

ANDREAS K. POULAKIDAS

## *Kazantzakis' Serpent and Lily and Symbolism: Text and Texture*

IT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED THAT TWENTY-THREE YEAR OLD KAZANTZAKIS in writing *Serpent and Lily*, his first important work by which he entered in 1906 the Greek world of letters, had been prepared for this undertaking by his secondary education at Naxos, through his relationship with Galateia Alexiou, and above all, through his exposure to the artistic magazines and literary periodicals in circulation at the turn of the twentieth century in Athens.<sup>1</sup> What has not been clearly established is how the Symbolist Movement in paintings and *art nouveau*, those that can be usually identified as decadent tendencies *de fin de siècle*, are consciously or unconsciously incorporated into this novella. It is, after all, a sickly, demented artist painter that is speaking to his reticent beloved throughout this narrative story recorded in diary form. The first entry is on May 2nd when this relationship begins and the last entry is on March 25th of the following year when this story ends, at which time the speaker forcefully compels his beloved to terminate her life as he does his own.

In this diary that lasts less than a year the narrative is structured into four parts, into the four seasons of the year, as each season captures the fluctuating mood of the speaker toward his beloved. This organization of the novella brings to mind the works of Alphonso Mucha, *The Seasons* (1896), that depict in a screen or panel four young maidens, each representing one of the seasons in its respective floral surroundings.<sup>2</sup> Through his beloved the speaker participates in each seasonal aspect of nature as he writes on May 5th: «Very slowly You go forth inside my soul with the pride of roses and the enormous yearning of ivy and the silent call of bashful violets.... I feel it — You are the Spring, oh, Chosen and oh, Bles-

sed....» (pp. 7-8)<sup>3</sup> [Mucha's *Ete*]. A month later, on June 4th as summer-time seems to capture the spirit of his beloved, he writes: «Some mystical flowering of roses and violets is performed within me and I hear the buds bursting and the eyes of branches opening and the birds singing, singing...» (p. 15) [Mucha's *Printemps*]. It is hard to believe that Mucha's *Lys* (1897) did not enter into Kazantzakis' consciousness when on July 27th this enamoured artist described his innocent, submissive beloved «like a flower of an enormous lily her body bent white, virginal, and innocent» (p. 24). Also the October 11th entry corresponds well with Mucha's *Automne*: «the crops, all-golden, become calm and lean heavily their heads, as if they are thinking, as if they are forecasting the sickles» (p. 53). Reminiscent again of Mucha's *The Seasons*, the October 12th entry refers to three of the four seasons as they can be personified in the shifting figures of the speaker's beloved:

Spring has budded and the summer of our love has burnt out and the weeping willows down by the river bend and lamentations are heard in the forests. Some premonition burdens the trees. A fall burdens my heart (p. 55).

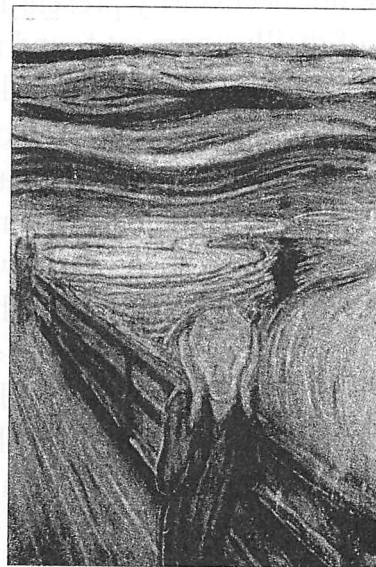
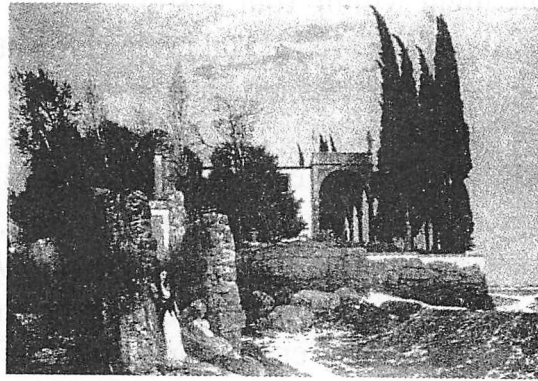
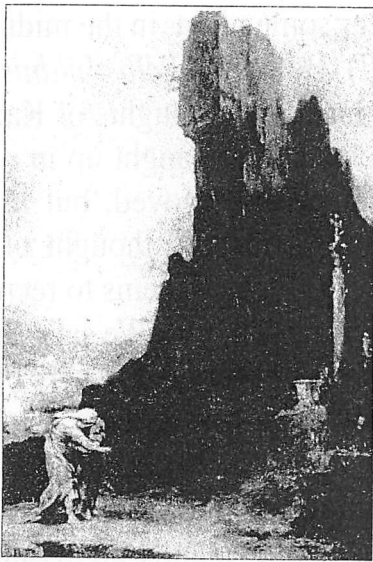
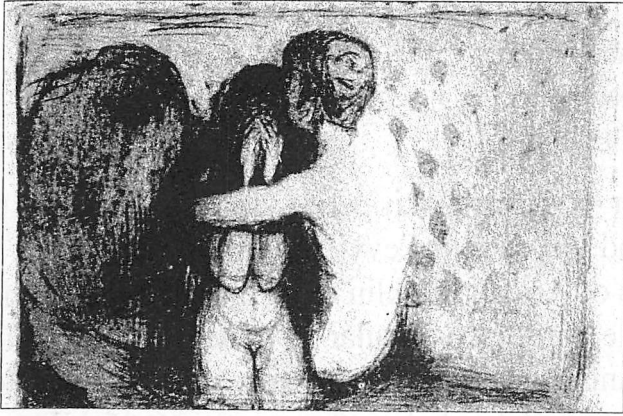
His beloved acquires each season a new spiritual, etherealized dimension according to the moods and feelings of her articulate lover.

Yet the tone, the mood, the generally pervasive atmosphere of this entire work, its very unifying, permeating essence, that recorded during the very last days of this diary, is echoed in the word, silence: On March 2nd, the speaker wearily states:

I am silent.

I am silent for I do not hope (p. 90).

And on that same day when this story tragically ends, the despairing artist writes: «I am silent, silent — a shroud spreads above my soul, an unseen hand pushes me and a heavy voice of someone else speaks to me and commands me» (p. 91). Vividly the very alluring painting of Lucien Levy-Dhurmer, *Silence* (1895), illustrates the sense of nothingness and despair that Kazantzakis could have grasped in seeing this painting: the vastness of the star-lit night and the distant ocean in the background enhance the terrifying realization that Matthew Arnold, the English Victorian poet, critic, and educator grasped in his poem, «To Marguerite — Continued»: «we mortal millions live alone.» The cause of this loneliness

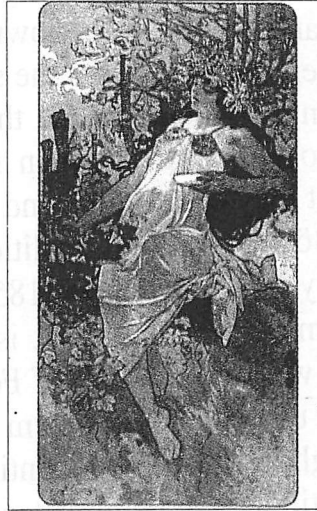


and isolation is «an unseen hand» or as Arnold would fatalistically conclude:

A God, a God their severance ruled!  
And bade betwixt their shore to be  
the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

The anonymous speaker of Kazantzakis' early novella shares in the gloom of this wandering and lost soul of Levy-Dhurmer's *Silence*.

The Symbolist paintings of Arnold Böcklin seem to find expression in the monologue. For example, three in particular fit in well with the articulations of Kazantzakis' unnamed persona. On July 15th the speaker records in his diary: «I sit in my atelier before the paintings which I started and cannot complete — I sit and ponder. I am awake and I dream. Oh, my chosen! If I die, I shall die of love and fear some night, in the midnight of the night within Your bosom» (pp. 21-22). Böcklin's *Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod* (1872) can be seen to enter into these thoughts of Kazantzakis' speaker. It is a painter apparently in his atelier caught up in some contented but dreaded thought, perhaps that of his beloved, but in the background looms ever intensely the vibrating, frenzied thought of the everpresence of Death. Additionally, the July 20th entry seems to recreate Böcklin's *Liebespaar auf einem Felsblock sitzend* (1876): «We sat outside on a rock by the sea. Something heavy crushed our breasts. Entirely black the clouds stood over us. Sorrowful as if they were full of tears. Both of us were very uneasy. Perhaps some premonition» (p. 23). Though black clouds are not necessarily present in this painting, it does sternly portray the sense of disillusionment found in this passage, evidently an invitation on the part of the lover to his beloved to make the great leap into the abyss, into nothingness. This premonition is actualized by the murder/suicide of this couple in the novella that takes place on March 25th, ironically on the day of the Annunciation, on the day Greek Independence Day is celebrated. Perhaps the best known of Böcklin's paintings, *Toteninsel* (1880) finds direct expression in this novella when on January 23rd the artist-painter describes this scene: «..a boat with a strange form —like a coffin— proceeds on the water without sails, without oars, and without a rudder, proceeds very quietly on the waters, and the waters around the bow are barely discerned breaking without a sound» (p. 86). Lastly, Böcklin's *Villa am Meer* makes the setting of this novella quite real where one can visualize the aristocratic artist's villa near the sea where he and



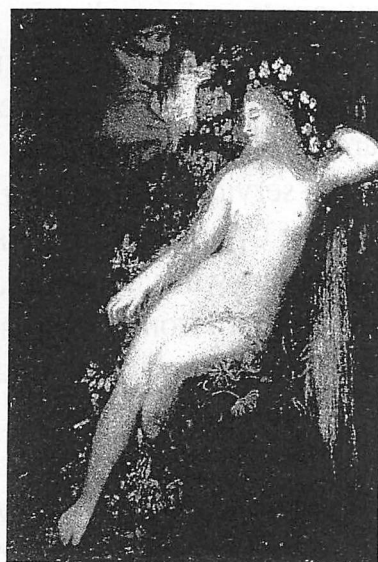
his beloved share the same anguished thoughts on February 20th: «I know of an island which arises down there, You don't see it, I see it — down there where the sky kisses the sea. From there, quiet and endless notes of erotic songs, which traverse the waters and come to find me, leave and walk across the waves when midnight strikes and reaches my heart. I sense that they enter in me and plead» (p. 89).

The Böcklin textural qualities of this literary text were spontaneously noticed by Kostis Palamas (1859-1943), Greece's greatest literary figure at the turn of the century. It is worth focusing on the review made by Palamas, who, on the 15th of February, 1906, in the periodical *Panathenaea*, and using the pseudonym Diagoras, commented on this work, ignorant though he was of the identity of its author. For him *Serpent and Lily* was an antinomy, or better yet, an extended, elaborate oxymoron. Palamas was shrewd enough and learned to recognize the artistic background of this work. After pointing out that the painting of the artist-lover has nothing in common with Pausias in Goethe's work, «Der neue Pausias» (1797) and that the artist in *Serpent and Lily* is only a degenerate student of a Böcklin (1827-1901) or a Max Klinger (1857-1920), Palamas wrote:

It is both a history and a poem.... A poem intertwining together thoughtlessly and thoughtfully the ecstasies of mysticism with the rage of priapism as if a bouquet of roses and Spanish flies were offered to you, an image of a Satyr and of a soul in an unbreakable cluster, a nightmare and a delirium, pathos and lyricism: an immoral work that mothers in all haste and with indignation would conceal from view of their children and also a work reminding one of the ethical antinomy of miserable man, a prison in which Body and Spirit endlessly are mutually tearing each other apart.

How true and accurate the critical assessment of Palamas was. This inner friction, a romantic carry-over, but one studied more «scientifically» by the Symbolists, will abide with Kazantzakis for a lifetime.

Edward Munch's art also finds expression in this story. As the relationship between lover and beloved becomes more desperate and nihilistic, Munch's *Death and the Maiden* (1894) can be seen in the words of the artist-lover, absorbed in thoughts of death recorded September 2nd: «Something is crying in our kisses and some sort of crackling of the bones of the dead is heard in our embraces and a lamentation accompanies the heartaches of our love» (p. 40). When one brings together Munch's widely-known painting, *The Scream* (1895), with the entry of November 15th



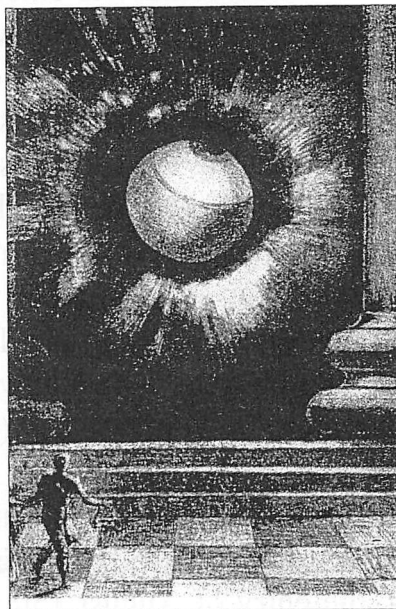
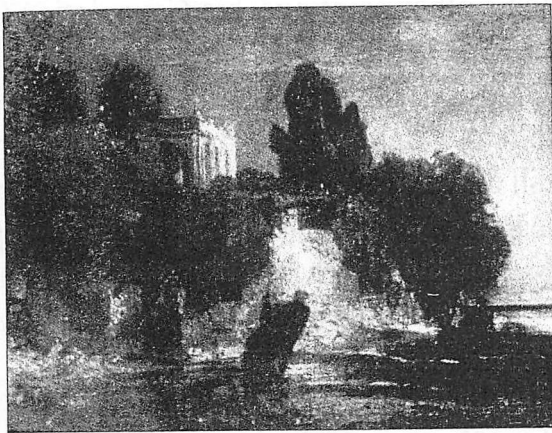
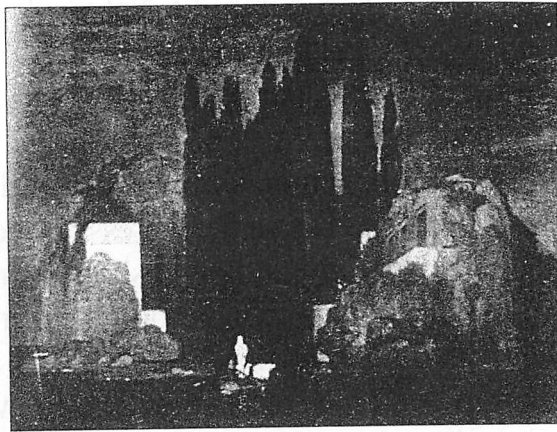
of the disturbed painter: «And I fear... I begin to sense.... And mutely do I sit —Adam, an exiled king; and I remember some other country and I cry— I cry the desperate and very bitter cry of orphans and outcasts» (p. 63), it is obvious that Kazantzakis was aware of Munch's disturbing consciousness, one that is shared by Kazantzakis' protagonist who experiences the anguish of the character on the bridge, a stranger in exile very likely in a foreign land, alone, forlorn, ignored by the couple that passes him by and far from those ships that could possibly bring him back home, a home that cannot be found even in that church in the distance that blends in with this meaningless landscape.

Digressing for a moment away from Munch's art, one can find in *Serpent and Lily* other echoes and sources that convey equally well the Symbolist quality of this work. In very liturgical language the speaker bemoans his great desire: «a longing for a great Liturgy cries inconsolably within me.» A great symphony, a great opera, a great litany, a great orchestration is conducted in his blood. And this great liturgy or function that cries seems to ask of the artist-conductor for a change of heart, for repentance, for rebirth that have been heard before in the *Triodion*, a hymnal of the Orthodox Church, especially in the services of the Great Canon of Contrition of Saint Andreas, Archbishop of Crete, and in the *troparia* of Cheesefare Sunday, the Sunday before Lent when remembrance is made on that day «of the exile of first-formed Adam from the pleasures of Paradise.» Kazantzakis seems to recall well the first of the «Ainous» of this holiday:

«Οἴμοι! ὁ Ἀδάμ, ἐν θρήνῳ κέκραγεν, ὅτι ὄφεις καὶ γυνή, θεϊκῆς παρῆρησίας μὲ ἔξωσαν, καὶ Παραδείσου τῆς τρυφῆς ξύλου βρώσις ἠλλοτριώσεν. Οἴμοι! οὐ φέρω λοιπὸν τὸ ὄνειδος· ὁ ποτὲ βασιλεὺς τῶν ἐπιγείων πάντων κτισμάτων θεοῦ, νῦν αἰχμάλωτος ὤφθην, ὑπὸ μιᾶς ἀθέσμου συμβουλῆς· καὶ ὁ ποτὲ δόξαν ἀθανασίας ἠμφιεσμένος, τῆς νεκρώσεως τὴν δορὰν, ὡς θνητὸς ἐλεεινῶς περιφέρω. Οἴμοι! τίνα τῶν θρήνων συνεργάτην ποιήσομαι; Ἀλλὰ σὺ Φιλάνθρωπε, ὁ ἐκ γῆς δημιουργήσας με, εὐσπλαγχίαν φορέσας, τῆς δουλείας τοῦ ἐχθροῦ, ἀνακάλεσαι καὶ σῶσόν με.<sup>4</sup>

This longing for a journey soon enough reminds the dejected and sinful artist of the Eden that Adam lost and of his real estate. As we can see it is not necessarily a particularized voice that is at this time crying out, but a universalized voice, the Cry as Bergson came to know it and the shriek that Edward Munch in vibrating colors expressed: «Ich fühlte das





grosse Geschrei durch die Natur.» It is the sighs of the Outsider, of the archetype of the first and foremost alien of the Western world, Adam, who knows that the door of paradise, as Saint Andreas of Crete penitentially sobs, has been forever closed.

Man's alienation is irrevocable and no amount of tears can rectify this estrangement. The same depressing feeling, the same psychological state, the same anxiety and anguish are versified by Baudelaire in his poem, «The Irreparable», which follows after the high flying optimism found in «The Invitation to the Voyage.» It is a dismal recollection of «the poor man in the throes of death whom the wolf has already scented» (p. 114). There is no hope for «the devil has snuffed the light at the windows of the Inn» (p. 114). The language of the novelist, the poet, and the painter is very ecclesiastical, very homiletic at this point.

Lastly now, amongst Munch's other paintings, his *Consolation* (1894), is well interpreted by the words of the artist-protagonist in *Serpent and Lily*, recorded in his diary on January 2nd when, holding her closely as he probably does, he tells her: «No, my Beloved, do not cry. Your tears drop on me and burn my entire flesh and all my soul. Do not cry, my Beloved. It is not Your fault if Your heart does not console my forehead» (p. 73). Munch must have supplied Kazantzakis with sufficient visual images to make the text's texture more woven into the artistic realities *de fin de siècle*.

One of the most prominent Symbolist painters of the latter part of the Nineteenth Century to enter into Kazantzakis' youthful consciousness as he was writing this novella was Odilon Redon. His circular images of eyes and heads floating in space qualify significantly the psychological texture of Kazantzakis' serpentine speaker. Many of Redon's works enter into this novella during the various seasons of this abnormal relationship.

On June 21st when the lovers are attracted to each other, the speaker tells his beloved: «When You open Your great Eyes and look at me, a magnet draws me to them, a mystic magnet, and some pan-harmonious voice sweetly sings to me. I am ready to drag myself to Your bosom, oh, Lorelei of souls — a shipwrecked sailor of love — to drown in the wet curvature of Your waves» (p. 19). Redon's *The Gnome* (c 1875) is also closely related to the above: a big-eyed head of man is drifting towards the sea in the direction of a sail boat where the Lorelei of his soul can be found. Redon's *On the horizon the angel of certitude* (1882) can be seen in the entry of August 15th: «someone approached during the night and

has the merciless passion of triumph in his eyes.... Oh, how I was pinned by the Angel who did not have compassion or mercy and in his eyes shine the wild flashes of victories» (p. 32). This artist is projected in Redon's *Gnome* (1879), who apparently tells his beloved on an autumn day, on October 2nd: «My eyes magnetize You and command You... and I have dominated You entirely, I have possessed all of your cells and all the hidden aspects of Your nudities» (p. 50). It is hard not to believe that Redon's *The Shulamite* (1897) had not been seen by Kazantzakis who has his artist-lover on January 2nd proclaim: «Oh, the eternal brutalization and desecration of love! We have desecrated our thoughts, oh Shulamite of my soul, in the secret temples on the shores of Phoenicia and in the apocryphal groves where the instincts revel...» (p. 74). On January 16th Redon's *Blossoming* (1879) can be seen in the words of the speaker: «It seems to me that there is someone in the air that observes me. A large eye that does not know sleep, that knows not tears. It looks me penetratingly within the soul» (p. 83). And the speaker goes on further to describe this floating «eye» with a human face within it by saying: «The Eye was motionless and was looking at me. And I now detected a certain joy in its depths; I was playing, oh, horror, quite well my part» (p. 84). Most illustrative of the fear and terror of this paranoid, fatalistic speaker is Redon's painting, *Vision* (1879) where a couple, a man leading a woman, is trying apparently to escape in an immense temple the everpresence, the omniscient presence of an huge eyeball that seems to be blocking their escape as their world strangely may be falling apart: «Some marble pillars are only standing. And each day a knock and an echo is heard in my heart and I, motionless and quiet and despairing, say, "Some marble pillar is falling"» (p. 87). From these works of Redon, one can ascertain the closeness between the written text and the visual texture of the artistic works.

In closing, references will be made to three other works of Symbolist painters that enrich the texture of this text. Gustave Moreau's painting *Galateia* (1880-1881) can be alluded to this text since Kazantzakis' mistress and later his wife bore the same name, *Galateia* to whom he dedicates («*Stin Toto mou*») this novella. It may be more coincidental than textual but in the early days of this love affair, the speaker states on May 11th: «Oh, Your motionless body sprawled out on the white sheets, and Your spreading hair on top of the pillow and Your pale lips that tried to say something but could not» (p. 12-13). As winter approaches on November 10th, this couple in the novella, closely bonded as they may be,

recognizes through the cynical, fatalistic, and nihilistic views of the speaker an old story that has been alluded to by the ancient world, the story of Oedipus and his daughter Antigone:

And my soul saw much and became blind. Blind, without a rod, bending from the weight of grief of all my generations, exiled from my Country, a criminal before I was born — I have dragged myself to Your very knees.

Oh, Antigone of my soul — Your light hair spreads around my feet and dries the blood from them.

Give me Your hand, oh, Daughter of my pain and lead me, the blind (pp. 59-60).

What better Symbolist painting bringing the visual essence of this written text to mind can one solicit than Henri-Leopold Levy's *Oedipus Going into Exile* (1892). Regardless whether Kazantzakis had seen this painting —and it is hard to believe that he had not seen it prior to writing this novella— it stands to reason that Symbolist texts and Symbolist paintings express the same texture of art that makes them so inseparable.

One last painting and one last literary citation can be brought together. Georges Clairin's *The Gondola* (c. 1897) has a way of illustrating the suicidal thoughts of the sick, decadent artist of this novella: «Come, my Beloved, we will stretch ourselves out on the boat... a great Tranquility will spread out on the waves. I will weave my hand around Your neck. I will seek Your lips and we will fall asleep. The tumult of life down there by the shore will no longer interrupt our embracing» (p. 90). On February 20th such were the words of this sick lover to his sweetheart, and Clairin's painting does show us such a couple drifting in a coffin-shaped gondola in perfect serenity towards «the great Tranquility» as one's beloved pale and very dead, as most Symbolist poets painted their sweethearts, drifted into the great abyss that Symbolist painters verbalized so similarly.

This work with its Byzantine lettering echoes other sources and psychological depths. The spirit of Kazantzakis' immediate cultural background, the poetic background of his early youth, can best be seen in the otherworldly chants and hymns of the Greek Orthodox Church that in their repetitive, exotic, enticing tones and lays tore man away from the «worldly and rational ordering of society» — «πᾶσαν τὴν βιωτικὴν ἀποδώμεθα μέρμηναν»— and surreptitiously and decadently led him away, as was the case for the artist-eroticist, to a monastic, ascetic existence, to

an intense cross-examination, away from worldly trivialities to a relentless pursuit of the Absolutes, to a microcosmic life. It was Byzantine Orthodoxy rather than Oriental culture, one is inclined to believe, that germinated, especially in Kazantzakis, decadence, a mystical and theological drift towards death, the former Platonic, the latter Christian, and in both cases otherworldly, and thus decadent: the former having brought about the decline and fall of Hellenism, the latter the fall of Byzantium itself. Since this life is seen as corruption and imperfection, those religiously-inclined Byzantinists who sensed the death of God and of institutionalized religion, sought refuge in art which is a form of death and otherworldliness. It was divine Eros, «θεῖος ἔρως ἀντιταπτόμενος», not carnal love that «tore-mented» the nameless artist, a saint of sorts for all his martyrdom; and he did suffer as his hagiographic diary informs us. His only asceticism lay in his erotic affairs which became for him tedious efforts and strenuous exercises to overcome ennui, the crass materialism of the age, the insensibility of man, the meaningless enslavement to the senses and to bring, even by force if necessary, another soul, that of the beloved, into the realm of the Ineffable, the Inexplicable, the Invincible. Devoid of social activism but alive in his silent Byzantine chimera, this artist, however, could not find meaning even in his «monuments of unaging intellect» and in «the artifice of eternity» (W. B. Yeats' «Sailing to Byzantium»), for life, dull and monotonous, was confined to nature, to a natural process, and could never extend itself beyond and outside this process.

Art coupled with a mystical, religious fervor can be dangerous. An Orthodoxy for the sincere pious believer can also be dangerous. It can lead man, as it apparently did Kazantzakis, to those ineffable truths and intangible beauties beyond life, above reason, and within the realm of the irrational, beyond any biological communion and close encounter, to a greater and ultimate end: Beauty, the end of all fastidious, fanatic, and frenzied souls, to an unknown and indefinable process called *metousiosis*.

Also, for Kazantzakis this work served a purpose. He was to graduate at the University of Athens in the School of Law. Nevertheless, the real studies that he had undertaken had a personal, humanistic bearing and were not those related necessarily to his arduous academic course of study, to his professional degree. He was very much like his artist, a man beyond reason and practicality. By writing not only a creative work, but also making a survey of art and literature, of aesthetics and philosophy of the nineteenth century, above all of the last decades of that century, he

related to others what he knew best and what he considered most important. If he were to make the grade, he had to pass this test. He had to prove to others, but especially to himself, that he knew his subject matter as well as he understood life; and with this knowledge he acquired power and confidence. And one cannot doubt but that he did give a noble, rich, and full report to Greco, to another artist, at the end of his life.

Thanks to the great perceptive works of Philippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (1969) and *The Symbolists* (1973), one can easily attempt this relationship between art and literature, between Kazantzakis' novella, *Serpent and Lily* and those Symbolist painters of the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was a time when the arts did communicate amongst the artists themselves.

## Notes

1. Andreas K. POULAKIDAS, «Kazantzakis' *Serpent and Lily*: An Exhibition in Symbolism and Art Nouveau» in the *Proceedings of the XIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association: Acculturation*, volume 9 (Paris, France: 20-24 August, 1985), edited by Milan V. Dimic and Eva Kushner, Peter Lang, Inc., European Academic Publishers (Bern, 1994), pp. 183-189.

2. Certain parts of this study were presented at the XIVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association that was held at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, August 15-20, 1994 during the August 18th Thursday morning session. Present at this session was Professor Malgorzata Czermińska of the Institute of Polish Philology at Gdansk University who requested a copy of my paper. On October 17, 1994 she wrote the following to me: «Your interpretation of the association between Kazantzakis' form of a one year diary and Mucha's set of paintings *The Seasons* seems to me very accurate. I agree with you that the symbolism of the four seasons (as an

element of symbolism of Nature) was very important for this period. One more example is the novel *Peasants* by the Polish writer W. S. Reymont. This novel was written between 1899 and 1908. It consists of four volumes: *Autumn Winter Summer and Spring* and presents rural life. Reymont received the Nobel Prize in 1924 for the *Peasants*. This novel has been translated into many languages.»

3. Karma Nirvami [Nikos Kazantzakis], *Ophis kai Krino* [*Serpent and Lily*]. Athens, 1906. The passages taken from this text were translated by the author of this study who has used a Copy of the first and original edition of *Serpent and Lily* found in the Psycharis Collection at Benaki Library: Library of Parliament of Greece, #15276. The metaphorical language of the inscription in this complimentary copy may be indicative of Kazantzakis' interest in becoming a member of the Masonic Lodge of Athens in which he was initiated in June, 1907, probably through the influence of the eminent linguist, Giannis Psycharis himself. It goes as follows: «To the

great architect, Mr. Psycharis. A small and humble pebble for a Great Edifice. Athens 2-3-906. Karma Nirvami.»

4. Τριώδιον Κατανυκτικὸν τῆς Ἁγίας καὶ Μεγάλης Τεσσαρακοστῆς (Ἀθήναι: Οἶκος Μιχ. Ι. Σαλιβέρου, Σταδίου 14), p. 67.

## Περίληψη

Andreas K. POULAKIDAS, Ν. Καζαντζάκη: *Ὄφεις καὶ Κρίνο: Κείμενο και Διακείμενο*

Στο πρωτόλειο ἔργο του *Ὄφεις καὶ Κρίνο* (1906) διαφαίνονται οι νέες διανοητικές και αισθητικές κατευθύνσεις του νεανικού Καζαντζάκη προς τον Συμβολισμό. Συγκεκριμένα η μελέτη αυτή ερευνά το ενδιαφέρον του για τους Συμβολιστές καλλιτέχνες κατά τα τέλη του 19ου αιώνα (Mucha, Lucien Levy-Dhurmer, Böcklin, Monch, και άλλους). Επί πλέον η παρακμάζουσα Βυζαντινή Ορθοδοξία αντηχεί παράλληλα και αντανακλά την πνευματική ανάπτυξη του Καζαντζάκη, συνταυτιζόμενη με το πνεύμα και την ροπή του Συμβολισμού. Ο πρωταγωνιστής του *Ὄφεις καὶ Κρίνο* καλλιεργεί τον θρησκευτικό μηδενισμό του Καζαντζάκη, ο οποίος εξαπλούται μεταγενέστερα στα υπόλοιπα ἔργα του ὅπως η αρρώστεια του αιώνας ἐφ' ὅσον ο ἄνθρωπος ὑπάρχει ἀνευ Θεοῦ και ἐλπίδος.

ΣΥΓΚΡΙΣΗ / COMPARAISON 8 (1997)

