Writing, identity and truth in Kazantzakis's novel *The Last Temptation* *

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The Last Temptation has provoked its share of controversy (not least, but not only, sparked by the Martin Scorsese film based on the book). More serious discussions have tended to revolve around issues of the book's theology – understandably, given its theme. But to approach this book exclusively from the angle of either religion or philosophy is to leave out what I believe to be its most genuinely radical component: namely its exploitation and simultaneous undermining, not only of its biblical sources, but at the same time also of the age-old art of story-telling.

This can be demonstrated by considering each, in turn, of the components of my title. All three are among the terms customarily invoked, ever since the books of the Old Testament and the writing down of the Homeric poems, to guarantee the authority and status of the most highly-valued narratives of a culture about itself. Writing (and this is true even of such a "residually oral" culture as the Modern Greek) traditionally is the most stable and trusted means of establishing, maintaining and transmitting to future generations the things they most need to know: *who* (identity) did *what* (truth).

These notions, or at least their stability, have come under such sustained attack, within the late-twentieth-century Western culture that we loosely term postmodern, that it seems almost quaint to invoke them in those terms at all, today. But the reason for doing so is that the very same foundations of (*inter alia*) narrative art that postmodernism in recent years has challenged, with heady and problematic success, are also those

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which Kazantzakis, the "belated" survivor of an earlier, Romantic or immediately post-Romantic era, also challenged, rather earlier in our century (*The Last Temptation* was written in 1950-1, and first published in Greek in 1955).

Writing

Kazantzakis's strictures against the written word are well known, and most explicitly articulated in *Zorba,* which harps endlessly on the moral and spiritual infirmity of the *kalamarás* ("pen-pusher") who is Zorba's ineffectual superior in the mining business and willing disciple in the lessons of life. But even in that book, there is an implicit paradox which goes all the way back to Plato. Just as Plato in theory despised writing but none the less depended on his mastery of it in order to immortalise the teaching of his master Socrates, so Kazantzakis, through the mouthpiece of the book's narrator, denounces again and again the art which will at the beginning and end of the book actually be vindicated in the act of *writing* the "synaxari" (or saint's life) of Zorba.

This ancient ambivalence about writing has a more complex part to play in *The Last Temptation.* Relatively early in the book, we find Kazantzakis's characteristic diatribe against the tyranny of the written word, in the scene in the monastery where the old Abbot, Joachim, is on his deathbed and castigates the monks for seeing no further than the written word (γράμματα) of Scripture:

> Μα τι μπορούν να πουν τα γράμματα; αυτά 'ναι τα μαύρα κάγκελα της φυλακής, όπου στραγγαλίζεται και φωνάζει το πνέμα. Ανάμεσα από τα γράμματα και τις γραμμές και γύρα τριγύρα στο άγραφο χαρτί κυκλοφορεί ελεύτερο το πνέμα... (108; Eng. 110)[1]

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[1] Greek text and page numbers refer to: Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ο τελευταίος πειρασμός* (ξαναστοιχειοθετήθηκε με επιμ. Πάτροκλου Σταύρου) (Athens: Ekdoseis Elenis Kazantzaki 1984). The reader is referred to the excellent translation of the novel by Peter Bien ("Eng." after the Greek page number refers to: Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation,* paperback ed., London: Faber 1975). For the purposes of this paper, however, I have preferred to give my own, fairly literal, translations of the passages cited.

> But what can writing say? The letters of the alphabet are the black prison-bars of the soul, that keep it suffocated and crying out. In between the letters and the lines, and everywhere round the margins of the unwritten paper: that's where the soul goes free...

This is Kazantzakis the demoticist, the scourge of narrow book-learning, in a familiar guise. But once Jesus becomes launched on his missìon in the second half of the novel, the art of writing will appear in a more varied light.

Matthew the publican, though not prominent in the story, is nonetheless one of the more fully characterised of the apostles, after Judas. He is introduced into the narrative in a scene which closely follows the synoptic Gospels (for which, it should be said in passing, Kazantzakis has no systematic preference). To the canonical social revulsion caused by the inclusion of the former tax official among Jesus' disciples, Kazantzakis adds an additional colouring. In his description of Matthew, sitting outside his customs shed, we at once recognise the negative attributes of the *kalamarás* in the world of Kazantzakis's novels:

> Κοντός, παχουλός, χλεμπονιάρης· κίτρινα, μαλακά τα χέρια του, μελανωμένα τα δάχτυλά του, μαύρα τα νύχια του, μεγάλα μαλλιαρά τ' αυτιά του· ψιλή η φωνή του σα μουνούχου. (319; Eng. 322)

> Short, fat, and sallow; hands yellow, flaccid; fingers ink-stained, nails black; ears huge and hairy; his voice shrill like a eunuch's.

We have no difficulty recognising the type. And yet this despised *kalamarás* will reach surprising heights, just as the canonical Matthew did. Before leaving to follow in Jesus' footsteps, Matthew in Kazantzakis's version takes the tools of his trade with him. The despised inkpot and quill will soon be put to a new use. When the other disciples have gone to sleep, Matthew sits up beneath the lamp, takes out his "virgin notebook" (απάρθενο τεφτέρι) and quill-pen (here and throughout called by the dialect term καλέμι), and finds himself in a familiar dilemma:

> Πώς ν' αρχίσει; από πού ν' αρχίσει; ο Θεός τον έβαλε δίπλα στον άγιο ετούτον άνθρωπο να καταγράφει πιστά τα λόγια που λέει και τα θάματα που κάνει, να μη χαθούν, να τα μάθουν και οι μελλούμενες γενεές, να πάρουν κι αυτές το δρόμο της λύτρωσης. ... ['Ο],τι πάει να χαθεί, αυτός να το πιάνει με το καλέμι του, να το απιθώνει απάνω στο χαρτί, να το κάνει αθάνατο... (331; Eng. 333-4)
>
> How to begin? Where to begin? God had placed him next to this saintly man to write down faithfully the words he says and the miracle he makes, so as they won't be lost, so as future generations will learn about them, and follow in their turn the road of salvation. ... Whatever's at risk of being lost, he'll be the one to catch it with his quill-pen, and set it down on paper, and make it immortal...

And at the moment of dipping his quill in the inkpot, Matthew hears behind him the rustling of wings, as though an angel were standing on his right side and whispering into his ear what he must write: which turns out to be the first sentence of the Gospel according to St Matthew as we know it (cited, moreover, in the original New Testament Greek).

The process of inspired writing described here is familiar from Homer and the Old Testament onwards. There are abundant precedents, too, for the sense of literary mission, the humble determination to catch fleeting reality and give it permanent form. And it is conspicuous, too, that the canonical opening sentence of Matthew's Gospel (which asserts the genealogy of Jesus Christ from the ancient kings of Israel) is not true in the world of Kazantzakis's story as we have read it so far.

This problematic relationship between writing and truth assumes ever greater importance as the book progresses. The Biblical story of Jesus' rescue of the disciples from the storm (Matt. 14.22-32) is narrated in the form of Peter's dream (though we are told that the dream was sent by an "angel from heaven" [p. 347]). Peter then tells the story of his dream to Matthew. Not for the first or the last time in this novel, the status of dreams and reality is put into question, as Peter explains to Matthew that the dream was so vivid, and his emotions so powerful, that "perhaps it wasn't a dream". Matthew agrees, and begins to wonder how he can write it up in his Gospel:

> Δύσκολο πολύ, γιατί δεν ήταν ολότελα σίγουρος πως ήταν όνειρο· δεν ήταν ολότελα σίγουρος πως ήταν αλήθεια· ήταν και τα δυο· το θάμα αυτό έγινε, μα όχι στη γης και στη θάλασσα ετούτη, αλλού· μα πού; (349; Eng. 351)
>
> Very difficult, this: because he wasn't altogether sure it had been a dream; he wasn't altogether sure it was true, either; it was both; this miracle had happened, but not on this earth and this sea, somewhere else. But where?

Where, indeed, could this miracle possibly be real, if not in writing?

Matthew has a harder time of it in a later passage (at the end of ch. 23), which gives a fuller account of the writing process. In order to write what the text here describes as the βίος και πολιτεία του Ιησού (life and times of Jesus [355; Eng. 357]), Matthew finds that the angel commands him to write things that he *knows* are not true. He protests; he refuses to write; sweat gushes from his forehead; but despite himself, he is writing at breakneck speed. What is narrated here is immediately recognisable as another version of Jesus' own struggle, and Jesus himself, half-wakened from sleep, recognises it as such (356; Eng. 358).

The crisis for Matthew comes in ch. 26, which also contains the pact between Jesus and Judas which is central to Kazantzakis's whole version of the story. It is a time of stress and uncharacteristic bad temper among the disciples. First Peter, who has never taken to Matthew, experiences a moment of paranoia: άτιμη γενεά οι γραφιάδες (a worthless brood, you scribes [397; Eng. 399]), and he determines to know what Matthew has been writing about *him*. For the second time in the book, the opening of Matthew's Gospel is quoted in the original, this time at slightly greater length. Despite the lapse of charity that initiated this exchange, Peter finds himself lulled by Matthew's narrative of things that he knows quite well his fellow-disciple could not have seen, is charmed to sleep by the evangelist's words, which he likens to pomegranates, and finally on waking embraces the writer and kisses him on the mouth: εκεί που σε άκουγα, he declares, μπήκα στην Παράδεισο

(while I listened to you, I entered Paradise [398; Eng. 399]). This is the aesthetic response to inspired art.

But now a sterner trial awaits the evangelist. Jesus summons him over, and asks to read the story so far. Jesus is immediately enraged, and throws the book on the ground.

> Τι 'ναι αυτά; φώναξε· ψέματα! ψέματα! ψέματα! Δεν έχει ανάγκη ο Μεσίας από θάματα, αυτός είναι το θάμα, άλλο δε χρειάζεται! Γεννήθηκα στη Ναζαρέτ, όχι στη Βηθλεέμ, ποτέ μου δεν πάτησα το πόδι στη Βηθλεέμ, δε θυμούμαι Μάγους, δεν πήγα ποτέ μου στην Αίγυπτο ... (399; Eng. 401)
>
> What's all this? he shouted. Lies! Lies! Lies! The Messiah doesn't need miracles, *he* is the miracle, he's no need of any other! I was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, I've never in my life set foot in Bethlehem, I don't remember any Wise Men, I've never been to Egypt ...

But Matthew, like many a writer of secular narratives before and since, insists that he himself is not the one responsible. These things were told him by an angel; and he tells Jesus what we already know:

> ... σαν το μωρό είμαι φασκιωμένος στη φτέρουγα [sic] του Αγγέλου και γράφω· δε γράφω, αντιγράφω ό,τι μου λέει. Αμ' τι; από δικού μου εγώ θα τα 'γραφα όλα ετούτα τα θαμάσματα; (399; Eng. 401)
>
> ... I'm like a babe swaddled by the Angel's wing and I write. I don't write, I *write out* what he tells me. So what? Would *I*, on my own, write all these miraculous doings?

And Jesus is struck by the same idea that had occurred to Matthew much earlier, when he had been considering how to write up Peter's dream about the storm:

> ... αν όλα αυτά είναι η αληθινή αλήθεια; Αν ετούτο είναι το πιο αψηλό πάτωμα της αλήθειας, όπου ο Θεός μονάχα κατοικεί; Αν ό,τι εμείς λέμε αλήθεια, ο Θεός το λέει ψέμα; (400; Eng. 401)
>
> whether these things aren't the true truth? Whether this might be the highest level of truth, where God alone dwells? Whether what we call truth, is called a lie by God?

Jesus then falls silent (Σώπασε) and reverently, now, hands the manuscript back to its author:

> Γράφε, ό,τι σου υπαγορεύει ο Άγγελος, είπε ο Ιησούς· εγώ πια ... μα δεν απόσωσε το λόγο του. (400; Eng. 401)
>
> Go on writing, write whatever the Angel dictates to you, said Jesus; as for me ... but his words were left unfinished.

It is as though Kazantzakis is about to set the highest seal on his own art, in the words Jesus is about to say to Matthew; but his Jesus stops short, perhaps baffled (it would not be out of character) at the phenomenon to which he has just been initiated. Bien, interestingly, tries to make sense of the unfinished sentence by translating "It is too late for me to –". But even that is an over-interpretation.

Matthew makes two further appearances in the novel. The first is on the eve of the Passion (in ch. 27), when he is unwise enough to complain to Jesus: σκοτεινά τα λόγια σου, πώς θες να τα βάλω στα χαρτιά μου; (your words are dark, how can you expect me to put them down on paper?).

Jesus rounds on him with a predictably Kazantzakian denunciation of his craft: καλά σας λεν εσάς τους γραφιάδες κοκόρια· θαρρείτε δε βγαίνει ο ήλιος αν δεν τον φωνάξετε (they're quite right to call you scribes cockerels; you think the sun doesn't come out unless you crow) but proceeds to express a more serious disquiet which is actually quite consistent with the unfinished sentence some twenty-five pages earlier:

> Άλλα λέω εγώ, άλλα γράφετε εσείς, άλλα καταλαβαίνουν αυτοί που σας αναγνώθουν! Λέω: σταυρός, θάνατος, βασιλεία των ουρανών, Θεός, τι καταλαβαίνετε; Καθένας σας βάζει στον κάθε άγιο ετούτο λόγο τα πάθη του και τα συμφέροντα και τις βολές του, κι ο λόγος μου χάνεται, η ψυχή μου χάνεται, δεν μπορώ πια! (423; Eng. 425)
>
> I say one thing, you people write something different. Something different again the people who read you take out of it! I say: "cross", "death", "kingdom of heaven", "God", and what do you understand? Each one of you puts upon these holy words his

> own passions and interests and hopes, and my words are lost, my soul is lost, I've had enough of this!

Jesus is ready to despair at the fickleness of the reception to which the written word is prone. But as we shall see more clearly later, in turning on Matthew in this way, he is unable to deny its extraordinary potency either.

Matthew appears, finally, at the very end of the long dream sequence which takes up all but the last of the last fifty pages of the novel. Here he too lends his voice to the chorus denouncing the renegade Jesus, in his case on the grounds that all his best efforts (there is no mention of an angel this time) will have been in vain if Jesus was never crucified, and his hopes for posthumous fame will therefore have been frustrated. In what is surely parodic sarcasm on Kazantzakis's part, Matthew insists that Jesus ought to have suffered if only for the sake of his, Matthew's, art:

> Έπρεπε, ας ήταν και για το χατίρι μου μονάχα, για να σωθούν ετούτα τα γραμμένα, να σταυρωθείς! (505; Eng. 506)

> You ought, if only for my sake, if only to save all that's written here – you ought to have died on the cross!

But by this point in the narrative, the cause of writing has been taken up by another figure, more powerful and, as presented, surely also more sinister, than Matthew.

I think it is a justifiable inference that Kazantzakis has no great liking for the apostle Paul. Paul, who historically never met Jesus while he was alive, gets to do so in the temptation-dream which extends Jesus' earthly life to shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (495; Eng. 495). Clearly discernible in Kazantzakis's portrayal of Paul is the role commonly ascribed to him as the institutional founder of the Christian church. The character and behaviour of Kazantzakis's Paul is therefore complicated by Kazantzakis's known antipathy towards the Church which he founded. Paul is a highly ambiguous figure when he confronts Jesus in the second last chapter of the book. As representative of institutionalised Christianity, he is clearly to be understood as one of those who dangerously imprison the spirit, who had so terrified and

alienated the real Jesus on an earlier occasion (see p. 435; Eng. 437). Yet he appears here as a forerunner of Judas and the other apostles whose taunts will eventually bring the temptation-dream to an end; Paul appears as a tempter-within-temptation, and there is an ambiguity about his role, which seems to be at once to rub Jesus' nose in his betrayal of his followers, and to hold out the prospect, rather as Satan had earlier done, of world domination through the power of the institutionalised Church.

To add further to the ambivalence in the portrayal of Paul, there is another detail worth noticing. The Biblical Paul, according to himself in the *Acts,* had earlier been Saul, a virulent persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Earlier in the temptation-dream, this Saul duly appears. In the scene of gratuitous violence in which Mary Magdalene is murdered by the Levites and servants of Caiaphas (a scene which re-enacts the deaths of the sexual temptresses in *Zorbas* and *Christ Recrucified)* Saul is one of their number. Not only is he bloodthirsty, but we first see him through the eyes of the doomed Magdalene:

> Ποιος είσαι εσύ, με το φαλακρό κεφάλι, με τη χοντρή κοιλιά, με τα στραβά πόδια, ο καμπούρης; (462; Eng. 462)

> Who are you, with the bald head, fat belly, bent shanks, crooked back?

And it emerges clearly from the strange dialogue which ensues, that the thread of continuity between Saul the persecutor and Paul, the converted apostle, lies in his zeal, and specifically his weakness for world domination (explicit on p. 462, concluding lines; Eng. 463).

Paul, when he reappears in the courtyard of "Master Lazarus" (the name Jesus goes by, now that he has become a family man and head of his household), at first presents himself with the trite, narrow-minded optimism of a certain type of convert. There is surely irony behind the way he first introduces himself to Jesus:

> Ήμουν, δεν είμαι πια ο Σαύλος, ο αιμοβόρος· είδα το φως το αληθινό, είμαι ο Παύλος. Δοξασμένο τ' όνομα του Κυρίου, σώθηκα και κίνησα να σώσω τον κόσμο ... (485; Eng. 484)
>
> I *was*, I am no longer, bloodthirsty Saul. I've seen the true light, I'm Paul. Praised be the name of the Lord, I'm saved and on my way to save the world ...

But the scene quickly develops beyond irony. Paul, the determined preacher, begins preaching under Master Lazarus' roof the Good News of the life and resurrection of his master Jesus Christ. Jesus (who incidentally is never given the title "Christ" in the novel) is in a position to know better and vehemently contradicts him. Recognition follows, but Paul is not dashed in the way that Matthew will be, when his turn comes at the end of the temptation-dream. Paul is angry, and in the end contemptuous. The world, he declares, *needs* the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection:

> ... μέσα στου κόσμου ετούτου τη σαπίλα, την αδικιά και τη φτώχεια, ο Ιησούς ο Σταυρωμένος, ο Ιησούς ο Αναστημένος, ήταν η μονάκριβη παρηγοριά του τίμιου κι αδικημένου ανθρώπου. Ψευτιά ή αλήθεια – τι με νοιάζει; (488; Eng. 488)
>
> ... amid the stench of corruption of this world, the injustice and the poverty, Jesus Christ the Crucified One, Jesus Christ who rose from the dead, was the only, cherished comfort of honest, wronged mankind. True or false – what's that to me?

This in turn leads into a long diatribe on the power of the written word. Disdainful of literal truth, Paul declares:

> ... εγώ με το πείσμα, με τη λαχτάρα, με την πίστη, δημιουργώ την αλήθεια· δε μάχουμαι να τη βρω, τη φτιάνω. Τη φτιάνω πιο μεγάλη από το μπόι του ανθρώπου, κι έτσι μεγαλώνω τον άνθρωπο. (488; Eng. 488)
>
> ... I, with obstinacy, with longing, with faith, am the one who creates truth. I don't struggle to find it, I *make* it. I make it bigger than mansize, that way I make mankind stand a bit taller.

This is too close to the spirit and the rhetoric of Kazantzakis's own credo, *Ασκητική*, to be simply undermined by the same irony with which Paul has been introduced a few pages earlier. And the whole long, passionate speech ends by making it explicit that the power that Paul claims for himself (in effect, to create a world) is none other than the power of writing:

> ... εγώ θα φτιάσω εσένα και τη ζωή σου κια τη διδασκαλία σου κι τη σταύρωσή σου και την ανάσταση, όπως εγώ θέλω· δε σε γέννησε ο Ιωσήφ, ο μαραγκός από τη Ναζαρέτ, σε γέννησα εγώ, ο Παύλος, ο γραφιάς, από την Ταρσό της Κιλικίας. (489; Eng. 489)

> ... *I'm* going to make you and your life and your teaching and your crucifixion and your resurrection, the way *I* want. Joseph didn't beget you, the carpenter of Nazareth, *I* did: I, Paul the scribe from Tarsus in Cilicia.

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Writing, then, to conclude the story so far, is seen in this novel as the very opposite of a transparent medium. At one point it appears in a fairly routine Kazantzakian guise, as a prison-house of the spirit. But whenever we see writing in action, in the activities of the apostles Matthew and Paul, writing turns out to be a highly complex process, fraught with struggle and danger. In its production it transcends the boundaries between waking experience and dream, and between truth and falsehood, so as to create a truth which is called by Matthew "the way of salvation" (το δρόμο της λύτρωσης [331; Eng. 333-4]) and by Paul the "salvation of the world" (να σωθεί ο κόσμος, 488; Eng. 488). In its reception, whatever λόγος or ψυχή caused it to be written in the first place, is lost through the subjective vagaries of reading and interpretation. Writing, according to this novel, has power in the world, both positive and negative. It never merely *records*, nor are the meanings it contains transparent to the understanding.

Finally, before we move on from "writing" to consider the other components of my title, we should also remind ourselves of the perhaps rather obvious fact that writing is not just one among

the novel's themes: it is also the medium in which *The Last Temptation* itself exists.

Identity

Determining the identity of the central figure is already explicitly articulated as a problem in the Gospels. In Matthew, the following exchange takes place between Jesus and the disciples:

> ... he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?
> And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.
> He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?
> And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. ... Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. (Matt. 16.13-16, 20; cf. Luke 9)

Fundamental to all four biblical accounts of the life of Jesus is the progressive revelation, in the face of rational doubt, that the man Jesus is identical with the Messiah, or Christ, whose coming was prophesied in the Jewish scriptures. The question of the identity of the central character assumes even greater importance in Kazantzakis's treatment of the story, but here it is not only those around Jesus who seek, in puzzlement, exasperation or desperation, to find out who he truly is: first among them is Jesus himself.

The four stages of the chief character's evolution, discussed by Peter Bien on the basis of Kazantzakis's own notebook for the *Last Temptation*, already place emphasis on the progressively changing identity of Jesus. These four stages are called by Kazantzakis: Son of the Carpenter, Son of Man, Son of David, Son of God.[2] It is probably uncontroversial to suggest that Kazantzakis's novel is not about the Son of God who was incarnated as a man (this is the "plot" of the Gospel stories), but rather about an exceptional man who through a long struggle first recognised and then fulfilled his mission to *became* the "Son

[2] Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis: Novelist* (Series: Studies in Modern Greek. Bristol Classical Press [= Duckworth] 1989), pp. 67-73.

of God". My point, in any case, is not about the book's theology. From the first page to the last, one of the most remarkable, effective and disturbing aspects of *The Last Temptation* is the instability of the chief character's identity. "Who are you?" (the question implicit in the synoptic Gospels as well) is a question that others obsessively ask of Jesus. As early as the second chapter, Judas is moved to ask him (and a ritualistic three times at that): "can it be you... you... ?" (μπας κι είσαι εσύ... εσύ...; [29-30; Eng. 28-9]); and Jesus can only answer with the most grammatically indeterminate counter-question possible: Εγώ; ποιος; (I? Who?)

Indeed it is not until the end of the fourth chapter (56; Eng. 56) that the young man, the son of Mary is named at all, and then it is (again in a ritualistic, threefold repetition) when his mother calls out to him at the scene of the crucifixion of the Zealot. In a later scene, after the start of Jesus' mission, but at a point when it is clear that he, least of all, fully understands the nature of that mission, Judas challenges him, in words which echo the synoptic Gospels:

> Δεν ξέρω πώς να σε λέω: γιο της Μαρίας, γιο του Μαραγκού, γιο του Δαβίδ; Δεν ξέρω, μαθές, ακόμα ποιος είσαι· μα μήτε κι εσύ ξέρεις... (206; Eng. 210)

> I don't know what to call you: son of Mary, son of the Carpenter, son of David? I don't know, you see, I still don't know who you are. But neither do you ...

It is Judas who proposes the visit to John the Baptist, which takes place almost at the midpoint of the book (at the end of chapter 16, out of 33). John also asks Jesus (and yet again, a ritual three times), who he is, but Jesus the first time throws the question back at him:

> Δε με γνωρίζεις; έκαμε ο Ιησούς ... Κι αυτουνού η φωνή έτρεμε· ήξερε, από την απάντηση του Βαφτιστή κρέμουνταν η μοίρα του. (239; Eng. 244)

> Don't you recognize me? said Jesus ... And his voice trembled; he knew, upon the Baptist's answer would depend the whole of his fate.

It is a scene of climactic ambiguity. Jesus depends on the Baptist *recognising* him. And by this point in the book, if not before, it has become clear that the whole question of Jesus' "identity" is not one of individuality, character, or even of biological substance. His poor mother, who has given him his name and since then more or less given him up in despair, does not, in this sense, know or recognise him at all. But John the Baptist, who has never seen him, is expected to recognise him. How?

> Δε διάβασες τις Γραφές; του αποκρίθηκε ο Ιησούς με γλύκα και παράπονο, σα να τον μάλωνε· δε διάβασες τους προφήτες; Τι λέει ο Ησαΐας; Πρόδρομε, δε θυμάσαι; (239; Eng. 244)

> Haven't you read the Scriptures? Jesus answered him with gentle reproach; haven't you read the prophets? What does Isaiah say? Baptist, don't you remember?

And we know that John has been reading the Scriptures; so well does he know them that recently he has dreamed about them and dreamed the very scene that is now taking place. Far from being a matter of individuality or personality, identity is something conferred by *writing*.

The scene of the Baptism is not only one of recognition, in which Jesus' identity begins to be subsumed into that of the Messiah prophesied by Scripture – a process which will be completed only with the second last sentence of the whole book. It is also a ritual of naming, and Kazantzakis extracts the maximum potential from this. While many miraculous occurrences in the Gospel narrative are toned down in the book, being presented as either dreams or hearsay, presumably in deference to the outward conventions of realism within which Kazantzakis usually operates, on this occasion the extent of divine intervention is, if anything, exaggerated. The river is suddenly stilled, schools of multi-coloured fish form a dance round Jesus, and the spirit of the river, in the form of an old man, rises up with gaping mouth and popping eyes (241; Eng. 245) – the scene strongly suggests a painting in the style of Titian, perhaps.

The Baptist, at the height of this miracle, stops short too, immobilised in the act of pouring water, as he does not know what name to give. In the book, as in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus

then sees a dove descending and hears a voice from heaven. But in Kazantzakis's version, no one can distinguish the words, or even whether they come from God or from the bird; not even Jesus:

> ... ψυχανεμίστηκε, ετούτο ήταν το αληθινό τ' όνομά του· μα δεν μπόρεσε ν' ακούσει (241; Eng. 246)

> ... he had a frisson that this was his true name; but what it was he couldn't hear.

According to tradition, the true name of God cannot be uttered, and in apparent deference to this tradition, the book specifically turns aside from the unambiguous declaration of the New Testament. The voice from heaven does *not* say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3.17). Indeed, to ram home the point, Kazantzakis puts this interpretation of the inchoate utterance at the Baptism into the mouth of Satan at the climax of the Temptation in the Wilderness (266; Eng. 270), and has Jesus expressly deny that this is what he heard, when he reads the words in Matthew's Gospel-in-progress (399; Eng. 401) and upbraids Matthew that he wasn't even there. Even at this miraculous moment, his true identity continues to elude Jesus.

The process of becoming that lies at the heart of this novel is the almost perverse opposite of what theorists of the realist tradition call "character development". Jesus as a unique individual recedes, as the narrative progresses, in order for him to recognise his true identity in a role which must determine his actions, even his thoughts, and in which he will be recognised by others too. It is a process not of "growing into" a true personality (the underlying theme of the entire *Bildungsroman* tradition, a tradition to which this book could, in most other respects, be said to belong), but of putting off all personal, individual traits in order to become something (rather than somebody) which transcends it. The nature of this process is made clearer by comparison with the earlier *Christ Recrucified,* in which characters closer to an everyday reality, within living memory at the time of writing, were more obviously subsumed by predetermined roles which, like Jesus and Judas in this novel, they also resist. Manolios was not Christ, but in the course of the

novel he *became* Christ. In just the same way the Jesus of this novel is not Christ either, but he becomes Christ.

This is why Kazantzakis makes such extensive use of an aspect of the Gospel narratives which lies at the opposite extreme from realism in the modern sense.[3] This is the way in which so many details of the actual life of Jesus as narrated conform to, and thus are said to "fulfil", prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures. Some of these, such as the entire story of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and Jesus' descent from the line of David, the book, as we have already seen, ascribes to the ingenuity of the evangelist Matthew and so relegates from the "actual" life of *this* Jesus. But many others, of which we saw an example at the beginning of the encounter with John the Baptist, are not only part of Jesus' "real" life, but also actively willed by him.

It is not only Matthew the pen-pusher who is well-versed in Scripture. So, as we saw, is John the Baptist, who is thereby enabled to "recognise" a man he has never set eyes on before – not as an individual, but in the acting out of a role. And so too, finally, is Jesus himself. There are many references to, in particular, Isaiah and the prophecies of Daniel, and passages from both are paraphrased in demotic Greek in the text. The realisation that he must die, and the basis for the pact he makes with Judas, derives from the words of Isaiah, which become so intensely present to Jesus that he seemed to see the prophet bodily in front of him, and to read the letters inscribed on the air, just as John the Baptist had earlier done (393-4; Eng. 395-6). And later, the nearest to an explanation that Jesus can give to his disciples (or to us) for his coming crucifixion and death, is a long recitation which he calls upon Matthew to produce from memory, again taken from Isaiah (433-5; Eng. 435-6).

Jesus' truest, ultimate identity, then, appears to lie in the willing surrender of whatever individual identity he has, in order to enact a story *that has already been written.* The most succinct statement of this convergence of writing with the much-sought identity of Jesus in the book, though it comes as the

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[3] Compare the discussion of "Figura" in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. W.R. Trask) (Princeton University Press 1953), esp. pp. 73-6.

conclusion to a passage that could be said to contradict it, forms the conclusion of a dialogue with the old Rabbi shortly before the crucifixion:

> ΄Αγιες Γραφές, γέροντα, είπε, είναι τα φύλλα της καρδιάς μου· όλα τ' άλλα φύλλα εγώ τα ξέσκισα. (402; Eng. 404)
>
> Sacred Scriptures, Rabbi, he said, are the leaves of my heart. All the others leaves I've torn up.

Jesus' quest for identity, then, is resolved by a metaphoric equivalence between the pages (φύλλα) of the Old Testament prophecies and, in the traditional Greek expression, the leaves (φύλλα) of his heart.

But this resolution is only fully achieved at a single moment in the novel, and that is in its last two sentences. Even when the decision has been taken to be crucified, the deal with Judas has been struck and carried through, and Jesus, assuredly now calling himself the "Son of Man" has mounted the cross, this hard-won identity is still dizzyingly unstable. This is the nature and purpose of the fifty-page long temptation-dream. Neither the dream itself, nor its dissolution, is actively willed by the dying Jesus. Waking, as he thinks, to find himself in the company of a guardian angel, who is subsequently metamorphosed into the more Mephistophelian negro boy (αραπόπουλο) who keeps him company throughout forty years of supposedly normal life, Jesus reverts to the developing, individual, human personality he had left behind in order to step into the role of the prophesied Messiah. But even here, with the temptress Magdalene safely murdered, his two wives and his children to keep him company, and the security that comes with the role of Master Lazarus, Jesus does not know for certain who he is. Master Lazarus is after all an assumed identity, and he knows this.[4] Even as he lives out the life that the last temptation allots to him, he knows, and we know, that he is only acting out an alternative role. (Indeed, a robust reading of the novel might suggest that Jesus is not so much tempted as allowed to have his cake and eat it.)

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[4] An example of this is explicit in the scene with Paul, e.g.: ξέχασε πως παράσταινε το μαστρο-Λάζαρο (485).

As the imaginary years pass, the disquieting, supernatural presence of the αραπόπουλο is a constant reminder that all cannot be as it seems in this supposedly "normal" world; and this Jesus is increasingly subjected to memories and real or imagined visitations from the past that rock the identity he has worked so hard to assume, and threaten the fragile happiness he has been able to build upon it. At the beginning of the final chapter (there are 33 chapters, as there were 33 years in Jesus' real life),[5] an ageing Jesus is disturbingly, and all too plausibly presented (if we take account of Kazantzakis's age at the time he wrote the book), as frightened by the passing of time and the evidence of his approaching physical decline and death. It is only having reached the end of his natural span (since the historical destruction of Jerusalem, which is now announced, took place three score and ten years after Jesus' birth) that the renegade Jesus reverts to the Cross; and even now, and entirely characteristically, he is disorientated:

> Έβαλε όλη του τη δύναμη να δει πού βρίσκεται, ποιος ήταν, γιατί πονούσε ... (506: Eng. 506)
>
> He used all his strength to see where he is, who he was, why he was in pain ...[6]

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[5] Kazantzakis's special affection for the number 3, perhaps implying instability and the absence of closure, is well known (it seems to have been Kazantzakis himself, for instance, who first drew attention to the carefully contrived total of 33,333 lines in his *Odyssey*). In this book the 33 chapters continue that tradition of numerical symbolism, to which may be added an allusion to Dante's *Commedia*, which Kazantzakis of course knew well. Each of the canticles of Dante's poem is made up of 33 cantos, with the exception of the last, *Paradiso*, whose 34th canto adds the closure always refused up till that point. In the last canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante sees God, and the unstable multiples of 33 are rounded up to the total of 100. Naturally, it is precisely that kind of closure that is denied to Kazantzakis's Jesus and to the formal structure of *The Last Temptation*.

[6] I have retained the tenses of the original. Although the absence of a strict sequence-of-tense rule in Greek makes the effect of the curious alternation here less marked than it is in English, this use of language nonetheless seems to heighten the effect of disorientation.

And only now, at the end of just over five hundred printed pages, and only at the moment of death, is that question, "who am I?", definitively and fully answered, in the last word given to the biblical Jesus in the Gospel according to St John: τετέλεσται.

The Greek word, as is well known, means far more than the "It is finished" of the Authorized Version. Bien translates, as does the New English Bible, "It is accomplished". The prophecies have been fulfilled; but in the context of this book, Jesus' lifelong quest for his own identity is resolved fully only now, in the fulfilment of what had been written long ago. And this fulfilment is followed not by a resurrection – the evangelists and Paul can be relied on to provide that – but by a new beginning. The novel actually ends: κι ήταν σα να 'λεγε: Όλα αρχίζουν (and it was as though he said: Everything is beginning).

Truth

We have seen how the struggle of becoming that is the book's main subject is intimately bound up with the problematic art of writing. "Truth" turns out to be a highly relative and unstable concept in this book; and it is time now to turn this concept on Kazantzakis's book itself. Given what is said in the text about the nature, function, power, and limitations of writing, what claims to truth does *The Last Temptation* itself make? My answer would be: precisely the same claims as it upholds for its canonical predecessors.

The story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles is retold by Kazantzakis in the middle of the twentieth century, in a form which owes much to the contemporary art of fiction. But Kazantzakis conspicuously does not call this book a novel, and it is worth noting, in passing, that all seven of the books from *Zorba* to *Report to Greco* that tend to be called novels are problematic in terms of genre.[7] The novel, as a genre, we know was not highly regarded by Kazantzakis, and along with the three components of my title, the conventions of realist, fictional narrative are thoroughly subverted in this book.

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[7] I owe this insight to Georgia Farinou-Malamatari.

Any retelling of a story is, in effect, inevitably both a reading and an interpretation. *The Last Temptation* both reads and interprets the New Testament narratives, but also, I believe, the classic, realist novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Working within the same narrative framework as his sources, but adding within the frame also the *making* of these canonical narratives, Kazantzakis treats his scriptural sources in a way which is far subtler than merely rejecting them or claiming to supersede them would have been. What he does with the New Testament "life of Jesus" can, I think, be best described as "deconstruction", in the sense that this was defined by Jacques Derrida in *De la Grammatologie* (1967), a book which lies much closer in time to the writing of *The Last Temptation* than it does to us today:

> The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. ... Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. [8]

"Realism" is subject to much the same treatment in this book. Not only is the more-or-less realist treatment of the life and times of Jesus framed between two dreams,[9] but the Bergsonian concept of "subjective time" is taken to perhaps its furthest extreme in literature in the fifty-page sequence in which Jesus, while dying on the cross, during an unmeasurably small instant of time, experiences in dream almost forty years of earthly life, not merely passing before his eyes but actually lived by him.

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[8] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. G.C. Spivak) (Johns Hopkins University Press 1974), p. 24.

[9] Peter Bien, in a letter, draws attention to this point, which may be connected to the same structural device (which amounts to putting the entire "realist" part of a text within quotation marks), as early as *Toda Raba* (written 1929). Cf. Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit* (Princeton University Press 1989), p. 162.

Though it does not appear to have been discussed in these terms, this blatant subversion of realist narrative has much in common with the better-known subversions of Jorge Luis Borges, which have been so influential in shaping the fiction we have grown accustomed to think of as "postmodern". Though there is no indication, and little likelihood, that Kazantzakis knew Borges's *Ficciones* (published in Buenos Aires in 1944), this daring dilation of narrative time, in particular, invites comparison with Borges's short fiction "The Secret Miracle", in which something very similar happens.

For Kazantzakis, I would submit, the outrageously unverifiable, indeed explicitly counterfactual story of Jesus' temptation on the cross, is *true*, in the same sense as everything else in the book is "true", including the New Testament narratives which it revises and interprets: true, that is, not because it happened (it didn't), but because it is written.

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest that the issues of identity and truth, central to the Gospel narratives of the life of Jesus and also of this twentieth-century retelling, are presented in *The Last Temptation,* as indissolubly bound up with the ambivalent and problematic nature of story-telling and particularly of writing. Overtly and admittedly, Kazantzakis's book is based on and retells a story from sacred Scripture (Άγιες Γραφές). But as often as the modern retelling seems to break away from the hieratic, over-interpreted writings on which it is based, to go behind the inscrutable face of the sacred text and bring alive what it presents as the actual, earthly and sometimes earthy experience of Jesus and those around him, it reminds us, in a paradox that it is tempting to call postmodern, that both the achievement and the limitation of this reality are identical to its realisation in writing.

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