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The Nietzschean Concept of *Becoming* in the Figures of Christ and Zorba the Greek

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The Biblical figure of Jesus Christ, it would seem, is an embodiment of exactly the sort of fusion—of Apollo and Dionysius; of the rational and the irrational—that Friedrich Nietzsche admired in Greek tragedy. As both Paul’s “folly to philosophers” and John’s “Logos” (Λόγος), Christ symbolizes the humanization—and thus rationalization—of the mystery of God, just as much as he magnifies the contradictory and absurd nature of the world and of human life. Furthermore, on the cross, Christ’s *kenotic*, or *emptying* act, can be read as a facilitation of a Nietzschean annihilation of *being*, which becomes substituted by the notion of *becoming*.

In what follows, I will attempt to investigate two narratives—one Pre-Nietzsche and one Post-Nietzsche: that of the biblical Christ and that of writer-philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Zorba the Greek*—as ‘lived’ examples of Nietzschean thought.

In rejecting the philosophical notion of *being* (that is, fixed entities or substances), Nietzsche attempts to draw our attention towards the nothingness (and therefore, infinite freedom) that underlies human existence. By accepting the human condition of nothingness and freedom, it can be understood that one never *is*, but also, that one is always *becoming*. As one, following Nietzsche’s exhortation, ‘gazes into the abyss’ and accepts one’s

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essential emptiness, one opens oneself up to the possibility of an infinitely and radically free sense of personal existence. Though Nietzsche credits Heraclitus, the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, for such notion (“Heraclitus will remain eternally right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction”),¹ it appears as though, in many ways, Nietzsche—a philologist after all—foresaw the later evolution of conceptions of language, signification, and the linguistic connection (or disconnection) with ontology. That is to say, that if the nature of the linguistic sign is arbitrary and the signifier and signified are bound merely by a superficial social contract, then it must be the case that our own being—existence—is always realized through negation, and not predication. In the statement “I am me”, ‘me’ is an empty sign. It gives us no information about the ‘I’, and the ‘I’, therefore, also remains *empty*. However, if I were to say that “I am *not* a tree”, then the ‘I’—the *ego*—would begin to take on meaning. In fact, the ‘I’ can be defined merely through an *infinite* list of *nots*—negations. The ‘I’ is free to bear an infinity of significations because, at its base, it bears no *a priori* signification. Its innate *nothingness* frees the ‘I’ to be defined in infinite ways.

The Nietzschean notion of the necessity of the annihilation of *being* in an opening up to infinite *becoming* can be observed in the figure of Christ. In his Letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul writes that “Jesus made himself nothing” (Philippians 2:7). By negating his very *being*—Jesus opened himself up to infinite *becoming*. Through his *emptying* act, Christ’s free, irrational, and contradictory (perhaps even *Dionysian*) essence is called forth. Being *nothing*, Christ can *become* God and man at once. He is, in such a manner, *free* (e.g. of binary oppositions, transcendental signification, etc.). In becoming nothing, Christ can live contradictorily: he can legitimately be both man and God. In a similar manner, according to the Kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*, God facilitated creation through self-annihilation (or perhaps more appropriately, through self-*contraction*). God diminishes—or contracts—himself in order to create (humanity). God dies on the cross in order to save (humanity). Through, in Nietzschean terms, the “death [or crucifixion] of God”, humanity is saved from its imprisonment. Humanity is saved from the *hala-*

kha (Jewish religious law), and finds itself free from its previously ritualistic existence that applied transcendental signification to such things as even the penile foreskin. With Christ—who eventually comes to symbolize the death of God—the physical world loses its significance: it loses its fetishized status. Through the annihilation of such fetishizations, the human individual becomes free. The foreskin no longer signifies respect for God; the foreskin merely signifies the foreskin (which, after all, due to the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of predication, would signify that the foreskin is *nothing*). The acceptance of the essential nothingness of the real world, which Christ brings about, seems to be the ultimate project of Nietzsche’s thought and such a removal of significant meaning even from death itself seems to be a result of Christ’s emptying act. Again, in his Letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that just as soon as he “became nothing”, Christ “became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:9-10). By becoming obedient to the reality of death, Christ remains stoically neutral towards his humanely fate: he neither fights it nor celebrates it. He applies no meaning or transcendental significance to it: he accepts it as reality. Much like Nietzsche’s Goethe,, Christ appears as a “free spirit [, a spirit that] stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism [...] that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—he no longer denies.”² Such a *kenosis*—of the “fiction of *being*”; of the imprisoning divinity that we believe lies within us—seems to fall well within Nietzsche’s vision for humanity. Much like Christ, we must purge from within us the things that lift us up, bind us, and connect us; which define us and limit our freedom. Through such *kenosis* of *being*, we live, as Nietzsche suggests, in light of *becoming*.

If we accept that God is *everything*, then it must be the case that God is also *nothing*, for within the set of *everything*, even *nothing* resides. In the same way, if God is *everything*, then God must also be man. Transitively, man—who, because of his *nothingness*, is free to be *anything* and *everything*—must be God. Indeed, Christ’s figure wholeheartedly represents this very notion. Such a notion of man who is both nothing and who can be anything—as formalized through the philosophy of Nietzsche—

can also be seen in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek*.

On the most basic level, Kazantzakis' novel represents exactly what Nietzsche so very much loved about Greek tragedy. The narrator, a young intellectual man described as valuing books over firsthand experience, represents the Apollonian, while Alexis Zorba, whose lasciviousness, drunkenness, and anti-reason attitude seems almost unbelievable, represents the Dionysian. On another level, however, the novel stands for the innate contradictoriness of the world. Zorba, in particular, represents the free man who, like God, Christ, and Nietzsche's Übermensch, lives a full life as he accepts his ability to be *everything* which comes through an acceptance of his innate *nothingness*. Following the teachings of his elder, Zorba, Kazantzakis's narrator (whom we shall call "the Boss," as Zorba does) finally realizes humanity's freedom: "One sees clearly now that he is nothing".³ In fact, by *emptying* the world one sees that anything is possible. Zorba, the Dionysian, lives in a dark, drunken state where borders become invisible, and where contradictions are impossible. The Boss, nonetheless, describes his friend's synthetic mind: "God, the business's best interests, and the widow had joined together inextricably in Zorba's mind."⁴ Most importantly, however, through the freedom that Zorba exhibits, God becomes possible. As one purges oneself of the logical, artificial boundaries that society has fabricated, the concept of God becomes possible. In Zorba's world where, through negation, *everything* becomes possible, God becomes possible as well. The Dionysian remarks: "Does God exist or does he not exist? What says Your Highness? And if God does exist (everything is possible, after all) how do you imagine him?"⁵ God is illogical, and it would seem that the existentialist—who sees beyond the oppressive force of logic—can accept the notion of God if they so choose.

A concrete example of the productive nature of the destructive act is seen through Zorba's severance of his finger. In a broader discussion about aesthetics, artistic production, and Zorba's dabbling in pottery, Zorba recounts:

So once I was a potter. I was crazy about that trade. Do you know what it means to take a lump of clay and make what you want out of it? The wheel and clay spin around like mad—*ffrrr!*—with you standing over them saying [...] ‘I’ll make the Devil knows what! That means, I’m telling you, that you’re truly human. Free! [...]

‘So what about the finger?’, I asked.

‘It got in the way on the wheel, kept getting in the middle and spoiling my design. So one day I grabbed an adze and—’

‘Didn’t it hurt?’

‘Of course it hurt! Am I a tree trunk? I’m a man: it hurt. But it hindered me in my work, I’m telling you. So I cut it off!’⁶

Here we see that in order to create, some sort of destruction must occur. In this instance, it seems clear that Kazantzakis draws a parallel between his Zorba and the Judeo-Christian God, who is, in the Bible, often portrayed as the *potter* (and we—humanity—and the world, his pottery). God and Zorba both create through annihilation, contraction (as the Kabbalistic term holds), or severance. As Zorba tells us, it is when he realizes that he is “[...] truly human! Free!”, that he is able to face his full creative potential. The severance of a finger symbolizes, in the grander picture, the purging—*emptying*—of worldly fetishizations. The fetishized organs (think *anal*, *oral*, etc.), to which one becomes, in Freudian terms, ‘fixed,’ get in the way of orgasm or, in this case, orgasm’s close relative: art (which, much like orgasm, symbolizes the harmonization of the non-empirical and the empirical; the union of fantasy and physical object). Just as God, Zorba creates through annihilation. God’s creation and Zorba’s creation occur in an identical manner. Creating art is cathartic: it occurs as an emptying of oneself *into* the Other (whether the Other be, in God’s

case, *man*, or, in Zorba's case, pottery). When one creates, one ceases existing *as* oneself, as an individual: one becomes split, existing as oneself, the *creator*, and as one's Other, the *created*. The act of creation is, in Nietzschean terms, living as *becoming*, for it requires one to annihilate the "fiction of being," "gaze into the abyss," and realize his freedom and nothingness. Creation, in this way, is destruction just as destruction is (and is a necessary predicate of) creation.

Another instance in which we see similarities among Christ, Nietzsche, and Zorba (in whom Kazantzakis seems to be actively interweaving the former two) is through the concept of *becoming-child*. Matthew reports to us that Jesus thus advised: "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:2-4). Much like a child, Jesus constantly speaks in metaphor (where the use of metaphor itself speaks to the fact that we understand what something is through *difference*—through the fact that something is *not* something, not that *something* is *something*), using basic examples to communicate his thoughts. Often, in fact, Jesus appears as a child (after all, he is the *son*!) who privileges action over speech. He never wrote anything down. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche celebrates the child: "But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion cannot do? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes-saying".⁷ And finally, on New Year's in Kazantzakis' novel, Zorba tells us that "for me, just like the New Year I become a small child again; like Christ I am reborn. The way he is born every year, so am I".⁸ In the examples at hand, we see a celebration of childhood. We see characters who exhibit a "sacred Yes-saying" for life, who act as if before their entrance into the Lacanian symbolic. They communicate using metaphors and their bodies. Indeed, Zorba communicates through dance and seems to have no patience for verbal language as we see in his remark: "men have sunk very low. They've let their bodies become mute and they only speak with their mouths. But what d'you expect a mouth to say? What can it tell you?".⁹ Christ, Zarathustra, and Zorba are not encumbered by what Nietzsche would call the fiction of logic, or the fiction of

reason: they are carnal creatures, in touch with man's ability to exist freely and infinitely, laudably innocent in the light of absurd humanly constructs.

A staunch atheist, the German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche is one of Christianity's most known critics. Despite his distrust of Christianity itself, Nietzsche has communicated some inkling of respect for Christ, remarking that "there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross."¹⁰ In fact, much of Nietzsche's philosophy can be read and realized through the biblical figure of Jesus Christ. A man who makes God rational through his being *Word*, Jesus serves as a concrete example of the mystical Hebraic God. At the same time, Jesus is a manifestation of utter irrationality and absurdity of human life. Embodying both the divine and the physical, Jesus symbolizes the existential freedom—the infinitude—that is found at the center of every human individual. In many ways, Jesus' freedom, as well as his ability to annihilate the world's trivialities, is an example of Nietzsche's ideal man. Compared, on many an account, to Christ and to God, Alexis Zorba symbolizes a lived example of Nietzschean philosophy. It seems to be no coincidence to me that Zorba—who Kazantzakis developed with Nietzschean thought in mind—has been compared (both para- and inner-textually) to Christ. Both characters seem to have successfully—as Nietzsche would celebrate—annihilated "the fiction of being" in order to live in light of *becoming*. Both characters have realized their essential nothingness, have recognized their own existential freedom, and have ultimately been able to see their own lives in light of the infinity of life itself. Their transcendence of fetishizations—which, needless to say, lead to feelings of regret and guilt and shame, and which otherwise limit one's innate freedom—allows them to live their lives in infinite ways, in accordance merely with their own choosing. It is telling, nonetheless, that a Nietzschean line can be sewn in a connecting manner through centuries upon centuries of human thought, regardless of the fact that Nietzsche died just over a century ago.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998.) p. 17.
2. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 114.
3. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, Trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), 194.
4. Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, 141.
5. *Ibid.*, 125.
6. *Ibid.*, 25.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. (HathiTrust Digital Library.) p. 44.
8. Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, 140.
9. *Ibid.*, 73.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920.) p. 111.

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