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Judas the Cat (Nikos Kazantzakis' Marxist-ish Tempter)

“Let God forgive him – God, because I cannot. May Israel’s blood, tears and ashes fall upon his head!”
(Judas about Jesus)¹.

“[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen”
(Jesus to Judas)².

“All sold to foreign avarice: the land and the sky and the underground. All sold for what we may call – please excuse the paradoxical expression – the reactionaries’ tragic frivolity. And it is so, in truth, that the price of grand treasons tends to be insignificant as compared to what is risked to accomplish them, and to the terrible evils which follow from them, and their motives are no less insignificant and petty, though always turbid and shameful. If you asked: Apart from the thirty silver pieces, why did Judas sell Christ?, it would be very difficult to find the answer.”³

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the most important character is Judas⁴. Nikos Kazantzakis opens his novel with a dream featuring Judas, and in the ending (in the dream/temptation-on-the-cross sequence) one hears a conversation between Jesus and Judas. Why doesn’t *The Last Temptation* faithfully tell the story of Christ,

¹ N. Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, transl. by P.A. Bien, New York 1998, p. 493.

² *Gospel of Judas*, transl. by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, in collaboration with François Gaudard, 2006, http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/_pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf, p. 4.

³ “*Toda vendida a la codicia extranjera: el suelo y el cielo y el subsuelo. Vendida toda por lo que pudiéramos llamar – perdonadme lo paradójico de la expresión – la trágica frivolidad de los reaccionarios.*

Yes que, en verdad, el precio de las grandes traiciones suele ser insignificante en proporción a cuanto se arriesga para realizarlas, y a los terribles males que se siguen de ellas, y sus motivos no son menos insignificantes y mezquinos, aunque siempre turbios e inconfesables.

Si preguntáis: Aparte de los treinta dineros, ¿por qué vendió Judas al Cristo?, os veríais en grave aprieto para responderos.” From: A. Machado, *Meditación del día*, [in:] M. Alonso, A. Tello (eds.), *Antonio Machado: Poeta En El Exilio*, Anthropos Editorial, 1985, p. 109 (my own translation).

⁴ Both in Kazantzakis’ novel and in the film by Martin Scorsese (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), “znowu najważniejszy okazuje się Judasz [...] po raz kolejny decydujący okazuje się Judasz” – “again Judas turns out to be most important [...] and again, Judas proves to be decisive” (M. Lis, *Ostatnie kuszenie Chrystusa*, [in:] *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), Kraków 2007, pp. 388-389).

but concerns itself instead with the traitor-apostle? Why is it that the central figure of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is not Christ, but Judas? According to Kazantzakis, everyone carries Jesus in themselves, and carries Judas in themselves. In each human soul there continues the unceasing battle. The Jesus in the novel is a dreamer, and lives in a world of ideas and of contemplating Divine mysteries. Judas, on the contrary, is a man of action, a doer. He does not think of God but of people. He is active, and always fights until the very end. It is, consequently, he who wins.

1. Nikos the Rebel

Who is the author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*? Nikos Kazantzakis was an impetuous man, adventurous, stubborn, and determined. He loved Homer, Bergson, Nietzsche and Zorba⁵. Among his spiritual guides he listed Buddha, Christ, St. Francis, El Greco and Lenin. He valued fight, clean conscience and nobleness the most. His works were concerned with the fight of the man, who – while he does not believe in anything – does not stop fighting, and seeks God, whom in the end he shall actually never and nowhere find⁶. Such was the main protagonist of Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* (his most important work, which he started seven times; following Homer's example, the work consists of 24 rhapsodies and 33 333 verses) – a lonesome traveller, who in his wandering talks to Managis (Buddha), Captain One (Don Quixote) and the fisherman (Christ), to finally change into a Nietzschean superhuman⁷, die and dematerialise, reaching absolute peace in nirvana. Similarly, in *The Last Temptation of Christ* we shall not find descriptions of Judas' or Jesus' deaths⁸, because Kazantzakis wants his protagonists to dissolve into

⁵ Giorgis Zorba, the model for the protagonist of *Zorba the Greek*, made famous by the performance of Anthony Quinn in Mihalis Kakogiannis' film (1964).

⁶ See: N. Chadzinikolau, *Literatura nowogrecka 1453-1983 (Modern Greek Literature 1453-1983)*, Warsaw-Poznań 1985, p. 122.

⁷ Kazantzakis admired Nietzsche and his works, although he dissociated himself from the idea of the superhuman (see: D. Augustyniak, *Poszukiwania Boga w literaturze kretańskiej na przykładzie twórczości Nikosa Kazantzakisa* [The Search for God in Crete Literature on the Example of Nikos Kazantzakis' Works], Poznań 2009, p. 67). In my opinion, the Judas in *The Last Temptation* is a character which combines the features of a classical hero and a modern fighter for his nation's independence, but he also (or maybe: mainly) has the features of the eternal superhuman (K, 442-448) – and thus Kazantzakis' explanations that he was not imitating Nietzsche there bring to mind explanations that the little Nikos might give when swearing he did not know where the carrot juice went, while his whole face was orange in colour. Another issue is the motive determining rejection of the superhuman idea, as declared by the Greek writer. *The Last Temptation* was written after WWII, so maybe Kazantzakis was unwittingly cutting himself off the Nazi doctrine of "masters and slaves"? Or is it maybe that he could not completely agree with Nietzsche's hatred towards Christianity as he himself deeply admired Jesus as a person?

⁸ It was treated differently by Charles Robert Carner in his film *Judas* (2004). In his version, Judas is an ardent patriot who hates the Romans. When Jesus makes him realise his own spiritual emptiness, Judas

nothingness. Jesus dissolves in the matter (as Jesus-Lazarus), and Judas disappears in the world of the spirit.

Kazantzakis' philosophy, combining the ideas of Nietzsche, Lenin, and elements of Buddhism, does not lead towards Christianity, by any means. However, the passion with which the Greek scandalist asked his questions about the sense of human existence ought to be appreciated. Nikos Chadzinikolau, speaking of the philosophy of life of the author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, states:

„*Nic nie istnieje! Ani życie, ani śmierć!* Ten „bohaterski nihilizm” wywołał wiele nieporozumień. Kazantzakis nie walczył jak Syzyf ze swoim kamieniem. Dochodząc coraz wyżej, spozstrzegając, że rośnie horyzont i jeszcze bardziej oddala się niebo. Jaki więc cel? Jaki obowiązek? Zatrzymać się, czy iść dalej? Bóg kiedyś był siłą, teraz jest słabością. Walczy, by uratować się. I człowiek musi walczyć, żeby poznać nie tylko wartość poświęcenia, ale i bezskuteczność poświęcenia, nie tylko pragnienie wolności, ale i fikcję wolności, żeby połączyć się z Bogiem, osiągnąć jedność. Bóg jest więc to stan, siła w człowieku, „płomień trawiący jego wnętrze”, nigdy jednak ponad człowiekiem, ponad jego pragnienia i żądania. *Sensem naszego Boga – pisał – jest walka. W tej walce rozwijają się i nieustannie działają ból, radość i nadzieja*”⁹.

The text in my loose translation:

[“*Nothing exists! Neither life nor death!* That “heroic nihilism” has caused many misunderstandings. Kazantzakis did not fight like Sisyphus against his boulder. Reaching ever higher grounds, he noticed that the horizon grew and the sky moved away further. So what aim? What duty there was? Should he stop or continue? God was once strength, now He is a weakness. He fights to save himself. And the man must fight to know not only the value of sacrifice, but also the futility of it, not only the desire for freedom, but also the fiction of freedom in order to merge with God, attain unity. God is thus a state, a strength in the man, a “flame consuming his soul”, but never beyond the man, beyond his desires and demands. *The sense of our God, he wrote, is to fight. In that fight there develop and constantly act the pain, joy and hope*”.]

Kazantzakis remained faithful to his beliefs until the end. As an agnostic and non-conformist, he wished his grave to have the inscription: *I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.* But the most valuable description of the writer can be found in the history of Crete dwellers. The Iraklion-born author of *Zorba the Greek* – just like the inhabitants of the island – can fight and suffer; accustomed to death,

curses Him and himself, and then turns Him in to the high priests. “Zrozpaczony, próbuje bezskutecznie ratować swojego Nauczyciela. Śmierć Jezusa i Judasza (przez samobójcze powieszenie) następują w tym samym momencie. Na ułamek sekundy przed zgonem Judasz ma wizję, w której słyszy z ust Nauczyciela, iż za chwilę będą razem w raju” – “In despair he tries in vain to save his Teacher. The deaths of Jesus and Judas (the latter hanging himself) occur at the same moment. A fraction of a second before he dies, Judas has a vision in which he hears from his Teacher that in a moment they will be in paradise together” (S. Bobowski, *Judasz (Judas)*, [in:] *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego (The World Encyclopaedia of Religious Films)*, pp. 229-230).

⁹ N. Chadzinikolau, op. cit., p. 122.

he seeks pride, fight, resurrection; he puts everything on the line, even if there be no hope, he shall never yield to fate's tragic nature¹⁰. Such is his Judas in *The Last Temptation*. Similar to the traitor-apostle... only at first sight. In reality, Kazantzakis' Iscariot does not come from Kerioth, but from Iraklion, and resembles a descendant of Heracles (the patron of that Crete city), who equals gods with his strength and valour¹¹.

2. Judas the Zealot

In Kazantzakis' novel, Judas belongs to the Brotherhood of Saint Assassins. He confesses that when talking to Phillip, whom he tries to make into one of the fighters:

"Turn over well in your mind the words we exchanged. Keep mum; don't let out the secret to anyone. Decide all by yourself. If you're a man and you come to the right decision, I'll reveal to you who we plan to strike [...] You were a mere nothing until now; no one cared whether you were dead or alive. I was the same – a nothing – until the day I entered the brotherhood, but ever since then I've been a different person: I became a man. No more Judas the redbear, the blacksmith [...] Now I'm working for a great purpose, do you hear? – for a great purpose; and whoever works for a great purpose, even if he's the humblest of the lot, he becomes great" (K, 115-116).

The Saint Brotherhood calls to a fight against the Romans and preaches the coming of the Messiah who will give freedom back to Israel:

"Don't pay tribute to the infidels. We have only one Lord, Adonai. Kill every Jew who disobeys the sacred Law, who laughs, speaks or works with the enemies of our God, the Romans. Strike, kill, clear the road so that the Messiah may pass! Cleanse the world, make ready the streets – he is coming!" (K, 114).

In *The Last Temptation*, Judas is not a common criminal. He is a Jewish patriot fighting for the liberation of Israel¹². His connection to the zealots' movement is indicated several times in the novel. In his conversation with Phillip:

The redbear looked around him and lowered his voice:

"Phillip, can you kill? [...]"

"I haven't killed a man yet, but I'd be able to, yes, without a doubt [...]"

Phillip shuddered. He understood.

¹⁰ See: *ibidem*, p. 128.

¹¹ Judas created in the image of the author of *The Last Temptation*, who should be more aptly named Judas-Nikos than an apostle from the Gospel, is the subject of one of my essays (see *Kot czarny. Literatura dla odważnych (Black Cat. Literature for the Bold)*, Kielce 2011, pp. 9-35).

¹² See W. M. Stabryła, *Judasz – sprawiedliwy Starego Testamentu (Judas – the Righteous of the Old Testament)*, "Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny", 2007, No. 2, pp. 85-95.

“Are you one of them – one of the Zealots?” (K, 113-114).

Some time earlier, we seen Judas plotting together with Barabbas, who will later be imprisoned for murder.

“The redbear bolted forward in a frenzy, no longer able to control his heart. He wanted to shout *Long live freedom!* and had already parted his lips, but his companion Barabbas seized him and placed his hand over his mouth” (K, 47).

Finally, as Thomas talks to Jesus, Iscariot is characterised as a particularly dangerous man. Thomas warns Jesus –

“Listen to me: here we’ve got to deal with man – with dishonest, seven-times-shrewd man. To begin with, watch out for Judas the redbear. Before I left Nazareth, I saw him whispering with the mother of the crucified Zealot, and then with Barabbas and two or three other knife-wielding cronies of his from the brotherhood. I heard them mention your name” (K, 129).

Thomas’ warning is very much justified, because the Saint Brotherhood has sentenced Jesus to death. Judas is to execute the sentence – death sentence – passed by the zealots. As a model zealot, Iscariot sets off to meet his prey – he goes to the desert to kill Jesus there. Yet the crime is not committed, although everything is in Judas’ favour:

“Suddenly Judas began to hiss – softly at first and with much tenderness, but all at once the sound grew stronger, became fierce and menacing, and the son of Mary, who had lain down to sleep, jumped up in terror [...]

“Judas, my brother, is that you?” he asked quietly. [...] “I’m delighted to see you, Judas, my brother. I’m ready [...]”

The blacksmith groaned and knit his brows. He did not like, did not like – indeed, it disgusted him to touch a neck which was offered undefended, like a lamb’s. What he wanted was resistance, body-to-body grappling, and the kill to come at the very end as was appropriate for real men, after the blood had become heated: a just reward for the struggle.

The son of Mary waited, his neck stretched forward. But the blacksmith thrust out his huge hand and pushed him away.

“Why don’t you resist?” he growled. “What kind of a man are you? Get up and fight!” (K, 155-156).

Judas cannot understand Jesus’ attitude. Why doesn’t Jesus fight for his life? Why does he want to give up his life so willingly? Paralysed with his victim’s defencelessness, Judas escapes. More than that,

“Ever since the day he left the monastery, he had been unrecognizable” (K, 162).

Judas did not execute the sentence on Jesus, because a bizarre idea was born in him: maybe Jesus *was* the Messiah foretold by the prophets. If he was not

afraid to die, maybe he would lead the uprising against Romans. Judas decided to test that (deciding he could always “eliminate” Jesus later).

The would-be killer turns into an apostle of the Messiah – the carpenter from Nazareth. Actually, he just pretends to be an apostle in order to be better able to watch the potential Messiah and prepare new rings of conspirators who at the right time would start a war against the Romans. Judas

“had gone around the villages [...] He would enter the houses, work, listen to the talk and register in his mind the words and deeds of each man, in order to inform the brotherhood of everything. But where was the old redbear – the rowdy, the wrangler?” (K, 162).

Judas the zealot becomes a silent agent, who awaits the opportune moment. For him, Jesus is only a tool to be used to attain his own plans. Seeing that crowds are starting to gather around the teacher from Nazareth, Judas decides to wait for the situation to develop. He treats Jesus with contempt – seeing the beggars that Jesus meets, he says derisively to Peter:

“Son of Mary” (K, 182);

when he looked at Jesus,

“his hard blue eyes looked daggers at the son of Mary” (K, 183).

But he also yields – and observes that with growing alarm – to a strange fascination with Jesus’ teachings:

“Judas leaned against the pine tree and stroked his red beard in a rage.

“So, son of the Carpenter,” he grumbled, “that’s what you’ve come to tell us, is it? Is this the stupendous message you bring us? You want us to love the Romans, eh? Are we supposed to hold out our necks like you do your cheek, and say, ‘Dear brother, slaughter me, please?’ (K, 185-186).

However, when listening to Jesus preach about the kingdom of heaven (which is not a state in geographical terms, but a spiritual space, freedom from evil and hatred) and call to unite¹³, Judas loses patience:

“the redbear kept his indignation within him, brooding over it and forcing himself to be patient and wait. He does not know what he’s talking about, he grumbled to himself. He lives in a dream world and hasn’t the slightest idea of what goes on around him. My heart will change only if the world about me changes. Only if the Romans disappear from the land of Israel will I find relief!” (K, 196-197).

¹³ “Change your heart, and heaven and earth will embrace, Israelites and Romans will embrace, all will become one.” (K, 196).

At the same time, Judas keeps a close and stubborn eye on Jesus. It seems to him that the candidate for the Messiah will awaken and suddenly start preaching a holy war against the Romans. Certainly, he is fed up with listening to the Gospel about loving your enemies (in his view, those are teachings for the weak, for a clan of slaves), and he does not attempt to hide that, but all the time watches the situation develop in order to use an opportune moment and declare a revolution. Should Jesus oppose his plans, Judas will not hesitate to turn against Him:

“Son of Mary, I don’t fit in with the others [...] I am a wild, uncompromising beast I was born out of wedlock and my mother threw me into the wilderness, where I suckled on the milk of the wolf. I became rough, rigid, and honest. Whoever I love, I’m dirt under his feet; whoever I hate – I kill [...] I am even able to kill someone I love, if I see him slip away from the true path (K, 203).

That declaration of Judas is as much brutal and cruel, as it is strikingly honest. Poor, miserable Judas, lost in the world of war and blood, looks towards Jesus, with a heart full of doubts – who is that mysterious young man from Nazareth? A dreamer or a madman? A true prophet, or a false messiah who will bring undoing unto Israel? Rather than delve in theological speculation, Kazantzakis’ Judas takes action¹⁴ – he stops being silent, and goes on to realise his plan. Since Jesus did not dare to declare a holy war for the freedom of Israel, Judas will use him like a banner. People, fascinated with the words and miracles of the teacher from Nazareth, will follow Him, when Judas (as His apostle) calls for driving the Romans out of Jerusalem.

3. Judas the Apostle

The Judas in Kazantzakis’s novel is strong. None of the other apostles can match him. The *Gospel of Judas* shows Iscariot in the same manner:

“They all said, “We have the strength.” But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot.”¹⁵ (*Gospel of Judas*).

It might be said that Judas is Jesus’ right-hand man:

“The sun fell upon the lake and illuminated the world. The redbear took the lead, blazing trail. Jesus followed” (K, 206).

And in another place:

¹⁴ “Watch out, son of Mary. I’ve said it once and I say it again: watch out, take the road I tell you. Why do you think I go along with you? Well, you’d better learn: it’s to show you your way.” (K, 204).

¹⁵ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 1.

Jesus “would call Judas” (K, 230) or “They left. Judas went in the lead” (K, 233).

Judas leads Jesus to Jerusalem so that in the holy city the prophet from Nazareth is revealed to be the true Messiah. Then the whole nation would take up arms.

For Judas, Jesus is no more a common carpenter from Nazareth, whom he earlier contemptuously called *son of Mary*. He has now become *son of David*, The Messiah sent by God. Hence it is the more intensively that he encourages Jesus to act, and wants no more delay:

“God lives for many years,” he shouted. “He is immortal; he can be patient therefore and wait. But I’m human, a thing, I tell you, that’s in a hurry. I don’t want to die before I see what I have now only in my mind – not only see it, but touch it with my hands!” (K, 246).

For Judas this is the time to start realising his plan. Alone at the head of the group of apostles (K, 292), Judas looks upon other disciples with a sense of superiority, because he feels chosen – only he is the confidant of Jesus’ true secret:

Thank you, God of Israel, for not fashioning me in their image. I was born in the desert; I’m made of Bedouin granite, not of soft Galilean soil [...] I – the savage, the devil, the cutthroat – I shall not abandon him (K, 258).

Judas wants to free Israel together with Jesus. The closer the fulfilment of his plans, the more his love to Jesus grows, and he makes a declaration of faithfulness – even in extreme adversity¹⁶. Judas is a true soldier, who knows no fear. He abandons his service to the Brotherhood (Barabbas demands that he execute the sentence on Jesus – K, 292) and forgets about the Zealot movement, as following Jesus becomes the most important thing for him. The powerful, blind hatred of the Romans changes in Judas into an equally fierce attachment and love to the Teacher from Nazareth. In his theological deliberations, Judas sees Jesus as the new John Baptist. So far, Jesus from Nazareth was a gentle lamb, and the prophet from the River Jordan was violent like a lion – after John Baptist’s death, the Messiah has combined those two personalities in the body of Jesus. He has become, in Judas’ eyes, the lamb and lion in the same body, like a fearful ancient monster (K, 297).

Despite many imponderables (Iscariot’s heart is plagued by recurrent doubts), Judas has already made his decision – he will follow Jesus until the end. Only he is able to keep up with Him in fulfilling God’s mission. He becomes the first among the apostles and... the one most faithful, as proven by the shocking dialogue:

¹⁶ “You damned stalwarts [...] One day every single one of you will forsake him – mark my words – while I alone shall not betray him” (K, 286).

“Judas: I’m with you to the death. You know that.
Jesus: Not enough! Do you hear – not enough. Till beyond death! ... Let us go!” (K, 295).

Judas expects that after John Baptist, who baptised with water, Jesus will bring a greater baptism – one with fire. As Jesus’ confidant, he looks down upon the other apostles, he laughs at them when they come back beaten after preaching the Gospel. More than that, he becomes Jesus’ personal guard in danger:

“Judas had now seized the strongest of the stalwarts and was stepping on him, the knife at his throat. But Jesus arrived in time to pull back the redbear’s arm. “Judas, my brother,” he cried, “no blood! no blood!”
“What then – water?” shouted the redbear, enraged. “have you forgotten that you hold an ax? The hour has come!” (K, 311)

Iscariot continually reminds Jesus of the mission to free Israel, and does not allow a moment’s weakness:

“Revolution! Remember the Maccabees! They expelled the Greeks. It’s our turn now” (K, 347).

At the same time, he is filled with various doubts. He does not know who the mysterious Messiah is, and how to understand the mission of freeing Israel from its captivity:

“Who is the Messiah?” he murmured. “Who? Is it perhaps the entire people? [...] Why must we grope in an agony, trying to see which one is the Messiah? That’s it: the people are the Messiah – I, you, every one of us. The only thing we have to do is take up arms!” (K, 227).

Starting with chapter XXV (there are thirty three chapters in the novel), Kazantzakis uses, with growing frequency, the expression “faithful dog” when speaking of Judas. Before the description of Mary Magdalene’s death there appears

“a black, red-spotted dog [...], its tongue hanging out” (K, 451).

The valley Magdalene is walking through is suddenly covered with cypresses and palms, and the landscape resembles a cemetery. Judas the faithful dog, often called redbear by Kazantzakis, not only seems to be present at the execution, but even instigates it (the black, red-spotted dog is likely to function as a symbol of Iscariot here).

Judas always accompanies Jesus and never leaves his side (K, 384). He doesn’t allow Jesus to leave anywhere without his knowledge:

“The redbear growled and bared his teeth like a sheep dog that hears his master’s voice” (K, 246).

He knows – or maybe just intuitively feels – that something great will happen, that the most important event in his life and the history of Israel is about to happen. Over and over, Iscariot renews his declaration of fidelity towards his Master:

“But Judas interrupted. ‘I’ll come with you, Master; I won’t leave you.’ ‘Come,’ said the master. ‘I won’t leave you either.’

Off they went toward Jerusalem, the two in front and Judas behind like a sheep dog” (K, 377).

The tension and apprehension grow in the novel. Judas feels that the final hour is close. Is Jesus the Messiah, or just another false prophet? Will Israel be freed, or will the Romans drown the country in its own blood? Judas is not a passive bystander – he takes matters into his hands, because he has been called to be an actor in the mysterious play.

4. Judas Betrayed

The Evangelists present Judas’ betrayal variously. Luke writes that “Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve. And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. And they were glad, and covenanted to give him money. And he promised” (22, 3-6). Mark adds: Judas “sought how he might conveniently betray him” (14, 11). And John states strongly: “And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him...” (13, 2)¹⁷. In *The Last Temptation*, it is Jesus’ initiative – it is He who assigns the mission to the last apostle:

“Judas,” Jesus answered after a deep silence, “I am now going to confide a terrible secret to you.” Judas bowed his red-haired head and waited with gaping mouth.

“You are the strongest of all the companions. Only you, I think, will be able to bear it. I have said nothing to the others, nor will I. They have no endurance. [...]

For the world to be saved, I, of my own will, must die.” (K, 385-387)

¹⁷ Card. Martini offers an interesting interpretation of the fragment from John. He states that the oldest codes – Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, and the Vulgate – say: *When the devil put it in his heart that Judas betray Him*. Jesus has put it in his own heart that he had to go to His Father and that he wanted to love his own unto the end. Satan put something different in his own heart – that Judas had to betray Jesus. Satan saw Judas being the weakest, a little embittered and discontented; he saw Judas standing at the border of the final split. (After: C. M. Martini, *Lud w drodze* (orig. *Popolo in cammino*), transl. by S. Obirek, Kraków 1992, p. 99). – All Bible quotes after King James Version.

Judas –

“had expected a different Messiah, a Messiah with a sword, a Messiah at whose cry all the generations of the dead would fly out of their tombs in the valley of Josphat [...] And the Messiah would sit on the throne of David with the Universe as a cushion under his feet, for him to step on. This, this was the Messiah Judas Iscariot had expected” (K, 387).

Meanwhile, Jesus wants to give his life voluntarily to redeem all people. What is more, the zealot and rebel who by accompanying Jesus was turned into His friend, must participate in the mysterious redemption sacrifice. At the same time, a sense of superiority, of being chosen, grows within him. He takes little notice of the apostles, who become second-class disciples to him:

“He detested the sight and sound of them; he could speak only with the rabbi. A terrible secret joined the two of them and separated them from the rest.” (K, 392)

Actually, the Judas from the novel has been cheated by Jesus. He wanted Jesus, as the Messiah, to free Israel. However, Jesus is not only unable to fulfil Judas’ plans, but even asks him for help in something that is completely against the head (and the heart) of Iscariot. And so – according to Kazantzakis – Judas’ betrayal proves his fidelity. During the last supper, Judas

“having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night” (J 13, 30).

Similarly in *The Last Temptation*: After Judas leaves the supper room, a strong gust of wind blows out the light of candles on the menorah. The very moment of treason (the kiss of Judas) is almost imperceptible in Kazantzakis’ version:

Jesus “felt Judas’s heavy-breathed mouth glued to his own and heard a hoarse, despairing voice: ‘Hail, Rabbi!’” (K, 392).

The innocent Jesus and the innocent Judas meet in the olive garden to redeem mankind together. They are the only ones who know what they participate in. Without Judas, Jesus would not be able to accomplish the work of redemption. In Kazantzakis’ “gospel”, Judas strongly resembles Abraham, who sacrifices Isaac, his son – he is like the father of the human family who sacrifices the Lamb which has to die to expiate people’s sins.

5. Judas the Immortal

In Kazantzakis' novel *Judas* is a character that "absorbs" the successive people standing in his way to Jesus. It is Judas who brings about the death of Mary Magdalene (K, 451), who takes Simon Peter's place among the apostles (K, 212; 406). It is he – and not St John – who is the Lord's beloved disciple (K, 206; 410). At first, Kazantzakis' Judas was a zealot, a villain – then he gradually transforms into Judas of the black matter, absorbing everyone who stands in his way to Jesus. He becomes the only and most important companion for Jesus:

"'Judas!'" but the unsociable disciple was at the very end and did not hear.

"Judas!" Jesus shouted again, desperately.

"Here!" the rebeard replied. He pushed aside the other disciples in order to pass through. "What do you want, Rabbi?"

"Stay next to me, Judas. Keep me company."

"Don't worry, Rabbi, I won't leave you." He took the rope from Peter's hand and began to lead.

"Do not abandon me, Judas, my brother," Jesus said once more." (K, 407)

But what shocks the most, is that the black matter which constitutes Judas' personality absorbs Jesus more and more strongly. It seems almost as if they were merged into one person, as proven by the dialogue in which Judas – using the plural of *we mustn't* or *us* – stresses his communion with Jesus:

"John leaned close to Jesus's breast.

"What are you thinking about, Rabbi?" he asked.

But Jesus pushed him away.

"Judas, come here beside me," he said, and he supported himself on the rebeard's sturdy arm.

"Courage, Rabbi," Judas whispered. "the hour has come; we mustn't let them be ashamed of us."

Jacob stared with hatred at Judas." (K, 410).

The apostles cannot save Jesus, who now wants to talk to Judas only. And only Judas receives a blessing to complete the work of betrayal:

"'Tonight,'" he said, "we shall be praying under the olive trees of Gethsemane, past the Cedron Valley. Judas, my brother, go – with God's blessing. God be with you!"

Judas parted his lips. He wanted to say something, but changed his mind. The door was open. He rushed out, and his large feet were heard stamping heavily down the stone stairs" (K, 428).

The *Gospel of Judas* ends in turning Jesus in:

"And he received some money and handed him over to them."¹⁸

¹⁸ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 7.

Similarly with Kazantzakis – after the last supper and the kiss of betrayal, the story of Judas breaks off. The novel passes over both the despair of the traitor, who brings the thirty silver pieces back to the high priests, and Judas’s death. Iscariot appears once more – in the *last temptation* from the title (Jesus’ dream, included in the last four chapters of the novel). Thus Jesus meets Judas in his dream at the beginning of the novel; the dream comes again during the last temptation, as Christ is dying on the cross. The temptation from the title is a demonic vision in which Jesus sees his happy future. He lives in Bethany, in the house of Lazarus whom he physically resembles. Now, as Jesus-Lazarus, he becomes the happy husband to Mary Magdalene, and later to Martha and Mary (K, 412-422). The calm, happy life is good, because it has become a fully human life. All that is going to happen if Jesus abandons the nonsensical – in the tempter’s logic – suffering on the cross.

In the dream sequence there also appear the apostles, blaming Jesus. Had he been crucified, they could have preached the Gospel, but he deserted. However, their complaints and grievances are more ridiculous than threatening. They are weak, cowardly people whose opinion is of no great consequence. And then Judas returns:

a “colossus”, “like a withered, lightning-charred tree”, “full of vigor, and unyielding”, “his obstinate skull is steaming with rage” – “desert lion” (K, 488-489).

Jesus-Lazarus makes an attempt at conversing with his beloved disciple and friend:

“But Jesus had fixed his eyes on his old savage companion and was speaking to him sweetly. “Judas [...] you went down to Jerusalem, seized the traitorous Sadducees, tied red ribbons around their necks and slaughtered them like lambs on the altar of the God of Israel. You’re a great, gloomy, desperate soul, Judas. Since the day we separated you haven’t seen a single day of gladness. Judas, my brother, I missed you very much. Welcome!” (K, 489).

At first Judas is silent – but he has not come in order to be silent. His accusation is cried out in the face of heaven and earth:

“Judas suddenly lashed out [...] and uttered a great, savage cry: “Traitor! [...] Your place was on the cross where the God of Israel put you to fight. But you got cold feet and the moment death lifted its head, you couldn’t get away fast enough [...] And you changed your face and your name, you fake Lazarus, to save yourself!” (K, 490-491).

It seems that Judas will kill Jesus, that he will execute the sentence passed forty years earlier by the zealots. The apostles flee in panic – they are just a group of old men, and Judas is strong. There comes the final confrontation:

“Judas and Jesus were now standing face to face” (K, 492).

The world stops to await the outcome of that meeting. And then... Judas' anger suddenly turns into a profession of love.

““You broke my heart, son of the Carpenter,” bellowed Judas, “how do you expect me to speak to you affectionately? Sometimes I want to scream and wail like a widow and bang my head against the rocks! Curse the day you were born, the day I was born, the hour I met you and you filled my heart with hopes! When you used to go in the lead and draw us along behind you and speak to us about heaven and earth, what joy that was, what freedom, what richness! [...] You took me in your arms – do you remember? – and begged, “Betray me, betray me. I must be crucified and resurrected so that we can save the world!”

Judas stopped for a moment and sighed. His wounds had reopened and begun to drain [...] A tear popped into Judas's eye. Crushing it angrily, he resumed his shouting. His heart was still not empty.

“ ‘I am the lamb of God,’ you bleated. ‘I go to the slaughter so that I may save the world. Judas, my brother, do not be afraid. Death is the door to immortality. I must pass through this door. Help me!’ And I loved you so much, I trusted you so much, that I said, “Yes” and went and betrayed you. And you... you [...]

“Quiet! Quiet!” Jesus begged. The blood began to run from his five wounds.” (K, 491-492)

For Judas, Jesus is a traitor. He is dead and buried:

“Let God forgive him – God, because I cannot. May Israel's blood, tears and ashes fall upon his head!” (K, 493).

The apostles realise their own fall and join Iscariot, who has turned out to be the only faithful one:

“Judas, step in front, lead us!” (K, 495).

And Jesus begs his forgiveness:

“«Judas, my brother, forgive me!» and started to rush into the redbear's arms. But Judas jumped back, put out his hands and would not let him come near” (K, 493).

Judas replies with the words said by Christ Arisen to Mary Magdalene:

Don't touch me!

(but how could she have heard that – here Kazantzakis is exceptionally carefree in his usually faithful attitude to the Gospel – if there was no morning of Resurrection because Jesus turned out a traitor and escaped from the cross?!).

Jesus finally understands: he is a coward and a traitor. He should have been crucified, but he lacked the courage. Everyone looks upon him with anger and hatred:

“You deceived us [...] Judas is right: you broke your word. Our lives have gone to waste”
(K, 494).

And at that moment... the dream ends. Jesus is alone. Plunged into darkness, he is hanging on the cross.

“His head quivered. Suddenly he remembered where he was, who he was and why he felt pain. A wild, indomitable joy took possession of him. No, no, he was not a coward, a deserter, a traitor. No, he was nailed to the cross. He had stood his ground honorably to the very end; he had kept his word. [...] His disciples were alive and thriving. They were gone over sea and land and were proclaiming the News. Everything had turned out as it should, glory be to God!” (K, 495-496)

Such is the ending to the “Gospel of Kazantzakis”. The novel gives no description of Judas’ or Jesus’ deaths. The author wants his characters to dissolve into nothingness. Jesus dissolves in the matter; as Lazarus – on abandoning the messianic aspirations – he blends into a world of breath and blood. Judas attains a different *nirvana* – spiritual nothingness. Faithful until the end, he seeks Jesus to right everything. He is the only one not to betray Him, he is faithful until the very end. He exists beyond time, does not grow old, and remains faithful to his ideals. Essentially... he is like Nikos Kazantzakis, the heroic nihilist!

* * *

In the *Gospel of John*, Judas

“was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein” (12, 6).

In *Gospel of Judas*, he was the thirteenth disciple, and a man cursed. In *The Last Temptation of Christ* he is the winner. In the final scene of his last meeting with Jesus

“Judas stopped for a moment and sighed. His wounds had reopened and begun to drain [...] “Quiet! Quiet!” Jesus begged. The blood began to run from his five wounds” (K, 491-492).

It is Judas who wakes Jesus to life, who wakes him from the temptation of lethargy. Jesus returns to the cross because he does not want to betray the faithful Judas, he doesn’t want him to fight alone... However, Kazantzakis’ novel is not part of the Apocrypha preaching the victory of the Gospel of love. Actually, Kazantzakis’ work is not about the story of Jesus; it is a story of dreams. A dream begins, and a dream ends the novel. In either dream, Jesus meets... Judas. And it is Judas who stands at the heart of the story – Judas is the final victor. One might even – on read-

ing *The Last Temptation of Christ* – risk posing the thesis that there exists only Judas, and all else is a dream.

But whence the “cat” from the title, if in presenting Judas Kazantzakis uses the image of a black dog which faithfully follows Christ? A work from four centuries ago – *The Sixth Vision, of Hell* (1608) – is to blame for that. The author, Francisco de Quevedo, thus describes his journey through the land of the damned:

“But if you would see somewhat worth the while, leave these fellows, and follow me; and I’ll shew ye *Judas* and his *Brethren*, the *Stewards* and *Purse-bearers* [...] he brought me to *Judas* and his *Companions* [...] and an *Eunuch* into the Bargain: Which perhaps (nay probably) He was; for nothing but a *Capon’d*, a *thing unman’d*, could ever have been guilty of so Sordid, and Treacherous a Villany, as to sell, and betray his Master, with a Kiss; and after that, so Cowardly, as to Hang himself in despair, when he had done.”¹⁹

Quevedo calls Judas a perfidious traitor and an avaricious rascal, who sold his Teacher, Lord and God, for “so base a price”. The damned Iscariot thus replies to the accusation:

“If Men (said he) were not ungrateful; they would rather Pity, or Commend me, for an Action so much to their Advantage, and done in Order to their Redemption. The Misery is mine, that am to have no part my self, in the Benefit I have procured to others. Some *Hereticks* there are, (I must confess to my Comfort,) that adore me for’t. But do you take *me* for the *only Judas*? No, No, There have been many since the Death of my Master, and there are at this day, more wicked, and ungrateful”²⁰.

In the times of the author of *The Vision of Hell*, “cat” was the name for thieves. In *The Last Temptation*, Judas is by no means – despite the stubborn repeating that the traitor-apostle was faithful to Christ (Kazantzakis is truly feigning utter ignorance here!) – dog-faithful. The Judas from the novel is a cat: first he stole Jesus from poor Mary Magdalene and caused her death. Then he stole the Master from the apostles. Finally, he robbed the man from Nazareth himself – in Kazantzakis’ work it is Judas who ultimately decides everything, he takes on the role of the guide, or even of the Messiah. Judas becomes Jesus, and the true Jesus will later play Lazarus. Kazantzakis knows very well where he is heading, he fawns and puns to the readers: after all, the final victor in his novel was to be Iscariot.

Abstract (Summary):

In this paper I analyze the character of Judas in the famous novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus is weak and full of doubt,

¹⁹ F. de Quevedo, *The visions*, transl. by Roger L’Estrange, London 1696, p. 226-7; original capitals and italics.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 228-9.

whereas Judas is a volcano of energy. Furthermore, the Greek writer of makes his Judas a superman. Only through his help does Jesus fulfil the mission. In the novel Judas is a realist, while Jesus lives in a dream world. Finally, Judas wins, and he is true to himself. Kazantzakis' creation of Judas is different both from what we know from the *Gospel of John*, as well as the version of the apocryphal *Gospel of Judas*. Kazantzakis, however, does not tell the history of Judas as another version of the fall of the traitor apostle, but announces an original version of Judas which stands in opposition to that of ecclesiastical orthodoxy. It is a story of – a man who struggles with God (and even against God) for his own immortality.

Key words:

Judas, betrayal, traitor, Gospel, Jesus

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Кс. Стэфан Радзішэўскі (нар. у 1971), PhD, кандыдат тэалагічных навук (гамілетыка, КЛТУ, 2005, кандыдацкая дысертацыя *Przepowiadanie homilijne biskupa Mieczysława Jaworskiego jako odpowiedź na zasadnicze wyzwania czasów współczesnych* [Гамілетычнае прадбачанне біскупа Мечыслава Яворскага ў якасці адказа на асноўныя заклікі сучаснасці]), кандыдат гуманістычных навук (польская філологія, КЛТУ, 2009, кандыдацкая дысертацыя *Pomiędzy duchem a materią. Wokół zagadnień wczesnej poezji Anny Kamieńskiej*. [Паміж духам і матэрыяй. У кантэксце праблем ранняй паэзіі Ганны Каменскай]), прэфект Назарэтанскай школы ў Кельцах, капелан каталіцкага інтэлектуальнага клуба (КІК) у Кельцах, аўтар кніг: *Kamieńska ostiumiczna* [2011], (*Ostium Каменска*, пра паэзію Ганны Каменскай), *Katechizm sercem pisany* [2006] [Катэхізіс, напісаны сэрцам] (пра казанні біскупа Мечыслава Яворскага), *Kot czarny. Literatura dla odważnych* [2011] [Чорны кот. Літаратура для смелых], а таксама *Kot biały. Literatura dla samotnych* [2012] [Белы кот. Літаратура для сумных і самотных], *Siedem twarzy Judasza* [2012] [Сем абліччаў Юды (апостал-зраднік у літаратуры XX стагоддзя)], *Poezja w sutannie* [2011] [Паэзія ў сутане (анталогія)], а таксама *Rekolekcje dla młodzieży* [2012] [Рэкалекцыі для моладзі (аўдыёкніга)]; выкладае літаратуру ў Універсітэце Яна Кахановскага ў Кельцах, Вышэйшай духоўнай семінары ў Кельцах, а таксама кіруе семінарскім тэатрам.

[Тлумачэнне на беларускую мову: Eugeniusz Pańkow, Helena Antoniewicz]