Reversing Class Defection

Two Ionian Tales of Gender, Nation, and Woe

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"In writing, no choice is self-evident" (Ernaux 2022) – this emphatic assertion marked a key moment of Annie Ernaux's Nobel Prize lecture, as it highlighted the contradiction inherent in an author's attempt to retroactively endow such choices with meaning and significance; in other words, it was a statement that underlined the nullified self-referentiality of an explanatory gesture performed at that very moment. Immediately afterwards, Ernaux addressed the existential hurdles encountered by "class defectors" who "no longer have quite the same language" as their family and friends from their original class, and have come to "think and express themselves with other words" (Ernaux 2022): social mobility, she argued, comes at a price, a multitude of psycholinguistic complications on the long road to individuation.

If Ernaux chooses to describe her social ascent, quite schematically, as a trajectory from Rimbaud's "inferior race" (Ernaux 2022) to the climax of the acquisition of symbolic capital that was her speech before the Swedish Academy, I suggest that by reversing the lenses of inquiry we can better understand complex movements of social positioning and intellectual achievement. Ernaux, in her lecture, emphasises both "the social injustice linked to social class at birth" (Ernaux 2022) and the plight in which she found herself because of her gender. In this epitextual source, we can trace a specific point of view: As in the author's novels, the self-narration is structured around a centripetal movement that aims to fuse a plurality of voices and insights into a single, socially meaningful gaze. The narrator's voice emerges at the point of intersection of class and gender with history, it is an 'I' that has dissolved in its concern for justice, in its hunger for revenge.

When applied to Ernaux's work, 'autosociobiography' as a category of genre classification is usually understood in terms of a process of self-narration embarked upon by a disadvantaged 'I' in which special emphasis is placed

on two primary parameters: humble social background and unprivileged female identity. By turning my attention to a previous historical and cultural context, to two versions of self-narration that suggest an (almost) reversed direction of inquiry, I attempt to explore the dynamics of self-narration as a narrative depicting class discomfort. The peculiarity of the cases at hand lies in the fact that the need for self-narration is perceived by subjects who are in conflict with their upper-class origins, and who, through writing, make a *sociological gesture* as they try to offer an insight into the social constraints of human life.

I scrutinise two instances of biographical self-fashioning in which the narrator, although speaking from a privileged position, describes social discomfort and the desire to overcome it by the sole means of education and writing. In the first case, such discomfort is the result of female oppression in an aristocratic environment: Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou's response is articulated in the form of an early feminist discourse. In the second, unease arises as a consequence of a complex interplay of negotiation processes pertaining to social, political, and cultural identities, leading Ermannos Lountzis to formulate a disillusioned tale of national and personal self-awareness. With my parallel investigation of the two narratives, I aim to demonstrate how the theoretical discourse on 'autosociobiography' can enrich our understanding of texts from socio-historical contexts different from our own, and accordingly, their differing negotiation with temporality.

In order to shift the discourse from post-war France to the Ionian Islands of the nineteenth century, we must adapt our heuristic tools while also paying attention to the vastly different socio-cultural system of this geographical and historical setting. The seven Ionian Islands, off the west coast of the Greek peninsula, constituted a kind of isolated middle ground, a contact zone between the wider Greek-speaking and Italian-speaking cultural areas. While the remainder of the Greek-speaking world had been under Ottoman rule for the best part of four centuries, the seven islands had formed part of the Venetian sphere of influence, producing local elites that were bilingual. Throughout the initial six decades of the nineteenth century, the islands were a British protectorate, which meant that the new overlords had to contend both with the locals' pride of their Venetian past and a fervent Greek national identity that was increasingly difficult to keep under control.

While Corfu was the administrative and cultural capital of the Ionians, it was another island, Zakynthos (more widely known as Zante), that brought forth not only one of the most important historians of modern Greece, Erman-

nos Lountzis (1806–1868), but also the first woman prose-writer in modern Greek, Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou (1801–1832). Both descended from the local nobility and both wrote their biographies in an attempt to come to terms with the fundamental shifts that took place around the middle of the century. Autobiography in the nineteenth-century Ionian became an exercise in identity negotiation; cultural hybridity and postcolonial tensions were reflected in the self-fashioning narratives composed by a local intellectual elite that struggled to make sense of its cosmopolitan past amidst the social turmoil in the islands caused by relentless political change.[1]

Moutzan-Martinegou's legacy as a writer has been all but obliterated: her *œuvre* remained unpublished during her lifetime (as is often the case with contemporary female writers), and much of it was lost, presumably forever, in the earthquake that devastated her native island in 1953, so that the only one of her works that remains accessible to the general public today is her autobiography.[2] Lountzis, on the other hand, a politician and historian, is an enduring presence in Greek historiography to this day, albeit a peripheral one: due to its focus on local concerns and hybrid cultural background, his work is now the domain of specialists, despite its high scholarly quality. His autobiography oscillates between *Bildungsroman* and autoethnographical memoir.[3]

In examining these two different yet similar cases of self-narration from the vantage point of the recent theoretical discussion on autosociobiography,[4] I seek to inquire after the possibility – the legitimacy, even – of expanded and/or differentiated applications of such a heuristic tool; in other words, I attempt to sketch what an autosociobiographical mode of writing might look like in different cultural or historical contexts. Moreover, I argue that both, Moutzan-Martinegou and Lountzis, pursued a form of self-narration that went beyond a critical revisitation of the past, and envisioned a more inclusive, open, and progressive future; not as a utopia, but as a desirable

1 For a general overview of the colonial experience of the Ionians, see Gallant 2002; on the cultural history of the Ionian world in the first half of the nineteenth century and the formation of local identities, see Gallant 2002: 1–14 and Leivadiotis 2022: 23–34.

2 On the publication history of Moutzan-Martinegou's work, see Athanasopoulos 1997: 9–16.

3 Lountzis's autobiography was published by Ntinos Konomos in Lountzis 1962: 29–70. In the same edition, we find Lountzis's correspondence with his two sons during their studies in Athens and Germany in the years 1856–1866.

4 See Blome/Lammers/Seidel 2022: 1, Eßlinger 2022: 196–7 and Twellmann 2022: 91.

possibility. In turn, this parallel scrutiny invites us to reflect whether the excluded worlds of unstable subjectivities and the controversy of the truth of their experience or the presence/absence of the subject in the textuality of its self-narration are theoretical debates that can or must be articulated only in terms of class mobility.

A Forgotten Call for Gender Justice

If we take as true Ernaux's axiom that "family narrative and social narrative are one and the same" (Ernaux 2018: 29), in the case of Moutzan-Martinegou's family narrative, the lever of the plot is family conflict as a result of social discomfort. Social expectations, shaped by class and gender roles deeply ingrained in nineteenth-century Ionian and European culture, clash brutally with a rebellious female self-confidence that cannot be reconciled with the prospect of marriage and the life of a housewife. Instead, Moutzan-Martinegou persistently verbalises her disdain and champions education and writing as the sole purpose of existence. As a young, unmarried aristocratic woman, she is confined to the family home. Her self-narration constitutes an act of protest, articulating as it does a sharp feminist commentary on the social condition of her gender intersected with observations on the amenities offered and limitations imposed by her elevated social and economic status. Moutzan-Martinegou's attempts to evoke sympathy, but above all, understanding, together with her frequent appeals to the reader's sense of justice, allows us to conclude that the ultimate goal of her authorial gesture is to address a specific audience with a precise aim, namely, to stimulate the local Ionian society to radically improve the living conditions of women through education:

> Zealots of the barbarian customs of my country, do not be irritated! But what am I saying, do not be irritated. Alas! You have been turned into beasts by your anger. I allow the girls to study. I give them liberty to come out of the house, wherefore I appear in your eyes to be a monster of nature, but I do not care. The custom is barbarous, tyrannical. I hate, abhor, and despise all barbarous, tyrannical things, nor do I fear those that love and use them. Cruel custom of my country, which condemns me – me, who does not want marriage (for I have been frightened by the examples of some married women), me, I say, who does not want marriage – to live forever locked up in a house; never to go to a church, never to touch the earth,

> never to feel the sweet breath of the wind, never to see the blue face of the heavenly garment. Tyrannical custom, barbarous custom, you do condemn me, but I mock your condemnation, no, no, God has not given me a sordid heart, neither have you with your confinements, with your imprisonments, ever managed to make it sordid; it always desires great enterprises, and is always ready to begin and to finish them. (Eptanisiaka Fylla 1947: 153)[5]

Confined to the four walls of her father's house, Moutzan-Martinegou does not write in order to portray her personal development over time or to convey her view of the world, but rather to communicate with the outside world, with a society that, moved by the description of her woeful human condition, will – hopefully – envision a version of the future that is more free, inclusive, and ultimately better. Self-dramatisation functions here as a fuse, exposing personal circumstances in order to denounce a social practice that relegates women to the role of socially limited and disadvantaged members of society. Vangelis Athanasopoulos, the most recent curator of her work, argues: "The autobiographer [Moutzan-Martinegou], because of the social conditions of the time, belongs to a cultural minority – that of women – and proposes her biography not as a representation of a particular individual but as a formulation of a social experience representative of that minority." (Athanasopoulos 1997: 56) In Moutzan-Martinegou's story-telling, self-promotion is neither the strategy nor the goal. This is because the self-narrating subject is in a state of identity negotiation: the very gesture of writing is the means by which she claims her right to shape and define herself as a person (Athanasopoulos 1997: 57).

This construction of self is performed on a double axis: on the one hand, transformative life experiences are narrated as an existential-ethical continuum, as a catalyst of temporal becoming in the form of 'paideia', erudition; on the other hand, the construction of identity, the constitution of the self, occurs within society, delineating the social space as a normative and utterly mimetic reflection. As the author makes clear, she is not merely narrating her personal condition, but her writing also functions as a denunciation of a social practice that affects most women. Thus, just as self-narrative becomes a testimony to a larger social problem, self-education becomes a testimony to its possible solution. The channelling of this concern into the literary forms of dialogue

5 All translations from the original modern Greek are my own.

and drama[6] confirms the writer's deep belief in the social – that is, communicative – function of exercising her authorial prerogative. Commenting on Moutzan-Martinegou's work, titled "Dialogue. Between Elisavet and Another Girl", Athanasopoulos notes that she writes

> not only as an outlet for her stifled creativity, but mainly to create in her works persons with whom she could talk, to have with them the dialogue she would have with the members of the Zakynthian society if she were allowed to leave the house and meet people (Athanasopoulos 1997: 59).

In "Dialogue. Between Elisavet and Another Girl", the temporal completion of her authorial gesture in the form of a future (almost providential) contiguity of personal and common good is envisaged in religious terms:

> I have asked Him and I ask Him that I may bring benefit to those beings whom He has made similar to me and whom He is pleased and delighted to see pursuing and seeking the common good, the common benefit. (Mpoumpoulides 1965: 120–21)

Self-narration and self-formation, channelled simultaneously in this performative act of writing, constitute a puzzling claim to identity. In this inverted phenomenology of the person,[7] the criteria of identity reflected in Moutzan-Martinegou's struggle of 'becoming' are ascertained and standardised by and against the social rules, norms, and expectations. She tries to break with normative behaviour by opposing her prescribed role and adopting the role of the oppressor: not only does she demand to be educated, but she writes with the clear intention to be published – in fact, she deliberately includes parts of her plays, letters, and translations in her autobiography, never missing an opportunity to express her desire to see her works in print.[8] As Rania Polykandrioti

6 Moutzan-Martinegou is the author of more than twenty tragedies and comedies in Italian and Greek. See Mpoumpoulides 1965: 57–112 and Athanasopoulos 1997: 14.

7 For a summary of the philosophical debate on personal identity, see Čapek/Loidolt 2021.

8 In reference to the tragedy *Teano o La Giustizia Legale* that she wrote in Italian, Moutzan-Martinegou notes in her autobiography: "If I receive from God the grace to publish all the works that I have written, I will have them printed as is, without any correction, to demonstrate that the only art to which I was inclined was that of tragedy." (Athanasopoulos 1997: 123)

points out, "[i]t has been argued that the literary genres cultivated by women in nineteenth-century Europe are those that were considered inferior, the genres of personal discourse: lyric poetry, letters, diaries, romantic novels with abundant autobiographical elements." (Polykandrioti 2002: 59–60). Moutzan-Martinegou breaks this rule deliberately, almost programmatically, and in a performative way when she dares to write about a predominantly, if not exclusively, masculine subject: economics (Athanasopoulos 1997: 67–70). Her treatise has not survived, but it is discussed in Moutzan-Martinegou's "Dialogue", in which the author defends her decision to write such a work despite her inexperience and emphasises the consciously revolutionary nature of a choice that seeks to overthrow the (male) establishment:

> You, who are a humble woman, who are twenty-four years and five months old, who, according to the old customs of your island of Zakynthos, are always shut up in your house without seeing other people […] you dare to write on economy […] art so remarkable that it should only be written by men, by old men […]. Don't you know, don't you understand, that new laws, new rules, new exhortations, even if they are beneficial, are annoying, hateful, intolerable to the majority of people? (Mpoumpoulides 1965: 120–22)

In describing her intentions, Ernaux does not mince words: "I will write to avenge my people." (Ernaux 2022) Moutzan-Martinegou's revenge takes the form of the linguistic appropriation of a social status. Her constant and arduous struggle for education, knowledge, and literary self-expression is a gesture of affront that articulates a statement of identity. Just as Ernaux reinforces her promise of revenge by citing Rimbaud's "I am of an inferior race for all eternity" (Ernaux 2022), Moutzan-Martinegou underscores it by translating a fragment from Aeschylus' *Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης* (*Prometheus Bound*): "I must bear my allotted doom as lightly as I can, knowing that the might of Necessity permits no resistance. Yet I am not able to speak nor be silent about my fate."[9]

9 Aeschylus: 103–7. Moutzan-Martinegou's translation was published first in Mpoumpoulides 1965: 131: "και πρέπει να υποφέρω, όσον δύναμαι, τούτην την δυστυχίαν, όπου η μοίρα μου έχει διωρισμένην, επειδή και ηξεύρω ότι η δύναμις της ανάγκης είναι άμαχος (δηλαδή δεν είναι βολετό να εναντιωθή τινας εις εκείνο, όπου αναγκαίως συμβαίνει)! Αμμή εγώ δεν ημπορώ μήτε να σιωπώ, μήτε να μη σιωπώ τούτες τες δυστυχίες." For the English translation, see Smyth 1926.

As Moutzan-Martinegou recounts the ancient, painful story of an excluded world, a collective trauma, the narrator gradually acquires the voice of a collective subject, that of her gender in its historical depth of silence and silencing. Her struggle for equality revolves around two key objectives: to remain unmarried and to be published. Both prove impossible to achieve under the overwhelming pressure of the socially controlled mechanisms of biopolitics, whose chief executioners are the men of her own family: in the end, she did marry, as her father and brother wished, and died giving birth to her son, who, decades later, would brutally edit her autobiography, removing the socially unacceptable parts in a final gesture of 'mansplaining' to his dead mother.[10]

If womanhood and class intersect in Moutzan-Martinegou's self-narrative as repressive or discriminatory factors, they do so in a surprising entanglement that could be interpreted as an early articulation of a discourse on the role and position of women that is determined by social considerations and historically constructed patterns (Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 143). At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that the awareness of class superiority is addressed as an inhibiting factor in Moutzan-Martinegou's attempt to claim her freedom. The concern and function of the self-narrative in this case reaches that expanded scope that claims insight and legitimacy in narrating not only the self, but through the self, class and society (Blome et al. 2022: 3–4). The performative scope of such an attempt is to build a better version of the future, while remaining a clear and arduous address to her contemporary society; the narrativisation of the woe, the discomfort and misfortune of the self as a narrative of anticipation and representation of a collective potential, is the key that makes Moutzan-Martinegou's work a meaningful gesture.

In any case, I would like to reiterate that my goal here is not to cast Moutzan-Martinegou's writing as a direct ancestor of Ernaux's style of self-fashioning. Rather, her work is used here to explore the stretching possibilities of a fledgling notion of literary criticism; if our concern could be projected onto the axis of temporality, we could see the dynamic construction of a literary model that deliberately tends to establish a channel of communication with both: past generations of oppressed women and future communities of readers who will eventually benefit from the narrator's call to action in the present. At the end of Ernaux's *The Years*, her vision of the slippery narrative of a life

10 For the first edition of Moutzan-Martinegou's autobiography, published (and heavily censored) by her son in 1881, 49 years after her death, see Martinegos 1881.

experience emerges eloquently in that vision of temporality that complacently devours any sense of past, present, or future:

> This will not be a work of remembrance in the usual sense, aimed at putting a life into story, creating an explanation of self. She will go within herself only to retrieve the world, the memory and imagination of its bygone days, grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen. (Ernaux 2018: 228)

The use of family history and social background as a framework for the discursive representation of the self has a long genealogy in France; we could trace it backward to Marcel Proust and beyond, and forward until Edouard Louis's work. If Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* invents a writing "that inextricably links the intimate, the social and the political" (Ernaux 2009), the same could be said of nineteenth-century Ionian autobiography. Yet in both cases under discussion here – that of Moutzan-Martinegou, whose parents belonged to the oldest and noblest local families, and that of Lountzis, himself an aristocrat and the richest landowner on his island – we should ask whether it is legitimate to speak of 'autosociobiography' when this term is usually employed in the context of upward social mobility. What happens when individuals from privileged social backgrounds try to free themselves from the constraints imposed by their class? The claim of class discomfort with its existential implications, whether it appears as discourse or performance, embodies its own dramatisation and propounds its own truth. Moreover, experiences of exclusion can take a multitude of forms that are not always measurable in terms of economic power. On the other hand, discussions about the truth of personal experience and the fictional construction of the self must take into account that the desire 'to be someone else' often only partially reflects a social condition. Even then, behind the violent discursive backlash of seeming 'class discomfort', the multiple intersections of numerous identities can be traced.

Autoethnographical Ambivalence

Ermannos Lountzis claims a future for his milieu: the bilingual, (micro)cosmopolitan, and culturally hybrid intellectual elite of the Ionian Islands (Leivadiotis 2022: 23–44, 145–52). His autobiography highlights the search for a new

category of excellence: no longer that of high birth and lineage, but that of education. The Greek War of Independence suddenly gave the local elite a new perspective, namely channelling a pre-national system of power into a new, nationally determined order, a process which, after the necessary adjustments, would transform the hierarchy of class into a hierarchy of erudition. If the interest of these Ionian individuals in the construction of valid versions of the self through education has an evident origin in post-Enlightenment rationalism, their anxiety to establish a new social hierarchy, that of intellectual excellence, reveals the aspirations of a new era (Tampaki 2004).

For the Ionian Islands, this new era is the transitional period in which the eventual union with the Kingdom of Greece was discussed and prepared, a phase that heralded the end of a long colonial experience and the beginning of a national future. For the nobility, it represented not only the end of an age of privilege, but also the beginning of the uncomfortable friction with the exigencies of a new economic model enabled by the spread of private property, the post-Enlightenment dynamics of individualisation, and the shift in the balance of power between social, economic, and cultural capital brought about by incipient modernity. His aristocratic background notwithstanding, Lountzis was a member of the Party of Radicals that strongly promoted social reform and the union with Greece. In his historiographical work, he criticised his own social class, the local nobility, as a regressive force (Arvanitakis 2014: 302 and Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 194–5), his own attitude being that of a cosmopolitan patriot who embraced the pre-national flexibility of cultural, linguistic, and religious identities while envisioning cautiously but warmly an entirely new potential for the self in a national perspective.

Lountzis's reaction to the highly complex historical situation in which he finds himself consists in the gradual renunciation of class privilege and the adoption of an alternative, imaginary system of hierarchy, a new citizenship of intellectuals. Against this backdrop, the author's self-reflection is historicised by the linearity of a narrative of woe and the enthusiastic anticipation of an era of social progress:

> My future, which then smiled to my imagination, how did it play out? The inner happiness that my soul was looking for, did it find it? Was there a year from that time without regret, without deception, without the destruction of a beautiful idea? Constant struggle against despair, look at my existence. See how my life is wasted. (Lountzis 1962: 89)

> The future is for us, not the past! God placed eyes on the forehead, not on the neck. To the past: respect and worship! But we shall live again in those who are to come; just as those who are now dead lived first for themselves and then in us. (Lountzis 1978: 83)[11]

Taken together, education, the aristocracy of knowledge, and a quasi-ostentatious cosmopolitanism constitute a carefully considered and selected response to the challenges raised by the end of an era, an Ionian *fin de siècle*. In Lountzis's 1862 autobiography, intimate-private, public-local, national-historical, and cosmopolitan-global narratives are woven into an autoethnographic palimpsest. The author's ambivalent posture departs from and returns to a dialectics of cultural and political consistency: in the very experience of progress and regression, the self, like the nation, tends towards the essential freedom of the spirit that is cardinal in the Hegelian system. Lountzis, who studied philosophy with Eduard Gans in Berlin, does not close his eyes to failure, to the false and misleading impressions created by personal or national efforts at self-awareness; rather, his growing frustration is channelled into other forms of self-narrative, such as his letters to his sons. It seems that Lountzis is negotiating with history and the *Zeitgeist* to make sense of himself, now that the excellence of rank has been invalidated and economic power requires a constant friction with people that wears him down:

> I can't go on incessantly dulling my head with peasants, with tenants, with lawyers, with bills, with arguments, with quarrels. I wasn't born for such things. I didn't think in my youth that dealing with such things would be my destiny. (Lountzis 1962: 105)[12]

Lountzis's class-related discomfort takes an interesting turn: in a sense, his efforts to escape the constraints of his aristocratic background and to become a worthy citizen of the land of intellectual endeavour are reminiscent of the modern project of individualisation through detachment from collective consciousness and the construction of autonomous self-perception, a process that is validated by *Selbstbildung* and reflected in the literary genre of autobiography.

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11 Quoted from Lountzis's *Miscellanea*, a biting satirical commentary on local society that was published in Malta in 1843 (Lountzis 1843 and Lountzis 1978).

12 Quoted from a letter to his sons dated 18 September 1860, in which Lountzis complains about the inconveniences and difficulties of running their estate in Zakynthos.

On the other hand, in the specific case of Lountzis's autobiographical notes, we cannot help but notice the performative aspects of his strategy of self-narration: the two versions of his biography, the earlier one being written in Italian and the later one being written in Greek, represent an utterly autoethnographic gesture that must be read in parallel with the author's overarching historiographical narrative of Ionian (dis)continuity in time and space. The autoethnographic echo in narratives that encapsulate interconnected personal experiences and socio-cultural consciousness can, from the vantage point of the historical *longue durée*, display a way of reflexively perceiving and performing the self. In other words, autoethnographic self-fashioning has the potential to give space and voice to embodied, experiential, intersubjective and extended articulations of the self, socially constructed or narratively produced, because it allows for an overview of the complexity of identity. The tension between the whole and the part, the unit and the totality, the particular and the system is seen as a constitutive element of micro and macro mechanisms of community building: community understood from a social, cultural, or national point of view. In this context, narrative strategies can act as amplifiers for voices and stories that emerge at the margins (geographical, linguistic, cultural, religious) of a dominant national culture, as well as for parallel marginal developments in different social groupings at the core of a national construct (Smith/Watson 2010: 258–9, Twellmann 2022: 95–7, Bochner/Ellis 2016: 65). When, with the benefit of hindsight, Lountzis recounts the bewilderment that his educational choices caused in his younger self, the moral-personal and the political-public are intertwined in the form of a causal relationship:

> I felt like an absolute master of myself, but the use I made of my free will quickly brought saturation and heaviness [...] Like the political world, the moral world cannot survive with anarchy. My philosophy led me to such an anarchy that I did not understand it and could not explain it, but I felt its effects involuntarily and instinctively, especially in the emptiness of my soul and in the search for something unknown. (Lountzis 1962: 51)

Katerina Tiktopoulou summarises Lountzis's intellectual trajectory as follows:

> The effort to make sense of the past (for the benefit of the present and the future) is undoubtedly what characterises his spirituality, at least in the years after 1850, and what led him to write both his historical works and

> the story of his individuality, his autobiography. The same man observes, analyses, and writes the history of the past of his island, of his nation, and of Christianity, and at the same time, almost in parallel, he observes, analyses, and narrates his own self. (Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 189)

In Lountzis's self-narration, the personal and the social are entangled in an ascending spiral in which the (personal) struggle for truth meets the (social) struggle for a progress that is understood, in idealistic-cum-eschatological terms, as driven by divine providence.[13] No surprise, then, that the author describes in great detail what he witnessed in Paris in the summer of 1830: the upheavals of the July Revolution provide an indirect commentary on the events surrounding the deposition of King Otto in Greece (Lemousia 2018: 33), but they are also linked to his own philosophical adventure which led him to intellectual breakdown and the eventual redemptive embrace of German idealism (Lountzis 1962: 59–60).[14]

Lountzis is first and foremost a historian, even when he is writing about himself. His research focuses on local history, and his narrative attempts to reconceptualise and recontextualise the cosmopolitan experience and the unique cultural imprint of a postcolonial insularity on the cusp of the transition from the pre-national periphery of the empire to the centre of the modern nation-state. His autobiography is a field of autoethnographical exercise (or even play): he writes about his own experience of the world, and his account is based on personal memories of the years of his youth and education. In a double gesture that embodies the ambivalence of his cultural hybridity, he writes about his life first in Italian (around 1861) and immediately afterwards in Greek (around 1862). Tellingly, both gestures (and both narratives)

13 In a letter to his son Anastasios (November 1859), we read: "[T]he idea of duty is engraved in your heart. It is through this idea that our individual existence is connected with the order and system of the universal world. When we fulfil our duty, we are fulfilling with our individuality the laws that govern the universe, in other words, we are fulfilling the plan of divine providence." (Lountzis 1962: 89)

14 Ermannos Lountzis's narrativisation of the 'German turn' in his intellectual orientation can also be observed in the correspondence with his sons (letter "Paris, 4th November 1857"): "Since my intellectual regeneration in my youth took place after my passage from France to Germany, it follows that I am more suited to Germany. I find the German world more suited to my habits and desires. Perhaps living too much in the ideal world has harmed me and stimulated my imagination in such a way that it is easily excited, and as a result I often end up a stranger or an infant in practical life." (Lountzis 1962: 76)

remain incomplete. In a way, he performs his own individualisation, writing about social events or cultural phenomena from a 'first-person' perspective while simultaneously performing his own transition from the cosmopolitan background of his Venetian education to the noviciate in Greek culture.

Such an account cannot be understood unless it is read in parallel with Lountzis's historiographical achievements. Only then do we realise that for Lountzis, the formation of the self serves an ultimate purpose, the formation of the national subject: an individual who, by living a virtuous life, reifies the nation and, at the same time, is perfected by the virtuous character of his polity and the righteous course of the nation. Self-narration as a speculum of nation-building provided a space for the negotiation of identity at a moment in Ionian history when the public debate on linguistic, cultural, and national orientation was at its height. Two years after Lountzis began his autobiography, the Ionian Islands were incorporated into the Greek kingdom. His view on this development was critical, if not positively scathing: for Lountzis, the reality of social progress in the historical present was an enormous disappointment.

With his idealistic vision of a social structure governed by the supremacy of education, knowledge, and virtue thwarted, his hope for progress now takes the form of a discourse about the potential of a future endorsed by a powerful past:

> But this solitude of the selfish and egoistic man in what a complete and crowded place it is transformed, for him who sees himself united with millions of others like himself; who, because of common feelings, desires, and hopes, regards them as brothers and companions in the same destiny; thus, a spiritual unity is formed, represented by that ideal body which we call a nation. In our case, the Greek family embraces all its children in one spirit; it stimulates innumerable breasts to pulsate like a single heart. Before such an idea, our miserable individuality is obliterated, and in its place we see the noisy scene of humanity; in the midst of it [we see] ourselves and with us the nation to which we belong. Our thoughts are at once enlarged by national greatness and are no longer confined to the present. Our lives are fused with the lives of those who have been, and extended to those who will be; all distance of time and place disappears, and a vast and wonderful view opens up before the gaze of our imagination. (Lountzis 1851: 5–6)

This powerful optative futurity is embodied in his autobiography and in his self-fashioning correspondence through the notion of a new social contract whose validity is derived from the local historical past, and whose preservation

and fulfilment is left to the will of future generations. Lountzis, like many other members of the local elite – his brother Nikolo is another case in point (Leivadiotis 2018: 56–75, Leivadiotis 2022: 145–52) – suffered from a paralysing ambivalence: discouraged by the prevailing socio-historical circumstances, they withdrew from active life while at the same time clinging to a fervent idealistic belief in a social progress that was to be realised in the fullness of time, rendering the writing of the self a balancing act between personal experience and the grand framework of history.

Concluding remarks

Like Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou, Ermannos Lountzis sought to escape from the prison of socially imposed duties and expectations. They are both, as Ernaux would say, 'class defectors', evaders of the constraints of their class. Their "truth claim", what Nancy Miller called the facts, pacts, and acts of the autobiographical gesture (Miller 1992: 10), goes far beyond mere self-representation; their truth is realised and performatively completed in the very act of writing, wherein the facts of past life intersect with the pact for a better future. In their texts, they propose, produce, and live their true lives.[15] Both, albeit in slightly different ways, turn to autobiography with the same overall objective: writing is not interested in the self as such, but in the potential for change, in the progress of a community, the progress of a society in crisis.

One might conclude from this shift, this final reversal, that the Ionian subjects in question ultimately remained trapped in pre-modern schemes of understanding the self through collective subjectivities. However, if this is the case, I propose that this perspective is articulated in a quite modern way, with a heavy focus on transtemporal entanglements and accompanied by intense class criticism. The self-narration of these two nineteenth-century Ionian aristocrats encapsulates the crucial issue of the historicity of the person as a temporality under negotiation. Perhaps it was the transitional and completely unpredictable historical context that caused Moutzan-Martinegou and Lountzis

15 "What illusion to believe that we can tell the truth, and to believe that each of us has an individual and autonomous existence! How can we think that in autobiography it is the lived life that produces the text, when it is the text that produces the life!" (Lejeune 1989: 131)

to articulate a narrative of the self and to engage in a discourse on the annulment of temporal causality. The authors' understanding of the future as an optative projection certainly gestures towards both the uncertain present of the Ionian elite and its debatable past (disputed because culturally hybrid) – theirs was an age of revolutions, political uncertainty, postcolonial hybridity, and rapid development, in which the very existence of the aristocracy, not to mention its privileges, were a matter of heated debate.

Linear and providential notions of time cannot accommodate the cracks and gaps that are already visible. The negotiated present self in its synchronic reality, the identity of the here and now, is only allowed to make sense as a projection into an indeterminate fullness of the future: the women of the future are not only the recipients but also the executors of Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou's last will and testament, whereas the sons of Ermannos Lountzis become potential instruments for the fulfilment of the ideal of national virtue. The narrative of the self is thus performed here and now as the first act of a drama that can only be enacted in the future by its own recipients – a thought and a gesture, I suspect, that writers such as Didier Eribon, Annie Ernaux, and Edouard Louis would find rather intriguing.

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