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Alexandros Papadiamantis: A Passionate Saint

Abstract

Despite his appellation as a ‘Saint of Greek Literature’, Alexandros Papadiamantis, a writer of national acclaim in Modern Greece, produces texts describing extraordinary passions as well as uncontrolled and uncontrollable drives. This article explores the emotional dynamics underpinning his work in light of four themes: the covert Hedonistic gaze, scenarios involving jealousy, staging the ineffable *jouissance* of the Other, Eros for women deprived of physical sensation due to a deeply-rooted fear of otherness, and the recurring deaths of feminine beings assimilated with preventive murder in the name of virginity and sterility.

Introduction

The eulogist of passion: this would be a much more appropriate designation for Alexandros Papadiamantis than his glossy and univocal moniker, ‘The Saint of Modern Greek Literature’. This prodigy of Neo-Hellenic prose owes his notorious appellation not only to his literary and ascetic way of life, but also to his explicit professions that ‘as long as [he] lived and breathed, [he] would never stop glorifying and worshipping Christ nor lovingly depicting nature and affectionately describing original Greek mores’.¹ One and a half centuries on, the works of Papadiamantis continue to fascinate, despite their ritualistic religiousness, committed hellenocentricity, and deeply rooted rural attachment, but they also create an imperceptible

enchantment and challenge critics,² who try to discern precisely why they so strongly appeal to our impulsiveness, reaching deep into its most archaic libidinal layer.

'In the beginning was the emotion', not the Verb, so Céline tells us.³ And Papadiamantis had a veritable talent for phrasing the sensory and affective vibrations buried in our immemorial past in accordance with the concept of the writer as 'the interpreter of the sensitive world',⁴ as described by Proust (1988:469) or Beckett (1990:97) The excitement aroused by the instinctual bases of the mother tongue is obviously elusive to the non-native reader of Greek texts, as are certain parts of Papadiamantis' unique linguistic style, which requires a 'palimpsest' vocabulary to make them travel through all the periods of Greek History. However, any reader, even one who accesses these texts through translation, can draw pleasure from the inexhaustible imagination of an author deemed 'the most fertile creator of myths in Modern Greek Literature' (Saunier 2001:7). Besides, this fascination is just as great for the younger generations of Greeks, for whom the distinctive language used by Papadiamantis is difficult to access, almost as difficult as a foreign language, which attests the transcendental and translinguistical virtues of his works. Tinged with passion, these works carry as much the etymological meaning of 'passion' (suffering from a lack, mourning linked to a loss),⁵ as the philosophical meaning of 'accident' (beyond the active will principle),⁶ as well as the economical meaning of overinvestment (iterativeness, even addictiveness of the passionate impulse).⁷

The aim of this contribution is to explore the emotional dynamism of Papadiamantis' works, while offering an initiatory journey into a literary world, which, in spite of the current craze in certain specialised circles, remains widely unknown outside of Greece. Our approach, which will necessarily be brief on account of the limitations of the present article, will mostly favor psychoanalysis as the interpretative framework, with the reader creating the meaning of the text; the author, as an empirical and psycho-biographical entity creator of the text, will be of no relevance to us here. It is obvious that in choosing to analyze the works of one writer alone and focusing our approach on psychological issues, our analyses may arouse some curiosity about Papadiamantis' psyche. In spite of the structuralists' decrees, the writer never really did die. Even Roland Barthes himself, who professed the death of the writer in the iconoclastic May '68 (1993:63-69),

acknowledged a short time later his ‘wish for the author’ (1982:39), perhaps because ‘as with every repressed emotion, the writer always rises back to the surface’ (Bellemin-Noël 2004:143)!

Our analysis thus revolves around four main axes or four ‘passions’: voyeuristic, jealous, Pygmalion-like, and gynocidal passion. It draws from the major and minor texts stemming from each period of Papadiamantis’ literary production, stretching from 1879 to 1911 (the year of the writer’s death) and comprising three novels—deemed historical novels by the critics—and some 184 short stories, with 30 being set in the working-class neighbourhoods of Athens and the remaining in the Sporades archipelago, especially on the island of Skiathos, the writer’s birthplace.

Voyeuristic Passion

The entire work of Papadiamantis is literally crisscrossed by visual perceptions.⁸ Countless expressions or terms relate to the sense of sight, and his texts are ripe with situations and characters egged by an overmastering scopopic drive. This also appears in the clandestine gazing emerging throughout the texts as the ultimate ‘Papadiamantian’ visual mode, which is not marked by realism or ‘photographism’—as the author delights in saying⁹—but by impressionism and hedonism. Let us examine more closely some typical examples.

In his narrative, ‘Dream on the Waves’ (‘Όνειρο στὸ κῦμα’), Papadiamantis recounts with regret the tale of a town dweller who long ago lived in a natural environment and a wonderful world of self-sufficiency:

I was a handsome adolescent, and I would look at my prematurely bronzed face mirrored in the water of streams and fountains, and I used to train my supple and slender body by climbing up rocks and mountains. (III, 261, 2–3)

For this bucolic Narcissus, happiness consisted—among other things—of the feeling that he lived in perfect harmony with the aquatic element, just as a beatific fetus in his mother’s womb:

I was feeling an unspeakable sweetness and rapture, imagining myself as one with the wave, with its liquid and salty and fresh nature. (III, 267, 10–11)

This young man, who had never experienced any delight other than those provided by his own body, reaches the fascinating and mysterious

world of the Other on an initiatory night, such as all of us experience at some moment in our lives with the same enthrallment. After many rationalizations, probably based on the hero's religious education so as to turn his desire for active voyeurism into passive and unintentional voyeurism, thus inevitably reactivating the tricks of adolescent and guilt-tainted sexual curiosity, 'the young mountain Satyr' (III, 267, 33) stealthily enjoys the exciting sight of a naked damsel bathing in the sea. This scene is divided into two parts corresponding to two different viewings: the first 'frontal' view made him run away (the young man possibly discerned the female genitalia), while the second one 'from behind' riveted and fascinated him (the young man saw what is common to both sexes). This sight could be unconsciously perceived as a castration fantasy, a consequence of the shocking discovery of the sexual differences. In the text, the castration appears in the form of a 'denial of reality' (*Verleugnung*¹⁰), which eventually leads to a poetic description about a fantasised woman:

I could see her dark, but still slightly golden hair, her well-turned arms, a honey-colored and heavenly dream under the moonlight. In the twilight, I could make out her supple waist, her hips, her legs, her feet covered by the waves. I could glimpse her bosom, her firm, protruding breast welcoming the breeze and the divine aroma of the sea. She was a whiff, a fantasy image, a dream drifting on the waves; she was a Nereid, a nymph, a mermaid, floating like a magical ship, the way a vessel sails in our dreams... (III, 269, 29–270, 3)

Need we recall that the other mermaid depicted by Papadiamantis in his novel, *The Gipsy Girl* (*Η Γυφτοπούλα* I, 603, 30), a mermaid who bewitches a pirate, is not a bird-woman, as might be expected in a digression ripe with Homeric influences,¹¹ but rather a fish-woman, a woman with a fish-shaped tail, thus phallic and uncastrated (I, 604, 25–26)?

Escaping from the typical Papadiamantian fiction that uses the main character as an intrigued spectator, 'A Night in Carnival' ('Αποκριάτικη νυχτιά') could be considered a forerunner to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*,¹² with its tale of a solitary student prone to peeping on his neighbours through the window of his room overlooking their common backyard, thus flattering the scandalous scopophilia of the 'Id' in our unconscious:

When the steady student had nothing to do, for instance when schools broke up for Christmas or Carnival, Spyros Vergoudis would sit at his window watching and overhearing what was happening (II, 301, 1–4).

Later on, we read:

Again in the evening [...], if he wished so, he could find some work to do, or he could stay in his upper floor room, standing with the lights off at the easterly window, spying on people coming in or listening to their words, noises, and whispers by sticking his ear to the keyhole (II, 302, 21–26).

The claustrophobic and agoraphobic profile of Spyros appears rather quickly as a mask for his gynophobia, whilst his lustful admiration for a young brunette (‘μελαχροινή κορασίδα’ II, 310, 22) on the brink of womanhood alludes to his dread of the sexual Other, a fear that all of us share to some degree. On the day marking the highlight of the Carnival festivities, the solitary young man, who lives ‘as a monk’ (‘μονάζων’ II, 303, 21), declines an invitation to a party, arguing that he does not dance; instead, he chooses to indulge in his passion for voyeurism. He fantasises nevertheless about having a love affair with one of his neighbours (II, 313, 8–10). While ‘involuntarily dancing in his bed’ (II, 308, 27–28) to the tune of a satirical Carnival song ripe with sexual innuendoes (‘How they pound peppercorns / the devil’s monks’¹³), he tells himself that ‘even his mother, rocking him in her arms the way she did when he was a baby, had never brought such voluptuousness as his neighbours’ cheers and effusions did that night’ (II, 308, 27–28).

This self-erotic rocking, which reawakens our first ‘holding’¹⁴ experiences and thus a feeling of solidarity with the main character, can become a source of suffering if it remains the only means of drawing pleasure. This is why the voyeur student, who sees his life as a ‘hard and long-lasting fasting period’ (II, 311, 6),

finds some comfort in considering that he is undoubtedly the happiest of all, since, having gone to none of the feasts, he has been able to attend three or four parties at once. (II, 308, 24–26)

He further notes that ‘one should probably stay at a distance if one wants to appreciate music and dance’, adding that when one is too close, ‘the noise impairs the hearing and annihilates the judgment’ (II, 308, 35–309, 3). Remembering Aesop’s fable, he whispers, ‘They’re probably sour anyway’ (II, 309, 7). Papadiamantis’ text induces us to give a name to the conflict leading to such a rationalization, namely the ‘complex of the fox’ (unable to reach the grapes so hungered for, the fox ends up despising them).

Jealous Passion

The distance maintained in Papdiamantis' texts between the characters and the objects so longed for, which also prohibits their bodily fusion, is often presented as the inevitable consequence of a failure in love due to the malevolent presence of a rival. This unwanted third party, this *terzo incomodo* who monopolises the lovers' mind like an obsession, not only causes heartbreak and suffering, but, by triggering an imaginative outburst, is also seen as a source of indescribable pleasure, apt to be compared, even in its negative form, with an enjoyment beyond the phallus, gender, and language, which Lacan calls the 'Jouissance of the Other'.¹⁵ Let us remind our reader that in Plato (*Philebus*, 47c–48b), the duality of pleasure and pain, likely to grow unboundedly, is considered the quintessence of jealous passion.

The short story, 'The Nostalgic Woman' ('Η Νοσταλγός'), brilliantly vouches for the limitless nature of this mixed *pathos* deeply rooted in our oedipal vessels. The plot is based on a young islander's love for an older neighbour who endures much suffering on account of her domineering husband. This love, born under the auspices of a triangular desire, reaches its apex when the woman, despite consenting to a nocturnal escape with her suitor, in order to return to her home island, rejects his advances and bluntly expresses her erotic unavailability. The disdained hero then expresses an incredible range of the responses to this fact: the heartrending suspicion that she loves another; the fantasy of playing the role of 'Charon preordained to join two beings who will indulge in infernal caresses' (II, 309, 10); the hero's attempt to detect the other lover's kisses on the woman's lips; the guilty avowal that he endeavours to wrest from her, now regarding her as 'deceitful' and 'unfaithful'; the delectable confirmation of these allegations that he imagines to have obtained; his imagined scenarios of stabbing and drowning her, followed by his suicide; the appealing image of their corpses lying lifeless on the seabed under the moonlight; the excitement, anger, humiliation, madness, fascination, and so on. This spectrum of reactions reveals the vertiginous hedonic potential of frustration that the writer shares with his reader in a somehow transferential delirium.

At the end of the narrative, the passionate and jealous young man feels elated at the thought of his love finally being reciprocated, while visualizing the rival husband, his squad, and the other fantastic admirers. However, our unconscious may easily recognize the alluring image of the 'whore-mother'

(Freud 1910) as well as the homosexual desire shown toward other male holders of sensual pleasures, which are lacking for the main character; these in turn entice our mental bisexuality. The 'Nostalgic Woman' shows quite powerfully how a jealous lover will stage the inconceivable 'Jouissance of the Other' by any possible means, which constitutes the supreme enjoyment of incest, which all of us have dreamed of at one time or another as little Oedipuses.

The narrative, 'Eros-Hero' ('Ἔρως-Ἥρωας'), provides a triumphant confirmation of the fact that jealous passion can go 'beyond the principle of pleasure'. The plot introduces a young sailor, who, by a strange twist of fate, carries in his boat a newlywed woman whom he has secretly loved since childhood, transporting her to the village of her elderly husband. Deeply distressed and rowing without thinking, his face grows deathly pale, just like Charon sailing towards the realm of Hades, as he begins to voluptuously unfold a string of revenge scenarios:

With a mere kick or even a smaller effort, say simply, by using one of his toes, he could 'bump off' three souls: the husband, the mother-in-law, and the young bride...even if he did forsake his intention of saving the latter. (III, 180, 21-24)

The hated rival, envied for his riches, 'could sink to the bottom of the sea with all of his real houses...but even better, without his houses, his lands, his estates' (III, 180, 26-28). That 'witch of a mother' ('στρίγγλα μάνα'¹⁶) who urged her daughter to wed,

would hardly have the time to make the sign of the cross for the last time, and her desperate cries would be swallowed in the abyss. The next day, in the village, the priests would be praying for her soul and asking the congregation to repent. Then, for forty days, all the old women of the village would refrain from eating fish, out of fear that they might have touched her drowned corpse. (III, 181, 7-14)

Enjoying his fantasy to the full, the young man was cutting through the waves like a dolphin, puffing and disgorging water like a whale, flinging out an arm as sharp as a swordfish's rostrum. He was swimming with his right arm, clasping the young woman with his left. (III, 181, 18-20).

And after this glorious crossing, the two lovers would collapse on the sand, worn-out, half-drowned, dripping with seawater.

Born and baptized anew, a second Adam and a second Eve, more naked in their clinging wet clothes than had they been totally nude. (III, 181, 26–30).

But here comes the charm of fantasy: the tragedy of an entirely powerless person turns into mental omnipotence, like the ‘helpless’ child (*Hilflosigkeit*) in all of us, left alone by our mother, we juxtapose the reverse and radical omnipotence of our mind, the hallucinatory satisfaction of our desires to our destitution and lack of power.¹⁷

Readers familiar with Papadiamantis’ texts, which punish any libidinal outburst by feigned epilogues of obedience to the religious rules, will not be surprised when at the very end of this story, the furious and jealous sailor in ‘Eros-Hero’

represses his passion, calms down, gathers his thoughts, cries, and appears to be a hero in love—a Christian love, chaste, made up of tolerance and charity. (III, 182, 14–15)

However, the fact that this supernatural weakening of an aggressive Eros arises immediately after a ‘vision’ (‘*νοερά ὄπτασια*’ III, 182, 13) of his mother ‘lamenting and crying and telling him, “Oh son! My son! What are you going to do?”’ (III, 182, 14–15), leads us to understand that the young sailor, being ‘overwhelmed’ by his mother who is ‘too old to take him in her arms or rock him in his cradle’ (III, 172, 5–6), becomes incapable of any erotic claiming, just as he had always been. As regards the loathed rival, ‘that bird of prey come from far away to steal the dove’ (III, 179, 10–11), he appears to our minds seasoned to this type of projective tactics¹⁸ to be the receptacle in which we pour out our anger and hatred whenever we cannot bear our own inadequacy, and our self-image becomes unendurable.

Pygmalion-like Passion

In the works of Papadiamantis, there are some rare passages in which a man and a woman enjoy a love affair without being hindered by distance, a screen, or any third party. In such unique moments, free of remoteness, the characters break their usual bounds and openly express their sensuality. Taking into consideration that these rare occurrences of face-to-face eroticism always occur in a context of hazard and danger that delivers the defenseless and unconscious woman into the lover’s hands, we should speak of a Pygmalion-like passion in reference to the legendary king of Cyprus who fell in love with a statue.¹⁹

One of the most famous scenes of Modern Greek Literature is the immortalization of such passion in 'Dream on the Waves'. The main character wishes—in a childish manner—for some danger to arise on the sea, and despite being struck by the efficiency of his 'animistic' thought, comes out *in extremis* of his hiding place and runs to the rescue of his secret love, whom he had never before dared to approach:

I saw that gorgeous body struggling under the water, closer to the seabed than to the surface, closer to death than to life; I dived in, caught the young girl in my arms, and swam back to the surface. As I was holding her with my left arm, I thought I could feel the warmth of her breath on my cheek. I had come in time, thank God! She did not show any sign of life though... (III, 272, 15–21).

This 'altruist' rescuer, who swims vigorously toward the shore, feeling his physical powers 'double as through some miracle' (III, 272, 24) when he touches the dying body, as though he could only feel energetic and strong towards a 'neutralised' woman, admits the ineffable happiness of that transcendental experience, which epitomises an epidermis touch as opposed to a common 'animal' copulation:

I shall always remember how the delicate and tender body of that chaste girl felt against mine, for such a short enchanted moment in that miserable life of mine. It was a dream, an illusion, an enchantment. How could this exquisite, sublime contact compare with the selfish embraces, the sham friendships, or the bestial lovemaking of this world? I had not carried a load; with her delicate body, I found relief and peace. Never before had I felt as light as I did for the time I carried her weight...I was the man who had managed for an instant to hold a dream in his hands, his own dream... (III, 272, 29–273, 2)

This poetically described dream reveals a deep-seated need to dominate the woman and instrumentalise her to the point of annihilating her otherness. This notion does not fall far from our natural tendency to don blinkers whenever we insist on only seeing a limited aspect of the 'Other', a 'partiality' that serves our own fantasies, as we cling to our narcissism to avoid the painful experience of finding the object of our desire to be wanting.

The psychological truth of this passion shown towards a woman in a state of unconsciousness is clearly revealed in the last scene of *The Gipsy Girl*, in which a strong earthquake and 'happy disaster' enable the young Gipsy, in love with his half-sister, to finally unleash his Eros:

Machtos began to kiss her, holding her tight within his arms, and he felt fulfilled...But Aïma lay unconscious, and the young man was *stealing* kisses...And those instants of fear and horror, when the world tumbled down around them, felt like a century of bliss. (I, 655, 4–21)

We should not disregard the fact that this misappropriation of the Other's intimacy follows a scene of equally covert peeping. Taking advantage of Aïma's sleep, which the earthquake rendered a 'convenient' loss of consciousness, the young man—who throughout the novel never ceases to display his scopophilic tendency—gazes at the closed eyes of his beloved in a state resembling that of the narrator and sleeping Albertine in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* [*À la recherche du temps perdu*]:

Indeed, watching his love sleeping like a lamb, sleeping calmly and innocently in the dim light is a rapturous sight for a lover; watching the rhythm of her breath is so sweet, looking at her waving chest so enviable; inhaling her sweet breath and admiring the dewdrops on her temples and the crown of blonde hair on her forehead is intoxicating. Machtos, overjoyed, sipped slowly, drop by drop, that chalice of ecstasy. (I, 652, 1–653, 8)

The reader, who has not forgotten the 'brown hair locks' ('καστανοὺς βοστρύχους' II, 359, 8) of the dark-skinned gipsy girl, may feel surprised when the elated young man 'sees' her blonde hair, unless he empathises with the character, admitting in his heart of hearts that he too manipulates the 'Other' as a fetish according to his obsessions and to what Lacan terms '*agalmata*'.²⁰

The novella, 'The Black-scarved Woman' ('Ἡ Μαυρομαντηλοῦ'), translates Pygmalion's desire verbatim, since the novel reaches its peak when an unmarried man, ignorant of Aphrodite's delights, passionately embraces the figure of a unfortunate woman long ago transformed into stone:

He embraced her so that for once, at least, the saying 'Two bodies in one soul' should come true. Oh! 'The Black-scarved Woman', that lonely stone heart, that statue of a maiden who had never experienced any emotion nor love, that nymph covered with oysters and shells, that unmade bed, full of pebbles, that widow with no husband, always wearing black clothes, but dry-eyed, was actually the only one to accept the hugs and kisses of my cousin, Yannios. (II, 166, 3–11).

The paradoxical status of the anthropomorphic reef as a mourning mother/virgin giving shelter to the enfeebled sailor on the brink of drowning obviously echoes the Mother-Madonna of our early years, who

still continues to live in our unconscious. Therefore, we may impute the young sailor's indifference toward other women to his 'mysterious bond' ('μυστηριώδης σύνδεσμος' II, 160, 8) with 'The Black-scarved Woman', an eternally fixed image of the mother.

Gynocidal Passion

It would perhaps be much more appropriate to call Papadiamantis the saint '*serial killer*' of Greek Literature rather than the 'Saint of Modern Greek Literature'. His generally thanatophilic literary world is filled with apparently accidental deaths of women (fiancées, parturients, and young girls) and totally or partially concealed murders, let alone the numerous instances of fantasised crimes. This structural obsession in the corpus, this last passion, may be termed gynocide.

The short story, 'Death of a Young Lady' ('Θάνατος Κόρης'), mainly deals with the death of a young girl about to marry, explaining that 'what the deceased got instead of the triviality of marriage and some other hackneyed things can only be better, since there can't be anything worse than these' (IV, 190, 10–12); this could be construed as a trite plea against nuptials. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, *The Gipsy Girl*, as the heroin dies when struck by the statue of the Goddess Artemis just hours before her wedding, we can only guess that the real stake of this untimely death was her virginity.

In the text, 'Reverie on the Fifteenth of August' ('Ρεμβασμός του Δεκαπενταυγούστου'), the disappearance of the nubile young girl, that 'delicate [...] flower picked by the Virgin Mary and put under Her protection, before being *infected by the contact of this world's vanities*' (IV, 90, 20–21; my emphasis), may appeal more strongly to our affectivity if our emotional Ego notices that the deceased girl was conceived on Assumption Day, the feast commemorating the end of the Mother of Christ's earthly life—probably implying a contamination of life by the germ of death. The following is thus the 'primary scene'²¹ in the action:

The day before yesterday, the virginal flower was cut open [ἄνοιξεν ἐρυθρόν]. Yesterday, she became a bride; the next day, a mother, a mother in childbed, a dead woman (III, 78, 21–23).

Thus, maternity, the inevitable consequence of a matrimonial union, is covered in blood (ἄνοιξεν ἐρυθρόν) and seen as deadly, conversely to 'The Sweet Kiss of the Virgin' ('Ἡ Γλυκοφιλοῦσα'), with the 'immaculate

mother in childbed who has never known a man's bed' [‘Λεχοῦς ἀμώμου ἀνδρός μὴ γνούσης λέχος’ (III, 76, 33)], and who thus ‘embodies the highest expression of motherly affection’ (‘ἦτο ἡ καλλίστη ἔκφρασις τῆς μητρικῆς στοργῆς” III, 75, 16–17). Roman Catholics and Orthodoxies alike, whether religious or not, all cherish a mother who has never been involved in a sexual act, who never submitted to the father's violence, a mother totally devoted to her offspring.²² The psychological benefits of reading Papadiamantis' prose, passionately devoted to the Virgin Mary, transcend the limits of faith, language, and geography.

Any reader of Papadiamantis' masterpiece, *The Murderess* (Ἡ Φόνισσα), in which an old village woman murders a string of little girls, is eventually exposed to a feast of unconscious urges. This matriarch, plagued by numerous female progeny, rebels against the subservience extended by every new birth in the family. Her criminal deeds are progressively revealed in the text as murders of femininity in its potential fecundity, but also as extreme acts of prevention: the murderess spares her victims the bleak future of maternity and the ‘hideous’ act leading to maternity through repeating the tragic original sin that brought them to life. Hence, we find her daydreaming, tinged with Schopenhauerian (2005) tones, on a redeeming sterility:

How happy those [monks] were, those who ever since their innocent youth and who as though by some divine inspiration felt that the best thing for them to do would be *not to bring other unfortunate people to life!* (III, 507, 22–28; my emphasis)

This pessimism is steeped in a slightly pedophilic idealism²³ aimed at keeping the victims (little girls) forever in childhood or, even better, stopping their evolution toward the social, moral, and sexual hell of maturity. Even the first names of the two little girls, ‘Flowering’ (Ἀνθή) and ‘Eternal Verdancy’ (Ἄαφνώ²⁴), who were cuddled and later spared by the murderess, bring to mind the floral metaphors used by the latter to express the sad bloom of femininity:

‘Krinio’, the little lily, who, alas, despite being naturally so thin and lacking the white and pink complexion of a lily, nevertheless showed signs of blooming. ‘God, how quickly they grow!’ thought Francoyannou. ‘Which garden, which meadow, which Spring produces such a plant? And how nicely they are shooting up, and growing, and sprouting leaves, and turning into

bushes! And will all those buds, those young plants, become lawns, thickets, gardens some day? (III, 433, 15–22)

Hence, the woman, like an exterminating angel, engages in precociously uprooting the femininity predestined to blossom and someday bear fruit.

Our inner self reacts quite intensely to the description of the little girls cuddled to death by the murderess, who, as her Christian name 'Hadoula' ('χάδι' signifying 'caress' in Greek) suggests, is destined to caress. And when the mother's hugging turns into suffocating embraces, we once again experience our former anxiety of being suffocated by the 'bad breast'²⁵ of our 'abject' (pre-oedipal) mother.²⁶ As an antidote against this worrisome resurgence, we have the dazzling figure of the 'manly' spinster who abstains from the infernal circle of nuptials and reproduction and sails through life with a peaceful mind, secure in her androgynous autarky.

The interchangeability of gender attributes and mixing of the sexes among almost all of the characters in *The Murderess*—recurrent themes in Papadiamantis' literary microcosm—cannot leave us indifferent, the sadly 'sexioned' creatures that we are, forever nostalgic of an asexual state of primitive fusion with our mother's body. When Plato recounts (*Symposium*, 189d–193d), through the voice of Aristophanes, the myth of the double human beings split into two by Zeus, who condemned them to spend their lives in search of their soul mate or other half, desperately trying to merge with their primary onanistic uniqueness, he gives a voice to a universal wish (Libis 1991), whose affective ambivalence is unevenly depicted by Papadiamantis through his androgynous characters.

The end of the chronicle of the main infanticide character leads us to move even further back in time to our self-ontogenesis. For instance, when this murderess is chased by police while trying to cross a narrow bridge to reach a small chapel to confess, the anguished woman, whose killing is an utmost attempt to obliterate the traumas of marriage and maternity resulting from the primordial trauma of her own birth,²⁷ allows herself to drown in a way suggestive of a reverse birth. How could we refrain from following her on her journey back to the source (*nostos*), back to the amniotic bath where we can forget our pains, cure the wounds of our sexuality, and purify the '*inter urinas et faeces*'²⁸ aspect of our loving?²⁹ Is this nostalgic travel (or painful return) not the stake of enjoyment brought about by writing as well as reading?

By way of conclusion

In the narrative, ‘The Devils in the Gully’ (‘Τὰ Δαιμόνια στὸ Ρέμα’), a text deemed emblematic of Papadiamantis’ personal universe, the main character, who deserted a holy place in order to succumb to a libidinal temptation, makes the confession, ‘When I bring to mind that event of my youth, it seems to me an allegory of my whole life’, before resorting to a quotation from Dante: ‘*Chè la diritta via era smarrita*’ (‘The right path has been missed’ III, 243, 21–27). If missing the ‘*diritta via*’ can be interpreted as both a failure of the metaphysical improvement sought by the author throughout his lifetime and the erotic choice of an art form—literature—teeming with tempting passions,³⁰ it ideally summarises the structure and contents of a literary work dedicated to diverting and disguising, both of which are major conditions, according to the Freudian perspective, for the ‘preliminary (formal, aesthetic) enjoyment’, a harbinger of sensual pleasure emanating from underground sources.³¹ The *ars poetica* of this Greek ‘national’ writer therefore presumably lies in his ability to satisfy above all the polymorphic perversity of our ‘Id’, while evading the ever-watchful Cerberus of our Superego.

Notes

- 1 This is a famous excerpt from the introduction of the short story, ‘Cantor of Easter’ (‘Δαμπριάτικος Ψάλλτης’), in which Papadiamantis himself speaks before commencing his narrative (II, 517, 1–5). The references to Papadiamantis’ texts refer to the reviewed publication of his complete works by N.D Triantafyllopoulos: Alexandros Papadiamantis, *Ἄπαντα*, Domos: Athens, 1981–1992). The Roman numeral refers to the volume and the subsequent Arabic numerals to the page and line(s), respectively.
- 2 Sixteen years ago, L. Proguidis (1997:52) quoted more than 25,000 annotations of Papadiamantis; over the last fifteen years, a real ‘Papadiamantis trend’ has led to a boom in the number of works written on his literary production.
- 3 This statement is found in many texts by Céline as well as in his interviews; it may therefore be used as a kind of ‘slogan’ associated with the French writer.
- 4 This is the subtitle appearing in a relevant essay entitled ‘L’amour de l’autre langue’ by J. Kristeva (1998:61–85). Cf. C. Dumoulié and M. Riaudel (2008).
- 5 Passion derives from the Latin *passio* < *patior* ‘to endure, suffer’ from the Greek *πάθος* ‘emotion of the soul, affected by a real-life experience, ordeal’, etymologically related to *πένθος* ‘mourning’ and *πενθέω* ‘to mourn somebody’s death’. See Lewis and Short (1975), s.v. *patior*; P. Chantraine (1999), s.v. *πάσχω*.
- 6 In Aristotle, *πάθος* is the one of the ten categories designating an ‘accident’ (συμβεβηκός, translated as *accidens* by the scholastics) that involves enduring an action; it therefore refers to a passive state of mind. See ATILF (2004), s.v. *passion*; P. Chantraine (1999), s.v. *πάθος*.

- 7 See S. de Mijolla-Mellor (2004:102).
- 8 On the supremacy of the visual images in the works of Papadiamantis, see the detailed study by R. Bouchet (1983) and the chapter 'Le désir voyeur ou l'amour ambivalent de la distance' in N. Evzonas (2012: 36–124).
- 9 See, for instance, the self-referring sentences of Papadiamantis in 'The Black-scarved Woman' ('Η Μαυρομαντηλού'): 'Let no one believe that I am making up or inventing anything in this text. The resignation and the wife's thrift and the affection of the step-mother are real facts that I saw for myself' (II, 158, note 1). See also 'The Poor Saint' ('Φτωχός Άγιος'), 'I am just writing down the memories and impressions of my childhood' (II, 211, 21–22), as well as his comment in the 'Cantor of Easter' used in the introductory paragraph of the present article.
- 10 The German term *Verleugnung* refers to the mental process of denying reality through sensory perception because of its traumatic contents. In Freud's works, all the relevant examples refer to either the denial of women's lack of a phallus or the denial of the father's death. For the first case, see S. Freud (1909) and, for the second case, S. Freud (1927).
- 11 In *The Gipsy Girl*, Velminnis is tied to the mast of his ship, similarly to Ulysses trying to resist the Sirens' song, although in the *Odyssey*, the Sirens are not fish-women, but bird-women.
- 12 As implied by the title, the main character peeps on his neighbors through the window located at the rear of his New York apartment.
- 13 'Πῶς τὸ τρίβουν τὸ πιπέρι / τοῦ διαβόλου οἱ καλογέροι': these apparently inoffensive verses found in the text come from a song sung during the period of Carnival. The song describes how monks used to grind peppercorns by using the different parts of their body (tongue, hands, wrists, back, nose, knees, feet, bottom, penis...). 'This is the way we grind peppercorns...' is danced as a mimic circular dance, taking turns for every part of the human body; in the last verse, people used to rub their penis on the ground in a parody of the sexual act, which is why 'the way we grind peppercorns' is still danced at weddings in some parts of Greece.
- 14 This term, invented by the British psychoanalyst D. Winnicott, embraces the entirety of the ministrations provided by the mother to the infant to help assure his or her bodily needs. The 'holding' experience does not focus on the child's body, but rather refers to the emotional place left between the child and mother. See D. W. Winnicott (1957).
- 15 See J. Lacan (1999). On jealousy as a negative counterpart of the enjoyment of the 'Other', see C. Dumoulié (1999:153–155).
- 16 This is the title of another short story by Papadiamantis (IV, 389–396).
- 17 Regarding the infant's primary incapacity to satisfy his libidinal needs, which creates feelings of abandonment and despair that can only be calmed down with the intervention of the mother or an equivalent person, see S. Freud (1926). The German term describing the state of mind of a helpless child is *Hilflosigkeit*.
- 18 . The British psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, studied and described the process of projective identification. See M. Klein and J. Riviere (1937:19–20) and, specifically on the relevance of this mechanism to the character of the lover-rival in literature and plays (1937:53). On the semiological analysis of the role of the 'opponent', see A.J. Greimas (2002:178–180).
- 19 Cf. the 'Pygmalion Fantasy' proposed as a full clinical entity by S. de Mijolla-Mellor (2009 260–277).
- 20 See J. Lacan (1991:167–182).
- 21 If parental sexual intercourse is perceived as lethal sadism, in a past time beyond conscious memory, one of the resulting outlets could be the rejection of the act to which we owe our existence. Papadiamantis' work represents the model for such a reaction: any birth, except that of Christ, is castigated; any delivery, except that of the Mother of Christ, is stigmatized; fertility is rejected unless, of course, it relates to nature.

- 22 On the narcisso-oedipal sources of Virgin Mary worship, see J. Kristeva (1997:65) and Th. Sebbag (2008:161–78). For a more general approach on Virgin Mary worship, see M. Warner (1976).
- 23 For a psychoanalytical approach to pedophilia, see S. André and G. Gosselini (2008).
- 24 This first name seemingly refers to the myth of the ancient nymph, Daphne. Most versions (namely, Parthenius of Nicaea and Ovid) converge on the details of her aversion to nuptials and men and to her rescue-transformation into a laurel bush just before the fatal loss of her virginity.
- 25 On the meaning of the 'bad breast', see M. Klein (1932). On the mother who strangles her baby while fulfilling the child's fantasy of a suffocating breast, see G. Carloni and D. Nobili (1977:54).
- 26 On the meaning of the 'ab-jected mother' (*mère abjecte*), whereby the infant in a primary state of emotional development cannot recognize an independent external entity as an object, but only as an ab-ject, as something between outside and inside reality, as something that is both intro-jected and ab-jected, see J. Kristeva (1980).
- 27 Cf. the psychoanalytical theory of O. Rank (1994).
- 28 The Latin expression, in its exact words, '*inter urinas et faeces nascimur*' ('we are born between urine and excrement'), is repeated four times in the Freudian corpus to demonstrate the primitive character of human sexuality (*Regarding the More General Downgrading of Sexual Life; Dora, an Analysis of Hysteria; Three Studies on the Theory of Sexuality; Civilization and Discontents*). The expression is attributed to Saint Augustine, even though it was first associated with Porphyry (233–304). It was used by a great number of Latin figures before being 'established' by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*.
- 29 The narrative, 'Shores of Twilight' ('Τὰ Ρόδινα' Ακρογιαλίας), explicitly describes reproductive sexual intercourse as 'making love in the dung' (IV, 142), which summons the ancient fantasy of our cresspit birth. On this fantasy, see S. Freud (1908).
- 30 Cf. the words of a monk, Th. Dionysiatis (2003:12), who admittedly made an indirect reference to literature as a deviation from the right path of religiousness and spiritual life: 'I haven't read any of Papadiamantis' work since I became a monk, except for a few narratives which I ran into by chance. The monk's attitude, as defined by his intellectual experiences, surpasses the psychological ploys of literature. But literature, despite its quality, is not for monks'.
- 31 As to the preliminary pleasure and its relevance to art, see S. Freud (1905–1906:303–310); for its relevance to wit, see his monograph (1905a), and for its relevance to genital enjoyment, see (1905b).

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