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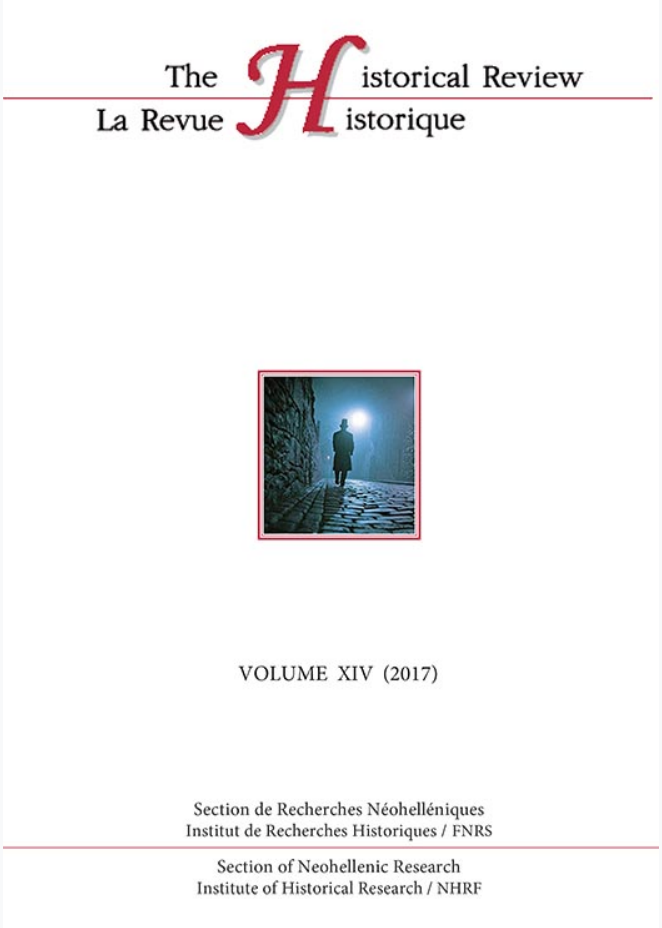

Dear to the Gods, yet all too human: Demetrios Capetanakis and the Mythology of the Hellenic

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DEAR TO THE GODS, YET ALL TOO HUMAN: DEMETRIOS CAPETANAKIS AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE HELLENIC

Emmanouela Kantzia

Abstract: Philosopher and poet Demetrios Capetanakis (1912-1944) struggled with the ideas of Hellenism and Greekness throughout his short life while moving across languages, cultures, and philosophical traditions. In one of his early essays, Mythology of the Beautiful (1937; in Greek), Hellenism is approached through the lens of eros, pain and the human body. Capetanakis distances himself both from the discourse put forth by the Generation of the Thirties and from the neo-Kantian philosophy of his mentors, and in particular Constantine Tsatsos, while attempting a bold synthesis of Platonic philosophy with the philosophy of despair (Kierkegaard, Shestov). By upholding the classical over and against the romantic tradition, as exemplified in the life and work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, he seeks to present Hellenism not as a universal ideal, but as an individual life stance grounded on the concrete. His concern for the particular becomes more pronounced in a later essay, "The Greeks are Human Beings" (1941; in English), where, however, one senses a shift away from aesthetics, towards ethics and history.

Titles, especially the ones used in biographical genres, have a narrative potential: they tell a story, a story that is so closely interwoven with a person that the two become inseparable. When they do so successfully, they have the ability to shape legacies. Such was the effect of the title used in the 1947 collected volume of Demetrios Capetanakis' English works[1] by his friend and editor John Lehmann,

[1] Capetanakis' essay "Μυθολογία τοῦ Ὡραίου" [Mythology of the Beautiful] was published in *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 8/1 (1937), pp. 64-105 and circulated as a separate volume in the same year. In the 1960s, it was published in the Galaxias popular series (Demetrios Capetanakis, *Δοκίμια* [Essays], Athens: Galaxias, 1962), together with "Ἔρως καὶ Χρόνος" [Eros and Time]. The latter, which is Capetanakis' own translation of his doctoral dissertation (*Liebe und Zeit*, Heidelberg 1934), was originally published in *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 9/4 (1938), pp. 433-467 and 10/1 (1939), pp. 25-57. Eventually, *Mythology of the Beautiful* served as title to the 1989 collected volume by Harvey that included Greek translations of some of Capetanakis' English essays and poetry (*Μυθολογία τοῦ Ὡραίου: Δοκίμια καὶ ποιήματα*, Athens-Limni: Denise Harvey, 1989). All page indications to these two works here refer to the Harvey edition and all translations are mine. As for his English essays, page indications refer to John Lehmann's edition *Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, London: John Lehmann, 1947.

"A Greek Poet in England".[2] Equally significant – though not as well known – were the titles chosen by Constantine Despotopoulos for his portrait of Capetanakis, published shortly after his death (1946), "A devotee of sensibility",[3] and the one used by George Theotokas on the occasion of the Capetanakis philological memorial (1961), "A great 'perhaps' of Greek and English letters".[4] Each of the above constructions tries to convey the uniqueness of Capetanakis from the perspective of a given audience. In the eyes of his British fellow poets and critics, what made him an interesting figure was the fact that he, a Greek, managed to build a career and a name as a poet in England; for his Greek contemporaries, Capetanakis was the German-educated philosopher, memorable for his contributions to aesthetic discourse; or, he was a gifted writer whose premature death does not allow us to envision the path his career and identity would have followed. Titles, however, are always limiting and at times misleading. Capetanakis was both a poet and a philosopher, or rather a poet-philosopher. Most importantly, his Greek identity was neither questioned nor established as a result of his moving to England; his rootedness in and struggle with the Hellenic tradition are palpable in all the works – essays and poetry; in Greek, English, German, and French – that he penned during the short span of his life.

Born in Smyrna, Demetrios Capetanakis (1912-1944) witnessed the horror of the 1922 catastrophe before his family – his mother Ariadne, his two siblings and himself – relocated to Athens. His father, Apostolos Capetanakis from Zagora, had died a few months earlier. After graduating from high school, Capetanakis completed his degree in political and economic science at the Athens University Law School, before moving on to study sociology and philosophy at Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers. Upon his return to Athens, he

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[2] The phrase was first used as heading to the Capetanakis tribute section of *New Writing and Daylight* 5 (1944), pp. 44-72. It has since served as a point of reference in studies or portraits of Capetanakis, as can be glimpsed from the titles: Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, "Δημήτριος Καπετανάκης. Ένας Άγγλος Ποιητής ἀπὸ τὴν Ἑλλάδα" [Demetrios Capetanakis: An English poet from Greece], *Ελληνική Φωνή* (10 March 1945); C. Th. Dimaras: "Ένας Έλλην ποιητής στὴν Ἀγγλία. Ὁ Δημήτριος Καπετανάκης. Τὸ γοργὸ πέρασμά του ἀπὸ τὴ ζωή" [A Greek poet in England. Demetrios Capetanakis. His quick passing from life], *Το Βήμα*, 11 July 1947); David Ricks, "Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 22 (1996), pp. 61-75; Dimitris Papanikolaou, "A Greek Poet (Coming Out) in England", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 30/2 (2006), pp. 201-223.

[3] Constantine I. Despotopoulos, "Ένας πιστὸς τῆς εὐαισθησίας", *Νέα Εστία* 39.448 (1946), pp. 272-274.

[4] Yorgos Theotokas, "Ένα μεγάλο «ἴσως» τῶν ἑλληνικῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγγλικῶν γραμμάτων", in *Πνευματική πορεία* [Spiritual course], Athens: Hestia, 1996 (first published in *Το Βήμα*, 9 April 1961), pp. 303-307.

started to earn a reputation primarily for his writings on aesthetics. At the time, he was among the collaborators of the *Archive of Philosophy and Theory of Science*, a quarterly philosophical journal whose editors included philosophers Ioannis Theodorakopoulos (1900-1981), Constantine Tsatsos (1899-1987), and Panagiotis Kanellopoulos (1902-1986), as well as a lecturer at the Askraios school of higher education, founded by renowned classicist Ioannis Sykoutris (1901-1937). He also collaborated with the *Nea Grammata* and *Kyklos* journals and wrote essays on contemporary Greek painting (Yannis Tsarouchis and Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas). In 1939 he received a scholarship from the British Council, which allowed him to study English literature at King's College, Cambridge. The final years of his life were spent between Cambridge and London, where he wrote and published extensively for Lehmann's periodical editions, gained the friendship of William Plomer and Edith Sitwell, and established himself as a young and promising "Greek poet in England". At the same time, he had been enlisted to work for the Greek Ministry of Information and also taught Greek to the British volunteers of a Friends' Ambulance Unit, who were training to assume relief work duties in Greece. These activities, in addition to the series of lectures on Greek poetry and art which he delivered at the University of London and his English translations of modern Greek poetry, testify to his steady interest in making modern Greek culture known and accessible to English-speaking audiences. His work was pivotal in generating an interest for modern Greek poetry among British scholars and editors in the late 1940s, though he himself was no longer alive to witness his success. Capetanakis died in 1944 from leukaemia at Westminster Hospital, London, at the age of 32.

That in the mid-1930s the questions of Hellenism and Greekness (*ελληνισμός*, *ελληνικότητα*) were of particular concern among Greek intellectuals and artists need not be elaborated here.[5] Studies produced in the last few decades[6] centre mostly

[5] It is much beyond the scope of this paper to try to situate Capetanakis among his contemporaries, although I will address some of the particularities in his approach which set him apart from the people of his immediate intellectual environment.

[6] See, for example, in chronological order: Mario Vitti, *Η γενιά του Τριάντα: Ιδεολογία και μορφή* [The generation of the thirties: ideology and form], Athens: Hermes, 1977 (and extended version, 1994); Dimitris Tziovas, *Οι μεταμορφώσεις του εθνισμού και το ιδεολόγημα της ελληνικότητας στο μεσοπόλεμο* [The transformations of nationalism and the ideologeme of Greekness in the interwar period], Athens: Odysseas 1989; Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; Nassos Vayenas, Takis Kayalis and Michalis Pieris, *Μοντερνισμός και ελληνικότητα* [Modernism and Greekness], Heraklion: Crete University Press, 1997; Dimitris Dimiroulis, *Ο ποιητής ως έθνος: Αισθητική και Ιδεολογία στο Γ. Σεφέρη* [The poet as nation: aesthetics and ideology in George Seferis], Athens: Plethron, 1997. For a more recent

on the Generation of the Thirties and provide us with useful, though limiting, schematic frames. In these, Hellenism and Greekness are treated in the context of binary dilemmas (tradition vs. modernism, European vs. Greek orientation in letters, continuity vs. rupture), even in attempts to collapse such dilemmas; they are thus examined with respect to the cultural politics of modern Greece. Capetanakis' thought, however, does not fit into such schemes precisely because he is not interested in asserting or bringing into question the continuity of Greek culture. As a genuine Platonic thinker, his primary concern is for the important things in life, the things which make life worth living – a disputed territory at least since the time of the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. To a number of his contemporaries, the poet-philosopher must have seemed removed from the concerns of his time, a fact which accounts partly for his relative obscurity even today. And yet, to contemporary readers who feel saturated with studies on Greekness and the Generation of the Thirties, the encounter with Capetanakis' thought might prove refreshing, opening up new ways of reflecting on Hellenism – not as an essence, neither as a criterion for aesthetics, much less as a cultural construction, but in the context of an individual's struggle with tradition.

This essay will examine Capetanakis' approach to the Hellenic by focusing mostly on his 1937 Greek essay[7] *Μυθολογία τοῦ Ὡραίου* [Mythology of the beautiful]. As will be shown, his debt to Plato and the classical tradition, followed by a scepticism towards Romantic and post-Romantic artistic trends, makes his thought radically different from that of his modernist contemporaries, while his rejection of Kantian aesthetics and fascination with the philosophy of despair distances him from the neo-Kantian philosophy of the *Archive* circle, and especially that of Tsatsos. Capetanakis approaches the Hellenic not as a universal static ideal, but as an individual life stance grounded on the concrete. His concern for the particular becomes more pronounced in a later essay, "The Greeks are Human Beings",[8] where one senses a shift away from aesthetics, towards ethics and history.

Capetanakis published *Mythology of the Beautiful* in 1937, shortly after his return from Heidelberg. At the time, he was a close collaborator of the

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study, see Dimitris Tziovas, *Ο μύθος της γενιάς του τριάντα: Νεοτερικότητα, ελληνικότητα και πολιτισμική ιδεολογία* [The myth of the generation of the thirties: modernity, Greekness and cultural ideology], Athens: Polis, 2011.

[7] I purposefully choose not use the term "treatise" or "philosophical treatise" for reasons that will become apparent. The question of genre is an important one in all of Capetanakis' works and must be dealt with in future studies of his work.

[8] Demetrios Capetanakis, "The Greeks are Human Beings", *Daylight: European Arts and Letters, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* 1 (1941), pp. 145-150 [=*Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, pp. 43-47].

Archive. As a student at the University of Athens, Capetanakis had attended the classes of Kanellopoulos and Tsatsos.[9] He had, moreover, been a member of the Sykoutris Philological Circle, where he must have had his first systematic exposure to some of the masterpieces of European letters (Shakespeare, Goethe, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky).[10] The year 1937 was marked by Sykoutris' suicide, the tragic culmination of a scandal that broke at the publication of his *Symposium* translation. The unprecedented attack that was waged against Sykoutris may have had its roots in academic politics,[11] but it was nonetheless articulated as a reaction to Sykoutris' treatment of homosexuality (including *παιδικός ἔρως*) as a component of classical Greek culture. The news of his teacher's death must have been devastating for Capetanakis, who was said to have been among Sykoutris' favourite students and those who organised his Philological Memorial.[12]

With the exception of his 1934 essay "From the Struggle of the Solitary Soul",[13] *Mythology* was the first philosophical essay which Capetanakis published in Greek and through which he built his reputation in the field of aesthetics. He had, however, already completed his doctoral dissertation and was most likely working on its Greek translation. *Mythology* and another of his works, "Eros and Time", are in many respects complementary: they not only revolve around the same themes

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[9] Capetanakis' respect and admiration for Tsatsos, whose study on Palamas he had reviewed in the same year (Demetrios Capetanakis, "Ἡ νεοελληνικὴ συνείδηση καὶ ὁ *Παλαμᾶς* τοῦ Κωνστ. Τσάτσου" [The neohellenic conscience and *Palamas* by C. Tsatsos], *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 8/2 [1937], pp. 230-236), did not prevent him from questioning the principles of Kantian aesthetics that his teacher had adopted and elaborated. Their disagreement in this respect becomes Tsatsos' point of focus in his review of Capetanakis' *Mythology of the Beautiful* (Constantine Tsatsos, "Δημητρίου Καπετανάκη: *Μυθολογία τοῦ Ὡραίου*" [Demetrios Capetanakis' *Mythology of the Beautiful*], *Τα Νέα Γράμματα* 3/3 (1937), pp. 238-245.

[10] For Sykoutris' scientific seminar and his philological circle, see Vassileios Laourdas, "Ὁ Ἰωάννης Συκουτρῆς καὶ οἱ μαθηταί του" [Ioannis Sykoutris and his students], *Νέα Εστία* 23/266 (1938), pp. 127-128 and Nassos Detzortzis, "Ὁ Ἰωάννης Συκουτρῆς ὡς διδάσκαλος" [Ioannis Sykoutris as a teacher], *Τα Νέα Γράμματα* 4/4-5 (1938), pp. 343-367.

[11] For a comprehensive study of Sykoutris' academic career, including sections on the academic politics of his time and the reception of the *Symposium*, Dionysios Alikaniotis, *Ιωάννης Συκουτρής: Η ζωή του 1901-1937* [Ioannis Sykoutris: his life, 1901-1937], Athens: Kaktos, 2008.

[12] See Ioannis Capetanakis, "Βιογραφικό Σημείωμα" [Biographical note], *Νέα Εστία* 39/448 (1946), p. 280.

[13] Capetanakis, "Ἀπὸ τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦ ψυχικῶς μόνου", *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 5/2 (1934), pp. 171-212 (also published as a separate volume). The study was to be submitted as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Athens. However, he was finally advised against it on the grounds of its lack of a strict scientific methodology. See Capetanakis, "Biographical note", p. 280.

(eros, beauty, the desire for immortality), but they also navigate a fixed territory of authors and texts. Capetanakis' doctoral dissertation was originally planned as a study of Søren Kierkegaard and modern literature, a plan which was eventually modified after his encounter with Rudolf Fahrner. An Austrian, Fahrner had been appointed professor of Germanic literature at Heidelberg in the mid-1930s. He was a great admirer of Stefan George, whom he had actually met and on whose poetry he often lectured.[14] Fahrner was a captivating lecturer, with a keen interest in Greek philosophy and art, and an even keener commitment to aestheticism. It is possible that Capetanakis' view of George's poetry as an attempt to construct an ideal Platonic state were inspired by Fahrner's lectures and writings.[15] Apparently, Capetanakis had wanted to dedicate his dissertation to Fahrner but decided against it, for fear of hurting the feelings of his mentor, Karl Jaspers.[16] But he did dedicate *Mythology* to him ("*στον ελληνικό* Rudolf Fahrner").[17] While I will return to this enigmatic dedication, it is important to keep in mind here that the two works illustrate Capetanakis' wavering between the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard and the aestheticism of Fahrner and George. Shortly after, and under the rising threat of Nazism, Capetanakis would gradually distance himself from George.[18]

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[14] He was also closely associated with George's disciples, although he developed into a fierce opponent of Nazism, which was the reason why he had to give up his post at Heidelberg. In the following years he travelled to Greece (invited by Capetanakis) and ended up staying there, teaching German literature at the university and serving as president to the newly founded German Scientific Institute in Athens. In 1944 he was actively involved in Claus von Stauffenberg's plot against Hitler's life. See Jan Andres, "'Hellas ewig unsre liebe': Erlesenes und erlebtes Griechenland bei Rudolf Fahrner", Danae Coulmas, "Athen '41: Peter Coulmas im 'Deutschen Wissenschaftlichen Institut'", and Rudolf Grimm, "'Geheimes Deutschland' im besetzen Athen? Errinerung an meine Arbeit im DWI und an Rudolf Fahrner", in Chryssoula Kambas und Marilisa Mitsou (eds), *Hellas Verstehen: Deutsch-griechische Kulturtransfer im 20. Jahrhundert*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2010, pp. 73-93, 117-136, and 95-115, respectively.

[15] See, in particular, Capetanakis' discussion of George's poetry as of a kind that solidifies a state in *Mythology of the Beautiful*; "Stefan George", *New Writing and Daylight* 2 (1942-1943), pp. 56-71 [=*Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, pp. 72-89]; and "Η ποίηση τοῦ Κάλβου" [The poetry of Kalvos], *Αναγέννηση* 1/1 (1953), pp. 1-7 (text of a lecture delivered at the Parnassos association in March 1938). Of particular interest is his coining of the expression "state poet" to refer, precisely, to the poet who would be admitted in the ideal (Platonic) state.

[16] See Maria Andromida, *Η ζωή και το έργο του Δημητρίου Καπετανάκη* [The life and work of Demetrios Capetanakis], PhD diss., University of Athens, 1997, p. 110.

[17] The dedication is omitted in the Harvey edition.

[18] In "Stefan George", Capetanakis presents the poet as a forerunner of the Nazis. Cf. Panagiotis Kanellopoulos' testimony on Capetanakis' "adventure" with George in "My friend Demetrios Capetanakis", in *Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, p. 174.

The title of the essay appears cryptic: the juxtaposition of the two terms (*μυθολογία*, *ὡραῖο*) calls for a deciphering of their relationship, as well as the meaning of each one individually. I will attempt the latter first. The choice of the word "mythology" must be somehow related to the author's intention to address beauty in the classical world. Capetanakis, however, attaches an additional meaning to it, by using it as an alternative term for philosophy. From his opening lines, the essayist makes it clear that he is not writing as a philosopher but as one who "philosophises genuinely about beauty" (25). The essayist's rejection of systematic philosophy as a means of accessing the beautiful is central to the methodology he will adopt. Kant's philosophy of beauty, for instance, appears suspicious to him, coming as it is from one who was not only indifferent to the arts, but had also never experienced passion for anything other than thought – and at any rate chose to dissociate beauty from the sensual (26).

This brings us to the second term in the title, that of beauty or the beautiful. Nowhere in the essay does Capetanakis make an explicit distinction between beauty in nature and the beauty of artworks. As we shall see, beautiful artworks are treated as attempts to express the puzzle of beauty in nature. But the beautiful here has a more specific colouring as well through its association with the Hellenic (47): "But which beauty is superior to the Hellenic? Which eros is more fertile than the Hellenic?" asks Capetanakis in the course of his essay. These two rhetorical questions establish a complex relationship among four terms that may be the key to interpreting the essay title: if the beautiful is to be approached through eros and if, moreover, both the beautiful and eros reach their highest point in their Hellenic articulation, then the Hellenic is the middle term linking beauty to eros and the two of them to mythology. For we must remember that mythology (as an alternative to systematic philosophy) is the only genuine way of approaching the beautiful – and this is the Hellenic way.

Let us then approach the different relationships separately and see if and how they come together at the end. A word of warning is necessary here. It is true that Capetanakis' erudition, his influences from a variety of most discrepant sources and, indeed, his passion for letters and life are overwhelming, rendering his thought vulnerable to inconsistency. But although it is necessary to address instances of contradiction, it is more important, especially for a writer who has not yet been studied systematically, to try to synthesise his line of thought. Yet synthesis is precisely what Capetanakis' essays resist. Their non-linear structure and the author's rhetoric of reiteration and rephrasing (modelled at times on platonic palinode)[19] would render the task daunting, did they not at the same

[19] See, for example, his re-enactment of the *Phaedrus* palinode in "Eros and Time".

time give the impression of being somehow centred. This may have something to do with what I perceive as Capetanakis' affinity to a didactic tradition, present in all his essays and acknowledged by the author himself.[20] Or it may have to do with the almost complete and striking absence of humour and irony in his essays (as opposed to his poems). But these are matters for future readers to judge.

First, then, Capetanakis looks for the beautiful in the Hellenic. The epitome of beauty is to be glimpsed in the classical statues – a beauty that is concrete and particular, but at the same time absolute. The beauty of statues is directly related to their object of representation: the human body and specifically the male human body, which stands superior to all other objects of representation. As he notes in his Rimbaud essay, "the highest *logos*, the loftiest reality, the ultimate happiness is incarnated in the beautiful male body".[21] A statue is an attempt to solve the enigma of beauty by capturing in its proper medium the essence of the beautiful. The beauty of the statue, therefore, is by definition imitative or at least reflective. The "clear Hellenic curves of the statues" (37) and the "divine integrity of [their] form" (38) must be attributed to the real physical beauty that inspired them. Nevertheless, this reflection or imitation of beauty has, in turn, the ability to awaken in the beholder a similar passion for perfection. Hence, the beautiful body is eventually turned into a symbol. Polykleitos' canon would be worthless, Capetanakis says, were it not an attempt to solve, or at least translate into earthly material, the metaphysical puzzle of beauty (63). Philosophy is discussed in the same terms: the philosopher is moved by human beauty and desires to solve its enigma through the medium of logos. Beauty, then, has a pedagogical function. Here, Capetanakis lays bare the platonic foundations of his philosophy: beauty – the concrete earthly object, the human body – is but a vehicle to a higher order

[20] In his Greek essay on Rimbaud ("Ρεμπώ. Μύθος καὶ μίτος γιὰ τὴν κόλαση τῆς ποίησής του" [Rimbaud: myth and thread for the inferno of his poetry], *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 8.3 [1937], pp. 309-337) he acknowledges Tsatsos' criticism of *Mythology* but explains that he was not aiming merely at a treatise on aesthetics, but at a "metaphysical preaching". See pp. 314-315, n. 2.

[21] Ibid., p. 319. There may be several sources here. Winckelmann discusses the superiority of the Greek body in his treatises of ancient Greek art, although one does not encounter such an explicit statement there. In Hegel's treatment of classical art (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1835-1838), the human body is discussed as the most suitable form through which the spirit reveals itself. In his introduction to the *Symposium*, Ioannis Sykoutris observes that the nude male body is considered superior to the female in purely aesthetic terms and attributes this opinion to Goethe and Schopenhauer (adding, in a most interesting footnote, that Goethe could not even in theory be called a misogynist). See "Introduction", in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Ioannis Sykoutris, Athens: Academy of Athens/Greek Library Series, 1949 (first edition, 1934), p. 53 and n. 1.

of reality. Its sight makes us tremble "at the recollection of the true, heavenly Beauty we once witnessed in the land of our souls" (40).[22] If one manages to philosophise genuinely about it – which Socrates and Plato certainly did – then their *logos* has the power to awaken a passion for the important things in life.

Capetanakis contrasts the absolute beauty of the classical statues to what he perceives as the aesthetic decline in modern art: "We are all sick since the time when decadence distorted the clear Hellenic curves of the statues" (37). The end of the Renaissance signalled the abandonment of the Hellenic quest for Beauty in favour of an inward turn. Dürer is the primary example Capetanakis uses to demonstrate the individual artist's seclusion from the outside world. This seclusion is associated with a move away from light, towards darkness; away from lived reality towards memory and contemplation. The nineteenth century becomes the par excellence century of dissolution.[23] Thus, the poet laments our predicament: "[modern art has] broken the sacred rules of verse (*τὸν ἱερὸ νόμο τοῦ στίχου*) and disfigured the godly canon of sculpture (*τὸ θεῖο κανόνα τοῦ σώματος*)" (44).[24] For Capetanakis dissolution is a symptom of our fear to face beauty in the world as boldly as the ancient Greeks did – *Graeca res est, nihil velare*, he reminds us at another instance (58) –[25] a fear resulting in the distortion of all forms, and especially that of human bodies. His pronouncement must be considered in light of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's theory of the ancient Greek statue as an ideal of wholeness and perfection and subsequent scepticism against the Romantic interest in the fragmentary.[26] At the same time, however, one cannot help but wonder whether his criticism does not extend to the modernist trends in contemporary Greek poetry. In Seferis' *Mythistorema* (1934), for example, ancient Greek monuments and statues are

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[22] Cf. the myth of the psyche in the *Phaedrus* 246a3-257a3. Capetanakis adds (40) that Plato's interpretation is a myth which, however, "expresses and deepens our initial *aporia*" (here referring to the puzzle of beauty and the dead end to which we come when trying to solve it).

[23] Dissolution is a motif in a number of Capetanakis' essays, most notably in "The poetry of Kalvos".

[24] Capetanakis' approach to modern art anticipates that of Tsatsos in his well-known dialogue with Seferis.

[25] The saying comes from Pliny the Younger, *Historia Naturalis*, XXXIV 10.

[26] See Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art 2: From Winckelmann to Baudelaire*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 112-113. Winckelmann insisted on reconstructing the whole from the broken parts of statues, and thereupon based his interpretation of classical art as an art of "noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur" (*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*). This led Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to contest both his methodology and his conclusion in his well-known aesthetic treatise *Laocoön* (1766).

depicted as broken or fragmented, relics of a heritage that weighs the poet down and mutilates his hands.[27]

The danger Capetanakis perceives in modern aesthetic trends is the artist's distancing, even complete estrangement, from the external world, where particular and tangible beauty lives. His call for a return to the classical, however, is articulated in uncertain terms:

> A mere tendency towards the ancient Greek body or that of the Renaissance could not serve for us as a model. Then we would indeed become the dream of a shadow (*σκιᾶς ὄναρ*). Our hands must reach directly for the first sources of life, must seek to embrace the breasts of the Gods. Thus, if we manage to feel (*νὰ ψαύσομε*) with our hands the compact existence (*συμπαγὴ ὕπαρξη*) of the Divinities, if we can hear their heart beating with our ear pressed to their flesh (*κολλημένο στὴ σάρκα τους*), our own uncertain existence will be condensed into a divine reality, our own heart will start beating with a divine pulse (45).

The tendency Capetanakis has in mind is that of the Romantics, though his view of Romanticism is limited and perhaps misguided.[28] Capetanakis associates Romanticism with a Christian turn in art dating all the way back to Plotinus: an abandonment of the human body in favour of the soul; a turn away from the specific towards an abstract absolute; and a plunging into the unconceivable and inaccessible realm of dream.[29] In the Romantic worldview, therefore, the

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[27] See in particular *Mythistorema* III.

[28] Nowhere in this, or any other of his Greek essays, does Capetanakis explain his use of the term. One can assume that he is referring to the German (and mostly to the Jena) Romantics and that he treats them *en masse* as representing a counter-movement to classicism. It might be that he is still echoing the views of Rudolf Fahrner, whose study on Romanticism he had reviewed a couple of years earlier. (See Demetrios Capetanakis, "*Ὁ γερμανικὸς ρωμαντισμὸς καὶ τὸ θεῖον*.Ἕνα βιβλίο τοῦ Rudolf Fahrner" [German romanticism and divinity: a book by Rudolf Fahrner], *Ἀρχεῖον Φιλοσοφίας καὶ Θεωρίας τῶν Ἐπιστημῶν* 6/4 (1935), pp. 496-499.) His treatment of Romantic poetry is much more refined in his unpublished Cambridge essays on English poetry, that are housed among his papers at the Gennadius Library.

[29] Capetanakis' criticism of the Romantic was challenged by both Constantine Tsatsos and Kleon Paraschos in their reviews. Tsatsos ("Demetrios Capetanakis' *Mythology of the Beautiful*", pp. 242-243) argues that the Romantic ideal cannot be characterised as less specific for tending towards the absolute, neither because it turns the spirit into the object of aesthetic contemplation, where classicism focuses on the body. Kleon Paraschos ("Δημητρίου Καπετανάκη: *Μυθολογία τοῦ Ὡραίου*" [Demetrios Capetanakis' *Mythology of the Beautiful*], *Νέα Εστία* 21.246 [1937], p. 477) notes that the term "Romantic" does not refer to artists who give up on life, but to those who have "an intensely perturbed sense of life" (*ὀξὺ ταραγμένο αἴσθημα τῆς ζωῆς*).

Hellenic is reduced to a distant recollection, a longing for what can no longer be. The philosopher revolts against this, demanding a return to bodies concrete – hence the importance of touch:[30] '*νὰ ψαύσομε, 'κολλημένο στὴ σάρκα τους*', '*συμπαγὴ ὕπαρξη* – bodies making palpable a divine reality. The paradox in this assimilation of the tangible to the divine is also echoed in the phrase "first sources of life" (*πρῶτες πηγὲς ζωῆς*). The phrase recalls Winckelmann's call for a return to the "purest sources" in art, in which case it would refer to the classical statues of the Gods.[31] This, I believe, is corroborated by the initial reference to Pindar. In his 8th Pythian for Aristomenes of Aegina, the Greek poet reminds us of our mortal nature: all manly endeavour is bound to come to an end; only the Gods can grant us the power to shine in our brief life. However, it is significant that Capetanakis does not refer to the first sources of art, but to those of life. Consequently, and if I am reading the passage correctly, the reference here is also to the sources which inspired the works of art and to which we must continue to return, if we are to follow the lesson of the ancients: these are the living human bodies. Thus, Capetanakis introduces an element of temporality alongside that of historicity, an element that extends all the way to the present.

There is one individual who is granted a privileged place in Capetanakis' work for having realised the Hellenic ideal as an ever-present reality and not as a Romantic dream: Winckelmann. Capetanakis goes as far as to pronounce him a mythical being – and we will see why he does that. The status of Greek art in Winckelmann's treatises is ambivalent. On the one hand it is held as an absolute and timeless ideal – a model for imitation – yet on the other it is systematically approached as the product of a historical reality and, in particular, of the natural environment that gave birth to it.[32] The ambiguity is carried over in Capetanakis' essay. There is an interesting moment in it when he says: "Greek nature could not be a romantic dream for Winckelmann, since Hellas meant to him the environment and the element of the most anti-romantic thing: of the Hellenic body" (50). There is something peculiar in the above-quoted passage. Why should the Hellenic body be "the most anti-romantic thing"? Winckelmann

[30] Capetanakis might have in mind Herder's treatise *Plastik: einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions' bildendem Traume* (1778), in which sculpture is treated as a distinctive from of art which appeals mostly to (or is always mediated through) the sense of touch. It is Herder, and not Winckelmann, who insists on the sensuous nature of the statue.

[31] Cf. J. J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Dresden, 1756 (first edition, 1755), p. 2: "Die reinsten Quellen der Kunst sind geöffnet: glücklich ist, wer sie findet und schmeckt. Diese Quellen suchen heißt nach Athen reisen."

[32] See Barasch, *Theories of Art 2*, pp. 106-107.

himself did not address the category of the romantic; he did not even use the term classical in his treatises. The terminology here must be rather borrowed from Hegel[33] and refer to the German philosopher's division of art into three forms, loosely corresponding to historical periods: the symbolic, the classic and the romantic. In Hegel's aesthetics (1835-1838), classical sculpture is considered exemplary for contriving an absolute union of the Idea and its sensuous reality. This is because the object of representation, human form, is the locus of the *Mind*, which is here conceived as an individualised, human mind. This union was inevitably destroyed in Romantic art as a result of the evolution of human consciousness (inextricably linked to the establishment of Christian faith). As the human mind becomes conscious of its being part of a divine reality, that it can only be realised as *Spirit*, it rejects the sensuous as an inappropriate means of representing the Idea. The shift is treated in a positive light by Hegel, as the result of historical progress and the evolution of human consciousness – even if Romantic art might in fact signal the end of all art; for Capetanakis, however, Romantic art marks the beginning of decline, precisely because it abandons the particular, sensuous body.[34] Hence, even though Capetanakis borrows the Hegelian apparatus, he refuses to see the Hellenic world as a mere stage in human history and claims it to be the absolute rule of life (48).

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Capetanakis pronounces Winckelmann to be Hellenic. What might come as a surprise is that he claims him to be Hellenic by birth. How could Winckelmann have been born Hellenic in the cold and dark climate of the North that reduces human beings to melancholy and an ever-longing for the heat and light of the Mediterranean sun – he who, moreover, never trod on Greek soil? It is a thing one marvels at, says Capetanakis. But if we choose not to treat this as the exception that proves the rule, there is yet another way of resolving the contradiction. Winckelmann's Hellenicity, Capetanakis remarks, was not the product of his classical erudition. It must, then, have been directly related to his personal circumstances. The German philosopher found, among his contemporaries, "the first sources of life" just as the ancient Greek sculptors did in their own environment. He was able to do that, to glimpse the absolute in the particular, to be born Greek in the northern

[33] For Capetanakis' engagement with the philosophy of Hegel while at Heidelberg, see Andromida, *The Life and Work of Demetrios Capeetanakis*, pp. 98-990.

[34] Capetanakis explicitly links the decline of the Hellenic ideal with the rise of Christianity. Plato, was for him the last Greek who tried to salvage the "Greek myth" (65). The Neo-Platonists (beginning with Plotinus), with their scorn for all material things (including the human body), stripped the beautiful of its sensuality, reducing it to the merely spiritual (65-68).

soil, because of *his own* particular nature: for Winckelmann was not foremost a theorist or philosopher, but a friend of friends *and* a friend of the Gods (45-46). He was, in other words, what Kant was not: a lover. This explanation, however, requires us to delve into the relationship between beauty and eros.

Beauty, genuine Hellenic beauty, if it is to be particular yet tend towards the absolute at the same time, cannot be a static concept; it must necessarily take the form of a drive or cause. Capetanakis approaches it through the emotional impact it has on the beholder. Beauty gives rise to a desire. This is established early on in the essay and serves as a significant point of departure from Kantian aesthetics. Capetanakis relocates the principles of disinterestedness and of peaceful contemplation[35] to the realm of knowledge and ethics, while introducing into the realm of aesthetics – indeed, as a *sine qua non* condition for aesthetic appreciation – that of personal interest: to philosophise about beauty one needs to have been torn apart at its sight, to have been mortally wounded by one's longing (eros) for it.[36] The essayist juxtaposes the Hellenic God to the God of philosophy: the former is superior in being a God that governs not only human logic, but also the senses. Hence the Hellenic God is qualified (28) as "luminous" and "alive" (*φωτεινός, ζωντανός*). The first adjective points to the element of historicity, by recalling Winckelmann's theory of classical art having been born in the sun-drenched Mediterranean land; the second reminds us of the element Capetanakis himself introduced, that of temporality.

Beauty, then, as defined through its effect, is that which produces a sudden revelation, conducing us into a state of both wonder[37] and desire. It is that which creates the need to solve its puzzle by conquering it: lovers long for the erotic touch, just as artists long to conquer its form and philosophers its essence. But to even think that conquering was possible would be to delude ourselves. The

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[35] As set out in the very beginning of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (I.2-3), the beautiful is that which produces in the beholder a state of pure delight, devoid of any personal interest.

[36] In his review of *Mythology of the Beautiful*, Tsatsos perceives this as a weakness in the approach. According to him, the beautiful does not only produce the feeling of pain but can also lead us to a state of peace and contentment: the latter is the beauty which springs from the objectivity of the idea, whereas the former is the "tragic beauty" that has its roots in the subjective gaze of the beholder. Tsatsos here follows Kant who, while claiming that aesthetic judgments are subjective, still tried to salvage their universality by presupposing universal agreement based on common sense. He thus argued that even though aesthetic judgments are subjective, they are (and must be) represented as objective. Tsatsos' concept of "tragic beauty", however, is not Kantian. It is possible that Tsatsos tries to merge the categories of the beautiful and the sublime.

[37] Cf. Plato's *Theaetetus* 155d2-4: *μάλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν· οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας ἢ αὕτη.*

lover of beauty is thus condemned to "run from body to body […], to lacerate himself in fiery embraces, in an attempt to answer the question that has been tormenting him from the moment he caught sight of living beauty" (28). Hence, Capetanakis arrives at his most important formulation: the rule of beauty is the rule of pain. Genuine philosophy can only spring from one's "ultimate fear", from the confrontation with "that which threatens one's very existence" (31).

The wording is familiar to those acquainted with the philosophy of despair. Capetanakis' debt to Lev Shestov[38] and Kierkegaard cannot be overstated. According to Lehmann, one of the pieces Capetanakis was working on before his death was an essay on Kierkegaard. This, along with an essay on Plato, was to hold central place in a collected volume he had been planning under the working title *The Shores of Darkness*.[39] Unfortunately, the notes which he left behind are sparse. Equally sparse are the direct references to Kierkegaard in his work, although the Danish philosopher's presence as a silent interlocutor is unmistakable.

For Kierkegaard, despair or "the sickness unto death" is the failure of realising one's self (*Existenz*). The cause of this sickness is one's inability or unwillingness to understand and accept that the self is grounded in an external source. Since this source for Kierkegaard is the power that established the self (presumably God), it follows that despair is a synonym for sin. Kierkegaard defines the self as a synthesis arrived at through a dialectical movement between finitude and infinitude, the temporal and the eternal, necessity and freedom. Hence, one form of despair is the individual's unwillingness to accept necessity as a limit to one's freedom, which entails experiencing life as mere possibility (its reverse is the despair of the individual who experiences life as mere necessity). A similar form of despair is that experienced by the individual who, in seeking infinitude, renounces the self's finitude.[40] Kierkegaard's "knight of infinite resignation" is a case in point: the person who despairs over all earthly things, grounds his experience in the infinite, yet is unable to make the movement to faith which would restore his finitude. Interestingly, the model for this knight is chivalric

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[38] Shestov's influence becomes more prominent in Capetanakis' English essays, and particularly in "Dostoevsky" (*New Writing and Daylight* 4 [1943-1944], pp. 24-35 [=*Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, pp. 103-116]).

[39] John Lehmann, "Introduction", in *Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, p. 10. Some of Capetanakis' notes on Kierkegaard, along with a bibliography he had compiled, are to be found among his papers at the Gennadius Library.

[40] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 [*Sygdommen til Døden*, 1849].

love: the idealisation of the beloved amounts to a negation of the possibility of the knight's ever possessing his lady – for such a thing would be absurd. The "knight of faith", on the other hand, follows the exact same movement, but takes a further step at the end: he acknowledges that the possession of his lady is absurd in this finite world, yet he believes it to be possible.[41] Despair, therefore, is not altogether a negative concept. For one thing, it is that which grants human beings their superiority over the other species (for despair comes in proportion to one's consciousness of it). Most importantly, despair – or the consciousness thereof – is the necessary step to faith.

It might seem curious that Capetanakis would have been so influenced by the thought of someone who is considered foremost as a religious thinker. It is not so. Kierkegaard started out as an aesthete and never ceased to define himself as a poet; love affairs are the primary examples he uses in a number of works to illustrate the concepts of despair and faith; moreover, some of his major philosophical works – and this is something that must have fascinated Capetanakis – were born out of his self-imposed broken engagement with Regine Olsen. Capetanakis also examines despair through the lens of beauty and eros. Despair is the state one is thrown into when admitting to the impossibility of conquering beauty (35): "Behind beauty rises God or looms nothingness – zero." Eros then, when experienced genuinely (not merely as a possibility but also as a necessity; not as a longing for infinitude, but as a desire to realise the infinite in the finite), threatens our being with complete dissolution. If, however, the self resists this threat and remains intact in the face of the ordeal, then it manages to realise itself. What this realisation consists of for Capetanakis is unclear. In the conclusion of his essay on Proust, he notes:

> Nothingness – everything – called God by believers – are the two names which philosophers give to the darkness which surrounds our existence. The true philosophers are those who can make us feel this thing that some call God, and others nothingness. [Proust] is always talking to us of nothingness, of the darkness of our soul and the night which extends beyond our lives: the night which those who believe call God.[42]

Clearly, Capetanakis does not belong to the philosophers who believe and who call the night God. And yet neither does he belong to the philosophers who are

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[41] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 [*Frygt og Bæven*, 1843].

[42] "A Lecture on Proust", *New Writing and Daylight* 6 (1945), pp. 107-117, here 102 [=*Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, 90-102]. This is the English translation of a lecture Capetanakis had delivered in French at Cambridge.

satisfied with "nothingness" – or else he would be a nihilist.[43] The despair over nothingness for Capetanakis – and nowhere does this become more apparent than in *Mythology* – seems to be the equivalent to Kierkegaard's state of infinite resignation. Can one go beyond that state? Can nothingness be transcended? It can, the poet suggests, though transcendence is not to be found in religion. To counter despair, one must surrender to its very cause, eros, and there seek to realise oneself.

Capetanakis demonstrates this not in theoretical, but in actual terms – that is, by examining the lives of a host of great thinkers that dared to face eros boldly, starting with Plato. The Greek philosopher became a martyr for his eros, surrendering "heroically" to the "horror" of his desires (the desires of his body) – though he did not, of course, find in them the *telos* of beauty (39-40). It is interesting that Capetanakis uses a passage from the myth of the psyche in the *Phaedrus* (249c-251e) where Socrates speaks, in hypothetical terms, of the feelings aroused in one at the sight of beauty and attributes these feelings to Plato. One has to wonder why he did not use biographical material, as he is wont to do with other authors. Nevertheless, this bold gesture allows him to approach the philosopher as a human being and to perform a fascinating reading of his works. Indeed, Capetanakis' understanding of Plato is unique not because he chooses to read the dialogues as autobiographical, but because, in doing so, he empties them of their rhetoric. Where most critics treat the moments of weakness, of *aporia*, as parts of the philosopher's (or Socrates') rhetorical strategy, Capetanakis views them as genuinely confessional. This becomes even clearer in his reading of the *Phaedrus* around which he structures his doctoral dissertation. Capetanakis refuses to interpret Socrates' first speech as a parody of Lysias, a mere exercise in rhetoric. On the contrary, he argues that Socrates is articulating a truth – albeit a partial one: the tragic realisation of temporality in human eros. His interpretation might actually serve as an indirect response to Kierkegaard.[44] Capetanakis does not see in Socrates the figure of the ironist, but that of a tragic hero who acknowledges his own limitations as a human being. Hence, Capetanakis arrives at his conclusion regarding Plato: "As the greatest Hellene, he maintained the divine and dignified grandeur of his stance, without closing his eyes in front of the tragic" (35).

Tragic, in this instance, must refer to the nature of eros, which is temporary (*παροδικός*). This is argued more thoroughly in Capetanakis' dissertation, as

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[43] See his "Dostoevsky", where the human cry of despair is treated as the ultimate rejection of nihilism.

[44] See Kierkegard's treatment of Socratic irony in *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 [*Om Begrebet Ironi med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates*, 1841].

well as in his essay on Proust. There is a passage in Kierkegaard which, I believe, sheds an interesting light on the importance of this notion in Capetanakis.[45] In his discussion of Abraham's sacrifice as the *par excellence* absurd action, the Danish philosopher compares Abraham to a tragic hero. The latter, he says, is often called upon to perform a sacrifice as well (for example, Agamemnon in *Iphigenia in Aulis*), but in this case his/her actions are always in accord with a universal code of ethics.[46] Abraham's sacrifice, on the other hand, is *not* an ethical action, but a unique case in which there can be a "teleological suspension of ethics". The tragic is therefore incompatible with faith in Kierkegaard. This is not so for Capetanakis, who insists on the lover's (Plato's in this case) assumption of his tragic fate as a step to transcendence.

In the same manner that he approaches Plato, Capetanakis discusses a number of other poets and artists from antiquity to his times: Ibycus, Michelangelo, August von Platen, George and, of course, Winckelmann. It is striking that, even though Capetanakis does make references to Winckelmann's theoretical works, he seems to be mostly interested in his letters and reminiscences, as well as in the biographical sketches of his contemporaries. Through these he seeks to present Winckelmann not just as a lover of ancient Greece, but as a Hellenic lover. Capetanakis is aware of his peculiar methodology and feels the need to account for it, by insisting that the only way to understand Winckelmann is by approaching his life and work as a whole (56).

The biographical emphasis in Capetanakis' approach to art and philosophy might strike a contemporary reader – or even his contemporary readers – as outdated. It is, however, entirely in line with the essayist's principle: to philosophise genuinely about beauty one must not seek to construct an abstract theoretical system, but turn to real life. With the exception of personal experience, biography – in the broader sense of the term – is the only other way to approach real life. Capetanakis is on his way to developing a new approach to the arts, even a new essay genre, that will earn him his reputation as a critic in England.[47] This new genre is not to be confused with biographical criticism, for

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[45] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, pp. 59-61.

[46] I believe that Antigone would be a counter-example to Kierkegaard's argument, though one could argue that even when the tragic hero does not act *according to* the universal code of ethics, his/her actions are measured against it. This, however, would still presuppose that there is a universal code of ethics, which is a very problematic notion.

[47] I am referring to his essays "Rimbaud" (*New Writing and Daylight* 1 [1942], pp. 105-121 [=*Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek Poet in England*, pp. 53-71]; note that this is a different essay from the Greek one referenced above), "Stefan George", "Dostoevsky", and "A Lecture on Proust".

biography is not used by the essayist primarily as a hermeneutical tool, but as a text of its own or, to be more precise, as that which lies in between the textual and the oral: myth. In his review of *Mythology*, Kleon Paraschos astutely remarks that the title refers to the ways in which some exceptional human beings faced beauty.[48] This observation, I think, is an elegant summary of Capetanakis' project. I would only add that mythology refers equally to the *lives* of these individuals who exemplify the Hellenic approach to beauty.

There is an aspect to myth implicit (and at times even explicit) in Capetanakis' essay, which allows him to piece together all the terms of the initial puzzle: its didactic potential.[49] What all these lovers of beauty had in common was a passion for teaching, an eros of the kind that manages to fertilise young souls and earn immortality for the lover. This is to be understood in the context of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*.[50] She defines eros as the desire for immortality (*ἀθανασία*). The sight of beauty produces in the lover a desire to give birth. The lovers who are pregnant in the body seek immortality through biological reproduction (*τόκος ἐν τῷ καλῷ*) and the propagation of the species (207d4-5: *ἀεὶ καταλείπει ἕτερον νέον ἀντὶ τοῦ παλαιοῦ*). Those, on the other hand, who are pregnant in their souls seek immortality through the engendering of good *logoi* (*τόκος ἐν ψυχῇ*),[51] leaving behind something even more valuable than biological children: a legacy for future generations (209c8-10: *ἅτε καλλιόνων καὶ ἀθανατωτέρων παίδων κεκοινωνηκότες*). And there is a third category of lovers, who stand superior to all since they manage to be initiated into the mysteries of Eros, by gradually ascending towards higher forms of the beautiful[52] until they finally catch sight of absolute Beauty. It is these lucky lovers who manage to become dear to the Gods (212a8: *θεοφιλεῖ γενέσθαι*). It now becomes clear why Capetanakis calls Winckelmann "a friend of friends" and a "friend of the Gods". In fact, all of Capetanakis' exemplary Hellenic lovers can be said to have arrived at the gates of the Absolute, to have come close to the sight of Beauty. But to have done so implies that they first had to become martyrs for eros, to have experienced the desire for human beauty and to have accepted their tragic fate.

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[48] Paraschos, "Demetrios Capetanakis' *Mythology of the Beautiful*", p. 477.

[49] It is no coincidence that in Plato's *Republic*, myth receives preferential treatment over other forms of literature because of its didactic potential (*Republic* 377a 4-7).

[50] The content of the speech is reproduced in "Eros and Time", 85-88.

[51] Plato refers to all products of virtuous individuals (209e3: *παντοίαν ἀρετήν*): good words, deeds, artworks, laws, etc.

[52] These lovers are the philosophers. Their ascension is described as a constant progression towards superior objects of eros: from an individual beautiful body to all beautiful bodies, to the beauty of souls, to human actions and laws, to knowledge, and finally to absolute Beauty (the Idea).

One should note that, both in Plato and in Capetanakis, the kind of eros which triggers the desire for immortality is aroused at the sight of a beautiful male body (which, we recall, is the ideal of human beauty) and can therefore be identified with – though need not necessarily be limited to – homosexual eros. This is suggested in *Mythology* by the essayist's choice of exemplary lovers (Plato, Winckelmann, George). It is also implied by his insistence on the transparency of beauty and eros in the Hellenic world (*Graeca res est, nihil velare*). Moreover, the initial dedication to Fahrner (the Hellenic) seems to point us in the same direction, the adjective carrying unmistakable Cavafyan connotations.[53] Nowhere, however, does the author make any explicit references to homosexuality. Even in his discussion of Winckelmann's affairs, he prefers to use the word "friend". If nothing else, the reception of Sykoutris' *Symposium* introduction must have taught Capetanakis to be careful with his choice of words. On the other hand, to cross the limits of conjecture and limit our understanding of Hellenic eros to homosexuality might be to do violence to the essay, without reaching a more thorough understanding of its philosophical grounds. In this respect, it is important to stress that even though human eros, the eros for human bodies, is of paramount importance for Capetanakis, it is always discussed as a vehicle and never as a *telos*. Hellenic eros – the eros of the loftiest kind – cannot be limited to the eros of human bodies; it must have the ability to fertilise the soul, and instil in it the good *logo*s. One might even venture to call it Platonic, keeping however in mind that Platonic eros is neither necessarily unconsummated, nor exclusively male, though it is arguably tragic.

Beauty is eros, eros Beauty – and both are Hellenic. This is so not because Greece gave birth to bodies divine, not because it formulated the sacred rule of art, but because it gave rise to the tragic attitude. The Hellenic, then, must not be viewed as an aesthetic criterion but as a privileged life stance. To be Hellenic is to be the lover of beauty; the lover who knows that human eros can only be temporal and tragic, yet is willing to experience it as the ultimate reality. This is the mythology of beauty. If the Hellenic crosses into the realm of myth, this is only because myth is, after all, the most concrete element of our lives.

It is difficult to surmise what Capetanakis' psychology was at the time he was writing *Mythology*. The tone of the essay certainly betrays self-confidence and a certain youthful exuberance. Still under the spell of George and Fahrner, it is likely that he envisioned himself as, or wished to become, an enlightened teacher

[53] M. Z. Kopidakis, *Ὁ «ἀπόλυτος Ἕλλην» Δ. Καπετανάκης καὶ ὁ «ἑλληνικός» R. Fahrner* [The "absolute Hellene" D. Capetanakis and the "Hellenic" R. Fahrner], Athens: Welfare Foundation for Social and Cultural Affairs (KIKPE), 2013, pp. 15-16.

of the young. He indeed must have been a passionate and charismatic speaker. What strikes the reader of his Greek essays mostly is the idiosyncratic, perhaps even mercurial nature of a poet who is capable of plunging into the depths of melancholy and, the next moment sore to the heights of elation. He certainly is not frugal with lofty words and phrases (absolute, divine, ideal, highest, genuine) nor is he sparing on quotes and sayings, questions and other rhetorical devices. And yet, within the span of barely three years, Capetanakis' style and tone seem to be dramatically transformed. The change has several causes, historical developments and his switching into a new language being the most important ones. At any rate, one cannot but marvel at the title used for his first published English essay by the former friend of Winckelmann (and of the gods): "The Greeks are Human Beings."

First, an explanation that is overdue. In my treatment of *Mythology,* I have been using the adjective "Hellenic" to translate the Greek "*έλληνικός*". Although the choice is contestable, it seems to me that in *Mythology* Capetanakis refers mostly to the ancient Greek legacy in the arts and letters, a legacy that has its roots in classical Greece (his references are to Polykleitos, ancient tragedy, Socrates and Plato). Nevertheless, I treated Hellenic as denoting primarily not a historical period, but the philosophical attitude or life stance that it gave rise to and which is still to be found in some exceptional individuals. It is true that in the essay I am about to discuss, and which was originally written in English, Capetanakis uses the adjective "Greek" to refer not only to contemporary citizens of Greece, but also to Greek history and tradition. There is a slight difference, though. In "The Greeks are Human Beings", history and tradition are treated from the perspective of contemporary Greeks. Moreover, it is used to designate the citizens, history and culture of a people as a whole (note that it is mostly used in the plural). In short, if "the Hellenic" refers to an individual life stance, "modern Greek" denotes an element of collective identity. This crucial difference marks the beginning of a new orientation.

Let me, once more, set the context. In 1939 Capetanakis began studying English literature at Cambridge. It is at this time when he met Lehmann. Two years later, and before the completion of his degree, he was enlisted to work at the London office of the Greek Ministry of Information. Capetanakis must have accepted the post for a number of reasons. Being away from his family in a period when his country was going through such hard times must have awakened a feeling of helplessness and guilt. He was, therefore, glad to be given an opportunity to offer his services, even from a foreign land. But his friendship with Lehmann must have also weighed on his decision. The prospect of living in wartime London, at the centre of intellectual activity, and collaborating closely

with Lehmann and his circle, could not have been indifferent to him. The essay in question was written at just that time. While we cannot assume that it was related to his propaganda work for the Greek government, it was certainly an attempt to solicit support for his compatriots and, towards this goal, to correct some British misunderstandings concerning modern Greeks. As such, it was addressed to an educated British reader by a contemporary Greek living in Britain. This, in fact, is Capetanakis' only essay where the first person is used systematically; the author's identity is stated explicitly; and the author draws directly from his personal experience to treat the subject: Capetanakis writes as *a Greek in England*.

The above circumstances largely determine the focus as well as the turn of the author's thought. Specifically, by switching from the Hellenic to modern Greeks, Capetanakis in fact turns his emphasis from aesthetics to ethics. To philosophise genuinely about beauty in the midst of a world war would certainly have been unthinkable; to treat death as the ultimate reality that grants the philosopher-lover a privileged worldview would seem completely inadequate when death had become the first item on the daily agenda. To even consider notions such as the "ideal" or the "absolute" would not do. To remain entrapped in the past would not do either. One had to go back to the basics of life. One had to face the present.

This is exactly what the author does. First, he sets out to dismantle all prejudice regarding modern Greeks. He distinguishes two main and equally misguided tendencies in the way the (educated) British view their Greek contemporaries.[54] The first one is that of idealising the culture of classical Greece, or judging it according to the present standards. In an astute gesture, Capetanakis denounces this tendency by reiterating Virginia Woolf's arguments in her essay "On not Knowing Greek"[55] – in other words he, as a Greek essayist, advocates the cause of his compatriots by referring to the authority of a British author. The opposite tendency, that of refusing to associate Greece with its ancient heritage, of choosing to see but ruins in the place where there once bloomed a civilisation, is equally misguided, in addition to being "less noble".[56] He concludes his examination with a complaint: "The Greeks of today are neither

[54] Since "the more educated an Englishman is the more difficult it is for him to see Greece of today as she really is" (43).

[55] Virginia Woolf, "On not Knowing Greek", in *The Common Reader*, London: Hogarth Press, pp. 39-59.

[56] In exemplifying this tendency, Capetanakis refers to Eliot's Mr. Eugenides in quite different terms from the ones Seferis will use in his comparative study of Cavafy and Eliot (1981; based on a lecture Seferis delivered in 1946). Capetanakis is clearly being critical of Eliot for his stereotypical depiction of modern Greeks, while Seferis is interested in Eliot's use of the mythic method to portray the decay in the modern world.

lingering specimens of a race that worked wonders two thousand years ago nor a Balkan people without any past and without any roots in the history of their land" (46). What, then, are they or how is one to approach them?

The Greeks, Capetanakis says, are a living people whom one must connect "to the whole rather than to some periods of their history" (46). He goes on to propose a "history of the Greek sensibility through the ages" by drawing on the model of Woolf's *Orlando*.[57]

> The Greek Orlando would be among other things a hero of the Homeric age, divine in his manly strength and weakness; a youth of the Academy of Plato with a mind burning with love; a soldier conquering Asia and the world of wonders under Alexander the Great; a fastidious poet in Alexandria handling words as if they were pearls; the man of taste under the Romans who preferred the peaceful and limited happiness of life in his own country to the "crowd" of Rome; a plotting courtier in Constantinople or a Byzantine monk painting emaciated saints in a background of gold; a scholar refugee teaching Greek to the Italians of the Renaissance; a brigand under the Turks, living on the mountains "in the company of the woods and the wild beasts" and wining his freedom by his sword; a "great interpreter" at the Sultan's court, a refined European in an oriental country ignoring Europe; a hero of the war of the Greek independence believing that "one hour's freedom is better than a long life of slavery"; an enthusiastic democrat of the nineteenth century; and finally a twentieth-century man full of vitality, who only a short while ago proved, in the way he fought the invaders of his country, that "he still has a soul in his breast" (46).

The impressive and impressively long list Capetanakis produces includes Greeks of all times (from antiquity to the Hellenistic world, Byzantium, Ottoman rule and Modern Greece) and trades (heroes, poets, courtiers, monks, brigands, state officials and soldiers), the famous alongside the anonymous, and is supplemented with references to Greek demotic songs, Rigas Feraios and contemporary poetry.[58] This is definitely not Capetanakis the classicist speaking, but the one who embraces and celebrates Greek culture in its totality. What is more important, one senses a gradual shift from the man of letters to the man

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[57] The recurrent references to Woolf are perhaps to be attributed to Lehmann's influence. John Lehmann was employed by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at Hogarth Press in 1931; he left his post in 1932 and returned as a financial partner in 1938. At the time, Lehmann had been working on an essay on Virginia Woolf. Note that Capetanakis' essay was written shortly before her suicide in March 1941.

[58] The last quote comes from an untitled poem in Pantelis Prevelakis' *"Melencolia" (Dürer)* cycle (1933-1934), which Capetanakis had translated for *Folios of New Writing* (1941) p. 70.

of action. This, I believe, reflects Capetanakis' shift of interest from aesthetics to ethics. The ethical value Capetanakis associates with Greek civilisation is freedom. What distinguishes the Greeks is their constant struggle for freedom.

But there is one significant category of Greeks whose absence from the above list cannot be missed: women. Whether the omission is conscious or not, it is accounted for by the author in the lines that follow: "The only thing that never changed in Greek civilisation was its male character" (46-47). This – admittedly sexist – assertion can be explained in the context of the whole argument: manliness for Capetanakis stands for fearlessness, courage, struggle, or what in *Mythology* he calls "not closing one's eyes to the tragic". He thus concludes the essay with an aphorism: "What matters is the Greeks of today and what will become of them. What now matters is humanity and what will become of it" (47). The statement can be read as a plea to his readers, although the content of this plea is not made explicit. The parallel structure of the two sentences suggests the close relationship, if not identity, between "the Greeks" and "humanity": if we want to save humanity, we cannot abandon the Greeks, for the Greeks are human beings.

I want to conclude by suggesting that despite the many differences between the two essays examined here, despite their discrepancy in style, focus, audience, and orientation, there is an all-embracing sentiment that binds them: a commitment to individual human beings. In his English essay, he begins by quoting a phrase that Tsatsos used to repeat in his university lectures: "We are interested in the Parthenon, not in the workmen who built it. What matters is the work of art, not human beings" (43). Once more, Capetanakis does not hesitate to disagree with his mentor, even express his revulsion at the statement. For him, one can only understand the work if one knows the people. The work "speaks of the interesting people who needed it and made it, and […] can still be mirrored in the eyes of people and affect their lives" (43). One recognises here the fundamental principles of *Mythology:* it is the lives of people that are interesting and not their works; to realise the beautiful or the good, one needs to accept one's limits as a human being; by doing so, one has the potential to affect the lives of other human beings. These, I think, are the elements of the Hellenic tradition which nurtured Capetanakis' life and work.

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