

# “Words that tell and hide”: Revisiting C. P. Cavafy’s Closets

*Dimitris Papanikolaou*

---

## Abstract

*Critics have traditionally viewed C. P. Cavafy’s work as moving from erotic secrecy to homosexual self-revelation. However, following Foucault, we should think of sexuality not as something repressed by control, but as a discourse inextricably linked with repression, power and knowledge. Seen in this way, Cavafy’s strategies of “telling and hiding” form a constant dialectic running through the whole of his work, producing (not unveiling) the sexuality, identity, and eroticism at its centre. Reviewing the theorized figure of the closet as a central trope of Cavafy’s writing, we witness how hiding can create a position from which to speak and a subversive set of discourses for the homosexual self. Cavafy puts desire, “semi-hidden,” in the phrases of his poetry, fully exploiting the dissonance of silences and things unsaid. In key poems we can see how he translates the closeting of queer desire into a textual practice that produces identification and eroticism. Furthermore, we can trace the closet leaking across textual and sexual boundaries, defying social control and threatening the reader’s certainties.*

In 1905, C. P. Cavafy wrote the following note:

Οι άθλιοι νόμοι της κοινωνίας—μήτε της υγιεινής, μήτε της κρίσεως απόρροια—με μίκραιναν το έργον μου. Εδέσμευσαν την έκφρασί μου· μ’ εμπόδισαν να δώσω φως /και συγκίνησιν/ εις όσους είναι σαν κ’ εμένα καμωμένοι. Η περιστάσεις η δύσκολες της ζωής μ’ έκαμαν πολύ να μοχθήσω για να γίνω [τέλειος] κάτοχος της Αγγλικής γλώσσης. Τί κρίμα. Αν κατέβαλλα—αν με το επέτρεπαν η περιστάσεις, αν η Γαλλική με ήταν όμοια χρήσιμη—τους ιδίους κόπους στην Γαλλική, ίσως σ’ αυτήν—ως εκ της ευκολίας που θα μ’ έδιδαν η αντωνυμίες /που λεν, και κρύβουν/—να μπορούσα να εκφραζόμουν ελευθερώτερα. Τέλος, τί να κάμω; Πάω άδικα, αισθητικώς. Και θα μείνω αντικείμενον εικασίας· και θα με καταλαμβάνουν το πληρέστερον, απ’ τα όσα αρνήθηκα. (Cavafy 1983:36)

Wretched social laws—a result of neither health measures nor any logical judgment—have diminished my work. They have hindered my means of expression; they have prevented me from bringing enlightenment and

emotion to those who are made like me. The difficult circumstances of life have made me try hard to fully master the English language. What a pity! If I had put the same effort into mastering French—if, that is, I had had the opportunity, if French had been similarly useful to me—possibly in that language—as a result of the convenience offered by the pronouns, that tell and hide—I would have been able to express myself more freely. But, what can I do? I am unfairly wasted in the aesthetic domain. And I will remain an object of conjecture; and they will understand me better from all those things I denied.<sup>1</sup>

Cavafy, already 42 years of age but yet to produce his mature work, is here in search of a language. The language he tries to find should be able to speak directly to those who are “made like him,” to fool the “horrible laws of society,” to free expression and make it aesthetically valuable (and fair). The language in question, most curiously, should be able to say and conceal at the same time, offering clarity, emotion and a more freely expressed self (“να εκφραζόμουν ελευθερώτερα”) through this complex dialectic. Yet even in what is purportedly written as a private memo, the “silenced” words (homosexuality, homophobia, homosexuals) are not referred to openly, but remain only implied. In a masterful stroke, the text performs what it describes: it says it while keeping silent.

In today’s terms, Cavafy is trying to find the language of coming out of the closet while maintaining the closet as a way of speaking: *a language that tells and hides*. For the record, I do not think he would have found the fulfillment of this strategy in French, or that it was simply a matter of language. The possessive pronouns which, in French, take the gender of the object possessed rather than that of the subject may have provided “one sort of a solution,” but only briefly. Nevertheless, the poet is not really talking linguistics here. Instead, he is in search of something larger, a strategy for uttering identity and poetic word, the one inseparable from the other; a dialectic of telling and hiding, of performing the silence, that would eventually characterize most of his poetry—written neither in French nor English, but in his own idiosyncratic Greek. Adopted as the *writerly* modality of keeping open secrets, Cavafy’s way of (not) showing/saying would end up a prime example of what Foucault describes as the performative silence.

Silence itself . . . is less the absolute limit of discourse . . . than an element that functions alongside the things said . . . There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying . . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault 1979:27)

As I will argue in this article, Cavafy used his open secrets and performative silences to frame his poetry within a multidimensional discourse of power/knowledge related to sexuality (his own, as well as that of his writings and characters). This framing, I suggest, did not simply "manage" the step by step unveiling of sexuality, but, instead, produced it. Silence and the "silenced thing," homosexuality, became a constant supplement of all the things that were said. Eventually, from the margins of discourse, the issue of sexuality was transferred to the center of his poetry.

The fact that hiding was one of Cavafy's main concerns, in both his life and his writings, is frequently repeated by critics. "Cavafy's only sacrifice in his life was the one we know: he tried to hide in any way possible" says Timos Malanos, while Markos Avgeris adds that "his socially condemned passions were isolating him from society; his fear of being exposed for his unmentionable tendencies made him hide from his own people during his whole life" (both quoted in Tsirkas 1958:284–285).

However, the traditional critical view on Cavafy's erotic poems has it that the poet passed from a period of hiding all homosexual elements of his poetry to a period when he gradually unveiled and revealed them, ending with numerous overt homosexual references in the last decade of his life. According to one critic, these were the "first" and the "second" Cavafy: "[In his latest period] poor, unmusical, badly written pieces of delirium were looking to cry out the scandal . . . the second Cavafy was confusing a dark and unmentionable desire . . . with the essence of poetry and morality" (Kambanis [1933] 1963:1424). Not all critics agree on the turning point between this first and second Cavafy: some settle on 1917–1918 as the crucial period, others go back as early as 1911, when a series of erotic poems began being published. Yet others, including George Savvidis, pinpoint the year, 1922, in which the first poem clearly referring to the gender of both lovers was published (Savvidis 1993:54). Furthermore, not all critics see this poetic evolution in the same way. Some, like Edmund Keeley, view it as an honestly documented quest for authenticity, referring to "Cavafy's persistent attempt to confront the truth, however painful, and to express it convincingly rather than settle for easy evasions . . . a long torment that went into his effort to tell things the way they were" (Keeley 1972:126–127). Others feel uneasy about this last gasp of libertinism in a poet who made a career out of half-saids. "Even though he started out by hiding, he did not stop becoming, progressively, more daring, especially when he started to get old, until he reached a tiringly [sic] repeated realistic presentation of the psychology and behavior of homosexual love" (Steryiopoulos 1980:200).

In the light of these conflicting perspectives, I want to argue that we should see the erotic poems as a whole, finding in them a constant negotiation of hiding and telling that unifies the poetic material. This negotiation is proposed as a key element in the poetics *and* the technology of the (homosexual) self. I suggest that this was a conscious strategy on Cavafy's part, clearly spelled out in the unpublished material from as early as 1904 (an important year for Cavafian poetics). Such a strategy was called on to manage the published material carefully and calculatedly throughout the poet's career.<sup>2</sup>

Using theoretical work undertaken in the field of Queer Studies, I will show how the figure of the *closet* as a system of managing a queer identity (Cavafy's *hiding and telling*) was central to all of his work—and indeed holds together not only the (erotic) poems but also his poetics and the reception of his work. This discussion is important because it offers a way to refocus Cavafy's relationship with sexuality—understood here in a Foucaultian fashion, as being not a natural given “which power tries to hold in check,” or “an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover”; but rather as a system of historically determined discourses, “a historical construct” (Foucault 1979:105).

### *Theorizing the closet*

Foucault's crucial linking of sexuality with knowledge and power is expressed most clearly, in relation to homosexuality, through the metaphor of the closet. Coined to denote the hidden part of a person's life, the closet has come to generally be associated with a hidden performance of (homo) sexuality around which the dynamics of knowledge and its absence are built. Initially the place for the hiding of homosexual acts (which were kept in the closet, thus out of the public gaze), it was subsequently seen as the origin of a liberatory identity praxis: *coming out of the closet* came to mean the announcement of one's “deviant” sexuality.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states in the opening of her seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* that “the closet is the defining structure of gay oppression in [the twentieth] century” (1990:71). As a particular discursive strategy for disqualifying male love—sweeping it, as it were, under the carpet—the closet goes hand in hand with the identification (and subsequent repression) of the homosexual as a particular kind of person, a distinct and retainable human type, an identity, a biography. This identifying move has been seen, after Foucault, as a characteristic of the nineteenth century in the western world. But, even though originally a site of oppression, the closet has recently started to be thought of as also a positive space in which to forge queer identities. It

becomes not only a hiding place, but also a place from which to utter identity, continuously negotiating what to tell and what to hide, what to keep in and out of the closet. Diana Fuss reminds us that “inside/outside [can] function as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production” (Fuss 1991:1). The idea of the closet as a place for negotiating hiding and telling thus becomes a semiotic nucleus, an origin of proto-writing (something very evident in Cavafy’s work). This is how the closet ends up as a plural concept that regulates homosexual desire and gay identities, *and* at the same time provides the space for the subversion of homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Reviewing Cavafy’s work, I could start by pointing out that, instead of leaving his silences to be manipulated by the systems of power immediately built around them, he made them part of his poetic project and thus exposed their own dissonance. When seen in this way, Cavafy’s concealment starts as a strategy to expose the very mechanisms that drive him to that concealment. The well-known poem “Τείχη” (“Walls”) works exactly in this way: it is society that builds thick high walls around one “with no consideration, no pity, no shame” (Cavafy 1975:3). The closet is a prison: “But I never heard the builders, not a sound. / Imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside world.” Meanwhile, as this oppressive barrier is written down, it is also exposed, thus becoming a starting point for self-expression. It seems almost to be by design that “Τείχη” was the earliest poem Cavafy kept in his published canon and the first to have been translated into English by his brother John.

As pointed out by an early critic, “The Walls, which Cavafy felt in his youth were a jail, became for him, little by little, his natural climate” (Ouranis [1933] 1963:1471). The comment is very interesting in the way it highlights an important strategy: turning a burden into a performance, turning a construct into a “second nature.” It shows a Cavafy who speaks from an adopted inside—a place where he is being kept but from which he can voice his incarceration. It reaffirms the view that Cavafy fashioned the closet not as a space for silence, but as a position from which to speak. “Τείχη,” employed so often in Greek criticism on Cavafy to imply homosexuality without using the word, had the potential to turn from a hidden site of identity into its active exposure.

If Cavafy helped his critics by setting up the main metaphor of closeting from the outset, he also supplemented the metaphor with a very real space that would be a trademark of his presence in Alexandria: his semi-lit, closed room. Following what seems to be a trend, the special issue of the journal *Semaine Égyptienne* on Cavafy (1929) opened with a description of that room.

Dans l'appartement règne une lumière très douce, toujours tamisée. Pas d'éclairage moderne . . . Dans cette pénombre reposante pour les yeux comme pour l'esprit, dans ce *clair-obscur* propice à la méditation . . . commence une joute de phrases. Cavafy préside, *plongé dans l'ombre*, enfoncé dans le coin le plus sombre de la pièce. (1929: 12; italics mine)

The light in the apartment is very gentle and always subdued. There is no modern lighting . . . In the half-shadow as calming for the eyes as for the mind, in that chiaroscuro ideal for meditation . . . the duel of phrases begins. Cavafy presides, plunged in shadow, submerged in the darkest corner of the room.

Some years earlier, the Athenian poet Mirtiotissa had expressed her thoughts after she visited the poet's house: "We came outside. The noise of the city seemed to me even more unbearable now, and the Arabs' loud voices ghastly. The Poet's figure followed me. . . . A proud man, he did not assent to committing suicide. He therefore armed himself with extreme will-power, closed himself off in his house, became his own vigilant guard, and transformed his Art into life" (Mirtiotissa 1924:84). Self-enclosure was mandated by society, and this makes society's harshness all the more keenly felt by Mirtiotissa's suddenly sensitized eyes (and ears). In this account, the poet's room is confirmed as a prototypical closet: it not only hides, it also guards. Whatever the potential reason for suicide, it is now definitely hidden and not acted upon. The closet only emits art with a capital "A," safe and sanitized.

Both these descriptions underline the way in which the poet's actual room, a real lived-in place, first becomes a metaphor of his entire life that was enclosed and closeted (but also appealing in its close[ted]ness), and then becomes a symbol for his poetics and poetry. It is in the latter sense that countless critics would refer to the room and to its trademark, Cavafy's oil lamp. It is a trope found in Seferis's most famous comment about the poet in his *Δοκιμές*: "Even today when I think of him, I feel that in his presence I become a sea-man who is going to have a discussion with a very well-read gentleman, sitting in a semi-lit library with precious carpets. When studying this strange man, I sometimes found myself muttering 'it is high time we went to take some sea air'" (Seferis 1981:364–365).<sup>3</sup>

What suffocates Seferis is the phantom of the clos(et)ed, semi-lit room, now leaving an imprint on the poetry, becoming a trope for its reading. But, as suffocation also means a powerful pull towards the power that suffocates, the poet is also anxious to cut himself off from any association with the closeted space that reading has produced. As he gasps for air, he also moves away, anxiously assuring us that he remained uncontaminated: he, a seaman, puts Cavafy aside and goes out to the sea.

Myrriotissa’s optimistic tone has already been disproved. There is much more than sanitized Art coming out of this unpredictable closet. In fact, these quotations show a microcosm of the various functions of the closet that I will retrace in more detail below, basing my analysis on readings of key poems. I will show how the closet is first constructed by Cavafy as a place from which to speak and reiterate sexual identity, then as a trope uniting life, poetic performance and poetry, and also supporting an “erotics” of reading as the key to that kind of poetry. I will finally show how the closet ends up possessing a threatening and centripetal power that destabilizes “solid” (poetic and sexual) identities. In short, I will analyze how the closet ultimately subverts its original function: instead of guarding and neutralizing the hidden thing, it ends up reinforcing and diffusing it.

*Closet/poetics/identity*

In January 1904, on his return to Alexandria from one of his few visits to Athens, Cavafy wrote three poems directly referring to encounters with a certain Alekos Mavroudis, whose initials are penciled in the manuscript of all three poems. These poems stand out in the Cavafian corpus of “unpublished” or “hidden” poetry (published after 1968 by G. P. Savvidis) for their quality, but also for the fact that they were written and finished, so unlike Cavafy, very close to the erotic experience they relate to. In one of them that is titled “December of 1903” (“Ο Δεκέμβρης του 1903”), the poet talks about not being able to talk.

Κι αν για τον έρωτά μου δεν μπορώ να πω—  
 αν δεν μιλώ για τα μαλλιά σου, για τα χείλη, για τα μάτια·  
 όμως το πρόσωπό σου που κρατώ μες στην ψυχή μου,  
 ο ήχος της φωνής σου που κρατώ μες στο μυαλό μου,  
 η μέραϊς του Σεπτέμβρη που ανατέλλουν στα όνειρά μου,  
 ταις λέξεις και ταις φράσεις μου πλάττουν και χρωματίζουν  
 εις όποιο θέμα κι’ αν περνώ, όποιαν ιδέα κι’ αν λέγω.

And if I can’t speak about my love—  
 if I do not talk about your hair, your lips, your eyes,  
 still your face that I keep within my heart,  
 the sound of your voice that I keep within my mind,  
 the days of September that rise in my dreams,  
 give shape and color to my words and phrases,  
 whatever theme I touch, whatever thought I utter. (Cavafy 1975:350–351)<sup>4</sup>

The poem is both concealing and revealing at the same time. In the end, this is not a poem about not telling but about telling the not telling, or, more precisely, about finding the key to decipher what remains untold.



What Cavafy cannot speak about is not love, but *his* love, his *kind* of love. The opening phrase “Κι αν για τον έρωτά μου” has to be understood as referring not to love in general (as in “my love for you”), but to “my kind of eros,” “my unsaid form of desire.” Everything that is not to be spoken about would perhaps, if clearly described, have betrayed, if not the identity of the lover, certainly his gender (the hair, the lips, the eyes; the face, the sound of the voice, the nature of the meetings). Even though it remains unspoken, homosexual desire finally manages to mold and color all words and phrases, to permeate every theme and thought. Hiding and not being able to tell are here on their way to producing a fully-fledged poetics. Every word and topic from now on will be contaminated by a hidden, unutterable and yet present force. The poem, itself “hidden but to remain” among the poet’s papers, would become a necessary, ever present supplement, an indelible mark on all of Cavafy’s poetry. For one thing, its central idea that closeted desire can be turned into the mark of words and poetry would appear time and time again in the Cavafian corpus, in the long series of poems where a pang of desire, an act or its reflection are able “to remain” in the words of the text.

Almost a decade after “December of 1903” Cavafy would go back to discussing the strategy of marking words with closeted desires, thereby suggesting that what was before an impulsive reaction to the way desire was silenced by social control had by now matured into a conscious, meticulously crafted strategy. The way to diffuse the unsaid desire, he says, is by “putting it semi-hidden in the phrases.” As the strategy of telling and hiding becomes firmly established in the poetry, the unsaid eros is also more concretely referred to as “the visions of your eroticism” (του ερωτισμού σου τα οράματα).

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

Try to keep them, poet,  
the visions of your eroticism,  
however few of them there are that can be stilled.  
Put them, semi-hidden, in your phrases.  
Try to hold them, poet,  
when they come alive in your mind  
at night or in the brightness of noon. (Cavafy 1975:122–123)



The word “semi-hidden” (“μισοκρυμμένα”) is the very heart of this poem (also being, literally, at its centre). The technique of the semi-hidden molds and shapes eros into eroticism, turns it, that is, into a discourse, a product of an identifiable sexuality. “*Your eroticism,*” in semi-hidden lines, stands now as a key to the technology of both the poet and the self. In the unpublished “December of 1903,” phrases were shaped/molded and colored by the unsaid desire, but now, with “μισοκρυμμένα,” we are steadily focusing on their texture. As the same idea is revisited the text returns to touch the phrases self-consciously and detail their textu(r)al surface (μισοκρυμμένα), while performatively asserting the speaking voice as the voice of a poet, the text as a poetic text, and the mode as that of an individuated, identifiable, yet unnamed, eroticism. This is a powerful merging of poetics, textuality, sexuality and eroticism, an *ars poetica* not destined to remain hidden like “December of 1903,” but to be published in 1916.

By that time, Cavafy had perfected a system of selective publication able both to hide and tell, constantly testing the limits of what could or could not be said, constantly managing the “semi-hiding” to produce a clearer poetic and sexual identity. It should be noted here that the fairly romantic view of Alexandria as a paradise of pre-modern sexual tolerance that never reacted to Cavafy’s homosexuality or to his poems’ homosexual allusions has been shown to be far from the truth. Yiannis Sareyiannis reminds us that “[t]he final success of his oeuvre should not hide the fact that Cavafy had to face many violent attacks in his life” (Sareyiannis 1964:50). Recent work (especially the bibliography by Dimitris Daskalopoulos (2003) has unearthed a variety of sources, including comments in popular magazines, satirical newspapers and popular songs, showing that Cavafy’s homosexuality was very much an open secret in early twentieth century Alexandria—a selective, powerful knowledge, an ever growing rumor used alternately to validate and invalidate the public figure and his work.

It follows that Cavafy’s meticulous system of publication could have been devised as a form of self-protection against homophobic attacks on him and his poetry. He privately published poem after poem in pamphlets and broadsheets, and distributed them to carefully compiled lists of recipients. He would also, very cautiously, submit individual poems to journals for publication. Semi-hiding, even in the publishing domain, was effectively a strategy for survival. Sareyiannis would take a further step in seeing something more reactive in this: what started as hiding for survival, ended up, in his view, as a process of immunization. “Dangerous and hidden,” the closeted sexuality would be administered in small doses to the very subjects it was kept hidden from: the polis of Alexandria.

I know very well from experience how prudish Alexandria was in Cavafy's time . . . . It was very easy, in such an atmosphere, to have a repetition of a scandal like that of Wilde. He was in danger . . . . Even so he dared; the shy and timorous Cavafy dared to write such a work, and succeeded not only in avoiding excommunication and expulsion, but also in dying honored in an Alexandria that was proud of him by that time.

This achievement cost him dearly in effort, endless calculations and infinite time, which would have been precious to a meticulous poet like Cavafy. In order to reach his goal he developed a rare diplomatic dexterity. I remember how, when I was young, I used to get indignant seeing those perennial, insistent "Candles" being published and republished, under the auspices of the poet. Only later did I realize what a perfect *paravent* this poem was. Behind the curtain of the "Candles," Cavafy hid and fortified the whole of his work. Never in his lifetime did he offer the same "dangerous" poem twice to the journals for the general public. His poems were published gradually, drop by drop, until the people were inoculated against their venom and did not have the power to sense the danger, to react, to cry out the scandal [ίσσαμε χει που ο κόσμος πια μπολιάσθηκε στο δηλητήριο τους και δεν είχε πια τη δύναμη να αφανισθεί, να αντιδράσει, να φωνάξει το σκάνδαλο]. (Sareyiannis 1964:49)

What is interesting in this extract is the way the strategy described in the micropoetics before (semi-hiding the "dangerous stuff" in words and phrases) is presented here as also governing the larger publishing project. It is now the "dangerous poems" (themselves in semi-hidden words) that are hidden behind "innocent"—and for Sareyiannis, dull—poems, like "Candles," the famous poem about old age. The result seems to be the same: the dangerous matter contaminates but also commands the whole material. In what seems almost like a larger scale replica of "December of 1903," Sareyiannis seems to be suggesting that Cavafy's whole publishing project was undertaken in order to hide the erotic poems, eventually turning all poetry into a closet. Another interesting point is that, along with the metaphor of immunization, the extract above is also threaded through by a less visible metaphor, that of the poet molesting his readers, approaching them unawares, before they can even shout for help. I find this a rare moment of critical insight: closeting is described in its dynamic aspects, focusing on the ways it can actually make what is hidden and unacceptable acceptable. But closeting is also implicated as the main factor in an erotic game initiated between poetry and its readers, with the former taking up the role of predatory suitor, and the latter becoming the sexual victim.

In 1918, Cavafy suggested indirectly that the "dangerous" poems lie at the core of his poetic project. He made this claim in a meticulously crafted way that reminds us of Sareyiannis's description. In a lecture delivered by his *protégé* and, later, inheritor, Alekos Singopoulos, in

Alexandria in 1918, now believed to have been written in large part by Cavafy himself, a series of erotic poems would be proposed as a key to Cavafian poetics. As if to prove Sareyiannis right, the lecture did indeed finish on the high note of the “innocent” “Candles” (a coda almost irrelevant to the rest of the lecture).

Before the “paravent” of “Κερίά,” Singopoulos/Cavafy offered a long description about the positive effects on one’s poetry of leading a decadent early life. Through an analysis of “Τα επικίνδυνα” (“Dangerous Things”), “Επήγγα” (“I Went”), “Μακρούα” (“Long Ago”) and “Επέστρεψε” (“Come back”), it was made clear that the specific decadent life Cavafy himself had led “in his first years of youth” informed the reading of the poems. “I believe that the theory I have laid out above, and this somehow cryptic poem “I Went,” would not be irrelevant to the poet’s first years of youth—to *whatever is being rumored about that period of his life*” (Sengopoulos [1918] 1963:620; italics mine).

The rumors, one thinks, must have been extensively graphic; they must have been about specific habits and acts that the young Cavafy engaged in. This is made clear by the very next phrase: “I said before that there are some rumors about Cavafy’s life as a young man. Perhaps the poem “Μακρούα” (“Long Ago”) seems to clash with those. Because this poem has something less concrete, more lackluster, lacking the impetus of “Επήγγα,” “Μια Νύχτα” (“One Night”), “Πολυέλαιος” (“Chandelier”), “Ηδονή” (“Sensual Pleasure”) and others.” In other words, how can the poem be less concrete than the rumors? Cavafy, in the voice of Singopoulos, goes on to explain that abstract poems such as “Μακρούα” are like that because they refer to a period of his life when desire was yet to be solidified into a concrete experience. They refer, he says, to the very early, the years of the poet’s adolescence, which “preceded the time of boundless hedonistic life [την εποχή που προηγήθηκε του χωρίς φραγμόν ηδονικού βίου].” Astonishingly, Cavafy provides readers here with a covert chronology of (homo)sexual education (first the abstract desires, then the concrete fulfillment, then the closeting, the half-saids, and the rumors). Even more crucially, he offers this as a key to his work.

It is evident that the game of hiding and telling (and telling the hiding) has here attained its most acute formulation. It deliberately annexes the rumors—the immediate consequence of closeting—to its own purpose. With this lecture given by Singopoulos (who was himself rumored to have been either a sexual partner or an illegitimate child of Cavafy (see Savvidis 1987:416–417)), Cavafy urged his compatriots to read all his poetry through the erotic poems and encouraged them to read it not without, but *through* the rumors. The rumor about Cavafy’s past was posited as a necessary (even though hidden and untold) supplement of the poetry. I would further suggest that this intensification

and channeling of the rumors—both of them functions of Cavafy’s closet strategies—were actively used to structure what we could call an “erotics” of reading his poetry. This idea is supported by “Στο θέατρο” (“At the Theatre”), another unpublished poem from 1904.

Βαρέθηκα να βλέπω την σκηνή,  
 και σήκωσα τα μάτια μου στα θεωρεία.  
 Και μέσα σ’ ένα θεωρείο είδα σένα  
 με την παράξενη εμορφιά σου, και τα διεφθαρμένα νειάτα.  
 Κι’ αμέσως γύρισαν στον νου μου πίσω  
 όσα με είπανε το απόγευμα για σένα,  
 κ’ η σκέψις και το σώμα μου συγκινήθηκαν.  
 Κ’ ενώ εκύτταζα γοητευμένος  
 την κουρασμένη σου εμορφιά, τα κουρασμένα νειάτα,  
 το ντύσιμό σου το εκλεκτικό,  
 σε φανταζόμουν και σε εικόνιζα,  
 καθώς με είπανε το απόγευμα για σένα.

I got bored looking at the stage  
 and raised my eyes to the box circle.  
 In one of the boxes I saw you  
 with your strange beauty, your dissolute youthfulness.  
 My thoughts turned back at once  
 to all they’d told me about you that afternoon;  
 my mind and body were aroused.  
 And as I gazed enthralled  
 at your tired beauty, your tired youthfulness,  
 your tastefully discriminating dress,  
 in my imagination I kept picturing you  
 the way they’d talked about you that afternoon. (Cavafy 1975:354–355)

As it turns from staged life (*σκηνή*) to staged society (*θεωρεία*), I suggest that this poem can be read as an allegory of the relationship Cavafy’s poetry seeks to create with its audience. The most powerful move of the poem is to turn the public denunciation (“*όσα με είπανε το απόγευμα για σένα*”) into an intensifier of desire. In a radical move that has to be thought of as subverting the very dynamic of the social condemnation of homosexuality, the poem turns the whispers into a titillating narration, a matrix of desire, a sexual fixation. Next to producing a sense of longing that is the very opposite of denunciation, the whispers also bestow identifiable characteristics on the young man. The adjectives *παράξενη* and *διεφθαρμένα* (strange and dissolute) first migrate from the rumors to the description of the man’s physical beauty and youthfulness, in the process transformed from derogatory to neutral, identifying terms. When they return, painstakingly gazed at, both adjectives have

been overlaid with the unexpected word *κουρασμένα* (tired). Free from any immediate context, *κουρασμένα* cleanses the youth while drawing identification to the surface of his body. Not only are youthfulness and beauty now positively depicted, they can also be penetrated by the poet’s unflinching gaze which deconstructs the tiredness and reconstructs from it the physical acts of pleasure that have caused it. Since they cannot be named, these sexual acts are signified by their results, readable on the surface of the youth’s body. Thus *κουρασμένα* introduces precisely that textual surface which the poet’s longing gaze now finds pleasure in reading.

Cavafy’s poetry is marked by the rumors of Cavafy’s past in the very way that the vision of the youth is marked by the rumors of his immediate past. In both cases the rumors transform their objects into objects of desire. The constant whispers provide titillation, turn the gaze towards the poetry but also give it its defining mark. Thus marked as a strange (“παράξενη”), a dissolute (“διεφθαρμένη”) poetry by the rumors, it will then be understood, in an erotic reading, as a poetry marked on the surface by what its poet may have done in his youth. Rereading the Singopoulos lecture after “Στο θέατρο” (“At the Theatre”) makes the reference to “whatever is being rumored about Cavafy’s earlier years” all the more significant. What Cavafy really did in his youth, the very thing that can and cannot be uttered, marks and informs the poetry and shapes its readings. The important issue here is not whether Cavafy did or did not do what the rumors imply. Rather, it is the fact that, as in “Στο θέατρο,” the act, laid out in its full probability by the whispers, marks the poetry and makes it readable, penetrable, and enchanting, in that order.

In any case, the titillating acts that preceded the poetry (either in the poet’s past or for the character that afternoon) mark it indelibly to the point of making it a threat to social heteronormativity. Twenty years after Cavafy left “Στο θέατρο” in his private papers, with the instruction “Not for publication; but may remain here,” and six years after Singopoulos’s lecture, the poem “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει” (“He Came to Read”) was published in the Athenian *Νέα Τέχνη* (*New Art*). The poem was republished, accompanied by negative comments, in Alexandria by *Ταχυδρόμος* (*Courier*). It provoked yet more severe criticism from an editorial in *Επιθεώρησις Αλεξανδρείας* (*Alexandria Review*, August 1924), a rival popular publication, which concluded that re-publishing the poem, even if only to criticize it, was profoundly immoral.

Our honest condolences go to the unfortunate readers of *Tachidromos*, who happened to buy the 5 August issue and bring it to their family, where it was probably read by their sons, their daughters, their sisters [το εδιάβασαν τα παιδιά των, τα κορίτσια των, αι αδελφαί των]. We commiserate with

these readers, as well as bringing to the attention of the vice squad the disgusting immorality which shamelessly and in every way is being transmitted to the rest of the city. (reprinted in Daskalopoulos 2003:499)

Made even more poisonous because of media rivalry, the comment quite graphically expresses what we could call the homosexual panic, evident here in the fear that a poem can indeed threaten the nucleus of the patriarchal society, the sons, the daughters and the sisters. But why such panic? The poem is not, one might argue, one of Cavafy's most graphic. A youth goes into a library, picks up books by poets and historians (the books that Cavafy himself might have browsed through) and after perusing them for some ten minutes or so, falls half-asleep ("μισοκοιμάται"). The youth

ανήκει πλήρως στα βιβλία—  
 αλλ' είναι εικοσι τριώ ετών, κ' είν' έμορφος πολύ·  
 και σήμερα το απόγευμα πέρασ' ο έρωσ  
 στην ιδεώδη σάρκα του, στα χείλη.  
 Στη σάρκα του που είναι όλο καλλονή  
 η θέρμη πέρασεν η ερωτική·  
 χωρίς αστείαν αιδώ για την μορφή της απολούσεως . . .

He's completely devoted to books—  
 but he's twenty-three, and very beautiful;  
 and this afternoon eros entered  
 his ideal flesh, his lips.  
 An erotic warmth entered  
 his completely lovely flesh;  
 with no ridiculous shame about the form of pleasure . . . (Cavafy  
 1975:244–245)

The poem offers its own rumor: the reader "innocently" sleeping is marked by what he did only hours ago; or, perhaps, he is sleeping because of the act, tired after it (tired in the same way as the youth from "Στο θέατρο"). The problem is not that he is asleep in a public space, but that we know the reason, that we see his sleep as marked by the act that came before it. On display in the public library, a sexual act resulting in a particular form of pleasure is turned into a spectacle by the body sleeping. As the result of it, the same body is imbued with a fully conscious sexual identity (hence there is no shame in "the form of pleasure"). Always careful with his typography, Cavafy has even provided a symbol of this procedure in the title. Distorting syntax, he has added to the phrase "He came to read—" a dash which remains hanging, introducing the half of the title that is not there, symbolizing the unsaid, or rather, marking "Έλθε για να διαβάσει—" for what it is: just a smokescreen. The threat is here: if the act is indeed concealed behind

the poem, if the public words contain the remnants of the hidden act, who says that the poem cannot perform likewise? Sons, daughters and sisters should indeed be protected, as the hanging dash points in their direction.

Whichever way we decode this hanging dash (by surmising that it means, say, “he came to read but this is not all,” or, perhaps that it reminds us of the phrase directly after the main poem’s only dash “—but he’s twenty-three, and very beautiful,” etc.), it is the closest Cavafy came to providing a sign for that hidden and dangerous supplement that we first saw identified by Sareyiannis, and that I would call the dynamic closet.<sup>5</sup> But there is something more at stake here. It seems to me that the threatening aspect of “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει—” is not that it has found a way to lay bare what is being hidden and has thus produced the sexual act as the necessary supplement for the poem to be read “χωρίς αστεία αιδώ . . . .” It is rather that the poem is already part of an elaborate economy of meaning which has first established hiding as a way to speak, then made it the centre of poetics and the charm of poetry, then the source of identification, and now ends up producing something larger: sexuality and, as its result, eroticism. Since eroticism has also been established at the centre of the reading process, the main threat of the closet as it has been dynamically showing itself is that what was initially contained is now leaking. Homosexuality is dangerously groping the unsuspecting readers, that hidden “form of pleasure,” still without a name, threatening to overcome them.

In the 1921 poem “Ἡ αρχή των,” the two men who emerge from their secret meeting still bear, like the youth of “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει—,” the mark of their preceding sexual encounter. The sexual act, as in “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει,” works as the dangerous supplement of the poem, which starts by describing the small routines of hiding that immediately follow sex.

Ἡ εκπλήρωση της ἐκνομῆς των ηδονῆς  
 ἐγένεν. Ἀπ’ το στρώμα σηκωθήκαν,  
 και βιαστικά ντύνονται χωρίς να μιλούν.  
 Βγαίνουνε χωριστά, κρυφά ἀπ’ το σπῆτι· και καθῶς  
 βαδίζουνε κάπως ανήσυχα στον δρόμο, μοιάζει  
 σαν να υποψιάζονται που κάτι ἐπάνω των προοιδει  
 σε τί εἶδους κλίνην ἔπεσαν προ ολίγου.

Πλην του τεχνίτου πῶς ἐκέρδισε η ζωή.  
 Αύριο, μεθαύριο, ἢ μετὰ χρόνια θα γραφοῦν  
 οἱ στίχ’ οἱ δυνατοί που ἐδῶ ἦταν η αρχή των.

Their illicit desire has been fulfilled.  
 They get up and dress quickly, without a word.



They come out of the house separately, furtively;  
 and as they move along the street a bit unsettled,  
 it seems they sense that something on them betrays  
 what kind of bed they've just been lying on.

But what profit for the life of the artist:  
 tomorrow, the day after, or years later, the strong lines  
 that had their beginning here, will be written. (Cavafy 1975:208–209)

What begins as (the gazing on) an encounter and ends as a poem is a game of trying to hide and uncover the mark that the sexual act has left behind. There is nothing in the text to say that the artist who would eventually write the verses was one of the two lovers; the “εδώ” of the last verse is, strictly speaking, the gazing that the first stanza describes. The poem focuses on the ritual of hiding, not the sexual act itself. This very ritual eventually marks the text, which has “its beginnings” in the effort to read a supplement, to uncover the hidden and unsaid encounter by looking at the lovers as they come out of their meeting. Gazing at them hiding interpellates *what kind* of sexual act they had been engaged in. What both lovers put on after sex, it seems, is both the mark of a deviant identity and a residue of that sexual act: they have worn, quickly and silently, both identity and sex as a system of signs; in other words, they have put on sexuality.

It is worth recalling here that in “December of 1903” homosexual desire is diffused “through every word and phrase.” Homosexual desire, unspeakable and uncontainable, contaminates, becoming a hidden and dangerous supplement of every “innocent” word and phrase. What links *the protagonists* of “Η αρχή των,” (and of “Στο Θέατρο,” “Ήλθε για να διαβάσει—” etc.) with *the words* of Δεκέμβρης, is the mark they bear, in both cases a result of hiding/closeting. Hiding becomes a semiotic act that connects poetry and personal identity and leaves the object of hiding (homosexual desires and acts) as the hidden substance of both. The poem “December of 1903” is stamped by the residue of an erotic impulse—the initials of the object of desire are inscribed on the manuscript. That nothing more can be said about him in a sense produces the poem (and gives rise, as we have seen, to a defined poetics); meanwhile, this textual process (marking the unspoken έρωτάς μου) also opens up identification for the subject of the poem. In “Η αρχή των,” the erotic meeting is stamped upon people, as they are being read by the poem; and it is the same mark that then becomes the residual remnant of the words. Let us remember that all this has been the result of the sheer social effort to contain and hide homosexuality. We had instead the (re)production of what was meant to be policed, homosexuality, into concrete identities, paradigmatically interwoven

with the very discourses that produce them: hiding, social control, textuality and the ordering of sexual acts.

*The leaking closet*

This is the point at which the marked homosexual identity outgrows its confined space and becomes threatening. That hiding is turned into its opposite, a spectacle of how identities are produced, may be a failure of social control, but has not yet posed a threat to the logic underlying the enforcement of closeting, that is, the safeguarding of a heteronormative society. What is more threatening, as I have already implied in my analysis of “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει—,” is the closet when it starts leaking, attracting the “normal” into the game of the “deviant,” the accepted and visible into the game of the hidden.

The Cavafian closet manages this in two interconnected ways. The first is by foregrounding how eroticism is not the origin but the product of sexuality. A relationship with the reader which is based on unmarked “eroticism” and “sensuality,” also becomes threateningly marked. In a second interconnected step, the spectacle of the closet is slowly turned into a viewpoint. The reader is no longer peeping through the closet’s keyhole; instead, s/he is looking out of its windows.

“Να μείνει” (first published as a broadsheet in 1919) is one of Cavafy’s later poems to have met with a hostile response by conservative critics, and at least one journalistic reaction similar to that of “Ἦλθε για να διαβάσει—.” The poem presents the dialectics of hiding/showing in both the act and its telling, and finishes with the, now familiar, trope of acts and visions distilled in poetry.

Ἡ ώρα μια την νύχτα θάτανε,  
ἢ μιάμισυ.

Σε μια γωνιά του καπηλειού·  
πίσω απ’ το ξύλινο το χώρισμα.  
Ἐκτός ημών των δυο το μαγαζί όλως διόλου άδειο.  
Μια λάμπα πετρελαίου μόλις το φώτιζε.  
Κοιμούντανε, στην πόρτα, ο αγρουπνισμένος υπηρέτης.

Δεν θα μας έβλεπε κανείς. Μα κιόλας  
είχαμεν εξαφθεί τόσο πολύ,  
που γίναμε ακατάλληλοι για προφυλάξεις.

Τα ενδύματα μισοανοίχθηκαν—πολλά δεν ήσαν  
γιατί επύρωνε θείος Ιούλιος μήνας.

Σάρκας απόλαυσις ανάμεσα  
στα μισοανοιγμένα ενδύματα·

γρήγορο σάρκας γύμνωμα—που το ίνδαλμά του  
είκοσι έξη χρόνους διάβηκε· και τώρα ήλθε  
να μείνει μες στην ποίησιν αυτή.

It must have been one o'clock at night  
or half past one.

A corner in the wine-shop  
behind the wooden partition:  
except for the two of us the place completely empty.  
An oil lamp barely gave it light.  
The waiter, on duty all day, was sleeping by the door.

No one could see us. But anyway,  
we were already so aroused  
we'd become incapable of caution.

Our clothes half opened—we weren't wearing much:  
a divine July was ablaze.

Delight of flesh between  
those half-opened clothes;  
quick baring of flesh—the vision of it  
that has crossed twenty-six years  
and has come to remain now in this poetry. (Cavafy 1975:182–183)

Upon the poem's first "popular" publication in a journal, the well-known columnist Paris Tangopoulos vigorously protested in the daily *To Έθνος* (*The Nation*, 12/6/1924): "This is the Cavafian construct, immoral nonsense. The Public Prosecutor certainly cannot interfere because in his last period, the poet, very prudently, muddles things up, blurs things, so that his perverted desire is not clearly visible [τα μπερδεύει, τα θολώνει, για να μην φαίνεται ο έκφυλος πόθος του]" (reprinted in Karaoglou 1985:116). The closeting, the mixture of telling and hiding (τα μπερδεύει), is correctly seen as a strategy of self-protection against the law. But who is being threatened by the perverted desire hidden behind the smokescreen of the half-saids?

The threatening element of the poem is that what is "to remain" in the poetry is not simply semi-hidden: it is erotic *because* it is semi-hidden. In a brilliant move, Cavafy produces sexuality and eroticism at once, indelibly linking them both to textuality. The poem, in Cavafian fashion, hides and tells, while its main characters hide and act. The two lovers meet in a semi-hidden corner of a semi-deserted tavern (with the sleeping servant on the border of inside and outside, as he is on the border of sleep). In an ironic touch, an oil lamp is added in the semi-lit room, as if transferred from Cavafy's own famous close(te)d room. Like its setting and characters, the poem itself is semi-hidden, since there is

no overt reference to the gender of the two partners. It can only be through contextual knowledge (the rumors about Cavafy’s sexuality) that Tangopoulos and other readers construe this as a homosexual meeting. Or, rather, to be fair to them (and to what Tangopoulos really says), gender and sexuality are read into the poem because of the poetics of hiding. It is because the gender of the two lovers is so craftily hidden (Tangopoulos: *τα μπερδεύει, τα θολώνει*), that the meeting is read as homosexual. This brings us back to the idea that hiding (re)produces sexuality. Nevertheless, the threatening aspect of this poem is not that it shows homosexuality in the making; it is the possibility that it produces pervasive eroticism as a result. All societal constructs that seem to impede erotic contact, instead of harnessing it, end up structuring it, giving it shape and existence.

The glimpse of a small piece of flesh uncovered between the half-opened clothes “has come to remain” and mark the poetry, in the very same way (and using the same verb) as another poem in which the narrator finds his relationship with a former lover remaining on his flesh (“σαν άρωμα που επάνω στη σάρκα μου έχει μείνει” (“Μέσα στα καπηλειά—”/“In the Taverns—”). Even memory is reified in this process that sees the residue of sexual acts destined “to remain” and produce identification and reading pleasure (or, rather, identificatory pleasure). But, what if this residue, in the way described by Sareyiannis, is nothing but an “immunizing factor,” part of a larger scale erotic proselytization? What if the pleasure of reading into the scene (reading its signs, un-closeting it), transforms itself into the pleasure of gazing at it?

The implications are crucial: what earlier was the hidden closet making a spectacle of itself is now emerging to circumscribe the reader. The fear is the shifting of the closet from an impeded spectacle to an enforced viewpoint. As hiding turns into telling, textuality into sexuality, and homosexuality into eroticism, writing has shifted into reading (reading the poetry but also its hidden substance, the homosexual mark), a complication that profoundly unsettles the reader. We could look for one of the best examples of this in the relatively early poem “Μια Νύχτα” (“One Night,” 1915), where what starts as the recollection of a passionate night becomes a shaking of the reader’s own certainties.

Η κάμαρα ήταν πτωχική και πρόστυχη,  
 ρυμμένη επάνω από την ύποπτη ταβέρνα.  
 Από το παράθυρο φαίνονταν το σοκάκι,  
 το ακάθαρτο και το στενό. Από κάτω  
 ήρχονταν η φωνές κάτι εργατών  
 που έπαιζαν χαρτιά και που γλεντούσαν.

Κ' εκεί στο λαϊκό, το ταπεινό κρεββάτι  
 είχα το σώμα του έρωτος, είχα τα χείλη  
 τα ηδονικά και ρόδινα της μέθης—  
 τα ρόδινα μιας τέτοιας μέθης, που και τώρα  
 που γράφω, έπειτ' από τόσα χρόνια!,  
 μες στο μονήρες σπίτι μου, μεθώ ξανά.

The room was poor and sordid,  
 hidden above the suspect tavern.  
 From the window you could see the alley  
 dirty and narrow. From below  
 came the voices of some workmen  
 playing cards and having fun.

And there on that common, humble bed  
 I had love's body, I had the lips,  
 the red and sensual lips of drunken ecstasy—  
 red lips of such ecstasy  
 that now as I write, after so many years,  
 in my lonely house, I get drunk again. (Cavafy 1975:106–107)

As is by now clear to see, Cavafy is once more playing his game of telling and hiding. The gender of the two lovers is not referred to directly—the reader is again invited to watch a hidden scene of sexual congress. The room, poor and humble like the love it houses, is hidden above the suspect tavern. The closet is once again opened, the closeting made into a spectacle. Its recollection is diffused throughout the poem because the moments of writing and of revisiting the experience are confounded. Furthermore, the two closeted spaces, the hidden space of the sexual act and the “lonely” house where the poem is being written (activating here the contextual mythologization of Cavafy's own room), the start and end of the poem respectively, collapse into one another. As the closet of homosexual acting and the closet of homosexual writing open themselves up to the searching eye of reading, the reader's position becomes radically complicit. On rereading this poem, one realizes that the focalization of the first stanza has always been an odd one, looking from the inside to the outside; performing the equivalent of a filmic reverse shot, Cavafy has turned the closet from spectacle into a viewpoint. The reader is now in the closet. It turns out that the eroticism of the poem (only of this poem?) was all along produced not from seeing the hidden and the hiding but, one step beyond that, from sharing its experience.

*The closet and the spectacle*

This modality, which I would call, after Sedgwick, turning the closet from a spectacle into a viewpoint, shows the most subversive and threatening aspect the closet presents to the societal powers that have produced it. I will now turn again to *The Epistemology of the Closet*, in order to present the theoretical ramifications of what I have already implied in my analysis of the poems. Sedgwick suggests that two homophobic views are crucial to an understanding of modern homosexuality and the construction of the closet: on the one hand a *minoritizing* position, according to which homosexuals are a distinct minority existing in every society, and on the other a *universalizing* position, which holds that homosexuality is a potential threat to anyone. But, rather than being mutually exclusive, these two positions co-exist as simultaneous tropes in modern definitions of homosexuality.

The modern understanding of homosexuality is organized around a radical and irreducible incoherence. It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who “really are” gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictable solvent of stable identities; and that at least a male homosexual identity and modern masculinist culture may require for their maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex desire that is widespread and in the first place internal. (1990:85)

Sedgwick has further shown how the closet can be reactivated by writers or their readers/theorists to reveal and exploit this structural incoherence at its core. “Queerness” as Ross Chambers suggests, “destabilizes and unseats the hegemony exercised by centralized norms. . . . The closet, in Sedgwick’s epistemology is a quintessentially queer institution. Designed as a way of policing a minoritizing (and essentializing) of homosexuality, it inevitably *leaks*—having the structure of an open secret” (Chambers 2002:175). This is, after all, why Sedgwick thinks of the closet as “a curious space that is both internal and marginal to the culture,” a topos “centrally representative of [the culture’s] motivating passions and contradictions” (Sedgwick 1990:56; see discussion in Chambers 2002:169).

We should not forget that it is part and parcel of Sedgwick’s agenda to show not only how homosexuality has been policed through closeting, but how it has also achieved an unsettling canonic centrality by exploiting the closet. In a famous phrase from *Epistemology*, she asserts that gayness is at the heart of the canon as gay writers and artists are “dozens, or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider ‘our’ culture” (52).

I draw on these claims to support my argument that Cavafy ultimately used the poetics of the closet to reassert a canonical placement, achieved not in spite of his homosexuality but through it. I also argue that, just as Sedgwick describes, Cavafy's closet was meant to leak, to stay as a hidden subtext in words and phrases, a necessary supplement and hidden essence of poetics that would then question—as well as inadvertently contaminate—the very forces (οι άθλιοι νόμοι της κοινωνίας) that produced it. This is the point at which Cavafy's minoritizing self-attitude (σ' όσους είναι σαν κι εμένα καμωμένοι) becomes a universalizing threat: an “unpredictable solvent to stable, solved, absolved, resolved sexualities.” It would take another article to show how responses to Cavafy's texts during the twentieth century have represented Greek culture's passions and contradictions, making his poetry central even as it was designated (at least the erotic poems) as marginal.

It is enough here to add one of the most telling examples: Timos Malanos's efforts to show how the Greek quarters of Alexandria had been virtually uncontaminated by Cavafy's youthful escapades in homosexuality. The critic had met and worked with Cavafy as a young man and pioneered a method by which he used rumors and first-hand accounts of Cavafy's personal life in order to validate his readings.<sup>6</sup> This is one of his most spectacular efforts (purportedly drawing on discussions with Cavafy) to set the record straight.

[The young Cavafy] fails to master himself. He spends whole nights in disguise away from his home in lower-class neighborhoods, bribing servants, accomplices who blackmail him. . . . At one time one could live in the neighborhood of certain isolated quarters of Alexandria, without one's own part of the town, the “good quarter” so to speak, knowing anything about one's way of life. The reason was that between them stretched *terrains vagues* that have since been filled up with houses, giving the city a unity which it formerly lacked. So in one of those isolated quarters, slave to his temptations, he passed his nights. (Liddell 1974:67; original in Malanos 1957:17–18)

Malanos's anguished claim of a properly heterosexual place for the Greek community in Alexandria (and for the Greek soul in general) collapses under its own weight. The closet has to remain closed, the roads uncrossed, the terrains vague. But at the time Malanos is writing, these terrains have been built on: the secret has been opened. With a little help from geography and town planning, what was far away is now close, what was discontinuous is now continuous, what was hidden and untouched is now an open secret.

The very inconsistency that the production of the closet tries to



hide is magnificently symbolized in the trope of the *terrains vagues*. Their instability, subversiveness, and pervasiveness announce the moment when the closet is turned upside down, from a tool of oppression to an element destabilizing the oppression of heteronormativity (and literary heteronormativity) from within. The terrain vague is the closet about to start leaking, the dangerous (“επικίνδυνο”) thing about to be administered. Alexandria (and Greek letters) would never be the same again.

In this article, I have introduced the concept of the closet as a key term in understanding Cavafian poetry and poetics, and their interrelationship with sexuality. I have argued that it is the closet that both engenders and unifies the Cavafian canon and that through it, homosexuality, as the marked sexual encounter, becomes dangerously close to the art of poetry, of writing and of publishing it, but also of reading it. I have shown how Cavafy first turned the closet from a means of policing sexuality to the trope for expressing it. When it was turned into the space in which power, knowledge and eroticism were confounded, the closet also became a topos unifying the poet’s life, publishing strategies and poetry. In my reading of key poems, I have also shown how the closet supports the forging of an “erotics” of reading as the main modality of approaching Cavafian poetry. Last but not least, I have traced how *the closet as spectacle* crosses the distance between the minoritizing and the universalizing position in the policing of homosexual identities, thus uncovering the inconsistency of the very mechanisms that marginalize homosexuality.

By highlighting the strategies and uses of the closet in Cavafy’s poetry, I have also sought to refocus critical discussion on several issues, including the centrality of the erotic poems, the way Cavafy introduced a homosexual identity in his work, and the relationship of poetry to sexuality. I have persistently argued that sexuality is seen by Cavafy as a quintessentially textual space: it orders poetics (through telling and hiding); it is produced through semiotic marks (eg., *κουρασμένος* . . .) constantly reread while re-constructing eroticism; it orders the performance of identities as a game of reading and writing.

Finally, I hope I have come close to answering the question of whether Cavafy managed, in the end, to find those “words that tell and hide.” That those words would also bring with them the most mature elements of Cavafy’s oeuvre and the trickiest answer to the “wretched laws of society” (“άθλιοι νόμοι της κοινωνίας”) was not at all coincidental.

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments.* The articles authored by Dimitris Papanikolaou and Christopher Robinson were presented at the symposium, “New Perspectives on Cavafy,” held at University College London on 22 November 2003. The symposium was generously supported by The Alexander Onassis Foundation, The Foundation for Hellenic Culture and University College London. As became apparent during the symposium, revisiting Cavafy, especially the erotic Cavafy, from the point of view of the history and theory of sexuality is one of the most engaging desiderata of current critical work on the Greek poet. Fruitful “new perspectives” on Cavafy continue to emerge by addressing the main characteristics of his poetry: eroticism and homosexuality. The wealth of readings resulting from such an undertaking have only recently started to make an impact. Cavafy lived at the crossroads of the nineteenth century discourses which, in Foucault’s well-known formulation, mapped the homosexual as “a personage, a species” whose homosexuality was conceived as a permanent characteristic “shamelessly inscribed on his face and on his body, as a secret that always gives itself away.” Papanikolaou’s article engages with Cavafian poetics from the perspective of silence and utterance, using Queer Theory’s articulation of the closet and Foucault’s main arguments about the production of sexuality. Robinson’s article reviews Cavafy’s supposed links with the Uranian poets of the nineteenth century before making the claim that his ideas about sexuality are much closer to those of modern gay poets and admirers of his work such as Mark Doty and Cathal O’Searcaigh than previously thought possible. Neither article aims to exhaust the question of Cavafy and sexuality, but provides instead specific arguments that link sexuality with poetics inviting a broader and long overdue discussion.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all translations from Greek are mine.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting reading has been very recently proposed by James Faubion (2004), who argues that “Cavafy did not need to read Foucault to learn that homosexuality was a sexological construction of his own lifetime. . . . The homosexual is not ‘under erasure’ in his poetry. He or she or it simply isn’t there. What instead charges the poetry are (homo)erotic intensities, pure and diluted, on which it might dwell at once as ethical and experiential askesis and as ethical and experiential problem.” Under the pressure of Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of minor literature, Faubion sees a Cavafy obsessed with the “refusal to participate in the practices that would divide him from himself and from others” and the “resistance to causes and categories and incarcerations that he did not want to be his own” (60). The merits of this analysis notwithstanding, I find the implications of seeing Cavafy’s homosexual writing as such an exercise in deterritorialization, particularly problematic. *Pace* Faubion, I believe Cavafy works not against but with the sexological constructions of his time and that his poetry is informed by and in turn informs the discourses that stabilize a technology of the homosexual self.

<sup>3</sup> The primary aim is to illustrate Seferis’s linguistic differences with Cavafy, but, as various commentators have sensed, this comment ends up largely being about Cavafy’s “strangeness,” and the claustrophobia that reading his poetry produces.

<sup>4</sup> I will be using the Keeley-Sherrard translation with modification towards the literal. For instance, in the following “Όταν διεγείρονται,” I will translate “του ερωτισμού σου τα οράματα” into “the visions of your eroticism,” as opposed to Keeley-Sherrard’s “those erotic visions of yours.”

<sup>5</sup> Cavafy used the hanging dash at the end of seven of his titles, and in all of them the dash stands for the mark of the unsaid, symbolizing the homosexual subtext of the poem. “Απ’ τες εννιά—,” “Έτσι πολύ ατένισα—,” “Για νά’ ρθουν—,” “Σ’ένα βιβλίο παληό—,” “Ήλθε για να διαβάσει—,” “Μέσα στα καπηλειά—,” “Ρωτούσε για την ποιότητα—.” Its use seems even more crucial once we realize that in all seven poems the characters (or the

narrator) are marked by their sexual choices (“σαν εμορφιά διαρκής σαν άρωμα που απάνω / στη σάρκα μου έχει μείνει” says the narrator of “Μέσα στα καπηλειά—”; “like durable beauty, like perfume / that has remained on my flesh”), and their previous experiences, in the very way that the “innocent” titles are marked by the hanging dash. Interestingly, the Keeley-Sherrard editions have erased these dashes from the titles of all these poems. Rae Dalven only preserves it in “Απ’ τες εννιά—.”

<sup>6</sup> Most of them, including rumors about the three last rent boys the frail Cavafy used to invite to his home (of which “Mr Malanos was informed by an unnamed correspondent”), or the narration of an evening when Cavafy “like a carnivorous plant” tried to seduce the young critic, are taken at face value by Robert Liddell (1974).

#### REFERENCES CITED

Cavafy, Constantine P.

1963 Κ. Π. Καβάφης. *Ποιήματα*, τ. Α and τ. Β, φιλολογική επιμέλεια Γ. Π. Σαββίδη. Athens: Ikaros.

1968 *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα (1882–1923)*. Athens: Ikaros.

1975 *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Sawvidis. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

1983 *Ανέκδοτα σημειώματα ποιητικής και ηθικής (1902–1911)*, παρουσιασμένα από τον Γ. Π. Σαββίδη. Athens: Ermis.

Chambers, Ross

2002 “Strategic Constructivism?” In *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, edited by Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, 165–180. New York and London: Routledge.

Daskalopoulos, Dimitris

2003 Δημήτρης Δασκαλόπουλος. *Βιβλιογραφία Κ. Π. Καβάφη*. Thessaloniki: Centre for the Greek Language.

Faubion, James D.

2004 “Cavafy: Toward the Principles of a Transcultural Sociology of Minor Literature.” *Modern Greek Studies Australia and New Zealand* 11–12: 40–65.

Foucault, Michel

1979 *The History of Sexuality*, v. 1 (An Introduction). London: Allen Lane.

Fuss, Diana (ed.)

1991 *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. London: Routledge.

Kambanis, Aristos

1963 Αρίστος Καμπάνης. “Ο φροϋδισμός εις την λογοτεχνίαν μας.” *Νέα Εστία* 872:1423–1424 (first published in *Έθνος*, 5 January 1933).

Karaoglou, H. L.

1985 Χ. Α. Καραόγλου. *Η Αθηναϊκή κριτική και ο Καβάφης (1918–1924)*. Thessaloniki: University Studio Press.

Keeley, Edmund

1972 “The ‘New’ Poems of Cavafy.” In *Modern Greek Writers*, edited by Edmund Keeley and Peter Bien, 123–143. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Liddell, Robert

1974 *Cavafy: A Critical Biography*. London: Duckworth.

Malanos, Timos

1957 Τίμος Μαλάνος. *Ο ποιητής Κ. Π. Καβάφης: Ο άνθρωπος και το έργο του*. Athens: Difros.

Mirtiotissa

1924 Μυρτιώτισσα. "Μια εντύπωση." *Νέα Τέχνη* 7–10: 84–85.

Ouranis, Kostas

1963 Κώστας Ουράνης. "Ο σεξουαλισμός του Καβάφη." *Νέα Εστία* 872 (November), 1468–1474 (first published in *Νέα Εστία* in 1933).

Savvidis, George

1987 Γ. Π. Σαββίδης. *Μικρά Καβαφικά* τ. Β'. Athens: Ermis.

1993 *Βασικά θέματα της ποίησης του Καβάφη*. Athens: Ikaros.

Sareyiannis, I. A.

1964 I. A. Σαρεγιάννης. *Σχόλια στον Καβάφη*. Athens: Ikaros.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky

1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Seferis, George

1981 Γ. Π. Σεφέρης. *Δοκιμές*, τ. Α'. Athens: Ikaros.

*La Semaine Égyptienne*

1929 Special Issue on Cavafy, 25 April 1929.

Sengopoulos, Alekos

1963 Αλέκος Σεργόπουλος. "Διάλεξις περί του ποιητικού έργου του Κ. Π. Καβάφη" [1918]. Reprinted in *Επιθεώρηση Τέχνης* 108 (December), 614–621.

Steryiopoulos, Kostas

1980 Κώστας Στεργιόπουλος. *Η ελληνική ποίηση*, τ. Δ', επιμέλεια Κώστα Στεργιόπουλου. Athens: Sokolis.

Tsirkas, Stratis

1958 Στρατής Τσίρκας. *Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του*. Athens: Kedros.