

in the underbelly of autobiography. I take that whole area of his poetry to be the realistic and ephemeral moments which are added to the larger mosaic of Eros as a governing principle. True, these moments exploit sentiment in a certain sense, but individual human nature for Cavafy is terribly implicated in such exploitation, nor is his own persona excluded from such irony. Of course, the fact that all those poems lead to a cumulative tragedy of loss, to the true rending mystery of loss, does not make each one of them successful, perhaps. Still, though there are degrees of success in his poems, I believe the erotic ones (those not necessarily deepened by history's insights but surely infused with the shock of the everyday reality of Eros) are not to be relegated as inferior. These poems may in fact serve as the imagistic sustenance, in the larger mosaic, of the ones we consider great.

Finally, it would be absurd to say that the homosexual content in Cavafy's poetry limits in any way the poet, any more than it does Sappho, or Anacreon, or W. H. Auden. Equally absurd would be to maintain, with the Victorians, that what Socrates is advocating with Eros is some sort of ideal "Platonic friendship," so called. The gap needs to be closed in the two wrong-headed directions, both for Cavafy and for Socrates. To be sure, both have an area of lust as a *rite of passage*, and both use the impulses that led to lust as a means of understanding the world, as a means to a life-giving force, a pleasure instinct by which to counter death; and, yes, both point ultimately to ideal, virtually divine landscapes of love, emanating always from lust; but that is the direction of the rarefied dialectical syllogism in philosophy as well—though the crude first step is still implicated in the process, never disowned. Cavafy may have originally withheld the pronouns that show gender in his poetry as a concession to the then current morality; but in fact that in itself became a forceful aesthetic device of great beauty and constraint in his earlier pieces. His exploration of Eros is just as attractive as Socrates' and uniquely universalized without being prurient. It is not answerable to any kind of morality in any sense. And the effect on consciousness, of any persuasion or creed, is inevitably profound. In that protensive effect lies the silent course of Cavafy's revolution: where consciousness may make life choices and be consoled in those choices by the highest ethic in poetry and philosophy.

Kazantzakis and the Cretan Hero*

ELIZABETH CONSTANTINIDES

KAZANTZAKIS' BIRTHPLACE, the island of Crete, has from the fifteenth century to the present day played a special role in the history of Greek literature. After the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks it was Crete, then under Venetian rule, that became the center of Greek culture. Stimulated by their contacts with the West, notably Renaissance Italy, Cretan authors produced works of the first rank, especially drama, narrative poetry, and pastorals. After the fall of Crete to the Turks in 1669, many Cretans fled westward, among them the most prominent and learned, and on the island itself the production of high literature came to a sudden end. Yet even from the period of cultural darkness that followed we have inherited from Crete, as from other parts of Greece, a rich store of folk songs of all types. Unique to Crete, however, are a large number of poetic narratives detailing various historical events, especially the uprisings, revolts, and heroic efforts of the Cretans to shake off the Turkish yoke. Many of these songs deal with the events of the Revolution of 1821 and of the major uprisings of 1866 and 1896. There are even recent songs about the German occupation during the Second World War.¹ The persistence in Crete of the heroic song, orally composed, recounting the brave deeds or death of a leader, using traditional forms of expression, passed on from one generation of bards to another, has led some modern scholars to compare these Cretan narratives to the heroic poetry of antiquity, particularly

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All references to Kazantzakis' texts are to the Greek editions. The translations of the passages quoted are mine except for the final quotation, which is taken from Bien's translation.

¹The largest collection of Cretan historical songs is found in Kriaras, pp. 7-184. For recent historical narratives see Detorakis, pp. 75ff. and Mavrakis, pp. 254-60. The most detailed version of the deeds of Daskaloyiannis, mentioned below, is 1034 lines long and was composed in 1786 (see Laourdas, p. 13).

to Homer's epics.² The most notable of the Cretan heroic lays is a long account of the unsuccessful revolt led by Daskaloyiannis in 1770, when with the encouragement of Russia, then at war with the Ottomans, several regions in Greece took up arms. Indeed, the history of Crete during the last two hundred and fifty years has been an unbroken series of rebellions. Even in the last century the word Cretan was synonymous with heroism and love of freedom. The greatest of the Greek Romanticists, Dionysios Solomos, in his poem *O Kretikós*, chose a Cretan revolutionary to embody not only patriotism but also the soul's desire for the ideal. Another Heptanesian poet, Gerasimos Markoras, wrote a long narrative poem, *O Órkos (The Oath)*, describing the love and heroism of a Cretan youth and girl at the time (1866) of the holocaust of the monastery of Arkadi. Yet another Heptanesian, Lorenzo Mavilis, himself joined the Cretan rebels during the last insurrection (1896) and wrote two of his finely chiselled sonnets about the island, one ("Krété") extolling its natural beauty and its long heroic tradition—"Death, immortality, and freedom"—and the other ("Excelsior") describing the nobility, vigor, and the hardiness of its mountaineer fighters.

It was inevitable, then, that Kazantzakis, too, who grew up in Heraklion during the period of turmoil before the island's liberation, should have been deeply affected by the revolutionary disposition of his countrymen. For about ten years, between 1889 and 1898, from Kazantzakis' sixth to sixteenth year, the boy and his family lived in fear and uncertainty and witnessed such terrible events as the slaughter of their neighbors by Turks on a rampage and patriots hanged in the public square. His family was even forced to flee for their safety, first to Piraeus and then to the island of Naxos (1897). That these events left an ineradicable impression on the boy and were crucial in the formation of his character and outlook is expressly stated by the author himself in his autobiographical work *Report to Greco (Anaphorá ston Gréko)*. The *Report* reviews his life and arranges its components, his experiences and spiritual states, as he wished them to be known to posterity. There he shows that he finally came to realize that Crete, the Cretan view of things, the "Cretan glance," *kretiké matiá*, as he

²Though in Greece, unlike Yugoslavia (see Lord, *The Singer of Tales*), there are no modern songs than can "compare in length and complexity with the Homeric poems" (Lord, "Parallel," p. 74), Crete has been an unusually rich source of heroic narrative poetry. There are indications that less than two hundred years ago the Cretans still preserved an oral form of the Byzantine romantic epic *Digenis Akritas* (Morgan, p. 53), and such songs as the lay of Daskaloyiannis, though more historic in character, show many of the salient features of ancient oral epic (Laourdas, pp. 8, 10; cf. Notopoulos, "Continuity," p. 84 and "Homer").

calls it, should be the guiding force of his life in this savage and destructive age in which we are living (*Anaphorá*, pp. 585ff.).³ It was the "Cretan glance," says Kazantzakis, with which Minoan youths faced the bull depicted on the frescoes of the palace of Knossos. It is the "Cretan glance"—a glance that viewed danger and death without fear or hope—that he bestows upon the protagonist of his long epic, *The Odyssey*, whom he considered his most important heroic creation. Odysseus not only represents metaphorically the author's own struggle to turn flesh into spirit, the worm into the butterfly, but he also becomes the model, "the Archetype," for the man of the future (*Anaphorá*, pp. 581, 587). In this view of life, struggle is the greatest good, victory there is none, glory lies in calmly facing "the abyss."

Now it has been remarked many times that the heroes of Kazantzakis' works resemble one another: that they are all depicted as rebels on a grand scale, fighting against their moral, political, or religious environment, all of them representing in some way or other the author himself. This may be true. There is no doubt, however, that for the most authentic presentation of the "Cretan glance" we should look at Kazantzakis' one work that is truly Cretan, whose protagonists live in Crete and are engaged in that most characteristically Cretan of all activities, struggling for their freedom. That work is the novel *Kapetán Micháles*, subtitled *Eleutheria e thanatos, Freedom or Death*. *Kapetán Micháles* was written late in Kazantzakis' career (1949-50) and like the *Report to Greco* represents a distillation of his views on his native land and its traditions.

The action of the novel is set in 1889 and describes the events that led to an uprising of the Cretans in the mountainsides around Heraklion. The immediate cause of the revolt is the actions of Kapetán Micháles and his brother Manoúsakas and their family feud with one of the local Turkish landowners, Nouri Bey. Nouri kills Manoúsakas, but in the duel is himself maimed and rather than live dishonored commits suicide. The death of Nouri inflames the Turkish community, and many of the Christians of Heraklion are slaughtered by Turks seeking revenge, though Micháles and his family escape to the countryside. Micháles and many of the Cretan men, including the brave Polyxínges, take to the mountains determined to win their freedom from the Turks. The central female personage is Eminé, the wife of Nouri Bey. Polyxínges loves her and after the Bey's death takes her into his house. Micháles also desires her and during the defense of a monastery under Turkish attack

³A detailed and comprehensive discussion of the influence that Kazantzakis' Cretan heritage and upbringing had on his works as a whole is found in Morton Levitt's *The Cretan Glance*, especially chapters 1 and 2. A summary of Levitt's views also appears in his article "The Cretan Glance."

leaves his post to save her. In the absence of Micháles the monastery falls to the Turks. Micháles cannot endure the disgrace: he slays Eminé for being the cause of his desertion, retreats to a mountain stronghold, and with a handful of friends and relatives dies heroically fighting a multitude of Turkish troops.

Some of the events described in the novel are based on historical occurrences, though not all of the same period: the slaughter of Greeks in Heraklion took place in 1889; the defense and burning of a famous monastery, that of Arkadi, in 1886; and the outstanding example of resistance from a mountain stronghold in the face of sure defeat is that of Daskaloyiannis in 1770. The characters in *Kapetán Micháles* according to Kazantzakis himself are modelled on Cretans that he knew. "I am struggling to resurrect the Heraklion of my childhood . . . Thousands of individuals now dead rise up in my memory and ask for a small place in the sun, two or three lines, a favorable word," he wrote to the author Pandelis Prevelakis, his close friend and a fellow Cretan (*400 grámmata*, p. 617). To his Swedish friend and translator, Börje Knös, he declared, "The individuals in this book, the episodes, the dialogue are all true, even if they seem incredible to people who were born in the light or half-light of Western civilization" (Eleni Kazantzaki, p. 567). In particular, the author's father, whose name was Michales, casts a long shadow over the whole work.⁴

We know from Kazantzakis' own words that his feelings toward his father were ambivalent and at times overpowering. He describes him as uncompromisingly harsh, primitive, almost feral (*Anaphorá*, pp. 36-37), a man who inspired fear, who belittled his young son's literary interests (pp. 93-94, 114, 571-72), and who emphasized in the most vehement ways the obligation to be fearless, unyielding, and loyal to Crete (pp. 104ff., 114-15). Yet Kazantzakis admired his father's intransigence and unflinching resoluteness in the face of disaster and death (p. 103) and was keenly aware that he did not live up to his father's expectations. The contrast between his father's character and that of his mother, whom he describes as patient, gentle, and tender, was responsible, he thought, for the conflict he felt within himself:

⁴Besides his father and other members of his family Kazantzakis specifically mentions in the *Anaphorá* the following persons that correspond in some way to characters in the novel:

the winsome little Turkish girl, Eminé (pp. 55-56)/ Eminé, Nouri Bey's wife; "Tityros," K.'s teacher (pp. 64-68)/Tityros, Kapetán Micháles' brother; K.'s neighbors, Demetrós and his wife Penelópe (pp. 55, 73)/Demetrós and fat Penelópe; Cf. also the three ugly Herakliote sisters whom K. refers to as the "Fokadopules" (Eleni Kazantzaki, p. 47) and the albino Foukaropóules of the novel.

My life was a very quiet one . . . Only my childhood was swept by a wild wind because my father, who had very great influence on me, was not a human being; he was a wild animal (*theriό*). And my mother was a saint, the gentlest of women. I took after both of them, and my struggle always was how to reach a synthesis without allowing either of these two roots of mine to atrophy (*400 grámmata*, p. 623, cf. *Anaphorá*, pp. 59-60).

When Kazantzakis senior died, Nikos felt a painful but joyous sense of freedom, as if a great burden had been lifted from him (*Anaphorá*, pp. 372-73). "The shadow over me has left, gone down, disappeared into the earth. Now that he who gave me birth has vanished, I am being born," he declared in a letter to his companion, later wife, Eleni Samios—a surprising declaration from a man then fifty years old (Eleni Kazantzaki, pp. 324-25). Even before his father's death in 1929 he had tried repeatedly to write about him. He sketched out, but never completed, a novel entitled *Kapetán Elías* based on Micháles Kazantzakis' life (Eleni Kazantzaki, p. 277). Ten years later with the composition of *Kapetán Micháles*, the son finally came to terms with his father's ghost: "I am trying as best I can to resurrect my father. To pay back my debt in this way: by giving birth to him who gave me birth" (p. 565). (Note that it is now the father who is being born.)⁵

Exorcising his father's ghost was not the only impetus behind the composition of *Kapetán Micháles*. Kazantzakis had already at the beginning of the Second World War turned to writing prose fiction that had a clearly Greek setting, *Zorba* (1941-43) being the first of several such novels.⁶ Moreover, he had before him—a fact often forgotten—a recent and, to his mind, successful example of fiction set in nineteenth-century Crete, namely the first two volumes of Pandelis Prevelakis' trilogy, *O Kreitikós*. In one of his letters to Prevelakis he expressed "enthusiasm" for the younger man's Cretan books (*400 grámmata*, p. 617).

No matter how many historical events and personages Kazantzakis incorporates into *Kapetán Micháles*, he always "transubstantiates" them—to use one of his favorite philosophical terms—into myth. The mythical dimension of his novels has often been mentioned by critics.

⁵Those closest to Kazantzakis, for instance his wife Eleni and his friend Pandelis Prevelakis, viewed his father with somewhat less awe. "The father, like all Greek peasants," says Eleni, "dreamed of seeing his son become a lawyer, or a member of Parliament—why not?—or even something better" (p. 47). Prevelakis calls Micháles "a primitive peasant, unsociable and uncommunicative" (*O poietés*, p. 18).

⁶For a discussion of Kazantzakis' disillusionment with Greek political and literary circles, especially in relation to his battle for the demotic tongue, and of his subsequent reconciliation to contemporary Greeks and to the use of Greek subject matter, see Bien, pp. 168ff., especially pp. 223-28; cf. Prevelakis, pp. 188-90.

Here I would like to point out—for I do not think this parallel has been discussed elsewhere—that *Kapetán Micháles* is a reworking of certain themes, incidents, and characters from ancient Greek heroic myth, particularly the *Iliad*.

As in a Homeric poem, so in *Kapetán Micháles* we find not only two peoples but two cultures in conflict. In both cases the conflict grows out of a private, individual wrong. As Homer's attention goes beyond the Achaean camp to the Trojan city and palace, so, too, Kazantzakis gives us close pictures of the Cretan Turkish community, the Turkish home, and Turkish customs. As in the *Iliad*, so, too, in the novel a woman plays havoc with warriors' lives. In Homer, of course, the figure of Helen is central because her abduction caused the war. In the novel the motif of abduction is less prominent and the *femme fatale*, the Circassian Eminé, is from the oriental, not the Greek, side.⁷ That Kazantzakis wishes to present the Circassian woman as the modern counterpart of the beautiful queen of Sparta is underscored by the new Christian name, Helen, that is chosen for Eminé as the day of her conversion and baptism draws near (*Kapetán Micháles*, p. 321). In addition, the role which Eminé plays has some affinities to that of Homer's Briseis. At the opening of the *Iliad* Agamemnon takes the slave woman Briseis away from Achilles, the acknowledged champion of the Achaeans, and as a result Achilles withdraws from the battle, thus endangering the Greek cause. Eminé likewise is responsible for the bad feelings between the two Greek leaders, Micháles and Polyxínges, and, above all, she causes Michális to leave the battle at a crucial moment for the Cretans.

Kazantzakis repeatedly underlines the parallels between the heroic society of Homer and that of the Cretan chieftains. He describes the councils of the *kapetánii*, the leaders of the rebellion, in a manner similar to Homer's depiction of the deliberations of the *basilees* (cf. *Kapetán Micháles*, pp. 309-16 and, e.g. *Iliad* 2.53-83, 9.13-181, 10.194-253). Among the Cretans, too, there is a Nestor, in fact more than one Nestor, grand old warrior chiefs who never tire of giving advice and recounting the brave deeds of their own generation (*Kapetán Micháles*, pp. 367-69, 448ff.). The Cretans also have their bards, the *rimadóri*, who sing of the glorious deeds of the past: one of them recounts the events

⁷Kazantzakis' view of the feminine in his metaphysical scheme of things is notoriously inimical. Women are associated with the flesh, with matter, with the downward, instinctive force that is destructive and opposed to the dynamic, constructive upward force connected with the male (e.g., *Asketiké*, pp. 9, 22-23, 88-89). Hence, women are considered an obstacle and must be removed if a man is to attain the greatest spiritual freedom. In all of Kazantzakis' novels the principle female personages die, or are killed, or rejected (see Prevelakis, pp. 58-59). On Eminé particularly, see Manousakis, pp. 77-78.

of the revolution of 1821 just as Demodokos and Phemios in the *Odyssey* sing of the Trojan War (*Kapetán Micháles*, p. 399; cf. *Od.* 1.325-27, 8.72-82). As in the *Iliad*, so in *Kapetán Micháles* the individual hero meets his opponent in a fierce duel after a prescribed ritual of taunts and challenges (cf. pp. 207-08 and *Iliad* 5.276-96, 7.224-312, 22.248-365). Hospitality, one of the basic laws of Homer's world, is also a requirement of Cretan society: Kazantzakis describes one incident where a guest is not turned away nor even informed that his host is in mourning for a son not yet buried (pp. 322-34). The famous ancient parallel is the story of Admetus, king of Pherae, who welcomed Herakles but did not tell him that his wife, Queen Alcestis, had just died, lest his guest leave his house without enjoying its hospitality.

Even in small details and minor characters the mythical references of *Kapetán Micháles* are clearly evident. The very first sentence describes a fit of wrath of the protagonist and calls to mind the celebrated opening line of the *Iliad*. Polyxínges' niece cuts off her hair as a sign of mourning (p. 274) as was the custom in ancient Greece. Micháles' mother has woven a winding sheet for her husband while he is still alive (p. 459) as did Penelope for her father-in-law, Laertes (*Od.* 2.94-102). The modern Cretan warriors pour a libation of wine onto the ground to seal their oaths (p. 316) as did the Greeks in pagan antiquity (cf. *Iliad* 3.295-301). Nouri Bey's magnificent horse mourns over his master's grave (p. 260) as the immortal horses of Achilles wept for Patroklos (*Iliad* 17.426-40). The frequent comparisons of the protagonists, especially the heroes, to animals—lions, boars, eagles, and the like—recall many a Homeric simile. Especially striking is the portrayal of the Foukaropoules, triplet sisters who are Nouri Bey's neighbors. They are albinos, white-haired from birth, bearing the names of Aglaia, Thalia, and Phrosyne (pp. 24-25). They busy themselves with their tasks and never leave their house but they peer out at the Herakliots from peep-holes in their door. They have an uncanny knowledge of what goes on and gossip about everyone. Their names are those of the three Graces, but their appearance and actions declare them to be a somewhat humorous presentation of a more awesome set of ancient goddesses, namely the three Fates, the *Moirai*.

In Kazantzakis' Crete the same heroic code obtains as obtained in Homer's epics: individual prowess, honor, and self-respect are valued above all else. The essence of this heroic view is that only in the face of death at the hands of an enemy can men win the highest glory. In both the *Iliad* and in the novel the code is acknowledged by Greek and enemy alike. For Achilles, judged by his fellow warriors to be the greatest among them, the allotment of glory was concomitant with a short life (*Il.* 1.352-53). Therefore, there was no question that his death

would be the confirmation of his position as the "best of the Achaeans" (1.412). Kapetán Micháles, like Homer's Achilles (he is, in fact, called Achilles by the European professor who visits his stronghold (p. 379), is unquestionably the greatest of the heroes in actuality as well as in reputation: his mere appearance in battle is enough to throw his enemies into confusion (pp. 338-39). Like Achilles he puts his private concerns above the interests of his fellow warriors and the people who depend on him. But Micháles differs in that he has no clear view until the end why it is that death alone can define his heroic role. When, finally, Micháles is fighting on in spite of sure destruction, he no longer fights for his country but for his (that is, Kazantzakis') view of what heroism really is: "Since the day I lost all hope . . . I have felt that I am immortal" (*Kapetán Micháles*, p. 395). His motto has become "Freedom and Death" (p. 488).⁸

If Mihális is a modern counterpart of Achilles, then Nouri Bey also has his Homeric prototype in Hector, the Trojan prince. Nouri Bey is, like Hector, a man of courage and honor, devoted to his wife and home. Yet he must set aside peace and comfort because duty to his father and people bids him challenge his enemy and fight with him to the death.

By using ancient myth as an organizing principle of his works, Kazantzakis is using, to quote T. S. Eliot, "the mythical method" as a "way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (p. 177-78). In this respect Kazantzakis has links with the Modernists. Though the mythical dimensions in Kazantzakis' work are more obvious in the *Odyssey*, for instance, or in *O Christos ksanastavronetai* (*The Greek Passion*), *Kapetán Micháles* also provides a noteworthy example with its repeated reference to the world of ancient heroic legend. That he chose Homer's *Iliad* as the mythological reference for his novel about Crete was for him altogether fitting. From his youth on, Homer was one of the sacred texts (e.g., *Anaphorá*, pp. 190, 284, 535 and Eleni Kazantzaki, p. 72). He had taken the *Odyssey* as the springboard for his own titanic poem on Odysseus. And from 1942 to 1955—precisely, that is, during the period when he wrote *Kapetán Micháles*—he was collaborating with the classical scholar I. Th. Kakridis on a modern Greek translation of the *Iliad*. The letters he wrote to Kakridis and the latter's account of the collaboration testify to Kazantzakis' continuing and intense immersion in Homeric material (*84 grám-mata* and Kakridis *To chronikó*).

⁸For a lucid interpretation of the figure of Kapetán Micháles and the other characters of the novel in terms of Kazantzakis' credo, see Manousakis, especially pp. 88-102.

By constantly suggesting that the Cretans are modern counterparts of the Achaean Greeks, Kazantzakis is of course ennobling the Cretan and the law by which he lives—a law that would otherwise seem extraordinarily cruel and primitive. At the same time he illustrates the continuity of the Greek tradition, where certain customs are unchanged and seem eternally valid. Most importantly, the reinterpretation of the ancient heroic myth allows him to illustrate his own world-view. Kapetán Micháles not only lives according to a time-honored heroic code but also illustrates the highest attainment of man, a realization that nothing has any worth but the struggle for spiritual freedom: "I, for my part, have finished *Kapetán Micháles*, a deeply tragic work about the struggle for Freedom, the age-old longing of the soul to be redeemed, of matter to be redeemed and to become spirit, of God to be redeemed from all human virtues that burdened him so that he, too, can become Spirit" (Eleni Kazantzaki, p. 567).

For Kazantzakis himself, the "pallid offspring" of his wild paternal ancestors, the struggle to transubstantiate the primitive beast within him (*Anaphorá*, pp. 28-33) was waged not with the weapons of war but less gloriously with letters, "the twenty-four little lead soldiers," as he said (p. 580). His struggle as a man of letters was no less difficult and no less hopeless than was Kapetán Micháles':

I know perfectly well that death is invincible. Man's worth, however, lies not in victory but in the struggle for victory. I also know this, which is more difficult: it does not even lie in the struggle for victory. Man's worth lies in one thing only, in this: that he live and die bravely [*palikarísia*], without condescending to accept any recompense. And I also know this third requirement, which is more difficult yet: the certainty that no recompense exists must not make our blood run cold, but must fill us with joy, pride, and manly courage (p. 580. Trans. Bien, p. 465).

It was this creative struggle that in his own eyes raised Kazantzakis to heroic grandeur and placed him alongside all the great heroes of the world, including those of Crete, and justified his own existence.

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