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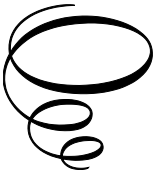
Centenary Reflections

Edited by

Lewis Owens and Nikos Mathioudakis

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-5797-6
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-5798-3

Dedicated, with the deepest gratitude, to Peter A. Bien

Άκουσε το λοιπόν, Στρατηγέ, την αναφορά μου και κάμε κρίση· άκουσε, Παππού, τη ζωή μου, κι αν πολέμησα κι εγώ μαζί σου, αν λαβώθηκα χωρίς κανένας να μάθει πως πόνεσα, αν δε γύρισα ποτέ την πλάτη μου στον οχτρό, δώσε μου την ευκή σου!
"Listen, therefore, to my report, general, and judge. Listen to my life, grandfather, and if I fought with you, if I fell wounded and allowed no one to learn of my suffering, if I never turned my back to the enemy:

Give me your blessing!"

Nikos Kazantzakis. *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο [Report to Greco]*.

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FOREWORD

Nikos Kazantzakis was a prolific author. He tried his hand at virtually every literary genre: poetry, drama, travel writing, children's literature, prose fiction, as well as journalism, translation and philosophy. Though he often expressed his scorn for the genre, it was with the novel that he eventually achieved the success that he craved and an international reputation; I say "eventually", because these novels were all written in the last third of his career, from the 1940s onwards.

The novel that initiated a string of memorable works is of course *Zorba the Greek*, to give it the title by which it is best known in English. What is less well-known is that the germ, or blueprint, of all the novels is contained in his philosophical credo *Askitiki*, "Spiritual Exercises", which had the alternative title *Salvatores Dei*, translated by Kimon Friar as *The Saviors of God.* Each of the novels can be seen as a rewriting of the basic ideas that he formulated in that work, which was completed in 1923. The 100th anniversary provided the ideal opportunity for an international conference—the brainchild of Dr Lewis Owens—which took place at Queens' College Cambridge in the summer of 2023, with the twin aims of celebrating the work's lasting significance and shedding new light on its composition, interpretation and reception. The choice of Cambridge as the venue was not accidental: Kazantzakis spent seven weeks there in the summer of 1946 as the guest of the British Council. During this period he received a copy of *Zorba the Greek*, which had just been published in Athens, and immediately began to pursue plans to have it translated into Swedish and English.

However, his main preoccupation during his stay in Cambridge was the need to discharge his obligations to the British Council by producing a significant piece of writing. He wrote, at breakneck speed, a novel entitled *O Aniforos* (*The Ascent*), which culminates with the protagonist picking up his pen to write. . . *Askitiki*; Kazantzakis intended to include the complete text of his philosophical work as the final part of his new novel. He completed it by the beginning of September 1946, a few weeks before he left England for Paris. *The Ascent* was not, however, published as Kazantzakis had planned, although one chapter of it was incorporated in his later novel, *Freedom and Death.* Indeed, *The Ascent* was thought to be lost, until the typescript was rediscovered more than seventy years later and it

was finally published in 2022. The link that it provides between Cambridge and *Askitiki* was thus re-established.

To the average reader Kazantzakis is today known exclusively as a novelist, one whose works have been translated into all the world's major languages and adapted for stage and screen. His reputation has waxed and waned over the years, from a high point in the 1960s to rejection and obscurity in the 1980s, particularly in the country of his birth. From the late 1990s onwards there has been a resurgence of interest, not just in the novels, but particularly in his politics and philosophy. The doyen of Kazantzakian studies, Professor Peter Bien, has produced masterly studies of all aspects of Kazantzakis's output and activities, as well as many superb translations. It is entirely fitting that his keynote address to the conference should appear first in this volume. If there were any doubt about the current revival of interest in Kazantzakis's philosophical work, from multiple perspectives, this collection of studies, deriving mainly from the Cambridge conference and written by scholars from many countries, will surely dispel it. Given that the ever popular novels are grounded in *Askitiki*, these studies will further illuminate the philosophical and theological concerns that underpin and permeate all of Kazantzakis's work.

David Holton, University of Cambridge

INTRODUCTION

LEWIS OWENS

It is a little over 25 years ago since I walked the short distance from Queens' College, Cambridge, to the rooms of George Pattison, then Dean of King's College, in order to defend my doctoral thesis on Kazantzakis. I was naturally nervous for many reasons—firstly, because Kazantzakis was still relatively unknown in Cambridge, despite his brief sojourn there in 1946[1]; secondly, because Peter Bien, the most eminent of Kazantzakis scholars and to whom this publication is dedicated, had flown in from New Hampshire to join George for the *viva voce*. I need not have worried: both George and Peter were sympathetic and gracious; the conversation flowed, difficult questions were asked, challenges were made, but my thesis examining Kazantzakis's early work *Askitiki* to defend him from accusations of nihilism was approved.

My research had taken me to the Historical Museum of Crete in Heraklion in early 1997 to examine Kazantzakis's personal library embellished with his intriguing marginalia.[2] Since then, *Askitiki* has both inspired and confused me. I have read it with joy and hope, then thrown it aside in frustration, discarding its grandiosity, before picking it up once more and clinging earnestly to various passages. I have often despaired my ineptitude to fully grasp it intellectually and have lamented my inability to live by its central tenets. Yet *Askitiki* has never left me.

The first person I met on my return to Queens' College after my *viva voce*, notably on the iconic Mathematical Bridge, was Jonael Schickler, a young, supremely talented doctoral student who was also working with George Pattison. Two years later, shortly before his 26th birthday, Jonael was cruelly taken from us in the tragic Potters Bar rail crash which claimed six other lives. Jonael's doctoral dissertation was published posthumously in 2005 with the title *Metaphysics as Christology. An Odyssey of the Self from Kant and Hegel to Steiner*. We shared many conversations about life,

[1] See Owens, 1998, 91-92; Athanasopoulou, 2017; Holton, 2018 for more on Kazantzakis's stay in Cambridge. See also Bart Soethaert's essay in this volume.
[2] See "Appendix" in Owens, 2003.

philosophy, music and Kazantzakis. It is therefore most apt that this collection of essays was issued from the *100 Years of Askitiki* International Conference that took place at Queens' over two days in June and July 2023. I feel sure that Jonael would have attended the Conference and quite possibly have contributed an essay to this volume. Nevertheless, as his main theosophical guide Rudolf Steiner argued in a 1918 lecture, "The Dead Are Always With Us". Thus I take this opportunity to remember Jonael again fondly.

I express my sincere gratitude to the full staff of Queens' College for ensuring the smooth running of the Conference and for welcoming all guests so warmly. I also thank Ianthi Tsimpli, the Cambridge Centre for Greek Studies, and Elias Sakellis, for their extremely kind financial support. The cover photo belongs to the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum Archive (www.kazantzaki.gr). We sincerely thank the Administrative Board and the Director of the MNK for granting permission to use the digital document.

Anna Coopey has been the epitome of kindness, intelligence and assistance, not just with helping me run the Conference itself but also for formatting these essays and suggesting the title. David Holton, Emeritus Professor of Modern Greek and Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge, remains a tremendous source of support. Darren Middleton has also flowed as a constant stream of academic stimulation and friendship. Most importantly, I would like to thank my wife, Dr Tanya Ursova, for first planting the seed of the Conference within me and, as always, supporting me in my endeavours. It is no exaggeration to say that without Tanya's assistance this publication would not have seen the light of day. My love goes also to our wonderful children, Daniil and Sofia.

Kazantzakis first sketched out *Salvatores Dei. Askitiki* in Vienna in 1922. He completed it in Berlin in 1923 and it was published in the literary journal *Anayennisi* (Renaissance) in 1927. In 1928 he revised the ending and reversed the title to *Askitiki. Salvatores Dei*, which was published in 1945. Kimon Friar's English translation was released as *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises* in 1960.[3] In this volume the work is predominately named *Askitiki* although some authors use the alternative titles *Salvatores Dei* or *The Saviors of God.* For the sake of consistency, Greek words have been transliterated phonetically but without accents when not in their original form. I am very grateful to Nikos Mathioudakis for his assistance with transliterating the Greek.

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[3] Kazantzakis, 1960.

Kazantzakis's early biography is too rich to be covered with any justifiable depth here so I will just cover the essentials.[4] Kazantzakis was born to father, Michalis, a native of the village Varvari (now Myrtia, site of the Kazantzakis museum), and mother, Maria, in what is now Heraklion, Crete, on 18/30 October 1883. The fierce battle for Cretan independence from the Ottoman Empire and the resulting civil strife saturated his childhood, forcing the family to leave for Piraeus on the Greek mainland temporarily in 1889, before 14 year old Nikos was sent in 1897 for two years to the island of Naxos for early schooling in French and Italian.[5] He moved to Athens in 1902 to commence his studies in law and published his first novel, *Serpent and Lily*, in 1906. He completed his dissertation on Nietzsche in 1909, married Galatea Alexiou in 1911, and with the poet Angelos Sikelianos stayed on Mount Athos for around forty days in 1914, seeking to formulate a new religion, reading Dante, the Gospels, and Buddhistic texts. Subsequent literary projects, travel, and political engagements continued to nourish his voracious spiritual appetite. And then came his residence in Weimer Republic Berlin, ravaged by inflation, poverty and hunger, yet vibrant with the spirit of revolutionary Communism. It was from within this fervent atmosphere that *Askitiki* was born.

As the title suggests, it consists of a series of spiritual exercises—more specifically a 'crusade'—to be followed after a disarming opening statement: "We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life." We are instructed through these exercises, often in fierce military language, from an initial "Prologue" to "The Preparation", consisting of three duties. "The March" then drives us through four steps of 'The Ego', 'The Race', 'Mankind' and 'The Earth'. Next comes "The Vision", then "The Action" where we are instructed to study 'The Relationship Between God and Man', 'The Relationship Between Man and Man' and 'The Relationship Between Man and Nature'. It is the revised ending, composed on 11 June 1928, whilst Kazantzakis was staying with Panaït Istrati in the forests an hour or so outside of Moscow, which has proved most problematic. This contains the provocative and controversial "Silence." I reproduce the final three beatitudes below in Kimon Friar's translation:

> BLESSED BE ALL THOSE WHO HEAR AND RUSH TO FREE YOU, LORD, AND WHO SAY: "ONLY YOU AND I EXIST."

[4] See the 'Chronology' presented in Volume 1 of Peter Bien's magisterial *Nikos Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit.* Bien, 1989, xvii-xxiv.

[5] For newly discovered details of Kazantzakis's early schooling on Naxos see Groen 2024, 161-168.

> BLESSED BE ALL THOSE WHO FREE YOU AND BECOME UNITED WITH YOU, LORD, AND WHO SAY: "YOU AND I ARE ONE."
> AND THRICE BLESSED BE THOSE WHO BEAR ON THEIR SHOULDERS AND DO NOT BUCKLE UNDER THIS GREAT, SUBLIME, AND TERRIFYING SECRET:
> THAT EVEN THIS ONE DOES NOT EXIST![6]

Translations can naturally divide opinion. Friar translates εξαίσιος as 'sublime'; Peter Bien suspects that Kazantzakis used here the Ancient Greek meaning of εξαίσιος, which is 'ominous'. Yet whichever translation we prefer we cannot fail to agree with Kazantzakis himself that the revised 1928 ending serves as a 'bomb' which blows up the entire *Askitiki*. Kazantzakis wrote with prescience to his close friend Pandelis Prevelakis on the day he revised the ending: "But the hearts of only a few people will be exploded."[7] For many, even those close to Kazantzakis, this revised ending was sufficient fuel for the accusations of nihilism and atheism which dogged him for much of his life. However, in the same letter to Prevelakis he writes of his tranquility: "The sun rises at midnight; I often go round the forest with Istrati during these extremely gentle, mystical dawns. I'm very peaceful, very well. I've entered the forest's tempo and it seems to me that two or three months here will do me immense good in both mind and body."[8] Although Kazantzakis was clearly becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet Union, which he had first visited in 1925, there is no sense of the despair that one may expect from a supposedly nihilistic temperament.

So we must look deeper and this collection of essays serves to do just that. Let us therefore return to 1922-23 when the work was initially sketched and written. Kazantzakis's time in Vienna and Berlin clearly influenced his worldview and the writing of *Askitiki*, as we will see below. Yet to see him as fully embracing communism even during this time is wrong. Certainly he was never seen by the Greek communists as one of their own. For Kazantzakis, the priority was always *meta*-political and hence *meta*-communist, what Bien terms a 'Politics of the Spirit'. As we will see, Kazantzakis had been taught early by Henri Bergson that matter is a necessary tool that must be taken to its extremes and exhausted in order for a new channel for the spirit to emerge and ultimately ascend. Kazantzakis battled with his inner desire to be politically engaged—to take to the streets and wave the banners against social injustice—versus his natural tendency

[6] Kazantzakis, 1960, 131
[7] Kazantzakis, 2012, 314
[8] Ibid.

for aesthetic withdrawal. It may be argued that he never adequately resolved this tension during his life. After various flirtations with active politics he withdrew more into his art, commencing with the *Odyssey*, his monumental *magnum opus,* consisting of 33,333 verses which he started drafting in 1925 and completed in 1938. Soon after, his attention turned to novels and his autobiography *Report to Greco*, which was completed shortly before his death on 26 October 1957, aged 74. These later novels can still be seen to flesh out in plot and characterisation elements of the philosophy that first engaged him in *Askitiki* a century ago.

Much commentary—some illuminating and helpful, some ill-informed and theologically naïve—has flowed under the bridge during the last 100 years; yet the essays that follow constitute the first compiled volume on *Askitiki* in English. It seems we cannot let Kazantzakis go or, perhaps, Kazantzakis will not let us go. Contributing scholars from Greece, Cyprus, USA, Croatia, Ukraine, Austria, Germany and Poland attest to the growing international appeal of this work and its author. The range of essays which follow is broad: doctoral students fresh on their academic journey, seasoned experts bringing decades of wisdom, and those who relay a more personal encounter with the text. There is room for all at the table. Yet Kazantzakis remains an enigma to many. Any serious scholar commenting on any major literary figure must never shy away from highlighting flaws and shortcomings. The work of Kazantzakis must not be immune from such treatment. There are confusing aspects to his work, even contradictory aspects. His language sometimes seems religiously hyperbolic and often out of step with current views on gender equality. This may perhaps be inevitable with someone as widely read, widely travelled, and widely ideological as Kazantzakis, living in difficult times when, as he himself declares, one world was dying and another world being born. He remained rooted in a male-dominated, patriarchal world and this cannot be glossed over.

Like many of his time, Kazantzakis saw the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche as too relevant to be dismissed. However, although he could no longer fully embrace the Orthodox faith of his youth in the wake of Nietzsche's proclaimed 'Death of God', as well as Darwin's empirical theory of natural selection, he could not eschew the concept of God entirely. In fact, quite the opposite. Henceforth came Bergson, who enthralled Kazantzakis with his lectures in Paris during 1907 and 1908. Here was a philosophy that accounted for the new scientific worldview of evolution but still retained a place for God, albeit a new, dynamic conception of the Deity.

A large amount has already been written about Bergson's influence on Kazantzakis and we will encounter it further in the essays below so there is

no need to expound it in depth here. Suffice it to say that Bergson's concept of the *élan vital*, the driving force through evolution that seeks freedom from material obstruction in striving towards ever higher levels of consciousness through humanity, essentially becomes Kazantzakis's personal idea of God. This concept of freedom is captured most poignantly on his own epitaph inscribed on his tomb on the Venetian ramparts overlooking Heraklion:

> Δεν ελπίζω τίποτα. Δε φοβούμαι τίποτα. Είμαι λέφτερος.
> I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.

But what does this 'freedom' mean? Freedom from what or for what? Or from whom? It is with the influential vitalistic philosophy of Bergson that the eminent **Peter Bien** opens this volume and addresses these questions. Bien shows Bergson's visibility throughout *Askitiki*, demonstrating convincingly Kazantzakis's assertion that the *vital impetus* equals the new God, and concludes with the importance of λεύτερος, in both text and epitaph, when those who form a union with this new God do not falter when hearing the *non-nihilistic* secret that their union "does not exist".

As a result of such philosophical and linguistic playfulness, *Askitiki* is stylistically challenging. We owe a great debt to **Nikos Mathioudakis** who next meticulously and technically provides a comparative approach between the single extant manuscript and the treatise as it survives to us. In doing so, we are presented with rather significant differences in both lexical and semantic style, and are shown how we can detect Kazantzakis's specific authorial identity within the changes, which have a strong impact on his poetic grammar.

John Sakkas and **Dora Simintzi** then provide the necessary historical and intellectual context to the work. The authors highlight how Kazantzakis's sojourn especially in Berlin during the period when he wrote *Askitiki,* fed into his "theology of activism," his desire to create a new humanity and a new society based on spiritual values consistent with his monistic worldview.

As **Ewa Janion** next describes for us so vividly, Kazantzakis's time in Berlin brought him into contact with a dynamic group of Jewish women important and influential in their own right: Rahel Lipstein, Dina Matus, and Itka Horowitz. The essay deftly juxtaposes the depictions of Itka in Kazantzakis's prose with those in the memoirs of her family members. As Janion shows, the stark difference between these narratives sheds some light on Kazantzakis's stance on communism and Jewishness, captured in the different portraits of Itka in the later works *Toda Raba* and *Report to Greco.*

As a Greek, Kazantzakis was naturally steeped in mythology. We see the role of the 'archetypical image of the Ancestor' very significantly in the essay by **Afroditi Athanasopoulou** and **Georgios Vlachos.** The authors argue that this image has a profound ideological function in *Askitiki*, since the Ancestor, as a metonymic depiction of both the fighting God and the previous generations that marched in the field of the constant evolution ("ascent") of beings, steadily reminds the fighting man of his Duty in the struggle for the transubstantiation of Matter into Spirit.

Kazantzakis's attraction to Nietzsche is well-known but we are invited to look more closely at this relationship by **George Dritsas.** Kazantzakis, along with other poets and thinkers of his time, including Palamas, Dragoumis and Karagatsis, was profoundly influenced by Nietzschean thought. Taking this influence into account, Dritsas outlines the connections and correspondences between *Askitiki* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* looking specifically at the "death" and "struggle" of God in relation to humanity and the world.

As **Thomas Karagkiozopoulos** next highlights, the use of opposing pairs plays a fundamental role in *Askitiki.* These opposing pairs*,* Karagkiozopoulos argues, are deeply rooted in existential and philosophical themes and are used to probe the depths of human nature, morality, and the eternal struggle between conflicting forces within individuals. Furthermore, opposing pairs in *Askitiki* extend beyond mere thematic exploration; they also serve as potent symbols and allegories. Each duality carries layers of meaning, inviting readers to delve deeper into the text and to unravel the complexities of Kazantzakis's narrative construction.

We are left pleasantly breathless following the essay by **Dionysious Psilopoulos,** who argues that *Askitiki* is a religious manifesto that helps humans discover the divinity within. We see how Kazantzakis differentiated between the inner divinity and the god of the sensible universe. The latter is a static, monolithic god to whom humans bow their heads and kneel, while the former is an ever-changing divinity that evolves along with humans. Instead of being slaves, humans should collaborate with the inner divinity, become free, and form the bridge that this divinity needs to cross and become conscious of itself and its creation. Psilopoulos argues, echoing Jung, that resolution of these opposites leads to the realization of the inner divinity which, enslaved by matter, is struggling to rise into consciousness.

Comparisons with other authors always present fresh interpretations and **Mara Psalti**'s superb essay discloses hitherto unknown similarities, yet also important differences, with the work of K. G. Karyotakis (1896-1928). Psalti eruditely argues that the publication of *Askitiki* likely caught Karyotakis off guard. The subsequent release of *Elegies and Satires* a few

months later confirmed Kazantzakis's unintentional appropriation of Karyotakis's well-established poetic material. However, Kazantzakis reinterpreted these familiar themes in a mystical, theological sermon concerning ascension, transforming the abyss, silence, chaos, void, and darkness into catalysts for redemptive action and salvation. In response, Karyotakis crafted "Aisiodoxia" ("Optimism"), a posthumously published poem that parodied *Askitiki* by reappropriating its central imagery into his own narrative. With brilliant and perceptive insight Psalti shows how Karyotakis consciously and intelligently produced an inverted parody of *Askitiki* to articulate his own philosophy of life.

Kazantzakis's recently discovered and published novel *O Aníforos* (*The Ascent*) emerged clothed in themes from *Askitiki* and **Bart Soethaert** analyses closely this relationship between the two works. In the novel, Kosmas's journey from Crete to England in the aftermath of the Second World War ends up in the solitary writing of *Askitikí* to give expression to his "vision of liberation". By focusing on how this autofictional novel multiplies the spatio-temporal signification of *Askitiki*, thereby exploring the capability of Kazantzakis's worldview to address a critical situation in a new context, the nuclear age, Soethaert reveals *Askitiki* as the main vector along which the heterogeneous textual materials of *O Aníforos*'s literary assemblage were projected.

From the outset of this volume we are challenged by Peter Bien to see *Askitiki* as non-nihilistic. But does that make it religious? Kazantzakis himself declared the work to be clearly theological. Nevertheless, his relationship with both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches was notably complex and often troublesome. **Bert Groen** brings his encyclopaedic knowledge to bear when offering alluring and compelling parallels between *Askitiki* and Orthodox theology (what he calls 'Christian footsteps'). Kazantzakis was raised in and saturated with the liturgical and spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church. Hence, Groen argues, whoever investigates Kazantzakis's formative years and the high number of influences to which he was subjected should mention first and foremost—namely from a chronological perspective—Orthodox Christianity. More specifically: the Greek Orthodox patrimony, its spirituality, hagiography, liturgy, iconography, sacred music, customs and folklore. Although emphasizing the weight of the Orthodox Christian tradition for Kazantzakis, Groen is rightly careful not to imply that it was of such overarching importance that it outstripped the other intellectual movements which affected him, namely the views of Nietzsche, Bergson and Darwin, as well as his own Cretan perception of Buddhism and communism.

With her close textual analysis, **Paola Pruett-Vergara** digs further into this Orthodox connection by arguing that Kazantzakis's spiritual and intellectual development was greatly influenced by Saint John Climacus and his seventh-century work, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The essay highlights the theme of death as the instrument through which one arrives at unity with God, whether that be the God of the Orthodox Church or Kazantzakis's non-existent One. The essay reexamines the "new asceticism" of *Askitiki* in light of Kazantzakis's complex relationship with one of the key texts of Orthodox spirituality.

Kazantzakis remains the most widely translated of all Greek authors. **Svitlana Pereplotchykova** continues this vital service and invites us into the complex world of translating Kazantzakis into Ukrainian. Pereplotchykova shows Kazantzakis to be a towering presence in Ukrainian intellectual and cultural debate from the end of the 1950s right up to the present. Her essay discusses translations of Kazantzakis's works into Ukrainian, with particular attention to the translation of *Askitiki*. Solutions for rendering peculiar features of Kazantzakis's writing are assessed, along with distortions in some of the earlier versions occasioned by the "close" reading of Kazantzakis's novels by local editors "well instructed" by Moscow.

Despite the often technical and 'intellectual' nature of the aforementioned essays, *Askitiki* also touches us on a very human, personal level. **Irena Gavranović Lukšić**'s vignette-like essay documents the passion, patience, and precision that accompanied her 10-year project to translate *Askitiki* from Greek into Croatian. The process of the translation itself, Lukšić tells us, took the form of "stages", the last one being the comparison of six different translations in five languages. **Afroditi Tseremi** brings this volume to a very personal close with her own deeply poignant reading of *Askitiki*—a 'Journey of the Soul'.

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There is substantial food for thought in the essays that follow so let me conclude with some final words. One of the highlights for me in the two-day Conference out of which these essays were born was the all-female panel chaired by Afroditi Athanasopoulou, which indicated not only that any perceived shortcomings in Kazantzakis's philosophy may be placed in a larger, all-encompassing political and spiritual worldview, but also that a new, young, and fiercely intelligent group of female scholars are driving us through a burning forest at night and into a new dawn. For that we must all be both grateful and excited. And as we enter this new dawn, let us not strive to become mere disciples of Kazantzakis. He would not have wanted that

any more than Nietzsche or Jung would have desired us to become 'Nietzschean' or 'Jungian'. Any original pioneer of human thought does not desire imitators but rather furnishes us with the tools to live our own, unique, individual lives—to journey to our own Ithaca through our individuality, our political engagement and, always the most important for Kazantzakis, our own spiritual development. Let us therefore heed our forerunners and learn how to mythologise once more as we seek a religiosity that satisfies our contemporary spiritual hunger and, perhaps, embrace a new, dynamic image of 'God'.

Askitiki compels us to emit our own Cry (*Kravyí*), like the light of a distant star which remains for a time after the physical body has died. The work is essentially Kazantzakis's early cry, his self-proclaimed 'Credo'. As with Jung, who tells us in his *Liber Primus* that his own 'Confrontation with the Unconscious' commenced in his fortieth year and was the womb out of which his subsequent thought was born, so *Askitiki*, first completed in Kazantzakis's fortieth year, feeds into all of his own later work. It implores us to plumb our own depths through a series of spiritual exercises, authentically and without existential security and protective masks, and to strive to transubstantiate the raw material of matter in which 'God' is trapped. This is an encounter that is both terrifying and ominous, stripped of all logical comprehension and rational articulation, where all opposites (including gender) are transcended and experienced intuitively. We enter profound "Silence." This encounter need not paralyse us or lead us into despair. We are compelled to 'sing' from the edge of this abyss, although not all will achieve this pinnacle of heroic, spiritual endeavour. Neither is it a call for mere individualism. Rather, "Silence" provides us with an understanding of our collective humanity. We may emerge renewed to re-engage with the phenomenal world by means of clearer, more penetrating eyes and a deeper, more fervent soul. We may learn to love and to build a new and more just society. This, moreover, is our responsible duty. In doing so, we may become Saviours of God.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHY KAZANTZAKIS'S *ΑΣΚΗΤΙΚΗ* IS NOT NIHILISTIC

PETER BIEN

Kazantzakis completed *Salvatores Dei. Askitikí* a century ago, in 1923. When he published it finally in 1927 he added a short preface saying it was written to formulate the concerns and hopes of a communistic circle opposed to the materialistic conception of communism; therefore it should be considered a *meta*communistic credo. However, after experiencing Soviet communism, he revised this credo so significantly on 11 June 1928 that the new text became a Second Edition with the title reversed to *Askitikí. Salvatores Dei*. In this second edition the final decalogue is so different from its source in the first edition that Kazantzakis in a letter once called it "a bomb that blows up the entire *Askitikí,*" adding as well that the explosion would reach the heart of very few people.[1] This second decalogue blesses all those able to declare to God "You and I are one" but also all those able to endure "this huge, ominous, revolting secret: even this one does not exist!"[2] As predicted, nobody was heartened by this new conclusion. Even

[1] Kazantzakis, 1965 / 1984, 77. Bien, 2012, 314. The letter is dated 11-6-28. The preface in the 1927 edition is:

> Η «***Ασκητική***» γράφηκε στη Γερμανία στα 1923 για να διατυπώση την ψυχική αγωνία και τις ελπίδες ενούς κομμουνιστικού κύκλου από Γερμανούς, Πολωνούς, Ρούσους, που δε μπορούσαν ν' αναπνεύσουν άνετα μέσα στη στενή, καθυστερημένη, υλιστική αντίληψη της Κομμουνιστικής Ιδέας. Η «***Ασκητική***» τούτη ας θεωρηθή η πρώτη λυρική απόπειρα, η **πρώτη κραυγή** του μετακομμουνισιτκού «ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ». Ν.Κ.

[2] Beware Kimon Friar's translation sometimes. I believe that Kazantzakis used the Ancient Greek meaning of the word εξαίσιος, mistranslated by Friar here as "sublime". It is defined in Liddell and Scott as "ominous," "ill-boding" in Ancient Greek. The word is not included in my *Oxford Greek-English Learner's Dictionary*

Kazantzakis's closest friend, Pandelis Prevelakis, called the revised incantation "a proclamation of absolute nihilism" and asked, "Can the source of life be Nothingness?"[3] Reverend Papastephanou, to whom Kazantzakis had always written with the assurance of being understood and appreciated, now replied, "In other words, everything [is] vanity, effacement, ashes, nothingness, nullifying."[4] Nikiforos Vrettakos was equally categorical in his book on Kazantzakis: "Everything is a void. . . . This revision was dictated by . . . a sort of psychic condition run amok."[5] Kazantzakis's friend, the philosopher Elli Lambridi, assumed that Kazantzakis had ended the revised *Askitikí* with Buddhism, overriding every other governing philosophy.[6] I am aware of only one commentator who suspected that the supposedly nihilistic ending might need further interpretation. That was Aziz Izzet, but he is tantalizingly brief, merely suggesting that the One Who Does Not Exist is something other than God.[7]

When I treated *Askitikí* previously, I followed Izzet and looked for the controversial ending's other possible sources, especially the mystical theology of the Eastern Church. This investigation was useful, as were several others. But now I want to see if "even this one does not exist" can be explained best by Bergsonism, without looking for any other source.

There is not much need to argue that Bergson played a supremely important role in Kazantzakis's intellectual life. That should be obvious from well-known evidence. To begin, we have a definitive letter written in January 1908, only three months after his arrival in Paris to complete his Ph.D. dissertation on Nietzsche. The letter reveals that his real interest lay elsewhere. He wrote, "I want to formulate an individual, personal conception of life . . . and then, in accord with this . . . to write—whatever I write. Fortunately I am auditing the celebrated psychologist Bergson here and I feel that I am not wasting my time."[8] Next, we have the extensive lecture he delivered on Bergson when he returned to Athens after his studies. Apparently Bergsonism was not well known in Greece; Kazantzakis determined to educate his fellow intellectuals. The lecture begins with a footnote announcing "This is not a study. It is a simple talk . . ."[9] But this

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although it is present (labelled [λόγ. < αρχ.]) in the wonderful *Λεξικό της Κοινής Νεοελληνικής* as meaning "very fine" in today's Greek, as in εξαίσιο κρασί!

[3] Prevelakis, n.d, 30-31.

[4] Stamatiou, 1975, 1036.

[5] Vrettakos, 1960, 150.

[6] Lambridi, 1939, 11.

[7] Izzet, 1965, 104.

[8] Markakis, 1959, 35.

[9] The text is easily available because it was reprinted in the Autumn 1958 issue of the periodical *Καινούρια Εποχή*.

"simple talk" runs just short of 24 pages in print and consists of about 8000 words; it probably took an hour and a half to deliver. Furthermore, when asked to list his works as part of his application in 1945 to be admitted to the Academy of Athens, Kazantzakis no longer considered the lecture just a simple talk since he included it along with *Ἀσκητική* and his Ph.D. dissertation as three texts he had printed in the category of philosophy.

The simple talk's date was 22 January 1913. Less than two years later, while he was at Mt. Athos with Angelos Sikelianos from mid-November to late December 1914, he entered a relevant comment in his notebook, happily discovered by Professor Bert Groen.[10] I translate it as follows: "What I must have as guide and teacher is Supreme Love equals *élan vital*, which creates everything, conquering and employing materiality as its instrument. . . . Formulate (Christian) religion according to Bergson."[11] The word "Christian" in this declaration is enclosed in parentheses because Christianity will be clearly supplanted by the Bergsonian religion which he declares he will formulate. Also, the supreme Love which he hopes to guide and teach him is not αγάπη but έρωτας—sexuality, the force responsible for living organisms—which makes this vigor quite properly equal to Bergson's famous "vital impetus." The future Bergsonian religious work that he eventually formulated is of course *Ἀσκητική*.

But almost a decade elapses between this desire to formulate a new religion and the time when Kazantzakis actually completed the first edition of his Gospel according to Bergson. Perhaps the evangelist's not so simple lecture in January 1913 may help to fill the gap. It begins by asserting that although Immanuel Kant diminished the capability of human intellect, Bergson did this more thoroughly by teaching that our intellectual faculty subtracts motion from any phenomenon it encounters. Since, for Bergson, motion is life's essential characteristic, we must employ another mental faculty, intuition, not intellect, to understand how the entire history of life has been a gigantic effort by the *élan vital* to liberate materiality from the inflexible mechanisms of inertia. This section of the lecture concludes by presenting Bergson's most central, and most famous, metaphorical representation of his philosophical system—namely, a jet of steam which in its upward surge condenses into drops which fall, constituting bits of matter

[10] Groen, 2024, 83.

[11] «Πρέπει τον ανώτατο Έρωτα = [ίσον] *élan vital*, που δημιουργ[εί] τα πάντα, νικώντας και μεταχειρ[ιζόμενος] όργ[ανο] την ύλη—να τον έχω οδηγό και δάσκαλο. . . . Διατύπωση (Χριστ[ιανικής]) θρ[ησκείας] à la Bergson». Kazantzakis, 2020, 85.

which die; *yet the surge continues*.[12] Later I will quote Bergson's own metaphorical description of this universal process.

Continuing now with Kazantzakis's simple talk: It dwells further on intuition, stating that Bergson was not only "the first . . . to demonstrate that the boundaries of intellect are smaller than what Kant posited for us, . . . [but that he was also] the first to call for the collaboration of intuition and intellect for the purpose of philosophical inquiry." The lecture concludes by recognizing, "Not everyone is capable of making the Bergsonian method their own flesh and blood. All those who can, however, will be immediately astonished by the wealth of complete understanding."[13]

May I dare at this point to suggest that Kazantzakis challenges us as we read the second edition of *Askitikí* to progress from Kant to Bergson so that we, unlike so many early critics, may succeed in realizing that "even this one does not exist" *avoids nihilism*? To begin, we must realize that the text's guiding principle is no longer any sort of Christian God or sensibility; instead, as its author foresaw on Mount Athos, it is now the *élan vital*, whose surge continues.

What follows is our need to discover some more about this "vital impulse" which has been aptly described as "an absolutely creative force . . . bent on no goal other than creation . . . [of] the amazing variety of forms and behavior . . . which seem to bear almost direct witness indeed to an inexhaustible, completely untrammeled creative prodigality."[14] What Kazantzakis challenges us to *feel* with our intuition, even if we cannot *grasp* it with our intellect, is that the proclamation "even this one does not exist" is not an all-inclusive nihilistic denial of future material existence but merely a temporary *rest* or *pause* in the life force's *ever-continuing evolution* toward freedom from materiality.[15] Bergsonism teaches that the vital impetus producing any specific progression such as the one elaborated

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[12] «Το *élan vital* ο Μπέρξονας το φαντάζεται σαν ένα ανάβρυσμα ατμού που στο αναπήδημά του συμπυκνώνεται σε σταγόνες που πέφτουν. Οι σταγόνες αυτές αποτελούν την ύλη, κάτι δηλαδή που δεν ξετυλίζεται προς τη δημιουργική προς τ' απάνω εξέλιξη, στον χρόνο, μα αποσυνθέτεται στο διάστημα. Τα ενόργανα όμως όντα διαρκώς προλαβαίνουν και αφομοιώνουν *élan vital*, διαρκώς δηλαδή δημιουργούνται, προσθέτουν στην ύπαρξή τους κάτι νέο».

[13] «Όλοι . . . δεν είναι ικανοί να κάμουν σώμα κ' αίμα τους . . . τη μπερξονική μέθοδο. Όσοι όμως μπορέσουν, θα ξαφνιαστούν ευτύς από τα πλούτη της πλέριας κατανόησης».

[14] Monod, 1972, 115.

[15] Cf. Kazantzakis's letter to Emile Hourmoúsios in 1943 about his hero in the *Οδύσεια*: "The nihilistic cry 'Even this one does not exist!' is not the climax of his struggle . . . He listens intently, gains courage from the horror, and resumes his chosen path: the Ascent" (*Τετράδια Ευθύνης* Γ΄, 187).

in *Askitikí* is nevertheless present not only through that progression's abysses of life and death *but also beyond them*.

Let's remember the opening of Kazantzakis's Bergsonian religious Gospel: Where do we come from? Where are we going? "We come from a dark abyss. We end in a dark abyss." Yes, the second abyss *does* annihilate one example of life, but it *does not* make all future evolution futile. The sloughing off of matter releases the *élan vital* from the weight of its own partial congealment. What continues to exist is life's undying impetus. Kazantzakis spelled this out for us with perfect clarity in his introduction to *Askitikí*. I quote mostly from Friar's translation, after it tells us about the two abysses: "In the temporary living organism these two streams collide: (1st) the ascent toward composition, toward life, toward immortality; (2nd) the descent toward decomposition, toward matter, toward death. Both streams well up from the depths of primordial essence . . . *[D]eeper down we feel that Life itself is a beginningless, indestructible impetus for the Universe*."[16]

All this agrees completely with subsequent material in *Askitikí*. "Deeper down we feel" means with our intuition, as taught by Bergson. We know that while writing *Askitikí* in Berlin the author urged his wife Galatea, who had remained in Athens, to mail him his volume of Bergson's work that he had lent to an acquaintance.[17] Although strangely there is almost nothing about Bergson in Kazantzakis's autobiographical *Report to Greco*, where a whole chapter is devoted to Nietzsche, in several interviews later in life he acknowledged his allegiance irrefutably as follows: "You know that I am a follower of Bergson"[18] who was "a marvelous spiritual guide who profoundly influenced my life. He answered questions that had been bothering me for a very long time."

But surely the most expressive proof of Kazantzakis's allegiance to Bergson is the celebrated epitaph on his tombstone in Iraklion: "I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free." This is taken from *Askitikí*, of course, where it is lengthened slightly by the totally Bergsonian phrase: λυτρώθηκα από το νου κι από την καρδιά, "I've been delivered from both mind and heart"—meaning "from both intellect and intuition"—straight out of Kazantzakis's lecture. Bergsonian philosophy also explains what the key word "free" (λέφτερος) really means in the epitaph. Many people may interpret it as a statement about Christianity—namely, I hope for nothing because there is no heaven; I fear nothing because there is no hell; therefore

[16] Βαθύτερα νιώθουμε: η Ζωή είναι κι αυτή άναρχη, ακατάλυτη φόρα του Σύμπαντου (my italics in the English).
[17] Jouvenel, 1958, 102.
[18] Sadoul, 1955, 5.

I am free. But surely it is better to interpret the epitaph, like most everything else in *Askitikí,* in a Bergsonian manner. An early clue helping with this comes in a 12-10-1936 letter to Prevelakis: "Now I am living through the third stage. . . .I call it freedom. . . . I know that ideas are inferior to a creative soul . . . ."[19] This means that freedom comes from untrammeled creativity—that is, from the *élan vital.* But Bergson's conception of creativity includes that it sometimes takes a rest. Listen now to Bergson's own description of his major belief, which I said earlier I would quote: "Let us imagine a vessel full of steam at a high pressure, and here and there in its sides a crack through which the steam is escaping in a jet. The steam thrown into the air is nearly all condensed into little drops which fall back. . . . But a small part of the jet of stream subsists, uncondensed, for some seconds; it is making an effort to raise the drops which are falling; it succeeds at most in retarding their fall. So, from an immense reservoir of life *jets must be gushing out unceasingly*, of which each, falling back, is a world [which] represents what subsists of the primitive direction of the original jet, . . . *an impulsion which continues itself in a direction the inverse of materiality*."[20]

As for us, I hope that our own intuition will honor the *rest* or *pause* at the end of Kazantzakis's second edition of *Askitikí*. We should not buckle under the huge, ominous, revolting secret that "even this one does not exist." Instead, we should recognize and affirm the *élan vital's* untrammeled movement in a direction the inverse of materiality, should receive the deceased author's untrammeled gifts like light setting out from a star bursting into black perpetuity. The star dies but the light does not.[21] That is why Kazantzakis can claim on the tomb «Δεν ελπίζω τίποτα, δε φοβούμαι τίποτα, είμαι λέφτερος»—free from materiality.

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[19] *Τετρακόσια γράμματα,* 465; *Selected Letters*, 499.

[20] Bergson, 1911, 260-261; 1907, 268-269 (my italics).

[21] Kazantzakis, 1960, 109 (my italics). Kazantzakis, 1962, 73:
Πώς ξεκινάει το φως από ένα άστρο και χύνεται μέσα στη μαύρη αιωνιότητα κι οδοιποράει αθάνατο; Το άστρο πεθαίνει, μα το φως ποτέ του· τέτοια κι η κραυγή της ελευτερίας.

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CHAPTER TWO

TEXTUAL CRITICISM ON KAZANTZAKIS'S *ASKITIKI*: FROM THE UNIQUE EXTANT MANUSCRIPT TO THE EDITION

NIKOS MATHIOUDAKIS

To Peter Bien

Introduction

Askitiki is Nikos Kazantzakis. And Nikos Kazantzakis is *Askitiki*. This particular work constitutes the ultimate spiritual and philosophical identification with its creator. This philosophical treatise has rightly been characterized as the beginning and the end of the complete work of the Cretan author, the Alpha (A) and Omega (Ω) of the ideological creation of all his literary works: *Askitiki* is "The Gospel of Kazantzakis" [in Greek: «Το κατά Καζαντζάκην Ευαγγέλιο»], as the author himself claims that this work is a real Outcry and the rest of his work is simply a commentary on this Outcry.

Nikos Kazantzakis appears in the Modern Greek Literature in 1906 at the age of 23 and he is the most widely translated Modern Greek writer (in about 50 languages). Also, he is one of the few writers, on a Greek or even global scale, who dealt with most literary genres: novel, poetry, essay, travelogue, theater, children's books, film scripts, as well as translation, adaptation and letter writing.

The Cretan writer is nothing more than this: a tireless writer, a craftsman of words, a worker of inspiration. Kazantzakis, almost seventy years after his death, stands in the literary galaxy as an unquenchable star. The agony of expression and the struggle of Kazantzakis's creation with his inner