Between Divine and Human Justice: 
A Reading of Papadiamantes’s
The Murderess

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Papadiamantes’s novella *The Murderess* has been read either as a moral tale exhibiting its author’s Orthodox beliefs, or as a critique of the gender positions and class structure of Greece at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the seeming divergence, both approaches share a common foundation, namely that the author is conceived of as the bearer of the truth of the novella. Whereas the issue of truth in narration is presupposed, it remains unexamined. I argue that a conception of “truth” in *The Murderess* is to be gleaned, first, in a series of irresolvable tensions such as inside and outside, narrator and character, and even the very fact of Hadoula’s guilt, and, second, in the site of Hadoula’s death which takes place “between divine and human justice”. The ultimate purpose of this article is to offer the conditions of possible interpretations of *The Murderess* beyond the hold of either religion or sociology.

Truthfulness and the moral tale

The truthfulness of the narrator in Papadiamantes’s novella *The Murderess* (Ἡ φόνισσα) has been universally assumed.1 No-one has questioned the veracity of the narrated course of events. This determines

1 The in-text quotations of Ἡ φόνισσα (1903) come from Triantafyllopoulos’s edition


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the direction of all the interpretations that I am aware of. Thus, like all Christian readings of *The Murderess*, for N. D. Triantafyllopoulos the text is perfectly “straightforward”: it is sin that troubles Hadoula.\(^2\) The corruption of her morality is the reason for her murders. Other Neo-Orthodox commentators go even further by seeing Hadoula as sheer unadulterated evil. Conversely, there are critics like Mary Layoun, who locates an external “crucial if just-off-stage pretext” for *The Murderess*: the socio-political struggle between the westernisers and the traditionalists (Layoun, 1990:26). The peasant Hadoula is in opposition to both the westernisers and the traditionalists since she wants to promote change for the underclass. Her revolt is emblematic of all futile attempts at change. Hadoula is caught in the deterministic causality of social inequality.

A. Papadiamantes

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\(^2\) “Straightforward” translates “εὐανάγνωστη”, which Triantafyllopoulos explains as a text without difficulties (1978:140).
These two readings of *The Murderess* could not be more contradictory. The one focuses on internal sin, the other on an externally imposed tragedy. Yet both accept the total truthfulness of the narrator — they simply shift the accent. The socio-political reading is merely the obverse side of the moralistic one. What these readings have in common — which is also much more important than their differences — is that for both *The Murderess* is a moral tale. Implied in both interpretations is a moral imperative, either for the moral rectitude of the soul, or for the change of the external conditions that provide the material cause of Hadoula’s actions. It would not be difficult to identify similar binaries in other interpretative approaches, such as the feminist or the psychoanalytic, which can be easily accommodated in the external and the internal camps respectively. The assumption of the truthfulness of the narration necessarily leads to readings that implicitly or explicitly assert that Papadiamantes is proposing a moral imperative. The fact that the “message” of the story is thus reduced to truisms like “one ought not to kill” or “one ought to eradicate social inequality” does not seem to be bothersome to anyone. Such seemingly obsequious readings do in fact great violence to the text.

I argue that it is possible to contest the validity of the reading of *The Murderess* as a moral tale. This can be done by questioning the assumption that the narrative is perfectly straightforward. When the truthfulness of the narration becomes an issue, then it can even be allowed that Hadoula did not commit the murders after all. This is not to say that Hadoula is innocent; I am not gathering evidence to show that she did not commit the murders. This procedure is ultimately trivial for criticism — it belongs to a court concerned with “matters of fact and real existence”. Instead, I show that the text itself undermines its own straightforwardness. Arguing for Hadoula’s innocence is a defence of the literary value of Papadiamantes’s prose, which can only be reduced to a “moral message” by selectively abstracting from the text. After the assumption of truthfulness has been challenged, I compare *The Murderess* to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The purpose is to shed some light on the space “between divine and human justice”. 

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justice” where, according to the last sentence of the novella, Hadoula “found her death”.

**Between the lines**

The “straightforward” reading of *The Murderess* trusts the obviousness of the narration. The reliable and omniscient narrator confidently represents Hadoula’s deepest thoughts, even her nightmares. At times, one has the feeling that the narrator’s point of view entirely merges with the character’s.3

It is after Easter and Hadoula has already murdered her granddaughter as well as the gardener’s two girls. While Krinio fetches lunch, Hadoula is left alone in the courtyard where they are washing clothes. The children who have been annoying them are also gone, except for a small girl. Xenoula plays next to the well and Hadoula tells her in eerie jest (ἀλλόκοτον γέλωτα): “Ἔ! Θέ μου, καὶ νά ’πεφτες μέσα, Ξενούλα!” [“Eh, my God, and if you fell in, Xenoula!”] (470; 66). A minute later Xenoula plunges into the well. Instinctively, Hadoula wants to scream out and call for help:

Αλλὰ τὴν μὲν κραυγή τῆς ἡ ἱδία ἐπνιξεν εἰς τὸν λάρυγγα, πρὶν τὴν ἐκβάλῃ, αἱ δὲ κινήσεις παρέλυσαν καὶ τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἐπάγωσεν. Ἀλλόκοτος στοχασμός

3 Tziovas, 1993:54. In a recent article (Tziovas, 2003) that appeared after this article was written, Tziovas does nuance the relation between the narrator and Hadoula (see, e.g., p. 88), but without thereby overcoming the foundational assertion “the narrator acts as the guardian of truth” (p. 87). Tziovas ultimately sides with the socio-political interpretation, but does so by assuming that Papadiamantes delivers a true message, or at least a message that Papadiamantes regards as true (p. 98). Surreptitiously shifting the province of truth from the narrator to the real author hardly disguises the fact that what motivates Tziovas’s article is a conception of affective criticism solely concerned with a psychology of the reader (p. 84), that is, a conception of criticism that presupposes, but leaves totally unexamined, the notion of narrative truth. Such a conception of criticism will always fail to show how a text works, unless it arbitrarily seeks the support of a fixed structure outside the text that underwrites its meaning (for instance, in pp. 99–100, Tziovas has recourse to Darwinian evolutionaryism of the late nineteenth century). Contrary to this procedure, the intention of the present article is to show how one can read *The Murderess* beyond the confines of representationalism.
τῆς ἐπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν νοῦν. Ἰδοὺ ὁ ἀστεϊσμὸν ως ἀστεϊσμὸν εἶχεν ἐκφέρει τὴν εὐχήν, νὰ ἔπιπτεν ἡ παιδίσκη μέσα στὸ πηγάδι, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἔγινεν! Ἄρα ὁ Θεὸς (ἐτόλμα νὰ τὸ σκεφθῆ;) εἰσήκουσε τὴν εὐχήν της, καὶ δὲν ἦτο ἀνάγκη νὰ ἐπιβάλῃ χεῖρας, ἀλλὰ μόνον ἦρκει νὰ ἤχετο, καὶ ἡ εὐχή της εἰσηκούετο.

[But she drowned her own shout in her throat before it was uttered, her movements were paralysed and her body froze. An eerie thought came into her mind. She had just uttered the prayer, more or less as a joke, that the child should fall into the well, and look it happened! So God (did she dare to think this?) had heard her prayer, and there was no need to move her hands any more, and her prayer was answered.] (471; 66)

The parenthetical question “(ἐτόλμα νὰ τὸ σκεφθῆ;)”, (“did she dare to think this”), is the clearest appearance of the narrator in *The Murderess*. The pause in the description to address the reader directly is an oft discussed technique of Papadiamantes. But what exactly does this particular apostrophe tell us?

For the “straightforward” interpretation, it could not be a real question, since it would be tantamount to the narrator undermining his own authoritative insight into Hadoula’s mind and the very truthfulness of his story. Nor could it be a rhetorical question. For it would then mean that “Hadoula did not dare to think it”, contradicting the rest of the description. It may be a parenthesis with oral qualities for emphasis, as in “I could never tell you what X confided in me” only to immediately divulge the information. However, this would not do either, because the structure is not the same: it does not deny an action in order to immediately perform it; rather, it expresses a doubt in the narrator’s authority. One who pursues the face-value meaning of *The Murderess* would choose to ignore this doubt. The “obvious” reading will take it as a pleonastic question, which does not contribute anything meaningful at all. It is just an effect used for emphasis. It is not a question at all, it is just the author drawing attention to himself — an empty noise, like stamping his foot on the page. If, on the other hand,

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4 To use rhetorical terminology, it can be a *captatio benevolentiae*. 


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the text is allowed to resist obviousness, then the meaningful complexity of the story is revealed. As a result, the narration becomes problematic in a productive way, and the apostrophe can be understood as a real question.

In order to heed the textual voice, one has to attend to what is not spelled out, especially in phrases which cross the boundary between real description and metaphoricity. Papadiamantes employs this polysemy in crucial passages dealing with Hadoula’s relation with her mother. During Hadoula’s engagement, Delcharo fears that her daughter will prompt her fiancé to ask for a bigger dowry, so she never leaves Hadoula alone with Iannis:

Τοῦτο ἔκαμνε, προσχήματι μὲν διὰ τὴν σεμνότητα:
— Δὲν ἔχω ... νὰ μοῦ σκαρώσῃ κανένα πρωιμάδι ... αὐτὴ ἡ Στριγγλίτσα! εἶχεν εἰπεῖ.

Βλέπετε, τὴν μεταφορὰν τοῦ ρήματος τὴν ἐλάμβανεν ἀπὸ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα τῆς συντεχνίας. ("Σκαρώνω καράβι" ἰσοδυναμεῖ μὲ τὸ “ναυπηγῶ ναῦν”): ἀλλὰ πράγματι τὸ ἔκαμνε, διὰ νὰ μὰ ἀναγκασθῇ νὰ δώσῃ μεγαλυτέραν προῖκα.

[She did this under the pretence of propriety.
“...I won't have that little Witch ‘build me an early-one,” she had said.

You can see that she took the metaphor from her husband’s boat trade. But she really said it so as not to be compelled to give a bigger dowry.] 5

Delcharo’s idiosyncratic turn of phrase is part of her “witchcraft” (μάγια), employed to control others to her personal advantage. The whole village knew that Delcharo was a witch. Thus, the phrase “σκαρώνω πρωιμάδι” is a double-edged metaphor: it signifies, on the one hand, a possible impregnation, and, on the other hand, it represents the witch’s machinations. The first side is what everybody perceives by staying on the semantic level; the other side, visible only to Hadoula, is a linguistic edifice which imposes Delcharo’s fabricated

reality, ensnaring everybody in it. The power of the witch’s metaphor consists in determining the others’ reality.

Twenty pages later, when the grand-daughter dies, it is stated that Konstantis, Hadoula’s son-in-law, was raising excessive demands for the dowry. And not only that, he settled in the house and left Delcharo pregnant, so that they had their first daughter three months after the wedding. Yet the forceful and scheming fiancé seems totally unrecognisable as the clumsy, good-for-nothing lout of a husband ordered about by his mother-in-law. What caused his transformation? Nothing, perhaps. Papadiamantakes allows for the possibility that Konstantis was manipulated to get married with a small dowry:

Καὶ ὁ τοιοῦτος νὰ ἔχῃ “καπρίτσια”, ἀπαιτήσεις, πείσματα· σήμερα νὰ ζητή τούτο καὶ αὔριον ἐκείνο· τὴν μίαν ἡμέραν νὰ ζητή τόσα, τὴν ἄλλην περὶ σὸτερα· καὶ συχνὰ “νὰ τὸν βάζουν στὰ λόγια” ἢ ἄλλοι ἰδιοτελεῖς ἢ φθονεροί, ν’ ἀκούῃ ἐντεῦθεν κ’ ἐκεῖθεν διαβολάς, ραδιουργίας, “μαναφούκια” καὶ νὰ μὴ θέλῃ “νὰ ταιριασθῇ”. Καὶ νὰ ἐγκαθίσταται μετα τὸν ἀρραβώνα στῆς πεθερᾶς τὸ σπίτι, καὶ νὰ “σκαρώνῃ” ἢ “σκαρώνῃ” ἢ “κότταπίττα”. Κι ὅλον τὸν καιρὸν “κόττα-πίττα”. Κι αὐτὸν τὸν γαμβρόν, μὲ μυρίους κόπους, μὲ ἀνεκδιήγητα βάσανα, μόλις, μετὰ πολὺν καιρόν, νὰ τὸν πείθῃ τις νὰ στεφανωθῇ ἐπὶ τέλους.

[He had his caprices and his demands and his eccentricities. Today he wanted one thing, tomorrow another: one day so much, and the next day a lot more. Before the match, he had often listened to mean and envious people, paid heed to slander from this direction and that, involved himself in sleek intrigues, and just not wanted to get settled. And then just after the engagement he installed himself in his mother-in-law’s house, and “built” suddenly “an early-one.” And all the time he had to be “Yes sir, No sir.” And then in the end, after an age of ten thousand troubles and anguish unnarratable, someone manages to persuade a son-in-law like that to come to the altar.] (444–45; 34–35, emphasis added)

6 The “Delcharo” here is Hadoula’s daughter, named after Hadoula’s mother, as Greek custom dictates.

7 Is it a coincidence that all the husbands in the novella are pretty ridiculous figures? Consider, for instance, Konstantis’s ridiculous ineptitude after his daughter’s death (ch. στ), or the ease with which Hadoula persuades Lyringos that his wife is in labour again, a few days after their daughter was born (Papadiamantakes, 1989:511).
Who (τίς) is this “someone” (τίς) who persuaded Konstantis to wed? Why are the details of the story impossible to narrate (ἀνεκδιήγητα)? Perhaps Hadoula follows in her mother’s footsteps. The employment of the same idiosyncratic metaphor for pregnancy makes their voices consonant. If that elusive “someone” is Hadoula and her tactics witchcraft, then the story is unnarratable. Or, what amounts to the same thing, the “someone” might be anyone but Hadoula, since her spell has determined the others’ reality. And it is the “suddenly” (ἐξαφνα), wedged between the verb and the object of the magical spell/metaphor, which raises the suspicion that Hadoula, like her mother, employed witchcraft. For it requires a phrase that functions like a conjurer’s trick, a linguistic imposition on and of reality, to convince the others that it is really unexpected for a couple to sleep together when they cohabit.

Although the text never actually labels Hadoula a witch, it is nevertheless implied persistently. Not only is Hadoula a well-known and highly-respected herbalist. Moreover, her meddling with the “will of God” by performing abortions is another fact that would have made her a witch in the villagers’ eyes. And how else but by witchcraft could anyone persuade the wife of the man that her son murdered to go to court to testify for his acquittal?

All these allusions go unnoticed in the “obvious” reading of the novella, and the parenthetical interposition “(ἐτόλμα νὰ τὸ σκεφθῇ;)” is not allowed to be a real question. But if the possibility is entertained that Hadoula is a witch, then her wish for Xenoula to drown is very much a curse. It is the imposing of a reality by means of language, very much like theia-Siraino whose words of witchcraft lead to the aga’s demise. The narrator’s address to the reader does not merely ask whether Hadoula wondered whether her wish precipitated the death: the text does not leave any doubt that she did ask that question. The issue is whether Hadoula interpreted it as the wish of God, mixing Christianity and paganism — a daring act (ἐτόλμα) indeed.


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The moment the narrator is permitted to doubt his own authoritative insight in Hadoula’s intentions, the moment Hadoula’s daring is acknowledged, an insidious doubt about the “straightforwardness” of the narration arises. The very moment when the narrator is unsure whether the daring is real or fabricated, factual or textual, that same moment releases the possibility for the same doubt to appear elsewhere. The ambivalence about the Christian world administered by the “reality” of the God-fearing villagers (including the narrator), and the world of magic whose double-edged metaphoricity is available only to Hadoula undermines the “obvious” truthfulness of the narrative. It even allows for the possibility that Hadoula did not “really” commit any murders. Perhaps people were suspicious and scornful of her magical skills (the craft that she inherited from her mother). All that was needed for their suspicion to be lethally aroused would be for Hadoula to find herself at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Towards the end of the novella, when Hadoula evades her pursuers in the mountains, she chances upon the monk Josaphat at Agaliano’s brook and tells him of her troubles:

— Τὰ βάσανα δὲν λείπουν ἀπὸ τὸν κόσμο, γερόντισσα … Ὅσο καὶ νὰ κάμῃ ὁ ἄνθρωπος, δὲν μπορεῖ νὰ τ’ ἀποφύγῃ …
— Ἄχ! πάτερ Γιασέφ, εἶπεν ἐν θλιβερῇ διαχύσει ἡ Φραγκογιαννοῦ. Να ’μου πουλι νὰ πέταγα!!!
— “Τίς δώσει μοι πτέρυγας ἢ σει περιστεράς; εἶπεν ὁ Ἰωάσαφ, ἐνθυμηθεὶς τὸν ψαλμόν.
— ‘Ἡθελα νὰ ἐφευγα ἀπ’ τὸν κόσμο, γέροντά μου … Δὲν μπορώ νὰ υποφέρω πλιά!
— “Εμακρύνας φυγαδεύουσα καὶ πύλισθης ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ”, εἶπεν πάλιν ὁ γέρων μοναχός.
— Μεγάλη φομπότονα μ’ ἁπάντω, γέροντά μου, καὶ μεγάλη λιγοψυχία μ’ ἐκόλλησε.
— Ὁ Θεὸς νὰ σὲ γλυτώσῃ κόρη μου “ἀπὸ ὀλιγοψυχίας καὶ ἀπὸ καταιγίδος”, ἐπέφερεν ὁ Ιωάσαφ, συνεχίζων τὸν ψαλμόν.
— Ἀπ’ τὴν κακία, ἀπ’ τὴν κακογλωσσία, ἀπ’ τὸ φθόνο, δὲν μπορεῖ νὰ γλυτώσῃ ἐνας ἄνθρωπος.
— “Καταπόντισσον, Κύριε, καὶ καταδίελε τὰς γλώσσας αὐτῶν, ὅτι εἶδον ἀνομίαν καὶ ἀντιλογίαν ἐν τῇ πόλει”, ἐπέρανεν ὁ πάτερ Ἰωάσαφ.
“There's no lack of tortures in this world, old lady. Whatever a man does, he can't escape them.”

“Ach! Father Josaphat,” said Frankojannou in a sorrowful outburst. “If only I were a bird to fly away!”

“Who shall give me wings as a dove?” said Josaphat, recalling the psalm.

“I should like to flee away from the world, old man. I can't stand any more!”

“Thou hast fled afar off and made thine abode in the wilderness,” the old monk continued.

“A terrible storm has come down on me, old man, and I have a great depression in me.”

“May God preserve you, my daughter, ‘from all depression and every storm’,” said Josaphat continuing the psalm.

“From malice and evil gossip and envy no one can escape.”

“Drown O Lord and divide their tongues, because in the city I have seen lawlessness and dispute,” concluded father Josaphat.

This meeting does not seem to contribute any information to the story. The brief dialogue has no impact on the course of events. The “obvious” reading would interpret it as confrontational for Hadoula. A sociopolitical interpretation would perceive Josaphat’s utterances in Biblical Greek as totally incomprehensible to the peasant Hadoula (Layoun, 1990:50). A moralist would discern the higher authority of the Scripture superimposed on Hadoula’s debased register. They both see an ethical imperative functioning here: the former as a laudable demand to change the world, the latter as the obligation to conform to divine strictures.

Conversely, if the narrator is identified with the “voice of the village”, then the subcontext of Hadoula’s actions is the relation between the divine and the pagan. Hadoula’s transgression is merely to address such a taboo relation. Now, from this perspective, on the one hand, the dialogue with the monk would indicate an acceptance of Hadoula, and, on the other hand, the Psalm would constitute an encapsulation of the whole story. The question is whether Hadoula would dare to assume a divine presence in the casting of the spell. The repetitive structure of the exchange, whereby Hadoula anticipates the Psalm, confirms the proximity and the possible interchange of the two realms, the Christian
and the pagan. Josaphat emphatically confirms Hadoula's linguistic description of the world. The monk's recapitulation, therefore, functions as an answer in the imperative to the question of the connection between divine and pagan: Dare to think the thought, dare to accept the divine echo.

Josaphat's quotation is “jointed with Hadoula's predicament”,9 it is a summary of her situation. It is their evil tongues and slender spirit that holds Hadoula accountable. The villagers’ distrust of the witch is magnified by her accidental presence in a series of deaths. Speculative remarks turn into outright suspicion and then to a certainty of guilt that forces Hadoula to escape to deserted places. The story has been handed down as this village verdict and is repeated in the realist mode of story. This village verdict, which is responsible for the plot of The Murderess, is what Proguidis calls the “journalism” that Papadiamantes fiercely resists. The main characteristics of “journalism” are simplistic moral judgements, the bowdlerising of mystery and the de-humanisation of lived experience (Proguidis, 1998:347). And it is precisely these characteristics which have transformed a herbalist who performs abortions into an evil and murderous witch. The words of the Psalm apply literally to Hadoula's sufferings. The dialogue between Hadoula and father Josaphat makes possible a complete inversion of the story, since it functions as a meta-commentary that undermines the truthfulness of the narrator.

An attentive consideration of the text easily shows that the assumption of the straightforwardness and truthfulness of the narration in The Murderess is unjustified. The Murderess is a complex narrative. Both a Christian interpretation, which sees Hadoula as the embodiment of evil, and a socio-political reading, which focuses on the social inequalities that lead to Hadoula's murders, fail to account for this complexity. They both presuppose the truth of the narrated events in order to discover a moral message. But the text undermines the narrator, to the extent that even Hadoula's guilt can be contested. Like her mother,

9  “προσηρμόζοντο κάπως εἰς τὴν θέσιν της” (Papadiamantes, 1989:507).

Hadoula is — or, at least, is perceived to be — a witch. A number of ambiguities make it impossible to ascertain whether the third person narrator is “objective”, or whether he represents the voice of the village whose rumours and suspicion condemn Hadoula. Papadiamantes’s strategy of undermining the narrator shifts the accent of the novella away from a symptomatology of murder and into the very act of interpretation itself. There is an irrational leap that necessarily regulates the relation between exteriority and interiority in both the Christian and the socio-political interpretation: the Christian seizes upon God’s eternal grace, while the socio-political seizes upon the given that causally determines Hadoula’s actions. Neither can negotiate a middle path which does not make an unwarranted metaphysical claim. It is precisely this middle path that Papadiamantes’s narrative interrogates, the path “between divine and human justice”.

“Between divine and human justice”

After the deaths of the girls, Hadoula leaves the town fearing the police and hides in the countryside. One day she is discovered by her pursuers, escapes and decides to seek absolution from a monk at a church on a tiny island thirty metres off the coast. As she arrives in front of the island, other pursuers appear. She runs toward the island, although the tide seems high. And, indeed, it is too high, so that she drowns pursued by the law and unable to reach the shelter of the church. The last sentence of the novella reads: “Ἡ γραῖα Χαδούλα εὗρε τὸν θάνατον ... μεταξὺ τῆς θείας καὶ τῆς ἀνθρώπινης δικαιοσύνης.” [“Old Hadoula met

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10 To repeat, the aim of this section has not been to assert the innocence of Hadoula in a legal sense, but rather to challenge the assumption that the text is straightforward. Further, only a few complexities of the text have been indicated. There are plenty of issues in the passages chosen that could have been further elaborated. And there are numerous other equally complex passages. For example, the names of Hadoula’s sons are mixed up (see Papadiamantes, 1989:426 and cf. pp. 449–50 and p. 453). This does not need to be taken as a mere mistake; instead, it can be taken as an error in Paul de Man’s sense, that is, as a trope and as an ineluctable diversion from truth.
her death ... between divine and human justice”) (520; 127). Just before she is submerged in the water, Hadoula looks up at the rocky precipice and sees the barren lot that her parents gave her for her wedding. She says: “νά τὸ προικιό μου!” [“There is my dowry!”] (520; 127).

The space between the divine and the secular where Hadoula expires is crucial. Her plight cannot be reduced to mysticism nor to statutory law. Her death is staged between these two extremes. What calls for further elucidation is the nature of this middle point. Our main clue is Hadoula’s final utterance: “There is my dowry!” It is obviously meant to be a moment of self-knowledge, emanating from Hadoula’s personal history and her connection to the collective historical past, signifying a sense of community but also starkly delineating the individual. The word “dowry” encapsulates Hadoula’s relationship to her parents and husband; it establishes a connection with the familial as well as the broader historical past; it refers to the socio-political context of her island as a law that determines communication; and it causes Hadoula’s murders and the position in between divine and human justice. The question is: In what way are the relations established at that position constitutive of Hadoula’s self-knowledge?

It would be helpful to compare for this purpose The Murderess to Crime and Punishment. Raskolnikov’s crime is not so much the murder of a pawnbroker, as his presumption that it is possible for a single person to rationalise the meaning of the law and thus to arrive at an internalised ethical system. Raskolnikov takes justice into his own hands. Hadoula commits the same crime. Painfully aware of the extreme poverty of her fellow villagers, she takes it upon herself to relieve them of the burden of providing a dowry for their daughters. One can speculate to what extent Hadoula is modelled on Raskolnikov, but the fact of such a modelling is beyond doubt. Fourteen years before the publication of The Murderess, Papadiamantes had made the first translation into Greek of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment.

The relevance of Crime and Punishment becomes apparent by considering the letter to Katkov, the editor of the Russian Messenger that serialised Crime and Punishment, in which Dostoevsky provides
a synopsis of the novel: A man performs a crime and no one suspects him. The murderer thinks that he can evade punishment, except that “Divine truth and human law take their toll, and he ends up by being driven to give himself up ... because it will make him one with the people again ... The criminal decides to accept suffering to expiate his deed” (quoted in Buchanan, 1996:1). However, Dostoevsky faced more problems than he had foreseen as the novel approached its conclusion. Not only did he have to account for a change of mind in Raskolnikov which would lead to the confession, but he also had to reckon with the problem of redeeming Raskolnikov. Accepting his crime and resigning himself to suffering brings only punishment. Self-knowledge is also required. Raskolnikov needs to become aware of his “return to humanity”. It is Raskolnikov’s dream of the plague-ridden world that performs this function at the end of the epilogue. Both Crime and Punishment and The Murderess, then, are concerned with the space between divine and human justice. Further, in both works there is a final event that reveals to the heroes something important about their subjectivities. This self-knowledge that happens in a flash has all the hallmarks of a revelation.

Revelation is necessarily linked to a regulative secret or mystery, since there would be nothing to be revealed, if everything were already known. The disruption of the world order is the essential force of revelation. Thus, revelation presupposes a rootedness in a primordial past or time of origin. Further, a revelation places a demand on the future. The “message” of the revelation receives a practical articulation. The revelation disrupts the old world order, replacing it with a new one. But in the dispensation of the law, the nature of revelation is radically altered. The revelation becomes institutionalised by church and state. The present actualisation of revelation in the institutions of the law is then purely determined by its past moment of genesis and its futural exigency.11 Paradoxically, institutionalised ethics divest revelation of

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11 This analysis of revelation, especially in its institutionalised form, follows Ricoeur, 1977.
its disruptive character. Revelation is actualised as the law’s actualisation in the present. There is a confluence, even coincidence, of revelation and law. Thus transformed, revelation is primarily concerned with the past and the future. Its embodiment in institutions robs revelation of its disruptive power in the present. Thus, the revelation’s actualisation is also its nullification. A revealed rationalisation is *in tandem* a rationalisation of revelation. For if there is an institution that embodies the revelation, then there is no more mystery; the mystery has been hypostatised. The law presupposes that there is no longer any need for revelation. The upshot is that the present is totally surrendered to the rational way that an institution functions. The law may be for “us”, but one is never allowed to enter into it — that is, not allowed to disrupt it by a further revelation; one is only allowed to stand before it. 

Here enters Raskolnikov. He realises that his present is given by an external law. The idea arises: “What if I can enter the law by rationalising?” Raskolnikov’s justification for the murder is that he can subvert the law by using the law’s own tools. He is here the sceptic who doubts the validity of values by following the values’ own precept to their extreme conclusion. Raskolnikov moves away from the norms of the community by asserting that it is only himself and no one else who possesses what is correct and ethical. He remains an unredeemed soul until the dream. However, there is something paradoxical about Raskolnikov’s revelatory dream. What precipitates his salvation is a repetition of the process that caused his downfall. In the dream, he identifies with the select few who evade the plague and rise above the derangement of the masses and their debasement of moral law. But precisely because “no one had seen these people anywhere” (Dostoevsky, 1991:627), they appear just like the murderer whom no-one recognises and who separates himself from the rest of the population. Perhaps it is not self-knowledge but solipsism that saves Raskolnikov.12 He convinces himself that he is right by completely

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12 I take the description of the dream as a form of solipsism following Michael Holquist’s suggestion (1977:158). Holquist is not referring to *Crime and Punishment* but to the
DIMITRIS VARDOUOLAKIS

internalising the notions of community and law. If beforehand his transgression was an act of rationalisation, the dream reveals to him that it is the other people’s rationalisations that constitute madness. The sceptical Raskolnikov takes a leap of aggression by denying the rest of the world; his resurrected double takes a leap of faith by claiming that the whole world conforms to his solipsism. This is nothing but the other side of the same coin: at the extremes of rationality, there is only irrationality, which exhibits itself either as sceptical negation or as solipsistic pietism. While the sceptical move was precipitated by the exasperation against the “mechanism” of society, the religious move is the embrace of the world order. But they are both equally arbitrary, they both require a “leap” that sets Raskolnikov apart. This leap gives priority to the future, since both moves seek to establish a normative ethical order. At the end, Raskolnikov finds himself in a complete stasis: physically, since he is imprisoned; emotionally, since he finally shows unconditional love towards Sonya; and, intellectually, since his faith was precipitated by an inexplicable illumination. This solipsistic stasis, adhering to the structure of revelation, is an annihilation of change and an annulment of the present.

It is at this point that the issue of literature’s ability to express or question a normative ethic can be raised. Does literature depict an imperative on how one acts? More specifically, is the resurrected Raskolnikov established as an exemplar of moral action? I am not sure whether Dostoevsky believed that literature had this ability and, therefore, I am not sure whether Crime and Punishment ends with a “moral message”. But I argue that Papadiamantes rejects the possibility of ethics in literature.

For an ethical system to be possible in a novel the character has to be taken as somehow a real person. Raskolnikov is true to life.
Raskolnikov had a true resurrection. There is a true normative basis operating in the novel. Dostoevsky delivers a true message — or, perhaps, Dostoevsky truly delivers a message. The first and last premise have to be necessarily true, while the other two may also be false — but they cannot be nonsensical or arbitrary. In any case, the most important aspect is that a character has to be thought of as a representation of a flesh and blood person. Clearly, this is only possible by expanding and/or contracting the content of the character. For instance, if Raskolnikov’s resurrection is imbued with a Christian ethic, then it has to be assumed that Raskolnikov has a much more complex and engaged relation to religion than the end of the novel states. Simultaneously, Raskolnikov’s solipsism would have to be ignored and thus the self-consciousness of his experience shrinks. In any case, the revelation that may indicate an ethical conclusion to Crime and Punishment has left Raskolnikov without a present. If his ethics presuppose a singular man in a doomed world, then the valuation of action can only be understood in terms of the past which provides the singularity, and the future which offers a hope of salvation.

Taking the opposite view, namely that literature does not prescribe ethical norms, would place the emphasis squarely on the present relations of the character. The dream of Raskolnikov, for instance, will no longer be important as precipitating a change of moral attitude. Instead, the dream would open up the possibility of relating Raskolnikov’s solipsism to his environment. The revelation throws Raskolnikov into a situation which can be investigated. The defining feature of the situation is no longer an imported normativity, nor an instance of his changed futural attitude. What is at stake is Raskolnikov’s present situation, as it is given by his “self-formation”. What Walter Benjamin contends about the characters in Goethe’s Elective Affinities is equally true of Raskolnikov and Hadoula:

13 In other words, all the premises must have a cognitive significance in order to become value judgements. This precludes judgements like “The oak is isosceles” which are arbitrary in the sense that there is no sensible relation between the subject and the predicate.
These characters are not natural, for children of nature — in a fabulous or real state of nature — are human beings. At the height of their cultivation, however, they are subject to the forces that cultivation claims to have mastered, even if it may forever prove impotent to curb them. These forces have given them a feeling for what is seemly; they have lost the sense of what is ethical. This is meant as a judgement not on their actions but rather on their language (Benjamin, 1997:304).

To this extent, the category of truth is totally inappropriate to literature. It is not possible to assume that the events of the story correspond to, or copy, or mimic real events. What matters is not the content of the characters’ experience, but the relations that the description of the experiences establishes. Papadiamantes’s persistent strategy of undermining the veracity of the narration is neither a sceptical move about any unknowability of reality or norms, nor a leap of faith, since Hadoula dies before she reaches the church. The strategy of undermining the narrator allows Papadiamantes to question both the sceptic and the zealot, but without his own text falling prey to either of them.

Dostoevsky’s influence on Papadiamantes is manifest in Hadoula’s rationalisation of the law and the symmetrical staging of her final revelation. In the early hours of the morning by her sick grand-daughter’s cradle, Hadoula deduces the permissibility of committing a crime in order to improve the fate of the living. Her crime is premised on a calculation of the impact that the death or the survival of the young girl will have. The dowry is the heavy burden that the poor villager cannot carry, tipping the scale in favour of murder. When Hadoula utters “There is my dowry!” at the final moment before the water chokes her, she realises the “material cause” of her transgression. But unlike Raskolnikov, Hadoula is not allowed to have an afterlife. She does not make a choice between scepticism and solipsism, but rather the ring of her words lingers on as an insistent questioning of these extremes. “There is my dowry!” is not a religious revelation, since there is no future posited here. But it is a revelation to the extent that in the in-between space that makes questioning possible Hadoula has gained her present — even for a brief moment before her final breath.
As a genuine, or un-institutionalised revelation, Hadoula’s utterance has a disruptive force. This brief moment emphasises the relations established in her character in order to question them.

The temporal structure of religious revelation would also have operated in *The Murderess* — as in *Crime and Punishment* — if the events of the story were taken as true and as bearing a moral message. Kolyvas argues that Papadiamantes’s characters “partake of a religiously determined norm and ethical rules,” and thus “revelation enlightens the truth and conceptualises time and human life,” and the truth leads to “a futural interpretation of past and present.” The Orthodox interpretation invests a metaphysically charged norm in the dowry. Hadoula is punished by divine law. A similar manoeuvre can be performed by a socio-political interpretation. The religious norms are replaced here by the forces of dialectical materialism. The dowry is invested with all the possible dicta about social inequality in Greece that can be found in historical treatises. Hadoula symbolises an impossible attempt to break free from human injustice. She seeks a better future and perishes pursued by the representatives of the oppressive human law. Finally, the ethics of *The Murderess* will also have to expand the character of Hadoula to accommodate her future intentions and simultaneously to contract her character in order to avoid the solipsism of her final utterance.

It remains unclear whether Dostoevsky intended an ethical interpretation of Raskolnikov, because in his synopsis he places the character under the law: “Divine truth and human law take their toll, and he ends up by being driven to give himself up”. Conversely, Papadiamantes is unequivocal that Hadoula “found her death between divine and human justice.” There is neither a religious nor a secular archimedean point. The barren lot (τὸ προικίο) of her final utterance is not merely an item of her dowry (προῖκα); more importantly, it stands for her

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14 Kolyvas, 1991:16, 19, and 20 (my trans.). Although Kolyvas is referring to the short stories “Φτωχός Ἁγιος”, “Τὸ νησί τῆς Οὐρανίτσας”, and “Ὁ γάμος τοῦ Καραχμέτη”, the same point would also apply to *The Murderess*. 


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endowments (προικισμένη) and how that relates to her personal past and the historical past, as well as a determination of her communality. Her whole self-formation is present in the word προικιό: the dynamics within her family that shaped her personality and led to her wedding are signified by this parental gift. There is also a gesture towards the customs of nineteenth-century Skiathos that, on the one hand, required the dowry, and, on the other hand, provided Hadoula with her cultural milieu and shaped her upbringing, mature life and interaction with her neighbours. And, finally, her special gifts as a witch are her mother’s other προικιό which served her well in life, established her position in the village and eventually led to her downfall.

If there is a judgement to be made by *The Murderess* it cannot be an ethical one. Instead, what is judged is language. The aesthetic justice that pertains to language occupies a relative space between the divine and the secular. This in-between position is what sustains the novel *qua* literature and does not let it lapse into a symbolic order. To that extent the category of truth may be useful for literature after all, but in a totally different sense than “the truth of the events of the story”. If there is a truth content to the work of literature, then the truth of literature becomes its capacity to live, not to live on in truth, but to live on.\(^\text{15}\)\(^\text{15}\)\(^\text{15}\)\(^\text{15}\) The content of truth is given by its form — a form that appears as that which is ineliminably present. In the course of this article, *The Murderess* has exhibited repeatedly this insistence (truth) of literary language. Above all, the truth of language manifests itself in Hadoula’s final utterance, which is allowed to speak only when it is not taken as a value judgement addressed to the reader but, instead, as a lingering question of the relations established in the word προικίο. There is no constitutive conception of Hadoula’s selfhood; rather, Hadoula’s becoming is the regulative principle that dispenses literary truth as the secret sustained in the word προικίο.

\(^\text{15}\) I am paraphrasing here Andrew Benjamin, 1991:155.
BETWEEN DIVINE AND HUMAN JUSTICE

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