

NICOS KAZANTZAKIS – HENRI BERGSON

by Klitos Ioannides

An eternal traveller, Odyssean Nicos 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.' An existential wayfarer and ontic man, the great Cretan, a descendant of Captain Michalis and Domenicus Theotocopoulos, El Greco, treads on the abyss of this world that, according to the Scriptures, lies in wickedness and with the flame of his soul he ascends one by one the Platonic steps of the *Symposium* towards the sea of beauty, i.e. towards the lightning of truth, the Heracleitean everlasting fire, the fire of 'moving eternity' as Plato puts it in his *Timaeus* or the life force of being (the *élan vital*), which is God, as his teacher, the 20th century French philosopher Henri Bergson, expresses it in his world view of creative evolution.

Nicos Kazantzakis calls the incessant breaking up of the limits and the confines towards the future and the unknown a 'cry' for the future. Every static crystallization of man's judgements, fallacies and sentimental illusions he calls 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. Discord and war, according to the patriarch of the Greeks, Homer, attend each 'Trojan war', in order to destroy corruption and decay, giving a challenging opportunity to the Prodigal Son, the Lucifer, according to N. Kazantzakis, to 'put to death' what causes death.

From the ashes of ruins the fighting man recreates the coming world, a certainty of tomorrow, which, also in its turn, will give its place to another certainty 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.

Dionysiac and Greek, Nicos 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, while at the same time, he prepares himself to take, in a heroic and saintly manner, the brave and fearless road of blissful spiritual self-sufficiency, which means redemption and subsequently liberation from Freedom itself, as an ideal pattern that stands in the way of autonomous Freedom; the attainment of the state of the infinite. "I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free," he will tell us in 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, those 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 Stragyrite's *Poetics* putting his spirit to the test with all the teasing questions to arrive, in the end, at the awe of the heart, in which dwells the victory over death as a supreme will of bravery and Buddhist apathy (freedom from passion), the supreme void-detachment from the perishable world ("I have now been given every power in heaven and on earth," as the Resurrected Lord said). It is an ascetic attainment and Greek reference to spiritual immortality, the Apollonian immortality, but also, in essence a resurrection similar to Christ's, an apostolic Loft, saintly and spirit-bearing.

Nicos 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, which is spirit, physical and metaphysical freedom.

Henri Bergson, but Kazantzakis too, who assimilated his thought creatively, departs from the concept of space and mental extension, from the 'esprit géométrique', and enters 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 Empedokles of Akragas puts it, from mineral to plant life and from there to animal and human life and beyond them to the kingdom of the 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 shown by his relations, and his life with Alexis Zorbas, which are full of adventure and intensity). He dynamically falls in love with things in their offing, with amazement and with the interjectional Ah! He is to be found at the point where the source of Life, the Castalian fountain 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 depth of things, the ineffable and the indescribable, the completeness of the inexpressible,

holy silence, the Cry for the unknown, as is characteristically called by Nicos Kazantzakis.

Kazantzakis and Bergson meet each other at the immediacy of experience, the incessant journey of originality, the listening to the soul and the fundamentals of the soul, the nucleus of life, where the physical and metaphysical spheres intersect.

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 intrepid movement, the *élan vital* (the life force) of the creative universe, which in no case comes to rest and inactivity.

Like his other teachers, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, he breaks away from the fleeting representations of the ordinary world and struggles as a true fighter for the great *Ascent*, using as weapons the will to live, the desire for life, for what each time concerns the Other, for the new forms of life (otherness). He accepts the Bergsonian view that “God is nothing ready, 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 the visionary, 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 preach the open, heroic and holy morality of men of a higher order against the closed morality of the masses. Hence, the anti-Socratism and the anti-Christian Zarathustrean doctrines of Nietzsche, which Kazantzakis often follows in his texts. Both teacher and student reject the mythologizing 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 and go in for continuous change and the uninterrupted whirl of duration. They are lovers of internal experience, which is continuous and indivisible. Psychology becomes a metaphysical extension and life beyond, God yielding to an incessant becoming, free action, endless creation, outside the mechanical sequence of causes and *causata*.

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 intuitive analysis and not to intellectual analysis that does not result in vision.

They both believe in the revolution, that inconceivable internal miracle, the grace which the Vedas, Buddha, Christ, Heracleitus, 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 equate with "a river without depth and without banks." They look for "intuition whose object is mobility of duration."

Nicos 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 Nicos 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 the free men, the powerful men, the 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 been the fundamental themes in Kazantzakis' life.

He constantly questions the realities of this world and struggles superhumanly, in a Nietzschean manner, for the metaethical spheres, the spheres beyond good and evil. He accepts the marginal state of destruction, of failure and the disaster of the abyss. He is conscious of the end of all things. And yet, before the visible and invisible steps of the Odyssean ascent, he puts, as the supreme essence of man, the Struggle, his Cretan Gaze and the Cry.

The God of Bergson and Kazantzakis is a fighting God. He is the unattainable expression of the life force (*élan vital*), the Heracleitean “ever-living fire.”

He will note 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 matters, the other great figure, the Alexandrian C. Cavafy will tell 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 will declare 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, had the desire 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 Parmenidian Being, which moves in the eternal present (*it was not, it will not be, but it is*), or the Platonic mystical One, around which lie suspended the universal materials, psychic and spiritual?

It is in these most sublime fields of thought and knowledge that Kazantzakis' texts live, move and exist, whether they be 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*. But it is also a burning but not blazing bramble-bush in the mystical Sinai of Darkness with its summit, as well as of the things that lie down below: The things of the desert and the golden calf, the sensible phenomena or the ‘prehistoric, dinosaursic worm’ as Kazantzakis calls it, which constitute a ghastly illusion.

A wandering ascetic, N. Kazantzakis creates by continuously drawing on his solitary wanderings, 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 shatter the shackles of ‘captivity’ and the restrictive cultural forms, doing service to naught, to nothing, to the infinite whole, drawing at the same time on the nourishing elements of his heart’s blood, which is his only redeeming and healing refuge.

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 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 bright and unrelenting, before us like the Cretan night, like Mt. Psiloritis, which he loved so much and to which he ministered. He appears before us as a true, enlightened Buddha with the wise third eye – the eye of the bull-god, the 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.

N. Kazantzakis wished Homer’s cycle to close with him. This is perhaps the reason why he wrote his own *Odyssey* in 33.333 lines. Even with the principles of his own world-view such a high objective is unattainable.

The universal spirit, the ‘common’ Heracleitean 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 spiritual scale of Jacob. And N. Kazantzakis, as a true Greek shaman, 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 in 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.

Nicos 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 and resourcefully (St. Paul) using all the means at his disposal and all the 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’ve learnt to write, I will die.”

Translated by Costas Hadjigeorgiou