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Part of the play

Going home to rediscover the muse

Theodor Kallifatides
ANOTHER LIFE
On memory, language, love, and the passage of time

Translated by Marlaine Delargy
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Theodor Kallifatides

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Surprisingly little of the Greek-born Swedish author Theodor Kallifatides's work is available in English. It is therefore a welcome development to have his memoir about writer's block, life as an émigré and language, *Another Life*, available in a lucid translation by Marlaine Delargy. One hopes that this beautifully designed volume will spark interest in making his work more widely available.

A major literary figure in Sweden, Kallifatides was born in the village of Molaoi, in the Peloponnese, in 1938. He lived through the Occupation, the Civil War and its aftermath before emigrating to Sweden in 1964. He fully embraced his life there, electing to write in his adopted language.

A prolific writer in many genres, including poetry, fiction and drama (he has even written and directed a film), Kallifatides suddenly finds himself, at the beginning of *Another Life*, unable to write at all. This book – part memoir, part journal, part essay – is loosely hung on the peg of a "nostos" narrative, a return home. Kallifatides decides that the cure for his inability to write may be to go back to Greece. An additional motive arrives in the form of an emailed invitation from the principal of the high school in his home village. The local people would like to name the school after him; there will be a ceremony and a student production of Aeschylus' *Persians.*

Kallifatides is charming in his lack of false modesty:

> I have nothing against formal honors. Quite the reverse. That is why I wrote. To have my name on a street in my village, to have a school named after me, to carry on existing. I'm sure that authors and artists felt the same way before we and the rest of society were browbeaten by the market. Eternity was no longer fashionable.

The book meanders between Kallifatides's cosy studio in Stockholm and a summer place in Gotland; and between the war-torn and impoverished Greece of his childhood and a modern Greece degraded by Europe-imposed austerity and struggling to cope with an influx of refugees. Certain elements of Kallifatides's personal history will be well known to his Swedish readership, and pop up the way shared memories do in a conversation with old friends. The anglophone reader new to his work will sometimes find the book discursive and haphazard: there is a chapter-cum-opinion piece on *Charlie Hebdo*, and an interlude involving the purchase of a bed – "called a Sultan . . . marvellous!" – from IKEA, but by the midway point, we are enjoying the ride.

Kallifatides has a novelist's ear for anecdote, a dramatist's for dialogue, and a poet's for aphorism. The journey's arc is not surprising – burnt out and bereft of language, Kallifatides travels to the village, where his muse is rejuvenated, and he begins to write again – but the discoveries, we realize, are made en route. He meditates on age (in a bar, a Swedish editor suggests that writers should stop at seventy-five; he is seventy-seven at the start of the book); joins Twitter (after his first tweet, a sentence that had been buzzing in his head, he has ten instant alerts; "by the evening there were a hundred people 'following' me"); and draws an intimate portrait of a long marriage that rubs along in daily rituals of affection and irritation. He also explores empathy for modern asylum-seekers, drawing on his own experience as an immigrant, and tries to come to terms with the humiliations visited on a Greece (and an Athens) he both recognizes and is estranged from. Reminiscing about meeting the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos in Athens while translating him into Swedish, Kallifatides recalls that he finally worked up the nerve to ask about a phrase, "Dear master, are you sure we say it that way in Greek?" The poet responded sadly, "But it's not Greek that's saying it that way. It's me".

Kallifatides is perhaps at his best here when writing about his love not only of Sweden, but of Swedish. "Instead of writing, I picked up an old Gotland newspaper and came across a couple of words I hadn't seen before: *ostor* – unbig! – and *fingå* – to go for a fine walk. A wave of happiness swept over me . . . . 'I'm going out for a fine walk in this unbig sun,' I called out to my wife [Gunilla]." Greek is different, heavier. The Greek idioms Kallifatides quotes tend to have the grimness of a Greek chorus. To toss a black stone over one's shoulder is to leave something behind for ever. Indifference is expressed with "it is raining elsewhere".

At the end, the author switches his computer's language setting from Swedish to Greek to start writing this very book. Here certain things suddenly made more sense to me. I now imagined an "original" Greek book: the Aristotle epigraph ("Nothing is more precious than a friend") would be in ancient Greek, and the opening of The Persians would be quoted electrically, in the original. There would be a seamlessness of fonts, with only the Swedish peeping out in another alphabet.

It is the high school production of Aeschylus' *Persians*, in Greek, on one supermoon-lit night in September, in his native village, that provides the epiphany, or maybe the deus ex machina, necessary to bring Kallifatides's words back to life. Unusually, *The Persians (*the oldest extant play in Western

literature) starts with a chorus; the words are spoken in the inclusive first-person plural. “So Aeschylus began, speaking directly to us”, Kallifatides says, enchanted. “We were not an audience; we were a part of the play.”