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Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Varia Issue (Summer, 1983), pp. 403-408

Published by: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40138823>

Accessed: 05-06-2017 23:05 UTC

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## Greece's Poet-Chronicler Tákis Sinópoulos (1917–81): An Interview

By E. D. KARAMPETSOS & DONALD D. MADDOX Tákis Sinópoulos was born in 1917 in the Peloponnesian village of Aghoulitsa, near

Pirgos. He was the foremost of the postwar Greek poets, the generation succeeding that of Nobel laureates George Seferis (see *BA* 42:2, pp. 190–198) and Odysseus Elytis (see *BA* 49:4, pp. 629–716 and *WLT* 54:2, pp. 189–201). In 1940, when the Italians attacked Greece, Sinópoulos was a medical student. Mobilized, he worked in a hospital in Corinth until the fighting ended and he could resume his studies. During the Civil War (1946–49) he served as a doctor with the Greek army. As Sinópoulos himself explains, he saw so many people die that death became an obsession. Together with the ghosts of old acquaintances and former passions, this obsession haunts his poetry.

His first volume of poetry, "No Man's Land," was published in 1951 and was followed by seventeen more; these have been collected into two volumes published by Ermis in Athens. Much of Sinópoulos's poetry was rendered into English during the 1970s. *Deathfeast* (1975) was the first of several works translated by John Stathatos and published by Oasis Books; others are *Stones* (1980), *The Grey Light* (1981) and, in collaboration with Wire Press, *Selected Poems* (1981). In 1979 the Ohio State University Press published *Landscape of Death*, an anthology of Sinópoulos's poems translated and introduced by Kimon Friar (see *WLT* 54:2, p. 321).

The interview took place on 23 September 1980 in Sinópoulos's Pirgos office. At first glance, with his bushy moustache, ruddy complexion and blue eyes, Sinópoulos seemed typecast for the film role of a British officer; but as he took a deep drag from one of the many cigarettes he would smoke that afternoon and started talking, the impression changed. The two hours of taped conversations, recorded between visits by patients, took three and a half hours to accumulate.

No appointment was necessary for the patients who walked through the open door to be greeted with a mixture of gruff kindness and humor. A grandmother with back problems winced every time he made her laugh and provoked new pain. She carried with her a plastic bag filled with prescriptions from doctors she had previously consulted. She had been taking the medicine according to whim and the amount of pain she felt. Since nothing seemed to help, she wanted Sinópoulos to prescribe something else. He tried to persuade her to take only some of the medicines she already had in a more rational way. When she complained that the pain got worse every time she picked

up her working daughter's baby, Sinópoulos advised her to let him cry. "All the men in this country have been spoiled because Greek women insist on picking them up when they cry," he shouted as she left. Then he picked up where he had been interrupted, and the interview resumed.

His office and the adjoining rooms were lined with shelves containing medical and literary works. On the walls hung the poet's abstract art. On the floors, chairs and tables sat tall stacks of books, periodicals and envelopes. Many had been sent by friends and aspiring writers who hoped for a comment or a word of encouragement. Sinópoulos, depressed by his declining health, had been unable to glance at them. The day before Easter 1981, shortly before he was to leave for England as the main guest of the Cambridge International Poetry Festival, Sinópoulos died.

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Q: Initially, your poems were hard to understand because we found them so unusual, and because of their length. They seem, however, to have a sort of cumulative effect, reminding me of a long poem by Eluard, "Poésie ininterrompue."

TS: Yes, possibly, but I don't think Eluard had any particular influence on me. More accurately, I would look for my roots in that *type* of poem, maybe in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, which—in some way—uses characters and relates a little story.

Q: That impresses me because Poe is not a great influence in American poetry. Most of his influence comes by way of Baudelaire's translations, which influenced the French and so many others.

TS: Yes, I too have read Poe in translation—French, mainly Greek. Despite that, in my early poems—primarily my first book—there is an atmosphere, an indeterminate climate of Edgar Allan Poe. Not, of course, that I've taken an awful lot from Poe, because I obviously lack entirely, let's say, Poe's "space." I move in a contemporary space, but I have taken a lot from Poe's oneiric, fantastic quality.

Q: Concerning dreams, in your poems we find the dream, delusion, nightmare, hallucination.

TS: All these exist in my poems; now one, now the other: visions, hallucinations, particularly the dream.

Q: Are you trying to exorcise the dream, or to approach it like the surrealists, who try to confront it, to connect it with reality?

TS: Not to exorcise it. I just try to write it down in my own way; but because my way of writing it down is not fragmented the way a dream is fragmented, with un-

related things and personages scattered randomly through its space, I try to put things in an order. Naturally, I can only write about dreams I remember when I wake. They are usually morning dreams, which are clearer, more accessible. So let's say I record the illogical dream in a logical manner. That's how I would put it. The spiritual development of the poem as it is further elaborated may finally have no particular relation to the original dream and its useless embellishment; but the impetus is always, particularly in the early volumes, the dream.

Q: Death and dream are often linked. Kimon Friar says you are obsessed with death. Ionesco claims his works are an attempt to accustom himself to death in order to live more humanly. Does that relate to your work?

TS: I don't know if I do that. In any case, death initially enters my work with a dual nature. One arises from my work as a doctor, whether I want it or not. Basically, I see many dead people. Some die in my hands; others are found dead; still others I watch gradually waste away. On the other hand, there's death in war, where I watch the wounded dying, or those who have been killed, and so on. Thus, in a sense, my whole life has been marked by such deaths; and because my temperament is that of a pacifist—I am against war, against violence and against killing, but I have no political stance—as a human being, I can't endure it. I have lived between these two Symplegades all my life: those who died of sickness or sudden death in my private life, and the war dead—those fallen in the Albanian War and the German Occupation, those who died of hunger in the streets of Athens, the victims of war and of guerrilla fighting, the dead of December 1944–January 1945 in the continuation of the heroic December events. All these things—add, of course, dead relatives—have created a continuous space filled with dead people, leading me to write somewhere in one of my books, "The Chronicle," that I have become a regular cemetery and that one day I must be done with these dead people. I don't try to exorcise death, because as a doctor I know death is unavoidable; and I don't try to purchase life through death, because I'm not afraid of death. Nor am I, at the same time, dismayed enough with life to try for another by meditating, in some way, on the nightmare of death. No, I regard these things as completely natural and inescapable phenomena.

Naturally, with my sensitivity and experience, I am pained by the wretched state of humanity—that we should have constant wars and millions of dead. Wars never stop—world wars, local wars, left and right. In a way, all these things burden me; moreover, I have a guilty conscience for all those deaths. I am myself guilty of those deaths—I believe I didn't do enough as a person, didn't do my duty, to ward off this evil. Of course, I did even more than I was able, but I was never satisfied and have never been able to quiet my feelings of guilt toward that human suffering.

Q: Parallel to the theme of death, there seems to be a very strong sense of the erotic, the libido, in your poetry. Death is everywhere, but it seems, in a way, to contain its opposite.

TS: Yes, but before we pursue that subject, let me say a few more words on the theme of death. My last two books—that is, works which have come out as books—"The Chart" and "The Book of Night," especially the former, are works with a very strong sense of death. Here, of course, we are dealing with something different from what came before, from other deaths I described earlier. I experienced a serious crisis as a result of my own illness. I was in danger several times, near death, in and out of the hospital two or three times; and I also suffered what I would call a "psychological crisis" between 1974 and 1979. An ugly psychological crisis—I reached a state of depression, which of course revealed itself in "The Chart" and "The Book of Night," but which, at the same time, manifested itself in a revulsion against any form of writing and reading. I felt the futility of trying, of struggling to conquer, let's say, "new heights."

I reached a point where I couldn't even answer my correspondence. Various poets, mainly young ones, were sending hundreds of books, and I couldn't answer, even to say "Thank you." Often I couldn't even open the envelope to see whose book it was—even to read a single poem. Do you understand? I'm still fighting it. A friend of mine, a psychiatrist, told me this is what we call "depression." You don't take medicine, nothing at all, and you struggle to break the cycle yourself and get beyond the anguish that is torturing you. After three whole years, of course, in the meantime, I had written "The Book of Night"—in any event, from the end of 1977 until the end of 1979 I was a wreck. I began to recover only in 1980, slowly; and I wrote that collection of poetry, *Politis*, which, according to friends, is perhaps the best work I've done till now. That is, it is a further conquest, beyond my previous accomplishment. Those things wore me out and were quite important—because this was the sense not of someone else's death, but of my own future death. Fear wasn't the overriding force. It was, rather, the sense that death is coming, and since it's coming, what's the point of desiring more? Thus the depression, the cessation of every kind of work. Today, at least I can talk. If you had requested a written interview, I would never have been able to give it to you; I would never have been able to sit down and write on paper what I'm saying to you. Orally, however, even if muddled, I can articulate certain things to you. Do you understand?

Well, now we can go on to the question of Eros you raised earlier. The erotic element is supreme in my poetry. In my youthful poetry it was self-evident—it speaks clearly about love, about erotic bodies, the sea, suns, et cetera. Later, after I had undergone my first experience of war and had begun to write my serious poetry, Eros was never absent; but it had entered a

second level and is always heard as a secondary theme. Nowhere is it in first place, except possibly in a book called "Helen." There you find a sort of erotic outpouring, but it isn't eroticism. At least, I would say, it isn't realistic eroticism—rather an ideal picture of love than of eroticism itself. Eroticism is also found in "Midpoint," sometimes manifest, sometimes hidden, and in the other books, including "The Song of Ioanna and Konstandhinos." This large volume about a couple is basically founded on human relationships, which in turn are based on sexual relationships. How two people meet, fall in love, come together, marry and, finally, how their ties are slowly worn away by the years until they separate. So the entire gamut of sexual experience and its various levels is described. The erotic element is in other books, in all the poems. Though I told you that it isn't always the governing theme for me, I would still say I'm an erotic poet.

Q: I didn't mean that exactly, but rather that I felt, with all the horror and all the death, there is always a saving eroticism that draws you away from death and makes you feel like a living being, that makes you carry on even though others have died, in spite of nightmares.

TS: I don't know if Eros plays that role, saving life from death. Eros also has a destructive side in the sense that death and Eros are intertwined. Eros doesn't help you escape from death and regain life. On the contrary, it pushes you into confrontation with death, into acquaintance with death, or into a catastrophe through death. I'm basically pessimistic about the duration, meaning and weight of the erotic relation between two people, especially when the relationship

is not simply a transient one of five, ten, twenty days or of one year, et cetera, but is a complement, lasting for years. Things change completely in this case; we have nothing to do or say about such things. It becomes a simple matter of cohabitation, of interdependence, of mutual esteem, living together under conditions of tenderness, of almost—I would say—brotherly or comradely love, the need for another's presence because you have become accustomed to having another presence in your house, to speak with, to make love with. But love is finally something extremely enfeebled; it is no longer love. It becomes merely a habit, a completely automatic act. You no longer feel that erotic joy you have when you first meet a woman.

Q: Something else that interests me is the apparent analogy between the poet and the "informer" that runs through your later poems. Is that based on a particular experience?

TS: No. I don't have any particular experience, and I don't think the reference to the informer is extended in my poetry. It's only in "The Chronicle." There I mention a certain informer, a certain traitor. In the others—"The Book of Night," for example—there are betrayals, but they are everyday human betrayals, of acquaintances, of friends or former friends, of women, et cetera. That's what there is. They have no relation to informers. Only in "The Chronicle." In *Deathfeast*, which refers again to that historical period, I don't think you can find it. I don't remember.

Q: Could it be that your sense of guilt for those who died has a partial responsibility, even though, as you said before, you did everything you could?

TS: No, it's not related. However, it might be related



TÁKIS SINÓPOULOS AT HOME, ATHENS, 1981 (© John Stathatos)

to our fears during the dictatorship, when our lives were in the hands of informers. We had organized a group that resisted the Colonels vigorously, and, of course, we feared an informer. We suspected that an informer from the security police had burrowed into our group. We learned later, for example, that the security police knew everything that happened at our meetings. They knew when we met, what was said and so on, as if there had been a microphone in the room where we were talking or a person who followed and reported everything that was said. So the idea of the traitor, the informer, could have entered my work through that.

Q: Let's move on to some more technical questions about the poems themselves. Could you give us a rough description of the rhythmic principle behind your later poems?

TS: Yes. The later poems and the earlier ones follow a single rhythmic principle. I would say "rhythmic principle" in the musical sense. Many poems function as though an underlying musical motif were operating beneath the superstructure, a musical motif, or many motifs—maybe I should say "a musical composition." One sees it in the early books such as "The Songs," and in later ones such as "In the Singular," which divides into five movements. After a fashion, we have a musical division—they follow a musical principle. There is also a rhythmic principle based on Greek meters of the old versification. There are, in many of my poems (scattered of course), fifteen-syllable lines, as well as a rhythm I would call iambic. Most of my poems—the last word of the poem, that is—are accented on either the ultimate or antepenultimate syllable. Rarely will you find a word accented on the penultimate syllable. There is always a break in the verse, a place where the line is divided. Even in my long-lined poems there are invisible, intervening breaks that divide their rhythm in reading. So the poem's rhythm is created by the reading. There is a pause at the division, the poem continues, then another division farther down, the voice pauses, we take a new breath and go at it again. That's what happens.

Q: Can you explain how all your poems are linked? How do the early ones differ from the later ones?

TS: I don't think they differ very much. They differ mainly in the versification, the creation of the line, in the organization of the poem. At first, many of my poems had a surface content that I developed for the length of the poem. This I would call the dramatic foundation of the poem—there are characters in it, characters who speak or don't speak to one another but who, in any case, exist in the poem. Later, little by little, I did away with the surface plane of the poem. I shattered the levels of the poem, put in fragments of various small narrative lines and extended the narrative structure through an entire book. For example, "The Song of Ioanna and Konstandhinos" is both a collection of poems and, at the same time, a novel. It is written in verse, dialogue, monologue and prose,

without anyone's being able to say it is a prose work. It's all poetry, regardless of the form in which it was written—even in the form of meditations, aphorisms or something else. The book that followed "Ioanna and Konstandhinos," "The Poetry of Poetry," is a small collection of words about poetry which are, at times, small lyric poems; at others, meditations on poetry written in the form of lyrics. They are not written the way an essayist or a critic writes. Here the rhythmic principle and the musical base I spoke of before are always functioning.

Little by little, after the dictatorship [i.e., 1974], I started writing poems with long versets. *Deathfeast*, for example, has poems written with three, four, two, three, four and five versets, which consist of two, three, four and five lines, each one a single verset—as are, more or less, the versets of Claudel. Claudel has done the same thing—not, of course, to the same extent. . . . You will find his versets are enormous, huge, and they go on, like a second verse, in another line, and so on. But I'm starting to exaggerate. Quite frequently I ended up with, say, five lines. Later, when I brought out "The Chronicle" in 1975, it was again a thematic poem, but written altogether as a book. It was a sort of historical chronicle of Greece between 1940 and 1974, but some poems were written in melodious verses, others in a kind of note on the poem, and still others as poems in themselves. In the last section, the part written in 1973–74 about the Polytechnic, there were both poems and prose poems. I used disparate elements, but that was the subject, the continuing resistance of the Greek people to oppression—whether from the Germans, the Greek establishment or the dictators. Within all this, there is the movement of many personages; there is an action. The action is never presented in the first person; it is referred to only indirectly. There are stories of people briefly recorded or represented by a single brushstroke, with two lines—stories of people, characterizations, images and everything else. So there is a difference between these and the early poems, but that difference doesn't lie in what I would call their "musical scoring" or underpinnings—rather in the versification itself. Their music always remains the same; the same rhythmic principle underlies all the poems.

Q: Your poetry seems to evolve toward a prose format from a more or less conventional verse arrangement. If this is anywhere close to the truth, do you think you've gained or lost anything in the transition?

TS: Yes, listen. To start with, I don't know whether I've gained or lost anything substantial in that regard. What concerned me most was my own inner impulse not to remain in the same unchanging poetic forms—that is, not to write poems in the same manner as in the beginning and repeat, in a way, the same things with some inner renewal, like many other poets. Their versification is external, monotonous, the same thing from beginning to end, but they still manage to renew themselves internally in some way. I wanted renewals

corresponding with an advance, a movement forward, and that desire led me to this thought: in recent years, we've ceased to be able to talk about different kinds of writing—that is, separately about poetry, separately about prose, separately about the prose poem, separately about thought, meditation, whatever else. We can use all of them. It suffices for them to submit to the dominion of the poet, or to the dominion of writing in general. All these things are called "writing." More than anything else, the language, not the kind of writing, determines the development and value of the poem you are making.

Q: We've been reading the poetry of Embiricós. Even though his poems seem completely different—because he has left behind the usual limits of form—we came to the conclusion that all his poems are basically the same. He differs only in the sense that instead of writing a sonnet or something like that, he writes an Embiricós poem, and every poem is like his signature. We have the impression you do something similar.

TS: No. I think what you say holds for Embiricós. What you recognize as Embiricós—without a signature—is his language. Language reveals the identity of the poet. If you read a text from a distance, without a signature, or if some reader at a lecture recites a poem to an audience and everyone shouts from below that it is Embiricós's or Seferis's or Elytis's, it means they know, they have learned the language of each one. There is no other differentiation, no other mark by which you can distinguish one from the other. The language is the only mark. Besides, in *The Grey Light*, published in the June issue of *Politis* [Citizen], there is a sort of return to the old versification, to brevity, to succinctness, to fragmented images with broken thought, with the dream element—all those things mixed together, but small, brief, more or less like the earlier verse.

Q: You have said you use surrealist materials in your own poems. Do you think the disparate elements of surrealism require a stronger principle of regularity to maintain cohesion than do other forms?

TS: I use surrealist materials, but I don't cut out anything. Quite simply, I use dreams and dream settings, the landscape of visions. That's the only use I make—and, possibly, the material of the absurd. But beyond that, I use all these things in a logical manner. This puts me in direct opposition to surrealism, which never makes logical use of its elements but simply records them as they are. There is no such thing in my work. The relation to surrealism—to which, I should add, I am in opposition, profound opposition, especially to Greek surrealism—ends there. Many times I have taken certain absurd elements, dream elements, this or that, which, in my opinion, does not mean there is a relation between my work and theirs. Now, I want you to pay attention here. Embiricós, with the passage of time, abandoned surrealism, the first surrealism, and proceeded to a second level of surrealism in which the fireworks, the absurd, the

oneiric, the automatic writing gave way—particularly the automatic writing, which completely disappeared. He ended up writing in a completely rational fashion, a strange thing for a person who began with totally incomprehensible poems.

Q: That's exactly why we asked the question. We find that Embiricós's last poems are regular, have acquired a form which is repeated in every poem.

TS: Yes, extremely regular; almost the form, I would say, of a classical poem or of something comparable to other poetic schools. Certainly in his last poems, those written during the final twenty years, Embiricós had gone beyond surrealism in its original form—up to 1945, let's say. From there, things began to evolve, as they evolved with Elytis too. Both poets sense themselves losing the ground from beneath their feet. They couldn't talk about or play the madman in such times, because here in Greece, after World War II, with the partisans, with the events in the Middle East, with the concentration camps, with the killing, with the hunger, with the death, a new consciousness began to take form in the people. They began to realize something stank in this country. That's why most of them joined EAM [the Greek Liberation Front]. Eighty percent of the Greek population supported EAM, either openly or covertly. Well, the Greek surrealists—I don't know why, for it's their business—in bringing the movement to Greece, brought only one side of surrealism: the esthetic side. They didn't even touch the revolutionary, social element of surrealism, an important aspect in France, either because the surrealists here were from upper-middle-class families and couldn't be bothered with such subjects, or because the Metaxás dictatorship [1936–40] put an end to every kind of display that had to do with social problems. Only after 1940 did consciences gradually begin to awaken again—a little with Elytis, a little with Embiricós. Okay. Basically with these two—not at all with Egonópoulos, because he's still conducting a monologue, even today; nothing disturbs his conscience. So Elytis's *Axion Esti*, written between 1956 and 1957, has elements from the Albanian War, the German Occupation and the resistance—elements, that is, which wouldn't have been put in his poetry before 1940.

Q: Well, we've exhausted our prepared questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything we've left out?

TS: There is one subject: the question of Greek historic space or intellectual space and how I dealt with it in my poetry. I enlisted in 1940, or rather 1941. The Greek-Italian War in Albania started in 1940. I enlisted later because I was still a last-year medical student. At first I served with various small medical units. Later I became an assistant surgeon, and they sent me to Larissa. That was in the summer of 1945. In the spring of 1946, the guerrilla war started. Naturally, the army mobilized, and I went along, wherever my battalion was sent. Somehow I managed to survive, beginning as a doctor at Loutraki, where the wounded were sent

from the border and the Greek-Italian War—there weren't many—and, later, surviving the entire German Occupation, the Italo-German Occupation, the December 1944 events and the Civil War of 1946–49. I was discharged in 1949.

After my discharge, I came to Athens, set up a medical practice and lived through the decade of 1950–60, the organization of a government of the Right and the right-wing terror. After that, of course, came the dictatorship. In other words, life wasn't exactly a piece of cake. I was active in all these things. I took part in the resistance against the dictatorship. All this has entered my poetry—that is, the historical, the geographic and, at the same time, the social space of that period in Greece permeates my work. My first books were motivated by a climate of existential anguish. At that time Europe was dominated by an atmosphere of existential mysticism, as found in Sartre, Camus, et cetera. Existentialism, as a philosophy, was in fashion then; here in Greece we had our own existentialist poetry. Add to that what I've already said about my own poetry's rhythmic principles and symbolic method. Well, then, the poem was that existential anguish. Within all that, however, in the poems, there were explicit references to the guerrilla war, the Albanian War and the events in general I experienced at that time. For example, one poem from "Midpoint," "Deathfeast for Elpenor," is a scene in the form of a dream that I experienced as a doctor with an army batallion in Larissa in 1946. Also, a poem from "Night and Counterpoint," "The Survivor"—a section which Mikis Theodorakis has set to music, a fine symphonic poem—comes out of the guerrilla war and is, in a way, guilt. I mean, naturally, that the guilt of a person who has survived the manslaughter emerges from the poem. After that, all the poems are nothing more than the memory and report of the events and circumstances of the Civil War and of the dictatorship—that is, *Stones*, *Deathfeast*, "The Chronicle" and part of "The Book of Night." In "The Book of Night" I return to existential situations, but among them still are numerous references to the war and the dictatorship.

I've been characterized as a sort of poet-chronicler of a certain moment in Greece, something no other poet has done so obviously and so systematically, since I return again and again to the same things, renewing my material. I think this is a significant trait both in my first books and in subsequent ones. Of course, it's there

in "Midpoint," a little in "The Songs," in "Midpoint II" and, swathed in symbol and allegory, also in the volume "Night and Counterpoint," where I speak clearly in the poem "The Survivor." Later, it is found in all the post-dictatorship collections: *Stones*, *Deathfeast*, "The Chronicle" and "The Book of Night." "The Chart" is an exception because it contains purely personal experiences, though parts of it still recall concentration camps, wars, arrests, killings, et cetera. These, then, are the elements necessary to help a reader understand my poetry.

One subject we perhaps didn't develop is that of Ezra Pound, whom, as I told you [we had touched briefly and unproductively on Pound earlier], I read in Greek and French translations. I was profoundly influenced by Pound's writing and his technique. As I was telling a friend of mine who is writing a study of "The Songs," the basic difference between us—excluding the question of stature, which was never raised—is that I organize a poem and, most basic, that I give it a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas with Pound a poem is, let us say, a continuous flow. My relation to Pound ends with the first books. Afterward I tried to make myself independent of Pound and Eliot and any other poet. To a certain extent I was influenced by Pierre-Jean Jouve, a great poet. The poem "Helen," for instance, is a transcription, a "meta-write," of his short poem "Hélène." I turned it into an entire book, but it was based on Jouve's style.

I also want to acknowledge Eliot's tremendous influence on me, basically with *The Waste Land*. The "wasteland" theme and Eliot's style became almost an obsession with me. Even in so recent a work as *Deathfeast* one can find an occasional little phrase that recalls Eliot. It may have escaped me without my wanting it; it may have become a sort of hidden memory, without my being conscious of it, my memory working underground and bringing to the surface—again, without my being aware of it—verses from Eliot.

Finally, there is our own poet, George Seferis. Seferis was a crucial figure in Greek poetry. He influenced people a great deal, and, naturally—favorably, most favorably—he influenced me, not openly, but as a human example of a writer and a stance. His erudition, his essays, his poetry brought a new epoch.

Salonika