

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS – HENRI BERGSON

An eternal traveller, the odyssean Nikos Kazantzakis, travels through his works and heroes-saints the terrestrial and extra-terrestrial spheres of phantasy and dream, the spiritual sphere, striving to grasp the incomprehensible mysteries and «urgently express», as Arthur Rimbaud puts it, «the topography of his soul and being».

Nikos Kazantzakis calls the incessant breaking up of the limits towards the future. He calls every static crystallization of man's judgements, fallacies and sentimental illusions a Nietzschean «death of God». He eliminates the relative and the finite, while the Bergsonian *élan vital*, sometimes creatively and sometimes destructively, using gods and devils, breaks down old and recreates new combinations, in climbing the ascent of the planetary universe.

From its ashes, the fighting man recreates the coming world, a certainty of tomorrow, which, in its turn, gives its place to another certainty that of the day after tomorrow, revealing, at the same time, the shifting boundaries of Ithaca and the brilliant cracks in the majestic scenery of the universe.

Nikos Kazantzakis dances to the rhythm of freedom overcoming fear and hope as the unavoidable and serious obstacles to the transformation of necessity into free will. At the same time, he prepares himself to take, in a heroic and saintly manner, the brave and fearless road of self-sufficiency, which means redemption and, consequently, liberation from Freedom itself; «I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free», he will tell us using the words of the Cypriot cynic philosopher Demonax of the 2nd century A.D.

Poet-philosopher, or the reverse, Kazantzakis advances to the Aristotelian universals, the elements of complete synthesis which, according to his visionary teacher (1907-1909), the Parisian philosopher Henri Bergson, are also pythian in nature. He is attracted by the details of the Stagirite's *Poetics* putting his spirit to the test with all the teasing questions to reach, in the end, the awe of the heart, in which dwells the victory over death as a supreme will of bravery as well as Buddhist apathy. It is an ascetic attainment and a Greek reference to the Apollonian immortality, but basically, a resurrection similar to that of Christ, saintly and spirit-bearing.

Nikos Kazantzakis, like his teacher Henri Bergson, believes in the inner experience of the soul, which cannot be expressed in words. He affirms the philosophy of life and struggles for the supreme good; the good that revives the dreams but not the bodies, according to André Malraux, and saves things of value from death, strengthened by creative life.

Both Henri Bergson and Kazantzakis depart from the concept of space and mental extension, from the «*esprit géométrique*», and enter the variable life of



the spirit, the «*esprit de finesse*» –to use two phrases from Pascal– which does not respond to geometry, but is fluid and continuous, a creative soul that evolves, as Empedocles of Akragas puts it, from mineral to plant life and from there to animal and human life and even beyond them, to the kingdom of spirit and freedom.

The fire of spiritual energy excites in Bergson and Kazantzakis the spirit of victory over body and brain, while, at the same time, the soul-consciousness remembers the higher world of forms, as knowledge-recollection of the self-driven soul in the world, the fundamental difference here being the distinction between intellect and the Dionysian ecstatic intuition, which is direct knowledge. N. Kazantzakis, like H. Bergson, does not like what is practical and useful, and does not look for things that are ready (this is obvious by his relations and his life with Alexis Zorbas, which are full of adventure and intensity). He dynamically falls in love with life, with the amazement and with the interjectional. He is to be found at the point where the source of Life, the Castalian spring of heaven, gushes forth permanently and in abundance.

Kazantzakis and Bergson, each in his own manner of expression, oppose intellect against vision because they do not wish to break away from life-giving nature (they are pre-Socratic in their views as regards this point). They love passion and the indescribable depth of things, the completeness of the inexpressible, the *Cry for the unknown*, as is characteristically called by Nikos Kazantzakis. Kazantzakis and Bergson meet each other at the immediacy of experience.

N. Kazantzakis unsatisfied with intellectual writing and study (he was a pen-pusher as he puts it), accepts the instinct - intuition (Zorba) as the centre of being. It is the direct self-awareness of spirituality, the very Bergsonian creative evolution, as the absolute meaning of life, awareness, self-action and freedom. It is for this reason that he incessantly contends with the mechanical, the mathematical, static state of things. Like Bergson, he looks for the dynamics of life, the *élan vital* («life force») of the creative universe, that never rests or remains inactive.

Like his other teachers, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Kazantzakis breaks away from the fleeting representations of the ordinary world and struggles as a true fighter for the great *Ascent*, using as his weapons the desire for life and for the new forms of life (otherness). He accepts the Bergsonian view that «God is nothing complete, nothing accomplished. God is incessant life, energy, freedom». It is the ever-living fire of the Ephesian mystic of the «common» Word. Thus, he is to be found powerful, almighty in the centre of the Cycle. The great Cretan, like Bergson, had understood that «there is something more in becoming» than in the cyclical being.

The Dionysian irrationalism, the living perception and dynamic action, has borne to Bergson and Kazantzakis the qualitative intensity as inner reality, free and capable of lasting and flowing, a fact which is not, but is always becoming. The latter contends with the expansive, spatial matter, with intelligence; it breaks away from necessity, discontinuity, the concept of space, and enters the immediacy of continuous life, of living experience. He views the organic and conceives fluidity from inside. Each viewing of reality cannot be acquired easily; it is a forceful internal stir of happy instances and bursts of the heart, of the true existential sea,

which is offered by the holy Cretan sea and to which the Cretan gaze turns to see the Being in the Becoming; that Becoming which is something more than the Being: outside and beyond the concepts of reflective intelligence (*dianoia*), a dynamic, mystical existence, a survival after death, health of the essential soul.

Bergson and Kazantzakis stand for the open, heroic and holy morality of men of a higher order in contrast to the closed morality of the masses, hence, to the anti-Socratism and the anti-Christian Zarathustrean doctrines of Nietzsche that Kazantzakis often follows in his texts. Both teacher and student reject the mythologising of the masses and declare themselves in support of the personal, responsible, anti-dogmatic and beyond the intellect morality of the free soul.

Bergson and Kazantzakis break away from practicality and the mathematical dimensions of length and breadth to the continuous change and the uninterrupted whirl of duration. They are lovers of internal experience; and psychology becomes for them a metaphysical extension. N. Kazantzakis, a literary figure and thinker, struggles hard and in an odyssean manner to overcome the inflexible limits of words. In this, like Bergson, he follows intuition, which leads to an insightful analysis, and not to an intellectual one, that does not result in vision.

They both believe in the revolution, that inconceivable internal miracle, the grace which the Vedas, Buddha, Christ, Heraclitus, Parmenides, the sophist Protagoras, Nietzsche can grant, as a perfect gift. Creation within and towards the infinite rejects and cancels flimsy repetition. They seek for duration which they compare to «a river without depth and without banks». They look for intuition whose object is mobility of duration.

Nikos Kazantzakis, an anguished and apprehensive figure, a voice in the modern wilderness, gives particular attention to the Socratic dictum: «[one] should give an account of things» free from fear or hope for Hell or Paradise. He struggles dynamically for political freedom (horizontal life) and existential freedom (perpendicular life). It is here that his own cross lies. For Nikos Kazantzakis the authentic man is he who is free even from freedom itself. And the freer he is the «more he becomes the son of God». For this reason he struggles against ignorance, as slavery *par excellence*, while real knowledge is truth and by extension freedom. Thus, the supreme model of man, according to Kazantzakis, is the hero and the saint; they are free men, powerful men, and an embodiment of truth. For this reason he will tell us that the central theme of his work is «man's struggle with God ..., our struggle and preoccupation to transform darkness into light, slavery into freedom». Freedom and the existence of God have always been the fundamental themes in Kazantzakis' life.

He notes at the end of his *Report to Greco*:

«Balance means motionlessness; motionlessness means death. But then life is an incessant negation; you negate what has been able, after it had found its balance, to resist decay; you crush it and you look for the uncertain».

And he goes on in the same revelatory confession:

«Grandfather, our own centre, which in its whirlwind has carried away the visible world and is now striving to lift it to the upper levels of fearlessness and responsibility, is this: the wrestling with God. Which God? The fierce peak man's soul aims at. We incessantly reach it but it shakes itself free and ascends higher and higher. "Can anybody wrestle with God?" people asked me sarcastically one day. "With whom else do you want us to wrestle?" I answered. Indeed with whom else? [...] This is why our entire life, Grandfather, was an ascent; an ascent and a crag and a wilderness! ... we kept climbing because for us happiness, salvation and Paradise was an ascent».

Not Ithaca but the journey is what really matters, C. Cavafy tells us.

The route Bergson and Kazantzakis have finally chosen to follow is fighting with God. N. Kazantzakis' beginning and end is fire. His soul and being are there, in the flame which mingled with «the fire that has given birth to us and the fire that will consume us», he declares emphatically in his *Report to Greco*. Here was his god and his Ascent. Without a reward «he died gallantly», as he wished, believing in only one value which was not victory but «the struggle for Victory» (*Report*).

Is it possible that N. Kazantzakis, in wishing to write the third Faust, since Goethe's second Faust reflected on the origins, the eternal forms –matrices of things and rulers of the world, the archetypes– wanted to prove, if we consider what he writes in his *Report*, that the ancient Greek exemplary triptych *Good – Beautiful – True* is the cause of death but also of resurrected life, as an unsubdued extract that springs from the Parmenidean Being, which moves in the eternal present (*it was not, it will not be, but it is*), or the Platonic mystical One, around which the universal materials, psychic and spiritual lie suspended?

It is in these most sublime fields of thought and knowledge that Kazantzakis' texts live, move and exist, whether they are poetry, prose, travel, essay or theatre.

What we have is the ineffable cry of the struggle and concern of an unyielding and unsubdued besieger of life and its concealed mysteries.

«Nature loves to hide» says Heraclitus, whose cryptic and ambiguous discourse N. Kazantzakis loved so much. Concealment and revelation, in the lightning of the eternity of the Fiery Holy Ghost, constitute the flame of Kazantzakis' soul. The essence of this flame is a true study of death, the definition of philosophy, according to Plato's *Phaedo*.

N. Kazantzakis, by continuously drawing on his solitary wanderings, creates a wandering ascetic, breaking every kind of intellectual and emotional prison simply because his spirit «cannot be shackled», to use the Pauline phrase. Every work of his is a landmark pointing towards an unknown destination, since he manages to shutter the chains of "captivity" and the restrictive cultural forms.

Permanently unsatisfied, he continuously departs for the comprehensive plans of God, like a contemporary Tantalus at the edge of Desire, but also a failed Sisyphus, believing that a restart constitutes, in the cycle that repeats itself, the concurrence of beginning and end, end and beginning. This is the deceit of the gods, the price of the Promethean Caucasus and the Calvary, the duty that

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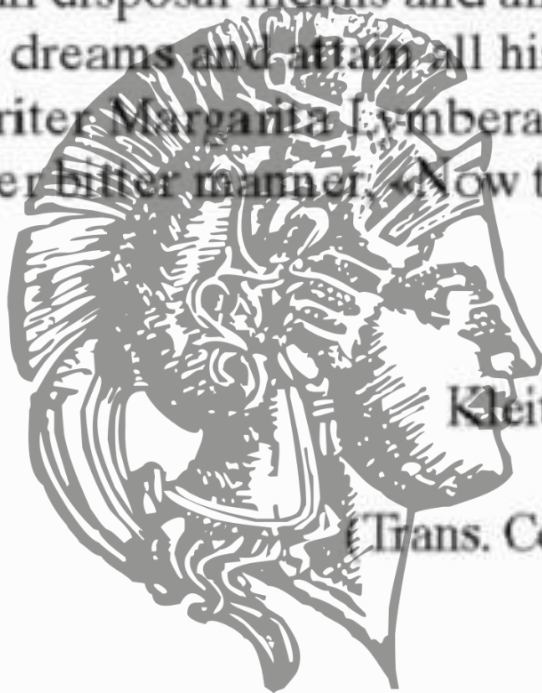


emanates from the responsible and oppressive ascent to heaven from his satanic, abysmal Cretan land.

Today, fifty years after his journey in this world, he appears before us as a true, enlightened Buddha with the wise third eye, a thunder-wielding Zeus or some other god, an immortal, invincible son of Man, who contended well against his passions and was crowned, a saintly martyr, worthy of the Greek race.

The universal spirit, the “common” Heraclitean discourse, positively and negatively, incessantly and perpetually, conquers the temporal “mountain” called *negation*. This is the semiology of the way up and the way down, the one and the same of the wise Ephesian. It is a constant initiation in the ascending steps of the fiery, the eternal, the saintly and the spiritual scale of Jacob. And N. Kazantzakis, as a true Greek sage, a divine man and a wizard of discourse, as Sophocles puts it in his *Electra*, enters and exits the gate of heaven, ascends and descends the fulfillment of his duty, inhaling and exhaling the son of Man, the Son of God, who is God himself, one and the same God.

Nikos Kazantzakis realised that the being is expressed in many and different ways (Aristotle) and he expressed it ingeniously. He expressed himself in a varied manner, resourcefully using all disposal means and all kinds of discourse. Thus, he managed to give life to his dreams and attain all his aims, even though towards the end of his life, as the writer Margarita Lymberaki once confided to me in Paris, he used to say in a rather bitter manner, «Now that I have learnt to write, I am going to die».



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ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑ

ΑΘΗΝΩΝ

