

SAVAS MIKHAIL

In An Uncanny House

Through the Looking-Glass

*How would you like to live in Looking-glass House, Kitty?*¹ Alice asks her little cat. A Looking-Glass House, a labyrinth of reflections, where the familiar doesn't appear in its true, albeit reversed, image, but is transformed into something completely unfamiliar, uncanny.

The house of the Uncanny – like the one the painter A.K., the hero of George Hadjimichalis' visual novel, confines himself in until his death. A Looking-Glass House, where the painter Hadjimichalis/Tweedledum meets and paints the painter A.K./Tweedledee, who paints, in a different or even opposite way, pictures from the life and times of Hadjimichalis.

The Note at the beginning of the exhibition *George Hadjimichalis - The Painter A.K. - A Novel* leaves no room for doubt that the artwork is created by Hadjimichalis. The artist himself, in an interview, makes it completely clear: "I paint the pieces, but they are his [A.K.'s]... I wouldn't paint that way."² A.K. is not Hadjimichalis, or a transparent persona of his, regardless of how many of Hadjimichalis' autobiographical details or works are presented as his own. If A.K. is identified with Hadjimichalis as a true representation, the whole setup falls apart, the entire Looking-Glass House shatters.

According to the exhibition's legend, A.K. was born exactly 30 years before Hadjimichalis, and, in the mid-1970s, decided to confine himself to his house/workshop, and carry on painting there feverishly until his death, in the 80s. A.K. is another, but not just any other; he is Hadjimichalis' Other, his demon or guardian angel or Golem, which, just like the living Golem Rabbi Lev made out of clay in 16th century Prague, bears the features of its creator.

But there is still a niggling doubt: could the Other be the Same?

"I know what you're thinking about," said Tweedledum; "but it isn't so, nohow."

"Contrariwise," continued Tweedledee, "if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."³

A carnivalesque conversion of formal, familiar Logic into uncanny Logic, dream Logic. But *who* is dreaming?

In this case, it's obviously the painter Hadjimichalis/Tweedledum. Or could it be that the painter A.K./Tweedledee is dreaming his dream inside Hadjimichalis' dream, confined within the Looking-Glass House?

"...He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream, too! Was it the Red King, Kitty?"⁴

A Dostoevskian novel

In the title of his exhibition, immediately after stating the occupation – artist – and name of the hero, Hadjimichalis adds the key clarification: *a novel*.

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, in *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, Wordsworth editions, 1993, p. 9.

² Interview with Artemis Kardoulaki in *Ta Nea tis Technis*, No. 199, August-September 2011, p. 3.

³ Lewis Carroll, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 201-202.

A novel obviously "written" only with non-verbal, purely visual means, but a novel, nonetheless, and one, in fact, that could be described as *Dostoevskian* in nature. And not just because the self-confined A.K. brings to mind the man of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, nor because the painter A.K.'s existential drama is marked by images of extreme intensity in the depths of the soul, to the point of heartbreak (culminating in the film inside the Labyrinth-House, his ultimate creation before he died, as a synopsis of his entire life and work), evoking scenes and heroes from *The Double*, *The Idiot*, or *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is mainly the fact that Hadjimichalis' entire installation, *The Painter A.K. - A Novel*, is built upon the guiding lines of Dostoevsky's Poetics, brought to light by Mikhail Bakhtin.⁵

This is not the monologue or confession of a solitary consciousness, of A.K., as a guise – or not – of Hadjimichalis. On the contrary, at its centre is the *dialogic relationship between the Self and the Other*, in such a way that the novel becomes polyphonic. It is often, for example, that one can make out, in the deafening silence, the voice of the Father, or the distinct whispers of female voices.

In his text *Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky book*, Bakhtin makes the following vital remarks, which are also critical in reading Hadjimichalis' visual novel:

...I cannot become myself without another, I must find myself in another by finding another in myself. [...] Capitalism create[s] the conditions for a special type of inescapably solitary consciousness. Dostoevsky exposes all the falsity of this consciousness, as it moves in its vicious circle.⁶

And

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. [...] A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.⁷

It is there, on the borderline between Hadjimichalis and A.K., through the eyes of the other and before the eyes of others, those viewing the exhibition, on this threshold of a half-open door that haunts the work in question, that we find the *opening* that Kierkegaard discussed in *Sickness unto Death* or *Treatise on despair*,⁸ and from where the Self will meet that force that deems it the Self.

Towards confinement

A visual *Treatise on despair* seems to develop through A.K.'s journey through life and Art, as we watch him move, step by step, towards a Descent into Hades – towards the irrevocable decision to confine himself to his house/studio, an unfamiliar House, until death.

Each step another chapter in Hadjimichalis' novel.

Chapter one is dominated by the painter's portraits, marked by the melancholy of Saturn, and the three concepts that, according to Hadjimichalis himself,⁹ are at the centre of his work: memory, loss, and death.

The artist's self-portrait as a young man is accompanied by one of Hadjimichalis' first pieces, *Funeral* (1969), which the 15-year-old painter made a year after his father's death – and

⁵ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, translation C. Emerson.

⁶ M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky book* in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, *op.cit.*, p. 283-302.

⁷ *Ibid.* (Underlined in the original.)

⁸ Soeren Kierkegaard, *Traité du désespoir*, idées nrf, 1963, σ. 248.

⁹ See *Ta Nea tis Technis*, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

by a landscape that calls up *The Crossroads* (1994), that fateful place, the crossroads, where Oedipus met and killed his father, Laius, an integral part of Hadjimichalis' major project *Schiste Odos* (1990-95/97). These indelible wounds do not remain in individual memory but are connected to the Universal, to historical memories and wounds of the German Occupation and the Greek Civil War, to expressionist images of urban decay, like masks in the style of Ensor and figures in the style of Soutine.

Chapter Two is marked by the strong and seductive presence of Women and Love. A persistent demand for Life, that remains undiminished, although it cannot exorcise the physical and emotional suffering, the historical cancellation, the melancholy, the death that return immediately after, in Chapter Three: the figure with the shaved head; three sides of the same face, convulsing and screaming; an empty parallelepiped reminiscent of Hadjimichalis' *Burials*, or *Crate* (1996-2000), the piece inspired by Aris Alexandrou, also empty but without the bright red colour glowing in the light of a bare lamp, like before; the red blood stain, which sets the tone of the entire piece; the cloth, bloody or not, crumpled or not, a bandage, a cover, the lovers' bed sheet or the Shroud of death, or the Turin Shroud, indelibly marked with the death of God; the ever-present half-open door.

In Chapter Four, the artist's journey towards self-confinement becomes irreversible.

In the first sub-chapter, his attention is already focused on enclosed spaces and their details, or on rooms with paintings within paintings – like the portrait of the figure with the shaved head and his eyes closed, or the landscape of trees and sea, a vista of Aegina. A literal *mise en abyme*. Painting of painting. On the other hand, a male foot evoking Caravaggio's agonies, a head, in an opening, with a face contorted by an agonised expression, leave no room for manoeuvre: A.K.'s road to self-confinement is now a one-way street.

The transition to confinement takes place in the second sub-chapter, and it's a break, a *μετάβασις εις άλλον είδος*, a transition into another genus, even in terms the visual means employed: it happens through equal-sized black and white photographs.

A Notebook at the start, packaged paintings at the end, and in between photographs of papers, sketches, pieces of cardboard from the studio, a game of darkness, light, shadows, between the dark room and the light, a lit-up floor and the shadows, the lit-up wall and the half-open door. We are literally on the threshold.

“In Dostoevsky,” wrote Bakhtin, “a person is always depicted on the threshold, or, in other words, in a state of crisis.”¹⁰ The person is nowhere to be seen in this unit. There are only two human traces in the photographs of the transition: first, near the beginning, a photograph of a young man in a notebook and, second, near the end, a human-shaped doll. No other person or the trace of one.

Where did Alice's Red King withdraw to? In his Uncanny House, the innermost places of the labyrinth inside the Looking-Glass House.

Confinement

Having taken the big leap, shut up in his studio until the moment he dies, the painter A.K. paints, manically and incessantly, details of his surroundings: details of walls, pipes, doors, locks, floor mosaics, sinks, light bulbs, sockets, radiators, and other such familiar, everyday things. Among them are objects charged with memories – a child's multicoloured marble, an ink pot, a small object he received as a gift from another artist, a box painted with a folk theme, even a door knob bearing that ominous red spot. In Hadjimichalis' exhibition, the majority of works – 170 paintings plus the model of the House and the film made there by A.K. before he died – belong in this Fifth and Final Chapter of the Novel. This obsession with ceaselessly painting details of his studio brings to mind obsessive-compulsive states –

¹⁰ Bakhtin, *op.cit.*

through which, as psychoanalysis teaches, the drive of death of expressed – or psychotic fixation.

Is A.K. psychotic, insane?

Alice isn't happy when the adorable, ever-smiling Cheshire Cat gives her such explanations:

“But I don't want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can't help that,” said the Cat: “We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.”

“How do you know I'm mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn't have come here.”

Alice didn't think that proved it at all.¹¹

And A.K.'s psychosis is not proven at all by his fixation on painting the details of the familiar space he confined himself to by his own volition. If we pay attention, we will be stricken by the fact that his confinement paintings are infused by a light, a glow if you like, that is often absent from the gloomy, angst-ridden pictures of the pre-confinement period. Madness, as we know, is the absence of work, as Foucault wrote, while what we have here is a flood of paintings. We are not dealing with annihilation but with a *celebration of painting* – Painting purely as Painting.

And then, the presence of random objects, charged with personal memories, preserve personal warmth and by no means prove the fragmentation of the Self.

But the fixation on depicting the same, all-too-familiar details of a house's interior, over and over again?

William James observed, in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, that if one shuts oneself in small booth, a closet, etc, they “begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness (a thing to make children scream at, as Stevenson says), of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that anything should be, but that this very thing should be, is mysterious!”

Although James sees that philosophy pays attention to this phenomenon, his pragmatism stops him from giving a rational explanation, “for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.” In our days, Alain Badiou, in *Logiques des Mondes*, searches for such a logical bridge, the law of appearance (la loi de l' apparaître) that allows the non-observable, inexistent to appear in existence, to become “the unapparent that shines in appearance.”¹²

The paintings from the period of the painter A.K.'s confinement manage to repeat, with growing pleasure, you might say, the feat of *transforming through the means of painting the most familiar into the unfamiliar*, into what Freud called *Unheimlich*, *uncanny*.

Freud distinguished between the *Uncanny in life*, the “queerness” that accompanies the return of familiar inhibitions as unfamiliar, and the *Uncanny in art*, which isn't limited to the return of the inhibited desire, but brings to light the hidden possibilities, the potential of the object.¹³ Such is the Uncanny or, more accurately, the transformation of the familiar into uncanny in A.K.'s paintings of confinement.

A.K. now lives in an Uncanny House, the House of the Uncanny.

This transformation certainly does not resolve the crisis, the dead end that drove A.K. to confinement. The last two paintings in the confinement period series highlight it: we see a human-shaped shade casting its shadow upon the wall, like Pindar's *man is a dream of a*

¹¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

¹² Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, Seuil, 2006, p. 490.

¹³ See also Savas Mikhail, *The Uncanny Architecture of Dream-Thoughts on the Cinema of Antoinette Angelidou*, *Ta Nea tis Technis*, No. 185, March 2010, p. 15-17.

shadow, and the recurring image – invested with multiple meanings – of the crumpled cloth or sheet or shroud.

Repetition and Exit/Exodus

Living in an uncanny House is not much different to living in a house like the one of poor Job, who cried out in Hebrew: *Sheol beti...*

... *Hades is my house: I have made my bed in the darkness.*¹⁴

A.K. seeks a way out before he dies, with a second *transition to another genus*: by building a model, a copy of the labyrinth in which he lives, and by making a film that, in essence, summarises his life and his work in both worlds – the world before confinement, and the world of confinement. This second transition, just like the last one, which led to confinement, is not a smooth slide to somewhere else, a gradual shift from one place to another or a conciliatory mediation, Hegel-style. It's a confrontation, a break. The second break is the *Cäsur*, as Hölderlin named it, a turn and reversal, in his *Remarks on Sophocles' Oedipus and Antigone*; a genuine dialectic negation of negation.

The unity amidst the differences of the worlds before and after confinement is now revealed. On the one hand, everything takes places inside the claustrophobic labyrinth of the second world. On the other hand, the Figures that haunt the first world, before confinement, return: the laughing child – the image through which A.K. was first introduced in the 58-second video *A Moment in the Mind of Mr. A.K.*, as part of Hadjimichalis' installation entitled *Hospital* (2004-05) at the 2005 Venice Biennale – the Father, distant, inapproachable and yet so close, the Dead woman beneath the shroud, the Lovers beneath the sheets. The last moment of the film features, covered by a sheet or a shroud, the protagonist, the dialogic relationship: A.K. looking at his reflection in the mirror until the final breakdown. The relationship, in fact, is a three-way, between the invisible Hadjimichalis, the Self, his Other, and his Other's other in the mirror.

Through the unity of the two opposite worlds and the three-way relationship at their end, Hadjimichalis attempts a Repetition of life and work in their entirety, a Repetition in the sense of Kierkegaard's *Gjentagelsen* (in French, a *Reprise* rather than a *Répétition*); a return, in other words, not of the Same, but of the same as the Other, of the Self and life itself, transformed.

There is a vital, critical detail in the film: in contrast to the silent worlds of paintings and photographs, there is a soundtrack. And it is that acoustic dimension that provides a true way out.

At some point, we hear the sounds of a storm, a tempest that causes the light bulb, the only light in the world of confinement, to swing violently back and forth, threatening to drown everything in darkness. At the same time, however, the ominous presence of the storm is also what provides the shocking proof that there is – primarily, dominantly – *an Outside*, beyond the claustrophobic universe of the labyrinth.

The storm brings about the transformation, the Repetition of the Same as the Other – and the Exodus from the labyrinth.

Kierkegaard, in his own *Repetition*, refers to the biblical story of Job. There, Job's cries of rage and his friends' rhetoric on divine judgement are interrupted by the thunder and the storm of divine intervention.

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said*¹⁵

¹⁴ Job 17:13, translation corrected, from the original in Hebrew.

¹⁵ Job 38:1, King James Version.

And Kierkegaard notes

Who could have conceived this conclusion? And yet no other conclusion is conceivable- and neither is this. When everything has come to a standstill, when thought is brought to a halt, when speech becomes mute, when the explanation in bewilderment seek the way home-then there must be a thunderstorm.

[...]

In the sense of the immediacy all is lost. His friends, especially Bildad, know of only one way out, that by submitting to his chastisement he might hope to have a repetition in superabundance. For that Job is not willing. Thereupon the plot thickens, so that only by a thunderstorm can it be resolved...¹⁶

After the storm, in A.K.'s pre-death film, we can hear birdsong, like the still, small voice that the prophet Elijah heard inside the cave that was his refuge.

Perhaps that birdsong speaks, in the tongue of birds, the words of David's psalm

Those who sow in tears, shall reap in joy¹⁷

Or, as the sombre Ecclesiastes puts it:

A time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted.¹⁸

The reaping of joy. Could it be that Joy itself, in the Looking-Glass House and in Wonderland, is called Alice?

*Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.¹⁹*

SAVAS MIKHAIL
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Translated into English by Daphne Kapsali

¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Repetition - An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1964, translation by Walter Lowrie, pp. 117-118.

¹⁷ Psalm 126:5, King James Version.

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:2, King James Version.

¹⁹ Lewis Carroll, *op.cit.*, p. 203.