"Where † wrote"

Utopian Literary Experience in Constantine P. Cavafy's *The Afternoon Sun*

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In her influential 1991 essay, Joan W. Scott dismantles the apparent *Evidence of Experience*.[1] Experience, she argues, is not to be seen as a substance on which historians can base their arguments; instead, we should ask how experience is constituted by the historical process. In her reflections on the methodological consequences of this change of perspective, Scott points to differences between the way the disciplines of history and literature deal with experience. She refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who ascribes the assigning of subject positions to history and the deconstruction of that assigning to literature. For Scott, this leads to the question of whether historians are equally capable of doing the work of deconstruction (Scott 1991: 790–791). She suggests that historians should adopt methods of reading common to literary scholarship. That is, a reading that does "not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction. [. . .] [I]t would grant to 'the literary' an integral, even irreducible, status of its own" (ibid.: 793–794).

In this essay, I will follow Scott's path, while also deviating from it. I will argue that the objects scholars of literature encounter are different from historians' objects insofar as they produce a different kind of experience. While experience in Scott's sense is constituted in an interplay of material conditions, practices, and dis-

1 I wish to express my gratitude to Manfred Herzer for pointing me towards the German translations of Constantine Cavafy's *The Afternoon Sun* and to Joan Scott and the participants of the workshop *Experience as Object of Research, Category of Analysis, and Epistemological Basis of Critique and Political Practice* at Bielefeld University, organized by Vera Kallenberg, for discussing an earlier version of this paper with me. I am particularly grateful to Maria Oikonomou for critically reading my paper.

courses,[2] the experience literary texts produce is a specific kind of experience. It is qualitatively different from other kinds of experience. It is unique in that the experience that the text produces transcends the conditions under which the text is produced. In the case that I will study here, Constantine P. Cavafy's poem *The Afternoon Sun* (1919), not only have scholars of literature and translators not deconstructed the subject positions that the poem displays, they have gone so far as to construct gendered subject positions in places where the text remains silent, in its gaps. Literary experience is not only, as Scott argues, contingent upon discourse, it is also, as I argue, contingent upon the limits of discourse. Literature systematically produces gaps, or *Leerstellen* (Iser 1971); it systematically produces a form of experience that relies on that which is not said. In *The Afternoon Sun*, it becomes apparent that this kind of experience is both negative and utopian, as I will argue. I will start by introducing Cavafy's poem and characterizing its central gap (1.) This is followed by a discussion of three possible ways to address this gap (2.) Finally, I propose a fourth response and outline its utopian potential (3.).

1. A Touch across Multiple Layers of Time

On the last pages of André Aciman's 2019 novel *Find Me*, Elio and Oliver – characters that readers may be familiar with from the author's best-selling novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) – finally arrive together at a place of memories and fantasies: Alexandria in Northern Egypt. They had a passionate affair in Elio's teenage years but later lost contact – even if the novel suggests that through all these years, both have been silently communicating their desire towards the other. Now they are together again, two bisexual men forming a gay couple. "Why Alexandria?" Oliver asks, and Elio, the chapter's first-person narrator, thinks to himself "of the Greeks, of Alexander and his lover Hephaestion, of the Library, and Hypatia, and ultimately of the modern Greek poet Cavafy" (Aciman 2020: 249–250). This chain of associations starts in a conventionally gay manner, evoking Greek love, but then turns to one of the few known woman philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity and arrives, again reaffirming a gay canon, at Constantine P. Cavafy, the great early 20th century Greek poet, who wrote about the Greek world and Greek love. A few pages later, Elio and Oliver visit the Cavafy Museum, located in the poet's former apartment:

2 In some instances, Scott's essay tends to attribute a primary status to discourse, as in the following, for example: "we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences" (Scott 1991: 779); "Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings)" (ibid.: 793).

> Cavafy's apartment, which was now a makeshift museum, felt drab and desultory despite the open windows. The neighborhood itself was drab. There was scant light as we entered and, with the exception of scattered sounds rising from the street, the dead silence in the home sat heavily on the spare, old furniture that had most likely been picked up from some abandoned storage house. Yet the apartment reminded me of one of my favorite poems by the poet, about a band of afternoon sunlight falling across a bed in which the poet, in younger days, used to sleep with his lover. Now, as the poet revisits the premises years later, all the furniture is gone, the bed is gone, and the apartment has been turned into a business office. But that ray of sunlight that was once spread over the bed has not left him and stays forever in his memory. His lover had said he'd be back within a week; but he never returned. I felt the poet's sorrow. One seldom recovers. (Ibid.: 258)

The poem Elio is talking about here bears the title *The Afternoon Sun*.[3] As I will argue, Elio's account of the poem is biased: it is a gay reading, even a homosexualization. In Elio's description of the poem, the sunlight pierces through time and connects the past moment, when the poet and his lover separated, to the present moment, when "the poet revisits the premises". This piercing through is extended into Elio's present situation: again, sunlight pierces through time and connects the poet's moment to Elio's moment. This ray of light is, for Elio, a gay "touch across time" (Dinshaw 1999: 1–54).

But Elio is not fully aware of what he is actually experiencing here. In his view, Cavafy and his lover touch him, and this touch mirrors the way that his and Oliver's past affair touches their present love. However, in the context of the novel, with its changing first-person narrators and complex constellation of several erotic homo- and heterosexual relationships, Elio's Cavafy moment is opened up toward a not-only-gay experience. Love, loss, and memory are topics central to all the characters and relationships in *Find Me*. *All* these constellations converge in the ray of light. The name Hypatia that penetrates Elio's chain of associations accounts for this convergence. Elio's conventionally gay interpretation seems to require a correction. The nature of this correction is hinted at by the mention of an intellectual woman, Hypatia. In this essay, I propose a reading of *The Afternoon Sun* that addresses this need for correction. Thus, my reading diverges not only from Elio's but from the generally accepted reading in Cavafy scholarship and translations.

Cavafy (1863–1933) wrote *The Afternoon Sun* in 1918 (Daskalopoulos/Stasinopoulou 2002: 91). The poem was published in 1919 in the Athenian literary journal *Vomos* and in the Alexandrian literary journal *Grammata* (Daskalopoulos 2003: 69). It consists of

3 Aciman comes back to Cavafy's *The Afternoon Sun* in a beautiful essay about Alexandria as a "provisional" city (Aciman 2022: 70).

six sections comprising between one and eight lines each. As in many of Cavafy's poems, a few rhymes and assonances are scattered throughout the poem in a manner that makes it easy to overlook them.[4] The poem's metrics is equally typical for Cavafy: the lines are of varying length, the last even-numbered syllable is always stressed, and there is a tendency to stress even-numbered rather than odd-numbered syllables.[5] This technique allows Cavafy to let his poems take on a conversational manner whilst simultaneously slightly distancing this conversational tone from everyday speech and pushing it, just a little bit, in the direction of a higher tone. This is the entire poem as translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrad:

The Afternoon Sun

This room, how well I know it.
Now they're renting it, and the one next to it,
as offices. The whole house has become
an office building for agents, merchants, companies.

This room, how familiar it is.

Here, near the door, was the couch,
a Turkish carpet in front of it.
Close by, the shelf with two yellow vases.
On the right – no, opposite – a wardrobe with a mirror.
In the middle the table where he wrote,
and the three big wicker chairs.
Beside the window was the bed
where we made love so many times.

They must still be around somewhere, those old things.

Beside the window was the bed;
the afternoon sun fell across half of it.

. . . One afternoon at four o'clock we separated
for a week only. . . And then –
that week became forever.
(Cavafy 1992: 96)

4 The rhymes are registered in G. P. Savvidis' edition (Cavafy 2000: 2, 102).

5 See the succinct characterization of Cavafy's metrics in Papazoglou (2012: 63–69).

In *The Afternoon Sun*, a subject speaks from within the situation it is speaking about. As Mario Vitti stresses, this poem has a mimetic (or dramatic; Doty 2010: 148) structure: It belongs to those Cavafian poems that

> follow psychic movements in a manner that presupposes parallel acting in a concrete space. […] In the poem *[The] Afternoon Sun* […] the speaker[6] pronounces an interior monologue that follows the flow of his reactions, as he moves through an empty room scrutinizing it, where he years earlier used to meet with a young man and now remembers the positions of the furniture, giving at last, spontaneously it seems, the information that they separated at four p.m. (Vitti 2003: 332)[7]

There is just one thing in Vitti's precise description that is not accurate: Vitti refers to the speaker's past lover as "a young man", *ena neo*. In the original text, there is no linguistic specification of the speaker's and the lover's gender, as Keeley and Sherrad point out (Cavafy 1992: 242): there are no adjective endings or pronouns that could clarify their gender. The speaker and the lover appear exclusively in verb endings (which are not gendered in Greek): while there is one first-person singular ending referring to the speaker – *xero* ("I know"), the speaker and the lover are twice included in the first-person plural – *agapithikame* ("we made love") and *eichame choristhei* ("we separated"); once the lover is referred to in a third person ending – *egrafe* (Cavafy 2000: 2, 13). This last verb form is translated as "he wrote" by Keeley and Sherrad. As is the case for all the English and German[8] translations that I am aware of, the verb's subject is explicated as "he". However, in Greek (like in Latin, *scribebat*, or Italian, *scriveva*), the explication of the subject is not mandatory, as it is, for example, in English or German, where *wrote* or *schrieb* require the addition of at least one word to form a sentence. Cavafy's use of language corresponds with the poem's mimetic structure. In a narrative poem or a poem that communicates with an intratextual addressee, it might be natural, even necessary, to provide information about the subject: *where my lover wrote* (*my lover* would be gendered in Greek). In an interior monologue, there is no need to explicate information that is part of the speaker's implicit knowledge; to do so would make the monologue sound odd and artificial.

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6 Vitti uses the generic masculine form *o omilon* and corresponding pronouns.

7 "Αρκετά ποιήματα […] αναπτύσσονται ακολουθώντας ψυχικές διακυμάνσεις με τρόπους που προϋποθέτουν μια παράλληλη δράση και μάλιστα σε ένα χώρο συγκεκριμένο. […] Στο ποίημα 'Ήλιος του απογεύματος' [sic] […] ο ομιλών προφέρει έναν εσωτερικό μονόλογο που ακολουθεί τη ροή των αντιδράσεών του, καθώς μετακινείται περιεργαζόμενος ένα δωμάτιο αδειανό, όπου συναντιόταν χρόνια πριν με ένα νέο και τώρα θυμάται τη θέση των επίπλων αφήνοντας τελευταία, τάχα αυθόρμητα, την πληροφορία ότι χωρίστηκαν στις τέσσερεις το απόγευμα" (author's translation).

8 I will discuss the one exception to this below.

In this conversational poem, gender is casually passed over. Not specifying the gender creates a semantic gap that can be addressed in several ways: It can be filled by assuming that: the lover is female (2.1); the lover is male (2.2); or the lover's gender is fluid or irrelevant (2.3). I will discuss these possibilities in the following. I will add one more possibility, which is of a different kind: It does not fill the gap but accentuates and outlines its negativity. From the perspective of this reading (3.), the lover's gender is not indicated, yet is functional in the literary experience the poem produces and relevant for its utopian character.

2. Where She/He/They Wrote

2.1 Where She Wrote

One could read *egrafe* as *she wrote*, which is what an early German translation does. Karl Dieterich (1896–1935), a professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, included *The Afternoon Sun* in his 1928 anthology of Modern Greek poetry.[9] In this version, the translation of Cavafy's *to trapezi opou egrafe* is "der Tisch, woran sie schrieb" (Cavafy in Dieterich 1928: 70), meaning, "the table where she wrote". This translation feminizes the love object. In the context of an implicit understanding of the poet as male[10] and poetry as the subjective expression of the poet[11] this amounts to a heterosexualization of the poem.

Dieterich's translation of *The Afternoon Sun* must be characterized as a violent distortion of the original. He eliminates the original structure of the sections; he silently leaves out one line (v. 14); and he censors the line that speaks about sex (v. 13), replacing it with a line of dashes. With heterosexualization comes a suppression of the reference to a sexual act. Of course, this is not a desexualization of the poem. Rather, it is a sexualization on conventional terms, a sexualization that depends on the taboo to explicitly thematize sex. The question that remains is why the verse that conjectures that "those old things" (the furniture) are still around is also omitted. Maybe this intervention is based on the desire to banish witnesses that could possi-

9 On Karl Dieterich and his 1928 anthology, see Mitsou (2010). Dieterich had already published a translation of this poem in 1921 together with two more of Cavafy's poems. In this version, Dieterich omits a few lines, including the one that contains *egrafe* (Kavaphis 1921).

10 Dieterich's anthology includes one section *Frauenlyrik* (*Women's Poetry*) (Dieterich 1928: 97–105), which exclusively comprises poems by women authors. Those are the only poems by women in the book.

11 "Cavafy has transferred his own sensitive constitution to his poetry" ("Kavaphis hat seine eigene sensible Anlage auf seine Dichtung übertragen") (Dieterich 1928: XIV, author's translation).

bly reveal what happened in the censored line.[12] The translation aims to relocate sex exclusively in the reader's fantasy.

Dieterich's translation heterosexualizes the original constellation and changes the mode of speaking about sex from the original conversational statement to suggestive allusion. It seems the translator felt the need to make something disappear from the poem that he viewed as an obstacle to introducing Cavafy to his contemporary German audience (Biza 2017: 478). I will come back to this implicit acknowledgement of an obstacle and argue that it contains a kernel of truth.

2.2 Where He Wrote

One can easily dismiss Dieterich's translation: the poem is obviously a homosexual one, it does not make sense to translate *egrafe* as *she wrote*. There are good arguments for this reading. I will discuss some of these in the following, but first I want to briefly address a bad argument. For many years, critics and scholars have argued that it is clear from Cavafy's biography that his erotic poems must be read as homosexual. Against the backdrop of a conventional understanding of lyric poetry as subjective expression, it seemed clear to readers, critics, and scholars that a homosexual author would write homosexual poetry. This kind of reading does exactly what Scott criticizes: it falls back on the evidence of experience and assigns subject positions accordingly. But why assume that the empirical author and the speaker should be identified? Furthermore, why should a homosexual author not be able to express heterosexual desire in a poem (and vice versa)?[13]

One can nevertheless read Cavafy's erotic poetry, as Dimitris Papanikolaou proposes, as a sophisticated project of "homobiographics". Cavafy's fame had steadily grown in the Greek-speaking world since his introduction to the mainland Greek public in 1903 by Grigorios Xenopoulos (1903). His fame reached the colonial metropolis London when E. M. Forster published an essay on Cavafy's poetry (with translations by Georgios Valasopoulos) in *The Athenæum* in 1919 (Forster/Valassopoulos 1919). One year before, Alexandros Senkopoulos, a close friend of Cavafy's, had delivered a *Lecture on the Poetic Works of C.P. Cavafy* in a scholarly club in Alexandria. Within Cavafy scholarship, there is agreement that the lecture had been written by the poet himself. It consisted of readings of a few poems as well as thoughts on the role of lust and desire in Cavafy's poetry (Senkopoulos 1963). As Cavafy's biographer Robert Liddell states,

12 For an explication of the significance of the third party in Cavafy's erotic poems, see Pieris (2001).

13 For criticism of such readings, see Alexiou (1983: 58).

> this lecture was a singularly daring gesture, and a frank declaration of Cavafy's hedonism: there could no longer be any doubt about the poet's identification with his work, or that the poems analysed [in the lecture – B.W.] were autobiographical – and most people must have known that they were homosexual. (Liddell 1974: 168)

Cavafy had always been very guarded about publishing his poems. They circulated in pamphlets of a few pages printed for private distribution among his network of friends, and a few were published in journals. "From the 1910s onwards", Papanikolaou writes, "Cavafy would start writing and, in circumspect ways, publishing poems that treated homosexuality in realistic and more outspoken terms." (Papanikolaou 2013: 270) His contemporaries had to guess Cavafy's sexual orientation from fragments of knowledge assembled from poems, the Senkopoulos lecture, and, most probably, gossip. Nevertheless, his homosexuality was an open secret; his closet was, as any gay closet is in one way or another, a glass closet (Sedgwick 1990: 79–80).

Papanikolaou criticizes biographistic attempts at reading Cavafy's work as a "lifelong project of confession" and emphasizes that the poems reconfigure the trope of confession common to sexological and popular discourse of his time in a way that "confirm[s] but also subvert[s]", and thus "undermin[es] the expectation for autobiographical material". Cavafy's "homobiographics" do not, like autobiographics, represent an individual's life, instead, they "represent" the "lives" of "those who are made like [him]" (Papanikolaou 2013: 273–274), Papanikolaou argues, recurring to a formulation Cavafy uses in an unpublished note (1905) and an unpublished poem (1908) (ibid.: 268–269). Papanikolaou's reading of Cavafy's erotic poems is in line with Scott's understanding of experience. It is interested in Cavafy's project of homosexual subjectivation, that is, in the question of how literature shapes subjectivity and experience. Papanikolaou understands Cavafy's erotic poetry as a "modern technology of the self" in the sense of the late Foucault (ibid.: 276).[14]

However, in this paper, I am interested in what kind of experience is produced in literature on a textual level. Therefore, I move away from the discussion of Cavafy's poetry in biographical and historical contexts and turn to the way homosexual content is addressed in the texts themselves. There are a few late poems that explicitly address male homosexual content. In *In the Tavernas* (1926), a speaker whose gender is not expressed directly makes it clear that their former male lover is now together with another man: "Tamides left me; / he went off with the Prefect's son" (Cavafy 1992: 141). In *Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old* (1927), the homosocial constellation is already apparent from the title onwards and is later affirmed by the grammatical gender used in the poem itself: "expecting him [*ton perimene*]" – "alone [*monachos*] like

14 Papanikolaou has elaborated his approach to the *homosexual Cavafy* in his monograph Papanikolaou (2014).

that for so many hours" (ibid.: 147; Cavafy 2000: 2, 64). *Lovely White Flowers* (1929) very plainly speaks of "his [male] friend [*o filos tou*]" (Cavafy 1992: 166, 2000: 2, 83). There is even an open remark about male prostitution in *Days of 1909, '10, and '11* (1928): "he'd sell his body [*to soma tou*] for a dollar or two" (Cavafy 1992: 161, 2000: 2, 78).

But what Michael Haag writes is true for many of Cavafy's erotic poems: "it was possible not to think of them as homosexual or even as self-revealing. This was because the personal pronoun is not mandatory in Greek and was often omitted by him, so that the sex of the loved one could remain ambiguous" (Haag 2004: 67). From the unpublished note of 1905 mentioned above, it is clear that this was a conscious strategy in a closeted situation: "Wretched social laws – a result of neither health measures nor any logical judgement – have diminished my work. They have hindered my means of expression; they have prevented me from bringing enlightenment and emotion to those who are made like me." Cavafy goes on to compare English and French grammar and decides that being able to write in French would have given him more freedom of speech: "possibly in that language [French – B.W.] – as a result of the convenience offered by the pronouns, that tell and hide – I would have been able to express myself more freely." (Cavafy, quoted after Papanikolaou 2005: 235–236)[15]

There are erotic poems by Cavafy in which words "tell and hide". It is obvious how they hide: by not explicating the grammatical subject. But how are they able to tell at the same time? The poems use different strategies to secure a homosexual understanding. There is a group of formulaic expressions that indicate homosexuality. These expressions use the "wretched social laws" directed against homosexuality to refer to it; they recur to the law (*nomos*) and call lust and related terms "illicit [*anomi*]" (Cavafy 1992: 67, 2000: 1, 88), "forbidden [*eknomi*]" (Cavafy 1992: 70, 2000: 1, 90), or "illicit [*paranomin*]" (Cavafy 1992: 81, 2000: 1, 89); they recur to morals calling lust "daring" (Cavafy 1992: 93), "tainted [*stigmatismeni*]" and "shameful"; or even turn to medical discourse with the use of "unhealthy" (ibid.: 1992: 123; Cavafy 2000: 2, 40). The most developed of these formulations is the one in *Days of 1896* (1927):

> His erotic tendency,
> condemned and strictly forbidden
> (but innate for all that) [...].
> (Cavafy 1992: 146)

This formulation clearly echoes early 20th century discourses about homosexuality, connecting references to the law and to nature as opposed to nurture, thus addressing the double bind inherent to modern homosexuality (it is both innate and for-

15 Cavafy is probably thinking of the possessive adjective *sa/son* that is indifferent toward the gender of the possessor (Papanikolaou 2005: 236).

bidden). Furthermore, there are certain codes the poems use to suggest a homosexual reading: references to contemporary discourses of aestheticism and decadence (Papanikolau 2013: 271–272; Jeffreys 2015: 160–161). As an example of these kinds of references, Papanikolaou cites the poem *Passing Through* (1917), where eroticism is connected to concepts such as "sensual pleasure [*idoni*]", "art [*techni*]", the "sensualist" (*aisthitiko*), and even "the exalted [*Ypsilo*] / World of Poetry" (Cavafy 1992: 70, 2000: 1, 90).

In *The Afternoon Sun*, however, there is no qualification of desire and the sexual act; there are no aestheticist or decadent codes.[16] Cavafy's strategies of making discreet words tell are significantly *absent* from this poem.

2.3 Where They Wrote

Should we state that the lover's gender is fluid? This would only add one more possible means of filling of the gap, it would be – as for *she wrote* and *he wrote* – an overly easy solution for a more complex problem. To state that the lover's gender is female, male, or fluid amounts to evading the poem's demand.

Should we state that gender is irrelevant in *The Afternoon Sun*? To do so would mean losing everything that makes this poem interesting and beautiful. It would make a tension that is fundamental to the fascination produced by the poem disappear. The poem's language does make a statement about gender. It *does* something: it does *not tell*.

3. Where † Wrote

I am proposing to stop filling the semantic gap implied by *egrafe* and to read this word instead as the linguistic manifestation of a semantic gap that cannot be filled. Instead of translating *egrafe* as *she wrote*, *he wrote* or *they wrote*, one should put a † between *where* and *wrote*, a translational *crux*. I am introducing this term from editorial philology to emphasize the textual (not contextual) gap at the center of the

16 One might read the imagined interior in the third section – the "couch", the "Turkish carpet", the "shelf with two yellow vases", the "mirror", and the "wicker chairs" – as vaguely reminiscent of aestheticist poetry (I am grateful to Florian Kappeler for pointing me to this possible reading). However, in comparison with, say, Napoleon Lapathiotis' (1888–1944) aestheticist poem *And I Was Drinking From Your Lips…* with its attention to the description of a room's interior (Lapathiotis 2001: 102) – a poem that caused a scandal in Greece in 1910 (Trivizas 2000: 68; Lypourli 2001: 10) – , the tone of Cavafy's description is much cooler, and the furniture is even called "these old things [*ta kaimena*]" in the following section.

poem.[17] In classical editorial philology, the † marks a location in the text that is *incurably corrupt*. The manuscriptual tradition has failed to preserve the text at this location. It is clearly damaged or illegible, one cannot make sense of it. The defect cannot be remedied by comparing the different manuscripts or by guessing. There is no alternative but for the philologist to place a † in the text. In *The Afternoon Sun*, the impossibility of representing the original occurs at the level of translation: *where † wrote*. In insisting on the negativity of the gap signaled by *egrafe* that manifests itself in a translational crux, I suggest a reading that diverges from the normal reading practice as conceptualized in the phenomenological theory of literary reception. As I will argue, Cavafy's poem demands from its readers a reading that does *not*, as in Wolfgang Iser's account of reading (Iser 1971: 10–14),[18] fill the gaps that the text produces. Rather, this poem points its readers' attention to the gap itself, to the breaks in the textual material *that is there*, thus pointing to that *which is not there* (but could be there). Let us take a closer look at the †.

The Afternoon Sun is an instance of Cavafy's art of incantation: "erotic ghosts return to haunt the poet", as Jeffreys puts it (2015: 161). This poem achieves its mimetic power by making use of deictic elements. The deictic function of language was conceptualized by Karl Bühler. Whereas concepts such as *room* or *sun* refer to meanings that are shared among speakers of a language and are secured by context, deictic elements fundamentally depend on the speaker's situation. *I*, *here*, or *now* can make sense only in relation to the speaker, who functions as their origin, or *origo* (Bühler 1990: 91–166). At the beginning of *The Afternoon Sun*, the speaker, the origo of the deictic elements, is located in space and time via elements of local, temporal, and personal deixis: via the demonstrative pronoun (local deixis), and the first person ending (personal and temporal deixis): "*This [afti]* room, how well *I know [xero]* it", that is: the present room here and now, where I am. The fifth line repeats this wording and introduces the dimension of memory: "This room, how familiar it is." The poem's third section, which is the longest, then meticulously relates the speaker to the spatial surroundings. The single elements are related spatially to each other via a web of interdependent prepositions: "near the door", "in front of it", "[c]lose by", "[o]n the right – no, opposite", "[i]n the middle", "[b]eside the window". This web of spatial relations is rooted in the origo via the deixis in the section's opening line: "Here *[edo]*". Thus, linguistic deixis functions as a means to establish the poem's speaker as the

17 By insisting on the analysis of this textual gap in the context of the poem alone, I turn against a powerful tradition in Cavafy scholarship that claims that Cavafy's poems can only be understood in the context of his oeuvre as a whole (Tsalapatis 2013: 99). Such an approach is fundamental to Papanikolaou's project, too, (Papanikolaou 2013: 270, 2014: 20–21).

18 Even if the title suggests a focus on *Prose Fiction* (Iser 1971), Iser's explanation of the gap makes statements about "the literary text" in general (ibid., 6 et passim).

"*zero point* of all [. . .] orientations" (Husserl 1989: 167, emphasis in original), that is, as a lived body, a *Leib* in the phenomenological sense. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks." (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 115) On the textual level, the ego is constituted as a lived body by way of deictic elements, it installs itself as the origo of spatial orientation.

The same section, however, introduces a new kind of deixis, one that is determined by memory. The local and temporal deixis of closeness, the *here and now*, is now coupled with a temporal deixis of distance, the *then*: "Here, near the door *was [itan]* the couch". In the following sections, local deixis is replaced by temporal deixis of distance, especially in the narrative last section. This interplay between deixis of spatial closeness and deixis of temporal distance has the effect of intensely concretizing absence. It is *here and now* that the speaker experiences that something is *no longer there*. The poem is about a concrete lack. Something is missing right here and right now.

The location of the gap (†) created by the absence of grammatical gender that the poem constructs so naturally and casually is not meaningless. On the contrary, the † is located at the poem's very center. It forms the center of the complex of concrete lack that the poem speaks of on the thematic level. The † is at the center of both the imaginary space and the spatial extension of the poem itself. On the thematic level, the action that is denoted by *egrafe* is performed at the center of the imaginary space: it is the *middle* of the room, *where † wrote*. The word *egrafe* is, at the same time, located in the middle of the physical space that the poem forms, appearing in the tenth of 19 lines, with nine lines before it and nine lines after it. In its middle line, *The Afternoon Sun* lets the imaginary space it constructs and the textual space it forms converge; at this location, imaginary space and spatial extension of the text become identical.[19] The gap in the self-aware middle line is certainly not irrelevant. It is a central and intensely gendered gap. The poem that constructs a concrete lack addresses a concrete lack of gender at its center.

In *The Afternoon Sun*, lack materializes itself in a concrete word. While *egrafe* marks a semantic gap, it is, as this gap's material carrier, something tangible, concrete linguistic material. The poetic function of language that is systematically mobilized in poetry emphasizes this material character by "promoting," in Roman Jakobson's words, "the palpability of signs" (Jakobson 1981: 25). *Egrafe* appears in a verse that, without any exception (as in other verses of the poem), lets unstressed

19 Cavafy's younger contemporary Kostas Karyotakis (1896–1928) makes use of a similar technique in his *Posthumous Fame* (1927), where the tenth line states that "after us" will remain "only ten verses" (Karyotakis 2001: 61; author's translation).

and stressed syllables alternate, thus "project[ing] the principle of equivalence" (here: the pattern xx́) "from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (ibid.: 27): *Sti mesi to trapezi opou egrafe*. In addition, in *opou egrafe*, two vowels touch each other in the word boundary without an elision: a hiatus, which is usually avoided in Greek poetry. This hiatus focusses attention on the word's vocalic beginning and thus to *egrafe* as palpable linguistic material.

The insight in the importance of concretely materialized lack in *The Afternoon Sun* produces an altered view of the gravitational relations in the poem, which is usually said to be focused on the bed (Alexiou 1983: 59; Doty 2010: 149). Dieterich misses the point once more when he censors line 13 ("where we made love so many times"). The poem's explosive potential does not lie in its most explicit line, but at its center, where it is most silent, in line nine. The poem is not scandalous in talking about sex, it is scandalous in talking about an erotic affair with someone who writes.[20] Dieterich certainly misses this point, but so do, to some extent, the mainstream homosexual readings. They must be criticized as homosexualizations. Neither the heterosexualizing nor the homosexualizing readings are able to see this point: that the two lovers in *The Afternoon Sun* are equals. They are neither differentiated by gender (the heterosexual model), nor by class or age (as in contemporary homosexual models[21]), nor by the differentiation that many of Cavafy's poems establish by the gaze: between the one who looks and the one who is looked at.[22] The two persons of *The Afternoon Sun* are exclusively and equally characterized as *lovers* (*agapithikame*) and as *people who write*; one of the lovers "wrote" (*egrafe*), the other is disclosed as a writer by the performative testimony of the poem itself.

It is the poem's structural mediateness (two layers of time connected by an act of memory) that brings about effects of immediateness. Temporal distance is fundamental in making the ray of sunlight do its work: making an absence present. On the thematic level, the sun shines from the past. But its touch across time also reaches

20 "This person of the poem must have used to write – and was, that is, a student. Maybe, maybe a writer. For it does not say the table where the person ate, it says *the table where the person wrote*." ("Τό πρόσωπο αὐτό τοῦ ποιήματος πρέπει νά ἔγραφε – ἦταν δηλαδή σπουδαστής. Ἴσως, ἴσως συγγραφέας. Γιατί δέν λέει τό τραπέζι πού ἔτρωγε, λέει *τό τραπέζι πού ἔγραφε*" (Iosifidis 1981: 72; emphasis in original, author's translation). By using the neuter *to prosopo* (the person), Iosifidis does not specify the lover's gender; the nouns *spoudastis* (student) and *syngrafeas* (writer) might be interpreted as generic masculine use.

21 Our contemporary understanding of homosexuality with its notion of egalitarian relationships is very young. Following Michael Navratil and Florian Remele, it only developed in the 1960s and is only common in certain parts of the world (Navratil/Remele 2021: 13–14). Even if Navratil's and Remele's claim might have to be slightly relativized (Bochow 2022), in Cavafy's Egyptian context male homosexual relationships were certainly in line with the Mediterranean model of homosexuality (Dall'Orto 1990).

22 For example, in *At the Café Door* (Cavafy 1992: 55), *Gray* (ibid.: 75) or *Picture of a 23-Year-Old, Painted by His Friend of the Same Age, an Amateur* (ibid.: 154).

into the future. It touches us, the readers – it touches me. This touch is a very concrete one. As I have shown, this poem refers to itself as a physical body with spatial extension by pointing to its center. As a textual work of art, it demands reading, it is intentional. "When I read", Toril Moi writes,

> the text is not outside me in the same way as a tree is outside me. On the contrary: the act of reading implicates me in the text from the start. If language is public and shared, as Wittgenstein thought, then there is no way for me to get outside the text's language, for it's also the medium of my own existence. Because we are already in its world, we never see the text as a totality from afar. Rather than considering the work as an inert object, criticism understood as acknowledgment treats it as action and expression, as a claim to which the critic responds. (Moi 2022: 51)

When Moi talks about the text implicating its reader, demanding acknowledgement, this must be concretized in view of *The Afternoon Sun*. As in the psychoanalytic setting, acknowledgment is not to be confused with empathy. My reading has so far shown that that which demands acknowledgement from the readers is something *negative*, a gap.[23] By placing the *table where † wrote* in the center of the imaginary space and in the center of its own body, this poem says: *look, there, in line ten, is my negative center*. This implicit *look!* that the poem formulates relates its spatial extension to the space that it and I, its reader, share. It points to the fact that it and its reader relate to each other in a concrete dynamic *situation*.[24] The poem's body implicates the reader's lived body. It points to my lived body, here and now, as I sit at a desk at Berlin State Library, in April 2023, in *this room*. The poem's intentionality addresses

23 See Christian Kläui's discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Axel Honneth, and Stanley Cavel's respective concepts of empathy and acknowledgment in a clinical psychoanalytic perspective (Kläui 2015: 66–73), where he concludes: "It is not enough to react with acknowledgment to a certain statement by someone else. When it comes to psychoanalytic work, something demands acknowledgment that manifests itself in a fundamental *negativity*: It is about an *'un-'*: *acknowledging the un-conscious, the un-known, the not-understood*. We cannot content ourselves with acknowledging our fellow human being in their statement, rather we must create a space to give validity to that which is unconsciously communicated in their statements." ("Es genügt nicht, auf eine bestimmte Aussage eines anderen anerkennend zu reagieren. Sei dies nun akzeptierend, zurückweisend, schadenfreudig, neutral oder wie auch immer. Wo es um das psychoanalytische Arbeiten geht, will etwas anerkannt sein, was sich in einer grundlegenden *Negativität* manifestiert: Es geht um ein 'Un-': *Um das Anerkennen des Un-Bewussten, des Un-Bekannten, des Un-Verstandenen*. Wir können uns nicht begnügen, unsern Mitmenschen in seiner Aussage zu anerkennen, sondern wir müssen einen Raum schaffen, um dem Geltung zu geben, was sich unbewusst in seinen Aussagen mitteilt" (ibid.: 72; emphasis in original, author's translation).

24 I am referring less to the neophenomenological concept of situation (Gugutzer 2017) than to Eugene Gendlin's dynamic conceptualization of situation (Gendlin 1991: 87–106).

its future readers and establishes a deictic relation between its material body and the reader's lived body: The sun shines not only from the past; it also shines from the future. When Elio's reading extends the ray of light from the imaginary past the poem constructs into his present, he sends a glimpse of his gay 21st century present – the poem's future – into its gap.

But as I argued at the beginning of this essay, Elio's reading is a constraining one. If the poem's central gendered gap is one that is capable of being illuminated by the future, this is because of its negative character. *As a crux*, it bears a utopian potential. The poem's afternoon sun can be identified as Ernst Bloch's *Vor-Schein*, anticipatory illumination. In Bloch's view, the (literary) work of art has "[p]recious words" at its disposal, which are able to "compel [übertreiben] what is so strikingly signified by them beyond its given position" (Bloch 1988: 145, 1973: 246). This exaggeration is capable of producing "an anticipatory illumination of reality [Vor-Schein von Wirklichem] circulating and signifying in the active present (BewegtVorhandenen)" (Bloch 1988: 146, 1973: 247). We should read *egrafe* as such a *precious word* that produces a *Vor-Schein von Wirklichem*. *Egrafe* is *telling* insofar as it exaggerates something that is implicit in the *Bewegt-Vorhandene*. *Egrafe* is sonically and visually concrete material that makes it possible for me to experience with my senses the reflection of utopian *Vor-Schein* upon this precious word-body.

The gendered materialized gap in the poem's center opens up possibilities. Both Elio's and Dieterich's readings close this utopian gap. It is possible and perhaps *natural* – or *evident* in the sense criticized by Scott – to understand the speaker and the lover – two people who write and love – as male. However, the text itself does not state this, it markedly rejects giving information at this point. Thus, it is open to the possibility of imagining a woman who writes and loves in the poem's *room*. It is possible to let Virginia Woolf send a ray of light from the future year 1928 into the poem's gap – as Elio does from a fictive 21st century –, it is possible to imagine in the poem's central gap a "woman" that has "money and a room of her own" (Woolf 1935: 6), an intellectual woman who writes and loves. I am not sure if such an independent intellectual woman could be found in Cavafy's Alexandria.[25] Germs of future developments were certainly perceptible. Cavafy knew married intellectual women who wrote. He was, for example, friends with the writer Pinelopi Delta (1874–1941), a member of the rich Alexandrian Benaki family, who was married to the entrepreneur Stefanos Delta (Liddell 1974: 66, 156).[26] I am not arguing that we should fill the gap

25 For an overview of social change in Egypt in the 19th century, including a few remarks about gender, see Baer (1969: 210–29, especially 210, 228).

26 See also Titika Dimitroulia and Alexander Kazamias's analysis of the three Egyptian-Greek translators, Eleni Goussiou, Eleni Argydou, and Emilia Frangia, in which they claim that there was "an early feminist current in Egypt's Greek community" in the second half of the 19th century (Dimitroulia/Kazamias 2019: 151).

created by *egrafe* by referring to such biographies – Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno argue that to "cast into a picture" a utopian state necessarily means to "diffuse[. . .]" utopian tension (Bloch/Adorno 1988: 11). But this *precious word* – precious in its failure to cater to readers' desire to know the lover's gender – does, through its position in the poem, have the potential to exaggerate progressive tendencies in its contemporary society in a utopian direction: that people can love and write regardless of their class and gender. The implicit conditions of producing this poem – to have a room of one's own and money to support oneself – come into view, only to be transcended in a utopian manner.

This is, I think, why Hypatia comes to Elio's mind while he dwells in gay Alexandria. And this is, I think, where the kernel of truth of Dieterich's otherwise heteronormative translation lies: In his 1928 translation, he feminizes the person, but does not let her love. In his 1921 translation, he lets the lover love – but not write: He omits the central line (Kavaphis 1921). To Dieterich, the poem seems acceptable when the lover *either* writes *or* makes love with the speaker. On the one hand, the reason for this is probably, as Maria Biza argues, the wish to conform to the "moral concepts" and "conventions of his time" (Biza 2017: 478).[27] On the other hand, however, the contradictory relationship of his two translations points *ex negativo* to the utopian possibility that a woman would have a room to love and write. Seen from this perspective, one must admit that Dieterich gets the point quite well. (And by the way: nothing can stop us from a lesbian reading of Dieterich's translations: *his* texts are open to *this* possibility.) In the constellation of Dieterich's two translations and in Elio's association of the name Hypatia, reflections of the *Vor-Schein* that the poem's gap succeeds in producing are perceptible.

The Afternoon Sun's *promesse de bonheur* is yet to be fulfilled. We still live in a society that is characterized by massive class and gender differences. The utopian literary experience that this poem produces is one that can and must be made by us. If we become involved in reading this poem, if we acknowledge its claim and answer its demand, it involves our lived body in its utopian anticipation. The literary experience Cavafy's *The Afternoon Sun* involves us in is not historical in the sense of past things, but historical in its relation to human history, to humanity's future: it transcends the poem's historical location – and ours, the readers'. Its "claim on me" (Moi 2022: 50), its utopian demand in the here and now, *became forever*.

27 "Wertvorstellungen bzw. Konventionen seiner Zeit", author's translation.

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