**Theatricality, didacticism, prosaic verse, use of persons as symbols, contemplative mood, flashbacks are some of Cavafy’s recurring ‘tropes’. Discuss.**

Within the vast poetry collection of Constantine Cavafy, arguably, a pattern of recurring tropes emerges, offering the readers an in depth understanding of what defines his artistry. The poems that I have chosen for this essay being *Young Men of Sidon*, *Alexandrian Kings* and *Kaisarion*, from his book *The Collected poems.* One might say that they serve as an example of Cavafy’s gravitation towards an array of literary devices such as theatricality, didacticism, prosaic verse, use of persons as symbols, contemplative mood and flashbacks, one might say that they create a narrative that extends beyond the individual poems, inviting us to explore the timeless themes captured by Cavafy.

Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863, to a family whose lineage could be traced back to nobility of the Byzantine empire. Cavafy also lived in England for five years when he was younger, which led to his fascination with English poetry. It can be said that different parts of Cavafy’s upbringing had influence on his poetry. For example, the Hellenistic legacy. Alexandria was a thriving centre of Hellenistic culture with a legacy rooted in Greek history and literature, one could say that this is reflected in Cavafy’s work through his constant references to significant Greek figures, historical events and mythological narratives.

Furthermore, we can view another significant impact on Cavafy’s work made by ancient Greek theatre and Greek philosophical tradition which can explain his recurring use of theatricality and didacticism. The theatricality observed in his work can possibly be due to Cavafy drawing on the tradition of Greeks’ history with drama and performance. Likewise, it can be thought that he also draws from didactic traditions of philosophical teachings from figures such as Socrates and Plato, who often sought to impart moral and intellectual lessons.

Starting with *Young Men of Sidon*, written by Cavafy in 1920, however it is set in 400 A.D., we already see a hint of theatricality with the ‘staging’ of the poem being set in another period. The poem is set in Sidon, a Hellenised city in the coast of Phoenicia, hinting at a reminiscence of the Hellenistic era. Cavafy could have strategically chosen this setting as it holds significance, it is part of the geographical triangle formed by Alexandria, Ephesus and Antioch, all cities that were major centres in the ancient world that were each rich with history and culture and may serve as a backdrop for the explored themes in Cavafy’s poem. The poem centres around five wealthy young men which correspond with the fact that they’re from Sidon as it can be viewed as a synonym for self-indulgence and luxury. The young men have brought an actor to recite poems to entertain them. The actor begins to recite an epigram that is traditionally said to be written by Aeschylus, however, one of the young men interrupts him to voice his dislike for it.

We immediately get an introduction to theatricality of the poem. Cavafy had an early interest in Heroda’s mimes and how it influenced his approach to poetry, it appears to be reflected in Cavafy’s with a small group of ‘actors’ portraying a scene from what was considered as normal, every-day life at the time. The poem begins with the ‘actor they had brought in to entertain them’[[1]](#footnote-1), this sets the scene and gives us an idea of the Sidonian lifestyle. As the poem continues, Cavafy’s choice for the actor’s recitation of Aeschylus’ epigram particularly highlights his use of theatricality as he is a well-known dramatist and one of the founders of Greek drama. It could be said that the young man who suddenly interrupts further adds to the theatricality of the poem due to its suddenness and enthusiasm ‘a spirited young man’[[2]](#footnote-2) who ‘interrupted at once and shouted’[[3]](#footnote-3), Cavafy allows the plot to evolve so that he can create a specific atmosphere, he is detailed and careful about the way he aims to portray the character of the young man and his arrogance, whilst also being able to keep the audience engaged with the mimetic atmosphere that he has created. Effectively, the interruption serves as a disruption to the theatrical flow and might cause the audience to focus on the young man who interrupts, possibly considering the fact that he’s young, wealthy, perfumed Sidonian who has the courage to oppose Aeschylus (indirectly). This may prompt the readers to reconsider Cavafy’s intention, could he be using the young Sidonian man as a symbol of modern poets? As mentioned, Aeschylus is a renowned ancient Greek playwright, but it could be considered that Cavafy uses him to represent the towering figures of classical literature and the quatrain about him may symbolise an attempt of contemporary poets to measure up to the great literary figures of their past. The young man’s critique of the quatrain having ‘faintness of spirit’[[4]](#footnote-4) may be seen as a commentary on a potential inadequacy of contemporary literature in comparison to the grandeur associated with classical works.

One could agree that the didactic elements of the poem are primarily expressed in the interruption of the young Sidonian man. Rather than just viewing it as a spontaneous outburst, Cavafy arguably displays a lesson that he aims to impart. The young man conveys dissatisfaction with the quatrain about Aeschylus as he calls for the actor to give his work ‘all your vigour’[[5]](#footnote-5) and ‘all your attention’[[6]](#footnote-6) and states that there is ‘faintness of spirit’ – a parallel to himself being described as ‘spirited’ [[7]](#footnote-7) by the poet. It can be interpreted that the young man is attempting to emphasise the importance of commitment to literary craft, he expects the actor to approach the epigram with greater intensity, suggesting that mere recitation is not enough and that it requires more of an immersion in the creative process. However, an alternative view is that Aeschylus did not write the epigram and uses the Sidonian as a speaker, to demonstrate the poetry is should still be pursued, even when somebody unworthy acts it out- he manipulates his own persona to the reader, so that he can express a strengthened idea of poetry. Jusdanis says in *The Poetics of Cavafy* that in this poem ‘Reconciliation between the poet and nonpoet is unwelcome’[[8]](#footnote-8), could he be referring to Aeschylus and the young man or could this also apply to Cavafy’s persona and the young man.

Cavafy’s technique of prosaic verse is important in this poem, due to the conversational tone being easy for a wider audience to engage with, it allows us to easily grasp the young man’s critiques yet might also be hinting at irony in the fact that the young man has the audacity to criticise a great poet like Aeschylus despite his simple and mundane form of speech. This could also be an example of Cavafy using prosaic verse in his work to balance the theatricality of it.

Moving on, *Alexandrian Kings,* written in 1912 but set in 34 B.C. at the coronation of Cleopatra’s sons in the Alexandrian Gymnasium. Cavafy gave the poem an underlying sense of irony surrounding the tragedy of the coronation since it was the last ceremony that the Alexandrians could enjoy as they will soon be conquered by the Romans. In the initial verse, Cavafy adopts a rhetorical and triumphant tone, mirroring the ceremonial proclamation of king ship, he also explores the theatricality inherent in historical events, the ‘stage’ is quite literally set for a grand spectacle ‘the sky a pale azure’[[9]](#footnote-9), ‘a triumphant accomplishment of art’[[10]](#footnote-10), ‘the extravagance of the courtiers exceptional’[[11]](#footnote-11), the use of the adjective ‘triumphant’ and language such as ‘accomplishment’ juxtaposes the acceptance of the inevitable defeat of the Romans, it further underscores the irony that Cavafy employs and can also be viewed as a way of distracting the reader as well as the audience within the poem from the underlying problem. Jeffreys describes in *Reframing decadence* that Cavafy ‘employs pictoral poetics to paint a vibrant canvas that dramatizes a historical scene in striking detail’[[12]](#footnote-12) arguably supporting the idea of Cavafy’s extravagant imagery and theatrics being used as a device to create contrast and irony within the poem.

Cavafy writes how the ‘Alexandrians sensed, of course, that these were mere words and theatricals’[[13]](#footnote-13) after Caesarion was named ‘king of kings’[[14]](#footnote-14), this idea is again reflected at the end of the poem as the people knew ‘what hollow words were those kingly titles’[[15]](#footnote-15) this becomes meta-theatrical as the audience within the poem could possibly be acknowledging the theatrics of the wider poem as well as that of the kings. Cavafy could also be using the authority as a symbol of the performative nature of political events and how power and authority are often enacted on a ‘stage’ for public consumption. This also emphasises the contemplative mood of the overall poem, it shifts from the initial triumph and grandeur to the revelation of underlying hollowness. The contemplative mood arguably deepens the emotional resonance of the poem, encouraging the readers to consider questions about power and perception.

Employing another of his recurring tropes, Cavafy’s use of prosaic verse is arguably another form of juxtaposition surrounding the ceremony, the while Caesarion appears beautifully and extravagantly dressed the language used to describe him is straight forward, for examples ‘dressed in rose-coloured silk’[[16]](#footnote-16) ‘ a posy of hyacinths upon his chest’[[17]](#footnote-17) it can be thought to serve as a reminder that the spectacle truly is false and that the reality of the situation is daunting on them. The rose-coloured dress is also significant to the atmosphere that Cavafy was attempting to create as it ties in with his historical accuracy.

Moving on to *Kaisarion*, he was the son of Julius Caesar and was put to death at the age of 17 after the suicides of Mark Antony and Cleopatra in Alexandria 31 B.C. This was the year that Rome had established political hegemony over the ancient world. Kaisarion was proclaimed king after Plutarch by the Alexandrian Kings in 34 B.C. but following their defeat, Kaisarion was executed on the grounds that otherwise there would be too many Caesars.

The poem adopts a subtly theatrical quality as the speaker recounts their engagement with a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies. He sets the scene of the modern world, feeling far away from the world of Kaisairon that we are about to jump into. It is worth to note that this poem follows *Alexandrian Kings* and Dimiras states in *Cavafy’s Technique of Inspiration* ‘there is an internal correlation, a completion of the first poem by the second’[[18]](#footnote-18) it can be interpreted that Cavafy intended for the poem to be viewed as a second act or a follow up performance of the first, again demonstrating his use of theatricality. The opening lines are an admission of his motivations ‘partly to throw light on a certain period’[[19]](#footnote-19) Cavafy’s intention is clear, but it also echoes the idea of stage lighting in theatre. He once again evokes dramatic irony, as we first view the speaker from the comfort of their own home and then move on to the beauty and the luxury of the Ptolemies ‘The lavish praise and flattery are much the same for each of them’[[20]](#footnote-20), ‘all are brilliant, glorious, mighty, benevolent’[[21]](#footnote-21) Cavafy is emphasising that Kaisarion, the victim in this historical period, is too far in history and past the point of human memory. As often seen within theatre, Cavafy is reviving the historical past.

Kaisarion is again being portrayed as an image of beauty as he was in *Alexandrian Kings* but as opposed to the luxurious garments, jewels and flowers that he was draped in, Cavafy captures his beauty in a different way in this poem, arguably he is the same ‘character’ but he is marking a different time as he was described with ‘indefinable charm’[[22]](#footnote-22), ‘good-looking and sensitive’[[23]](#footnote-23). ‘a dreamy, an appealing beauty’[[24]](#footnote-24) Cavafy uses flattering and almost romantic language to describe him, yet he meticulously chooses what he looks like, like an actor fulfilling a specific role- relating back to the theatricality that he often includes. In comparison to the description of the Ptolemis, Kaisarion takes on a more nuanced role as a historical figure that we ‘know so little about’[[25]](#footnote-25) his character allows personal interpretation from the audience.

The prosaic style of the poem, specifically in the first verse gives the audience no indication as to how the poem and the ending will develop. Dimiras also refers to the prosaic verse that Cavafy uses and explains the idea that it is ‘a careful but powerless guard of the world of sensibility’[[26]](#footnote-26) the narrative appears so straightforward yet complex at the same time as there is a depth of emotion and introspection within the simplicity of it as Cavafy brings historical figures to life as well as employing him as a canvas for the reader’s imagination as well as his own.

As the narrative shifts, we can view a subtle form of flashback that Cavafy uses in order to transition Kaisarion’s narrative. The mention of him transports us to a reconstructed past and as an audience we can come to understand Cavafy’s ability to blend history, imagination and personal reflection. Coming back to the present the poem takes on a dreamlike quality as the speaker exclaims ‘my lamp went out- I let it go out on purpose’[[27]](#footnote-27) almost as if he is anticipating the visit from Kaisarion, the intentional extinguishing of the lamp adds to the atmospheric shift, creating a space for the historical figure in the room.

Arguably, Cavafy uses Kaisarion as a symbol or representative of neglected historical figures who have been overlooked or marginalised in broader historical narratives. It can be said that he is also a symbol of vulnerability and hope, he is depicted as ‘pale and weary, ideal in your grief’[[28]](#footnote-28), his imagined state in conquered Alexandria adds a layer of pathos.

Alternatively, Kaisarion might also be a symbol of Cavafy’s close relationship with history, his engagement with Kaisarion appears intimate, specifically when he writes ‘it seemed you came to my room’[[29]](#footnote-29) and the sympathy that Cavafy clearly holds for him as he refers to the Romans that killed him as ‘scum’[[30]](#footnote-30). Dimiras supports this idea when stating that Cavafy ‘draws sensual pleasure from history’[[31]](#footnote-31).

In summary, Cavafy’s poems *Young Men of Sidon, Alexandrian Kings* and *Kaisarion*, collectively showcase his recurring tropes which shape a narrative that transcends the individual works. His use of theatricality, didacticism and prosaic verse, influenced by Hellenistic culture and Greek theatre, Cavafy uses these tropes to offer insight into historical narratives. The interruption in *Young Men of Sidon* symbolises the critique of contemporary poets against classical figures. *Alexandrian Kings* unfolds as grand spectacle with rhetoric tones, exposing the irony beneath the ceremony and *Kaisarion* serves as a follow up, further exploring historical figures and symbolising historical elusiveness. Collectively, these tropes become a lense through which Cavafy brings history to life, inviting readers to engage with timeless themes.

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