The erotic poems of C.P. Cavafy

Sarah Ekdawi

I am going to talk about what constitutes the erotic poetry of C.P Cavafy, but also about Oscar Wilde's contribution to it. I would like to begin by quoting a short extract from the court transcript of the libel suit brought by Oscar Wilde against the ninth Marquess of Queensberry, in 1894. Queensberry entered the now infamous plea of justification, which resulted in Wilde's own subsequent trial, on counts of sodomy and indecency, and his imprisonment. In this extract, Edward Carson Q.C. is cross-examining Wilde on the subject of homoeroticism in his life and art. The distinction between art and life is by no means always clear.

> *Carson:* The affection and love of the artist of Dorian Gray might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency?
> *Wilde:* I have no knowledge of the views of ordinary individuals.
> *Carson:* Have you ever adored a young man madly?
> *Wilde:* No, not madly. I prefer love – that is a higher form.
> *Carson:* Never mind about that. Let us keep down to the level we are at.
> *Wilde:* I have never given adoration to anyone except myself.
> *Carson:* I suppose you think that a very smart thing?
> *Wilde:* Not at all.
> *Carson:* Then you have never had that feeling?
> *Wilde:* No. The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say – yes from Shakespeare's sonnets.
> *Carson:* I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice.
> *Wilde:* On the contrary, I have written an article to show that they are not. I objected to such a perversion being put upon Shakespeare.

In 1924, according to Timos Malanos, Cavafy himself came perilously close to bringing a similar libel suit against the journalist, Socrates Lagoudakis. The trouble began, it appears,

when Cavafy drew attention to the rough breathing used by Lagoudakis in writing Νέα Ὑόρκη, pointing out that in English it is New York and not New Hyork. Lagoudakis set about a scurrilous press polemic, heavily hinting at Cavafy's sexual proclivities. A petition signed by sixty of Cavafy's supporters, protesting at these scabrous attacks and attesting to the poet's exemplary conduct as well as his literary merit, apparently resolved the situation out of court. Cavafy might have ended up, Malanos says, "in the dock like Oscar Wilde".

If Cavafy's homosexuality was, by 1924, something of an open secret in some Alexandrian circles, it was by no means as flamboyantly open as Wilde's had been, thirty years earlier, in London and Paris, with such disastrous consequences. Circumspect about his private life, Cavafy also exercised discretion in his art, only publishing poems with erotic themes in which the sex of the addressee is unstated (such as "Γκρίζα" – "Gray"), or where the kind of love referred to would only be apparent in the context of his other, unpublished work. (One example of this is "Ἐπῆγα" ("I Went"), where the speaker could very well be making a macho heterosexual boast.) In cases where the beloved is obviously male, other distancing devices, such as a pseudo-historical setting or consignment to the tomb, are employed. The poet clearly cannot be implicated in, for example, the "dangerous thoughts" of Myrtias, a Syrian student living under the joint reign of the sons of Constantine the Great; nor could his be the voice that issues from the grave of Iasis.

Apart from the small number of poems with erotic themes or undertones which Cavafy chose to publish, there are the poems of this nature which he printed for private circulation, some of which are more explicit (like "He asked about the Quality"), and then the so-called "Unpublished" poems that were neither printed nor disseminated by the poet. Among these is the poem described by Yourcenar as "an embarrassing confession of carnal fetishism": "The Bandaged Shoulder". Clearly, Cavafy was taking no chances of this kind of thing falling into the wrong kind of hands – at least in his lifetime.

No such circumspection – alas! – was favoured by Wilde, who sent pleasurable shock-waves through Victorian society, until the Public Prosecutor put a stop to him. Wilde publicised his affection for Lord Alfred Douglas and published provocative works. The most notable of these were the two that Carson

seized upon: *A Portrait of Mr W.H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The *Portrait of Mr W.H.* is Wilde's attempt to demonstrate that the mainspring of Shakespeare's inspiration, not just for the sonnets but also for the plays, was homosexual love. Wilde describes the sonnets, here, as "slight and secret things... intended [...] for private circulation only among a few, a very few friends."

Three things suggest that Cavafy had read *A Portrait of Mr W.H.*, published in London in 1889. In the first place, the strong connexion posited between inspiration of the highest order and homosexual love is repeatedly reaffirmed by Cavafy himself in poems written after that date. In the second place, the notion of the sonnets as secret poems for private circulation is paralleled not only in Cavafy's publishing practices, but also, as we shall see, in statements he makes about poetics in his erotic poems. For the moment, I will refer you only to the poem "Theatre of Sidon, 400 A.D.", where the speaker boasts: "I sometimes write highly audacious verses in Greek / and these I circulate – surreptitiously, of course."

In the third place, the passage where Oscar Wilde actually describes "W.H.", the supposed recipient of both Shakespeare's passion and his sonnets, and on Wilde's hypothesis, a boy-actor in the plays, is oddly reminiscent of a poem by Cavafy. Wilde writes: "I could almost fancy that I saw him standing in the shadow of my room, so well had Shakespeare drawn him, with his golden hair, his tender, flower-like grace, his dreamy deep-sunken eyes, his delicate mobile limbs and his white lily hands." This vision came to Wilde, he says, after he had been reading Shakespeare's sonnets. In "Kaisarion", Cavafy attributes a similar apparition to his own reading of epigraphs. He says, "My art gives to your face / a dreamy, 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 – I thought you came into my room."

Cavafy is said to have written historical, philosophical and erotic poems – and "Kaisarion", as its uncertain opening ("Ἐν μέρει ... ἐν μέρει" – "Partly ... partly") suggests, is one of many borderline cases that do not neatly fit this classification. It is not, as far as I can see, a philosophical poem; it could scarcely be called erotic, although a beautiful youth is described, and history merely serves as a kind of pretext. If we return, however,

to Cavafy's own terminology, we find that he claims to have written historical, philosophical and "sensual – or for that matter, sentimental" poems: "ἡδονικὰ – ἢ καὶ αἰσθηματικὰ ποιήματα".

Ἡδονὴ refers to sensual pleasure or hedony, while αἴσθημα designates sentiment or sensation. The first has connotations of decadence and the second, linguistically at least, of Aestheticism. It would perhaps be overstating the case to translate Cavafy's phrase "ἡδονικὰ – ἢ καὶ αἰσθηματικὰ ποιήματα" as "Decadent or maybe Aestheticist poetry" – αἰσθηματικός is not, after all, the same as αἰσθητικός – but the best way to classify poems like "Kaisarion" might well be under a heading such as "Beauty for Art's Sake". It is also worth remembering that a central concept in Aestheticism was the appeal of the arts to the senses.

The words ἡδονὴ and ἡδονικός, αἴσθημα, αἴσθησις, καλαισθησία, αἰσθητικός and αἰσθηματικός recur in the "ἡδονικὰ – ἢ καὶ αἰσθηματικὰ ποιήματα", which, for the sake of convenience, I shall now go back to calling "erotic poems". To give but one example, the youthful Kaisarion is described as "αἰσθηματικός". Love, on the other hand, is curiously lacking – an omission which has bedevilled critical discussion of this most controversial section of Cavafy's œuvre. Stratis Tsirkas, among other eccentricities, devotes a sub-section of his book about Cavafy to "Ἀπὸ πότε καὶ πῶς παραστράτησε" – "When and how he went wrong". He speculates that the poet's initiation into – I quote – "mechanical homosexuality" must have happened in England, during his impressionable years. Malanos, as might be expected from a loyal friend of the poet, is both more sympathetic and less prurient. He lays stress on Cavafy's discretion and on the danger of scandal attendant upon what he calls, quoting Lord Alfred Douglas, "the Love that Dare not speak its name", although he also, on occasion, berates the poet for his "cowardice".

Marguerite Yourcenar was struck, she says, by the detached and impersonal nature of Cavafy's erotic poems, and concludes that either Cavafy rarely experienced love or that he chose not to mention it. Edmund Keeley expresses fervent admiration for what he calls "autobiographical honesty" in Cavafy's poems, and yet, as Margaret Alexiou has pointed out, he clearly situates what he calls Cavafy's "Sensual City" on a lower plane than

the historical one. Alexiou herself, however, in her desire to avoid a judgemental position, claims to find "The Bandaged Shoulder" no more shocking than the published poems. W.H. Auden, in common with Keeley, admires Cavafy's "honesty" on the subject of physical pleasure, but Stephen Spender objects to Cavafy's equation of "erotic memory or wish with poetry". To all these critics, Cavafy's privileging of physical over metaphysical love has obviously required apology.

Perhaps the closest Cavafy ever comes to a love-poem (and I discount, as he himself did, early romantic maunderings) is "Ἔρωτος Ἄκουσμα" ("On Hearing of Love"). This poem can be viewed as a kind of answer to the critics, though it is typically full of twists, and by no means a straight answer. Since it is very short, I will quote it in Greek as well as in English:

ΕΡΩΤΟΣ ΑΚΟΥΣΜΑ

Στοῦ δυνατοῦ ἔρωτος τὸ ἄκουσμα τρέμε καὶ συγκινήσου
σὰν αἰσθητής. Ὅμως, εὐτυχισμένος,
θυμήσου πόσα ἡ φαντασία σου σ' ἔπλασσεν· αὐτὰ
πρῶτα· κ' ἔπειτα τ' ἄλλα – πιὸ μικρὰ – ποὺ στὴν ζωή σου
ἐπέρασες κι' ἀπόλαυσες, τ' ἀληθινότερα κι' ἁπτά.–
Ἀπὸ τοὺς τέτοιους ἔρωτας δὲν ἤσουν στερημένος.

ON HEARING OF LOVE[1]

On hearing about great love, respond, be moved
like an aesthete. Only, fortunate as you've been,
remember how much your imagination created for you.
This first, and then the rest
that you experienced and enjoyed in your life:
the less great, the more real and tangible.
Of loves like these you were not deprived.

The poem hinges on the contrast between great love (about which the speaker has heard, and to which, as an aesthete, he knows the correct response) and smaller loves, which he has actually enjoyed. Equally important is the comparison between the things he was fortunate enough to have had created for him by his imagination, and the so-called "smaller loves". But does

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[1] All translations used in this article, except for "Artificial Flowers" and "From the Drawer", are those of Keeley and Sherrard.

the phrase "loves like these", in the final line, refer only to the smaller loves, or does it include the creations of fantasy, and if so, does it also include the great love – or at least the hearing about it? Implicit in the closing word, "deprived", is the idea that the closest the speaker has come to "great love" is to have heard about it and responded like an aesthete. And an aesthete, as we already know, responds primarily through the senses (or αἰσθήσεις).

The conventions of love-poetry demand that physical beauty be matched by beauty of the soul, and the physical act of love by a higher, mental or spiritual communion. In the erotic poems of Cavafy, the metaphysical counterpart of physical passion is not Love, but Art. In fact, the only stated object of love in these poems is the poems themselves: "Τὴν ἐργασία μου ... τὴν ἀγαπῶ" ("I love my work") (taken from the first line of "Ζωγραφισμένα"). Cavafy's erotic poems concern the relationship between Art and sensual pleasure, and in this relationship, the vital mediator and interpreter is Memory. The poems are, without exception, retrospective, and Roderick Beaton has made the point that the present tense in Cavafy "refers to nothing but the time of writing". Thus, the creative act could be said to occupy the temporal foreground of the poems.

The argumentation of many of the poems is as follows: pleasure creates a memory; memories are transmutable into art; through art the actual physical experience of erotic pleasure can somehow be relived. This proposition could scarcely be further removed from Keeley's ideas about autobiographical honesty; it is more in keeping with what Dionysis Kapsalis has called "Cavafy's autobiographical inventions". Of equal importance to memory, which Cavafy portrays, in any case, as both selective and fallible, are fiction and fantasy. In the unpublished poem, "Half an Hour", the speaker claims that artists can, by stretching the imagination, create erotic pleasure, while in the poem "January 1904" (also unpublished), remembering is described as "remoulding with the mind". Memory is also presented as capable of enhancing the past, in the teeth of the evidence: in "On Board Ship", the speaker is reminded of a boy by a pencil sketch, but says, "I remember him as better looking" and "He appears to me better looking / now that my soul brings him back, out of Time".

The unifying themes of the erotic poems of Cavafy are erotic pleasure, Art and memory. Within this broad framework, four main categories of poems can be distinguished: poems about specific encounters; epitaphs; erotic poems of poetics; and poems about the life of the senses more generally. The clearest example of the last group of poems is "Ἡδονῆ": "To Sensual Pleasure", where this is described as "χαρὰ καὶ μύρο τῆς ζωῆς μου" – "the joy and incense of my life". One poem which exemplifies descriptions of encounters is "He Asked about the Quality", in which two young men flirt dangerously over a pile of coloured handkerchiefs. In the epitaph-poems ("Tomb of Lanis", "Tomb of Ignatius" and so on), as Valerie Caires has pointed out, the dead are treated as objects of eros in a way which is alien to their apparent source, the Hellenistic epigrams. Although it unquestionably was inspired by the epigrams, and even occasionally echoes their language, Cavafy's erotic treatment of the dead may also owe something to Wilde's "Grave of Keats", whose occupant is described as "Fair as Sebastian" and deemed to have "sweetest lips" as well as a broken heart.

Before returning in more detail to Oscar Wilde and his presence in Cavafy's poetry, I would like to look at the poems which serve as Cavafy's affirmation of the "Importance of Being Sensual": the erotic poems of poetics. I shall also discuss two Cavafian poems of poetics which, although they do not mention eroticism directly, are very clearly aestheticist and deal with the superiority of Art to Nature (in one case) and the superiority of art for secret circulation (in the other).

The erotic poems of poetics are: "Ἔτσι πολὺ ἀτένισα" ("I've Looked so Much"), of 1911; "Νόησις" ("Understanding"), 1915; "Ἡ ἀρχή των" ("Their Beginning"), 1915; "Κι ἀκούμπησα καὶ πλάγιασα στὲς κλίνες των" ("And I Lounged and Lay on their Beds"), 1915; "Ὅταν διεγείρονται" ("When they Come Alive"), 1916, and "Ἐκόμισα εἰς τὴν Τέχνη" ("I've Brought to Art"), 1921. Thus, all but the first and last belong to the years 1915-1916. It should also be pointed out that the first and last poems cover rather different ground from the others, and that it is the poems of 1915 and '16 which really state the case for sensual pleasure as the mainspring of poetry.

The first of the poems listed, "I've Looked so Much", opens with the claim, "I've looked on beauty so much / that my vision overflows with it" and goes on to provide a kind of catalogue of

the building-blocks used in the erotic poems: "The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs. / Hair as though stolen from Greek statues..." These constituent parts of bodies and poems are summed up as "Figures of love, as my poetry desired them" and then the speaker seems to sink into a reverie, typographically suggested by the three dots which interrupt the penultimate line and by the row of dots with which the poem closes. Dreaminess is also indicated by the poem's concluding repetitions: "in the nights when I was young, / encountered secretly in my nights." The focus of this poem, then, is physical beauty and poetry's desire for this.

The connexion between the life of the senses ("ὁ ἡδονικός μου βίος") and the impulse to poetry ("βουλὲς τῆς ποιήσεώς μου") is much more strongly stated in the first of the 1915-16 poems, "Νόησις" – "Understanding":

> Μέσα στὸν ἔκλυτο τῆς νεότητός μου βίο
> μορφόνονταν βουλὲς τῆς ποιήσεώς μου,
> σχεδιάζονταν τῆς τέχνης μου ἡ περιοχή.
>
> In the loose living of my early years
> the impulses of my poetry were shaped
> the boundaries of my art were plotted.

Here, both inspiration and subject-matter are linked with sensuality.

"Their Beginning" opens with a reference to lawless eroticism: "Ἡ ἐκπλήρωσις τῆς ἔκνομής των ἡδονῆς ἔγινεν" – "Their illicit pleasure has been fulfilled" and goes on to describe the silent and furtive departure of the couple, fearful that something about them will give away "σὲ τί εἴδους κλίνην ἔπεσαν πρὸ ὀλίγου" ("what kind of bed they've just been lying on"). The reader, incidentally, is only privy to the meaning of "illicit" and "what kind of bed", if he or she has read the epitaphs and the encounter-poems. "Their Beginning" ends, "But what profit for the life of the artist: / tomorrow, the day after, or years later, he'll give voice / to the strong lines that had their beginning here."

The next poem, from the same year, also elects to use the word "κλίνη" (instead of "κρεββάτι") for "bed". Here, too, the kind of pleasure sought does not correspond to the description "ἀναγνωρισμένοι ἔρωτες" – "accepted modes of love". This is a

stronger hint than the words "illicit" and "what kind of bed" at homosexuality, and it is probably for this reason that "And I Lounged and Lay on their Beds" remained unpublished. The poem recounts a visit to a house of pleasure, where, the speaker claims, "I went into the secret rooms / considered shameful even to name. But not shameful to me – because if they were, / what kind of poet, what kind of artist would I be?" and goes on to assert that celibacy would not only be preferable to commonplace pleasures, but would also be "more in keeping with my poetry". Thus the poetry, as well as the kind of pleasure alluded to, is firmly dissociated from the commonplace. "Such a poet can never be popular," commented E.M. Forster of Cavafy. Clearly, though, such a poet had no yearning to be popular, and here again it is worth remembering Wilde's statement, quoted above and emblematic of his posture: "I have no knowledge of the views of ordinary individuals."

In 1919, Cavafy rewrote a poem from 1913: "Ὅταν διεγείρονται" ("When they Come Alive"). This poem is in the form of an injunction to one addressed as "Poet". The poet is enjoined to preserve his erotic visions ("τοῦ ἐρωτισμοῦ σου τὰ ὁράματα") by placing them, half-hidden, in his poetry: "Βάλ' τα, μισοκρυμένα, μὲς στὲς φράσεις σου." This need and desire for secrecy is echoed in the last, and rather later, poem in this group, "Ἐκόμισα εἰς τὴν Τέχνη" ("I've Brought to Art"). Here, the mood of reverie, noted in "I've Looked so Much", returns: "Κάθομαι καὶ ρεμβάζω" – but in place of the red lips, sensual limbs and sculpted hair, the speaker reviews his contribution to Art thus:

> I've brought to Art desires and sensations:
> things half-glimpsed,
> faces or lines, certain indistinct memories
> of unfulfilled love affairs.

The word "μισοκρυμένα", "half-hidden", from "When they Come Alive" is recalled in "μισοειδωμένα", "half-glimpsed" in "I've Brought to Art". The poet, then, has brought to art things which remain partly hidden.

We have seen how, in these poems of poetics, Cavafy locates the origins of poetry in ἡδονὴ (or sensual pleasure); claims to have brought to Art "desires and sensations" ("ἐπιθυμίες κ'

αἰσθήσεις"), and refers to a certain desire for artistic concealment, speaking of things half-hidden and half-glimpsed. We have also seen that beauty, specified as red lips, Greek hair and sensual limbs, is as important as erotic visions, and that the commonplace is scorned.

In a somewhat earlier poem of poetics, "Τεχνητὰ Ἄνθη", which dates from 1903, Art, in the guise of "Artificial Flowers", is preferred to Nature. The closing lines of this poem connect it both lexically and thematically to the "sensual and sentimental" ("ἡδονικὰ – ἢ καὶ αἰσθηματικά") poems under consideration. The lines in question refer to the flowers:

> Ἐὰν δὲν ἔχουν ἄρωμα, θὰ χύσουμ' εὐωδία,
> θὰ κάψουμ' ἐμπροστά των μύρα αἰσθηματικά.
>
> For if they have no odour, we shall pour out perfume,
> we shall burn before them the incense of the senses.

Edmund Keeley has identified this poem as "one of a few unacknowledged borrowings from Oscar Wilde", quoting in support Wilde's *Decay of Lying:* "[Art] has flowers that no forest knows of, birds that no woodland possesses."

In 1912, Cavafy made artificial flowers the subject of another poem "Τοῦ μαγαζιοῦ" ("For the Shop"). This poem was published, whereas "Artificial Flowers" was kept by the poet among his papers, and marked "Not for publication, but may remain here." The reason for this might be artistic, since, unlike "The Bandaged Shoulder", "Artificial Flowers" is not particularly revealing. It does, however, reveal one thing which Cavafy may well have wished to keep hidden: his interest in Wilde. The published poem, "For the Shop", is, paradoxically, about the reason for concealing certain works of art – not, as one might expect, erotic art, but flowers made from precious stones. In Cavafy's writing, then, as in Wilde's, artificial flowers acquire a symbolic status.

Both of Cavafy's poems on this subject, "Artificial Flowers" and "For the Shop", employ highly elaborate rhymes. In this way, the poet's craftsmanship is implicitly associated with the jeweller's. "Artificial Flowers" proclaims a decadent dislike for roses, lilies and narcissi, which are said to "adorn common gardens" and to fill the speaker with ennui. It may be pertinent that roses and lilies have often been used as metaphors for

female beauty. The rest of the poem lavishes extravagant praise on artificial flowers, attributing theory, wisdom, faithfulness, rhythm, knowledge and immortality to them.

"For the Shop" is briefer and incomparably less florid. It consists of five rhymed couplets, where all but the final rhyme of the poem are rich. "For the Shop" depicts a jeweller carefully wrapping up roses made of rubies, lilies made of pearls and violets made of amethyst, for the safe. The items which are "for the shop" are only mentioned in the final couplet. They are termed "περίφημα στολίδια" ("first class ornaments"), but are not described in detail or accorded a correspondingly rich rhyme. The jeweller will not offer for sale the so-called "examples of his bold, his skilful work", the artificial flowers; instead, he brings out for his customers, "bracelets, chains, necklaces and rings".

Marguerite Yourcenar, commenting on "For the Shop" and "Sculptor of Tyana", has suggested that Cavafy created, but did not preserve, a secret œuvre alongside his published and unpublished poems. More recently, Anthony Hirst, of King's College London, has argued that the flowers of "Artificial Flowers" and "For the Shop" represent poems that Cavafy "was unable to write or unable to publish". Whilst agreeing with Hirst's contention that "For the Shop" "would seem too slight if it did not have some hidden meaning", I am less sure about his conclusion, in this particular context, that "Th[e] metaphor of the safe refers [...] more to the unwritten poems stored in Cavafy's mind, than to a few written but unpublished poems among his papers". Elsewhere, however, for example in the unpublished poem "Hidden Things", Cavafy appears to be referring to precisely such "unwritten poems".

In order to open a safe, a secret numerical combination is usually necessary. On the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, we might do worse than set a poet to catch a poet. In 1947, the poet George Seferis adopted a code-breaking approach to the poet C.P. Cavafy, the results of which were not sufficiently substantial, in themselves, to be very convincing. Seferis argued that in the poem "Those who Fought for the Achaean League", Cavafy was making a coded reference to the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922, which had not quite happened at the time of writing, but was imminent. I do not necessarily regard the timing as problematic, since, as Cavafy himself says, "The Wise Perceive

things About to Happen", but whatever the explanation, the fact remains that Cavafy's historical data and datings are invariably of vital importance to the full understanding of a given poem.

For this reason, the suggestion made by George Savidis, to the effect that the dates in the poems set in modern Alexandria which contain the word "Days" in their titles are deliberately misleading fabrications, is not especially persuasive. It seems more likely that a meaning is encoded in Cavafy's modern dates, as I shall now attempt to show. For this, it is necessary to return to the subject of Wilde's disgrace and imprisonment. It should be borne in mind that Wilde was at the pinnacle of his career in the early 1890s and that few of his doings escaped comment in the British and French press. It is improbable in the extreme that anything Wilde did in this period could have escaped Cavafy's notice.

At the end of 1893, Lord Alfred Douglas visited Cairo and Luxor, disporting himself with friends in between on a gilded barge on the Nile. At around the same time, Wilde was introduced to Paul Verlaine, who had been in prison some twenty years earlier for wounding Rimbaud with a revolver. Verlaine read Wilde a poem about his prison experiences. In March 1895, the Queensberry trial opened, to be followed a month later by Wilde's own trial and imprisonment. Wilde was in prison from May 1895 until May 1897.

Between 1896 and 1897, Cavafy wrote three of the five surviving poems which he classified under the heading "Prisons" ("Φυλακαὶ") in his thematic catalogue. Of the two best-known of these, "Τείχη" ("Walls"), 1896, and "Τὰ παράθυρα" ("The Windows"), 1897, Cavafy wrote: "These are clearly allegorical poems about the difficulties of life." In 1896, Lord Alfred Douglas published "An Introduction to my Poems with some Remarks on the Wilde Case", in a French literary periodical. In the same year, Wilde's *Salomé* was staged for the first time, and Cavafy wrote a poem called "Σαλώμη".

Of course, all this could be co-incidence, but one of Cavafy's notes to a poem stretches co-incidence to its limits. The note is attached to Cavafy's unpublished poem, "Σαλώμη", and dated 11 February 1896. It is in French, and reads as follows:

"Now, Salome offered, on a golden platter, the head of the prophet to a young Greek orator who spurned her love. But he said: 'It's your head, Salome, that I want'. He said this in jest, but the following day, a slave brought him the blonde head of the woman who loved him. The sage could no longer remember his wish of the previous day: he ordered them to remove the bleeding object and went on reading Plato." Taken from an Ancient Nubian Gospel. See "Le Journal" no. 1232, 11 February 1896.

Cavafy's poem, "Salome", reproduces this account in verse. The date is significant. On 11 February 1896, Wilde's *Salomé*, which had been banned in London, opened in Paris. Cavafy's reference to a Nubian Gospel in this context reads rather like an assertion that Wilde does not exist. Cavafy does, however, leave us the date as a clue.

1896 also occurs as the date of one of Cavafy's five "Days of... " poems; the other four are all dated between 1901 and 1911. The theme of these five poems is male beauty under adverse conditions. "Days of 1903" is the shortest and has more in common with poems like "Gray" than with the other "Days of..." poems. It laments the loss of a beautiful pale face with poetic eyes, encountered only once, at night, in the street. The other poems paint portraits of beautiful young men under pressure from extreme poverty ("Days of 1908" and "Days of 1909, '10 and '11") or sexual dissipation ("Days of 1901" and "Days of 1896"). All of the young men are, as usual, anonymous and have distinguishing marks of a kind most unlikely to facilitate their identification. One has poetic eyes; another, when not naked, sports a cinnamon-coloured suit; a third has for his father a poor sailor, while a fourth has the ability, in spite of vast sexual experience, sometimes to feel like a virgin.

"Days of 1896", however, offers more concrete information:

DAYS OF 1896

He'd become completely degraded. His erotic tendencies,
condemned and strictly forbidden
(but innate for all that), were the cause of it:
society was totally narrow-minded.
He'd gradually lost what little money he had,
then his social standing, then his reputation.
Nearly thirty, he'd never worked a full year –

at least not at a legitimate job.
Sometimes he earned enough to get by
acting the go-between in deals considered shameful.
He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly
if you were seen around with him too often.

But this wasn't the whole story – that wouldn't be fair:
the memory of his beauty deserves better.
There is another angle; seen from that
he appears attractive, appears
a simple, genuine child of love,
without hesitation putting
the pure sensuality of his pure flesh
above his honour and reputation.

Above his reputation? But society,
totally narrow-minded, had all its values wrong.

"Days of 1896" describes a young man who is completely ruined as a result of his erotic tendencies. He loses first his money, then his position in society and finally his reputation. He ends up likely to compromise anyone seen with him. He is condemned for placing sensuality above honour.

1896 was the central year of Wilde's prison-sentence; the only complete year he spent in prison. By this time, he had certainly lost his money – the contents of his house in London had been sold by public auction. His social standing was destroyed, and he had lost his artistic as well as his private reputation. His affairs with a series of disreputable young men – some of them blackmailers – had been detailed in the press as well as in court; his name had been removed from the board of honour in his Oxford college, and his plays from the London stage. Wilde had refused to go abroad in order to escape trial and dishonour; he could be said to be in prison for placing sensuality above honour. And very few of his former friends were prepared to stand up and be counted. Many, including Holman Hunt, Emile Zola and Henry James, even refused to sign petitions for his early release, and the French writer Catulle Mendès insisted on fighting a duel in the forest outside Paris with a literary journalist who had dared to suggest he was one of Wilde's circle.

Two details in the poem "Days of 1896" do not fit Wilde. The suggestion that he had never worked makes sense, but he cannot really be said to have acted as some kind of shady go-between.

Unless, of course, this can be read as an ironical allusion to his lecturing – or even his art – presenting him as a go-between in the service of Art and the public. The second inaccurate detail is the age: Wilde was over forty, rather than under thirty. He had, however, done his best to lie about his real age at the trial, both from vanity and to play down his seniority to Lord Alfred Douglas, who was only twenty-four.

Finally, "Days of 1896" concludes that "the *memory* of his beauty deserves better", suggesting that the poem's subject was dead at the time of writing. In 1925, when the poem was written, not only was Wilde long dead, but there had also been a number of posthumous publications and skirmishes concerning him. Wilde's prison-writings, *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* were now in the public domain, and Lord Alfred Douglas had published a variety of self-exonerating articles. Douglas had also developed a taste for libel suits and had taken Wilde's friend and literary executor, Robbie Ross, and – of all people – Arthur Ransome to court. Ross had published the unabridged version of *De Profundis* and Ransome had written a book about Wilde containing disrespectful allusions to Douglas. Thus, Wilde and his homosexuality were still very much under public discussion.

"Days of 1896", if not actually about Oscar Wilde, would at least appear to contain veiled allusions to his fate, especially in view of Cavafy's "prison poems" which actually date from that year. It is probably the closest that Cavafy comes, in writing at least, to mentioning the man himself. In conversation, according to Malanos, Cavafy sometimes cited Wilde's *Salomé* as a work inexcusably lax about historical detail. This critique of *Salomé* is rather mysterious, as Wilde could scarcely be said to have been striving after historical authenticity in such a fanciful work. It is also, perhaps, significant that Wilde had actually praised Shakespeare at length, in *The Truth of Masks,* for his careful attention to historical details. It would seem that Cavafy himself, whose historical details are meticulous, would rather have been compared to Shakespeare than to – say – Wilde. Cavafy's own "Salome" is, of course, authenticated by French newspapers and Nubian gospels, and remained unpublished (and probably unmentioned) during the poet's lifetime.

Wilde drew much of the inspiration for *Dorian Gray* from the Decadent novel by Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*. In it, the author lingeringly describes two of Gustave Moreau's most widely-acclaimed masterpieces, the paintings of Salome. Richard Ellmann has suggested that the paintings also partly inspired Wilde's *Sphinx*. In 1896, Cavafy wrote a poem called "Οἰδίπους" ("Oedipus"). Beneath the title, he made the following note: "Written after reading a description of the painting 'Oedipus and the Sphinx' by Gustave Moreau." Savidis notes that this is the first Cavafy poem to have been inspired, albeit indirectly, by a painting. It may, however, have been inspired quite simply by a poem: Wilde's *Sphinx*.

Portraiture is a very important theme in the erotic poems of Cavafy, who, as David Ricks has recently pointed out (in connexion with Cavafy's use of lighting and scene-setting), was very interested in portrait-photographs, and often posed for them himself. It is worth remembering, in this context, that the press gleefully disseminated photographs and cartoons of Wilde throughout his career, and also that Wilde's two most sensational works, as I mentioned before, were the *Portrait of Mr W.H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whilst a third, *Salomé* had a painting among its antecedents.

Cavafy wrote seven erotic poems which concern depictions of young men in paintings, drawings, photographs or, in one case, beaten silver. In addition to these pictures of unnamed men, there is the poem "Oedipus", allegedly inspired by Moreau's painting, in which Oedipus is young, with his life and the road to Colonus stretching out before him, and the Sphinx, who has tumbled him suggestively to the ground, pawing at his chest. Also worthy of inclusion in the category of erotic or aesthetic poems is "Ζωγραφισμένα" ("Pictured"), which begins, "I love my work and I'm very careful about it", and concludes with the artist refreshing his eyes on a painting: "recovering through art", he says, "from the effort of creating it". The subject of the painting under scrutiny is a handsome boy, described as "lying down close to a spring, / maybe exhausted from running". Thus, the artist recovers from his exertions by contemplating the image of a boy recovering from exertions of his own.

One of the erotic portrait-poems, "Ἔτσι", translated as "The Photograph", muses on a dream-like face that has somehow got into an obscene photograph; while another, "In an Old Book",

poses the opposite problem: a boy of rare beauty whose "ideal limbs" the speaker says, "are shaped for beds / that common morality calls shameless", seen in an old water-colour painting, respectablised by a classical allusion in its title: "Representation of Cupid".

The Conceit of classical allusion in portrait-painting is further explored in the epitaph-poem, "Tomb of Lanis". This poem recounts an episode in which the mourner at the graveside, addressed as "Markos", had commissioned a portrait of his dead love, Lanis, from a renowned painter. The artist had wanted to paint the beautiful youth as Hyacinth, but Lanis had proudly refused. The speaker comments: "Your Lanis didn't hire out his beauty like that; / reacting strongly, he told him to paint neither Hyacinth nor anyone else, / but Lanis, son of Rametichos, an Alexandrian." Valerie Caires has pointed out that in the poetry of Cavafy the word "Alexandrian" is practically synonymous with "homosexual".

According to the speaker, the portrait of Lanis as himself still preserves something of what was valuable in its original. The poem presents three possible sites where the dead Lanis might be: the tomb, which, we are told, preserves nothing of Lanis; the portrait, which preserves something of him, and the addressee's memory, which preserves, for example, the episode with the painter. The unstated site of preservation is, of course, the poem.

Preservation in memory, a picture and, by implication, poetry is again the theme of "On Board Ship", where, as already mentioned, the speaker's memory is privileged over the more tangible reminder, a pencil sketch. Once again, the speaker's memory encompasses the time at which the portrait was made and its attendant magic: the beautiful afternoon and the presence of the portrait's subject. Once again, the broader site of preservation is the poem.

"Τεχνουργὸς κρατήρων" ("Craftsman of Winebowls") concerns a portrait in silver of a young man whom the artist loved. Since the youth has been dead for fifteen years, the artist relies on memory, appealing to it as though to a muse, for help. One interesting feature of this portrait, to which the craftsman himself draws attention, is the representation of "ἄνθη κομψά" ("graceful flowers"), which are, of course, artificial. Describing the human figure, the artist says, "In the centre I put this

beautiful young man, / naked, erotic, one leg still dangling / in the water." This may contain a glancing allusion to Wilde's "Panthea", which mentions a "gleam of boyish limbs in water".

Natalia Deliyannaki has drawn attention to the use, in "Craftsman of Winebowls" and other poems, of split lines. Here, the divisions may operate to emphasize the boy's suspension between land and water, and his partial existence in memory and Art, but no longer in life. The craftsman's medium, silver, reflects Cavafy's interest, shared by Wilde, in precious ornaments.

Cavafy's poem "Picture of a 23-year-old, painted by his friend of the same age, an amateur" describes the portrait-painter scrutinizing the picture he has recently completed. The poem progresses through a catalogue of the subject's clothing, to the absence of a tie and the open shirt-collar which allows, the speaker says, "a glimpse / of his beautiful chest and neck". The artist's eyes now travel up to the face, the beautiful hair and the eyes with their sensual note, finally lingering over the lips. The poem closes with the words: "the lips ... / that mouth of his, those lips / so ready to satisfy a special kind of erotic pleasure." "Picture of a 23-year-old... " describes a painting as the painter sees it, and includes information about the painter's intentions, chief among which is to show off the subject to his best erotic advantage.

Portraits are used by Cavafy in these poems in a number of different ways, ranging from a versified description – itself apparently inspired by a description – of a painting by Moreau, to commentaries on the nature of memory and art. The portraits are presented in a variety of frames, sometimes displayed through the eyes of the artists admiring their handiwork and in one case described in an epitaph. The poems suggest many different ways of looking at pictures and also many different reasons for doing so, although the unifying factor remains male beauty.

Perhaps the most personal, if only because it is in the first person and no portrait-painter or craftsman's identity is adopted, is the unpublished poem, "Απ' τὸ συρτάρι" ("From the Drawer"). This is a circular meditation on a photograph which, because of its nature or associations, has to be kept hidden in a drawer, but which has been damaged as a result of being kept there and is therefore only fit for keeping in a drawer. In this

poem, once again, we encounter the theme of secret art. The poem reads as follows:

FROM THE DRAWER

I was intending to hang it on a wall in my room.
But it has been damaged by damp inside the drawer.
I shall not put this photograph in a frame.
I should have kept it more carefully.
Those lips, that face –
ah if for one single day, for one hour
only, their past could return!
I shall not put this photograph in a frame.
Seeing it damaged like this would upset me.
And besides, even if it weren't damaged,
it would bother me to have to be careful
in case a chance word or something in my voice
were to betray me,
if I were ever asked about it.

Ostensibly reflecting on a private photograph, Cavafy may in fact be asking a significant question about his own poetic practice. Namely, has keeping his sexual leanings partly hidden ("μισοκρυμένα") damaged his work, or would exposing them have occasioned even greater damage?

Codes and disguises are a recurring Cavafian theme, more often than not connected with the encoding and disguising of unconventional love and of what Cavafy calls "strong" or "daring" verses. In an autograph note of 1902, some twenty years earlier than "From the Drawer", he wrote: "It crossed my mind, tonight, to write about my love. And yet, I shall not do so." The note concludes: "Still, let me note down a letter – T – as a symbol of my feeling or of this moment." There have, of course, been plenty of attempts to decode that letter "T".

"From the Drawer", like "For the Shop", refers to a secret possession, possibly a parallel to some of Cavafy's own writings, that has to be kept hidden. Deciding not to place the photograph in a frame might represent a decision not to tell us any more about it – we only learn that its subject had lips and a face which the speaker longs to see again.

Some other photographs, about which we learn even less, provide the pretext for Cavafy's most shocking erotic poem:

"The Bandaged Shoulder". The poem is by no means sexually explicit, but it represents various reversals of the conventions of romantic love which critics of a nervous disposition, as I have indicated, have found difficult to stomach.

THE BANDAGED SHOULDER

He said he'd hurt himself against a wall or had fallen down.
But there was probably some other reason
for the wounded, the bandaged shoulder.

With a rather abrupt gesture,
reaching for a shelf to bring down
some photographs he wanted to look at,
the bandage came undone and a little blood ran.

I did it up again, taking my time
over the binding; he wasn't in pain
and I liked looking at the blood.
It was a thing of my love, that blood.

When he left, I found, in front of his chair,
a bloody rag, part of the dressing,
a rag to be thrown straight into the garbage;
and I put it to my lips
and kept it there a long while –
the blood of love against my lips.

The opening is obviously ironical; the words "He said" suggest doubt from the outset, and the two reasons given for the wound contradict and thereby discredit each other. Thus it comes as no surprise to learn that the reason was probably something else. The suggestion, here, is that the real reason is unmentionable, and the only hint at it lies in the speaker's repeated statement that the blood is a "thing of his love" ("πράγμα τοῦ ἔρωτός μου"). The dirty rag which the speaker ardently presses to his lips conjures up, and so subverts, a courtly parallel: the chivalrous knight kissing his lady's handkerchief; whilst the notion of "blood of love" evokes at the same time the marriage bed and Christ crucified. Finally, the blood referred to by the speaker is not even the blood of a beloved man, but of physical love and it is pleasing – even erotic ("μ' ἄρεζε") – in itself. It is surely these subversive reversals of western notions of honour and

religion, and not the dirty bandage, which have shocked the commentators. Worst of all, in a poem devoid of metaphysical love, there is no appeal to that other higher authority, Art. For all we know, the photographs the unnamed man is reaching for are pornographic. The subject of the poem is not disguised as Hyacinth or Cupid; nor is he modestly wrapped in a veil of historical details. The ruse of perceiving beauty amidst squalor (characteristic of the erotic poems and seen at work, for example, in several of the "Days of ... " poems) has been abandoned. But the voice, the use of irony, the unexpected twists and the ambiguous suggestiveness are unmistakably Cavafian.

"The moral life of man", wrote Oscar Wilde, in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium".

A comparably ignoble wound to the one concealed in "The Bandaged Shoulder" is the one received in a pub brawl by the subject of the poem "In a Town of Osroini". This poem was originally called "Χαρμίδης" ("Charmides") and inverts the logic of the Platonic dialogue of the same name. In Plato's dialogue, beauty is required to be inner as well as outward. Cavafy's poem implicitly maintains the opposite: that physical beauty is all. This is also the implied message of Wilde's ambitious and lengthy poem "Charmides" (first published in 1881), which hymns the beauty of a "Grecian lad". Ellmann states that Wilde considered "Charmides" his best poem to date. There are two strange things about Cavafy's poem: first, the removal of Charmides from the title, and secondly, the closing line: "Our thoughts went back to Plato's Charmides". Why "Plato's Charmides" and not just "Charmides"? Perhaps this line can be read as "I mean Plato's Charmides and not Wilde's" – which, of course raises the question, why not Wilde's? Like the attribution of his "Salome" to a Nubian Gospel, or his "Oedipus" to a well-known French painting, Cavafy's indication that *his* Charmides is a Platonic borrowing may simply be an effort to deny that he had any interest in Oscar Wilde.

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I have tried to show that the erotic poetry of C.P. Cavafy probably owed quite a lot to Oscar Wilde, but that Cavafy was at great pains to conceal this. The reason for this reticence is unlikely to have had anything to do with artistic considerations; there is nothing in Cavafy's work or notes to indicate that he feared the charge of influence or plagiarism. The most likely explanation is that he did not wish to be associated with the Anglo-Irish writer on account of their shared sexual preferences. The connexion which Malanos was quick to make between Wilde and Cavafy, when the latter's reputation was being threatened by the journalist Lagoudakis, underlines the dangers, especially at a time when litigation was rife in England among the heirs to Wilde's literary and personal legacies. Cavafy was surely wise to avoid handing over such decadent ammunition as "Artificial Flowers" and "Salome" to his enemies. Of course, there is also the possibility that Cavafy would not have cared for comparison to Wilde in literary terms, any more than he relished personal comparisons.

Wilde believed that literary criticism was a form of autobiography, whilst his persecutors believed that art itself was autobiographical. In the erotic poems of Cavafy, the poet and his masks are very difficult to disentangle. In conclusion, I would like to quote one more poem by Cavafy, leaving the reader to decide how autobiographical it is. The poem is "Hidden Things".

HIDDEN THINGS

From all I did and all I said
let no-one try to find out who I was.
An obstacle was there distorting
the actions and the manner of my life.
An obstacle was often there
to stop me when I'd begin to speak.
From my most unnoticed actions,
my most veiled writing –
from these alone will I be understood.
But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,
so much effort to discover who I really am.
Later, in a more perfect society,
someone else made just like me
is certain to appear and act freely.

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