

Specters of  
CAVAFY

Maria Boletsi



*Specters of Cavafy*

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Maria Boletsi, *Specters of Cavafy*

# Specters of Cavafy



*Maria Boletsi*

University of Michigan Press

*Ann Arbor*

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Published in the United States of America by the  
University of Michigan Press  
Manufactured in the United States of America  
Printed on acid-free paper  
First published July 2024

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data has been applied for.*

ISBN: 978-0-472-07684-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)  
ISBN: 978-0-472-22205-6 (ebook)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11723240>

Cover illustration: *Cavafy* bust by Apostolos Fanakidis, 2013. Polyester and neon.  
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*To Aris and Maya, my life's poetry*



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Digital materials related to this title can be found on the Fulcrum platform via the following citable URL: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11723240>



## *Acknowledgments*

Some texts follow us in our lives as constant partners in thinking, guiding the ways we read, signify, and experience other texts, objects, and situations in life. Cavafy's poems have been such partners for me—as for many others—haunting most of my writings and shaping my thought through modes of address that have taken unexpected twists and turns since I got hooked on his poems as a teenager. This book is my attempt to articulate and make sense of this address. Written over the course of several years, it shifted shape many times and feels like the product of a (still ongoing) conversation between Cavafy's writings, other threads in my work, and the ideas of other “partners in thinking”: philosophers, theorists, and writers who have shaped my work as well as real-life interlocutors, colleagues, friends.

Artemis Leontis, the series editor, not only believed in the project and embraced it for this new series, but offered invaluable feedback on the manuscript and unwavering support throughout the process of this book's publication, alongside Ellen Bauerle from the University of Michigan Press. Dimitris Papanikolaou's sharp comments and creative insights pushed many of my ideas in the book further. Karen Emmerich's and Gregory Jusdanis's meticulous, attentive reading and constructive feedback on the whole manuscript made this book better in so many ways. Nikolas Kakkoufa, Alexander Kazamias, and Will Stroebel read and provided perspicacious comments on different parts of the manuscript. Eduardo Cadava, Ricardo Domeneck, Álvaro García Marín, Stathis Gourgouris, Hero Hokwerda, LudovicK Jansen, Vassilis Lambropoulos, Christian Moser, Alexander Nehamas, Maria Oikonomou, Eleni Papargyriou, George Syrimis, Markus Winkler, and many others were precious interlocutors in various exchanges over the past decade that helped me think through my ideas in this book. Kristina Gedgaudaite, Tatiana Markaki, Eva Fotiadi, and many other colleagues and friends offered encouragement, feedback, or advice in various greatly appreciated forms. Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal have been my mentors for almost twenty years and a constant source of guid-

ance and inspiration, which has fueled this book and my thinking in general. Arnold van Gemert has also been a mentor, whose constant support provides an anchor for me and the Modern Greek department in Amsterdam.

My colleagues both at the Modern Greek Studies department of the University of Amsterdam and the Film and Literary Studies department of Leiden University have been wonderfully supportive and generous in countless ways, nurturing my “double identity” as a scholar in comparative literature and modern Greek studies, which permeates this book. I am also grateful to the members of the “Greek Studies Now” network between Oxford and Amsterdam as well as the “Crisis, Critique, and Futurity” research group at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis for the rewarding close-knit community we have fostered and for sharing and discussing each other’s works in progress. My undergraduate and graduate students and my PhD students with whom I have time and again shared my fascination with Cavafy’s work continue to surprise and inspire me with their insights, including new, unexpected readings of Cavafy. I am also grateful to my research assistants, Kim Sommer and Angel Perazzetta, for their outstanding work on the indexes.

My ideas on this book were sharpened through a series of gatherings in which I tested my writings on Cavafy with diverse audiences. To mention just a few: the five symposia of the Modern Greek Studies Association in which I presented parts of this book in all its stages between 2009 and 2022; the two Cavafy Summer Schools (2017, 2022) and the research seminar series and lecture series on Cavafy of the Onassis Foundation in Athens (2017) in which I participated; the Cavafy Symposium at the University of New South Wales in Sydney (2013); the “Götter im Exil: Neuzeitliche Figurationen antiker Mythen” symposium at the University of Freiburg (2018); the inaugural conference of the “Greek Studies Now” network, titled “Modern Greek Studies in the 21st Century: Perspectives and Practices in Cultural Analysis,” at Oxford University in 2020; and the “Figure(ation)s of the ‘Present’” conference at Bonn University (2020). The book was also enriched through conversations with academic and nonacademic audiences in many places where I was invited to present parts of this book, including Amsterdam, Athens, Bonn, Cologne, Columbus, Geneva, Vienna, Leiden, Leuven, Lund, Melbourne, Princeton, Sofia, Thessaloniki, and New Haven.

The role of various institutions in completing this book has also been crucial. The Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University, where I worked on this book as a research fellow in the fall of 2016, provided me with a wealth of facilities, a stimulating environment with engaged interlocutors, and one of the most valuable and rare commodities in academia today: research

time. The Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and the Leiden University Center for the Arts in Society have provided a stimulating interdisciplinary environment in which I have found precious interlocutors and collaborators over the years. The Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation has supported my work as Marilena Laskaridis Chair in Modern Greek Studies in Amsterdam since 2018 in so many ways, as the chair's sponsor but also as partner and collaborator: the work we do in Modern Greek Studies in Amsterdam, from which this book largely benefitted, would not have been possible without this support. I am also grateful for the continuing support of the Dutch Society for Modern Greek Studies, which founded my chair and functions as a bridge between academic and broader audiences. The open online Cavafy archive of the Onassis Foundation is a true blessing, and without access to this wealth of material this book would not have been the same. The Foundation was also generous in providing permissions for using images of archival material and from its 2013 "Cavafy campaign." Angeliki Mousiou and Marianna Christofi from the Cavafy archive were extremely helpful in facilitating all aspects of this book project that involved archival material.

No words can adequately capture my gratitude to my family for their support and love: especially my parents, Anastasia and Spyros, my sister Aggela, and my husband, Savas, who has patiently put up with the crazy working hours and small sacrifices that writing this book involved. Aris and Maya were both born after I had started working on this book and have prolonged the book's completion in the loveliest and most rewarding ways.

This book was also written in the company of specters of people who are no longer around. As an MA student at the University of Amsterdam in 2004, I wrote a paper on speech acts in Cavafy's poetry, which my late teacher John Neubauer (1933–2015) encouraged me to submit to the journal *Arcadia*—the first article I ever published, in 2006. That article contained the seeds of this book, which may not have flourished without his generous support. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is another haunting presence: although I never got to meet her in person, her discussion of my first article on Cavafy in her last book toward the end of her life, and our subsequent brief email exchange, were a lesson in the power of intellectual generosity by a heroine of mine, whose inspiring work resonates throughout this book. Gerard Hendrik Blanken (1902–1986), the first professor of Modern Greek at the University of Amsterdam, and the first to translate Cavafy and introduce him to the Dutch public, should also be mentioned here: the donation of his personal Cavafy archive to the special collections of the University of Amsterdam in 2020 by his daughters allowed Cavafy's specters to enter our university's archives. As I spent time in the company of his

collection—particularly some early editions of studies on Cavafy—Blanken’s extensive notes and corrections in the margins were a constant reminder of the various careful hands through which Cavafy has been mediated. Lastly, Edmund Keeley’s (1928–2022) haunting presence is unmistakable too: his translations of Cavafy—also included in this book—will keep inspiring readers far beyond his recent passing.

The first part of chapter 4 on Cavafy’s diary appeared in a different version as “Reading Irony through Affect: The Non-Sovereign Ironic Subject in C. P. Cavafy’s Diary” in the volume *How to Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, ed. Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa (Brill 2019), 17–39, and in an earlier and much more condensed form, in Greek, in “Η θερμοκρασία της ειρωνείας στον Καβάφη” [The temperature of irony in C.P. Cavafy] in the literary magazine *Δέντρο*, no. 193–94 (2013), 83–88. Parts of chapter 5 are based on my article “Still Waiting for Barbarians after 9/11? Cavafy’s Reluctant Irony and the Language of the Future,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 32, no. 1 (2014): 55–80, and other parts of the same chapter draw partly from my chapter “On the Threshold of the Twentieth Century: History, Crisis, and Intersecting Figures of Barbarians in C. P. Cavafy’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ (Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους’ 1898/1904)” in Markus Winkler with Maria Boletsi, Jens Herlth, Christian Moser, Julian Reidy, and Melanie Rohner, *Barbarian: Explorations of a Western Concept in Theory, Literature and the Arts*, vol. 1, *From the Enlightenment to the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Metzler 2018), 285–334. An earlier condensed version of (part of) my argument in chapter 6 was integrated in my inaugural speech as Marilena Laskaridis Endowed Chair of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Amsterdam, *The Futurity of Things Past: Thinking Greece Beyond Crisis* (September 21, 2018).

When citing full poems or longer excerpts from Cavafy’s poems and prose, I offer both the Greek text and an English translation. For shorter passages or (parts of) lines, I either offer both the Greek and English translation, or only the English, when citing the Greek is not crucial for the analysis. Quotes from other non-English sources are offered only in English translation, unless citing the original is important for the argument. For simplicity, I did not maintain the Greek polytonic system for Cavafy’s texts in Greek. Unless otherwise stated, I retained the original spelling from Cavafy manuscripts I consulted, even when subsequent editions adjusted his spelling. For citing Cavafy’s original texts, I used manuscripts and editions from the Cavafy archive. Citations from the prose poem “Τα πλοία” and the published version of the poem “Το καλαμάρι” are from Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Τα ποιήματα: Δημοσιευμένα και αδημοσίευτα* [The poems: Published and unpublished], edited by Dimitris Dimiroulis (Gutenberg 2015), used with the editor’s kind permission. Citations from the unfinished

poems “Γένεσις ποιήματος” and “Θάταν το οινόπνευμα” are based on the original manuscripts but I have also consulted Renata Lavagnini’s valuable edition, Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Ατελή ποιήματα, 1918–1932* [Unfinished poems, 1918–1932], edited by Renata Lavagnini (Ikaros, 1994).

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Kostas Bassanos, *In Search of the Exotic*, 2016. Installation view at EVA International—Ireland’s Biennial 2016. Dimensions variable. Photo Miriam O’Connor. Courtesy the Artist and EVA International.

Glenn Ligon. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 2021. Neon, dimensions variable. © Glenn Ligon. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: © Natalia Tsoukala, Courtesy NEON.





## Preface

Few other poets have laid a bigger claim on our present and its concerns than Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933). A homosexual poet who lived most of his life in Alexandria, writing in idiosyncratic Greek from the margins of the Greek world, and who was initially received hesitantly, even dismissively, by most Greek critics in his time, he once seemed destined to remain excluded from the literary canon. Yet he is now seen as the most important modern Greek poet and a prominent figure in world literature. Cavafy’s poetry remains emphatically contemporary. As critics miss no chance to repeat, his work addresses theoretical, cultural, and political concerns, desires, and anxieties that are at the heart of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His poems keep coming back like specters, claiming, and being claimed by, future presents.

Addressing Cavafy’s popularity in our present, Gregory Jusdanis succinctly lists some of the concerns and themes that add to his poetry’s continuing relevance:

As a writer of the diaspora he reflected considerably on the fate of individuals living away from their homelands. He composed frank and daring homoerotic verse decades ahead of other poets. While contemporaneous Greeks and other Europeans may have focused on the glories of Hellas, he turned his glance to the “decay” of Hellenic civilization. He filled those poems set in antiquity (but not those in modern, Muslim Alexandria) with people of mixed ancestry, race, and religion. And he did this with the experimental strategies of modernism.<sup>1</sup> (Jusdanis 2015, 112–13)

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1. For another account of Cavafy’s appeal to future generations, see Ilinskaya-Alexandropoulou 2006, 38–40. Particularly perspicacious is Arseniou’s approach to Cavafy’s appeal and his poetry’s “value” in the twenty-first century (2016). See also the introduction to the special issue “Cavafy Pop” in the *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* that explores the “many lives” of Cavafy’s poems in popular culture (Papanikolaou and Papargyriou 2015).

One can add many more factors that contributed to the contemporary appeal of Cavafy's writing to different communities of readers and its relevance for debates on modernity, postcolonialism, the relation of self and other, multiculturalism, homosexuality, and biopolitics—some of which will be broached in this book. As I write this preface in 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, I keep thinking of the ways Cavafy's poetic casting of vulnerable subjects, conditions of social alienation, enclosure, and boredom, and the messy experience of time that such conditions generate, resonate in the global landscape shaped by this pandemic and the isolation and "unequal distribution of vulnerability" it has generated (Butler 2020, 71).

Cavafy's address to future audiences and contexts has often been articulated by critics in terms of *prescience*. Daniel Mendelsohn, for instance, refers to the "prescient way" in which Cavafy's "sensual' poems [. . .] treat the ever-fascinating and pertinent themes of erotic longing, fulfillment, and loss," adding that the homoerotic desire in these poems "makes him seem the more contemporary, the more at home in our own times" (Mendelsohn in Cavafy 2009a, xvi). Jusdanis also writes: "Cavafy was able to foresee the cultural and political milieu of the second half of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first centuries. It is as if Cavafy had lived with us and, with the benefit of time travel, jumped back to the early twentieth century to write about our time" (2015, 113); and he continues: "We are now living in Cavafy's time, a period described and foreseen by him. He was indeed writing for the future" (2015, 112). Already in 1923, the Greek poetess Myrtilotissa, who visited Cavafy in Alexandria, saw something future-oriented in him. Registering the impressions from her meeting with him, she wrote in an essay that his eyes seemed to be coming "from a far distant time and revealing a mystery unknown to us" (1924, 84).<sup>2</sup> Claims about Cavafy's prescience find support in Cavafy's own self-appraisal in a short unpublished text he wrote in the third person, in French, famously proclaiming that Cavafy "is an ultra-modern poet, a poet of the future generations."<sup>3</sup> In this text, in no modest terms, he identified his sober, laconic style, the cohabitation of emotion and intellectualism, and his "subtle irony" as among the elements that make his work likely to be "appreciated even more by future generations," granting him "a primary position in a world that thinks far more than does the world of today" (2010, 143).

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2. Quoted and translated by Jusdanis 2015, 112.

3. Trans. by Jeffreys (Cavafy 2010, 143). Cavafy wrote this text at the request of a writer for a French-language magazine (Cavafy 2010, 163; Pieris in Cavafy 2003, 387). The French original was not found in the poet's archive but was translated and published by Michalis Peridis (Cavafy 1963a).

Through his future-looking gaze, Cavafy spoke back to his contemporaries in Greece, whose suspicion against a poetry utterly foreign to Greek literary tastes confirms that no prophet is accepted in their own time and land. In foreseeing his poetry's future, he also inaugurated, so to speak, the oft-repeated claim in later criticism that Cavafy foresaw, sensed, or anticipated concerns and discourses that would take center stage much later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Are we then to see Cavafy as a clairvoyant or a prophet? Not if we do not want to partake in his consecration and veneration. But then in what terms are we to account for the ways his poetry haunts our present?

This haunting does not issue from the ability of a poet-genius to *predict* the future. Quite the contrary: it flows from the openness of his poetry's address, the unstable truths, conflicting perspectives, porous social and cultural contexts, and polyphonic poetic worlds in which multiple voices, quotations, inscriptions, and intertexts refuse to yield a final judgment or conclusion that steers the future toward a singular direction. The claim that his poetry *foresees* the future can thus, somewhat paradoxically, be linked to a certain kind of *unforeseeability* that his writings' "multiple points of input" (Stroebel 2018, 305) cultivate: the way his writings anticipate futures without fully circumscribing them. Of course, to say that Cavafy's contemporary address emerges from his poetry's openness, multivocality, and adaptability to different contexts, is a commonplace that does not cover the whole story. There is a central conflict registered in his writing: on the one hand, a desire to predict and control the future, articulate historical laws, and close off contexts, and on the other hand, a tendency to break those laws and contexts open, contaminate them, and expose them to contingent forces from elsewhere. In this book, I identify such forces as "specters." As I will show, while Cavafy's writing registers the desire to foresee, determine, and read the past and the future in a way that makes sense, it concurrently makes the "text" of the present, past, and future unreadable or unpredictable. This conflict between control and its abolition can also be connected to the restrictions and inadequacies of the available discourses through which Cavafy sought to express the homosexual self and the politics of the homosexual body in his time. The desire to articulate this self amid severe social taboos and in a language that had no proper place for homosexual subjects yet, may have also pushed part of his writing to articulations that point toward a future to come.<sup>4</sup>

The assumed prescience of his poetry, however, also emerges from the ways

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4. For Cavafy's poetics of sexuality and his articulation of the homosexual self through and against discourses of sexuality at his time, see Papanikolaou 2013 and 2014.

his poems co-shape what they supposedly foresee. In his essay “Telepathy,” Jacques Derrida articulated this process as a question:

Often I ask myself: How are */fortune-telling books/*, for example the Oxford one, just like fortune-tellings, clairvoyants, mediums, able to *form part of* what they declare, predict or say they foresee even though, participating in the thing, they also provoke [provoquent, ‘produce’] it, let themselves at least be provoked to the provocation of it? (1988b, 10)

Cavafy was certainly no medium, prophet, fortune-teller, or clairvoyant. Perhaps his poetry’s relation to the future could be more aptly described through the figure of the oracle in ancient Greece. The oracle’s cryptic messages were meant to predict and codetermine the future. However, “those destructive institutions of the state,” as Walter Benjamin aptly called them, in fact “provoked” misunderstandings (Benjamin 2005, 542).<sup>5</sup> With their elusive, open-ended, inscrutable messages, oracles, as I argued elsewhere, often “prefigured the future in the alien, barbarian language of that future” (Boletsi 2013, 137). Their enigmatic speech “signifies the unpredictability of the future as it tries to predict and direct it” (137). Cavafy’s poetics makes space for future specters: languages or concerns that are not *yet* or not *fully* there at the time of their writing. To account for the perceived prescience of his poetry, we should not only turn to his texts or poetics, but also to his poetry’s recastings, iterations, and recyclings in and from our present. Cavafy both foresees and is foreseen; he haunts and is haunted by future presents. To broach his poetry’s address today, I argue, we should take heed of this two-directional haunting, from the past to the future and from the future to the past, again and again.

To that end, this book revisits Cavafy’s writing and its bearing on our present through the figure of the specter and the idea of haunting. It proposes *spectrality* as a conceptual metaphor for revisiting Cavafy’s idiosyncratic modernist poetics and as an analytical lens for probing his poetry’s afterlives in contemporary settings.<sup>6</sup> These, as I hope to show, are two entwined levels of inquiry. The ways Cavafy’s writing haunts and is haunted by future presents are tied to what I call his *poetics of the spectral*. Cavafy’s spectral poetics can be seen as a response to the same question that stubbornly returns in his writing in different guises:

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5. From Benjamin’s essay “The Destructive Character” (“Der destruktive Charakter,” 1931).

6. I use “afterlife” in line with Walter Benjamin’s use of the term in “The Task of the Translator” (“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”), where he conceptualized translation as the original’s afterlife: a process of transformation and renewal that marks the original’s continued life in every present (1999, 72–73). The afterlives of Cavafy’s poems manifest themselves in acts of interpretation, adaptation, recontextualization, citation, artistic restaging, etc.

*What are the conditions that make the dead haunt? What makes things past—including the poems themselves—active forces in future presents?*

His writing asks how the past can be brought into the present but also how the past can turn into a force of futurity in ways that cannot be fully controlled or anticipated.

The presence of specters and ghosts, as well as the spectral as a theme in Cavafy's poetry, have not gone unnoticed by critics. In the introduction to his translations of Cavafy's poems, Daniel Mendelsohn briefly discusses "apparitions" in the poems, referring both to "those who have vanished into history" (e.g., "Καίσαριῶν" / "Caesarion") and to figures from the poetic subject's past, including former lovers or the poet's own young body. Mendelsohn concludes that these apparitions "symbolize" a key theme in Cavafy's work: "the presence of the past in the present" (Mendelsohn in Cavafy 2009a, xxxv). In an essay from 1946, George Seferis described the effect of Cavafy's poetry through the metaphor of a missing statue, which also hints at the liminal, spectral space in between presence and absence that marks Cavafy's poetics: "Cavafy's poems show the emotion [συγκίνηση] we would have from a statue which is no longer there; which was there, which we saw and has now been displaced" (Seferis 1999, 158; my translation).<sup>7</sup> George Savidis also noticed that Cavafy gradually developed a technique of conversing with the—real or imaginary—dead (Savidis 2004, 49). But despite these and many other fleeting references to specters or uses of the vocabulary of haunting to refer to aspects of Cavafy's poetry, there has been no study that uses spectrality as a lens through which to understand Cavafy's poetics and his work's continued resonance. This book is the first to propose the ontologically unstable, liminal figure of the specter as a conceptual metaphor for revisiting Cavafy's poetics and the shifting address of his poetry today.

A specter is a figure of epistemological and ontological uncertainty, between presence and absence, "visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality" (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2). Liminality, dispossession, ambivalence, and ontological indistinctness typify its "conceptual appeal" (Peeren 2014, 12). Owing mostly to the publication of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (*Spectres de Marx*, 1993), ghosts and specters have emerged since the 1990s as powerful conceptual metaphors, giving shape to what some have called a "spectral turn" in literary and cultural theory (Weinstock 2004; Luckhurst 2010). In their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader*, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren trace a striking shift in the cultural workings of ghosts and haunting at

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7. Seferis's metaphor is discussed in chapter 6.

the end of the twentieth century: “from possible actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance (‘he is a ghost of himself; ‘we are haunted by the past’)” specters and ghosts evolved into “influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academia alike” (2013, 1).

By employing the specter in this book as a *conceptual metaphor*, I draw, like del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, on the work of Mieke Bal, who defines conceptual metaphors as ones that evoke “a dynamic comparative interaction, not just another thing, word or idea and its associations, but a discourse, a system of producing knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Ordinary metaphors may yield aesthetic images or carry certain semantic content. Conceptual metaphors do more than that: they are figures of thought and analytical tools. As such, they perform “theoretical work” (Lord 2007, 92) through which they “shape and articulate new critical possibilities” (Reynolds 2001, 161).<sup>9</sup>

As a conceptual metaphor, then, the specter has been employed in the study of liminal states or dispossessed and marginalized subjects; “competing epistemological and ethical positions” (Davis 2005, 379); unstable relations to power (Peeren 2014, 3); the functions and implications of technology and (new) media; “the exclusionary, effacing dimensions of social norms pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class” (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2)<sup>10</sup>; and nonlinear temporalities, through which history shapes the present but is also continuously being shaped by the present (Brown 2001). Significantly, the specter also helps us broach questions of power. Specters can be figures of sovereign power but also of “compromised agency” (Peeren 2014, 3). They cannot always be controlled: they can see without necessarily being seen, can transgress boundaries, can return unexpectedly, can refuse to appear despite attempts to call them up or refuse to leave despite attempts to exorcize them. Their “almost sovereign power,” however, as Peeren notes, is “counterbalanced by vulnerabilities” (2014, 2–3). Their “incomplete [. . .] embodiment” can restrict their agency in the physical world and their autonomy can also be circumscribed when they are “involuntarily conjured and exorcized” by others (3). This marks their ambivalent relation to power. In Cavafy’s poetry, as I show in this book, we can trace this ambivalence in the unstable relation between specters and the characters who encounter, conjure, or try to exorcize them.

According to del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, the preference cultural criticism has shown for the terms “specter” and “spectrality” over the terms “ghost” and “ghostliness”—a preference I share in my choice of terminology—attests to the

8. Bal’s argument presented in del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 1. See also Bal 2010, 10.

9. Lord and Reynolds quoted in del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 1, 21.

10. On this function of the specter, see also Peeren 2014 and Gordon 1997.

change in the status of the ghost in the 1990s “as an analytical tool that does theory” (2013, 1). The terms “specter” and “spectrality” are etymologically linked to vision, i.e., “to that which is both looked at (as fascinating spectacle) and looking (in the sense of examining).” They therefore lend themselves better to the study of sociopolitical and ethical questions and phenomena “other than the putative return of the dead” (1). In this book, I use “specter” as an umbrella term through which I approach Cavafy’s poetics, but I am also attentive to the wide spectrum of words Cavafy used to refer to spectral entities in his writings, each of which carries different connotations and affective charges. The following indicative but nonexhaustive list of such words in poems from different periods—both from the “canon” of 154 poems and from poems that remained unfinished or unpublished by Cavafy—gives an impression of the diverse vocabulary of spectrality in Cavafy’s poetry:

- αιθερία μορφή (ethereal form) [“Ιωνικόν” / “Ionic”]  
 απάτη οφθαλμών (optical illusion) [“Ο βασιλεύς Κλαύδιος” / “King Claudius”]  
 απήχησις (reverberation, resonance) [“Ἐν εσπέρα” / “In the Evening”]  
 άυλες μορφές (immaterial forms) [“Ο Ιουλιανός εν τοις μυστηρίοις” / “Julian at the Mysteries”]  
 είδωλον (apparition) [“Ἄπ’ τες εννιά—” / “Since Nine—”]  
 είδωμα (vision, sighting) [“Γένεσις ποιήματος” / “Birth of a Poem”]  
 ίνδαλμα (image, idol) [“Να μείνει” / “Comes to Rest”; “Κίμων Λεάρχου, 22 ετών, σπουδαστής Ελληνικών γραμμάτων (εν Κυρήνη)” / “Kimon, Son of Learchos, 22, Student of Greek Literature (in Kyriini)”]  
 Όντα και Πράγματα που όνομα δεν έχουν (beings and things that have no name) [“Τρόμος” / “Dread”]  
 οπτασία / οπτασίες (apparition(s), vision(s)) [“Τα πλοία” / “The Ships”; “Ο Γενάρης του 1904” / “January of 1904”; “Ευρίωνος τάφος” / “Tomb of Eurion”; “Πολύ σπανίως” / “Very Seldom”]  
 οράματα (visions) [“Όταν διεγείρονται” / “Whenever They Are Aroused”]  
 παραισθήσεις (hallucinations) [“Ἐν απογνώσει” / “In Despair”]  
 σκιές / σκιά (shadows/shadow) [“Για να ῥθουν” / “That They Come”; “Ενας έρωσ” / “A Love”]  
 φανερώνεται (appears) [“Του πλοίου” / “On Board Ship”; used for the appearance of a specter]  
 φαντασίες (fantasies) [“Θάλασσα του πρωιού” / “Morning Sea”]  
 φαντάσματα (ghosts) [“Πελασγική εικών” / “Pelasgian Image”]  
 φάσμα (specter, ghost) [“Ο βασιλεύς Κλαύδιος” / “King Claudius”]



The varied terms for spectral entities in Cavafy's writing testify to his preoccupation with the spectral not only in his early period, in which such terms are admittedly more frequent, but throughout his work.

This book, it should be stressed, is not just a study of literal and metaphorical specters and ghosts in Cavafy. Nor does it specifically trace the workings of specters as a theme or concern in Cavafy's early work, flowing from his influence by nineteenth-century esoterism, occultism, spiritualism, and decadence, and his flirting with the supernatural. In my discussion of some of Cavafy's early texts and poems, I address the ways his preoccupation with the spectral took shape through his engagement with those movements, as well as under the influence of new technologies and media in modernity (mainly photography and cinema). But by proposing spectrality as a conceptual metaphor, I am primarily interested in the entanglement of the spectral with Cavafy's modernist poetics—not only in his later, so-called realist phase, but already in his early writings. Even though in his later work specters become increasingly abstract and largely disengaged from the occult or the supernatural, spectrality remains a constant component of his poetics. The lens of the spectral thus allows me to read works from Cavafy's early and later phases, poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction, as interconnected by adjacent questions and recurring concerns, despite the stark distinction critics have drawn between his early and "mature" production.<sup>11</sup>

Cavafy's poetics of the spectral translates into various strategies of animating the past and keeping death and finality at bay without appealing to eternal life, fixity, or the permanence of poetic truth, language, and history. In Cavafy's poetic universe, no truth or perspective is everlasting, no presence is enduring, no identity is stable. Invoked characters or past moments are ephemeral presences that never fully materialize. Each present is invested with an affective intensity that springs from the threat of its imminent disappearance. Presence is haunted by absence and nothing hypostatizes fully or forever. This precariousness makes his writing all the more able to haunt unpredictably. Cavafy's preoccupation with spectrality pervades his writings in various permutations. Sometimes it takes the form of (literal) ghosts, shadows, apparitions, visions, conjurations of past lovers or historical figures. It manifests itself through a disjointed temporality, whereby past, present, and future traverse and reshape each other. Elsewhere, spectrality attaches itself to a form of irony that accommodates precarious desires or truths that are haunted by antagonistic truths. It facilitates articulations of the self that do not depend on a sovereign subject but on partial self-dispossession. It can take the form of strategies for breaking

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11. See the section "Reading Cavafy Pre-posterously" in chapter 1.

contexts open, undercutting totalization, and fragmenting wholes—strategies that preserve the open-ended futurity of past things and, through it, the political hope of the *otherwise* in the present. And it often translates into a paradoxical stance of assuming and simultaneously relinquishing control over language and the self, allowing both an active “haunting” and a passive “being haunted” to take place.

By exploring liminal spaces, sexualities, and experiences, Cavafy’s work invites an interplay of spectral forces. As Nehamas writes, “self and other, inside and outside, past and present, real and imaginary” cannot “be told apart” (1983, 319). His erotic poems are replete with shadows and apparitions of dead lovers or lost sensations, which the poetic “I” tries to conjure, with or without success. Many historical poems, too, become playing fields for specters that assume different functions: promising, warning, twisting dominant perceptions of events, triggering crises, or casting an unexpected light on a historical situation.

Cavafy’s spectral poetics takes shape through his persistent exploration of the conditions for activating the past in the present and making past objects—including his poems—incalculable forces in future presents. Unpacking this spectral poetics, then, can provide more insight into why Cavafy, according to the aforementioned self-assessment, referred to himself as “a poet of the future generations” (2010, 143). How does a poetry that largely concerns itself with the past, memory, loss, and death, carry futurity? How does it haunt future presents?

My approach to Cavafy’s writing in this book takes shape in conversation with previous scholarship on Cavafy, but also, importantly, with interlocutors from recent cultural and social theory associated with the “spectral turn,” theories of performativity and affect, critical and poststructuralist theory, theories of irony, queer studies, and political theory. In the company of these interlocutors, many of whom have not so far been brought to bear on Cavafy’s work, I revisit Cavafy’s poetics and address its contemporary resonance. How does our present haunt his poetry, recasting it through its concerns, anxieties, and crises, and how do Cavafy’s poems haunt and recast global and local realities from the end of the Cold War to the recent Greek debt crisis that broke out in 2009?

This book argues that there is much to gain from bringing spectrality to bear on Cavafy’s work and its afterlives. I recognize that, as Peeren remarks, popular conceptual metaphors that become part of academic trends—such as spectrality since the late 1990s—run the risk of becoming “overstretched,” diffuse or diluted, and thus of losing their critical rigor or capacity to produce new questions and articulations of cultural phenomena (2014, 12–13). While some of spectrality’s uses have been less successful or productive than others, it remains a powerful analytical and theoretical tool (12) that can help us articulate how

Cavafy's work eludes the threat of its disappearance. Additionally, spectrality allows me to read lesser-known or underrated Cavafian texts, including prose texts, in a new light. As a conceptual metaphor, I argue, the specter can yield new images and sets of (cultural, historical, theoretical) associations, through which we can experience Cavafy's writings anew, in ways that, hopefully, renew its potential to intervene in contemporary debates and to haunt and move future readers and critics.

## CHAPTER ONE



### Introduction

#### *Cavafy's Ghost Ships*

##### a. Ghost Ships

Constantine P. Cavafy's early prose poem "Τα πλοία" / "The Ships" (1895–1896?) is an allegory about poetics. I turn to this poem in this introductory chapter in order to lay out and visualize central aspects of what I call Cavafy's spectral poetics. The text allegorizes the process of turning imagination into poetry through acts of selection and "censorship" by the poet, critics, audiences, and society. It is one of three unpublished prose poems by Cavafy,<sup>1</sup> which have been read as symbolist experiments.

In "The Ships," the journey "from imagination to paper" is dramatized through the figures of ships carrying Imagination's materials. Already from the first lines, the journey is cast as a "difficult crossing":

Από την Φαντασίαν έως εις το Χαρτί. Είναι δύσκολον πέρασμα, είναι επικίνδυνος θάλασσα. Η απόστασις φαίνεται μικρά κατά πρώτην όψιν, και εν τοσούτω πόσον μακρόν ταξίδι είναι, και πόσον επιζήμιον ενίστε διά τα πλοία τα οποία το επιχειρούν. (Cavafy 2015b, 698)

From Imagination to Paper. It is a difficult crossing, a dangerous sea. At first sight the distance appears short, but in fact the journey is a long one, and very damaging for the ships that undertake it. (Trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 84)

The text lays out the processes of loss and damage of the materials the ships carry. These roughly fit into three categories: a. *involuntary losses*, i.e., acci-

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1. The other two were "Το Σύνταγμα της ηδονής" / "The Pleasure Brigade" (1894–1897?) and "Ενδύματα" / "Clothes" (1984–1897?). On "The Ships," see also Arampatzidou 2013, 206–8.

dents that damage the materials during the journey or when the cargo is transferred to the land; b. *inevitable sacrifices* during the journey, owing to the fact that the ships have limited space and some materials need to be thrown overboard; c. *conscious practices of selection* once the materials reach the land. Even those materials that manage to arrive at the port undamaged—and thus come closer to entering the realm of poetry—are often refused entry by “customs agents” who follow the “laws” of “the land” (2010, 84). These laws presumably pertain to processes of selection or censorship by the literary establishment (critics, publishers, audiences that follow the dominant taste). The laws may also refer to societal norms that dictate what kind of poetry is admissible and which poetic texts should be banned as dangerous: as we read, some of the beverages the ships carry “are highly intoxicating” (2010, 84) and threaten society’s norms and moral standards. Cavafy links these norms and standards to institutional and even corporate power: the one local company that holds the monopoly over wine, produces fake wines that taste of water and are thus harmless. This company blocks the import of foreign wines, which can only enter through smuggling or by mistake, as when “customs officers” mislabel the containers with “the prohibited items” (85). In his suggestion that precious poetic materials (the authentic wines) are always imported from elsewhere, never autochthonous, we may already find early traces of Cavafy’s centrifugal vision of Hellenism, which would take shape later in his poetry. A society that blocks foreign imports is condemned to drink the local company’s same fake wine.<sup>2</sup>

The text provides a forceful visualization of the hegemonic powers that regulate the “republic of letters.”<sup>3</sup> In doing so, it provides an early articulation of a tension we trace in Cavafy’s later writings: a conception of poetry, on the one hand, as autonomous and “the private expression of the artist,” and on the other hand, “as a matter of social negotiation dependent on certain cultural conventions that emerge under specific historical conditions” (Jusdanis 1987, 53). As Alexander Nehamas argues, Cavafy’s approach to poetry “as a complex institutional practice” entails that aesthetic value and beauty are products “of particular struggles and accommodations among different groups and interests” and are thus entwined with power (1989, 134).<sup>4</sup> In the spirit of symbolism

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2. This reference to strong and fake wines echoes Cavafy’s later poem “Επιτήγα” / “I Went” (1905/1913), in which strong wine is associated with the intoxicating effect of unconventional pleasures.

3. The phrase alludes to Pascale Casanova’s book *The World Republic of Letters* (1999).

4. In this part of his article, Nehamas discusses Jusdanis’s views on the tension between artistic autonomy and art as a social institution in Cavafy’s writings.

and aestheticism, true poetic value in the poem is attached to the precious foreign materials that dodge (and antagonize) institutionally and socially imposed criteria. The power of the latter is acknowledged but certainly not embraced.

“The Ships” is also an early articulation of the spectral nature of poetic truth and authenticity in Cavafy. Simply put, the more precious an item is, the more fragile and short-lived it is:

τα καλύτερα πράγματα είναι κατασκευασμένα από λεπτές υάλους και κεράμους διαφανείς, και με όλην την προσοχήν του κόσμου πολλά σπάνουν εις τον δρόμον, και πολλά σπάνουν όταν τα αποβιβάζουν εις την ξηράν. Πάσα δε τοιαύτη ζημία είναι ανεπανόρθωτος. (Cavafy 2015b, 698)

the best items are fashioned out of delicate glass and diaphanous ceramic, and despite all worldly precaution, many break on the journey or many break when they are being unloaded on to land. (2010, 84)

This damage is “irreparable” because these items are one of a kind and the stores in the “markets of the Imagination” are “short-lived,” “conduct brief transactions,” and “dissolve immediately” as soon as they sell out their wares (84).

Precious, that is, true and authentic poetic materials, are not eternal but fragile, mortal, subject to death, damage, disappearance. A similar casting of poetic truth as transient is found in another, nonliterary text Cavafy probably wrote in 1903 in English, which critics posthumously titled “Philosophical Scrutiny.”<sup>5</sup> Poetic creation in that text also involves processes of selection, destruction, and censorship (this time by the poet). The materials that generate poetic truth reside in a fleeting impression or thought that may have been “a passing or a short-lived truth” but that is nevertheless “worthy to be received, both artistically and philosophically” (Cavafy 2010, 119). The precarious character of these materials makes them all the more powerful and haunting. In “The Ships,” the emphasis on breakage, loss, and accidents in the process of poetic creation is telling: in the poetry emerging from the ships’ cargo, we almost hear the echoes of the discarded, shattered precious items haunting the items that reach their destination intact.

The prose poem reaches its climax when a ghostly presence enters the scene

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5. For a reading of this text, see chapter 4. On the vulnerability of the products of imagination and of poetic truth in Cavafy, see also Kostiou 2022, 19-25.

in the form of what I call “ghost ships.” These ships, which carry the truly valuable cargo, never reach a port and are exempted from the financial exchanges in which other ships partake:

Θλιβερόν, θλιβερόν είναι άλλο πράγμα. Είναι όταν περνούν κάτι πελώρια πλοία, με κοράλλινα κοσμήματα και ιστούς εξ εβένου, με αναπεπταμένες μεγάλας σημαίας λευκάς και ερυθράς, γεμάτα με θησαυρούς, τα οποία ούτε πλησιάζουν καν εις τον λιμένα είτε διότι όλα τα είδη τα οποία φέρουν είναι απηγορευμένα, είτε διότι δεν έχει ο λιμνήν αρκετόν βάθος διά να τα δεχθεί. Και εξακολουθούν τον δρόμον των. [. . .]

Ευτυχώς είναι πολύ σπάνια αυτά τα πλοία. Μόλις δύο, τρία βλέπομεν καθ’ όλον μας τον βίον. Τα λησμονώμεν δε οργήγορα. Όσο λαμπρά ήτο η οπτασία, τόσο ταχεία είναι η λήθη της. Και αφού περάσουν μερικά έτη, εάν καμίαν ημέραν—ενώ καθημέθα αδρανώς βλέποντες το φως ή ακούοντες την σιωπήν—τυχαίως επανέλθουν εις την νοεράν μας ακοήν στροφαί τινές ενθουσιώδεις, δεν τας αναγνωρίζομεν κατ’ αρχάς και τυραννώμεν την μνήμην μας διά να ενθυμηθώμεν πού ηκούσαμεν αυτάς πριν. Μετά πολλού κόπου εξυπνάται η παλαιά ανάμνησις και ενθυμώμεθα ότι αι στροφαί αύται είναι από το άσμα το οποίον έψαλλον οι ναύται, ωραιοί ως ήρωες της Ιλιάδος, όταν επερνούσαν τα μεγάλα, τα θεσπέσια πλοία και επροχώρουν πηγαίνοντα—τίς ηξεύρει πού. (2015, 700)

There is one other thing that is lamentable, most lamentable. This is when certain great ships pass by, festooned with coral and masts of ebony, with great white and red flags unfurled, laden with treasures, which never even approach the harbour since either all of their cargo is banned or the harbour is not deep enough to receive them. And they continue on their way. [. . .]

Fortunately these ships are quite rare. At most we will see two or three during our lifetime. And we quickly forget them. However bright the vision might have been, its memory will fade just as quickly. And after a few years pass, if one day—while we sit indolently watching the light of day or listening to the silence—if by chance some inspired verses return to our mind’s ear, reminding us that we have heard these melodies before—we do not recognise them at first, and we rack our brains to remember where we once heard them before. After much effort, our

old memory awakens and we recall that these strophes were part of the song sung by the sailors—sailors as beautiful as the heroes of *The Iliad*—when the great ships were passing us by, those sublime ships that were heading—who knows where. (2010, 85)

Although the text does not designate them as ghost ships, the vocabulary of spectrality surrounds their appearance: they are described as a “vision” (“οπτασία”) and their sightings are rare and fleeting. Even though people’s memory of them fades, they keep haunting the living through the faint memories of the sailors’ songs, which resurface unexpectedly in some people’s minds. Conjuring the specters of those ships through memory is an arduous practice: “we rack our brains to remember” and the “awakening” of memory happens “After much effort” (2010, 85). The ships and their songs retain an unsettling force, which we may ponder by borrowing Wendy Brown’s words:<sup>6</sup>

To be haunted often entails being touched or suffused by something that one cannot quite recall, feeling the importance of something that one has laid aside or tried to forget. It is to recognize that there is something from the past occupying the present, something whose shape or meaning eludes us. (2001, 153)

The songs of the phantom ships refuse to recede into oblivion, because their meanings are fragmentary, unsettled—and “to be haunted by something is to feel ourselves disquieted or disoriented by it” (Brown 2001, 152). The poets’ attempts to conjure these songs in their minds are a process of learning to listen to ghosts, which in “The Ships” becomes essential for poetic creation.

The poem at first sight projects a rather elitist vision of true poetry as something to be kept away from mundane transactions and circulation—a vision we come across in later Cavafian poems (e.g., “Του μαγαζιού” / “For the Shop,” 1913). But the crux of this allegorical image, I argue, lies elsewhere. Poets turn the echoes of the phantom ships into poetry without ever owning the ships or their cargo: the ships’ departure point remains unknown, their return unpredictable, and their future direction incalculable. If the materials of true poetry are carried by ghost ships always on the move, then poetry itself issues from specters that a poet learns to live with without ever mastering. Poets can never arrest or fully reconstruct (*re-member*) the songs from those ships, as they are never fully present; only snippets resurface.

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6. Brown’s delineation of haunting responds to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.



The poets who mine their memory to summon the ships' songs do not always succeed. Their attempts sometimes meet the fate of Cavafy's futile effort to capture the beautiful song of two passing youths through its scansion on a cigarette box—a failure he describes in an unpublished note from 17 October 1911:<sup>7</sup>

— UU— UU—U  
 — UU— UU—U  
 — U—U U—U

Cavafy realizes that the song's scansion is a useless venture, unable as it is to conjure the "beautiful and attractive" voices of the two youths ("I thought that I was really doing something. I did nothing"), let alone their own beauty (they were "visions of beauty") (trans. Jeffreys, Cavafy 2010, 139).<sup>8</sup> Trying to capture the echoes of those songs—an attempt to listen to ghosts—highlights the poet's limitations and lack of mastery. Cavafy writes in the same note: "and I, the artist, thought I was doing something important by collecting and preserving an echo" (2010, 139). The true poetry, he realizes, "was the beauty of the two boys." Using the vocabulary of spectrality, he expresses the hope that "the forms" of the youths can perhaps be "summoned during a moment of creative emotion, that perhaps will leave in my art something of its fleeting passing" (139).

Those passing youths and their songs recall the sailors' songs from the phantom ships that never drop anchor, always moving toward an elsewhere. In "The Ships," the figure of the poet is strikingly marginal. There is no ultimate authority in this text that controls poetry's creation, dissemination, and fate, even though many powers are at work. Poetic creation unfolds as a complex matrix of accidents and laws, serendipity and misfortune, conscious and unconscious choices, voluntary and involuntary damages, misunderstandings (the mislabeling of the cargo) and conscious rejections, clandestine and overt operations, discipline and intoxication, institutional or social constraints and their overriding, sedentary and nomadic forces, which altogether obfuscate the terrain of agency. The poet remains in the background, not in control of his creations, which depend on uncertain conjurations of long-lost songs, partly involuntary and partly the result of great effort.

7. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F09, Item 0022, photo 3; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F09-0022 (213), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-u-38/>.

8. The repetitive rhythm of the song's first two lines, as registered in the scansion, mirrors perhaps the doubling of beauty (two youths) but also hints at repetition as the mode of a specter's appearance.

The movement of Cavafy's ghost ships is one of unforeseeable returns, like the comings and goings of specters. They thus offer me a starting point for revisiting Cavafy's poetry as inhabited by spectral forces. These forces unhinge the present from the past or from a future yet to come. They create fissures in stable contexts and introduce a spectral temporality, antagonizing progressive, decadent, deterministic, or teleological visions of history. Cavafy's spectral poetics takes shape through strategies for postponing death, finality, or completion, which allow poetic texts to keep haunting without ever "dropping anchor."

### b. Specters, Time, and Justice

Keeping death at bay with the help of specters does not buy one eternal life. It is a process that involves deep awareness of and engagement with the inescapability of death and the cruelty of linear time.

Cavafy had his fair share of confrontations with death and personal loss early on in his life. Just in the years from 1896 to 1902 he lost three of his brothers, his mother, an uncle, his maternal grandfather, and two close friends (his father had already died in 1870). All these and many other losses put him in the lifelong company of specters. But death clouded his experience of the present even before his life was marked by these losses, as for example in the unpublished text "Μια νύξ εις το Καλιντέρι" / "A Night Out in Kalinderi," probably written in 1885–1886. The text, which draws from Cavafy's recollections from his stay in Istanbul, is an early registration of Cavafy's struggle with death and linear time—a struggle that may also account for his attraction to specters. The narrator recounts a trip to Kalinderi, a coastal strip between two towns on the Bosphorus (Neochorion and Therapeia). He describes how his good mood is shattered on hearing some local men on a boat sing a song about a man's premature death. Inserting the specter of death into life, the second stanza of their song uses the word "σκιά" (shadow) to capture life's precarity ("all things in life are false, / all lies, all shadows"), while the third (and last) stanza confirms death as the only certainty. As the song ends, leaving the narrator in a depressed mood, the clock strikes midnight, metaphorically evoking death's arrival, and a black cloud covers the moon like the "lowering of a stage curtain." So the narrator decides to leave:

Επήρα εκ νέου την άγουσαν προς το χωρίον. Το εύρον να κοιμάται εν  
 ύπνω βαθεί. Εις τον ίσιον δρόμον ερημία. Μόνον τον γέροντα μπεκτοήν

απήντησα όστις με το ρόπαλόν του έκρουε την ώραν επί της γης—  
απαθής μετρητής του Καιρού.<sup>9</sup>

I once again took the road towards the village. I found it in a deep sleep. The main road was deserted. The only person I met was the old night-watchman who, by tapping the ground with his cane, kept track of the time—that indifferent measurer of Time. (Trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 76)

The narrator is haunted by time's passing, figured by the guard's cruel "tapping" that measures linear time, bringing everyone closer to death. Resorting to the nonlinear time of specters—their unsettling of temporal lines—was Cavafy's way of countering this forward movement in his writing, without, however, denying its force. The specter is an ambivalent figure in this sense: both a reminder (or even harbinger) of death and a denial of death's finality or proof of a form of life beyond death.<sup>10</sup> In the above-quoted passage, the potential challenge to linear time is somewhat suggested though Cavafy's curious use of the word "Καιρός" (*kairos*) for the "chronological, quantitative measuring of time" (Lindroos 1998, 12) that in Greek belongs to the word *χρόνος* (*chronos*). The Greek word (and concept) *καιρός* captures "the right or opportune time" (Smith 1986, 12), a time that lies beyond "movement through temporal continuity" and "emphasises breaks, ruptures, [. . .] and multiple temporal dimensions" (Lindroos 1998, 12). The use of this word, then, to conclude a story that affirms death's finality and time's linearity may prefigure a recalcitrant, spectral temporality that Cavafy would cultivate in his later writings. The tension between measured, linear time (*chronos*) and the time of rupture and opportunity (*kairos*) is perhaps already captured by the instrument of measurement: the cane that taps the ground, shaking the earth, and causing imperceptible ruptures that might grow to become rips in the neat fabric of linear time.<sup>11</sup>

To trace the ways spectral time takes effect in Cavafy's writings, I draw on Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), in which he proposed a rethinking of history in the present through a practice of *hauntology*.<sup>12</sup> Derrida wrote his book on Marx after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the

9. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F04, Item 0006, photo 7; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0006 (1648), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/ys38-ankz-xp55/>

10. This ambivalence of ghosts led Sigmund Freud to cast them as figures of the "uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche") (1976, 635).

11. I am grateful to Artemis Leontis for pointing out this tension in the instrument of measurement.

12. First published in French as *Spectres de Marx* (1993).

Soviet Union, at a time when the global community was faced with a new political reality that, according to certain liberal thinkers, signaled “the end of history.”<sup>13</sup> Rejecting the latter diagnosis, Derrida revisited Marx’s “spirit” and its fates after 1989 and negotiated a relation between present, past, and future through a practice of hauntology. Playing with its near-homonym, “ontology,” hauntology replaces “the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost,” which is in-between presence and absence, death and life (Davis 2005, 373). Eschewing history as origin, hauntology explores the operations of specters in the production of history. As Wendy Brown writes, “the specter begins by coming back, by repeating itself, by recurring in the present” (2001, 149–50). History as a spectral phenomenon does not move forward, but appears and recedes, changing its claims on the present. The same event can haunt us in different ways across time and space (151). The past is not an objective account: it is what lives on from past events, how we conjure those events in the present, but also how past traces can stubbornly return to grasp us, undoing our experience of the present and our vision of the future (150).

Cavafy’s poetry could be read as a tireless attempt to conjure the past in the present. As Daniel Mendelsohn writes, Cavafy “may be said simply to have inhabited his pasts so fully that they are all equally present to him” (Cavafy 2009a, xxxv). The past exists only insofar as it can be enacted, (partially) revived, or reshaped in the here and now of the poetic utterance. The promise of poetry to bring the past into the present might not always be actualized. Conjurations of the past do not always work in the way the subject wants them to.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Cavafy’s poems persistently strive to create poetic presents in which the past and the future intervene in unexpected ways.

Cavafy’s poetry has given us a host of historical stages in which conflicting political interests, religions, cultures, individual aspirations, and expectations lead to divergent conjurations of past and future, often showing how misconstrued or disastrous such conjurations are. The (historical) present is at times a battlefield of purposefully conjured specters, which are undercut by the intrusion of other specters that no one had invited, anticipated, or called upon. In “Ἐν Πορεία προς τὴν Σινώπην” / “On the March to Sinopi” (1928), for example, the soothsayer sees “some shadowy things” (“Κάτι σκιώδη πράγματα”)<sup>15</sup> that he cannot decipher (an equivocal specter of the King’s ominous future), which

13. The phrase alludes to Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

14. For a discussion of incomplete or failed conjurations, see chapter 2.

15. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0016, photo 100–101; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003–0016 (2083), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1916-1929/>. My translation.

lead him to warn King Mithridatis to be content with what he has. The king ignores these specters of the future, with disastrous consequences.

Hauntology, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, shows that a self-sufficient notion of the present cannot exist (1999, 39). Specters reveal the identity of the present to itself as disjoined, casting the present as a transitory instant, which already contains the past and the future. Derrida's emphasis on the disjunction of the present from itself collapses the absolute separation among present, past, and future. This does not mean that the distinction among them dissipates, but that past and future become part of the present just as much as the present is already part of them. Ghosts of the past occupy, produce, and shape the present, teaching different lessons and extending different warnings, promises, or hopes each time. But their workings are usually unpredictable: hauntology implies a present that is highly unreliable. "Derrida's ghosts," Jameson notes, "are these moments in which the present [. . .] unexpectedly betrays us" (1999, 39). This view of the present opens up the possibility of multiple futures, which elude historical patterns. Cavafy's "Δαρείος" / "Darius" (1920) showcases the way ghosts can grasp subjects unexpectedly and crack the present open, especially in moments of crisis. The court poet Phernazis, who is trying to write a poem about King Darius (an ancestor of Phernazis's current king), calls on Darius's specter in order to ponder which sentiments motivated Darius as a leader. Phernazis is tempted to interpret the specter's message strategically in the present, in a way that will please his own king and put him in the king's favor, yet he cannot make up his mind about it. It is only at a moment of crisis—an imminent war—that this specter's message becomes suddenly illuminated for Phernazis, leading him to a revelation through self-reflection.<sup>16</sup>

Needless to say, Derrida's take on history responds to a different historical moment than Cavafy's. Nevertheless, in Derrida's hauntological thinking, and in the ways it has been taken up by others, I find valuable conceptual tools for probing how Cavafy's writing conjures fictional or historical specters in the poetic present and for tracing how his porous poetic worlds are disjoined by spectral forces from the past and the future. Derrida's conceptual vocabulary also enables me to grasp how conjurations of the past in Cavafy's writing are linked to mourning, justice, and futurity.

Derrida speaks of ghosts—"certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us"—"in the name of *justice*" (1994, xviii). To him, there is no justice without responsibility "before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead" (xviii). Hauntology is not

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16. Cf. Maronitis's reading of this poem (1999).

only a theoretical approach but a practice of living more justly, “between life and death,” that is, living “with ghosts,” in “the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship” of those others who are never fully present (xviii). Justice requires learning to speak not only “of the ghost” but also “to the ghost and *with it*” (xviii), and to listen to it, rather than being afraid or unaware of it or trying to exorcize it (47, 176).

Theorists have taken up Derrida’s notions of hauntology and spectrality in attempts to develop more ethical approaches to history and historiography. Such mobilizations of spectrality have been particularly prominent in queer and postcolonial studies—both fields concerned with interrogating Western, heteronormative understandings of temporality and revising historical narratives to include marginalized, silenced, or effaced voices.<sup>17</sup> As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes, “without ghosts to point to things that have been lost and overlooked, things may disappear forever” (2004, 6). Carla Freccero, for example, proposes a “fantasmatic historiography” (2006) and, elsewhere, a “queer spectrality” (2013) as central to the project of queer historiography. In queer theory, spectral temporality is often seen as concomitant with queer time. As queerness “has always been marked by its untimely relation to socially shared temporal phases” (McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011, 6), it can be seen as an outcome of “strange temporalities” (Halberstam 2005, 1). Queer time involves ways to think of futurity beyond “paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2005, 2). It captures interruptions of “an established temporal order” that can be traced in “textual moments of asynchrony, anachronism, anastrophe, belatedness, compression, delay, ellipsis, flashback, hysteron-proteron, pause, prolepsis, repetition, reversal, surprise” (Freeman 2011, xxii). Such interruptions may hold “other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically” (xxii).

Cavafy’s preoccupation with specters is linked to questions of historical justice. It involves attempts to address past injustices and foster alternative chronotopes in which queer and other silenced or marginalized subjects may survive and envision different futures.<sup>18</sup> As I trace the entwinement of spectrality, history, and justice in Cavafy’s writing in parts of this book, I am attentive to interruptions of linear, (hetero)normative time, which may harbor other possi-

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17. See, among many others, Bergland 2013; Chen 2018; Freccero 2006; Freeman 2011; Halberstam 2005; Love 2009; McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011; Papanikolaou 2018; Spivak 1995.

18. On “queer survival” see Bateman 2017 and Mitsikakos 2023, as well as Mitsikakos’s doctoral dissertation “C. P. Cavafy and the Art of Queer Survival” (in progress, Oxford University). Also Papanikolaou 2014, 184.

bilities of “living historically.” Poetic conjurations of ignored eras and historical figures bring them out of History’s shadows and hypostatize them momentarily as spectral forces who interfere in the (poetic) present. Perhaps the most striking example of such a historical ghost is the young king Caesarion, Cleopatra’s son, famously conjured in the homonymous poem (1918).<sup>19</sup> A lesser-known instance in which Cavafy conjures silenced figures to broach historical injustice can be found in a prose essay he wrote about the sophists.<sup>20</sup> At the end of this essay, Cavafy connects his attraction to, and sympathy for, the sophists to the fact that most of their works have been lost and their voices forgotten. History—under the dominance of Socrates’s disparaging attitude toward the sophists—has not done them justice. Their silencing, he writes, does not mean that their works were of lesser value than the works that were preserved: “It is not right to accuse the departed.” In an act of empathetic imagination (Margulies 1989), Cavafy imagines how their ghosts must experience this injustice: “precisely this ill-luck of theirs, this silence that fate imposed on them—how unbearable it must be to their shadows [σκιάς]—ought to make us lenient [επιεικείς] and sympathetic toward them.”<sup>21</sup>

Reckoning with the sophists’ specters is projected as a debt: we owe it to them to set history’s bias aside and show sympathy and leniency (the word “επιεικείς” in the above-quoted passage evokes a juridical discourse). We ought to listen to their enraged ghosts that cannot bear this injustice.<sup>22</sup> Many of Cavafy’s writings approach history as a power struggle but also as an open, moving archive that can be radically rewritten (Papanikolaou 2014; 2015). Spectrality as a lens helps us trace the way Cavafy stages these struggles and uses historical archives as a means of doing justice to the specters of those who are not there *anymore* or who are not *yet* here. This is one of spectrality’s ethical functions, as Peeren writes: “to call attention to and assign responsibility for social practices of marginalization and erasure, and for cultural and historical blind spots” (2014, 6).<sup>23</sup>

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19. For an analysis of this poem, see chapter 2.

20. The essay, which Cavafy titled “Ολίγα Σελίδες περί των Σοφιστών” / “A Few Pages on the Sophists,” was probably written between 1893 and 1897. For Cavafy and the sophists, see Dallas 1984.

21. Translations from the essay are mine. For the original, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F05, Item 0004, photo 8; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F05-0004 (189), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/nnt9-gwe3-cwd5/>

22. Being “lenient” does not entail agreeing with the sophists. In fact, in another text (excerpt), in which Cavafy discusses the sophists’ views on justice, he disagrees with the way some sophists (Polos and Thrasymachus) accepted the law of the strongest as justice. See Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F05, Item 0013; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F05-0013 (882), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-216/>. Ironically, the fact that these sophists were forgotten may prove their point: history only remembers the powerful who impose their voice and will on others (in this case, Socrates’s voice prevailed over the sophists). By conjuring them, Cavafy proves *them* wrong.

23. For this function of ghosts see Gordon 1997.

### c. Reading Cavafy Pre-posterously

As I trace the workings of spectral temporality in Cavafy's poems in this book, I transpose this temporality into a mode of (re)reading Cavafy's work through its afterlives. This approach is inspired by the notion of *pre-posterous history* that Mieke Bal proposed in *Quoting Caravaggio* as a mode of reading. Just like spectral time, pre-posterous history disavows a linear logic: it is based on an act of reversal that "puts the chronologically first (pre-) as an aftereffect behind (post-) its later recycling" (1999, 6–7). As Bal explains in another essay, an artwork's "becoming," that is, its ability to change and function differently and unpredictably in its every viewing or reading,

implies a retrospective temporal logic according to which each new moment of viewing recasts the terms in which the previous encounter with the work could be understood. Each new phase of that becoming is informed by a later work that retrospectively glosses an earlier work. Each work puts a spin on the ensemble of what came before it. (2013, 85)

This "retrospective impact" of a later work on a previous one questions the primacy of the latter as a stable origin and unsettles the logic of unidirectional influence of a past object on its future recastings (understood as readings, viewings, interpretations, adaptations, intersemiotic and intermedial translations, citations, etc.). Concretely, a "pre-posterous" reading that follows a spectral temporality would allow us, for example, to study the conversation between a Cavafian poem and a contemporary adaptation of that poem not only to determine how the poem shapes this later work but also for the way the later work "haunts" back, by inviting, provoking, or inspiring new readings of Cavafy's poem from our present. As I hope to show through such readings in this book,<sup>24</sup> a pre-posterous reading does not bypass the historicity of a text and the context of its creation in favor of a presentist approach. On the contrary, it can open up this context—a context that could never be fully described or circumscribed anyway, as so many Cavafian poems remind us—and put it in conversation with other contexts. It can thus expand a poem's historicity by sidestepping a linear temporality whereby a (settled) past can only exert influence on the present. Such an approach is aligned with the conception of Cavafy's archive as open and constantly in a process of becoming, which Dimitris Papanikolaou proposed (2014).

Pre-posterous readings can follow two distinct but interconnected move-

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24. In chapters 3, 5, and 6.



ments, which can be described through the rhetorical categories of “metalepsis” and “prolepsis.” “Metalepsis” pertains to a certain belatedness that captures the ways earlier texts are “produced” by theories or frameworks developed later. Freccero, for example, uses “metalepsis” for a mode of reading of early modern texts through the lens of queer theory—a theory developed long after these texts were written. To read “metaleptically” involves the “willful perversion of notions of temporal propriety and the reproductive order of things” (2006, 2); the perversion, that is, of a logic of lineage according to which only the past could “produce” the present, but not vice versa. The reverse movement, “prolepsis,” is a gesture of “turning belatedness *into avant la lettre*” (3). Proleptic readings can account for the ways “an instantiation of the modern” may figure in early modern texts, that is, “‘before’ the modern” (3). Prolepsis thus refers to the ways early texts anticipate later theories, conditions, and concerns. It therefore helps us address the ways Cavafy’s poetry has been said to anticipate future theoretical lenses,<sup>25</sup> including concerns in queer, postcolonial, and cultural studies, reception theory, psychoanalysis, and (post)structuralist theory (Papanikolaou 2014, 42–44; 2013, 2015; Worthy 2022). At the same time, these lenses also produce his poetry *metaleptically*.

A pre-posterous reading combines metalepsis and prolepsis, transposing spectral temporality on methodological questions. As such, it has another important implication in this book. Revisiting the Cavafian archive pre-posterously, by following the movement of its spectral poetics, challenges the idea of Cavafy’s linear evolutionary development toward poetic maturation. I refer here to the established view that Cavafy moved from one influence or phase to the next—as Michalis Pieris put it, his “gradual romantic, Parnasian, symbolist evolution toward an absolutely personal kind of visionary realism” (1989, 274). This evolutionary approach often goes hand in hand with an underappreciation of Cavafy’s early writings as immature, nonserious exercises, experiments with “borrowed” styles or first steps in a course toward maturity that Cavafy reached much later in his life. The year 1911 is the watershed that inaugurates the phase in which, according to most critics, Cavafy found his true voice and became a major poet. This approach finds support in Cavafy’s own dismissal, already in 1903, of a large part of his early production.<sup>26</sup> A similar judgment traditionally accompanies Cavafy’s prose work, the bulk of which

25. For the claim that Cavafy anticipated future concerns, see the preface. James Faubion, discussing a notation by Cavafy from 1902, in fact uses the term “proleptic” to describe the way Cavafy saw his poetry: “a poetry of reference,” Faubion writes, “even if its reference is proleptic, to lives yet to come” and “remains referentially proleptic even when its settings are of the Hellenistic past” (2014, 237).

26. I broach this issue in chapter 4 through a discussion of Cavafy’s “Philosophical Scrutiny.”

was also produced in the early phases of his poetic career. Even though the young Cavafy aspired to write prose, his prose works, according to this view, never matched up to his poetry, which is why he gave up on his aspiration to develop a prose style (Jeffreys 2010, 193).

It would of course be absurd to deny the substantial differences between the phases of Cavafy's work, as well as the dominant influence of different movements and styles in each phase: this is not my intention in proposing a "pre-posterous" approach to Cavafy's archive. Following the logic of spectrality in Cavafy's writings, however, makes us attentive to the ways in which past influences and ideas are not left behind, but keep reappearing—like revenants—in later writings. Conversely, I also argue that Cavafy's idiosyncratic modernist poetics (commonly associated with his "mature" realist phase) haunts his early writings and can be traced in those too, albeit in different forms.<sup>27</sup> Cavafy himself used the vocabulary of spectrality to capture this interrelation or mutual haunting of his poems as a form of *return* that is emphatically not a repetition of the same. In a text published anonymously, possibly by Cavafy himself, in the magazine *Αλεξανδρινή Τέχνη* (Alexandrian Art), Cavafy wrote:<sup>28</sup> "Repetition in Cavafy is nowhere to be found. Each of his poems, without exception, has something different from the others. [. . .] At times, the light of a new poem slightly penetrates the half-light of an older one (light in one poem, half-light in another)—not without purpose—but according to the most careful poetic economy."<sup>29</sup> This process, Cavafy noted, never results in "repetition" but in "return" (quoted in Savidis 1992, 210): the specter's *modus operandi*. Along these lines, early influences, images, desires, and insights, return in later poems in unexpected shapes. And early poems and writings are put in a new light when we read them through Cavafy's later production. When we suspend a strict qualitative and linear distinction between his early writings and his "mature," realist phase, in favor of a spectral, pre-posterous approach, we find traces of Cavafy's modernist poetics in his early production too.

I therefore propose the conceptual metaphor of spectrality as a lens for revisiting all phases of Cavafy's writing, not only his preoccupation with spiritualism and occultism in his early writings, in which ghosts and supernatural

27. I pursue this argument particularly in chapters 3 and 4.

28. Savidis argues that this as well as many other notes published anonymously in *Αλεξανδρινή Τέχνη* were dictated, reviewed, and most probably also written by Cavafy himself (1992, 209).

29. My translation from the Greek: "Επανάληψη στον Καβάφη δεν βρίσκεται ποτέ. Το κάθε ποίημά του, χωρίς εξαίρεση, έχει κάτι το διαφορετικό από τα άλλα του. [. . .] Κάποτε το φως ενός καινούριου ποιήματος ελαφρά διαπερνά το ημίφως ενός παλαιότερου (φως στο ένα ποίημα, ημίφως στο άλλο)—όχι στον βρόντο αλλά σύμφωνα με προσεκτικότερη ποιητική οικονομία" (Cavafy quoted in Savidis 1992, 210).

figures make frequent appearances. Spectrality allows me to approach Cavafy's multifaceted poetics not in the evolutionary or organicist terms of "growth towards poetic maturity," but, as Gregory Jusdanis already argued in his study on Cavafy's poetics, in a way that makes it "possible to indicate the simultaneous presence of divergent and conflicting elements, and to examine inconsistencies and contradictions" (1987, xvii; see also Faubion 2003, 35; Kolocotroni 2021, 68).<sup>30</sup> Thus, even if Cavafy himself questioned and repudiated part of his early production, we do not have to follow or accept his judgment. The suspicion toward linear history that many Cavafian writings suggest, casts a shadow over evolutionary approaches, prompting us to distrust the neat distinctions they produce and to be attentive to the interplay of past and future specters—i.e., to follow the proleptic and metaleptic movements—in every period of the poet's life and work.

In this book, I read poems and prose texts from all periods of Cavafy's work, but draw particular attention to certain less studied or underrated Cavafian texts: fictional and nonfictional prose works—from his short story "Εἰς το φῶς τῆς ἡμέρας" / "In Broad Daylight" to the diary from his first visit to Greece—and early poems that have been relegated by critics to (failed or immature) experiments of his youth. It is to one such early poem that I turn now, written in 1894 and rejected later on by Cavafy. Through this poem, I bring spectrality to bear on the relation between the poet, the act of writing, and the multiple hands into which the poet's words enter after his death.

#### d. The Writer's Inkwell: From Tyrannical Prehension to Foreign Hands

Cavafy's writings haunt, but they are also, in their materiality, multiply haunted objects. The crossed-out words, punctuation marks, notes, corrections, repudiated versions, revisions, and fragments that his manuscripts consist of—snippets of the songs coming from those distant ghost ships—often make it impossible to speak of finished products or final versions. These writings, however, are also products of extreme control, as is attested by Cavafy's constant

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30. As Michalis Chryssanthopoulos shows, the narrative of the division of Cavafy's work into an early, underrated phase and a later, mature phase after 1911, was introduced by George Seferis (1974, 328) and later refined by G. P. Savidis, who distinguished three moments of revision in Cavafy's poetic practice: 1891, 1903, and 1911 (Savidis 1992; Chryssanthopoulos, forthcoming). Chryssanthopoulos challenges this narrative by pointing out continuities between Cavafy's earlier and later works, arguing that "Cavafy's earlier poems contain the 'sounds' or 'words' that prefigure and in a certain manner 'dream' his later poems" (forthcoming). I am grateful to Chryssanthopoulos for sharing the manuscript of his forthcoming article.

revisions and mode of circulating his poems through self-made collections he distributed to people he knew and respected. Even such controlling practices, though, can be seen as strategies for postponing endings and eschewing finality. The oscillation between the desire to control and to let go, to master the specters and to give in to their unpredictable workings, is central to Cavafy's spectral poetics.

Both impulses—to control and to renounce mastery—permeate Cavafy's work from its early stages. If “The Ships” leaves us with the image of ghost ships always moving elsewhere, escaping the laws of the land and the poets' complete recall, in another early poem, published before “The Ships” was composed (1895–1896), the scale tilts in favor of the poet's controlling impulse. I am referring to the poem “Το καλαμάρι” / “The Inkwell,” published toward the end of 1894 in the *Εικονογραφημένον Αιγυπτιακόν Ημερολόγιον του 1895* (Illustrated Egyptian Almanac of 1895) but later renounced by Cavafy (Daskalopoulos and Stasinopoulou 2013, 37).<sup>31</sup> The poem, which centers on the world-making force of the poet's inkwell, starts as follows:

Του ποιητού ιερό, τίμιο καλαμάρι,  
που από μέσα σου ένας κόσμος βγαίνει,  
κάθε μορφή κοντά σ' εσένα σαν πηγαίνει,  
γυρίζει με μια κάποια νέα χάρι. (2015b, 418)

The poet's sacred, honorable inkwell,  
you, from whom a world entire comes forth,  
every time a form passes close by you  
it comes back with some charm that is new.  
(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 217)

The process of poetic creation that “The Ships” allegorized is visualized differently here. As we read in the next verses, the inkwell offers access to “mythic treasures” (“τα μυθικά τα πλούτη”) and the “jewels of the imagination” (“στης φαντασίας τα διαμαντικά”), which resonate with the precious materials that formed the cargo of “The Ships.” But if the poet-figure in the ships was practi-

31. Poems like this, published in periodicals but never included in Cavafy's self-made collections, were classified by George Savidis as “repudiated” (“αποκηρυγμένα”) (Cavafy 1983b). Savidis is responsible for the established division of Cavafy's poetic work into four categories: the 154 “acknowledged” poems that form Cavafy's “canon”; twenty-seven “repudiated” poems; about eighty “hidden” or “unpublished” poems that Cavafy chose not to circulate; and about thirty “unfinished” poems found among his papers (see Emmerich 2017, 140). For an exposition and critique of Savidis's categorizations and editorial practices, see Emmerich 2017, 135–40.

cally absent, here the poet is more prominent, albeit not as an absolute master: his assumed agency has to pass through the inkwell, around which the poem revolves. If we take the inkwell as a metonymy for the poet, then the power granted to the inkwell is also the poet's power. Yet, the poem also supports a disengagement of the poet from the inkwell by granting the latter autonomy as an object—an autonomy, however, that, as we read in the final stanza, is purchased with the inkwell's expected loyalty to the poet:

Του ποιητού ιερό, τίμιο καλαμάρι,  
 που απ' την μελάνη σου ένας κόσμος βγαίνει—  
 μ' έρχεται τώρα εις το νου πόσος θα μένη  
 κόσμος χαμένος μέσα σου, σαν πάρη  
 τον ποιητή μια νύκτα ο ύπνος ο βαθύς.  
 Τα λόγια θα 'ναι πάντα εκεί· αλλά ποιό ξένο χέρι  
 θα ημπορέση να τα βρη να μας τα φέρη!  
 Εσύ, πιστό στον ποιητή, θα τ' αρνηθής. (2015b, 419)

The poet's sacred, honorable inkwell,  
 you, from whose ink a world entire comes forth,  
 I'm put in mind, now, of how many people will  
 stay lost within you, when the deep  
 slumber comes one night to take the poet.  
 The words will always be there; but what strange hand  
 will have the power to find and bring them to us!  
 You, faithful to the poet, will refuse it. (2009a, 217–18)

What happens to the inkwell's world-making force when the poet is no longer there to direct it? The words that could create more worlds are the inkwell's captives. If a “foreign hand” (or “strange hand,” in Mendelsohn's translation of “ξένο χέρι”) tries to release them, the inkwell must stay faithful to the poet and refuse to be used by someone else. In this expectation of faithfulness, we can detect the poet's desire to arrest the inkwell's activity. After his death, the inkwell had better stop providing materials rather than enter into foreign hands. Despite the poet's desire to keep controlling the inkwell beyond his death, however, the inkwell has the ultimate power to fulfill or ignore the poet's injunction. The poet is, in this sense, dependent on the inkwell, both for the act of writing that issues from it, and for controlling what survives the poet and which hands can “touch” that legacy.

This desire for control would never leave Cavafy but would be constantly negotiated, mitigated, and counterbalanced by a spectral poetics that allows

other forces—multiple truths and perspectives, conflicting contexts, people, ghosts, and objects—to enter the scene of writing. Even though the poet longs for control, he realizes that absolute control means death, ending. In “The Inkwell,” poetry seems to end when the poet dies, and the only way to defer this ending would be for the inkwell to enter into foreign hands. Even though the poetic subject seems reluctant to allow this to happen, Cavafy would allow and even invite such “foreign” interventions in other poems, in which spectral forces confound seemingly controlled contexts.

In fact, one such spectral force is already at work in “The Inkwell”: it manifests itself through an alternative final verse Cavafy conceived for this poem, which can be found in a manuscript in the Cavafy archive (figure 1):

Τα λόγια θα ἔναι πάντα εκεί· αλλά ποιό ξένο χέρι  
θα ἠμπορέσει να τα βρει να μας τα φέρει!  
Ἐσύ, πιστό στον ποιητή, θα τ’ ἀρνηθεῖς·  
να τὰ βρη θα ἠμπορέσει και να μας τα φέρη,  
ποιο χέρι θα ἔναι ἄξιο να το ἐμπιστευθῆς.<sup>32</sup>

The words will always be there; but what strange hand  
will have the power to find and bring them to us!  
what hand will be worthy of your trust.

I have crossed out and replaced the last two verses to underline the difference with the poem’s above-quoted published version. The order of words in the penultimate verse is inverted but the real change concerns the final verse, which in the unpublished version can be translated as “what hand will be worthy of your trust.”

The final injunction to the inkwell in the published version—“You, faithful to the poet, will refuse it”—is missing in this version. Instead, the poem ends with a reformulation of the previous question in the form of an *anaphora*—a figure of speech grounded in repetition, usually of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses. Of course, the repeated question (“what strange hand [. . .]” / “what hand [. . .]”) lacks a question mark and can be read as a rhetorical question that suggests a negative answer: i.e., “no [strange] hand” will be able to extract these words from the inkwell. Its repetition, however, betrays a subtextual desire to override this negative answer and overturn the equation

32. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0078, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0078 (78), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-78/>. I could not verify whether this version was written before the published version. The translation of the last verse is mine. For the other two verses, I follow Mendelsohn’s translation, quoted above.

## Τό Καλαμάρι

Τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἱερό ὡς τίμιο καλαμάρι  
ποῦ ἀπὸ μισό σου ἕνας κόσμος βραίνει,  
κάθε μορφή κοντά σ' ἐσένα σάν πηγαίνει  
μεῖναι μὲ μιὰ ἕσπασα νέα χεῖρ.  
Ποῦ ἤρχει ἡ μαζάνη σου τὰ μοθιὰ  
τὰ ἀσπίδη! Κάθε κόμπος τῆς εἰς τὸ χεῖρ' σάν σάξει  
ἕνα διαμάνι περισσότερο μιὰ βάρη  
μῆσα στὸ φαντασμάς τὰ διαμαντιά.

Τὰ γόγια ποῖς σὶ δίδασκεν ὅπῃ σὺν μίση  
εἶχενεῖς τοῦ κόσμου ὡς μιὰ εἰθουσιάζει.  
Κὶ τῶν παιδιῶν μας τὰ παιδιὰ θά τὰ διαβάσει  
μὲ τῶν ἰδιὰ σημάγιοι ὡς γέσι.

Αὐτὰ τὰ γόγια ποῦ τὰ βρήναι, πῶ σ' αὐτὰ μας  
ἔνω ἤχων σάν πρωτοαμουσμένα,  
ὄμοι δὲν φαίνονται ὅσοι δόξου ζῆλα —  
σ' ἄσση δὲθ' θά τὰ ζῶνε ἡ καρδιά μας.

Ἡ πένητα ὅπου βρέχει ὡσάν διύλη μοιάει  
ποῦ σὸ εὐσώφ' τῆς ψυχῆς μερῆς.  
Τῶν αἰσθημάτων τὰ χεῖρ' μερῆς μὲ ὄσ' ἔχει,  
ταῖς ὥραις τῆς ψυχῆς μερῆς κ' ἄλλοι.

Τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἱερό ὡς τίμιο καλαμάρι  
ποῦ ἀπ' τῶν μαζάνη σου ἕνας κόσμος βραίνει,  
σὸ νῦν μου τώρα μ' ἔρχεται πόσος θά μῆναι  
κόσμος χαμένος μισό σου σάν πᾶρη  
τὸν ποιητὴ μὲ νύλα ὁ ὕψος ὁ βαθύς.  
Τὰ γόγια θάναι πάντα εἶναι ἄσση σοὶ ζῆλο χεῖρ,  
νά τὰ βρῆθαι θά ἡμωσῆ ὡς νά μῆς τὰ εἶπαι,  
ποῖο χεῖρ' θάναι ἄξιο νά τὸ ἡμωσῆθαι.

Figure 1. Unpublished version of the poem "The Inkwell." Reproduced by kind permission of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation © 2016–2018. CC BY-SA 4.0.

of the poet's death with poetry's end. In fact, this desire is already suggested by the speaker's regretful realization that the inkwell will stop producing words after the poet dies: "[. . .] πόσος θα μένει / κόσμος χαμένος μέσα σου [. . .]" / "[. . .] how many worlds / will stay lost within you [. . .]."<sup>33</sup> The word "lost" ("χαμένος") intimates this regret: what a waste, what a loss.

In *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, Shoshana Felman discusses the figure of the anaphora in relation to repeatedly broken promises. The repetition of an unkept promise betrays a desire for "a denegation of the end" and "a denial of death," while "faithfulness is tantamount to an acceptance of the end, of death" (2003, 25). In "The Inkwell," this faithfulness is a promise or commitment the poet asks the inkwell to make: to remain faithful to him by allowing no one else near his words. This requested faithfulness is the poet's final attempt to keep controlling his work's fate beyond death, even though the inkwell holds the actual power. Faithfulness to the poet would block poetry's afterlife and its performative, world-creating force: the "world" ("κόσμος") the poet's hand created would indeed be "lost" ("χαμένος"). The repetition of the question "which hand [. . .]" with which Cavafy ends the alternative version of the poem, leaves the question open for a bit longer, thus creating the possibility or hope for a breach in the inkwell's faithfulness. In other words, the inkwell may be implicitly called to pledge faithfulness to the poet ("ποιο χέρι θά'ναι άξιο να το εμπιστευθείς" suggests that no other hand will be worthy of the poet's trust), but rhetorically, through the anaphora, the poem's alternative ending calls for a *deferral* of this end, a breach of trust that would grant the inkwell—and poetry—a life beyond the poet's death. The poem's published version is haunted by this alternative ultimate verse, which tries to loosen the poet's posthumous grip on the inkwell.

The tension between the poet's controlling impulse and the desire for "foreign hands" is also staged in the poem's paratext: Cavafy's three hand-written notes to the above unpublished version of the poem. Written on a separate page that accompanies the poem's manuscript, these notes contain instructions for the English translation of certain words or phrases.<sup>34</sup> In the first and longest note, Cavafy clarifies that the adjective "τίμιο" that is attributed to the inkwell does not denote "honest" but derives its meaning from "precious," "honorable,"

33. I prefer the translation of "κόσμος" with "worlds" over Mendelsohn's translation with "people": "worlds" seems more apt, also given that Cavafy uses the same word in the previous verse (where Mendelsohn does translate it with "world"). The repetition of the same word highlights the subject's regret even more and links "world(s)" with the performative force of "words" in the translation, both semantically and through assonance and alliteration.

34. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0078, photo 2; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0078 (78), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-78/>. I am grateful to Karen Emmerich for drawing my attention to these notes and their potential significance for the argument.



and “honored,” giving as an example the religious use of “τίμιο” for the honorable wood of Christ’s Cross (“τίμιο ξύλο”). The adjective “ιερό” (sacred), used alongside “τίμιο” in the poem, is already telling of the inkwell’s religious connotations, which Cavafy’s note makes more explicit. The repetition of “ιερό” and “τίμιο” works to highlight the religiously binding nature of the inkwell’s duty. Of course, Cavafy’s apostrophe to the poem’s translator in his notes—he addresses the translator in the second person<sup>35</sup>—de facto overrides this duty by anticipating the “foreign hands” of the poem’s translators, while it also betrays a distrust toward these hands: he tries to control the poem’s afterlives by indicating the “correct” translation of words or phrases.

Approaching Cavafy’s writings through the spectral metaphor allows us to account for the paradoxical cohabitation of such antithetical forces in his work. To illustrate this point, I turn to Maurice Blanchot’s theory of literary inspiration in *The Space of Literature* (*L’espace littéraire*, 1955), in which he laid out a writer’s crisis of subjectivity while composing a text. In a section titled “Tyrannical Prehension,” Blanchot addresses the conflicting forces of control and its release in the writing process—put differently, the negotiation between the active and the passive—in terms reminiscent of the “The Inkwell” and its alternative ending. The vocabulary of spectrality is instrumental in Blanchot’s visualization of this process:

Sometimes, when a man is holding a pencil, his hand won’t release it no matter how badly he wants to let it go. Instead, the hand tightens rather than open. The other hand intervenes more successfully, but then the hand which one might call sick makes a slow, tentative movement and tries to catch the departing object. The strange thing is the slowness of this movement. The hand moves in a tempo which is scarcely human: not that of viable action, not that of hope either, but rather the shadow of time, the hand being itself the shadow of a hand slipping ghostlike toward an object that has become its own shadow. This hand experiences, at certain moments, a very great need to seize: it must grasp the pencil, it has to. It receives an order, an imperious command. This phenomenon is known as “tyrannical prehension.”

The writer seems to be the master of his pen; he can become capable of great mastery over words and over what he wants to make them

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35. Referring to the word “τίμιο” in his first note, Cavafy writes: “Είναι ολίγον δύσκολον να ‘σε’ δώσω την σημασίαν της αλλά θα προσπαθήσω” / “It is somewhat difficult to give ‘you’ its meaning but I will try” (my translation). Cavafy may have had his brother John in mind, who was the first translator of his poems in English.

express. But his mastery only succeeds in putting him, keeping him in contact with the fundamental passivity where the word, no longer anything but its appearance—the shadow of a word—never can be mastered or even grasped. [. . .].

The writer's mastery is not in the hand that writes, the "sick" hand that never lets the pencil go—that can't let it go because what it holds it doesn't really hold; what it holds belongs to the realm of shadows, and it is itself a shade. Mastery always characterizes the other hand, the one that doesn't write and is capable of intervening at the right moment to seize the pencil and put it aside. (Blanchot 1982, 24)

Two hands, two opposed forces. The hand that writes follows an injunction ("order," "command") to hold on, seize, tighten its grip on the pencil/pen, be its master, even though the writer "badly" wants to release it. This "sick" hand aspires to control not only the words but also their signifying force: what the writer "wants to make them express." This is a futile aspiration, as the words and their signifying potential belong to an interminable movement that exceeds the writer, his pen, and his life. The words do not belong to the ontology of presence, but to "the realm of shadows." As the hand tries to arrest their movement, it, too, becomes a shadow, "slipping ghostlike toward an object that has become its own shadow." If words are already ghosts, their movement is uncontrollable. And whereas the writer's impulse to master the words depends on a linear temporality, whereby the hand is the origin of the words that belong to it, the words-as-ghosts in Blanchot's image belong to a spectral time that defies chronology and causality. They can also haunt the writer's hand from a future in which the poet is dead, a shadow.

The spectral vocabulary in Blanchot's text does not simply capture the slipperiness of words and their meaning. Rather, it transposes writing from an ontological to a *hauntological* realm (to borrow Derrida's term), making it a ghostly interplay—the hand, the pen/pencil, the words, are all "shadows"—that defies the temporality of origin, the ontology of the "work" as an autonomous, circumscribed object, and the writer's mastery over it. The writer's only controlling power lies with the other hand: it is the power to interrupt the writing by putting the pen/pencil aside. This intervention is neither an active nor a passive act: the writer is neither the text's master nor fully impotent. With this interruption—a letting-go of the impulse to control—the writer joins the realm of shadows to which writing also belongs, a realm in which one can simultaneously haunt and be haunted.

Cavafy also captured writing as a balancing act between the passive and the

active in his poem “Εκόμισα εις την Τέχνη” / “I’ve Brought to Art” (1921). The poetic subject’s active contribution to Art in the poem’s first half—“I’ve brought to Art desires and sensations”—is counteracted in the second half: “[. . .] Let me submit to Art” (trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 116). If in “The Inkwell” Cavafy’s “tyrannical prehension” appears to have the upper hand, “I’ve Brought to Art” makes space for both impulses: mastering and submitting. And yet, even “The Inkwell,” as we saw, is haunted by the opposite impulse, hidden in the ending of its unpublished version.

Like the speaker in “The Inkwell,” Blanchot ends his section on “Tyrannical Prehension” with a reflection on the poet’s death. “The fact that the writer’s task ends with his life,” he writes, “hides another fact: that, through this task, his life slides into the distress of the infinite” (1982, 25). Unlike the poet’s finite life, the “distress of the infinite” unleashes a spectral time that disjoins the present of writing, allowing the poet as a specter to haunt and be haunted by his words, as they escape the inkwell’s guardianship to also haunt and be haunted by “foreign hands.”

#### e. Ghosts and the Archive

My reading of “The Inkwell” and its two endings brings spectrality to bear on the materiality of Cavafy’s manuscripts. As open and often unfinished assemblages, these manuscripts invite what Blanchot calls “the distress of the infinite.” Cavafy’s inkwell certainly broke its commitment to stay faithful to the poet by keeping his words away from foreign hands. As Will Stroebel has shown in his perspicacious study of Cavafy’s handmade collections, already during the poet’s lifetime his collections invited or registered several foreign hands. These collections, Stroebel argues, “constituted not a hermetically sealed space of authorial intention but, at least on certain occasions, an open platform that invited the agencies of multiple hands” (2018, 279).

Cavafy never published a conventional edition of his work and rejected attractive proposals to do so.<sup>36</sup> From 1912 up to his death he followed an idiosyncratic system of self-publication that involved (sometimes after first publishing a poem in a journal) printing individual poems, collating them into makeshift collections, and sharing them with acquaintances, friends, and people he respected. These collections have been distinguished into two types:

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36. He famously declined a contract for publishing translations of his poems by Hogarth Press, run by Virginia and Leonard Woolf (Jeffreys 2015, 38).

the “thematic” and the “chronological” collections, in which poems were ordered by date of composition (Savidis 1992; Emmerich 2017, 135; Hirst 1995; Ekdawi and Hirst 1996; Stroebel 2018). Considering Cavafy’s extreme “control of the poems’ textual production,” it becomes understandable, Stroebel argues, that Cavafy scholarship “has revolved almost inescapably around the gravitational pull of centralized authorial agency” (2018, 279). The fact that he was concurrently “the writer, editor, designer, binder, publisher, distributor, and, at times, censor of his poems” enhances the overall impression that his texts were a “personal possession” (279). “The Inkwell,” as we saw, registers this controlling impulse.

Alongside the desire to control, Cavafy’s collections also betray the opposite impulse. Stroebel sees them “as a kind of ongoing, open workshop, one that continually suspended the finality of its own production” (280). Scrutinizing Cavafy’s collections from 1910 to his death, he concludes that Cavafy “was not working towards a complete edition but rather *indefinitely deferring it*” (290). This deferral of completion is even more palpable in his unfinished poems. In her study of a set of these unfinished poems found in Cavafy’s archive, Karen Emmerich masterfully shows how in Cavafy’s work, and particularly in the unfinished poems, the “original,” as she puts it, “is always a singularly plural affair” (2017, 135). Despite the desire of many of Cavafy’s readers and editors for an “original” body of work, the instability of the materials Cavafy produced, coupled with multiple layers of mediation to which his archives were subjected, leave “the promise of an ‘original’ body of work” unfulfilled (140).

Even though my study does not center on the materiality of Cavafy’s collections, my take on the Cavafian archive through the lens of haunting and spectrality is aligned with, and indebted to, approaches such as Stroebel’s and Emmerich’s, which challenge attempts to stabilize Cavafy’s archive and arrest the spectral movement of his writings—a movement also registered in the archive’s materiality. My approach thereby subscribes to a moving, open-ended, dynamic notion of the Cavafian archive, as it was elaborated in Papanikolaou’s pioneering study on Cavafy and his poetics of sexuality (2014). Papanikolaou put forward a conception of the Cavafian archive that extends beyond the texts Cavafy wrote to include the poet’s own life and his work’s shifting reception. The notion of the archive Papanikolaou proposed—in line with the “pre-posterous reading” I delineate in this book—casts Cavafy’s archive as always in becoming: an archive that shifts with each new reading and future recasting.

This moving archive, which emulates the never-ending movement of Cavafy’s ghost ships, showcases the creative role that “foreign hands” have played in perpetuating the potential of Cavafy’s writings to haunt and be haunted by future

readers. Foreign hands, however, do not always seek to preserve the archive's openness. In Cavafy's case, such hands often sought to appropriate, claim, (re) possess, consecrate, venerate, or circumscribe Cavafy and his oeuvre and arrest the spectral forces that permeate his archive. Practices of control over the narrative of Cavafy's life, his archive, and the meaning of his work abound in the history of Cavafy's reception. Such attempts can be traced, as Emmerich writes, in "the fetishization of his manuscripts; the interpretation of his poetry as allegorical autobiography;" the tendency "to extrapolate a poet from the poems," or "the need to construct a solid oeuvre out of a mass of materials left unpublished (in any conventional sense) at the time of his death" (2017, 134). To those we may add processes of canonization of Cavafy as a national poet, accompanied by the consecration of his corpus. Attempts to read Cavafy's oeuvre through a key or master narrative that would unlock its ultimate meaning can also be counted among the "hands" that resist his archive's spectrality, although some of these attempts gave us fascinating readings. These include Stratis Tsirkas's reading of Cavafy's work as a veiled political allegory, the decoding of which revealed hidden socialist and anticolonial attitudes; or George Seferis's tracing of a "mythical method" in Cavafy (comparable to T. S. Eliot's), grounded in analogies between the present and the (ancient) past. The allegorical logic of decoding that runs through these and other readings runs the risk of reducing the poems to vehicles leading us to a final meaning that lies elsewhere, outside the poems themselves.<sup>37</sup>

To write about Cavafy's specters is also to be inevitably haunted by the multiple faces of Cavafian criticism, which opened up his poetry to many interpretive angles, proliferated its afterlives, and widened its address to groups of readers, making Cavafy a figure of world literature, but which also sought to memorialize, nationalize, and circumscribe the signifying force of his poetry's afterlives. Although this book does not delve into the strands of Cavafian criticism, the chapters that deal with the afterlives of Cavafy's poetry broach processes of the poet's appropriation and consecration.

Besides contributing to studies of Cavafy, this book seeks to bring Cavafy's work in conversation with approaches in literary and cultural theory—particularly theories of spectrality, haunting, performativity, and affect. By expanding Cavafy's interlocutors in this way, I join studies that have made a case for the significance of Cavafy and his idiosyncratic modernism beyond the field of modern Greek studies: for world literature, European modernism,

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37. Tsirkas 1971; Seferis 1974, 324–63. For a brief discussion of readings of Cavafy based on the logic of decoding, see Beaton 1981, 517. For the problematic aspects of allegorical readings, see Attridge's chapter "Against Allegory" in his study on J. M. Coetzee (2004, 32–64).

postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, and queer theory.<sup>38</sup> By bringing Cavafy in contact with such “foreign hands,” I assert his work’s relevance for these theoretical fields. Cavafy’s writing is not only *metaleptically* recast through approaches in these fields, but *proleptically* contributes to them, and sometimes speaks back to them. By pluralizing the potential sea routes of Cavafy’s “ghost ships,” I try to stay faithful to the several points of input his writings offer and the multiple hands they invite, despite the poet’s controlling impulse.

## f. Outline

In this book, spectrality is mobilized on two interrelated levels, which roughly correspond to the book’s two parts. In part 1 (chapters 2, 3, and 4), I bring the spectral metaphor to bear on Cavafy’s poetics. In part 2 (chapters 5 and 6), I probe the workings of Cavafy’s poetry in contemporary contexts and reread some of his poems through their recent afterlives. The distinction in two parts is neither strict nor absolute: part 1 also includes readings of poems inspired by recent adaptations and reworkings, just as part 2 involves reflections on Cavafy’s spectral poetics and its imbrication with his poetry’s workings in the present.

In chapter 2, I turn to literal and more abstract specters in Cavafy’s poetry: apparitions of humans and gods, spirits, ghosts, appearances of the dead, and visions of past or future specters, but also failed attempts to invoke the dead or reanimate the past. Spectral appearances have commonly been associated with Cavafy’s early work and credited to his attraction to esoterism and occultism—an attraction that waned as his work evolved toward realism (Haas 1984, 1996). Resisting this assumption, I argue that the poet’s engagement with the spectral permeates both his early and later work in different guises, and is ingrained in his modernist poetics. His poems experiment with strategies of invoking the dead and bringing the past in the present, but often also acknowledge or stage the *failure* of such strategies. With this in mind, I turn to the two most prominent speech acts in Cavafy’s poetry, which I see as conditions for the appearance of spectral forces—or for their failure to appear: *conjurations* and (broken) *promises*. What does the success or failure of these speech acts mean for the power or impotence of poetry to momentarily suspend death, to cast the present as ruptured, and to function as a space of mourning or justice?

Speech act theory foregrounds language’s ability to do things, and as such

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38. I draw on many such studies throughout this book, but the list is too long to reproduce here.

it can be seen as a theory of conjuration: it explores how utterances call realities, subjects, and acts into being. If Cavafy's poetry is marked by an unyielding attempt to make the past present, it is hardly surprising that the speech act of conjuration takes center stage in it. His poems teem with conjurations of lovers, historical figures or past scenes, and invocations of (dead or forgotten) gods or of future visions. Such conjurations can take place intentionally or strategically, but they can also overtake a character unexpectedly; they can succeed or fail, signaling the subject's limited agency; and they are contingent on specific contextual conditions.

Broken promises, which also abound in Cavafy's poetic universe, share with conjurations a *disjoining* of the present: they make the present precarious. As I show in this chapter, conjurations and broken promises transgress linear time and often challenge the sovereign authority of the conjuring or promising subject. I argue that both speech acts in Cavafy's writing become means of negating or deferring death and endings, without appealing to eternal life or presence. They are strategies of perpetuating desire and ensuring that both the past and the future keep unhinging the present in ways that subjects cannot always control. Zooming in on these speech acts offers us an entrance into Cavafy's poetics of the spectral. Finally, I show how Cavafy's characters, and particularly young eroticized men, move from a spectral existence to brazen presence in the last decade of his writing, thereby reconfiguring Cavafy's spectral poetics without, however, abandoning it.

Chapter 3 brings spectrality and haunting to bear on modernity through the ghost story "Εἰς τὸ φῶς τῆς ἡμέρας" / "In Broad Daylight"—the only short story Cavafy ever wrote. I start with a pre-posterous reading of the story through Ersi Sotiropoulos's novel *Τι μένει ἀπὸ τῆ νύχτα* (2015) / *What's Left of the Night* (2018), which focuses on Cavafy's trip to Paris. Starting with the premise that Cavafy's story responds to the modern condition not despite, but through, its concern with the spectral, I trace how haunting and spectrality shape the subject's experience of the modern city both in Sotiropoulos's novel and Cavafy's story. To scrutinize the entwinement of the spectral with modernity, I follow an (inter)textual thread that takes me to the figure of the *noonday demon*: a demon with religious origins, allegorizing the temptations of ascetic life, which evolved into a secular figure carrying the "disease" of modernity and capitalism. Revisiting the story through this chameleonic figure and its travels from religious to capitalist contexts, I probe the continued life of ghosts, specters, and demons in rationalized, capitalist modernity. Central to this exploration is the way the story responds to the "ascetic" spirit of modern industrial capitalism, as Max Weber described it, but also to the more recent phase of financialized capital-

ism. The story ends up haunting the “iron cage” of capitalist modernity with the possibility of different forms of enchantment and spectrality, through new technologies and media, such as cinema.

Chapter 4 explores the intersection of spectrality, irony, and affect. Critics have often associated irony in Cavafy’s poems with a detached poet-observer, removed from characters and events. By contrast, in this chapter, I draw attention to a kind of irony that issues from a vulnerable subject, from linguistic instability, and from textual transmissions of affect. Revisiting irony through spectrality and affect, I show how irony can be produced through acts of haunting that need not be governed by the speaker’s intention. Irony here emerges from the desire to inhabit competing truths, perspectives, or narratives. Privileged or chosen “truths” and positions are haunted by what the subject represses or is forced to reject. Avoided “truths” become sites of desire that haunt the text, raising the “temperature” of Cavafy’s factual language and producing an irony I term *reluctant*. The subject’s desire to control language is counteracted by the desire to submit the text and the self to the haunting of other histories, discourses, and truths, and to embodied forms of knowledge that challenge the integrated self. The reluctant ironist who emerges through these processes is dispossessed: marked, like specters, by a nonidentity of the self to itself, s/he can say “I believe and I do not believe,” “I know and I do not know,” or “I want to be and I want to be other.”

This discussion unravels through a reading of two early nonfiction prose texts: Cavafy’s diary from his first trip to Greece (1901) and an essay (in English) on the process of poetic creation known as “Philosophical Scrutiny” (1903). Contrary to previous studies of Cavafy’s irony that focus exclusively on his poetry, I propose a reading of both these prose texts as ironic. By revisiting irony through Cavafy’s prose—and nonliterary prose at that—I challenge the dominant reception of his prose as a failed venture to do something he only achieved poetically. His nonliterary prose texts offer surprising entrances to his spectral poetics and new ways of considering the interrelation of irony, affect, and intentionality.

Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with how Cavafy’s poems haunt contemporary realities, as well as how reworkings, adaptations, and citations of poems can metaleptically trigger new readings of these poems that reveal what in chapter 6 I call “the futurity of things past.” Chapter 5 probes the afterlives of “Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους” / “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1898/1904). As Cavafy’s best-known poem, it has been restaged in works of literature, visual art, music, and popular culture in numerous cultural contexts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Especially since the early 1990s, and even more



since the attacks on September 11, 2001, the poem's frequent mobilization in Western political commentary and cultural theory warrants particular attention. This chapter explores the poem's figurations in sociopolitical debates and ponders its prominence in discussions about post-Cold War and post-9/11 realities up to recent debates on terrorism and the declared "migration crisis" since 2015. Which understandings of history or visions of the future does the poem's use in political commentary support, especially in situations of crisis? Commentators often use the poem as an allegory that reveals a familiar historical pattern meant to help people make sense of an increasingly elusive present. Contrary to such uses, I argue that the poem's haunting force stems from the way it defamiliarizes and disjoins the present.

To support this hypothesis, I call on the specters of barbarians within the poem: I examine the poem's critical engagement with progressive and decadent narratives of history in modern European thought that involve barbarians, and particularly Edward Gibbon and Ernest Renan's writings, to which Cavafy's poem responds. By scrutinizing the barbarians evoked in the poem and the conceptions of history they are bound with, I ask how the poem deals with persistent past narratives in the present. The poem's revolutionary gesture, I argue, lies in fostering a space of *crisis* as choice and critique of the Empire's historical "truth," through which the future emerges as an open question.

In chapter 6, I follow Cavafy's specters from colonized Egypt to contemporary Greece during the country's recent debt crisis, asking how his poems haunt today despite and through regulatory practices aimed at preserving the poet's myth. To that end, I approach the Cavafian text as a statue that sometimes needs to be fractured to come alive in the present. The commemoration of Cavafy in 2013—150 years from his birth—involved practices of dissemination of his poetry in public space, which sometimes involved the fragmentation of verses. In this context, I probe certain Cavafian verses that were released in public space and decontextualized, showing how fragmentation and even misquoting are sometimes serendipitous events that amplify a poem's signifying force. Specifically, I propose a fragmentary, pre-posterous reading of the poem "Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ." / "In a large Greek colony, 200 B.C." (1928) by tracing the interplay of past and future specters in the poem's present. I show how the poem recasts Egypt's modern history of public debt and colonization, and resonates with the neoliberal rhetoric of debt, crisis, and reform in crisis-stricken Greece. In the poem's somber and seemingly closed context of crisis, I also trace the specter of an incalculable future that has not arrived yet. This specter allows the poem's colony, Cavafy's Egypt, contemporary Greece, and other contexts of crisis to remain open to historical contingency and political hope.

## CHAPTER TWO



### Cavafy's Spectral Poetics

#### *On Broken Promises and Conjurations*

##### a. Introduction

###### *i. Cavafy and Speech Acts*

What are the conditions that make the dead haunt? What makes things past active forces in future presents? These questions are at the heart of Cavafy's spectral poetics. In this chapter, I zoom in on some of the main conditions and strategies through which Cavafy's poems respond to these questions. To do so, I delve into the two most prominent speech acts in Cavafy's poetry that take center stage in his spectral poetics: *conjurations* and *promises*. Conjurations, as utterances that seek to call forth the past, and promises, as utterances that commit to future action, run through the entire Cavafian corpus. Yet, as I will show, it is particularly when promises are broken or when conjurations do not quite work according to the conjurer's intentions that they become all the more revealing of the conditions that underlie the spectral temporality of Cavafy's poetry.

I approach conjurations and promises as "performatives" or "speech acts,"<sup>1</sup> that is, utterances that do not state, describe, or represent, but perform acts in and through language. To do so, I draw from the theory of the performative or speech act theory, which deals with language's ability to do things. Initiated by J. L. Austin,<sup>2</sup> this theory has been taken up by several philosophers and literary theorists, who broadened its applicability and implications for language, literature, society, and processes of subject constitution. Austin initially dis-

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1. I use the terms "speech act" and "performative" interchangeably, as they are used by J. L. Austin and most theories of performativity.

2. Austin introduced his speech act theory in a lecture series at Harvard in the 1950s, posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

tinguished two kinds of utterances: *constatives*, which state, represent, or describe something and can be either true or false (e.g., “It is sunny today”), and *performatives*, which perform the act they designate and cannot be true or false but are successful or unsuccessful—in Austin’s terms, “felicitous” or “infelicitous.” For Austin, the felicity of a speech act largely depends on a series of conventions—the “felicity conditions”—that ensure that the speech act does not fail or “misfire.” For example, the speech act “I do” during a wedding ceremony will be infelicitous if the person performing the ceremony is not authorized to do so, or if either the bride or groom is already married (Austin 1962, 15–16). Austin in fact ended up giving up the distinction between constative and performative utterances, arguing that all language is performative. Constatives, he concluded, are also a type of performative that perform the acts of stating, affirming, announcing, etc.

As I argued in previous work, bringing the speech act theory to bear on Cavafy’s poetry is not merely a retroactive application of a theoretical vocabulary on poems written before this theory was articulated.<sup>3</sup> Cavafy’s own poetics foreground language’s performative force. His poetic language is not a means of recording memories and experiences or representing past events and characters. It is first and foremost a force of *poiesis*, an attempt to “present” in the sense of “making present”: to create scenes, reanimate past worlds, bring historical or fictional characters onto the poetic stage. It is, in other words, a *poetry of conjuration*. On a basic level, performativity itself can be seen as a theory of conjuration: it is concerned with how utterances call realities, subjects, and acts into being. Performativity, Andrew Sofer writes, “is a kind of magical altering of reality through the power of the word, one that channels what might well be called an occult force” (2009, 5). Hence, the speech act of the conjuration, on which this chapter centers, exemplifies the performative force of language.

The performative force Cavafy saw in poetic language—its potential to “make present”—is by no means omnipotent. As his poetry projects the creative power of language, it also emphasizes the instability, historical contingency, and precarity of language as a means of shaping realities and constituting subjects and truths. It questions language as an instrument of truth by testing how the same “truths” perform differently when the (social, religious, cultural, historical, aesthetic) codes and conventions shift. As Lambropoulos succinctly put it, Cavafy loved poetry because he “trusted language with genuine suspicion” (1983a, 631). Cavafy’s poetry does not simply project language’s perfor-

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3. In Boletsi 2006, I examined the function of infelicitous performatives in Cavafy’s poetry. The present chapter takes some of the premises of this earlier article as a starting point, but expands and revises my earlier argument while treating different material.

mative force, but explores the *conditions* under which language can conjure the past, shape present realities, and constitute subjects—or fail to do so. To retrace these conditions, I take my cue from revisions of the performative in poststructuralist, critical, and queer theory, particularly in the work of Jacques Derrida (1982, 1988a), Judith Butler (1993, 1997), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, 2010, 2011), who used performativity to understand how subjects are discursively constituted through the repetition of (normative) utterances.<sup>4</sup>

The premises and mechanisms on which a law or rule is based become more visible when that law or rule is broken. Likewise, instances in which performative language fails to perform specific acts or to produce the desired effects can reveal a lot about how language produces the past and the future or constitutes subjects in ways that escape its users' intentions. In my previous work on Cavafian speech acts, I drew attention to the remarkable fact that most speech acts within Cavafy's poems seem to go awry in one way or another: promises are broken, orders not executed, prayers not heard, warnings or threats disregarded, injunctions or oracles' predictions misunderstood, often with painful or disastrous consequences for those involved. In "Ἡ ἀρρώστια τοῦ Κλείτου" / "Kleitos' Illness" (1926), for example, a prayer is not heard because it is addressed to the "wrong" deity. In "Ἡ Διορία τοῦ Νέρωνος" / "Nero's Deadline" (1915/1918) and "Ἐν πορεία πρὸς τὴν Σινώπην" / "On the March to Sinope" (1928), the downfall of the historical characters flows from the misinterpretation of an oracle and the disregard for a soothsayer's warnings, respectively. Something in the situation surrounding speech acts tends to go wrong or some of the criteria that would ensure the felicity or desired "uptake" of a performative are not met (Boletsi 2006, 397). Consequently, in many poems, the "perlocutionary force"<sup>5</sup> of speech acts—i.e., their effects, their power to convince—deviates from the intention of the subject performing the speech act. These breaches are symptomatic of the instability of seemingly homogeneous contexts, the transgressive force of homoerotic desire vis-à-vis social norms, the divergent effects of the same utterance in different contexts, and the porousness of social codes. Such breaches, as I will show, unsettle the self-sufficiency of the present, allowing specters from the past or the future to interfere in the poetic "now."

Many speakers in Cavafy's poems invest in language's performative power but also fear that language may betray them and fail to carry out what they

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4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who transposed the theory of performativity into gender and queer studies, discussed issues of performativity in Cavafy in an essay she wrote on Proust, Cavafy, and their "queer little gods" toward the end of her life (2010), in which she also responded to my earlier article on speech acts in Cavafy (2006). This chapter draws from her approach and especially her notion of the "periperformative."

5. Austin's term for the effects of speech acts on others.

expect or intend. These speakers are hardly ever sovereign subjects in control of language and its effects. Rather, they are vulnerable, internally divided characters who break their promises almost as soon as they make them, whose public and private performances are often conflicting, and who lack clear intentions and a unified sense of self. Whereas Austin's theory assumes an intentional subject at the origin of speech acts, Cavafian performatives are not generated by a predetermined, sovereign subject, but partake in processes of subject formation (Boletsi 2006, 402).<sup>6</sup>

The lack of mastery over language and the discrepancy between what language states and what it does—i.e., between its constative and performative force—captures the deconstructive aspect of performativity. Paul de Man understood this discrepancy as “a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text” (1979, 298), while Sedgwick saw it as the “torsion, the mutual perversion [. . .] of reference and performativity” (2005, 2). This discrepancy has a productive dimension: it allows Cavafy's characters to transgress norms, live different lives, express homosexual desire, and dream about different futures even when their language conceals their desire, states shame or even announces their downfall or death. In a myriad ways, Cavafy's poetry showcases the productive force of speech acts even when they go wrong—or precisely *because* they (can) go wrong. Their misfiring or unexpected effects create discursive fissures through which transgressive subjectivities take shape, desire proliferates, and alternative futures may be imagined. The “*dislinkage*” between what is said and what is performed by the saying (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 2)—that is, the way the constative and the performative challenge each other—is also at the heart of Cavafy's irony, which I delve into in chapter 4.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, performativity in Cavafy is not only about how his poetry brings worlds, characters, and past events into being. It is also about compromised agency, the faltering of sovereign subjectivity, the gap between what someone says and means or what one says and does, the limits of language's force and its insubordination to the speaker's intentions, and, ultimately, the *productive*

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6. In that sense, performativity in Cavafy comes closer to Derrida's and Butler's poststructuralist accounts of Austin's theory that reject the assumption of an autonomous subject at the origin of language.

7. The discrepancy between what Cavafy's language says (or does not say) and what it does by saying (or not saying) also underlies Papanikolaou's approach to Cavafy's strategies of “hiding and telling” in the erotic poems. These include the “performative silences” in early poems that end up “expos[ing] the very mechanisms that drive him to that concealment” (2005, 237, 239). In Cavafy's writing, Papanikolaou argues, hiding and being “in the closet” are performative gestures that tell and disclose, and are linked to “the poetics and technology of the (homosexual) self” (238). In his analysis of the poem “Κρυμμένα” / “Hidden,” George Syrimis also discusses the “discursive fissures and openings” in Cavafy's vocabulary of “denial and evasion” that invite the *disclosure* of the secret by declaring it (2003, 98–99).

force of these gaps, limits, and insubordinations. In turning to conjurations and promises in this chapter, I am interested in what unkept promises and failed or incomplete conjurations tell us about Cavafy's understanding of subjectivity, language's force, and the relation of performativity to the spectral in his poetry.

But what is an (in)felicitous promise or conjuration? Who or what determines felicity in these cases? One cannot answer this without addressing the thorny issue of intentionality in speech act theory. Austin's theory made the felicity of a speech act mainly dependent on social or linguistic conventions rather than on the speaker's intention. Concretely, for Austin, when someone says "I promise," they perform the act of the promise regardless of whether they intend to keep it or not.<sup>8</sup> A promise would be infelicitous if, for example, the speaker has no authority to promise what she promises (e.g., when I promise to make someone the mayor of Athens without having the power to live up to that promise), but not when a speaker does not intend to keep the promise or breaks it for any reason. This is why in this chapter I refer to violated promises as "broken," "unkept" or "unmet" rather than "infelicitous": strictly speaking, they are still felicitous even when they are not kept.<sup>9</sup>

Following this logic, conjurations, as long as they adhere to certain contextual conditions, would also be deemed felicitous even when they fail to make specters appear. However, in the case of conjurations it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the (linguistic) act from its outcome when assessing its felicity. More simply put: is a conjuration still a conjuration if it does not end up conjuring something, in the same way that a promise is still a promise even when it is not kept? There is a subtle yet important difference: if a conjuration is an act of "making present," a conjuration that fails to summon a specter would be automatically deemed an "attempted" or "failed" conjuration. This has to do with the double meaning of "conjuration" as both a "a magic incantation or spell" (i.e., the words uttered to summon a specter) and "the performance of something supernatural by means of a magic incantation or spell."<sup>10</sup> Conjuration thus signifies both the speech act and its (desired) effect: the specter's appearance. For this reason, to designate a conjuration as "felicitous" or "infe-

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8. It should be noted, however, that Austin's theory is ambivalent when it comes to the issue of intention. Although it breaks with the speaker's intention as a prerequisite for linguistic felicity, it presupposes an intentional subject at the origin of the speech act, who is responsible for the act and its effects. The ways in which Austin's theory deconstructs but also reintroduces the speaker's intention have been famously laid out by Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context" (1982) and *Limited Inc* (1988a).

9. On this point, I deviate from my previous article on performativity in Cavafy (2006), in which I designated unkept promises as "infelicitous."

10. According to *Google's English Dictionary*, provided by Oxford Languages.

licitous,” I take into account not only the formulas and conditions surrounding the conjuring, but also whether it actually succeeds in summoning a specter.

## *ii. Promises, Conjurations, and Spectrality*

Promises and conjurations hold a central place both in Cavafy’s poetry and in speech act theory. If a conjuration, as we saw, exemplifies the performative force of language, a promise has been “taken as the exemplary model of speech acts in general” (Felman 2003, 3).

What does conjuring imply? In her discussion of Derrida’s figure of the specter, Wendy Brown lays out the act of conjuring in terms that resonate with Cavafian conjurations:

Conjuring, always a mixture of conscious and unconscious elements, is also a precise and deliberate activity paradoxically combined with pure hope. We conjure the not-yet-true—for example, the dead as reborn, or an imagined triumph—in an effort to make it true. [. . .] Historiography as hauntology [. . .] opens the stage for battling with the past over possibilities for the future. In figuring the past as “alive” in the present, conjuring indexes a certain capacity to invoke and diminish it, to demand its presence on stage or to attempt to banish it to the wings. Of course conjuration is never only or fully in our hands. (2001, 151)

A conjuration is often an intentional act with a goal—we conjure something forth or away, we try to relive, revive, or exorcise a piece of the past. But, Brown reminds us, it does not always work the way we want it to. Poetic conjurations in Cavafy can be felicitous or not, deliberate or (partly) involuntary, verging on epiphanies. Similarly, conjured entities do not always act predictably or abide by the authority of the poetic subject.

Specters produce the present as highly precarious and unpredictable. “Spectrality,” Fredric Jameson writes, shows that “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be,” and that “we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might [. . .] betray us” (1999, 39). Hauntology defies “narratives of systematicity, periodicity, laws of development, or a bounded, coherent past and present” (Brown 2001, 143). So how do *promises* relate to the precarious temporality of specters? The interrelation of promises and spectrality emerges when a promise is *broken*. A promise presupposes a stable, linear temporality: it seeks to control, manage, and predict future behavior, to gear it toward the fulfillment of the promise. Promises create a debt, making sure

that future action leads to its repayment, i.e., the fulfillment of the promise. Every promise, Shoshana Felman writes in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, “promises consistency, continuity in time between the act of commitment and the future action” (2003, 20). Thus, to speak with Lacan, it carries “the assertion of anticipated certainty”: “It is a certain time [. . .] defined [. . .] by its end, at once goal and termination” (Lacan, quoted in Felman 2003, 32). The promise is thus “defined [. . .] by the end in these two meanings: by death, or life’s end, which life is fleeing, and by the satisfaction, the goal or the end of desire, which life is pursuing” (32).

Broken promises, however, share with conjurations an unhinging of the present. They make the present porous and open to intrusions from elsewhere by defying linear time, transgressing the line between life and death or challenging the authority of the speaking “I.” The breaking of promises in Cavafy’s poems removes this sense of control over the future, opening up the present and future to the force of desire and to the contingent, the not-yet-here. It also makes normative expectations falter, allowing more fluid and less strictly regulated bodies and subjectivities to emerge. Broken promises thus join the temporality of specters, messing up the linear time a promise demands. They create a present that may betray our expectations and interrupt straight lines toward a known future.

### b. On Broken Promises

In Cavafy’s poetry, the promises that characters make to others or to themselves are usually either deliberately or involuntarily broken. Unkept promises and unmet commitments pervade Cavafy’s universe, attesting to the recurring discontinuity between intention and action that many Cavafian characters share. Especially in erotic poems, this discontinuity often issues from the clash between homoerotic desire and social norms or expectations. It can also signal the clashing aspirations of historical or fictional actors, as well as the antagonistic moral, religious, or social codes in the heterogeneous historical contexts Cavafian characters find themselves in.

In the poem “Απιστία” (1904)—translated as “Unfaithfulness” by Keeley and Sherrard and as “Betrayal” by Mendelsohn—we find Thetis grieving for Achilles’s death and furious with Apollo, who misled her about her son’s fate. The god who had promised her the safety and longevity of her offspring at her wedding with Peleus proved to be responsible for her son’s death: Apollo guided the hand of Paris, who killed Achilles. False promises and expectations



also figure in historical poems, such as “Δημητρίου Σωτήρος (162–150 π.Χ.)” / “Of Dimitrios Sotir (162–150 B.C.)” (1915/1919). The poem centers on the betrayed expectations of the Selefkid Dimitrios Sotir, king of Syria between 162 and 150 BCE, who found himself on the losing side of history. An external narrator reproduces Dimitrios’s perspective in free indirect speech, showing Dimitrios lamenting the failure of his plans. The poem registers the king’s mourning for the loss of a loved object: his imagined homeland. The image of Syria that accompanied him in his life as an object of desire, linked to his future vision, is disappearing before his eyes. The spectral character of Syria is suggested through the words “οπτασία” and “όραμα” (both translated by Keeley and Sherrard as “vision”) in the following lines, which foreground this specter through its unattainability:

Έτσι μικρός απ’ την πατρίδα έφυγε  
 που αμυδρώς θυμόνταν την μορφή της.  
 Μα μες στην σκέψι του την μελετούσε πάντα  
 σαν κάτι ιερό που προσκυνώντας το πλησιάζεις,  
 σαν οπτασία τόπου ωραίου, σαν όραμα  
 ελληνικών πόλεων και λιμένων.—<sup>11</sup>

He was so young when he left his country  
 he hardly remembered what it looked like.

But in his mind he had always thought of it  
 as something sacred that you approach reverently,  
 as a beautiful place unveiled, a vision  
 of Greek cities and Greek ports.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 102)

In the last two verses, the specter of Syria that Dimitrios longed for gives its place to a Syria he does not recognize (“Αυτή η Συρία—σχεδόν δεν μοιάζει σαν πατρίς του, / αυτή είν’ η χώρα του Ηρακλείδη και του Βάλα.” / “This Syria—it almost seems it isn’t his homeland—/ this Syria is the country of Valas and Herakleidis”). Facing the real Syria marks the final stage of his grief: the acceptance of the lost object and the letting-go of its ghost. In the process of work-

11. For all quotes from the poem in Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photos 49–50; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

ing through this loss that unfolds in the poem we can discern all five stages of grief: denial (he refuses to accept the disparaging attitude of his “friends” in Rome and sticks to his plans despite growing evidence to the contrary), anger (“αγανακτούσε” / “he [. . .] had become indignant”), bargaining (“Αρκει να βρει έναν τρόπο στην Ανατολή να φθάσει” / “If he could only find a way of getting to the East”), depression (“Τώρα απελπισία και καῦμός” / “And now? Now despair and sorrow”), and finally acceptance (Cavafy 1992, 101–2). The motif of the promise is tied to the stage of denial:

Τραβιούνταν μόνος του, κι αγανακτούσε, κι όμνυε  
 που όπως τα θαρρούν διόλου δεν θάναι·  
 ιδού που έχει θέλησιν αυτός·  
 θ' αγωνισθεί, θα κάμει, θ' ανυψώσει.

He had cut himself off, had become indignant, and had sworn  
 it would not be at all the way they thought.  
 Why, wasn't he himself full of determination?  
 He would act, he would fight, he would set things right again.  
 (Cavafy 1992, 101)

The past continuous tense of the verb “όμνυε” in Greek suggests a repetitive promise to himself to keep fighting for his dream against all odds. The promise, however, was doomed to fail: he did not have the power to bring his plan to fruition. The clash between “reality” and his commitment to a doomed vision—a common Cavafian theme—turns this promise into a manifestation of Dimitrios’s melancholic attachment to an unattainable object and his refusal to face its loss. It is only by breaking this promise to himself that he can accept the loss and allow the specter of his imagined Syria to depart (“Είχανε δίκιο τα παιδιά στην Ρώμη. / Δεν είναι δυνατόν να βασταχθούν η δυναστείες / που έβγαλε η Κατάκτησις των Μακεδόνων” / “They were right, the young men in Rome. / The dynasties born from the Macedonian Conquest / cannot be kept going any longer”; 1992, 102).

In other poems, the theme of one’s repeated pledge to oneself becomes connected to forbidden desire. In “Ηλθε για να διαβάσει—” / “He had come there to read” (1924), the intention stated in the title is soon given up. The poem broaches the theme of desire that overpowers one’s good intentions: “He’s completely devoted to books— / but he’s twenty-three, and very good looking” (trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 129). And so desire takes over

and the books remain on the shelves. “Τα επικίνδυνα” / “Dangerous thoughts” (1911) also reads as a pledge made by the fictional character Myrtias to himself, after an external narrator introduces him in a parenthetical sentence:

Είπε ο Μυρτιάς (Σύρος σπουδαστής  
στην Αλεξάνδρεια· επί βασιλείας  
αυγούστου Κώνσταντος και αυγούστου Κωνσταντίου·  
εν μέρει εθνικός, κ’ εν μέρει χριστιανίζων)·  
“Δυναμωμένος με θεωρία και μελέτη,  
εγώ τα πάθη μου δεν θα φοβούμαι σα δειλός.  
Το σώμα μου στες ηδονές θα δώσω,  
στες απολαύσεις τες ονειρεμένες,  
στες τολμηρότερες ερωτικές επιθυμίες,  
στες λάγνες του αίματός μου ορμές, χωρίς  
κανέναν φόβο, γιατί όταν θέλω—  
και θάχω θέλησι, δυναμωμένος  
ως θάμαι με θεωρία και μελέτη—  
στες κρίσιμες στιγμές θα ξαναβρίσκω  
το πνεύμα μου, σαν πριν, ασκητικό.”<sup>12</sup>

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.”

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 38)

12. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0005, photo 23; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003-0005 (2085), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1908-1914-4/>

By stressing Myrtias's conflicting allegiances ("in part a heathen, in part christianized"), the narrator prefigures the glitch that may sabotage Myrtias's implicit pledge to give in to carnal pleasures while retaining his ascetic spirit. This feels like an incompatible combination of urges and modes of living—a "dangerous" balancing act indeed. Although we do not know whether Myrtias stuck to his pledge, his inflated speech does not inspire much confidence that he did.<sup>13</sup> The poem's title indicates the thin line on which the character's commitment rests and reads as a warning that such tricky combinations are likely to fail.

"Των Εβραίων (50 μ.Χ.)" / "Of the Jews (A.D. 50)" (1912/1919) follows a comparable structure: a brief introduction of the character, Ianthis, by an external narrator, followed by Ianthis's speech in the first person. The difference from "Dangerous Thoughts" is that the character's speech is here bookended by the external narrator, who returns to comment on Ianthis's speech. As a result, although Ianthis's words do not contain an explicit promise but constitute a (constative) statement, the narrator's framing compels us to read them as a repeatedly broken promise: a pledge to refrain from the carnal pleasures of Hellenism and return to his purportedly true or desired identity—Judaism.

Ζωγράφος και ποιητής, δρομεύς και δισκοβόλος,  
σαν Ενδυμίων έμορφος, ο Ιάνθης Αντωνίου.  
Από οικογένειαν φίλην της Συναγωγής.

“Η τιμιότερές μου μέρες είν’ εκείνες  
που την αισθητική αναζήτησιν αφίνω,  
που εγκαταλείπω τον ωραίο και σκληρόν ελληνισμό,  
με την κυρίαρχη προσήλωσι  
σε τέλεια καμωμένα και φθαρτά άσπρα μέλη.  
Και γένομαι αυτός που θα ήθελα  
πάντα να μένω· των Εβραίων, των ιερών Εβραίων, ο υιός.”

Ένθερμη λίαν η δήλωσις του. “Πάντα  
να μένω των Εβραίων, των ιερών Εβραίων—”  
Όμως δεν έμενε τοιούτος διόλου.  
Ο Ηδονισμός κ’ η Τέχνη της Αλεξανδρείας  
αφοσιωμένο τους παιδί τον είχαν.<sup>14</sup>

13. As Roderick Beaton also writes, although we could “give Myrtias the benefit of the doubt for the moment, we need not be too confident that his words will prove true for himself” (1981, 521).

14. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 46; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0011 (2073); <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>

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.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 98)

An utterance, Felman argues, is always “in excess over its statement,” and thus its effects cannot be reduced to its referential content. The performative force of an utterance can be seen as “a sort of energizing ‘residue’” (2003, 52). Indeed, what Ianthis says is at odds with what his language ends up doing. Even without the narrator’s debunking of Ianthis’s statement, his implied promise, disguised as a statement, already contains the specter of its misfire: the four verses devoted to the life he repudiates (Hellenism) as opposed to the mere two lines on his devotion to Judaism stage the seductive force of Hellenism, which rhetorically overshadows Judaism. This creates a conflict between the constative and performative, or between what Ianthis states and what his statement does, i.e., perform his desire for Hellenism. Ianthis deconstructs his own statement. His lines on Hellenism thereby turn into a speech act of seduction: Hellenism issues its own promise of pleasure and beauty, which overpowers Ianthis’s commitment to Judaism.

The articulation of his preferred affiliation (Judaism) is rhetorically striking: “and become the man I would want to remain forever: / son of the Jews, the holy Jews.” To “become” the person one always wished to “remain” sounds odd, if not contradictory. The desire for a singular, permanent identity that “forever” and “remain” (“πάντα,” “μένω”) suggest is undercut by the fluidity of “become”

(“γένομαι”). The repetition of “the Jews” (the second time with the qualification “holy”) betrays an anxiety: the fear that the linguistic declaration of his preferred identity may not succeed in bringing this identity performatively into being. This is why he may feel the need to repeat it. As even the two meagre lines on Judaism contain a repetition, it sounds as if he has nothing more (and nothing interesting) to say about Judaism. The repetition of “Jews” has an additional dimension: it tries to constitute the speaker’s body as Jewish by naming it, repeatedly.<sup>15</sup> The repetition, however, fails to fulfill the speaker’s intention. The external narrator’s subsequent citation of the same repetitive constative (“... to remain forever / a son of the Jews, the holy Jews”) seals this failure by reiterating it once more, ironically, only to affirm that “he did not remain anything of the kind.” The narrator’s citation of Ianthis’s statement performs it anew, but this time as a repeatedly broken promise. The poem’s play with the performative aspects of (seemingly) constative statements, and the conflict it stages between what language says and what it does, projects the precariousness of language as a means of constructing stable identities and the messy interference of bodily desire in linguistic attempts to construct bodies in normative ways.

Repetitive promises can be described through the figure of the *anaphora*, which denotes the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses. Felman uses the anaphora to discuss promises that are repeatedly not carried out and thus carry the logic of “the act of beginning ceaselessly renewed through the repetition of promises not carried out, not kept” (2003, 24). The repeated broken promise as anaphora, and the breach between intentions and actions, find their most exemplary manifestation in “Ομνύει” / “He swears” (1915):

Ομνύει κάθε τόσο    ν’ αρχίσει πιο καλή ζωή.  
 Αλλ’ όταν έλθ’ η νύχτα    με τες δικές της συμβουλές,  
 με τους συμβιβασμούς της,    και με τες υποσχέσεις της·  
 αλλ’ όταν έλθ’ η νύχτα    με την δική της δύναμι  
 του σώματος που θέλει και ζητεί, στην ίδια  
 μοιραία χαρά, χαμένος, ξαναπιαίνει.<sup>16</sup>

Now and then he swears    to begin a better life.  
 But when the night comes on    with its own counsels,

15. Here I follow Butler’s theory of performativity, which argues that bodies are discursively constructed through the repetition of normative linguistic acts that name them (1993).

16. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 5; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>

its own compromises, and with its promises:  
 but when the night comes on with a power of its own,  
 of a body that desires and demands, he returns,  
 lost, once more to the same fateful pleasure.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009, 49)

The character's pledge to start a better life is overturned by the "promise" of the night and its seductive pleasures. The attribution of the word "υποσχέσεις" (promises) to the night, which makes it a promising subject, casts the night as a force that antagonizes the character's pledge to himself. The latter is a promise to restrain desire, while the night promises seduction. The repetitive pledge ("now and then he swears") underscores the subject's struggle and repeated failure to stick to it. The gap in the middle of the first four verses visualizes the breach of his pledge and the rift between language and a disobedient body that refuses to obey language's injunctions.<sup>17</sup>

If homoerotic desire in these poems shines through the subject's repeatedly broken promise to do the opposite of what the body desires, it is perhaps only in Cavafy's early prose poem "Το σύνταγμα της ηδονής" / "The Pleasure Brigade"—probably written between 1894 and 1897 and never published or circulated by Cavafy—that this desire is straightforwardly affirmed and even presented as a duty ("χρέος"): a commitment to be faithful to one's body. This prose poem, written before the poems I discussed above and free from the reservations linked to the prospect of its publication, inverts the kind of promises that would be made in Cavafy's published poems later on. Here, there is no trace of conflict suggesting that this promise or duty to oneself would or should be broken. The guilt of transgressing conventions—invoked in the broken promises of

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17. This poem can be (and has been) connected with confessional notes by Cavafy from September of an unknown year, in which we trace the same repetitive breaking of a promise to himself. As McKinsey notes, the use of the uncommon, archaic verb "ομνύω" in these notes enhances their link with the poem in which the same verb is used (Cavafy 2015a, 139). Peridis, who first linked these notes with the poem, situates them in a cluster of confessional notes between 1897 and 1909 that testify to Cavafy's struggle with his sexual proclivities (1948, 45). The notes were partly written in shorthand by Cavafy and interpreted by Peridis:

“ΠΑΙΡΝΩ ΜΕΓ(ΑΛΗΝ) ΑΠΦ.(απόφασιν) ΤΩΡΑ ΟΜΝ.(ΥΩ)! Είμαι βέβαιος περί επιτυχίας!  
 Ει και τώρα ενέδωσα [. . .]. Να δούμε.  
 1 Σεπτ. 11 ½ μ.μ.”  
 “Και όμως ενέδω.(σα) πάλι. Και τώρα! τώρα! ΠΑΛΙ ΟΜΝ.(ΥΩ)  
 10 Σεπτ. 11 μ.μ.” (Cavafy quoted in Peridis 1948, 48)

“I’VE TAKEN A GR[EAT] DEC[ISION]. NOW I SW[EAR]! I’m certain of success. Even if I  
 succumbed just now [. . .]. Let’s see.  
 Sept. 1, 11:30 p.m.”  
 “And yet I succum(bed) again. And now! now! I SW[EAR] AGAIN!!  
 Sept. 10, 11 p.m.” (my translation)

the other poems—is renounced from the first sentence: “Do not speak of either guilt or responsibility.” The directives continue in the third paragraph: “Be not restrained by some vague virtue. Do not believe in inhibiting promises. Your obligation is to succumb—ever to succumb—to the Desires” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 81).<sup>18</sup> Jeffreys interestingly translates “υποχρέωσις” (commonly translated as “obligation”) as “promises” in the above passage, thereby forging an association with all the (broken) promises in the published erotic poems, which were indeed tied to moral, conventional “obligations.” In this “personal manifesto” for Cavafy, pleasure is not the outcome of a broken promise but, as Stathis Gourgouris notes, “an overt and conscious responsibility to the self, a chosen way of life” (2017, 139).<sup>19</sup>

Even though such a straightforward commitment to hedonistic pleasure is nowhere found in the published poems, there is one published poem in which the productive dimension of the repeatedly unkept promise takes center stage: “Νόησις” / “Understanding” (1918). Here, the broken promise propels the poetic act and is tied to poetry’s futurity. The older speaker realizes that the repetitive breach of his intentions in his youth was a condition for poetic creation. The poet, in other words, owes his art to the broken promises to himself. Reflecting on the futility of his repentance for living a sensual life when he was young, he concedes:

Τι μεταμέλειες περιττές, τι μάταιες . . .

Αλλά δεν έβλεπα το νόημα τότε.

Μέσα στον έκλυτο της νεότητός μου βίο  
μορφόνονταν βουλές της ποιήσεώς μου,  
σχεδιάζονταν της τέχνης μου η περιοχή.

Π’ αυτό κ’ η μεταμέλειες σταθερές ποτέ δεν ήσαν.  
Κ’ η αποφάσεις μου να κρατηθώ, ν’ αλλάξω  
διαρκούσαν δύο εβδομάδες το πολύ.<sup>20</sup>

18. In Greek: “Μη ομιλείτε περί ενοχής, μη ομιλείτε περί ευθύνης.” and “Μη αφήσεις καμμίαν σκιεράν αρετήν να σε βαστάξη. Μη πιστεύεις ότι καμμία υποχρέωσις σε δένει. Το χρέος σου είναι να ενδίδης, να ενδίδης πάντοτε εις τας Επιθυμίας.” Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F04, Item 0003, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0003 (186), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-109/>

19. Gourgouris discusses this prose poem in relation to the notion of debt (2017, 138–39).

20. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 34; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0011 (2073), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>



How needless the repentance, how futile . . .

But I didn't see the meaning then.

In the loose living of my early years  
 the impulses of my poetry were shaped,  
 the boundaries of my art were laid down.  
 That's why the repentance was so fickle.  
 And my resolutions to hold back, to change,  
 lasted two weeks at the most.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 86)

The promise's periodic nature—each time it lasted “two weeks at the most”—indicates that it was repeatedly broken.<sup>21</sup> The futility of the repentance, which arose from the constant violation of his “resolutions,” is retrospectively projected onto the resolutions too by the older poet. Nevertheless, his poetry's “impulses” and his art's “boundaries” needed the conflict between resolution and action, that is, the *breach* of the promise, to take shape.

The productive dimension of the broken promise brings us closer to the spectral logic that pervades it. In the above-discussed poems, the spectral qualities of a promise only emerge in one's *failing* to keep it, and even more when this failure requires the repetition and renewal of the promise. The repeated broken promise functions as the periodical return of a specter, haunting the subject. As an anaphora, what the unkept promise repeats is inconsistency and rupture, yet the failure to keep it “makes it possible to begin it again” (Felman 2003, 25). The lack of accomplishment triggers a new beginning that perpetuates desire, which, in its turn, fuels poetic creation. Since in many poems the characters' promises aim at the repression of homoerotic desire, the breaking of these promises guarantees the continuation of desire and denegation of its ending. If, as Felman notes, “faithfulness is tantamount to an acceptance of the end, of death” (25), broken promises turn into spectral figures that—temporarily—transcend, trick, or defer death as the end of desire.

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21. The repetitive nature of the resolutions (and their failure) is suggested in the Greek original by the imperfect tense of the verb “last” (“κρατούσαν”), indicating a repeated or continuous action in the past.

### c. On Conjurations

Holding death in abeyance is what broken promises share with conjurations, to which I now turn. At stake in conjurations is language's power to reanimate past lovers, scenes, or experiences. Critics have noticed the performative force Cavafy ascribes to language.<sup>22</sup> Poetry "does not describe" and "does not depict," Vassilis Lambropoulos wrote in his discussion of Cavafy's "Μακρυνά" / "Long Ago": "it writes by naming" and explores "the power of language to render the world by naming things" (1983a, 630–31).<sup>23</sup> In his discussion of the grammar of the self in Cavafy, Alexander Nehamas notices how the subject in many Cavafian poems is focused on the spectral afterlives of people and experiences, and is thus "concerned with the 'visions' of its eroticism rather than with that eroticism, with the 'recollection of those hours' when it had its own pleasure rather than with that pleasure" (1983, 314–15). Nehamas links the subject's tendency to conjure the past rather than give us direct access to it with Cavafy's "increasing awareness of the transforming power of writing" (318)—that is, language's performative force.

Although, to my knowledge, critics have not brought linguistic performativity in Cavafy to bear on conjurations and specters, they have drawn attention to poems that involve visions of the poet as "seer" under the category of "vision-iste" or "οραματικά" (Haas 1984, 220–23; Dimaras 1956; Yourcenar 1978, 45; Pieris 1983, 138–41)—a term Cavafy himself used in a comment on his poem "Κεριά" / "Candles" (Savidis 1978, 204). As Haas remarks, in contrast with Cavafy's early symbolist-inspired poems featuring the poet-seer "as interpreter of the hidden meaning of things," in later poems the poet's visions become "images from a historical or personal past which are exclusively sensual, if not erotic, in nature" (1984, 220). The "visions" Haas refers to in the later poems are studied in this chapter under the category of conjurations.

*Conjuration* dovetails but does not coincide with *vision*: it has different implications for understanding subjectivity, power, and agency in Cavafy. Vision signifies the experience of seeing something or someone (either of supernatural origin or a product of one's mind) as well as the product of that experience (a spectral entity or mental image), and usually requires a subject with a higher or privileged position and perception. Conjuration, by contrast,

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22. See also Papanikolaou 2014, 43.

23. My translation from the Greek.

refers to an act, not only its product. A poet “has” a vision, but cannot “have” a conjuration: the poet can only (try to) perform it. Hence, conjurations require a shift of focus from the subject as “owner” of a vision to an act which may or may not be successful in making something appear. In acts of conjuration, the conjurer is not in control of the outcome and the relation between conjurer and conjured is not fixed. This allows me to probe the performative aspects of conjurations in the poems: the conditions of their (in)felicity, their implications, and the ways they co-shape the conjurer or unsettle temporal frames.

In Cavafy’s poetry, neither conjurers nor spectral entities are fully autonomous, nor does the one have absolute power over the other. Specters, Peeren reminds us, have an ambivalent relation to power: they can unsettle the living and exert power over them, but they are not self-sufficient, because they can be “involuntarily conjured and exorcized.” A specter “may appear as a dominant, even sovereign being, but can also manifest as a figure of compromised agency” (2014, 3). By steering the discussion toward conjurations rather than visions, we can approach the relation between conjurer and conjured as mutually constitutive and part of an open-ended act—a kind of relation I deem central to Cavafy’s spectral poetics.<sup>24</sup>

### *i. Early Ghosts*

In Cavafy’s early writings, specters are often linked to metaphysical or supernatural conditions, owing to Cavafy’s influence by mysticism and the European esoteric movement (Haas 1984, 1996). Later, as Cavafy enters his so-called realist phase—after 1903 and especially after 1911—spectral presences often appear on the poetic stage through the poetic subject’s conjurations (broadly understood) and become disengaged from the supernatural.

Although, based on the above, there are good reasons to uphold a distinction between specters in Cavafy’s early and later period, a closer look at ghosts, visions, and apparitions from the early poems in fact shows that many of those

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24. In this chapter I mainly discuss poems featuring invocations of (historical or imaginary) people, scenes, and sensations from a speaker’s past. I also turn to poems thematizing the “stage” of conjurations and to poems in which conjurations fail to summon a specter. Another category I have not included concerns invocations and epiphanies of gods. Some invocations of gods or of their specters—e.g., in “Ἴωνικόν” / “Ionic” (1911), “Ἐνας θεός τῶν” / “One of Their Gods” (1899/1917), “Εἶγε ἐτελεύτη” / “If Actually Dead” (1897/1920)—draw from, and often ironically twist, the motif of the exile of the Greek gods in modernity, initiated by Heinrich Heine’s influential essay “Götter im Exil” (“Gods in Exile,” 1853) and taken up by nineteenth-century philosophers and literary authors, including decadent literature. Other invocations of gods—as in “Δέησις” / “Prayer” (1898) and “Ἡ ἀρρώστια τοῦ Κλειτοῦ” / “Kleitos’ Illness” (1926)—broach questions of grief and mourning or indicate the clash of cultural and religious codes. I discuss Cavafy’s invocations of gods in Boletis 2020.

early spectral figures are not autonomous entities but stem from the subject's consciousness. They are figures in one's dreams and nightmares ("Πελασγική εικών" / "Pelasgian Image") or guilty secrets of one's past ("Τρόμος" / "Dread"), and there is often ontological doubt about whether they originate in the supernatural or in a (troubled) human mind ("Ο βασιλεύς Κλαύδιος" / "King Claudius," "Ένας έρως" / "A Love").

In "Πελασγική εικών" / "Pelasgian Image" (1892), unpublished by Cavafy, the centuries-long sleep of an ancient Giant living inside the earth—probably Enceladus—is disturbed by ghosts sent by Ephialtes in his dream.<sup>25</sup> Disheveled by these "unknown and dreadful phantoms" ("φαντάσματα άγνωστα και φορικιώδη"), the Giant causes powerful earthquakes with his violent movements, until he realizes that the ghosts are not real but "a cheap shadow of a dream" ("ονείρου ποταπήν σκιάν") (trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 260).<sup>26</sup> Even in the mythical setting of this poem—part of a trilogy of poems dealing with ancient creation myths from different cultures—a perceived supernatural entity ("φάντασμα," i.e., "ghost" or "phantom") is eventually reduced to a mere shadow ("σκιάν") in one's dream.<sup>27</sup> Real or not, however, the poem shows how much damage the Giant's fear for these ghostly entities can cause.

Ghostly figures also come up in two religiously themed poems, both unpublished: "Darkness and Shadows" (1882?)<sup>28</sup> and "Τρόμος" / "Dread" (1894). "Darkness and Shadows" recounts the disruption of humanity's happiness and peace by the arrival of darkness and "opaque shadows." Although God dispels the shadows, they prove to be so many—for so "numberless" were people's "vices" and "sins"—that they still envelop the world in "endless night." God eventually decides to drive the shadows away and let the Sun illuminate the world, yet the shadows remain nestled in people's minds, as the final lines suggest: "The earth and deep lay bathed in luminence / The mind of man in night's

25. See Mendelsohn's comments on this poem in Cavafy 2009a, 494–95. The poem "Pelasgian Image" is grouped with "Indian Image" and "Chaldean Image," which deal with creation myths from ancient Greece, India, and Babylonia respectively. "Pelasgian" refers to ancient indigenous people living in Greece, "associated with a primitive or 'barbaric' phase of culture" (Mendelsohn in Cavafy 2009a, 494).

26. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0032; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0032 (139), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/k3gt-7x9p-dzt3/2>

27. Given the poem's mythical setting, the fact that these "ghosts" were sent to his dream by Ephialtes suggests that they are not merely a product of his subconscious. In myths, subconscious forces are regularly externalized and attributed to deities and mythical entities.

28. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F12, Sub-file SF001, Item 0017; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S04-F12-SF001-0017 (815), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/darkness-and-shadows/>. The manuscript of this poem (in English) was by the hand of Cavafy's brother John: an English "transcription" (as the subtitle reads) of a poem Cavafy wrote in French, which has been lost (see Mendelsohn's notes in Cavafy 2009a, 535–36).

obscurity.” “Darkness and Shadows” dramatizes a shift from literal to metaphorical ghosts residing in people’s minds and suggests that the latter cannot be conjured away by God or other powers. Despite the poem’s religious theme, this final antithesis between outside (illuminated) and inside (darkness and shadows) prefigures the internalization of specters in Cavafy’s poetry: their transposition from the realm of religion, myth, or the occult to the human mind and its subconscious. This transition not only marks Cavafy’s own work but anticipates an epistemological shift that would be precipitated by Freudian psychoanalysis a few years later.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the psychoanalytic insight that people are subject to unconscious drives and cannot fully control their minds need not be seen as a radical break with spiritualism; in fact, it “had a natural connection with spiritualists’ ideas” that questioned rationalism and the subject’s autonomy (Gershon 2019).

The muddling of the external or internal origin of specters is also dramatized in “Τρόμος” / “Dread” (1894).<sup>30</sup> This time, the speaker turns to Christ, pleading for his protection from horrifying “Beings and Things that have no name” (“Όντα και Πράγματα που όνομα δεν έχουν”) (trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 280). The speaker fears that these dark beings—reminders of a guilty conscience—may drag him back to a dark past, before he was saved by Christ. Although their message never becomes explicit, the fervor with which the subject implores Christ to protect him from them betrays the power they still have over him. His greatest fear is that hearing their voices may bring into his soul “some dreadful reminder of the hidden things they know” (“καμμιά φρικώδη ανάμνησι απ’ τα κρυφά που ξέρουν”). The content of the “hidden things” is never revealed. Yet readers today cannot help associating the “hidden things” in the final line with Cavafy’s unpublished poem “Κρυμμένα” / “Hidden Things” (1908). In this confessional poem, the poet hints at his homosexuality as a factor forcing him to covert modes of expression and suggests that future readers can only come to know him through “the most covert” of his writings (2009a, 319).

In “Dread,” the nature of the spectral beings remains unclear: they can be supernatural demonic entities but also products of the subject’s guilty conscience and memories of a past he cannot shed. In the subject’s description, the repetition of “as though” (“σαν να”) in the phrases “as though they know me” and “as though they were mulling over the foul times” suggests their uncertain

29. Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published in 1899, after this poem was written.

30. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0044; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0044 (91), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-83/>

ontological and epistemological status: are they objectively there and do they really know him or does his troubled mind generate them and give them power over him? His plea to Christ for protection may thus be a moot speech act. As we saw in “Darkness and Shadows,” God may easily dispel the external “darkness and shadows” that hide the sun, but He is less capable of driving away internal spectral forces. Poems such as “Darkness and Shadows” and “Dread,” though certainly different in theme, language, and style from Cavafy’s later ones, already anticipate the specters of Cavafy’s realist phase: entities linked to the speaker’s past memories, desires, or fears, which in these early poems momentarily merge with their supernatural counterparts.

The poem that most explicitly dramatizes the ontological doubt about a ghost’s internal or supernatural origin is “Ο βασιλεύς Κλαύδιος”<sup>31</sup> / “King Claudius” (1899). This poem—Cavafy’s longest—presents and assesses different interpretations of Hamlet’s murder of his uncle, King Claudius. The narrator does not hide his sympathy for “[. . .] that luckless king / whom his nephew slew because of some imagined suspicions” (trans. Mendelsohn; 2009a, 302) and devotes a good part of the poem to singing the king’s praises. Although Hamlet is curiously never mentioned by name (Haas 1996, 408), the narrator presents Hamlet’s version of the story too, but makes sure to immerse it in a vocabulary suggestive of Hamlet’s subjective and unreliable perception (“He [Hamlet] *suspected* him [Claudius] of a murder”; “he *reckoned* that he saw a ghost”; “And from the ghost, *presumably*, he *learned* / of certain accusations against the king”; Cavafy 2009a, 302–3; emphasis added). Thus, the ghost (“φάσμα”) that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has so vividly imprinted in readers’ imagination emerges here as an effect of Hamlet’s nervous instability and excited imagination:

Θα ήταν έξαψις της φαντασίας  
 βεβαίως και των οφθαλμών απάτη.  
 (Ο πρίγκηψ ήταν νευρικός εις άκρον.  
 Σαν σπούδαζε στο Βίττεμπεργκ, τον είχαν  
 για μανιακό πολλοί συμμαθηταί του).<sup>32</sup>

It must have been excitement of the imagination  
 To be sure, some trick played on his eyes.

31. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0092, photos 3–5; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001–0092 (96), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/tmr9-9rea-m5wt2>

32. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0092, photo 4; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001–0092 (96), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/tmr9-9rea-m5wt/>

(The prince was nervous to extremes.  
 When he was studying in Wittenberg his fellow  
 students took him for a lunatic.)  
 (2009a, 303)

It was Horatius, the narrator claims, who gave credence to Hamlet's and the ghost's testimonies later on—an act for which Horatius is mocked:

Αλλά ο Ωράτιος εις την ανάγκη  
 έβγαζε και το φάσμα μαρτυρία.  
 Το φάσμα ειπε τούτο, ειπ' εκείνο!  
 Το φάσμα έκαμεν αυτό κ' εκείνο!<sup>33</sup>

But Horatio, whenever it seemed necessary,  
 Would even produce the ghost as a witness.  
 The ghost said this, said that!  
 The ghost did this and that!  
 (304)

With unmistakable sarcasm, the narrator disavows the ghost as a supernatural phenomenon and stresses its instrumentalization in the name of political expediency by Horatio and particularly by Fortinbras.<sup>34</sup> The poem dramatizes the ontological doubt around ghosts through a narrator who ends up dismissing them: the “goodly king” was slain “with phantoms and fairy tales” (“με φαντάσματα και παραμύθια”) (Cavafy 2009a, 305). The poem ends by drawing attention to Fortinbras, who profited from the ghost story (305). The narrator, Haas observes, shows how the ghost's purported appearance is politically instrumentalized by Fortinbras “the realist,” who is opposed to “Hamlet the mystic” (409). Haas thus takes the poem—the last of the early poems in which a ghost appears—as symptomatic of Cavafy's “own itinerary,” which “leads from mysticism to realism” (409).<sup>35</sup> But even as the landscape of spectrality becomes reconfigured in Cavafy's later work, Cavafy, as we will see, did not leave specters behind.

33. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0092, photo 5; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0092 (96), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/tmr9-9rea-m5wt/>

34. See also Haas 1996, 408–9.

35. The translation of Haas's quote from the French is mine.

## ii. Conjurations and Agency

If in the early poems the origin of specters is surrounded by ontological doubt, in later poems specters leave the realm of the supernatural and become associated with the speaker's memory, imagination, and desires. The shift from externally to internally generated specters—which is not without exceptions—does not mean that specters in later poems come to be controlled by their conjurer. The conjuring subject is at times involuntarily overcome by their intrusion and may try to conjure them away. Spectral forces, even when generated by the speaker's mind, often assume a semi-autonomous status. This leads to variations in the distribution of agency and vulnerability between conjurer and conjured specter. Conjurations, in other words, do not affirm the conjurer's sovereignty: more often than not, they put this sovereignty into question.

Cavafy's poetry is replete with apparitions of past or deceased loved ones or unattainable objects of desire that participate in attempts to momentarily re-enact the past in the poetic present. But conjurations do not always result in full presence. Often they only succeed in summoning bits and pieces of the past. The poetic subject's persistent attempt to conjure and hold on to specters that are fading away, but also to tame and control them, is powerfully staged in "Όταν διεγείρονται" / "Whenever They Are Aroused" (1913/1916):

Προσπάθησε να τα φυλάξεις, ποιητή,  
 όσο κι αν είναι λίγα αυτά που σταματιούνται.  
 Του ερωτισμού σου τα οράματα.  
 Βάλ' τα, μισοκρυμένα, μες τες φράσεις σου.  
 Προσπάθησε να τα κρατήσεις, ποιητή,  
 όταν διεγείρονται μες το μυαλό σου,  
 την νύχτα, ή μες την λάμψη του μεσημεριού.<sup>36</sup>

Try to keep watch over them, poet,  
 for all that few of them can be restrained:  
 Your eroticism's visions.  
 Place them, partly hidden, in your phrases.  
 Try to keep hold of them, poet,

36. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 15; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>



whenever they're aroused within your mind,  
at night or in the brightness of midday.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; 2009a, 73)

The verbs “φυλάξεις” and “σταματιούνται,” which convey the subject’s intended action vis-à-vis the specters, carry an ambiguity that is reflected in the divergent translations by Keeley and Sherrard (“keep” and “stilled”; 1992, 66) and Mendelsohn (“watch over” and “restrained”; 2009a, 73).<sup>37</sup> In Keeley and Sherrard’s translation, the emphasis is on holding on to specters that are only fleetingly activated, and the suggested way of achieving this is by transposing them into poetic diction and “stilling” some of them in the process. In Mendelsohn’s translation, the subject is more intent on controlling and taming the specters: watching over and restraining them, that is, making sure they are sublimated in poetry so that they do not get out of hand. The verb “κρατήσεις” in the fifth verse, similarly translated by Keeley and Sherrard (“hold them”) and Mendelsohn (“keep hold of them”), directs us again toward preservation and safe-keeping rather than control: the subject hopes that poetry can function as a “ghost catcher” of sorts. The poem’s ambiguity muddles the speaker’s ultimate desire: does he want to “catch” the specters in poetic lines in order to halt their wild, unpredictable force? Or does he want to hold on to them through poetry in order to prolong their effect on him and sustain their arousing force when they are gone? Either way, the subject’s undecidability indicates that his agency and autonomy are compromised by their presence. His attempt to control them aims at regaining control over his own body and mind.

Whether the subject wants to control or hold on to these specters, the poem’s most intriguing aspect lies in the way it uses performative language to express this desire.<sup>38</sup> The whole poem unfolds as a speech act of urging oneself to watch over or hold on to erotic visions that, we feel, are not exactly obedient and willing to be restrained, tamed, and transmuted into poetry. The poem does not describe the process of turning erotic visions into poetry, but conveys the subject’s plea to himself to *try* to do so. The use of the imperative and the repetition of “try” (“Προσπάθησε να τα φυλάξεις”; “Προσπάθησε να τα κρατήσεις”) hints at the speaker’s anxious uncertainty about the outcome of this attempt, and thus his limited agency vis-à-vis the specters. These unruly

37. The different translations of the poem’s title—“When They Come Alive” by Keeley and Sherrard, and “Whenever They Are Aroused” by Mendelsohn—also set a different tone for the poem’s reading. In Mendelsohn’s translation, the erotic visions are expressly connected with sexual arousal and, implicitly, masturbation.

38. For a brief discussion of the speech act in this poem, see also Boletsi 2006, 402.

specters have a force of their own that dishevels the speaker, as very few of them can “be stopped” (another translation of “σταματιούνται”).

“Θάλασσα του πρωϊού” / “Morning Sea” (1915) can be read as a failed attempt to exorcize specters that, as in “Whenever They Are Aroused,” disarticulate the speaker:

Εδώ ας σταθώ. Κι ας δω κ' εγώ την φύσι λίγο.  
Θάλασσας του πρωϊού κι ανέφελου ουρανού  
λαμπρά μαβιά, και κίτρινη όχθη· όλα  
ωραία και μεγάλα φωτισμένα.

Εδώ ας σταθώ. Κι ας γελασθώ πως βλέπω αυτά  
(τα είδ' αλήθεια μια στιγμή σαν πρωτοστάθηκα).  
κι όχι κ' εδώ τες φαντασίες μου,  
τες αναμνήσεις μου, τα ινδάλματα της ηδονής.<sup>39</sup>

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.  
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,  
the yellow shore; all lovely,  
all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this  
(I really did see it for a minute when I first stopped)  
and not my usual day-dreams here too,  
my memories, those images of sensual pleasure.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; 1992, 58)

The speaker's stated intention is to absorb nature's beauty and get immersed in a present that seems self-sufficient, “uncontaminated” by past specters. He hopes that nature can offer an antidote to these overbearing specters, but all he sees in nature are tedious clichés (“all lovely, all bathed in light”).<sup>40</sup> The specters (announced by the words “φαντασίες” / “day-dreams,” “αναμνήσεις” / “memories,” “ινδάλματα” / “images”) prove more powerful than his intentions and invade the scene by coming back, again and again: the words “κ' εδώ” / “here,

39. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 7; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

40. As Jusdanis notes, the description of nature in this poem is “conventional” and “stereotypical,” in unspectacular vocabulary that befits “the most familiar and automatized everyday scene” (1987, 161).

too” suggest their recurrence. Their unsolicited arrival marks the speaker’s failed attempt to insulate the present from specters from elsewhere, making the poetic “now” porous and dirempted. The repetition of “ας σταθώ” in the beginning of each stanza (translated by Keeley and Sherrard with “let me stand” and “let me stop” respectively) alters the verb’s signifying force: if “σταθώ” in the opening line announces the poet’s standing in the same place, connoting immobility and inactivity, its repetition in the second stanza turns it into a form of *stasis* in the ancient Greek sense of *conflict*. It announces a spectral temporality that invades the “now” to mess up the poet’s blissful—and boring—contemplation of nature.

Thus, spectral figures in Cavafy often carry their own agency that does not necessarily chime with the subject’s wishes or intentions. In “Επιθυμίες” (1904), which Mendelsohn translates as “Longings” but can also be translated as “Desires,” even desires do not belong to the subject. Unrealized desires figure as autonomous beautiful corpses:

Σαν σώματα ωραία νεκρών που δεν εγέρασαν  
 και τα΄κλεισαν, με δάκρυα, σε μανσωλείο λαμπρό,  
 με ρόδα στο κεφάλι και στα πόδια γιασεμιά—  
 έτσο’ η επιθυμίες μοιάζουν που επέρασαν  
 χωρίς να εκπληρωθούν· χωρίς ν’ αξιωθεί καμιά  
 της ηδονής μια νύχτα, ή ένα πρωί της φεγγερό.<sup>41</sup>

Like the beautiful bodies of the dead who never aged,  
 shut away inside a splendid tomb by tearful mourners  
 with roses at their head and jasmine at their feet—  
 that’s what longings look like when they’ve passed away  
 without being fulfilled, before they could be made complete  
 by just one of pleasure’s nights, or one of its shimmering mornings.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; 2009, 181)

Desires in this poem are, Nehamas writes, “detached, independent objects in their own right”: “The text grants these desires of young bodies for young bodies an unexpected wholeness and materiality by likening them synecdochically to these young bodies themselves” (1983, 302). As unfulfilled, these desires should stand opposed to death, since desire exists as long as it is unrealized;

41. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF002, Item 0002, photo 10; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF002-0002 (2062), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-483/>

as Gourgouris succinctly puts it, “the execution of desire is desire’s execution” (1996, 281). Yet here, unfulfilled desires come to be associated with death. What are we to make of their aesthetization as beautiful corpses? I see their personification as corpses not as an affirmation of desire’s death, but rather of its spectral nature, that is, of the way it constantly crosses the line between life and death. These sensual corpses look completely out of place in death. Their beauty, still very much alive in their dead state, signals their continued life as a form of haunting; they still exude desire from their coffins. The poem’s ending subtly captures the spectral nature of these desires through the image of the “moonlit morning” (“ένα πρωί της φεγγερό”).<sup>42</sup> The half-presence of the moon in the morning sky as the sun gradually takes over signifies the transgression of the boundary between light and darkness, day and night, life and death. As specters, these desires, too, live in a twilight zone between life and death.

### iii. *The Physicality of Specters*

Like the personified desires in “Longings,” Cavafy’s spectral entities have a striking albeit fleeting materiality. Even when they appear as immaterial, they are invested with the ability to move, touch, unsettle, even possess other bodies. Specters, Derrida writes, are not just spirits without a body, but figures of “a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit” (1994, 6).<sup>43</sup> As a figure of “incomplete and intermittent embodiment” (Peeren 2014, 3), the specter is “neither soul nor body, and both the one and the other” (Derrida 1994, 6). Acts of conjuration in Cavafy, then, often try to recapture a specter’s materiality in order to recover part of the past’s lost materiality through its affective impact on the subject’s body. Cavafian specters are more likely to move the flesh than the mind of their conjurers.

In “Πολύ σπανίως”/ “Very seldom” (1911/1913), the old man’s loss of his youth is counterbalanced by the recitation of his verses by youths: this is “the share that he—*he*—still has in youth” / “το μερτικό που έχει ακόμη αυτός στα νιάτα” (trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 40).<sup>44</sup> His verses call forth spectral visions (“οπτασίες”) that move these young men and “stir” (“συγκινούνται”)

42. Mendelsohn translates the phrase as “shimmering morning,” but my reading chimes more with the translation “moonlit morn” by Rae Dalven (Cavafy 1961, 3).

43. Derrida writes: “For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming specter of the spirit without at least the appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility like the disappearing of an apparition. For the ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectroscopic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical incorporation” (1994, 126).

44. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0003, photo 11; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003-0003 (2058), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-480/>

“[t]heir healthy, sensuous minds, / their well-limned, solid flesh” (“το υγιές, ηδονικό μυαλό των, / η εύγραμμη, σφιχτοδεμένη σάρκα των”). We may assume that the stirring works both ways: in the poem’s intricate weaving of sexuality and aesthetics, the old man’s knowledge that he can move these bodies with his verses stirs his own flesh too (Papanikolaou 2014, 67–68). While the adjective “sensuous” (“ηδονικό”) casts their minds as physical and erotic rather than intellectual organs, the adjective “healthy” (“υγιές”) carries both physical and moral overtones. On the one hand, it contrasts their youth with the sickly, crippled old poet, who can fantasize and vicariously claim his share in this healthy youth. On the other hand, it provocatively anticipates and simultaneously twists society’s condemnation of the homoerotic desires of both the young men and the old poet: casting back the common shaming and pathologization of these desires as a form of debauchery and corruption, the speaker metonymically attaches the *health* of these men’s bodies to their (sensuous) minds and to the poet’s verses, through and against society’s judgment.

In “Κάτω απ’ το σπίτι” / “Below the house” (1917/1918), a similar “sensual emotion” (“ηδονική συγκίνησι”) overtakes the older subject’s body as he passes by a house he used to frequent in his youth for sexual encounters. As the sensation of those encounters is reanimated, “desire’s spell” (“γοητεία του έρωτος”) makes everything around him beautiful. The final stanza reads:

Και καθώς στέκομουν, κ’ εκύτταζα την πόρτα,  
και στέκομουν, κ’ εβράδυνα κάτω απ’ το σπίτι,  
η υπόστασίς μου όλη απέδιδε  
την φυλαχθείσα ηδονική συγκίνησι.<sup>45</sup>

And while I was standing, gazing at the door,  
and standing, tarrying by the house,  
the foundation of all my being yielded up  
the sensual emotion that was stored inside.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; 2009a, 81)

The sensation linked to those past experiences (“συγκίνησι”), stored in his body’s memory (“φυλαχθείσα”), gets activated by a material trigger: the house. The stored “συγκίνησι” is then exuded outward, as the verb “απέδιδε” (“yielded up”) in the penultimate verse suggests. A faint memory thereby turns into an

45. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0003, photo 59; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003-0003 (2058), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-480/>

intense corporeal experience: his aging body becomes possessed, as it were, by a ghost from the past that resides in him.

The desire to be touched or possessed by a specter also takes center stage in “Επέστρεφε” / “Come back” (1912):

Επέστρεφε συχνά και πέρνε με,  
Αγαπημένη αίσθησις επέστρεφε και πέρνε με—  
όταν ξυπνά του σώματος η μνήμη,  
κ' επιθυμία παληά ξαναπερνά στο αίμα·  
όταν τα χείλη και το δέρμα ενθυμούνται,  
κ' αισθάνονται τα χέρια σαν ν'αγγίζουν πάλι.

Επέστρεφε συχνά και πέρνε με τη νύχτα,  
όταν τα χείλη και το δέρμα ενθυμούνται . . . <sup>46</sup>

Come back often and take hold of me,  
Sensation that I love come back and take hold of me—  
when the body's memory awakens  
and an old longing again moves into the blood,  
when lips and skin remember  
and hands feel as though they touch again.

Come back often, take hold of me in the night  
when lips and skin remember . . .  
(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 43)

Here too, a past sensation becomes a spectral entity with its own agency. The speaker apostrophizes the sensation in the imperative. As a speech act of conjuration, the verb “Επέστρεφε” tries to summon this sensation, asking it to momentarily take over his body, part by part. The repetition of “επέστρεφε” (three times) turns it into an anaphora that approximates an incantatory formula, expressing the desire for the specter's recurring appearance. This desire is intensified by the form “επέστρεφε” instead of the grammatically more correct present imperative form “επίστρεφε.” The imperative “επέστρεφε” coincides with the verb's form in the past continuous, which conveys the periodic repetition of an act in the past. The choice of “επέστρεφε,” critics have noted,

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46. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0003, photo 9; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003-0003 (2058), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-480/>

performs the repetition phonetically too, through the internal repetition of the sound “ε” four times within the verb (*epestrefe*) (Veloudis 2008).

This multilayered repetition stages the interweaving of temporalities: the present of the imperative, the past of the “old longing” in the past continuous form of the verb that is “hidden” in “επέστρεφε,” and the future of the specter’s recurring appearance that the subject hopes for. The repetition of “when” (“όταν,” which could also be translated as “whenever” or “every time that”) as a conditional for the specter’s future comings projects the desire for its repeated appearance. The intermingling of past, present, and future turns the sensation into a spectral force without clear origin in the past or *telos* in the future, but rather defined by repetition ad infinitum.

The physicality of specters, but also the role of physicality in their generation, are foregrounded in the unfinished poem “Γένεσις ποιήματος” / “Birth of a Poem” (1922) and the unpublished “Μισή ώρα” / “Half an Hour” (1917). “Birth of a Poem” lays out the ingredients for a specter’s creation:

Μια νύχτα που το φως τ’ ωραίο της σελήνης  
στην κάμαρή μου εχύθη . . . η φαντασία, κάτι  
παίρνοντας της ζωής: πολύ ολίγο πράγμα—  
μια μακρυνή σκηνή, μια μακρυνή ηδονή—  
ένα είδωμα δικό της έφερε της σαρκός,  
ένα είδωμα δικό της σε κλίνη ερωτική . . . <sup>47</sup>

One night when the beautiful light of the moon  
Poured into my room . . . imagination, taking  
something from life: some very scanty thing—  
a distant scene, a distant pleasure—  
brought a vision all its own of flesh,  
a vision all its own to a sensual bed . . .

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009b, 12)<sup>48</sup>

As in many other poems, a dim light (the moonlight) belongs to the contextual conditions that facilitate conjurations. The spectral entity—a “vision” (“είδωμα”)—issues from the subject’s imagination. This grants more agency to

47. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0010, photo 3; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0010 (148), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-97/>. Also included in Lavagnini’s edition of Cavafy’s unfinished poems (Cavafy 1994, 126).

48. Mendelsohn’s translation of the poem is based on Lavagnini’s edition of its last version (1994).

the conjurer than in other poems, even though the subject does not directly pose as the specter's creator: "imagination," cast as a semi-autonomous force, generates the specter. The title announces the "birth of a poem" even though the poem describes the birth of a *specter* ("vision"): the two seem to converge. The poem's alternative title, "είδωμα δικό της" ("a vision all its own"), written and underlined under the first title ("Γένεσις ποιήματος") in Cavafy's manuscript, affirms this coalescence of *poiesis* and *spectrogenesis*. This double genesis is performed by the imagination but also needs "something from life": a material trigger, which grants the specter its physicality. The seemingly paradoxical formulation "vision [. . .] of flesh" ("είδωμα [. . .] της σαρκός") affirms the body's key role in spectrogenic processes as well as in the ontological makeup of Cavafian ghosts as not devoid of materiality.

Ironically, "Birth of a Poem" belongs to Cavafy's unfinished poems. As if undermining the organicist implications of its title, its unfinished status is more faithful to the untimeliness of the poem's specter. Resisting a linear understanding of time that demands that what is born eventually dies, as an unfinished poem, it can never reach life's predestined ending. And so its specter can keep returning.

Like "Birth of a Poem," "Μισή ώρα" / "Half an Hour" broaches the spectrogenic process, but centers on that "very scanty thing" "from life"<sup>49</sup> that sets this process in motion: a brief encounter with a man in a bar. The speaker's unfulfilled desire ("Μήτε σε απέκτησα, μήτε θα σε αποκτήσω / ποτέ, θαρρώ"; "I never had you, nor will I have you / ever, I daresay")<sup>50</sup> enhances his need to transfigure a real-life presence (the man) into a spectral force that springs from poetic creation:

Είναι, δεν λέγω, λύπη. Αλλά εμείς της Τέχνης  
κάποτε μ' έντασι του νου, και βέβαια μόνο  
για λίγην ώρα, δημιουργούμεν ηδονήν  
η οποία σχεδόν σαν υλική φαντάζει.

It is, I don't deny, a pity. But we who belong to Art  
sometimes—with the intensity of mind, and of course only  
for a little while—create a pleasure  
that gives the impression of being almost real.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 328)

49. Quotes from the above-discussed "Birth of a Poem."

50. For the Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0096, photo 59; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0096 (101), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/gc4k-rgrc-m27s/>. The translation is Mendelsohn's (Cavafy 2009a, 328).



The word “υλική” that is attributed to “pleasure” could be better translated as “material” than “real,” reminding us that Cavafian specters are indeed “almost material.” Their liminality—material but never fully, present but only fleetingly (“for a little while”)—makes them desire-generating machines, since desire lives on when it remains unrealized. The verb “φαντάζει” in the same line (“gives the impression”), with the same root as “φάντασμα” (ghost), also brings the phantasmatic in proximity to the material (“υλική”).

The rest of the poem dramatizes the encounter with this man that lasted “half an hour,” laying out the ingredients for his poetic transfiguration into a specter: “imagination” (“φαντασία”), “merciful alcohol” (“ευσπλαχνικός αλκολισμός”), and most importantly, the speaker’s proximity to the man’s body (“χρειάζονταν να βλέπω και τα χείλη σου, / χρειάζονταν να’ναι το σώμα σου κοντά.” / “I needed to see your lips as well, / needed to have your body close to me.” 2009a, 328). Specters in Cavafy are never purely metaphorical or creations of the mind: they are generated through a metonymical process of proximity of bodies, even if they never touch.

The young man who triggers the poetic process in “Half an Hour” is apostrophized as a subject. This second-person address establishes a reversible relationship between first and second person, through which subjectivity is shaped in the present of an utterance (Bal 1999, 189; 1993, 307). Even when the “you” is absent or silent, it is still an “I” in potentia. As a result, Bal explains, the “you” has “the subjectivity to act, and hence, to confirm the subjectivity of the previous I” (1999, 178–79). Cavafy’s conjurers are “made” or unhinged through spectral encounters. The use of apostrophe in such encounters<sup>51</sup> projects the interdependence of conjurer and conjured as ontologically and affectively entangled bodies in a virtual encounter in which they touch by not touching.

#### *iv. The Stage of Conjurations*

The felicity of conjurations in Cavafy’s poems usually depends less on the intention or will of the conjurer and more on the contextual conditions surrounding conjurations.<sup>52</sup> Even when apparitions issue from memory, and thus from the subject’s consciousness, the subject is not their puppet master, but rather a

51. For another use of the apostrophe, see my discussion of “It Must Have Been the Spirits” below in this chapter.

52. Contextual conditions are crucial for the felicity of speech acts in Austin’s theory. For the speech act “I do” to be felicitous during a wedding ceremony, one also needs, e.g., someone authorized to perform the ceremony. The utterer’s intention does not determine the felicity of the speech act (notwithstanding some exceptions): a wedding will not be annulled if the bride confesses afterward that she was joking when she said “I do.”

stage director, who tries to ensure that the conditions for a conjuration are met. Several descriptions of Cavafy himself in his semi-lit room also cast him as a stage director in a spectral environment that lacked electric lighting. The opening lines of a special issue of the journal *Semaine Égyptienne* devoted to Cavafy (April 1929) capture the spectral qualities of his room most strikingly:

The light in the apartment is very gentle and always subdued. There is no modern lighting [. . .]. In the half-shadow as calming for the eyes as for the mind, in that chiaroscuro ideal for meditation [. . .] the duel of phrases begins. Cavafy presides, plunged in shadow, submerged in the darkest corner of the room. (1929, 12)<sup>53</sup>

The stage of conjurations often includes material triggers—a book, a photograph, a damaged tombstone, the dim lighting of an oil lamp or candle.<sup>54</sup> In “Ἐν εσπέρα” / “In the Evening” (1917), for example, the specter of a short-lived erotic encounter in the speaker’s past—described as “ἀπήχησις” (“resonance” or “echo”)—is invoked through a letter that the speaker reads repeatedly (“πάλι και πάλι” / “again and again”) under a fading light.<sup>55</sup> In “Του πλοίου” / “On Board Ship” (1919), another object—a “little pencil portrait” of a past lover made on the deck of a ship—raises the expectation of conjuring the lover’s specter. Yet, the mimetic character of the drawing obstructs the conjuration: “Τον μοιάζει. Ὅμως τον θυμούμαι σαν πιο ἔμορφο.” / “It’s *like* him. But I remember him as better looking” (trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 100; emphasis added).<sup>56</sup> Mimetic representation does not favor conjurations. Cavafy disliked the mimetic quality of drawings or photographs, as he suggested in a note from 1906.<sup>57</sup> For Cavafy, who privileged performative language, language or images should not resemble, describe, or depict, but should create a reality. In “On Board Ship,” the poet’s memory proves more evocative than the drawing’s accuracy. The lover’s specter appears (“φανερώνεται”) thanks to the poet’s faint memory, and precisely because of its inaccuracy.

53. Quoted and translated from the French by Papanikolaou (2005, 240). For Papanikolaou, Cavafy’s “clos(et)ed, semi-lit room” turns into “a metaphor of his entire life that was enclosed and closeted (but also appealing in its close[ted]ness)” and ultimately a symbol for his poetics of telling and hiding (240).

54. For the importance of material triggers in Cavafian poems, see also Stroebel 2018, 287.

55. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 22; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

56. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 48; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

57. He wrote: “Descriptive poetry—historic facts, the photography (what an ugly word!) of nature—is perhaps safe. But it is a minor and somewhat fleeting thing” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 134).

Although the attention to contextual conditions for conjurations is a motif in several poems, “Για να ’ρθουν—” / “That They Come” (1920) stands out for its exclusive focus on those conditions rather than on the actual appearance of “the shades”:

Ένα κεριάρκει. Το φως του το αμυδρό  
αρμόζει πιο καλά, θα ’ναι πιο συμπαθές  
σαν έρθουν της Αγάπης σαν έρθουν η Σκιές.

Ένα κεριάρκει. Η κάμαρη απόψι  
να μη έχει φως πολύ. Μέσα στην ρέμβη όλως  
και την υποβολή και με το λίγο φως—  
μέσα στην ρέμβην έτσι θα οραματισθώ  
για να ’ρθουν της Αγάπης για να ’ρθουν η Σκιές.<sup>58</sup>

One candle is enough. Its faint light  
is more fitting, will be more winsome  
when come Love’s— when its Shadows come.

One candle is enough. Tonight the room  
can’t have too much light. In reverie complete,  
and in suggestion’s power, and with that little light—  
in that reverie: thus will I dream a vision  
that there come Love’s— that its Shadows come.

(Trans. Mendelsohn 2009a, 98)

The speaker directs the stage for the shadows’ arrival. The motif of a candle and a dimly lit room creates the liminal zone between light and darkness that facilitates spectral appearances. The title “Για να ’ρθουν” announces that the poem’s subject matter is not the shadows’ arrival but the conditions required for this arrival. In that sense, the poem foregrounds what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called “periperformatives” (2003), a concept she also brought to bear on Cavafy’s poetry (2010, 2011). Periperformatives “are about performatives and, more properly, [. . .] they cluster around performatives”: “they are near them or next to them or crowding against them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative” (2003, 68). Even though periperformatives constitute the periph-

58. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 54; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

ery of the performative, they sometimes upset the “space of authority” claimed by a performative, or the speaker’s agency (2003, 68). In “That They Come,” the emphasis on the conditions surrounding the conjuration and the ostracizing of the actual conjuration from the poem’s space invert the hierarchical center-periphery relation between performative and periperformatives: the speaker’s great care for these conditions suggests that they may “be more potent than the performative proper” (76).

The prominent presence of periperformatives in this and other Cavafian conjurations dramatizes the speaker’s attempt to control the scene of conjuration and simultaneously muddles the terrain of agency: periperformatives foreground the multiple forces that, in Sedgwick’s words, “warp, transform, and displace, if they do not overthrow, the supposed authorizing centrality of that same performative” (68). “Γκριζα” / “Gray” (1917) is another instance of a poem focusing on periperformatives rather than the conjuration itself. Here, a gray opal (“σπάλιο μισό γκριζο”) triggers the memory of a lover’s eyes. The ellipsis marks after the first stanza create a pause that prepares us for the intrusion of a specter through the reanimation of memory. But the specter does not actually appear. Instead, the poem ends with a plea to memory to conjure the specter to which those gray eyes belonged. In this apostrophe, memory becomes the conjuring agent, decoupled from the poetic subject:

Και, μνήμη, ότι μπορείς από τον έρωτά μου αυτόν,  
ότι μπορείς φέρε με πίσω απόψε.<sup>59</sup>

And, memory, whatever of that love you can bring back,  
whatever you can, bring back tonight.  
(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 75)

“Απ’ τες εννιά” / “Since Nine—” (1917/1918) also starts with the contextual conditions likely to set off a spectral appearance. The lamp’s light at night accompanies the conjuration of the specter of the speaker’s young body:

Το είδωλον του νέου σώματός μου,  
απ’ τες εννιά που άναψα την λάμπα,  
ήλθε και με ήυρε και με θύμησε<sup>60</sup>

59. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 23; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0011 (2073), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>

60. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 41; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0011 (2073), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>

The apparition of my youthful body,  
 since nine o'clock when I first turned up the lamp,  
 has come and found me and reminded me  
 (Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 55)

What follows is a parade of the bygone things this apparition reanimates (“perfumed rooms,” “pleasure spent,” streets, “bustling city centres,” “theatres and cafés”) but also sad memories and suppressed feelings from separations and deaths of family members. What matters most in this conjuration is the past’s affective dimension and materiality: through the apparition of his young self, the speaker momentary relives the impact of past presences on his body, but also experiences the irretrievable loss of the past’s materiality.

Conjurations in Cavafy are often caught in a space between mourning and melancholia. They signal an acknowledgment of loss but also an inability to let go that affirms the grip of the past on the present even as past objects fade away. The apparition of the poet’s former body in “Since Nine—” claims such a space by setting in motion a diorama of contrasting images, in which the past signifies both life and death. The conflicting workings of this apparition can perhaps account for the thickening of time in the final lines:

Δώδεκα και μισή. Πως πέρασεν η ώρα.  
 Δώδεκα και μισή. Πως πέρασαν τα χρόνια.

Half past twelve. How the time has passed.  
 Half past twelve. How the years have passed.  
 (2009a, 55)

#### v. *Conjurations and Historical Justice*

“Καίσαριων” / “Caesarion”<sup>61</sup> (1914/1918) is exemplary of Cavafy’s attentiveness to the stage of conjurations. The speaker deliberately lets an oil lamp go out, facilitating the specter’s arrival. But “Caesarion” also gave us the most memorable apostrophe to a ghost in Cavafy’s poetry—an apostrophe that connects conjurations and haunting to questions of historical justice. Staging the tension between history and poetry, the poem reclaims the presence of a marginal

61. In their translation of the poem that I am using here, Keeley and Sherrard adopt the spelling “Kaisarion,” but I prefer to use “Caesarion” to refer to the poem and its protagonist, which is the common name for this historical figure in English.

historical figure: the young king Caesarion (47–30 BCE), son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar and last pharaoh of ancient Egypt, who was put to death as a seventeen-year-old boy on Octavian's order shortly after Cleopatra's and Marc Antony's suicides. Caesarion, whose existence was suppressed by a historical record determined by History's winners, is summoned as a ghost: poetry gives him the afterlife that History withheld.

The poem comprises three stanzas and can be distinguished in two parts, with the shorter second stanza acting as a bridge from the first to the second part. The first part presents the material trigger for the conjuration that follows: “a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies” that the poet picks up at night “Partly to throw light on a certain period, / partly to kill an hour or two” (1992, 82) (“Εν μέρει για να εξακριβώσω μια εποχή, / εν μέρει και την ώρα να περάσω”).<sup>62</sup> The formulaic language used in the inscriptions for the Ptolemies (“Οι άφθονοι έπαινοι κ' η κολακείες / εις όλους μοιάζουν [. . .]” / “The lavish praise and flattery are much the same / for each of them [. . .]”) is unsuited to animate those historical characters, so the poet is about to set the inscriptions aside:

θάφια το βιβλίο αν μια μνεία μικρή,  
κι ασήμαντη, του βασιλέως Καισαρίωνος  
δεν είλκυε την προσοχή μου αμέσως . . .

Α, να, ήρθες συ με την άοριστη  
γοητεία σου. Στην ιστορία λίγες  
γραμμές μονάχα βρίσκονται για σένα,  
κ' έτσι πιο ελεύθερα σ' έπλασα μες στον νου μου.  
Σ' έπλασα ωραίο κ' αισθηματικό.  
Η τέχνη μου στο πρόσωπό σου δείνει  
μιαν ονειρώδη συμπαθητική εμορφιά.  
Και τόσο πλήρως σε φαντάσθηκα,  
που χθες την νύχτα αργά, σαν έσβυνεν  
η λάμπα μου—άφισα επίτηδες να σβύνει—  
εθάρεψα που μπήκες μες στην κάμαρά μου,  
με φάνηκε που εμπρός μου στάθηκες· ως θα ήσουν  
μες στην κατακτημένην Αλεξάνδρεια,

62. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photo 30; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

χλωμός και κουρασμένος, ιδεώδης εν τη λύπη σου,  
ελπίζοντας ακόμη να σε σπλαχνισθούν  
οι φαύλοι—που ψιθύριζαν το “Πολυκαισαρήν.”<sup>63</sup>

I would have put the book away had not a brief  
insignificant mention of King Kaisarion  
suddenly caught my eye . . .

And there you were with your indefinable charm.  
Because we know  
so little about you from history,  
I could fashion you more freely in my mind.  
I made you good-looking and sensitive.  
My art gives your face  
a dreamy, an appealing beauty.  
And so completely did I imagine you  
that late last night,  
as my lamp went out—I let it go out on purpose—  
it seemed you came into my room,  
it seemed you stood there in front of me, looking just as you would have  
in conquered Alexandria,  
pale and weary, ideal in your grief,  
still hoping they might take pity on you,  
those scum who whispered: “Too many Caesars.”  
(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 82)

Through the accumulation of first-person verbs denoting *poiesis* as creation, the poetic subject emerges almost as ghost-maker (“I could fashion you”; “I made you”; “And so completely did I imagine you”). Nevertheless, he does not own the ghost: the ghost arrives (“And there you were”) and stands before the poetic subject as a foreign presence. If others determined his fate when he was alive, in his poetic spectral life he might claim a different fate.

As a revenant, king Caesarion appears in other Cavafian poems too, most notably “Αλεξανδρινοί βασιλείς” / “Alexandrian Kings” (1912), written before “Caesarion.”<sup>64</sup> This poem stages a public ceremony in 34 BCE in Alexandria,

63. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0012, photos 30–31; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001–0012 (2071), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1915-1925/>

64. Caesarion also makes a fleeting appearance in “Τυανεύς γλύπτης” / “Sculptor from Tyana.”

during which elaborate titles were given to Cleopatra's children before a huge crowd. Among the children on the podium we find thirteen-year-old Caesarion, who is named "King of Kings." The ceremony—as the Alexandrian crowd knows—is a big theatrical performance and the proclamations are "empty words": only three years before the defeat of Antony in Actium, the children are appointed kings of areas, some of which had not yet been conquered (Bien 1964, 29). On this stage, Caesarion figures as a tragic actor in a play that is not his. It feels as though his melancholic presence on the podium is haunted by the future specter of his imminent death four years later. In fact, the living Caesarion of "Alexandrian Kings" feels more like a ghost, a living dead, than his actual ghost in "Caesarion."

If ghosts return when they have unfinished business, in "Caesarion" this unfinished business is registered on two levels: the injustice done to him during his life (his assassination for political expediency, prefigured in the last line: "those scum who whispered: 'Too many Caesars'") and his exclusion from History ("a brief / insignificant mention") (Cavafy 1992, 82). But what demand can Caesarion make as a ghost? If the poet's conjuration and apostrophizing of Caesarion try to undo the injustice done to him by History, what kind of justice is restored through this silent ghost who does not get to respond, speak back, tell his story? The apostrophe, according to Barbara Johnson, is not really an exchange, but "a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (1986, 30). The poet does not—in fact *cannot*—give Caesarion his own voice through this apostrophe. But neither does he appropriate Caesarion's voice based on his own surmise of what that voice would be. Caesarion receives a presence in the poem, not a full representation. But if the poem cannot restore the injustice done to Caesarion—his murder and exclusion from History—it does something else: *it thinks through the conditions for reckoning with historical injustices in the present*. Spectrality is key to this venture: the poem projects haunting and the ghost-figure as necessary for addressing the demand of the other in the enterprise of history-writing and for thinking about the historical archive in an ethical way.

Surely, the case of a murdered prince who did not rise to become an important historical figure is not comparable to the repression and silencing of millions who disappeared without a trace from the historical record or even had their civilizations erased, such as the exterminated native peoples of the Americas. We can, of course, link Cavafy's casting of Caesarion with larger marginalized groups. Takis Kayalis, for example, argues that Caesarion's effeminacy combined with his "public humiliation and victimization" evoke "the persecu-



tion of homosexual men in the early twentieth century” (2019, 60).<sup>65</sup> Yet the poem is not only about Caesarion or those he may stand for: it offers a way of thinking history *otherwise*, through ghosts.

Carla Freccero proposes “spectrality” as “a way of thinking ethics in relation to the project of historiography”: “To assume the perspective of the ghost—or to include haunting in a conceptualization of history’s effects—foregrounds the imperative issuing from the other in the labor of the historian” (2013, 337). Freccero contrasts spectrality to a “necrological” historiographical model, which seeks to bury the dead, appease the ghosts of historiography, and “entomb within writing the lost other of the past” (2006, 70–71).<sup>66</sup> But how can one listen to the repressed voices of those who had no voice in history if their traces are gone? This task can only be “a fantasmatic activity” that “involves following traces that are lost, listening to voices that ‘could have’ spoken (but, it is implied, did not).” “This impossible task of retracing and listening,” Freccero continues, “of locating desire in the (not quite total) silences of texts, articulates a complex interplay of desire and identification” (2013, 340).<sup>67</sup> Although giving Caesarion a voice is an impossible task, the speaker tries not only to turn him into a subject by addressing him as a “you,” but to identify and empathize with him. He transposes himself in Caesarion’s last moments in order to share in his grief. Even though the phrasing “ideal in your grief” comes close to a risky aestheticization of the prince’s anguish, the line that follows, “still hoping they might take pity on you,” takes us from the external traces of this grief to Caesarion’s (assumed) perspective and experience of his last moments.

Caesarion’s hope in his final moments may seem futile in light of his imminent end, but not if we decouple it from History’s linearity and the logic of patrilineage that is ultimately responsible for Caesarion’s death (“too many Caesars”). Discussing the temporal interplay in the poem, Beaton saw the opening lines as splitting temporality into “recorded time, which is perceived as a closed series; and experienced time, which remains an open series” (Beaton 1983, 34). Luke Worthy discusses this open temporality as a manifestation of “queer time.”

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65. Kayalis argues that Caesarion was not as forgotten or marginal as Cavafian scholars have taken him to be: despite the “scarce information” about him, he “was familiar to large 19th-century audiences and enjoyed a wide circulation in European letters, both as historical and as literary character” (2019, 45). Nevertheless, the fact that Cavafy’s poem operates on this assumption warrants its reading in relation to histories of marginalization and silencing.

66. Freccero discusses Michel De Certeau’s views on this point. Derrida also links ghosts with historical justice: “No justice [. . .] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility [. . .] before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (1994, xix).

67. Freccero makes this point in her discussion of Beatriz Pastor’s work on the history of America’s conquest.

“[A]s Caesarion travels across the white space of the stanza break,” Worthy writes, “[t]he past and the present collide” and “Historical, sequential time bursts into a queer moment” in which “the (closed) archive is prised open” (2022, 30). The temporality that condemns Caesarion to death is that of “*chronos*, of linear time whose very name mythically signals lineage (in the ancient Greek myth, Kronos is father to Zeus)” (McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011, 8). The queer time of this ghost, however, is “closer to the time of *kairos*, the moment of opportunity” (8–9) that antagonizes History as “a line of ‘Caesars’” and creates “the chance that one might belong to another transhistorical community” (Worthy 2022, 31).<sup>68</sup> This temporality reconfigures Caesarion’s futile hope (“still hoping [. . .]”) into an opening toward a “reparative future” (Freccero 2006, 102). As Worthy aptly argues, “‘hope’ seems to be a part of Caesarion’s identity, or certainly what makes him so ‘perfect’” (“ιδανικός”) (2022, 32). Even though death comes for him, “Cavafy doesn’t allow History to close around [him],” allowing hope for a different relation to history to survive through poetry (32).

Apostrophes to historical ghosts such as the one in “Caesarion” signal a demand by a (silenced) object of history to be a subject, even if the full realization of this demand remains impossible. In “Caesarion,” the speaker’s conjuration responds to a demand the other is making through his marginal trace in a history book. To make space for this demand, the speaker has to give up part of his self-sufficiency and allow Caesarion’s ghost to upset the contained space of his room and History’s settled temporality.

## vi. Failed Conjurations

Caesarion’s appearance—as in many other conjurations in Cavafy—is facilitated by careful staging. Favorable contextual conditions, however, do not always guarantee a conjuration’s felicity. Some poems revolve around the impotence of subjects to animate past specters, as the finality of death overrides the specter’s ability to intrude on the present.

“Μακρὰ” / “Long Ago” (1914) forcefully registers such a failed conjuration. The poem begins with a periperformative: a statement of the subject’s wish to “tell” (“πῶ”) this memory, and thus turn it into a speech act of conjuration.

Θά’θελα αὐτὴν τὴν μνήμη νὰ τὴν πῶ . . . .  
Μὰ ἔτσι εσβήσθη πια . . . . σαν τίποτε δὲν ἀπομένει—  
γιατὶ μακρὰ, στὰ πρῶτα εφηβικά μου χρόνια κείται.

68. As discussed in chapter 1, theorizations of queer and spectral temporality largely overlap.

Δέρμα σαν καμωμένο από ιασεμί . . . .  
 Εκείνη του Αυγούστου—Αύγουστος ήταν;—η βραδνά . . . .  
 Μόλις θυμούμαι πια τα μάτια· ήσαν, θαρρώ, μαβιά . . . .  
 Α ναι, μαβιά· ένα σαπφείρινο μαβί.<sup>69</sup>

I'd like to speak of this memory . . .  
 But it's so faded now . . . as though nothing is left—  
 Because it was so long ago, in my early adolescent years.

A skin as though of jasmine . . .  
 That August evening—was it August?—  
 I can still just recall the eyes: blue, I think they were . . .  
 Ah yes, blue: a sapphire blue.  
 (Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 52)

In Greek, the transitive use of the verb “πω” (“tell,” translated by Keeley and Sherrard as “speak of”) with “memory” as its object—an unusual collocation—pushes us toward the realm of performativity.<sup>70</sup> Yet the grammatical dependence of the verb “πω” on “Θά'θελα” (“I'd like”) keeps us in the realm of performatives: the subject expresses the *desire* to conjure rather than perform the conjuration. The desire to “tell” the memory is obstructed, as memory only comes back in flashes: snippets of the lover's body parts (skin, eyes) that metonymically evoke his body but prove unable to conjure it in its totality. As the specter dissipates, the subject's piecemeal invocation of his body parts registers an uneven struggle against death: the death of memory—forgetting. The attempted re-animation is somewhat undercut by doubt (“was it August?”), but through this doubt, the subject does reach his only certainty in the final verse: “Ah yes, blue: a sapphire blue.” He hangs on to that little something that remains—the eye color—as a token of a Pyrrhic victory against death.

Other poems make it difficult or impossible to determine whether a conjuration is felicitous. “Εν τω μηνί Αθύρ”/ “In the Month of Athyr” (1917) can be counted among them. This poem—one of Cavafy's most discussed ones—stages the attempt of a speaker-as-archeologist to decipher the writing on the heavily damaged tombstone of a young man, Lefkios. The speaker struggles to reconstruct bits and pieces of that epigraph as clues that might help him under-

69. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF003, Item 0002, photo 32; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003-0002 (2057), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-479/>

70. This is contrasted with Keeley and Sherrard's translation “speak of this memory” (emphasis added), which suggests a constative, referential use of language.

stand who Lefkios was and thus momentarily conjure his specter and save it from oblivion:

Με δυσκολία διαβάζω      στην πέτρα την αρχαία.  
 “Κύ[ρι]ε Ιησού Χριστέ.”      Ένα “Ψυ[χ]ήν” διακρίνω.  
 “Εν τω μηνί [νί] Αθύρ”      “Ο Λεύκιο[ς] ε[κοιμ]ήθη.”  
 Στη μνεία της ηλικίας      “Εβί[ωσ]εν ετών,”  
 το Κάππα Ζήτα δείχνει      που νέος εκοιμήθη.  
 Μεσ στα φθαρμένα βλέπω      “Αυτό[ν] . . . Αλεξανδρέα.”  
 Μετά έχει τρεις γραμμές      πολύ ακρωτηριασμένες.  
 μα κάτι λέξεις βγάζω—      σαν “δ[ά]κρυα ημών,” “οδύνην,”  
 κατόπιν πάλι “δάκρυα,”      και “[ημ]ίν τοις [φ]ίλοις πένθος.”  
 Με φαίνεται που ο Λεύκιος      μεγάλως θ’ αγαπήθη.  
 Εν τω μηνί Αθύρ      ο Λεύκιος εκοιμήθη.<sup>71</sup>

I can just read the inscription on this ancient stone.  
 “Lo[r]d Jesus Christ.” I make out a “So[u]l.”  
 “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 [f]riends.”  
 I think Lefkios must have been greatly loved.  
 In the month of Athyr Lefkios went to sleep.  
 (Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 77)

The poem ponders a question that runs through Cavafy’s spectral poetics: can the dead keep haunting the living even when their scant material traces are too fragmentary and insufficient to allow a reconstruction of (parts of) their life narrative, their selfhood, their form? We already saw how this question plays out in “Caesarion.” By posing this question, “In the Month of Athyr” epitomizes another central tenet of Cavafy’s spectral poetics: the tension between the desire for wholeness and presence, and the impossibility of a full reconstruction of the past and the self.

71. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Sub-file SF001, Item 0011, photo 25; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF001-0011 (2073), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/e95t-s896-d9rp/>

In 1923, E. M. Forster, who had met Cavafy and was a great admirer of him and his work, read this poem as haunted by Lefkios's ghost. The poem, he observed, "would convey the obscurity, the poignancy, that sometimes arise together out of the past, entwined into a single ghost" (1923, 96). But is Lefkios's ghost still around in the poem's present or in the present of reading? Is this a felicitous or infelicitous conjuration? The poem's affective intensity lies in the impossibility of deciding on the answer. The tombstone's fragments do not provide enough information to give us a sense of his life or his form.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the poem's ending leaves us with the eerie sense that a spectral presence has been stirred. If Lefkios's ghost lurks among the fragmented words of his tombstone, the poem metonymically grants this man's ghost an indistinct materiality. The gaps within each line on the page—an icon of the gaps on the tombstone—become openings through which Lefkios's ghost may find a way out. The shudder or shock many readers—including myself—feel when reading this poem registers the affective impact of this spectral entity struggling to manifest itself in the poem through the inscription. But does the reader's shock issue from this spectral presence or from the realization that time has erased this ghost, preventing it from returning?

There is more at work in this poem than the ambivalence of an unresolved question. Reading the poem as exemplary of Cavafy's "poetics of fragmentation," Gregory Nagy argues that whether the poem suggests a "Christian or a pre-Christian ψυχή," one could read "Hi[m]" ("Avró[v]") as an implicit reference to the body of the god Osiris in Egyptian mythology—"the first person to die and then be resurrected after death" (2010, 268–69).<sup>73</sup> Osiris, Nagy explains, was tricked into entering a larnax or chest during a symposium, which was then sealed and thrown into the Nile, and "his body was then dismembered and scattered by Seth, lord of chaos, only to be reassembled and restored to life by the goddess Isis, loving consort of Osiris, in the month of Athyr" (269). Plutarch notes that there is a different tomb for each part of Osiris in various places in Egypt (270). For Nagy, Osiris's dismemberment is mirrored in Cavafy's poem, which in its turn mirrors the dismembered inscription (270). Like Isis,

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72. See Lambropoulos 1983b for a reading of the poem as a meta-reflection on the process of reading. The poem's reader, Lambropoulos argues, learns nothing about Lefkios. However, the poem's force lies not in conveying knowledge of the truth about him but in the way it communicates something to the reader: not in "*what* but in *how* we understand" by reading (667–68; my translation). The force of this "how" may be the spectral presence we feel in the poem despite Lefkios's irretrievable loss.

73. Karabini-Iatrou (2013) also notes how the poem foregrounds the co-existence and interaction of religions in Alexandria.

the reader is called to reassemble the “fragmented members of the poem” to bring it “back to life” (270).

Nagy broaches the question of whether or not the poem manages to reassemble the fragments and reanimate Lefkios, and it is in the company of his reading that I proceed with my own. As the missing parts in the inscription seem irretrievable, the remaining fragments are unlikely to ever be reunited with the missing ones to form a totality. Nevertheless, Nagy writes, “the reader poet persists” in his attempt “to read the inscription as if to sustain a hope of restoring it and bringing it back to life simply by continuing to read” (270–71). Nagy concludes that “What ultimately reintegrates the disintegrating poem as it draws to a close is the love expressed for Leukios at line [[10]]” (272), which is the poet-reader’s conclusion: “I think Lefkios must have been greatly loved” (Cavafy 1992, 77). The love of Lefkios’s friends, surmised by the mutilated words “tea[r]s,” “grief,” and “sorrow,” is affectively transferred to the poet-reader (Nagy 2010, 272) and to the poem’s readers. This double affective transference of love propels a *momentary* reintegration of the fragments, and thus, ultimately, Lefkios’s conjuration.

Making the conjuration dependent on this affective transference and its interpretation by readers, the poem puts forward a radically relational conception of the self. If Lefkios’s spectral self is transiently reconstructed through this poem, it is not a self-sufficient self, but one that can only be conjured through the love of *others*. This is a two-way process: Lefkios depends on others to “exist,” but the grief, sorrow, and loss experienced by his friends as part of their mourning expose *their* dependency on Lefkios and their vulnerability to *him*. As Judith Butler writes, “What grief displays is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us [. . .] in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (2004, 23). Lefkios’s friends, we may assume, are undone by this loss and have to readjust their sense of self as a result. This loss, and love, are transferred to the poet-reader and possibly to the poem’s readers. Lefkios’s spectral appearance is therefore contingent on the entanglement of multiple relational subjectivities. The poem masterfully poses the question of what constitutes a (felicitous) conjuration through which it proposes a relational self: a specter can momentarily “exist” through its conjurers, but conjurers also “exist” through specters that co-shape their sense of self.

While “In the Month of Athyr” dramatizes the precarious nature of conjurations, “Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους” / “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1898/1904) leaves no doubt about the infelicity of the barbarians’ summoning. This poem, which I discuss at length in Chapter 5, constitutes perhaps the

most blatantly failed conjuration in Cavafy's poetry. The poem stages a city's preparations in anticipation of the barbarians' arrival, which never takes place. It is structured as a dialogue: a speaker poses a series of questions about the city's commotion and preparations, to which another speaker repeatedly gives the same answer: "Because the barbarians are coming" (1992, 18–19). This repetitive constative statement is meant to have a reassuring, almost hypnotic function (Boletsi 2013, 147–48). However, the statement can also be read as an implied conjuration: an incantatory formula—a "Let there be barbarians"—through which the empire tries to summon its constitutive other. This formula seems to have worked before, as the citizens appear to know what the barbarians are like or what they like. But the formula's obsessive repetition, as I argued elsewhere, betrays the speaker's anxiety about the barbarians' arrival, prefiguring their absence. His words sound "like a stage-manager's increasingly nervous cue to the barbarians-as-specters to enter the stage: a cue that receives no response" (Boletsi 2018a, 325). Language refuses to produce its referent. When we hear that "there are no barbarians any longer," the conjuration falters, leaving the empire before a great challenge: redefining itself without this spectral other. "Waiting for the Barbarians" thus transposes the relational conception of subjectivity I traced in "In the Month Athyr" into collective processes of identity-formation: how can the 'civilized' (re)define themselves now that their conjuration of the barbarians has failed?

### *vii. Exit the Ghost*

By now we have seen specters appearing, struggling to appear or failing to appear; conjurers trying to call up specters, evade them, control them or letting themselves be touched, inhabited or disarticulated by them; conjurers facing the inescapability of death but also the alternative futures that specters sometimes signal. But how do specters leave the stage in Cavafy's poetry? Such an exit is staged in the unpublished poem "Ο Γενάρης του 1904" / "January of 1904" (1904). The poem is divided in two parts: the first stanza stages the speaker's encounter with a specter and the second the latter's disappearance.

Α η νύχταις του Γενάρη αυτουνού,  
 που κάθομαι και ξαναπλάττω με τον νου  
 εκείναις ταις στιγμαίς και σ' ανταμώνω,  
 κι ακούω τα λόγια μας τα τελευταία κι ακούω τα πρώτα.

Απελπισμέναις νύχταις του Γεννάρη αυτουνού,  
 σαν φεύγ' η οπτασία και μ' αφίνει μόνο.  
 Πώς φεύγει και διαλύεται βιαστική—  
 πάνε τα δένδρα, πάνε οι δρόμοι, πάν τα σπίτια, πάν τα φώτα.  
 σβύνει και χάνετ' η μορφή σου η ερωτική.<sup>74</sup>

Ah this January, this January's nights,  
 when I sit and refashion in my thoughts  
 those moments and I come upon you,  
 and I hear our final words, and hear the first.

This January's despairing nights,  
 when the vision goes and leaves me all alone.  
 How swiftly it departs and melts away—  
 the trees go, the streets go, the houses go, the lights go:  
 it fades and disappears, your erotic shape.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 313)

As in other Cavafian poems, although the vision (“οπτασία”) issues from the speaker’s mind, it is not fully controlled by him: in the second stanza, the subject is unable to stop the vision from departing. A textual equivalent of the filmic *dissolve* is mobilized here to convey the vision’s gradual disappearance, as the poetic subject returns to his “despairing” January night. Even though the conjuration is felicitous, the pain that the specter’s dissolution (“διαλύεται”) causes reminds us that conjurations in Cavafy’s poetry work not only as temporary suspensions of death but also as figures of a repeated experience of loss and incomplete mourning.

### *viii. Specters and Futurity*

Conjurations do not solely concern the relation between past and present. By loosening the fabric of the present, they also allow intrusions from (im)possible, (un)realized futures. The poem “Απ’ το συρτάρι” / “From the Drawer” (1923) broaches the question of futurity by juxtaposing a spectral with a linear

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74. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0104, photo 25; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0104 (110), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/1904-1/>



temporality through its engagement with photography. The speaker wishes to conjure a past lover. The material trigger is the lover's photograph, hidden in a drawer:

Εσκόπευα στις κάμαράς μου έναν τοίχο να την θέσω.

Αλλά την έβλαψεν η υγρασία του συρταριού.

Σε κάδρο δεν θα βάλλω την φωτογραφία αυτή.

Έπρεπε πιο προσεκτικά να την φυλάξω.

Αυτά τα χείλη, αυτό το πρόσωπο—  
α για μια μέρα μόνο, για μιαν ώρα  
μόνο, να επέστρεφε το παρελθόν τους.

Σε κάδρο δεν θα βάλλω την φωτογραφία αυτή.

Θα υποφέρω να την βλέπω έτσι βλαμένη.

Άλλωστε, και βλαμένη αν δεν ήταν,  
θα μ' ενοχλούσε να προσέχω μη τυχόν καμιά  
λέξις, κανένας τόνος της φωνής προδώσει—  
αν με ρωτούσανε ποτέ γι' αυτήν.<sup>75</sup>

I had in mind to place it on a wall of my room.

But the dampness of the drawer damaged it.

I won't put this photograph in a frame.

I ought to have looked after it more carefully.

Those lips, that face—  
ah if only for a day, only for an  
hour their past would return.

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75. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0094, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0094 (99), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/8g5k-gtsq-bam9/>

I won't put this photograph in a frame.

I'll endure looking at it, damaged as it is.

Besides, even if it weren't damaged,  
it would be annoying to be on guard lest some  
word, some tone of voice betrayed—  
if they ever questioned me about it.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 336)

The poem hints at photography's aspiration to summon the past, but focuses more on the materiality and perishability of the medium itself. The poem's blemished photograph projects the vulnerability to time of a medium that is supposed to freeze time. The assumed "forever" of photography's fixing of its subject proves to be contingent on the medium's materiality (the photographic paper), which subjects photographs to damage, decay, and death. The speaker's attempt to protect the photograph by keeping it in a drawer—away from elements that could damage it, as well as away from the public eye that could damage *him*—ironically results in its damage due to humidity. Nothing guarantees this object's eternal life, not even the private, enclosed space of the drawer.

The verb "εβλαψεν" ("damaged") as well as the repetition of the past participle "βλαμμένη" ("damaged") foreground the question of time and decay in relation to photography and spectrality. Can a blemished photograph still conjure its subject? The poem does not answer this question directly, as the speaker does not actually perform a conjuration but merely expresses his wish to summon the depicted man. His reference to the lips and face, as metonymies for a person who is not concretely described, hints at the fragmentary character of memory (and perhaps of the damaged photograph's image) that may further obstruct the conjuration. Just as "In the Month of Athyr," this poem asks: could the fragments (lips, face) lead to a reconstruction of the depicted, or is this hope wishful thinking? The narrator does not seem confident about the felicity of the endeavor, and his uncertainty is registered in his attempted self-correction: "if only for a day, only for an / hour their past would return." If a conjuration that would last a whole day seems too ambitious, he is willing to settle for an hour.

In her reading of this poem, Eleni Papargyriou sees the material damage done to the photograph by time as "traumatic" for the poetic subject, since it reminds him of the "growing distance separating him from the photograph's present"—a distance that will keep growing into the future as the future continuous tense of this line suggests: "Θα υποφέρω να την βλέπω έτσι βλαμμένη"

(Papargyriou 2011, 84). While Mendelsohn's translation of the line ("I'll endure looking at it, damaged as it is") suggests an acceptance of the continued suffering in the future, the verb "υποφέρω," which can be translated both as "endure" and "suffer," can also be read as the speaker's explanation for not putting the photograph in a frame: having to look at the blemish every day would make him "suffer," besides the risk of public exposure this display would entail for a homosexual subject in a society that repudiates queer intimacies.

Based on the above, the poem would appear to be less about photography's ability to generate specters and more about its own perishability and the victory of linear over spectral time. Read in this way, the poem presents a subject trapped in a fixed present and a predetermined future marked by suffering and mourning for past losses (the beloved) as well as a "mourning yet to come" (Cadava 1997, 8):<sup>76</sup> the mourning for the photograph's and the speaker's own death. Yet the poem's grammar, I argue, puts up a fight against time's ruthless linearity. I find these formal, grammatical traces of resistance to normative linear time in the poem's mixing of tenses and temporal frames, as well as real and imaginary scenarios in the past, present, and future through an accumulation of implied and explicit conditional sentences.

The first two lines imply a third-type conditional (i.e., things that did not happen in the past and their imaginary outcomes):

"I had in mind to place it on a wall of my room. / But the dampness of the drawer damaged it."→

*If I had placed the photograph on a wall, the dampness may not have damaged it and it may have remained intact.*

The third line also evokes a third-type conditional

"I ought to have looked after it more carefully."→

*If I had looked after it more carefully, it might not have been damaged.*

Then comes the narrator's wish for a momentary conjuration of the past, expressed through the grammatical structure "if only": "if only for a day, only for an / hour their past would return." The "if only" form expresses an intense

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76. I borrow the phrase from Cadava's discussion of Benjamin's account of the early photographic portraits of David Octavius Hill, where Cadava writes: "The portraits bear witness to the recognition that we are most ourselves, most at home, when we remember the possibility of our death. We come to ourselves through these photographs, through these memories of a mourning yet to come" (1997, 8).

wish that things would be different, marking a disjunction between a present reality and an alternative desired scenario. This contrast suggests the speaker's resistance to reality and the pressure that an alternative possibility exerts on this reality, haunting it with the *otherwise*.

The poem then takes us to the projected future: the narrator's plan not to frame the photograph. This statement of intention still leaves open the question of what the narrator will do with it: will he put it back in the drawer, where it would be further damaged by dampness? If the line "Θα υποφέρω να την βλέπω έτσι βλαμμένη" is understood as an affirmation of suffering (contrary to Mendelsohn's translation of "υποφέρω" as "endure"), then it participates in another implied conditional that gives us the anticipated result of the opposite scenario from the one implied in the decision "I won't put this photograph in a frame." This conditional would be either of the first or second type (that is, a likely or unlikely scenario in the future, respectively), depending on our interpretation:

"I won't put this photograph in a frame." →

*If I put this photograph in a frame, I will suffer by looking at it, damaged as it is.*

Or:

*If I were to put this photograph in a frame, I would suffer by looking at it, damaged as it is.*

This conditional creates an unlikely *but not impossible* scenario for the future, which haunts the narrator's actual decision.

The last four lines are also replete with intertwined explicit and implied conditional sentences that I attempt to paraphrase as follows:

"Besides, even if it weren't damaged, / it would be annoying to be on guard [. . .]" →

(i) *If I were to put the photograph on the wall, I would be on guard [. . .]*

And:

(ii) *If the photograph were intact, I'd probably still not put it on the wall (for fear of social exposure)*

And the last lines:

“[. . .] lest some / word, some tone of voice betrayed— / if they ever questioned me about it”

(i) *If the photograph were hanging on the wall and (ii) if people were ever to question me about it, some tone of voice might betray me.*

This convoluted landscape of conditionals of several and mixed types does a lot more than simply convey the subject’s regret for unrealized possibilities in the past and his certainty about the suffering and death awaiting him in the future. It unsettles and deconstructs teleological, fatalistic conceptions of time as an unstoppable march toward death by introducing the force of the “what if?” that haunts this linear temporality with alternative pasts, presents, and futures. The poem’s conditionals conjure probable, possible, likely, unlikely, imaginary, impossible, and unrealized scenarios, which allow utopian hopes to exist alongside repression and death drives. These scenarios also carry fears, regrets, desires, and anxieties: possible or impossible, they are not all desirable alternatives. Yet the hauntological time that all these conditionals introduce opens up the future to the possibility of the *otherwise*—and of survival beyond the photograph’s (and subject’s) death. *What if* there is a future in which hanging this photograph on the wall would not expose the speaker to social condemnation from revealing an illicit homosexual affair? Such a future scenario, not likely (yet) in the poem’s present, challenges the seemingly inescapable fate of the decaying photograph and the homosexual subject, who is condemned to hide in another drawer of sorts: the closet. The poem’s grammar turns the drawer—and the subject’s metaphorical closet—from a signifier of concealment, repression, shame, death (the drawer’s dampness gradually destroys the photograph) into what Papanikolaou calls a potential “escape laboratory.”<sup>77</sup> The poem is more than a tale of closeted homosexuality: it grammatically opens up a precarious space that could accommodate queer futurity and survival. Queer survival, Benjamin Bateman writes, “lives on not into a prescribed future whose prescriptions can be and feel deadly but within a present thick and ripe with residual pasts and early futures,” a time in which “present and future” meet “in sideways movements as if drunk on the excess of temporality brimming within and over any particular now” (2018, 15).<sup>78</sup> As a queer, spectral tempo-

77. Papanikolaou aptly argues that concealment in Cavafy turns into a strategy that exposes the very mechanisms that imposed the concealment (2014, 172; also 2005).

78. For queer survival in Cavafy, see Mitsikakos 2023 and his doctoral dissertation “C. P. Cavafy and the Art of Queer Survival” (in progress).

rality infiltrates the poem through the “(what) ifs” of the explicit and implied conditionals, the speaker’s present thickens: it is not solely determined by the past but momentarily inhabited by a future yet to come, which is always “at risk of being missed” (18).

### ix. From Spectrality to Presence? Negotiating Shame

The last poem I turn to in this chapter is the unfinished “Θάταν το οινόπνευμα” / “It Must Have Been the Spirits” (1919). Mendelsohn’s translation of the title aptly connects alcohol with spectrality through the word “spirit,” preparing us for the conjuration performed in the poem: just as in “Half an Hour,” alcohol facilitates conjurations. “Οινόπνευμα” in the Greek title, after all, also contains the word “spirit”: “πνεύμα.”

The poem comprises many fragmentary versions, substantially different from each other, difficult to read, and with several corrections and deleted parts, which create a complex, spectral terrain for analysis. Its composition, as Lavagnini notes, seems to have troubled Cavafy a lot (Cavafy 1994, 40). The manuscript containing the poem’s drafts is dated February 1919: Cavafy is in his so-called realist phase and about to enter the final decade of his writing, during which references to homosexuality become much more explicit. Critics talk about a shift in Cavafy’s work around that time, from a phase of concealment and shame to a phase of *parrhesia*, although they do not all agree as to the precise beginning of the latter phase. Some see 1917–1918 as a turning point, others take 1920 as the year marking the “last internal division of his work” (Dallas 1984, 138),<sup>79</sup> while Savidis pinpoints 1922 as the start of this new phase, when Cavafy first publishes a poem that explicitly thematizes homosexual love (Savidis 2004; 54–55).<sup>80</sup> What particularly interests me here is that Cavafy’s proclaimed shift from an “economy of shame” (Papanikolaou 2014, 163) to *parrhesia* is accompanied by an ontological transition in his characters: in the last decade, most young men are not conjured anymore as ghosts from the past but figure as full-fledged presences in the poems’ “now.” In my reading of “It Must Have Been the Spirits,” I argue that the assemblage of this poem’s drafts may be seen as a *mise-en-abyme*, i.e., a mirror text, for the way Cavafy negotiates his relation to his past poetic production around that time, when transitory specters are about to hypostatize. The catalyst in the way this process is dramatized, I argue, is the affect of *shame*.

79. My translation of Dallas’ quote from the Greek.

80. The poem Savidis mentions in this context is “Σ’ ένα βιβλίο παλιό” / “In an Old Book.” See Papanikolaou for a discussion of critics’ views on Cavafy’s two phases (2014, 163–64) and a reading that aptly challenges the absolute distinction between the two.

In tracing the workings of shame in the poem, I draw on Sedgwick's delineation of shame in relation to performativity. Distancing herself from moralistic takes on shame as attached to repression and guilt and as "an enforcer of proper behavior," Sedgwick mobilizes shame to rethink queer performativity as a strategy for producing "meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame" (1993, 11). Along these lines, I argue that Cavafy's drafts of this poem integrate shame in a way that renders this "potentially paralyzing affect" transformational and productive—"narratively, emotionally, and performatively" (11). Shame ends up engendering, as it were, Cavafy's ghosts as presences. As a catalyst in the transition from spectrality to presence, shame helps us understand this transition as part of a continuum rather than a radical break with Cavafy's poetic past.<sup>81</sup>

In the poem's last version, a compelling image unfurls from the aging poet's intoxicated mind: elements in his room are gradually replaced by phantasmatic elements of an imagined scene, possibly from the past. His "soul" is inserted in this scene in the form of a "dissolute youth" (trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009b, 4).<sup>82</sup>

Θάταν το οινόπνευμα που ήπια το βράδυ,

θάταν που νύσταξα είχα κουρασθεί όλη μέρα.

Σβύσθηκεν απ' εμπρός μου η μαύρη ξύλινη κολόνα  
 με την αρχαία κεφαλή· κ' η πόρτα της τραπεζαρίας,  
 κ' η πολυθρόνα η κόκκινη· και το καναπεδάκι.  
 Ήλθε στη θέση των της Μασσαλίας ένας δρόμος.  
 Κ' ελεύθερα η ψυχή μου χωρίς συστολή  
 εκεί εφάνηκε πάλι κ' εκινείτο  
 με την μορφήν αισθητικού κ' ηδονικού εφήβου—  
 του διεφθαρμένου εφήβου: ας λεχθεί κι αυτό.

Θάταν το οινόπνευμα που ήπια το βράδυ,

θάταν που νύσταξα, είχα κουρασθεί όλη μέρα.<sup>83</sup>

Ανακουφίσθηκε η ψυχή μου, που η καϋμένη  
 όλο συστέλλεται υπό το βάρος των ετών.

81. Although Papanikolaou does not discuss this poem, his argument about the productive dimension of concealment in Cavafy (as a strategy of telling by hiding), which challenges the idea of a break between the phase of concealment and parrhesia, resonates in the argument I advance through my reading of this poem.

82. If we connect the imaginary scene to Cavafy's biography, Marseilles was the first stop of Cavafy's 1897 trip to France and England with his brother John (Lavagnini in Cavafy 1994, 83).

83. The second halves of these two verses are not written out in the manuscript, but the Greek sign for "etc." suggests that these verses repeat the first two.

Ανακουφίσθηκε η ψυχή μου και μ' εφάνη  
 στις Μασσαλίας έναν δρόμο συμπαθητικό,  
 με τη μορφή του ευτυχισμένου, διεφθαρμένου εφήβου  
 που τίποτε δεν ντρέπονταν εκείνος, ασφαλώς.<sup>84</sup>

It must have been the spirits that I drank last night,  
 it must have been that I was drowsing, I'd been tired all day long.

The black wooden column vanished before me,  
 with the ancient head; and the dining-room door,  
 and the armchair, the red one; and the little settee.  
 In their place came a street in Marseilles.  
 And freed now, brazenly, my soul  
 appeared there once again and moved about,  
 along with the form of a sensitive, pleasure-bent youth—  
 the dissolute youth: that, too, must be said.

It must have been the spirits that I drank last night,  
 it must have been that I was drowsing, I'd been tired all day long.

My soul was released; the poor thing, it's  
 always constrained by the weight of the years.

My soul was released and it showed me  
 a *sympathique* street in Marseilles,  
 with the form of the happy, dissolute youth  
 who never felt ashamed, not he, certainly.

(Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009b, 4)<sup>85</sup>

In a description that—just like in “Since Nine—” and “January of 1904”—evokes a filmic *dissolve*, furniture and objects in the speaker's room vanish. The *dissolve* creates the effect of a soft focus through which the real succumbs to the phantasmatic. The blurry image that is poetically produced, just like “[t]he blurred

84. This is the poem's last version in Cavafy's manuscript; Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0003, photos 6–7; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0003 (161), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-100/>. Lavagnini's edition of the poem's last version (1994, 84) adds a number of commas (after “νύσταζα,” “ψυχή μου,” “συστολή,” “εκινείτο”). Here, I follow the manuscript's punctuation. I also consult Lavagnini's edition when needed, which is extremely useful given the challenging legibility of parts of the manuscript.

85. Mendelsohn's translation is based on Lavagnini's edition of the last version (1994, 84). His translation seems to suggest that the speaker's soul transfers back in time to accompany another “dissolute youth.” The Greek phrasing, however, equally suggests that the soul itself takes the form of a “dissolute youth,” although this remains ambiguous.



surroundings that belonged to the 19th-century style of photo-portrait,” captures, to use Thierry de Duve’s words, “the fading of time, in both ways, i.e. from presence to absence and from absence to presence” (1978, 121).<sup>86</sup> This blurriness enables the past’s spectral appearance.

Concerned with his aging body, the poetic subject momentarily separates it from his “soul,” turning the latter into a distinct entity: the specter of a young man, possibly the poet’s young self. The soul’s escape to the phantasmatic carries an untimeliness: the old speaker’s soul appears to be out of sync with the body it resides in and slips away into another temporality. In the last version, this is suggested in the lines: “My soul was released; the poor thing, it’s / always constrained by the weight of the years.” In an earlier draft, this out-of-syncness is registered in the following lines—both struck through:

Ξέχασε αυτό το σώμα που γέρασε, ψυχή  
Forget this body that has aged, soul

Μέσα στο σώμα αυτό το γήρας δυσκολεύεται  
Within this body old age is having a hard time<sup>87</sup>

The aging body as a burden is a common Cavafian theme. “Οι ψυχές των γερόντων” / “The Souls of Old Men” (1898/1901) offers one of the most memorable images of souls tragically trapped in old bodies. In “It Must Have Been the Spirits,” the soul’s escape from this entrapment is suggested as a passage through shame and constraint to an unshamed existence. Three phrases in the above-quoted last version suggest this: “χωρίς συστολή” (“brazenly”) and “που τίποτε δεν ντρέπονταν εκείνος” (“who never felt ashamed”) refer to the soul as a young man, and “συστέλλεται” (“constrained”) refers to the constraints of old age that afflict the old speaker in the here and now. The words “συστολή” and “συστέλλεται” semantically conjoin shame, constraint, and shrinking, evoking shame’s “defining trait,” which is (partial) self-effacement (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 4).

The ontological splitting of (old) body and (young) soul, resulting in the soul’s externalization, is not uncommon in Cavafy’s writing. As Kostas Boyiopoulos remarks, Cavafy’s speakers “In their attempt to halt aging, [. . .] assume

86. Cavafy transposes this technique to the textual medium as a means for poetic conjurations. On blurred images and their temporality, see van Alphen 2018, 123–29.

87. The phrase “που γέρασε” is not clearly legible in the manuscript, so I consulted Lavagnini’s edition. My translation. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0003, photo 2; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0003 (161), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-100/>. In Lavagnini, the verses are coded 2.2 and 2.8, respectively (Cavafy 1994, 75–76).

the form of the youthful males with whom they are infatuated” (2012, 21). Verses from the poem's earlier drafts even indicate that Cavafy considered turning this specter into another man altogether:

Δεν τον φαντάζομαι να 'πήρχεν και να γέρασε.  
Μα ότι δήποτε κι αν έκαμε η ζωή,  
στην ποίηση έμεινε όπως ήταν<sup>88</sup>

I don't imagine him to have survived and grown old.  
But whatever life may have done  
in poetry he remained as he was.<sup>89</sup>

Does his soul attach itself to the poet's younger self or to another man's body? The ambivalence that the poem's fragmentary versions generate confounds the boundaries between self and other, body and soul. But whether the specter is that of the poet's younger self or of another man, it does not matter much: in both cases, *a specter arrives* that the speaker perceives as both part of himself and external to him.

The separation between the old subject, ashamed of his body, and the young specter “who never felt ashamed,”<sup>90</sup> ties old age with shame on the one hand, and youth with shamelessness on the other. Remarkably, however, the earlier drafts reveal the exact opposite dynamic between the poetic subject and the young specter: the old subject appears confident while the young specter of his soul appears shy and ashamed, at least in the speaker's perception. In these drafts, the speaker addresses the young specter in the second person and repeatedly invites it to approach him *without feeling ashamed*, e.g., in the following lines:

ποιον θα ντραπείς, ψυχή. Το σπίτι είναι κλειστό

whom are you shy of, soul. The house is closed

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88. Sheet 4 of the manuscript in the Cavafy archive. There seems to be a full stop or comma after “ζωή” in the manuscript. I opted for a comma here, as the next verse starts with a small letter. The words “τόλμησε” (dared) and “Τέχ[νη]” (art) are stricken through as rejected alternatives for “έκαμε” (have done) and “ποίηση” (poetry), respectively. Verses coded as 4b in Lavagnini's edition (Cavafy 1994, 82).

89. All translations from earlier versions are mine.

90. The poem's last line in its last version.

Μη συσταλείς [ουδόλως] καθόλου για να [ξαναφανείς] φανερωθείς

Don't hesitate at all to appear [again]<sup>91</sup>

The prompt to the specter to shed *shame* appears no less than ten times in the drafts, in different variations (some stricken through, others not), in phrasings such as “μη ντρέπεσαι,” “ποιον θα ντραπείς,” “μη συσταλείς,” “χωρίς καμιάν αιδώ φανού” (“don’t be ashamed,” “whom are you shy of,” “don’t hesitate,” “without any shame, appear”): shame is clearly a leitmotif in the poem.<sup>92</sup> The specter, as the speaker’s language suggests, is too hesitant to come out of the shadows and approach the speaker, perhaps worried that its youthful form may have deteriorated. This may be the only shy, reserved ghost in Cavafy’s poetic universe. The poetic subject reassures the specter that it has not changed and that it should not be ashamed to approach him. He even calls his young soul to invade, seize, or violate his body, as the (twice stricken through) phrase “Βίασε αυτό το σώμα”<sup>93</sup> suggests, which appears three times (twice stricken through), once before the phrase “ποιον θα ντραπείς, ψυχή” (“whom are you shy of, soul”). The latter phrase reads as an attempt to exorcize shame from this desired contact.

The poet’s address to the specter in the earlier drafts can be read as an apostrophe. As a rhetorical figure, the apostrophe is intimately tied with conjurations, since an “absent, dead, or inanimate entity [. . .] is thereby made present, animate” (Johnson 1986, 30).<sup>94</sup> Although the apostrophe is expelled from the poem’s last version, its emphatic presence in earlier drafts suggests a negotiation between an “I” and a “you” that had to take place before the last version

91. These two verses are from the second and third sheet of the manuscript, respectively. The verse “Μη συσταλείς [ουδόλως] καθόλου για να [ξαναφανείς] φανερωθείς” is written with ink; the words “ουδόλως” and “ξαναφανείς” are subtly struck through with a pencil and above them the words “καθόλου” and “φανερωθείς” are written respectively, with a pencil. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0003, photos 2–3; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0003 (161), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-100/>. Verses coded by Lavagnini as 2.7a and 3.2 respectively (Cavafy 1994, 76).

92. In sheets 2 and 3 in the manuscript.

93. The verb “βίασε” in the imperative appears three times (twice stricken through and once written in the margins next to a line that is stricken through), as a call to his soul to act on the old man’s body (see sheets 2–3 in the manuscript or the lines coded as 2.2, 3.4, and 3.5 by Lavagnini; Cavafy 1994, 75–77). I am unsure about the precise meaning of “βίασε” here (which in modern Greek commonly means “rape”). My sense is that its meaning is akin to the verb’s older meaning of “force” or “violate” (Stamatakos, *Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας* 1971, 789), understood in the poem’s context as seizing, taking hold of, violating, or ravishing.

94. The switch from the constative/descriptive to performative language, and from a third-person narration to a second-person address (deixis), is also reminiscent of “Caesarion,” discussed earlier in this chapter.

could come about. The frequent use of the imperative (“μη συσταλεις,” “φανού” etc.) in the earlier drafts signals a *performative* language that tries to effectuate a conjuration. This language is contrasted with the *constative* language of the last version, which merely describes a scene and the specter’s presence in it. In this last text, the stark opposition between the vulnerable old man and the overconfident young specter “who never felt ashamed” flips the dynamic of the previous drafts: these drafts suggest a vulnerable, shy, hesitant specter, too scared to face the mirror and approach the poet, who becomes increasingly confident and pressing in his demand (“φανού”) to the specter to present itself. It feels as though the shedding of shame that the old subject persistently demands of his young self in the earlier drafts is the condition for the latter’s appearance in the last draft. In that sense, the speaker’s apostrophe to his young self seeks to reverse the common speech act “shame on you!” and its implications: if “shame on you!” aims to efface the addressee (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 4), here the speaker’s attempt to excise that shame from his younger self seeks to confer presence on the latter, acknowledging it, coming to terms with it.

The movement from the various drafts to the last version therefore registers a negotiation between old and young self—with clear homoerotic (and auto-erotic) overtones—through which an ashamed specter eventually asserts presence. This play with shame can be understood in relation both to Cavafy’s poetic treatment of homosexuality and to his attitude toward his past poetic production: it signals an attempt to come to terms with this production that was marked by a poetics of shame and partial concealment of homosexuality. If the poem’s last version offers the negotiation’s outcome, the nexus of the fragmented drafts captures this negotiation, the terms and implications of which I try to disentangle.

In four lines from earlier drafts, the speaker’s call to the specter to not feel ashamed is accompanied by the reassuring addition that the *mirror* is away.<sup>95</sup> The mirror motif here is reminiscent of the portrait’s function in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). As another Dorian Gray, the specter of the speaker’s soul may be afraid of looking at its actual ugly or aged form in the mirror. But why would the speaker reassure the specter that the mirror is away

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95. For example, on the bottom of the seventh and last sheet in the manuscript, after the last version, two lines appear, crossed out with diagonal lines. In the first, which is difficult to reconstruct, the subject urges the specter “not to hesitate” (“μη συσταλεις”) and assures it the mirror is away. The second line reads “φανού ως ήσουν κ’ είσαι: δεν άλλαξες καθόλου” (“present yourself as you were and are: you haven’t changed at all.”). See Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF001, Item 0003, photo 7; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0003 (161), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-100/>. The line is marked as 5β: 20 in Lavagnini’s edition (Cavafy 1994, 79).

if he is also assuring it that it has not changed at all? This contradictory reasoning marks the paradoxical situation the poem sketches: the separation yet continuing entanglement of young soul and aging body. The specter is young, yet the mirror might show its old age, because the specter is also a reflection of the old speaker, even if the speaker addresses it as other. The specter's and the old speaker's fears and desires entwine despite their (partial) ontological separation.

In this paradoxical fusion and separation of self and other, narcissistic autoeroticism dovetails with the desire for a homoerotic encounter with a young man.<sup>96</sup> Yet the mirror's function in the poem goes beyond that: it is a metaphor for the projection of shame between the speaker and his young soul in a way that the above-mentioned reversal between the earlier drafts (ashamed specter / confident old man) and the last version (confident specter / ashamed old man) ceases to be a contradiction. Shame, Sedgwick writes, belongs to the same "circuit" as "narcissism" (1993, 7): "shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove" (5).<sup>97</sup> The mirroring of shame and confidence between old subject and young specter underlines that the specter is both separate from, and a version of, the old subject.

This function of the mirror is enhanced by the apostrophe, which often indicates a desire for fusing the self and the apostrophized other. "If apostrophe is the giving of voice, the throwing of voice, the giving of animation," Johnson writes, "then a poet using it is always in a sense saying to the addressee, 'Be thou me'" (1986, 31). The contradictions we trace across the drafts are symptomatic of an impossible desire: the fusion of two temporalities (past and present), two entities (self and other), two forms (young and old), through a split of the self (soul and body) that can never be complete. The poet tries to articulate this paradoxical relation of self and other in a language that falls short of capturing its complexity, given language's dependence on oppositional pairs (past/present, real/imaginary, self/other). Only a specter can concurrently embody these oppositions: it can simultaneously say "I am (here)" and "I am not."

If the young specter's shame is also the (old) speaker's, the speaker tries to transpose it into a force that will allow the young specter to emerge "without shame" in the last version. There, the old subject's transference of shame upon

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96. Exploring the influence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on Cavafy—though not in this particular poem—Boyiopoulos writes: "Through Wilde's magical mirror device, Cavafy incorporates the *other* in the *self* and the reverse, turning his desire for handsome *épheboi* into a quasi-metaphor for narcissistic eros" (2012, 22).

97. Sedgwick discusses Silvan Tomkins's argument on this point.

himself (his aging body) has “bought” the specter a brazen presence. Shame, Sedgwick shows, can be a way of reckoning with one’s past self.<sup>98</sup> I thus read the exchanges between the old speaker and the young specter across the drafts as a *mise-en-abyme* for Cavafy’s reckoning with his own past poetic production in 1919, as he gradually moves toward the last decade of his writing—a reading that, of course, does not rest on any assumption about Cavafy’s actual intentions while working on this poem. In the poem, the young specter can be seen as a figure both for the young spectral men in Cavafy’s past production and for the young(er) author of those poems.

Shame is “refused return” and indicates a disruption of contact with someone (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 6; Basch 1976, 765). The old poet’s plea to the specter to not feel ashamed tries to reconstitute the disrupted interpersonal link with his younger self—and with Cavafy’s past production, insofar as this was marked by an “economy of shame” (Papanikolaou 2014, 163). The disrupted bond that shame suggests is often accompanied by estrangement. Shame, Silvan Tomkins writes, is a barrier that emerges when “one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar” (Tomkins 1963, 123; quoted in Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 7). Such estrangement is here suggested by the specter’s (assumed) reluctance to look in the mirror: whereas a mirror commonly generates identification with oneself, the specter may be afraid that he will not recognize “himself” in it, just as the old poet has trouble recognizing himself in his younger self and his past work.

Despite this disruption, the old poet tries to mend the bond with his past self on a basis other than complete identification. This mending, to use Sedgwick’s words, does not entail “get[ting] the two selves permanently merged into one”: on the contrary, the distance and difference of the speaker from his younger self-figuration are “marked, treasured and in fact eroticized” (1993, 8).<sup>99</sup> The old speaker’s repetitive plea to the specter to renounce shame turns shame into a “pleasurable form of exhibitionistic flirtation” (10) that at times even takes the more aggressive form

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98. In fact, Sedgwick develops her argument on shame and performativity through an analysis of Henry James’s Prefaces to the New York edition of his most important novels—an occasion for reflecting on his earlier literary production—and sees shame as the way James reckons with the “conjured young author” of the past works he revised and revisited. Parallel to the way I view this poem as Cavafy’s attempt to renegotiate his relation to his past as he moves to a new phase, Sedgwick sees James’s “relation to the past as the intensely charged relationship between the author of the Prefaces and the often much younger man who wrote the novels and stories to which the Prefaces are appended—or between either of these men and a yet younger figure who represents the fiction itself” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 7).

99. Sedgwick develops this argument with reference to Henry James’s relation to his past production (see previous note).

of a desire to be seized by the specter (“βίασε”)—a desire that hints perhaps at an attempted (yet unattainable) fusion of the speaker and his younger self.

In the last version, the appearance of a confident specter represents perhaps the reestablishment of this bond, not as a fusion of the poet with his shamed younger self—they remain ontologically separated in the poem—but as a transposition of shame into love for this past figuration of himself, his past poetry, and its characters. This love manifests itself, to quote Sedgwick, “both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it” (8). In fact, the negotiation has not ended in this last draft, and shame is still part of it. The poem’s last version is structured as an *anaphora*: the second part repeats the first, starting with the same lines (“Θάταν το οινόπνευμα που ήπια το βράδυ, / θάταν που νύσταζα είχα κουρασθεί όλη μέρα”) and repeating the specter’s description in similar words, but not quite:

First description:

με την μορφήν αισθητικού κ’ ηδονικού εφήβου—  
του διεφθαρμένου εφήβου: ας λεχθεί κι αυτό.

along with the form of a sensitive, pleasure-bent youth—  
the dissolute youth: that, too, must be said

Second description:

με τη μορφή του ευτυχισμένου, διεφθαρμένου εφήβου

with the form of the happy, dissolute youth

The adjectives in the first description suggest an external representation, showing how the specter is seen by the speaker and by society: “αισθητικού κ’ ηδονικού” in the first line pertain to the speaker’s perception and are contrasted with “διεφθαρμένου” in the second line, hinting at society’s judgment. The specter’s second description, however, comprises only one line, in which “ευτυχισμένου” (“happy”) and “διεφθαρμένου” (“dissolute”) are adjacent. The word “ευτυχισμένου” is the first and sole registration of the specter’s own feelings and self-perception: it confers interiority and subjectivity to this young man. He is not just the object of other people’s focalization: the specter is *happy*. If the repetition of “διεφθαρμένου” registers the persisting formative power of shame—here, as an internalization of society’s interpellative address—the sec-

and time this shame is combined with happiness. The specter is happy despite and through shame: the two are not mutually exclusive, as this queer specter is not *exclusively* defined by society's interpellation.

The final line, which qualifies the young specter as one "who never felt ashamed, not he, certainly," also showcases the productive dimension of shame in the poem and in Cavafy's work. Ironically winking at the previous drafts in which the same specter appeared very ashamed in the speaker's perception, this line on the one hand suggests that the shame in the previous drafts may not have been the specter's but the old man's to begin with: "not *he*, certainly" (emphasis added) may suggest that the shame was there, but it was someone else's. On the other hand, the demonstrative negation of shame in this last line indicates the outcome of a process in which shame was intensely involved in producing the confident specter.

The poem's ending is thus a testament to the persisting ghostly presence of shame even after its ostensible repudiation. Yet shame has taken another form in this process. To borrow Sedgwick's words once more, the speaking subject has now managed to remove shame "from its terminal place as the betraying blazon of a ruptured narcissistic circuit, and instead to put it in circulation—as the sign of a tenderly strengthened and indeed now 'irresistible' bond between the writer of the present and the abashed writer of the past" (9). The young self remains unmerged with the poet's present self, but is welcomed, unabashedly.

From its fragmentary drafts up to the last version, the poem takes us through a dizzying set of reversals, mirrorings, and projections, across a wide spectrum of "relational positionalities" (8) between speaker and specter around the axis of shame. As a *mise-en-abyme* for the poet's relation with his past production, this negotiation registers the formative dimension of shame in Cavafy's work and its transposition into love. As a result, in the years to come, young men will enter the poems as full-fledged presences rather than transitory specters from the past conjured by a speaker. Yet shame is not excised in poems from Cavafy's last decade. It remains an active force that has done "the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading" (13) necessary for these young men to hypostatize, in poems such as "Ἐν απογνώσει" / "In Despair" (1923), "Πριν τους αλλάξει ο χρόνος" / "Before Time Altered Them" (1924), "Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει" / "He Had Come There to Read" (1924), "Το 25ον ἔτος του βίου του" / "The 25th Year of His Life" (1918?/1925), "Δύο νέοι, 23 ἔως 24 ἐτών" / "Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old" (1927), "Μέρες του 1901" / "Days of 1901" (1927), "Ἐνας νέος, της τέχνης του λόγου—στο 24ον ἔτος του" / "A Young Man, Skilled in the Art of the Word—in His 24th Year" (1928), "Μέρες του 1909, '10, και '11" / "Days of



1909, '10, and '11" (1928), "Ρωτούσε για την ποιότητα—" / "He Asked about the Quality" (1930), "Μέρες του 1908" / "Days of 1908" (1921?/1932), and others.

As shame often entails self-effacement, its link with the spectral is palpable: the specter's liminality is captured by the statement "I am (not)," just as shamed characters breaking their promises in Cavafian poems feel compelled to bracket or efface part of themselves. If the "I am (not)" of spectral characters shifts toward a more confident "I am" in the last decade, this "I am" is still largely shaped against the backdrop of the social stigmatization of these men, even when society's condemnation is also condemned and mocked, as in "Μέρες του 1896" / "Days of 1896" (1925/1927). Just as the shy specter in the early drafts of "It Must Have Been the Spirits" haunts the confident specter of the last version—it is, after all, the same specter—the young men in Cavafy's subsequent poetry carry the shame that has "made" them, but do not let it efface them. But if in Cavafy's time homosexual subjects are forced into spectral, debased lives, their reconfiguration into presences in the later poems proleptically evokes a desirable possible future, which is not there yet—also not in those poems. Thus, in the symbolism of Cavafy's shift from specters to presences, we may read a visitation from future specters, as a reference "to lives yet to come" (Faubion 2014, 237), to future queer subjects able to say "I am" and claim a less spectral place in the social. In the characters of the last decade, Cavafy's past specters meet future ones. The drafts of "It Must Have Been the Spirits" stage this as an encounter between an ashamed and confident ghost—both the same but also other—as the speaker's performative plea to the specter to not be ashamed turns into the "I am" of a future to come and to an unapologetic claim to happiness in deviance and defiance ("ευτυχισμένου, διεφθαρμένου").

#### d. Living with Specters

Just like the broken promises I explored in this chapter, conjurations entail a temporary denegation of death and endings. This denegation, as we saw, does not appeal to eternal life or full presence; neither does it reinstate a sovereign speaker who can defy death, master specters, or even trust his own intentions. Conjurations try to momentarily bring past moments or departed people into the present. The breaking of promises and commitments is also, albeit in a different way, a "ceaseless repetition of the crossing of death-lines" (Felman 2003, 26). Conjurations and unmet promises transgress the line between life and death and resist the finality of desire. As such, they are at the heart of Cavafy's spectral poetics, as strategies for keeping death at bay and ensuring that both the past and the future keep unhinging the present in ways that subjects cannot always control.

Conjurations also signal incomplete mourning. Even as they unsettle teleological, linear time, specters in Cavafy also act as painful reminders of the incapability of death, irrecoverable loss, and time's cruel passage. But if Cavafian specters facilitate mourning, it is a mourning that usually refuses to fully let go of the lost object, thus flirting with melancholia. It is a mourning that, to speak with Derrida, is "in fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or in its concept, between introjection and incorporation" (1994, 121). It is a mourning that allows those who are not here—no longer or not yet—to keep revisiting and making demands on their conjurers, and through them, on the readers.

In the last decade of Cavafy's work and life, roughly speaking, lovers and scenes from the past, as we saw, nearly cease to appear as specters invited into the present through the speaker's memory. Instead, they figure as actual presences, often without memory's mediation (with some exceptions). Erotic encounters usually materialize in the speaker's here and now. This hypostatizing of characters and scenes also accompanies the increasingly unapologetic presence of homoerotic desire in Cavafy poetry—a desire that in the later poems becomes less concealed, and thus less inflected by spectrality. Even though many young men in poems of the last decade still live precarious, socially marginalized lives, their ontological shift from spectrality to presence, as I argued in the previous section, proleptically points toward a possible future to come, in which queer subjects may assert their social presence more confidently. Thus, the hypostatizing of young men in Cavafy's last phase need not be seen as a leaving behind of the poetics of spectrality. It foregrounds another aspect of spectral temporality, namely a proleptic movement that invites a projected future into the present.

Even if conjurations become less frequent in the final years, spectral entities never completely disappear or abandon Cavafy in this phase. From his early writings up to his last poems, Cavafy did not stop testing different ways of animating the past in the present, calling on specters that would infuse the last phase of his poetry both with a whiff of enchantment and irrecoverable loss, as in the poem "Κατά τες συνταγές αρχαίων Ελληνοσύρων μάγων" / "Following the Recipe of Ancient Greco-Syrian Magicians," written two years before his death (1931). Like the aesthete in this poem, Cavafy kept looking for formulas to concoct that magic poetic potion that might momentarily conjure, "as part of this return of things past" ("σύμφωνα με την αναδρομήν"), the ghosts of former selves and lovers or of subjects and communities to come.<sup>100</sup>

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100. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF002, Item 0026, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF002-0026 (12), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-63/>. The quoted phrase from the poem is translated by Keeley and Sherrard (Cavafy 1992, 174).

## CHAPTER THREE



### Haunted Modernity

#### *Cavafy's Noonday Demon*

##### a. Reading Pre-posterously: From Sotiropoulos's *What's Left of the Night* to Cavafy's "In Broad Daylight"

On May 7, 1897, Cavafy embarks on a European tour with his brother John, during which they will visit both Paris and London, returning to Alexandria on June 28. At the threshold of the new century, the brothers will take full advantage of this tour, visiting theaters, operas, and various cabarets and night-clubs (Daskalopoulos and Stasinopoulou 2013, 42). In 2015, 118 years later, celebrated Greek author Ersi Sotiropoulos gives us a fictional account of this trip in her novel *Τι μένει από τη Νύχτα / What's Left of the Night*,<sup>1</sup> using archival material and historical sources to imaginatively reconstruct and fictionalize three days in the life of young Cavafy. Zooming in on these days from Cavafy's trip in Paris, Sotiropoulos weaves together Cavafy's life, sexuality, desire, and poetry in this formative period.

In an episode recounted in the novel, "Cavafy" (I use quotation marks when referring to Cavafy as the novel's fictional protagonist) gets lost in the streets of Paris during daytime. Having lost his travel companions and his sense of orientation, he roams the streets, unable to reach a familiar location. Even though we have an external narrator, "Cavafy" remains the focalizer: the Parisian streets are cast through his disoriented vision and perception, marked by increasing anxiety, physical discomfort, queasiness, "great fatigue" (due to the heat and his hunger), and a sense of alienation in the foreign city (Sotiropoulos 2018, 79).

"Cavafy's" confused state and inability to gain control over the space he finds himself in yield descriptions of the modern city that are defined by blurriness, haziness, disorientation, and other qualities that belong to the seman-

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1. The novel's English translation by Karen Emmerich was published in 2018.

tic complex of spectrality. As he looks back down the street, “people came on in waves, their silhouettes melding into a blur”; “The atmosphere seemed hazy,” and in the street, the sight of “umbrellas, buggies, carriages, commotion, horses, mane” (74) moving uncontrollably in different directions, mixed with other “fleeting images,” confuses him (75). People vanish behind carriages and reemerge again, registering “Cavafy’s” interrupted perception and inability to absorb the scene as a whole. “Cavafy’s” own movement is not unobstructed: “You had to be an acrobat to cross the boulevard just there” (75). His ability to “measure” and thus control the space is compromised (“How many blocks had he gone? Three or four? He couldn’t be sure,” 75). As he finds himself in an unfamiliar working-class district, he tries to retrace his steps in a futile attempt to regain a sense of orientation (“Something wasn’t right”; “It made no sense at all,” 75). Even though he realizes he is lost, something prevents him from doing the obvious: “while the simplest, most logical thing would have been to stop the first passerby and ask for directions, again that same resistance within him kept him from taking such a step, as if he had made some bet. But what kind of bet?” (79). “Cavafy’s” reluctance to ask for directions evokes the two conflicting forces that run through Cavafy’s work and, as I have argued, are productive of his spectral poetics: the desire to be in charge and to let go; to subject his work to ruthless control and submit it to the workings of alien forces—ghosts, past visions, future readers, critics, artists—that may take it to different places or give it unexpected afterlives. “Cavafy” is lost in Paris, but part of him does not want to find his way.

The city’s descriptions, tied as they are to “Cavafy’s” perception, are replete with vision-related metaphors and a vocabulary suggestive of blurriness. The reflective surfaces that are described raise an expectation of transparency of vision that they fail to realize, yielding unreliable optical experiences. When “Cavafy” finds himself “at the entrance of an arcade,” he sees “Hundreds of lamps” that “burned all at once under the glass dome” (81). From the shop’s window he sees a woman “behind the dusty glass,” who is also “watching him,” while drinking from a “blue glass” (81). These blurred, dusty, semitransparent reflective surfaces are matched by an equally hazy atmosphere outside. Even though there is “Not a cloud in the sky,” the atmosphere is experienced as a “hazy, gelatinous film, and behind it the sun, which continued to burn” (77) as “a colorless haze had spread over the area, sticking to your skin” (78). We can visualize the city itself as a “hazy [. . .] film,” offering a new optical landscape full of fleeting images, speedy movement, and (moving) reflective surfaces that challenge vision as a medium of solid knowledge. Modern cities at the turn of the century emerge as spectral spaces, haunting people who get lost in them.

In a description of St. Petersburg from 1899, Dr. M. V. Pogorelsky offers a vivid expression “of this new urban visual environment that mingled real and virtual images, visions transmitted or reflected by glass” (quoted in Gunning 2007, 114). According to Pogorelsky, “The quality of multiple reflections that the modern city provides us with has turned it into the natural medium of haunting” (114). Notice the convergences between Pogorelsky’s description of a trolley trip through St. Petersburg and Sotiropoulos’s casting of “Cavafy’s” experience in the streets of Paris:

In the window opposite you see the real street; it also reflects the side of the street behind the observer’s back. Reflections of the front and rear windows of the car fall on it as well; apart from that, the double reflection of the real part of the street under observation is imprinted on it. [. . .] In clear air and bright sunlight both real objects and their mirages look particularly life-like, and what you get as a result is a magic picture, extremely complex and mingled. [. . .] Passing carriages are not one directional any more, they move in a chaos overtaking themselves or passing through each other. Some carriages and passersby look as if they were rushing forwards, but at the same time you are aware that, in fact, each step they make takes them backwards. If your attention wanders for a second you also lose the criterion that separates real objects from their equally life-like apparitions. (Pogorelsky, quoted in Gunning 2007, 114)<sup>2</sup>

Discussing Pogorelsky’s account as illustrative of turn-of-the-century perceptions of the city, Tom Gunning argues that the “visual experience of the new mobile modern city with its clash of reflective surfaces” generates “a haunted space” that Pogorelsky also understood as “ghostly” (2007, 114). The nineteenth-century preoccupation with the occult, the spiritual, and the supernatural interlaced with processes of modernization, technologization, and urbanization. The occult and the spectral provided an apt vocabulary for expressing the shifting experience and perception of time and space emerging from new means of communication, technologies, and media, such as photography and film, and new means of transportation (e.g., trains).<sup>3</sup>

In Pogorelsky’s St. Petersburg and in the Parisian setting that Sotiropoulos populates with the young “Cavafy,” the city emerges as a ghost-producing

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2. The English translation is by Yuri Tsivian.

3. See, for example, Leeder 2015, Peters 1999, Eisner 2008, and many others.

machine on multiple levels. This spectrogenic process is somewhat literalized in Sotiropoulos's novel when the young poet encounters an actual ghost—or at least a man whom “Cavafy” experiences as a ghost:

An old man with a beard dragging a sack overtook him, then turned to look back. Those eyes. They bore into him as if trying to stare straight into his soul. The man took a few steps forward, then turned to face him once more. His clothes were ragged but clean, he didn't look like a beggar. Who knew why he was staring like that. The man's expression had something sad about it, but derisive, too. He quickly crossed the street to the opposite sidewalk. The old man still stood in the same spot—and despite the distance his gaze was so piercing that it made him stop in his tracks. That gaze reminded him of something. A short story he had written. About an encounter with a ghost. (2018, 80)

This strange encounter evokes the only short story Cavafy ever wrote, entitled “Εἰς τὸ Φῶς τῆς Ημέρας” / “In Broad Daylight,” probably written in the winter of 1895–1896.<sup>4</sup> Sotiropoulos builds “Cavafy's” ghostly encounter in her novel after Cavafy's story, which also revolves around a man's encounter with a ghost: twice at night, in his sleep, and the third time in broad daylight.

Let's now see how Cavafy's story unfolds. “In Broad Daylight” starts with a group of friends in Alexandria having a casual discussion after dining together in the casino of Saint Stefano in Ramleh. The discussion revolves around money: what they would do if they were rich, and the joys and independence money brings with it. The internal narrator—one of the friends—is not the protagonist but belongs to the intradiegetic audience of the main story that is narrated that same evening by another friend of the group, Alexander A. Alexander's story is thus embedded in the main narrative that frames it. It takes up the biggest part of the narrative and is presented as something that happened to him ten years earlier.

Alexander tells this story to explain to his friends how he almost became a “multi-millionaire” but did not, as he “didn't dare” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 86).<sup>5</sup> In the story, the ghost of a bearded middle-aged man visits him twice during his sleep, asking him to excavate a treasure chest filled with gold, diamonds, and other precious stones, buried by Pompey's Pillar in Alexandria. The ghost

4. “Εἰς τὸ Φῶς τῆς Ημέρας” was first published by Lavagnini in 1979 and was first translated in English in 1983 by James Merrill for *Grand Street* and, later, by Connolly (2004), Kostis (2006), and Jeffreys (2010).

5. All quotes from the story are from Jeffreys's translation.

tries to entice him with the promise of riches: the whole treasure will be his if he retrieves it, save for a small iron box that the ghost wants to keep for himself, the contents of which he never reveals to Alexander. The ghost asks Alexander to meet him the next day: “I will be waiting for you from noon until four o’clock in the Petite Place, at the café near the blacksmiths” (88). Alexander does not take the ghost seriously and misses his rendezvous with him. The second time, the ghost reappears in Alexander’s room at night, vexed because Alexander did not show up, and gives him the same rendezvous for the following day: Petite Place, between noon and four. Alexander does not experience the first two appearances of the ghost as particularly unsettling, even though the second appearance gives him an increasing feeling of uneasiness. He explains both appearances rationally, assuming that the ghost was a figure in his dreams and not an actual intrusion of a supernatural force. But when the following day he accidentally ends up at the Petite Place on his way to a café and sees the man from his dreams sitting there, in broad daylight, waiting and staring at him, he is overcome by horror. Only at this third encounter does he start perceiving the man as an actual ghost or demon:

Φρίκη! Εκεί ήτο έν μικρόν καφενειόν και εκεί εκάθητο. Η πρώτη εντύπωσίς μου ήτο ως μία ζάλη και ενόμιζα ότι ήθελα να πέσω. Ακούμπησα εις έν παράπηγμα και τον εκοίταξα πάλιν. Τα ίδια μαύρα ρούχα, το ίδιο ψάθινο καπέλλο, η ίδια φυσιογνωμία, το ίδιο βλέμμα. Και με παρετήρει ασκαρδαμυκτεί. Τα νεύρα μου έλαβον τοιαύτην έντασιν όπου ενόμιζα ότι είχε χυθεί σίδηρος εντός μου. Η ιδέα ότι ήτο ἕμερα μεσημέρι, ότι επερνούσαν άνθρωποι αδιάφοροι νομίζοντες ότι τίποτε έκτακτον δεν συνέβαινε, και ότι εγώ, μόνος εγώ, εγνώριζον ότι συμβαίνει το φρικτώτερον πράγμα, ότι εκάθητο εκεί έν φάντασμα, τίς οίδε ποίας δυνάμεις έχον και από ποιαν σφαίραν του αγνώστου ερχόμενον— από ποιαν Κόλασιν, από ποίον Έρεβος—με παρέλυε και ήρχισα να τρέμω. Το φάντασμα δεν εσήκωνε το βλέμμα από επάνω μου.<sup>6</sup>

Horror! There he was, sitting at the small café. My initial reaction was a sort of dizziness, and I thought that I might faint. I leaned against a merchant’s stall and looked at him again. The same black clothes, the same straw hat, the same facial features, the same gaze. And he, unblinking, was staring at me with a fixed gaze. My nerves had grown so tense that

6. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Item 0005, photos 9–10; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>. All references to the original are from the Cavafy archive.

I felt as though I had liquid iron running through me. The idea that it was broad daylight, that people were passing by indifferently as though nothing strange were happening, and that I—only I—recognised such a horrible thing, that sitting there was a ghost who possessed who knew what powers, and who had come from who knew what realm—from what Hell, from what Erebos—this idea paralysed me and I began trembling. The ghost did not lift his gaze from me. (91)

Overcome by fear, Alexander jumps on a carriage and asks the driver to take him to a remote address, but soon afterward orders the driver to take him back to the *Petite Place*, eager to see whether the ghost has left or whether he may not be the same person as the man in his dreams after all. When he realizes that the ghost is still there, piercingly staring at him, he instructs the driver to take him away again. He ends up at the hall of the Casino, “pale as a cadaver,” too afraid to go home: to “return again to the room where that supernatural Shadow had appeared during the night—that very same ghost I had just seen sitting in a public café in the shape of an ordinary human—was out of the question” (91). In a state of hysteria, he takes a train to Moharrem Bey, where he seeks refuge with his friend G.V.—an “eccentric” “who occupies himself with the study of magic” and who, Alexander hopes, may help him make sense of his experience and exorcise the ghost (92). His nervous breakdown, accompanied by high fever, keeps him in bed for a month, during which he stays with his friend. This is where Alexander’s story ends. As soon as he finishes the story, the primary narrator takes the word again, but only to give an abrupt ending to the whole narrative, as the group of friends is in a hurry to catch the last train back to town, about to leave in three minutes.

The story belongs to the genre of the fantastic, following Tzvetan Todorov’s definition that locates the crux of this genre in the ontological doubt a character (and by extension, the reader) experiences regarding the nature of strange events in an otherwise realistic setting: in other words, the hesitation about whether the cause of an event is natural (and can be rationally accounted for) or supernatural (and therefore follows different laws) (1975, 25–26). The protagonist’s and the reader’s doubt about the ontological nature of the strange man is never fully resolved, making the story a textbook case of the fantastic. The scale leans toward a rational explanation (the man’s appearance as a dream) in the story’s first part, then moves toward the supernatural when Alexander sees the man in broad daylight and identifies him as a ghost. But even though from this point on he refers to the man as a ghost, specter, or “supernatural Shadow” (Cavafy 2010, 91–92) (“φάντασμα,” “φάσμα,” “υπερφυσική Σκιά”), or,



conveying the view of his friend G.V., a “spirit” or “demon” (Cavafy 2010, 92–93) (“πνευμάτων,” “δαιμόνων”),<sup>7</sup> he keeps seeking rational and psychological explanations for his experience.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the description of his state when he seeks refuge with his friend allows the possibility—remote as it may be—that his unstable mental state may be at the root of his experience and that the ghost may have been a hallucination (Alexander leaves “like a madman” and starts “crying hysterically and shaking all over” when he reaches his friend; 2010, 92–93).<sup>9</sup> In line with Todorov’s criteria for the fantastic, in Cavafy’s story the setting in which a possibly supernatural force intrudes is realistic—even more so, because the places mentioned in the story, as Lavagnini has shown, are places in Alexandria that Cavafy haunted and details in the story can be related to real events in Cavafy’s life (Cavafy 1979).

The story’s allusions to Cavafy’s biography have been explored in adaptations of the story, and most notably in Takis Spetsiotis’s 1986 TV movie *In Broad Daylight*, in which Alexander is a poet and an alter ego of Cavafy himself.<sup>10</sup> They also find their way into Sotiropoulos’s fictionalized biography of the poet, to which I now return. In *What’s Left of the Night*, “Cavafy’s” encounter with the ghost and the ghost’s persistent stare (also a theme in Cavafy’s story), make “Cavafy” experience this encounter as a form of haunting: “That was precisely the sort of gaze he’d had in mind when he wrote that story, and now here it was in real life” and “As he walked he felt those eyes following him, clinging to him” (Sotiropoulos 2018, 80). As “Cavafy’s” pace quickens, he keeps turning back to see whether the man is following him, but “He wasn’t sure. Parisian delusions. Exhausted hallucinations” (81).

The unreliability of his senses, and particularly the eyes—the chief organ of perception and knowledge—is typical for the experience of haunting. Gunning writes: “We do not believe in ghosts, we are haunted by them. We do not see ghosts. Rather, our senses of vision and perception are brought to a crisis by them” (2007, 116). This epistemological doubt (is this man really after “Cavafy” or is “Cavafy” hallucinating?) finds a parallel in the short story, in

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7. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF04-S02-F04-0005 (188), photos 11–12.

8. For example, he goes back to the Petite Place to check whether the man there may have simply resembled the man in his dreams.

9. For a detailed discussion of the way the story oscillates between rational and supernatural explanations, see Athanasopoulou (2003, 659–61).

10. There are more adaptations of the story: an illustrated version is included in the series of illustrated Greek literary works by Manolis Zacharioudakis (1993) and in the comic book *Gioussouri*, illustrated by Thanasis Petrou and adapted by Dimitris Vanellis (2012). It has also been adapted into a play directed by A. Androu (Festival Filippon, 2013) (Diamantopoulou and Stoikou 2015, 302). For a discussion of the story’s adaptations, see Diamantopoulou and Stoikou 2015.

which the uncertainty about the nature of the encounter with the ghost is not resolved. In the novel, it is precisely the similarity “Cavafy” recognizes between his short story and this real-life experience that makes him perceive the man as a ghost. The encounter is certainly uncanny, following Freud’s understanding of “*das Unheimliche*,” which includes the “unintended recurrence of the same situation” (1975, 631) and instances when something we imagined, wished, feared, or dreamed about happens in real life.<sup>11</sup> Sotiropoulos writes, conveying “Cavafy’s” perspective:

An image born of his imagination when he wrote that story—the peculiar gaze of the man who visits the main character at night, the person who can’t be a person but must be a ghost, a supernatural presence—how strange to encounter that very same image later, in real life. As if imagination dictated reality. And just as the character in his story hadn’t kept his appointment with the ghost despite his great curiosity, he, too, had preferred to ignore the call of that gaze and had instead merely continued on his way. Any contact with the supernatural or even just the foreign, the new, always carried a certain threat. Both he and his character had chosen to remain whole, untouched, safe at the borders of the known world. (2018, 82)

The entwinement of fiction and (fictive) reality that this passage describes is more intricate than an instance of life imitating art: if fiction (the short story) partly triggers “Cavafy’s” haunting experience in Sotiropoulos’ novel, this haunting takes place in another literary work that fictionalizes Cavafy’s life, written in the future by an author who partly reconstructs, partly invents a few days from Cavafy’s life, creating a fictional story from snippets of biographical information and historical sources. This creates a spectral environment—a hall-of-mirrors effect, in which fiction and reality are multiply reflecting and doubling each other: concurrently haunted by, and haunting, each other. Consequently, “Cavafy’s” insight in the above-quoted passage that both he and his story’s character eventually shun the encounter with the supernatural in order “to remain whole” and “safe at the borders of the known world” carries an ironic undertone: there is no “safe” position insulated from the supernatural and the spectral if we consider the interpenetration of fiction and reality as well as the involvement of the occult and the supernatural in the subject’s experience of

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11. This latter instance is related to what Freud refers to as the “omnipotence of thoughts,” the belief that we can make something come true just by thinking about it (1975, 633). For Freud, this is a superstitious residue from mankind’s animistic phase that survives in modern civilization.

the modern city, as it is registered in Sotiropoulos's novel (and, as we will see, in the story too).

The effect of mirroring and duplication from the way fiction and reality reflect each other can also account for the "doppelgänger effect" that can be traced in Cavafy's story, in "Cavafy's" encounter in the novel, as well as between these fictional settings and Cavafy's biography. The idea of the doppelgänger has been brought to bear on Cavafy's story on different levels. Maria Athanassopoulou, for example, argues that the ghost can be viewed as the protagonist's doppelgänger, basing this claim on a series of similarities between the ghost and Alexander A., including their preoccupation with money and the intense stare through which they try to "master" the other, the foreign (for the ghost, the foreign is Alexander; for Alexander, the foreign is the ghost) (2003, 663). Peter Jeffreys sees the ghost as Cavafy's doppelgänger and notices similarities between the ghost's physical description and Cavafy's own figure (2015, 54). Taking the story as an entrance into Cavafy's psychology, Jeffreys reads "In Broad Daylight" as an allegory for Cavafy's own anxieties, and particularly his "subliminal anxiety over his prose" (55). If the ghost is Cavafy's double, the iron box the ghost desires could, according to Jeffreys, be "a displacement for Cavafy's prose writings that on some psychic level haunted and tormented him"; the expression of "a repressed desire" to develop "a hermetical euphuistic prose style that Cavafy so desperately sought," until he gave up and devoted himself to poetry (54). In Spetsiotis's filmic adaptation too, Alexander is Cavafy's double: a poet whose decision not to pursue a life of riches (by refusing the ghost's offer) is cast as a choice for art and an unconventional life.

In *What's Left of the Night*, "Cavafy" and his ghost are also entwined, but instead of a doppelgänger-effect, we have an unexpected reversal of roles. "Cavafy" has a nagging feeling, something "opaque and very small that he needed to unravel" about the ghost. This opacity—which transfers the vocabulary of blurriness, haziness, and (non)-transparency from the urban landscape to the subject's psychological landscape—leads him to the following realization:

An encounter with a ghost. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that the old man wasn't the ghost. The old man was merely the vehicle, the channel that allowed an uncanny presence to reveal itself. Now he told himself, try to step into his shoes on the sidewalk, to pick up his bundle. See that man with the mustache and little round glasses across the way? Still fairly young, though he's lost any youthful quality. Always trying to escape, tormented by fears, imagining someone's following him. When he looks ahead he sees insurmountable barriers,

walls he himself has diligently built. He was the ghost. The old man had seen right through him, had tried to exorcise that ghost with his piercing gaze.

The idea pleased him, the reversal of roles. The ghost as his alter ego. (2018, 83)

As he sees himself through the eyes of the other (the presumed ghost), “Cavafy” becomes aware of his own foreignness and out-of-placeness: a strange, tormented figure who makes an anxious, if not paranoid impression. To come to this realization, he has to partly dispossess himself in order to internalize the ghost’s gaze and cast it at himself. Surprisingly, the idea that *he* is the ghost—this “reversal of roles”—“pleased him” instead of terrifying him or making him feel more alienated. It is perhaps by endorsing the unstable ontology of the ghost that he can escape the “insurmountable barriers” and the “walls he himself has diligently built” and can connect with other people and worlds, beyond the familiar. Ghosts can, after all, walk through walls or bring the past into the present.

If we now perform a similar move as the fictional “Cavafy,” we can look back at Cavafy’s short story through the eyes of the fictionalized “Cavafy”-as-ghost in Sotiropoulos’s novel to trace the ways the novel may haunt Cavafy’s story too, and thus invite new readings. I purposefully started this chapter with Sotiropoulos’s fictional reworking of Cavafy’s ghost story rather than proceeding chronologically, i.e., starting with the story and then moving to its “afterlives” through Sotiropoulos’s novel. This gesture follows the spectral temporality of a *pre-posterous reading* that, as previously delineated, places an object of the past “as an aftereffect behind (post-) its later recycling” (Bal 1999, 6–7). The fictional “Cavafy” of Sotiropoulos’s novel may be haunted by Cavafy’s short story, and shaped in dialogue with it, but that story is also pre-posterously haunted by the 2015 novel.

The reversal of roles between “Cavafy” and the novel’s ghost invites me to revisit the short story in this light. Critics have already traced similarities between the ghost and Alexander through the doppelgänger theme, so popular in literature of the fantastic. I take that argument further to suggest that in the encounter between Alexander and the ghost in broad daylight, *it is in fact Alexander who behaves more like a ghost*. While the ghost is sitting in the café, waiting for him, Alexander is the one who makes an appearance, and a fleeting one at that. Too scared to approach the bearded man, he leaves the site immediately, only to return again to the same spot a bit later, as a revenant would. Alexander’s momentary appearance, disappearance, and reappearance,

the interrupted nature and speediness of his comings and goings in contrast with the sedentary ghost who does not move an inch from his position between noon and four, could support a reading of Alexander himself as a ghostly presence in this scene, with the bearded man desperately hoping to “conjure him up” so that he can complete his mission. What ghost sits in broad daylight for four straight hours, waiting for a man to come to him? This question, as well as the possible reversal of roles between Alexander and the ghost, becomes pivotal to the reading of the story I propose in the following, a reading that is haunted, as it were, by the scene in Sotiropoulos’s novel.

### b. Ghosts and Modernity

Cavafy’s “In Broad Daylight” carries a thick intertextual web: it evokes, incorporates, and responds to a host of literary works and essays on poetics written around Cavafy’s time, as well as other poems and writings by Cavafy. As many critics point out, the story is written in the manner of E. A. Poe. Lavagnini, who produced the story’s first philological edition (1979), notes the influence of Poe’s short stories and essays on poetics on Cavafy, particularly “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Poetic Principle” (Lavagnini, in Cavafy 1979; Lavagnini 2003, 77, 85). Cavafy may have also read E. T. A. Hoffmann’s stories (in French translation) and was influenced by literature of the fantastic—particularly by French writers—that was popular in nineteenth-century Europe (Lavagnini 2003, 78). Baudelaire, who commented on, and translated, Poe, was also among Cavafy’s well-known sources of influence during this period—an influence registered in this story too, as Lavagnini and others have noticed.

The intertextual links of Cavafy’s story with literature of the fantastic, with the movements of spiritualism and occultism, as well as with esoterism and religious traditions, have already been explored, most notably by Lavagnini and Diana Haas (1996). Lavagnini links the story with Cavafy’s openness to the irrational and the supernatural in this period, and particularly his endorsement of the possibility of interaction between the spiritual world and material objects (2003, 79–80). Haas locates a series of striking motifs in the story: the motif of the look, the pair of light and darkness, the play between courage and fear, and, finally, the theme of temptation. She sees the latter theme as symptomatic of Cavafy’s preoccupation with religious questions and motifs. According to Haas, the ghost tempts the protagonist with the promise of riches, and Alexander, who is keen on becoming rich, is initially curious as to what the ghost has to offer. Haas sees the protagonist as an initiate who may dare to go beyond the

real world to find out what lies on the other side (1996, 360). Sophie Coavoux also traces in the story an early manifestation of the theme of temptation in Cavafy, particularly the temptation of the flesh. She links the story—along with the essay “Λάμια” / “Lamia” (1892) and the poem “Τρόμος” / “Terror” (1894)—with a period in Cavafy’s life during which he was struggling with the “demons of the temptation of the flesh” and tried to ward them off “by resorting in particular to the Christian faith” (2013, 96).<sup>12</sup> Lavagnini and Haas also situate the story within Cavafy’s early work, tracing connections with other poems, essays, and notes.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular interest is Athanasopoulou’s approach to the story, as it links the story’s preoccupation with the supernatural with experiences and anxieties that pertain to the modern condition, and specifically the subject’s shifting, estranging experience of the modern city—themes that are also central to the ghostly encounter in Sotiropoulos’s novel. In Cavafy’s story, Alexander’s encounter with the ghost in an urban setting, Athanasopoulou argues, is an attempt to come to terms with the modern condition: the modern city, the crowds, the monetization of the economy, the shifting function of looking as an epistemological tool (suggested through the motif of the “stare” in the story), and the mechanization of time through timekeeping devices such as clocks (2003, 663–64).

My reading also starts with the premise that the story’s response to the modern condition is not at odds with its concern with the supernatural and the spectral. On the contrary: modernity is multiply haunted by spiritualism and the supernatural, and ghosts often function as media that give expression to an estranging modern experience—remember how in Sotiropoulos’s novel the ghost is also seen as a “vehicle, the channel that allowed an uncanny presence to reveal itself” (Sotiropoulos 2018, 83). The continued life of ghosts, specters, demons, and deities in a rationalized, secular modernity, albeit in different forms and functions, and the significance of attending to them for a better understanding of European modernity, are already hinted at in the opening words of Alexander’s narration:

“Ἐάν ἤμην εἰς ἄλλην συντροφιά—αἴφνης μεταξύ των λεγομένων  
‘ανεπτυγμένων ἀνθρώπων’—δεν θα ἐξηγούμην, διότι θα με

12. My translation from the French.

13. Haas reads the story together with two other poems and an essay by Cavafy, tracing parallels and structural convergences in all these texts: the poems “Τρόμος” / “Terror” (1894), “Ἰουλιανός ἐν τοῖς μυστηρίοις” / “Julian at the Mysteries” (1896), and Cavafy’s essay “Lamia.” The links between “In Broad Daylight” and “Lamia” are striking and discussed extensively by Haas (1996) and Lavagnini (2003, 84).

περιγελούσαν. Αλλά ημείς ευρισκόμεθα κομμάτι πλέον υψηλά από τους λεγομένους ‘ανεπτυγμένους ανθρώπους,’ δηλαδή η τελεία πνευματική ανάπτυξις μάς έκαμε πάλιν απλούς, αλλά απλούς άνευ αμαθείας. Εκάμαμεν όλον τον γύρον. Όθεν φυσικώς επιστρέψαμεν εις το πρώτον σημείον. Οι άλλοι έμειναν εις τα μισά. Δεν ξεύρουν, ουδέ εικάζουν, πού τελειώνει ο δρόμος.”<sup>14</sup>

“If I were in any other company—particularly among supposedly ‘progressive people’—I would not explain myself, since they would laugh at me. But we find ourselves a bit above the alleged ‘progressives.’ That is to say, our perfect intellectual development has made us simple again, but simple without being ignorant. We have come full circle. Thus we have naturally returned to our starting point. The others remain mid-way. They neither know nor can guess where the road ends.” (2010, 86)

If progress entails disenchantment, rationalization, and the expunging of traces of a spiritual, supernatural or religious ecology, those who are open to such traces in our Enlightened modernity do not represent a regression to a premodern phase, but a “perfect intellectual development”: they possess a conscious simplicity and superior knowledge. Cavafy’s suspicion of progress, under the influence of Baudelaire, among others, is registered in various writings from this period (such as the poem “Κτίσται” / “Builders,” 1891). Although the meaning of the above-quoted passage remains cryptic, the fact that Alexander kicks off his story with these words invites his intradiegetic audience and extradiegetic readers to listen with an open mind. Such an openness would place them in a superior position to the ignorant proponents of progress and rationalization that he disparagingly calls “progressives.”

### c. Cavafy’s Noonday Demon: From Religion to Capitalism and Back

To trace the imbrication of the spectral with modernity in Cavafy’s story, I follow a slightly different thread than other critics have—one that will take us to another kind of demon, connected to the story’s ghost.

Even as the story follows the conventions of the fantastic genre, there is a central element that is odd and out of place, even though it is granted the most

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14. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), photo 3, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>.

prominent place, in the story's title: the ghost's appearance *in broad daylight*. Alexander's friend—an expert on ghosts, magic, and the occult—also singles this out as unusual: “in the History of Ghosts, the presence of such spirits or demons in broad daylight is quite rare” (Cavafy 2010, 92–93). Not only is this uncommon in the ostensible “History of Ghosts,” but it is also very unusual in the history of Cavafy's own poetic conjurations of specters. As we saw in the previous chapter, specters in his poems appear under specific settings, which involve dimly lit rooms, evenings, and liminal zones between light and darkness. What supernatural entity appears in broad daylight?

This enigma that Cavafy implicitly also poses through the story's title leads us to the one demon that has associated his name with daylight: *the noonday demon*. This is a demon with religious origins, exemplifying the temptations of ascetic life, who nevertheless evolved into a figure said to carry the “disease” of modernity. The noonday demon is the demon of *acedia*, which is commonly translated as sloth, even though its meaning is much more complex. *Acedia* comes from the ancient Greek κήδος (*kédos*), which denotes “care,” “concern” or “interest,” and the privative prefix α-, which signifies lack. In Greek it thus suggested an inert state marked by “lack of care or interest” or “a tiredness with life” (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 8; Kuhn 1976). Not much was written about *acedia* in Greek and Roman antiquity. The concept became important in the early patristic tradition, but beyond the Christian context, it survived in modernity in different shapes: in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *acedia* became associated with various concepts and conditions, including *ennui*, *Langeweile*, boredom, depression, melancholy, even burnout.

The first to offer an elaborate doctrine about *acedia* was Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 AD), who belonged to the Early Christian Desert Fathers, a monastic movement of Christians who traveled to the desert beyond Alexandria, determined to lead an ascetic, solitary life of prayer (Nault 2013, 21; Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 8). In this context, *acedia* assumed a moral meaning: it was one of the eight vices Evagrius laid out in his treatise *The Eight Spirits of Wickedness* (*De octo spiritibus malitiae*), and was in fact considered by the Desert Fathers as “the most lethal of the vices” (Agamben 1993, 3) and the “father (or mother) of all other sins” (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 8). As each vice was personified by a different demon, *acedia* was represented by the noonday demon (Nault 2013, 21). The demon, Giorgio Agamben writes, “chose its victims among the *homines religiosi* (religious men), assailing them when the sun reached its highest point over the horizon” (1993, 3). Monk and theologian John Cassian, also in the fourth century, describes *acedia* as a “listlessness” of the desert, personified by the “noonday demon [. . .] mentioned in the ninetieth Psalms,” under



the influence of which a monk becomes “exhausted,” “anxious,” “disengaged and blank,” “confused,” and longs for “far-off and distant monasteries,” finding “[e]verything that lies at hand [. . .] harsh” (Cassian 2000, 219–21; quoted in Leslie 2009, 37). This is how this demon afflicts its victims, according to Cassian:

As soon as this demon begins to obsess the mind of some unfortunate one, it insinuates into him a horror of the place he finds himself in, an impatience with his own cell, and a disdain for the brothers who live with him, who now seem to him careless and vulgar. It makes him inert before every activity that unfolds within the walls of his cell, it prevents him from staying there in peace and attending to his reading; and behold the wretched one begin [*sic*] to complain that he obtains no benefit from conventual life, and he sighs and moans that his spirit will produce no fruit so long as he remains where he is. (Cassian quoted in Agamben 1993, 4)<sup>15</sup>

“[Th]e allegorizing mentality of the church fathers,” Agamben writes, “magisterially fixed the hallucinated psychological constellations of *acedia*” in the figure of the noonday demon, who captured a broad spectrum of symptoms, including confusion of the senses, “somnolent stupor,” “wandering of the mind,” “instability of place and purpose,” “the flight of the will before itself and the restless hastening from fantasy to fantasy,” and the inability to think clearly (Agamben 1993, 5).

Cavafy, as we know, showed keen interest in patristic texts (Dimoula 2019), and particularly in asceticism and the lives of monks in his work<sup>16</sup>—an interest that, as Coavoux notes, could be seen as the “inverted double of the theme of temptation” (2013, 96).<sup>17</sup> In the story at hand, we can recognize many of these symptoms in Alexander’s responses to the ghost’s appearances, which range from anxiety to panic and involve the increasing feeling that he is losing his mind or hallucinating.

The temptation that the story’s ghost poses is of course not of a religious but of a monetary nature: the ghost tempts him with the prospect of riches on retrieving the hidden treasure. In the story, we have moved from a religious to a modern capitalist context. In Cavafy’s time, *acedia* had already shifted to different signifying terrains and found new expression through the notions of *ennui* and *spleen*, which were central to symbolist and decadent poetry. In Baude-

15. From John Cassian’s *De institutis coenobiorum* 10, chap. 2.

16. His poem “Συμεών” / “Simeon” (1917) exemplifies his preoccupation with ascetic life.

17. My translation of Coavoux from the French.

laire's work, particularly, by which Cavafy was influenced at the time, *ennui* became emblematic of a critical vision of modernity marked by decadence and moral exhaustion (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 5). Just as the church fathers personified *acedia* through the noonday demon, Baudelaire's poem "Au lecteur" ("To the Reader"), the prefatory poem to *Les fleurs du mal*, also personified *ennui* as a demon and a monster: "ce monstre délicat" ("delicate," "dainty," or "squeamish" monster). And even though Baudelaire was responding to a very different condition than the one encountered by the church fathers, his monster of *ennui* is also bathed in a religious vocabulary that involves demons, the Devil, and a graphic poetic casting of the main vices and sins of modern people. Modern sinners are plagued by a host of monsters, beasts, and demons who parade in the poem. Among them, the monster of *ennui* poses as the most ugly, wicked, and foul ("Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!"). It fully reveals itself in the last stanza:

C'est l'Ennui!—L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,  
 Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.  
 Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,  
 —Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!  
 (2012, n.pag.)

I speak of Boredom which with ready tears  
 Dreams of hangings as it puffs its pipe.  
 Reader you know this squeamish monster well  
 —hypocrite reader,—my alias,—my twin!  
 (trans. Richard Howard; Baudelaire 1982, 6)

Among the monsters and demons that pursue and disempower modern subjects, *ennui* holds the crown, so much so that Baudelaire's poem can be seen as a "manifesto of boredom, a banner which—implicitly—connects and intertwines the two terms: modernity and boredom" (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 7). As Dalle Pezze and Salzani write, for Baudelaire, the "destructive defeat" in which *ennui* "engulfs the world" is the defeat "of the modern subject, of the yearning for meaningfulness, self-realisation, self-fulfilment, generated by the Enlightenment utopia and fostered by the dreams of Romanticism" (7). Thus, to quote Elisabeth Goodstein, *ennui* constitutes a "synecdoche for the spiritual crisis" of modernity (2005, 233; Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009, 7).

The entwinement of *acedia* and modernity would continue to preoccupy philosophers, artists, and literary authors throughout the twentieth century

and to attract conflicting approaches.<sup>18</sup> Whereas modern psychology, as Agamben notes, turned *acedia* into “a sin against the capitalist work ethic,” “parallel to the bourgeois travesty of sloth as laziness,” laziness in modernity also became positively signified as “the emblem that artists oppose to the capitalist ethic of productivity and usefulness” (5, 9). As an example of the latter trend, Agamben in fact mentions Baudelaire’s poetry, which is pervaded by “the idea of  *paresse* (laziness, idleness) as a cipher of beauty” (9). As a symptom of modernity, *acedia* goes hand in hand with modernizing processes that corroded traditional forms of experience, creating the need for new forms of expression. According to Goodstein, *acedia* as boredom “appears as both cause and effect of this universal process [of modernization]—both as the disaffection with the old that drives the search for change and as the malaise produced by living under a permanent speedup” (2005, 1–2).

How can these travels of the shape-shifting noonday demon be brought to bear on Cavafy’s “In Broad Daylight”? What forms does this demon take in the story, and to what effect? Revisiting the story through the figure of the noonday demon and its connotations in both religious and secular contexts helps us further probe the entanglement of the ghostly with modernity.

As we saw, in the religious context, the noonday demon was a personification and externalization of fears, desires, and thoughts that the subject (the monk) was experiencing. In Cavafy’s story, we may notice how Alexander exhibits symptoms associated with *acedia* even before his encounter with the ghost in broad daylight. His lifestyle and daily routines suggest that he already carried this demon inside him, as it were, before the ghost made its appearance. Alexander leads a life of idleness, filling his days with dinners, parties, socializing with friends, gambling, excursions, social events, and lots of sleep. Even though he admits that he does not have money (“I didn’t have any money at all, but one way or another I managed to get ahead and live well enough”; 2010, 86–87), his days are almost exclusively devoted to leisure rather than work. Retracing Alexander’s steps in the course of the three days during which the encounters with the ghost take place, one cannot miss the narrative’s emphasis on his leisurely lifestyle:

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18. *Acedia* also preoccupied Walter Benjamin. In *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, he traces *acedia* in baroque tragic heroes, including Hamlet: “The irresolution of the prince, in particular, is nothing other than saturnine *acedia*,” he writes (2019, 161). The inability to make decisions marks baroque tragic heroes, often leading them to passively accept their fate. Martin Heidegger developed another theorization of *acedia*. Agamben traces in the patristic version of *acedia* “the same categories that served Heidegger in his celebrated analysis of daily banality and the collapse into the anonymous and inauthentic” that characterizes “our existence within so-called mass society” (1993, 5).

1. His activities on the evening of the ghost's first appearance: "One evening I had gone to Rossini's and after hearing a great deal of nonsense, I decided halfway through to retire and go to bed, since I had to rise early the next day for a trip to Aboukir on which I had been invited" (87).
2. During the excursion the following day: "I set out for the country excursion and enjoyed myself greatly. [. . .] We had an exceptionally good time." On the same evening he makes new plans: "I returned from the celebration quite exhausted and quite late. I had just enough time to change clothes and eat before heading out to join friends where an evening of cards had been planned and where I remained playing until nearly two-thirty past midnight. I won one hundred and fifty francs and returned home exceedingly pleased" (88).
3. The following morning—after the ghost's second appearance—he gets up in order "to attend a wedding" at which "all the best society of the city was in attendance." But before going to the wedding, he takes the time to have breakfast and read: "in order to pass the time, I picked up and read a periodical published in Germany—*Esperos*, I believe" (89).
4. Alexander's only work-related activity takes place after the wedding, but it is recounted in a way that makes it sound more like leisure than work: he goes to Bulkeley Station to visit a house that he was "hoping to rent for a German family from Cairo that was planning to summer in Alexandria" and makes a deal with the landlady. He seems to make a living as some kind of real-estate agent, renting and selling properties.
5. Upon returning home, he has "lunch and coffee," after which he sets out "to visit a friend [. . .], hoping to plan something for the afternoon" (90). On his way to this friend, he encounters the ghost at Petite Place.

Alexander thus leads a fine life of leisure and entertainment despite his poverty. The money he earns comes from minimal effort: gambling at the Casino and occasionally acting as a real-estate agent. Even though he participates in the capitalist economy and the pursuit of money is a central desire for him and his friends, he refuses to subscribe to the kind of capitalist work ethic that would make him a "cog in the machine."

According to one of Cavafy's contemporaries, Max Weber, the spirit of modern capitalism is marked by a new kind of "worldly asceticism" that involves an unwavering commitment to the accumulation of money for its own sake rather than as a means of satisfying people's needs or improving their lives. Weber's well-known essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first pub-

lished in 1904–1905,<sup>19</sup> captures this capitalist spirit as follows: “Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs” (Weber 2005, 18). The asceticism that marks this rationalized capitalist ethic, the roots of which Weber locates in Protestantism, has something unnatural about it. The drive to earn “more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture” (18). When viewed “from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual,” this ethic for Weber appears “absolutely irrational” (Weber 2005, 18; Appadurai 2011, 520). Alexander’s lifestyle suggests a disavowal of this ethic, since his motive for moneymaking is purely eudaemonistic. This applies to the whole group of friends: the tone is set from the beginning of the story, which finds the friends discussing what they would do if they were rich, and particularly “the *independence* that money brings, and the *pleasures* it supplies” (2010, 86, emphasis added). One of the friends, in fact, connects the accumulation of money with the *ceasing* of work: he starts describing “what he wished to do and above all what he would *stop doing*” if he had three million francs (86, emphasis added). In a complete overturning of the ascetic spirit of capitalism, as Weber conceived it, the pursuit of money is here simply a means to an end: worldly pleasures and a carefree mode of living.

What can we make, then, of Alexander’s refusal to accept the ghost’s offer of a shortcut to a great fortune, which would amount to his complete financial independence? To address this question, let us first return to the figure of the noonday demon and his passage from a religious to a secular, capitalist context. That demon, as we saw, afflicted those committed to an ascetic life with the temptation of another life. It presented its victims with the possibility of the *otherwise*, making them question their choice for religious asceticism. For Weber, the spirit of modern capitalism is grounded in a form of worldly asceticism, marked by a “strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life” (Weber 2005, 18) and an affirmation of frugality and caution as necessary virtues in forging a reliable labor force. This attitude is grounded in the religious zeal that Weber traces in Puritanism and Calvinism, projecting “religious behavior into the day-to-day world” (Giddens 2005, xii). This is how Weber describes the passage from religious to secular asceticism:

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19. Weber’s *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* was first published as a two-part article in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Giddens 2005, vii). It was first published in English in 1930.

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition [...]

Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. (2005, 123–24)

Religious asceticism may have receded, but its ghost still haunts capitalist modernity. This ghost played an important role in creating what Weber famously called the “iron cage” of modernity: a bureaucratic, rationalized order that expunges enjoyment (Giddens 2005, xvii). But while for Puritans this attitude was presented as a choice (they “wanted to work in a calling”), Weber writes, “we are forced to do so.” Modern subjects find themselves in an “iron cage” without the choice of an escape (2005, 123).

Viewed against this backdrop, Alexander's rejection of asceticism and the accumulation of money for its own sake unsettles this capitalist spirit (as Weber understood it). If, as I argued in the first section inspired by Sotiropoulos's novel, Alexander is the one who behaves more like a ghost in the story, this reversal of roles supports a reading of *Alexander* as a personification of the noonday demon. Alexander challenges the ascetic capitalist work ethic with the temptation of a hedonistic lifestyle outside of modernity's “iron cage” (Weber 2005, 123), with little money—without, however, renouncing capitalism as such. In his final encounter with the ghost in broad daylight, the ghost raises his hand to show his emerald ring: Alexander interprets this gesture as the ghost's attempt to prove to him that he is the same man who visited him in his dreams, thus inviting him to respond to his calling. But emerald, besides symbolizing wealth and abundance, was also believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits. Could the ghost's raising of the emerald ring thus be seen as his attempt to exorcize this other noonday demon in the shape of Alexander that he is desperately waiting for and hoping to win over to his side?<sup>20</sup>

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20. The story's filmic adaptation by Spetsiotis introduces an element that foregrounds the power of emeralds to ward off spirits and demons. As Alexander is recovering, his friend G.V. gives him a ring with an emerald stone, identical to that of the ghost, and as he puts it in Alexander's fin-

Needless to say, by reading the story alongside Weber's ideas, I am not suggesting that Cavafy is actually responding to Weber. Weber published his essay in 1904–1905, so that would not have been possible. The story, however, responds to the conditions of modernity and capitalism that at the time of its writing—the transitional, turbulent *fin de siècle*—were radically changing people's lives: with technologization, mechanization, industrialization, the radical “makeover” of modern cities, a new work ethic, and new understandings of the modern subject.

Alexander's stance toward the capitalist work ethic would have been met with sympathy, at least by some of Cavafy's contemporaries. A few years before the story was written, Oscar Wilde had envisioned a world without work in his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891). In an idiosyncratic critique of capitalism that advocated a new, healthy individualism with a socialist basis, Wilde imagined a future in which machines would relieve people from labor, leaving them free to develop their creativity. Wilde found “nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour” and considered it “mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure” (1891, 302). Thus, in the utopian future he envisioned, “Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure—which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things,” while “machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work” (303). Insofar as Wilde's critique of capitalism opposes the work ethic of industrial capitalism, his utopia is echoed in Alexander's leisurely and hedonistic lifestyle. Both carry the spirit of aestheticism—it is no coincidence that Wilde identifies his “new individualism” with the “new Hellenism” in his essay's final sentence (319).

Of course, one could also opt to read Alexander's lifestyle in a negative light, taking his idleness and pursuit of enjoyment through meaningless, superficial social contacts as signs of a life devoid of meaning and purpose. Read in this way, Alexander could be said to carry *acedia* as the *disease* of modern man—the disease that Baudelaire (and others) captured through the notion of *ennui*. While such a moralistic reading is possible, the rather upbeat account of Alexander's daily activities—but for the ghost's disruption of them—does not carry much of the melancholy spirit of listlessness and despondency that marks the decadent *ennui*. To argue that Alexander is repressing or cloaking such melancholy feelings and that he is not “truly” content with his superficial life, would

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ger, he tells him: “In older times, they believed that it [emerald] came from Hell and it can protect you from evil spirits” (translation mine). This gesture introduces a twist to the story, as in a certain way it blurs the positions of Alexander and the ghost, considering that in Cavafy's story the ghost has this ring.

be an interpretive assumption that requires psychologizing a fictional character, while the story does not offer textual evidence to support such a reading.

Alexander has endorsed a life of idle pleasure, in which the pursuit of money works to his benefit, and seems happy with his choice. The terms in which he recounts his life in the story are in no way reminiscent of those Baudelaire used to describe the modern carriers of *ennui*. This is not a story of repentance of a modern sinner who regrets his life choices. The final sentence of his narration to his friends confirms his unapologetic endorsement of his lifestyle: “So here, my friends, was the chance I had to become a millionaire—but I didn’t dare. I didn’t dare and I have no regrets” (2010, 93). But if Alexander internalizes the “noonday demon” that challenges modern ascetic capitalism, and does so guilt-free, what kind of tension does his encounter with the ghost stage? What is the ghost’s function in the story, and why does Alexander reject his offer?

#### d. A Little Box . . .

To untangle this question, we need to consider that there are two desiring subjects with different objects of desire in the story. While Alexander desires more money (albeit as a means to a more comfortable life), and is therefore tempted by the treasure the ghost promises, the ghost is after the mysterious iron box that accompanies the treasure. The fulfillment of these desires is an interdependent process: if Alexander accepts the ghost’s “gift,” the iron box will enter into the ghost’s possession. Thus, either both desires will be fulfilled or neither—and the latter is indeed what happens. Notably, the ghost depends on Alexander’s choice, not the other way around. If we associate the story’s ghost, then, with the ghost of those “dead religious beliefs” that Weber traced in modern capitalism, the ghost’s survival depends on Alexander endorsing the commitment to the accumulation of money that the treasure may stand for—a commitment that holds the danger of money becoming an end in itself rather than a means to a better life. The ghost’s gift is not unconditional but based on the expectation of reciprocity, and thus part of an economic transaction that follows the logic of exchange:<sup>21</sup> accepting the gift would automatically mean that the ghost acquires the iron box. If there are strings attached to the ghost’s offer (as Alexander also suspects),<sup>22</sup> those could involve Alexander entering a contract

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21. In that sense, the ghost’s gift is not a gift, if we follow Derrida’s understanding of the gift as something that lies beyond the demand of giving and taking and does not involve self-interest or calculative logic (Derrida 1992, 30).

22. Alexander immediately distrusts the ghost’s motives: “I wondered why he didn’t go himself



whereby his accumulation of wealth would lead not to more independence, but to an entrapment in an iron cage—here, in the shape of the iron box the ghost seeks to possess.<sup>23</sup> Repeated references to iron in the narrative enhance the significance of the box and its material in the story:<sup>24</sup> the ghost gives him a rendezvous at “the café near the blacksmiths” (2010, 88) (“το καφενείον που είναι κοντά στα σιδεράδικα”),<sup>25</sup> and the moment Alexander first sees the ghost in daylight, he describes his reaction through a rather unusual metaphor involving iron: “My nerves had grown so tense that I felt as though I had liquid iron running through me” (91) (“τα νεύρα μου έλαβον τσιανή έντασιν όπου ενόμιζα ότι είχε χυθεί σίδηρος εντός μου”).<sup>26</sup> If the feeling of iron inside him works as a premonition of the danger of being co-opted by the ghost and the “iron trap” of capitalist modernity that the box may allude to, Alexander’s rejection of the ghost’s gift starts to make more sense.

Alexander does not explain why he rejects the gift, but he is explicit about not regretting his choice. On returning to the café and confirming that the man was the same as the ghost of his dreams, he resolutely decides: “My only objective was to distance myself” (2010, 92) (“Ο μόνος σκοπός μου ήτο η απομάκρυνσις”).<sup>27</sup> Alexander’s withdrawal from this exchange deprives the ghost of any power over him. Contrary to decadent depictions of the disempowered modern subject, here Alexander is calling the shots. Alexander may perceive his rejection of the ghost’s offer as lack of courage (“I didn’t dare”; 2010, 93) but this decision allows him to retain his independence and power over the ghost by not becoming part of the transaction the ghost seeks to entangle him in. Read in this way, what seems like an act of cowardice evokes the kind of refusal registered in Cavafy’s poem “Che Fece . . . Il Gran Rifiuto” (1899/1901), even if the grounds of the refusal are different.<sup>28</sup> Alexander’s refusal exposes the ghost’s vulnerability, suggesting that the modern subject can still make a choice

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and take what he wanted, and why he needed my help” (2010, 87). The ghost guesses his suspicion but the explanation he provides is vague and unsatisfactory: “There is a reason which I cannot tell you and which prevents me. There are certain things that even I cannot yet do” (87).

23. It is worth noting that the German term Weber used for what has been famously translated as “iron cage” is “*stahlhartes Gehäuse*,” which can be translated as “shell as hard as steel”: not a cage, then, but a kind of box or container. For the implications of these translations, see Baehr 2001.

24. These references to iron are also pointed out by Athanasopoulou 2003, 662.

25. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), photo 5, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>.

26. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), photo 9, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>.

27. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), photo 11, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>.

28. Spetsiotis’s filmic adaptation of the story (1986) uses the opening line of Cavafy’s “Che fece . . . il gran rifiuto” as the film’s epigraph.

that evades the entrapment in an iron cage. In retrospect, the ghost's offer appears weak, vague, and fishy, presented in a manner reminiscent of present-day phishing emails trying to scam people by offering to give them the fortune of a Nigerian prince or the inheritance of a dying widow, no strings attached: "I absolutely need someone and I choose you, because I have your best interest in mind" (2010, 88). As another *Bartleby*, Alexander "prefers not to."

### e. . . and a Big Box

Just as the ghost is deprived of the object of his desire (the box) and Alexander of the chance to become rich, the reader is deprived of answers to the questions the story raises, including the mysterious contents of the iron box—that "black box" of the story we never come to possess. The reader is also bereft of a proper ending. The imminent arrival of the last train deprives the friends of the time they would otherwise have to respond to the story Alexander has just shared. This is how the story ends:

Εδώ εσταμάτησεν ο Αλέξανδρος. Η πολλή πίστις και η μεγάλη απλότης μεθ' ων έκαμεν την διήγησίν του μας εμπόδισε να την σχολιάσωμεν. Εξ άλλου η ώρα ήτο μεσάνυκτα και 27 λεπτά. Και όπως το τελευταίον τραίνον διά την χώραν ήτο εις τας 12½, ηναγκάσθημεν να τον αποχαιρετήσωμεν και να φύγωμεν βιαστικοί.<sup>29</sup>

Here Alexander stopped. The great assurance and simplicity with which he relayed his narrative prevented us from making any comment. Besides, it was twenty-seven minutes past midnight. And since the last train back to town departed at twelve-thirty, we were obliged to say good night and leave in haste. (2010, 93)

This final image, which finds everyone in a hurry to catch the last train that leaves in three minutes, strikingly contrasts with the abundance of free time in Alexander's life, allowing him to meet friends, stroll, attend social events, read magazines, and sleep. The protracted time the narrator spends ill in bed, recovering and trying to process his encounter with the supernatural (a whole month), also stands in sharp relief to the condensed and sharply measured time

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29. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F04-0005 (188), photo 13, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-111/>.

of the clock that announces the train's impending arrival. The anticipation of the train makes the group disperse (the story's final word is "βιαστικοί" / "in a hurry"), without taking the time to process and reflect on what they have just heard, as they rush to board this other, bigger, moving metal box of modernity. This sudden interruption that leaves the story open, without real conclusion, could be read as the violent intrusion of modernity—with its mechanized time, rationalization, and technologization—into the world of a story that strives to reserve a place for the supernatural or spectral in a rapidly shifting world. Viewed in this way, the announcement of the train's arrival signals the advent of a heteronormative time that comes with certain expectations and experiences: "people feel guilty about leisure, frustrated by waiting, satisfied by punctuality" (Halberstam 2005, 7). But does the figure of the train, another iron box, signal the end of enchantment and haunting in the modern world, rendering the ghost story and its temporal rhythms irrelevant or obsolete?

I don't think this is the case. The figure of the train is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a symbol of modernization, industrialization, and mechanized time. On the other hand, in a story probably completed in 1896,<sup>30</sup> it is inextricably linked with the arrival of another medium—film—that reinserted enchantment, illusion, and spectrality at the heart of modernity and technology. Granted, film as a medium has also been said to mimic "the segmenting and sequencing of time achieved in the era of industrial capitalism" and to partake in various "forms of rationalized timespace," especially in the case of mass cinema (Freeman 2011, xviii). But it was from early on also described as a "haunted or ghostly medium" and a ghost-producing machine (Leeder 2015, 3; Peters 1999, 139). It is perhaps not sheer coincidence that at the time Cavafy's story was probably written, the short documentary film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*) had just been directed and produced by the Lumière brothers (in 1895), and it was first shown to the public in January 1896. The film, which shows a train entering the station of the French town of La Ciotat, is linked with a founding myth of cinema: the story is that the audience, still unfamiliar with the illusion generated by cinema, was so terrified and overwhelmed by the moving image of the train coming at them that they ran to the back of the movie theater. One cannot help but associate the imminent arrival of the train that interrupts our ghost story with the advent of cinema as another ghost-generating medium—"the Kingdom of Shadows" as Maxim Gorky declared it in 1896, after his first

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30. According to Lavagnini, who follows Savidis's suggestion, the story was most likely written in the winter of 1895–1896 (2003, 77).

encounter with the Lumière brothers' films (Leeder 2005). In the year the story was written, 1896, the first short films of the Lumière brothers were actually first shown in Egypt—in the Tousson stock-exchange building in Alexandria on 5 November—making Egypt a pioneer of cinema in the region.<sup>31</sup>

The development of photography, cinema, and, more generally, of communication and media technologies in modernity, did not “exorcize” the supernatural but enhanced its prominence (Leeder 2015, 3). This is the other side of the story of modernity and technologization—one from which ghosts are certainly not expunged. The cinematic ghost of the Lumière brothers' train becomes the carrier of new forms of spectrality and enchantment in modernity. Perhaps this is why the contents of the box in the story remain undisclosed: the way the contents of modernity's black box will take shape in the future is not predetermined, as long as acts of haunting are allowed to continue, albeit by different means, and to exert their workings in the present, interrupting modern capitalism's processes of rationalization.

Let us not forget that the train does not arrive *yet* within the story, leaving modernity's rationalized, heteronormative time indefinitely suspended and challenged by the alternative temporal rhythms by which Alexander and his friends live: beyond the demands of productivity, efficiency, punctuality. By ending with the *waiting* for the train rather than its arrival, the story claims some space for these alternative, queer temporalities within the temporal framework of modernity and industrialization. In doing so, it leaves open “possibilities that can neither be measured nor evaluated by time construed as ‘productive’” (St-Gelais 2017, 122) and that will keep haunting modernity's “iron cage” with alternatives.

#### f. Ghosts of Capitalist Futures

If modernity's black box would remain elusive, capitalism would also prove to be a shape-shifting demon, which would take different forms in the course of the twentieth and up to the twenty-first century—as would the various critical responses to it.

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31. After these first screenings in Alexandria and then Cairo, the Lumière brothers sent cameramen to Egypt to shoot exotic scenery and historic events in the region. The first film shot in Egypt was the documentary *Place des Consuls, à Alexandrie* (1897) by Promio, who was delegated by the Lumière brothers to film buildings and scenes from Alexandria (Alex Cinema a & b, n.d., n.pag.; Abou Chadi 1998). I could not verify whether Cavafy was present at the screening, but it is likely that he was aware of such an important event in the city. I am grateful to Dimitris Papanikolaou for alerting me to the coincidence of the story's writing with the arrival of cinema in Alexandria and its potential significance for our reading of the story.

In Alexander's attitude toward the capitalist work ethic we can easily trace a resistance to the ascetic capitalist spirit, as Weber laid it out. But how do the *future* specters of capitalism—and the critiques they attracted—bear on Cavafy's story and its protagonist? What claims could they make on our reading of the story from the vantage point of the third decade of the twenty-first century: the era of neoliberal finance capitalism, in which the dream of a "post-work" world owing to automation and artificial intelligence is counteracted by the dystopian conditions of the precariat?

Many thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would come to challenge the capitalist work ethic as Weber delineated it, by predicting a future of less or no work and more leisure, even though their appraisal of this scenario would vary widely, ranging from utopia to dystopia. As we saw previously in this chapter, in 1891, Cavafy's contemporary Oscar Wilde had articulated the future prospect of human labor being taken over by machines and people being free to undertake creative pursuits. A few decades later, John Maynard Keynes would offer another utopian projection of a world without work. In the essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," published in 1930,<sup>32</sup> Keynes predicted that if capitalism was managed well and combined with "technical improvements" (2013, 323), humanity's needs would be covered to the extent that "our grandchildren" would merely need to work "three hours a day" (329). Although this gradual liberation from work was a welcome prospect, he also saw in it the danger of humanity suffering from "a general 'nervous breakdown' (327) induced by 'man' not knowing how to use his free time: 'how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well' (328). The answer to this problem would come from those who 'cultivate [. . .] the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life' (328); in other words, those who renounce the obsession with accumulating money and realize 'that avarice is a vice [. . .] and the love of money is detestable' (331).

Critiques of the capitalist work ethic and its implications are also prominent in Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers. An emblem of this critique is Guy Debord's famous wall-writing "Ne travaillez jamais" ("Never work"), painted on a wall on the Rue de Seine in Paris in 1952.<sup>33</sup> As we move to the era of neo-

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32. The essay was first presented as a talk in 1928 and was then published in two instalments in the *Nation and Athenaeum* on 11 and 18 October 1930, in the midst of the Great Depression (Keynes 2013, 321).

33. Debord's slogan would come to capture the spirit of the Situationist International and play a central role in the revolutionary events of May 1968.

liberal capitalism, thinkers would not cease to seek emancipatory possibilities in the stance against work. Harry Cleaver's call for a "struggle against work" that would resist "the endless subordination to work in order to gain space, time and energy to elaborate alternatives" is a case in point (2015, 84). In a neoliberal precarious public sphere marked by "unfulfilling jobs and stagnant wages," "the gospel of work" has been losing valence (Lynskey 2020). In this context, Cleaver's Marxist critique joins other proposals for "a post-work world" from socialist, feminist, and environmentalist perspectives (Lynskey 2020).<sup>34</sup>

Most of these (and other) critiques or projections of a labor-free future, though issued from different perspectives, are in cahoots with the way I read Alexander's stance in Cavafy's story: his rejection of the gift of immense wealth and his choice for a life of leisure that requires money but is not defined by the pursuit of money. Alexander's lifestyle and choices, however, open up to a somewhat different reading if we allow them to be haunted, pre-posterously, by the future specter of finance capitalism, which succeeded the industrial capitalism Weber wrote about.

The passage from industrial to financialized or "rentier capitalism," which became fully established in the 1990s, after the fall of Eastern-bloc communism, entailed a letting-go of previous imperatives of economic justice advanced by classical economics and liberalism. As David Harvey writes, if "Keynes held the 'coupon clippers,' who parasitically lived off dividends and interest, in contempt and looked forward to what he called 'the euthanasia of the rentier' as a necessary condition" for "economic justice" and for avoiding the "periodic crises" of capitalism, "neoliberalization [. . .] has celebrated the role of the rentier, cut taxes on the rich, privileged dividends and speculative gains over wages and salaries and unleashed untold though geographically contained financial crises" (2005, 187). Capitalists in the FIRE-sector (finance, insurance and real estate) simply "extract income in the form of interest, fees and amortization on debts and unpaid bills" without producing anything (Hudson 2015, 49). Casting finance capitalism as a form of parasitism, Michael Hudson describes it in no subtle terms: "A financialized economy becomes a mortuary when the host economy becomes a meal for the financial free luncher that takes interest, fees and other charges without contributing to production" (34). The parasitism of the rentier economy is grounded in "the idea of rent extraction: taking without producing" for the few, while the majority live in debt and precarity (38).

What does this have to do with Cavafy's story and its protagonist? Alex-

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34. Others, such as Daniel Susskind in *A World Without Work* (2020), ponder the implications of automation and artificial intelligence for the future of work, which could turn out to be either utopian or dystopian (Susskind 2020; Lynskey 2020).

ander may be poor, but his ways of making a living contain early traces of the behavior of those—to use Hudson’s terms—parasitical “financial free lunchers” of the future who live off the economy without producing.<sup>35</sup> Despite his limited means, he manages to maintain an apartment with “three well-furnished rooms and [his] own servant, in addition to the services of [his] landlady” (2010, 87), and attends high-society events, such as a wedding “where all the best society of the city was in attendance” (89). He makes money as a *gambler*—playing cards and paying frequent visits to the Casino—and as a *real-estate agent*. In the only reference to his business in the story, we learn that Alexander went to see a house that he “was hoping to rent for a German family from Cairo that was planning to summer in Alexandria” (90). His real-estate business even contains a whiff of scam: even though the house does not prove to be “as spacious as [he] had been told,” he still promises the landlady “that [he] would recommend the house as being suitable” (90). When he runs into a lawyer on his way back, we learn that this lawyer was arranging for him the sale of a small property Alexander owned in Moharrem Bey: “the last lot of a fairly large plot which I had been selling off bit by bit in order to cover some of my living expenses” (90).

His money-making practices are thus solely linked to gambling and real estate, and include small scams and the slicing up of a plot of land, possibly in order to sell it for a higher price. If we add to this the prominent place the Casino occupies in the story<sup>36</sup> or the reference to the Stock Exchange as Alexander and the lawyer walk past it (90), a striking constellation of economy-related references emerges. If the significance of these references is not apparent in the story, it may become more palpable in a pre-posterous reading of the story through the future specter of rentier capitalism. Such a reading requires a *proleptic* gesture, concerned with how the story turns “belatedness into *avant la lettre*” by containing traces of later frameworks or developments before they fully materialize (Freccero 2006, 3): the parasitical practices of rentier capitalists, the gambling habits of stockbrokers, and an economy that runs on credit and debt.

Of course, Alexander does not exactly fit the profile of a wealthy, sleek Wall Street broker, banker, or real-estate agent. He is, after all, poor and probably in debt: he sells his plot of land bit by bit to cover “living expenses” (90). When the selling is completed, he will lose all ties to property, turning from a (small)

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35. I am very grateful to Will Stroebel for suggesting this interpretive route through the prism of today’s finance capitalism.

36. The Casino of Saint Stefano is where the friends get together at the beginning of the story and where Alexander recounts his story with the ghost. Alexander actually “lived at the Casino” during the present of the narration (Cavafy 2010, 86). The Casino is also where he flees after his terrifying encounter with the ghost, before he decides to go to his friend G.V.

landowner to an indebted consumer. But even in this persona he continues to prefigure one of the core mechanisms of finance capitalism today, namely consumer debt, which has turned consumers into commodities, financial products to be speculated, gambled, and traded within the FIRE sector. In neoliberalism, Maurizio Lazzarato writes, “All the designations of the social divisions of labor [. . .] (‘consumer,’ ‘beneficiary,’ ‘worker,’ ‘entrepreneur,’ ‘unemployed,’ ‘tourist,’ etc.) are now invested by the subjective figure of the ‘indebted man,’ which transforms them into indebted consumers, indebted welfare users, and [. . .] indebted citizens” (2012, 38). Alexander’s liminal position in the story may not be fully compatible either with the persona of a cutthroat neoliberal capitalist or with that of a twenty-first-century precarious indebted subject, but he evokes economic practices and patterns that were already there in Cavafy’s time but would become fully fledged in the era of rentier capitalism. The fact that in Alexander’s persona these traces merge with the dandyist lifestyle of an aesthete<sup>37</sup>—in which Wilde and others saw the promise of exiting the capitalist work ethic at the time—is not without significance. The blurring of the lines between aesthetes, rentiers, and indebted consumers points at some of the contradictions of capitalism and most of all its ability to co-opt and absorb potential resistance, as it evolves and fortifies itself.

### g. Haunting and Desire

The reading of the story I proposed remains a surmise that Cavafy’s text will never confirm or deny, as the contents and meaning of the iron box are never revealed. Nevertheless, the text contains several hints that invite us—indeed, tempt us like another noonday demon—to read it allegorically, even though it does not offer us a key to deciphering its allegory, just as it denies us (and the ghost) access to the iron box. The vagueness of the ghost’s motives and his unspecified reasons for choosing Alexander; the strange appearance of the ghost in daylight; the striking emphasis on Alexander’s hedonistic lifestyle; the frequent references to money, transactions, gambling, and the Casino as a key location in the story; the references to iron; the story’s abrupt interruption due to the train’s imminent arrival: all these elements seem to be pregnant with a meaning that they refuse to yield *finally*. In this way, the story resists a rationalized process of deciphering while playing with the reader’s desire for a final

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37. For Cavafy’s sympathetic treatment of dandies and aesthetes in his poetry, see Roilos 2009, 62–64 and Jeffreys 2006. As Faubion notes, Cavafy himself “was a dandy, with a taste for well-cut suits” (2014, 232).



meaning that never arrives—just like the barbarians in Cavafy’s famous poem, written two years later. In the same year Cavafy’s story was probably written, 1896, a similarly futile search for a final meaning was ingeniously staged in Henry James’s novella *The Figure in The Carpet*, a literary detective story that mockingly plays with the obsession of critics and readers to unlock the hidden pattern in an author’s work. However, even though Cavafy’s story remains radically open to different readings, the accumulation of hints such as the above points toward an entanglement of ghosts, modernity, and capitalism, as well as religion, spiritualism, and rationalism. The story puts the reader on a track of disentangling these threads—as I have tried to do—even if the final pattern never reveals itself.

Both the ghost’s little iron box and the big metal box (the train) remain spectral presences that never materialize, perpetuating the reader’s desire for a deferred meaning that never arrives. The story opens up a signifying transaction that it refuses to bring to a halt, just as Alexander refuses the transaction the ghost offers him. If the iron box represents the story’s “black box”—encapsulating the supposed key to its meaning—it is no coincidence that in the story that box does not come into anyone’s possession. Bypassing the cornerstone of capitalism—ownership of property—the box remains an unreachable object of desire that escapes the canceled transaction between Alexander and the ghost. Its value cannot be determined in the terms of the market and is retained as long as the box remains out of reach. The box thereby joins those precious objects in Cavafy’s work that draw their value from being withdrawn from participation in market transactions, just like the precious creations of the jewelry maker in the poem “Του μαγαζιού” / “For the Shop” (1913), which he keeps hidden from his customers.<sup>38</sup> The rejection of the logic of market exchange was already traceable in Cavafy’s early prose poem “Το Σύνταγμα της ηδονής” / “The Pleasure Brigade”—written between 1894 and 1897, roughly in the same period as “In Broad Daylight.” That poem, as Gourgouris notes, showcases the poet’s “repudiation of the language of debt and indebtedness, marketable valuation and exchange.” This repudiation would be multiply dramatized in Cavafy’s later work and would evolve into a “life stance in his poetry, not just erotic but indeed, literally, political” (2017, 139).

“In Broad Daylight” can be seen as a stage of interrupted prospects and unfulfilled desires: the ghost desiring the box; Alexander desiring money (even though he refuses the gift); and the reader desiring meaning or a proper end-

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38. Jeffreys also relates the story’s box to the array of “container metaphors” that populate Cavafy’s writing, including “boxes, chests, drawers” (2015, 37).

ing. Assuming that the fulfillment of desire (the possession of its object) entails desire's death, its perpetuation is a deferral of death and endings: an assurance that haunting will continue and ghosts will return. Alexander's refusal of the ghost's gift has this effect too: it perpetuates his desire for the object (money), even if he rejects the proposed means to that end. The ghost's offered gift is a *pharmakon* in the word's double sense: it will cure his poverty and fulfill his desire for money, but it will also end this desire. His month-long illness after withdrawing from the ghost's offer may thus be seen as the malady of a melancholic struggling to come to terms with the fracture between desire and its lost, unattainable object. In his discussion of the noonday demon of *acedia*, Agamben writes the following about those afflicted by the demon: "in psychological terms the recessus [withdrawal] of the slothful does not betray an eclipse of desire but, rather, the becoming unobtainable of its object: it is the perversion of a will that wants the object, but not the way that leads to it, and which simultaneously desires and bars the path to his or her own desire" (1993, 6). Alexander may withdraw from the ghost's proposed transaction ("the way that leads" to the desired object), but he does not give up on his desire. The "persistence [. . .] of desire in the face of an object that the subject itself has rendered unobtainable" (6) is registered in the opening lines of the story: ten years after his ghostly encounter, in the narrative's "now," Alexander and his friends are still dreaming of what they would do if they had money. The fact that in the story Alexander even lives at the Casino can hardly be a coincidence. He literally remains close to a desired object that keeps slipping away.

Nevertheless, the unattainability of Alexander's desired object need not only signify a loss that condemns him to a (pathologized) melancholic state. Alexander, as I argued, refuses to become part of the "worldly asceticism" of the capitalist work ethic. As an embodiment of the noonday demon that challenges ascetic capitalist modernity, he takes pleasure in his idle lifestyle. He thus embodies an alternative to the bourgeois mentality and normative expectations tied to this capitalist ethic, even though he is certainly not positioned *outside* the capitalist machine.

Alexander's voice would keep haunting Cavafy's subsequent writings in different guises. It would talk to readers about idle young men spending their time gambling at casinos or seeking other forms of entertainment ("Το διπλανό τραπέζι" / "The Next Table"; "Στο θέατρο" / "At the Theatre," "Μέρες του 1908" / "Days of 1908"); about men longing for the pleasures money can buy yet refusing to conform with society's or their families' expectations of (capitalist) success through the accumulation of money, productivity, marriage, and reproduction ("Εν τη οδῶ" / "In the Street"; "Μέσα στα καπηλειά" / "In the

Tavernas”; “Το 25<sup>ο</sup> έτος του βίου του” / “The 25<sup>th</sup> Year of His Life”; “Δύο νέοι 23 έως 24 ετών” / “Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old”; “Ένας νέος, της τέχνης του λόγου—στο 24ο έτος του” / “A Young Poet in His Twenty-Fourth Year”; “Μέρες του 1896” / “Days of 1896”; “Μέρες του 1909, ’10 και ’11” / “Days of 1909, ’10 and ’11”). It would continue to talk about idleness and boredom (“Μονοτονία” / “Monotony”), about returning to the same place (“Στον ίδιο χώρο” / “In the Same Place”; “Η πόλις” / “The City”), or about the noon hours (“Ο ήλιος του απογεύματος” / “The Afternoon Sun”). It would continue to perform refusals (“Che fece . . . il gran rifiuto”), but also to say yes and surrender to the force of desire (“Επήγα” / “I Went”; “Ηλθε για να διαβάσει” / “He Had Come There to Read”). It would continue to see ghosts in the city, stare at them but also be looked at by them (“Θυμήσου, σώμα” / “Body, Remember”; “Στες σκάλες” / “On the Stairs”). And it would continue to hope for the returns of such ghosts. In the years after the arrival of that train in Cavafy’s short story, the poetic subject in many of Cavafy’s writings would keep being a ghost in the perception of others, hiding his homosexual desire from “the light of day,” but also someone who knows how to speak and listen to the ghosts of others.

We can thus view the desired object that never materializes in Cavafy’s story as a desire-producing machine that fuels poetic creation. Art and literature open a space for imagining or experiencing the possibility of a (fictional, momentary) appropriation of the object that cannot be obtained. To use Agamben’s words, “the phantasm generates desire, desire is translated into words, and the word defines a space wherein the appropriation of what could otherwise not be appropriated or enjoyed is possible” (1993, 129). As we saw in the previous chapter, the motif of unfulfilled desires and broken promises in Cavafy’s work carries that creative side: unfulfilled desires haunt the subject and become “transubstantiated” in poetry, just as broken promises often function as conditions for poetic creation (as we saw, for example, in “Understanding”). And so the story’s iron box, another unattainable object with a nagging spectral presence, keeps haunting readers, reminding us that there will always be things that escape appropriation, resist the rational structures of modernity, and make sure we remain haunted. Preserving that whiff of enchantment that specters carry, the box reminds us of the cargo from those ghost ships in Cavafy’s prose poem that passes us by and that we sense without ever touching or owning.<sup>39</sup>

In Sotiropoulos’s *What’s Left of the Night*, with which I started this chapter, “Cavafy’s” experience of haunting in the streets of Paris also sets in motion a process of poetic creation. His experience repeats a scene from the story that he

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39. See chapter 1.

has already written in the novel's "now," but it also propels the poetic rendering of another haunting by a ghost Cavafy would never conjure away: Alexandria. As "Cavafy" senses that the ghost is his alter ego, he realizes that he is not only *haunting* but also *haunted*, and "Suddenly the lines from the poem he had been thinking about [. . .] leaped within him":

The city will follow you. You'll grow old in the same gray  
streets. And through the same neighborhoods you will stray.  
(2018, 83)

In the multiple acts of haunting staged in Cavafy's story and Sotiropoulos's novel, the distribution of power and the distinction between haunted and haunting is just as opaque and hazy as the Parisian atmosphere in the novel. Those who are actively haunting are also vulnerable, haunted by others. No one has full control of these acts of haunting. And through this hazy landscape, the modern city emerges—whether it is Paris or Alexandria—ready to haunt but also to be haunted by new ghosts of modernity, whether they appear in broad daylight or at night, under the city's newly acquired electric illumination.<sup>40</sup>

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40. Electric lighting was first introduced in the streets of European cities between the 1880s and 1890s (Berend 2013, 165), enhancing the spectral qualities of the modern city.

## CHAPTER FOUR



### The Reluctant Ironist

#### *Affect, Spectral Truth, and Irony's Temperature*

"What did you mean by your remark about the antinomian nature of irony?"

—Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (1962, 31)

If the problem of the human act consists in the relation between language and the body, it is because the act is conceived [. . .] as that which problematizes at one and the same time the separation and opposition between the two. The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the "mental" and the domain of the "physical," breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language.

—Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (2002, 65)

#### a. Introduction

Is Cavafy the distanced ironist many critics have held him to be? Does irony in his writing issue from an autonomous, sovereign subject in control of speech, and is this irony distanced and devoid of empathy? How are affects, spectrality, and the body involved in the textual production of irony?

Critics have commonly ascribed irony in Cavafy's poetry—especially in historical poems written after 1911—to a poet-observer's distance from the characters and situations depicted. According to this view, the poet-observer's overview of, and insight into, history, allow him to ironically reflect on a situation and expose the folly or ignorance of other characters. He knows what other characters—victims of tragic irony—are blind to. In her useful discussion of approaches to Cavafy's irony, Katerina Kostiou, for example, refers to the "widely accepted view in criticism that the ironic author is an observer" and is often "able to elevate himself and observe from above, or even to travel in time

without consistency” (2000, 241).<sup>1</sup> This ironic attitude is perceived as “cold,” grounded in aloof intellectualism.<sup>2</sup> Theorizing the critical potential of detachment in Cavafian irony, Yiorgos Veloudis compares (what he sees as) Cavafy’s intentional ironic distancing with the defamiliarization effect in Brecht’s epic theater (1983, 55). He thus approaches Cavafy’s irony as part of an “industrial,” rationalist, modernist aesthetics (56).<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to approaches to Cavafy’s irony as a form of detachment by a sovereign subject in control of language and history, in this chapter I show how irony in Cavafy’s texts can produce, and be produced by, a vulnerable, haunted subject. In chapter 2, I argued that the poetic subject who promises or conjures is far from autonomous and in control of these speech acts and their outcomes. It is a vulnerable subject, unhinged and physically affected by the specters it calls forth. This nonsovereign subject, I show in this chapter, is involved in the ironic performance of Cavafian texts. Irony in Cavafy’s writing often springs from an intimate engagement with the lives of others, as well as from the subject’s undecidability, conflicting desires, and reluctance to offer the final word on any situation. This irony often involves forms of identification with others that combine distance and proximity, or, as Lambropoulos puts it, “a unique combination of affection and skepticism” (2013, 5).<sup>4</sup> For Natalie Melas, this mixture of distance and affection makes up Cavafy’s “queerness,” by which she refers—borrowing E. M. Forster’s well-known phrase—to the “oblique angle” at which the poet stood vis-à-vis established norms and expectations (2013). This “obliqueness,” Melas elaborates, is “an estranging and often intimate immediacy created by the address in his lyrics” that prevents readers from assuming “a safe and future distance from their claims” and trains them “in the arduous pleasures of ‘cerebral emotions’” (2013).<sup>5</sup> From this strange cohabitation of distance and intimacy emerges an ironic sensibility with a *temperature*, accompanied by intense affects.

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1. My translation from the Greek. Kostiou writes this in a footnote in which she comments on an early approach to Cavafy’s irony by G. Vrisimitzakis (1927), who also stresses Cavafy’s “mocking” and “cold” style (Vrisimitzakis in Kostiou 2000, 241). In her recent study on Cavafy, she also refers to *distancing* as a key element in studies of Cavafy’s irony (2022, 34).

2. Vrisimitzakis presented in Kostiou (2000, 241).

3. The irony Veloudis compares to Brecht’s theater is only one of the forms of Cavafian irony that Veloudis discusses (54–55). For other studies of the relation between Cavafy and Brecht see Savidis 1985, 125–33 and Meraklis 1985, 31–49.

4. In an article from 1932 in the magazine *Κύκλος*, reprinted in *Νέα Εστία* in 1963, Alkis Thyrylos already noted that Cavafy’s irony is accompanied by *pity*: “his smile,” he writes, is “very ironic, but without any satirical, futile, remedial intent” and “full of pity” (1963, 1419; my translation from the Greek). Although “pity” does presuppose distance and a superior or condescending attitude toward others, Thyrylos’s observation is an early acknowledgment that Cavafy’s irony is not exclusively grounded in detachment.

5. The phrase “cerebral emotions” is a quote from Cavafy’s self-assessment from 1930 (see “Preface,” note 3). Jeffreys translates this with “intellectually emotional” (Cavafy 2010, 143).

In this chapter, I show how irony in Cavafy's writing can emerge from acts of haunting that involve affective operations: the body haunting the text; formal elements haunting (and thwarting) the speaker's stated intention; repudiated "truths" or positions haunting the chosen ones; and the poet's destructive impulse haunting the controlling impulse, and vice versa. Using "irony" in the singular runs the risk of homogenizing different forms of irony and diverse techniques for ironic effects in Cavafy's writing. My approach neither offers a formula for decoding Cavafian irony as a singular phenomenon, nor does it cover the entire spectrum of irony in Cavafy. The kind of irony I draw attention to invites a recasting of the (ironic) subject in Cavafy as nonsovereign and relational, and is entwined with Cavafy's spectral poetics.

The chapter centers on two prose texts: the diary Cavafy kept from his first trip to Greece in the summer of 1901 and a text from 1903 known as "Philosophical Scrutiny." His diary is a piece of autobiographical writing with hardly any intimate, confessional thoughts. It offers a dry, factual account of the poet's trip, replete with commonplace descriptions. "Philosophical Scrutiny" is a compilation of reflections on poetic creation and on the scrutiny to which Cavafy subjected his poems at the time. Neither of these texts is literary and neither was published by Cavafy: they are both unpolished texts, written in English for personal use. While "Philosophical Scrutiny" has attracted some critical commentary,<sup>6</sup> the diary has hardly received scholarly attention.

Revisiting irony in Cavafy through his prose—and nonliterary prose at that—is an unorthodox route, considering that studies of Cavafian irony have only focused on his poetic texts. Even though Cavafy's irony has been linked to his poetry's antilyrical, prosaic character, he is generally considered to have failed as a prose stylist. Cavafy, Jeffrey argues, "never felt confident about his prose writings" and was not able to create a "poetic prosaics" that could parallel his "prosaic poetics" (2010, 196–97).<sup>7</sup> Taking this failure for granted, critics have refrained from close analytical work on Cavafy's prose. His prose texts are often treated as sources of information on Cavafy's life, psyche, and shifting literary or personal interests, but are rarely considered "in their own right" (198). And even though there have

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6. For some recent discussions of "Philosophical Scrutiny," see Kostiou 2022 and Sophie Coavoux, who traces in it the entanglement of Cavafy's poetic and erotic development (2013, 163–71). James Faubion also discusses this text, focusing on the notion of "truth" it negotiates (2014, 238–40).

7. Most samples of Cavafy's prose belong to his early phases. Between 1891 and 1897 he experimented with journalistic prose and between 1894 and 1897 he wrote a few prose poems, but eventually gave up on prose "as a creative mode of expression" (Jeffrey 2010, 193).

been studies on Cavafy's creative prose, a large part of Cavafy's nonfictional prose remains unexamined.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to the reception of Cavafy's prose as a failed venture to do something he only achieved poetically, I contend that some of Cavafy's prose writings are rhetorically and stylistically highly complex texts that warrant close reading. The two texts under discussion offer surprising entrances into Cavafy's poetics. The ways their form and content are intertwined or undercut one another, and the conflicts and desires their language stages, are revealing for Cavafy's spectral poetics and its relation to irony.

To be sure, my reading does register a certain failure in these texts, which I understand here as a dissonance between what they set out or were expected to do, and what they end up doing. The diary, as I will show, fails to comply with the author's stated intention to provide a purely factual account of his trip. And "Philosophical Scrutiny"—full of contradictions, self-undermining claims, meandering sentences, and fragmentary parts—does not offer any systematic account of Cavafy's poetics and thus fails to live up to the expectations raised by its first, posthumously given, title: "ars poetica" (in Greek "Ποιητική"). As shown in chapter 2, the breach of promises and the instability or failure of conjurations in Cavafy's poems are central to his spectral poetics; so is the kind of "failure" or dissonance I trace in the two prose texts in this chapter. What appears as the truth or intention of the text (or of passages in it) is haunted—that is, contradicted, deconstructed, interrupted—by other "truths" or embodied forms of knowledge that exceed the texts' regulatory operations. Both texts show how Cavafy's ironic sensibility manifests itself in his prose and how this prose does more than just report on Cavafy's life or poetry.

My analysis unpacks a conflict in these texts, which is at the heart of Cavafy's spectral poetics: the simultaneous desire for control and for its relinquishing. The subject's desire to place itself outside language in order to secure its meanings is constantly counteracted by the desire to submit the text and the self to the contingent and the ephemeral, to the haunting of other histories, truths, and embodied forms of thought that challenge the integrated self.

Even though the diary consists mainly of factual information and platitudes, its language, I argue, is haunted by embodied forms of knowledge. The faint textual manifestations of such knowledge create a surplus of meaning, drawing attention to the text's suppressed other: the poet's body. To reckon with these recalcitrant

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8. For just a few examples of studies on Cavafy's creative prose, see Jeffreys (2010; 2015, 33–56), Athanasopoulou (2003), and Lavagnini's notes in her edition of the story "Εἰς τὸ φῶς τῆς ἡμέρας" (1979, 33–59). For his prose poems, see Savidis (1987, 275–91), Roilos (2010, 41–44), Katsigianni (2000), and Gourgouris (2017, 138–39), among others.



textual traces in the diary, I take my cue from queer reading practices. For Freeman, queer reading is marked by a “commitment to overcloseness” that allows us to unpack “affective histories,” “practices of knowing, physical as well as mental,” and “grasps’ of details” through an engagement with the text that is “too close for comfort” (2010, xx–xxi). Such reading practices, Sedgwick writes, involve a “strong formalist investment” in texts and in their ability “to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary,” with special attention to those “sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other” (1993, 3–4). As I turn to overlooked details, my reading of the diary also subscribes to deconstructive practices of “overreading” that push “at the limits of what can be said about the texts,” thus “testing and refining our sensitivity to shards of meaning that risk going unheeded” (Davis 2010, 187). By probing the diary’s self-deconstructive gestures (i.e., the undoing of its stated intention), I follow traces of bodily discomfort that invite a queer, deconstructive, ironic “overreading” of this factual text as it “touches” the poet’s body in ways that are, indeed, “too close for comfort.” Irony emerges here when Cavafy’s detached mode of writing is disrupted (involuntarily perhaps) by textual traces of bodily demands and affective ways of knowing that thwart the writing subject’s controlling impulse. Irony, in other words, takes effect when the text ends up doing something other than what the writer states or intends.

“Philosophical Scrutiny” is a text about control: it sets out to register the practices of scrutiny to which Cavafy subjected his poems in 1903. The aspiration to control and scrutinize by formulating poetic principles, injunctions, or criteria for evaluating poems, however, stumbles upon the text’s incongruities, tentative or wavering claims, and conflicting truths. The text shows how Cavafy’s irony often emerges from a precarious self and from what I term “spectral truths” that can be experienced by (some) readers, without any assurance that their specter will stay active forever.

By advancing an approach to irony through affect and spectrality, I argue that irony in these texts can spring from the desire to inhabit competing truths or attitudes. It can issue from the textual repression of physiological forms of knowledge that threaten to derail a text’s regulatory mechanisms. It can come about when stated facts and positions are haunted by what the subject represses, avoids, or ostensibly rejects. It can be prompted when the subject’s desire to control language is destabilized by embodied forms of knowledge. These processes yield an ironic subject I term *reluctant*.

The reluctant ironist emerging from Cavafy’s texts is haunted: haunted by his continued attraction to the positions or “truths” he avoids or rejects; by the lives and experiences of others that he touches without fully appropriating; and by the demands of wayward, queer bodies—including his own—that

defy his intentions or counteract (normative) linguistic acts. Avoided or repudiated “truths” often become sites of desire that haunt Cavafy’s text, raising the temperature of intellectualist language. What is rejected still exerts force over a subject who is “made” and “unmade” in language through risky identifications with others. Just as a specter finds itself between identity and nonidentity, being and nonbeing, the reluctant ironist is also *dispossessed*: he acknowledges that language is never one’s own, that the self is never fully present in writing, and that one is vulnerable to the truths and lives of others. This ironic subject is able to say “I believe and I do not believe,” “I know and I do not know,” or “I want to be and I want to be (other).” The reluctant ironist is marked concurrently by belief and nonbelief, knowledge and ignorance, self-identity and self-alienation, control and its relinquishing.

Reluctant irony invites physiological forms of knowing that are sidestepped by intellectualist approaches to irony, especially in the rhetorical tradition. If, following Judith Butler, “[i]n speaking, the act that the body is performing is never fully understood,” reluctant irony draws attention to the body as “the blindspot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said” (1997, 11). These affective aspects of the ironic performance take center stage in this chapter, which traces the temperature of Cavafy’s irony through its affective transmissions.

### b. Irony and Affect

In its most basic understanding, irony involves the *substitution* “of the unsaid (called the ‘ironic’ meaning) for its opposite, the said (called the ‘literal’ meaning)” (Hutcheon 1994, 12). In approaching irony through affect, however, I focus on the *contiguity* and *interaction* of the said with the unsaid. Ironic meaning, Hutcheon writes, is “inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, probing irony’s workings is not about establishing the final truth of an utterance or unraveling the ironist’s true intentions. Irony, according to Hutcheon, “undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier: one signified’ and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational, and differential nature of ironic meaning-making” (13).

The game of irony commonly involves an ironist—“the one who intends to set up an ironic relation between the said and the unsaid”—and an “interpreter,”

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9. Burke presented by Hutcheon (1994, 12).

who “attributes” and “interprets” irony (11). Even though I explore irony in relation both to the subject (the “I” of the text) and the reader/interpreter, the kind of irony I delineate does not presuppose an intentionally set up “ironic relation between the said and the unsaid” by an ironist. The writing subject, in other words, is neither external nor unsusceptible to the text’s ironic operations. Irony participates in (re-)constructing a subject who writes and is simultaneously written by the text.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that the irony in the texts under discussion was not intended by Cavafy (it may or may not have been), but that their ironic performance is decoupled from the surmise of such an external intention. Intention is relevant in my analysis insofar as it is manifest in the text, and not as a conjecture about what the author may have intended. Irony, I argue, may emerge from affective operations that compromise the writer’s mastery and control of the text.

The relation of irony to affect has not gone unnoticed by theorists. Contrary to the conventional view of irony as a “mode of intellectual detachment,”<sup>11</sup> there is, Hutcheon argues, an indisputable “affective ‘charge’ to irony” that could “account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distant detachment to passionate engagement)” (1994, 15). Although irony is thought to engage “the intellect rather than the emotions,” it can provoke strong emotional engagement (Hutcheon 1994, 14–15; Walker 1990, 24). Such theorizations of irony’s affective aspects, however, tend to consider emotions as a *product* of irony, taking irony itself as a stable starting point in this process: *first* there is irony, which *then* provokes emotional responses. My inquiry postulates a reverse movement: not from irony to affect, but from affect to irony. Irony, I argue, can spring from a text’s affective transmissions.

The connection between irony and emotions is not missing from discussions of Cavafy’s irony either.<sup>12</sup> Nasos Vayenas has attributed the affective force of Cavafy’s poetry to his use of irony, arguing that his poetry generates emotions through the contrasts that the combined energy of verbal and dramatic irony creates.<sup>13</sup> For Vayenas, sensual experience in Cavafy is produced by a

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10. Here I take my cue from Roland Barthes’s analysis of the writer’s relation to the writing in his essay “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” (1970, 136–44) and from Alexander Nehamas’s account of the formation of the subject in Cavafy’s poetry (1983).

11. Schoentjes presented by Hutcheon (1994, 14).

12. In his parallel reading of Cavafy and T. S. Eliot, George Seferis discussed the inseparability of intellectual thought and feeling or sensation in Cavafy, noting that Cavafy’s thought “feels” (1999, 154) and his poetry “draws emotions from a void” (158).

13. With verbal irony, Vayenas refers to irony’s common definition as conveying meanings or feelings contrasted with the meaning of the uttered words. Dramatic irony is plot-related and generated by situational contrasts that reveal a different reality from what characters thought (1999, 353).

“transformation of thought into feeling.”<sup>14</sup> An emotion or sensation that moves us (“συγκίνησης”) is “condensed in an intellectual expression,” which, upon its contact with the reader, is “decompressed” and drags the reader in, effecting catharsis (1999, 355). Building on Vayenas’s approach, Roderick Beaton also attributes the “emotional impact” of Cavafy’s poetry to irony, and particularly to “the vivid juxtaposition of contradictory emotions, of things seen from contradicting angles, of contradictory ‘visions’” (1981, 518).

Vayenas’s account of the intertwinement of thought and feeling in Cavafy’s irony is very useful, yet my approach rests on a somewhat different premise, to wit, that irony’s production in Cavafy’s writing often proceeds not from thought to feeling, but from affect to thought. Irony is generated when a textual element grasps the reader unexpectedly: this experience signals an affective intensity that may lead to a thought or feeling when processed by the reader. As a reader of Cavafy’s poetry, I am struck by the impact his dry, prosaic poems have on me on a visceral level, even after several readings of the same poem. This experience—a kind of shock effect—may take place before a process of interpretation is consciously set in motion, but is nevertheless inextricable from the kind of thinking his poems trigger. His poems, to put it with Brian Massumi, *shock us to thought*:<sup>15</sup> they cause affective responses that stimulate our intellect and interpretive impulse.

This account of the poems’ impact rests on a notion of affect as distinct from feeling or emotion. Feelings, Teresa Brennan notes, can be defined as “sensations that have found a match in words” (2004, 5). By contrast, affects, following Gilles Deleuze, have no predetermined content, but can be seen as energetic “intensities” or responses “on the surface of the body as it interacts with other entities,” which can produce feelings, emotions, and thoughts.<sup>16</sup> For Deleuze, affects are “critical entities that hover over the body” (Deleuze 1998, 124). They force us “to engage involuntarily” and become a “catalyst for critical inquiry or thought” (van Alphen 2008, 23). These “critical entities,” Elspeth Probyn writes, signal a “combination of thought and body in which a distinction between the two is no longer important” (2010, 80–81).

Seeing affect as a form of thought disrupts the opposition between thought and feeling. This offers another entrance into a well-known conundrum in Cavafy’s poetry: the question of how his poetry’s affective charge issues from

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14. Discussing Seferis’s approach to Cavafy, Vayenas quotes T. S. Eliot here (1999, 352). All quotes from Vayenas are my translations from the Greek.

15. “Shock to thought” refers to the title of a book edited by Brian Massumi: *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari* (2002).

16. Deleuze presented in van Alphen 2008, 23.

prosaic, factual language. If affect triggers thought, we can understand how the critical thinking associated with Cavafy's irony is prompted by the affective charge of his language and its formal elements. My analysis of Cavafy's diary in the following section centers on such formal manifestations of affects—traces of an embodied knowledge that, like a ghost, is and is not there in the text.<sup>17</sup>

### c. "A Diary of Occurrences," But Not Quite

#### i. *The Poet's Disordered Body*

In the summer of 1901, Cavafy made his first trip to Greece, with his brother Alexander. The trip lasted about seven weeks, during which they stayed mostly in Athens and had a "thoroughly urban" holiday, as Robert Liddell describes it in his biography of the poet—taking walks, spending time in cafés and theaters, visiting acquaintances and relatives, and sightseeing (Liddell 1974, 103). Cavafy kept a diary of this trip in English with entries on fifty-one different dates (sometimes with several entries on the same day), spanning from a couple of lines to a couple of pages each. This, as he wrote in the first sentence, was "intended to be a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas." This statement chimes with the expressive mode of his poetry. As many critics have noticed, often Cavafy's poems do not deal with the emotional impact of an event explicitly but register the event in its factuality, through "objective," "rational," and "impersonal" representations that keep the language free from the involvement of the self and minimize sensuousness or lyricism (Nikolareizis 1999, 111, 113).<sup>18</sup> The event by itself creates a framework that triggers a sensation or emotional impact (116–17). Nevertheless, the diary's first sentence is accompanied by a disclaimer:

This is intended to be a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas. It may however become the reverse; it is in the nature of diaries to turn out quite the opposite of what is expected or intended.<sup>19</sup>

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17. In my approach to the affective dimensions of Cavafy's texts, I take my cue from Eugenie Brinkema's proposal for "reading for a formal affectivity" that focuses on the ways "affects inhere in textual and visual forms" (2014, 116). Close reading and formalist analysis enable us to study affects in their manifold particularities rather than treat affect as beyond or outside of language (xv).

18. Hero Hokwerda also discusses the detached tone of many Cavafian poems as a form of "depersonalization" that typifies modernist poetry (2013, 192).

19. Entry on June 13, 1901. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 1, <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-425/>. See also Cavafy 1963b, 259. All quotes from the diary are from the manuscript at the Cavafy archive. When in doubt about the language in the manuscript, I consulted the diary's edition in the complete prose works by Fexis & Papoutsakis (Cavafy 1963b).

By calling the initial statement of intention into question, the second sentence separates this intention from the performativity of language. By doing so, it hints at the force of generic expectations (since diaries do, after all, tend to record impressions and ideas), but also, significantly, at the author's inability to fully control what language does, even when it comes to autobiographical writing. If this "diary of occurrences" ends up defying the writer's intention and conveying more than facts, this parallels the paradox in Cavafy's poetry that I previously delineated: his poetry's ability to trigger emotions and sensations through a factual, detached language.

To be sure, reading a factual diary as an ironic text is not an obvious approach. Yet, the diary's opening sentence sets us on a path of looking precisely for elements that may "reverse" the writer's intention and do "the opposite" of what is "expected or intended." It invites us, in other words, to read the diary against the grain, with an eye to irony, understood here as a contrast between what the text says it is doing and what it ends up doing. By suggesting language's ability to do something else from what it says, the diary's opening can, in fact, be read as a rudimentary description of irony, seen as language that conveys the opposite of what it says. However, contrary to common definitions of irony as the intentional transmission of a meaning opposed to what is stated, Cavafy's opening statement projects the same process as the result of language's *insubordination* to the writer's stated intention. As such, this statement captures the central conflict I trace in Cavafy's writing, between the desire to control language (make language mean what one wants it to mean) and to submit to language's unpredictable workings; to pose a coherent self but also to let language (re)constitute the self in ways that were never "expected or intended."

So how does this text become more than "a diary of occurrences"? How is it haunted by its repressed others—"impressions and ideas," but also visceral sensations, bodily excesses, affects that rub against the factual language and unsettle it? My reading probes such forces that "thaw" the diary's cold recording.

Cavafy's diary has not attracted scholarly attention, since it was read according to the author's intention: as no more than a "diary of occurrences."<sup>20</sup> In his biography of the poet, Liddell summarizes events mentioned in the journal, noting that Cavafy is "of course" "recording 'occurrences' not impressions," and so "it is unfair to quote from this pedestrian journal" (1974, 105).

The few impressions the diary registers are brief, dull, and almost unbearably cliché. For instance, Cavafy finds the island of Delos "pretty to look at" and

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20. Liddell dismisses Cavafy's suggestion that his diary might do more than just register facts, by concluding: "But it did no such thing" (1974, 102).

“the bay most picturesque,”<sup>21</sup> while “the coast opposite Patras” “is picturesque” too.<sup>22</sup> Upon his arrival in Athens, he notes that it is “a very very pretty town” and that Pireaus is “a very nice little place.” Their hotel (Hotel d’ Angleterre) and the food are “excellent” and “the officers and soldiers look all they should be.” The “leading buildings” he sees in Athens—“National Bank, Bank of Athens, Boulê, Theatre, University”—are all “fine” and the same epithet, “fine,” captures his only stated impression from his visit to the Archaeological Museum.<sup>23</sup> For his visit to the Acropolis he uses equally nonspecific superlatives: “the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, the Propylaea, the view of Athens from the Acropolis, the museum of the Acropolis. Sublime, sublime!”<sup>24</sup> When he does not feel like describing what he saw, he writes “I shall not enter into a long description—but I will generally mention that all we saw were things of grace, grandeur, or interest.”<sup>25</sup> This self-ironic comment, which also hints at the banality of (the English) language, has an unmistakably comical effect. The generic epithets convey nothing of the specificity of the places he sees and of the poet’s experience of, or emotional response to, these places. Liddell disparagingly ascribes the banality of the descriptions to Cavafy’s lack of “visual sense” (1974, 104).

Whereas impressions are scarce in the diary, the recording of facts and figures borders on the obsessive. Arrival and departure times are diligently noted and the duration of activities is often recorded down to the minute (e.g., “the passage [from the ship to Delos] lasted 8 minutes,” he writes on June 15).<sup>26</sup> Daily happenings, places he visits, and people he meets are consistently listed, and descriptions of his everyday routes are diligently registered.<sup>27</sup>

The nearly neurotic recording of facts, bereft of any signs of the poet’s affective immersion in his environment, is the formal imprint of a struggle for control through language. For the poet of the Greek diaspora who had never set foot on Greece until then, Athens and other Greek sites he visited would have been measured against his mental image of Greece mediated by his readings, other people’s accounts, and visual material. This mental image, however,

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21. June 15. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 5.

22. July 31. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 55.

23. June 4/17 and 5/18. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 7, 8, 9.

24. 7/20 June. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 10.

25. 8/21 June. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 12.

26. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 4.

27. See, for example, entry on 8/21 July. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 43, 44.

could not have included the experiential dimension of physically being in these places. The generic descriptions convey a sense of restraint by a subject who struggles not to let his surroundings disorient him and disrupt his sense of self or, perhaps, his imagined relation to Greece. The foundering of this attempt, however, is prefigured in the diary's opening sentences. Cavafy's intention to write "a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas" betrays the anxiety of losing control, of allowing language to do more than record facts, of letting the affective charge of encountered things upset the subject's attempt to keep his account civil, rationally regulated. His second sentence—"it may however become the reverse"—prepares us for the breakdown of this attempt by acknowledging the risk of this not happening.<sup>28</sup> In his effort to exorcise this risk, he names and invites it.

If generic epithets suppress affective transmissions, are there textual elements where this blocking out of the sensorial falters? Nowhere is Cavafy's obsession with figures more blatant than in his recording of *temperatures*. He constantly pauses his recounting of daily happenings to interject the temperature at several moments during a day. In a relatively short diary that covers seven weeks, there are thirty-one temperature recordings and many more references to weather conditions, especially the unbearable heat. Twice he feels the need to clarify that the temperature he notes down at a certain moment is the temperature in his room, and not outside. On July 27, one day before leaving Athens, he notes that he suffers from the heat, but seems to suffer even more from the fact that he cannot measure the temperature: "It is very warm. But as I have packed up the thermometer, I can't state any figure."<sup>29</sup>

The preoccupation with the weather already starts during his travel at sea on his way to Athens. "Awful sun, going to Delos. I was afraid of getting a sun-stroke," he writes on June 15.<sup>30</sup> Upon arriving in Athens, the heat and "the absence of shade in the streets" are mentioned as "the only disadvantage."<sup>31</sup> The following examples offer a taste of his preoccupation with the matter:

16 June: "Yesterday afternoon it was very warm. The thermometer in my cabin showed 81, but after sunset it fell to 78; at 10 p.m. it was 77 and this morning at 7 76. By 8:30 it showed 77."

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28. June 13. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 1; Cavafy 1963b, 259.

29. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 51.

30. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 4.

31. June 4/17. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 8.



8/21 June: "Thermometer yesterday was 75 in early morning, towards noon 78, in the evening 75. Today towards noon 76, at 6 p.m. 75."

26/9 July: "Thermometer at 79. It rained towards noon. And again at 4 p.m. Phalerum is not cooler than town. Thermometer showed this morning 78 in both places."<sup>32</sup>

These temperature recordings hint at the immense impact of the heat on Cavafy's body. When he records a "tremendous" heat on the afternoon of July 30 with his thermometer showing 91 degrees, we vicariously feel his relief when on July 31 he writes that "today the weather is much cooler."<sup>33</sup> His pleasant descriptions of the Athenian surroundings are constantly interrupted by the discomfort caused by the heat—his chief source of frustration. His references to the weather and the temperature index a constant fight against meteorological forces he cannot control. Apart from the physical strain, what he cannot deal with is the weather's unpredictability. "What an unstable climate!" he exclaims on July 8, during a rainy day amid the heat of the summer.<sup>34</sup> He almost feels personally betrayed by the heat in Phalerum, because he did not expect this area to be warmer than Athens:

8/21 July: "The thermometer shows this morning 82. I never imagined Phalerum was such a hoax so far as cool weather is concerned. I have noted that up to now every day I go to town I find it either cooler or not warmer than Phalerum."<sup>35</sup>

The word "hoax" almost anthropomorphizes the weather as an agent playing tricks on the poet and messing with his expectations.

The temperature recordings simultaneously actualize and thwart the writer's intention to record facts. Temperatures are of course facts par excellence. Yet the excessiveness and frequency of their recording creates cracks in the diary's factual discourse, allowing the body to haunt the writing. Their repetitiveness opens a linguistic gateway through which "bodily physiological processes"

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32. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 6, 13, and 30, respectively.

33. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 55.

34. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 29.

35. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 44.

that “push for admission to consciousness” may enter (Brennan 2004, 149). The experiential dimension of occurrences and their impact on the body, which the diary’s language represses, returns as the haunting excess of this repression—an excess literalized in the evoked image of the poet’s body sweating under the Athenian sun. If the temperature recordings try to monitor and control these bodily secretions in language, the sweat ends up dripping on the diary, as it were, disrupting the poet’s intention to keep it factual, neat, dry. These recordings become sites of friction between a sovereign, almost disembodied subject position and a vulnerable subject pulled by environmental forces. As a result, they record the text’s failure to fully regulate a disordered body.

If the diary projects a subject trying to insulate itself from its environment, looking from a distance, mapping, and objectively recording, this account is haunted by the alternative narrative of a body in discomfort. The temperatures are not the only formal traces of this discomfort. Cavafy’s struggle with the heat is topped by a recurring feeling of “unwellness” throughout the trip—ranging from light indisposition to severe sickness. This unwellness is in fact the starting condition of his trip, as soon as he leaves Alexandria. The diary’s second paragraph reads:

Yesterday at 5 p.m. I left Alexandria by the Khedivial Company’s s/s “El Kahira.” Alexander left too. I was unwell towards noon, slightly better afterwards, and I felt after a few hours on board much better.<sup>36</sup>

This is the first of several references to bodily indisposition, the nature of which is left unspecified and is usually registered through the vague epithet “unwell,” paralleling the generic epithets for places. Almost all references to his bodily condition are negative. The only positive references are statements of him feeling *better*, which function solely in relation to a previous state of “unwellness.” For example, on 8/21 June, after a walk, he writes: “Afterwards felt unwell and came and remained at the hotel.”<sup>37</sup> On Sunday 24/7 July he mentions that he did not lunch because he “felt unwell.”<sup>38</sup> On 29/12 July he writes again, “Yesterday I was unwell almost the whole day.”<sup>39</sup> Getting slightly more specific, on 4/17 July

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36. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 1. See also Cavafy 1963b, 259.

37. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 11.

38. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 28.

39. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 32.

he notes that he had a headache the day before but still kept an appointment, after which, however, his “headache was worse.”<sup>40</sup> The next day (on 4/17 July) he also “felt ill” and had no lunch.<sup>41</sup> The following day he reports: “Better in health.”<sup>42</sup> Again, on 6/19 July he “[f]elt unwell at 3 p.m.,” but at 7 p.m. he felt “[m]uch better.”<sup>43</sup> This does not last long, as a day later he writes: “Not being very well still, I did not lunch.”<sup>44</sup> The following day, 8/21 July, he makes sure to report his health’s improvement: “Felt much better in health yesterday afternoon and evening; and quite well this morning.”<sup>45</sup> However, on July 26—one day before his departure from Athens—he becomes indisposed again: “I did not feel quite well,” he notes, but he also reports that later the same day he feels “very well” again.<sup>46</sup>

These frequent, brief reports on his health are comparable to the temperature recordings. They, too, are strictly factual, repetitive, and follow a similar formula, recognizable by the use of the adjectives “unwell,” “well,” or “better.” They inform us on Cavafy’s state as though seen from an outsider’s perspective, without offering access to his subjectivity and the psychological or emotional impact of this unwellness.

Although these references seem devoid of any affective charge, their persistent return—just as in the case of the temperatures—and their impersonal tone create a haunting effect. The reader is grasped by a language that, we sense, wants to convey something other than information, yet stubbornly refuses to do so by blocking any empathic identification with the suffering subject. There is just one instance in the diary where the regulated language conveying unwellness is somewhat loosened.<sup>47</sup> On July 10/23, Cavafy writes:

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40. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 39–40.

41. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 40.

42. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 41.

43. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 42.

44. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 42.

45. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 44.

46. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 51.

47. There is another instance in which Cavafy specifies that his unwellness is stomach-related, but with less vivid language: during a stay in Patras, he notes that he “did not dine” because his “stomach was out of order” (Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 54).

towards 8 p.m. I began to feel an oppression on my stomach, and I passed a “nuit blanche” suffering from terrible colics and vomiting all the time. I do not know to what to ascribe this; probably it was due to a glass of water that I drank at Zacharato’s, and that had a stale taste.<sup>48</sup>

Breaking the pattern of imprecise references to discomfort, Cavafy offers here the only graphic (albeit still laconic and factual) representation of unwellness and its impact on him—he writes that he was “suffering.”

References to places in the diary, as we saw, use adjectives that connote the subject’s aesthetic pleasure, but are usually nonspecific and formulaic. The references to heat and unwellness are the only textual traces of a less “touched-up” account of the poet’s experience. The implied evocations of sweat and the explicit reference to vomit, which may stimulate our olfactory sense, are contrasted with the “sanitized” sketches of touristic sites, which only stimulate the visual sense. The former references allow us to imagine Cavafy as a body responding to the Greek environment through involuntary emissions that haunt the diary’s rational construction. Through these emissions, we can relate to his experience of the trip as a spiral of suffering, recovering, then feeling unwell, again and again. “Disordered flesh,” Brennan argues, is often a site of repression or “withheld knowledge” (2004, 155). What kind of knowledge, then, could these emissions of “disordered flesh” yield?

### *ii. Disorientation and the Displacement of Hellenism*

There is an ironic contrast between the poet’s body, vulnerable to environmental conditions and infections as he enters Greece, and the compulsory disinfection process he and other passengers on his ship undergo before reaching the mainland, aimed at blocking the import of exotic diseases. While on board, he recounts the two-day quarantine and disinfection process on the island of Delos—during which their “dirty linen” had to be “purified”—and describes the process as a “farce.”<sup>49</sup> This disinfection process as we move from Africa toward Greece (and Europe),<sup>50</sup> metaphorically mirrored in the diary’s sanitized

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48. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 47.

49. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 3.

50. It is worth noting that in his book on Cavafy and his era, Stratis Tsirkas reverses the common assumption of sanitized Europe versus Africa as a potential agent of contamination by describing how it was the English colonialists and their incompetent administration in Egypt that brought cholera to Egypt (and then to Europe) (1983, 160).

language, ironically contrasts with the poet's body coming "under attack" by its environment throughout the trip, owing to the heat, the food, the water, or poor sanitary conditions in certain places.

The literal and metaphorical oscillation between sanitization and contamination, health and sickness, signals an incompatibility between the poet and the Greek (or, specifically, Athenian) space. It is as if two foreign "bodies"—the city of Athens and the poet—partly reject each other. Cavafy's artificially charming descriptions of places may be overcompensating for this mismatch—a mismatch that finds an unwitting reflection in the image of the poet vomiting, expelling elements he could not digest.

Expelling intimate impressions and emotions from the diary is perhaps one way for the writing "I" to suppress this incompatibility: the "I" usually puts himself in a position of seeing without being seen. But if the diary does not allow us to "see" much of Cavafy, the above incompatibility becomes more palpable through another account of Cavafy in Athens, in which the poet becomes the object of someone else's gaze. During his trip, Cavafy got to meet Gregorios Xenopoulos, novelist, playwright, journalist, and leading figure in the Greek literary scene. Two years later, in 1903, Xenopoulos recorded his impression from that encounter in a seminal article about Cavafy in *Panathinaia* magazine, in which he introduced the poet to the Greek literary scene.<sup>51</sup> He found Cavafy to be "deeply dark, like a native of Egypt" and "with the attire of an elegant Alexandrian, slightly Anglicized" (Xenopoulos 1903, 97).<sup>52</sup> The contradictions in Xenopoulos's description betray his inability to pin down the poet. He found him "most polite and worldly" and with "very delicate manners" even though his speech was "almost pompous and exaggerated," and he contrasted his "*politesse* and *pretentious manners*" with the "modest simplicity and shy naïveté and kindly awkwardness of our men of letters" (97; emphasis in original). The pronoun "our" indicates that in Xenopoulos's eyes Cavafy was an outsider. Sympathetic as it may be, Xenopoulos's description of the poet is exoticizing. The eminent Greek saw Cavafy as a strange alloy of influences and mannerisms foreign to the Athenian literary scene: an Egyptian "native," Anglicized, and Greek but not quite.<sup>53</sup> And if Xenopoulos's description was overall positive, most of his Greek contemporaries received Cavafy as an out-

51. In his diary, Cavafy also gave his impression of Xenopoulos from this first meeting: "A very nice man. He said he admired my poems, and I said I admired his 'contes.' And I sincerely do" (2/15 July). Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photo 37.

52. All quotes from Xenopoulos are my translations from the Greek.

53. Martin McKinsey also reflects on Cavafy's foreignness during the poet's stay in England. To many British people, Cavafy, "for all his superior learning and his European manners," was "at best a Levantine, at worst a 'wog';" in the streets of London or Paris, he was a "civilized barbarian" (2010, 108).

sider and a misfit to a literary establishment ruled by national poet figures such as Kostis Palamas or Angelos Sikelianos.<sup>54</sup>

Cavafy's "complex diasporic positionality" (Halim 2021, 127)<sup>55</sup> and his out-of-placeness vis-à-vis the Greek but also the European literary and cultural scene has often been discussed.<sup>56</sup> Cavafy was the child of a well-off Constantinopolitan family in Alexandria, who in his early youth saw their family fortune disintegrate and ended up working for thirty years as a clerk at the Irrigation Office in Alexandria under the British. As "a trilingual bourgeois déclassé," he was not "subaltern," but he was part of "a colonised cultural elite" (Faubion 2003, 52). He was "sociologically destined," Faubion argues, to hold the position of "the spatial, temporal and geographical kilter [. . .] at which every colonised subject—thus provincialised and objectivised—stands from the colonising metropolis: out of place; out of date; out of sight" (58). In fact, as a member of the Greek diaspora in Alexandria, Cavafy found himself on the periphery of both the British Empire and Greece. His peripheral position is also reflected in Xenopoulos's confused reaction, even though in this case the center of reference was Athens and not London.

In Xenopoulos's description, Cavafy emerges as out of place and out of sync with the Athenian space. Although we can never know for sure whether and how Cavafy experienced this out-of-placeness, we may read his obsessive preoccupation with orientation and mapping, as registered in the diary, as an attempt to mitigate a sense of disorientation and unfamiliarity. Descriptions of his routes are often so detailed that we could draw them on a map. The following passage from 8/21 July 1901, notably written right after his meeting with Xenopoulos, is a case in point:

On leaving him [Xenopoulos] I walked down to the Rue du Pirée and through several of the streets leading out of it, one of which brought me to the Rue Sophocles, from which I reached the Rue du Stade and the Place de la Constitution. I had my hair cut, Οδός Νίκης [*Nikis Street*], and then sat at the Café of the Place de la C.<sup>57</sup>

54. The so-called "eighties generation" in Modern Greek literature generally rejected Cavafy. Apart from a few exceptions, his acceptance by critics would start late in his life and continue mostly after his death. See Vitti 1982, 35–37; Vitti 1978, 295; Dimaras 1968, 455–57.

55. For Halim, Cavafy's diasporic positionality includes "a strand of empathic Egyptote thematics" in his corpus, which challenges an "image of Cavafy from which all things Egyptian and Arab have been airbrushed" (Halim 2021, 126–27; also 2013, 56–119).

56. See for example Chouliaras 1983 on the exilic experience in Cavafy. For an astute reflection on Cavafy's Hellenism, see Kolocotroni 2021, 59–63.

57. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 43–44.

In his July 31 entry he even draws a map of Patras—“a rough (a very rough and incomplete) sketch of some of the streets”—because, he writes, he could not “find a plan of Patras” and was afraid that “none exists.”<sup>58</sup> “The question of orientation,” Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, is “not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’” (2006, 7). Thus, the attempt to find one’s way includes what she calls “homing devices” (9). Such “orientation devices” try to do “the work of inhabitation” by seeking “ways of extending bodies into spaces” (11). Cavafy’s attempt to literally map the urban landscape signals a need to find “homing devices” in surroundings in which he may have felt like a foreign presence. Reconstructing his routes in Athens or sketching a map of Patras would allow him to assume an eagle’s-eye view of the city rather than feel lost or disoriented.

Moments of disorientation, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, concern not only “the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us” (2005, 296). For Ahmed, these are “queer moments” through which a different orientation can come about (2006, 4). Cavafy’s recorded unwellness and nausea, combined with his obsessive need to map and orient himself, suggest perhaps a fight against a disorienting experience in a space that resists his queer presence. If, following Ahmed, “orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails”; in other words, “some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others” (2006, 11). In the case of Cavafy’s diary, this disorientation can be understood as bidirectional: a result of the poet’s own resistance or inability to fully inhabit the (foreign) Greek space and the resistance of that space to his presence, as registered, for example, in Xenopoulos’s exoticizing description.

Cavafy’s out-of-placeness in Athens, nowhere explicit in the diary yet sensed through the text’s affective emissions, chimes with the deterritorialization of Greece in his poetry, where Hellenicity is sought outside of Greece proper. The diary prefigures a poem Cavafy would write in 1914, which exemplifies Cavafy’s centrifugal Hellenism and his rejection of Greece as Hellenism’s center. In “Επίανθοδος από την Ελλάδα” / “Going Back Home from Greece,” two philosophers, who self-identify as Greeks, are sailing away from Greece. The title suggests that their home is not on Greek ground—just like the home of Cavafy, whom we can imagine next to these philosophers sailing back to

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58. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), photos 55–56.

Alexandria after one of his few visits to Greece. The speaker indeed describes “the waters of Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt” they are sailing as “the beloved waters of our home countries” (“νερά της Κύπρου, της Συρίας, και της Αιγύπτου, / αγαπημένα των πατρίδων μας νερά”).<sup>59</sup> But as he proclaims their Greek identity, he does not feel the Greece they are sailing away from encompasses their Greekness:

είμεθα Έλληνες κ' εμείς—τι άλλο είμεθα;—  
αλλά με αγάπες και με συγκινήσεις της Ασίας,  
αλλά με αγάπες και με συγκινήσεις  
που κάποτε ξενίζουν τον Ελληνισμό.<sup>60</sup>

we are Greeks also—what else are we?—  
but with Asiatic affections and feelings,  
affections and feelings  
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

(Trans. Keeley & Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 199)

The speaker feels happier as the distance from Greece grows, which indicates his alienation from the Greek space. This alienation is bidirectional, as the word “ξενίζουν” confirms: their “affections and feelings” are also “alien to Hellenism.” The speaker’s Greekness is dissociated from a geographically delimited Greece. The rest of the poem projects his disavowal of an ethnocentric ideology that strips Hellenism of its Eastern elements. In the concluding verses, he proudly proclaims his deviant, but more inclusive, Hellenism: “We must not be ashamed / of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins; / we should really honor it, take pride in it” (Cavafy 1992, 199) (“Το αίμα της Συρίας και της Αιγύπτου / που ρέει μες στες φλέβες μας να μη ντραπούμε, / να το τιμήσουμε και να το καυχηθούμε.”).<sup>61</sup> As Hala Halim observes, the speaker’s position—“its paradoxical reverence for Hellenism and its exaltation of the blood of Egypt and Syria”—signals a “diasporic ambivalence to ‘origins,’ an in-between condition,” that yields “a paradoxical alchemy of synthesis” (2013, 69).

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59. Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 199. The poem is probably situated in the post-Classical Mediterranean, and the two characters, possibly returning from Athens, live somewhere in the Greek East of the Hellenistic period. For the poem’s historical setting, see Mendelsohn’s comments in Cavafy 2009, 528. For a discussion of the poem, see Clay 1977.

60. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF0001, Item 0047, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0047 (116), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/r8r7-gfx3-t9ye/>

61. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0047 (116), photo 2.



Cavafy's diary may offer fewer indications than the poem's speaker of how the poet experienced his first encounter with Greece. Nevertheless, the diary's text is suggestive of a disoriented body, ill adjusted to its Greek surroundings, and upset by bodily emissions that disrupt the textual adherence to civility, decorum, and what Xenopoulos identified as "very delicate manners."

### *iii. The Poet's Vomit and the (R)jection of Aesthetic Disinterestedness*

The vomit reference, to which I return here, can be seen as a nodal point in the diary. There, Cavafy's account of his trip, which hardly betrays any emotional involvement by the writing subject, turns into something different. Based on the very few impressions of places the diary offers, the poet seems to absorb everything without getting too close. Towns or sites are generically cast as "pretty," "picturesque," "fine," "grand," or "sublime" without any actual descriptions being given. Cavafy's judgements seem modeled after Kant's notion of aesthetic judgement as stemming from the subject's disinterestedness. According to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, judgements of beauty are based on a distanced kind of pleasure that leaves the subject's desire for the object out of consideration. Aesthetic judgement is not "founded on any interest" (Kant 2007, 129) since "interest vitiates the judgement of taste and robs it of its impartiality" (54). Aesthetic experience requires a "psychical distance" of the subject from the object of contemplation, which, in Edward Bullough's words, "is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one's own self" (1994, 461). Aesthetic judgements in Cavafy's diary appear as a caricatural, ironic staging of this dispassionate disinterestedness, amounting (regardless of Cavafy's intentions) to a parody of Kant's aesthetic judgement. In other words, the subject's detachment here produces not just disinterested, but uninteresting aesthetic judgements that preclude the reader's vicarious participation in the poet's trip.

In the face of this detachment, the allusions to negative experiences and discomfort (hellish heat, sweat, unwellness, headaches, vomiting) call attention to the failure of any attempt to conceive the subject of aesthetics as disengaged from the body and its surroundings. The image of vomit is pivotal to this operation of the text. Disgust, Winfried Menninghaus argues, is the "absolute other" of aesthetics: it negatively defines modern aesthetics, which were founded in the eighteenth century "based on prohibition of what is disgusting" (2003, 7). "Disgust," Brinkema adds, "haunts aesthetics; it not only must be disciplined, but it gives shape to the nascent philosophical discipline" (2014, 125). But where does the threatening dimension of disgust lie and how does this dimension manifest itself in the diary's vomit scene?

Kant addresses the threat of disgust to aesthetics in the following terms:

There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic pleasure, hence artistic beauty: namely, the ugliness arousing disgust. For in that strange sensation, resting on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it were pressing us to consume it [*zum Genusse aufdrängen*]. (Kant, quoted in Menninghaus 2003, 104)<sup>62</sup>

Kant's addition to previous approaches to disgust, Menninghaus notes, is that "disgusting entities in themselves 'press us to consume' them." Thus, "the defense-reaction of disgust does not only involve the proximity and presence of something repellent; rather, it is also the correlative of an intruding act of consumption" (104). Menninghaus elaborates this:

only to the extent that there is consumption—sexual, gustatory, olfactory—there can also be disgust: [. . .] in order to experience something as disgusting, it must first have entered—however partially—our sense of smell or taste; it has to be "taken in" or "consumed" before being judged as totally unenjoyable. (104–5)

Here we can locate the threat disgust poses to Kant's aesthetics: because it requires consumption by the subject, disgust "annul[s] the reflecting distance and disinterest of the imagination" (Menninghaus 2003, 105). Disgust, however, does not only preclude the subject's exteriority to the object. It combines proximity with distantiating from the object, since the object is *rejected* and (potentially) ejected. In "the field of disgust" for Kant, "the reality of consumption ('intake') turns into the convulsive rejection of itself" (105). Vomiting concretizes this insight, since, as Ahmed writes, it "involves expelling something that has already been digested, and hence incorporated into the body of the one who feels disgust" (2014, 94).<sup>63</sup>

What is then incorporated and ejected in Cavafy's diary and in the vomit scene? Cavafy's vomiting, of course, did not—certainly not consciously—stem from disgust at something he saw, tasted, or smelled. Nevertheless, imagining the scene may evoke disgust *in the reader*, especially since the vomit reference is starkly contrasted with the diary's sanitized language. The reference

62. Menninghaus's quote from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* follows but also modifies Werner S. Pluhar's translation.

63. Ahmed draws here from Rozin and Fallon (1987, 27).

thereby turns into an affectively charged image that activates the readers' visual, olfactory, and aural senses, shaking them out of the diary's tediously formulaic language. If the diary's language prompts a reading position based on detachment (corresponding to the writing subject's disinterested position), the intake of the vomiting scene into the diary's body "contaminates" this language, pressing the reader to "consume" the diary through affective immersion. But given the combination of proximity (intake) and distanciation (expulsion) accompanying disgust, this consumption is also likely to lead to a (r)ejection. The vomit scene exteriorizes the haunting other of aesthetics in Cavafy's diary: the other as a body immersed in its environment, overcome by pleasure, discomfort, or nausea, incongruous with the polished references to places. The diary's aesthetically pleasing impressions are ejected, as it were, in the vomit scene. The "very very pretty" sites acquire a funny taste or smell, as they run into the text's other, the poet's body, that returns to *reject* the narrative in its own way. Along these lines, no element entering the diary is safe or fully controlled by a sovereign self: it runs the risk of being pushed out through the body's involuntary "revolt."

For Kant, the "model of vomiting" functions literally but also metaphorically, as an "attempt [. . .] to expel an idea that has been offered for consumption" (quoted in Menninghaus 2003, 105). Here, this idea is Cavafy's stated intention to make this "a diary of occurrences, not of impressions and ideas," which functions as a reading guideline, even though strictly speaking Cavafy himself never offered the diary for consumption by readers.<sup>64</sup> His disclaimer—that a diary may also "become the reverse"—is metaphorically performed in the vomit scene, where the reader is invited to "reverse" the initial statement she was called to internalize, expel it, and redirect her attention to the undermining disclaimer: a disclaimer that already contained the infectious agent contaminating the diary's factuality.

Ahmed relates the feeling of being disgusted to a form of dissent "that seeks to challenge 'what is'" while also showing "how dissent cannot be exterior to its object" and "is always implicated in what is being dissented from" (2014, 99). Along these lines, the arousal of disgust in the vomit scene may prompt the reader to challenge the diary's status as merely factual and exchange a distanced with a more immersive reading.

The kind of dissent Ahmed relates to disgust, based on a simultaneous intake of, and critical distance from, an object, also helps us understand the

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64. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F24, Item 0001, photo 1; GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0001 (1650), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-425/>

kind of irony the diary accommodates. The dissent Ahmed describes, it seems to me, is not dependent on the subject's conscious intention but involves an involuntary movement of (critical) distancing. Rejection and critique, after all, cannot easily happen at will when the object is internalized by the subject. The diary's opening statement and its disclaimer perform a kind of irony whereby the text (r)jects a stated truth without the writing subject being fully conscious of, or intending, this rejection, even though it senses that the text might (involuntarily) revolt against this truth.

Reading the diary as an ironic text—that is, a text that at times does the reverse from what the writer intended—makes the reader more alert to affective transmissions that the text's self-censoring operations try to subdue. Irony lies in textual sites that show the incompleteness of this repression: in other words, in sites that allow acts of haunting. “The senses and the informational channels of the flesh,” Brennan writes, “are intelligent, aware, and struggling either to subdue or communicate with a slower, thicker person who calls itself I” (2004, 140). Brennan defines this “slower” I as “the self who knew but did not know it knew,” as opposed to a “faster” self “who presents itself as the knowing subject” (140). The diary's opening sentences present a self who intends to control the narrative yet senses that he cannot fully do so—a self who *knows but does not know that he knows* that the diary's intended content will be haunted by this repression. The sweating implied in the temperature recordings introduces bodily secretions that culminate in the vomiting scene, where this repressed knowledge spills over, as it were, on the diary's pages, demanding to be consumed and dragging the reader from a position of observation to one of affective engagement.

As a result, the text's irony does not emanate from what Brennan calls a “faster” I, a “knowing” and sovereign subject exterior to the writing, but from textual manifestations of a struggle between a faster and a slower “I”—a struggle the opening sentences register and prefigure. Even though I took these sentences as implicit guidelines for the diary's reader, they are first and foremost a self-addressed exchange between the writing subject's “faster” and “slower” selves, given that the diary was a personal document, not intended to be consumed by others (although it was). Irony here is not the outcome of the speaker's intentional “transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented” (Hutcheon 1994, 11), but what flows from the breach of the subject's intention: haunting transmissions of something other than occurrences. The tension between the diary's dry language and these spectral others raises the temperature of Cavafy's irony through the affective charges that facts and figures unexpectedly leak.

#### d. Philosophical Scrutiny

##### i. “Avoid—Without Denying”: The Text’s Ironic Performance

“Philosophical Scrutiny” is the title critics posthumously gave to a text Cavafy wrote in 1903 in English, containing his reflections on poetic creation. The text is a series of thematically linked notes rather than a systematically developed argument. Apart from a postscript dated 25 November 1903, the text is not dated by Cavafy, but is assumed to have been written in the second half of 1903.<sup>65</sup> It was written in shorthand by Cavafy and is full of abbreviated words that make the manuscript convoluted and difficult to read. It was edited and transcribed by Michalis Peridis, Gwyn Williams, and George Savidis, and included in Peridis’s 1963 edition of Cavafy’s *Ανέκδοτα πεζά κείμενα* (Unpublished Prose Works).<sup>66</sup> The manuscript, which comprised sixteen sheets of paper, was divided by Peridis into two parts and titled “Ars Poetica” (in Greek, “Ποιητική”). In the index of his study *Οι Καβαφικές εκδόσεις* (Cavafian publications), Savidis lists this text as “Φιλοσοφικός έλεγχος” (“Philosophical Scrutiny”) in square brackets (1992, 352). This title, from a phrase in the text’s opening sentence, was taken up by subsequent publications of the text.<sup>67</sup>

The text is considered to mark a change of gear in Cavafy’s poetic course, resulting from his decision to revise and repudiate a large part of his earlier poetic production. This new phase he entered in 1903 would climax in 1911, when, according to a common view in criticism, Cavafy found his true poetic voice. John Anton phrases this view as follows:

With the writing of the “Ars Poetica,” Cavafy crossed at the age of forty into his transitional period which ended in 1911. But more significantly it helped him sever most of his ties to the trends and movements of the nineteenth century in order to develop his own original style and become one of the major poets of the twentieth century. (1978, 98)

65. See also Daskalopoulos and Stasinopoulou 2013, 56.

66. Many words in Cavafy’s shorthand remain difficult to interpret and not all critics agree with Peridis’s “reconstruction” of specific words (see for example Savidis 1992, 144). For the sake of readability, I quote from the transcribed version, following Jeffrey’s edition (which, as far as I can tell, follows Peridis’s transcription with small amendments), but also refer to the manuscript when necessary. For the manuscript, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F05, Item 0024; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F05-0024 (1598), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-389/>

67. In his edition of Cavafy’s prose works (2003), Pieris adopts this title in square brackets too. See also the comments on the text’s editions by Dimiroulis in Cavafy 2015b, 722. Dimiroulis’s publication includes both parts of the text, but other publications, such as Pieris’s, only include the first—theoretical—part, omitting the second, which deals with the revision of the poem “Το Πιόνι” / “The Pawn.”

In this widely accepted narrative of the poet's elevation to poetic maturity, 1903 and 1911 are seen as watersheds marking the discarding of past poetic "baggage" and intellectual or literary influences, as when people in an air balloon throw off excess weight to go higher. Although the shifts Cavafy's work underwent after 1903 and especially 1911 are indisputable, this narrative of "teleological evolution," as Jusdanis observed, carries organicist presuppositions: it tends to view literary movements as "self-enclosed organic entities, through which a poet develops in logical patterns of perfectability" (1987, xvii). It is a narrative I partly challenge by revisiting this text.

Many have noted the text's importance for understanding Cavafy's approach to art. Peridis sees it as "Cavafy's most original and creative prose text."<sup>68</sup> Coavoux also stresses the text's significance for understanding Cavafy's poetic and personal (particularly sexual) crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century, and traces in it concerns that would keep reappearing as a "leitmotiv" in his poetry and notes (2013, 164). Nevertheless, the text has not attracted many close textual analyses, even though it is often referenced or briefly discussed to support other arguments or analyses of poems.<sup>69</sup> Critics' reluctance to close-read this text may be related to the difficulty of extracting its propositional content. It lacks a unified argument and even though many parts are interconnected, several passages could be reshuffled without this seriously affecting the structure of the whole. Although the text's first posthumous title was "Ars Poetica," it yields no straightforward principles or instructions on how to write or revise poems. Replete with contradictions, ambiguities, and tentative claims, it is a text that does and undoes, constructs and deconstructs itself. These qualities, I argue, are central ingredients in its ironic performance. Its confounding qualities could account for its unjust reduction by certain critics to inessential remarks—"rambling *obiter dicta* about his literary preferences" as Peter Green disparagingly describes it (2011). One of the few readings of the text in its own right—a 1978 article by John Anton—glosses over the text's inconsistencies in order to cast it as a unified whole and an organic part of Cavafy's oeuvre. Nevertheless, Anton's dizzyingly multiple attempts to categorize the text end up testifying to the text's resistance to classification: "a personal guide and handbook" (85); a "self-addressed poetics" (85); a "conceptual framework" for the poet's revision of his work (98); "a statement of position, an account as well as a program for future revisionary work" (98); "both a procedure and a doctrine, a method for attaining technical precision and a theory of thematic truthfulness" (1978, 100).

68. Peridis in Cavafy 1963a, 28. My translation from the Greek.

69. Roilos, for example, references the text in his discussion of truth and falsity in Cavafy (2010, 172–173) and Faubion in his casting of Cavafy as a figure of minor literature (2003, 46, 63).

Reading “Philosophical Scrutiny” as an ironic text, I find its instructive value in its resistance to propositional messages. Its lessons, if any, reside mainly in what its language does, and particularly in the way it yields “truth” as a spectral phenomenon—or, rather, experience. The spectral interplay the text invites is also, on another level, underlined by the way it was written, with many words in shorthand and many others written out. This gives the visual impression of a text haunted by hidden things, inviting a game of hide-and-seek and a process of “deciphering” to bring to light and hypostatize hidden (parts of) words. This attempt involves guesswork, and the reading of certain words remains uncertain, just as the text’s propositional content remains unstable, as we will see.<sup>70</sup>

Focusing on the text’s performativity, I trace, and experiment with, the ways its incongruous truths haunt each other. Let me start with a fragment: the second half of the text’s second sentence:<sup>71</sup>

[. . .] the poems should be sacrificed, retaining only any verses of such poems as might prove useful later on in the making of new work. (2010, 116)

With the sentence’s first part omitted, this fragment sounds like an injunction calling for the poems’ sacrifice. Even though “later on” and “new work” probably refer to a future phase in Cavafy’s creative course, the sentence could also be read as an instruction to future readers on how to treat Cavafy’s poems, or, more generally, how to approach the past in the present: do not preserve everything; keep only what might prove useful for future work; discard the rest.

In an obvious way, the latter interpretation would be a misreading of Cavafy’s sentence. The sentence is not a call for future readers to disperse and reappropriate bits and pieces of poems. It rather registers Cavafy’s control of his poems and his wish to subject them to harsh scrutiny. Indeed, the omitted first part of this sentence lays out the conditions for the poems’ required “sacrifice”:

Flagrant inconsistencies, illogical possibilities, ridiculous exaggeration should certainly be corrected in the poems, and where the corrections cannot be made the poems should be sacrificed [. . .]. (116)

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70. Notably, Cavafy also talks about guesswork in his text. “Guess work,” he writes, “is not to be avoided” but “must be used cautiously,” and works better if the poet “transforms it into a sort of hypothetical experience” by transporting himself into the world and subjectivity of his characters (Cavafy 2010, 116). Although this refers to *poetic* creation, one is almost tempted to read this as a wink at future readers of this text, who had to use a fair amount of guesswork to decipher the words.

71. There is one sentence before this one, which announces the text: “After the already settled Emendatory Work, a philosophical scrutiny of my poems should be made” (2010, 116)

The repetition of “correct” (as noun and verb) and the affectively charged vocabulary (“flagrant,” “ridiculous”) betray a disdain for incorrect, unfitting, superfluous elements. The desire to rectify improper, irrational, inconsistent elements in poems seems partly at odds with the impulse I traced in the second part of the sentence when I severed it from its context, i.e., the readiness to destroy parts of previous poems and re-use them as fragments in novel constellations or as tools for future creations.

Is the sentence’s intended meaning violated, then, when we “misread” its second part by decontextualizing it? In other words, do we find the sentence’s “truth” only when we quote it in its entirety? Not necessarily. My “misreading” of the sentence’s second part is, for example, consistent with another injunction in the text, a few sentences later:

Also care should be taken not to lose from sight that a state of feeling is true and false, possible and impossible at the same time, or rather by turns. And the poet—who, even when he works the most philosophically, remains an artist—gives one side: which does not mean that he denies the obverse, or even—though perhaps this is stretching the point—that he wishes to imply that the side he treats is the truest, or the one oftener true. (116–17)

This passage clashes with Cavafy’s previous rejection of inconsistencies, irrationalities, and exaggerations. Not only does this passage endorse the coexistence of impossible, contradictory states in poetry and life (something that could qualify as logically inconsistent), but, in a brilliant manifestation of irony, the second sentence implicitly instructs readers not to take the poet’s words at face value as expressions of his intended “truth”: sometimes the poet gives one perspective but also feels for the opposite or even doubts whether the perspective he projects as true is in fact “truer” than other perspectives. The comparative adjective “truest” hints at the plasticity of truth for Cavafy, which manifests itself in degrees. The coexistence of opposites—“true and false, possible and impossible”—can take place concurrently but also “by turns,” thus assuming a temporal dimension. A perspective, belief, or feeling that is true at one moment can later become false.<sup>72</sup> Cavafy will return to this point in other parts of “Philosophical Scrutiny,” as we will see.

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72. Cavafy had already made a comparable point in his essay “Ο Σακεσπύρος περί της ζωής” / “Shakespeare on Life” (1891), in which he stressed the historical contingency of any statement: “I do not have much confidence in the absolute worth of a conclusion. From any given observations I formulate one judgment and someone else another; and it is possible for both to be at once mistaken and correct as regards each person because these observations have been determined by our unique circumstances and idiosyncrasies or happen to conform to them” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 27).



The above passage brings forward some main traits of Cavafy's irony. Deviating from irony's understanding as the intentional transmission of an attitude opposed to the one stated (Hutcheon 1994, 11), Cavafy's irony projects a perspective or "state of feeling" without simply rejecting the opposite. It follows a metonymical rather than metaphorical logic, based on the contiguity of conflicting states or attitudes rather than the substitution of one by the other. What is more, the passage broaches the elusiveness of intention and truth in language, which enables a form of irony decoupled from the speaker's intention. This irony diverges from Wayne Booth's notion of "stable irony." If stable irony is "intended but covert, stable and localized" (1974, 7), allowing a reconstruction of the intended meaning of a literary work, Cavafy's passage suggests that in poetry it is impossible to trace a stable intention that would guarantee the truth either of the stated or of its opposite.<sup>73</sup> Both sides can be true, or one side may be truer or "the truest," but neither the reader nor the author can confidently tell which one it is, since the author does not necessarily "den[y] the obverse" or assert the absolute truth of "the side he treats" (Cavafy 2010, 117). It is impossible, according to this passage, to retrieve the perspective *intended* as true and thus settle a poem's signifying play; searching for a stable truth or intention in poetic utterances may thus be a wild goose chase.

Cavafy, who began "Philosophical Scrutiny" with the imperative to purge his poetry from inconsistencies, irrationalities, and exaggerations, proceeds in his text to make the true, the possible, and the intentional increasingly opaque categories. Elsewhere in the text, the dissociation of poetry's signifying force from the poet's consciousness is posited more explicitly:

Very often the poet's work has but a vague meaning: it is a suggestion: the thoughts are to be enlarged by future generations or by his immediate readers: Plato said that poets utter great meanings without realising them themselves (2010, 117)

Asserting the poet's lack of control over the meanings of his work, Cavafy acknowledges latent meanings and desires in his texts and the role of future readers in activating them.

Which poetic principles does this text put forward, then? Does Cavafy want

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73. For Booth, "stable irony" is covert, because it is "intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface," and stable, because "once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and deconstructions" (1974, 6). Importantly, for Booth only the work's intention can be reconstructed, not the author's.

to purge his work of inconsistencies and improper elements? Does he embrace impossibilities and conflicting truths as an indispensable part of his poetry? The answer to both questions is yes, since opposed states or impulses can be concurrently at work in a poem, even if some are covert or silenced. When read separately, the two parts of the sentence with which I started my reading register such conflicting desires:

- A. “Flagrant inconsistencies, illogical possibilities, ridiculous exaggeration should certainly be corrected in the poems, and where the corrections cannot be made [. . .]” (256)
- B. “[. . .] the poems should be sacrificed, retaining only any verses of such poems as might prove useful later on in the making of new work.”

Part A registers the desire to control, self-censor, purge the improper. In part B, I trace a subtextual impulse to free verses from their context, fragment them, and question the demand for consistency. Cavafy the control freak meets a Cavafy who makes his poetry vulnerable to future uses and “destructive” acts of fragmentation. Elsewhere in the text, the latter impulse becomes more overt, such as in the following passage:

I have said above that the poet always remains an artist. As an artist he should avoid—without denying—the seemingly highest—seemingly, for it is not quite proved that it is the highest—philosophy of the absolute worthlessness of effort and of the inherent contradiction in every human utterance. If he deny it: he must work. If he accept it: he must work still, though with the consciousness of his work being but finally toys,—at best toys capable of being utilised for some worthier or better purpose or toys the handling of which prepares for some worthier or better work. (117)

Upon entering this labyrinthine passage, no Ariadne’s thread helps us exit it by extracting its final message. Its dizzying structure recalls Paul de Man’s casting of irony as “unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness” (1983, 215). In the passage’s second sentence, the insertions between dashes and other relativizing formulations deny or question the proposition of the main sentence (“avoid—*without denying*,” “*seemingly* highest”; emphasis added). As these insertions obstruct the sentence’s semantic transparency, the reference to “the inherent contradiction in every human utterance” sounds like a witty self-referential remark. The manuscript shows that Cavafy inserted some of these

rhetorical “hurdles” later, interrupting the flow of the sentence and muddling its message: the word “seemingly” before “highest” and “seemingly, for” in the parenthetical sentence were added with a pencil.<sup>74</sup>

If these insertions would be omitted, the sentence would read as a self-addressed instruction to avoid fatalism or “the vanity of human things,” as he calls it in the next paragraph (117). This echoes the nineteenth-century French decadent movement, by which Cavafy was influenced, especially in the 1890s.<sup>75</sup> The decadent experiences life as “an inexorable movement towards death,” and art as the only force that “stood some chance of creating meaning out of the pointlessness of everyday existence” (Robinson 1988, 2). Yet Cavafy’s sentence does not simply affirm art’s power in the face of life’s vanity: it performs the “inherent contradiction in every human utterance” by undermining the sentence’s own potential to mean univocally. The sentence projects positions that are “true and false, possible and impossible,” stating something and partly recanting it, or denying and affirming it concurrently (Cavafy 2010, 117). The phrase “avoid without denying” epitomizes Cavafy’s reluctant irony: an irony that avoids one position, suggesting a preference for another, without ignoring the continuing force of the avoided position, which haunts the text.

Cavafy’s embracing of contradictions in this text dovetails with Romantic irony, especially as Friedrich Schlegel conceived it. For Schlegel, irony was the disavowal of “the principle of non-contradiction,”<sup>76</sup> according to which any judgment about an object that includes opposite predications is invalid (Albert 1993, 825; Schlegel 1958 vol. 18, 810).<sup>77</sup> Rather than a substitution of the “literal” with the “‘intended’ meaning,” he saw irony as “the simultaneous presence of two meanings between which it is not possible to decide” (Albert 1993, 826). Schlegel’s irony compels us to think both opposite sides together (828), in their “indissoluble antagonism” (Schlegel 1991, 13; quoted in Albert 1993, 829),<sup>78</sup> without reconciling them; it is, in Schlegel’s words, “the form of a paradox” (1958 vol. 2, 153; Albert 1993, 827). The concurrent presence of mutually contradictory attitudes that defines irony brings it close to Schlegel’s understanding of infinity, which rests precisely on the possible cohabitation of opposed states

74. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, OF CA CA-SF01-S02-F05-0024 (1598), photo 4.

75. See also Coavoux 2013, 169.

76. Schlegel’s dismissal of this principle was a critique of Kant.

77. Kostiou also briefly notes the link of Cavafy’s broaching of contradictions in this text with Romantic irony (2022, 22).

78. Schlegel uses this phrase in Fragment 108 from his “Critical Fragments” (originally published in *Lyceum*, 1797) to refer to Socratic irony, which “contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication” (1991, 13).

(827). The interplay of opposites that irony invites, however, does not yield a synthesis. In a delineation of Schlegel's irony which is strongly reminiscent of Cavafy's statements on, and textual performance of, contradictions in "Philosophical Scrutiny," Georgia Albert writes:

the reading of the ironic text becomes a sequence of incomplete interpretations in which first the one, then the other 'side' is privileged, and must constantly attempt to find a way to bring the dialectical back-and-forth oscillation to its final goal, to a synthesis of the two poles and thereby to rest. This final synthesis, however, is regarded by Schlegel as unreachable. (1993, 829)

Contrary to a synthesis, which would have brought the text's ironic play and signifying force to a halt, the impossibility of reconciling contradictions, which defines this version of irony, ensures that the text's signifying force continues *ad infinitum* (829). Thus, while literary works can only present limited perspectives, their task for Schlegel is "to open up the possibility of the infinity of other perspectives" (Speight 2007).<sup>79</sup>

Cavafy's "Philosophical Scrutiny" does not only make comparable claims about contradictions but also stages them textually. It both states and performs the desire to inhabit opposed truths or positions simultaneously or live conflicting narratives of one's life. I call it "desire" because it is never fully realized in Cavafy's writings. Cavafy's poetic universe, replete with conflicted characters who break promises, betray stated intentions, follow one path and wish they had followed another, is to a large extent produced by this desire.

In the following sentences from the above-quoted passage, Cavafy hypothetically follows the implications of two opposed positions:

If he deny it [i.e., the vanity of things]: he must work. If he accept it: he must work still, though with the consciousness of his work being but finally toys—at best toys capable of being utilised for some worthier or better purpose or toys the handling of which prepares for some worthier or better work. (2010, 117)

The identification of the poet's work with "toys" evokes the partial sentence with which I started my reading:

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79. For how this openness materializes in Cavafy's work, see, for example, Dracopoulos 2013.

the poems should be sacrificed, retaining only any verses of such poems as might prove useful later on in the making of new work. (116)

The reference to “toys” replaces the violent vocabulary of sacrifice with that of play. The verses retained from the poems’ sacrifice can become toys in the hands of the poet or others—tools for other, better work. The vocabulary of utility in relation to poetry (casting verses as “useful” or “toys capable of being utilised for some [...] purpose,” 117) is renounced in the next paragraph, where Cavafy dissociates poetry from utility and evokes the principles of aestheticism. People’s work, he writes, “can be divided into two categories, works of immediate utility and works of beauty. The poet does the latter” (117). Of course, the references to utility pertain to what is useful for poetic creation—not to practical use. In that sense, they do not break with aestheticism. “Art and aestheticism,” as Roilos points out, “are inherently anti-economic categories in Cavafy’s poetics, since they go hand in hand with nonproductive (self-)expenditure” (2010, 195). Yet the text first taps into the vocabulary of utility for poetry before dismissing it in the next paragraph. Another principle of Cavafy’s poetics—that of pure poetry, uncontaminated by the market—is shown to be haunted by the conflicting desire to treat (fragments of) poems as useful tools or toys for other purposes.

## *ii. Poetry’s Spectral Truth*

Critics have traced the influence of Edgar Allan Poe in Cavafy’s ideas in this text. “The marked importance of beauty,” Jeffreys writes, “along with the acknowledgement of vanity in conflict with the dutiful effort to compose align Cavafy with Poe, whose essay ‘The Poetic Principle’ resonates throughout Cavafy’s text” (Jeffreys in Cavafy 2010, 159). Cavafy’s distinction between works of utility and beauty, with poetry belonging to the latter, echoes Poe’s rejection of any form of utility or interest in poetry in “The Poetic Principle.” Poe’s repudiation of didacticism also chimes with Cavafy’s text. The two texts, however, exhibit more differences than convergences. These differences, I argue, underscore the radical character of Cavafy’s text, especially concerning his conception of truth and poetry’s relation to time, both of which are tied, as I will show, to his spectral poetics.

Poe may shun didacticism in poetry, but his essay is expressly programmatic and its principles are easy to extract. The text constructs a series of oppositions that capture the poetic in its absolute difference from other realms and concepts. The only “province of the poem” is Beauty, and the “Poetic Senti-

ment” flows “from the contemplation of the Beautiful” (1875, 205). Poetry’s relation with the “Intellect” (the realm of “Truth”) and with “Conscience” (the realm of “Duty”) is secondary and incidental (204–5). The “Poetic Sentiment” is thus “easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the Heart” (205). Following this compartmentalization, Truth has no business in the poetic: “radical and chasml differences” separate “the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation” (202). This is the basis for Poe’s rejection of didacticism: attacking those who see “Truth” as the “ultimate object of all Poetry” and judge poems by the “moral” they inculcate, he posits that “there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem [. . .] written solely for the poem’s sake” (202). The following passage seals poetry’s divorce from Truth:

The demands of Truth are *severe*. [. . .] In enforcing a truth we need *severity* rather than efflorescence of language. We must be *simple, precise, terse*. We must be *cool, calm, unimpassioned*. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. [. . .] He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the *obstinate oils* and waters of Poetry and Truth. (202; emphasis added)

Severity, precision, simplicity, terseness, calmness, disinterestedness form Truth’s semantic complex. Its incongruence with Poetry is succinctly captured through the metaphor of “obstinate oils.” Passion, Duty, or Truth may occasionally find their way into a poem, but are not essential to the poetic and must be made subservient to Beauty.

“Philosophical Scrutiny” projects a radically different conception of truth. Truth is here indispensable for poetic creation but has nothing to do with Poe’s understanding of truth as a universal moral we can extract from a poem. Written with a small letter, truth for Cavafy is a porous phenomenon or, rather, experience. It can lie in a sincere, short-lived impression or sentiment that gives rise to a poetic event. True poetry need not spring from the poet’s personal experiences: “If one ought to wait for old age to risk a word about it, [. . .] if one ought to experience every sorrow or perturbed state of mind in order to speak of it—one would find that what is left to write of is very little” (2010, 116). Poetic creation involves “guess work,” which the poet “transforms” “into a sort of hypothetical experience,” allowing him to “transport himself into the midst of the circumstances” and “create an experience” but also—albeit with

“more difficulty”—do the same “in matters of feeling” (116). Thus, a poem’s truth often stems from the poet’s vicarious experience of the lives of others. Later in the text, Cavafy adds:

the poems one writes, though not true to one’s actual life, are true to other lives (“Το πρώτο φως των” [“Their First Light”], “Τείχη” [“Walls”], “Παράθυρα” [“Windows”], “Θερμοπύλαι” [“Thermopylae”])—not generally of course, but specially—and the reader to whose life the poem fits admires and feels the poem. (118)

Contrary to Poe’s Truth, Cavafy’s truth is not generally applicable.<sup>80</sup> A poem that is true for one individual need not be true for another. In a note from July 7, 1905, Cavafy casts the limited applicability of his poetry’s truth through the metaphor of a suit that only fits a few people: “Like a good tailor who fashions a suit that fits one man (or even two) resplendently; and an overcoat that might suit two or three—thus for me might my poems be made ‘to fit,’ in one case (or perhaps in two or three).” So, the note continues, “If my poems, do not fit in a general sense, then they fit in a particular sense” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 133).<sup>81</sup> This is no “one size fits all” truth. As Faubion also remarks in his discussion of Cavafy’s text, the poet’s truths are transient and “[t]heir validity rests entirely in their applicability” (2014, 239). Neither is the poet’s truth, however, a fully subjective experience. Cavafy is not collapsing the notion of truth altogether by suggesting that there are only relative perspectives on reality. As it springs from the self’s engagement with others, truth is intersubjective and relational, because it can be shared by *some* others: the hypothetical others the poet identifies with while creating the poem, as well as readers whose lives a poem touches. Cavafy emerges here as the poet of a collective, but a collective that he refuses to delimit by specifying the kind of readers his poetry speaks to, or will speak to. These readers belong to a community-to-come, which his poetry may help shape.

If (poetic) truth is generated by the poet’s transference to the experience

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80. Kostiou’s recent study on Cavafy also discusses the ephemerality and partiality of truth in Cavafy, as it emerges from his “Philosophical Scrutiny” and other notes and essays, and comments on the notions of sincerity and truth in Cavafy’s art (2022, 17–26). Beaton also notes how Cavafy’s irony becomes a “subtle balancing” between contrasted truths and attitudes rather than a destruction of one for the sake of another: “Cavafy used irony, not to debunk certain attitudes and characters, nor in support of convictions or a world-view of his own, but in order to create an autonomous dramatic world” with “its paradoxes and its relativities” as well as “its refusal of an ultimate, profound truth” (1981, 527–28).

81. For the Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F09, Item 0006; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F09–0006 (198), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-u-23/>

of others, this process involves the sharing of feeling but also—contrary to Poe’s separation of these two realms—“intellectual insight” (Cavafy 2010, 118). Cavafy continues:

Moreover—though this is a delicate matter—is not such study of others and penetration of others part of what I call “personal experience”? Does not this penetration—successful or not—influence the individual thought and create states of mind? (118)

If writing poetry is a mode of relating to others, what kind of relationality does Cavafy propose and why does he designate this as a “delicate matter”? If entering the lives of others becomes part of “personal experience,” this process decenters the self, casting it as vulnerable and relational. This form of identification can be grasped through what Kaja Silverman calls “heteropathic identification,” as distinguished from “idiopathic identification.” The latter absorbs the other into the self, based on the projection of a likeness, resulting in the other becoming (like) the self. This is a “murderously assimilatory identification through which the self creates and fortifies itself” by repressing or annihilating the other’s difference (Silverman 1996, 23).<sup>82</sup> The subject who “absorbs” the other refuses to threaten its own coherent ego through “alien identifications” that could jeopardize its unity (25). In heteropathic identification, on the other hand, the self partly surrenders to the other: it “takes the risk of—temporarily and partially—‘becoming’ (like) the other.”<sup>83</sup> The other’s difference is not assimilated, but becomes part of the self, causing the ego to waver. This, Ernst van Alphen remarks, “is both exciting and risky, enriching and dangerous, but at any rate, affectively powerful” (2008, 28). This is perhaps why for Cavafy making others part of one’s “personal experience” is a “delicate matter” (Cavafy 2010, 118). The self runs the risk of being changed and undone by this encounter with others, even if the encounter is imaginary. This risk is also implied in the parenthetical insertion “successful or not”: the success of this process would not be questionable in the case of idiopathic identification, where the self is safe, sovereign, in control.

In a note from 1902, Cavafy describes this form of identification as “τεχνητήν ειλικρίνειαν” (“artificial sincerity”). Referring to a poem in which he praises the countryside although he has never visited it, he wonders whether this amounts to “insincerity,” but then asks: “isn’t it when art lies the most that

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82. Silverman draws from German philosopher Max Scheler’s work *The Nature of Sympathy* (1923).

83. Silverman presented in van Alphen 2008, 28.



it creates the most?” and concludes: “Did I not imagine in such a manner that it was almost as though I were living in the countryside?” (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 129).<sup>84</sup> The concept of “artificial sincerity” that he coins to describe this process suggests the combination of proximity and distance, appropriation and expropriation, identity and difference in this identificatory process.

Cavafy’s reflections on this form of identification invite us to rethink irony in his poetry not necessarily as abstinence from identificatory processes (i.e., the distance of a detached ironist), but as flowing from heteropathic identifications. The subject in much of Cavafy’s poetry does not hold a stable truth that grants it the security of a universal perspective. If the study of others becomes part of “personal experience” (2010, 118) through which the self may change, the self can “feel” the truth of others: even when this truth is *avoided*, it is not *denied* (117). And so the avoided truth assumes a spectral life, haunting the self.

The subject in Cavafy’s writing, Nehamas has argued, does not constitute a coherent self: especially in Cavafy’s early poetry, the subject is often “grammatically and thematically” passive, fragmented, disintegrating (1983, 301). Nehamas shows how the subject in Cavafy’s poetry gradually becomes an active, creative agent through writing. Active and creative, however, do not equal sovereign. For Nehamas this subject is neither an “absolute master” (310) nor external to the writing: it is “constituted in writing” (319).<sup>85</sup> The language of “Philosophical Scrutiny”—its self-questioning, its precarious positions—also projects a subject who writes while being “written” by the text. Like the “I” in Cavafy’s poem “Ἐκόμισα εἰς τὴν Τέχνην” / “I’ve brought to Art,” this subject actively brings “to Art desires and sensations” but also “submit[s] to Art,” letting itself be changed by the encounters poetry effects (trans. Keeley and Sherard; Cavafy 1992, 116). This entails a form of dispossession, a condition of not “owning” oneself, which in “Philosophical Scrutiny” becomes a prerequisite for poetic truth.<sup>86</sup>

Poetic truth in “Philosophical Scrutiny” also has a temporal dimension that sets it further apart from Poe’s notion of the poetic. Poe locates the essence of the poetic in its ability to partake in the eternal and counter death and tran-

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84. For the Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F09, Item 0001; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F09-0001 (196), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-u-21/>

85. In Cavafy, Nehamas concludes, “[t]he opposition between self and other, inside and outside, past and present, real and imaginary, disappears not because one of them has absorbed the other but because [. . .] they no longer can, or need, be told apart” (1983, 319). My reading of the relation of self and other in Cavafy based on heteropathic identification is aligned with Nehamas’s point.

86. In my discussion of the vulnerable self in Cavafy, I take my cue from Judith Butler, who in *Precarious Life* (2004) and other writings proposes vulnerability as a condition for reimagining the self beyond and against the Western tradition of the sovereign, autonomous subject.

science. Poetry satisfies people's "thirst" for "immortality": it is a "consequence and an indication" of man's "perennial existence" (Poe 1875, 203). It tries to "reach the Beauty above," and offers "brief and indeterminate glimpses" of the divine, the eternal, the "the glories beyond the grave" (203). By contrast, for Cavafy, poetry's truth is mortal: subject to death, transience, and temporal change. Poetic truth can be sparked by a "sincere" impression or feeling that may later dissipate or feel foreign and fake to the individual who experienced it (the poet), but may be revived by touching someone else—a reader. One's poems, Cavafy writes, "though not true to one's actual life, are true to other lives" (2010, 118):

If a thought has been really true for a day, its becoming false the next day does not deprive it of its claim to verity. It may have been only a passing or a short lived truth, but if intelligent and serious it is worthy to be received, both artistically and philosophically. (119)

This passage echoes a note by Cavafy from 1902: "Do Truth and Falsehood really exist? Or is it only the New and the Old that exist—with Falsehood merely being the old age of Truth?" (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 130).<sup>87</sup> The note asserts truth's contingent nature: truth is a value people live by because it works in a historical, social, or personal conjuncture. When it ceases to perform its function, a new truth takes its place. The note has unmistakable Nietzschean overtones. For Nietzsche, Nehamas writes, "only degrees and subtleties of gradation' separate truth from falsehood" (1985, 45), and concepts deemed true or real today may be perceived as "outgrown toys" by future generations (58). Yet the evanescent, shorted-lived character of truth makes it all the more potent for Cavafy, able to touch others. Permanence and eternal life are rejected as artistically invalidating:

So is every sincerity to be laid aside, on account of the short duration of the feeling which prompts its expression? But then art is at a standstill; and speech is condemned—because what is always lasting? And things cannot and should not be lasting, for man would then be "all of a piece" and stagnate in sentimental inactivity, in want of change. (Cavafy 2010, 118–19)

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87. For the Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F11, Item 0005; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F11-0005 (192), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-114/>. For a discussion of the historically contingent understanding of truth in Cavafy, see also Chryssanthopoulos 2013, 667–68.

When speech and art remain invulnerable to time, they are “at a standstill.” The last sentence in this passage once more dismisses a coherent self (“all of a piece”). The safety of a uniform, stable ego is boring, artistically irrelevant.

Cavafy offers examples to illustrate how the evanescence of truth works in poetry. One of them is found in a postscript to the text dated “25 November 1903,” where the tone gets more confessional, ending as follows:

If even for one day, or one hour I felt like the man within “Walls,” or like the man of “Windows” the poem is based on a truth, a short-lived truth, but which, for the very reason of its having once existed, may repeat itself in another life, perhaps with as short duration, perhaps with longer. If “Thermopylae” fits but one life, it is true; and it may, indeed the probabilities are that it must. (119)

Truth, following this passage, may be mortal, but not quite. When the truth on which a poem rests—an impression, state of mind, feeling—extinguishes for the individual, poetry can resurrect it momentarily by repetition, either in the poet’s life or in the lives of others. Cavafy proposes poetic truth as *spectral*: neither immortal, nor entirely mortal. Poetry carries the specter of a short-lived truth, which is occasionally conjured, allowing the poet or some readers to sense its presence and be affected by it. Just as repetition marks a specter’s *modus operandi*, truth in poetry “may repeat itself in another life,” Cavafy writes, but there is no guarantee that it will (2010, 119). Truth thereby becomes an unpredictable *revenant*: we cannot know when, how, and to whom it will reappear. In his final sentence, as if to reassure himself, Cavafy raises the probability of that happening: “Thermopylae,” he notes, “may, indeed the probabilities are that it must” fit one life. Yet, there is no certainty that it will.

If poetry’s truth is spectral, the poet lacks control over his poems’ fate. Cavafy broaches this topic in another paragraph in “Philosophical Scrutiny,” in which the dissociation of poetry’s life from that of its creator becomes a condition for poetry’s afterlife. Despite “the shortness of human life,”

The work is not vain when we leave the individual and we consider the result. Here there is no death, at least no sure death: the result may perhaps be immense; there is no shortness of life, but an immense duration of it. So the absolute vanity disappears. (2010, 117)

His confidence in the afterlife of poems is nuanced by the disclaimer “at least, no sure death.” Poems, too, face death if they fail to address future generations

in ways that conjure their truth anew: some keep haunting readers while others may not be granted an afterlife. Walter Benjamin's words from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* resonate in Cavafy's lines pre-posterously, from the future: "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (1999, 247).

### *iii. The Control Freak and the Destructive Character*

Acknowledging the poet's limited control and the poems' relative autonomy, Cavafy releases his poems toward the future, allowing them to be "utilised" as "toys" that "might prove useful later" (Cavafy 2010, 117) or hoping that their "truth" may "repeat itself in another life" (119). The recurring image of poems finding temporary residence in the lives of others—both in "Philosophical Scrutiny" and in Cavafy's notes—finds an unexpected parallel in the way Cavafy registered images of the soul's afterlife in a short fragment in English ("[Fragment on Beliefs Concerning the Soul]"), dated between 1884 and 1886. This text documents the poet's interest in beliefs around the world concerning the transference of human souls after death to objects, animals, and other entities (Cavafy 2010, 11). Considering his early fascination with the European esoteric movement, especially between 1891 and 1903, Cavafy, as Haas has shown, was drawn to "the possibility of life beyond death" (Haas 1984, 216).

Whether his references to poetry's afterlives reflect his early proclivities for esoterism or not, broaching the poems' spectral lives has a crucial function in "Philosophical Scrutiny." It counteracts the violence of the scrutiny to which Cavafy sets out to subject his poems in this text. It thereby highlights a central conflict in this text, which, as I previously argued, marks Cavafy's spectral poetics: the desire to control and let go.<sup>88</sup> Asserting the poems' spectral lives involves a "letting go" from their creator, a readiness to test their shifting meanings and affective force in other times and in the hands of unknown readers. This clashes with Cavafy's impulse to subject his poetry to the highest control. Many of the text's contradictions could be traced back to these antagonistic desires.

"Philosophical Scrutiny" was written in a period of crisis, during which Cavafy ruthlessly revised and repudiated part of his earlier poetic production. Cavafy's poems may be radically open to interpretation, but they were products of extreme control. His controlling impulse also governed his distribution practices: he repudiated or hid many of his poems from audiences, sent the hand-made collections of his poems to a limited number of people, ignored E.

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88. See, for example, my analysis of "The Inkwell" in chapter 1.

M. Forster's offer to get them published, and in 1925 refused to sign a contract for the publication of his poems' English translations by Hogarth Press, run by Virginia and Leonard Woolf (Jeffreys 2015, 38). This controlling impulse often called forth a destructive tendency, which in "Philosophical Scrutiny" led him to talk about poems that "should be sacrificed" (2010, 116) or about "effacing" poems "vowed to destruction" (118).

No Cavafian poem captures better the artist's wish to control and preserve his poems by limiting their exposure than "Του μαγαζιού" / "For the Shop" (1913). The poem's protagonist, a jewelry maker, is committed to keeping his most precious creations—"δείγμα της τολμηρής δουλειάς του και ικανής" / "examples of his bold, his skillful work"<sup>89</sup>—in a safe, hidden from ignorant customers, to whom he offers different kinds of ornaments. As Jusdanis argues, the poem captures an outlook on art "as an elitist activity produced by artists for a small coterie of readers," in line with the elitism of modernist aesthetics (2005, 40).<sup>90</sup> Cavafy's understanding of authentic art, Roilos writes, requires "careful control of the circulation of its discourse" and its shielding from "the degenerating effect of mundane circulation" (2010, 172).

Cavafy's impulse to preserve by controlling circulation is manifest in other writings too.<sup>91</sup> Yet his writing is also rife with the competing desire to release his creations to readers who will grant them new afterlives. Perhaps it is because he knows he cannot control his poems' afterlives that he practices extreme control while they are still under his pen: this, after all, lies within his power. In fact, many controlling practices, such as his unremitting revisions of poems, can be seen as attempts to defer finality and fixity. Just as in the conjurations and broken promises discussed in chapter 2, controlling practices often strive to keep endings at bay and preserve difference as a flow. In the poet's "neurotic hypersensitivity," as registered in his mode of work or his unwillingness to get his poems published in English, we may read a resistance, Faubion observes,

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89. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF0001, Item 0143; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0143 (638), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/6c2t-4t6p-xcmf/>. Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 47.

90. Jusdanis contests the assumption of elitism in Cavafy by viewing Cavafy's active involvement in his poetry's distribution as a deviation from an elitist position on aesthetic production and artistic autonomy (2005, 40). Nehamas shows how the poem's form (e.g., the use of "couplets ending in homophonous rhymes") enhances the sense that that jeweler and his precious creations are "hermetically sealed off from the world" but reads this isolation as "a gesture of defiance and disdain" (1989, 130–31). According to Haas, the poem testifies to Cavafy's awareness that his poetry, "ahead of its time," would not be appreciated by contemporary readers and should therefore be preserved for the future (2001, 142).

91. Cavafy, as Jeffreys notes, often uses "container metaphors—boxes, chests, drawers" to signify "the storing up of valuable relics" from the artist's work and life (2015, 37).

“to causes and categories and incarcerations that he did not want to be his own” (2003, 60).<sup>92</sup>

Relinquishing control may end up disrupting the poems’ unity and even inviting their fragmentation and (partial) destruction. This impulse in Cavafy’s writing prefigures the aesthetics of the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes—a connection Tellos Agras already established in 1922, when he related aspects of Cavafy’s poetry to dadaism and futurism (1922, 33).<sup>93</sup> The destructive impulse becomes thematized in the poem “Δυνάμωσις” / “Strengthening” from 1903, which offers in that sense a counterweight to the controlling impulse exemplified in “For the Shop.” Probably written shortly before “Philosophical Scrutiny” and never published by Cavafy, the poem performs Cavafy’s version of what Walter Benjamin would call “the destructive character” in his homonymous text from 1931.

Όποιος το πνεύμα του ποθεί να δυναμώση  
να βγη απ’ το σέβας κι από την υποταγή.  
Από τους νόμους μερικούς θα τους φυλάξει,  
αλλά το περισσότερο θα παραβαίνει  
και νόμους κ’ έθιμα κι απ’ την παραδεγμένη  
και την ανεπαρκούσα ευθύτητα θα βγη.  
Από ταις ηδοναίς πολλά θα διδαχθή.  
Την καταστρεπτική δεν θα φοβάται πράξι·  
το σπίτι το μισό πρέπει να γκρεμισθή.  
Έτσι θ’ αναπτυχθή ενάρετα στην γνώσι.<sup>94</sup>

Whoever longs to make his spirit stronger  
should leave behind respect and obedience.  
Some of the laws are ones that he will keep,  
but for the most part he will contravene  
both laws and ethics, and he will leave behind  
the norms that are received, inadequate.

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92. For Faubion, these resistances mark Cavafy’s “minor literature” (2003, 60; Deleuze and Guattari 1986).

93. The founder of futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who met Cavafy in Alexandria in 1930, told him: “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” (Liddell 1974, 204; see also Kourelis 2015, 233–34). Marinetti saw “a genuinely futuristic program” in the way Cavafy revised “traditional literary norms” (Roilos 2010, 10).

94. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF0001, Item 0091; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0091 (95), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-84/>

Many things will he be taught by pleasures.  
 He will never fear the destructive act;  
 half the house must be demolished.  
 Thus will he grow virtuously into knowledge.  
 (Trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009a, 310)

The destructive impulse in this poem corresponds to an early phase in Cavafy's poetic development, from which "Philosophical Scrutiny" also emerged, and evokes the practice of control by destruction, for the sake of someone's growth. But destruction in this poem is not really aimed at control or preservation. It is a more radical stance of disrespect, breaking laws, defying traditions and customs, demolishing the house—the familiar, the normative—without knowing what this destruction will bring, but for the (somewhat vague) aspiration that it will make one "grow" "into knowledge." As a gesture of creating new space by discarding normative discourses and paradigms, this call to destruction prefigures the avant-garde mind frame that Benjamin's "Destructive Character" (1931) captured:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. [. . .] What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. (2005, 542).

Nevertheless, the poetic subject in "Strengthening" is not a cheerful destroyer that erases all traces of the old. A contrary impulse pervades this poem too: "some of the laws" will be honored and only "half the house" will be pulled down. In addition, the rhyme used in the Greek original endows the poem with a sense of harmony and restraint that formally resists the destruction of tradition the poem propagates. This ironic contrast distinguishes the poem's call to destruction from the anarchic rhythms of Benjamin's destroyer. The hesitation before the destructive task—registered in the poem's traditional form and the desire to keep half of the house standing—casts this subject as a *reluctant* destroyer, in tune with the reluctant irony I traced in "Philosophical Scrutiny." The poem exemplifies the way Cavafy's reluctant irony questions established truths—traditions, norms, societal laws—without denying their continuing force. The poem's subject has been co-shaped by these truths, which still haunt the poetic call for their destruction. What is avoided or destroyed never wholly disappears, but may return to haunt that which seeks to replace it.

Since truths in Cavafy function like revenants, Cavafy's later poetry also carries the destructive impulse of this poem alongside the impulse to control and protect poems from exposure and abuse. In light of this, Cavafy's work may be studied in terms not of linear evolution, but of a spectral temporality: a constant coming and going, avoiding previous impulses or influences without denying them, challenging them without renouncing them. If "Philosophical Scrutiny" is to be read as an *ars poetica* of sorts, this is what its language teaches us. The text is an arena on which romantic, aestheticist, symbolist, decadent, modernist, and avant-garde principles and sensibilities test each other, without the text subscribing unconditionally to any of them. The text's enactment of symbolist principles—e.g., art for art's sake, art's task to create an experience—is indisputable, but so is its challenge to symbolism, as the comparison with Poe's essay showed. It evokes decadence through its reflection on fatalism but also ironizes a decadent mindset. Its fragmentary composition, its cryptic form (in shorthand), and its radical approach to the future prefigure some of the methods and impulses of the avant-gardes, yet none of these impulses, as we saw, is endorsed without reluctance. Staging antagonistic influences, desires, and truths, this text's ironic performance carries a spectral logic: its truths, haunted by their many others, do not crystallize into confident propositions. It is this logic that prompts the text's afterlives.

#### e. Cavafy's Little God of Irony

Cavafy's reluctant irony is not a cowardly or easy way of avoiding choices and clear-cut positions. As the reluctant destroyer in "Strengthening" shows us, it involves a hesitation that is important to experience before destroying any ground or position. A short prose poem by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert—another master of irony—helps me visualize Cavafy as a reluctant ironist. The poem, published in Herbert's collection *Studium przedmiotu* (*Study of the Object*) (1961) is titled "From Mythology":<sup>95</sup>

First there was a god of night and tempest, a black idol without eyes,  
before whom they leaped, naked and smeared with blood. Later on, in  
the times of the republic, there were many gods with wives, children,  
creaking beds, and harmlessly exploding thunderbolts. At the end only

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95. My discussion of Herbert's poem in relation to Cavafy's irony is partly drawn from Boletsi 2014, 71–73.



superstitious neurotics carried in their pockets little statues of salt, representing the god of irony. There was no greater god at that time.

Then came the barbarians. They too valued highly the little god of irony. They would crush it under their heels and add it to their dishes. (2007, 180)

In this idiosyncratic account of people's shifting relation to religion, the worship of idols gives way to an anthropomorphic pantheon, evocative of that of the Greeks and Romans, succeeded by the god of irony, who is represented by "little statues of salt." This god's statue is an embodiment of contradictions: a statue of salt is ephemeral, expendable, going against the stability and eternal life attached to a deity. A god of irony undoes the semantic stability and certainty that religious faith requires. To complicate matters further, salt was long regarded as possessing the "power to repel spiritual and magical evil" ("Salt," 2021). True to his ironic nature, this god undermines himself: he is represented by something reified yet easily crushed; and his material form (salt) may hold the magical power to repel and exorcise his spirit. There is also an intimate link between irony and salt. Irony can be viewed as the salt that adds flavor and multilayeredness to language. Idioms such as "to take something with a grain of salt" suggest that one does not take a statement or argument literally or at face value, but maintains a stance of suspicion or doubt: the suspicion toward truth that irony also demands.

In the end, however, the barbarians arrive and crush the statue of the god of irony. The last traces of a religious-metaphysical mindset, already contaminated by irony in the poem's third stage, evaporate, as the barbarians turn this god's statue into seasoning. Do the barbarians really destroy irony, though? The barbarians' destruction of this god's statue need not be read as a destruction of irony itself. The line "they too valued highly the little god of irony," referring to the barbarians' act, can be read both literally and ironically. If the line is read ironically, the barbarians' destructive act affirms their disavowal of irony. If the line is read literally, the barbarians' crushing of the statue constitutes an endorsement of this god and thus an act of irony. Instead of worshipping irony, they perform it, by destroying the metaphysical grounds of the religion of the "superstitious neurotics." Viewed as ironic, their act subscribes to a philosophical understanding of irony as radical negativity and groundlessness: the destruction of metaphysical foundations. This concept of irony is invested with the barbarians' destructive force. Paul de Man, for whom irony involved "radical negation" and the impossibility of understanding or controlling meaning, wrote that "an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of

solvents" (1996, 165–66). His choice of words resonates with the dissolution of the god of irony by the barbarians in Herbert's poem. Their version of irony involves the destruction of every stance that threatens to crystallize into religion or metaphysical truth.

How is Cavafy's irony to be understood? Is irony for him a little god of salt he keeps in his pocket, or does his irony correspond to the barbarians' destructive act? In other words, does irony in Cavafy's writing embody a contradiction (a questioning of, and attraction to, established truths), or is it a stance of radical negation? In Herbert's poem the barbarians may arrive, but in Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" they do not. As a result, Cavafy gets to keep this little god of irony in his poetic pantheon. Cavafy's universe is replete with little gods, which, as Sedgwick remarks, often mediate writing and desire: *Lores*, *Eros*, *Muse*, personified concepts like *Memory* or *Poetry* (2010, 9). To this pantheon, we could add the little god of irony, which Cavafy honors precisely because of his antinomian nature. This god's embodiment of contradictions makes him a custodian of the spectral truth Cavafy sketched in "Philosophical Scrutiny."

Herbert's god of irony captures the reluctant irony that, in different guises, permeates "Philosophical Scrutiny," Cavafy's diary from Athens, his "Strengthening," and many other poems, including "Waiting for the Barbarians," to which the next chapter turns. Cavafy reveres this god, but realizes that his power is transient and his status vulnerable. And so he carries him in his pocket, reluctantly and with a slight embarrassment perhaps, fully aware of the irony in such a gesture.

Cavafy's irony is not nihilistic or cynical, but often drawn to the truths it questions, following, as we saw, the logic of "avoiding without denying." His poetry oscillates between, on the one hand, the desire for presence and truth, for formulating historical laws, controlling the future, and, on the other hand, the acknowledgment of ephemeral truths, shifting perspectives, the force of appearances, the awareness he shares with other ironists like Nietzsche that "every description [. . .] is relative to the needs of some historically conditioned situation" (Rorty 1989, 103). In many of Cavafy's writings, irony is accompanied by sympathetic engagement with others and hesitation to offer the final word on any (historical) situation. As a result, truth becomes spectral: it is there and it is not, often questioned by a reluctant irony that dispels it and yet understands its allure.

The conflicting desires involved in Cavafy's irony yield texts that transmit powerful affects, raising the temperature on the thermometer Cavafy consulted so obsessively during his first trip to Greece. Although the poet's body could not take the heat, his writing certainly can.

## CHAPTER FIVE



# Specters of Barbarians

### Introduction

In his essay “Philosophical Scrutiny” (1903), discussed in the previous chapter, Cavafy ponders the value of poetry against the backdrop of the “vanity of human things”:

Some work done in vain and the shortness of human life may declare all this [a poet’s work] vain; but seeing that we do not know the connection between the after life and this life, perhaps even this may be contested. But the mistake lies chiefly in this individualisation. The work is not vain when we leave the individual and we consider the result. Here there is no death, at least no sure death: the result may perhaps be immense; there is no shortness of life, but an immense duration of it. (Cavafy 2010, 117)

Viewing the lives of poems as independent from their creator’s life, Cavafy professes his belief in poetry’s afterlife—an afterlife that is, however, never guaranteed, as the disclaimer “at least, no sure death” suggests. If poems cease to speak to future readers, they, too, face death. Cavafy’s poetry has so far evaded this fate, yet his poems’ afterlives need to be seen against the backdrop of the uncertainty of poetry’s futurity, which accompanies Cavafy’s professed hope for poetry that outlives its creator.

In the previous chapters, I revisited Cavafy’s modernist poetics through the spectral metaphor. In this and the next chapter, I trace the afterlives of specific Cavafian poems in contemporary settings. Specters signal a nonlinear temporality, whereby the past haunts the present, but is also time and again produced by the present. As we saw in chapters 1 and 3, this temporality invites a “pre-posterous” approach to history (Bal 1999, 6–7) that acknowledges the mutually constitutive relation between present and past: a temporality that is multiply enacted within Cavafy’s poems. Bringing this approach to bear on poetry’s

afterlives, I now center on the ways Cavafy's poems haunt, and are haunted by, the present moment—the ways they address contemporary concerns and the ways these concerns shape our reading of the poems, the associations they evoke, and their affective and political force. The afterlives of Cavafy's poems manifest themselves in their various translations, interpretations, readings, adaptations, recontextualizations, citations, and artistic restagings, which lead the “original” poems to ever new beginnings.

This chapter calls on the specters of barbarians. It traces the contemporary afterlives of Cavafy's poem “Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους” / “Waiting for the Barbarians,” written in 1898 and published by the poet in 1904. As Cavafy's best-known poem, it has been restaged in works of literature, visual and performance art, and music in several cultural contexts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “Waiting for the barbarians” has become a popular phrase that, as Mendelsohn writes, “has been used as everything from the title of a novel by J. M. Coetzee to the name of a chic men's clothing store in Paris” (2012, x). Since the early 1990s and, even more, since the attacks on September 11, 2001, the poem, as I will show, has also come to haunt the Western political imaginary. Mobilized as an allegory for global and local events, situations, and challenges, as part of critiques of contemporary empires, or as a call for a new start and radical change, the poem speaks to desires and anxieties generated after the Cold War and amplified since September 11, 2001.

In what follows, I look at the poem's functions in the political imaginary after the Cold War, and especially from what has been nicknamed “9/11” up to recent crisis-scapes, including the declared “migration crisis” in Europe since 2015. How does this poem figure in political commentary? What understanding of the present and vision of the future does it yield? Which conceptions of history and historical time does the poem's figuration in political commentary from this period support? As we will see, commentators have often used the poem to project a familiar historical pattern that helps them make sense of the present. What I argue, however, is that the poem's haunting force stems from the way it disjoins and defamiliarizes the present. To support this claim, I turn to the poem to call on the specters of barbarians within it. The poem critically converses with both progressive and decadent European narratives of history—the former grounded in linear, evolutionary notions of historical time, and the latter in organicist, cyclical conceptions of historical time—in which barbarians held a central place. By tracing the specters of barbarians that the poem evokes and the conceptions of history they are interlaced with, I ask how the poem deals with persistent past narratives in the present and how it fosters the possibility of alternative future narratives.

The chronological starting point of this exploration—the end of the Cold War—is a watershed that precipitated fundamental rearrangements in the global political landscape and intense debates on history and the present. After the fall of Eastern-bloc communism, the global community was faced with a new political reality that called for reassessing the past and reimagining the future. As the global hegemony of Western neoliberalism, led by the US, was established, several Western liberal thinkers welcomed this professed postpolitical era in celebratory tones. They saw in it the inauguration of a postpolitical world, in which violence and passions would be expelled from political life, and replaced by reason and consensus (Mouffe 2005, 28, 31). This optimistic outlook was premised on an understanding of history as a progressive course that was reaching its final stage—the “end of history,” as Fukuyama famously put it (1992). At the other side of this liberal optimism, we find pessimistic diagnoses of the present grounded in narratives of historical decline, which were amplified after 9/11. Such grim accounts often drew parallels between the West—particularly the “American Empire”—and previous historical empires, which fell under the pressure of either internal problems or external “barbarian” invasions.

Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994) was also a response to this new political reality. His practice of *hauntology*, as we saw, was meant to challenge both progressive and decadent accounts of history. The mode of historicity that specters signal, according to Brown, antagonizes “narratives of systematicity, periodicity, laws of development, or a bounded, coherent past and present” (2001, 143). Hauntology undercuts not only linear but also cyclical narratives that see the present as a repetition of the past. In hauntological time, the past keeps coming back, but never as the same. Specters yield a precarious present, allowing the possibility of futures that may escape historical patterns.

This chapter asks how Cavafy’s poem intervenes in the above debates on post-Cold War realities and the present moment. To address this question, I first trace the poem’s uses in recent political commentary and cultural theory. I then delve into the poem’s intertextual engagement with European narratives of history and barbarians around the time it was written. The way “Waiting for the Barbarians” haunts the present, I argue, can be illuminated by revisiting the (historical) specters of barbarians that the poem itself conjures and unpacking the mode of this conjuration.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In chapter 2, I discuss this poem as a failed conjuration.

### b. The Poem's Literary and Artistic Restagings

The poem takes place in an unnamed city in a decaying empire, reminiscent of Rome, which appears to be in commotion, as everyone is preparing to receive the barbarians. It is staged as a dialogue between (probably) two interlocutors:

—Τι περιμένουμε στην αγορά συναθροισμένοι;

Είναι οι βάρβαροι να φθάσουν σήμερα.

—Γιατί μέσα στην Σύγκλητο μια τέτοια απραξία;  
Τι κάθοντ' οι Συγκλητικοί και δεν νομοθετούνε;

Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα.  
Τι νόμους πια θα κάμουν οι Συγκλητικοί;  
Οι βάρβαροι σαν έλθουν θα νομοθετήσουν.

—Γιατί ο αυτοκράτωρ μας τόσο πρωί σηκώθη,  
και κάθεται στις πόλεως την πιο μεγάλη πύλη  
σε θρόνο επάνω, επίσημος, φορώντας την κορώνα;

Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα.  
Κι ο αυτοκράτωρ περιμένει να δεχθεί  
τον αρχηγό τους. Μάλιστα ετοίμασε  
για να τον δώσει μια περγαμνή. Εκεί  
τον έγγραψε τίτλους πολλούς κι ονόματα.

—Γιατί οι δυο μας ύπατοι κ' οι πραιτόρες εβγήκαν  
σήμερα με τες κόκκινες, τες κεντημένες τόγες·  
γιατί βραχιόλια φόρεσαν με τόσους αμεθύστους,  
και δαχτυλίδια με λαμπρά γυαλιστερά σμαράγδια·  
γιατί να πιάσουν σήμερα πολύτιμα μπαστούνια  
μ' ασήμια και μαλάματα έκτακτα σκαλιγμένα;

Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα·  
και τέτοια πράγματα θαμπόνουν τους βαρβάρους.

—Γιατί κ' οι άξιοι ρήτορες δεν έρχονται σαν πάντα  
να βγάλουνε τους λόγους τους, να πούνε τα δικά τους;

Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα·  
κι αυτοί βαρυνούντ' ευφράδειες και δημηγορίες.

—Γιατί ν' αρχίσει μονομασία αυτή η ανησυχία  
κ' η σύγχυσις. (Τα πρόσωπα τι σοβαρά που εγίναν).  
Γιατί αδειάζουν γρήγορα οι δρόμοι κ' η πλατέες,  
κι όλοι γυρνούν στα σπίτια τους πολύ συλλογισμένοι;

Γιατί ενύχτωσε κ' οι βάρβαροι δεν ήλθαν.  
Και μερικοί έφθασαν απ' τα σύνορα,  
και είπανε πως βάρβαροι πια δεν υπάρχουν.

Και τώρα τι θα γένουμε χωρίς βαρβάρους  
Οι άνθρωποι αυτοί ήσαν μια κάποια λύσις.<sup>2</sup>

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?  
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.  
What laws can the senators make now?  
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate  
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.  
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,  
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?

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2. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF0001, Item 0050; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0050 (7), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-62/>

Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?  
Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?  
(How serious people's faces have become.)  
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some who have just returned from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 18–19)

The poem sets up a situation of crisis, in which civilization has reached an impasse; so much so, that the barbarians pose as a remedy for this ailing imperial body. The second speaker has a clear answer to the first speaker's queries: "Because the barbarians are coming today." This answer is confidently repeated five times, assuming a reassuring function that makes it sound almost like a promise. The barbarians' nonarrival, however, crushes the second speaker's confidence and deprives civilization of its only answer. The two final lines offer no resolution or closure. They merely issue an ambiguous statement that deems the barbarians "a kind of solution." The breach of the poem's implicit promise—to present the barbarians—exposes them as a construction of the Empire that serves its self-definition. But if the barbarians do not exist anymore, the historical narrative on which the Empire built its legitimacy ceases to be viable.

The fact that the barbarians remain spectral presences in the civilized



imagination, never materializing, amplifies the poem's ability to haunt. In other words, the poem's afterlives are stirred by the structure of the repeated but broken promise of their arrival that permeates the poem. This promise is perpetually renewed, as it were, through other works that restage and refashion the narrative of *waiting for the barbarians*.

The theme of waiting for the other's arrival has been taken up by several literary works, some of which I have discussed in detail in previous studies (Boletsi 2007, 2013). Dino Buzzati's existentialist novel *Il Deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*, 1938), Samuel Beckett's play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), Julien Gracq's novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* (*The Opposing Shore*, 1951) and J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) are prominent literary preoccupations with this theme. From the above works, Coetzee's novel is the only one that explicitly converses with Cavafy's poem, with its title projecting the poem as the novel's main intertext.<sup>3</sup> Numerous poems from more than ten countries have also responded to Cavafy's poem or applied its dialogic structure to different historical and cultural contexts. Examples of such poems are James Merrill's "After Cavafy"; Richard O'Connell's "Waiting for the Terrorists," which broaches the political climate in the US after 9/11 (2008); Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's "Waiting for the Pakeha," a poem from New Zealand that presents the natives waiting for the European settlers; and Anthony Weir's "A Yeatsian Gloss on Cavafy's Poem" (2012).<sup>4</sup>

Adaptations of the poem in other media abound too. In visual art, artworks bearing the title "Waiting for the Barbarians" (in several languages) include paintings by Swiss artist Urs Stooss (1990), Rotterdam-based artist Arie van Geest (2002), British artist David Barnett (2004), London-based artist Linda Sutton, Dublin-based artist Arturas Jelesinas, German artist Neo Rauch ("Warten auf die Barbaren," 2007), Albanian Athens-based artist Toni Milaqi (2008), and a collage by Enrico Varasso from Canada (2014). South African artist Kendell Geers's permanent labyrinthine installation "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2001), situated outside the Art House Kloster Gravenhorst in Hörstel, Germany, alludes to Cavafy's poem through Coetzee's novel, with which the artwork primarily converses. Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco's installation "Esperando a los bárbaros" (1996), inspired by Cavafy's poem, comprises one hundred sets of eyes printed on paper and placed between pieces of wood,

3. For a comparative reading of the poem in relation to J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* see Boletsi 2013, 139–76, and 2007, 67–96.

4. The poems mentioned, besides O'Connell's and Weir's, are included in an anthology of poems inspired by Cavafy, edited by Nasos Vayenas (2000), in which we find fourteen poems that respond to "Waiting for the Barbarians" by poets from Argentina, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Egypt, Great Britain, Holland, New Zealand, Romania, Serbia, and the United States.

producing the effect of unidentified people staring at the viewers through the crevices of a wooden fence.<sup>5</sup> A more recent video installation, titled “I Stared at Beauty So Much: Waiting for the Barbarians” (2013), by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, comprises a video made by superimposing more than 50 photographs of Beirut, taken at different times and each capturing different durations. The images yield a blurry, animated view of the city in which several timelines intertwine. This visualization of a disorienting, spectral temporality is enhanced by the video’s soundscape, in which the city’s noises blend with verses from Cavafy’s poem heard in repetition.<sup>6</sup>

The poem has also become a starting point for entire art exhibitions. It reverberated, for example, in the sculpture exhibition “The Barbarians” (2002) by British modernist artist Anthony Caro. In the catalogue of Caro’s exhibition, “Waiting for the Barbarians” was quoted in its entirety as the artist’s main source of inspiration, together with an excerpt from W. H. Auden’s long poem “The Age of Anxiety.” More recently, American artist Dana Schutz named one of her solo exhibitions, hosted at the Contemporary Fine Arts gallery in Berlin (17 September–29 October 2016), after Cavafy’s poem.

In music, American composer Ned Rorem’s song “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2001) was written to the lyrics of an English translation of Cavafy’s poem.<sup>6</sup> Philip Glass’s opera *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which premiered in Erfurt, Germany, in 2005, is based on J. M. Coetzee’s novel. The opera *Barbarians* by Australian Greek composer Constantine Koukias, which premiered in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2012 as part of the MONA FOMA festival, is an operatic adaptation of Cavafy’s poem. Lena Platonos’s song “Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους” (Waiting for the Barbarians, 2011), featuring Giannis Palamidis (vocals), adapts Cavafy’s poem to experimental electronic music. Even the British extreme metal band Anaal Nathrakh from Birmingham has given the title of Cavafy’s poem to one of their songs, included in the album *Eschaton* (2006). More recently, composer and musician Laurie Anderson staged another musical interpretation of the poem at St. Thomas Church in New York, in the context of the “Archive of Desire” festival organized by the Onassis Foundation to commemorate the 160th anniversary of Cavafy’s birth.

5. The installation was exhibited at the 23rd International Biennial of Art of São Paulo (1996), the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston (2000), and Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen, Germany, as part of the exhibition *Radical Shift: Political and Social Upheaval in Argentinian Art since the 1960s* (2011). For Sacco’s and Geers’s installations, see Boletsi 2013, 139–207.

6. See the installation’s description on the artists’ website at <http://hadjithomasjoreige.com/waiting-for-the-barbarians/>. Accessed 1 September 2021. The video’s duration is 4 min and 26 sec. I saw the artwork at the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, as part of the exhibition *Trembling Landscapes* (September 2020–January 2021). The artwork was commissioned by the Onassis Cultural Centre.

The poem's resonance extends to theatrical productions. A theatrical adaptation of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, written and directed by Alexandre Marine and produced by Maurice Podbrey, premiered in Cape Town in 2012.<sup>7</sup> In 2016, a dance adaptation of Coetzee's novel directed by Michiel de Regt with Iván Pérez as choreographer was produced in Holland by Korzo and Toneelschuur productions. The opera "Fortress Europe" by Calliope Tsoupaki, which premiered in Amsterdam in March 2017, responded to the migration crisis by staging Europe as an old lady attached to the past and resistant to the present, trying to protect her borders against intruders. Allusions to Cavafy's poem were unmistakable: the phrase "waiting for the barbarians" was repeated in the libretto (written by Jonathan West) in order to interrogate Europe's attitude toward the "unwanted others" it tries to keep outside the gates.

Among the poem's artistic restagings, two recent art installations stand out for the way they play with language and the idea of translation, and are particularly relevant for our discussion of the poem's mode of haunting today. The first one is Kostas Bassanos's *In Search of the Exotic* (2016), a site-specific wall sculpture hosted at Cleve's Condensed Milk Factory as part of the 2016 EVA International—Ireland's Art Biennial—at Limerick (2016). For this artwork, Bassanos formed the line "ΕΙΝΑΙ ΟΙ ΒΑΡΒΑΡΟΙ ΝΑ ΦΘΑΣΟΥΝ ΣΗΜΕΡΑ" ("The barbarians are due here today") (figure 2) with black letters on the roof of a building in the former milk factory, which was one of the Biennial's main venues. The use of the Greek language instead of an English translation for a work exhibited at an international art event contributed to the line's incomprehensibility to the average (non-Greek-speaking) visitor. Greek, a former signifier of the (civilized) center, became in this case a marker of the European periphery and of the inscrutability that accompanies the word *barbarian* from its beginnings in ancient Greece: as an onomatopoeic word, it was meant to capture the Greeks' perception of the sound of non-Greek languages as unintelligible noise (Boletsi 2013, 57). According to the artwork's description in the exhibition catalog, the use of the Greek language was meant to introduce difference to hegemonic models that promote uniformity and "an imagery of the same" ("Still (the) Barbarians: Exhibition Catalogue" 2016). Greek as a (currently) minor language is here taken up as a means of "resistance through language as a safeguard of cultural identity" ("Still (the) Barbarians: Exhibition Catalogue" 2016).<sup>8</sup>

7. Initially written in Russian by Alexandre Marine, the script was adapted into English by Marine's son, Dmitri.

8. This was in line with the Biennial's gesture to translate its catalog for the first time into Irish instead of only using "the art world's lingua franca," English (Rosenmeyer 2016). Claiming



Figure 2. Kostas Bassanos, *In Search of the Exotic*, 2016. Installation view at EVA International—Ireland's Biennial 2016. Dimensions variable. Photo Miriam O'Connor. Courtesy of the artist and EVA International.



Figure 3. Glenn Ligon, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 2021. Neon. Dimensions variable. © Glenn Ligon, Courtesy of the artist. Photo: © Natalia Tsoukala, Courtesy NEON.

Another installation, this time in Athens, reversed the above gesture by projecting the poem's multiple English translations as the mode of its haunting. The installation "Waiting for the Barbarians" by New York-based conceptual artist Glenn Ligon presented nine different English translations of the poem's two final lines. The translated lines were illuminated by neon and fixed on one of the facades of the former Public Tobacco Factory in Athens (figure 3), which was recently transformed into a cultural space by NEON.<sup>9</sup> The artwork, commissioned by NEON, was part of the international group exhibition "Portals" (2021) at the newly opened art space of the Public Tobacco Factory.<sup>10</sup>

The installation creates a "neon Babel," as Cathryn Drake called it (2021), in which translation is projected as a practice that partakes in, and enhances, the ambiguity and multivalence of the poem by creating diverse openings for (re)reading those lines. As Ben Eastham remarks, the installation suggests "that irony and ambiguity are strengths rather than weaknesses of any art that hopes to carry meaning through changing historical contexts" (2021). The repetition of those oft-cited lines in the installation draws attention to repetition and difference as the mode in which the poem's lines haunt the present. Their continuing relevance thereby issues not from a stable and timeless symbolic function that transcends language, but from the difference introduced to the "original" by each translation. Emulating the mode of the specter's appearance—its repeated returns that are never the same—the installation focuses less on the lines' meaning and more on the medium and mode of their dissemination: the way these lines can still, quite literally, "illuminate" new, contemporary contexts through processes of translation, decontextualization, and recontextualization. If in Bassanos's artwork the Greek language resists the hegemony of English as *lingua franca*, in Ligon's installation English is not a transparent medium of global communication. It rather emerges as an always imperfect medium that can extend the poem's haunting force into the future by producing ever-more-different translations. At the same time, the installation's exaggerated repetition of the two lines also works as a (self-reflexive) comment on the almost nauseating repetition of those lines in contemporary public rhetoric and popular culture: a repetition that has also led to standardizations of the poem or mobilizations of those lines in the service of different ideological agendas, as I show in the following.

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space for peripheral languages and resisting forms of domination through language was one of the exhibition's goals (Dunne 2016). For a discussion of this artwork and the Ireland 2016 Biennial, see Boletsi 2023, 415–16.

9. NEON is a nonprofit organization for the promotion of contemporary art. NEON's *Portals* exhibition was organized in collaboration with the Hellenic Parliament (see David 2021).

10. The exhibition was curated by Elina Kountouri and Madeleine Grynstejn and brought together fifty-nine artists from twenty-nine countries.

### c. The Poem as a Figure of Cultural Mutation

Apart from its artistic restagings, “Waiting for the Barbarians” has also become a figure for the shifts of artistic cultures over time, and especially for the interaction of old and new cultural forms. In his essay collection *Waiting for the Barbarians: Essays from the Classics to Pop Culture* (2012), Mendelsohn traces the interaction of contemporary pop culture with Greek and other “classics.” His essays address what he calls the “waiting for the barbarians’ phenomenon”: “the ways in which the present, and especially popular culture, has wrestled, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, with the past” (2012, xi). Rejecting a negative reading of the poem as being about a civilization “under siege by the crude force of barbarity” (x), Mendelsohn follows a note by Cavafy himself in which he sees his poem as “an episode in the progress toward the good” (quoted in Mendelsohn 2012, x). Based on this, Mendelsohn considers the barbarians’ imminent arrival as reflecting “positive progress” and the poem as an allegory for the frictions between old and new cultures, or between “high and low” (x). “New energies” that come to breathe new life into “what’s established and classic” and challenge the old culture are often perceived as a barbarian threat to culture as a whole. However, Mendelsohn contends, many “declines and falls” in history can more accurately be seen as “shifts, adaptations, reorganizations” (x–xi). The barbarians’ advent thus signals a cultural shift emerging from the friction between old and new. Italian writer Alessandro Baricco makes a comparable argument in his collection of essays on contemporary culture, entitled *Barbarians (I Barbari, 2006)*.<sup>11</sup> For Baricco, the clash between established cultural forces and the “barbarian” bearers of new cultural forms signals a process of cultural mutation, leading toward different ways of experiencing and signifying culture.

But if the poem itself advances such a thesis, what are we to make of the barbarians’ nonarrival in the poem? If we follow Mendelsohn’s reading, this nonarrival would seem to remove any hope for such a regenerative cultural shift. Mendelsohn’s point in fact applies a lot more to Cavafy’s unpublished poem “Οι εχθροί” / “The Enemies” (1900). The poem presents three sophists visiting “the Consul.”<sup>12</sup> Responding to the Consul’s warning that their fame has given them enemies, one of the sophists lays out how criteria for the evaluation of art or writing shift over time. As a result, former masterpieces turn into forgotten,

11. Published in 2006 in Italian and in 2014 in English.

12. As Savidis has noted (Cavafy 1971, 104), the main idea advanced in “The Enemies” resonates with Cavafy’s unpublished essay “The Musings of an Ageing Artist” (1894–1900?) (trans. Jeffreys; Cavafy 2010, 82–83). See also the discussion of “The Enemies” by Jusdanis (1987, 53–54) and Chrissanthopoulos (2013, 673–74).

“strange” (“αλλόκοτα”) or even “ridiculous” (“κωμικά”) works. In other words, what was considered civilized can be relegated to the “barbarian” and what is deemed barbaric (unfamiliar, crude, offensive) based on current standards of taste can later enter the ranks of civilization:

“Όσα ημεῖς ἐπαραστήσαμεν ωραία καὶ σωστά  
 Θα τ’ ἀποδείξουν οἱ ἐχθροὶ ἀνόητα καὶ περιττά  
 Τα ἴδια ξαναλέγοντας ἀλλοιῶς (χωρὶς μεγάλον κόπο).  
 Καθὼς κ’ εμεῖς τα λόγια τα παληὰ εἶπαμε μ’ ἄλλον τρόπο.”<sup>13</sup>

“What we portrayed as beautiful and proper  
 the enemies will reveal to be foolish and useless,  
 repeating the same things differently (without much effort).  
 Just as we spoke the old words in another manner.”

(Trans. Jurdanis 1987, 54)<sup>14</sup>

In this shifting terrain of power struggles over the valuation of cultural products, the sophist does not insist that he and his allies hold the truth.<sup>15</sup> He admits that they, too, “spoke the old words in another manner.” His real enemies come from the future, threatening to establish different standards that will reduce his and his friends’ works to foolish musings of barbarians. Considering Cavafy’s own alertness to the shifting valuation of cultural products in new contexts, I now turn to some of the future political contexts in which his own “barbarians” were mobilized. Which future enemies would the absent protagonists in “Waiting for the Barbarians” personify or allegorize, and which identities or truth regimes would they threaten? Which future anxieties and desires would they be called to capture, not only in the arts but in politics?

#### d. Waiting for the Barbarians After the Cold War

Cavafy’s barbarians did not only get to travel in artistic settings. Several op-eds and articles in the press as well as works of cultural theory have tapped into the poem to broach issues in politics and international relations or to comment on

13. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F01, Sub-file SF0001, Item 0122; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F01-SF001-0122 (130), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/emc8-887z-xqta/>

14. I am grateful to Gregory Jurdanis for granting me permission to use his translation of this poem.

15. See also Jurdanis (1987, 54) and Nehamas (1989, 134). Nehamas aptly connects this poem with a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*.

political and cultural crises. The poem's popularity today is certainly not unrelated to the renewed popularity of the term *barbarian* and the rekindled rhetoric of "civilization versus barbarism" since the 1990s and particularly since 9/11.

Civilizational rhetoric—premised on a stark opposition between forces of civilization and barbarism—was reinvigorated in the West within the framework of what has been called the "culturalization of politics" (Žižek 2009, 119). This culturalization describes a discursive shift in public rhetoric since the 1990s that led to a recasting of global politics in terms of culture (Mamdani 2004, 17). After the Cold War, global dividing lines were perceived as less determined by political ideology—capitalism versus communism or democracy versus totalitarianism—and more by culture (18). Global challenges were framed as being less about economy and more about religion; less about social disparities and more about cultural differences. Samuel Huntington's well-known study *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), in which he reduced global conflicts to a "clash of civilizations," helped consolidate this shift. In Huntington's model, political and economic differences were revamped as cultural differences, and thus ascribed to a way of life and cultural origin that were taken as given. This shift, as I argued elsewhere, partly accounts for the renewed valence of the barbarism/civilization dichotomy in public and scholarly discourses in the 1990s and especially after 9/11.<sup>16</sup>

Despite some allusions to the Roman Empire, Cavafy's poem lacks explicit historical markers.<sup>17</sup> This enabled its deployment as a broadly applicable allegory for post-Cold War and post-9/11 realities. These include reflections on the "American Empire" after the Cold War. Lewis Lapham, for example, used Cavafy's poem to title his collection of essays on American society (1997). The poem guides his critical reflection on the post-Cold War period, in which most dangers to US society, as he sees them, stem from internal barbarians: America's hypocritical political elite and corporate culture. The political oligarchy of the corporate state has abandoned true democratic politics for the pursuit of money, in the process dissolving "traditional moral values" and people's "sense of history."<sup>18</sup> In the collection's final essay, Lapham addresses the uninhibited reign of global capitalism as the real barbarism in a post-political era without external barbarians (1997, 219).

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16. Parts of this exposition of the discourse of culturalization and the function of the "barbarian" figure in it are drawn from Boletsi 2013 (40–45), where I lay out this context in more detail.

17. Some scholars have also traced allusions to the Byzantine Empire. Renato Poggioli, for example, suggests that the poem's "locale" could be either Rome or Byzantium (1959, 139). Filippomaria Pontani (2018) argues that a possible source of inspiration for the poem was a passage from Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates.

18. Hodgson on Lapham's book (1998).



Lapham's evocation of Cavafy's poem in his book's title underlines the poem's emblematic function in the post-Cold War order, in which, it seemed, the barbarians of the American Empire did not exist "any longer." Their presumed absence generated conflicting visions on this new reality, ranging from confident proclamations of the triumph of liberal democratic governance to quasi-apocalyptic scenarios about the imminent fall of the American Empire. In his essays, Lapham partakes in a popular trend in the 1990s that is still thriving today: drawing historical analogies between contemporary America and past empires—particularly the Roman Empire and the so-called "Dark Ages" after its fall.

A master in the art of drawing such analogies is Morris Berman. In his 2001 article "Waiting for the Barbarians" in *The Guardian*, Berman complements the gloomy picture of present-day America he had already painted in *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000b) with insights gained by the attacks on 9/11. Berman diagnoses America's decline as due to the same internal problems that the Roman Empire was facing toward its end: growing social inequality, dropping levels of literacy, lack of critical thought, spiritual decline, apathy, political corruption, etc. To this "internal barbarism" he adds the threat of external barbarians after 9/11, and compares these attacks with the Roman "barbarian invasions." America today, then, "has barbarians at the gates, and also, it would seem, within them" (2001).

Drawing historical parallels grants an air of validity to a diagnosis of the present and prognosis of the future, even though such comparisons of the present with the past are inevitably based on selective elements bound to confirm the hypothesis put forward. Contemporary conditions and events are overlaid with familiar historical plots, narrativizing the present through predictable schemes that yield the sense of historical repetition. In Berman's article, Cavafy's poem, with its allusions to ancient Rome, provides a perfect allegorical vessel that conjoins that historical context with the present as if they were part of a cyclical pattern.<sup>19</sup> In Berman's use of the poem, as in most of its mobilizations for post-Cold War realities, the barbarians are solely negative signifiers: they are the destroyers that a declining civilization awaits in fear. The desire involved in the anticipation of the other, as well as the prospect of a new start through a barbarian invasion—both crucial ingredients of the poem's equivocal performance—are circumvented. Hence, the future prospect Berman draws is aligned with his bleak view of the present: "It is a chilling thought, the possibil-

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19. Although Berman does not quote the poem in this article, the poem's figuration in the title of his essay lends force to his argument. Berman explicitly refers to Cavafy's poem in his book *Wandering God* (2000a).

ity that for the remainder of the new century, America will be waiting for the barbarians” (2001).

In her article “Paranoid Empire” (2009), cultural theorist Anne McClintock cites Cavafy’s poem, noting that it “haunts the aftermath of 9/11 with the force of an uncanny and prescient *déjà-vu*” (2009, 92). Her reference to the poem’s force in terms of a *déjà-vu* foregrounds repetition as its mode of haunting. The poem is integrated in McClintock’s discussion of the paranoia that triggered US imperial violence especially after 9/11. “To what dilemma are the ‘barbarians’ a kind of solution?” McClintock asks (92). After the Cold War, the barbarians of the American Empire—the USSR as its chief enemy—were not there “any longer.” An empire’s legitimacy, however, is grounded in the construction of barbarians: an external enemy that generates “nightmares of impending attack” and justifies military violence. “Cavafy’s insight,” McClintock notes, “is that an imperial state claims legitimacy only by evoking the threat of the barbarians”; the barbarians are “the rejected from which we cannot part.” When there are no barbarians any longer, she continues, “the legitimacy of Empire vanishes like a disappearing phantom” (92). In the 1990s, as the antagonism of the US and the USSR receded, the lack of a visible external threat turned into a source of anxiety for US power. There was no use training a colossal army without a plausible external threat. As secretary of State Colin Powell noted before 9/11, “though we can still plausibly identify specific threats [. . .] the real threat is the unknown, the uncertain” (quoted in McClintock 2009, 93).

In this context, the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks came to fulfill the role of the “new barbarians” that offered a “kind of solution” to the “enemy deficit” and to the “crisis of imperial legitimacy” of the 1990s (McClintock 2009, 92). However, these new barbarians were not real *enough*. As Arjun Appadurai notes, terrorist actions after 9/11 were met with great uncertainty regarding the agents of this violence: “Who are they? What faces are behind the masks? What names do they use? Who arms and supports them? How many of them are there? Where are they hidden? What do they want?” (2006, 88). These “new barbarians” were spectral figures, whose elusive qualities served as a justification for the declaration of total war from the US and its allies. As McClintock aptly remarks, the circulation of “images of ‘shadowy,’ ‘invisible,’ and ‘unseen’ enemies” attests to the fact that “9/11 presented a trauma in the realm of vision (the *visibility* of the United States to attack and the *invisibility* of the enemy)” (2009, 94). The war on terror targeted specific countries and individuals in an attempt to hypostatize these ghosts by identifying them with individuals (e.g., Bin Laden) and states, or producing them as real bodies under US control (e.g., the tortured prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib) (95).

Hence, although the barbarians seemed to have arrived with 9/11, in fact they had not. Since 9/11, Western societies have been dominated by the fear that those spectral enemies will arrive, again and again. The real traumatism produced by the events on 9/11, Jacques Derrida argued in an interview, lies not in the destruction caused that day, but in the kind of future threat these events imposed upon the world: “Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (2003, 97). The 9/11 attacks introduced the specter of a worse barbarism awaiting in the future.

In the years following 9/11, the poem’s citations in the press often accompanied reflections on the West’s relations with its “others”—be it terrorists or other groups, particularly Muslims, migrants, refugees, but also emerging (Asian) global powers. In this context, the poem prompted critiques of the demonization of others after 9/11. For example, in a 2002 article in the *Irish Times*, Patrick Comerford reflects on the suspicion and prejudice that Muslim populations within or outside Europe and the US faced after 9/11. His brief discussion of the poem underscores the need for the civilized to construct barbarians as a means of evading confrontation with internal problems. Reaching his conclusion through Cavafy’s poem, he writes: “An imagined external enemy provides excuses for not wrestling with real social and political problems. On the other hand, real dialogue with the Islamic world is the only way of removing prejudice and fears of an imaginary threat” (2002).

In debates about the position of the US after the Cold War and 9/11, the poem was amply used by progressive commentators, as we saw, to criticize America’s construction of external barbarians as an imperial ruse. Along similar lines, Ian Buruma cites Cavafy’s poem in a 2008 article in the *New Yorker*, in which he argues that “America’s time of global dominance is finished, and that new powers, such as China, India, and Russia, are poised to take over.” In this context, he writes: “All great empires set too much store by predictions of their imminent demise. Perhaps, as the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy suggested in his poem ‘Waiting for the Barbarians,’ empires need the sense of peril to give them a reason to go on. Why spend so much money and effort if not to keep the barbarians at bay?” (2008). However, the poem was also mobilized by conservative agendas that promoted clear-cut moral distinctions after 9/11. A striking example is William Kristol’s 2013 article “Civilization and Barbarism,” which starts by quoting the poem’s final verses. Published in the neoconservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*, Kristol’s piece sketches the twentieth century as an era in which civilization (identified with the US) tries to ward off barbarians (first Nazis, then communists) who threaten to sink the world into “a new

dark age.” The end of the Cold War, Kristol remarks, did not mean the end of the barbarians, as 9/11 confirmed. Thus “there are still, in the enlightened and progressive 21st century, barbarians at the gates—and, sadly, within the gates” (2013). While terrorists lurk outside the gates, proponents of abortion belong for him to the barbarian hordes inside US borders. His plea for clear-cut oppositions in politics—good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism—exemplifies the call for absolute moral judgments that gained currency in post-9/11 politics. However, Kristol’s use of Cavafy’s poem to advance this claim—a poem that at the very least interrogates the transparency of any such opposition—is striking proof of the tendency of commentators to see in a literary work only what already confirms their worldview.

Since 9/11, the tag of the barbarian has been attached not only to terrorists but to Islamic culture, nonliberal societies, and migrants in Western societies. In 2015 and the following years, Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe and elsewhere to escape a catastrophic civil war were regularly cast by European media and politicians as a horde of barbarians flooding Europe and threatening the security and way of life of European citizens.<sup>20</sup> The global financial crisis of 2007–2008, the Eurozone crisis of 2009, uprisings, riots, terrorist attacks, the declared “migration crisis,” and environmental degradation have all forged the sense of living in perpetual crisis. This sense has been instrumentalized by states to impose states of emergency, securitarian anti-immigration measures, biopolitical control, or austerity politics. The narrative of Rome’s barbarian invasions, prevalent in public rhetoric, exacerbates this sense of perennial crisis and the foreboding of an imminent attack. Cavafy’s poem was summoned to capture this sense of crisis, civilizational *malaise*, and the paralyzing state of waiting it yields, in relation not only to the “American Empire” but also to the European Union. In a 2015 article in the *Financial Times*, Toni Barber compares what he sees as Europe’s current decline with Cavafy’s imaginary city:

In his 1898 poem “Waiting for the barbarians,” the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy describes a polity that invents or exaggerates mysterious foreign threats to prop up its decaying power structures. The listless ruling elites, hollow public ceremonies and pervasive forebodings of doom depicted in Cavafy’s masterwork should serve in 2016 as a wake-up call for Europe. (2015)

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20. For example, in a speech on September 15, 2015, president of the French National Front party Marine Le Pen referred to the refugee crisis as a dangerous “migrant invasion” like that of the fourth century (de Boni 2015).

Barber's concern is Europe's inability to manage its challenges. National governments and the EU apparatus in Brussels are incapable of coping with "terrorism, immigration, homegrown political extremism, the eurozone's unity, unemployment, lacklustre economic growth or even Europe's military defences" (2015). This inability is cast in terms of a decline and "malaise": a diagnosis supported again through a comparison with Roman history. His reading of Cavafy motivates his final analogy between Rome and present-day Europe:

Like Cavafy's imaginary state, or like the Holy Roman Empire, which lasted for 1000 years before Napoleon put it out of its misery in 1806, the EU may not disintegrate but slip into a glacial decline, its political and bureaucratic elites continuing faithfully to observe the rites of a confederacy bereft of power and relevance.

Authors like Barber who draw parallels between the present and Rome's history tend to reduce the poem to an allegory or catchphrase. As such, the poem appears to carry a self-evident meaning that adds legitimacy to the argument of the author citing it. Notably, most of the above-cited authors trace in the poem a familiar historical narrative of decadence: an empire in decline awaiting a barbarian invasion. In their reflections, the poem serves to illuminate the present by offering the illusion of a historical repetition of the same. In the following, however, I argue that the poem's haunting force does not derive from its projection of a mythical archetype or a historical constant that helps us make sense of the present, but from the way it disrupts familiar understandings of the present, leaving us on unstable ground.

#### **e. Between Enlightenment, Decadence, and Modernism: Barbarians and Historical Time**

The poem's citizens are confident that their present and future are foreseeable based on a historical pattern in which the confrontation of empires with barbarians is a constant.<sup>21</sup> This certainty motivates the second speaker's repetitive answer "Because the barbarians are coming." Their confidence, however, is shattered: the historical narrative on which civilization's legitimacy rests fails to contain the new crisis caused by the barbarians' absence. The barbarians the

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21. The argument in this section is a condensed version of the argument laid out in Boletsi 2018a, 296–310 and 328–34.

citizens try to conjure—absent, yet forcefully present through this absence—carry traces of different conceptions of historical time in modern European thought: narratives of progress, in which history is a linear movement forward, and narratives of decadence, hinging on a cyclical approach to history, in which civilizations as organic entities rise and fall (Morley 2004, 573). The poem's ending, I argue, unsettles both cyclical and progressive notions of historical time, yielding a future that escapes the sphere of predictability.

To trace the poem's engagement with progressive narratives, we may turn to Edward Gibbon's magnum opus *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (in six volumes, 1776–1789). Cavafy was an avid but critical reader of Gibbon and kept detailed notes on the historian's work between 1893 and 1899—around the time of the poem's writing. "Waiting for the Barbarians" has even been claimed to be a product of Cavafy's dialogue with Gibbon's work.<sup>22</sup> Eighteenth-century Enlightenment historiography and its belief in progress, as Gibbon expressed it, were being challenged in the European *fin-de-siècle* when Cavafy wrote his poem. But the theme of barbarian invasions, central to late-nineteenth-century decadent literature, largely owes its popularization to Gibbon's work.

For Gibbon, the fall of the Roman Empire was due to a constellation of factors that led to the Empire yielding "to the pressure of its own weight," allowing the barbarians to take over (Gibbon 1907, 289). Nevertheless, Gibbon maintains an optimistic outlook on history, which is clearly registered in his "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West" in chapter 38. There, he states his certainty of the disappearance of the barbarians from the historical stage. Tapping into eighteenth-century evolutionary models in which European civilization was seen as the culmination of a civilizational process, Gibbon finds that Europe is so advanced in his time that its prosperity is not at risk. The balance of power within Europe may shift, but the barbarians cannot pose a serious threat anymore to "the great republic of Europe." The possibility of new barbarian enemies is not fully dismissed. He cautions that "new enemies, and unknown dangers, may possibly arise from some obscure people, scarcely visible in the map of the world" (293). Yet he is confident that these enemies would stand no chance against Europe:

Cannon and fortifications now form an impregnable barrier against the Tartar horse; and Europe is secure from any future irruption of Barbar-

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22. Critics who have advanced this claim are George Savidis, Stratis Tsirkas, and Diana Haas. See Haas 1982, 96.

ians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous.  
(296)

Gibbon's rationale is remarkable. Even if barbarians were to take over Europe, they would cease to be barbarous, because the degree of scientific and technological progress this takeover would require would undo their barbarian status. Based on this, the barbarians by definition stand no chance against civilization: if they would defeat civilization, the name "barbarian" would not fit them, as they would have entered a new stage of progress. For Gibbon, history moves forward without risk of regression: "it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism" (297).

The phrase "there are no barbarians any longer" in Cavafy's poem appears to emulate Gibbon's certainty that "no people [. . .] will relapse into their original barbarism."<sup>23</sup> The poem confirms Gibbon's diagnosis that the barbarians have disappeared, but turns Gibbon's optimism on its head. If for Gibbon the barbarian threat has been overcome, Cavafy's poem turns the barbarians into an ambivalent signifier—a force feared and longed for, an agent of destruction and potential regeneration.

A brief comment by Cavafy on his poem from 1904 invites us to follow another thread in its intertextual nexus:

I was also s[o]m[e]wh[at] doubtful ab[ou]t "περ[ι]μ[έ]ν[ον]τας τους  
Β[α]ρ[β]άρους" & there I f[ound] in Ren[an] t[he] surmise that their  
recurrence is a possibility. (Cavafy 1983a, 61)

In another note on the poem, Cavafy writes that "Renan mentions the possibility of 'nouveaux barbares.'"<sup>24</sup> Cavafy's notes lead us to Ernest Renan's reflections on civilization's relation to barbarians in his earliest work *L'Avenir de la science* (*The Future of Science*), written in 1848 but published in 1890. Cavafy's observation that Renan deems the recurrence of barbarians possible is in fact (partly) disputed in Renan's study. Disavowing the idea of cyclical history, Renan attacks proponents of decadence in his time for drawing fallacious parallels with ancient Rome to prove the present decline of European civilization.

23. Tziouvas also observes that "Cavafy seems to share Gibbon's optimism about the gradual disappearance of barbarians," although "he has some doubts about the progress of western civilization" (1986, 166).

24. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F11, Item 0036, photo 4; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S03-F11-0036 (233), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-128/>

There is a tendency to believe that modern civilization must have a destiny analogous to ancient civilization and undergo, like it, an invasion of barbarians. It is forgotten that humanity never repeats itself, and does not twice employ the same methods. (1891, 365)

Renan's optimism stems from the belief that even if barbarians defeat civilization, they will immediately shed their barbarian nature through their encounter with "civilization and rationalism" (59). Thus, in both Gibbon and Renan, the specter of the barbarians as a threat to humanity's progressive course is conjured away through a similar reasoning: the barbarians will be assimilated by civilization as soon as they come in contact with it, and civilization will always conquer "until the day when there will be no longer any one to conquer, and when sole mistress it [civilization] will reign in its own right" (Renan 1891, 63). Cavafy's poem grants Renan his wish, but, ironically—to use a phrase by Renan—the poem's "Let there be no more barbarians" (1891, 318) does not carry the utopian note of Renan's account. It leaves the citizens dumbstruck, desolate.

Renan refutes two central assumptions of the decadent mindframe: the historical inevitability of the barbarians' recurrence and the conception of the barbarians as a destructive force that allows civilization to be reborn from scratch. History is an intransigently continuous line, and the barbarians, he argues, can only cause minor crises that civilization quickly assimilates. They "are but accidents in the great voyage" of civilization and may only cause "unfortunate delays" or even introduce regenerative elements (369). Revisiting Rome's history, Renan contends that the barbarians never fully destroy civilization to lead to a new start, but simply take over and continue the old order of things. "It is an easy commonplace to speak at large of social palingenesis, of renovation. It is not a question of being born again, but of continuing to live" (367), he writes, and in this context, he underscores

the eagerness with which the barbarians, upon their entry into the Empire, embrace Roman forms, and drape themselves in Roman tinsel, titles of Consul and Patrician, in Roman insignia and costumes. [. . .] The barbarians did not at first make any change in the order of things which they found established. (368)

The barbarians' compliance with the structures they found leads Renan to assert that

The barbarians overthrew the Empire, but in reality, when they attempted to reconstruct they reverted to the plan of the Roman society which had



struck them from the very first by its beauty, and which was the only one, moreover, they knew. (368)

Extending this interpretation to his present, Renan predicts, like Gibbon, a barbarian-less future, in which “modern civilization will be sufficiently full of life to assimilate these new barbarians who are desirous of entering, and to continue its march in their company” (369–70).

Cavafy’s poem tests Renan’s historical vision. Readers may be tempted to imagine the poem’s barbarians as destroyers and bearers of the new, according to the barbarian figure prevalent in decadent literature.<sup>25</sup> However, if we look closely at the citizens’ projected image of the barbarians, the connotation of destruction is strikingly absent. The citizens assume to know what the barbarians are like, how they will behave, and how they will rule once they arrive. The consuls and praetors are overloaded with jewelry, because “things like that dazzle the barbarians” (Cavafy 1992, 18). The orators are silent, because the barbarians are “bored by rhetoric and public speaking” (19). The emperor has prepared a scroll to give to the barbarian leader “replete with titles, with imposing names” (18). Unlike the barbarian destroyers of decadent literature, these barbarians are expected to take over and preserve this empire’s structures, just as Renan assumes that the barbarians build “again upon the old plan” and act as “the direct prolongation” of the civilization they conquer (367–68). The barbarians conjured by Cavafy’s citizens recall Renan’s barbarians, with their “eagerness” to “embrace Roman forms, and drape themselves in Roman tinsel, titles of Consul and Patrician” (367). They are actors in a well-rehearsed drama devised by the empire to prolong its life.

So why are these barbarians only “a kind of solution” and why do they fail to materialize? On the one hand, the citizens invest the barbarians with messianic expectations that typify decadent literature, by which Cavafy was influenced, especially during the 1890s. European literature of the *fin de siècle* turned the barbarians into ambivalent figures: both an “incarnation of [. . .] evil” and “bearers of a prospect of regeneration of an old and debilitated world.”<sup>26</sup> The barbarians Cavafy’s citizens call upon are feared and longed-for agents that will hopefully lead to a new start. However, the citizens leave no room for the arrival of something new: they presuppose an already-known other that will simply continue the old. The poem sketches a solipsistic society that can only imagine the new and the other in all-too-familiar terms. Therefore, these bar-

25. For an exposition of the barbarian figure in decadent literature and the poem’s relation to decadent poetry, see Boletsi 2018a, 310–21.

26. Vassiliadi 2008, 95. My translation from the French.

barians cannot inaugurate a new future narrative: they are a structural element of the empire. As an external, unpredictable other, they never existed.

Cavafy's poem evokes, tests, and undercuts both decadent and progressive conceptions of historical time. The fact that the barbarians do not exist "any longer" in the poem suggests that they may represent a previous stage in a linear progressive narrative. But the poem inverts Renan's and Gibbon's optimistic predictions of a barbarian-free future: a society that fully appropriates otherness and continues along the same line, the poem suggests, cannot save itself or be granted a new start. The poem also distances itself from decadent theories of history that construed civilizations as organisms "subject to a natural life-cycle" (Morley 2004, 580). Decadence, Neville Morley writes, tends to "look back to the past for a sense of destination," standing between a past "lost ideal" and the imminent "triumph of barbarism" or "a new order" (578). Barbarians in decadent narratives partake in a cyclical pattern in which Empires rise and fall to barbarians, who initiate a new empire, until the inevitable fall recurs. In line with the decadent spirit, the poem's citizens are *conditioned* to expect the barbarians, as the almost mechanical repetition "Because the barbarians are coming" suggests. To them, history is a predictable narrative, in which periodical confrontations with barbarians are a central plot; "Better the familiar barbarians than the unknown future" (Morley 2004, 583). But then, the barbarians' absence is announced. The denial of the possibility of the barbarians ever arriving again sets "Waiting for the Barbarians" apart from decadent literature and cyclical notions of history.<sup>27</sup>

The barbarians' failure to appear blasts open the historical continuum the empire had fostered. It fractures the present enough to "make an alternative conceivable" (Morley 2004, 574). The "restlessness" and "confusion" registered in people's "serious" faces after the news of the barbarians' absence may signal a questioning of old frameworks (Cavafy 1992, 19). Now that the barbarians cannot act as messianic figures, the citizens may be forced to rethink their future beyond the scheme of the battle between civilization and barbarism. Reflecting modernist sensibilities, the poem unsettles the sense of continuity in history and introduces a spectral temporality in which "past, present and future exist in a relationship of crisis" (Armstrong 2005, 9).

The poem's failure to conjure the familiar barbarians produces a disjointed

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27. Tziouvas also argues that this poem negates "the cyclical conception of history which was quite widespread particularly in the nineteenth century with Burckhardt and Mommsen and culminated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the philosophies of history of Spengler and Toynbee" (1986, 175). In Cavafy's rejection of cyclical history, Tziouvas traces the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy.

present that cannot be fully grasped through the past and through laws of periodicity. In this unfamiliar present, the future is not dictated by progressive, eschatological or cyclical narratives. The barbarians' refusal to fulfill their role in the empire's mythico-historical scenario and the removal of the possibility of their return creates a precarious ground from which an alternative future narrative may emerge. The future thus becomes an unknowable other invested with the unintelligibility that marks the barbarian's etymology in ancient Greek: the incomprehensible sounds of a foreign language. As old narratives are discredited in the poem's present, a space opens for the new: the "barbarian" as the specter of an unknowable future. These are the barbarians that, one might say, have not arrived *yet* in the poem.

The barbarian as an affirmative figure of the new and the unknown that emerges from shattering old paradigms would become central in avant-garde art in the early twentieth century. The movements of Dada and Surrealism are cases in point. Dadaists revolted against the barbarism of World War I and of new technology. Surrealism also turned against the barbarism that European progress had generated. But both movements also mobilized barbarism positively, as a counterforce to the rational, conventional structures of European culture. Dadaists, Stephen Foster writes, "turned the negative qualities of crudeness and barbarism into a virtue" (1979, 143). Surrealists were regularly referred to as "barbarians storming the gates" of European culture (Vaneigem 1999, 20). Friedrich Nietzsche had already envisioned the barbarian as a figure capable of revitalizing the decaying European civilization by disregarding moral inhibitions.<sup>28</sup> Later, Walter Benjamin would call for a new positive concept of barbarism in his 1933 essay "Experience and Poverty" ("Erfahrung und Armut"). In a daring attempt to counter the rising threat of fascism in Germany, Benjamin proposed a "positive barbarism" that would engage in a destruction of the old, clearing the ground for creative barbarian spirits to start anew (2005, 732).<sup>29</sup>

Cavafy's poem showcases the dependence of the civilized on the category of the barbarian for their self-definition. Yet it also allows readers to envision the

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28. The figure of the "new barbarian" poses in some of Nietzsche's writings as a solution to the slave morality of European civilization. In a note from 1887, posthumously published in *The Will to Power (Der Wille zur Macht, 1901)*, Nietzsche envisions the barbarians of the twentieth century as "elements capable of the greatest severity towards themselves, and able to guarantee the most enduring will" (1968, 464). Although in his work barbarism often appears as a negative signifier, associated with slave morality, in a note from 1885 he envisions "another type of barbarian, who comes from the heights: a species of conquering and ruling natures in search of material to mould" (1968, 479). For these references to Nietzsche, dadaism, and surrealism, see Boletsi 2013, 77–78, 84–85.

29. For a detailed discussion of barbarism in Benjamin's essay, see Boletsi 2013, 108–38.

possibility of another “kind of solution” that might involve the barbarian *otherwise*: as the affirmative figure of a future narrative, which is “barbarian” because it has not been articulated yet and thus no present narratives or categories can adequately capture it.

#### f. Barbarians and the Desire for New Narratives

With this in mind, let us return to the present. The poem’s interplay between different conceptions of historical time—progressive and decadent—reverberates in its mobilizations in political contexts since the 1990s. Many attempts to make sense of the post–Cold War order took recourse to these familiar narratives of historical time.

On the one hand, progressive narratives, exemplified by Fukuyama’s influential thesis, saw in this historical moment “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989, 4). Fukuyama anchored his thesis to a Hegelian idea of historical development, according to which history “culminated in an absolute moment—a moment in which a final, rational form of society and state became victorious” (4). As Robert Kagan writes, the faith “in the inevitability of human progress” and “the belief that history moves in only one direction,” grounded in the Enlightenment, were “given new life by the fall of communism” in the early post–Cold War years (2008). Proponents of this vision saw the barbarians’ disappearance in Cavafy’s poem as a confirmation of this narrative, even though in the poem no optimism accompanies this disappearance.

On the other hand, cyclical narratives of history, which deemed the barbarians’ arrival as a probable or even inevitable scenario, undergirded diagnoses of the US or the West in decline. Such accounts, as we saw, detected cyclical patterns by establishing parallels between Rome and the “American Empire” or “Fortress Europe.” When these accounts appealed to Cavafy’s poem, it was to highlight either civilization’s deep internal crisis or the inevitability of its fall to barbarians. They thereby disregarded the poem’s refutation of the barbarians’ arrival, which dismantles laws of periodicity.

The events of 9/11 shook up progressivist narratives and the related diagnosis of an “end of history.” As David Simpson writes, 9/11 was perceived “as an unforeseen eruption across the path of a history commonly deemed rooted in a complacent steady-state progressivism” (4). In immediate media responses to 9/11 but also in scholarly analyses, 9/11 figured as a “limit event”

and a “rupture in historical understanding” (Bond 2011, 735). However, familiar plots were soon mobilized to make sense of this “limit event.” Thus, while the “end of history” thesis lost credence and came to exemplify the naive optimism of the (early) 1990s, accounts that rest on decadent patterns still hold sway today.<sup>30</sup> In the rhetoric of culturalization, and particularly in the aggressive form it has recently taken in what is called “post-truth politics,” the narrative of Empire trying to ward off barbarians produces a grim image of Western societies in crisis and decline. This narrative framework seems more effective than ever in mobilizing people by pleading for a return to an idealized past and exacerbating the fear of “barbarian invasions” in the present. It feeds restorative projects led by nostalgia for “imagined past greatnesses, usurped by foreign invaders” or “barbarians” (Hamid 2017). Indeed, as author Mohsin Hamid wrote in the *Guardian* in 2017, nostalgia “is a terribly potent force at this moment of history.” The accelerating pace of change makes people long for an imagined past simplicity.

And so we are left stranded: unstable in the present, being dragged from the past, resistant to the future. We become profoundly angry, vulnerable to the dangerous calls of charlatans and bigots and xenophobes. We become depressed. And in our depression we become more dangerous, too. (2017)

The poem’s final lines reverberate in this passage: finding himself on unstable ground, the speaker of those lines also holds on to a past narrative of empire and barbarians that he deems “a kind of solution.” But he is also compelled to look toward a future that, without the barbarians, might be liberated from the tyranny of this past narrative and give rise to alternatives. This desire for alternative narratives of the present and the future is also prevalent today, and often undercuts nostalgic restorative ventures. Social and artistic movements or projects expressing this desire often mobilize the barbarian as an *affirmative* concept.

Contemporary art, particularly, shows a noteworthy fascination with the barbarian as an affirmative figure in artistic attempts to imagine alternative presents and futures.<sup>31</sup> No less than three recent international art biennials centered on the barbarian, two of which explicitly involve Cavafy’s poem in their titles and

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30. Since 9/11, the “end of history” has been refuted by proclamations of the “end of the end of history,” issued by various authors and commentators (Zakaria 2001; Kagan 2008; S. Hamid 2016).

31. My discussion of these artistic events here summarizes arguments developed in more detail in Boletsi 2023. 400–23.

conceptual frameworks: the 2013 Istanbul Biennial entitled “Mom, Am I Barbarian?”; Ireland’s 2016 EVA International Biennial “Still (the) Barbarians”; and the events organized in 2017–2018 under the title “Waiting for the Barbarians” as a prelude to the 6th Athens Biennale (ANTI, held in 2018). All these events took place in cities situated on the margins or periphery of Europe: Istanbul, Turkey (2013); Limerick, Ireland (2016); and Athens, Greece (2017–2018).

The 2013 Istanbul Biennial “Mom, Am I Barbarian?” curated by Fulya Erdemci,<sup>32</sup> drew on conflicting conceptualizations of the barbarian. In the Biennial’s conceptual framework, the negative history of barbarism and the world’s imbrication with violence and “strong connotations of exclusion” are acknowledged (Erdemci 2013). But the Biennial also evokes affirmative uses of the barbarian in avant-garde art and critical theory, as it invites artists and thinkers to ask, in the current context, “What does it mean to be a barbarian?”

What does the reintroduction of barbarity as a concept reveal today? Is it a response to an urge to go beyond already existing formulas, towards the unknown? It may refer to a state of fragility, with potential for radical change (and/or destruction), thus, to the responsibility to take new positions. Through the unique interventions of artists, the biennial exhibition [...] will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of “publicness” today. (2013)

Echoing an avant-garde spirit, the Biennial’s understanding of “barbarity” expresses a desire for change and for breaking with existing traditions. The word “thus” in the above quote links (not unproblematically) radical change and destruction to a form of responsibility—the responsibility to envision “new positions” that may give expression to “new subjectivities,” not represented in the current social order.<sup>33</sup> This kind of (positive) barbarism is deemed pertinent in the contemporary world:

In the face of excessive production, connectivity and complexity in the world, the simple and direct (and their opposites, the over-complicated and convoluted) are espoused as an expression of the desire to start anew. Against the alarming incompetence of cities, governances and regimes, there is an increase in retreats to the countryside to start anew, develop new communities and alternative economic systems.

32. The title of the Biennial is derived from Turkish poet Lale Müldür’s homonymous book.

33. The connection of (positive) barbarism with new subjectivities is prominent in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s conception of the “new barbarians” in *Empire* (2000, 214).

Positive barbarism is here projected as a potential counterforce to processes of neoliberal globalization (“excessive production,” “complexity”) and as expressive of the desire to start anew. This desire may take diverse forms: retreating to the countryside, forming inclusive collectivities, or conceiving alternative economic systems.<sup>34</sup>

If the Biennial’s call for affirmative barbarism was limited by the institutional restrictions of such an artistic event, its objective was perhaps more effectively taken up by a political event that took place between the announcement of the Biennial’s theme (January 2013) and the actual exhibition (October–November 2013), and ended up overshadowing the Biennial: the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, from late May to late August 2013. The affirmative barbarism the Biennale sought to pursue was more forcefully performed by the Gezi protesters, albeit by different means. The protesters mobilized creative, humorous, hybrid, estranging, “barbarian” languages and expressive means to articulate their critique of the present and put forward alternative worldviews.<sup>35</sup>

Ireland’s Biennial, curated by Koyo Kouoh, was held in Limerick on the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland. It foregrounded the question of postcoloniality in the new millennium, with Ireland’s postcolonial condition as a test ground “of Western colonization systems” (Kouoh, quoted in Bailey 2016). The Biennial drew from the negative understanding of the barbarian as a concept implicated in colonial mechanisms of othering in order to explore persisting “forms of subjugation, alienation, humiliation and dispossession and their inevitable result in war and terror” today (Biennial Foundation 2015). However, its framework was also informed by affirmative understandings of the barbarian as a force of critique and a carrier of alternative “languages” that could be articulated through an “aesthetics of subversion, transcendence and reappropriation” (Biennial Foundation 2015).

Cavafy’s poem resonates in the title, “Still (the) Barbarians,” in equivocal ways. The adverb “still” hints at the continuation of the poem’s narrative today—a world still waiting for barbarians. It underlines the persistence and constant renewal of processes of exclusion and demonization of the Irish and other formerly colonized nations that have been construed as barbarians, alongside processes of decolonization. Read in this way, the title criticizes the

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34. Although the Biennial projects positive barbarism as a force of the new, in this quote we also trace a nostalgic recourse to an (imagined) past simplicity that tends to underlie restorative projects and cyclical notions of history. Inadvertently or not, the Biennial’s text projects the naiveté and, ultimately, the impossibility of neatly distinguishing a “negative” from a “positive” barbarism, and thus also the risks involved in any positive mobilization of this concept.

35. For a comparison of the “barbarian languages” of the Gezi protest with Istanbul’s Biennial, see Soyupak 2018.

perspective of those who still construct certain peoples as barbarians. The word “still” also alludes to the inertia of the citizens in Cavafy’s poem, drawing attention to current experiences of crisis as a perennial state of passive waiting, civic inaction, and acquiescence; a state that art aspires to counter. However, the title’s “barbarians” could also be read as a potentially affirmative category of self-definition, pointing at new, potent identities that may take shape through and against histories of colonization.

In the 6th Athens Biennale (titled ANTI), Cavafy’s poem gave its title to a series of performative events in 2017–2018 that functioned as a prelude to the Biennale itself. The 6th Biennale was scheduled to take place in 2017. However, when Documenta—the renowned contemporary art exhibition that takes place in Kassel (Germany) every five years—announced its plan to hold its 14th edition both in Kassel and Athens in 2017, the Biennale announced “a strategic postponing” of its 6th edition in “a year of ‘Active Waiting.’” This year included a series of events under the heading “Waiting for the Barbarians,” curated by Heart & Sword Division (HSD), a group of artists, curators, and theorists.<sup>36</sup>

The “Waiting for the Barbarians” program drew on the conflicting barbarian figures that Cavafy’s poem also evokes. According to HSD’s “Curatorial Statement,” on the one hand, in public discourse the barbarian is a figure for menacing external others who have been “ante portas” “since the start of the new century” (a likely allusion to 9/11), and “keep on coming, again and again.” On the other hand, in intellectual thought and the arts, the barbarian has often been a “positive and messianic” figure called to capture “a new nomadic/rootless/hybrid/global subjectivity” (Heart and Sword Division 2017). The curators denounced the conception of the barbarian as a negative other: “The Barbarian is neither the ominous Other, the refugee, the migrant, the Muslim, nor the exoticizing and eroticizing orientalist, the ‘menace’ of the ‘northern colonialist’” (Heart and Sword Division 2017). But they were also critical of artistic endorsements of barbarism, as the following statement from an interview indicates:

A large part of contemporary art and intellectual thought beautified, refined the barbarians. In the new century, this process is reflected in art’s selective and often raw enthusiasm for radical political thought. In the recent intellectual history of Documenta and the field of art there are

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36. This program of events, launched on 5 April 2017, was supposed to culminate in April 2018 with the exhibition “Waiting for the Barbarians.” Eventually, the Biennale’s title became ANTI and “Waiting for the Barbarians” remained the title of the program that functioned as a “prelude to ANTI” (“6th Athens Biennale” 2018).



many moments of excitement and ambivalence towards the barbarians. (HSD in Kleftoyanni 2017)<sup>37</sup>

The affirmative conception of barbarism in art harks back to decadent art and poetry, but also to the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. The curators, however, were especially critical of the twenty-first-century epigones of this tradition. The artistic scene of the new millennium embraces what HSD saw as a light, “tamed” barbarism, emulating radical political thought without its political edge. The main target of their critique was Documenta 14, which they saw as an exemplification of this “tamed” barbarism within the institutional framework of such a lavishly funded international artistic event. The curatorial team saw this refined form of artistic barbarism as integral to the art system and, more generally, the capitalist market. They counterpoised this “fake” barbarism of institutionalized art to a more authentic barbarian identity, which they assumed for themselves, implicitly situating themselves outside (or on the margins of) the global art system: as “natives” rather than inauthentic critical cosmopolitanists. This form of resistance—projected as authentic barbarism—flirted dangerously, however, with nationalism and parochialism.<sup>38</sup>

The institutional restrictions of high-profile art events surely complicate their potential to act as affirmative “barbarian” forces in the art world and in society. Nevertheless, the desire for alternative narratives for the future animates the imagination of contemporary artists as well as of various social and protest movements that have emerged from the Great Recession of 2007–2009 to the present: from the “Occupy” movement, the “Indignados” in Spain and elsewhere, the crowds assembling in “Syntagma” (Constitution) Square in Athens in 2011, and the 2013 Gezi Park protesters in Istanbul, to more recent climate protests, the Black Lives Matter movement, the massive 2019 protests across Latin America, and many others. Some of these movements were criticized for lacking clear causes, objectives, and political programs. What this criticism failed to acknowledge is that demands for social change and new narratives cannot always be articulated through the vocabularies of dominant discourses without risking reproducing the ideological structures and systemic inequalities these discourses encompass. Demands for radical, emancipatory

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37. My translation from the Greek.

38. The nationalist undertones of their venture were suggested by the “barbarian attire” in which they appeared during a press conference, comprising black costumes reminiscent of Greek brigands, associated with the history of Greek resistance against the Ottoman occupation (Bailey 2019, 14).

change may at times sound confusing, because they could anticipate a future language: a language that sounds like barbarian noise (“bar bar bar”), because it has not been (fully) formed *yet* in terms recognizable to hegemonic discourses.

### g. Reluctant Irony as Being-with-Specters

The conflicting mobilizations of barbarism today in political and artistic contexts underscore the concept’s double potential. Barbarism denotes civilization’s negative other in an oppositional, exclusionary mindset. But it can also signify newness, radical change, or critique of an established framework. Cavafy’s poem mobilizes the concept’s twofold potential by negotiating between specters of past barbarians that are not there “any longer” and specters of future barbarian (foreign) narratives that are not there yet. The former specters alert us to the pervasiveness of the old opposition between civilization and barbarism in Western history; the latter specters signal the possibility of another “kind of solution,” and, perhaps, a language freed from the category of the barbarian. But what is the poem’s approach to these competing specters, past and future? Does it opt for one over the other?

An essential catalyst in this spectral interplay is irony, as it emerges from the final two lines:

And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.  
(1992, 19)

Some critics have suggested that these lines are spoken by a third, detached voice that rises above the limited perspective of the two speakers.<sup>39</sup> I propose, however, that these lines are spoken by the first speaker—the one asking the questions. These words are an attempt to salvage the old discourse on barbarians—an attempt severely weakened by the doubt in the words “a kind of.” “A kind of solution” captures the agony of the speaker, who realizes the bankruptcy of the previous order and yet clings to it for fear of the unknown. Refusing to crystallize into a definitive statement, these lines yield a sense of groundlessness and undecidability. Civilization’s “truth” that sees in the barbarians the solution to the waiting has to coexist with the subversive addition “a kind of,” which questions this truth, *without, however, fully dismissing or replacing it with*

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39. See for example Poggioli 1959, 148.

*another truth (yet)*. This irony captures the contiguity of two truths rather than substituting the one with the other.

The ironic voice of these lines knows that the “old” barbarians are not the solution, as these barbarians are produced within a dominant discourse that is part of the problem. But the speaker is also reluctant to conjure away the specters of the old barbarians. He is, after all, constituted as a subject through this discourse. Fully disavowing its categories may be an impossible gesture of self-erasure.

These lines express the kind of *reluctant* irony delineated in the previous chapter: not nihilistic, but drawn to the security of old truths while also questioning their efficacy. The speaker realizes the truth of the (old) barbarians has “aged” but cannot let it go. He longs for presence and truth: hypostatizing the past barbarians who are fading away and confirming the historical law of their perpetual reappearance. But he simultaneously concedes that this historical “truth” is contingent: the words “a kind of” transpose it from a metaphysical realm to the precarious realm of linguistic approximation and catachresis. The phrase “οἱ ἄνθρωποι αὐτοί” / “those people” enhances this reluctant irony: designating the barbarians as “humans”—another translation of the word “ἄνθρωποι”—on the one hand demythologizes these historico-mythical creatures and rehumanizes the others civilization has demonized for the sake of its self-legitimization. On the other hand, using the word “ἄνθρωποι” is also, perhaps, a last attempt to produce the barbarian specters as actual presences: this final speech act tries to bring them to the same ontological plane as the empire’s citizens. The speaker, of course, knows this attempt will misfire, but tries nonetheless.

The ambiguity of the final lines does not end there. The poem’s last word—the Greek *λύσις*—harbors an ultimate ironic gesture. The word’s common meaning in modern Greek is “solution,” which is how it is translated in English. But the ancient Greek *λύσις* can denote the remission of an illness (the healing of the Empire’s malaise) as well as dissolution, breakdown: this accentuates the poem’s equivocal projection of the barbarians as both a solution and part of the problem. The poem’s irony thus also cautions against conceptions of the barbarian as a *positive* figure of historical change through total destruction of the old—conceptions that circulate in twentieth-century avant-garde art but also, as we saw, in the contemporary art world. The final lines invite readers to add some hesitation, the words “a kind of,” to any overconfident narrative of a solution to a crisis, any discourse that promises unmediated access to truth or any plea for destroying the past to make way for the new.

What kind of temporality does the poem’s end project, then? The empire’s

crisis is marked by the apocalyptic anticipation of the barbarians as a solution that would set things right. This anticipation structures the experience of the present as sluggish, uneventful, static (Bryant 2016, 23). In her delineation of temporalities produced through situations of crisis, Rebecca Bryant describes this experience “as a present lived at a threshold of anticipation” (23). Within this “threshold” the citizens, as we saw, are not open to a radically different narrative, but plan to transfer their power structures to the barbarians. The barbarians’ disappearance disrupts the citizens’ threshold of anticipation, giving shape to what Bryant calls a “critical threshold.” “[U]nlike in apocalyptic narratives,” Bryant writes, in a critical threshold “the future is not one of anticipated rectification or reorientation of time and space but is rather uncertain and unknown” (23). The critical threshold the poem’s ending fosters produces the present as “uncanny.” Its familiarity, as shaped by past narratives, dissipates. The present assumes “the burden of gathering the past and projecting it into the unknown future” (24).

By making the present uncanny, the poem introduces a temporality that is neither linear nor cyclical, but spectral. The past keeps haunting the present in the poem’s end—the speaker of the final lines does not let go of the barbarians—but the way this past may shape the future becomes incalculable. Bryant foregrounds the *return* of the past, which is central to the logic of haunting, as distinct from *repetition*, which typifies cyclical narratives of history:

While repetition implies taking lessons from the past, but more importantly shaping our comportment and intentionality towards the future, return instead implies the past as a type of haunting of the present, where uncanniness arises not from intentionality but from the past’s unpredictability in relation to the future. In this instance, the uncanny present is a moment of crisis that may be resolved through mobilizing “forgotten” pasts to develop a new intentional stance towards the future. (2016, 29)

The final two lines exemplify such a conjuncture of present, past, and future, in which the past haunts, but does not predetermine, the present and the future. The word “now” (“τώρα”) signals a present that cracks open, inviting the future tense as an open question (“τι θα γένουμε” / “what’s going to happen”) without erasing the past (“Οι άνθρωποι αυτοί ήσαν” / “they were, those people”).<sup>40</sup> The

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40. I am grateful to Dimitri Gondicas for the observation that the final lines bring together the past, present, and future.

past tense with which the “old” barbarians are linked (“were”) indexes both the mourning for something lost (i.e., the certainty of their arrival) as well as their persisting force in the present, which now, however, loses its predictability. The logic of haunting has, in Gayatri Spivak’s words, an “unanticipatable periodicity”: the past keeps coming back, but how or when it comes back we cannot know and predict (1995, 70). The unforeseeable outcome of this temporal interplay is also implied in the verb “θα γένουμε.” The verb “γένω” means “become,” and even though Keeley and Sherrard translate this with “going to happen,” another, perhaps preferable, translation would be “will become of us” (i.e., “what will become of us without barbarians”).<sup>41</sup> This utterance is less concerned with what events may take place in the future and more with the subjectivities or identities that will be formed through this fracturing of the empire’s narrative.<sup>42</sup> As the poem ends, the “we” emerges as precarious, in becoming (“θα γένουμε”), amenable to a form of dispossession that is also, as we have seen, the specter’s mode of being: a “we” that *is* and *is not*, or that *is (other)*.

This “we” is, perhaps, more receptive to the voices of specters. Specters do not carry a univocal truth or secret but an address to the living by past voices or by the not-yet-articulated possibilities of the future (Davis 2005, 379). What we do with this address is our responsibility—just as the poem transfers the search for another “kind of solution” to Cavafy’s future readership, as a challenge in our present.

The reluctant irony of the final lines thereby becomes part of a practice of being with specters. “Being-with specters” for Derrida entails learning to converse with them rather than being afraid or unaware of them or trying to control or exorcize them (1994, 47, 176). Conversing with specters will not help us decipher the present: it involves a process of *unknowing* which may make our certainties waver. The poem sets such a process of unknowing in motion by withdrawing the barbarians from the empire’s stage.

The poem’s spectral temporality disjoins not only cyclical and linear narratives but also the time of an *eternal present*—time at a standstill—that dominates the poem’s city. This is the temporality of chronic crisis without prospect of resolution. Today, our realities are permeated by this sense of perpetual crisis. “The concept ‘crisis,’” Agamben said in an interview in 2013, “has indeed become a motto of modern politics, and for a long time it has been part of

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41. I am grateful to Alexander Nehamas for alerting me to the significance of the verb “θα γένουμε” in the original.

42. It is worth noting that in the Greek there is no question mark at the end of this verse, unlike in the English translation.

normality in any segment of social life” (2013).<sup>43</sup> While in ancient Greek “crisis” (*κρίσις*) signified “judgment” and “decision,” “the present understanding of crisis,” Agamben argues, “refers to an enduring state. So this uncertainty is extended into the future, indefinitely.” While crisis is mobilized in politics as “an instrument of rule” that works to legitimize authoritative and often anti-democratic political and economic decisions (Agamben 2013), this chronic experience of crisis has also intensified the longing for alternative, different modes of living, belonging, and relating to others.

In the poem, the temporality of crisis as a permanent state that forestalls choice and decision is forcefully enacted in the citizens’ passive waiting for a *deus ex machina*. The poem’s revolutionary gesture, however, lies in reopening a space of *crisis* as choice and critique by debunking the empire’s historical “truth” and reintroducing the future as an open question.

Avoiding dogmatism, the poem does not offer a new truth to replace the old narrative of empire and barbarians. But it harbors an alternative mode of living in crisis times to the citizens’ passive waiting: living in the company of specters, acknowledging the affective force of old narratives, but also the possibility of recasting them toward new subjectivities and future “barbarian” languages that are, hopefully, worth waiting for.

Cavafy’s own poetic language also sounded “barbarian” to most of his contemporaries. “I do not like his barbarian rime [. . .]. He will have no followers. Those who will follow him, will create parody,” Timos Malanos stated in an interview in 1924 (quoted in Daskalopoulos and Stasinopoulou 2013, 106).<sup>44</sup> His idiosyncratic poetic diction—its hybridity, mixture of linguistic registers and of demotic and archaic Greek, and the unembellished, prosaic, antilyrical language—baffled Cavafy’s contemporaries, and especially literary circles in Greece. This is perhaps why Cavafy looked forward, to his poetry’s afterlives and to a future readership, when he wrote in his self-assessment in 1930 that he is “a poet of the future generations” (2010, 143). Anticipating future languages and concerns through expressive modes not fully intelligible in his time, or perhaps even today, Cavafy’s specters are fortunately still among us.

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43. The original interview in German is titled “Die endlose Krise ist ein Machtinstrument.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 24 May 2013. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/bilder-und-zeiten/giorgio-agamben-im-gespraech-die-endlose-krise-ist-ein-machtinstrument-12193816.html>

44. My translation from the Greek: “Δεν μου αρέσει η βάρβαρος ρίμα του [. . .] Δεν θα έχει κανένα μιμητήν. Εκείνος που θα τον μιμηθεί θα κάμει παρωδίαν.”

## CHAPTER SIX



### The Futurity of Things Past

#### *From Colonized Egypt to the Greek Crisis and Beyond*

##### a. Introduction

The previous chapter followed the contemporary afterlives of Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" and the ways this poem deals with persistent historical narratives in the present while opening up the possibility of alternative future narratives. This final chapter continues to trace the afterlives of Cavafy's poetry by drawing even more attention to the question of futurity. How do Cavafy's poems address the future, and which modes of reading could stimulate his poems' futurity—their ability to keep haunting, and be haunted by, future presents unpredictably?

My understanding of futurity is tied to the spectral temporality that emerges from Derrida's hauntology,<sup>1</sup> and from what Arjun Appadurai calls a "politics of possibility" (2013, 1, 3), whereby past and future are taken to be open-ended rather than already realized or predetermined (Stuit 2016, 99): that is, open to possibilities and modes of being and thinking that cannot be fully calculated or articulated in the present. The past can activate such possibilities when engagement with the past is not "retrospective," based on nostalgic idealization or ossification of past objects, but "prospective": concerned, following Svetlana Boym, with the past's "many potentialities that have not been realized" (2001, 178).<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I ask how the "remembrance of things past" in Cavafy—to use the first English title of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*—turns into the *futurity* of things past.<sup>3</sup>

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1. For a delineation of Derrida's hauntology (1994) and spectral temporality, see chapter 1.

2. On this notion of futurity, see also Eshel 2012.

3. This phrase, which Scott Moncrieff used in his translation of the title of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1922, belongs to Shakespeare's Sonnet 30. My delineation of futurity in this paragraph is drawn from Boletsi 2018b, 6.

This understanding of futurity, which acknowledges the open-ended address of past objects in the present, is attached to the pre-posterous reading I proposed in this book, following Bal's notion of pre-posterous history (1999). Past texts haunt their future recastings but are equally open to being transformed by them. A pre-posterous reading can thus fracture a poem's seemingly unified context and even recast its parts as fragments from the future. In this chapter, I explore the futurity emerging from Cavafy's spectral poetics alongside such practices of fracturing and fragmentation. How can poetic fragments, decoupled from their immediate surroundings in a poem, invite pre-posterous readings of that poem that summon specters of realized and unrealized futures?

The poem that takes center stage in this chapter is “*Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.*” / “*In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.*,” a poem Cavafy composed in 1928, toward the end of his life.<sup>4</sup> Instead of starting with the poem itself, however, I first turn to the workings of fragments from this and other Cavafian poems in the present. I follow Cavafy's specters in Greece in the midst of the country's debt crisis (2009–2018) through acts of public commemoration and dissemination of the poet's work, in which Cavafian verses were released in public space, decontextualized, and misquoted. Fragmentation, recontextualization, and even misquoting, I argue, can sometimes amplify a poem's signifying force. Along these lines, I zoom in on the travels of a line from “*In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.*” in Athens during a public campaign in 2013. The workings of this severed line—and the controversy it sparked—prompt me to revisit the poem pre-posterously: starting from its contemporary fragmentation, I explore how the poem is haunted by Egypt's modern history of debt and colonization before and after the poem's writing (1928), as well as by the neoliberal rhetoric of debt, crisis, and reform in Greece in the years of the recent debt crisis—and beyond. The poem, as I show, presents a society in crisis without offering the prospect of a better future. Yet a verse in it, when read as a fragment, invites specters of alternative futures that activate the possibility of historical justice and political hope.

The pre-posterous reading-by-fragments I propose does not erase the poem's historicity by decontextualizing it, but expands it by decoupling it from linear temporality and the logic of unidirectional influence of the past on the present. If, as Sara Ahmed argues, “*historicity is what is concealed by the transformation of the world into ‘the ordinary,’ into something that is already familiar, or recognisable,*” the reading I propose seeks to rekindle the poem's historic-

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4. Boletsis 2018b contains a condensed version of my argument and analysis of this poem in the present chapter.



ity by making the text strange, “as if” encountered for the first time (179–80). The poetic text thereby emerges as a node traversed by multiple histories that work unpredictably on the present. Following a spectral logic, this reading-by-fragments allows the poetic text to override the constraints of its own context and “return” to us *otherwise*.

As we trace the afterlives of Cavafy’s poems, we run against regulatory practices aimed at preserving the poet’s cultural and national myth. How do Cavafy’s poems haunt today despite, but also through, such practices? In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* titled “Cavafy Pop” (2015), Dimitris Papanikolaou and Eleni Papargyriou observe that “in recent years, the popular reception of Cavafy’s work has grown so pluriform, multilayered and anarchic, that in many ways it renders the old traditional biography of the poet and the assumptions about his work (and the work’s ‘integrity’), obsolete.” There is, they write, “a global workshop on Cavafy’s poetry and persona” yielding a reception that “extends from painting and photography to comics and video art, from the use of poems out of context or in a fragmented fashion on the Internet, street art and in public spaces, to the commercialization of Cavafy’s image and ‘hit’ verses on media headlines, in merchandizing or TV commercials” (2015, 184–85).<sup>5</sup> And yet this popular reception of Cavafy “is often intertwined with,” or runs up against, “a powerful literary myth,” which involves regulatory mechanisms seeking to preserve the “integrity” of Cavafy’s poems as consecrated artefacts (184, 187). Attempts to disseminate Cavafy’s poetry in public space and subject it to unorthodox recastings thus clash against attempts to canonize, consecrate it, and regulate its meanings. With such processes in mind, I turn to Cavafy in the following section through the metaphor of a fractured statue.

### b. Cavafy’s Fractured Statue

In his essay “Shelley Disfigured” (1979), literary theorist Paul de Man centers on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s long unfinished poem “The Triumph of Life” (1822), on which Shelley was working shortly before his untimely death that year. As an unfinished fragment, the poem, de Man argues, has attracted much “archeological labor”: it has been “unearthed, edited, reconstructed, and much discussed” (1984, 93). The poem itself invites this archaeological task, as it is structured

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5. On Cavafy’s rise to worldwide fame and his function as a multifaceted icon, see Dimirouli 2013.

around questions that a reader-archaeologist is prompted to pose to the poem itself, such as: “Whence camest thou? and whither goest thou? / How did thy course begin, I said, ‘and why?’ (ll. 296–97)” (Shelley, quoted in de Man 1984, 93). Posing such questions to the poem allows us to see it as a “fragment of something whole [. . .] or a moment, in a process that now includes us within its horizon” (94). With this in mind, de Man asks: “What relationship do we have to such a text that allows us to call it a fragment that we are then entitled to reconstruct, to identify, and implicitly to complete?” (94). De Man extrapolates this question to Shelley himself, whom he visualizes as “a statue” that “can be broken into pieces, mutilated or allegorized [. . .] after having been stiffened, frozen, erected.” This brings him to the question: “Is the status of a text like the status of a statue?” (94–95). Through the statue metaphor, de Man addresses the monumentalization of canonical literature:

For what we have done with the dead Shelley, and with all the other dead bodies that appear in romantic literature [. . .] is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graces. They have been made into statues for the benefit of future archeologists “digging in the grounds for the new foundations” of their own monuments. They have been transformed into historical and aesthetic objects. (121)

If canonical texts as statues have grown stiff, “inflexible in their interpretation,” the reader’s task for de Man would be to disfigure them, without, however, pulling them down (McQuillan 2001, 68). De Man calls this “reading as disfiguration” (1984, 123):

to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat—that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn. (122)

De Man pleads for a reading that gives the dead a voice but also enables *us* to address *them*—i.e., a reading that allows the dead to haunt *us*, and *us* to haunt, change, deface *them* through our apostrophe in the present. Their ability to haunt and be haunted does not mean that the dead escape their “demise”; theirs is an agency in and through death. Apostrophes are, after all, addressed to the departed.

De Man’s metaphor of the poet-as-statue to be disfigured finds a visual analogue in Apostolos Fanakidis’s bust of C. P. Cavafy (figure 4). The artwork was



Figure 4. *Cavafy* (bust) by Apostolos Fanakidis, 2013. Polyester and neon. Photograph by Thaleia Kimbari. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

included in the exhibition *Κ.Π. Καβάφης: Ζωγραφισμένα / C.P. Cavafy: Pictured* at the Theodorakis Foundation in Athens in 2013.<sup>6</sup> The work preserves and simultaneously disfigures the poet's image. The white polyester bust of the poet is interrupted by a stripe of red neon light creating a schism across the face. The work has an uncanny effect, owing perhaps to the shock of an inanimate object appearing to be alive, topped by other visual incongruities—red and white, warm and cold, and by extension, life and death, wholeness and fragmentation, containment and overflow. The visceral energy the work transmits through the impression of flowing blood overpowers the stiffness of the bust as though it cannot be contained by it.

The artwork stages the poet's monumentalization and its simultaneous

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6. This exhibition hosted more than 100 artworks inspired by, or conversing with, Cavafy and his poetry.

undoing. Contrasted with the red neon light, the white cold bust turns into a marker of death rather than eternal life. The poet, to borrow de Man's words, is projected as one of those "dead bodies" we "bury" "in their own texts made into epitaphs" (1984, 121). The fissure across the face both fractures and animates the poet's face. It works as a destructive agent that cracks the poet's "skull" open but also a life-giving force that introduces a pulse into a fossilized body. The red light's evocation of blood connotes life but also the transience of things, even those that seem untouchable by time, like statues. Turning a statue into a living object, the work reminds us that conjuring the dead sometimes demands a defacement—a rupture in the dominant narratives that have erected their statues—but also that this conjuration is temporary, uncertain. The work thereby reflects on monumentalizations of Cavafy in Greece. To put it with de Man, it gives "the dead" "a face and a voice" by creating and deforming Cavafy's epitaph so that his specter can return, addressing us, and allowing us to address it, from the present (de Man 1984, 122).

George Seferis famously likened the effect of Cavafy's poetry to that of a missing statue. "Cavafy's poems," he wrote, "show the emotion [συγκίνηση] we would have from a statue which is no longer there; which was there, which we saw and has now been displaced [. . .]. The catastrophe is that missing statue" (Seferis 1999, 158; my translation).<sup>7</sup> Following this metaphor, the haunting force of Cavafy's poetry is likened to something gone or displaced that is still "felt" in the present like a phantom limb. But if Seferis's metaphor puts more emphasis on what is missing, in this chapter I exchange the missing statue metaphor with that of a fractured statue, as visualized in Fanakidis's bust. Cavafy himself was preoccupied with fragments and ruins. Many of his poems are attempts to read ancient inscriptions, fractured and partly illegible tombstones, past societies in decline or past lives in moments of ruin and loss. In tune with Cavafy's own strategies for conjuring the past, fracturing a poem—in the way Fanakidis's artwork "fractures" Cavafy's bust—may be a way of making it come alive and activating its potential to address future presents.

### c. Verses in Transit

The exhibition *C. P. Cavafy—Pictured*, in which Fanakidis's artwork was included, took place in 2013, which UNESCO declared as the "Year of Cavafy."

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7. Seferis drew this metaphor from Petros Vlastos, who saw Cavafy's poems as pedestals without statues (Seferis 1999, 158).

This was a year of worldwide celebrations of 150 years from the poet's birth in academic, artistic, and popular settings: conferences, special journal issues, magazine articles, exhibitions, performances, and campaigns. One of these events that took place in the last months of 2013 involved putting up large posters with lines from Cavafy's poems on Athenian buses, trolleys, and metro stations. This initiative was part of a publicity campaign launched by the Cultural Center of the Alexander Onassis Foundation to celebrate the Foundation's acquisition of the poet's archive that year. Commuters, shoppers, workers, pensioners, migrants, tourists, or schoolchildren in transit in Athenian streets shared their everyday routines for a few weeks with fragments from nine Cavafian poems, such as: "Ἐπέστρεφε συχνά και παίρνε με αγαπημένη αίσθησις" ("Come back often and take hold of me, sensation that I love"), "Ἐδώ που ἔφθασες λίγο δεν εἶναι" ("To have come this far is no small achievement"), "Δεν ἔχω σήμερα κεφάλι για δουλειά" ("I'm in no mood for work today"), "Ἐξένος εγώ, ξένος πολύ" ("A stranger, a total stranger"), and "Και τέλος πάντων, να, τραβούμ' εμπρός" ("And after all, you see, we do go forward") (figures 5, 6).<sup>8</sup> These lines were quoted without mention of the poems they were taken from. Framed by a pop aesthetic, created by the Beetroot design group, they were turned into "poetic slogans" (Astrapellou 2013).

This was not the first time Cavafian verses figure in public space. In Leiden, a city in the Netherlands, for example, Cavafy's "Κρυμμένα" / "Hidden Things" is written in Greek on one of the city's walls (figure 7). This was part of a project by the Foundation TEGEN-BEELD, aiming to bring world poetry to the public in Leiden. The project originally included 101 poems from around the world placed on walls around the city between 1992 and 2005.<sup>9</sup> Cavafy's poem—the only Modern Greek poem included in the project—figures in its entirety and without daring choices in its aesthetic framing, making this a safer experiment in poetry's public dissemination than the decontextualized Cavafian verses in 2013 Athens.

Another artistic experiment involving public display of Cavafian verses took place in Malaga, Spain, in 1998 under the title *Calle Cavafis* (Cavafy Street). Rogelio López Cuenca's project *Calle Cavafis* sought to recontextualize several poems in order to spark historical, cultural, or political associations that would bring them closer to the Spanish public and to events of the late twentieth cen-

8. The translations of these lines are Keeley and Sherrard's. The lines are respectively from the poems "Ἐπέστρεφε" / "Come Back"; "Το πρώτο σκαλί" / "The First Step"; "Συμεών" / "Simeon"; "Μύρης, Αλεξάνδρεια του 340 μ. Χ." / "Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340."; and "Ἐν μεγάλη Ἑλληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ." / "In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C."

9. More poems were added after 2005, bringing the total number to 112. Some of these poems have been painted over or destroyed over the years.



Figure 5. From the 2013 “Cavafy campaign” by the Onassis Foundation (Athens, Greece). Displayed line (in English translation): “A stranger, a total stranger,” trans. by Keeley and Sherrard. Image reproduced by kind permission of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation.

ture (González and Nicolaidou 2015, 214). The project spanned two weeks in the autumn of 1998, during which billboards were placed on roadsides and bus stops figuring fragments or the full text of seventeen Cavafian poems in Catalan or Spanish translations or, in a few cases, in Greek (214).

As Vicente Fernández González and Ioanna Nicolaidou explain, Cuenca used the generic conventions of advertising slogans as a means of publicly recasting poetry. His rendition of “Waiting for the Barbarians” is a case in point:<sup>10</sup> the poster featured verses and words from the poem without mentioning the source. Seen at a bus stop, the poster would have given the impression of an advertisement or “discount offer.” The framing of the poem’s fragments evoked and subverted the language of consumerism (216). The foregrounding of the words “vacías” (empty) and “barbaros” (barbarians) on the poster, transferred connotations of emptiness and barbarism to capitalism and con-

10. For an image of Cuenca’s rendition of the poem, see González and Nicolaidou 2015, 217.



Figure 6. From the 2013 Cavafy campaign by the Onassis Foundation (Athens, Greece). Displayed line (in English translation): “And after all, you see, we do go forward,” trans. by Keeley and Sherrard. Image reproduced by kind permission of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation.

sumerism, redirecting attention from the poem’s (absent) external barbarians to forms of barbarism inherent in capitalism.

The 2013 Cavafy campaign by the Onassis Cultural Center also experimented with recontextualization. The campaign aimed at stimulating the public’s interest in Cavafy’s work and projecting the topicality of his poetry today by dislodging it from conventional modes of display.<sup>11</sup> The venture was deemed controversial by some and attracted mixed reactions in the press. Many welcomed this public sharing of Cavafy’s verses, which projected his poetry as public property, not only belonging to an elite of specialists. But there were also critical responses, ranging from light skepticism to indignation and outrage, which generally had two motivations: philological and ideological.

11. See the comments by Afroditi Panagiotakou and Yannis Charalambopoulos in Astrapellou 2013.

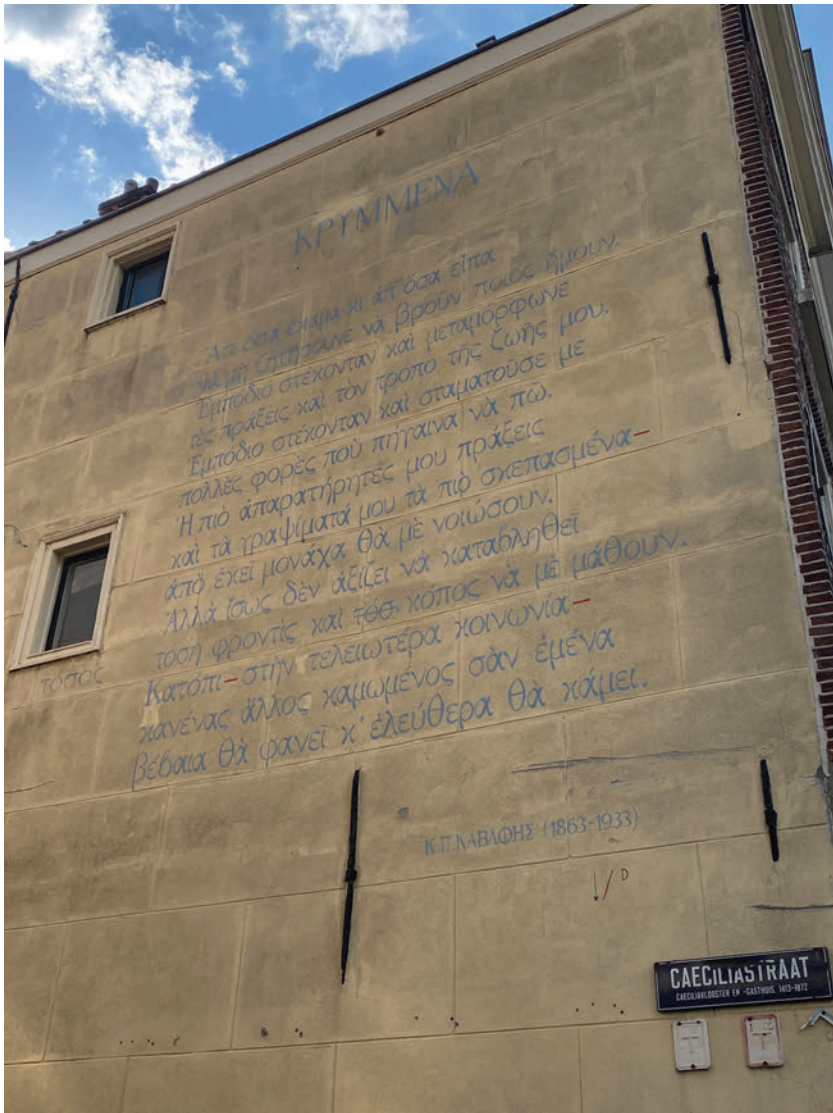


Figure 7. Cavafy's poem "Κρυμμένα"/"Hidden Things" on the corner of Turfmarkt Street 6 and Caeciliastraat, Leiden, the Netherlands (since 1994). Part of the "wall poems" (muurgedichten) project of TEGENBEELD Foundation. Photo Maria Boletsi. (September 2022).



Literary scholar Nasos Vayenas, for example, found that the choice of verses for the campaign “should have been assigned to people who know Cavafy’s work well” in order to mitigate the risk of misreadings and political misuse (quoted in Astrapellou 2013).<sup>12</sup> Cavafy’s poetry, others asserted, should be protected from mundane settings and fragmentation. In a piece called “Ψιλοκομμένος Καβάφης?” (“Minced Cavafy?”), blogger Nikos Sarantakos argued that Cavafy’s poetry “does not warrant slicing.” In his view, the campaign’s fragmentation of Cavafy’s poetry produced distorted meanings and obscured the ironic charge of these lines in the context of the poems (2013). Whereas some maintained that the campaign subverted neoliberal discourse by unleashing in public space a product exempted from commercial competition, others underscored the danger of ideological misuse of these verses (Doxiadis 2013).<sup>13</sup> Extracted from their poetic contexts, the lines were deemed vulnerable to political propaganda, which was heightened in a country deeply afflicted by the financial crisis in 2013 (Doxiadis 2013). Certain lines, decontextualized as they were, were even considered to work in support of the right-wing government’s pro-austerity rhetoric, such as the line “Και τέλος πάντων να, τραβούμι εμπρός” / “And after all, you see, we do go forward” from “Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.” / “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” (Plantzos 2015, 196). Despite their divergent motivations, many critiques of the campaign were grounded in the logic of safeguarding Cavafy’s poetry from potential misuses that its fragmentation and public exposure would generate.

#### d. “Violence Is a Dangerous Thing”

The most controversial line in the campaign was “είν’ επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία” (figure 8) from the poem “Εν μεγάλη Ελληνική αποικία, 200 π.Χ.” / “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” (1928). The line’s fragmentation, many noticed, invited a misreading of the word *βία* (*via*) as “violence” rather than “haste,” which is the word’s apparent meaning in the poem. Although “violence” is the common meaning of *βία* in Greek, in the poem Cavafy uses the word in its more archaic meaning of “haste,” nearly obsolete in modern Greek today.

12. My translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Greek nonliterary sources in this chapter are mine. The Greek original is quoted only when deemed important for the argument.

13. Kyrkos Doxiadis’s comments are derived from his talk during a panel discussion on the Cavafy campaign titled “Τι συμβαίνει όταν ο Καβάφης μπαίνει στα μέσα μαζικής μεταφοράς;” (What Happens When Cavafy Enters the Means of Public Transport?), organized by the Onassis Cultural Center on 4 November 2013. At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huktWMqFCqs>. Accessed 10 June 2017.



Figure 8. From the 2013 “Cavafy campaign” by the Onassis Foundation (Athens, Greece). Displayed line (in English translation): “Violence / haste is a dangerous thing” (my translation). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation.

Removed from the poem, this line would thus be read by contemporary readers as “violence is a dangerous thing.”

The perceived misquoting of Cavafy’s line was thought to turn Cavafy into a spokesman for the Greek government’s rhetoric. Understanding the logic of this charge requires a brief sketch of the political climate at the time in Greece, where violence had grown into a highly debated issue. In 2013, the effects of the Greek debt crisis that broke out in 2009, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, were intensely felt by the population. High unemployment rates, the impoverishment of a large part of the population, and harsh austerity politics had sparked political unrest and protests across the country, voicing people’s anger “at the perceived turning of Greece into a ‘debt colony’” (Plantzos 2015, 195).<sup>14</sup> Some acts of protest expressed new, creative forms of activ-

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14. To sketch the political climate in which the campaign was received, I draw from Plantzos 193–97.

ism that eschewed conventional party politics. The Greek “Indignant Citizens Movement” (*Aganaktismenoi*), who gathered at the Syntagma Square in Athens in the spring and summer of 2011, was case in point. But hostility against the state was also expressed through riots and acts of vandalism. Especially since the death of three bank employees in May 2010 after hooded protesters set fire to the bank during an anti-austerity rally, antigovernment protest was strongly condemned by the government and its supporters, and became increasingly associated with violence. As Dimitris Plantzos explains, “[d]enouncing violence wherever it may come from’ soon became a returning mantra on the lips of government officials and its sympathizers, suggesting that any anti-austerity pronouncement was in fact guilty of the deaths of those three people as well as of countless incidents of vandalism, destruction of property and, in a word, terrorism” (2015, 196). By renouncing all violence, the Greek government, then led by the center-right party New Democracy, embraced in its rhetoric the “theory of the two extremes.” This refers to the conflation or simplistic comparison of extreme-right violence and human rights abuses exercised primarily by the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (which had secured a place in the Greek parliament) with violent incidents during protests associated with the radical left (including supporters of the left party SYRIZA) and anti-authoritarian extra-parliamentary groups. The government mobilized this narrative to oppose the oppositional parties of Golden Dawn and SYRIZA as equally “extreme” and dangerous to the country’s democracy.

Notably, a vocabulary of violence permeated several critiques of the Cavafy campaign too. For example, Poly Krimnioti, in two articles in the left-wing newspaper *Avgi* on 17 and 19 October 2013, accused the Onassis Foundation of misquoting Cavafy’s line “εἰν’ επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία” with the purpose of forcibly relating the fragment to the threat of violence in Greece, thereby giving credence to the “theory of the two extremes” (2013a).<sup>15</sup> “The poet,” she wrote, “is being raped (from *βιασμός* / *viasmos*), because his thought is being distorted” (2013a).<sup>16</sup> At the same time, she posed the purportedly “self-evident” fact that “since Cavafy is such a great poet, his verse is not at risk of misunderstandings” (2013b).<sup>17</sup> Following this logic, great poets are so clear about their meanings that it is impossible

15. The article was characteristically titled “Η βία, η βιασύνη, οι βάρβαροι . . .” (Violence, Haste, the Barbarians . . .).

16. In Greek: “ο ποιητής βιάζεται (εκ του βιασμός), διότι διαστρεβλώνεται η σκέψη του.”

17. In her 19 October follow-up article, Krimnioti discussed the response of the Onassis Foundation to the controversy this verse sparked. The foundation denied that any political expediency was involved in the campaign and issued a statement that “the particular verse will be complemented as follows in the places where it has been posted: ‘Να μη βιαζόμεθα· εἰν’ επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία’” (quoted in Krimnioti 2013b). The foundation thus decided to amend the citation by quoting the verse in full, thereby making the meaning of the word *βία* (*via*) as “haste” unequivocal and precluding the line’s misreading.

to read their poems differently than they intended—leaving ambiguity to bad or minor poetry. Cavafy’s casting as a “great” (read: “national”) poet connotes a process of consecration and policing of his poetry’s meanings. Krimnioti’s religious vocabulary—she refers to a society’s poets as its “holy and sacred things”<sup>18</sup>—casts a great poet as a nation’s property, whose integrity needs safeguarding. Cavafy’s statue ought not to be disfigured.

If a great poet is “not at risk” of being misunderstood, as Krimnioti poses, whence the anxious attempt to police the “self-evident” meaning of the poem at hand? The violent language in this and other responses to the “misquoted” verse betrays an anxiety about fracturing the poet’s “statue.” From this perspective, new and deviant readings are likely to be perceived as acts of violence against the poem and its maker. The online publication of Krimnioti’s 19 October article, under the image of a bus showing the controversial line, featured the following caption:

Poetry’s reception is an open issue, just like a bottle at sea. Those in power chose to chop up Cavafy with the *via*-thing.<sup>19</sup>

In this peculiarly self-contradictory caption, reception is qualified as open-ended, while the “message in a bottle” metaphor visualizes poetry’s semantic finiteness. Poetry may travel to different places, but the bottled message is predetermined: it has been inserted by the poet, waiting to be discovered. In the same caption, the verb “chop up” (in Greek, “κομματιάσει”) produces an image of the poet’s dead body being dissected by its usurpers. This image was repeatedly evoked by the campaign’s critics: Cavafy was being “raped” (“βιάζεται”; Krimnioti 2013a), “minced” (“ψιλοκομμένος”; Sarantakos 2013), “dismembered,” and “placed on the butcher’s table” turning into “fillet, chops, antlers, brains” that are “distributed free of charge” through public transport (Kontrarou-Rassia 2013).

This violent vocabulary in fact echoes the practices of the political reformer in the poem at hand, “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” The poem’s speaker compares the reformer’s practices to those of surgeons who “slice away” so many things from the body politic that hardly anything is left (Cavafy 1992, 156). The speaker lives in 200 B.C. in a colony, probably in one of the Hellenistic kingdoms of the successors of Alexander the Great. As the colony is in crisis,

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18. Krimnioti 2013b. In Greek, she uses the phrase “τα ιερά και τα όσια.”

19. My translation from the Greek. The caption was on the article’s web page when I accessed the source on 28 January 2019. When I revisited the web page in August 2022, this caption had been removed. It can still be found in the article’s reproduction on this blogspot: [https://picasonidis.blogspot.com/2013/10/blog-post\\_4494.html](https://picasonidis.blogspot.com/2013/10/blog-post_4494.html) (accessed 10 December 2023).

many consider a political reformer as a solution—a solution, however, that the poem’s speaker distrusts. In the fifth stanza, the speaker reflects on the likely outcome of the reformers’ practices:

Κι όταν, με το καλό, τελειώσουνε την εργασία,  
 κι ορίσαντες και περικόψαντες το παν λεπτομερώς,  
 απέλθουν, παίρνοντας και την δικαία μισθοδοσία,  
 να δούμε τι απομένει πια, μετά  
 τόση δεινότητα χειρουργική.—<sup>20</sup>

And when, all being well, they finish the job,  
 every detail now diagnosed and sliced away,  
 and they retire, also taking the wages due to them—  
 it will be a miracle if anything’s left at all  
 after such surgical efficiency.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 155–56)

The poem’s vocabulary is immersed in *via* in the sense of *violence*. In my reading of the poem, I return to the violence involved in such practices of “surgical efficiency,” which finds parallels in the language of critiques of the 2013 Cavafy campaign.

Notwithstanding the violent language of these critiques, one could pose: don’t they have a point? *Via*, after all, does mean “haste” in the poem, while the verse’s fragmentation in the campaign invites readers to read it as “violence.” Delaying my reading of the poem as a whole for a little longer, I first turn to the immediate surroundings of the verse under discussion in the sixth (and last) stanza:

Ίσως δεν έφθασεν ακόμη ο καιρός.  
 Να μη βιαζόμεθα· είν’ επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία.  
 Τα πρόωρα μέτρα φέρνουν μεταμέλεια. (emphasis added)

Maybe the moment has not yet arrived.  
 Let’s not be too *hasty*: *haste* is a dangerous thing.  
 Untimely measures bring repentance.  
 (Cavafy 1992, 156; emphasis added)

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20. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F03, Sub-file SF003, Item 0016, photos 95–96; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF003–0016 (2083), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-1916-1929/>

In the second verse of this excerpt from the sixth stanza, the proximity of “βία” (*via*) with the verb “βιαζόμεθα” (to hurry, hasten), with which it shares the same root, and the fact that the verse’s second half repeats the exhortation of the first half, lead us to signify “βία” as “haste.” Is the word’s meaning unequivocal though?

In what follows, I question the purportedly self-evident singular meaning of *via* as “haste.” In doing so, I am not simply making a case for poetry’s semantic openness and for readings unbound by the poet’s or the text’s intentions. In fact, the issue of intention is pivotal in Cavafy’s work. Cavafy was deeply concerned with intentions. But intentions become most interesting in his poetry when they are broken or violated by poetic characters. Broken promises and breaches of intention, as shown in chapters 2 and 4, drive poetic creation and mark Cavafy’s spectral poetics.

Thus, when talking about honoring a poem’s intention or integrity—as many critics of the 2013 Cavafy campaign did—one should bear in mind that intention in Cavafy’s writing is a tricky and unstable construct, often breached, obscured (e.g., by irony), or impossible to ascertain. As we saw in his “Philosophical Scrutiny” (1903), discussed in chapter 4, Cavafy not only acknowledges that poetry can accommodate competing truths, but suggests that attempting to identify the perspective intended as true by the poet may be a futile venture (Cavafy 2010, 116–17). The same instability applies to the “intention” of a poem, which remains a construction based on the readers’ conjecture.<sup>21</sup> While this applies to all poetry, it is particularly pertinent to Cavafy’s writing, which experiments with the instability of intentions and truths, and thematizes breaches of intention so as to fuel the perpetuation of desire and the deferral of finality—including the finality of a text’s signifying force. To put it epigrammatically: sometimes we may do more justice to the intentions of Cavafy’s poems by violating them.

#### e. Debt, Reform, and Violence in Colonies Past and Present

In light of the above, I turn to “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.,” from which the controversial line was taken in the 2013 campaign:

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21. The readers’ construction of a poem’s “intention”—what Umberto Eco called *intentio operis* (1992)—may appear as a poem’s intrinsic intention but rests on the consensus of what Stanley Fish called an “interpretive community” of readers who share similar standards (Fish 1976). This consensus can always be questioned by another interpretive community.

Ότι τα πράγματα δεν βαίνουν κατ' ευχήν στην Αποικία  
 δεν μὲν' η ελαχίστη αμφιβολία,  
 και μ' όλο που οπωσούν τραβούμ' εμπρός,  
 ίσως, καθώς νομίζουν ουκ ολίγοι, να έφθασε ο καιρός  
 να φέρουμε Πολιτικό Αναμορφωτή.

Όμως το πρόσκομμα κ' η δυσκολία  
 είναι που κάμνουνε μια ιστορία  
 μεγάλη κάθε πράγμα οι Αναμορφωταί  
 αυτοί. (Ευτύχημα θα ήταν αν ποτέ  
 δεν τους χρειάζονταν κανείς.) Για κάθε τι,  
 για το παραμικρό ρωτούνε κ' εξετάζουν,  
 κ' ευθύς στον νου τους ριζικές μεταρρυθμίσεις βάζουν,  
 με την απαίτησι να εκτελεσθούν άνευ αναβολής.

Έχουνε και μια κλίσι στες θυσίες.  
*Παραιτηθείτε από την κτήσιν σας εκείνη·  
 η κατοχή σας είν' επισφαλής·  
 η τέτοιες κτήσεις ακριβώς βλάπτουν τες Αποικίες.  
 Παραιτηθείτε από την πρόσδοδον αυτή,  
 κι από την άλληνα την συναφή,  
 κι από την τρίτη τούτην: ως συνέπεια φυσική·  
 είναι μεν ουσιώδεις, αλλά τί να γίνει;  
 σας δημιουργούν μια επιβλαβή ευθύνη.*

Κι όσο στον έλεγχό τους προχωρούνε,  
 βρίσκουν και βρίσκουν περιττά, και να παυθούν ζητούνε·  
 πράγματα που όμως δύσκολα τα καταργεί κανείς.

Κι όταν, με το καλό, τελειώσουνε την εργασία,  
 κι ορίσαντες και περικόψαντες το παν λεπτομερώς,  
 απέλθουν, παίρνοντας και την δικαία μισθοδοσία,  
 να δούμε τι απομένει πια, μετά  
 τόση δεινότητα χειρουργική.—

Ίσως δεν έφθασεν ακόμη ο καιρός.  
 Να μη βιαζόμεθα· είν' επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία.  
 Τα πρόωρα μέτρα φέρνουν μεταμέλεια.

Έχει άτοπα πολλά, βεβαίως και δυστυχώς, η Αποικία.  
Όμως υπάρχει τι το ανθρώπινον χωρίς ατέλεια;  
Και τέλος πάντων, να, τραβούμ' εμπρός.

That things in the Colony are not what they should be  
no one can doubt any longer,  
and though in spite of everything we do go forward,  
maybe—as more than a few believe—the time has come  
to bring in a Political Reformer.

But here's the problem, here's the hitch:  
they make a tremendous fuss  
about everything, these Reformers.  
(What a relief it would be  
if no one ever needed them.) They probe everywhere,  
question the smallest detail,  
and right away think up radical changes  
that demand immediate execution.

Also, they have a liking for sacrifice:  
*Get rid of that property;*  
*your owning it is risky:*  
*properties like those are exactly what ruin colonies.*  
*Get rid of that income,*  
*and the other connected with it,*  
*and this third, as a natural consequence:*  
*they are substantial, but what can one do?*  
*the responsibility they create for you is damaging.*

And as they proceed with their investigation,  
they find an endless number of useless things to eliminate—  
things that are, however, difficult to get rid of.

And when, all being well, they finish the job,  
every detail now diagnosed and sliced away,  
and they retire, also taking the wages due to them—  
it will be a miracle if anything's left at all  
after such surgical efficiency.



Maybe the moment has not yet arrived.  
 Let's not be too hasty: haste is a dangerous thing.  
 Untimely measures bring repentance.  
 Certainly, and unhappily, many things in the Colony are absurd.  
 But is there anything human without some fault?  
 And after all, you see, we do go forward.

(Trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 155–56)

The poem's colony is in crisis—financially, but also, presumably, in terms of its social or political organization. The reformer whom many see as a solution is suggested to be an outsider (they will have to “bring” him “in”) and thus distanced from the colony and its citizens. This may be why the speaker distrusts reformers. Their main concern is getting results fast: financial recovery regardless of societal impact and without careful analysis of the situation. In his speculative reconstruction of the reformer's rhetoric, the speaker uses aggressive language to present the reformers' *modus operandi*, which unmistakably projects the violence of their practices.<sup>22</sup> The giving up of property and the elimination of “useless things” (“περιττά”), left unspecified to suggest that they do not matter to the reformers, are all presented as inevitable: a “natural consequence” (“συνέπεια φυσική”). In the reformers' logic, the colony's financial crisis warrants a state of exception that legitimizes aggressive measures. The verse “*they are substantial, but what can one do?*” (“είναι μὲν οὐσιώδεις, ἀλλὰ τί νὰ γίνῃ;”) epitomizes the logic of “there is no alternative” that casts violent decisions as a necessary evil. Their “liking for sacrifice” (“κλίσι στες θυσίες”) suggests an almost sadistic pleasure in the chopping up they engage in, and words such as “eliminate” (“να παυθούν”), “get rid of” (“παρατηθείτε”), and “slice away” (“περικόψαντες”) accentuate their ruthless result-oriented mentality.

The reformers' violent practices “contaminate” the word “βία” (haste) with its other meaning—*violence*. The word thus performs the interrelation of *violence* and *haste* in the reformer's approach. The line “εἶν' επικίνδυνον πράγμα ἡ βία” (“violence is a dangerous thing”), as it featured in the 2013 Cavafy campaign, by inviting a “misreading” of “βία” as *violence*, prompts a reading of the poem through this other meaning of “βία”: a reading that underscores the violence in the reformer's “surgical efficiency”—an understatement for acts of barbaric butchery.

The colony not only faces the prospect of violent reform but is also haunted

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22. The reconstruction of the reformer's language is found in the italicized verses, which mimic the speech of the reformer's persona in the speaker's imagination.

by the specter of another future violence that enters the poem through the title's date. This date was significant for Cavafy, as it was also used in the poem "Στα 200 π.Χ." / "In 200 B.C." and in two unfinished poems ("Αγέλαος" / "Agelauos" and "Μηδέν περί Λακεδαιμονίων" / "Nothing about the Lacedaimonians"). The title's date, as we read in Savidis's notes, situates the poem "at an optimum moment of the decline of Hellenism" (Savidis in Cavafy 1992, 266). A few years later, a series of "crushing blows" will be "dealt by Rome to the independent hellenistic kingdoms of Asia," leading to their takeover by the Romans (Mendelsohn in Cavafy 2009a, 449). Thus, Mendelsohn observes, this date foreshadows the "imminent fall" of the colony and "of Hellenistic Greek civilization" (449).

A pre-posterous reading of the poem, through the misquoting of its fragmented line in 2013 Athens, invites us to draw attention to the double meaning of "βία" as violence and haste. The entwinement of haste and violence weaves a thread through which I trace the ways the poem haunts, and is haunted by, the recent past, the present of its writing, as well as future presents.

Some have drawn parallels between the poem's situation of crisis and the political situation in Greece around the time the poem was circulated by Cavafy (1928). According to Alexander Tzonis and Alcestis Rodi, the poem reflects "the situation in Greece during the years following the collapse of 1922" and is written "in the spirit of the political chaos and social anomy of the first part of the 1920s" (2013, 77). Following their reading, the crisis in the poem's colony resonates with the severe crisis Greece faced in the years after the Greco-Turkish war (1919–1922) and the so-called "Asia Minor catastrophe" of 1922, which wiped out "the millennia-long Hellenic presence in Asia Minor" and debunked the "Great Idea"—the Greek irredentist narrative that envisioned the restoration of a greater Greece (Gallant 2016, 189).<sup>23</sup> The population exchange to which the Greek and Turkish governments agreed after the war led to the influx into Greece of roughly 1.5 million Greek refugees, mostly from Asia Minor, who had to live in substandard conditions. The imperative of reform in Cavafy's colony may thus be related to the need for societal restructuring in Greece after the 1922 military defeat and the country's refugee situation. According to Tzonis and Rodi, the "vacuum of leadership" in Greece, the "unpreparedness [of the country's leaders] to assume responsibility to change the structure of its [the country's] institutions and economy," and the "overde-

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23. The war began when Greek armed forces landed in Smyrna (now Izmir) in Asia Minor, aiming to gain territories from the Ottoman Empire and redeem the Greek populations still under Ottoman rule. The Greek expedition was eventually defeated by the Turkish nationalist forces in August 1922, in an offensive that led to the Turkish recapture of Smyrna and the death of tens of thousands of Greeks and Armenians during the city's Great Fire.

pendence on politician-reformers” are critically addressed in Cavafy’s poem (2013, 77). In their reading, the reformer’s attitude alludes to the failed dictatorship of “reformer” Theodoros Pangalos in 1926 (77–78).

Besides the 1920s crisis in Greece, however, the poem’s colony summons another colony in Cavafy’s time: Egypt under British rule. Taking the “misreading” of “βία” as “violence” as a starting point, I address the nexus of crisis, debt, reform, and colonialism in the poem, in occupied Egypt, and in Greece during the recent financial crisis (2009–2018), in order to pose the question of the poem’s futurity. As I bring the poem to bear on Egypt’s political and economic history, I do not contend that this history holds the key to understanding the poem as a historical allegory. In that sense, my approach deviates from the kind of allegorical readings that Stratis Tsirkas’s influential approach to Cavafy’s poetry exemplifies. Offering the earliest systematic study of Cavafy’s relation to Egypt in two books (in 1958 and 1971), Tsirkas saw Cavafy’s poetry as reflective of the sociopolitical climate in Egypt. Following a Marxist allegorical approach, he argued that historical settings and characters in several poems are “masks” that veil events and political circumstances in Cavafy’s Egypt and Alexandria (1971, 46–47).<sup>24</sup> Tsirkas was particularly interested in Cavafy’s stance vis-à-vis Egypt’s British occupation and traced an anticolonial stance in his writings, notwithstanding the poet’s indebtedness to British culture and literature.<sup>25</sup> By “deciphering” poems in order to uncover their meaning and Cavafy’s true intentions, his approach treated poetic texts as vessels for an external message and frame of reference.<sup>26</sup> Curiously, “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” does not figure among the poems Tsirkas reads as allegories for contemporary events and is not discussed in his books on Cavafy, despite the poem’s unmistakable political charge.

Unlike Tsirkas’s approach, the triangulated conversation I stage between the

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24. Tsirkas was a Greek literary author and critic who lived in Egypt until 1963. His two books on Cavafy, titled *Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του* (Cavafy and His Era; 1958) and *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης* (The Political Cavafy; 1971), have not been translated into English. For a discussion of the merits and shortcomings of Tsirkas’s first study, see Kazamias 2013. For Cavafy’s political thought, see also Risva 1981.

25. For more recent approaches to the ways Cavafy or his work engages with colonialism, Egypt, and the British Empire see Halim 2013 (56–119) and 2021; Jeffreys 2021; Kazamias 2021; Mufti 2021; and Papatheodorou 2021.

26. Tsirkas proposed three “keys” for understanding the mechanism of Cavafy’s historical poems. The first is the historical event, source, or era, which provides the context for the poem’s staging. This historical event is the “alibi” for the poem’s masked reference to present circumstances—the second key, which is usually concealed. The third key refers to the “psychic event”—the poet’s own experiences and inner life, as reflected in his poems (1983, 318–20). Despite the shortcomings of his approach (Dimiroulis 1983, 93), Tsirkas’s contribution to the study of Cavafy’s political and ideological affiliations and the way they resonated in his poetry remains valuable.

poem, the political-economic history of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Egypt, and contemporary Greece, is not motivated by the search for the poem's "true" intention as something that exists independently of reading acts and determines the poem's relation to external realities. Following the preposterous logic of a spectral temporality, I am concerned with how the poem resonates with Egypt's history of debt and with the recent Greek crisis, but also, significantly, with how these past and future contexts recast the poem and fracture its seemingly stable context. In this reading, poetic fragments take center stage: the "misquoted" line from the poem in the 2013 Cavafy campaign as well as another line I will temporarily sever from the poem's context, become agents that activate the futurity and political hope that the poem seems to withhold from the colony in 200 B.C.

The British occupied Egypt in 1882 without, however, annexing it. Egypt remained a semi-autonomous territory of the Ottoman Empire, ruled by a khedive—viceroy of the Turkish sultan—and his Council of Ministers: it thus had a nominally independent government, but with British "advisers" having actual control over government policy (Jakes 2020, 1). Even before 1882, however, an indirect form of colonialism by European powers had already been set in motion since the mid-nineteenth century and particularly since 1876.<sup>27</sup> A chief factor that led to this informal colonization was *debt*. Egypt's loss of political sovereignty can be ascribed to the pressure put on the Egyptian government to "comply with the foreign creditors" (Tunçer 2015, 29). The history of Egypt's sovereign debt goes back to the early 1860s, around the time of Cavafy's birth, when the Egyptian khedive Said Pasha negotiated the first of many loans with European banks to fund infrastructure projects, including the Suez Canal (Tunçer 2015, 31; al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 81). The loans soon became unsustainable, leading to more loans, and eventually, in 1873, to the biggest loan in Egypt's history (£32 million) contracted with various foreign banking houses (Tunçer 2015, 34). The guarantees for this and the previous loans amounted to nearly the entire revenue of the Egyptian government (34). According to the account of Egypt's financial history by socialist writer Theodore Rothstein in 1910, the khedive's irresponsible overborrowing, enabled by European financiers and their "scoundrel practices," as well as the high rates and "onerous" terms of these loans, which amounted to "usury," effected Egypt's financial ruination (4–6, 39).<sup>28</sup> In 1873, the loans turned from the khedive's "personal liability" to "a State liability of Egypt" (7). As further loans were not possible, Ismail Pasha was

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27. 1876 marks the formation of the Caisse de la Dette Publique, which initiated the direct interference of European powers in Egypt's affairs.

28. See also Tsirkas 1983, 73–75.

forced to sell 45% of the shares of the Suez Canal to the British government in 1875 (Tunçer 2015, 34; Tsirkas 1983, 77–78). Following these developments, on the khedive's request, the British government sent “a special mission” to Egypt to look into the country's financial state, and in March 1876, the committee to which this task was assigned, supervised by Stephen Cave, released a report (Tunçer 2015, 35). The following lines from the so-called “Cave report” on the reasons for Egypt's financial state are telling:

[Egypt] suffers from the ignorance, dishonesty, waste and extravagance of the East, such as have brought her suzerain to the verge of ruin, and at the same time from the vast expense caused by *hasty* and inconsiderate endeavours to adopt the civilization of the West. (Cave, quoted in Tunçer 2015, 35; emphasis added)

The “hastiness” of reforms and modernizing processes in Egypt at the time was seen by many contemporaries and later historians as one of the reasons for the collapse of Egypt's finances. Sir Samuel Baker, for example, found Ismail at fault for undertaking “the *rapid* accomplishment of a work that would require many years of patient labor” (quoted in Rothstein 1910, 38; emphasis added). A chapter in Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis's study *The History of Modern Egypt* (1969) is tellingly titled “Ismail, the Impatient Europeanizer” (1991, 70–89). In Vatikiotis's account, the link between hastiness and reform is particularly pronounced and associated with a European (colonial) mentality. Ismail, he writes, was “impatient to achieve eminence as a ruler and reformer by European standards, and the changes he introduced into the country were perhaps both too sudden and rapid to be managed and absorbed by the elements of his administration” (1991, 82). As a result, in his time, Egypt “was caught in a European whirlpool, a helpless victim of its force” (83).

Parallels between the language of the “Cave report” and popular Western European rhetoric on the reasons for the Greek financial crisis that broke out in 2009 are almost too easy to draw: irresponsible expenditure; corruption; the incompetence of Greek administrators; Greece's incomplete modernization and Westernization; the Greek “character” as lazy, dishonest, following an extravagant “Eastern” lifestyle. These are all-too-familiar stereotypes that echo the rhetoric of this late-nineteenth-century British committee regarding Egypt's unsustainable debt. The juxtaposition is revealing for the Orientalist bias and neocolonial logic inscribed in Western rhetoric about the Greek debt crisis.

By turning to European powers for financial help, Ismail Pasha “took a fatal step that allowed the Powers from then on to interfere actively in internal Egypt-

tian affairs” through the formation, by Ismail’s decree on 2 May 1876, of an institution known as the Caisse de la Dette Publique (Caisse) (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 82). The Caisse comprised “four commissioners representing the chief bondholding countries, England, France, Austria and Italy,” and “[t]wo controllers, one English and one French, were appointed to supervise state revenue and expenditure” (82). This resulted in a European-controlled administration of public debt and a series of fiscal measures that gave the controllers significant powers. By 1879, finding that there were not sufficient funds to service the debt, the collectors suggested measures that amounted “to a declaration of bankruptcy” (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 83).

Although all this happened in Cavafy’s early youth, the reformer-figure in “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” could have been modeled after such controllers and commissioners who posed as saviors of a nation that purportedly could not save itself: external “reformers” who could impose hasty measures, take away “*that income / and the other connected with it*” (Cavafy 1992, 155), and gradually strip a nation of its wealth, self-governance, and independence under the guise of this nation’s incapability to manage its own finances. These may be “*substantial*” possessions, but “*the responsibility they create for you is damaging*” (155).

The Caisse can be seen as “a prelude to British military take over” (Tunçer 2015, 51).<sup>29</sup> With “the Law of Liquidation” that the new khedive Tawfiq and the powers signed in 1880, Egypt became “unable to move without European permission,” setting off a process of severe exploitation of Egyptian resources and a gradual takeover of Egypt’s public sector by Europeans (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 83–84).<sup>30</sup> The population’s animosity toward this European takeover sparked a nationalist revolt in 1881, which used the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians” (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 86; Tsirkas 1983, 89). The violent outbreak that ensued in Alexandria triggered the British bombardment of the city and the beginning of Egypt’s British occupation in 1882 that would last until 1954.

The downfall of Egypt’s finances ran parallel to the financial ruination of Cavafy’s own well-off family, following the death of his father—a successful merchant—in 1870 and culminating in the dissolution of the family’s company

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29. The role of the Caisse in tax collection was pivotal from 1876 to 1904, as it “controlled more than 45 per cent of government revenues” (Tunçer 2015, 51).

30. Foreigners started taking over Egypt’s public sector under the pretense of remediation and consolidation of the government apparatus, while the actual aim, as Russian lawyer and diplomat Fyodor Fyodorovich Martens (a.k.a. Frédéric F. de Martens) put it, was “to dislocate the Government machinery of Egypt, to discredit the government of the Khedive [. . .] and to arrest all legislative and administrative reforms which could in any way damage the interests of the foreign creditors” (Martens 1882, 371; quoted in Rothstein 1910, 121, and in Tsirkas 1983, 92).

in 1876. Faced with financial hardship, Cavafy's mother Charikleia took her children to England in 1872, where she had relatives, and returned to Egypt in 1877. Throughout this period, the young Cavafy followed events in Egypt closely (Tsirkas 1983, 91).

Two weeks before the British bombarded Alexandria, Cavafy's family, responding to the widespread panic that had led many members of Alexandria's Greek community to leave the city, fled to Istanbul, where they first stayed in a house leased by Charikleia's relatives and later in Charikleia's father's house. The Cavafy family was one of the last to leave the city, a delay that had to do with the family's insufficient funds. Cavafy recorded his experience of the events around the bombardment and their move to Istanbul in a diary he ambitiously (if not ironically) titled *Constantinopoliad an Epic*.<sup>31</sup> The invasion of 1882 certainly left a mark on him, as their apartment was destroyed in the bombardment, including many of his books and manuscripts (Daskalopoulos and Stasinopoulou 2002, 22; Tsirkas 1983, 127; Kazamias 2021, 104). The occupation established a "Veiled protectorate" with the British being the actual rulers "behind a façade of Egyptian ministers who had little authority" (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 89).

The occupation of 1882 initiated a colonial stage that, as Tsirkas argues, "destroyed and uprooted everything," led to "chaos and dissolution," and "deformed" the Egypt that "Cavafy's generation had known" (Tsirkas 1983, 157; Kazamias 2021, 96). The British legitimized their occupation as necessary for supervising "reforms" they deemed essential for the country's development and for ensuring that bondholders would be paid (al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 89). By the turn of the century the Egyptian economy was working to the full benefit of the British as a provider of raw materials for Britain (al-Sayyid Marsot, 90, 93). These reforms had very adverse effects on the Egyptian population. Playing with the term "reformer" (αναμορφωτής), Tsirkas sarcastically refers to Lord Cromer, who was in control of Egypt's finances from 1883 to 1907, as the "great deformer" ("παρὰμορφωτής"; Tsirkas 1983, 157).<sup>32</sup>

As Great Britain's agent and consul-general in Egypt for a quarter century, Cromer, Aaron Jakes writes, "exercised minute control over the official narrative of the peculiar regime he was charged to oversee," curating the regime's

31. Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F24, Item 0003; GR-OF CA CA-SF02-S02-F24-0003 (262), <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/constantinopoliad-an-epic/>. On *Constantinopoliad*, see Haas 1994. For the events of 1882 and Cavafy's experience of them, see, among others, Kazamias 2021 (95) and Cavafy's biography *Alexandrian Sphinx: C.P. Cavafy – A Poet's Life* by Jeffreys and Jusdanis (forthcoming in 2024). I am grateful to Gregory Jusdanis for sharing their manuscript of Cavafy's biography prior to its publication.

32. Translations from Tsirkas are mine.

“public image” and framing the introduced reforms as the occupation’s success story (2020, 1–2). In the two-volume account of the occupation’s accomplishments Cromer wrote on his return to England under the title *Modern Egypt*, he disparagingly cast all resistance to British reform as an attitude of conservatism, backwardness, and recalcitrance that typifies the “true Eastern”:

The point of view of the Eastern is wholly different from that of the Western. I speak of course of the true Eastern, free from European alloy: for when once the Eastern, and notably the Egyptian, has been semi-Europeanised, he will often develop with amazing rapidity into a root-and-branch reformer. He will not understand moderation in reform any more than the Egyptian cook [. . .] will understand moderation in the use of salt. The true Eastern is a staunch conservative. [. . .] European affairs appear to him to be in a constant state of flux. [. . .] The mind of the true Eastern is at once lethargic and suspicious: he does not want to be reformed, and he is convinced that, if the European wishes to reform him, the desire springs from sentiment which bode him no good. Moreover, his conservatism is due to an instinct of self-preservation, and to a dim perception that if he allows himself to be even slightly reformed, all the things to which he attaches importance will be not merely changed in this or that particular, but will rather be swept off the face of the earth. Perhaps he is not far wrong. (Cromer 1908, vol. II, 161)

In Cromer’s account, reform, progress, modernization, Europeanness, and whiteness are part of the same semantic complex, leaving conservatism, suspicion of progress, resistance to change, lethargy, and by extension laziness, to the Eastern who is “free from European alloy” and is the passive object of reform. Accepting the necessity of reform seems to be the only way for the “true Eastern” to graduate to a “semi-Europeanised” status. Cromer’s passage perfectly mirrors the two stances represented in Cavafy’s poem, but in this case from the reformer’s perspective. In the aggressive vocabulary Cromer uses to justify reform (“amazing rapidity,” “root-and-branch reformer,” the need to show no “moderation in reform”), it is easy to recognize the reformer’s persona in the poem. And in Cromer’s depiction of the Eastern’s resistance to reform we cannot help but recognize the poetic subject’s resistance to change and suspicion of reformers: to use Cromer’s words, the fear that “all the things to which he attaches importance will [. . .] be swept off the face of the earth,” or, to use Cavafy’s words, the expectation that “it will be a miracle if anything’s left at all / after such surgical efficiency” (Cavafy 1992, 155–56). Cromer interestingly



acknowledges that this fear of the Egyptians has a basis, but to his mind, radical change and destruction of the old is—to quote again from Cavafy’s poem—“a natural consequence.”

British reforms indeed “swept” many things “off the face of the earth.” They strangled local industries (e.g., through exorbitant taxes on cotton products by Egyptian factories) (Tsirkas 1983, 158). The living conditions of fellahin (farmers) deteriorated dramatically, owing to unbearable taxes imposed by British administrators (158–59). Roughly half of the national income was “swallowed up” by foreigners (159). When Cavafy returned in Alexandria from Istanbul in October 1885, he found a city (and a country) in disarray, with its new rulers breeding discontent, anger, and resistance in the local population—anticipating the riots and uprisings that would follow.

If the crisis in Cavafy’s poem and the reformers who are called to take action evoke Egypt’s history of debt, reform, and occupation, in the poem’s world, the reformers’ projected actions somewhat anticipate the colony’s eventual takeover by the Romans—just as Egypt was occupied by the British—adding credence to the speaker’s prediction that “Untimely measures bring repentance” (Cavafy 1992, 156). The reformers’ practices thereby emerge as part of an imperialist project: reform in the poem becomes a legitimizing mechanism for foreign intervention and colonization under the guise of a society’s financial remediation. The speaker’s prediction that such a reform would aggravate the population’s living conditions and only benefit the reformers echoes the dismantling of Egypt’s social fabric, its loss of sovereignty, and the expropriation of its resources by the British. But whereas the speaker in the poem expects the reformers to “retire” after “taking the wages due to them,” Egypt would remain under the rule of its British “reformers” for many years to come.

The poem stages a situation of crisis. In ancient Greek, the word *crisis* (*κρίσις*) signified judgment but also decision and choice between two alternatives (Koselleck 2006, 358). In the poem, the only alternatives are those represented by the speaker and the reformer. The reformer’s way involves violence and haste. The speaker’s alternative may be less violent but is nonetheless hardly convincing. At best, it ensures the colony’s short-term survival, but perpetuates deficient structures and thus a chronic crisis without prospect of real change. The final verse, “and after all, you see, we do go forward,” is reminiscent of the final verse in Cavafy’s “Waiting for the Barbarians,” in which the absent barbarians are cast as “a kind of solution” (1992, 19). The poems could in fact be read as each other’s counterparts. In both of them an external intervention is entertained as a solution to a crisis, despite the prospect of violence that both barbarians and reformers carry (albeit of a different kind).

In both poems, these “solutions” are projected as equally feeble, as they both follow a logic of preserving existing structures and frameworks. In “Waiting for the Barbarians,” this framework is defined by the deep-rooted binary between civilization and barbarism as a means of self-definition. “In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” presents the colony’s crisis as a decision between only two options: preservation or external intervention. Neither poem presents us with a convincing alternative that restores hope for the future. But precisely because both poems end with an intense taste of pessimism and dissatisfaction, they invite us to ponder another “kind of solution” that defies the poems’ restricted horizon—a horizon that is in both cases defined (and exhausted) by a dualistic mode of thought: barbarians versus civilization; external reform versus preservation.

The poem’s resonance in contemporary Greece in the years of the financial crisis is almost inescapable. Greece, a “debt colony” as it has been called, came into the hands of foreign financial “reformers”—represented primarily by the so-called “troika” (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund)—who demanded harsh austerity measures with a sense of urgency and haste and assumed increasing control over the country while its social fabric was disintegrating. Beyond the case of Greece, the rhetoric of Cavafy’s reformer also haunts the contemporary logic of neoliberalism and its imperative of reform. Notice, for example, how Alain Badiou’s caustic reconstruction of the neoliberal reformers’ rhetoric echoes the speaker’s mimicking of the reformer’s speech in Cavafy’s poem:

[Our masters tell us] we should energetically engage in incessant “modernization,” accepting the inevitable costs without a murmur. [. . .] To that end everyone must pedal: modernize, reform, change! [. . .] New laws rain down every week—bravo! Let’s break with routine! Out with the old!

So let us change.

But change what, in fact? [. . .] All the measures dictated to us by the economic situation are to be implemented as a matter of urgency. [. . .] Those who, for whatever reason [. . .] are suddenly opposed to the *carve-up* of their country, to its pillaging by the powerful and the “human rights” that go with it, will be brought before the tribunals of modernization, and hanged if possible.

Such is the invariant truth of “change.” The actuality of “reform,” the concrete dimension of “modernization.”

(2012, 2–4; emphasis added)

Cavafy's poem foreshadows the sweeping force of neoliberal reform, which uses "surgical efficiency" to "carve up" countries and exacerbate the majority's precarious conditions. The speaker's milder but conservative mentality in the poem—leave things as they are, avoid change—could resonate with conservative political forces in present-day Greece (and beyond) that seek the preservation of the status quo with the corruption and systemic deficiencies that go with it.

The poem's seeming lack of a true alternative to externally imposed reform, save for the speaker's weak plea for preserving an ailing structure, also finds resonance in dominant crisis rhetoric in Western politics since the 1990s, and particularly in the context of the European debt crisis. *Crisis* today becomes an "instrument of rule" (Agamben 2013), aligned with the so-called "TINA doctrine," an acronym for "There Is No Alternative" that indicates the lack of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism since 1989.<sup>33</sup> Reinforcing "a *politics without an alternative*" (Badiou 2007, 4), crisis rhetoric "serves to legitimise political and economic decisions that in fact dispossess citizens and deprive them of any possibility of decision" (Agamben 2013). "Bia" as *haste* is key to the authoritative workings of this rhetoric: declaring a "crisis" legitimizes immediate action, leaving no time to debate or reflect on different options. The concept of *crisis* is thereby robbed of one of its core features: actual choice that involves dissent and critique.<sup>34</sup> During the Eurozone crisis, this withholding of choice was exemplified by the widespread projection of austerity politics by the EU as a "one-way street," i.e., as the only legitimate option.

The poem presents a society trapped in the logic of binary choices: either violent reform or preservation of the old system. This sense of entrapment is enhanced when we consider that both options leave the poem's society under a form of political subjugation. In the poem's historical setting, the speaker's society is already a "colony" that is now facing a new form of colonization by external reformers (and eventually, by the Romans). In Cavafy's time, these forms of subjugation resonate with Egypt's status as a semi-autonomous Ottoman outpost, subsequently colonized by the British Empire.<sup>35</sup> The title's date, 200 B.C., intensifies this entrapment by introducing historical fatalism: any decision between the two alternatives presented in the poem is ultimately futile, since soon after 200 B.C. the colony will be conquered by the Romans, who

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33. The slogan "there is no alternative" was first used in the 1990s by Margaret Thatcher and other conservative politicians.

34. For contemporary crisis rhetoric, see Boletsi et al. 2020, 1–4.

35. I am grateful to Karen Emmerich for this observation.

will annul any previous decision. This sense of historical inevitability contracts the poem's horizon: there are no different possible futures depending on decisions in the present. A striking omission haunts the poem: the absent prospect of emancipatory politics to the people's benefit, or the prospect of a future in which this society is no longer a "colony." How can we come to terms with this omission, which strangulates the colony's futurity? Does the specter of another future lurk somewhere in the poem, and, if so, which mode of reading may summon it?

#### f. Reading-by-Fragments and the Promise of Futurity

The poem was printed and circulated by Cavafy in 1928. At that time, the reformer's violence that the poem prefigures had been actualized by British colonial violence. Even though there was Egyptian resistance to the British occupation from the start, after 1919, national resistance to the colonizer became more systematized and widespread. After World War I, the request for independence by an Egyptian national delegation led by revolutionary leader Saad Zaghlul was supported by a mass movement organized at a grassroots level and through tactics of civil disobedience. Zaghlul's deportation sparked violent explosions in the country leading to the revolution of 1919 (Al-Sayyid Marsot 2007, 96). In the years following the 1919 revolution, Egypt was still "seething with violence and unrest" (100). The British government was eventually forced to abolish the protectorate in 1922, recognizing Egypt's independence as a kingdom, but with so many restrictions that the independence was practically rendered void (97). The British occupation would persist until the coup of 1952 that would eventually lead to the full withdrawal of British troops in 1956.

The violence of foreign intervention that Cavafy's poem addresses through the reformer figure is inescapably haunted by the history of Egypt's occupation. The mismanagement of the khedives that enabled external interventionism and eventually colonization, the hasty reforms, the exploitation of the Egyptian people, are all specters that the poem conjures more forcefully when we involve the other meaning of *βία* as "violence" in our reading. But the word *βία* also summons the revolutionary violence of anticolonial struggle, which at the time the poem was written (1928) had been suppressed and would only lead to emancipation from the British in 1956—beyond Cavafy's own life. It is here that other specters, this time from the future, come into play in the poem's present. In light of this future event, let us reread the following verse:

Ἴσως δεν ἐφθασεν ἀκόμη ο καιρός.  
(2015, 366)

Maybe the moment has not yet arrived.  
(1992, 156)

As part of the speaker's speech, this verse is a conservative plea for preservation: let's not rush things, the time for reformers has not come yet. Read as a fragment, however, the verse becomes invested with a subtextual desire for an incalculable future event that is not bound by the poem's contracted horizon, a desire for what Derrida called a future "to come" (*l'avenir*). The "real future," Derrida said in an interview, is not "a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable" but a future referring "to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected"; the "to come" is the "Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival" (Derrida, in Dick and Kofman 2005, 53). Dislodged from its surroundings, but still read in relation to the poem's world, the above fragmented verse haunts us like a specter from an alternative future—not the one we know awaits this colony (Roman takeover) or the one the speaker expects (continuation of the crisis), but one that the poem's world does not actualize or even allow us to imagine. Read in relation to Cavafy's Egypt in 1928, this verse becomes imprinted, preposterously, with a future emancipatory moment that would take another twenty-four years to arrive, in 1952, and would arrive again in 2011 with the Tahrir Square Revolution, yet in another sense is still "to come," as the process of emancipation is never complete. This future specter that neither the poem nor its author could have predicted in 1928 can only be conjured if this verse is momentarily wrenched from the poem's world and escapes the speaker's horizon.

"Ἴσως δεν ἐφθασεν ἀκόμη ο καιρός" / "Maybe the moment has not yet arrived." The Greek word *καιρός* is aptly translated by Keeley and Sherrard with "moment" rather than "time." There are two words for "time" in Greek that correspond with two distinct temporalities in ancient Greek thought: *chronos* (*χρόνος*) captures "the chronological, quantitative measuring of time" (Lindroos 1998, 12) while *kairos* (*καιρός*) refers to "a qualitative character of time," that is, "the right or opportune time to do something" (Smith 1986, 12). *Kairos* does not understand "movement through temporal continuity" but "emphasises breaks, ruptures, non synchronised moments and multiple temporal dimensions" (Lindroos 1998, 12). The poem's speaker does not grasp the opportunity that the word *kairos* in the above verse signals, because in his horizon the only alternative future holds the unwelcome prospect of reform. He thus pushes it

away (“the moment has not yet arrived”) and pleads for a frozen time instead: his closing statement—“and after all, you see, we do go forward”—conveys a false sense of temporal progression. It is a moving forward without the prospect of an unanticipated event and without the opportunity for change that *kairos* suggests. It is a continuation of the same as time—*chronos*—passes.

*Kairos*, Smith writes, “means [. . .] a time of *crisis* implying that the course of events poses a problem that calls for a decision at that time” (1986, 10). Brought to bear on the interpretation of historical events, *kairos* pertains to “constellations of events pregnant with a possibility or possibilities not to be met with at other times” (4–5). All these aspects in the semantic field of *kairos*—decision, crisis, possibility—are staged in the poem. But instead of bearing new possibilities, the potential of *kairos* is stifled by the dualistic choice between preservation and aggressive reform. And yet, the future-oriented energy of this word rebels against the speaker’s conservatism, leading us to search elsewhere—beyond the speaker and the reformer—for “possibilities” that the poem’s closed structure refuses. For *kairos* to bear these possibilities, the verse it belongs to has to be read as a fragment that produces meaning beyond its immediate context. This fragment fractures the poem as an impermeable context—an intact *statue*.

*Kairos* also carries an ethical dimension: it connotes “justice or [. . .] what is ‘due’ to an individual in an order of equality” (Smith 1986, 15). In that sense, it animates the claim to justice in the poem, which hovers over the colony. The colony’s crisis suggests that time is “out of joint,” that is, “things are not going as they ought to go” (Derrida 1994, 19): there is an injustice in the way the present has taken shape.<sup>36</sup> Responses to this crisis within the poem follow two temporalities. The temporality of the reformer is linear, moving in fast-forward mode: a relentless course of progress that leaves the past in rubble and does not look back. A second temporality emerges through the speaker’s desire to defer change, freeze the present, and keep things as they are, thus turning crisis into a normalized chronic condition. Neither option undoes the injustice of the present.

The appearance of a specter is often linked to an injustice, calling “for a different order of justice,” one “that breaks with the current order of things” (Brown 2001, 154). Rereading the poem through the specter of a future “moment” (*kairos*) that “has not yet arrived” requires a third, spectral temporality that reintroduces the possibility of justice. For Derrida, justice is not possible when the present is self-contained and the future predetermined. Derrida’s understanding of justice involves an “out-of-jointness” or fracturing—of time, of closed

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36. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida gives Hamlet’s famous line, “time is out of joint” an ethico-political dimension: it is a line that signals an injustice (1994, 22).

contexts—that is “reconciled to the endless commerce of specters, and to the indeterminacy of the past and of the past’s relationship to the present” (Brown 2001, 154). Justice requires that the present remain open to the incalculable workings of past and future specters, and thus to multiple futures.

The poem stages a chronic crisis without futurity. The speaker’s conservatism, the reformer’s violence, and the title’s fatalism leave us with the taste of an unsettled injustice that almost compels us to fracture the poem’s context in search of an “otherwise” that expands and explodes the poem’s limited horizon. Animating the desire for the “otherwise” requires a resisting reader who rejects the colony’s apparent lack of futurity and looks for the excess of meaning that the poem’s lines may carry when temporarily disengaged from the poem’s body. To activate the poem’s futurity and hope for justice, then, the reader may need to defy the poem’s “integrity” and listen to the specters of alternative futures some of its fragments carry. She may need to become an archeologist who attends to this colony’s (future) ruins and grants them a form of historical agency. The verse “maybe the moment has not yet arrived” is part of these ruins, pregnant with a different future-to-come.

Fragmentary reading as an archeological practice is not foreign to Cavafy’s poetry. It takes its most gripping shape in Cavafy’s “Ἐν τῷ μηνί Αἰθύρ” / “In the Month of Athyr,” in which the reader-as-archeologist fails to reconstruct the past as a coherent narrative based on the partly illegible fragments of Lefkios’s tombstone. Forced to give up the ideal of totalization in reconstructing the past, what we are left with in that poem are fragments—pieces for conjuring up the dead youth not as he really was, but as *we* relate to his specter from our present when we allow it to exert its inscrutable force on us.

Cavafy’s poetic strategies for summoning the dead often prompt readings that fracture the poems-as-statues, opening them up to recontextualizations. The “misquoted” line “εἰν’ επικίνδυνο πράγμα ἡ βία” (“violence is a dangerous thing”) in the 2013 Cavafy campaign in Athens is another recontextualization that—serendipitously—gives this poem another future. Like the colony, the poem itself is “destroyed,” fragmented in this campaign eighty-five years after its writing, but through this destructive act an open future can be “bought”: the kind of future the poem withholds from the colony.

“In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” gives readers a challenge: to create space in language for political hope and justice even in the context of a crisis that seems to stifle choice and futurity; to resist the supposed necessity of dualistic choices—either violent reform or preservation of the status quo—and make room for alternatives. Literature can open such spaces, turning the limited probabilities that govern the present and future into (impossible) possi-

bilities. The poem's "moment" that "has not yet arrived" resonates in different crisis-scapes—including Greece during its debt crisis—as a call for resistance to monologic crisis narratives that dictate the future as a one-way street. It comes to join other contemporary searches for futurity, such as the one in Christos Ikonomou's *Κάτι θα γίνει, θα δεις / Something Will Happen, You'll See* (2010), a short story collection that became emblematic of Greek "literature of the crisis."<sup>37</sup> The book's stories host impoverished, working-class people afflicted by the structures of neoliberal capitalism—laid-off, unemployed, indebted people, whose dreams dissipate as they watch the future being cancelled. The small acts of protest or resistance that characters in these stories perform often seem futile. But through and against the pessimism of its stories, the book's title captures the stubborn hope for an unexpected event—the "something" that will open up the future against all odds, or the "moment" that is yet to arrive.

The crisis staged in Cavafy's poem—a crisis without redemptive hope—is undercut by the desire for crisis as a revolutionary moment or event that bears the hope of the *otherwise*. The space of political hope, according to Ahmed, involves the past, the present, and the future:

hope involves a relationship to the present, and to the present as affected by its imperfect translation of the past. It is in the present that the bodies of subjects shudder with an expectation of what is otherwise; it is in the unfolding of the past in the present. The moment of hope is when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. (2014, 184)

I link this hope to a responsibility to read for the otherwise and to read otherwise. Reading a poem anew in the present allows us to encounter a past object with what Ahmed calls "critical wonder": "as if" this object appears before us "for the first time" (179). The poem thereby becomes an event in each present—indeed, a "moment" that "has not yet arrived" and that will never arrive finally, fully.

Fragmentation, of course, involves violence and should by no means be idealized. How, then, is the pre-posterous reading-by-fragments I performed different from the reformer's violence in the poem? The reformer in the poem's colony—or its neoliberal epigones—chops up and destroys in order to preserve a doctrine of no alternatives and thus prevent a different future from taking place. He casts his violence as a "natural consequence," because the reformer

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37. The collection was largely framed through the Greek crisis, even though most stories were written before the crisis. It was translated into English in 2016 by Karen Emmerich.



allows no alternative narrative. His violence aims at controlling a singular narrative and preserving a system by reforming it to perfect its machinery. In my reading, two verses from the poem return as fragments from the future to place it in new constellations. As a future specter, the line “Maybe the moment has not yet arrived” momentarily escapes the speaker’s conservatism and introduces the hope for an open-ended future. And the line “εἰν’ επικίνδυνον πράγμα η βία” as a “misquoted” fragment from the 2013 campaign (“violence is a dangerous thing”) prompts us to rethink the relation of “haste” with “violence” and to revisit the poem through the specters of colonial but also revolutionary violence in Egypt’s history. By fracturing the poem, this kind of fragmentation creates space for new stories and futures.<sup>38</sup>

In his reading of Shelley’s poem “Triumph of Life,” with which I started this chapter, de Man stresses that this poem is structured around questions that a reader-archeologist is prompted to pose to the poem itself: “Whence camest thou? and whither goest thou?” (Shelley, quoted in de Man 1984, 93). Cavafy’s poetry, too, asks how the past can be activated in the present, but also how it can become a force of futurity: “whither goest thou”?

How *do* the dead haunt, then? And how do poems, as past objects, haunt future presents? There is no magic distillation ensuring the success of all conjurations in Cavafy’s poems. Some fail, some succeed, though never permanently. From our present, we also offer different responses to this question through practices of commemoration, citation, sacralization, translation, adaptation, and fragmentation.

“In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.” also struggles with the same question: is there an afterlife for this colony, despite the finality of its future collapse, to which the date 200 B.C. painfully points? While the speaker’s logic of preservation and the reformer’s control-by-destruction fail to create the prospect of a just future, I looked for fragments that activate the poem’s subtextual desire for an alternative. The crisis in the poem’s colony will meet its violent *lysis* (dissolution) in the colony’s conquest by the Romans. But through the poem’s fragments, Cavafy’s colony can dream of another future, beyond the title’s implied verdict.

Creating space for an open future-to-come may involve violence. This could be the emancipatory violence of anticolonial struggle in Egypt around the time of the poem’s writing and in the years after the poet’s death, up to the Egyptian

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38. In light of this reading, it seems ironic that both lines from the poem used in the 2013 Cavafy campaign—“violence is a dangerous thing” and “and after all, you see, we do go forward”—were assumed to support the Greek government’s pro-austerity rhetoric and its attempts to subdue dissent under the guise of condemning any form of violence. Fragmentation and recontextualization involve risks: one cannot secure the effects or directions such acts take. Cavafy also took such risks in his poetry by recontextualizing quotes and disrupting stable contexts.

Revolution of 2011; or acts of political dissent and disobedience that sought to disrupt the monologic narrative of austerity in Greece; or acts of disfiguring Cavafy's fossilized statue, to use de Man's terms, as we invite it into new configurations in the present. As we extend such invitations, however, we need to keep in mind that Cavafy's poetic work, full of unfinished poems and multiple versions, never published in his lifetime as a definitive body of work, was never an intact statue to begin with, but one full of sutures, fragments, and ruptures that make sure his specters escape the finality of death, albeit temporarily.

## Epilogue



### *Returns and Unknown Destinations*

#### a. Cavafy as Control Freak, Collector, Surgeon, Reluctant Destroyer, Revolutionary

Cavafy's "In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.," I argued in chapter 6, is a stage for conflicting desires. The desire to preserve an ailing system antagonizes the desire for violent intervention intended to reform the system in a way that ensures maximum profit for those in power. Opposed as they are, these stances share a comparable directionality: they both shun emancipatory change as a possible historical outcome of a society's crisis and ultimately aim at preserving and controlling an existing system, either by doing nothing or by reforming it.

These conflicting stances in the poem can also be traced, albeit in different forms, in Cavafy's own writing and his stance to his poetic work. Cavafy's writings, I argued in this book, are marked by a central conflict: the desire to preserve and to destroy, to control and to let go. His poems may remain open to multiple readings but they were products of extreme control. His controlling impulse also partly governed his distribution practices and his efforts to regulate his poetry's reception. His poem "Του μαγαζιού" / "For the Shop" (1913), discussed in chapter 4, exemplifies the artist's wish to control and preserve his most valuable creations by limiting their public exposure and safeguarding them from circulation. *This* Cavafy, keen on preserving possessions, keeping them safe from the influence of the world and of time, and being selective regarding which possessions could be shared with others and when, would probably object to his poetry's fragmentation, circulation in public space, and (mis)quoting—the kind of practices I discussed in the previous chapter.

The poet's controlling impulse, which sometimes manifests itself as a desire

for preservation, also has a flip side: at times it triggers a destructive impulse. Cavafy's "Philosophical Scrutiny," as we saw, registers the destructive impulse accompanying the scrutiny to which he subjected his early poetic production. The violent vocabulary he employs in this text is not unlike the reformer's rhetoric in "In a Large Greek Colony, 200 B.C.," as the following passage from "Philosophical Scrutiny" suggests:

Flagrant inconsistencies, illogical possibilities, ridiculous exaggeration should certainly be corrected in the poems, and where the corrections cannot be made the poems should be sacrificed, retaining only any verses of such poems as might prove useful later on in the making of new work. (Cavafy 2010, 116)

In the same text he talks about "effacing" poems that are "vowed to destruction" (2010, 118). The desire to control and rectify improper, irrational, excessive elements in order to preserve the poems' integrity is enveloped in a language of sacrifice and destruction that echoes the reformer's speech from the 1928 poem. In a letter to his friend Periklis Anastasiadis that Peridis dates to around 1896, Cavafy comments on the way he worked on one of his poems—he does not specify which—using a vocabulary that eerily evokes the reformer's "surgical efficiency":

I've not yet quite finished the process of squeezing and amputating my verses made of many-syllabled words. I have five or six operations more to perform if poetical surgery should be set about with caution. (Cavafy, quoted in Peridis 1948, 311)

I am by no means equating the reformer's political and ideological modus operandi with Cavafy's process of poetic creation. These are practices of a radically different nature. My juxtaposition, however, unfolds a certain desire in both: to cut, destroy, and "amputate" as a means of heightening control. This desire is not incompatible with the other desire I traced: safeguarding one's possessions. As two sides of the same coin, they aim at control. And yet, Cavafy's writing is also rife with another, truly antagonistic desire: to renounce control, emancipate his creations, make them vulnerable to future specters through metaleptic readings, release them toward future readers who may change or fragment them and grant them new afterlives. *This* Cavafy, to quote again from "Philosophical Scrutiny," works "with the consciousness of his work being but finally toys,—at best toys capable of being utilised for some worthier or better

purpose” (2010, 117). As we saw in chapter 4, even his controlling practices, including his constant revisions, constitute strategies of postponing completion and keeping finality, totalization, and death at bay. Many of his manuscripts are palimpsests inhabited by specters of deleted or crossed-out words, punctuation marks, notes, corrections, and rejected versions. The drafts of his unfinished poems haunt each other, often making it impossible to reconstruct an “original” and compelling us to read some of the poems as fragments. Cavafy’s poetic collections, as William Stroebel puts it,

suspend themselves across a [. . .] Möbius strip, leading, for example, to (autograph or allograph) inscriptions, marginalia, and emendations in pen on top of the printed impressions of a given poem, which might spark the replacement of older impressions with newer ones, which might, in turn, invite new inscriptions, and so on ad infinitum; [. . .] Suspending a single, unified print run and a commercial binding—and, through them, the consolidation of a final, “complete” edition—Cavafy’s intermedia extended the process of composition indefinitely. (2018, 280–81)

His works are paradoxical products of control and its abolition.

The poet’s desire for renouncing control can also involve forms of destruction, fragmentation, and violence—a violence that seeks to open up poetic language to unpredictable futures. His 1903 poem “Δυνάμωσις” / “Strengthening” embraces this destructive impulse by praising the one who “will never fear the destructive act” and is ready to break with the old to make space for the new, without, however, fully eradicating the old (“*half* the house must be demolished”; trans. Mendelsohn; Cavafy 2009, 310; emphasis added). The character in this poem, I argued in chapter 4, is a reluctant destroyer. He knows that what is destroyed never fully vanishes but can stubbornly haunt the new edifice that takes its place.

Cavafy the fetishistic collector, Cavafy the control freak, Cavafy the surgeon, Cavafy the reluctant destroyer, Cavafy the revolutionary. The poems are precious jewels to be kept in a drawer; toys to be played with by others; palimpsests; specters released toward the future. Different approaches to Cavafy’s work often overemphasize one of these impulses as defining for Cavafy’s poetry or persona, yet his writing stages all these impulses without allowing any of them to rest or be fully actualized.

The interplay of these desires yields different responses to the recurring question of spectrality in Cavafy’s poetry and prose, with which I started this book:

*What are the conditions that make the dead haunt? What makes “things past”—including poems—active forces in the present?*

Fully aware of the inescapability of loss and death, knowing that even poetic truth is not eternal or universal, Cavafy’s writing, in its early and later phases, experimented with techniques of conjuring the past as an event in the present—be it past moments, lovers, memories, forgotten historical characters, the parade of young men who try to speak beyond their graves in his epitaphs, but also the poems themselves as past objects in future presents.

### b. Concluding, or Returning

Let me end with a return to Cavafy’s ghost ships, with which I started chapter 1. If the ghost ships in Cavafy’s prose poem “Τα πλοία” / “The Ships” are read as a metaphor for the spectral forces running through his poems, there have been many attempts to domesticate those ships: attempts at monumentalization, consecration, and fetishization of Cavafy’s persona and poetry. Yet the ghost ships insist on the deterritorialized movement of their valuable cargo. This cargo keeps haunting readers by stirring sensations, memories, visions, and insights that connect the ships’ distant “songs” to the readers’ various presents, even after the ships are gone. In that sense, approaching Cavafy’s poetry and prose through the lens of spectrality also provides a forceful answer to critics who claim that Cavafian criticism has been saturated or that nothing new can be said anymore about his work.

On the day of his death in a hospital in Alexandria, Cavafy—whose tracheotomy had deprived him of his voice—is reported to have drawn a circle with a dot in its middle on a piece of paper.<sup>1</sup> This drawing has been seen as an affirmation of the perfect circle that his life was about to form: Cavafy died on his seventieth birthday, on April 29, 1933, in an act of “elegant concentricity, a perfect closure” (Mendelsohn in Cavafy 2009a, xxvi). Although Cavafy’s intention in making this drawing will remain unknown, some recognize in it, Mendelsohn writes, “the conventional notation, used by authors when correcting printer’s proofs, for the insertion of a period, a full stop” (xxvi). The symbolism of a perfect closure, apt as it may seem on this occasion, is nevertheless counteracted by Cavafy’s disdain for conclusions. “I do not strongly believe in the absolute value

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1. Mendelsohn refers to this incident in the introduction to his translations of Cavafy’s poems (Cavafy 2009a, xxvi).



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Figure 9. Cavafy's last passport. Reproduced by kind permission of the Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation © 2016–2018.

of a conclusion,” he had written in his essay on Shakespeare in 1891 (Cavafy 2010, 27). Cavafy certainly wrote and lived with an intense awareness of the specter of death. However, instead of the symbolism of closure that the circle and dot were taken to hold, I prefer to draw another symbolism by turning to the two erroneous birthdates in Cavafy's last passport—1872 and 1864 rather than the actual year of his birth, 1863 (figure 9).

Whatever the reason for the presence of these mistaken birthdates on his passport may have been,<sup>2</sup> the dates confound and pluralize Cavafy's own point of origin, and by extension, his destination. They inadvertently insert a spectral temporality in the very document that seeks to register the basic markers of a person's life and identity within the official scheme of “chrononormativity”—a

2. As Peridis writes, at the time Cavafy was born no civil registry books were kept in Egypt, and his parents only registered his birthdate on the occasion of his baptism on 28 May 1864 (1948, 11). It is thus conceivable that the first erroneous birthdate on his passport reflects the date of his baptism. The other erroneous birthdate, 1872, coincides with the year that his mother took Cavafy and the rest of her children to Liverpool, following her husband's death.

temporality that involves “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent” (Freeman 2011, xxii). Cavafy’s passport contains all categories required to place someone in a heteronormative temporality of lineage, reliant on “the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Halberstam 2005, 1): date and place of birth, names of offspring, name and photo of spouse, etc. The poet’s passport inadvertently ends up queering this temporal order: the false birthdates or the haunting empty spaces where the names of children and the photo of a female spouse should have been, invite a queer temporality that hints at possibilities for other “ways of living” (Freeman 2011, 6), beyond “paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2005, 2).

These other ways of living also resonate in the designation “poet” (“ποιητής”), which Cavafy filled in as his profession in this passport for the first time. By the time he used this word in his passport, Cavafy had redefined the poetic as a multiply haunting and haunted space that accommodates spectral temporalities and queer modes of living. Thus, proclaiming “poet” as his profession also came with an affirmation of living with ghosts: those of alternative presents, unrealized futures, and lost or unrealized pasts, unsettling the narrative of one’s life as a closed circle or a straight temporal line from birth to death.

Of course, Cavafy was painfully aware of, and bound by, the constraints of chrononormativity. His spectral poetics took shape through these constraints. One of his best-known poems, “Κεριά” / “Candles” (1893/1899), gave us one of the most forceful images of linear temporality. But just as his passport affirms yet also haunts chrononormativity with other alternatives, I argue that this is also the case with this poem. The poem creates the image of a line of candles as a metaphor for the speaker’s life progressing irreversibly from birth to death. The extinguished candles stand for the days of his past, while the lighted candles represent the (decreasing) days that lie ahead.<sup>3</sup> Impotent in the face of time’s cruel linearity, the speaker avoids looking at the line of extinguished candles, “terrified” at “how quickly that dark line gets longer” (“τί γρήγορα που η σκοτεινή γραμμή μακραίνει”; trans. Keeley and Sherrard; Cavafy 1992, 9). How can a poem that affirms linear time be steeped in spectral imagery, marked by the interplay of light, darkness, and shadows that the lighted, extinguished, and still-smoking candles generate? Can we trace another, antagonistic temporality at work in the poem?

3. For the poem in Greek, see Onassis Foundation Cavafy C.P. Fonds, File F02, Item 0002; GR-OF CA CA-SF01-S01-F02-SF002-0001 (2061), photos 11 and 12; <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-482/>



The speaker's melancholy at the passage of time and his refusal to look at the extinguished candles ("Δεν θέλω να τα βλέπω· με λυπεί η μορφή των" / "I do not want to look at them; their form saddens me"; trans. Keeley and Sherard; Cavafy 1992, 9) already registers the desire for an alternative temporality. Is this desire simply wishful thinking? Cavafy's own commentary on this poem opens up another possibility.<sup>4</sup> In this commentary, he rejects the poem's categorization as "allegorical" and identifies it instead as one of his "vision-iste" poems, thereby inserting it in the semantic and conceptual sphere of spectrality (Cavafy, in Savidis 1987, 163). In allegories, Cavafy argues, the correspondence of allegorical images with their referents is expected to adhere strictly to the laws of realism, reason, and probability, and to contain no logical inconsistencies. Scrutinizing the image that his "Candles" form, he shows that this poem would never pass the test of allegories, as it is full of logical inconsistencies. For example, if all lighted candles representing days of the future are already burning simultaneously, Cavafy wonders, how can a candle keep burning for days, months, or years without completely disappearing? And if the extinguished candles of the past were also once burning for long periods of time, how is it possible that their material hasn't completely disappeared? (Cavafy, in Savidis 1987, 163–64). As a "vision-iste" poem, however, "Candles" is not bound by logic and verisimilitude:

Όταν λέγομεν ότι η 'μέραις μοιάζουν σαν κεριά αναμμένα και σβυσμένα, τα κεριά είναι "a fleeting image of the mind," το οποίο image περιγράφεται ως έρχεται και το οποίο image επιτρέπεται να μην εκπληροί όλους τους όρους της πιθανότητας, διότι ο νους συχνάκις συλλαμβάνει [[απίθανα]] αδύνατα και απραγματοποιητά images (Cavafy, in Savidis 1987, 165).

When we say that the days look like candles lit and extinguished, the candles are "a fleeting image of the mind," an image that is described as it comes and is allowed to not meet all conditions of probability, because the mind often conceives [[improbable]] impossible and unrealized images. (my translation)

Seeing them as a spectral image of the mind, released from the demands of reason and realism, Cavafy affords "Candles" the freedom of another logic.

4. According to Savidis, Cavafy's commentary on "Candles" was meant for his brother John, the first translator of his poems in English. It is dated by Savidis between 1897 and 1899 (Savidis 1987, 166).

Veering away from the “probable,” the candles are sent off to the realm of the improbable and impossible. Might that realm also harbor another temporal logic that twists the seemingly inescapable laws of linear temporality, lineage, and certain death? The reason the image of the candles is logically inconsistent lies in the *simultaneity* of past, present, and future:<sup>5</sup> in the present of the image, the days of the past coexist with the days of the future, as the speaker can see them all at once. This simultaneity fosters a spectral chronotope, in which the entirety of one’s life can be present in one instance: not after this life is over, in the manner of a recollection, but in the very midst of it. Thus, even though the poem does not abolish the laws of linear time—the speaker’s fear and sadness stem precisely from these laws—the “impossible” poetic image that is summoned to visualize these laws ends up unsettling them. Poetry creates an alternative chronotope, a realm of shadows, darkness, smoke, and fire, from which linearity and chrononormativity do not exit unscathed.

Viewed in this way, Cavafy’s placing of the candles in the realm of the “unrealized” in his commentary does not just affirm the unrealistic, illogical character of the image, but acknowledges the spectral logic the poetic realm cultivates. This logic also holds the hope of an improbable future, in which the rigid frame of linear time is transgressed and one’s life may continue beyond death. As a result, the candles not only circumscribe life, reminding us of death’s certainty, but could also turn into a connecting thread that extends the poet’s life by “binding” it with future lives and worlds beyond his death. Cavafy’s life and writings become parts of a nexus that connects them with other lives and communities of readers, past and future, following a spectral temporality. And thus, in a movement of “queer errancy,” the candles, too, start veering “away from heteronormative destinations” (Luckhurst 2017, 1051–52) toward “impossible and unrealized images” (Cavafy, in Savidis 1987, 165) that bring them closer to Cavafy’s ghost ships, “heading—who knows where.”<sup>6</sup>

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5. Many thanks to Dimitris Papanikolaou for pointing out this simultaneity suggested in Cavafy’s comment.

6. Cavafy 2010, 85. The last words of “The Ships.”



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