

PREVELAKIS' *THE ANGEL IN THE WELL* AND THE WEIGHT  
OF THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

From his first appearance in prose Prevelakis has consistently been a master of language and style, but, after his intermediary novels on the Cretan struggle for liberation and on intellectual development, he has, with *The Angel in the Well*,\* turned back to the form of his first two books of prose fiction, *The Chronicle of a City* (1938) and *The Death of Medici* (1939): the short but dense narrative without true fictional characters but aspiring to a universal significance through the power of the myth. *The Angel in the Well*, although termed on the front cover "Novel", is rather a novella by reason both of its shortness, its lack of characters and its simple plot.

The plot is elementary, and all the more powerful because of it. A novice, in the last stages of his noviciate but still plagued by doubts about the existence of the after life, retires to a solitary hut at the bottom of a ravine during Holy Week in order to intensify his meditation. Up above, a mare dies while she is almost ready to give birth, and the novice climbs up and cuts the foal from the womb, carries it down to the hut on his shoulders and begins to rear it. Through this animal he learns how to love God's creatures and thus to approach God; but the army are going around commandeering all horses for use in the event of a war. The foal must be taken up to top again, otherwise it will grow too large to be able to be lifted out of the ravine. So the animal is hoisted up, and the novice, deprived of his means for reaching God, is left with the dilemma whether to believe in the Resurrection (of the foal and of himself) and live as a good Christian, or to commit suicide, an action that he has been planning for some time.

The book leaves him at this point. At the base of the story is what Prevelakis considers to be man's most important problem ever since the Renaissance, and the basis of contemporary anguish: is one to believe in the after life or not? What is life's aim when one knows that it will come to an abrupt end that cancels out all that one achieves? Life has no meaning for Prevelakis unless man can transcend himself, and in his previous books he has repeatedly stressed the importance of creation as the supreme human activity.

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\* O Angelos sto Pigadi. Mia Megalovdhomada. Mythistorima, I Ekdosis ton Filon Athina 1970.

Here the novice is aiming at another kind of self-transcendence (the number of Greek novelists who turn to religion in their later years is significant), and the frustration of his efforts by man's heartlessness and incomprehension is seen by Prevelakis as a common occurrence today. The novice shuts himself off from mankind and finds love in nature, but man keeps impinging on his solitude, and gradually, as if through a conspiracy, deprives him of the only thing that shows him the way to redemption. Truly, for him, "L'enfer, c'est les autres".

Like all Prevelakis' work, this is an exceptionally well made book: although, by his own admission, he writes quickly, his books come out as well-cut and well-polished gems, each one many-faceted but a unity. The book is held together not only by the plot but by constant internal cross-reference: most events in the story are prefigured as if by prophecy or omen. Almost everything that happens is referred to beforehand, so that the plot seems to be carried along by destiny, almost "that the prophecy might be fulfilled."

The ultimate problems here are similar to those of the youthful *Death of Medici*, and Prevelakis even uses a similar technique in some respects: for instance, the interior monologues of Giuliano and the novice are strikingly alike both in tone and in style. But the important difference lies in the fact that in *The Angel in the Well* the whole tradition of the Orthodox Church stands behind the myth and supports it as it goes along. And Prevelakis gives us a clue to his method when he describes the presence of the monks at the funeral of the novice's predecessor at the hut. The novice watches them arrive:

"He saw them coming down in the fear of God, first of all the abbot, and then Elijah and Isiah, Matthew and John, Callistus and Isidore-(...) these renowned names would have made you remember the Prophets and the Evangelists, the Great Hierarchs and the Patriarchs.

"The monks did not seem to feel the weight of so much glory. Like the complete peasants they were, they cared less for the splendour of the Church than for the prosperity of the monastery" (pp. 57-58).

Fascinated by the monks' unconscious memory of the roots of Christianity and by their bearing so effortlessly the glory of their tradition, Prevelakis sees in the history of Christianity a continuity which, like human creation, gives some hope that death is not the end of everything. There is that, anyway, irrespective of resurrection or non-resurrection.

But it is not enough for Prevelakis simply to state that the history of Orthodoxy is implicitly latent in the actions of his monks: he universalises his plot by constant reference to Christianity, its tradition and its rites. First of all, the book is subtitled "A Holy Week," and the action takes place from

the morning of Lazarus' day (the day before Palm Sunday) to the evening of Good Friday. The days are very significant—the novice is brought back to life through the foal, then he and the foal together play out their own Passion, which ends with the death of the foal and the dilemma of the novice. Apart from straightforward parallels between the story and Christ's Passion, references are made to the lessons, hymns and prayers read by the novice on the days for which they are set in the Orthodox prayer-book (these are different from those set by the Western Churches), and there is a multitude of comparisons between the novice's situation and other stories from the Bible. It is not just a question of mere parallelism—an exact Imitation of Christ—but a complex web of symbolism that does not merely allow one thing to be identified with another. Most of the symbolism is quite explicit (the reader is even referred in an appendix to specific passages in the Bible), but it is worth examining to see how each reference makes the myth's significance shoot out rays in different directions.

I have said that most of the events in the book are prefigured, and that the plot gives an impression of inevitability. This impression is heightened by the dove-tailing of the references, which seems to point to a re-enactment of a huge number of legends by one man and all compressed into one week. This technique provides a depth of mythical sub-structure beneath the story which (as with the analogous method of Eliot and Cavafy) magnifies every single event or situation into an infinitely wide idea, feeling or concept. For instance, when the soldier plans to hoist the foal up the side of the ravine (like the Crucifixion, this happens finally on Good Friday) the novice immediately thinks of the Slaughter of the Innocents, which in itself is prefigured in the lessons for Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week, which tell of Pharaoh's command that all male Jews should be killed at birth, and Moses' miraculous escape from this order. It is through double references of this nature that the plot gives the impression of having pre-existed and of having waited for Prevelakis to come and write it, so archetypal is it. While the novice is waiting for the soldier to prepare the machine to lift the foal out, he sees the truth of what he has previously told the uncomprehending abbot: that he has been living his own personal Passion during this week:

"...he now saw clearly why he had called the past week the week of his Passion: the foal and the man, the one with its innocence, the other with his conscience, had trodden for six days in Christ's footsteps... His Holy Passion stirs up man's soul! Wherever there is slavery, his revolt is resurrected. Where there is sin, his sacrifice is repeated. That is what a divine archetype means: an example for those who struggle alone on the

borders. When I say 'on the borders', I mean in struggles that will decide whether you will live or die. And I say 'alone' because Christ appears only in solitude, in those places which he liked to haunt: the shore of a lake, the foot of a mountain or its top, a boat battered by the waves.... And finally, on the cross, the only platform that has the power to convince (p. 170).

Thus both the novice and the foal are living their Passion. They are following the divine archetype in solitude, and the novice witnesses the Crucifixion itself, that of the innocent foal. Remember that Christ was the Lamb.

There are many parallels with Christ's Passion in the book. For instance, the commandeering committee of the army is compared with the Sanhedrin plotting together to put Christ to death; and the fact that both the army and the abbot (a practical man who does not understand the novice's spiritual and intellectual yearning) seem to conspire to take away the foal is like the combination of Church and State (the Chief Priests and Herod) which succeed together in having Christ crucified. Then, before the final dénouement, the novice feels the stirrings of revolt against the commands of the abbot, and seeks to sabotage them—compare the Agony in the Garden and Christ's words: "Let this cup pass from me." (Especially as the bottom of the ravine is often referred to as a garden because of its lush vegetation). The novice comes to see the abbot as Judas, since he betrays the foal into the merciless hands of the warmongers: it was partly because of the novice's experiences in war that he decided to become a monk. And, finally, the foal dies of fright as it is being hauled up to the top of the ravine, in front of numerous bystanders, and the novice carries the body down to the bottom again as if the foal is descending into Hell. Will it rise again on the third day?

It will be seen from these examples (and there are many more than these) that *The Angel in the Well*, though it may at first make the reader think of *Christ Recrucified*, bears only a superficial relation to it. In Kazantzakis' novel, the characters begin to correspond exactly with the people involved with the Passion—e.g., Manolios equals Christ, Katerina equals Mary Magdalen and so on and so forth. But in Prevelakis' book it is not as simple as that. From the previous paragraph one can see the shifting system of reference that the author employs. Both the novice and the foal are likened to Christ, without ever becoming his equivalent. Then again, first it is the army that is compared with the High Priests, and then it is the abbot who represents them; while at the same time he plays for a time the part of Judas. It is not that Prevelakis is being inconsistent, but that by avoiding a rigid correspondence between his own myth and that of the Passion he gives it a wider significance and makes it

capable of being interpreted in different ways, as well as not letting himself be bound too closely to the one myth. As we saw from the passage quoted above, Prevelakis wants to show how Christ's Passion can be relived under many different circumstances.

Reference is made not only to the Passion story, for the novice is also Lazarus, the story of whose resurrection is mentioned several times. The first two chapters, in which the novice decides to go and live in the ravine, takes place on Lazarus' day, as it is called in the Orthodox calendar, and at the end of the second chapter he has seen the possibilities that his new home affords him: he can cultivate the garden and learn to love God's creatures, and when this process has been completed, he will be reborn in Christ. And just as the rabbis sought to kill Lazarus because the fact of his resurrection was converting people to belief in Christ, and because they were indignant that such a miracle as resurrection should happen, contrary to all their teaching, so also the abbot cannot understand the novice's affection and need for the foal, and tries to get it back for practical reasons. The rabbis want to deprive Lazarus of his resurrection, just as the abbot, albeit unknowingly, tries to take away that of the novice.

Another important group of references concerns the garden of Eden. The place which the novice makes his home is a garden which his predecessors have modelled on Paradise. The occupant of the hut cultivates fruit and vegetables and keeps bees, and is surrounded by all kinds of trees, flowers, birds and insects, which Prevelakis describes in loving detail, not only naming each one, but evoking them through his special use of language. The fourth chapter of the book is entitled "Eden and the Devil." The Devil appears in the guise of the driver of a steamroller which is being used to build a road near the ravine. The building of the road is an example of man's heartlessness: nature is disregarded and destroyed, and the countryside gashed from end to end. It is by a splinter of rock flying from a dynamite explosion caused by the workers that the foal's mother is killed. The ravine is cut off from the world above, approachable only by means of a hazardous ladder made of climbing vines. In this refuge, which is so far removed that it seems to be covered by a trap-door, the sounds of the world are distant and its troubles far away. Its peace is disturbed only by man. The driver of the steamroller comes down and asks the novice to sell him the foal so that he can eat it on Easter Sunday and celebrate the end of the fast he has been religiously observing during Lent. In the next chapter the devil appears in the person of the soldier who wants to take the foal away for the army. In the end these two men work together to make the crane that lifts the foal to its death. They are both hard and unfeeling, and cannot under-

stand the agonies of the novice. They seem to be plotting together to deprive him of the animal, and the abbot looks as if he is in with them; while they all have practical uses for the foal, only the novice wants it because of its beauty. There are also references to Adam himself: the novice realises when he first arrives at the bottom of the ravine that he must regain Adam's innocence before he can be worthy of forgiving and loving—the two things he must be able to do before he can find salvation. So he is put back into the state of grace he would have been in if men had not let him down. Like Adam, he was betrayed by a woman: his fiancée abandoned him for his father, and it is because he cannot forgive his father, as well as the horror of war (and all this together goes to show man's heartlessness) that he decided to become a monk.

I have mentioned the parallel of the men's designs on the foal with the Slaughter of the Innocents, and the fact that the novice nurtures a creature that would otherwise have died, which is reminiscent of how Moses was found in the bulrushes and secretly reared by his own mother in the teeth of Pharaoh's cruel command. There are many other hints pointing to other stories. In the ravine there is a spring which, because it pours from the living rock, is considered to be holy water, and in the hollow of a nearby olive tree there is an icon of St. Anthony: this may suggest a parallel between the novice's term of trial in the ravine and the saint's temptations when he lived as a hermit in the desert. Then, at the funeral of the old ascetic who lived in the ravine before the novice, all nature seems to follow him to his resting-place, and the scene is likened to the story of all the animals following Noah into the Ark. This monk's Ark will take him from an earthly paradise to a heavenly one. Again, after a storm during which trees are struck by lightning and the resulting fires are put out by a downpour of rain (all this full of danger for the man in the ravine) he looks out of his dilapidated hut as Noah must have looked out of the Ark and watched the waters subsiding. He has weathered another of life's storms and passed through fire and water, while the storm (happening as it does on the Wednesday before Easter) shows creation's anger and indignation at the forthcoming Crucifixion. The Biblical lessons set for the next day tell the novice how God showed his wrath and omnipotence to Moses and Job by causing storms and natural disasters.

This does not pretend to be by any means an exhaustive survey of the use of symbolism and reference to Christian stories made by Prevelakis in this book. The plot is straightforward, bare and dramatic, and is simply and directly told; there is no nuance of character—the personages that appear are rather symbols or types. The book draws its strength from its very archetypal nature, and from its dense use of internal crossreference (which I have hardly

mentioned in this essay) and intricate external references to the scriptures and the rites of the Church (to exhaust all of which would mean writing another book of the same size). These external references give it its depth, a depth which, for example, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* could never have, because although it is equally archetypal it stands in mid-air, without ties with tradition and history. The references endow each detail with a significance that gradually proceeds to infinity.

But it would be a mistake to see this referential richness as being the result of an intellectual process. The ideas that appear in the book are in the blood of the Greek people; the parallels and connections are already there. In the rites of the Orthodox Church there is the Epitaphios, for instance, the representation of Christ in the tomb. In the book (and it happens in some monasteries) there is the re-enactment by the monks of Christ washing the Apostles' feet. Prevelakis has not invented the connections to show his own personality: he has connected them in order to illustrate universal problems. Thus the weight of the Orthodox tradition rests as naturally on his shoulders as it does on his uneducated peasant-monks.

Athens, February, 1971

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