

Performances and epitaphs in C. P. Cavafy's 'Young Men of Sidon, A.D. 400'*

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Few poems of Cavafy have received as much critical attention as the 'Young Men of Sidon'.¹ In encountering the poem and the critical debates around it, there are two issues that come across as particularly striking for someone with a background in ancient Greek theatre and its reception. First, there is the centrality to the poem of Aeschylus' epitaph and dramatic work. Second, there is the rebuke of Aeschylus' epitaph in the second half of the poem and the role that rebuke has played in discussions around Cavafy's own take on the autonomy of art. In what ways can a Hellenistic epigram of contested authorship serve as a launch pad for a discussion around Cavafy's own views on poetic commitment? How can it embody Aeschylus' tragedy? And in what ways does it mediate between Aeschylus' dramatic work and the textual practices of Cavafy's poem?

The aim of this paper is to read the 'Young Men of Sidon' as a reflection on the complexities and paradoxes of literary transmission and value-formation. More specifically it argues that the poem addresses questions related to literary production and reception with the help of two particular tropes, the epitaphic and the performative. Like an epitaph, the poem pronounces the procedures of textual mastery dead, but at the same time it acknowledges that they have an afterlife. Like a performance, it exposes them as fictitious, but at the same time it recognizes that their fictitiousness has a lasting and haunting power. The language of the poem displays strategies associated with performances and epitaphs to frame its own practice in ways which oscillate between competing modes of representation. On the one hand its epitaphic and performative functions provide a critique of the procedures of mastery over texts and their authors. On the other hand they acknowledge and exploit

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¹ See Lambropoulos (1988) 182-208 and the relevant entry in Daskalopoulos (2003).

the allure of such procedures and of their promise to deliver finality, fixity and permanence.

Epitaphs

There are various reasons why the attribution to Aeschylus himself of the epigram recited and discussed in the poem cannot be taken seriously. The Hellenistic ‘Life of Aeschylus’ in which the epigram has been preserved says nothing about its authorship by Aeschylus and states instead that it was inscribed by the citizens of the Sicilian city of Gela on the public tomb in which Aeschylus was buried (Page 1972: 332). The likelihood that it was written by anyone at all at the time of Aeschylus is in fact small as a fifth-century epitaph would look rather different both in terms of form and in terms of content (Page 1981: 131). Aeschylus is supposed to have written at least two epigrams but their fragmentary survival, their non-inclusion in ancient anthologies, his anecdotal loss to Simonides in a competition for an epigram for the battle of Marathon, and the virtual disappearance of the epigram as a genre during the fifth century, perhaps due to the dominance of other elaborate forms of poetry such as tragedy, do not make the connection between Aeschylus and epigrams particularly strong. The epigram of the ‘Life of Aeschylus’ is neither the work of Aeschylus nor the product of an inscriptional tradition of funerary epitaphs of the fifth century BC. In all likelihood it is the product of a literary tradition of pseudo-epitaphs of the Hellenistic period. In any case its attribution to Aeschylus is not made until a couple of centuries later, at the time of Athenaeus (14.627c-d) and Pausanias (1.14.5).

The ancient biography of Aeschylus, like the epigram itself, turns into biographical narrative what since Aristophanes’ *Frogs* was a critical discourse about Aeschylus’ poetry. They both draw on an “anti-individualistic, anti-sophistic and anti-imperial” (Scodel 2003: 139) strand in the ancient reception of Aeschylus that transformed the poet of warlike characters that features in Aristophanes to the poet who excelled as a fighter in Marathon and the poet who defeats Euripides in a contest for the throne of Tragedy to the representative of a heroic generation (Scodel 2003: 140; Lefkowitz 1978: 464). Athenaeus and Pausanias’ later attribution to Aeschylus himself of the epigram may contradict the details of Aeschylus’ Hellenistic biography but it builds on the same strand of his reception. Rather than questioning the critical discourse of

Aeschylus as the poet of action from which this strand originated and on which it depended, the attribution of the epigram to Aeschylus had the effect of further enhancing its message. As Scodel argues, “Aeschylus could simultaneously serve as the emblem of his era and as one stage in the development of Greek literary sensibility” (Scodel 2003: 140).

Most readers of the ‘Young Men of Sidon’ have ignored or quickly bypassed the issue of the questionable authenticity of the epigram and its position in Aeschylus ancient reception. At one end of the spectrum there is Seferis (1974: 442) who, following Athenaeus and Pausanias, confidently attributes the epigram to Aeschylus (‘or to one of his contemporaries’). At the other end there is Savidis (1985) who argues that “Cavafy himself was aware of the modern scholarly doubts concerning the epitaph’s authorship” only to summarily dismiss any claims that Cavafy might be endorsing the young Sidonian’s rebuke of the epitaph. What I would argue here is that the questionable link between the epigram and Aeschylus exemplifies the wider epitaphic theme at play in the poem and in reception history at large. As Mills-Court, among others, has argued, an epitaph is “the sort of inscription that marks presence if only by pointing to its absence” (Mills-Court 1990: 33): the paradox of its operation is that in drawing attention to absence it acknowledges its failure to incarnate presence, but at the same time it refuses to reduce absence to nothingness.

To begin with, there is a strong sense in the poem that the actor’s performance of Aeschylus’ epigram is followed by a moment where the young man and his readers are provided with unmediated access to Aeschylus. Despite of, or because of, the unfortunate delivery of the epigram, the young man embarks on a spontaneous and passionate conversation directly with Aeschylus himself, rather than with his work or its reception. The immediacy and familiarity of the second person singular used by the young man throughout his speech (5 related verbs and 8 pronouns) does not only bring Aeschylus back to life but also facilitates his merging with the addressees themselves of the poem in the future. The strong appeal of this rhetorical gesture can be seen in the impact it has had on many of the poem’s critics. If the young man collapses the difference between the alleged author of the epigram, his interlocutors, and his future readers, his speech has enabled critics of the poem to also collapse the difference between the young man and the author of the poem, that is, to make the

young man the conveyer of the poet's message. Attributing to Aeschylus the authorship of the epigram and attributing to Cavafy the words of the young man are not unrelated but analogous, illustrating as they do different ways in which an epitaph can create the illusion of a direct and immediate link with the deceased.

At the same time, however, there is an alternative set of practices in operation in the poem whose effect is to conceal, rather than reveal, Aeschylus' presence through fragmentation, mediation, dissolution, and denial. The poem is based not on the authorial certainty of recognizable Aeschylean verses but on a short poem of uncertain authorship; not on references to Aeschylus' surviving work but on the fictions around his biography; not on the generic attributes of tragedy but on the literary genres of epitaph and biography. The young man, rather than lending his voice to Aeschylus, addresses him as his interlocutor. Aeschylus' voice is never heard. The young man's engagement with the past is a monologue, not an exchange of ideas with authors or readers. The poem foregrounds this manner of engaging with a past poet, but it also creates a framework that exposes its shortcomings at least in two ways: through comments on the youthfulness, vivaciousness, and passion for letters of the young man as well as on the liminality of the setting: a "private, privileged, perfumed gathering of immature youths at the end of the ancient era in the rich Hellenized Phoenician port of Sidon" (Lambropoulos 2002: 208). Even when Aeschylus' work is praised in the final lines of the poem, this praise is based not on an insightful and original engagement with Aeschylus' work but on "commonalities" (as Seferis 1974: 447 puts it) around its art, characters and language - in ways reminiscent of some of Cavafy's earlier poems where ancient Greek tragedy is mediated through critical filters such as nineteenth-century drama and art as well as through Plato and Aristotle (Fountoulakis 2007; Patrikiou 2002). The concealment and dissolution of Aeschylus, then, displays an alternative conceptualization of poetry, where its language is not the creation and incarnation of its writer, but a symbol of the writer's loss. The poet is not the principal agent of artistic creation. Poetic language preserves neither the remains nor the traces of its author. Rather, it announces the death of Aeschylus through symbols which nevertheless transform that death "into a force that generates the presence that seems lost" (Mills-Courts 1990: 35). Viewed in this light, the position of Aeschylus in the poem is analogous not to that of the poem's readers, as the young man has it, but to that of Cavafy himself:

seemingly firm and deceptively familiar, but in fact fragmented, mediated, dissolved, and hidden. By the same token, the position of the readers is analogous to that of the young Sidonian and the other readers-within-the-poem: undertaking a very real engagement with Aeschylus (and Cavafy) but remaining in the shadow of their strikingly elusive anonymity.

The poem, with its take on the epitaph of Aeschylus, can be situated within an ironic tradition of literary epitaphs that contest, rather than celebrate, the memory of the deceased which can be traced all the way back to the first work of Western literature. In Homer's *Iliad*, 7.89-91, for instance, Hector imagines a tomb for his victim that preserves the name of the conqueror rather than of the victim. If epitaphs are expected to praise the deceased, the *Iliad* provides examples of imagined epitaphs that challenge the epitaphic form by inciting blame rather than praise. In a way comparable to the fictional epitaphs of the *Iliad*, the 'Young Men of Sidon' shows that the epitaphic form "is a medium not for appropriate memory but for appropriation" (Scodel 1992: 65). Just as in the *Iliad* the speaker's fantasies of commemoration expose his (always male) "wish to inscribe himself everywhere, to mark as his own property that is not his" (Scodel 1992: 65), so it can be argued that in the 'Young Men of Sidon' we have the inscription of different voices on the monument of Aeschylus' poetry as well as on the monument of Cavafy's poetry itself. It is perhaps not surprising for epic poetry, given its preoccupation with the preservation of heroic memory, that it *both* appropriates media of preservation of memory such as monuments and inscriptions *and* also questions their ability to preserve the memory of the deceased. The 'Young Men of Sidon' does not perhaps engage in competition with monuments and epitaphs in the way that Homeric poetry does. It nevertheless displays its embodiment of, and distance from, monuments and epitaphs in ways reminiscent of epic poetry. At the same time, if "there is an ironic distance between Hector's concerns for memorialization and the epic's narration of them" (Scodel 1992: 67), there is a similar distance between the actor's enactment of memorialization, the young man's enactment of and concern for memorialization, and the poem's narration of them. Just as Homeric epic does not confer on real or imagined epitaphs the authority they try to claim for themselves (to paraphrase Scodel 1992: 67), so does the 'Young Men of Sidon' question the authority that the epigram of Aeschylus and the young man's anti-epigram claim for themselves.

Performances

Theatricality has often been seen as an important aspect of Cavafy's poetry defining it in opposition to lyricism. Cavafy himself has been identified as 'dramatic' or 'tragic' poet.² There are various features of the 'Young Men of Sidon' than can be, and have been, identified as theatrical: the dialogic character of the poem, the existence of characters with different points of view, the presence of an actor, the oral delivery of literary poems, the presence of a backdrop against which the characters speak, the juxtaposition between self-perception and reality, the emotive language used, and so on. Despite its anti-lyrical credentials, Cavafy's theatricality has nevertheless often been employed in criticism in ways that reaffirm notions of unity and authority: Cavafy is depicted as the stage actor who takes on different roles or as the stage director who controls actions, characters, and emotions.³ Theatricality has been read not as an effect of the language of the poem - and of the ways in which it has been read - but as the product of the agency of its author.

Restoring the unity between the poem and the poet is certainly one of the possibilities opened up by the theatrical strategies in operation in the poem. The characters who listen, look, speak, smell and act, the spatio-temporal setting within which they function, the chance encounter with Cavafy's epitaph, the actor's delivery that goes wrong, the spontaneous reaction of the young Sidonian, his passionately direct and sermon-like address of Aeschylus, the abrupt ending of the poem and its suspension of closure, all provide a sense of immediacy, spontaneity, and embodied interactivity. A whole theatrical apparatus is in operation in the poem, that privileges liveness and presence as authentic and contingent. A performance that comes across as non-scripted is a performance that promises unmediated access to a reality behind the scenes, to the living presence of truth. The temptation to assign such a performance to the authorial role of the poet-as-director is only a small step away, and critics of the poem have often found it an easy one to take.

² The relevant bibliography can be found in Fountoulakis 2007; Patrikiou 2002.

³ See examples in Patrikiou 2002: 273, n.2.

Of course, the poem is imagined theatre. It simulates the theatrical experience by both replicating and replacing it. The vocalization and contingency of performance are mediated textually, through specific features of the poetic language which cover narrative form (including plot and characterization), affect (audio-visual, dramatic, or more specifically tragic), and content (Aeschylus and his work). The questions raised by the liminality of the setting, the atmosphere of the gathering, the actor's misjudged delivery of the epigram, the age and disposition of the young man, and his non-dialogic engagement with Aeschylus' epitaph do not bring Aeschylus (or Cavafy) closer. Foregrounding the possibility of failure, ignorance, and of unintended and unforeseen consequences, they exemplify Plato's claim in the *Republic* (597e) that artistic representation stands at third remove from reality. Through performance strategies, then, just as through epitaphic strategies, presence is not only affirmed but also ironized. If it is affirmed with the help of the rhetoric of the ontological superiority of performance over other art forms, it is also ironized through the exposure of its limitations and shortcomings within a narrative framework that remains detached.

The incursion of theatricality into the poem, however, is not merely a question of the employment of specific performative techniques into a literary context. Rather, it has to do with an epistemology which, although more readily associated with the theatrical stage, it can also be used for thinking about poetry (Newton 2006, Bennett & Royle 2004: 233-39). To conceptualize the poem as performance enables us to see it not as an artefact but as an event; not as words printed on a page but as an encounter with those words, a contingent but lived experience that, like a live performance, "becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan 1993: 146). Just as one cannot watch the same performance twice (following Heraclitus' logic that makes impossible to cross the same river twice), so is every encounter with a poem unique and unrepeatable. The poem enacts the contingent and embodied nature of the reader's encounter with the poem through its own encounters with Aeschylus. When, for instance, the young man positions himself in relation to Aeschylus, he does not merely describe an action. He performs that action. His speech actively defends poetry through present indicatives (the classic examples of performatives according to Austin 1962: 56) and imperatives that stand out of the rest of the poem and seek to blur the distinction between the written word and the spoken world and to close the

temporal and spatial gap between the present of his performance, the past of Aeschylus, and the future of the poem's readers. If "every performative (a promise or threat or whatever) is haunted by the necessary possibility that it will fail or go astray" (Bennett & Royle 2004: 238), the poem foregrounds this haunting: the message of the young man's speech is at odds with a narrative frame that, without fully invalidating the speech, stresses its subjectivity and specificity, thus limiting its authority. So the question that arises from an understanding of literary interpretation as performance is not what the poem describes, nor, simply, what the speech of the young man does, but also what the dissonant framing of the speech does, and what is the role of the tension between the two in the act of reading the poem.

Conclusion

The 'Young Men of Sidon' presents poetic language as a reflection on poetic creativity, literary history, and literary value-judgement, oscillating between presence and representation, incarnation and imitation. The relation between the poem and the literary past is conceptualized not only in terms of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, with the characters waging an oedipal struggle against an all-powerful body of canonical works. It is also conceptualized in terms of a rupture with the classical past, in terms of an ongoing, complex and often contentious process of selection and imitation of past artworks, where the competition is not directly with the past itself but with other definitions of that past. The poem is not trying to establish itself as a legitimate heir of Aeschylus' tragedy, nor, on the other hand, to expose its link with tragedy as completely arbitrary. Rather it provides a reflection on the complexities and paradoxes of the interpretative processes that link the two together as opposite ends of the same spectrum. In doing so, it features Aeschylus not just as a source of anxiety but as a multifaceted prism in which it refracts its own image.

The poem flirts with the allure of divine, prophetic poetry, with the notion that poetic language is a privileged medium of communication between the reader and a canonical literary tradition (the epigram as the voice of Aeschylus; the young man as the heir of Aeschylus) – the same kind of medium that some of the criticism of the poem has seen as facilitating the communication between the reader and the author

(the young man as the voice of Cavafy; Seferis as the voice of Aeschylus). The poem achieves this effect with the help of epitaphic and performative discourses which promise liveness, presence, finality, and closure. However it also features an alternative type of poetics, whereby the poem does not incarnate the literary past, nor its own author, but sides with representation, with the plurality of words and voices, with the discontinuities and uncertainties of literary genealogies. The poem does not lament the inability of epitaphs to convey the truth about the deceased, nor the inability of performances to blend seamlessly with the reality they enact. The self-effacement of that reality or truth is the inevitable effect of writing and reading. The absence of the author and of the literary past is a necessary condition for poetry to come to life through its encounter with its readers. The poem does not disclose truths about its author or the literary past. It announces the death of Aeschylus and Cavafy (the end of their singularity, fixity, uniqueness) and yet transforms their death “into a force that generates the presence that seems lost” (Mills-Courts 1990: 35).

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