Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian Themes in Kazantzakas' *Zorba the Greek*

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Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Zorba the Greek* is highly representative of Kazantzakis' own Nietzschean worldview. Heavy in themes of the Apollonian/Dionysian conflict Friedrich Nietzsche sees as innate in man, the narrator of the novel and Zorba (its namesake), both embrace and embody these mythic personae. While the narrator embodies Apollonian characteristics, Zorba embodies those Dionysian. The novel illustrates value and virtue in Apollonian and Dionysian juxtaposition, rather than in isolation, and serves as a testament to Kazantzakas' own Nietzschean beliefs on human purpose and the pursuit of art.

According to the Hadaegh and Shams, Nietzsche sees the “Apollonian tendency in art (as) correspond(ing) to the realm of dream, and the Dionysiac, to the realm of intoxication. Apollo is the god of measured restraint, illusion and the divine image of the principle of individuation. It expresses the deep and happy sense of the necessity of dream” (Journal of Language Teaching and Research 329). In direct contrast and often attemptedly subdued (mistakenly) is the Dionysian tendency. Nietzsche sees this tendency as one “forging the bond between man and man, and between man and nature. By the magic of the Dionysiac rite, the individual, expressing himself through song and dance, reconciles with his fellow and himself and becomes a member of a higher community. He becomes a work of art, manifesting the creative power of the universe” (330). To add to these descriptions, Nathan Devir states that “he (Nietzsche) does not treat Dionysus and Apollo as mere mythical creations; rather, he sees in them, respectively, the archetypal manifestations of the primordial will and rational measure” (PLL 74).

Nietzsche views the tragic art period of Greece as the highest period in humanity's history. This era of Greek art exhibited stories and dramas hinging upon the Apollonian/Dionysian conflict and heavily valued both sets of characteristics. “According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy was able to achieve what it did because of the opposition between two dialectical principles; the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The former is an orderly, defined essence that sees the self as a separate ego; and the latter is the chaotic dynamism that rejects the idea that the self can exist as anything but part of the whole. Thus, in Apollonian perspective, 'tragedy' is something that happens to the individual, whereas in the Dionysian perspective, tragedy is all part of the supra-personal loss of the sense of self. The combination of these two perspectives allows for Greek tragedy to attain its full fruition in Attic drama” (PLL 75-76). Nietzsche sees the decline in both Greek art and Greece itself as stemming from the movement toward Socratic thought (a basic tenet of which being man's most noble pursuit as knowledge). “With Socrates optimism begins, an optimism no longer artistic, with teleology and faith in the good god; faith in the enlightened good man. Dissolution of the instincts” (PLL 74). The Socratic pursuit of knowledge is seen by Nietzsche as one that denies the Dionysian half of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy. This Dionysian rejection implies what Devir calls a “static truth,” rather than a subjective purpose of life.

According to Morton Levitt, “if (Kazantzakas) were forced to designate 'those who had left their traces embedded most deeply in (his) soul”... he would name Nietzsche and Zorba, among a few others. Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek* pays homage to his friend and philosophical mentor Nietzsche, as well as to Nietzschean ideals. The work itself is an example of what Nietzsche views as “true art” in that it is formed in the image of classic, pre-Socratic Greek tragedies.

A primary Dionysian theme presented in Zorba is his dancing. When first confronted with Zorba's unique form of expression, the narrator, confused, asks “What came over you to make you dance like that?” To which Zorba replies “What could I do, boss? My joy was choking me. I had to find some outlet. And what sort of outlet? Words? Pf!” (Kazantzakis 71). This is the epitome of
what Nietzsche calls “the Dionysiac rite.” It is only through dance that Zorba can express himself, as he finds words far too limiting. Zorba immediately goes on to describe his reaction to his son’s death, years prior, also manifesting itself in dance. “But if at that moment I had not danced, I should really have gone mad—from grief” (72).

As the narrator assesses his own life, devoted to study (at the time, of Buddha, nonetheless) and filled with restraint (Apollonian), he is filled with regret. “My life is wasted, I thought. If only I could take a cloth and wipe out all I have learnt, all I have seen and heard, and go to Zorba's school and start the great, the real alphabet? ...I should fill my soul with flesh. I should fill my flesh with soul. In fact, I should reconcile at last within me the two eternal antagonists” (74). These “two eternal antagonists” the narrator sees are in direct accordance with those seen by Nietzsche. The mental world of restraint and the physical world of consumption, personified in Apollo and Dionysus, respectively. The narrator does not wish to abolish his own Apollonian tendencies, but rather find a balance with their counterparts.

The characters are further in line with those mythical personalities in whose juxtaposition the value and meaning of life lie (according to Kazantzakis and Nietzsche) in terms of their relationships with nature and men. While the narrator again personifies Apollo in his isolation, Zorba, in perfect Dionysian fashion, wishes to embrace all things animate and inanimate. “If only we knew, boss, what the stones and the rain and flowers say. Maybe they call-call us-and we don't hear them. When will people's ears open, boss? When shall we have our eyes open to see? When shall we open our arms to embrace everything-stones, rain, flowers, and men?” (94).

When speaking of the hatching butterfly, the narrator describes attempting to hurry its re-emergence from the cocoon and its inadvertent death. “That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm” (121). The “great law of nature” and “eternal rhythm” reference the natural ebb and flow of the drives by and power between Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human personality and actions. To deny this natural order is exemplified in this instance in the death of the butterfly.

The segment of Zorba the Greek discussing the monks is particularly enlightening when viewed in reference to the Nietzschean Apollonian/Dionysian conflict. The narrator previously studied and idolized the Buddha, living a life of repression and inaction, in search of mental nirvana. It is in the interactions with the monks that the narrator sees that denial of the flesh leads to disaster and misery.

On the way to the monastery, the narrator and Zorba meet Zaharia, a monk who warns the travelers to turn back. “Go back, I tell you. Money, pride, and young boys! That's their Holy Trinity!” (189).

Zaharia reveals his own desires for women, food, alcohol, etcetera, and has gone so far as to personify them in an alter-ego named “Joseph”.

Zorba recounts earlier in the novel a story of another monk he has met named Father Laurentio with an “inner devil” named “Hodja”. “Hodja wants to eat meat on Good Friday! ‘Hodja wants to sleep with a woman. Hodja wants to kill the Abbot. It's Hodja, Hodja, it isn't me!”

“I've a kind of devil inside me, too, boss, and I call him Zorba!” (145).

The images painted of the monks who suppress their physical desires are stained with misery and pain. Zorba, who claims is “inner devil” and does not see it as separate from himself, while not exempt from pain, is shown to be free. It could easily be argued that this attempt at separation from the Dionysian aspect of one’s self, to Kazantzakis (as well as Nietzsche), brings more pain to the human experience than Dionysian actions themselves could possibly result in and that this attempt at separation of Apollonian drives from those Dionysian is a primary cause of human suffering.

It is also worth noting that Kazantzakis actually met the person his character Zorba is based on in a Monastery. This adds an even further truth to the message of the undeniable duality faced by man, including monks, viewed by most as exhibiting utmost self-control.
Later in the novel, when the village is celebrating Easter, Zorba tries to convince the narrator to go into the town to celebrate as well. When he is unsuccessful, Zorba says “If I had two sons, one quiet, careful, moderate and pious, and the other rascally, greedy, lawless and a woman-chaser, my heart would go out to the second one. Perhaps because he'd be like me?” (235). This is a clear indicator of Zorba's preference for and embodiment of Dionysian expression. The paragraph continues “But who's to say I'm not more like God himself than old Pappa Staphanos, who spends his days and nights going down on his knees, and collecting money?” (235).

This is Kazantzakis asking the reader (quite openly) to question the common supposition that these desires and actions are beneath humanity, and even God himself. As the scene plays out, Zorba leaves the narrator for celebration in the town. Suddenly, the narrator is struck with the desire to act and inanimate objects begin to be personified. “The whole beach came alive” and “in the west the evening star began to dance merrily” (235), connections with Earth and the heavens highly symbolic of the Dionysian half of the mythic and Nietzschean duality. The narrator further says, “The earth smelled of camomile,” (235), a plant traditionally symbolic of action.”

My mind had made no decision, it was my body that had leaped up. My body alone was deciding and was not consulting me” (235). It is at this point in the novel that the narrator's inner Dionysus takes control of his internal power struggle and ultimately leads him to the widow's house.

Reflecting upon the previous night's actions, the narrator “seemed to hear (his) being bursting its shell and growing larger. That night, for the first time, (he) felt clearly that the soul is flesh as well, perhaps more volatile, more diaphanous, perhaps freer, but flesh all the same. And the flesh is soul, somewhat turgid perhaps, somewhat exhausted by its long journeys, and bowed under the burden it has inherited” (237-238). At this point in the novel, the narrator at last experiences the reconciliation of body and mind (or of Apollo and Dionysus) his time and experiences with Zorba show him he is lacking. However, in accordance with Nietzsche's beliefs on tis personal struggle, this balance is fleeting.

When the townspeople attack the widow (the very next day), the narrator reverts back to his Apollonian tradition of inaction. It is Zorba who acts to protect her and Zorba who is grieved most when she is ultimately killed.

This event marks a severance of the narrator's Apollonian/Dionysian sides. Other embodiments of Dionysian characteristics are also withdrawn from the novel at this point. The widow Bouboulina, an exaggerated Dionysian character, dies. Stavridakis, a personification of the blending of Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies, also dies. This rapid withdrawal of characters, symbolic of flesh and connectivity, culminates in the decision of the narrator to part from Zorba.

Though the narrator internally reciprocates Zorba's feelings in sadness over the impending separation, in response to Zorba's open display of emotion, he is “appalled by (Zorba's) desperate affection” (300).

After the separation, the narrator fully retracts to his Apollonian drives and is never to see Zorba (or express his inner Dionysus) again.

The end of the novel shows a slight reconciliation of the narrator's head and body in his overwhelming drive to write about Zorba and the time they shared upon Zorba's death. However, the reader is left with a sense of longing in the narrator for the brief time he spent with Zorba and the brief time he lived fully, according to Nietzsche, melding his internal Apollo and Dionysus.

Zorba the Greek is a direct indicator of Kazantzakis' Nietzschean worldview. In creating the novel, he brings life beautifully to the competing forces Nietzsche says make up a fulfilled life. Through the story, Kazantzakis shows that our “inner devils”, or as Nietzsche would term, our “inner Dionysus”, cannot and should not be repressed. Kazantzakis also shows that their value is in their juxtaposition, rather than in their isolation. While Zorba lived an artistic life, worth remembering, it would not have been remembered or recorded without the calculating and rational (Apollonian) author recording it.
Works Cited


