
Seth Benardete (1930-2001)

A Remembrance

[Professor Michael Davis *Will* be reviewing Seth Bernadete's works in a forthcoming issue of *The Political Science Reviewer*.-Ed.]

Seth Benardete was born in Brooklyn, where he grew up with his older brother Jose. His father Mair Jose, born in Istanbul, was a professor of Sephardic Studies and Spanish at Brooklyn College; his mother Doris taught in the English department. Benardete's intellectually formative years were spent at the University of Chicago (1948-52, 1954-55), where he developed friendships with Alan Bloom, Stanley Rosen, and Severn Darden (of Second City fame), amongst others. As a student in the Committee on Social Thought, he had the opportunity to study with Leo Strauss, who had moved to Chicago from the New School for Social Research (at that time still called the University in Exile). This encounter was decisive for the direction of his thinking and scholarship. Benardete began to learn from Strauss, above all, how to read Plato. He remarked many years later in the opening line of a talk, "Strauss on Plato": "What philosophy is seems to be inseparable from the question of how to read Plato."

With an interest in developing his philological skills, Benardete pursued his studies abroad, one year at the American School in Athens (1952-53), and the following year on a Ford Foundation fellowship in Florence (1953-54), where he wrote his dissertation on the *Iliad*. His first teaching position was as a tutor in the great books program at St. John's College in Annapolis (1955-57), where he worked with Jacob Klein, who was dean of the college. During this period he provided an early demonstration of his mastery of

ancient Greek translating Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Maidens* and *The Persians* for *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Benardete's extraordinary knowledge of the subtlety and nuances of the language is evident in the translations of Platonic dialogues he produced over the years, such as the recently published *Symposium* (2001), which, as Leon Kass remarks, "enables every Greek-less reader to encounter Plato's art and thought in all its charm, power, and perplexity."

As a member of the Society of Junior Fellows at Harvard (1957-60), Benardete wrote his first book, *Herodotean Inquiries*, as well as his influential essay on Sophocles' *Oedipus*, which became the first of his many powerful studies of Greek tragedy. During those years Benardete met and married Jane Johnson, who had received her Ph.D. from Harvard and was teaching there. His family held a special place for him throughout his life, and he took pride in the accomplishments of his children, Ethan, now a neurosurgeon, and Alexandra Emma, an architect.

After several years of teaching at Brandeis University, Benardete returned to New York City in 1965 when he joined the Classics department at New York University and began giving a series of courses in ancient philosophy at the New School that continued for the duration of his career. At N.Y.U. Benardete taught the complete range of Greek and Latin poetry, history, and philosophy. Many students recall the intense experience of the summer courses he later taught in the Latin-Greek Institute at the City University Graduate Center. Benardete's lectures on ancient Greek philosophy at the New School drew a devoted following, with some-fortunate New Yorkers-continuing to attend with the same excitement year after year. Typically, each course would focus on one work for the term (though the lectures on Plato's *Republic*, for example, stretched out for three semesters). Over thirty-seven years, Benardete's course offerings included the pre-Socratic thinkers and Aristotle, while covering almost the entire corpus of Platonic dialogues. (When he became ill in the fall of 2001 he was preparing a spring course on Plato's *Euthydemus*, one of the few dialogues he had not taught before.)

It was a special privilege for a student to study in an individual tutorial with Benardete, who gave of his time and ideas with unstinting generosity. He could be found in his office most of the day, seven days a week. Even, or especially, when he was struggling with unsolved problems, his work always seemed to be a source of pleasure and satisfaction to him. His research was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Earhart Foundation, and the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung in Munich. His accomplishments were recognized by the award of an honorary degree from Adelphi University.

The fruits of Benardete's long years of teaching and studying Plato began to appear at a rapid pace in the mid-1980s and never ceased until he suddenly became ill just a couple of months before his death. His translation of and commentary on the trilogy, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* (1984) was followed by books (all published by Chicago) on the *Republic* (1989), the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* (1991), the *Philebus* (1993), and the *Laws* (2000). According to Plato's famous image, the philosopher is distinguished from the other prisoners chained in the cave of social convention by the experience he undergoes of being turned around toward the opening into the light. In his interpretations of the Platonic dialogues, characterized by their startling insights, paradoxical formulations, and unexpected turns, Benardete sought to capture and induce the experience of that radical turnaround, which is the mark of philosophic thought.

Benardete returned to Homer, forty years after his dissertation, with what he called a "Platonic reading of the *Odyssey*," *The Bow and the Lyre* (1997)- "a work of matchless erudition and insight," as Harvey Mansfield puts it, by "our greatest student of the relation between poetry and philosophy." His earlier studies of Homer and Greek tragedy, Benardete came to think, while they may have shed light on the structure of a poem as a whole of parts, failed to pay sufficient attention to the concrete unfolding of the plot and the key provided by that temporal sequence to the meaning of the work. This dynamic dimension has an equivalent, he realized, in the unfolding action of the Platonic dialogue, and it is the argument of

that action which interpretation of the dialogue should aim to uncover. This discovery alone of the common ground of poetry and philosophy is one mark of the originality of Benardete's work and secures its abiding importance. It was encapsulated in the title, *The Argument of the Action*, a collection of essays on Greek poetry and philosophy spanning his whole career (2000). Commenting on that volume, the distinguished French scholar Pierre Vidal-Naquet observed: "There is in the United States one man who is as comfortable with the art of interpreting Homer, Herodotus, or Euripides as he is with that of understanding the most difficult problems raised by the Platonic dialogues, a man who follows texts step by step and discovers their hidden meanings. That man is Seth Benardete."

Benardete's writings exhibit a mind that seemed to move in leaps, which has been exhilarating to some readers, while provoking others; but as one could see if one had the opportunity to talk with him, there was always a complex path of careful steps that had led him to his conclusions. And those paths grew in complexity as he returned to the same works over a lifetime, always starting afresh, without exactly abandoning the prior layers. Philosophy, as Benardete once put his own understanding of it, is the concrete encounter with the unexpected, and he exemplified this uniquely in his thinking and reading, his conversation and writing. No predetermined system or method stood in the way of his openness to such an encounter. Yet he had his tools of thinking, which, though never applied mechanically, helped make possible the impressive range of his corpus. The unity of that body of work is suggested by the recurrent themes that run through it—eros and the beautiful, the city and the law in its role of making human being human, the poets and their gods. Benardete was in pursuit of an understanding of the whole, though not in any explicitly systematic form. It is hardly accidental that one of his favorite Platonic metaphors was "hunting," with its implication of the elusiveness or recalcitrance of the beings and the need to sneak up on them in indirect and subtle ways.

In his teaching and writing, but especially vividly in conversation—where humor, depth of insight, and soaring thought were

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inextricably intertwined-Benardete was a model of what it means to live the philosophic life.

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