

JAMES A. NOTOPOULOS
(1905-1967)

The death of James Notopoulos has meant the untimely loss of one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of ancient and modern Greek studies in America. With his splendid research he had opened up an important new area in Homeric studies and it will be difficult to find his successor. For it will be difficult to find anyone with the same great talents, the same exceptionally wide knowledge of ancient Greek culture and the same deep and sincere love for all things modern Greek. More than that, this gifted scholar radiated goodness, courtesy and exemplary modesty. None of us who knew him will ever forget his wisdom and his remarkable personal qualities.

He was born in 1905 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, of poor Greek emigrant parents. The first years were very difficult for his father and mother, who had to work hard on the quarries in the area. However, as time passed, the parents and their four sons made progress and proved themselves worthy members of the American society. One of the sons became a judge, two became merchants, and James became professor of ancient Greek and Latin literature at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He was appointed there as soon as he finished his University studies and remained there until his death. Trinity College has neither the same reputation nor the same financial resources which other institutes of higher education in America possess. It has, however, a great tradition of humanistic studies, which Notopoulos carried on in worthy fashion.

He made his debut in the American world of scholarship with a large book entitled, *The Platonism of Shelley*, which was greeted with enthusiastic reviews by a number of specialists. It was a study of Platonism and the poetic mind. As Notopoulos explains in his preface, Shelley was one of the greatest followers of the Platonic tradition. "Plato, a philosopher-poet, helped Shelley, a poet-philosopher, to give birth to the natural Platonism in his own soul. Shelley was one who had to have a philosophy to express in his poetry. When this philosophy was the radical, revolutionary thought of the eighteenth century, his poetry reads like poetic pamphlets. When Shelley's own ideal philosophy was awakened, shaped by and derived from Plato and the Platonic tradition, then he wrote some of the best Platonic poetry in English literature." The book is divided into two main sections. In the first the author analyses at length the immediate references Shelley makes to Plato, and the gradual infiltration of Platonic ideas into his poetry. In the second section he systematically publishes the complete texts of translations of dialo-

gues of Plato made by Shelley either for personal reasons or for publication. He also adds an extensive commentary. With this book Notopoulos not only showed that he had a great familiarity with the works of Plato and Shelley but also that he possessed an exceptional philosophical and poetic training.

While studying at the Universities of Harvard and Oxford, Notopoulos had become acquainted with the works of Milman Parry on Homer and became very interested in the new prospects which the theories of Parry had opened up. Parry had maintained that the basis of the Homeric epic poems was epic songs, which were put together by oral poets using standard expressions which kept passing unchanged from one poet to another and from generation to generation. In order to prove his theories valid, Parry and later Albert Lord and others who followed them studied the way the Moslem folk epics of Yugoslavia were made up, and applied themselves to a systematic comparison of the Homeric epic poems and the poems of the Yugoslav bards. Notopoulos started from these new tendencies in the interpretation of Homer and after writing several more specialised studies on Homer's technique, in December of 1949, at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association at the John Hopkins University, he produced a report on the subject of the standard phrases in Homer and in the Yugoslav epic folk poems. The discussion which followed his talk made a mark on him for the rest of his life. For the first time he heard that epic oral folk poetry existed and still now exists in Greece and that it would be invaluable to study it and see it in its relation to Homer. Notopoulos, who up to that point had had no communication with Modern Greek tradition and Modern Greek scholarship was very excited with what he heard. He asked for more details and a year later published an analysis of the Cretan epic song of Daskaloyannis and pointed out its many similarities with the epic poems of Homer. This study, published as it was a year after the publication of Professor Albert Lord's study on the similarities of technique in the Yugoslav and the Homeric epic poems, was considered as a great event in the history of Homeric studies. Immediately after the publication of this study Notopoulos accepted the proposal of the Guggenheim educational foundation to come to Greece and continue his research in this new field equipped with all the technical resources required.

He came to Greece in September 1952 and remained till June 1953. The ten months he spent here were some of the happiest of his life. He perfected his modern Greek, he got to know many Greek colleagues, and he collected

a vast store of material of folk songs, traditions, words and expressions, which all together would contribute to a productive study on the Homeric epic poems. In an essay which he published in the Minutes of the American Philosophical Society he stressed the importance that the study of this material would have and he announced that he was planning to write a book on the subject: *Homer and the Contemporary Heroic Oral Poetry. A study of Comparative Oral Literature*. He estimated that he could finish this book in three years. However, as is usually the case, he was forced to postpone its completion from year to year because of his teaching and administrative duties at the College and the problems presented by his research. He realised that he should re-examine the modern Greek folk epic poems within the great unity of the modern Greek folk song. On the other hand he ought not disregard modern Greek literature which could afford him other valuable material. A passage on this subject in the Memoirs of Kolokotronis, another in the Memoirs of Makriyiannis and a third in the *Kritikos* of Pantelis Prevelakis greatly enriched his knowledge. He then realised that he must acquaint himself with the bibliography on the Acritic poems and the problem as to whether modern Greece is an immediate continuation of ancient or perhaps medieval Greece. A new world of enchantment was opened before the scholar who had started his academic life with the comparison of Plato and Shelley, continued it with the comparison of Homer and the folk epics of the Moslem Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and who was now gradually discovering Modern Greece. Several studies which were published during this time on relevant problems showed how well he was progressing.

He finished the book in April 1967. It is a vast work. It contains a mass of Greek epic poems some of which have already been published, others from the Archives of the Athens Academy unpublished and yet others unknown so far which Notopoulos himself heard and wrote down in Crete, Epirus, Cyprus and Naxos. He has these poems both in the original Greek and in an English translation, with interpretative commentaries on historical and linguistic points. In his introduction he collects the conclusions to be drawn from all this material, he relates the technique of the Homeric epic poems and the modern Greek Acritic and demotic songs and he stresses the importance which the knowledge of the modern Greek tradition has for any scholar concerned with Homeric studies.

Notopoulos would have given this book to press in the winter of 1967-68 and he planned to bring the first copies here himself and see again the Greece he loved so much. But death which had been threatening him for years in the form of a grave and painful illness, eventually overcame him and

put an end to his plans. His death has meant a great loss for literary studies, for Greece, and for all who knew him and loved his exceptional personality.

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