**Discuss the portrayal and effects of loss in the poetry of Cavafy**

A main theme throughout the poetry of Cavafy is that of loss. Cavafy explores the portrayal of loss first on an initial level (referring to the objective initial loss in reality). However, as Richard Howard states, Cavafy’s greatness as a poet is primarily because “he comes to terms… with that relation to our own lives we most mistrust and evade – the *relation to* loss”[[1]](#footnote-1) (my italics). Thus, as well as portraying loss on an initial, objective level he also portrays loss on a secondary level (the level on which the initial loss impacts the characters, somewhat based upon the characters’ fantasy).

In two of his earliest, highly philosophical poems, *Walls* and *Supplication*, Cavafy directs his attention towards the nature of loss on a conceptual level, portraying a distinction between the initial, objective loss and the effect that this initial loss has *in relation to* the person connected with the loss. In both poems, the lead figures are subject to a loss which, during the immediacy of its happening, they are unaware of; unbeknownst to her, the mother in *Supplication* loses her son at sea [“The sea took a sailor into its depths. – /His mother, unaware, goes to light…”][[2]](#footnote-2) whereas the narrator of *Walls* laments his loss of freedom and opportunities after walls were constructed around him whilst he was unawares [“Imperceptibly, they shut me off from the world outside”].[[3]](#footnote-3) Whilst these objective losses in both poems are very different the effects of the losses on the subjects are almost parallel.

Both *Walls* and *Supplication* are structured in four stanzas comprised of two lines each. In both poems the middle stanzas describe the actions and feelings of those subjected to the loss (the narrator and the mother) whilst the stanzas enveloping them describe their actual objective losses. The result in both cases is a motif of a kind of oppression; the reader gets the impression that despite the actions of the key figure, the poems close on the same note of loss with which they began. The actions of the main figures are also largely intransitive as the mother in *Supplication* “prays and supplicates”[[4]](#footnote-4) whilst the narrator of *Walls* is “sitting and despairing”.[[5]](#footnote-5) These intransitive verbs convey to the reader a sense of incompletion akin to the sense of loss the key figures are feeling, as well as adding to the oppressive, stagnant motif derived from ineffectual action. Thus the structure and verbs used in the poems reinforce the idea that as a result of the initial objective loss, the key figures experience a secondary loss to themselves as they lose the ability to act effectively to change the situation.

The extent to which this secondary subject-oriented loss is dependent on the initial loss is explored further by Cavafy in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the mere expectation of the barbarians’ arrival drives the narrator’s community to inaction (the narrator asking “Why do the Senators sit back and do not legislate?”[[6]](#footnote-6) and receiving the reply “Because the barbarians will arrive today… / When the barbarians come, they’ll do the legislating”).[[7]](#footnote-7) Here, the arrival of the barbarians represents the initial loss (to the community’s previous way of life). However, the fact that the community “unravel around [merely] the anticipation” [[8]](#footnote-8) of this initial loss has led to them to self-inflict a secondary loss (the loss of motivation to maintain their ways of life, here embodied in loss of motivation to legislate). This secondary loss proves to be unnecessary as Cavafy reveals at the end that the fear which it was a response to never actually happens [“night has fallen and the barbarians have not come”].[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, there is a suggestion that the secondary loss (the loss as it effects the subject) is dependent not on the *reality* of theinitial objective loss but on the *perception* of an initial loss to those who would be subject to it.

However, this contradicts the case Cavafy presents in *Supplication* as here the mother experiences a secondary loss (loss of the ability for her actions to have an effect, despite her efforts to bring about her son’s safe return) without her even being aware of the initial loss (that her son is already dead). This seemingly presents the reader looking to make connections between Cavafy’s works with a paradox: on the one hand the secondary loss can take place based only on perception of an initial loss, even when no initial loss actually exists (as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*), yet on the other hand the secondary loss seems the direct result of the initial loss regardless of its perception: simply the fact that her son has already been lost at sea necessarily means that the mother in *Supplication* loses the ability to save him, despite her being entirely unaware of it. However, this paradox can be solved if the reader views the way in which the secondary loss is related to the initial loss not in terms of perception but in terms of fantasy and reality. Despite the fact that the mother in *Supplication* does not perceive the initial loss of her son at all whilst the community in *Waiting for the Barbarians* are perceptive to the point of paranoia, both are parallel in that they are both mistaken about the reality of the initial loss. Both proceed to base their actions on this mistaken fantasy (that the barbarians will invade; that her prayers are able to make her son return home safe), and in doing so suffer the secondary loss of needless community stagnation and ineffective action respectively.

Cavafy further exploits the discrepancy between fantasy and reality to create a sense of loss through disillusionment and loss of the fantasy itself. In *Supplication*, Cavafy disillusions the audience, confirming to them that “he’ll never come back, the son she awaits”,[[10]](#footnote-10) whilst simultaneously presenting the mother as a figure who remains held in the grips of the fantasy that she is still able to cause his return. In this way Cavafy juxtaposes the present hope of the mother with the confirmation to his audience of the inevitable future that “he’ll never come back”[[11]](#footnote-11) for an ironic effect similar to the way in which he creates historical irony by electing “to describe the way in which a historical character… sees the world, and then to describe the future events which will overthrow that view of the world”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Cavafy therefore involves his audience in his methods used to portray loss. He does so through means of this very loss-dependant form of irony based upon disillusionment, but it is his manipulation of the audience’s empathy which gives this irony its acute and impactful edge.

Although the audience is aware from the start that the son in *Supplication* is dead [“The sea took a sailor into its depths”],[[13]](#footnote-13) Cavafy quickly moves the audience’s focus on to the mother’s hasty, desperate actions through the fast-paced enjambment across the first and second stanzas “his mother, unaware, goes to light/ a tall candle before the Virgin Mary”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, though the audience knows better, Cavafy ensures that they empathise to some extent with the mother’s hope that her son will return as the fast pace at which they read of her actions (caused by the enjambment) parallels the hastiness with which the mother acts in desperation to ensure her son’s return. The additional connotations of strength and power associated with the “*tall* candle” means that for a moment the audience, like the mother, find the believed power associated with the Virgin Mary as a potential source of hope. However, as well as disillusioning the audience that the son will never return, Cavafy disillusions his audience on a religious level by depicting how powerless the venerated icon is in reality [“the icon listens, solemn and sad, well aware / that he’ll never come back”].[[15]](#footnote-15)

This loss of hope on such an ultimate, miraculous level gives the audience a sense of despair. Barnstone’s statement that “despair is most decisively apparent… [when there is] recognition of a present with future impossibilities, with a future blackened by unredeemed death”[[16]](#footnote-16) is very applicable to the state of the audience at this point who realise that the poem is centred on a ‘present’ (the mother’s supplication) with ‘future impossibilities’ (that of the son’s return) which come as a result of that son’s ‘unredeemed death’. However, the sense of closure that comes with their despair is lost to the mother who is never enlightened and thus never able to recognise the ‘future impossibilities’ which her present actions are attempting to achieve. In a sense the despair is transferred to the audience, who despair on behalf of the mother. In this way, Cavafy draws the audience together with the mother, with whom they have empathised in the middle stanzas, before using the diverging paths of the audience and the mother to illustrate the balance to be found in loss. This balance is such that either hope is lost when the fantasy of a situation is dispelled, causing despair but also the positive effect of closure (as experienced by the audience) or the fantasy is maintained which leads to loss of the closure that would come with despair (as happens to the mother).

This idea that loss in terms of disillusionment is balanced against a type of gain is also apparent in *The God Forsakes Antony*. In this poem, Antony is the silent recipient of disillusionment when narrator didactically encourages him to “bid farewell to the Alexandria you are losing”,[[17]](#footnote-17) rather than to choose to believe the fantasy that it is not too late and he has not lost Alexandria [“don’t be misled, don’t say it was / a dream, that your ears deceived you”].[[18]](#footnote-18) The narrator goes on to tell Antony that by accepting loss (of both the fantasy and the real objective loss of Alexandria), he will be able to experience the gainto his character of courage and worthiness as he will act “as one courageous, / as befits you who are deemed worthy of such a city”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The idea that out of loss can come a gain implies that Cavafy presents the entire concept of loss itself as merely a point of perspective. ‘Loss’ can be viewed as merely an aspect of a larger process of cause and effect as both Antony’s objective loss of Alexandria and the Antony’s accepting his death (thus losing any fantasy and disillusionment about the situation) “confirm the reality of earlier failure”,[[20]](#footnote-20) and hence are simply the effect of an earlier cause.

Thus, what were previously viewed as losses, rooted in the *situation* (the objective loss of Alexandria and the secondary loss of Antony’s fantasy regarding it are both focussed on the situation), have the potential to result in gains in his *character* (such as him becoming ‘worthy’ and ‘courageous’). It is arguable that the situational losses are only superficial when compared to the more valuable and influential gains to Antony’s essence. Hence, it could be argued that the only genuine and not superficial losses which Cavafy presents in *The God Forsakes Antony* are those which are caused by an interruption to the process of cause and effect. This is evident on the metaphorical level of the poem. Cavafy uses the positive metaphor of “exquisite music”[[21]](#footnote-21) throughout the poem to illustrate the loss of Alexandria, stating that it is possible for Antony to find “ultimate delight”[[22]](#footnote-22) in the sounds, however to do so he must “listen with deepest feeling, yet not / with a coward’s entreaties and complaints”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Essentially, Antony must accept the objective loss of Alexandria as being unchangeable and he must be passive to it (demonstrated by his passive requirement to ‘listen’), rather than cause disharmony in the unfolding of events by attempting to act against it (with ‘entreaties and complaints’ which aurally clash in the imagination of the reader against the “exquisite music”[[24]](#footnote-24) and the “exquisite instruments”[[25]](#footnote-25) representing the harmony of the whole progressive process of which a part is loss).

This attitude, evident in *The God Forsakes Antony,* that there is a kind of gain or even beauty to be found in passively accepting loss seems at first surprising considering so many of Cavafy’s poems are dedicated to lamenting loss associated with the passing of time. However, even poems which lament loss and seem at first to contradict the message of *The God Forsakes Antony* can be found to convey a similar message. In *The Souls of Old Men*, Cavafy makes a generic observation on the nature of old men who lament the passing of time and fear their approaching loss of life. Cavafy portrays these men both pitiably [“how pathetic they are”][[26]](#footnote-26) and tragicomically [“souls that dwell – tragicomically – / within their aged, ravaged hides”],[[27]](#footnote-27) but in the poem there is no sense of real tragedy which remains pure and untouched by a bitter comic element. In *The God Forsakes Antony*, the concept of loss is shown to be merely down to perspective (as the situational loss of Alexandria has the potential to result in a more valuable gain of dignity and worthiness on the internal level of Antony’s essence). Here too loss is presented as a sense of perspective, as there is a comic irony that the souls of old men should “tremble lest they lose it [life]”,[[28]](#footnote-28) as according to the Greek Orthodox church into which Cavafy was baptised[[29]](#footnote-29), the soul is supposedly immortal, so this loss is merely an illusion.

Additionally, as in *The God Forsakes Antony*, the true loss is that which occurs not in a situational context but affects the essence of the men’s souls. In his comment of “how weary of the miserable life they must endure. / How they tremble lest they lose it, and how they cherish it”,[[30]](#footnote-30) Cavafy demonstrates the torn nature of the souls of these men; how they are wearied by life but fear the solution, which would be the loss of it. It is this *confusion* which is their true loss, as it is a loss of clarity which affects their souls [“the confused and contradictory / souls”][[31]](#footnote-31) on the level of their *essence*, as opposed to mere loss of life which, like the death of Antony, would be only be a loss on a physical, situational level (affecting only their external “aged, worn-out bodies”).[[32]](#footnote-32)

However, Trypanis argues that Cavafy’s lament at the passing of time is in reality a veil for a lament on unfulfilled homosexual desires, stating that the “most important sources of Cavafy’s inspiration were erotic passion and, closely connected with it, distress at the passage of time”.[[33]](#footnote-33) It is arguable that this is subtly evident in *The Souls of Old Men* as the depiction of loss as confusion and loss of clarity comes with the sense of being emotionally torn between two diverging options (in this case, the desire to be rid of wretched life and the fear of losing it), and it is easy to imagine similar conflicting emotions being evoked by Cavafy as a “clandestine homosexual”.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, this ‘distress at the passage of time’ is more obviously, and more truly tragically, linked with irrecoverable past homoerotic passion in *The Afternoon Sun*.

In *The Afternoon Sun*, the narrator visits the now refurbished room in which he used to meet with and make love to his lover. In the poem, the narrator proceeds from describing the present reality of the room [“Now this one and the one next door are rented / as commercial offices”][[35]](#footnote-35) to describing the room as it used to be [“over here, near the door, was the couch”],[[36]](#footnote-36) and thus the appreciation of reality is juxtaposed with the following rejection of it in favour of a fantasy. However, whilst fantasy is portrayed as the cause of ineffectual action and the cause of loss of potential to despair and find closure for the mother in *Supplication*, here fantasy is not the cause of a loss but is rather empowering to the narrator who seeks refuge from the loss of his lover in the solace of fantasy. Thus, the narrator presents the audience with the regenerated illusion of a past which is attractive and vivid through his use of adjectives (such as “yellow vases”[[37]](#footnote-37) and “Turkish rug”[[38]](#footnote-38)) and, as Margaronis argues, this “reflection becomes, in its own way, another kind of possessing”.[[39]](#footnote-39) Thus, Cavafy presents fantasy as being able to ease loss: the passage of time may result in the loss of the lover in reality but remembrance can combat this loss as it takes place in the realm of fantasy which transcends time and is therefore able to be truly possessed.

The narrator portrays to the reader first the memory of the furniture and then begins to hint at the lover himself, though only through connection with the furniture, describing “the table where he used to write”[[40]](#footnote-40) and “the bed / where we made love so many times”;[[41]](#footnote-41) the only time the narrator refers to his lover directly, the memory is dispelled and the reality returns [“we parted, / just for a week… Alas, / that week was to last forever.”].[[42]](#footnote-42) Thus, whilst Cavafy presents memory as a refuge from loss caused by passage of time, the narrator here remains passive and accepting of the loss and does not attempt to change the reality of the loss, based on his fantasy. As a result, the narrator is able to go through the stage of ‘despair’[[43]](#footnote-43) as defined by Barnstone and has the closure which the mother in *Supplication* loses in praying and trying to change the reality of the loss of her son based on the fantasy that he is not yet lost.

In conclusion Cavafy portrays loss as being a result of disharmony between: the present and the future (e.g. the souls’ needless and fantasy-based fear of future death when souls are in reality immortal in *The Souls of Old Men*); the present and the past (e.g. the present fantasy of the mother in *Supplication* that her son will return home and the past reality that he is already dead); or the fantasy present and the real present (e.g. the fantasy imminent invasion of the barbarians and the reality in *Waiting for the Barbarians*). These losses all result from confusion between fantasy and reality and Cavafy implies that such loses can be prevented either by the disillusionment of the fantasy (as in *The God Forsakes Antony*) or by the use of fantasy only as refuge from an already appreciated reality (as in *The Afternoon Sun*).

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12. C. Robinson 1988: 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cavafy, *Supplication* line 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *ibid* lines 2-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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