C.P. Cavafy: (Homo)Erotics and (Re)Constructions

THESIS

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In this thesis, I will explore the relationship between C.P. Cavafy’s (1863-1933) life and his erotic poetry. Specifically, I will consider how Cavafy’s sexuality is (re)constructed by and through his poetry as well as criticism and the role that secondary sources and ancillary texts play in this construction. Why do some critics read Cavafy’s erotic poetry as gay, while others resist such readings and admit to only a few poems being gay? What different reading strategies does either group employ to reach their conclusions? Is resistance to characterizing his poetry as homoerotic merely a sign of anxiety over the queering of Cavafy’s oeuvre and is this a sign of masked homophobia? Or are there justifiable objections to such characterizations? Are ethical readings that read his erotic poetry as queer over-determined? What role do interpretive communities play in substantiating either side of this debate? Since Cavafy wrote in Modern Greek, what structural differences lay between the original language and works translated into English and how do those differences arise?

To answer some of the questions, I will use close-reading techniques of Cavafy’s erotic poetry, both in the original Modern Greek as well as English. I will attempt to resuscitate defunct or even unfashionable theories of literature in my assessment (especially Formalist ones), showing how some still prove useful and productive in reading and analyzing his poetry. I will also survey Cavafian criticism and try to unpack the assumptions that underlie either conclusion. To accomplish this, I will introduce the
notions of feedback and estrangement to try to explain some of these complications. I will also consider the role that pleasure plays in his poems. Finally, I will suggest that Cavafy’s ambiguous use of language, coding, and production methods surpassed mere self-censorship and at the same time served to secure his position in an emerging canon.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dearest mother, father, and brother,

For their patience, love, and encouragement.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Coleman and Dr. Winnubst for their time, thoughtful suggestions, and for graciously serving on my committee. After all these years, my brother Van’s reassurance and humor still buoy my spirits. I am grateful for Dr. Ellickson's encouragement. I would especially like to thank Dr. Armstrong, who made this possible. From my undergraduate studies on through graduate school, his enthusiasm, humor, intellectual rigor, patience, and most of all, his kindness were consistent throughout my schooling and will never be forgotten.
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Table of Contents

Abstract....................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication ................................................................................................................. iv
Acknowledgments..................................................................................................... v
Vita................................................................................................................................ vi
List of Figures .......................................................................................................... viii
Thesis .......................................................................................................................... 1
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 48
Endnotes ..................................................................................................................... 51
Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 54
List of Figures

Figure 1 Publication Instructions in Greek ................................................................. 33
Figure 2 Publication Instructions in English................................................................. 34
In this thesis, I will offer a reading of C.P. Cavafy’s (1863-1933) sensual poems, both those within the established canon as well as those outside of it and on the margins, notably the so-called “Hidden” poems. All of the sensual poems discussed here will be mostly referred to as erotic. My decision to use the term erotic is to provide some consistency in relation to critical texts and commentaries that seem to collapse the differences between the sensual and erotic, texts that often use these terms interchangeably.¹ Specifically, I will show how ethical readings of these erotic poems (re)construct Cavafy’s sexuality as gay, thus making the poems homoerotic. Or I will demonstrate how interpretive communities push readings of Cavafy’s erotic poems toward homoerotic meaning. I will then consider how his sexuality is as much determined, even over-determined, by extra-textual (secondary) sources and ancillary texts as by the homoerotic content of the poems themselves. In this sense, the thesis will continually address the issue of limits, including the limits of language, the limits of allowable discourse, the limits of translation, and the limits of meaning. The construction
of Cavafy’s erotic poetry as gay and Cavafy’s own concerns with this canonical legacy vis-à-vis his sexuality will seem at odds. I do not intend to necessarily reconcile these differences. However, I will explore these various aspects of Cavafy’s work and reception through the lens of feedback and estrangement, terms to which we will return in more detail.

What I want to do up front is demonstrate a commitment to Cavafy’s erotic poems and texts. These poems are sensual. And it is precisely this notion of sensual production that I will explore, especially through Roland Barthes’ hedonistic view of language and literature, on which I will elaborate later. Above all, my purpose in the following pages is to engage in current conversations about Cavafy in scholarship on his work, the media, and their intersections, with specific focus on poetry and poetics, Modern Greek Studies, queer theory, translation theory, the construction of personae (both grammatically and literally), identity and difference, and identity politics. Within this larger context, I consider and explore the question of alterity present in Cavafy’s poetry, specifically in light of the ways his erotic poetry is most commonly read in the secondary literature and popular media.

There is a growing interest in Cavafy the poet and poet historian, ο ιστορικός-ποιηηής—literally, the historical poet, as he called himself—as well as the homosexualist author. Indeed, UNESCO declared “2013: the Year of Cavafy” (UNESCO). English translations (not considering other languages), anthologies (Modern Greek poetry, gay poetry, etc.), traveling exhibition of archives, scholarship and symposiums around Cavafy’s work have increased significantly, especially since the 1950’s. Cavafy is a
worthy subject not only for Modern Greek studies, or poetry and poetics, but also for
translations studies, colonial and post-colonial studies, gender studies, GLBTQ studies,
amongst other fields and disciplines.

More specifically, the stature of C.P. Cavafy’s poetry is nearly unparalleled in the
Modern Greek literary canon. Greek poets and Nobel recipients George Seferis (1963)
and Odysseus Elytis (1979) have both paid homage to Cavafy, commenting in their
speeches, lectures, and various essays that their own respective work responds to his
poetry, if only in a futile attempt to escape his shadow (and their own anxiety) of
influence.² Seferis’ collection of essays, On the Greek Style, considered Cavafy’s work
contemporaneous and Cavafy a poet who “came leaping across a chasm of the ages to
take his own place in the Greek Anthology” (127). In his Nobel Lecture, Seferis hinted at
the difficulties encountered when trying to label Cavafy, stating how “He loved countries
and periods in which the frontiers are not well defined, in which personalities and beliefs
are fluid” (George Seferis). Sixteen years later in his own Nobel lecture, Odysseus Elytis
surveyed the whole of Modern Greek poetry and various styles, suggesting that Solomos
figured at one end and Cavafy at the other. Of Cavafy’s laconic style, he states that
“Cavafy, who like T. S. Eliot, reaches, by eliminating all form of turgidity, the extreme
limit of concision and the most rigorously exact expression” (Odysseus Elytis). That two
Nobel winners would make such remarks exemplifies Cavafy’s decisive importance and
his role in the Modern Greek canon, assuring his legacy and name.

But to many English speakers, C.P. Cavafy is not necessarily a familiar name.
While known in specialist circles or as a character in Lawrence Durrell’s Alexandria
Quartet, his work is characterized by its unmistakably modern and laconic style. W.H. Auden refers to Cavafy’s “unique tone of voice” (viii) in his introduction to Rae Dalven’s early and now standard translation of his work, suggesting that even in translation, Cavafy’s voice is unmistakable, for “nobody else could have possibly written it” (xvi). However, even for a reader unfamiliar with Cavafy’s poems, certain titles are well known. Indeed, while Cavafy’s relatively modest number of poems were little known and hardly circulated at the time, eventually growing not only in stature and influence in Modern Greek but beyond this initial context, the work now exists both within academic and literary circles as well as through mass media. David Hockney’s fourteen etchings of Cavafy hang in the Tate Gallery. The popularization of his poetry even made the tabloids and news headlines when the poem “Ithaca” was read, according to her own wishes, at Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’ funeral (Goldman). More than that, Cavafy is probably best known for his poem “Waiting For the Barbarians,” which has found its way into newspapers, books, and movie titles alike, a telling phrase signaling various (and often contradictory) ideas of power, ideology, hegemony, and social construction. Recently, with the development of queer theory and the growing number of published gay literary anthologies, Cavafy has once again found new popular as well as academic audiences. His erotic writings are of great interest to queer identity politics—and book-publishing niche markets—as well as those who would resist such readings and agendas. According to Bloomberg News, Cavafy’s influence now extends throughout the world, his work translated in over 70 languages (Williams).
Cavafy’s poetry, as he claimed himself and subsequently adopted by numerous critics, falls into three categories: the historical, the philosophical (or sometimes didactic), and the sensual (Liddell 10). In this sense, it may seem odd to spend so much time and energy considering his sensual or erotic poems. However, the borders between the three categories (historical, philosophical, and erotic) are occasionally collapsed and their differences elided within poems by the author himself. For instance, “Craftsman of Wine Bowls” combines the historical and the (homo)erotic:

On this wine bowl—pure silver,  
made for the house of Herakleidis,  
where good taste is the rule—  
notice these graceful flowers, the streams, the thyme.  
In the center I put this beautiful young man,  
naked, erotic, one leg still dangling  
in the water. O memory, I begged  
for you to help me most in making  
the young face I loved appear the way it was.  
This proved very difficult because  
some fifteen years have gone by since the day  
he died as a soldier in the defeat at Magnesia.

Or an erotic poem might also be combined with an historical category. Poems such as “Of the Jews (A.D. 50)” among a few others are examples of Cavafy employing his knowledge of obscure historical events and re-contextualizing them with modern concerns (alienation, homoeroticism).

These themes are expressed clearly in other poems that disrupt the very categories Cavafy outlined for himself. Drawing on his expert knowledge of micro-histories and forgotten pasts, we might also easily identify today with our own modern perspective a
queer code operating within the poem. This is seen in the poem “Temethos, Antiochian, A.D. 400”:

Lines written by young Temethos, madly in love.
The title: “Emonidis”—the favorite
of Antiochos Epiphanis; a very handsome young man from Samosata. But if the lines come out ardent, full of feeling, it is because Emonidis (belonging to that other, much older time: the 137th year of the Greek kingdom, maybe a bit earlier) is in the poem merely as a name—a suitable one nevertheless. The poem gives voice to the love Temethos feels, a beautiful kind of love, worthy of him. We the initiated—his intimate friends—we the initiated know about whom those lines were written. The unsuspecting Antiochians read simply “Emonidis.”

It is not difficult to identify the code through the lines: “We the initiated—/his intimate friends—we the initiated/know about whom the lines were written (lines 11-13).

In light of the blurring of these various distinctions, genres, and categories, I would like to address a formalist reading of Cavafy’s work, and specifically a formal reading that comes into tension with the sexual or homosexualist themes that appear with so much frequency in the reception of the poems. Before addressing the issue of formalism, however, the notion of homosexualist should be explained, which is borrowed loosely from Gore Vidal. I purposefully chose to use the term homosexualist rather than the more common and accepted term queer for several reasons.6 As Vidal states in his essay, “Sex Is Politics,” there might be some incongruence (or deficit in terms of binaries) with the current word “homosexual” that would be better remedied by the word
homosexualist. The shift, though a subtle one, moves focus from being to becoming (in a Nietzschean sense), and so considers the performativity of sexuality. The shift that term “homosexualist” signals is differentiated from the term “queer,” which seems to continue a focus on being rather becoming. As Vidal states:

Actually, there is no such thing as a homosexual person, any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexual person. The words are adjectives describing sexual acts, not people. The sexual acts are entirely normal; if they were not, no one would perform them” (161).

Of course, Vidal might indeed have it slightly wrong: the words homosexual and heterosexual do not describe an act, but are once removed, labeling a person a thing (noun) because of an act (verb). Nevertheless, Vidal continues, even seeming to abandon his neologism:

The reason no one has yet been able to come up with a good word to describe the homosexualist (sometimes known as gay, fag, queer, etc.) is because he does not exist. The human race is divided into male and female. Many human beings enjoy sexual relations with their own sex, many don't; many respond to both. This plurality is the fact of our nature and not worth fretting about (161).
I use the term homosexualist in light of Vidal’s claims, hoping to accomplish two things.
First, I hope to add to Cavafian scholarship about notions of authorship and author intentionality, as well as the seeming anxiety over the focus on his (over-determined) homosexualism by some critics, or its obverse, the absence of ever addressing Cavafy’s sexuality by other critics. I hope to show that his sexuality is constructed, for the most part, posthumously, his poems the sight of others’ projections, expectations, and agendas.
Second, more generally and more ambitiously, I hope to upset the expectations and notions we bring to bodies that are (or come to us) labeled “gay” or “queer” or “straight.” While Vidal used the term homosexualist in 1976, its infrequent use still makes it fresh. Using such relative neologisms like homosexualist and homosexualism helps estrange or de-familiarize our understanding of the “thing,” making it something new again. Thus, I hope to move the conversation on sexuality from focusing on the labeling of bodies through sex (constructing a body that is static, rigid, and defined), to one considering sexuality that is dynamic, fluid, and possesses performativity; that is, echoing Vidal, I wish to offer for consideration that sexuality prima facie is something one does, not something that one is.

From this perspective, it should be interesting and productive to return back to our understanding of Cavafy the author, the poet, o ποιητής (literally, the maker), or the homosexualist poet, and the relations and associations we create with his poetry, with the poems as such.

Text-centric ways of reading, such as those proposed by the Russian Formalists and New Critics might not seem that fashionable or profitable these days, given the
contemporary climate of hostility toward such attempts. But I want to suggest that a cursory look at Formalist models of literature and its insights in the reading of Cavafy’s erotic poetry might still prove fruitful.

Whereas it might be surprising not to use the now conventional term queer as developed by Eve Sedgwick but rather opt for Vidal’s forgotten term homosexualist, we may still turn to Sedgwick, but this time in consideration of the still beneficial approaches that formalist tools and readings offer us.

Most productive would be to reconsider E.D. Hirsch’s formulation and distinctions between meaning and significance. At the same time, reconsidering Hirsch’s formulations through the lens of feedback and seeing them in contrast to Stanley Fish’s concepts of affective stylistics and interpretive communities will hopefully achieve this.

Such Formalist and New Critical avenues (method and aesthetic, respectively) of reading Cavafy’s erotic poetry would yield quite different results, depending upon whether the poems were from the so called “Canon” or from the so-called “Hidden Poems” or other posthumous collections like the “Repudiated Poems.” However, such close textual reading of all of Cavafy’s erotic poetry would reveal little about his own homosexualism. Consider the following poem, “When They Are Roused”:

Try to guard them, poet however few they are that can be held. The visions of your eroticism. Set them, half hidden, in your phrases. Try to hold them, poet, when they are roused in your mind at night, or in the noon glare.
There is little indication that Cavafy is speaking of homoerotic desires or even his own desires, but rather, I suggest and will later expand upon, desire per se. A reader without acquaintance of Cavafy or his life would not be able to discern the homoerotic coding of the “half hidden” phrases. We can safely assume that most inexperienced readers might merely reflect the heteronormative imperative which imposes itself on most ambiguous writing, and to which queer readings resist and attempt to displace. Only with the knowledge of his biographical data, or at least his last and most brazen poems in which homosexualist love was no longer alluded to but addressed directly, would we recognize and read the earlier erotic poems, indeed, as gay. But as many formalist theories presuppose, to do so would be to violate the notion of a text as an autonomous and self-contained unit of meaning. And so employing extra-textual evidence into the reading of a text comes into direct contact with formal conventions.

A problem seems to arise, pitting a formal reading against a contextual one; the latter goes beyond the borders of Cavafy’s texts, and thus posits itself as a more ethical reading of his poetry. This problem is further complicated if we consider Julia Kristeva’s theorizing of intertextuality and the interplay between and amongst texts. Cavafy’s own poems, as we shall later see, clearly exemplify this intertextuality. The question then becomes: in our reading of Cavafy’s poems, how should we situate these extra-textual sources? And to what end?

In light of these questions, it is no surprise, then, to read George Seferis’ particular thoughts on the merits of these different approaches in reading Cavafy. Seferis,
who was influenced both by Cavafy as well as T.S. Eliot early in his own literary career
(he translated Eliot’s *The Waste Land* into Modern Greek), epitomizes these different
critical approaches to Cavafy. In *Cavafy: A Biography*, Robert Liddell quotes Seferis on
these approaches:

> Outside his poems Cavafy does not exist. As it seems to me, one of two
> things will happen: either we shall continue to write scholastic gossip
> about his private life, fastening upon the *bon mots* of provincial
> witticisms; and then, of course, we shall reap what we have sown; or else,
> starting from his basic characteristic, his unity, we shall listen to what is
> actually said by his work, this work in which, drop by drop, he spent his
> own self with all his senses (11).

Clearly we sense the hostility toward biographical recourse as a lens with which to help
us read Cavafy. Yet, what is surprising is the fact that Seferis at other times does just that,
as in his essay, “Cavafy and Eliot—A Comparison,” where he often uses biographical
data to extract meaning out of Cavafy’s poems.

> But such a quandary is easily resolved if we expand the horizon of what we
> consider texts, and more importantly, what is *permissible* to include in such a valuation as
> evidence or supplementary tools for interpretation. The impulse to a strict, formal reading
> of a text appears counterintuitive if we consider Evan-Zohar’s theory of literature, as
developed in his essay, “The ‘Literary System.’” Evan-Zohar’s approach to the literary as
system offers us an alternative to the “text-centric” view of literature found in New Criticism and elsewhere. In this perspective, all kinds of literary knowledge and practice “belongs” to the literary institution, not only (not even mainly) what happens “inside” texts. What is permissible, then, is everything within the system of literature. As Evan-Zohar states, “The literary system does not ‘exist’ outside the relations contended to operate for/in it” (28). As such, what is important is considering the phrase “the relations contended,” a phrase that has echoes to Foucault’s “regimes of truth.” Biography and the sources it relies upon (diaries, journals, memoirs, letters, etc.) are all included in this system of the literary as it is deemed pertinent in the reading of Cavafy. If all texts become permissible, then it would serve us well to include as much information as possible, and not just what lies “inside” the text. Therefore, it is a matter of supplementing our knowledge of Cavafy. Evan-Zohar continues: “The choice between taking a variable as exogenous or making it an endogenous one . . . is a matter of relevance and convenience” (28). Therefore, it has become convenient to make connections with extra-textual literatures and see them as just more lenses with which to consider the “inner” text, the poem. 9

Operating within Evan-Zohar’s method is the concept of feedback. By admitting “extra-textual” evidence into the interpretation of Cavafy’s poetry, a more complete picture is created. But are all texts open to the same analysis and readings? Which are more important? Which axis is weighted more, and why? And who deems so?

To address some of these questions, I turn for the moment to literary critic Manuel Savidis in order to tease out some of his thoughts on recent Cavafian scholarship.
As the legal inheritor and long time curator of the Cavafy Archives, Savidis’ positions on Cavafy are sometimes seen as more credible than others, if only for his access to the archives that were unavailable to most scholars (he inherited the archives from his father, the late critic and early champion and translator of Cavafy, George Savidis).  

In his essay, “Cavafy Through the Looking Glass,” Savidis surveys current scholarship on Cavafy and the trend for using extra-textual sources as a more “ethically” responsive reading of Cavafy, in other words, readings that construct his sexuality, posthumously:

> Over the years, we have had portraits of Cavafy as a sensual, political, historical or ironical poet, and so forth, depending on the scholar’s point of view and the various academic approaches which were prevalent at any give time (1).

I think it fair to read here “prevalent” as a substitute for “fashionable” or “dominant.” He continues: “The more recent academic slants on Cavafy focus on his qualities as a syncretic, diasporic or gay poet” (1) praising them as worthwhile and noting their dependence (read intertextuality) on biographies, journals, memoirs, and so on. But he retracts a full endorsement of homosexualist readings, remarking: “Cavafy would scoff at most modern characterizations of himself […] knowing […] how slippery these terms are, and how their apparent meaning changes over time” (1). In this light, it is difficult to
know if the archives allow him to infer what Cavafy might (or might not) have thought of the matter or whether he, too, is engaging in psychologisms.

Nevertheless, like others mentioned in this essay, Savidis addresses the role of the poet and also uses spatial tropes, demarcating the interior/exterior dichotomy. He states: “Cavafy as a public persona and a poet was one thing; Cavafy, the man, was quite another” (1) (as we will see, the distinctions here echo Michel Foucault’s understanding of the author-function). In challenging the dominance (and perhaps the legitimacy) of homosexualist readings of Cavafy’s erotic poetry, Savidis attempts to debunk the static romanticized image we now have of Cavafy as an ascetic, homosexualist poet:

The mental image most of us have of Cavafy is that of an elderly homosexual, composing verse in a candle-lit room. It is a romantic and possibly comforting image, and probably accurate for the last years of his life. But before he was old, Cavafy was young: before homosexual, he was bisexual (1).

I assume that Savidis is suggesting that another lens through which to read the erotic poems other than homosexualism is bisexualism (and the logic might even suggest that he was a practicing heterosexualist before either), as if a sense of anxiety infiltrates his claim, specifically concerning the proliferation and dominance of homosexualist readings of Cavafy.
Savidis avers that to claim to understand the man Cavafy solely through his poems is inadequate, and so debunks any strict Formalist reading. In his own way, Savidis seems to implicitly agree with Eve Sedgwick’s axiom on the varied emphasis people place on sex and sexuality. In her seminal *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick differentiates attitudes toward sex and sexuality, suggesting: “Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little or none” (25). But does this imply that we, the readers, are thinking more about sex and sexuality than Cavafy did himself? Or more specifically, are we spending our energies constructing a homosexualist Cavafy that was less engaged in homosexualism than we attribute? Savidis address this question, unequivocally:

Cavafy’s sexuality evolved over the years, along with his personality and his poetry. Although his erotic poems are almost exclusively homosexual, Cavafy spent most of his adult life trying to avoid the tag of a ‘gay poet.’ He tried to be remembered solely as a poet, with no modifiers, with the possible exception of ‘Greek’—a word which defies simple translation. (2)

No. Cavafy also referred to himself as a historico-poet. But most telling and affirming of Savidis’ claim would be Cavafy’s grave marker, for under Cavafy’s name and above his birth and death dates (the same day, by the way) simply is the word “POET.”
And Savidis’ answer to our possible preoccupation with Cavafy’s sexuality continues to the point of absurdity.\textsuperscript{11} Apprehensive, if not annoyed, over the recent focus of scholarship on Cavafy through the lens of sexuality, he writes:

If we start to try to explain [Cavafy] using personal rather than literary criteria, there are plenty more to choose from than his sexual orientation. Cavafy was a practicing smoker longer than he was a practicing homosexual. How did that influence his poetry? . . . He was an avid tennis player, at least until the age of 45 (are we to read “Waiting for the Barbarians” as the work of a tennis player?\textsuperscript{12} Can we amend our mental image of Cavafy . . . ?) Cavafy was also a public servant; a drinker; an inveterate gambler and . . . a terrific dancer. [S]hortsighted, and short of statue; he was a seventh son. Take your pick and draft your thesis. Or, better still, read his poems again (2).

Savidis’ sentiment is not uncommon. Robert Liddell also dismisses the importance of a heterosexualist lens, as if complaining of its ascendancy at the time (he was writing in 1974), and reluctant to capitulate to its impending dominance. In his book \textit{Cavafy: A Biography}, Liddell speaks with the same waving of the hand as Savidis, even though the former predates the latter by over 30 years:
Cavafy’s homosexuality is of course well known, even too well known, for it can be exaggerated and read into work where it is not present. Nevertheless, it is important to his readers as being not only part of the whole man, but also of his writing self (as it is perhaps not important in the writing self of, e.g., Sophocles and Oscar Wilde) (65).

As we will see, we can identify in Liddell’s statement the separation of various “Cavafies,” the man and the writing self. Liddell continues his equivocations and tries to negotiate Cavafy’s sexuality vis-à-vis his artistic output and its merit, remarking: “If he were for a time bisexual—and there is reason to think so—his heterosexuality never touched his writing self and is therefore of no interest to admirers of his poetry” (66). What those reasons are that make Liddell think so, he never shares, just as he fails to demonstrate how Cavafy’s homosexualism was “too well known” or “exaggerated,” and by whom.

Further, we may turn elsewhere to consider the perceived divisions and binaries of interior and exterior, private and public, man and poet. Cryptic grumblings regarding the growing dominance of homosexualist readings of Cavafy’s poetry are evident in D.N. Maronitis’ essay “Arrogance and Intoxication: The Poet and History in Cavafy.” Here, Maronitis expresses thoughts similar to those of Savidis and Liddell, among others. Maronitis is concerned with Cavafy the historico-poet, but still takes time to make a barbed aside and offer his view of the growing interpretive community of homosexualist readings of Cavafy’s erotic poetry. Maronitis states:
(His private life is nobody’s concern, although recently it has become fashionable for psychologists and scandalmongers to deal with it, too.)

The literary critic’s task lies principally in the crystallized poetic work, which can be seen in two ways: either totally severed from the umbilical cord joining it to the poet, or in its immediate relation to its creator. I do not know which is best (119).

Again, we sense an anxiety over such readings and their growing dominance, especially through a pejorative like “scandalmongers.” Again, there is a certain logic of repetition operating behind all these various remarks and asides.

These various extra-textual texts to which we have appealed are so many more tools employed in attempting to determine meaning or authorial intention. Extra-textual evidence is incorporated and utilized for a more comprehensive assessment and analysis. Knowing that Cavafy was a homosexualist from his other poems and letters, or from the discourse of other critics, would appear to count in our estimations of his intent and the meaning of his erotic poems. The knowledge of one text informs and supplements the knowledge about other texts, despite the grumblings of an interpretive community anxious with the new critical “trends” in interpreting Cavafy’s erotic poems.

Modifying these various responses and theories and making them more productive is the notion of feedback and its mechanism of increasing returns, where
feedback is defined as a process in which a result is reintegrated back into the system for further development. In other words, feedback is defined as a response within a system that influences the continued activity or productivity of that system. In essence, it is the control of a reaction by the end products of those reactions. By introducing the concept of feedback, I hope to engage not only the debates over authorial intention, meaning, and significance, but address again the seemingly irreconcilable attitudes and approaches to these same debates.

While New Critical and Formalist approaches remain text-centric, they, too, are structured with the concept of feedback. Surveying different formal innovations, I consider the role of feedback in various systems. In this light, the argument first turns to foregrounding the New Critical debate over meaning. Then, using insights from E.D. Hirsch and Stanley Fish among others, this thesis argues that much criticism of Cavafy centers around the use of authorial intentionality as propagated by and circulated through interpretive communities, even as these interpretations are themselves informed by the concept of feedback. In doing so, I hope to reconcile the different approaches to interpretation as promoted by Hirsch and Fish, Richards, Jakobson, and others. Rather than only suggesting that Cavafy’s aims were to produce homoerotic poetry, I will also argue that with these literary productions he aspired toward canonization at a time when national literatures were fermenting.

For his contribution to literary theory, among other things, Viktor Shklovsky is famous for the concept of “estrangement,” de-familiarization, or in its original,
"ostraniene." Developed through his distinction of “seeing” and “recognition” in his important work *Theory of Prose*, *ostraniene* is “baring the device” by which our familiarity with an object and the conventions employed in its representation are disrupted. Focusing our attention on the novel device itself, and allowing for new perceptions of common things and experiences achieve this, Shklovsky states: “By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious” (Shklovsky 6). *Ostraniene*, in other words, makes us see things anew, a type of *jamais vu*.

Necessary to the function of *ostraniene* is feedback. Descriptively, when a device becomes recognizable, mundane, and thus transparent and forgettable, *ostraniene* serves to reconfigure our relation to the object through the act of “baring the device,” and so giving us a “vision” of the familiar from a new perspective (10). To do this, one must be aware of the accepted conventions as well as subgenres that will be employed in this estrangement. A loop is in place in which devices become familiar through repeated use, up until the point in which a new device is employed, thus reconfiguring our relation to the object by refocusing our senses through and with a new device.

Focusing on Cavafy’s erotic poetry, we find the concept of *ostraniene* operating within, notably where he complicates the recognition of homoerotic love through poetic ambiguities and devices within the structure of Modern Greek. Aside from the later and posthumous poems, in the original and, to some extent, in translated works, the effect is registered through the poem’s addressee, so that rather than a specifically gendered
addressee, the poem postulates an amorphous and un-gendered reader who immediately identifies with the poem.

This de-familiarization occurs on two levels. First, de-familiarization arises as a device where Cavafy dispenses with conventional Romantic metaphors and devices that are attributed to the themes of love and instead relates the erotic to the everyday and banal. In his erotic poems, settings are often “shabby,” “drab,” “dark,” and “dingy.” In this sense, his poetry is thoroughly modern. Secondly, the estrangement in his poetry is a device that cannot only mask (seemingly) homosexualist content, but may make it accessible to any reader, regardless of sexual orientation. That is, the homosexualist code or even discourse (to the more opaque readers) in this erotic poetry is made transparent, nearly invisible to those who know it and can read it. At the same time, it might not be present at all (except for a handful of poems in which both bodies are defined as male and the context is erotic). We find this time again in his erotic poetry in which ambiguities as well as homosexuality are collapsed together and conveyed through unfamiliar metaphors and descriptions. Cavafy describes homosexualist love in its negative relation to a heteronormative construction of love. He calls it “deviant,” “debauched,” “ill-famed,” a “destructive act,” “a devastating scandal.” Occasionally, he uses more tender terms such as a “sensitive love” or “a special kind of erotic pleasure.” Generally, descriptions (or intimations) of homosexuality are masked and coded with a negative eschatology. Cavafy estranges erotic desire through the linguistic conventions of Modern Greek as well as coded terms. He does so not only out of necessity to police his own literary production and curtail censorship, but also to re-present a vision of eroticism
that abandons Romantic metaphors and devices of love in favor of more modern, albeit sterile ones, and even those are often masked with homosexualist code, while at other times there is no hiding at all. What is different, however, is the ambiguity of personae that hovers over the poem (and allows for multiple readings). Any number of Cavafy’s erotic poems fall under this device of estrangement.

Consider, for instance, the poems, “At the Theatre,” “On the Stairs,” “One Night,” and “The Bandaged Shoulder” respectively. All describe an erotic desire—the first two examples through potentially gay coded language, the third hangs in limbo with ambiguity, and the last uses overt identification of the male other. Consider “At the Theatre”:

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 languid beauty, your languid youthfulness,
your tastefully discriminating dress,
in my imagination I kept picturing you
the way they’d talked about you that afternoon.

This poem may suggest a male object as well as narrator, perhaps a homosexualist other with words like “languid youthfulness” and “discriminating dress.” But are these descriptions necessarily male gendered and by convention in the domain of male attributions? Edmund Keeley says as much in “The ‘New’ Poems of Cavafy,” exploring the narrator’s “own imagination in ‘picturing’ the object of this attention ‘the way they’d
talked about [him] that afternoon” (134). The “ill-famed house” from “On the Stairs” in which the narrator and narratee encounter one another in passing was a house of “pleasure.” Is this necessarily a coded reference to homosexualist love?

Consider the fact that for thirty years, according to Keeley in *Selected Poems*, Cavafy’s small apartment at 10 Lepsius Street was above a brothel, with “some scandalous intrigue taking place in the Alexandrian world immediately below the poet’s second-floor balcony” (94). Others, like Liddell, have also pointed out this fact. But it is curious that none of Cavafy’s poems are read in light of the fact that he lived above a heterosexual brothel. In light of this knowledge, reconsider, for instance, not only the previous poem but also “One Night”:

The room was cheap and sordid,  
hidden above the suspect taverna.  
From the window you could see the alley,  
dirty and narrow. From below  
came the voices of workmen  
playing cards, enjoying themselves.  

And there on that common, humble bed  
I had love’s body, had those intoxicating lips,  
red and sensual,  
red lips of such intoxication  
that now as I write, after so many years,  
in my lonely house, I’m drunk with passion again.

To read this as a homosexualist poem would be to see a code operating. Liddell certainly sees it in his analysis, commenting that “‘One Night’ is no doubt a reference to the shameful house in the Attarine quarter where, over ‘a disreputable tavern,’ and within the sound of those playing cards below, he “had the body of Love,” going on to conjoin this
reading with a line from another poem, “Orophernes” (another historico-erotic poem), and then collapsing several lines into those giving themselves “up to Greek pleasures” (160). Is this a legitimate and ethical reading, or is it over-determining the gendered object and content of “One Night”? Perhaps the signs are there: ambiguity of person (a closeted epistemology?), only an “I” remembering and reminiscing, the absence of the other’s gender. But if praise is given to Cavafy’s imaginative prowess in his historical poems, why cannot the same be applied to the more intimate erotic ones? And was Cavafy merely concealing a male object and, in turn, homosexualism, or is the real object of the poem the “I’s” apprehending and retaining a memory, the only thing that remains from the encounter? We should pause to note the modern tone of this poem, with its bleak, dingy, and concrete descriptions of exteriority in the first stanza, contrasted to the soft, “intoxicating” (repeated two times) interiority that is memory in the second stanza. Moreover, the ambiguity of the other’s sex serves to upset conventions of love poems. Do we not bring certain expectations to the second stanza, projecting the kind of body that possesses those “red lips of such intoxication”? This knowledge is withheld and left to us to fill in. Again, the significance of the poem may lie not in the affirming of either homosexualist or heterosexualist love or pleasure, but rather in the reverie of a memory of the encounter and its marked ambiguities.

On the other hand, the object in the poem “The Bandaged Shoulder” is certainly a male other; his bloodied bandage “kept there a long while—the blood of love against my lips.” But now the question swings to the narrator. Are we to assume the “I” is a male? Why? Does the extra-textual evidence demand it? Are we then not collapsing “Cavafy
the man” or “Cavafy the poet” with the “I” speaking in the poem? Is this to commit an “intentional fallacy”?\(^\text{14}\) Could such an ethical reading actually over-determine the narrator’s sexuality, and in turn, Cavafy’s? The “Bandaged Shoulder” is regularly cited as an example of homosexualist relations. Because it is so often quoted and anthologized, we should read the poem in its entirety:

He said he’d hurt himself on a wall, or had fallen, but no doubt there was some other reason for the wound, for the bandaged shoulder.

He was reaching up to the shelf for a photograph he wanted to look at more closely when the bandage came undone. A little blood ran.

I did it up for him again, taking far too much time over the binding; he wasn’t in pain, and – to be honest – I liked looking at the blood. That blood. It was all part of my love.

When he left, I found a strip torn from the bandage under his chair, a rag I should have thrown straight in the trash – but I picked up and raised it to my lips, and kept there a long while: his blood on my lips, O my love, my love’s blood.

With other poems, through third person narration, explicitly announcing that the two lovers are indeed male (“Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old”), it is no wonder interpretive communities affirm a reading of “The Bandaged Shoulder” as homosexualist, and thus, ethical. Looking closely at some selected lines in “Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old,” he writes:
he’d also begun to have disturbing thoughts about the immoral life he was living. Their good looks, their exquisite youthfulness, the sensitive love they shared; they went to a familiar and very special house of debauchery.

Here, no code is apparent, or it is flimsy, with signals like “house of debauchery.” Is it in this poem and only a few others where both lovers are identified as male, which then determines the lens or interpretation through which all of Cavafy’s erotic poems are read? Yes, some poems are clearly homosexualist, but are they all? Cavafy’s estrangement of the object of these erotic poems makes this not entirely clear.

At this point, our discussion of estrangement might be complimented by considering Cavafy himself—the man, the poet, the Greek, the Alexandrian, the homosexualist, and so on—and how these different “Cavafies” are read (or excluded) from interpretation. What are the implications of including the extra-textual evidence into our interpretations of Cavafy’s poems (as Kristeva, Even-Zohar, and others suggest)? And if we subscribe to the idea that a person, who and what one is, is the intersection of many axes (sexuality being just one of them), then should we not consider aspects of his life other than his sexuality? If removing Cavafy’s sexuality as the main lens or focus (or axis, to continue the metaphor) for reading his erotic poems seems heavy-handed, then we should ask if the structures for discourse are currently dominated or over-determined by the lens of sexuality and identity politics. If it is argued that sex/sexuality is the most important “axis” to our personality, then does that not say more about the what is permissible within discourse? In Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, she
considers different attitudes and ways we may think about sexuality. As an axiom for her analyses, she states: “Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others” (25). This may not necessarily be a groundbreaking statement, but it is necessary aspect of her argument that she states this “common-sense” knowledge in her development of axioms. So with the myriad of readings incorporating extra-textual evidence—why are we assuming that homosexualism meant as much to Cavafy as we attribute to his work?

Returning to Cavafy or the multiple Cavafies, we can pose a further question: Why is it assumed that the “I” in his erotic poetry is Cavafy himself? This question might appear superficial, naïve, or perhaps even unethical in light of all the translations, interpretations, analyses, and discourses that interpret and construct Cavafy’s erotic poetry as homosexualist. Yet, nearly all criticism on Cavafy stresses the theme of imagination vis-à-vis unrequited love, unfulfilled desires, aesthetic apprehension of the past, and so on. And imagination is obviously and most certainly necessary when his subjects have been dead for thousands of years, their civilizations nearly forgotten. The interpretations, translations, and other discourse on Cavafy’s erotic poetry seem to take as an axiom that he is writing from personal experience. Yet this same focus is never applied to his historical or philosophical poems. Why?

A brief consideration of authorship might elucidate these questions further. In his essay, “What Is an Author?,” Michel Foucault attempts to answer some detractors and their criticisms of his book The Order of Things, considering “the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently point to
this figure who is outside and precedes it” (115). This is apt, especially with regard to Even-Zohar’s system and the use of spatial binaries (inside/outside, interior/exterior, and so on). But if we are to consider other aspects of Cavafy’s life, might the Cavafy we know now diminish in significance? Foucault continues: “Thus, the essential basis of . . . writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (116). On the one hand, that is exactly what happens in Cavafy’s erotic poetry: he disappears, whether partially (through coding for instance) or totally (an erotic poem with no “I,” instead writing in third person). On the other hand, the opposite happens, when interpretive communities reconnect the writing self and the man and reinsert Cavafy back into his erotic poems, thus making him totally visible. The ethical readings that blanket all of Cavafy’s erotic poems as homosexualist create one long function of conjunctions and equivalences. There is movement from the poems (the interior) connecting ultimately to the man Cavafy (the exterior). For example, the “I” uttered within the erotic poems is added to or the same as “the hand writing the poem (Cavafy’s),” which is then added to or the same as “Cavafy, the poet, is writing the poem,” which is then added to or the same as “the man Cavafy,” and so on. Many steps are required to collapse the interiority of the poem into the exteriority of the maker (ποιοτής) of the poem. But such conflations are problematic. They arrive at a lens that predetermines the reading of the erotic poems as homoerotic and claims them ethical, finally returning to Cavafy himself and ascribing on Cavafy’s body the label
“homosexual.” Foucault offers some insight into this “logic” and deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

When discourse is linked to an author, however, the role of [personal pronouns, conjugation of verbs] is more complex and variable. It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a “second self” whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the “author-function” arises out of their scission—in division and distance of the two. One might object that this phenomenon only applies to novels or poetry […] but all discourse that supports this “author-function” is characterized by a plurality of egos (129-130).

By these insights, what happens when “Cavafy the poet” is conflated or collapsed into “Cavafy the man”?

Refusing to settle on the notion of ostraniene to help explain the change in genres and literary forms, Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynianov propose a different temporal and historical relation to texts in order to describe this change. In their seminal essay
“Problems in the Study of Literature and Language” (1927), Jakobson and Tynyanov signal a move towards questions of diachrony. The essay draws from Jakobson’s earlier work, which addressed the binary opposition of synchrony and diachrony as postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure. To briefly summarize, Saussure took up a position concerned with a synchronic approach, and an approach in which we can see the device of feedback implicitly operating. The arbitrariness of the signifier and signified was inconsequential in itself, he argued, as the meaning (or relation) of the sign was established by its difference to other signs, not to any mimetic theory of correspondence to an actual object. These usages and devices accrued over time, especially through repetition. Subsequently, Jakobson and Tynyanov became interested instead in a diachronous approach to signs, enabling them to historicize or contextualize this arbitrariness. It is feedback that thus regulates and describes the dynamics of interaction among these relative autonomous social activities and accounts of change in literary genres.

T.S. Eliot also accounts for change in the canon in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. He states that the meaning of a literary text changes over the course of time, locating it not in the changing perspectives of readers, as Welleck and Warren suggest in their *Theory of Literature*, but instead in a changing literary tradition. But what Eliot as well as Welleck and Warren all fail to do is consider the notion of feedback and how it operates in modifying the changing literary tradition with those changing perspectives of readers. If we understand Eliot correctly, the introduction of every new text into the system of literature suggests that all other texts rearrange themselves accordingly (or better, are rearranged). When situated in light of Cavafy’s work, Gregory Jusdanis states...
in *The Poetics of Cavafy* how “his poems are conspicuously permeated by tissues of other real and fictitious text” (xxii). Jusdanis continues: “Cavafy’s poetry illustrates its ‘writerly’ aspect by absorbing with itself other texts so as to remind the reader that it is inescapably infiltrated by written documents” (120). His reading of Cavafy’s “If Actually Dead” demonstrates how “this poem succeeds in ‘reading’ a number of texts simultaneously and in grafting one on the other” (126), an argument that closely approximates Kristeva’s theorizing of intertextuality.

The conversation amongst and between texts seems to account for the formation of a literary canon and how new works affect and are, in turn, affected by the constellation of other texts. To reiterate, Cavafy’s position in the Greek literary canon cannot be underestimated. Seferis considered Cavafy, along with Solomos (author of patriotic poems as well as the nation anthem) “the antipodes that form the limits of the immense horizon in the literary landscape of our small country” (143). Cavafy’s position in the Modern Greek canon is mostly due to this intertextuality and the careful, methodical plotting of his poems’ publication.

Since we are discussing various types of constructions (poetic, canonical, corporeal, sexual, and so on), it would now help us understand how Cavafy produced and circulated his poems and then draw possible connections to his legacy. As Robert Liddell documents, Cavafy published less than fifty poems in his lifetime; some were published in periodicals, broadsheets, or two personal chapbooks and pamphlets. Cavafy never published a book during his lifetime. Liddell’s biography lays out Cavafy’s production methods. Cavafy occasionally:
Published in periodicals – in Leipzig, Alexandria, and Athens. Six poems [were] issued on broadsheets […] between 1891 and 1904. Two pamphlets printed for private distribution: that of 1904 contains fourteen poems, and that of 1910 increases the number to twenty-one (132).

Often, there was overlap in that one poem found its way to the public through all three paths (132-135). That so few of his poems should have had such an influence, finding their “own place in the Greek Anthology” (and the rest of the world) speaks not only of the force of Cavafy’s poetry but also to the interaction and dynamic relation amongst texts (Seferis 127). Cavafy wrote his first poem at age 19. Another 22 years would pass before the 41 year old Cavafy “published” his first poem. But Cavafy was cautious with his production and publication. It is said he produced around seventy poems a year, but only three or four survived his scrutiny. This was extremely calculated. Liddell cites a note from, dated 1906, where Cavafy comments on his own work, production, and circulation of poems:

By postponing and re-postponing to publish, what a gain I have had!
Think of […] trash written of Byzantine poems and many others which would disgrace me now. What a gain! And all those poems written between 19 and 22. What wretched trash! (134).
A telling sign of Cavafy’s preoccupation with the emerging Greek literary canon and his place in it can be found on a page paper-clipped to his unpublished poems (Fig.1). Inscribed by Cavafy himself, it shows evidence of his aim to control the content of his corpus that he wished or intended for circulation, especially after his own death. The directions are in Modern Greek and read “NOT FOR PUBLICATION BUT MAY REMAIN HERE.” That Cavafy should have been so cautious and concerned as to what was published proves that his considerations on the emerging Greek literary canon were on the forefront of his thought.

Figure 1  Publication Instructions in Greek

Yet, he was not unaware of his English readers either, whether they were a present or future audience, and so he chose to re-write these directions in English as well.
That Cavafy should have taken so much care about which of his poems would be circulated says several things. First, many of the unpublished poems, the so-called “Hidden,” were finally published in the 1968. Up to then, they were tightly withheld and controlled by the curators of his archive, specifically George Savidis. He seemed to follow the pattern first set by Cavafy’s friend and heir, Aleko Singopoulos, and withheld access to Cavafy’s poetry. Singopoulos published the first book edition of Cavafy’s poems in 1935, two years after the poet’s death. These 153 poems (or 154, depending on sources) form the so-called “Canon.” But after that, nothing appeared for over three decades. Edmund Keeley’s essay “The ‘New’ Poems of Cavafy,” assesses the 1968 release of the 75 “Hidden” poems. In it, Keeley describes a plan by Cavafy that suggests the latter’s keen interest in preserving his own legacy after his death. Keeley writes how Singopoulos withheld the “Hidden” poems from publication “because he apparently felt that he ought to honor the poet’s tacit wish to keep the unpublished poems out of print at
least until they could in no way diminish the image of the poet that his heir hoped to promulgate in the years following his death” (131). And Keeley also documents the tight control over the archives that editor Savidis adopted from Singopoulos when he purchased the archives. Keeley describes the limited access:

Singopoulos, constantly protective of the poet’s image, did not give anyone access to the papers in his possession until after the Second World War, and even then the access he allowed was strictly controlled, so that no more than 12 previously unpublished poems came to light between 1948 and 1963 (131).

Cavafy’s careful and deliberate production and circulation of his poems (which subsequent curators of the archives have repeated) suggest a person quite conscious of his place (or future place) in letters and anthologies. We know that of the annual crop of 70 or so poems, only three or four survived.

Following Eliot’s theorizing, Seferis, it should be noted, seems to echo Eliot’s notion of seeing the meaning of an individual work’s dynamic as contingent upon its relation to other literary works. “For every work of art that comes to be added to the series affirms and at the same time modifies the meaning of the older masterpieces,” Seferis writes (81). This is a description of the concept of feedback and tends to suggest that a text does, indeed, have a “life.” It is this argument that we will now trace through several influential critics.
In *Objective interpretation*, E.D. Hirsch develops the difference between a text’s meaning and its significance. He asserts that the notion of authorial intention is central to a text’s meaning, which, in turn, is static and reproducible. In recalling Husserl’s phenomenological perspective, Hirsch states that the object of perception remains the same—though there may be spatial or temporal differences in its apprehension, to equate an object with meaning misses a step. Better would be to suggest that although we view a text through different lenses (i.e., gender, power, sexuality, difference, and so on), the text always remains the same, in this case, the poem. Hirsch continues by stating that a text’s meaning is reproducible and that it stays the same, and it is *significance* that changes over time. I would like to suggest that this change in significance is what Jakobson called “the Dominant,” and that at different times in literary history, different Dominants direct the reading of the text and its organization with other texts. In other words, this principle is organized through the concept of feedback. The reading of Cavafy’s erotic poems as autobiographical and gay now becomes the Dominant.

According to Hirsch, a literary text’s meaning derives from the “speaking subject” or the authorial consciousness, whose intentions shape the text rather than the readers. In an objective interpretation, the reader must set aside any subjectivity in attitudes, values, or predispositions and assume the author’s stance. To do this calls for a reader who will make explicit reference to the speaker’s subjectivity. Only from this perspective can the reader determine the probable, rather than the possible, meaning of a text. From this we can see the appropriateness of allowing for extra-textual markers and the relevance of
Hirsch’s claims for criticism of Cavafy’s poems, notably in terms of how we may assemble gendered subjectivities.

Hirsch states that “criticism […] builds on the results of interpretation; it confronts textual meaning not as such, but as a component within a larger context.” This larger context is its significance, while interpretation derives from meaning. For Hirsch, meaning is stable and only its significance changes (as theorized by Eliot and Seferis). The implications follow that, whether the homosexualist code in Cavafy’s poetry is recognized by the reader or not, the meaning of the poems stays the same. This move helps show just how wide and disparate audiences claim Cavafy. And the interaction between meaning and the significance it bears is accounted for by feedback. Feedback helps explain why Cavafy is claimed either as a national poet, or a gay poet, or a proto-modernist poet, etc. That is, his significance as a national or gay poetry (or whatever other perspective by which a group finds such significance). To conceptualize, an equation might look something like this:

\[
\text{Stable meaning + perspective = significance}
\]

The feedback loop of significance is put back into the equation, reinforcing, through repetition, particular readings or significances. Significance and meaning, in other words, are bound in a recursive loop. (And the converse would also be true—the less a particular reading appears, that particular reading or significance abates and makes room for other readings.) But to find or determine a meaning, anything that will assist the reader is permissible. Hirsch approves of ancillary material in the exposition of meaning. As he states: “The interpreter need all the clues he can muster” (240).
It is doubtful that a formal reading of Cavafy’s poetry would reveal the apparently “gay” code operating throughout his poetry. Stripped of ancillary material such as title, date, or even identifying the author, the direct and casual speech of Cavafy’s erotic poems suggest or signal little if anything of homosexualist love. Indeed, a Dominant (Jakobson) heteronormative reading will probably come to the forefront by fiat. As documented in Practical Criticism, I.A. Richards’ own experiments in “estranging” have shown that when readers are confronted with only the text of a poem, they often diverge greatly on interpreting its so-called meaning. The text, then, becomes a sort of Rorschach test or mirror, saying more about the reader than the text itself. I invoke Richards here if only to suggest that the “gay” codes that operate within Cavafy’s poetry are more difficult to register without ancillary markers that would steer the reader towards grounding the poem in front of them as “gay.” Moreover, it is the function of titles, authorship, and dates, and so on to become a catalyst on a micro level of the operation of feedback. The expectation and assumptions a reader brings to a text are derived from these extra-textual markers, which then, in turn, reorganize and direct the reading of the text. Any reading void of these ancillary markers interrupts the function of feedback, reproducing (in the case of Cavafy) a heteronormative assumption. Despite his unique voice, not knowing that Cavafy authored a particular poem would affect our interpretation, especially since he often employed the direct “I/you” form of address, or allowed the narrator’s and addressee’s gender to remain ambiguous.
In developing his notion of affective stylistics, Stanley Fish responds to the New Critical notion of the affective fallacy, a term taken from Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay of the same name. Succinctly, meaning is where the reader finds it in relation to their language and interpretive community, not from the text. In Fish’s view, all authorial intention or meaning is affected by the conventions the reader brings to the text. Meaning, therefore, is a social construct and built by consensus.

In his critique of Hirsch’s notion of the stability of meaning, Fish insists on the contextualization of interpretation, a sort of Heisenberg Principle in action, remarking: “It follows, then, that when one interpretation wins out over another, it is not because the first has been shown to be in accordance with the facts but because it is from that perspective of its assumption that the facts are now being specified” (340). Meaning is where you find it, and you find it, according to Fish, from the onset of your search. The question or lens of an interpretive community presupposes its findings.

But Fish seems to miss the mark with his reasoning. He does not acknowledge the validity of Hirsch’s argument, namely the distinction between a stable meaning and that of significance. Instead, he insists on collapsing the two. While his notion of interpretive communities coincides with Hirsch’s set limits or horizons, there is little other correspondence. Except for the concept of feedback. And it is through the notion of feedback that we may explain not only the ossifying effects of repeated and reinforced interpretations, but also how readers from different interpretive communities might be able end up with similar meanings. A feedback loop requires that there exists a set
algorithm in place, which the mechanism of feedback operates with (in the case of increasing returns) or against (in the case of diminishing returns).

Since Cavafy wrote in Modern Greek, it follows that a discussion of the language and the difficulties in its translation should ensue. Cavafy was familiar with and wrote in demotic Modern Greek, but occasionally he also mixed in the more purist form, καθαρεύοσζα, as well as classical Greek, too. In light of this use of language, and with attention to the play of estrangements and ambiguities, we turn to some closer reading of Cavafy’s poems.

Modern Greek, as with all other European languages, has three personal pronouns in the singular case, that is, I, you, and s/he/it. These are organized in that specific order (as opposed to the nomenclature of Indian languages which reverses this ordering of pronouns). Differentiated from the English tongue (and common to most European language), these personal pronouns in Modern Greek are distinguished by the conjugation of the verbs. Thus, the pronouns serve as an auxiliary to the distinction (Benveniste).

More interestingly, in Modern Greek, a communicative sentence can signal the person solely by the verb’s conjugation, without recourse or use or need of the specific pronoun, as the person is identified and folded or collapsed into the verb itself. This is the case with Modern Greek, in which the pronoun need not be present at all, allowing for an ambiguity.

In Cavafy’s Alexandria, author Edmund Keeley picks up on this characteristic of the language. He states:
Ambiguity of gender is easily sustained in Greek because personal pronouns before a verb are not mandatory and are often omitted as a matter of course. Also, Cavafy sometimes has his persona address his subject in the second person, again permitting an ambiguity (this is his “unpublished” erotic poems as well) (178).

Keeley goes on to note the attempts of an early Cavafian critic, T. Malanos, to read Cavafy’s erotic poems through the lens of ambiguity. Without access to many documents (which Savidis did), Malanos’ readings, Keeley tells us, were in the end, “rather inaccurate.” Yet, Keeley admits:

Malanos shows that Cavafy retained an ambiguity in gender throughout this first-person erotic poems, and though the homosexual content of the poetry in the third person becomes unmistakable with the poet's growing candor, it is usually by analogy to these poems rather than by direct identification of the love involved that the reader of the Greek text comes to see the first-person/second-person poems as part of the same world inhabited by the male homosexual protagonists portrayed through narrative or description in the third person.
This reasoning by Malanos may be a sign of heterosexualist anxiety. It attempts to re-appropriate the homosexualist space the erotic poems have created by inventing a cumbersome reader-response theory. Regardless, the role of personae in reading Cavafy is an important one, especially when one considers the complications of translation.

Emile Benveniste addresses this discussion of personal pronouns and develops a theory that the concept of person is completely missing in the third person s/he/it. This argument lends itself to the usage of the third person singular in Modern Greek. By conjugating the verb, the person’s gender remains indeterminate and suspended. The fact that Cavafy uses the I/you class of personal pronouns in nearly all of this erotic poetry, or else employs the device of conjugating verbs without revealing the gender, is important here: it establishes an intimacy between the narrator and the reader, and it sidesteps the need to determine the gender of the object in the poem. This device helps suspend the notion of person in the objects and creates an ambiguity that can be read across multiple valences and by a number of interpretive communities.

The poem “Gray,” written and published in 1917, both resonates with the particularities of the Greek language as well as highlights the difficulties encountered in translation. At the sentence level, the necessity of convention and form in the English language requires a gendered pronoun to serve as an object in this poem. Translated, the middle two stanzas reveal that the owner of these “two lovely gray eyes” is a man, the speaker’s lover. But in the original, no such inference can be made, as there are neither any revealing textual markers of the object or the narrators/author’s voice. The translators made this decision, and they pooled their assumptions from an already established
interpretive community on how to ethically read Cavafy. Below is a comparison of a translation by Keeley and Sherrard and the original, with emphasis added in each. In the first example, the pronoun is stressed; in the second, it is the conjugated verb (and the absence of a pronoun).

We were lovers for a month.  
Then he went away to work, I think Smyrna,  
And we never met again.

Those gray eyes will have lost their charm—if he’s still alive;  
That lovely face will have spoiled.

Για έναν μήνα αγαπηθήκαμε.  
Επειδή έφυγε, θαρρώ ζηην Σμύρνη,  
Για να εργασθεί εκεί, και πια δεν ιδωθήκαμε.

Θ’ασχήμισαν—αν ζει—τα γκρίζα μάτια  
θα χάλασε τ’ ωραίο πρόσωπο

The conventions of English demand a gendered pronoun to serve as the object. No such need is required in Modern Greek.

However, whether we are considering Cavafy’s erotic poems in the original or in translation, what should be considered more than just the body or sex of the addressee or object of the poems (whether explicitly or implicitly stated) is the notion of pleasure. Given that there often remains so much ambiguity in the personae and the pronouns in Cavafy’s erotic poems, and given that this allows for both homo- and hetero- readings, we might benefit from developing our understanding of pleasure and how it operates within Cavafy’s poems. It seems that critics arguing over the merits of whether or not a
particular poem is layered with homosexualist code or not and therefore determining whether any reading is or is not ethical seems to miss the point. Scholarship on Cavafy points to the device of memory and reverie operating within his poems. But little is said, if at all, on the idea of pleasure.

Roland Barthes addresses this very aspect of pleasure, though not within Cavafy’s poems, but in texts *per se*. For Barthes, what matters in writing is producing meaning on a sensual level. In the case of Cavafy, we may add to this an aesthetic level as well. In his essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes argues that the role of language is not necessarily for communication, but rather for pleasure, specifically physical pleasure. But to be clear, his thinking does not follow the line of Cavafian scholarship that concentrates on memory and reverie. He states that, “The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures” (224). To distinguish the types of pleasure found in texts, Barthes arrives at the ideas of “figuration” and “representation.” For Barthes and for this thesis’ expanding our understanding of Cavafy’s poems as well, what is more important is figuration. He defines figuration as:

The way in which the erotic body appears (to whatever degree and in whatever form that may be) in the profile of the text. For example: the author may appear in this text but not in the guise of direct biography (which would exceed the body, give a meaning to life, forge a destiny). (225).
Barthes’ hedonistic approach to literature offers us some room to reconsider just what is at stake when critics or translators fixate on the object of the poems rather than the effect the poems themselves.

In contrast to figuration, Barthes considers representation and ultimately finds it unproductive and dull. Representation, according to him, is derivative and a feeble type of figuration, calling it “embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meaning than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.)” (225). Desire, when and if it may be imitated by representation, remains flat:

Such desire never leaves the frame, the picture; it circulates among the characters; if it has a recipient, that recipient remains interior to the fiction (consequently, we can say that any semiotics that keeps desire within the configuration of those upon whom it acts…is a semiotics of representation. That is what representation is: when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen) (225).

The focus (in scholarship, publishing niches, etc.) on what types of bodies occupy Cavafy’s erotic poems seem to fall on the side of representation, ultimately stunting the poems’ use of ambiguity and capacity to produce meaning on a sensual, pleasurable level for the reader so that it may “leap out of the book.”
Four major editions of Cavafy’s poems are presently in circulation. They are Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard’s translation, edited by George Savidis; Rae Dalven’s translation, introduction by W.H. Auden; Theoharis Constantine Theoharis’ translation, introduction by Gore Vidal, and Aliki Barnstone’s translation, foreword by Gerald Stern. In fact, many more translations also exist in English. It might be interesting to note that in considering the formal construction of Cavafy as gay, Dalven’s and Theoharis’ translations both have introductions by prominent writers who themselves are openly gay. And to consider that Cavafy is to be found in well over a dozen gay anthologies further serves to establish and cement his role as a homosexualist writer.

Currently, more than seventy of his poems appear in over a dozen different anthologies of gay poetry. Of the vast amount of criticism on Cavafy, few (to my knowledge) engage in formal considerations other than scansion, and none consider how his poetry is constructed and construed as, indeed, “gay.”

Cavafy rarely published his works during his lifetime, choosing instead to circulate his poems amongst a small number of “revolving” acolytes who fell in or out of favor with him in various Alexandrian salons. These multiple editions were made and bound by himself, often collecting amended poems. Moreover, feedback can be seen operating within the production of Cavafy’s work. As the word poet literally means, “one who makes,” Cavafy was always re-making himself through his poetry. With the meeting of these small groups, Cavafy received comments and suggestions, and would, in turn, adjust his small but growing body of work with each new chapbook. Some poems fell out
of circulation entirely depending on the reaction he received from the salons. This is the very idea of feedback operating within the production and distribution of his texts.

Above all, the recent advent of queer theory and the appropriation as well as reading of Cavafy’s erotic poetry as homosexualist, including the subsequent placing of his corpus within gay anthologies, is another formal construction and reinforcement of reading Cavafy’s work, and thus his body, as gay. As more and more gay poetry anthologies will be produced, one can safely assume that through the repetitive loop of feedback, Cavafy’s corpus of erotic poetry will continue to be read as gay.
Conclusion

In Hirsch’s model, feedback is the mechanism by which significance is altered. In Fish’s model, feedback is the mechanism by which meaning is constructed, and thus, changing. Cavafy’s corpus falls into both national as well as gay literatures. This establishes that there is a relation of texts in terms of significance. Superficially, there are competing interpretations of meaning, but through Hirsch, we can still suggest an authorial intention in the production of texts and the concern of legacy as the aim. That is, a stable meaning, accessible to all reading groups, is still available and thus salvageable. Instead of concluding that a poem is a homosexualist one or it is not, what if we were to consider that it is both simultaneously? Would that be unethical or illegitimate?

Through Evan-Zohar’s theorizing of literature as system, the interpretive community can be seen at work here, employing a number of extra-textual references in determining the object’s gender. If all writing (in this case biographical) is open to its context, then we can infer that the subject is indeed a male. This community, through the authority of translations by Dalven, Theoharis, Keeley and Sherrard, Savidis, Tsirkas, Friar, extending to more recent translations by Barnstone, Boegehold, Haviaras, Mendelsohn, Sachperoglou and Sharon, and combined with ancillary texts by
homosexualists like Vidal, Auden, Forster, Merrill, and so on, together establish and reinforce the notion that Cavafy is indeed speaking of gay love. And this frames the horizon (to use Hirsch’s terminology) and limits the reading communities’ ability to read anything but a male, in the conflation of author and narrator.

Through E.D. Hirsch’s *Objective Interpretation*, our ambition here is not to reignite debates over authorial intention, meaning, and significance, but rather to modify it through the concept of feedback. My small selection of available poems in no way suggests that they are entirely representative of Cavafy’s erotic corpus either, as surely other poems can be considered that would seemingly contradict my claims. But this should not wholly deflate or upset my argument. Rather, allowing for minor adjustments, we can also integrate these poems as well.

We have seen the mechanism of feedback operating throughout several disparate as well as similar Formal methods and approaches to interpretation. Most interesting and possibly profitable would be to reconsider them in the light of feedback and show the family resemblance among them. But by allowing for the fact of different competencies of apprehension and interpretation, how can different groups with different aims all read such different meanings in the same poem by Cavafy? Does a stable fixed meaning allow for these differences, and are these differences accounted for as significances? We have seen the formal devices by which Cavafy estranges the concepts of sensuality and love in order to create an ambiguity that makes room for the various perspectives and feedback loops of each interpretive community. But by definition, feedback must occur with or through an algorithm of some sort. And a stable algorithm we may call meaning.
Both Hirsch and Fish’s models use feedback. In Fish’s interpretive communities, the group determines the meaning of words, phrases, and codes. This group takes that constellation of meanings, expectations, and conventions and uses them as a lens with which to read and thus derive meaning from a text. From this reading, an output or meaning is derived, wholly determined from the onset of the reading. With output, the assumptions are re-affirmed and subsequent readings will repeat this trajectory of interpretation. Thus, this feedback loop re-intensifies the collected assumptions of the group through repetition. Readings of significance, then, are ossifications. These repetitions have the characteristic of an increasing return. Obviously, each group’s assumptions will determine the so-called meaning, thus making it unstable and contingent upon the valuation of each particular interpretive community. But for such different groups to arrive at similar reading (this is a sensual poem, this is an historical poem, and so on, as designated by Cavafy himself) some sort of stable algorithm must be in place from the beginning. It is with recourse to E.D. Hirsch’s notion of objective interpretation that a stable meaning can be deduced and the change in significance can be accounted for by the concept of feedback.

Many groups claim Cavafy, and the two mentioned here are the national and gay canons. At the time Cavafy wrote, national literatures were being produced in most western nations. The young nation of Greece was still struggling with nationhood. Cavafy saw it all from the margins, at the edge of the Mediterranean in Alexandria. A poet who surveyed the millennia of Hellenic continuity, perhaps his method of production and publication was his implicit understanding to bide his time, even posthumously, when his
work—and perhaps he himself—would be accepted. We close by returning one last time to his poem, “Hidden Things”:

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

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1 Dalven, Jusdanis, Keeley, Sherrard, et al., use both terms, but more often use the word erotic.

3 It is fitting, then, that the Cavafy Archives should now be in the possession of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, purchased in late 2012.
4 Since Cavafy has been translated in over 70 languages, it would be interesting to survey critiques from other countries and see how other cultures respond to and negotiate with the homosexualist content of Cavafy’s erotic poetry.
In his *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, Rae Dalven quotes G. Lechonitis, who interviewed Cavafy late in the poet’s life. Cavafy once remarked:

> Many poets are exclusively poets...I, I am a poet-historian. I, I could never write a novel or a play, but I feel in me a hundred and twenty-five voices that tell me that I could write history. But now there is no more time (217).

Namely, the excellent work done within Queer Theory, especially through Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler is now established in academia. However, I find it problematic that the word “queer” might elide the very differences between being and becoming as elucidated above.

In this thesis, you will still find use of the words gay and queer, but mostly in reference to anthologies, genres, or when quoting others, especially within established theoretical works.

For sake of brevity, this thesis does not explore the so-called “Repudiated Poems” which would only complicate and lengthen this enterprise considerably. This collection is filled with many examples of overt or easily identifiable direct or indirect objects, the addressees, which are clearly female. Love poems for females within Cavafy’s oeuvre are rarely discussed, and will be explored in a forthcoming essay.

And yet even such a system still relies on the assumption that the “I” outside the poem is connected through Cavafy, to the “I” inside the poem. In other words, there is a collapsing of all these “Cavafies” into one.

Cavafy bequeathed his archives to his long-time friend and heir, Aleko Singopoulos, whose widow then sold it to G. Savidis.

As Savidis later claims in another essay, “Some Notes on the Cavafy Forum” (2006), there are multiple and oft-repeated but activities of Cavafy’s life that could just as easily become lenses through which to read his poetry. These activities have been absent or ignored from Cavafian scholarship. For instance, Cavafy was an avid tennis player, and through the logic of repetition, he argues that one could stress tennis as a lens. The essay is uncomfortably defensive. The umbrage that his initial essay caused, “Cavafy Through the Looking Glass,” is evident by the flurry of responses to it and his subsequent more measured rejoinder.


The term feedback comes from the theoretical sciences and is used in many disciplines, hard and soft sciences, alike. Its use took prevalence at the time Cavafy
was writing, especially in mathematics and engineering. I use this term in its most general sense, as a process in which past results affect future results in a recursive loop.

14 See Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, T.S. Eliot, etc.
Bibliography


