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The Editorial and Ideological Evolution of Nikos Kazantzakis' *Ascesis*

ABSTRACT: The present article examines the editorial and ideological evolution of Nikos Kazantzakis' *Ascesis*, focusing on the significant differences between its first edition (1927) and the extensively revised second edition (1945). While extant scholarship has predominantly focused on linguistic changes – most notably in the final section of *Ascesis*, the well-known “CREDO” – this study seeks to address a critical research gap by arguing that these revisions mark a far more significant transformation. The analysis draws on biographical sources and Kazantzakis' correspondence as well as his political essays and philosophical influences (notably Nietzschean, Bergsonian, and Buddhist though) in order to contextualize *Ascesis* within the author's philosophical development and evolving worldview. The study demonstrates how the work transitions from a politically charged, collectivist manifesto embedded in the ideological context of early 20th-century communist thought to a deeply personal and metaphysical text centered on existential struggle and ascent as well as a multifaceted engagement with nihilism. Special attention is given to the removal of overt political references, the addition of the “Silence” chapter, and the restructuring of the final “CREDO”, which collectively signal a shift from political engagement to lyrical-philosophical introspection. The findings indicate that *Ascesis* underwent not only a stylistic revision but a fundamental restructuring in Kazantzakis' conception of spiritual struggle and in his *Weltanschauung* in general, all of which seemingly occurred in a considerably short time span. This evolution is indicative of the broader tensions between literature, ideology, and personal metaphysics in

Kazantzakis' works – the article contends that *Ascesis* should be read not as a lesser philosophical addition, but as a central work within the author's repertoire. The study posits that *Ascesis* ultimately manifests as a lyrical expression of existential anguish and the will to struggle for its own sake, transcending ideological frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ascesis*, 20th century Greek literature, Textual criticism, Philosophy of struggle, Nihilism.

Introduction¹

What is the meaning of ascetic ideals? – In the case of artists they mean nothing or too many things; in the case of philosophers and scholars something like a sense and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality. (...) That the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man, however, is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its horror vacui. It needs a goal – and it will rather will nothingness than not will.
Nietzsche 1989: 97

Nikos Kazantzakis' *Ascesis* [*Spiritual Exercises*]: *The Saviors of God*² was originally published in 1927, followed by a radically changed and expanded second edition in 1945. The work's significance cannot be overstated: it certainly occupies a central place among the author's literary entourage,³ although in and of itself it teeters on the border between literature *sensu stricto* and philosophical/political essay writing. The palpable tension between these two styles is detectable not only in the work itself, its two editions included, but also in the wider

¹ I wish to thank Vasilis Vasiliadis who provided many valuable comments and corrections to a draft version of this article. I am also thankful to the anonymous reviewers who pointed my attentions towards anything I have omitted.

² Notwithstanding the title change between the first and the second edition, I will continue using *Ascesis* to refer to the work in general in order to simplify discussion, distinguishing the editions only when necessary.

³ And is without a doubt central to Kazantzakis' ideology.

publishing context as well as in the writer's correspondence. *Ascesis* functions as a manifesto in its call to struggle, a credo in its declarative tone, and a philosophical lyric in its poetic form. These identities coexist without contradiction and shine through differently in both editions.

Despite its importance, scholarly engagement with the evolution of *Ascesis* has remained relatively limited.⁴ The changes between the two editions had been at one point analyzed by Dimitris Sakkis.⁵ The weight of his analysis falls mostly on the very last part of the work – the well-known “CREDO” of Kazantzakis, which was also the part of the text that underwent the most changes between the two editions. Besides that, Sakkis only skims through the other elements, not providing additional interpretations or attempting to explain them – both these other elements as well as the “CREDO”. However, he does analyze the linguistic changes – something that will not be approached in a systematic manner here, since there is no need to do so; selected changes will be mentioned whenever necessary. Similarly, I will refrain from commenting extensively on the change in orthography and other more “formal” editorial, typographical elements. The most in-depth analysis of *Ascesis* was done by Peter Bien,⁶ who analyzes the work in its entirety, provides a lot of background information and comments relatively briefly on the ideological change between the two editions, offering plausible inspirations.

In this article I aim to at least partially fill this research gap by analyzing the ideological changes between the two editions of *Ascesis* and explaining them in light of biographical data and Kazantzakis' epistolography as well as his political essays. This article argues that, firstly *Ascesis* has been transformed from a collectivist, metacommunist manifesto-adjacent work to an introspective, metaphysical personal manifesto and as such, illustrates Kazantzakis' growing engagement with heroic nihilism, Buddhist concepts, and his rejection of ideological struggle in favor of existential ascent. This study re-evaluates *Ascesis*

⁴ At least in comparison to the attention that Kazantzakis' other works have received. One important exception is the recent conference *100 Years of Askitiki: The Centenary Conference* which took place in 2023 (with the proceedings forthcoming).

⁵ Σακκής 1985.

⁶ Bien 1989.

as a text that resists easy categorization – a text that is neither wholly political nor purely literary, but rather both at the same time.

Philosophical and biographical background

While the two aforementioned dates are significant milestones in the editorial history of *Ascesis*, its history begins much earlier than that. The philosophical interests of the writer himself need to be mentioned first as necessary ideological background: they revolved mostly around Bergson, Nietzsche, Buddha and many more⁷ – Lenin, Jesus Christ and St. Francis of Assisi, among others. Kazantzakis mentions some of these figures in *Report to Greco*:

If, however, I wished to designate which people left their traces embedded most deeply in my soul, I would perhaps designate Homer, Buddha, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Zorba. (...) Buddha, the bottomless jet-dark eye in which the world drowned and was delivered. Bergson relieved me of various unsolved philosophical problems which tormented me in my early youth; Nietzsche enriched me with new anguishes and instructed me how to transform misfortune, bitterness, and uncertainty into pride.⁸

Καζαντζάκης 2000: 441, transl. Kazantzakis 1966: 430

He had discovered the thought of the first two already in the first decade of the 20th century during the time he studied in Paris, in 1907–1909. He also encountered it shortly after, when he took to translating their works in the years 1911–1915.⁹ He researched the philosophy of Nietzsche especially scrupulously, as he wrote and defended his thesis on the topic in 1909 (*Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Law and the*

⁷ See Levitt 1977 for a more in-depth analysis on the impact of the first two as well as Georgios (Alexis) Zorbas.

⁸ Since even the minute details and changes between the two analyzed editions of *Ascesis* may carry important ideological weight, all of the translations of this work in this article are my own. The references are to the edition of the work in original from which the text was taken. Other works are cited either in existing translation or in my own, noted accordingly.

⁹ Αθανασοπούλου 2007.

State). Even though the German philosopher was the one he would be occupied with the most, it was actually Bergson and his Vitalism that became the basis of his own *Weltanschauung*, not only as far as his political-religious views are concerned, but also regarding his ethics – at the same time, for Kazantzakis, Nietzsche has functioned rather as “the destroyer of the old.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, while Bergson’s influence, especially regarding the concept of *élan vital*, cannot be undervalued, I believe that Nietzsche’s role was definitely significant as well – especially in *Ascesis*, which thrives on the tensions between Kazantzakis’ largest inspirations and his own philosophical outlook, as I attempt to show below.¹¹ Whereas Nietzsche offers the method of transvaluation through suffering and Bergson provides his Vitalism, Buddhism shapes the spiritual tone of non-attachment and creative void, as well as influencing heavily on the understanding of “nothingness”.

The first few years of the 1920s were important for a variety of reasons, of which two are most apparent: the steady rise of communist ideas and the abrupt fall of the Megáli Idéa after the Greek defeat in Asia Minor. Both of these had a profound effect on Kazantzakis, disillusioned by the actions of the Greeks as well as the rest of humanity. He would accept communism as a way to “fill the ideological void” and shape it in his own way, mixing in elements from his general worldview and previous ideologies.¹²

Before the editorial changes applied in the work are analyzed, one seemingly important information needs to be mentioned: right before beginning to write the *Ascesis*, Kazantzakis deletes whatever up to that point he had written of his poem about Buddha. He shares this with his wife on the 31st of October 1922:

At the same time, I’m working (...) on “Buddha” as well. I tore up what I had written of “Buddha” so far (up to 3000 verses). I want to make a new effort, something superior, more difficult, more rigorous than anything I’ve done so far.

Καζαντζάκης 1958: 99

¹⁰ Bien 1989: 25–26.

¹¹ See also Bien 1971 for a more detailed analysis of Kazantzakis’ Nietzscheanism.

¹² Bien 1989: 55–58.

The first edition

Shortly after, in December of the same year,¹³ he would begin creating the aforementioned “something higher”, or rather, the work entitled *Salvatores Dei*, “The Saviors of God”, with the subtitle *Ascesis*, as it was published in the beginning. Its first version was finished already in March 1923, i.e., in a four-month timespan. The first edition, however, as previously mentioned, would not see the light of day until Autumn of 1927. Its reception was, at the very least, mixed – the work was mostly ignored or considered only for its artistic beauty, not for the ideas within.¹⁴

The work was welcomed by the journal *Αναγέννηση*, “Renaissance” (and shortly after published separately, without any editorial changes to the text), wherein the writer had prepared the terrain shortly before, having written and published three political-philosophical essays¹⁵: *Conversation with a leader* (09.1926), *New Pompei* (10.1926), *Russia crucified* (01.1927), which can be considered “satellites” of *Ascesis*.¹⁶ These essays already display a great deal of influence from foreign philosophers and the writing style present in *Ascesis*, while also introducing the term “metacommunism” – a philosophy transcending communism’s material limitations, one devoted to creation after the ruin brought about by communism. The term is used by the writer to refer to *Ascesis* itself, which the writer mentions should be considered “the first cry of the metacommunist “CREDO”” in the introductory note to the first edition.¹⁷

In *Russia crucified* the term is used in the very end, as a type of conclusion to the three essays, before proceeding to *Ascesis*. In the

¹³ Μερακλής 2007.

¹⁴ Bien 1989: 77.

¹⁵ They have later been included in Kazantzakis’ *Travelling: Russia*, first published in 1928, cf. e.g. Καζαντζάκης 2010.

¹⁶ Κόκορης 2023: 19; Κόκορης 2020: 87–88.

¹⁷ It has to be mentioned that the word “cry, scream” (κραυγή) is used by the writer repeatedly when referring to the work. For example, in a letter to Pantelis Prevelakis, his friend, also a known writer, he writes that *Ascesis* “is the most frantic Cry [σπαραχτική Κραυγή] of my life” (Πρεβελάκης 1965: 481).

dialogue that forms most of the essay, in the end the author is scolded that “that what you are saying is not Communism!”,¹⁸ to which he responds:

What is the value of names? These are the things which my heart says with passion, this is what my mind arranges with clarity, this is what my actions desire.

However, so your mind calms down, give it a name, name this heretical opinion of mine not Communism.

But **Metacommunism**.

Καζαντζάκης 1927b: 277¹⁹

The fact that these essays contain many ideas and phrases similar to *Ascesis* is not at all surprising given that they were written at a later date (even though their publication came about earlier) and that their function, among others, was to prepare the terrain in *Renaissance* so that it would be more accessible and better suited for *Ascesis* itself. Already in the first of the three he notes:

All these things – economic systems, laws, regimes – how superficial and unworthy they are to renew the face of the earth!

Only if the human heart is transformed [μετουσιωθεί] will all of this modern-day complicated reality with its unsolvable problems become unexpectedly simple.

Καζαντζάκης 1926b: 24

With this he recognizes very early on that it is the internal struggle that needs to take precedence, not one aimed at changing the country, the system, etc., but one that results in the changing of the very essence of the human heart – I believe his usage of the word μετουσιώνω ‘transubstantiate, change the essence of something’ is not at all accidental and refers to the depth of the changes necessary for a better humanity – a fundamental re-creation, a concept which comes up repeatedly in Kazantzakis’ essays as well as *Ascesis*.

¹⁸ Καζαντζάκης 1927b: 277.

¹⁹ The bold letters are the writer’s.

The connection between these two is evident: the “meta” in meta-communism and μετουσίωση ‘transubstantiation’ points to the same – the second phase of being, one that comes after destruction. In *Ascesis* and elsewhere, Kazantzakis’ whole ideology, as noted by Peter Bien,²⁰ while at its core focused on destroying capitalistic decadence as well as communist materialism, ultimately aimed to allow humans to evolve beyond and understand reality as the author himself understood it. Acknowledging the present state was only required to change it, as “the biggest sin is satisfaction”,²¹ i.e., being content with the status quo.²² Only then could the human heart change.

In fact, between the three essays in general the author repeatedly mentions humanity’s ascent:

Their slaves, workers, serfs, servants, cooks, and maids rise up [ανεβαίνουν] (...) The greatest feats in thought, art, and action were accomplished in this impetuous ascent of man.

Καζαντζάκης 1926a: 77

Or

a Fighter ascends from matter (...) [The appearance of the Fighter today]: He is the leader of the dark proletarian class that is rising [που ανεβαίνει].

Καζαντζάκης 1926b: 77

The “scream” (κραυγή):

only a Crucified Cry remained on the Cross.

Καζαντζάκης 1927b: 276

The “debt” (χρέος), used later in naming chapters in *Ascesis*:

I fight to see clearly the contemporary debt.

Καζαντζάκης 1926b: 77

²⁰ Bien 1989: 71.

²¹ Καζαντζάκης 1958: 223.

²² Bien 1989: 73.

As well as the push for progress and for moving forward:

Life never turns back (...) Let us go with it! And more: let us push it to go even further!

Καζαντζάκης 1926b: 78

and many more – the essays warrant their own analysis: also see especially Owens²³ who provides a much more in-depth commentary in the context of Kazantzakis' political beliefs.

His letters to Prevelakis are especially revealing when it comes to analyzing the editorial history of *Ascesis*. Even before the first edition was published, Kazantzakis writes (01.08.1927):

Specifically for *Askitiki*, which I especially love, I say this: Let it come out now in *Anayennisi* so that I can see it first in a bad edition. Then I'll make the various revisions that are needed—certain things are repeated too often; there are some deficiencies in the order, etc. After that, we'll publish it as we wish it to be—that is, as you say.

Πρεβελάκης 1965: 33,²⁴ transl. Bien 2012: 262

Meaning that he recognizes the need for corrections immediately. Corrections which he would apply a year later, while spending his time in Bekovo in Soviet Russia (11.06.1928):

Today I've been revising *Askitiki*. I added a brief chapter, "Silence," a bomb that explodes the entire *Askitiki*. But the hearts of only a few people will be exploded.

Πρεβελάκης 1965: 77, transl. Bien 2012: 314

As such it might be surmised that in this time period the next, second edition of *Ascesis* was already nearly finished and ready to be printed. This is also seemingly confirmed by Prevelakis: when on 18.09.1928 Kazantzakis writes to him that "I have sent you the *Ascesis*", where Prevelakis, being the editor of their correspondence, notes:

²³ Owens 2001.

²⁴ Here and hereafter the bold letters are my own, unless noted otherwise.

The final version of *Ascesis*: the offprint from *Anagennisi* corrected and supplemented with the chapter “Silence”. (The 2nd edition in 1945 was made from this).

Πρεβελάκης 1965: 96

The second edition

Some final corrections, likely less significant and not ideological in nature, have been implemented in 1944. Kazantzakis writes (02.03.1944):

Please, if you still have the manuscript of the new *Ascesis*, call Hourmouzios (...) I will send someone to take it; I corrected it, definitely.

Πρεβελάκης 1965: 515

After which a year passed and in 1945 the second edition of *Ascesis* was published – this time with the title *Ascesis*, with *Salvatores Dei* moved to the subtitle. These two rounds of corrections (including the “addition” of the “Silence” chapter already in 1928) constitute the main differences between the two editions.

The most radical changes regard the beginning and end of the work. It is worth quoting the introductory note in its entirety in order to facilitate further analysis:

“Ascesis” was written in Germany in 1923 in order to express the mental anguish and hopes of a communist circle of Germans, Poles, and Russians, who could not comfortably take a breath within the narrow, backward, materialistic understanding of the Communist Idea. Let this “Ascesis” be considered the first lyrical attempt, the first cry of the meta-communist “CREDO”.

Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 1²⁵

Taking this introductory note into account, it is extremely difficult not to connect the work to the aforementioned three essays. In my personal opinion this note functioned as a type of a connecting link,

²⁵ In this case, the bold letters are the writer’s.

helping *Ascesis* fit better in the context of Kazantzakis' political-philosophical works published shortly before in the same journal. As such, the ground, prepared in this way by the writer, is not lost. It was said that this had been the first important program difference between the two editions.²⁶ Maybe, however, if we accept the note's function as a connecting link, its removal was done: first, due to the lack of context in the form of the three political essays and second, due to the work's style being considerably less political-philosophical and much more literary²⁷ – this introductory note would appear not connected to the rest of the text.

An ideological change can be noted in the text as well – in the second edition Kazantzakis makes the work more wide-reaching, more personal and at the same time more general and more intense. He himself passes from “the first scream of the metacommunist “CREDO”” in 1927's introductory note to “the most frantic Scream of my life” in a letter to Prevelakis in 08.05.1939. It seems that, having lost the context of the writer's political writings, *Ascesis* takes on the form of a personal manifest (even more than before) – it is not a metacommunist scream anymore, it is completely Kazantzakis' scream. The struggle becomes superhuman (υπερανθρώπινος) – with the following removal one of the most clear-cut examples:

Let us unite, let us hold fast, let us join our hearts, let us create (...) let us create a **human kingdom**, a brain and a heart on earth, let us give human meaning to the **superhuman** struggle!

Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 5

While in the second edition the phrase “a human kingdom” does not appear.²⁸

²⁶ Σακκής 1985: 262.

²⁷ Nikiforos Vrettakos notes regarding the first edition: “It's not a clear work of art nor a clear work of philosophy. He [Kazantzakis] himself, finally, classifies it as a “lyrical credo”, and this classification would have been more complete, had he written “my credo expressed lyrically”” (Βρεττάκος 1960: 94). While Kostas Tsiropoulos writes: “*Ascesis* is liberated from other duties and is left to function within us as a completely poetic work” (Τσιρόπουλος 1993: 178), see below for a comment on this opinion.

²⁸ Καζαντζάκης 1945: 18.

The struggle is not about ephemeral, political creations, but more so about the “ascent”, one central motive in *Ascesis* and generally in Kazantzakis’ thought, about the struggle in and of itself. The following opinion by Vrettakos is especially enlightening and accurate: “[Kazantzakis] does not consider himself bound by the borders of a nation or an ideology but aspires to present himself as an Akritas²⁹ of the world.”³⁰

“Silence” and its significance

The “addition” of the “Silence” chapter to the second edition mostly functions as text rearrangement – Sakkis notes that “Thus, K. took ten paragraphs from the chapter “THE VISION” (p. 20 of the 1st version) and transferred them to the chapter “Silence” on p. 91. He also reversed the order of the first two paragraphs. The rest of the (short) text consists of actual additions to the second version, to the chapter “Silence”.” as well as that in the chapter we have “in most part, a change in layout.”³¹ Nevertheless, Kazantzakis’ own characterization of it as a “bomb” suggests the emotional and philosophical charge he associated with this turning point. At first glance it might also seem unusual that one such bomb came about already a year after the publication of the first edition.³² Where Sakkis sees a technical rearrangement, I argue that ‘Silence’ constitutes an important turning point in Kazantzakis’ priorities – the chapter’s violent, prophetic tone and changes in what is highlighted reorients the entire *Ascesis*, or at the very least its climax, toward a mystical-existential vision that cannot be reduced to editorial tweaks.

Something that is immediately palpable in the second edition is the increased intensity, violence, fierceness, all of which get exacerbated

²⁹ See below for a more extensive analysis of the presence of Akritas in *Ascesis* and Kazantzakis’ other works.

³⁰ Βρεττάκος 1977: 38.

³¹ Σακκή 1985: 264.

³² See below for an attempt at answering.

through vocabulary changes³³ as well as especially emphasized upon in “Silence”:

A flame is the soul of man; a fiery bird, jumping from branch to branch, from head to head, crying out: “I cannot stand still, I cannot burn down, no one can extinguish me!”

Καζαντζάκης 1945: 75

Which in the first edition, without the first phrase and starting as “A fiery bird, the Soul [το Πνέμα], jumps”³⁴ is found in the second third of the paragraph. In “Silence” it is moved to the very beginning, becoming a sort of slogan for the penultimate chapter. The following, non-existent in the first edition, is also extremely indicative of the change in Kazantzakis’ state of mind:

The soul is a fiery tongue, licking and fighting to set ablaze the all-dark mass of the world. One day, the entire Universe will become a firestorm [πυρκαγιά].

Fire is the first and the last face of my God. Between two great fires we dance and weep.

Καζαντζάκης 1945: 76

At this point, especially in the second, prophetic sentence, one can very clearly locate the much more intense, violent and pessimistic character of the work’s later parts.

³³ Whereby the first-edition words: scream (κραυγή), borders (σύνορα), terrible stream (φοβερό ρέμα), break! (να συντριβείς), I feel that (νιώθω πως), they run [like water] (τρέχουν) have been changed to frantic scream (σπαραχτικιά κραυγή), extreme borders (ακρότατα σύνορα), almighty stream (παντοδύναμο ρέμα), break! (να σπας!), it sparks/flashes inside me (αστράφτει μέσα μου), they tumble (κατρακυλούν), accordingly.

³⁴ Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 33.

Rewriting the “CREDO”

Another section where the changes are, without hyperbole, extreme, is the aforementioned “CREDO”, whereby even the introduction differs radically. In the first edition it was named “confession of faith” (ομολογία της πίστης), while in the second it is presented as “this magical, proud incantation” (μαγικό τούτο περήφανο ξόρκι). The ascent and all of the writer’s philosophy ceases to be something to be believed and becomes magic, an inseparable union of words and acts which has creative power in and of itself.

As far as the text of the “CREDO”³⁵ is concerned, the ending, the enumeration of the “blessed”, has been changed to an extent that it is worthwhile to cite it here in its entirety in order to facilitate the analysis:

Blessed are those who listen, for they will be saved, by fighting.
 Blessed are those who are saved, for they liberate God, by creating.
 Blessed are those who bear on their shoulders the Supreme Responsibility.
 Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 33

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO LISTEN AND THROW THEMSELVES
 TO FREE YOU, LORD, AND SAY: ONLY YOU AND I EXIST.
 BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO FREE YOU AND UNITE THEMSELVES
 WITH YOU, LORD, AND SAY: YOU AND I ARE ONE.
 AND THRICE BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNYIELDING BEAR
 ON THEIR SHOULDERS THE GREAT, SUBLIME AND TERRIFYING
 SECRET:
 AND THIS ONE DOES NOT EXIST!

Καζαντζάκης 1945: 78

³⁵ I do not include the entirety of the text here, noting only some more interesting parts. For a complete comparison (with little commentary) cf. Σακκής 1985: 264–265. Let it also be said that in the second edition the “CREDO” is printed entirely in upper-case – a convention which I will be following in this article, given, among other, the tendency of the author to capitalize some words central to his philosophy (Universe, Earth), as well as the changes between the two editions regarding the words which have been capitalized.

Sakkis believes that this last phrase gives a “dimension of heroic nihilism and of struggle for struggle itself”³⁶ to the entire work; perhaps even this struggle does not have an ounce of meaning on its own, as noted by Tsiropoulos, who holds that *Ascesis* is liberated when it as well as the struggle lose their sense, as such becoming an entirely poetic work.³⁷ I believe that neither of these two opinions can be accepted in its entirety: regarding the second, it has to be said that a manifest does not cease to be a manifest when its expressed in a literary manner – both Tsiropoulos and Sakkis misread the second edition as merely poetic. I contend instead that the shift in style intensifies rather than dilutes Kazantzakis’ philosophical ambition and further connects them to the philosophical tradition he was most versed in – one of Bergson and Nietzsche, the latter of which wrote his philosophical works with great literary finesse (and who himself thought of his own style as composed and even musical).³⁸ It is enough to adduce *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, called “a masterpiece of literature as well as philosophy.”³⁹ Even though Kazantzakis was primarily a writer, not a philosopher (which in and of itself is not the most fortunate expression), *Ascesis* must be located on the border between philosophy and literature – with its contents philosophical in nature. The weight of these contents does not become lighter in either of the two editions, whether strongly attached to the writer’s political works or as a personal manifest.

While it is true that the “AND THIS ONE DOES NOT EXIST!” at the end of the “CREDO” does constitute an extremely telling example of a definite change in Kazantzakis’ expressed *Weltanschauung*, at least as far as struggle itself is concerned, one cannot say that this “nihilistic” dimension was completely absent in the first edition, with only the second expressing such views. In the very beginning of the work (after the introductory note) we find this exact element:

³⁶ Σακκής 1985: 266.

³⁷ Τσιρόπουλος 1993: 178. Likewise, Sakkis notes: “Both the dramatic tone of the 2nd version and its clearly pervasive lyrical mood contribute to a different reading of *Ascesis*, which consists in its transformation from a philosophical essay into a poetic work” (Σακκής 1985: 268).

³⁸ Babich 1990: 109.

³⁹ Parkes 2008: xii.

We come from a dark abyss; we end up at a dark abyss. The bright space in between we call Life.

As soon as we are born, the return begins as well, the beginning at the end at the same time. Every single moment we are dying.

Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 1

In the second edition it does become heavier and begins to dominate completely in the writer's thought. This is especially visible in the chapter "Silence", wherein one can see the following passus:

Where do we come from? Where are we going? What meaning does this life have? Hearts cry out, heads ask, beating against the chaos.

Καζαντζάκης 1945: 75

An admission of the lack of knowledge and the empty struggle to understand the sense of life, if not a rejection of the existence of such higher sense at all. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Kazantzakis was not a nihilist,⁴⁰ but rather, following the Buddhist thought, perceived the "nothingness", beginning with the abyss and finishing with non-existence of the One, as space for everything else to emerge. Following Owens one could say "The idea of the nothing is not nihilistic since the nothing may also be called pure Being."⁴¹ However, as I argue later in this article, in *Ascesis* there is nevertheless an important dose of nihilism in the sense stemming from Nietzsche's thought and his own understanding of Buddhist philosophy. As such, I continue referring to such notions as nihilistic, keeping in mind that Kazantzakis himself was not a nihilist and that his thought does not exemplify nihilism in the traditional sense, but rather as the confrontation with meaninglessness that serves as a precondition for transcendent creation, rather than as philosophical despair, as it is often conceived of, especially colloquially.

⁴⁰ Pace Andreas Poulakidas (1975: 217) who believes that "Kazantzakis, on the other hand, in his *Spiritual Exercises* can be accused of nihilism, the basis of humanistic existentialism." I agree with Lewis Owens (1998: 332) that this conclusion is not acceptable.

⁴¹ Owens 1998: 339.

Digenis Akritas

One important thing that has *not* changed is the reference to Digenis Akritas – in both editions the credo begins with “I believe in one God, Akritas, Digenis⁴²” as well as later on contains “I believe in the human heart, the soil threshing ground, where day and night Akritas fights with death.”⁴³ This Byzantine and Modern-Greek folk hero is present here and elsewhere in Kazantzakis' writings ever since his first steps as an author⁴⁴: at one point he took on composing an epic poem on the topic – the Byzantine-Medieval continuation of the *Odyssey*, his *magnum opus*.⁴⁵

Multiple times he would refer to Akritas as the “New Adam” and note how he would be present as different personalities throughout the ages,⁴⁶ pointing towards the “idea” of Akritas, a new man, as opposed to the old man, Odysseus. At one point, later in time than the first edition of *Ascesis*, he writes in his notes: “AKRITAS = the new ADAM.” and then “How Adam creates the world: He begins and from the unsolvable chaos separates the day, the night, the sky, the earth, animals, plants... (see Genesis) and gives them names, personalities, he saves them from the chaos, gives them a soul... On the 7th day he creates God. In order to give an explanation to the universe.”⁴⁷

In this later context the mention of “I believe in one God, Akritas, Digenis” seems to conflate every single concept developed beforehand: a man that ascends and becomes the new man, the ascent itself, Digenis, God, and throws them together, creating a singular entity, which,

⁴² Digenis Akritas literally means two-blood (two-born) border warrior – referring to his origin as a son of a Christian woman and an Islamic emir, as well as his profession – an Akritas, a member of an elite Byzantine border guard.

⁴³ Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 33; Καζαντζάκης 1945: 77ff. A reference to a folkstory retelling how before his death, Digenis Akritas would wrestle with the personification of death itself.

⁴⁴ At one point the author used “Akritas” as a pseudonym when writing for two Athenian newspapers in 1907 and 1908 (Μαθιουδάκης 2023: 124 n. 2).

⁴⁵ Kazantzakis writes (02.07.1939): “Perhaps it will do me good in the new work, AKRITAS, which will be the last important work of my life, the counterpart [τέρι (sic!)] to the ODYSSEY” in a letter to Stamos Diamantaras (Μαθιουδάκης 2023: 124 n. 5).

⁴⁶ Μαθιουδάκης 2023: 132–133.

⁴⁷ Μαθιουδάκης 2023: 133.

in the words of Kazantzakis' secret: "DOES NOT EXIST!" The separation between these ideas is artificial and the process of "connecting" and "becoming one" does not involve actual union, but the acceptance of the truth. And while in the first edition this newfound energy would have been directed towards actual, real struggle, in the second complete nihilism takes over with the struggle solely internal. This would then point to this part of the writer's philosophy being much older and much earlier developed than one would think. Already in the 1920s (if we accept that the most significant changes have been made in 1928 and not in the 1940s) the status and position of Digenis was established, central to Kazantzakis' philosophy.⁴⁸

From a political to a philosophical struggle

As it has been noted in regard to the removal of "a human kingdom" and the introductory note, i.e. the part, among other things, about the struggle of a communist circle of Russians, Poles, and Germans, as well as the "first scream of the metacommunist credo", along with the added stronger focus on rejection of it all in general, it all points to an important change in Kazantzakis' stance on struggle that has a specific goal to achieve. Consequently, in part going against what I have written before, I believe that the disappearance of the introductory note did not happen solely due to the lack of a wider political-philosophical context, but also due to the fact that Kazantzakis was distancing himself from the aforementioned essays, which expressed the need for an actual, real struggle oriented towards changing the world and not a philosophical, internal struggle for the sake of struggle.

The additions to his "CREDO" also show this turn towards a struggle that is more holistic, one that does not spare anyone without exception:

⁴⁸ See also Bzinkowski 2017 for a wider analysis of Akritas' interplay with the other works by Kazantzakis. For the presence of Digenis Akritas in the author's works see a recent article by Giannis Mitrofanis (Μητροφάνης 2024).

HELP! YOU CALL, LORD, HELP! YOU CALL, LORD, AND I HEAR YOU.

INSIDE ME, MY ANCESTORS AND DESCENDANTS, AND ALL THE RACES, AND THE WHOLE EARTH, WE HEAR YOUR CRY WITH FEAR AND JOY.

Καζαντζάκης 1945: 78

In comparison with:

Help, you call, Lord, and I hear you.

Καζαντζάκης 1927a: 33

Even though we do not know exactly which changes have been made in 1928 and which in 1945, we have to be aware that “Silence”, the “bomb”, has been added a year after the first edition had been published. As such, perhaps Kazantzakis already had such thoughts in his mind – nihilism, struggle for the sake of struggle and not one that aims for change, internal contemplation and change – but believed that his readers were not ready to accept the truth. Perhaps he himself was not ready to accept this. Hence why he prepared the ground with political essays, beginning with something accessible to a wider audience, moving towards a pseudo-political text (besides the introduction and references that are rather miniscule and few and far between these topics do not show up at all), a “bad edition”, and arriving at a completely lyrical-philosophical personal manifesto. After all, the form of *Ascesis* had already been prepared internally,⁴⁹ which is likely why he finished the entire text in just 4 months.

Such seems to be the “parallel” Kazantzakis himself delineates in *The Ascent*, first published in 1946, where the protagonist, Kosmas, having been diagnosed with “the Ascetics’ illness”⁵⁰ at the very end of the novel decides to write his own “metacommunist Credo.”⁵¹ He

⁴⁹ Βρεττάκος 1960: 92.

⁵⁰ The parallel is only strengthened by the fact that Kosmas falls ill, among others, after having watched the performance of Shakespeare’s *Tempest* – a play Kazantzakis interpreted as Shakespeare leaving the real world, something he also attempted to achieve in his *Akritas* (Bien 2007: 112).

⁵¹ Καζαντζάκης 2023: 246.

finishes the work in less than three weeks and names it “ASCESIS” – at which point in the novel Kazantzakis wanted to include the entire text of the work,⁵² considering it the most appropriate place.⁵³

Besides, as Prevelakis notes, Kazantzakis’ travel to Soviet Russia was an important stimulus and the last push towards completing this change in his philosophy: “Kazantzakis’ temporary stay in Bekovo is linked to an important event in his intellectual life: his turn towards total nihilism. It is paradoxical, yet true.”⁵⁴

The idea that Kazantzakis was ready to affirm nihilism from the outset (with his own goals in mind) is further strengthened not only by the aforementioned note by Prevelakis, but also by the fact that the writer would send him the “final form of *Ascesis*” already in 1928 – the changes made in 1945 must then have been actual corrections and not radical ideological changes. The wait until the second edition was published is not readily explainable. It is a fact that in the meantime Kazantzakis would create and publish his most important work, his magnum opus, the *Odyssey*, whose style’s influences can be seen in the second edition. However, they seem to only be contained to the language used, not to his worldview.⁵⁵ Perhaps he wanted to establish himself as a recognized writer before displaying his lyrical manifesto to the world or he wanted to see if, having written the most important work of his life, he himself would hold true to the ideas of his literary youth – the question shall remain unanswered for now as it warrants further research.

As a final wrench in the gears, one should mention a different approach to Kazantzakis’ nihilism: perhaps he viewed it not in absolute, hopeless terms, but rather as something that one has to accept and face as a challenge⁵⁶ in order to push through it, completing the ascent in that way. Just as Nietzsche’s “God is dead”, in Kazantzakis’ view those who

⁵² Μαθιουδάκης, Βασιλείαδη 2023: 258.

⁵³ The link between *Ascesis* and *The Ascent* has been recently analyzed by Bart Soethaert (2023) and Ioanna Skordi (2023).

⁵⁴ Πρεβελάκης 1993: 30.

⁵⁵ As noted by Sakkis: “Some “linguoplastic” [γλωσσοπλαστικές] tendencies, evident in others works by Kazantzakis, such as mainly in the *Odyssey*, are also discernible in the vocabulary of *Ascesis*” (1985: 267) with examples.

⁵⁶ Kaufmann 1974: 96.

accept the nihilistic outlook (one not at all easy to accept, hence why the secret is “heinous” and weighs heavy on their shoulders) would be able to move past it. Just as communism and the crucifixion of Soviet Russia was necessary for “metacommunism” to exist.⁵⁷ As such, once again, Kazantzakis cannot himself be described as nihilist – his work, similarly, cannot be thought of as pessimistic.⁵⁸ Yet, as I said, a nihilistic dimension *does* exist, is apparent in the work’s first edition and expanded upon in the second, functioning in the Nietzschean sense of the word, i.e., one of a philosopher who despised nihilism and was actively attempting to bring about its end by exposing its most extreme form as violently as possible – hence the important shift towards fierceness and increased intensity of expression in the second edition. The Buddhist conceptuality underlying this all, the highest form of creation only being possible after the destruction of the former, permeates the work in its entirety, only becoming more significant with the removal of overt political references from the first edition.⁵⁹

Summary

From a formal point of view there are a few changes which have far-reaching ideological implications as well. These include the removal of the introductory note and the reorganization of the last few chapters into “Silence”. The language and style of the work becomes much more lyrical and influenced by works created after the initial publication, most notable Kazantzakis’ *magnum opus* – the *Odyssey*.

Most importantly, the transformation of *Ascesis* between its 1927 and 1945 editions constitutes much more than a stylistic revision or a simple reorganization of previously existing text. The largest ideological changes seem to have been made nearly immediately after 1927,

⁵⁷ See Owens 2001: 444, who nevertheless disagrees that the final line of the “CREDO” is nihilistic and connects Kazantzakis’ deity to Bergson’s *élan vital* (as does Bien 1989: 68), an identification I am not at all opposed to.

⁵⁸ Owens 1998.

⁵⁹ Bien 1989: 134–136 seems to agree that, at least in two possible interpretations, Buddhism with its circular time and “transcendental subjectivism” was the main driving force behind this change in the second edition.

during Kazantzakis' stay in Soviet Russia. They reflect a profound shift in the work's philosophical orientation – from political struggle rooted in communist ideas, all too close to the author's political essays (especially *Russia Crucified*) to a deeply personal and metaphysical internal exploration. This shift is not incidental but deliberate, as evidenced by Kazantzakis' own correspondence, the timing of his revisions, and the rhetorical intensification found in key passages analyzed in the article. Although the second edition of *Ascesis* appeared in 1945, the core ideological transformation – especially the insertion of "Silence" and the philosophical shift – was largely complete by 1927. The later edition refined and intensified this vision rather than introducing a new, altered one.

The aforementioned removal of the original introductory note, the restructuring and partial, but extremely important rewriting of the "CREDO", and the insertion of the chapter "Silence" with all of its additions collectively signal a movement away from overt political focus of the text and the writer's thought toward a worldview shaped by Bergson's vitalism, Nietzschean staunch opposition to nihilism often wrongly characterized as nihilism itself, as well as Buddhist metaphysical philosophy.⁶⁰ Rather than rejecting his earlier political essays, Kazantzakis reorients them – *Ascesis* redirects the energies found therein inward. Struggle ceases to function as a way to better society or humanity's earthly status and becomes internal, a way for the individual to ascend to a higher state of being. The nihilism nevertheless present in the work is not one of despair but of hope – one that needs to be affirmed, transformed and surpassed, for which one must go "Beyond! Beyond! Beyond!" in the second-edition's own words.

Ascesis, therefore, must be understood as a hybrid text: philosophy veiled in a thick covering of literary finesse, none of which dominate over the other but rather work together, forming a deeply personal manifesto. It is an intensely dynamic work – an embodiment of Kazantzakis' own intellectual and spiritual metamorphosis, one might add. In *Ascesis* Kazantzakis' cries out, proclaiming his own "CREDO", inviting humanity to take it as its own, to accept the inevitable: the non-existence,

⁶⁰ Bien goes as far as to say that *Ascesis* "offers an implicit dialectic between Bergson and Buddha, will and idea, action and contemplation" (Bien 1989: 141).

and to relish in it, to believe that all of creation comes from nothing and to struggle – to struggle without any certainty for the sake of struggle, or rather, more precisely, for the sake of one's own being.

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