

A philosopher's appreciation for Jean-Pierre Vernant (January 4, 1914—January 9, 2007)

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A line about Jean-Pierre Vernant's teaching stands out in the obituary by Oswyn Murray.

Vernant "always used the 'tu' form and recognized you as a fellow worker whatever your age."¹

It did not surprise me to read such a thing. Considering the friendship-in-scholarship he fostered with his writings alone, I can imagine what teaching was available to students of Vernant's acquaintance.

There are no academic genealogies connecting me with Vernant that I know of. We barely have disciplinary turf in common: He was a classicist while I as a student of ancient philosophy enter classics only by courteous permission. Even so Vernant, whose books I came across by accident in the first place, then went back to on a whim and subsequently at last feeling driven to read, showed me what methods worked best on antiquity and when I could apply them. "Fellow *worker*" is too strong a thing to say—not many people work as he did—but my study of Vernant did create a fellowship between us. It's not every day that one is taught so well by a stranger.

I turned to Vernant as if from Nietzsche—"as if" because in my initial readings and even while growing attached to his writings I did not realize what role he could play in a re-evaluation of Nietzsche's classical scholarship. That part of my appreciation would take longer. I did already know that the problem existed. Nietzsche's Greece is a deep well from which he draws up inexhaustible quantities of life-giving water. But he has not dug through to China the way he

¹ O. Murray, *The Independent* (January 11, 2007).

thinks he has. The inspiration is genuine, the surmises continue to astonish, but too many of the facts are false or incomplete.

Philosophers have made empirical mistakes before. No one waves the pineal gland in Descartes's face. Hegel's history of thought survives his belief that Heraclitus came after Parmenides. Doesn't Nietzsche deserve the same pass on factual details? He insisted that the Dionysus cult entered Greece from Asia when Dionysus had been worshipped in Greece longer than most of the Olympians; so what?

But it would mutilate Nietzsche's thought to make historical fact so irrelevant to the value of his philosophizing that the philosophy becomes an ahistorical analysis of morals. His point is that historical fact presses itself into philosophy, no matter how unwelcome or recalcitrant the fact may be. No more apriorism for philosophy now; no more of those just-so stories that English genealogists tell about where morality comes from. Those stories have been dropping from the blue but now philosophy stands prepared to become something else.² An actual story like that of the primeval masters and slaves will show where modern morality came from and where it did *not* come from.

Nietzsche writes as if the real story of antiquity though in need of being deciphered from the surviving evidence really exists in there.

So surely it matters that Nietzsche's purported portrayal of the ancient Romans applies much better to the ancient Germans in his own back yard. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Essay I he characterizes non-Jewish ancient society as bifurcated into slaves or commoners on one side and their masters the warrior-aristocrats on the other. Another ruling class composed of priests sometimes intrudes on the two-tiered system, but this priestly caste is something closer to an

² *On the Genealogy of Morals*: just-so stories of morality, I.2-3; blue-sky origins of speculative history, Preface section 7.

exception to the basic social division; and more typically Jewish; and an alternative to the warrior rulers.³

As a matter of fact however, as Celtic, Vedic Indian, and Roman pantheons show the most clearly, Indo-European societies tended toward tripartition. Georges Dumézil in the mid-twentieth century argued that such cultures represented themselves as divided among priests, warriors, and farmers.⁴ Dumézil's analysis contains all three of the classes from *Genealogy I* but depicts those classes as co-existing and even coordinated instead of divided—as Nietzsche would have it—between warrior-rulers legitimately in power and priests as late arrivals and usurpers. Dumézil's *Mitra-Varuna* examines the priestly caste in still more detail, with an eye to the powers available to the Roman *flamen* and Vedic *brahman*, two priests at the heart of their societies.⁵

Least of all were the priests *arrivistes* among the Romans, whom *Genealogy I* calls the noblest of all peoples and wrings its hands over wondering how the priestly people *par excellence* (Jews) ever could have overcome them. Overcome they did though. “Whom does one bow to in Rome today?” Nietzsche asks in triumph showing his decisive fact, a priest perched where the imperial warrior had been.⁶

As history this is something more like fantasy. Not only did the Romans have their own priests and priestly governors—according to tradition the first pious king to officiate over sacrifices was Numa, the king after Romulus—but the Roman Republic even had a position of chief priest, *pontifex maximus*. Caesar himself held the position of *pontifex maximus* and

³ *Genealogy of Morals*: warrior-aristocrats and commoners, I.2, I.4; priestly caste's opposition to knight-aristocrats, I.7; priesthood occasioning exceptions to the moral system, I.6; Jews as priestly people, I.7.

⁴ See e.g. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, translated by Philip Krapp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); also such more recent comparative mythographers as Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

⁵ Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An essay on two Indo-European representations of sovereignty*, translated by Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

⁶ Romans the noblest of all peoples; Jews as priestly people; who rules in Rome: all *Genealogy I*.16.

Augustus took it on some time after Caesar's death. After Augustus and following his precedent every emperor was *pontifex* representing the priesthood until the reign of the Christian emperor Gratian (375-383), who found that title inappropriate for the emperor and transferred it to Rome's bishop.

No priesthood had to invade Rome when it had already been ensconced there. No one but a high priest was *ever* bowed down to in that city.

What the First Essay of *Genealogy* describes, as I said, is Germanic culture, of which one can truly say that it left priests out of its vision of itself until the much later time of a foreign takeover. In his report from Gaul, Caesar observed that the Germans had no priests comparable to Celtic Druids.⁷ He must have found this worth mentioning because the absence of a priestly class made the Germans anomalous among Indo-Europeans. Indeed, early Germanic legal documents describe a society of nobles, commoners, and slaves. The *nobiles* are most likely warriors while the *ingenui* and *serviles* belong together as the *Genealogy*'s low-born.⁸

Nietzsche accuses English genealogists of projecting the morality they know best into the deep past that gave birth to morality.⁹ Here he is in the same fix. What claimed to describe Europe's most ancient precedent culture now looks more like a projection of Germany's ancient past, along with more than a sneer or two about Judaism. Not to put too fine a point on it, Nietzsche got his facts wrong and these errors matter.

The question is not whether the scholarship holds up, but what to do when you realize it doesn't. It is important to bear in mind that later findings do not refute Nietzsche altogether. Even as a historian he advances general assertions that remain defensible and indeed are better defended now than they were in his time. The following sorts of claims, for instance:

⁷ *Gallic War* 6.21.1.

⁸ Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, p. 191.

⁹ *Genealogy* I.2.

- Socrates is an abrupt development in Greek culture.
- Tragedy does not communicate a moral anything like what one finds in later moralizing literature.
- Greek religion is neither frivolous nor demonic but represents a coherent way of ordering human experience and a moral code that deserves to be recognized as one.
- Modern Europe is radically unlike its archaic beginnings and can profitably investigate those beginnings for alternatives to modern culture. Greece represents the *rest* that has been thought and said.

If some of these broad historical claims seem more like truisms or platitudes today, that should be seen as the result of Nietzsche's success at changing moderns' views of antiquity. Even as a historian he will not go away easily.

The challenge for Nietzsche's readers then becomes how to keep the broad outlines of his history while avoiding the pitfalls created by his historical errors. Take *The Birth of Tragedy* and its re-creation of Greece in "the tragic age" as a time with greater integrity than a merely "pre-Socratic" epoch enduring the long advent until Socrates. Nietzsche takes tragedy to symbolize a culture that could recognize irrational impulses as natural and even as wise. Even when keeping those impulses at bay under Apollo's guidance the tragic age did not deny their existence. Only Socrates ruled out the irrational as unreal—unreal *because* irrational.

But if Nietzsche is right about the totalizing effects of Socrates/Plato, philosophy's cheerful optimism not only followed tragedy but blocked it from a later observer's view. It takes a skillful interpreter to reconstruct a culture whose very claim to *be* culture had been denied.

The challenge of conceiving pre-Socratic Greece may be seen as the subject Vernant took up first, in *The Origins of Greek Thought*.¹⁰ Such a book was possible only after the 1950s. Nietzsche's talk of Homeric heroes had to proceed in ignorance of what would later be known about the Mycenaeans as Bronze Age Greek-speakers contemporary with the Trojan War. Schliemann may have unearthed Mycenae in the 1870s, but it was not until 1952 that Michael Ventris deciphered Linear B to prove that the residents of those ruins spoke Greek. Given the continuity of language, dwelling, and religion from the Mycenaeans onward, the question about ancient Greece became: What could account for the revolutions of the eighth century? For it was during roughly the lifespan that ended in 700 that the Greeks appropriated the Phoenician alphabet, produced the Homeric epics, likely started the Olympic Games, and brought a wide scattering of autonomous cities into international political and financial relationships. What made all these achievements so suddenly possible, and what did their concurrent appearance signify? Some accounting needed to replace talk of Greek miracles; anyway one can't set out to study and understand a miracle.

Nietzsche himself is too prone to miraculous explanations. This is a pitfall of his emphasis on Greek myth. Did Dionysus wake the new civilization?

It is true that no readers took Nietzsche's mythmaking literally. But the religious language did help divert attention away from democracy as an explanation. In all the effort to say what tragedy was and where it came from Nietzsche either ignores the story of Athens' politics or makes fun of democratic explanations. The tragic chorus as Athenian citizens? Ha! It would be "blasphemy" to speak of "constitutional popular representation" in this context. If anything *The Birth of Tragedy* associates Athenian democracy with the decline of tragedy instead of with

¹⁰ *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); originally published in French in 1962 as *Les origines de la pensée grecque*.

the conditions that gave it life and health: Euripides destroyed tragedy when he used it to represent everyday life and the (democratic) language of contracts and lawsuits.¹¹ Nietzsche's beloved tragic age has nothing to do with democracy or with those movements, even when not democratic yet, that took the Greek *poleis* from inherited monarchy and aristocracy to citizen organizations. (See for example the oligarchic Spartans' language of equality among their hoplite citizens¹²: nowhere near democracy, but no longer a traditional monarchy either.)

Nietzsche is not alone in despising ancient democracy too much to discuss it. Most modern glorifications of ancient Greece before him downplayed democracy or condemned it outright. Jennifer Roberts has traced the extent and long duration of anti-democratic assessments of Greece well into the nineteenth century and among surprising cases (e.g., Rousseau).¹³ Nietzsche is not going out of his way to despise the Athenian achievement. He does not deserve to be seen as liberal history's villain. But he does not buck the anti-democratic trend either.

Vernant by contrast took the rise of Greek citizenry to be the telling change that inspired the others, and particularly inspired the philosophical revolution of the Ionian cities along the coast of Asia Minor. *The Origins of Greek Thought* identified citizens' equality before the law—what the Greeks called *isonomia*—as the key to the new worldview. On his paradigm, as compelling as Nietzsche's utterly different mythic one, *isonomia* inspired a worldview in which all cosmic forces have the same rank. One force may be stronger than another but they meet on equal footing and admit of direct comparison.

¹¹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967): blasphemy about political representation, section 7; Euripides and language of daily life, 11.

¹² Spartan male citizens called themselves *homoioi*, "similar," i.e. to one another: Xenophon, *Lacedaemonian Constitution* 10.7. And Thucydides says that the richer Spartan citizens dressed so as to be "living in equality [*isodiaitoi*]" with their peers: *History of the Peloponnesian War* I.6.

¹³ Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The anti-democratic tradition in western thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Now it is possible for Anaximander to say the earth hangs suspended in mid-universe with the forces around it balanced on all sides.¹⁴ More abstractly but in just the same spirit the time that humans occupy becomes the equal of the gods' time, past and present fundamentally alike and commensurable. In place of a long-gone era in which gods created the world through processes that since ceased to operate,¹⁵ Thales imagines a single common era. Water as *archê* today implies water as *archê* in all past epochs.

Even that word *archê* is telling. What had meant "rule" as in kingship and hegemony comes to bespeak an impersonal governance of the universe that grants no special privileges and recognizes no ranks. And in general the era that Vernant describes, while no less impressive than it had been for Nietzsche, owes its successes to worldlier phenomena and therefore opens itself up to the historian's investigations as a divine tragic age could not have done.

Nor does it seem that the era will end magically either: Socrates remains as important as ever, but not because he entered an alien world. The era of legal procedures and financial exchanges and first cosmological inquiries is a world recognizably like the present age, and Socrates could have communicated with it.

Wasn't Nietzsche nevertheless right to speak of "the typical 'ideality' " of tragic characters and the distance of their world from the world that Socrates occupied? Euripides studying Aeschylus's tragedies found "something incommensurable in every feature and in every line . . . an enigmatic depth." Even if Socrates belongs to the same conceptual universe as Thales and Heraclitus, the heroes of tragedy still appear to their audience from out of another realm.

Though Nietzsche could not have known about a Mycenaean Bronze Age that Agamemnon and

¹⁴ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* I.5; cf. Aristotle, *On the Heavens* II.13, 295b11-16.

¹⁵ One must really class the hyperbolic miracles of *Birth of Tragedy* as events from such a lost era. What else to say about brother-lover-gods Apollo and Dionysus engendering tragedy?

Odysseus lived in, he did see that they would never speak in the kinds of words Socrates demanded of his interlocutors.¹⁶

Vernant can accommodate this conceptual distance; he only locates it in a different place, not between tragedy and Socrates but within tragedy itself. On the account he developed in the essays collected in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*,¹⁷ the hero's incommensurability is itself the subject that a tragedy meditates on. See for instance "The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece."¹⁸ Athenian tragedy translates the outsized characters from Greece's heroic age into the legal vocabulary of the democratic fifth century. "Imagine Orestes alive today. Who could do him justice?" tragedy asks, and goes after its hero, weighing mitigating and aggravating circumstances and turning the assessment of his matricide over to a jury.

The point of a tragedy's applying anachronistic terms and penalties to Homeric heroes is that it recognizes the distance that stretches between its own time's lawcourts and prosecutions and an earlier era's barely containable battlefield heroics. Beyond legal terminology tragedy can generally be said to see the heroic age as similar enough to the age of tragedy—*just* similar enough—for its characters to be evaluated as humans.¹⁹ They are legally bound or exonerated, vain and cowardly or nobly dignified. And yet they are simultaneously different enough to be explicable only in supernatural terms, as pawns of a godly whim or agents of divine will.

It is as if, Vernant says, the syntactical ambiguity in Heraclitus's saying "*êthos anthrôpôi daimôn* [the character of the person is a spirit]" came to life on stage as a moral ambiguity. Greek grammar permits Heraclitus's apophthegm to mean equally 1) that a person's character is all that the so-called guiding spirit in that person can be; *and* 2) that one's so-called character

¹⁶ *Birth of Tragedy*: ideality of characters, 10; incommensurability of Aeschylean tragedy, 11.

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, translated by Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

¹⁸ In *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 23-28.

¹⁹ "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp 29-48.

emerges under closer investigation to be a divine spirit. The *êthos* is actually a *daimôn* and the *daimôn* in fact is nothing but *êthos*. Sacralization and desacralization are both available.

Heraclitus's saying loses its force when the two grammatically permissible readings cease to be both metaphysically possible. Then much more is lost as well. "The minute it becomes impossible to read it equally well in the two different senses . . . the tragic consciousness is gone."²⁰ The tragic consciousness is the awareness that Theseus could not exist within Athens of the present day even though Athens could not exist without its founder-hero Theseus. The heroes on stage are real in a way, illusory in a way.²¹ Here is where the book's title pairing "myth" and "tragedy" may mislead.²² Myth "does not yet question itself"; tragedy by contrast is "a questioning to which there can be no answers."²³ Thus the inapproachability that Nietzsche so precisely rightly spotted in tragic heroes but with less precision attributed to their mythic status has been given a historical context. The classical city again stands at the center of Vernant's inquiry, committed to *isonomia* but curious to learn the limits of the concept. Being the effort to translate what is alien prevents tragedy itself from being wholly alien.

The alien also haunts Plato's dialogues; here again Nietzsche defined what has become a persistent problem. That problem is not the usual worry about Plato's difficulty as an author—the worry that has led some people to call the dialogues "literary." The word is misleading but it responds to something real about the dialogues, not so much their ironies and elusiveness as a constant destabilizing alternation between seductive obliqueness and bullying directness, faced with which the reader cannot rest in either suspicion or earnestness. Ignoring that quality of Platonic writing Nietzsche pressed an opposite interpretive worry. For if the pre-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²¹ "The God of Tragic Fiction," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 181-188.

²² See the review of *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* by Roger Just, *Man* (n.s.) 17 (1982): 588, which calls the connection between the book's essays and myth "questionable."

²³ "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," pp. 37, 38.

Socratic age is as different as he claims it to be from the Socratism of the dialogues and therefore foreign to the present, then modern readers reading Plato can only hear half of the conversation. Despite his questioning method Socrates is not really *having words with* the young gentlemen of Athens. He is no teacher to the Greeks, there must be something familiar about teachers, rather an alien among them who could therefore alienate the Greeks from themselves.

So who was Plato's audience? How did his philosophy sound when it was first written?—that is the problem that Nietzsche bequeaths to Plato's interpreters. It is a contrary hermeneutical problem in that readers of a "literary" Plato try to bring him close but readers of a lost pre-Platonic time need to keep him at a distance reconstructing what an intrusion on that time he must have been.

Broadly understood all Vernant's researches help the student of Plato who interprets in this second way, which again makes him the right author to turn to from Nietzsche. As Vernant continued to read antiquity and to write his remarkable papers he expanded his scope to include topics in ancient art, warfare, marriage, and city life. Most of all he read ancient religions and rituals. He asked as urgently as Nietzsche had where Greek religion came from and what forms it took; as Nietzsche also had he saw Greek religion to be a moral code and projection of human society; but he went further in translating the language of religion, perhaps able to go further because he listened more patiently to the way people spoke that language.

I will close with a word about one example of Vernant's inquiries that both discover the pre-Socratic world and illuminate the Socratic response to that world. The subject is ancient visual art. My own research is focusing on some of the passages in which Plato turns decisively against poetry and the visual art it resembles. And Vernant has done much to show what that art could have been like before Plato and how it might have been conceptualized before him. His

work is essential. The study of Plato's aesthetics, despite having been pursued exhaustively, has not yet adequately treated the uses of visual art before him. What mimetic relation did Plato think was at work in the paintings and sculptures of his day, and what alternative relations were available to his imagination? Here again I am indebted to Vernant for demonstrating how much richer a reading of Platonic aesthetics can become when it is set in the context of statuary in ancient ritual.

A modern reader knows too much about sculptures and paintings that look like the objects they represent, and can forget that in Plato's time visual objections had replaced another representational relation.

In one pair of articles Vernant reconstructs the uses that archaic (pre-500 BC) statuary had been put to.²⁴ His prime example is the *kolossos*, not necessarily a large object despite the later uses of that name for it; the *kolossos* functioned roughly as a grave marker, sometimes a grave's surrogate when the presumed-dead body could not be found. Without making the slightest effort toward resembling the dead (or resembling any human) a *kolossos* nevertheless stood in the dead person's place and can even be said to have referred to the person. The *kolossos* is a double "as the dead man is a double of his living self."²⁵

Vernant brings together the attested rituals by means of which a *kolossos* could effect communication between the living and the dead; between, as he puts it, visible and invisible realms. The communication takes place by virtue of the rituals but Vernant does not jump to conclusions about "convention" grounding the reference. Blanket and blank appeals to convention leave a process sounding arbitrary. Philosophers sometimes have purposes that make

²⁴ The two articles are both included in *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, translated by Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006); originally published in 1965 as *Mythe et pensée chez les grecques*. The articles are "The Figuration of the Invisible and the Psychological Category of the Double: The Kolossos," pp. 321-332; "From the 'Presentification' of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance," pp. 333-349.

²⁵ "The Figuration of the Invisible," p. 322.

the question of *whether* some phenomenon is conventional the only question that needs to be answered. For most purposes however one knows nothing without knowing *how* the convention shapes practices and frames experience. Vernant reads the uses of a *kolossos* for the logic of the referential relation.

For instance the object is blind. The stone it is made of is sightless to begin with, and the *kolossos* may well be made eyeless.²⁶ This blindness, however paradoxically, evokes the invisibility of the *psychê* it connects to. The *kolossos*'s immobility by a different route points to the *psychê*'s extravagant mobility.²⁷ Such associations are not logical implications; they reveal what Vernant calls "the play of correspondences and oppositions . . . among the different aspects of reality" that operates within a religious ritual.²⁸ The ritual gives the *kolossos* its referential power, so that the sculpture denotes its object regardless of whether or not it looks like that object.

Already Plato's reader has something to go on; for the communication between visible and invisible realms has a specific meaning in the *Republic*. Plato names the lower and worse part of the Divided Line "the visible" and repeatedly equates progress into philosophy with the passage out of visibility and away from even lingering vestiges of the visual. Consistent with this depiction of intellectual success is the *Republic*'s diagnosis of the greatest cognitive failure, which is to say *mimêsis*. Book 10 assesses painting by contrast with a Form (the bed, the table) and the human-made objects (beds, tables) that derive from a Form. Painting ranks third (the

²⁶ See Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Dédale: Mythologie de l'artisan en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975), p. 110, on eyeless *kolossoi* in the archaeological record.

²⁷ It is interesting to note that Deborah Steiner's very different take on the *kolossoi* in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* while distinguishing itself from Vernant's reading nevertheless retains his equation of a *kolossos* with the twinned traits of sightlessness and immobility. See "Eyeless in Argos; a reading of *Agamemnon* 416-19," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995): 176-177, esp. 176n5, 177n10. I must say that I find Steiner's own reading (179, 180) unpersuasive and unlikely to supplant Vernant's.

²⁸ "The Figuration of the Invisible": disappearance represented by blindness, p. 329; immobility and motion, p. 330; "play of correspondences," p. 328.

picture of a bed) because unlike the real-life bed it does not refer to the truest one which is the Form and the bed that the god made.²⁹ In the language that Vernant translates ancient ritual into: The physical bed permits communication with the invisible Form while the bed in the painting keeps the mind shuttling between two visible objects.

An intense and specific pressure is being brought to bear on this passage that distorts the very theory it appeals to. Besides *Republic* 10 only one passage in Plato's entire corpus admits the possibility of Forms for artifacts.³⁰ And as he never does elsewhere he makes the Forms products of divine manufacture here. In other words Plato says two things in Book 10 that contradict his usual account of Forms, and the two departures from the theory are needed for him to posit a type of artificial object to contrast with *mimêsis*. By contradicting his own account of Forms in both respects he can connect an artifact with a god. Why force this link? Perhaps to show that what mimetic art fails at, a religious art once accomplished. The "imitation of appearance alone" that Plato defines *mimêsis* as, which is the concoction of a visible thing related to another visible thing's visibility, is blameworthy by virtue of abandoning the effort to communicate with the invisible.

It was Vernant who helped me see that Plato was using the prosaic bed to function in his argument as a *kolossos*. (More speculatively one might even see the "double" of Vernant's analysis as a precursor to the Platonic *idea*—"belonging to some other, inaccessible sphere." The double is the inspiration for and the condition for the possibility of metaphysical dualism.³¹) It had already been uncontroversial to say that Plato has traditional religious art of some kind in mind as his aesthetic goal—thus in *Republic* 10 only "hymns to gods and praises of good men"

²⁹ *Republic*: the visible in the Divided Line, 509e; progress out of the visual, e.g. as regards "the lovers of sights," 475d-480a; bed, Form of bed, and imitation, 596a-598b.

³⁰ *Cratylus* 389a-b.

³¹ Vernant, "The Figuration of the Invisible," p. 325. I owe this observation about the double, and this language for it, to Brian Seitz.

will be his city's admissible poetry³²—but now it appears that even the alternative to mimetic painting he spells out is a case of everyday manufacture that he describes as if it were religious art.

Hard to say how specifically Plato could identify the practices that had given images their old power, but he knew that the power had disappeared by his time. In this respect tragedy again resembles painting. An ancient proverb allegedly said that tragedy had “nothing to do with Dionysus”³³ and Plato would have agreed. Never mind the parade of gods and heroes, tragedy had lost its divine function. I came to see the breadth of Plato's complaint only thanks to Vernant's reading of ancient art.

There is no escaping that key word “reading.” It has to figure in any portrayal of Vernant and every statement of gratitude to him. For all the variety of topics that Vernant took up and all the interpretive methods he tried, the consistent theme in his writing is his expert reading. Over and over in his hands leaden coincidence turns into a lustrous and ductile significance. Instructing by example as the best teachers do he inspires his own readers to seek out for themselves those humble but puzzling and stubborn little facts, images, orthographies, turns of phrase, and twists of argument that once unriddled permit a distant and formal time to address the investigator with Vernant's own preferred *tu*.

³² *Republic* 607a.

³³ The proverb *ouden pros ton Dionuson* is attested much later in the Byzantine encyclopedia the *Suda*, but the reference claims antiquity for the saying, alleging that it was Athenians' response to Epigenes of Sicyon (*Suda* omicron 806); according to this same source Epigenes was the first author of tragedies (*Suda* theta 282).