

Smoke

1. *Lagios, Sartre, Karouzos*

From Thanassis Valtinos's *Nicotine Addiction* to Aris Alexandrou's *Mission Box*, to Théodore de Banville's poems and Akis Panou's lyrics ("my whole life is a cigarette"), feeling at the same time Annie Leclerc's passion when she remarks "oh, my dearest cigarette, you really can piece back together a fragmented body" (*Au feu du jour*) and listening to Elias Lagios reciting, enveloped in the sublime darkness of Kallidromiou Street, "the musical scale of smoke rings – a shifting, weightless note" (*Marianna's Book*), and from the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, with a Boyard cigarette perennially stuck between his index and middle finger, and all the pages he devotes to cigarettes in his *Being and Nothingness*, to Italo Svevo's breathtaking *Confessions of Zeno* and the smoldering (not only with cigarette smoke) episodes of the anti-war novels by Norman Mailer, Erich Maria Remarque, and Ernest Hemingway, smoking, one of the three or four great passions of men and women, has found myriad ways to permeate the pages of books we love. If the task of literature (and certain songs by Akis Panou, Tom Waits, and Nick Cave really do belong to the realm of literature) is to make us more human by familiarizing us with death, the mysteries of love and desire, the anxiety of existence, and ways to forgo fate, then smoking, along with its next of kin, alcohol and coffee, should actually be listed among its major accomplishments.

The poet Nikos Karouzos, an obstinate explorer of that enigmatic expanse called bosom and a compulsive smoker (Gauloises and untipped Karelia Agriniou), was not one to leave cigarettes out of his poems: "But damn – a romantic cigarette would have changed

my life's direction".* Théodore de Banville, deploring the passing of dandyism in an increasingly materialistic and utilitarian society, would yield to smoking to renounce such a rigid organization of existence. In fact, he would also portray the cigarette as a passionately desirable woman, as a divine and overbearing mistress: "In a word", he wrote, "everyone wants everything; however, the cigarette, which is the most imperious, the most engaging, the most demanding, the most loving, the most refined of mistresses, tolerates nothing which is not her, and compromises with nothing: it [*elle*] inspires a passion that is absolute, exclusive, ferocious like gambling or reading".†

A fellow poet of Karouzos, Banville, and Baudelaire, the symbolist poet Jules Laforgue would publish a sonnet about cigarettes in 1880 – at a time when they enjoyed universal popularity, "under the influence of the Crimean war, from which French soldiers returned having acquired that compulsive pleasure from their enemies the Turks, and under the influence, as well, of such consummate smokers as Louis Napoleon and George Sand, both of whom smoked more than fifty cigarettes a day".‡ In the words of Laforgue:

Yes, this world is flat and boring: as for the other, bullshit!

I myself go resigned to my fate, without hope,

And to kill time while awaiting death,

I smoke slender cigarettes thumbing my nose at the gods.

Onward, you living, keep up the fight, poor future skeletons,

I am plunged into infinite ecstasy by the blue meandering that

Twists itself toward the sky and puts me to sleep,

Like dying perfumes from a thousand smoldering pots.§

* "O chronos kakopoios" [Time, the malefactor], in *Ta Poiimata* [Collected Poems], Vol. 2 (Athens: Ikaros, 1994).

† As quoted and translated by Richard Klein in *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 43.

‡ Klein, *ibid*, 56.

§ As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 56.

2. Mallarmé, Beckett, Leontaris

If Laforgue wrote about the cigarette, Stéphane Mallarmé would celebrate in a poem, a sonnet, the cigar – his refined aesthetic must have prevented him (despite being a fierce smoker of cigarettes himself) from trying to rhyme cigar-*ette*. Here, too, smoking is evident, as is the substance of smoke – that is, familiarity with decline, with the inevitable passing of time:

The whole soul summed up
When slowly we exhale it
In several rings of smoke
Abolished in other rings

Attests some cigar
Burning cannily if
The ash separates at all
From its bright kiss of fire**

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In another passage Mallarmé makes a distinction between cigarettes and pipes, placing the former among his summer activities and the latter among his winter activities: “Yesterday I found my pipe while dreaming a long evening of work, of beautiful winter work. Discarded were cigarettes with all the childlike joys of summer in the past illuminated by the blue leaves of sun, flimsy veils [*mousselines*], and taken up was my grave pipe by a serious man who wants to smoke a long time, without being disturbed, in order better to work”.^{††}

Sartre would also associate smoking with writing – although smoking is an activity which verges on its negation –being one of the pleasures of leisure, almost a non-action– it would be hard to picture a non-smoking author. The philosopher would describe smoking as

** As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 65.

†† As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 32.

an “appropriative destructive reaction”, a “little crematorial sacrifice”, a “sacrificial ceremony”, and his cigarette or pipe as the “little heater between the fingers”. Accounting the experience of seeing a landscape while smoking, he articulates thoughts which connect our perception of the world at large and our attitude towards these perceptions: “Through the tobacco I was smoking it was the world that was burning, that was being smoked, that reabsorbed itself in steam to reenter in me. To maintain my decision to stop, I had to achieve a sort of decrystallization – that is, without exactly realizing it, I reduced tobacco to being only itself: a leaf that burns; I cut the symbolic links with the world, I persuaded myself that I would take nothing away from the theater, from the landscape, from the book I was reading, if I considered them without my pipe; that is, it finally came down to my having other modes of possessing these objects than that sacrificial ceremony”.^{‡‡}

So Sartre tried to quit smoking. But it was a vain attempt. Like Samuel Becket, he, too, continued to smoke through his final days and final nights. When, in an interview for the European edition of *Newsweek*, he was asked about was the most important thing in his life, Sartre replied without hesitation: “I don’t know. Everything. Living. Smoking”. More humorous, the surrealist André Breton was credited with the famous saying, “I swear that I am innocent, you are mistaking my eye pupil for the fire of my cigarette”. Another surrealist, the poet and writer Andreas Embiricos, would never stop smoking and being photographed holding his cigarette with matchless style (a style, by the way, only rivalled by the poet Byron Leontaris).

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3. *Annie Leclerc & Richard Klein*

Smoking is more or less part and parcel of intellectual creation, either artistic or philosophical. Smoking is some sort of consolation. Poets and writers know what it means to console and to be consoled. They know what time means, they know what it means to be constantly close to frustration and death, and they know how to find ways to deceive these

^{‡‡} As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 36–37.

harsh certainties. In fact, Annie Leclerc even goes as far as asserting that “the cigarette is prayer for our times”.^{§§} In the same book, Leclerc attempts a classification of cigarettes: “Now I remember the taste of that cigarette, its vile, raw taste of lying. It’s not a bland cigarette. How many films would lose their savor, how many characters their intensity if one took from them this cigarette. It’s the ‘Humphrey Bogart’ cigarette. The cigarette of the cop, the journalist, the bad guy, the cigarette of someone ‘in the know’ [*avertie*], forewarned. It’s the cigarette of the politician, the scientist, the militant, man or woman. It is always the military cigarette, colonial, imperial. It is the phantom of power desired, aspired to, smoked for so long that it ends by assuming form, becoming solid”.^{***} Toward the end of her book, she writes about the connection between air and smoking, between cigarettes and breath, as they intertwine –like hostile realities, maybe even mortally so– in our own body: “Air... As if the word itself had been forgotten. Strange little word. A suspended word, withdrawn from other words. A fresh word, inaugural, unfinished, which opens itself between tongue and palate, a word so light, inconsequential, that as soon as it is said it is already in the air. A downy word. A bird word. Air... Didn’t I use to smoke as well to repair this forgetting, to remind myself of air, of throat and lungs? To smoke so that it passes through me, so that it circulates and is exchanged? It is not amusing to be always oneself. To be alone, singular, separated. I must have smoked to try to open the shell, to split open the all-so-heavy, onerous pouch of emotions, of food and thoughts. To smoke in order to try, to try again an exit from this receptacle-self, garbage-can and tabernacle. To lift the lid of suffocating repetition. To smoke in order to pass beyond. And to breathe even beyond breathing”.⁺⁺⁺

Richard Klein, who, in an effort to quit smoking once and for all, set himself to write an exquisite book which variously celebrates the cigarette, the cigar, and the pipe, highlights the importance of smoking as a tool to manage anxiety, anticipation, and fear. Furthermore, dissecting a short poem by Charles F. Lummis (“My Cigarette”), he offers a few valuable insights about these ‘magic wands’ – that is, cigarettes: “Cigarettes are fiery

^{§§} *Au feu du jour* (Paris: Grasset, 1979).

^{***} As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 165.

⁺⁺⁺ As quoted and translated by Klein, *ibid*, 178.

batons with which you can summon the future and conduct it, slim, white facilitators of anticipatory thinking and imaginative hypotheses, instruments of ecstatic projection away from the present to a future time in which the present for a moment no longer exists. Their magic derives perhaps from their capacity to moderate the anxiety occasioned by thinking about the future, all anticipation (anxiety is always directed to anticipating a future menace. They allow you calmly to project yourself forward to possible future worlds that may never be, but, for the time of a cigarette, are – more intimately than the present moment. Smokers playing chess and writing valentines smoke incessantly; so do journalists and actors in the wings”.⁺⁺⁺

What else could a cigarette be? Perhaps I should summon up a reply I have previously given to this question, many years back. (How many? Estimated roughly, as many as the number of years it would take to smoke 90,000 cigarettes, i.e. 4.500 cigarette packs.) So what is (and what isn't) smoking? Well, the more the cigarettes, the more their uses and abuses. Every Friday buries a Thursday, as James Joyce ruthlessly reminds us, and how can one cope with this devastating cruelty if one doesn't drink, doesn't eat, doesn't fall in love, doesn't write, and doesn't smoke? A nod to death, and also a stretching of life, a constant wager on our limits, and also a lofty extravagance, a playful waste, the cigarette helps the *homo pulveris* to disperse the 'accursed share', the burden of excessive health that can become unbearable when faced with the ultimate darkness of death. The cigarette, together with its inseparable companion, alcohol, injects us with small doses of death, lends visibility to death, as Nikos Karouzos would say, so that we can endure it by defying it, defy it before it defies us, so that we can eventually corrode the despair of irrevocable decay before it corrodes us. The cigarette is this ruse, this 'gimmick' we have found to 'waste time', which involves this pleasurable sort of insolence, before it can waste us away. Armed with a cigarette, we wage a battle against time, prolonging seconds, raising a smokescreen against the condemning eyes of fate. "Ash is cigarette's farewell", as Ramón Gómez de la

⁺⁺⁺ Klein, *ibid*, 52.

Serna aphoristically summed it up, and our life is a series of farewells, small ones and big ones, made less painful by smoking.

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