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## Vassilis Alexakis's "late works": *L'Enfant grec* and *La Clarinette*

In an article devoted to the study of desire as theme and narrative practice in the novels of Vassilis Alexakis, I suggest that we can periodize his work by dividing it into three main stages: "la période parisienne qui témoigne d'un afflux de personnages français vivant et évoluant dans cette ville. *Le Sandwich* (1974), *Les Girls du City-Boom-Boom* (1975) et *La Tête du chat* (1978) font partie de ces débuts d'Alexakis qui écrit en ce temps exclusivement en français. La deuxième période est celle des romans en quête d'identité. Elle commence avec *Talgo* (1981), continue avec *Contrôle d'identité* (1985), prend son véritable élan avec *Paris-Athènes* (1989) et se clôt avec *Avant* (1992). Cette période est marquée par la redécouverte de la langue maternelle. Alexakis varie ses thématiques, va et vient entre le grec et le français, commence à s'auto-traduire et s'interroge sur la nature même de l'identité qu'elle soit culturelle, linguistique, ontologique, etc. La troisième période commence avec *La Langue maternelle* (1995) et s'étend jusqu'à *La Clarinette* (2015), le dernier roman publié du vivant de l'auteur. Elle contient également *Le Cœur de Marguerite* (1999), *Les Mots étrangers* (2002), *Je t'oublierai tous les jours* (2005), *Ap. J-C.* (2007), *Le premier mot* (2010) et *L'Enfant grec* (2012). Ce sont des romans à double thématique : d'un côté le narrateur ou la narratrice mène une enquête (la signification de la lettre Epsilon de Delphes, la crise économique grecque, le premier mot articulé par notre espèce, etc.) ; d'un autre côté, il ou elle fait le deuil d'un être aimé, d'une relation amoureuse, de tout un monde" (Chatzidimitriou, manuscript).

In this study, I would like to suggest that Alexakis's last two novels can be separated from the third period and read as his quintessentially "late works". Although I will refrain from arguing for the development of a "late style" in Alexakis's last two works, I will show that *L'Enfant grec* and *La Clarinette* reflect on lateness in ways that extend some of the author's favored themes while, at the same time, expanding their inter- and extra-textual narrative function. I will first discuss some of the prevailing theories in the field of "late style" studies; then articulate the theoretical contours of Alexakis's "lateness"; and, finally, identify the narrative strategies that the author deploys in his last two novels to both center and eschew his ongoing reflection on death and loss (prevalent themes of his third period as defined above); to highlight the porous, if not irrelevant, border between reality and the novelistic universe; and to texture the radical contractions of space and time that make the life of a bilingual, bicultural subject who staunchly refuses to relinquish either pole of his binary—even as he senses the inevitable approach of life's ending—manageable, if not enjoyable and creatively productive.

In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), Friedrich Nietzsche warned his contemporaries of the possibly immobilizing weight that the study of history can place on the shoulders of modernity. If we cannot willfully and selectively forget, if death is a necessary corollary of forgetting, then we are admitting to the full erasure of the present and succumb to an existence that has abdicated its ontological imperative: "If death at last brings the desired forgetting, by that

act it at the same time extinguishes the present and all existence and therewith sets the seal on the knowledge that existence is only an uninterrupted has-been, a thing that lives by negating, consuming and contradicting itself"(p. 61). He then argues that "[t]he oversaturation of an age with history…implants the belief, harmful at any time, in the old age of mankind, the belief that one is a latecomer and epigone" (p. 83). It is a fairly bleak but reasonable assessment of a time that, as François Hartog (2020) has suggested, witnessed the reinsertion of mankind into *Chronos* as the christic *Kairos*, the apocalyptic timeline that situated the species within the firm boundaries set by the Incarnation on the one end and the Parousia on the other, came progressively undone. In this new era,

> *Chronos* suffit, voire se suffit à lui-même, et qu'est-ce que *Chronos*, sinon du temps mais en grande quantité, puisqu'il faut le compter en millions d'années ? Une des difficultés résidait dans le fait qu'il était impossible de se représenter de telles durées, inouïes pour l'esprit humain. Ce temps continu, lent à s'écouler, agissant graduellement bien avant l'apparition de l'homme, n'a plus besoin de l'aiguillon d'un *kairos* (ou seulement marginalement). (p. 218)

If we position Nietzsche's reflection on epigonism within Hartog's analysis of humanity's return to *chronos*, in other words, its gradual disengagement from the Christian time of apocalyptic teleology that began with humanism and was ongoing and accelerating at the end of the nineteenth century, we see that his "latecomer" in the "old age of mankind" is not so much "late" to history or simply "old" as he is out of time: out of the teleological inevitability of the christic *kairos*; and yet not fully synchronized with the indifferent *chronos*, which has no beginning, no end, and, most importantly, no clear purpose other than the self-fulfillment of a futurism that resides in the power of progress.[1] Moreover, the *krisis* that invested the horizon of Christian time has now not so much disappeared as it has changed hands: "… le Jugement demeure, mais un transferts'opère : la faculté de juger passe de Dieu à l'Histoire" (Hartog, 2020, p. 232). The "old age of mankind" then is the moment of an approaching end not to History but rather to man's ability to escape it: judge and jury of a present that has only just recently discovered its irrelevance and insignificance within the flow of *chronos* (to offer a signpost: *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859), History, if not reimagined, threatens to foreclose upon the as of yet unfinished project of modernity.

A few decades later, Theodor Adorno's analysis of Beethoven's "late style" offers Nietzsche's latecomer a solution to modernity's historical conundrum. Although not discussing time or History but rather artists' late works, Adorno theorizes that "[l]ate works show more traces of history than of growth" (1998, p. 123). In fact, the late work "breaks through the roundness of form for the sake of expression exchanging harmony for the dissonance of its sorrow and spurning sensuous charm

[1] "Le futurisme régnait, même si ce ne fut jamais sans partage, sans contestations et sans chutes. Entre 1850 et 1960 (pour prendre des chiffres ronds), il a tendu à dominer le monde de gré ou de force et à régler aussi ce qu'il fallait entendre par politique" (Hartog, 2020, p. 275).

under the dictates of the imperiously emancipated mind" (p. 123). In other words, the late work emancipates itself from artistic imperatives and harmonious (or readable) expression, consciously forgetting the whole for the fragment, acknowledging the encroachment of death without however succumbing to it:

> The force of subjectivity in late works is the irascible gesture with which it leaves them. It bursts them asunder, not in order to express itself but, expressionlessly, to cast off the illusion of art. Of the works it leaves only fragments behind, communicating itself as if in ciphers, only through the spaces it has violently vacated. Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the matter it previously formed. (Adorno, 1998, p. 125)

In other words, late artistic creations work against the grain of their very essence: stripped of what makes them art, in a quasi-ontological reversal, they witness the subjectivity that brought them to life take its leave in real time. The past/present/future continuum unravels while a sense of temporal exile sets in. Robert Spencer has noted that both Adorno and Edward Said have written "a great deal about the physical and psychological experience of exile. But lateness is a sort of temporal exile; it names an experience of historical dislocation" (2016, p. 229). Indeed, Edward Said, a careful if not admiring reader of Adorno, suggests in *On Late Style* that "the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile" (2006, p. 8). He then argues that "[t]here is an inherent tension in late style that abjures mere bourgeois aging and that insists on the increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism which late style expresses and, most important, uses to sustain itself" (p. 17). Whether, then, we conceive of lateness as the deliberate fragmentation of a whole into undecipherable ciphers, as Adorno does; or an apartness that refuses communication with the established social order, which is what Said theorizes; because artistic subjectivity is deliberately positioned in a creative stance of "reproductive productiveness" (Said, 2006), lateness in both thinkers is an experience that allows the artist to exit the imperatives of time or, as Robert Spencer rightly observes, a form of historical dislocation.

One of the challenges that theorists of "late style" have to contend with as they reflect on the category is, indeed, time and the relationship of late style to History. Robert Spencer has suggested that "there is no such thing as *a* late style that is transhistorical and seizes artists when they become conscious of death" (2016, p. 232). In fact, in their introduction to *Late Style and Its Discontents*, Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles argue that "we should redefine old-age style as something which is directly or indirectly the *product* of the adjustments and collaborations necessary for creative artists in old age, not something that exists *despite* such contingencies" (2016, p. 7). They further suggest that there is no such thing as "late style". Rather "the idea of late style is, like all critical and cultural constructs, contingent, complicit, and culturally invested. It has emerged from the history of genius and has quietly persisted in shaping the way in which we view the relationship between old age and

creativity…" (p. 12). Another significant challenge that we face when reflecting on "late style" as a theoretical category is its structural and thematic relationship to deteriorating health due to old age and, ultimately, death. The issue has a clear linguistic dimension. As Ben Hutchinson explains: "the English category of 'late style' in fact represents a somewhat uneasy conflation of the German terms *Altersstil* and *Spätstil*. While the former translates as old-age style, the latter translates directly as late style, but this 'late' style may or may not correspond to the style of work produced by artists in old age" (2016, p. 11).

The critic's inability to clearly define late style since there can be as many late styles as there are moments in time as well as late style's difficult relationship to senescence make the concept of "lateness" a more appealing theoretical tool for my current analysis of Vassilis Alexakis's last two novels. Without discarding Adorno's and Said's "temporal exile" in late works, which, in fact, is central to my reading of both novels, I will rely more heavily on Ivan Callus's argument that lateness "has investments in the future anterior even as it reaches the reader, inevitably, as a *billet* from a past that cannot be recovered, but also as a *billet* to the future whose memory it seems to lay a claim on" (2013, p. 331). As Ben Hutchinson has suggested "lateness is experienced in real time, as the overwhelming, overdetermining presence of the past" (2016, p. 12). *L'enfant grec* and *La clarinette*, I will argue, are steeped in a narrative and thematic incarnation of Hutchinson's and Callus's lateness that both celebrates and undermines the past while laying claim to a future that imagines the present in the future anterior.

Ivan Callus suggests that some books "can be identified as consciously written in anticipation of death, and in response to the awareness that the writing at hand might well be one's last" (2013, p. 327). If, then, "the phrase 'I am late' is implied by such texts it is because the sense of the expiration of one's being gains inexorably upon the writing, forestalling it even as the text takes shape in the attempt to resolve itself before it is exceeded" (p. 329). Both *L'enfant grec* and *La clarinette* were written at times of declining health, the first directly following a serious operation that the author/narrator underwent in Aix; the second at a time when the author/narrator already knew that he was suffering from emphysema, an incurable condition (2015, p. 29). There is a sense of paradoxical urgency to that kind of writing: urgency to tell the story before time runs out (the kind of urgency that propels forward) which, however, cohabits with a deliberate slowing down of time. Alexakis's late works both create and erase the textual space that urgency occupies by means of narratively centering and eschewing death and loss; walking the tightrope that separates reality from imagination; and reconfiguring spatiotemporal borders.

These are all recurrent themes and narrative tropes in Alexakis's œuvre. Ben Hutchinson argues that in order to better understand repetition as a feature of lateness we should look at the meanings of the French word "répéter": "the latecomer's repetition seeks to stage a new and original performance of the existing elements of the past…, gaining authenticity not through constitution but through reconstitution" (2016, p. 15). In a discussion of aging modern painters and the question of thematic and formal revisiting in painting, Philip Sohm cautions us against what he calls a "slippery quantitative approach", which consists in taking "the frequency of repeti-

tion in general as a measure of creativity… The problem … is how to measure repetition. What degree of similarity is required to justify the label 'revisit'?" (2007, p. 51). Hutchinson and Sohm make two salient points about repetition that are crucial to our reading of recurrent themes, structures, characters, and narrative tropes in Alexakis's work as a whole: first, when repetition occurs, it must perform within a new textual environment; second, no reproduction—if we choose to call rewriting a reproduction—is ever identical to its previous iteration. In fact, I would argue that in most of Alexakis's novels, and in his two last novels in particular, repetition is an homage to Callus's "future anterior": a *clind'œil* to the reader, a reminder that what she is currently reading is the past of a narrative moment in a future book. It is precisely this type of temporal pirouette, that decisively situates *L'enfant grec* and *La clarinette* beyond any attempt at periodization: while not admitting the "definitive cadences" of death, the "opulent, fractured, and somehow inconsistent solemnity" of the narratives keeps reminding us of death (Said, 2006, p. 24) as it looks back from a temporal beyond.

The narrator of *L'enfant grec* is a Greek-French writer who, following a serious operation and several-day stay at a hospital in Aix, is now back in Paris but cannot return to his studio apartment which is situated on the fifth floor of a building without elevator access. As he is still not able to walk without the help of crutches, he takes residence at a hotel next to the Luxembourg gardens. His days consist of writing the narrative that we are reading, visiting the gardens, and striking conversations with people who work there: from the marionette players at the Guignol theater, to the Senate librarian—the French Senate is located within the confines of the Luxembourg gardens—to the lady who is charged with the maintenance of the gardens' public toilets. During that time, he rereads books of his Athenian childhood, visits *La Moquette*, a place of community and creative expression for unhoused people in Paris, and researches the history of the Parisian catacombs which he ends up visiting at the very end of the book. The narrator is moving through a small area in the city (essentially the gardens and their immediate surroundings) very slowly. In the first few pages of the novel (pp. 9-15), he enumerates several new discoveries that he is able to make since his handicap has inevitably changed his relationship to both space and time: "Mon handicap m'oblige à regarder bien plus attentivement que je ne le faisais par le passé les vitrines des magasins et les façades des immeubles" (Alexakis, 2012, p. 12). Remembering the days he spent at the hospital in the company of his two adult children, he notes: "Nous ne nous ennuyions guère car chaque instant était précieux, lourd de sens, exceptionnel… Je vivais si intensément le présent que rien ne me manquait… La crainte de tout perdre m'avait rendu attentif à tout" (p. 44). Anne Fuchs has argued that slowness can be a correlate of lateness and that their combined effects interrogate our relationship with modernity: "At the flip side of acceleration, lateness and slowness disrupt the relentless logic of the modernizing project by critiquing the harnessing of attention that is a hallmark of modernity's high-speed society" (2015, p. 33). Alexakis's narrator performs a radical contraction of space and a concomitant dilation of time that changes the meaning of presentism as François Hartog (among many others) has defined it—echoing Anne Fuchs' reflection on a hyper-solicited attention that collapses under its own weight—namely, as a regime of historicity that finds "sa proper finalité en elle-

même" (2020, p. 279). As Valérie Zuchuat has aptly commented, the narrator's crutches "autorisent la transgression" (2023, p. 148). The transgression of modernity's imperative for speed, then, allows the narrator to begin effacing all kinds of boundaries: spatiotemporal coordinates; the frontier between reality and imagination; as well as the ontological border that death ultimately is.

In the Luxembourg gardens, conventional time loses its meaning. As the narrator makes his way toward one of the gardens' exits he notices something peculiar: "J'ai repéré … un buste de la comtesse de Ségur, posé sur un piédestal. L'arrondi de ses joues donne de loin l'impression qu'elle est très jeune. Mais plus on s'approche d'elle, plus ses traits se creusent et ses rides s'accentuent. La comtesse vieillit à chaque pas. À trois mètres elle n'est plus qu'une dame âgée" (pp. 33-34). Following this reflection on the countess's multiple and simultaneous ages, here turns to his recent healthscare: "À présent je sais qu'on peut passer très vite d'un âge à un autre" (p. 34). Time, however, is not the only dimension that the narrator transgresses. Limited as he is to his hotel room for both his recovery and the writing of this book, he spends a lot of time on his bed which, under scrutiny, can transform into a fantastical natural landscape: "Il y a … sur la couverture à carreaux brun clair et brun sombre, un bloc de correspondance et un crayon. Lorsque je me tourne ou que je bouge les pieds le paysage change, de nouvelles montagnes se forment, le crayon disparaît dans une gorge profonde" (p. 37). As he reflects on his past, and in particular on the women that he has met over a lifetime, the narrator visualizes distance in time as diminished stature, imagining the current size of these women as similar to that of the Guignol puppets: "Les marionettes … ont probablement eu autrefois une taille humaine. Elles habitaient de vrais appartements et possédaient de vraies montres. Il faut accepter l'idée que les personnes rétrécissent chaque jour un peu plus" (p. 136). Time and space do not respond to the logic of watches, and urban or natural environments in this text; they rather submit to the imperatives of an imagination that transcends immanence and, while sensing the overwhelming weight of the past that is lateness's inevitable burden, resists it by extirpating the self-in-time from the dicta of reality.

Illness (and the horizon of death) is the clea rimpetus for rejecting the real while writing becomes the preferred method for rendering the tension between "disenchantment and pleasure" (Said, 2006, p. 148) that ensuesas lateness invests the newly created spatiotemporality: "Il me semble que quelque chose s'est rompu à Aix, que l'opération a modifié ma perception de la réalité … Je me sens en tout cas dégagé des règles auxquelles j'ai été soumis toute ma vie, un peu comme un nouveau retraité … L'espace supplémentaire dont je dispose m'apparaît alors comme une aire de jeu" (2012, pp. 100-101). In the world of the narrator, this playground, this concomitant extension *and* suppression of the real, is invested with words that straddle the border between his two lives, the real and the imagined one: "Je pense … que les mots prêchent aussi bien le vrai que le faux … Je les soupçonne même d'avoir une légère préférence pour le faux, probablement parce que c'est mon cas. J'ai toujours vécu il me semble avec un pied hors de la réalité. Ecrire est une façon de reconnaître qu'on a une double vie" (p. 276). Deteriorating health and the inevitable approach of death give the narrator permission to fully expose the boundary between the two and thereby render it irrelevant. When he is about to enter the Parisian under-

ground quarries, what we have come to call the Parisian catacombs, he asks Charles, a retired literary critic who accompanies him, if he knows where the border between reality and imagination is: "–Bien sûr. Elle est ici. –Tu veux dire que le réel est derrière nous? –Non, je pense qu'il est en bas" (p. 307). The instability of the passage's shifters (when this exchange takes place, they are at the iron gate that gives access to the quarries) belies Charles' certainty and reinforces what we have learned as we have attended the narrator's reconfiguration of space and time, reality and imagination: "ici" is not here; it is "en bas"; but it is also "derrière" since, as we find out a couple of pages later, the descent to the quarries is only possible "à reculons" given the steep incline of the ramps that lead from the first underground level to which the iron gate leads, the sewer level, to the lower level where the disaffected quarries are located (p. 309). As the narrator enters a space that, similarly to the Luxembourg gardens, is circumscribed by both its limited surface and its past (historical and literary—the catacombs figure in many of the books that the narrator discusses in *L'enfant grec*), he invests it with words that have a clear "préférence pour le faux".

Unstable, if not immaterial, as the border between the city of Paris and its underground may be, it does mark a transition of sorts. Marianne Bessy reads the catabasis, the descent to the underworld, in *L'enfant grec*, as a Foucauldian heterotopia noting that it "manifeste le passage d'une frontière entre le monde des vivants et celui des morts" (2020, p. 120). Although illness, death, and aging are important key themes in the novel, Bessy argues that "[c]e n'est pas la mort et la solitude que le narrateur trouve à la fin de son initiation souterraine mais une communauté pleine de vie" (2020, p. 121). Indeed, what the narrator sees in one of the quarries' alleyways is young people, dressed up as the narrator's childhood literary heroes, having an initiation party for first-year students at the École des Mines. As Bessy suggests "[l]a catabase qui clôt le roman peut ainsi être interprétée comme un pied-de-nez à la mort après l'épisode de santé cauchemardesque qui l'avait forcé à l'immobilité et à l'angoisse" (2020, p. 121). If the descent to the quarries is indeed a catabasis, a descent to the underworld, then what the narrator discovers in this afterlife of sorts is his own lateness: he is literally late to the party that he had been organizing for the better part of the novel, in other words, the conscious resurrection of his literary heroes by means of meticulously revisiting his favorite childhood books; but he is also, and most significantly, late insofar as the elements of his past that he has brought into the present are, in fact, looking back at him from the future, the realm of the afterlife that his catabasis materializes. Although close, summoned as it has been by illness and a serious operation, the realm of the dead is still not of the present time. As is characteristic of lateness, time and reality in *L'Enfant grec* lose their known dimensions, collapsing into a transversal writing universe where everything is always possible, or where, as Edward Said has suggested, a "miraculous transfiguration of common reality" occurs (2006, p. 6).

Death, however, is not absent from *L'Enfant grec*; it is sublimated, exorcized, and partially eluded, but it punctures the text regularly. Its most salient apparition in the novel is the Death puppet. The first time the narrator sees the Death marionette in the Luxembourg gardens' Guignol theater, he notices its whiteness in a sea of colorful puppets (incidentally, all characters from his favorite childhood novels), its

expression of disgust, and the fact that it has chicken feet instead of hands (2012, p. 70). He doesn't know who this character is, but he is certain that it doesn't quite fit in with the others. Later on, while he imagines a Guignol production that he is watching in the company of a mysterious woman, death reemerges. This woman, who wears a white tunic, encourages him to take the stage and talk about his intellectual and affective relationship with some of the puppets in the show—the same marionettes from the Guignol theater who are characters from his favorite childhood readings. As he concludes his speech, he realizes that the woman in the white tunic is no other than the Death puppet. Death, then, encourages him to imaginatively resurrect memories that permit him to inhabit all dimensions of time at once: "J'étais plus jeune que vous quand je vous ai connus. Vous êtes les seules personnes avec qui je peux évoquer le jardin de Callithéa où j'ai grandi … J'ai tous les âges de ma vie à la fois. Si vous disparaissiez, je n'en aurais plus qu'un seul. Je serais un vieil homme en sortant de ce théâtre" (pp. 253-254). Finally, the Death puppet reappears during the four-hundredth anniversary party for the Luxembourg gardens that the narrator attends with some of his acquaintances, moments before they all begin their descent into the quarries. The marionette, which has grown to gigantic dimensions, shreds the tent under which the festivities are taking place with one of its chicken feet and threateningly hovers over all guests. The narrator notes that, contrary to most people who started panicking and running toward the gardens' exits: "… notre équipe a su conserver son sang-froid. J'ai informé mes camarades que la figurine représentait la Mort et qu'elle faisait partie de la collection du théâtre des marionnettes" (p. 299). From an entity that does not fit its environment, to a stranger who encourages him to dilate the present moment so that it may encompass past and future as well as accommodate both reality and imagination, to, finally, a non-threatening if still impressive puppet whose place is at the Guignol theater, Death is as "reproductively productive", to go back to Said's term, as the novel itself. The instability of its multiple iterations helps the narrator transgress the spatiotemporal borders that his illness, slowness, and age impose while providing thematic and structural material for the production of the novel that we are in the process of reading. The Death puppet does not simply materialize the narrator's inevitable future demise; it is also, structurally, a guide, it functions as an Ariadne's thread of sorts that ultimately leads to the center of the labyrinth (the quarries) where the narrator finds a different kind of monster: a demonstration, to go back to the word's most likely etymology, of the power that writing wields against the teleology of individual time.

That very power is amplified by the intertextual multidimensionality of time in both *L'enfant grec* and, as we will see later, *La clarinette* as well. Alexakis has almost always cited or referenced previous texts when writing a new novel. What is new in *L'enfant grec*, is the singular attention that he pays in this text to his first novel, *Le sandwich* (pp. 35-36, 42, 115, 120, 155, 163, 214, 221-22, 228, etc.). When we read in *La clarinette* that, in the meantime (his last two books were published three years apart) his editor had decided to publish a second edition of *Le sandwich*—one of the regrets that he expresses in *L'enfant* grec is that *Le sandwich* is his only novel to have been edited once (p. 35)—we can only assume that the narrator's insistence on reviving interest in his first novel has managed to break through the

barrier of *L'enfant grec* as a novel, a work of art, and effect change in the real world. The new reality is then reinscribed within the novelistic landscape of *La clarinette*. In other words, the narrator of *L'enfant grec* wishes a shift of reality in the future that, a few years later, the narrator of *La clarinette* confirms has occurred from his privileged temporal space of the future anterior (2015, p. 37). Writing for the narrator of *L'enfant grec* is a process that exceeds the present moment and extends necessarily into the future: "'Je n'ai jamais écrit que la suite de mes propres romans ai-je pensé" (2012, p. 23); or: "'J'écris toujours la même histoire ; ai-je pensé. Je persévère parce que je ne comprends pas ce qu'elle signifie. J'écris pour connaître le fin mot de l'histoire'" (p. 50); but also: "Quelle que soit l'histoire qu'on raconte, je ne suis pas convaincu qu'elle présente plus d'intérêt que l'aventure de son élaboration même" (p. 118). The narrator, then, concedes writing novels to get to a presumed end (narrative or linguistic), a process which he then undermines by revealing to the reader that more important than any story an author tells is the "adventure" of writing itself. The forward-looking movement that extends each novel into the next in search of the "fin mot" exists, in other words, in a dilated present where both subject matter and its genesis must coexist and remembered by what, narratively and historically comes next. *L'enfant grec* is not a novel about the Greek economic crisis of the early teens; Alexakis's literary testament to the crisis is *La clarinette*. And yet, anticipating the story of his next novel, the narrator of *L'enfant grec* references the difficulties his compatriots are facing multiple times (pp. 107-08, 162, 203-206, 208, 210-11, 303, etc.). One passage on the Greek crisis in particular imagines the protagonists of *Le Jeune Héros*, yet another of the narrator's favorite childhood readings that follows the heroic adventures of three Greek youth during the Nazi occupation, meeting up in Georges Azur's, the band-leader's apartment, close to Syntagma Square and within earshot of a demonstration against austerity, to discuss the country's current political and economic predicament. When both of his old friends are gone, Georges shoots a bullet into the apartment's window to better hear the yells of the demonstrators (pp. 165-175). The fact that Georges hesitates briefly between suicide and what he ultimately chooses to do is a proleptic echo of *La clarinette*, conjugated, as we now know, in the future anterior, and remembered by the book that will follow in the author's "série de romans" as he attempts to identify the "fin mot" on the desperation of Greek people under the troika-imposed austerity plan (*La clarinette*, pp. 78, 284-288).

In pure Alexakian form, the "fin mot" on the Greek crisis does not materialize in *La clarinette* either. The narrator tells us that he had planned on writing a book on memory and the Greek crisis but that he is in fact writing a narrative that he had not anticipated (pp. 18, 24). This change of plans is due to the illness and passing of his editor and friend, Jean-Marc Roberts, to whom he addresses this book in the second person and in French, a departure from his initial plan to write *La clarinette* in Greek. He concedes that his research on the Greek crisis is full of gaps (p. 105); that a short stay in Athens which was supposed to advance his investigation into the causes and effects of the Greek crisis did not yield much (p. 170); and that there are limits to his understanding of economic science and, therefore, the successful transmission of what he learns to Jean-Marc and to his reader (p. 284). In his work on lateness in the novels of Don De Lillo and Philip Roth, Kevin Brazil notes that

> lateness…is…a structuring temporality concerned with processes of relative decline like living after death, aging, and national decline that lack a known end point. Lateness is a state that cannot bring itself to an end, and therefore neither can it produce the moments of rupture, completion, or new beginning that…stem from a desire to transform an experience of decline into a source of new and unique possibilities. (2020, p. 222)

The narrator of *La clarinette* repeatedly then makes the case that there are no moments of "rupture", no sense of "completion" in this book. As the author anticipates his own end (in addition to the emphysema diagnosis which I have mentioned, there is acknowledgement of his tobacco addiction which helps him contextualize the "piètre état de [s]espoumons", p. 234), death becomes the ontologically impossible space on the timeline from which he revisits and expands his favorite themes: the border between reality and imagination and those temporal dilations and contractions that make life in exile possible. Contrary to *L'enfant grec* where death is a character (the Death puppet), in *La clarinette* death is the space and time of enunciation. It is from that place of absolute temporal and ontological alterity that the narrative fragments its own reality and continuity so that the lateness of characters and storylines is amplified to such an extent that they collapse under their own weight into a wormhole of sorts, making possible the brilliant ending image of the novel (and of Alexakis's novelistic life): the shadow of the Eiffel tower extending over the Aegean Sea (p. 350).

*La clarinette* comes to life as the narrator is in the process of translating *L'enfant grec*. *L'enfant grec* enters the writing space of *La clarinette* from the very first paragraph: "Mon dernier livre, comme tu le sais, je l'ai d'abord écrit en français. J'ai eu du plaisir à le rédiger, à parcourir de long en large le beau jardin du Luxembourg …" (p. 9). Later on we learn what the book was about (p. 11); that the narrator underwent a serious operation in Aix (pp. 12, 47, 67); that the book was well received by the critics (p. 15); that he visited the disaffected Parisian quarries (pp. 24, 30, 32-34); that he is currently translating it into Greek (pp. 95-96); that he briefly spoke about the Greek crisis in that book (pp. 22-23); and that puppets played a central role in his story (p. 322). The two novels do not so much succeed each other in time as they become coterminous. There is no clear thematic, temporal, linguistic, or spatial boundary between the two. The Greek crisis germinates in *L'enfant grec* to reluctantly blossom in *La clarinette*, whereas memory, whose momentary loss inspired the title of *La clarinette* (the bilingual narrator cannot recall the name of the instrument in either Greek or French) as well as a research project on memory-function that the narrator undertakes while also interrogating the Greek debt crisis, is central to *L'enfant grec*'s revival of the narrator's childhood literary heroes. This meta- and, in fact, extra-textual erasure of thematic borders mirrors and buttresses the already always present transgressive attitudes of Alexakis's lateness in both novels. In *La clarinette*, however, challenging the limits of what is possible becomes a compositional imperative: if the locus of enunciation is indeed, as I have suggested, death or the horizon of a radical alterity, then how can the narrator relate to it?

Dominique Bonnet suggests that in addition to the two research projects that he undertakes in the novel, the narrator expresses a clear "volonté de renouer le dialogue avec le défunt. La quête c'est donc aussi retrouver le chemin de cette communication par une enquête sur le passé, sur les souvenirs, qui finalement s'assouvit par le maintien en vie de l'être cher dans la fiction de l'écriture" (2020, p. 85). Valeria Marino offers an analysis of *La Clarinette*'s lateness, its exchanging of "harmony for the dissonance of… sorrow" (Adorno, p. 123), from a psychoanalytical angle, using Freud's Fort/Da theory: "reconstruire les derniers jours de l'ami équivaut à mettre en scène le Fort, l'éloignement de l'être aimé ; établir au contraire une conversation imaginaire avec l'éditeur, au temps présent coïncide avec le moment du Da, l'affirmation de la vie, au cours duquel la voix de l'ami est retrouvée grâce à la fiction" (2023, p. 132). In both cases, the narrator positions himself in an already indeterminate, spatiotemporally exploded, intertextually dependent fictional environment which is then recalled from a de-othered beyond: if the deceased friend can respond (2015, pp. 327-329); if literature can summon his voice; isn't then death yet another extension of the present moment into its own future anterior, a game that the author has often and so successfully played?

But in order to recall anything, one needs to mobilize memory. Memory function is significant in *La clarinette* not only because the narrator momentarily loses it, but, most saliently, because of Jean-Marc Roberts' passing. In addition to being the narrator's editor and good friend Jean-Marc was also an invaluable source of writing memory: "Roberts was ... the writer's most faithful reader, and his insights into Alexakis's work—as well as his recollection of what has already appeared in print—will be missed after his passing" (Rice, 2021, p. 72). *La Clarinette* revisits the narrator's approximate recollection of his own books several times: when he tells Jean-Marc that he wants memory to be at the center of his next novel, his editor reminds him that he has already written a novel on memory (p. 22); Jean-Marc also cautions him against developing an idea that he has already explored in a previous work (p. 26). It is Jean-Marc who suggests that the narrator speak with a friend of his, a neurologist, who can assist with his research on memory. During his consulation with the neurologist, the narrator discovers that "nos souvenirs sont souvent créés de toutes pièces, relèvent de l'affabulation romanesque" (p. 48). Even more salient, is the discovery that forgetting, truth, and death are etymologically linked: "Je venais de découvrir que le mot grec *alétheia*, vérité, est composé du *a* privatif et de *léthé*, l'oubli. –Le Léthé est aussi le nom d'un des affluents du Styx qui marque la frontière avec le royaume des Enfers" (p. 48). Jean-Marc, his interlocutor in this passage, responds with a seemingly out-of-place question: "–Tu as l'impression de traverser ce fleuve quand tu reviens à Paris ?" (p. 48). This exchange, in fact, materializes the out-of-placedeness of Alexakian lateness with remarkable narrative economy: it explains why the narrator in either *L'Enfant grec* or *La Clarinette* never quite cares about separating what is real from what is imaginary (both extra-, inter-, and intratextually); it reinforces the temporal indeterminacy of the narrative environments in both books (what is the meaning of crossing over Styx, a place, if on the other side awaits the beyond, a new temporality?); and it concretizes the undergirding binary dynamic that both books' temporal and ontological transgressions negotiate, that of an exilic subject in constant oscillation between two countries, two languages, two

worlds. If the Greek crisis is inevitably present in *L'enfant grec*, a most Parisian novel, and an imagined stroll around Paris as the narrator contemplates taking permanent residence in Athens (pp. 226-230) emerges in the midst of a narrative, at least partially, about the Greek economic crisis in *La clarinette*, it is because the narrator consistently delays his arrival, the end point of the Nietzschean existence as uninterrupted has-been, contemplating it in a dilated present from the vantage point of a future that has already been both imagined and recalled.

When he reflects on our current, Anthropocenic *chronos*, François Hartog suggests that we need to mediate the irreconcilable distance separating the new geological time that we have inadvertently ushered into *chronos* and time as human experience of the world: "Pour vivre dans l'Anthropocène, avons-nous besoin de nous fabriquer des médiateurs ou des médiations à même d'appréhender ce formidable *Chronos* ? … Oui, entre le temps de l'Anthropocène et le temps du monde, il n'y a pas de commune mesure et, pourtant, nous n'avons plus d'autre choix que de vivre dans l'un et l'autre en même temps" (p. 329). I would like to suggest that, although not in conversation with the particular challenges of living under the tyranny of presentism in the temporal vastness of *chronos* as Anthropocene, lateness in Alexakis's last two novels operates along the lines of what Hartog conceives as a possible mediator between different temporal regimes. Marianne Bessy has suggested that in *La clarinette* Alexakis writes "sur un mode romanesque décomplexé dans le but premier de mettre en scène l'acte d'écriture" (2018, p. 70). What if art, liberated but conscious of its existence, vacated its spatiotemporal coordinates, its themes, its meaning, the physical restrictions of its material existence, and communicated with us in Adorno's ciphers? In other words, what if it selectively forgot, as Nietzsche would suggest we do if want to liberate ourselves from the formidable weight of History? It is quite possible that the expressiveness of such an artistic creation, can alter, even if temporarily, our urgency-dependent and anxiety-provoking relationship to time, reminding us, by its very anachronism and marginality, that lateness is not epigonism; it is rather an invitation to playfully mediate between the multiple, competing, but not mutually exclusive iterations of temporal selfhood, past, present, and future. As Alexakis has shown us, being late, as the narrator of *La clarinette* is getting to the hospice care facility after Jean-Marc's death (pp. 272-274), is an opportunity to successfully negotiate between the unfathomable distance that separates death as it enters *chronos* and the time that it takes one to smoke a pipe as he says goodbye to a good friend (p. 275).

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## Περίληψη

**Ιωάννα Χατζημητρίου**

### Τα έργα της ύστερης συγγραφικής περιόδου του Βασίλη Αλεξάκη: *Ο μικρός Έλληνας και Το Κλαρινέτο*

Στην παρούσα μελέτη, θα ασχοληθούμε με την υπόθεση ότι τα δύο τελευταία μυθιστορήματα του Αλεξάκη θα μπορούσαν να διαβαστούν ως τα κατ' ουσίαν «όψιμα έργα» του. Αν και σκοπός μας δεν είναι μια επιχειρηματολογία αναφορικά με την ανάπτυξη ενός «όψιμου ύφους» στα τελευταία έργα του Αλεξάκη, θα προσπαθήσουμε να αποδείξουμε ότι *Ο μικρός Έλληνας* και *Το Κλαρινέτο* αντανακλούν την τελευταία αυτή συγγραφική περίοδο με τεχνικές που διευρύνουν όχι μόνο ορισμένα από τα αγαπημένα θέματα του συγγραφέα, αλλά και την ενδοκειμενική και εξωκειμενική αφηγηματική τους λειτουργία. Αρχικά, θα παρουσιάσουμε μερικές από τις επικρατούσες θεωρίες από τον χώρο των μελετών του «όψιμου ύφους». Στη συνέχεια, θα σκιαγραφήσουμε το θεωρητικό πλαίσιο της ύστερης περιόδου του έργου του Αλεξάκη. Τέλος, θα προσδιορίσουμε τις αφηγηματικές στρατηγικές που υιοθετεί ο συγγραφέας στα δύο τελευταία του μυθιστορήματα, επιχειρώντας να προβάλει αλλά και ταυτόχρονα να αποφύγει τον συνεχή στοχασμό σχετικά με τον θάνατο και την απώλεια, να αναδείξει το πορώδες σύνορο ανάμεσα στην πραγματικότητα και στο μυθιστορηματικό σύμπαν και να διαμορφώσει τις ριζικές συσπάσεις του χώρου και του χρόνου που καθιστούν τη ζωή ενός δίγλωσσου συγγραφέα που ζει μέσα και ανάμεσα σε δύο πολιτισμικά πλαίσια τουλάχιστον διαχειρίσιμη, αν όχι ευχάριστη και δημιουργικά παραγωγική, ακόμη και όταν αισθάνεται την αναπόφευκτη έλευση του τέλους της ζωής.