

Amalia-Florentina DRĂGULĂNESCU *

Conflictual Mythological Paradigms in Nikos Kazantzakis' s Dramas

Abstract: Broadly speaking, both in his novels, *Report to El Greco*, *The Fratricides*, even *Christ Recrucified*, as well as dramas (e.g. *Kouros*, *Melissa*), the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis transfigures certain classic ancient paradigms. These relate in particular to conflicting situations, thus understanding the supremacy of several *creators* compared with the aspiration towards the perfection of some *creatures*, as the eternal dominance of the human substance. In other words, beyond the autobiographical configuration, though unacknowledged by the author, his writings bear the mark of an *agony* that is finally filled with *serenity*, corresponding to an ideal *apathanatismos*. Always referring to the heroes and demigods (Dyonissos, Theseu, Ariadne, Minotaur, etc.), this writer translates, on the one hand, paradoxically, the experiences of modern man into a classical, almost austere antiquity in a kind of reversible *katharsis* over time, and on the other he completes all the ancient protagonists with their modern features, and more with some personal characteristics. Therewith, the traditional and modernistic symbols, myths, or meanings are melted in an innovative (tehné) hermeneutic crucible, through which, either by a sustained *struggle*, or a sophisticated *fight*, new creatures as they are encountered in most Kazantzakian dramas are contrived.

Keywords: myth, conflict, demythisation, modern paradigms, remythisation, drama.

Myth has always attracted man's interest, his need for enjoyment being combined with the urgent need (even nowadays) for explanations of not yet understood phenomena. As Vassilis Vitsaxis believes in *The Myth. A Reference Point in The Existential Searching*: "Therefore, ideas on *reality* emerge by the experience of the sacred, of truth, *significance*, which will be further systematized by metaphysical speculations" (Vitsaxis 2007, 29). On the other hand, the *conflict* in literature is rather a dynamic paradigm that includes various characters, situations and forces, entities usually in creative opposition. There are also some *stages of the conflict*, which are manifested both in the psycho-social relations and in the literary field, – the *disagreement/confrontation*, *escalation* and its *resolution* (see Arabs versus Westerners). In what concerns the evolution of the myth, we witness the initial establishment of a *convention*, corresponding in

* PhD, Researcher, Department of Literary History, Institute of Romanian Philology "A. Philippide", Romanian Academy – Iași branch; Romania; e-mail: amalita004@yahoo.com

modern and postmodern times to a *contravention*, the amendment of essential myths, while their reconfiguration follows new patterns. The twentieth century sets up more insights on “casting” and diverting conflicting issues, and here we mention A. Gide, P. Claudel, J. Joyce, Luigi Pirandello, A. Malraux, Sartre, S. Beckett, Saint-John Perse, E. Ionesco and A. Sikelianos, as well as the poets R.M. Rilke and P. Valery.

Among N. Kazantzakis' plays, available to the Romanian reader, only three have been translated so far – *Kouros*, *Melissa* and *Christopher Columbus*, in which the *aspects of the conflict* – the old world, the new world, or rather the features of the old man towards the new human mythology are especially revealed. It is worth mentioning that the Greek writer melts some myths, but not European or African but interim, of *Cretan* origin, drowned and then saved, as another Atlantis. While briefly analyzing the first three plays, *Kouros* seems the most important, bearing the effigy of that young man of those ancient Greek times, a marble sculpture representing, according to some specialists, Apollo's embodiment, reaching *colossal* heights even up to 3 meters tall. That obvious aristocratic ancestry (*areté*) of these representations is really interesting; their supposed noble origin which was associated to a certain point with *immortality*. Firstly, a *symbolizing* intention is detected in the mere selection of the protagonists' names in these three plays, as so often met in Kazantzakis' writings (e.g. Manolios of *Hristos răstignit a doua oară* / *Christ crucified a second time*). For example, *Melissa* automatically represents in the artistic imagination the *bee's* symbol, which, incidentally, is not related to the primordial *melos*. She mainly concentrates not only on the creative, but also on the destructive, conflicting forces, in a secondary register. The significance of the legendary Sophocles being surrounded by bees at birth extended to the belief that the *poet* himself is the embodiment of a bee as a creative receptacle, and Rilke states this in a letter, “We are the bees of the invisible. We arduously gather the honey of the visible to deposit it in the golden hive of the invisible.” In one of the dictionaries of literary symbols, “bees were often regarded as very warlike, and their hive to be organized like an army” (Ferber 2001, 17), while a swarm of bees was considered ominous.

It is very difficult to summarize the ideo-affective peculiarities of Kazantzakis' plays, what persists is the fact that the writer fractally gathers ancient mythological shreds, to translate them into a valuable *opera aperta*. Furthermore, he takes over Shakespearean visions in an original manner, for example when *Periander* (from *Melissa*), the tyrant in Corinth, appears in the *garden* as a *nékyā* holding a dagger in his hand, his name meaning “almost man.” (Not coincidentally, his little son, Kipselos, bears the name of the *hive*, and it is up to a point that he carries the hopes of the royal family enlargement and of that dynasty). As far as *Licofrom* is concerned, who

etymologically is the one who is “wolf – raised”, he indirectly struggles with the spirits of a long past, living in an era of sublime degradation. Besides, both in *Melissa* and *Kouros*, the *night* (Nyx) shows itself as a supreme deity above all other gods, because during the night, the conflicts, especially the inner ones, are exacerbated (a. “Night is a bigger and stronger goddess than the day”; b. Theseu asks Ariadna – “Who sent you to me, daughter of the Night?” – The Night sent me. The night with full moon. Don’t ask me more” – Kazantzakis 1989, 34). Therefore, among the characters of the same play, but also in prose, an *identity transfer* often takes place at N. Kazantzakis, so that Kipselos and Licofron brothers become alike, far beyond the different mentalities, while Ariadna borrows Theseus her (divine) powers as in the past, and she almost becomes masculine. The central core of the quasi-trilogy is, of course, *Kouros*, *kouros* and *koré* being the twin hypostases of the same superior human type defying *destiny*, and therefore death, “*Destiny* embraces one of his thousands of thrilling masks to thrust you in chasm” (see Madam Hortense). Moreover, in all his three plays, the writer starts from the prehistoric *myth of a new world and a new civilization* (since Gilgamesh and Enkidu), reaching once again *the myth of a new man*, or more subtly, of *the new Adam*, but not without being accompanied by agony, because the Christian hues of Kazantzakis’ writings cannot be abstracted, gradually passing through intermediate mythological sequences. (Even if he was excommunicated, his books were indexed, the patriarch Athenagoras of those times kept them in his personal library).

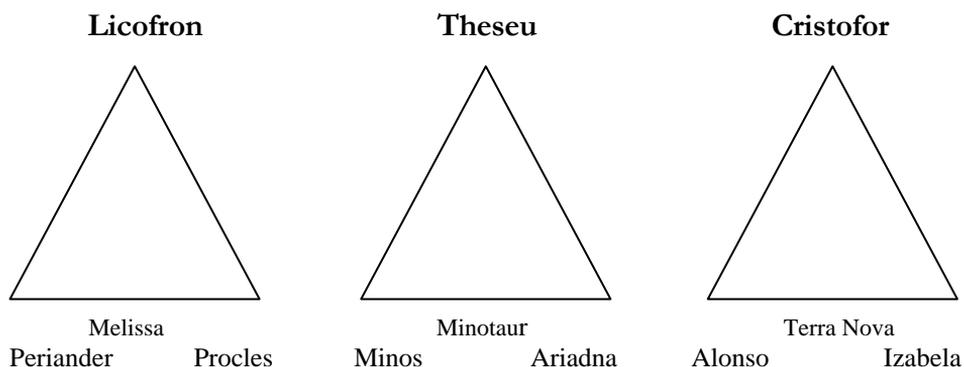
According to the Greek playwright, the old idea of immutable *destiny* is paradoxically changed into the concept of *moment* “a full of promises passing moment over your head” (*Kouros*)/ (Kazantzakis 1989, 29), having similar definitions. Why did Kazantzakis feel the need to reshape some perfect mythological patterns? *Theseu as a Saviour in Attiki*, hybridly forged and updated from Hercules and St. George; the *adamic / mono-gamic love* (Periander-Melissa), whose mechanism breaks down at some point, (“Sorry, Melissa! You know very well that I was driven by love, I was crazy for you” (Kazantzakis 1989, 76), searching and finding of a new land by Christopher Columbus. Ultimately, three plays also contain in their subtext the abandonment of the conflict under the occurrence of exaltation and conflict (e.g. Theseu gives up fighting with the Minotaur which does not even occur as a character of the drama, but only by the features of the atypical master, Minos.) There is also a complex artistic motif, having a solid foundation but hard to detect at first sight: it is the *everlasting human metamorphosis*, nearly *teandria*: in *Kouros* there is the semi-god, the new Theseu, in *Melissa* by the Periander’s transfiguration, thanks to the assumption and forgiveness, through Licofron’s son, while Christopher Columbus, as his name suggests, is

a terrestrial pattern of Christ paradigm to a point – he bears Christ's message to new, unknown realms, but not without risk. The animalistic hypostases found in these dramas firstly contribute to the setting out of the bestial side from the superior one, and later to the contrasting, stronger outline of the latter – “Why have you commanded to hunt the horses before dawn?” Periander asks his son, in other words, the metaphoric language is a means of transmitting deeper meanings, since the *horse* served for a psycho-pomp function and led Licofron before death, more precisely *before* understanding the death of (his mother) by the help of his grandfather's stories, the tyrant of Epidaurus, and connoisseur of *mysteries*. Bearing a Christian hint, it is *temptation* that comes permanently – Theseu's temptation to seduce Ariadne (and to be with her), or when Periander addresses a request to his son: “Do not go there. I have read in the stars. I know very well that you will repent. Listen to me. My whole life has passed as well as *fighting men and gods*. (I learned to distinguish between what's right and what's wrong.)” (Kazantzakis 1989, 78).

As in all these modern plays, the idea of *free will* is implied, along with the idea of a fatal destiny (*fate*). It is *the third gate of destiny*, cited in *Melissa*, that says *Dare, but not too much*, a reinterpretation of that ancient Ananké stenai, which stands for *poor necessity* (as it exists in the postmodern *weak thinking* according to Gianni Vattimo). In fact, up to a point, the Greek writer can easily make the

transition between Modern and postmodern dawn by a deconstructive trend in his writings, this interpreted (pseudo-) trilogy having *sacrifice* as a guiding thread, but necessarily having a goal, and then overcoming the necessary sacrifice, there being a systemic connection between the parts, because, as I mentioned, it refers to a *new spirit* and a *new world*. Let us not forget that the Greek writer was attracted almost irresistibly, as a call of sirens, by Nietzsche's *new man's ideology*, while, of course, grounded insidiously and erroneously on the territory of the former USSR. Returning to *Melissa* which is the most intense play, Alka, Licofron's wife warns him when he wants to travel to *Epidaurus* – “I saw a golden dagger above your crown”, the dagger being *the leitmotif* and the hybris pattern *simplifying* (the hatchet with two blades). Compared to Theseu, who was ruled by the brilliant Apollo, the young king of *Melissa* wants to worship Dionyssos, the “new god, the master of life and death”, for “the gods were born of his laughter, and from his tears they have begot men” (Kazantzakis 1989, 81). There are also the socio-literary implications, the allegations, the allegory of a modern world that should be better than the old one, but it is perpetually decadent, ruined. In this respect, Procles, the other master of Epidaurus, on the verge of his death, farewells those lived and known, such as the *lyrical ego/ narrator* from *Raport către El Greco / Report to El Greco* – I gather my tools: the ugly, the smell, the touch, the hearing, the reason. It has come to an end, the day is over; I turn back like a mole into my house, the earth. Not because I am exhausted, I'm not but the sun has set. (Kazantzakis 1986, 25)

In his plays Kazantzakis simulates the fact that he is no longer interested in the remnants of myths, though, for example, he meets the figure of old Aed, as he “had just arrived on our shore”, says Licofron. “It is said that he had come on a dolphin, but I do not believe in these stories.” (Paradoxically, by denying the reality of the myth, the consolidation, coagulation of its fragments occurs, as there is a revival of the beliefs about the *undead* and other supernatural, paranormal phenomena nowadays (e.g. the Hoia forest). It is interesting to notice that according to Nikos Kazantzakis the city of Epidaur becomes the dwelling place of Dionysus, although in ancient times this had been the home of Apollo’s son, Asklepios, the pious healer. This antagonism, between Apollonian and Dionysian, also of Nietzschean origin, is solved somewhat by the fact that the one who was healed spent a night, as an initiate in Asklepios, more precisely in the place called *enkeoimitiria*, as a foreshadowing of death, a huge place where he had to sleep, while God appeared to him in a dream, giving health advice. From the Asklepiian cock of Socrates’ supposed “apotheosis” until Christ’s warning, we paraphrase, “I came to bring the sword into the world, not peace!” there is a long and still shortcut way. Also, the writer does not forget that he is within the bounds of modern artistic conventions, and when Procles whispered to Licofron who killed his mother, he forgets to tell us the readers too, the *suspense* being often directed by the playwright, this time. At the same time, he prefers certain actantial, triadic, relatively balanced schemes.



Another thing worth mentioning, is that once with V. Vitsaxis some “efforts to reinterpret the myths in many ways, especially those which relate to *gods*, did not miss the post-classical period, during Epicureans and even more intense for Stoics” (Vitsaxis 2007, 75). The fact that the *logos coalesce with myth* according to the same interpreter, although the plays are quite mixed, various reminiscences of myths making an original unit, and much less known than the prose, and, for example, the mythical pattern of the labyrinth that takes shape in *Melissa*, the initiatory journey of Licofron (and Kipselos) –

“and when you throw the dagger at his [Periander] feet, just tell him: “*Hades salutes you! And now farewell!*” (Kazantzakis 1989, 87), and the destiny is shaped in somewhat different paradigms – “Happiness determines man to *have no shame* (our emphasis) and pass beyond human boundaries...” (Kazantzakis 1989, 89). The transgressive structures between *Kouros* and *Melissa* have some resemblance, given that in some mythological variations Theseus is born in the city of Peloponnese and he is abandoned by his father (real or adoptive), and at the age of 16 he receives some more gifts especially from Athena.

The monster called Minotaur remains in a state of *adiáphoron*, that is, in a state of *indifference*, as well as the *myth* itself, until it is brought to light by the struggle, the creative effort, the eternal conflict between man's lower parts and his spiritual side. In fact, it is certain that for all the heroes of Kazantzakis, fighting for themselves is primordial because “man's goal is, according to the old stoic formula, to live in harmony with nature, performing the right consisting in things that are useful or have a certain value in relation to this kind of life, while evil resides in things that do not have such a contribution” (Vitsaxis 2007, 28). Minotaur's meanings, which are partly confused with Minos, have been revealed over time by writers such as Henry King (1677), Jan Amos Comenius (1631), J.L. Borjes, Kafka, L. Durell and others. If we remain inside the *conflict*, the reiterated challenge (some would say feminist) thrown to Ariadne by Theseu relates to the battle of the sexes too, but the latter had not responded by the end of this challenge, Nikos Kazantzakis being thus in need and evoking the oldest partial form of the myth, when she leaves her pregnant, and yet abandons the woman who is responsible for the thread (there is also an implicit suggestion here, that the woman is the full, but reversed embodiment of the three Moiras – Lachesis, Clothos and Atropos).

The religious hue is much deeper in *Christopher Columbus*. Why are this mythical figure and this *pattern* neglected by other writers, and selected by Nikos Kazantzakis, is a good question... The old man in that drama is glancing, surprisingly, in the voice of André Malraux – “The world broke down. It's ready to perish. Only prayer can stop it from falling into the abyss.” (Kazantzakis 1989, 142). There are other modern/-ist implications in the play, such as understanding, *reconciliation* between *heaven* and *earth*, as the author says, beyond temptation, ships and gold. *Christopher* receives several epithets from others, he becomes a Don Quixote of the Seas – a *fool*, an impoverished *hidalgo*, whose mind got crazy – “Maybe our tonight's guest is even Christ” says the prior (into another situation of identity interference). Sometimes the conflicts themselves (between Juan and Alonso, for example) get connotations about a true *revolution* (“If necessary, bring God out of heaven, and from a blow, make Him take the devil in hell instead”

(Kazantzakis 1989, 148). There is also a heroic, somewhat exotic, unutterable character – The Holy Virgin of the Atlantic; Christian representations are enriched with new valences; once it is simple, but with somewhat biblical references, and why not, in the broad sense of the word – ”The world! The world is an apple! We cut it in two, and each one takes his share.” (Kazantzakis 1989, 149).

The stranger, namely Christopher Columbus, speaks extremely important words in the volume economy, as well as an illustration of the values of *the positive type of conflict* that we have referred to so far. ”It is the struggle, the trial, the way up, the ship that takes us from the old world to the new world. From the mud to the gold.” Almost visionary, Nikos Kazantzakis does not give up the exoticism that he preserves from other writings (*Report to El Greco, Alexis Zorbas*, travel diaries); ”In the Levant, I crossed the whole Mediterranean, I stopped at Chios, on the island where I found trees, from which a white, aromatic resin that the sultanas chew to sparkle their breath was flowing” (Kazantzakis 2007, 151). A definite and creative empowerment (*dynamis*) is expected to flow to the surface, so as it concerns Theseu or Licofron, and especially Christopher, in which we recognize one of Kazantzakis *alter-egos* in each of them, when he says, ”My mind is a map made by the greatest cartographer, by God.” (Kazantzakis 1989, 153). When there are no conflicts between the people (Juan and Alonso think of how to eliminate the stranger, when the protagonists are not caught up with great impulses (or fixed ideas), in *agony* in its original meaning, then the serene and absolute appeasement occurs (the Christian *isihia*), or the sleep that is ”the Lord’s angel, and the one who takes care of people.” (Kazantzakis 1989, 155). The three main male figures in the book reach the condition of *apathanatismos* through the purification of their passions (*katharsis*) ”freed from dying”, and that’s why Columbus declares almost categorically, ”The knife does not enter my body. I have a *great idea*, our emphasis” (Kazantzakis 1989, 161). There’s a scene in the *Second Act* where Christ is in a discussion with The Holy Virgin, while Christopher Columbus enter the stage – see page 162. According to the Greek writer the allegory child-world and the need to exchange that evil of this world are urgent. ”I feel God’s presence around me. No knife can pierce me” (Kazantzakis 1989, 165). Unbeatable, Columbus himself burns the map, which obsesses him so much, thus releasing his own pride. Unexpectedly he finally reaches an agreement with captain Alonso, and go together to the Antilles, ”the golden city with four gates – that one bordering the ocean is full of sapphires, that from the plain is full of emeralds, that from the northern mountains is full of rubies, the one from the southern river is of large pearls, like the egg-pot” (Kazantzakis 1989, 168).

In a retro-prospective scenario, we can ask ourselves what would be the attitude of Kazantzakis if they lived in our times, full of conflicts, of mythological residues (about Crusaders’ Knights, for example) and a Mediterranean

full of war immigrants or refugees... Therefore, the hybridization of the mythological remnants, coagulated in a personal manner by this writing alchemist, Nikos Kazantzakis, especially in his theater plays, proofs a good coexistence between tradition and modernity, beyond any old-fashioned gossip. The apparent conflicting mythological paradigms in this writer's plays confirm once again that, like Ariadne's masculine mask, we stretch out a saving thread that we can find in the labyrinth of these writings, and find out what is the idealistic link between them.

References

- Kazantzakis, Nikos. 1974. *Kouros, Melissa, Christophe Colomb*. Paris: Plon.
- Kazantzakis, Nikos. 1986. *Raport către El Greco*. București: Univers.
- Kazantzakis, Nikos. 1989. *Teatru. Kouros, Melissa, Cristofor Columb*. București: Univers.
- Ferber, Michael. 2001. *Dicționarul de simboluri literare/ A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Chișinău: Cartier.
- Vitsaxis, Vassilis. 2007. *Mitul. Punct de referință al căutării existențiale*. București: Omonia.