

Sor Juana's scientific understanding was passé, but her cultural perceptions were prophetic. Even her dated interests—her obsession with neo-Platonic mysteries and neo-scholastic metaphysics—anticipate a poetic mode of the modern age. In Sor Juana's richest poem, "First Dream," she evokes an isolated soul facing not God but boundless space. Sor Juana's true heirs appear only two centuries or more later: the Valéry of *Le cimetière marin*, the Mallarmé of *Un coup de dés*, and Latin American poets such as Chile's Vicente Huidobro and Mexico's José Gorostiza.

During Sor Juana's lifetime, the 1680s were her years of greatest incandescence and fame. Then came a time of plague, famine, and riots. Being an anomaly, a prominent intellectual woman, she antagonized the prelates, and she lost her patronage at court. No longer could she sustain her creative spirit in solitude. She signed in blood a renunciation of all secular learning, and she surrendered her precious books and musical and scientific instruments, keeping only three prayer books and some hair shirts and scourges. After years of watchful waiting the prelates had won. In 1695, aged 46, Sor Juana died of the plague while attending her sisters.

Beyond her literary significance, Sor Juana still exemplifies the troubled spirit of Latin American culture. She raised her voice in a world blocked from modern paths by the Inquisition, cumbersome bureaucracy, a stratified society, a peripheral location. Modern Latin America often seems equally held in check: Reforms,

revolutions, and technocratic programs have not fulfilled the agenda of more than a century and half of independence. The "marvelous realists" of Latin America's literary "boom"—writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortazar, and José Donoso—assert as a generation what Sor Juana affirmed in isolation: that Latin America is a civilization unto itself, that it challenges the rationalist, often predatory, values of the modern world. Paz himself, in *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds*, says that the "great wound of the West" has been the same "separation of history and morality" which Sor Juana experienced; García Márquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, even challenges the efficacy of our notions of linear time. This ironic, transcendental way of seeing the world that characterizes so many Latin American writers has its precedent in Sor Juana, in her limitations and her achievements in spite of them.

Sor Juana has been hailed as the "Tenth Muse," the "Phoenix of America" and "the first feminist of America." To Paz, her deeper significance lies in the insoluble contradiction between herself and her world, a symbol of Mexico's ambivalent modernization during the centuries that have ensued. This biography—splendidly written, richly informed, deeply thoughtful, and skillfully translated—opens a grand new window on the tribulations and meanings of Spanish-American civilization.

—Richard M. Morse, Secretary
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What Aristotle Didn't Know

MYTH AND TRAGEDY IN ANCIENT

GREECE. By Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Zone Books. 527 pp. \$28.95

MYTH AND SOCIETY IN ANCIENT

GREECE. By Jean-Pierre Vernant. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Zone Books. 279 pp. \$22.95

For at least two decades now, much of the most challenging and controversial work in literary and social criticism has been emanating from France, and its effect on the study of the humanities in the United States and Great Britain has been little less than seismic. The most common

labels for this criticism are "structuralism," "deconstruction," "new historicism," and "semiotics." Like most labels, they are not very helpful. Nor do they catch the spirit of writers as diverse, and diversely brilliant, as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard.

Still, if one were to attempt a generalization about these variously imaginative critics, it would not be unfair to say that all of them are radically reassessing the "naturalness" of our Euro-centered, humanist assumptions about mankind, art, and society. Taking their cue from the magisterial anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, these thinkers all explore the ways in which our idea of "the way things are" is in fact a cultural *construct* of our society, no more or no less "rational" than the seemingly (to us) bizarre rituals and myths of remote, primitive tribes.

What makes the two books under review important is that they carry this enterprise, the creative and reverent disassembling of our ideas about "the way things are," to the very origins: to Athens during the fifth century B.C., when many of our Western conceptions about man first took form. For two millennia, fifth-century Athens—the golden age of Socrates and the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—has loomed over the West as an exacting standard of austere and serene nobility.

Now, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religions at the Collège de France (assisted by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Professor of Sociology at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes), makes so bold as to question almost all the accepted judgments and readings of Greek tragedy. Vernant finds that our obstacle to understanding the Greek classics is neither their distance nor their obscurity. Instead, he argues, the barrier "is the fact that they are too close to the mental universe of the West and seem too 'natural' to us." Vernant thus sets himself to the task of "de-familiarizing" those too well-known Greek tragedies.

An observation made early in *Myth and*

Tragedy sets the direction of Vernant's iconoclastic work. For at least a thousand years, Greek tragedy has been considered by most scholars as the highest and noblest expression of classical spirituality. Greek tragedy, classicists insist, gave birth to the characteristic Western mode of thinking and even shaped the character of Western philosophy. Not quite so, writes Vernant:

"Tragedy emerged in Greece at the end of the sixth century. Within 100 years the tragic seam had already been exhausted, and when Aristotle in the fourth century set out, in his *Poetics*, to establish the theory of tragedy, he had, so to speak, become a stranger. Tragedy faded away as philosophy experienced its moment of triumph."

Vernant indeed interprets this birth of rationalist philosophy in Plato and Aristotle, with its banishment of the archaic myths that informed tragedy, as a betrayal of the energy that possessed Greek tragedy.

But if the Greek tragedies were not philosophical art, what were they? The Greeks "invented" tragedy, Vernant says, in just the way Neolithic man "invented" the hoe, or early capitalist man "invented" the railroad: The Greek *polis* was ripe for, and needed, that particular invention. Agamemnon and Orestes, Oedipus and Antigone, all those figures without whose names and myths we could scarcely name ourselves, are figures through whose actions on stage the nascent Greek city-state, in a golden moment of self-doubt and self-definition, acted out its ambiguous transition from one age to the next—from a heroic culture to a democratic society. More a social than an artistic phenomenon, the tragedies reconciled the democracy of Athens to its transition from a primitive religious community into a more rationalistic, legalistic *polis*.

This, of course, is not what Aristotle saw when he looked at the tragedies. The "classical" interpretation of tragedy, starting with him, assumed that it was *mimetic*, *exemplary*, and *moral*. Tragedy was *mimetic* in that it was an "imitation of life," meaning human life in human society. It was *exemplary* because it told of the down-

fall of a great, eminent man through his pride (*hubris*), his violation of the ethical rules of human behavior. And tragedy was *moral* because it aimed to instruct the audience, to remind them of the universal force of those ethical rules.

Vernant contradicts Aristotle point by point. Tragedy is *not* mimetic: It employs mythic figures whom the audience *knows* to be mythic and somehow out of place in the Athenian city-state. Tragedy is *not* exemplary: The hero of tragedy, Vernant insists, is not an example but a *problem*, a remnant of the heroic age who does not quite function in the atmosphere of a legalistic democracy. And tragedy is *not* moral: The tragedies did not "solve" or "teach" resolutions to the moral and historical conflicts embedded in them; more daringly, they externalized and acted out in all their ambiguity conflicts such as Oedipus's, where man seems "some kind of incomprehensible, baffling monster, both an agent and one acted upon, guilty and innocent, dominating the whole of nature with his industrious mind yet incapable of controlling himself, lucid and yet blinded by a frenzy sent to him by the gods." This defines tragedy, according to the new *Poetics* of Vernant.

Aristotle is not the only authority to come under fire. For more than a century, much of the most exciting classical scholarship has followed Friedrich Nietzsche's

ground-breaking *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *Genealogy of Morals* (1887): As the very words "birth" and "genealogy" suggest, Nietzsche's emphasis was on origins and on what Greek tragedy created for Western culture. Vernant flatly states that this emphasis is as misleading as the Aristotelean analysis was.

Vernant replaces the emphasis on origins with a concern for how the tragedies *functioned* to ease tumultuous social and cultural transitions within Greek society. What makes his reinterpretation pertinent, he believes, is that the schisms of fifth-century Athens are culturally related to our own. We, like Aeschylus and unlike Aristotle, inhabit a violent universe torn by conflicts in which old gods are dying and traditional ideas of heroism are being severely tested by different—and desperately needed—novel ideas of community.

In studying Greek tragedy, Vernant finds not a distant father but instead a "cousin" who has helpful words for us. Vernant makes his claim urbanely: "I believe that today we are witnessing a kind of rebirth of this sense of the tragic in life; each of us is aware of the ambiguity of the human condition. Perhaps that is why these Greek gods, who . . . seem to form a kind of language, continue, as we listen to them, to mean something to us."

—Frank D. McConnell '78