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## Kazantzakis and Prevelakis: Two Cretan Voices

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WHEN A SOIL IS RICH and fertile, ample and various is the growth from it. In their individuality, the roots descending and suckling on the same motherly bosom, select the nutrients that give them the power to raise their individual blossoming testimony to the sun.

Such has been the Cretan soil. There has been a Cretan presence, a Cretan realm in the Greek world since the beginning of time, a Cretan cultural ground with striking individuality, character, and power which, in its uniqueness and originality, has often taken the role of leadership in the Greek reality and intellect. Of that realm, the two most outstanding literary representatives in our century have been Kazantzakis and Prevelakis. One could hardly think of another couple of Greek writers so closely connected with each other and with their native soil yet so strikingly different in some crucial respects in the message that their respective personalities have derived from that soil.

It was in November of 1926 when Prevelakis, still a young student of seventeen in Athens, went to meet his elder fellow islander. The latter, then forty-three years old, at the peak of his heyday had already gone through most of the intellectual and other exposures and adventures that shaped the distinct frame of his mind. He had already produced *The Saviors of God*, which was to serve as the groundwork and foundation for most of his subsequent creativity, and had even written, a year before, in first draft, the first six rhapsodies of his *Odyssey*, his magnum opus.

That meeting was the beginning of an intimate and unbreakable friendship that was to last until Kazantzakis' death in 1957. In Prevelakis Kazantzakis found not only his most faithful and trusted younger friend but also his best pupil, collaborator, fellow worker and helper who was to eventually become his most knowledgeable interpreter, critic and

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Note: The quotations from *Report to Greco* are from the published English translation by Peter Bien (Simon & Schuster, 1965). All other translations are by the author.

evaluator. Correspondingly, Prevelakis found in Kazantzakis a master to draw impetus and guidance from, to share thoughts and feelings with, to agree yet also to disagree with. Speaking of that initial meeting, Prevelakis wrote that "he fell instantly in love with him [Kazantzakis] as that happens when Moira wills it" (Παντελή Πρεβελάκη, "Ο Καζαντζάκης: Βίος και Έργα," Τετράδιο *Ευθύνης* 3, Athens, 1977, p. 20), while, in the several letters written to him, Kazantzakis would call Prevelakis "beloved companion," "beloved brother," "the only man whom I would like to see," and "the only man whom I feel close to me, thoroughly so, and my equal" (Letter 58 of July, 1928, in *Τετρακόσια Γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη στον Πρεβελάκη*, Athens, 1965, p. 85). On learning in 1950 of Prevelakis' starting to write his book on him, eventually to be entitled *Ὁ Ποιητής και τό Ποίημα τῆς Ὀδύσσειας*, 1958 (*Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey: A Study of the Poet and the Poem*, 1961), he wrote to him: "Before I die, may God make me worthy of such a joy. I would like very much, before I die, to learn whether I was worth being born," (Letter 361 of April, 1950, in *400 Letters*, p. 623), and once again, in a letter sent from Freiburg in Breisgau only six months before his death, he wrote, "How could I tell you of my emotion in waiting to learn your word about my life and work? You are the only man in the world who can judge me and whose judgement will have incalculable value for me. May God give you strength, and give me too life enough to live as to read your judgement" (Letter 438 of April, 1957, *Letters*, p. 718). In his speaking extensively and out of deep familiarity with Kazantzakis' personality, life, and experience, particularly as those led to the creation of his new *Odyssey*, boundless is his respect and praise for his master's genius and its grandeur, and deep is his admiration for the astonishingly colossal accomplishment. In examining, however, that epic's philosophical substructure, its myth and ethos, its language and style, its metaphors and imagery in their origin and use, the character of his Odysseus and the morality that inspires his action, and the extent to which those are meaningfully and harmoniously integrated in his work, Prevelakis, with no little regret, was to come to painful reservations. A higher concern, and with no trace of antagonism in it, made him wonder as to whether the message in the new *Odyssey* responded to the expectations of the Greek people. Did it agree with that people's tradition, morality and history? These reservations were due to the difference in temperament, personality and world view between master and pupil as this is manifested in their work and their respective final intellectual and creative orientation.

Unfortunately, Prevelakis' study of Kazantzakis was completed and published in 1958, the year following Kazantzakis' death. Had

Kazantzakis read it, he would have appreciated his pupil's affectionate consideration as much as his criticism, his honest, frank, perceptive, meticulous and thorough examination and weighing of all that was involved in the creation of his masterpiece. He would have taken it as voicing the judgment of his alter ego who, in critical and tense moments of his life, had actually expressed wonderings and doubts as to the righteousness of the road his mind and oration had taken.

In the very opening of his study, Prevelakis avows, "I have loved him, denied him and loved him again" (*Kazantzakis and His Odyssey*, p. 13). The short statement simply summarizes a long story. Prevelakis grew impatient with the fact that, to his mind, elements in Kazantzakis' complex self, as those were stimulated by his widely eclectic intellectual avidity and the conditions and experiences of his life, made him deviate from putting his extraordinary gifts and his tremendous toil into right use, that of producing the great modern Greek epic. Faithfulness to his Cretan and Greek origin in its cultural and ideological wealth ought to have served Kazantzakis as his resource and force in the fulfillment of such a purpose. Yet his ambition led him to the exactly opposite direction: that of illustrating the incurable decline of the western world—a quite "legitimate" choice, according to Prevelakis, which, however, deprived the Greek world of the epic it needed to give it a directional and encouraging message.

The question naturally rises, did Kazantzakis decide to ignore his Cretan heritage, and did he consciously mean to cut way from it? We only assume that our very questioning would have caused his indignation. His *Report to Greco*, the last and crowning piece of his career, provided the most eloquent answer to such a wondering. As he informs us, in no stage of his life and creativity did he cease to hear the "frightening, bellowing, monstrous ancestors in him" (*Report*, p. 26). Feeling regret that he was not endowed with what would have made him an actual fighter, like his ancestors and father in the battle for his island's liberation, he was comforted in the thought that the intellectual weapons in his hands would enable him to fight differently but no less in a liberating battle. In "The Prodigal Returns" of that *Report*, where that adjective, "prodigal," tells much of his incidental feelings of guilt while avowing his need to repeatedly renew his ties with his native soil in between his ceaseless travels and intellectual adventures, he states (pp. 435-36):

There is a mystical contact and understanding between this soil which fashioned us, and our souls. Just as roots send the tree the secret order to blossom and bear fruit so that they themselves may receive their justification and reach the goal of their journey, so

in the same way the ancestral soil imposes commandments upon the souls it has begotten. Soil and soul seem to be of the same substance, undertaking the same ascent; the soul is simply maximal victory . . .

The soul knows full well (even though it pretends to forget many times), that it must render account to the paternal soil . . . This is the terrestrial—and unique—Last Judgment where your life is weighed within your still living entrails. You hear the strict, righteously judging voice rise from the soil of your forebears and you shudder; what answer can you give it? You bite your lips and think, Oh, if only I could my life over again!

We should not fail to notice here the anxious wondering once again at the end of this quotation. Even before, yet more emphatically after 1940, the time of his writing of *Zorba the Greek*, his fascination for the discovery of his new Odysseus would at times alternate with some inner yet avowed questioning and doubt as to whether he had chosen the right way, whether his intellectual adventuring had not taken him away from his native roots.

As already stated, it was principally Crete that brought Kazantzakis and Prevelakis together and served them as the deep foundation of their lifelong friendship and collaboration. Yet to what extent did their understanding and interpretation of Crete agree or disagree? What did Crete mean to each of them? What did it involve and impose upon them as a response and a creative duty? Unquestionably so, there were affections, values, notions, beliefs they shared in common, supreme among them the notions of heroism and freedom. Yet how differently these were to inspire them!

Part of that heritage, to give a key instance, the Cretan El Greco, was to be a meaningful tie between them. They both deemed and took him as their most distinguished and inspiring great-grandfather. While a student in Europe and studying El Greco's work in the early 1930s, Prevelakis felt him as the unique companion of his mind and soul. "El Greco," he stated in his interview to Peter Mackridge in 1972, "was for several years the basic crystal round which my intellectual concerns solidified . . . El Greco, the heir of an ancient cultural tradition jealously guarded as a lifeline during the dark ages of foreign occupation, came into contact with the modern civilization of the West, was temporarily attracted to it, renounced it, and finally combined it with his original culture" (*Omphalos: A Mediterranean Review* 1. 1 March 1972, p. 34). Extensive has been Prevelakis' work on El Greco as part of his academic specialty.

As for Kazantzakis, after his pilgrimage to Toledo, where he

cherished the locales of the old master's life and worshipped his canvases, it was finally to him that he was to give the conclusive *Report* of his life, where in its "Epilogue" we read:

I marvel at the human soul; no power in heaven and earth is so great. Without being aware of it, we carry omnipotence within us. But we crush our souls beneath the weight of flesh and lard, and die without having learned what we are and what we can accomplish. What other power on earth is able to look the world's beginning and end straight in the eye without being blinded? In the beginning was not the Word (as is preached by the souls crushed beneath lard and flesh), nor the Act [rather obvious reference to *Faust* 1, 1237, and we should mention, by the way, that in April, 1950, Kazantzakis announced to Prevelakis his plan to write a *Faust* 3, which he wished to be his final work. A preliminary sketch of the argument and action of that never-written *Faust* is extant.], not the Creator's hand filled with life-receiving clay [obviously the biblical version]. In the beginning was Fire [Heraklitos should receive credit for the notion]. In the end is neither immortality nor recompense, paradise nor the inferno [and that takes care of Christianity and other religions promising salvation]. In the end is Fire. Between these two fires, dear grandfather, we traveled; and we fought, by following Fire's commandment and working with it, to turn flesh into flame, thought into flame—hope, honor, dishonor, glory, into flame. You went in the lead and I followed. You taught me that our inner flame, contrary to the nature of the flesh, is able to flare up with ever increasing intensity over the years. That was why (I saw this in you and admired you for it) you became continually fiercer as you aged, continually braver as you arrived ever closer to the abyss. Tossing the bodies of saints, rulers, and monks into the crucible of your glance, you melted them down like metals, purged away their rust, refined out the pure gold: their soul. What soul? The flame. This you united with the conflagration that engendered us and the conflagration which shall devour us (*Report*, p. 495-96).

Fascinating this is in its ontological, existential, fiery verve, and are we really far from Heraklitos and some other Pre-Socratics, those in fact who coupled matter with spirit, body with soul? Yet are we far from this El Greco's embodying what has also been embodied in the new Odysseus, Kazantzakis' own? Despite some similarities, despite the native fire with which El Greco inspired both authors, how much indeed does the nature, the quality and the direction of that Fire differ in

each author's viewing and espousing the old Cretan master! Whereas Prevelakis saw in El Greco the embodiment of an ancient tradition, and found in him the force to help him preserve himself from the decadent world then surrounding him, to help him return to that tradition and its soil that was his, Kazantzakis instead embraced him as the rebel, a Fire ravaging in its continuous ascent, one ever getting closer to the abyss, to put it in the shortest terms. Much like his Odysseus, his El Greco too carries the spirit expressed in *The Saviors of God*. He is another such savior, though exceeding many others.

We have only touched upon some points of consonance and dissonance, of agreement and disagreement between master and pupil. No short study could aspire at a thorough consideration of all that is involved in their connection. The work of both authors is too voluminous for even a furtive study. We can only limit our focus to what each has deemed his crowning masterpiece, the work by which he has wished to stay in the memory of men. Here again a most remarkable similarity occurs, where the pupil may indeed be said to have followed his master's steps. Kazantzakis' epic, his *Odyssey*, must have served as a tempting challenge for Prevelakis to produce his own epic, a lyrical one, his *New Erotokritos*, a work still in progress at the present. There have been so far two versions privately printed, respectively in 1973 and 1978 and distributed to the poet's "few close friends." We should add that Prevelakis' very first literary work was a short epic entitled *Soldiers* (1928) inspired by the living Cretan folk tradition of the *rimadha* (rhyming couplet).

There is no question as to the central value and significance that Kazantzakis' attributed to his *Odyssey* which he deemed his "life's work." On June 21, 1954, he wrote to his prominent Swedish translator Börje Knös, "I think that my entire soul, all the flame and light I could produce of the material I am made of is stated in the *Odyssey*: whatever else I have produced is only secondary" (*400 Letters*, footnote on p. 672). To this he added on April 8, 1955, in another letter to him, "I think that my salvation, that of an intellectual, depends on the *Odyssey*; if that will live I shall too" (*400 Letters*). Similarly so, Prevelakis too has wished his *New Erotokritos* to be his "last abode." What needs to be noted in our consideration is the fact that while the *Odyssey* was the product of Kazantzakis' heyday to then serve much as the foundational precedent for some of his subsequent work, *The New Erotokritos* comes as Prevelakis' final, all-encompassing word in his lifelong creativity.

The *Odyssey*, starting in Crete in 1924, took seven writings and fourteen years for its completion and publication in 1938. In the long gathering of its materials and its transformations (at least in terms of enrichment of its demotic vocabulary), Prevelakis stood as Kazantzakis' main

provider from Greece, and let us mark that the epic's fervent commitment to the demotic in its pictorial and musical wealth was to be another major tie between master and pupil. Kazantzakis was, after all, one of the foremost fighters for the demotic cause soon to be joined by Prevelakis himself. For both authors the language was no less than the nation and the race itself.

We assume that even much earlier, yet positively after the epic's completion, the pupil's appreciation of it, as that has already been stated, was tinged by serious reservations. In the interceding twelve years of their friendship and collaboration, Prevelakis had known plenty of his master's mind as that was recorded in that epic. The poem essentially gave poetic expression to what was already contained in *The Saviors of God* as that was composed in the most critical period of Kazantzakis' life, in Berlin in 1922, and was finally enriched with its nihilistic conclusion in Bekovo, Russia, in 1928. And as Kazantzakis wrote to Börje Knös in 1955, "*The Saviors of God* is the seed from which all my work has sprung; whatever else I have written is only a comment on, an illustration of *The Saviors of God*." That book (the parallel of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*) had summarized his creed as formed from his mind's searchful, anguishing perambulations through Nietzsche (and Schopenhauer behind him), Bergson, William James, Buddha, Lenin and other teachers of mankind. In his constant search for a concept of God that his eclectic restlessness could accept, their views challenged and undermined his earlier aristocratic nationalism, his Orthodox Christianity and all the ideologies and creeds offering solace, and promising metaphysical salvation. As Prevelakis has stated:

Kazantzakis was not the inventor of his ideas. He collected them from distinguished teachers of his time and from great mystagogues of the past. In his conscience the old idols did not crumble after methodic questioning. Resulting from these circumstances there were contradictions and recantations until the time when he crystallized a personal *Weltanschauung*, even though that itself was still an amalgam, a compound mixture. But this phenomenon we should not attribute only to his eclecticism. The reason lies in our century itself, a century of disbelief and controversy ("Kazantzakis: Life and Works," *Τετράδιο Εὐθύνης*, 3, p. 10).

In his book on Kazantzakis, commenting on his figure of Odysseos, Prevelakis summarily remarks:

He would not be a national hero: he would be a rebel, uprooted, even a *desperado*. The arena of his action would be the whole world. Instead of the friendly setting of his native land, there would be the threatening horizons. Instead of well-known faces there would be

magic masks. Instead of the fruit of honest toil, there would be desperate piracy. The climate of his soul? Solitude and revolt! Cosmic terrors, a feeling of homelessness, excitement of the ego. Inhumanity. Despair. Nihilism (*A Study of the Poet and the Poem*, p. 56).

Had Kazantzakis read this statement, he wouldn't have denied its truth. His hero was meant to be what he actually is: the truest projection of his creator's own mind at that time, with his advancement being the record of Kazantzakis' own mental adventure. If Nietzsche's outlet from the despair of his impasse, that of modern western man, was his creation of the Superman, so was Kazantzakis' own creation of his Odysseus, his equivalent of the Superman as the product of a similar despair in facing the death of the gods: a new Superman, self-centered, avid, egotistical, amoral if not immoral, bright-minded yet instinctual and animalistic, ruthless to the point of inhumanity, frightening, yet at the same time the embodiment of Kazantzakis' Dionysiac affirmation and exaltation of life. His Odysseus is anything but the embodiment of the common man for whom Kazantzakis, as he frankly avowed, had no patience or sympathy. He repeatedly sharply distinguished between men and Man. "The Struggler," he has written (and he deemed himself such a struggler), "is not interested in men; he is interested in the flame which kindles men. His course is a red line which perforates men as though they were a chaplet of skulls. I follow this red line; of all things in the world, it alone interests me" (*Report*, p. 423).

His concern was for Man in his evolution from the beast he initially was to the full manhood that he should strive to reach. That was, he thought, his supreme duty to accomplish or at least to help him come to.

I fought throughout my life and am fighting still, but a sediment of darkness continues to remain in my heart, and the struggle continually recommences. The age-old paternal ancestors are thrust deep within me, they keep fluctuating, and it is very difficult for me to discern their faces in the fathomless darkness. The more I proceed in my search for the first terrifying ancestor inside me, piercing through the heaped up layers of my soul—individually, nationally, human species—the more I am overcome by sacred horror. At first the faces seem like a brother's or father's; then, as I proceed to the roots, out of my loins bounds a hairy heavy-jawed ancestor who hungers, thirsts, bellows, and whose eyes are filled with blood. The ancestor is the bulky, unwrought beast given me to transubstantiate into man—and to raise even higher than man if I can manage in the time allotted me. What a fearful ascent from monkey to man, from man to God (*Report*, pp. 24-25).

Much in the figure of that terrifying ancestor whom he struggled

to transcend is drawn from his father, the way he viewed him and felt about him. Let us remark that when still a young man Kazantzakis translated Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and his phraseology here is somewhat reminiscent of that translation.

I had never faced my father with a feeling of tenderness. The fear he called forth in me was so great that all the rest—love, respect, intimacy—vanished . . . He was always right . . . Oh, how I wish he'd be wrong for once . . . An oak he was . . . he ate up all the strength around him; in his shade every other tree withered. I withered in his shade similarly . . . This is why I was forced to write down all I wished I had done, instead of becoming a great struggler in the realm of action—from fear of my father. He it was who reduced my blood to ink . . . He alone remained always as I had seen him in my childhood: a giant . . . There is much darkness in me, much of my father. All my life I have fought desperately to transubstantiate this darkness and turn it into light . . . Virtue for me is not the fruit of my nature, it is the fruit of my struggles . . . Virtue's flower is a pile of transubstantiated dung (*Report*, pp. 475-76).

In his way, in his new *Odyssey* his personal problems and experiences were marvelously universalized. Odysseus was to perform the transcendence his creator needed and aspired at. Yet as to how close his Odysseus lies to his Cretan heritage, that is considerably a matter of interpretation. He himself had no doubt that his hero, as the product and projection of his soul, was consequently the product of the Cretan soil and soul as well. In creating him he felt, as he thought he should, that he abided with the voice of Crete in him, yet also with the Cry of his times. "Happy the man who hears the Cry of his times (each epoch has its own Cry) and works in collaboration with it. He alone can be saved" (*Report*, p. 416). He hoped that he would thus extend his heritage into the future of mankind "where the world needs to be saved anew" (p. 416). Man's soul, he felt, had grown to the extent that it could not fit into the old molds any more. Besides, it had reached "the constellation of anguish," a point of transition into "a future equilibrium," (p. 450), into a "future harmony," through the "mobilization of all the luminous forces still surviving" (p. 450). The struggle would be "not for beauty, but for deliverance" (p. 451), and he would add once again at this point that "my purpose in writing, a purpose at first unconscious and afterwards conscious, was to do my utmost to aid Crete" (p. 452).

In his recognizing "the Cry of the future," Christ, Buddha, and Lenin had been "stations en route"; his own infidelities "constituted an unshakable faith in the essence" of that cry (p. 470). The only road

was the Ascent, and with no Ithaca involved, "the most masterful trap of all" (p.473). The great journey should have "no return" (p. 479), yet his Greekness would keep his body and soul together, for as he states, "the body is not blind unwrought material when bathed in Greek light; it is suffused with abundant soul which makes it phosphorescent . . . The soul is not an invisible airy phantom" (p. 484). His Odysseus needed to be endowed with the "Cretan Glance," as that was symbolically illustrated in the bullfights at Knossos where "the Cretans transubstantiated horror, turning it into an exalted game in which man's virtue, in direct contact with mindless omnipotence, received stimulation and conquered—conquered without annihilation" (p. 486).

In these selected quotations from his *Report*, Kazantzakis' mind and major intentions in shaping his *Odyssey* are made clear enough. Following the havoc of the First World War, written in the 1920s and 1930s, the epic does in a way bear the stigmata of a world in crisis and anxiety, and the growing impasse that was eventually to bring another havoc, another world war. Added to the general crisis, there was in Greece the disaster in Asia Minor in 1922 with its disheartening, immediate as well as long-time, political and other effects darkening the atmosphere. And, as well, there were reasons more personal which made Kazantzakis feel embittered with his country and his fellow Greeks. One might wonder indeed that if Kazantzakis had stayed in Greece throughout, would he have written his epic at all and would it have been the same?

The epic's first publication, in sumptuous format, in Athens in 1938, met generally with poor response and very few were the exceptions. The reasons for that response were several and understandable. There was the excessive length of that epic (its 33.333 lines), its seventeensyllable iambic verse deviating from the popular traditional verse of fifteen syllables; there was the excessively wide range and richness of its demotic vocabulary, not always accessible to the understanding of even the learned Greek reader. There was further the strange intellectual conglomeration of its contents, encompassing a wide variety of cultures, myths, lores, religions, cults, symbols, ideologies, and philosophies as sampled from man's advancement through the ages. And there was most of all its hero, this new, excited and exciting, root-breaking Odysseus with whom the Greek reader wouldn't easily identify himself, if at all. Greece, with its national, political and other turmoil and suffering, was still to some extent discovering, storing, examining, building and defending its complex racial, cultural and national identity and its difference from the Western world.

The new *Odyssey*, rather than a modern Greek national epic, despite its Greek elements, despite the Cretan fire that drove its creator, is in fact a world epic of modern man in his crisis. It is not without

significance, supporting this view, that the new *Odyssey* won its first victory, its first consideration, its acceptance, and its readers some twenty years after its original Greek publication, in 1958, when it was made accessible to the Western world through the masterful English translation of Kimon Friar.

In passing now to Prevelakis' epic we are inclined to assume that that epic had a long preparation and gestation in its creator's mind, long before that epic started shaping itself. The often powerfully poetic nature of his prose, after the verse he published early in his career, encourages the guess that several of his epic's remarkably autonomous couplets, in their often epigrammatic individuality, were written all through Prevelakis' unceasingly creative life. I remember his telling me years ago that poetry never stopped springing naturally from him. The long accumulation then was eventually to merge into the wider epic frame.

As to the connection of the two epics with their authors' fictional prose work, let us remember that Kazantzakis' novels, which brought him his worldwide popularity and fame late in his life, though several of them had an earlier original inception, were all written and published after the completion and publication of his *Odyssey*, from 1940 to the time of his death. Most of them bear, in part at least, the stamp of some of the spirit expressed in the *Saviors of God* and his epic, though a remarkable change is also noticeable—an emotional return to his native roots. As Prevelakis has remarked:

Kazantzakis, during the period of his country's foreign occupation, participating in the hardships of the Greek people, formed a new way of viewing the world, and devoted himself to intellectual creativity which in several respects revokes the nihilism of his Odysseus ("The Odyssey of Nikos Kazantzakis," a talk delivered on the celebration of Kazantzakis' centenary from his birth at the Academy of Athens, on February 15, 1983, p. 37).

To this he adds that Kazantzakis' translations of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust*, as well as some of his national tragedies, all produced mostly during the country's Nazi occupation, were, in a sense, their author's "gifts to his nation," an offering to help the Greek people in its critical moment. As to the novels themselves again, marking his change of mind, they resume besides their author's "old attempts to Christianize his soul." To further quote Prevelakis:

These impressive works are instigated by a faith in social progress, justice and solidarity for man: a purely humanitarian behavior. Kazantzakis, without relinquishing his metaphysical reflections,

inclines in the second period of his life to moral problematism. He wishes to dedicate himself to those who suffer the turmoil of history . . .

During the First and Second World Wars he suffered the harmful impact of tragic nihilism. The next day after the War, the demolisher tends to become a builder . . . Historical circumstances, then, and internal reasons impel Kazantzakis to complete his work with new creativity. This we won't attribute to any repentance or to a ransom for Odysseus' hybris. Both his old and his new attitude towards the human and the ultimate problems were dictated to him by his time and his place (pp. 40-41).

Prevelakis, in comparison, Kazantzakis' junior by twenty-three years, and so belonging to a different generation, and, to some extent, to a different time, was led by his personality and experience, as well as by a deep self-consciousness and feeling of indebtedness and dedication to his Cretan origin, into a different road. Much he shared of his master's intellectual adventures, his discoveries, worries, crises, failures and conquests, and no less the difficult struggle to survive, to earn a living. Whether they lived and worked together, for short periods close to each other, or apart, as most of the time, in different countries, their exchange and collaboration knew no substantial break. Having lived in Greece most of his life, Prevelakis never broke his immediate contact and ties with Greek reality and his native soil. In fact, living there, he was long absent Kazantzakis' main, if not his only, contact with Greece, his eager supplier of Greek things, his representative, and the defender of his interests.

But to return to their emotional ties with Crete itself—if Kazantzakis claimed descent from a pirate great-grandfather and from fighters, including his grandfather and father, Prevelakis, too, was the offspring of a family of distinguished educators, clergymen, and fighters, including an uncle who perished young as one of the few heroic defenders of the Arkadi monastery, a key bulwark of defense in the major Cretan uprising of 1886. Different upbringings, however, as added to the other differences between them, gave Prevelakis not only a basically different order in his creative inclination and orientation but a different order as well in the sequence of his creativity. From his very beginning Prevelakis followed his own way as a writer. If for Kazantzakis, as is stated in his *Report* (p. 308), "Crete is fine, but only to gain momentum, from it," for Prevelakis Crete has been instead far more than the provider of momentum, far more than a springboard. Unswervingly so, Crete has been the main, if not the sole, thematic and emotional provider for his work besides being the shaper of his conscience and

intellectual objectives. Crete has been for him the beginning, the core and the end. If Kazantzakis' novels, marking a return to his native roots, followed all, chronologically and in part spiritually, his worldwide epic, Prevelakis' own *myth-historiai*, i.e., his imaginative chronicles, his novels and plays, most valuable in themselves, have essentially been the precedents and the building steps towards his own epic. Crete's heroic battle for freedom, which inspired Kazantzakis' *Freedom or Death* of 1949-50, had long before inspired Prevelakis' *Desolate Crete* of 1945 and its companion piece, the trilogy of *The Cretan* of 1949-50.

Early enough in his development, Prevelakis sensed the danger of being victimized by the decadence of the western world the way that his master was partly at least victimized. Early enough he sensed the wounds on him from his exposure to that world, and there is a long record in his work of his fight against its alienating impact. Early enough his Cretan heritage provided him with the notion of freedom, as it did Kazantzakis too, yet whereas in Kazantzakis freedom was to know no limits in its ravaging advancement to a final nihilism which is absolute freedom, freedom for Prevelakis has carried an ethical order and discipline with it as inspired by the ethics and order of Christian Orthodoxy.

In the several lists Kazantzakis has variously given us of his educators, his major "Saviors of God," his prophets and masters, Christ was eventually to fade out, although, according to Prevelakis, even after his master embraced Nietzsche's anti-Christian spirit, "Christ continues enlightening and tormenting him. The agony of the still youthful intellectual is tinged (colored) by pricks of conscience which he struggles to surpass, envisioning an impossible synthesis of Christianity and Nietzscheism" ("Ο Καζαντζάκης: Σχεδιάσμα Ἑσωτερικῆς Βιογραφίας," introducing the *400 Letters*, p. xxx). As Prevelakis again helps us remember, Christ inspired four of Kazantzakis' works: first an early tragedy, entitled *Christ*, probably written in 1915, where Christ's resurrection is accomplished in the hearts of his apostles and of Magdalene; second, the seventeenth rhapsody of the *Odyssey*, where the Nietzschean doctrine overcomes the Christian; third, the canto "Christ" of 1937; and four, the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* developing what was already essentially contained in the just mentioned canto. *The Report* contains several conflicting statements as to its author's changing feelings with regard to Christ whose face "had fascinated [him] indescribably ever since [his] childhood" (p. 101), whom, on a Good Friday, he associated with Adonis (p. 162), whom he thought the world was ripe to "love in a new way" (p. 208), whose resurrection is told by two playful dolphins (p. 218), whom he calls "a veteran campaigner" grown invisible, having taken refuge in the heart (p. 236). Yet he was later to ask "if Christ's

way was the one leading to man's salvation, or whether it was simply a well-organized fairy tale promising paradise and immortality with immense cleverness and skill" (p. 338), with this wondering leading him to what was his prevalent thinking since then:

We ought, therefore, to choose the most hopeless of world views, and if by chance we are deceiving ourselves, and hope does not exist, so much the better. At all events, in this way man's soul will not be humiliated, and neither God nor the devil will ever be able to ridicule it . . . The faith most devoid of hope seemed to me not the truest, perhaps, but surely the most valorous. I considered metaphysical hope an alluring bait which true men do not condescend to nibble. I wanted whatever was most difficult (p. 338).

This manner of thinking led him away from the order and discipline inherent in the Cretan world as that passed from the Venetian to the Ottoman rule at the end of the seventeenth century. Seven centuries of increasing resistance to foreign masters, of battle for self-preservation and final liberation in 1912, a battle that cost much suffering and torrents of blood, had built up a society of tense yet fascinating internal harmony. No sooner, however, did that society, that world, gain its liberation than it had to face a new enemy: its unavoidable invasion and disruption by the decadent spirit of the western world, its political interests in and claims upon Crete and Greece altogether.

What could still be preserved, saved of that ethical, moral, social and cultural harmony and its long-tested values, and how could these be proven as of essential and lasting value to man facing our modern crisis, these concerns were to become Prevelakis' own central and crucial ones. Whereas in the past a societal order itself, with its set of ethical values, provided man with a frame of principles and directions, of ideals and objectives as to his thinking, feeling and behavior, modern man, instead, in his isolation, and with immense difficulty as to his choice of action, would singly have to turn within to consult his own conscience so as to get from it a possible answer to his questionings. Contrary to Kazantzakis, who also faced the same quandaries, Prevelakis turned to his Cretan tradition for whatever answers that might provide. His work is in a sense a painful record of his search and what that search has given him.

Interestingly enough, his literary writing opened with a short "little epic" called *Soldiers*, to close with another and a major one. In between, lyrical poetry alternated with prose and drama, apart from his studies on art. In 1938 he started imaginatively chronicling Crete's heroic historical experience in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. In the *Tale of a Town* (1938), in *Desolate Crete* (1945), and in

the trilogy of *The Cretan* (1948-50), a supreme craftsmanship in storytelling, using with exceptional mastery the pictorial, musical and other wealth of the demotic, ranges from the lyricism of personal, nostalgic, often elegiac recollection to combining in varying proportions, selectively, historical fact and legend with imaginative, "mythical" shaping of the experience in its essential process. The imaginary Kostandis, the schematized embodiment of fighting Cretan youth in his trilogy *The Cretan*, is succeeded in it by the historical figure of Venizelos, the brilliant young Cretan statesman whose genius and action gave Crete its proper form of political freedom.

Prevelakis was next to pass to his considerably autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, a novelistic trilogy giving account of his own intellectual adventure and development through three major stages. In the *Sun of Death* (1959), his hero, early orphaned, is brought up by an elder nurse, Aunt Roussaki, a charming embodiment of traditional Crete and mother Earth in their intuitive wisdom, who initiates him to his Cretan heritage where death is an omnipresent, inherent reality and a constant test of life in its worth. *The Head of Medusa* (1963), in the second volume, stands for the advancement upon the still young hero of the western world as symbolized by the figure of Loizos Damolinos, his second major educator, who combines in himself, yet brought to an extreme point of exaggeration, whatever Prevelakis found in Kazantzakis as contrary to the Greek tradition. A longing to recover himself from the alienating exposure leads the now mature hero to attempt a *nostos*, a return to his native land and his roots, in the hope that he might be an enlightener and rescuer of his fellow countrymen from the losses that the times had brought upon them. He hopes to taste *The Bread of the Angels* (1966), reserved by Dante for those worthy of paradise. But his attempt fails, for he is divided within himself and his already corrupt fellow Cretans treat him offensively as an unwanted stranger.

A desperate point is reached within himself, reflecting what has made Prevelakis deem our times more "tragic" than ever before, in the ancient sense of the term. That tragic sense is what stands as the foundational theoretical tie between his prose and his drama, the seven plays he has written as illustrations and reflections of "the disease of our century" where the choice of action is painfully internal in a conscience crossed on disparities in a world deprived of external ethical and moral direction.

The impasse would not, however, make him swerve from his beliefs, efforts, and course. A last step was still missing in that course. If Kazantzakis' Dionysiac search and rise brought him finally to face, bravely so, the existential abyss of nothingness and to accept it, his

fervently Apollonian and humanistic pupil, in reaction to that outcome, was to turn even more emphatically to his heritage in its traditional aspects and resources. One would hardly associate Kazantzakis with the spirit of the Renaissance and its artistic code, though there were moments when he expressed his admiration for the enviable healthy solidity of some of its products. That spirit and code, however, have made a central part of Prevelakis' classical, humanistic inclination and orientation as it lies behind not only his scholarly, his academic specialization as an art historian, but behind much of his literary work itself. During the Venetian rule of Crete from 1201 to 1699, the Renaissance spirit and code became essential components influencing that island's cultural and intellectual development, and were foundational in its literary flourishing at the end of the seventeenth century. Of that flourishing, the supreme accomplishment was *Erotokritos*, Vincenzo Cornaro's chivalric love romance.

Several reasons made Prevelakis turn to that masterpiece as the inspiring precedent and, to some extent, the elementary foundation of his *The New Erotokritos*. Technically, he was to adopt its fifteen-syllable iambic rhyming couplet, turning it, however, from its narrative nature into a powerfully lyrical one of remarkable individuality which, to use Constantinos Tsatsos' simile, makes it like a precious pebble in a mosaic. To quote the poet's own metaphor in his dedicatory Preface:

Οἱ στίχοι, ἄς δείχνουν σκορπιστοί, μιᾶς ρίζας εἶναι κλάδοι,  
ἑφτά φωτιές βυζαίνουνε στό λύχνο τό ἴδιο λάδι.

(Scattered as the verses look, from the same root they branch;  
Seven flames suck the oil of a single oil lamp.)

The lovely demotic of that romance, with some of its Cretan dialectal intonations, he also embraced, widened and raised to the point of its exquisitely balancing feeling and thought, the world of man and that of nature as inseparable and further extended into the spiritual realm, a new element lending his epic its major dimension.

But there were further, more essential, reasons for his choice. In search of his myth and hero, Kazantzakis turned to the ancient world, to the Greek, in fact to the universal mythical and legendary prehistory, to the epic of which the hero is much the Everyman in his archetypal experience with the human, the supernatural and the preternatural realms. That hero he modified, advancing to the utmost the metamorphoses he had already suffered through the classical and the Western world, so as to turn him into an adventurer beyond morality, ethics and society itself. Prevelakis instead chose as inspiring precedent a modern Cretan masterpiece, for long the treasure and delight of the Greek

people, both the literate and illiterate, and a solace all through the long years in that people's suffering and striving to rise from slavery to freedom.

That chivalric love romance, full of anachronisms in its free mixture of the ancient with the late mediaeval world, and strangely enough with no reference to Christianity, was still, to some extent, the product of the Cretan ethos of the time that produced it. Prevelakis, thoroughly "Cretanized," Christianized and spiritualized the old love tale, lending it its historical, moral and metaphysical texture and significance. Cornaro's *Erotokritos* ("tested by love" as the name indicates) was the lover of "virtuous" Aretousa. Eventually, their mutual love, causing them many sufferings, was to inspire and incite him to fight heroically, to overcome all obstacles and contrarities so as to accomplish a final reunion and happy ending. Prevelakis' new *Erotokritos* also is principally the lover of Aretousa, but is essentially and supremely the Cretan lover of and fighter for freedom of which Aretousa is the symbol and embodiment. History and the Bible (both the Old and the New Testament in combination) lend the tale of the epic its pattern as well as its multiple, parallel, concurrent meanings. The new *Erotokritos* is also Adam initially granted "God's Realm" with its "Harmony of the Creatures," and Aretousa as his companion. Yet he is destined through experience and human frailty, not only his own, to lose that realm. He comes to know "The Fate of the Mortals," "The Realm of Darkness," "The Night of Torments and Trials," and "The Pain of the Innocent Ones." These stages or states, lending the Songs of the epic their titles, reflect corresponding stages in Cretan history as parallel to the biblical ones of Man, and no less those in the poet's own external and internal experience, for this new *Erotokritos* is also the Poet, Prevelakis himself, who through poetic creation strives to recover the lost paradise. He strives to rise from the disease of the century, and to help others, too, to rise with him, transcending all contrarities. To quote him:

Μικρό ' ναι τό χωράφι μου μά ἡ πεθυμιά μεγάλη,  
ἀπ' τή μιά θάλασσα ἀλετριά νά σύρω ὥσμε τήν ἄλλη,

"Ἥλιος καί γῆς γιά ἓνα σκοπό μοχτοῦν τροπαιοφόρο,  
τ' ἄνθος γουρμάζει σέ καρπό, ρίχνει ὁ καρπός τό σπόρο.

Νά μπόρουν μ' ἓνα πέταμα τόν οὐρανό ν' ἀγγίσω,  
μά πρῶτας τά γεννήματα πού ' σπειρα νά θερίσω.

Κι ὡς τ' ἄχυρο στό λίχνισμα σηκώνεται κολόνα,  
χωρίς νά κόψω ἀπό τή γῆς, νά μῶ μέσ στόν αἰώνα.

Κι άνίσως σφάλει ό πόθος μου, πάλι θά τά ' χω άκούσει  
Τά πέταλα καί τό γυνί πού 'χουν τήν πέτρα κρούσει.

'Απ' όσες σπίθες τιναχτοῦν, ένα τσαμπί θά κάνω,  
στή νύχτα άν έτσακμάκισα νά δείξω πρίν πεθάνω.

"Όσα καρδιά καί λογισμός γεννήσαν, θά τά βάλω  
σέ τάξη έδώ, ταιριάζοντας σεμνά τό ' να μέ τ' άλλο.

Μ' όλα τά δέντρα π' άνθισαν, βουβή' ναι ή πάσα χτίση  
άνίσως στή μοσκοβολιά τ' άηδόνι δέ μεθήσει.

Χτίση! τά μάτια πάνω μου ρίξε καί μή σέ νοιάζει,  
ή μάνα θρέφει τό παιδί μόνο πού τό κοιτάζει (A, 159-76).

(A small one is my acre, yet great is my desire  
to drive my plough all along from the one sea to the other.

The sun and earth for just one goal triumphant do they strive,  
the flower to grow to fruit, the fruit to sow the seed.

And much like winnowed chaff that rises in a column,  
I wish to reach eternity but not to leave the earth.

And even if my wish is wrong, I still will have heard  
the horseshoes and the ploughshare impacting on the stone.

From all the sparks that will come off a grape-bunch I shall make  
to tell the night before I die I tried to light a fire.

Whatever heart and mind have spawned I shall humbly put  
In order, matching everything with every other thing.

Unless fragrance inebriates a single nightingale,  
Nature will not speak at all though all the trees are blooming.

O Nature! cast your eyes on me and have no other care.  
A mother's gaze is enough to nurse her cherished child.)

A long battle is involved, internal more so than external. There is brought to mind the hero's failure, in *The Bread of Angels*, to recover himself through return to his native land so as to become its people's enlightener and savior. Here again the land is eventually liberated from its days of slavery and turmoil, yet internally in terms of its human

souls, it has not really regained itself. It is spiritually a Dead Land, a waste land, with its virtues trampled down by "foreign time." Even freedom itself has been jailed and exiled.

Another road is left for the real return and recovery: a road within, a spiritual one. This is the only road left to modern man in his alienation and social isolation. The force and direction for that recovery need to be drawn, and are actually drawn by the hero in the lyrical epic from the ethics that Orthodox Christianity provided the Cretan world within its battle for self-preservation and freedom. Only then could "Fallen Adam" be recalled." This is the only way that God's creatures and the soul of man can be restored in a new paradise.

All through the nine Songs of the epic, Erotokritos' beloved, apparently a mortal girl, the supreme embodiment of femininity, of mother nature, of beauty and virtue, his companion, helper, and muse, and even his fellow sufferer, will eventually (like Dante's Beatrice) reveal at the end her true, her spiritual identity. It is Erotokritos' own suffering and his rise through it, his discovery of the truth that will make her reveal herself to him as no other than true Freedom itself.

"Αωωμη, θεοπρόβλητη καί ζωηφόρα εικόνα  
τά κάλλη της τήν πρώτη 'Αρχή τοῦ κόσμου φανερώνα.

"Ω ΛΕΥΤΕΡΙΑ!" τής έκραξα, καί μονομιᾶς τήν είδα  
στά μάτια τῶν συντρόφων μου ν' άστραφτεϊ σά λεπίδα.

"Ω Λευτεριά!" μουρμούρισα, κ' ένιωσα τή γαλήνη  
στά σπλάχνα μου νά χύνεται, τά μέλη μου νά λύνει.

*Δόξα σου, Κύριε! Δόξα σου, Πανάγαθε καί Δίκιε!*  
*Προτοῦ γυρίσω μέσ στή γῆ, τ' άφθαρτο φῶς μέ βρῆκε.*

(All pure, impelled by God, a life-giving image;  
Her beauty the world's own first incipience revealed.

"O Liberty!" I cried to her, and I saw her instantly  
like a blade shining in my companion's eyes.

"O Liberty!" I murmured, and I felt serenity  
pouring into my entrails and loosening my limbs.

*Glory be to Thee, O Lord most gracious and all kind,*  
*before returning to the earth I met with light imperishable.*

This is how *The New Erotokritos* closes, and the short present account does much less than even summarize the argument of its nine

Songs, let alone speak of the art which handles the elements, themes and contents of these Songs. There is lyrical beauty and power, there is original, inventive freshness of imagery in unceasing descriptions of nature wherefrom ingenious similes and metaphors are drawn as expressive of nature's emphatic connection with man, his states of mind and feeling, his soul. There is subtle thoughtfulness, contemplation, as well as dialectical wondering that finds its answers to sempiternal existential questions through deepening into the roots of ethics and tradition, into the metaphysical realm. There is matter embodying spirit in its transcendental rise where even death and the grave become the ground of ascent. There is concern for and love of man, the fellowman, the "other" who is inseparable from one's own self. There is hope in the very core of despair. And there is above all the masterful and brilliant meshing of a multiple symbolism making the epic considerably allegorical in the particular sense that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is so.

The comparison of the two major Cretan authors and poets was not meant to be evaluative. It was only to sample some of their similarities and differences, their "disaffinities" within their major affinity itself as springing from their Cretan origin and heritage. They have both prided themselves on having been the voice of their land, of their soil as identical with their soul. They have both deemed their work as a product of and an offering to their Cretan origin. Their accomplishment places them on the top level of literary creativity in our times. Yet how each has understood and interpreted his land's cultural identity and what it entailed as a message to the world, that is what has basically made the major difference between them.

Prevelakis felt impelled to address foremostly his fellow countrymen, his nation, in terms of their traditional, their Orthodox Christian values. He is principally the national author and the humanist. In full awareness of our modern cultural and spiritual crisis, his message, with the long tested values it contains, offers a solace to the agony of modern man in his existential quandary. Kazantzakis, instead, though he too wishes to cure the disease of the century and though he too honors his Cretan roots, in his epic at least he gives the world a message equivalent to a command that goes beyond recent historical experience and Christian ethics. He saw Crete as the mother of a restless, untamed power derived from the mixture of three continents, a wild and fiery drive springing up from prehistory and advancing into the future of mankind and the earth, if not of the universe itself, a cruel spirit moving forward, conquering, creating, burning, ravaging, reconstructing once again and always ready to face the abyss. He lived most of his time abroad, finding Greece often inhospitable and unfriendly to him, and his mind destined to endless adventure. His country was not ready to

accept him, and this caused him, under the influence of a continent in crisis, to become a world rather than a national author. He tried, as he believed, to open the way to the man of the future with the "Call" inherited from Crete. Greatly true is the vision he has given of our present critical moment and of the dubious future of humankind as well as of the force of life, the *elan vital*, as it wildly advances with less and less restraint to an ultimate abyss.

If Prevelakis has been the faithful one, expecting the eventual "Recall of the Fallen Adam," Kazantzakis has been the abolisher, the desperate and unpromising, the immensely creative yet barren messenger of an active void in the infinitum.