

June 2005

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Recommended Citation

Spanos, William V. (2005) "Persephone's Pomegranate (Excerpted from Chapter VI, Pasiphae's Bull, Crete, June 1970)," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol5/iss1/21>

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PERSEPHONE'S POMEGRANATE
(EXCERPTED FROM CHAPTER VI, PASIPHAE'S BULL, CRETE,
JUNE 1970)
William V. Spanos

Opposition unites. From what draws apart results the
most beautiful harmony. All things take place by strife.

Heraclitus, *Fragments*

Strife is not a rift [*Riss*] as a mere cleft is ripped open;
rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong
to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the
provenance of their unity by virtue of their common
ground. It is a basic design, an outline sketch, that draws
the basic features of the upsurge of the clearing of
beings. This rift does not let the opponents break apart;
it brings what opposes measure and boundary into its
common outline.

Martin Heidegger,
"The Origin of the Work of Art"

My soul, your voyages have been your native land!

Niko Kazantzakis,
The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, Bk.XVI

It would be inadequate to say that the richly diverse panoramic
scene stretching out before our eyes under the deep blue Cretan
sky was breathtaking. What we experienced was not simply a
matter of sight, but also and simultaneously of smell, of touch,
of sound, of taste—and of historical time. The air we breathed,
which down below was on the edge of being hot and enervating,
was cool and refreshing, almost uncomfortably stimulating; the
mountainside smelled so strongly of wild herbs—*thimari*
(thyme), *faskomilo* (chamomile), *vasilikos* (basil), *origanon*

(oregano)—that it seemed as if we were tasting its aroma; and the surrounding silence up there at the center and (literally) top of Crete spoke a disturbingly unknown language that, nevertheless, resonated with familiarity. It was, I thought, this surging, multidimensional and primal language—this dislocating language of excess—that we deracinated moderns had forgotten or, rather, repressed, in our frantic and murderous race to develop a technological discourse positively capable of domesticating and plundering the earth and that the awesome presence of Psiloriti was trying to remind us of. As I was pondering over this silent language, which I identified not with rational meaning but with *force*—the kind of subterranean force, for example, that infused Kazantzakis's language—I remembered my dream and Ioanna's reference to Psiloriti as the *omphalos* of the *omphalos* of the world and caught a faint glimpse of what she had really meant.

"So, Professor Spanos, what do you think of all this?" Ioanna asked, breaking the silence as she extended her arms in a gesture that seemed to be attempting to encompass the recalcitrantly uncontainable panorama. "Was the drive up here worth all the trouble?"

As I nodded in affirmation, she added, "I don't think you can understand Knossos and Phaistos and Aghia Triada—I mean I don't think you can know the Minoans—without making the pilgrimage to the summit of Psiloriti. She alone knows their secret."

Attuned by now to Ioanna's oracular language, I replied, "I think I got a hint of it standing here on the lips of her mouth."

"Perhaps, but you must enter her mouth willingly," she said with that estranging enigmatic smile—the *meidiama*—I had by then come to identify with the Kore. "And *that*, you'll get a chance to do after we've driven around that last curve," pointing to what appeared to be an opening on the terminal ridge of the peakless mountain.

We took one last look at the forbidding, but profoundly attractive, ragged panorama before us; then, turning our backs to its disconcerting lure, re-entered the car and proceeded with great

anticipation and anxiety toward the opening in the mountainside, though not knowing what to expect to find on the other side of the ridge. Reaching our destination, we made the last u-turn and I spontaneously braked. The vista was astonishing, another defamiliarizing border crossing. Down below, perhaps three or four hundred meters deep, a vast fertile oval-shaped plain, maybe two kilometers long and half a kilometer wide, surrounded protectively by the craggy ridge of the mountain, spread out before us like a gigantic green carpet interfused with yellow and red flowers. In various areas of the plain, we saw, in miniature, several shepherds, staffs in hand, tending their flocks of grazing sheep and goats, and at each end of the lush plain, low round huts made of stone piled on stone, which seemed to serve the shepherds as sleeping quarters. The contrast between the awe-inspiring scene to which we had been bearing witness for the last hour and a half (it took that long to drive up the mountain) and this one, which its facade concealed from view, was at first startling. Despite my better judgment, I couldn't, at that stunning moment, resist recalling the most memorable movie of my adolescence, *Lost Horizon*, which starred Ronald Coleman and Louise Rainer, particularly that wonderfully contrasting scene when the weather-battered remnant led by Coleman, after the airplane carrying them out of the political maelstrom in China has crashed somewhere in the relentlessly ferocious Himalayas, discovers Shangri-la, the Utopia, where humans never grow old as long as they remain within its protective precincts. What at first, in the process of our ascent of Psiloriti, seemed to me a yawning cannibalistic mouth, now, at the end, underwent a marvelous change into some rich, strange, and welcoming valley. I looked at Ioanna, and saw that she had been looking at me with that mysteriously knowing Minoan smile.

When the spell was broken, I drove slowly down the winding decline, and then, following Ioanna's directions, to the east end of the plain and parked alongside one of the stone huts, which, Ioanna informed us, was called a *mandhra*. This, she said, was not only her shepherd cousins' sleeping quarters, but also where

they made the famous Cretan goat cheese called *misithra*. One of the shepherds, who was tending a flock of sheep not far from the *mandhra*, had seen our maroon French station wagon drive into the bowl, and, curious to learn who from the outside world had dared to invade their space, began to walk towards us. A young man, between 30 and 35 years old, he sported the handlebar mustache that seemed to be the obligatory feature of the Cretan peasantry and was wearing brown riding pants, black knee-high boots, a black vest over a rough-textured white blouse, and a black head-band with the tassels dangling, like small soundless bells, from his forehead. He exuded the aura of what I could have called the heroic, but it was a heroism indissolubly associated with the force of the barbaric, which is the paradoxical definition I would give to the utterly untranslatable Greek word "*palikari*," which Greeks always use to refer to exuberant and fearless young men. Suddenly, he recognized Ioanna and, registering surprise, came running to greet her and to discover what had brought her up here "*pera ap' ton cosmon*" (beyond the world) so unexpectedly. As they were talking animatedly, I was struck by his resemblance to Ioanna, but also to the lithe young men in the Minoan frescoes: their long shining black hair, long delicate noses, supple athletic bodies, narrow waists, and, not least, their dark and intensely flashing almond-shaped eyes. This resemblance may have been wishful thinking, reflecting my perhaps illegitimate rejection of the prevailing theory that the highly developed Minoans were rendered extinct by one form of cataclysm or another. Not unlike the prejudice which radically distinguishes ancient from modern Greeks, this preference for the exotic ancient had allowed—or, rather, compelled—Henry Miller, for example, to measure and highlight the exquisite cultural refinement and joyous grace of the Minoans he "encountered" at Knossos by invoking the sharply contrasting cultural squalor and vulgarity of the modern Cretan villagers, summed up in the western, particularly American, stereotype of the contemporary Greek male: "Walking back to meet the bus [that would take him from Knossos to Heraklion] I stopped at a little village to get a drink. The contrast between

past and present was tremendous. The men who gathered around me took on the appearance of uncouth savages. They were friendly and hospitable, extraordinarily so, but by comparison with the Minoans they were like neglected domesticated animals. . . . As I sipped my glass of water, which had a strange taste, I listened to one of these glorified baboons reminisce about the glorious days he spent in Herkimer New York."

Wishful thinking or not, the uncanny resemblance between these young contemporary Cretans and the Minoans depicted in the frescoes made a strong impression on me, and it deepened rather than diminished as the day wore on. In putting it this way, I do not want to suggest that I was inadvertently backing into a racist position on the question of the origins of the Cretan people and their culture. No more than in my speculations about the national identity of the modern Greeks, I was not affirming the unbroken biological continuity of the Cretans. In registering this resemblance at the time, I was mindful of the cultural significance of the Cretan Kazantzakis's proud affirmation that his ancestors on his father's side were Arab. What I was intuiting, in opposition to the conventional view of the origins and "end" of the Minoans (which *is* racist), was not only that certain physical features of the Minoans survived in and dominated the mixed bodily makeup of the modern Cretans. It was also, and more important, that certain cultural traits, not least those paradoxical physical and verbal gestures that, from one perspective, seems like unnatural—aesthetic, even effete—refinement, but, from another, a monstrous natural ferocity, survived in and dominated the adulterated cultural identity of the modern Cretans. And, I thought, these physical and cultural characteristics endured, despite the Cretans' long, violent, and corrosive history of conquest and piratical plunder by their Mediterranean neighbors—Dorians, Mycenaean, Arabs, Turks, Venetians, Germans—because of their abiding and fierce will to be free.

After this reunion, Ioanna, now glowing, introduced us to her handsome cousin. She told him in Greek that I was an American, one of her teachers at the University of Athens, whose

parents had emigrated to the United States from Thessaly, and that I was bearing witness to (*martirevi*) the military dictatorship's devastation of Greece and to America's complicity in that destructive process. Interrupting Ioanna, her cousin, whose name, regretfully, I have forgotten, took hold of my hand and, smiling approvingly, squeezed it firmly, and told her to tell me that the rule of the military junta was as brutal as the Turkish occupation—"Afti oi sintagmatarhi einai fovira skilia" (Those colonels are ferocious dogs)—and that the world outside of Greece needed to know about it. She told him that we had driven up to the summit of Psiloriti because she wanted to bring us to the womb of Crete, the womb that gave birth to Ellas; that only up here in the sacred place of the beginning, and not where the tourist buses go, would we be able to learn not only the secret of Knossos, but the meaning of Crete and Greece itself, in other words, the meaning of "*eleftheria*" (freedom). Her cousin nodded in agreement, and as he was ruffling my son's long black hair with one hand and pointing the shepherd's crook he was holding in the other in the direction of the ridge opposite to where we were standing, he told Ioanna in a Greek dialect that was far more Cretan than her's—he could neither understand nor speak English—to make sure she showed us the cave where Rhea saved Zeus from his murderous father, Chronos. He then excused himself, saying that he had to get back to his flock, but would return later. Ioanna told him that we had brought food and wine with us in the hope that he and his brother would join us before our descent. He replied that it was a splendid idea, and strode off.

About an hour later, after we had meandered through the lush green pastureland to the other end of the bowl, all the time listening to the faint mesmerizing contrapuntal tinkle of the many-sized goat bells and breathing the intoxicating thin air at the top of the world, Ioanna, her staff in hand, suggested that it was time to make our pilgrimage to the cave where Cretan—and Greek—history began. Before beginning, we refreshed ourselves at a watering trough fed by a mountain spring at the bottom of

the crags of the ridge across the way from the mandhra. To me, partly under the spell of Ioanna's oracular presence—and following the compelling example of the children, who, almost naturally, would often enact the myth associated with the particular place we visited in Greece—our drinking from the ice cold waters pouring out of the ancient mountain's ribs into the containing basin was like the ritual purification of a pilgrim drinking from the Castalian Spring at the foot of Delphi in the Parnassus range before mounting the sacred way and entering the sanctuary of the Pythian oracle of Apollo. With Ioanna in the lead, a bouquet of wild flowers she had picked in her hand, and me bringing up the rear of the procession, we began the ascent up the rocky slope of the ridge to the cave.

As we climbed, Ioanna told us that Cretans dispute the place of Zeus's birth. Those who live in the villages surrounding the Diktian mountain range (*Lassithiotika*) in the east claim he was born in one of the caves of that range, but those who live in the villages surrounding the Idean range (*Psiloriti*) insist he was born in the cave we were about to visit. She also added laconically that he could not possibly have been born in the Diktian range, because it was in the east, and Zeus was the god who determined what was East (*anatoli*) and what was West (*dhitikos*), morning and evening (*proi kai espera*), youth and old age (*neotis kai gerontia*), birth and death (*ghenesis kai thanatos*). In response, I asked her if that interpretation didn't make it sound as if Zeus was similar to the God of Christianity rather than a pagan god. Before she could answer, a piercing whistle came echoing from the plain below to interrupt our conversation. Turning, we saw two shepherds, the one we had been talking with and another, similarly dressed in the native manner, who turned out to be his younger brother, walking hurriedly towards us across the plain. When they arrived, the cousin we had met introduced us to the other, and told Ioanna that they had decided to accompany us to the cave where Zeus was born.

Ten minutes later, after a strenuous climb through rock and prickly scrub and some unidentified Cretan flora that defied the

stone out of which they seemed to grow, we arrived at the huge gaping mouth of a cave that seemed to lead downward into the earth's dark bowels.

We stopped for a while to rest. Then Ioanna turned to her cousins and told them to lead the way. Following them, we entered and began our descent into the reddish throat in silence, our footsteps echoing all around us as if, I imagined, they were the muffled bellowing of the wounded Minotaur. About fifty meters from the mouth, the dimming light turned into darkness. The shepherds reached into their pant pockets and pulled out several candles which they lit and handed to all of us. The dancing shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight against the broken contours of the walls, enhanced by the reverberation of our movements, disintegrated the world illumined by the light of day. We seemed to be entering another, forgotten, primeval time and reality, the vestiges of which we recognize only in our dreams. I remembered Plato's allegory of the cave. But unlike Plato, I did not identify the monstrous flickering shadows with the unreal, "sepulchral" world, as he puts it in *The Republic*, into which mankind had fallen from the eternal reality of the transcendent realm of pure forms. To me, now deeply immersed in the story of Crete, the shadows *were* symbolic of the inescapable reality of mankind's original, finite condition prior to its rationalization—or, better, to civilization—of being, the dreadful realm of the uncanny, where men and women are never at home, but also where that primal estrangement becomes the condition for the possibility of creative freedom. And then, in an associative leap that, by this time, our sojourns in Greece had made virtually inevitable, Persephone's abduction by Hades into the underworld

Suddenly, the older brother exclaimed, "Ekei!" (There!), pointing his gnarled shepherd's crook in the direction of a corridor of the cave that turned sharply to the right, "*Ekei genithikai o Zeus!*" (That's where Zeus was born!) In the dim light, we made out a sort of niche in the ragged wall of the cave, the shelf of which seemed to have been chiseled into the shape of an infant's body. We all stood there in the silence of awe. To me, it was an

encounter with what I can only call the temporal sublime, a movement that enlarged time's horizons beyond my mind's ability to contain it, accompanied by the diminution of my sense of self to the point where it seemed no longer to exist. I had had intimations of this awesome sense of time from the moment I stepped on Greek soil. In fact, I had felt its dislocating force deeply a couple of months earlier when we entered the cave on the island of Paros, where the ancients quarried the famous Parian marble, examples of which I had seen in the small museum at Epidauros, that, it was claimed, unlike the marble quarried on the slope of Mount Penteli near Athens, was diaphanous. The intimations of this temporal sublime were so dislocating that I was compelled by the experience eventually to write two antiphonal poems about the unnamable ambiguity it precipitated. The first one, "Paros I, Spring 1970," affirms it against Plato:

Had Plato,
who preferred
golden circles
to poetry
in that time,

really known
that Parian marble
was won
by candlelight,

he might have
understood
the dark ravings
of his prodigal teacher
and we angels known
this great-thighed earth.

The second, "Paros II, Spring 1970," answers this affirmation:

It's easy, my friend,
to scorn his longing
for angelic embraces

but look under
the embroidered finery
into that proliferating ditch

then lie down
with her stinking body
in your golden arms.

They quarried the marble
by candlelight

and it shown diaphanous
in the blazing sun.

Here, however, in the bowels of Psiloriti, as the flickering candles we were holding before us ignited the ancient labyrinthine past into awesomely present life, I came not only to accept the absence of a principle of presence—a center—in being and the alienation from civilization as we know it that this absence entails, but also to affirm its positive potentialities, not least the absolute, which is to say, terrible, freedom they enable.

As I was meditating on these matters in the volatile darkness of the cave, Ioanna asked the older brother to narrate the story associated with the sacred place to which he was pointing for their foreign guests (*oi xenoí mas*), telling him that she would translate his Greek words into English. At first, he demurred, saying that she was the educated one in the family and thus knew the story far better than he did. But in the end, after she had convinced him that his inhabitation of the summit of Psiloriti made him a more trustworthy authority than mere books conferred on her, Ioanna prevailed. I cannot, of course, remember exactly what this young Cretan shepherd told us about Zeus that

unforgettable afternoon in the Zeus's cave. But I do remember vividly the occasion, the gist of the story, and, not least, the time frame in which it was narrated, all of which Ioanna, knowingly, made every effort to preserve in her translation.



We—by which I mean in this case not only I, Peggy, and Ioanna, but also the children, Maria, Stephanía and Aristides—listened to this uneducated, simple shepherd's tale in silent rapture, as if he were an ancient bard, a Thales or a Homer, recalling first things to an audience who inhabited a later banalized world. And when he had finished, and the echoing of his last words were finally absorbed by the dark interior, a resonant silence fell over us. It spoke to me about familiar elemental things, but, as before at Knossos, it was in a foreign tongue which, like the Minoan scripts called Linear A and Linear B, I could not translate in the sophisticated language I had at my disposal. As I was contemplating what I took to be this impasse, Ioanna turned away from the cave wall she had been staring at and, holding the candle with both hands before her, said to us half seriously and half in jest, "There! The oracle has spoken." We all turned our gaze towards her and laughed, but my laughter was defensive. In that silent dark, flickering with spectral shadows, Ioanna and her shepherd cousin underwent a metamorphosis before my eyes. For an instant she became Rhea—or was it Demeter or Persephone?—in the form of the bare-breasted Minoan goddess holding snakes in both her upraised hands, and he, her priest.

As we were ascending out of the dark belly of the cave into the bright light of day, the story we had heard echoing in my head and feeling somehow "chosen," I couldn't help recalling for a second time Father Mapple's version of the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale, which Herman Melville turns upside down in *Moby-Dick*: "God came upon him in the whale, and swallowed him down to living gulfs of doom, and with swift slantings tore him along 'into the midst of the seas,' where the

eddy depths sucked him ten thousand fathoms down, and 'weeds were wrapped about his head,' and all the watery world of woe bowled over him. Yet even then, God heard the engulfed, repenting prophet when he cried. Then God spake unto the fish; and from the shuddering cold and blackness of the sea, the whale came breaching up towards the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth; and 'vomited out Jonah upon the dry land;' when the word of the Lord came a second time; and Jonah, bruised and beaten—his ears, like two sea-shells, still multitudinously murmuring of the ocean—Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!"

When we had climbed to the mouth of the cave, Ioanna's cousins told us that they had to return to their flock, but hoped that we would remain on the mountain until later in the day when they could come back to the *mandhra* to visit with us until it was time to descend. We thanked them warmly and replied that we did intend to explore the summit of Psiloriti a while longer and then, before departing, to have a picnic, to which we invited them. About two hours later, after we had circled the bowl on foot—it was now around four or five in the afternoon—we returned to the *mandhra* to prepare a country-style supper. We laid two colorful Cretan woolen blankets we had bought in a village near Aghia Triada on the lush green grass, brought out the picnic basket brimming with peasant bread, sausages, cold cuts, feta cheese, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, and the yellow melons Greeks call *piponi*, and sent the children to bring back the several bottles of homemade Cretan wine and soft drinks, which, on our arrival, we had submerged in the watering trough on the far side of the *mandhra* to cool. Shortly after, the two cousins returned to partake of the festive communal meal. To the fare we had brought, the shepherds contributed the fresh and exquisitely delicious *anthotiro* they were then making. This, the younger brother noted with pride, was the goat cheese the guardian shepherds fed the young stripling Zeus "in that time" (*s' afton ton kairon*).

After we had seated ourselves cross-legged in a circle around the square blankets, I poured wine into everyone's paper cup, and, raising mine, proposed a toast, which Ioanna translated into Greek, to our hospitable hosts: "May Zeus, the thunderer, guard his guardians and their beautiful and sacred earth until the end of time." And the older brother reciprocated in Greek: "*stous Amerikanoi episkeptis mas, ghia kai hara*," and, as he traced a wide circle with his outstretched hand holding the cup of wine, added, "*Pothoumai o Zeus na sas harisi haris 'sto onoma tou Psiloriti*" (To our American guests, health and joy; may Zeus grant you grace in the name of Psiloriti). I have thought that beautiful but untranslatable ancient Greek word—*haris*—ever since, having felt that, coming from this particular Cretan toaster's mouth, it was the greatest of all possible gifts.

As we ate and drank, we conversed exuberantly about many things, thanks, in part, to the wine and the thin intoxicating air of that altitude—and to Ioanna's abilities as a translator. Our hosts talked about their lives as shepherds, the Cretan earth, the military dictatorship, America, and, surprisingly, their poets. We, in turn, talked about our lives as academics, the America earth, American democracy, America's role in Greece and the rest of the world, Athens, and, more specifically, about the Rita Pipinopoulou affair, which had absorbed so much of our time, thought, and energies that year. What filtered through to me in the process of our conversation was not simply a sense of these Cretans' contemporaneity—their radical politics, their hatred of the Greek colonels and the police state they were fanatically bent on building, and their disappointment in the United States' policies concerning Greece and Cyprus—but also and simultaneously a sense of their Janus-like antiquity. It was, on one side, their fierce love of the austere and ungiving Cretan earth, their resonant elemental language, their unencumbered attunement, too, to an unspoken "something" deeper even than their Cretan or Greek nationality and Orthodox Christian religion, a "something" that rendered the words they spoke and their bodily gestures primal and poetic. On the other side, it was a narrowness of horizon that manifested

itself as a ferocious barbarism latent with violence. Both Kazantzakis's wonderfully live Zorba and the cruel villagers who stone the widow; both the Minoan acrobat and the charging bull; both man and beast: Minotaur.

After we had drunk several glasses of wine and the vestiges of the inhibiting distance between two entirely different ways of life had melted away, the younger brother, who had said very little thus far, spontaneously began to sing a beautiful Cretan folk song about his village, Anoghia—something having to do with its resistance to the Turkish occupation. Ioanna and his older brother joined in, and soon the three were dancing in a circle, their arms on each other's shoulders and their feet tracing an intricate pattern of forward and backward movement, which, it seemed to me, was very different from—somehow more sophisticated and elegant than—the simple patterns of the various dances of the mainland, at least those, like the *tsamiko* and the *sirto*, with which I was familiar. Eventually, the dancers invited us to join their airy circular chain. We were reluctant at first, but after studying the complex steps intently for a while, we—the *xenoi*—rashly succumbed to the temptation to levitate with our Cretan hosts. The consequence, however, was far different from our hope. Our self-conscious, arhythmic stumbling, which held up the forward motion of the chain, reintroduced the gravity which their bodies seemed to defy. But our American ungainliness, certainly the result of our alienation from the earth and the sky, fire and water—the very elements invoked by most demotic Cretan songs—was not entirely disastrous, since it was received by our hosts with amused delight.

These good spirits and the laughter reverberating across the green plain must have been contagious, since it wasn't long before several other shepherds, quite young and quite old, having heard the commotion we were making in our corner of the bowl—no doubt unusual on the remote reaches of Psiloriti—came to participate in these pastoral festivities. They sang about love and life and death, about exile from the homeland (the *xenitia*), about the Turkish occupation, about their mountains, their flowers,

their animals, and their birds. Having seen and admired the fresco of the partridges from what Arthur Evans, no doubt mistakenly, called the "caravanserai" (a rest house with baths) at Knossos, I was especially struck by the repeated references in their songs to the partridge (*perdika*), which invariably was a metaphor for both the sought-after, hard to domesticate, or deeply loved girl (*kore*), and, especially in the *mirologhia* (the songs of lamentation over the dead), the soul that had departed from the dead body. Despite my awareness of the unlikeliness of this identification, I couldn't help feeling that these Minoan partridges were the ancestors of the ubiquitous partridges in the folk songs the Cretan shepherds were singing, another instance, to me, of the uncanny continuity between the Minoans and the modern Cretans.



At a certain point in the festivities on Psiloriti, one of the newcomers, a middle-aged man whose darkly bronzed weather-beaten, bearded face and burley body made him look more like the Minotaur than a man, began, to our amazement, to sing the *Erotocritos*, the beautiful long dramatic poem in fifteen syllable couplets about the love affair between Erotocritos and Arethusa, which the seventeenth-century Cretan poet, Vincenzo Cournaros modeled on the story of Romeo and Juliet. I knew of this poem only from the numerous portraits of the two lovers by the great itinerant Greek primitive painter Theophilos. (Not incidentally, the partridge is also a prominent motif in his paintings.) But we were even more amazed when one after another of this motley company picked up the verses where the previous singer left off until they had gotten through a large portion of this poem. Where in the United States, I thought, or in Europe for that matter, was this fusion of folk, song, and space, this elemental communal comportment towards the earth and its rhythms any longer possible? Even in rural Greece, as I had come to realize earlier in the spring, when we had accompanied my mother on her first visit to her native village since her childhood, the kind of

familiarity with the music and poetry of one's home region to which we were privileged to bear witness that afternoon was gradually but distinctly fading from the people's memory in the face of official Greece's rush to become modernized.

They drank Cretan wine, they told Cretan stories, they sang Cretan songs, they danced Cretan dances, and we foreigners, unequivocally welcomed, joined them there at the summit of the Cretan world in the neighborhood of the birth of the protean Zeus and the labyrinthine Olympian dispensation. It was, for us, certainly an example of the *filoxenia* that came so naturally to the Cretans, but to put it that way is not adequate, at least for me. What I was experiencing that afternoon was more than something natural; it was a natural event that transformed itself into the mythical. Or, to try to be more precise, it was an experience in which the self's awareness of its ultimate alienation from being and thus its compulsion to bend the primal errancy of being to its own will gradually metamorphosed into an awareness that the self's alienation from being is precisely what constitutes its oneness with being. Once again, though now in a more intense way than before, we had magically become a community of solitudes singing and dancing around the edge of the abyss:

Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in the dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

What more could tourists ask for? But when the sun began to fall towards the west, and we realized that, like it or not, it was time for us to descend to the lower world, we were given something more. As we were clearing away the remains of our communal supper and packing them into the back of the Peugeot,

the older brother began to recite what we took to be a poem until we realized that what he was "reciting" was about us and our visit to Psiloriti and therefore, that he was improvising. It was in fact a *mantinadha*, the fifteen syllable rhymed couplet basic to traditional Cretan prosody, whether of the communally composed folk songs we heard that afternoon or the consciously composed *Erotokritos*, that, I had been told back in Athens, Cretans were famous for making up spontaneously. As soon as he had finished his verse, the younger brother responded by offering another that continued the inaugural motif. And this antiphonal improvisation went on until virtually everyone of the shepherds had made one up.

Unfortunately, I can't recall any of the verses they improvised that extraordinary afternoon. They all had to do with the honor these lowly shepherds felt and the great pleasure they and the mountain Psiloriti took from our visit, the desolation they would feel at our departure, and the anticipation of our redemptive return in some future time. And this in a simple and unselfconscious language that reflected the vast scope and depth of time with which the natural surroundings, the historical context, the talk, and the conditions of the occasion resonated. Which is to say, it was a language that endowed this event with an unforgettable mythic aura. Needless to say, we were both astounded and thrilled by this utterly unexpected gesture that made us feel as if we, like the shepherds and their sheep and goats, were organic and larger than life parts of this astonishing mountain. I remember now, even after the lapse of thirty years, turning to Ioanna, looking into her amused eyes, and saying, "Now I understand what you meant when you told me this morning that Psiloriti was a sacred mountain."