

Demetrios Capetanakis: a Greek poet (coming out) in England*

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The homosexual undertones of Demetrios Capetanakis's English writings become evident when the work is seen in the context of the British literary circle that was instrumental in its publication. However, reading Capetanakis's poems as a 'coming out' narrative leads us to assess the mismatching interpretations of gender and sexuality in Greece and the West and the larger complications of identity and identifications. It is suggested that, in Capetanakis's work written in English, what seems at first a liberating expression of the 'true self' through writing can instead be viewed as posing the problem of the idea of a stable, unified and solid identity.

In October 1995 Edafos Dance Theatre, an Athenian group known for their innovative work,¹ presented *Ρέκβιεμ για το τέλος του έρωτα* (*Requiem for the End of Love*) in a derelict electricity warehouse in Athens; the performance was staged and choreographed by Dimitris Papaioannou to a specially commissioned musical piece by Giorgos Koumendakis. The *Requiem's* libretto came from the Greek translation of the poem 'Lazarus', originally written in English by the poet and critic Demetrios Capetanakis a few days before his death in London's Westminster Hospital in 1944 at the age of thirty-two.

As a dance theatre performance, the *Requiem* did not hide either its gay genealogy or its activist agenda: the whole of this thirty-minute piece was taken up by the brilliantly monotonous image of male bodies engaging in erotically charged movements before falling down a long staircase — the relevance to the Aids epidemic becoming more than clear. Composer Koumendakis poignantly dedicated *Requiem* to 'all those friends who have been lost to Aids'. The performance was paired as a double bill with *Τραγούδια της αμαρτίας* (*Songs of Sin*), a similar production by Edafos using songs praising love between

* I would like to express my thanks to William McEvoy, Michael Worton, Christopher Robinson, Peter Mackridge and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

1 The group eventually became much more popular after its core members were responsible for designing the opening ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympics. On the performance described here, see Omada Edafous, *Ενός λεπτού σιγή* (Athens 1995).

men, written by the homosexual composer Manos Hadjidakis not long before his death, using poems by Dinos Christianopoulos.

Related in this way through performance to a range of homosexual themes, *Requiem for the End of Love* both queered and repatriated Capetanakis's original text. When 'Lazarus' first appeared in English in 1945, its verses, reflecting the poet's agonizing time while being treated for leukaemia, must have struck a chord as a 'soldier's death narrative'. Fifty years later in Greece, the poem was now being recontextualized as an Aids narrative, in a production that proposed a radical re-evaluation of all homosexual suffering with or within the discourse of the current epidemic. But the question needs to be asked: was this an over-interpretation?

Let us first take a look at the text:

This knock means death. I heard it once before
As I was struggling to remember one,
Just one thing, crying in my fever for
Help, help. Then the door opened, yet no Son

Came in to whisper what I had to know.
Only my sisters wetted me with tears,
But tears are barren symbols. Love is slow,
And when she comes she neither speaks nor hears

...

And now I hear the knock I heard before
And strive to make up for the holy time,
But I cannot remember, and the door
Creaks letting in my unambiguous crime.²

On the surface, the poem is a powerful dramatization of someone's dying moments. It is permeated throughout by the agony of speaking with symbols while constantly trying to uncover and interpret them. Yet even though the last verse signals the end of (symbolic) ambiguity, it becomes at the same time the opening to a void: as space is escaping and evaporating (the narrative voice trying to remember another room in order to conceptualize and symbolically validate the current room of dying), the poem ends with an open door and the uncertainty of whether 'the Son' will enter this time. The 'unambiguous crime' is left on the threshold, open, liminal and ambiguous. Yet there is nothing unequivocally homosexual about this poem, even though, arguably, some of its imagery allows it to be reviewed within a homosexual tradition and ultimately read as queer (exactly as the Edafos production had done).

As a result of the performance of *Requiem for the End of Love*, 'Lazarus' made quite an impact on the Athens of 1995, with younger readers soon on the look-out for the

2 D. Capetanakis, 'Lazarus', in Demetrios Capetanakis, *A Greek Poet in England*, ed. John Lehmann (London 1947) 34. Henceforth cited as *GPE*.

author's work, this 'obscure' literary figure, who had moved to England in 1939 and died there during the war. Hailed by older critics as a philosopher with an interest in aesthetics (his monograph *Η μυθολογία του ωραίου* (*Mythology of Beauty*), written in Greek in the 1930s, had enjoyed considerable success in later editions in the 1960s³), Capetanakis's English work was largely unknown in Greece until that point. Moreover, what had certainly not been addressed before was something very evident in the context of this performance: that Capetanakis's writing in English had a clear homosexual undertone.⁴

In this article I follow up on this lead and provide some new material supporting a homosexual reading of Capetanakis's English work. At the same time, I also reflect on how problematic such a critical gesture can be. I propose to analyse two main narratives that underpin our reaction to a literary case such as Capetanakis's, while also trying to map their shortcomings. The first narrative contends that when a writer works in another language, he or she is able to avoid a number of inhibitions associated with his/her native tongue and culture, and consequently is in a position to express his/her real self more clearly. Consider, for instance, David Ricks's view that 'Capetanakis seeks escape from his Greekness to find insight through the poetry of an adopted culture, in which he can move free of inhibitions';⁵ or Panagiotis Kanellopoulos's assertion that 'στην Αγγλία, αποτινάζοντας κάθε ζυγό, γίνεται ο Δημήτρης Καπετανάκης πέρα για πέρα ο εαυτός του'.⁶ Yet this poses a number of questions: first, how possible is the supposed removal of inhibitions in the first place? Secondly, does an adopted culture not bring with it new inhibitions in the form of new discourses codifying identity? Moreover, how do such processes find expression in a textual system like that of Capetanakis? Last but not least, what are the implications of the narrative of 'becoming one's true self' if, as seems to be the case with Capetanakis's English output, that narrative is closely allied to a coded expression of the homosexual self?

Such questions lead to the second narrative I wish to present and challenge here: the 'coming out' story, the modern tendency to associate 'expressing one's true self' with 'expressing one's true sexuality'. This is exactly where the notion of 'coming out of the closet' comes from: the idea that if one voices one's 'true' sexuality, then one is freeing a

3 Republished in the famous popularizing series of Galaxias.

4 I am suggesting here a largely subcultural rereading still not represented in official criticism. From the articles written on Capetanakis, only the one by David Ricks comes close to touching on the homosexual themes of Capetanakis's English poems, and this is done almost cryptically, swept under a footnote. First Ricks says about Capetanakis's 'Detective Story': 'There is a barely concealed indication that the protagonists are adherents of *άγωνα αγάπη κι αποδοκιμασμένη*'. Ricks supplements this coded Cavafian reference to homosexuality with a further reference to a gay poet, which is added in a parenthesis (still within the footnote): 'Capetanakis' poem "Experienced by Two Stones" might be compared with Thom Gunn's "The Bed": D. Ricks, 'Demetrios Capetanakis: A Greek poet in England', *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 22 (1996) 73. See my reading of that poem below.

5 Ricks, 'Capetanakis', 63.

6 P. Kanellopoulos, 'Η σύντομη πορεία του Δημήτρη Καπετανάκη', *η λέξη* 47 (September 1985) 714.

hidden essence from its constraints.⁷ To explore this, I will focus on poems and contextual information that may be said to support such a view of the poet coming out as homosexual in wartime London. Even though this essay stems from a reading of Capetanakis's English writing as a coming-out narrative, it also tries to indicate the limitations of this approach. The question of coming out seems to run through Capetanakis's English oeuvre as a theme, in more or less obvious ways, and certainly gives his work a dimension usually overlooked by its Greek readership. However, upon closer examination, Capetanakis's poems and critical texts in English seem less outspoken than at first glance and much more concerned with the *aporia* of identification — any identification. In so doing, they comment in important ways on the contradictions resulting from 'becoming one's true self' and 'coming out'.

As I will show, the use of an 'adopted culture' may remove inhibitions, but it also makes Capetanakis more aware of coding; indeed, it makes coding in its diverse forms — textual, cultural, social — the subject of almost all of his limited number of English language poems. Furthermore, moving to a new cultural context and becoming a member of a new circle of intellectuals may seem to facilitate a remapping of identity, but in fact such a move ends up displaying more clearly the uncertainty of identification, the black holes that lie at the core of any identity, if indeed we conceive of identity, in Teresa de Lauretis's perceptive phrase, as 'the narrative that gives meaning to experience'.⁸ To put it simply, if identity is the narrativization and at the same time the interpretation of experience, its role is to cover the gaps produced by identification, those moments where the multiple attachments of a person contradict each other. Theorists of identity would argue here that identities are produced at the meeting point (the suture) between positions offered to a subject (interpellations) by the discursive environment she or he moves within and by his/her own attempts to perform subjectivity. As Stuart Hall reminds us, 'precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies'.⁹ My aim here is to analyse both the gaps of identification and the dialogue between positions offered and positionalities taken in the game of identity.

It is important to note that, since the whole point of this article is also to probe issues of 'clearly defined' and 'outspoken' sexual identity, I am not concerned to prove beyond any doubt that Capetanakis engaged in homosexual acts during his stay in England. I am

7 See the introductions to E. Kosofsky-Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London 1991) and D. Fuss, *Inside-Out* (London 1991).

8 Quoted in L. Duggan, 'The trials of Alice Mitchell: sensationalism, sexology, and the lesbian subject in turn-of-the-century America', *Signs* 18:4 (1993) 793.

9 S. Hall, 'Who needs identity?', in S. Hall and P. Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London 1996) 4. An elaborate discussion of identity and identification would be beyond the scope of this article. I have decided instead to refer to three key interventions, Stuart Hall's on identity and subjectivity, Lisa Duggan's on gay identification, and Stephen Heath's on suture, all of which have helped shape the overall argument of this article.

not a biographer: what I have in front of me are Capetanakis's writings, the writings of others about him, and the historical data of the literary circles within which he moved. Thus I am also arguing from the perspective of the (contemporary) reader: what at first may look like 'coming-out' writing contributes instead to a much more complex picture of the writing subject, the sexual subject, and the subject as identity-in-motion. Thus in the last part of the article, I turn self-consciously to the complications of seeing Capetanakis as the 'Greek poet coming out in England' that my title proclaims.

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This is, more or less, what we know of him: Demetrios Capetanakis was born in 1912 in Smyrna (or Izmir), the major port of Asia Minor from which he fled with his family in 1922, following the Greek defeat in the Greco-Turkish war and the subsequent expulsion of Greek populations from the area. A law graduate who had followed postgraduate studies in philosophy in Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers, he went to England in 1939 on a grant from the British Council. He carried out research at Cambridge, and remained in London during the Second World War. During this period he wrote a series of articles and poems for various prestigious publications, including *New Writing*, *Penguin New Writing* and *New Writing and Daylight*, *The Listener* and *Time and Tide*. John Lehmann, the influential author and publisher of *New Writing*,¹⁰ became Capetanakis's mentor, closest friend and literary executor after his death. Lehmann also edited a posthumous collection of works entitled *Demetrios Capetanakis, a Greek Poet in England*, which included commemorative articles by Edith Sitwell and William Plomer.¹¹ As David Ricks has noted, Capetanakis's English reputation rests on that slim posthumous book, and his poetry's success 'was rather *d'estime*, [as] he is today little known as a poet in England', even though his poems have been published in various anthologies.¹² In Greece he has been better known for his philosophical essays (republished in popular editions in the 1960s and then in the 1990s), and for some of his literary criticism. However, he is known mostly among intellectuals, his reputation resting on the commemorative articles presenting him as 'a lost promise for Greek letters' that began to appear soon after his death.¹³

Nevertheless, reading the footnotes of English literary history and against those dominant narratives, one finds Capetanakis associating with a working group of homosexual writers (Lehmann, Plomer, J.R. Ackerley) — and, through them, linking himself with a homosexual literary tradition (or, rather, a genealogy of the homosexual writing

10 A co-founder of the Hogarth Press, Lehmann became a very successful literary magazine editor. His best-known achievement was *New Writing and Daylight*, which reached its peak during the war.

11 This slim book, as well as a handful of very warm reviews by writers with whom Capetanakis had become friends during his stay in England (amongst them Geoffrey Grigson, J.P. Ackerley and E.M. Forster), secured a posterity for his work. The book itself counted at least five reprints in English and a Greek translation in 1984. Some of the poems and articles included in it were reprinted in English anthologies. Four poems have also been turned into a lieder cycle by the well-known homosexual composer Ned Rorem.

12 Ricks, 'Capetanakis', 61.

13 See *Τετραδίο Δεύτερο* (1945) 14–30, *Νέα Εστία* 19/445 (June 1946) 262–92.

self),¹⁴ before moving on to perform his own homosexual self through writing. This is the narrative suggested, for instance, in John Lehmann's diary when he describes his first meeting with the Greek intellectual in April 1941. Capetanakis was presenting the work of some Modern Greek poets to Lehmann when at one point,

[Capetanakis] grew enthusiastic about one of them, and said: 'He has this vision of a world of heroic bodies — a masculine world of course...' He [Capetanakis] is modest and charming as well as extremely gifted, and his melancholy devotion to Adrian [Liddell Hart, at the time Lehmann's lover, and friends with Capetanakis at Cambridge] touches me very deeply.

Lehmann's biographer, Adrian Wright, notes that 'with [this conversation], the young man had made his own sexual preference clear'.¹⁵ As a result of his meeting with Lehmann (and of the identifications that came with it), Capetanakis undertook translations of Modern Greek poetry for *Penguin New Writing*, and was introduced to William Plomer, a homosexual writer from South Africa who had a deep interest in Greece and Modern Greek literature.¹⁶ Note in the above description that Capetanakis is seen as successfully combining identifications as a Greek writer, an avid Greek reader (of both texts and 'masculine heroic bodies') and a potential member of an intellectual homosexual group. Capetanakis immediately seems pigeon-holed, read and shaped by Lehmann's preconceptions: the narrative suggested here is that of the young, 'modest and charming' Greek writer who 'comes out' to his future English mentor.

A Greek homosexual writer having to 'come out', as it were, in wartime London, may sound like an ironic contradiction to some. It certainly does to William Trotter, biographer of Capetanakis's contemporary, the homosexual conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, who had also left Greece in the 1930s. Trotter points out that in the first decades of the twentieth century

the Greek attitude toward homosexuality was one of extreme denial. There was great irony in this, for it was after all the civilization of ancient Greece that gave western culture its ideal of homoerotic love: the young man — part Apollo and part Socrates — in whom grace, health, beauty, and intelligence find a balance more perfect than Nature usually provides.¹⁷

Obviously what is at issue here are competing constructions both of homosexuality and of male, national and artistic/poetic identity in Greece and the West in the first half of the

14 Practically all Capetanakis's references in his English writings can be seen to have a homosexual subtext, while most of the English colleagues he befriended led homosexual lives.

15 A. Wright, *John Lehmann: A Pagan Adventure* (London 1998) 127.

16 Indeed, Plomer was one of the first English writers to write about Cavafy, and exchanged some letters with the poet, before dedicating his own poems to him and borrowing identifiably Cavafian settings for his short stories set in Greece, published in his *Four Countries* (London 1949).

17 W. Trotter, *Priest of Music: The Life of Dimitri Mitropoulos* (Portland 1995) 27.

twentieth century. But one needs to be wary of taking this distinction between ‘Greek’ and ‘Western’ at face value, the former characterized as oppressed and ‘in denial’, the latter as liberal and self-conscious.

As I will show through my reading of Capetanakis’s work, these are disparate and inconclusive identities that often operate oppositionally and antagonistically. Trotter’s remark proposes a very reductive and largely retrospective reading of ‘homosexual emancipation’ in the West, and presents the ‘Greek attitude of denial’ as its opposite. What lies behind the idea of Greeks being ‘in denial’ of homosexuality is the very historically located idea that homosexuality is somehow inherently Greek. This narrative served as a collective myth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the emerging type of the modern homosexual, man and woman, reclaimed ancient Greek homosexual practices as precedent most affirmative of his/her identity.¹⁸ It is exactly this figure of the ‘modern homosexual’ that commentators such as Trotter find countries like Greece to be ‘in denial of’.

In other words, while classical Greece appears to be central in the reverse discourses (the invented genealogies, the politics of identity) of modern homosexuality in the West, what is seen as an ‘attitude of denial’ extrapolates Greece to the East and potentially identifies it with premodern sexualities. This is the unspoken structure of the ‘emergence’ of the modern homosexual, which I find extremely intriguing, especially for the pressure it exerts on individuals. ‘Part Apollo and part Socrates’ on the one hand and ‘in extreme denial’ on the other, Greeks such as Capetanakis found (and, to a certain extent, still often find) themselves positioned at the crossroads of identity discourses. The extent to which their coming out is a problematic act in itself and turns the Greek Eros inside out — homosexuality as a Greek fantasy activated and disowned at once — is one of the underlying themes of this paper.

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Capetanakis’s first poem written in English appeared in the June 1942 issue of *Penguin New Writing* under the title ‘Detective Story’. Apparently commenting on a crime of passion, the poem ends up being about identification and gender performances:

The stranger left the house in the small hours;
A neighbour heard his steps between two dreams;
The body was discovered strewn with flowers;
Their evenings were too passionate it seems.

They used to be together quite a lot;
The friend was dressed in black, distinguished looking
The porter said; his wife had always thought
They were so nice and interested in cooking.

18 For an influential elaboration of this argument, see S. Bravman, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge 1997).

And this was true perhaps. The other night
 They made a soup that was a great success;
 They drank some lager too and all was right,
 The talk, the kisses and at last the chess.

‘It was great fun!’ they said; yet their true love
 Throbbled in their breasts like pus that must be freed.
 The porter found the weapon and the glove,
 But only our despair can find the creed.¹⁹

Is this a homosexual couple? Certainly the poem is sparing with its pronouns. The friend ‘was dressed in black’, the two of them drank lager, they were both ‘nice and interested in cooking’ — and indeed, in cooking well — they used phrases like ‘it was great fun’ and they spent their time playing chess. Crucially, all this appears to be a description provided by the porter and his wife, who, as onlookers and in their readiness to gossip, also stage typical performances. But is it the porter and his wife who observe that ‘their true love / throbbled in the breasts like pus that must be freed’, or the cryptic poet, who takes that story and turns it into an exercise in existentialist dialectics? Whatever the case, it seems to me that the focus of this text is on the reader, the impulse one feels to decode, to play the detective, to find out more, to characterize and categorize. With the outsider’s gaze as the ultimate mediator of meaning, it is left to the reader to decide whether and in what way to read homosexuality in the crime. Framed by a socially constructed role (porter), and the implied role of the intellectual authorial voice, the poem eventually becomes a comment on gender and sexuality (as) performances. This is exactly why the event described reads like an elaborate stage performance with setting, costumes and theatrical gestures.

The fascination of a foreigner with British life is here mixed with a fascination for cryptic meanings and possible homosexual connotations with a slight philosophical edge. The last verse, ‘only our despair can find the creed’ is a direct reference to Capetanakis’s philosophical formulations such as the ‘force of despair’, the ‘call of darkness’, the realization that ‘we belong to a world of appearances and that nothingness lurks behind everything’.²⁰ The last quotation comes from an article Capetanakis wrote around this time on Rimbaud, a text which can be seen as a mirror image of ‘Detective Story’ and promotes an understanding of homosexuality as one way of exploring deeper, philosophical, questions about life. Rimbaud’s homosexual liaison with Verlaine, Capetanakis suggests, was an ‘experiment in applied metaphysics’ — a way to go beyond the ordinary, the everyday, an exploration of the inexorable.²¹

It should be pointed out that allusions to homosexual love in articles and poems would not have been considered strange in late ’30s–early ’40s literary circles. Similar

19 Capetanakis, ‘Detective Story’, *GPE* 19.

20 *GPE* 63.

21 *GPE* 67.

allusions crop up frequently in the work of writers such as W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, J.R. Ackerley, William Plomer and John Lehmann. Valentine Cunningham has famously criticized what he calls 'the politics of '30s homosexual writing, the way literary homosexuals conducted their literary affairs — admittedly in a legal context not at all of their own making'. He has argued, not without reasonable evidence, that close bonds formed at public schools and Oxbridge between bourgeois young men evolved in the '30s into a literary 'clique-puffery':

[B]onded by shared private codes, covert languages and publicly inadmissible passions, the literary homosexuals did not let each other down. E.M. Forster claimed Joe Ackerley 'always helped his friends'. So did they all ... Homosexual John Lehmann's tastes, as editor and publisher, ran prominently among his homosexual friends.²²

Such a literary homosexual coterie was still very active in the early '40s, when Capetanakis became close to some of the best known of its members and started publishing in the widely circulated *New Writing* and *Penguin New Writing*, edited by Lehmann. As Peter Burton argues, 'a distinguishing feature of these two publications was the prominence given to work by gay men; contributors included Stephen Spender, William Plomer, W.H. Auden, Denton Welch, Keith Vaughan, Osbert Sitwell, Jocelyn Brooke, John Minton and Tennessee Williams'.²³ *Pace* Cunningham, we have to see this generation's literary politics as an active strategy: gay writers were prepared to fight back and impose their own, ruthless and, as it seems, effective canon politics. Phrases such as 'he is one of us', or '[the *Listener* is] one of our main outlets', that Cunningham quotes in abundance,²⁴ are evidence of how sexual identity interpellation was instrumentalized in the clear attempt to establish an alternative canon. Even though its origins lay in bourgeois camaraderie and public school solidarity, we should not underestimate the effect this positive identification of *the homosexual writer conducting his affairs* (both literary and sexual) would have had on aspiring authors such as Capetanakis who became involved with the circle around this time.²⁵ Becoming acquainted with a language, a culture and a subculture all at once, Capetanakis seems to have been fascinated by this environment and its strategies. Covert but clearly discernible references to a homosexual subculture can be found in a number of his poems. 'Cambridge Bar Meditation', for instance, is a poem that, on the surface, mocks the university's antiquated traditions, but it also complains about the narrator's feelings of loneliness there ('the friends are gone to London...'). It begins like this:

22 V. Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford 1989) 149.

23 P. Burton, 'Introduction', in J. Lehmann, *In the Purely Pagan Sense* (London 1985) 2.

24 Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*.

25 A very good account of the poetics and politics of homosexual writers in the period under discussion is given by Alan Sinfield in his *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London 1997 [1989]), esp. the chapter 'Queers, treachery and the literary establishment', 60–85. I follow Cunningham and Sinfield in focusing primarily on male homosexual writers.

We shall not tell you where the well is hidden.
 Cambridge is gay, but unseen courts atone.
 The centre of the town is soil forbidden,
 Allotted to the don who walks alone.²⁶

It is worth bearing in mind that *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel banned for obscenity in 1928, the year of its publication, was by this time being circulated in subcultural (*hidden*) circles that would eventually secure its status as an underground classic.²⁷ A covert reference to that novel may or may not be present in the above verse. The same is true for the modern use of the word 'gay' — which, I hasten to add, was already being used to mean 'homosexual' in the 1930s. Double-edged phrases playing with the word cropped up in the songs of Noël Coward from at least 1929 — most famously in 'Mad About the Boy' (1932) with the phrase 'He has a gay appeal / That makes me feel / There's maybe something sad about the boy'.

Whatever the case, the poem clearly demonstrates a foreign writer's fascination with the codedness of British life, operating through the creation of a double code whereby there is room for the philosophical, but also for a subcultural reading able to pick up on specific references. Since a conscious deployment of coded language and sexual innuendo is mixed with social or philosophical themes, we get a sense of Capetanakis's attempt to establish a distinctive poetics out of this combination. The poem 'Angel' is a case in point:

An angel comes bringing a smile as token
 Of love, eternal love that fears no danger,
 But when we need him most, he says in broken
 Language 'I cannot help, I am a stranger',
 And vanishes. Angels are not of this
 But of another world that knows no pity.²⁸

The self-conscious and ironic use of English as a foreign language makes this poem a subtle undermining of a certain form of idealized, sublimated homoeroticism. Indeed, the figure of the angel here reads as if it is lifted directly from the poetry of Stefan George in order to be playfully subverted.

Capetanakis's writings show beyond doubt that in England he moved from an idealized vision of the body and the erotic, heavily influenced by George and German idealism, to a pragmatics of desire and sexuality influenced by the Lehmann circle. In an article on George written in England during the war, Capetanakis used the German poet's aesthetics to mount a larger attack against state totalitarianism. He pointed out that the devotion to the master and the idea of 'brotherhood' promoted by the George circle could be seen as

26 GPE 20.

27 See Alison Hennegan's 'Introduction' to *The Well of Loneliness* (London 1982) viii, and Rebecca O'Rourke, *Reflecting on the Well of Loneliness* (London 1989).

28 GPE 32.

a forerunner of Nazism ('Initially I was impressed, amused and intrigued by the [spiritual sons of the Master]. I did not know yet what inhumanity was hidden in them. Today I know better about Georgeism, as we all know better about Hitlerism').²⁹ Intriguingly, Capetanakis went a step further in claiming that it was precisely sublimated homoeroticism and homosocial idealism that were to blame for the totalitarian social implications of George's poetry. Analysing George's Maximin poems (mourning the loss of a sixteen-year-old boy), the critic stresses that

unfortunately George did not speak about his friendship with Maximin with all the sincerity we would want. [His writing on Maximin] is so extraordinary, because of the strange mixture of sincerity and insincerity, of candour and calculation, of truth and falsity, we find in it. When, for instance, George describes the warmth which Maximin's body radiated all round it, we are moved by the candid description of the lover's emotions at the presence of the beloved. But when he implies that this warmth was not only felt by himself, but that it had an objective power which was going to affect the whole world and bring about a new era of life, we cannot quite follow him.³⁰

In other words, desire must be treated for what it is, and not reproduced as an all-encompassing aestheticizing posture. Reread from this perspective, the whole article moves around ideas of sincerity and insincerity, opacity and transparency. One can be sincere, Capetanakis implies, while being extremely opaque. What is important is to be able to 'read poetry in order to come in contact with a human being' not with a sublimated ideal. In order for this to happen, the poet has to give enough (but not too many) clues that 'could reveal his personal life'.³¹ Poetry is not an evasive expression of ideal being, but a process of unveiling the hurdles that produce the self.

Following that strategy, Capetanakis said of his poems that 'what was important was to make of them "cryptic messages"'.³² In the four poems he published in the first issue of *New Writing and Daylight* (summer 1942),³³ he again takes up the question of cryptic language and its existential implications. The poem 'Prophets' starts by describing how 'The prophets wept, forgetting all their bliss', before ending on a philosophically higher note:

But those who see His face in all its terror
Will die for that, yet not before they give
A cryptic message to the world in error
With hints of what to hope and how to live.³⁴

29 GPE 73–4.

30 GPE 83.

31 GPE 84.

32 GPE 16.

33 'Cambridge Bar Meditation', 'A Saint in Piccadilly', 'What We Must Take From the Land of Fear', 'Prophets': all published in the first issue of *New Writing and Daylight*, Summer 1942, 33–5.

34 'Prophets', GPE 23.

Nevertheless, the deeper philosophical meaning of ‘Prophets’ notwithstanding, it seems that there are also more mundane cryptograms, just as there are more direct desires to cater for, as ‘A Saint in Piccadilly’ demonstrates:

Among the many ways of liberation
The most effective ones are mad or silly.
I met no saint in holy congregation,
But found a martyr haunting Piccadilly

...

The world is loathsome to his boundless yearning;
To pierce the heavens is his deadly task;
But prayer is useless when the flesh is burning,
And meditation fails him after dusk.

The call of darkness then assails the room;
The windows tremble and his throat is dry;

The meaning of the cryptogram is faint,
But his desire is clear. He rushes out
And, hungry for the humblest end, the saint
Picks up the lowest person seen about.³⁵

These poems, it should be acknowledged, are in constant dialogue with John Lehmann’s poetic output of the time (similarly uneven in quality). ‘A Saint in Piccadilly’, for instance, seems to be the exact intertextual pair of Lehmann’s ‘To Penetrate That Room’:

To penetrate that room is my desire,
The extreme attic of the mind, that lies
Just beyond that last bend in the corridor.
Writing I do it. Phrases, poems are keys.
Loving’s another way (but not so sure).³⁶

Lehmann’s homosexual identity is here produced and transferred through a way of writing, a style, a poetics — it is this style, with its potential to encode identity, that Capetanakis shares. As Alan Sinfield writes about this type of homo-poetics, ‘homosexual desire was constituted as a submerged discourse — to be decoded by those in the know, but too dangerous to be spoken directly’. Sinfield uses the example of Auden’s poetry, which presents itself ‘as a quasi-philosophical meditation, requiring me to root around for verbal links to justify my analysis’.³⁷ The reader, I argue, is pushed to act in a similar way in the case of Capetanakis.

35 ‘A Saint in Piccadilly’, *GPE* 21.

36 J. Lehmann, *Collected Poems 1930–1963* (London 1963) 26–7.

37 Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture* 68.

In Capetanakis's poems such as 'A Saint in Piccadilly', a non-native speaker's apparent excitement with the mechanisms of the English language (also evident in the perfunctory rhyming), and a more general symbolist poetic agenda, are paired with the fascination for cryptic homosexual vocabulary and references to London's gay life (Piccadilly, 'pick up the lowest person about').³⁸ The poems reiterate the assertion that there is no sublimated philosophical purity, but that every philosophical and intellectual mode of questioning has to find expression through semiotic coding and embodied experience — the latter a continuation of the former. This is how I read Capetanakis's poem 'The Land of Fear'.

Before we leave this deadly Land of Fear
For countries guarded by police, where houses
Are houses, you are you, and here is here,
We must make sure we take with us what rouses
All these suspicions of a weighty nod
Lurking in everything and everywhere.
Because our lives would be condemned if God
Made us a present of His lips, His hair,
And we could not suspect it, but we spent
A night of love with pure eternity,
Thinking that all embraces have an end
When in the morning comes the tray with tea.³⁹

The poem mocks the idea of a clear-cut expression of meaning and desire, suggesting that it may be the sexual encounter, rather than the idealism of an unconsummated relationship, that provides transcendence. Again, Capetanakis leaves room for the philosophical reader, but there is also scope for the initiated few who would discern behind these lines a description of cruising that ends in a brief sexual act.

We should also remember here that a homosexual lifestyle does not seem to have been restricted by the Blitz, when Capetanakis wrote poems like 'The Land of Fear'. On the contrary, Hugh David's *Social History of British Homosexuality* informs us that in wartime London, 'a carpe diem attitude resurfaced. No one knew what might happen that night, that week. ... Chaos reigned, anything went and [homosexual] men ... were having the time of their lives. The Yanks and the Canadians were coming and in the perilous darkness the phrase "Over here" took on wholly new connotations'.⁴⁰ David quotes a series of personal memoirs (by Quentin Crisp and John Lehmann amongst other) to illustrate the casual relationships homosexual men could enjoy with servicemen stationed

38 For the position of London as a gay metropolis at the time in question, see M. Houlbrook, 'A Sun Among Cities': *Space, Identities and Queer Male Practices, London 1918–1957* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 2002), and M. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality* (Cambridge 2003).

39 'The Land of Fear', *GPE* 12.

40 H. David, *On Queer Street: A Social History of British Homosexuality, 1895–1995* (London 1997) 147.

in London during this period. This was, in the words of John Lehmann, ‘a game with exacting rules’.⁴¹

One is led to read Capetanakis’s ‘American Games’ in this context:

When I speak of man’s dark doom
 Bill from Cincinatti drawls:
 ‘If one makes oneself at home
 On this earth, one never fails.

 If one wants to play a game,
 One must first accept the rules.
 If you want to live your time,
 You have got to stand the walls

 Which imprison us and kill
 Those who strike to pull them down.
 If you think my wisdom dull

 You have never tried base-ball,
 Which has taught me lots of sane
 Things.’
 I play my life with Bill.⁴²

Both men here present themselves as types, defined by their nationality, intellectual standing and, perhaps, if we think of Lehmann’s ‘game’, their sexuality. The American ‘non-intellectual’ talks about baseball, rules, the benefits of a simple life and an uncomplicated masculinity; the Greek existentialist, conversely, speaks of ‘man’s dark doom’. That the obvious nod to Cavafy’s ‘Τείχη’ (albeit with reversed connotations) comes from the mouth of the American baseball player provides a further textual irony. This is a game of national, class, social and sexual identities as performances. The tilted rhyming, based on shifting patterns of consonance and assonance (doom-home-game-time, drawls-fails-rules-walls, kill-dull-ball-Bill, down-sane), provokes a feeling of externally imposed poetic rules both followed and failed. On top of this, the see-sawing near-rhymes create a camp atmosphere (reminiscent of a Noel Coward song) that culminates in the similarly camp conclusion: ‘I play my life with Bill’. If this play is all about how the self is constructed and performed, then a certain writing style becomes an integral part of it and homosexuality one of its modal variations.

Capetanakis would revisit the idea of courting and writing as a performance in a study of Thomas Gray and his ‘unrequited love’ for Horace Walpole.⁴³ He talks in the piece about masquerade, masks and styles as ways of subverting the natural order. But more importantly, they are also ways to present a more ‘successful’ version of the self:

41 The phrase ‘this game with its exacting rules’ is used by John Lehmann to describe the courting of lower-class men in his *In the Purely Pagan Sense*, 52.

42 ‘American Games’, *GPE* 31.

43 A chapter of this unfinished study was posthumously published by John Lehmann in *GPE*.

The masque if it is tasteful ... conceals *the inferior social position, the want of physical attractions*. It can even disguise *one's sex*. Gray's position in his milieu was ambiguous, and only the deceit of a masque could have made him appear as he should have liked to have been — equal to the best, important, free, charming. Behind his mask he could have got rid of his inferiority feelings, his shyness, his inhibitions. He might have been run after, courted; he might have made a figure and enjoyed himself. If the world were a masquerade Gray might have been a success.⁴⁴

From the social subversiveness of masquerade, we move to an understanding of masquerade as a prop in the game of attraction. Nor should the analogy between gender and class positions be overlooked: 'one's sex' is seen to be as oppressive as one's social class. Nevertheless, the mask removes inhibitions at the same time as it reproduces them. The mask is based on unsettled divisions (high-low class, male-female) and, through it, one assumes an identity that is already there, iterated and iterable, even if it is not one's own. In the end, the mask's function is not to subvert the natural order as such, nor simply to make the 'natural order' seem more like a masquerade; rather, it becomes a necessary vehicle of success in a natural order that is *already conceived as a game*. Literature, it follows suit, is simply another type of masquerade. Gray's only option, Capetanakis maintains, was 'to hold private and silent masquerades in letters'.

Intriguingly, by pointing to social class, gender and literature as performances, Capetanakis places emphasis on his own position in British literary circles as also being a type of performance, the performance of a 'Greek poet in England'. Indeed, one of the reasons Capetanakis's articles, poems and translations from Greek were so eagerly sought after by wartime journals was Greece's symbolic standing during the war. As had often been the case in the past, the symbolic content ascribed to Greece was once again a mixture of classical grandeur and contemporary suffering: occupied Greece was presented as the classical topos of democracy desecrated by fascists.⁴⁵

Capetanakis was called upon to adopt and perform the role of a Greek writer in exile. The first article he published in English in 1941, titled 'The Greeks are Human Beings', was meant to support the Greek cause after the country's fall to the Germans. It also functioned as an attempt to refute a range of ready-made assumptions associated with Greeks.

Many businessmen in London must have met T.S. Eliot's M. Eugenides, the rich vulgar Greek merchant, and they no doubt think of him when they hear of Greece. That is very misleading, as misleading as to think of the age of Pericles when one hears of Greek history. The Greeks of today [should be seen] as modern Europeans.⁴⁶

44 GPE 123–4, emphasis added.

45 All the magazines edited by Lehmann published, as a symbolic gesture, texts on Greece, poems with a Greek setting and Modern Greek literature in translation. The same happened with the *Listener*, *Personal Landscape* etc.

46 GPE 45–46.

However, when the author presents his own description of ‘the true Greek’ near the end of the article, he proposes an alternative version of Greekness based on a ‘history of Greek sensibility’. In what seems one of his most ironic critical moves, this ‘true image of a Greek’ also turns out to be an exercise in role play, since what he has in mind is ‘something analogous to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* ... the Greek Orlando’.⁴⁷

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To recapitulate: in 1940s London, Capetanakis came into contact with homosexual identities which were being rearranged and reproduced as intellectual postures and types of performance. Not only did it take one to know one, but the whole process of homosexual identification had also become a spectacle, a literary game, a narrative subtext. What I find extraordinary is the way in which Capetanakis’s Greekness underwent a similar rearrangement: it functioned both as a viewpoint (the *author speaking as Greek*) and as a spectacle (the speaking *author as Greek*). In order to meet his British contemporaries’ expectations, Capetanakis had to come out not so much as a homosexual, but as a Greek.

For evidence of this, one need only reflect on the fact that Edith Sitwell used to ask Capetanakis to read ancient Greek poetry out loud in order ‘to hear its sound’.⁴⁸ She called him, ‘a most extraordinary creature, a Greek’ who had flattered her by comparing her poetry to Sappho’s,⁴⁹ and ‘had the high and noble spirit of a Greek hero [that] will not be lost to us’.⁵⁰ John Lehmann used to recall Capetanakis’s ‘enigmatic smile playing over his strangely mobile features and giving them the look of an archaic Greek statue’.⁵¹ Ackerley’s biographer informs us that Capetanakis was normally referred to by the *Listener*’s editor as ‘little Demetrios’ — a reference to both his small build and his ‘innocent Greek spirit’.⁵² And Plomer called him ‘the John Hampson Simpson of Greece, or shall I say the Yanni Hampsonopoulos Simpsonakis’, referring to the homosexual writer John Hampson Simpson.⁵³

Some people, including Rosamond Lehmann, suspected that Capetanakis was John Lehmann’s lover. Not quite, says Lehmann’s biographer:

Some who knew Lehmann in later years assumed the relationship between him and Capetanakis was sexual, but this seems doubtful ... there is certainly no evidence for believing it was. Capetanakis’ feelings operated in another, less physical, sphere.

47 *Ibid.*

48 E. Sitwell, *Selected Letters* (London 1998) 248.

49 *Ibid.*, 295–6.

50 *GPE* 41.

51 J. Lehmann, *I Am My Brother: Autobiography*, II (London 1960) 120.

52 P. Parker, *Ackerley: A Life of J.R. Ackerley* (London 1989) 180.

53 P. Alexander, *William Plomer: A Biography* (Oxford 1989) 243. The reference to John Hampson Simpson underlines even more Capetanakis’s insistence on identity as performance. Simpson was a homosexual writer who had adopted a pen-name in order to publish the covertly homosexual novel *Saturday Night at the Greyhound*.

Perhaps we need to think that what they felt for one another transcended the bodily, though there can be little doubt that Lehmann must have been attracted to the younger man who confessed to him 'away from you I am just nothing'.

Was it in part from this obscured passion that Capetanakis' poems, esoteric, accessible, other-worldly, humane, sprang?⁵⁴

The 'passion' referred to here is, I think, not obscure at all. On the contrary, the sexual and representational politics of this generation of English writers were in fact often based on such intensely erotic but seemingly unconsummated relationships among 'equals'. Paradoxically, such 'highly aesthetic' relationships acted as the framework for the narration (and guiltless experience) of other, more avowedly sexual ones. A prime example is to be found in John Lehmann's three volumes of autobiography, in which there is no hint of sexual encounter, only high, and sometimes erotically charged Platonic friendships. As might be expected, Capetanakis takes a leading role in these autobiographies (the second of which, *I Am My Brother*, is even named after one of Capetanakis's verses from the poem 'Abel'). Only in the unofficial supplement to John Lehmann's autobiographical writings, the 'erotic novel' *In the Purely Pagan Sense*, do sexual encounters become central to the narrative, while the intellectual, Platonic friendships get pushed to one side. They still remain, however, as a narrative point of reference: most of the narrator's uneducated lovers are amazed at the size of his library, sometimes asking to borrow books before, or after, sex. Interestingly, however, the most intellectually fulfilling relationships still continue to be those that remain unconsummated.

One is tempted to think at this point that Capetanakis, in being produced as a 'Greek writer' in the eyes of his British homosexual contemporaries, was also produced as *asexual*. What he represented for some of them was an idealized, unconsummated, highly theorized homosexuality. 'Little Demetrios' could not have been an object of desire to some of them because he was Greek, or, to be more precise, because he was *an intellectual Greek*.

I venture this provocative formulation in order to stress how much the symbolic centrality of classical Greece for modern Western homosexualities was not alone in the shaping of Western homosexual attitudes to Greece. It was also crucially paired with a genealogy of seeing homosexuality as 'endemic to the east and south'.⁵⁵ The well-documented tendency of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western intellectuals to treat Italy and Greece as both a homosexual utopia and a locus of

54 Wright, *Lehmann* 129.

55 It suffices to mention here Sir Richard Burton's 'Terminal Essay' to his translation of *Arabian Nights* (1885–1888), which concludes that one Sotadic Zone exists, within which 'the vice is popular and endemic'. This zone includes Italy, Greece and Asia Minor, as well as North Africa, and then expands eastwards. R. Burton, 'Terminal Essay', in *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, X (London 1886) 245–6.

permissive homosexual desire combines to form a hybrid topography of aesthetic essentialism and orientalist exoticism.⁵⁶ In order to conform to this view of the topos as both classical and orientalized at once, the ideal Greek lover had thus to be a working-class young man (variations on a shepherd, a fisherman's son, a rural worker, a boy on a donkey), a figure who was essentially speechless.

The silent working-class youth was seen as part of the landscape, sharing its stillness and muteness, the catalyst for the sexual energy of the imaginary topos. This is how Stephen Spender comments on Herbert List's 'Greek' photographs, where 'native' Greek adolescents are posing in front of ancient ruins:

Often the male nude or semi-nude here seems a key unlocking the sexuality enshrined in stone and the Greek countryside. At the same time the nude figure, under the influence of the setting of chiseled stone and severe landscape becomes erotic rather than purely sensual — bridling sensuality with the aesthetic. Sometimes the imagery of the Greek statues seems to invade — *petrify almost* — the youthful nudes.⁵⁷

A Greek who would actually be 'talking' and therefore not conforming to this aestheticizing petrification, an intellectual peer like Capetanakis, risked being eroticized as sexless within this discourse, less Apollo and more Socrates, precisely because he was closer to the vision of Greece as the classical topos and defied the mystification of oriental topography.⁵⁸ The point I want to make here is that the way homosexuality is adopted as a concrete element of identity is culturally specific — and as such it has a discursive genealogy which may be more complex, contentious or exclusionary than it seems at first.

It is important to note that the same elements that support Western homosexual discourses as described above are treated very differently in Greece. Since classical civilization has been largely used, with different degrees of subtlety, as a foundation of modern Greek identities, references to homosexual desire in classical texts and culture often cause considerable anxiety, occasionally turning into nationalist paranoia, as happened with the backlash against Ioannis Sykoutris's edition and translation of Plato's *Symposium*

56 For an account of Greece and Italy as utopian spaces for modern homosexual writing, see R. Aldrich, *Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London 1993). On the importance of Greece (as both symbol and landscape) for the reverse discourses of modern homosexualities see S. Bavmann, 'The lesbian and gay past: it's Greek to whom?', *Gender, Place and Culture* 1:2 (1994) 149–67.

57 S. Spender, 'Introduction', in H. List, *Junge Männer* (London 1988) 3.

58 In a very similar vein, Isherwood's homosexual narrator in *Down There on a Visit* (London 1962) finds his idealistic view of Greece challenged by modern Greece. While in Greece he exclaims: 'I couldn't care less, here, about Classical Greece; I feel far more remote from it than I ever do in Northern Europe' (105). In *Christopher and His Kind* (London 1977) Isherwood returns to such comments, recalling his unease with modern Greece and his jealousy over his lover's frequent encounters with Greek men. Most of the latter are chauffeurs or fishermen, and generally portrayed as uncivilized, including one who 'was capable of going to bed with many human beings and with many sorts of animal' (141). Naturally, 'not one of [these] boys had heard of Homer' (145).

(1934).⁵⁹ One often detects in these discussions an underlying assumption that homosexuality is, somehow, a product of the West and deeply un-Greek, a view that positions itself as the exact counterpart to the orientalist gazes analysed above.⁶⁰

A literary homosexual subculture in 1920s and 1930s Greece (writers such as Napoleon Lapathiotis, Mitsos Papanikolaou and Marios Vaianos) did not change this attitude, since its members never made their presence felt or challenged the canon as English writers did. On the contrary, Greece's Modern(ist) literary Generation of the 1930s, which would eventually dominate the literary canon, suggested an organic link between masculinity, heterosexuality as a normative identity, and national pride.⁶¹ In one quite notorious extract from their correspondence, George Theotokas wrote to George Seferis in 1931:

Δεν σου χρησιμεύει σε τίποτα να συνεχίσεις την πολιτική της *tour d'ivoire*, του *détachement*, της *bouteille à la mer*, που δεν ταιριάζει σε ανθρώπους ρωμαλέους και καλοφαγάδες και καλογαμιάδες σαν κι εμάς, αλλά μονάχα σε ασθενικούς ονειροπόλους και σε πουσταρέλια σαν το σιχαμένο Μαρσέλ Προυστ (τον ξανακοίταξα τώρα τελευταία και μου ήρθε να ξεράσω με τη νοσηρότητα, την αηδιαστική *sensiblerie*, την ψυχική σαπίλα κι αποσύνθεση αυτού του οικτρού υποκειμένου).⁶²

The point here is scarcely about Proust, or even about a literary posture. What Theotokas wants to advocate is a new Greek identity, extrovert, self-confident, assertive. One ought not to forget that the two young authors⁶³ conversing here are on a mission to modernize

59 The orchestrated attack against the gifted Classical scholar was certainly prompted by other interests and served various aims (including internal university politics). It nevertheless exploited the assumption that an ancient Greek text had to be 'morally sound', judged of course by the standards of conservative nationalist morality. Although intellectuals rushed to support Sykoutris (and, to an extent, Plato), it is interesting to note that, even decades after that instant, and after the dead Sykoutris was elevated to the status of the nation's mythical teacher, disciples felt the need to stress that he was also a 'πρότυπο Ἡθους, πρότυπο Αρετής, πρότυπο Ανδρισμού': N. Detzortzis, 'Ο διδάσκαλος', in *Ιωάννου Συκουτρῆ: Μελέται και ἄρθρα* (Athens 1956) 42.

60 The reception of Cavafy's oeuvre was often driven by this view. Stratis Tsirkas would, for instance, seriously argue that Cavafy learned homosexuality 'while at school in England', a comment that R. Liddell refutes with an orientalist banality also quite popular in Greece: 'an Alexandrian need not go far to learn that practice'. See R. Liddell, *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (London 1974) 62–77. See also M. Peranthis's 'fictionalized biography', *Ο αμαρτωλός: Κωνσταντῖνος Καβάφης* (Athens 1953) for similar views.

61 Homosexual theorists have challenged the way social institutions enforce an understanding of heterosexuality as the gender and sexual norm and as the foundation of 'normal life' in the society. For Adrienne Rich this is the social matrix of 'compulsory heterosexuality'; based on that analysis Michael Warner has proposed the influential term 'heteronormativity', which I use in this discussion. See A. Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs* 5 (1980) 631–60, and M. Warner, 'Introduction: fear of a queer planet', *Social Text* 29 (1991) 3–17.

62 G.P. Savvidis (ed.), *Γιώργος Θεοτοκάς & Γιώργος Σεφέρης: Αλληλογραφία (1930–1966)* (Athens 1975) 56.

63 Capetanakis was a close acquaintance of both Theotokas and Seferis and introduced the latter's poetry to the Lehmann circle. As Roderick Beaton notes, Capetanakis's 'brief career in England helped lay the foundations for George [Seferis's] own success in that country.' R. Beaton, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel* (New Haven 2003) 139.

both Greek culture *and* Greek society. The ideal agent to bring this about, it is implied, is a powerful, masculine, heterosexual intellectual. Heteronormativity produces a sense of self, community (σαν κι εμάς) and mission, and should lead to active social and national engagement, while queerness (πουσταρέλια) is associated with utopianism, passivity, failure and otherness.

I certainly do not wish to overemphasize the homophobic and heteronormative comments to be found in the private, or not so private, writings of the Generation of the 1930s. What I do wish to stress, however, is how little room for manoeuvre (or for difference) Greek intellectual circles, in casually equating heterosexuality, manhood, Greekness and literary production, offered a writer like Capetanakis.

This is also the assessment of one of the main critics of the group. In a commemorative article on Capetanakis, Andreas Karandonis describes the ‘new generation of writers’ that assembled around the older Katsimbalis. In doing so, he slides from a description of a literary and aesthetic formation to that of a heteronormative education:

Ο Κατσίμπαλης ... μας έδειχνε τη ζωή με το μπαστούνι του ... Κάθε ένας από τη συντροφιά μας είχε τον τύπο του, μα το σύνολό της, ήταν αυτό που θα λέγαμε «ρωμέϊκο». Μας άρεσε το τριγύρισμα στους συνοικιακούς δρόμους από τις πρώτες ώρες του δειλινού ως πέρα μετά τα μεσάνυχτα. Οι μεγαλόφωνες και ρητορικές συζητήσεις, για ποίηση και τέχνη. *Η άμεση και φυσιολογική ζωή*. Τα καφεενδάκια, οι ταβερνούλες, τα κορίτσια που περνούσαν από μπροστά μας και τους ρίχναμε λογάκια, τα πειράγματα, η ανοιχτόστομη, ως τη χυδαιότητα, κάποτε, σεξουαλική κουβέντα, το ξέγνοιαστο γέλιο, οι εκδρομές, οι καυγάδες, οι δύσκολοι, κρυφοί, ρωμαντικοί έρωτες ... Τα κύρια ενδιαφέροντά μας ήταν η ποιητική μας παράδοση με τον Σολωμό, τον Παλαμά και τον Σικελιανό, το πρόβλημα του Καβάφη, ο γαλλικός συμβολισμός, ο Καρυωτάκης ... Συμφωνούσαμε, διαπληκτιζόμαστε, αλλά πάντα με τρόπο διαλεκτικό ... Υπήρχε και κάποιος ρουμελιωτισμός και κάποια βάρβαρη δημοσιογραφία και κάποια τυπολατρεία πατροπαράδοτη και κάποια χοντρή, «μάγκικη» λαϊκότητα στις εκδηλώσεις μας αυτές. *Δηλαδή, πολύς «νεοελληνισμός»*. ... Τα πράγματα που μας ζώναν και που μας ζούσαν, κρατούσαν την καθιερωμένη, παμπάλαια σημασία τους: η θάλασσα θάλασσα, η ποίηση ποίηση, η γυναίκα γυναίκα, ο άντρας άντρας.⁶⁴

In this context, literary renovation, uncomplicated heterosexual male identity and ‘proud Greekness’ become integrated into the ‘authentic’ Greek way of seeing the world. What is intriguing is that this charade is offered as a necessary introduction to Capetanakis, or rather, to his ‘difference’. Capetanakis is mentioned some lines later as an aberration from a gender and poetic system that presented itself as ‘naturally’ Hellenic and male.

64 A. Karandonis, ‘Ο Δημήτριος Καπετανάκης στην Ελλάδα’, *Προβολές Α’* (Athens 1965) 191. Note that this quotation ends with a claim about authenticity (‘η θάλασσα θάλασσα, η γυναίκα γυναίκα, ο άντρας άντρας’) of precisely the type that Capetanakis undermines in poems such as ‘The Land of Fear’ quoted above.

Under the influence of the ‘new philosophical systems from Europe’, Capetanakis is seen as, ‘άμοιαστος με μας’. With his ‘εκλεπτυσμένη ευαισθησία’, and his obsession with Plato’s ‘ερωτική φιλοσοφία’, Capetanakis ‘ήταν ο πιο μυστηριακός, ο πιο ανεξιχνίαστος ξένος της συντροφιάς μας.’ However, after this initial uneasiness, Karandonis hastens to clarify matters:

Το ξεχώρισμα, η αισθητική απομόνωση του ανδρικού σώματος από το γυναικείο [στο λόγο του Καπετανάκη], θα μπορούσε να οδηγήσει τη σκέψη μας στην άποψη πως έχουμε να κάνουμε με μια περίπτωση ειδικού αισθησιασμού, όπως π.χ. συμβαίνει στο έργο του Καβάφη. Μα το παράξενο είναι πως ο Καπετανάκης στάθηκε αποκάλυπτος εχθρός του κάθε είδους τυφλού και σκέτου «αισθησιασμού». Γι’ αυτόν η ενατένιση της σωματικής ανδρικής ομορφιάς για να πραγματοποιήσει τον πνευματικό και τον αισθητικό σκοπό της, πρέπει να οδηγήσει στη μετατροπή του ωραίου σώματος σε μια θεότητα, στον Έναν.⁶⁵

In a strange way, for Capetanakis to have been considered worthy of this group of intellectuals — and not as someone who shared ‘το πρόβλημα του Καβάφη’ — he had once again to be produced as sexless. His aesthetic appreciation of beauty may indeed have implied a separation of male from female bodies, but, as Karandonis seems to suggest, at least his favourite male bodies were conveniently elevated. He may not have been able to follow the ‘πειράγματα με τα κορίτσια’ in which all the others in the group excelled, but at least he positioned his ‘ανδρικά σώματα’ so high that, his Greek friends could rest assured, he would never reach out and touch.

Let me repeat at this point what I have set out to do in this article: instead of trying to establish Capetanakis’s sexuality, I am concerned with the pressure exerted on him by the literary establishment of Athens (at the time promoting a staunchly heterosexual literary identity) that would then find a counterpart in similar identity pressures (although from the opposite direction) in England.

It is in this way that I come back to question the title of this article. ‘A Greek poet coming out in England’ (a paraphrase of the title of Capetanakis’s posthumous collection edited by Lehmann) ends up indicating the semiotic *terrains vagues* of the poet’s encounter with and literary performance of homosexual identity in England. Coming out from where and to whom? Identifying with whom, and at the expense of what other identification? If London literary circles of the 1940s provided a discourse for one to identify as a homosexual (author), it was the same discourse that produced the Greek homosexual as ideally asexual and the Modern Greek as potentially a split subject (*‘in denial’*). Back in Greece, the homosexual was produced as potentially non-Greek and non-male, the non-Greek as potentially homosexual, and the intellectual Greek as instrumentally heterosexual. The apparent discontinuity here becomes urgent and defiant if one moves on to combine these identifications. A first effect of the move to embrace these mismatching interpellations can

65 *Ibid.*, 196–7.

be found in the distrust of ‘static identities’ in Capetanakis’s writing and the persistent rereading of identities as masquerades, which I analysed in the first part of this article.

In fact, Capetanakis’s fascination with cryptic vocabularies and the articulation of homosexuality with poetry gives rise to a much more complex picture. What a contemporary reader might at first glance interpret as the longing for a stable identity expressed through writing, is better understood if we read Capetanakis’s work as a framing of voids that resist interpretation. Commenting on Rimbaud, Capetanakis described how ‘the orders of the world were full of gaps, pointing to another inconceivable reality lying behind them’.⁶⁶ He himself saw writing as a way to negotiate these gaps — the only way to come closer to the inconceivable reality lying behind them. Theorized in terms of the notions of nothingness and darkness that occur in Capetanakis’s texts, or simply becoming manifest in the inconsistencies between how one is seen and produced within different cultural systems, these identity gaps remain the void calling for but also guaranteeing continual identity rereading(s). They are untranslatable but also urge us towards unending mistranslations. They are unambiguous but spread endless ambiguity. They prevent identity as stasis. But they also require it, if only to force its undoing. The last verse from ‘Lazarus’ still echoes here: ‘Then the door opened, yet no Son / Came in to whisper what I had to know.’ Capetanakis’s last poem is keen to leave us with the image of identity in suspension — a constant question of ambiguity and flux terminated by death.

I would like to end on a more positive note. In what I consider the most fascinating poem Capetanakis wrote in English before he died, an uncanny expressionism is used for the first time to address eroticism beyond the codings of identity. The poem is titled ‘Experienced by Two Stones’, and was first published after the poet’s death.

Blond smell of sleeping noon and quenched desire;
Stillness of clotted sun and limbs that float
In hairy sweetness, auburn like the fire
Which licked the lips and glided down the throat,
Leaving a lump of bliss stuck in the root
Of coming songs...

Experienced by two stones
Grown in the core of love’s transparent fruit
Round which the burning bee, the summer, drones.⁶⁷

In its parading of daring metaphors and unlikely word pairings, the text stands out as different. It is strange, quaint, stilted, unhomely, uncanny, queer. The very strict poetic mechanisms that Capetanakis quite monotonously used in his sparse English poetry are here defied by the anarchy of linguistic excess.

If we attempt to impose a narrative, we can paraphrase the poem as follows: with their desire quenched and already becoming memory, the two lovers find themselves still locked in an embrace. One of them is blond and sleeping, the other looks on. The fire of

⁶⁶ *GPE* 59.

⁶⁷ *GPE* 29.

the sexual encounter has not abated but instead translates into a clotted synaesthesia; in their embrace the lovers become the stones ‘round which the summer drones’, both part of the landscape and the core of the fruit of love.

Nonetheless, this elaborate game of multiple coding that ends up in a knotted textuality defies any such attempts to narrativize; the poem’s centre seems to resist decoding, resist, that is, the reading of metaphors in order to unearth their figurative origins. As I understand it, the two stones at the poem’s core challenge us *not to read* them as metaphors of the two (possibly male) lovers, but can be seen instead as two unambiguous stones, lying at the epicentre of a poem that is all about striving to speak figuratively about love and desire. Let me explain: even though we know that the poem uses the two stones to stand for the two lovers, what the *mise en abyme* at its centre (‘a lump of bliss stuck in the root of songs’) wants us to do is face the challenge of (sexual) experience that achieves a non-referential code, an impenetrable language of its own. The two stones at the core of this poem are there *not to be untangled*. The poem ties its many codes, metaphors (upon metaphors), references, insinuations, easy symbols and overcoded experience so tightly together that the resulting textural surface challenges us to see it not for what hides behind it but for what it is: a stone of representation, a lump of bliss (Barthes’s ‘jouissance’ *avant la lettre*) that must not be decoded. Desire, for the first and last time in this author’s foray into English and into difference in language at large, becomes a stone of representation that *is not to be deciphered*, but is meant to stay there, hanging in the in-between of the tropes that nominate literature.