
The Archaeology of the Soul is a collection of essays by the late Seth Benardete compiled and edited by Ronna Burger and Michael Davis. Their arrangement is in accordance with a lucid plan, which divides the collection into four parts: essays on Greek poetry; essays on Greek philosophy; studies of Roman philosophy and poetry; and Benardete’s reviews of the work of various contemporary scholars. A helpful introduction composed by the editors and a concluding coda — Benardete’s memorial speech for Leo Strauss — frame the collection. The value of this publication is inestimable, since it brings together in a single place those essays of Benardete that had either remained unpublished or fallen out of print. The editors, therefore, have performed a great service to those devoted to classical learning, the study of philosophy, or both.

The title of the collection has been chosen by the editors and, as they explain in their introduction, is a variation on a phrase that Benardete himself employs in the first essay of the volume, ‘The Poet-Merchant and the Stranger from the Sea’: ‘The archaeology of the human spirit is one of the characteristics of ancient poetry.’ This ‘spiritual’ archaeology, Benardete explains, is ‘the attempt to consider the origins of things in the light of the current experience of those things’ and thereby ‘expose the criminality of the presumably lawful’. The case in point in this essay is sailing, which, though now as routine as the plowing of the soil, signified at its origin the ‘uncanniness of man’ in his ‘transgression of all limits’ (p. 1). Homer, in Benardete’s view, is the first to reveal this original meaning of sailing in his portrayal of ‘Odysseus’ search for wisdom’, a search that, in an attempt to uncover ‘things as they are’, must of necessity violate ‘the prohibition [of the law] not to look beyond one’s own’. This ‘transgressiveness of knowledge’ (p. 2) culminates in ‘philosophy’s desacralization of everything’ (p. 249), when, for example, Heraclitus denies the foundation of the sacred law of burial according to which corpse and carrion are two by declaring that corpses should be thrown out faster than dung.

Homer and his influence are themes that run like a golden thread through Benardete’s thought and the essays of this book. As Benardete makes clear, Homer is not only the first to show the necessity of philosophy’s transgression of sacred limits, but, in a seeming paradox, also appears as the source for the meaning of the sacred as it was experienced by the Greeks. This experience of the meaning of the sacred is encapsulated in the ‘tragic formula . . . *pathé mathos*, by experience, understanding’ (p. 268). It is represented paradigmatically by Homer’s account in the *Iliad* of the deeds and suffering of Achilles through which he arrives at the insight that ‘even in the house of Hades the
soul and image are something’. The rite of burial and the sacred status of the corpse is the sacred law’s acknowledgment of this ‘fact’. Through his insight Achilles comes to an understanding of both the necessary limits on human action (beyond such limits man is not a god, but a beast) and man’s need, therefore, for the gods. The return of Hector’s corpse to Priam for burial is the belated return of Achilles to the humanity he sought to discard (p. 72). By this account, Hades distinguishes man from both god and beast. It is the negative and lawful determination of man.

It is Benardete’s contention that pathe mathos exhibits itself not only on the sub-philosophical level of Greekness in the insight into the meaning of the sacred, but on the philosophic plane as well. Here again, in Benardete’s view, Homer first charted this course. His portrayal of the manner in which Odysseus’ experiences at sea prepared him for the discovery of the nature of the human represents just such a philosophical version of understanding through suffering. His discovery, however, is the antithesis of Achilles’ insight, insofar as Odysseus’ uncovering of the truth of human nature meant the recognition that ‘he was mind and shape together’ (p. 228), a two that though apparently opposed, are in fact inseparably united by an invisible and intelligible bond. The knowledge of nature that made Odysseus resistant to both the enchantments of Circe and the blandishments of Calypso, is, therefore, also a rejection of the central premise of the sacred: Hades or the separate existence of the soul.

In the essays collected here on Greek philosophy, Benardete shows how Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle are the inheritors and elaborators of this original Homeric discovery of nature. As for displaying, however, the necessity, if insufficiency, of experience for philosophical understanding — the philosophic version of pathe mathos — this is given its most complete articulation in this volume in the essay “‘Night and Day . . .’: Parmenides’. On Benardete’s reading, Parmenides portrays himself at the opening of his poem as on the way to truth unencumbered by opinion. He is pure mind able to read off directly from the experience of things the first principles of things; experiential light and night are transformed into the causal agents fire and earth ‘or if one wishes, energy and matter’ (p. 225). A ‘pre-Socratic’ materialist cosmological ‘theory’ (p. 225) would have been the inevitable result of such reflection were it not for the fact that Justice blocked his path (p. 204). According to Benardete, this Justice must be understood in terms of the punitive justice of the law and the ‘punitive understanding man has of himself’. This punitive understanding is identified by Benardete with ‘tragic knowledge’, namely, that man is the paradigm of non-being (p. 207): at the core of man’s lawful humanity is the understanding of man as corpse or a mindless shadow in Hades.

Parmenides shows, on Benardete’s reading, how any materialist cosmology must reproduce this nullity of the human insofar as both the human experience of the human and nature in its Homeric or philosophic sense evaporate in the glare and heat of such ‘theory’ (p. 226). It is Justice then that blocks the