
Kazantzakis and Sikelianos:
Complementary Spirits*

DOROTHY M.-T. GREGORY

KAZANTZAKIS AND SIKELIANOS met in 1914 when both of them were about thirty years old. By that time, Kazantzakis had already accomplished many things: he had studied law in Athens, philosophy in Paris and had written a dissertation on Nietzsche. He was also very active in the Educational Society (Ἐκπαιδευτικὸς Ὀμιλός), a group of intellectuals who were devoted to the updating of Greek education and the establishment of the demotic language. Yet, in spite of his many accomplishments, Kazantzakis, as he himself tells us in his *Report to Greco*, felt stifled and alien among his fellow intellectuals in Athens. He was besieged by philosophical questionings, by a thirst to find answers to his metaphysical anguish. In the middle of this psychological climate, his meeting with Sikelianos was for Kazantzakis an epiphany of the spirit. This is how he describes it in the *Report to Greco*:

. . . one day the light shone . . . I met a young man of my own age whom I loved and respected without interruption one of the few people I found more agreeable in their presence than in their absence. He was extremely good-looking, and knew it; he was a great lyric poet, and knew it. He had written a long, marvellous

*My decision to speak about Kazantzakis and Sikelianos in this evening's Symposium was mainly dictated by the fact that while the year 1983 marks the one hundredth anniversary of Kazantzakis' birth, next year—which is only one month away—will mark the one hundredth anniversary of Sikelianos' birth and I thought it would be appropriate to commemorate them together. After I started my research, however, I discovered, in the August 15, 1983 issue of *Néa Ἑστία*, a long article on the same topic by Pandelis Prevelakis, who was a close friend of both writers. This discovery made my task both easier and harder. Easier because I had at my disposal so much information by an authority on Kazantzakis and Sikelianos; harder because it was difficult not to sound as repeating Prevelakis. In any event, my presentation is my own synthesis of what I consider key points in the relation of the two writers. For a more detailed account of their friendship, those who read Greek can consult Pandelis Prevelakis, "Kazantzakis-Sikelianos: To Chroniko mias Philias," in the August 15, 1983 issue of *Néa Ἑστία*.

poem which I read over and over, finding insatiable delight in its versification, diction, poetic atmosphere, and magical harmony.¹

The poem Kazantzakis refers to is, of course, ὁ Ἀλαφροῖσκιωτος (*The Lightshadowed* or the *Visionary*), the long magnificent poem which Sikelianos had written at the age of twenty-two and which had immediately established him as the most promising lyric voice of his generation. And Kazantzakis continues about his newly-found friend:

... he had great majestic dignity, a rare charm and nobility. When you watched him speak, his blue eyes sparkling ecstatically, or heard him rattle the windows as he recited his poems, you understood what the ancient Greek rhapsodists must have been like, the bards who wandered from palace to palace, crowned with vine leaves or violets, and tamed their still-beastial auditors by means of poetry. Truly from the very first moment I saw this young man, I felt he was an honor to the human race.

We became abrupt, immediate friends. So greatly did we differ, we divined at once that each needed the other and that the two of us together would constitute the whole man.²

The difference Kazantzakis alludes to was one of temperament, of personality. Though in the broader sense, both of them had a religious attitude to life, Kazantzakis was always trying to quench his spiritual thirst with the mind, whereas Sikelianos possessed that inner gift we sometimes call "cosmic consciousness," by which I mean the capacity of the individual consciousness to experience a sense of total unity with the Cosmos, a sense in which the difference between subject and object is obliterated so that Nature is felt as an extension of the self or (otherwise phrased) the self as an extension of Nature. This kind of apprehension of the world gave Sikelianos a mystical assurance, an inner harmony which Kazantzakis lacked. But differences of temperament aside, Kazantzakis and Sikelianos had the same lofty purpose in life. As Eleni Kazantzakis put it, they were "identical in their longing for the absolute."³ They shared a sense of mission, of prophecy if you will, and they both aspired to "externalize" whatever was "most sacred and profound"⁴ in them, in lasting works, which would embody at the

¹Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. Peter Bien (New York, 1965), p. 191.

²Ibid.

³Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on his Letters* (New York, 1968), p. 404.

⁴Ibid., p. 55.

same time a synthesis of their heritage: both ancient Greek and Byzantine.

Three days after their first meeting, Kazantzakis and Sikelianos left for Mount Athos in a spirit of exaltation. Their pilgrimage to its various monasteries lasted forty days. Here is an entry from Kazantzakis' diary referring to that trip:

Our spiritual pilgrimage to Mount Athos. How we lived our race and the faith of our fathers; how we everywhere elevated the soul, how we hailed life rising like an arrow of divine grace toward things heavenly. The art and faith guiding the vitals of the painter, the architect, the musician, the stone-carver. How we read Dante, Buddha, the New Testament. How we talked about Greece and life.⁵

Early in 1915, the two friends undertook another pilgrimage, to historical sites this time in order to discover and experience "the consciousness of their history." They visited Sparta and Mystra, Mycenae and Olympia, Thebes, Delphi and the Acropolis. Kazantzakis felt his "brain full of light and sureness" and on March 19, 1915, he commented in his notebook:

All this evolution of mine, I owe,
a) to my expeditions to Mount Athos, Mystra, Delphi,
b) to my recent reading (Dante, Rodin, Bergson, Claudel and
c) to the company of Angelos Sikelianos.⁶

As for Sikelianos, he also expressed his profound joy about their friendship in a poem entitled: *Χαιρετισμός στό Νίκο Καζαντζάκη* (*Greeting to Kazantzakis*) in which he presents the two friends on the top of a mountain recognizing each other as kindred spirits. The poem is rather long but one can get a sense of it from the following excerpt in which the two friends are presented addressing each other:

Ψηλὴ μᾶς κύκλωνε σιωπῇ σάμπως κυκλώπειο τείχος·
καὶ ξάφνου, σιγανή,
σάμπως τρεχοῦμενου νεροῦ π' ὀλοένα φτάνει ὁ ἦχος,
τοῦ φίλου μου ἢ φωνῆ

⁵Ibid., p. 56-57.

⁶Ibid., p. 57-58.

στ' αὐτιά μου χτύπησε: «'Αδερφέ, εὐλογημένη ἡ ὥρα
 ποὺ πῆρα τὸ στρατί,
 τὸ εὐωδισμένο τὸ στρατὶ ποὺ φεύγει ἀπὸ τὴ χώρα,
 καὶ σ' ἤβρα ὡς ἀσκητὴ

»'ποκάτω ἀπὸ τὸν ἔλατο, στὴ μυστικὴ εὐωχία
 ν' ἀγάλλεσαι τοῦ νοῦ,
 καὶ μεραστήκαμε ὡς ψωμί μαζί τὴν εὐτυχία
 τοῦ κάταστρου οὐρανοῦ . . . »

«Εὐλογημένη», ἀπάντησα, «καὶ τρισευλογημένη,
 σὰν εἶδα ἀπὸ μακρὰ
 πὼς ἡ καρδιά σου ἦτανε πιά στὴν κορυφὴ φτασμένη,
 κι ἀπάνω ἀπ' τὰ πικρὰ

»τὰ πάθη πὼς σὲ κέντριζε θεῖος ἔρωτας μονάχο,
 κι ὀλοένα πιὸ πολὺ,
 νὰ ἰδεῖς ἀπ' τὸν ψηλότερο τῆς δύναμής σου βράχο
 τὴν πλέρια ἀνατολή!

This spiritual communion between Kazantzakis and Sikelianos lasted with the same intensity for a few more years. But in the midst of their friendship, both personal and historical circumstances were gradually tracking different paths for them. In 1919, Prime Minister Venizelos, Kazantzakis' fellow Cretan, appointed Kazantzakis as director of the newly formed Ministry of Public Welfare, and Kazantzakis left for Caucasus leading the mission for the repatriation of 150,000 Greeks who had been persecuted by the Bolsheviks and the Kurds. But when in November 1920, Venizelos was defeated at the polls, Kazantzakis resigned from the Ministry and two weeks later, embittered by the poor judgment of his countrymen, left for a few months' stay in France, Germany and Italy. Kazantzakis' ardent nationalism had suffered a blow; while in Germany he began being interested in communism in which he thought he saw a new promise for mankind. Back in Greece in 1921, Kazantzakis spoke to Sikelianos about his hope in the Russian experiment and urged his friend to go with him to Russia to study the results of the revolution. Sikelianos seemed to agree but, for reasons not entirely clear, the trip did not materialize. The following year, May 1922, Kazantzakis left again for Austria and Germany for a sojourn that this time would last for two whole years. In spite of Kazantzakis' and Sikelianos' continued devotion to each other, their interests began to diverge. As Prevelakis observes, Kazantzakis' relation to Greece was "centrifugal" and Sikelianos'

"centripetal."⁷ The first was the eternal wanderer; the second was solidly embedded in his native soil. Their perception of history began to be differentiated at this time too. Kazantzakis who during his stay in Germany was very much affected by his reading of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, formed a cyclical view of history. Like Spengler, he saw cultures as living organisms which die after they have completed their cycle. A new culture begins with the emergence of a great visionary figure. Among such great visionary souls in the past Kazantzakis had placed Moses, Christ, Buddha. And now, even though in later years he would become dissatisfied with the excessively materialistic aspect of communism, Kazantzakis thought he saw a new redeemer in the person of Lenin.⁸

Sikelianos, on the other hand, whose view of history remained mythic and syncretic, was beginning to immerse himself in his Delphic vision which aspired to establish at Delphi (the place where the Greek spirit attempted the first synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysiac elements) a worldwide center, a United Nations of the spirit so to speak, which transcending the ephemeral political creeds of our times would be the living symbol and the promoter of universal brotherhood.

Sikelianos must have written to his friend abroad his plans because in a letter Kazantzakis wrote to Sikelianos, in December 1922, we read: "I too am thinking of you. I too live in fervent expectation, awaiting the fruits of your victory. However, our paths have diverged."⁹ And to his first wife, Galatea, Kazantzakis writes from Germany in 1923:

I wrote to Sikelianos that our roads have split and that we can no longer go on together. His life seems phony and outdated to me. May God grant him great poems and may he not become completely lost.¹⁰

And Sikelianos accepts his friend's decision. He writes a farewell poem to Kazantzakis in which he compares the two of them to Saint George and Saint Demetrios on horseback ready to start on different paths, wishes his friend well and only asks of him to remember him:

⁷"Kazantzakis-Sikelianos: To Chroniko mias philias" *Néa 'Eστία*, 1347 (August 15, 1983) 979.

⁸For more on the influence of Marx and Spengler on Kazantzakis, see James F. Lea, *Kazantzakis: The Politics of Salvation* (The University of Alabama Press, 1979), pp. 63-69.

⁹Prevelakis, "Kazantzakis-Sikelianos," 980.

¹⁰Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Suffering God: Selected Letters to Galatea and to Papastephanou*, trans. Philip Ramp and Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (New Rochelle, New York, 1979), p. 88.

ΑΠΟΧΑΙΡΕΤΙΣΜΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΖΑΝΤΖΑΚΗ

Πῶς "Αι-Δημήτρης τοῦ "Αι-Γιωργιοῦ τὸν τράχηλο ἀγκαλιάζει,
καθεὶς τους ἀνεβαίνοντας σὲ ψυχερὸ φαρί,
τὸ δρόμο ποῦ μυρίζεται μακρὸ κι ἀναγαλλιάζει,
καὶ τό' να εἶναι σιδέρικο καὶ τ' ἄλλο εἶναι ψαρί,

ὅμοια κ' ἐγώ, ὡς ξεκίναγα γιὰ τὸ μεγάλο δρόμο,
καὶ σὺ 'σουνα στὸ πλάγι μου γι' ἄλλο στρατὶ νὰ πᾶς,
ἀκόμα πάνω ἀπ' τ' ἄλογο σοῦ ἀγκάλιασα τὸν ὄμο
κ' εἶπα: «'Ο Θεὸς στίς στρατές σου, καὶ σὺ νὰ μ' ἀγαπᾶς!»

For almost twenty years, the two friends followed their divergent paths. They did not correspond, even after Kazantzakis returned to Greece and settled in the island of Aegina, but they would periodically learn each other's news from their mutual younger friend Pandelis Prevelakis. Since my focus is on the common experiences of Kazantzakis and Sikelianos, I will pass over their divergent activities and accomplishments during the years of their separation and will move quickly to the years of their reunion.

Eleni Kazantzakis thinks that during the long years of their separation, Kazantzakis and Sikelianos were longing to see each other but neither one would take the first step. Finally, a door for communication opened accidentally toward the end of 1940, when Greece was at war with Italy. One day Sikelianos, somewhere in the Peloponnese, ran into Eleni Kazantzakis (or rather Eleni Samios as she was known at the time) and in the course of their conversation asked her if she thought that Kazantzakis would like to go with him to Epiros to visit the soldiers at the front. A few days later, Kazantzakis' answer came, "My dear brother, I go with you wherever you want. I am ready."¹¹

It appears that changing conditions on the front did not permit this trip to materialize. Sikelianos, rather than answering his friend, took the boat and went to Aegina to see him in person. But the last minute he must have felt intimidated by twenty years of separation and never knocked on the door. Kazantzakis heard about it only the next day from the carriage driver of Aegina who told him. "Kyr Niko, yesterday evening, Mr. Sikelianos told me to take him to your house. But once he reached your door, he did not want to dismount and we turned back."¹² Another year went by. In the meantime, Greece was under the German-Italian occupation; Sikelianos sent to Kazantzakis one of his *Akritan* poems, the moving poems of resistance and hope which

¹¹Helen Kazantzakis, p. 393-94.

¹²Ibid. ("Kyr Niko," which literally means "Mister Nikos," was not translated because the translation would not convey the respect and warmth of the Greek expression.

he had handwritten in one hundred copies and distributed among friends during the terrible Athenian winter of 1941. Kazantzakis acknowledged the poem in moving words and, referring to the figures of Saint George and Saint Demetrios, which Sikelianos used in his farewell poem twenty years earlier, he told his old friend that in those critical times the two saints should walk next to each other.¹³ The time was ripe for a meeting and Prevelakis arranged it at his house in Athens.¹⁴ As if they had never separated, Prevelakis reports, the two friends made plans for Sikelianos to go to Aegina and live next to Kazantzakis. And indeed Angelos and Anna Sikelianos went to Aegina and stayed from the middle of May to the end of October 1942. As Eleni Kazantzakis mentions, it was a very productive time for the two writers, a meaningful and happy interaction for the two couples in spite of the famine and the strictures of the German occupation.¹⁵ Sikelianos wrote his verse tragedy *Daedalus in Crete*, while in Aegina, which he dedicated to Kazantzakis. And Kazantzakis, who was at the time working on the translation of the *Iliad* into modern Greek in collaboration with the classical scholar Iannis Kakridis, started feeling, as he reported, his trilogy *Prometheus* "kicking his vitals . . . longing to come out."¹⁶ Kazantzakis' *Prometheus* was completed in 1943. Needless to say, both the figures of *Daedalus* and *Prometheus* spoke directly to the hearts of the subjugated Greeks uplifting their spirits and nurturing their hope for deliverance.

With Sikelianos' departure, Eleni Kazantzakis reports, their "environs turned destitute . . . That visionary poet who strolled at ease among his visions" had been an inspiring and comforting presence.¹⁷ And Kazantzakis wrote to his friend:

Beloved Brother,

Impossible to tell you how much this place is clamoring for you, living in the hope of your returning with the swallows . . . I remember all the eternal moments we have spent together and I feel no difference between recollection and actual life. All things are present, i.e. immortal.¹⁸

But the Germans did not permit Sikelianos to return to Aegina, and

¹³Ibid., pp. 402-03.

¹⁴In his article, pp. 984-85, Prevelakis mentions that both he and Kazantzakis have their birthdays on February 18 (Prevelakis, of course, being twenty-five years younger) and they often celebrated the day together. So, in 1942, he invited Kazantzakis to his house in Athens for the occasion and arranged for Sikelianos to pay them a visit the following day.

¹⁵Helen Kazantzakis, pp. 405-06.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 407.

¹⁸Ibid.

the liberation was still two years away.

In November 1945, Kazantzakis became minister without portfolio in Sophoulis' government. Sophoulis was planning to send Kazantzakis to the United States to plead the cause of reconstruction. Mrs. Kazantzakis tells us that, in order for her to be able to follow Kazantzakis to the U.S. without unnecessary complications, she and Kazantzakis decided, after eighteen years of unwedded life together, to get officially married. And, of course, the natural witnesses of their wedding, their "koumbaroi," were Angelos and Anna Sikelianos. Mrs. Kazantzakis writes in her book that Sikelianos set on his friend's head a delicate branch of laurel instead of the orange-blossom wreath required by the Greek Orthodox rite.¹⁹

That branch of laurel, emblematic of Sikelianos' recognition of Kazantzakis' greatness, seems to me also emblematic of another international "branch of laurel," the Nobel prize, which, in the years that followed, many Greek men of letters had hoped would be awarded jointly to the two friends. In 1946, Borje Knöss, a Neo-Hellenist scholar from Sweden, proposed Sikelianos for the Nobel prize, a proposal that was seconded by the society of Greek writers whose president was Kazantzakis. A few months later, the same society, under another president at this time, proposed jointly Kazantzakis and Sikelianos for the prize. Sikelianos was very happy. "I shall set the crown upon your head with my own hands," he told Kazantzakis, laughing, "and you shall crown me in turn."²⁰

The same year Kazantzakis left for London as a guest of the British Council. Little did he know at the time that the political climate of Greece would make it virtually impossible for him to return to his country. The two friends did not get the Nobel prize either in 1946 or in the next few years, in spite of the support of many writers from all over the world. From correspondence between Borje Knös and George Theotocas, which became available recently, it seems that those who undermined the chances of the two friends' getting the Nobel prize were Greek reactionaries such as the academician Spyros Melas who, when he visited Sweden in March 1951, slandered Kazantzakis and Sikelianos by presenting them as communists and spreading the wrong impression that the majority of the Greeks did not favor these two writers.²¹

Three months later, in June 1951, Sikelianos died suddenly, and Kazantzakis received the blow abroad. "I cannot accept it. It's unjust!"

¹⁹Ibid., p. 433.

²⁰Ibid., p. 438.

²¹See Lilè K. Alivizatou, "Angelos Sikelianos and the Nobel Prize," *Διαβάζω*, 46 (Sept-Oct., 1981) 64-71.

grumbled Kazantzakis. "Every day thousands of human wrecks are begging God to cut their suffering short. Thousands of desperate people, empty of substance, are seeking death, believing in a better life. And just at this point, the elect of the elect, the 'complete' man is struck by lightning at the zenith of his creative powers."²² To Borje Knöss in Sweden he wrote: "Forty years of indissoluble friendship united me with Sikelianos. He was the only person with whom I could breathe, talk, laugh, be silent. Now Greece has become barren for me."²³ And to Prevelakis in Greece,

To soothe my pain, I have decided to write a book about Angelos. We visited so much of Greece together, we struggle together in different ways and from divergent paths, and perhaps it would be useful for future Greeks to know the intensity and the fire that had brought us together and kept us united for forty years.²⁴

Kazantzakis' own death a few years later did not allow him to write that book. He only devoted to Sikelianos a chapter in his *Report to Greco* entitled "My friend the poet" in which he speaks about the fire that brought them together and their pilgrimage to Mount Athos. It might be significant to add at this point that it was shortly after their pilgrimage to Mount Athos that Kazantzakis wrote the tragedy *Christos* and that Sikelianos composed on the one hand "The Consciousness of my Faith," which includes the poem "Dionysos-Jesus," and on the other *Easter of the Greeks*, in which the figure of Jesus is central again. And it is interesting to note (as George Savvidis before me has observed)²⁵ that in the 1940s the Christian myth reappears in the work of the two friends with new intensity. Two of Sikelianos' *Acritan Poems* written in 1941, the first winter of the German occupation, and his two tragedies, *Christ in Rome* and *The Death of Digenis*, written in 1945 and 1946 respectively, deal with Christ. And Kazantzakis does the same in three novels written between 1948 and 1950, namely *Christ Recrucified*, *The Fratricides* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. And there is a parallel message in the two writers' presentation of Christ, particularly in Sikelianos' *The Death of Digenis* and Kazantzakis' *Christ Recrucified*. In both of them a human being, a Christ figure opposes his moral stature against oppression and fights for freedom, human dignity and social justice.

²²Helen Kazantzakis, p. 498.

²³Ibid., p. 500.

²⁴Prevelakis, p. 986.

²⁵See George Savvidis, "The Christian Myth in Sikelianos" in *Τετράδια Εὐθύνης*, No. 11: *Κοτίνος στὸν Ἄγγελο Σικελιανό* (Athens, 1981), 35-43, particularly 40-41.