

# The Dialectic of Teleological Journeys *The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Odyssey:* *A Modern Sequel*

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**ABSTRACT** Researchers' attention has been drawn to parallels between Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. However, hitherto, no connections have been observed between Kazantzakis's *Sequel* and the Mesopotamian work. Convergent are the primary motivations and actions undertaken by the protagonists of both poems, particularly their "peregrinations" to the boundaries of the world, dictated by eschatological anxieties. Moreover, the hero of Kazantzakis's *Sequel* undergoes a transformation analogous to the legendary ruler of Uruk: under the influence of concerns, the proud kings opt for solitary wanderings, which results in better self-understanding and higher axiological awareness. The comparison of symbols, such as the sun, fire, lightning, the Water of Life and Death, and theriomorphic allegories, indicates Kazantzakis's utilization of numerous intermediary sources stemming from the ancient Near Eastern tradition. An additional aim of the article is to indicate interpretative possibilities of books describing the wanderings of the Odyssean spirit after abandoning the project of building the "ideal city," as versions of *ars moriendi*: the art of overcoming the fear of death.

**KEYWORDS** *ars moriendi*; body alignment; self-sufficiency; spiritual journey; spiritual maturity

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* are situated almost at the antipodes of history.<sup>1</sup> The former emerged in its early period and, as it is presumed, draws upon myths formed in preliterate epochs. The latter, due to its time span of 4 millennia, belongs to the most recent times (González-Vaquerizo 2022, 349-377). Nevertheless, to some extent, it is a continuation of Homer's famous work. Furthermore, through the modification of certain motifs, it provokes a complex dialogue with the Homeric tradition in which poets, philosophers, playwrights, and rhetoricians freely treated motifs drawn from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.<sup>2</sup>

When approached together, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* have not been the subject of scholarly interest. However, parallels between *Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Odyssey* have been noted for over 130 years. As pointed out by Jan Kozłowski (2018, 11), Peter Jensen was the first scholar to systematize the list of converging motifs. These similarities prompted the author of the article "Das Gilgamesh-Epos und Homer" to conclude that the *Odyssey* was influenced by the Mesopotamian epic. Jensen's thesis regarding the dependence of the *Odyssey* on *Gilgamesh* was supported nearly a century later by Martin West. West's argumentation was boosted by Wouter Henkelman who highlighted that after the discovery and decipherment of *Gilgamesh* in the 1870s, it was found that a remark concerning the king of Uruk (together with the correct spelling of the name Γίλγαμος) appears in the third chapter of Claudius Aelianus' treatise *De natura animalium* (2006, 807-56).

Some scholars point to the lack of sufficient evidence to infer a direct influence of *Gilgamesh* on Homer's *Odyssey*. For instance, Andrew George

1. In the article, for stylistic reasons, I use the abbreviated title: *Odyssey*. Throughout, I rely on the English translation by Nikos Kazantzakis, titled *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, translated into English verse, with Introduction, Synopsis, and Notes by Kimon Friar (Kazantzakis 1963).

2. As noted by Richard Garner, in tragedies, there has been an initiation of freer references to Homer than in poetry. "Tragedy created new possibilities for allusion: suggestive echoes could be multiplied, dispersed, and made to resonate in a poetic space extended far beyond the usual limits of polished lyric and pointed elegiac. Hints could be followed up and reinforced, shaped, and modified just as could the imagery internal to the play or even trilogy" (2014, 21). Philosophy and rhetoric further loosen these ties, indicating that narratives should be adapted to current needs and the capacity for understanding. Moreover, among philosophers and subsequently rhetoricians, there is a tendency to provoke readers by disrupting conventional interpretations. For instance, Gorgias, in his *Defense of Palamedes*, characterized Odysseus as a vindictive and deceitful schemer lacking moral restraints. Similarly, in *The Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias of Leontini portrayed the weaknesses of the beautiful lover of Paris in superlatives.

presented a detailed overview of the research status concerning the connections between Greek and Mesopotamian literature (George 2003). Responding to these findings, Stephanie Dalley, in turn, argues that it is necessary to limit oneself to identifying and describing parallels. According to Dalley conclusions regarding borrowings from the traditions of Mesopotamia in Homer should be withheld until the discovery of mechanisms of interaction between Mesopotamian literature and archaic Greece (Dalley 2017, 116). This viewpoint is also upheld by Louis Pryke (2019, 197) who further presents the current state of research on the epic along with an extensive bibliography.

Interest in parallels between works stemming from different traditions should not end with antiquity, especially if the existential and psychological issues addressed in works from different epochs may prove relevant to us. A comparative analysis of *Gilgamesh* with Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* is, metaphorically speaking, a journey into unknown territories. However, it must be emphasized that *Gilgamesh* is significantly more modest in literary terms, both in terms of text length and vocabulary richness. As compared to the *Odyssey*, the language of *Gilgamesh* seems concise; even in its more literary passages. Consequently, it appears as an abstract of a lost work, especially when compared to the decorative style of Kazantzakis's poem (Mathioudakis 2017, 66–95). Moreover, in terms of the length of the epics, they differ substantially. It is enough to say that even if it was possible to reconstruct the entire content of *Gilgamesh* someday, it would consist of approximately 3000 lines (Helle 2021, xvii), whereas Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* has more than eleven times as many, precisely 33,333 lines (Kazantzakis 1963, 6). Furthermore, in *Gilgamesh*, there are occasional signs displaying uneasiness as far creating descriptions is concerned. Likely for this reason, literary threads perceived as important or attractive by editors are repeated several times, often without any modifications, which increases the actual disproportion in the length of these works and reduces the space for free play with literary devices (Gilbert 2012, 157–75). For some reason, editors of the standard version omitted certain threads already present in the Old Babylonian version. In over seventy different versions of *Gilgamesh*, there are fragments that are literary attractive but there are also passages based on simple, almost protocol-like sentences (Tigay 1997).

In certain respects, Kazantzakis's work is closer to the Mesopotamian epic than to Homer's epic. The very theme of Odysseus' journey to the boundaries of the world, driven by eschatological anxieties, can evoke associations with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The hero of the sequel undergoes a transformation analogous to the legendary ruler of Uruk. Proud kings, conquerors, nourished by the applause of crowds, eventually, under the

influence of worries, choose a solitary wander, resulting in better self-understanding and a higher level of axiological consciousness. Both kings endowed with “superhuman” powers ultimately become human when they discover their true selves, experiencing hunger, pain, fear, and despair. Both stubbornly strive to surpass their existing limitations. Both sought freedom in struggle, first at the level of physical actions and then in the realm of the spirit. Both Gilgamesh and Odysseus, despite losing external attributes of power—physical prowess, beauty, recognition, authority, wealth—attain inner maturity.<sup>3</sup> In the *Odyssey*, this process of weakening vital forces with an increase in self-awareness leads to a critical point of “non-being.” Meanwhile, in *Gilgamesh*, the king of Uruk—after traversing the road “to the boundaries of the world”—receives a second youth from Uta-napishti, presumably for better use than before embarking on the journey. In both works, the significant importance is attached to the foreshadowing of the protagonist’s fate. In the *Odyssey*, the most important hints related to spiritual advancement are signaled by epithets or “distinctive” signs. For example, in the first book, the term “the man of seven souls,” interchangeably with “seven-souled man,” is introduced. This is a frequently repeated epithet, appearing several times before a more distinctive suggestion of the motif of the seven-headed totem emerges in the text. However, the description of the artifact, which serves as a harbinger of Odysseus’s spiritual transformation, appears long before the content of the poem allows for the connection of this foreshadowing with the hero’s described fate. The motif of the seven-tiered sculpture is introduced in Book 5, and in Book 14, there is a clear indication that Odysseus is to undergo seven levels of spiritual experience. Starting from Book 16, a greater emphasis is placed on describing the processes occurring within Odysseus’s soul. The place of practical activities, which are highlighted earlier in the text, will be taken by the process of understanding, as manifested in dialogue with various interlocutors. The protagonist’s internal enrichment process, encapsulating the seven-tiered dialectic of the spirit, will continue until his last breath; that is, until the conclusion of Book 24.

Both works also share translators’ significant role in the preparation of the text to make it accessible to a wider audience. The Mesopotamian epic is reconstructed from many fragments originating from different epochs.

3. Gilgamesh temporarily loses his initial status during his period of wandering. By the same token, Odysseus, after the catastrophe of his city, ultimately relinquishes fulfilling significant social roles and possessions. Nonetheless, the legend surrounding him grew, portraying him as an ascetic, a prophet, and even a savior and deity.

Furthermore, analogous to the works of Homer, *Gilgamesh*, according to Eric Havelock's assumptions, was a part of the oral tradition (1963, 61–144). Nikos Kazantzakis endeavored to adapt Homer's style to the contemporary linguistic practice, combining various regions of Greece. The poet used words borrowed from local dialects for this purpose.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the author of the *Odyssey* employed rarely used words and coined a series of neologisms (Mathioudakis and Karasimos 2022–2023, 141–63). An additional challenge for readers of the original version is the seventeen-syllable meter. The requirements that the work placed on the reader meant that the work was not popular on its native ground. It was only Kimon Friar's translation that made the new *Odyssey* accessible to a larger group of readers. Peter Bien, a respected researcher of Kazantzakis's work, noted that even Greeks were more inclined to read the English translation than the Modern Greek original (Bien 1972, 218), (Bien 2007, vol.2, 178–9). As Aleksandra Zervou pointed out:

Friar chose a shorter and lighter in perception twelve-syllable or eleven-syllable verse instead of Kazantzakis's seventeen-syllable verse, which was often criticized by Greek critics and even ordinary readers. (Zervou 2019, 30)

According to Kazantzakis's intuition, whether literary works will endure and influence culture is to be determined by its sufficiently large readership (cf. Bzinkowski 2018, 123–4). In short, literary translations into contemporary *lingua franca* facilitate engaging in intertextual dialogues and reviving the literary heritage that would otherwise be lost to oblivion.

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT SYMBOLS

Despite distortions introduced by translations, the most important ideas of both works form a relatively clear picture that paves the way for comparisons and dialectics of significant meanings between these works. At first glance, one can already notice similarities between the most important symbols and metaphors in both works. The sun, light, and flame play a significant role in them. In *Gilgamesh*, the sun is personified as the god Shamash, about whom Ur-shanabi says that only he can move freely above the boundless sea (Helle 2021, 74). When the king of Uruk felt fear of death, he offered a short prayer to the sun:

4. The issue of creating the specific language of the *Odyssey*, based on Greek dialects, is analyzed in detail in the extensive monograph by Nikos Mathioudakis (2020). Furthermore, readers may find Peter Bien's comments on the historical context in which Kazantzakis created the poem of interest (Mathioudakis 2020, 25–32).

After I have walked and wandered the wild,  
 will I lack rest in the underworld?  
 All those years of lying down!  
 Now my eyes will see the sun, till I am full of light.  
 The dark of death is far away—look at all the sun!  
 When do the dead ever see daylight? (IX.10-15)<sup>5</sup>

In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, the sun patronizes the traveler, from the Prologue to the Epilogue. There are numerous references to the sun, flame, or light, both in descriptive and metaphorical senses, for example, in the Prologue:

O Sun, my quick coquetting eye, my red-haired hound,  
 sniff out all quarries that I love, give them swift chase,  
 tell me all that you've seen on earth, all that you've heard  
 and I shall pass them through my entrails' secret forge  
 till slowly, with profound caresses, play and laughter,  
 stones, water, fire, and earth shall be transformed to spirit,  
 and the mud-winged and heavy soul, freed of its flesh,  
 shall like a flame serene ascend and fade in sun. (Prolog. 23-30)<sup>6</sup>

The same applies to the following passage (towards the end of Book 23):

As a low lantern's flame flicks in its final blaze  
 then leaps above its shriveled wick and mounts aloft,  
 brimming with light, and soars toward Death with dazzling joy,  
 so did his fierce soul leap before it vanished in air.  
 The fire of memory blazed and flung long tongues of flame,  
 and each flame formed a face, each took a voice and called  
 till all life gathered in his throat and staved off Death; (23.1305–11)<sup>7</sup>

5. The Old Babylonian version (Helle 2021, 81). With quotes from *Gilgamesh*, I use traditional pagination directly below the quote; indicating with Roman numerals the tablet number, and after a period, Arabic numerals are used for the corresponding lines. If the quote comes from a version other than the "standard" one (as here), I explain it in the relevant footnote.

6. In the article, I use pagination consistent with most commentaries on Kazantzakis's *Odyssey*. For example, Prologue followed by the numbers of the corresponding verses; or the book number, followed by the verse number after a period.

7. Kimon Friar enthusiastically discusses this passage in the Introduction (Kazantzakis, 52–3).

In both epics, a significant emphasis is placed on descriptions of atmospheric phenomena, especially the wind, storms, lightning, and thunder, which all appear in “realistic” descriptions (though doubts may arise whether descriptions featuring a monster like Humbaba are still within the realm of reality):

South wind, north wind, east wind, west wind, gust, and gale,  
 tempest, blizzard, wind of evil, demon blast,  
 thunderstorm, whirlwind, and hurricane: let thirteen winds  
 rise!  
 Darkness will fall on the face of Humbaba  
 and Gilgamesh’s weapons will bring him down.<sup>8</sup> (III.89–93)

In the *Odyssey*, the expression of describing a storm is also reinforced by the introduction of animistic comparisons:

The archer raised his eyes and like a dragon scanned  
 the lowering, wrathful clouds that on the billows cast  
 their savage claws and blindly dragged the heaving waves.  
 The hollow sound of thunder broke, and earth and sea  
 was zoned with lightning as though God flashed wrathful eyes... (5.170–174)

In *Gilgamesh*, the image of a storm serves to enhance the expression taking place while describing a nightmarish dream:

The storm howled, the earth roared,  
 daylight hid, darkness spread,  
 lightning flashed, fires blazed,  
 I aches shone and death rained down.  
 “I was stunned by the howl of the storm,  
 the day went dark and I lost my way.  
 But then the blaze faded, the fires died down,  
 they slowly burned out and dimmed into embers.<sup>9</sup> (IV.34–41)

In Book 23 of the *Odyssey*, the protagonist of the poem, while dying, succumbs to hallucinations. However, in fleeting moments of consciousness, he notices that he is in the world of his own imagination:

8. (Helle 2021, 30).

9. The Old Babylonian version (Helle 2021, 38).

Fire will surely come one day to cleanse the earth,  
 fire will surely come one day to make mind ash,  
 fate is a fiery tongue that eats up earth and sky!<sup>9</sup>  
 The womb of life is fire, and fire the last tomb,  
 and there between two lofty flames we dance and weep;  
 in this blue lightning flash of mine where my life burns,  
 all time and all space disappear, and the mind sinks,  
 and all—hearts, birds, beasts, brain and loam—break into dance,  
 though it's no dance now, for they blaze up, fade, and spin,  
 are suddenly freed to exist no more, nor have they ever lived! (23.932–41)

In both works, the imagery combined with descriptions evoking other senses can be compared to the classical ekphrasis, which employed suggestive synesthesia (Webb 2009, 61–130). Both in *Gilgamesh* and in the *Odyssey*, expression is often reinforced by comparisons to atmospheric phenomena or the strength, speed, agility, perceptiveness, or appearance of animals. In the Mesopotamian epic, animistic comparisons serve to characterize the psychological state of the hero who has lost his companion:

He touched his heart—it beat no more.  
 He veiled the face of his friend like a bride's,  
 like an eagle he circled around his corpse,  
 like a lioness forced to abandon her cubs  
 he paced back and forth, before and behind him.  
 He pulled out heaps of curly hair  
 and cast his clothes off in disgust.<sup>10</sup> (VIII.58–64)

In both works, some words are used in various roles, in literal, metaphorical, allegorical, or symbolic meanings. The number “seven” plays a particularly important role in both works. In *Gilgamesh*, it is associated with the symbolism of the week, a period that, as one can infer, does not always correspond to the calendar measure of time. According to Uta-napishti's account, the construction of the ark lasted a week, which—considering the existence of many decks and the necessary quality of resistance of the gigantic structure to stormy conditions—sounds unbelievable, given that ensuring the safety of humans and animals was the essence of this undertaking. Even with today's technological capabilities of wood processing, realizing such a project in such a short time is a phantasmagoria. Given the context of

10. (Helle 2021, 73).



ancient times, where the timeframe for significant construction tasks was well-known, one would not interpret the information about a week-long construction period literally. There is also no mention of invoking supernatural forces in the construction of the ark. The flood was also said to last for six days and seven nights. It can be speculated that the week is a symbol of a significant stage, representing a certain completeness. Perhaps the number seven is associated, as it later was in Hebrew cultures, with a qualitative transformation (Lukács 2020, 3–11).

As Sophus Helle observes, in key moments of the *Gilgamesh* epic, the number “seven” is associated with the number “six” in the context of personality development (cf. Helle 2021, 182–3). Enkidu: “For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused and made love to Shamhat” (I.193–194).<sup>11</sup> At that time, the animals that had accompanied Enkidu left him, suggesting that the narrator perceived eroticism as a significant factor in shaping humanity. This is consistent with Mesopotamian mythology, in which this particular sphere played an important role. Ishtar was the goddess of Uruk, and the most important myths were associated with her, even in spite of the emphasis placed on her unpredictability.

Ishtar is a central character in Babylonian poetry, and with good reason—her poetic potential is endless... She is always changeable and always changing everything around her, turning mountains into valleys, men into women, and weaklings into warriors. She does nothing that ought to be done and everything that should not be. Given the link between gods and cities, her character in turn reflected on Uruk, which was associated with frequent festivals and the ritual performance of activities that were otherwise taboo. (Helle 2021, xix)

Researchers have noted that Gilgamesh serves as the male counterpart to the goddess Ishtar, or he acts contrary to the rules of kingship (for example, by harassing his own subjects), or in his positive actions, he is also excessive (Helle 2021, 203–7).

Gilgamesh is supposed to mourn Enkidu for six days and seven nights. Finally, for the third time, he appears as part of the test arranged by Uta-napishti: Gilgamesh is to stay awake for six days and seven nights, which was supposed to guarantee his immortality. However, the hero is sleeping throughout this designated period. Time is measured in a peculiar manner: each day, Uta-napishti’s wife bakes a loaf of bread which was placed next to the sleeping hero.

11. (Helle 2021, 10).

His first bread was all dried out,  
 the second was tough as leather,  
 the third had some moisture left,  
 the fourth had turned white,  
 the fifth was showing spots,  
 the sixth was still fresh  
 and the seventh was on the coals  
 when he touched and woke up the man. (XI.225–31)<sup>12</sup>

As noted by Helle, these three periods represent phases of significant transformations. In the first transformation, Enkidu transitions from being a wild creature to becoming human. In the second transformation, immersed in despair, Gilgamesh sheds his former way of being. In the third transformation, it becomes apparent that humans can only “dream” of immortality. According to the scholar, the sequence of three weeks does not include the two weeks from Uta-napishti’s narrative. In the first time span, the construction of the ship took place, while in the second time span, there was the voyage across the stormy ocean during the flood. For some reason, the narrator introduced the connection between the numbers of six and seven, not to indicate time, but magnitude.

Then I drew the design and laid out her frame:  
 Six times I decked her over,  
 dividing her into seven decks. (X.60–62)<sup>13</sup>

In the conclusion of the story of saving the animals and humans, the king of Shuruppak mentions that he burned seven and seven censers, pleasing the gods with a fragrance attractive to them. Ultimately, the god Ellil, feeling guilty for the reckless decision regarding the flood, bestows immortality upon Uta-napishti and his family. The former king of Shuruppak, by saving humans and other living beings, deserves deification as he has repaired the damage caused by the god, proving himself useful and effective in his deity-like actions.

#### THE IDEAS OF STAGES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In both works, attempts can be made to systematize descriptions of human maturity by identifying the moments where the characters undergo

12. (Helle 2021, 108).

13. (Helle 2021, 102).

significant internal transformations. At this point, it is noteworthy to observe that the *Odyssey* explicitly contains a description encompassing the main stages of the human spirit. However, in the case of the Mesopotamian epic, such pivotal moments must be deduced.

The figure of Gilgamesh is initially depicted in the epic as a cruel despot who disregards the will of his subjects, neglecting the duties of a king towards his people (Helle 2021, 203–207). His actions must have been significant violations of norms, as the divine tribunal decides to send a mighty figure to subdue the ruler of Uruk. At that time, Enkidu remains at the first, lowest, pre-cultural level of human development, possessing mental characteristics akin to an animal. The harlot Shamhat enables Enkidu to learn speech and to acquire human emotions through lessons in eroticism, thusly elevating himself to a rudimentary level of culture. The higher, third level suggested by the epic's narrative is love combined with friendship. This level is also reflected negatively. Captivated by the ruler of Uruk, Ishtar, the divine patroness of the city, is brutally rejected by the king and disdainfully mocked by his partner, which can be explained at a psychological level as the reaction of lovers whose relationship is threatened by a third party. Nevertheless, the goddess's response to the humiliation will later cause disturbances in the lives of both heroes. The conflict with Ishtar also reveals deficiencies in the ability to assess strengths, an inability to resolve disputes, a tendency towards coercive solutions, and a lack of foresight regarding long-term consequences. During their joint campaigns, Gilgamesh and Enkidu realize another level of human development—the struggle. The fifth level emphasized in the text is despair. It is despair that initiates a qualitative transformation of the spirit of the ruler of Uruk. During his long journey, Gilgamesh learns to negotiate, restraining his aggression, although his warrior-like nature resurfaces when he impulsively destroys the “stones.” Nevertheless, immediately afterward, the hero reflects and strives to rectify the mistake, which represents a novelty, especially when compared to the earlier stages when he escalates aggression. The sixth level is represented by Uta-napishti even before he becomes a god. The king of Shuruppak gains the trust of the gods because he is pious, and moreover—as it is revealed during the construction of the ship and the crossing of the ocean—he is effective in action. His respect, or love, for life is meant to represent the highest level of maturity available to humans—the seventh level. The last, eighth level, is reserved exclusively for the gods. Uta-napishti becomes a god because he has exceeded the limit reserved for humans. Gilgamesh will reach these levels, although he goes beyond the scenarios defined by the gods. By creating a literary work that will be esteemed for centuries, he

revives a tradition that would have otherwise fallen into oblivion. Mesopotamian cultures feared the loss of memory among the living. Commemorative artifacts were intended to alleviate the burdens of life after death. Gilgamesh, by recording his experiences, also perpetuates the image of people (i.e., Shamhat and Enkidu), and allowed the gods to avoid oblivion. Uta-napishti “lives” through the story told by Gilgamesh, and only in it does he achieve eternal life. Gilgamesh’s noble idea of saving humans and animals is also due to the one who “set down all his trials on a slab of stone” (I.10).<sup>14</sup> Gilgamesh’s dream of transcending his own limitations reaches its climax in Uta-napishti’s tale of saving living beings on a grand scale. It is an expression of longing for moral heroism, which can still point upward, like an arrow from the 10th Tablet of *Odysseus*.

In the *Odyssey*, the scale of action undertaken by the main character is significantly more modest. The hero discovers that engaging in larger-scale societal actions entails risks that are difficult to assess from the outset. The authoritarian rule of an individual threatens with social catastrophes because the individual has limited resources of knowledge. The “man of seven souls” gradually realizes that there are no means to save humanity; he himself belongs to nature, and his salvation lies in the faculty of rational action in a manner analogous to nature, even if the latter lacks reason. “Rescuing” on a broader scale is limited here to the principle attributed to Hippocrates; namely, “First do no harm.” In a positive dimension, it involves the pursuit of self-awareness, combined with the affirmation of life at all its stages, even in the face of radical physical impairment.

Similarly to the Mesopotamian epic, in the *Odyssey*, each stage of the journey signifies a qualitative transformation of the hero. In the *Odyssey*, the seven levels of spiritual maturity are explicitly foreshadowed in the fifth book through the description of an artifact. Therefore, the most influential scholars of Kazantzakis’ work analyze the text according to the proclaimed schema. However, there may be concerns that such a formal order could hinder our understanding of other relationships beyond those that have been announced in the linear order of the sculpted representation.

During a stroll in the marketplace of Heraklion, *Odysseus* was moved by the sight of a seven-headed “totem.” Without hesitation, he purchases a statuette made of ivory, aware that the merchant is exploiting his enthusiasm. The underlying implication is intriguing: *Odysseus* sold the idol of friendship a little earlier, which Menelaus had given him as a farewell gift; in this symbolic way, he closed a Greek chapter, opening another, as it

14. (Helle 2021, 3).

would turn out, one of many. The artifact bought at the Cretan stall depicts a sculpture with images of heads piled one on top of the other, on seven levels. On the lowest level, there is indeed a human head, but resembling a beast; the next one is also brutal, but devoid of animal features—the face of a warrior. On the third level, the dreamy head of a sensual man is depicted. On the fourth level, one could imagine the representation of a flourishing mind, a head that makes “its roots had turned to flower, its meat to purest mind” (5.610). On the fifth level, there is a head, an allegory of tragic despair; above it. The sixth level is “the last head but one, and steadfast weighed all things, beyond all joy or grief, like an all-holy, peaceful, full-fed, buoyant spirit” (5.615–7). Finally, the most enigmatic form is to be found on the highest level:

The final head shone, crystal-clear, translucent, light,  
and had no ears or eyes, no nostrils, mouth, or brow,  
for all its flesh had turned to soul, and soul to air! (5.627–9)

In the *Odyssey*, similar to the *Gilgamesh*, an eighth level can be distinguished. It is inaccessible to humans and defined by the Sun and the Earth. In the Epilogue, the distressed Sun refuses to accept sustenance from the Earth on the day of the hero's death because it grieves too deeply over the parting. The narrative in Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* suggests that the process of shaping the spirit is not semantic in nature. The hero of the poem, despite swiftly interpreting the levels of spiritual experiences, has to work on himself for a long time to traverse the entire path outlined in this figurative guide. The process of adapting to all these stages suggested by the sculpture continued until the hero's last moments of life.

An issue of references to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be indicated here. In Book 14, Odysseus, upon his return from a seven-day solitary contemplation in a cave high in the mountains, encounters manifestations of rebellion among his greatest allies thus far. Therefore, prior to the establishment of the Tablets of Law, he ventures two more times into places of seclusion<sup>15</sup> in search of inspiration that would alleviate tensions

15. In Kazantzakis's poem, numerous allusions to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be discerned. At first glance, it is evident that Kazantzakis maintains a distance from the idea of the Übermensch. Odysseus, in the societal dimension, proves to be a minimalist who reveres life even in its trivial or anti-aesthetic manifestations. Nevertheless, Kazantzakis employs similar metaphors: the tempter (equivalent to the fool) who also takes the form of a black snake; lions' place replaced by jaguars; eagles are also allegorical animals, defining the main character's personality traits. The animal world, much like in *Zarathustra*, serves as a significant point

within the community he leads. In his initial vision, he affirms previous intuitions which are expressed in the aforementioned aphorism:

Whatever blind Worm-Mother Earth does with no brains  
we should accept as just, with our whole mind, wide-eyed;  
if you would rule the world, model yourself on God. (15.600–2)

The second experience gives rise to more serious issues. While wandering through the steppe, Odysseus stumbles upon a solitary, blossoming pear tree, beneath which he discovers the entrance to a cave. In the depths, he encounters a god who shows him a new path. That which blossoms and rises toward the sun corresponds to that which grows into the earth. From the dirty manure, the soil, due to the powers of roots delving “on in the darkest gloom” (15.386), the soul is to transform patiently, with despair and love, into a blossoming pear tree (15.388–90). Odysseus is designated here as “the two-willed man” (15.313); although earlier the narrator calls him the man of many wills (2.919), and even the myriad-willed (6.85). Through the interpretation of the pear tree, the need for the inclusion of the opposing point of view is awakened in the consciousness of the “Lawgiver.” Nevertheless, Odysseus decides to reject whatever would hinder him in the accomplishment of his task. When he notices that Kentron, his friend and travel companion, is helping elderly people, he reacts with anger:

Quit mollycoddling the old men, softhearted fool!  
By God, at times my demon tempts me to round up  
all useless codgers on the cliffs and shove them off! (14.608–610)

The resistance of his conscience, however, compels him to make a declaration that in the future, he would not invoke the voice of the “cruel Archer.” Furthermore, he states that he would apply this cruel law to himself:

By God, when my mind rots and my flesh wastes away,  
I’ll climb to a high peak and cast myself to death! (15.615–616)

of reference. However, in the *Odyssey*, alongside animals associated with nobility, organisms evoking fear and disgust play a significant role. Worms, in particular, serve as the army of Mother Earth. Kazantzakis’s Odysseus glorifies sex and reproduction, disdainful of programmatic asceticism, despite becoming an ascetic himself; nonetheless, he makes this choice for his own use and in the final stage of life. Starting from the 16th book, having learned from bitter experience, he avoids a patronizing tone, which marks a significant difference from Zarathustra, who, assuming the role of the “teacher of the *Übermensch*,” falls into distinct dogmatism.

The construction of the city presents itself to the “great lawmaker” (15.581) as the ultimate goal, hence he suppresses voices associated with moral dilemmas within himself. He believes that a happy *civitas* requires the elimination of weak individuals; namely, the sick, and the elderly. “The two-willed man” realizes that the law he is to introduce in his harmonized city of the future would be cruel. However, in response to doubts expressed in the questions:

“No one but I can save the whole wide world! Where are we going? Shall we win?”—the deity responded. “Don’t ask! Fight on!” (15.822–3). The narrator swiftly answers back: “Thus did dread God command within the lone man’s breast, and the lawmaker’s mind grew light” (15.824–5). The submission to the god’s will forces Odysseus to carve ten commandments on stone tablets:

“God groans, he writhes within my heart and cries for help.”

“God chokes within the ground and leaps from every grave.”

“God stifles in all living things, kicks them, and soars.”

“All living things to right or left are his co-fighters.”

“Love wretched man at length, for he is you, my son.”

“Love plants and beasts at length, for you were they, and now they follow you in war like faithful friends and slaves.”

“Love the entire earth, its waters, soil, and stones;  
on these I cling to live, for I’ve no other steed.”

“Each day deny your joys, your wealth, your victories, all.”

“The greatest virtue on earth is not to become free  
but to seek freedom in a ruthless, sleepless strife.”

He seized the last rock then and carved an upright arrow  
speeding high toward the sun with pointed thirsty beak;  
the last command leapt mutely on the empty stone  
to the archer’s joy, as though he’d shot his soul into the sun. (15.1161–76)

The lawmaker senses threats from conflicting intuitions. Hence, he adorns the Tablets of Law with a relief bearing a meaningful message:

but he bent low and hewed his God to bind him tight  
in thick and mystic snares that he might never flee.

He carved flames, blood-drenched roads that rose in zigzag  
curves,

he carved trees, beasts, and hearts, a swift and slender ship,  
and that small bird, frail freedom, with a wounded breast. (15.1155–59)

The bas-relief is intended to serve as either a fetish or a totem; its creator regards the work of art as an object possessing magical qualities, rather than an object of aesthetic contemplation. Nevertheless, the iconographic program of this bas-relief will be partly elucidated during the catastrophe described in the subsequent book:

As the flames' zigzag slashed like a red snake on earth,  
it lit up Kentaur's dreadful and most guileless head  
in scattered fragments on the stone, sinking in mud. (16.258–260)

Apparently, the representation of the relief as an illustration of the Tablet of Laws is not an intentional prelude to despotic and bloody rule, but rather a foreshadowing of the tragic events to come. The irreconcilable conflict between individual freedom and despotic rule paves the way for a conflict. Doubt may arise as to whether the catastrophe is not a product of Odysseus's solipsistic imagination. Kazantzakis skillfully balances on the edge of magical realism, leaving the ultimate interpretation to the reader's decision. In a realistic interpretation, Odysseus founds a city in a seismically active area, which accidentally coincided with the establishment of the Laws. Nevertheless, Odysseus has already been concluding the premises of his project which itself is a harbinger of another narrative turn: similar to the situations after the introduction of reforms in Ithaca and the preparation of Telemachus for assuming power, or as in Crete, when after a successful revolt, Odysseus hands power to his comrade Hardihood. Regardless of the overall assessment of realism, Odysseus's despair after the death of his friends and the shift in his thinking after the collapse of the most spectacular project are consistently portrayed. Henceforth, Odysseus avoids actively engaging in socio-political issues, generally limiting himself to debating with his interlocutors. The exception to this rule will be the attempt to help a frightened community (Book 22), which—despite its limited impact—also ends in disaster.

The experience of failure, despair, spiritual weakness, oscillating on the border of mental illnesses akin to paranoid delusions and schizophrenia prepare the foreground for the reconstruction of sensitivity (Books 16 and 17). In Book 18, after months of lethargy, Odysseus resumes his journey. From now on, it will no longer be an exodus aimed at founding a city, but a "pilgrimage" towards death, the signs of which he begins to perceive more clearly. Among these signs is the ritual burning of the leader's body on a pyre. What is especially meaningful to Odysseus is the battle between the peacock and the serpent, which he interprets as an allegory of war in



which the victorious beauty feeds on weaker spoils. This ruthless struggle of forces is juxtaposed with Odysseus's own experience, who, fainting from starvation, experiences the proximity of death. However, he regains strength when being fed by an African woman carrying food for her husband working in the fields. This image of a sensitivity reflex is contrasted with the courtesan Margaro's carefree attitude. The appropriate interlocutor for Odysseus becomes the Prince Motherth, described as a "prefiguration of Buddhism" (Prevelakis 1961, 39). Odysseus agrees with the Prince that life is a "hollow shadow." However, he develops this thought by indicating seven paths worth traversing before one accepts that life and death are illusions. "Seven well-hidden paths lead to the grace of salvation" (18.1225), namely: 1) despair; 2) renunciation of emotions; 3) renunciation of senses; 4) renunciation of creations and mandates of the mind (i.e., virtues, deeds); 5) renunciation of creatures (as they are phantasms); 6) and 7) the discovery that "Death is a shadow, too, that hunts the shadow, Life." As far as Odysseus's argumentation is concerned, Margaro finds confirmation that her doctrine of salvation in bodily pleasure is valid. On the other hand, the Prince becomes convinced that the world is a projection of the spirit. In the subsequent books, the fundamental scheme is similar. Odysseus appears in the role of a wiseman seeking synthesis between opposing positions. In this dialectic, parties incapable of rising to the level of intellectual discussion also participate. In Book XIX, Odysseus's first interlocutor is a blind old man, a hermit who has heard the legend of the approaching savior. Upon hearing the rumor from the old man's lips, Odysseus replies, "I am the great savior of the world, in which there is no salvation" (19.418). The old man, moved by these words, believes that he has finally encountered a man who would free him from inner turmoil. By the faculty of touch, he recognizes the formation of Odysseus's face and then carves his portrait. The hermit has spent his entire adult life carving divine figures, hoping to bring comfort to those seeking God. He has forsaken all pleasures, devoting himself to contemplation accompanying craftsmanship, yet he himself does not experience this comfort:

I carve high heaps of gods to solace wretched men  
 who dash and cling to my lush fantasy's creations  
 till all their pains take wing and fly away like birds.  
 Only I writhe, forlorn, and shout in the wilderness.  
 Why were we born? Toward what do men and beasts proceed? (19.491-5)

Odysseus does not offer a verbal response to these questions but instructs the hermit to press his ear to the ground. The hermit then understands that he has wasted his life by imposing asceticism upon himself. He dies shortly afterward with an open hand in his sleep, which is an allegory of unfulfilled desires. Odysseus manages to close the hand only when he has placed a handful of soil into it. The earth proves to be an answer for the man who dedicated his life to embodying spirits in his sculptures. A handful of soil becomes a symbol of a good death because the earth is the arena where life wages its battle, also causing death in the process. An aporia arises here in relation to the “seven paths” from the previous book. There, the interlocutors agree that life and death are just shadows. Yet, there is a clear suggestion that life is based on tangible realities that are not illusions. Odysseus seems to distinguish proper life, considering bodily and instinctual realms, from life based on delusions where satisfaction cannot be achieved. The hermit imposes strict asceticism upon himself, he gives human shapes to blocks of wood, also carving “nude girls” in casual poses and in “every mood” (19.404–8). By indulging in phantasms, the craftsman has lost sight of what was “at hand”; namely, the joy of life arising from the possession of the body.

Book 19 closes with the motif of Elias who plays the “miraculous” seven-string lyre. Legend had it that its strings were once moistened with the blood of his seven sons, whom he sacrificed to obtain the divine gift of intoxicating and captivating music. Enthralled by the concert, Odysseus wants to initiate a conversation by asking about the truth regarding the sources of his extraordinary talent. The musician, however, responds angrily:

What do I care about your life, ascetic archer?

What do I care what’s false or true, what’s yours, what’s mine?

It may well be, you fool, I’ve sung my own pain only! (19. 1421–3)

Undeterred, Odysseus expresses his admiration to Elias by saying, “The paths of life are seven, and with your song, my dear, you’ve chosen the most cool” (19.1426–7). Elias reacts with even greater irritation, wanting to free himself from the intruder. It is suggested here that Elias is a dogmatist of sounds themselves. In matters of his own creativity, he is uncompromising because he can only play the song of sophisticated suffering, which is not subject to hermeneutics. However, there is a significant omission: Odysseus has no reservations about the musician’s way of being; although he is just as far from being satisfied as the sculptor-hermit whom he encountered earlier.

We can surmise that only during his playing does he experience relief from his pain. It is unclear why Odysseus enthusiastically recognizes his friend in Elias, while he was less effusive towards the sculptor. It is also unclear why the sculptor seeks help and receives it, whereas Elias ostentatiously rejects the offer of conversation, indicating that he would nurture his emotional pain instead. The issue of suffering, this time related to fear, will be resolved differently in Book 22, where Odysseus's suggestions will prove to be off the mark. There may be a deeper psychological subtext here. The hermit essentially diagnoses his own situation, and Odysseus facilitates his understanding of the essence of the problem. Moreover, he does so when there is no longer an opportunity to correct the trajectory of life. Elias remains a rebel but is able to continue his own journey. Analogously, like Odysseus, who does not accept external role models, settling his internal anxieties independently. However, in Book 22, Odysseus involuntarily goes beyond his competencies.

In Book 20, the poet describes a primitive tribe of cannibals and the mad Captain Sole, reminiscent of a knight from *La Mancha* in Cervantes's work. Odysseus manages to protect Sole from a ritualistic murder. Nevertheless, the potential victim fails to notice the danger, provoking it once more. This character is both grotesque and tragic. Odysseus metaphorically observes that even death pauses upon hearing the lark's song, implying that not all human actions must be directed towards practical ends. The main discussion resembles the one that takes place in Book 18. Participants include Prince Motherth and Odysseus, with the Lord of the Tower replacing Margaro, reminiscent of Menelaus from Book 4. Here, Odysseus confronts two manifestations of weakness: the Prince, who desires to vanish, and the Lord of the Tower, who wishes to continue his leisurely enjoyment of life without engaging in its essential conflicts. The subtext of this book contains a generalized socio-political commentary. The author of the *Odyssey* witnessed the greatest totalitarianisms of the 20th century. Leaders of criminal systems exploited the indolence of their own elites and the naivety of embittered masses, leading their societies to high levels of self-destruction. However, despite initial suggestions, the *aporia* in this section finds no resolution in the work. The hero appears to be a critic of decadent indifference to the broader social context, but where he actively engages in social life, he suffers defeats. Odysseus recognizes in Captain Sole a brother, although he also sees him as a madman. This suggests that there are people who fulfill themselves as provocateurs of thought, even though their actions are grotesque or tragic in the practical field. The content of this book suggests that their involvement is a full expression of life, which is contrasted with

the ways of decadents and refined intellectuals who avoid livelier passions, both in positive and negative senses. Odysseus indicates that risk and suffering are necessary backgrounds for the joy of life.

The spiritual transformation stemming from suffering also marks a turning point in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the distress of the despairing wanderer is contrasted with the tranquility of Uta-napishti, whose life has lacked drama since the settlement of the king and his family in the land of Dilmun. Although he lives eternally, his life follows a monotonous pattern. Uta-napishti represents a markedly different personality, especially when contrasted with the two heroes of Uruk. The narrator portrays him as a composed sage capable of assessing the injustice of the gods themselves. It can be inferred that he has found solace in a life defined by the uniform rhythm of days and nights, isolated from the tumultuous masses, devoid of the drama of sudden changes. In contrast, Gilgamesh and his partner are created for active pursuits. Enkidu, before becoming human, roamed the forests and steppes with the animals:

Naked like an animal,  
with the gazelles he grazed on grass,  
with the herd he rushed to drink,  
with the beasts he quenched his thirst. (I.109–12)<sup>16</sup>

Upon dying, Enkidu wishes to curse Shamhat, seeking revenge for leading him into the human world, abundant with extreme emotions. It can be inferred that Enkidu recognizes that the animals to which he once belonged are not acquainted with the fear of death. In contrast, Odysseus discovers the joy of communing with animals towards the end of his life:

“I’m thirsty! Ah, for a sip of water to cool my heart!”  
As he sighed softly thus, two honey-colored calves  
moved stumbling down the flowering mountain slopes, and made  
straight for the seashore, mooing, dug their snouts in sand,  
and when sweet water brimmed the shallow pits, they stretched  
with yearning their long gleaming necks and slowly drank.  
Odysseus leapt and with his nails dug in the sand  
till slowly sweet, clear water bubbled round the rocks  
and he, too, fell before the bullocks longingly  
and lapped it swiftly with his tongue and filled his bones:

16. (Helle 2021, 7).

“How beautiful the world!” he cried, and his eyes brimmed;  
 “Ah, how can the delighted soul decide to leave it ever?” (21.556–66)

Implicitly, there is a suggestion that one of the ideals achievable in the *ars moriendi* is a death like the one that characterizes animals. Animals do not fear death because they lack the consciousness of it. Although Odysseus is close to losing his life, having been touched by Death, he nevertheless chooses the path of conscious dying. The “man of many wives” recalls the days when he decided to end the amorous idyll with the divine Calypso and set out on the journey home to Ithaca. Already at the beginning of the poem Odysseus compares the time spent with the beautiful nymph to a spiritual death. Wanting to preserve the acquisitions of his mind until the end of his days, he rejects the temptation of “double” death; that is, dying in the state of unconsciousness. Being already close to the ideal of full self-awareness, he cannot allow for an easier solution—the path of regression. The hero, even in the face of impending death, aims to surpass himself, thus creating a ritual that would facilitate his reflective contemplation of parting with life. Odysseus embarks on the construction of a one-man boat resembling a coffin, with which he ventures to sail to Death as a symbol of eternity. This stage of the journey to the ultimate goal begins with suffering. Odysseus renews the experience of even the lowest levels of spirituality. However, he does it not as a direct participant in social life but as a detached observer and thinker who realizes that only in the world of consciousness is dialectics of opposites and contradictions possible. In the physical world, contradictions lead to catastrophes. This time, the construction is doomed to be completed, despite the frailty of the former hero’s strength, because he is supposed to receive unselfish, almost supernatural assistance:

and the beasts came to sniff his traces and to spy;  
 they crowded close and their eyes shone in the wet leaves,  
 the monkeys rushed about him screeching, aped his ways,  
 and when he bent his body and his ax struck hard,  
 they bent their bodies, too, and helped the old man work.  
 One day a black lightheaded traveler passed that way,  
 thrust secretly amid the leaves, and watched with fear  
 how monkeys, leopards, elephants and weasels ran,  
 assisting sons, to fetch the old man water, tools,  
 to open paths and to drag down the heavy logs;  
 even a bird with crimson wings flew through the sky  
 and fetched divine flame in its claws, the lightning bolt. (21.845–56)

The narrator explains shortly afterward that this drama of extraordinary events is largely a projection of the imagination of the eyewitness:

The crack-brained traveler rushed with haste pellmell to town  
and told of the great miracle, and all minds shook. (21.857–8)

In the community where oral tradition plays a significant role, news of the extraordinary events surrounding the Ascetic, who is “reduced to the role of a god” (21.511), quickly spread:

The seashore filled with ghosts and demons; all who passed  
closed their pale lips for fear of chewing the shrill sounds,  
for they heard laughter and choked wails and piping songs  
and the ax striking joyously to trim the craft. (21.859–2)

The narrator deploys this fable-like image to illustrate myth-making mechanisms:

The brains of men are always filled with wings and air,  
nourished on bubbles always, and well fed with smoke:  
alas, no spirits ached for the old man, and beasts  
but snarled and left him all alone to fight the woods  
with but an ax for comrade, and no other help;  
the two alone hacked down the trees and planed them smooth,  
the two alone stooped down and roughly hewed the hull  
and gave shape to great freedom’s final savage wing. (21.869–76)

One can observe a parallel with the construction of the ship, whose measure is indicated by Uta-napishti. When asked by the old fisherman why the boat resembles a black coffin, Odysseus replies:

Old man, I took a rule and measured my old body,  
old man, I took a rule and measured my heart and mind,  
I measured earth and sky, I measured fear and love,  
the greatest happiness of all, the greatest pain,  
and from my measurements, old man, this coffin came. (21.923–7)

The coffin-boat is a one-person vessel with which, as the old hero believes, Odysseus would reach for eternity. However, as revealed in the subsequent book, life is to impart yet another lesson. Odysseus is compelled to construct

a private “ark” with which he would ultimately reach his destination. If we look for parallels with the Mesopotamian work, it’s mainly on the basis of inversion. If Uta-napishti builds a massive ship to transport all species of land animals and humans, then Odysseus constructs a boat for one living creature—a human who will reach the goal only when he is already dead. In Odysseus’s metaphysics, death is simultaneously eternity, initiating another stage in the endless process of transformations.

In the conclusion of this book, “The Man of Seven Souls” engages in a discussion with the young, black-skinned Fisherman, who is a prefiguration of Christ, and is struck by the maturity of the youth who confirms his argument about the value of selfless love through his way of life. When told that God can save a person at the last moment if they accept Him into their heart, Odysseus responds with enigmatic silence. Nevertheless, a moment earlier, despite enthusiastically praising the spiritual quest of the youth, he emphasizes that their paths are divergent. Odysseus based his philosophy on physicality, which, in his view, the young African disregarded.

The “Man of Seven Souls”; is believed to have already gone through all the stages of spiritual experience and is ready to meet Death. However, fate makes him to face a yet another trial. In the 22nd book, after the boat crash, he finds himself in a settlement of people living in extremely difficult conditions somewhere beyond the southern polar circle. For the last time in his life, he engages in social issues, believing that the people he has encountered would improve their comfort if they freed themselves from their religion of fear. He uses his authority among the naive people, having been convinced that the Good Spirit has visited them. At its urging, the residents give vent to their suppressed emotions, welcoming the spring thawing with joy. However, during the festivities, the ice breaks, resulting in the death of many people. The residents’ carefree attitude during the innocent merriment, which has led to an unfortunate outcome, can be compared to the moment of pleasure during the refreshing bath when Gilgamesh ultimately loses the chance of obtaining the eternal life. The accident in the “white world” proves that it is very easy to make mistakes in assessing other people’s situations, even when one has a significant life experience. Odysseus understands *post factum* that in places where deadly fates are distributed abundantly, one must be particularly careful with attempts to modify habits, considering that the demobilization of vigilance can lead to dramatic consequences. The “Good Spirit” once again revises its understanding, shedding the remnants of arrogance. In the hymn closing the 22nd book, a minor mood of peaceful silence predominates. The assertion that there is no safe haven home (22.1468) points to an issue that Odysseus

have not previously addressed in his reflection—the fragility of human existence. This time, the “Great Voyager” does not react with rebellion, as he has done after the loss of his friends and the catastrophe of the city. Unperturbed calmness indicates that he has reached the penultimate level of initiation, as well as readiness to end the journey:

O soul, you stretch your bottomless, your unslaked palms  
to quench your endless thirst with that immortal water, Death! (22.1475–6).

Before reaching there, he reconciles with his memory, summoning everyone who has responded to him with acceptance (Book 23). However, there is no one from Ithaca except for his faithful dog, Argus.

Finally, with one last effort of the mind, the scene of returning “home” unfolds. The nostalgia for “home,” which develops from Book 16, gains deeper significance. The modern Greek word νοσταλγία (i.e., nostalgia) combines two ancient Greek words, which still retain their original meanings: νόστος “return home,” or “return to the homeland,” and ἄλγος—“suffering,” “pain.” It is not about returning to places from one’s youth or any particular space of physical kind. It is meant to be the return that begins with a flash of light, symbolizing life and spiritual enlightenment. Needless to say, suffering is a necessary condition for the homecoming that brings solace.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The perspectives of the *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh* are contrasting in the socio-political sphere. The editors of successive versions of the Mesopotamian epic crafted ideological propaganda aimed at strengthening the authoritarian rule of the king. Beginning with the Sumerian king Ur-nammu and his son Shulgi (the rulers of Babylon), and up to the fall of the Assyrian dynasties, Mesopotamian scribes suggested an affinity with the legendary hero from Uruk. Editorial changes to the epic text align with a longstanding tradition of ideological consolidation of power through references to the region’s oldest narratives. However, a significant portion of the ideological context of ancient power systems has faded into oblivion along with the scriptoria and their religious framework. Today, we read *Gilgamesh* without interest vested in its ideological baggage with which it was burdened in antiquity. When liberated from institutional duties, the hero of Uruk may serve as a model for self-improvement. The journey of the spirit begins with an aggressive egotist, exploiting his social position over his subjects. In the initial tablets, he appears as an unpredictable man whose



thoughtless actions bring himself and the city to the brink of ruin. The long wanderings through the wilderness of thought, beyond the boundaries of the known world, transform the frivolous individual into a statesman who is conscious of his moral obligations to his own people. The proud words about the erection of the walls of Uruk by the “seven wisemen” show that the former despot, driven by the whims of his “heart,” has learned to listen to and leverage the competencies of others, thereby finally benefiting from the predispositions bestowed upon him by the gods. Although the narrator, speaking of Gilgamesh in the first tablet, informs that “Anu, Enlil, and Ea made him wise” (I.242), his imprudent actions described in the first six tablets suggest that the scribe employed barely concealed irony. It is only the transformation that occurs during Enkidu’s illness that initiates an evolution, the results of which confirm the promise made at the beginning of the work. Gilgamesh does not limit his activity to the horizon of his own existence but writes a literary “travel guide,” enabling the reader to avoid the risk of learning from their own mistakes.

The *Odyssey* is also the journey of a hero with inexhaustible vitality, embarking on it as an arrogant autocrat. In contrast to the Mesopotamian apologia for power, the hero learns to harmonize with minor manifestations of life. He appears as a critic of opportunism, encouraging people in many places to take the risk of full engagement in social life. Yet his own achievements are disappointing. It seems that Odysseus represents a different path than Gilgamesh. We may assume that his proper social role consists of initiating transformations. He does not have the personality of a statesman capable of embodying great ideas but a sensitive soul that perceives them. His proper role is limited to inspiring others on the path of self-realization. Wherever he withdraws early enough from actively influencing social changes, there arises a chance for the success of his initiatives (i.e., Ithaca, Crete, or Egypt). Odysseus, like Gilgamesh, is not a figure to be imitated but a “provocateur” of thought, reaching the maximum of his own possibilities in this field. Analogously to Socrates, whose engagement was limited to suggestive aporia, it turns out to be the most fertile choice of that generation to this day.

Kazantzakis drew inspiration from Buddhism and Christianity, as well as from the philosophies of Plato, Nietzsche, and Bergson (Bien 2007, vol. 1, 194, 214–5). An expression of fondness for the idea of extended love for one’s neighbor is the novel *Saint Francis*—a portrayal of a beggar who, in his affirmation of all forms of life, finds fulfillment. Kazantzakis’s hyperbolic descriptions do not constitute an apology for poverty but rather a praise of Epicurean self-sufficiency, including independence from the intrusive

tendencies of institutional order. Kazantzakis's garden is not a confined *hortus conclusus* but a world whose boundaries are delineated by thought. *The Odyssey* is saturated with metaphors, allegories, and symbols; primarily, it stimulates the imagination and through it, reflection.

It goes well beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively discuss this elaborate and densely woven text, imbued with internal dependencies, adorned with fleeting images transitioning from realism towards dreamlike reveries, fantasies on wakefulness, and myth-making "unfolding before the reader's eyes." The dialectics of opposites signaled in the metaphor of the pear tree and developed from the 16th Book onwards requires detailed elaboration.

The aim of the article was to unveil the interpretative possibilities of the books describing the wanderings of Odysseus's spirit after the abandonment of the concept of the "ideal city" (Prevelakis 1961).<sup>17</sup> Particularly intriguing could be the expansion of hermeneutics regarding the last eight books of the *Odyssey* in comparison with the last four tablets of *Gilgamesh* within the dialectic developed by "late Plato," in dialogues, such as *Parmenides*, *Philebus*, and *Sophist*. Systematic comparisons of metaphors and symbols should reveal deeper connections concerning the negative eschatology in *Gilgamesh* and Kazantzakis's *Odyssey*.

The question of whether Kazantzakis was inspired by *Gilgamesh* remains open. There is no evidence for it, and the parallels do not form a clear network of connections to provide an affirmative answer to the question. At this stage, similar conclusions can be drawn to those regarding the hypothesis of *Gilgamesh*'s influence on Homer's *Odyssey*. Currently, the premises for formulating conclusions about the inspiration of the *Modern Sequel* by the Mesopotamian epic are too ambiguous. Kazantzakis could have found similarities with *Gilgamesh* without knowing the epic itself: in most cases, a familiarity with the Bible would have sufficed. Scenes featuring worms as messengers of death are intriguing. The first such description occurs in the 14th book, during a week-long meditation in a cave, where Odysseus sees a worm crawling up his torso and perceives it as a harbinger of death. This imagery evokes associations with the description of a worm emerging from Enkidu's nose, which awakens Gilgamesh from lethargy and prompts him to decide to bury his partner's remains. Similarly related is the motif of the Waters of Death. In Kazantzakis's *Odyssey*, starting from the 7th book, the symbol of the Water of Immortality, which is also

17. Pandelis Prevelakis, in his influential interpretation, repeatedly uses the term "ideal city," which aligns with its colloquial usage, signifying a positive distinction above mediocrity.

the Water of Death, appears repeatedly.<sup>18</sup> In *Gilgamesh*, the hero was supposed to cross the Waters of Death before reaching the land of Eternal Life. Perhaps a detailed analysis would allow for a plausible conclusion that Kazantzakis, among many other sources, drew from motifs of *Gilgamesh*. Worth exploring would be parallels with other Mesopotamian works, such as the *Enuma Elish*. In the *Odyssey*, there are clear references to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, such as the motifs of meditation in a cave, Tablets of Law, and the symbolism of animals (Konidaris-Fabi 2008). However, there are several differences: Kazantzakis's Odysseus affirms simple people who are open to others as long as they do not adopt servile attitudes. In contrast, he looks unfavorably upon people of refined taste but lacking vivacious temperament. A comparative analysis regarding attitudes toward life, humanity, sensuality, intellectual and ethical maturity, transience, and death could be intriguing. Intuitions dating back to classical antiquity can be recalled: where the scope of our understanding expands, a conducive space for discovery emerges. *Gilgamesh* and Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* stretch the bow from which one can aim for lofty goals.

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18. Furthermore, the motif of the Water of Immortality appears in passages: 8.1253-59; 9.1260; 9.1350; 12.1238-48; 13.1346-51; 14.990; 17.1295, 17.303; 18.1117; 19.354; 22.1465-76; 24.543, 24.1255-56 (Kazantzakis 1963, footnote up to 7.1332-33).

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