"The Importance of Being Long Dead": Ancient Characters and Modern Desire in Fernando Pessoa and C. P. Cavafy

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Keywords


Abstract

Pessoa and Cavafy are key figures in European Modernism. The fact that both have consistently drawn on the classical past to write about eroticism is a key theme in their work and an overlooked connection. This paper will focus on the appropriation of classical characters both by Pessoa and Cavafy to discuss this pattern as the common theme through which they can be compared. The influence of other authors, especially Baudelaire and Walter Pater, whose approach to classics played a vital role in shaping Modernity's perspectives on the classical tradition, will also be discussed. These elements will be taken into account to examine how the two poets have borrowed and/or subverted the authority of the classics to discuss homoerotic desire and politics in poems penned during and in the aftermath of World War I.

Palavras-chave


Resumo

Pessoa e Kavafis são figuras centrais do modernismo Europeu. O facto de que ambos se inspiraram na Antiguidade clássica para escrever sobre erotismo é um tópico em comum, mas que não está estudado. Este artigo centra-se na apropriação de personagens clássicas tanto da parte de Pessoa quanto de Kavafis para comparar os dois poetas. A influência de outros autores, mais especificamente Baudelaire e Walter Pater, cuja relação com os clássicos desempenhou um papel crucial no modo como os Modernismos se apropriaram da tradição clássica, será também objecto de discussão. Uma consideração destes elementos dará lugar a uma análise do modo como ambos os poetas utilizaram e/ou subverteram a autoridade da tradição clássica para discutir temas de homoerotismo e política em poemas escritos durante e na sequência da Primeira Guerra Mundial.

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Competing Perspectives: Classical and Modern / Ethical and Aesthetical

Pessoa and Cavafy’s lives overlapped chronologically, although they did not belong to the same generation. Pessoa was born in 1888, the same year as T. S. Eliot, and died in 1935. Cavafy was born in 1863 and died in 1933. Like Cavafy, Pessoa circulated his texts in newspapers, literary and art periodicals and among people he was close to or interested in. Again, like the Alexandrian poet, he worked all his professional life in an office as a translator for corporations based in Lisbon; at one point he described this career as his “pseudo-job.” Cavafy worked for thirty years in Alexandria’s municipal bureaucracy, at the office of the Third Circle of Irrigation, an institution noted for its Dantesque name. Both lost their fathers at an early age, which defined the fates of their families, and, after a period of youth spent abroad, in which he received an Anglophone education, Pessoa returned to Lisbon. Cavafy lived in London and Liverpool between the age of 9 and 16. His family returned to Alexandria in 1879, and moved again, this time to Constantinople, in 1882, after nationalist uprisings and the subsequent British bombardment of Alexandria. The definitive return to the city happened in 1885. Lisbon and Alexandria were crucial to Pessoa and Cavafy’s works, respectively.

Educated in Durban in South Africa, where his family moved when he was 7 years old and from which he returned, by himself, at 17, Pessoa describes his English education as the decisive fact of his life. Contemporaries of Cavafy have described him as speaking Greek with a faint English inflection, a consequence of his English childhood. Like Cavafy, Pessoa lived through a time of political turmoil both at home and abroad. Drawing on a sentence by George Seferis (“Outside his poetry Cavafy does not exist.”), Daniel Mendelsohn (apud CAVAFY, 2012: xvii) described the Greek poet in his introduction to the Knopf edition of the Complete Poems as follows:

1 In a letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues (November 19, 1914), see PESSOA (1985: 39). Pessoa authored an autobiographical note which was published and contextualized recently, including in its political implications, by José BARRETO (2017). Cavafy carefully documented his family’s genealogy, see LIDDELL (2002: 17-18) and JEFFREYS (2015: 3).
3 In the original: “[...] εξω απο τα ποιηματα του ο Καβάφης δεν υπαρχει [...].” (SEFERIS, 1974: 362). For a discussion of Seferis and Cavafy please see GIFFORD (1987), who notes that Seferis saw Cavafy in the kind of “harsh light” in which one needs to see Pessoa or Joyce: as a poet who reached perfection against the constraints of his medium (GIFFORD, 1987: 255). In an earlier essay, Margaret ALEXIOU (1983: 46), like Mendelsohn here, situates Seferis’ assertion within the wider context of the poet’s dismissal of speculations about Cavafy’s private life, which the poet saw as largely monopolizing the debate on his work (see, e.g., SEFERIS, 1983: 87).
That flesh-and-blood existence was, after all, fairly unremarkable: a middling job as a government worker, no great fame or recognition until late in life (and even then, hardly great), a private life of homosexual encounters kept so discreet that even today its content, as much as there was content, remains largely unknown to us. All this—the ordinariness, the obscurity (whether intentional or not)—stands in such contrast to the poetry, with its haunted memories of passionate encounters in the present and its astoundingly rich imagination of the Greek past [...] that it is not hard to see with Seferis that the “real” life of the poet was, in fact, completely interior; and that outside that imagination and those memories, there was little of lasting interest.

(apud CAVAFY, 2012: xvii)

It is not difficult to understand how Cavafy and Pessoa have inspired similar impressions on those who dwelled on the subject of their biography, and a number of connections can be used to compare their writings.

This essay responds to the notion that a comparison between these two poets allows us to enter into a slightly less explored field of debate, that of the common cultural, political and historical elements at work within the wider context of Southern European Modernism and the forces, both aesthetical and historical, that shaped common aspects of two of the modern literatures in this region. This debate runs parallel to the more traditionally-pursued line of enquiry on the relationship of Modern Southern European literatures with the so-called major literatures of Northern and Western Europe and to some extent complements it.

This paper focuses more specifically on Cavafy and Pessoa’s appropriation of Ancient Roman and Greek culture to write about homoerotic desire. A study of this topic allows for a survey of key ethical and aesthetical questions at stake in the work of the two poets, and an exploration of elements that, in light of these poets’ engagement with a wider literary tradition, helped define their critical stance towards their own context, which includes a response to cultural and historical events that were taking place at a global scale. I am interested, more specifically, in highlighting a few topics that lay the ground work to consider how Cavafy and Pessoa’s incorporation of the classical tradition in their writings both draws on its authority and subverts it, at once inscribing them in the wider tradition of decadent literature and allowing for a reflection on how we can think of the two poets as complicating key ethical and aesthetical principles of that tradition.

I will sketch here briefly the history of a tension at the origins of literary Modernism, that, in my view, is relevant to contextualize common aspects of Pessoa and Cavafy’s use of the classical tradition within the framework of Modernity, and, more specifically, their engagement with it to write about desire.

The introductory essay of The Truth of Poetry by Michael Hamburger—“Puerile Utopia and Brutal Mirage”—traces the history of a tension that, insofar as it informed Baudelaire’s trajectory as a poet, also played a vital role in defining Modernity. That tension was defined by what Michael Hamburger terms as “Baudelaire’s uncertainties about the function of poetry” (HAMBURGER, 2007: 3),
which found its expression on the use of two contradictory conceptions of the purpose of poetry, none of which, according to Michael Hamburger, was ever completely discarded by the French poet.

The first assumed the form of a series of statements on poetry by Baudelaire that are influenced by Théophile Gautier’s call for an art for art’s sake, an idea that played a central part in defining the Decadent movement, and which informed an attempt, on Baudelaire’s part, to define the specificity of poetry over other types of discourse. In 1859, four years before Cavafy was born, Baudelaire stated that “La poésie […] ne peut pas, sous peine de morte ou de déchéance, s’assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n’a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n’a qu’ Elle-même (apud HAMBURGER, 2007: 4).”

There are two preliminary points that I would like to make regarding this assertion. This definition cannot be taken to imply that the specificity of poetry lies in the realm of fiction, as opposed to “Vérité.” It is rather an effort to detach poetry from a merely utilitarian function and, in that sense, to place it in a more objective realm: to some extent, poetry’s aesthetical functions are here implied as a way to assert that its scope cannot be circumscribed to the same rules by which the validity of other discourses (“science,” “morale”) are asserted. In Baudelaire’s poetical expression, this stance finds its equivalent, for instance, in a poem like “The Albatross,” in which the poet’s inaptitude to be among a crowd is paired with that of the albatross, who may be the wild traveler of the seas, but when trapped in a ship is stripped of its extraordinary abilities of fierce voyager and mocked by a company of sailors.

Hamburger’s interpretation finds support in another of Baudelaire’s statements that was of consequence for the young Cavafy, which, however, points to the other fundamental contradiction that I mentioned earlier, and which is tied with the notion that poetry does not have, for its object, anything other than itself. In his study of the tradition of decadence in Cavafy’s poetry, Peter Jeffreys (JEFFREYS, 2015: 31) highlights a passage from the essay “Exposition Universelle, 1855”, in which Baudelaire turns the very rhetoric through which the literature of decadence was usually discarded in moral terms to set forth a critique of the standard against which it was usually found at fault, that of the “doctrine of progress.” “This grotesque idea,”—writes Baudelaire—“which has… released each man from his duty, freed each soul from its responsibility, and has liberated the

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4 “Death or deposition would be the penalty if poetry were to become assimilated to science or morality; the object of poetry is not Truth, the object of poetry is poetry itself” (Michael Hamburger’s translation, HAMBURGER, 2007: 4).

5 “Often, when bored, the sailors of the crew | Trap albatross, the great birds of the seas, | Mild travellers escorting in the blue | Ships gliding in the ocean’s mysteries […] | The Poet is a kinsman in the clouds | Who scoffs at archers, loves a stormy day; | But on the ground, among the hooting crowds, | He cannot walk, his wings are in the way” (BAUDELAIRE, 1993: 15-17). The translation quoted here is that of James McGowan.
will from all the bonds imposed on it by love of the beautiful” (apud JEFFREYS, 2015: 31-32). What Baudelaire is attacking here⁶, in a somewhat Romantic vein, is a dismissal of decadent literature as “merely degenerate and effete” (JEFFREYS, 2015: 32),⁷ but he is also addressing the fast-changing social and urban context of Paris, which is to a great extent what the decadent elements of The Flowers of Evil respond to and try to translate.

Michael HAMBURGER (2007: 5-15), who has scrutinized the history of these two contradictory, but not mutually exclusive, conceptions of the purpose of poetry in Baudelaire’s writings and its ethical implications, points to passages in Baudelaire’s critical essays in which he sports the exact opposite stance of the one quoted above⁸ and, in doing so, he notes that Baudelaire’s practice was more classical than it is generally conceded, classical in the sense prescribed by Samuel Johnson:⁹ that the task of a poet is observing not what is individual but what is general, not the streaks of a tulip, or the shades of green in the trees, but the prominent and striking features that call to mind the original. Samuel Johnson’s own perspective on the task of the poet found its roots on Aristotle’s concept of mimesis as explained in the Poetics.

Hamburger traces this contradiction in Baudelaire’s thought about poetry to this classical stance and points out two of its consequences that are relevant for the comparison I intend to make here between Cavafy and Pessoa: that indeed Baudelaire was “a classical, or near classical artist in a modern society” (HAMBURGER, 2007: 16), that is to say, someone who in his practice both as a poet and a critic, was interested in individual things with universal implications, but who could not, therefore, avoid attributing “social, ethical, and even religious significance to preoccupations that were in fact aesthetic (HAMBURGER, 2007: 16).” His polemical stance towards what he terms as the “doctrine of progress” is typical of this perspective. Having said that, Michael Hamburger’s reading of this tension in Baudelaire’s critical and poetical thinking is particularly relevant to my approach to Pessoa and Cavafy because he interprets it as rooted in conceptions

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⁶ Baudelaire’s perspective on progress, as voiced here, is also an oblique attack on a utilitarian view of literature. The precedent of Baudelaire’s standpoint is to be found on Théophile Gautier’s 1835 preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin which inaugurates, if not the decadent movement, the notion of art for art’s sake. The tradition of this idea in both Baudelaire and Gautier has been briefly and effectively contextualized by David WEIR (2018: 40-45).

⁷ Margueritte MURPHY (2008: 33), as pointed out by JEFFREYS (2015: 211), comments on this passage at length, to clarify that what Baudelaire objects to is the idea of the inevitability of progress, with technical innovation and production as its two main features, “seeing it both as a constraint on liberty and a delusion.”


⁹ “[...] the business of the poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species, to remark general properties and large appearances [...]” (apud HAMBURGER, 2007: 16).
about classical and modern poetry that see them as fundamentally at odds. However, as pointed out by Hamburger, the distinction is aesthetical rather than ethical:

> The distinction of modern poetry is that it has concentrated on numbering “the steaks of the tulip;” but again and again it has shown its power to universalize the particular, to give a new centre to experiences which by all the classical criteria should be peripheral, because they are the experiences of specialists. The modern poet may “number the streaks of the tulip” and not only think but hope, that he has left it at that; but, whether he likes it or not, he has said something new about flowers, and about men.”

(HAMBURGER, 2007: 20)

That meaning is “always realized at the point of reception" (MARTINDALE, 1993: 3) is a guiding principal for the study of classical reception and it does seem inescapable when it comes to consider the classical background of what is modern about Baudelaire’s Modernity. What Michael Hamburger deems in this passage as the intrinsically Modern quality of Baudelaire’s writings is taken up by another author who dwelled on the same subject. In his preface to *The Flowers of Evil*, when questioning what in Baudelaire’s writings could be defined as intrinsically Modern, this is how Jonathan Culler described it:

> A first answer is this poetry’s ability to bring into verse the banal, the prosaic, or the disgusting—thought to loom especially large in modern life—and give it a poetical function [...] Baudelaire produces dissonant combinations, which can be seen as reflecting the dissociated character of modern experience, where consciousness is confronted by objects, sensations, and experiences that do not go together [...] In addition, dissonant images foreground the operations of language themselves and the problem of sense-making that is so central to the play of modern literature.

(CULLER, *apud* BAUDELAIRE, 2008: xxv)

The idiosyncratic mixture of death and homoerotic desire we find in some poems by Cavafy and Pessoa can be seen as capturing the dissonant character of modern experience, but they are also seeking to comment upon that experience in ethical and aesthetical terms, that is, on more universal grounds, not in the least by borrowing from the classics. The tension that Hamburger discusses in Baudelaire is relevant to discuss my topic, considering how Cavafy and Pessoa navigated the social, political and historical context in which their writings, and more specifically their writings about desire, emerged.

The parallels between Cavafy and Baudelaire have been discussed at length by Peter JEFFREYS (2015: 26-56). As noted by JEFFREYS (2015: 32-33), a critique of the idea of progress similar to Baudelaire’s is undertaken by the young Cavafy in the
poem “Builders” (“Κτίσται”) authored in 1891, in which the builders of an edifice are cast in a light akin to that of Sisyphus, who toil over the construction of a building so that a new generation may not go over it, but, as the narrator concludes: “But it will never live, this fabled generation; | its very perfection will cast this labor down | and once again their futile toil will begin” (CAVAFY, 2012: 204). The first years of Cavafy’s trajectory as a poet are influenced not only by Baudelaire but also by the Parnassian movement, which, as pointed out by Daniel Mendelsohn (apud CAVAFY, 2012: xxx), “with its eager response to Théophile Gautier’s call for an ‘Art for Art’s sake,’ its insistence on elevating polished form over earnest subjective, social and political content, and particularly its invitation to a return to the milieus and models of the antique Mediterranean past, had special appeal.”

In its rejection of progress, and therefore in a pattern similar to Baudelaire’s, the aesthetical perspective implied by Cavafy’s poem may indeed be read as aligned with a position akin to that of “art for art’s sake.” Similarly to Baudelaire, however, by casting his narrator in the detached position of the observer, the one who does not fit into the society of builders, Cavafy’s poem aligns him with a wider aesthetical movement but is not detached of social and ethical concerns. A perspective akin to the one we find in a poem like “Builders” finds echo in one of Pessoa’s poems that I will discuss in the final section of this paper, “Chess Players” (“Os Jogadores de Xadrez”).

Insofar as it exposes the futility of a society whose social pursuits are merely utilitarian (focused on production for the sake of a form of progress whose emphasis lies in more production), which also expurgates individuality (note that the emphasis is on the anonymous collective as reduced to a function, “Builders”), the poem can be paired with one of Cavafy’s most famous compositions, “Waiting for the Barbarians” (“Περιµένοντας τους Βαρβάρους”) which, in this sense, can be seen as a companion-piece to “Builders” and be interpreted as an ironical commentary on the social and cultural indolence generated by political apathy and disengagement. There is another decadent link to this poem, as the precedent for Cavafy’s poetical treatment of the barbarians can be found in Paul Verlaine’s...
“Langueur,” the poem which is often taken as inaugurating the decadent movement in poetry (see Jeffreys, 2015: 85; and Weir, 2018: 8-12). On broader terms, this ethical and aesthetical standpoint remained of consequence to the more mature Cavafy, and is also relevant to approach the aesthetical background of one of the poems at the core of my discussion, Pessoa’s “Antinous.”

Like the young Cavafy, the young Pessoa was interested in Baudelaire and he is aware of this tension in Baudelaire’s approach to ethics and aesthetics. This seems to have had an impact not only on his opinions on Baudelaire but also on his own ethical and aesthetical perspectives on the function of poetry. He pairs the French poet with writers whose aesthetical views were aligned with the perspective of “art for art’s sake” and his heteronyms voice a number of distinct perspectives on this aesthetical principle of decadence (instances are discussed below).

In one of the texts that are now collected in the volume Escritos sobre Gênio e Loucura (Writings on Genius and Madness), in which Pessoa distinguishes the three civilizational paths that are left open by the decadent aspects of the symbolist movement, Baudelaire is opposed to authors like Nietzsche and Whitman. These two, according to Pessoa’s classification, had surrendered to the external world and allowed themselves to be permeated by it, but Baudelaire was an instance of an artist who opposed this tendency, in what Pessoa classifies as an option for an individual, isolated dream – what he deems a passive answer to modern life (Pessoa, 2006: 1, 388; BNP/E3, 19-28). In an earlier note, collected in the same volume (Pessoa, 2006: 1, 380; BNP/E3, 141-89 e 90), in which he comments on Nordau’s moral judgement of Baudelaire in Dégénerescence, Pessoa rejects the notion that Baudelaire’s aesthetical options as a poet can be equated with his emotional (or indeed moral) outlook as an individual. Jorge Uribe, who has commented at length on Pessoa as a reader of Nordau, points out that Pessoa, although attracted to Nordau’s theories, in general, resists the notion that one’s moral standpoint can be equated with one’s aesthetical perspectives (see Uribe, 2014: 31-36). Considering these passages, another note, penned by Pessoa in English, may suggest that, even if Pessoa does not fully acknowledge these contradictory stances in Baudelaire’s perspectives about the purpose of poetry, he

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15 For a more detailed discussion of Baudelaire’s influence on the young Cavafy, and therefore on his development as a poet, please refer to Peter Jeffreys’ chapter “Translating Baudelaire: L’ Esprit Décadent and the Early Writings” (Jeffreys, 2015: 28-56).

16 For a discussion of Pessoa’s early adaptation of Baudelaire’s poem “À Une Passante” (Pessoa’s “Quando Ela Passa,” dated of 1902) please refer to Reckert (47-80).

17 “Os sentimentos inspiradores não são limitados aos assuntos moraes [...] | Baudelaire é um grande poeta e um homem emocionalmente doente” (Pessoa, 2006: 1, 380; BNP/E3, 141-89). Compare it to Wilde, in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray: “The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium” (Wilde, 2006: 3).
had reflected on them for the purposes of his own practice: in it we read: “Baudelaire’s theory of poetry: no moral end…” (PESSOA, 2006: II, 670; BNP/E3, 134-66). Pessoa’s ambivalence towards Nordau is prescient, nevertheless. Nordau’s theories on the concept of degenerate art proved enduring. Originally formulated in 1892, they would provide an ideological basis for the Nazi exhibition Entartete “Kunst” (“Degenerate “Art”) in 1937.18

Michael Hamburger does not establish any direct connection between Baudelaire and Pessoa. However, in the chapter he dedicates to Pessoa (HAMBURGER, 2007: 138-147), he discusses a parallel between Pessoa and Gottfried Benn, pairing Benn’s multimodal-self with a discussion of the heteronymic project as an impulse to express “the truth about the multiple selves that elude biography.” In connection with this impulse, Hamburger quotes a passage from a letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, dated from January, 19, 1915, in which Pessoa mentions “the terrible importance of Life, that consciousness which makes it impossible for us to produce art only for art’s sake, and the consciousness of having a duty towards ourselves and towards humanity” (Pessoa apud HAMBURGER, 2007: 146).19

Despite Pessoa’s conflicted perspectives on Baudelaire, one can assert that, for Pessoa and Cavafy alike, he remains the towering figure of a movement that established a perspective on poetry, and a way to discuss poetry, that, whilst acknowledging a tension in its function between social norm and aesthetical purposes, powerfully suggested that these do not need to equate themselves, and that ethics, poetical expression, and social norm do not necessarily coincide. That this precedent was readily available both for Pessoa and Cavafy is a link between the two poets that cannot be downplayed, as it had consequences for how they approached classics, ethics and desire in their works. In his essay on Cavafy, Eliot, and history, Seferis does not mention “the terrible importance of life,” but he does note, on a more general discussion of Cavafy’s poetics, that “[i]f poetry were not deeply rooted in our bodies and in our world, it would be a short-lived thing” (SEFERIS, 1983: 80).

**Walter Pater’s Winckelmann**

Walter Pater is another vital link in the chain that ties classical tradition, the expression of homoerotic desire, decadence and the poetry of Fernando Pessoa and C. P. Cavafy. A few studies have discussed the influence of Walter Pater over Cavafy (GIANNAKOPOULOU, 2001; JEFFREYS, 2015: 93-121) and Pessoa (FEIJO, 1999; URIBE, 2014, 2015). Classical reception in both Cavafy and Pessoa is complex and multi-layered, but a number of key aspects of their aesthetical perspectives on classical culture and

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18 For a discussion of the links between Nordau’s and this exhibition see WEIR (2018: 100-103).
19 Michael Hamburger’s translation. For the original see PESSOA (1985: 43).
homoeroticism have a common reference in the writings of Walter Pater. In the following section, I will outline briefly some of the main points in which it can be said that Pessoa and Cavafy were influenced in similar terms by this author.

Pater’s significance to modern poetry is epitomised in W. B. Yeats’ famous decision to include his passage about La Gioconda, an excerpt of the chapter dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci in Studies in the History of the Renaissance, in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935. Something about this passage captured the imagination of other Modern poets. Pessoa, like Yeats, seems to have been well aware of the significance of this passage to Modern poetry: he translated a lengthy excerpt into Portuguese and published it in the second issue of Athena in 1924.20

In Cavafy’s case, Walter Pater’s novel Marius the Epicurean and his Imaginary Portraits21 influenced aspects of his approach to Ancient history and homoerotic themes that are particularly influential to understand, among others, Cavafy’s recasting of a genre whose roots can be traced to Antiquity, the type of short, epigrammatic poetry we find in Cavafy’s epitaph-poems and whose form imitates that of the Hellenistic epigrams.22 These are the poems that will be at the core of my discussion in the next section. Peter Jeffreys, who authored a key study of Pater’s influence on the Alexandrian poet, situates Cavafy’s reading of Pater around the 1890s, the same decade in which he was actively reading Baudelaire, and analyzed the extent to which Marius’ main themes (male comradeship, the tension between a Pagan and Christian background, conversion, Christian liturgy and death) are recast in a series of poems, allowing Cavafy to develop his own critical approach to Decadence (see esp. JEFFREYS, 2015: 108-113). As I will discuss, this set of themes are also relevant to consider the ways in which Pessoa approached desire and Antiquity not only in his exploration of erotic and sexual themes, but also on aesthetical and ethical grounds. Walter Pater, whose interpretation of decadence is relevant for both Pessoa and Cavafy, tied it with an awareness of the urgency of beauty as framed by a sense of death.

In Pater’s novel, Paganism and Christianity entail distinct ethical outlooks. In a similar way, Cavafy’s characters that inhabited the chronology in which these two cultural eras intersect, Late Antiquity, are often torn by or ambivalent about the dialectic tension between Paganism and Christianity.23 Perhaps, nowhere in

20 A copy of The Renaissance is extant in Pessoa’s library. See PIZARRO, FERRARI and CARDIELLO (2010: 307). Although some works by Yeats are extant in Pessoa’s library, the Oxford Book of Modern Verse was only published in 1936 (Pessoa died in 1935).
21 For a discussion of Pessoa and the Imaginary Portraits see URIBE (2014: 139-148).
22 A discussion of the originality of Cavafy’s approach in comparison with the Greek Anthology can be found in CAIRES (1980). The classical resonances of Pessoa’s own epitaph-poems, Inscriptions, have been discussed by SENA (1981), VIEIRA (1988), and HAYNES (2016). I elaborate on this point below.
23 These poems include “Dangerous Thoughts,” “Myres,” “Tomb of Ignatius,” “From the School of the Renowned Philosopher,” the unfinished 1919 poem “And Above all Cynegirus,” and “Kleitos’ illness.” As noted by Jeffreys, the irony of the notion that Hellenism exerted a corrupting allure
this entire corpus is this tension so powerfully dramatized as in the poem “Myres: Alexandria in 340 A. D.” (“Μύρης· Αλεξάνδρεια του 340 μ.Χ.”) (CAVAFY, 2012: 157-159). Other than noting the thematic parallels, scholars who have focused on this poem, have observed that Myres is almost homonymous with Marius (JEFFREYS, 2015: 113; RICKS, 2001).

In the poem, ideas about the social practices represented by these two forms of religion find themselves at odds in the funeral of the young Myres, who led something of a double life, playing the beautiful Apollo and giving himself to pleasure with his pagan friends, but who died, so the old women attending his funeral declare, with the name of Christ on his lips. The poem is set in 340 A.D., when Paganism was about to come to an end and it highlights the oppressive side of Christianity: the closed house, the old women whispering at the funeral. The narrator flees the scene horrified, remembering the life of fun and sensuous pleasure Myres lived among his (pagan) friends. The closed house, the funeral ritual, and the sneers bestowed on the narrator no doubt translate an atmosphere familiar to Cavafy, living in turn-of-the-century Alexandria:

Some old women, near me, were speaking softly
about the last day he was alive—
the name of Christ always on his lips,
a cross that he was holding in his hands
[…]
We knew, of course, that Myres was a Christian.
From the very first we knew it, when
two years ago he joined our little band.
But he lived his life completely as we did.
[…]
[Ph]eaps I had been fooled
by my passion, had always been a stranger to him.—
I flew out of their horrible house,
and quickly left before their Christianity
could get hold of, could alter, the memory of Myres.25

(CAVAFY, 2012: 158-159)

over Roman culture, which is, to a minor extent, a theme in Pater’s novel, is not wasted on Cavafy, see JEFFREYS (2015: 111). That Hellenism is often spurned as a cultural and political commodity in a Roman environment is a theme explored in poems such as “The Seleucid’s Displeasure,” “Of Demetrius Soter (162-150 B. C.),” “On the Italian Seashore” and “Poseidonians” and in the essay “Greek Scholars in Roman Houses” (CAVAFY: 2010: 60-65).

24 For the autography of the first page of this poem see Fig. 1.

25 “Κάτι γοηές, κοντά µου, χαµηλά µιλούσαν για | την τελευταία µέρα που έζησε— | στα χείλη του
διαφωτός τ’ όνοµα του Χριστού, | στα χέρια του βαστούσ’ έναν σταυρό [... ] | Γνωρίζαµε, βεβαίως, | που ο Μύρης ήταν Χριστιανός. | Από την πρώτην ώρα το γνωρίζαµε, όταν | πρότερησι στην παρέα | μας είχε µπει. | Μη ζεύγεταν απολύτως σαν κ’ εµάς [... ] | µήπως κι είχα γελάσθει | από το πάθος | µου, και π α ν τ α του ήµουν ξένος.— | Πετάχθηκα έξω απ’ το φοικτό τους σπίτι, | έφυγα γρήγορα | πριν αρπάξθη, πριν αλλοιωθη | απ’ την χριστιανοσύνη τους η θύµηση του Μύρη.”
In Fernando Pessoa’s corpus, the heteronym who dramatizes and discusses the tension between Paganism and Christianity is Ricardo Reis, with particular incidence in the different notes for the preface to the works of Alberto Caeiro (Pessoa, 2016: 209-284). It is difficult to arrive to a precise definition of what exactly Ricardo Reis means by “Paganism” or even “Classicism.” Pedro Braga Falcão is one of the scholars who is sensitive to the fact that the focus of Reis’ Paganism tends not to be Paganism: he notes that the central element in Reis’ Paganism is not really Paganism but Christianity (Falcão, 2014: 310). In general, however, it is no great point of contention to remark that a clearer understanding of Pessoa’s views on the decadence of empires (as informed by his writings about the classical world) calls for an analysis of Ricardo Reis’ perspectives on Paganism and Christianity as explained in his prefaces to Caeiro and that, from a historical and political point of view, these need to take into consideration the wider context of Pessoa as a reader of Edward Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-1788)26 and eventually Montesquieu’s Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur des Romains et de leur Décadence (1734),27 which, in itself, requires a more systematic study of Pessoa’s references to Late Antiquity. Such discussion is not in the scope of my article.

Nevertheless, Gibbon’s multivolume history played a role in shaping the Victorian perspective on classical decadence, in the sense that it highlighted a few aesthetical precedents for it. The closing chapters of the first volume, in which Gibbon establishes a connection between the decay of the Roman Empire and the violent rise of Christianity, which he links with corruption and degeneracy, for the shock of his contemporaries, alongside his account of the lives of emperors of Late Antiquity that he termed as decadent (including in sexual sense, chiefly Commodus and Heliogabalus), inaugurate a perspective on Ancient history that was influential to shape the decadent movement and seem to echo in some of Reis’ perspectives on the rise of Christianity. Cavafy, on the other hand, was a reader of Gibbon, and a few of his Byzantine poems have him as a source. His perspectives

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26 Pessoa had read Gibbon by the age of 16. In 1904, and under the influence of Carlyle, he quotes his approach to history as preferable to that of Macaulay in his essay “Macaulay,” which was originally published in The Durban High School Magazine in December 1904. This essay remained largely unknown until it was republished by Maria da Encarnação Monteiro (1956). Severino (1983: 111-118) discusses the essay in light of Carlyle’s influence. More recently, the text was republished in Bothe (2013: 169-174).

27 Another link in Pessoa’s chain of “Roman imperial decadence” that deserves a more detailed attention is that of Petronius. For discussions of Pessoa as a reader of Gibbon see Rebele (1982: 286-287) and Jackson (2016: 130). Gibbon’s volumes do not seem to be extant in Pessoa’s library, but a copy of Montesquieu’s Lettres Persanes and Le Temple de Gaulle is, as is Augustine Birrell’s Selected Essays, 1884-1907, whose essay on Gibbon is underlined (as noted by Rebele, 1982, 305). At some point, Pessoa seems to have sold two of three volumes of Oeuvres (see Pizarro, Ferrari and Cardiello, 2010: 436).
on the rise of Christianity in a Pagan context therefore reflect his readings of Pater but also of Gibbon.28

Ricardo Reis’ explicit engagement with Walter Pater in the notes for the prefaces (see esp. PESSOA, 2016: 239; 281), and namely his description of Pater as one who “combined a perfect understanding of Paganism with a desire to be pagan, [but] was no more than a sick Christian who yearned for Paganism,”29 make it tempting to trace the origin of Reis’ critique of Pater in this passage to Reis’ own perspective, inherited from Gibbon, that Christianity played a decisive role in the process of decadence of the Roman Empire and in the fundamental continuity between Paganism and Christianity devised by Pater in the trajectory of Marius in *Marius the Epicurean* or, in the essayistic version of the same argument, that between Pagan and Christian art in Pater’s chapter on Winckelmann in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.30 Although Cavafy acknowledges the tensions between Christianity and Paganism, his perspectives are more nuanced than those voiced by Ricardo Reis: he identifies a fundamental line of continuity between Hellenism and the Late Antique and Byzantine periods and he does not seem to have shared Gibbon’s perspectives on the Church Fathers.31

The relevance of the heteronyms’ perspectives on Paganism (and that of Pater’s essay on Winckelmann) to locate the core of the Portuguese avant-garde has not been understated. António Feijó has suggested that its locus is to be found not so much in the pages of *Orpheu* as in the heteronyms’ different stances towards Paganism, which were crucial to shape and define their aesthetical perspectives on poetry (FEIJÓ, 1999). In this line of reasoning, Feijó traces the origins of defining aspects of the heteronymic structure, and more specifically the modelling of Alberto Caeiro, to Walter Pater’s essay on Winckelmann.

*Pace* Reis’ polemical style, it can be said that the ideal of Antiquity that he strives to achieve was influenced, at least in one decisive aspect, by Pater’s

28 For a discussion of the extent to which Gibbon might have inspired Cavafy’s poetry see EKDAWI (1996b) and HIRST (1998 and 2000). Cavafy’s reading notes on Gibbon were published by HAAS (1982). Bruce FRIER (2010) offers a discussion of the presence of Rome, more broadly, in Cavafy’s poems. Roderick BEATON (1983) discusses the uses of the past, mythical and historical, as a concept in Cavafy.

29 “Mesmo Walter Pater, que unia a um perfeito entendimento do paganismo, um desejo de ser pagão, não passou de um christão doente com ansias de paganismo” (PESSOA, 2016: 281).

30 “The history of art has suffered as much as any history by trenchant and absolute divisions. Pagan and Christian art are sometimes harshly opposed, and the Renaissance is represented as a fashion which set in at a definite period. That is the superficial view; the deeper view is that which preserves the identity of European culture. The two are really continuous: and there is a sense in which it may be said that the Renaissance was an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place” (PATER, 2010: 113-114).

31 See a poem like “In the Church” (CAVAFY, 2012: 39). Regarding Cavafy, Gibbon and the Church Fathers, see, for instance, Cavafy’s unfinished poem “Athanasius” (CAVAFY, 2012: 361); for a discussion of which see JEFFREYS in CAVAFY and FORSTER (2009: 10-14).
(Hegelian) portrait of Winckelmann as one whose understanding of Antiquity was direct and uncontaminated by the fact that he lived in his own century. This blurring of chronological barriers found expression in Pater’s approach to history in *Imaginary Portraits* and is also of consequence for Cavafy’s own approach to history in general, and Ancient history in particular, with his deployment of historical and fictional characters alike in the broad historical canvas of the Ancient World. In Cavafy’s case, but also in that of Pessoa, this also meant that the past and the present were often identified in a “simultaneous moment” (Seferis, 1983: 67).

For the purposes of my discussion, however, the point I intend to make is of a more general nature. Cavafy and Pessoa read Pater at crucial stages of their development as writers and, as we shall see in the next section, this had consequences for their engagement with both the classical tradition and their approach to a decadent aesthetics. In Pessoa’s case, this is especially visible in the longest of his English poems, “Antinous.” In his study of the archival materials related to Pater, Jorge Uribe tentatively dates Pessoa’s awareness of Pater to as early as 1903 or 1904, when Pessoa was 15 or 16 years old, at which point he may have read *Marius the Epicurean*. Although we have no record of that particular book in Pessoa’s library, there is a notebook dated to these specific years that includes the project for a drama titled *Marino the Epicure* (see Uribe, 2015: 190), whose plot may have been inspired by the contents of Pater’s novel (Uribe, 2015: 193). In 1915, in a list whose purpose is not clear, Pessoa includes the titles of key works by Pater, among which are works that were also relevant to define Cavafy’s approach to Antiquity: *Marius, Imaginary Portraits*, and *The Renaissance*. Of these, the only one that is directly alluded to in any of Pessoa’s subsequent work is *The Renaissance*, of which, as I noted earlier, an underlined copy is extant in Pessoa’s library.

Liana Giannakopoulou has traced the influence of Pater’s chapter on Winckelmann, collected in the same volume (see Pater, 2010: 86-117), on Cavafy’s poems about sculptures and sculptors, and more generally, on how the poet’s narrators often assume the perspective of sculptors before their subjects, as well as the resemblance in vocabulary between some of Cavafy’s poems and Pater’s essay (see Giannakopoulou, 2001: 89). Feijó’s analysis of Pessoa’s reception of Pater’s essay as focused on a pursuit of more general aesthetical principles resounds therefore with Cavafy’s own practice.

Cavafy and Pessoa’s readings of Pater played a pivotal role in defining how they came to incorporate Antiquity in their writing. Although other Victorian

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32 E.g. “To most of us, after all our steps towards it, the antique world, in spite of its intense outlines, its perfect self-expression, still remains faint and remote. To him [Winckelmann], closely limited except on the side of the ideal, building for his dark poverty a house not made with hands, it early came to seem more real than the present” (Pater, 2010: 87); “Goethe boldly pleads that Winckelmann was a pagan, that the hallmarks of Christendom meant nothing to him” (Pater, 2010: 91).

33 I am following here Uribe (2015: 192-193).
authors and texts could feature in this discussion.\textsuperscript{34} I will focus more specifically on the role played by Walter Pater’s biographical sketch of Winckelmann in \textit{The Renaissance} in defining Pessoa and Cavafy’s dialogue with Ancient desire and how tracing the common aspects of that dialogue has consequences to how we are to perceive both poets as commentators of a broader political context. In his chapter on Winckelmann Pater casts the German art historian as the key figure that reinvented Classical art at the crossroads between the Renaissance and the Modern age and he highlights his stance on male desire as both a consequence and a crucial aspect of this aesthetical and intellectual project. Because Pessoa and Cavafy’s own approach to classical themes and the topic of desire inherits from the wider Victorian practice of crossing history, visual arts, poetry and homoerotic desire, Pater’s essay establishes a relevant precedent enshrining a paradigm of the artist and the intellectual that both poets seized upon in their practice.

Winckelmann, as portrayed by Walter Pater, is one who comes to relate to classics out of a background of poverty (PATER, 2010: 87), and establishes himself as a scholar outside the framework of institutions and against figures of authority.\textsuperscript{35} In Pater’s characterization, he is one who redisCOVERs the material side of the classical world in terms that are described by Pater as equivalent to that of platonic reminiscence (PATER, 2010: 89), and who therefore performs an intellectual feat which is equated with that of initiating a second Renaissance.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, he was one whom Goethe conceived of as a pagan (PATER, 2010: 91), although by converting himself to Christianity, albeit insincerely (PATER, 2010: 92), he had at least reconnected with the spirit of the Renaissance (as noted by Pater, “the Protestant principle in art had cut off Germany from the supreme tradition of beauty”; PATER, 2010: 92).

Winckelmann’s Hellenism, therefore, could not be of a merely intellectual nature, as “proved by his romantic, fervid friendships with young men” (PATER, 2010: 94). Through his perspectives on the material aspects of ancient art, and namely sculpture, which Pater enshrines as the most accomplished art form of Antiquity, and a direct product of Ancient religion, Pater renders a portrait of Winckelmann in which homoerotic desire is the crucial part of his intellectual

\begin{itemize}
\item Other particularly relevant authors include Wilde, Symons, Symonds and Swinburne, all of which were to some degree influenced by Pater’s approach to classics and decadence.
\item “The condition of Greek learning in German schools and universities had fallen, and Halle had no professors who could satisfy his sharp intellectual craving. Of his professional education he always speaks with scorn… ‘Homo vagus et inconstans,’ one of them pedantically reports of the future pilgrim to Rome, unaware on which side his irony had whetted… that Winckelmann, the votary of the gravest of intellectual traditions, should get nothing but an attempt at suppression from the professional guardians of learning, is what may well surprise us” (see PATER, 2010: 87).
\item “Filled as our culture is with the classical spirit, we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved when at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for us the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance” (PATER, 2010: 89).
\end{itemize}
A characteristic passage of Winckelmann is quoted to substantiate this argument:

As it is confessedly the beauty of man which is to be conceived under one general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn instinct for the beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will always seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female. But the beauty of art demands a higher sensibility than the beauty of art of nature, because the beauty of art, like tears shed at a play, gives no pain, is without life, and must be awakened and repaired by culture.

(WINCKELMANN, *apud* PATER, 2010: 94)38

When Pessoa defined António Botto as an aesthete, by saying that he was the only Portuguese author who could be described as such, he wrote that this passage quoted by Pater might as well have been written to be the preface to Botto’s book *Canções*.39

The detachment that Winckelmann conceives here between art and nature relates to key aspects of a decadent aesthetics. More decisively for Pater’s own aesthetical agenda, his treatment of Winckelmann establishes a powerful intellectual precedent for a figure whose perspective on art, not unlike Baudelaire’s, emerged against the establishment and placed the emphasis not on its moral and social purposes, but on the experience of it. The polemical conclusion of *The Renaissance*, which can be and has been read at once as a response and a reaction to Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843-1860) and *The Stones of Venice* (1853), in which art is approached through the lens of its moral purposes, is also in the logical sequence of Pater’s chapter on Winckelmann. The criticism faced by Pater over the conclusion of *The Renaissance* was so vehement that he excluded it from the second edition of the book in 1877 to republish it, with revisions, in 1888, the year Pessoa was born—that is, in the form we can now find in Pessoa’s copy of the 1915 edition— with its final lines underlined.40

37 “These friendships, bringing him in contact with the pride of human form, and staining his thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation with the spirit of Greek culture” (PATER, 2010: 94).

38 It is not in the scope of this study to contextualize this passage in the wider debate about classical reception, the Victorian age and gender stereotypes. Kestner, for instance, whose *Mythology and Misogyny* comments on the influence of *The Renaissance* on Victorian painters does not discuss this passage. His book, nevertheless, sheds light on the wider context of Pater’s perspective; see KESTNER (1989).


40 “Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the love of beauty, the desire of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you, proposing to give you nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.” The original read “the love of art for art’s sake has most” (see PATER, 2010: 121; PATER, 2010: 179). A facsimile of that page, as underlined by Pessoa, is available at the end of this essay (Fig. 3).
As Baudelaire intended when he incorporated classical motives in *The Flowers of Evil*, here Pater is at once borrowing and subverting, albeit in an oblique and tactful way, the authority of the classics to question, if not to challenge, social conventions about sexuality and desire. What was or could be perceived in their era as subversive in both Cavafy and Pessoa’s subsequent engagement with the classics to write about homoerotic desire inherits from and places them in this wider aesthetical discourse. Through a compared close reading of a few poems by Cavafy and Pessoa in the next section I hope to highlight a few original aspects of the two poets’ engagement with main topics of “classical decadence” as typified by Pater’s reading of Winckelmann.

**Alexandrians**

Halfway through his study of Winckelmann, Pater quotes a description of the author by Madame de Staël, in which she describes him as someone who had “made himself a pagan for the purposes of penetrating Antiquity” (PATER, 2010: 93). One year before publishing the first version of the “Antinous,” Pessoa would describe himself in the following terms: “I am a decadent pagan, who turned up during Beauty’s Autumn, when Ancient clarity was falling into slumber. I am a mystic intellectual of the sad race of the Neoplatonists of Alexandria.”

It is a recurrent topic in Cavafy’s epitaph-poems that characters assert their identity as Alexandrians. Sarah Ekdawi, in her study of Cavafy’s mythical ephebes, notes: “‘Alexandrianism’ was a term used in Victorian philology and criticism to denote ‘degeneration’... Could Cavafy have known this? Whether he did or not, he adopted the word ‘Alexandrian,’ as later day homosexuals have taken up ‘queer’...” (see EKDAWI, 1996a: 36). Ekdawi comments that the earliest attested use of the term (with this connotation) can be traced to a lecture by G. P. Marsh, delivered in 1865, in which the intended meaning is pejorative. Whether or not Cavafy was aware of the meaning of the word in a Victorian context, he used it “in a wholly positive way” (EKDAWI, 1996a: 36). We cannot go as far as to speculate that this allusion to Alexandria in Pessoa assumes the same connotation it might have had for Cavafy, but we can, nevertheless, point out, that with Cavafy, Pessoa shared an Anglophone background and that in this excerpt he portrays himself as an exile of Ancient culture, somewhat displaced in Modernity, which has parallels with the image of Winckelmann depicted by Walter Pater. A character in one of

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42 See “Tomb of Lanes,” “Tomb of Iases” and “For Ammon, who died at 29 Years of Age, in 610” (CAVAFY, 2012: 66; 67; 71). The only character in the epitaph-poems who seems to renounce his Alexandrian identity is Ignatius, who has changed his name from Cleon, and who converted to Christianity (CAVAFY, 2012: 69).
Cavafy’s epitaph-poems, “Tomb of Iases” (“Ιασή Τάφος”) describes himself in a way that strikes a similar chord to the one we find in the excerpt by Pessoa.

... But they took me so often for a Narcissus or a Hermes
that excess wore me out, and killed me. Passerby,
if you are an Alexandrian you won’t judge me. You know the yearnings
of our life; what heat they hold; what pleasures most high.43

(CAVAFY, 2012: 67)

When Pessoa describes himself as “a decadent pagan, who turned up
during Beauty’s Autumn,” his language is reminiscent of a passage in J. A.
Symonds’ review of The Renaissance in which he praises the chapter on Du Bellay.44

In general, in the main body of poetry written by Pessoa, himself, the two
traditions, classical and decadent, intercept in a way that is coherent with this
instance of self-fashioning. In his study of the reception of Pater in the writings of
Pessoa, Jorge Uribe has noted that a broader issue involving Pessoa’s perspectives
on the author is that they are not always coherent in between the theoretical
writings, the heteronyms’ perspectives and Pessoa’s own positions (see URIBE,
2014: 120). This problem, which has a wider context within the works of Pessoa,
and extends to other authors, poses the question of whether variation in opinions
consistently denotes the kind of hesitant positions that are shaped by ambivalence
or if these positions sometimes differed for more specific purposes. This question
has an impact on how we are to perceive not only Pessoa’s dissonant perspectives
on Pater (e.g., those of Ricardo Reis are not the same as those of Pessoa) but also on
how we are to approach classical reception within the works of Pessoa. As we have
seen, to a certain extent, neither Ricardo Reis’ nor Pessoa’s perspectives on Pater
(or Roman and Greek Antiquity, for that matter) coincide, and how we are to
perceive that discrepancy can also help us consider how classical reception(s),
more broadly, can be approached in Pessoa.

If Ricardo Reis is the representative of a thread of classicism that is intended
to replicate the values epitomized in certain authors of the Augustan period, then
one could expect his perspectives on Pater to be ethically and aesthetically
coherent with Reis’ own standpoint on classical culture, including how his views
on the Ancient world can be understood as a lens that the poet uses to refract his
views, for instance, on contemporary history, literature, sexuality, and philosophy.
As Horace said of Homer, however, sometimes Reis dormitat, and other

43 Μα απ’ το πολύ να μ’ ἔχει ο κόσμος Νάρκισσο κ’ Ερμή, | η καταχρήσεις μ’ ἐφθείσαν, μ’
ἐσκότωσαν. Διαβάτη, | αν είσαι Ἀλεξάνδρευς, δεν θα επικρίνεις. Ξέρεις την ομή | του βίου
μας- τι θέρμην έχειν τι ηδονή υπερτάτη.
44 “Like Théophile Gautier and like Baudelaire, Mr. Pater has a sympathetic feeling for the beauty of
autumn and decay” (The review was published in Academy, n.s 4, on March 15, 1873, p. 104.).
heteronyms were aware. I will highlight one of these instances below, as it is relevant for my discussion.

Reis’ perspectives on the classical world allow him to embody, within the context of Pessoa’s works, the neoclassical reaction to the avant-garde that is typified by the writings of Álvaro de Campos.45 Along the same lines, if Pessoa’s aesthetical perspectives on the Ancient world are those of one who fashions himself as a decadent pagan, who, in the tradition of the author of *The Renaissance*, had a “sympathetic feeling for the beauty of Autumn,” then one can expect that his point of view on Pater is also influenced by the latter’s point of view on Antiquity. That would imply a coherent enough aesthetical and ethical pattern, both in Pessoa’s response to Pater and in his appreciation for “decadent Antiquity” and in his approach to the subject of homoerotic desire, that can be traced from the instance of self-fashioning quoted above to Pessoa’s quotes of Pater in his discussion of António Botto’s *Canções* in *Contemporânea*. Insofar as Pater was an influential source in the composition of the “Antinous,” this pattern also encompasses the two editions of the *English Poems*, which comprised that poem and was published under the label of Pessoa’s imprint Olisipo in 1918 and 1921 (see Jorge de Sena, in *Pessoa*, 1974: 34-35), the latter a revised edition, accompanied of *Inscriptions*, creative translations of 14 epitaphs from the Greek Anthology,46 in an editorial decision that some critics have read as an attempt to dilute the obscenity of “Antinous.”

Whereas “Antinous” has often been perceived as an exceptional poem in the works of Pessoa, in part because it was one of the few texts that Pessoa made a point to see circulated in book form, in part because of its explicit and shocking sexual content (featuring, in decadent fashion, an extended scene of necrophilia), whose obscenity was not particularly diluted in the second edition of the poem, in Cavafy’s poems Antinous is a surprising omission in light of the pervasiveness of representations of Antinous as a homoerotic icon in literature of this period (see Waters, 1995). Cavafy’s particular interest in Ancient sculpture and, perhaps, the fact that Antinous died in the same landscape inhabited by the poet, Egypt.

45 And conversely the response of Álvaro de Campos, as a key representative of the Portuguese avant-garde, to Ricardo Reis’ neoclassicism, including his comments on his all-too abstract approach to female figures (e.g. *Pessoa*, 2014: 498), what he sees as an asexual approach to the (classical) world: “Faz festas à Musa (sic), olhando para outro lado, pensando sei lá em quê. E, aliás, nas festas de Ricardo Reis não há foguetes, porque a ode alcaica foi sempre uma pessoa sossegada” (*Pessoa*, 2014: 498) (“He caresses the Muse while he looks to the other side, thinking about god knows what. And, moreover, in Reis’ caressing there is no fireworks, because the Alcaic ode was always a quiet person”).

Pessoa’s “Antinous” spans 361 lines. It has echoes of, or intertextual ties, with works by Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde (see SENA, 1974: 34; JACKSON, 2016: 131). The English it was written on is closer to the language of Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley than to the experiments of Eliot, H. D. or Pound. J. A. Symonds’ poem “The Lotus-Garland of Antinous” was an influence, and perhaps a model, as was Swinburne.47 Antinous is a poem about power and powerlessness: Hadrian is an emperor but cannot countermand his lover’s death. It is a poem about myths and Ancient gods (Antinous is compared with Ganymede, Apollo, Venus, Jupiter), a lament, a poem about love, lust and sex, about the relentless and violent side of nature, and surviving the moment when the ground is taken from under our feet and nothing is left. In its depiction of Hadrian’s vulnerability, it provides an insight on what it feels like to have your body fall apart. It is also a poem about memory and the persistence of beauty. Something in its rhythms replicates the pace of Keats’ odes and his connection of truth and beauty.48 Here are the opening lines:

The rain outside was cold in Hadrian’s soul.

The boy lay dead
On the low couch, on whose denuded whole,
To Hadrian’s eyes, whose sorrow was a dread,
The shadowy light of Death’s eclipse was shed.

The boy lay dead, and the day seemed a night
Outside. The rain fell like a sick affright
Of Nature at her work in killing him.
Memory of what he was gave no delight,
Delight at what he was was dead and dim.

... 
O complete regency of lust throned on
Raged consciousness’s spilled suspension!
These things are things that now must be no more.
The rain is silent, and the Emperor
Sinks by the couch. His grief is like a rage,
For the gods take away the life they give
And spoil the beauty they made live.

(PESSOA, 1993: 41)

The classical and Victorian backgrounds of Pessoa’s “Antinous” have been well documented by scholars of Pessoa (see, for instance, SENA, in PESSOA, 1974; JACKSON, 2016; and REED, 2016). KLOBUCKA (2013) discusses how Pessoa’s second

47 J. D. REED (2016: 107) inscribes Antinous in the same tradition of “Laus Veneris.”
48 KEATS (2008: 177-178). Pessoa was struck by the final lines of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and the final lines are underlined and marked “marvellous”: http://bibliotecaparticular.casafernandopessoa.pt/8-294/1/8-294_item1/index.html?page=317
redaction of the poem removed a number of negative terms to refer homoeroticism.49

For the purposes of my discussion, I would like to displace “Antinous” from the group of poems alongside which it is more common to read it, Pessoa’s other erotic poems, and to explore a few links it displays with a group of poems that fit into another category, that of Pessoa’s anti-war poems (see LIND, 1981; and MONTEIRO, 2015). We are now aware that the corpus of Pessoa’s anti-war poems is far more considerable than the small group originally identified by Lind (1981), but I will focus here on a handful of the main poems.50 Although “Antinous” does not fit in the same category as these poems, it was written and published during World War I. With Ricardo Reis’ “Chess Players” (PESSOA, 2016: 106-109) dated from 1916, it has in common the fact that both poems take place in imperial settings which are reminiscent of a decadent aesthetics, the Roman empire in “Antinous,” the Persian in “Chess Players,” thus adding a note of “oriental decadence” to Reis’ usual brand of Classicism. That “Chess Players” describes a game of chess between two characters who keep focused on their game while their setting is ravaged by war is something that made another of the heteronyms, António Mora, describe Reis’ poem as “reckless” (estulto) and “vainglorious” (jactancioso), insofar as it displayed no concern for the wars or crisis of men, and therefore could not be distinguished from the low Christian decadence of authors such as Pater and Wilde (PESSOA, 2002: 242).51

Jorge URIBE (2015: 222) dates Mora’s fragment to approximately 1918, which also places it in the same period as the “Antinous.” What Mora seems to be criticizing here is the notion that a game of chess set in a war scenario is, in dangerous fashion, morally aligned with a perspective of art for art’s sake: the players go on playing at the margins of society, and regardless of context. Coincidentally, Mora’s criticism voices the kind of critique the poem could spark after Portugal entered World War I in March 1916 (the date of Reis’ poem is June 1916). Having said that, what “Chess Players” entails is a rejection of war by means of the affirmation of an ethic centered in individuals and their actions. The profoundly civilized activity of playing chess is opposed to the destruction of war. Cast as Reis is in the role of the stoic, that trait of his characterization cannot be discarded from a reading of the poem, and it triggers associations with Latin

49 Pessoa’s perspectives seem to have iterated. KLOBUCKA (2018: 69-70) discusses the presence of the key expression “Deixa-os falar!” (“Let them talk!”), which suggests a resistance to homophobic discourse, in Botto and authors who were related to or contemporary of Antônio Botto, including in Pessoa’s most openly homoerotic poem, “Le Mignon,” dated from 1915 (see PESSOA, 2007: 496-497).
50 António Sousa RIBEIRO (2017: 9-22) further contextualizes the writings of the Orpheu generation within the wider framework of literary discourses during World War I, including a comparison of Campos’ “Martial Ode” and Rilke’s “Five Chants.”
51 Mora’s views on the conflict differed considerably from Reis and Pessoa. See Manuela Parreira da SILVA (2017).
authors that span from Horace to Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. If each one of the heteronyms is not irrelevant for the characterization of the narrators of Pessoa’s poems, what kind of narrator is the one behind the voice of Hadrian?

Pater’s essay on Winckelmann has been deemed by António Feijó (1999) as the semantic model for “Antinous.” If we consult Pessoa’s volume of Pater’s The Renaissance, we find the chapter on Winckelmann profusely underlined, notably the following passage: “Hellenism, which is the principle pre-eminently of intellectual light..., has always been most effectively conceived by those who have crept into it out of an intellectual world in which the somber elements predominate” (Pater, 2010: 93). This passage is relevant to contextualize Pessoa’s own description of himself as a “decadent pagan,” and it is also aesthetically coherent with the way Ancient desire is portrayed in “Antinous.” The other Paterian element lurking in the background of “Antinous” is the connection Pater emphasizes between Ancient sculpture and male beauty as perceived by Winckelmann. The physical descriptions of Antinous throughout the poem are, in general, aligned with the archaeological record we have of the figure of Antinous, which leads me to another of Pessoa’s poems. With the most famous of Pessoa’s anti-war poems, “His Mother’s Boy” (“O Menino da Sua Mãe”), which is still, to some extent, tied to the semantics of a decadent aesthetics, “Antinous” shares the fact that they both deal with the subject of the dead bodies of young men and with grief.

Pessoa wrote “His mother’s boy” in 1914 but the poem remained unpublished until 1926. In it we find the description of the body of a young soldier, which has been pierced by two bullets and lies on a desert plain. We are told that the soldier is dead and rotting away. Pessoa establishes two poignant contrasts. The first is between the boy and his cigarette case, which, so it is described, fell, still intact, from one of his pockets. In this regard, there is an oblique connection to be noted with “Antinous”, the world of objects, as expressed in a statue and in a cigarette case, signify the prevalence of objects over bodies that have been objectified by death. The second contrast lies in the fact that back home his family prays that he may return safe and sound. Professional readers of Pessoa have noted that the physical description of the boy, an only child, described as “blond, pale, bloodless,” apparently identifies him as English, rather than Portuguese. George Monteiro has seen in the boy’s characterization a condemnation of the pressure imposed over Portugal by the British government during the process that

52 For the passage, as underlined by Pessoa, see Fig. 2.
53 Antinous’ statues being the form by which he becomes known to Modernity and particularly admired by Winckelmann, on which see Waters (1995: 198) and Vout (2006). See Figs. 4 and 5 for two images of one of Winckelmann’s favourite busts of Antinous, the Antinous Mondragone. For more information on which see Vout (2006).
54 Not the least through the intertextual echoes of Rimbaud. For a discussion of these and other intertextual links see Monteiro (2000: 129-144). An English translation of the poem by Keith Bosley can be found in Pessoa (1997: 36).
led to World War I (Monteiro, 2017: 62). In another of Pessoa’s anti-war poems, Álvaro de Campos’ “Martial Ode” (“Ode Marcial”), written sometime between 1914 and 1915, a soldier realizes the horror of his actions by telling the story of how, in a raid, he had snatched away from a wall in a house he stormed the picture of an old woman’s son, while she stood in the room powerless and crying. Questions about the nature of memory and grief apply to “Antinous” and to the anti-war poems in ways that make it thematically closer with these poems than with the more conventional type of engagement with the classical world that we find in the Inscriptions, despite their shared classical background and the fact that the presence of the Inscriptions is meant to underscore the “classical decadence” of Pessoa’s English Poems. However, “Antinous” and the “anti-war” poems all have in common the fact that they explore the psychology of grief, the stability and instability of the world in imperial settings, and the death of young men.

Paul Fussell, who in The Great War and Modern Memory has studied the homoerotic aesthetics of World War I poetry, has traced the relation of influence between the historical proximity of the Aesthetic movement and conventions of male beauty and death, including in their homoerotic undertones, in World War I poetry, that is, poetry contemporary to these poems of Pessoa and to the poems of Cavafy I am about to discuss. In Pessoa’s “His mother’s boy” as in these poems, the blondness of (handsome) soldiers is a recurrent topic (Fussell, 2013: 198). This type of beauty is epitomized in the iconic picture of a young war poet whose book is extant in Pessoa’s library, that of Rupert Brooke, “whose flagrant good looks seemed an inseparable element of his poetic achievement” (Fussell, 2013: 299). Brooke’s picture, bare-shouldered, was in the frontispiece of his only book of poems and became iconic.55 George Monteiro has read Pessoa’s “His mother’s boy” in comparison with Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier,” and discussed the ways in which Pessoa’s poem can be read as a response to the political agenda of that poem (Monteiro, 2015: 24). Dated from 1915, in it Brooke displays the kind of patriotic bravado that glorifies a soldier’s death at the service of his country:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

(See Brooke apud Kendall, 2013: 106)

55 The resemblance between Rupert Brooke’s photograph and that of António Botto, also bare-shouldered, in the 1922 edition of Canções, published under Pessoa’s imprint, Olisipo, is striking.
Brooke would die in 1915, en route to Gallipoli from Alexandria, of fever, without ever seeing combat. His poems, nevertheless, became instrumental in England’s World War I propaganda. It is hard to speculate about the direction Brooke’s poetry might have taken had he seen combat. Pessoa’s “His mother’s boy” contrasts with Brooke’s patriotic tone by depicting the anonymity of a young soldier’s unburied body whose identity is defined by the fact that he is now lost to his mother. As the war progressed, the links between patriotic excitement and aestheticized violence would give place to a more somber tone, focused on the death and destruction brought about by one of the most violent conflicts in the history of Europe, the one that gained Brooke’s generation the epithet of lost generation.56

Jorge de Sena, who was the first translator of Cavafy (via English) into Portuguese, noted the thematic parallels between Pessoa’s poem and Cavafy’s “Prayer” (“Δέησις”) (CAVAFY, 2012: 184), in which a mother goes on praying for the safe return of a son who has died at sea, as noted by George MONTEIRO (2000: 133). In Daniel Mendelsohn’s edition of Cavafy’s poems, “Prayer” is dated to 1896,57 but a later poem, “Safe Haven” (“Εις το Επίνειον”) (CAVAFY, 2012: 64), written in 1917, has as its subject the death of another young sailor, Emes, who falls ill at sea and dies on disembarking. His origin, like those of Pessoa’s young soldier, are unknown but, before dying he whispers the words “home” and “elderly parents.” Cavafy’s narrator concludes that no one knew who his parents were, and that it was better so, for the parents would then keep hoping he was alive.

In poetry that reports to the period of instability leading up and during World War I, Cavafy wrote a number of poems about the bodies of (modern) young men who lived lives of instability and decadence,58 and whose beauty is sometimes reminiscent of the Ancient Greek world. In Pessoa’s work, the figure who lives a decadent and unstable life is Álvaro de Campos who seeks rare sensations, struggles to dispel ennui, values artificiality above nature, is taunted by the cruelty of time and death, prefers eroticism to real sexual pleasure, and is fascinated with art and the fragment. This description is an almost verbatim quote of Peter Jeffreys’ definition of decadence, and its influence on Cavafy, in Imaginary Portraits (2015). One should add, that another blond, pale, young man, this time with an Anglophone name, is recast in one of Álvaro de Campos decadent poems, “The Passage of the hours” (“A Passagem das Horas”) in which we read “Freddie, I called you Baby because you were blond, white, and I loved you | How many empresses yet to start their ruling and princesses who lost their throne you were to

56 Marjorie PERLOFF (2005: 141-142) notes that, in general, the avant-garde at first saw the war as a sign of revolution and liberation (e.g. Marinetti’s Manifestos; Pound’s “Vortex”). Some perspectives begin to change around 1916, when the realities of trench warfare could no longer be overlooked or understated.

57 A picture of the poet possible dated from that year can be found in Fig. 6.

58 See, for instance, CAVAFY (2012: 75; 76; 77; 78; 84).
When Cavafy wants to describe, for instance, Caesarion, here are his main physical attributes: “pale and wearied, perfect in your sorrow” (CAVAFY, 2012: 61). Peter Jeffreys notes that “the underlying tension between Alexandrian culture (decadence) and Imperial hegemony” had become an important theme for Cavafy, and he deems it related to larger cultural preoccupations of the British empire at this point (JEFFREYS, 2015: 116).

Cavafy, whose use of Ancient history often complicates the subtext of contemporary history, which he seldom comments upon directly, has written the bulk of his epitaph-poems during the period of World War I, a fact that remains largely overlooked by scholars. On the basis of Cavafy’s letters to E. M. Forster alone, one can note that Cavafy was familiar with a number of English poets who authored poetry during World War I. This is the case of Siegfried Sassoon, whose poetry Cavafy seems to have admired. He was also reading Robert Graves in 1921 and he was aware of Rupert Brooke, since he mentions his monument in the island of Skyros, where he was buried.

The originality of Cavafy’s use of the Ancient form of the epitaph has been commented upon by Valerie Caires, who has noted that whereas the Ancient form tends to emphasize family links and conventional roles, Cavafy’s epitaph-poems present a highly-aestheticized combination of self-assertion on the part of the narrator and a focus on homoerotic beauty which has a precedent on the erotic epigrams of the Greek Anthology, but not on the epitaphs (see CAIRES, 1980: 140). In an age that would make a political use of epitaph-poems as a genre to lament dead soldiers as a collective, Cavafy’s epitaph-poems affirm the individual identities of young men and details of their lives, their mythical beauty and details of their private stories, including their relationships with other men. How original Cavafy’s engagement with the form is, can be measured in relation to Pessoa’s

59 “Freddie, eu chamava-te Baby, porque tu eras louro, branco e eu amava-te; | Quantas imperatrizes por reinar e princesas desthronadas tu foste para mim!” (CAMPOS, 2014: 136-137). This poem dates perhaps to 1916.
60 For a reading of “Caesarion” as a poem that is intended to question the process of history see BEATON (1983: 33-35).
61 “[...]χλωµός και κουρασµένος, ιδεώδης εν τη λύπη σου[...]”
62 For a discussion of an instance in which Cavafy comments upon contemporary Greek history with a poem about an episode of Ancient history, see Seferis reading of “Those who fought for the Achaean League,” a poem written on the eve of the Greek defeat by the Turks in Asia Minor (SEFERIS, 1983: 63-64).
63 Cavafy seems to have been particularly fond of the poem “To an Old Lady, Dead,” collected in The Heart’s Journey (1928). See CAVAFY and FORSTER (2009: 85; 89; 105). Sassoon seems to have read Cavafy as well (see CAVAFY and FORSTER, 2009: 52).
64 Cavafy read Graves in 1921 in the pages of The London Mercury (where he also read Sassoon), and in The Chapbook. See CAVAFY and FORSTER (2009: 90) and Graves asked Forster to introduce him to Cavafy (CAVAFY and FORSTER, 2009: 87).
65 See for instance A. E. Housman’s “Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries” or Rudyard Kippling’s “Epitaphs” in KENDALL (2013).
more conventional adaptations in *Inscriptions*. To find a similarly compelling use of classical forms at the intercession of lament and homoerotic desire in Pessoa one needs to go back to the kind of poetry we find in “Antinous.”

When Pessoa wrote the first version of “Antinous” in 1915, as a young man of 27, that year he wrote a letter to an English editor, Frank Palmer, which shows that he attempted to publish the poem in England in the year in which he composed it. In the letter, he highlights a crucial difference between Portugal and England:

> Suppose a review or book were really published or introduced into England bearing such a composition, what could happen? I ask this because I am not familiar with proceedings (legal) possible on this line. Here in Portugal, though a fairly stringent law exists on this and kindred subjects, yet only political writers, and that only at periods of great excitement, run any risk. From the moral standpoint, almost any kind of literature can be published, even going into the clearly obscene.
>
> (Pessoa, 1996: 35)

Did Cavafy’s refusal to publish a collection of poems in English, when E. M. Forster was urging him to do so (and Hogarth Press, Chatto & Windus, and Heinemann all expressed interest in publishing a volume) betrays an awareness of the response his poems might have elicited in England? We will never know but, if “Antinous’’ reception in England is anything to go by, it might have done. Though we have no record of Frank Palmer’s response, we know that the poem was never published in England. As I noted earlier, Pessoa published the first version of “Antinous” in 1918 in Lisbon, where very few people read English. He

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66 For the letters, including Cavafy’s correspondence with Leonard Woolf, see Cavafy and Forster (2009: 57; 59-60; 77-78; 80). For a discussion see Jeffrey in Cavafy and Forster (2009: 3-17). For a more general discussion of the relationship between Cavafy and Forster see Jeffrey (2005).

67 When the subject of the erotic poems is brought up in the correspondence between Forster and Valassopoulo, Forster is optimistic that the erotic content would not be an issue, given the general attitude towards writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley (see Forster, in Cavafy and Forster, 2009: 68). Ironically, in 1960 Forster would find himself in the role of one of the witness in the obscenity trial brought against Penguin under the Obscene Publications Act (1959) over the publication of the unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Penguin avoided conviction in the end (see Bedford, 2016). Cavafy himself, in 1924, had found himself close to being involved in a similar libel suit, when he got entangled in a petty polemic with the journalist Socrates Lagoudakis involving a misspelling of the name of the city of New York (which Cavafy corrected). Lagoudakis attacked Cavafy viciously, not eschewing making allusions to his private life. Only a petition signed by a number of Cavafy’s supporters seems to have de-escalated the situation (see Ekdawi, 1993, 23-24). In late 1922 and early 1923, Pessoa found himself entangled in a similar public argument not over his own writings, but when he tried to defend Botto’s *Canções* and Raul Leal’s *Sodoma Divinizada*, both published under the imprint of Olisipo, against the Action League of Lisbon Students, who sought to have the books forbidden on grounds of them inspiring moral degeneration. For the key documents pertaining to that polemic see Barreto (2012: 240-270). Oddly enough, one Pessoa’s drafted responses to the polemic (which Pessoa opted not to publish) also involved him amending a typo (see Barreto, 2012: 241)
then circulated the poem in England and garnered some reviews. The *Times Literary Supplement* (see Monteiro, 2017: 61) deemed the subject distasteful to an English audience, although its convoluted descriptions of the poem echo an uneasy reading that was not oblivious to the poem’s literary merits. *Antinous* is described as “interesting for what we should now call this Renaissance style and atmosphere, and the poetry is often striking” (apud Monteiro, 2017: 61). In January 1919, “Antinous” was also reviewed in *The Athenaeum*. In 1920, the only poem Pessoa published in England appeared in this prestigious magazine, which a few months earlier, in April 1919, had published an essay by Forster on Cavafy, accompanied of a few translations by George Valassopoulo.

Regarding Pessoa’s “Antinous,” *The Athenaeum’s* reviewer was less kind than the *TLS* reviewer but no less ambivalent: the poem is described as “repellent” but certain passages are deemed to have “unquestionable power” (as noted by Jorge de Sena, in Pessoa, 1974: 68).

In the last lines of “Antinous,” when raising the idea of a statue of his dead lover, Hadrian casts himself, like the narrator of Caesarion, as a decadent artist. Here’s an excerpt from that poem:

> And so fully did I imagine you
> that yesterday, late at night, when the lamp
> went out—I deliberately let it go—I dared to think you came into my room,
> it seemed to me you stood before me: as you must have been
> in Alexandria after it had been conquered,
> pale and wearied, perfect in your sorrow,
> still hoping they’d have mercy on you,
> those vile men—who whispered “Surfeit of Caesars.”

(Cavafy, 2012: 61-62)

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68 Cavafy’s poems were published, among other periodicals, in *The Athenaeum, The Chapbook, The Criterion, The Oxford Outlook, and The Nation* (see Cavafy and Forster, 2009). *The Athenaeum* is the most likely link between Pessoa and Cavafy. Forster’s essay and Valassopoulo’s translations were published in the issue dated of April 25, 1919. Foster’s essay features the memorable description of the poet in the streets of Alexandria, in a “straw hat” and “at a slight angle to the universe.” In the issue dated of May 19, 1919, a letter signed by Forster and Valassopoulo notes a printer’s blunder in the poems “The Sea of a Morning” and “Alexandrian Kings” (see Cavafy and Forster, 2009: 39). Pessoa’s poem *Meantime* was published in *The Athenaeum* on January 30, 1920. A number of other poems by Cavafy would feature in *The Athenaeum* at least until 1924 (see Cavafy and Forster, 2009: 46-61). I am grateful to Sarah Ekdawi for pointing out the possibility that a common link between Pessoa and Cavafy could have emerged as an outcome of E. M. Forster’s efforts to see Cavafy published in England.

69 “Και τόσο πλήρως σε φαντάσθηκα, | που χθες την νύχτα αργά, σαν ἔσβυνεν | η λάµπα µου
—ἀφίασε ἐπίπεδα να σβύνει— | ελάφρευσα που μπήκας µες στην κάµαρα µου, | µε φάνηκε που εµπρός µου στάθηκες· ὡς θα ήταν µες στην κατακτηµένην Αλεξάνδρεια, | χλωµός και
κουφασµένος, ἰδεώδης εν τῇ λύπῃ σου, | ελπίζοντας ακόµη να σε σπλαχνισθούν | οἱ φαύλοι —
που ψυθύριζαν το Τιτλικασσαρί.”
And just as Cavafy’s poem describes the assassins of the young Alexandrian prince as “vile,” literarily casting on them the scorn of a future age, Pessoa’s “Antinous” is also concerned with *vox populi*. Hadrian rejects the scorn not of his contemporaries but of future ages, thus asserting his own “decadent” identity; in its recollection of dazzling erotic beauty and its choice of subjects—death and a handsome youth desired by another man—, “Antinous” is of the same aesthetic tradition as Cavafy’s poems discussed above. Thus, Pessoa’s “Antinous” is also similar to the characters in Cavafy’s epitaph-poems who are compared to mythical figures and are lamented by their lovers. In the “Tomb of Lanes” (“Λάνη Τάφος”), Lanes is compared to Hyacinth (Cavafy, 2012: 66), while Iases, quoted above, complains that he was so often mistaken by a Narcissus or a Hermes, that excess wore him out and killed him (Cavafy, 2012: 67).

Pessoa’s “Antinous” and Cavafy’s epitaph-poems can be conceived as poems that inherit from the classical and the decadent tradition. If the figure of Antinous is a conspicuous absence from Cavafy’s corpus, a figure whose trajectory is quite similar to that of Antinous is Aristobulus, whose death is the main subject of the eponymous poem (Cavafy, 2012: 59-60). Aristobulus is the young prince from Judea who is drowned in a treacherous plot devised by King Herod who fears his popularity as high priest. With Antinous, Aristobulus shares youth and a legendary beauty, which is to become the subject of poets and sculptors. In a manner that recalls that of Pessoa’s “Antinous”, the emphasis of the final lines of the poem is not on aesthetics but on a wider context. Beauty underscores loss, but the lens of the poem turns to the grief of Alexandra, Aristobulus’ mother, who cannot expose Herod and the real cause of her son’s death. In adding Alexandra’s perspective, the poem stresses the relation between the functions of art, political awareness and memory. Homoerotic beauty, private grief and loss are set against the savagery of Herod and the decadence of a ruling class, just as in “Antinous” Hadrian is rendered powerless by forces that surpass him, hinting at how the future is to relate with the legacy of Antinous’ supreme beauty, which enshrines that story.

If, on the one hand, the authority of the classical tradition is used by Pessoa and Cavafy to depict and express homoerotic desire, that use does not merely point to the tension between art and life that was at the basis of the decadent movement’s motto of “art for art’s sake.” In the tradition of Baudelaire, the awareness of that tension implies an examination of the ways in which poetry can be used to invite a second look at the place of individuals in history, long-standing social conventions, and the role history plays in shaping individual trajectories.
Fig. 1. Autography of the first page of Cavafy’s “Myres: Alexandria in 340 A.D.”
The final third page of this manuscript shows the corrected date of April 9, 1929.

Figs. 4 & 5: Antinous Mondragone, marble, ca. 130 d.C., today stored in the Louvre Museum, often identified as Winckelmann’s favourite bust of Antinous. Source: Wikimedia Commons.
Fig. 6. Portrait of Cavafy in Alexandria by the photo shop Fettel & Bernard. 1896 is the possible date. Source: Cavafy Archive, Onassis Foundation. Cf. https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/dnz4-wz2g-ywdg/
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Bibliography


Faia  "The Importance of Being Long Dead"


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