For the municipality in Crete, see Nikos Kazantzakis (municipality).

Nikos Kazantzakis (Greek: Νίκος Καζαντζάκης; 18 February 1883 – 26 October 1957) was a Greek writer, celebrated for his novels which include Zorba the Greek (published 1946 as Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas), Christ Recrucified (1948), Captain Michalis (1950, translated 'Freedom or Death), and The Last Temptation of Christ (1955). He also wrote plays, travel books, memoirs and philosophical essays such as The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises.

His fame was further spread in the English speaking world by cinematic adaptations of Zorba the Greek (1964) and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988).

1 Biography

Nikos Kazantzakis

When Kazantzakis was born in 1883 in Heraklion, Crete had not yet joined the modern Greek state, (which had been established in 1832) and was still under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. From 1902 Kazantzakis studied law at the University of Athens, then went to Paris in 1907 to study philosophy. Here he fell under the influence of Henri Bergson. His 1909 dissertation was titled "Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State." Upon his return to Greece, he began translating works of philosophy. In 1914 he met Angelos Sikelianos. Together they travelled for two years in places where Greek Orthodox Christian culture flourished, largely influenced by the enthusiastic nationalism of Sikelianos. Kazantzakis married Galatea Alexiou in 1911; they divorced in 1926. He married Eleni Samiou in 1945. Between 1922 and his death in 1957, he sojourned in Paris and Berlin (from 1922 to 1924), Italy, Russia (in 1925), Spain (in 1932), and then later in Cyprus, Aegina, Egypt, Mount Sinai, Czechoslovakia, Nice (he later bought a villa in nearby Antibes, in the Old Town section near the famed seawall), China, and Japan. While in Berlin, where the political situation was explosive, Kazantzakis discovered communism and became an admirer of Vladimir Lenin. He never became a committed communist, but visited the Soviet Union and stayed with the Left Opposition politician and writer Victor Serge. He witnessed the rise of Joseph Stalin, and became disillusioned with Soviet-style communism. Around this time, his earlier nationalist beliefs were gradually replaced by a more universalist ideology.

In 1945, he became the leader of a small party on the non-communist left, and entered the Greek government as Minister without Portfolio. He resigned this post the fol-
2 Literary work

His first work was the 1906 narrative Serpent and Lily (Όφις και Κρίνο), which he signed with the pen name Karma Nirvana. In 1909, Kazantzakis wrote a one-act play titled Comedy, which remarkably resonates existential themes that become prevalent much later in Post-World War II Europe by writers like Sartre and Camus. In 1910, after his studies in Paris, he wrote a tragedy, “The Master Builder” (Ο Πρωτομάστορας), based on a popular Greek folkloric myth. Kazantzakis considered his huge epic poem (33,333 verses long) The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel to be his most important work. Begun in 1924, he rewrote it seven times before publishing it in 1938. According to another Greek author, Pantelis Prevelakis, “it has been a superhuman effort to record his immense spiritual experience.” Following the structure of Homer’s Odyssey, it is divided into 24 rhapsodies.

Medallion honoring Kazantzakis in the Venetian Loggia, Heraklion

His most famous novels include Zorba the Greek (1946, in Greek Ο Φτωχούλης του Θεού); Christ Recrucified (1948, UK title The Last Temptation of Christ) in Greek Ο Χριστός Ξανασταυρώνεται; Captain Michalis (1950, UK title Freedom and Death, in Greek Καπετάν Μηχανίς); The Last Temptation of Christ (1955, Ο Τελευταίος Πειραματίδας) and Saint Francis (1956, UK title God’s Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi, in Greek Ο Φτωχούλης του Θεού). Report to Greco (1961, Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο), containing both autobiographical and fictional elements, summed up his philosophy as the “Cretan Glance.”

Starting in his youth, Kazantzakis was spiritually restless. Tortured by metaphysical and existential concerns, he sought relief in knowledge and travel, contact with a diverse set of people, in every kind of experience. The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on his work is evident, especially Nietzsche’s atheism and sympathy for the superman (Übermensch) concept. However, he was also haunted by spiritual concerns. To attain a union with God, Kazantzakis entered a monastery for six months. In 1927 Kazantzakis published in Greek his “Spiritual Exercises” (Greek: "Ασκητική"), which he had composed in Berlin in 1923. The book was translated into English and published in 1960 with the title The Saviors of God.

The figure of Jesus was ever-present in his thoughts, from his youth to his last years. The Christ of The Last Temptation of Christ shares Katzantzakis’ anguished metaphysical and existential concerns, seeking answers to haunting questions and often torn between his sense of duty and mission, on one side, and his own human needs to enjoy life, to love and to be loved, and to have a family. A tragic figure who at the end sacrifices his own human hopes for a wider cause, Kazantzakis’ Christ is not an infallible, passionless deity but rather a passionate and emotional human being who has been assigned a mission, with a meaning that he is struggling to understand and that often requires him to face his conscience and his emotions, and ultimately to sacrifice his own life for its fulfilment. He is subject to doubts, fears and even guilt. In the end he is the Son of Man, a man whose internal struggle represents that of humanity.

Many Orthodox Church clergy condemned Kazantzakis’ work and a campaign was started to excommunicate him. His reply was: “You gave me a curse, Holy fathers, I give you a blessing: may your conscience be as clear as mine and may you be as moral and religious as I” (Greek: Μον δόσατε μια κατάρα, Άγιοι πατέρες, οσά δένω κι εγώ μια ευχή: Σας εύχομαι να γίνεται η συνείδηση σας τόσο καθαρή, όσο είναι η δική μου και να έτε κόσμο τόθκοι και θρήνους όσο είμαι εγώ’). The excommunication was rejected by the top leadership of the Orthodox Church but emblematic of persistent disapprobation from many Christian authorities for his political and religious views.[2]

In Kazantzakis’ day, the international market for material
published in modern Greek was quite small. Kazantzakis also wrote in colloquial Demotic Greek, with traces of Cretan dialect, which made his writings all the more controversial in conservative literary circles at home. Translations of his books into other European languages did not appear until his old age. Hence he found it difficult to earn a living by writing, which led him to write a great deal, including a large number of translations from French, German, and English, and curiosities such as French fiction and Greek primary school texts, mainly because he needed the money. Some of this “popular” writing was nevertheless distinguished, such as his books based on his extensive travels, which appeared in the series “Travelling” (Ταξιδεύοντας) which he founded. These books on Greece, Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Cyprus, Spain, Russia, Japan, China, and England were masterpieces of Greek travel literature.

3 Bibliography of English translations

3.1 Translations of The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, in whole or in part


3.2 Travel books


• Russia, translated by A. Maskaleros and M. Antonakis, Creative Arts Books Co, 1989.

3.3 Novels


• The Rock Garden, translated from French (in which it was originally written) by Richard Howard, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.


• Toda Raba, translated from French (in which it was originally written) by Amy Mims, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.

• [Report to Greco — see under ‘Memoirs, essays and letters’]


• At the Palaces of Knossos. A Novel [for children], translated by Themis and Theodora Vasilis, edited by Theodora Vasilis, London: Owen, 1988. Adapted from the draft typewritten manuscript.


3.4 Plays


• Christopher Columbus, translated by Athena Gianakas-Dallas, Kentfield (CA): Allen Press, 1972. Edition limited to 140 copies.

• From Odysseus, A Drama, partial translation by M. Byron Raizis, "The Literary Review" 16, No. 3 (Spring 1973), p. 352.

• Comedy: A Tragedy in One Act, translated by Kimon Friar, "The Literary Review" 18, No. 4 (Summer 1975), pp. 417-454 {61}.
3.6 Anthologies


3.5 Memoirs, essays and letters

- *Burn Me to Ashes: An Excerpt*, translated by Kimon Friar, "Greek Heritage" 1, No. 2 (Spring 1964), pp. 61–64.
- "*He Wants to Be Free – Kill Him!*" A Story, translated by Athena G. Dallas, "Greek Heritage" 1, No. 1 (Winter 1963), pp. 78–82.
- *Two Dreams*, translated by Peter Mackridge, “Omphalos” 1, No. 2 (Summer 1972), p. 3.
- *Nikos Kazantzakis Pages at the Historical Museum of Crete*

3.6 Anthologies


4 References


5 Further reading

6 External links

- The Nikos Kazantzakis Museum, Crete
- The Nikos Kazantzakis Pages at the Historical Museum of Crete
- Iran to pay homage to Greek author Kazantzakis – Tehran Times, April 10, 2008
- Society of Nikos Kazantzakis friends (Greek)
- Kazantzakis Publications (Patroclous Stavrou)
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7.1 Text


7.2 Images

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