A Passage from Brooklyn to Ithaca: The Sea, the City and the Body in the Poetics of Walt Whitman and C. P. Cavafy

Michael P. Skafidas
Graduate Center, City University of New York

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A PASSAGE FROM BROOKLYN TO ITHACA:
THE SEA, THE CITY AND THE BODY IN THE POETICS
OF WALT WHITMAN AND C. P. CAVAFY

By

M ICHELAS SKAFIDAS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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MICHAEL SKAFIDAS

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Wayne Koestenbaum
Date
Chair of Examining Committee

Giancarlo Lombardi
Date
Executive Officer

André Aciman

David Reynolds

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

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By

MICHAEL SKAFIDAS

Advisor: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

This treatise is the first extensive comparative study of Walt Whitman and C. P. Cavafy. Despite the abundant scholarship dealing with the work and life of each, until now no critic has put the two poets together. Whitman’s poetry celebrates birth, youth, the self and the world as seen for the first time, while Cavafy’s diverts from the active present to resurrect a world whose key, in Eliot’s terms, is memory. Yet, I see the two poets conversing in the crossroads of the fin de siècle; the American Whitman and the Greek Cavafy embody the antithesis of hope and dislocation to such a degree that a comparative examination of their poetics reveals two minds, and two narratives, closer than their continents. The textual approach of my subject includes the examination of poetry, prose writings, and autobiographical documentation, as well as biographical testimony. The thematic approach is organized around three key subjects that I see as integral and consistent in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy: the sea, the city and the body.
I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my dissertation advisor Professor Wayne Koestenbaum for his unparalleled wisdom, support and effective supervision of my study. His valuable guidance (not to mention his remarkable promptness) made the timely completion of this project possible. I further wish to thank my two readers, Professor André Aciman and Professor David Reynolds, both great authorities on Cavafy and Whitman respectively. It was an honor having them as members of my Supervisory Committee. Special thanks to Professor Stefanos Rozanis from Athens, Greece, for sharing with me his profound knowledge of Cavafy and his era. Moreover, I wish to acknowledge the generosity of artist Lucas Samaras who provided me with insights for the third chapter, as well as with images of his work that appear his courtesy in the Image Gallery. Last but not least, I would like to thank my early mentor Professor Eugenia Paulicelli who inspired me to persevere and complete my graduate study. Naturally, I dedicate this work to the memory of my parents, Vasiliki and Panagiotis Skafidas. Without their love and encouragement none of this would have been possible.
# Table of Contents

Introduction.......................................................................................................................................................... 1  
A Passage from Brooklyn to Ithaca 1  
Harmonic Oppositions 3  
Authoring Identity, Rethinking Masculinity 5  
The Poet as a Cosmopolitan Loner 9  
New World, Old World and the Legacy of the Enlightenment 15  
Dissolving Barriers: Language, Meter and Innovation 19  
The Negations of Modernity 37  
Celebrating the Self, Visualizing the Body: Urban Narcissism and the Aesthetics of Solipsism 41  

## Chapter 1  
The Sea .............................................................................................................................................................. 45  
The Throne of the Invisible and the Coming of the Central Man 45  
A Nursery of the Craft 53  
Traversing the Ulyssean Sea 56  
The Meaning of Ithacas 62  
Whitman on the Beach: Discovering the Invisible Influence 77  
Cavafy on the Waterfront: Looking at the Mirror of the Earth and the Ego 85  
Navigating a Sensual Sea 94
Chapter 2

The City .........................................................................................................................

Harbor of Dreams, City of Orgies: Discovering Language, Expressing the Self in the Urban Labyrinth 100

Champions of Desire: Spectacle, Consciousness and Memory in the Evanescent City 131

Chapter 3

The Body .........................................................................................................................

The Words of the Body 156

Embodying Memory, Inhabiting Desire 176

Mining the Truth from the Body: The Poetics of Confession and Reconstruction 191

Remembering the Body in Words and Images: Poetry in the age of Photography 196

On Lucas Samaras’ Island of Oblivion: Celebrating the Body in the Shadow of Whitman and Cavafy 202

Image Gallery ....................................................................................................................219

Works Cited .....................................................................................................................230
Figures

Figure 1: Portrait of Walt Whitman. Samuel Hollyer, street engraving after Gabriel Harrison, 1855 ................................................................. 219

Figure 2: Gabriel Harrison, Photographic Portrait of Whitman, 1854 ............. 219

Figure 3: Charles Hine, Portrait of Whitman, 1860 ...................................... 219

Figure 4: Thomas Eakins, Portrait of Whitman, 1860 ..................................... 219

Figure 5: Frontispiece for Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-1888. Photography by Charles H. Spierler, 1876......................... 220

Figure 6: Whitman and Bill Duckett (Photographer unknown), 1886 .......... 221

Figure 7: Whitman with Duckett in Camden (Photographer unknown), 1886..... 221

Figure 8: Thomas Eakins, “Old Man,” 1880s .................................................. 221

Figure 9: Photographic portrait of young Cavafy taken in Alexandria’s photography studio “Fettel & Bernard,” 1890s ......................................... 222

Figure 10: Photographic portrait of the older Cavafy, 1910s ........................... 222

Figure 11: David Hockney, Portrait of Cavafy in Alexandria ....................... 222

Figure 12: Photographic portrait of Cavafy taken in Alexandria’s photography studio “Fettel & Bernard,” 1890s ........................................... 222

Figure 13: Yannis Tsarouchis, Painting inspired by Cavafy’s poem “Outside the House.” ............................................................... 223

Figure 14: Yannis Tsarouchis, Painting inspired by Cavafy’s poem “Desires.” .... 223

Figure 15: David Hockney, Drawing inspired by Cavafy’s poem “He Asked About the Quality.” ........................................... 224

Figure 16: David Hockney, Portrait of Cavafy in Alexandria ........................... 224

Figure 17: David Hockney, Drawing inspired by Cavafy’s poem “Body of Love.” ... 224
Figure 18: Lucas Samaras, “Self.” (Courtesy of the artist.) …………………………. 225

Figures 19 & 20: Lucas Samaras, Self-portraits from the “Autopolaroids” series (Courtesy of the artist.) ……………………………………………………………….. 226

Figures 21 & 22: Lucas Samaras, Self-portraits from the “Phototransformations” series (Courtesy of the artist.) ………………………………………………………… 226

Figure 23: Lucas Samaras, A panoramic synthesis of Samaras’ self-portraits selected by the artist for this study. (Courtesy of the artist.) ……………………….. 227

Figure 24: Lucas Samaras, Self-portrait, 2015. (Courtesy of the artist.) …………….. 228

Figure 25: Lucas Samaras, Self-portrait, 2005. (Courtesy of the artist.) …………….. 228

Figure 26: Lucas Samaras, Self-portraits from the “Autopolaroids” series. (Courtesy of the artist.) …………………………………………………………………….. 229
Introduction

*A Passage from Brooklyn to Ithaca*

This treatise is the first extensive comparative study of Walt Whitman and C. P. Cavafy. Despite the abundant scholarship dealing with the work and life of each, until now no critic has put the two poets together. The affinities between Whitman and Cavafy start with the most generic one, the century in which they were born. Cavafy was twenty-nine years old the year (1892) Whitman died; thus, Cavafy in his formative years had plenty of opportunities and reasons to read Whitman, whose work and reputation were already established in the second half of the century in England and in France where Whitman was esteemed higher than in America.¹

We have no practical evidence that Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, or any of his other works, were part of Cavafy’s library, which was poorly handled after his death;² as a result only a small part of it survived.³ Nonetheless, it is highly unlikely that Cavafy, who was known to be

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¹ Erkkila and Blodgett in their studies have extensively documented Whitman’s reception in France and in England respectively.
² The Cavafian scholar Stefanos Rozanis in a discussion with the author confirms that indeed after Cavafy’s death there was “book plundering” in his library to such degree that very few items were recorded. Further testimony to this matter in Peridis: 1948 (65) and Liddell (121-2).
³ In *The Library of C. P. Cavafy* (2003), M. Karabini-latrou claims that “the number of books of the survived Cavafy Library at the Study of New Hellenism is 964” (8’).
an avid reader of English and American literature since early adolescence, was unaware of Whitman’s work. For one thing, due to his close friendship with E. M. Forster, whose admiration for Whitman is recounted duly in Beauman and is confirmed by Forster’s taking on a Whitman poem title for one of his novels, Cavafy almost certainly was exposed to Whitman and discussed his works with Forster, especially in light of the subtle homoerotic allure parts of his poetry radiated. Therefore, in spite of the want of technical evidence, my interpretive analysis will draw from the prevalent themes, ideas and theories of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries that inform the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy. Moreover, this study is also concerned with the cultural context of the period from 1819 (birth of Whitman) to 1933 (death of Cavafy) that instilled radical changes in literature and language due to an unprecedented and multileveled series of innovations in historical, social, technological and economic terms.

The textual approach of my subject will include the examination of poetry, prose writings and autobiographical documentation, which is especially abundant in the case of Whitman, as well as biographical testimony. I interpret the term “poetics” in the inclusive context that Jusdanis proposed in his own study of Cavafy, where poetics is defined as not constituted solely of the conception of the poetry, or the poet himself, or any single element, “but of the sum of his views and statements on the total act of poetic production, dissemination, and reception (1987: xiv). While I am not excluding the input of the various biographers of Whitman and Cavafy, I tend to read more often from Reynolds and Liddell, whose studies I consider to be the most thorough and inclusive of most prior legitimate sources on the subject, even though, it must be added, Liddell at times gets carried away in his antagonism with the “outdated” interpretations of

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4 Tsirkas
5 Passage to India
Tsirkas. Moreover, unless otherwise noted, the translation of Cavafy’s poems rendered in this study is by Edmund Keeley/Philip Sherrard.

*Harmonic Oppositions*

The thematic approach is organized around three key subjects that I see as integral and consistent in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy: the sea, the city and the body. The three following chapters of this study are thus entitled after them respectively. My intention is not to mystify the sea or to safeguard the aura of deep images, but rather to examine how the sea evolves in symbolism and representation and triggers a language that at the same time is literal and metaphoric in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy. An additional objective is to explore the symbolic significance of the sea as, what the poets imagined, an expansive female entity – mother, mistress, songstress, enchantress, source of life and death – in contrast to the limitations of a masculine land subject to corrosion. The harmonic opposition between sea and land – two distinct but equally wilful natural elements – institutes the dialectics between contraries in the compositions of both poets: feminine and masculine, fluid and solid.

Both in his youth and senescence Whitman sought solace in the sea and formed songs out of its cadence with an ardor as natural and consistent as the one that the ever sea-minded Greek poets were known for from the age of Homer to the modern days of Elytis. As we will see, Whitman’s advocacy of free and unrhymed verse, one of the most innovative aspects of his poetry, manifests an indissoluble pact with the maritime element: the pulse of the sea prompts Whitman to break free from the pressures of rhyme and follow the organic rhythm of feeling and

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6 In *Specimen Days* Whitman refers to the seashore as his “invisible influence,” the point where the solid is marrying the liquid and where the real is blending with the ideal (1971: 67), acknowledging thus the land as his father and the sea as his mother.
voice; its afflatus stands in for the blessings of the heavenly muse of ancient times. But if the sea uplifts him with an assurance of infinity in his regular escapes to the shore, it is the pace of modern life in the ever-transforming city – the meeting point of irreconcilable components – that tirelessly supplies him with the words and images he picks from every shred of the social and cultural fabric. The city is a shelter of the mind and the body where Whitman, as much as Cavafy, always returns with Ulyssean fervor, whether the city is real or imaginary.

The three circles of Cavafy’s poetry – the historical, the philosophical and the emotional poems – also roam around the axis of the urban environment of the poet. There Cavafy not only (re)invents stories and invites historical and sensual memories but also interweaves reality with myth, history with private experience. At the same time, as insinuated in “Ithaca” and “The City,” or as presented more explicitly in “The Ships,” among other Cavafy compositions tied to maritime symbols, the poet’s urban world, whether literal or imaginative, is defined by the presence of the sea. As a barrier and a bridge, a mirror and an abyss, the conflicting features of the sea constitute an allegory of the volatility of human nature in the passing of time that brings to mind Michael Moon’s analysis of “fluidity” as a mode of consciousness in the poetics of Whitman, which will be examined in the first chapter.

According to Pieris, the sea, as a theme explored in various forms, makes up 17% of Cavafy’s total poetic output, and therefore the investigation of the role of maritime themes in Cavafy’s verse is imperative (Pieris, 1989: 274). The fact that Whitman and Cavafy are routinely considered to be poets of the city and the body, as examined in the second and third chapters, should not detract from their revealing intercourse with the natural world in their poetics. Thus,

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7 Dimaras’ categorization of Cavafy’s poems (77)
8 In his poem “Voice from the Sea,” for instance, Cavafy addresses the sea as a sublime songstress of desire and death. Furthermore, in “Morning Sea” the poet stands on the edge of the Alexandrian shoreline contemplating the beauty of nature vis-à-vis a private fancy: the sea stretches as a floating manifestation of the poet’s own fantasies, recollections and “ikons of pleasure.”
while considering Cavafy’s sea poems in comparison to those of Whitman, it is essential to indicate and further investigate, in line with Savidis and Pieris, the presence of nature in the Cavafian narrative, a presence that puts at rest the old presumption of Cavafy’s composition as primarily an ode to a decayed urbanity that does not concern itself with the natural world.

*Authoring Identity, Rethinking Masculinity*

Whitman’s poetry celebrates birth, youth, the self and the world as seen for the first time, while Cavafy’s diverts from the active present to commemorate a resurrected world whose key, in Eliot’s terms, is memory. Yet, I see the two poets conversing in the crossroads of the fin de siècle, one leaning on the edge of the impatient New World, the other on the ancient shores of humanity – a disrupted world. Whitman and Cavafy, as much as the spirit of the times they represent, embody the antithesis of hope and dislocation to such a degree that a comparative examination of their poetics reveals two minds, and two narratives, closer than their continents – “my palms,” Whitman promises, “cover continents” (61).

Cavafy’s own individuality as a poet and private man evokes many traits that Whitman was known for: a profound interest in everyday people and their stories that inspires him to step forward as an “historian” of the unrecorded; comfort in the anonymity of the crowd that becomes the object of intellectual and erotic flânerie; a dislike of conspicuous wealth and the nouveaux riches; an immense desire for literary distinction and concern for fame after death⁹; an expressive

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⁹ Malanos’ reference to the “fake” and “vain” modesty of Cavafy (1957:24) evokes the criticisms that Whitman himself often received about his vanity. Whitman was also known for the fierce self-promotion of his work and his anxiety about its place in the future. In a passage that highly resembles Whitman’s methodical approach to fame, Malanos further notes about Cavafy that his “restless ambition metamorphosizes into a psychosis about his posthumous reputation. He wants to impose himself upon time. Who poet doesn’t? But while other poets wait patiently, Cavafy, unwilling to trust the fortune of his work in the verdict of time, traps his fame with a thousand
individualism instigated by life in the city as a single man; an autoerotic imagination that in older age reveals aspects of identify of the younger self; a perception of the body as the cradle of emotions, *noesis* and physique. They both coincide with a charged socio-political climate of two newly formed nations – Whitman’s voice mingles with the clamor of the emerging United States; Cavafy’s cosmopolitanism conflicts from afar with the ethnocentrism of the nascent Greek state. The work of both poets was often ignored during their time because of its dramatic departure from metrical, social and gender conventions.

As Syrimis notes, “it is no coincidence that, in retrospect, Cavafy’s poetry enters the stage of Western literature, along with that of other male figures such as Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, André Gide, Marcel Proust, E. M. Forster, Federico Garcia Lorca, and, somewhat later, Jean Genet and Tennessee Williams at a time when notions of masculinity are in flux and the male body is being converted into a spectacle and a site of either transgression, nature or discipline” (2006: 2). In the early decades of the twentieth-century, when Cavafy reached his maturity as a poet, male identity suffered a process of critical re-evaluation that resulted in a negative representation of masculinity in modernist literature. What did it mean to be a man in the industrial era? In particular, three modernist writers who took pride in having being inspired by Whitman’s humanism voiced extreme discontent about the male condition. D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller – often deplored and banned in their own time – responded to urbanization and excess of male ambition in ways that Whitman and Cavafy would have recognized as the pronouncements of a kindred spirit. Moreover, Virginia Woolf depicted gender as a dialogue of opposites, which in many ways recalls the Whitmanian sentiment about the fluidity of gender.

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*ploys. Most of what is written about his work, is elicited by the poet himself who has elevated the art of flattery into science*” (1957: 40-41).

10 Miller depicts the great metropolises as “autumnal cities,” unnatural states of decay, greed and injustice where man loses purpose, identity and hope. “For the man of the autumnal cities there was left only the vision of the
Whitman came of age “before the codings and coordinations of modern sexuality (e.g., ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’) took hold to the scene of their near emergence at the end of his life” (Coviello: 75). During the last years of Whitman’s life homosexuality, as Foucault notes, “was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul” (Foucault, 1978: 43). It is in this light that Leaves of Grass makes its case as a “passionate argument for the androgynous union of strength and tenderness, sagacity and impulse” (Kaplan, 38). Whitman was unusually open about his hermaphroditic notion of gender and playfully cryptic about his own sexuality, considering the constrictions of puritanical America and homophobic Europe. As Robert K. Martin notes, Whitman had no fear of affirming in writing his feminine qualities in a conventional environment of strict sexual delineation. For Whitman the love between men implicitly challenged “traditional Western ideas of male superiority and of male hardness and female softness” (Martin, 69).12 Aside from the sexual connotations of such love, male bonding for Whitman above all signified a means to social change, as another Whitman’s apostle, Forster, also came to advocate. In that sense, Whitman’s idea of manly love as another form of pacifism is the key to egalitarian democracy. Martin very insightfully observes that for Whitman the “aggressive impulse of man is rooted in

11 “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place,” writes Woolf in Orlando (189). One may detect a Whitmanian footprint in Woolf’s hermaphroditic depiction of masculinity as a “welter of opposites” which anticipated the discourse on gender that in the second half of the twentieth-century invoked a new dialogue between sexes, generations and disciplines.

12 Right there one can detect the spark that brought Rupert’s (a mouthpiece for Lawrence) admission at the closure of Women in Love: “to make (life) complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love” (475).
competiveness ... if men saw each other as potential lovers rather than potential rivals, they would perhaps no longer be willing to kill each other” (66).

The age of prosperity from 1870 to 1914 empowered individualism and encouraged the rise of unconventional social life styles in the Western world. In this new social atmosphere, discreet sexual inversion – as homosexuality was called prior to being registered as a medical term the year of Whitman’s death – became moderately tolerated in certain cities by the upper middle class as a sign of eccentricity of the modern times, as long as the subject of such inclination kept it silent. Tsirkas reminds that in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, for instance, in sharp contrast with Wilde’s homophobic England, homosexual proclivity not only was not persecuted in the Alexandrian salons that Cavafy frequented but it was considered fashionable – a sign of a refined nature and aristocratic upbringing (290). In contrast with Whitman’s sublimation, alluded to by his own systematic denials of sexual promiscuity or reference to any specific sexual relationship, Cavafy often fulfilled his erotic fantasies and carried the afterglow of his unleashed physicality into brief soliloquies of nostalgia and intoxication. There was nothing aristocratic about Cavafy’s objects of desire. Both poets’ lower class attraction appears indistinguishable from their erotic predilection for common men whose rankness elicits desire for the organic, the unassuming, the robust and the subdued. Cavafy’s

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13 Halperin acknowledges American neurologist Charles Chaddock as the unwitting “inventor” of homosexuality. Chaddock introduced the term “homosexuality” into the English language in 1892, in order to render a German cognate that had emerged twenty years before.

14 As it will be examined, in his daybooks of the 1850s and his diary of 1870, Whitman reveals his voyeuristic tendencies in observing male strangers, with whom he never interacts, and remains adamantly cryptic about the sexual nature of his relationships with Doyle and Stafford or about his homosexuality although as shown from his well-known exchange with Symonds in 1890 (Kantrowitz, 1998).

15 Reynolds describes how “Whitman’s notebooks of the midfifties are filled with long lists of men he has met in Brooklyn and New York. Most of these men were in their late teens or early twenties, and many were drivers, policemen, or other common workers” (323). In his diary from 1908 Cavafy notes that “I like and I am moved by the beauty of ordinary people, of impoverished youth. Servants, workers, clerks ... The lot of work and the activity make their body lean and symmetric ... Their faces either white when their work is indoors, or sunburned when it is outdoors, have a likeable, poetic color. It is in contradiction with the rich young men who are either sickly and
take on sexuality anticipated Foucault’s later analysis of it. While in his historical and philosophical poems Cavafy looked at the collective and individual past as a source of knowledge about the destiny of man and the fallacies of life that often cage the self, in his emotional (or sensual) poems he treated desire, in homologous terms with Whitman, as a neutral and resilient author of identity constantly challenging the social parameters of gender and the inconclusiveness of sex ethics.

_The Poet as a Cosmopolitan Loner_

The theoretical framework of my analysis begins with the consideration of Romanticism as the altering movement that “brought into modern consciousness the feeling that society can develop or progress only by individualizing itself, by being sufficiently tolerant and flexible to allow an individual to find his own identity within it, even though in doing so he comes to repudiate most of the conventional values of that society” (Frye: 48). The Emersonian principle of self-reliance that articulates the positivistic perception of rational man as a self-sustained being in the void that Lukacs later described as transcendental homelessness, underlines the intentions both of Whitman and Cavafy to construct a poetics based upon the premise of an expressive individualism that cultivates and celebrates the virtues and the vices of the sinless self.

European Romanticism generated a new perception of lonesomeness. The creative self was seen and appreciated as an independent entity that flourishes in solitude not only in the countryside that once magnetized the romantic soul, but also in the heart of the emerging naturally dirty or full of fats and grimes from the excessive gorges and the drinks and the leisure. One reckons that in their bulging or creased faces appears the ugliness of their theft and robbery of their inheritances and their interest” (Savvidi, 328).
megalopolis where multiplying populations grew accustomed to the benefits of urban anonymity. The Byronic figure, the Faustian quest, the discernment of Baudelaire’s lonesome passionate spectator, emerged as solitary acts personifying a will for the uncompromised privacy that appealed to the Victorians. Thus, singedom and solitude rose as synonyms of freedom, privacy and indulgence in a bohemian landscape that uttered a new way of urban living.16

Whitman and Cavafy embodied the metropolitan type of the expressive individual that Simmel described as an offspring of the rational and intellectual urban culture (1971) in which undiscerning sociability often amounts to malady. “Do not spill thy soul; do not all descend; keep thy state; stay at home in thine own heaven,” Emerson admonishes. In “As Much You Can” Cavafy rearticulates:

And even if you cannot make your life the way you want it,
this much, at least, try to do
as much as you can: don’t cheapen it
with too much intercourse with society…

Yet, it is because of their “intercourse” with society – bodily, historical, and platonic – that Whitman and Cavafy are able to articulate their poetic voice. The romantic, symbolist and aesthetic stages in the works of Whitman and Cavafy spring from the awareness of (physical and

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16 The rise of the nineteenth century metropolis, especially Paris, enabled many individuals to remain unmarried by choice. In the anonymity of the crowd, the bohemians emerged as the early singletons, self-asserted bachelors and bachelorettes who looked up to singedom – a British neologism denoting the bohemian state of being unmarried or not involved in any long term relationship – as a desirable lifestyle in the urban environment. Sedgwick credits Thackeray as the author “who introduced both the word and the concept of bohemia to England from Paris” (1990, 193). Prior to the success of Henri Murger’s Scenes de la vie Bohème – a popular collection of short stories that in 1845 legitimized bohemia and later inspired Puccini’s popular opera La Bohème (1896). Long before Puccini’s time, in the heights of English Romanticism, a pivotal figure like Lord Byron had advocated bohemianism as the road to a private libertarianism that often scandalized the public. The “bachelor” that Sedgwick refers to in her essay “The Beast in the Closet” is a product of that era: his persona is “highly specified as a figure of the nineteenth-century metropolis. He has close ties with the flâneurs of Poe, Baudelaire, Wilde, Benjamin” (1990, 193). By the turn of the century, as Klinenberg attests, the bohemian lifestyle was still considered “a bold and provocative way to use one’s social liberties” (35). It was because of this emerging lifestyle that homosexuality nestled in the front closet of the fin de siècle and invited certain euphemisms such as “new phase of love” that Cavafy uses in his journal of 1905, published posthumously, referring to the new openness of French novelists when dealing with matters of forbidden pleasures, as opposed to the English, who remained fearfully conventional (Savidi, 1983).
human) nature as a force to be reckoned with inside and outside the individual. Identity (as much as history) is the making of such reckoning.

Whitman and Cavafy write in an age defined by the sense of dissolution anticipated by Hölderlin and Nietzsche. Without the metaphysical guarantees of the Homeric or the Christian world the soul of modernity was to defy nihilism and regain a prospect of confidence based on the old premise that life is worthwhile only when a person experiences the depth of life through his strong feelings or sensations. Thus, the primacy of the imagination becomes the compass of Whitman’s and Cavafy’s aesthetic experience in blending emotion with reason, the personal with the universal, and the historical with the imaginative. As it has been argued, Whitman is attacking the mode of consciousness he finds in western man because for the poet the art that redeems is personal and indissoluble (Anderson, 1974: 35). The same can be said about Cavafy, whose poetry streams from the body and the mind of the empirical and the intellectual artist. Cavafy denounces Ruskin’s idea of art as an agent of morality and utilitarianism that restricts poetry within the bonds of “noble grounds” or a preconditioned usefulness: “there are works of immediate utility and works of beauty. The poet does the latter,” Cavafy maintains in Ars Poetica. For Cavafy impersonal art is sterile, distorting and detached from the experience of its maker. The greatest truth for both Whitman and Cavafy resides not in the confinement of language in the cause of morality but in the ability of the poet to surpass ethical judgment for an aesthetic one. “The true artist,” Cavafy believes, “does not have … to choose between virtue and vice; but both will serve him and he will love both equally” (Liddell, 117).

The roots of nineteenth-century aestheticism will be traced in Kant’s seminal Third Critique, which established the autonomy of the aesthetic by differentiating it from the discourses on pleasure, emotion, morality and knowledge. The modern discourse on beauty
begins with a consideration of the notions of free and dependent beauty that Kant proposed.\textsuperscript{17} The four Kantian explications of beauty – quality, quantity, purpose and satisfaction – proposed a less dogmatic representation of beauty in art whose effect is evident in the perception of beauty in modern poetry. Furthermore, the Kantian distinction between free beauty and dependent beauty instigated new ways of evaluating aesthetically the human form. After the Renaissance the human body slipped out from the shadows of religious dogma to reclaim a classical lucidity in form and essence. Johann Lavater’s influential theory suggested that in the modern age human physiognomy was more decisive than sartorial codes in evaluating people. Kant’s critique, published almost two decades after Lavater’s theory, went further in suggesting that a person’s beauty can be judged not only in terms of physiognomy or dress but also in terms of character. Wilde’s famous proclamation that “all art is at once surface and symbol,”\textsuperscript{18} came as a denunciation of the physiognomical perspective and a call for artists who “go beneath the surface ... at their peril.”\textsuperscript{19}

Most ground-breaking theoretical perspectives on beauty that emerged in the nineteenth-century and extended to the next shared a common affinity with the Kantian proposition, whose effect is also evident in Whitman’s and Cavafy’s meditations on beauty. Cavafy’s poem “Artificial Flowers” (1903),\textsuperscript{20} for instance, exemplifies the poet’s fondness for dependent beauty

\textsuperscript{17} Free beauty assumes no concept of what the object should be and is usually to be found in nature. A dependent beauty, on the other hand, reflects a fixed idea of an empirical concept –a building, a picture, or the appearance of a human being.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray}, Preface: 6 (Barnes and Noble Classics, 1995).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 6
\textsuperscript{20} I do not want the real narcissus—nor do lilies
Please me nor real roses.
They adorn the trite, pedestrian gardens...
I love flowers fashioned of glass or gold,
genuine gifts of a genuine art;
dyed in hues lovelier than natural colors,
wrought with mother-of-pearl and enamel
with ideal leaves and stalks...
(old buildings and pictures, human bodies) as opposed to his indifference toward free beauty (nature). In Cavafy’s separation of natural and artificial flowers, Jusdanis detects “the existence of two conceptions of beauty: the one of nature, imperfect and perishable; and the other of art, perfect and timeless. This polarity between transcendental and natural beauty informs Cavafy’s conception of art dividing the world, on the one hand, into the ugly, the old and commonplace; and on the other, into the beautiful, young, and idealized” (80).

This division echoes Poe’s theory of separation of truth and beauty, which decisively placed the beautiful in the realm of subjective imagination. For Poe, poetry should appeal strictly to the sense of beauty, not truth: “truth demands a precision,” Poe claimed, “and Passion, a homeliness” (Poe, 2003: 1600) The contemplation of a subjective beauty empowers the soul with pleasure, even if that beauty derives itself from the old, the illicit, the commonplace and the ugly, as it often does in Poe, Whitman, Baudelaire and Cavafy. Pater, in his Studies in the History of the Renaissance, claimed that nothing matters more than “the experience of brilliant moments,” which is precisely, as we will see in the third chapter, the precious experience Cavafy defends in his poem “The Regiment of Pleasure.” According to Pater’s elitist approach, though, beauty is an eclectic quality only for the initiated. Whitman’s euphoric humanism and Cavafy’s Baudelairean resourcefulness in finding beauty both in the high and low spectrums of life, naturally reject Pater’s notion as awfully pedantic—after all, Pater’s notions of beauty were deeply rooted in Winckelmann’s over-idealization of the classical homoerotic forms of beauty that by Cavafy’s time were considered rather picturesque. Regardless, Pater’s equation of beauty and pleasure with the attainment of experience evokes the orgasmic self that both Whitman and Cavafy foster in their poetics.
The tendency to look for beauty beneath appearances in the hidden aspects of personality and imagination triggered a re-examination of the relationship between the inner and the outer, the body and the soul, the artist and the world. Blake’s monistic perception of man as having “no Body distinct from his Soul” echoed the neoplatonic idea of the flesh/spirit dialogue that became popular in the Renaissance; Whitman invoked this dialogue when he proclaimed himself as “the poet of the Body/the poet of the Soul.” The evasive aspects of beauty, as well as the mysteries of the body and the soul, preoccupied the Symbolists as much as they had perplexed the Romantics. What came to be embraced as “art for art’s sake” initiated a new critical approach in Europe, expressed by such critics and poets as Schiller, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Pater, and Wilde, and reverberated across the ocean to nestle in the sensibility of American poets such as Poe and Whitman. If poetry’s main subject, as Poe and Baudelaire asserted, was itself rather than the truth, Whitman’s and Cavafy’s narcissism entails a poetics that is at the same time personal, fearless, self-redeeming and, in Mallarmé’s words, “in love with itself.”

Whitman’s poetics sought to transmit meaning not only from mind to mind, but also from body to body, and of course, from generation to generation. The importance of form and imagery over content and literalism that nourished modern art gave wings to the poetry of suggestion that involves the reader as an active participant in deciphering symbols and impressions. “The reader will always have his or her part to do,” writes Whitman. The confessional tone of Whitman and Cavafy and the emotional reciprocity their poems elicit activate the sensory channels of the reader. If reading, as Proust contemplated, is the “urging force” that unlocks the gates of spaces we could not otherwise enter, the enterprise of reading Whitman and Cavafy entails a process of illumination in which the reader indeed intuits feelings, sensations and spaces previously

\[21\] Cited in Reynolds, 1996: 175
\[22\] On Reading
unknown or beyond reach. In his *Ars Poetica* Cavafy draws a distinction between the general “guess work” of the philosopher and the personal experience that the poet brings to the table, engaging thus a more intimate communication with the reader. Cavafy concretely exemplifies the process of poetic illumination when he writes, “very often the poet’s work has but a vague meaning: it is suggestion: the thoughts are to be enlarged by future generations or by his immediate readers: Plato said that poets utter great meanings without realizing themselves.”

*New World, Old World and the Legacy of the Enlightenment*

Owing to Sedgwick’s analysis I have chosen to read Whitman as a transplanted voice within European consciousness; to understand him as he was read and understood in fin de siècle Europe. The novelty that European intellectuals detected in Whitman’s poetics was that his voice spoke from a society without a feudal history (Sedgwick, 1985: 204). Another objective is to show how the legacy of the Enlightenment and the growing influence of romanticism, symbolism and aestheticism in England and in France, empowered Whitman’s messages, some of which inform Cavafy’s own, with a universality that appealed to Europeans. Some of Whitman’s ideas are extremely close to those of European poets who also exerted a certain influence on Cavafy, such as Hugo, Tennyson and Baudelaire. Despite the rhetoric of intense Americanism, which occasionally “tended toward jingoism” (Reynolds, 1996: 150), Whitman owed much to the European spirit and its classical roots, albeit he often longed to evade the...

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23 *Ars Poetica*

24 In her essay “Toward the Twentieth-Century: English Readers of Whitman” (1985) Sedgwick discusses Whitman’s reception in England. Following the publication of *Leaves of Grass* there, Whitman emerged as a “magnetic figure in the history of English sexual politics” (202) at a time when “the historical configuration of male homosocial desire was in a rapid flux—a flux that circulated around alternative readings of Whitman” (203). As a result, Whitman’s verse, but also the poet’s own American character, unleashed new readings and interpretations of homoeroticism that defied the “assumed class contexts in which the sexual ideology was viewed” (204).
pressures of the European Enlightenment. In *Specimen Days*, he asks “Will the day come … when those models and lay figures from the British Islands –and even the precious traditions of the classics will—be reminiscences, studies only?” (95) Yet, in “Song of Exposition” Whitman walks the path of Virgil, Tasso and Milton when he summons the muse to “migrate from Greece and Ionia” and bless his forthcoming American epic. He continues: “We do not blame thee elder World/, nor really separate ourselves from thee, / (Would the son separate himself from the father?)”

Modernity emerged as an extension of the founding pillars of the Enlightenment in science, philosophy and aesthetics. As a cultural but also spiritual movement, the Enlightenment facilitated the intellectual and technical means to subdue the two greatest enemies of the modern Western world: theocratic thought and superstition. As stressed above, the principles of reason and individualism instituted the core of the Enlightenment thinking which had no tolerance for worship of tradition; as a result, art was separated from the burdens of pedantry, utility and conventionalism. Ironically, these principles led to the demise of the Enlightenment itself, when the Romantics sought to replace the “coldness” of reason with the “warmth” of emotion.

Whitman belonged to the generation of poets who got caught in the interim between the waning days of the Counter-Enlightenment Romantic school of thought and the Symbolist movement that succeeded it. Arguably, Darwin’s intervention at mid-century once more shifted the cultural winds. As an avid reader of Darwin’s writings and a naturalist by hobby, Whitman would be the least of all to object to his findings. Cavafy, on the other hand, is a child of

Furthermore, In *Specimen Days* Whitman claims that “while the contribution which German Kant and Fichte and Schelling and Hegel have bequeathed to humanity – and which English Darwin has also in his field – are indispensable to the erudition of America’s future, I should say that all of them, and the best of them, when compared with the lightning flashes and flights of the old prophets and exaltés, the spiritual poets and poetry of all lands (as in the Hebrew Bible), there seems to be, nay certainly is, something lacking – something cold, a failure to satisfy the deepest emotions of the soul – a want of living glow, fondness, warmth, which the old exaltés and poets supply, and which the keenest modern philosophers so far do not” (Cited in Stavrou, 16-17).
modernism: most of the wisdom that Whitman’s interpretive century gave birth to by the end of the 1890s became subject to criticism. Such a critical perspective born out of disillusion at once doubted the past and overvalued the future. Cavafy never succumbed to the idealization of the future but rather relied on the present as the culmination of experience of a life lived in the orbit of destiny and sentiment along the sounds of progress. As many modernists – poets and novelists alike – Cavafy rarely escaped the shadow of the Counter-Enlightenment. His poetics takes into account the familiar antithetical beliefs – about life and death, *eros* and *agape*, history and destiny – that Whitman was also known for. Therefore, as I see it, the main barrier between the two poets is not as much the time that divides them, but the place. 

Whitman and Cavafy came out of two distinct environments. New York and Alexandria were geographically remote from Europe, but their intellectuals gravitated towards the European literary trends. As readers and writers, the two poets were both avid Europhiles whose aesthetic assumptions have European sources. The spirit of the Enlightenment was a primary influence on Whitman, who was acquainted early on in his youth with the work of the revolutionary writers and thinkers of eighteenth-century France (Reynolds, 1996: 23), which piloted Whitman in the development of his own poetics of democracy and progress as an antipode to the poetry of feudalism and regression. In between the imported prejudices – racism and homophobia to name only a couple – of the old world and the crowning of materialism as the corollary of the American Gilded Age, Whitman emerged as a transgressor whose uneasy temperament could fit neither in the old world mentality nor the new. It is not accidental that Whitman’s work was underappreciated more often than not during his lifetime in his own country, for through his prose and verse he critiqued and challenged the duplicitous moral standards of the same society he sought to attract.
The legacy of the Enlightenment, disseminated in North America by the European settlers, remained marginalized in the course of the Greek emancipation after four centuries of Ottoman control. Despite Byron’s involvement in the Greek revolution, for instance, English Romantic poetry remained largely untranslated and unappreciated in Greece until the early twentieth century. In comparison, a single exception was the case of the philhellene Victor Hugo, also known in Greece as the “French Byron,” who saw all his main works translated in Greek in the second half of the century (Provata, 2002:108), albeit they appealed to the masses and not to the Greek intelligentsia, which adamantly resisted the authority of European Romanticism, no less the influence of its American counterpart. Unlike England, France, Russia, Germany or Italy, where Whitman’s works were translated and circulated within the second half of the nineteenth century, the first Greek translation of *Leaves of Grass* did not appear until 1956, with a warm introduction by the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos.

Hence, while nineteenth-century European readers were aware of Whitman, and American literature was absorbing and responding to the European developments, Cavafy’s contemporaries in Greece largely dismissed the latest literary trends in Europe, namely symbolism, aestheticism and modernism, which sprang from the heart of Romanticism, for a literature that heavily conveyed patriotic and national themes outside the larger European context. Cavafy’s cosmopolitanism manifests itself as a reaction to the alienation of personal and historical exile: his poetic voice is in tune with Europe but disengaged from the post-Ottoman-Greek literary current; his hometown, Alexandria, is home to a growing Greek community that

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26 Adamantios Korais, the leading poet of the Greek Enlightenment, living in Paris in 1929, denounced the French Romantic school as “detrimental” and “catastrophic” for the progress of the people (Provata: 100).
27 A detailed presentation of Whitman’s first translated editions and reception outside America can be found in Wilson Allen and Folsom (1995). Moreover, Fiedler recounts how *Leaves of Grass* “was one of the first American books officially sponsored in translation by the Bolshevik Government” (Hindus, 64).
has as much in common with the “fabled generation” that Cavafy pleads for in his poem “Builders,” as Ottoman Greece with the golden age of Pericles. Unlike Whitman’s patriotic zeal, Cavafy remained cold toward modern Greece. Liddell notes that his passion for the Hellenic world was in opposition to his poor interest “in the current affairs of the modern kingdom of Greece” (78).

Dissolving Barriers: Language, Meter and Innovation

Whitman understood early on that the only way to succeed in producing a new poetic narrative was to go beyond the restrictions of the poetry of form for a more experimental free verse poetic style. In the opening sections of An American Primer, Whitman defiantly observes that there is a powerful “sameness through all languages, however old, however new, however polished, however rude. –As humanity is one under its amazing diversities, language is one under its [humanity’s diversity]... The master between any two ages, any two languages and two humanities, however wide apart in time and space, marks well not the superficial shades of difference, but the mass-shades of a joint nature” (1904: 1-2). As it turned out, the two languages that Whitman aspired to conjoin were British and American English, whose technical and cultural distinctions provided the poet with the clay to shape a new poetic language whose unique versification “dissolved the boundaries between prose and poetry, between polite diction and slang” (Reynolds, 308).

29 Reynolds credits the writer and critic John Neal as one of Whitman’s early influences and one of the first Americans to reject “rhyme and meter on behalf of rhythmic prose-poetry” (1995: 41). The colloquialism in writing that Neal advocated anticipated Leaves of Grass and had an impact on Poe and Hawthorne. Also, Neal expressed a prophetic certainty that “prose and poetry would soon be conjoined” (Reynolds, 314)
It has been remarked that proselike poetry is a product of the fin de siècle; the period between 1880 and the 1920s, in particular, is the beginning of the innovative proselike expression, which comes to full blossom in the 1910s (Vagenas, 54). During this period, which coincides with the rise and fall of the Gilded Age and delineates the last years of Whitman as well as the formative years of Cavafy, the urge to liberate verse from the constraints of rhyme and metrical convention anticipated modernism’s preoccupation with breaking free from organized artistic forms that by the early twentieth century would be apparent not only in poetry, but also in painting, music and architecture. The origins of this turbulent change that swept over society and the arts around this period were relevant to the economic and industrial progress that was affecting the speed, the mind and the wellbeing of all classes, albeit not in a universally beneficial way, as Charles Dickens’ novels had demonstrated before the explosion of the Gilded Age and Edith Wharton’s had testified during its final stages. Responding to this massive alteration of the collective consciousness Virginia Woolf notably claimed that “on or about 1910, human character changed.”

As an articulation of the human character, language could not remain fixed. The modernists and their nineteenth-century French Symbolist forerunners that had exerted a certain influence on Whitman and Cavafy saw conventional language and meter as part of an antique world. The disillusion with the confinement of the individual to a prison-like clockwork societal and cultural scheme, saturated on one hand with old conventions and accelerated on the other by an aggressive progress – a progress that in the early period of Cavafy is depicted as a Kafkaesque “giant edifice”\(^\text{30}\) – became a pronounced symbolism, especially in the poetry of Cavafy, whose four poems “Walls,” “Trojans,” “Windows,” and “The City” present us with variations on the theme of a physical as much as a cultural and an existential detention. For Whitman, on the other

\(^{30}\) “The Builders,” 1891
hand, the pen was mightier than the sword, and the cultural revolution he envisioned began with language: the main premise of Whitman’s *Primer* is the ability of language to transcend social, psychological and temporal barriers. Thus, for Whitman one of the main tasks of the modern poet was troublemaking, smashing the walls of tradition and communicating with a language more fitting for the rhythm of the times.

In his seminal essay *A Lecture on Modern Poetry* in 1908, T. E. Hulme affirmed that “there is an intimate connection between the verse form and the state of poetry at any period.” Most particularly, Hulme paralleled the transience of verse forms with the mutability of manners, individuals and social periods. “They evolve from their initial freedom to decay and finally to virtuosity,” he claimed. From Homer to the Parnassians, Hulme observed, “new forms are deliberately introduced by people who detest old ones.” According to Hulme, who led the “School of Images” during the nascent stage of Imagism in 1908-09, the “image” was a vehicle of modern poetic expression, and free verse was its principal form. After the short-lived Parnassian experiment, which in the 1880’s attempted to revive the absolute perfection of rhyme and form in poetry, critics like Hulme welcomed “the birth and marvelous fertility of a new (poetic) form,” the free verse, which he hailed as the “emancipation of verse” (3). Of course, the idea of vers libre was not entirely new. As noted before, only the name was new, but it could be found in many previous works as old as Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Dryden’s *Threnodia Augustalis* and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*.\(^3\)\(^1\) What appeared as new, however, was the determination of the vers libristes to introduce it as the most representative verse form of modernity, or a “new way of hearing through words.”\(^3\)\(^2\)

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\(^3\)\(^1\) Preface to *Some Imagist Poets*, 1916
The fixity of the poetic form and the elaborate rules of regular meter reflected the ancient world’s need to “construct things of permanence which would stand fast” in the flux that terrified the ancients” (Hulme). But in this new age of knowledge and experience, as Bakhtin put it in his essay “Epic and Novel,” prose gradually overcame the fixity of verse, and the novel in particular gained momentum because it came into “contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present” (Bakhtin, 27). Whitman exalted unrhymed verse as a natural measure. It unfolded like the waves of the sea: unbound, unpredictable, unmeasured, unmetered. Modern verse, along with other forms of modern art, aspired no longer to form just a story but rather to fix an impression. As Hulme famously summed up his essay, “a shell is a very suitable covering for the egg at a certain period of its career, but very unsuitable at a later age ... While the shell remains the same, the inside character is entirely changed. It is not addled, as a pessimist might say, but has become alive, it has changed from the ancient art of chanting to the modern impressionist, but the mechanism of verse has remained the same. It can’t go on doing so. I will conclude ... by saying, the shell must be broken” (1908).

Long before Hulme, Whitman too wished the eggshell broken. Whitman had also addressed poetic language as a phoenix that obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor. In an interview, the poet had pledged his allegiance to the Symbolist cause, popularized in America by Edgar Allan Poe, by declaring the poetry of the bards as “essentially feudal and antique” (Myerson, 15). In a caustic remark, he admitted that even the classics to him sounded better in prose: even though he had read many translations of Homer, the one he liked best after all was a literal prose version by Buckley (Myerson, 40). As early as the antebellum period, in the 1850s Whitman decisively came forward with his manifesto that proposed an

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33 Whitman’s likening of unmetered cadence with the waves of the sea evokes Poe’s line “The wave—there is movement there!” from his metered poem “The City in the Sea.”
escape from intellectual captivity through linguistic and metrical innovation. “I am done with many of the words of the past hundred centuries,” he emphatically claims. “I am mad that their poems, bibles, words, still rule and represent the earth, and are not yet superseded” (1904: 12).

In Whitman’s time, as convincingly articulated by Taupin, poetry in America was enjoyed mainly as a distraction, produced by a dilettante’s ambition to imitate the grand spirit of bygone times and entertain an indiscriminate public (1985: 27-28). No doubt Whitman found himself very lonely in his unrefined époque, a displaced apostle short of eager admirers or apparent successors, whose individualism and the free form of his verse had landed a bit prematurely on a land too flat for his elevated nature. Whitman’s “I” emitted the “barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world,” but only a few seemed to be listening to him. As poetically uttered by W. C. Williams, “man finds himself on the earth, whether he likes it or not, with nowhere else to go...If there is no room for us on the outside we shall, in spite of ourselves, have to go in: into the cell, the atom, the poetic line, for our discoveries. We have to break the old apart to make room for ourselves ... By making room within the line itself for his inventions, Whitman revealed himself to be a worthy and courageous man of his age and, to boot, a farseeing one” (Hindus, 31).

Whitman’s “inventions” were manifested through his objection to the legacy of the English language as versified by the English. He further contested the waning influence of the Victorian generation of poets on the rest of the Western world by observing that “Nobody ever actually talks as books and plays talk” (1904:6). Williams points out that one of the most innovative aspects of Whitman’s verse was his decision to distance himself from the old patterns of the English language, in terms of diction, style and meter, as used and perpetuated by the Romantics and especially the Victorians. As Whitman proclaims, “modern poetry and art run
into a sweetness and refinement which are really foreign to us, they are not ours” (Myerson, 15).\(^3^4\)

Undoubtedly Whitman had found inspiration and solace in the refined innocence of the early Romantics. After all, most of his verse is an appeal to restore reason and harmony through the marriage of feeling and brain power. But, at the same time, he denounced the blind allegiance of the Romantics to obsolete linguistic codes and codifications for a verse that was meant to follow and reflect the new order of the world – “a relative order, a new measure with which no one was familiar” (Hindus, 270). As we will see, Whitman’s voice, as much as Cavafy’s later, blossomed along the lines of synaesthesia -- “the harmony or equilibrium of sensations” --, a symbolist contribution pioneered by Baudelaire, who claimed, in his “Correspondences,” that “Man wanders through a forest of symbols.”\(^3^5\) Whitman was among the first to walk alone in the American forest of symbols, searching for ways to decipher the new measure applied to all things in the second half of the nineteenth-century.

Whitman’s decision to write in proselike verse articulated a deliberate breach from the restrictions of English poetry, and an alliance with the French Symbolist School much to the dismay of the literary establishment.\(^3^6\) Williams insightfully observed that “the essential pace of the English and the American languages is diametrically opposed each to the other ... Certainly not only the words but the meter, the measure that governed Whitman’s verses, was not English ... The change in the entire aesthetic of American art as it began to differ not only from British but from all the art of the world up to this time was due to this tremendous change in measure, a

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\(^3^4\) In this context, I see in Whitman’s “us” both the sensibility of nascent Americans, as well as the universality of the modern generation that Cavafy depicts in “Builders” as destined to “know an artless/ happiness, and length of days, and wealth, and wisdom/ without base seat, or servile industry.”

\(^3^5\) According to Pratt, the word “Symbolist” may have originated in this line (Taupin, 11).

\(^3^6\) Whitman’s contemporary Longfellow, for instance, opposed this by writing “we cannot yet throw off our allegiance to Old England” (cited in Reynolds, 318).
relative measure, which (Whitman) was the first to feel and embody in his works” (23, 28). In a reflection that synopsized the scope of his Primer Whitman exemplified his technique and his endeavor:

The fault I have to find with Tennyson, although he is a master of his art, with Longfellow, Whittier, and all the rest, is that they are too much like saints. Nature is strong and rank. This rankness is seen everywhere in man, and it is this strength and rankness that I have endeavored to give voice ... As to the form of my poetry, I have rejected the rhymed and blank verse ... But I cling to rhythm, not the outward regularly measured short foot, long foot—short foot, long foot—like the walking of a lame man, that I care nothing for. The waves of the sea do not break on the beach one wave every so many minutes; the wind does not go jerking through the pine trees, but nevertheless in the roll of the waves, and in the roughing of the wind in the trees, there is a beautiful rhythm. How monotonous it would become—how tired the ears would get of it—if it were regular. It is under-melody and rhythm that I have attempted to catch, and years after I have written a line, when I have read it to myself, or my friends read it aloud, I think I have found it 37.

While it would be a fallacy to characterize Whitman as the father of free verse and to claim that modern free verse writers derived their form from Whitman, at the same time Whitman did contribute his American freshness to the French Symbolist cause. The French Symbolist School is generally considered to be the cradle of vers libre that provided a model of free verse to poets in the second half of the nineteenth-century, as well as to the Imagist movement that followed the fin de siècle and is acknowledged by critics as the first school of modern poetry. In The French Influence on American Poetry, Taupin points out how in Whitman’s time “the first effect of French influence on American poetry was not a reaction, but a weak imitation” (19). Poe’s and Whitman’s originality stood as a testimony of the fact that, as Taupin observed, “True influence consists in surpassing one’s model, not in reproducing it.”

37 Cited in Myerson, 22
While Poe was drawn into the realm of pure fantasy, Whitman envisioned the future as the giant womb of a *magna mater* that would deliver in true form all of his noble prophecies (part of which were also on the French Symbolist agenda): democratic socialism, gender equality, restored recognition of male bonding, unregimented urban sensuality, dissemination of a poetry liberated—in verse and in context—from the chains of replication and ennui, the aesthetic urge to expose the mysteries of poetic creation within the poem itself. Whitman’s way accurately predicted the path of discovery made in Cavafy’s time, when Hulme claimed that “the process of artistic creation would be better described as a process of discovery and disentanglement.”

Indeed, as the most uncompromised of his generation of American poets, Whitman exemplified the determination of the new world not to emulate but to compete creatively and converse with the French spirit, and especially that of Baudelaire, who became a foundational source for Whitman. Erkkila astutely points out in her study *Whitman Among the French* that “Just as Whitman felt that it was necessary to break down the traditional barrier between poetry and prose in order to express the vastness and complexity of modern life, so...Baudelaire voiced the desire for a new, freer form in which to express the teeming life of the contemporary urban landscape...However, the ways in which Whitman differs from Baudelaire—his free verse and organic form, his pantheistic and affirmative vision, his cosmic and scientific themes, his social and prophetic concept of art—suggest the extent to which Whitman’s poetic venture was sufficiently original to have a strong impact not only on the French Symbolists but on modern French literature in general” (56-58).

One may argue that the French Symbolist desire to get rid of the weary forms of the past coincided with a shift that was taking place in America and in England prior and/or along with

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38 Whitman’s knowledge of French, which he learned during his residence in Washington (Myerson: 72), was adequate enough for him to read some of the original French poems he already knew from translations.
Baudelaire’s pivotal contribution to the movement. In cataloguing the poets and writers who experimented with free verse before Whitman, Reynolds demonstrates how the cultural tendency to innovate poetry that was to prevail in France and subsequently in the world, was also unfolding in a quieter way in other parts of the world. In terms of influence on modern poetry, eventually French Symbolist poetry took off at a time when English Victorian poetry embodied the fading embers that followed the great flame of English Romanticism. In France, as effectively argued by a critic, “After the Romanticism of Hugo, there had followed an even more brilliant Counter-Romanticism, led by such poets as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé... the whole body of French Symbolists. These poets were in a sense inheritors of Romanticism, in that they continued to seek the bizarre and the remote as subjects for their poetry, rather than the ordinary and commonplace, but they did not seek it in China or Greece...rather they sought it within themselves, in the subjective reality of their own experience” (Taupin, 9).

French Symbolism may present us with a link not only between the “prehistory” and the “history” of the new poetic forms on both sides of the Atlantic, but also between the two poets of this study whose interests and imaginations were partly bathed in Baudelairean sentiments. The “rankness” that Whitman spoke about lurks in the shadows of the Symbolist poetry, a poetry largely concerned with the sinister aspects of human nature. Baudelaire’s verse in particular sought to identify the poet with the role of “fallen man” whose demise, regardless, is not subject to any punitive process but rather arises as a gift, or flower of experience. For Baudelaire, as much as for Whitman and Cavafy, the fallibility of human nature signifies the core of artistic endeavor and demonstrates the practical Symbolist ability to extract beauty from the heart of rankness, by “resolving the surface complexity of modern experience into new harmonies of

39 Aside from Neal, Reynolds also credits the poets James Macpherson, Samuel Warren and Martin Farquhar Tupper as forerunners of Whitman’s proselike verse (314).
poetic language” (Pratt in Taupin, 12). Another parameter of this poetic language other than its penchant for free verse, as will be examined below, is the use of idiomatic, demotic, vernacular and slang that the poets of this study bring forward.

Both Whitman and Cavafy occasionally paid their homage to Baudelaire through unrhymed, symbolic poems, written in the early stages of their creative years that imply, whether intentionally or inadvertently, both gratitude and apprehension toward the influence of the French master. As Erkkila advises, “an understanding of the rapport between Whitman and Baudelaire is essential to the study of Whitman’s relationship to the French Symbolist writers … Not only the closeness of publications but even a certain similarity in the titles (of Leaves of Grass and Flowers of Evil) suggests the rather strange connection between these two seminal works in modern literature” (52). 40

Flowers of Evil was first published in 1857 after fifteen years in the making. Two years prior to that, the first edition of Leaves of Grass came out. It contained an untitled, unrhymed, protracted self-hymn to the young individual that Whitman was, in correspondence with nature and universal experience, that would not acquire its definitive title “Song of Myself” until 1881. In this early “song” that charted the organic foundation of the Whitmanian principles before the completed version of the poem, 41 Whitman applies the symbolic themes that also occupy Baudelaire’s compositions. Baudelaire’s perception of nature as a temple in which the beauty and artificiality of life mingle through conflicting odors, “prolonged echoes,” “confusing words” and “forests of symbols,” is exemplified in his sonnet “Correspondences,” in which the poet

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40 Asselineau makes a note that two of the initial titles Whitman was thinking for Leaves of Grass were Drops of Evil and Flames of Evil; cited in Erkkila, 261.
41 According to Leaves of Grass editors’ note, “Song of Myself” may have evolved in various stages, “beginning in the notebooks of 1847-48 and continuing with many revisions through seven editions,” until its completion in 1881, but “the poet never altered the poem fundamentally, restring himself to changes in diction and rhythm” (Blodgett, Bradley: 1965).
juxtaposes the symbolic dualities of body and soul, innocence and experience, nature and knowledge. The binaries that once became subjects of a cosmic marriage in Blake’s monistic universe, in Baudelaire, as much as in Whitman, regain their power of earthly opposition and their freedom to correspond to one another: “There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children/sweet as oboes, green as meadows/ -And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant, / … / With power to expand into infinity, / Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin, / That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.”

The experimenter of “Correspondences” is the ancestor of the gray man that recounts the purpose of symbolic voyages in Cavafy’s “Ithaca” and “The Ships.” In Whitman that man manifests himself through the poet’s youthful “I.” Whitman prefigures Baudelaire’s experimenter: a young, robust, fearless male specimen eager to climb up the hill of experience, on top of which—in the future—we find Cavafy hearkening to the “prolonged echoes mingling in the distance.” Writes Whitman: “Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded/with perfumes…The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.” Then, changing tenor, Whitman resists the allure of both innocent and corrupt perfumes: “The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, /it is odorless.” The poet undertakes to recreate life and poetry through the unadulterated “smoke of my own breath,” suggesting thus an opposition between experience from knowledge and senses, and experience from Nature, a concept that Wordsworth proposed (Blodgett, Bradley: 29).

As early as 1891 Cavafy indicated his own affinity for the symbolist imagination, especially Baudelaire’s idea of *synaesthesia* and the perception of the universe as “a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination assigns their relative place and value” (Jusdanis,

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42 “Correspondences”
43 “Song of Myself”: 2, lines 13-17.
44 Ibid: line 21
Cavafy’s early debt to Baudelaire is manifested in the poem “Correspondences According to Baudelaire,” which was not made public until Savidis published it for the first time after the poet’s death in an article about the early years of Cavafy’s development (Anton, 84). In this tribute to the French poet, Cavafy incorporates Baudelaire’s sonnet into his own composition that is less obedient to metrical structure than Baudelaire’s. It begins with an emotional appeal:

“Aromas inspire me as music does, / as rhythm does, as do beautiful words, / and I delight when, / in harmonious verses, Baudelaire expresses / what the amazed spirit, even dimly, / feels amidst sterile stirrings.” Then the poet proceeds to replicate the fourteen lines of Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” in Greek translation before retreating to his own conclusions delivered unrhymed in between blank verse lines:

“Do not believe only what you see.  
The vision of poets is sharper still.  
To them, Nature is familiar garden…”

In most of his poems Cavafy employed either a strong or a more relaxed iambic rhythm; his penchant for free verse, which is apparent in a significant portion of his poems in his mature period, but also in all five clusters of Cavafy’s poetry, frequently divided Modern Greek critics as Whitman’s had in America. Often the meter of iambic pentameter in Cavafy’s poems is

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45 “Correspondences According to Baudelaire” (1891)  
46 According to various critics, Cavafy’s “mature period” begins in the late 1910s, for reasons that are explained in detail later.  
47 At this point, it should be clarified that the categorization of Cavafy’s poetry into five sections—the Canon (154 poems), the Repudiated, or Renounced Poems (37 poems), the Hidden Poems (75 poems), the Unfinished Poems (30 poems) and the Prose Poems (3 poems)—is a result mostly of the poet’s own evaluation of his work, but also the intervention of the critics who after Cavafy’s death sought to present the poems under clear guidelines that reflected the poet’s wishes but also his development in terms of craftsmanship. The Canon, the largest part of Cavafy’s corpus, constitutes the approved poems by the poet for circulation, initially among selected friends, and eventually for publication in the original Greek and later, upon Forster’s insistence, in English translation. The Repudiated (or Renounced) cluster, consists of earlier compositions that Cavafy eventually deemed as unpublishable because, in his thinking, they did not match the superiority of the poet’s mature period. The Hidden Poems remained in the poet’s private collection either because they contained autobiographical elements that the poet wished to remain disclosed or, like the Repudiated, were thought of a lesser value of the poet’s later craft. The Unfinished are poems that Cavafy had put aside with the intention to retouch later but never did. Finally, the Prose Poems are prose compositions, some approved and some originally hidden by their author.
combined with the hexameter and a neutral tone that denotes, as a critic remarks “a faceless voice as factual as a reporter of the BBC” (Kalogeris, 9). For reasons that are mentioned above, Cavafy was generally distrusted and occasionally denounced by his Greek contemporaries – poets and critics alike – in the mainland for abandoning traditional metrical standards and adapting themes that were closer to European developments than to the makings of the very young Greek state which more or less occupied the attention of Modern Greek poetry of the early century. Moreover, Cavafy came under attack for his insistence in reviving obscure historical periods that stood remote from the patriotic zest of the Greeks whose revolution against the Ottomans still blazed in the collective memory of the nascent nation. Characteristically, Cavafy was openly reprimanded by leading Greek poet Palamas for “legislating the amorphous in versification” (cited in Anton, 62).

In an interesting parallel with the ancient world, the criticism that Cavafy received in his time for his innovative verse is evocative of the reaction caused by the storyteller Herodotus in classical Greece for choosing prose over verse for his Histories. Herodotus had abandoned the elevated language and metrical structure of epic poetry for the “naked language” of storytelling – a language lacking the decorous ornaments of the meter, therefore a language doomed to the mundane deformity of pezos logos (prose), or literally in Greek ordinary language that “walks on foot,” as opposed to riding in poetry’s winged chariot. Palamas might have had that distinction in mind when in an interview he questioned Cavafy’s qualifications as a modern bard. “But is he a poet?” he asked. “… Rather, he is a case of reportage. His writings seem as if his concern is to bring us a report from the centuries” (Cited in Anton, 61-62).

Cavafy’s minor background in journalism, an experience he shared with Whitman, along with Cavafy’s many years in public service which Whitman also knew, indicates an early
acquaintance with *pezos logos*. Rather than isolating the elevated from the pedestrian language, the new from the old forms, the rhymed from the unrhymed poetry, Cavafy, as much as Whitman before him, saw the great marriage of separated forms and metrical variations as the key to a poetics that could at once instruct and delight the modern reader and at the same time maintain the cachet of poetry as a competent genre in the prose age of journalism and the novel, both genres that Cavafy was known to cherish. In this respect, Cavafy was the first Modern Greek poet, writing outside of Greece, who got rid of rhyme and embraced new forms, long before a new generation of Greek modernist poets, such as Angelos Sikelianos, introduced some proselike verse in Modern Greek poetry in the 1930s, while Yiorgos Seferis, Yannis Ritsos and Odysseas Elytis experimented further with it after the Second World War.

Another manifestation of the marriage of the old with the new in the poetry of Whitman and Cavafy is the hybrid language they both use. Whitman’s adoption of demotic and idiomatic modes of popular expression in his writings, as we will see, helped propagate the use of slang which up until then was considered by many in America as illegitimate language. Cavafy was also known for mixing the purist Greek katharevousa, a synthetic and often pompous language introduced in the nineteenth-century by Greek government officials,\(^{48}\) with an idiomatic demotic, or the vernacular tongue of the people made up from a linguistic amalgamation of colloquialisms, idioms, and simplified diction and grammar that emerged towards the close of the century until it finally prevailed as the chosen language of modern Greeks. Interestingly, Cavafy’s great opponent Palamas was among the first to advocate strongly the demotic when most intellectuals in Greece were still deploring it.

\(^{48}\) Katharevousa was originally conceived by the poet and revolutionary leader Adamantios Korais in the early nineteenth-century as a compromise between Ancient Greek and the Demotic Greek of the time.
A more systematic dissemination of demotic Greek followed on account of its extensive usage by the poetic modernism of the 1930s generation. Even though in his early compositions Cavafy employed mostly katharevousa, by the 1910s he used the demotic abundantly in most of his later poems, often in perky combination with the katharevousa to accentuate irony as well as a propensity for antithetical associations, uttering thus a middling style that combined polite and low diction. The demotic Greek incorporated aspects of slang and new modes of popular expression at first adamantly resisted by the traditional Greek society. Even though the Greeks had used marginal vocabulary in their daily life since the Ottoman period, there were no entries of it in the dictionaries of Greek language until 1995 (Prountzou, 13), perhaps because official modern Greek language, torn by the debate between katharevousa and demotic, caught up belatedly with the neologisms of slang.

The origins of slang as a critical and caustic language are to be traced in sixteenth-century Britain and early seventeenth-century France, where the *argot* was known as the language of the drifters and, according to the lexicographer Richelet (1626-1698), was first...

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49 In Cavafy’s 1915 poem “One Night,” for instance, the cheap and degraded room (πτωχική και πρόστυχη κάμαρα) of a past pleasure is juxtaposed with the poet’s solitary house of the present. In the original Cavafy writes *μονήρες σπίτι* ("solitary house") splitting thus the katharevousa and the demotic between the adjective and the noun. The adjective means “solitary” but also “antisocial” and “ascetic” in katharevousa, while the noun *σπίτι* is the demotic replacement of the old word *oikos* ("house"), which perhaps Cavafy avoids deliberately because by his time it had also acquired a slang connotation for “brothel.” Similarly in “The Seleucid’s Displeasure,” as Mendelsohn points out, we find the juxtaposition of the purist *επαιτεία* (2009: xlv) with the demotic *ζητιανεύω* ("to beg"), which Mendelsohn misconstrues as *ζωντανεύω* (“to enliven”) in his introduction to his own translation of Cavafy’s poems (2009: xiv).

In the case of another poem, “Painted” (1915), the poet alternates the demotic word *αγόρι* (“boy”) with the vernacular *παιδί*, whose lexical meaning is “child” but whose idiomatic meaning suggests a bewitching young man easily identifiable in the anonymity of the crowd by his good looks and sexual allure, in other words the type of man that lies in the core of Cavafy’s erotic poems. As in the lyric poetry of Sappho, which was part of Cavafy’s library (Karabibi-Iatrou, 50) language offers the key to a hedonistic memory but also functions as a shield for the poet’s lasciviousness. “O my memory, keep them as they were,” Cavafy pleads. But Cavafy’s memory, unlike Sappho’s, is a *practical* and *un-platonic* memory in that it recaptures in most cases a fulfilled desire and not, as will be discussed in the ensuing chapters, a regret for inaction that inspires the frustrating ode of *mokarismos* that Sappho was known for. Thus, the use of demotic, by itself a *practical* language, in tune with the fleshy rhythm of people’s tongues and conducts, enables the older Cavafy, who as we will see he came to terms with his homosexuality, to take *eros* from the winged chariot of ancient poetic forms and their descendants and bring it down to the streets of experience.
recorded in a French dictionary in 1680.\(^{50}\) The *argot* has been described as “an antilanguage, the language of antisociety, a language that in essence exists to express the anticulture of an establishment, contravenes grammatical, syntactical and semantic rules and exists simply as an isolated entity” (Battistella 2005: 5-8, cited in Prountzou, 12). Part of the increasing popularity of the English slang vocabulary in the seventeenth century is owed to the expansive politics of the British, which culminates with the defeat of Napoleon and the infiltration of British culture and customs in the New World through immigration.

According to Reynolds, “the term ‘slang’ was first used in America around 1850 to mean ‘illegitimate language’” (1996: 319). It must be noted that the incorporation of slang in English American poetry in the late nineteenth-century was an act as defiant as the use of demotic Greek, which has no immediate equivalent in English. Evaluating the translations of Cavafy’s poetry into English, Auden once rightfully observed that “in English there is nothing comparable to the rivalry between demotic and purist Greek … We have only Standard English on one side and regional dialects on the other.” The development of the English language has sprang from an alliance of two old European languages: the Old English of the Anglo Saxon culture formed by the Germanic tribes and the relatively more recent Romanesque, or sometimes called Romance English, a direct influence of Latin, including Norman French. The “Romance” languages had a lasting impact on British literature, especially after the Renaissance, when a revered poet like Milton extensively used words of Latin origins in his revival of the epic poetic form. Whitman demonstrates knowledge of both by combining Middle English –a late form of Old English – words such as “yawp” or “rankness”– with Romance terms like “afflatus.” Overall, his declared intention corresponds with the earlier discussion about the formation of an American language that grows independently from the tradition and authority of British language.

\(^{50}\) Richelet cited in Prountzou, 13.
Regional dialects provided Whitman with an opportunity to update and enrich his poetic American vocabulary that he picks up on the streets and every corner of life in a new city that in its daily communication has little knowledge, let alone use, for words like “afflatus.” The “nigger dialect,” for instance, Whitman praises for furnishing “hundreds of outré words, many of them adopted into the common speech of the mass of the people … (it) has hints of the future theory of the modification of all the words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America” (Whitman 1904: 24). He borrows extensively also from the Native American vocabulary, especially place names. With the curiosity at once of a lexicographer and a journalist, Whitman collects – and rescues – hundreds of such words from their vernacular insignificance: “Many of the slang words among fighting men, gamblers, thieves, prostitutes, are powerful words,” he exclaims. “These words ought to be collected – the bad words as well as the good. –Many of these bad words are fine” (1904: 7).

When Whitman notes that “modern taste is for brevity and for ranging words in spelling classes” (14) he adequately anticipates the upcoming discourse on English language. By the early twentieth century the influence of Romance English gave way to the tendency for shorter and simpler words that made up a popular and more fitting language for modern prose and verse, fiction and journalism, in a similar fashion that demotic Greek appealed to modern Greeks. In that respect, the closest that comes to mind in English that is comparable to the opposition of demotic and purist Greek, in terms of diction and style at least, is perhaps the division between the elitist diction of “Romance” and the plainness of Anglo-Saxon English whose accessibility and inclusiveness appealed to Whitman.51

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51 It is emblematic how the poets’ own name Walt —a nickname for Walter— came as a result of such a linguistic predilection. By Whitman’s own telling, he acquired it from the bus-drivers in New York, with whom he rode and chatted constantly when he lived in that city (Myerson, 74).
The vernacular served Whitman’s egalitarian mission: it enabled him to incorporate the idioms of his nascent nation into his narrative, and by doing so to give voice to the linguistic texture of the American working class life that was changing in mid-century due to rapid urbanization. Reynolds suggests a reasonable application of Bakhtin’s idea of skaz to Whitman’s poetics. The Russian literary term refers mainly to the incorporation of national idioms into an oral form of narrative that broke into fiction in the late 1910s. Skaz idiomatic speech consists both of vernacular and slang whose spontaneity is integrated into a narrative that elicits the characteristics of particular characters with strong personas. Even though the term is usually applied to prose fiction, as Reynolds demonstrates, it has relevance to Whitman’s proselike verse which abounds in incorporations of idioms obtained through the oral dealings of the bard with the street culture. This exchange is processed in an all-assimilating narrative that revolves around the omnipresent persona of a poet with a thousand faces. Blending the temperaments of opposites – high and low, beauty and death, male-female, revolution and repression – Whitman aspired to find a third way of understanding modern life’s utterances.

Most arguably, this understanding, as in the case of Cavafy, came from the consideration of the unruly street as the pedestal of that new language whose “lawless germinal element, below all words and sentences, and behind all poetry” revealed “a certain perennial rankness and Protestantism of speech” (cited in Reynolds, 319). As Whitman observed, the great writers “embody the rude materials of the people and give them the best forms for the place and time” (cited in Reynolds, 1996: 325), crafting thus a language that represents both the sounds and the imagery of the modern city. In her essay “Melodious Meditations” Virginia Woolf declared her admiration for Whitman by stating that in the new century “the best artistic work is done by people who mix easily with their fellows” (cited in Cuddy-Keane, 41). She had firmly Whitman
in mind. To those for whom Woolf is marked by upper-class-Englishness her affinity for Whitman definitely strikes an odd chord. But also it is indicative of the welcoming of Whitman’s egalitarian spirit in the Old World at a time that, as Woolf remarked, any move to turn literature into a “special cult” of “geniuses” and “great men” who are treated with special “reverence” by “the masses” seemed deplorable. “Was there ever a plan,” she asks, “better calculated to freeze literature at the root than this one?” (Cited in Cuddy-Keane, 41)

**The Negations of Modernity**

Unlike other poets, especially of British origins, Whitman was not – and never pretended to be – an elitist poet. On the contrary, his commonness he methodically promoted as an asset, in tune with the social trends that emerged in the decades that followed the French Revolution east and west of the Atlantic. The bourgeoisie, a class of town-dwellers that had surfaced around mercantile functions in Paris, was renowned for its contribution to the revolution that inspired numerous intellectuals outside France. According to the emerging middle-class sensibility which spread from revolutionary France, commonness, the extreme opposite of the aristocratic identity, was viewed rather as an asset than a mishap in the rearranged social map. The empowerment of the American middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century changed drastically the socioeconomic structure of the developing capitalist nation. A new hierarchy of needs placed emphasis on aesthetic achievement and materialistic self-fulfillment and as a result, in Veblen’s famous words, expenditure for display became more conspicuous than ever before. In this social climate that Whitman came to distrust later in his life, it became obvious that with regard to class mobility and social stratification, between the two evils of plutocracy and aristocracy America
has chosen the former, albeit as Whitman prophesized, the rich could be as corrupted, ostentatious and overbearing as the European bluebloods. But back in his optimistic time, before the profligacy of the Gilded Age and Gatsby’s upcoming sacrifice in the pool of materialism, Whitman dreamed a different American dream than the one that arose from the heart of Gatsby era’s “vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.”

In his study of Cavafy, C. M. Bowra emphasizes how the immense accumulation of wealth in the peaceful years from 1870 to 1914 did not bring happiness but trepidation, a global fear so overwhelming that it could be expressed only with images of disintegration and desolation (81). Cavafy’s philosophical and emotional poems of his mature years encapsulated modernity’s anxiety in cynical soliloquies and in compositions with strong negative figures and themes (as in “Gray,” “Very Rarely,” “Builders,” “The City” and “Walls,” among others). Cavafy is fully aware of all the things that went awry at the turn of the century, misfortunes that Whitman hoped would not occur. In fact Cavafy’s own life story attests to a process of financial degeneration that is not the exception of his time. Unlike Whitman, who was raised in a rather spartan rural environment, Cavafy came from an urban, wealthy and cosmopolitan family that lost its money as a result of historical circumstances and private upheavals. But, even as the intellectual privileged man that he was, Cavafy distrusted elitism as much as Whitman did. Back then, elitism in Europe assumed the air of superiority of the educated aristocracy; in America it exuded the pride of the nouveau rich who mimicked European customs and hoped that indeed, as the maxim of the American leisure class had it in the 1890s, when good Americans die they go to Paris. Cavafy detested both the old and the new versions of elitism. At the same time he was acutely aware of his position as a powerless subject – a caged intellectual – relying on his modest salary as a clerk for the irrigation department.

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As will be further discussed in the ensuing chapters, Cavafy’s poetry, like most modernist literature and not strictly verse but also prose fiction, was not as much about the pessimism of an imprisoned individual as it was about the resolution of a free individual – the individual whose stoic voice comes through in the poem “The City” – to accept the knowledge of the sorrows of mankind in a fashion that brings to mind Woolf’s ongoing effort to cope with the mutability of the human condition. It remains questionable if Cavafy indeed ever read Woolf later in his life, but it would be an oversight not to observe that aside from their mutual distaste for over-idealizing past “geniuses” in literature, they share certain essential modernist themes, most notably the will of the early twentieth-century individual to turn the imprecision of memory into the most trustworthy revelation about the meaning of a life lived amidst the negations of modernity.

The early optimism of the antebellum Whitman, on the other hand, is mindful of the pre-modernist innocence of the American endeavor to start afresh in a state of tabula rasa, although post-Columbus American identity never attained such a degree of authenticity. Whitman’s idealistic vision of an American cultural revolution remained largely unfulfilled: the succeeding editions of *Leaves of Grass* and other Whitman poems that followed the experience of the Civil War and the Reconstruction indicate a darker mood that conforms with the poet’s aging reflection of himself as the “Pilot of the Mist” in the ensuing angst of old age. But, arguably, even in his youth Whitman never obsessed over empty ideas; nor did his instincts fail to discern the futility of ideals in the emerging capitalist empire. As Reynolds points out, negative centers and figures from society and politics appear since the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (such as “the moneymaker that plotted all day” and “lice of politics” among many others), expressing Whitman’s doubts about the feasibility of his notion of cultural democracy (1996: 322).
Moreover, as it will be discussed in the second chapter, in *New York Dissected* and *Democratic Vistas* Whitman sharply criticizes the moral structure—and thus demystifies the democratic ideal—of America as a hopeless edifice built of ambition and greed.

Whitman’s America embodied the contradictions of modernity to an excessive degree: the endless contrasts of high and low, rich and poor, allure and decay, religiosity and prostitution, were also visible but perhaps less pronounced in Cavafy’s terse descriptions of shrinking Alexandria. Whitman’s New York was not merely the epicenter of “corruption,” “bribery,” “falsehood” and “scoundrelism” (Whitman, 1949: 10) but also an emerging Mecca of incoming migrants with a yet non-existent sewage system or fixed sanitary regulations. Pigs mingled freely with humans in the unpaved streets of the city, and rotting garbage along with piles of human excrements challenged the nostrils of the poor and the rich. Perhaps Petronius’ Rome was tidier than antebellum New York. Predictably Whitman saw beauty in urban decay, a literal but also allegorical decay that was not exclusively American: the decomposing elements lurking behind the splendor of nineteenth-century Paris or London have been duly dramatized in the pages of Hugo, Baudelaire, Zola and Dickens.
In Whitman’s day for the first time the vista of urban antithesis—an old source of inspiration for writers and painters alike—became the subject of a new optical fascination. As much as the Romantics before him, Whitman was enthralled by technological innovations, and undoubtedly one of the most defining ones in his time was the development of photography. The early days of photography revolutionized the ways a city was perceived and framed by its own dwellers long before photography was even considered an art form. Whitman’s urbanized generation was among the first to experience the impact of what came to be called a visual culture in America and in Europe, a culture that saw the word and the image forming an extraordinary alliance. The past no longer resided exclusively in the realm of words and legends; photographs gave undisputed proof of one’s existence. The extraordinary impact that the newly established medium of photography would have on poetry and language did not escape Whitman, who duly noted in “Spontaneous Me” that “real poems [are] being merely pictures.” The idea that images are born in poetry, which Whitman unwittingly advocated before it was even articulated by the Imagists, correlated with a new dialectics of the image and the word that Whitman attempted to establish. Often times Whitman thought in images, and as a result Leaves of Grass in particular provides us with a narrative whose editing is crafted by someone who had a hint of the future technique of cinematic montage in mind.

The principal aspect of photography that appealed to Whitman was its inclusiveness. Like the slang language that lured Whitman into new avenues of experimentation, photography affirmed a democratic aesthetic aligned with Whitman’s endeavors to emphasize the appeal of
the middle and lower classes in modern life. One of the reasons literature was changing direction at the end of the century was also due to the spreading of the new medium in public life, especially after Louis Daguerre’s invention of the daguerreotype process of photography in Paris in the late 1830s. The Western society was transitioning from a word-dominated to an image-minded culture; the development of photography signaled the beginning of the rivalry between the image and the word. Photography provoked an immediate, impossible to avoid, and often unfair competition between the past and the present. As much as oil painting’s reputation was subjugated to a newly empowered critique, standard forms of poetry, as already discussed, were also suffering the blows of the modernizers. Even though it took a long time for photography to be recognized as a legitimate form of art in America, Whitman certainly was among the first to pave the way. As Reynolds synoptically puts it, “Photography put new demands on the artist and the writer. Since the world could now be captured ‘as is,’ what was the artist’s role?” (1996: 280).

Whitman’s excitement to capture the world around him as a kind of “roving camera,” in many ways intimates the voyeuristic impulses of modernist literature that sprang from the crude curiosity of the flâneur. Isherwood’s legendary declaration in the opening of Goodbye to Berlin in 1930 verbalized the non-interventional, voyeuristic aspects of the urban self that later

\[\text{53} \text{ Whitman himself maintained that the superiority of photographs to paintings was that “they are honest.” Moreover, he believed that “the photograph has this advantage: it lets nature have its way: the botheration with the painters is that they don’t want nature to have its way” (Cited in Reynolds, 281, 283).}\]

\[\text{54} \text{ The American photographer, publisher and avid admirer of Whitman, F. Holland Day (1864-1933) is often acknowledged as the first in America to advocate that photography should be considered a fine art, but it must be added that Whitman’s perception of photography as an essential metaphor behind his democratic aesthetic, preceded Day’s involvement with the subject. Emphatically – and somehow exaggeratedly—Whitman professed that everything in Leaves of Grass “is literally photographed. Nothing is poetized” (Cited in Reynolds, 281).}\]

\[\text{55} \text{ Citied in Reynolds, 283}\]

\[\text{56} \text{ “I am a camera with its shutters open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed” (Isherwood, 3).}\]
became the subject of Sontag’s analysis.57 The proliferation of photographic images promotes the narcissism of the city; it establishes within people, in the words of Sontag, a “chronic voyeuristic relation”58 with the world around them but also with the reproduction of their own image. In that respect, as will be examined in the second and third chapters in accordance with Cavafy’s dual persona as actor and voyeur, Whitman championed the virtuosity of a modern chameleon in the spectacle of the city: actor and spectator, observer and observed, active and passive, image-maker and versifier.

A most crucial aspect of photography’s increasing appeal in the nineteenth-century was its technical capacity for portraying the self unlike any other previous mode. The emerging prospect of stage-managing the self before the lens of a camera gave rise to a new wave of self-awareness that stood apart from self-portraiture in painting or the textual representation of the self; it paved the way for an uninhibited self-depiction in art that also left its imprint in literature by increasing the emphasis on the confessional and the exhibitionistic aspects of the self.

Whitman’s unabashed preoccupation with celebrating the self, thus, will be juxtaposed in the third chapter with the development of the aesthetics of solipsism into a full-fledged artistic form that triggered alternate ways of inspecting the carnality of the self in the twentieth century.59

Even though the self-portrait is regarded as a photographic tradition inherited from the tradition of painting60 in the final chapter my aim is to examine the links between textual and photographic self-representation and see how the former informs the latter in terms of

57 In her study On Photography Sontag draws a persuasive analogy between the expectation of photography to reflect idealized images in the nineteenth-century and its eventual development into an act of non-intervention. Sontag also refers to Whitman as an early embodiment (the “delirious prophet of cultural revolution”) of culture’s fixation with idealized images.
58 Sontag, On Photography
59 The progressive fascination with framing the self is nothing new to us moderns. Post-modern technology has given rise to the massive cultural fixation with the reproduction of the inartistic self-image that in today’s parlance is known as “selfie.”
60 Guibert extensively discusses the development of the self-portrait into a visual autobiography of the modern self in Ghost Image.
conceptualization, interpretation and imagery. In particular I will be turning to the art of self-depiction as championed by artist Lucas Samaras, whose visual self-representation broke new aesthetic ground in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of its depiction of life and art as “the lived experience of the body” (Kuspit, 55). This exposed experience turned the exteriority of the poetic body into the subject of an exhibitionistic quest, revealing thus aspects of the self that both Whitman and Cavafy interiorized in their poetics.

Hence, it is my undertaking to conclude this study by examining the poetics of the body of Whitman and Cavafy vis-à-vis the post-modern visual self-meditations of Samaras. In their textual and visual contemplations these rugged individualists are addressing their future readers and viewers in a non-traditional way. The three artists’ representation of the transient body as proof of the existence of the self, but also, in Nietzsche’s words, as an “incarnation of dissonance” yearning for the redemption of beauty, responds both to the romantic notion of the corporality of the human soul, as well as to a perception of the self as an agonistic body of resistance, always in battle with the ills of progress, always in fight with the deformation brought upon by time.
Chapter 1

The Sea

The Throne of the Invisible and the Coming of the Central Man

O Ocean vast! We heard thy song with wonder,
Whilst waves marked time.
Appear, O Truth!” thou sang’st with tone of thunder,
And shine sublime!

-Victor Hugo, “The Ocean’s Song”

This chapter examines the presence of the sea, which pervaded the Romantic imagination and whose centrality is evident in Whitman and Cavafy. The consideration of the physical, emotional and cultural proximity of each poet to the sea reveals firm ties with maritime themes substantiated in the poetics of both by references to voyages, seafaring, shipping, shipwrecks and emigration. In addition, one may detect in Whitman and Cavafy a consistent representation of the self as subject to the fluid element; the poet-voyager is habitually drawn to the fixity of solidity, but he also appears intuitively motivated to breaking waves and crossing boundaries, as Whitman attests in “Song of the Open Road” and Cavafy in “Ithaca.”

The “thirst for the sea” that Cavafy refers to in “The Second Odyssey” is as ancient as the tales of Odysseus and as inexorable as Baudelaire’s longing for the “marvelous travelers” whose
“glorious stories we read in your eyes as deep as the seas.”⁶¹ Arguably, from the time of Homer to the days of Columbus and Darwin, no poet or explorer can evade the wonderful horrible song of the sea.⁶² To use a romantic analogy, the voice of the sea enunciates us. As a metaphorical entity the sea encapsulates the fluidity of time and memory; its flux carries the “flowing literatures” and furtive knowledge of the centuries in “silent thoughts, of Time and Space and death, like waters flowing;”⁶³ its voice literally instructs the cadence of Whitman’s verse.⁶⁴ There are a number of figurative and literal seas, as Pieris remarks apropos of Cavafy’s seascapes: “that of the sensual landscape (linked with themes of hedonism, art, memory, etc.); that of the historical and political aspect (connected to the topics of sea battles, political exile, coastal colonies, etc.); and that of social and economic considerations (combined with themes such as emigration and occupational involvement with the sea)” (274). Above all, the echo of the Romantic sea encompasses all of the above in the poetics of Whitman, but also of Cavafy, whose symbolism is often indebted to his latter-day romanticism.

¹⁶¹.“The Voyage”
¹⁶² Just for the record, Darwin was known for his fear of the sea. As the scientist himself recorded in The Voyage of the Beagle he often suffered severe physical and psychological ailments aboard the Beagle caused by the wrath of the stormy seas. Regardless, that did not stop him from crossing the oceans in search of his findings.
¹⁶³ Whitman, “Passage to India”
¹⁶⁴ In “Had I the Choice” the sea is invoked as a mentor, the poet’s gate to knowledge, cadence and creation:

Had I the choice to tally greatest bards,
To limn their portraits, stately, beautiful, and emulate at will,
Homer with all his wars and warriors—Hector, Achilles, Ajax,
Or Shakspeare's woe-entangled Hamlet, Lear, Othello—Tennyson's fair ladies,
Metre or wit the best, or choice conceit to wield in perfect rhyme, delight of singers;
These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,
Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,
Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse,
And leave its odor there.
I will be considering Whitman’s sequence of eleven poems “Sea-Drift,”65 the eight-poem cluster “Fancies at Navesink,” “Song of the Open Road,” “Passage to India” and “Song of Myself,” and Cavafy’s poems “Voice from the Sea,” “Morning Sea,” “Ithaca,” “Great Feast at the House of Sosibius,” “Second Odyssey,” “Aboard the Ship,” “Prayer,” “On the Waterfront,” “Days of 1908,” and “After the Swim,” as well as the prose poems “The Ships” and “One Evening in Kalinteri.” An examination of the multifaceted aesthetic representations of the sea as a metaphorical and philosophical space in the poetry of Hugo, Byron, Tennyson and Baudelaire will enable me to trace earlier and running-parallel motifs that are also present in Whitman and Cavafy. It is important to evaluate romanticism’s aestheticization of the sea prior to establishing the main thematic maritime links in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy, which incorporate aspects of the Ulyssian journey as an internal and external adventure.

The aesthetic contemplation of the sea begins with Romanticism. The romantic sea flows irrespective of time and history, it has its own indefinite temporality, and a fathomless individuality that, according to Byron, makes it “boundless, endless, and sublime – The image of Eternity- the throne of the Invisible…”66 In the first half of the nineteenth century the secular symbolism of the harbor before a wide romantic sea overshadows the sheltering features of the landlocked medieval Christian convent, as much as the railway station takes over the cathedral in the second half, in promising exodus, mobility, freedom and redemption through faith in nature, science and art. Unlike the relative safety of the railway in its fixed land course, a (romantic) ship follows paths untrodden (in Whitman’s language), always striving to evade the limitations of the “unendurable Cold earth, the place of graves”; always captained by a superhuman desire to reach chimerical islands of terror and pleasure, and confront the strength of nature with the

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65 First published in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
66 *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV, CLXXXIII
cunning of a Gilliatt.\textsuperscript{67} From Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}, where Satan adroitly navigates the empyrean sea in defiance of divine supremacy, to Byron’s re-enacted voyaging passions of Satan and Ulysses, to J. M. W. Turner’s visual manifestations of the temperamental sea, awaiting to enchant and consume all voyagers, the “glory” or “gloom” of the water-world, in John Ruskin’s words, define the parameters of an immeasurable albeit treasured power. The waves erode the boundaries between reason and imagination in the romantic soul, a soul likened by Baudelaire to “a brigantine seeking its Icaria.”\textsuperscript{68}

The romantic imagination turns the sea into a world of its own makings. This is the protean sea that contains Coleridge’s archaic mariner and Tennyson’s diverted Ulysses; Hugo’s toilers and Baudelaire’s passions and shipwrecks; Whitman’s seed and tears and Cavafy’s lovely bones of \textit{eros}. As Cohen observes, “the sublimation of the seas culminated in the empty seas of the Romantic sublime. Cleared of historical mariners (of the previous centuries), the sea was then open to imaginative repopulation by poets, novelists, and artists” (11). This “repopulation” of the great waters, once the undifferentiated flux of God and later the open seas that carried the ships of the fallen race, led to a renewed Romantic attitude that Auden, in his seminal study \textit{The Enchafèd Flood}, outlined in four distinctive notes (23):

1. To leave the land and the city is the desire of every man of sensibility and honor.
2. The sea is the real situation and the voyage is the true condition of man.
3. The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial.
4. An abiding destination is unknown even if it may exist: a lasting relationship is not possible nor even to be desired.

In Auden’s tenets one discerns some familiar figures and themes: (1) Byron in his quixotic delusion; (2) the post-Homeric (Dantean) seafarer and main occupant in the poetics of

\textsuperscript{67} Gilliat: the solitary hero in Hugo’s \textit{Toilers of the Sea}, who confronts the sublimity of the water-world and its creatures with remarkable cunning and resourcefulness.
\textsuperscript{68} “The Voyage”
Hölderlin, Tennyson, Nietzsche, Pascoli, Hugo, Baudelaire, Whitman, Cavafy and, of course, Conrad if one is willing to cross to romantic-realist prose territory; (3, 4) Hugo, Baudelaire, Whitman and Cavafy who, as we will see, spoke of vanished cities, unsinkable desires, sailors’ voyages, chimerical islands and, above all, death! “The spasm of the sea forebodes some woe,” Hugo tells us. “Oh Death, my captain, it is time! Let us raise the anchor!” Baudelaire exclaims in “The Voyage,” a pivotal poem that resonates with Whitman’s themes, while it foreshadows Cavafy’s preoccupation with the sea as a songstress of death.

Baudelaire believes that journeys, like modern life itself, are full of ephemeral pleasures but mainly of “unforeshadowed disasters.” The clash between waves and ships defines the story of humanity; it is the subject matter of a primordial narrative that is often recalled by the Romantics. Baudelaire sighs: “Man, no one has sounded the depths of your being; / O Sea, no person knows your most hidden riches, / So zealously do you keep your secrets! / Yet for countless ages you have fought each other / Without pity, without remorse.”

The romantic maritime corpus is a paean to this notion of a contingent gloom, a wonderful terror ingrained in the infinity of a sublime sea, real or metaphoric, streaming amidst indissoluble contraries: splendor and death, male camaraderie and ascetic living, the twin phantoms of Odysseus and Ulysses competing afloat the sorrowful tides of the centuries for a telos, the closure that modernity denies us. The ambition of the romantic soul to inhabit such a wild place transcends reason; the romantic adventurer, like Coleridge’s mariner, must traverse “Alone, alone, all, all alone / Alone on a wide wide sea!”

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69 *Toilers of the Sea*, 351

70 Turner’s pictorial seascapes of mayhem demonstrate visually the romantic idea of the sea as a constant challenger of the human voyage. In particular, I see Turner’s “The Wreck of a Transport Sea” (1810) as the most evocative pictorial representation of fluid nature’s indifference to human annihilation, which became a regular theme not only in Baudelaire but also in Hugo’s various poems and great novel *The Toilers of the Sea.*

71 “Man and the Sea”
In the “Analytic of the Beautiful” Kant explains how the separation between aesthetics and instrumental reason, which became essential to the Enlightenment episteme, contributed to the metaphorical representation of the sea in literature and the arts. Drawing from the concept of the sublime, its thesis subject to amendment throughout the history of aesthetics from Longinus to Burke, Kant postulated that “if we are to call the sight of the ocean sublime, we must not think of it as we [ordinarily] do, as implying all kinds of knowledge ... as a vast kingdom of aquatic creatures ... or again as an element which, though dividing continents from each other, yet promotes the greatest communication between them ... To call the ocean sublime we must regard it as poets do, merely by what strikes the eye” (sited in Cohen, 116). Unlike Burke, who separated the idea of the sublime from the pedestal of language on which Longinus had originally placed it and claimed that the origin of the sublime is terror of the potential pain evoked by a natural object, Kant argued that the sublime comes from the failure of imagination fully to comprehend a natural object of immense terror or pain, such as a stormy sea or an avalanche, which results not necessarily in a state of pain, but in a feeling of delight brought on by the transcendence of reason.

Kant used the antithetical concept of calm and stormy sea as an Enlightenment allegory for an autonomous volatile Supreme Being, or a “Magna Mater” in Whitman’s enunciation, whose dominance does not correlate with theological stipulations. Unable to comprehend and control the sublimity of the sea as a sentiment that “expands the soul” and overwhelms us with the infinite greatness of the world, Kant claims, the mind is “incited to abandon sensibility” (#23, 129). A sublime sea is primarily a generator of aesthetic signification; its suggestiveness involves our imagination to turn it into a transcending experience, than merely look at it as the watery mass that it really is. As Kant emphasizes, the sight of the vast ocean alone heaved up by storms
cannot be called sublime; it must be attached to a person’s intuition, fears and experience “to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime” (#29, 152). Whitman responds to the idea of a sublime sea. “The thought of the sea,” he recounts, “The thought of ships struck in the storm and put on their beam/ends and the cutting away of masts…”

Hugo further evokes the Kantian premise when, speaking of the water world, he claims that “nature’s creations, as sublime as the creations of human brilliance, encapsulate the absolute and impose upon us … These are creations that stupefy us because they turn terror into sublimity, because they astonish us and because they surpass the common human capability” (1980: 300).

The aesthetic experience of a sublime sea, thus, can push the mind to the edge; it can make humans grasp the relation of their senses to the world, and realize both their limitations and the possibility of transcending them. The reading of twentieth-century literature, especially the novel, as a corroboration of the Nietzschean-like strife between limitations and transgression highlighted the intellectual awareness that the modern world predicted by the novelists, and essentially nurtured by the prophetic vision of the poets, is indeed unmoored from the heavenly harbor as determinedly as the vessel of Milton’s dark mariner, or Hölderlin’s own influential poetic craft of estrangement. Hence, the anguish induced by such joint western sense of embarkation on unknown seas devoid of Olympian jurisdiction or a Christian compass informs

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72 “Song of the Broad-Axe”

73 Prediction and prophecy are used here in the context of Bakhtin’s analysis of the former as a characteristic of the novel, the latter of the epic, in his essay “Epic and Novel” from The Dialogic Imagination. Whitman anticipates the twentieth-century discourse on the epic and novel when he writes “the times and depictions from the Iliad to Shakespeare inclusive can happily never again be realized—but the elements of courageous and lofty manhood are unchanged” (“A Backward Glance o’ver Travel’d Roads,” Lines 368-370).

74 The German Romantic poet’s influence on Nietzsche is well known. Hölderlin’s idea of disbandment from the heavenly harbor can be abridged in one telling strophe from “The Poet’s Vocation” that evokes the synthetic identity of the artist as an embodiment of Milton’s Adam and Satan, both trapped and compressed in a body circumnavigating the flux of modernity:

But if he must, the man remains fearless.
Alone before god, simplicity keeps him safe.
He needs no weapons and no cunning,
As long as God’s absence comes to his aid.
Lukacs’ notion of “transcendental homelessness,” which corroborates modernity’s alignment with the Enlightenment’s gradual rejection of divine authority, from Kant’s secular ethics to Nietzsche’s moral nihilism. Both Whitman and Cavafy are positively aware of this breach. It is not conclusive to which extent the two poets were versed in the works of Nietzsche, but their maritime approach indicates an affinity for the sea-beaten, albeit sufferable brigantine of the Übermensch. Certainly that affinity remains unwitting in the case of Whitman, who could not have read Nietzsche’s works because their English translations were published after the poet’s death.

Before Nietzsche gave him a name, the Übermensch already existed in the imagination of poets: he was Dante’s escapee from the Homeric pelagos of nostos; the polytropos oarsman whose intrepid nature led him through many stages of transformations; later we find him again as the harbinger of Enlightenment rationality; he is Emerson’s Central Man, a man determined, in Bloom’s words, to reverse the defeat of Christ and insist that “we demand Victory” (1976: 260). This man is piloting the quixotic and Byronic journeys and, of course, the Whitmanian “voyage of (the human) mind’s return, / to reason’s early paradise, / Back, back to wisdom’s birth…” Whitman trusts that “after the seas are all cross’d … finally shall come the poet worthy that name. The true son of God shall come singing his songs … The true son of God, the poet, / (He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains.” This “true son of God” is none other than a justified overman whose mind contains the intertwined knowledge of Columbus, Darwin, Frankenstein and Zarathustra. He is also a martyr in Cavafy’s Lukacsean landscape of pessimism.

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75 Lukacs, The Theory of the Novel (1920)
76 Stavrou has published the most extensive comparative study of Whitman and Nietzsche that I know of. Malanos records a conversation he had with Cavafy apropos of his poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” in which the poet demonstrated knowledge of the “philosophical theory of the eternal return by Nietzsche” (299).
77 The Homeric epithet applied to Odysseus in the Odyssey that literally means “man of many ways.”
78 “Passage to India”
79 “Passage to India”
and resignation. The twentieth-century world is broken; it can no longer be fixed by any Son, but its fragments constitute modernity’s corpus of regret.

*A Nursery of the Craft*

Free man, you will always cherish the sea!
The sea is your mirror; you contemplate your soul
In the infinite unrolling of its billows;
Your mind is an abyss that is no less bitter.

-Charles Baudelaire, “The Voyage”

The notion of the sea as a mirror of the woes of the free man, to cite this section’s epigraph, begins in the Renaissance and gradually extends into the nineteenth century. An early specular reflection of human *metis* came out from the sun-driven waves that pillowed the first seaman in the Western imagination, as Odysseus is often depicted. The Homeric mariner defied the Sirens’ tune of oblivion to craft his own song of νόστος bound to reverberate infinitely and haunt the consciousness of posterity. Yet, the idea of the boundless sea as a representation of the volatility of the human mind emerges rather later with a pronouncement made by Milton’s dark mariner, banished as he is in a sublime sea of fire, that sets the tone for the self-containment of the Romantic generations: “the mind is its own place.” That place, according to Dickinson, lies somewhere “deeper that the sea”; the mighty nous resembles, in Hugo’s analogy, the endless oscillation of the ocean that is rippling without end; the intercourse of heart and brain, Baudelaire suggests, happens in the midst of such ebbing and flowing, the *afflatus*, in which we find Whitman “tossing like a cork in the stream,” to use Henry Miller’s suitable analogy, or

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80 Translation Geoffry Wagner
81 *Paradise Lost*
82 *Toilers of the Sea*, 356
Cavafy sailing without hurrying to beat any storm or pleasure because the lust for travel and knowledge is greater than the satisfaction of arriving at any harbor.

And so the sea becomes the silent witness of man’s courage – and death. The melancholy that engulfs Whitman on the shore is expressed in solidarity with the ecumenical mother’s grieving song about the pains of humanity: her tears cuddle his poetic craft; they cradle the faith of the poet along with the fate of the seaman; they moisten the harsh but rewarding paths “filled with adventure, filled with understanding.” On the other hand, Hugo’s “sterile sands and the fields beyond” instill a wonderful pessimism in the heart of Whitman and Cavafy. Unlike any mortal mother, the poets know, the sea is doomed to endless mourning in a rolling eternity of sorrow for those who come and go. The sea contains all the tears of the earth and therefore, Hugo observes, her agonizing task is to lament incessantly: “The ocean mourns for the bedevilment of humanity.”

Along these lines, both Whitman and Cavafy address the sea through elegies whose covert tone is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s treatment of it as a tormented female body. According to Baudelaire the sea is a maternal abyss withholding the mysteries of life and death, as well as Hugo’s depiction of it as a mournful nurse who infinitely composes and decomposes herself to receive and consume the centuries and their legends. In the “Sea-Drift” group of sea-poems (first published in the 1881 edition of Leaves of Grass) Whitman likens the sea to a “fierce old mother incessantly moaning” for “her castaways.” Her dirge discloses the “key, the word up from the

83 Cavafy, “Ithaca”
84 Whitman, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”
85 Toilers of the Sea, 354
86 In his poem “Music” Baudelaire exclaims, “Over the vast gulf cradle me. At other times, dead calm, great mirror of my despair.”
87 Whitman turns the English neutral for the “sea” into feminine (as in Greek η δάλασσα or French la mer), emphasizing thus a gender dialectics between two distinct but equally willful natural elements, sea and land, in harmonic opposition, as also later encountered in Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea, where the sea appears
waves” – “O give me the clew!” he implores, “(it lurks in the night here somewhere)” – that will help him configure his “liquid-flowing syllables.” In his renounced poem “Voice from the Sea” (1898) Cavafy presents us with a comparable variation to Whitman’s sea, the sea as a seductive songstress whose “secret voice,” like that of a Siren, reveals the happiness and sorrowfulness of life and exhorts the poet to resist or give in to the torrent of memory: “The sea breathes out a secret voice –/ a voice that goes in/ our hearts and touches it/ and rejoices it.” Then, putting aside the sea’s erotic appeal to the young, a commonplace theme in romantic literature, Cavafy retrenches his rapture by asking: “is it a song, or the moan of the drowned?”

Is it the song of Odysseus or the requiem of the ship-wrecked Ulysses? It is both. Overall, both poets drift in the Ulyssean antithetical current of progress and regret that begins in the ancient Aegean Sea, runs through the medieval straits of Dante, and pours out into Baudelaire’s ocean of modernity. 88 It seems that Whitman, like the Greek heroic bards he vows to respect but not to emulate, 89 is innately aware of the seduction – and the anxiety – the sea exerts on the

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88 Baudelaire is acutely aware of the legacy that constitutes the western traveler’s references. He writes in “The Voyage”:

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We shall embark on that sea of Darkness
With the happy heart of a young traveler.
Do you hear these voices, alluring and funereal,
Singing: “This way, those of you who long to eat
The perfumed lotus-leaf! it is here that are gathered
Those miraculous fruits for which your heart hungers;
Do come and get drunk on the strange sweetness
Of this afternoon without end!”
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89 As already mentioned in the introduction, in “Song of Exposition,” written in 1871, Whitman analogizes the relationship of his generation of poets with the ancient bards to that of a son to a father. But in “As I Ponder’d in Silence,” written the same year, he draws the line between the previous generations’ deeds and his own literary intentions. The awesome “phantom” and “genius of poets of old lands” that comes before Whitman “with distrustful aspect, / Terrible in beauty, age, and power” resembles Homer. When provoked by the Shade to
poet’s mind and senses: an awareness that without the wonder of the Homeric sea-voyage of
Odysseus, in Boitani’s words, there wouldn’t be an arkhe of poetry, there wouldn’t be a “nursery
of the craft” (151). As a Greek of the Diaspora sailing in between the ports of Alexandria,
Istanbul, Athens and London during his lifetime, the well-travelled Cavafy is also undoubtedly
aware of that analogy. The speculation that Cavafy is solely “the poet of interior spaces”
evades the truth that even when Cavafy speaks of closed windows, literally or metaphorically, he
is still awfully aware that his body, his memory, his home, his city and his culture are subjects to
the “invisible influence,” as Whitman would put it, of the Alexandrian shore, gate to the
Mediterranean, sea of Homer and Dante, sea of legends, history and continuity.

_Traversing the Ulyssean Sea_

In his hidden poem “Second Odyssey” (1894), Cavafy acknowledges the sea of the bards
as an early source of tradition and inspiration in his work:

A great second Odyssey,
Greater even than the first perhaps,
But alas, without Homer, without hexameters.
Small was his ancestral home,
Small was his ancestral city,
And the whole of his Ithaca was small.

The thirst
For the sea rose up with him.
He hated the air of the dry land.
At night, spectres of Hesperia
Came to trouble his sleep.
He was seized with nostalgia
For voyages, for the morning arrivals
At harbors you sail into,
With such happiness, for the first time.

90 As framed by I. M. Panagiotopoulos’ in his essay “Cavafy: Poet of Interior Spaces,” which reshuffles positions
previously expressed by Malanos, Tsirkas and Savidis.
And so he left.

As the shores of Ithaca gradually
Faded away behind him
And he sailed swiftly westward
Toward Iberia and the Pillars of Hercules,
Far from every Achaeian sea,
He felt he was alive once more,
Freed from the oppressive bonds
Of familiar, domestic things.
And his adventurous heart rejoiced
Coldly, devoid of love.

Two themes that stand out in Cavafy’s early “unripe” period are the natural beauty of his parents’ coastal village outside Istanbul (“Nichori,” 1877, “One Night in Kalinteri,” 1882), and the Mediterranean culture’s thematic fixation on the return of Ulysses. Ultimately, the latter enables Cavafy to escape the former, which the poet does in his “mature” period where there are no traces left of the charms of Nichori in his poetry ... And so he left ... It would take Cavafy another decade and a half, as we will see, to turn around the idea of Ithaca from a Homeric absolute to a malleable symbol of emancipation – an experience of growth and change that parallels the crossroads of the modern world in the fin de siècle.

For Cavafy, as much as for the diverse new world, the promise of fulfillment no longer lies in a fixed destination but rather, as his poem “Ithaca” (1910) implies, on a floating island, a place of the mind that is equivalent to a traveler’s longing for past moments. Cavafy’s Ithaca blinks like a lighthouse across the distance and spaces – generally far, always elusive. In his thematic analysis of Cavafy’s “Ithaca,” Anton examines the legacy of the Homeric Odysseus and the Hellenic idea of nostos in Western literature in three stages: the first major transformation, he maintains, occurred with the medieval Dante, the second with the English Romantics, and the last with Cavafy. Reinventing the idea of “Ithaca” atoned Cavafy for his previous literary
simplicity; it also allowed him to contain the anxiety of tradition that, as in the case of Whitman, had smothered his early period.\footnote{In the essay “The End of Odysseus” that he wrote a year after the “Second Odyssey,” Cavafy appears as skeptical about the influence of the bards as Whitman had been. In particular, he acknowledges the “triple pressure,” in Savidis’s words, of Homer’s Odyssey, Dante’s Canto XXVI from the Inferno and Tennyson’s “Ulysses” in the formation of his own sensitivity and ambition. Such rich legacy, Jusdanis emphasizes, fills Cavafy with fear and apprehension about the possibility for originality “for a belated poet, coming at the end of a long tradition of masters and masterpieces,” largely predicting Bloom’s study on the anxiety of influence (143).}

Some of the prime marine symbols in the poetry of Whitman and Cavafy, such as islands, ships and waves, inevitably recall and perpetuate elements of the Homeric sea-voyage. The core in Homer’s imperfect geographical knowledge was the sea that united and divided civilizations, the known and the unknown, the present and the future. The two Homeric epics themselves, The Iliad and The Odyssey, stand across from each other like two opposite shores: the poem of war – the war-field approached and edged away from by the Achaeans through the Aegean Sea –, versus the post-war poem of Odysseus’ healing return by ways of punishing waves and meandering paths that eventually led to the awaiting queen of the loom. In the three millennia that separate us from Homer’s time, arguably, two things remain unchanged, the invulnerability of the sea and the appeal of Odysseus/Ulysses to the western poets as the centripetal errand-knight who always departs and returns, rises and approaches to announce the contingency of progress. As Stevens inquires in “The World as Meditation,” “Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east?”

Whitman’s contribution to the genealogical and intertextual framework of the Ulyssian narrative remains largely unacknowledged, even though his verses in “Passage to India” and “Song of the Open Road” constitute a link between Tennyson and Cavafy. Like Cavafy, Whitman follows the long thread that runs through the centuries and unites the epochs of Homer,
Dante and Tennyson. Whitman directly invokes the last two—and borrows freely from Dante—when he asks:

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not grovel’d here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?  

In Dante’s famous Canto XXVI, Odysseus’ phantom recounts a different fate than the one predicted by Teiresias, the blind prophet who tells Odysseus in Hades that “death will come to you far from the sea, the gentlest of deaths, taking you when you are bowed with comfortable old age.”  

Dante’s Ulysses returns to die at sea. Dante finds him in the eighth circle of hell and listens to his testimony:

I put out into the deep open sea with but one ship and with that small company which had not deserted me.... I and my companions were old and tardy when we came to that narrow pass where Hercules assigned his landmarks. “O brothers,” I said, “who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West deny not to this the brief vigil of your senses that remain, experience of the unpeopled world beyond the sun. Consider your origin, ye were not formed to live like Brutes but to follow virtue and knowledge.... Night already saw the other pole with all its stars and ours so low that it rose not from the ocean floor.”  

The release of Ulysses from the ennui of the Homeric Ithaca, attained by Dante to the dismay of many classical Greek scholars, inspired the typology of the modern restless wanderer in poetry (Tennyson, Whitman, Pascoli, Cavafy) and in history (Columbus, Vespucci, Darwin), and explored the limits of the mind and the body, the imaginary and the real, the metaphysical and the scientific. Arguably Dante did for Homeric Odysseus what Milton would later do for biblical Adam: he liberated him from the context of antiquity and by doing so he created an emancipated harbinger of the enlightenment rationality, a curious intertemporal traveler vowed “to follow knowledge like a sinking star, / beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”  

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92 “Passage to India”
93 The Odyssey, Book XI
94 Dante, Inferno: Canto xxvi, 94-126.
95 Tennyson, “Ulysses”
Boitani astutely observes, “(Dante’s) Ulysses embodies the tragic birth of the modern world …

The meeting-point between interpretation, poetry, and history generates … a typological
sequence in which Dante’s Ulysses is the ‘figure’ and Christopher Columbus the ‘fulfillment’”
(44). This is the moment that Odysseus ceases to sail the seas of imagination: “sitting, sleepless,
beside the ocean,” Boitani writes, “Dante announces his prophecy: ‘There are no Pillars!’, and it
is Columbus who hears and fulfils it…Poetry meets history with a vengeance!” (128).

After the great expeditions of the Renaissance the Ulysses theme continues to fuel
consistently the imagination of the romantic generations. Tennyson’s return to the Dantean
property affirms a further thirst for a “newer world” that Columbus’ discovery could not quench.
By the time Tennyson writes his dramatic monologue (in 1833, but not published until 1842) the
romantic sea is repopulated with the Dantean mariner’s dreams and visions.

There lies the port: the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas.

Come, my friends,
’Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Tennyson spares Ulysses and his mariners a death at sea. As later implied by Cavafy in
“The Second Odyssey,” Ulysses’ greatest threat in modernity is no longer death, but exile from
the Mediterranean to the new colonies of the West. Indeed, as Anton notes, “the conquests of the
Elizabethan era of the worlds beyond the shores of the Atlantic called for a new Odysseus,
unrelated to the Mediterranean, and free of the classical devotion to his little Ithaca. Odysseus, or rather Ulysses, now belongs to the New World. He cannot return to an old GrecoRoman sea, the greater portion of which had been conquered by the warriors of a different faith, yet still confined between the Pillars of Hercules and the shores of Lebanon and Egypt ... Tennyson’s Ulysses bears no Grecian marks. His soul is without metron” (2003: 12). The migration of Ulysses to a new gigantic island –so disproportionately larger than Ithaca! – alters the twentieth century’s European consciousness. For many European intellectuals this new “Ithaca” of modernity appears to be a distant grave of the Old World and its heroes. “Oh, America,” D. H. Lawrence bewails in “The Evening Land,” “The sun sets in you. / Are you the grave of our time?”

As a true representative of the Evening Land, the optimist Whitman picks up the thread of Ulysses’ tale and transforms it into the heroic song of a new world in search of new routes and inventions. This time the boundaries between poet and character are dissolved; the poet has become Ulysses, and his men have multiplied to the millions that maneuver the sailing sails of the new nation. He writes:

…We must not stop here…

However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwell-
ing we cannot remain here,

However shelter’d this port and however calm these waters we
must not anchor here… 96

For Whitman the journey unfolds irrespective of any geographical or historical limitations, which is what Cavafy also came to realize in his prime period. The thirst for travel and knowledge is increasingly greater than the satisfaction of arriving home. Thus, in the process of

96 “Song of the Open Road,” Section 9, p. 154
this transformative progression the boundaries between the self and the world continually shift and the meaning of the destination grows and changes.

Between Whitman’s prime and Cavafy’s mature period there is one further noteworthy variation of the Ulyssian theme by the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli, whose “Last Voyage” retraced the path of Odysseus in 1904. It remains uncertain if Pascoli’s poem is the mainspring, next to Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” for Cavafy’s “Second Odyssey,” as Anton and other critics have suggested –and doubted. Pascoli places Odysseus in the orbit of a new nekyia in the vast necropolis of his revisited Homeric past. Odysseus has returned alive to the Mediterranean but his presence there, in Anton’s words, is a “walk to the cemetery” (2003:13). By the time Cavafy writes “Ithaca,” Odysseus has died again. Cavafy, after Pascoli, undertakes the repatriation of Odysseus; this time, only his corpse arrives in the Ionian Sea. The old world is done for Cavafy. The voices of Homer and Dante can no longer be impersonated. As we will see, in “Ithaca” and in “The Ships” Cavafy will become his own mariner as well as the personification –rather than the impersonation– of a new Ulysses, who is undergoing a psychological nekyia in the bygone world of the mind.

The Meaning of Ithacas

Unlike Whitman’s epic scope, which constitutes a grand farewell to the epic poetic form with the conclusive edition of Leaves of Grass in 1881, Cavafy is known for his small, brief compositions, indicative of his own phrasal parsimony but also of the post-romantic commitment
to short form that set the tone for the poetic form of the new century.\textsuperscript{97} Reading Whitman and Cavafy in a comparative sequence makes one think of the analogy between a wide ocean like the Atlantic, elicited by the former poet’s oceanic range, and a shielded sea, such as the virtually enclosed –by land– Mediterranean, often echoed in the poetry of the latter. Whitman’s open ocean and Cavafy’s sheltered sea meet in the mythical point fatefully crossed by Dante’s Ulysses, the Pillars of Hercules, or, in today’s actual geographical terms, the Straits of Gibraltar. It is through this marine association that I wish to continue with my own journeying into the world of the two poets.

In terms of symbolism, the sea precedes the two main themes with which Whitman and Cavafy are often associated, the city and the body. Both poets address the self as a floating ark that always aims for the land that could not contain the Dantean Ulysses. The adventure of the inventive journey for both poets is psychological, sensual and spiritual. Marine imagery endows the sea poems of Whitman and Cavafy with a powerful feeling that reflects the coupling of personal experience with the volatility of a memory that is at once personal, interpersonal, historical, intertextual and predictive.

Why would Whitman be described by those who knew him as an “old sea captain” (Loving, 298) unless it were for his Ulyssean intention to “anchor my ship for a little while only”\textsuperscript{98} and then sail off again? The Ulyssean and the Quixotic intermingle in Whitman’s quest: Rocinante is replaced by the nameless vessel. His proclamation that “In dreams I was a ship, and sail’d the boundless seas”\textsuperscript{99} brings forward the ship as a symbol of life. Poetic inspiration came, Whitman recounts, “when I saw a ship under full sail and I had the desire to describe it exactly as

\textsuperscript{97}Cavafy’s favoring of laconic compositions is further attributed to his affinity for the style of economy instigated by the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, a prime influence on Cavafy, whom Malanos refers to as a “lover of terseness” (156).
\textsuperscript{98}“Song of Myself” (65)
\textsuperscript{99}“Ship Ahoy!” 1891
it seemed to me” (Myerson, 71). He failed, he admits: “I have been able to describe a locomotive ... but the ship at sea has always eluded me” (Myerson, 71). This failure, perhaps, relates to the idea that, as a Whitman’s biographer maintains, “it was not so much the sea as the sea’s edge which captivated him” (Callow, 16).

Ironically, Whitman had no experience of sea voyaging. He dreamt of the sea and cherished the shoreline, he imagined far and brave voyages and felt “the Atlantic breezes fanning me,” but he bore witness neither to any long brave sea-voyage nor to any storm at sea. Imaginary seafaring was known to Homer, as much as to Dante and Tennyson. Unlike the great American story-tellers of the nineteenth-century who based their sea-tales on some personal experience, there is no indication that Whitman spent time on an actual boat, no less crossing any ocean, aside from his regular commutes on the Brooklyn and later the Camden ferry. Regardless, “the seas are all cross’d” for the “old sea captain” who converts the absent experience of boating into a Quixotic cerebral adventure. His passage to India anticipates Cavafy’s technique of mentally recreating geographical and historical landscapes. As Cavafy maintains, “by the imagination … the user can transport himself into the midst of circumstances and can thus create an experience” (1903).

Moreover, as Cavafy further suggests in “The Ships,” oftentimes the journey could be taking place under a paper moon: it’s all in the mind. Whitman’s fixation with the imagery of the ship as an instrument of progress and knowledge, as attested in “Ships Ahoy!” but also in the

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100 “A Song of Joys”
101 Unlike the empirical maritime knowledge of Melville and Cooper, for instance, Whitman is largely an inexperienced self-designated “mariner.” Regardless, in Whitman’s corpus America is represented as a sea-nation and the poet engages into an imaginary sea-faring that stands apart from Melville’s bitter sea and completely lacks the practical knowledge of Cooper, whose service for the American navy inspired many of his works, as much as it was inspired by what Cohen terms ‘American maritime nationalism’ of an era in which “Cooper celebrates American prowess on the seas as the United Sates aspired to overtake Great Britain’s global saltwater empire” (9).
excluded poem from *Leaves of Grass* “The Beauty of the Ship,” prefigures Cavafy’s symbolism in its implication that the seafarer must reach the shore to become a poet. In Cavafy’s “The Ships” the distance from imagination to paper is described as “a difficult passage, a dangerous sea.” “The distance seems short at first sight,” Cavafy notes, “but how long a voyage this is, and how damaging it often proves to the ships that attempt it.” It is through this perilous enterprise that the unquixotic Cavafy strives for a private absolution, sailing “‘from harbor to harbor’ enjoying with ‘rare excitement’ the sensual pleasures of the journey and transforming them into art” (Capri-Karka, 22).

Despite the economy of Cavafy’s style and the presumed autonomy of each of his poems, in tune with Anton’s proposition, I read Cavafy’s works “not as isolated entities but as distinct acts comprising a life’s ‘work in progress’ and as a continuous thematic dialogue between despair and pleasure, surrender and hope, false starts and grand illusions, dead-ends and fearful exits, failures and renewed efforts”; such reading of Cavafy’s poems gradually “reveals the promised meaning of wisdom which an Ithaca is expected to grant” (318:1995). Whitman’s epic intentions with *Leaves of Grass* lie not far from such an all-embracing thematic scheme. In his “Song of the Open Road” (1856) he pledges to follow the current of wisdom, a swinging wisdom that is not necessarily “tested in schools” but “[it] is in the float of the sight of things;” in order to reach it “we must not stop here.”

The entire plexus of *Leaves of Grass*, also a long life’s “work in progress,” spreads from an oath proclaimed in “Song of the Open Road” that evokes Ulyssian bravado and foreshadows the philosophical wanderlust of Cavafy’s voyager in “Ithaca,” who implores that “the road is a

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102 When, staunchly entering port,
After long ventures, hauling up, worn and old,
Battered by sea and wind, torn by many a flight,
With the original sails all gone, replaced, or mended,
I only saw, at last, the beauty of the Ship.
long one.” “Song of the Open Road” and “Ithaca” express an immense desire for knowledge of the flesh and the mind. Both poems exhort the task of turning the self into an ark of experience, an act that combines the responsibility of the captain with that of the poet; and ultimately, they both involve the sea as the inevitable witness, a primordial channel and a bridge that from the times of Homer to the days of Darwin unites and divides the past and the present, the real and the imaginary, the already written with what is yet to be said.

Writes Whitman:

Allons! The inducements shall be greater,
We will sail pathless and Wild seas,
We will go where winds blow, waves dash, and the Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail.

Listen! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you:
You shall not heap up what is call’d reaches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin’d, you hardly settle yourself to satisfaction before you are call’d by an irresistible call to depart,
You shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mockings of those who remain behind you,
What beckoning of love you receive you shall only answer with passionate kisses of parting,
You shall not allow the hold of those whose spread their reach’d hands towards you.103

As noted, Whitman found inspiration for this poem in a passage from George Sand’s novel Consuelo104 (Blodgett, Bradley: 149). But, as an invitation to adventure for a life of purpose and fulfillment, “Song of the Open Road,” first published in the second edition of Leaves of Grass in 1856, implies that this fulfillment can never come from the land alone. Far

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103 “Song of the Open Road”
104 “What is there more beautiful than a road? It is the symbol and the image of an active and varied life ... And then that road is the passage of Humanity, the route of the Universe...”
from the clamor of the emerging cosmopolis and urban ennui, Whitman’s “open road” gradually transforms into a euphemism for a sea-way, the “long road” Cavafy is talking about, a rather Ulyssean all-promising sailing experience – for Whitman, for his nation and for his emigrant fellows. Whitman presents us here with a pre-Ithacan nineteenth-century euphoric perspective about the American future that would be annulled by the following century’s landlocked American experience.

In another poem that appeared in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman deplores the tiresomeness of city life, and he further opts for the joyful experiences promised by the boundless sea:

O to sail to sea in a ship!
To leave this steady unendurable land,
To leave the tiresome sameness of the streets, the sidewalks and the houses,
To leave you O you solid motionless land, and entering a ship,
To sail and sail and sail!

O to have life henceforth a poem of new joys!
To dance, clap hands, exult, shout, skip, leap, roll on, float on!
To be a sailor of the world bound for all ports,

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105 I use the terms pre-Ithacan and post-Ithacan to denote the two conflicting states of mind produced by the effects of the Ulyssian voyage prior to and after the arrival: the former propelled by the bewilderment caused by the expectation of reaching a highly-anticipated (often symbolic) destination; the latter subdued by the Dantean sense that the journey was worth more than the destination. The “post-Ithacan” syndrome is also a recurring motif in Romantic poetry. Characteristically, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth turns the regret for having crossed the peak of the Alps without noticing into a symbolic occurrence of universal significance: “With hope it is, hope that can never die, / Effort, and expectation, and desire, / And something evermore about to be” (Book Six: 607-9).

106 In an ironic turn of events, almost a century after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Sal Paradise’s landlocked post-Ithacan journey in Kerouac’s *On the Road* provided an audacious response to Whitman’s overbearing exaltation: the American dream of social equilibrium and pecuniary success for all (Whitman’s “Centre of equal daughters, equal sons... A grand, sane, towering, seated mother”; Gatsby’s “orgastic future”) has been reduced to a “mad dream” in a place that “everything was dead” and dry, in a “home” which resembles more the anarchic “hopeless imbroglio” that Schlegel saw in modernity, than the architecturally constructed world of Dante’s *Inferno*, whose flames produced the vision of the post-Homeric Odysseus. In his intoxicated rite of a modern-American *nekya* the un-Ulyssian Sal has Dante’s hell in mind: “I did not die, and I was not alive” (*Inferno*, 34, 25) Thus his oblivion of the all-embracing fatherly poet’s wish for continuity (especially as expressed in “Poets to Come”) comes as an insult both to Whitman and to Ulysses’ legacy: “I realized that I had died and been reborn numberless times but just didn’t remember...” (Kerouac, 173).
A ship itself, (see indeed these sails I spread to the sun and air,) 
A swift and swelling ship full of rich words, full of joys.\textsuperscript{107}

In the first section of this poem we detect a discontent with urbanity and desire for escapism that anticipate the tone of Cavafy’s poems “The City” and “Monotony” in which the poet expresses his unhappiness with the “sameness” of the city in analogous terms:

You said: “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore, find another city better than this one. 

How long can I get my mind molder in this place?\textsuperscript{108}

Moreover, when Cavafy speaks of “monotony” it is self-evident that he refers to urban ennui and not to any kind of pastoral isolation; it is a known fact that, as he got older, Cavafy was determined to keep himself locked within the walls of the city where “one monotonous day follows another/equally monotonous ... Easy to guess what lies ahead: / all of yesterday’s boredom.”\textsuperscript{109}

The notion of civilization, especially as it is treated by Cavafy, incorporates the deficiencies of urbanity; civilizations emerged from cities and languished in them. Cavafy’s declining Alexandria would be no exception to the rule, and its people, some of whom appear as characters in Cavafy’s poems, share the poet’s sense of ennui. As Malanos observes, “[Alexandria’s] people, supersaturated from civilization, feel what Cavafy feels: decay, monotony and boredom” (Malanos, 74). This is further attested in the claustrophobic early poem “Walls,” whose dystopian theme is in alignment with Cavafy’s urban pessimism.\textsuperscript{110} But, Cavafy was finally able to overcome the smothering sensation described in the above poems with the

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\textsuperscript{107} “A Song of Joys” \\
\textsuperscript{108} “The City” \\
\textsuperscript{109} “Monotony” \\
\textsuperscript{110} The dystopian theme of “Walls,” written in 1896, attests at the same time to the poet’s regard for modern society as an unyielding system, a consistent theme of his poetics, and to the inspiration he found in Anglo-Saxon authors with similar views, such as Thomas Hardy whose \textit{Jude the Obscure} Tsirkas lists as a main source of influence behind “Walls” (264). 
\end{flushright}
marine escapism of “Ithaca,” a poem that shows us for the first time a poet equally able to be as optimistic as the Whitman of the second section of “A Song of Joys,” which is cited above. Whitman’s poem is an incantation for a similar poetic universe that Cavafy crafts on his journey to “Ithaca” – a sea-road full of joys, full of rewards. Anton notes how “Ithaca” indeed came as an answer and a solution to “The City,” the two poems having been written apart but published in the same year (1995: 121).

Paradoxically, Ithaca remains an unspecified toponym in Whitman’s corpus. It suffices for him “to know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for travelling souls”\(^{111}\) that spring from a “vast Rondure, swimming in space.”\(^{112}\) And so, even though Whitman refers constantly to ships, sailors, “quiet islands,” journeys and “the days that must happen to you,” Ithaca retains the anonymity and the vagueness of an undiscovered Arcadian island that lies ahead, in the future of humanity where an advance civilization might be able to restore the glory of the golden days of what Cavafy calls the “fabled generation.” Whitman’s utopian Ithaca brings to mind the fictitious and unnamed insula that Don Quixote bequeaths to Sancho Pancha; above all it is a metaphoric space existing in a magician’s cartography. “The past and present wilt,” writes Whitman. “I have fill’d them, emptied them, / and proceed to fill my next fold of the future.”\(^{113}\) Whitman’s intention to “project the history of the future”\(^{114}\) by imagining the future is not homologous to Cavafy’s attempt to write about the future by remembering the past.\(^{115}\)

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111 “Song of the Open Road”
112 “Passage to India”
113 “Song of Myself”
114 “To a Historian”
115 Only by the “candle-light of old age” would occur to Whitman that “perhaps the best of songs heard, or of any and all true love, or life’s fairest episodes, or sailors’, soldiers’ trying scenes on land or sea, is the résumé of them, or any of them, long afterwards, looking at the actualities away back past, with all their practical excitations gone. How the soul loves to float amid such reminiscences” (“A Backward Glance O’ver Travel’d Roads”: Lines 1-5).
Unlike Whitman’s conception of a rewarding destination awaiting in the future, Cavafy’s most revealing finding in his voyage is that a rewarding Ithaca, as Proust would realize, might indeed reside in the past, certainly not in the future. During this digression into a past that “remembers” the future, as Boitani maintains, “poetry adapts to future events (historical or private) and contributes to their form and meaning, transmitting the memory of them after their enaction” (22). For the mature Cavafy the clue lies always beyond the shore of the present, and the poetic quest begins with recollection and the knowledge – that is, Dante’s and Tennyson’s knowledge – that the individual yearning for experience cannot yield in any city or any harbor.

In “Ithaca” the past and the present ally and conspire in the poet’s mind; they reveal fragments of a personal history that at the end present us with a coherent image of an ideal life and a persuasive philosophic account of a life lived as all people should live. The poem unfolds as a rhetorical narrative that surpasses the scope of a self-absorbed monologue, as it has often been read by critics who had Browning in mind, or the hortatory tone of Pseudo-Petronius’ *Exhortatio ad Ulyssen* that according to Malanos’ and Tsirkas’ assumption, is the source of Cavafy’s “Ithaca.”116 “Ithaca’s” persuasive qualities are equally in effect whether it is being read in solitude or recited before a crowd, and it demonstrates all three Aristotelian principles of *logos, ethos* and *pathos:* the experienced and thus trustworthy poet invites the reader to participate and follow the open road with his intellect and heart. The poem further corroborates Aristotle’s perception of poetry as “more serious and philosophical than history” simply because the symbolic idea of Ithaca transcends the walls of the city and the transience of civilization.

116 This view has been discredited by later critics like Anton who have mentioned Baudelaire’s “The Voyage” as a possible source of inspiration for “Ithaca,” but who have doubted Petronius’ influence on Cavafy (1995: 314) despite some obvious similarities:

Leaf your land in search for foreign coasts, young man!
A sequence of more dangerous events awaits you.
To adversities do not succumb...
Full of experience you should arrive, Odysseus, in different places.
allowing Cavafy to rise, thus, in Whitman’s words, as a “Chanter of personality, outlining what is yet to be,” but also not to be:

As you set out on the way to Ithaca
hope that the road is a long one,
filled with adventures, filled with understanding.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
Poseidon in his anger: do not fear them,
you’ll never come across them on your way
as long as your mind stays aloft, and a choice emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
savage Poseidon; you’ll not encounter them unless you carry them within your soul,
unless your soul sets them up before you.

Hope that the road is a long one.
Many may the summer mornings be
when—with what pleasure, with what joy—you first put in to harbors new to your eyes;
may you stop at Phoenician trading posts
and there acquire fine goods:
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and heady perfumes of every kind:
as many heady perfumes as you can.
To many Egyptian cities may you go
so you may learn, and go on learning, from their sages.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind;
to reach her is your destiny.
But do not rush your journey in the least.
Better that it last for many years;
that you drop anchor at the island an old man,
rich with all you’ve gotten on the way,
ot expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

Ithaca gave to you the beautiful journey;
without her you’d not have set upon the road.
But she has nothing left to give you any more.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca did not deceive you.
As wise as you’ll have become, with so much experience,
you’ll have understood, by then, what these Ithacas mean.

117 “To a Historian”
As Cavafy attests in “Ithaca,” at the end of the journey the ship will hopefully drop anchor in the humble harbor of experience, a metaphor for a poetics of transgression and self-containment. Cavafy proposes a more complex dialogue between Ithaca as the source of fulfillment and at the same time the materialization of such fulfillment. As far as the Dantean Cavafy is concerned though, he better never to anchor the ship. In the highly symbolic “The Ships” the poet portrays the land as a Kafkaesque labyrinth traditionally hostile to the riches of voyages, and the land’s “customs officials” as always suspicious of the “inebriating beverages,” or the “heady wines,” which in another poem of his, “I Went,” Cavafy describes as the beverage “that those unafraid of erotic pleasure drink.”

In my reading of “Ithaca,” however, Cavafy the “seafarer” is not solely mindful of the sensual harbors, as it is often claimed, but of the totality of a life journey. Cavafy’s hedonism responds to Whitman’s own poetic excess and his determination to address life as a ship whose journey and not the destination is what amounts to the reward. In his predictive poetry, Whitman assesses that future poets, orators, musicians will justify him. I see Cavafy as one of them. The sea of time and history that divides the two poets is also the wise arbiter that brings them together. “Ithaca’s” unnamed journeyman – ostensibly the Alexandrian himself –, one may

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118 Writes Cavafy in “The Ships”: “New sacrifices are in order again upon arrival at the white papery port. The customs officials come and inspect a particular merchandise, deliberating whether they should permit delivery; they forbid the unloading of another; and for a few select goods, they only admit a small portion thereof. The land has its laws. Not all goods have a free bill of passage, and contraband is strenuously forbidden. The import of wines is prohibited, for the continents from which the ships hail produce wines and spirits from grapes which grow and mature in a most generous temperature. The customs officials do not welcome these beverages at all. They are highly inebriating. They are not fit for all heads. Furthermore, there is a local company which has a monopoly on wines. It produces liquids that have the color of wine and the taste of water, and you can drink from them all day long without feeling the least bit tipsy. It is an established company. It is highly regarded of, and its stock is always overvalued. But then again, let us be content when the ships arrive in port, even with all these sacrifices. For at last, through vigilance and tender care, the number of broken or jettisoned goods during the voyage is limited. Also, the laws of the land and the customs regulations are certainly tyrannical but not entirely exclusive, and a great part of the cargo is unloaded. The customs officials are not infallible, and several of the prohibited goods pass through in deceitful containers, misleadingly marked, and a few good wines, destined for choice feasts, are imported.”

119 “Poets to Come”
envisage, is accompanied by the shadows of Dante and Tennyson, as well as the spirit of Whitman.

Sensual and intellectual wisdom, the two poets suggest, may give birth to what Anton, in his discussion of “Ithaca,” describes as the “offspring to the political virtue suitable to human beings at last free of fear, free of wars, no longer given to the abuse of power and the distortions of the human mind” (2003:13). This utopian state reads almost like an extension of the founding principles of the “Island of Utopia” that Thomas More envisioned in the Renaissance. More’s text had provoked new ways of thinking about the imagined geography of the island form and how it is linked to the possibility of social change; it suggested that utopia is a chimera born out of the fallen state of history itself, just as islands have their origins in ruptured continents.

The metaphoric floating island\textsuperscript{120} that Cavafy has in mind in “Ithaca” epitomizes the individual flight from the monotony of the city, but it also represents a self-devised destination away from the inevitable shortcomings of civilization. The physical world, Cavafy reminds us again and again with Hugo’s tenacity, through his historical but also philosophical poems, is a constant series of historical failures and individual disappointments, a realization that does not stand that far from the precepts of historical materialism shaped by the social movements of the nineteenth century that to a certain extent informed and influenced Whitman’s thinking.\textsuperscript{121} Cavafy’s distaste for the culture of consumerism is equivalent to Whitman’s distrust of aggressive capitalism. For both poets, the land is often associated with moral corruption and political decay, while the sea, aside from adventure, promises respite and regeneration, but also a

\textsuperscript{120} “Floating” because Ithaca is detached from the fixity of the Homeric world and it has entered the volatility of the modern experience.

\textsuperscript{121} A comparative analysis of Whitman’s and Marx’s ideas is offered by Jason Stacy in \textit{Walt Whitman’s Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman’s Journalism} (2008).
cathartic mayhem for, as Emerson put it in *English Traits*, one can never anchor on the same
wave, or hold property in what is always flowing” (Raban, 273).\textsuperscript{122}

Prior to Whitman, Cavafy and Baudelaire, Hugo often rhapsodized the merciless
intervention of the sea in human affairs. Unlike the breakable continents, Hugo tells us, the sea is
the unstoppable stream of continuity that endures the test of time, which brings to mind
Whitman’s analogy of the perishability of the human body versus the indestructibility of the ever
flowing energy of the soul. Materiality and civilization, like anything solid, at the end are always
subject to corrosion and degeneration by the fluid element. Unlike humans, “water is never idle”
Hugo warns in his poem “The Vanished City” from *The Legends of the Centuries*:

\begin{verbatim}
In times whereof tradition speaketh not,
A brick-built city stood upon the spot
Where now the north wind stirs the ocean foam.

Ships voyage now where chariots rolled before,
And hurricanes replace the kings of yore.
For, to make deserts, God, who rules mankind,
Begins with kings, and ends the work by wind.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{122} Characteristically, the metaphoric antagonism between land and sea as agents of corruption and integrity respectively becomes evident in Cavafy’s hidden historical poem “A Great Feast at the House of Sosibius” (1917) where the transition from the calm Alexandrian sea to the politics of the land is described as an undesirable journey.

\begin{verbatim}
My afternoon has been lovely, quite lovely. The oar touching most gently,
caressing a sweetly calm Alexandrian sea.
Such a respite is needed: our labors are heavy.
At times we ought to take an innocent and clement view of things.
Unfortunately though, the night has come. And, look, I’ve drunk all the wine,
not a single drop has been left in my bottle.
Alas! ’T is time to go back to other affairs.
A noble house (the eminent Sosibius and his good wife, let us say) has invited us to a feast.
Once more we must return to our intrigues—and take up again our tedious political fight.
\end{verbatim}
This folk, this ant-hill, rumor, gossip, noise,
This troop of souls, by sorrow moved, and joys,
Sounded as in a tempest hums a swarm—
The neighboring ocean caused no alarm.

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And then all vanished! – waves roll o’er the plain. –
Now you see nothing but the deep, wide main,
Stirred by the winds, alone beneath the skies.

Such is the shock of ocean’s mysteries!

(Hugo 1897: 246)

The sea relentlessly exposes the futility of the human endeavor whose necessity, however, justifies the purpose of the Ulyssean venture. In his early poem “Builders” (1891) Cavafy also depicts civilization as a vulnerable creation that is subject to the wrath of nature:

Progress is a tremendous edifice – each carries his stone;
One carries words, others council, another deeds –
and day by day it raises its head higher.
Should a hurricane, a sudden swell come, the good workers rush together in a throng and defend their lost work.
Lost because each one's life is expended suffering abuse,
pains, for a future generation, that this generation may know honest happiness and long life and riches and wisdom without base sweat and servile work.
But this fabled generation will never, never live.
This work will be wrecked by its very perfection
and all their vain toil will begin anew.

This poem echoes Hugo’s, but also Baudelaire’s rejection of the ideal of progress. Cavafy’s idea of progress is split between a sense of powerlessness and disenchantment and a renewed effort of adjustment. The volatile past of the Hellenic World itself justifies Cavafy’s apprehension: from the pinnacle of Classical Greece to the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman occupation of Greece, history has proved to this poet of the Greek Diaspora that, as Herodotus knew long before, there is no such thing as everlasting cultural or political dominance in time. As Vrisimitzakis notes,
“(Cavafy) sees a whole civilization, which never lacked in periods of progress or freedom, reaching a prime before its slow decline into the centuries. Some peoples achieve greatness; they become Builders of a glorious civilization, but this civilization they cannot preserve” (39).

Whitman also speaks of “Towers of fables immortal fashion’d from mortal dreams,” but overall he believes in progress with all the zest of a young American in a young country that is yet to reach new heights. “The seas all cross’d,” tells us Whitman, “weather’d the capes, the voyage done, / Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain’d…” Whitman’s nineteenth-century fervor is further propelled no doubt partly by Darwin’s extraordinary scientific Odysseys; his optimism, thus, climbs to mounts of poetic anticipation. In contrast, Cavafy’s apprehension underlines the anxiety of the new century: has the aim indeed been attained? Does mythical Ulysses ever materialize in peace in the harbors that Columbus or Darwin reached? Do anchors, voyages, islands, ships and waves ever cease to symbolize or expose the transience of human endeavor and the Ulyssenian struggle to transgress such an inadequate destiny? One may imagine Cavafy’s smiling as he reiterates “hope the voyage is a long one” with the cynic stoicism of the fin-de-siècle modernist who presumes to know that post-Homeric Ithaca lies not far from Sancho Panza’s promised insula. But, as we will see, Whitman’s enthusiasm is justified by the influences of his youth, some of which are intricately tied with the effects of the American sea culture in terms of history, geography and emigration.

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123 “Passage to India”
124 “Passage to India: 220-1
125 Following Darwin’s expedition aboard the Beagle and his subsequent scientific findings, in the second half of the century, the sea also acquired an epistemological dimension as a path to knowledge. Darwin’s travels and deeds were vigilantly watched by Whitman. As observed by Walker, Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1859) was published the same year as Origin of Species. In his paper that draws a connection among Whitman, Darwin and Burroughs, Walker maintains that Whitman had embraced the idea of evolution before the publication of the Origin of Species (3).
Whitman on the Beach: Discovering the Invisible Influence

To me the sea is a continual miracle,
The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—
The ships with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?
-W. Whitman, “Miracles”

Far from the maelstrom of urban progress and the temptations of the “corrupted land,” in the immensity of the open sea, the man of Whitman’s age was given a second chance in reconstituting a heroic self away from the rules of society and tradition that enveloped the individual like the invisible walls that Cavafy describes as being built “without reflection, without mercy, without shame.”126 As much as it had shaped the sensibility of old sea-nations, the division between wild sea and tame land (Raban, 1992: 15), a persistent theme in Whitman, also defined the character of nineteenth-century America. The sea held a pivotal significance to the American progress before the emergence of the American frontier after 1850. It is estimated that by the beginning of the Civil War, the American fleet alone accounted for three quarters of the world’s ships (Whitaker, 2002: 1). Hence, early American settlers frequently chronicled their tumultuous experiences at sea in poems, narratives, and journal entries. Whitman’s generation ran the tail end of an American era that romanticized the sea not only as an unconventional road to freedom, business or soul-searching for the individual, but also as a sheltering haven from the evils and distractions of society. As a critic maintains, “this romantic view extended to the life of the (American) sailor, a way of life that seemed to offer adventure, freedom, and escape from the increasing industrialization of society” (Whitaker, 2002: 1).

126 “Walls”
Whitman was born by the sea and he notably always referred to his native Long Island by its Native American name Paumanok. In his childhood his interactions with Native Americans, who revered the ocean, left him a fond memory of a pre-industrial coastal culture that gradually faded and disappeared in the whirlpool of progress. Evidently, some of the stories and the language he heard as a kid and later used in his poems, as discussed in the previous chapter, came from the natives’ idioms and oral tales that were dispersed throughout the forming nation. And so, Whitman reminisces affectionately in “Starting from Paumanok”: “The red aborigines, / Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds … they depart, charging the / water and the land with names.”

Before the age of commercial aviation that in the late 1930s accelerated cross-Atlantic travel, the sea retained the monopoly of transportation, keeping the New World and its customs at a considerable distance from the makings of the Old. When he came of age Whitman was acquainted with the enlightened aspect of the ocean as a channel of progress, the floating bridge through which western knowledge crossed in the form of books carried in cargo-ships, to evoke Cavafy’s metaphorical language in “The Ships,” that approached the New World with the uncanny allure of floating Trojan horses. In the nineteenth century the general consensus, in

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127 It has been asserted that early American sea literature, unlike Western Europe, did not begin with the stories of Homer but with “the oral traditions of Native Americans, who recited stories of the common experiences of whaling and fishing, cultural folklore of how the land had been created from the great waters, and seminal encounters with others from across the sea” (Whitaker, 2002:1).

128 Whitman is never unaware, as we have already seen, of the pitfalls entailed in Europe’s hegemonic enterprise of acculturating America. The idea that Renaissance America had evolved from a state of tabula rasa into a nation formed by European dynamics was consistently fought by Whitman as a fallacy. In “Passage to India” Whitman refers to the continents as “brides and bridegrooms hand in hand,” and certainly one may deduce that he envisioned America as a young bride — and not a young servant — of old Europe. Hence, Whitman’s ideal America should form a fluent self at ease with its past and in charge of its own present that will enable the composition of its own national narrative as opposed to narratives of mimicry. “Of the great poems receiv’d from abroad and from the ages, and to-day enveloping and penetrating America,” Whitman asks, “is there one that is consistent with the United States, or essentially applicable to them as they are and are to be?” (1965: 567).

Some of Whitman’s Eurocentric American foes might have sought support in Ruskin’s popular teachings in England at the time about the humility that obedience requires to justify their view of Europe as America’s rightful
both continents, was that the egg of the future was being hatched by the old hen and, in a way, the future did come to America via the Atlantic Ocean at the age of the great expeditions. Francis Bacon once remarked that the nautical compass that enabled cross-ocean navigation was perhaps as important a technological tool as gun powder and the printing press in changing the face of the world (cited in Cohen, 3), and certainly in reshaping the stakes of the Americas. Like the Arcadian Macondo, the mythical island in Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the pre-Renaissance New World existed outside (Western) history and geography waiting for Melquides to arrive by sea in form of Columbus from the route of Ulysses. *Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east?* Indeed both imagination and history, personified by the modern figures of Melquides and Columbus, approached the uncharted other West, completing thus the nautical steps of Dante’s centripetal hero, who once aimed towards it but got caught by a medieval tempest over the pillars of Hercules.

To be sure it was through the depths of the same ocean that the wire of modern communication unraveled – like the “clew” Whitman sought for – plugging the old to the new world. “The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires,” Whitman exclaims in “Passage to India,” celebrating the laying of the Atlantic cable that was successfully completed in 1866. Practically, the cable further solidified the crosslink that Columbus and Vespucci had already established in the Renaissance: it further minimized the boundaries between the Old and the New World, the past and the present. The observation that the completion of the West was achieved only in the nineteenth century with the entry of industrialized America in its breadth is not hyperbolical.

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master. “There is no such thing [as liberty] in the universe,” Ruskin claimed. “There can never be. The stars have it not; the sea has it not; and we men have the mock and semblance of it only for our heaviest punishment.” Whitman’s view stood diametrically opposite. Not many intellectuals in his time dared to propose that “even Shakespeare … belongs essentially to the buried past” (1967: 567). Respect Shakespeare and his likes, Whitman suggests, not as masters of influence but as references. “Shakespeare sang the past … the formed,” Whitman specified. “I project the unformed, the future” (Anderson, 21).
Memories worth of millennia rolled without any notion of the New World prior to the European Renaissance. The formation of modern western identity as we know it was only finalized in the nineteenth century with the inclusion of America as Europe’s cultural and political young sibling.

Whitman is never oblivious of this fundamental role of the sea as the birth canal of modern America, and thus of his own “genetic” and complex association with it, which, to paraphrase Fitzgerald, implied the idea that Walt Whitman of West Hills, Long Island, sprang from his platonic conception of himself as a son – and by extension, a poet – of the sea: “Like one of yours, ye multitudinous ocean.” The multifarious association of Whitman with the sea is at the same time genealogical, physical, intellectual, historical, philosophical and emotional.

From the very first edition of Leaves of Grass, where Whitman lays the historical and autobiographical foundations of his poetry, we learn that his grandmother’s father was a sailor entangled in heroic battles. Then, gradually Whitman surfaces in his poetic voyage as a “kindred soul” to the wild ocean, an American Ulysses whose autobiographical “I” in Leaves of Grass keeps at bay the memory of his physical mother, as Odysseus often forgot his, only to acknowledge the sea as the magna mater of eros, life and history: “Oh madly the sea pushes upon the land,” he exclaims, “with love, with love.” Whitman ponders that, “I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme. Afterward, I recollect, how it came to me that instead of any special lyrical or epical or literary attempt, the seashore should be an invisible influence, a pervading gauge and tally for me, in my composition” (1971: 67).

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129 “By That Long Scan of Waves” (1885)
130 “Song of Myself,” Section 35
131 Anticlea, Odysseus’ mother, we learn in the eleventh canto of The Odyssey, died of a broken heart after her son’s departure for Troy. There is no other mention of her by Odysseus in the entire epic outside the House of Death where Anticlea’s phantom appears.
132 “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: 77-78
The seashore, Whitman tells us in his *Specimen Days*, is the place of a primordial alchemy, the point where the solid is marrying the liquid and where the real is blending with the ideal (1971: 67). Whitman acknowledges the land as his father and the sea as his mother, evoking the writings of Hugo in which Eve embodies the sea and Adam stands for the rock. Characteristically, in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” the poet introduces his natal Paumanok as his fatherland:

I throw myself upon your breast my father,
I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me,
I hold you so firm till you answer me something.

Then, a few verses down, he turns to the sea:

Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother,
Endlessly cry for your castaways, but fear not, deny not me,
Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet as I touch you
or gather from you.

The binaries solid/liquid, real/ideal, corrupted/pure, body/soul, old/new-worlds that are established as the propellers of the evolving composition in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* emphasize the poet’s harmonization with his time’s changing pace, a pace that leads him to espouse what Moon, in his very astute analysis of the elastic boundaries of *Leaves of Grass*, terms “fluidity,” a poetic response to Whitman’s own “culture’s massive anxiety about the loss of boundaries between mind and body, of erotic boundaries between males, of boundaries of gender between men and women, and of boundaries between races and social classes” (Moon, 59).

In agreement with Moon’s reading of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* “as a powerful attack on the culture’s privileging of ‘solids’” (60), I see Whitman’s concept of “adhesiveness,”

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133 Whitman also seems historically aware of the old European legends celebrating the nuptials of land and sea when he refers to the “doge of Venice now wedding the Adriatic,” taking into account an old Venetian ritual where the Doge annually performed a ceremonial wedding of the city to the sea by throwing a ring into the Adriatic Sea (Blodgett and Sculley, 416).

134 *Toilers of the Sea*, 355
as a manifestation of his own objective to reconcile rivalrous *natures*. If anything, Whitman’s poetry is a call for the elimination of solid boundaries. As Reynolds puts it in the documentary *American Experience* (2008) on the life of Whitman, “poems have boundaries, *Leaves of Grass* has none.” Whitman’s openness engulfs the body and the soul, it speaks of oral sex and masturbation, homosocial bonds and voyeurism; it equates the human body with democracy and desire with freedom, at a time that most of the above do not constitute a legitimate topic of poetic discourse in the Anglo-Saxon world. (Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin only a year before the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*.)

Whitman’s “adhesive” nature is primarily expressed in “Song of Myself,” the self-hymn that set the tone for the overly transcendental mode of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, bound to be downcast in subsequent editions, where he rises as “Partaker of influx and efflux I, extoller of hate and conciliation.”\(^{135}\) It is by the sea that Whitman introduces his Hegelian self: “I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul.”\(^{136}\) Whitman on the beach becomes a boy and a poet; a disciple and a master; an onanist and a lover; a man embodying multitudes and oneness; the vocal synecdoche for “many long dumb voices.” “Through me,” he declares in transcendental fashion, “the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.”\(^{137}\) His seed, Whitman implies, moistens “the roots of all that has grown.”\(^{138}\) Behind the pomposity of such a statement lies Whitman’s determination to resist tradition as a source of anxiety and impose his own voice. It is also an oblique tribute to unconventional Byronic prowess – young, naked, robust, pansexual and libidinous on the beach – Whitman is bound first to emulate and then to override.

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\(^{135}\) “Song of Myself,” Section 22

\(^{136}\) Ibid, Section 21

\(^{137}\) Ibid, Section 24

\(^{138}\) Ibid, Section 22
Young Whitman’s penchant for Byronic vigor is hard to miss. Byron, whose verses were often referred to by Whitman as “my daily food,” was also known for his manifold relationship with the sea as a swimmer, loner, traveler and escapee. Many of Whitman’s colorful depictions of the sea, as well as his notion of the self as a harbor of opposites, are in tune with the English poet who embraced the aquatic world as an integral part of civilization and of himself. In addition, the shoreline is also exalted by Byron as the magical point where the self harmonizes with the universe in divine solitude: “there is society where none intrudes, / By the deep Sea, and music in its roar.”

Lyricism aside, it was by the shore that the self-taught Whitman literally became a learned poet; there he started his “conversation with the most cultivated men of past centuries who have been their authors,” as Descartes once referred to the act of reading “good books.” On the beach, Whitman tells us, he read the Old and New Testaments, Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, all the way to Byron, Tennyson, Carlyle, Emerson, Hugo and Baudelaire. “I read first thoroughly on the peninsula of Orient, northeast end of Long island,” he recounts, “in a shelter’d hollow of rocks and sand with the sea on each side … in intervals, summers and falls … down in the country, or to Long Island seashores – there, in the presence of outdoor influences… – (probably to better advantage for me than in any library or indoor room –it makes such difference where you read).”

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139 LeMaster and Kummings discuss in detail the thorough impact Byron had on Whitman who considered Byron’s poetry as valuable and influential as Homer’s and Epictetus’ (76).
140 Characteristically, in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Byron illustrates the various facets of the sea in his life starting in childhood. “I have loved thee, Ocean!” he exclaims, “And my joy / Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be / Borne like thy bubbles…” (CLXXXIV) The sea is further depicted by Byron as a “glorious mirror” of the transience of humanity at variance with the eternity of nature(CLXXVIII), an immortal home by whose liquid gates the poet’s naked body attains absolution.
141 Ibid (CLXXVIII).
142 A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” Lines 265 264-8 (Whitman, 1965). Moreover, in such a classical fusion of open air nature and idyllic learning, Whitman banterers in a parenthetic remark, “I have wonder’d since
It is not surprising, then, that *Leaves of Grass*, in all its splendor and thematic diversity, blossomed as the fruit of such invisible influence. As we saw, Whitman’s oeuvre, from the early days to the end, abounds in maritime references, metaphors and allusions. The final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in particular, opens and closes with direct references to the sea as a muse; the entire poem is declared forthrightly by its maker as the “ocean’s poem,” and that shows Whitman’s resistance to the conventional notion that America’s foundational narrative is a continental one. Written from the perspective of seamen’s collective consciousness, Whitman crafts his maritime thesis in “In Cabin’d Ships at Sea” that appears in the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*:

*Here are our thoughts, voyagers’ thoughts,*
*Here not the land, firm land, alone appears, may then by them be said,*
*The sky o’erarches here, we feel the undulating deck beneath our feet,*
*We feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of endless motion,*
*The tones of unseen mystery, the vague and vast suggestions of the briny world, the liquid-flowing syllables,*
*The perfume, the faint creaking of the cordage, the melancholy rhythm,*
*The boundless vista and the horizon far and dim are all here,*
*And this is ocean’s poem.*

Then, in the last of the eight poem group “Fancies at Navesink,” Whitman says goodbye to a long productive life by way of the sea. The “we” of the earlier poem turns into “me” at the end of the poet’s long journey: Whitman implies that he has arrived alone, all his fellow-seamen

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143 In her extensive analysis of Fenimore Cooper’s works, for instance, Gesa Mackenthun has attempted to show how literary criticism refused to admit Cooper’s sea fiction into the American national canon, in contradiction to his frontier novels (cited in Cohen, 134).
144 Part of the “Inscriptions” group of nine poems written in 1871, later expanded to twenty-four poems that were chosen by Whitman as the opening section of the finalized edition of *Leaves of Grass.*
145 This group of poems, composed late in Whitman’s life and added later to the final section of *Leaves of Grass*, is assessed as a consistent poetic effort that “takes its place with the “Sea-Drift” cluster, which it indeed surpasses with respect to sustained unity of theme and mood, as evidence of the fascination of the sea upon the poet’s mind and art, and his sense of kinship with its rhythms” (Blodgett, Bradley, 1965: 514).
presumably devoured by the waves like Odysseus’ unnamed crew. The sea’s reign in the poet’s consciousness appears as a final irreversible act. A transmutation has occurred: the mortal turns into infinite; the voice of the sea, like the whispering of a muse, takes over the American bard’s verse:

Then last of all, caught from these shores, this hill,
Of you O tides, the mystic human meaning:
Only by law of you, your swell and ebb, enclosing me the same,
The brain that shapes, the voice that chants this song.  

_Cavafy on the Waterfront: Looking at the Mirror of the Earth and the Ego_

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.
The brilliant blue of the morning sea...
-C. P. Cavafy, “The Morning Sea”

Unlike Byron and Whitman who both enjoyed swimming naked, Cavafy refrains from such physical intimacy with the sea. Aside from the occasional notes in his journals in which he records laconic impressions of the sea viewed from the waterfront or from the deck of some boat, Cavafy seems to be withdrawn from the literal plane of the sea to the point that one wonders if the poet ever owned a bathing suit, let alone raced naked along the shore. Cavafy’s shyness strikes me as a paradox because, the brine element is an integral part of Greek culture; Cavafy’s point of origin alone is stretched around a Mediterranean triangle—Alexandria—

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146 “Then Last of All”
147 “The sea’s color and form are wonderful—intensely Greek,” observes Cavafy in one of his journal’s entries, in English, in 1901, on his way to the port of Piraeus (Cited in Pieris, 275).
Istanbul-Athens—, which has been the center of fervent inspiration for most Greek poets before and after the age of Cavafy.¹⁴⁸

Nonetheless, Cavafy’s main association with the sea remains figurative; in his poetics he regards the sea either as a songstress of death, or, as a mirror reflecting not only the deeds and misdeeds of humanity, but also of the self and the past. In other words, the sea comes to denote a metaphorical space that reaches out towards a representation of time that for Cavafy is both public and personal. For Cavafy, to borrow Boitani’s words, the sea becomes a mirror of the earth and of the ego, and by extension it manifests aspects of the outer and the inner. Not surprisingly, often Cavafy catches himself standing on the waterfront gazing at the phantoms of history and/or the “idols” of past pleasures. Cavafy on the sea-front displays the bewilderment of Whitman of “Out of the Cradle,” in which he exclaims:

O how joys, dreads, convolutions, human shapes, and all shapes,
Spring as from graves around me!
O phantoms! You cover all the land, and all the sea!

In his earlier period when Cavafy speaks of the sea his tone evokes the austere judgment of Conrad, who has depicted the sea as an ungenerous, conscienceless “savage autocrat spoiled by much adulation.”¹⁴⁹ When thinking about and responding to maritime themes the early Cavafy is overpowered with trepidation. In his prose poem “An Evening in Kalinteri” (1882) and the renounced poem mentioned earlier “Voice from the Sea” (1898), for instance, the poet at first attempts to praise the “savage autocrat” as a source of life and enchantment, but also a source of happiness for the young. But then a sorrowful tune that erupts from the outside (a passing boat)

¹⁴⁸ Both Greek Nobel laureate poets Seferis and Elytis, for instance, have been repeatedly photographed with bathing suits on the beach and have alluded to the almost pedagogical importance of the beach life in their knowledge along the lines of Whitman, who by his own admittance, as we saw, instead of a college instruction received a self-taught education on the shore.
or inside (a passing thought) abruptly reverses the delight to a funereal disposition. In both poems, the rising action resolves into a climactic switch from blitheness to gloom:

“A summer night, one of those heated nights of August, as the heat made itself felt in the house, I decided to go to Kalinteri to breathe some fresh air…Kalinteri is a coastline that stretches between Nichori and Therapia.

The full moon spread a silvery mantle over the waters of Bosporus; the Asian coast shone across with its tiny white houses and the occasional minaret, and appeared as a cheerful stage design of a magical theatre.

When Bosporus loses its smoothness and creases, it is only because he rejoices, because he smiles. He is a tender-hearted god who wishes the happiness of men and enjoys conviviality…

In such peacefulness my mind was finding rest, and under the spell of the panorama I eyed, my thoughts were becoming hopeful and pleasant, consorted as they were with the blissful splendor that surrounded me.

Suddenly, the silence broke; a big boat appeared on its way to Therapia and in it a company of men were singing.

Don’t take him as fast to the tomb,
let him enjoy the sun a little more!
Do not take him as fast it’s a pity –
he did not feel what life was,

I felt a ferocious demurral. I was expecting some merry and valiant song, full of joy and life, one of those brave songs that the fecund and lively coast of Bosporus gives birth to. Instead of that, in those simplistic and unrefined lyrics – the product of some provincial-poet’s muse – I heard a bitter dirge about the vanity of it all, that primordial grievance of the suffering man, “all is lying, all is shadows.”

The singers hushed and the boat started to move away. But my good disposition went with it. The air struck me as a bit damp, and I arose and made a few steps. At a place that there was no wind I lit a lantern and saw the time. Midnight. It was the time to return. Right at that moment a dark cloud, which was approaching from the horizon for a while, covered the moon. It appeared to me as a falling curtain. I carried my way back to the village again. I found it asleep, in a deep sleep. The straight road laid empty. Only the elder man I came across, the one who tolled with his bat the time on earth – the impassive counter of time.”

“An Evening in Kalinteri”150

The sea exhales a hidden voice—
A voice that enters
into our heart and moves it,
and gladdens it.

Her melody bears messages endewed
to souls. She brings to mind lost youth,
without bitterness or grief.
Of loves that passed she speaks quietly,
Forgotten feelings once more come alive
within the waves’ respiring so sweet.

150These excerpts from Cavafy’s prose poem “An Evening in Kalinteri” are translated here by the author.
A song is it, or the plaint of those who drowned?—
The tragic plaint of those who died,
    Who have for shrouds the chilly foam,
and lament for their wives, and for their children.
for their parents and their empty nests,
    while the bitter ocean trashes them,

    dashes them on rocks and jagged stones,
in seaweed wraps them, drags them, hurls them out,
    and they, as if still living, hasten
with their eyes wide open, terrified,
    and their hands outstretched and wild
in their final agony.

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“Voice from the Sea”

These two elegiac poems bear a striking resemblance to Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” in which a bird’s song lamenting the loss of his mate, a sorrowful “aria” delivered on the Paumanok seashore, brings tears to “a man, yet by these tears a little boy again.” Similarly with the aforementioned Cavafy’s elegies, what begins as an ode of liveliness and hope becomes one of grief and desolation. Moreover, in his earlier and mature periods, as demonstrated by the poems “Prayer” (1898) and “In Harbor” (1918) respectively, Cavafy depicts the sea as a wet tomb awaiting youthful Greek sailors and migrants, hence, referring not only to the pains of Greek emigration that became particularly felt in the first half of the twentieth-century, but also to the disembodiment and decline of the once upon a time “vast Pan-Hellenic world” whose youth disperses and perishes in the sea of modernity.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{151}The two poems are presented here in their entirety:

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The sea engulfed a sailor in its depths.
Unaware, his mother goes and lights
a tall candle before the icon of our Lady,
praying for him to come back quickly, for the weather to be good—
her ear cocked always to the wind.
While she prays and supplicates,
the icon listens, solemn, sad,
knowing the son she waits for never will come back.
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“Prayer”
Most of Cavafy’s poems with a prominent maritime theme, as Pieris notes, propose that “the intermediary role of the sea is decisive for the conflicts between antithetical concepts” (276). The conflicting pairs include youth and death, the past and the present, the infinity of nature versus the perishability of civilization, as well as the internal versus the external. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sareyannis has categorized the world of Cavafy’s characters into the “inside” and the “outside,” an interiority and an exteriority that represent not only his characters, but after all, Cavafy’s own conflicted identity as a poet who vacillates between the urban claustrophobia of “Walls,” “The City,” “Monotony” and “In the Evening,” and the desire to overcome it by stepping “outside” to experience not only the vibrancy of the city,152 but also, finally, the exhilaration, as Whitman would put it, of (imaginatively) sailing “to sea in a ship” on the road to fulfillment, as we already saw in “Ithaca.”

The approach of Cavafy’s mature period demonstrates a different, much more reconciliatory relationship between the poet and the sea. Four years after the publication of the optimistic “Ithaca,” Cavafy added “Morning Sea” (1915) to his maritime corpus, a poem that

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A young man, twenty eight years old, on a vessel from Tenos,
Emes arrived at this Syrian harbor
with the intention of learning the perfume trade.
But during the voyage he was taken ill. And as soon
as he disembarked, he died. His burial, the poorest,
took place here. A few hours before he died,
he whispered something about "home," about "very old parents."
But who these were nobody knew,
nor which his homeland in the vast panhellenic world.
Better so. For thus, although
he lies dead in this harbor,
his parents will always hope he is alive.

“In Harbor”

... Then, sad, I went out on to the balcony,
went out to change my thoughts at least by seeing
something of this city I love,
a little movement in the street and the shops.

“In the Evening” (1916)
further exemplifies the proximity between him and the natural world and his striving for a balance between the “inside” and the “outside.” In “Morning Sea” we find the poet contemplating an Alexandria waterfront. The city is still awakening behind him; ahead rests a calm morning sea; the poet stands right on the edge between the two, and he depicts the Alexandrian sea as a protean tableau, an image of transformation that shifts from an outer plain public view of “brilliant blue” to an inner private mirror of “my memories, those images of sensual pleasure.”

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky, the yellow shore; all lovely, all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this (I really did see it for a minute when I first stopped) and not my usual day-dreams here too, my memories, those images of sensual pleasure.

This poem exemplifies Cavafy’s determination to harmonize his inner cravings with the outer world by addressing an emotive memory that is brought in the presence – and the present – of the eternal blue, color of sea and sky, but also a color signifying unity, continuity and endurance, especially in the Hellenic experience. The sea’s aesthetic appeal to Cavafy’s senses triggers a language that at the same time is literal and metaphoric. As Vrisimitzakis has noted, the two parallel realities that Cavafy is faced with in “Morning Sea” lead to the recognition of two different voices and rhythms, the “natural” and the “individual” (23). Undeniably, Cavafy has chosen to build up his work through bold brushstrokes that reveal aspects of his own private idiosyncrasy and tastes.

But, there is a moment while living his individual life that the poet feels the need for a different vision of reality. It is then that he turns to external nature to distance himself from his own memories and fantasies (Vrisimitzakis, 24). In “Morning Sea” the sea appears as a
representation of nature that the poet responds to briefly as almost to a painting or a photograph. After a respite, though, the inner images and thoughts that had been suppressed for a moment will resurface to compete with the scenery. The relief that nature alone cannot bestow to Cavafy, the poet will consummate with history and memories of sensual pleasure.

“Morning Sea” is arguably a pivotal Cavafy marine-poem in that it epitomizes the intervention of nature in Cavafy’s coastal urban sensibility, whether the poet likes it or not. “I never lived in the country,” Cavafy emphasizes in his diaries\(^{153}\) nor did he wish to. But he can never resist or defy the call of the sea, either as a reminder of nature, a gigantic mirror of his Alexandrian passions, or a symbolic gate to experience. Moreover, “Morning Sea” delineates the significance of the sea in the circle of Cavafy’s productivity, especially his mature period, which begins and culminates with poems carrying strong marine references.

Specifically, Cavafy steps into the first decade of his mature period with two antithetical key poems, as “The City” and “Ithaca,”\(^{154}\) that literally, as discussed earlier, obey the authority of the sea in the poet’s mind. Then, in “On Board Ship” (1919), four years after “Morning Sea,” Cavafy for the first time defines at last the gender of *eros* – “it’s like him” – and subject of his constant fascination in a poem that evokes an erotic moment that took place long ago and that the poet is remembering now while crossing the Ionian Sea, where, not accidently, Ithaca lies.\(^{155}\)

> It’s like him, of course, this little pencil portrait.

\(^{153}\) Savidi, 262
\(^{154}\) As discussed earlier, before these two poems embody the two extreme opposite realities of despair and hope that define Cavafy’s work. Even though the gloomy “The City” was written in the closing years of the nineteenth-century Cavafy did not publish it until 1910, a year earlier than “Ithaca,” which promulgated the poet’s new-found resolution to be optimistic in his mature years.

\(^{155}\) Prior to this poem, the gender of the ubiquitous body of *eros* in the erotic poems of Cavafy remains consistently and dexterously undefined, even though it is always assumed to be male. Regardless, this assumption ends with the gender clarification that Cavafy deliberates in this poem. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Whitman is also known for camouflaging often the male gender of his erotic fascination, especially in the first editions of *Leaves of Grass*. 
Hurriedly sketched, on the ship’s deck,
the afternoon magical,
the Ionian Sea around us.

It’s like him. But I remember him as better looking.
He was sensitive almost to the point of illness,
and this highlighted his expression.
He appears to me better looking
now that my soul brings him back, out of Time.

Out of Time. All these things are from very long ago—
the sketch, the ship, the afternoon.

Finally, Cavafy’s last published poem in 1932, “Days of 1908,” one year before his death, ends with a powerful image of the unbound body of eros that, freed of the constraints of clothing, comes at last to rest in splendid nudity by the sea under the summer sun. Disrobing in public may be regarded as a vulgar act, especially in Cavafy’s time and culture, but taking one’s clothes off by the sea is perceived as a natural urge signifying transparency and purity, both attributes of the rite of baptism. As Cavafy implies here, in the presence of the sea, beauty and sensual fulfillment transcend the parameters of time or class. As we have also noticed with Whitman, the males that Cavafy is solely interested in belong to the lower class. These are common lads, or sea-gods in urban disguise, whose gift is hidden under the facade of worn-out clothes; these young men retain their dreadful commonness on the street, but once they reveal their flesh on a sunny beach they qualify for the eternity that art may offer. Most likely Cavafy’s men are not literate enough to read poetry, but certainly, as in the case of “Days of 1908,” their natural gift is unwittingly to inspire it on the sea-edge:

That year he found himself without a job.
Accordingly he lived by playing cards
and backgammon, and the occasional loan.

But sometimes for a week or more, set free
from the ghastliness of staying up all night,
he’d cool off with a swim, by morning light.
His clothes by then were in a dreadful state.
He had the one same suit to wear, the one
of much discolored cinnamon.

Ah days of summer, days of nineteen-
eight, excluded from your vision, tastefully,
was that cinnamon-discolored suit.

Your vision preserved him in the very act of
casting it off, throwing it all behind him,
the unfit clothes, the mended underclothing.
Naked he stood, impeccably fair, a marvel—
his hair uncombed, uplifted, his limbs tanned lightly
from those mornings naked at the baths, and at the seaside.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that such externalization of the poet’s erotic sensibility is
materialized here, as a postscript in the end of his creative life, by bringing the body of love out
of the darkness of a cheap hotel room to a bright coastal landscape. As Pieris notes, the sea in
“Days of 1908” “is not just the symbol of an ideal experience contrasted with the shabby and
ghastly urban world. It is the realistic setting in which the poet will boldly present a young and
erotic body, quite naked, as a symbol of his constant and painful struggle to rid himself of all
those hateful bonds of society’s current conventions of pseudo-morality” (283).\footnote{In the previous Cavafy unfinished poems “After the Swim” and “On the Waterfront” the illicit – ostensibly homosexual – sexual activity is also conducted by the sea, albeit always close to the occasionally “shabby and ghastly urban world,” in the present time, but also in the historical past. As a silent, tolerant and exonerating witness, the sea here acquires the motherly qualities of forgiveness and compassion vis-à-vis the land’s inflexible and unforgiving treatment of secrecy and guilt; aside from the –presumably male – lovers, no one else knows about their encounter but her. The memory of a promiscuous passion away from the social promenade is recounted in “On the Waterfront” (1920), which Mendelsohn in his translation of the poem that I am using here translates as “On the Jetty”:}

Intoxicating night, in the dark, on the jetty.
And afterward in the little room of the tawdry
hotel—where we gave ourselves completely to our unwholesome
passion; hour
after hour, again and again to “our own” love—
until the new day glistened on the windowpanes.
Navigating a Sensual Sea

The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon’d...
-W. Whitman, “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand”

As we saw, in most of the poems with marine themes by Whitman and Cavafy discussed in this chapter the sea appears both as a metaphoric and realistic setting in which the poets contemplate the mutability of identity. Both the quixotic Whitman and unquixotic Cavafy allocate an Ulyssean perspective of life and of the self in a poetics that evokes the contours of

Night of our encounter
on the jetty; at a great
distance from the cafés and the bars.

Written one year later, “After the Swim” depicts a scene that takes place in the last years of Byzantium where same sex erotic activity no longer abides by the elastic rules of “pagan,” “Hellenic Education.” The enchanting nudity here anticipates the ultimate leap to sensual freedom that Cavafy expressed in “Days of 1908”:

Naked, both of them, as they emerged from the sea at the Samian shore; from the pleasure of the swim
(a blazing summer’s day).
They were slow getting dressed, they were sorry to cover
The beauty of their supple nudity
which harmonized so well with the comeliness of their faces.

Ah the ancient Greeks were men of taste,
to represent the loveliness of youth
absolutely nude.

Finally in the gloomy unfinished poem “The Item in the Paper” (1918) the corpse of a presumably male prostitute with the “sublime flesh” that the narrator “hadn’t kissed enough” is found some late night on the waterfront:

... It wasn’t certain
that it was a crime. The newspaper
expressed its pity, but, as usual,
it displayed its complete contempt
for the depraved way of life of the victim.
what Cohen calls “maritime modernism,” an intellectualization of the sea that challenges the writer and the reader to the difficult work of navigating the foggy, uncharted seas of language thought and feeling. An essential revelation that arises from this process of cerebral navigation concerns the erotic identity of the poet: Whitman’s and Cavafy’s maritime approach further suggests a sensual intensity that culminates with the metaphoric notion of the ocean as a repository of the seminal flux of male desire. The rhythmic composition and decomposition of waves, just as the recurring euphoric and refractory moments of the erotic act, generate a void in which disintegration and rebirth are interchanged. It is in such volatile state that both poets diverge from “the culture’s privileging of solids” (Moon, 60) and enact their own hedonistic Ulyssian trajectory in their poetics.

One of the aspects of “Ithaca” that underscores Cavafy’s originality, Anton claims, is the way the poet “sought to restore the Odysseus in all of us in the domain of sensuality” (2003: 10). Cavafy’s Odysseus, one may add, incorporates elements of both the Homeric and the Dantean configuration in an evolving body of representation. After all, an insinuation of the Dantean interpretation that often goes unacknowledged is Ulysses’ sensual curiosity: his decision to return to the sea with his male comrades may also be understood as an attempt to evade the constraints of monogamy and the conformity to domesticity. “Neither my fondness for my son,” utters Dante’s Ulysses, “nor pity/ for my old father nor the love I owed/ Penelope, which would

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157 Cohen credits Hugo as one of the pioneers of the trend (10).
158 As Moon further notes, “the ceaseless and ‘impress[ive]’ ‘drifts’ or ‘waves’ of the ocean are the poem’s (Leaves of Grass) model for the similar ways in which texts and selves are, ideally speaking, endlessly subject to being composed and decomposed, divided and reunited within themselves, divided form and reunited with others” (135).
have gladdened her, / was able to defeat in me the longing/ I had to gain experience of the world/and of the vices and the worth of men.”

Whitman is quite clear in his understanding and embracing the meaning of such an invigorating Ulyssean path. “The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives/around you would have to be abandon’d,” he urges. Only then the journey can be set in motion “with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea or/some quiet island, / Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you, / With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss or the new husband’s kiss, / For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.” Even though it can be misleading to elevate the essence of the terms “comrade,” “lover” or “brotherly love” in Whitman’s work

159 In an intertextual reading, the Dantean Ulysses’ polysemous confession can also connote a subtle early swing from the stereotyping of matrimony as a fulfilling harbor; in this light, I read it as an anticipation of the disrupted male/female bond invoked in the highly Whitmanian closing exchange between Ursula and Birkin in D. H Lawrence’s Women in Love written six centuries later:

“Aren’t I enough for you?” she asked.
“No,” he said. “You are enough for me, as far as a woman is concerned. You are all women to me. But I wanted a man friend, as eternal as you and I are eternal.”
“Why aren’t I enough?” she said. “You are enough for me. I don’t want anybody else but you. Why isn’t it the same with you?”
“Having you, I can live all my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love,” he said.
“I don’t believe it,” she said. “It’s obstinacy, a theory, a perversity.”
“Well—” he said.
“You can’t have two kinds of love. Why should you!”
“It seems as if I can’t,” he said. “Yet I wanted it.”
“You can’t have it, because it’s false, impossible,” she said.
“I don’t believe that,” he answered (475).

The correspondence of Lawrence’s passage with Whitman’s poem “Fast Anchor’d Eternal O Love!” is apparent:

Fast-anchor’d, eternal, O love! O woman I love;
O bride! O wife! more resistless than I can tell, the thought of you!
Then separate, as disembodied, or another born,
Ethereal, the last athletic reality, my consolation;
I ascend—I float in the regions of your love, O man,
O sharer of my roving life.

160 This poem, “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” is part of the thirty-nine-poem cluster of “Calamus.” Whitman wrote it at the age of forty-one, roughly the alleged age of Ulysses when he left Ithaca for his final journey.
strictly to the erotic level that Lawrence often ascribed to it, it would be sensible, however, to take into account the homoerotic curiosity that evolves in certain isolating male environments, such as a ship at sea, which also stands as a metaphor for the perilous passage and the intoxicating cargos that Cavafy depicts in “The Ships.”

Whitman is part of the underrepresented nineteenth-century sexually-deviant bohemian culture; thus, he habitually manifests himself as a cerebral mariner whose erotic imagination, like that of a sailor, often seeks relief in self-love. If the restrained Cavafy sublimates his erotic fantasies with a vision of a calm sea in the terraqueous urban setting of “Morning Sea,” Whitman’s physicality is unleashed on the seashore through acts of masturbatory excess. As we saw earlier, Whitman regards the seashore as the core of creation, a sexually charged point where the fatherly land copulates with the sea and the real unites with the ideal. It is right there, then, that the poet stands naked to sing and caress the phallus, albeit it is not a cheerful song. Whitman seems aware of his infertile action: his “seminal milk” will not join the stream of procreation. Thus, in “Song of Myself” the phallus occasionally embodies a dangerous power; it is depicted as the tip of a dead end that leads to death at sea (Bloom, 352).

Whitman did not only acquire a self-education on the beach, but also awareness of his body and the unconventional nature of its cravings. By his own admission, the poet spent a considerable portion of his adolescent life “loafing” on the beach –“loafing” is used here as a euphemism for masturbation, another crucial part of Whitman’s outdoor influences. Whitman literally comes of age by the ocean; there his solitary independence evolves into a longing for the erotic sea, or the world of sensual freedom that Cavafy envisioned: “You sea!” Whi...
exclaims in “Song of Myself” (Section 22). “I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean, / I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers ... We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of/the land, / Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse, / Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.”

Can it be that through sensual freedom a man and a poet, in particular, whose sexuality is primarily male-oriented, may assert a different stage of fatherhood, and thus transcend the stage of homosexual barrenness, as seen from a Victorian point of view? Whitman often envisioned himself as a father of young ideals in his poetry, not to mention his famous response to Symonds’ challenging question about his male-oriented eroticism, in which the aged Whitman replied that he had fathered three (fictional) children. As a solipsist in search of a procreant self, Whitman captained his own private Odyssey to great lengths of poetic self-discovery, which in a way is also what Cavafy did. Vrisimitzakis once noted that Cavafy likes to narrate the private Odysseys of others (22). But, having read Cavafy’s poems as distinct acts comprising a life’s

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“Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs,” Whitman further chants in “Song of Myself.” “Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.” The continuous references to “jettys,” “oceanic tides” and “floodgates” attest to the autoerotic consciousness of the younger Whitman as expressed in the first edition of Leaves of Grass.

Bloom devotes a section of his Western Canon to the discussion of Whitman’s autoeroticism, claiming that the erotic orientation in Whitman’s poetry and possibly his life was masturbatory (343). Indeed, Whitman’s celebration of masturbation in “Song of Myself” caused a “genuine scandal” (cited in Laqueur, 61). A most characteristic masturbatory scene depicted in “Song of Myself” (Section 28) takes place on the edge of a headland. In this delirious scene, self-love is depicted as an emotional Cavalry unfolding in the presence of the sea. “I am given up by traitors,” Whitman writes evoking the voice of a martyr. “I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the/greatest traitor, / I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me/there. / You villain touch! What are you doing? My breath is tight in its/throat, / Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.”

In an interesting juxtaposition, in his secret notes, Cavafy expresses similar anguish about his habitual masturbation, as Mendelsohn points out, he refers to by the “Alexandrian nickname for that activity –‘39,’ because it was thought to be thirty-nine times more exhausting than any other sexual activity.” “And yet I see clearly the harm and confusion that my actions produce upon my organism,” Cavafy notes in 1897. “I must, inflexibly, impose a limit on myself ... otherwise I shan’t be able to travel. I shall fall ill and how am I to cross the sea...” (cited in Mendelsohn, xxii). Both Whitman’s poetic account and Cavafy’s confession are apparently influenced by the prevailing Victorian notions of self-pleasure as an act of self-pollution and a vice more dangerous for the brain than sodomy, alcoholism and gambling. Of course, as it will be examined in the last chapter, autoeroticism later came to be considered as the sexuality of modernity and of the democratic middle class who created it (Laqueur, 18). The “idols of pleasure” the mature Cavafy sees as specular visions emerging from the sea in “Morning Sea” are released fragments of sensual moments that have evolved into autoerotic fantasies.
'work in progress,' it has become evident to me that the continuous dialogue between despair and pleasure, and between the older poet with his younger self, reveals above all the meaning of Cavafy’s own private journey.

I’d like to conclude this chapter with an idea expressed by Vrisimitzakis about the poetics of Cavafy that highly resonates with Whitman’s work and private life, but also with Baudelaire’s, who preceded both in extracting beauty from pain and shabby pleasures. One of Cavafy’s main ideas, the critic maintains, is that a man can never become an artist unless he corrupts himself first during a life’s journey. This “corruption” of the self – caused by one’s natural exposure to ηδονές, or sensual pleasures, and occasional pains – is the safest road to art. But, at the same time it should be understood, sensual pleasure merely accompanies life; it can never be a substitute for it (12). Both poets seem to agree that man does not strive toward sensual pleasure, but toward life. Sensual pleasure may be one of the most vibrant expressions of living, but living and knowing remain always the goals on the road to Ithaca.

Writes Cavafy: “Joy and balm of my life the memory of the hours/when I found and held on to pleasure as I wanted it. / Joy and balm of my life—for me, who had no use/for any routine enjoyment of desire.”163 The attainment of such pleasure, of course, is also part of the urban experience examined in the next chapter. In the expanding avenues of New York or the Alexandrian shady alleys, Whitman and Cavafy draw from the crowd a sensation that corresponds with Baudelaire’s affection for the street-life in Paris. “To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh/is enough,” Whitman writes. “To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arms ever so/lightly round his or her neck for a moment, / what is then? / I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.”164

163 “To Pleasure”
164 “Children of Adam,” Section 4.
Chapter 2

The City

Harbor of Dreams, City of Orgies:
Discovering Language, Expressing the Self in the Urban Labyrinth

Here rises the fluid and attaching character
-Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

In this chapter, the city is examined as a harbor and a swinging labyrinth in which Whitman and Cavafy mature amid, as worded by Baudelaire, “the ebb and the flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” The distance between the “unvintaged” sea and the hospitable city in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy, as already proposed, is a formative, mainly metaphoric and occasionally literal space that our poets must cross with Ulysscean determination to arrive in port, and thus know, feel and tell not only the joys and sorrows of the human journey, but also the sweet exhaustion caused, as Cavafy put it, “by the world’s seductive instability.”

165 The Homeric epithet ατρύγητος («unvintaged,” “unharvestable,” “barren” sea) is uttered by Eurycleia, the maid, in the second book of The Odyssey to illustrate the dangers that lie ahead for Telemachus if he is to depart the safe grounds of Ithaca for the unknown seas that, she thought, had swallowed his father.
166 “Brindisi” (1886)
In his analysis of the maritime significance in the Romantic imagination, Auden claims that “on the one hand, the poets long to immerse in the sea of Nature, to enjoy the endless mystery and novelty, on the other, they long to come to port in some transcendent eternal and unchanging reality from which the unexpected is excluded. Nature and Passion are powerful, but they are also full of grief. True happiness would have the calm and order of bourgeois routine without its utilitarian ignobility and boredom” (75). Juxtaposing a ship’s “strictly disciplined and authoritarian society” with normal urban life, Auden further argues that “ship and city can have almost exactly the opposite significance … the land can be thought of as the noir ocean de l’immonde cité, the place of purposelessness, of the ennui that comes from being confronted with infinite possibilities without the necessity to choose one” (67).

Whitman and Cavafy yearn for the muddled spectacle of the immonde city in which they blend in both as actors and spectators, a duality that produces the oscillating narratives of the observer and the observed, the seducer and the seduced, the individual and the crowd in a city that harbors the contradictions of humanity. Consequently, the poets depict the city as a maelstrom of opposites, an earthly stage where heaven and hell mingle harmoniously. Without the malodorous urban decay and the unprompted theatricality of the crowd, both symptoms of the “meaningless freedom” of the shore (Auden, 67), Whitman and Cavafy would not have grasped the array of their art; an art that is defined by the three consecutive facets of the city – the sensual, the ideal and the evanescent – as lived and imagined by the poets.

Both Whitman and Cavafy were bred in coastal areas peopled by migrants, as the poets’ own descendants who had once arrived in their respective adopted homelands from overseas –

167 When Cavafy moved to his “lonely house” on the disreputable Rue Lepsius of Alexandria, where he remained for the last twenty-six years of his life, he famously bantered that “where could I live better. Below, the brothel caters for the flesh. And there is the church (across the street) that forgives sin. And there is a hospital (nearby) where we die” (cited in Liddell). Moreover, as we will see, Whitman’s conflicted depiction of New York in his fiction and poetry springs from a point of view of the city as a place that embodies the dichotomies of high and low.
Whitman’s from England and the Netherlands to Massachusetts and Long Island, New York, and Cavafy’s from Constantinople to Alexandria.\textsuperscript{168} Hence, the gate of the sea and the nautical element of the émigré culture that came through it contribute to the “invisible influence” in their urban experience and their composition. Part of this influence is the eroticism the sea blows upon the young,\textsuperscript{169} an eroticism that will express itself and take the form of sensual bravado in a youthful urban landscape that Whitman affectionately terms “City of Orgies.”\textsuperscript{170}

The connection among youth, eroticism and the longing for the sea that appears as a commonplace of romantic literature (Pieris, 276) is also a very vital characteristic of coastal cultures. The “libidinous prongs” of desire Whitman enunciates in “Song of Myself” are symptomatic of the sea’s erotic challenge to the young in literature written by or about males growing and living in terraqueous landscapes, mythical and literal alike, across time and space, from the passion of young Paris that set Troy on fire to the brutal sexual appetites raging over Havana’s Malecon as voiced in the postmodern narrative of one of Whitman’s apostles, the Cuban Reinaldo Arenas whose eroticized fiction was admittedly “anxiously fascinated” with Whitman’s erotic poems, especially “Calamus.”\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{168} Cavafy’s family originally came from Istanbul’s Fener neighborhood, where the city’s rich and powerful Greeks lived. Later they moved to Samatya, a fishermen’s area, before finally they immigrated to Alexandria, where the Cavafys became prominent members of the Orthodox Christian minority among the Muslim majority.

\textsuperscript{169} As seen in the previous chapter, in Cavafy’s “Voice from the Sea” (1898) the sea is depicted as a Cirkean enchantress with a “secret voice,” a voice that nestles in the heart of the young awakening desire and sensuousness:

\begin{quote}
And if you are young, the yearning for the sea
will course within your veins; the wave will say
a word of its love to you, and it will dip
your love in mysterious perfume.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{170} From the Calamus section: “City of orgies, walks and joys, /... Not the pageants of you, not the shifting tableaus, your spectacles, repay me, / Not those, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift/flash of eyes offering me love, /Offering response to my own-these repay me, /Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.”

\textsuperscript{171} “The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be,” writes Arenas about his youthful days in Havana in his memoir Before Night Falls (1993). “Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed.” Arenas’ recollection corresponds with
In a similar fashion, whether one thinks of Whitman’s masturbatory visions on the headland or Cavafy’s lustful evenings in the seamy hotels on the waterfront, both poets’ erotics of youth reflect the excessive allure of a landscape that is “projected masculine, full-sized and golden.” Whitman associates the swinging pulse of the ever-evolving city with the dark river of language that expresses the fluidity of human nature. His aphorism “the efflux of the soul is happiness” affirms a link between the poet’s inner state and the outer influences that modulate it. “Here is happiness,” he writes, “I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times, / Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged. / Here rises the fluid and attaching character.”

Whitman’s fluid and phallic I, his shape-shifting first-person universal that transcends the boundaries of time and space, begins with sexuality: his happiness is conserved by it; his urbane verses depend on it as much as a calamus needs the moistness of the earth to grow.

As Foucault suggested, social reality subverts certain elements of the purely natural aspects of identity. The social construction of sexuality is part of an urban narrative assembled in the city, which is the birthplace of modern identity. In the writings of both Whitman and Cavafy “deviant” sexuality is seen as a strength that originates in the passion of savage nature but is only fully understood, expressed and defended in the social environment; in other words it is perceived as an act that, like art itself, requires an audience to canonize it by condemning it or accepting it. As opposed to Whitman’s reconciliatory tone, in Cavafy’s post-Romantic explicit poems of maturity written after 1910, homoerotic desire is deemed irrevocable and non-negotiable. As Jusdanis remarks, “(Cavafy’s) art speaks of corruption and the transgression of

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Ishmael’s realization in Melville’s *Moby Dick* that the experience of the sea is as strong as, in his analogy, Cato’s decision to throw himself upon his sword: “why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him at some time or other crazy to go to sea?” (Cited in Pieris, 277).

172 “Song of Myself” 58
173 “Song of the Open Road,” Section 8
174 The calamus is a plant native to America that features a long, phallic bloom.
social limits; it exceeds the decorous and permissible and urges one toward the condemned” (100).

“I don’t know if perversion yields strength,” Cavafy ponders. “Sometimes I believe so. Certainly, however, it is the source of greatness” (Cited in Jusdanis, 100). When Cavafy speaks of οἱ ἀνδρείοι τῆς ηδονῆς (“the champions of pleasure”) he prefigures the heroics of sexual transgression that defined Foucault’s analysis of sexuality, especially in light of the AIDS crisis that in the 1980s claimed Foucault’s own life. In the French philosopher’s view, a Faustian pact disrupts the ignobility and boredom of bourgeois heterosexuality with a “temptation (that) has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality (and is) as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for” (Cited in Miller, 34).

As a means of self-governance, sex demarcates the Dionysian aspects of the democratic personality Whitman and Cavafy often evoke. In their poetics, Whitman and Cavafy address sensual pleasure as an antidote to oblivion, a cause worth pursuing and dying for, because beauty and truth for both poets, in Dickinson’s verse, “themself are One.” “Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful except/death and love?)” wonders Whitman. “O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, / I think it must be for death.” And as Cavafy commandingly attests in “The Regiment of Pleasure,” it is through the exhaustion of “heavenly intoxications” and reverie, the most grueling of ascetic practices, that the Dionysian artist shall meet his worthy fate: “And finally, when you collapse in the street, even then your fortune is enviable. When your funeral will pass by, the Forms to which your desires gave shape will shower lilacs and white roses upon your coffin, young Olympian Gods will bear you on their

175 “When They Come Alive”
176 Poem 449
177 “Scented Herbage of My Breast” from the “Calamus” cluster.
shoulders, and you will be buried in the Cemetery of the Ideal, where the mausoleums of poetry gleam conspicuously white.” Despite the symbolic tone of this prose poem, in an overall view, it becomes apparent for Cavafy that, as Martin has remarked for Whitman, sexuality is “not a metaphor, but an act” (1979: 28) that is entwined with the city itself.

Both Cavafy and Whitman reached their peak of creative maturity later in life in the cosmopolitan city. In a private note written in 1902, Cavafy, headed for his fortieth-birthday, remarks that “I have been liberated,” albeit it would take over a decade for this enlightened knowledge to register in his poems. In an interesting parallel Whitman promulgates in the first poem of the “Calamus” cluster his resolve to “sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment, / Projecting them along that substantial life, / Bequeathing hence types of athletic love, / Afternoon this delicious Ninth-month in my forty-first year.”

Why did it take them so long? Capri-Karka observes that “growing up and living in a family and a society that functions within certain laws and convictions results in a conditioning of the individual that cannot be easily dismissed. One can logically reach a decision, but erasing from the subconscious the accumulated fears, guilt and insecurity is a very slow and painful process, especially if it takes place under the constant persecution of a society not ready to accept change. It is true that Cavafy grew up in Alexandria, where the mixture of races, nationalities and religions created certain neutrality, but the moral principles of his immediate (conservative Greek) environment were more restrictive. Had he lived in Greece, he would probably never have been liberated” (21). By the same token, Whitman would not have emerged as the great conciliator of opposites, who once described Brooklyn as a symbol of mediation between city and country (Reynolds, 33), had he not made the journey from Paumanok to the “Gomorrah across the river,” as he often referred to New York City (Reynolds, 32), the place that actually

178 “In Paths Untrodden”
moulded more than anything else Whitman’s imagination, creative powers and personality. For Whitman, in particular, the distance between provincialism and cosmopolitanism signalled the invigorating leap in his life from solitary boyhood to emancipated manhood.

In the works of Whitman and Cavafy there is a focal semi-autobiographical theme of transformation through sex: it follows the gradual transposition of male youths from the plane of provincial erotic isolation to freedom and a constant “service to Pleasure”¹⁷⁹ in the urban setting. The countryside and the city are juxtaposed thus as two opposite symbolic poles that represent the barrenness of innocence and the exhaustion of intoxication. In particular, as showcased in the three specific works by Whitman and Cavafy drawn around this motif of transformation that I am citing here, the erotic calling of young men to the city entails dangers: a lad flees the provinces for the urban labyrinth of sensual anomie and moral degradation.

This fateful journey comes full circle respectively in Cavafy’s two poems “In the Boring Village” (1925) and “Days of 1896” (1927) that I present here, in their entirety, in chronological and thematic sequence:

> In the boring village where he works—
> clerk in a textile shop, very young—
> and where he’s waiting out the two or three months ahead, another two or three months until business falls off
> so he can leave for the city and plunge headlong into its action, its entertainment;
> in the boring village where he’s waiting out the time—
> he goes to bed tonight full of sexual longing,
> all his youth on fire with the body’s passion, his lovely youth given over to a fine intensity. And in his sleep pleasure comes to him;
> in his sleep he sees and has the figure, the flesh he longed for...
> “In the Boring Village”

He became completely degraded. His erotic tendency, condemned and strictly forbidden (but innate for all that), was the cause of it:

¹⁷⁹ Cavafy, “The Regiment of Pleasure”
society was totally prudish.
He gradually lost what little money he had,
then his social standing, then his reputation.
Nearly thirty, he had never worked a full year—
at least not at a legitimate job.
Sometimes he earned enough to get by
acting the go-between in deals considered shameful.
He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly
if you were seen around with him often.

But this isn’t the whole story—that would not be fair.
The memory of his beauty deserves better.
There is another angle; seen from that
he appears attractive, appears
a simple, genuine child of love,
without hesitation putting,
above his honor and reputation,
the pure sensuality of his pure flesh.

Above his reputation? But society,
prudish and stupid, had it wrong.

“Days of 1896”

These two poems were written after 1911, a date acknowledged by Cavafy himself as the
dividing line between his apprenticeship and his creative maturity that enabled him gradually to
distance himself from the simplistic Romantic imagery that dominated his verse in the early
period from 1884 till 1894. Part of this intellectual growth came as a result of the fact that
Cavafy’s “erotic vision and his view of the city outside his window had merged almost totally by
the time he came to publish erotic poems set in the contemporary city, so that modern
Alexandria, at least as depicted in his work, had become for him an image of the Sensual City”
(Keeley: 1976).180 The aforementioned poems trace the path from sexual hibernation to the
ultimate experience of sensual intoxication that is known to the poet both instinctively and

180 Cavafy’s gradual maturity as a poet runs parallel to modern Alexandria’s gradual decline, a fact that urged the
poet to look backwards and reconstruct the aura of the historical city. Characteristically, Savidis has argued that
“the year 1911 seems to mark the final stage of progress in the poet’s changing conception of himself: from a
gifted aesthete in search of his voice to a committed poet who knows where he is heading and who plans to
devote himself diligently to getting there. I think we can now add that the poet’s accommodation with Alexandria,
which included a recognition of the rich resources in ambiance, historical context, and mode that it could make
available to him, not only proved crucial to his progress in this regard but influenced the particular course that his
work took from 1911 onward” (Cited in Keeley: 1976).
empirically. As with many of Whitman’s sexual poems, Cavafy often attributes a punitive element to excessive hedonism (“He became completely degraded”), a trend that surfaces in his poetry and private diaries in which outbursts of guilt and immense anxiety caused by libidinous thoughts or acts are expressed.\footnote{In the 1890s we find Cavafy as ambivalent and perplexed about his sexuality as never before or after. The poet’s anxiety perhaps is not entirely unrelated to the debate on sexual behavior that erupts around this period when thinking in terms of sexual identities and the preoccupation with sexual labeling comes to a peak. The homosexual practices that were condemned in Whitman’s time, and which tyrannized young Cavafy’s conscience, by the closing of the century, rather than as sinful actions, came to be viewed as marks of a deviant personality, whose origins became the focus of intense debate. As a critic notes, “The typology of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ behavior thus came to be mapped on to a medicalized pathology of character-types—the homosexual ‘invert’, the ‘nymphomaniac ... and so on. This approach had its origins in the Enlightenment desire to understand human nature in new, scientific ways; but it grew increasingly elaborate and powerful in subsequent centuries, as medicine and biology became even more authoritative determinants of what was sexually ‘natural’” (Dabhoiwala, 358).}

Hence, the young repressed clerk of the former Cavafy poem runs away from the masturbatory village in search of the tangible pleasures of the city that, in the latter poem, will ruin his reputation because society is “prudish and stupid.”

Here are echoes of Whitman’s early semiautobiographical cautionary tale, the dime-novel *Franklin Evans* (1842) in which young Franklin leaves his village for the big city where...
intemperance lurks. In my view, Franklin’s alcoholism can also be read as a metaphor for a youth’s addiction to illicit sexual pleasures triggered by excessive drinking. In a suspicious string of events, Franklin maltreats both his wives literally to death but rejoices in the company of “moustached dandies and lively (male) youth” (Whitman, 2007:72). Even though the immensely popular *Evans* was condemned by his author and his critics – as were some of Cavafy’s early poems – as too simplistic and juvenile, yet it reconciles “the lyric poet’s need to tell a limited story with the social reformer’s need to locate a more comprehensive and impersonal point of view” (Pollak: xvii). Moreover, it attests to young Whitman’s tendency to use cryptic and symbolic language as an antidote to silence. For instance, similarly with Cavafy’s earlier poems, young Whitman also shies away from defining the gender of his “lovers,” even though the homosexual implication can be guessed. As Martin claims, this “frequent strategy” allows Whitman to conceal his homoerotic disposition “without outright duplicity and deception” (17). Martin further argues convincingly that some of the bolder language that Whitman employs after 1860 could not be spoken earlier, “partly because of social pressure and partly because of the absence of vocabulary” (1979: 30).

By the same token, when the adolescent Cavafy was discovering his eroticism in Alexandria and later in Istanbul, unable as he was to externalize the sensations, he immersed himself in a state of hibernation similar to that of young Törless in Musil’s novel, who realizes that it is “the failure of language that caused him anguish, a half realization that words were simply random, mere evasions, and never the feeling itself” (Musil, 91). It was in the exotic

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182 Reynolds provides a short history of the temperance doctrine associated with excessive drinking and the prohibition movement that became popular in the 1850’s to Whitman’s dismay (1996: 93).
183 Capri-Kafka notes how prior to the poem “On the Ship” (1919) Cavafy refrains from revealing the sex of the beloved. “Although the homosexual nature of love could be guessed from the whole context of the poems, the poet carefully manipulated his sentences so as to avoid explicit use of the male gender when referring to a lover” (82).
Istanbul of the 1880s, the erstwhile metropolis of the Byzantium where East and West mingled, that Cavafy came to terms with his eroticism. To avoid a political crisis that followed the Arab nationalist uprisings of 1882 in Egypt, Cavafy’s mother, Charikleia, with her children moved to her paternal home in Istanbul when Cavafy was nineteen.

As Malanos and Anton agree, it was during that time in Constantinople that Cavafy became seriously interested in writing poetry, and specifically erotic poetry. “The sensitive, somewhat withdrawn and rather reticent youth, who gave most of the time to private studies, found himself transplanted to another cosmopolis, one with decidedly oriental flavor and intrigue,” Anton notes. “Cavafy’s stay in Constantinople at this critical age seems to have eased the surfacing of his emotional ambiguities. His attachment to his cousin marked the beginning of his attraction to persons of his own sex, but it took years before the problems related to the expression of his intense eroticism became a theme in his poetry” (1995: 29-30).

Evidently, the influence of that period persuaded Cavafy to open up and write his first poems as an antidote to silence; this is the beginning that eventually led to the structuring of Cavafy’s poetry around the three cores of history, meditation and feeling with emphasis on the erotic fiber of humanity. In this silent and suppressed state of youth, the imagery of the city acquires the dimensions of a visual encyclopedia for the poet in search of language. The city itself becomes an object of erotic flânerie that is implicit in the case of Whitman, while it

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184 Back then there was a very large Greek community in Istanbul, which the Greeks still call Constantinople. Cavafy’s awareness of the Byzantine tradition and the historical record of his culture, as well as his love for his native language, are attributed by Tsirkas, Liddell and Anton, among other critics and biographers, to the three years he spent in Istanbul with his family as a youngster.

185 Malanos originally acknowledged the “pleasure-seeking uncontrolled adolescence phase” that Cavafy experienced in Istanbul as a formative experience of his erotic character (1975: 15).

186 Whitman’s poetry is filled with instances of voyeurism and lustful descriptions. In “Song of Myself” section 13, for instance, Whitman observes an anonymous Negro who is holding “firmly the reins of his four horses.” The description that follows strikes me as acutely erotic: the Negro’s “blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast... The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of his polish’d and perfect limbs... I behold the picturesque giant and love him...” Similar confessions are to be found in Cavafy, mostly triggered by the
becomes gradually unequivocal in the case of Cavafy. As Pontani remarks, “the street, the shops, the sidewalks, in addition to the walls and the patios and the windows, enter the cycle of erotic love and stay forever there” (213). Characteristically, in his poem “Passage,” Cavafy reflects on his evolution from a timid Törless to an emancipated sensualist:

The things he timidly imagined as a schoolboy
are openly revealed to him now. And he wanders around,
stays out all night, gets involved. And as is right (for our kind of art)
his blood—fresh and hot—
is relished by sensual pleasure. His body is overcome
by forbidden erotic ecstasy; and his young limbs
give in to it completely.

In this way a simple boy
becomes something worth our looking at, for a moment
he too passes through the exalted World of Poetry,
the young sensualist with blood fresh and hot.

As opposed to the confrontational and occasionally cynical homoeroticism expressed in Cavafy’s erotic and historical poems written after 1920, and generally in the contemporary Mediterranean and Latin poetry that followed, Whitman’s own erotic character remains intentionally—and to a certain extent justifiably by his own time’s shortcomings—ambiguous in his pages. This is owed partly to Whitman’s sublimated sexuality for various reasons that should be examined here. Prior to becoming the “ultimate Broadway rambler” in the “fiery fifties,” Whitman, as we saw, grew up in the spaciousness and parochialism of rural New York; his early days were primarily spent among nature and animals in the fields and the shores of the countryside, a place as remote from the city streets paved with brothels and theaters that the underage Cavafy knew as Paumanok from Alexandria.

lascivious delectation of the eye in various corners of the city and expressed in poems such as “He Has Come There to Read,” “In the Street,” “At the Café Door,” from the Canon and “At the Theatre” from the Hidden Poems.

187 The terms belong to Justin Martin, who recounts Whitman’s days as a New York bohemian patron of Pfaffs in Rebel Souls (2014).
In his youthful semi-autographical fiction we find the Long Islander Whitman even deriding the appeal of the very city he would grow so fond of later in life. “Men of the cities!” he quips in his short story “The Tomb Blossoms,” “what is there in all your boasted pleasure – your fashions, parties, balls, and theatres, compared to the simplest delights we country folk enjoy? Our pure air making the blood leap with buoyant health; our labor and our exercise; our freedom from the sickly vices that taint the town” (Brasher, 1963). Cavafy’s earlier dissipated passions, as much as Baudelaire’s Parisian sensual delights, were the flowers of such urban “sickly vices.” Whereas Cavafy’s adolescent experiences of “abused hedonism” in the tainted town (Anton, 1995:34) were revived later as stimulants of the imagination that provided the subject matter for several of the confessional erotic poems he composed in middle age, Whitman’s youthful “cries of unsatisfied love” mumbled on the shore of Long Island signaled the unfulfilled beginnings that inspired his early fiction and eventually the “lusty lurking masculine” verses Whitman would scribe later in the city.

One may briefly pause here to recall the distinction between savage and urbane male sexuality, an elemental literary theme since the time of Gilgamesh. In modernity we also often draw a line between crude and debonair sexual behavior, whose respective manifestations are particularly strong in Whitman’s narrative. Unlike Cavafy’s case, Whitman experienced both the silence of the countryside and the clamor of the city, and to a certain extent this dualism generates a double standard that begins with the poet’s own epic intentions to reconcile nature’s and society’s most irreconcilable forces, especially in terms of sexual expression and the way one perceives, interprets and experiences sexuality. Growing up in the countryside is living close

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188 In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh the two main characters, king Gilgamesh and his rival and companion Enkidu, represent primordial archetypes of savage and civilized masculinity that complement each other.
to nature and, therefore, to raw sexuality.\footnote{189} Whitman’s lonely outbursts on the shores of Paumanok indicate a sexual energy that is too big of a force to contain, no less express itself, in a puritanical American hamlet. In his delirious monologue “Spontaneous Me” (1856), the older urbane Whitman discloses the agony of adolescent lust in provincial isolation.\footnote{190} Evidently, as

\footnote{189} Arenas, who was bred in the rural Cuban countryside, argues that “There is no truth to the theory, held by some, about the sexual innocence of peasants. In the country, sexual energy generally overcomes all prejudice, repression, and punishment. That force, the force of nature, dominates. In the country, I think, it is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man. Physical desire overpowers whatever feelings of machismo our fathers take upon themselves to instill in us” (19). Arenas further notices that rural eroticism manifests a sexual voracity that is “all-embracing” and involves “all of nature, including trees. I would carve out a hole in a soft-stemmed tree, like papaya and stick my penis into it. It was great fun to fuck a tree” (19), and animals: “Not only the mares, sows, hens or turkeys but almost all animals were objects of my sexual passion, including dogs” (18). Similar extreme accounts of raw sexuality and zoophilia in the desolation of the Italian provinces are presented in the 1977 film \textit{Father and Master} by the Taviani brothers, the story of a Sardinian shepherd who escapes the volatility of provincialism by educating himself. In contrast, unlike the Latino or the Mediterranean overly desublimated experience, Whitman’s puritanical environment is one that encourages sublimation and restraint. When Whitman speaks of animals in his poetry is from a comparative desexualized perspective between nature and civilization that favors the former as pure and genuine and reduces the latter to a punitive social censored system that prefigures the writings of many of the social and psychoanalytical theorists of the twentieth-century:

\begin{quote}
I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self contained; 
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;
Not one is dissatisfied – not one is demented with the mania of owning things;
Not one kneels to another, nor his kind that lived thousands of years ago;
Not one is responsible or industrious over the whole earth.
\end{quote}

\footnote{190} Spontaneous me, Nature,
The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,
The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,

...........................................

The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures,)
The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me,

...........................................

Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts of love, bellies press’d and glued together with love,
Earth of chaste love, life that is only life after love,
The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the body of the earth,
The hubb’d sting of myself, stinging me as much as it ever can any one,

...........................................

The limpid liquid within the young man,
The vex’d corrosion so pensive and so painful,
The torment, the irritable tide that will not be at rest,

...........................................
demonstrated in this poem, in his youth Whitman seems as determined to hold back from his impulses and refrain from hedonistic excess as an athlete the evening before his game: “the hot hand seeking to repress what would master him.”

Is that Whitman’s hand? Most likely, the answer is yes. Instead, Whitman offers to his reader the words written with that hand as the seed of an unmitigated passion; his sublimated song converts socially unacceptable impulses into truths daringly formulated into verses. This is the passion of a poet “like me” whose “masculine poems” substitute for the amorous “souse.” As Moon observes, Whitman’s chameleonic, “fluid” self is a “collective or composite self designed to accommodate the reader as well as the author, to bring them into affectionate contact with each other” (88). After all, for Whitman the most sublime erotic act is the act taking place between himself and his reader, or at least, that’s what he wanted us to think, that reading him one or two hundred years later would be another way of copulating with his intangible body.191

In addition, Whitman’s erotic ambiguity on the page and his reluctance to be associated with a sexual group, or overtly specify the gender of a partner can also be seen as an effort to

\[
\text{The mystic amorous night, the strange half-welcome pangs, visions, sweats,} \\
\text{The pulse pounding through palms and trembling encircling fingers,} \\
\text{the young man all color'd, red, ashamed, angry;} \\
\text{The souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and} \\
\text{...........................................}
\]

191 “We are seas mingling,” writes Whitman, “We are two of those cheerful waves rolling over each other and interwetting each other.”191 Then, in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” he asks: “What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?”191 Finally, in “So Long!” of the “Songs of Parting” cluster, he addresses directly the future reader as a lover of his text:

Dear friend, whoever you are, here, take this kiss, 
I give it especially to you—Do not forget me, 
I feel like one who has done his work—I progress on, 
The unknown sphere, more real than I dreamed, 
more direct, darts awakening rays about me—
So long! 
Remember my words—I love you—I depart from materials, 
I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.
come to grips with his own bisexual nature, long before Krafft-Ebing, Ellis and Freud contributed to scientific perspectives on sexuality. In retrospect, it is of minor consequence, if at all, whether the poet whose poetry advocates “the fluid and attaching character,” was indeed bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual—these are all labels that Whitman’s generation could not have known anyway. He was rather as much a natural man as he was American, two identities suggestive of largeness, multiplicity, progress and experimentation; identities which he himself fused in his narrative.192

At the same time though, Whitman also comes forward as a *Hellenized* American. This is not so solely because of the Homeric and classical references in his writings, or his Greco-minded conviction that “the known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet;”193 it is also because, in my view, his *Americanes* is often informed and enlightened by the eroticized Greek culture and the sense of the ideal brotherhood that rose from its democratic constitution.194 Undoubtedly, the “inseparable cities” Whitman has in mind195 are closer to the

192 “The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without the corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen,” Whitman notes in his 1855 Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. “Not nature nor swarming states nor streets and steamships nor prosperous business nor farms nor capital nor learning may suffice for the ideal man ... nor suffice the poet ... The pride of the United States leaves the wealth and finesse of the cities and all returns of commerce and agriculture and all the magnitude of geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy the breed of fullsized men or one fullsized man unconquerable and simple”(44-60). Moreover, five years later, Whitman lists the publication date of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* as “Year 85 of the States.” According to the idiosyncratic “Whitmanian calendar” not only Whitman’s space but also his time is defined by the ideals of the American dream of independence and unity that were set in stone on July 4, 1776 with the birth of the United States of America (Martin, 2014: 105).

193 Ibid, line 216.

194 In a parallel remark, John Valente, in his preface to Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* notes that “as an American and a modern, rough and ready, with boasting words and homely phrases, ever infinitely aware of himself, (Whitman) sat and argued and debated in the accepted manner of the Athenian Academy” (x).

195 Specifically, Whitman writes in “A Song”:

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies;
I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other’s necks;
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

For you these, from me, O Democracy, to serve you, ma femme!
eroticized democratic state that the Athenians instigated than to the “abnormally libidinous” Gilded Age capital of greed, rugged individualism and “shallow notions of beauty” perpetuated by the “untutored masses” that the older Whitman deplores in Democratic Vistas and New York Dissected. In “To a Western Boy” from the “Calamus” cluster, Whitman unswervingly evokes the mentor-apprentice exchange established in classical Greek society as a pedagogical-amorous affair meant as a process of initiation and enculturation for the young:

Many things to absorb I teach to help you become élève of mine;
Yet if blood like mine circle not in your veins,
If you be not silently selected by lovers and do not silently select lovers,
Of what use is it that you seek to become élève of mine?

The blood-bond between a schoolboy and his tutor that Whitman explores here, as Kantarella reiterates in her authoritative study, “was considered necessary in Greek society on the grounds that it could transfuse the manly virtues into the boy through the sperm of his lover (8). Keuls further comments on the rationale of such manly sexual role-play that rises above the realm of mundane pleasure in ancient Greece: “anal intercourse is an act that humiliates the person undergoing it, and symbolizes in a very obvious way the submission of the younger person to the older: in other words, it is an act of ‘enculturation’” (Cited in Kantarella, 8). Later, upon coming of age, the former élève would end the homosexual phase of life, and take on the virile role with a woman.196

For you! for you, I am trilling these songs,
In the love of comrades,
In the high-towering love of comrades.

196 This was not necessarily an agreeable transition to many a mentor, albeit it was respected and obeyed in the ancient era. But for Whitman, as much as for Lawrence, whose Whitmanian fixation with male bonding, as we saw, is imprinted in his corpus, love between men remained the highest bond. Characteristically, Whitman writes in “Fast Anchor’d, Eternal, O Love”:

Fast-anchor’d, eternal, O love! O woman I love!
O bride! O wife! more resistless than I can tell, the thought of you!
—Then separate, as disembodied, or another born,
Ethereal, the last athletic reality, my consolation;
In Whitman’s early days, social cross-age male bonding was semi-acceptable urban conduct in New York despite its endemic association with sodomy, which was already institutionally persecuted in certain states in America.\footnote{It is worth noting that as early as 1779 Thomas Jefferson wrote a law in Virginia that contained punishment of castration for men who engage in sodomy. Jefferson’s law was later viewed as an attempt to mitigate the sodomy laws in Virginia, which back then continued to prescribe death as the maximum penalty for the crime of sodomy in that state. It was not until 1882, as Reynolds notes, that “consenting to sodomy” was criminalized in New York (1995: 394).} As Reynolds observes, the pejorative term “sodomist” was not replaced by the word ‘homosexual’ in English until 1892, the year of Whitman’s death (1995: 396).\footnote{A few years later, in 1898, in the aftermath of Wilde’s trial in England, Havelock Ellis was also brought to trial under the charge that his \textit{Sexual Inversion} was obscene.} It was around that time that, in Foucault’s analysis, “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (1978: 43). And, it was during the times of Cavafy and Lawrence, both contemporaries of Ellis and Freud, that the idea of sexual identity was formulated. Hence, Reynolds observes, “before the 1880s, ‘lover’ had no gender connotation and was used interchangeably with ‘friend’ ... similarly the word ‘orgy’ had no sexual association; it meant ‘party.’ When (Whitman) writes, ‘I share the midnight orgies of young men’ or imagines a ‘city of orgies, walks and joys’ where ‘lovers, continual lovers, only repay me,’ he is imaginatively participating in the uninhibited gatherings that working-class comrades enjoyed” (1995: 392).\footnote{However, as Reynolds adds, “romantic friends could have genital sex without necessarily feeling guilty,” because “since romantic friendship was commonplace, homosexual acts did not stir up much controversy, either with the public or with police” in antebellum America.}

Having said that, it would be an oversight not to take into account Whitman’s profuse sexual vigor that lurks behind his subtle notion of brotherly love, an ideal manly love edging both on the platonic and physical aspects of male-male affection that is awakened from the

\begin{quote}
I ascend—I float in the regions of your love, O man,
\vspace{2mm}
O sharer of my roving life.
\end{quote}
deathbed of the medieval centuries and is brought to life in Whitman’s poetic corpus. Such love, of course, can flourish only in the city where men flock in Whitman’s time to evade poverty and parochialism, and stick together, or as Whitman would put it, adhere to one another in an emotional (and occasionally somatic) union that largely excluded femaleness. Sometimes, I read Whitman’s plea for adhesiveness as a euphemism for his own yearning for same-sex physical contact in the “city of orgies”; at other times it strikes me as an attempt to bridge (or camouflage) the poet’s own divided sexual persona. In Robert Martin’s view, “City of Orgies” celebrates not merely the ordinary parties that working-class comrades enjoyed back then, but rather “a series of brief encounters. From realizing that the lover will eventually die and that those who refuse the sensual pleasures of the city are already dead comes a desire to celebrate the transitory” (74). In this context, the phrase “lovers, continual lovers only repay me,” somehow anticipates the homoerotic culture of sexual promiscuity that thrived in New York City in the second half of the twentieth-century. In “Calamus” Whitman makes clear the noteworthiness of such, transient or not, union and its centrality to his poetry:

What think you I take my pen in hand to record?

...................
The splendors of the past day? Or the splendor of the night that envelops me?
Or the vaunted glory and growth of the great city spread around me?—no;
But I record of two simple men I saw to-day, on the pier, in the

200 It is noteworthy how Whitman associates femaleness with abstract, large, intangible or even sacred entities, such as the sea, a mother’s womb (which is often compared with the sea), his own mother, Democracy (“ma femme!”), or America (which in Whitman’s narrative occupies the central role of a “gigantic mother,” a term Hugo once used to describe Paris), while he sees maleness in more tangible, figurative and concrete bodies like the solid land, the human form and the “hubb’d sting,” his euphemism for the erected male organ. This detachment from ordinary femaleness, other than the reverence for motherhood or the perception of awe-inspiring properties such as the sea, the city and the revolution as female, can also be attributed to the fact that unlike cosmopolitan European cities like Paris where the sexes mingled socially in the nineteenth-century, American society was primarily gender-split. As Justin Martin observes, “During the 1850s, there were considerable constraints regarding where a woman could go in public...A lone woman out on the town raised questions...There were also public institutions (in New York) that were decidedly male domains—taverns chief among them .... (One of them) had the slogan ‘Good Ale, Raw Onions, and No Ladies’” (63-64).
midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends;
The one to remain hung on the other's neck, and passionately
kiss'd him,
While the one to depart, tightly prest the one to remain in his
arms.

“What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand?”

Certainly, adhesiveness is also meant as the key to friendship, peace and strengthening
America’s fragile democracy, which back then was increasingly tyrannized by Victorian codes
of morality. Male camaraderie for Whitman signified a means to social change, and thus it is
insinuated as a remedy to aggression and class division. The dialectics between the erotic and the
civic self that Whitman contemplates inevitably leads to a vision of democracy governed not
only by the practice of ethics and law, but also by the uncensored sensual behavior of the
constituents of the republic. Martin defines Whitman’s homosexuality as “a source of political
strength and a valid basis for his political belief in brotherhood” (1979: 49). Taking into account
Whitman’s conviction that “democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable
twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating
itself,” it is reasonable to infer, as Martin does, that “Whitman seems to have believed, like
Melville in Typee, that heterosexuality was the sexual expression of capitalism and of a society
based on property. Homosexuality was for him the sexual expression of community, and would
follow necessarily in a true socialist society” (1979: 84).

Whitman’s social dream borrowed heavily from the vision of the French socialist and
libertine Charles Fourier (1772-1837), whose theories gained popularity in America during a
time that class differences became particularly felt in the New York of the 1840s and 1850s.
Fourier’s pre-Marxian utopian socialism denounced the tyranny of capitalism and proposed the
structure of society in organized communities he called “phalanxes.” As Reynolds notes,
Whitman learned more about Fourierism when he opened a Brooklyn bookstore that carried all the progressive publications of the time. But, “it was Fourier’s ideas of ‘passional attraction’ and brotherhood, not his economic plan, that most appealed to (Whitman)” (Reynolds, 1995: 142). Fourier’s *Love in the Phalanstery*,202 in particular, an exposition of the arrangements of the phalanx with regard to sexual attraction, proposed that “every sexual appetite, being God-given, was to be satisfied” and every impulse should be held to be natural (Novick, 15-16).

The city of dreams Whitman meant to live was a place free of sin, injustice and war. This is clearly stated in “I Dream’d in a Dream” in the “Calamus” section of *Leaves of Grass* where an unnamed utopian city, presumably New York, is depicted along the lines of classical Athenian ideals, as well as Fourier’s idea of the vehement Phalanstery:

I dream’d in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth;
I dream’d that was the new City of Friends;
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love—it led the rest;
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
And in all their looks and words.

Yet, the city he left Long Island for, proved to be anything but a dream. Whitman made it to New York in 1841 at the age of twenty-one primarily, but not solely, for bread-winning purposes. At the same time, the city offered him a getaway from his own alleged troubling sexual misdeeds on Long Island203 and a new freedom to draw erotic fantasies from the anonymity of the crowd,

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202 Fourier’s text was translated into English by Henry James Sr., the novelist’s father, and published in the journal *The Harbinger* (Novick, 15)
203 Reynolds recounts allegations for Whitman’s sexual misdemeanors as a young teacher in Southold, Long Island (1996: 65-80). Despite the havoc that Whitman’s affection for his young pupils caused in the small town in 1841, Reynolds argues that “Whitman’s feelings for young men were particularly ardent expressions of the kind of same-sex passion that was common among both men and women in nineteenth-century America. Such ardor was in fact widely accepted in the street culture of Brooklyn and New York, but in a Puritan-based rural town like Southold, a bastion of conservatism, it would have been frowned upon, whether or not it involved sexual contact” (72-73).
amid the ebb and the flow of intoxicating nights in an erotic environment akin to the sensual landscapes Cavafy knew. Possibly, the young Whitman did experiment sexually at least with some of the scores of men he met and fell in love with a handful. but to what degree these experiences influence his narrative remains inconclusive because by his own admittance: “I dare not even tell in words.”

Whitman’s rebelliousness in openly practicing the diversity he preached in his poetics, at least in sexual matters, had its limitations; the persecution suffered by distinguished figures such as Byron and especially Wilde on the other side of the Atlantic made him cautious throughout his life of his own society’s prudent stand on such matters. A critic maintains that “Whitman abandoned fiction primarily, because he was not yet ready to claim the unconventional sexual desires that his narratives had begun furtively to uncover” (Pollak, 38). Moreover, it seems that his vigorous ambition to become one day America’s leading poet, an urban bard whose

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204 In his daybooks of the 1850s Whitman famously catalogues the numerous men that had a lasting impression on him:

“Jakey (James) tall, genteel friend of Brownie

Jay (5th av.) –19

John Campbell, round light complex lymphatic, good look.”

As Kantrowitz observes, “it’s unlikely that (Whitman) could have sexual encounters with so many men and more probable that he was a spectator, saving reminders of the attractive men he had seen ... to serve as fuel in his masturbatory fantasies since he could not have access to male pornography beyond the images of Hercules, Pan, and Bacchus that he kept on his bedroom wall” (8). But, it would be reasonable to assume that Whitman did experiment sexually at least with a few of these men.

205 His longtime affection for Peter Doyle, to name one, has been duly recorded by all his biographers.

206 In “Earth, My Likeness” from the “Calamus” section he writes characteristically:

Earth, my likeness,
Though you look so impassive, ample and spheric there,
I now suspect that is not all;
I now suspect there is something fierce in you eligible to burst forth,
For an athlete is enamour’d of me, and I of him,
But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to burst forth,
I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs.

Harold Bloom, in his *Western Canon*, notes that there is little evidence that Whitman had sexual relationships with anyone else aside from himself (337). But both Callow and Reynolds indicate that his largely platonic relationship with the Southerner Peter Doyle intensified Whitman’s homoerotic experience and ignited a passion that was possibly fulfilled with unknown men.
democratic intellect would inspire love and reconciliation, sometimes urged him to compromise with commonplace words of advice expressed at the time such as, “the poet who would be the literary redeemer of the land must not only dissever himself from the base associations of the day, but he must kindle new altars, at which his innermost soul may worship.”

Such a call to secular sainthood appealed to young Whitman, who saw trails of a messianic destiny in his path in the American Jerusalem he came to inhabit. Some of Christ’s teachings that failed to materialize in the old world would somehow play again in Whitman’s egalitarian city of friends, with Whitman, of course, presiding as a secular Moses. Whitman envisioned himself as a poetic incarnation of an urban prophet and healer not in a biblical but rather in a romantic sense. Like Milton’s incorruptible Savior, a man “born to promote all truth” and be lauded as a “living oracle,” Whitman resists all temptations in the desert of the mind and returns to the city to espouse an Aristotelian sense of moderation that at the same time negates the hypocrisy of Victorian dogma and defends the poet’s solipsistic personality. “Most of the great poets are impersonal: I am personal,” he claims. “In my poems all concentrates in, radiates from, revolves around myself. I have but one central figure, the general human personality typified in myself” (cited in Buck: 63). Like Christ’s, Whitman’s palms “cover continents” and his healing power is bestowed upon the wounded soldiers in Washington that Whitman nurses during the Civil War. Like Blake, he sees “All truths waiting in all things.”

207 This passage appeared in an article titled “Prospects of American Poetry” in Knickerbocker in 1836 and is cited in Callow (83).
208 Not accidentally, perhaps, Whitman stresses this point further by the time he publishes the third edition of Leaves of Grass by particularly specifying to his Boston publishers that the book be “small and thick, giving it roughly the dimensions and the heft of a Bible...The book was supposed to be so much more (for Whitman) than a mere poetry collection. Perhaps it could even serve as a spiritual guide, spelling out a ‘new American religion’ or maybe ‘no religion,’ as he had scrawled in a notation to himself several years earlier. How better to convey these outsize aims than with a suitably holy-looking tome” (Martin, 2014: 103).
209 Paradise Regained
210 “Song of Myself,” Section 33
211 Ibid, Section 30
Like Nietzsche’s overman, “I resist any thing better than my own diversity,” and like an unbound Prometheus he embraces the divine and the quixotic in a democratic song, which could have plausibly been Christ’s farewell to the world from the heights of Golgotha: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

Accordingly, Whitman conceived his own way of eschewing the austerity of Victorian morality, as much as his own fears of overexposing himself, and cross relatively unscathed into what Moon calls “forbidden territory.” Indeed no other poet since Roman times until then attempted to incorporate such unconventionally erotic verses into a body of poetry such as Whitman’s. Martin astutely observes that especially “Whitman’s ‘Calamus’ poems are revolutionary, because no one (since Virgil at least) has written, ‘He loves him’; instead they had written, ‘He loves her’ and ‘He kills him.’ Whitman ‘takes pen in hand to record,’ performs the traditional epic gesture, but then undercuts it by recording a kiss between two men, inappropriate as subject both because it is two men and because those men are ‘simple’ and of no historical significance...Throughout his work he performs his subversive role with regard to the epic. While a poem such ‘Song of Myself’ has the scope of an epic and some of the external form, it is in fact an antiepic, for it celebrates only the self and not ‘arms and the man.’ The hero is within, not without, and the drama is one not of the founding of a city but of the establishment of a self. Whitman turns the form of the epic against itself” (1979: 81).

Whitman’s pioneering act is followed by the anti-epical Cavafy who is justly credited by Keeley as “among the first in recent centuries to explore and describe the forbidden territory of homosexual love” (1976: 68). Cavafy himself had expressed disdain about the “coldness of

212 Ibid, Section 16
213 Ibid, Section 1
English literature” and its conservatism in one of his private notes, as mentioned in the introduction. “In the past ten years,” the poet writes, “plenty of French books –good and bad – examine and bravely take notice of this new phase of love ... No English book that I know has done so. Why? Because (the English speaking writers) are afraid of colliding with the prejudices” (Savidis, 1987). As Keeley goes on to say, “there is hardly anything that seems appropriate for comparison (with Cavafy); and the generally vague, indirect eroticism of Whitman and Wilde bears only a slight resemblance to what Cavafy was attempting to do” (1976: 180). But, Keeley’s view of Whitman’s “indirect eroticism” is not taking into account Whitman’s achievement of cunningly negotiating the conflicting private aspects of the self with the social body, turning thus sexual diversity into an established literary thesis at a time that the conventional notions of eroticism, especially in English speaking literature, forbade it. This he achieved by employing the two modes of literality and indeterminacy, which, as Moon convincingly argues, “render Whitman’s text a Penelope’s web, endlessly making and unmaking its meanings –meanings themselves densely interwebbed with the culture’s economies (even when these meanings are antithetical to the culture’s dominant versions of economies)” (Moon, 36).

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214 Written in 1905, this note indicates that Cavafy was still unaware of Whitman’s work that year. As argued earlier, if Cavafy ever read Whitman, it must have been due to his friendship with Forster, an ardent admire of Whitman, that according to their published correspondence does not begin until 1916 (Gika). Moreover, Forster’s autobiographical novel Maurice, ironically, would be among the first in English literature to openly treat the “new phase of love,” but Cavafy wouldn’t know of it because even though it was written in 1913 and revised in 1932 it was not published until 1971.

215 In his analysis of Whitman’s early prose story “The Child’s Champion,” Moon detects “the site of an action that is always dual. Literality, is one of the text’s powerful modes of articulating its cultural-revisionary project: naming the body, its parts and ordinary activities, describing the ways in which the body serves as both the site and the object of prohibited desires, including erotic ones...The other principal instrumental mode of the Whitman text is that of indeterminacy of resisting the bases of official dispositions of the (male) body by rejecting the culture’s strong tendencies to isolate and disconnect the erotic from other political economies of embodiment...Between the two poles... literality and indeterminacy, the text produces a relationship that one might call oscillative: it is always negotiating the passage back and forth between the two poles it brings into close contact. Together these two principles provided Whitman with an effective means of exploring meanings that his culture considered ‘dangerous’ while forestalling the worst forms of persecution imposed by the culture on persons who attempted to locate their projects in such ‘forbidden territory” (35-36).
As the nineteenth century unfolded it became increasingly evident that some of the founding pillars of the Christian capitalist culture, the establishment of heterosexual orthodoxy being one of them, would not remain unchallenged for long. Whitman’s web incorporated elements of compromise and negotiation in light of the poet’s own preoccupation with classical forms of sexuality. The young Whitman set out to romanticize male bonding along the lines of a resurgent notion of Greek love (partly the reason for Byron’s and later Wilde’s politicized downfall in homophobic England), which emphasized the platonic aspects of a same-sex affection that in antebellum New York, like in Cavafy’s Alexandria, was considered more like an obstinate eccentricity than a crime. In the accelerated pace of the emerging metropolis and the anonymity of the crowd Whitman sees a window of opportunity. He blends in with his people because that’s where he belongs. But he also brings in – one is almost impelled to say “imposes” – his own aesthetic and erotic ideals in verses that mean to connect the past with the present.

To be sure, in an aesthetic point of view, Whitman’s erotic scenes and lustful descriptions of maleness are not set in the pastoral landscapes the Romans favored; when Whitman’s “lovers” are not fondling each other by the sea, such as the “Twenty-eight young men” who “bathe by the shore” without thinking “whom they souse with spray,” they are to be seen mostly in the heart of the city. “Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, / yet never told them a word,” Whitman writes.”

Ordinary males flocked in the city streets in Whitman’s New York; their bodies exchanged heat aboard the democratic horsecars that were once described by

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216 In particular, the consequences of Byron’s bisexual practices in homophobic England are thoroughly discussed in Louis Crompton’s *Byron and Greek Love.*

217 In discussing the influence of Plato in Whitman, Martin argues that Whitman’s response to the platonic concept of the ideal lover was more of a noble poetic fiction than a felt desire, but it served a purpose because “the notion of the ideal companion as the other half of an incomplete self gave a kind of legitimacy to homosexual love and placed it alongside the western tradition of idealized heterosexual love” (1979: 74). As in the case of Cavafy, who never abided by the notion of one ideal lover and his erotic poems advocated sexual promiscuity as the sensible expression of the bohemian homosexual, Whitman largely viewed monogamy as a barrier to sensuality.

218 “Song of Myself” (11)

219 “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”
James Sr. as the “moving phalanxes of democracy.” These common men are also ubiquitous in Cavafy’s ancient or contemporary Alexandria. They are the butcher-boy, the blacksmith, the tramp, the sailor, the sweating negro, or the passing stranger whom Whitman addresses with all the lyricism, the heartache and the cryptic passion of a Sappho: “Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon you, / You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream)”... “You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face flesh, as we pass, you / take of my beard, breast, hands in return, / I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone / or wake at night alone.”

Remembering an anonymous body of desire alone at night, a stranger’s body seen earlier on the street but not touched or spoken to—sounds more like a Cavafian than a Whitmanian enterprise, an urban reverie, which brings to mind that the two poets share much more than their expressed erotic proclivities; they share a vision of life in the city that cannot be lived, understood or enjoyed without the continuous lascivious delectation the poets receive simply by cunningly looking at (and cataloguing) desirable bodies in public spaces. Martin observes that “Whitman seems to have delighted in a promiscuous sexuality that celebrated moments of

220 “To a Stranger”

221 In “In the Street” (1913; 1916), Cavafy recounts an impression of a passing stranger, only with more emphasis on the sensual aspect of the encounter:

His attractive face a bit pale,
his chestnut eyes looking tired, dazed,
twenty-five years old but could be taken for twenty,
with something of the artist in the way he dresses
—the color of his tie, shape of his collar—
he drifts aimlessly down the street,
as though still hypnotized by the illicit pleasure,
the very illicit pleasure that has just been his.

Moreover, in “That They Come” (1920) Cavafy summons pleasure’s visitors to keep him company at night in his room. As in most of his erotic poems, Cavafy places such reverie in the deep of the night:

One candle is enough. Tonight the room
should not have too much light. In deep reverie,
all receptiveness, and with the gentle light—
in this deep reverie I will form visions
to call up the Shades, the Shades of Love.
sensual awareness in which a democratic unity was ratified by a sexual response to a passing stranger. Whitman’s treatment of this theme appropriately places emphasis on the response of the eyes: ‘frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love.’ Through visual recognition and response the homosexual might recognize other homosexuals without being observed by others around ... Such (eye) contact offers not only the possibility of sexual encounter but also an affirmation of community. The city remains distant and foreign – a ‘pageant,’ ‘tableau,’ or ‘spectacle’ – until the response of eyes removes the poet from his situation as spectator and brings him on stage. At this point the boundaries of self and world dissolve” (1979: 74).

In that sense, the unidentified but ubiquitous attractive male body in Whitman and Cavafy – the shapely lowlifes Cavafy eyes in and outside Alexandrian theatres and brothels, or the lads Whitman gazes at and lists in his daybooks– strikes the poets’ reader as the modern embodiment of a *Kouros*, the ancient statue of some anonymous, usually noble and always beautiful Greek nude male youth whose public display pleased the eye of ordinary citizens across the archaic Greek world. The *Kouros* reigned as a symbol of purity and beauty in a Greek art that contributed to the pleasant experiences of the eye, and by doing so it constituted beauty and sexuality as dominant elements of visual recreation for everyone in a pre-democratic society that took seriously the importance of sensual enchantment in civic life. The archaic *Kouros* anticipated the sensual sculpture of the male form that would later thrive in the classical Greek and Roman periods.

Translating sensual beauty from its fixed ancient marble context into a malleable vocabulary of images is a Renaissance undertaking. Part of this expression is the attempt by the romantic and post-romantic generation of poets to equate male sensuality with the aesthetics of

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222 This notion was expressed by Joseph Campbell and is cited and discussed by Camille Paglia, who further asserts that “the Greek beautiful boy was a living idol of the Apollonian eye. As a sexual persona, the *Kouros* represents the tense relation between eye and object...” (116).
urban decadence. Like a fallen angel, mortal eros entered the city to confront the laws and whims of modern society. Cavafy routinely records his visual response to the lustful imagery that a city—an ancient or modern—can offer. Such attractiveness lies beyond the fixity of architecture or the naturalness of the surrounding landscape and is to be seen in the perishable male human form, which the poet acknowledges as the living art that indispensably embellishes the urban spectacle. In “At the Theatre” (1904), for instance, Cavafy emphatically lets his eyes escape a theatrical show for a view that eventually would occupy his creative imagination more vigorously in the years to come:

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.

The theatrical stage is presented here also as a metaphor for the spectacle of the city which can be tiresome for the observing poet without the intervention of the enticing eros that ought to appear as a Deus ex machina to alter the mood of the scene. Moreover, in “I’ve looked So Much,” written seven years later (but published in 1917), Cavafy exhorts the pleasure elicited from looking at (or imagining) the figures of love floating in his city like angels from past centuries:

I’ve looked on beauty so much
that my vision overflows with it.

The body’s lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,
always lovely, even uncombed,
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them...

Even though the gender of the figure of love is not acknowledged, the description of its “stolen” properties reveals a boyish, if not androgynous quality that relates to the “Greek statues” of the archaic, the classical and the Hellenistic periods.
Then, after an ellipsis the poet confides:

.... in the nights when I was young,
encountered secretly in those nights.

The past cohabits with the present in Cavafy’s room. In this particular instance the poet almost whispers to us the profane union of an ancient ideal with his own promiscuous delight; profane because the object is apparently an underage boy, as most ancient “figures of love” made of marble or flesh were at a time that pederasty concerned more the philosophers than the police. The older poet possesses an Apollonian awareness; he knows that tranquil art transcends the unruly impulses of the flesh. He also knows that his younger Dionysian self once upon a time could not resist the temptation to disclaim the ideal for an ephemeral and illicit excitement. Yet, the confession remains elliptical because, after all, the point of the poem the older Cavafy is composing is not the fleeting excitement of a Dionysian spurt; it is rather the overall monumentality of an Apollonian vision that lures the eye to look not only outwards in the public life of the present moment for sensual beauty, but also inwards to a personal memory as shaped by the cultural and the individual imagination.

As previously discussed, the distance between interiority and exteriority is a suspended space that defines Cavafy’s poetics; it delineates the dark room in which the poet recovers his inner visions and past actions and exposes them to light like the photo rolls a photographer develops for the world to see. Hence, Cavafy delivers his autobiographical memento in fragments seeking absolution from the future reader who would patiently put the poet’s puzzle together. After all, not only a voyager must reach the shore to become a poet, but also, the poet’s work must reach the city for an audience. As we saw with Whitman, the idea of a future audience offers a psychological reinforcement, the assurance that the poet must go on. Aesthetic continuance, Jusdanis reiterates, depends heavily on the audience “that receives the work and
incorporates it within the discourse on poetry...A work of art cannot be beautiful or have aesthetic worth in itself, nor exist for the artist alone, since in order to survive it must be canonized and culturally reproduced, be pleasing or valuable to a wider audience, which, having been ‘moved’ by the work, endorses it and passes it on to the next generation” (49).

To illustrate this point, Jusdanis cites Cavafy’s poem “Very Seldom” that in many ways is evocative of Whitman’s numerous poetic appeals to his future readers, the most celebrated of which claims that “It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or even so/many generations hence:”223 This is Whitman at his best: envisioning tomorrow and communicating with the “yet unborn” generations through verse. His I leads in Leaves of Grass as the textual voice that unites the impossibly:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Full of life now, compact, visible,} \\
\text{I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States,} \\
\text{To one a century hence or any number of centuries hence,} \\
\text{To you yet unborn these, seeking you.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{When you read these I that was visible am become invisible,} \\
\text{Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,} \\
\text{Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and become your comrade;} \\
\text{Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

“Full of Life Now”

Cavafy’s “Very Seldom” is redolent of Whitman’s preoccupation with the immortality of the text; the poem is expressed in third person and it speaks of poetry as an aesthetic artifact whose value will be judged by posterity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{His verse is now recited by young men.} \\
\text{His visions come before their lively eyes.} \\
\text{Their healthy sensual minds,} \\
\text{their shapely taut bodies} \\
\text{stir to his perception of the beautiful.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

223 “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”
Moreover, reading Cavafy, as much as reading Whitman, could be described at times as a sensual act itself; the reader is drawn into a reverie that often awakens private notions of desire, and thus reading elicits a response to an iconic language that involves both the mind and the senses. Cavafy’s masculine poems echo Whitman’s “real poems … The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me...” Those poems elevate bold sensual imagery to an aesthetic pedestal. Part of the poet’s aim is to provoke an uncensored response to this aesthetic body and have his reader respond to it as an ancient Greek spectator of the Kouros would have, irrespective of the erotic disposition of the beholder, with approval and delight. This response will enable the poem, in Jusdanis’ words, “to be categorized as an aesthetic artifact and to circulate as art” (49).

_Champions of Desire: Spectacle, Consciousness and Memory in the Evanescent City_

...Streets now unrecognizable,
bustling night clubs now closed,
theatres and cafés no longer there.
C. P. Cavafy, “Since Nine O’ Clock”

The ideal city Cavafy found in the ruins of the – individual and historical – past is a vanished city consisting of urban inconsistencies and personal myths. Raban notes that “the city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture” (2). Cavafy’s _soft_ city is a Lost Atlantis of sorts reconstructed in thought and in verse. As we saw in the previous chapter, the romantic imagination perceived the solidity of land as a symbol of illusory permanence: today’s metropolis is tomorrow’s Atlantis, in Hugo’s analogy. Like any living organism, a city thrives and languishes and, eventually, as Marquez shows us in _One Hundred Years of Solitude_, its devastation owes not
only to the whims of nature, but also to the very progress its own people have bestowed upon it. The preoccupation with the evanescence of the city, of course, is not a novelty of the romantics or the modernists who followed. Long before them, Herodotus illustrated astutely the instability of political power and the impermanence of civic greatness in the ancient world. The “kings of yore” Hugo mentions are phantoms of gone cities, and King Alexander, the founder of the great Alexandria, is one of them.

The fact that Cavafy is more unmistakably aware of this than Whitman is because Alexandria, once a global metropolis of the Hellenistic culture, had shrunk to a small corner of the world by Cavafy’s time, while Whitman’s New York, albeit still a developing urban welter inferior to Boston, which back then reigned as the cultural capital of the States, aspired to become the queen of the globe that ancient Alexandria had been and Baron Haussmann’s Paris was. Hence, on the one hand, Alexandria appears in Cavafy’s poetry as a necropolis of deeds and pleasures, a city of memories whose splendid past and sordid present, as we will see, inhabit two opposite planes in the poet’s mind. On the other hand, Whitman’s New York appears in the poet’s corpus as an Ithaca of modernity, an American capital of hopes whose memory is too recent to rhapsodize, but whose future is projected too bright to be unacknowledged.

Cavafy’s memory and Whitman’s prophecy are keen on envisioning an ideal place whose angles mutate as fast as the thoughts that produce them. By transgressing the boundaries of the present for a world that has existed or for one that is yet to be, the poets arrive in their own island of utopia, a place where the “bourgeois utilitarian ignobility and boredom” are replaced by the beauty and excitement that only art can offer. As Keeley comments, and his observation is

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224 After cataloguing the American achievements in “Song of Exposition,” from “High rising tier on tier with glass and iron facades” to the “press whirling its cylinders, shedding the printed leaves steady and fast” – both associated mostly with New York’s rapid urban development – Whitman assumes that “This, this and these, America, shall be your pyramids and obelisks, / Your Alexandrian Pharos, gardens of Babylon, / Your temple at Olympia.”
offered here having also Whitman in mind, “In Cavafy’s poetics, art—or the artistic imagination—is given the function of completing and elevating what is partial and transitory. It is art that raises the ephemeral and the unrealized, the shabby and commercial, the passion of momentary ecstasies, to another region where the mind holds power and sway, the realm of imaginative recreation, in short, the world of poetry” (1976: 59).

Alexandria after the end of its golden age is the home of Cavafy: actual and metaphoric home; ancient and modern; fatal and beloved; a metropolis made up by the contradictions of the mind and the body of the poet. “Without contraries is no progression,” Blake once pondered. Between attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, the action and the word, the poet Cavafy put up with his era’s challenges and reached equilibrium in a place of his own, a realm of hedonism and sadness, truth and fantasy, recollection and melancholy. Like most of the Greek men he is describing, Cavafy is confined in a city of “muted heroism” where “men have nothing to look forward to and everything to look back on. Their back is to the sea, the barbarians are at the gates, and the daemon forever rages within (Aciman, 1). Old age (time) and Alexandria (space) converge in the Cavafian state: the aging poet, imprisoned in his own aged hometown, recalls the sounds “of our life’s first poetry.” Youth, that is what signals above all Cavafy’s creative paroxysms. Shadows, sounds and verses make up the poet’s grievance in the dusk of his old town:

I don’t want to turn for fear of seeing, terrified, how quickly that dark line gets longer, how quickly the snuffed-out candles proliferate.

“Candles”

Since nine o’clock when I lit the lamp the shade of my young body has come to haunt me, to remind me

225 “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”
226 “Voices”
of shut scented rooms,
of past sensual pleasure—what daring pleasure.
“Since Nine O’Clock”

Without the roaring of the Alexandrian crowd, without the stench of the city’s decay, without the overbearing remembrance of its lost heyday, perhaps the poet would not have picked up the thread of his art, as he did in this once Hellenized Egyptian metropolis where at the turn of the century we find the forty-four year old Cavafy not only living and writing poetry in solitude, but also playing tennis, enjoying social evenings with a few good friends and paying visits to Kurk, who is the finest tailor of the Alexandrian bourgeoisie (Savidi). He fusses about the excessive pace of progress, about the clamor of the upcoming century –the last of the second millennium– and the smothering smallness of Alexandria, but as he admits himself in a diary entry that prefigures the fatalistic tone of his poem “The City”:

I got used to Alexandria at this point, and most likely even if I were rich, I’d still live here. Regardless, this saddens me so much. What difficulty, what a burden it is the small city –what lack of freedom.
I’d still live here (again, I am not entirely certain I would) because it is like a home, because it resonates with the memories of my life.
But, how needed it would be for a man like me –so different– the big city.
London, for instance. Since I left it...how much I have it in my mind (Savidi, 318).

The cosmopolitan young Cavafy returned to Alexandria from Istanbul in 1885, at a time when, as Liddell recounts, “the second generation of other Alexandrian families was lavishly spending the fortunes that the previous generation had made” (79). Cavafy drew inspiration from such a paradoxical setting of affluence and moral decline. He had no one’s fortune to spend. Even though his family had prospered once upon a time, the riches were gone by the time Cavafy was very young. A bread-winner, self-sustained and used to Spartan simplicity as he was, Cavafy never fell for the ostentation of the nouveaux rich, let alone the jingling of the emerging western economies, or the affectations of the empowered middle class.
On the contrary, he was lured immensely by the promises of erotic passion and the entrenchment of pleasure. Cavafy’s self-conceived sense of economy that defined his own perception of capital (as much as Whitman’s, one may add), was not based upon the swap of banknotes or gold and silver certificates, but on the exchange of erotic bodies and the give and take of pleasures, both imaginary and real. For as long as the anticipation or the memory of hedonism remained afire, the barbarians of progress abated behind the curtain of the night. But along with the sun every morning returned the fear and the angst of a pedestrian daily life split among vacuous mornings at the Irrigation Department (where Cavafy worked as a civil servant for more than three decades), occasional tennis games, and dress-rehearsals at the tailor. As Forster once observed, the Alexandria of Cavafy’s time “is scarcely a city of the soul. Founded upon cotton with the concurrence of onions and eggs, ill built, ill planned, ill drained – many hard things can be said against it, and most are said by its inhabitants” (Forster, 13).

In consequence, the Alexandrian demise occupies an integral part in the Cavafian enterprise. In between the daily inanity of the Alexandrian bourgeoisie and the onslaught of modernization Cavafy oozes the self-confidence of the snobby pariah; he emits, in Forster’s observation, “the strength (and of course the limitations) of the recluse, who, though not afraid of the world, always stands at a slight angle to it, and, in conversation, he has sometimes devoted a sentence to this subject. Which is better – the world or seclusion? Cavafy, who has tried both, can’t say” (18).

Alexandria, Athens, London, Istanbul, New York –is it so much a matter of geography, or is it perhaps the city of the mind, a world worn-out by historical and personal traumas that define Cavafy’s own place? Cavafy might very well be attracted to the idea of London, but as he admits in his poem “The City” it is not possible because there is no other place to go to:
You said: “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore, find another city better than this one. Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead. How long can I let my mind moulder in this place? Wherever I turn, wherever I happen to look, I see the black ruins of my life, here, where I’ve spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally.”

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore. This city will always pursue you. You will walk the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods, will turn gray in these same houses. You will always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere: there is no ship for you, there is no road. As you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner, you’ve destroyed it everywhere else in the world.

In a tribute to Cavafy’s poem, Orhan Pamuk notes that “the city that makes us is the one within us” (7). And that’s why, perhaps, as André Aciman persuasively conveys, “no poem by Cavafy is as simple or as complicated as ‘The City.’ The ‘city’ that the poet cannot escape is his albatross, his beast in the jungle, his secret sharer, his heritage, his sexuality, his cross to bear, his haven. But the ‘city’ is Alexandria, too, an Alexandria that won’t go away but won’t let go of him either. It haunts him everywhere. There is not undoing the life he’s lived there, just as there is no land to turn a new leaf in. The city that may never have been his home and which he can’t wait to leave behind as he yearns for his true Ithaca remains his one and only home” (2).

Written three years later, in 1913, another equally known poem titled “As Much As You Can” denotes the mood of the poet in the beginning of the new century. Several critics have correctly pointed out that the stereotyping of Cavafy as a complete recluse is a fallacy that through the years has established a misconstrued idea of the poet as an urban hermit. Cavafy did have a social and sexual life – a circle of devoted friends whom he liked to entertain in his apartment, and a ring of anonymous lovers that he occasionally encountered. At the same time, his introvert personality discouraged excessive sociability, an attitude that is conducive to his
sexual behavior that was routinely conducted reticently. It comes as no surprise then that Cavafy favors the Emersonian principle of the self-reliant individual who deems the mirthfulness of social salons and urban gatherings as rather inappropriate for the gloominess of the time:

And if you can’t shape your life the way you want,
at least try as much as you can
not to degrade it
by too much contact with the world,
by too much activity and talk.

Try not to degrade it by dragging it along,
taking it around and exposing it so often
to the daily silliness
of social events and parties,
until it comes to seem a boring hanger-on.

Twentieth century: the summit of contraries: poverty and acceleration, war and peace, communication and incoherence. Most of the “triumphs” that Whitman’s generation anticipated and marveled at (“latest connections,” “the inter-transportation of the world,” “Steam-power,” “the Atlantic’s delicate cable”) had long passed the point of excitement as the world was preparing for yet another war (Whitman’s pacifist prophecies – “Away with themes of war! away with war itself!” – had failed to materialize). Cavafy’s consistent denial to include the socio-historical fabric of his own time into his narrative is only an indication of his repudiation and snubbing of the greater society’s failure to learn from the ills of history. Instead, he is intensely interested in the makings of his own neighborhood that follows its course once the lights of Alexandria go down: a man in the apartment across the street has just come in from work and lights a cigarette; a woman prepares the dinner table. These are ordinary images loaded with subtle meanings. As Raban observes, “to live in a city is to live in a community of people who are strangers to each other. You have to act on hints and fancies, for they are all that the mobile and cellular nature of the city will allow you. You expose yourself in, and are exposed to by
others, fragments, isolated signals, bare disconnected gestures, jungle cries and whispers that resist all your attempts to unravel their meaning, their consistency” (7).

Sometimes the poet stands by the window and gazes at the urban vista. More often, alone he takes to the dark streets. He walks in and out of coffee shops, bars, brothels: an evening world of life and fantasy; celebration and folly; shame and delight; an impromptu performance with no closure. At the same time a spectator, actor and director, the poet takes in the hints from the passing strangers to model his own interpretations. And even when he can’t be out on the street Cavafy still finds a way to look at what enchants him the most:

My work, I’m very careful about it, and I love it. But today I’m discouraged by how slowly it’s going. The day has affected my mood. It gets darker and darker. Endless wind and rain. I’m more in the mood for looking than for writing. In this picture, I’m now gazing at a handsome boy who is lying down close to a spring, exhausted from running. What a handsome boy; what a heavenly noon has caught him up in sleep. I sit and gaze like this for a long time, recovering through art from the effort of creating it. “Pictured”

The “art,” of course, that entices the poet above all springs from an urban panorama of images and impressions. Even though as we saw, Cavafy has visited and lived in real metropolises of his time, like London and Istanbul, after all, he identifies and harmonizes the most with the suspended rhythm of Alexandria, which is redolent of what Raban, while describing 1970s London in *Soft City*, calls “living labyrinth and theatre.” The city is a theater, an endless series of scenes in which every person can exercise their own unique magic by performing multiple roles. A metropolis is too complex of a synthesis to be tamed or even explained. The city is rather, as Harvey has deftly put it in response to Raban’s perception of the city, “a labyrinth, an encyclopedia, an emporium, a theater,” the place where fact and
imagination simply must fuse. Hence, life in the city constitutes a form of art and it takes the vocabulary of art for one to describe the relationship between a man and the essence that exists in the constant creative give and take of urban life” (5).

The three cycles of Cavafy’s poetry – the historical, the philosophical and the emotional poems – are conceived in the shadow of such an urban labyrinth where the poet “ascends slowly the paths of his city and there like a made-up actor creeps in the theatre of our lives, reciting tenaciously his disgruntling monologues, there he morbidly persists to address us with his guarded language and draw us to his fictional obsessions, leaving us no other way to live through the painted backgrounds of life and history that he constructs with incredible cunning and craftsmanship (Rozanis, 19). Like a perennial child, Cavafy is dazzled by the past and the present of the city; like an aged exile he mourns –but never envies– the excitation of youth. Time and again he steps out onto his balcony with sadness “to change my thoughts at least by seeing something of this city I love, a little movement in the street and the shops.”

In the city Cavafy does not simply invent stories and recapture memories; he interweaves history with myth and personal experience, becoming thus a storyteller of the unrecorded. And even though from his 154 poems of the canon, poems that form the total of the output recognized by the poet himself, the historical poems come first, it is via the confessional tone of the emotional poems that Cavafy’s vulnerability is denuded. “Cavafy does not get direct inspiration from the facts, but he needs time and memory to move him: the sounds from the first poetry of our lives” (Dimaras, 82). Eliot’s two verses recapitulate best the driving force that prompts Cavafy’s emotionalism: Memory! /You have the key.

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227 This poem, “In the Evening,” written in 1917, manifests Cavafy’s final reconciliation with Alexandria. The city is no longer the smothering entity that oppressed him earlier in life. As the poet grows older it becomes evident that “that small corner” was indeed his choice and not some unwanted fate, as declared in earlier poems like “The City” and “Walls.”
Memory remains the regnant voice not only in the emotional but in all three circles of Cavafy’s poems. Memory is Cavafy’s perpetual pilot: it drags him by the hand as Virgil pulled Dante along and it travels him back. The human transgressions of the historical and the modern world crowd in Cavafy’s mind, and at the end they mirror the poet’s own passions. In “Come Back” Cavafy, like Dante, implores the spirit of his own Virgil to

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\begin{align*}
\text{Come back often and take hold of me,} \\
\text{sensation that I love come back and take hold of me—} \\
\text{when the body’s memory awakens} \\
\text{and an old longing again moves into the blood,} \\
\text{when lips and skin remember} \\
\text{and hands feel as though they touch again.} \\
\text{Come back often, take hold of me in the night} \\
\text{when lips and skin remember...}
\end{align*}
\]

Observing the present turning into the past, and then devoting one’s art to recapturing Time, reinterpretng it, learning from it, only to lose it and then search all over for it again, it seems, are the Sisyphean challenges for the Ithacan Cavafy (or his influential ancestor Wordsworth). By using poetry as a vehicle, the language and the sensibility of the older Cavafy led him to the landscape of emotional translucence in which we also find the older Whitman—a point where the inner stream of the poet’s consciousness flows into the outer, ever-malleable world of his city and his time.

The romantic idealism, along with all fears and trepidations of youth, changes into a sense of empowerment and self-awareness as Whitman and Cavafy grow older in the city. The sharp discrepancy between the two consciousnesses of the poetic self contemplated by Wordsworth\textsuperscript{228} is manifested in the poetics of Whitman and Cavafy: the older poet and his

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\textsuperscript{228} Wordsworth’s \textit{Prelude} anticipates many of the themes that concern Whitman and Cavafy. In particular, this autobiographical poem, written over a long stretch of time, records the transformation of the poet’s life (and mind) from youth to maturity, depicting thus the poet himself as he is now and himself as he once was. Such endeavor leads to a psychological insight into the poet’s own nature, and more broadly human nature. As Wordsworth contemplates in \textit{The Prelude}, “so wide appears the vacancy between me and those days which yet
younger self are contrasted, contradicted and united through memory to a surprising effect for the older poet about a time that he was not yet a poet. If Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* led the way as an autobiographical account of the growth of the poet’s mind, Whitman and Cavafy recollect in their poems a sensual past whose moments of intense experience cannot be separated from the intellectual growth of the man. This is emphatically encapsulated in Cavafy’s poem “Understanding” (1918):

The years of my youth, my sensual life—
how clearly I see their meaning now.

How needless the repentance, how futile...

But I didn’t see the meaning then.

In the loose living of my early years
the impulses of my poetry were shaped,
the boundaries of my art were laid down...

A year earlier, in “In the Evening” Cavafy expresses the awareness that:

It wouldn’t have lasted long anyway—
the experience of years makes that clear.
Even so, Fate did put an end to it a bit abruptly.
It was soon over, that wonderful life.
Yet how strong the scents were,
what a magnificent bed we lay in,
what pleasure we gave our bodies.

An echo from my days given to sensuality,
an echo from those days came back to me,
something of the fire of the young life we shared:
I picked up a letter again,
and I read it over and over till the light faded away.

In “That Shadow My Likeness” (1860) Whitman gazes at his own reflection and wonders whether the shadow he sees corresponds to his present state. Is there ever a possibility of

have such self presence in my mind, that musing on them, often do I seem two consciousnesses, conscious of myself and of some other being” (Book 2, Lines 29-33). Whitman’s autobiographical “Song of Myself” refers to the vacancy between the two states. “The past and present wilt,” Whitman proclaims in section 51. “I have fill’d them, emptied them, / And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.” Then a few lines down in the same section, he addresses the changeability of the poet’s mind. “Do I contradict myself?” He asks? “Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes).”
construing a *true* self when the self is indeed a mutable body that like a leaf is constantly fighting change?

That shadow my likeness that goes to and fro seeking a livelyhood, chattering, chaffering.
How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it flits,
How often I question and doubt whether that is really me;
But among my lovers and caroling these songs,
O I never doubt whether that is really me.

Cavafy’s elegiac poem “Since Nine” is particularly evocative of Whitman’s reverie:

The shade of my young body
also brought back the things that make us sad:
family grief, separations,
the feelings of my own people, feelings
of the dead so little acknowledged.

Half past twelve. How the time has gone by.
Half past twelve. How the years have gone by.

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In the *Principles of Psychology* William James has observed that we perceive reality differently according to circumstances, whether we are awakened or asleep, and above all differently when we are adolescents or older. Regardless, we never doubt that our emotions reveal the same world. The distinction in sensation appears stronger because of the difference of emotions from one age to the other. Accordingly, the middle-aged Whitman appears to be a different person from the uncompromising, spontaneous, unruly author of the first editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as much as the Cavafy of “Ithaca” is a different man from the poet of “Nichori,” or “When My Friends, I Was in Love” (1885), in which the poet chants the “felicity” of heterosexual attraction. The change and growth that both poets are capable of bring to mind the type of organic change that Ruskin once defined as “that of a tree, not a cloud” (Rosenberg, 10). In Whitman’s case, this gradual process of transformation that becomes apparent in the evolving versions of *Leaves of Grass*, which is the subject of Moon’s analysis, attests not only to
outside pressures and temptations that Whitman at some point later in life yielded to, but also to a series of life-shifting awakenings that affected the sensibility of a Wordsworth or a Cavafy as well.

After the experience of the American Civil War, for instance, Whitman’s perception of the world altered radically. Unlike Cavafy who, as we saw, remained deliberately aloof from even the most momentous current affairs of his time, such as World War I and the Asia Minor catastrophe, Whitman was as directly engaged with history-as-it-happens as perhaps Wordsworth himself, who had gone to Paris to experience the miracle of the French Revolution for himself—alas, only to be utterly disenchanted, “sick and wearied out” by its “contrarieties.” Whitman’s direct involvement with the Civil War and his devotion to nursing the male wounded body, as I will examine at length in the next chapter, contributed to the makeover of the former “imperturbe,” “omnific” bard to a dutiful healer whose proposition to mend national ills came as an attempt to heal his inner tensions as well (Pollak, xv).

The young Whitman had pledged to live a life “self-balanced for contingencies, / to confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do.” The old poet of Camden is a man who has indeed lived and survived the storm—but at what cost? In “The Dismantled Ship,” a poem from the cluster Sands at Seventy published in the 1889 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman uses symbolism to address (his own?) old age as a shipwreck. By the time he wrote this poem, Whitman had already survived a stroke and lived in seclusion in Camden, New Jersey, a place he was circumstantially drawn to, but admittedly not particularly fond of.

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229 For instance, it has been extensively documented by biographers how the one-time polemic, socially driven Whitman, ended up befriending the powerful and the rich.
230 The Prelude, Book 10
231 “Me Imperturbe,” 1860
In some unused lagoon, some nameless bay,
On sluggish, lonesome waters, anchor'd near the shore,
An old, dismasted, gray and batter'd ship, disabled, done,
After free voyages to all the seas of earth, haul'd up at last and
hawser'd tight,
Lies rusting, moldering.

This elegy is suggestive of Whitman’s darker moods in Camden, some of them also recorded in
his conversations with Traubel. Another recollection, the ode “Memories,” from the same
cluster, indicates a more nostalgic, almost Cavafian one may say, disposition; a glimpse of
Whitman’s former self, who once sought salvation in beauty and pleasure:

How sweet the silent backward tracings!
The wanderings as in dreams – the meditation of old times re-
sumed – their loves, joys, persons, voyages.

Henry Miller duly observes that “between the early Whitman and the ‘awakened’
Whitman there is no resemblance whatsoever” (Miller, 1969: 202). Whitman’s older voice

\footnote{Characteristically, in one of Traubel’s entries, Whitman tells him “I am getting so fidgety about myself – am so uncertain about the future – there seems so little hope for me for long – that I am disposed to trust myself more and more to your younger body and spirit...” (279).}

\footnote{The old man reminiscing in Whitman’s “Memories” resembles an early sketch of Cavafy’s more conscious graybeard that hides in the middle of the crowd in “An Old Man”:}

At the noisy end of the café, head bent
over the table, an old man sits alone,
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he’s aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.
So brief an interval, so very brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,
how he always believed—what madness—
that cheat who said: “Tomorrow. You have plenty of time.”

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost
now mocks his senseless caution.

...............
acquires a less dogmatic tone, and his confessed truths reflect the inclusiveness and clemency of old age; his “awakening” in the second half of his life is analogous to the “liberation” that Cavafy attained after 1910. Cavafy famously proclaimed himself “a poet of old age,” an exaggeration, one may add, denoting the poet’s fixation with temporality and memory. In Whitman’s case maturity is a work of progress mirrored in the gradual development of *Leaves of Grass*, a natural and synthetic accomplishment whose final 1891-1892 edition reflects at the same time the finality of a grown tree and the determination of a completed architectural structure to stand the test of time—“the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold,” Ruskin once pondered. “Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness,” (Rosenberg, 132) and this indeed is the type of “voiceful” edifice that Whitman had in mind.

As I will further discuss in the next chapter, the confessional mode that characterizes the writings of Whitman and Cavafy, especially in the second half of their productive periods, is mainly the result of a middle-aged epiphany that sprang from within. But also, for the purposes of this chapter, it suffices to reiterate that Whitman’s “awakening” and Cavafy’s “liberation” were stimulated by their social environment, and these resurrections took hold at a time when intense urbanization and science prompted new considerations of the self.234

In Whitman’s time, cities attracted larger populations than ever—New York’s population that young Whitman once marveled had reached 1.5 million people, by the time of his death had exceeded six million. By then electric incandescent lights had replaced all gas lanterns in streets, bridges and buildings making New York a city of light worthy of Paris. Whitman witnessed the

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234 It is noteworthy how both poets’ response to the city varies according to the mind frame dictated by their age. In his younger days, for instance, Whitman declares his distrust of the big city in *Franklin Evans*. Later he becomes the “ultimate Broadway rambler,” a city poet that finds oxygen only in the city. Later, in old age he is openly disenchanted by the urban environment. Paradoxically, the same place that Whitman describes as “very wicked, and as deceitful as it is wicked” (2007) is the same metropolis that once boosted his phallic “I.” In contrast, Cavafy, whose younger self of “Walls” and “The City” bemoans the urban condition, later in life makes peace with his city. As he tells us in the poem “In the Evening” he goes out to the balcony and his gloomy thoughts are put aside only “by seeing/ something of this city I love.”
rough beginnings of what came to surpass Haussmann’s and Baudelaire’s city as the capital of modernity in the twentieth-century. Surely, by the end of the fin de siècle, and under the auspices of Boss Platt, New York finally succeeded in expanding even more in terms of population and authority as a global power city. Yet, there are vivid accounts about nineteenth-century New York contrasts that bear strong resemblances to the previously recorded ills of London or Paris – pigs and men circulating in the same neighborhoods of a city without sanitation system; rivers overflowed with the detritus of accumulated humanity; poverty and wealth woven into an increasingly divisive social fabric. As a critic observes, “cities were centers of culture and civilization, yet their concentrations of people also made them progenitors of a pervasive social corruption visible not only in the inhabitants but in the environment itself. City life embodied the seemingly tireless dichotomies of mind and body, of high and low, which structured social thought and social practices” (Reid, 9).

Baudelaire’s illustrious passionate spectator is the tireless witness of that period of pronounced urban dichotomies. Part of the flâneur’s self-imposed task is the decoding of disunion in the rising culture of enticement that separates the rich from the poor, the beautiful from the ugly, the appearance from the essence. The eyes of the flâneur know no boundaries. At the same time frivolous and detached, democratic and a snob, intellectual and hedonistic, Baudelaire’s “prince” traverses the social environment looking for signs of beauty, but also for a confirmation from other passing strangers who like himself desire to “become one flesh with the crowd.”

Both Whitman and Cavafy embody the social but also erotic, as we saw earlier,

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235 The U.S. Senator, and quintessential New Yorker, Thomas C. Platt is credited as one of the key players in the transformation of New York into a real metropolis. Platt steered passage of his long-pursued Greater New York bill that incorporated the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island into the city in 1898.

236 In Baudelaire’s own description, “the crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement,
curiosity of Baudelaire’s anonymous loafer. Whether amidst the euphoria of modernity, represented by Whitman’s conflict-ridden metropolis, or in the streets of the abating Alexandria, the two poets circulate in urban landscapes whose polymorphous crowds mirror the disparities of the city and the multiplicity of life in it.

The crowd is Cavafy’s living sanctuary. If memory, in William James’s analogy, is a “direct emotion,” Cavafy’s emotional response is drawn from an empirical knowledge that is firmly linked to the collective memory of the crowd. His own accumulated memory he recollects and re-enacts; the others’ he assumes and molds. Hence, the main protagonist—and source of inspiration—of the Cavafian world is the crowd whose secrets, in the end, are also the poet’s own secrets. Sareyannis notes that for Cavafy the crowd is a passion. “All passions limit our directions and chain us in a controlled orbit, but they also give us a strange spiritual susceptibility: the gambler lives in a different world and the miser or the lovestruck in another. The man of the crowd proceeds automatically towards his passion because that makes him feel more intensely. It is not impossible that our Alexandrian poet composed his verse in the streets. It may be the crowd affected him as a stimulant, something analogous with the rotten apples in Schiller, with coffee in Balzac, or with opium in Coleridge” (Pieris, 1994: 180).

The crowd’s presence substantiates a city’s perception as a living labyrinth and a gigantic theatre where each person can impose his or her own individual magic by performing several roles: politician, bureaucrat, prostitute, priest. In this context, as Simmel observes, “we know of in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are or are not - to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.”
the bureaucrat that is not only a bureaucrat … This extrasocial nature—a man’s temperament, fate, interests, worth as a personality—gives a certain nuance to the picture formed by all who meet him. It intermixes his social picture with non-social imponderables” (13). Whitman brings his own curiosity and persona to this panoramic spectacle. “What do you see Walt Whitman?” He asks. “Who are they you salute, and that one after another salute you?” In an appropriate comment, Reynolds speaks of Whitman’s inspiration from the crowd and his “ever present readiness to compose an extrasocial urban self by assuming scores of identities and a shape-shifting androgynous persona” (1995: 162).

As Reynolds observes, Whitman, in several senses, was like a natural actor who cruised the city streets assuming scores of social identities. “When he grew his beard and adopted his distinctive casual dress in the fifties, people on the street, intrigued by his unusual appearance, tried to guess who he might be: Was he a sea captain? A smuggler? A clergyman? A slave trader?” (1995:161). Naturally, as Reynolds continues, “nowhere did he act so much as in his poetry. The ‘I’ of Leaves of Grass has proven puzzling to critics. Some has seen it as autobiographical and have taken his poetry as a confession or sublimation of private anxieties and desires. Others see it as a compete fiction...Such confusions can be partly resolved by recognizing that the ‘real’ Whitman, as part of a participatory culture, was to a large degree an actor, and that his poetry was his grandest stage, the locus of his most creative performances. When developing his poetic persona in his notebooks, he compared himself to an actor onstage, with ‘all things and all other beings as an audience at a play-house perpetually and perpetually calling me out from behind the curtain’… In ‘Song of Myself’ alone he assumes scores of identities: he becomes by turns a hounded slave, a bridegroom, a mutineer, a clock, and so on.

237 “Salut au monde!”
He is proud of his role-playing ability: ‘I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person.’ ‘I become any presence or truth of humanity here’” (1995: 161-2).

Unlike Whitman’s chameleonic persona, Cavafy’s acting repertoire in his poetry and life is less diverse. As a critic maintains, Cavafy remains “hidden behind a fictional or historical character. This is Cavafy’s acting...When he plays a role, it is unavailing and dangerous for us to try and understand if the poet agrees or disagrees with his character. It is exactly like wondering, when one sees an actor performing, whether the actor agrees with the point of view of the person he is impersonating or not: Cavafy, like an actor, does not simply reflect the role, he lives it...In a lyrical, hedonistic reverie, he impersonates historical or fantastical persons and takes their place in poems offering thus a very impersonal, neutral and objective form of poetry” (Dimaras, 103, 151).

Cavafy sees history as a vast reservoir of possible roles to be impersonated; he scouts through it with the cunning of Odysseus in the Underworld. Yet, Cavafy’s nekyia has no penchant for famous warriors and prophets; his anti-epical underworld is the necropolis of the unheroic. As Sareyannis observes, “it must have been a great moment for Cavafy the day he discovered that history can be approached as an anthology of the lives of unknown or semi-known people: that day he understood that he was able to implement his obsession with confabulation not only in the existing real crowd, but also in the historical crowd” (185). It has been noted that the combination of contemporaneity and antiquity that appears in the works of Joyce and Yeats is implemented systematically by Cavafy “long before Joyce’s *Ulysses* appeared, and even earlier from Yeats” (Pieris, 153). However, Cavafy’s juxtaposition of the ancient vis-à-vis the modern city is driven by a different motive from that of a mere historically
inclined writer whose efforts concentrate on organizing and giving form and meaning to what Eliot once termed the infinite panorama of futility and anarchy that is history.

On the contrary, Cavafy looks straight to the vanity and anarchy of his own soul, a soul stricken with the deficiencies of human history. Within the poet’s stream of consciousness, fragments of collective and personal histories float like beautiful shipwrecks. Cavafy’s poetry does not disclose any panoramic symmetry; his poems rather evolve like heterogeneous links of thoughts and recollections that together form a poetic retrospective. Like a somnambulist, Cavafy relives the past and feels the present through the specific roles that he chooses to re-enact. Above all, as we know from poems like “The City” and “Walls,” one of the favorite roles of the poet is that of the prisoner of history and fate –Cavafy’s two unavoidable sorceresses that blend indistinctly in his imagination. Cavafy bemoans above all the powerlessness of the individual to escape from the fetters of history, whether history is a fait accompli or in progress. These are similar social, psychological and physical barriers to those that his contemporary Kafka depicted as strongholds of alienation, absurdity and brutality. But Cavafy, unlike Kafka, relied on eros, the poet’s own version of Christ, redeemer and oarsman, to paddle him to the elusive island of Ulysses.

Keeley speaks of the “‘two-plane’ image of Alexandria” to describe Cavafy’s attempt to unite mythical time with factual space and vice versa. According to this line of thought, “the ‘mythical method’ that Cavafy offers us after 1912, [is] a version related to, but rather different from, the method of Yeats, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, had begun to practice at much the same time. The ‘mythical method’ is the manipulation of a ‘continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ through what Joyce called ‘two-plane’ writing. But instead of carrying the parallel forward in simultaneous, superimposed images ... Cavafy juxtaposes an
ancient city and a contemporary city in parallel poems, published and distributed more or less simultaneously, the pairing a continuous process, with the image of the city paralleling the other year after year” (Keeley, 46-47). At the same time, Cavafy’s major thematic purpose, in Keeley’s words, “was to underline areas of continuity, even of identity, between past and present in the erotic experience of the lovers portrayed, while at the same time underlining the vast differences between past and present in the station and social value of these lovers. Put in simplest terms, the lovers of Cavafy’s ancient Alexandria are not only accepted by their society, but are often depicted as representing the best which that society has to offer ... whereas Cavafy’s contemporary lovers are generally depicted as impoverished outcasts” (48).

By contrasting the status of the homosexual lover in the ancient and modern city, Cavafy contemplates two different planes of homoerotic experience. His preoccupation with the notion of an ideal love that exists mainly in the past is an idea that as we examined earlier has also been

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The comparison of Cavafy’s well known historical poem “The God Abandons Antony” with “Ithaca” can be cited here to illustrate this point.

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don’t mourn your luck that’s failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don’t mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.

As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion...
listen—your final delectation—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Capri-Karka has proposed a parallel reading of this poem with “Ithaca,” which were both written in 1911 (60): On a literal level, “The God Abandons Antony” is a farewell of Antony to Alexandria; on a symbolic it is the conclusion of a life of sensual pleasure. Antony’s journey is at the end, in contrast with “Ithaca’s” modern voyager who is traveling with no particular harbor in sight but with Ithaca on the mind.
meaningful to Whitman. Cavafy’s remembered Alexandria with the Greek way of life it represents is very close to Hellenized Whitman’s “new city of friends” –an idealized version of the city of Plato and Socrates that embodies and expresses the values of a perfect society and behavior in opposition to the modern society that Cavafy refers to as “stupid,” “prudish” and “imperfect.”

According to Sherrard, the ancient model “provides a norm and a standard according to which other societies, other patterns of human behavior, may be assessed and judged. And this applies also to the type of love to which the city is dedicated. That too for Cavafy is the ideal type of love. It is the highest that society and indeed human life itself have to offer. It is not the exception, still less is a corruption. On the contrary, it is the standard, the norm. When man is that ‘best of all things, Hellenic’, his eroticism is homosexual ... The effect therefore of Cavafy’s device is not only to suggest that homosexual eroticism is entirely normal –is indeed as superior to heterosexual eroticism as ancient Alexandrian society is to contemporary Alexandrian society; it is also to judge this modern society in that it fails to recognize this because it is bigoted and has ‘all its values wrong’” (Sherrard, 96).

If it’s true, as Kierkegaard once suggested, that the sorrowful man lives either in the past or in the future, Cavafy’s fate haunts him like the truth of a past that remembers. What do they mean? Fate, memory, experience: the three impetuses of human existence guide the voyage of this –and every– Odysseus. Every island left behind marks a station and a loss. The history of the future that Whitman vows to project in “To a Historian” inevitably belongs to the past; it acknowledges the losses and proposes a different reckoning of the hours. “The clock indicates the moment – but what does eternity indicate?” Whitman asks. Cavafy may have the answer. Resolving to evade the castle of his own historical fate and follow the flow of the senses, the

239 “Song of Myself,” 44
poet anchors his hopes in one harbor only, and that is a place of sensual delectation. In the haze of such solitary haven, Cavafy’s “beautiful lighted chandelier,” like a lighthouse, illuminates the poet’s sense of muted valor:

In the small room where, amid walls alone,  
the chandelier throws out its fervid sheen,  
this is no usual light that is displayed.  
Not for faint-hearted bodies is it made,  
this heat with its voluptuous vehemence.  
“Chandelier” (1914)

The tenacity of the poet entails the endurance of such heat:

Try to keep them, poet,  
those erotic visions of yours,  
however few of them there are that can be stilled.  
Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.  
Try to hold them, poet,  
when they come alive in your mind  
at night or in the brightness of noon.  
“When They Come Alive” (1916)

For Cavafy eternity lies in a realm of preserved sensual pleasures. As in Whitman’s corpus, Cavafy’s hedonistic chronicle fashions an unanswerable riddle for the aging poet: are all these lustful moments “half real” or intensely tasted? Does it matter? Hedonism acquires quixotic proportions in the Cavafian world because, as the poet suggests, in his iron age only the “champions” of pleasure deserve remembrance, and as the poet suggests, he is one of them:

I didn’t hold myself back. I gave in completely and went,  
went to those delectations that were half real,  
half wrought by my own mind,  
went into the brilliant night  
and drank strong wine,  
the way the champions of pleasure drink.  
“I Went” (1913)

If anything, Whitman, as a poet and man, conceived himself as such a champion. In “One Hour to Madness and Joy” Whitman deciphers eternity in an hour of sensual bliss:
O something unprov'd! something in a trance!
To escape utterly from others' anchors and holds!
To drive free! to love free! to dash reckless and dangerous!
To court destruction with taunts, with invitations!
To ascend, to leap to the heavens of the love indicated to me!
To rise thither with my inebriate soul!
To be lost if it must be so!
To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fulness and freedom!
With one brief hour of madness and joy.

This poem, impulsive and raw as it is in its prompting symbolism, anticipates in more ways than one Cavafy's dismay for the medieval, albeit enduring politics of sin. By nature Cavafy, unlike Whitman, was demure. “I know I am cowardly and I cannot act,” Cavafy noted in his private diary. “That’s why I only speak...I’m unconcerned if no one agrees with me. My word won’t be lost. Someone might reiterate it and it might reach the ears of those who will listen to it and be encouraged by it...I don’t think my words are unnecessary” (Savidi, 266). One thing that always triggered Cavafy’s polemical voice was his confidence in the truthfulness of the senses. In his early prose poem “The Regiment of Pleasure” a sensual revolution is proposed as the ultimate social violation and return to the naturalness of being:

Speak not of guilt, speak not of responsibility. When the Regiment of the Senses parades by, with music, and with banners; when the senses shiver and shudder...

All of morality’s laws – poorly understood and applied – are nil and cannot stand even for a moment, when the Regiment of the Senses parades by, with music, and with banners.... Your duty is to give in, to always give in to Desires, these most perfect creatures of the perfect gods...

Do not confine yourself at home, misleading yourself with theories of justice, with the preconceptions of reward, held by an imperfect society... Just as life is an inheritance, and you did nothing to earn it as a recompense, so should Sensual Pleasure be...

Do not be deceived by the blasphemers who tell you that the service is dangerous and laborious. The service of sensual pleasure is a constant joy. It does exhaust you, but it exhausts you with inebriations sublime.

The duty of the Cavafian and the Whitmanian champion, thus, is to yield everlastingly, to yield always to the Desires that are the perfect forms of the perfect gods in the ideal city. From Brooklyn to Ithaca, the command of Hedonism leads the poets to an indispensable path. As Yourcenar once said about Cavafy –her observation, in this context, being applicable also to
Whitman—“the carnal reminiscences established the artist as a master of time. His faithfulness to sensual experience arrives at a theory of immortality” (Pieris, 231). Cavafy, the poet of closed windows and gloomy interiors, finally calls for openness and light: “Do not shut yourself at home; but keep the windows open, open wide...so as to hear...the Regiment of the Senses.”

That must be indeed Cavafy’s most heroic moment.

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240 “The Regiment of Pleasure”
Chapter 3

The Body

The Words of the Body

“Human bodies are words, myriads of words
.....................
I myself am a word with them–my qualities interpenetrate with theirs–my name is nothing to them.”
-Walt Whitman

“Cavafy is the first Greek poet whose word is the word of the body.”
-Viron Leondaris

For Whitman and Cavafy the experience of the body is multilayered. The traumas of birth and war (the wounded body), the impetus of desire (the sensual body), the discursive nature of identity (the transgressive body), the ongoing struggle for freedom (the political body) and the inescapability of the past (the remembering body) constitute a confessional body that is the subject of the final chapter.

As a pillar of the city, the human body bestows purpose and energy to space. From a city’s maternity ward to its graveyards the sanctity of life emanates from the malleable body that grows from innocence to experience before crossing the gates of Erebus. “If anything is sacred,” Whitman notes, “the human body is sacred.”241 Civilization is an imprint of the flesh, in whose perishable layers, as Plato had it, soul and nous nestle and wrestle like fluid agents awaiting

241 “Children of Adam,” Section 8.
release upon decease. On an individual level, identity is shaped and determined through the body. Flesh curtains the invisible aspects of the self, its tenets and feelings and longings; it shells the will of the individual, as Nietzsche would put it. Each individual’s unique history, experience and memory, hence, spring from the body which also determines one’s fate. Anticipating Freud’s maxim “anatomy is destiny,” Whitman declares that “I too had received identity by my body / That I was, I knew was of my body, and that I should be I / knew I should be of my body.”

Harold Bloom employs this verse to support his claim that “reality is an Epicurean emulsion until the self identifies with its own body, which is fate. A consistent metaphysical materialism allows for no freedom except the knowledge of the body’s priority” (2015: 81).

Both Whitman and Cavafy evolved under the weight of such knowledge and consequently pioneered in their respective cultural milieux as poets of the body. The interiority of the body illuminated in their poetics is an extension of the awareness of the Enlightenment that physiological assembly alone does not make one human, as Victor Frankenstein understood. The unity of matter with spirit and the concord of the creator with an image of humanity are crucial points here. As George L. Mosse notes in his seminal study The Image of Man, “The eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s ideal of nature was instrumental in the joining of body and soul ... The belief in unity—in the interrelationship of men, women, and nature—was decisive here ... The exploration of nature ... meant learning to read nature’s innermost purpose through outward appearances, decoding that which could be seen, touched, measured, and dissected” (24).

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242 “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”
243 Martin notes that “there was a long tradition of art in America and Europe which spoke on behalf of the soul. But in the American 1850s there had been few poets who spoke for the body” the way Whitman did (1979:16). In his study Cavafy the Inmate, Leondaris, as cited in the epigraph, observes that “Cavafy is the first Greek poet whose word is the word of the body” (Dimaras, 1992: 150).
Whitman and Cavafy agree in the predominance of the body not only in the physiological sense that Whitman’s listing of body parts encapsulates in Section Nine of “Children of Adam,” but also in terms of a self-awareness that could not have come without the knowledge of a body that, as Cavafy writes, constantly “needs and demands” (“He Swears”). Both poets address the body as the sensuous link to the world of experience. Whitman believes in “the flesh and the appetites” (“Song of Myself”) with the naturalness of a primordial self: “Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles.” For Cavafy the physiological faculties constitute a miracle only when they parade in unison for a greater purpose, which is the attainment of the perfect pleasure bound to outlast the passing judgment of an “imperfect society.” In this poem Cavafy allies with Whitman’s assertion of the primacy of physical life as a moral force. Whitman’s and by extension Cavafy’s sexual politics implies that control and supervision of human sexual instincts are unnatural and unhealthy and that “the liberation of eros would give people a new respect for their bodies and the bodies of others” (Killingsworth, 12).

Whitman’s revisionary poetics pioneered as an autobiographical narrative; its emphasis on the exigencies of the body differentiated it from the general biographical and autobiographical trends of the poet’s time. As Scott E. Casper notes in his study about the developing genre of biography in nineteenth-century America, biographies helped define the emerging nation’s

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244 O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you...

245 “The Regiment of Pleasure,” cited in the previous chapter.

246 In “Native Moments” of the “Children of Adam” cluster, Whitman’s resolution to abide by the urgings of the body prefigures Cavafy’s paean:

Native moments—when you come upon me—ah you are here now,
Give me now libidinous joys only,
Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
To-day I go consort with Nature’s darlings, to-night too,
I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men,
I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
The echoes ring with our indecent calls...
identity. In an age predating radio, film and television, biography was not simply a genre of writing, it was a medium that allowed many Americans, and not only the intellectuals, to learn about public figures and peer into the lives of strangers. Whitman must have read some of them and despite their mediocre literary value recognized the fact that confessing one’s own private experience to the public increasingly mattered. If Rousseau’s *Confessions* had opened a window to a much esteemed intellectual’s private life in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution, the American biographical narrative manifested a much more pedestrian endeavor ranging from memoirs of pious women and patriotic narratives of eminent statesmen, to ”mug books” that collected not only the lives of rascals but also of ordinary Midwestern farmers, such as the “common farmer” and “father of five sons” that Whitman sketches in “I Sing the Body Electric.”

Unlike the mass-oriented typical biographical enterprises of the time, Whitman’s autobiographical project entailed the sweat and the anomie of an animalistic plot; it sang of the spasms of the delirious self; it smelled of armpits and of acid “limpid jets of love hot and enormous.”247 As Thoreau put it, “[Whitman] writes the history of his own body” (Cited in Aspiz, 239). The inaugural poem of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “Song of Myself,” in particular, proposed a “body/soul dialogue, such as those popular in the Renaissance. The poet repeatedly insists upon the equality of the body and the soul ... Nonetheless, the major thrust of the poem is toward recognition of the claims of the body. If Whitman was to establish the equality of body and soul, it was necessary to insist upon the goodness of the body” (Martin, 1979: 15).

One of Whitman’s most notable goals was to elicit and deliver a new language of the body, an aestheticized erotic vernacular whose confrontational temper rendered the integrity of

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247 "Children of Adam,” 5
“The words of the Body!” Whitman exclaims in *Primer*. “The words of parentage! The words of husband and wife! ...” (4) Then he adds, “the blank left by words wanted, but unsupplied, has sometimes an unnamably putrid and cadaverous meaning. It talks louder than tongues. What a stinging taste is left in that literature and conversation where have not yet been served up by resistless consent ... The lack of any words ... is as historical as the existence of words. As for me, I feel a hundred realities, clearly determined in me, that words are not yet formed to represent. Men like me ... will gradually get to be more and more numerous—perhaps swiftly, in shoals; the words will also follow in shoals” (20-21).

Would “adhesive” be such a word? “Amative”? “Camerado”? “Mettle”? “Calamus”? Is it just the diction or also the syntax that bespeaks a body language? “I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid, / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol,” Whitman states. Then he employs phallic imagery to describe the urgency of an unleashed profanity: “Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on, / To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakens me.” Hence, Whitman’s urge to textualize the body, as attested by the epigraph of this section, created a language that filled “the blank left by words wanted.” Whether ancient or modern, religious or agnostic, wounded or robust, male or female, we all experience the world through the body, Whitman proposed. And as Reynolds observes in the Whitman documentary *American Experience*, if we all agree that the body is sacred then we have the beginning of a modern democracy.

Whitman’s linguistic proposition took shape in the maelstrom of antithetical cultural airstreams. Throughout the pages and the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman’s

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248 Whitman’s aesthetic “body-language,” it should be noted, evolved as an extension of the hybrid language the poet developed by mixing verse and prose, slang, Standard English and Frenchisms, as examined in the first chapter.

249 “Song of Myself,” 50
evolving sensual persona is always aware of the gap between the interiority of Christian morality and the extrovert nature of the pagan mindset revived after the Renaissance. There are certain binaries in Whitman’s work that often explain the temperament and the actions of his chameleonic personality: androgynous, autoerotic/homoerotic, prophet/child, actor/spectator, fluid/solid, ancient/modern. In Whitman’s poetics the Adamic and the Promethean coexist in a body that seeks the warmth, absorbs the energy, but also resists the libidousness of other bodies; in other words, it cannot exist outside the frame of the social body.

The poet acknowledges the primacy of such organic exchange when he writes: “All is recall’d as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, / matured, / You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me, / I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours/only nor left my body mine only...” Whitman’s notion of sexual democracy entails a principle of exculpated and articulated corporeality that forms the core of the poet’s adhesive thesis. For Whitman the allegory of sin as the amphibious daughter of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a poetic anachronism. Whitman’s ideal democratic body of the new world is a reaction to, rather than the extension of, the Judeo-Christian notion of guilt and sin. Camille Paglia, a critic whose gender politics have often been associated with controversy, argues somehow convincingly that “Whitman calls for an end to a false shame rooted in Judeo-Christian sexual repression. Even more boldly he links sexual shame to social injustice and bigotry. Mind must accept and forgive body, he argues, if we are to reconnect with nature” (2006: 90).

Whitman’s sexual idealism, hence, begins with the body and a call for a re-conceptualization of its moral properties. This becomes evident in the poem “As Adam Early in the Morning” in which the first bachelor, unbound of Eve whose presence is strategically eliminated, but also free of the strictures of the Father who is clearly absent, has returned in the

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250 “To a Stranger”
shape of a modern everyman to address the reader with the voice, the conviction, and the image
of the Promethean Christ that we also know from Milton’s *Paradise Regained* and Kazantzakis’

*The Last Temptation:*

As Adam early in the morning,
Walking forth from the bower, refresh’d with sleep;
Behold me where I pass—hear my voice—approach,
Touch me—touch the palm of your hand to my Body as I pass;
Be not afraid of my Body.

The central verb here, “touch,” denotes Whitman’s preoccupation with mundane naturalism.

Whitman’s heraldic “appetites” advocate the worship of the body as nature’s moving temple:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites;
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from;
The scent of these arm-pits, aroma finer than prayer;
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

Sensory perception and spiritual fulfillment are equally pivotal to Whitman. Paglia further
observes that Whitman’s self-portrait “flaunts not singular, epic feats of valor but our basic
metabolic functions: ‘fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding’” (2005: 90). Whitman, one
may add, is more of a sensualist than a gourmand. Wining and dining lie in the margins of the
poet’s interests. There are only a handful of mentions of food and eating en passant throughout
*Leaves of Grass,* as opposed to the abounding eroticism that rendered it as “new [sexual]
Bible” (Grier, 1:353).

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251 Whitman briefly mentions eating as an anatomical function of the body in the cataloguing of the body’s
workings in “Children of Adam”: “Food, drink, pulse, digestion...” But he refers to the “seminal milk” of creation as
the ‘best liquor.’ In a famous passage in “The Sleepers,” omitted by Whitman after 1855, the poet brings briefly
together dietetics and erotics:

The cloth laps a first sweet eating and drinking,
Laps life-swelling yolks...laps ear of rose-corn, milk and
just ripened:
The white teeth stay, and the boss-tooth advances in
darkness,
And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses,
and the best liquor afterward.
As Foucault has demonstrated, sex and gastronomy are linked. In his pivotal analysis of sexuality Foucault compares modernity’s interest in sexual identity with the ancient Greek preoccupation with diet, arguing that since the seventeenth-century sex has replaced food as the privileged medium of self-constitution in the modern West. Whitman stood at the crossroads of such reformation of the self, which even though it had timidly commenced in the seventeenth-century and evidently thrived in the following two centuries, especially in the Libertine literature of de Sade and de Laclos and later during the Romantic period, it lingered half construed in the heights of Victorianism.

The ancients interpreted gluttony as an alimentary excess surpassing all other bodily indulgences. Characteristically, Pope has called *The Odyssey* “the eatingest of epics” because all the adversities entailed in the Homeric epic at the end of the day are resolved over a sumptuous banquet. In contrast, one may hail *Leaves of Grass* as the sexiest of nineteenth-century poems, an epos that willfully promulgated the transition from dietetics to erotics, and by doing so it turned the textualized body into the subject of a modern epic that, in terms of its homoerotic openness, for Cavafy’s generation meant as much as *Paradise Lost* signified for Blake’s and Byron’s poetic age. The “hundred realities, clearly determined in” Whitman’s mind that “words are not yet formed to represent” evolved into poetic manifestations of the *swinging* (the italicized epithet is used here with its 1960s connotation of neo-libertinism) body–his and the others’; the poet’s

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252 *History of Sexuality, Vol. II, The Use of Pleasure*

253 Characteristically, in an interview Foucault claimed that “[The Greeks] were not much interested in sex. [Sex] was not a great issue. Compare, for instance, what they say about the place of food and diet. I think it is very, very interesting to see the move, the very slow move, from the privileging of food which was overwhelming in Greece, to interest in sex. Food was still much more important during the early Christian days than sex. For instance, in the rules for monks, the problem was food, food, food. Then you can see a very slow shift during the Middle Ages when they were in a kind of equilibrium and after the seventeenth century it was sex” (Cited in Taylor, 72).
bodily emphasis suggests an appeal for intimacy that goes beyond sexual roles and stereotypes.254

Whitman’s preoccupation with amativeness, as the *joie de vivre* of poetry and life is linked with the classical past, but also with phrenology, a popular pseudoscience of his time according to which amativeness is a corporal property located on the lower back of the head. It is imperative for the *Hellenized* Whitman to install such “property” in the heart and mind of his young nation’s democracy, while at the same time, allow it to inspire his own creation. Amativeness remains a hint in the epic world, deliciously concealed in secluded environments of seduction, such as Achilles’ and Patroclus’ tent outside the walls of Troy, or Calypso’s and Nausicaa’s enticing islands; on his native island young Whitman sets himself at first on a beach infused with a Phaeacian sensation. “When I wander’d alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, / laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,” he writes. But then he sheds off the Ulysscean guise and deviates from Nausicaa’s mythical shore to anticipate his true nature:

“And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way/coming, O then I was happy, / O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food/nourish’d me more...”255

Who is the centripetal lover moving toward the core of the poet’s plexus? Does he have a name –is his name Peter (Doyle), or Fred (Vaughan), both real men with whom Whitman was allegedly obsessively preoccupied? Or is he a reverie: a future reader whose body Whitman’s phallic words promise to invade; a wounded soldier from the fields of the civil war; a phantasmal

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254 Reiterating Reynolds’ point, which is mentioned in the previous chapter, Bohan states that, “nineteenth-century audiences were far more likely to disapprove of Whitman’s explicit treatment of the body and heterosexual love that of the poems’ suggestion of homosexuality. Contemporary customs allowed for and even encouraged open demonstrations of male friendship and affection to an extent unthinkable a few decades later” (4). At the same time, one may note, Whitman’s new language and imagery evaded the limits of his time’s tolerance with experimental sexuality. *Leaves of Grass*, as Jacob Stockinger put it, invoked a particular “homotextual” experience (cited in Martin, 5) brought upon by a poet who turned himself into a textual erotic machine (Erkkila, 1996: 124) in order to challenge the limits of broad-mindedness of the general reader.

255 “When I Heard at the Close of the Day”
Patroclus and infinitely missing half of the poet-warrior? When reading the rest of this poem one may flee the coast of Paumanok for the shore of Troy and envisage Achilles and Patroclus the night before Hector’s axe struck. Whitman would not have picked another moment because death and love form yet another of his wonderful binaries:

And the next came with equal joy—and with the next, at evening, came my friend; And that night, while all was still, I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores, I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands, as directed to me whispering to congratulate me, For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night, In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me, And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.

Happiness is as elusive for Whitman as the “seas of bright juice [that] suffuse heaven.” “It is not chaos or death,” he tells us. “It is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.”

Yet, the greatest, perhaps, among the Whitmanian conflicts is the poet’s vacillation between his Adamic anxiety with life and his Dickinsonean eagerness for death. Part of the poet’s moral constitution is his inclination towards sublimation of his erotic impulses, which as Freud told us, is a euphemism for the death of the natural and the unconstrained. If bodies become words for Whitman, pleasures are text-locked metaphors hardly evading, if at all, the realm of the page. “Camerado, this is no book,” Whitman admits in “Song of the Open Road.” “Who touches this touches a man ... It is I you hold and who holds you, / I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.” As Bohan acknowledges, “Whitman would have his readers believe

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256 “Song of Myself,” 50
257 It has been suggested that the term “camerado” does not correspond to a word found in any dictionary (Pollak, 104). It is yet one of Whitman’s adapted street-smart words that allows him at the same time to address the general reader as a lover (Killingsworth, 48), connote the poet’s intellectual proximity to the bodies of history and legend, or even admit Whitman’s own gender-elasticity, because “a man who is a book is no longer defined by the corporeal limitations of his sex” (Pollak, 104).
that *Leaves of Grass* is not a book but ‘a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of Nineteenth Century America)’” (6). In “Song of the Open Road” the poet further claims that “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence.”

Whitman’s presence as a “wound-dresser” has often been interpreted as the ultimate diversion of his homoerotic impulses to an acceptable social and moral role. As a war on the body, the American Civil War had a physical and intellectual impact on Whitman. Reynolds argues that “Whitman had long sought appropriate receptacles for his homoerotic feelings ... during the war he found that this love could be fused with public service, patriotism, and religion.” One may detect this particularly in certain poems from the “Drum-Taps” cluster of *Leaves of Grass*. As Reynolds further notes, “the [Civil] War’s violence and an ennobled homoeroticism went hand in hand for Whitman. The inner wounds he had described in tormented ‘Calamus’ poems like ‘Trickle Drops’ and ‘[Hours Continuing Long]’ were outdone by the actual wounds he saw daily in the hospitals” (1996: 430).

Aspiz has further indicated that Whitman’s painful realism in depicting wounded soldiers, like his concern for injured firemen, suggests an allure of violence and pain that is “linked to Whitman’s sense of compassion” and is “fed on the psychological-sexual interplay of violence and suffering” (62). In “A Song of Joys” the poet cries out “To taste the savage taste of blood! ... The sight of the flames maddens me with pleasure.” Even later, in his war poems, Whitman rarely expresses repulsion by blood and bodily putrescence. In the “Wound Dresser” his descriptions are mostly clinical and journalistic, with a rare bemoaning of the “sickening” wounds:

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
.....
From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood...
I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep...

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound...

Cleanse the one with gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sicken-ing, so offensive...

In the same poem he confides that the pleasures of tending the wounded body are much stronger than the odor of gangrene.

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand
I seat by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad...
(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested,
Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)258

Whitman’s commitment to the wounded soldiers has been duly documented by the poet himself in *Specimen Days*, as well as his biographers through long accounts of his hospital visits

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258 In a cunning parallel, Cavafy declares a similarly compulsive interest in the wounded male body which he also tends as a wound dresser under different circumstances. In “The Bandaged Shoulder” Cavafy equals blood with the nectar of the body, as tangible and rousing as the male seed that often is given a mention in Whitman.

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

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

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

When we left, I found, in front of his chair,
a bloody rag, part of the dressing,
a rag to be thrown straight into the garbage;
and I put it to my lips
and kept it there a long while—
the blood of love against my lips.
and letters addressed by the poet to dead soldiers’ families. As Bloom observes, “only Whitman, of all our titans, professedly comes to us as a healer.” (2015: 31). Whitman’s heroic service as an unpaid volunteer nurse and wound dresser in Washington D.C. during the Civil War indeed allowed him to explore an alternative manifestation of male bonding and express his love for the male body as an act of erotic altruism.

In this context, “Drum-Taps” can be read as Whitman’s poetic approximation of the *Iliad*. This is the voice of a modern Homer who is not only imagining the battle, but who is physically involved. He has the vigilance of the reporter, the determination of the healer, but also the awareness of the poet:

To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass’d heroes (was one side so brave? the other was equally brave;) …

Aside from a war on the body, Whitman also depicts the Civil War as a violent act that awakens feelings of tenderness in strong men. The cathartic experience of such outer and inner conflict emancipated the poet like a “purifying power” (Reynolds, 1996: 419) that would heal personal

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259 Reynolds recounts extensively Whitman’s communications with dead soldiers’ families (1996:428-9), as well as his ‘personalism,’ as Reynolds calls Whitman’s personal involvement with the wounded, as opposed to “the cool professionalism of the nurses associated with the United States Sanitary Commission” (1996: 431).
260 Bloom means contemporary titans from Eliot to Twain, to whom I would add ancient and classical poets whose epics encapsulate the theme of war from Homer to Tasso and Milton.
261 Even though, it should be noted, as Reynolds reminds us, beyond Whitman’s war poetry “affectionate bonding between soldiers in the field was a common theme of popular war poems ... The eroticized language of same-sex affection ... was thus part of public life during the war. It was a war of brutal violence but also of male bonding and loving comradeship. It was normal for a soldier to assume the role of parent, sibling, or spouse for a dying comrade.” (1996: 428).
262 Depending on one’s reading, the *Iliad*, aside from a war poem, is also a love poem that embeds the complex comradeship of Achilles and Patroclus within its corpus.
263 “The Wound Dresser,” 1
and national passions. Indeed, a poem like “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” from the “Drum-Taps” cluster blends “wartime violence, homoeroticism, and patriotic piety,” as Reynolds observes (430). Moreover, I agree with Killingsworth’s reading of “Vigil Strange” as a transfiguration of homosexual love by the context of the war, which makes the relationship of Whitman with the anonymous wounded body “hauntingly ‘Greek’” (138). It is hard to read “The Wound Dresser” without comparing its elegiac tenderness with Tennyson’s requiem for his beloved Hallam, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1849), or with the Iliadic spirit that nurtures it.

Above all, as I see it, Achilles’ lamentation for the bereaved Patroclus echoes in Whitman’s bereavement-poems: it is the most vulnerable moment of a notoriously violent male. As a warrior of words, Whitman might not possess the violent nature of an Achilles (he rather abides by the rules of the intellect, the *metis* or cunning that enabled Odysseus to navigate the most hostile seas), but he is definitely influenced by the legacy of epic male comradeships, which he sees not only as the pinnacle of ideal love, but also as evidence of bendable masculine conduct in ancient narratives. After all, didn’t Patroclus and Enkidu share both masculine and

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264 *Vigil strange I kept on the field one night;*
*When you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,*
*One look I but gave which your dear eyes return’d with a look I* *shall never forget,*
*One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach’d up as you lay on* *the ground,*
*Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle,*
*Till late in the night reliev’d to the place at last again I made my* *way,*
*Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son* *of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)*
*Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene, cool blew the* *moderate night-wind,*
*Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-* *field spreading,*
 *
*Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my* *soldier ...*
feminine qualities with their epic alpha-male companions respectively, as much as Whitman himself identified with both he-bird and she-bird – the one abandoned, the other abandoning – in his poem?

Thus, it would be reasonable to read the death of the “feathered guest from Alabama” in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (written before the war) as an anxious premonition of erotic bereavement which, as with the case of Dickinson, is expressed through a metaphor of grief as the constant whisperer of an incomplete present. Unlike Dickinson’s representation of death as a tangible Body that tortures her consciousness with an executioner’s lash, Whitman’s oscillating portrayal of death springs from a platonic conception of it as life’s perpetual wooer lurking in the twilight like an impatient suitor who counts the hours until the queen’s loom has ceased. Pollak argues persuasively that Whitman’s sense of loss is owed partly to his distrusting “his own body because it housed an emotionally vulnerable self. If ‘an American rude tongue’ was to express his faith in sex and the people, his poetry would suggest that the various kinds of love and friendship he had experienced—including familial love—were both sociable and socially isolating” (84). His poetics emerged more from a point of isolation that favored chastity in the sense of self-regulation. As Pollak further argues, “in his struggle to celebrate vulnerability as well as strength, the poet provides a powerful critique of the feeling ‘the body gives the mind / of having missed something” (97).

Whitman’s self-regulation comes with a price, and part of this price is poeticized regret, as we know from Cavafy. The economy of desire and repression, as we saw, also worked for the

265 Characteristically, King Gilgamesh is told by Ninsun, his divine mother, that ”You will love [Enkidu] as a woman and he will never forsake you.” When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh appropriately mourns him like a wife. Moreover, Homer’s Patroclus has been depicted as a hero combining the masculine qualities of a fierce warrior and the feminine properties associated with a passive lover, while in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida he is portrayed as Achilles’ “masculine whore” of “diminutive (physical) stature.” Interestingly, the most famous warrior of Whitman’s time was Napoleon, a man also famous for his skills as fierce fighter, but whose diminutive stature, unrelated to homoeroticism, rendered him as a physiognomic anomaly to the standard stereotypes of military masculinity.
young Cavafy. The poet’s Freudian elegy “Desires” portrays unfulfilled desire as a repressed and tyrannical body that resists oblivion:

Like beautiful bodies of the dead, who had not grown old and they shut them with tears, in a magnificent mausoleum, with roses at the head and jasmine at the feet — that is how desires look that have passed without fulfillment; without one of them having achieved a night of sensual delight, or a moonlit morn.

As pointed out earlier, unlike the explicit and often materialized sensuality that characterizes the modernist tradition and especially Cavafy’s complexity as a poet and man, Whitman abided by the platonic principles of desire whose dialectic dualism appealed to nineteenth-century ethics, according to which the acceptable behavior of the moderated lover demonstrated a wise balance between body and soul. Death is part of this balance. Poetic power, Pollak notes, “Emerges from this history of erotic bereavement— for love (in the past tense) and death are the words out of the sea” (123) by which the he-bird is lamenting. Moreover, death (unlike Death the noble horseman in Dickinson’s pathway to eternity) in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries served as a deus ex machina literary device of prudence, emancipation and/or sublimation. From Goethe’s Faust to Dumas’ The Lady of the Cameliias physical passion is never consummated between the lovers because death interferes —the Italian opera cashed in on this trend, which remained current until at least the death of Verdi. Whitman, a renowned lover of Italian opera, consistently employed the motif of a male lover’s death as a device of self-restraint and sympathy-seeking from the audience.

A section of Plato’s Republic, a text Whitman had studied meticulously, accentuates how “the brilliance of a soul and that of a body are incompatible with the excess and violence of the pleasures” (Foucault, 1990: 90):

“Can you think of a greater and sharper pleasure then the sexual?”
“No, nor a madder one.”
“The right kind of love has nothing frenzied or licentious about it?”
“Nothing.”

Foucault elucidates the distance between self-indulgence and continence by juxtaposing two binaries that form the core of Plato’s and Aristotle’s take on sensuality: σωφροσύνη (sophrosyne, moderation or prudence) versus ακολασία (akolasia, immoderation or self-indulgence) and ακρασία (akrasia, incontinence) as opposed to εγκράτεια (e gratiea, continence, abstinence, or self-mastery). It seems to me that Whitman’s entire oeuvre is an attempt to articulate the rivalry between body and soul and juxtapose the two as the opposing forces that strain toward different goals and work “against one another like the two horses of a team” (Foucault, 1990: 67).

Whitman asks:

And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?  
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

Plato associated bodily and spiritual unity with harmony. The equilibrium of the body leads to the proper hierarchy of the soul: “he will cultivate harmony in his body for the sake of consonance in his soul” –which will enable him to conduct himself like a true musician (Foucault, 1990: 104). In the epic world, a true musician is the one who turns the Sirens’ gloomy song of oblivion into a song of restoration and remembrance. But the modern individual is destined to dissonance and discontent. Whitman’s mountaineering as an American Übermensch is yet another metaphor for the struggle of the individual to redeem himself through, as Whitman famously declared in a letter to Emerson, “faith in sex.” Whitman rejects metaphysical

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266 Republic 402-3
267 Aristotle makes clear in Nicomachean Ethics that ακολασία pertains strictly to the pleasures of the body related to sexuality: “the pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell,” he argues, “must be excluded” (cited in Foucault, 1990: 40).
268 “I Sing the Body Electric,” Section 1
269 Whitman writes characteristically in this letter dated August 1856 that “I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is. Of bards for These States, if it come to a question, it is whether they shall celebrate in poems the eternal decency of the
divinity for the holiness of the body. He is naturally preoccupied with male physicality and celebrates the phallus as the “Godhead” of procreation and desire. Yet, Whitman’s sexual iconoclasm suggests that the seminal milk of eros is better to be regulated than dispersed and the body of eros better to be imagined than touched. For Whitman it all mingles in a convoluted “embrace of love and resistance.”

Yes, Whitman has faith in sex but with a neoplatonic fervor and a pagan sense; he sees the allure of the sexual body as a riddle and a test, and above all as the call for a struggle of self-mastery that might enable one to “achieve domination in the area of desires and pleasures” (Foucault, 1990: 64), and never, as Plato claims, to “abandon his body to the irrational body of the beast.” Both Bloom and Paglia, two critics who have written extensively on Whitman’s sexual solipsism, agree that the poet’s sexuality rarely—if ever at all—took off from the realm of

amativeness of Nature, the motherhood of all, or whether they shall be the bards of the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex, and of the feeble and querulous modesty of deprivation. This is important in poems, because the whole of the other expressions of a nation are but flanges out of its great poems. To me, henceforth, that theory of any thing, no matter what, stagnates in its vitals, cowardly and rotten, while it cannot publicly accept, and publicly name, with specific words, the things on which all existence, all souls, all realization, all decency, all health, all that is worth being here for, all of woman and of man, all beauty, all purity, all sweetness, all friendship, all strength, all life, all immortality depend. The courageous soul, for a year or two to come, may be proved by faith in sex, and by disdaining concessions” (The Walt Whitman Archive).

D. H. Lawrence uses the term in his traveling diaries, in which he observes that, in opposition to the Anglo-Saxon reserved sensuality, the Italians worship the phallus as the “Godhead” of the senses. In contrast with Whitman’s profuse explicit references to the male member—his and the others’—, Cavafy resolutely refrains from any references, direct or metaphorical to it. The phallus remains hidden in the dark room of Cavafy’s poetry; it is never illuminated, verbalized, no less celebrated. In contrast, the image of the phallus, along with other erotic themes, surfaces copiously only in the visual art that Cavafy’s erotic poems have elicited from artists such as David Hockney and Yannis Tsarouchis (Figures 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17).

“From my own voice resonant, singing the phallus, / Singing the song of procreation,” Whitman exclaims in “From Pent-up Aching Rivers” (1860), the second poem of the “Children of Adam” cluster. Further down in “I Sing the Body Electric” (1855) of the same cluster, Whitman marvels at “The march of firemen in their own costumes, / the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-stra...” Commenting upon Whitman’s phallocentric model “of the origins and nature of identity,” Moon asserts that “in the (Leaves of Grass) text’s most exorbitantly masculine moments, males are represented as the only persons being capable of exceeding the limits of ‘solid’ identity and achieving identities that can be disseminated: ‘On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babies, / This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics’ (‘I Celebrate Myself’)” (Moon, 79).

Republic, Book IX
the imaginative and the triumphantly masturbatory. The rollicking, ‘turbulent,’

swashbuckling persona projected by (Whitman) is certainly hyperbolic, in the Byronic way,”

Paglia claims. “In real life, Whitman was mild-mannered, diffident, and erotically drawn to men,

though like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, he may have been mainly celibate” (2005: 90).

Whitman’s penchant for self-autarky is arguably the most explicit erotic behavior in

Leaves of Grass, which has also been acknowledged as a song of masturbation (Erkkila, 1996:7).

His credo of self-mastery takes him to the solitary headland of self-hedonism (“my own hands

carried me there”) where this pre-Freudian Adam exasperates “You villain touch! What are

you doing?” As Laqueur has pointed out in his study, modern masturbation is a design of the

Enlightenment. “Beginning in the eighteenth-century,” he notes, “solitary sex came to represent

the relationship between the individual and the social world, a sort of crossroads where men and

women, boys and girls could go terribly wrong, where they might, if not carefully watched and

taught otherwise, choose the wrong kind of solitude, the wrong kind of pleasure, the wrong kind

of imagination, the wrong kind of engagement with the inner selves...Then came the Freudian

revolution (Laqueur, 22).

Freud taught us that conventional early views about the ill effects of masturbation were

laughable, and proposed instead the idea of the universality of infant masturbation that

informed the beginnings of liberal sexology and led to the notion of masturbation as, in the very

astute analysis of Laqueur, “an experience of self-esteem or self-love, a form of personal autarky

that allows each of us to form relationships with others without losing ourselves. What the

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274 As noted in previous chapters, several passages in Leaves of Grass provide with explicit descriptions of

Whitman’s masturbatory moments of tormentous pleasure. (See: “Song of Myself,” Sections 28, 45 and

“Spontaneous Me.”)

275 “Song of Myself, 28)

276 In the previous centuries, onanism, like sodomy, was considered a vile disease affecting not only the body, but

the human character as well. In his popular book L’Onanism (1760) Andre David Tissot characteristically insisted

that those who practiced masturbation would bear its treacherous marks upon their bodies and their spirits (cited

in Mosse, 27).
philosophes had regarded as the surest road to ruin has become for some a road to self-realization, the nearest thing we have in our day to the Hellenistic care of the self but now available not only to the leisured gentleman, as it was in antiquity, but to everyone democratically” (23).

For Whitman Emerson’s notion of self-reliance applies to aspects of sexual behavior. In the poet’s eroticized democracy solitary sex no longer elicits anxiety as a subspecies of sodomy, as it was once considered, but is accepted as the sexuality of modernity, an alternative road to pleasure that constitutes a different relationship between the individual and the social world (Laqueur, 22). Erotic solipsism in a social context, thus, enables Whitman to connect his childhood fantasies with the world that he elicited them from. His leap from adolescent masturbation to the contingency of adult sexual experience takes place over a poetic space instituted by his conception of the body as a gospel of pleasure. As a narcissistic chronicle assiduously recording the growth of its own creator, *Leave of Grass* could not and should not be anything less than a bible exposing, recounting and revising the self-indulgences of the evolving self.

In “Song of Myself” (45) Whitman tellingly juxtaposes the “ever-push’d elasticity” of youth with the “florid and full” balance of manhood. His faith in sex entails the present as much as the past in a Cavafian way. His lovers suffocate him, he confides, through streets and dreams where they come naked to him at night as they also came to Cavafy. Whitman the somnambulist and the onanist can see and hear faces and bodies ascending from the underworld “Calling my name from flower-beds, vines, tangled underbrush, / Lighting on every moment of my life, /Bussing my body with soft balsamic busses...”
Embodying Memory, Inhabiting Desire

“In the Soul’s House the Passion’s Circulate”
-C. P. Cavafy

There could be several explanations for Cavafy’s restrained narcissism. For one, he admittedly was not as impressive looking and “robust” as the young Whitman. His own slim, unathletic body, often contrasted in his poems with the athletic physique of the “bodies of love,” as the poet often referred to his imaginary or real younger lovers, went unacknowledged in his poetry and remained carefully concealed under gray suits in his daily life. His solitary (naked or dressed) reflection in the mirror does not excite the poet.\textsuperscript{277} The Alexandrian, like Baudelaire, is chiefly interested in the body of others. Paradoxically, it was the robust Whitman who habitually refrained from letting his own body, the same body he glorified in his poetry, harvest the fruits of love in real life by often avoiding the “frequent flash of eyes offering [him] love.” But Cavafy,

\textsuperscript{277} In contrast, Cavafy’s mirror is used only as a witness to the body of desire. This is clearly stated in his poem “The Mirror in the Front Hall:"

The luxurious house had a huge mirror
in the front hall, a very old mirror,
bought at least eighty years ago.

A very handsome boy, a tailor’s assistant
(on Sundays an amateur athlete),
stood there with a package. He gave it
to one of the household who took it in
to get the receipt. The tailor’s assistant
was left alone, waiting there.
He went up to the mirror, looked at himself,
and adjusted his tie. Five minutes later
they brought him the receipt. He took it and went away.

But the old mirror that had seen so much
during a life of many years—
thousands of objects and faces—
the old mirror was all joy now,
proud to have embraced
total beauty for a few moments.
despite his own unremarkable bodily presence, had a direct, unabashed and self-confident approach to body contact, and a skill of pursuing in real life what he referred to in his poetry as the strangers’ “body of love.” For Cavafy the aesthetic body enunciates the necessity for sex: simply viewing or imagining the Kouro for him is an act of incomplete delectation that instigates action. Cavafy’s peripatetic encounters with the bodies of love construe a heroic journey— a championship of desire— that takes place in the margins of a world more evocative of Baudelaire’s capital of intoxication, or even Leopold Bloom’s putrid Irish labyrinth, than any ethereal Homeric island.

Cavafy’s association of pleasure with tried and true ανδρεία (andreia, manly valor) denounces the rules of εγκράτεια as outlined in Aristotle’s Eudemian Ethics. His poem “I Went,” cited entirely in the previous chapter, emphasizes Cavafy’s philosophy that a life lived platonically is perhaps a life not worth living. Cavafy had read his Plato like Whitman. In his early period the younger poet of “Walls” shared patterns of sexual self-alienation similar to those of the older Whitman. A glance at Cavafy’s and Whitman’s development of social and sexual behaviors and consequently of their relationship with the body, reveals a contrasting pattern: as Cavafy gets older he shuts off the feelings of guilt that once kept him erotically timid and dubious, while Whitman, as the revised editions of Leaves of Grass but also the poet’s own lifestyle indicate, grows from a youthful state of outspoken libertinism, where hedonism was treated like a virtue and act of courage, to a period of self-censorship and muffled sensuality. Anton points out that as he got older, “[Cavafy] was intentionally twisting the Platonic definition of the virtue of courage, andreia, of knowledge of what to fear and what not to fear; it was a

278 “Anyone who would become so intensely absorbed in looking at a statue or in listening to a song as to lose his appetite or taste for lovemaking could not be reproached for self-indulgence, any more than could someone who let himself be seduced by the Sirens. For there is pleasure that is liable to akolasia only where there is touch and contact: contact with the mouth, the tongue, and the throat (for the pleasures of food and drink), or contact with other parts of the body (for the pleasure of sex)” (cited in Foucault, 40).
clever move on his part to extend the meaning of that virtue to cover the conquest of the fears of
the apolaustic love and sensual indulgence” (1995: 284).

The older Cavafy’s moderation and self-mastery are intentionally feeble; his private un-
Aristotelian and un-Platonic tactics, materialized in late-night escapades and concealed carefully
from his mother and his social circle, reveal a penchant for promiscuity that is characteristic of
modernity. Cavafy’s sensual empiricism evokes the scientific distrust of the intangible that
increasingly affected the imagination and the demeanor of western societies in the twentieth
century. Touching the body is paramount for the poet at all costs (emotional or monetary);
contacting with the mouth for him is no longer reserved for the pleasures of food and drink. In
fact, dietetics concern Cavafy even less than Whitman. When we find him by the coffee shop
door, it is not coffee and cakes that stimulate his senses:

Something they said beside me
made me look toward the café door,
and I saw that lovely body which seemed
as though Eros in his mastery had fashioned it,
joyfully shaping its well-formed limbs,
molding its tall build,
shaping its face tenderly,
and leaving, with a touch of the fingers,
a particular nuance on the brow, the eyes, the lips.
“At the Café Door”

Upon night’s fall the poet will congregate with the lovely body:

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.
“One Night”

In this poem Cavafy recalls an erotic act conducted in a pseudo-ideal setting made of dust
and sweat: the cheap room, the poor neighborhood and the sordid furnishings stand in stark
contrast to the exquisite body waiting on the humble bed to be savored, most likely in exchange
for a few shillings. As discussed in the previous chapters, Cavafy, like Whitman, remained
interested solely in the body of the common man. He finds it more thrilling, sturdy and libidinous
than the flabby bulk of the rich; simultaneously, one may note, the working class body, male or
female, in Cavafy’s Alexandria was readily available for hire. Cavafy made out with poor low-
class males that worked as prostitutes. This is a reality that never directly gets touched and is
only evasively, or sometimes symbolically, insinuated in his poetry. Beyond the imagery of the
ideal body of love that Cavafy carefully construes there is a world of capitalist anomie and
exploitation. Despite Cavafy’s pronounced distaste of capitalism, the poet’s proximity to the
body of love is enabled by it.\(^{279}\) None of the poet’s bodies perhaps would have rendered their
services to the poet, or any other accidental client, outside such commercial structure.\(^{280}\)

The (black) “man’s body at auction” that Whitman speaks of in “Children of Adam”
section 7, referring to the indecencies of the American slavery, in Cavafy’s Alexandria is
replaced by the eager prostitute. At a time that Alexandria’s youth suffered the consequences of
high unemployment inflicted by the unstable political reality, prostitution flourished. Many
young men, irrespective of their own sexual tastes, discreetly “auctioned” themselves on the
street, at the sea front, and more openly in the low-class hotel where observant gentlemen like
Cavafy, in an uncanny resemblance to Whitman’s bidder, “look on this wonder ... Examine these
limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve, / They shall be script that you

\(^{279}\) In comparison, Whitman also, at least in his verse, as Pollak insightfully observes, on one hand “favored chastity
in the sense of self-regulation,” on the other, he openly tolerated prostitution (85).

\(^{280}\) Liddell documents in detail Cavafy’s association with prostitution. “In the Rue d’Anastasi, in small shops and
cafes were the young men of Cavafy’s poems,” he writes. “In the same quarter ... was a house built in the old
oriental manner ... There were shops on the street level, and above was a maison de passe. The boab collected
boys and girls – and many must have been glad to earn an extra ‘talliro’ (about four shillings) by prostitution. Some
of them may even have found a little comfort in human contact. All night the house resounded with shouts and
cries. Cavafy had a room there (and it would have cost him next to nothing). There he sometimes slept with Greek
boys – occasionally he and his partner got drunk first in one of the little bars nearby. One morning he picked up a
piece of chalk and wrote on the dirty window: You’re not to come here again, you’re not to do it again.” And yet
the next night or some other night saw him again in old clothes, muffled with a scarf, making his way to this sordid
quarter” (68).
Hence, money and sex form an inconspicuous yet vital synergy in Cavafy’s narrative.

This becomes evident in his rich-in-symbolism poem “He Asked about the Quality,” in which lasciviousness and expenditure mix in a deftly orchestrated scene that contrasts the secreted hunger for the flesh with the conspicuous thirst for materialism:

Passing in front of a small shop
that sold cheap and flimsy things for workers,
he saw a face inside there, saw a figure
that compelled him to go in, and he pretended
he wanted to look at some colored handkerchiefs.

He asked about the quality of the handkerchiefs
and how much they cost, his voice choking,
almost silenced by desire.
And the answers came back the same way,
distracted, the voice hushed,
offering hidden consent.

They kept on talking about the merchandise—but
the only purpose: that their hands might touch
over the handkerchiefs, that their faces, their lips,
might move close together as though by chance—
a moment’s meeting of limb against limb.

Quickly, secretly, so the shopowner sitting at the back
wouldn’t realize what was going on.

In the opening strophe of this poem (unquoted here), which was written in 1930, we are told that the onlooker is poor (“he’d taken up a trivial, poorly paid job”), yet “good looking,” and “interesting: showing as he did that he’d reached/ his full sensual capacity./He’d turned twenty-nine the month before.” Interestingly, as documented in Liddell, Cavafy got his first job at the age of twenty-eight as an unpaid clerk in the Third Circle of Irrigation, where he remained unpaid for two and a half years (125). That was the peak of Cavafy’s own economic scarcity and sensual capacity. His regular visits to the low-class hotel, that had started early on his life,
therefore, do not mean that Cavafy was ever a wealthy patron. To the contrary, it shows that the poet was willing to sacrifice the little money he had to share the riches of the flesh with his own sex and his own class (despite his noble upbringing, as we saw earlier, after the bankruptcy of his family Cavafy ended up being as poor as the lower class). Even when he started making a moderate salary, Cavafy consistently invested a substantial portion of it in the acquisition of carnal enjoyment; his “investment” supported the despondent males in whom the poet saw a part of his own desolation as a young man, and at the same time made him a true artist in return.

Perhaps, that is why Cavafy repeatedly called himself a “poet of the old age,” simply because the subject of his poetry could only come about out of the passions (and thus the recollection) of his youth reflected in the old mirror of the poem we read above. As the poet ponders in “I’ve Brought to Art:”

    I brought to Art desires and sensations:
    things half-glimpsed,
    faces or lines, certain indistinct memories...

Liddell perceptively observes, in response to Seferis’ emphasis on the union of sensuousness, learning and thinking in Cavafy’s poetry, that “it is not only the case that a thought is felt [in Cavafy’s work]; the converse also is true – that ... his body ‘thought’. Whether he be ranked as a great poet or no, he has undoubtedly the right to be classed among the ‘ultimate’ writers, that is, those who have gone further than any others in the expression of some part of human experience. It is natural that he should be an elderly poet, for a body must at least have arrived in middle age before it can participate in the ‘sense of the past’” (171).

    In his adolescent years, the time which Cavafy, as discussed in the previous chapter, struggled with the inarticulate confusion of young Törless, we find the poet frequenting the heterosexual wing of the same brothel that is depicted in his poetry as the metaphoric house of the soul. His early symbolic poem “In the Soul’s House,” cited here in its entirety, begins with an
epigraph about the female eminence in sex from the Flemish poet’s Georges Rodenbach “Le Voyage dans les yeux”:

“In the Soul’s House the Passions circulate —
beautiful women in silk raiment dressed,
with sapphires glimmering darkly in their hair.
They rule the whole abode: from outer gate
to rooms the innermost and secretest;
and when the night’s incontinences rouse
the riot in their blood, they congregate
tumultuously in the hall, and there,
flushed and dishevelled and with bosoms bare,
dance wildly and carouse.

Outside the House, pale-visaged, oddly dressed
in dress disused, the Virtues live through days
embittered by the sounds behind the wall;
and ever and anon, as the unrest
of the hetairae in inebrious craze
affrights their pensive silence, they advance
up to the windows, and with foreheads pressed
against the panes, survey the fevered hall, —
the lights, the flowers, the glittering gems, and all
the wonder of the dance.

The house depicted in this poem resembles the brothel of the Rue d’Anastasi. Men traditionally flock into it to cherish in abundance what the Virtues censure outside of it. The inner/outer motif reappears here to draw attention to the discrepancy between self-control and incontinence, appearance and essence, private intoxication and public hypocrisy. Woman enters this setting as the sexual governess of a young man’s body (and the first tutor in charge of initiating orgasm in the young inexperienced homosexual poet’s body) that is too timid to seek the skills of amorousness elsewhere. Typically, like Whitman who persistently implied he could be as passionate for women as for men, Cavafy begins his confessions as a young poet by employing
an ancient stereotype of male sexual initiation by a *fille de joie*. And so, in this rare moment in his poetry, the young Cavafy embraces woman as the magna mater of passion that resides in the house of the soul. The androgynous nature of man, so elaborately versed in Whitman, in Cavafy is captured laconically in this poem as an analogy of a feminine soul residing in a male body.

Cavafy’s soul is imprinted on Alexandria itself. Cavafy’s city is a showcase of all the human vices that constituted the penal circles in Dante’s *Inferno*. Hence it is in the literal body of Alexandria – its architecture, alleys and urban spaces – where the traces of the poet’s own body are to be found as remnants of a “somatized soul that carries with it the brothels and dark corners of hedonistic Alexandria” (Tsakiridou, 11). In “Outside the House,” for instance, Cavafy revisits a trembling edifice that still houses the “stored up” energy of a bodily pleasure:

Walking yesterday in an outlying neighborhood,
I went by the house
I used to go to when I was very young.
There Eros with his magnificent power
had taken hold of my body.

And yesterday
when I walked along the old road,
the shops, the sidewalks, the stones,
walls and balconies and windows—
all were suddenly made beautiful by the spell of love:
nothing ugly was left there.

And as I stood gazing at the door,
stood there lingering outside the house,
my whole being radiated
the sensual emotion stored up inside me.

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281 Enkidu’s enculturation in the oldest epic, *Gilgamesh*, begins with his sexual initiation by the temple harlot prior to his arrival in Uruk and his eventual coupling with the king.

282 The words πόλις (“city”) and ψυχή (“soul”) are both feminine in Greek. As indicated earlier, Whitman also depicted America and democracy (also feminine in Greek), along with the sea, as feminine bodies. The words eternity (αἰωνιότητα), wisdom (σοφία), virtue (ἀρετή) and immodesty (ακολασία) all carry feminine articles in Greek, denoting thus Cavafy’s trajectory in the feminine city, which the Greeks perceived as the mother of democracy and civilization.
In this poem Cavafy introduces a fragment of the architectural body of the city as a complicit witness of the poet’s past. The old building and the poet’s aging body are paralleled as crypts of illicit happiness. Architecture, whether low or high, manifests a sense of identity; the way people create and inhabit space is an extension of the way people live in history and inhabit culture.

John Ruskin once unwittingly offered to Proust a key to the resuscitation of the past through an appreciation of “not only the ancient thought that lay in those old stones waiting to be read, but also that melancholy charm which the passing of centuries had added to the handiwork of many a long forgotten sculptor” (Murray, 483). Ruskin, who was a contemporary of Whitman, had emphasized that there is no such thing as *tabula rasa*. Human knowledge, and inevitably memory and desire, are part of the continuity of life; humans emerge, grow and change and that change, as Whitman also showed with the changeability of *Leaves of Grass*, “was that of a tree, not of a cloud,” or to take the analogy one step further, that of a man, not of cloud, as Percy Shelley might say. Proust’s alter ego in *Remembrance of Things Past* argues that “the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them.” Ruskin’s influence had helped Proust to overcome the immobility of a present without access to the truth that lies in the past; a distant past survived in the façade of ruins not simply because marble and stone are time-resistant but rather because they had been made to relive in people’s minds. This resurrection by thought was, perhaps, in Proust’s eyes, “the greatest task that Ruskin accomplished” (Murray, 483).

Cavafy’s urban travels, as well as his imaginative journeys to the Hellenistic East, are often conducted on Ruskin’s traces. As much as Cavafy might be fond of the ancient Hellenistic

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283 John D. Rosenberg, *Introduction to The Genius of John Ruskin*, p. 10
284 See Shelley’s “Mutability.”
stones, he has only known empirically the interiors of the less heroic structures of Alexandria.

The body of the poet’s incarnate desires inhabits private and public space. Cavafy’s juxtaposition of the past and the present takes place in a city whose architectural body encapsulates the highs and the lows of both. Aside from space, a city’s architectural body also defines – as much it is defined by – time. Along these lines Cavafy, like Ruskin, sees poetry and architecture as the two vital enemies of forgetfulness.²⁸⁶ For Cavafy, a city is above all a gigantic composition made of flesh and stone; a living poem and a pulsing organism on its own. *If men lived like men.* Cavafy does not fall for monumental seduction; he believes that greatness is not an exclusive imprint of great monuments, but also a result of inhabiting inconspicuous spaces with a sense of *la vraie vie.* For Cavafy the anonymous seedy house in his old neighborhood is as worth remembering and honoring as the Parthenon (whose looting by the British is the subject of the poet’s essay “Give Back the Elgin Marbles”).

As we saw, in “The Builders” Cavafy acknowledges the folly of ambition through the symbolism of a rising edifice that represents the building of a modern day Babel. But, of course, Cavafy is fully aware that there is no return from iron to gold: the golden age is both a fiction of the storytellers and an ancient chapter scribed in Pericles’ time. As Cavafy himself explained to a friend of his in 1907, the colossal organism that we perceive as civilization in the iron age has embraced the planet so tightly with its tentacles that every effort to avoid it and return to a

²⁸⁶ According to Ruskin, one cannot escape the past simply because it is the foundation of progress. The achievement of civilization is marked on its deeds, more specifically on architecture. “It is as the centralization and protectress of this sacred influence [of memory] the Architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought,” noted Ruskin in his essay *The Seven Lamps of Architecture.* “We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.” In the same essay Ruskin further argues that “there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture; and the latter in some sort includes the former, and is mightier in its reality: it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled...The age of Homer is surrounded with darkness, his very personality with doubt. Not so that of Pericles: and the day is coming when we shall confess, that we have learned more of Greece out of the crumbled fragments of her sculpture than even from her sweet singers or soldier historians...If men lived like men indeed, their houses would be temples -temples which we should hardly dare to injure” (Rosenberg, 131).
primordial state of being is as futile as ploughing the sand. The barbarians will never come (cited in Malanos, 74). Thus, as we saw in the previous chapter, Cavafy embraced his own decayed city as a modest but crucial station because only it can provide the poet with the lucidity of the present. It is here that Cavafy shares Rousseau’s inference that “human nature can never regress” (Malanos, 74), and therefore the barbarians no longer exist, if they ever did at all. And it is at this point that the poet’s body functions as an arc of salvation. Hence, it is only the memory of the body that redeems la vraie vie of a vanished world.

The old cliché that “outside his poetry Cavafy does not exist,” emphasizes the poet’s perception of memory as the language of the body’s knowledge. Cavafy’s body responds to time like a leaf; a thinking leaf that is, which, as in Whitman’s poetry, is subject to nature’s order of changeability and transformation – “Every leaf a miracle,” Whitman writes in “Lilacs.” Hence, Cavafy can live outside his poetry as much as he can live outside his body. Memory springs from the experience of the body to manifest itself as a response to the increasing pressures of time on the body. We understand—and in the case of Cavafy we remember—the world through the body, which, as in Whitman’s case, is “the link with nature and the common denominator among all classes, races, divided groups” (Killingsworth, 8). Cavafy’s preoccupation with the body is primarily evident in his emotional poems, where the poet commands his body to “remember”:

Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds you lay on,
but also those desires that glowed openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembled for you in the voices—
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it’s all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too—how they glowed,
remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices.

“Body Remember”
Above all, memory crafts the tenacity of a self that relentlessly revolts against—and is ultimately defeated by—the truth that there is no permanence. “I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,” Whitman writes. “For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul/and of immortality.” As the self-appointed poet of the body and the soul, the Blakean Whitman takes note that “the pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are/with me.” For Whitman behind all appearance is soul whose ultimate reality underlies the poet’s monistic philosophy of the self. But what Whitman perceives as “soul” Cavafy recognizes as memory. Time can be regained only when “the body’s memory awakens/and an old longing again moves into the blood...when lips and skin remember,” in other words, life cannot be construed without the key of memory which ceaselessly resets the sequence of time. Thus, Cavafy’s aging but tenaciously hopeful body becomes a home of the sirens and an echo chamber of past melodies:

Voices, loved and idealized,  
of those who have died, or of those  
lost for us like the dead.  

Sometimes they speak to us in dreams;  
sometimes deep in thought the mind hears them.  

And with their sound for a moment return

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287 “Starting from Paumanok,” Section 6.  
288 “Song of Myself,” Section 21.  
289 In “Eidolons” Whitman writes:  
   And thee my soul,  
   Joys, ceaseless exercises, exaltations  
   ........................................  
   Thy body permanent,  
   The body lurking there within the body...”  
Then, in Section 9 of “Children of Adam” the poet challenges the distinction between the tangible and the intangible aspects of the self:  
   “O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and  
   Women, nor the likes of the parts of you,  
   I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the  
   Soul, (and that they are the soul)...  
290 “Come Back”
sounds from our life’s first poetry—
like music at night, distant, fading away.
“Voices”

It was Balzac who argued that “hope is memory that desires.” There have been numerous interpretations of the French novelist’s truism; most notably those of David Harvey and Ronald Barthes correspond with Cavafy’s and Whitman’s respective attitudes to the present and, by extension, to time. In *Paris the Capital of Modernity*, Harvey argues that “the twinning of memory and desire helps clarify how the myths of modernity circulate with such powerful force” (52). Harvey further argues in an interview that hope is an active state nourished by memories that are activated by a desire to ameliorate the conditions of the present. That corresponds with Cavafy’s sense of memory as the redeemer of a past that constitutes life worthy and richer in the present irrespective of the poet’s discontent with history. For Barthes, in comparison, it is the volatility of memory expressed through a constant re-evaluating of one’s past through a process of re-finding time and re-writing differently each time about it (2010: 32); such revisionary process constitutes the pleasures of writing, which could be richer than the pleasures of living, as arguably in the case of Whitman who, as we saw, sublimated his private passions in the role of the poet.

If art is indeed an effort to put the infinite into the finite, as Robert Browning had argued before Ruskin (Murray, 482), then time is not simply a maniac scattering dust, as famously professed by Tennyson, but also the source of art whose task is to turn dust back into form. The redemption of Time that occupied Wordsworth’s imagination and was later turned into the

291 Characteristically, Harvey states in an interview that, “Everybody has a memory, but memory can become nostalgia when it’s left on its own; nostalgia is not hope. Hope is memory that’s mobilized around desire. So the question is what do we desire and how do we want to desire it? So if I focus on Balzac, to whom I return again and again, I might conclude, [in Balzac’s words] ‘that’s what’s it about, I desire things, but I cannot do this absent of the memory.’ As Walter Benjamin says about memory, ‘memory is not history; it is something that flashes up, in moments of danger’” (Pender, 8).

292 “In Memoriam”
subject of Proust’s work also preoccupies Whitman and Cavafy. The poets’ memory springs from the body; their spatial circumstances are less important than time, which takes on all the crucial roles. Aside from space, Whitman’s New York and Cavafy’s Alexandria are mostly time—the “flood tide below me” that Whitman sees “face to face” in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Whitman’s proclamation “it avails not, time nor place” corresponds with Cavafy’s determination to reverse the irrevocability of time by turning the self into a project of safe-guarding and recollecting the makings of the body.293 “We are time,” Cavafy maintains (Liddell, 118); “I am the clock myself,” Whitman proclaims in “Song of Myself.” The personification of time in the poetics of both poets suggests a fixation with temporality which illuminates the self in a context that is at the same time personal and historical.

But is it possible to separate the historical from the personal? Nadine Gordimer, an admirer of Cavafy, has said that the novelist is the historian of the unrecorded. Taking Gordimer’s remark one step further, Marguerite Duras, also an avid Cavafy reader, once claimed in a Cavafian mode that the story of her life did not exist; only the novel of a life was real for her, not historical facts: “It's the imaginative memory of time that it is rendered into the body of life.”294 Similarly, for Whitman and Cavafy it was the poem of a life that at the end was real to them. Cavafy once claimed that “I am an historical poet. I would never be able to write novels or plays, but I feel 125 voices inside me telling me that I could write history.” By history Cavafy did not strictly mean the decay or the glory surrounding Ruskin’s monuments. In my opinion, he mostly meant the unrecorded history—he and the others’—conducted in the shabby and unremarkable houses of his world; an unacknowledged history that is embedded in the evolving

293 As demonstrated in Cavafy’s poem “When They Come Alive.”
layers of humanity. Hence, Cavafy’s *historicism* transpires not so much from the *body* of history as from the poet’s own body. Leondaris emphasizes how “the historicism that is ascribed to Cavafy is a thwarted historicism. As the averted past spanks the body of the inmate it makes his voice sound...His body has no other way of affirmation” (Dimaras, 150).

*Mining the Truth from the Body: The Poetics of Confession and Reconstruction*

The confession lends itself … to new ways of exploring the existing ones. It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done –the sexual act– and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it.

Michel Foucault[^295]

Appropriately, I’d like to read Cavafy’s “Voices” (cited above) not only as an evocation of a personal past, but also as a confessional poem whose symbolism is also informed by “voices which have spoken so long in our civilization –repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking

and what one thinks his is not thinking” (Foucault, 1978: 60). One must have an inverted image of power Foucault reminds us\(^{296}\) in order to understand that all these voices “are speaking to us of freedom” (60). The voice of the sensuous “I” –Whitman’s “I” overflowing in the present tense; Cavafy’s first person subsisting on the gifts of the past tense– conveys the intimacy of an erotic act and, and the same time, a confession of the emancipated self.

In Foucault’s analysis, the act of confession is described as a disclosure of knowledge that “is driven from its hiding place in the soul or extracted from the body” (1990: 59). In this context, the course of mining a truth from the self is suggestive of the process of extracting semen from a man’s body. In Whitman’s and Cavafy’s confessing poems the poets’ particular physical and emotional truths are released. The image of “seas of bright juice suffuse heaven” that surfaces from the Whitman’s unawareness (“Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs”) stands both as a reference to ejaculation and a metaphor for the awakened self which, having found a language for the unspoken truth, has broken free from silence and self-censorship.

As Moon suggests, Whitman’s body “is not a human one, but a gigantic and invisible form (‘Something I cannot see’). As orgasm temporarily obliterates (one might say ‘obliviates’) ordinary consciousness or awareness, the ‘cosmic’ orgasm figured in these lines... indeed obliterates everything but itself from the text’s field of vision” (49).

Whitman and Cavafy disavowed the priest and are not aware of the shrink, yet they count on the reader’s judgment as a substitute for both. Neither poet was exposed to post-Freudian perspectives; nonetheless their body-poetics anticipated the discourses from the movements of

\(^{296}\) This is the power Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* as a dispersed and pervasive power-knowledge that is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and ‘truth’ and tie the individual to the middleclass common will (1990: 58, 63). This is arguably the power that suffocates the younger Cavafy of ‘Walls’ who, like Kafka, often sees himself as an inmate. It is the same power he finally inverts later as an escapee champion of hedonism.
the twentieth century which were brewing at Cavafy’s time. Both poets present us with aspects of
Western man that Foucault characterized as a “confessing animal” (59) accountable for the
transformation of literature.\textsuperscript{297} Even though both Whitman and Cavafy are writing in the age of
scientia sexualis,\textsuperscript{298} their confessional poetics also attest to the poets’ employment of aspects of
ars erotica that allow their bodily experience to be communicated as a medium for truth – “the
transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another” (Foucault: 1990:61).\textsuperscript{299} As
Foucault further professes, “the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject
is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for
one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the
interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession” (61).

In the twentieth century the audience became increasingly associated with the authority
that requires the confession. One confesses in public or in private, to friends or to the shrink,
through text or images. “One admits to one self,” Foucault writes, “in pleasure and in pain, things
it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about” (1990: 59). As

\textsuperscript{297} In History of Sexuality, Volume I, Foucault argues that “we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and
heard ... to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between
the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage” (59).

\textsuperscript{298} Foucault defines two historically distinct “procedures for producing the truth of sex...On the one hand, the
(ancient) societies which endowed themselves with an ars erotica. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure
itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience, pleasure is not considered in relation to an
absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden...but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as
pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, evaluated in terms of its intensity in
the body and the soul... there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of
infamy...but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its
effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged... Our civilization possesses no ars erotica. In return, it is undoubtedly
the only civilization to practice a scientia sexualis...the only civilization to have developed over the centuries
procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art
of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession” (1990: 57-58).

\textsuperscript{299} Specifically, Foucault juxtaposes the two incompatible procedures for producing the truth of sex: “in Greece
truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to
another; sex (therefore) served as a medium for imitations into learning (the truth). For us, it is in the confession
that truth and sex are joined... But this time it is truth that serves as a medium for sex and its manifestations”
(1990: 61).
we saw, Whitman’s time saw the early stages of this massive trend when publishers and authors capitalized on the audience’s increasing curiosity for biographical narratives. Whitman’s confessional in particular, involved more than the submission of the confessor to the confessed. Killingsworth observes how “the poet of ‘Calamus’... cruises the reader, seeking sympathetic lovers who will accept the gift of his body/poems/self. But he alternates between direct and indirect approaches to the reader, between figural complexity and ‘plain speech,’ between confession and furtive withdrawal, thus putting his prospective lovers/readers to the test and forcing them to discover their true allegiances and attitudes toward him...while protecting the secrecy of his or her own true identity” (124).

It is not coincidental, thus, that one of the preliminary titles Whitman considered for *Leaves of Grass* was *Flames of Confessions* (Erkkila, 1980: 261). As it has been noted, the movement of the opening poem (‘Song of Myself”) in the inaugurating edition of *Leaves* is “circular rather than progressive, returning upon itself in evocation of ecstasy and confession, of identification and recognition, of rapturous union with earth and spirit –truly a celebration both personal and universal” (Blodgett, 29). While Cavafy remembered for himself, Whitman “made it his life work to remember for others” (Pollak, 97). Traits of Rousseau, whose *Confessions* consist of private stories confided from a middle-aged sage to his younger self for the purposes of instructing his young readers, such as the author’s initiation to masturbation, are evident in Whitman who declares in “Paths Untrodden,” that “In my forty-first year I proceed for all who are or have been young men, / To tell the secret of my nights and days…”

The confession of the older Cavafy is conducted in a highly covert tone: the older poet primarily addresses his younger self in a sequence of comparing and contrasting the two consciousnesses of the self, as examined in the previous chapter. “The liveliest events do not
inspire me immediately,” Cavafy explained in his diaries. “First I need time to go by. Then I remember and I’m inspired.” This self-acclaimed “poet of the old age” often speaks of the others when he speaks of himself—that’s a good reason to explain why his poetics of experience is better understood and appreciated by readers also of an older age. In “Body Remember” the body becomes a metonymy for the intellect: the protagonist “remembers with the body, as if it were isolated from the brain” (Capri-Kafka, 70): “Now that everything is finally in the past,/ it seems as though you did yield to these desires...”

The older body functions here as a synecdoche that concerns us all: how in one way or another must we all strive for such a reconciliation of the emotions with the physique, the past with the present? Moon makes an observation that I think it is also pertinent for Cavafy: “Whitman forces his readers to reconceptualise their ideas of the nature and limits of the bodily and of what can be written about them. This body-politics is designed to reconstitute the readers’ very subjectivity in relation not only to the author’s but to their own and everyone else’s bodily existence—by critiquing and revising prevailing modes of conceiving bodiliness in relation to such primary forms of social practice as sexuality, gender and writing” (1991: 4).

Thus, it might be added that the confessed body is also a tutor of the Ulysscean body-longing for its distant home, a home that like the Cavafian Ithaca is already disjointed from the present, but whose memory contributes to the volatility of the present. As eloquently put by Faubion, “longing is itself the essence of the moved and moving body, of the sailing body of the man in motion” (49). In the twentieth century, a period of accelerated ambition, technological

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300 The hypothetical “it seems as though,” so ubiquitous in the poems of both poets, brings us back to the subject of Whitman’s and Cavafy’s autoerotic fantasies. Bloom interprets section 28 of “Song of Myself” as a confession of masturbatory anxiety. (1994: 351-353). A similar anxious confession appears in the diaries of Cavafy, but never in his poems. Cavafy seems to disapprove of masturbation as a vulgar act; instead he lets his autoerotic fantasies speak of sensuality not as an act but rather as a mood.
innovation, intense mobility, war and migration, the “sailing body” of humanity, which increasingly strove to remain at the controls of purpose, often yielded to the movement of Gatsby’s fatal boat that beats on “against the current, born back ceaselessly”\( ^{301} \) into a past which it may be idealized, yet it cannot be repeated for all the money in the world.

As a response to Gatsby’s fatal nostos the autobiographical novels of Thomas Wolfe articulated most effectively in the American 1930s both the Cavafian awareness that one cannot restore the past, as well as the Whitmanian distrust for the Faustian buoyancy of a nation about to turn into the gigantic web of highways going nowhere.\( ^{302} \) Wolfe’s narratives predicted the futility of the Ulyssian quest as it became increasingly evident in the maelstrom of progress: even man’s first walk on the moon in 1969, admirable as it was as a scientific transgression that brought humankind for the first time outside its territorial limitations, also reminded us of humanity’s solitary orbit in a universe endlessly mirroring the unanswerability of life and death. Echoing Cavafy and Kafka and anticipating Camus and Lukács, in Wolfe’s first novel, the autobiographical Bildungsroman *Look Homeward Angel* (1929), Eugene Gant asks: “Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?”

*Remembering the Body in Words and Images: Poetry in the Age of Photography*

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\( ^{301} \) Nick Caraway’s voice in the closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*.

\( ^{302} \) Sal Paradise, the lost traveler in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, descends from Wolfe’s school of disenchantment that depicted the idea of nostos as a chimera. As George Webber realizes in Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again*, “All things belonging to the earth will never change—the leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again ... the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth ... Only the earth endures, but it endures forever... You can’t go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love ... back home to exile ... back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.”
The metaphor of the alienated individual’s sailing body in motion towards the unknown exercised a certain power on the twentieth century visual culture which relied heavily on the textual tradition for references and inspiration. Images are born in poetry and, particularly after the Renaissance, painting and photography instigated a new visual language that illuminated not only the physiognomy but also the character and the inner complexities of the self. The creative reciprocity between verbal and visual modes of representation, especially after the breakthrough of photography in the 1840s with the first cameras made in France and in England, revived aspects of the Horatian tradition that had once connected painting and poetry as ‘sister acts.’

In addition to painting, the emerging popularity of photography constituted a new dialogue between the word and the image. Certainly, photography changed radically the way a writer sees the world and addresses the self.\footnote{Whitman’s belief that a photograph is more spontaneous than a painting because it lets nature, and not the artist, have its way was a premature estimate of photography as a mostly utilitarian medium. Pictorialism emerged during the later nineteenth century as an aesthetic movement that changed the role of photography from a utilitarian medium to a new artistic expression. Under the stylistic rules of pictorialism the photographer became increasingly involved in the manipulation of what would otherwise be a straightforward photograph, acting thus as the “creator” of an image rather than simply its “recorder.” By the end of Whitman’s century, photography had already developed into a highly stylized visual art-form subjected to the photographer’s imagination, while, in a reverse call, the most typical literary technique of modernist literature that became known as stream of consciousness, attempted to encapsulate thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind with the immediacy and spontaneity of a camera programmed to capture primarily the un-orchestrated sights of the mind.} In America, in particular, as Johns notes, “it was not until photography and lithography democratized the distribution and apparent readability of images after the Civil War that visual texts can be assumed to have functioned in common experience like verbal texts” (Erkkila and Grossman, 1996: 148). As Bohan characteristically remarks, Whitman’s desire to emphasize “the eternal Bodily Character of One’s-Self” drew sustenance from the pictorial emphasis of his verse, from his penchant for clothing my ideas in...
The poet’s intense relationship with the visual culture has been duly documented.\textsuperscript{304} Whitman’s crafting, as I suggested earlier, is not devoid from (naturally unwitting) image-making practices: he worked like an auteur, posed like an actor and controlled the sprawling synthesis of his poems like a \textit{monteur} – \textit{Leaves of Grass} evolved through a scrupulous process of thematic and textual revising and re-assembling that cunningly evoked the practices of what came to be known as cinematic montage. Whitman also embraced the visual arts as an effective means of self-promoting and myth-making; his eagerness as a poser attests to his awareness of the power of the (self) image (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4).\textsuperscript{305}

In comparison, the un-narcissistic Cavafy would seem disinclined to laud photography with the power-adjectives (“inclusive,” “democratic”), or metaphors (“dresser of words”)

\textsuperscript{304} Berger, Bohan, Folsom, Johns and Reynolds, all part of my most valuable sources, extensively discuss Whitman’s fascination with the image, his preoccupation with his own (photographic and painted) portraits, as well as his kinship with his contemporary painter and photographer Thomas Eakins whose interest, in concert with Whitman’s work, “was rather in disrupting unified understandings of the masculine. By regarding gender as malleable rather than fixed, Eakins helped redraw the borders of permissible masculine identities” (Bohan, 134). Eakins’ work has been characterized by critics as a predominantly manly sphere that excludes femininity, substantiating thus the claim (as already discussed in the previous chapter) that males and females occupied separate spheres in late nineteenth-century American society” (Berger, 7). Moreover, as Johns claims, “Eakins partakes of the passion about humankind and the love of the physical body that marks Whitman’s work. In his paintings, Eakins created portraits of male beauty and companionship that, like some of Whitman’s poetry, probed the homosocial body as a metaphor for the ideal society. In fact, although Whitman and Eakins came eventually to know each other, even before they met the two shared a commitment to the communicative power of the body itself” (158).

\textsuperscript{305} Whitman was notoriously keen on posing for painters, particularly for Eakins, and photographers. Folsom observes that “the 130 extant photographs of Walt Whitman form the most extensive photographic record of any American writer who lived and died in the nineteenth century” (Erkkila and Grossman, 1996: 193). Moreover, Whitman’s much discussed and analyzed frontispieces for the evolving editions of \textit{Leaves of Grass} have been evaluated by J. T. Mitchell as an “imagetext, a composite or synthetic work that fuses image and text” (cited in Bohan, 33). His portraits, Whitman claimed, in fact were essential self representations that involved as part of the poetry (Bohan, 33). This is evident not only in the painted portraits of the older Whitman by Eakins but mostly in the so-called “Calamus Photographs” that were taken after the publication of his “Calamus” poems in 1860 (Figures 6 and 7). In this series of photographs that span the last twenty-five years of his life, Whitman poses with his young male friends, including Peter Doyle and Bill Duckett. These images, as Folsom claims, punctuate Whitman’s post-Civil War life, they become visual manifestations of the poet’s decision, announced at the opening of the ‘Calamus’ cluster to “proceed for all who are or have been young men, / To tell the secret of my nights and days, / To celebrate the need of comrades” (Erkkila and Grossman, 1996: 197).
Whitman had for it; Cavafy remained pointedly unenthusiastic about photographic exposure even though in his mature years photography had already infiltrated culture. Cavafy disliked posing for the camera as much as he avoided referring verbally to the nakedness of his own body. It would be fair to notice that the poet’s highly confidential and secretive tone of his poems, as well as his firm decision to control their dissemination by dividing them into accepted (by him), rejected and hidden poems, corroborates a philosophy of life and art that is in conflict with the intrusiveness of photography, which the poet most likely considered not only as a privacy-transgressor, but also as a spoiler of the imagining process. The limited number of the extant Cavafy’s photographic portraits (Figures 9, 10 and 12) further encourages us to think that he avoided photography intentionally, “a strange attitude for an educated, cosmopolitan Alexandrian, but not as strange for someone of his character” (Papaioannou, 28).

Nevertheless, Cavafy did not altogether ignore the effect of *photographed* time. After all, photography works by capturing time and representing a bygone reality as nearly as possible on film, on paper, or nowadays in digital form. Moreover, a photograph provides Cavafy with the illusion of the visual reconstruction of the past; a picture acquires meaning and value for him with the passage of time as an artifact of the past and therefore a *memento mori*. In two rare instances the poet directly acknowledges photography’s elegiac properties as, in Sontag’s words, a “twilight art” (15) that triggers a feverish nostalgia for the lost body of desire. At the same time intimidated and bewildered in the presence of such unwavering imprinted evidence, the poet responds to it with his two poems “The Photograph” and “From the Drawer” that are redolent of Sontag’s reading of a photograph as “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a
wood fire in a room, photographs—especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past—are incitements to reverie.”

As an agent of abrupt intimacy, which terrified the introvert Alexandrian while it fascinated the gregarious New Yorker, undoubtedly, photography brought a more accurate and

306 Cited here in their entirety, Cavafy's two poems address photography as an incitement to reverie that at the same time is a testimony of illicit sensuality and a proof that the reminisced bodies, acts and feelings once indeed existed:

“The Photograph”

In this obscene photograph sold secretly
in the street (so the policeman won’t see)
in this lewd photograph,
how could there be such a dream-like face?
How did you get in there?

Who knows what a degrading, vulgar life you lead;
how horrible the surroundings must have been
when you posed to have this picture taken;
what a cheap soul you must have.
But in spite of all this, and even more, you remain for me
the dream-like face, the figure
shaped for and dedicated to the Greek kind of sensual pleasure—
that's how you remain for me
and how my poetry speaks about you.

“From the Drawer”

I pulled this out to hang on a wall in my room.
But the humidity in the drawer has damaged it.
I won’t frame this photograph.
I should have protected it more carefully.
Those lips, that face—
for just one day, for one hour,
just, to return to the past.
I won’t frame this photograph.
I must suffer looking at its damaged state.
Besides, even undamaged
it would bother me to display, like some
word, some tone of voice laid bare—
what if someone asked about it?

Moreover, Tsakiridou has suggested that two additional Cavafy poems, “On Board Ship” (1919) and The Mirror in the Front Hall (1930), also show “a distinct photographic sensibility despite his dismissal of photography as superficial and redundant representation.” In these poems Cavafy further “demonstrates an uncanny ability to make the past palpable, intimate and unrealistically desirable—something ... that photographers can also do.” (1995: 3)
open relation to visible reality— and to the human body in particular— than any other mimetic art. As a proof of existence and record of private and historical evidence a photograph captures humanity’s body in motion as it goes through life’s rites, or historical milestones. Aside from a miniature of reality, a photograph is also a mirror of the self. A great part of the twentieth century artist-photographer’s interest lies in the human body, which the modern lens sought to undrape, dissect and detach from its family history. The body that Whitman and Cavafy versified, for instance, is a precursor of the self-dramatized “polaroided” body which, as it will be examined in the last section of this chapter, is the subject of a post-modern imagist like Lucas Samaras. It would be an understatement to say that photography’s technological advantage of portraying the naked body with such an irresistibly direct visual language overshadowed all previous representations of nudity and eroticism in painting and in poetry. Section 9 of Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric,” a detailed verbal recitation of the physicality of the male body, anticipates the emphasis on the male body in the visual literacy of the next century.

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307 Guibert observes how the photographic history of the family is “repeated without change from one family to another, from one generation to the next—pictures of marriages and births are taken...the photograph functioning as a yardstick. Holidays ..., dinners, vacations, and one of the most commonly repeated subjects for photography in the forties, fifties, and sixties, the body clothed in a bathing suit, are all recorded. The body is seen as joyous, momentarily free, but still within the family circle, cut off from the outside world, without change, without movement” (34).

308 The term is used by the artist Lucas Samaras to differentiate his self-portraits taken with a Polaroid from other pictorial methods.

309 ...Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shou-ders, and the ample side-round of the chest,
Upper-arm, arm-pit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,

........

Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the back-bone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above...
At the same time, Sontag’s observation that photographs offer a new “grammar, and even more importantly, an ethics of seeing” (3) affirms the notion of modern imagery as a visual communication informed by the rules and structures of verbal culture. Especially after the industrialization of photography in the twentieth century it is harder not only to separate the word from the image but also to interpret artistic images outside the textual context that informed—or one should say—generated them. It is as wrong to downplay the influence of Whitman, or Cavafy on twentieth century photography, as it would be to claim the insignificance of Homer, or Dante, or Milton for the writers who followed them.

Whitman, more than any other writer of his time, anticipated that sometimes a writer’s ideas are better understood when considered side by side with those of a visual artist. During his time the poet scrupulously encouraged a parallel consideration of his poetics and the visual arts. Hence, it would be fair to presume that he would expect the generations of poets and readers that followed to study him in such comparative light. Whitman’s protean nature, as a poet and man, in concert with his poetry’s emphasis on personal self-discovery, correlated with the spirit of modernism which brought with it an emphasis on pictorial self-representation through technological forms. Whitman had encouraged his audience to think in images when reading his poems; it is almost as though he invited the reader to approach his versatile persona as a complex icon, a riddle of words, images and impressions waiting to be deciphered. Moreover, his preoccupation with his own image is evident in his impersonation of various roles for his photographic portraits that appeared as frontpieces in the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* (Figure 5). As Davidson claims, “it is hard to think of another writer of his era [other than Whitman] who so thoroughly exploited the possibility of the camera for staging versions of the self, from Broadway dandy to rough-hewn outdoorsman, from kindly preceptor to visionary
On Lucas Samaras’ Island of Oblivion: 
Celebrating the Body in the Shadow of Whitman and Cavafy

Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?”

Thomas Wolfe

The growing visual self-fashioning before the lens of the camera led to the reception of photographic self-portraiture as a dominating genre in the twentieth century. The ensuing preoccupation with the representation of the self promulgated a confessing image that integrated the knowledge and the narcissism of the post-Freudian technological self. Photographic self-portraiture biographized the self in ways far more direct and economical, but not necessarily less profound, than the textual and painting cultures. For the purposes of this comparative study I will be turning to the twentieth century artist Lucas Samaras, whose post-modern meditations on the body echo, intentionally or not, the poetics of both Whitman and Cavafy. In his panoramic self-portraiture, expressed through painting, photography and filmmaking, Samaras methodically staged versions of the self in a sequence that combines Whitman’s investigative narcissism and Cavafy’s diasporic sensibility.

Visual self-representation dates back to the time when glass was invented. The mirror enabled artists to see and draw or paint what they actually looked like and not what they had imagined themselves to be. Prior to that, as Samaras points out, “in Homer’s time there were small mirrors made of metal, but no glass. People did not have a chance to see themselves naked
really, unless they saw their reflection on the pool like Narcissus” (Skafidas, 2014). Long before Samaras came to prominence in the late 1960s, the self-portrait acquired significance in the modern era as an exposure not only of the artist’s body, but also of his or her intimate environment. In Van Gogh’s self-portraits, for instance, we also get a glimpse of the painter’s bedroom; almost half a century later, in M. C. Escher’s lithograph-series *Hand With Reflective Sphere* the artist depicts himself in his private study. As we enter the age of photography, technology expedites, as much as it multiplies, the incentives for visual self-exposure. From Andy Warhol to Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, the twentieth-century visual artists exposed the self in unprecedented ways. But unlike Samaras’ inexorable fixation with himself and his ego, Warhol and Mapplethorpe more often than not took photos of others, while Sherman’s chameleonic impersonations reflect mostly characters and selves that stem from her pictorial imagination.

In Samaras’ case, the artist himself becomes the exclusive subject and object of his art; in that sense Samaras becomes not only a representative but also the center of the world, which he is attempting to construe through his own self-image, as seriously and as teasingly as Whitman who was once saluted as the bard of the self. In an attempt to defend Samaras’ eminence as a master of self-depiction in the post-war American landscape, the scholar and curator Marla Prather points out that despite the “innumerable precedents [that] exist in the genre of self-portraiture, Samaras’ devotion to his own image is an obsession born of profound narcissism, for which he makes no apology…His ‘Autopolaroids’ and ‘Phototransformations’ are among the artist’s most transgressive inventions” (Prather, 8). Samaras’ “Autopolaroids” and “Phototransformations,” the “Autopolaroids” and “Photo-transformations” that followed them, were groundbreaking series of manually manipulated, often grotesque self-portraits taken in the artist’s studio with a Polaroid from 1961 to the mid 1970s. 

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310 The “Autopolaroids” and “Photo-transformations” that followed them, were groundbreaking series of manually manipulated, often grotesque self-portraits taken in the artist’s studio with a Polaroid from 1961 to the mid 1970s.
and his idiosyncratic diaries, broke new aesthetic ground in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of their depiction of life and art as “the lived experience of the body” (Kuspit, 55). His assertion that “I am a natural body” (Rose, 1978) suggests a preoccupation with the self not as a social construction, but as a primordial presence whose unrepentant ego is resonant with several transgressive aspects of Whitman’s revisionary politics of the self.

Samaras’ narcissistic quest resonates with Whitman’s evangel of the body. Whitman had stated that “If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it.” Samaras’ own song of himself further evokes the Whitmanian “blast of self-actualization whose bracing textures provide a kind of music against which to set Samaras’ wondrous investigations into what it means to be. ‘Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex, / Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life’” (Kastner, 3). Indeed, Samaras deals with images the way Whitman did with words for the purpose of recording a life that becomes paradigmatic for others. Samaras’ vibrant, reminiscing self is recorded through a series of self-portraits that document the process of aging, along with the psychological and physical transformations that it entails, with a clinical quality of naturalness that Whitman once attributed to *Leaves of Grass*, in which “everything is literally photographed. Nothing is poeticized.”

“In my pictures I am talking to my future viewer in a non-traditional way, which I guess is what Whitman did in his time with poetic language,” Samaras postulates. “Photographs reveal something inner about any self, and photography is an imprint of existence. Photography is the

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The emulsion of the early Polaroid film, which was protected under a layer of Mylar—a form of polyester resin used to make heat-resistant membrane-like films and sheets—remained wet and malleable for up to twenty-four hours. Samaras removed the Mylar and manipulated the emulsion with a stylus or his fingers to create distorted body images.

311 “Song of Myself,” 24
best way to depict the idea that you existed. You don’t have to say that nature is aware of your existence, that God knows you are here. The camera gives you proof that you have lived at least once” (Skafidas, 2014). Groundbreaking techniques in photography, such as the invention of the Polaroid in the late 1960s, enabled him to take the study of the self from the poeticized to the literal. “Technology allowed me to see myself in a different way,” Samaras maintains. “Even though I’ve done a million other things, people still think that the Polaroids were the best part of my work. My Polaroids were quite raw, open and sexual also. I went lecturing with them, and I had people get up and leave the auditorium because they couldn’t accept the naked part” (Skafidas, 2014).

As Kuspit reasonably maintains, “one reason why Samaras in an ‘unrepentant ego’ (and one may add, an unembarrassed egoist [who refers to artist as god]) –instead of an unrepentant id or an unrepentant superego– is because for him art-making is a way to assert his will to live. Art alone sustained him in his childhood ... in circumstances where it was hard to practice and in a family that found it alien. Because of its existential necessity ... he feels no need to apologize for the sense of self it gives him. Samaras has always said his works are small because that makes them easy to carry. They are also small because they symbolize the way he hunkered in on himself in a hostile world. He created a small inner space, womblike and reclusive, where he could hold out against the world, a space in which his creativity could grow and develop undisturbed, and hatch at its own space: a space not unlike the cave in which he hid from the Germans with his mother and aunts, or the small West Side apartment that functioned as both studio and home” (45).

In that sense, Samaras’ claustrophobic manias and Emersonian sense of self-reliance descend from Cavafy’s perception of the present as a cave defined by the inescapability of the
past. Samaras’ cave is Dr. Frankenstein’s laboratory where the inmate-artist surrenders to the authority of the ultimate creator, himself. In such voluntary confinement the Whitmanian self-actualization and the Cavafian fascination with the body as nature’s most sacred albeit vulnerable miracle, converge in a body of time that contains Promethean impulses in post-modern variations. If Frankenstein recreated life by reassembling the ill-assorted parts of dead bodies, Samaras creates art by dealing with his own body as an open wound that harbors the conflicts of the self. Thus, his often gruesome body images, result in “impossible anatomy and at times blur the boundary between the body and its environment” (Fortenberry & Morrill, 323).

Samaras’ roots are in concord with our poets’ own cultural identity: the artist is a cross between the diasporic experience that Cavafy typified and the New World assertiveness characteristic of Whitman. A cosmopolitan of the Greek Diaspora who was born in Kastoria in 1936, the Greek-American Samaras came to America with his family after the end of World War II at the age of thirteen, and flourished in the late 1960s New York art scene as much in tune with his cultural heritage as was Cavafy for whom Forster once observed that, “Greece was not territorial. It was rather the influence that has flowed from his race through the ages” (Liddell, 78). The young Samaras resembles the early years of Cavafy in more ways than one. To begin with, Samaras belongs to the diaspora of cosmopolitan Greeks who share a historical awareness of the loss of things Greek, and as Tsakiridou notes for Cavafy, “a nostalgia for their recovery. This way of being disposed toward one’s self and toward the world recalls the Homeric nostos … [But] the nostos of diaspora belongs to the imagination, Greece remains remote and unreachable. [The immigrant] therefore must reconstruct her from a past that most of the times he understands only symbolically and viscerally” (1).

Moreover, similarly with young Cavafy’s Törless-like experience in Istanbul, Samaras
tasted in the New World the exasperation of an unsettled youth and the inability to express it verbally. In Samaras’ case, the lack of language is not only emotional or sexual, but also literal, considering that the young migrant found himself in an American school where no one spoke his language. Hence, Samaras’ tale of confinement begins in childhood; firstly as the only child in a household of adults threatened by the disasters of a world war and the civil war that followed it, then as the young immigrant in a school-class that spoke a different tongue. The result was the formation of a personal art that integrated Samaras as the subject and the object of his own monologic perspective. At this point it would be worthwhile pausing for a second to read a few excerpts from the artist’s own affirmations as expressed in his so-called “Autointerview” that in 1971 manifested his philosophy:

**Why are you afraid of words?**
Because sometimes they are a different state of mind than what I’m doing.

**What does your work remind people of?**
My autobiographic obsessions.

**Why?**
They see my photograph [s] ... and they assume that my work must have meaning only for myself. I bring out the sociology in them.

**Is your work autobiographic?**
Autobiographic, anthropomorphic, practical, abstract, realistic, mental, real, imagistic, fantasist-sure.

**Why are you fascinated by your image?**
Anything that anyone does is fascinating if you have the time... My body is one of the materials I work with. I use myself and therefore I don’t have to go through all the extraneous or other kinds of relationships like finding models and pretending artistic distance... I use myself also because it is still unorthodox to use one’s self.

**Is that narcissism?**
Call it what you will, I get things done. The old notion of narcissism makes no provision for the audience... If I am, I am. My method and my subject matter help me to do what I do... Artists’self-portraits always fascinated me. I wanted to see the face that was responsible for the deed. Anyway, I was always inside-out rather than outside in... Others talk about themselves when they talk about abstractions. I talk about others when I’m talking about myself...

**Is it significant that you took the polaroids yourself?**
I suppose so ... Because of the absence of people I could do anything ... In that sense I Was my own clay. I formulated myself, I mated with myself, and I gave birth to myself.
And my real self was the product—the polaroids.

Samaras’ “Autopolaroids” project the pleasures and the terrors of the—physically and emotionally—bare artist whose penchant for “esthetic speculation, psychological perspicacity, sensual subtlety and warm embarrassment” rivals in intensity and in scope Whitman’s revisionary poetics of the self as originally articulated in the first edition of “Song of Myself.” In that poem Whitman had exposed himself as “hankering, gross, mystical, nude.” The stripped male body in post-Renaissance literature and visual arts often acquires the symbolic meaning of the unburdened self whose physicality conveys naturalness and personality. As suggested earlier, such development was owed mostly to Lavater’s theory of the human physiognomy, which in the late 1700s attempted to demystify the terrors of nudity in art and in public life. Lavater introduced a new way of seeing the body not according to the clothes that draped it but through its unabashed physical profile which expressed true character. Thus, the outward appearance enabled the viewer to recognize aspects of the unseen inner side of an individual. Whitman directly acknowledges the importance of physiognomy in “I Sing the Body Electric:”

The expression of the face balks account,
But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees,
Dress does not hide him,
………………………………..
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more…

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313 In the artist’s own words as expressed in his essay “Autopolaroid.”
314 The theory of physiognomy had tremendous impact on the construction of modern masculinity because it reflected the linkage of body and soul, of morality and bodily structure (Mosse, 25). Moreover, it changed the attitudes towards male nudity, which compared to female nudity, had remained marginalized. Especially any pictorial representation of the male genitals outside the decorative context of neoclassicism, which triggered Winkelmann’s treatment of male beauty as an extension of the ancient Greek ideal, had been regarded as offensive and intrusive because it reflected the Dionysian dimension of masculinity that all the medieval centuries sought to suppress.
One may trace the modern fascination with the depiction of the undressed male form back to the years of romanticism when Byron plunged his naked figure in the sea, pledging thus for union with nature. Echoing the romantic spirit, Whitman claimed that “nature was naked, and I was also.” Undraping the male body in modernity, aside from its inevitable pornographic associations, can be interpreted as an act of escape and a peaceful demonstration of idiosyncrasy. Samaras’ nudity conveys transparency and, despite the artist’s declaration that “[I want to] be my own critic, my own exciter, my own director, my own audience,” his self-description as an “ecdysiast” betrays an element of exhibitionism, a desire to be seen and assessed by an audience. Naturally, Samaras is not a romantic. His exhibitionism, if one may apply the term appropriately to him, is rather a behavior provoked by two major factors that shaped his sensibility: the cultural and historical circumstances surrounding his youth in the America, at a time when it had become evident that the great American Cultural Revolution heralded in the

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\(^{315}\) Whitman’s association of nudity with the purity and the liberty of the Adamic self is a dominant theme in certain clusters of *Leaves of Grass*, including “Song of Myself,” “Calamus” and “Children of Adam.” Whitman, who often sang the enchantments of swimming naked like Byron, characterized clothing as “irksome to wear” and “themselves indecent” (Cited in Folsom, 213). Whitman, as much as William Blake before him, habitually shed his clothes in the presence of friends and acquaintances not as an act of profane exhibitionism but as a gesture of familiarity and intimacy among peers. (Blake was known for reciting poetry naked while his also undraped wife tended to guests who welcomed their hosts’ nudity as an extension of friendliness.) Moreover, Whitman claimed that “those ‘many thousands’ who had not experienced ‘the free exhilarating ecstasy of nakedness’ could not know ‘what faith or art or health really is,’ for ‘the whole curriculum of first-class philosophy, beauty, heroism, form’ derived from the ‘natural and religious idea of nakedness’” (Folsom, 213). It was a combination of Whitman’s penchant for stripping off his clothes and Eakins’ insistence on the undraped figure as essential for an artist’s work which led several critics to assume that the naked male figure that appears in the 1880s Eakins’ photograph “Old Man” is Whitman himself (Figure 8). Despite the striking resemblance of the aged model with Whitman, critics and assessors have not reached a consensus that the figure is indeed Whitman. A detailed account of the controversy surrounding this image is provided by Folsom (215-217).

\(^{316}\) From Samaras’ essay “Autopolaroid,” *Art in America* 1970

\(^{317}\) In one of his short films Samaras records the facial expressions of his guest-viewers who have come to his studio to watch *Ecdysiast*, an older Samaras’ short film in which the artist is dressing and undressing.

\(^{318}\) As Samaras sees it, “Exposing oneself is both a self-journey and a journey you share with other people. Some people use the term exhibitionism, which nowadays is trendy again because of the selfie mentality. But I never saw it that way. My self-portraits are not strictly about sexuality, they are about the development of the self in time and the various stages of the self, from youth to aging. Aging is quite shocking and requires strength to continue” (Skafidas, 2014).
first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had not materialized, and the technological developments that coincided with them.

One of the most isolating experiences of a migrant is the perception of his body as a portable yet impenetrable home, which, like the sailing body of the modern Ulyssian traveler that we find in Cavafy’s “Ithaca,” is destined to sail for a life-time in distant seas. Samaras presented his body to the New World as a gift from the land of Odysseus; a gift as ambitious, but far more innocuous than the Trojan Horse. The artist came of age in the spatiotemporal frame of the American 1960s when disenchantment and elation mixed. Samaras’ migrant eye witnessed the discrepancies of a divided society, which, as Norman Mailer astutely put it in his essay “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,”319 since the First World War had been “leading a double life.”320 In a way, one may add, Samaras came forward as an artist with the Whitmanesque mandate to formulate a new perspective of the diasporic self at a time that America itself was in the crossroads. As a critic notes, Samaras’ self-image was “transformed gradually in a symbol of a race and a history. In a microcosm. The scrupulous daily study of the self and its processing point toward a multiplicity of identities, while the narrow space in which he moves refers to the Alexandrian poet’s verses. [Samaras’] image is not only the blending of two homes, the bridging of past and present, the resultant of many faces and personalities, but also it is the shell of what remains unseen. This image is an attestation not only to the ostensible existence of the artist but

319 Originally published in *Esquire* magazine, November 1960
320 “Our history,” Mailer claimed, “has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull ... and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.” The latter Dionysian American stream is arguably Whitman’s intellectual bequest, whose resonance with the turbulent 1960s, a period of cultural and political discontent, should not be underestimated. One of the most vigorous expressions of Dionysian intoxication in America was the psychedelic movement, largely anticipated by the Beat movement whose expansive elements were later incorporated into the hippie and larger counterculture movements that influenced Samaras’ expression. The ideals of the 1960s transgressive movement, which largely advocated the liberation of color, form and sound, while they encouraged a boundary-dissolving experience in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality, are imprinted in Samaras’ work.
also to his intellectual, emotional and recollected world. It is the image of an inner world. In his body there is not a single but multiple tenants” (Koskina, 91).

If Cavafy had understood historical and intellectual continuity by exploiting the great negative moments of Hellenism –the decline of Athens, the loss of Byzantium and the fall of Hellenistic Alexandria (Tsakiridou, 3) –, Samaras’ alienation exemplified the total loss of his own patrida (homeland) after the savageries of the second world war and the civil war almost wiped out the frail modern Greek state. The memory of the Byzantium may be also prevalent in Samaras’ historical consciousness, but unlike Cavafy who remained in the nearness of Greece, Samaras’ expatriation entailed a different route. America appeared in Samaras’ path as a gigantic island of oblivion (the “evening land” Lawrence depicted in his poem of the same name) populated by modern incarnations of the Homeric lotofagoi. Part of the psychedelic notion of life in the 1960s was the erasure of customary institutions – family and tradition being among them – embedded in what Foucault termed the pervasive power-knowledge.

In his short film Self (Fig. 18) Samaras displays his own tendency to erase links with family history and tradition. The artist, in a parody of cannibalism, sails in the Hudson river –his own adaptation of the Aegean Sea– and patiently devours family photographs until there is none left. Such conceptual carnage signals Samaras’ post-modern Third Odyssey, in which a cannibal Ulysses tests his dietetic limits in a highly digestive culture that allows him to abort previous identities. Ever since, Samaras has subjected his life and work to an arrant transformative process that condenses the past, the present and the future in the miniature of his own body, a

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321 As the artist sees it, “People say you are part of a family, ‘you are my son, you are my daughter, you belong to this religion or to that country’ and you should feel flattered about it, but you also owe to acknowledge the truth which is the fact that, ‘yes you are my father and you are my mother,’ but the chimpanzee who preexisted is also my father and mother. So don’t make a fuss because I’m your son. Some people also say ‘you are Greek.’ Yes, I am, but I am also Italian, Mongolian, African or anything else. Ethnicity is a social trap” (Skafidas, 1996: 296).
body that contains and represents the cosmos. His art, thus, becomes “his only homeland, given that Samaras has previously ‘absorbed’ all the ‘others.’…His body, which is also the body of his ancestors, becomes the tool that allows him to use it in the present like a reproduction that is examined through the microscope of the photographic camera which the artist converts from a technological to a pictorial medium” (Koskina, 86, 92). In that sense, Samaras’ fixation with the self as a home that absorbs the past and the present is not unrelated to Cavafy’s tacit narcissism of nostos and the “anticipation of total and unconditional pleasure upon one’s return to the originating, tautological point, one’s home or Patrida (Tsakiridou, 5). Yet, Samaras no longer needs to return to a home that has already been absorbed and reduced to the artist’s own body.

As a result, sexuality is also reduced to a monologic dimension. Samaras’ understanding of autoeroticism as an act of salvation and at the same time as the overall expression that defines his life and his art brings to mind Cavafy’s preoccupation with his own sexuality as the defining point of art and life and in particular of his homoeroticism, which expressed not simply a sexual or psychological orientation, but rather “the total syntactic orientation of his poetics” (Tsakiridou, 5). Samaras’ emancipation coincided with the development of Polaroid 360 that arrived in his hands in 1969. “I went home with it for the first time,” Samaras recalls, “got undressed and started photographic myself. I had never had such a wonderful experience with the camera before. It was like a process of lovemaking with the self. It was as though, in my reflection, I had discovered a new lover and even though perhaps I stood unworthy of him, I was happy that this ethereal creature visited me and everything was happening without dramas and tragedies” (Skafidas, 1996: 204).

It was then that the artist perceived autoeroticism not as a substitution of sexual intercourse, or as an act of self-pleasure, but as a foundation of his new identity and a philosophy
of life that allowed him to mate with himself and by doing so avoid the “terror” of coupling with others. For Samaras autoeroticism is a course of survival that stands diametrically opposite to the mindset that imposes partnership as a requisite for the completion of hedonistic pleasure. As the artist further explicated, “my primal interest is my narcissism. Back then when I discovered the immediacy of the Polaroid I started canoodling with myself. I liked my naked body even though I was raised as a child in the narrow-mindedness of Christian breeding according to which you cannot enjoy your own body. The instancy of the Polaroid gave me the freedom to restore the relationship with my body in a fairly mature age. And that happened because art is linked with my personal drive in life” (Skafidas, 1996: 204).

The self-dramatization of Samaras’ journey from the prime of youth to the deformation that comes with old age incorporates the voices of the two consciousnesses of the evolving self that we first detected in Wordsworth and whose resonance is also evident in Whitman and Cavafy. The dialectics of his Dionysian past with his Apollonian present pillars Samaras’ project: his self-depiction, rather than a mere narcissistic venture, unfolds as an exercise in humility and an act of comparison expressed through a discourse between the inner and the outer, the young and the older self (Fig. 23, 24, 25), which is the only coupling that the artist has known: Samaras’ asexual power of procreation is obtained only in the solitary laboratory of his art. Yet, the artist’s belief that “professional self-investigation is as noble a search as any other” signals “an awareness of his project’s situation within the social world and a recognition that no matter how hermetic the conditions of their creation, sufficiently penetrating forms of self-expression have the power to communicate meaningfully beyond the context of the individual” (Kastner, 3). The

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322 Almost two decades later, the artist moderately reconsidered this point of view. Characteristically, he states that “Photographing your own body isn’t erotic for me. But there might be something in the nature of love –eros and agape which are two different things in the ancient Greek context– that brings tenderness to it, but no sexuality” (Skafidas, 2014).
channel to humanity springs from Narcissus’ lake. “One needs to reach a point where one can say ‘I love me,’” the artist proclaims. “Only then one has truly understood, embraced and loved humanity” (Skafidas, 1996: 216).

“I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,” Whitman declared in “Song of Myself,” anticipating Samaras’ notion of the body as a metaphor for the limitations of time. Unlike Whitman’s organic optimism, Samaras goes by Cavafy’s deliberate, exploitative narcissism, which, as Tsakiridou observes, is “not unlike that of photography when, begging its own paradigm, it sets out to record or make ‘art’ out of death or disaster. [Cavafy’s] art, like that of the photographer, alludes to the whole—e.g. the once personal, living body—by giving evidence of its immanent dissolution. Thus, it becomes irrefutable that something has indeed died and that its poetic (or photographic) presence is there in order to monumentalize and utilize that death” (5). For Samaras, as for Cavafy, beauty is not eternal, death is eternal and beauty is death’s most magnificent inmate.

In the four selected images from the “Autopolaroids” and “Photo-transformations” series shown in the Image Gallery (fig. 19, 20, 21, 22), Samaras is caught in a stage of phantasmagoric

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323 It should be noted that occasionally Samaras attempts to depict the outside world through a process of self-transformation and pretending otherness (as much as Whitman meant to embody otherness and Cavafy aspired to be an actor-poet impersonating in his poetry various urban and historical personas) that perhaps is not irrelevant with the artist’s training as an actor at a young age (Fig. 26). His self-examining quest incorporates the epidermic impersonation of various roles, a transvestite and a Christ figure being two of them, that are performed as parables of transgression meant to mock convention and also disband similar margins with those Whitman sought to dissolve in his poetry between inner/outer, male/female, god/man, flesh/spirit, reason/feeling, life/art (Fig. 26). Samaras’ post-modern performance is in tune with Whitman’s unifying verse: “I am of old and young, maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man … I resist anything better than my own diversity” (“Song of Myself, 16). Characteristically, as the artist asks his alter ego in his “Autointerview”:
-Why did you take pictures of yourself with a wig?
-Because I wanted to try that style, that behavior.
-Do you want to be a woman?
-No, I wanted the pretense.
-But why that way?
-I also wanted to pretend being a bird, a snake, a mountain—and evil—and maybe I’ll do these things another time.
frenzy that is highlighted by the use of colors, the double exposures and a general sense of horror infiltrated into the artist’s naked body and urban space. His “polaroided” figure appears gruesomely distorted by the pressures of estrangement. Unlike the outgoing, self-confident, often flattering, and occasionally buoyant self-portraits of other contemporary artists who flourished in the same period, such as Warhol and Mapplethorpe, Samaras’ self-depictions are clearly vexed intimations of mortality. In image 22, the artist stands bare in his kitchen pointing with his right hand towards a cooking stove, while his face evokes the agonized expression of the nameless man in Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.” As Kuspit observes, in this image “details of the body may stand out, but the body as a whole dissolves into an undifferentiated flux, rhythmically moving but amorphously chaotic” (Cited in Fortenberry &Morrill, 323). Unlike the natural landscape in the background of Munch’s composition, Samaras’ action, as in all of his images, is set in the confinement of his small studio in which the artist acts as the voyeur of his own solitary sexual heat (Fig 20), or the interlocutor of his split persona (Fig. 19) that, presented in a double exposure, is trying to evade the constraints of time and space. In image 21, Samaras’ figure appears like a modern variation of Prometheus; his body seems worn out, but it is not necessarily defeated.

The allegory of the body as an ark that progressively sails towards nothing else but disintegration and destruction works as a stimulant for Samaras’ creation; a creation constantly driven by the promethean terror that the artist is running out of time for spreading the knowledge of the body. Kuspit points out that “for Samaras life is inherently morbid–there is no avoiding the death instinct–even if much of it can be defensively transformed into exhilarating art, radiant with libidinous excitement and glamorous aggression. Art is a veneer on the body that does not stop its decay” (45). Therefore, the artist’s work suggests a reading of the Cavafian Ithaca not as
an earthly rewarding destination, but as the lost home that one can never retrieve simply because it has already been absorbed in a body that is predicated on death:

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island...

Like Cavafy’s experimenter, Samaras embodies the knowledge of the bards and the prophets of past centuries in brainy intercourse with everything. As I see it, the self-dramatization of Samaras’ journey constitutes at the same time a decorative spectacle and the psychological revelation of a predicament, as Isherwood would put it: a solitary body constantly floating in the oceanic surge of an expanding consciousness, “which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars” (Isherwood, 406). It is the same feverish consciousness that we also find in Cavafy’s poetics of *eros*, remembrance and loss.

The greatest loss, after perhaps the predictable defeat of youth, in Samaras’ case at least, is the lost language. Almost seventy years after he arrived to the great island of oblivion, appropriately, Samaras has forgotten his mother tongue, an unusual if not deliberate corollary of resettlement. Thus, in an ironic way, Samaras himself ends up being an incarnate of a modern Poseidonian, one of the ancient characters in Cavafy’s poem “Poseidonians” who has come to represent the “paradox of the diasporic voice” and restore the forgotten language to an “iconic and stylized metalanguage with which the immigrant recollects” (Tsakiridou, 7):

The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language
after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrenians, Latins, and other foreigners.

and how low they’d fallen now, what they’d become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life.
Yet, Samaras is hostile to monumental seduction, whether this is caused by lost language, forgotten heritage or bygone architecture. “The past is like looking at a ruin,” the artist claims. “Whether this is the Acropolis or my younger self, it is the same. Ruins bring up a sense of inconsolable loss. The void that stretches between the young and the old age is a tragic space. It is not the past that is tragic, it is the process that shapes it and the deformation of beauty that follows it” (Skafidas, 2009:57). It is this “inconsolable loss” and the inevitable voices of the past that “urge and urge” the poets of this study to recapture a sense of identity and an image of the self that corresponds not only with the memory of the individual but also with the desire of the “procreant” humanity. In Cavafy’s fashion, Beckett once pondered that there is no escape from the hours and the days because “yesterday has deformed us or has been deformed by us.” But deformation does not exclude regeneration. While Samaras revolves around his solipsistic orbit, it is feasible to hear a voice from another aeon whispering to his ear “I too had receiv’d identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew/ I should be of my body.”

Naturally, more than a self-reliant creator, which he certainly is, I also see Samaras as the “poet to come” that both Whitman and Cavafy anticipated in their poetics; a torchbearer that reached America from the East, like Stevens’ “interminable adventurer,” with a mission to carry on the Ulysscean quest in a “more perfect society.” Even though ours is not, by all means, a much better society, it is probably a much freer society that, at least in the West, has come to embrace and legitimize most of the political and sexual imperatives that shaped the life and formed the autobiographical poetics of both poets. Thus, Cavafy’s subtle invocation in his poem “Hidden Things,” with which I would like to conclude this study, has been moderately fulfilled:
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 unnoticed actions,
my most veiled writing—
from these alone will I be understood.
But maybe it isn’t worth so much concern,
so much effort to discover who I really am.
Later, in a more perfect society,
someone else made just like me
is certain to appear and act freely.
A selection of Whitman’s most well recognized photographed and painted portraits. Samuel Hollyer, street engraving after Gabriel Harrison, 1855 (1). Gabriel Harrison, 1854 (2). Charles Hine, 1860 (3). Thomas Eakins, 1887 (4).
Frontispiece for Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-1888; photography by Charles H. Spierler, 1876.
The Calamus Photographs: Whitman and Bill Duckett (Photographer unknown) 1886 (6). Also with Duckett in Camden (Photographer unknown), 1886 (7). “Old Man,” 1880s by Thomas Eakins (8).
Two of the very few portraits of young Cavafy taken in Alexandria’s photography studio “Fettel & Bernard” in 1890s (9 and 12). The older Cavafy, 1910s (10). A portrait of Cavafy in Alexandria by David Hockney (11).
Paintings by Yannis Tsarouchis inspired by Cavafy’s poems “Outside the House” (13) and “Desires” (14).
Illustrations of Cavafian themes by David Hockney: “He Asked about the Quality” (15); a portrait of the poet in his city (16); a visual representation of the Cavafian “Body of Love” (17).
“Self,” 1969 Film still, 16mm color film, 23 minutes. Produced, written and directed by Lucas Samaras
A panoramic synthesis of Samaras’ self-portraits selected by the artist for this study, 2015 (courtesy of the artist).
Self-portraits juxtaposing the artist’s older and young self from 2005 (25) and 2015 (24).
26 Autopolaroids, 1970s
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WORKS ON CAVAFY


WORKS BY WHITMAN


WORKS ON WHITMAN


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