

## The History of Tennis

by George Syrimis

“As for the term ‘gay’, anyone who has read Cavafy’s poetry will agree that it does not do justice to the sensibility and sexuality expressed therein.”<sup>1</sup> In what must be one of the most remarkable and boldest statements about Cavafy and his sexuality, Manuel Savidis presents the above argument as a universal and irrefutable statement of fact; *anyone will agree* is another way of saying everyone *must* agree. All one has to do is simply read the poetry itself. He sees no need “to sift through the ample documentation of Cavafy’s life” nor examine “the facts which contradict [his] theories.” One is, consequently, left more than a little confused to read that one should examine “the ample documentation of Cavafy’s life,” especially when none is provided by the author himself to substantiate his own claim of Cavafy’s early bisexuality, and most especially since the author, later on, warns us against the use of personal over literary criteria. As for the term ‘gay,’ one only wishes Mr. Savidis gave his reader even the slightest indication that he commands the term’s history, and the “sensibility and sexuality expressed therein.”

The relevance of Cavafy’s homosexuality to his homoerotic poetry has traditionally been dismissed on both ontological and epistemological grounds. The argument was simple: either Cavafy was not gay, or if he was there is no way for us to know through his poetry. Even if Cavafy were recognized as homosexual and that his poetry was profusely influenced by his sexuality, we are admonished from discussing it on the grounds that it compromises the poetry’s alleged universality and objectivity. In the final analysis, it is of little consequence whether Cavafy was homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or asexual. As Mr. Savidis himself concedes, “[Cavafy’s] erotic poems are almost exclusively homosexual” and as such we should approach them. Given this ample documentation of the centrality of homosexuality in Cavafy’s erotic poetry, there is no compelling need to find support in his also “ample

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<sup>1</sup> Savidis Manuel, “Cavafy Through the Looking-Glass,” C. P. Cavafy Professorship in Modern Greek website, University of Michigan, 2005. <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/modgreek>

documentation” in journal notes where he seems to be more than informed of the “new phase of love”<sup>2</sup> and of its French and English literary production. Might Cavafy be speaking here of an emerging modern homosexual identity that we have, in the last forty years, come to call “gay” and whose history we trace back to Oscar Wilde, a partial contemporary of our very own poet?

It is also no coincidence that, in retrospect, Cavafy’s poetry enters the stage of Western literature, along with that of other male figures such as Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, André Gide, Marcel Proust, E. M. Forster, Federico García Lorca, and, somewhat later, Jean Genet and Tennessee Williams at a time when notions of masculinity are in flux and the male body is being converted into a spectacle and a site of either transgression, nature, or discipline.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, however, the moment of revelation or recognition of homosexuality at the turn of the century did not merely expose a sexuality that had always been there to be revealed as such, but also marked the moment at which such sexuality was constituted and produced.<sup>4</sup> In other word, homosexual identity was as much constituted and produced around the turn of the century as it was (re)discovered. In the words of Cavafy, again,

In these last ten years many French books-- good and bad-- have been written that examine and bravely take into consideration the new phase of love. New it is not; only it has been neglected for centuries, with the prejudice that it was madness (science says it’s not) or a crime (reason says it’s not). This love exists even among the English themselves, as it exists -- and has existed -- in all nations, in few people, of course.

It is only fair here that one give credit to Michalis Peridis, whose biography of Cavafy from 1948 may have tended to over-emphasize the autobiographical aspects of the poetry, but who nonetheless anticipated, without the benefit of either Foucaultian sociology, or of Gay and Lesbian Studies or of New Historicism, much of what I am arguing in the previous paragraph. He concluded his section on the erotic poems with the following paragraph:

The hedonism of Cavafy is not simply a personal phenomenon of an idiosyncratic and eccentric poet who wanted to show or was carried away into showing in his verse the

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<sup>2</sup> Cavafy journal note, October 1905, in G. P. Savidis, 1987: 110. For a partial list of Cavafy's library, including books that "expose or describe [sexual instincts] in a scandalous way" see also Peridis, 1948: 76.

<sup>3</sup> Boscagli, 1996: 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Edelman, 1994: 14.

manifestation of "an infertile and condemned love." It is a phenomenon tied in with the times the poet lived and during which, in the whole world, scientific research and studies examined the question of gender/sex and established its power and the importance of its expression. Concurrently and parallel [to the studies], artistic works interpreted its prohibitions on the sensibility of their creators.<sup>5</sup>

For decades, Peridis's insights fell on deaf ears. Just a few years later Rika Angelianou-Karayani, the widow of Alecos Segkopoulos, Cavafy's heir, gave a series of interviews to Alecos Karapanagiotopoulos, which were published in Greek in 1985. In this text, which lays claim to the status of document, Mrs. Segkopoulou insists that Cavafy was not "passive" (παθητικός), a term I interpret as homosexual. Rather, she asserts, such assertions were based on circumstantial evidence and malevolent gossip. In fact, "Cavafy never reached any extreme situations, never lost his masculinity, nor did he ever abandon his spiritual interests because of any alleged passion." It is not so much the veracity of the information that concerns me here but rather the particular constellation of concepts that for Mrs. Segkopoulou, and by extension for the greater Alexandrian community, signify "the homosexual."<sup>6</sup> Manuel Savidis is right to expect that scholars of Cavafy's sexual orientation "have to be informed by the personal and historical data in order to be comprehensive and persuasive." One simply wished he, too, directed his reader to such data as well. So judging by Mrs. Segkopoulos' account, some of the characteristics of the male homosexual are passivity, submission, loss of self-possession and self-restraint, anomaly, deformation, femininity, an anti-spiritual hedonism, extremity and a casual

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<sup>5</sup> Peridis, 1948: 194. For evidence, Peridis lists the following researchers and authors: Kraft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886), Sigmund Freud, F. Marshall, Havelock Ellis (*Sexual Inversion*, Albert Moll, G. Maranon, A. Marie, and H. Licht. Literary authors include: Samuel Butler (1835-1902), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), André Gide (1869-1951), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), James Joyce (1882-1941), Henry de Montherlant (1896-1972), Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), and Aldous Huxley (1894-1963).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the accuracy of the information is not questioned at all by Karapanagiotopoulos since the author seems to take Mrs. Segkopoulou's statements at face value. That she was the wife of Alekos Segkopoulos is not a trivial detail since rumors have it that he was either Cavafy's lover or illegitimate son (Pieris, 1994:9). The mythical dimension of Segkopoulos' relationship to Cavafy and the divergent versions of this myth, son and lover, are themselves telling of the diverse and contradictory ways in which Cavafy's homosexuality has (not) been discussed in Greek letters.

association with excessive maternal love. All terms, except femininity and maternal love, are present in Cavafy's erotic poetry.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Segkopoulou concludes as follows:

we can say that those who relied on indications, because as I have already said there is no proof [of his homosexuality], prove how little they managed to fathom the thought and life of Cavafy.<sup>8</sup>

Coming from an eye-witness and a personal acquaintance of Cavafy, Mrs. Segkopoulou's testimony cannot be dismissed lightly. Nor should it be taken for granted either. It is highly unlikely that Cavafy confessed to her his sexual escapades. Her explanation of homoerotic themes that proliferated explicitly in Cavafy's work after 1922 is that they were merely exercises in poetic persona.<sup>9</sup> Her argument (you simply cannot fathom the thought and life of Cavafy) is eerily reminiscent of Manuel Savidis' ontological and epistemological refutations.

But what is one to make of the poetic persona argument and, even more puzzling, of the evasive personal pronouns in a number of poems where gender is obscured, as in "Hidden" for example. Can we assume that those poems too are about male to male desire or should we revert to the safety of the heterosexual assumption? When in doubt, should we read straight?

In a number of poems that I read as homoerotic, the personal pronouns remain teasingly neutral. In these poems, the epistemological objection is most virulently raised. I am referring here to a certain admonition by the prominent scholar and editor

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<sup>7</sup> Malanos notes the absence of female characters in Cavafy's erotic poems: "Once or twice women appear on stage as well, but not in an erotic role. 'Woman' here is not a character of love or pleasure. We have therefore, a one-sided poetry that does not express love in its entirety, nor all of its anomalies, but only one" (1957: 144). For a study of female characters in Cavafy see M. Prinzinger's article "Complicity and Conflict: Some Aspects of Reading and Gender in Cavafy" (1993).

<sup>8</sup> Karapanayotopoulos, 1985: 17. The word for 'indications' is "ενδειξεις", a noun that can also mean presumptive or circumstantial evidence, signs or clues.

<sup>9</sup> A similar claim is made for the poetry of Sappho. On the biases and distortions in critical comments, ancient and modern, on Sappho see Lefkowitz (1973) and Hallet (1979) whose work documents the incessant trivialization, the homophobic and misogynistic anxieties of scholars throughout the ages. John J. Winkler (1993) puts forward the argument that Sappho's lyric poems display a double consciousness, a cultural bilingualism that employs two systems of understanding, allowing the lesbian subject to converse in the language of the dominant patriarchal culture while still continuing to communicate among themselves in a language of their own. It is my contention that such a coded system of male homosexual poetry is also present in the erotic poems of Cavafy that is invisible to the general public but explicitly thematized as strategy of literary exclusion in a number of erotic poems.

of Cavafy G.P. Savidis who notes that homosexuality becomes explicit only in the 106th of Cavafy's 154 official poems. This occurs in the poem "In an Old Book" from 1922, when Cavafy was 59 years old. G. P. Savidis is quite determined about our assumptions of the erotic poems preceding 1922:

In other words, until [1922], two thirds of Cavafy's work, only our predisposition or our prejudice -- that is our whorish or puritanical mind -- read mechanically or interpret indecently as homosexual every erotic poem by Cavafy and its attendant expressions -- something which, most probably, he himself intended, at the time, only to the point of ambiguity.

Locating a homosexual reading at the extremes of both homosexual self-indulgence and puritanical homophobia, attributes that we allegedly may all share but really shouldn't (they are *ours* after all, which is to say not G. P. Savidis'), categorically forecloses discussion of homosexual allusions by denying them any discursive space. There is simply no way one can introduce homosexual desire in a poem like "Hidden" without slipping into a whorish or puritanical frame of mind. G. P. Savidis' denial of homosexuality from all pre-1922 erotic poems proscribes the inscription of homosexuality into the semantic ambiguities of Cavafy's erotic poems. Such an interdiction finds moral support through a correlation of a homosexual disposition with mechanical artificiality, and, through a series of all too common associations, with the inauthentic, the unnatural, the sick, and the decadent--terms that compound the prohibitive insinuations of indecency and intimate towards impropriety, indelicacy, lasciviousness, and sordidness.

Fifty years after Cavafy's death, G. P. Savidis employs a system of double binds to construct an epistemological closet for two thirds of the Cavafian corpus where both "either" and "or" are no options. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns that such "an excruciating system of double binds systematically oppress[es] gay people, identities, and acts by undermining through contradictory constraints on discourse the grounds of their very being"<sup>10</sup>. Although Cavafy's erotic poetry officially 'outs' itself in 1922, its prehistory still remains subject to invisibility and unrepresentability. I have elsewhere argued that the ambiguity, which characterizes a number of the pre-1922 poems, need not be construed as an interpretive taboo nor as an epistemological

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<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, 1990: 70.

impasse.<sup>11</sup> To the extent that such ambiguities are proposed as riddles whose lexical clues may be found dispersed in different poems, they need not be considered, as G. P. Savidis seems to suggest, as forbidden territories.

But why is a reading of Cavafy's poems as poems of homosexuality so objectionable? The strongest objection to the relevance of homosexuality in Cavafy is, perhaps, Peter Bien's 1990 article "Cavafy's Homosexuality and His Reputation Outside Greece." In this article, Peter Bien addresses the question of a homosexual translation of Cavafy. Bien rejects a "homosexual" translation on the grounds of its alleged parochialism. In this, he echoes Malanos who saw the homoerotic poems as one-sided. For Malanos, these poems "address themselves to a limited circle which we could expand, if we include all those who enjoy poetry, without taking into consideration those subjects with which they disagree."<sup>12</sup> It may be appropriate here to ask who are "we" and, by implication, who are "they"? Bien provides an answer that undermines both his and Malanos' objections; That "Cavafy would never have entered the British literary consciousness had it not been for [E. M. Forster's] energetic advocacy over three decades... and that homosexuality certainly played a part in Forster's involvement"<sup>13</sup> and that another homosexual, W.H. Auden, took up Forster's promotion of Cavafy do not seem to register as a contradiction to Bien's argument against homosexuality's parochialism. Paradoxically enough, it is "they," the "limited circle" that have been most instrumental and successful in expanding Cavafy's readership. Michalis Peridis argued for this four decades before. Commenting on an emerging literature of homosexuality, Peridis attributes Cavafy's popularity abroad precisely to the particularity of his sexuality.

Cavafy was one of the literary interpreters, and one of the most original, of this movement, and that is one of the reasons that his work finds direct appeal world wide, among literary circles, who are the bearers of ideological, morphological and emotional currents of their times.

Peridis tempers the 'universal' appeal of Cavafy by historicizing it. Peter Bien, however, magnifies Cavafy's alleged universality by removing it from history all

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<sup>11</sup> Syrimis, 2001, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Malanos, 1957: 144.

<sup>13</sup> Bien, 1990: 202-203.

together. Bien appropriates Alexiou and Lambropoulos's introductory remarks that Cavafy's poetry "save[s] concrete moments of experience from history"<sup>14</sup> by incorporating them into his own rejection of the alleged alienation of homosexuality: "Cavafy's own agenda would seem to be not so much to proclaim homosexual love either to initiates or non-initiates as "to save concrete moments of experience from history" by writing about them."<sup>15</sup> I will not take issue with what "Cavafy's own agenda would seem to be" other than to refer the reader to Cavafy's own journal notes regarding the limitation imposed upon his poetry by the stigma of homosexuality. "The power [Cavafy] wields is the power of language" concludes Bien but fails to acknowledge that Cavafy is subject to that power himself. This is the reason why Cavafy "spent most of his adult life trying to avoid the tag of a "gay poet."<sup>16</sup> If this is questioned, one should read Cavafy's notes more carefully.<sup>17</sup> In the erotic poems, those "concrete moments of experience from history" are neither incidental nor arbitrary but rather calculated and specific. And whose history do these poems bespeak of? If there is power over language in these poems it is not so much that Cavafy "persuades audiences that "seeming is reality and reality only seeming"" but rather that there is more to his erotic poetry than meets the eye. We are talking here about self-censorship. Readers of Cavafy are all too familiar with this theme. If Cavafy wielded any power over language it is precisely in terms of "a specifically homosexual strategy of liberation"<sup>18</sup> (which indeed it does). It is no small feat to be the first Greek poet to dare write about homosexuality in positive and celebratory terms since ancient times, a feat that did not escape the attention and admiration of even a prejudiced critic like Malanos.<sup>19</sup>

Bien concludes his essay with the following:

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<sup>14</sup> Alexiou and Lambropoulos, 1985: 12. Quoted in Bien, 1990: 206.

<sup>15</sup> Bien, 1990: 206.

<sup>16</sup> Savidis Manuel, C. P. Cavafy Professorship in Modern Greek website, University of Michigan, 2005

<sup>17</sup> The wretched laws of society-- the outcome of neither health nor reasoned judgment-- have diminished my work. They have fettered my expression; prevented me from giving light and excitement to all those made like me...In the final analysis, what is there for me to do? So I waste myself, aesthetically. And I will remain the object of speculation; and I will be understood better from everything that I have denied (15.12.1905), G. P. Savidis, 1987: 111.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 1983, editors' statement, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Malanos, 1957: 144.

Should Cavafy be translated in a specifically homosexual way? I think not. What preoccupied him was the modern perception of the reality of loss and, at the same time, the failure of traditional attempts to confront that reality, whether through a Christian faith in heavenly recompense or in a Victorian faith in earthly progress. Homosexual love, being infertile, is a perfect emblem for loss. Focusing on such love in order to show that experience is neither false nor worthless just because it lacks fruition, and that process is more important than results, Cavafy elaborated a strategy that liberated him from his sexual impasse and also from the philosophy of absolute worthlessness of effort. This strategy, however, speaks to the need of everyone. To translate Cavafy's poems specifically for a homosexual audience is to compromise their universal appeal.

Loss, failure, infertility, falsity, worthlessness and impasse are bracketed here in a discussion of homosexuality. Homosexuality is proposed here as indicative of the failure of modernity, in essence as a symptom of a modern pathology or inadequacy. This is not too far from Tsirkas' assertion that homosexuality is the by-product of a decadent bourgeois.<sup>20</sup> That homosexuality is seen as infertile and as a perfect emblem of loss is to confuse and conflate love with procreation. The former is, in fact, not a requirement for the latter. This conflation of love with procreation is also a gross misreading of the immense literature of love. Most great love affairs climax with a kiss and sometimes more... I know none, though I suspect there must be some, which find their teleological culmination in the delivery room. The ascription of loss to non-procreative sexual acts would, needless to say, implicate not only homosexual sex but also heterosexual sex involving contraception as well as sex by women past menopause or infertile heterosexual partners for that matter. Would we approach heterosexual love at a mature age with the same reservations? As to the compromise of Cavafy's alleged universal appeal I remain skeptical. As a test of this appeal we could read the poem "Those Who fought for the Achaean League" (1922) and compare it with "Pleasure" (1917). If by "universal appeal" we mean something akin to Hellenocentrism, then the argument is indisputable. I for one fail to see how "Achaean League" is more universal than "Pleasure" even with its implicit slur on heterosexuality in its final line. Experimental sexuality is not the privilege of homosexuality alone.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tsirkas, 1958: 301.

<sup>21</sup> See also Tsirkas' formulation of homosexuality as a symptom of modernity, 1958: 301.



In a sense, Peter Bien echoes George Savidis' pronouncement that what makes Cavafy a contemporary poet is "not the fact that he has replaced Oscar Wilde on the altar of gay dilettantes the world over" but rather that "he represents the Greater Hellenism."<sup>22</sup> There is no need to take issue with the characterization of Cavafy's gay readers as dilettantes other than to point out that Savidis is associating, yet again, homosexuality with falsity, artificiality and pretense. And even if Cavafy did not construct disparate audiences in his poems, which he did, his critics certainly have. And should the alleged subjectivism and specificity of homosexuality be construed as a compromise to the poem's articulation of "universal truths" and "essential nature,"<sup>23</sup> if those are still desirable literary virtues, let us be reminded of the words of our particular gentleman poet, whose vision of the universe was not entirely straight, that

one lives, one hears, and one understands; the poems one writes, though not true to one's actual life, are true to other lives-- *not generally of course but specifically*-- and the reader to whose life the poem fits admits and feels the poem...And when one lives, hears, and searches intelligently and tries to write wisely, his work is bound, one may say, to fill some life."<sup>24</sup> "If my poems are not generally relevant, they are partially. That is no small achievement. Thus their truth is guaranteed."<sup>25</sup>

It can, of course, be argued that one needs no authorial validation of a minority position to appreciate the homoerotic poetry of Cavafy. In encountering another person or a new text we look for affinities and similarities with others. We try to classify and profile the unknown; we render it familiar, legible, and legitimate. In the case of texts, we locate them in traditions, movements and schools that ground our analysis on comparison, affinity and divergence.

When research of this kind is focused on the way people choose to define themselves, we bracket it under the label 'identity politics.' It refers to the political, literary, or theoretical activity of specific social groups who see themselves as marginalized and suppressed by dominant and oppressive institutions and sets as its goal the assertion of distinctiveness and self-determination of its subjects. But even though identity politics is a phenomenon observed in late twentieth century liberal

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<sup>22</sup> Savidis, 1987: 406-407. From an interview given to Georgios Pilichos in 1983.

<sup>23</sup> Anton, 1994: 212.

<sup>24</sup> Cavafy, 1963 (Unpublished Prose Texts, ed. M. Peridis). Translated in English by Anton, 1994: 339-345.

<sup>25</sup> Cavafy, Journal note from July 9, 1905. In G. P. Savidis, 1987: 109.

democracies, its insistence on distinctiveness and liberation is by no means recent. Was not Solomos engaged in identity politics as well? Isn't Papadiamantis' "The Murderess" also about what it means to be a woman in rural Greece? Aren't Cavafy's poems about Hellenism also about the ways in which one defines one's self with respect to dominant imperial (Hellenistic or British) and national centers (Athens)?

In my own work on Cavafy's homoerotic poems, I have tried to show how the silence imposed on modern homosexuality may help us explicate the pervasive vocabulary of concealment, obscurity, opacity, and evasion. These terms function in Cavafy as sign posts of homosexuality, pointing to a desire that phrases itself as a tentative and teasing revelation, a revelation as secrecy; *half-seen* characters, *unfulfilled* loves and *indistinct* memories may be elements of any erotic recollection but within the semantic and formal parameters of Cavafy's poetry, they more often than not a) signify the clandestine experience of homosexuality and b) attempt to surmount the illegibility of that desire. And it is this illegibility that Cavafy's poetry attempts to overcome. By focusing on the language of homosexuality, we may also enrich our understanding of Cavafy's poetic development and resolve the implications of the poems' self-referentiality. To take one example, by the time "Aimilianos" was written, in 1918, Cavafy had already adopted a coded idiom that he would continue to employ in explicitly homosexual poems. That code, that "panoply of lies" that Aimilianos aspires to construct "with words, appearance, and manners"<sup>26</sup> to fool his enemies, had already become transparent in Cavafy's poetry by the time "Temethos" was written in 1925. By then, his poetry displayed few scruples about the theme of homosexuality, becoming in some cases almost confrontational and provocative.<sup>27</sup> What I find relevant and revelatory here is not so much the textual transparency of homosexuality in these two poems but rather the metatextual commentary on Cavafy's own tactics of evasion. In corroboration with his personal

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<sup>26</sup> The line "With words, appearance, and manners" suggests of course the development of a style, a persona, and a conscious elaboration of an identity, presumably here fictitious and fake. That popular discourses of homosexuality also insist on calling the lives of gay men and women a 'life style' only perpetuates a long standing portrayal of homosexuality as artificial and, thus, unnatural, as a 'life style' rather than simply a 'life.'

<sup>27</sup> See for instance "I Went," 1913; "Sensual Pleasure," 1917; "Theatre of Sidon," 1923; "Days of 1986," 1927; and the unpublished "Addition," 1897; and "And I Reclined and Lay Down on Their Bed," 1915.

notes, these poems attest to the strategies of evasion and deception employed by Cavafy at certain points in his poetic development. These tactics are not mere external aesthetic choices that were subsequently applied to his erotic poems. Rather, they are consequences of his homosexuality, or rather of his choice to write about homosexuality, and as such aesthetic responses to it. Cavafy's homoerotic poetry engages in double game of saying by not saying, of revealing by not revealing, that is eminently poetic; poetry, in other words, as rarely 'straightforward.' Along these lines, one may also observe the overlap between the discourse of aestheticism and homosexuality in Cavafy. Characterized by a slight aversion to concerns with content, nature, politics, or ethics, aestheticism, and particularly its decadent strain, is understood and criticized for its inversion into itself, for its alleged narcissistic self-engagement, its perversity, and artificiality. It is not surprising that the critical language of aestheticism resembles that of homosexuality as understood at the turn of the twentieth century. An understanding of the history of homosexuality and its philosophical and literary traditions, may also shed light on the complex and shifting relationships between readers and authors, relationships that are more often than not also erotic.

Last, but certainly not least, we may finally come face to face with the eroticization of Hellenism and pose some new questions: How is homosexuality made compatible with the luxurious life of a decadent Hellenism? What is the civic and political significance of sexual relations between men of different ethnic or religious backgrounds in the context of a Hellenocentric empire? How are elitism, cultural domination, Hellenic enculturation and homosexuality semantically related and to what effect? In contrast, why are all the contemporary homosexual characters stripped of their Hellenic identity and why is contemporary Greek history all but absent from the contemporary love poems? Why are the ancient erotic characters dignified with a name and a rudimentary biography, participating in almost all cultural facets of society, while the contemporary characters remain anonymous on the margins of both cultural achievement and economic success and often explicitly removed from community units? And finally, what is one to make of the unfinished poem "Newspaper Report"?

The idiosyncrasy of Cavafy's poetry notwithstanding, its originality can be contextualized and historicized. Radical and ground breaking as the poetry may be, and in many ways it is both in the Greek and international context, it is neither an accident nor a coincidence that Cavafy writes precisely when he does. In this light, the homoerotic poetry of Cavafy can be understood as the product of a number of external forces (philosophical, religious, legal, scientific) that bear on our understanding of homosexuality. The production of poetry is, therefore, not simply an exclusive, sovereign act of individual creation but rather the result of negotiation with, resistance and submission to community, culture, class, aesthetic tradition and so on. We might understand the “unique” and “inimitable” style of Cavafy better if we do not approach it as an individual peculiarity and a self-contained productive process but rather as a complex appropriation of the world and a specific interpretation of a wider collective experience of sexuality at the time.

So in encountering his poetry we may ask, was Cavafy ‘gay’? Of course, he was and, of course, he wasn’t. He was as much gay as he was Greek, which is to say that his particular and personal position with respect to these two identities, identities which he himself fused in his poetry, will diverge from ours and from those of his predecessors; they will remain in flux, in immanent dialogue and opposition to their very history. Will such an approach reveal the inner and hidden depths of “the homosexual psyche” as one of my critics demanded? I very much doubt it. As Nietzsche warned, “only that which has no history is definable.”<sup>28</sup> For the time being, I am re-reading the poetry in search of tennis balls.

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, 1967:80.

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