

## Reflections on Kazantzakis and the Greek language

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I discovered Kazantzakis over forty years ago in the Vikelaia Library in Iraklion. I say that I discovered him because no-one introduced him to me. During those years (the early 1950s) Nikos Kazantzakis was not even mentioned in schools, let alone taught. His books were not displayed in bookstore windows and the people around me who were reading literature preferred Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Rolland, Maurois, Zweig, and other, mostly foreign, authors. As a result, no-one led me to Kazantzakis, neither the school nor the larger intellectual environment of Iraklion. I was brought to him by the church. This irony would, I believe, have amused Kazantzakis.

It was 1952 or 1953 when Father Xenos was sent from Athens to the church of Agios Minas, the patron saint of Iraklion. Father Xenos was an attractive, highly educated and extremely inspired preacher. His sermons made a strong and lasting impression upon his audience, especially us teenage girls, at an age when heart and soul are open and in readiness (είναι σε πλήρη διαθεσιμότητα, as Kazantzakis might have put it) to receive all kinds of ideas, and when the mind begins to pose questions and to seek answers and explanations.

Xenos's preaching fascinated us because, apart from his strong personality, he had the ability to present his ideas not in a religious, metaphysical, apocalyptic way but in a dialectical form supported by philosophical argumentation. For these reasons the sermons in the church and his Sunday School classes were similar to lessons in philosophy, and this made them all the more interesting, challenging and attractive. Xenos cultivated my interest in philosophy so that when he occasionally mentioned the name of the German philosopher Nietzsche, whom he characterized as godless, mad, insolent, blasphemous etc., my curiosity was aroused to find out more.

At the Vikelaia library I found Nietzsche's *Thus spake Zarathustra*, which turned out to have been translated into Greek, indeed into perfect *katharevousa*, by Kazantzakis. The text was very powerful, the messages were tremendously daring and of course completely new to a 15-year-old girl like myself, brought up in Iraklion at that time. As for the language, which was Kazantzakis's contribution to that text, it was extremely poetic. I was both intellectually impressed and emotionally shaken. I would read and re-read every page many times over with excitement; I would copy whole sections and learn them by heart so that I could have access to the book even when I was away from it.

My appetite was whetted, and I tried to find more books by Nietzsche. Instead of Nietzsche I came across a little book with the title *Ασκητική*. At the beginning I was not sure whether it was another translation of Nietzsche by Kazantzakis or a book by Kazantzakis himself.

*Ασκητική* is the book in which Kazantzakis articulates his credo, and it is clearly an adaptation and to some degree an extension of Nietzsche's philosophy. However, even here, we can discern some important points of difference between Nietzsche's philosophy, as it appeared in the book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and that of Kazantzakis in *Ασκητική*.

One difference is that of form and more specifically of language, and the other concerns the content of the two works. From the point of view of form we notice that, whereas in his translation of *Zarathustra* Kazantzakis uses *katharevousa*, which he handles with great confidence and skill, in *Ασκητική*, where he attempts to express his own version of ideas similar to those of Nietzsche, the language is a smooth demotic. From the point of view of content we see that Kazantzakis's hero, who is also some sort of superman, is neither as desperate nor as cruel or ruthless as Nietzsche's superman. It is as if the nihilism, negativism and hardness of Nietzsche's superman has become more moderate and the Nietzschean hero has given way to a Greek Akritas whose desperation is much more tolerable because it is comforted by a sunny and joyous Greek landscape which inspires love for his country, compassion for his fellow-countrymen and love for life itself, as we can see from the following excerpts from *Ασκητική*.

Αγάπα τον άνθρωπο γιατί είσαι εσύ [...] Αγάπα το σώμα σου, μονάχα με αυτό στη γης ετούτη μπορείς να παλέψεις και να πνευματώσεις την ύλη. Αγάπα την ύλη απάνω της πάνεταί ο θεός και πολεμάει.

Πιστεύω στον άγρυπνο αγώνα που δαμάζει και καρπίζει την ύλη, τη ζωοδόχο πηγή φυτών, ζώων και ανθρώπων.

Πιστεύω στην καρδιά του ανθρώπου, το χωματένιο αλώνι που μέρα και νύχτα παλεύει ο Ακρίτας με το θάνατο.

From the moment I discovered first Nietzsche and then immediately afterwards Kazantzakis, the walk between Agios Minas and Agia Paraskevi, where we had our Sunday School meetings, on the one hand, and the Vikelaia library on the other, became an intellectual to-ing and fro-ing between Xenos's inspired religious lessons and the challenging and, to some, subversive philosophical messages of Nietzsche and Kazantzakis. In spite of the contrast between these two worlds I felt no conflicts and no psychological trauma, only great excitement. Later on in 1955 in the Theotokopoulos room of the Vikelaia library, I had the great fortune to hear Kimon Friar speak about Kazantzakis's *Οδύσσεια*. I was by then more than ready to fall completely under Kazantzakis's spell.

After *Ασκητική* I discovered *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*, and with this book I passed on to yet another world. It was as if I had descended from the abstract intellectual level of philosophy which was occupied by gods and supermen and shapes and symbols and had entered a garden, earthy, full of light, fragrance and sensuality. The hero Zorbas, in spite of the fact that he too embodies the ideas of heroic pessimism, is, at the same time, the opposite of an ascetic (*ασκητής*) because he participates in life by living with all the means he has available, arms, legs, body, senses, mind. Zorbas too is aware that there is no final solution for the human race and no hope of a god or an afterlife. Nevertheless, he is won over by the love for life itself; thus the total negation of Nietzsche's nihilism, as it passes through the mature personality of Kazantzakis, becomes hellenized and turns into an affirmation of life, which presents itself within the natural and human Cretan landscape and

folklore and is filtered through a language which is a clear and smooth demotic with some Cretan influence.

The three books mentioned above, the translation of *Thus spake Zarathustra*, the *Ασκητική* and *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*, represent the intellectual but also, in parallel, the linguistic stages of Kazantzakis's development. It is this intellectual and linguistic progress and their interdependence which we shall try to present here. We must stress from the start that when we examine Kazantzakis's language we cannot restrict ourselves to a simple enumeration and classification of its formal characteristics. If we want to understand Kazantzakis the artist, it is important to investigate the special relationship which Kazantzakis had with the Greek language because this relationship, as I will suggest, in agreement with Bien (1972), who has provided the main source and inspiration for this paper, reveals how his personality and his art developed and matured.<sup>1</sup>

The first thing that one notices when studying Kazantzakis is his passion for the Greek language. Kazantzakis does not simply use the language but becomes its servant and its high priest. He collects it, nurses it, cultivates it with a love and anxiety that reach the point of fanaticism, perhaps even greater than that of Palamas himself. Kazantzakis thirsts for words, which he collects passionately throughout his life and yet he never seems to have enough of them. In his effort to enrich his vocabulary not only did he personally travel all around Greece looking for new ones but he also asked his friends repeatedly to collect words for him. His need for words was such that he even resorted to coining his own.

His almost obsessive dedication to language leads him to work on all literary genres. He writes essays, novels, poetry, translations. He even writes children's books and text-books. It is as if he is constantly sharpening his tools in preparation for a major work. Furthermore, his linguistic activities are not restricted to writing; he organizes linguistic clubs, writes

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of the formal characteristics of Kazantzakis's language can be found in Andriotis 1959 and Tsopanakis 1977.

dictionaries and even gets involved with the educational system as an active participant of the educational reforms of 1917.

His intense intellectual and emotional involvement with the Greek language is characteristically expressed in his autobiography *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο*, where he likens the demotic Greek language to his fatherland (πατρίδα). It seems that Greek words have also become his social environment, since he sees in them both good friends and enemies. In spite of his love for words he is often frustrated when he finds them too poor and too weak to express the intensity of his agony and his vision, and he then refers to them as prisons which denigrate his dream:

Το όνειρο δεν ήθελα να το δω να φυλακίζεται και να εξευτελίζεται μέσα στη λέξη.

(*Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο*)

This frustration must spur him on to work on the language with the urgency of somebody who has a major artistic inspiration and desperately needs the material which will express it accurately and in an aesthetically satisfying way.

On the other hand, sometimes he views words as all-powerful spells (ξόρκια) which can ward off temptation, or as fishing-nets and weapons which constrain and tame the awful truth of the abyss by making it more familiar and accessible.

The above observations indicate how much importance Kazantzakis attributed to language. For this reason I think that by examining the most striking characteristics of his idiom we will be better able to appreciate his personality, his beliefs and his vision.

The basic characteristics of Kazantzakis's language during his mature years, which are present most strikingly in the *Οδύσσεια*, are as follows:

- (1) extreme demoticism influenced by the Cretan dialect;
- (2) very rich vocabulary;
- (3) love for complex words (compounds);
- (4) a wealth of adjectives;
- (5) exaggeration, excess.

Let us examine these characteristics, starting from his demoticism, which is of primary importance.

Apart from one or two early works, such as *Όφεις και κρίνο* and translations like *Τάδε έφη Ζαρατούστρας*, which were written in *katharevousa*, and two novels written in French (*Toda Raba*, and *Mon Père*), Kazantzakis wrote all the rest of his work in demotic. Indeed, what he himself considers as his *magnum opus*, the *Οδύσσεια*, is characterized by an extreme, almost fanatical and self-conscious demoticism, while in his novels, which form the major output of his later years, the language remains clearly demotic but noticeably less extreme and less self-conscious.

Nowadays, with the official recognition of demotic and its establishment in all types of discourse, Kazantzakis's demoticism does not impress us in the same way that it must have impressed the Greeks of sixty years ago. During the early years of Kazantzakis's career, Greece was divided into two fiercely hostile linguistic camps, one advocating demotic and the other supporting *katharevousa*. The movement for literary demoticism in which Solomos had played a leading role had weakened and been abandoned by many writers, but towards the end of the nineteenth century it had been revived by the strong personalities of Psycharis and Palamas. As a result, when Kazantzakis embarked on his literary career the New School (*Νέα Σχολή*), with Palamas as its leader, had already made great progress in the promotion and cultivation of demotic. But even then, the success of demotic was restricted to poetry while in other types of literary discourse, such as the novel, *katharevousa* remained the predominant language, with the two most important prose authors of the time, Papadiamantis and Roidis, both writing in *katharevousa*. In such an intellectual context Kazantzakis's decision to write in demotic was both difficult and daring. If we take into consideration the fact that Kazantzakis had already written successful works in *katharevousa*, we must conclude that his decision to abandon *katharevousa* completely and to take up demotic was a most significant step in his career.

Let us consider some of the reasons which may have combined to lead Kazantzakis to the rejection of *katharevousa* in favour of demotic.

1. One of the reasons for Kazantzakis's embracing of demotic, suggested by Bien (1972), must have to do with the influence of Palamas. Kazantzakis was very impressed by Palamas, who was the most widely recognized and most respected literary figure of his time. It was therefore inevitable that Kazantzakis, who was very ambitious from an early age, would aspire to achieve comparable or indeed greater success. It seems that Palamas expressed his liking for the young Kazantzakis and praised Kazantzakis's early work *Ὀφίτης και κρίνο*. Such praise from Palamas must have flattered Kazantzakis and must have made him more susceptible to Palamas's influence. In addition, Palamas was the most important figure in the New School of Athens, which constituted the progressive circle of literary personalities, and Kazantzakis with his Cretan liberal tradition was more likely to wish to align himself with a progressive movement.

2. The other two most important literary figures of that time, Papadiamantis and Roidis, were in spirit demoticists, in spite of the fact that they wrote in *katharevousa*. Papadiamantis, whose characters are common peasant folk, wrote the dialogues within his stories in a dialectal demotic, and Roidis clearly denounces *katharevousa* in his linguistic treatise *Τα Είδωλα* (1893), where he advances sophisticated linguistic arguments offering further support for Psycharis's position on demotic; Roidis expresses his regret that because he was never taught demotic he cannot use it in his own writings. Kazantzakis could therefore find encouragement for espousing demotic in these two successful authors in spite of their own *katharevousa* practice.

3. Psycharis himself, who presented the scientific argument in favour of demotic, must have had a significant influence on Kazantzakis. Kazantzakis adopts Psycharis's support for a pan-hellenic demotic that would embrace all the linguistic elements from all parts of Greece. Psycharis's own book *Το Ταξίδι μου*, published in 1888, provided one of the first modern examples of demotic prose and the success that it had and even the controversy that it caused among the progressive intellectual circles must have further encouraged Kazantzakis to choose the

demotic. After all, Kazantzakis was after both success and controversy.

4. Another factor encouraging the use of demotic was to be found in the general intellectual climate of Europe at that time. The philosophical ideals of the European Enlightenment and Romanticism which Kazantzakis must have been exposed to during his studies in Germany and France, and which influenced him a great deal, also give support to the ideas of freedom of will and of the vital force (*élan vital*) of the common people and therefore of their language.

5. From the way Kazantzakis speaks about the *Οδύσσεια* we can see that his highest ambition is to become a great poet. He characterizes the *Οδύσσεια* as his main work, "το κατ' ἐξοχήν ἔργον", while his novels are referred to by him as minor, secondary works, as "πάρεργα" (Prevelakis 1958: 278). He considers epic poetry to be the highest literary genre and his models are Homer and Dante, in that order. It is very clear from early on that Kazantzakis aims to become Greece's Dante and in order to achieve this he has to write an epic poem equal to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Such an epic would have to be written in a demotic local dialect comparable to the Tuscan dialect used by Dante after he had rejected Latin. Kazantzakis believed that by adopting the living language of his birth-place, the Cretan demotic, he too would be able to make a double contribution to his country by giving it a very important philosophical and poetic work and at the same time a living, fresh and powerful language which he himself will have cultivated. From such a work and such a language Kazantzakis hoped that a new Greek civilization would be born and that he would be its prophet.

Bien (1972) observes that Kazantzakis's demoticism passed through three stages which correspond to the development of his art and his philosophy. Let us consider these stages as outlined by Bien.

During the first stage (1902-1909) Kazantzakis is not yet a mature author. His ideas, as presented in his first works *Όφεις και κρίνο* (1902) and *Ξημερώνει* (1907), show a strong influence of Western European ideas. At this time Kazantzakis's language is



demotic but it still contains a lot of *katharevousa* elements, e.g.: Από τα χείλη σου στάσσει ζμερος (Όφης και κρίνο, p. 17), Έλα να σπείσομεν αφού θα πεθάνομεν (ibid., p. 71).

During the first decade of the second stage of Kazantzakis's development (1910-1920) his ideas continue to be foreign but his subjects and his heroes begin to become Greek: *Πρωτομάστορας*, *Χριστός*, *Νικηφόρος Φωκάς*, *Οδυσσέας*. Sikelianos's influence on Kazantzakis is clearly visible in these works. During this time, when Kazantzakis turns his attention to Greek themes, his language becomes more decisively demotic:

Εγώ κάτι άλλο θέλω, εγώ πνίγομαι στην αγκαλιά σου, εγώ  
θέλω να βγω όξω στο φως (*Broken souls*, quoted in Bien 1972:  
159).

This stage in Kazantzakis's development, as Bien observes, is characterized above all by a tremendous activity directed towards the cultivation and promotion of demotic both as a language and as an ideal. Kazantzakis has embraced Psycharis's message and has decided to support a pure panhellenic demotic language, one that would contain the lexical wealth of Greece from all local dialects. In 1909 he associates himself with the proponents of extreme demotic known as "οι μαλλιανοί" ("the hairy ones"), and becomes the president of the *Solomos* society in Iraklion, the aim of which is the promotion of demotic. In his speech as president of this society he condemns *katharevousa* and declares that the language of all written discourse must have as its basis the living spoken language. He was strongly criticized for this speech not only by the supporters of *katharevousa* but also by many demoticists, who found his views rather extreme and probably threatening. But Kazantzakis responded to this criticism with characteristic pride by saying, "I was laughed at by 25,000 people and I laughed back at 25,000." Also during this period, along with Fotiadis, Glinos, Delmouzos and Triantafyllidis, Kazantzakis participated in the creation of the Educational Association, whose purpose was to promote demotic in education. In 1917 they succeeded in persuading Venizelos's government to introduce demotic into the first four years of primary school. Also during this period,

together with his wife Galatea, Kazantzakis wrote school books and translated foreign books for children.

These passionate educational activities lasted thirty whole years. Bien (1972), commenting on Kazantzakis's work during this period, agrees with Prevelakis (1958), who observed that in spite of these linguistic activities to promote demotic, Kazantzakis continued to express foreign ideas and that even this extreme demoticism was inspired, to a large extent, by the aristocratic nationalism of Ion Dragoumis, which had its origins in the West. In support of this view Prevelakis and Bien offer Kazantzakis's repeated criticism of the Greek people, whom he calls "ραγιάδες" (slaves) and to whom he attributes laziness and "καφενετακή μακαριότητα" (Bien 1972: 171).

During the second part of this period (1920-40), again according to Bien, Kazantzakis's vision of a Greek national rebirth suffered a grave blow with the assassination of Dragoumis and Venizelos's fall from office. Kazantzakis, full of disappointment and bitterness, abandoned Greece and exiled himself to Paris and Vienna. He embraced communism, an ideology which also offered support to his demoticism by its emphasis on the value and the rights of the common people, but soon rejected it and moved to a new phase during which his demoticism was no longer supported by either the nationalistic ideals of Dragoumis or communism. Thus, for the first time Kazantzakis's passion for demotic became independent of any other ideology, as Bien observes. Despite this lack of any philosophical or political basis, Kazantzakis's demoticism, instead of weakening, became even more extreme and more intransigent. This fanaticism provoked criticism even from demoticists, but without any effect on Kazantzakis, who remained firmly and uncompromisingly committed to demotic.

The most characteristic work of this period is the *Οδύσσεια*, a very impressive epic poem with a clear philosophical purpose. It is written in a rich demotic language with strong influence from the dialects, especially the Cretan dialect. Bien and Prevelakis are again in agreement in the observation that, in spite of the linguistic intensity of this work, Kazantzakis has not yet completely captured the soul and the spirit of the Greek people. The language may be that of the common people of Greece, but the ideas continue to be foreign and aristocratic.

Kazantzakis's demoticism has not yet found its natural context. Prevelakis (1958: 70) says:

[...] ίσαμε την ώρα τουλάχιστον που γίνεται μυθιστοριογράφος – ελευθερώνει με την ποίησή του «αδέες του πνεύματος» και όχι «αδέες του αίματος». Οι ρίζες του δεν τον κάνουν να πονεί.

Until the time at least when he becomes a novelist he releases through his poetry ideas of the intellect and not of the blood. His roots do not make him ache (my translation).

Furthermore Bien finds that demotic is ill-suited to the high philosophical aims of the work and that for these reasons the *Οδύσσεια* failed. We will return to these two points later on.

During the third and final stage of his development (1940-57) Kazantzakis, in collaboration with Yannis Kakridis, worked on the translation of the *Iliad* and at the same time wrote his more mature and most successful novels. In these novels, Bien comments, the language is a mature and strong demotic but without the extremes and the excesses of the language we find in the *Οδύσσεια*. In his most successful novels, *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*, *Ο Καπετάν Μιχάλης*, and *Ο Χριστός ξανασταυρώνεται*, Kazantzakis seems to have finally come close to the common Greek people in both his language and his themes and ideas. Thus language and content are now in total harmony.

The above analysis of Kazantzakis's linguistic and intellectual development is that given by Bien and by Prevelakis, and it is convincing to a large extent. However, I would like to express some reservations which concern two of the points made about the most crucial second stage of Kazantzakis's fanatical demoticism and more specifically about the *Οδύσσεια*.

Firstly, I would like to add that Kazantzakis's linguistic passion during the second period, which follows Dragoumis's assassination and Venizelos's fall from power, may also be partially explained by Kazantzakis's personality and his Cretan *γινάτι* or "spite", which he himself encapsulates in the Cretan saying, "όπου αστοχήσεις γύρισε κι όπου πετύχεις φεύγα" ("where you have failed there you must return, where you have succeeded you should move away").

We saw that during this period Kazantzakis was severely criticized for his language (e.g. Lambridi 1939), but the stronger the criticism the more extreme his language became. In response to the attacks he received he became more determined to succeed and with his success to take revenge against both the conservative and reactionary narrow-minded *katharevousa* supporters and the moderate, sensible and lukewarm demoticists. Moderation in language is as abhorrent to Kazantzakis as *katharevousa* itself.

Another factor which leads Kazantzakis to his linguistic extremes derives directly from the demands of the work which he is trying to create. On this point, I take issue with Bien, who finds the language of the *Οδύσσεια* inappropriate to its purpose.

The *Οδύσσεια*, as Prevelakis observes, constitutes a super-human attempt to express his vast experience:

Η υπεράνθρωπη επιχείρηση ν' αξιοποιηθεί και ταξινομηθεί η απέραντη πνευματική πείρα του Καζαντζάκη είναι η *Οδύσσεια* (Prevelakis 1958: 49).

This explains both its length (33,333 seventeen-syllable lines) and its lexical wealth. In the *Οδύσσεια* we find descriptions of large numbers of myths, habits, social customs, beliefs, etc., which would have been impossible to express without rich linguistic material. In fact, in spite of the large number of words that Kazantzakis had collected and made up himself he was still not satisfied. It must also be stressed that the words he wanted to employ had to be derived from the living language, as used by the people of the various regions of Greece; words which refer to and describe concrete objects and concrete feelings, because Kazantzakis believed that his philosophical ideas would become more easily accessible if they were presented through specific concrete descriptions of things which one can see, hear, smell, touch, etc., and not through abstract symbols.

Να λες τα πιο αφηρημένα πράγματα με τον πιο συγκεκριμένο κι αιματηρό τρόπο [...]. Καμιά περιγραφή· όλα τα προβλήματα μεταφερόμενα στο συναίσθημα, ίσαμε το πάθος (Prevelakis 1958: 80).

Thus, if what Kazantzakis wanted to communicate was a vast experience he obviously required a vast vocabulary which he could only find by combining all the resources of Greece plus whatever he himself could create. Besides, if all this experience needed to be expressed through concrete sensual pictures, as was his intention, it was absolutely necessary that he should resort to the concrete descriptions of the common life of fishermen and peasants.

We may therefore say that Kazantzakis's philosophical position of ultimate denial in combination with his artistic sensitivity led him to push language to its limits. Thus, unlike Bien, I see no disharmony between Kazantzakis's philosophy and his language in the *Οδύσσεια*. On the contrary, Kazantzakis's linguistic extremes are in tune with the extreme agony which accompanies his message, the realization of the fall of the gods and the loss of hope.

Another reason for the linguistic extremes in the *Οδύσσεια* may be his nostalgia for Greece. Remember that he is writing this work while in exile in Europe, and feeling rejected and hurt by his compatriots and critics. As he himself admits:

Η δημοτική γλώσσα είναι η πατρίδα μας! [...] Μονάχα όποιος αγαπάει τη δημοτική μας γλώσσα με τόσο πάθος, νιώθει πως δεν πειράζει [...] που παλεύει χωρίς βοήθεια μέσα στην αμάθεια, την τεμπελιά, και την αδιαφορία της ράτσας του (quoted in Prevelakis 1958: 191).

The demotic language is our fatherland, only he who loves our demotic language with such passion feels that it does not matter [...] that he is fighting without help within the ignorance, the idleness and the indifference of his race (my translation).

The connection between language and fatherland is not new in Kazantzakis. It was used by the European Enlightenment (Herder at the end of nineteenth century) and later by European Romanticism (Humboldt at the beginning of the twentieth century), and when the Ottoman empire was being dissolved and the need arose for criteria on the basis of which the boundaries of the new nation states could be defined, it was proposed that the natural borders of a free state must be determined in terms of

linguistic boundaries, as far as this was possible. In the context of Greek literature Solomos uses the formula fatherland=language when he stresses that for a nation to survive it needs to cultivate and to strengthen its national identity, and that this is achieved with the cultivation of its tradition and its language. Now since nation equals the common people who fought for this nation, Solomos draws the conclusion that the language of the Greek nation should be the language of the Greek people, i.e. demotic.

Psycharis and also Palamas later on repeat this and so does Kazantzakis. But in Kazantzakis the connection between language and homeland acquires a new dimension. For Kazantzakis during his self-imposed exile in Paris and Vienna, demotic becomes a substitute for fatherland. Inside demotic he finds stored the whole experience and wisdom of his race and this experience and wisdom is an indispensable element for his own emotional and intellectual cultivation. I would suggest, therefore, that the linguistic activities and the extreme demotic language in the *Οδύσσεια* derive not only from Kazantzakis's intellectual and artistic needs but also from his personal human needs. If various reasons forced him to be physically absent from Greece he would try to bring everything that is Greek close to him through the linguistic wealth collected from all parts of Greece.

Pursuing this point further, we may note that according to Bien and Prevelakis the *Οδύσσεια* failed because the language of the common people, the extreme demotic, was not well suited to the high philosophical ideas which it attempted to express:

It can also be seen how colorful, evocative, and pictorial demotic expressions tend to be, and how rooted in sensual experience of everyday Greece – characteristics that, as I shall argue, perhaps made them inappropriate for the poem in which they appeared although wonderfully appropriate for the novels of Kazantzakis' final period (Bien 1972: 213).

And later on, criticizing the lack of congruence in the *Οδύσσεια* between language and content, Bien says:

Lastly and most comprehensively, the language, though meant to be true to the spirit of the Greek people, to express what is best in

them, is employed in a poem that has nothing essentially to do with Greece or the Greek people, but is indeed completely contrary to the spirit of Greece and was written by a man who, by his own confession, did not at that period "see, hear, or taste the world" as a Greek does. [...] in this case we discover an incongruity that erodes the aesthetic unity found in fully realized poems (ibid.: 222-3).

I would like to disagree with this position for the following reasons: firstly, we have very impressive examples, also discussed by Bien himself, of literary philosophical works from other periods of Greek history but also from different languages, which show clearly that neither idiosyncratic language nor indeed difficulty of language have prevented their success.

A striking example of this is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an epic which expresses lofty philosophical ideas in the local dialect of Tuscany, an idiom which had not been used as a written language before and which was unfamiliar to the rest of the Italians. Another example is the Homeric epic, whose language is a combination of various Greek dialects. Milton resorted to an archaic and rather difficult language while James Joyce went so far as to break the rules of grammar.

All these examples show that neither idiosyncratic nor difficult language necessarily prevents the success of a literary work. In addition, we can see that in some cases when an author wants to express new and original philosophical ideas he often finds the common language poor and worn-out and therefore inappropriate for his aims. For the poet-philosopher, new ideas and new messages constitute revelations intending to overthrow the current wisdom and to introduce new values. It is for this reason that the poet-philosopher requires new, fresh, and vivid linguistic material. With such new and unexpected language he will surprise his reader and will make him or her more alert and more attentive. Thus, new and sometimes revolutionary ideas are expressed not only through the meaning of the words used but also through the form of the language itself. In such works the words are not only conventional vehicles of meaning but also symbols of that meaning.

If we look at the language of the *Οδύσσεια* from this perspective we can conclude that the Cretan demotic was in fact

the one best suited to Kazantzakis's purpose because it was as vivid and as fresh as his ideas. In addition, the Cretan demotic offered Kazantzakis another advantage. Not being an established written medium, it did not afford words for abstract ideas and therefore these ideas had to be presented via words for concrete objects and concrete experiences used as metaphors. In this way the philosophical messages would, in the first instance, be felt as experiences of the senses, which is precisely what Kazantzakis wanted to achieve.

There is another point in Bien's evaluation of the *Οδύσσεια* with which I cannot fully agree. Bien observes that the subjects or themes in the *Οδύσσεια*, pessimism, nihilism and Buddhism, are not Greek but foreign imports, whereas the themes of the novels are indeed Greek. My view is that already in the *Οδύσσεια* and perhaps even earlier Kazantzakis had conceived what he himself refers to as "the Cretan glance", which constitutes the filter through which he will interpret Western pessimism and turn it into a Greek and indeed Cretan stance of "heroic pessimism". Let us examine this point a little more closely.

The central message in the *Οδύσσεια* is the same as the one which we find in the novels. Indeed, we may safely say that all of Kazantzakis's heroes – from the time of the *Οδύσσεια*, and perhaps even before, up to the novels – are extensions and variations of his central character, Odysseus, and that the philosophy of the *Οδύσσεια* may be summarized by what he himself gives as the main message:

- (i) Good and evil are enemies.
- (ii) Good and evil cooperate (the yin and yan of eastern philosophy).
- (iii) Good and evil are one and the same thing.
- (iv) Even this one thing does not exist.

In view of the pessimism expressed in the above it is natural to ask: What is the use of the heroism with which Kazantzakis insists on combining it? It must be pointed out that Kazantzakis's heroism is not the seeking of death, as the nihilist Schopenhauer suggests, nor is it the same as the passive patience and acceptance of the Buddhists. Kazantzakis's heroism is some-



thing different. Kazantzakis's hero in fact sees the abyss very clearly but he views it as a new challenge for his fighting spirit, a spirit which, I would suggest, is imbued with a specifically Cretan idea of freedom. I believe that Kazantzakis's originality and his Greekness reside precisely in this.

The heroes of Crete, Daskalogiannis, Saint Minas, etc., fight against the enemy, the Turks, in spite of the realization that they will be defeated. Yet they fight because they consider freedom to be the ultimate good. But what kind of freedom can one expect from a fight that is doomed to failure without any hope of ever overthrowing the enemy? Kazantzakis, having been brought up in Crete listening to stories of these heroic and futile battles of the Cretan heroes, seems to have arrived at the following view:

Freedom is the ultimate good.

When you cease to fight for freedom you have given up and you have accepted your slavery.

As long as you continue the fight, the vision of freedom is kept alive.

Therefore freedom in such a context is not necessarily equated with victory, since victory itself may lead to acquiescence and weakness which are another kind of slavery. Freedom is thus to be seen as alertness and the constant resistance to all powers which try to enslave us. The ultimate enemies are on the one hand the hope of actually achieving freedom and on the other the fear of non-existence. The behaviour of the Cretans at Arkadi is a powerful example of people who dared to look death in the face with a steady and cool eye (the Cretan glance), without hope and without fear.

Kazantzakis seems to have admired this kind of heroism of the ideal Cretan fighter, and Arkadi must therefore have become the clearest symbol of Kazantzakis's version of heroic pessimism. Furthermore we may suppose that he appreciated that the degree of one's heroism depends on the intensity with which one is able to enjoy to the full the earthly pleasures which one is prepared to sacrifice for freedom. The more one loves the beauty and the pleasures of life the more frightening the reality of the abyss must be. This, in turn, will increase the

taste of freedom for the hero who is prepared to accept that nothing exists. Thus the superman is not he who merely contemplates the abyss and is ready to accept it, but rather he who has the keenness of the senses with which to enjoy to the full the pleasures of the body and of the spirit and yet is able to peer fearlessly into the abyss.

This Cretan-Greek interpretation of heroic pessimism justifies, in Kazantzakis's work, the love of life and of the world both of the senses and of the intellect. Thus Kazantzakis, by filtering Western philosophy through Cretan ideas, has managed to change it from a total negation to a strong affirmation of life.

Καλό κι αληθινό 'ναι το ψωμί και το νερό κι ο αγέρας,  
 μπαίνουν βαθιά στα σωθικά του αντρούς και τον  
 κορμοψυχώνουν (Οδύσσεια Ω 977-8).

Kazantzakis's philosophy may indeed have its origins in western forms of pessimism, but its version of heroism already exists in Cretan history and lore, and it is this particular ingredient of the fight for freedom which Kazantzakis embodies in Odysseus as indeed he does in all his other heroes in the novels.

Let us return to the language of the *Οδύσσεια*. Given the interpretation of its philosophy, as we have analyzed it, we see that it would be completely inappropriate for Kazantzakis to describe the lust for life and the bravery of his heroes and to make these descriptions believable, in any other language than that of the simple Cretans. Only then could the physical and intellectual context, as well as the experience which gave rise to this particular wisdom, come alive and ring true. I conclude, therefore, that the *Οδύσσεια* represents, both in terms of philosophical themes and in terms of language, the Greek and indeed the Cretan filter which determined Kazantzakis's own interpretation of heroic pessimism. In fact I want to go a step further and suggest that Kazantzakis arrived at his own original view precisely through his intense dedication to the demotic language. His linguistic zeal in collecting words, writing dictionaries, translating, etc., was the preparation of his tools but also the cultivation of his sensitivity to the ancestral voices.

The demotic language is Kazantzakis's Beatrice since it ultimately became his teacher and his guide, because it is through the language that Kazantzakis approached his own roots and recognized in them the wisdom of his race.

I have devoted some space to the presentation and justification of the first characteristic of Kazantzakis's language, namely his demoticism and especially the language of the *Οδύσσεια*, because I feel that this linguistic zeal for the demotic is of fundamental importance in our appreciation of his art and his ideas. Prevelakis and Bien may be right in their assessment that the *Οδύσσεια* failed but I do not think that this is due either to the themes or to the choice of language. As a plan it has both the right themes and the right choice of linguistic medium for the time and place and the purpose for which it was written. If it has failed, I would see its shortcomings as the following:

- (1) The work is too rich both linguistically and thematically. This makes it too difficult not only because of the demotic words but also because of the long lines, the complex words etc., all of which act as stumbling blocks to the smooth and simultaneous assimilation of rhythm and meaning.
- (2) The general intellectual climate of the modern era in which it appeared no longer provides us with the conditions or allows us the leisure for reading long epic poetry.
- (3) The reader may be put off by the self-consciousness of Kazantzakis the artist who is also a linguistic propagandist.

Bien (1972) proceeds with his analysis of Kazantzakis's language by examining the output of his final period (1940-57), which includes the translation of the *Iliad* and the novels, and his assessment is that here Kazantzakis has finally achieved the desired congruence between the language and the themes presented:

The novels succeed because their language is joined to vision and is therefore no longer arbitrarily imposed [...] Nor is it coupled by violence with high poetic style or with abstract philosophical concerns, as it was in the *Odyssey* (Bien 1973: 256).

I would propose instead that in the novels the themes remain the same as those of the *Οδύσσεια* but there is a shift in the emphasis given to the two sides of the heroic pessimism. In the novels the heroism, whose characterization, as we have argued, contains as a necessary element the love of life, is more foregrounded, while in the *Οδύσσεια* the main emphasis is given to the pessimistic aspect. This more centrally presented love for life, compassion and heroism makes the novels much more representative of the Greek way of life and thus more recognizable as true. As far as the language is concerned it is still the Cretan demotic but here, in prose, Kazantzakis has the space to express himself more naturally and the reader is given the time to absorb both the poetry and the meaning in a less difficult way. Moreover, by the time the novels appear the public must have become more adjusted both to the demotic and to the form of the novel. We may venture to say that the novel by then, not only in Greece but in other cultures of the West too, seems to have supplanted the epic. Craig Raine, in a recent (1996) interview in *The Guardian*, says: "The epic poem has a lot of common features with the novel and surely the biggest epic of the 20th century is James Joyce's *Ulysses*."

We may now proceed to examine the remaining characteristics of Kazantzakis's language.

We have listed as the second important characteristic of Kazantzakis's language his extremely rich vocabulary. His passion for words expressed itself very early on in his life. As a pupil at secondary school in Naxos he tried to translate a French dictionary into Greek. His sister-in-law Elli Alexiou tells us that she remembers him bent over his desk collecting and recording new words, names of birds and plants, cries of animals etc. In his correspondence with Prevelakis he asks him to provide him with new words for animals and plants and for exorcisms and curses. He says he wants to tour Greece in order to steal like a pirate ("να κουρσέψει") words from every part of Greece. In collaboration with Prevelakis he undertakes to write a French dictionary with *katharevousa* and demotic translations (whereas Kazantzakis finished his part, Prevelakis never did finish his). Kazantzakis also attempted to write a French-Greek dictionary in collaboration with the French linguist André

Mirambel. In his autobiography Kazantzakis comments on the power of words as follows:

Κάθε λέξη είναι σκληρότατο τσόφλι, που κλείνει μέσα του μεγάλη εκρηχτική δύναμη· για να βρεις τι θέλει να πει πρέπει να την αφήσεις να σκάζει σαν οβίδα μέσα σου και λευτερώνεις έτσι την ψυχή που φυλακίζει.

Every word is a very hard shell which contains a great explosive power; in order to find what it means you must let it explode like a bomb inside you so that it will release the soul that it hides.

(Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο p. 103)

And again: "Οι λέξεις δεν είναι ούτε οι αδελφοί ούτε οι γιοι παρά οι πατέρες των αισθητών πραγμάτων" ("Words are neither the brothers nor the sons but the fathers of perceptible things") (Prevelakis 1958: 72).

It is easy to appreciate this passion of Kazantzakis's, or any other author's, for words if we consider the role that words play in our life and our civilization. With words we analyse the world around us and make it familiar and approachable. The things, whether concrete or abstract, which exist within language have become ours since we have classified them by placing them in a network of relationships with other objects. This is very clearly appreciated by Kazantzakis, as we see in *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*. When the boss hears Zorbas calling him a "bookworm" he replies:

I was pleased knowing now the name of my misery, I could more easily perhaps defeat it. As if it were no longer diffuse, bodiless and unreachable.

Words show the distinctions that the mind makes between physical, intellectual and artistic experience, and the more complex the experience that needs to be described, the richer the vocabulary needed. We must not forget that Kazantzakis wanted to express this rich experience and his complex philosophical ideas through the reader's feelings, through concrete experiences communicated with vivid sensual descriptions. The rich vocabulary is taken from the language of the common people

because it is fresh and because it retains its connection with physical objects. Here are some examples from the *Οδύσσεια*: ο νους ξαστέρωνε, η καρδιά γλύκανε, ο θάνατος θερίζει νιούς, η γη είναι σγουρό σταφύλι, ο σκληρός λόγος κουφοδρομούσε μέσα μου, οι θύμησες ξεκίνησαν και σπρώχνει η μια την άλλη και βιάζονται.

The third characteristic of Kazantzakis's language is his love of compound words. He is not satisfied with the tremendous wealth of the words that he has collected from all over Greece but wants to extend this treasure with compound words which he coins himself. With these compounds he tries to convey the complex and multifaceted character of his ideas or to combine and bind together conflicting ideas in a single linguistic form, to reconcile the irreconcilable. Again, this can be illustrated with examples from the *Οδύσσεια*: ζερβοδεξοχέρης, θεοφονιάς, ουρανομπαύχτης, ουρανοθάλασσο, αντρογυνοχωρίστρα, νεφροκαρδιογνώστης, λοξονούσης. In the use of such compounds Kazantzakis follows a long Greek tradition from Homer to *Erotokritos*.

The fourth characteristic of Kazantzakis's language is, as we have already mentioned, the rich use of adjectives. He will rarely leave a noun without an adjective to modify it. More often he will modify his nouns with two or more epithets, many of which are compounds: τους σαραντάπηχους αγέρικους αρχόντους; οι ληγερές σπαθάτες χουρμαδιές; αντάρτισα καρδιά του ανεμοσκούφη ανθρώπου (from the *Οδύσσεια*). Kazantzakis himself tells us that he loves adjectives not only as decorative elements but as essential tools which allow him to express his emotions in a global way, from many sides, because, as he claims, the emotion is never simply either positive or negative but both at the same time.

Τίποτα δεν υφίσταται τόσο ουσιαστικά όσο το επίθετο.  
Για να μη χαθεί η ουσία πρέπει να εκφράσουμε τις  
συνυπάρχουσες ιδιότητες.

(Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο)

We must point out that the same noun appears with a variety of adjectives within the same work, as if it is developing and changing in nature. Prevelakis has counted the adjectives Kazantzakis uses to describe Odysseus and has found there to be

more than 200. Some of these are: *αγριοσκουφάτος, αετογοργομάτης, ανέλπιδος, ουρανομπαίχτης, μονιάς, θεοφονιάς, δαιμονόδαρτος*. This wealth of adjectives and compounds is further enriched by an impressive use of metaphors and similes.

A more general characteristic of Kazantzakis's language is its excesses: *Τα πάντα εις άγαν*. He refuses to restrict himself to the moderate demotic of Palamas but tries to cultivate a panhellenic demotic with a strong Cretan influence. The fifteen-syllable line cannot accommodate his poetry; he has to stretch it to a seventeen-syllable one. Existing words seem to him too few and limited; he extends them by making his own words, more complex in form and meaning. To make his text more noticeable he simplifies the accentual system and thus becomes one of the pioneers of the monotonic system. This simplified accentual system and some orthographic changes which appeared in the pre-final versions of the poem caused a great deal of negative reaction and Kazantzakis was forced to return to a more acceptable traditional orthography in the final version. His poem has to be the longest ever in Greek literature with the magic number of 33,333 lines. He finds it impossible to restrict himself to one literary genre so he attempts them all: poetry, essays, theatre, translations, text-books, travelogues, dictionaries and novels.

In view of Kazantzakis's predilection for extremes we may want to pose the question whether his linguistic intensity and excess has damaged or benefited his art. I think such a question is very difficult to answer. Did the excessively elongated limbs in El Greco's paintings contribute positively or negatively to his art? A work of art should be judged in its totality and by the degree to which it moves us and whether through our contact with it we are made to see some new truths.

The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way (I would say) poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader not in the lines of symbols printed on pages of a book. What is essential is the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading.

(Jorge Luis Borges, cited in Heaney 1995)

What we can perhaps say in conclusion is that Kazantzakis, endowed with a restless, childlike, daring and totally honest mind, tried to explore tirelessly all the possibilities open to him. In this search he immersed himself in his Cretan tradition and his Cretan language with impressive results. His extreme dedication to his own language and culture ultimately rewarded both him and us.

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