

THE EXISTENTIALIST VISION IN KAZANTZAKIS'  
ODYSSEY

Patricia Deduck  
Southwest Texas State University

ABSTRACT

The basis of Kazantzakis' philosophical treatise, The Saviours of God, as well as the vision informing his monumental Odyssey, is essentially an existentialist one. Kazantzakis' affinity with existentialist thought is evident not only from his use of ideas central to existentialism--the subjective approach to knowledge, the repudiation of the adequacy of any system for addressing the dilemmas of existence, and the dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy--but also from his use and development of themes common to all existentialisms--subjective versus objective truth, existence and death, the denial of hope, and freedom.

Of the various critical approaches to Kazantzakis--one of the most renowned of twentieth-century Greek writers--few contain references to his link with a major philosophical sensibility of the twentieth century, existentialism. Influenced more by philosophy than by literature, Kazantzakis must have been aware of this mode of thinking which we now term "existentialism," although he himself may never have applied that particular label to it. All of Kazantzakis' writings reveal his deep interest in the crucial problems of man, and, according to one critic, they "introduced into his country the chill of the 'Existentialism' which, twenty years later and after the Second World War, was to be popularized by French literature."<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to isolate certain ideas common to all the existentialists, which we may consider as key concepts. The object of inquiry is, of course, existence: man's relationship to the world, to other men, and to himself. Perhaps the most important characteristic is the repudiation of the adequacy of any set of beliefs or systems for addressing basic philosophical problems. Along with this characteristic goes the refusal to belong to any school of thought. In addition, all varieties of existentialism display a great dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy, which they view as superficial and remote from life, and instead, place great emphasis upon a philosophy which originates from the personal experience of the individual. The existentialists, therefore, regard man as an individual rather than simply as part of a broader system, and they view him as an incomplete, or open, reality--that is, as one who is continually creating himself.

With only these basic characteristics in mind we may already see Kazantzakis' affinity with existentialism. His writings are informed by a rejection of traditional philosophical systems; they display a concern with developing a philosophy based on life as it is experienced within the individual consciousness, and an attempt to find meaning in personal experience. He begins what some consider his philosophical treatise, *The Saviours of God*, with an explanation of the essence of life, and in its starkness and directness the introduction is conspicuously devoid of the ready-made labels and views with which traditional religion and philosophy have tried to console man. Furthermore, in his major fictional work, *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, Kazantzakis' Odysseus becomes the "god-slayer" who refuses to accept any rigid system of belief, and who, with the author himself we may imagine, cries out: "I will not accept boundaries; appearances cannot contain me; I choke!"<sup>2</sup> As Prevelakis has pointed out, "all

the values produced by Hellenism from the time when Homer established the form of the Olympians, and to which Christianity added with its message of love and its promise of life eternal, are overthrown in the new (*Odyssey*."<sup>3</sup>) Like other forms of existentialism, Kazantzakis' philosophy is also based on the individual existentialist experience, which views man subjectively. Indeed, the overall intent of his philosophical treatise is, as he says, "to give a human meaning to the superhuman struggle" (p. 55).

Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* presents the "modern man in search of a soul." If we take the phrase "modern man" in the sense in which Jung used it, we are speaking of the existentialist man. Therefore, an examination of Jung's "modern man" will provide us with what we might call the archetype of the twentieth-century existential hero, and give us insight into the existential experience dealt with in so much of modern literature. It will also provide us with a basis upon which to examine Kazantzakis' "modern man," Odysseus, and his relationship to this archetype.

The significant characteristics of Jung's modern man are reflective of the key concepts of existentialist thought referred to previously. He is, first of all, that man who has broken with tradition, who has rejected the dogmatic view of traditional religion, and who holds valid only those ideas which are found to be in accordance with his own individual experience. His dominant passion is to know, to experience for himself. This is also the ruling passion of Kazantzakis' Odysseus; he no longer seeks to return home, but instead, to go beyond the bounds of all tradition. He sings the praises of knowledge for its own sake, and blesses his life for never allowing him to be satisfied with its experience: May you blessed, my life, for you disdained to stay/ Faithful to but one marriage, like a silly girl;/ The bread of travel is sweet, and foreign lands are honey;/ For a brief moment you rejoiced in each new love,/ But stifled soon and bade farewell to each fond lover./ My soul, your voyages have been your native land!<sup>4</sup>

The modern man must, according to Jung, be fully conscious of his own existence as being; indeed, he must be most intensively and extensively conscious, for he is the one who is "aware of the immediate present, who stands upon a peak, or at the very edge of the world, the abyss of the future before him, above him the heavens, and below him the whole of mankind with a history that disappears in primeval mists."<sup>5</sup> Odysseus occupies just such an unique position: Kazantzakis pictures him as suspended between two eras, between a dying civilization and a new one about to be born. "Though my left foot is rooted deep in earth," Odysseus claims, "the right/ Shakes high beyond the chasm's edge and longs

to dance. . . Blessed be that hour that gave my birth between two eras!" (p. 87, 11. 735 & 742).

To be fully conscious necessitates a solitary existence for the modern man, for each step closer to a fuller consciousness removes him from his participation with his fellow men. As Jung expresses it, modern man moves from a state of "participation mystique," from "submersion in a common unconsciousness" to solitary existence.<sup>6</sup> This is precisely the movement of Odysseus, from active participation with other men to a form of asceticism which makes him finally the "Solitary One."

Because he has estranged himself from his fellow humans, who live their lives within the confines of tradition, modern man is also "unhistorical." This is perhaps the one trait which makes man completely modern, a moving to the "very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow."<sup>7</sup> This is exactly what Kazantzakis sets forth as man's goal in his Saviours of God: to move towards the void, the abyss, that "dread essence beyond logic," and once there to "walk tiptoe on the edge of the insatiable precipice and struggle to give order to your vision. . . give form and meaning to the formless, the mindless infinitude" (p. 101, 78-79). And his Odysseus faithfully follows the command, indeed, claims, "I long for the dread abyss!" (p. 425, 1. 302).

To be unhistorical is, to Jung, the sin of Prometheus, for the attainment of this higher level of consciousness is as much a burden as it is a blessing. It is interesting to note that Kazantzakis uses Prometheus as one of the three forefathers or "fates" of Odysseus. To Kazantzakis he is "the mind's master," and as a minstrel tells Odysseus, he visited him as a child and "in his wounded hands. . . now held/ The seed of a great light, and stooping over your skull/ Gently unstiched the tender threads and sowed the seed." (p. 30, 11. 1190-1193) As Tantalus bequeathes Odysseus the gift of insatiable desire, and Heracles that of unceasing struggle to purify the spirit, so Prometheus sows the seeds of rebellion in Odysseus. And perhaps this is the greatest gift, for he implants within Odysseus the refusal of the mind to accept the limits and boundaries prescribed by convention or tradition, and in so doing, frees him to seek a meaning in life based on his own experience.

Jung's characterization of the modern man provides us with a summary analysis of the existential hero, including Kazantzakis' Odysseus, while also providing us with a general introduction to the existential predicament. For a fuller understanding of Kazantzakis' particular presentation of this predicament, we must

turn our attention to an analysis of the major themes in existentialism. There is a striking consistency revealed by the myths most often used to embody this predicament. In his examination of modern literature, Nathan Scott distinguishes four such myths or patterns of symbolic statement. One is the "Myth of Voyage," which presents the often painful journey through the irrational world of phenomena or the self<sup>8</sup>, and this is the metaphorical vehicle Kazantzakis uses to render Odysseus' existential predicament. In a letter to Prevelakis, Kazantzakis explained that his Odyssey continued "the enormous epic of the white race--the epic of Homer. It closes a circle left open for so many centuries."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Kazantzakis brings Homer's Odysseus into the present and describes his voyages through the many realms of twentieth-century philosophy and thought, where Odysseus must deal with the dilemmas facing all modern men and must try to explain in subjective terms the meaning of his own existence.

The first major theme of existentialism is that of subjective truth: the idea that there is no knowledge independent of the knowing subject. For the existentialist, knowledge is not an end in itself, but proceeds from and terminates in the question, "What does this knowledge mean to me, the existing thinker?" In this respect subjectivity is truth.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis is upon the individual, as Kierkegaard insists it should be. This anti-rationalism and emphasis upon the individual consciousness appears in Kazantzakis' thought also. In the Saviour of God he discusses the conflict between "mind" and "heart," representations of conflicting orientations to the universe. The mind to Kazantzakis is more than just reason; it includes the senses and represents the supreme consciousness. As he expresses it: "Free yourself from the simple complacency of the mind that thinks to put all things in order and hopes to subdue phenomena. Free yourself from the terror of the heart that seeks and hopes to find the essence of things" (p. 56). Kazantzakis' preference is for a synthesis of the two, in which pure rationality is tempered by the stirrings of the senses.

In the Odyssey Kazantzakis indicates that reason is inadequate for discovering the mystery of existence. Indeed, he often praises the powers of the subconscious, as in Odysseus' assertion that "It is not man's most fruitful nor most difficult duty/ To find out in the abstract reaches of his mind/With what pulse God walks gasping on this earth with pain" (p. 449, 11. 1344-1346). And in Book XVII Odysseus gives himself over to the powers of the subconscious and delights in creating and destroying a world entirely of his own making.

Anti-rationalism is a result of the existential affirmation of man rather than of the universe of things. Indeed, this is what Sartre means by his "Existence precedes essence": the idea that man, as opposed to things, becomes rather than merely is. As Sartre explains, "We must begin from the subjective. . . Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."<sup>11</sup> As such, man does not have a universal nor a permanent nature; he is, rather, the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is. Kazantzakis' conception of man comes very close to this for he sees as man's duty the task of defining himself by his own actions. "What is our duty?" he asks in the Saviours of God, and answers, "To bring together all our adventures, to give meaning to our voyage, to battle undauntedly with men, with gods, with animals, and then slowly, patiently to erect in our brains, marrow of our marrow, our Ithaca" (p. 79). And Odysseus' journey in the Odyssey is just such a story of the (individual's) "encountering" and then "defining" himself in an attempt to find meaning in his existence.

Another common theme of existentialism is the relationship of existence and death. For several of the existentialists, death is not seen as an external event, but rather, in line with the subjective approach to man's existence, as one's own death in the sense that it is one's "ownmost" thing. Any form of stoic indifference to death, some existentialists argue, is not courage but cowardice, a kind of escapism which avoids the reality of life.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, because death opens up the terrible possibility of life's ending meaninglessly and man's being absorbed into the void of nothingness, many refuse to acknowledge the reality of death. The conventionally religious man uses the promise of eternal life made by traditional Christian theology to dull the personal sting of death. In a similar way, what we might call the "modern mass man" who immerses himself in his secular life, also manages to evade the implications of death by becoming deeply involved in everyday affairs and mundane activity.<sup>13</sup> Neither way is satisfactory to the existentialist, for the individual is being dishonest with himself and with the reality of his existence. Instead, the existentialist insists that man must encounter death, as he must the absurdity of life and the possibility of nothingness. Then, as a solitary individual, stripped of all protective philosophical consolations, of all hope, he must make a genuine decision about his relationship to himself and to his life.

This theme in particular strikes us in reference to Kazantzakis, for his ideas on death and hope are central to his philosophy. Not

to rely on false hope, but to stare fully conscious into the abyss, the void of nothingness, is the message he relates to us in his Saviours of God. "I know now: I do not hope for anything, I do not fear anything," he says, and urges man to "gaze on the dark sea without staggering, confront the abyss every moment without illusion or impudence or fear" (p. 78). To Kazantzakis, the ultimate stage of man's spiritual exercise, which he terms "Silence," is the embracing of this very abyss. "Every person, after completing his service in all labors, reaches finally the highest summit of endeavor, beyond every labor, where he no longer struggles or shouts, where he ripens fully in silence. . . There he merges with the Abyss" (p. 129). And having "merged" with the Abyss, man should accept the "great, sublime, and terrifying secret: That even this one does not exist!" (p. 131)

In the Odyssey Kazantzakis presents the denial of all hope as the thirteenth labor which Odysseus must undertake. When Odysseus realizes that his heart has "flown beyond the final labor, Hope" (p. 514, l. 1190), death itself becomes his companion in his travels, signifying Odysseus' ability to be cognizant of the reality of death and yet live without clinging to the illusion of hope. Moreover, Odysseus characterizes death as "the salt that gives to life its tasty sting!" (p. 571, l. 912). At the end of the Odyssey, when death finally comes, Odysseus accepts it without hope, without fear, and embraces it, for he has fulfilled his goal in life, found his personal meaning in existence: the transubstantiation of matter into spirit. As Kazantzakis expresses it: "The Archer has fooled you, Death, he's squandered all your goods,/ Melted down all the rusts and rots of his foul flesh/ Till they escaped you in pure spirit, and when you come,/ You'll find but trampled fires, embers, ash. . ." (p. 714-715, ll. 34-37).

Perhaps the most significant theme of existentialism is that of freedom, the concept which most closely links Kazantzakis to other existentialists. The concept of freedom is a primary idea on which all existentialists are united, and, as Friar points out, it is the keystone of Kazantzakis' philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Existential freedom is grounded in the awareness of universal as opposed to necessary contingency and of man's often agonizing responsibility for choosing between complex alternatives concerning his existence. Having left behind himself all ethical guidelines originating from theological and philosophical systems, the individual is left alone to face the void of nothingness and to decide what order to make out of existence and what meaning to give to his life. Indeed, freedom is a terrible gift, for the process of creating personal meaning through the act of decision is most often lonely and agonizing. Yet

only by actively choosing can man attain authentic existence; thus, the role of freedom becomes crucial in this process of becoming.

Although Kazantzakis' concept of freedom has some unique features, it retains features common to all. In Kazantzakis' philosophy, as in existentialism, the conclusion that we are free derives in part from the rejection of traditional philosophical and theological schools of thought. To Kazantzakis, unlike other existentialists, freedom (is not a given) of man's condition, but a state to which man must ascend. Freedom is the ultimate goal of Odysseus, for, as Kazantzakis explains in the *Saviours of God*, "It is this drive toward freedom. . . which slowly creates the head of man" (p. 89). Also, in Kazantzakis' philosophy, as in the various forms of existentialism, freedom is integrally related to the idea of choice. To Kazantzakis, action is the ultimate form of theory: "Action is the widest gate of deliverance. It alone can answer the questionings of the heart. Amid the labyrinthine complexities of the mind it creates its way, hewing to right and left through resistances of logic and matter" (p. 99). The action Kazantzakis refers to is that of choosing, of making decisions. Action or choice defines man; it is through man's exercise of his choice that he creates himself and the meaning of his existence. To Kazantzakis freedom is based on the denial of all hope. "Die every day. Be born every day. Deny everything you have every day," Kazantzakis advises, for "the superior virtue is not to be free, but to fight for freedom" (p. 118).

In the *Odyssey* Kazantzakis presents us with Odysseus' journey toward absolute freedom. As Prevelakis points out, Odysseus moves through three stages in his quest: first, the aesthetic stage during which Odysseus concerns himself with the sensual perception of phenomena and is driven to action by what he sees; second, the ethical stage during which Odysseus is concerned with the relationships of phenomena; and third, the metaphysical stage during which Odysseus is concerned only with the essences of phenomena.<sup>15</sup> Absolute freedom results from Odysseus' vision of the true nature of phenomena and existence and his subsequent denial of any god or any hope. "What freedom?" he asks, and answers, "To stare in the black eyes of the abyss/ With gallantry and joy as on one's native land!" (p. 588, 11. 257-258). When Odysseus encounters a fisher-boy (who represents Christ), he rejects the boy's philosophy because it is based upon the hope of salvation. He tells the boy, "That man is free who strives on earth with not one hope!" (p. 677, 1. 1351).

The central point of Kazantzakis' concept of freedom, and the one which differentiates it from other existentialists' concepts, is

that man's struggle for freedom is more valuable than its attainment. "The greatest virtue on earth," Odysseus tells the inhabitants of an ideal city-state, "is not to become free/ But to seek freedom in a ruthless, sleepless strife" (p. 478, 11. 1171-1172). To Kazantzakis, the search is more important than the discovery, for in the "sleepless strife" of searching man fulfills his highest duty: to transubstantiate matter into spirit. Indeed, Kazantzakis views freedom itself as a prison; it is the last prison that Odysseus escapes from at the moment of his death: "Then flesh dissolved, glances congealed, the heart's pulse stopped,/ And the great mind leapt to the peak of its holy freedom,/ Fluttered with empty wings, then upright through the air/ Soared high and freed itself from its last cage, its freedom." (p. 775, 11. 1390-1393).

Kazantzakis' affinity with existential thought is obvious not only from his use of certain ideas central to existentialism, but also from his use and development of themes common to all forms of existentialism. Examining his ideas on the subjective approach to knowledge, and his themes of existence and death, hope, and freedom, increases our understanding of an important source of the writer's thought. However, before categorically labeling Kazantzakis as an existentialist, we must remember that caution is always necessary in applying any label to a particular writer. Since Kazantzakis' writings reflect the major concepts and themes associated with existentialism, we may apply the term with some justification. What must be emphasized again is that existentialism is not a school of thought; there is no comprehensive, consistent set of tenets which can be held up as the "philosophy" of existentialism. We must deal, rather, with existentialisms, and in Kazantzakis' case, we must deal, I believe, with one of existentialism's more intriguing expressions.

## NOTES

1. Pandelis Prevelakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), p. 117.

2. Nikos Kazantzakis, The Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises, trans. Kimon Friar (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), p. 50. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
3. Prevelakis, p. 116.
4. Nikos Kazantzakis, The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, trans. Kimon Friar (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), (pp.) 508-509, 11. 954-959. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
5. Carl Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933), p. 196.
6. Jung, p. 197.
7. Jung, p. 197.
8. Nathan Scott, Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1965), p. 10.
9. Prevelakis, p. 63.
10. Kurt Reinhardt, The Existentialist Revolt (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1952), p. 231.
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism (London: Methuen, 1948), (pp.)25-27.
12. Reinhardt, p. 236.
13. William Spanos, A Casebook on Existentialism (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), (pp.) 6-7.
14. Kimon Friar, "Introduction," The Saviours of God, p. 34.
15. Prevelakis, (pp.) 75-76. The source of these three stages is most likely the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages Kierkegaard speaks of.