

THE REVERSE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT'S DIONYSIUS¹

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Abstract

The essay explores some singularities of Jean-Pierre Vernant's historical anthropology, highlighting his interpretations of Greek tragedy and the Dionysus in the context of the relationships between Hellenism and modernity.

Keywords

J.-P. Vernant, historical anthropology, tragedy/modernity, Hellenism, Dionysus

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Resumo

O ensaio explora algumas singularidades da antropologia histórica de Jean-Pierre Vernant, destacando suas interpretações da tragédia grega e de Dioniso no contexto das relações entre helenismo e modernidade.

Palavras-chave

J.-P. Vernant, antropologia histórica, tragédia/modernidade, helenismo, Dioniso

I

In the late 1980s, Paul Veyne argued that there was a causal relationship between a “reflorescence of ancient history” and the advent of a “new century of Enlightenment”, more precisely, between the development of a historical anthropology of Antiquity and the emergence of an era of Reverse Enlightenment. According to the classicist and historical epistemologist, the works of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Michel Foucault (volumes II and III of the *Histoire de la Sexualité*), his colleagues at the *Collège de France*, could serve as testimony to this relationship of causality, both constituting, in some way, proof of this bold thesis. The causal relationship envisioned by Veyne would also have a political dimension since, at least in France,

les travaux historiques jouent le même rôle que les œuvres philosophiques au XVIII^e siècle : ils ouvrent une nouvelle ère des Lumières, mais (et tout est là) des Lumières à l’envers, avec les possibles conséquences politiques de tout mouvement d’*Aufklärung* (Veyne, 1991: 435).

II

Some of Vernant's reflections on the interplay between the experience of historical time and the political dimension, as expressed in his proposal for an anthropology of ancient Greece, demonstrate commitment to the concept of Reverse Enlightenment. This way, it is symptomatic that, in the same year of 1989, when modern time was grappling with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ‘enlightened’ narrative that connected past, present, and future was being challenged, the author of *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* was articulating the unique aspects of approach as a Hellenist:

quand un chercheur entreprend de promouvoir un nouveau champs d’études, les problèmes qu’il est conduit à se poser au cours de son enuête sont toujours plus ou moins l’écho des grandes interrogations qui travaillent le corps social dans son ensemble, concernant son identité, le *passé* où il s’enracine, ses responsabilités *présentes*, l’*avenir* dont il est porteur (Vernant, in Olender, 1989: 11, my italics).

The connection made by Vernant between an experience of historical time (perceived through the categories of past, present, and future) and an epistemological standpoint enunciation (the researcher exploring new fields of investigation) is a key aspect of his analysis. This connection, which is similar to how Veyne intellectually operationalizes the knowledge-power binomial, is evident in the passage above. By referring

to Vernant and Foucault as agents of the emergence of this *nouvelle histoire grecque*, the author of *Comment on écrit l'histoire* also reinforced, in the same text, that time, politics, and knowledge could not be dissociated in the understanding of his thesis:

du simple fait qu'un historien aborde l'Antiquité selon une certaine méthode et aussi sous un angle que nous verrons, cet historien suggère sans le vouloir une certaine façon d'envisager le présent ou l'avenir. Alors, s'il en est ainsi, la vogue de l'histoire grecque est autre chose qu'une illusion et davantage qu'une 'idéologie' : c'est un savoir-pouvoir (Veyne, 1991: 140, my highlights).

The connections between time and knowledge-power are also requisites for Veyne to distinguish today's Enlightenment from that of the past. While the 18th century "attacked prejudices in the name of Reason, the new historical Enlightenment distances itself from all rationalizations, as it is particularly dedicated to the explanation of presuppositions" (Veyne, 1991: 436). Although it is not entirely accurate to equate Vernant with this distancing "from all rationalizations", since he never renounced a 'rationalist' perspective, the "explanation of presuppositions" and the "historical" approach have always constituted fundamental elements of his method of working with ancient Greek culture.³

III

An excerpt from Louis Gernet, in a text that Vernant always considered one of the most influential in his intellectual formation, reinforces Veyne's considerations. For Gernet—to whom the vernantian classic *Les origines de la pensée grecque* was dedicated—the historical reflection on the Hellenic experience would help to escape from an "*Aufklärung* philosophy" that had clearly taken on anti-humanist forms (Gernet, 1948: 122). According to Gernet, certain mental functions have been naturalized in modernity: "it is because they are carried out in our societies according to a mechanism from which man himself seems to be absent" (Gernet, 1948: 122). To demonstrate that these functions are actually "products of the spirit", it would be necessary to look elsewhere (in this case, towards an anthropologized ancient Greece), because such functions "have a past that a philosophical unconscious of *Aufklärung* can conceal richness of" (Gernet, 1948: 122). There would be no other way to unveil this richness than to invest in the work of a historian, given that, as Gernet continues, "one of the most certain reasons for the existence of history is to restore—wherever

³ Cf. Vernant, 'Raison d'hier et d'aujourd'hui', 1966: 97-103.

and as much as it can—those ancient states in which human creations are better perceived” (Gernet, 1948: 122).

This interference between a practice of knowledge—the historical anthropology of ancient Greece—and a broader cultural critique is also visible in the conclusion of the 1974 Vernant’s inaugural lecture, when he assumed the chair of Comparative Studies of Ancient Religions at the *Collège de France*. In his effort to understand the singular functioning of Greek polytheism, the historian-anthropologist considered it indispensable to reflect on the current categories of the history of ancient religions, that is, to elucidate his presuppositions as a researcher:

L’étude comparative du rite, du mythe, de la figure des dieux vient ainsi déboucher sur une grande question d’histoire : comment, dans notre culture, s’est constitué le champ du savoir, dessinée la frontière du religieux. C’est dire que les catégories à travers lesquelles nous tentons de saisir les faits de religion, dans leurs divers aspects, sont elles-mêmes impliquées dans notre recherche ; l’investigation, dont elles fournissent les instruments, se retourne sur elles et les désigne comme le véritable objet de l’enquête. Position inconfortable, mais qui éclaire sans doute un des ressorts secrets de notre entreprise : en nous embarquant vers une Antiquité dont les derniers liens avec nous semblent se dénouer sous nos yeux, en cherchant à comprendre du dedans et du dehors, par la comparaison, une religion morte, c’est bien sur nous-mêmes qu’à la façon d’un anthropologue, finalement, nous nous interrogeons (Vernant, 1975: 34).

These words of Vernant echo the opposition established by Foucault seven years earlier between an ethnological dimension of history and a philosophy of history inspired by the Enlightenment, which supports Veyne’s thesis.

L’histoire en cela n’a pas pour autant à jouer le rôle d’une philosophie des philosophes, à se prévaloir d’être le langage des langages, comme le voulait au XIX^e siècle un historicisme qui tendait à faire passer au compte de l’histoire le pouvoir législateur et critique de la philosophie. Si l’histoire possède un privilège, ce serait plutôt dans la mesure où elle jouerait le rôle d’une ethnologie interne de notre culture et de notre rationalité, et incarnerait par conséquent la possibilité même de toute ethnologie (Foucault, 1967: 626).

IV

The notion of “tragic interference”, which Nicole Loraux sought to characterize the object and method of Vernant’s works developed in the first volume of *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, is a good alternative to deepen the theme of the Enlightenment Reverse and the historical

anthropology of the French Hellenist (Loraux, 1973: 908-925; Vernant; Vidal-Naquet, 1972). Tragic interference fundamentally refers to the forms of interaction between past and present, present and past: there (in the Greek 5th century BC) and here (in contemporary culture).

There, in classical Athens, the driving element of tragic action was fueled by the tension that inhabited a simultaneously evanescent and persistent past. Even though a distance had been established from *mythos* and *epos*, some of their values continued to drive the questions that the democratic city of Cleisthenes and Pericles posed about the present. This tension between the time of myth and the time of classical Athenian *polis* was reproduced through a series of other tensions in the structure of tragic text and spectacle: between different types of verses, between the chorus and the protagonist heroes, between the use of masks and its absence, between the plan decreed by the gods and the tortuous paths of human actions and decisions.

Here, in the contemporary context, interference manifests itself on two levels. First, in the long duration or the vast distance between the presence of the ancient Greek past and researcher's present; and secondly, within another temporal order, between "academic analyses whose theoretical objective is directed, at least in principle, to objectivity and detachment" and "the author's commitment to current political events" (Vernant, 1995: vii). Indeed, according to Vernant, "three sedimentary layers" resonate: that of Antiquity, that of the scholar and his object, and that of the researcher engaged in their own time. As "each one possesses its own mode of temporality", there is of short-circuit between different pasts and different presents, leaving no alternative but to acknowledge "the boundaries that separate them" and simultaneously find "means of crossing their limits without conflating them, without distorting them" (Vernant, 2004: 10-11). Finally, Vernant, reflecting on lifetime of work, admits to have navigate through an "almost always intermediate situation and sought to forge a path between opposing domains: past and present, myth and reason, archaic world and city, self and the other". Crossing boundaries, therefore, not to blur them, succumb to any claim of totality or relinquish the discriminatory power of reason, but, as he observes once more, "to more clearly identify through comparison the characteristic traits of that which distinguishes them" (Vernant, 2004: 13).

V

In his 1966 review of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (1932), a neo-Kantian summa, Michel Foucault offered the French reader another of his penetrating observations about the philosophical conjuncture. Despite its length, it is worth quoting it in full.

L'énigme kantienne qui, depuis près de deux cents ans, a médusé la pensée occidentale, la rendant aveugle à sa propre modernité, a soulevé dans notre mémoire deux grandes figures : comme si l'oubli de ce qui s'est passé, à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, lorsque le monde moderne est né, avait libéré une double nostalgie : celle de l'âge grec auquel nous demandons d'élucider notre rapport à l'être et celle du XVIII^e siècle auquel nous demandons de remettre en question les formes et les limites de notre savoir. À la dynastie hellénique, qui s'étend de Hölderlin à Heidegger, s'oppose la dynastie des modernes *Aufklärer* qui irait de Marx à Lévi-Strauss. La *monstruosité* de Nietzsche est peut-être d'appartenir aux deux. Être grec ou *Aufklärer*, du côté de la tragédie ou de l'Encyclopédie, du côté du poème ou de la langue bien faite, du côté du matin de l'être ou du midi de la représentation, c'est là le dilemme auquel la pensée moderne – celle qui nous domine encore, mais que nous sentons déjà vaciller sous nos pieds – n'a jamais pu échapper encore (Foucault, 1966: 574-575).

If we accept the constitution of these two significant figures of “our memory” and the terms of the dilemma presented by Foucault – a dilemma “that still dominates us” – in which dynasty would we situate Vernant's analyses of Athenian tragedy? On the side of nostalgia for the Hellenic dynasty, which took the Greek drama as one of the engines of its speculative development, or on the side of the modern Enlightenment dynasty, in which we could easily include the positive knowledge of the French social sciences, to which Vernant, moreover, often declared himself indebted? Significantly, was in that same year of Foucault's review, 1966, that the French Hellenist began his reflections on the Greek theater with the short text ‘La tragédie grecque selon Louis Gernet’, reflections that would culminate a few years later in the publication of the two volumes of *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Vernant, 1966; Vernant; Vidal-Naquet, 1972; Vernant; Vidal-Naquet, 1986).

At first, answering the questions in the previous paragraph does not seem to require much effort. Vernant explicitly rejected the dynasty that intended to “elucidate our relationship with being”. In a text dedicated to understanding the tragic phenomenon, he himself stated: “I have no affinity with Heidegger, nor with German philosophy, nor with the Greek worldview spread by this tradition” (Vernant, 1989: 425). Furthermore, it would not be difficult at all to show Vernant's intellectual connections to a certain Enlightenment tradition represented by the names of Karl Marx

and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the latter of whom is attributed with the role, replacing Émile Durkheim as the great master of the French social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Vernantian perspective, in its endeavor to comprehend the mental universe of ancient Greeks, appears, however, to encompass a certain 'monstrosity'. Yet, not that of Foucault's Hellenistic Nietzsche, belonging simultaneously to the "morning of being" and to the "noon of representation", but perhaps the 'monstrosity' of not strictly adhering to either of the two dynasties or of belonging to one of them in a manner distinct from the author of *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*. Indeed, didn't Vernant's thought – particularly his reflections on tragedy – derive precisely from the observation that in both past and present, something was "faltering under our feet", to use Foucault's diagnostic terms once more? It is within this vacillation or through it that its 'monstrosity' might simply be taken as the singular expression of a historical anthropology of ancient Greece.

Thus, the Vernantian Enlightenment and its conception of the modern cannot be definitively understood through this elucidation of "our relation with being". As demonstrated, the French Hellenist and social scientist explicitly distances himself from the German Romanticism tradition, particularly in its uses of this philosophical and poetic movement made of ancient Greek culture. Even Marx, an author with whom it cannot be said that Vernant had bad relations. This is evidenced by his late 1980s reference in one of the texts of *Mythe et Tragédie en Grèce ancienne (vol. II)*, through which he sought to elucidate both the historicity and the transhistoricity of the tragic subject, associating his references to the Hellenic world with the "ideology of his time". "For Marx", Vernant reminds us, "as for the educated men of his generation in Germany, Greece represents the infancy of mankind" (Vernant, 1979: 80). The French Hellenist continues with several questions.

Personne aujourd'hui ne saurait accepter la réponse de Marx. Pourquoi les Grecs seraient-ils l'enfance de l'humanité? Pourquoi cette enfance serait-elle plus saine, plus "normale", que celle des Chinois, des Égyptiens, des Babyloniens ou des Africains? Est-ce l'enfance enfin, la naïveté, le naturel qui séduisent dans une tragédie grecque, par exemple dans les *Bacchantes* d'Euripide? Nous faudrait-il prétendre aussi que c'est l'enfance normale qui nous séduit dans le *Banquet*, le *Timée*, le *Parménide* ou la *République* de Platon? Une enfance singulièrement dégourdie et sophistiquée, avouons-le (Vernant, 1979: 80-81).

The ironic inquiries in the passage above confirm the explicit distancing from the Romantic dynasty and the idea of the Greeks as "normal

children". Vernant's intellectual relationship with the Greek world passes through the *Aufklärer* heritage, which challenges "the forms and limits of our knowledge".

Just as Foucault spoke regarding to modern Western thought of Nietzsche's 'monstrosity' intermediate place, and we of the intermediate place, non-place, or new place of Vernant's historical anthropology, as we quote Euripides' *Bacchae* and refer to something that would be "faltering under our feet", in our exploration of Greek tragedy, the necessity of delving into Dionysus becomes inevitable.

VI

The Dionysus of Vernant, as appears in his research on tragedy, the status of *mimesis* and Greek religiosity is distant from the "timeless Dionysism" understood in the phenomenological tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche or Erwin Rohde (Nietzsche, 1872; Rohde, 1894). In fact, Gernet had already critiqued this timeless conception of Dionysus in an important review, favoring as a contrast Henry Jeanmaire's ethnological Dionysus. According to Gernet himself, Jeanmaire's book dedicated to the Greek god situates his analyses within a "carefully examined historical reality" (Gernet, 1953: 83; Jeanmaire, 1951).

Let Vernant introduce himself to the debate in his own words.

Je ne crois pas du tout à l'opposition faite par Nietzsche entre Apollon et Dionysos. C'est à mes yeux une pure construction, une fabrication. Elle traduit seulement des problèmes, un horizon spirituel et religieux qui étaient ceux de Nietzsche et de son époque. De même, l'image que nous avons du dionysisme est une création de l'histoire moderne des religions avec Nietzsche et Rohde. Et nous sommes tous des enfants de Rohde et de Nietzsche. Mais je crois qu'ils se sont trompés. Le dionysisme n'est pas du tout un élément originellement étranger à la Grèce et qui, à un certain moment, serait venu du dehors modifier le jeu du système. Le dionysisme appartient à la Grèce aussi loin qu'on puisse remonter (Vernant, 1989: 425-426).

Once it is established that Dionysus has long belonged to the Greek world, the deity serves Vernant as a catalyst for the peculiar involvement of historical anthropology within the "Hellenic dynasty", enabling him to reintroduce into the understanding of the tragic phenomenon the problematics surrounding notions of beauty, art, and fiction. This reintroduction avoids nostalgia and refrains from invoking the introspective individual, autarchic, egocentric will typical of certain

modern philosophical and romantic traditions. Above all, for our Hellenist, Dionysus represents the deity facilitating “the experience in this world here that there exists in the cosmos the dimension of alterity. Dionysus embodies across all domains” (Vernant, 1989: 430).

Given that the god is also the “patron of tragedy”, this experience of alterity is projected by Vernant onto the entire dynamics of Athenian theater.⁴ It is through the figure of Dionysus that the relationship between otherness and fiction involved in the composition and reception of classical tragedies are woven. The tragic poet, therefore, is seen by the French Hellenist as someone who

crée un univers et, dans ce univers, le fictif et le réel ne sont pas disponibles. D’une certaine façon même, le fictif, l’imaginaire, l’autre sont plus vrais que la réalité. Et on découvre que la réalité ne trouve pas sa véritable signification et tout son poids humain qu’après être passée par cette espèce de transmutation qui en fait une œuvre. Le théâtre est dans le monde grec une façon de devenir autre (Vernant, 1989: 434-435).

Through the action of the actors, through the staging of a plot, no longer through indirect discourse as in the epic, the characters reveal a “real absence” (Vernant, 1989: 432). “The *presence* that the actor embodies in the theatre”, Vernant explains, “is therefore always the sign or mask of an *absence* in the daily reality of the audience” (Vernant, 1981: 23).

Let us not forget precisely about the audience. Dionysian fiction and alterity participated in the new genre through the poet's creation and the effect they produced in the stands. It is known that initially it was not easy for the Athenian spectator to accept this mimetic aspect, which, under the inspiration of Dionysus, “blurred boundaries” (Vernant, 1989: 431). Citing the famous case of the audience reaction to the performance in 494 B.C. of Phrynicus’ *The Capture of Miletus*, as well as the positive reception twenty-two years later in 472 B.C. of Aeschylus’ *The Persians* (a ‘contemporary’ tragedy that did not have as its theme the heroic world, from which he

⁴ Saying that he is the ‘patron of tragedy’ does not mean for Vernant to look for the origins of Greek theater in the cult and rituals of Dionysus: “Le problème des origines est donc un faux problème: (...) il se situe à un tout autre niveau que le fait à expliquer » (‘Le moment historique de la tragédie en Grèce: quelques conditions sociales et psychologiques’, 1968: 13). Vernant, therefore, insists that tragedy is only comprehensible when taking into account simultaneously its character of triple invention: aesthetic (with the emergence of a new poetic genre, destined to be staged); socio-institutional (with the creation of tragic competitions organized by the civic community); and psychological (with the appearance of a tragic consciousness that takes man as a problem to be deciphered) (‘Le dieu de la fiction tragique’, 1981: 21-24).

sought to maintain a distance) (Vernant, 1979: 85-89), Vernant emphasizes how “difficult it was to become aware of the fictitious”: “it takes time for one clearly conceive the existence of an imaginary world, of fiction, which is situated on a different plane than that of everyday life” (Vernant, 1989: 434). However, once this awareness was established in 5th century B.C. Athens, once the spectators realized that “what the theater gave flesh and life was not in reality” (Vernant, 1989: 433), the stage was set for catharsis to take place.

Finally, one might say with Vernant that attending a tragic spectacle meant “to penetrate the fascinating gaze of Dionysus, which is the other sight, the other vision” (Vernant, 1989: 431). The problem precisely with Pentheus, the tyrant in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, is that he “refuses to confront Dionysus, to change his gaze and his ordinary being to enter, like a theater spectator, into another way of seeing” (Vernant, 1989: 432). The condition, in fact, for establishing this exchange of glances with the patron of tragedy presupposed the spectator's agreement to “change their view of things”, the agreement to “become other than himself” and, then, the recognition that “all categories that seem well defined to us can be shaken” (Vernant, 1989: 434). Thus, tragic representations delimited a place in the life of the city “where, at certain moments, the system could explode” (Vernant, 1989: 431). This is the role of the god who made what was underfoot falter!

The tragic effect, however, did not only involve this destabilizing role. The spectator, Vernant argues,

au lieu de sortir de la représentation brisé, anéanti, en sort ragaillardi, c'est la *catharsis*. Tout d'un coup, ce qui était absurde, bruit et fureur, devient clair et compréhensible par le fait de la transposition, de l'expression esthétique. Le beau devient une voie d'accès à la compréhension de ce qu'est l'homme, c'est-à-dire ce qu'il y a de plus précieux et de plus ridicule, de plus faible et de plus puissant (Vernant, 1989: 428).

Therefore, in the tragic experience, there is a reversal of categories, systems explosions and, as Vernant emphasizes, a certain “domination”. Artistic expression through producing catharsis also exercises the act of “mastery”, self-control, and awareness of limits. “The aestheticization of several issues”, Vernant writes, “is truly one of the hallmarks of Greek culture” (Vernant, 1989: 428). Otherness, estrangement, and disorder – attributes of the god Dionysus, vividly portrayed by Euripides in *The Bacchae* – cannot be translated and expressed by humans except when dramatized by the “theatrical illusion”, through “aesthetic transposition” (Vernant, 1989: 436). This transposition, this “illusion” plays an essential political role in the city for Vernant. It is not a matter of aestheticizing the politics but

perhaps of politicizing the beauty.

VII

The aim of this this brief exploration of Greek tragedy and its patron Dionysus is to illustrate the 'monstrosity' of Vernant's historical anthropology (in contrast to the 'monstrosity' of Nietzsche's thought), and thereby asserting that the French Hellenist occupies a unique position distinct from the two main dynasties of modern thought delineated by Foucault. Additionally, this tour prompts reflection on Vernant's conception of Reverse Enlightenment, which does not exactly fit the definition given by Veyne. Finally, it ventures into uncharted territories, particularly in examining Vernant's ideas concerning the relationship between tragedy and politics through the Greek concepts of *praxis* and *mimesis praxeos*. We know that Vernant's exploration of this relationship raises critical questions that enable him to oppose the tenacious philosophies of Enlightenment-inspired history that still prevail in his time. In this sense, we find it fitting to end this exploration with the concluding remarks from Vernant's work titled 'A theatre of the city':

dire qu'il n'y a pas de sujet et que l'acteur sur le théâtre du monde est l'histoire, c'est pour moi en dernière analyse absolument idéaliste. Ça consiste à habiller en sujet de l'histoire, extérieur à l'histoire, la dirigeant, lui donnant son sens, quelque chose dont personne ne sait ce que c'est (Vernant, 1989: 438).

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