

Incarnations: exploring the human condition
through Patrick White's *Voss* and
Nikos Kazantzakis' *Captain Michales*.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare that this thesis is my own work and was composed by me.

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ABSTRACT

Nikos Kazantzakis' *Captain Michales* is a freedom fighter in nineteenth century Crete. Patrick White's *Voss* is a German explorer in nineteenth century Australia. Two men struggling for achievement, their disparate social contexts united in the same fundamental search for meaning.

This thesis makes comparison of these different struggles through thematic analysis of the texts, examining within the narratives the role of food, perceptions of body and soul, landscapes, gender relations, home-coming and religious experience. Themes from the novels are extracted and intertwined, within a range of theoretical frameworks: history, anthropology, science, literary and social theories, religion and politics; allowing close investigation of each novel's social, political and historical particularities, as well as their underlying discussion of perennial human issues.

These novels are each essentially explorations of the human experience. Read together, they highlight the commonest of human elements, most poignantly the need for communion; facilitating analysis of the individual and all our communities.

Comparing the two novels also continues the process of each: examining the self both within and outside of the narratives, producing a new textual self, arising from both primary sources and the contextual breadth of such rewriting.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis makes close thematic examination of two novels: *Captain Michales* by Nikos Kazantzakis and *Voss* by Patrick White. As a comparison of two literary texts, this process is, by definition, an exercise of comparative literature: ‘the comparison of one literature with another and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression’.¹ As a *thematic* comparison of the two texts, this study falls within a particular sector of comparative literature, a consequence of what Clifford Geertz termed *genre blurring*²: the investigation of universal human facts through their depiction across particular fictitious inconstancies.

In his *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, Claudio Guillén posits three justifications for the comparing of particular works, all based on definitions of *supranationality*: evidence of cross-national fertilisation within literary works; literary indicators of common socio-historical conditions in distinct and disparate cultures; and applying literary theory across cultural and national boundaries.³ This study subscribes chiefly to the second of these. I have no evidence of direct mutual influence between *Voss* and *Captain Michales*, and my study is thematic in practice and anthropological in intent.

There are elements common to both novels which contribute to the justifying of this specific choice of comparison. Each is a fictional, fleshed-out rendering of what is essentially historical fact. Each presents the eponymous male protagonist in a small, culturally insular location, struggling with wider significance. And each is the product of an established, outward-looking author, having attained and seeking further international recognition. Both texts are fairly cotemporaneous⁴, written at a time when Greece and Australia were situated at the literary margins; both looking towards the same centre for approbation; while at the same time asserting their own distinct national identity.

¹ Remak 1961: 3

² Geertz 1983:19-35

³ Guillén 1993: 69-92

⁴ *Voss* was published in 1957, *Captain Michales* 1949-1950.

All of these factors allow for many areas of crossover between the textual themes, as well as facets of distinct individuality; and both the similarities and the differences assist in the investigation of human commonalities. Duplication of thematic content across incongruous contexts adds weight to the idea of universality. Conversely, conflicting depictions may indicate elements specific to the one cultural scenario.

Such teasing and testing out of the narrative themes assists in verifying the supranationalism of each component; in the case of this study, to identify elements universal to the human experience of being in the world.

TWO AUTHORS, ONE TEXT

Patrick Victor Martindale White (1912-1990) was a prodigious author. In a career spanning half a century, he published twelve novels, as well as shorter stories, plays, poetry and essays. *The great Australian modernist*⁵, his 1973 Nobel Prize was awarded ‘for an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature’⁶. Equally prolific, Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), *the literary giant of Modern Greece*⁷, published six novels, a series of plays, travel journals, translations, a sequel to *The Odyssey*⁸, and a detailed exposition of his own cosmology⁹. Born in Iraklion, his Cretan identity remained strong despite a lifetime’s absence, forming the backdrop to much of his work.¹⁰

Two authors of international renown, each given robust representation in their separate national canons¹¹; particularly for the subjects of this study. *Voss* is White’s

⁵ Wilding 1997:22 White’s *Australianness* is articulated thus by Ross Gibson (1984:198): ‘White is an Australian Author. This is not a simple statement. It means at least three things: (a) he writes from personal experience of a unique native land; (b) as a white Australian whose cultural and genetic roots lead back to Europe, he writes against a background of the great traditions of European literature; (c) being a twentieth century Australian he writes in a society whose characteristics have been influenced by the reception, during the colony’s formative years, of English opinions and myths about Australia.’

⁶ <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1973> – accessed 28/10/03

⁷ Pappageotes 1972: 247

⁸ The work of fourteen years (1924-1938, see **Branhou** 1979: 16-17): twenty-four *Rhapsodies* comprising a total of 33,333 lines of iambic decapentasyllabic verse.

⁹ *Salvatores Dei: Askhtikh* (1927, originally 1922-1923): *The Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises*.

¹⁰ Peter Bien (1972:228) speaks of Kazantzakis’ *obvious love of the details of Greek reality* expressed through his work. For further discussion see, for example: Levitt 1980: 3-33, Lea 1979: 137-163, **Xournouziog** 1977: 220-232.

¹¹ For discussion of the role of literature in the ongoing creation of national identity, see, for example: Jusdanis 1991, Lambropoulos 1988.

emerging Australian self: the battle between ‘two Australias, the actual and the possible’.¹² *Captain Michales* is Kazantzakis’ novel on Crete.¹³

It is not, however, their national identification which marks these authors’ common distinction, but rather their exploration of what it means to be human. In the words of Ingmar Björkstén: ‘The basic theme in Patrick White is mankind’s search for a meaning for, and a value in, existence.’¹⁴ Mirrored by Kazantzakis’ own confession: ‘The major and almost the only theme of all my work is the struggle of man with “God”’: the unyielding, inextinguishable struggle of the naked worm called “man” against the terrifying power and darkness of the forces within him and around him.’¹⁵

Two authors united by their wrestling with the human condition; and especially so in the novels under examination here: *Voss*, the foreigner grappling with our great unknown, and *Captain Michales*, the freedom fighter lost between his self-perceptions.¹⁶ These are narratives of universal resonance: heroic feats constructed out of everyday agonies, best exposed through exploring their everyday concerns.¹⁷

The themes here explored are the quintessential of everyday: food and hunger, body and soul, the landscape, gender, home-coming, and our constructions of the numinous. These are facets of our humanity we sift over constantly: consciously, and through the very processes of living. They are themes of prominence in these novels and of significance for the broader human text.

I have approached these themes rather broadly, drawing on a range of cultural sources: sociology, anthropology, history, literature, politics, religion and science –

¹² Brady 1982: 194

¹³ Nikos Kazantzakis, in a letter to Börje Knös, December 12th 1949, Helen Kazantzakis 1968: 485.

¹⁴ Björkstén 1976: 31 This is echoed by Hansson 1984: 91-145, and with specific reference to *Voss* by, for example, Riem 1988 and Green 1974. For discussion of wrestling with meaning in *Captain Michales*, see, for example, **Prebel akhj** 1977.

¹⁵ Letter to Börje Knös, January 4th 1952, Helen Kazantzakis 1968: 507. This is echoed by Dombrowski 1996, and with specific reference to *Captain Michales* by, for example, Levitt 1980: 25-31. For discussion of wrestling with God in *Voss*, see, for example, Edgecombe 1989: 1-32, Kramer 1973 (this is focussed on *Riders in the Chariot*, but comparisons are drawn with *Voss*).

¹⁶ Further exposition of the individual’s struggling as personal and social being within the two novels may be found, for example, regarding *Voss*: Bliss 1986: 61-81, Mather 1963; regarding *Captain Michales*: Beaton 1998, **Karal hj** 1997.

¹⁷ A natural extension of Edward Said’s (1983) consciousness of the *worldliness* of text, writer and reader.

as apparent in their narrative expression. In this I have applied tenets of comparative literature to both the novels and also their underlying shared text, differentiating the common from the unfamiliar¹⁸, unravelling influences¹⁹ and reappropriating within the canon the text thus translated²⁰.

As with every textual translation²¹, the process is inherently subjective.²² As such, and in its investigating themes fundamental to our shared humanness, it is, in essence, an exploration of the self: contemplation by the conscious self of the emerging self – my self²³, the resultant textual self, and the universal human Self²⁴.

TWO TEXTS, ONE SELF

The two subject texts of this investigation give a variety of social landscapes; yet against these various backdrops emerges the same human self.²⁵ James Faubion's *Modern Greek Lessons* highlights the dominance of individual identity over that imposed by common cultural and historical conditions.²⁶ His discussion specifically concerns contemporary Greece and the USA, but his conclusions are equally applicable to nineteenth century Crete and New South Wales. There is no 'typical Australian' in *Voss* and no 'typical Cretan' in *Captain Michales* because 'the projects

¹⁸ See, for example, Steiner 1995.

¹⁹ See, for example, Welleck 1970: 1-36.

²⁰ See, for example, Bassnett 1993.

²¹ Systematising tenets of translation practice, theorists such as Theo Hermans (1985), Gideon Toury (1980) and Itamar Evan-Zohar (1979) demonstrate the pervasiveness of perceptual prejudice – which extends, of course, to every reading as translation: the inevitable intrusion of the reader/translator's own perspective.

²² Subjectivity – of writer, reader, and the arena of their engaging – is, of course, a crucial factor in critical reading. For further discussion with particular relation to cross-cultural readings, see, for example: Bernheimer 1995, Gunew and Longley 1992. This becomes especially apparent through books such as Jonathan Culler's (1997) overview of literary theories. The sheer breadth of approach – every one in its own view definitive – reinforces the subjective nature of each analysis; divulging at least as much about the theorist as the theorised text. Excellent specific application of this is made by Peter Hulme (1986) in his study of colonialism in the Carribean, showing the unavoidably mutual influencing of reader and text.

²³ While I believe my choice of themes, the manner of analysis and secondary theoretic tools are wholly justified by the novels' content, the only certainty of this process is its representation of me – or, at least, a sum of my own prejudicial perspectives: my influences, my interests, within expressive and temporal limits.

²⁴ In the words of Howard Dossor (2002:1): *The Self! That convoluted enigma; that existential chameleon; that personification of mystery that dares to contemplate itself; that shuddering of suffering; that shifting shadow; that unequalled celebration of creation. The Self.*

²⁵ Such emergence is, of course, enabled only through the conduit of reader: Roland Barthes' (1977: 148) centre of textual unity. Alan Cheuse (2001: 11-12) extends this role for the reader beyond enacting the written text (*All the lives I've lived and deaths I've died!*) into engendering the lived text: *we are the readers of our lives.*

²⁶ Faubion 1993: 165. For fuller discussion, see Chapter Six: "The Self Made: Developing a Postnational Character", pages 159-183.

of self-realization dominant in both territories still come with only a minimum of civilizing strictures, leaving to individuals the burden, or privilege, of making more concrete determinations on their own.’ Further, the facets of self beyond the social identity are those at the root of common human being. It is these which are exposed by the comparison of such culturally disparate texts.

Fundamentally, this study searches for a unity of human self. William James posited a unified self who integrates the variety of experiences to which the individual is exposed – itself the collaboration of these diverse components.²⁷ Robert Weber extends this with the development of a *unity system* to which individuals adhere in their development of selfhood, founded on internal consistency and harmonious connection with one’s surroundings.²⁸

Literature is an appropriate place for the investigation of such systems of unified selfhood, since it functions both to represent cultural externals and as a means for integrating the self: internally and in relation to one’s community.²⁹ These two particular texts are doubly suited for such investigation, bearing in content and context the weight of human experience; exemplifying through the narrative process fundamental elements of developing selfhood:

*the courage to explore, for the sake of the venture; the audacity to question freely; the effort to master the experienced environment; the endurance to survive in a fluid, capricious social universe and to accept the self as an unfinished process of becoming.*³⁰

THREE WORKS, ONE LANGUAGE

This thesis compares two novels written in different languages. In order to keep my analysis as justifiable as possible, I have worked from the original languages, reading White in English and Kazantzakis in Greek. However, to facilitate sensible reading,

²⁷ See, for example, James 1985.

²⁸ Weber 2000: 19-35 Weber sites this *unity system* on a secondary level of Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, traversing both safety and social needs – rather than at the top of the hierarchy, where Maslow placed self actualisation.

²⁹ See, for example, Robert Wilson (1979: 7, 9, 11): “Literature observes man as he moves through situations and knits the diverse facets of the personality into a consistent whole. ... Literature may be most broadly considered as an extant and vital part of man’s culture, of his equipment for viewing the world and his place in it. ... Because literature is always closely tied to a specific language, it is perhaps the most likely of all the arts to represent the unique features of the society in which it arises. ... literature reflects the society of which its author is a member, it also represents the chief elements in the personalities shaped by a particular social context.”

³⁰ Wilson 1979: 153

the body of my text is written entirely in English. All Greek quotations are translated, the original within the footnotes. For the non Greek-speaking reader, I have referred constantly to Jonathan Griffin's 1956 translation, clearly indicating where I have deviated from this particular English rendition.

For balance, I probably ought to have made similar continual reference to Vrasidas Karalis' Greek translation of *Voss*³¹, for the reader more comfortable in Greek. However, the logical pursuant to that would be a re-rendering of the body in Greek: a task which could only result in the creation of two distinct theses.³² Thus, the text I tender is distinctly anglophone-centric.

All reference to *Voss* is made to the first UK edition, published in 1957 by Eyre and Spottiswoode.³³ For ease of notation, citations from this work are designated throughout with 'P'.

My study of Kazantzakis' novel is made from the Greek 1981 edition.³⁴ Reference to this is denoted by 'S'.

The title of the Greek text is *O Kapetan' Mixal' hj* ('*El euteriá h)Qar'atoj*), literally: *Captain Michales (Freedom or Death)*. In order to reinforce that this is a reading of the original, I have chosen to stick with the main part of the title, citing the novel in English as *Captain Michales*.

Page numbers from the English translation by Jonathan Griffin³⁵ are preceded by 'p'. There are parts of the original which do not appear in the translation. In these cases I have provided my own English translation, identified as such. There are occasions on which I do not feel that Griffin's translation most accurately encapsulates the original and I have altered the translated passage. These are all also clearly indicated.

³¹ Gouait, Patr'ik, (1995) *Boj: Spoudh'sthnperiteteia kai toner'vta*. (Eisagwgh/ Metafrash: Brasi'as Karal' hj.) Aq'ra, El I ar'ia: KaraKh.

³² And one to which, I fear, I am not entirely equal.

³³ White, Patrick, (1957) *Voss*. London, England, UK: Eyre and Spottiswoode.

³⁴ Kazantzakhj, NiKoj, (1981) *O Kapetan' Mixal' hj* ('*El euteriá h)Qar'atoj*). (IE' eparektupwsh.) Aq'ra, El I ar'ia: Ekdo'seij N. Kazantzakh.

³⁵ Kazantzakis, Nikos, (1956) *Freedom and Death*. (Translated by Jonathan Griffin) Oxford, UK: Bruno Cassirer.