

Cavafy, photography and fetish

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Nowhere in his 154 acknowledged poems does C. P. Cavafy mention the word photography. In a 1906 note he describes the word “φωτογράφησις” as ugly, directly connecting it to the recording of immediate impressions: “Ἡ περιγραφικὴ ποίησις – ιστορικὰ γεγονότα, φωτογράφησις (τι ἀσχημὴ λέξις!) τῆς φύσεως – ἴσως εἶναι ἀσφαλὴς. Ἀλλὰ εἶναι μικρὸ καὶ σαν ὀλιγόβιο πρᾶγμα.” A few lines above in the same note Cavafy makes a distinction that somehow clarifies the previous passage: “Κάθεσαι καὶ γράφεις – ἐξ εἰκασίας/πολλάκις/ – δια αἰσθήσεις, καὶ ἔπειτα ἀμφιβάλλεις με τὸν καιρὸ ἀν δὲν ἐπλανήθῃς.”¹ Cavafy appreciates the contrast as lying between photography as a method of documentation, as an essentially realist medium, and the free application of creative faculties, sensory and imaginative, in generating poetry. This distinction chimes with a similar one made by Palamas in 1907 in the Preface to his *Ο Δωδεκάλογος του Γύφτου*:

[...] ἡ φωτογραφικὴ, καθὼς προχώρησε τόσο πολὺ καὶ μας γνώρισε στενωτέρα με τὴν ἀλήθεια, ἀναγκάζει τὴ δημιουργικὴ τέχνη νὰ ταμπουράνεται πίσω ἀπὸ τοὺς γιομάτους νόημα κύκλους τῶν μορφῶν καὶ τῶν χρωμάτων, πού εἶναι λάμψη ὅλα καὶ μυστήριον· δηλονότι νὰ τραβήξῃ ὡς ἐκεῖ πού δε θα δύνηται νὰ πάῃ καμιὰ φωτογραφία, ὁσοδήποτε τελειοποιημένη, κι αὐτὴ ἀκόμα ἡ πολύχρωμη.²

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¹ G. P. Savvidis (ed), *Γ. Π. Καβάφη, Ἀνέκδοτα σημειώματα ποιητικῆς καὶ ἠθικῆς (1902-1911)* (Athens: Ermis 1983), p. 37

² Kostis Palamas, “Preface” to *Ο Δωδεκάλογος του Γύφτου*, in *Ἄπαντα*, Vol. III (Athens: Biris-Govostis n.d.), p. 297.

Whereas for Cavafy the distinction becomes somehow tantalizing, for Palamas photographic realism presents new opportunities for painting and poetry alike, offering liberation from the fetters of verisimilitude to allow them to expand into abstraction.³

In her discussion of photographic themes in Cavafy, Cornelia Tsakiridou points out the discrepancy between the poet's blunt rejection of photography in his 1906 note and his eventual appropriation of photographic techniques as a metaphor for the workings of memory.⁴ Tsakiridou argues that for Cavafy, whose poetics depend on the constant and painstaking revision of drafts, the immediate and definitive arrest of images through the photographic lens was unthinkable. And yet Cavafy shows a profound photographic sensibility in many of his poems, such as "Του πλοίου" and "Ο καθρέπτης στην είσοδο", which capitalize on fixing memory as a permanent imprint either on a pencil sketch or on a mirror's surface. Tsakiridou accounts for this paradox as Cavafy's failure to understand his own poetics, and concludes that he would hardly write about photography in such a dismissive tone in 1930. I believe this cue requires a certain degree of revision.

Despite the fact that many of Cavafy's acknowledged poems display a photographic sensibility, as Tsakiridou claims, it is in the hidden or unpublished ones that he explicitly refers to the

³ By 1906 photography had already become a widespread everyday practice thanks to roll-film cameras, invented by Eastman Kodak in 1888. Pavlos Nirvanas, a keen journalist and photographer, notes that in 1906 "thousands of Kodak users roamed the streets of Athens documenting just about everything, animate or not." It was in 1906 that Nirvanas took the first photograph of Papadiamandis, an extremely reluctant sitter, with such a portable Kodak for the journal *Παναθήναια*. The image of the old, downcast-eyed Papadiamandis sitting with his hands crossed on his lap has since become iconic and has been reproduced countless times on book covers, sketches, paintings and engravings. See Pavlos Nirvanas, "Αλέξανδρος Παπαδιαμάντης", *Παναθήναια* 13 (1906) 7-13, and Eleni Papargyriou, "Το φωτογραφικό πορτραίτο του συγγραφέα", *Νέα Εστία* 1830 (February 2010) 339-59.

⁴ Cornelia Tsakiridou, "The photographic dimension in some poems of C. P. Cavafy", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 17.2 (1991) 87-95.

concept. The four poems that mention photographs, “Έτσι” (1913), “Ο δεμένος ώμος” (1919), “Άπ’ το συρτάρι” (1923), all collected in the volume *Κρυμμένα*, and “Η φωτογραφία” (1924), now included in the *Ατελή*,⁵ were kept away from the public eye. In these poems Cavafy does not generically refer to photography, but to photographic portraits of young men. What I am suggesting is that there is a significant difference between poems that can be termed “photographic” because they treat themes that impinge on photographic theory and those that explicitly mention photographs, capitalizing on their visual material and their value as material objects. Photographs in these poems, and most certainly outside Cavafy’s poetry too, are kept concealed, destined for private consumption, as indeed are the poems which contain them.

My discussion here will take two directions: one is concerned with the conditions of keeping and looking at the photograph, conditions conducive to the notion of fetish. Breaking into the scene through Freudian psychoanalysis, the term “fetish” acquired a central position in media discourses, undergoing a plethora of modalities: for Marxist thinkers like Benjamin “commodity fetishism is a way in which social relations between individuals are displaced into objects”.⁶ Further than this, in the 1980s the term signalled a humanist turn in media discourses, in addressing the perishable prominence of the human body, such as in the writings of Roland Barthes and Christian Metz.⁷ The second direction is with regard to the photograph’s social dimension and the archival mode of photography as a means of social control and sur-

⁵ C. P. Cavafy, *Κρυμμένα ποιήματα 1877;-1923*, ed. by G. P. Savvidis (Athens: Ikaros, 1993) and C. P. Cavafy, *Ατελή ποιήματα, 1918-1932*, ed. by Renata Lavagnini (Athens: Ikaros, 1994). All other poems quoted here originate in the one-volume standard edition of the 154 acknowledged poems by Ikaros.

⁶ See David S. Ferris, “Phantasmagoria and commodity fetish”, in his book *The Cambridge introduction to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), pp. 116-18.

⁷ See Martin Jay, “The camera as memento mori: Barthes, Metz and the Cahiers du Cinema”, in his book *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1994), pp. 435-91.

veillance. If in Cavafy's time homosexuality was constructed as deviance, as a form of social pathology, then photographs that imply homosexual relations may have worked as incriminating evidence that had to be concealed.

Cavafy's disparaging 1906 comment about photography does not betray a fault in his understanding of the medium or his own writing; his ambiguous stance should primarily be aligned with modernist discourses that question photography's mimetic qualities. Modernist thinkers from Baudelaire to Bergson and Benjamin organize their critique of photography on the common belief it arouses among viewers that "the camera's technical proficiency [...] can provide us with exact reproductions of the world."⁸ At the same time these thinkers fully endorse the opportunities the new technical media present for the shaping of human perception. In "Little history of photography" (1931) Benjamin turns against the "modernity" of the photograph, favouring the singularity of the daguerreotype over the industrial reproducibility of the negative, Henry Fox Talbot's invention which inducted photography to the modern era. Contrary to the mass-reproduced prints of the modern era, Benjamin regards the daguerreotype's "aura" to be unique, because it is the direct result of a long exposure, the sitter's prolonged presence against the sensitized glass plate.⁹ Benjamin's Marxist filtering questions the capitalist modality of modern reproduction techniques, which create infinite communities of looking and manipulate the observation of the body, equating it to a commodity and exposing it to public scrutiny. In eulogizing contemporary examples of photographers such as Atget and Sander, who created photographic images of a deeply humanist calibre, Benjamin makes clear that he does not generically reject photography, but sets out the

⁸ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of light: theses on the photography of history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 92.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Little history of photography", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. II, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999), pp. 507-30.

conditions under which it can become a humanist art; creative over mimetic, pensive and personal over commercial, preferring time exposure over snapshot.¹⁰ Cavafy's preoccupation with photography aligns itself with this rhetorical line, underpinning humanist potential over the commercial modalities of a realist art.

Cavafy's photographic sensibility in the four poems mentioned above concurs with the turn towards reconfiguring photography's contested realism as material authentication for the human body, as the body's touch on the printed matter, rather than scientific, indisputable, and therefore impersonal, testimony. The indexicality that Christian Metz, among others, ascribes to photography suggests that we do not cherish photographs of beloved ones because they are visually similar to them, but because they have materially attested to their presence.¹¹ This harks back to Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), the first text to humanize so emphatically photography's documentary evidence. Barthes revisits realism in photography, but dissociates it from mimesis and aesthetics. His rediscovered realism connects photography to human presence, the what-has-been, which readily authenticates itself: "photography's inimitable feature [(its noeme)] is that someone has seen the referent in *flesh and blood*."¹² Similarly to Cavafy, Barthes shows more interest in photographs than in

¹⁰ Among twentieth-century Greek poets, George Seferis also questioned photographic automatism. Seferis was inclined towards a more humanist notion of creativity, such as in painting, sculpture or dance, in art forms, in other words, where the body plays a primary role. But despite these objections, Seferis was a keen photographer, in the same way perhaps that Cavafy was a frequent sitter of photographic portraits. See Eleni Papargyriou, "Preliminary remarks on George Seferis' visual poetics", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 32.1 (2008) 80-103.

¹¹ Photography is "indexical, entailing a process of signification (semiosis) in which the signifier is bound to the referent not by a social convention (i.e. a symbol), not necessarily by some similarity (i.e. an icon), [or not just by similarity,] but by an actual contiguity or connection in the world – prints left on a special surface by a combination of light and chemical action." See Christian Metz, "Photography and fetish", *October* 34 (Autumn 1985) 81-90, p. 82.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage 2000), p. 79.

photography and treats their observation as an act of love. Like Cavafy, the photographs he esteems most are those of beloved ones, which are closer to the observer's heart, and he ends up with an emotional phenomenology, with a subjective yet comprehensive outlook on photographic perception rather than an ontological explication.¹³ In the second part of his essay he goes on to perform its phenomenological/personal cue, by discussing his attempts to rediscover his recently deceased mother in her photographs. He fails to recognize her in her most characteristic poses as either a frail old woman or a fashionable young lady. When he does find her it is in a photograph of her as a young girl, posing with her brother in the winter garden of their family home. The fact that Barthes rediscovers his mother in a photograph that depicts her in a fashion that could not possibly have been known to him disjoins the photograph from the referent, by underscoring the abolishment of physical similarity as a criterion for identification.

Because of its indexical tactility and its size – the photographic lexis is much smaller than the cinematic lexis and the look it prompts has no fixed duration – Metz connects photography to fetish. Many of Cavafy's poems feature a lingering look, with those revolving around reading being no exception. Equally, the four photography poems I am discussing here blend the referent with the moment of observation in an ultimate act of love: "Closer to pleasure than to science, the act of looking at a photograph [...] does not differentiate between a subject an image, but rather brings together 'two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing'."¹⁴

¹³ His most memorable contribution to the study of the photographic text is the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*; he considers the first to be the visual material designed by the photographer, which is therefore directly recognizable by the spectator, and the latter the photograph's subconscious, a symptomatic plate of intricate detail that may prick the spectator in mysterious and unpredictable ways.

¹⁴ Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca, "Notes on love and photography", in: Geoffrey Batchen (ed.), *Photography degree zero*:

Freud described the fetish as an imaginary object, as “a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up”.¹⁵ Metz further accredits the fetish with a protective function, treating it as an amulet that soothes and consoles individuals against the terrifying loss of loved ones: “The fetish always combines a double and contradictory function: on the side of metaphor, an inciting and encouraging one; and on the side of metonymy, an apotropaic one, that is, the averting of danger (thus involuntarily attesting a belief in it), the warding off of bad luck or the ordinary, permanent anxiety which sleeps (or suddenly wakes up) inside each of us.”¹⁶ Photographs are defined by absence; we look at photographs of those who are not there. The selective nature of the frame that includes one object while excluding others may further support this idea: the click of the camera button, the closing of the shutter, permanently fixing the on-frame while excluding the off-frame, “marks the space of an irreversible absence”. The photograph, as a substitute for the beloved person, functions as consolation, whereas, at the same time, it accentuates the loss. Cavafy fetishizes similar artefacts to photographs which have touched a man’s body in one way or another, such as sketches and letters, which bear tactile traces of the handwriting. Similarly to photographs, letters are taken out and read in solitude, then put back in their secret, hidden treasury.¹⁷ And this act is to be repeatedly performed as a ritual. Perhaps it would not be unfair

reflections on Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida (Cambridge Mass. and London: The MIT Press 2009), pp. 105-39, p. 111.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage 2001), pp. 147-57, pp. 152-3. An earlier treatment of the subject can be found in Freud’s *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* in *The standard edition*, Vol. VII, pp. 125-245, particularly pp. 153-5.

¹⁶ Metz, p. 86.

¹⁷ See, for example, the line “Στα χέρια μου ένα γράμμα ξαναπήρα” from the poem “Εν εσπέρα” (1917) or the treatment of the pencil sketch in “Του πλοίου”.

to consider Cavafy's poems, often disseminated in manuscript form, as fetishes, as an erotic act addressed to the recipient.

In the poem "Έτσι" the poetic subject (henceforth referred to as the narrator) looks closely at the pornographic photograph of a young man, sold clandestinely on the street, wondering how a dreamlike face like his ended up in such degrading circumstances:

Στην άσεμνην αυτή φωτογραφία που κρυφά
στον δρόμο (ο αστυνόμος να μη δει) πουλήθηκε,
στην πορνικήν αυτή φωτογραφία
πώς βρέθηκε τέτοιο ένα πρόσωπο
του ονείρου· εδώ πώς βρέθηκες εσύ.

Ποιος ξέρει τι ξευτελισμένη, πρόστυχη ζωή θα ζεις·
τι απαίσιο θα 'ταν το περιβάλλον
όταν θα στάθηκες να σε φωτογραφήσουν·
τι ποταπή ψυχή θα είν' η δική σου.
Μα μ' όλα αυτά, και πιότερα, για μένα μένεις
το πρόσωπο του ονείρου, η μορφή
για ελληνική ηδονή πλασμένη και δοσμένη —
έτσι για μένα μένεις και σε λέγ' η ποίησίς μου.

On a first level, the narrator renounces the sordid pornographic context in which the photograph was taken and, in a bout of creative imagination, restores the sitter's image to the elevated aesthetic state of "ελληνική ηδονή". In his way, the narrator retouches the photograph; it works for him only after he has air-brushed the backdrop and purified it from the squalor of its pornographic use. As in the poem "Να μείνει" ("γρήγορο σάρκας γύμνωμα [...] τώρα ήλθε να μείνει μες στην ποίησιν αυτή"), the verb "μένεις" in this poem's concluding line implies the permanent imprinting of the image on the personal plate of memory and, subsequently, on the collective plate of poetry.

Yet, who is the owner of the photograph? Who has bought it clandestinely on the street, avoiding the policeman's attention? Most likely the narrator; in the light of this, we no longer read the poem as a renunciation of pornography, but as play with the reader's expectations. The epithets modifying the photograph,

“άσεμνη” and “πορνική” should not be seen as essentially critical, but as echoing public Victorian and post-Victorian discourses on pornography, not necessarily endorsed by Cavafy. Cavafy seems to be more discomfited by the social circumstances that lead young (most likely working class) men to this kind of occupation. The epithets describing the life of the sitter, “ζευτελισμένη, πρόστυχη”, perhaps implicate his concern about the sitter’s poverty, not about the photograph, much less about its voyeuristic purposes, which in his ownership he tacitly accepts.

How does this photograph work as fetish? There are concurrent layers of secrecy: the clandestine nature of the transaction on the street; the private viewing at home, and then the narrator’s elusiveness regarding the detail of its visual content. Under closer observation, what is said about the sitter’s external appearance is next to nothing; “dreamlike” reveals something about the quality of the image but no concrete detail. Interestingly, Barthes does not show us the Winter Garden photograph either.¹⁸ For him it is a personal fetish; we get its detailed description, but not the photograph itself, as happens with dozens of other images upon which he draws in his discussion. Cavafy is more secretive than Barthes, in that his description of the photograph in question is much more laconic. The photograph which would provide the visual detail that the poem intricately conceals, is absent, because we do not get the chance to actually “see” it.

Let us consider the information the photographic portrait would provide: a precise visual duplication of the sitter’s facial features, his shape of face and colour of iris, his hairstyle, clothes and possibly bodily position. More importantly, it would provide a marker for identification and individuality; it would be *that* man, as opposed to any other. On the other hand, most of these visual specifications, the “represented objectivities”, as Roman Ingarden would name them, are missing from the poetic text. If they were actually there, the text would look trite, loaded with superfluous

¹⁸ “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’” (Barthes, op. cit., p. 73).

clauses. But even the most tediously descriptive account would eventually fail to grasp the individuality of a man, which a photograph would easily and naturally render. But, however eloquent in its visual vocabulary, the photograph loses its indexical qualities when it is framed within the poetic text. In Cavafy's poetry it becomes further blunted, perhaps even suppressed, reduced to a series of general epithets. It is as if Cavafy strives to make the photograph unfaithful to itself; but it is through this unfaithfulness, the abolishment of mimesis, that the photograph remains most faithful to its true creative concept and recognition is most effectively achieved.

The comparison with painting is illuminating: the vagueness in rendering the male body in "Έτσι" can be juxtaposed to Cavafy's detailed description of a portrait in "Εικόν εικοσιντριετούς νέου καμωμένη από φίλον του ομήλικα, ερασιτέχνη" (1928):¹⁹

Τελείωσε την εικόνα	χθες μεσημέρι. Τώρα
λεπτομερώς την βλέπει.	Τον έκαμε με γκρίζο
ρούχο ξεκουπωμένο,	γκρίζο βαθύ· χωρίς
γελέκι και κραβάτα.	Μ' ένα τριανταφυλλί
πουκάμισο· ανοιγμένο,	για να φανεί και κάτι
από την εμορφιά	του στήθους, του λαιμού.
Το μέτωπο δεξιά	ολόκληρο σχεδόν
σκεπάζουν τα μαλλιά του,	τα ωραία του μαλλιά
(ως είναι η χτενισιά	που προτιμά εφέτος).
Υπάρχει ο τόνος πλήρως	ο ηδονιστικός
που θέλησε να βάλει	σαν έκανε τα μάτια,
σαν έκανε τα χείλη ...	Το στόμα του, τα χείλη
που για εκπληρώσεις είναι	ερωτισμού εκλεκτού.

Contrary to the model in "Έτσι" the desired body described here is fictional; and since it is shielded behind its fictionality, created "εξ

¹⁹ Panagiotis Roilos has recently discussed "ekphrasis" as a homotextual function in Cavafy; and yet he does not distinguish between painting and photography, a distinction which, in my view, is necessary. See Panagiotis Roilos, *C. P. Cavafy: the economics of metonymy* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2009), p. 92.

εικασίας, δια αισθήσεις”, Cavafy can be more explicit about the painting’s visual content. By contrast, he says very little of the photograph, whose reality entails documentary evidence that reveals something about the life of its owner. This distinction turns out to be more a matter of social order than aesthetics; the photograph creates the homosexual body as a social construct. To this point I will come back.

The context of looking at the photograph in “Έτσι” is pivotal. Context here does not only entail the spatio-temporal conditions of individual observation, but also the implied communities of looking, formed on the basis of common assumptions which directly impact interpretation. Barthes claims that, contrary to the erotic photograph, the pornographic one has no *punctum*. In Victorian and post-Victorian times a pornographic photograph was not exactly made public, as, say, *The Sun*’s page 3 is today, but was supposed to circulate enough to be profitable. Contrary to that, the erotic photograph addresses the lover’s gaze only. Cavafy’s narrator transforms the pornographic photograph to an erotic one; as such, he protects it from intruding gazes, restoring it to personal secrecy.

The switch of viewing contexts is also thematized in the poem “Απ’ το συρτάρι”, which capitalizes on the alternation between hiding and revealing:

Εσκόπευα στις κάμαράς μου έναν τοίχο να την θέσω.

Αλλά την έβλαψεν η υγρασία του συρταριού.

Σε κάδρο δεν θα βάλω 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 βάλω την φωτογραφία αυτή.

Θα υποφέρω να την βλέπω έτσι βλαμμένη.

Άλλωστε, και βλαμμένη αν δεν ήταν,
θα μ' ενοχλούσε να προσέχω μη τυχόν καμά
λέξις, κανένας τόνος της φωνής προδώσει —
αν με ρωτούσανε ποτέ γι' αυτήν.

The particular importance of the photograph is evoked in the middle section: “Αυτά τα χείλη, αυτό το πρόσωπο – / α για μια μέρα μόνο, για μιαν ώρα / μόνο, να επέστρεφε το παρελθόν τους.” The narrator, again, is evasive regarding detail, and reveals no more than the beauty of the sitter’s lips, the photograph’s implied *punctum*. The material damage to the photograph points to the passage of time, to decay, mortality and death. The photographic paper, organic like the human body, ages too (like Dorian Gray’s portrait).

The photograph freezes time, extracting it from a sequence of moments and preserving it like “a fly in amber”.²⁰ The moment it depicts is unrepeatable, it has died forever as such, Barthes argues, equating photography to a kind of “thanatography”. In reality, what changes is not the image, but the distance separating the image from the spectator’s gaze. The photograph always speaks in present tenses, it always “is”. But it points towards an expandable future, the I-will-be-looked-at, the countless unforeseeable moments of observation, unrepeatable even for a single spectator. The photograph crosses the distance and reaches out to our time. We do not return to the past, we have the past re-enacted for our sake, performed, in a sense, by the simple context of our looking at it. For Cavafy’s narrator, looking at the photograph is traumatic because the material damage done to it points to the dangers posed to his own gaze, to the growing distance separating him from the photograph’s present, as indicated in the telling future continuous tense in the line “Θα υποφέρω να την βλέπω έτσι βλαμμένη.”

Memory in Cavafy is often described as return; his narrating subjects plead for the past to return, infinitely, pointing to the

²⁰ Metz (see n. 11) quoting Peter Wollen, p. 84.

projectile expansion of the present into the future. In the poem “Επέστρεφε” (1912) the narrator pleads for the beloved sensation to return; the emphasis on the adverb “frequently” makes up a vague, but prominent, future level: “Επέστρεφε συχνά και παίρνε με.” More prominently, in “Γκρίζα” (1917), the moment of looking at a semi-precious stone evokes memory of a lover’s eyes; the narrator addresses memory, imploring her to bring back the relics of love, like a photograph that has arrested the moment: “Και, μνήμη, ό,τι μπορείς από τον έρωτά μου αυτόν, / ό,τι μπορείς φέρε με πίσω απόψι.” “Απ’ το συρτάρι”, however, is not a poem merely preoccupied with the workings of memory. The last section shifts the attention away from the photograph’s attestation of the lover’s material existence towards the photograph as incriminating evidence for the illicit homosexual affair: “Άλλωστε, και βλαμμένη αν δεν ήταν, / θα μ’ ενοχλούσε να προσέχω μη τυχόν καμιά / λέξις, κανέννας τόνος της φωνής προδώσει – / αν με ρωτούσανε ποτέ γι’ αυτήν.” The photograph’s exposure on the wall would make it susceptible to public scrutiny, even if by “public” we mean Cavafy’s close circle of family and friends. These constitute an interpretive community with different presumptions on morality and accepted social behaviour.

As Allan Sekula discusses in “The body and the archive”, soon after the invention of photography in 1839 the police in various countries of the Western world embraced its techniques to create archives of criminals’ images for indexical purposes.²¹ Sekula explores the social conditions of this indexicality, tracing them to the bourgeois order “that depends upon the systematic defence of social relations based on private property, to the extent that the legal basis of the self lies in the model of property rights,

²¹ Sekula quotes Talbot’s 1844 speculation in the photographic book *The pencil of nature*, noting on a calotype depicting several shelves bearing articles of china: “should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures – if the mute testimony of the picture were to be produced against him in court – it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind.” Sekula observes that “Talbot lays claim to a new legalistic truth, the truth of an indexical rather than textual inventory.” See Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October* 39 (Winter 1986) 3-64, p. 6.

in what has been termed “possessive individualism”, every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police.”²² These policing methods employing photographic techniques invented a more extensive “social body”. Sekula does not discuss homosexuality, but as a form of penalized social behaviour it almost certainly had a place in the police archive of the deviant body.

Matt Cook observes that in the second half of the century the newly-established science of sexology provided the first investigations into homosexuality, employing both legal and medical techniques, and vocabulary, in an attempt to describe, understand and, ultimately, control homosexual practices.²³ Sexology, Cook claims, offered an apparatus of treatment around the perverted, accompanied, as Robert Nye puts it, by “a small army of medical and legal specialists devoted to studying, curing or punishing them”.²⁴ In this context, sexology offered descriptions of the physiology of the homosexual man, defining a set of characteristics, or signs that point to femininity. In the questionnaire “Am I at all Uranian”, published in 1909 in Xavier Mayne’s (pseudonym of American writer Edward Prime-Stevenson) *The Intersexes*, we read criteria that indicate homosexual leanings such as “were your bones and joints large or small, was your chest broad or narrow,

²² Sekula, *ibid.* p. 7

²³ “Structures of criminal justice which policed homosexuality which were established in [the nineteenth century] were to endure at least until 1967” notes Cook, adding that between 1806 and 1900 8,921 men were indicted for sodomy, gross indecency or other “unnatural misdemeanours” in England and Wales, while, between 1806 and 1861, 404 men were sentenced to death; 56 of those were actually executed. See Matt Cook (ed), *A gay history of Great Britain* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing 2007), p. 107.

²⁴ Sexology’s impact was not all negative. Dimitris Papanikolaou discusses it as a modernist discourse that contributed to the homosexual body’s rise from obscurity, obtaining prominence in the social sphere: “«Η νέα φάσις του έρωτος»: ο νεοτερικός λόγος της σεξολογίας και ο Καβάφης”, in *Πρακτικά της 1Β’ επιστημονικής συνάντησης του Τομέα Μεσαιωνικών και Νέων Ελληνικών Σπουδών αφιερωμένης στη μνήμη της Σοφίας Σκοπετέα* (Thessaloniki: Aristotle University Publication 2010), pp. 195-211.

was your wrist flat or round, were your fingers pointed or blunt, your skin soft or rough, your body 'odorific' or neutral smelling, could you whistle and sing easily and naturally."²⁵ Some of these are physiognomic traits that seek to typecast the body and predict social behaviour. Photography, and particularly the photographic portrait, used for physiognomic purposes, largely contributes to these categorizations. The body made public through photography is more easily observed, scrutinized and, ultimately, judged. At the same time, a bourgeois audience is formed around photographic representations of the homosexual man, as a public ready to tend its dismissive opinions and cement a code of morality based on the objectification of sexual difference.

The narrator in Cavafy's poem is not so much discomfited by these differences; what he cannot accept is the caution that would be required on his part should the nature of his relation to the young man on the photograph be queried. The imposition for him is, mainly, the change expected in his own moral code, which does not allow for truthfulness in linguistic terms. The extended "social body" of the man exposed in the photograph, would elicit an equal extension in the narrator's bodily conduct, and eventually, in his language. The oral caption with which he would accompany the photograph would not reflect the intimate sentiments shared by the two; it would be false and unfaithful to them.

Cavafy aspires for the homosexual body made public in the police archive to return to the private sphere of intimacy; he eventually returns the photograph to its natural, socially enclosed treasury, the drawer, reversing the social dimension of photography as documenting a certain type of pathology. The photograph, inscribed into the concept of a personal fetish, is re-attached to the personal and intimate body, treasured in the private space of personal files, where its privacy can be protected from the mechanisms of public surveillance and control.

²⁵ Quoted by Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

In “Ο δεμένος ώμος” the presence of the photograph is much more subtle and yet the photographic metaphor is much more blatant:

Είπε που χτύπησε σε τοίχον ή που έπεσε.
Μα πιθανόν η αιτία να ’ταν άλλη
του πληγωμένου και δεμένου ώμου.

Με μια κομμάτι βίαη κίνησιν,
απ’ ένα ράφι για να κατεβάσει κάτι
φωτογραφίες που ήθελε να δει από κοντά,
λύθηκεν ο επίδεσμος κ’ έτρεξε λίγο αίμα.

Ξανάδεσα τον ώμο, και στο δέσιμο
αργούσα κάπως· γιατί δεν πονούσε,
και μ’ άρεζε να βλέπω το αίμα. Πράγμα
του έρωτός μου το αίμα εκείνο ήταν.

Σαν έφυγε ηύρα στην καρέγλα εμπρός,
ένα κουρέλι ματωμένο, απ’ τα πανιά,
κουρέλι που έμοιαζε για τα σκουπίδια κατ’ ευθειάν·
και που στα χείλη μου το πήρα εγώ,
και που το φύλαξα ώρα πολλή —
το αίμα του έρωτος στα χείλη μου επάνω.

The pronounced homoerotic undertones of dressing the same-sex beloved’s wound are well-known, from ancient depictions of Achilles nursing the wounded Patroclus to Alan Hollinghurst’s 1988 gay novel *The swimming pool library*. In Cavafy’s poem the photograph is mentioned almost parenthetically, as the object the wounded man is curious to see more closely. Yet the blood-stained bandage is essentially equated to the photograph: the blood is imprinted on the cloth like an image on sensitized paper; like a fussy photographer meticulously developing a negative, the narrator lingers while re-dressing the wound, enjoying the sight of the beloved man’s blood. The speckled bandage left behind after he has gone is fetishistically treasured by the narrator as a material testimony of his bodily presence.

If we take the scene to be a photograph, its *punctum* is the re-opened wound (it surely is instructive that Barthes would describe the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* as a “prick, as a mark made by a pointed instrument; a sting, speck, cut and a little hole”).²⁶ The trace of blood on the bandage, the poem’s photograph, works as a bodily imprint that testifies to the beloved’s intimate history: then, in this room. Preserved as a fetishized keepsake the bandage protects the narrator against his loss, the beloved’s exit from the intimate space of the room and perhaps out of his life too (we never really find out if desire has ever been fulfilled; the opening of the poem, which implies the wound was caused in a quarrel, perhaps an erotic one, suggests otherwise). Religious iconography may be at play here too; Thomas’s verification of Christ’s crucifixion by touching his wounds, or the martyrdom of St Sebastian, traditionally depicted as being tied to a post and shot with arrows.²⁷ But hints at Christian or ancient iconography, such as depictions of Achilles and Patroclus that I mentioned earlier, gloss over the essentially modern focus of imprinting, of photographically fixing the body permanently on a blank surface (in this context, perhaps reference to the shroud of Turin might be more relevant). It is no coincidence that the poem elicited two photographic renderings by gay photographers in recent years, by Duane Michals (2007) and Dimitris Yeros (2010), a fact which points to its photographic significance.²⁸

²⁶ Barthes, op. cit., p. 27.

²⁷ See also Martha Vassileiadi, “«Για τα σκουπίδια κατευθείαν»: νοσολογία, πάθη και πληγές κι ενσώματες ταυτότητες στον ερωτικό Καβάφη”, in the electronic proceedings of the Fourth Symposium of the European Association for Modern Greek Studies (http://www.eens.org/EENS_congresses/2010/Vassiliadi_Martha.pdf, accessed 10 May 2011).

²⁸ Duane Michals’s rendering is a photographic sequence, which appeared in his 2007 album *The adventures of Constantine Cavafy* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers 2007), whereas Yeros’s unique print inspired by the same poem appeared in the recent album *Shades of Love: photographs inspired by the poems of C. P. Cavafy* (San Rafael, California: Insight Editions 2010) which is an expansion of an earlier photographic project also based on Cavafy’s poetry. Photographic renditions of literary works are rarely known to be successful, at least

Finally, the last of Cavafy's four photography poems, "Η φωτογραφία", again reconfigures the moment of looking at a past lover's old photograph, creating an opposition between the social and the private sphere:

Βλέποντας την φωτογραφίαν ενός εταίρου του,
 τ' ωραίο νεανικό του πρόσωπο
 (χαμένο τώρα πια – είχε χρονολογία
 το ενενήντα δυο η φωτογραφία)
 του πρόσκαιρου τον ήλθεν η μελαγχολία.
 Μα τον παραμυθεί όπου τουλάχιστον
 δεν άφισε – δεν άφισαν καμιά κουτή ντροπή,
 τον έρωτά των να εμποδίσει ή ν' ασχημίσει.
 Των ηλιθίων τα «φαυλόβιοι», «πορνικοί»,
 η ερωτική αισθητική των δεν επρόσεξε ποτέ.

The paratextual evidence of the poem's date, August 1924, becomes involved in the main text as signalling the time of looking, separated by thirty-odd years from the date the image was taken, 1892; the latter is parenthetically stated in a distich that stands on a par with a photograph's legend. Described in, again, rather unspecific terms, the young lover's beauty comes to wound the spectator's old age. But, as in "Απ' το συρτάρι", the image of beauty soon crumbles before the social repercussions of the homosexual affair.

The poem works on the opposition between the social and the intimate spheres: the social sphere is represented in the snippets of public commentary, «φαυλόβιοι, πορνικοί», faithfully rendered within quotation marks; the intimate is implied within "ερωτική αισθητική", an elevated sensual perception that eliminates their

since Julia Margaret Cameron's dubious 1874 undertaking to illustrate photographically Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Yeros interprets the poem tediously literally, with the bandaged back of a man almost filling out the whole frame. Michals, on the other hand, freely improvises on the scene adding legends to the photographs that make up the sequence. The distance he takes from the poem makes his interpretation more visually compelling than that of Yeros. On Michals's work on Cavafy see also his earlier album *Homage to Cavafy* (Danbury, Hampshire: Addison House 1978).

effect. The visual space of the photograph is subsequently divided into social critique and intimacy, private happiness that reacts to criticism with indifference. The faithful rendition of the public comment, a technique that had reached its peak five years earlier with the famous “πολυκαισαρή” in Cavafy’s 1919 poem “Καισαρίων”, seen within a visual culture, is not simply linguistic, but functions as a kind of technical reproduction; the authenticated discourse rendered within quotation marks ensures that the framed words are a “photograph” of language.²⁹ This is a xeroxed sample of opposition, a second imaginary photograph that threatens the purity of the real one. In Benjamin, treatment of language is often paralleled with photographic reproduction: quotations and inscriptions in the photographic era should not just be treated in linguistic or intertextual terms, but as an act essentially qualified within the visual.

In “Η φωτογραφία” the lack of shame, the aesthetic perfection of the relationship, is a strong impulse to rekindle the mechanism of memory and re-enact the past for the sake of the present, transcending time as the distance separating the sitter’s eyes from the eyes of the observer. It also restores language: the photograph works as consolation, in the fetish’s most essential significance; the two lovers did not allow degrading comments on their homosexual relationship to spoil its aesthetics. Those who criticized them are called imbeciles: their comments are placed in quotation marks, as a speech act that does never take real effect.

²⁹ The poem may be developing a stratagem also employed in the earlier poem “Σ’ ένα βιβλίο παλιό –”, dated to 1922, where the reader is made to realize that the epithets used to describe this special kind of love, “ανώμαλες έλξεις, αναισχυντα κρεββάτια”, are not Cavafy’s own, but echo society’s perceptions of homosexuality.