Laughter and Freedom: 
The theory and practice of humour in Kazantzakis

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In 1914 Kazantzakis published his translation of *Le rire (Laughter)*, by the philosopher Henri Bergson, whose lectures he had attended in Paris. *Le rire* is clearly, though informally, integrated into Bergson’s philosophy as a whole, which profoundly influenced Kazantzakis. Bergson proposes that laughter can be interpreted as society’s way of punishing the type of behaviour which he describes as “automatism”. This occurs when humans react to circumstances or events in an “unthinking”, inflexible way. In so doing they fail to utilise the mental powers which distinguish our species, and which allow us to achieve a unique degree of freedom and creativity. Many of the amusing traits of characters in Kazantzakis’ novels can be interpreted according to Bergson’s theory. At the same time, Kazantzakis seems to continue a tradition of popular humour, in which wisdom may be found in the sayings or actions of an apparently foolish or naïve person.

In general Kazantzakis’ works exude a profound seriousness and a passionately earnest belief in his own mission to enlighten his readers. “Humour” is not a word we would associate with his tragedies, his *Odyssey*, or his philosophical works such as *Saviors of God (Ασκητική)*, or with most of his travel writing.

Nonetheless, humour is noticeably present in several of Kazantzakis’ works, especially his novels. In *Zorba the Greek* it is particularly striking. Who can forget Zorba’s homespun philosophy on life and God, or his letter to the Boss from town, where he has gone to buy materials for the mine but spends their money on night-life (and a lady called Lola), or the disastrous inauguration of his “monorail”? In other books we may find humour concentrated in the earlier chapters, where minor characters are introduced. Like Kapetan Michalis’ brother Tityros in *Freedom or Death (Ο Καπετάν Μιχάλης)*, a caricature of the weak, absent-minded schoolteacher, who slips on the round shotgun pellets which his mischievous students have placed in


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his path (65). Or like Mastrapas, also in Freedom or Death, whose wife ties him by the foot to their bed every night to prevent him going astray (56). Or like Kostandis in Christ Recrucified, who gets beaten by his wife, and feels particularly bitter when the priest Father Grigoris warns him to stop beating her (22). Another wonderful piece of humorous writing in Christ Recrucified is where the pedlar Giannakos talks to his donkey before they set out together on their rounds (58–60). Humour in Kazantzakis is in fact a rich subject for research. Here we can do no more than suggest possible approaches.

Kazantzakis had thought hard about the meaning of laughter. One of his early projects after returning from postgraduate studies in Paris (1907–1909) was to translate into Greek a famous study on laughter, Le rire, by the eminent philosopher Henri Bergson, whose lectures he had attended. Following the conventions of the day his

1 References are to the Greek text as reprinted in Kazantzakis, n.d. The book’s title appears as Freedom or Death in the American edition (Kazantzakis, 1956). The British publishers use the variant Freedom and Death.

2 References are to the Greek text (Kazantzakis, 1973). Christ Recrucified is the title in the British edition (Kazantzakis, 1954); in the United States it appears as The Greek Passion.

3 The edition referred to in preparing this paper was Bergson, 1981. First published in the Revue de Paris (Bergson, 1900), the work has been frequently reprinted and can be found on the internet (see under Bergson, 1924). An English translation (Bergson, 1911) was approved by the philosopher.
Translation is in a simple form of katharevousa, which is perhaps the main reason why it is little used today.\footnote{Recent work in English on Bergson includes Mullarkey, 1999a and 1999b; Lawler, 2003, has not been available to me. For a detailed discussion of Le rire, see Moore, 1996:66–90.}

Translation for Kazantzakis was not simply a way of earning a (meagre) living. It gave him an opportunity to work with language, one of his great passions. As we might expect, Kazantzakis is a careful and conscientious translator, aware of the importance of detail. He knows that it is not enough for translators to know the relevant languages; they must also have knowledge of the subject matter, or at least be prepared to acquire it as necessary.\footnote{H. Bercson, Το γέλοιο (= Bergson, 1914). The error in the philosopher's name is obviously not Kazantzakis' responsibility. The orthography of γέλοιο is presumably his, on the analogy of the adjective γελοίος.} But above all, translating was highly suited to his mindset of passionate enquiry, as it gave him an opportunity to work on writers and texts in which he was profoundly interested.

Bergson of course was one of Kazantzakis' great gurus.\footnote{One example from Le rire will suffice: Tomanas' otherwise useful Greek translation gives the impression that Dorine, a character in Molière's comedy Le Tartuffe, is a man (Bergson, 1998:64).} As early as 1913 we find the Cretan writer summarising the teacher's thought in an admirably lucid essay, published in the journal of the Educational Society (Εκπαιδευτικός Όμιλος).\footnote{On Kazantzakis' use of Bergson, see Bien, 1989, especially 36–53; Vouyouca, 1998.} It was Bergson's concept of the élan vital — the creative force in beings which drives them to evolve — which Kazantzakis took as the core idea in his philosophical essay Saviors of God (Ασκητική); characteristically, Kazantzakis gave this concept more emotive connotations by renaming it: God.

In Le rire Bergson sets out to examine what we laugh at and why. It is a short work written in a straightforward style, with examples of humour chosen largely from French comedy. Bergson's book is regarded as a historical landmark in the philosophy of laughter, and is still read and discussed. One feature which must have attracted Kazantzakis is the organic relationship of Bergson's theory of laughter to key concepts and concerns of his overall philosophy. Although Bergson does not develop these links in a formal way, a reader who has perused his writings will recognise at least one fundamental term and several of his core ideas in his treatment of laughter.

In developing his conception of the nature of humankind, Bergson sets out from the premise that we humans are differentiated from other animals by our mental faculties, namely our intellect, supplemented by a developed power of intuition. (In emphasising the limits of the intellect and the importance of intuition Bergson was followed, of course, by Kazantzakis.) These abilities enable humans to minimise dependence on their environment or other circumstances, and above all to free
themselves from instinctive or reactive patterns of behaviour. Hence human life can be free and creative in a way impossible for any other species.

At the same time Bergson recognises that we are social animals. In Le rire his basic hypothesis is that laughter is society’s way of censuring any of its members whose behaviour, while not immediately dangerous, contravenes its concept of what a well-ordered society should be like. Society expects its members to use their cognitive abilities to address the issues of everyday life in a flexible, sensitive manner; they should have overcome the kind of behaviour which he calls “automatisme” (αυτοματισμός in Kazantzakis’ version). He describes automatism as: “a certain inflexibility of body, mind and character, which society would like also to remove, in order to achieve from its members the highest degree of flexibility and sociability. The comic is this inflexibility, and laughter is its punishment”.

Bergson’s first example of comic automatism (1981:7) is that of a man who (recalling Kazantzakis’ Tityros) falls over in the street because he is not looking where he is going. The victim was not using his faculties, he was walking like a crude robot rather than a sentient, intelligent being. If we now find this example too politically incorrect, let us take a similar example from an animated cartoon. In The Simpsons Sideshow Bob, normally a malicious and calculating character, has a peculiar problem with garden rakes. He repeatedly steps on one, making it spring up and hit him in the face; like a crude robot, he fails to learn from his experience, and repeats the mistake several times in quick succession. Homer Simpson gets into similar scrapes, reacting also with his trademark exclamation, “Doh!” Typical cases of automatism, Bergson would say. The repetition adds to the humour, because it is in itself a form of automatism (cf. Bergson, 1981:53–56).

If adults find this kind of humour rather primitive, that demonstrates the power of social constraints and social change. To explain this in Bergson’s terms, in order to laugh at someone, we have to be able to switch off any emotional involvement, any feelings of pity, sympathy or concern. Laughter, to use his term, is accompanied by insensibilité, or αδιαφορία in Kazantzakis’ version (Bergson, 1914:5). We (or some of us!) can laugh at Sideshow Bob because we know he is a cartoon character and has no bones to break; but if we see an actual person slipping in the street we will presumably want to make sure they are not hurt before (perhaps) sharing a laugh with them. Society’s views on what is laughable are not fixed for eternity; they have changed in the century since Bergson wrote.

Bergson’s approach to the study of humour can be seen in a general way through his chapter headings (as translated by Brereton and Rothwell — see Bergson, 1911):

8 Translations from Bergson and Kazantzakis are my own, unless otherwise stated. In Kazantzakis’ version (15): “Κάποια ακαμψία σώματος, πνεύματος και χαρακτήρος, την οποία η κοινωνία θα της έκανε επίσης να αποδίωξη, δια να επιτύχη από τα μέλη της τον ύψιστον βαθμόν της ελαστικότητος και της κοινωνικότητος. Η ακαμψία αυτή είναι το κλωμόν και το γέλιον είναι η τιμωρία του”. This is an exact translation of the corresponding French passage (Bergson, 1981:16). In quoting Kazantzakis I preserve his orthography but apply the monotonic accent system.
Ch. I: The comic in general — The comic element in forms and movements — Expansive force of the comic

Ch. II: The comic element in situations and the comic element in words

Ch. III: The comic in character.

Some types of humour are easier to explain than others by Bergson’s method. One type which responds well to his analysis is what he calls “the comic in character”. It can occur when a person or her reactions to events are repetitive and predictable, and hence amusing. Such characters are the basis of many of Molière’s comedies — The Miser, for example, or The Imaginary Invalid. With some of these characters the relation between automatism and lack of freedom is obvious: the domination is literal.

Sometimes, Bergson concedes, the connection between humor and automatism is less direct: situations or events may seem funny because of what he calls “the expansive force of the comic”, because they suggest other situations in which automatism is direct and obvious (1981:28–50). This may apply to many cases of “role reversal”, a sub-category which Bergson discusses under the general heading of comedy of situation. Why do we laugh when the thief becomes a victim of theft, when the cheat is cheated? Because, Bergson would say, they have allowed some external agency to prevent them from being themselves, to act as free beings in their chosen way. They are victims of something which at least metaphorically could be called automatism (1981:71–73).

Role-reversal is typical of the kinds of humour which Kazantzakis exploits in minor characters, such as Mastrapas and Kostandis. In the society described in both Freedom or Death and Christ Recrucified, men are expected to be dominant; when a husband allows himself to be dominated, he is not realising his potential as a free (male) human being.

And yet Kazantzakis’ world is one in which even a rather ridiculous and unfree person is not necessarily condemned for ever. Anyone can make the decision to change. In Freedom or Death, Mastrapas joins Kapetan Michalis in the rebellion against the Ottomans, and stands by him up to the point where further resistance is pointless; those with dependants want to leave, and Michalis gives them, in effect, an honourable discharge (489). Tityros also overcomes his fear and becomes a revolutionary orator; more than that, he kills the man who was his chief tormentor (320–21). As a character, critics may find him unconvincing (cf. Manousakis, 1983:125), but the message is clear.

At times Kazantzakis uses humour with great subtlety and delicacy, going far beyond the mere exposure of a character’s failings. A few chapters into Freedom or

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9 On the characters in Freedom or Death, see Manousakis, 1983. Manousakis links Kazantzakis’ characterisation with Bergson’s philosophy, but does not deal specifically with humour.

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Death (78–79), we meet the ladies of the neighbourhood on a fine afternoon knitting and chatting together in a shady courtyard, where they are joined by Ali, an aged, impoverished Turk who lives nearby. Someone asks him what tasty morsels he cooked for lunch. They all know that he has hardly enough money to keep himself alive, but the ladies and Ali himself all keep up the pretence that he is a great culinary connoisseur. And so Ali describes the expensive cuts of meat and the delicious sauces, all products of his fantasy, which he claims to have cooked that day. The ladies find an excuse to ply him with food: “I’ll give you a plate of boiled greens for the evening,” says one, “you’ll see how they cool your stomach. You’ve turned it into sausage with all that meat and spices”.10 “All that caviar”, says another, “must get boring in the end. Let me give you a plate of split olives. You’ll see, they’re bitter, they’ll bring your appetite back”.11 By the end of the afternoon they are all in a good mood: they have had fun with Ali, but they have also made sure that he will get a good meal, and by keeping up the pretence they have avoided insulting his self-esteem. We too, the readers, have enjoyed his harmless fantasising — which no doubt Bergson could interpret in terms of automatism. And yet our final impression of Ali is not one of ridicule. In all ways open to him he does his best to preserve his self-respect; his worn-out clothes are always spotless and he washes till his skin shines. His food fantasy is part of this process. He is struggling to keep some control over his own condition, not to give in to his poverty.

There is another tradition, or rather a whole body of traditions, of humour quite different from the French comedy from which Bergson drew examples: the many versions of what we could call, in one phrase, the wise fool. The topic is too vast to do more than hint at it here. To treat it properly we would have to consider the Byzantine concept of the “σαλός” or holy fool; or the idiot whom Muslims are taught to respect because he has been touched by Allah; or people like the jesters of medieval lords and monarchs, or the fools and clowns of Shakespeare’s plays, men whose role is to “play the fool”. Stories about them may appear on the surface to be simply funny anecdotes, analysable, perhaps, along the lines Bergson suggested. But on another level, sometimes, society’s laughter is turned back upon itself. The fool displays a deeper wisdom. An apparently naïve or idiotic comment hides a deeper truth. “Out of the mouths of babes and children…” In Zorba, the simple-minded Mimithos sometimes plays this role (e.g. 127).12

10 “— Να σου δώσω εγώ απόψε, γείτονα, ένα πιάτο βρούβες, είπε η Μαστραπάδαινα, να δεις πως θα δροσέρεψε το άντερό σου, που το παραγέμισες κρέας και μπαχαρικά και το έκαμες λουκάνικο” (73). The English translation by Jonathan Griffin (Kazantzakis, 1956:69) is slightly different.
11 “— Και το πολύ χαβιάρι, γείτονα, το βαριέται ο άνθρωπος, [...] να σου δώσω εγώ ένα πιάτάκι σκιστές ελιές, να δεις, πικρές είναι κι ανοίγουν την ορέξη” (73). Griffin’s version has “too much caviar, neighbour, does a man in”.
12 References to the Greek text are to the sixth printing (Kazantzakis, 1964). Again the English versions are my own. In Wildman’s translation (Kazantzakis, 1995) Mimithos appears as Mimiko.
One genre of popular stories once familiar to both Muslims and Christians from the Balkans to Persia and beyond, are the tales of Nasreddin Hodja. Nasreddin is a mythical figure — although the city of Akşehir in Turkey claims to have his tomb — a Muslim preacher, whose comically naïve doings and sayings often suggest a moral lesson. Such tales were once part of a tradition of popular humour which cut across barriers of nationality, language and even religion. But their potential for moral or religious teaching was also understood, especially by the Sufi or mystical branches of Islam, with which Kazantzakis had first-hand contact while living in Crete before the exchange of populations in 1923.13 Hodja stories continue to be reprinted in Greece, often as children's books.14

‘Don’t laugh, boss’, [says Zorba], ‘but I think of God as being exactly like me. Only bigger, stronger, crazier ... and immortal. [...] He’s holding a large sponge, full of water, like a rain-cloud. On his right is Paradise, on his left Hell. Along comes a soul, stark naked, poor thing, it’s lost its body and it’s freezing. God looks at it and laughs under his moustache; but he plays the bogey-man: “Come here”, he tells it, in a rough voice, “Come here, cursèd one!” [...] “Alas”, it cries, “I have sinned”. And it starts to confess its sins, and it goes on and on, like it’s never going to stop. God gets bored and starts to yawn. “That’s enough! You’ve worn my ears out!” And swish! one stroke of the sponge and he’s wiped out all the sins. “Get off to Paradise”, he tells it. “Hey, Peter, take this poor thing as well!”’ (134–35).

This too could be seen as a form of automatism, as defined by Bergson. Zorba is addressing a profound theological issue, the nature of deity and the problem of good and evil, yet he is talking the way he always talks, not as a theologian or philosopher, but in Zorba-concepts. (“Ζορμπάς είμαι — ζορμπάδικα μιλώ!” [“I am Zorba, so I talk Zorba”], he says on page 76.) Many of Zorba’s individual phrases, his images of a very human God, can be analysed according to the categories of verbal humour which the philosopher sets out in Chapter II of Le rire.

But Zorba’s conclusion goes straight to the heart of the theological issue: “God, you know, is a great lord, and that’s what being a lord means: to forgive! How can the belief in divine punishment be reconciled with the concept of God as a great lord? Does not lordliness imply generosity? The boss-narrator’s closing comment stresses the two sides of Zorba’s tirade: “I remember how I laughed that evening, when Zorba spouted all this rigmarole. But this ‘lordliness’ of God was taking shape and maturing within me, compassionate, generous and all-powerful” (135).

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One of the most amusing episodes in *Zorba the Greek* is provided by Zorba's visit to town and his letter to the Boss (178–87), mentioned above. Many of its details could be analysed separately along the lines proposed by Bergson. But while still relishing its humour, we can appreciate that there is another side to the episode. Being Zorba involves doing crazy things, following impulses. Any automatism in Zorba is secondary to our sense of a person who is truly a free man.

It is significant that our examples of Kazantzakis' humour come from his novels, all written in the last sixteen years of his life. Just as the novel allowed him at last to exploit his feeling for the speech of ordinary people, without trying to create a heightened poetical language as he had in his tragedies and the *Odyssey*, so too it allowed him to give free range to his sense of humour and his understanding of comedy as a vehicle for serious messages. In his earlier work there is only an occasional glimpse of this side of Kazantzakis, mainly in his travel writings. And yet it is evident, for example, in some of his posed photographs which have survived from these decades (see for example Anemogiannis, 1985:53).

I do not know whether or to what extent Kazantzakis was consciously influenced by Bergson's theory of laughter. I am certainly not suggesting that he subjected his own stories to Bergsonian analysis. Unquestionably, though, he had studied Bergson's theory in depth and had pondered its position in the teacher's overall philosophy. Bergson, perhaps, suggested to Kazantzakis how to take humour seriously.

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