



The author set many of his stories on Skiathos, where he was born.

MASTER OF THE GREEK SHORT STORY

*Nineteenth-century writer Alexandros Papadiamandis is one of the forefathers of modern Greek literature. As a new collection of his short stories is released, **Alice Dunn** wonders how typical his stories are of their time*

Alexandros Papadiamandis (edited by Lambros Kamperidis), *The Boundless Garden: Selected Short Stories II*. Evia: Denise Harvey Publishers 2019. Pp. 390. £35. ISBN 9789607120410

The short story is a young art' declared Elizabeth Bowen in 1937.

This is a popular opinion, based in part on the 'explosion' of short stories, as Dean Baldwin called it, published in magazines in the late 19th century. In his book, *Art and Commerce in the British Short Story 1880–1950*, Baldwin states: 'I have counted at least twenty-three magazines founded during the 1890s that published short fiction either significantly or exclusively.' There was a ravenous appetite for the form. Short stories, however, have always existed. As Mary Rohrberger explains, 'Short narrative fiction is as old as the history of literature.'

This is clearly a contentious topic, and the way we approach the question of when short stories started tells us a lot about how we think culture happens and originates. Is there something in society drawing these creations forth? Or is it the artist who throws the idea at society and society has to wake up to it? This concern has been central to the process of assembling this collection of short stories by Alexandros Papadiamandis.

The acknowledgments for the book, released last year, tell their own story of the difficulties encountered in the journey to its publication: 'The year 2011 was the centenary anniversary of Alexandros Papadiamandis' death', they read. 'It was our

wish also to mark this centenary with the publication of the second volume of his Selected Short Stories in English translation ... Unfortunately, this was also the time that Greece was entering a deep financial crisis and there were insufficient funds to underwrite this substantial project.' Despite the difficult economic climate in Greece, work on the project continued, and the collection was finally produced.

The stories were written mainly in the years 1894 and 1902, a time that is often thought of as Papadiamandis' most creative. This was, nonetheless, an uncertain age for Greece, 'A period of post-Enlightenment turmoil that followed closely on the heels of Greece's War of

Independence, when the traditional old ways were disappearing under the pressure of the indiscriminate adoption of western mores and ideas', as the blurb on the inside cover asserts.

Papadiamandis may have looked to the brevity of the short story for punchiness and power in such a climate. Its brief form allows the reader an intense experience – a series of epiphanies – when the whole world becomes clear in an instant.

Consider, for example, Papadiamandis' description of snow in 'Love in the Snow': 'Snowflakes, white flies, wisps of cotton driven to whirlwinds in the air, falling to the earth; seeing the mountain turn white in the darkness.' Or, in 'The Yearly Sacrifice', how 'the echoing sea heard the horrible jest of the old seaman and transmitted it from wave to wave, not to the shore across the way where the calm blue waves lap playfully, but to the centre of the sea, to the measureless deep, the terrible abyss.' Papadiamandis' short stories encapsulate moments in time beautifully.

Papadiamandis was not only a writer of short stories and novels, but also an avid translator. He put many works into Greek, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*. Kipling was well known for practising the art of omission. When Ernest Hemingway turned his hand to writing short stories, he looked to Kipling's short fiction and became preoccupied with condensing his prose as much as possible. Papadiamandis' own use of omission is apparent not only in his skilful economy with language, but also in his plotting. In his story 'Neighbourhood Entertainment' he uses dialogue almost exclusively to tell the story of a young man's suicide, handled as though it is merely gossip among friends:

'It's over? Is it really?'
 'He's just died.'
 'Did they give him communion?'
 'Will they bury him with priests?'

Papadiamandis' words work hard for effect and his character observations are so convincing that we find ourselves recognizing people from our own lives in his fiction.

The writer was born in 1851 on the island of Skiathos, where many of his short stories are set. 'The Matchmaker', for example, features a description of its glorious light: 'The winter sun entered freely and lit up all of the widow's tile-covered ground floor.' There's a strong sense of place in 'Dream on the Wave', too: 'This sheer rocky coast of mine – Platana, Grand Shore, The Vineyard – was exposed to the North-east wind and sloped towards the Northern wind.'

Papadiamandis had a busy and interrupted education, attending several schools before going on to study philosophy at the University of Athens. He never obtained his degree owing to economic difficulties. He began work, however, on his first novel, *The Migrant*, which was published in serialized form in a newspaper. After being briefly conscripted into the army, he worked as a translator and had his first short story published in 1887. He had a quiet life, mainly in Athens, working on his writing.

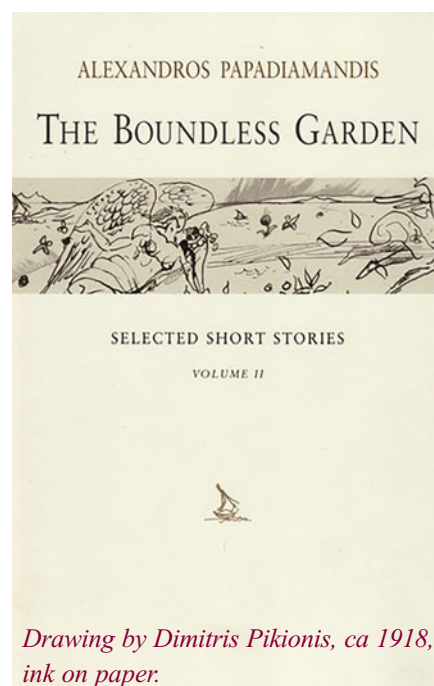
His father was a priest, and ideas of spiritualism litter his short stories, as they do those of many writers of

the early 20th century. Anton Chekhov and Edgar Allan Poe, with whom Papadiamandis has been compared, wrote several stories about spirits. Poe's famous story, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', is about a mesmerist who puts a man in a hypnotic state just before he dies. In Papadiamandis' story, 'Sin's Spectre', we are asked the question of what happens to the soul after death. 'Is it true that the departing soul is filled with loathing, when it sees its maggot-ridden, mortal frame?' Perhaps Papadiamandis was influenced by the beliefs of Alcmaeon, who thought the soul was the source of life.

Papadiamandis' stories are notable for their inclusion of mythical sentiment – a nod to the Hellenic but also Christian past. There is a story about witches: 'They were women. Three naked women, completely naked. Like Eve their ancestress, in the days before fig leaves were used and the coats of skins were sewn together.' Later, in the same story, the narrator questions what he has seen, 'What were they meditating on, what were they invoking from pale Hecate, their mother, who sailed high in the skies, these three unveiled, unvested priestesses?' His work also moves into animism and naturalism – a world perhaps inspired by Émile Zola, whose work he also translated into Greek.

Having moved between myths, spirits and naturalism, we are somehow unprepared for the moment when we find a story on materialistic concerns. In 'Gagatos and the Horse' we are given a snapshot of a 'big shot' who is busy 'lending sometimes at 18%, sometimes at 16% or 15% plus compound interest. Shipping loans, usually at 36%, again plus compound interest.' The torrent of contrasts in this book of stories is truly exciting.

By the end of the collection, we are convinced that a degree of disenchantment must accompany enlightened truth. It is the job of brilliant writers like Papadiamandis to reinject some enchantment into our lives through reading.



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