

Life-Span Development in Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek*

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Kazantzakis's novel, *Zorba the Greek*, has been the subject of relatively little Anglo-American literary and scholarly criticism considering that the text has been translated into English for almost 30 years. This rather modest history of criticism may result primarily from the lack of general agreement concerning the novel's literary worth. As Peter Bien has stated, Kazantzakis has "continued to appeal to a large number of cultivated readers while being generally ignored in 'critical and academic circles'"; further, he thinks there can be found "no agreement whatsoever about his ultimate worth, and it would seem impossible to predict at this stage whether he will be read fifty years after his death." Nonetheless, there is no question that the novel is popular with educated readers of discriminating literary taste, argues Bien, as Kazantzakis's novel is "terrifyingly intellectual" and has "no salacious interest."¹

The criticism published to date can be roughly broken down into three categories: (1) the Boss and Alexis Zorba as autobiographical characters representing Kazantzakis himself and Kazantzakis's friend of 27 years, George Zorba; (2) the novel as Kazantzakis's vehicle for expressing his thoughts and views on Nietzschean philosophy; (3) the novel as Kazantzakis's expression of Bergsonian metaphysics and cosmology.

Helen Kazantzakis's biography, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters*, contains much historical information about Kazantzakis which tends to support the first theme: she notes that Kazantzakis and George Zorba operated a lignite mine in the southern part of the Peloponnesus at Prastova, Mani (not Crete), in 1917, and after the collapse of the mine, the two friends abandoned it and separated—Zorba off to the mines in the Chalcidice Peninsula and then to Serbia, and Kazantzakis to Switzerland.² These events appear to parallel closely the story line of the novel.

The letters of George Zorba and Kazantzakis published in the biography, also support the close relationship between historical evidence and fictional detail. Zorba's letters to his friend exhibit the same personality, philosophy, and linguistic patterns as those of the fictional character. For example, in an excerpt from a letter written in 1950 concerning a telegram he had received from his American publisher, Max L. Schuster, Kazantzakis shows the same intensity of emotion for George Zorba that the Boss felt for Alexis Zorba: "I was happy because...I love this book [*Zorba the Greek*] very much, because the being Zorba I loved very much."³

¹Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 3.

²Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), p. 65. See also Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965; Theodore Vasilis, *Journeying* Boston: Little, Brown, 1974; *Symposium*, New York: Minerva, 1974.

³H. Kazantzakis, p. 514.

George T. Karnezis, Lewis A. Richards, and Morton P. Levitt are also among those who corroborate the autobiographical nature of the novel.⁴ Additionally for Levitt, Alexis Zorba is in many ways patterned after Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the Übermensch in his "distrust of poets and his preferences for action above contemplation, in his desire to will his own fate, above all, in his love of laughter and dancing: he too has 'canonized laughter,' he has learned 'to dance as a man ought to dance. . . .' He reaches Zarathustra's position . . . through the life force itself. . . ."⁵

Indeed, Andreas Poulakidas goes so far as to say that *Zorba the Greek* could not have been written without the author's thorough knowledge of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for his familiarity with Nietzsche's book enabled him to develop the person George Zorba into the Übermensch, Alexis Zorba. Alexis gives "meaning and value, as he sees it, to life," whereas the Boss is too intellectual and philosophical to become an Übermensch; Alexis, "on the contrary, has life as his teacher, and life produces the answers" (emphasis added).⁶

Reed Merrill sees Alexis Zorba as Kazantzakis's vehicle for expounding Nietzsche's nihilism and *amor fati*: Alexis's

philosophy is based upon Nietzschean nihilism, an acceptance and affirmation of life in the face of emptiness and of unflinching contempt for systems based upon hope and unfulfilled desires. . . .

He is extremely compatible with the idea of *amor fati* because of his lack of intellectual pretension. . . . He is the natural born overman who knows that "there is then no true, rational, orderly, permanent, or benign universe for us." Quite possibly the philosopher's most difficult problem in understanding Zorba is accepting his wisdom beyond learning. Zorba's knowledge is of human experience, it is not ruminative and mystical and it is not filled with self-deception and false hopes.⁷

A third theme, Bergsonian metaphysics and cosmology, is found both in Levitt and Bien. Levitt carries his Nietzschean analysis into Bergsonianism by suggesting that Alexis Zorba attains the state of the Übermensch not through "mystical contemplation . . . but through the life force itself, through a kind of Bergsonian intuitiveness." Alexis's great capacity for laughter is best understood by seeing laughter as "a slight revolt on the surface of social life . . . like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter." For Levitt, Alexis Zorba is a true Bergsonian metaphysician; he has the same sense of justice as common sense—"justesse et justice"—a similar resilience when faced with new situations, and the same refusal to agree to convention without questioning it.⁸

⁴George T. Karnezis, "Zorba the Greek: The Artist and Experience," *Carnegie Series in English*, 2 (1970), pp. 43-52; Lewis A. Richards, "Fact and Fiction in Nikos Kazantzakis' Alexis Zorba," *Western Humanities Review*, 18 (1964), pp. 353-59; Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance: The World and Art of Nikos Kazantzakis* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), pp. 88-91.

⁵Levitt, p. 95.

⁶Andreas K. Poulakidas, "Kazantzakis' Zorba the Greek and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," *Philological Quarterly*, 49 (1970), pp. 232-38.

⁷Reed B. Merrill, "Zorba the Greek and Nietzschean Nihilism," *Mosaic*, 8 (1975), p. 104.

⁸Levitt, p. 95-97.

Bien sees Kazantzakis as turning to Bergson (after his Christianity was demolished by Darwin), for his cosmology of a central force or prime mover of the universe as an "evolving vitality" which changes mortal bodies into spirits; Bergson, for Kazantzakis, turned the voids at either end of life into "absolute freedom, absolute spirituality . . . the fulfillment of life's strivings rather than their negation." For Bien, *Zorba the Greek* is a "parable" of Bergsonian cosmology demonstrating the "life force at work.... Human effort is shown to be futile and yet nonetheless radiant because people like Zorba, when they burn themselves out, imitate God, save him, push universal evolution toward the freedoms of unencumbered spirituality."⁹

An additional critical stance toward Kazantzakis's novel, one not hitherto discussed, connects the analyses of earlier critics, the hints from Bergsonian theory, and recent developments in life-span developmental psychology. As Bergson himself has said, "In short, we are free when our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it, when they have that undefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his work. . . . Certainly our character is altering imperceptibly every day, and our freedom would suffer if these new acquisitions were grafted on to ourself and not blended with it . . . the act which bears the mark of our personality is truly free, for ourself alone will lay claim to its paternity."¹⁰

Indeed, we will argue that an understanding of contemporary theories of personality development could place one's reading of Kazantzakis's novel within a new and interesting framework, even though we may agree that the author's original dual intention was the expression of Bergsonian metaphysics and the immortalization of George Zorba. From our perspective, an analysis of the personalities in *Zorba the Greek*, particularly those of the Boss and of Zorba, will brighten into the clearest focus through the theoretical patterns of life-span developmental psychology.

However, it will be no easy matter to identify those theoreticians or theories which offer the greatest amount of heuristic potential, since there are almost as many theories of life-span development as there are developmental psychologists.¹¹ For example, the idea of invariant stage-sequence development, as popularized by Levinson, Gould, and others, has been criticized on several grounds: its North-American provincialism, many of its epistemological assumptions, and its conflation of age and stage. Nevertheless, for our discussion, Levinson's and Merriam's works will provide the basic theoretical underpinnings. The usefulness of their theories would be, we assumed, not to "fix" a psychological reality in the manner of many Freudian critics, but rather, to act as a heuristic device, one enabling the reader to understand selected elements in the novel with a greater clarity, a more forceful vividness.

⁹Bien, pp. 12-13, 38.

¹⁰Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), trans. R. L. Pogson, pp. 172-73. See also Levitt p. 97.

¹¹Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978); Sharon B. Merriam, *Coping with Male Mid-Life* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980); M. F. Loventhal, M. Thurnher, D. Chiriboga, *Four Stages of Life: A Comparative Study of Women and Men Facing Transitions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975); Roger Gould, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); H. Spierer, *Major Transitions in the Human Life Cycle* (New York: Academy for Educational Development, 1977); George E. Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Nancy K. Schlossberg, "A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition," *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9 (1981), 2-18; Jean Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Levinson uses a biographical approach in his study of male adult development, selecting 40 men from four occupational groups, all 35 to 40 years old. His data source was the interviewing of all 40 subjects over a period of two to three months with follow-up interviews approximately two years later. Levinson terms his approach "biographical interviewing." From the data collected Levinson posits 10 developmental periods in the life of the adult male, all of which are composed of sets of choices or tasks the adult male faces in each period of adulthood and must be dealt with:

(1) Early Adult Transition (Age 17 through 21): leaving the pre-adult world and making preliminary moves into the adult world.

(2) Entering the Adult World (Age 22 through 27): exploring the adult world while avoiding major commitments (keeping options open) and, antithetically, making something of oneself and building a more stable life structure.

(3) Age Thirty Transition (Age 28 through Age 32): reevaluation of choices made in the previous developmental period and becoming more serious about one's life.

(4) Settling Down (Age 33 through 39): becoming an established, valued member of society and of one's vocation and striving toward the top of one's social and professional "ladder," becoming more senior.

(5) Mid-Life Transition (Age 40 through 44): a major, usually crises-shaped period containing much questioning of what one has done with one's life and the recognition that parts of oneself have been neglected in shaping the life structure; these neglected parts of oneself now *force* change in the life structure (emphasis added).

(6) Entering Middle Adulthood (Age 45 through 49): somewhat similar to those Entering the Adult World, but with much more urgency and seriousness; one must build a new life structure based upon choices giving one's life meaning.

Levinson's remaining four developmental periods are posited on a tentative basis awaiting further research:

(7) Age Fifty Transition (Age 50 through 54): similar to the Age Thirty Transition in that the major tasks are a reevaluation of the work done during the Mid-Life Transition and a modification of the life structure formed during that period.

(8) Culmination of Middle-Adulthood (Age 55 through 59): building yet a second middle-adulthood structure for the completion of middle-adulthood; this is a period somewhat similar to Settling Down.

(9) Late-Adulthood Transition (Age 60 through 64): termination of middle-adulthood and the creation of a basis for the beginning of the final developmental period.

(10) Late Adulthood (Age 65 and Beyond): Levinson admits oversimplification in his speculation that the major developmental task is the preparation for one's own death, a coming to terms with it, and he further speculates that there is, for some

older adults, yet another period of development—Late Late Adulthood, beginning at approximately age 80 for which he posits no developmental task or tasks.¹²

Sharon Merriam limits the scope of her study of adult male development to what she terms “male mid-life,” roughly the period defined by Levinson as encompassing both the Mid-Life Transition and Entering Middle Adulthood. Merriam’s methodology is the use of literature as a data source for identifying the “issues of mid-life which must be confronted . . . : (1) awareness of aging; (2) search for meaning; (3) generation squeeze; (4) career malaise; and (5) ego rejuvenation.” Merriam states that these five issues cause a process of “fragmentation” which ultimately results in a “restructuring” of adult male life.¹³

In *Zorba the Greek*, we are told that the Boss is age 35 and Zorba approximately 65, and with the exception of the novel’s conclusion of the final eight pages, the entire time elapsed during the novel’s course is approximately seven months.¹⁴ However, at the time of the historical lignite mine operated by Kazantzakis and George Zorba, Zorba’s actual age was closer to 55.¹⁵ As to why Kazantzakis added ten years to Zorba’s age, we can only speculate. Our own alternative view sees Kazantzakis assuming that his portrayal of Zorba as the master of life’s experiences would be all the more convincing given 65 years of experience rather than 55. A close reading of *Zorba the Greek* yields evidence corroborating the theories of adult-male development of Levinson, Merriam, and their theories, in turn, provide the literary critic with a psychologically sophisticated analytic tool with which to gain a better understanding of the text and of authorial intent.

The narrator of the novel, the Boss, is more readily understood and his behavior made more explicable when viewed through Levinson’s lens. At age 35, the Boss exhibits the behavior, in dealing with his developmental tasks, outlined by Levinson in his fourth developmental period—Settling Down and “becoming one’s own man.”¹⁶ Forming a coalition with Zorba results from his attempting to cope with one of the primary tasks of this period—forming a mentor relationship. He responds to the additional tasks of developing a dream and of forming an occupation by buying the lignite mine and deciding to “interest myself in practical work, to know and love the human material which had fallen into my hands, to feel the long-wished-for joy of no longer having to deal with words but with living men. And I made romantic plans—if the extraction of lignite was successful—to organize a sort of community in which everything should be shared” (p. 52).

Only the fourth major task of this period is given little attention: building a marriage and family; the Boss, after much vacillation, begins a sexual relationship with the widow only to have it extinguished by her murder. Yet he is not without the need for the “special woman,” “A creature full of feminine devotion, tenderness and patience was coming toward me: she was the mother, the sister, the wife. And I, who thought I needed nothing, suddenly felt I needed everything” (p. 116).

¹²Levinson, pp. 14, 57.

¹³Merriam, pp. 5, 28, 77-78.

¹⁴Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek* trans. Carl Wildman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), pp. 53, 128. Hereafter all references to this English language translation will be placed in parentheses at the end of the quoted material.

¹⁵Richards, pp. 353-54.

¹⁶Levinson, p. 144. Indeed Levinson has identified four major tasks found in all four of these early adulthood developmental periods: a) developing a dream and providing a place for it in one’s life structure; b) shaping a mentor relationship; c) developing an occupation, and d) building a marriage and family.

Of these four major tasks, forming a dream, an occupation, a love relationship, and a mentor relationship, it is the last to which the Boss devotes most of his time over the course of the novel. This mentor relationship between Zorba and the Boss follows closely Levinson's description of it from the younger man's position—the mentor is usually several years older, has much more experience in the "world the young man is entering," and is simultaneously a "counselor," "guru," "teacher," and "advisor."¹⁷ The well-read, well-educated and bookish Boss is keenly aware that he has learned little about living life, "I went over my whole life, which appeared vapid, incoherent, and hesitating, dreamlike. I contemplated it despairingly" (p. 119). And he sees Zorba who, being unschooled formally, is not "perverted": "He has had all manner of experiences; his mind is open and his heart has grown bigger, without his losing one ounce of his primitive boldness. All the problems which we find so complicated or insoluble, he cuts through as if with a sword. . . . It is difficult for him to miss his aim, because his two feet are held firmly planted on the ground by the weight of his whole body...always in contact or mingled with the Mother. . . . We educated people are just empty-headed birds of the air" (p. 63).

For the Boss, Zorba is one from whom he can learn about "real life" and how to live and enjoy living; "his body and soul formed one harmonious whole, and all things—women, bread, water, meat, sleep—blended happily with his flesh and became Zorba. I had never seen such a friendly accord between a man and the universe" (p. 132). Thus the Boss has committed himself to learning all he can from Zorba, desiring a style and an attitude toward life patterned after his new-found mentor.

Zorba's part of this relationship is understood more readily when seen as that which Merriam calls "Ego rejuvenation . . . through the mentor relationship and extra-marital sexual activity."¹⁸ Unlike Levinson, Merriam does not attempt to categorize the stages of development by age brackets as well as behavior; she focuses only on the behavior of adult males whom she terms "middle-aged"; she thereby avoids a pitfall in Levinson's approach (which he acknowledges)—a given stage (or stages) of adult development may be found to begin or terminate chronologically sooner or later than posited by his theory. Although Kazantzakis tells the reader that Zorba's age is 65, we know, from the biographical data (see note 15), that George Zorba's age was 55 at the time the two operated the lignite mine. At this age, for Levinson, Zorba would be expected to be ending the Age 50 Transition and beginning the Culmination of Middle Adulthood (as noted earlier, these later developmental periods of Levinson's theory remain tentative while awaiting further research). Nonetheless, Zorba exhibits behavior compatible with Levinson's theory: reevaluation of the work done during the Mid-Life Transition and building a second middle adulthood life structure. Having terminated a lawful marriage and several common-law marriages, Zorba decides that marriage is the "Great Folly," and views "Honest marriages" as "tasteless . . . a dish without any pepper" (p. 81). Zorba has learned much from his 55 years of experience and as having chosen a new life structure even more nomadic than previous ones: "For in his mind our profits underwent marvelous transformations:¹⁹ they became travels, women, and new adventures . . . 'wings' was the name he gave to money—for him to fly away" (p. 104).

¹⁷Levinson, p. 97.

¹⁸Merriam, p. 71. See also Bernice L. Neugerten, *Middle Age and Aging* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), who emphasizes "individual fanning out," a movement which causes individuals to differ in structure because of the accumulation of varied life experience; this theme is also echoed by George Valliant.

¹⁹Merriam, p. 97. Neugerten thinks that mental flexibility, or openmindedness, becomes a critical issue in middle years.

And Zorba's mentoring to the Boss is a behavioral task which also fits Levinson's scheme of adult development for a man aged 55.

For Merriam, Zorba's behavior is quintessentially that of male middle age; as noted above, Zorba's mentoring and his sexual promiscuity are elements of Merriam's "ego rejuvenation" developmental task (see Merriam, pp. 63, 67, 70).

Of the other four issues of middle age which must be confronted in Merriam's theory—awareness of aging, search for meaning, generation squeeze, and career malaise—only the last is not exhibited by Zorba. Merriam (p. 29) sees middle-aged men as reordering their time perspective, seeing their lives in "terms of the time they have left to live, rather than the number of years since birth." Zorba is acutely aware of his aging (see pp. 115-16, 128, 134).

Merriam (p. 40) defines the middle-aged man's search for meaning as a review and questioning of his entire life and its accomplishments (or lack of) and an "internal questioning of life in general. . . . Identifying anchors of family, career, and self no longer seem relevant. The returns on an investment of forty or so years of living are found to be elusive." This constant questioning of the meaning of life and of life itself is seen to occupy Zorba throughout the novel (see, for instance, pp. 53-54, 146-47, 221, 269).

The generation squeeze with which middle-aged men must cope is defined, by Merriam (p. 50), as the difficulty of being between two generations—the young and the old—and of feeling no longer young and not wanting to become (and fearing becoming) old. Her term for this generational limbo is "bipolar projection"; middle-aged men see, in their "old" parents, "what they do not want to become. And...they mourn the loss of vitality and youthful promise." Throughout the novel, Zorba is seen envying the Boss his youth and fearing growing old (p. 87). He clearly mourns his lost youth, and is continually reminded of the loss of his youth throughout his relationship with the Boss; his greatest fear is not death, but old age (pp. 144-45).

Although Zorba's developmental "stage" or the sum of his developmental tasks fit both Levinson's concept of Age 50 Transition and Merriam's "middle-aged man," Merriam's theory, providing no specific age criteria, appears to be the more appropriate model upon which to base an analysis of Zorba. Nevertheless, Levinson (p. 62), though clearly stating that middle-aged male developmental tasks are fully completed by age 45—certainly no later than the forties generally—has provided an escape clause to the constriction of mere birthdays.

As outlined by Levinson (pp. 100-01), both the mentor and his novice derive satisfaction and fulfillment from their relationship; in fact, he posits that the mentor relationship is "best understood as a form of love relationship. . . ." It is like the intense relationship between parents and grown offspring, or between sexual lovers and spouses; he says further that the termination of a mentoring relationship most often involves "strong conflict" and even "bad feelings." The younger man may experience strong feelings of freedom and revitalization upon termination of the relationship, while the mentor may experience the younger man as "irrationally rebellious and ungrateful." The Boss's and Zorba's relationship fairly closely parallels this paradigm. For Zorba, the Boss is almost a survival figure: "It's only when I'm with you that I have any chance, through talking to you, of getting some relief from my morbid state of mind" (p. 146). And for the Boss, his and Zorba's relationship is close to that of father and son: "My life with Zorba had enlarged my heart; some of his words had calmed my soul. This man with his infallible instinct and

his primitive eagle-like look had taken confident short cuts and, without even losing his breath, had reached the peak of effort and had even gone farther" (p. 292).

The termination of their relationship is the termination of the novel (except, of course, the final addendum of biographical data about Zorba's letters and death), and this severance follows Levinson's paradigm; Zorba sees the Boss as acting somewhat selfishly, ungrateful, and rebellious, while the Boss views their separation as a marker of the beginning of a new period in his life (pp. 298-99).

Although seemingly cruel, the Boss's need for distance is vital to his own growth and continued development. By definition, the mentoring must come to a stop, to allow the trainee to make his own way forward, for he himself to become possibly a mentor for someone younger. Even though Zorba has attained a "wisdom beyond learning," he is no more immune than anyone else, from the occasional conviction that if only "the other" would listen, he too could learn what Zorba has learned, and that merely by taking advantage of Zorba's experience. Kazantzakis knew that mere listening must have a stop, the Boss must move on—on his own! With the help of developmental psychology, Kazantzakis's fictional intentions may be seen more clearly. Only by breaking away from George Zorba could Kazantzakis see the world through his own eyes clearly enough to write the novel. To know this task, however, only makes more poignant Boss's last words. Zorba dies without the Boss being physically present; yet with death at hand, his intensity of living remains undiminished—"I've done heaps and heaps of things in my life, but I still did not do enough. Men like me ought to live a thousand years. Good night! (p. 310)—fortunately for us as readers, Kazantzakis carried Zorba with him to his dying day.