

# “My dream to become somebody else”: The Dissociative Desire in Theodor Kallifatides’ *The Past Is Not a Dream*<sup>1</sup>

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“Στην Ελλάδα οι άντρες ζούσαν μέσω της γυναίκας”.

Θοδωρή Καλλιφατίδη, Μελένη Στέλιο

## 1. Introduction

Theodor Kallifatides (Molaoi, Greece, 1938) is a poet, a novelist, an essayist, and a translator whose literary career began in 1969, after his migration to Sweden. He belongs to the generation of young Greeks after the end of the Second World War and the Civil War and in the middle of the Cold War and the Marshall Plan, that had no choice but to leave the country to survive and pour their experiences into writing (Ambatzopoulou 1994). His prolific work deals with various themes, such as the life of migrants in Sweden; Life in Greece from the 1940s until today; the intertwinement between national and gender identity; love, marriage, infidelity, paternity, and abandonment; the social construction of gender; and

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<sup>1</sup> This essay furthers and extends some of the observations contained in the paper “La prigione del mio genere’: la mascolinità, la Grecia e l’altra in A. Sourounis e T. Kallifatides” delivered at the XII Colloquio Internazionale sul Medioevo Romano e Orientale *Medioevo e moderno: fenomenologia delle rappresentazioni dell’alterità fra Oriente e Occidente*, held in Catania on 21 and 22 November 2019.

bilingualism. He is an established author in both countries and he has been studied by critics both as a Greek diaspora writer and as a migrant Swedish writer<sup>2</sup>. He published only in Swedish during the first twenty years of his career (his books were translated by others into Greek from 1986); however, since 1994 he has self-translated his books from Swedish to Greek and vice versa, giving rise to a rewriting of his own novels.

Taking into account two theories regarding literary triangles, namely Girard's theory on mimetic desire<sup>3</sup> and Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory on homosocial desire<sup>4</sup>, in the following pages I will offer a close reading of Theodor Kallifatides' autobiographical work *Τα περασμένα δεν είναι όνειρο* (The Past is Not a Dream). I will argue that the book features a triangular structure that does not fall under

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<sup>2</sup> With regards to the literary frame of the modern Greek diaspora see Balta 1998, Chatzevasileiou 2018: 411-412, Kallan 2003, Pappas 2004, Recuenco Peñalver 2017; for critiques that include him among the Swedish migration writers, see Bassini 2009, Ciaravolo 2017, Ciaravolo 2019, Cremnitzer 2010, Cremnitzer 2013, Eriksson 2010, Gokielis 2017, Granqvist 2013, Gröndhal 2009, Kongslien 2007, Rossell 1982, Stoubæk 2011. Whether from a Greek or a Swedish perspective, the majority of the critics have focused their attention primarily on the topic of migration, with few exceptions (see Recuenco Peñalver 2017, Eriksson 2010, Granqvist 2013, Rossell 1982).

<sup>3</sup> René Girard (1965) pointed out a recurrent triangular scheme in the literary production of great novelists. At the three summits of this structure stand a desired object, a subject, and a mediator who give life to the dynamic of desire that animates the novel itself. According to Girard, the subject's desire for the object is actually caused by the mediator, who often plays the role of a romantic rival. The mediator's desire for the object creates a second desire in the subject that is exactly the same as the mediator's: a competing desire. Therefore, the subject's impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator. The resolution of the story only happens when, at the end of the novel, the subject finally repudiates the mediator and the "divinity" he represented, renouncing his pride. The gaze of the subject is no longer directed at the mediator but at himself, and the desire that until that moment had created passions, hate, jealousy, and envy is appeased when it is no longer mediated, but autonomous.

<sup>4</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) refocused Girard's theory and proposed a new point of view on the literary triangle: she investigated an extended sample of texts – both from a chronological point of view and in terms of genre – in order to shed light on a recurrent triangular scheme where two (or two groups of) men establish a relationship through a woman. This literary triangle constitutes the reflection of those social and political relations that structure the masculine and feminine sexual economy; its distinguishing feature is what Kosofsky Sedgwick called "homosocial desire", namely the set of connections between men that produce a power hierarchy that keeps them at the top, transforming women in a sort of exchange currency. Hence, although the female characters in literature are usually represented as objects of desire or rivalry, and consequently romanticized or eroticized, they are in fact the means through which the male characters can interact together, above all suspicion of homosexual content.

the variants included in these theories and that it is actually situated in the interstices between the two. At its summit stand a subject, a desired object, and a mediator, but just as in Girard's (1965) reading of Dostoyevsky's work, or perhaps even more so, the mediator here is placed in the foreground while the object of desire is relegated to the background, creating a novelistic composition that openly reflects the real hierarchy of desire. The mediator and the subject are two different "versions" of the narrating self, and while in Girard's theory the impulse of the subject toward the mediator is concealed by the desire toward the object, in Kallifatides it is revealed; the object is embodied by various female characters. However, the triangle does not mirror the economy of sex where women play the role of exchange currency between men, as in Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory, because it actually constitutes a process of emancipation from that economy. The book describes the life of the narrator, the evolution of his literary career, and his migration from Greece to Sweden not as a *Bildungsroman*-like linear path of maturation, but as a transformation, a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the self that is not caused by a desire to emulate – as in Girard – but by an urge to stand out from the dominant paradigm, by a dream to “να γίνω ένας άλλος”<sup>5</sup> (Kallifatides 2012: 165). This tension, that I call “dissociative desire”, involves the textual dimension as a space of elaboration and critical thinking on the construction of identity and translates into a distancing from a model of hegemonic masculinity – perceived by the protagonist as inextricably interwoven with Greek national identity – and into the acquisition of a new self with the mediation of women.

## 2. “Becoming somebody else”: The Journey of *The Past Is Not a Dream*

The protagonist of *The Past Is Not a Dream* is Theodor Kallifatides himself, and for this reason the book was received as an autobiography<sup>6</sup>; however, the work

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<sup>5</sup> “To become somebody else”. All the translations of Greek excerpts in this paper are mine.

<sup>6</sup> In 2013, the book received the Greek national prize for “Testimony-biography-chronicle-travel literature”, and it was presented to the Greek public as an autobiography. As with the other books from the same author, the cover does not bear any description of the genre to which the story belongs. On the back cover though, the story is defined as “Μια βαθιά εξομολόγηση επί τον τύπον των ήλων” [an in-depth confession that cuts to the chase]. The cover of the Swedish edition

resembles a novel and it presents the features of the author's fiction, such as the unadorned style, the episodic narrative, the frequent time jumps, here mainly formed by flash-forwards, and the theme itself. The story can be divided into two main parts, separated by the moment in which the protagonist decides to leave for Sweden.

The first part, where the protagonist is in his childhood and young age, describes a phase of identity formation. However, it is an imperfect formation, an unstable construction full of cracks and chinks that leaves the protagonist in a conflict between a sense of attachment and a sense of extraneousness. I am referring in particular to the constant sense of “ανικανότητα να προσαρμοστώ”<sup>7</sup> (*ibid.*: 104) expressed by the narrator, as opposed to the strong feelings of love and affection that tie him to Greece. The second part of the story begins under the auspices of the imposition of a new name: in his first passport Θεόδωρος Καλλιφατίδης is rendered as Theodore Kallifatides. He starts a new life in Sweden where his identity conflicts are slowly appeased, cracks close and little by little a new, complete identity is recomposed. The new language, Swedish, and the writing happening in this new language give a fundamental contribution to this “therapeutic” process<sup>8</sup>: “Είχα ξαναρχίσει να γράφω, μα κάτι περίεργο συνέβαινε. Τα ελληνικά δεν κολλούσαν με τη ζωή μου”<sup>9</sup> (*ibid.*: 182). The intensity of the new situation becomes an irresistible drive to write, but he can only express himself in this unexplored language whose “personality” is completely different from Greek and that has only recently come to be part of his life. The books born under these new circumstances are highly successful, and the recognition of his

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(Kallifatides 2010) reads “en självbiografisk roman” [an autobiographic novel] instead of the description “roman” [novel] usually used for Kallifatides' novels; on the back, an excerpt of the book is followed by this comment: “Så inleds den självbiografiska romanen, berättelsen om vad som format människan bakom ett av landets mest älskade författarskap” [This is the beginning of the autobiographical novel, the story that shaped the man behind one of the most beloved writings in the country]. I would like to thank Ulrik Brüer Gerber for help with the translation.

<sup>7</sup> “Inadaptability”.

<sup>8</sup> With regards to language's therapeutic function in Kallifatides see Recuenco Peñalver 2017.

<sup>9</sup> “I had started to write again, but something strange happened. Greek language didn't match with my life anymore”.

readers – namely their appreciation, but also their ability to identify him based on his portrait, published on the cover – adds an important piece to the process of identity reconstruction of the protagonist: “‘Μα εσύ είσαι’. Μία από τις καλύτερες κριτικές της ζωής μου. Είχα πάει εντελώς άγνωστος σε μια νέα χώρα κι είχα γίνει εγώ” (*ibid.*: 185)<sup>10</sup>.

The idea of becoming an other, the multiplication and fragmentation of identity in different personalities, with the help of bilingualism and the condition of being a migrant, is a recurrent theme in Kallifatides’ works, so much so that the critics went so far as to speak of schizophrenia (Kallan 2003: 153) or “schizoglossia” (Recuenco Peñalver 2017: 24). Monika Kallan (2003) observed that in the three novels *En fallen ängel* (A fallen angel, Kallifatides 1981), *Vem Var Gabriella Orlova?* (Who was Gabriella Orlova, Kallifatides 1992) and *Det sista ljuset* (The last light, Kallifatides 1995) there are characters called Andreas<sup>11</sup>, a name containing the root of the ancient word ἀνὴρ, man. They are Greek men that have never left their country or could not bear to live far from it, animated by a strong sense of honor and by a certain degree of inflexibility. According to Kallan, these characters “embody the Greek man Kallifatides asserts he left behind when he decided to become a Swedish writer” (Kallan 2003: 139)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> “‘It’s you’. One of the best reviews of my life. I had gone to a new country as a total stranger and I had become me”.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from an “Andreas”, *Vem Var Gabriella Orlova* also features a “Mike Andrews”.

<sup>12</sup> Kallan (2003: 151) brings forth as an alternative hypothesis that the name Andreas could refer to Andreas Papandreou, who spent time in Sweden the first period after the Juntas’ coup. The idea seems plausible, especially in consideration of the fact that at least the Andreas of *The Last Light* (Kallifatides 1995), with whom the protagonist Odysseas’ wife falls in love, owes much of his charm to the charisma and the skills proven in organizing political demonstration and protests in Sweden during the Junta. However, the hypothesis does not exclude the possibility that Andreas embodies the lost Greek identity of the character, and in fact seems to reinforce it: during the whole decade of the 1980s Andreas Papandreou had a very strong public image, which under many aspects resembles Kallifatides’ Andreas. It was not only his institutional office of Prime Minister that made him in all respects a representative of Greece, but also the populist and centralizing character of his leadership and the length of his period of office that made him an almost omnipresent figure that could well embody a certain model of Greek hegemonic masculinity to which the Andreas seem to allude. For further discussions of identity issues in Kallifatides see also Balta 1998 and Paparouse 2004.

In a later essay, *Μια νέα πατρίδα έξω απ' το παράθυρό μου* (A new homeland out of my window, Kallifatides 2002), the author splits himself into two different people with different lives and goes as far so to speak of himself using the third person:

Τι ξέρω για εκείνον τον νεαρό που έφυγε πριν από τριάντα οχτώ χρόνια;

Εξ' ορισμού τα πάντα ή σχεδόν τα πάντα. Μαζί μεγαλώσαμε, αν και μερικές φορές πήραμε διαφορετικούς δρόμους ή μάλλον εγώ τον εγκατέλειψα. [...]

Ο παλιός μου εαυτός δεν πρόκειται να μου ξεφύγει, τουλάχιστον όχι τόσο εύκολα όσο του ξέφυγα εγώ<sup>13</sup>. (*Ibid.*: 20)

In *The Past is Not a Dream*, the desire of the narrator to become somebody else is emphasized by the frequent use of flash-forwards that repeatedly juxtapose different phases of the life of the protagonist, e.g. an event of his childhood with something happening in the future, at a further point in the narrative. This technique not only has the effect of a constant splitting of the protagonist, but also regularly underlines that the whole story is a long flashback, an *a posteriori* interpretation of the narrator's life from a point where he can look back and explain phenomena that he could not fully grasp at the time they were happening.

This process is interwoven with two themes that contribute to the formation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the protagonist's identity. The first is textuality, and the second is gender.

## **2.1. Textual and Intertextual References; Sexuality and Gender Construction**

I use the term textuality in a broad sense, as a reference to writing, literary and artistic texts, and to the world of *belles lettres*. Since the beginning, textuality is

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<sup>13</sup> "What do I know about that youngster who left thirty-eight years ago?"

By definition, everything or almost everything. We grew up together, although sometimes we went our separate ways or I should say I abandoned him [...].

My old self is not going to escape me, or at least not as easily as I escaped him".

part of the personal history of the protagonist as is real life experience. The references to textuality belong to four main categories: (a) direct references to the readings that contributed to the formation of the protagonist, for example Dostoyevsky (“Με είχε επηρεάσει; Στα πάντα”<sup>14</sup>, Kallifatides 2012: 71) or Simone De Beauvoir (“άνοιξε τα μάτια μας. Δε θα βλέπαμε πια τη γυναίκα όπως πριν”<sup>15</sup>, *ibid.*: 74); (b) direct references to members of the literature world that the protagonist personally met or was friends with and have subsequently had an influence in his life, such as the writer Maria Metsora; (c) direct and indirect references to the author’s own work that are presented as milestones (especially those written only in Swedish, in the first two decades of this career); and (d) re-narration of events or episodes of his life that appear almost in the same fashion in (or dialogue with) other books by Kallifatides that are considered works of fiction as well as in non-fictional texts such as TV interviews and essays<sup>16</sup>.

The second theme interlaced with the protagonist’s journey from Greece to Sweden is gender and sexuality. This subject has a pervasive presence in the whole story, but is developed in different ways in the first and in the second part. In the first, the numerous references to the field of gender and sexuality are mainly related to the systemic aspects of the construction of masculinity in Greek society, and to the consequences that it has on the education of the protagonist and of other men of his generation:

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<sup>14</sup> “Did he influence me? In everything”.

<sup>15</sup> “[She] opened our eyes. We would never see women in the same way again”.

<sup>16</sup> These intertextual references “extract” some narrative episodes from the previous literary production and from the public image of the author and reposition them in a new context, in which they gain a different meaning and a coherence with his life (or I should say with the narrative of his life developed in *The past is not a dream*). This a *posteriori* rewriting and resignifying process that blurs the boundaries between *fiction* and *non-fiction* seems to hint at a reflection on the author’s whole body of work and on the genre it belongs to, as well as on the genre of autobiography as a space for the elaboration of the self. I believe this subject deserves to be further developed which I will attempt to do elsewhere due to space constraints. Here, I will only deal with the function played by textuality and intertextuality in this specific work. With regards to the overlapping of intertextuality and autobiography in another of Kallifatides’ novels, *Brev till min dotter* [Letters to my daughter], see Granqvist 2013.

Κάθε χαρά ήταν αμαρτία, και η μεγαλύτερη ο έρωτας. Ο Θεός, οι γονείς, άλλοι συγγενείς μας φύλαγαν με ανελέητη αφοσίωση. [...] Πίσω απ' όλα αυτά διαφαινόταν κάτι άλλο, μια σκοτεινή δύναμη που καταδίκασε τη μισή ανθρωπότητα στον πειρασμό και την άλλη μισή στην αμαρτία<sup>17</sup>. (*Ibid.*: 27, 32)

In this part of the story, the recurrent references to domestic violence, committed against women by jealous or despising men, are lucidly observed as the social counterpart of the military violence occurring in barracks and on the streets at the service of an oppressive power. This construction of masculinity deploys its effects on the young man without encountering any resistance and reveals its most obscure sides in the form of the jealousy that makes him suffer next to the women he loves.

The idea of toxic masculinity as a distinctive trait of Greek national identity is a recurring motif among several of Kallifatides' earliest works. In his first novel, *Utlänningar* (Foreigners) (Kallifatides 1970), set amongst Greek migrants in Sweden, the protagonist declares that in Greece being present during a rape is not an unusual activity at all and that it is the real dream of every Greek man. In the last pages, this affirmation is confirmed by the violence perpetrated by two of his roommates on the third one, who finally kills herself. However, the novel where misogyny and violent masculinity are most clearly depicted as distinctive features of Greekness is without any doubt *Bönder och herrar* (*Masters and peasants*, Kallifatides 1977). This furious and sour description of a village in the Peloponnese called Ialos can be read as an allegory of Greece (as well as a description of Molaoi, the village where the author was born, as he himself suggests in the foreword). In the story, masculinity and its performance, homophobia, and misogyny seem to consume people's lives and especially men's. The proof of virility seems to be the only source of prestige or shame and can lead a man to power or to death. At the same time, every socially reproachable behavior is inevitably associated with a lack of manliness: "One of

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<sup>17</sup> "Every joy was a sin, and the biggest of all was love. God, the parents, other relatives would guard us with merciless dedication. [...] And behind all of this, one could discern a dark force condemning half of the humanity to temptation, and the other half to sin".



the many beliefs about emigrants was this – that if you left Iallos and went abroad to make your fortune and that if, in addition, you succeeded, your penis got smaller. All emigrants left Iallos virile men and came back eunuchs” (*ibid.*: 33). The dramatic narration of a child’s rape by a group of older children, encouraged by authorities to circulate in paramilitary-like squads, occupies the most painful pages of the book and forms its core; the indicator of the trauma from which the dissociative desire originated might be located in this episode.

In the second part of *The Past is Not a Dream*, the gender issue is developed in a more personal sense, starting from the moment when the character becomes more aware of his own masculinity and of the way in which it conditions his life and his relations:

Μέχρι τότε η ζήλια ήταν αυτονόητη, επιβαλλόμενη και επικυρωμένη. Δεν μπορείς να είσαι ερωτευμένος αν δεν ζηλεύεις. Αυτό ήταν το αξίωμα. Σκέψου όμως να συνέβαινε το αντίθετο; Ότι δεν μπορείς να είσαι ερωτευμένος εφόσον ζηλεύεις<sup>18</sup>. (Kallifatides 2012: 157)

In Girard’s theory, jealousy is one of the passions brought about by the presence of the mediator, an indicator revealing that the desire towards the object is an “irresistible impulse to desire what Others desire, in other words to imitate the desires of others” (Girard 1965: 12). In *The Past Is Not a Dream*, the protagonist’s jealousy is an ever present feeling in his romantic relationships, from adolescence until old age, but from the moment he becomes aware of it, he realizes its harmfulness and he starts thinking about it in a critical way. Hence, jealousy becomes a part of the gender theme developed within the text in a series of moments of perspicuous analysis of several aspects of his own education.

Almost every consideration about gender made by the narrator is of a relational kind, meaning that it focuses on gender, not in terms of the grade of resemblance or distance from a certain model, but as a phenomenon generated by the

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<sup>18</sup> “Until that moment, jealousy was assumed, imposed and approved. You can’t be in love if you’re not jealous. This was the tenet. But what if it worked the opposite way? What if you can’t be in love because you are jealous”.

interaction with Others and mainly with women; the relation with women often represents a means of comprehension or liberation.

## 2.2. At the Crossroad between Text and Gender

These considerations on gender and sexuality are almost always inextricably interwoven to the dimension of textuality in the four abovementioned forms in which this dimension appears in the book. In the chapters that describe the protagonist's life before his first romantic connections with women, the intersections between text and gender do not include the presence of a female character. In this part of the book, the narrator reflects on the systemic and social dimension of gender construction, and in doing so he displays full awareness not only of the social mechanisms of construction of masculinity, but also of the way in which certain texts serve said mechanisms:

Ήμαστε υπνωτισμένοι από την εκκλησία, τη λογοτεχνία, τα σχολεία. Θαυμάζαμε συγγραφείς που δεν είχαν τίποτα καλό να πουν για τη γυναίκα. Ακόμα και τα κορίτσια μάθαιναν να τους θαυμάζουν. Μόνο η γυναίκα-μητέρα γλίτωνε από το μίσος. Μα αυτό δεν ήταν παρά ένα άλλοθι. Αφού αγαπούμε τη μητέρα μας, δεν μπορούμε να μισούμε τις γυναίκες, μα καμιά γυναίκα δεν ήταν σαν τη μητέρα μας.

Τα τείχη υψώνονταν γύρω μας, έτσι όπως το έλεγε ο Καβάφης. Ούτε τους χτίστες ακούγαμε, ούτε τα τείχη βλέπαμε. Γίναμε μισογύνηδες, υιοθετήσαμε την αντρική γλώσσα της περιφρόνησης και της υπεροψίας απέναντι στο άλλο φύλο. Λίγο πολύ γίναμε όλοι βιαστές. Και οι περισσότεροι θα παραμέναμε τέτοιοι σε όλη μας τη ζωή<sup>19</sup>. (Kallifatides 2012: 53-54)

In a declaration made by Kallifatides during a TV interview to Antaios Chrysostomides (Demetriou *et al.* 2009), the author recalls how deeply

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<sup>19</sup> "We were hypnotized by the church, by literature, by the school. We used to admire writers that had nothing good to say about women. Even the girls would learn to admire them. Only the woman-mother would keep away from hate. But this wasn't but an alibi. Since we loved our mother, we couldn't hate women, but no woman was like our mother.

The walls were rising around us, just like Cavafy used to say. We neither heard the builders, nor saw the walls. We became misogynists, we adopted the masculine language of despise and superiority before the other gender. More or less, we all became rapists. And most of us would remain that way for the rest of our lives".

disappointed he was when he found out about Nikos Kazantzakis' misogyny, and he concludes saying that not only Kazantzakis but all literature conveys a misogynist vision. The lines quoted above describe the cultural modes of construction of a misogynist masculinity. At the same time, they counterpose two kinds of literature: one complicit with the patriarchal system, illustrated in the first paragraph, and one – represented by Constantine P. Cavafy, whose poem *Τείχη* (Walls) is referred to in the second paragraph – that “speaks the name” of the wall, namely it stimulates critical thinking about that same construction. It is clear to which of the two kinds of literature Kallifatides tries to adhere. In this sense, the excerpt can be read as a poetics passage: positioned in the first chapters to describe the childhood of the protagonist, it actually declares the project in which not only *The Past is Not a Dream*, but also a significant part of the author's work is engaged where literature is a space for critical thinking about the construction of gender identity. The reference to the “masculine language of contempt and superiority before the other gender” could be read as an allusion to the personal and ideological value of the language one chooses to write in, a subject Kallifatides had already dealt with in novels and essays (see e.g. Kallifatides 1981 and Kallifatides 1993).

The thematic interweaving between sexuality and textuality characterizes even the protagonist's earliest memories: as a child, he was taking a walk in nature with the purpose of finding inspiration to write a school essay, when he accidentally witnessed, for the first time, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. The scene upsets him, and he runs away, frightened by what he saw and discouraged by his failure in finding a subject to write about. He then decides to sublimate that sexual experience through writing, and diverts the expression of his feelings so that he can describe the event without referring to it openly:

Τότε είχα την πρώτη μου λογοτεχνική ιδέα. Θα μπορούσα να γράψω για το τι είδα, γράφοντας για κάτι άλλο. Αμ' έπος, αμ' έργον. Χωρίς καμία δυσκολία έγραψα μια ιστοριούλα για μια μάχη ανάμεσα σε δύο στρατιές μυρμήγκια. Όλα χώρεσαν εκεί μέσα. Ο φόβος, η απέχθεια, το πάθος κι ούτε λέξη για το ζευγάρι.

Αυτή ήταν η σωτηρία μου. [...] Από βλαχάκι, βασιλιάς χάρη στη γλώσσα. Θα το θυμόμουν. Χρόνια αργότερα θα αναγκαζόμουν να το ξανακάνω<sup>20</sup>. (Kallifatides 2012: 35)

His first sexual experience is transformed into his first creative writing experience, and this double first experience foreshadows some aspects of the future literary career of the author: sexuality and gender as the basic theme, writing as a natural and smooth process, and language as the key to success.

### 2.3. The Role of Women

As the first romantic relationships appear in the protagonist's life, the dimensions of textuality and gender intersect more and more frequently, and they begin to include the women of his life. Women and writing occupy increasingly relevant positions in the text, to the point that almost every episode of the protagonist's story seems to revolve around these two axes; the text soon becomes the place where life experience is elaborated and appropriated through a creative process where women play a fundamental role:

Με εξαίρεση τις ώρες με τη Μαρία, τίποτε άλλο δεν με χόρταινε τόσο πολύ όσο οι στιγμές μπροστά στο άδειο χαρτί και μ' όλο τον κόσμο στο κεφάλι. Ακόμα και οι ώρες με τη Μαρία έλαμπαν περισσότερο, όταν έγγραφα γι' αυτές. Ήταν σαν η ζωή να μεγάλωνε, τη δοκίμαζα ξανά, γινόταν δική μου<sup>21</sup>. (*ibid.*: 84)

Even the crucial moment of the realization of jealousy – taking place in the excerpt I quoted in Section 2.1 – is located at the intersection of textuality and

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<sup>20</sup> “Then I had my first literary idea. I could write about what I had seen, by writing about something else. No sooner said than done. Without any difficulties, I wrote a short story about a battle between two armies of ants. Everything would fit in there. Fear, disgust, passion, and not a word about the couple.

That was my salvation [...]. I used to be a farm boy, and I became a king thanks to language. I would remember it. Later on I would need to do it again”.

<sup>21</sup> “Apart from the hours I used to spend with Maria, nothing else would fill me so much as the moments in front of the empty paper and with the whole world inside my head. Even the hours with Maria would shine more, when I wrote about them. It was as if life became bigger, I tried it on again, it became mine”.

gender, and it is provoked by Li, the object of the protagonist's jealousy: "Δεν έχεις το δικαίωμα να με τιμωρείς γιατί έζησα" μου είπε τελικά, και συνήλθα"<sup>22</sup> (*ibid.*: 157). Li is not only an avid reader, but also a poet with three collections to her credit. After seeing her read a book by Lorca on the deck of the ferry boat on which they are travelling, the character is taken by jealousy, and in reaction he decides to flirt with another girl just a few meters away. And in a quiet moment after his infidelity has been forgiven, he realizes he has not written in a long time and asks Li for a suggestion on how to overcome this block. But Li is also the name of the female protagonist of the homonymous – set on a boat – novella by Nikos Kavvadias (2008), to whom Kallifatides might indirectly be paying a tribute (Kavvadias had dedicated to the Spanish poet one of his most famous poems, *Federico García Lorca*). Finally, Li is the name of one of the female characters of Kallifatides' (1978) novel *Kärleken* [Love], where she is not Greek but Swedish, and not a betrayed girlfriend but the young lover with whom the male protagonist cheats on his beloved companion, triggering a long meditation on the concept of love and infidelity. Therefore, the excerpt displays a number of layered textual and intertextual indicators – which include references to the acts of reading and writing as well as what might be an allusion to Kavvadias' oeuvre, and to previous works of Kallifatides' himself – that revolve around the female character Li.

The decision to leave Greece and go to Sweden, one of the most pivotal decisions in the protagonist's life and a fundamental step in the narrative, also features a similar stratification of textual dimension and gendered reflection where a woman serves as a bridge towards the emancipation from a specific kind of masculinity. In this period, the young character is romantically involved with Maria Metsora, who has a detached attitude toward him, makes fun of him, and disappears from time to time, hindering his tendency to develop feelings of jealousy and possession. After one of her longest absences, she reappears married to another man, and the protagonist asserts:

Λυπήθηκα μεν, ταυτόχρονα όμως ένιωσα απελευθερωμένος. Ήταν υπεύθυνη για τη ζωή της, δεν ήμουν αναγκασμένος να παίζω τον ένα ή τον

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<sup>22</sup> "You don't have the right to punish me for having lived' she told me in the end, and I came around".

άλλο ρόλο, μου έδινε άδεια εξόδου από τη φυλακή του φύλου μου<sup>23</sup>.  
(Kallifatides 2012: 163)

Maria's own emancipation discharges Theodoros from the obligation to perform a masculinity that he feels is being forced upon him. The protagonist realizes with relief that there might be a chance for him to escape the wheels of the gender mechanism that seemed undefeatable up until that moment; that escape will finally find its way on the road to Sweden, where women "δεν είναι ελευθερίων ηθών, αλλά ελεύθερες"<sup>24</sup> (*ibid.*: 179). Maria Metsora, herself a future writer, will encourage him to travel to Sweden with an almost divinatory consideration on Swedish language:

Τη μύησα στα σχέδιά μου και την έβαλα να ακούσει το δίσκο του Λιγκουαφόν [...] και μου είπε: "Αυτή είναι η ιδανική γλώσσα να γράψεις παραμύθια". Τότε ακόμα δεν ήξερε ότι μια μέρα θα έγγραφε τα δικά της θαυμάσια παραμύθια με το όνομα Μαρία Μήτσορα. Η γνώμη της ήταν αποφασιστική<sup>25</sup>. (*Ibid.*: 166)

### 3. Conclusion

The years in Sweden pass quickly, at an almost frenetic pace imposed by the new experience of migration: learning a new language, understanding a population, creating bonds, finding odd jobs of all kind, undertaking university studies in Philosophy. In Swedish, the writing flows relentlessly and soon leads the protagonist to success; at the same time, he meets his life companion, builds a new family and is forced by distance to stay away from his family of origin even in the moments of difficulty and grief. During this time, the protagonist is tormented by nostalgia, but he has decided not to return to a place that did not welcome him during his youth. His new life is in Sweden, and any return to

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<sup>23</sup> "On the one hand I felt sorry, but at the same time I felt liberated. She was responsible for her own life, I was not obliged to play this or that role, she was giving me leave from the prison of my gender".

<sup>24</sup> "are not libertines, but liberated".

<sup>25</sup> "I told her about my plans and I let her listen to the Liguaphone disk [...] and she told me: "This is the perfect language to write fairy tales". Back then she didn't know yet that one day she would write her own admirable fairy tales with the name Maria Metsora. Her opinion was decisive".

Greece cannot be more than a visit, a passing moment. Nevertheless, the book ends with a journey to Greece, and not to Athens, the city of adolescence and youth, but to Molaoi, his native village, where the protagonist has been invited to receive an award. He attends, accompanied by his wife, whose presence ensures he does not confuse past and present and forget his real identity: “εκείνη ήταν η ασφαλιστική μου δικλίδα σ’ αυτό το ταξίδι πίσω στο χωριό για να μην ξελογιαστώ, για να μην ξεχάσω ότι η ζωή μου ήταν πια κάπου αλλού”<sup>26</sup> (*ibid.*: 218). Once again, a woman represents the liaison with his identity; she allows him to remember that this return to the starting point is just geographical and not chronological. However, being unexpectedly acknowledged as a prominent representative of a place where he felt rejected and exiled from until that moment<sup>27</sup>; meeting people that remembered him but recognizing only a few of them; looking in the village for the points of reference of his childhood, the objects that represented the very symbol of the village (the same objects described in *Masters and peasants*), without finding them; all of this plunges the protagonist into a crisis: “Τι προσπαθώ να κάνω τελικά; Τι ψάχνω; Κλαιγόμουν στη γυναίκα μου. Ίσως όλα είναι μια μεγάλη παρεξήγηση”<sup>28</sup> (*ibid.*: 223). Thanks to the self-awareness he owes to the presence of his wife, the protagonist is finally able to overcome the moment and allow his two identities, which had been separated during his past personal and literary path, to be reunited and pour into his present self. It is the final resolution that, in Girard’s theory, happens when the protagonist is forced to conversion by his impending death, renounces his pride, and abandons the mediator, and finally goes back to himself. Kallifatides does not need to be on the verge of death: the (implicit) realization of overcoming of the trauma that had generated the dissociative desire and the acknowledgment of the fellow villagers do justice to the child he had been. At the same time, him

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<sup>26</sup> “She was my safety valve in this journey back to the village not to lose my mind, not to forget that my life was somewhere else”.

<sup>27</sup> *Minnet i exil* [The memory of exile, Kallifatides 1969], was also the title of Kallifatides’ first collection of poems and literary debut.

<sup>28</sup> “What am I trying to do in the end? What am I looking for? I would whine to my wife. Maybe it’s all just a big misunderstanding”.

being there and his openness to his past allows him to take that same self he had pulled away from. The self is recomposed and renounces the mediator as Other:

Για πρώτη φορά στη ζωή μου ένιωσα αλληλεγγύη με τον εαυτό μου. [...] Τώρα τα τωρινά και τα περασμένα έσμιγαν σαν δυο ποτάμια. [...] Τα περασμένα ξαναγύρισαν. Τα περασμένα δεν ήταν όνειρο, αν και μπορούσες πια να ζήσεις μαζί τους. Τα χρόνια και οι καιροί είχαν περάσει κι ήταν ίσως ώρα να ξαναβρώ εκείνη τη μαύρη πέτρα που είχα ρίξει πίσω μου φεύγοντας<sup>29</sup>. (*Ibid.*: 228, 230)

As in Girard's theory, the ending appeases hatred and passion, and most importantly it placates the hate towards the home country where he felt rejected and towards the self that had been built in the image and likeness of that country. The "obsession" of distinguishing himself from that self and from that country – that had helped him build momentum to depart and resist exile – is now transcended; the desire to be somebody else is exhausted, and since "the absence of desire in the present makes it possible to recapture past desires" (Girard 1965: 298) and transform them into a narration, the author is finally ready to tell his own story. As Girard observes,

Great novels always spring from an obsession that has been transcended. The hero sees himself in the rival he loathes; he renounces the "differences" suggested by hatred. He learns, at the expense of his pride, the existence of the psychological circle. The novelist's self-examination merges with the morbid attention he pays to his mediator. All the powers of a mind freed of its contradictions unite in one creative impulse. (*Ibid.*: 300)

Since in Kallifatides' case the milestones of his journey have already been told during the course of his past literary career, they have to be rewritten in the light of the new awareness, free from the forces and passions that had spurred his previous writings, and most notably his early works, the ones that mostly expressed the urge for dissociation due to their subject and the language they were written in. They can now be written anew in the author's mother tongue and

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<sup>29</sup> "For the first time in my life I felt solidarity towards myself. [...] Now the present and the past were merging like two rivers. [...] The past returned. The past was not a dream, even though you could finally live with it. The years and the times had passed and maybe it was time to find that black stone I had thrown behind me while leaving".



find their position in the story of his life, becoming the subtext of *The Past is Not a Dream*.

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