

Papdiamandis' Story of Love without Hope in the Shadow of the Holy Mountain

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1

The Greek prose writer Alexandros Papdiamandis lived from 1851-1911, and wrote dozens of short stories, some longer novellas, and essays for various periodicals of his era. In his own time Papdiamandis was quite popular and highly acclaimed; in our more contemporary time, although his art is fairly consistently praised—insofar as it is known—the ideas that lie behind his prose are contested in terms of critical esteem. For some like Christos Yannaras, Papdiamandis is like the Russian Dostoevsky, in that “in the theological ignorance prevailing in the Orthodox churches during the last few centuries, these two ‘secular’ authors are perhaps the only examples of writers who set down the criteria for distinguishing” theological truth from theological kitsch in their respective cultures (255-6). For others like Elizabeth Constantinidis, who translated and wrote the introduction for the English collection of short stories *Tales from a Greek Island*, although Papdiamandis identifies and used a “mythical method” years before Eliot celebrated Joyce, and although he blends “pagan antiquity” and “Christian ideals” (xiii) in a vibrant and interesting way, to her mind “Papdiamandis’ attitudes on religious, political and social questions can be described as conservative, or rather, more precisely, as reactionary, in the vein of other nineteenth-century reactionaries such as Balzac and Dostoevsky” (xv). She follows up this idea by stating that “Papdiamandis holds this view of the liberal European West as decadent and corrupt in common with several other writers whose thought was deeply tintured by Eastern Orthodoxy, most notably Dostoevsky and Tolstoy” (xv-i). Dostoevsky’s name comes up frequently in connection with Papdiamandis in literary criticism for which the designated audience is Western European or North American. Indeed, the latest full-length study of Papdiamandis’ work to be translated into English is titled *Greece’s Dostoevsky*. Like Dostoevsky, Papdiamandis lived in a time of immense change for his country. As Lambros Kamperidis states in his introduction to the collection *The Boundless Garden*, “Papdiamandis lived in the midst of an uncertain age of transition. Born in the middle of the nineteenth century (1851) in a period of post-Enlightenment turmoil and a generation after Greece’s War of Independence” (xiv), Papdiamandis Greece was, in a sense, ill at ease with itself. It was a time when, as Kamperidis puts it, “the modern Greek state [...] ushered in a highly centralised, impersonal, western style of government that soon replaced the local independent and autonomous administration of neighbourhoods and communities radiating from the nucleus of church and parish life” (xx-i). Papdiamandis was not sanguine about these forceful changes, and he saw clearly the risk involved in a movement from familiar environment to a defamiliarised, imposed political form. In a familiar environment, how nearness to things and distance from things are measured is of a different sort than in a defamiliarised political formal structure.

My own initial way into Papdiamandis’ work blended the familiar and the personal. I was in Greece for the second time, and I travelled with a middle-class, cultured Greek friend to Skiathos—the island of Papdiamandis’ birth and death, the centre of his imagination, and the setting for a significant percentage of his stories. On Skiathos, whose name evokes the Holy Mountain of Athos, home of monastic communities for over a thousand years, we visited

various beaches, chapels, and locales whose names I read later in Papadiamandis' stories; we also visited the Papadiamandis Museum, where one can see paintings of the author, the bed on which he died, his tables and writing instruments, etc. I was impressed at the time; I'm not sure I would return now. After we left the island—which, like all Greek islands, carries an image of utopia—I visited my friend in his apartment in Thessaloniki, and saw images of some men I recognised in his icon corner: Alexander Kalomiros (his father, and an important theologian of our last century); Fotis Kontoglou (who along with the Russians Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky was instrumental in reviving traditional Orthodox iconography in the 20th century); and Papadiamandis himself. At my surprise that these three men were set alongside various other saints' icons, my friend said, "Well, if they aren't saints, who is?" This homespun logic, irrefutable in its simplicity, struck me and I think something of this ethos lies at the heart of Papadiamandis' art: a sensibility that discerns at the centre of familiar things and persons one knows their singular meaningfulness and value in themselves, and perhaps even despite themselves, so to speak.

Papadiamandis' vision is whole: he has an integrated sense of things, one that to my mind represents well an Eastern Orthodox ethos. This has been called, variously, a "liturgical ethos" or a "eucharistic ethos" (Keselopoulos, 28), which are attempts to encapsulate the essence of what he does either in terms of a structure of worship or a structure of thanksgiving, which are the same thing. In any case, when considering his art, an arbitrary sense of differentiation is less useful than confining: Yannaras says that with Papadiamandis "there is no distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane,' and even the most 'desacralised' aspects of human behaviour have a place in the dialogue of love and freedom" (255); and addressing his latest "enthusiasts and detractors," Kamperidis states that as each "group of critics" focuses on its "own area of interest, dividing, as it were, the seamless garment of his work into reductive, conflicting pieces," none of them "fit or do justice to the whole fabric of his vision" —for "separated from the whole, each becomes a caricature" (xiv-v). The critical sense that something in Papadiamandis' work is lost when it is broken down into segments rings true: above all, his writing focuses on rhythm and tonality; its compelling power comes from its basic rhythm and its humble tonality—it is a great example of form as hope. That is, as readers we become conscious of the work's own particular blending of *textured, value-laden content* ('what we are') and *depictive form* ('what we may or ought to be'). For as the matter of a work of literature expresses existential reality, the form in which the writer depicts it subtly indicates its boundaries and thus what may surpass it in a hopeful way. As Yannaras states, Papadiamandis' sense of rhythm comes through because "every aspect of life follows the rhythm of the Church's calendar, the ecclesial experience of time": an "ever moving stasis," which is matched by a "landscape filled with small churches, shrines, monastic cells, places of pilgrimage—sensible 'signs' of a place where relationship becomes an immediacy of communion" (255). Both rhythm and tonality draw something near for Papadiamandis, and a sense of 'nearness' comes to illuminate much of his work.

2

Greek communal life, especially island communal life, was changing in Papadiamandis' time. There was a sense of disintegration of older, steadier forms of life which were being altered,

quickly and slowly, by a centralised political attempt to ‘modernise’ Greek life. Papadiamandis’ response to these changes is measured and gentle, but nonetheless very firm. He demonstrates how changes in life, when imposed from without and in a spirit of excited imitation of other cultures and places, have a deforming rather than reforming character. They introduce alien forms of living and thinking into the community, resulting in a prevalent ‘mis-directedness’ of the spirit. This was exemplified in certain critics of the time who sought from Papadiamandis stories which are “all poetry” (that is, concerned with nice pieties, grandeur, or romanticised images), not what he calls his “prose of everyday reality.” Papadiamandis’ simple stories of limpid, lucid prose work to countermand the unrelenting force of external change (which wrought internal disintegration) through their insistent recognition of the good and the bad aspects of simple Greek life. His artistic vision, which arises and does not differ from his “stance towards life” (Keselopoulos, 155), is an integrated one: he strives to see the meaningfulness of Greek traditional life apart from or underneath the changes imposed from elsewhere, without denying or turning away from how traditional life may miss the mark or, conversely, is steadfast regarding its own inner truth and coherence. These matters begin in forms of life and then are manifested in all the arts; if one is unwell, the other tends to grow unwell too. As Keselopoulos puts it succinctly in *Greece’s Dostoevsky*: “when [...] the tradition is not lived properly and when an authentic liturgical life is absent, it follows that there will not be genuine art. The absence of this life witnesses to an ecclesiological crisis that, in turn, deteriorates into formalism and the demise of all living forms and experiences of art” (171).

Papadiamandis’ response to the forms of dissociation or estrangement that began to affect communal life in his day is interesting. He works within a form of storytelling that through an integration of rhythm, tonality, and image offers a coherent vision of that which was in substantial ways losing its coherence. The communication of this coherent vision by a Greek man living in the busyness of Athens and the relative calm of Skiathos itself demonstrates that a deep form of endurance or steadfastness is possible; one doesn’t have to necessarily raise one’s voice or participate in the general clamour to make sense of growing forms of senselessness or incoherent, imposed forms of life. If genuine art is not possible in the absence of genuine life, as Keselopoulos suggests, Papadiamandis uniquely achieves a form of genuine art by depicting how genuine life can and will endure in the midst of communal disintegration.

Papadiamandis’ style—his voice—is disarmingly direct and intimate. One hears him as much as one reads him; he draws near in his person through his quiet voice, and his genius is discernible in his tonality, in how he says what he says—for his subjects are, for the most part, quite unremarkable. His “prose of everyday reality” arises in large part from people and places he knows himself, having experienced them or their type with patience over time. Of his festal stories of Pascha or Nativity, Papadiamandis writes that he is “in truth inspired by [his] recollections and feelings, which attracted and moved [him] personally—and perhaps a few select readers” as well (“Paschal Chanter,” 264). Like all good storytellers, he has a palpable personal presence. In his story “The Monk,” Papadiamandis has the central character “think aloud” for several paragraphs about the current state of the church, which he sees as unduly “not itself,” as it were, at the end of which Papadiamandis writes:

All these thoughts, it is true, did not pass unaided through Father Samuel's head, but then, was there ever a writer who did not from time to time substitute his own cogitations for those of his hero? And with the reader's leave, we have here interpolated a number of our own personal ideas into the sentiments of the hapless monk. We hasten to add that with these thoughts we do not strike at the authority of the Church, but simply express our sorrow at the state of affairs. (164)

This may seem to be an odd and unnecessary admission, one that explicitly works against any notion of art as an impersonal vocation, of trying to bring one's audience into one's own way of seeing things through effective artifice. But Papadiamandis is not concerned with comports himself impersonally—he tells his stories as a person talks to other persons about persons one will recognise. As one might (in real life) relate a story about a person one loves, unconcerned with much else but clearly saying what truly happened, Papadiamandis tells his stories of good and erring characters, in gladness or sadness, fortune or catastrophe, with the air of one simply seeking to give a faithful transcription of reality. Dostoevsky says that reality is transfigured as it passes through art (xiv); Papadiamandis holds that lived reality glows with transfigured meaning, and his art of storytelling is simply verbal participation in a life already beautiful (καλὸν) —beautiful because it is comprised of women and men who bear within their breasts an image of something divine. When a person errs, this image becomes marred, but it cannot come to an end. The personal love of the storyteller attests to this idea: true forms of meaning may go awry, but they cannot be irretrievably lost as long as the tradition which sustains them stays vital. When a tradition begins to lose its vitality, as it had in Papadiamandis' time, these forms of meaning must be set forth in a confident and steadfast manner, that they may, in their presence, indicate a possible fullness or repleteness that attends communal and traditional spiritual health.

This particular sense of presence and fullness—and how they mutually draw near—may be called Papadiamandis' 'eschatological cast of mind.' In the Orthodox tradition, eschatology is not the science of the 'last things' in the 'end times' and attended by doom or ecstasy; it is, rather, a way of seeing and living both time and being in terms of presence and fullness—not in terms of here and there, is and is not, or now and then. If Papadiamandis is interested in seeing what "forms a living part of the liturgical 'now'" (xxii), as Kamperidis phrases it, he wants not only to understand and depict "how the spirit of the past breathes life into the present" (xvii), but also to understand and depict how the spirit of the future breathes life into the present. In Orthodox daily prayers one finds the phrase "good things to come," which is the truest expression of the Orthodox understanding of the future. The sense that lies behind this phrase, however, is that by "good things to come" one really means the fulfillment (or fullness) of what is real and given now, not something 'more real,' so to speak, that will replace or supersede something 'false' now. This is the meaning of Christ's statement that He gives "life in abundance" (Gospel of St John, 10:10).

3

Papadiamandis' eschatological cast of mind measures persons and things through their nearness in presence and fullness, which means he discerns in human erring (missing the mark)

not so much the end result (i.e. a mistake made) but rather a spiritual 'going-awry' that leads to this erring behaviour in the first place. It is a stance of love that faces and traces the process of freedom and action, however it strays from what Papadiamandis himself would see as its appropriate course.

Thus, in his very good novella *The Murderess*, Papadiamandis presents a story of one who loves—really, strives to love—but cannot hope, at least in any recognisable way. *The Murderess* is the story of “Old Hadoula,” a grandmother who has made her life as a healer of sorts—especially attending to other women—and now, of a sudden, has decided to help ease what she sees as the inevitable suffering of girl-children by murdering them, easing them into death through choking or drowning. She begins with her granddaughter, and murders maybe half a dozen small girls before she comes to her own end. As the story opens, we find Hadoula watching over her granddaughter while the ill girl’s mother sleeps. In this state, Papadiamandis tells us, “Her ponderings and memories, dim images of the past, arose in her mind one after the other like waves that her soul could see” (15). Her past is full of suffering. We hear that “In her private thoughts, when she summed up her entire life, she saw that she had never done anything except serve others” (1). Papadiamandis continues:

For many nights [Hadoula] had permitted herself no sleep. She willed her sore eyes open, while she kept vigil beside this little creature who had no idea what trouble she was giving, or what tortures she must undergo in her turn, if she survived. Nor was she capable of feeling the despair to which her grandmother only secretly gave expression:

‘O God, why should another one come into the world?’

As the old woman rocked the child, she could have sung the whole saga of her sufferings over the cradle. In the course of the previous night she had really lost track of reason in the catalogue of her sufferings. The whole of her life, with its futility and its emptiness and hardness, had come into her mind in pictures and scenes, and in visions. (2)

From here it is not far to Hadoula's first act of murder. Papadiamandis writes:

[Hadoula's] brain really had begun to smoke. She had gone out of her mind in the end. It was the consequence of her proceeding to high matters. She leant over the cradle. She pushed two long, tough fingers into the baby’s mouth to shut it up.

She knew it was not all that usual for very small children to shut up. But now she was out of her mind. She did not know very clearly what she was doing, nor did she admit to herself what she wanted to do.

She kept her fingers there a long time. Then she withdrew them from the little mouth, which had ceased to breathe, and pulled at the baby's throat, and squeezed it for a few minutes.

That was all. [...]

Her brain had gone up in smoke. (38)

This first murder is the type for Hadoula's other murders; it is her 'senseless sense'—she has written her own memories of pain and suffering onto the female world, and has set about working to set it right. But her way of interacting with others in the world has become confused, a counterfeit image of what it ought to be. Her 'love' for little girls means they must die; her 'hope' is that girls will find a peace in death she's certain they won't know on earth; she 'heals' their condition by not letting it live itself out. Loving, hoping, healing—these are all forms of interpersonal meaning that in Hadoula have gone awry, misdirected from their finer ends. As such, they are symptoms of her deeper spiritual error and delusion. She knows that loving, hoping, and healing are integral parts of human life, but in the general disintegration of her mind and spirit she is no longer able to recognise what they mean. The forms are present, but she is unable to partake of their fullness. The same applies to her spiritual life, which is present but now has gone awry for her. Thus she prays to Christ, feels remorse after killing her granddaughter, fasts strictly during Lent, and visits the Chapel of St John in Hiding, to seek refuge from her acts and thoughts. Her regard is unsure, though; she does not notice that as she kills the girls the lampadas in front of nearby icons are extinguished; once upon witnessing a girl's death by drowning she is tempted by the thought it was God's will that the girl died, in answer to Hadoula's prayer; and she rejoices at girls' funerals, and is unable to grieve at all, whether sincerely or just for show.

Papadiamandis' story of Old Hadoula shows us how what is naturally in her soul has become misdirected, how it has gone awry—and thus it also shows us, in a way, how it could be directed appropriately again, how a proper sense of things could be recovered. This is how his storytelling takes the form of hope, both for person and for tradition. For Hadoula's desperate response to female suffering is not unprecedented: the suffering of women, especially young women, was deep, and Hadoula only put into practice what we understand was on many women's minds then—namely, a chafing against a prohibition on female infanticide. In rural Greece of that time, having and raising a girl involved an incredible financial struggle, especially as a demanding practice of dowries was well-established. Papadiamandis writes despairingly:

[Families with girls] must, they absolutely must, 'set up' all those daughters, and give them their [dowries, even if they had five or seven girls].

O my God!

And what dowries, by the customs of the islands! 'A house at Katronia, a vineyard at Ammoudia, an olive grove at Lehouris, a field at Strophlia.' In the last few years, around the mid-century, another burden had been added: the money-count, that which at Constantinople was called dust in the eye, a custom which, unless I am mistaken, the Orthodox Church had forbidden absolutely. Everyone had to give in addition a dowry counted in money. It might be two thousand, or a thousand, or five hundred. Otherwise,

he could keep his daughters and enjoy them. He could put them on the shelf. He could shut them up in the cupboard. He could send them to the Museum. (21)

This practice of dowries in which women were disfigured, seen not as living persons but inert objects of value which, along with other objects of value, a man had to be persuaded to accept and accommodate, in Papadiamandis' eyes shows a culture dissociated from its own living parts, a culture which treats vital things as objects to be handled and preserved.

Papadiamandis' withering reference to museums is not insignificant. Like his culture's treatment of women, especially younger women, Greece's new-found focus on museums, especially ecclesiastical museums, is a manifestation of its estrangement from its own living parts, and a symptom of a disintegration within its ethos. This disintegration of an Orthodox ethos replaces, in Yannaras' words, the "dynamism of living tradition" with a spirit of "romanticism and the preservation of customary piety," a spirit whose "nostalgia for the past offered nothing to the present" (258). Yannaras is referring here specifically to some writings of the great iconographer Fotis Kontoglou; in his book *Fotis Kontoglou*, Nikos Zias writes that "Kontoglou, unlike Alexandros Papadiamandis who reacted strongly on principle to the idea of a Byzantine Museum, was enthusiastic about the establishment of such a collection in Athens" (48). Zias is referring to the work of George Lampakis (1854-1914), "founder of the Christian Archaeological Society (1885) and the Byzantine Museum and [a] lecturer of Christian and Byzantine Archaeology at the Theological School of Athens" (Keselopoulos, 162-3). As an extra blow for Orthodox cultural figures like Papadiamandis, Lampakis was associated with a Protestant brotherhood in Greece at the time. One of Papadiamandis' well-known responses to this situation comes in his story "Paschal Chanter," where a character in a disused church muses on some of the remaining icons he sees:

[Along with icons of Christ, the Theotokos, and the Holy Baptist,] the beloved disciple, too, was there still, rejoicing in the Resurrection, although lines of care furrowed his high forehead, caused by the foreknowledge that a shameless church robber would shortly seize him from his setting and carry him off to Athens to place him not in a church and a place of sacrifice and a sanctuary, not in a place for oblations, but in a Museum. Almighty God! a Museum, as if Christian worship had ceased to be practised in this country, as if its vessels belonged to a buried past, objects of curiosity! ... Have pity on them, Lord! (274-5)

A disintegration of cultural ethos brings about an improper relationship to and participation in forms that belong to the culture—forms like love and marriage, or churches and museums, or even finer forms of temporal and ontological registers of meaning. As Papadiamandis sees and records husbands being 'bribed' to take wives, or icons being removed from a context of ecclesial life to a context of distanced 'artistic' appreciation, he seeks to show not only the inappropriate nature of such transformations of meaning but also the value of the original form of meaning itself. Only that which is essential survives—albeit with its image marred—serious disfiguration.

In his simple stories, his “prose of everyday reality,” Papadiamandis strives to see and evoke how what is essential in personal life—what endures in a vital way—is present in various parts of private and communal life, even if it remains in marred or distorted rather than full form. Faced with a general climate of cultural struggle and disintegration, he seeks in his writing to offer a vision that may help in the process of reintegration and of regaining coherence. We understand that Old Hadoula’s spiritual character is a product of a disintegrated ethos, for only—in Papadiamandis’ terms—in such a spiritual climate could one think that it will work to seek everything through nothing, or utopia through nihilism, or transfiguration of form through disfiguration of form. As I state above, for Papadiamandis reality does not want transfiguration—it is transfigured presently, even if its hale fullness is not always discernible or apprehensible. Old Hadoula does not recognise this, and so she seeks healing through undoing, and works to accelerate the end of suffering.

Hadoula’s own end is touching. At large from the police, she hides in the Kastro, the older and by then abandoned part of Skiathos. It is a place replete with childhood memories, in which she seeks refuge; instead, she gets bad dreams, filled with the faces and cries of the girls she has killed. At last she resolves to visit a hermitage nearby, in which a solitary “old man, Father Akakios” lives and prays and occasionally receives people. Papadiamandis writes that the monk “set up at Ayi Sostis, an old retreat with a deserted chapel on a small, sea-lashed rock that constituted a sea-crag, almost a little island, on a steep northern shore, not far to the west. With every ebb of the tide his little island became a small peninsula” (121). Hadoula wants to visit him to “take confession,” for she knows and has heard that Father Akakios has “the rare grace of discernment” (121). In the Orthodox tradition confession is not an act of revelation followed by an act of assured expiation. It is, rather, a process of coming simply into the presence of another person who with discernment is able, in a different and perhaps deeper way than one’s own awareness allows, to see how what is spiritually essential in oneself has gone awry and yet may be reintegrated and renewed. Old Hadoula doesn’t get this from Father Akakios – she misjudges the current and drowns in the tide halfway there – but she does receive this from Papadiamandis, in whose vision she is not reduced to something hateful but rather is seen as a wounded spirit which, despite her significant error, is best held in a compassionate way.

We are not told in the story, but we surmise that Father Akakios came to Skiathos from Mount Athos—the Holy Mountain. In any case, there is the constant sense in Papadiamandis’ stories (and in his own life) that the external forms and internal rhythms of Greek traditional island life are played out in the light of monastic struggle and joy; the various melodies of personal life are grounded in the steadier *eison* of monastic discipline. Thus Papadiamandis’ different stories—in this case, a story of a kindly, crafty, bitter old woman who wants to ease the suffering of others—have as their backdrop the ecclesial and ascetic rhythms of a considered form of life that offers in a fuller sense what is present for many of Papadiamandis’ characters: a form of life dedicated to joy and thanksgiving. This lies behind everything that Papadiamandis writes; not utopia from elsewhere, but a simple distillation of prosaic gladness perpetually present and possible in its fullness.

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