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My Distant Acquaintance with Philosopher-Physician Nikolaos Louros and my Intimate Engagement with His Archives

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My Distant Acquaintance with Philosopher-Physician Nikolaos Louros and my Intimate Engagement with His Archives

Agamemnon Tselikas¹



Bronze bust of Nikolaos Louros by Giannis Pappas sculptor, 1963 (Alexandras Maternity Clinic).

Abstract

Five letters exchanged between Nikolaos Louros, the medical doctor, academician, philosopher, and renowned man of letters during the 1963-1966 years, are presented in this article. The topic of all these letters was the Louros' decision to use in his voluminous book "Obstetrics and Gynaecology" the vernacular Greek language instead of the formal "Katharevousa" an artificial language imposed on the newly formed Greek State by the middle of the 19th century by the then archaephile literati. Their aim was initially applauded as a means to "purify" the language suffering of the many local dialects and the "barbarism" of the mass of uneducated Greeks. However, as time passed, it became an obstacle to expression and free thinking. The establishment, particularly the medical one, insisted upon its use in the University and the texts written by the faculty members. Thus, it required a lot of courage by Nikolaos Louros to use for the first time the vernacular in a scientific medical book.

The opportunity to present these epistles was given by my friend Professor Athanasios Diamandopoulos, who classified Louros' huge Archive wherein, between a lot of other letters, those five ones were traced. These include two between the academician novelist Elias Venezis (1963), two more with the philosopher Evangelos Papanoutsos (1963) and one with the intellectual author Kostis Bastias (1966). The spirit of all of five letters underlines the overwhelming acceptance by the recipients of Louros' ideas about the language. They accept the real contribution of the vernacular to a better understanding by medical students the substance of Louros' book which would be otherwise obscured by the bounds of "katharevousa". The article concludes with the memories of the author's acquaintance with Louros while the former was in his green days in paleography and Louros already was a respectable member of the echelons in the academic and social life.

Key words: Agamemnon Tselikas, Nikolaos Louros, Elias Venezis, Evangelos Papanoutsos, Kostis Bastias

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AIM

In this article, I aim to showcase the contributions of Nikolaos Louros towards the recognition of vernacular Greek in medical literature, replacing the arcane “katharevousa”, a form of Greek language established in the 19th century by the archaeophile literati as a reaction to the impoverished local dialects in the modern Greek Kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

This article is inspired by my longstanding acquaintance and friendship with Prof. Athanasios Diamandopoulos, through my work as a palaeographer working with the much-misunderstood post-Byzantine manuscripts known as iatrosophia. In seeking to trace the scientific roots and origins of these texts, I dedicated many years to studying ancient and modern Greek as well as medieval medical texts. This research journey, challenging as it has been, yielded numerous and impressive findings. As someone who is neither a medical doctor nor a historian of medicine, I have found it fascinating to explore medical texts ranging from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. This exploration has been particularly intriguing in terms of how these texts were transmitted and circulated, and how medical knowledge was transferred and exchanged across the various geographical boundaries of the Mediterranean, especially in Greece during Turkish and Venetian rule.

At the invitation of my friend, Professor Diamandopoulos, whose persuasive skills are well noted, I found myself unable to resist his appealing proposal to contribute, to the best of my ability, in showcasing the Archive of philosopher-physician Nikolaos Louros.

I must repeat that I am neither a medical doctor nor a historian of medicine; instead, I am a paramedical historian with expertise in palaeography and textology across the ages. By a fortunate coincidence, I had a theoretical, albeit distant, acquaintance with the name and personality of the eminent physician-philosopher whose institution we honour today. I choose not to use the commonly accepted term ‘iatrophilosophos’ because, in Byzantine and post-Byzantine manuscripts, it describes someone endowed with medical wisdom—that is, scientific knowledge—rather than someone who possesses knowledge in both fields. Nevertheless, history does present exceptions, such as Georgios Koressios from Chios Island, a 17th-century figure who was indeed a physician, a philosopher, and a theologian.

I first encountered the name of Academician Louros in 1968 during my freshman year at the Philosophy School of the University of Athens, within the Hel-

lenic Society for Humanistic Studies, founded by the late Konstantinos Vourneris, a professor of classical literature at the same university. Professor Vourneris introduced us to Humanismus, elucidating the term’s relevance across all aspects of social life. He emphasised the intrinsic humanitarian value of ancient classical texts and discussed their profound impact on the evolution of the European spirit. The aims of the Society, as outlined in its various publications, were:

“To contribute to the study of the paramount values of the humanistic ideal as expressed particularly in the classical Greek works of literature and art. And, to foster the humanistic tradition of the Greek people. So, its programme aims at educating a wider public on one hand, and pursuing scientific research on the other”. As I engaged closely with the Society’s activities, the conferences it organised and through my role as an assistant in its office, I became familiar with its publications. Among these was an article by Louros titled “Medicine and Humanistic Education”, first published in Athens in 1961 and later included in a second edition of the Society’s publications in 1967. It was this work, in particular, that epitomised the integration of Humanism and science as expressions of a fully developed human personality.

Simultaneously, during my scientific research, I encountered another of his articles in the “Epetiris” Yearbook of the Research Centre of Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens. This was titled “The ‘Introduction’ and the ‘Twelve Sophisms’ from Francis Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*”, where these twelve sophisms, along with their explanations, were translated into Greek.

It is evident what resonated with Louros in this text, aligning closely with his own philosophical and epistemological views, despite Bacon’s often reactionary and contradictory nature. *“Its purpose”*, Louros remarked, *“is to highlight the need for cognitive progress and its importance. For this reason, he does not limit himself to describing what is known, but also to highlight the great gaps in knowledge, in the hope that others will fill them in. I’m sure both of these articles are in the rich library that surrounds us here as in mine”*.

After the restoration of democracy in Greece in 1974, when the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation was reorganised, Academician of Nikolaos K. Louros served on its inaugural board of administration from 1974 to 1983. He worked alongside other distinguished intellectuals who shared a firm commitment to democratic and liberal principles. Their collective goal was to promote humanitarian education in the new era of Greek society and to forge connections with corresponding European culture and science. Noteworthy among these individuals were

Ioannis Kakridis, Linos Politis, Pantelis Prevelakis, Aristovoulos Manesis, Evag. Papanoutsos, and Konst. Tsatsos, names you are undoubtedly familiar with.

This is how Louros's decision is interpreted: He adhered to common sense and the obvious need to connect with the studying youth using the vernacular—the language they spoke—rather than the detached and pretentious language imposed by scientific conservatism. Simultaneously, he aimed to promote his work and address the challenges of education and scientific research in post-war Greece. He achieved this by authoring his significant book on Gynaecology and Obstetrics in the contemporary Greek vernacular. In this process, Louros also engaged with many representatives of writers and intellectuals from the "Generation of the Thirties", deliberating on the language issue. He boldly chose to use the modern vernacular of his time to articulate his medical ideas and disseminate his teachings.

As a collaborator of Professor Linos Politis in paleography, I formally assumed the directorship of the Centre for History and Paleography in 1980, a facility he had established within the Cultural Foundation aimed at advancing the study of paleography and making Greece's manuscript collections accessible to the academic community. I recall Louros's visits to the Foundation; he was always serious, thoughtful, and eager to inquire about our project.

This introduction serves to share my personal perspective on one aspect of the personality of the philosopher and physician whose archives and library surround us, serving as a wellspring of inspiration for ongoing scientific research. More importantly, they exemplify the proper dissemination of science, aiming to touch the soul and emotions of individuals, encouraging spiritual advancement not only within Greece but, I would argue, globally, as, like other members of this Foundation, Louros was not confined by local boundaries. Thus, in this environment, akin to days long past, Louros meets with representatives of the intellectual generation of the 1930s and becomes an active participant of it.

Entering the archive of Nikolaos Louros required not just my involvement but also that of other dedicated younger specialists. When Professor Diamandopoulos opened the doors to the rooms where the Archive is stored on metal shelves, I felt daunted, as if I were about to swim in an ocean of unknown and stormy waters. The sight of the archival materials meticulously arranged on metal shelves and in cardboard boxes—organised in great detail by Professor Diamandopoulos and Mr. Marinis—was overwhelming. An archive, through its letters, accounts, various notes, and copies or original writings, unfolds the multifaceted personality of its crea-

tor. Thus here, I felt a profound connection with the spirit of the great philosopher and disciple of Hippocrates, whose vast scientific and social contributions were evident. Navigating this archive is a long and challenging journey, demanding not only specialised knowledge but also the collective support and assistance of all of you.

RESULTS

From the outset, my research was focused on archival materials relating to prominent figures in the literary and educational fields. Due to pressing personal commitments, my time was limited, and over the last two weeks, I managed to review only two files of correspondence from the 1960s. Here, I highlight a selection of these documents: two letters (Fig. 1,2) exchanged with the renowned and gentle writer Ilias Venezis (Fig. 3), two more (Fig. 4,5) with the progressive and subversive, educator Evangelos Papanoutsos (Fig. 6), and one (Fig. 7) with the writer, journalist and theatre administrator Kostis Bastias (Fig 8). Reading these brief correspondences, one can quickly grasp Louros's intention to solidify the use of the vernacular as the scientific language of modern Hellenism, leveraging the influence of reputable writers, educators, and journalists.

1. Louros to Venezis (Fig. 1)

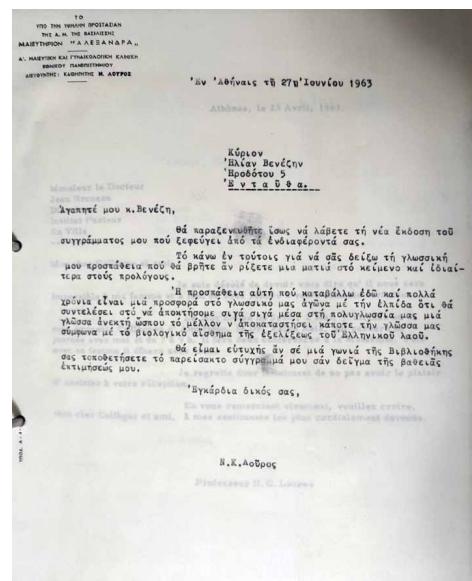


Figure 1. Louros to Venezis, June 27, 1963.

27 June 1963

You may be surprised to receive the new version of my writing that is beyond your interests. (Gynaecology and Obstetrics)

I do it anyway to show you my linguistic effort, which you will find if you take a look at the text and especially the prefaces.

The effort I have been making for many years is a contribution to our language struggle in the hope that it will contribute to slowly acquiring within our multilingualism a language tolerable until the future restores our language in accordance with our biological feeling of the evolution of the Greek people.

I shall be glad if you will place my unnormal enclosed book in a corner of your library as a token of my deep appreciation.

Sincerely yours
N.K. Louros.

2. Venezis to Louros (Fig. 2)

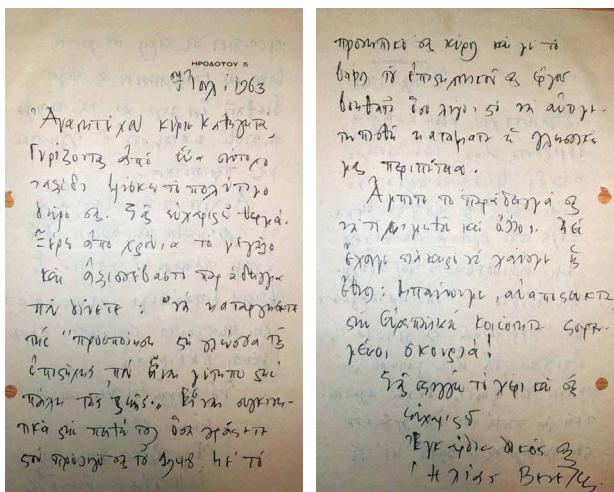


Figure 2. Venezis to Louros, July 7 1963.

7 July 1963

Dear Professor,

Returning from a short trip I found your precious gift. Thank you very much. I have known for years the great and venerable example you set: "to remove the pretence in the language of science which is a front in the struggle of life." What you write in the preface of 1948 is moving in its persuasion.

With your personal prestige and the weight of your scientific work, you help as few as possible to confront our linguistic adventure head on. Then your example may be imitated by others. We have no more time to waste as a nation. We inevitably enter the European community loaded with rust. I shake your hand and thank you.

Sincerely yours
N. K. Louros

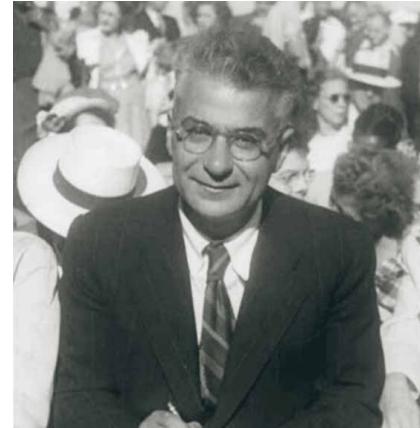


Figure 3. Elias Venezis: March 4, 1904 – 3 August, 1973.

3. Louros to Papanoutsos (Fig. 4)

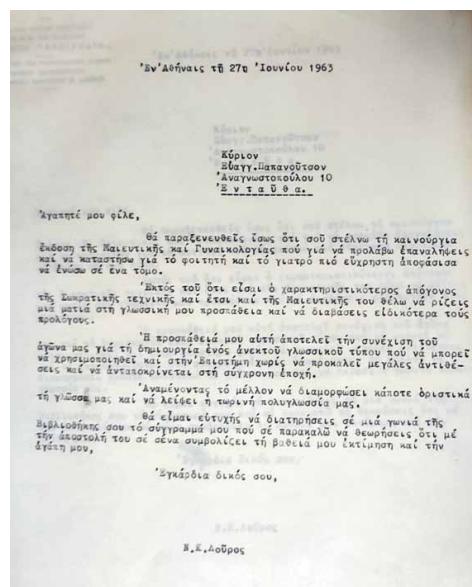


Figure 4. Louros to Papanoutsos, June 27, 1963.

June 27, 1963

*You will perhaps be surprised that I am sending you the new edition of *Obstetrics and Gynaecology* which, in order to prevent repetitions and to make it easier for the student and the doctor, I have decided to unite in one volume.*

Apart from the fact that you are the most characteristic descendant of the Socratic technique and thus of his Midwifery, I want you to take a look at my linguistic effort and read the prefaces in particular.

This effort of mine is a continuation of our struggle for the creation of a tolerable language type that can also be used in science without caus-

ing great contradictions and that responds to the contemporary era.

Expecting the future to once and for all shape our language and to miss our current multilingualism.

I will be happy for you to keep in a corner of your library my book, which please consider that by sending it to you, it symbolizes my deep appreciation and my love.

Sincerely yours,
N.K. Louros

4. Louros to Papanoutsos (Fig. 5)

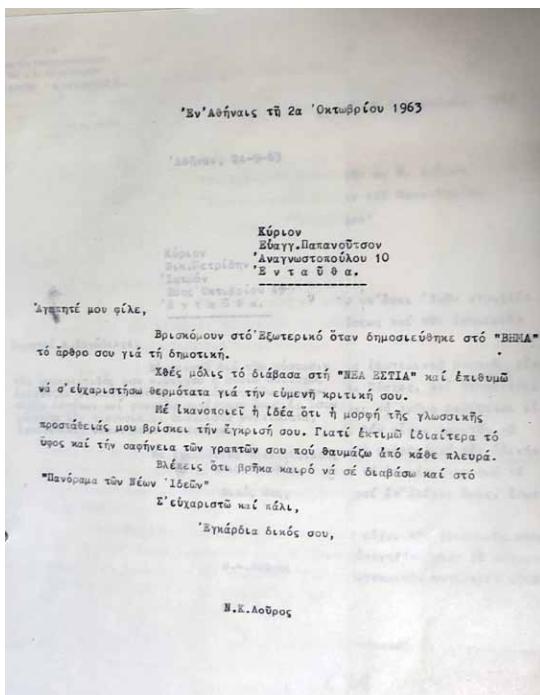


Figure 5. Louros to Papanoutsos, October 2, 1963.

2 October 1963

My dear friend,

I was abroad when your article about vernacular Greek was published in VIMA.

I just read it yesterday in "Nea Hestia" and I want to thank you very much for your kind review.

I am satisfied with the idea that the form of my linguistic effort meets with your approval. Because I especially appreciate the style and clarity of your writings which I admire from every angle.

You see that I also found time to read you in the Panorama of Ideas. Thank you again,

Cordially yours
N.K. Louros



Figure 6. Evangelos Papanoutsos: July 27, 1900 – May 2, 1982.

5. Louros to Kostis Bastias (Fig. 7)

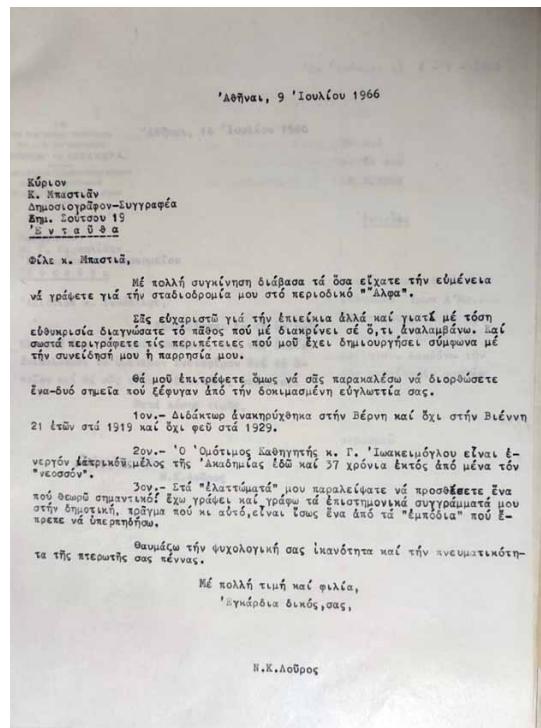


Figure 7. Louros to Kostis Bastias, July 9, 1966.

July 9, 1966

Dear Mr. Bastia,

It was with great emotion that I read what you were kind enough to write about my career in Alfa magazine.

I thank you for your leniency but also because you have diagnosed with such frankness the passion that distinguishes me in what I undertake. And you rightly describe the adventures which my impudence has created for me according to my conscience.

But you will allow me to beg you to correct one or



Figure 8. Kostis Bastias: 5 February 1901-25 December 1972.

two points which have escaped your tried eloquence.

1. I was declared a Doctor in Bern and then in Vienna aged 21 in 1919 and not in 1929.

2. The emeritus professor Mr. G. Ioakeimoglou has been an active medical member of the Academy for 37 years except for me the newborn.

3. To my defects you omitted to add one, which I consider important. I have written and am writing my scientific papers in vernacular Greek, which is probably one of the obstacles I had to overcome.

I admire your psychic ability and the wit of your pen.

With much respect and friendship,

*Cordially yours
N.K. Louros*

Discussion

In this interview, published in June 1966 in the Greek magazine "Alfa", the eminent and experienced

journalist and writer Kostis Bastias offers a unique portrayal of Louros's scientific career. Rather than presenting a chronological biography, Bastias provides an experiential narrative. He recounts the life of a physician who was not seduced by the allure of the stage or artistic acclaim, but was driven by a profound and intrinsic desire to contribute to the well-being of his fellow humans through medical science. Bastias paints Louros's career as a challenging journey. Once Louros committed to his path, he quickly realised that his quest was not going to be easy but would be fraught with both internal and external barriers. Kostis Bastias describes Louros's career as an "obstacle-ridden road", a path on which Louros ultimately triumphed through sheer will, a pragmatic approach, and a robust social presence across multiple levels, all underscored by a deeply humanitarian spirit.

Conclusions

This brief overview offers just a glimpse of what we might uncover from a thorough examination of Louros' archive, which deserves to be studied in depth. Such a study would not only illuminate his diverse and dynamic life—encompassing political, social, and scientific facets on an international scale—but also serve as an exemplar for younger medical scientists. Today's medical professionals often grapple with the impersonal nature of automation, technocracy, and unrestrained utilitarianism, losing sight of their humanity and that of those around them, whom they have an obligation to serve. Louros' life and work underscore the importance of humanism in medicine: the recognition and respect of human existence as a complete spiritual and emotional entity. It is crucial that this legacy inform and inspire current and future generations in the medical field.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η απόμακρη γνωριμία μου με τον φιλόσοφο γιατρό Νικόλαο Λούρο και η κοντινή με το αρχείο του.

Αγαμέμνων Τσελίκας

Στο άρθρο αυτό παρουσιάζονται πέντε επιστολές που αντάλλαξε ο ακαδημαϊκός γιατρός και φιλόσοφος Νικόλαος Λούρος με ανθρώπους των γραμμάτων κατά τα έτη 1963 και 1966 με αφορμή την έκδοση του συγγράμματός του «Μαιευτική και Γυναικολογία» (Αθήνα 1963) και μία συνέντευξη στο περιοδικό «'Αλφα» (Ιούνιος 1966). Ο Λούρος είχε συνειδητοποιήσει και αποδεχτεί πλήρως ότι η Δημοτική μπορούσε θαυμάσια να αποδώσει επιστημονικές έννοιες και τόλμησε ως πρωτοπόρος να εκδώσει το σύγγραμά του στην απλή Δημοτική διαπνεόμενος από το πνεύμα του επιστημονικού ανθρωπισμού, δηλαδή του να παράσχει τη δυνα-

τότητα σε όσο δυνατόν ευρύτερο κοινό να προσεγγίσει και να κατανοήσει εύκολα την επιστημονική γνώση. Η δυνατότητα για την παρουσίαση των επιστολών αυτών μου δόθηκε από τον καθηγητή και φίλο Αθανάσιο Διαμαντόπουλο, ο οποίος είχε ταξινομήσει και καταγράψει το πλουσιότατο αρχείου του ανθρωπιστή και ακαδημαϊκού Νικολάου Λούρου, που απόκειται στο ομώνυμο ίδρυμα. Στους φακέλους της αλληλογραφίας εντοπίστηκαν οι πέντε επιστολές που εδώ παρουσιάζονται. Πρόκειται για δύο επιστολές μεταξύ του Λούρου και του λογοτέχνη Ηλία Βενέζη (1963), δύο με τον φιλόσοφο Ευάγγελο Παπανούτσο (1963), και μία προς τον δημοσιογράφο και λογοτέχνη Κωστή Μπαστιά (1966). Οι επιστολές αυτές αποτελούν ένα ελάχιστο δείγμα της αποδοχής των γλωσσικών ιδεών του Νικολάου Λούρου από την πλευρά σημαντικών πνευματικών εκπροσώπων της εποχής του ως προς τη χρήση της Δημοτικής στα επιστημονικά συγγράμματα.

Ως προς την απόμακρη γνωριμία μου με τη δράση και παρουσία του Νικολάου Λούρου στα πνευματικά πράγματα της χώρας μας γίνεται αναφορά στη συμμετοχή του στην «Ελληνική Ανθρωπιστική Εταιρεία», που είχε ιδρύσει ο καθηγητής της Κλασικής φιλολογίας στο Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών Κωνσταντίνος Βούρνερης, της οποίας ως φοιτητής παρακολούθησα τη δράση και τις διαλέξεις της (1968-1969), όπως και αργότερα ως προϊστάμενος του Ιστορικού και Παλαιογραφικού Αρχείου του Μορφωτικού Ιδρύματος της Εθνικής Τραπέζης από το 1980, του οποίου ο Νικόλαος Λούρος υπήρξε μέλος του πρώτου Διοικητικού Συμβουλίου του.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: Αγαμένων Τσελίκας, Νικόλαος Λούρος, Ηλίας Βενέζης, Ευάγγελος Παπανούτσος, Κωστής Μπαστιάς

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