

## THE RECEPTION OF VERNANT IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Six Anglophone colleagues of Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914–2007) in Britain and the USA recall his influence on their lives and research: his importance for the history of mentalities and for the theory of alterity and structuralism are discussed, together with the influence of Ignace Meyerson’s theory of psychologie historique. The article ends with personal reminiscences of friendship, and Oswyn Murray’s obituary from The Independent newspaper, highlighting his career in the Resistance.*

### KEYWORDS

*Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, altérité, mentalité, structuralism, l’imaginaire, Marxism, French Resistance, Greek rationality, Greek religion*

### Introduction

**T**his article was originally written shortly after the death of Jean-Pierre Vernant in 2007, and completed by 2010 for a volume that finally appeared in French translation almost a decade later in *Relire Vernant*, eds. S. Geourgoudi and F. de Polignac (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2018) 291–316. It was intended, not as a definitive assessment of the impact of Vernant on Anglophone scholarship (which in truth was and is in general slight), but as the record of his personal influence on those scholars who were most closely associated with him and his ‘École’. I therefore solicited the direct participation of all those known to me who had been at one time or another members of the group, and their contributions are clearly indicated.

In the meantime, in an effort supported by my collaborators, we struggled to find a place for our record to be available in English, and were grateful to our Croatian colleagues for a first publication in *Annales in*

\* I am deeply grateful to those friends and colleagues who responded to my original request for enlightenment on their relations with Jipé: these were Richard Buxton, Page Dubois, Simon Goldhill, Geoffrey Lloyd, and Froma Zeitlin; as a consequence this is a truly collaborative attempt on the part of those who knew him to understand the importance of his work; and I am little more than an editor of our thoughts.

*Perspective: Designs and Accomplishments*, vol. 1, eds. D. Roksandić, F. and N. Šimetin Šegvić (Zagreb, 2019) 97–108. Now we are delighted that with the agreement of all concerned the article will finally be made widely available in *HCS*.

Two expert readers have objected to aspects of my characterisation in this historic document, firstly to my description of British and French scholarship around 1960, when I was a graduate student working in Oxford and London. But I can assure my readers that I do not exaggerate the dire state of Classical Studies in Britain and France during that distant period when many new ‘white tile’ universities (Essex, Sussex, Warwick, York) had decided not to include Classical Studies in their programmes because it was a dead subject. I may one day expand on the situation in Britain; for that in France I simply refer to a long forgotten article by myself on ‘André Aymard’, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 85 (1973) 217–21, and to the devastating chapters by François Dosse, ‘Un regard renouvelé sur la Grèce antique’, in *Pierre Vidal-Naquet: une vie* (La Découverte, 2020) chs. 10–15. The world has indeed changed since then, thanks not least to the efforts of my generation of ‘soixante-huitards’ on both sides of the Channel. The history of the Centre Gernet is also explored in the online publication by its successor, the group ANHIMA, which contains my formal ‘rapport’ for the EHESS written in 1997 on the retirement of Pierre Vidal-Naquet.<sup>1</sup>

The second lack in the original article is the absence of one of the heroes of that generation, John Gould, who died in 2001 and therefore could not be invited to contribute. As Nick Fisher shows in his magnificent British Academy obituary (*Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XI, 239–63), John was perhaps throughout his life the most perceptive and influential protagonist of Vernant’s ideas in Britain.

Perhaps I may be allowed also to record my personal regret at one failed opportunity. Although I was of course aware of Vernant’s distinguished wartime career in the Resistance as Colonel Berthier,<sup>2</sup> I never discussed this with him, which was a pity since we had a close connection:

<sup>1</sup> ‘The External Rapport on the Centre Gernet 1996’, in François de Polignac (ed.) *Qu’est-ce que faire une école? Regards sur ‘L’école de Paris’*, *Cahiers mondes anciens* 13 (2020) ([https://doi.org/10.4000/mondes\\_anciens.2654](https://doi.org/10.4000/mondes_anciens.2654), last accessed 03.07.20).

<sup>2</sup> See J.-P. Vernant, *La traversée des frontières* (Paris, Le Seuil, 2004); Michel Goubet, Paul Debauges, *Histoire de la Résistance dans la Haute-Garonne* (Toulouse, Éditions Milan, 1986); Laurent Douzou, ‘Jean-Pierre Vernant résistant’, *Le Genre humain* 45–6 (2006) 13–17 (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-genre-humain-2006-1-page-13.htm>); and the websites: <https://www.ordredelaliberation.fr/fr/compagnons/jean-pierre-vernant>; <http://museedelaresistanceenligne.org/media1295-Jean-Pierre-Vernant>

my father Patrick Murray had been the civil servant in charge of Special Operations Executive (SOE), which was responsible for liaison with the Resistance and for providing them with military supplies. What conversations we might have had! So in honour of a great man, I have added to this article the obituary that I wrote for *The Independent* of 11<sup>th</sup> January 2007.

Finally it has been suggested to me that the article has a message for the present generation; this was not its primary intent, but I am happy if that is so.

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The antediluvian state of classical studies in the Anglophone world of the early sixties was not so different from that in France. Scholarship was dominated by the absolute separation of ancient literature, history and philosophy into three unconnected disciplines. ‘Literature’ concerned itself with prose and verse composition between the ancient and modern languages and with textual criticism in the traditional sense — the discovery of the original *ipsissima verba* of a text assumed to have been written down by the author himself and corrupted over the centuries by careless copyists. The practice of literary criticism had been abandoned in the early twentieth century as a sentimental Victorian aberration; there remained only the notion of a literary tradition, based on the idea of a written text that had evolved in the private study of the writer without contact with any external world, but simply through consideration of his predecessors. ‘Ancient history’ was confined to the study of classical Greece and Rome of the late Republic and early Empire. History itself was deemed to consist of facts and dates, and to be concerned primarily with battles, political events and institutions, together with a form of practical agrarian economic history, originally designed to assist future British administrators in governing the Indian empire. There was always one and only one truth: the only uncertainties permitted were caused by the paucity of sources, and the generally agreed unreliability of our surviving historical texts, which it was the duty of the ancient historian to correct according to the demands of a modernising rational historical consensus. ‘Ancient philosophy’ dealt with the eternal validity (or alternatively the demonstrable incorrectness) of the views expressed in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, without any reference to their other writings or to the world that they inhabited. The influence of German Jewish refugees from 1933 onwards had merely reinforced these various forms of philological positivism which were already endemic, and derived from nineteenth century admiration of German *Altertumswissenschaft*.

Since the situation in France was little better, it scarcely mattered that we were completely ignorant of French scholarship (though unlike the modern generation we could still speak and read the French language).<sup>3</sup>

For us younger scholars, who were the first generation to engage in organised doctoral research, three figures of the older generation stood out, all of them in one sense or another outsiders. In Oxford the Irishman E.R. Dodds in his revolutionary book, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), and in his earlier commentary on Euripides *Bacchae* (first edition 1944), had suggested the relevance of psychology and anthropology to the study of ancient literature. The Italian refugee Arnaldo Momigliano, Professor at University College London, showed us how we could liberate ourselves from the straitjacket of positivism by studying the classical and continental tradition of the history of ideas. And in Cambridge the former Marxist Moses Finley, exiled from the United States by Senator McCarthy, revealed how economic history lay at the basis of any true understanding of the ancient world.

It was Finley (and later Momigliano) who first introduced us to the ideas and personalities of the 'École de Paris'; although neither of our mentors was particularly close in historical method to the preoccupations of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. Finley may perhaps have been initially attracted to them by the fact that both of them had been and still were active in the left wing politics that he missed in contemporary Britain. But the author of *The World of Odysseus* (1954) also saw that the first book of Vernant, *Les Origines de la pensée grecque* (1962) was inspired by the same need that he had seen, to rethink the history of early Greece as a result of Michael Ventris' decipherment of Linear B. Both Vernant and Finley saw immediately the problem that the decipherment posed for the historian: how could this centralised Mycenaean palace economy, now proved to be Greek, relate to the archaic and classical world of the polis? Finley had sought a positivist economic solution in an interpretation of Homeric society as a product of the Dark Age, which was at this time only beginning to be studied by archaeologists. With this insight he inspired a generation of British archaeologists to move on from 'Homeric archaeology' as a form of antiquarian commentary on literary texts to the great achievements of the excavating age from Vincent Desborough to Mervyn Popham, John Boardman, Nicholas Coldstream, Anthony Snodgrass, and most recently Irene Lemos.

<sup>3</sup> There were of course certain exceptions to my negative picture already beginning to emerge, notably R.P. Winnington-Ingram, Bernard Knox, John Sullivan, John Gould, and Peter Green; but these had hardly yet had time to produce much impact.

Vernant's answer was couched in terms of a change of mentality, and has in fact dominated the study of the ancient Greek world ever since. The problem as he saw it was not so much one of the different economies of the two systems, their land-tenure or their social structures. It was rather the development from a hierarchic and perhaps theocratic world to the rationality inherent in the principles of Greek thought; and the answer to the problem in his opinion lay in the creation of the public institutions of the Greek city-state, and in the development of a style of rational political argument. Almost everything that has been written since on the political history and the intellectual development of Greek thought still starts consciously or unconsciously from the questions that Vernant posed in 1962. This aspect of the influence of Vernant in the English-speaking world was well understood from the start, although its inherent contradiction with his emphasis on *alterité*, the difference between antiquity and the present, has never been fully recognised.

The name of Vernant was already well known in Britain by 1965, when (surely at the suggestion of Moses Finley) he was invited, together with Walter Burkert, to address the Triennial Conference of the classical societies of Britain at Oxford: the occasion was engraved on his memory as on mine. I was a young research student, and I was given the task of guiding him in the pronunciation of English. He had chosen to speak on a recently discovered fragment of an Alcman commentary, which made reference to the image of the 'seiche'.<sup>4</sup> The word 'seiche' was completely new to me; I searched in the dictionary and offered him the translation 'cuttlefish'. But the word 'cuttlefish' at that time was equally unknown in English (except among fishmongers selling exotic fish); and in the delivery of his lecture the combination of this unfamiliar word, completely out of context as far as philologists were concerned, uttered in a heavy French accent, created in the lecture room (which was circular) an echo which ran continuously round the room — 'ze cootlefeesh, cootlefeesh, cootlefeesh,' — until the point that the audience themselves began to resemble a net full of cuttlefish, staring at the lecturer with open mouths. To begin with he thought that they were transfixed by his argument, but after a few minutes he realised that their amazement was due to the fact that they could not understand a word of what he was saying, and he was nevertheless forced to continue with his paper for another forty minutes. It is a moment in his professional career which he often recalled to me, and

<sup>4</sup> See J.-P. Vernant, 'Thétis et le poème cosmogonique d'Alcman', in *Hommages à Marie Delcourt* (Brussels, Latomus, 1970) 38–69; revised in M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant (eds.) *Les Ruses de l'intelligence. La mètis des Grecs* (Paris, Flammarion, 1974) 134–64.

because of which he remained resolutely Francophone for thirty years, until a visit to the monoglot United States with young French colleagues who were able to offer him better protection than I was. Late in his life, after the death of his wife, he began to experiment with English in Cambridge, translated by Valérie Huet. In 1999 his second visit to Oxford took place; I was instrumental in causing the University of Oxford to present Jipé with an honorary degree at the annual feast of Encaenia: in reply to my speech of welcome before the Faculty, he spoke long and eloquently, but of course in French.



Vernant in Oxford, chez les Murray, 1999

© Oswyn Murray

It is difficult to separate the influence of Vernant outside *Les Origines* from that of his colleague and collaborator Pierre Vidal-Naquet, although Pierre's relation to England was very different. His connection went back to his childhood: in his *Mémoires*<sup>5</sup> he writes of his young governess, Miss

<sup>5</sup> *Mémoires 1, La brisure et l'attente 1930–1955* (Paris, Seuil, 1995); *Mémoires 2, Le trouble et la lumière 1955–1998* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1998). These can now be supplemented by F. Dosse, *Pierre Vidal-Naquet, une vie* (Paris, La Découverte, 2020).

Mac, who introduced him to the famously chauvinist children's book on the history of England, *Our Island Story*, which begins with Queen Boadicea, courageous rebel against the Romans (prototype of Astérix), and King Alfred who burned the cakes, and continues with William the Conqueror, who managed to correct the fault of his French birth by his conquest of England, and finishes with Queen Victoria, empress of an empire on which the sun never sets. It seems that Pierre was so enamoured of England that there was talk of sending him to the most prestigious of all English schools, Eton. One wonders how his natural radicalism might have been affected by such early contacts with the English aristocracy — although Eton was of course also the school of the most famous of our left-wing writers, George Orwell. At any rate, since his wartime childhood Pierre was a passionate Anglophile who spoke English fluently and who knew the works of Shakespeare almost by heart. He was particularly proud of the honorary doctorate given to him by the University of Bristol in 1998, at the instigation of his English admirer, Richard Buxton. Pierre always felt at home in England: he loved to contrast the silence that followed the presentation of his ideas on the Black Hunter at the Société des Études Grecques in Paris in 1966 with the animated discussion among the anthropologists and historians of Cambridge, when he spoke there a year later. But in fact from an English perspective, Pierre too remained more French than he realised: the reception of his ideas in the Anglo-Saxon world always moved slowly and encountered fierce resistance.<sup>6</sup>

The first aspect of the thought of the 'École de Paris' that was important for the English was their conception of 'altérité'. But the alterities of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet were different from each other and were a good deal more subtle than the English realised. For Vidal-Naquet it was not an alterity that separates us from the Greeks: according to him it was necessary to see the problem as one that existed for the Greeks themselves. In his historical work Vidal-Naquet was always fascinated by those at the margins, those who were excluded from the status of citizens, wholly or in part; his research therefore concentrated on the mental world of groups such as artisans, adolescents, women and slaves. But in contrast to his contemporaries (at least in England) what interested him primarily was not their characteristic of being oppressed victims of the dominant culture. It is in fact the opinions of these outsiders which most closely resemble that view from the outside which is our own; it is they who can reveal to us the secrets of a society to which they also in some sense belong: they can serve as intermediaries between the dominant culture and ourselves.

<sup>6</sup> See John Ma, 'Black Hunter Variations', *PCPS* 40 (1994) 49–80.

For Vernant alterity seemed to be something yet more internal. It consisted in the necessity of recognising the difference between ourselves and the Greeks, the need to ‘regarder la lune avec les yeux des Grecs’. One might say that, whereas Vidal-Naquet saw ancient society as a world in internal conflict, Vernant saw it as a unity opposed to the view from the exterior.

Initially it seemed to the English that Vernant and Vidal-Naquet were structuralists. In the preface to their first collection *Mythe et Tragédie*, they admitted that ‘la plupart des études réunies dans ce livre relèvent de ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler l’analyse structurale’, but what mattered to them was not a form of decoding, a decipherment of the myths to reveal an underlying binary structure, but what they called ‘la sociologie de la littérature et ce qu’on pourrait appeler une anthropologie historique’. What tragedy presents is not a myth, but the reflection of a myth in a social context — at the same time a reflection on myth and a communication through myth.

One of the earliest English disciples of the French school, Richard Gordon, tried to capture the essence of what he saw as this structuralist approach in a selection of translated essays by Marcel Detienne, Louis Gernet, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, entitled *Myth, Religion and Society: Structuralist Essays* (Cambridge, 1981). These were some of the earliest translations from the French of the ‘École de Paris’ to appear; but they had little impact in comparison with the far more radical structuralist approach which was being presented in the discipline of anthropology by translators of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In what follows I shall confine myself to those younger contemporaries of Vernant who had close contact with him, and formally acknowledged his influence. In Britain these include Geoffrey Lloyd, who was the centre of his influence in Cambridge and introduced Simon Goldhill to him, myself at Oxford, Simon Pembroke in London, Richard Buxton in Bristol, and in the USA James Redfield (Chicago), Charles Segal, Froma Zeitlin (Princeton) and Page duBois (San Diego).

For Britain it was individuals in the Cambridge Faculty of Classics who were the most important in the reception of French ideas; they perhaps saw the connection between an earlier Cambridge ‘school’ of ritualists, with Jane Harrison, James Frazer and F.M. Cornford; certainly they were much encouraged by the leading Cambridge anthropologist, Edmund Leach. Moses Finley sent a number of his pupils to study in Paris, notably Richard Gordon, Richard Winton and Richard Buxton — ‘les trois Richards’, as Vidal-Naquet christened them; although Finley himself did not always approve of the results. The influence on Richard



Buxton especially of his contact with the *École de Paris* has dominated his choice of research themes ever since.

Geoffrey Lloyd had already pursued a philosophical form of structuralism influenced by Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss in his first book, *Polarity and Analogy*, which was completed in 1957 but not published until 1966; at that time he was ignorant of the work of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. He first met both of them in the house of Moses Finley during their visit to Cambridge in 1966; after that he was influential in introducing young Cambridge scholars to the ideas and to the institution of the Centre Gernet. His wife Janet (Ji) is in herself one of the most important sources of Vernant's Anglo-Saxon influence; for she has been responsible for a series of outstanding translations of works by Detienne, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, from *The Gardens of Adonis* (1977), *Cunning Intelligence* (1978) to *Myth and Society* (1980), *Myth and Tragedy* (1981), and *Politics Ancient and Modern* (1985). But although Lloyd was perhaps inspired by Vernant's comparative approach (as by Joseph Needham) in his later work on wider traditions such as India and especially China, he has been led to offer radical criticisms of the classical French tradition of *mentalité* from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl to Marcel Granet and Jacques Le Goff, in his polemical work, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge, 1990). Although in two chapters (chs. 2 and 4) he seeks to distinguish Vernant's insistence on the causal relationship between political institutions, science, and tragedy in the Greek world from this approach, it is hard not to see Vernant as influenced by the unifying tendency in French social anthropology, in the terms that Lloyd (following Peter Burke) cites — '(1) the focus on the ideas or beliefs of collectivities rather than on those of individuals, (2) the inclusion, as important data, of unconscious as well as conscious assumptions, and (3) the focus on the structure of beliefs and their interrelations, as opposed to individual beliefs taken in isolation' (p. 4). This was surely a major part of the tradition of Durkheim and Louis Gernet that Vernant inherited.

In a later Cambridge generation, Simon Goldhill, who (as mentioned above) was introduced as an undergraduate to both Vernant's and Vidal-Naquet's work by Geoffrey Lloyd, regards Vernant's most important contribution as his

work on tragic language first and foremost; the work on *le moment tragique* secondly; then the whole apparatus of myth and 'pensée'. His openness and intellectual verve were of crucial importance, of course, but mostly what had an instant and lasting impact was a linguistics that went beyond the Victorian philology still dominating the field (I was

reading lots of linguistics in those days), and, secondly, a politics of theatre that went to the heart of tragedy as a civic event.

Vernant's general contribution is to be seen

partly in tragedy: everyone is post-Vernant now except for a few self-appointed hyper-conservative loons: we will never go back to naïve positive linguistics or the belief that tragedy has no contact with a world of politics and city life (I hope). There are now dozens of close readings of tragedies based on Vernant's insights. But his 'structuralist' analyses of myth are just as important in the general field of classics: the tri-partite systematization of man–beast–god; sacrifice as a system; food as signifying system; divinity as a network not as multiple monotheisms — these are all crucial and still being worked out — and taken for granted by everyone who works on ancient religion.

My own debt to Vernant is difficult to disentangle from my debt to Pierre Vidal-Naquet<sup>7</sup> and more generally to the *équipe* of the Centre Louis Gernet, of which I regard myself as an honorary member. My closest academic friends have been the members of the Centre, and I spent three long periods in Paris as *professeur attaché*, two in rue Monsieur-le-Prince and the last in rue Vivienne; I am proud that my website of the *Bibliotheca Academica Translationum* (<http://bat.ehess.fr>) continues to be hosted by the Centre and its successor ANHIMA. When Pierre Vidal-Naquet retired, at a time when the Centre Gernet seemed to be threatened with closure, I was asked in June 1996 to write an official assessment for the EHESS of its international importance; my conclusion was:

The Centre may not compare in terms of facilities with the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, the Center for Hellenic Studies at Washington, All Souls College Oxford or the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, but in terms of productivity and intellectual excitement it is superior to all of these. I have enjoyed my duties enormously, and I know where I would rather work, despite all the frustrations of French academic life.

I am told that my intervention on this occasion was indeed significant.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See my obituary in *The Independent*, Friday 4 August 2006; and my chapter in *Pierre Vidal-Naquet, un historien dans la cite*, eds. François Hartog, Pauline Schmitt, Alain Schnapp (Paris, La Découverte, 1998) ch. 10.

<sup>8</sup> See 'The External Rapport on the Centre Gernet 1996', in François de Polignac (ed.) *Qu'est-ce que faire une école? Regards sur 'L'école de Paris'*, *Cahiers mondes*

Certainly I was deeply influenced by reading *Les Origines*, as can be seen from the argument of my article ‘Cities of Reason’ (1987, 1990), which seeks to explain the problem of the difference and identity of Greek political thought in relation to the modern world.<sup>9</sup> Beyond that I responded to the combination of history and philosophy that I recognised in both Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. My approach to the Greek symposion not only reflects a close collaboration with Pauline Schmitt Pantel and François Lissarrague; it also rests on the belief (learned at least in part from Vernant) that social rituals have a significance in the investigation of mental attitudes or *l’imaginaire*, and that the Greek experience should be viewed as a whole in art, philosophy, literature and history. The only aspect of Vernant’s thought that I have found difficult to assimilate is the idea that religion has an especially privileged position as an explanatory tool for understanding the Greeks; but in that I recognise that I am very much in a minority. If I were to try to characterise my personal approach to history, I would see it as acquired almost equally from Arnaldo Momigliano and from Vernant.

The move across the Atlantic was some ten years later than the start of the influence of Vernant on British culture, and is largely due to two individuals in the United States. Froma Zeitlin has described the importance of the influence of Vernant in her introduction to the translation of Vernant’s *Collected Essays*, two thirds of which were brilliantly translated by herself for the first time;<sup>10</sup> more personally (see above, n. 1) she says:

Vernant was instrumental in my intellectual development from the moment that I discovered his work. My own involvement with Greek tragedy profited enormously from his structuralist approach: tragedy, more than any other genre, because of its tight organization and closed circuit, as it were, of language and event, lent itself to the construction of binaries and oppositions as a key to understanding the workings of drama. Jipé’s further insistence on the relations between tragedy and the society from which it arose and in which it remained embedded remained again a continuing source of enlightenment. A second strand of influence for me was his work on the image, a topic that engaged him for many years, was the subject of a number of his inquiries at the

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Cities of Reason’, *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander*, eds. Oswyn Murray and Simon Price (Oxford, OUP, 1990) 1–25.

<sup>10</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma Zeitlin (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1991) 3–24.

Collège and after. Starting already with Homer and focusing on the changes from the archaic to the classical period and the decisive intervention of Plato regarding the issues of mimesis, the mirror, the question of copy and model, and the gradual secularization of the image, he produced seminal work, whether on the *kolossos* or the eye of the Gorgon, and so much more. A final word on his engagement with matters of religion (his chair was in Comparative Religion), whether the nature of the gods (his piece on the body of the gods, for example, remains exemplary), the uses of ritual and cult, and his treatment of sacrifice in particular all contributed to the development of my own ideas. At the same time, the work he did with Detienne on *métis* in their collaborative volume on the nature of cunning intelligence stands for me as one of the finest pieces of scholarship I know, the source of endless ramification beyond the limits of that study.

Page duBois has also described the importance of Vernant for classical studies in her article for *Mètis*;<sup>11</sup> today she offers a different perspective from that of Froma Zeitlin:

For people in literary studies, I think Jipé was more influential than Pierre, who always seemed more of a historian than someone interested in what we call literary questions, although for Jipé they were not literary but cultural questions.

I see Jipé more within the context of Marxism than perhaps others do. His early work on Marx on the Greeks, on class struggle, was very important to me in reconciling 60's radicalism and anti-war activism with academic study of ancient Greece. He was always very engaged politically, although Pierre was better-known perhaps for contemporary interventions on questions of Algeria, torture, holocaust denial, etc. I think Jipé retained some elements of Marxist historicism in his approach, although he became estranged from official Stalinist politics. In the essays on Oedipus, I see the traces of a struggle between a rigorous historicism, in which the ideas of a particular historical moment are specific to that time, that place, and a desire to comment on the human condition in a more general sense. I actually found his collaboration with Marcel Detienne, the early encounter with Lévi-Straussian structuralism, to be fascinating, but problematic. The brilliance of Detienne's *Adonis* book seemed revelatory but shocking. Jipé's earlier work was so historically specific, and the book on *métis* left behind that specificity to range very far, from Homer into late sources. I found that disappointing at the time, and I think he continued to struggle with a

<sup>11</sup> 'Inscription, the Law and the Comic Body', *Mètis* 3 (1988) 69–84.

sense of a strongly rooted historical psychology, so influenced by Meyerson, and the temptations of a wider-ranging description of antiquity as an epoch.

I do agree that he created the scholarly world of many progressive classicists — undoing boundaries between sub-fields for many of us. But there were and continue to be real obstacles between those working on ancient culture in a broader sense, and those who do ‘literary studies’, philosophy, epigraphy. I think for some classicists the Parisian school seemed very radical at first; then it was domesticated and defanged in the U.S., to some degree. Like the work of Derrida and others, Jipé’s work on a few literary texts became exemplary, read in isolation from the rest of his work, and much of the radical purchase of his method, which was much more broadly cultural, was lost.

Behind all these different responses lies a general recognition of the importance of Vernant’s methodology, as much as of the positive results from his researches: it is his methods and style of approach that have had more importance than any particular theories or discoveries. One of the most important aspects of Vernant’s approach is that expressed in the title of his last work *La traversée des frontières* (Paris, 2004). For whether or not the present generation realises it, classical studies in the Anglophone world live in a post-Vernant age, in the sense that we cannot escape from the influence of his work — just as in other respects we are all post-Freudian, post-Marxist and post-structuralist, so we now inhabit a world that Vernant created, which results from his work on Greek myth and its use for reconstructing the history of the Greek mentality. It was his insistence that myth was *pensée*, that ideas were history, that texts were expressions of the mental world of a real and contemporary society which was in no way identical with our own, that the sphere of the *imaginaire* is the reality of history, that created the scholarly world we now all inhabit — a world where performance is a historical event, where tragedy is a public art, where poetry is created for an occasion, and where there are no longer any barriers between Greek literature, Greek philosophy and Greek history. Vernant’s achievement, not just in France, but throughout the world of classical scholarship, is indeed this unification of classical studies. And in that sense his gift to us is not so much in the conclusions of the articles and books that he wrote, but in presenting us with a new and unified method of research. So internalised, problematised, with all its uncertainties, the history of mentalities finally taught the English-speaking world that positivism must be abandoned.

In contrast to Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who has had more influence on historical studies, it is in literary studies that the impact of Vernant has been greatest, as Page duBois emphasised in her programmatic article for

*Métis*. And the work of Miriam Leonard seeks to continue this tradition for a new generation.<sup>12</sup> But more widely the old traditions die hard, and the present generation seems to be turning its back on the achievements of the ‘École de Paris’. It seems that the Anglo-Saxon classical world is once more fragmenting into a series of technical disciplines.

Only perhaps in one respect is the approach of Vernant still being actively pursued: as Froma Zeitlin observes, in his later work he became interested in the problems of perception and the image. In collaboration with Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, and in parallel with the interest in iconography of other members of the Centre Gernet, he explored the changing modes of vision. He saw that in the archaic world the image was not representation but a double with independent power to act; it was Plato who created the modern conception of imitation. In modern Anglo-Saxon scholarship, whether consciously or not, this has found expression in a proliferation of studies on the body and the gaze.<sup>13</sup>

This leads me to reflect that we have never yet taken seriously the ideas that underlie the central insight of Vernant. The unifying theory beneath all the work of Vernant on comparatism, *mentalité, l’imaginaire*, was his belief in the importance of the ideas of his old comrade in the Resistance, Ignace Meyerson.<sup>14</sup> As conceived by Meyerson, human psychology was both universal and historically determined: it embodied the response to basic human functions, perceptions and activities, such as space, time, work, the gaze. This theory, as Vernant saw, validated the comparative approach and the search for distinctive *mentalités* in different periods; it allowed for the historical development of psychological processes, while maintaining a materialistic framework. It made possible the search for *l’imaginaire*. And it especially established the importance of Greek literature and Greek myth in reconstructing how to ‘see the moon with the eyes of the Greeks’. A generation in which an epigraphic study of ancient Greek emotions, without reference to ancient philosophy or literature, can be awarded millions of pounds of public money reveals both how little the influence of Vernant has penetrated into the modern consciousness, and how essential it is that we return to his insights. For epigraphy is primarily concerned with words, whereas Vernant saw that

<sup>12</sup> Miriam Leonard, ‘Tragic Will and the Subject of Politics’, *Phoenix* 59 (2005) 133–42; *Athens in Paris* (Oxford, OUP, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> For the English reader this is well highlighted by the selection of essays translated by Zeitlin and entitled ‘Image’ in part 3 of *Mortals and Immortals*.

<sup>14</sup> On this important aspect of Vernant see the collection of his essays, *Passé et Présent. Contributions à une psychologie historique réunies par Riccardo Di Donato*, 2 vols. (Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1995); and the section ‘Psychologie et anthropologie historiques’, in *Entre Mythe et Politique* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1996).

what was important was their changing meanings: ‘In this sense the psychologist can make his own the famous remark of Marx, that the whole of history is nothing more than the continuous transformation of human nature.’<sup>15</sup>

## II

In collecting these various responses to the intellectual challenge posed by the work of Vernant it is obvious to me that the most important aspect of his legacy is the impact that his personality and his extraordinary gift for friendship had on those who met him, among Anglophone as among French-speaking colleagues. It is only possible fully to understand the significance of his influence from this point of view. So I end with some personal reminiscences offered by colleagues in Britain and the United States:

*Geoffrey Lloyd*

Ji and I first met both JPV and PVN at a dinner party given by Moses and Mary Finley at 9 Adams Road. That was in 1966; PVN refers to that dinner party or at least to the relevant visit to Cambridge in his *Mémoires*, where he speaks very warmly of his encounter with Simon Pembroke. Two little anecdotes: I gabbled on in my excitement and Moses at the other end of the table said ‘Geoffrey, you really ought to speak more slowly’. To which my reply was: ‘But Moses, I think it is OK. I am speaking French’. Then at the end of the evening, when we had left the house and were getting into our car, JPV came rushing out and said he was terribly sorry he had not realised who I was. Of course I was immensely touched.

Now as to *Polarity and Analogy*, the thesis on which it was based was written in 1957, though after several mishaps with CUP it only got to be published in 1966. But although I used a lot of Lévi-Strauss and quite a bit of more recherché anthropology (courtesy of Leach and Rodney Needham) I did not (to my undying shame) refer to either JPV or PVN. I was rightly chided for this in a (favourable) review of the book written by Jacques Brunschwig (PVN’s cousin). I don’t know whether Geoffrey Kirk, who was my titular supervisor (though I only saw him three or four times in three years) knew their work: but he never mentioned them, and he

<sup>15</sup> ‘En ce sens, le psychologue peut faire sienne la formule célèbre de Marx selon laquelle l’histoire tout entière n’est qu’une transformation continue de la nature humaine.’ From ‘Histoire et psychologie’, in *Religions, histoires, raisons* (Paris, Maspero, 1979) 73, translated as ch. 15 in Zeitlin (ed.) 261–68.

was worried enough at that stage about my using Lévi-Strauss, suggesting it could get me turned down (eventually of course he made heavy use of him in his *Mythology* book, even asking me, in a nice volte-face, for advice on the subject). So JPV and PVN did not influence that first book of mine at all, though later of course I cited them profusely, particularly in ch. 4 of *Magic Reason and Experience* (1979), ‘Greek science and Greek society’. The materials of that book were given as lectures in Paris in 1978, which was I think the first of many invitations I had, from JPV, PVN and later Nicole Loraux, to lecture at the Centre or at the Maison. From the beginning, JPV’s *Origins* impressed me even more than PVN’s *Cleisthenes*, but science as the child of the polis was the principal lesson I got from both.

Now let Ji talk about translating JPV:

I loved translating Jipé’s books, not only because I learned so much from them and they were written so lucidly and elegantly, but also because, when I submitted my translations for his approval, he always responded so kindly and so helpfully. That has certainly not been my experience with everyone I have translated! I loved his books — and we both loved him.

As regards a wider interest in Cambridge, Moses spread the word. I think it was he who won Kirk round, but Leach was enthusiastic about the work at the Centre (writing a rave review of Ji’s translation of *The Gardens of Adonis*) and John Dunn and Quentin Skinner got the message from Moses. Then of course there were the three Richards sent by Moses to the Centre. But there were of course plenty of stick-in-the-muds — as indeed there still are.

### *Richard Buxton*

I first came across anything to do with French anthropology/mythology in my second year as an undergraduate at King’s, when Geoffrey Lloyd was my tutor (1969–70). He recommended (I think in connection with an essay on the Presocratics — polarities etc.) *La pensée sauvage*. I was very taken with it, but didn’t have much context for it, and much of it went over my head. Apart from Geoffrey, no one in Cambridge Classics that I then knew — I hadn’t then been taught by Moses — had any interest whatever in this angle. But that certainly wasn’t the case with King’s *anthropologists*. Presumably under that influence I took a coach to Oxford to hear Lévi-Strauss lecture. As Eliot put it, I had the experience



but missed the meaning: fatally, L-S spoke in impossible English ('The Releshun-sheep beetween the Meet and the Reet ...').

As a postgraduate I asked to be supervised by Moses. In my second year (1972–73) he suggested I went to Paris. He fixed it with Henri van Effenterre (the director) that I could stay in the Maison des Provinces de France instead of the Maison Franco-Britannique; that was a great idea and decisive for my French.

My first and best point of contact was Pierre, meeting whom I found a life-changing experience. He was my *de facto* supervisor that year (during which time I had almost no contact with Moses). He took a great interest, was personally warm and tremendously exciting both intellectually and as a great, morally uplifting human being.

I went to seminar courses taught by Pierre, Marcel Detienne and JPV. Pierre was doing *Ajax* and *OC*, Detienne the 19/20<sup>th</sup> century historiography of myth, and JPV Hesiod. In those days of course there was no *Centre*: Pierre's seminars were in the rue de Varenne (nice room but smoky — Nicole Loraux got through a packet of 20 each seminar, it seemed), Detienne's in the Sorbonne and rue des Feuillantines (concrete floor; lots of ants in the spring); JPV in the Sorbonne only. Pierre's lecturing style was the least obviously gripping: a bit staccato, with pauses that weren't always dramatic. But the democratic feel of the seminars was a fabulous medium for learning: there I met F. Frontisi-Ducroux, Laurence Kahn, Pauline Schmitt Pantel, Alain and Annie Schnapp. Detienne was a brilliant speaker, but more of a showman; in him I found none of Pierre's genuine wish to involve the audience. JPV was the best speaker of all: glorious French, effortlessly riveting, yet with nothing whatever of the prima donna about him. The only occasion I ever saw him below par was after (it was said) he had just learned of his then failure to be elected to the Collège de France. I was in awe of him; I don't recall making a single intervention. In Detienne's seminars I was referred to as 'un de Finley's boys', and in a sense I performed this appointed role, which was, when I did pipe up, to counter the affirmation of synchronic structuralism by affirming the importance of the changing socio-historical context.

When I got back from Paris I gave Moses a piece on *OC* which I had written for Pierre. Pierre had praised it, but Moses rubbished it. In essence he said I had to unlearn at least half of what I had — from my perspective — gained in Paris. This was when I asked for a change of supervisor. Pat Easterling took over the job, which for me was perfect. The thesis eventually became *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy*, alias *Peitho*. Looking back, I can now see how the argument of the book grew out of my time in Paris. The general section on *peitho/dolos/bia* was a kind of structural background, followed by detailed analyses of the plays. I did

the same kind of thing in a 1980 *JHS* article on blindness: first the structure of the myths, then the detail on the plays. I was trying to reflect the approach of what I found the amazing *Mythe et tragédie* (not yet *Mythe et tragédie un*): to look for structures, but not to forget the individual contributions of dramatists. In *M et T* Pierre on *Philoctetes* and JPV on *OT* did that wonderfully.

In the years since 1973 I had regular contact with Pierre, very occasional but friendly contact with JPV, and no contact with MD. Along with John Gould — definitely another to add to the Anglo Reception list — I successfully proposed JPV for an honorary doctorate at Bristol in 1987. (I was delighted to hear JPV stress the fact that Bristol had honoured him *first*, in his acceptance speech when, many years later, Oxford gave him an honorary degree! Cambridge: never). In 1998 Pierre duly got *his* honorary doctorate at Bristol; it was certainly the proudest day of my academic life when I gave the oration. But I enormously respected JPV too.

#### Generalia:

1. Fundamental to understanding the influence of JPV is the notion of the *équipe*. His wartime record, and the related mutual admiration between him and Pierre, created a formidable bond which rubbed off on the next generation of scholars. It was tied in also with active political engagement; one of the lesser-known of Pierre's works is the massive collection of documents about the 'events' of 1968, edited by him and Alain Schnapp. There is clearly some degree of relationship between the Anglo reception of JPV/Pierre and politics: it was evident enough with Moses, and antithetically with Hugh Lloyd-Jones — the latter once used extremely fruity negative language to me about JPV, then visiting Oxford, and the reason was politics.

The downside of the *équipe* is the sense of separation between it and others. It's such a pity there was so little interaction between JPV and Burkert (all that potential for debate about sacrifice), and virtually none at all between JPV and Martin West.

2. Self-evidently, *structure* was at the heart of what JPV contributed: structure of the pantheon (Hermes/Hestia); structure of modes of thought (*Metis*). The focus on structure fed into the preoccupation with margins and liminality (JPV on Artemis) — an interface here with the approach, in Bremmer and others, which stressed initiation and other rites of passage, picking up on Pierre on *Philoctetes* also. The structure of the landscape too: I have tried to do something with this idea.

3. Equally self-evidently, the importance of *la cité* was crucial. The mantra of *Mythe et Tr.* is: tragedy is heroic myth viewed from the perspective of the city. This has been a long-lasting influence, notably in Simon Goldhill's work.
4. Again deriving from *M et Tr.*: the inherent *ambiguity* of tragedy. One can see this in lots of Anglo work of course: John Gould, Simon Goldhill, me.
5. Closely related: the *tensions* in the city. There are surely connections with Geoffrey Lloyd's work on competitive contexts, though Geoffrey takes the question in wholly fresh directions.
6. Among US scholars, Froma of course is important in *inter alia* developing matters of gender which neither Pierre nor JPV fully worked through. Note also though Charles Segal — a lot of his work was influenced by Paris.
7. To my knowledge the admiration for Simon Pembroke was Pierre's, and very strong it was. I'm not aware of JPV having a similar view, though I may be wrong.
8. The biggest facilitators of the Anglo reception of JPV and Pierre were undoubtedly Moses and Geoffrey — *and Ji*: one absolutely mustn't underestimate the significance of her series of translations.

### *Froma Zeitlin*

Jipé entered my life in a strange roundabout way. I had discovered *Mythe et pensée* myself in the Columbia library in 1970, when I was finished my doctoral dissertation on Ritual in Greek Tragedy and was looking for something new to read. I was mesmerized from the first by the new concepts and brilliant analyses of both familiar and unfamiliar texts and ideas. I later discovered that the person I had thought was Jean-Pierre Vernant was the same as Jipé, the husband of Lida, the cousin on her mother's side of my very best friend from elementary school days, to whom she often referred. Lida Vernant came from the same émigré background as did my friend, Mathilde Naiditch (Klein), whose family fled Russia to France after the Revolution. While the Naiditchs again fled France for the US in 1940, Lida remained in France and, already married to Jipé, eventually spent the war in hiding, while Jipé became a hero of the Resistance. After the war, the two families again picked up their relationship with the same intimacy on both sides of the Atlantic. After making my astonishing discovery, I had the opportunity to meet Jipé when he visited my friend in New York. Needless to say, I leapt at the chance, despite my then impoverished French (from high school). That was the beginning — already anticipated, as it seems, by Jipé's discovery

of one of the first essays I ever published (“The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in the *Oresteia*”), a copy of which he found in my friend’s house and seized upon in turn for Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who was working on a similar topic. A small world indeed. But my real relationship with Jipé began in the fall of 1975 when I went to Paris for several months on an NEH fellowship. It was the time of Jipé’s inauguration into the Collège de France, which I had the good fortune to attend, and I then met all the rest of the *équipe* — Marcel Detienne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Nicole Loraux (who had just become a *maître assistant* at the *École des Hautes Etudes*), François Hartog, Alain Schnapp (archaeology), Jesper Svenbro, and other visitors like myself. I recall being astonished at the collaborative venture in which they engaged: they attended one another’s seminars; they planned programs with foreign visitors; and they were full of ideas. Nicole Loraux especially impressed me, with her combination of literary and historical acumen, even at the time when she had newly returned to Paris from Strasbourg to take up a brilliant career that was tragically foreshortened many years later when she had a stroke at the age of 51 from which she never really recovered. I cannot recall now whether I met the iconologues at this time or at a later visit (François Lissarrague, Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, Jean-Pierre Darmon [Roman mosaics], along with Alain Schnapp), but they too belonged to the ‘family’ as it were, into which I was included as a life-long member. Some years later, I served as *Directeur d’Études Associé* in the Collège de France (1981–82) under Jipé, at which time I gave a series of lectures (in French). I also subsequently edited (with an introduction) a series of essays by Jipé (*Mortals and Immortals*), published by Princeton University Press in 1991, but Jipé had already made several trips to Princeton where he lectured, as I recall, on Eros, on the Gorgon, and finally, on Odysseus. We solved the Anglophone problem by translating and distributing his paper to the audience, which left Jipé, with his wonderful Gallic expressiveness, to make his listeners feel that they actually understood French.

My relationship with him deepened still further when his beloved Lida was stricken with Alzheimer’s (at the time, much less known than now), and I spent numerous hours with the two of them and later with him alone at his house in Sèvres that was piled high with books and papers. His other life, his political one, especially as a hero of the Resistance (he was awarded the coveted title of *Compagnon de la Libération*), and his numerous friendships with an entire coterie of admirers and comrades supplied a seemingly endless series of stories, told with humor and verve, in the style for which he became famous. I was privileged to share these private moments with him at home (or in his office later at the Collège, when he was served faithfully by Françoise Frontisi

(his assistant) and François Lissarrague, both of whom looked after him, especially after his retirement from the Collège. His had not been an easy life: his father died soon after he was born; his mother died when he was 8. He and his brother Jacques were raised by his father's aunt (and his mother's grandparents), and yet, he never dwelled on these losses. Rather, I and many others marveled at his equanimity of temperament and generosity towards others (even his detractors), his ability to rise above petty issues, but fierce in his defense of his own ideals, and, perhaps, above all, his willingness to listen, no matter to what and to whom (*Jipé écoute*, we always said). In a sense, it is impossible to separate the man from what he accomplished in virtually every endeavor he undertook. He was a master of tact and possessed a quite remarkable sensibility, when it came to human interaction. I will recount just one small example. In my introduction to the volume, *Mortals and Immortals*, I had made ample use of the metaphor of the mirror, as a way of situating him in his French milieu, milking it for its extension to reflection as to the very idea of an image. I took my cue from his own work on Greek ideas of the mirror, which I had included in the collection. I sent the introduction to him and received in return a telegram (only Jipé continued to use the old-fashioned telegram), and it said 'au miroir parfait de ton texte, je suis beaucoup plus beau que nature'. *Le mot juste* on the one hand (he understood exactly what I had meant), and a characteristic modesty, on the other.

### *Page duBois*

As to my personal relations with Jipé: I attended his lectures at the Collège de France, and after one of them went up and introduced myself, because I had translated one of his Oedipus essays, commissioned by the American Marxist Fredric Jameson, for *New Literary History*. We became friends and he invited me to lecture at the Collège. I learned so much from him, admired him so much, and saw him as a political model, since classicists in the US seemed to me at the time methodologically unconscious and very conservative both in their intellectual work and in their engagement with US imperialism, etc. He always seemed sympathetic to the left in America, although deeply contemptuous that the US government had denied him a visa to enter the country because of his previous membership in the French Communist party.

He came to speak at UCSD when for some reason the Lacanian Daniel Sibony was visiting, Sibony questioned him sharply about the Freudian Oedipus and Jipé refused to be drawn, making it quite clear that his

conviction concerning historicism, in the sense I alluded to above, extended to 'the Oedipus', and that he was not in the least interested in a psychoanalytic interpretation of the mask, his topic of the day.

On another visit (?), he coincided with Jacques Derrida, who was teaching or lecturing at UCSD. We organized a joint party, with the devotees of both great men. I brought Jipé to the party. Derrida was already there, and there was a bit of tension as they sighted one another across the crowded room. They knew each other, of course, from Paris, and Derrida had used Jipé's work on the *φάρμακός* extensively in his essay 'La pharmacie de Platon'. There was a moment of hesitation, and I could see that Derrida was waiting. Jipé, with characteristic generosity, modesty and good will, walked over to him and shook his hand, and Derrida received him. Very like Jipé not to insist on his seniority and superiority, in my view.

I loved visiting him and Lida in Sèvres; he would arrive at the train station in a battered Deux Chevaux and we would have a beautiful Sunday lunch and walk in the garden. After she so sadly died, he took me to lunch at Balzar on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and we reminisced. He very much enjoyed that nostalgic atmosphere. And I saw him at Froma's and George's apartment in New York, where he seemed exhilarated by the city, and was protected most kindly, gently and almost surreptitiously by François Lissarrague and Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux.

For me, the idea that influenced me most was the notion of totality, in a Marxist sense; that the thinking of a society is the ideas of a historically specific moment, that material practices, cultural poetics, exist within a horizon. He rejected a developmental, Hegelian, Engelsian 'myth to reason' sort of model eventually, but retained this sense of a historical whole, a structuralist version of correspondence and internal relations within and between autonomous domains of society.

I agree that methods and approach have been more influential than particular discoveries. I don't really know Meyerson's work, except as an influence on Jipé; when I introduced him at UCSD, once, and mentioned M., he seemed pleased and touched to be associated with his old comrade.

As for his personal impact of him on me, I adored him. He was a benign and generous patron, always kind and encouraging. He would correct me gently if he thought I was going off track — once I said that I had been shocked at what seemed to me a strange anti-Semitism in the work of Simone Weil, and he said: 'Mais elle était quand-même une personne assez remarquable'.

I do think many classicists in the US never really took account of how important politics and Marxism were to him. The work of Marx, even Althusser, continues to influence my understanding of his theoretical

position. And I think many classicists thought the Parisian school was dangerous, sloppy, too ambitious and insufficiently positivist and returned gratefully to the previous division of labor in the discipline.

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*Oswyn Murray*  
*Obituary of Jean-Pierre Vernant*<sup>16</sup>

Towards the end of his long life Jean-Pierre Vernant was asked whether he saw any connection between his wartime exploits and his work as a scholar. Surprised by the question, he reflected briefly, and replied that perhaps his later obsession with the figure of Achilles and the concept of the youthful heroic death (*la belle mort*) did indeed reflect the experiences of himself and his friends in the Resistance.

Vernant was born in 1914, the son of a father who was killed in the First War; in 1937 he passed out top in the *agrégation* in philosophy for the whole of France, shortly after his brother had achieved the same distinction. Discharged from the army after the fall of France, the two found themselves in Narbonne in August 1940 at the height of the anti-British feeling caused by the destruction of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir with the loss of 1300 French sailors; their first known act of defiance was to paste the walls of the city with the slogan, *Vive l'Angleterre pour que vive la France* (long live England that France may live).

In 1940 at the age of 26 Vernant was appointed philosophy teacher at the main boys' school in Toulouse; his pupils did not guess the other life of their young professor. He helped form the *Armée Secrète* in 1942, and by the end of the war, as Colonel Berthier of the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*, was commander of the entire Resistance movement in Haute-Garonne, organising the liberation of Toulouse on 19–20 August 1944. His ability to unify the many independent groups made Toulouse a centre of the Resistance and one of the most active theatres of clandestine warfare in France. Assisted by sympathisers in the railways, the police, the factories and local government, from among the refugees from Fascist Italy and the Spanish civil war and French Jewish refugees from the north, with the help of military supplies spirited away from the army at the fall of France or dropped by the British SOE, their operations included disrupting railway and road supplies, sabotaging factory production, executing collaborators and organising the main escape route to Spain for allied pilots who escaped or were shot down. A potentially disastrous

<sup>16</sup> First published in *The Independent* on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2007.

police raid on their headquarters in October 1943 led to the capture of five members and the movement's records. A message was sent to the prefect of police, that if any of these records were transmitted to the Germans he would personally be executed on the orders of London: the records disappeared. Three agents were sprung with the help of a technique subsequently used often again, involving the fabrication of orders for their immediate release written on genuine official paper, and sent by official courier precisely at the last moment on Saturday before the closure of all offices for the weekend, when no telephone message could be sent to query the order. A forged official confirmation arrived on Monday; and the operation was repeated for the other two people arrested. So successful was this method that after the war the French government refused the title of member of the resistance to one of Vernant's team, because his record showed that he had been officially declared to be a collaborator.



Le Résistant au grand jour de la Libération: J.-P.Vernant  
(Goubet, Debauges, *Histoire de la Résistance dans la Haute-Garonne*, 31)



Vernant himself escaped arrest partly because (as he later discovered) his government dossier had become inextricably confused with that of his brother: when finally in spring 1944 he was about to be 'dismissed' by the Vichy education authorities and handed over to the French fascist organisation known as the Milice, he received two anonymous letters (both misspelling his name in different ways) warning him not to trust the headmaster or the school inspector, and went into hiding. After the war he was surprised to find that there was no record of any decision to dismiss (or reinstate) him in the archives, and finally concluded that, though a decision had indeed been taken, it had not been recorded because the authorities had postponed action over the holidays, being unwilling to commit themselves to anything at this stage of the war. Instead when the war was over, he received promotion and a letter of commendation for his 'professional qualities and civic courage' signed by the very same inspector whom he suspected of denouncing him. Otherwise he was given little recognition, since in their efforts to re-establish conservative control of France, the Allies, de Gaulle and the French establishment united in refusing to recognise the populist Resistance movements, which were dominated by the left. Vernant himself was a member of the Communist Party from 1932 intermittently until 1970; but his independence from the party line dates from the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1939, and he was often publicly critical of the party, regarding himself as a Marxist rather than a party member.

His experiences in Vichy France taught Vernant that official history and official records were a worthless farrago of falsehoods; and the memory of his fellow fighters in the hour of victory was scarcely more reliable. The success of the Resistance had been due to the fact that it had created an alternative structure of 'reality' that ran alongside the structures of the Vichy regime; the only truth was the psychological experience of the group, as Tolstoy had understood it — *mes copains*, Vernant called them. Returning to academic life he began a thesis on the notion of work in Plato, and pursued a form of research into Greek civilisation inspired by the social psychology of his colleague in the Resistance, Ignace Meyerson: he sought to understand the specifically Greek conceptions of those general ideas common to all human experience, like labour, value, time, space, memory, the will and the person, imagination and sacrifice, or the difference between us and them, Greeks and barbarians (*altérité*). Between 1948 and 1962 he followed the seminars of Louis Gernet, veteran sociologist and pupil of Durkheim. From these two influences he developed one of the first and most successful approaches in the *histoire des mentalités*. He was always open to new ideas, being editorial secretary for

the *Journal de Psychologie* in the Fifties, and later embracing anthropology and structuralism without becoming imprisoned by them. Never a man to waste words, his first book of 130 pages, *Les Origines de la Pensée Grecque* (1962), changed the history of Greek studies: in the wake of the decipherment of Linear B it asked the simple questions, what is the relationship between the newly discovered Mycenaean world of palace bureaucracies and the invention of rationality by the Greeks, and how does Greek rationality relate to modern ideas; to him the answers lay in the democratic political experience of archaic Greece, and the forms of verbal exchange developed in relation to civic duties. In this book he posed the fundamental questions which have been the starting-point for all studies of ancient Greece for the last sixty years. His later work concentrated on the place of religion in Greek society and the evidence of literature and art for Greek social forms.

In 1948 Vernant entered the CNRS and in 1958 joined the group around Fernand Braudel in the *VIe section* of the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (later the *EHESS*), in 1964 he established his own research centre in the house of Auguste Comte, devoted to 'comparative research on ancient societies': initially the group included experts not only on ancient Greece and Rome but also on Assyria, Egypt, India, China and Africa, and a number of anthropologists. Religion was treated as a central aspect of all societies, which must be studied for their unifying principles. The Centre became the focus of intellectual activity in comparative history throughout Europe and the United States: everyone would make the pilgrimage to the cramped collection of rooms in rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Slowly, and to the regret of Vernant himself, the pressures of academic life and the interests of enthusiastic young researchers pushed the focus of the Centre towards the classical world, until by the time he handed over its direction to his friend and collaborator Pierre Vidal-Naquet (obituary: *The Independent*, 4 August 2006), it had emerged as the centre for a new type of Greek and Roman history. Once again, as during the war, he had created an alternative structure of subversion alongside the official academic cursus: when the events of 1968 arrived, it was members of the Centre who took over control of classical studies in the universities, and the Centre Louis Gernet became the most important institution in the world for the study of Greek civilization. He was proud of having established what an outsider called the 'École de Paris': 'neither my work nor my life nor my personality can be separated from the team: ... may the Centre continue. A living research team is an institution and a sort of family, with all its tensions.' Although he always remained closely connected to the Centre, from 1975 to 1984 Vernant was Professor at the

*Collège de France* in the comparative history of ancient religions, where his lectures were famous for the clarity and elegance of their French style.

The charisma of Jipé (as he was called by all his disciples) rested on the warmth of his personality: he always used the ‘tu’ form and recognised you as a fellow worker whatever your age; in seminars he had an uncanny ability to understand what the speaker really meant (*Jipé écoute*), and to formulate it afterwards to the speaker privately. As an orphan he had built his life on friendship: it was easy to understand how people could have risked their lives for him. Once he told the story of how he came to acquire a holiday house on the exclusive island of Belle-Ile. For many years he and his adored wife Lida (the daughter of Russian émigrés, whom he had met in 1932 when she was 14, and married in 1939) had rented the house for holidays; one day the owner came to him to say that he had to sell. Regretfully Jipé said that he could not possibly afford to buy it. ‘You don’t understand’, the owner said, ‘I want to sell it to you. Tell me the price (*dîtes-moi le prix*).’

Jipé was a very private person, who refused to write his memoirs, and accepted the honours heaped on him simply as the gifts of friends. He retained his mental and physical powers until the end, and was a champion swimmer able to outpace all rivals even in his late eighties. He nursed his wife until her death from Alzheimer’s in their idyllic Russian-style house at Sèvres outside Paris; their only daughter died soon after. But he continued to retain his positive attitude to life, looked after by his son-in-law and surrounded by disciples and friends, the most loved and revered classical scholar of his age.

Jean-Pierre Vernant, Resistance leader and classical scholar: born Provins 4 Jan 1914, died Sèvres 9 Jan 2007; Directeur d’Études, École Pratique des Hautes Études 1958–75; Directeur, Centre de recherches comparées sur les sociétés anciennes 1964–75; Professeur, Collège de France 1975–84; married Lida Nahimovitch/Josefson 1939 (died 1992); one daughter. Compagnon de la Libération; Commandeur de la Légion d’Honneur; honorary doctor of the Universities of Bristol, Brno, Chicago, Crete, Naples, and Oxford.

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