



GOVERNANCE, HUBRIS, AND JUSTICE IN MODERN TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT *Hubris* is a notion that has recently acquired special urgency, as it seems to express in the post-communist era the demands of justice during the tragic clash between governance and violence. This ethico-political notion deserves to be studied not only in ancient writings but in modern drama and thought as well. Nikos Kazantzakis' unduly neglected *Capodistria* (1944) dramatizes the dilemmas of civic action during the democratic constitution of a polity. A reading of this tragedy from the perspective of political theory suggests ways in which the meaning of *hubris* in modernity may be better understood.

KEYWORDS governance • *hubris* • justice • Kazantzakis • tragedy

We commonly associate *hubris* with ancient Greece, and especially tragedy. We recognize it in Oedipus, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Ajax, and many other mythological figures. We also know that historians attributed it to Asian monarchs, like Xerxes, or Greek cities, like Athens. Although we often use the word to refer to human misfortune (an early death), natural disaster (a devastating hurricane) or political folly (an invasion of a country), no discipline (such as literary criticism, ethics, and political theory) has devoted any systematic thought to its current uses. For example, it is interesting that the term is deployed in the study of classical tragedy but not of contemporary drama. There are no studies of *hubris* in Shakespeare, Racine, Schiller, Ibsen, or O'Neil. Is it legitimate, though, to transfer the ancient notion to contemporary situations? In what sense can we talk about modern *hubris*?

Let us start with an attempt at definition based on a certain consensus in classical studies. *Hubris* indicates excess and insolence. It means having power and abundance, and abusing them for self-aggrandizement. It is usually

contrasted with self-limitation, moderation, and justice or (to use Greek words), *nemesis*, *eunomia*, and *sophrosyne*. I will cite four distinct qualities of the notion.

1. *Hubris* refers to transgressing a rule, not violating a law, and therefore it is by definition a relative notion. *Hubris* crosses limits that should not be crossed but also limits that nobody can point to in a tangible way. A community recognizes *hubris* when it is committed but it cannot define exactly what kind of crime it is because it violates a social order, not a legal code.

2. *Hubris* is a cosmic notion and operates on several levels – natural, social, legal, political, ethical, and so on. No force in the universe is exempt from its allure. It has been perpetrated by plants, Centaurs, Persians, suitors, and even the sun could conceivably succumb to it.

3. *Hubris* is not necessarily committed by evil people or forces, and actions leading to it are not always immoral from the start. A violation of measure can start with impeccable intentions and honest plans before it deteriorates into excess. Even forms of excellence like virtue can lose self-restraint and slide into insolence.

4. Because *hubris* is always voluntary and never induced by the gods, it requires autonomy. It presupposes that forces can decide independently and lucidly on their plans and execute them accordingly. Only a force fully responsible for its actions can be held accountable for their consequences.

In classical Greece, *hubris* often worked like contemptuous aristocratic behavior that assaulted honor and diminished status. It represented the ultimate anti-democratic crime that dishonored the body of the citizen and could lead to stasis or even tyranny. On the classical stage, citizens saw the pitfalls of insatiable power and wealth. Tragedy examined the responsibility and culpability of autonomous agents trying to control their destiny. It presented heroes at the crossroads of choice among courses, individuals who started with reasonable claims but took the path of *hubris* even though originally they had no such intention. Theater dramatized the need for autonomy to freely limit its own freedom. In modern times, Kant included this among the antinomies of practical reason.

To summarize, *hubris* refers to self-serving immoderation which transgresses communal standards of shared wealth and power, and violates the self-governing balance of a particular social order. We can trace this Greek principle from archaic poetry and pre-Socratic thought to classical theater and Hellenistic history. But can we detect it in modern writings? Take, for example, the century-old debate regarding the possibility of a modern tragedy. From the Battle of the Books in neoclassical France to the Canon Wars in the postmodern USA, critics, playwrights, and scholars have been quarreling over the viability of this genre in a world so different from pagan antiquity. If tragedy is dead, maybe it has taken *hubris* with it to the graveyard of exhausted genres and ideas. Yet, we have not stopped calling incidents

'tragic' and attitudes 'hubristic'. I would argue that *hubris* constitutes a unique theoretical realm where questions of ethics, politics, justice, and art converge. A look at contemporary literature offers ample evidence. In order to explore *hubris* in some depth, I propose to look at its operation in a modern play, the three-act tragedy in verse *Capodistria* by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957).

First, a disclaimer. There are many aspects of the play that I cannot examine here. One is its place in the theatrical oeuvre of its author. We think of Kazantzakis primarily as a novelist, forgetting that no other genre pre-occupied him longer in his life than playwriting, that 'he actually began as a playwright and considered himself a playwright until the end of his career fifty years later' (Bien, 1975: 398). It would be worth comparing *Capodistria*, his only play with a modern historical theme, with others, which deal either with earlier periods or mythological figures. I also cannot place this play in the context of the tremendous literary activity in the first half of the 20th century that signaled a renaissance of tragedy, producing thousands of such plays all over the world. In the wake of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1772), literature and the crafts of the stage experienced a rebirth of theater. For example, Kazantzakis' play is contemporary or near contemporary with the plays *Antigone* by Anouilh, *Galileo* by Brecht, *Caligula* by Camus, *The Flies* by Sartre, and *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Hauptmann. Third, I do not have the space to discuss *Capodistria* as an explicit and direct response to *Turmoil in Nafplion* (Theotokas, 1965), a play written by Kazantzakis' friend, Yiorgos Theotokas, and dedicated to their common friend, Angelos Sikelianos. I will only mention that *Turmoil*, which depicts the last days of President Capodistria, was written in the autumn of 1942 as an attempt at a national popular tragedy based on demotic elements such as folk songs and legends. Thus, despite the presence of a chorus, its style is closer to Synge and Lorca than to Hofmannsthal or D'Annunzio. When *Turmoil* was published in January 1944, Kazantzakis borrowed relevant books from Theotokas and composed his own play in the spring of that year, during the end of the occupation of Greece. Finally, I cannot examine here how both plays deal with the deadly strife that was developing among the Greek resistance forces fighting the Axis occupation, but the interested reader can find much valuable information in the writings of Peter Bien (2007) and Kyriaki Petrakou (2005). I will only mention that the play premiered at the National Theater two years later, as part of the celebration of Independence Day on 25 March 1946, less than a month before general elections, and it was withdrawn within a month due to criticisms from the left and attacks from the right.

Ioannis Capodistria (1776–1831) was a Greek from Corfu who had a distinguished diplomatic career in Russia, reaching the rank of foreign minister under Czar Alexander I. Because of his international experience, he was elected first president of Greece for a seven-year term. Greece had emerged victorious from a long struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire

but had also been wounded by local civil strife that often accompanies such struggles and tears emerging nations apart. The president's central concern was to bring order to an embryonic state that was not used to centralization. Convinced that the nascent polity could not afford democracy, he adopted an authoritarian outlook: he did not allow the democratic constitution of 1827 to operate, he postponed the meeting of the National Assembly, he persuaded the legislature to dissolve itself, and he set up a personal cabinet. Capodistria assumed office in January 1828 and was assassinated in October 1831 by feudal rulers.

Kazantzakis' drama takes place on the last two days of the hero's life, on 8–9 October 1831. Capodistria is an Enlightenment idealist whose highest personal value is virtue. As the play opens, he is celebrating his 55th birthday, having spent a sleepless night weighing his life on 'virtue's scale' (Kazantzakis, 1971[1956]: 11). He is also a steadfast patriot driven by an overarching sense of responsibility. He remains focused on fulfilling his duty as a leader charged with organizing and running a land that has not been free for centuries. During the two days of the play, he is faced with the major interests vying for the future of the new country – military, clerical, regional, ideological, popular and others. In the course of Act I, he meets in his office with religious leader Papayiorgis, military leader Kolokotronis, popular leader Makriyannis, and factional leader G. Mavromichalis. Now that the war of liberation is over, Greece is threatened by civil unrest: there are rebellions in the land, mutinies on the islands, clashes at sea, conspiracies in the capital. In all his conversations with the other leaders there is a lot of talk about striking a balance among competing interests. Socio-economic justice is a dominant theme in the play, culminating in the land distribution announced by the president in Act II. People call for their due share. The need for a fair apportionment of goods and rights is obvious to all. But there is broad disagreement over the criteria. Individuals have very different ideas about fairness depending on their background, their status, their role in the national revolution, their allegiances and so on. How can they reach concord?

The issue at hand is the kind of organization the country needs at this stage. What regime would best serve the interests of the people? Which form of government would best honor the sacrifices of the freedom fighters? Is the new country ready for broad representation? Can it afford to hold free and open elections or should it first go through a phase where power is concentrated in a few clean, calm hands? Capodistria believes in the law, others advocate the constitution and yet others insist on practicing local rule. Some support the president's approach as a constitutionalist one while others oppose it as tyrannical; some uphold the rule of law while others denounce it as despotism. The public is divided between law and liberty, governance and justice, necessity and freedom.

Kazantzakis' play has tremendous material for a great tragedy. It presents a state in the aftermath of revolutionary change reaching independence,

experiencing civil unrest, facing the threat of tyranny, and asking how autonomy can be founded. It deals with the responsibilities of governance following a revolution and confronting the fundamental constitutional question: how can self-rule be constituted? The demands of justice on governance during a period of violence following liberation are tremendous. Must revolution choose between tyranny and anarchy?

In their confrontation in front of the presidential palace in Act II, General Kolocotronis and the president debate the meaning of fair share. Kolocotronis is the most famous military figure of the struggle for independence, who witnessed the ravages of war and led the Greeks to victory. Capodistria was brought to Greece after the war to lead the nation into its modern era. To the former, it is self-evident that for every task, be it nursing or fighting for freedom, there must be some reward, some share in the success. Having fulfilled his task, he feels his country owes him. Since he is no monk to fast, he heeds the wild voices of hunger when he hears them inside him, and does not stop to consider whether others are in greater need. In a defiant rebuttal, Capodistria says that he is no monk either but he does fast because he can combine his own horrible voices in a higher synthesis – the voice of Greece asking him to save her.

You all quarrel, moan, [claiming] only
 What each one of you considers his own advantage
 And [nobody] can see the entire sacred cycle;
 But I discern the cycle and judge uprightly. (p. 95)¹

Capodistria is the only leader who holds steadfastly to his patriotic commitment, allowing no personal advantage, considering no tactical moves, making no compromises, encouraging no half-measures (p. 30). While others declare their interests and pursue what they consider theirs, he is the only incorruptible public figure in the play. Each morning, he swears that he will not let human or demon distract him from his path (p. 30). He believes in absolute consistency and total purity. Kolocotronis, the military leader, suggests to him that reality is very complicated. Today's Greeks are not like the ancients or the Byzantines, neither are they westerners or easterners, but rather a new and strange mixture that must be approached in a complex way. Capodistria responds that he does not like this *loxos*/indirect approach. In return, the general warns that his path is too straight, and he will perish.

Kolokotronis
 Forgive me for telling you the whole truth. I don't think
 Your mind ever wore a foustanella
 And it can never understand one who wears it.
 Greeks are neither ancient Hellenes,
 Nor Byzantine monks with robes
 Nor tail-coated Europeans, nor Turks,
 Nor ungainly Russian bears.

A strange new blend in this land!
Enter this blend and put down roots.
And relentlessly eat right and left, to grow tall!
Capodistria
Your route is indirect, I don't like it!
Kolokotronis
Yours, Count, is too straight, and you are lost! (p. 55)

Capodistria's reason is haunted by mixture. Things never turn out as pure as he wants them. For example, his fervent patriotism flees the specter of the double motherland. For 3000 years two Greeces fight one another. One represents blind passion and shameful interest while the other stands for noble struggle and bright vision (p. 29). As he invokes this specter, though, he addresses himself not just to Kolokotronis but to all the freedom fighters and the other people assembled before the palace. And he does that in order to differentiate himself from everyone else. He too feels inside him the stir of the Greece which is lazy, blind, and fratricidal. But he can also feel noble Greece coming. For her alone he works and suffers, and for her glory he will die.

Gradually, Capodistria begins to entertain an alternative, more comforting vision of his country. Greece is a magnificent edifice that is in the process of being built. The site is still under construction (p. 94). Those who work there are unable to comprehend the entire project and can think of their own interests only. As a result, they complain and fight. Only the president, the master builder, can see fully and accurately the plan of the building, keep it in sight, and judge with uprightness.

Capodistria is an unselfish leader who takes a rationalist approach to national progress. As a true man of the Enlightenment, all he has in mind is 'schools, justice, virtue, and order' (p. 67). His mission is to impose structure upon chaos (p. 54) through order, law, and education. However, despite his great faith in human potential, he finds it hard to embrace people. As somebody who sees the world as a struggle of mind and body, mission and temptation, he feels that everybody around him is prone to sin. That is why he lives fearless but friendless. No matter how much he wants to help his fellow Greeks, he feels an irrepressible contempt for them. Early on, he confesses:

I detest the Greeks; I endeavor, I struggle,
I suffer and I die for them but I don't want them;
They taint the immortal light of Greece! (p. 34)

It is here that we see Capodistria begin to yield to *hubris*. His greatest vision is undermined by the suspicion that hatred, crime and dishonesty have damaged the Greeks irreparably – that the one Greece has destroyed the other. Thus he is determined to create order by imposing law on the new nation and put a harness (p. 14) on those who disobey. Law may be tough

but it is like God's will on earth and must not shy away from arming itself, fighting, and winning (p. 54). Capodistria sees himself as a fearless penman who will break the swords of the rebellious military leaders (p. 22), uproot the traditional pursuit of honor (p. 55), and challenge old passions to yield to 'new virtues' (p. 96). He will mold Greeks to his ideal.

Thus Capodistria may stand unselfishly above all material rewards but he is not exempt from arrogance. His "ascetic, fiery purity" (in Kazantzakis' own words) makes him confident of his moral superiority and privileged insight. His *hubris* is that, because he understands virtue as purity of motivation and disposition, he becomes inflexible. Self-righteousness will prevent him from showing forgiveness or love. Law is above love, and virtue is mother of freedom (p. 90). The violation of modesty and moderation will draw Capodistria farther away from those around him. Unable to listen to any advice, he takes the path of increasing alienation. His *hubris* becomes most pronounced in Act III when, on his way to church and his death, he meets Old Demos, a blind singer who used to be a freedom fighter and is now reduced to begging. This is Capodistria's last encounter before he faces his killers. The singer scorns the president, rejecting with contempt the kind of freedom he has advocated. Capodistria's response captures his *hubris* better than anything else: 'Shut up your shameless mouth. Your mind is small and too narrow to understand. You, fighter, do not know what freedom is' (p. 142). This is the play's best way to depict how aristocratic behavior dishonors the citizen body. By the time he announces to the people his radical decision to distribute national land to the poor (p. 99), his mind is no longer on the daily business of government. He now sees his mission in existential terms. He will preach a 'new deep revolution' (p. 103) – getting rid of one's own tyranny. This is the next, greater war of independence from the inner Turk.

Capodistria is an ascetic figure who disciplines himself and is determined to discipline his people as well. In the end he wants to lead them to moral perfection. He turns into one of those literary characters for whom freedom cannot be imposed from outside but begins with self-overcoming. 'The individualism of Kazantzakis's rebels finds its fulfillment in the pursuit of personal, spiritual truths which transcend social, economic, ideological, and political imperatives' (Constantinidis, 2001: 129). This rebellion 'is based on an ethical rather than a political decision, and the "social" conflict is presented as part of a central theme of greater universal significance' (p. 135). Yet, as soon as he preaches his moral revolution to the people, the news arrives that the civil strife is turning into a war with Greeks killing Greeks. At the end of Act II, Capodistria concludes that the most powerful force is not fate but 'the soul of the free, pure, desperate person' (Kazantzakis, 1971: 121). His path and that of the nation have diverged. He finds the courage to admit that his presence has become divisive:

My name raises a flag of discord;
So long as I live, brothers, you won't enjoy reconciliation. (p. 124)

Returning to the symbol of the master builder, he decides to build himself into the edifice of Hellenism, sacrifice himself at its foundations, and die at the hands of his opponents. His ultimate *political* act (yet at the same time one which gives him personal and even existentialist salvation) must be a willingness to accept death, indeed to make it his final weapon in the struggle for true freedom. This is what Kapodistrias comes to realize (p. 53), and why he refuses to take any action to protect himself from the conspirators Mavromichalaioi, even though he knows their plan to kill him (pp. 9, 65, 70, 97; Bien, 1977: 163). The politically active intellectual justifies his struggles in transcendental terms. From a national standpoint, the politics of virtue has failed and Capodistria must die because he has become part of discord; but from an existential one, his death will bring him the ultimate justification as he is dying for his ideal.

The play could have stopped here, having traversed the course of a traditional tragedy with its hero and everyone around him learning a serious lesson in justice and governance. Peter Murphy has articulated this lesson in perfectly classical terms:

To give up the desire for mastery is at the same time to learn that one's scope for action (*praxis*) is *limited*; that – irrespective of which of the *nomoi* one identifies with or sides with in the political conflicts (*stasis, polemos*) of the *polis* – one's speech or deed must ultimately be 'measured.' It must be 'moderated.' It must accord with 'the mean,' with a measure of all of the *nomoi*. This signifies that even the toughest conflict of forces gravitates toward equilibrium, a balancing of opposites; in other words, toward a just way of living together. (2001: 60)

The *hubris* of Capodistria, consisting of excessive pride and immoderate confidence, is the mistake committed on the stage by many great leaders since the drama of Athens. Here I will mention only two, the eponymous hero of Victor Hugo's *Cromwell* (1827) who is caught between the demands of collective and personal destiny; and Willy Brandt, the chancellor of West Germany and hero of the play *Democracy* by Michael Frayn, which premiered in London in 2003. The political leader is an exemplary tragic figure in that an inflexible pursuit of an absolute ideal leads a noble character to loss of *sophrosyne* and a community to *dysnomia*.

The demands of governance foregrounded in Kazantzakis' play bring to life vividly what since Kant we have come to recognize as the tragedy of autonomy, namely, autonomy's internal contradictions. Not only the protagonist but all the other Greek leaders are men who remember how just three years earlier the same city welcomed Capodistria with exalted hopes, or how ten years earlier the nation rose in the name of freedom to fight oppression. Yet the commitment of these leaders to self-rule is so

passionate, so selfish, that, with the exception of Makriyannis, it drives them to the abyss of *hubris* too.

There is something, however, that keeps this play from becoming the great tragedy it could have been, with its highly appropriate period, setting, and group of heroes. It is the modern character, or rather temperament, of the protagonist. Kazantzakis is not content to present him through his actions; he also wants to portray an agitated soul with its conflicts and impasses. Thus his hero ends up being part leader and part master builder, part Creon and part Solnes, as Kazantzakis is pulled in two different directions by Sophocles and Ibsen.

He wants his audience to not only understand Capodistria's dilemmas but also to admire him, if not identify with him. Thus he gives him three characteristics typical of the hero of the Romantic tragedy, as we have known it since Schiller, Wordsworth, and de Musset. First, a literary disposition. Capodistria calls himself a 'writer', makes literary allusions, speaks as an intellectual, and is distinguished by his taste. As a politician he is a man of laws and ideas more than of administrative and collaborative action. He has a culturalist approach to the world, and to his presidential tasks in particular. Second, Capodistria has a melancholic disposition. He is a loner who talks to himself, to God, to Greece, to fate. He feels that his days are numbered, distrusts people, and is prone to metaphysical speculation. Thus, in addition to observing his public appearances, the audience becomes aware of his tormented inwardness that is driven by dark forebodings. Third, Capodistria is cast as a martyr. In terms of language (with its many religious references) and world view (which focuses on patriotic sacrifice), he is shown offering his life for his country and the common good that he alone can perceive.

A combination of aesthetic, melancholic, and religious aspects makes the protagonist an admirable hero and redeems his failings. At the end of the play his *hubris* appears not as transgression but as defiance. This is how John Anton put it in a general discussion of the author's tragic view:

As a result of the recasting of the meaning of virtue and the paradox of freedom, the classical view of *hubris* or excess pride no longer retains its original meaning. Kazantzakis has turned defiance, total and uncompromising, into a basic and necessary excellence of the hero-martyr. In other words, defiance is not a tragic flaw but a sweeping force and primordial motive. (Anton, 1983: 63)

In his discussion of the early play, *The Master Builder* (written in 1908), Bien agrees 'that a major theme is the typically classical one of *hubris*, with the difference that Kazantzakis justifies and extols what the ancients condemned' (Bien, 1975: 405). That is why Capodistria's *hubris* is completely justified. But does a justified transgression still deserve the name of *hubris*?

Kazantzakis is influenced by the philosophy of the tragic (Lambropoulos, 2006) which emerged with the German Romantics as he absorbed it

from Nietzsche and the French Nietzscheans. This philosophy understands life in terms of a dialectic between liberty and necessity, history and nature, will and law, liberation and legislation. The dialectic condemns humans to the *hubris* of revolt. The greatest manifestation of the human spirit is the pursuit of individuation, which requires the violation of natural order. In order to practice their independence, in order to fulfill themselves, humans must exceed limits. In this tragic view of life, *hubris*, more than transgression, constitutes a condition for existential self-affirmation. It represents the blessed fall which brings with it both suffering and redemption. Instead of questioning Capodistria's excessive confidence, we admire his single-mindedness since he gives his life for his country.

This revisionary treatment of *hubris* raises another question: Is it possible to integrate philosophy and theater, in this case, the tragic idea and the requirements of tragedy? Bien has responded in the affirmative. He believes that, because at that extremely difficult moment (1944) Kazantzakis wanted to offer a conciliatory message to the divided nation, he pursued the synthesis of two seemingly contradictory views of man, what Bien calls the 'political' and the 'existential'. Intertwining the two in the hero's death, he could show fellow Greeks that they could be productively combined. Bien uses words such as fusion, amalgam, and syncretism so it is clear that he is not thinking of the possible combination in terms of a strict Hegelian synthesis. In his felicitous phrasing, Kazantzakis tried to reconcile the political Capodistria Tyrannos with the existential Capodistria Martyr (Bien, 1977: 167). John Anton is more reserved in opinion about Kazantzakis' theater: 'We have here a subtle continuity and radical discontinuity with the classical heritage' (Anton, 1983: 60). For example, *sophrosyne* is a virtue that all the men in the play consider important yet they – except Makriyiannis – defy measure and so commit *hubris*. It is ironic, then, that, before dying, Capodistria, whose *hubris* is redeemed in the end, calls for concord, an ideal which his self-righteous attitude did little to promote. This is the internal contradiction of this tragedy. In traditional tragedy, from Phrynichos to Racine, freedom's self-limitations create balance; in modern tragedy, they are constraining and therefore appear as a paradox. We end up being interested more in the personality of the heroes than in their activities. Action turns from public to expressive. This may be at least one reason why tragedy has appeared so often elusive to modern authors: the function of *hubris* today is quite different, and often suffers from inconsistency. Since contemporary theater finds freedom contradictory, it presents *hubris* as paradoxical.

Yet the sense of *hubris* that is compromised at the end of Kazantzakis' play can be found with greater integrity in another work with the same hero – not a play but a history. I cannot prove that C. M. Woodhouse knew the tragedy when writing his biography of the president, though it is very likely that he had heard that the world-renown Greek author had worked on the same subject. The British historian too sees his protagonist as a tragic hero.

The book has the interesting title *Capodistria: The Founder of Greek Independence* (1973). Its last chapter is called 'The Final Tragedy, 1831' and chronicles events from July of that year until the assassination in October. Woodhouse places the constitution at the center of his hero's concerns, arguing that 'the constitutional question was inextricably interwoven with all the episodes in Capodistria's life. From the Ionian Islands at the turn of the century, through Switzerland and France and Poland, and back to his own country a quarter of a century later, the same question never ceased to dog his path and torment his mind' (Woodhouse, 1973: 506). In 1831, it had become more pressing than ever. To Woodhouse, the tragedy of the situation was that 'the most liberal minister of his generation was now hated as a tyrant. . . . Having endured failure and exile for the sake of his liberal beliefs, he was now deserted by his liberal friends and pursuing a policy worthy of Metternich' (p. 491). He was accused of despotism. Criticisms of his administration had a certain basis. 'It was an ironic circumstance that Capodistria, who had been responsible for introducing a constitution in the Ionian Islands, was also responsible for abolishing it in Greece' (p. 508). Yet the biographer is at pains to show that in fact Capodistria's positions remained consistent throughout his career. He never betrayed his principles. It could be argued that history betrayed him as it kept switching his opponents.

He remained, by 19th-century standards, a liberal from first to last. But the antagonists of his liberalism changed. In his youth they were the Venetians and Turks; in his middle life, Napoleon and Metternich; in his last years, the primates and Phanariotes. (p. 509)

He cannot be accused of inconsistency or tyrannical tendencies, Woodhouse concludes.

And then, in the last three pages of the 500-page book, the historian names the many manifestations of Capodistria's *hubris*. His faults were interpreting his selflessness as self-righteousness; viewing himself as philosophizing; indulging in a speculative temperament prone to contemplative mysticism; assuming that God was on the side of Greece and those like Capodistria who were trying to save her; intending to mold the future of the people on the basis of his political philosophy. In trying to assess Capodistria's place in history, Woodhouse reaches for a literary model: 'His tragedy was that of a Shakespearean hero, at least as defined by A. C. Bradley: a good man raised to high estate by his own merits, and then utterly cast down by a combination of character and circumstance' (p. 512). Capodistria was the protagonist in the play of his nation's founding. 'These are the common tragedies of nations newly emerging to independence' (p. 513).

Writing in 1973 with greater historical distance from the shattering events of the civil strife of the 1940s, Woodhouse can afford to be more uncompromising in his view of Capodistria and to make no attempt at justifying his hubristic features. In the same vein of the tragic dialectic that resists

reconciliation it is worth reading what George Theotokas wrote in 1965, almost twenty years after his tragedy *Turmoil in Nafplion* was first printed:

The President appears as the successor of the Revolution who comes to announce that 'the Revolution is over,' that is, who expresses the spirit of the post-revolutionary state, its dire need for organization, lawful order, discipline. His opponents appear as the carriers of the spirit of the Incessant Revolution that admits no motivation, no stop in its course toward making the original ideal real. Here the ideal is 'freedom' as something absolute which is uninterested in the consequences of its pursuit and does not tolerate any compromises with life's needs. I stress that a theatrical interpretation that would present the work as justifying either view would be wrong. The meaning of the tragedy – outside all historicity, of course – is that these two trends clash in a fatal way and with the same force of conviction and self-sacrifice. (Theotokas, 1965: 399)

As Louis Ruprecht put it: 'Tragedy teaches the *permanence*, not the *modernity*, of social conflict and civil disobedience' (1994: 237). Kazantzakis' play depicts the tragic encounter of governance, violence, and justice, an encounter we continue to observe in nations torn by factionalism, emerging into independence, debating land rights, fighting despotism, or forging a new constitution. *Capodistria* raises the question of the just, viable founding of a polity as it examines the limitations of constitutionalism during a post-revolutionary transition. To use the words of Cornelius Castoriadis from his work on the self-institution of society, the play shows people asking individually and collectively what laws they should make and how autonomy is going to protect its self-confidence from the excesses of blind pride. Kazantzakis illustrates Stathis Gourgouris' general remark that:

as document of the predicament of (social) autonomy – of the struggle to give oneself the law without instituting a transcendental finality – tragedy is a form of society's creative imagination that embodies the chaotic pool out of which society strives to imagine (and institute) oneself. It is a revolutionary expression in a quintessential sense, because it allows us to glimpse – it puts on stage, it performs, for us to see, to *theorize* – the language of self-alteration. (2003: 157)

While promoting autonomy as the greatest fulfillment of individual and collective potential, Castoriadis often pointed out its tragic character. He did not use the adjective 'tragic' to make an existential, psychological, or aesthetic judgment. Rather, it was to acknowledge the basic character of autonomy as an 'ontological opening' that sets forth anew all fundamental questions, and therefore entails several risks: the fear of freedom and the need for external assurance that makes people unwilling to posit human life as an absolute; the necessity of limits to the self-instituting activity of the community; the absence of a norm of norms that would guarantee the validity of man-made law; and the uncertainty about good and evil on both the individual and the collective level. Thus the tragic designation refers not to the operations or the outcome of autonomy but to the very modality of human freedom in

any truly political society. 'The tragic is the search for human measure which remains faithful to the conflictual essence of truth because it cannot have recourse to an outside, higher authority – the search which accepts that there is no other measure than the human one. That is why it is permeated by wonder, questioning, radical doubt, action, struggle and eruptions of liberation' (Lambropoulos, 1997: 6). Castoriadis' tragic view of autonomy highlights the agonistic nature of politics and justice, of public, collective deliberation and self-creation.

As we have seen, *hubris* is linked to notions of measure, limit, order, and rule. It is a contingent idea whose manifestation is context specific: we know *hubris* when we see it but we cannot tell exactly when it occurs. Thus we need to be mindful and vigilant since we never know when we may commit it or when we may become its victims. Furthermore, while the ancients were unanimous in condemning it, we have seen that radical trends in modernity identify *hubris* with a tragic affirmation of human freedom: What if infringement is the price for human greatness? Thus our moral views on transgression are today more ambivalent. Who determines the boundaries of autonomy and the limits of power? To how much self-confidence are virtue or creativity entitled? How far can good intentions go in using unacceptable means to achieve noble goals? We continue to find it hard to give firm answers. A comparison of older and modern views of *hubris* can give us a better idea of our ethico-political responsibilities as individuals, as members of communities, and as citizens since these views have dramatized the dilemmas of civic duty and public action.

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Note

1. Page numbers refer to the Greek edition. All translations are mine.

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