

Βασίλης Μακρυδήμας, *Στον αστερισμό των αντιθέσεων. Ο κριτικός και δοκιμογράφος Τ.Κ. Παπατσώνης*. Athens: Gutenberg 2021. pp. 499.

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This book is a revised and extended version of part of the author's doctoral thesis (Ioannina) covering all the writings of T.K. Papatsonis and their reception in their time; the section now published is an account of Papatsonis the essayist and critic. Papatsonis is a notoriously difficult subject, presenting both a practical and an intellectual challenge. His literary productions span a long period, scattered across many newspapers and journals, some of them short-lived. Even the two-volume selection of his critical essays (*Τετραπέρατος κόσμος Α'*, hereafter ΤΚΑ, and *Όπου ἦν κῆπος*) is out of print and hard to obtain. The intellectual challenge derives from the poet's breadth of reading and range of interests: he was a voracious reader in several languages. This fact makes any overview of his sources and his assimilation of them a demanding task, yet one that is needed if we are to grasp the foundations of his critical outlook and follow its development over time.

We possess a number of detailed studies on Papatsonis. Some are by an older generation of critics: now they are increasingly by younger scholars (often in doctoral and master's dissertations). Such contributions have appeared in volumes of tributes and in special issues of magazines (among them, *Manifesto*, *Κ*, *Φρέαρ*) devoted to aspects of Papatsonis' criticism and essays. These aspects include translation; literary movements; reviews of Greek literary works on their first appearance; essays on or prefaces to foreign writers; and the reception of Greek writers over time. Some of the contributions to the field have been by M. himself, among them 'Ο Καβάφης του Τ.Κ. Παπατσώνη' and 'Τ.Κ. Παπατσώνης-Γιώργος Θεοτοκάς. Ένας ανεκπλήρωτος διάλογος με φόντο τον Χριστιανισμό'.

In the present study, however, M. sets out to provide an overall account of Papatsonis as critic and essayist. And he succeeds in doing so, both through his invaluable gathering-up of that author's scattered prose writings, and through his systematic recourse to this body of work to establish a comprehensive interpretative frame. I shall present its key elements here.

Papatsonis' critical oeuvre, which spans the period 1910-1975, is here divided into decades (with the exception of the last phase from 1950). This approach is illuminating on the topics of each decade and on the successive positions taken up by Papatsonis. We see him set out as a young poet seeking to stand on an equal footing with the literary establishment (and especially Palamas) and painstakingly establishing his own literary ancestry (not least in relation to Cavafy). We witness his struggle to adopt a distinctive stance vis-à-vis the Generation of the Thirties (with a critique of Seferis) and to be an advocate for the work of those poets who, in some measure, are in accordance with his own quest (Lapathiotis and *poésie pure*, Sikelianos and mysticism). Papatsonis at the same time sets out his elective affinities in relation to dominant trends (surrealism

as emancipation from rationalism). Later, as an established poet with key positions in the nation's cultural life (National Theatre, National Gallery, Society of Aesthetics, and the Academy), Papatsonis takes a new look, informed by long reflection, not only at the modern Greek literary canon, but at certain major foreign writers (Claudel, Hölderlin, Eliot) from whose work he had translated, but now with emphasis on the theological and the metaphysical.

M. provides a discussion of the most important features of each phase in an effort to situate them closely in their historical context, but without neglecting the factual or theoretical clarification needed to shed light on Papatsonis' critical approaches (the psychoanalytical among them). He sets out to show how – despite his abiding Christian commitment – this is an author who feels over time the attraction of Unanimism, Corporatism, Socialism understood as having roots in Christian justice, and Surrealism (viewed neutrally in political terms) in the interests of creating a renewed poetic idiom capable of expressing metaphysical emancipation (*Ursa Minor*). Such a stance is by no means unknown in Europe between the wars when it comes to groups of writers and intellectuals studied or translated by Papatsonis.

It has been noted before now that Papatsonis' essays are generally concerned with foreign writers, his shorter critical pieces with Greek writers, and principally the poets. His constant dialogue with foreign literature is indeed impressive, likewise his currency with developments abroad. Sometimes Papatsonis' essays are anecdotal in character, reflecting his own acquaintance with the writers in question; sometimes they have the nature of an encyclopaedic overview for Greek readers unfamiliar with the material, whom he terms 'isolated hermits of civilization and heirs to an inheritance which is not easy to shoulder' (TKA 290).

The close relationship Papatsonis establishes with the work of foreign writers (among them, Dante, Claudel, Eliot, Valle-Inclán, Hölderlin, Poe), most of them religious men and some of them converts, had a formative influence. It affected his life (his turn to Catholicism, in all probability) and his sense of the reality around him (which he almost always discerns intertextually). It affected the formation of his literary likes and dislikes (Hugo and Goethe among the latter); the forms of his poetry (the verset, especially); and its themes (nature, love, death, mysticism).

Yet Papatsonis is at pains to distinguish 'outward' imitation from creative assimilation. For him, true art is that which assimilates 'each influence under the personality of the artist, above all, and under a seal that manifests his consciousness of race and place' (TKA 299). Accordingly, the cleaving to particular writers is justified: they are 'revealing of our hidden and inexpressible inner essence' and contain 'a kernel or kernels of that eternal truth that guides the canons of the Beautiful' (TKA 319). Such declarations enable Papatsonis to assimilate the work of foreign writers in a way fitted to his sensibility and in creative fashion. This applies, both to his adhesion to a 'renewed formal mould' offered by Modernism, and to his critique of Greek writers; but it also helps him to promote his own hybrid type of Christianity, especially in his

later essays. He also proves able to entrench in a distinctive idiom his distinctive thematic (this M. terms ‘the poetic of antitheses’, picking up his book’s title). Space does not allow me to mention more than a few examples: the true art of race and place versus ‘stagnant cosmopolitanism’; a reevaluation of the Middle Ages (with emphasis on the art of the Church) versus the Renaissance (with its worldly rationalism); and, in that spirit, the promotion of that learned side of Byzantine culture which is at once part of the Greek tradition and possesses an ecumenical character as part of Christendom. Papatsonis, then, does not see the opposition of East and West as an antithesis so much as a cultural continuum (though he does, especially in the later period, draw attention to key differences). It is in such terms that he comes to form his own distinctive artistic presence and avoids the charge that he is *engagé* or easily categorized.

M.’s study combines a number of admirable and uncommon features: indefatigable work with the sources (this also marks his later book *T.K. Παπατσώνης, Άπαντα τα ευρεθέντα ποιήματα εκτός συλλογών 1911-1976*); acquaintance with the wider bibliography on those political, aesthetic, and religious questions which bear on Papatsonis; and fruitful dialogue with the work of other scholars. This book is the first rounded overview of Papatsonis’ oeuvre of criticism and essays and a sure foundation for any future study of the poet.

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