

The Image of Nicos Nicolaïdes in the Correspondence of Thodosis Pierides to Stratis Tsirkas

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RÉSUMÉ

Nikos Nikolaïdis était le «Mentor» d'un groupe de jeunes écrivains qui vivaient en Égypte dans les années de l'entre deux guerres et lui demandaient conseil en matière d'écriture. De la riche correspondance de l'écrivain de prose Stratis Tsirkas et du poète Theodosios Pieridis sont choisis des extraits dans lesquels d'un côté est tracée la physionomie de Nikos Nikolaïdis et d'un autre côté on éclaire les relations d'apprentissage ou de distanciation entre le «maître» et ses correspondants.

ABSTRACT

Nikos Nikolaïdis was the mentor of a group of young writers living in Egypt in the years between the two World Wars. A few excerpts selected from the many letters exchanged between the novelist Stratis Tsirkas and the poet Theodosios Pieridis trace a portrait of Nikos Nikolaïdis and shed light on the relationship or distance between mentor and trainees.

The central objective of the present paper is the illustration of the spiritual artistic and humane image of the great Cypriot prose writer Nicos Nicolaïdes (N.N.), as it emerges through the body of letters written by Thodosios Pierides (T.P.) to his dearest friend, the well-known author Stratis Tsirkas.

In this way yet another -entirely unknown- side to the image of our author as it has been formed to date is added, enriching the pre-existing one even further.

Indeed this viewpoint acquires greater significance if we take into account that it derives from an extremely sensitive artistic persona, a deeply contemplative man who from very early on injected and nourished his thought in Marxist theory whilst simultaneously dedicating his entire life to correspondingly revolutionary practice.

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As a parenthesis we may note here that the ideological perspective from which Pierides views his friend and teacher Nicolaides makes his judgment of certain issues harsh, perhaps sometimes excessive. On the other hand his intimate and lengthy relationship with Nicolaides, a lifetime relationship, lends to his writings the integrity of knowing the man well. Above all however, Thodosis Pierides' integrity is reinforced if we consider that all that he writes he writes 'from the heart,' addressed to his friend Tsirkas to whom he reveals without forestalling thoughts and feelings, taken directly from the haven of his soul. Whatever is said then, right or wrong, exaggerated or modest, entails an immediacy and authenticity which is entirely uncommon.

Unfortunately, we lack here the corresponding viewpoint of the receiver of the letters, Tsirkas, which would have enabled us the ability to compare but also to cross-check certain information. However, the 'roaming existence' of T. Pierides, the constant persecutions and moving about, his illnesses, the general disarray and disorganization of his life¹ did not allow him to keep track of and organize his "papers."

With reference to the relationship between T. Pierides – S. Tsirkas, which extended to their partners in life and in the struggle (Alexandra and Antigone respectively), it could be said that it shall be illustrated in its entirety and worth only when at some point the entire collection of letters from T.P to Tsirkas (some 132 dated and many non-dated)² are published.

The relationship of the elder, by roughly 25 years, N.Nicolaides with the younger T. Pierides and S. Tsirkas extends chronologically from the teenage years of the two almost same aged writers (second half of the decade 1920-1930), with the focal point being the sea sponge boat of Sakellaris Yiannakakis and the home of N.Nicolaides, till the death of the 'teacher' in February of 1956³. It is well-known that Nicolaides fostered a unique love towards Tsirkas, predicting perhaps his bright literary development. After all, he made him his general heir and co-executor of his will⁴. On the other hand, in addition to the study of his work⁵ Tsirkas took great pains to publish and promote the work of N. Nicolaides following his death.

As for the relationship between the three of them I note as added proof of intimacy the use of Nicolaides' Christian name in mutual conversations. I also add T. Pierides' frequent references and varied comments about Nicolaides which constitute the author as one of the central personas within the correspondence between the two friends who shared the same ideology and craft. (In total, Nicolaides is mentioned in 17 of the dated and 5 of the non-dated letters).

It is specified that the numbering of the letters follows the general sequence with which they were placed within the bulky file 'Thodosis Pierides' of the Tsirkas Archive by Theano Michaelidou, prior to its delivery to the Greek Literary and Historic Archive from Tsirkas' wife, Antigone who was kind enough to lend me the file for the purpose of photocopying the letters.

In order to limit the large expanse of research, certain excerpts are published and commented upon here, the majority of which are from the dated letters with only one from the non-dated included. It is to be noted that for the dated letters chronological order has been strictly adhered to.

Corrections have been made in cases of oversights or certain insignificant spelling errors. Overall, I have faithfully maintained the linguistic convictions of the writer which, to a certain extent, reflect both the period within which they were written and Psycharis' influence.

Sixth Non-Dated Letter.

"...Lazy, perhaps once upon a time but also now? I know I like to be lazy but can I? I've worked like a dog yet you still call me lazy? Fine for Nicos. For him work means verse. But you?..."

This non-dated letter was placed after another dated 27.10.1933 in the Tsirkas file by Theano Michailidou. The common content of the two letters suggests that they were written at the same time.

The inclusion of Nicolaides' name within Tsirkas' criticism of T. Pierides for being lazy illustrates yet again the severity and demanding nature of the writer with respect to matters of work. For an artist who worked so hard to create his art, who had as a permanent motto in life "art requires extreme work", it was natural that he demand the same devotion from his younger fellow-craftsmen, especially of course from those he could see possessed unique abilities.

Letter 10: Illioupolis (Cairo) 8.11.1930.

"...I send you <Protoporia>. I didn't like my poem in print. No Yiannis, whatever you say- it is not a good song.

I like your narrative – no comments...Know only that I am jealous of the joy you will receive – Nicos found it wonderful (with reservations as always

– with the reservations of a perfectionist critic who must find faults...”

In the same issue of the Athenian magazine *Protoporia*⁶ T.P.’s poem ‘*I protimera tou Fthinoporou*’ [The first day of Autumn] and Stratis Tsirkas’ narrative ‘*Anoiksi*’ [Spring] were published (at the time Tsirkas signed with his real name Yiannis Hadjiantreas).

T.P.’s distaste for this poem comes as a complete contrast to his future publishing and broader luck. For this reason, although he avoided including it in his own edition of his as yet unpublished poetry collections (an edition realized by his brother Yiorgos Pierides), it was included in the Anthology of Greek Lyrical Poets by Kleonas Paraschou and X. Lefoparides in 1931, as well as in the perhaps more important to date modern Greek anthology of Sokolis⁷.

In contrast, Tsirkas excludes his narrative ‘*Anoiksi*’ [Spring], which he does not republish either in his collection of short-stories or in the comprehensive volume ‘*Ta dioigimata*,’⁸ [The short-stories] at the same time ignoring the positive reviews of T.P. and Nicos Nicolaides.

As concerns Nicolaides, the excerpt is of extreme interest firstly on account of the large degree of respect for the opinion of their teacher fostered by the then young litterateurs, as well as the great joy created by every one of his complimentary reviews (“I am jealous of the joy you will receive”) and also for the “detailed criticism” practiced by Nicolaides. The letter lacks Nicolaides’ opinion of the same poem by T.P. which he would have logically expressed to him verbally. It would have been strange for Nicolaides to have spoken to Pierides only of Tsirkas’ short story, totally ignoring Pierides’ poem which was found in the same issue of the same magazine. Could it be that his opinion was negative and that this had negatively affected the poet himself? Whatever we may postulate will remain at a hypothetical level.

Letter 26: 8.9.1932?

“...Once you called me a saint. You were partially correct. (I love Rolland more than Proust- the no. 6 more than Nicos-). You were partially correct with respect to this: I cannot play with ideas. For me, an idea is a belief, not however like that of Christianity but a belief which enforces responsibilities...”

It is noted that the aforementioned are cited within the context of an attempt he made to remain faithful to the woman of his life, Alexandra⁹.

The strange reference to Nicolaides and the no.6 is thrown in with a reference to the French novelists Romain Rolland and Marcel Proust, a reference superbly honoring the Cypriot novelist, regardless of the fact that Pierides' preference on the particular topic seems to lean towards the 'sociable' Rolland.

A second aspect illustrated by the excerpt is the contrast between his own view and that of his friend and teacher Nicolaides with regards to how the critical issue of ideology should be dealt with. He declared that he doesn't play with his own ideas but that he applies these in practice, with discipline, fighting for these. Such a differentiation from the views of N.N. will also be illustrated in another letter.

Letter 34: 9.9.1937

"...Each time you utter 'You sound just like Nicolaides' you kill me. Each time I answer: You are right, you are right. My upbringing (Illioupolis, dignified family, then the ep...ic Puritanism of our first teacher) has left traces on me...."

It is unknown to us which of T.P's passages Tsirkas is playfully commenting on yet this type of teasing appears to have been repetitive. T. Pierides' particular repetition regarding 'sounding just like Nicolaides' and its acknowledgement confirms that there is truth behind the ridicule. The extent of it though, suggests that it is worthy of investigation. I note that in T.P's letters also there are certain words and phrases characteristic of Nicolaides now and then. I assume indeed that the two friends also used such expressions verbally between them. However, the novelist and poet Tsirkas also 'sounds like Nicolaides' respectively,¹⁰ he himself both accepting and declaring such origins and dues towards his 'first teacher' during interviews. Here, finally is the only instance, as far as I know, in which T.P. refers to Nicolaides as his 'first teacher.'

Letter 35: 15.9.1937.

"..... Why, you wretch, didn't you send a book¹¹ to Nicos? Don't you know how much he likes to complain? And he is justified I must tell you. Because he knows that there is such a gulf between us that he is ready to interpret every random event as evidence that we are trying to renounce him. Send

him a book with a good dedication. He never ceases to be a *maitre*. And if I, the fanatical man, forget it sometimes, you shouldn't..."

Within this passage many interesting things are illustrated:

Firstly, despite the austere tone of the sender (he refers to the receiver of the letter as being a "wretch" and calls Nicolaïdes a whiner) a dominating tender tone is difficult to conceal.

The existence of a gulf between Pierides-Tsirakas on the one hand and Nicolaïdes on the other as referred to here, has much to do, I believe, with a distance between them with respect to ideological beliefs and more particularly their relationship to art. The two youths, fanatical and enthusiastic Marxists, laid their art at the service of ideology and in addition they had during that period become involved in intensely political activities¹², situations which according to Nicolaïdes were detrimental to their creative (literary) work.

The above mentioned 'contestation' rather (not 'renunciation') of the teacher is nullified as both of them obviously accept him and recognize Nicolaïdes as a 'maitre' (teacher in the art of logos, craftsman), a highly honoring title, which other *Aigyptiotes* [residents of foreign origin in Egypt] of the trade also awarded him.

Letter 46: 4.9.1938

"Dearest Yiannis,

Here is my song. As you can see, despite Nicos' suggestions, always enamored with actualité. As for its form, regardless of my discussions with you and him, despite the hesitations which troubled me for a while, I went ahead more robustly with luminescence and clarity..."

Here T.P. refers to his poem '*I ballanta tis Marias*' [Maria's Ballad] which was published in a separate booklet in Cairo the following year (1939) to be reprinted in 1943 in Alexandria within the collection '*Tragoudia tis elpidas*' [Songs of hope]. This letter was written in the mountain village of Prodromos in Cyprus.

Unfortunately Nicolaïdes' wise objections to this poem¹³ with respect to its actualité and form are ignored by Pierides, this resulting in its being very average. Generally, current political reality, wherever 'utilized' poetically by Pierides usually damages the aesthetic result greatly. The same occurs with

the other 'regimented' Cypriot poet, Tefkros Anthias as is often the case with many other poets (Ritsos etc.).

As for the traditional form of the poem as well as the 'readability' of its notions, which often reach the level of simplicity (probably the traits which he himself considered as 'luminescence and clarity') it appears that added to Nicolaides' objections to it are Tsirkas' relevant protestations.

It is strange however that T.P., who had produced modernistic poetry among the very first Greek poets (Takis Papatsonis, Anastasios Drivas, Theodoros Dorros)¹⁴ and before the greats of modernism (Seferis, Elytis etc.), is led in a few years into general retreat. Particularly in this poem, the chosen form suffers from platitudes, frequent hiatuses and an abuse of repetition whilst Pierides' usual performance in metrical poetry is exquisite.

Letter 48: 23.1.1939.

"I put everything aside in order to write you something which will bring you great happiness.

I will tell you this in brief because my time is limited.

Open up your ears and listen:

Nicos has just now left. Upon coming through the door, without waiting to catch his breath from our 96 damned steps, impatient and excited he said:

- I came specifically to speak to you about Yiannis' book.

- !

- What do you think of Yiannis' talent?

- !

- I think he possesses infinite talent. His book, from the first till the last line, is a masterpiece. In every sense. The tiniest word is the work of a great poet.

Moved, I remained silent. And then Nicos, with an enthusiasm I have rarely seen in him said the following:

- '*Dose mou to tragoudi!* (Give me the song) I have not yet read in all the poetry of the world such a poem. It is a great, great poem. One of the greatest poems in the world.

That's it.

It will all seem so great that perhaps you will hesitate to believe it.

And yet, I swear in the name of the revolution, in the name of poetry, I swear in the name of our immortal friendship, that that's what he said..”

That which is truly impressive about the above excerpt is the enthusiasm generated in T. Pierides by Nicolaides' outburst regarding Tsirkas' collection of poetry '*To lyrico mas taksidi*' [Our lyrical journey], an enthusiasm he is obviously eager for Pieridis to convey to Tsirkas. All of this serves as authentic verification as to the great respect the two of them felt towards the opinion of their 'teacher'. (A little further down T.P. will unreservedly exclaim: "Yianni, we will save Greek art. Do you understand?...")

Another facet which emerges here is Nicolaides' exaggerated admiration of Tsirkas' poems, a fact which propels him towards superlative reviews of these and especially of the poem 'Dose mou to tragoudi'¹⁵ [Give me the song].

Finally, a third aspect which results is the tender mood of Nicolaides towards those younger than he which is revealed in his haste to rapidly convey the joy of his praise.

Letter 70: 27.11.1950

“..However before I end lets speak a little of the literati.

Why does Nicos agitate you so? With Nicos, one must choose between two types of behavior. One either puts up with his childishness and petty wiles, or one utters the classic Cypriot expression: Assichtir! [Fuck it!] Or, one interchanges between the two according to the topic. Playing around with pseudo-theatricalities and fretting over the use of semi-colon is one thing. Uttering absurdities about great and dramatic things (and teaching those around them to do the same) is another.

As for that saying 'try your hardest as he has surpassed you,' that is such an (out of our world) utterance! We speak in the plural. We say 'we.' We write without signing when necessary. Because it all adds up. Nicos could not understand all this!

However if his praise leaves me indifferent (he so often falls amiss!) yours does me great service. Thank you..”

This letter must have been written in Paris whilst he was there for studies with his wife Alexandra. Tsirkas lived in Alexandria at the time but kept in contact with Nicolaides who lived permanently in Cairo.

It is the only letter within which the 'nervous and emotional' Pierides, as

he describes himself in the same letter, uses a harsh tongue against Nicolaides. Of course this radical outburst was apparently caused by Tsirkas' intense complaints about Nicolaides as contained in one of his previous letters. These complaints came at a time when Pierides was going through a difficult psychological period as is projected overall in the present letter.

In any case N.N. is here accused of 'childishness' and 'petty wiles,' theatricalities as well as "fretting over the use of a semi-colon". The final accusation is Pierides' personal account- in his quest for literary essence in alternative sources beyond form- the quest for Nicolaides' well-known practice of 'picking at' even the very last detail in the attempt to find perfection of literary discourse. A dose of exaggeration is probably concealed within the other criticisms also which have as the 'seed of truth' Nicolaides' self-indulgence.

In essence it is at this point that Nicolaides' self-indulgence comes into conflict with the camaraderie and feeling of duty towards the social collectivity which weighed upon the thought and character of the ideologists Tsirkas and Pierides who were constantly found within the constellation of 'we' (the beautiful phrasings in the third paragraph of the excerpt bring to mind the respective phrases of Makriyiannis).

Behind all of this however, conflicting political estimations regarding 'dramatic things' which are never named are concealed.

Nicolaides' final prompting of Tsirkas 'try your hardest because he has surpassed you'(inferring Pierides), however it is interpreted, cannot possibly be morally justified, T.P's answer – of which N.N. is unaware – is "well deserved" and to the point.

Letter 82: May 1958.

"..Nicos' death – although we were expecting it – has brought upon me an unexpected anguish. Complex feeling. Not only grief for a much loved man who is lost – because this man lived his life, such as he chose, well rounded and complete. This anguish has something else within it: It contains our own adolescence and youth, our first steps in life and much of that which followed; it contains a part of our own lives – perhaps the best part, surely the most intoxicating – which for me, ended upon his death. If you were here, I would suggest that we take a bottle of wine and spend the evening with the "remember?" There are so many that we would need 7 nights and 7 bottles of wine!

Will we be given this one day?..."

N. Nicolaïdes dies on the 24th February 1956. Tsirkas will bid a warm farewell to his friend and teacher at the funeral which takes place in Cairo the following day. For T. Pierides, the anguish of the great loss bursts with the words above and continues in a type of account of the relationship and his debts towards Nicolaïdes, indirectly attributing ‘perhaps the best, surely the most intoxicating’ part of their lives to his presence (puberty, youth, the first – literary – steps).

The extremely sensitive and highly condensed text can finally be considered as the parting speech of Thodosis Pierides towards Nicolaïdes, a speech which vindicates them both and the rapport existing between them.

NOTES

1. The closest and most valid information regarding the life of Thodosis Pierides is found in the ‘*Viographika*’ [Biographies] published by his brother, the well-known prose writer Yiorgos Ph.. Pierides at the beginning of the first volume of the publication: T. Pierides, *Pioitika Apanta* [Collected Poems], edited by Y.F. Pierides, Vol. 1: *Ta ekdomena* [Published Works] Pysros, Nicosia, 1975, pp. 11-16.
2. A brief description of this relationship, providing more detail on certain important moments, can be found in the study K. Nicolaïdes, Thodosis Pierides and Stratis Tsirkas, ‘*treis serenates sto feggari*’ [three serenades to the moon] and their respective correspondence in ‘*Epetirida*’ *Pedagogikis Akadimias Kiprou* [Pedagogical Academy of Cyprus Journal], Vol. 31, Nicosia 1990, pp. 23-35.
3. More specifically with regards to the humane and literary relationship between N.N. and Tsirkas see K. Nicolaïdes, Nicos Nicolaïdes, Stratis Tsirkas, Yiorgos Fil. Pierides (*Epalliles poreies kai diaplokes*) [Successive paths and conflicts], Porfyras, issue 105, Kerkyra, Oct-December 2002, pp. 331-350.
4. See ‘*Katalipa apo to Archeio tou Nicou Nicolaïde*’ [Remnants from the archives of Nicos Nicolaïdes], Research-Editor Lefteris Papaleontiou, Nicosia 2003, pp. 313-321.
5. His studies on N.N. are collected by Lefteris Papaleontiou in the volume: Stratis Tsirkas, ‘*O diigmatografos Nicos Nicolaïdes*’ [The story-teller Nicos Nicolaïdes], editor – addendum L. Papaleontiou, Nicosia 2003
6. Year 2. Issue 10, October. 1930

7. Alexandros Argyriou, '*I Elliniki Pioisi*' [Greek Poetry], Vol. *Neoteriki pioites tou Mesopolemou* [Neoteric poets of the interwar] Publisher, Sokolis, p. 118 (introduction) and 44-49. Argyriou also includes T.P's even more noteworthy poem '*Max*'.
8. See Stratis Tsirkas, '*Ta dioigimata*' (The short-stories), Kedros, Athens 1978.
9. He marries Alexandra 4 years later, in 1936.
10. For the literary dialogue between Tsirkas-N.Nicolaides see footnote 3.
11. Reference to the first book circulated by Tsirkas, the collection of poetry '*Fellahoi*' [Fellahs] Alexandria 1937, front cover by their common friend the artist Yiorgos Dimou (member of the group of the sea sponge boat). Tsirkas dedicated this book "To the poet T. Pierides/the unparalleled friend and fellow traveler."
12. Both are found at the head of the Communist Party cell in Egypt in 1936, whilst playing a leading role in the founding of the International Peace Bureau.
13. The seasonality is also emphasized by the dedication: "To the women of Greece who fell victim to the struggle against Metaxas." Indeed in the second version of the Ballad in 1943 the dedication differs: "To the women of Greece who fell fighting for freedom". In this way Women of the period (1940-41) and the Occupation are included.
14. See the relevant list of neoteric poets in Alexandros Argyriou (see footnote 7).
15. Nicolaides later converses with this poem through his own poem-in playful tone- '*To tragoudi tis hamozois*' [The song of a deprived life] see footnote 3, pp. 346-347.