

# Narrating the Life of a Subverted Saint: Kazantzakis' initial title for *Zorba* and the parody of a genre\*

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This paper attempts a generic comparison between Kazantzakis' most celebrated novel and the medieval genre of hagiography. With references to the original *Life of Alexis* and to other canonical hagiographical texts I demonstrate how the generic conventions and the communicative purposes of hagiography are exploited in the dominant genre of the novel. Bakhtin's theories on parody and speech genres will form the theoretical framework of the reading.

The title is one of the most efficient paratextual devices that facilitate the communication between author and reader. Nikos Kazantzakis had initially titled his famous novel *Το συναξάρι του Ζορμπά* (*The Saint Life of Zorba*) but finally selected the more ambivalent one, in its Greek version at least,<sup>1</sup> *Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά* (*Life and Times of Alexis Zorba*). As Roderick Beaton notes both titles are direct references to one of the most popular genres of Modern Greek literature, the Lives of Saints (Beaton, 1999:177). The authorial narrator also clearly presents the novel as a narration of a saint's life, as a *synaxari* (Kazantzakis, 1973:12, 365):

Και ξαφνικά, χωρίς καθόλου να το 'χα στο νου μου, πήρα χαρτί, ξάπλωσα στις πυρωμένες πλάκες της ταράτσας κι άρχισα να γράφω το συναξάρι ετούτο του Ζορμπά... Θαρρείς κι είχα εγώ όλη την ευθύνη ... να στερεώσω ακέριο το πρόσωπο του, το πρόσωπο του "Γέροντά" μου (Kazantzakis, 1973:365).

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the English translation of the title of the novel, *Zorba the Greek*, deprives the English-speaking reader of all the mentioned connotations.

suddenly, urged on by that divine hand, I took some paper, stretched myself out on the burning flagstones of the terrace and began to relate the sayings and doings of Zorba. [...] I felt that if he disappeared it would be entirely my fault, and I worked day and night to draw as full a picture as possible of my old friend (Kazantzakis, 1961:313–314).

Although both versions of the title point towards hagiography, the ambivalence of the finally selected title sets the tone for the comparison I will attempt. The utterance “βίος και πολιτεία” in Modern Greek oral discourse is commonly used to describe a person whose life was full of adventures of questionable morality. Taking into consideration Zorba’s morals in relation to the moral teaching of the hagiographic tradition the title of the novel sounds at least like irony or, to put it in terms of generic criticism, parody.

Parody is the dominant register in the interrelation between *Zorba the Greek* (Kazantzakis, 1961) as a modern novel and the genre of hagiography. The generic conventions of the *synaxari* are adopted only to be exposed and subverted. These include not only the textual structures but also the communicative purposes of hagiography that are coincidentally employed and undermined.

In this paper I will take up the task of briefly reviewing the generic features of hagiography that relate to Kazantzakis’ treatment of this stylised traditional form. I will then proceed to a close textual comparison between *Zorba the Greek* and representative lives of saints and I will associate the programmatic communicative strategies of Kazantzakis’ poetics with the addressivity aims of hagiography. Finally a theoretical evaluation will be pursued, in the light of Bakhtin’s account of the functions and importance of generic parody in literary history (Bakhtin, 1998).

The primary convention on which hagiography is grounded is a rather complicated establishment of the truth. A *synaxari* is of course neither just fact nor just fiction, but due to its edification purposes it appears to be holding, more than any other biographical genre, an immanent truth. C. Hahn notes that: “That truth may consist more of spiritual and rhetorical verity than historical fact” (Hahn, 2001:32). Behind that precondition, she adds, lay Jauss’ conclusions for the preference for the exemplary among medieval authors. “The exemplary narrative, founded in ‘truth’, is didactically superior even to doctrine” (Jauss cited in Hahn 2001:32). The saint — hero and protagonist of the narrative — serves as an authoritative example for imitation. Conscious of their tasks the hagiographers borrowed only basic historical facts from the saint’s life and employed elements from the almost formulaic hagiographic tradition to construct their narratives.

*Zorba the Greek* appears to consist of a similar mix of historical and fictive elements. As many critics have noticed, almost all primary characters of the novel were persons who existed in real life. Further on a number of the key elements of the plot are based on actual facts. Certainly, all these elements are integrated in the construction of a totally imaginary narration, and separating fact from fiction is an impossible and meaningless task. What should be noted here is that this representational blend is not a unique feature of hagiography since most biographies are also based

on such a convention.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, what inextricably links Kazantzakis' novel with the hagiographical tradition are its programmatic edification strategies. *Zorba the Greek*, apart from an intriguing storytelling, is chiefly the exposition and praise of a whole philosophy personified in the literary character of Zorba. As Alexis Ziras notes: "Kazantzakis' narrative compositions descend from his theoretical conceptions on life, which were formed during his apprenticeships under different philosophical and religious models and which were transformed into novels". The protagonists of his novels, either saints or heroes, "have one obvious didactic goal; mainly, to communicate and teach his theoretical beliefs on life and the meaning of the world" (Ziras, 1992:135, 140).<sup>3</sup>

A compelling similarity with hagiography, which plays a major role in the fulfillment of this edification project, is the establishment and the form of the relationship between the saint and his hagiographer. The first-person intratextual narrator in a *synaxari* usually presents himself in a prologue, as a monk or a student of a recently deceased holy man. He sets as a goal of the narrative to preserve and spread through the text the teaching of his spiritual father. In the life of St. Onufrius, for instance, Paphnutius, the hermit who had met the saint during the last days of his life, buries his body under angelic orders and sets forth to Egypt to preach about the saint and compose his biography (Paphnutius, 1986:19). Paphnutius seems to be undoubtedly the intratextual narrator of the story who is identified both with the character called Paphnutius and the actual writer of the *synaxari*. That identification is supported by the preface written by the editor who confirms the identity of the "holy" author.

In *Zorba the Greek* the above features are used retrospectively. The narrator is also a primary character of the narrative; sometimes he may even be considered the protagonist. Most of the time he seems to be transcribing in a second-degree narrative the life and times of Zorba, as Zorba himself narrated it, and he undertakes the task of performing a symbolic post-mortem ceremony by composing this *synaxari*. The confusion though between writer and narrator, fact and fiction, is underlined and exploited by the inconsistencies between the programmatic preface and the actual closing of the book. These inconsistencies concern chiefly the self-referential ironic distance drawn between the persona of the author and the intratextual narrator of the text, a manipulation which exposes and destabilises the convention of the historicity of the writer-hagiographer.

We now turn to the most important narrative strategy, which dominates the structure of the hagiographic text and is essential for the fulfilment of its goals: repetition. According to Hahn, "repetition is a source of narrative power, for it lends authority and builds a sense of certainty, connectedness to the life of Christ and Church" (Hahn, 2001:40). Repetition can be detected in various forms within the narrative. Hahn's definition of *topoi* "as a non original narrative unit, ranging from an adjectival

<sup>2</sup> For a reading of *Zorba* as biography, see Farinou, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Translations of Greek quotations (except those from *Zorba the Greek*) are my own.

phrase to a story sequence” can be very useful in the reading of this kind of repetition in *Zorba the Greek*. Although narrative “continuity” or “logic” may weaken with the use of these units, the hagiographer manages to build on them block by block the holiness of the saint (Hahn, 2001:41–42).

*Zorba the Greek* is full of such hagiographical *topoi*. The context though, in which they appear, results in a subversion of their moral function, because the convention of the repetition of a narrative unit closely connected to the purposes of edification is parodied when used for the support of a radically different edification.

A constant and fundamental *topos* for instance in Saints’ Lives is the struggle against the devil in various episodes. One of the first forms of temptation that a saint usually confronts is the temptation of women. The demon of fornication strikes the saint constantly and relentlessly in various forms, but the saint’s faith always prevails through prayer and inner struggle. The rejection of any kind of sexual activity and marriage is essential in any saint’s life but is exemplified in the *Life of Saint Alexis*, the prototype of the virgin saint, who is forced to get married but symbolically denies worldly pleasures on his wedding night. Farinou-Malamatari suggests that the choice of Zorba’s fictional first name (the name of the actual person was Giorgos) might be read as an ironic reference to the life of virginity of Saint Alexis (Farinou, 1998:170).

On the other hand Zorba’s addiction to love and women needs no comments. What is extremely interesting however is that Zorba’s adulterous life achievements are represented and constructed by the very same narrative devices and conventions that constitute the narration of the life of a virgin saint. His amorous encounters with various women and especially his multiple marriages fall under a certain repetitive pattern and function as hagiographical *topoi* that reinforce the exemplary character of Zorba. His proverbs about the position of women in the cosmic order are nearly formulaic. Making love to women is paradise on earth. Apart from parodying that generic feature of hagiography, this unconventional secular saint confronts the views on women that the lives of saints teach through direct references to hagiographical texts. In the second chapter of the book when the Boss notices that Zorba had one of his fingers cut off, he confesses that he did it because it got in the way when he was making pottery. The narrator links Zorba’s complete devotion to his passion with a case in *synaxari* where an ascetic castrated himself to avoid the temptation of a woman:

“Όμοια κι ένας ασκητής μια φορά, λέν τα συναζάρια είδε μια γυναίκα, σκανταλίστηκε, πήρε ένα μπαλτά...

—Τον κακό του τον καιρό! ... Αυτό να κόψει! να χαθεί ο κουτεντές! Μ’ αυτό το βλογημένο ποτέ δεν εμποδίζει...

—Πώς! επέμεινα εμποδίζει και πολύ μάλιστα.

...Να μπεις στην βασιλεία των ουρανών

... —Μα αυτό, είπε, κουτέ, είναι το κλειδί της Παράδεισος!” (Kazantzakis, 1973:33).

“It reminds me of the ascetic who, according to the Golden Legend, once saw a woman who disturbed him physically, so he took an axe...” [...] “Cut that off! To hell with the fool! The poor benighted innocent, that’s never an obstacle!” “But,” I insisted, “it can be a very great obstacle [...] to your entry into the kingdom of heaven.” [...] “But, you fool, that is the key to paradise!” (Kazantzakis 1961:20).

The juxtaposition with the world of hagiography and the subversion of its conventions is accomplished through the dialogue of texts and voices.

Apart from fornication, a number of other demon-related *topoi* appear in *Zorba the Greek*. The saints have the ability to locate the presence of demons within themselves and in other people, to talk with them and certainly to exorcise them. The *topos* of demonic possession appears several times in the novel. Zorba, as a true saint, is sometimes possessed by demons. One of them drives him to dance when his feelings overflow and the second one, also called Zorba, prevents him from accepting ageing and the subsequent decrease of his sexual activities (Kazantzakis, 1973:96, 180). An embedded story from a *synaxari*, which is ironically narrated by Zorba himself, is used to expose the conventionality of the *topos* since Zorba indirectly admits that the demon serves simply as the projection of his own desires.

The absolute parody of the demonological teaching of hagiography, however, is the sequence of episodes with Zorba and the demon-possessed monk, Zacharias. For instance, when Zorba meets the possessed monk for the first time, he acts as an original saint, who instantly recognises the possession-situation. Initially, as any exorcist, he asks the demon to present himself. Instead of the typical saintly reaction, fasting and praying, his therapeutic methods include the provision of the demon with cod, brandy, and wine. After Zorba poses a series of questions the monk’s play-acting is revealed (Kazantzakis, 1973:229–230). The narration of this encounter has a distinctively comic tone, deeply ironic towards the hagiographical intertext.

Other *topoi* of the *synaxari* that are exposed and subverted repeatedly in *Zorba* include for example the ability of the saint to perform miracles. The process of constructing a miracle is explicitly uncovered in the case of the “miracle” that Zorba performs in the monastery (Kazantzakis, 1973:331–332). The rejection of food or at least cooked food by saints is replaced by Zorba’s religious respect for eating and his competent cooking skills. The constant travelling of the saints can be read in Zorba’s innumerable wanderings. The *topos* of the foundation of monasteries by the saint, recurrent in hagiography, appears several times in *Zorba*, mostly though as a vision of the Boss who casts Zorba in the role of the porter — St. Peter.

A last noteworthy saintly habit of Zorba is fundamentally intertextual. Like every genuine saint, Zorba although uneducated often quotes from the scriptures, interprets God’s Word for his student — the Boss — and preaches on various theological matters. One of St. Antony’s favourite quotations, in the famous early Life composed by Athanasius, is the “word of the Apostle, ‘I die daily’”. “For we too live as though dying daily we shall not sin” (Athanasius, 1948:201). Likewise Zorba seems to understand that his earthly wisdom equals the wise Solomon. When confronting an old

man who claimed that he acted as if he should never die, he replied: “Εγώ ενεργώ σα να ’ταν να πεθάνω την πάσα στιγμή” (Kazantzakis, 1973:53) (“I carry on as if I was going to die any minute” [Kazantzakis 1961:37]). Among other biblical themes he discusses, he retells hilariously the creation of man by God (189). He restores the value of Satan’s inventions, “beautiful women, spring and wine” (217) and he even has views on paganism, “Zeus that great martyr” (222). He parodies the saints’ advice on how to follow the path of God in the most blasphemous way: “Αν με ρωτήσεις ποιος είναι ο δρόμος του Θεού, θα σου ’λεγα ο δρόμος που πάει στη Μαρία. Μαρία είναι η χήρα” (145) (“If you asked me what path God follows, I’d say: the one leading to Mary’s. Mary is the widow!” [119]).

In order to make the desired impression on its audience hagiographical narrative seeks to remain in every case “simple”. A simplicity nevertheless that is manipulated by rhetoric artifice so that “the simulacrum of reality can be created and the act of persuasion can succeed” (Hahn, 2001:31). *Zorba the Greek*, albeit a novel full of troublesome philosophical debates, succeeds most of the time in producing as well the effect of the simple narrative of folk tradition. Ziras suggests that “this is performed with the popularised projection of the paradigmatic structures of the text by means such as parabolic narratives and symbolic acts” (Ziras, 1998:210–211), devices also systematically used by hagiography.

As all the above examples point out, the generic features of the *synaxari* are incorporated in innovative ways in Kazantzakis’ novel. A number of different narrative conventions are adopted and in most cases parodied. The communicative purposes of the *synaxari* that *Zorba* seems to perform, partly by using the intertext in this specific way, are the edification and entertainment of the reading audience.

There are however more functions that can be read in this integration of another genre into the novel. These can lead to a wider comprehension of the perpetually discursing forces that comprise the novel’s signifying capacity and perhaps contribute partly to its popularity among readers.

Bakhtin’s theories on speech genres and the novel provide the essential theoretical ground for this proposal.<sup>4</sup> According to his view, parody in novels is an indication of a truly historical struggle of the genres. The novel due to its special constantly renewed and open status as a genre can re-accentuate the genres it incorporates and parody them by freeing them from their conventionality and their close attachment to the past (Bakhtin, 1998a:70–73).

Indeed the tradition of the *synaxari*, which has been stylised and stopped evolving long ago, is reactivated in *Zorba*. Exactly as Bakhtin puts it “it becomes more dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally and most importantly the novel inserts into it a certain semantic open-

<sup>4</sup> For Bakhtin’s theories, I have used his essays “Epic and novel” and “The problem of speech genres” (Bakhtin, 1998a; Bakhtin, 1998b) and Angelatos’ complete account of Bakhtin’s views on the dialogue of the genres “Η διαλογική προοπτική” (Angelatos, 1997:157–192).

endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality” (Bakhtin, 1998a:72).

Hagiography is not the only “old” genre that *Zorba* as a modern novel incorporates. The Platonic dialogues, the epic, the folk tales, the ancient Greek novel, biography and religious poetry are a few of the literary genres that critics have pointed out in the novel’s intertext. With these coexist a powerful polyglossia, a number of other speech genres, derivatives of controversial linguistic, religious and philosophical traditions. Each of these genres, as Dimitris Angelatos observes, “Carries its own ‘chronotope of wisdom’ and when these chronotopes are interrelated dialectically under the dominant genre of the novel, the voice of the creative memory of the genres is freed. A latent signifying stock is created that waits to be activated by the reader” (Angelatos, 1997:163–168).

Seen from that perspective *Zorba the Greek* preserves much more than the spiritual anxieties of its creator; it is a living testimony of the dialogue of ideas, voices and forms in Modern Greek literary history. It is a novel grounded on a specifically distinctive polyphonic cultural discourse narrated as simply as clearly and as pleasurably as a saint’s life.

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