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# **Speaking Without Words: Zorba's Dance**

Anthony Quinn "teaching dance" on the island of Crete to the music of Mikis Theodorakis is a popular image that portrays Greeks as extremely emotional, passionate and spontaneous. This paper shows the importance of dancing in Greek culture and how Greeks talk through their body by examining Kazantzakis character, Zorba, who "has many things to say but would rather dance them".

### *Key words:*

Greek dancing, Zorba the Greek, Nikos Kazantzakis

## **Entering the Dance**

My life's greatest benefactors have been journeys and dreams. Very few people, living or dead, have aided my struggle. 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.<sup>1</sup>

The words to follow are on Zorba the Greek and his dance. My goal is to show the importance of dancing in Greek culture and how Greeks talk through their body, as well as how, through body language, Greeks create a dialogue between the western-Apollonian-order with the eastern-Dionysian-chaos. Greeks act life; indeed, as Zorba, their kinsman, they dance it as well. By doing so, Greeks subconsciously and creatively use dancing as a therapeutic means of self- and psychoanalysis, as they manage to liberate themselves by healing their egos. After all, the world of Greece is a world of culture, always with the human being centered.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1965, 445.

<sup>2</sup> Spyros Orfanos, *Mythos and Logos*, Psychoanalytic Dialogues 16, 2006, 481-499.

Constantine Cavafy and Nikos Kazantzakis are two Modern Greek writers whom non-Greeks are familiar with. The popularity of the novel *Zorba the Greek* is attributed to the fact that it urged American and European intellectuals discover what they were not, what their repressed self was; in other words, it offered westerners a prototype of liberation.<sup>3</sup> Readers got fascinated by the transcendence of the ego that the East was promising them. The Mediterranean eyes of Kazantzakis's work were an attraction for the western society, which, tired from logic and abundance, admired Zorba, a daring, spontaneous hero, who refused conventions and admitted his emotional passions.

In 1964, the film "Zorba the Greek" was released and became even more popular than its "visual" 1960 relative, "Never on Sunday". The film was directed by Michael Cacoyiannis with the popular soundtrack composed by Mikis Theodorakis. The final image by which the audience left the cinema was that of Zorba's dance, a scene which became the symbol of Greece and of the Greek spirit represented by Zorba in particular.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of this theme led to the production of a Broadway 1968 musical and a 1987 ballet.<sup>5</sup> Mikis Theodorakis comments that the film's music has been turned into a myth.<sup>6</sup> Since that time, Zorba and his dancing have lent their name to restaurants and various other products over the world.<sup>7</sup>

When in Paris, between 1907 and 1909, Kazantzakis combined his studies about the French philosopher Bergson with a reading of Nietzsche. The German philosopher had a powerful influence on Kazantzakis, who, in turn, wrote a dissertation on him.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Nietzsche's "process theology" is expressed in Kazantzakis's novel, "Zorba the Greek". According to Nietzsche's ideas about the sources of religion, god is the result of whatever the most energetic and heroic people value and create.

Peter Bien, indeed, argues how Zorba's actions are immediate reflections of Nietzsche's ideas.<sup>9</sup> To his perception, Zorba is the "superhuman" who knows that there is not a true, reasonable, permanent, ordered, or good world for us.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his works, however, Kazantzakis does not kill "his" God, as Nietzsche would do, but, instead, wishes to save Him, thing which derives from Kazantzakis's

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<sup>3</sup> Dimitris Dimiroulis, *Everything Looks Magnified*, The Tree 155-156, 2007, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Lisbet Torp, *Zorba's Dance: The Story of a Dance Illusion and its Touristic Value*, Ethnografika 8, 1992, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Original Broadway Cast, with a book by Joseph Stein, lyrics by Fred Ebb, and music by John Kander. The ballet is choreographed by Lorca Massine.

<sup>6</sup> Mikis Theodorakis, *The Anatomy of Music*, Alfios, Athens, 1990, 223-4.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how this film distorts Kazantzakis's view see Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis's Novels on Film*, Journal of Modern Greek Studies 18, 2000, 161-170.

<sup>8</sup> The dissertation was completed in 1909 and has the title *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State*.

<sup>9</sup> P. Bien, *Kazantzakis: The Politics of Spirit*, Crete University Press, Heraklion, 2001, 312.

<sup>10</sup> Reed Merrill, "Zorba the Greek" and Nietzschean Nihilism, Mosaic 8 (2), 1975, 104.

wish to kill the awesome father of his childhood, whom he continued to hate and fear most of his life.<sup>11</sup>

Kazantzakis had obvious relationships with psychoanalysis. Even though he seemed to despise psychoanalysts, in 1922, in Vienna, he wrote that he is satisfied with Freud's theory for dreams and instincts. He particularly favored the dark subconscious as we see in a 1949 letter to his philhellene Swedish friend Knoes. He visited the Viennese psychiatrist Stekel to consult him in regard to his skin disease.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it was the occasion of that illness which brought him in contact with psychoanalysis and convinced him that the power of the unconscious was stronger than his willful determination to become a religious prophet and a heroic world figure by means of self-discipline and identification with Buddhist principles.<sup>13</sup>

A psychological analysis of Zorba could argue that Kazantzakis's hero who lives everything, everyday, as for the first time, is the exact opposite of his biological father, the dreadful, authoritative Captain Michael.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Kazantzakis felt free when the formidable man died, that "heavy lion" who had contributed to the emotional eunuchism of his childhood.<sup>15</sup>

## A New Statesman

If it had been a question in my lifetime of choosing a spiritual guide, a guru as the Hindus say, a father as say the monks at Mount Athos, surely I would have chosen Zorba. For he had just what a quill-driver needs for deliverance: the primordial glance which seizes its nourishment arrow-like from on high; the creative artlessness, renewed each morning, which enabled him to see all things constantly as though for the first time, and to bequeath virginity to the eternal quotidian elements of air, ocean, fire, woman, and bread; the sureness of hand, freshness of heart, the gallant daring to tease his own soul, as though inside him he had a force superior to the soul; finally, the

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Hartocollis, *Mysticism and Violence: The Case of Nikos Kazantzakis*, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 55, 1974, 209.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on Kazantzakis's struggle of ascetics against sexuality as a manifestation of the mystic's struggle against his own internal violence see P. Hartocollis, *Mysticism and Violence: The Case of Nikos Kazantzakis*.

<sup>13</sup> P. Hartocollis, *Mysticism and Violence: The Case of Nikos Kazantzakis*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Kazantzakis's 1956 novel (*Freedom or Death*, Simon and Schuster, New York) carries his father's name in its original, Greek version (thus, *Captain Michael*). For more information on that see Stamatis Philippides, *Ambivalences: Theses on the Narrative Word of Six Modern Greek Writers*, Indiktos, Athens, 2005, 182-3.

<sup>15</sup> Zografou and Petrakou have applied psychological analyses to Kazantzakis's works and talk about his relationship with his father and how it influenced his writings. Kyriaki Petrakou, *Kazantzakis and the Theater*, Militos, Athens, 2005, 303-336 and Lili Zografou, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Tragic*, Kedros, Athens, 1960. For Kazantzakis's own thoughts on his father see *Report to Greco*, 31-33.

savage bubbling laugh from a deep, deep wellspring deeper than the bowels of man, a laugh which at critical moments spurted redemptively from Zorba's elderly breast, spurted and was able to demolish (did demolish) all the barriers –morality, religion, homeland– which that wretched poltroon, man, has erected around him in order to hobble with full security through his miserable smidgen of life.<sup>16</sup>

An intellectual is writing a manuscript on Buddha. At the port of Piraeus, he meets with Alexis Zorba, an uneducated man, and hires him to superintend the workmen in the abandoned lignite mine on the island of Crete. Zorba values more experience and understanding than scholarly learning: "What's the use of all your damn books? You think too much, that is your trouble. Clever people and grocers, they weigh everything." After a series of victories and failures, the writer leaves Crete, but asks Zorba to teach him to dance.

The story described illustrates the contrast introduced by Nietzsche between the Apollonian and the Dionysian outlook on life. Apollo, the writer, represents the spirit of order and rationality, while Dionysus, Zorba, represents the spirit of ecstatic, spontaneous will to live. The whole story is a fable about the mind and the body.<sup>17</sup>

Bien describes the boss's transformation this way: "His Apollonian powers, hitherto either paralyzed or misdirected, can now turn to the task of redeeming Dionysian reality, rescuing Zorba from dissolution".<sup>18</sup> He can function now as a "tragic" artist, fuse his western mentality with Zorbatic barbarism, transform within his womb the barbarian seed, and bear an artistic son: the tragic myth called Zorba the Greek.

Kazantzakis wants his eternal Greek (or, Hellene) to be nothing different than the Greek race itself, a marvelous synthesis of both East and West. Moreover, through "Zorba," Kazantzakis embraces both the western as well as the eastern. The protagonist wants to get rich, but, at the same time, acts very irresponsibly. He abandons rationality to live in madness. In Bien's view, he rejects the mind in favor of the heart, whereas everyone is overwhelmed by an inexorable, tragic, destructive fate (1974: 131-133).<sup>19</sup>

Kazantzakis's vision, besides being Greek, is definitely "Cretan" too. Crete, for Kazantzakis, is his homeland, an island at the southernmost part of Greece, a crossroads of many cultures and civilizations, a synthesis that he always

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<sup>16</sup> N. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 445.

<sup>17</sup> S. Philippides meditates more on these "bipolar" Kazantzakian notions (spirit-body, mind-material, abstinence-sensuality, laziness-action, logos-action, high style-folk style; *Ambivalences: Theses on the Narrative Word of Six Modern Greek Writers*, 158).

<sup>18</sup> P. Bien, *Zorba the Greek, Nietzsche, and the Perennial Greek Predicament*, Antioch Review, Spring, 1965.

<sup>19</sup> P. Bien, *The Mellowed Nationalism of Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek*, Review of National Literatures, Greece: the Modern Voice 5 (2), 1974, 131-133.

pursues. He feels neither European, nor ancient Greek, nor eastern. He breathes another air, a composition of all these forces and its components that empower and make him proud and brave. The syncretic glance that dares to look at life and death nakedly, Kazantzakis names Cretan. It is the exact same look of the Minoan who stares at the scared bull, just before his dangerous leap.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have traced political connotations on Zorba as well. They comment on how he expresses patriotism by being an internationalist during the Second World War period.<sup>21</sup> Although the homonymous novel was written during the dark days of the Occupation, Kazantzakis's double objective through it was to examine and project the Greek people's remarkable powers of endurance despite repeated disaster, and the artist's need to draw from the unpleasant concreteness of everyday reality in order to create abiding archetypes.

Though the film ends rather deliciously with Zorba teaching the boss how to dance, the whole point of the book's end is that the boss is liberated as an artist and is then able to write his "saint's life of Zorba." He does not become like Zorba (--as the film would have us believe). Instead, the boss converts Zorba's flesh into spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Doubtless, Kazantzakis sees Zorba as a teacher, and writes about him in the same spirit Plato "apologizes" for Socrates. For him, Alexis Zorba is a spokesman of wise teachings, who created his biographer, Nikos Kazantzakis, who, in turn, metamorphosed him into Zorba the Greek. Through these writings, Kazantzakis is now the author who applies his authority to control and expand on his hero's personality.<sup>23</sup> By creating such models, he struggles to resemble them, thus, he is also being self-created.

All in all, Kazantzakis creates a myth, as, through Zorba, he emotionally addresses great moral questions of inaction, agency and fate versus free will. He then uses this myth as his own, personal mirror.<sup>24</sup> But, will he dance?

## Zorba's Dance

I do not believe in coincidence; I believe in destiny. This bas-relief divulged the secret of my life with astonishing simplicity, perhaps the secret of Zorba's life as well. It was a copy of an ancient tombstone

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<sup>20</sup> N. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 486 and Maria Hnaraki, *Unfolding Ariadne's Thread: Cretan Music*, Kerkyra Publications, Athens, 2007, 45.

<sup>21</sup> More on these political connotations in P. Bien, *Zorba the Greek, Nietzsche, and the Perennial Greek Predicament and The Mellowed Nationalism of Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek*, and Angela Kastrinaki, "Greek Wild Carryons and All That": *Zorba, an Internationalist during Occupation*, Nikos Kazantzakis 2004 University of Crete Conference Proceedings, 2006, 151-62.

<sup>22</sup> P. Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis's Novels on Film*, 164.

<sup>23</sup> Georgia Farinou-Malamatari, *Kazantzakis and Biography*, Nikos Kazantzakis Chania November 1997 Scientific Two-Days' Proceedings, 1998, 173-4.

<sup>24</sup> According to Orfanos, "Myths can be like mirrors" (2006: 8).

carving. A naked warrior, who has not abandoned his helmet, not even in death, is kneeling on his right knee and squeezing his breast with both palms, a tranquil smile flitting around his closed lips. The graceful motion of the powerful body is such that you cannot distinguish whether this is a dance or death. Or is it a dance and death together? Even if it is death, we shall transform it into a dance, I said to myself, encouraged by the happy sun falling upon the warrior and bringing him to life. You and I, my heart, let us give him our blood so that he may be brought back to life, let us do what we can to make this extraordinary eater, drinker, workhorse, woman-chaser, and vagabond live a little while longer – this dancer and warrior, the broadest soul, surest body, freest cry I ever knew in my life.<sup>25</sup>

Kazantzakis often feels compelled to describe in details and depth the gradual development of psychological conditions that lead to an imperative necessity for singing or dancing. Such activities represent, for him, the outcome, the climax, and the quintessence of the inner psychological preparation and ascent, often complex and bewildering, of the hero reaching his true liberation through these fundamental acts. Moreover, he also mentions in his writings the use of musical instruments, manipulated by his heroes as symbols of elevation at important moments. All in all, Kazantzakis sees music and dance as means of extreme elevation, often almost a religious one.<sup>26</sup>

Zorba may also be viewed not as a novel, but as a memorial.<sup>27</sup> When Zorba's flesh died, his myth started to crystallize in Kazantzakis's mind. Zorba started to become a fairy tale. Kazantzakis would see him dance, neighing in the middle of the night and calling him to spring up from his comfortable shell of prudence and habit and to take off with him on great travels.<sup>28</sup> His love (*Eros*) for Zorba, gave life to his death (*Thanatos*). The writer, who is not a dancer, immortalized him in pen.

Zorba's singing and playing on the *santouri* (dulcimer) carries his sorrow and his yearning. In Kazantzakis novel, *Freedom or Death*, the teacher, instead of answering to the question "where are we coming from and where are we going to", he grasps the *lira* (three-stringed Cretan instrument), and plays it, while the dying grandfather disembodies. As the voice of the *lira* recalls his deeds and his experiences, he transubstantiates to the soul which abandons his body.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> N. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 458-459.

<sup>26</sup> John Papaioannou, *Kazantzakis and Music*, *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10 (4), 1983, 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> Manolis Yialourakis, *Kazantzakis Told Me...*, *The Tree* 155-156, 2007, 33-34.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Matthias, *Prologue to Zorba the Greek*, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16 (2), 1998, 242-243.

<sup>29</sup> Roderick Beaton, *Of Crete and Other Demons: A Reading of Kazantzakis's Freedom and Death*, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16 (2), 1998, 208.

It is the dancing, however, which Zorba manages to drag his boss in too, which acts as the intensively as well as impressively emotional and passionate act: Kazantzakis sees on the music-dance blaze-up of Zorba the contact with the timeless, a moment that transcends every cultural civilization meaning.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, on the last day in Crete, the boss learns from Zorba a remedial lesson in dancing.<sup>31</sup>

Zorba is dancing solo, arms extended, ready to fly with the eagles of Crete. He has the freedom to perform improvisational, virtuoso movements, giving himself to dancing. He jumps in the air, performing agile, acrobatic leaps, trying to show his gallantry and pride, demonstrating strength and agility, and that, in fact, he does not fear anything and anybody who threatens his freedom; He feels independent and free because he can dance. The wildness his dance might exhibit is a sweet one: self-protection against any misfortune.<sup>32</sup>

In Greece, the embodied soul can find its release not through logos but through movement. Zorba is the authentic, almost forgotten Greek self, the man who may drink, curse and sleep with women of loose morals but who has an enviable quality that the educated European lacks: He is in tune with himself. The metaphor is one that would have appealed to Plato, for it is through the means of music and dance, a language of the body (*soma*) as well as the mind (*nous*), that Zorba, in contrast to the “boss” (and perhaps to Kazantzakis himself), achieves a secure sense of his place in the universe.<sup>33</sup>

As Kazantzakis states, this novel about his diseased friend Alexis Zorba is more than anything a dialogue between a pen-pusher and an older folk person; a dialogue between a lawyer of the “Mind” and the great soul of the people.<sup>34</sup> It is apparent that Zorba’s stories are more connected to the body than to the brain. In such contexts, folk dancing becomes for Zorba and, in extension for the Greeks, a primal non-verbal behavior, an authentic voice, a “deeper body language”.<sup>35</sup>

Marta Savigliano argues how tango is the only place in which she feels comfortable, restless, but at home, especially when not at home.<sup>36</sup> Such is Zorba’s story. His dance both hurts and comforts him. It is his changing, resourceful source

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<sup>30</sup> Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Zorba's Transformations*, Nikos Kazantzakis 2004 University of Crete Conference Proceedings 2006, 92.

<sup>31</sup> But, unlike Zorba, he does not merge with the dance; in Nietzsche’s terms, he does not become the work of art (P. Bien, *Zorba the Greek, Nietzsche, and the Perennial Greek Predicament*, 159).

<sup>32</sup> M. Hnaraki, *Unfolding Ariadne's Thread: Cretan Music*, 102-108.

<sup>33</sup> Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Song, Self-Identity, and the Neohellenic*, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 15 (2), 1997, 233.

<sup>34</sup> Eleni Kazantzaki, *Nikos Kazantzakis: The Uncompromising; Biography Based on Unpublished Letters and Texts*, Athens, 1983, 567.

<sup>35</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the relationship of the folk and the authentic in Kazantzakis’s work see S. Philippides, *Topos: Theses on the Narrative Word of Seven Modern Greek Writers*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 1997, 209-230.

<sup>36</sup> Mart Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1995.

of identity, his strategic language, a way of talking about, understanding, exercising decolonization.

“Boss, I have never loved a man as much as you. I have hundreds of things to say, but my tongue just can’t manage them...So, I will dance them for you”. It is when feelings well up to the point where words can no longer suffice that Zorba begins dancing. For Zorba, the impersonator of the folk, or for any Greek, in extension, dance is the ultimate creative act and follows its own, natural laws. Despite the fact that the book does not end with the dance scene, most people continue to see the conclusion as the hero learning to dance and thereby to perceive the world in the manner of his mentor.

Kazantzakis’s biological father demanded that his son becomes a fighter, and not a writer. By using folk elements, such as the afore-mentioned vivid dance scene, Kazantzakis indirectly describes his liberation as a writer, which lies in the discovery of an “authentic” person; the narrator of popular, folk stories. In this sense, Zorba teaches Kazantzakis how to express himself in folk style; he becomes his foster father.<sup>37</sup>

Greeks are passionate people. They adore life and enjoy living. But, as the wise Buddha said, the more you are attached to this world, the more you suffer. From the times of Homer the complaint is the same: Life is wonderful, but so short! Let’s not forget that the Greek word for song (*tragoudhi*) stems etymologically from the ancient Greek word “tragedy”.

The original Zorba, the hero of Kazantzakis’s novel, is a passionate but not a jovial person. In his depth you can find a lot of despair. His merry-making is tinged with a strong taste of regret. You can hear this in Greek songs. You can feel it in the deep, serious expression of a male solo dancer. He is not having fun. He is expressing the beauty and agony of living. Indeed, Zorba transforms his metaphysical questionings into structured, rhythmic movement: Who made the world? Why? Why do we die? Where do we come from and where do we go?<sup>38</sup>

Dance, after all, is a body dialogue with the queries. Zorba travels with an open chest and closed eyes. His dancing teaches unity and pride, the take-off. He deals with God; He speaks a language that cannot be interpreted, but felt. Zorba taught Kazantzakis to love life’s trouble,<sup>39</sup> and not to be afraid of death. Through movement, with no fear and no hope, the writer shall be free!

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<sup>37</sup> S. Philippides, *Ambivalences: Theses on the Narrative Word of Six Modern Greek Writers*, 177-183.

<sup>38</sup> Nikos Dimou, *Dialogues: The metaphysics of “grinia”*, [http://www.ndimou.gr/dial\\_7.asp](http://www.ndimou.gr/dial_7.asp)

<sup>39</sup> After all, quoting... Zorba, “life is trouble, only death isn’t”! N. Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1953.



## Flights

I experienced great agitation and fellow feeling as I gazed at this flying fish, as though it was my own soul I saw on that palace wall painting which had been made thousands of years before. “This is Crete’s sacred fish,” I murmured to myself, “the fish which leaps in order to transcend necessity and breathe freedom.” Did not Christ, the ICHTHYS, seek the same thing: to transcend man’s destiny and unite with God, in other words with absolute freedom? Does not every struggling soul seek the same thing: to smash frontiers? What good fortune, I reflected, that Crete should have been perhaps the first place on earth to see the birth of this symbol of the soul fighting and dying for freedom!<sup>40</sup>

Though the boss danced, he did not become like Zorba. He did not wish to pass the remaining of his life in Dionysian enthusiasm. He learnt from him, however, how to face the contradictions in life with happy disposition. He wrote a book on him, creating an Apollonian parable of Dionysian knowledge, succeeding, once more, Greece’s mission toward western civilization throughout the ages: To bring together the eastern instinct (*pathos*) with the western reasoning (*logic*).<sup>41</sup>

Kazantzakis was definitely not aware of what we would formally call today “art-” or “dance-therapy”. Following, however, a reflective path as a writer, he kept targeting resolution and personal satisfaction through his works. His Zorba is contemporary and global in that he is both real and constructed, as we all also are. The same way Kazantzakis’s Zorba opposes to the “boss”, our identity dissolves into multiple, contradictory forces. We are all many, and full of oppositions, our unity being only a fake structure.<sup>42</sup>

More than 60 years since Kazantzakis wrote Zorba and more than 40 since it became a film, Zorba the Greek is still, worldwide, the recognizable cultural-artistic product of Greece – even the “passport” of modern Greece. It may even symbolize the folkloric Greece that many of us want to get rid of, but its sincere aim is to teach us how to find personal freedom by dancing, by performing a creative act, undergoing a change analogous to creation. After all, it was a friend, Alexis Zorba, who molded Kazantzakis, who, in turn, created Zorba the Greek, and, by extension, us all modern dancing Zorbas.

(Translated by the author)

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<sup>40</sup> N. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 454-455.

<sup>41</sup> P. Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis Novelist*, Bristol, 1989, 20.

<sup>42</sup> S. Philippides, *Dostoyevsky’s Descendants, Mereskovsky and Kazantzakis, and Kazantzakis’s Narrative Art*, Unpublished Paper Delivered at the Nikos Kazantzakis 2007 University of Crete Conference, 2007.

**Марија Хнараки**

## **Језик тела: Зорбин плес**

*Кључне речи:*  
плес, Грчка, Грк Зорба, Никос Казанцакис

Никос Казанцакис, писац критског порекла, аутор је популарног романа *Грк Зорба*, који је извршио значајан утицај на интелектуалце у смилсу откривања шта то они нису и шта је њихово потиснуто ја. Другим речима, понудио је Западњацима прототип ослобођења. Према овом роману снимљен је и истоимени филм, у коме глумац Ентони Квин подучава плес, представљајући Грчку као земљу снажних, страствених и спонтаних емоција.

Ничеов контраст између Аполона и Дионизија, и различитости у погледу на свет, представља суштину Казанцакисовог дела. Аполон – писац, представља дух рационалности и реда, док, Дионис – Зорба, представља дух екстазе и спонтаности живљења. Очигледно да је Ниче имао велики утицај на Казанцакиса: Зорбино понашање се може посматрати и као рефлексивна Ничеових идеја о надљудском.

У суштини, читава прича о Зорби је бајка посвећена идеји о свести и телу коју Казанцакис прижељкује за вечиту Грчку (или Хеленизам), а која треба да представља расу Грка као такву, једну дивну синтезу Истока и Запада. Управо кроз Зорбу, писац успева да приближи Исток и Запад, као појмове и искуства који се могу доживети у пишчевој домовини, на острву Крит.

Научници су, такође, покушали да укажу на извесне политичке конотације садржане у роману. Кроз свог главног јунака, писац поставља питања морала и судбине наспрам слободне воље.

Психолошка анализа Зорбиног карактера може да укаже да главни јунак – који живи и доживљава све снажно као да је први пут, представља сушту супротност свом биолошком оцу, озбиљном, доминантном капетану Мајклу. У многим делима, писац често детаљно описује постепени развој психолошких услова који су довели до потребе за плесом или певањем.

Плес је веома важан у култури Грка, јер се Грци изражавају кроз говор тела. Кроз говор тела, Грци успостављају дијалог између западњачког – Аполоноског реда и источњачког – Дионизијског хаоса. Грци живе живот; и као Зорба, њихов рођак, они играју кроз живот.

Очигледно је да су Зорбине приче више повезане са телом и телесним него са главом и мозгом. У таквом контексту, народни плес постаје за Зорбу, и за Грке, примарни вид невербалног понашања, један аутентичан глас, значајнији говор тела, који изражава лепоту и агонију живљења.

Плес, на крају, јесте дијалог тела које поставља питања. Зорба путује кроз живот дишући пуним плућима али одбијајући да гледа око себе. Он подучава уједињење и понос. Плесач разговара са Богом, он говори језиком који не може да се преведе али се може осетити. Као и Грк Зорба, плесач има много тога да каже али пошто се то не може исказати речима, исказаће се кроз плес.