. and the A.D. erotic poems is that lovers no longer "wear out" and die from "unsurpassable sensuality" (ηδονή υπερτάτη), like Iasis in the "Alexandrian" epitaph "Tomb of Iasis", but waste away being *deprived* of this sensuality; in effect they die from moral exhaustion, as the dying hero admits in "Kleitos' Illness" (τον ήυρε ο πυρετός εξαντλημένο κιόλας ηθικώς), because love has become saleable, and sinful in the Christian perception. I quote the relevant passages from the two poems to indicate the crucial difference:

¹⁸. In what concerns the love triangle theme, the poem "In the Tavernas" should be read side by side with the poem "Kimon, Son of Learchos, 22, Student of Greek Literature (in Kirini)" for the subtle but significant differences that exist between the two poems. Róilos (2009: 224) discerns analogies between the Antiquity-inspired poem "In the Tavernas" and the contemporary to Cavafy's time erotic poem "Lovely White Flowers", in both of which the erotic loyalty and disloyalty is determined by socio-economic expectations and exchanges.

Tomb of Iasis

[...]

But from being considered so often a Narcissus and Hermes,
 excess wore me out, killed me. Traveler,
 if you're an Alexandrian, you won't blame me.

You know the pace of our life—its fever, its unsurpassable sensuality. (v. 5–8)

Kleitos' illness

[...]

The fever found him already worn out morally
 by the pain of knowing that this friend, a young actor,
 had stopped loving and wanting him. (v. 6–8)

It is worth noting that the word “fever” (*θέρμη, πυρετός*) exists in both poems with different meaning of course.

It is therefore understandable why in Cavafy's poetic corpus there are no erotic poems referring to the medieval-Byzantine period,¹⁹ since the dominant ideology of this era promoted an ideal of love (*αγάπη*) devoid of any corporal or sensual pleasure, and thus completely irrelevant to the “Hellenic pleasure” (*ηδονή*) established in Plato's theory of love, as laid out in the *Symposium* (a sensual pleasure, we should note, that hardly boils down to homosexuality alone). According to this theory, the union of body and soul, of lover and object of affection, was indivisible and intrinsic (into one and the same flesh), and hence divine; in effect the body acted as a medium of the soul in the sense Cavafy embodied in one of his *Unfinished* poems:

I kissed his forehead, his eyes, his mouth,
 his chest, his hands, and every single limb;
 so that I imagined — as Plato's heavenly lines
 have it — that my soul came to my lips.²⁰

19. With the exception perhaps of the *Unfinished* poem “After the Swim”, which takes place in the Byzantine years. See Lavagnini (1994: 122, and commentary on pp. 118–121); transl. in Mendelsohn (2009: 11). It should be noted, however, that the nudity theme in the verses 1–9 is connected with the ancient Greeks rather than with the Byzantines.

20. See [My Soul Was on My Lips] and footnote in Mendelsohn (2009: 114). Cf. related commentary in Lavagnini (1994: 314) and Dēmēroulēs (2015: 626). The ancient epigram attributed to Plato, which is included in the *Palatine Anthology* (vol. I, Book V, 78), reads: *Την ψυχὴν, Αγάθωνα φιλών, ἐπὶ χεῖλεσιν ἔσχον. / ἦλθε γὰρ ἡ τλήμων ὡς διαθισσομένη* [My soul was on my lips as I was kissing Agathon. Poor soul! she came hoping to cross over to him]. See: *The Greek Anthology* with an English translation by W. R. Paton, London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927, p. 167. Obviously, Cavafy was aware of the “long canon” of the Hellenistic *ἐκφρασις/descriptio* of beauty *from top to bottom* (forehead—eyes—mouth—chest—

2. Making the same jump in time that Cavafy was forced to do, let us now proceed to the **contemporary erotic poems**, which take place in the poet's era, in the first decades of the 20th century. The socio-economic and political circumstances during this transitional and in many respects momentous period that culminated in the First World War in Europe and the Asia Minor Catastrophe for Greece can hardly be expounded here and, in any case, are widely known.²¹ What is important to note is the correlation between past and present that Cavafy makes in his erotic poems, a correlation which has been delineated by Edmund Keeley in his book *Cavafy's Alexandria*. I quote a significant passage (emphasis mine):

Cavafy juxtaposes an ancient city and a contemporary city in parallel poems, published and distributed more or less simultaneously, [...] with the image of one city paralleling the other year after year [...] **so as to offer a "two-plane" image of Alexandria**. (Keeley 1996, 47)

Discussing these poems further, in terms of their "juxtaposition" and "two-plane" structure, Keeley notes that:

The relationship between the two planes [...] is one of analogy, which includes differences as well as similarities, and [...] it is fairly complex. [...] One might assume that the conception of love [...] is used primarily to make **an ironic comparison between the two planes** [...]. There is a clear contrast between the circumstances and social role of lovers in the two cities, a clear difference in how the lovers are viewed by their society and in the value placed upon what they represent. (Keeley 1996, 71)

I will not dwell upon the similarities that are to be expected: the lovers are always young and always sensual/passionate, and also, more or less explicitly, homosexual. I prefer to refer to the differences that are more interesting in terms of interpretation.

hands—limbs). On this subject, see in detail Peri (2004). A friend of mine suggested that the translation of *μέλη* as "limbs" and of *θάρρεψα* as "imagined" could be replaced with "parts" and "felt", respectively, which are closer to Cavafy's sense.

21. Tsirkas (1971), whose book remains a fundamental reference edition on Cavafy and his era, gives an account of the poet's life in relation to the socio-historical circumstances in the then British-ruled Egypt, at a time when Alexandria was the major intellectual and economic centre of the Greater Hellenism (as the Greek diaspora often is called). Tsirkas's work becomes even more enlightening, if read together with more extensive historiographic studies, such as those of Eric Hobsbawm on Europe on the eve of the First World War that marked the beginning of the end of Empires.

A recognisable feature of Cavafy's contemporary erotic poems is that the lovers, unlike their ancient Alexandrian counterparts, are *anonymous*, apparently because their social status, as depicted by Cavafy, starkly differs between the two periods: the lovers were totally acceptable and seen as the best young men in ancient Alexandria (B.C.), while being denounced as debased outcasts in the poet's contemporary society.²² The poem "Days of 1909, '10, and '11" is ideally suited to help understand this difference, since the two periods—contemporary and ancient—in this case are juxtaposed not in parallel poems, but in the same poem, yet without running into each other (see the dash, which indicates the boundary between the two epochs in the last stanza; emphasis mine):

Days of 1909, '10, and '11

He was the son of a harassed, poverty-stricken sailor
(from an island in the Aegean Sea).
He worked for a blacksmith: his clothes shabby,
his workshoes miserably torn,
his hands filthy with rust and oil.

In the evenings, after the shop closed,
if there was something he longed for especially,
a fairly expensive tie,
a tie for Sunday,
or if he saw and coveted
a beautiful blue shirt in some store window,
he'd sell his body for a dollar or two.

I ask myself if **the glorious Alexandria
of ancient times could boast of a boy
more exquisite, more perfect**—lost though he was:
that is, we don't have a statue or painting of him;
thrust into that awful blacksmith's shop,
overworked, tormented, given to cheap debauchery,
he was soon used up.

Cavafy's attention to detail in describing truthfully the historical context in which his characters act is well attested in his poetry and has been noted numerous times by Cavafy scholars. In the case of the erotic poems, however,

22. For an account on homosexuality in the social context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Western postindustrial world and in Alexandria as an important cosmopolitan financial center, see Roilos (2009: 218–221) and, more extensively, Papanikolaou (2014: especially Chapter 2).

the depiction of "contemporary realia" seems to serve another purpose as well: such intratextual elements, and often the title itself or even the form of the poem, operate as signs that *do not allow us to confuse the two eras*, the ancient and the contemporary, in Cavafy's corresponding or "parallel", according to Keeley, erotic poems. In short, these elements serve to *contextualise* the erotic content of the poem, thus avoiding the anachronisms and/or the generalisations that an eternal issue, such as love, would allow.²³ In the case of "Days of 1909, '10, and '11" we saw above, it is worth noting that Cavafy insists especially on details relating to the hero's economic and social status (humble origins, immigrant, overworked blacksmith, clothes and shoes miserably torn), details which compose a kind of frame, both textual and social, that contextualises the prostitution of the young hero.

This observation leads us to the most prominent feature of Cavafy's contemporary erotic poems, which is the socioeconomic profiling of the protagonists. In most cases, as we have seen, they are *socially debased*: poor people (blue- or white-collar workers) striving to make ends meet,²⁴ often unemployed, or petty swindlers without a "legitimate" job. It is indicative that many of them are gamblers (as is the case of "Two Young Men, 23 to 24 years old"), or sell their bodies to strangers for a tie or a nice shirt, like the anonymous blacksmith of the poem "Days of 1909, '10, and '11". The reasons for separation between the lovers are also accidental and, basically, economic. The necessities of life force them to migrate (to Smyrna or even further, to New York or Canada: see the poems "Before Time Altered Them" and "Gray"), or to give themselves to another lover who has more means to support them (an indicative example being "Lovely White Flowers").²⁵

23. I provide an indicative list of such realia in Cavafy's contemporary erotic poems: ties, collars, vests, shirts, couches, desks, drawers, cafés, bars, tobacco shops, casinos, cinemas, even cars. On the other hand, the *form* of the Antiquity-inspired erotic poems of Cavafy, which are composed as if they were ancient Greek epigrams, seems to serve the same purpose, the distinction of the two eras. In the few instances where anachronisms are present (the "tavernas" being a good example), this is done deliberately and with a very careful poetic economy, as I intend to demonstrate in another paper concerning the category of the poems of poetics with no specified time and space, in which the erotic memory plays a central role.

24. Cavafy's focus on workers, who are underpaid in their jobs and gamble to make ends meet, may as well reflect his own experience as an underpaid public servant at the Irrigation Department, who occasionally tried his hand at the Stock Exchange. See Tsirkas (1971: 223 ff., especially Cavafy's requests for a raise, which according to Tsirkas reveal the drama of his life as a public servant: 229–234). On the social status of Cavafy's family see *ibid.*: Chapter II and V-IX.

25. Besides any "aesthetic" interpretation of these themes in relation to the decadent literary taste of the period, it is obvious, I think, that immigration, like gambling or prostitution or other outlaw activities such as burglary, is an inevitable choice for Cavafy's young heroes driven

Money, in fact, is the “fortune” or the “destiny” that determines whether the love affair would continue or end (needless to say that most affairs, if not all are fleeting).²⁶

It is clear that in selecting the lovers portrayed in his contemporary poems from among the proletariat—and often the lumpen proletariat—Cavafy paints a picture of decline/decadence that is fundamentally money-based and has to do with the degradation (*αλλοτρίωση*) of the individual and of human relations in the conditions of capitalism. I quote the poem “Days of 1896”, which depicts quite clearly this degradation of the human personality brought about by the capitalist class system and its values (emphasis mine):

Days of 1896

He became completely degraded. His erotic tendency,
condemned and strictly forbidden
(but innate for all that), was the cause of it:
society was totally prudish.

**He gradually lost what little money he had,
then his social standing, then his reputation.**

Nearly thirty, he had never worked a full year—
at least not at a legitimate job.

Sometimes he earned enough to get by
acting the go-between in deals considered shameful.

He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly
if you were seen around with him often.

But this isn’t the whole story—that would not be fair.

The memory of his beauty deserves better.

There is another angle; seen from that

he appears attractive, appears
a simple, genuine child of love,
without hesitation putting,

by poverty and reflects actual circumstances of the poet’s time. Roilos considers the whole spectrum of “illegal” or “idle” activities of the lovers’ marginalised way of life as a manifestation of the “antieconomy of jouissance”, which he perceives in terms of non productive economic-libidinal desires and exchanges that constitute the anti-paradigm of the capitalist economy of profit and productivity (see Roilos 2009: 199 and *passim*).

26. The theme of “fortune” in Cavafy needs a detailed examination that cannot be expounded here. Pertinent to our topic is the observation of Mackridgē (2008: 229) that “‘Fortune’ is a function of the social and economic circumstances”. Referring to two common figures in Cavafy’s erotic poetry, the gambler, who “invests in fortune”, and the flâneur, who wanders in search of libidinal pleasure “betting” on *tychē*, Roilos remarks, in support of his overarching argument of the “antieconomy of jouissance”, that “they [both] privilege unpredictability at the expense of strategic financial planning” (2009: 216–217).

**above his honor and reputation,
the pure sensuality of his pure flesh.**

Above his reputation? But society,
prudish and stupid, had it wrong.

The characterisation of the society as “prudish and stupid” is a recurrent motif in Cavafy's erotic poems, especially those that refer to the poet's contemporary society (reflecting also to his “A.D.” underground erotic poems). This element suggests that Cavafy's obsession with the working-class youths is not merely aesthetic, in the sense that he is attracted by their *natural* beauty and their *natural* language, but it has an ideological rationale as well: emphasising “the pure sensuality of the pure flesh” of the poor and socially debased, and adopting their modes of expression in his poetic idiom, Cavafy seems to dare the established mores of bourgeois society, in particular the hypocrisy of “good manners”, “honor” and “reputation”, exposing the profoundly *immoral socio-economic basis* of the market society in his oeuvre.²⁷

*

The analysis that preceded should leave no doubt, I believe, that Cavafy is *both* historical and social poet, as Savvidēs suggested, and grounds his poetics, as he ought to, in both dimensions of historical time, past and present, thus ensuring the unity of his oeuvre.²⁸ Above all, Cavafy is a dialectical poet, as evidenced by the “ironic comparison” of the two eras he makes in his poems—Antiquity-inspired and contemporary—focusing on the underlying socioeconomic causes that influence the superstructure, i.e. the perceptions, moral values, and attitudes of the people, and ultimately the social function of art in each era. As Keeley explains,

27. See indicatively the poet's note in Savvidēs (1983a: 43), which refers to the beauty of the poor young men, as opposed to the rich young men, on whose “swollen or withered faces the ugliness of the crimes of their inheritances and interests is revealed” (the translation is cited from Roilos 2009: 228). It is remarkable how close to Marxist analysis is the anatomy of social reality that emerges from Cavafy's erotic poetry. On the socialist ideas, “which at that time had a popularity greater than their narrow ideological influence”, see Papanikolaou (2014: 146, note 53), including related bibliography. On how Cavafy's (and Lapathiotis's) poetry fits into the tradition of “the erotic mythologisation of the proletariat”, see Vasileiadē (2008).

28. This view recurs in all Savvidēs's writings on “political” Cavafy (see, for instance, Savvidēs 1966: 180–181, note 100; Savvidēs 1985: 140; Savvidēs 1987: 405). On Cavafy's social views, see the poet's *Notes*, and related commentary in Savvidēs (1985: 135–145 and 147–154), as well as Cavafy's *Essays* in Pierēs (2003).

The focus does not move merely *from* the contemporary *to* the ancient. There is a movement in both directions: an illumination of the present by its analogy to the past, and vice-versa. (Keeley 1996: 72; emphasis his)

What is the purpose of this “complex analogy” between past and present? To answer this question, let me first point out that the comparison Cavafy makes between the ancient and the contemporary sensual city hardly relates only to Alexandria B.C. (see 1.1 here); it also concerns—and this is the crucial point in his perspective—the paradigm shift that took place from A.D. onwards (see 1.2 and 1.3), thus reflecting in a way the state of affairs in the world during the poet’s time. In general lines, as Keeley and other Cavafy scholars have suggested, the mapping of the B.C. and A.D. centuries in Cavafy’s poetry enables the poet to depict history in the making and to portray the rise and fall of a civilisation (and its causes), using the Hellen(ist)ic past as a “metaphor valid for the entire Western civilisation” (Savvidēs 1985: 326), at a time—his own time—marked by equally profound shifts in the cultural paradigm. Dallas in fact (1986: 150–154) speaks of “projections of [Cavafy’s] era onto the dimensions of historical time”, i.e. “equal and reciprocal correspondences” or “resonances” of the poet’s contemporary experiences with those he described in his historical poems.²⁹

We could summarise the most characteristic of these analogies as follows: the degradation of eros and *φιλοκαλία* in Cavafy’s ancient world, as a result of the entry of the Barbarians on the historical stage (see the “A.D.” poems discussed in 1.3), corresponds to the poet’s contemporary capitalist world in the first decades of the 20th century, which brings new or similar barbarisms: the degradation of human relations and values to mere profiteering in the market society; the imperialism of the Great Powers³⁰ and the games of power viciously played by the not-so-mighty, which lead to the Great War and the Asia Minor Catastrophe (as was the case with the “guys in Rome” and “Syria” in ancient times); the personality cult in the form of the “Superhuman”, along with the dogma of racial purity and intolerance (which brings in mind, among other ancient examples, the puritanical au-

29. Dallas also provides an indicative list of such resonances on pp. 153–154 of his study, which correlate certain historical poems of Cavafy with the era of Venizelos, in which the most significant event for Greece is the so-called “National Schism” (Εθνικός Διχασμός), in the broader context of WW I and the Asia Minor campaign resulting to the uprooting of the Greek population from the ancestral land of Ionia.

30. Perhaps with a special emphasis on Great Britain, given its role as a ruler of Cavafy’s contemporary Alexandria (Egypt), and its leading role in the Entente coalition in the context of the WW I.

thoritarianism of Julian), and so on.³¹ As far as art and its social function is concerned, one could discern a profound analogy between the circles of *aesthetes*, as depicted, for instance, in “Young Men of Sidon, A.D. 400”, with the circles of *décadents* in the poet's time.³² Both circles of “perfumed literati” are detached from the world of action, yet their art and stance is hardly unaffected by the dramatic historical developments of their era in a *milieu* profoundly divided by blindly dogmatists: no longer quasi-Christianised but ragingly “Christian”, no longer Hellenic but “heathen”, no longer a mixture but each alien and alienated in their own faith and their own credo, to recall “Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340”.

From this point of view, one can argue—as has been shown in this paper—that Cavafy's historical perspective is obvious not only in his historical poems *per se*, but also in the thematic area of his erotic poetry, which in fact intersects with the historical area, as the poet himself had stated.³³ “Moulded his historical insight and his erotic vision into a coherent mythology”, to use Keeley's words (1996: 138), Cavafy's method allows us to look at things dialectically—in “ironic comparison”—and to explain *historically* the paradigm shift in the “long term”, thus ultimately to arrive at conclusions with diachronic and universal validity.³⁴

This finding is closely related to Cavafy's worldview that is determined by “Alexandrian” values and ways of life, i.e. by a sense of being neither “Greek” (Ἕλληνας), nor “Hellenised” (Ἑλληνίζων) but “Hellenic” (ελληνικός): the product of a mixture dominated by the Greek spirit, culture, and language that form the foundations of the Western civilisation.³⁵ When the mixture

31. For Cavafy's views on these ideologies, which reflect the *Zeitgeist* of his era, see the poet's *Notes* in Savvidēs (1983a: especially p. 49 and elsewhere).

32. Cf. in this regard the discussion made by Roilos (2009: 142–145), commenting on Cavafy's essay “A Few Pages on the Sophists”.

33. See Cavafy's note on poetics first published in *Αλεξανδρινή Τέχνη* (vol. I, no. 6, May 1927: 39–40) and re-published and commented by Savvidēs (1966: 209–210), where, among other things, the poet remarks: «η ιστορική περιοχή κάποτε προσεγγίζει τόσο στην ηδονική (ή αισθησιακή) που είναι δύσκολο να κατατάξει κανείς ορισμένα ποιήματά τους» [“The historical area sometimes touches so nearly on the erotic (or sensual) that it is difficult for one to classify some of the poems in these areas”]. Quoted in Keeley's translation (Keeley 1996: 212, note 13)].

34. Keeley in fact believes that Cavafy's survey of Greek history in the *longue durée* can serve as “a metaphor for the human race in general” (Keeley 1996: 130). This argument is developed further in the last chapter of his book, entitled “The Universal Perspective” (p. 135 ff., especially 148–151).

35. Significant observations on this subject (Ἕλληνας, Ἑλληνίζων, Ἑλληνικός) are made by Keeley (1996: 105 ff.). The scholar considers Cavafy's “abiding respect for this Greek tradition” (hedonism, art, philosophy, self-awareness, worship of beauty, and of course the Greek

dissolves, then the “Hellenic” and, hence, the Western civilisation comes to an end. From this perspective, I believe that in terms of ideology and thematic focus, Cavafy’s purpose in juxtaposing the ancient and contemporary sensual Alexandria in “parallel” poems, written and distributed more or less simultaneously, was to point out that the true cause of the decline of a civilisation is not the mixture, the “cosmopolitan amalgam”, but the aversion to the Other, which is no less than dogmatism, intolerance and fanaticism of the greedily power-hungry and the arrogant self-deceived.³⁶

I shall conclude with an observation on Cavafy’s poetics of love, which reveals the poet’s attitude towards the ethics of the market society (in both senses of the word “market”: as a forum and as a trading place) diachronically. Probably the most specific feature of Cavafy’s erotic poems, as has been pointed out,³⁷ is the tendency to look at things from “another angle”, as the poet writes in “Days of 1896”, and to overturn conventions: whatever is considered ugly, poor, unlawful, corrupt, inferior, etc., is in reality—in the reality of love—pure, beautiful, authentic, superior.

I am quoting one of many examples in Cavafy’s oeuvre, in this case from the poem “Days of 1901” (emphasis mine):³⁸

language) as a manifestation of the “cultural, rather than political, chauvinism of Hellenes” (*ibid.*: 110).

36. For a more detailed discussion, see the closing observations in the chapter on Cavafy in Athanasopoulou A. (2016: 115–126). On Cavafy’s concept of decline, see also the fundamental study of Haas (1982). Dallas identifies syncretism, the “cosmopolitan amalgam”, at all levels of Cavafy’s oeuvre: in the language and technique, in the themes and meanings, in the merging of ways of life, etc. (see Dallas 1986: 24–25, 44, 120, and elsewhere). Of course, this has been noted repeatedly by many Cavafy scholars.

37. In Cavafy scholarship, it is commonly accepted that the poet’s obsession with the “deviant” love manifests “the very art of rule breaking, [...] the infringement of society’s sanctions on discourse and behaviour”, to quote Jusdanis (1987: 97). Pierēs (1992: 203) notes: “The works Cavafy wrote in the last fifteen years of his life include at least fifteen poems, in which the theme of the house and the chamber recurs time and time again [...] as an artfully crafted poetic inversion of the elements that define what is decent and what indecent, what is sacred and what profane, what is shameful and what honourable, what moral and what immoral” (the titles of the poems are listed in a footnote). The author expresses similar views in his subsequent studies on eros in Cavafy’s poetry (see Pierēs 2001, 2008). See also Roilos (2009), who bases his analysis of Cavafy’s (homo)erotic poetry on the argument of the infertile economico-libidinal (self-)expenditure. For the meaning of “expenditure”, based on Bataille’s notion of “general economy” as contrasted to the market economy, see p. 118, note 15.

38. Other examples from the *Canon* include: “Days of 1896”, “Outside the House”, “One of Their Gods”, “Passing Through”, and other poems.

Days of 1901

The exceptional thing about him was
that **in spite of all his loose living,**
his vast sexual experience,
and the fact that usually
his attitude matched his age,
in spite of this there were moments—
extremely rare, of course—when **he gave the impression**
that his flesh was almost virginal.
His twenty-nine-year-old beauty,
so tested by sensual pleasure,
would sometimes strangely remind one
of a boy who, somewhat awkwardly, gives
his pure body to love for the first time.

This alchemistic function of love, if I may say, that makes reality more beautiful without embellishing it, is not as absurd or as far-fetched as it may seem or be interpreted at first sight (as the product of the poet's imagination at best or a wishful thinking at worst). On the contrary, it is a bold act, albeit only in words, with unforeseeable consequences for the future (not just his own but also of his readers).³⁹ Perhaps the most telling example is the *Unfinished* poem, entitled "A Company of Four" [outlaws], where Love beautifies "the filthy money" in a complete reversal of the established moral of capitalism according which money can buy everything, including love. I quote the relevant verses from this intriguing, in any aspect, poem:

The money that they make certainly isn't honest:
now and then they fear that someone will get hurt,
that they might go to jail. But look, you see how **Love**
has a power that can take their filthy money
and make it into something gleaming, innocent.⁴⁰

39. See the *Unpublished* poem "The Bank of the Future", in which, not incidentally, I think, Cavafy speaks about his poetics in market terms. The poem was written early on (1897), when the poet was still unsure of the mark he would leave in art. However, his choice of the "bank" motif shows how preoccupied he was (probably due to his employment as well) with the market society from the very beginning of his poetic formation. In later poems, the art—market relationship, while remaining a central theme, will be developed with much greater mastery, securing the poet a prominent place in the "bank of the future", as evidenced by the lasting and universal impact of his work. On the art—market relationship in Cavafy, see the Chapter 3 in Roilos (2009); analysis of the poem on pp. 208–210.

40. See Lavagnini (1994: 289); Mendelsohn (2009: 35). The subject of crime/criminality in Cavafy's erotic poems, especially those which take place in the poet's time, is an issue that de-

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that love and, in particular, the attitude towards love is a *political* act. The criteria and motives behind the choices one makes in love, the choice of who you would go with and who you would let go determines *who you are*.

Cavafy knew, as we all know, that love—true love—is always new and fresh, and that oldness and decay can happen only in a culture that has no place for love (in whatever form). He also knew, as we all know, that no love is “unnatural”, as long as it is reciprocated and genuine. Love is revolutionary by nature because it liberates. It is the most liberating force there is, as it requires *dénudement*.

If we examine Cavafy’s poems from this perspective, we may be able to understand better some of his choices. We would see, for instance, that the theme of love in his poetry is closely related to the theme of decline; more precisely, it falls under the overarching theme of *old age vs. youth*, of *decay vs. immortality*, or of death anxiety (*Todesangst*) vs. life instinct (*Lebenstrieb*) in Freud’s terms. We would also discern that lovers, “the champions of pleasure” (*οι ανδρείοι της ηδονής*), in Cavafy’s poems always meet “in the street”, or “at the threshold”, or in a “very special house”, as there is no “appropriate” place to accommodate the bravery of love, the vigour of life. Such a place can only be intangible; it can exist solely in memory or in the person’s inner life, which is not governed by the laws of society (thoughts are free). In this respect, the contemplation of love in the “lonely house” is not a perversion, as it has occasionally been interpreted,⁴¹ but the chronotope of freedom, I think.⁴²

serves to be examined in its own right. For now, I refer the reader to an interesting paper by Haas (2000b), entitled “Νόμος και έγκλημα στην ερωτική ποίηση του Καβάφη” [Law and Crime in Cavafy’s Erotic Poetry]. See also Roilos (2009, especially pp. 213–216), in which the topic is examined in the European context (the heroization and aestheticization of the figure of the outlaw in Romantic and especially in decadent literature).

41. Such an interpretation was first proposed by Malanos (1933). On Cavafy’s technique of inspiration, see Dēmaras (1992: 127–139); for an English version see C. Th. Dēmaras and Diana Haas, “Cavafy’s Technique of Inspiration”, *Grand Street*, 2/3 (Spring 1983): 143–156. The subject of Cavafy’s eroticism is revisited in a recent (rather controversial) monograph by Papanikolaou (2014). However, many other aspects—aesthetic, philosophical, psychological—of the poet’s approach to staging his erotic poems and choosing his motifs need be explored further, I believe, in order to form a comprehensive picture of the erotic theme in Cavafy’s poetry.

42. I coin this term bearing in mind Bakhtin’s and Foucault’s theories. Foucault’s thought is enlightening, particularly as regards the balance between concealment and *parrhesia*, which is crucial for the individual’s sense of freedom. Needless to say that the scheme *απόκρυψη / παρ-*

Last but not least, lovers in Cavafy *denude progressively*, i.e. they gradually liberate themselves from the social restrictions and personal inhibitions, in a process that culminates in "Days of 1908"—the last poem Cavafy himself published—in the exquisite verse *Κ' έμενε ολόγυμνος· άψογα ωραιός· ένα θαύμα*. I quote the poem, which in my opinion summarises the features of Cavafy's erotic-political poetry:

Days of 1908

He was out of work that year,
so he lived off card games,
backgammon, and borrowed money.

He was offered a job at three pounds a month
in a small stationery store,
but he turned it down without the slightest hesitation.
It wasn't suitable. It wasn't the right pay for him,
a reasonably educated young man, twenty-five years old.

He won two, maybe three dollars a day—sometimes.
How much could he expect to make out of cards and backgammon
in the cafés of his social level, working-class places,
however cleverly he played, however stupid the opponents he chose?
His borrowing—that was even worse.
He rarely picked up a dollar, usually no more than half that,
and sometimes he had to come down to even less.

For a week or so, sometimes longer,
when he managed to escape those horrible late nights,
he'd cool himself at the baths, and with a morning swim.

His clothes were a terrible mess.
He always wore the same suit,
a very faded cinnamon-brown suit.

ρησία lies at the centre of Cavafy's poetry and poetics. Not incidentally, Foucault's work served as a basic tool for Papanikolaou's approach to Cavafy (see Papanikolaou 2014: 149 ff., especially 151–153, 166, 172–173, and elsewhere). See also Jusdanis (1987: 95–96, especially note 18 on Foucault's view of fantasy as a key aspect of [homo]sexuality). The concept of the "chronotope" in Bakhtin's narrative theory is so widely known that a special reference is hardly needed (for a comprehensive account, see Shepherd 1998, especially pp. 139–210). It is intriguing to examine whether Bakhtin's and Foucault's views can be used in combination, with the necessary adjustments, for analysing Cavafy's poetics of love, and in particular the inspiration technique based on memory/contemplation (my hypothesis is that this technique enables Cavafy to create a "space-time", i.e. a "chronotope" of artistic and personal freedom).

O summer days of nineteen hundred and eight,
from your perspective
the cinnamon-brown suit was tastefully excluded.

Your perspective has preserved him
as he was when he took off, threw off,
those unworthy clothes, that mended underwear,
and stood stark naked, impeccably handsome, a miracle—
his hair uncombed, swept back,
his limbs a little tanned
from his morning nakedness at the baths and on the beach.⁴³

This poem—the last of the *Canon* published by the poet—closes the cycle of Cavafy's erotic poems with a truly Platonic statement on the nature of love in its naked, radiant purity (an *apotheosis*), that would have been adopted, I think, by all poets initiated in the erotic experience, either "pagans", "Christians" or "agnostics", from Symeon the New Theologian, exalting *θείος έρως* in his writings, to Andreas Embirikos's *Oktana*, to name just two among many others in the Neo-Hellenic tradition, and beyond.

43. Cf. the *Unfinished* poem "After the Swim" (1921), which refers to the Byzantine period (see Lavagnini 1994: 122; Mendelsohn 2009: 11). Between the two poems exist significant similarities in the staging and the motifs. Of particular interest for the erotic theme are the verses 1–9 of the unfinished poem, in which the "supple nudity" of the young protagonists is related to the *καλαισθησία* of the ancient Greeks.

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