

We publish here the English translation of “The Highlands are enough for me” (subtitled ‘The Papdiamantis of my own holy quartet’), by Marianna Koromila, in *Christmas with Papdiamantis* (Athens, December 2008), pp. 23-27.

The Highlands are enough for me

‘My soul was always in those parts, even if most of the time my body wandered here and there; and sometimes I recalled the line of the Scottish bard: “My heart’s in the Highlands, my heart is not here”’.

Alexandros Papdiamantis, *Ghost of a sin*, 1899

My grandfather Georgis was a veteran journalist who had worked hard for his living, but was still poor as a church mouse. He was a wise, good-natured and venerable old man, who had but one way to relate to his grandchildren. He told them stories. Sometimes he would tell us about the house-snake Erechtheus whom the Athenians used to feed with honey-cakes, other times about Michael Akominatos, the learned Metropolitan of Athens, who had cursed his fate when heartless Constantinople sent him to a boorish and melancholy 12th-century Athens, ruled by ‘parochial drones’ and ‘priestly malice’. My grandfather would laugh with all his heart. And we would be entranced. We would forget the cold in that two-storey house on Diogenes Laertius Street, with its many cats and empty pantry. Tea would be brought in, and the Sunday afternoon visit would finish just before it grew dark outside. The others would go downstairs, but I would stay two minutes longer with my grandfather. He owed me his parting story, the episode with kyr-Alexandros, the unworldly man with the ragged overcoat.

My grandfather had known him well. He had been a child of about my age when he met kyr-Alexandros in the offices of his father’s newspaper (Papdiamantis had left his studies for good; the exiguous economic support he had received from his family dried up when he reached thirty, and so he worked as a translator for the *Ephemeris* of Dimitrios Koromila from 1882 to 1892). He was a man of few words, sullen, eccentric and withdrawn. Other children might have been afraid of him. But not my grandfather.

‘His monthly salary was one five-drachma coin’, my grandfather would say, laughing. ‘Eh, five or six years passed and my father decided to give him a raise! “Mr Papdiamantis, you will now earn five and a half drachmas each month”, he once announced to him.’ And kyr-Alexandros, exiled in the world of Athens and its intellectual circles, an emigrant content to eke out a living on so little, replied to his employer: ‘I don’t need an increase, Mr Koromila. I don’t know what I would do with it. Five drachmas are enough for me.’

‘The Highlands are enough for me’, I would add. I never wanted to commit the sin of doubt and check up on my nearly-blind grandfather’s story. I bring it forward now just as I have cherished it for over half a century – only at this particular historical moment it is more poignant than ever. I offer the story as a sort of object for contemplation, mindful of all the well-intentioned objections, the clear-headed ideological reservations and the fundamental contradiction. The personality of the monkish kyr-Alexandros always works the same, inexplicable magic it worked back then on my childish mind. Often I have wondered what it was about an unemployed

wanderer, who hid himself in his legendary over-coat, which could enchant a 1960s tom-boy and make her feel forever connected to him.

I read and re-read all his work. And it is an uneven oeuvre. Critics are right to point out that it is often boring and repetitive (but it is unfair not to take into consideration that the greater part of his writing was the product of professional duress while tied to a newspaper desk). Sometimes I go back to his writings, and they do not seem in the least bit boring. They are like the saints' lives collected in the *synaxaria*. If you can bear to read them, you place them under your pillow for the difficult hours of the night, and the even more difficult hours of the day.

I studied with care the monographs, philological essays, special tributes, criticism and analyses of his work and his idiosyncrasies. And I read at both extremes: those who adore and those who despise him.

For some he is 'the saint of Skiathos, the great painter of the down-trodden, the creator who re-makes the world'; he is 'pious, visionary, unaffected, solitary, the nationalist creator par excellence, nostalgic, pure nature worshiper, ecstatic, contemplative, fastidious, observant, frugal, poetic, gentle, an exceptional portrayer of character, enchanting, a unique spiritual being with eremitic traits, a monk in the world with the glowing soul of an adolescent who both continued and brought to an end the Byzantine tradition'.

But for many others, he is a 'worshiper of stereotypes, decadent, negative, worthless, one-dimensional, reclusive, conservative, reactionary, in step with modern Greek retrogression, a wallower in darkness, a fatalist, loveless, sarcastic, malicious, flaccid, awkward, numbed, a cobbler-together of stories, submissive to his fate, a Byzantinizer, absolutist, a katharevousizer, wooly, inexperienced, a peasant, peasant-minded, a stagnant soul, seized by religiosity, possessed, boring, eccentric'.

Since I have learned to recognize unbridled enthusiasm, uncritical populism, theological excesses, grave-robbing, fanatical juxtapositions, dogmatic views of the past, as well as the ill-willed distortions or irreverent elaborations of the present, I continue to be enchanted by the writings of Papadiamantis and the way in which that odd fellow introduced to me by my grandfather served the cause of beauty.

In my personal prayer niche the 'exhausted wrestler with life', as he described himself at age forty-three, takes his place alongside Cavafy, Calvus and Vizyinos. They were all ascetics each in their own way. They were all at an angle to the world, enthusiasts, standing at a distance and pursued.

Every day I pay homage to this holy quartet, grateful that through it I have the privilege of living *Under the majestic oak tree*. I belong to that group of people who are fortunate enough to share in such company, even if the moral distance that separates us and my quartet is enormous. My only hope is that no Vargenis will dare to cut down the 'beautiful tree' and sell it off as a Christmas tree (like those our docile citizens throw off their balconies when they learn from the mass media that the Twelve Days of Christmas have come to an end, and it's now time to start preparing for the feast now celebrated world-wide, St. Valentine's).