This article examines one chapter in Papadiamantes’s novel *The Merchants of the Nations* under the rubric of a logic of confession.

The chapter which will be analysed here contains a scene of confession. The term “confession” should be understood here as an address to God. This means that a confession is not to be confused with either an admission of guilt, or with the “return of the repressed” in psychoanalysis (Reik, 1959). The canonical example of a confession as an address to God is Augustine’s *Confessions*.¹ In Augustine, the conception of God is given in relation to time yielding an existential defaultness of the human. There is a temporality which yields a logic of confession as well as an ontology of man. Augustine raises the issue of time in Book XI. There, time is explicitly related to God: “You have made time itself” (XI, xiii, 15). To put this the other way round, God, properly speaking, has no time: “In the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present” (XI, xi, 13). The absence of time leads to a conception of God as that nothing which encompasses everything. The upshot of this view is that, in a strict sense, the human only knows the present: “If future and past events exist, I want to know where they are. If I have not the strength to discover...

¹ This is not to equate the confessional scenes in Papadiamantes and Augustine. There are two important differences between the two confessions. First, Augustine explicitly addresses God, he confesses to God who is absent at least to the extent of never responding. On the contrary, the scene of confession in Papadiamantes is between persons, one of whom can directly and unequivocally bestow forgiveness. Second, what is examined in Papadiamantes’s novel is an event whose historicity is determined by the participants. Conversely, Augustine’s work also participates in the complex network of relations that its own genre — the genre of autobiography — demands. It is the very confessional nature of writing that Lyotard emphasises: “Not memory, then, but the said inner human, who is neither man nor woman, an outside inside. This is the only witness of the presence of the Other, of the other of Presence. A singular witness, the poem” (Lyotard, 2000:7). However, regardless of the complexities that those differences introduce, it could still be argued they both partake of what will be called a “logic of confession”.

the answer, at least I know that wherever they are [i.e. wherever they are from the human perspective], they are not there as future or past, but as present” (XI, xviii, 23). The fate of mankind is given in temporal terms as its fated presentification radically divorced from past and future — yet, at the same time, not only being able to conceive of past and future, but also needing them in order for the defaultness to be expressed. This interplay between the eternal and the present is what comprises for Jean-François Lyotard the unique message of Augustine’s confession: “\textit{chronos}, at once and in its eternity, consists in delay” (Lyotard, 2000:17). What Augustine’s text testifies to, according to Lyotard, is precisely this human lagging behind, the impossibility of a firm grasp in and of time. All of Lyotard’s final and unfinished work revolves around this point. Waiting as the feature of the present is consistently problematised because of its dependence on the past and on the future which nevertheless must remain prohibited to it:

The \textit{Confessions} are written under the temporal sign of waiting. Waiting is the name of the consciousness of the future. But here, because it is a question not only of confessing faith in an end that awaits, that lies in sufferance, but of confessing the self, of displaying the sufferance of what has been done, waiting must go back through the past, climb back to its source, the upstream of this faith, toward the life that has been unhappy, toward the work that it once was (Lyotard, 2000:70).

Past and future remain prohibited because they remain God’s properties and the God addressed in the \textit{Confessions} does not respond: “you never calls me you in turn” (Lyotard, 2000:75). Four points about a logic of the confession are gleaned from the discussion of Augustine. First, the present is the only time accessible to man. Second, the past and the future are ruptured from the time within which the human exists. Three, while past and future must be rejected from that which is human, a logic of confession still needs to associate those temporalities with the human. This yields a notion of constitutive defaultness of man — man as lacking a future. Finally, four, to the extent that forgiveness is guaranteed by God, time is a property of the divine.

*   *   *

Alexandros Papadiamantes’s novel \textit{Oἱ ἐμπόροι τῶν ἐθνῶν} (\textit{The Merchants of the Nations}, 1882–83) ends rather spectacularly. A dark night in the thirteenth century is suddenly illuminated by the burning Venetian fleet laying siege to the castle of Naxos in the Cyclades. However, the spectacle of the fire is of secondary importance. The ploy of the Venetian general, Sanoutos, burning the fleet so that his captains could not desert him is peripheral. As is that Sanoutos’ lover, Augousta or Agape, unaware of his scheme, is trapped in the flaming flagship. Central is the male figure on the shore, witnessing the burning. His name was Ioannis Mouchras, presently known as Vendikis, Augousta’s husband who had saved Sanoutos from pirates, only for the Venetian to desecrate his hospitality by stealing his wife. Just before the auto-da-fé is complete, the sinful wife notices her husband on the beach
and he notices her. “She made a gesture of both farewell and entreaty to him [...] and cried out hoping to be heard: ‘Ioanni, my husband, forgive me!’ ‘I forgive you with all my soul’, replied Ioannis, understanding the gesture. And the flames engulfed her” (340). The climactic pathos of this adventure romance could not but offend contemporary sensibilities. However, this novel is still of interest today because of a startling discourse on forgiveness during Augousta’s confession in the middle of the book.

Prior to examining the confessional scene, it has to be asked what is involved in a confession. A confession is not so much a conversation between two people, as it is a dialogue which has a particular temporality. And if this temporality indexes the present and the past of the parties involved, its temporal register is also insistently futural. The whole purpose of the confession is concentrated in the declaration “I forgive you!” Yet, it is still unclear whose time is the time of confession. To raise the issue of “belonging” is far from peripheral or arbitrary to the meaning of the confession. “Belonging” is ineliminable in confession for three reasons which disclose three types of belonging vis-à-vis time and which establish the participant’s individuality. First, a confession requires individuals who are involved in a pre-determined system of legal, political, personal, theological, and hermeneutical relations. And for those relations to determine the parties as distinct individuals, the relations must give to each one some property, there is a belonging in general to each individual. Second, a confessional secret is something unique to one of the individuals, a present knowledge or experience that no-one else shares. This non-knowledge could not be claimed by anyone else making it a belonging of the confessee. In the confessing act of the confession, that singular belonging of the secret is offered to the other. Third, the declaration “I absolve you!”; that is, the utterance that ushers in the parties as witnesses to the future, is something whose guarantor is the confessor. In this remarkable act, the confessor becomes a confessee — but not of a past personal experience, instead he confesses of the future sin-free life of the other. Surely, after the declaration, that vision of the future belongs to both parties, but prior to that the experience belonged only to the confessor, it was a singular experience. This futural declaration, then, repeats the two previous belongings: the general intersubjective one and the secret of a unique experience. For this reason this declaration can be taken as a second confession in itself, the only difference being that the futural belonging of forgiveness is never now, it is always a moment later. The notion of belonging that is inscribed in the event facilitates the separation of the two individuals, their unique properties, and thus makes possible the event itself. Belonging refers to the individual qua individuality, it is what constitutes the participants as distinct entities with distinct roles in a confession.

Since the distinctness of the individuals through time has to be maintained for confessionality to make sense, it is still perplexing that what the confessor

---

2 All references to Papadiamantes, 1997 are given by page number parenthetically in the text.
guarantees in the future — forgiveness or absolution — is something that singularly belongs to the other. Thus, the distinctness between the two individuals starts to blur. Even the temporality of that utterance — “I absolve you!” — can no longer be self-evident. Maybe it belongs to a combination of those temporal registers. Maybe it finds a balance or equilibrium between past, present and future. In which case, it is the measure of the price of belonging, it is the economical currency of the belonging of confession. However, for this currency to come into circulation, the distinctness of the individuals has already been staked. The question, then, is whether this distinctness can now, après coup, be redeemed. This question, which is not simply monetary since the currency pertains to the human’s salvation, strikes at the heart of Alexandros Papadiamantes’s novel, *The Merchants of the Nations*. This is evidenced from the very beginning, by the title itself. It refers to “the merchants of the nations”, even though there are no business transactions in the novel, there are no merchants as such. The title in fact refers to national predilections of weighing or measuring the human’s salvation — an emporium of the soul’s redeemability.

There is, on the one hand, the attitude of the Venetian Sanoutos, which gives weight to the calling of his flesh, to his present sexual desire. Conversely, the good Greek nobleman Mouchras or Vendikis is leading his life according to moral precepts. Augousta is wavering, unable to decide what is weightier: her desire for Sanoutos, or her moral obligation towards her honourable and legitimate husband. Her plight dramatises the valorisation of present desire versus futural redemption.

This dramatisation is nowhere more pronounced than in the confession scene in the first chapter of the second part of the novel. Augousta has left Sanoutos and sought refuge at the monastery on Patmos, becoming sister Agape. One Sunday she summons abbot Ammoun to her cell to confess. Her confession starts with a caveat: “Whoever narrates his life and speaks at length about his sufferings and sins, always lies, because of necessity he talks about his own self” (227).

This is not say that I disagree with Triantafyllopoulos’s assertion that “the main topic [of the novel] is money” (Triantafyllopoulos, 2003:217). Rather, the issue of money introduces of necessity a variety of other issues, such as ethics, identity, theology and so on. Triantafyllopoulos seems to allude to this a few lines later, when he assert that in the title “the ‘nations’ is objective genitive of the ‘merchants’”.

Although a psychological approach will inevitably be reductive, what may be discerned in this caveat is possibly a resentment of confession. Such a resentment may be prompted by a confession that Augousta made at the very beginning of the novel (158–60), just after meeting Sanoutos for the first time. However, that confession could not stem her desire for the Venetian. It is not possible here to offer a synoptic view of the scenes of confession in Papadiamantes’s oeuvre. However, an additional example from his early work can be mentioned briefly. It comes from Papadiamantes’s next novel, *The Gypsy Girl*. There, a Catholic nun uses confession as a ruse to find what the protagonist, Aima, has in her mind. This may indicate that Papadiamantes persists in being sceptical about confession, or it may indicate Papadiamantes’s aversion to the Catholic Church. Whatever the case, the most remarkable feature of this confession is that the confessor turns into the confessee. This indistinction of personal boundaries is of immense importance in *The Merchants of the Nations*, as will be shown shortly. This turning in *The Gypsy Girl* is described thus: “Her [the Catholic nun’s]
a customary way to augment a confession. Whereas a confession presupposes the distinctness of the individual, and hence the remembering of a personal experience that burdens the individual, here Agape explicitly denies that it is possible to determine that which belongs singularly to the individual constituting its individuality. From the moment that individuality is supposed to be formed by a personal recall (a remembered unique experience), the narration becomes of necessity aberrant. Talking about the individual, contends Agape, can be nothing but a lie. In other words, what is denied is the possibility that one can recount that experience (the secret belonging) which calls for forgiveness. After this remarkable opening, Agape confesses that she was in fact physically content while she was with Sanoutos, and that she only “was deceiving herself and everybody else” because “her sorrow was hypocritical” (227). That experience, then, an experience of desire and passion, was thoroughly hypocritical. Not that the desire itself was feigned; rather, the truthfulness of the desire could only present itself hypocritically.

Ammoun hears her “as if in ecstasy”. Many thoughts rush into his mind. “First of all,” Ammoun thinks, “was this a confession? But if it was, it was altogether unlike any usual confession that he had heard in his whole long forty years in the profession” (229). The complete novelty of Agape’s confession leads Ammoun’s thoughts in the opposite direction to Agape. He reflects that, if this is a confession, then every other “confession” he has heard in forty years was not really a confession. For, even considering his own confessions, he could never recall a single one that was completely “unhypocritically honest” (229). Suddenly, Agape’s confession is instead considered as no ordinary confession, because it is a truly honest confession. The hypocrisy, in its doubling up, now functions as a double negation — a positive. An admission of the impossibility of not lying constitutes the hyper-truth that could ever be confessed and that always has been and will be confessed. The only true confession is not a non-lie. However, Ammoun realises that he cannot convey those musings to Agape, because they would instantly, in the present, “change over position” and she would have become his confessor (230). In that case, their individualities will merge, their distinctness will dissolve. Moreover, the confession itself will be dissolved within the dissolution of the participants’ individuality.

There is no doubt that, from a certain perspective, Agape and Ammoun espouse diametrically different positions. Whereas Agape insists on the ungraspable vagrancies of her uniquely personal experience, Ammoun contemplates his own professional experience in the institutional practice of confession. Thus, for Agape, her past uniqueness prohibits her from offering the secret of her confession in the present, because that would entail the elimination of the contingency of her past experience, it would deny embodiment to her past. Ammoun, conversely, perceives

aim at the beginning was to convince the girl that she had to confess so that she would act as her confessor. [...] But she has not imagined that from interrogator she was going to find herself in the position of the interrogated [ἀπὸ ἀνακρίτριας νὰ περιέλθει εἰς τὴν θέσιν τῆς ἐξεταζομένης]” (518).
every confessing — every confession that is not the “usual” kind but a true confession — as the enactment in the present of the same scene, namely of the honesty of the confession in its hypocrisy. For the former, there is nothing but the secret, while for the latter, there is anything but a secret. For Agape, particularity will for ever remain secretive because it is ungraspable in its incessant changing. For Ammoun there is no secret because the whole of humanity is only given by default, in its sinful apposition to the sinless God. However, despite all variation, they both partake of an essential sameness. This is not to say that they are the same. Rather, their partaking of an essential sameness indicates that sameness as such, in its proper formality, regulates the thought process of both the nun and the abbot.

In other words, they partake of a common logic. A logic which is intent on keeping sameness. In particular, the sameness of the individuals involved in confession. This is a logical function because it sustains the distinctness of the individual through the course of time. This is the logic of confession. Why, then, is it that, despite both Agape and Ammoun’s urge to confess, neither is able to do so? It will appear that what disturbs the logic is the notion of distinct individuality, which is nevertheless required and presupposed by the logic. The individual in its distinctness cannot be allowed, without bending the rules of the logic, to refer to the future — cannot say “I forgive you!” If there is such a debilitating and auto-destructive force to the future, then what has to be examined is the notion of belonging which, as already intimated, makes individuality possible. On the one hand, there is the general belonging which indicates the insertion of the individual in a web of institutional relations — Ammoun’s “forty years in the profession”. Such a belonging is plural. On the other hand, the belonging of the secret is singular. This is the belonging that exercises Agape, who justifiably protests that her unique experience cannot be presented truthfully. Agape and Ammoun’s positions have three structural elements in common. First, in relation to past and present, they both privilege only one side of belonging — either only the plural or only the singular. Second, it follows that the future announced by the “I forgive you!” will also have to be grasped one-sidedly. For Agape, forgiveness in general is impossible because the vision of the future can never be in accord with her own singular experience. For Ammoun, personal forgiveness is impossible because a true confession is only the rehearsal of the same double negation. In both cases, the lack of a distinct vision of the future instils a constitutive fault in the distinct individual. Third, consequently, they both draw an existential conclusion about the defaultness of the human.

However, what is it that legitimates such an existential conclusion? Who can authorise the pronouncement of such a defaultness? The answer of both Agape and Ammoun would have to be: what legitimates and authorises such a conclusion is what we have just witnessed. Namely, the emergence of our individuality — be it constituted in the singular or in the plural — which now, in the present, in the event of its presentification, is found in default. “We” — here Agape and Ammoun are joint in one voice — “we are the actualisation of that state”. But, immediately,
a dilemma emerges: is this one voice singular or plural? How can Agape raise her voice in conjunction with Ammoun, without contaminating her treasured singularity? And how can Ammoun raise his own voice at all without reiterating something that has already been said and which therefore is not his own at all? So it transpires that, although they may have joint voices, they nevertheless mean very different things. In which case, closer attention will have to be paid to exactly what they mean when they say “we are the actualisation of that state”.

Now, as was shown a moment ago, the sameness that sustains the distinctness of individuality has to be something formal. It is the formality of identity giving, not each individuated identity. This formal sameness dictated that, for individual distinctness to be maintained, the future is in default because no vision of it can be provided. Thus, when Agape says that “I myself actualise here and now that state of default”, she actually means that her own singular future cannot be given. Whilst Ammoun may be saying the same thing, he actually means that the future cannot be given to him because it is only ever plural. The former’s premise is singularity, the latter’s is plurality. But both premises are part of a logic that demands the existential conclusion according to which there is absolutely no image of the future. Yet, at the same time, it seems impossible to observe such a strict prohibition against the future. After all, a moment later, they can repeat the same pronouncement. It appears impossible to pronounce this existential defaultness, in the present, without alluding to the future, and thereby blatantly lapsing into self-contradiction. The logic of the confession, the logic of sameness, has reached its limit.

Papadiamantes re-visited this limit in the memorable ending of The Murderess. Just like The Merchants of the Nations, The Murderess ends with a scene of death at the sea. Hadoula is drowned pursued by police while she is trying to cross over to the church on a small island in order to confess her sins. Thus, there is no confession here, nor any forgiveness. Papadiamantes explicitly states that Hadoula perished “between divine and human justice” (Papadiamantes, 1989:520). This statement should be read as an admonition against the possibility of a witness who will adjudicate between divine and human justice. Papadiamantes repeats the scene of judgement from the earlier novel but without the bestowal of forgiveness. The reworking of this old scene allows for a future to come into play in the interval between the human and the divine (cf. Vardoulakis, 2005).
DIMITRIS VARDOULAKIS

Bibliography

Augustine, 1991

Lyotard, 2000

Papadiamantes, 1997

Papadiamantes, 1989

Reik, 1959

Triantafyllopoulos, 2003

Vardoulakis, 2005