



**“The Alexandrians don’t Need a Guidebook to
their City”:** *Literary Nostalgia in Harry Tzalas’
Seven Days at the Cecil*

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to examine Harry Tzalas’ *Seven Days at the Cecil* (2009) as a specimen of nostalgic writing, highlighting the way subjective recollections are transformed into a shared collective experience; a rendering of an intangibly fleeting past into a work of art. Nostalgic literary works may thus be regarded as not only a means of preserving personal memories, but also as a means of vivifying places, historical eras, anecdotes and figures. What unfolds throughout the novel is a nostalgic revisiting of the past; of an Alexandria that had once accommodated the characters, but is now in the realm of the distant, the inaccessible and the vanishing. Their remembering of the past is not elegiac; rather it is life-giving and self-defining. By a fortuitous meeting, a varied cast of characters find themselves entangled with each other. Each day, for a period of seven days, they visit different places in the city of their childhood; places of yesteryear that are still alive in their memories, though some of which could not withstand the ravages of time. The locus of their encounter is the Cecil Hotel. Arriving there acts like opening a floodgate of reminiscences through which Tzalas probes into the nature of nostalgia and the whole gamut of human emotions it invokes. The choice of the Cecil Hotel is particularly apt, for despite the renovations it has witnessed, it is still coloured in hues of the past, very much like the city itself. It thus serves as a causeway between the past and the present. To the author and his characters, Alexandria is not a symbolic homeland or an ecological niche, nor is it a relic of the past; rather it is a sensuous city, vibrant with scents, tastes, colours, tactile sensations, audible sounds, and the lithe rippling of the sea waves - all of which remain alive in their memories. As it has occurred to them, the grip of their Alexandria is too tenacious to let go of them, and this leads the narrator to contend at the end of the novel: “The Alexandrians don’t need a guidebook to their city, they carry her in their soul”.

KEY-WORDS: Alexandria, Tzalas, Egypt, culture, nostalgia

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Alexandria is “an island in the surging sea in front of Egypt, and men call it Pharos” (IV. 353-55); in the *Oracle of the Potter*, the third century BC [Hellenistic Egyptian](#) prophetic text, Alexandria is an “all-nurturing city”, harbouring “all the races of mankind” (qtd. in Scheidel 27); according to Lawrence Durrell, it is a “capital of memory” (qtd. in Smith 24); and in the words of the Alexandrian-born writer Harry Tzalas, “she has been a city of memories” (*Seven* 235). With this description, Harry Tzalas’ novel *Seven Days at the Cecil* (2009) ostensibly comes to an end. In point of fact, a narrative of the sort never comes to an end, pivoted as it is on a mystical bond between the characters and the city they all knew too well. “The older we get, the more we become like this city”, says Sorial, one of the characters in the novel. “The more we realize what irreparable damage time is doing to us, the more we take refuge in the past” (235). It is this relentless search for refuge in bygone times through nostalgic reminiscences that captures the kernel of Tzalas’ novel. What unfolds throughout the narrative is a nostalgic revisiting of the past; of an Alexandria that had once accommodated the characters, but is now in the realm of the distant, the inaccessible and the vanishing. Their remembering of the past is not elegiac; rather it is life-giving and self-defining. It is the aim of this paper to examine Harry Tzalas’ *Seven Days at the Cecil* as a specimen of nostalgic writing, highlighting the way subjective recollections are transformed into a shared collective experience; a rendering of an intangibly fleeting past into a work of art. Nostalgic literary works may thus be regarded as not only a means of preserving personal memories in a durable form, but also as a means of vivifying places, historical eras, anecdotes and figures.

Seven Days at the Cecil is Harry Tzalas’ second literary work to be translated into English, the first being a collection of short stories, *Farewell to Alexandria*, published in 2004. Both works, in addition, to his third translated book *Drunken Seas*, draw on the author’s memories of his native city where he was born in 1936. Tzalas’ parents were also Alexandrian-born, his grandparents having settled in it at the end of the 19th century. He left for Greece in 1959 with the exodus of the European communities that had long been part and parcel of Alexandria’s demographic make-up, and had rendered it “a cosmopolitan city par excellence” (Awad and Hamouda 10). Though there is no particular date that pinpoints the end of cosmopolitanism, the year 1956 is generally regarded as the actual beginning of departure “when the English, French and Israeli attack on Egypt led to the expulsion of English and French nationals. Waves of exodus followed the 1961 nationalizations Within a few years, Alexandria had lost its multicultural diversity and polyglot character” (11)¹. Nonetheless, according to

This paper would not have come to fruition had it not been for the academic and personal inspiration I had received, and in fact continue to receive, from Professor Sahar Hamouda. It was thanks to Professor Hamouda that I worked for three years (2010-2013), under her guidance and constructive supervision, in the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center (Alex Med) at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. It was an inestimably enriching experience from which I benefitted on all levels. It was during the time when I was working there that I had the privilege of attending the book launch of Harry

Tzalas, if “Alexandria is different today from what it was seventy years ago when [he] was a child, ... 21st century Athens is also different from what the Greek capital was 50 years ago Those changes are neither positive nor negative; there is a constant unavoidable mutation of places and of human beings” (Personal interview).

If the cosmopolitanism of Alexandria has largely faded in real life, it is still alive in Tzalas’ memories, as well as in those of his characters. As he makes it clear in the novel, cosmopolitan Alexandria is still alive in the way the city carries with her the scars of the successive eras that she has lived through. The Ptolemaic, the Roman, the Early Christian City, the City of the Arab conquest, the Ottoman - all are represented by monuments and ruins. And the new Alexandria dreamt of by Mohammed Ali.

There are remarkable buildings from the 19th and 20th centuries to be found in the centre of Alexandria, as well as along the Corniche The Neoclassical buildings of the Greek ruling classes ... the Neo-Venetian, the Neo-Baroque, the Neo-Gothic, the Neo-Islamic of the Italian, Jewish, French, British, Armenian, Lebanese and local traders. (26)

Nowhere is the true essence of cosmopolitan Alexandria more succinctly revealed than in Tzalas’ description of it as “a wonder of coexistence”, where a multitude of people from “different tribes, faiths and nations lived harmoniously and flourished” (27). In short, it was “a safe haven, a burgeoning center of commerce, and the gate of entry into Egypt”, attracting “all kinds of people from the Ottoman Empire, Europe, Asia and North Africa who settled down into what became their second home” (Awad and Hamouda 10).

Change is a key word to understanding the novel; a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds: “You feel as if time had been turned back and that you are experiencing a different Alexandria”, proclaims the narrator (46). Moreover, in the Foreword to the English edition, Tzalas calls the readers’ attention to the changes that had happened in the lapse of ten years between the first publication of the book in Greek in 2000 and the new English edition; changes pertaining not only to the city itself, but also to the people mentioned in the book. The choice of the Cecil Hotel is particularly apt in this context since “the lobby and ballroom of the Cecil were once the center of Alexandria’s social life” (Dalrymple). After so many years of departure from the city “one finds [in it] a mixture of the old décor surviving from the inter-war years, together with careless later refurbishments” (*Seven* 30). Despite the renovations the hotel has witnessed, it is still coloured in hues of the past, very much like the city itself. It is now owned by a huge French hotel chain rather than by the Metzger family

Tzalas’ *Seven Days at the Cecil*. I was even more privileged to have his dedication on my own copy of the book. Even more enlightening was getting the opportunity to interview the author, thanks to Professor Hamouda’s suggestion and arrangement.

¹In their introduction to *Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria*, Awad and Hamouda state how “the actual rupture” came in 1956, though some see the end of cosmopolitanism with World War II; others would cite 1936 when the Montreux Convention abolished Capitulations and deprived foreigners of their privileges (11).

of the past. The hotel thus serves as a causeway between the past and the present. It becomes one of the many “landmarks of the past” that the narrator seeks to “rediscover” and through which he can “come to terms with the present” and “adapt” to it (13). More than any wordy explanation, these words capture most expressively how nostalgia becomes a coping mechanism for securing a firm foothold in both the past and the present. For this reason, it is hailed by Tzalas as being “always a positive feeling; one is nostalgic about a happy experience, pleasant moments. Bringing back memories of our childhood makes us feel good” (Personal interview).

By a fortuitous meeting, a varied cast of characters from different walks of life find themselves entangled with each other: the narrator, a journalist aspiring to write a tourist guide to Alexandria, following in E.M. Forster’s footsteps, but using his own style of writing; Sorial, the Alexandrian architect, who is deeply entrenched in Alexandria and knows the city and its history inside out, or as is mentioned in the novel “knows everyone and everything” (11); Princess Cécile Ali Toussoum and her niece Miléna, the former of whom is Alexandrian-born of French origin who left in the wake of the war; and William Traver, an English author famous for his historical novels, and who had also served for a short time during the war as a pilot with the RAF. Each day, for a period of seven days, they visit different places in the city of their childhood; places of yesteryear that are still alive in their memories, though some of which could not withstand the ravages of time. The locus of their encounter is the Cecil Hotel. Arriving there acts like opening a floodgate of reminiscences through which Tzalas probes into the nature of nostalgia and the whole gamut of human emotions it invokes in each and every character.

A cursory look at the word “nostalgia” and its origin thus becomes indispensable. Though the word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek roots, *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing, it did not originate in ancient Greece. Rather, its origin harks back to the seventeenth century, precisely to the year 1688, when a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, coined this term in his medical dissertation to denote “the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one’s native land” (qtd. in Boym 3). He was particularly referring to the extreme homesickness that Swiss mercenaries experienced. Being unable to adapt to foreign lands and customs, and hardly putting up with the pain of being wrenched apart from their parents, they felt an imperative need to go back to their native lands. Disallowed to do so, they started exhibiting varied symptoms: insomnia, anxiety, lack of appetite, high temperatures, among many others (Mirella 210). In the course of his attempt to postulate a treatment for this disease, Hofer could not help not being proud of his patients since nostalgia for him was a demonstration of the patriotism of his compatriots who were under the spell of their native land to the point of sickness (Boym 5).

In 1863, Dr. De Witt C. Peters defined nostalgia as a “species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home” (qtd. in Wilson). According to the account given by Dr. Albert von Haller:

The course of the disease was mysterious: the ailment spread ‘along uncommon routes through the untouched course of the channels of the brain to the body,’ arousing ‘an uncommon and ever-present idea of the recalled native land in the mind.’ Longing for home exhausted the vital spirits, causing nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, as well as ... a propensity for suicide. (Boym 4)

In the context of the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, dangerous but not always lethal. Opium, leeches, purging of the stomach and a journey to the Swiss Alps were prescribed whenever nostalgic symptoms were discerned. (Boym xiv, 5). In the nineteenth century several clinical studies were also conducted, trying to define the symptoms, causes, and treatment of this ailment. In 1821 a very important article was published in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* arguing that nostalgia was not exclusively experienced by soldiers, but by all those who were away from home. With the increasing number of those afflicted with nostalgia, a more radical treatment was undertaken. Physicians often failed to find the locus of nostalgia in their patient’s mind or body. In the course of time, the word *nostalgia* began to lose its medical implications to designate a passion or a feeling. In the twentieth century, nostalgia became a subject matter to be tackled by musicians, painters, writers, and poets, acquiring various and contrasting forms. In short, when it was first employed nostalgia denoted a sort of psychosomatic condition, then it became part of literary and everyday discourse. A difficulty is thus encountered when one attempts to find a plausible definition for nostalgia since it does not belong to any specific discipline: “It frustrates psychologists, sociologists, literary theorists and philosophers, even computer scientists who thought they had gotten away from it all—until they too took refuge in their home pages and the cyber-pastoral vocabulary of the global village” (Boym xvii). Adding to its enigmatic nature, “[n]ostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial” (xvii).

Repeating “the unrepeatable” and materializing “the immaterial” is what Tzalas focuses on through the encounter of his characters at the Cecil Hotel and their exchange of stories from times of yore. In the light of the supposition that “[c]ertain memories ... gain prominence ... due to their connection to culturally significant events that coincide with individuals’ own age cohort” (Singer 129), Alexandria in general, and cosmopolitan Alexandria in particular, becomes the pivotal point of their memories. The act of sharing those memories invests individual recollections with a social suffusion. Nostalgia, as Tzalas’ novel will reveal, “may be experienced collectively, in the sense that nostalgia occurs when we are with others who shared the event(s) being recalled” (Wilson).

At the outset of the novel and in the very first encounter between the narrator and Sorial, the religious diversity of cosmopolitan Alexandria is evoked by mentioning the ancient cisterns in the crypt of Saint Mark’s, the Coptic Patriarchal Church, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Library, and the vaults of the Nabi Danial Mosque. By the same token, the historical wealth of the city is evident in the remains of the medieval fortifications preserved in the east, the catacombs and the

subterranean Ptolemaic necropolis, the three-storey cisterns and the narrow alleyways of the Arab districts (11-12). The loftiness of the city and the way it has hosted distinguished persons from different walks of life are alluded to in terms of “the remains of the elite of cosmopolitan Alexandria” (12). Horse-drawn carriages and the tram serve to recapture the spirit of a previous time that still has its mark on the present. Similarly, the past inserts itself in the present through the gastronomic heritage of Alexandria evoked in mentioning “old” and even “pre-war” restaurants such as Santa Lucia, San Giovanni, and the renowned *Élite* (13). Notwithstanding the renovations to which these places have been subjected, and though their owners are probably no longer the same familiar ones, they are still imbued with the tinge of their glorious past. It is this sense of retained familiarity that induces the narrator to refer to the city as “my Alexandria” despite the forty-year separation from it (13). The namelessness of the narrator invests him with a universal dimension to typify nostalgic persons in general, and nostalgic writers in particular, the latter of whom were referred to by Tzalas himself on the occasion of launching the book as “amateur writers who go through their personal experiences and rarely escape the narrow boundaries of their own community.... These writers want to leave a mark of their passage”.

The narrator’s desire to be left alone in the city “to gently, gradually rekindle the memories [he] had coveted in the chubby-holes of [his] soul” (*Seven* 14) typifies what “private nostalgia” is all about: recollections from the past which are idiosyncratic in the way they conjure up feelings peculiar to a particular person (Wilson). On the other hand, his mulling over questions such as: “Who will I talk to about the past? With whom will I browse through the yellowed pages of memory? Who will tell me what has become of those who left, those who have been lost with the passage of time?” (*Seven* 18) lends credence to the postulation that “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations” (Boym xvi). It thus becomes apparent that nostalgia is not insular; rather it bridges the gap between the personal and the collective, thereby forging and cementing human ties. Throughout the novel, the individual and the collective run parallel, and are coeval in salvaging the history of cosmopolitan Alexandria from falling into oblivion, or to use the narrator’s words, from being “lost with the passage of time”. In this context, the homecoming to Alexandria becomes the locus where individual nostalgia is rendered collective, the latter of which is an instrumental “meaning-making tool both for the community and the individuals in the community” (Pennebaker and Banasik 18).

Of all the evoked remnants of the past, Tzalas’ description of the Cecil Hotel is most effective in rendering the past an active entrant in the present:

The twin elevators of the Cecil Hotel are true antiques. The old chambers are made of wood with glass doors. The wells, within which the elevators lazily carry the guests up and down are adorned with attractive metalwork.

The chief bellboy counts your luggageThree bellboys are mobilized to deliver them to your room.

The diminutive Nubian in charge of the elevator ... first tries out what little he knows of two or three languages, and finding that conversation works best in French, assures you, between the second and third floors, that Field Marshal Montgomery stayed in the room opposite during the Second World War. As you pass the third floor, he will point out the room of Om Kalsoum ... the room next to it, where Omar Sherif stayed, and further down, the room of Josephine Baker - the dark Parisian exotic dancer, legend of the inter-war. By the time we reached room 507, he had reeled off the names of some ten or so famous loyal guests of the old hotel. You see, the elevator moves slowly, desperately so, and each floor is high-ceilinged. (*Seven* 15-16)

More than merely being a description of a landmark Alexandrian hotel that dates back to the year 1929, the way the quaintness of the past is evoked and brought to bear on the present reveals the importance of nostalgic writing in vivifying times of yore. Moreover, Tzalas' portrayal of the hotel renders it an emblem of the city itself and how it has withstood the ravages of time. The regal ambiance revealed in the above description evokes the opulence of Alexandria in its cosmopolitan heyday when a multitude of nationalities were living an exuberant mode of life. The art deco elevator brings to life a fading golden era. Words like "antiques", "old chambers" and "old hotel" render seemingly irreversible times accessible, thus underscoring the importance of nostalgic writings in resurrecting the glory of bygone times. Furthermore, one cannot but hum nostalgic tunes at the mention of renowned celebrities of the past such as Om Kalsoum, Omar Sherif and Josephine Baker, among many other "famous loyal guests". That the hotel was frequented by Field Marshal Montgomery underscores the historical valence of not just the hotel, but of the city at large; a theme that Tzalas broaches throughout the book. The linguistic diversity of cosmopolitan Alexandria is evidently evoked in the Nubian's ability to converse in three languages. In so mentioning, Tzalas foregrounds the time in the history of Alexandria when "[t]here had been much linguistic churning" (Derbyshire)².

The way nostalgia, and by implication literary nostalgia, provides a sense of connectivity with the past is most obviously revealed when the narrator steps out into the balcony of his room and beholds the extant Alexandrian landmarks: the glittering Corniche; the fort of Qait Bey; the Eastern Harbour; the fishermen and their daily activities; the rhythmic clatter of the horse-drawn carriages; Saad Zaghloul Square; Ramleh Station; the tramway; the Silsileh; the ancient Cape Lochias, among many other yearned-for places. The exhilarating impact of the panoramic view offered to him underscores the redemptive power of nostalgia and the way it helps locate and identify the self in an ongoing life story. His sense of elation is heightened as he later

² "Arabic, still colored with some Ottoman Turkish, was the majority language of the city, while French was the commercial lingua franca. Greeks were the largest European nationality in residence, but as late as 1910 the traveller Douglas Sladen had been able to write that 'Alexandria is an Italian city... Italian is its staple language' " (Derbyshire).

saunters on and frequents the places whose memories are still impinged on his mind: the Boulevard Saad Zaghloul; Mohamed Ali Square; Evangelismos, the largest Orthodox Church in the city; the Attarine Mosque; Rue Fouad; Cinema Royal; the Plaza; Cinema Rio, among many others. Wherever he looks around, he finds the past resurfacing in his present. At the same time, he becomes aware of the ravages of time which he cannot possibly evade. Very much like the buildings he beholds, he has “known glorious days”, but has been “worn down by merciless times” (*Seven* 18).

“Let me see if I can remember the suburbs and their beaches” (17), broods the narrator. In so nostalgically pondering, he may be viewed as attempting to patch up memory gaps. An uplifting sense of victory is felt by him as he recalls “Mazarita, Soter, Chatby, Camp César, Ibrahimeya, Sporting, Cleopatra, Sidi Gaber, Stanley, Rouchdy, Glymenoplou, San Stefano, Sid Bichr ...” (17). It is apparent that those recollections have an enduring emotional and self-defining hold over him. They are, to a great extent, touchstones that used to punctuate his life in the past. In commenting on the consolatory impact of those self-defining recollections, the narrator at some point in the narrative says: “how precious memory is as the years pass by and we look to fleeting moments from the past for consolation” (33). Memories of the sort “are commonly retrieved to serve as reference points to provide guidance or reinforcement with respect to specific current situations in the individuals’ lives” (Singer 119). A prime concern of nostalgic writing is to render these transient mementoes more enduring. On the other hand, he is utterly dismayed when he fails to recall “many of the old street names [that] have changed” (*Seven* 17). As much as nostalgia can be a coping and self-defining mechanism that begets an integrated self, it can also engender a sense of alienation that “expresses longings for times that are ... beyond recall” (Lowenthal 28). The very same sense of dismay is imparted to him when he steps into *Edouard’s*, once owned by an Armenian who used to make the best shoes in town. Upon meeting his son, he learns about his death and the physical degeneration that is happening to his wife. At this point, the narrator regrets stepping into the shop: his nostalgic reminiscences open his eyes to the change in fortune and how the present can sometimes mar, spoil, tarnish or sully one’s recollections of the past.

This may explain why nostalgia often becomes a “difficult emotion” (Wilson). The sense of difficulty stems from its inherent paradoxical nature and the antithetical emotions it conjures up. Much as it recaptures times of felicity and happiness, the fact that one is at bay from an edenic or ideal situation is likely to be a stimulus for a sense of loss and estrangement, as is evidenced in the narrator’s description of Sidi Bichr as being “unrecognizably suffocated by enormous buildings” (17). The difficulty posed by nostalgia can be evinced in the following view:

If nostalgia is a sickness, there is no cure. If it is a problem, there is no solution. Even when one returns to a place he longs for, neither he nor the place is the same as the nostalgic recollection. If one is nostalgic for a particular ‘time’, there is no way of going back. And, even if one could go back in time, the life experiences

and subsequent changes in the self would make the nostalgic recollection inapplicable (Wilson).

The narrator's sense of dissociation is thus the outcome of the fact that "neither he nor the place is the same as the nostalgic recollection". So as not to be further uprooted by the winds of change, the narrator seeks refuge in the sea, though paradoxically enough, it is in a never-ending state of flux: "But the sea is the same, the same as it was then. That is why I love the sea; it never changes [The waves] come and go interminably, just as I did when I watched them as a child, and tomorrow they will still do so" (17). The sea thus becomes another touchstone to which the narrator resorts. In this context, the narrator becomes a mouthpiece that voices the author's fascination with "the continuous movement of the dark blue waves merging with the special, unique scent of [its] breeze" (Personal interview). In addition, as the narrator's musings reveal, nostalgia is not solely retrospective; rather in many instances it can also be prospective since it engenders a coping strategy with not only the present, but also the future.

The tapestry of reminiscences that Tzalas weaves becomes more complex as Sorial and the narrator start to share their disparate nostalgic episodes with Princess Cécile and William Traver whom they meet in the lobby of the hotel. The contours of collective nostalgia are thus broadened as the characters take turn in recounting their experiences. Since collective nostalgia actively contributes to "forging a national identity [and] expressing patriotism" (Wilson), nostalgic writing becomes of paramount importance in transforming these personal experiences into a tellable story. Through the telling and retelling of what happened, "memories become stories, and as we reinterpret and reevaluate these stories, they become stories about us" (Fivush 89).

In all the "stories" recounted by the characters, Tzalas hardly misses an opportunity to bring to the fore the historical value of the city. For example, the account given by Cécile and her niece of their visit to the Graeco-Roman museum sets in motion a conversation laden with historical facts and anecdotes. Similarly, Traver's account of his visit to the excavations at Kom el Dikka enables Sorial to acquaint the other characters with the findings of the Polish archaeological mission whose prime aim was the tomb of Alexander the Great, but discovered instead a whole neighbourhood dating back to post-Roman years. This proves that "there is always something fresh to learn about ancient Alexandria, [since] recent excavations have provided ample new material for discussion" (Harris and Ruffini vii). The narrator's account of his visit to the Jewish cemetery, accompanied by a member of the Archaeological Service also serves to underscore the longstanding stature of Alexandria as the territorial focus of different communities and creeds: "Arabs and Jews, Greeks and Italians, French and British, Armenians and Turks jostled together. Between the mosques and synagogues could be found the churches of Copts and Maronites, Chaldeans and Melchites, and all the many varieties of Orthodox and Catholic" (Derbyshire). The way Alexandria exhibited a peaceful coexistence among different faiths and denominations is revealed in the narrator's reading of the

inscriptions written on the headstones in varied languages, and also in his comment as he is groping his way among the graves alongside his Muslim companion: “And the two of us walked in impotent silence. One a Christian by faith, the other a Muslim, surrounded by a multitude of Hebrew souls” (42)³. It was, in short, a “diversity” leading to “a luxuriant tolerance” (Awad and Hamouda 13). The narrator’s visit also testifies that there are still remnants of the old Alexandria; the Jews have departed, but the synagogue and the cemetery still exist.

On the third day of their meeting, more historical vistas are being opened up as the characters decide to have lunch in a well-known fish restaurant in Anfoushi. Mentioning this neighbourhood cannot but direct their conversation to the harbour, whereupon they move back in time to discuss Dinocrates and his initial idea of joining the Pharos Island to the mainland. A more heated debate ensues as they broach themes related to mummies, embalming, and afterlife. Rivetting for them all is the narrator’s account of his visit to a curiosity shop in Fouad Street whose Greek owner has a sarcophagus containing the body of a scribe dating back to the 6th century BC during the 26th Dynasty. If this bears witness to anything, it attests to the city’s unrivalled cultural and historical heritage which continues to inspire generations. The character of Miléna and the interest she exhibits in learning about the city proves the importance of nostalgic literary writings as illuminating texts for prospective generations. That her knowledge of Alexandria is “based solely upon the books she had read” further underscores the role of similar texts in recapturing the past (*Seven* 98).

The more they become engrossed in their history-laden conversations, the more Sorial impresses them with his “memory” (71), and how it can accommodate knowledge of the city; its foundations; its history; the countless myths attached to it; the disparate and often contradictory accounts surrounding the tomb of Alexander the Great; how Alexandria has emerged as a melting pot of disparate cultural amalgamations; the establishment of the Mouseion and the Serapeum; the Roman’s imperial rule, the spread of Christianity; the Arab conquest in 641 AD and the subsequent decline of the city; in addition to countless related stories. Iconic figures associated with Alexandria such as Alexander, the Ptolemies, Cleopatra, Mark Antony, Julius Caesar, the Ottomans, Napoleon, Champollion, Ambroise Skilitis, Mahmoud Bey El Falaki, among many others, are invariably mentioned by Sorial. Their day is crowned by a visit to the Nabi Daniel Mosque; a memorable experience that enriches their exploration of the city.

An equally memorable experience is their visit to the military burial grounds at El Alamein on the fourth day of their sojourn in Alexandria. The importance of this visit lies not only in foregrounding the role played by Alexandria in such a decisive event, but also in showing how nostalgia charges historical events with an emotional hue; an endeavour that can be best accomplished via nostalgic writings. “You can feel

³ In addition to Muslims and Jews, there were “Catholics, Catholic Copts, Syrian Catholics, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Copts, Maronites, and Protestants (Awad and Hamouda 12).

the souls of the dead soldiers all around you, touching you ...”, whispered Cécile, only to have her voice reverberate in an echo: “touching you ... touching you ... repeating them as if the souls agreed and each of them wanted to be touched” (91). In so “wanting”, it is as if the souls are pleading for remembrance, lest they would be lost in oblivion while keeping the focus solely on the atrocious throes of the battle itself. As they themselves must have experienced nostalgic longings for their homelands during the time of service, it is as if they are experiencing the same craving even after their death, buried as they are in foreign territories. Nostalgic writing can thus be regarded as a viable means of salvaging the memory of those soldiers from becoming what is known as a “silent event”, which occurs when people avoid talking about a major shared upheaval (Pennebaker and Banasik 10). Writing about their demise may serve the very same purpose of building memorials: to keep them alive in memory.

In keeping with his role as an eye-opener to the city and its history, Sorial unearths many facts about the course of the Second World War and its aftermath as far as Alexandria is concerned. As for Traver, though not an Alexandrian, his nostalgic reminiscences about the war and the momentous Battle of El Alamein also play a highly instrumental role in keeping alive the memory of the battle that “changed the course of the war in North Africa” (*Seven* 100). Hard as it may seem to encapsulate the turmoil of the battle in a few words, he, at Miléna’s instigation, succinctly manages to do so. Though he had served for a short time during the war as a pilot with the RAF, he did not fight at El Alamein on account of his being hospitalized after his plane had gone down a few months before the battle had commenced. Upon the arrival of Rommel at El Alamein, he had been evacuated with other wounded ones to Palestine. In this regard, his remembering of the battle and his well thought-out account of its course without having first-hand experience of it, may be understood as an example of what is known as “flashbulb memories”; that is, a merging of personal circumstances and historical events in memory. Flashbulb memories are particularly remembered because they allow individuals to carve out a place for themselves in a particular historical context, and when recounting their personal flashbulb memories to others, they are included in the event itself (Pennebaker and Banasik 5). People not only remember important events, but also their own individual circumstances when they heard about them and what they were engaged in when the event took place. An individual’s personal history is thus integrated with the history of the time, rendering Traver a participant in such a decisive battle, not just in the events preceding it.

If nostalgia for the time when Traver exhibited military skill and expertise gives meaning to his present, it equally brings about an adverse effect in the case of the father of Yiannis, the Greek lad whose story Traver recounts to the other characters. Yiannis died for the sake of his country, or more accurately for the sake of his country’s flag as his ship was bombed and he was found ashore clutching the flag tightly in a heroic attempt to save it. Fifteen years after his death Traver learns about his story and eventually visits his parents. In the father’s case, nostalgia for the time when his son exhibited heroism and valiance brings nothing but pain and a sense of

dissociation, rendering life futile and meaningless. It brings him great woe to recall the time when people praised his son’s sacrifice, as he explains to Traver:

After the war ... people came to see me ... to praise Yannis’ sacrifice. A service was held; they awarded him a posthumous medal for bravery. They made speeches They even wanted to put up a statue I asked them not to make a statue. They insisted. They had the impudence to tell me that Yannis didn’t belong to me ... he belonged to Greece. He should be held up as an example to the generations to come.

They erected many memorials, they found other heroes My heart bleeds for them all. I think about them again and again, all the time, it drives me mad, it drives me sad. (122-23)

It thus becomes apparent that as much as nostalgia can be a coping mechanism and a means of consolation, as much as it can beget sadness and displacement for some people. “Bringing back memories of the past hurts”, the narrator proclaims towards the end of the novel (218). As far as Tzalas is concerned, his nostalgic reminiscences about the war are of the former sort:

My childhood was marked by war, repeated night bombardments and then we had to move to my uncle’s house at Sidi Bishr, as the area was considered safer because at a distance from the British Naval Base of the Western port. But this was a pleasant period for me that I remember with nostalgia, just because I was so young and luckily youth is unconcerned of the daily problems, of the misery of war. (Personal interview)

On the other hand, the enchanting sea and the lithe rippling of its waves at El Alamein wield an enchanting impact on Cécile, nostalgically taking her back to the prime of her life when “she still dreamt beautiful dreams”. At this moment of recollection, “she kept her eyes closed to hold on to that fluttering sensation for just a while longer” (95). Losing herself in such a reverie reveals the uplifting impact of nostalgia and how it can be a defense mechanism against the irreversibility of time. If she cannot practically retrieve her youth, nostalgia enables her to relive the feelings she experienced; to capitalize on self-assertive and rewarding episodes. Thus, Cécile’s reminiscences reveal how nostalgia is not just “a longing for a place”, but actually it is “a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams” (Boym xv).

The way nostalgia becomes a yearning for “the time of our childhood” is what underlies Cécile’s going for a walk along the Corniche the following day, recalling “how she had felt as a ten-year-old girl, when her father would sometimes take her out fishing in his boat at dawn. That was how the morning smelt” (*Seven* 127). She can also recall how her parents used to take her for a treat at Athinaios patisserie, spectacularly famous at the time. The resurgence of sensory recollections like the smell of the morning and the taste of the treat exemplifies a sensory nostalgia, whereupon certain objects resurface in the present, evoking the same sensations experienced by a person when he/she had an empirical encounter with them. “[T]he nostalgic has an amazing capacity for remembering sensations, tastes, sounds, smells

... and trivia of the lost paradise that those who remained home never noticed”, thereby exemplifying a kind of “gastronomic and auditory nostalgia” (Boym 4). This recurs later on in the novel when Cécile visits the house where she was born and feels she can still “smell the aroma of [her father’s] tobacco”, whereupon the narrator comments that “scents and smells hold memories too that lie readily to jump out at us with the ghosts of the past” (200).

As she basks in her memory of the good old days, with nostalgia serving as a padlock between her past and the present, the narrator’s voice intercedes, ushering an account of her meeting with Prince Ali Toussoum; an account interspersed with historical anecdotes that Tzalas never misses to highlight. More history is unleashed as Traver moves back in time to the Alexandria of 1798, just two days after the landing of Bonaparte’s forces at the bay of the Marabout, to the west of Alexandria, the modern-day Borg el Arab. Even more historically enlightening is the visit they undertake to Rashid. Famous for its Ottoman mansions, the renowned Rosetta Stone, the vast plantations of date palms, its breathtaking monuments, and its impressive museum, their visit not only foregrounds the importance of the city throughout history, but also calls attention to some of the restorations it has witnessed, in addition to some culturally specific practices and objects.

Meeting at the dance hall of Athinaios on the sixth day of their encounter enhances the sense of familiarity between the characters, since it holds “a special memory” for each of them, with the exception of Miléna (173). These recollections do not read as lamentations as much as they are self-defining touchstones. More importantly, they reinstate staple landmarks of cosmopolitan Alexandria. Very much like his attitude upon his initial arrival at the Cecil Hotel, the narrator involuntarily compares the present day reality of the place to how he used to hold it in his childhood memory: “How long it’s been since I last came to the ‘Athinaios’! It used to seem such a big place, enormous. Now I see it in its true dimensions, rather cramped, a bit on the small side for a dance hall” (171). Held in the grip of nostalgia, he recalls the very first time he went with his parents for an *après-midi dansant*. Cécile links it to the time when there was a good band, and people danced Tango, the Swing, the Foxtrot, the Charleston and the Waltz, and later on the Blues, the Mambo, Rock and Roll and the Samba. Particularly memorable for her is dancing a Waltz with a handsome gentleman for the first time. Sorial also has his share of memories at Athinaios since it was the venue of his encounter with a Scottish nurse, Rosie, who came with the British forces and with whom he fell in love and wanted to marry, but never did as she left when the war had come to an end. Traver vaguely remembers Athinaios, yet he links it to the time of his convalescence in Alexandria after his return from Palestine. Having been there maybe only once, he remembers his company of some airmen, two Greeks and two Jewish girls.

In this regard, Athinaios creates a sense of solidarity between the characters; a camaraderie which may be well understood in terms of the notion of “diasporic intimacy”:

Diasporic intimacy does not promise a comforting recovery of identity through shared nostalgia for the lost home and homeland Diasporic intimacy could be seen

as the mutual attraction of two immigrants from different parts of the world ... [when] there comes a surprise, a pang of intimate recognition, a hope that sneaks in through the back door in the midst of the habitual estrangement of everyday life abroad. (Boym 253)

Through this intimacy, it dawns on the characters that what they have long taken for granted as being lost, can still be retrieved and resuscitated:

Diasporic intimacy is belated and never final; objects and places were lost in the past and one knows that they can be lost again. The illusion of complete belonging has been shattered. Yet, one discovers that there is still a lot to share. The foreign backdrop, the memory of past losses and recognition of transience do not obscure the shock of intimacy, but rather heighten the pleasure and intensity of surprise. (255)

To a great extent, music also plays an effective role in “heighten[ing] the pleasure and intensity of surprise”. Earlier on, the pianist in Monty’s Bar played “As Time Goes By” from the film *Casablanca*, then “Plaisirs d’Amour”. At Athinaios, music emerges as a symbolic memento from the past, stimulating a special kind of “auditory nostalgia” (Boym 4). At this point in the narrative a new character is introduced, or as she is referred to in the novel, “intrudes” (176): An old woman appears from nowhere, climbs up onto the stage where the band is seated, adjusts the microphone, bows to the scanty audience, turns to the musicians announcing “Les Feuilles Mortes”, the great hit of the 50s, then addresses a non-existent audience, dedicating the song to His Excellency, the Consul General of France. Humming to the tune of nostalgia, Cécile recalls how it “was Ali’s favourite song”. In a nostalgic yearning, she sums up the effect of the song on her: “Oh, what wonderful memories it brings back” (178). If “nostalgia ... is a result of an interaction between subjects and objects, between actual landscapes and the landscapes of the mind” (Boym 354), Madame Flora’s songs may be said to be the catalyst that triggers off this interaction. Tzalas’ inclusion of more songs of the same era vividly recreates the artistically charged ambiance of cosmopolitan Alexandria⁴. Nowhere is this sense of nostalgia more deeply evoked than in the narrator’s comment: “Songs we all knew, songs we had all sung, songs that brought back a bygone era” (178). It just dawns on the characters, just as it does on the readers, that the past can also find a place in the present. As she joins their table upon Sorial’s request, the more-than-seventy-year-old singer sets out to recount episodes from her past:

I was young then, I could sing for hours ... you should have seen the things that went on in those days ... there was chaos outside, with bombs falling everywhere - but inside, we kept up the revelry. We used to turn out all the lights, draw the heavy curtains and burn a few candles. It was our very own resistance. We made fools out of Hitler and Mussolini.

⁴ “La Mer”, by Charles Trénet, follows, and is dedicated to the Admiral whom she imagines to be seated next to the Consul General. The theme of the song also heightens the feelings of nostalgia evoked in the hall; it is a sad song telling of people leaving and never to return. Other songs followed: “Milord”, “Padam Padam”, and “Sous le Ciel de Paris”.

In those days, my voice used to drown out the roar of the cannons and the barking of the men of the Air Defense Corps. The lads used to drink even more then, and some would ask me to sing ‘Lili Marlene’. Others would ask for ‘Yupee Yaya’ or ‘It’s a long way to Tripperary’, while the fighters for Free France wanted to hear the songs their fathers had sung in the bloody trenches of the First Great War, ‘Je mettrais mon ligne sur la ligne Siegfried’. (180-81)

More than merely being a reminiscence bump, these nostalgic thoughts are self-defining determinants of her life; a mechanism of recuperation, giving meaning to the hollowness of her present. By the same token, “the letter from Maurice”, her son, which she handles as something “precious”, as a “cherished relic” or “a priceless rare manuscript” (183), is not just a memento that evokes the good old days, but it is, more importantly, a life-giving force that redeems the vacuity of her present life. As the narrator puts it, she is living “on her love for her son and the memories of her performing years” (186)⁵. Since “the past is ephemeral (and memory is often private), there may be no compelling check on the validity of the memories”, and this is why she finds it particularly “safe and effective to search the past for evidence that supports [her] preferred views of [herself]” (Cameron, Wilson and Ross 209). Her attitude may thus be explained in terms of the supposition that

[p]eople select and interpret certain memories as self-defining, providing them with privileged status in the life story. Other potential candidates for such status are downgraded ... or forgotten altogether. To a certain degree, then, *identity is a product of choice*. We choose the events we consider most important for defining who we are and providing our lives with some semblance of unity and purpose. And we endow them with symbolism, lessons learned, integrative themes, and other personal meanings that make sense to us in the present as we survey the past and anticipate the future. (McAdams 104).

In the midst of Flora’s heart-wrenching story, Tzalas never misses an opportunity to bring to life many features of the Alexandria of the time: the curiosity shops and second-hand bookstores in Attarine; the departure of the Europeans who had long been living in Alexandria; and the parts of the city particularly inhabited by the Greek community. The way he vivifies elements of the past stems from his belief that “the city’s past - not only the far remote - is the soul of the city; to feel it you need some tangible remains”. By those “tangible remains” he does not necessarily “refer to the *dissected* remains that are exhibited in museums and archaeological sites, nor necessarily works of art”, but rather “modest buildings that have been there for centuries and still retain the soul of Alexandria” (Personal interview).

The penultimate day of their sojourn in Alexandria is crowned with a “walk around the streets of the old city” in compliance with a “nostalgic urge” that overtakes

⁵ In point of fact, nobody can ascertain how truthful her account of her son Maurice is—his whereabouts, his career as a famous pianist and even his writing letters to her in the first place. Even Sorial who knows the city and its inhabitants remains clueless about the father of the son, only adding that her story has always been shrouded in mystery and malicious gossip. The only conclusion he arrives at is that from the time Maurice went to study in Paris, he wrote to his mother only once; that is the letter with the photograph she keeps on reading and showing off to whomever she meets.

Cécile (196). In the narrator’s company, she expresses her wish to see the house where she was born; an undertaking that lets loose a gamut of human emotions which confirms how nostalgia innately combines contradictory aspects: “bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence” (Harper 120), leading the narrator to conclude: “how painful our memories become when we begin to stir them up”, like “spiteful Furies [that] sprang out from all around” (202). By going to her past abode, it dawns on her that the past which is over and gone, and from which she has been wrenched apart, becomes present again for a short while, bringing to life all the people who used to inhabit her childhood. Dilapidated as it is, with the plaster peeled off the façade; the stonework and bricks showing through; two missing balconies; and a half-fallen shutter, the house never loses its familiarity to her. To her, as she tells the narrator the following day, “it was a superb day, full of deep emotions”, but it was also “the most painful day” she has known in years. “There were also such incredible moments of happiness”, making her experience “feelings [she] had thought had been lost forever”, she adds. Summing up the impact of that visit on her, “it was a day when [she] was completely possessed by a past that tightly embraced the present” (219). Writing about such an “embrace”, as Tzalas does, helps make those transient and ephemeral moments more enduring and self-serving.

Finally, on the “last day” as the title of the last chapter of the novel indicates, Cécile expresses her wish to go to the Midan, or the Midani, as the Greeks call it, which is the biggest bazaar in Alexandria, situated to the west of Mohammed Ali Square. In so wanting, she seeks to recapture her past since the bazaar is connected to her going there once with her mother when she was a child. Sensory nostalgia and the way it evokes the same sensations when a person had a firsthand empirical encounter with them is nowhere more fully exemplified than in Cécile’s remembering of the smell of “cumin, pepper, cinnamon, [and] nutmeg” (206). The outbreak of a fire in the market brings their visit to an end, leading them afterwards to Kom el Nadoura; a visit that Tzalas pictorially captures in his writing, interspersed with enlightening knowledge about Alexandria. His endeavour to keep alive the history of Alexandria in general, and cosmopolitan Alexandria in particular, is summed up in the narrator’s comment that “the cosmopolitan Alexandria of the past one and a half centuries, listlessly, lazily perseveres” (216). What nostalgic writing does in this regard is to bolster this spirit of perseverance.

As the “last day” approaches its end, Cécile, taking the narrator into her confidence, tells him about the visit she has undertaken to Marco, a boy who used to live in their neighbourhood when they were children and who has become, at the moment of narration, an eminent medical doctor running his clinic in Sherif Street. As a young girl, she fell in love with him though she had never exchanged a word with him. Over the years, his memory has remained so deeply impinged on her mind that she eventually decides to visit his clinic under the pretext of her being unwell. Clinging to the memory of Marco is attempting to relive the prime of her life. This

explains why she experiences the same freshness of feelings like those felt as if she were on her first date: she was “nervous”, “agitated”, her heart was “a-flutter”, and her “stomach really did begin to ache” (223). Her sense of longing is not just for a time of yore, but also for unrealized dreams and squelched hopes. To her utter dismay, however, Marco has changed beyond recognition. This change is only one of the countless manifestations of change that are wrought in one’s life and which one cannot possibly evade. No less immune to the ravages of time is Alexandria. “Alexandria has changed too”, retorts Cécile. “It’s no longer the Alexandria that I carried around inside me for so many years ... the Alexandria that I conjured up in difficult times I’m losing the Alexandria that I believed would be waiting for me Have I lost Utopia, or have I lost everything?” (225).

With these unsettling rhetorical questions, their seven-day sojourn in Alexandria draws to a close. Nonetheless, if Cécile’s Alexandria has been “lost” in real life, same as that of the narrator’s, Sorial’s, Traver’s, Tzalas’ himself, or anybody who has been uprooted from it, it is still alive and thriving in their memory and nostalgic reminiscences. In other words, it becomes apparent that they are all caught up “in a memory game” (219). Try as they might to master its rules, they remain forever baffled by the nature of nostalgia and its inherent paradoxes, as Cécile expresses the dilemma they are all facing: “Since the first day I came back to Alexandria, I have been asking myself why I keep raking up the memories of the past. Why don’t I just stay comfortably in the present and whatever it has left to offer me? Why do I keep opening and closing doors when I don’t know where they lead?” (218-19). In an epiphanic moment, it dawns on them that “[i]t’s all this city’s fault. It allows memories to jump out from all around” (219); a supposition that Tzalas refutes by exempting Alexandria from any blame: “One can feel well with nostalgia or one can desperately cry for the lost paradise. It is not Alexandria’s fault if nostalgia alienates us from the present; she has given us a reason to be nostalgic” (Personal interview). It has been Tzalas’ endeavour throughout the novel to render these fleeting memories of the past a tellable story that immortalizes the city. “If the city is special to us” as the narrator finally says, it is “because we entrusted her with our childhood dreams” (230).

To sum up, if *algia*, the longing, has helped the characters survive, *nostos*, the return home, is what they have carried within them. To the author and his characters, Alexandria is not a symbolic homeland or an ecological niche, nor is it a relic of the past; rather it is a sensuous city, vibrant with scents, tastes, colours, tactile sensations, audible sounds and voices, and the lithe rippling of the sea waves that would forever dwell in their memories. As it has occurred to them, the grip of *their* Alexandria is too tenacious to let go of them. Try as they might to break free, it becomes the haven to which nostalgia directs them. Needless it thus becomes for the narrator to write the guidebook he has initially envisaged: “[T]he Alexandrians don’t need a guidebook to their city, they carry her in their soul” (230). In its lieu, one can proclaim that they would forever need a constant revisiting of it; a recapturing of its times of yore; a vivification of some of its aspects that have fallen in oblivion; an

evocation of its glorious history and unrivalled spirit of peaceful coexistence; a tribute to all those who have left their mark on its history; a salvaging of its heritage; a protection of the remnants of its past; and a foregrounding of its landmarks—all these endeavours are succinctly undertaken by Harry Tzalas in *Seven Days at the Cecil*⁶. As an axiomatic specimen of literary nostalgia, the novel has demonstrated the importance of transforming an intangibly fleeting past of a city into a work of art.

A.H.

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⁶ Upon asking the author about what he thought Alexandria was really in need of, he replied saying: What Alexandrians need is (a) a legislation that would stop the destruction of the buildings of the historical center of the city, protection for every building that was built before the 1940’s Alexandria could be placed under UNESCO protection as a World Monument to be preserved. (b) Finding the financial means to carry out such a vast project. (c) Explain to the population the importance of protecting their historical and architectural heritage and make them proud of it (d) Last but not least living in a city with a soul is not only a pleasant emotional feeling, it has practical positive consequences: Italy has built its lucrative tourism industry on the principle of preserving its heritage. Tourists will not visit Alexandria because of the monstrous skyscraper of the new Corniche, they can visit skyscraper sites in the USA. The above may seem utopia, and it probably is for a town that has to face a multitude of pressing problems, but the minimum that could be done is to list a number of buildings which are unique and declare them “as preserved monuments”. This procedure could be extended to certain streets and some special neighbourhoods. Time will come when there will be the possibility of restoring all those preserved neighbourhoods. (Personal interview)

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