

Reading Andreas Kordopatis, Understanding History and Fiction in Thanasis Valtinos

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Abstract

Beginning with a brief account of the reception of Aristotle's divide between literature and history, this paper explores a contemporary Greek case of blurring the boundaries between those narrative forms, as exemplified in the work of Thanasis Valtinos. Focussing on one of his early works, it argues that by creatively manipulating textual formats which often do not belong to the realm of literature, Valtinos's prose constructs a blurry space between fiction and historical reality which challenges ordinary views of perception and representation and tests the boundaries of prose writing. Literature may not be able to restore historical truth, but by exploring how individuals negotiate life through specific historical conditions and circumstances, regardless of whether their understanding of these circumstances is systematic, comprehensive, accurate, or naïve, it can give voice to the experience of anonymity and therefore contribute to our understanding of what history potentially overlooks. Furthermore, it can problematize what is viewed as historical truth and accordingly sharpen our critical approach to the past by cultivating the potent space between history and fiction, between what has happened and what may have happened.

Keywords

Fiction; history; migration; potentiality; Valtinos.

Fiction, History and Valinos's Prose

The fate of most theoretical systems, interpretive schemes and definitional boundaries is not to be verified, but to be challenged, adapted to new conditions and contexts, or falsified. A few retain some of their former cachet, either because they dominated discussions over a long period of time and therefore still play a role in understanding the historical treatment of a specific question, or because despite being incomplete, they continue to relate to the present and contribute to answering contemporary questions. Such is the case with Aristotle's position on the relationship between history and literature. In chapter nine of the *Poetics*, having first discussed tragedy and myth, Aristotle argues that:

[I]t is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.¹

The reception of Aristotle's views demonstrates, firstly, that universal claims are contingent on prevalent cultural, historical, and epistemological sense-making parameters. Secondly, it provides a classic example not only of how theoretical frameworks of the past are redeployed to provide credence to contemporary perspectives, but also how they are adapted to new contexts and interpretive interests. In the nineteenth century, for example, his prejudice against history was used to articulate the boundary between fact and fiction, clearly delineating domains of operation. History followed a realist path, guided by the belief that "objective" reality can be grasped and represented in language, while literature engaged with the romantic universal path of the possible. History dealt with facts, while literature contributed minimally to our understanding of the past as it relied on fictionalization and engagement with the beautiful. As suggested by Hayden White, "the division between literature and history properly belongs to the nineteenth century, when the arts, theory of aesthetic, and what has formerly been called *belles lettres* were split between two possible paths of development: romanticism, on the one hand, realist, on the other."²

The advent of modernism and the radical change in epistemological paradigms during the course of the twentieth century challenged the established certainties of the past and led to a re-examination of the Aristotelian divide. In the realm of art and literature, these changes brought about a greater awareness of issues relating to perception and the representation of reality and prompted unprecedented experimentation in narrative forms. More importantly, during this period, literature ended its long preoccupation with the beautiful. Disassociated from aesthetics, it was viewed as another form of writing concerned with expressing emotions and exploring the human condition. Fiction in particular, argues White, was transformed from:

1 *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. E. S. H. Butcher (London: MacMillan, 1902), 35.

2 Hayden White, "The History Fiction Divide," *Holocaust Studies* 20, no. 1-2 (2014): 30.

An ontological to an epistemological concept; henceforth, fiction is no longer identified with “lie,” falsehood, or “imaginary” but is treated as a cognitive instrument, specifically of the (productive) imagination (poietic); it is a form of literary writing featuring certain “devises” rather than a discourse about imaginary beings. Along with all this goes the collapse of the hierarchy of literary genres which dictates a certain “content” for the particular “forms” of literature.³

In history and historiography, on the other hand, the acknowledgment of how present prejudices, ideological positioning, and epistemological assumptions influence the way we construct and represent our view of the past led to the realization that connections between historical events do not necessarily originate from the events themselves, but are often the result of the historian’s intervention, interpretation, and style of writing. More recently, cultural historians have emphasized the importance of micro-history and have argued that the possible and the potential, including thoughts and emotions, are in fact part of history: “The study of past cultures always entails the mapping of past possibilities.”⁴

Besides challenging historical realism—particularly the view that history is solely constructed on observable facts—the consequence of these changes was the re-examination of the established divide between history and literature and the blurring of their boundaries. In broad terms, it was accepted that historical and literary accounts of the past share common narrative practices. Literary critics acknowledged the historical features of literary texts, and historians recognised the literary dimension of their narratives. Nonetheless, Aristotle’s distinction appears to have retained some of its original usefulness, even if only at the level of author intention and reader expectation: although the concept of the past has become more problematic, historical texts still claim to refer to something that did exist, while literary texts which borrow from history are expected to move more freely between history and fiction.

In this paper I explore a contemporary Greek case of blurring those boundaries, as exemplified in the work of Thanasis Valtinos. His prose is distinguished by an ongoing dialogue with twentieth century Greek history. He draws material from key periods of contemporary Greek history, particular from the devastating civil war and its aftermath, the Greek dictatorship and migration. History, in his case, is not simply constituted by great events and their broader significance, but by the experience of these events by ordinary people, irrespective of whether these experiences played a significant role in influencing historical change, verified prevalent historical interpretations, or were simply naive perceptions of historical reality. Like many other writers who draw from history, Valtinos is driven by the “powerful impulse” which originates from “the political desire to write the histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded,”⁵ and thus concentrates on the gaps in history, on micro-history, on that which history leaves out.

3 Hayden White, “The History Fiction Divide,” 31-2.

4 Hannu Salmi, “Cultural History, the Possible and the Principle of Plenitude,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (May 2011): 174. See also, Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 49-73, 103-112; Anna Green, *Cultural History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 64-81; and Hanna Meretoja, “Fiction, History and the Possible: Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 71, no. 5 (2016): 371-404.

5 A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), 11.

An additional feature of his work is that his narratives do not always follow a traditional linear structure. Valtinos often builds his stories on forms borrowed from non-literary contexts, such as product flyers, newspaper advertisements, diary entries, personal or business letters, actual or “manufactured” news pieces, court transcripts, oral testimonies etc. These unusual textual formats, which do not belong to the sphere of the literary (and occasionally lack even a narrative), are nevertheless used in a way that contributes to the emergence of a coherent story. They frequently appear to simultaneously refer to three layers of historical reality which seem to parallel the platonic perspective of the relationship between reality and artistic representation: the given reality behind the narrative; a personal narrative or a document about this reality; and finally, its literary account or representation. However, the story is presented in such a way that it is difficult to assess the degree to which these are fictitious constructions or real “historical sources,” obfuscating where the reference to historical reality stops and where the writer’s presence begins. As a result, Valtinos often gives the impression of stitching together the raw material of a narrative without actually providing that narrative.⁶

Certainly, the search for new forms as a way of dealing with the problematic relationship between reality and representation is not a new phenomenon; nor is it Valtinos’s discovery. In his case it is directly linked to what Jean-Francois Lyotard termed the post-modern “incredulity” of what is taken to be true—that is, the post-modern scepticism of grand, universalizing metanarratives—and is related to similar issues emerging from post-modern narratives.⁷ Within this context, Valtinos’s quest is not merely the result of the author’s ambition to escape the ordinary or to construct stories in a manner that simply avoids being “a bit of the same”;⁸ rather, it seems to be linked to a genuine concern about the perception and representation of historical reality. For Valtinos, there seems to be no privileged position from which to view history. To overcome this problem, he appears to adopt two interrelated methods. The first is to let the source materials of history speak for themselves, even when they are dipped in fictionalization, ideology or subjectivity, and the second is to narrate a story while concurrently referring to its construction, thus indirectly pointing to the problems inherent in each representation. By creating literary narratives which continuously point to the raw materials of history, Valtinos stands with one foot on history and the other on fiction, thus giving the impression that his prose operates in the blurry space in-between the two domains. It is precisely this positioning which generates questions on how historical reality is perceived, narrated, and constructed.

6 As can be expected, Valtinos’s forms raise a number of questions regarding the classification of his work. These questions are intensified in cases where the author insists on calling his novels “texts,” as, either because of their size or form, they do not easily fit the mold of what we usually refer to as a novel. See, for example, how Stavros Zoumboulakis, editor of *Anaplous* (an apparently autobiographical narrative articulated in the form of an interview), records his experience with Valtinos’s persistence in labelling it a “novel” in Σταύρος Ζουμπούλακης, «Αναπλέοντας προς τη Σκοτεινή Ρίζα», *Athens Review of Books* (June 2012): 9.

7 See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Linda Hutcheon, “The Politics of Parody,” *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 93-117.

8 In an interview about his work *Data from the Decade of the Sixties*, Valtinos notes: “This socio-historical period could not be dealt with in any other way, because that would not make sense anymore. Creating a classic novel on this important decade would most likely lead, at least these were my fears, again to a bit of the same.” «Μια συνομιλία με τον Σάββα Παύλου», *Ακτὴ* 6 (1991): 15.

To illustrate the case, this paper examines one of Valtinos's early works, entitled *The Book of the Days of Andreas Kordopatis*. In addition to allowing for exploration of the manner in which he blurs boundaries, *The Book* also provides an opportunity to examine Valtinos's experimental forms and illuminate his mature work, unencumbered by the controversial historical references in some of his latter novels, and their attendant ideological baggage.⁹ Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to reconsider migration, a rather neglected aspect of Greek history. Despite the mass movement of Greeks during the twentieth century, immigration still remains a footnote to Greek history. Even when discussed, it is often idealised, perpetuating stereotypes of people who against all odds and through hard work, managed to excel in their endeavours. Little is known of what they went through to adapt to their new environment, their longing for the familiar, their struggles to communicate in a new language, their difficulties in finding work, or many of the other trials of immigrant life.

The Book of the Days of Andreas Kordopatis

The *Book* recounts the real story of Andreas Kordopatis's failed attempts to emigrate to America in the early twentieth century. Forced by poverty and economic and social instability, and prompted by the mass migration that began at that time, the story's hero tries to emigrate three times; however, each time he fails to pass the necessary health checks. After much suffering, he manages to reach America on his fourth and final attempt, along with hundreds of other southern and eastern European immigrants. On arrival entry is again declined by the authorities. However, with the help of his brothers, who are already American citizens, he decides to remain illegally and manages to evade detection from November 1907 to June 1910, approximately six months short of the time required to be eligible for permanent residency. Most of the story centers on this period, and specifically on his adventures as an illegal immigrant who is forced to flee from city to city in order to avoid deportation.

Thus, Valtinos decides to tell a story which runs counter to the stereotypical accounts about immigration. This is not the story of a successful man who sets up in another country and starts a new life away from poverty, nor a man who returns home having made a fortune overseas. Here we have the story of a failed attempt at re-homing: a man who goes through unimaginable difficulties and, in the end, returns to his place of origin with little tangible evidence of his journey other than his own story. This is perhaps why Valtinos chooses to make Kordopatis the narrator of his story. With the exception of the following note at the beginning of this short book, the voice and presence of Valtinos himself ostensibly recede into the background:

Ο Αντρέας Κορδοπάτης [writes Valtinos in 1964] ζει στο χωριό Δάρα Μαντινείας. Κοντεύει τώρα ενενήντα πέντε χρόνων. Τα περιστατικά που ακολουθούν, είναι ένα κομμάτι από τη ζωή του. Μερικά τα είχε γράψει ο ίδιος, άλλα μου τα διηγήθηκε. Αυτό στάθηκε το πρώτο υλικό. Ξανάφτιαξα την ιστορία από την αρχή, φροντίζοντας να διατηρηθεί το ύφος και η απλότητα της κουβέντας του. Αλλαγές στα γεγονότα έγιναν ελάχιστα, κυρίως σε

⁹ For critical reactions to Valtinos's work, particularly his use of history, see Δημήτρης Παϊβανάς, «Η Πεζογραφία του Θανάση Βαλτινού, ο Μεταμοντερνισμός και το Ιστοριογραφικό Πρόβλημα», *Επιστήμη και Κοινωνία* 12, (2004): 297-334; and Δημήτρης Παϊβανάς, *Βία και Αφήγηση. Ιστορία, Ιδεολογία και Εθνικός Πολιτισμός στην Πεζογραφία του Θανάση Βαλτινού* (Αθήνα: Εστία, 2012).

σημεία που ήσαν απαραίτητες για λόγους τεχνικούς.¹⁰

Andreas Kordopatis [writes Valtinos in 1964] lives in the village Dara Mantinea. He is nearly ninety-five years old. The events that follow are one part of his life. He had written some of them himself, others he told me about. This was the original material. I recreated the story from scratch, taking care to maintain the style and simplicity of his narration. Changes to the events were minimal, mainly at points that were deemed necessary for technical reasons.

The story is told in a first-person narrative, giving the impression that Kordopatis is the author. However, the fact that Valtinos relies on actual events with minimal changes is not the same as merely recording an oral history. Nor does the fact that he uses a real person to tell the story mean that Valtinos functions simply as a scribe. There is an obvious difference between the experience of events and the narration of that experience, even if the person who lived the events and the person narrating them are one and the same. The experience is not language, although many things can be experienced or relived through language. Since Valtinos decides to convey the story in this fashion and not in a conventional narrative, the challenge he faces is to maintain the orality and the tone of Kordopatis's narrative and therefore the illusion that it really is Kordopatis who tells his story. He has no choice but to create a simple, austere, and humble narrative in a fashion similar to the oral tradition of Greek folk songs, characterized by concise descriptions and a focus on the main adventures of the hero. Therefore, although the story relies on the real experiences of a real person, it does not cease to be a story which, like all the stories that come to the realm of language, is comprised of fictional elements. Valtinos explained to Kleftoyannis that:

Kordopatis was the uncle of one of his classmates. He met him when he was already 80. "He was a nice guy. One of my classmates was asked to write Kordopatis's memoirs. He produced five or six pages in a mixed language. We used to read them and crack up laughing." Valtinos kept these pages. When he accidentally found them again, he thought "what a nice topic immigration is, especially the first wave." So, he found the aged Kordopatis, who "wrote with his mind. He remembered everything." When writing *The Book*, Valtinos kept as his principle "the simplicity of narration." And he produced a dazzling, pure, oral folk narrative.¹¹

Hence, we have a story which gives the impression that it is located at the intersection of fiction and historical reality, a point where the two narrators meet. Kordopatis, who tells the story, wants to bring his experiences to the field of language, while Valtinos, who is always behind him, wants to give voice to Kordopatis himself and thus bring forth the tone of his voice. It could even be argued that Valtinos does not simply want to tell the story, but to capture the *character's* voice. This is why he makes Kordopatis tell his own story. The character's voice inexorably adds to the truthfulness and

10 Θανάσης Βαλτινός, *Συναξάρι Αντρέα Κορδοπάτη* (Αθήνα: Αγρα, 1990): 9. The book of the Days of Andreas Kordopatis was first published in the journal *Tachydromos* during January–February 1964. Unless otherwise stated, translations of Valtinos's book have been made by the author of the present article.

11 Ιωάννα Κλεφτογιάννη, "Η Ιστορία ενός Σύγχρονου Οδυσσέα," *Ελευθεροτυπία* (November 5, 2011). Valtinos's words are enclosed in quotation marks.

authenticity of the narrative, while simultaneously representing the voice of thousands of immigrants. Through his voice, one may hear an aspect of the broader collective experience of migration. Consequently, the narrative form adopted along with the writer's introductory note is critical to the story's placement in the blurry space between fiction and reality. To further explore this space, we must examine key aspects of Kordopatis's story, beginning with his decision to emigrate.

Kordopatis's Decision and the Experience of the Interstitial Space

Initially, Kordopatis decides to emigrate for unsurprising reasons: natural disasters, social and economic instability, and the 1897 war are all factors which render any effort to find a job or establish a sustainable business at home futile. Despite multiple attempts at a new beginning, he always ends exactly where he started—jobless and disillusioned. He remains a man without prospects, agency, direction, or a center; paradoxically, a homeless man in a home that offers neither safety nor opportunities to follow his dreams.

Like any desire, the desire to re-home begins from a "lack." In his case, however, this lack is not simply due to the difficulty in making ends meet, but emanates from something more fundamental that mobilizes every human: the potentiality associated with the ability to dream.¹² Dreaming is a prerequisite of existence and "homelessness" is the prerequisite for realizing dreams. Kordopatis's decision is thus based on the hope that somewhere there must be a place where dreams are possible. His hope is fuelled by random news and rumours and stems from the belief that he can endure anything but the absence of the opportunity to do something with his life.¹³ Baseless or not, this hope opens the potentiality to dream, and with it, the courage to embrace the unknown. The fact that at this stage the promised land remains an abstract image, constructed on the basis of limited information, functions as a supplementary impetus for hope and not as an obstacle—a blank canvas on which plans for the future are drawn with hope.

From the moment he decides to leave, Kordopatis gradually enters an unfamiliar existential zone dominated by what is to come. The repetitious cycle of his former existence, which always made him return to where he started, gives place to a series of temporal and spatial tensions. His world is divided between here and there, present and future, reality and the desire to re-home—between actual space and the imaginary realm in which he dwells. In the context of these dichotomies, everything is on standby awaiting what is to come. Life in the here and now, as is evident from the following passage, is on hold:

12 In addition to the references to Aristotle above, for the issue of potentiality see: Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. E. D. Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

13 The following dialogue with an immigrant is typical of how Kordopatis gathers information about a potential new home:

How was it in America?

Very good. We could eat whatever we wanted. Cheap things, clothes, shoes.

Payday?

One could get two dollars, one seventy-five, one and a half.

Jobs?

Lots. Train lines, gold mines, charcoal mines and others. (24)

Η μάνα μου με έβλεπε που είχα βάλει το κεφάλι κάτω να φύγω και στενοχωριόταν. Δεν ήθελε να ξενιτευτώ. Και τότε σκέφτηκε να με παντρέψει. Έβαλε μια αδερφή της να μου το πει. Ήταν ένα ωραίο παχουλό κορίτσι, χαρούμενο. Μου έπεσε η θειά μου από κοντά, να τα φτιάξουμε να την πάρω. Της λέω δεν γίνεται τίποτα. Το κορμί μου με παίδευε [...]. δεν την άντεχα τη μοναξιά. Αλλά είχα άλλα στο νου μου. (37)

My mother could see that I was determined to leave and she was worried. And then, she thought to have me married. She asked one of her sisters to talk to me. She was a nice chubby girl, happy. My aunt pressured me to get involved with the girl, to marry her. I told her, nothing can be done. I was dogged by my body [...]. I could not stand loneliness. But I had other things in my mind.

As Kordopatis starts his journey this in-between state is exacerbated. On the ship he finds himself among people from different nationalities, with different perceptions and values, cultural and religious practices, and eating habits and languages—who all share a common fate. “We were,” he says, “nearly three thousand different races: Greeks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Turks, Russians, Romanians, Serbs, Austrians” (47). During the voyage he enters “contact zones” with other cultures and is continuously exposed to new traditions and ways of life.¹⁴ The relatively homogeneous perspective of his previous life gives way to diverse points of view. These points of contact are distinguished by cultural and linguistic intersections, and as such constitute areas of transformation. Their traces are primarily depicted in language and communication, which also appear to function in a space in-between:

Ιταλιάνο; μου λέει.
 Νο, Γκρέκο, του λέω.
 Μπόνο Γκρέκο.
 Ιταλιάνο; τον ρωτάω.
 Πες, μου λέει.
 Μπόνο Ιταλιάνο, του λέω κι εγώ.
 Τον ρωτάω ύστερα, γκρικ σάλα, δωμάτιο ύπνου. Έκλαιγαν τα μάτια μου. Δεν μπορήγαμε να συνεννοηθούμε. (59)

Italiano? He tells me.
 No, Greco, I tell him.
 Bono Greco.
 Italiano? I ask him.
 Yes, he tells me.
 Bono Italiano, I tell him too.
 Then, I ask him, Greek place, room for the night? I shed tears. We couldn't understand each other.

Something similar happens with his identity. Forced to play hide-and-seek with the authorities to avoid deportation, he continually adopts different aliases and identities, leaving his real self on the sidelines. In the end, he almost becomes a doppelganger of the identity he wants to acquire:

14 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zones,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

Πήγαμε στο εργοστάσιο κι έγραψαν τα ονόματά μας. Εγώ έβαλα Τομ Κάλας, όχι Αντρέας Κορδοπάτης, γιατί με κυνηγούσαν οι κλητήρες, να χάσουν τα αχνάρια μου. Άλλαξα ονόματα και επίθετα πολλά. (93-94)

We went to the factory and gave our names. I put down Tom Callas, not Andreas Kordopatis, so the agents could lose track of me. I changed names and surnames a lot.

Perhaps nothing reveals the in-between space occupied by Kordopatis during his stay in America more than his experience of space. As an illegal immigrant who tries to avoid the authorities, he has no choice but to be constantly on the move. Considering that he relocates eighteen times in a period of two-and-a-half years, space for Kordopatis has meaning only as arrival and departure. His spatial orientation no longer has anything to do with the allure of a specific geographical location, but only with the security it can offer. Cities exist as transit points. They are simply points on a map leading from one transient refuge to another. The most prominent example of this homelessness is when a train—the ultimate in-between space—becomes his home. He lives, eats and sleeps on the move, in a space which is the antithesis of the stability and safety evoked by the concept of home:

Μένουμε σε βαγόνια επίτηδες για εργάτες. Μαγειρεύουμε μέσα, κοιμόμαστε το βράδυ κι όταν η εταιρεία είχε ανάγκη για άλλο μέρος, μας έπαιρνε και μας κουβάλαγε τη νύχτα. Έτσι ξημερωθήκαμε και δουλέψαμε σε διάφορες πολιτείες: Σέντερ Πάρκ, Λόγγαν, Μπόζεμαν, Λίβινστυν. (89)

We stayed in workers' wagons. We cooked and slept in them and when the company needed us to go to another place, the wagons moved us during the night. So, by the morning we would arrive and work in different cities: Center Park, Logan, Bozeman, Livingston.

Kordopatis moves from city to city and job to job like a fugitive. The paradox of this experience is that he is forced to erase any trace of himself in a place he wants to make his own. He longs for a centre to call home, but this desire forces him to keep moving. Space therefore, retains the promise of permanency, but has not yet been invested with the familiarity or memories to become place.¹⁵ In this context of continuous movement, the only seemingly stable points are with relatives or people from his place of origin. With them, space becomes less hostile and alienating, not simply because of their common origin and the implicit expectation of understanding, but primarily because of their common language. Without them, Kordopatis inhabits a space of silence:

15 Although the meaning of the concepts of space and place is varied, in broad terms, space refers to an abstract spatial location, while place refers to how individuals develop emotional, personal social and meaningful connections with a specific space. For a discussion of space and place, see: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. J. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); and J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Ταξίδενα τριάμισι μερόνυχτα. Χωρίς φίλους, χωρίς Έλληνες να κουβεντιάζω, μόνος μου.
(74)

I was travelling for three and a half days. Without friends, without Greeks to chat with, on my own.

Another source of the “familiar” is, as can be expected, other immigrants. Despite individual and cultural differences, there is between them a tacit understanding of kinship. Together they share the experience of the in-between space and a common fate, united by the language of the common experience, even when that language is in broken or inarticulate phrases. His sense of space is therefore determined by points of safety among people with common experiences. Because of these points of intersection, space is invested with new memories and acquires a familiarity which gradually transforms it to place.

The Dynamics of Interstitial Space and the Search for Form

Although Kordopatis remains homeless, having recovered the potentiality of “the dream” has given him the strength to endure any hardship and overcome any obstacle. With the restrictive conditions of his previous life behind him, he now realises that despite the enormous difficulties he faces, if he persists, he can potentially escape the cycle of continuous relocation and eventually begin a new life. His objective is to reach the three-year period which will secure permanent residency. With each passing day he is closer to this goal, and with it, to the possibility of realising his dream of a new beginning.

Analogous to Kordopatis’s experience of physical space, the mental space between the desire for a new beginning and the realisation of that dream opens a dynamic field of possibilities. All obstacles and challenges can now be justified because of their temporariness. Temporariness is respite from commitment. It liberates Kordopatis from all other problems and fears, leaving him free to pursue the ultimate goal of permanent residency. Everything else is suspended. Without roots in space and with time not having found its normal flow, it is easier to leave one thing and to do another. Unwavering in his goal, he finds himself in a unique position where all setbacks have an end date. The present is a break between a past that does not let him dream and a future that exists as a promise. Adversity therefore functions as a means of revealing potential that even Kordopatis himself did not know he had.

Contrary to expectations, the absence of a permanent home not only designates “lack,” it also generates a strange energy that gives rise to hope and the potential to dream. Finding oneself between departure and arrival leaves one facing an uncharted territory with the potential for exploration, new adventures and existential perspectives. On the basis of Kordopatis’s story, it can be argued that the permanence of a home refers to *stasis*, while its absence points to *kinesis*. This is why the interstitial—a space between desire and fulfillment—is a dynamic field that not only fuels the promise of well-being, but keeps alive the possibility of recovering everything that one has lost, even one’s own being. It demarcates an area where the promise of arrival meets the desire of “dwelling,”¹⁶ more than

16 Dwelling, according to Heidegger, relates to the manner in which we exist, to our “being in the world.” “The real

it would in a permanent home. It offers an inexhaustible impetus because it constantly invites the individual to the potential of being. It is perhaps a space analogous to childhood, where anything is possible despite the limitations or boundaries evident to adults. Paradoxically, it appears that Kordopatis is at home precisely when he is in-between, since there, hope has an energy not provided by the permanence of home.

To arrive, one must first dwell in that which is neither here nor there. The interstitial is the condition of arrival. However, Kordopatis does not reach anywhere. His adventure completes a circle since he returns precisely to where he started. When he begins to feel comfortable in the new space, he reveals his real name, is betrayed, arrested and deported. His experience remains the experience of in-between, as is the experience of each migrant—though in his case, the “in-between” is not simply between two places, as is usually the case with a “typical” immigrant, but between departure and arrival, the desire to establish a new home and his inability to do so. The rather fictional end of the book confirms the significance of this interstitial space. As he travels back to his village, Kordopatis plans his next trip:

Κατεβαίνω και πάω στο πραχτορείο Μαλούχου. Ήταν ένας νέος υπάλληλος. Του λέω: Σε έξι μήνες ειδοποίησέ με όταν έχει πλοίο. Και άφησα όνομα και σύσταση. (138)

I get off and go to Malouchou's agency. There was a new employee. I tell him: “In six months, let me know when there is a ship.” And I left my name and address.

I want to propose here that the way in which Valtinos constructs the story is not accidental. He does not simply attempt to tell the story in a way that escapes the ordinary. Instead, by creating a space between personal storytelling and fiction, he chooses a form which is analogous to Kordopatis's experience. This form allows him to explore the individual's experience of specific historical circumstances and, more importantly, how the individual comprehends and brings that experience to language. It is a means of capturing the “authentic” voice of migration, and by extension, the anonymous voice of history; for if the space in between is a space that opens up new opportunities, so too does the blurry in-between space of Valtinos's narrative open up numerous options for conveying both the individual's experience and perception of specific historical events.

Concurrently, Valtinos's choice indirectly points to another condition at the core of every narrative: that of a personal experience. Kordopatis recounts his story many years after the events, and as can be expected, the story is infused by the games played by memory. As a result, reality and fiction have already been interwoven in his story, both from the gaps left by memory and filled by imagination, as well as from the significance retrospectively attributed by Kordopatis to the events he experienced.

plight of dwelling,” he writes, “is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that *they must ever learn to dwell*. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling. But how else can mortals answer this summons than by trying on their part, on their own, to bring dwelling to the fullness of its nature? This they accomplish when they build out of dwelling, and think for the sake of dwelling.” Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 159.

The story reaches Valtinos already mediated by language and the remnants of memory. This is why, from the author's perspective, the most effective way of rendering the story is precisely as it was rendered—that is, as a story which points simultaneously to a personal testimony and a fictionalized literary piece, analogous to how Kordopatis both actually experienced the events and had them evolve in his mind.

There is no doubt that behind Kordopatis's story lies a real person and a specific historical reality. Nor can Kordopatis's recollection of his own experience be denied. However, as the fictional "investment" of any true story is a condition of human existence and directly related to the way we experience and recall a given reality; it is uncertain how much of it corresponds to reality and how much to fiction. In discussing oral histories, A. Portelli argues:

Oral sources are *credible* but with a different credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no "false" oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that "wrong" statements are still psychologically "true," and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.¹⁷

The only possible way we can have access to these psychologically true statements about events is through an unmediated third-party narrative; that is, through the voice and perspective of the person who experienced them, even though both might be saturated by fiction. To achieve this, the author has to give the impression that he retires into the background so that the anonymous hero can attain voice, name, and presence. Such narratives manage to avoid generalizations or claims of objectivity while indirectly pointing to them. By keeping one eye on historical reality and the other on literary narrative, the text draws attention both to the way in which one talks about reality and the way in which one invests it with meaning. As Kordopatis's interstitial space holds open the possibility of the dream, so too does the interstitial space of Valtinos's narrative open up the possibility of language and writing to the experience of history, reminding the reader of the problems associated with any narrative, including those of history. The fact that the text itself claims to lie on the boundaries of literature and personal testimony may alienate the text's reception as literature. Valtinos's text becomes, analogous to the hero, the "stranger" of the conventional literary narrative in order to destabilize our expectations and to critique the clichés of successful migrant stories. Although the story may alienate the reader with its form, it captivates with the personal tone and the orality of the narrative. Readers may not feel at home in Valtinos's text, but may find the familiar in the simplicity and directness of Kordopatis's voice.

17 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 51.

Concluding Remarks

The preceding discussion can shed light on the central feature of Valtinos's mature work, namely the unusual forms through which he refers to contemporary Greek history, and by extension on the broader issue of the intersection of fiction and history. If Kordopatis is at home in the interstitial space between desire and fulfilment, Valtinos seems to be at home in the space between history and fiction. For Kordopatis, this space opens up the potentiality of dreaming and claiming agency. For Valtinos, the blurry space in-between history and fiction offers him the opportunity to explore the diverse possibilities of how ordinary individuals navigate through history while it is still unfolding, how they experience and comprehend specific historical events, and how they are affected by them emotively. The reason behind his insistence on giving voice to ordinary individuals seems to emanate from the belief that all narrators, including historians or those relaying personal experiences of history, are neither independent of their own ideology nor in a position to know the entire historical circumstances to which they refer. A specific historical event, an individual's experience of it, and a narrative of that event are not one and the same thing. There is always a distance that separates them, a gap in information, a residual meaning lost or left behind when one moves from the event to experience and its linguistic representation. Valtinos's answer to this problem is to recount a story by combining micro-histories and personal narratives with strategies for placing source material centre stage, in order to enhance our understanding of how language brings historical reality to consciousness.

He maintains the emphasis on the voice of ordinary individuals throughout his mature work and develops it further in two ways: firstly, by employing personal accounts, letters and a variety of other historical documents, and secondly by broadening the perspective of the single voice narrative used in *Days of Kordopatis* with the introduction of a range of diverse voices. Considering his work in its entirety, it is tempting to suggest that it constitutes a single narrative of the history of twentieth century Greece conveyed through different voices. Like the *Days of Kordopatis*, the form chosen in each of his novels is congruent to the content and in particular to the intentions of the author as denoted in the titles of subsequent novels. Prime examples of this are *Data from the Decade of the Sixties*, which attempts to convey the spirit of the sixties on the basis of a series of letters, and the *Book of the Days of Andreas Kordopatis II. The Balkan Wars*, which deals with the period of the Balkan Wars through a series of personal accounts and testimonies.

Furthermore, his unusual forms point to suspicion and scepticism over traditional narrative forms and are therefore intended to challenge the way we relate to the past. They invite the reader to critically reflect on prevalent versions of history, on the role that the source material of history may play in the construction of a historical narrative, and therefore on the methods on which we rely to develop an understanding of historical reality. We could even argue that the more controversial the voices and personal accounts, the more critical and reflective the reader may become. The critical reception of his novels *The Descent of the Nine* and *Orthokosta*, both drawing from the civil war in Greece, is a case in point. The first was broadly considered pro left wing, with its autobiographical style capturing "the fate of a whole movement,"¹⁸ while the second generated a lot of discussion among Marxist crit-

18 Σπύρος Τσακνιάς, «Θανάσης Βαλτινός: Η κάθοδος των εννιά», in Θεοδόσης Πυλαρινός, *Για τον Βαλτινό. Κριτικά Κείμενα*, (Λευκωσία: Αίγαιον, 2003), 78. Quoted in Δημήτρης Παϊβανάς, *Βία και Αφήγηση*, 74.

ics in particular, who regarded it as a defence of the collaborationist military groups known as “Security Battalions” and consequently criticized the author for his reactionary politics.¹⁹ Such readings, though, seem to miss the point with Valtinos’s interplay between history and fiction. There is no contradiction or shift in the author’s political outlook. Contrary to that, his approach seems consistent throughout his writing career. The reader, consequently, should not seek to find in Valtinos’s novels support for either left or right-wing politics, but instead, the author’s consistent approach to giving voice to anonymity. The political dimension of his work which draws on the civil war does not relate to taking sides or adopting a simplistic morality of good versus evil, but precisely to the fact that he concentrates on what the language of individuals reveals about their understanding and experience of history.

By blurring the boundaries between history and literature, Valtinos thus insists that literature has its own way of dealing with the past. The literary can shed light on history, not by attempting to restore historical truth, but by exploring how individuals experience history while history is still unfolding, regardless of whether their understanding of the specific historical conditions and circumstances they negotiate is systematic, comprehensive, accurate, or naïve. It can thus assist us not only in understanding that which may have happened, but in learning about what history potentially forgets or neglects. Literature may not be able to restore historical truth, but by questioning issues of representation and established notions of historical narratives, it can problematize what is viewed as truth and therefore enhance our understanding of the past and the interplay between literature and history, fiction and reality, and the potential and the real.

¹⁹ Δημήτρης Παϊβανάς, *Βία και Αφήγηση*, 179-184.

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