

Loukis Akritas' *Kampos* and Ethnographic Narrative Realism

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans les années 1930 Loukis Akritas, qui est installé à Athènes, tente d'écrire des narrations complexes, comme le roman *La plaine* (1936), s'inspirant des narrations sociales analogues de l'espace littéraire hellénique et international. À l'aide de techniques réalistes il essaie de montrer des confrontations intenses d'hommes de la campagne chypriote, qui arrivent à des comportements extrêmes, comme c'est le cas avec le protagoniste du récit de Konstantinos Theotokis *La vie et la mort de Karavelas* (1920).

ABSTRACT

During the 1930s, Athens-based Loukis Akritas tackles more complex narratives, as in *The Plain* (1936), drawing his inspiration from social narratives of the Hellenic and world literature. Using realistic techniques, he tries to exploit intense confrontations of Cyprus's rural life, bringing them to a pitch, as in the case of Konstantinos Theotokis, the protagonist of *Life and Death of Kavarelas* (1920).

In this paper, our investigation will focus on axes pivoting around social and psychological speculation as well as the description of space as a narrative *locale* - the invariables characterizing *Kampos* [Lowland] (1936) by L. Akritas. At the same time we will attempt a first intertextual approach between the aforesaid novel and K. Theotokis¹ narrative *I zoi kai o thanatos tou Karavela* [The life and death of Karavelas] (1920).

The story unfolds in the Cypriot countryside, namely in the Mesaoria lowland that survives or rather strives to survive with the cultivation of fields, especially those owned by landowners, when the weather allows it. The writer outlines the morals of a small rural village society, psychologically portrays characters and registers aspects of rural life.² He employs frugality to imprint his material, condensing the quintessence of primary instincts,

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rampant passions and interests that rule the microcosm of an enclosed society. Limited action unfolds both in the interior (coffee-shop, Valetas' and Roidos' houses) as well as in external spaces (the lowland, farms).

Kampos contains an attitude toward life; it is a novel with a *thesis*, a *socialistic* novel, like *I zoi kai o thanatos tou Karavela* (1920).³ It belongs to the so-called “protest prose”,⁴ it works interferingly, in a covert manner, without being explicitly didactic, admonitory or moralistic.⁵

We do not wish to place the novel into the genre of naturalism – rather, it leans toward realism; yet, some naturalistic traces can be found in *Kampos*, since the writer naturalistically renders the rural-popular mores and describes “characters that fall victim both to their internal impulses and to external social forces”.⁶ Oftentimes we observe that the above are transformed and rendered realistically. In other words, they represent reality more faithfully and with precision, sometimes with cynicism but also with harsh rawness. In that way, events can actually speak for themselves and lead to verisimilitude, that is why the characters' actions make us sad and frightened without however surprising us as they portray truth, albeit cruelly. *Kampos* may be described as an ethnographic novel, but in its renewed form, namely realistic ethnography, as the writer is not limited to a photographic depiction of the natural environment, defined by naturalism and descriptive narration, neither does he stop at a superficial description of his characters' and situations' external characteristics. In contrast, he delves into them, shedding light on details that better portray them, through a realistic account of the exhaustive clash between two landowners.⁷ Through the villagers' discussions (i.e. Alexis' and Valetas' philosophical thinking) penetration into the internal world of the fictional manpower is achieved. Action unfolds within a setting that allows Akritas to successfully transcend the context of ethnography. *Kampos* recounts “a story that would run the risk of moving within the stereotypes of ethnography if it weren't for dynamic realism in the clash between two rival families – a realism that takes off through epic-lyric descriptions” (A. Zeras). On the other hand, the writer does not revoke the ethnographic dimension neither does he displace his directorial and scenographic framework – from the countryside to the city – as proposed by many of his contemporary prose writers who embraced urban ethnography. Akritas brought a new hue to the ethnographic dimension, the hue of the psychological portrayal of characters, leaving his own mark of renewal unto Cypriot prose discourse. He recounts space, the countryside, the way its structures change, social diarthrosis, the laws governing the

lowland that are clearly different than those of the city and the relations between men and women. In addition to that, the writer introduces a new element: he recounts the attitude and mentality of the collective consciousness of a large group among the novel's characters, going beyond individual consciousness; at the same time "he nods encouragingly to human power, to a man's tenaciousness to attain his self-ruling" (A. Zeras).

Akritas probes into topics that relate to the love for the land – bordering on pathology – to eroticism, incited by primary and animal instincts, to the authoritative power that emanates from the acquisition of more land, to greed, money, usury. The writer displays the ethical or unethical behavior of the villagers', whose actions are some times consistent with the surrounding space⁸ and stem from internal or external factors: passions, wealth or poverty and hunger, the agony for tomorrow, predominance or contempt, isolation and dead-ends, situations affecting their psychic world, allowing impulses to surface. Oftentimes, these impulses are not only extremely remote from the social conventions that should govern life; they are also dangerous.

Here in the villages, we are the most damned people on earth. We never cease to fight people, to fight the sky... Say it forsakes us for a year and we are all willing to sell our very soul to Satan... (1981: 81)

The atmosphere of that time is skillfully reproduced in the novel, while destitution is also depicted. The individual's loneliness surfaces through fiction, alongside alienation, phobia and contempt for letters, since the villagers consider cultivated people as something strange, foreign to them; that is why they disdain and write them off, cutting them off from their lives.

To him, [Alexis] was a loser, as he stepped out of his class and ended up selling books. [...] This was not a job worthy of his race. (1981: 32)

There is a very strong feeling that the law of the mightiest, namely the landowner, weighs upon the village; and this has been handed down to small societies, to this day. "We are insignificant" Christofis admits replying to Leousis, "and it is not befitting for us to judge the deeds of the great. We accept the world as we find it" (1981: 67) Indeed, economic and land supremacy is what determines the behavior and attitude of landowners toward the poor villager, who either did not inherit a lot or was deprived of it. At the same time, primitive, primordial competitiveness bordering on the tragic makes its way into the landowners, Leousis and Roidos, over land supremacy, and also into the self-conceited (like Leousis) and the landless villagers over the untouchable

dream of private property or even bitterness for the loss of plots because of debts. Therefore, on the one hand the archetypal “conflict” between masters and plebeians is recalled in an intense and unremitting manner, with each side utilizing every means within their reach, mostly covertly in order to develop and mobilize their defense and survive. On the other hand, most villagers are characterized by a potentially simulated servile behavior toward the masters, led by the feeling of fear with the ultimate aim to make their living.

The villagers, Valetas too, bowed their heads, just like servants, upon seeing the master from afar riding his rutting horse, snorting and jumping over ridges and ditches. (1981: 21)

Each time he'd enter the coffee-shop, they would rise. The old would crouch their bodies, ready to bow some more, if he wouldn't rush to sit down. (1981: 225)

The feeling of avowed fear imposes silence upon the poor: “We are all afraid of you” Christofis will say to Roidos. The lack of slightest resistance on behalf of the poor rural folk is both pronounced and entirely justified. The only two who do resist and are perhaps the most dignified fictional characters are Valetas, Annoula's father and Alexis, Leousis' brother. Valetas, a mellow man with philosophical disposition is a balancing and regulatory factor, even though the extent of a villager's intellect does raise a few questions. The same could be said for the bookseller Alexis, the other “intellectual”, even though the latter is well-traveled and obviously knowledgeable of things.⁹

Confessions from the past, *analepses* and discussions in the penumbra between these two characters display the writer's sensitivity and reveal his ideological universe. Through Valetas and Alexis, Akritas states his own world view as he ponders over life with an obvious wish to remodel the world. It is only through the discussions of these two that this takes place. In no other case does the writer suggest, judge or deliver a social sermon. He merely describes and awakens his reader with regards to sensitive demands. What we are to understand is that both Theotokis and Akritas effortlessly urge their reader toward the human process of empathy/ sympathy for the fictional hero or of contempt/dislike against him. They urge him toward the emotive effect of a beautiful picture of the natural environment and of frustration for injustice and evil.

The writer's imagery is showcased through lyrical descriptions in which nature is thoroughly represented and described. Akritas systematically adopts

the tactic of the description of space, mostly of the natural landscape, and of characters too, just as Theotokis does (albeit rarely in terms of nature's description), in order to pass from one event to the other or to make a pause in action. Nevertheless, the depictions of landscapes and nature stand in general in complete contrast to the events that take place, not only in the soul and mind but also in the actions of fictional heroes. The idealization of habitat and idyllic descriptions run contrary to the hard life of poor villagers and also to the harshness of the landowners that becomes externalized through cruel manifestations. Nonetheless, through the descriptions of nature and the landscape the tender covert side of people is often put forward, even if it belongs to a dimension we are having trouble accepting when juxtaposed with persons and characters whose behavior is in fact ill-assorted with such sensitivities.¹⁰ All this of course is entirely compatible on the one hand with the masters' passionate bond with the land and with the hard way with which they manage rural tasks and on the other hand with their more or less contented lives. In the one instance, the land is proven life-bearing for man. In the other, the power it exercises may become disastrous for him, which is actually the case with the two landowners and eventually, whilst unanticipated and unexpected with Vasilis, Roidos' son too.¹¹ The polite, kind-hearted and somewhat naive young man, who cared very little for land property, was transformed and gradually led to self-alienation, when he inherited the land after his father's death. The thoughts of his father-in-law, Valetas, plead the same view:

And he heard him speak with a familiar tone, as if something came out upon him that tore him apart. He became frightened of this young lad, the wealthy lad that loved his daughter. Something crossed his mind, a fear that dared him at nights. (1981: 191)

Aim. Hourmouzios' review of the novel *I zoi kai o thanatos tou Karavela*, could in many instances apply to the events unfolding in *Kampos*, as it contains analogies and common features with K. Theotokis' novel.¹² In both works the element of nativity is recorded to such an extent that it allows us to assume the writers are inspired by true events when focusing on characters and space. They create personae and facades and depict characters, attitudes and situations within the context of realistic ethnography. Men are the masters of the game, while women remain oppressed, one way or another.

Akritas proportionally echoes the typology of Theotokis' narrative heroes: comic-tragic personae that touch on the limits of grotesque, slimy types,

dislikable characters such as Christofis, who could be juxtaposed with Karavelas' figure, "a dark pariah",¹³ as one of them is possessed by slyness and passion for money and the other by slyness, malice and sexual passion for a woman. Both of them are prone to criminal vengeance (Christofis attempts to murder Leousis, following an implicit suggestion both by Roidos, for economic gain, and by his wife, so that he becomes worthy in her eyes). Even animals, namely oxen, owned by prosperous villagers are tragic "protagonists" in both novels, as they comprise the object of vengeance of the two aforementioned pathetic human caricatures: of the hideous Christofis, the master's pawn and the tragicomic figure of Karavelas, who ends up the laughing stock of the village. There are two principal reasons for his fall which are interlinked: Argyris' greed and the guile of the attractive Maria, who took advantage of the old man's love in order for her family to appropriate his fortune.

The wealthy landowners' greed, combined with their guile and exploitation of the weak, with unlawful transactions, leads to the creation of sub-humans on both sides, executioners and victims. Of course, we have the feeling that Akritas' novel contains a more toned-down realistic rawness than Theotokis'. The latter penetrates deeper into human psychology in order to display impunity and lack of humanity, even though the Cypriot writer's heroes appear in some cases as unfeeling, corrupted or criminals. On the other hand, the likeable characters of Vasilis (in the beginning), Annoula, Alexis or Valetas, "idealized personae leaning toward the dream" (Al. Alafouzou) are completely absent from Theotokis' novel, in which even children are sly and behave with irony.

Akritas' male protagonists are possessed by stubbornness that touches the limits of animal behavior, whether this concerns the poor and their survival or the rich and their predominance. Men escape to the coffee-shop, an exclusively male meeting place. It is there that they cut business deals, that they have discussions and gossip-talks, disputes, pronounced altercations, there that imagination runs wild and magnifies things.

Two types of women prevail in *Kampos*: On the one side stands the woman-courage, who follows her fate silently, ungrudgingly, with patience and perseverance, putting up with man's fancies.¹⁴ She has not the right to life; she lives in total isolation inside a dead-end, leading something that resembles a life. This even applies to the wealthy Athena:

The drained look of Athena, Roidos' wife. Two sad eyes, moist, with the black kerchief on her head; speechless, crying, sinking inside her

garden. She is a slave to Roidos from one morning to the other, and she will remain his slave until the day she dies. (1981: 86)

Athena and Leousis' wife, whose name is not mentioned, are low profile, almost absent women, completely dedicated to the role imposed upon them by the ways of the village: "Don't forget you're a woman!" (1981: 25), Roidos will tell his wife. Even Vasilis, upon the first blow, thinks scornfully of Annoula: "Women are somewhat inferior, just like geese brawling in the pits, ending up with nothing to eat". 1981: 186).

On the other side, the women of poor villagers like Anastasia, Christofis' wife, offers herself to the masters with ample ease for one kilo of wheat. Anneta too, the lecherous young woman whose husband is working away in ships, is sexually provocative to Vasilis. They are cunning and lush women, ready to erotically submit to the rich landowner in exchange for his favor, selling themselves out without the least sign of shame or inhibitions.

The personal impasses of the women in *Kampos* emerge vividly as they compromise by stepping into calculated marriages. Numerous social problems crop up from the institution of dowry. If a woman possesses a dowry then she will be "made an honest woman of", even if she's not beautiful, even in the absence of love. Inescapably, the couple becomes alienated and extramarital affairs ensue. The feeling of love is on the one hand forbidden; Roidos confesses: "I hate all those who love women" (1981: 100). On the other hand, it is shameful and becomes an object of mockery; therefore, even those who know and are able to love, end up hiding it. Athena reveals the reality of repressed feelings:

Our village is small, Vasilis, and our love shows. You should know that people hate those who love. If I kiss you in front of them, the whole village will taunt: "Athena kissed her son". And I will hide my face in shame. (1981: 44)

Whereas Vasilis declares for his beloved that:

He will kiss her in front of the whole village, just to confess in all directions that Annoula was the only woman he ever loved and no lass will ever be able to make him stray (1981: 202).

Annoula's fulfilled wish to marry the young man she loves, namely Roidos' son, will not bring the desired effect; it will be categorically refuted. The loss of her newborn, right after birth, will multiply her sadness for Vasilis' unfaithfulness leading her to despair. Her father's intervention will save her

marriage but it will not render her free. This event draws to the surface the delicate balances between people whose connecting joints are often precarious. Up until that point, her father's unconventional thinking and dignity had been vividly demonstrated, therefore one would expect them to lead him to transcendence. Eventually, however, acceptance of the status quo and fate will prevail together with conventionality of actions, stemming from unwritten laws or perhaps an innate humility.

Akritas' writing bore the invention of characters and situations within a context where the lowland, both as "*cursed*" and "*blessed*", remains without a doubt the great protagonist of the novel, as everything evolves around it. Fictional heroes often waver, postpone, keep their distance or even cancel out plans; therefore transcendence will not be attempted, let alone achieved. Nonetheless, catharsis will come in part with the deaths of Roidos and Christofis but also with Leouis' incarceration. But it is still "in part" since Vasilis, "the new master" thinks just like his father, joyful of the fact that "now he is alone, all alone!" (1981: 227) and will strive to maintain his predominance in order to empower his ego. His lurid, horrific cry (1981: 231), identical to his father's, when he touches the land with passion, reveals a primitive bond with it. His relation to land is "possessive" (A. Zeras); it is an erotic affair (the juxtaposition of land/ rural tasks with sexuality are quite obvious) setting up the continuity of a close-knit future, in which Roidos' descendant will be flourishing and becoming richer. At the same time, he will be treading with mathematical precision on the course his father had opened just as the old man predicted he would, at a time when no one thought so: be the master with everything that entailed. But in the meantime:

The lowland will be flooded with livestock and people once more and it will cleanse the skin from the mine's sickness. And if they're hungry here, as they are hungry elsewhere, it is because they have been created poor and the lowland must be ruled by the masters, until things change. Until each villager works the lowland alongside others, but without owning it. Or else it will drown them, make masters out of them. (1981: 229)

NOTES

1. I extend my thanks to Professor Yiorgos Kehayioglou for pointing this out and for the fertile discussion we had with regards to this project. I would also like to thank the publisher Mr. Filippotis for kindly providing me with a copy of the novel.
2. See Y. Katsouris, *Pneumatiki Kypros*, 353-355 (1990) 129.
3. See Aim. Hourmouzios, *Constantinos Theotokis, O eisigitis tou koinonistikou mythistorimatos stin Ellada* [Constantinos Theotokis, The introducer of the socialistic novel to Greece] Athens, Ikaros, 1941.
4. I. M. Panayiotopoulos, *Ta prosopa kai ta keimena* [The persons and the texts], Athens, 1943, pp. 35-36. A. Zeras, "Loukis Akritas: I ekmetrisi tou anthropinou tharrou" [Loukis Akritas: the measurement of human courage], *I mesopolemiki pezographia* [Interwar prose], Vol. 2, Athens, Sokole, 1992, pp. 126-127.
5. Perhaps with the exception of the tale of Regaina, contained within the novel.
6. M.H Abrams, *Lexiko logotehnikon oron* [Dictionary of literary terms], Athens, Patakis, 2006, p. 375.
7. L. Akritas appears at first to follow on the traces of early Cypriot short-story writers such as I.B. Kepiades ("To paraponon tis Anthoullas") [Anthoulla's complaint] and especially D. Stavriniades (*Kypriaka diigimata, 1898*) [Cypriot short stories], of N. Hadjigavriel and K.G. Eleftheriades. For more on the course and historic evolution of the Cypriot short-story, see L. Papaleontiou, Introduction to the *Anthologia kypriakou diigimatos* [Anthology of the Cypriot short-story] Vol. 1, Nicosia, Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005, pp. 13-36.
8. "It represents a rural drama [...] by no means a rural drama with ethnographic parameters, but definitely a story in which characters, conflicts, attitudes and problematics are at least at a first level, dependent on the space wherein the drama unfolds." A. Zeras, "Loukis Akritas: the measurement of human courage" p. 124.
9. Al. Alafouzou talked of "exaggerated and unnatural intellect in Akritas' peasants". *Neoi Protoporoi* 7 (July 1936) 273-275. See also the equivalent views of A. Ziras (as above), Y. Katsouris (as above) and L. Papaleontiou in the Proceedings of the Symposium *Kyprioi logotehnes pou ezisan stin Ellada* [Cypriot literary figures who lived in Greece], Nicosia, Ministry of Education and Culture 1999, pp. 75-78.
10. Through the symbolism of the landscape and of narrative description, one traces psychoanalytic decipherments of the persons' deeper being, i.e. as it emerges through Leosis apology during his trial (1981: 139).
11. "The writer submits to the reader a nexus of biotheoretical views on the fatal results that the power of land (and consequently of nature) may have on a man's life": A. Ziras, as above p. 68.

12. Aim. Hourmouziou, *Const. Theotokis*, 1946, p. 131.
13. Y. Dallas, *Constantinos Theotokis*, Athena, Sokole, 2001, p. 194.
14. In contrast, Theotokis' women are in their majority unyielding, pusillanimous, self-serving and vicious.