

DECADENCE, DEGENERATION, AND THE END

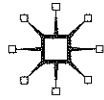
DECADENCE, DEGENERATION,
AND THE END

Studies in the European *Fin de Siècle*

Edited by

Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction: The Empire at the End of Decadence <i>Christopher Nissen and Marja Härmänmaa</i>	1
Part I The Twilight World	
1. Thermal Degeneration: Thermodynamics and the Heat-Death of the Universe in Victorian Science, Philosophy, and Culture <i>Mason Tattersall</i>	17
2. A Regenerative Decadence or a Decadent Regeneration: Challenges to Darwinian Determinism by French, Spanish, and Latin American Writers in the Fin de Siècle <i>Natalia Santamaria Laorden</i>	35
3. Late Antiquity as an Expression of Decadence in the Poetry of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George <i>Anastasia Antonopoulou</i>	49
4. Decadence and Regeneration: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales as a Tool for Social Change <i>Magali Fleurot</i>	67
Part II The Seduction of Sickness	
5. Decadent Tropologies of Sickness <i>Pirjo Lyytikäinen</i>	85
6. Consuming and Consumed: Woman as <i>Habituée</i> in Eugène Grasset's <i>Morphinomaniac</i> <i>Abigail Susik</i>	103

7. Decadence, Melancholia, and the Making of Modernism in the Salome Fairy Tales of Strindberg, Wilde, and Ibsen <i>Kyle Mox</i>	125
Part III Decadence and the Feminine	
8. Mariia Iakunchikova and the Roots of Decadence in Late-Nineteenth-Century Russian Modernism <i>Kristen M. Harkness</i>	145
9. The Spectral Salome: Salomania and Fin-de-Siècle Sexology and Racial Theory <i>Johannes Hendrikus Burgers</i>	165
10. "For the Strong-Minded Alone": Evolution, Female Atavism, and Degeneration in Aubrey Beardsley's <i>Salomé</i> <i>Gülru Çakmak</i>	183
Part IV Two Studies of Death	
11. Death at Sea: Symbolism and Charles Cottet's Subjective Realism <i>Maura Coughlin</i>	203
12. The Seduction of Thanatos: Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Decadent Death <i>Marja Härmänmaa</i>	225
<i>Bibliography</i>	245
<i>Index</i>	271

FIGURES

6.1 Eugène Grasset. <i>La Morphinomane</i>	106
6.2 Eugène Grasset. <i>La Morphinomane</i>	114
6.3 Eugène Grasset. <i>La Morphinomane</i>	115
8.1 <i>Death and Flowers</i> , c. 1893–95, aquatint, 19.3 x 16.2 cm	151
8.2 <i>L'Irréparable</i> , c. 1893–95, aquatint, 24.7 x 28.7 cm	152
8.3 <i>L'Effroi</i> , c. 1893–95, aquatint, 30 x 20 cm	153
10.1 Aubrey Beardsley. <i>The Peacock Skirt</i>	191
10.2 Aubrey Beardsley. <i>The Eyes of Herod</i>	194
11.1 Daniel Mordant. Engraving after Charles Cottet, <i>In the Country of the Sea. The Men Who Leave, the Farewell Dinner, the Women Who Remain</i>	208
11.2 Richard Louis Georges Richon-Brunet, known as Richon-Brunet	215
11.3 Charles Cottet, <i>Mourners, Brittany (Deuil Marin or Marine Grieving)</i>	217

Late Antiquity as an Expression of
Decadence in the Poetry of Constantine
P. Cavafy and Stefan George

Anastasia Antonopoulou

INTRODUCTION: CAVAFY'S AND GEORGE'S THESES
REGARDING HISTORY

Literary modernism reacts to the historicism of the nineteenth century in two ways, either by producing "poetry without history" or poetry of a "productive historicism." The latter term, suggested by Dirk Niefanger,¹ denotes an aesthetical procedure in literature, which responds to modern experiences of alienation by depicting them in an historical context, so that they become more familiar. In this way, new relationships arise between history and poetry. This tendency is especially observable within the literature of European decadence, which, by orienting itself toward such historical periods as the Late Roman or the Hellenistic-Alexandrian eras, tries to define the present. This chapter investigates this phenomenon on the basis of the work of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George.²

Cavafy (1863–1933), who is now considered as one of the preeminent Greek poets, was a Greek of the Diaspora, born in Alexandria. More than any other Greek poet of his time, he "worked within the context of European poetics"³ of the late nineteenth century, such as the movements of Symbolism, Aestheticism, and Decadence. Stefan George (1868–1933), the leading exponent of the German Aesthetic movement, with strong ties with the French Symbolists, introduced the dogma of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) in Germany, not only

through his poetry, but also by means of his programmatic texts in the literary magazine *Blätter für die Kunst*, which he founded in 1892. For both poets, the past plays a dominant role; nonetheless, they both revolutionize the tradition of historical poetry, as it was established in the nineteenth century. In his early lyrical collection *Algabal* (1892), for instance, George creates an absolute novelty within German literature by putting an extremely negative historical personality in the center of the work, while at the same time making a strong departure from the sources. Cavafy's historical poems on the other hand constitute an innovative and unique treatment of history, which provides a complete departure from post-Romantic patriotism.

In his foreword to the collection *The Books of the Eclogues and Eulogies, of Legends and Lays and of the Hanging Gardens* (1894), Stefan George stresses that no image of a specific historical period is set forth in these poems, in spite of the fact that they refer to the past. The poet goes on to say that the content of these lyrical texts is nothing more than "reflections of a soul which has fled temporarily to other times and other places."⁴ The imagery of the poems is indeed evocative of an exotic past, yet at the same time it is familiar, since the writer concludes that "each epoch and each spirit, by being individually formulated, moves into the realm of the present and the personal" (George 1958, 1:63). This statement provides an essential characterization of what we have called "productive historicism" at the beginning of the chapter. Cavafy's relationship to history is more complicated, given that a considerable number of his poems revolve around historical themes. Since the publication of G. Seferis's article on Cavafy, it is commonplace in scholarship to say that the poet employs the "historical method," which means that the present is expressed through the past by means of the technique of "objective correlation," in analogy to the "mythical method" of the modernists.⁵ The Cavafian historical method, however, is not one of absolute identification of the past with the present. It does not function as a one-to-one correlation; instead, it is to be understood kaleidoscopically as a game of reflections that allows the reader to see his or her own present condition through history.⁶

It is obvious now that the Cavafian attitude toward the past is very similar to that of Stefan George. Their common interest in Byzantium and in the Late Roman and Hellenistic-Alexandrian eras connects them both to the wider phenomenon of European Decadence, since the French Symbolists were the first who made these historical periods the subjects of their poetry. They are transitional periods characterized

by exhaustion, failure, and decline, yet at the same time by spiritualization, splendor, and debauchery. In eras like these, poets find a familiar frame to express their feelings. Concerning the Hellenistic period, Cavafy said, "In this epoch I feel free. I have made it my own"; then, about the Byzantine period: "For me the Byzantine period is like a cupboard with many drawers. If I need something, I know in which one I have to search in order to find it."⁷ In German literature, Stefan George represents the anticlassical tendencies of the turn of the century, according to which antiquity remains a literary theme brought forward through an entirely different approach from the one undertaken by eighteenth-century classicism. In the place of the humanistic ideal of antiquity, there now appears an epoch of decline: Stefan George brushes the brilliant Age of Pericles aside and turns to the Late Roman and Hellenistic eras instead.

DECADENCE AND LATE ANTIQUITY: THEMATIC CORRELATIONS IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE AND CAVAFY

Within the scope of this study we adopt the general definition of the term Decadence as formulated by W. Rasch, who describes it as "a literary phenomenon in European literature at the end of the nineteenth century, with a thematic focus on the depiction of decay and downfall, in all its differentiations."⁸ According to Rasch, Decadence encompasses such aesthetic categories as *fin de siècle*, aestheticism, or *l'art pour l'art*. Under the main theme "decay," many motifs that describe its symptoms and manifestations are subordinated, such as biological degeneration, enmity toward nature, worship of beauty, scorn for contemporary values, exhaustion, sexual perversity, sensuality, and self-indulgence.

Here we concentrate on the question of how both poets employ the past in order to express their decadent feelings and their poetics. A possible first answer is that both poets' protagonists are often historical or pseudo-historical figures, who appear incapable of changing the circumstances of their lives for the better and avoiding failure. Such characters include the last Byzantine Emperor Theophilos Palaiologos in the homonymous poem of Cavafy, who has lost his courage and prefers to die, or Dimitrios in the poem "King Dimitrios" (Cavafy), who faces the end of his kingship not like a king but "like an actor." Once the play is over, Dimitrios "changes his costume and goes away."⁹ Similarly in George, in particular in the collection *The Books*

of the *Eclogues and Eulogies*, one of the main recurring figures is that of the resigned person, as in the poems "The End of the Victor" or "The Knight who Gives Up." Just as in Cavafy, the protagonists here accept their failure, not as a tragic breach but as a human condition. The much-cited verses from Cavafy's poem "The God Abandons Antony" reflect the attitude of both poets: "Don't mourn your luck that's failing now... / As one long prepared... / Say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving."

Along with the historical figures, both poets present whole cultures that are too tired to act, cultures that stagnate in lethargic suspension. However, behind this inactivity the initial process of degeneration lies hidden. As an example of thematic analogies between their works, let us consider comparatively Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" and George's "The Burning of the Temple." They are both pseudo-historic poems, and despite their differences they both share the same thematic focal point, namely the juxtaposition between civilization and barbarism.¹⁰ D. Dimiroulis, interpreting Cavafy's poem, summarizes its content in the formulation "Barbarism against civilisation or civilisation inviting barbarism";¹¹ this could apply to George's poem as well. Both poems are written in a dialogic form and have a dramatic-theatrical character. Exact historic dates are not mentioned, but clear references to such terms as "Forum," "Senate," "consuls," "praetors," and "Emperor" in Cavafy's poem, as well as the naming of the barbarians as Huns in George's poem, all lead the reader directly to the late Roman era. In George the representatives of the old civilization are the priests of the temple, whereas in Cavafy they are all of the powerful officials of the *agora* mentioned above. In both poems, these civilized figures show the same attitude toward the barbarians: they do not choose the way of resistance, but instead are prepared to yield their land and goods to the barbarians.

Ili, the leader of the barbarians in George's poem, does not appear; we are informed about him and his actions only indirectly through the conversation between the priests. He is the barbarian invader planning to occupy the land and destroy everything. In Cavafy's poem no leader of the barbarians is mentioned. The presence of the barbarians as a whole is very powerful in the poem, stressed through the tenfold repetition of the epithet "the barbarians." In each poem the plot ends differently. In George's case, the temple burns in the end. The priests surrender, sacrificing themselves, the temple, and what it represents, for a new beginning. In Cavafy, on the other hand, the barbarians do not appear despite the expectations. Or it could be that "there are

no barbarians any longer," as the border guards report. The narrator of the poem concludes: "And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution." The empire is now really disappointed because the barbarians do not come. Both poems can be read in the context of European Decadence, since in both of them surrender and defeat are perceived as the only salvation, and the barbarians as the only solution, for timeworn and decayed cultures.¹² Both poems show a clear affinity for the dominant "degeneration-regeneration" theme, which in fin-de-siècle literature is often expressed symbolically through the fall of the empire and the imminent arrival of the barbarians. Although at first sight it seems as if the poems formulate different positions through their closing verses, I would argue that they represent the same skepticism toward the solution of the barbarians. Cavafy, with exquisite irony, denies the very existence of the barbarians, and by doing this, he "negates messianic consolation" (Tziovas 1986, 175). He makes "a parody out of the mythology of salvation" through the return to a primitive barbaric condition (Tziovas 1986, 175). Similarly, George remains skeptical, although at the end of his poem he lets the barbarians come and destroy the temple. In his poem, no dialectic synthesis between barbarism and civilization emerges. Following the destruction of the temple, the old culture is not substituted by a new one, despite the fact that barbarism includes embryonic elements for a new creation.¹³ To erect a new temple—that is the conclusion of the poem—more than "a thousand years" would be needed.¹⁴

Thus, the burning of the temple has to be read much more as a yearning and less as a suggestion. Both poets are deeply concerned with the way the Western world has been taken over by positivistic rationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Both poems use the fall of the Roman Empire as a backdrop for the anxiety and uncertainty that permeates the European thought of their time.

DECADENT AESTHETICS WITH REGARD TO LATE ANTIQUITY

Beyond the thematic analogies, the past plays an important role for both poets in formulating the principal aspects of Decadence, such as artificiality, the aestheticization of life, and the emphasis on the depiction of ritual in poetry, which are examined below.

The first section of George's collection *Algabal*, entitled "The Realm Below," describes a subterranean world of luxurious artificiality

fashioned by the emperor Algalab himself.¹⁵ Here he is neither priest nor emperor, but an aesthete. This is his realm, his own sanctuary to which he flees from reality. Diamonds and rubies, alabaster, ivory, crystals, and topaz are the materials of this self-conjured world, which is never illuminated by natural light, but rather by the flickering artificial light of candles.¹⁶

The garden he has constructed, as the last poem of the first section states, needs “neither air nor warmth,” since the trees are made of coal and pieces of lava. It is a lifeless, sterile garden with no ability to reproduce. Algalab’s garden is the most characteristic example for the modified perception of nature in the context of European modernism. It presents an absolute “denaturalization of nature in favor of the aesthetic need of the decadent.”¹⁷ This rebellion against nature itself possesses above all a significant poetic meaning, which finds a clear articulation in the last stanza of the poem. Here the speaking *I* expresses its wish to turn this lifeless garden into a fruitful one: “But how can I engender you in my sanctuary . . . great dark black flower?” The *black flower*, “a poetic provocation,”¹⁸ substitutes the *blue flower*, the main symbol of longing in the German romantic tradition. By negating the blue flower, the poet diverges from Romanticism and introduces a new aesthetics, which proclaims an absolute autonomy of art. The work of art has to be understood as an autonomous entity, entirely a product of the artist, independent from society, politics, and ethics.¹⁹ The poet is like Algalab, who “wishes to share no credit for his creation with nature, or ultimately with God.”²⁰

With regard to space in Cavafy’s poetry, it is undeniable that it is urban and artificial, deprived of references to nature. I. M. Panayotopoulos has therefore characterized Cavafy as “the poet of the enclosed space.”²¹ In many of his poems the small room dominates,²² which at times, as in the case of “Walls” or “The Windows,” appears to be hermetically isolated from the outside world. The small room, almost always referred to as dark or only artificially lighted, constitutes the poet’s sanctuary; it is a place of solitude, memory, vision, and poetical creation. The choice of isolation is a conscious one, and is associated with an elitist distancing of oneself from the multitude. The public space in Cavafy’s poetry is principally the cityscape of his contemporary Alexandria,²³ but stylized through reminiscences of ancient Alexandria in the form of a timeless, mythical city. In this way Cavafy’s Alexandria becomes synonymous with cultural and racial fusion, homoeroticism, and indulgence. Apart from Alexandria, other ancient cities that constitute the scenery of Cavafy’s poems are Antioch,

Sidon, and Seleucia, all of them cities which in the Hellenistic period experienced a peculiar flowering, characterized simultaneously by cultural development and moral degeneration. In Cavafy’s poetry they are never simply geographical places, but rather codes of eclecticism for those who understand life as something full of indulgence and intellectual activity.²⁴ The poetical map of these cities includes very few recognizable places, such as disreputable hotels, coffee shops, taverns, casinos, or theaters. At the same time, as Charalambidou-Solomi stresses, the urban scenery in Cavafy’s poetry is depicted as a sterile cityscape without nature, children, animals, and women. In fact, all manifestations of the natural element (flowers, plants, mountains) are excluded from his poetry. Thus, Cavafy’s Alexandria is represented as a poetically recreated city designed “to serve as a suitable setting for his aesthetics.”²⁵

The rebellion against nature in both poets can be understood not only as a resistance to Romanticism, but to bourgeois society as well.²⁶ In the sterile environment of their poetry, the only birth is the birth of a poem. This is an important common characteristic between them. In his artificial garden, Stefan George attempts to engender the black flower, actually the new poetry; whereas Cavafy, in his incomplete “Genesis of a Poem,” acknowledges as conditions for engendering a poem the isolation of the artist in an enclosed space where memory and vision predominate.²⁷ It is significant that both of them flee to the past and revel in an ancient ambiance (for George, it is Algalab’s late-Roman decadent environment, whereas for Cavafy, it can be found in the decadent mythical urban cityscape of Alexandrian cities).

The only reaction to this feeling of decadent stagnation suggested by Aestheticism is the intensity of senses, which leads to the indulgence in each moment. Walter Pater’s *Renaissance*, a hugely influential book for European modernism, proclaims a new Hedonism that flourishes in the desire to celebrate the transitory nature of life by freezing the moment and preserving it. To maintain the ecstasy of the moment “is success in life,” concludes Pater; only the accumulation of such moments constitutes a meaningful life.²⁸ The quest for perfect moments is one of the main dimensions in Cavafy’s work, often expressed through direct or indirect references to the past. Tastes, colors, and perfumes become allegories not only for an intensive sensual life, but also for daringly aesthetic writing. In the poem “Ithaka” the poet presents life as a long journey, justified only as a journey in the world of senses. Not only does the title point to the past, but also the whole organization of the poem, with repeated references to a

time-transcending exotic Orientalism. Therefore, one must indulge in "sensual perfume of every kind," or search in Egyptian and Phoenician cities for distinguished fine things like "mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony." The luxuriant quality of materials and clothes as an aspect of the aesthetics of life appears in the poem "Alexandrian Kings," where Cleopatra's son, Kaisarion, the young king, is depicted only through his luxurious clothes and valuable jewels. We hear nothing about the other traits of his personality; he is completely identified with his extravagance. In George's *Algabal* we notice similar aesthetics of life and an underlying intense sensual experience. The emperor's clothes are all of a rare exquisite silk material, imported exclusively for him from Syria. At the same time rare oriental scents like essence of spikenard, lavender, myrrh, or incense create a sensual atmosphere, recalling similar details in Baudelaire's *Correspondances* or *Parfum exotique*.²⁹ *Algabal* is presented as a hedonistic, narcissistic figure; in his realm a luxurious exoticism predominates, which, as in the case of Cavafy's poetry, echoes the discourses of exoticism and Orientalism that permeate European Decadence. This Orientalism, which abounds in the works of both poets, includes the Western vision of the East as a mysterious land of fabulous luxury, erotic license, and indolent indulgence; thus, it conforms perfectly to the aesthetics of *décadisme* (Decadence). The Orient is the absolute *Other*,³⁰ and its evocation points to an extraordinary experience for the senses, far away from the banality of daily existence.

Between Cavafy's and George's aestheticization of life there is, despite the common dimensions discussed above, a great difference: George radicalizes this aspect to the point of aesthetic amoralism. We can take as an example the first poem of the second section, which describes a scene where the emperor is feeding his pigeons. The whole poetical narration assumes an air of a still painting. When one of the slaves disturbs this static scene he is forced to commit suicide, submitting to the emperor's will. At the same time the elimination of the slave restores the aesthetic order, creating, however, a new picture: The slave's red blood on the green basalt tile becomes a new aesthetic experience, which again leads to the creation of a new work of art, since *Algabal* orders a craftsman to engrave the scene on a trophy. Another poem describes a scene in which *Algabal* orders his guests to be asphyxiated at a banquet under a mass of roses dropped from the ceiling.³¹ In this way, the emperor offers his guests an extreme variation of *mourir en beauté*, while at the same time he provides himself with a rare spectacle. This amoralism points to an "aesthetical

fundamentalism,"³² which aims to create an independent realm of art in which bourgeois values are excluded or converted into their opposites. The scorn of bourgeois values and the elitist attitude toward society, deriving from the conviction of the superiority of art, is a theme in Cavafy as well, but it never reaches the extreme of amorality that is evident in the case of George.

Closely connected with the aesthetics of life is the ritualization of experience in decadent literature. Both Cavafy and George share a strong interest in ritual and the cultic as a common characteristic, which situates both of them within a particular tendency in modern literature, along with poets such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, or Valéry. Modernists use rituals as an ancient or primitive form of communication, expressing in this way an antithesis to the conventional consideration of reality. W. Braungart examines the function of the ritual in George's work in its expression as religious worship or social ceremonial, and speaks of an "aestheticization of the ritual."³³ This statement could perfectly characterize Cavafy's poetry as well, since rituals occupy an outstanding place in his work.³⁴ Many ritualistic poems address popular orthodox liturgical rites that recall the Byzantine tradition. His poem *In Church*, for instance, focuses on the ornamental decoration of the church and on the magnificence, splendor, glory, and austerity of the liturgy. The attitude of the *I*-speaker is not the attitude of a believer, but of an aesthete.³⁵ It is worth noticing that the religious ceremony is presented in a theatrical manner that leads to a heightening of the senses: sight (the precious holy vessels, the majestic presence of the priests), hearing (the liturgical chanting and harmony), and smell (the aroma of incense).³⁶ A similar ritualistic and ornamental character runs also through the prose poem "Old Christian Vision," by George. The consecration of a young man named Elidius is here depicted in an old Byzantine basilica. A great multitude is gathered, while priests preparing the consecration mutter litanies. The appearance of the Archpriest recalls the Cavafian "splendor of our Byzantine heritage." He is followed by children holding lit candles, in his complete palatial vestment with a miter decorated with glowing gemstones. Both poets turn to ritual, considering it a form of externalization of the esoteric dimensions of the soul;³⁷ both of them employ ceremony and ornament to enhance aesthetic poetics, while at the same time offering a clear opposition to the bourgeois optimism of progress at the beginning of the twentieth century.

DECADENT EROTICISM AND ANTIQUE ART

A sexuality deviating from Christian morality is one of the main tendencies in fin-de-siècle literature. Within this tendency, homosexuality constitutes undeniably the most frequently recurring theme. Many Aesthetes and Decadents excluded women as an object of desire from their works, replacing them with "the ideal of the young man."³⁸ The glorification of the beautiful ephebe in fin-de-siècle literature epitomizes the spirit of decadence, according to Philip Stephan, since it is combined with some of its principal characteristics, such as worship of beauty, an elitist attitude, and the defiance of more traditional ethics.³⁹ For Cavafy, the motif of the ephebe pervades his oeuvre as a whole, whereas it predominates in George's *Maximin* cycle. In both poets, as will be clarified later, homoerotic love is connected with Platonic ideas and with the aesthetics of J. J. Winckelmann, who praised ancient Greek sculpture in his works, especially as they were presented by Walter Pater.⁴⁰

George has often been characterized as a continuator of the ideas of Winckelmann in modernism, since he placed the quasi-religious worship of an ephebe in the center of his poetry.⁴¹ The *Maximin* poems have a biographical origin, inspired by the extremely gifted young boy Maximilian Kronenberg, whom George met in 1902, and who died suddenly after having spent three years in close contact with the George circle. In the boy's youth the poet has found the embodiment of his ideal, which can be summarized in his later verse "deification of the body and the embodiment of the deity."

In 1906, after the boy's death, George published a memorial book entitled *Maximin, ein Gedenkbuch*, glorifying him as a god. On the title page of the memorial book there is a photograph of Maximin "that signals the homoerotic charge of the ensuing paragraphs."⁴² The archetypal character of Maximin is underlined through iconographic references to antiquity. Following the typology of Antinous, the young boy appears in the photo as a bust, turned away from the viewer at a three-quarters angle, with nude upper body, a garland on his hair, and a rod in his hands. The photo stylizes him as "a live statue" (Sünderhauf 2004, 223). Already the opening sentences of the memorial book, wherein the poet describes his first meeting with Maximin, reveal the religious attitude toward the ephebic youth, who is depicted as "all powerful." However, the Greek apotheosis of an athletic ideal that is immediately evident in Maximin's appearance is also combined with the evocation "of a centuries-old Christian culture" (George 1958, 2:522). The heroic athletic attitude of the young

boy is thus mitigated through the burden of culture that he seems to carry. Maximin is a latecomer, who despite his heroic shape possesses the characteristics of that melancholy which is formed through centuries of Western culture, exactly like Tadzio in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Both of them remind us of Cavafy's young latecomer Kaisarion in the homonymous poem, who looks "ideal in his grief."

Maximin and Tadzio are two examples in the German literature of the early twentieth century that embody the idea of an ephebic beauty combined with an antique sculptural understanding, Platonic perceptions, homoeroticism, and Decadence. As a matter of fact the preface to *Maximin* abounds with metaphors inspired by ancient sculpture that are projected onto the young boy. These serve to illustrate the significance of antique art for George's perception of male beauty: "brightness and charisma"; "heroic shape"; "gesture"; "the far-off gaze and at the same time so penetrating and brilliant that the others had to look down"; "the embodiment of our notion and of our ideal"; "the slight browning of his skin"; "the ideal of the youth"; "blooming beauty"; and "superiority not through talking or acting, but alone through his presence in the space." The erotic undertones in the text are not provocative, since they present Maximin as a sublimated, essentially genderless figure. The last lines of the preface constitute the climax of the deification. After his early death Maximin has to be worshipped like a god: "We now can eagerly, after impassioned signs of veneration, erect his statue in our sanctuary, kneel before him and worship him."

It has been pointed out that ancient sculpture serves Cavafy both as a source of inspiration and as a vehicle for his definition of the ideal of the young ephebe.⁴³ The main feature of the Cavafian ephebe is his beauty; sometimes this beauty is truly divine, as in the case of the poems "One of Their Gods" and "Ionic." In the first poem the young man is a "tall, extremely handsome, / with the joy of being immortal in his eyes" who, descending from the Olympian mountaintops, moves through the Syrian marketplace of Seleucia arousing general admiration. In "Ionic" the godlike ephebe is a "young ethereal figure" who "indistinct, in rapid flight, / wings across the hills." In both poems the deity seems to be among us in a lovely human form. On the other hand, clear Platonic references emerge in the poem "In a Town of Osroini." The poem describes a wounded young man named Remon, lying by an open window, while the moonlight shines on "his beauteous body." Remon could be Syrian, Greek, or Armenian, but the moonlight makes his "sensual face" remind us of "Plato's Charmidis": thus, he becomes "a timeless icon of homosexuality."⁴⁴

A particular section within Cavafy's love poetry includes the epitaph poems that refer to dead or dying young men. The dead young men have "a subtle beauty" ("For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610") or are "famous for their good looks" ("Tomb of Iasis"). The settings, as well as the protagonists in these poems, are fictitious. The names (Iasis, Ammonis) point to the past, while some details and specific references place the poems clearly in the late Alexandrian period, a period employed by the poet to denote sensuality. Cavafy uses the historical as a tool for exploring the personal, and at the same time as a tool for expressing homosexual desire, as a strategy to conceal intended meanings. "Epitaphs, codes and the classics" are, as Sarah Ekdawi acknowledges in her article on the Cavafian ephebes, three Victorian strategies for writing about sex, which Cavafy used in the same fashion as Oscar Wilde before him.⁴⁵ A particular use of sculptural terms is to be found in the poem "Kaisarion." Here the sculptural vocabulary functions as a metaphor for the poet's imagination. The fact that history books dedicate only a few lines to Kaisarion gives Cavafy the freedom to mold him into an object of beauty according to his imagination. He forms a sympathetic view of Kaisarion, a delicate and sentimental beauty: "I made you good-looking and sensitive / ... / pale and weary, ideal in your grief." The ideal of beauty is here undermined by decay, evoked by the pallor and sorrow of the young man. In both poets, the glorification of male beauty adopts religious characteristics evoked through sculptural terms. This has to be understood as a strategy of sublimation that has its roots in J. J. Winckelmann, who in his famous descriptions of ancient sculptures in the eighteenth century uses sublimation strategies to conceal his homoerotic feelings. Walter Pater plays an intermediary role between Winckelmann and modernism; in his study "Winckelmann" (1867), he examines Hellenism and homoeroticism from the standpoint of aestheticism.⁴⁶ In both poets the classical ideal of beauty, the plastic perfectness, is tempered with the characteristics of morbid decay.

In conclusion, I would like to stress one final similarity. L. Giannakopoulou points out that the description of male beauty in Cavafy's "I've Looked So Much" ("The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs. / Hair like that stolen from Greek statues, / Always lovely, even uncombed, / And falling slightly, over pale foreheads") corresponds to Hellenistic sculpture, and specifically to the work of Lysippus (Giannakopoulou 2007, 135ff). It is known that during the Hellenistic period intense erotic feeling was expressed in art and projected onto statues, which were "invested with a deep homoerotic feeling and were the object of constant observation and fantasies"

(Giannakopoulou 2007, 149). In this context, it is worth mentioning that Lysippus is the only ancient sculptor mentioned in the work of Stefan George. In his short epistolary work *The Emperor Alexis's Letters to the Poet Arkadios*, the poet refers explicitly to Lysippus characterizing his works as "magnificent" and underlining as a distinctive trait "the strong limbs unified with fine curves in a divine manner."⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

The European literary avant-garde rediscovered late antiquity at the end of the nineteenth century, and transformed it into a model epoch for the fin de siècle. This study examines the phenomenon on the basis of the poetry of C. P. Cavafy and Stefan George, two poets who have never been considered comparatively before.

Both of them take inspiration from late antiquity to create their themes and their poetics. In the second subchapter, the essay has examined how both of them employ historical or pseudo-historical figures and situations from the late Roman and Alexandrian periods in order to express the modern decadent feelings of weariness, exhaustion, and decline. As a main example for this, the study has juxtaposed the poems "Waiting for the Barbarians" (Cavafy) and "The Burning Temple" (George).

Beyond the thematic correlation, we may conclude that the period of late antiquity plays an important role for both poets in formulating their views of some of the main aspects of decadent aesthetics, such as artificiality, aestheticization of life, or evocation of ritual in poetry (subchapter 3). The last subchapter (4) investigates how Cavafy and George employ ancient sculpture in their works in order to glorify ephebic male beauty and encode their homosexuality. The use of history in their writings could be characterized as productive historicism (subchapter 1), since neither of them is interested in a purely antiquarian reception and depiction of history; instead, they both employ history in a free and productive manner in order to depict life in the modern age and express their dissatisfaction with the moral and social order.

NOTES

1. See D. Niefanger (2002) "Formen historischer Lyrik in der literarischen Moderne," in D. Fulda (ed.) *Literatur und Geschichte. Ein Kompendium zu ihrem Verhältnis von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: De Gruyter), pp. 441–46, here 442.

2. A juxtaposition between the two poets has never been attempted before, save for a passing reference made in 1962 by one of the first translators of Cavafy's poetry into German, Helmut von den Steinen. He had emphatically characterized Stefan George as the German equivalent to Cavafy; see K. P. Kavafis (1985) *Gedichte. Das gesammelte Werk*, trans. Helmut von den Steinen (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini), p. 22. His view is also evident in his correspondence with the poet Karl Wolfskehl. The two men often refer to Cavafy and George, ascribing to their poetry common characteristics of the Gnostic theories. Nevertheless, a comparison between Cavafy and George from this perspective would be "hardly useful" for the history of literature, as Chryssoula Campas has remarked; see C. Campas (2010) "Athen und Ägypten. Helmut von den Steinen, Übersetzer von Kavafis," in C. Campas and M. Mitsou (eds.) *Hellas Verstehen. Deutsch Griechischer Kulturtransfer im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau), pp. 289–328, here 311. In the scope of the present study we will put aside the misleading idea of the Gnostics' influence; instead, we will compare the two poets from the standpoint of fin-de-siècle modernism.
3. See G. Jusdanis (1987) *The Poetics of Cavafy. Textuality, Eroticism, History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. x.
4. S. George (1958) *Werke*, 2 vols. (Munich: H. Küpper), vol. 1, p. 63. The translation is mine, as are all translations from German or Greek, unless otherwise indicated.
5. G. Seferis (1974) "Κ. Π. Καβάφης, Θ. Σ. Έλιοτ: παράλληλοι," in G. Seferis (ed.), *Δοκιμές*, vol. A. (Athens: Ίκαρος) Seferis, "Καβάφης, Έλιοτ," pp. 347 ff. ["K. P. Kaváfis, Th. S. Eliot: parálliloi." In *Dokimés*. Edited by Giorgos Seferis, vol. A, 324–63. Athens: Íkaros, 1974.]
6. A. Athanasopoulou (2011) "Ο «πολιτικός» Σεφέρης και ο «ιστορικός» Καβάφης: παράλληλοι," *Το Δέντρο*, 179 /180, pp. 9–22, here 17. ["Ο 'politikós' Seféris kai o 'historikós' Kavafis parálliloi?" *To Dénτρο* 179/180 (2011): 9–22].
7. I. A. Sareyiannis (1964) *Σχόλια στον Καβάφη* (Athens: Ίκαρος), pp. 35ff. [*Schólia ston Kaváfi*. Athens: Íkaros, 1964.]
8. W. Rasch (1986) *Die literarische Décadence um 1900* (Munich: Beck), p. 21.
9. All translations of the Cavafian poems are by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. See C. P. Cavafy (1992) *Collected Poems*, trans. E. Keely and P. Sherrard, ed. G. Savidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press). See also the official Cavafy website: <http://www.cavafy.com/>
10. Cecil Maurice Bowra points to an affinity between the two poems, however without discussing the historical aspect; see C. M. Bowra (1967) "Cavafy and the Greek past," in C. M. Bowra (ed.) *The Creative Experiment* (London: Macmillan), p. 38.

11. D. Dimiroulis (1984) "Cavafy's Imminent Threat: Still *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 1.2, pp. 89–103, here 92.
12. The most characteristic example of the articulation of such a decadent sense of life is Paul Verlaine's poem "Langueur" (1883), in which the poet identifies himself with the declining Roman Empire ("Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence"), appearing unable to resist against the imminence of the barbarians; see P. Verlaine (1969) *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. J. Robichez (Paris: Garnier), p. 314, v. I. Both poets, Cavafy and George, knew Verlaine's poem: George as an admirer and translator of the French symbolists into German, and Cavafy as a similarly keen connoisseur of French poetry. Greek critics have investigated Cavafy's "Barbarians" in reference to Verlaine's "Langueur"; see D. Tziouvas (1986) "Cavafy's Barbarians and their Western Genealogy," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 10, pp. 161–78, here 165, and Dimiroulis, "Cavafy's Imminent Threat," 92ff.
13. See G. Varthalitis (2000) *Die Antike und die Jahrhundertwende. Stefan Georges Rezeption der Antike* (PhD diss., Heidelberg), p. 123.
14. S. George (1974) *The Works of Stefan George*, trans. O. Marx and E. Morwitz, 2d ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), p. 387.
15. The antique sources present Heliogabalus as an extremely negative personality, linking his name to the emperors Caligula and Nero, and ascribing to his character such features as eccentricity, sexual indulgence, exquisite luxury, autocratic power, and cruelty. On the relationship between the collection and its sources, see V. A. Oswald (1948) "The historical Content of Stefan George's *Algabal*," *The Germanic Review*, 23, pp. 193–205.
16. This imagery reflects the influences of the French modernists on George's poetry, pointing to the *Rêve parisien* or *Paradis artificiels* of Baudelaire; see C. Baudelaire (1975) *Oeuvres Completes*, ed. C. Pichois (Paris: Gallimard), pp. 101–03 (poem 102 of *Tableaux parisiens*), and 377–517. On this topic see C. David (1967) *Stefan George. Sein dichterisches Werk* (Munich: Hanser).
17. B. S. Ahn (1996) *Dekadenz in der Dichtung des Fin de Siècle* (Göttingen: Cuvillier), p. 107.
18. R. Vilain (2005) "Stefan George's Early Works 1890–1895," in J. Rieckmann (ed.) *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George* (New York: Camden House), pp. 51–77, here 60.
19. D. Kafitz (2004) *Décadence in Deutschland. Studien zu einem versunkenen Diskurs der 90er Jahre des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg: Winter), pp. 467ff.
20. J. D. Todd (2005) "Stefan George and two types of Aestheticism," in J. Rieckmann (ed.), *Companion*, pp. 127–43, here 131.

21. See I. M. Panayotopoulos (1982) "Ο Καβάφης, ποιητής του κλειστού χώρου," in I. M. Panayotopoulos (ed.) *Τα πρόσωπα και τα κείμενα*, vol. 4 (Athens: Εκδόσεις των φίλων), pp. 89–102. ["Ο Κανάφης, ποιητής του κλειστού χώρου." In *Ta próσωpa kai ta kéimena*. Edited by I. M. Panayotopoulos, 4: 89–102. Athens: Ekdóseis tōn filōn, 1982.]
22. See D. Charalambidou-Solomi (2000) "Η κλειστή κάμαρη στην ερωτική ποίηση του Καβάφη," in M. Pierris (ed.) *Η ποίηση του κράματος. Μοντερνισμός και διαπολιτισμικότητα στο έργο του Καβάφη* (Heraklion: Πανεπιστημιακές εκδόσεις Κρήτης), pp. 213–25. ["Ἰ kleistī kámarī stīn erōtikī poīīsī tou Kaváfī." In *Ἰ poīīsī tou krámatos. Monternismós kai diapolitismikótita sto érgo tou Kaváfī*. Edited by Michalis Pierris. 213–25. Heraklion: Panepistīmiakés ekdóseis Krītis, 2000.]
23. See E. Keely (1977) *Kavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress* (London: Hogarth Press).
24. E. Arambatzidou (2000) "Καβαφικές συνάφειες αισθητισμού. Συγχρονία και διαχρονία σε μια κοσμοπολίτικη αλεξανδρινή εκδοχή," *Η ποίηση του κράματος*, ed. Pieris, pp. 29–36, here 35. ["Kavafikés synáfieis aisthītismou. Sygchronía kai diachronía se mia kosmopolitīkī alexandrine ekdochī." In *Ἰ poīīsī tou krámatos*. Edited by Michalis Pieris. 29–36.]
25. D. Charalambidou-Solomi (1997) *A Study in Decadence: The Love Poetry of Ernest Dowson and C. P. Cavafy* (PhD diss., Athens), p. 199.
26. R. Norton (2002) *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle* (London: Cornell University Press), p. 118.
27. See Charalambidou-Solomi, *A Study in Decadence*, p. 206.
28. W. Pater (1986) "The Renaissance," in W. E. Buckler (ed.), *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts* (New York: New York University Press), p. 219.
29. See poems 4 and 22 of C. Baudelaire (1975) "Spleen et idéal," in C. Pichois (ed.), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard), pp. 11 and 25.
30. E. W. Said (1979) *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage).
31. This episode has become one of the icons of the fin de siècle, in the form of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's sumptuous painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888, private collection).
32. See S. Breuer (1995) *Ästhetischer Fundamentalismus. Stefan George und der deutsche Antimodernismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft).
33. W. Braungart (1997) *Ästhetischer Katholizismus. Stefan Georges Rituale der Literatur* (Tübingen: Niemeyer), p. 54.
34. Yatromanolakis and Roilos systemize the role of the ritual in Cavafy's work. See D. Yatromanolakis and P. Roilos (eds.) (2005) *Προς μια τελετουργική ποιητική* (Athens: Αλεξάνδρεια). [*Pros mia teleourgikī poīitiki*. Athens: Alexándreia, 2005.]
35. See G. Rigopoulos (1991) *Ut pictura, poesis. Το εκφραστικό σύστημα της ποίησης και ποιητικής του Κ. Π. Καβάφη* (Athens:

- Σμίλη), p. 91. [Ut picture poesis: To ekfrastikó sýstīma tīs poīīsīs kai poīitikīs tou K. P. Kaváfī. Athens: Smīlī, 1991.]
36. D. Haas (1983) "‘Στον ένδοξό μας βυζαντινισμό.’ Σημειώσεις για ένα στίχο του Καβάφη," *Διαβάζω*, pp. 78, 76–81, here 79. ["‘Ston éndoxó mas vyzantinismó.’ Sīmeiōseis gia éna stīcho tou Kaváfī." *Diavázō* 78 (1983): 76–81.]
37. See H. Linke (1960) *Das Kultische in der Dichtung Stefan Georges und seiner Schule* (Munich and Düsseldorf: Küpper).
38. See Jusdanis, *The Poetics of Cavafy*, pp. 35ff.
39. P. Stephan (1974) *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 42.
40. On Pater's consideration of Winckelmann see S. Evangelista (2009) *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 23–54.
41. See E. S. Sünderhauf (2004) *Griechensehnsucht und Kulturkritik. Die deutsche Rezeption von Winckelmanns Antikenideal 1840–1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag), p. 217.
42. A. Bisno (2011) "Stefan George's Homoerotic Erlösungsreligion, 1891–1907," in M. S. Lane and M. A. Ruehl (eds.) *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle* (Rochester, NY: Camden House), pp. 37–55, here 45.
43. L. Giannakopoulou (2007) *The Power of Pygmalion: Ancient Greek Sculpture in Modern Greek Poetry, 1860–1960* (Bern and Oxford: Peter Lang).
44. S. Ekdawi (1996) "Cavafy's Mythical Ephebes," in P. Mackdrige (ed.), *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry: Essays in Memory of C. A. Trypanis* (London: Routledge), pp. 33–44, here 42.
45. Ekdawi, "Cavafy's Mythical Ephebes," p. 43. On Wilde's aesthetic Hellenism see also Evangelista, *British Aestheticism*, pp. 125–57.
46. For the essay on Winckelmann, see Pater, *The Renaissance*. Works of Walter Pater were in Cavafy's personal library; see Giannakopoulou, *The Power of Pygmalion*, p. 139. In the George circle the importance of Winckelmann was widely discussed, since one of George's followers, Bertold Vallentin, wrote one of the first monographs on Winckelmann.
47. S. George *Werke*, vol. 2 p. 493. However, the common preference of Cavafy and George for postclassical literature is remarkable as well. In his *Eulogy of Mallarmé* (1893), George speaks of the strong impression that the writings of the Byzantines, the later Romans, the Alexandrians, and the ecclesiastical fathers all made on him. A common source of inspiration for both poets seems to be the Hellenistic poet Callimachus. Cavafy's affinity to Callimachus was noticed early, while George's awareness of the Alexandrian poet is documented through his poem "To Callimachus". Nowadays, the poetry of Callimachus is recognized as the prototype of the *l'art pour l'art* literature.