



Teleioni, E. (2013) 'Nikos Kazantzakis' Travel Writings on England'

Rosetta **12.5**: 79-83.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Colloquium2012/teleioni_kazantzakis.pdf

Nikos Kazantzakis' Travel Writings on England

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Travel writing is a vast but more or less little-explored area of study. Critics have not yet decided whether it really constitutes a genre or not and though various definitions of travel writing have been given, it seems that none of them is completely accurate. This mainly occurs because of the fact that the borders of this “genre” are loose and cannot be defined with certainty. However, most scholars agree that travel writing has a hybrid nature and that it embraces the forms of ethnographic writing, journalism and autobiography.

The systematic study of travel writing began approximately twenty years ago, in the mid-1990's. Several seminars were organized and annually conferences were held in the USA, Europe and Asia. In the late 1990's, the scholarly research on travel writing developed most extensively, thanks to two main factors: firstly, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a study strongly associated with the Foucauldian criticism, which extensively exploited travel texts, and, secondly, the flourishing of post-colonial studies that gave a new impetus to the study of travel narratives.¹ During the last years there has been a proliferation of travel writing studies, monographs, collections and anthologies. Issues that are being discussed in recent travel writing studies are: the role of gender in travel and travel writing, the political functions of travel, the postcolonial perspectives on travel and the function of language in travel and travel writing.

Since one of the very first travel texts was Homer's *Odyssey*, Greece appears as one of the countries with great tradition in the literature of travel. However, in contrast to its undoubtedly growing popularity abroad, in Greece travel writing has not attracted scholars' attention on a large scale. In addition to that, even the travel

¹ Dimitris Tziouvas, “Ταξίδια και Ιδέες”, *To Vima*, 21 September 2008.

writings of great Greek authors like Nikos Kazantzakis do not seem to have received the proper attention by scholars.

Nikos Kazantzakis, who established travel writing as an art form for Greek letters² had spent half of his life abroad and considered travel as one of the two greatest joys of his life (the other was writing).³ He sent hundreds of travel accounts to various Athenian newspapers and wrote five travel books: *Journeying* (1927), *Russia* (1928), *Spain* (1937), *Japan-China* (1938), *England* (1941). In this paper, I will focus on Kazantzakis' travel texts on England, in an effort to discover how revealing they are not only of a country but of an author as well.

Nikos Kazantzakis visited England in July 1939, having been invited by the British Council, an invitation recommended by the Ambassador of England to Greece, Sir Sydney Waterlow himself. The author visited London and perambulated England for approximately four months (from July to November 1939).⁴ At that time, England was going to experience one of the most crucial periods of its history, since it was on the verge of World War II.⁵ The historical moment Kazantzakis chose to visit England was not only crucial for the country itself, but for the whole world as well, since it was the time that the Nazi troops began the conquest of Europe. Thus, Kazantzakis observed the preparation of the British army and experienced the first bombings right from the shelters.

However, as in his trip in Spain in 1936 (another crucial moment, that of the Spanish Civil War), his mind is not again on the wartime reality, but on the country itself. References to the war are few. Besides, Kazantzakis states the goal of this journey right from the beginning of his book: he aims at discovering the meaning of England

² Peter Bien, *Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit*, Volume 2, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2007: 17.

³ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας-Ισπανία*, Athens: Kazantzakis Publications (Patroclos Stavrou) 2002: 7.

⁴ Kazantzakis writes to his wife Eleni on 20 February 1939: "Ο Waterlow μου έστειλε στα γενέθλιά μου γράμμα και μου γράφει στο τέλος: Il faut absolument nous revoir bientôt." Eleni Kazantzaki writes, commenting on this: Μονάχα ο Εγγλέζος κράτησε το λόγο του: Ο Νίκος έφυγε μόνος για το Λονδίνο." [Eleni N. Kazantzaki, *Νίκος Καζαντζάκης: Ο Ασυμβίβαστος*, Athens: Kazantzakis Publications (Patroclos Stavrou), 1998: 436].

⁵ The World War II began in Europe on 1 September 1939, with the invasion of Poland by Germany, and subsequent declarations of war on Germany by France and most of the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth.

and the English soul, something that will constitute a motive for the “widening of his own soul”.⁶ To achieve this goal, Kazantzakis focuses on English people and endeavours to discover their characteristics.

English people, according to Kazantzakis, have a genuine love for formality; they have knowledge of the social hierarchy, but they also know that they are capable to climb it; they combine the characteristics of their ancestors: the rural element from the Saxons, the love for art and daydream from the Celts, the love of the sea and adventure from the Vikings and the understanding of the need for order and organization from the Normans; English people love the countryside and that’s why they have constructed so many parks; they feel that their most important debt is to obey their conscience; Above all, Kazantzakis highly appreciates and admires the English man who is the less vain and the most proud human in the world. His dignity, the confidence in his own power, his few words and gestures, his trust in the leaders he has chosen, the fact that he is always ready to obey the heaviest debt with silence and persistence are indeed among the virtues of the English people that Kazantzakis wishes his compatriots also had.⁷

For Kazantzakis, three are the most significant contributions of England to humanity: firstly the Magna Carta, one of the most important documents of Medieval England and the first document forced onto an English king by his subjects in an attempt to limit his powers and protect their privileges. The second is the human model of the gentleman, which combines pride, dignity, persistence, resilience and discipline. The third is Shakespeare, the great English poet and playwright, who, according to Kazantzakis, “raised a voice of freedom”.

While perambulating England, the famous Greek novelist visits the British Museum, where he picks out the Assyrian reliefs, the Persian miniatures and the Greek marbles, writes about religion, education and industrialization in England, providing a plethora of historical details and describes various landscapes, mainly from the English countryside. However, since his focus is the idiosyncrasy of English people,

⁶ “Κάθε καινούριο χώρα που πατούμε μπορεί και πρέπει να γίνει αφορμή να πλατύνει η ψυχή μας. [...] Πώς μπορείς να κυριέψεις μια χώρα; Ένας μονάχα τρόπος υπάρχει: να βρεις το νόημά της. Ας προσπαθήσουμε λοιπόν να βρούμε το νόημα της Αγγλίας.” 2002: 43.

⁷Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας-Αγγλία*, 2002: 195.

almost everything that attracts his attention concerns them, in a more or less direct way.

Through the travel texts on England, significant aspects of the Kazantzakean personality and thought are being revealed: the distance Kazantzakis keeps from reality that makes him speak about the necessity of war at a time when the Nazi troops are about to conquer Europe; the formulation of the idea that the right path is the ascent (the “*aniforos*”), to which we can lead other people through our love for them; the opinion that the man is subjugated by the machine; the admiration of specific human virtues –pride, dignity, persistence, resilience, discipline, terseness and humanity– he found in English people and which he appreciated in his whole life. Finally, it seems that the highest secret ideal of England, namely freedom, coincides with the Kazantzakean freedom, an idea that permeates his oeuvre, his life, his thought.

Kazantzakis’ book on England has been characterized as the best of his travel books, in terms of completeness. In his writings on England, Kazantzakis presents the characteristics of a place and its people with great accuracy. As in his other travel books, Kazantzakis manages to present England the way it really is, without leaving his personal thoughts uncontrolled.⁸ For all the abovementioned, it seems that Kazantzakis’ travel texts on England do deserve a close, critical reading that will be focused on their entirety, namely both the 37 accounts that were published in *Kathimerini* and the book entitled *England* that was based on them.

⁸ Nikiforos Vrettakos, *Νίκος Καζαντζάκης: Η αγωνία και το Έργο του*, Athens: Sypsas, 1960: 576.

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