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**Peter Bien: Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, Volume 2**

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## Kazantzakis's Attraction to Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s

In the first volume of this study I treated the *Odyssey* as a “mythification” of Kazantzakis’s experiences up to 1929—a reworking on the plane of imagination of his frustrating attempts at action on the plane of reality. I also presented an articulation of “freedom,” Kazantzakis’s new “political” stance that had followed both nationalism and leftism, not to mention Buddhism. When we come to a discussion of *Report to Greco* at the end of this second volume, we will see Kazantzakis once again asserting this “freedom” as the goal of his spiritual journey, but calling it now “Odysseas.”

The *Odyssey* took a long time to write. If we discount the first draft, its composition was accomplished in concentrated bursts of energy that stretched out over nine years. However, the actual time devoted to the six reworkings was only about twenty-four months, which explains why Kazantzakis was able to do so much else during the years in question (1929–1938). We should also realize that the epic had attained its definitive form by the third draft (1932) and that in his subsequent reworkings Kazantzakis merely improved individual sections, adding metaphors or concepts drawn from his recent experience (Prevelakis 1965b:126–127). Although incorporated to some degree in the epic, these experiences did not determine its essential nature or subject matter. Hence I feel justified in having discussed this work in its entirety immediately after my treatment of Kazantzakis’s experiences in Russia, his writing of *Toda-Raba*, and his third “political” stage—“freedom”—which he dates from about 1933. It should not surprise us to learn that a great many things happened to him during the *Odyssey* years, things that we must now stop to review.

These experiences helped to direct Kazantzakis’s career in the crucial years that saw the Italian and German invasions of Greece, the Axis occupation, the resistance to it, the civil war, Kazantzakis’s attempt to reenter politics, and—in the literary field—the writing of *Vios kai politela tou Aléksi Zorbá*, the Prometheus trilogy, *Kapodístrias*, and *Konstantínos Palaiológos*.

Kazantzakis’s activities in the eight years from 1932 to 1940, aside from the *Odyssey*, were (as usual) enough to occupy the entire lifetime of a less energetic man. Outwardly, they included two trips to Spain (1932–1933 and

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1936), a journey to Japan and China (1935), and a visit to England (1939). But Kazantzakis also wrote continuously throughout these years. In constant need of money, he kept an eye on markets that the *Odyssey* would never reach, turning out a history of Russian literature in two volumes; a series of children's books; one-half of a French-Greek dictionary; five scenarios for the cinema; translations of selected lyric poetry of contemporary Spain; travel articles on Spain, Japan, China, the Peloponnesus, and England, later collected in four volumes of *Taksidévondas*; translations of the entire *Divine Comedy*, of Pirandello's *Questa sera si recita a sogeto*, and of Goethe's *Faust*, part I. In addition, he reworked the travel articles on the Orient, as he had the Russian articles, in order to produce in French the novel *Le Jardin des rochers* (written in 1936). It was also during this period that he composed most of his *terzinas* on the great personalities who had influenced him. Finally, he drafted—again in French—the novel that eventually became *Kapetán Mihális*, and he completed three ambitious plays in Greek: *Othello Returns*, *Melissa*, and *Julian the Apostate* (written in 1936, 1937, and 1939, respectively).

Not all of this voluminous output relates directly to Kazantzakis's political experience or thought during the 1930s, yet much of it does. Certain writings must therefore be considered if we are to understand his evolving stance in the crucial years following the *Odyssey*—years that produced in him a revived nationalism in a mellowed form very different from his Dragoumian chauvinism of the 1910s. This new stance suffuses many (although not all) of the novels and plays written from 1940 onward.

We are already beginning to see that the label “freedom” that Kazantzakis attached to a putative final period, presumably lasting from 1933 until his death, needs some qualification. The last two and a half decades of Kazantzakis's life were hardly static; they involved obvious growth and change. Yet the label “freedom” is an appropriate one for this period since Kazantzakis always maintained his allegiance to the creative imagination, never losing his faith in some *future* political effectiveness of the *kravýi* (the cry or outcry) that he was voicing. (This futurity is what leads me to term his politics eschatological.) But within this basic stance there were many changes of detail—or, more accurately, revivals of attitudes that had been surpassed. Kazantzakis never really abandoned an allegiance. What we are tempted to call “positions” or “stages” are merely instances of priority when the ongoing clash of opposites becomes temporarily quiescent. Hence his “freedom” may be termed a priority that remains unchallenged for the last twenty-five years of his life if it is viewed as a general principle; nevertheless, it is a priority cloaking the same conflicts that we saw earlier—specifically, between participation and withdrawal, action and art.

Insofar as Kazantzakis allowed himself to become involved once more in the active life, he betrayed a continued attraction to opposite extremes of the political spectrum, with hatred of the bourgeoisie remaining, as always,

the fulcrum allowing him to swing either way. In the 1930s he refused to oppose fascism; in the 1940s he returned briefly to the parliamentary socialism that he had rejected first in his Paris years and again in his years of militant communism; in the 1950s he placed his hopes in Chairman Mao. But all this, I repeat, was only insofar as he allowed himself to become involved in the active life, for overriding these worldly allegiances was always the *un*worldly allegiance to “freedom” defined in the way I tried to demonstrate in the first volume—namely, as “the condition of a creative soul expressing itself in art” (Bien 1989:188, 2001:237), with devotion to all that is subjective, imaginative, and eschatological as presuppositions. We must always remember that Kazantzakis was a communist/fascist/Maoist/socialist/nationalist whose kingdom was not of this world (Prevelakis 1965b:342).

Yet he always had a great deal to say about this world, including fascism and Nazism, which dominated the 1930s. It is important therefore to expose whatever facts we have concerning Kazantzakis’s attitude toward these -isms so that we may judge responsibly, avoiding facile name-calling or labeling.

Kazantzakis’s attraction to the right, which goes back to his early sojourn in Paris (1908–1909), surfaced again in 1924 when he concluded, “Mussolini is perhaps much greater than we have been accustomed to thinking up to now” (1958a:236). Interestingly, the characteristics that Kazantzakis admired in Mussolini were precisely those that he had also admired in the communists of Berlin in the early 1920s and, a decade or so earlier, in the arch-nationalist Ion Dragoúmis (1878–1920), whose extensive influence is recorded in volume 1 of this study—namely, an all-encompassing ideology, subordination of the individual to the “mystic” whole, youthful energy, Darwinian hardheadedness, primacy of the will over the mind, a cult of the ritualistic, and hatred of bourgeois morality. Let us always remember that Kazantzakis’s allegiances at discrete moments in his career were ways he found to apply positions broader than any particular faction, indeed that they were often broad enough to encompass antithetical factions. Thus he found no difficulty in concluding in 1927 that communism and fascism were “faithful collaborators” (1927f:1). If he adhered exclusively to anything at all, it was to Bergsonian vitalism, not to any political party or ideology. Valuing passion and energy above all else, he was apt to equate communism with fascism because both, in his opinion, displayed vitalistic virtues.

In examining his attraction to Mussolini and his subsequent reluctance to oppose Franco or Hitler, we must acknowledge his inborn distrust, as a Greek, of the Great Powers, in particular of Great Britain and France, which (so he concluded, along with many other Greeks) had manipulated little Greece for their own benefit ever since the time of the Greek war of independence.<sup>1</sup> The depth of this prejudice may be seen in Kazantzakis’s reaction to Parisian life when he went there in 1908 and wrote home chiefly about effete French sculptors, painters, and musicians (compared with the

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robust Germans), and about profligate French customs. Kazantzakis also accepted all the clichés about Anglo-Saxon reserve and sexlessness, going out of his way, for example, to describe the female English tourists on a *bateau mouche* fancifully as “camel-footed and plank-breasted” (1909a: 10 January 1910). Starting in this way, perhaps playfully, he continued to harp on the same string as his career unfolded. In Vienna, observing the postwar misery there, he wrote to his first wife, Galatea, that France was the cause; next, when he moved to Berlin and saw even greater misery, he again cited France as the villain (1958a:21, 145). All this serves as background to the even stronger—and decidedly unplayful—remark he made, first in a letter to Galatea in 1924 at the height of his Bolshevik fervor (1958a:245–246), then in his 1926 article “The New Pompeii” (reprinted in 1965e:259–267; cf. 1964a:504, 1965c:419). After contemplating the fate of Pompeii while walking through the ruins, he hears a whisper: “God grant that I may stroll in this way in Paris and London, talking Russian to the comrades.”<sup>22</sup> No wonder that Kazantzakis preferred “vital” dictatorships in the 1930s to the necessarily sedate workings of parliamentary democracy.

It is against this background of his distrust of Great Britain and France, his sympathy for Germany after the First World War, his general preference for German culture, and his vitalistic, antirationalistic orientation that we must view his reaction to Hitler. More specifically, this reaction was determined by his attitude toward war. As usual, he struggled to reconcile two opposing tendencies: his basic humanity, on the one hand, and his intellectual conviction that strife is good, on the other. As we examine the specific situation in Germany, we are therefore going to find Kazantzakis wavering between repulsion and attraction—or, as he liked to phrase it, between the dictates of the heart and the mind.

His inconsistent attitude toward Hitler is a perfect example of this wavering. As early as July 1931 we find him horrified at the thought of Germany under such a leader. Writing to Pandelis Prevelakis from his retreat in Gottesgab, Czechoslovakia, he comments:

Yesterday, Eleni sent me French newspapers. Suddenly I saw that Germany is at the lip of the abyss. My heart constricted; a people half an hour away from me was in danger all the days I was writing poetry. Tomorrow I must abandon my writing and go to Germany to see. (Prevelakis 1965b:254)

Two years later, as he pleaded with Eleni Samiou to leave Paris and join him in Aegina, he had no illusions regarding what Hitler would eventually mean to Europe: “With Hitler the world is upside-down again and I’m afraid that some huge harm may break out all of a sudden and you’ll be far away in the center of the fire” (Eleni Kazantzaki 1977:347, 1968a: 287). In 1935 he expressed interest in an antifascist congress although declining an invitation

to attend (Eleni Kazantzaki 1968a:324). In 1938 he clearly viewed Hitlerism as a curse:

Have you seen what is happening in Germany? . . . We've entered a middle age. . . . All the symptoms. What should we do? Dream, plan, work for the coming civilization. (Eleni Kazantzaki 1977:426, 1968a:356)

Nevertheless, these reactions of the heart were countered by the opposite reaction of the mind, which counseled him to admire the German situation in a qualified way, or at least to gaze down upon human folly with Olympian passivity. In 1933 he justified his inactivity in a letter to Renaud de Jouvenel, whose periodical *Le Cahier Bleu* was vigorously anti-Nazi: "If I were a man of action I would be absolutely at your side. But the smile of My Lord Buddha invades me from time to time" (Jouvenel 1958:91). In 1936 he published his notorious article "Fear and Hunger" as a justification for his refusal to join with other Greek intellectuals in signing a protest against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. I must quote this at length since it offers such a succinct, clear exposition of Kazantzakis's attitude toward war, his valuation of energy, his distrust of France and Great Britain, even his Olympian eclecticism:

The fundamental instincts of man are two:

- a) to extend his power around him as much as he can; to grasp, conquer, take things, devour;
- b) to preserve as much . . . as possible what he has conquered.

The first instinct is the primordial need of the living, developing organism: *Hunger*. The second instinct has primordial *Fear* as its immediate consequence.

A young organism—healthy, lively, still involved in its upward assault—is hungry. Need urges it to intensify its power, to face danger bravely, to lunge everywhere around itself, and to find food so that it may satisfy its hunger.

A mature organism that has eaten and been filled has just one additional purpose: to prevent others from taking what it owns, to keep established order from being altered, to preserve everything as it is—peacefully.

The first preaches war because only war can save it from the danger of dying from hunger. Naturally, it proclaims that war is holy, that power and justice are one and the same, and that the end justifies the means. The second preaches peace and formulates various philanthropic, justice-loving, sublime worldviews in order to camouflage its fear. It knows that only peace serves its interests and guards its abundant conquests.

Of today's great nations, Germany, Japan, and Italy are suffocating within their borders; they have no place to expand; they are hungry.

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France and England are overstuffed; they have divided the world between them and they look with fear upon peoples who lack property or food.

How can an impartial mind, one that refuses to be blurred either by love or hate, confront the actions of these two groups?

A few months ago, our “intellectuals” carried around an infuriating, anodyne protest against Italy, which had leaped forward to devour Abyssynia. Someone asked me if I would sign it.

“Surely I sympathize with Abyssynia, which is defending its liberty,” I answered him, “but at the same time I recognize Italy’s right to live: to stop suffocating within the narrow frontiers that do not give her sufficient room. All the peoples who created great civilizations have followed the same gluttonous, inhuman, dark instincts: in their initial bodily development they committed injustices, they seized, they devoured. And as soon as their bodies became stabilized and hunger ceased, they began to create. Italy is doing the same today, following the same inhuman laws. The spirit is the most bloodthirsty of vultures.”

I would have signed had the protest been against England and France, which possess the entire world and refuse to give land to poor peoples in order that they may live. They are the inhuman over-filled capitalists of the nations, and they do not permit other peoples, the proletarians, to lift their hands in revolt. And although both instincts—hunger and fear—are primordial and profoundly human, yet of the two I prefer hunger because only that stirs up stagnant waters and urges the world upward.

“Aren’t you afraid of being called a fascist?”

“Why should I be afraid? Didn’t they call me a communist? I can never be either the one or the other because I am a free man. I am free because I am not a man of action, who, in order to act, needs dogmas, certainties, and practical thoughts.”

Today, whoever wants to preserve his liberty pays dearly. But he is left with a great joy: he knows that he remains sober among his intoxicated contemporaries.

Fascism and Hitlerism are profound, extremely significant phenomena worthy of the greatest reverence and fear because they spring from the deep psychical and at the same time economic needs of the nations that engendered them. Mussolini and Hitler are two great, leading doers-of-deeds who are playing their part in their own way, just as Lenin and Gandhi did in their way, to help solve the frightful worldwide drama that we are experiencing. . . .

Hitler is an instrument of a power higher than himself. . . . Whatever good he possesses he owes to passive powers inside him,

to feminine elements that receive the monstrous instigation of his endangered race. . . .

For years now I have aligned my fate with the leftists. But I struggle to keep my judgment intact and to observe the opponents with reverence—and not only with reverence but with a strange, illicit love. At first I did not understand why; now I do. It is because now I divine . . . that we are secret collaborators fighting for the same goal. What goal?

That the human soul may move a little, that it may remain as vigilant as possible, tremble a little from Fear or, insatiable, lunge forward, all around itself, urged on by Hunger. . . . (Vrettakos 1960:577–579)

This text provides us with a particularly blunt expression of the attitude toward war that Kazantzakis developed at the start of his career. That he did so is not surprising, considering what I have already noted and also considering his ethnic background. In Greece, and especially in the Crete of his youth, the most respected figure was the warrior; even priests led men into battle, carrying on the tradition of the holy war first encountered by Kazantzakis in the saints' lives that he had read as a boy. This ethnic background was then reinforced in Kazantzakis's case by his intellectual masters—Nietzsche, Sorel, Spengler, even Bergson—all of whom preached strife as creative, peace as decadent. Further reinforcement came from Ion Dragoumis's exhortations in his novel *Samothrace* (1909) that so moved Kazantzakis in the early years. Here is a sampling:

[T]he nation will be saved not by education but by war because in this way it will awake from the drugs that it is fed every day by its literati. . . . War makes the man; and nations are a reason to make war. Only by making war does the slave become free. (Dragoumis 1926:97)

Ever since the Greek race has existed, it has never lost the military tradition. The ancients imagined Virtue (Αρετή, from the word Ἄρης [the god of war]) to be filled with bravery. And, as long as the race does not lose this tradition, it will always exist. As soon as it does lose it, it will die. (Dragoumis 1926:114)

War will . . . deliver us from both enemies and decline. Peace makes us flabby. (Dragoumis 1926:126)

In addition, we should note Kazantzakis's use of Dragoumis's *Samothrace* in connection with a political manifesto of his own in 1910, called "For Our Youth." Here we find arguments similar to those employed twenty-six years later to justify the expansionism of Mussolini and Hitler:

The more fanatically patriotism manifests itself, the more completely and quickly does it serve humanity. For if it destroys its neighbor-nation, is not that destruction, when viewed in perspective, a

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benefaction to mankind? It is proper for all those who are old and tired to vanish—all who have already fulfilled their destiny and given to thought and action what they could. In this way they relinquish their place to other nations that are young and vigorous . . . , nations that will vanish in their turn as soon as they fulfill their destiny. Then they, too, will grow tired, will preach cosmopolitan ideas, will consider patriotism a leftover relic from barbaric times, and will die. That is how it always happens: cosmopolitanism and patriotism are the results and not the cause of a nation's withering or vitality. . . . As soon as cosmopolitan ideas, philanthropy, tolerance, and Christianity begin to prevail, that moment is an infallible symptom of fatigue and death. (1910a:235–236)

The same type of thinking enters a novel called “Kapétan Elia” that Kazantzakis wrote in French in 1929 but eventually tore up. Here, a virile father filled with passion for homeland and women is contrasted with a decadent son: “Romain Rollandist, Esperantist, pacifist, would-be writer” (Prevelakis 1965c:142). The same contrast is developed in *Melissa* (1937) and in the poem “Grandfather–Father–Grandson” (also 1937), not to mention in *Kapétán Mihális*, which in effect is the final version of “Kapétan Elia.”

It is clear that Kazantzakis, raised a Cretan and nourished with the ideas of Dragoúmis and Nietzsche, considered strife an inescapable condition of life, one to be desired rather than eschewed. In addition, he had adopted from Bergson (1911:94) the belief that “life does not proceed by the association and addition of elements, but by dissociation and division.” “If life realizes a plan,” Bergson argues,

it ought to manifest a greater harmony the further it advances, just as the house shows better and better the idea of the architect as stone is set upon stone. If, on the contrary, the unity of life is to be found solely in the impetus that pushes it along the road of time, the harmony is not in front, but behind. The unity is . . . given at the start as an impulsion, not placed at the end as an attraction. In communicating itself, the impetus splits up more and more. Life, in proportion to its progress, is scattered in manifestations which undoubtedly owe to their common origin the fact that they are complementary to each other in certain aspects, but which are none the less mutually incompatible and antagonistic. So the discord between species will go on increasing. (1911:108–109)

But Kazantzakis was not content to base his attraction to war merely on the generalized metaphysic (or “metabiology,” as George Bernard Shaw [1929] liked to call it) that we have just seen. He based it as well on his dogma of the transitional age. According to this, war is not a creative, vital,

or spiritual form *per se*. It is just the spirit's mode of expression in our particular transitional period; in other ages life may "ascend" in peaceful ways. This view of course contradicts the dogma that creativity and progress derive exclusively from strife. But Kazantzakis never let contradiction disturb him, especially when by joining two discordant views he could have his cake and eat it, too. In this case he could justify war either as a general, ineluctable precondition of all progress or as a particular, ineluctable precondition of progress in a specific era, implying in the latter case that the paradoxical goal is to keep alive the lighted candle of the human spirit—that is, peace (see Eleni Kazantzaki 1977:426, 1968a:356).

The more general position attracted Kazantzakis even in the crucial year 1939, as we see in his published response (delayed until 1945) to the question, Will wars ever cease?

I hope, I fear, never!

"I fear" because a voice inside me—the "human being"—naturally pities people and abhors blood. Thus I "fear" that wars will never cease.

"I hope" because there is also another voice inside me that does not care about the happiness of people (of every person and above all of myself), and that knows that "war is the father of everything" and that life without it would have become a morass of stagnant water. Naturally, this inner voice is not exclusively my own; it is an "inhuman," or "superhuman," or—better—a "beyond-human" voice that fights for purposes beyond mankind. And this voice "hopes" that wars will never cease. (1945d)

The same stance may also be seen three years earlier. On the way to Spain in 1936 to report on the civil war, Kazantzakis was asked, Are you for or against war? He answered: "Neither for nor against . . . as I am neither for nor against earthquakes" (1962b:146). This implies that war is a natural, inescapable phenomenon. In his articles on Spain, he went on to note his feeling that "war intensifies to the highest pitch all of mankind's griefs and joys" (1962b:147, 1963c:163).

In 1954, however, he came back to this same question in an entirely different fashion, one that shows him espousing the more qualified position that invokes the dogma of the transitional age. He is speaking to an interviewer in Antibes, France:

"May I tell you something? Do you know what I remember: an Athenian journalist who came here and wrote afterwards that I am in favor of war. To be asked 'Are you for or against war?' is like being asked 'Are you for or against earthquakes?' I never said I was in favor of war—it's only that he didn't understand what I was saying. We are

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at the end of a historical period. The world in which we live is disintegrating. Moral, psychical, economic decay. The world stinks from this decay. Such is our age. Because decomposition has always been the prologue to composition, another age is struggling to be born, as always happens. . . . The interval between a civilization that is disappearing and another that is being created has always been called a middle age. That is what we are experiencing. We do not see it. Historians are the ones who will see it. And it is a fact that middle ages always have wars. (Yalourakis 1958:157; first published in 1954)

The same wavering (not to call it duplicity) that allows him to eat his cake and have it, too, appears in *England*, the result of a five-month visit in 1939 during which Kazantzakis experienced the first German air raids over London. On the one hand he invokes war, in Dragoúman fashion, as a necessary stimulus to vitality; indeed, he repeats the language of “Fear and Hunger”:

Man’s deepest impulses are two: (1) Hunger—to extend his power as far as possible around himself: to seize, conquer, expropriate, eat; (2) Fear—to keep his spoils from being taken from him, to preserve whatever he has conquered as best he can for as long as possible. (1964c:10, 1965a:10)

A voice inside us, the “human being,” naturally feels sorry for people and is repelled by blood. But there is another voice inside us that does not care about people’s safety, well-being, and happiness, and knows that life without Father War would become a morass of stagnant water. This inhuman—unhuman, superhuman—voice inside humans is not our own; it belongs to some demon that lurks in the human soul. Still better: it is beyond-the-human, a voice that shouts and fights for purposes that transcend mankind. And this voice “hopes” that wars will never cease. (1964c:248, 1965a:249)

On the other hand, in *England* Kazantzakis again invokes the dogma of the transitional age, even though this contradicts the other position in which strife is deemed “spiritual” at all times. The section called “Conversation with a Young Man” sounds very much like his “Confession of Faith” (Prevelakis 1965b:221–230; Eleni Kazantzaki 1968a:565–570) in that it counsels responsible people first to discover what form the ascending spirit takes in *their particular age* and then to align themselves accordingly. Next, sounding very Spenglerian, Kazantzakis characterizes our age as one of transition, in which war is the inevitable instrument for change:

A human being who insists, even now, on serving the “spirit” must, if he wants to be saved, see clearly and courageously what his duty is: what mission he may have among the monsters. And he must take his place in the cosmogony of today’s disintegrating world.

We have entered a period that will perhaps last for two centuries and during which war will repeatedly follow armed peace. (1964c:224, 1965a: 224–225)

But as if this contradiction were not enough, Kazantzakis then complicates things still further by insisting that all people of good will must now take sides while he himself (although not without misgivings) refuses to take sides, defending his right to stand above the fray so that he may struggle to divine a future synthesis derived from the current opposites. Thus he aligns himself solely with a hypothetical *cosmos* that will issue in the future—eschatologically—from contemporary chaos.

The crux of the matter is that even at this point, after Germany had annexed the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, Kazantzakis refused to align himself strongly against Hitler. His agonizing is perhaps most clearly evident in the little essay on Nietzsche that he included in *England* and reprinted (with some changes) in *Report to Greco*:

The present moment that the world is undergoing is a heavy one laden with all the devil's gifts. How would Nietzsche—who sowed the dangerous seed of the Superman: beyond good and evil, beyond morality, philanthropy, and peace—how would he now view, and with what Dionysiac shudder, the blood-red wheat germs that have sprouted? (1964c:185, 1965a:187)

Who was the man who proclaimed the essence of life to be the longing to expand and dominate, and that nothing is worthy of being accorded rights except power? Who was the man who prophesied the Superman, and in prophesying him brought him? The Superman had arrived, and here was his cowering prophet, struggling to hide beneath an autumn tree!

It was the first time that I felt so tragically sympathetic toward him. For it was the first time I saw so plainly that all of us are the flutes of some invisible Shepherd, that we play whatever melody he blows into us, and not the melody that we ourselves desire.

I gazed at [Nietzsche's] sunken eyes, sheer brow, drooping mustache. "The Superman has come," I whispered. "Is this what you wanted?"

He cringed even more, like a hunted and wounded beast attempting to hide. His voice rang out proud and sorrowful from the other bank: "Yes!"

I could feel his heart ripping in two. (1964a:396, 1965c:331; cf. 1964c:197, 1965a:199)

The precise meaning of this affirmation is best stated in a letter written on 11 October 1939, toward the end of Kazantzakis's stay in England. This text

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should dispel forever the misconception, often found among those who have read only the later novels, that Kazantzakis was primarily a liberal humanist who championed Christian values. Those who believe this have overlooked his own repeated characterization of his life as “inhuman.” This is what Kazantzakis wrote to Prevelakis barely a month after Hitler had invaded Poland, leading to England’s and France’s declaration of war against the Third Reich:

I am happy to be here in England, at a moment of such worldwide historical importance. I enjoy following how frontiers move and shift, how the geographical map has rediscovered the fluidity that suits it so well. It is a divine moment. We are living amid astonishing creativity; every morning I feel indescribable joy when I spread the *Times* out across my knees. What voracious souls crave—to live for centuries in the brief temporal interval allotted them—is what we now have, and we should be overjoyed. I had never hoped for such a divine gift. I have it and am tasting it with profound delight. (Prevelakis 1965b:491–492)

The remainder of the letter implies that people of good will must take sides while he himself, contradictorily, remains aloof:

I hope to return to Aegina soon. I’ve taken what I could; it’s time now to immerse myself in solitude. I want to be in time to finish whatever I still have formless and melodious inside me. I really do not have any complaint about life—all I ask is to survive a few more years, until I manage to finish. I am living now at every moment—living life more now than when I wrote in the *Odyssey* that I must leave to Charon only a few insignificant sweepings. . . .

As is my custom, I am living an “inhuman” life—i.e., one that is tranquil and happy (without any external cause) in the midst of worldwide horror: not as a spectator but as an inhuman power that looks upon human beings with neither disdain nor esteem. I would like to be able to express precisely what I am thinking and feeling, but I would be stoned by all sides. And that is a sign that I am right. (Prevelakis 1965b:492–493)

His Olympianism, although passive, is not a cynical fiddling while London burns. It is “responsible” according to Kazantzakis’s own conception of that word, for he does take a stance of sorts: to influence reality by creating a riverbed into which some hypothetical civilization may flow at some unspecified future date. Never one to fear stoning by the critics, he did go ahead to formulate his position. For him, the true artist must be devoted neither nostalgically to the past nor vigorously to the present, but prophetically to the future:

In this terrible period of action, only those who have great amounts of future inside them deserve to be poets. Prophetic verse [is] the

poet's effort, beyond crime and blood, to conceive the created civilization and, by fashioning new human types, to help fluid reality enter the ideal templates that he yearns for and maps out. (1964c:226, 1965a:227)

He goes on to say that this is all the more important because the present time is the beginning of a new era. As the German bombers roared over London, Kazantzakis felt that he was experiencing "the first death-rattle of industrial civilization" (1964c:220, 1965a:221), the death rattle that, if I may invoke Giambattista Vico (1968), would also be the thunderclap issuing in the era of renewal:

We find ourselves now at the beginning and are entering it. Our era is no longer in decline. . . . Its tremendous forces are at their zenith. Perhaps they are barbarian ones, but that is always how civilizations begin. (1964c:228, 1965a:228–229)

Kazantzakis sees his role, then, as divining the coming civilization. In *England* he announces this first in the prologue, which brings together many of his chief political ideas: insistence on the bankruptcy of technological, scientific civilization; the Nietzschean plea for a complete reevaluation of values instead of a mere readjustment; the Bergsonian metabiological view whereby political events are seen as manifestations of the life force pushing evolution "upward"; the interest in each side's passion, intensity, and purity rather than in its actual position; the conviction that the seeming antagonists are secret collaborators; the eschatological vision of renewal following catastrophe; the need for a chimera; the ability of this chimera to clothe itself in flesh at some hypothetical point in the future; the conflict between the heart, which prompts us to take sides in the present, and the mind, which counsels us to stand aloof in order to divine the new synthesis; the need to follow the mind as it directs us toward "freedom."

I will cite those portions of the prologue that are most relevant to Kazantzakis's refusal to condemn Hitler:

You must look at contemporary world-wide reality with an unclouded eye—unclouded by hate and love—so that you may acknowledge the virtues and at the same time the infamy, the light and the dark. (1964c:7, 1965a:7)

Improvement, reassessment, continuation are not enough. Contemporary man has finally felt the need for a fundamental reversal, a change in front, a new table of values, a reevaluation of virtue. (1964c:9, 1965a:9)

A young organism—healthy, lively, still involved in its upward assault—is hungry. Need urges it to intensify its power, to brave

## CHAPTER ONE

danger, to lunge everywhere around itself, and to find food so that it will satisfy its hunger. It makes war.<sup>3</sup> (1964c:10, 1965a:10)

Intellectuals today, more than ever before, have a large responsibility. They have a duty to be saturated with the fate of their epoch. . . . And they must keep their personal independence intact so that they may be inviolate and upright when their time comes. (1964c:12–13, 1965a:12–13)

Kazantzakis's stance in 1939 clearly seems to be that of Olympian aloofness. To his credit or discredit, he maintained this aloofness throughout the Axis invasion and occupation of Greece despite some moments of honest concern (which become fully relevant to the novel *Aléxis Zorbás*). He was dreaming, planning, working for the coming civilization, holding his tiny lighted candle. If nothing else, we must agree that he conscientiously acted out the myth that he had created for himself.

In attempting to explain Kazantzakis's aloofness, we have already examined his conviction that strife is as naturally inevitable as an earthquake. But we must also acknowledge a diametrically opposite attitude evident in his early manhood: world-weariness, a glimmer of which remained even in the 1940s. This took the initial form of decadent aestheticism in *Serpent and Lily* (1906); it then reemerged as Buddhism followed by the subjectivist doctrine of "play" seen in the second half of the *Odyssey*. World-weariness receives its most concentrated expression in "Othello Returns" (1937), which elaborates the doctrine that all events are in the mind of the observer, so-called reality being nothing but a script invented as one goes along. This long-established attitude helps to explain the ease with which Kazantzakis could excuse his aloofness on grounds of being possessed by Lord Buddha's smile. On top of all this was the continued weight imposed by the concept of the transitional age. Despite his intimation that the transitional age was perhaps coming to an end, Kazantzakis in the late 1930s and early 1940s still considered correct action impossible—just as he had in his 1906 play *Day Is Breaking*. Imperative for this transitional age, as for the earlier one, was correct thought. In other words, Kazantzakis could not fulfill his own vision of heroic action: "to move and not be sure" (Manos Haris 1961:62). Instead, like the Boss in *Aléxis Zorbás*, he needed to "calculate," thinking of the future instead of the present.

On the other hand, he did not see himself in the late 1930s as equivalent to the Boss, much less as equivalent to the impotent intellectual type he had denigrated as "Romain Rollandist, Esperantist, pacifist, would-be writer." Instead, he saw himself paradoxically as a virile activist on the spiritual plane, enduring the scorn of both sides because of his devotion to a hypothetical synthesis in an unspecified future at the conclusion of the transitional horror from which he remained aloof.

When we think of the nature of the threat in 1939, it is hard to sympathize with Kazantzakis. He of course was not the only one who remained aloof. Groups like the Quakers refused conscription in the name of their own vision of a future kingdom of the spirit.<sup>4</sup> In England, Sir Osbert Sitwell proclaimed in 1943 that a country “is worth dying for, as it is worth living for, because of the flowers its soil produces” and that “the modern development of ‘healthy citizenship’, as it is called, under which every man is obliged to take a hand to repel the attacks from land, sea and air brought upon him by his incompetence as a voter, sterilizes all talent” (Sitwell 1943:162, 168). Yet these analogues are inexact. Unlike Kazantzakis, these figures dissociated themselves from politics, the first because of an unambiguous allegiance to eschatological religion, the second because of an unambiguous allegiance to aesthetics. Kazantzakis, contrariwise, cloaked his religiosity and also his aestheticism in political garb, attempting to convince himself and others that he was pursuing activism on a higher plane.

Although he invited other people of spirit to join him, they did not find his position attractive. George Theotokas complained publicly in December 1939 of the view, represented in Greece chiefly by Kazantzakis, that all opposing forces are historically necessary for the creation of a new world (Theotokas 1939). The ethical consequences of this view, he maintained, are that all sides must be considered right. This he could not accept in December 1939, with Germany already occupying Poland and having entered a state of war with Great Britain and France. Nikiforos Vrettakos (1960:576), speaking of *England* in his excellent study of Kazantzakis, sees this book as confirming how very much Kazantzakis had lost touch with reality in the 1930s. All of Kazantzakis’s “big words” about “responsible man” and so forth, Vrettakos insists, were simply ways of sidetracking his refusal to condemn Hitler. He had become a prisoner of his *idées fixes* and his own rhetoric.

My own feeling is that these criticisms are just. Yet Kazantzakis always exhibited a degree of uneasiness about the dictates of the mind, and this is what enabled him in the 1940s to come back into touch with reality now and then, to the great benefit of his subsequent career.