
*Rosetta* **12.5**: 28-34.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Colloquium2012/lefaki_papadiamantis.pdf
Alexandros Papadiamantis’ Short Stories: Exploring the Relation between Society and Fiction at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (1887-1911)

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Alexandros Papadiamantis (1851-1911) appears to be a unique case in Greek fiction. As a century has already been completed since his death, he continues to provoke the strong, and ever-increasing, interest of critics and scholars of literature. Analyses and opinions of Papadiamantis’ work and personality are continually being produced, sometimes giving rise to fierce clashes and disagreements.¹ This is indeed often an indication of his individuality and of the crucial and multifaceted significance of his work; for all analysis and opinion is at the same time an attempt to say something about the cultural past and present of Modern Greek society.

His short stories, the artistically mature and most prominent part of his literary output, depict with exemplary skilfulness the Greek rural and urban society at the turn of the twentieth century. These texts represent a world that oscillated between the past and the present and reveal the difficulties and limitations the nascent Greek State was faced with as it sought to align with its European counterparts. Despite the divergent interpretations of the author’s short fiction, critics seem to agree that Papadiamantis did actually engaged with the debate about the country’s ideological and cultural orientation. Yet, they tend to insist on Papadiamantis’ Hellenocentric and orthodox devotion and to undervalue the author’s social concerns.² Contrary to these well-established interpretations, I shall argue that Papadiamantis was actually highly

¹ For a judicious selection of critical approaches to Papadiamantis’ literary output from 1891 onwards see Georgia Farinou-Malamatari, 2005.
² Papadiamantis has been frequently seen as a devout Orthodox Christian and a strong supporter of Greek tradition who was intensely opposed to the western orientation of Greek society. This critical approach – known as the “Orthodox criticism”– has been epitomized by Zisimos Lorentzatos in 1960. For a discussion on the ‘Orthodox criticism’ see Farinou-Malamatari, 1987: 15-17.
sceptical about his contemporary society and challenged the prosperity modernization was supposed to offer.

This paper aims to put Alexandros Papadiamantis’ short stories into the wider historical, social and cultural context of the end of the nineteenth century and to explore how these narratives record the author’s contemporary reality.

Papadiamantis’ appearance as a writer coincided with remarkable changes in Greece. The rapid development of and structural changes in the Greek economy and society during the 1870s and 1880s and the massive urbanization process transformed the picture of the newly founded Greek kingdom to such a degree that ‘what is considered as the Greek state started to acquire a structured economic and social existence only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century’. Similarly, Greek prose writers of the period using a new genre, the short story, endeavoured to come to terms with the new social reality formed by a series of transformations. Furthermore, literature at that time involved with the project of nation-building since it provided the vehicle for achieving and demonstrating Greek cultural continuity.

One of the major challenges of the Greek State at the last quarter of the nineteenth century was to establish a coherent national identity that would bring justice to the notion that modern Greeks were direct descendants of the ancient Greeks. At the same time, the nation should embark on a modernization process that would allow it to become a member of the western European nations. To put it differently, ‘in the midst of the multiple practical problems which were confronting it, the newly-established Greek state embarked on a process of redefining its national identity by a dual course: to westernize its manners and, at the same time, find its fundamental Greekness in local customs and mores’.

The coherence of the national ideology, however, was threatened by the gap between the ancient glory and the present decadence, since foreigners saw Greeks

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as barbarous and oriental.\textsuperscript{5} The unlettered peasantry presented a potentially embarrassing contrast to the idealized image of Greece. According to Michael Herzfeld, what the newly founded Greek State needed was a new mythology, a body of patriotic writing which could juxtapose grand ideas with cultural experience.\textsuperscript{6} Such text was collectively created through the development of a national discipline of folklore (\textit{laografía}). ‘Greek folklorists, working according to the romantic assumption that there had always existed an identifiable, organic, essential Greek tradition, would excavate the past of the simple Greek folk-whose history had gone virtually undocumented for centuries- and emphasize those elements that could be interpreted as direct links from Classical Greece, through Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire, to the modern nation-state’.\textsuperscript{7}

Within this framework is to be understood the literary competition announced by the Greek literary journal \textit{Estia} for the production of ‘Greek short story’ in 1883.\textsuperscript{8} Nikolaos Politis, the pioneer of the folklorist studies in Greece and the instigator of the competition, urged the younger generation of Greeks prose writers to compose stories that reflected purely Greek as opposed to urban and westernized, ways of life. As Dimitris Tziovas notes, in this time literary texts could receive a critical welcome if they could convincingly prove that they were indigenous.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, for decades, Greek writers created literature, which was heavily folkloristic. \textit{Estia}’s competition should be seen as ‘the ultimate stepping stone towards the development of the first programmatic realist school in nineteenth-century Greek literature’.\textsuperscript{10} Beaton equates Greek realism with \textit{ethnographia} and argues that Greek prose fiction in the 1880s and 1890s is not possible to be detached form ‘the designation of ethnography’.\textsuperscript{11}

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\item \textsuperscript{5} Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, a German historian, was the first to sneer at the Greek claims of national continuity. As Maria Koundoura observes "his very name has been execrated in Greece from 1830 until our time as the symbol and epitome of anti-Greek sentiment", 2007: 90.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Michael Herzfeld, 1982: 13.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Eric.L.Ball, 2006: 14.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Δελτίον της Εστίας, 333 (15.5.1883), reprinted in P. Mastrodimitris, \textit{Ο Ζητιάνος του Καρκαβίτσα}, Athens: Kanaki, 1996: 20.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Tziovas, 1986: 194.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Borghart, 2005: 317.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Beaton, 1982-1983: 105.
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At this point I should briefly touch upon the precise designation of the notion ‘ethographia’. According to Beaton, ‘it can be defined as a form of realism devoted, with much precession of external details, to the life of peasants in the Greek countryside, described either with sentimentality or with strong emphasis on its brutal and unpleasant aspects’.\textsuperscript{12} Although the usage of the term has often been ambivalent,\textsuperscript{13} it encompasses the detailed depictions of small, traditional rural communities. The preferred genre of \textit{ethnographic} writing was the short story, which centred on descriptions of local contemporary life, with particular attention to be paid to rustic manner and customs. Most of the \textit{ethnographic} texts produced at the period under discussion were more or less limited to a descriptive rather than a critical representation of rural village life. Authors with largely nationalistic preoccupations, like Georgios Drosinis, offered an idyllic and sentimental representation of rural life where the long descriptions of the natural landscape abound. Yet, among the “ethnographers” there are authors who broadened their thematic scope and paved the way for a more critical representation of the rural society. Mario Vitti, who has meticulously studied the parameters that formed the “ethographia” writing in Greek nineteenth-century fiction, suggests that the depictions of folk ranged from sentimental idealism to scathing critical reformism.\textsuperscript{14}

The transition to the ‘here and the now’ of the society and the focus on its shortcomings is undeniably linked with the massive modernization process that took place in Greece in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At this time Greek kingdom and its picturesque capital had to overcome its contemporary inertia and turn from a small southern Balkan state to a modern and civilized European country. In other words, the overwhelmingly agricultural economy and lack of infrastructure should be replaced by a plan of progress. This ambitious programme of reconstruction was initiated in the late 1870s by the liberal administration of Charilaos Trikoupis. The programme was successfully implemented and formed the basis for the country’s industrial and by extension economic development and its tilt

\textsuperscript{12} Beaton, op.cit. 105.
\textsuperscript{13} Peckham notes that \textit{ethnographia} is “undoubtedly one of the most controversial words in Greek language”; 1995: 96.
\textsuperscript{14} Vitti, 1991.
toward Western Europe. Alongside with this modernization process, however, there was a parallel decline in the standards of living for the lower classes, as Greek society was starting facing the cruelty, injustice and fluctuations in prosperity characteristic of a capitalist order.

Papadiamantis, perhaps the most profound representative of the so-called generation of the 1880s, portrayed rural life in the late nineteenth-century Greece in a more comprehensive way. Most of his short fiction is set in his native island, Skiathos, and provide intimate insights into peasants’ life. In these so-called Skiathos stories, the author seems to implement an integral perception of the island and to portray the complete picture of the rural society. Peter Mackridge, ostensibly prompted by the recurring, long descriptions of the island’s various locales, has remarked, ‘the island of Skiathos becomes a book that Papadiamantis reads and transcribes’. Indeed, to a certain degree Papadiamantis tends to view the rural community panoramically: the author dramatizes varied incidents and scenes of the everyday life, which put together potentially, give a total picture of the rural society.

Papadiamantis, however, did not approach rural society as a manifestation of traditional Greek life, nor did he equate it with social evil. He refashions a world where the strong bounds that provided solidarity among people and contributing to a sense of familiarity and security among the community are beginning to fade. In other words, the author, who seems to be ‘highly cognizant of the gains as well as the losses of the modern’, tends to focus on the most disturbing aspects of modernity. As Mary Layoun aptly notes, Papadiamantis' texts are narratives of a society sometimes in violent transition, disrupted by an urban, modernizing movement, which, even when it remains on the periphery of the plot, is metaphorically omnipresent.

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15 Information about this historical period can be found in Nikos Svoronos, Επισκόπηση της Νεοελληνικής Ιστορίας, Athens: Themelio, 1976: 100-111.
17 Ricks, 2009: 251.
18 M. Layoun, 1990: 46. Mary Layoun's observations are the result of her analysis of Papadiamantis' The Murderess, but in my opinion a latent tension between the pre-modern and the modern is apparent in much of Papadiamantis' fiction.
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