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*The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*  
(review)

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that comes from skepticism. Granted, all religions appear gawky in their adolescence, but sometimes disciplinary agnosticism permits us to discount desired but undeserved self-presentations. While no researcher should scorn the belief system of a group that she encounters, neither is it necessary to nuzzle. This attachment may cause Magliocco to downplay sexuality, drug use, and posturing in the community. These seekers often appear in her telling to be, frankly, rather puritanical. For some young people, their witchy beliefs may serve as an in-your-faith dogma, sparking familial drama at Thanksgiving. Resistance may appear as bullying to one's intimates. As scholars, let us recognize Neo-Paganism in all its forms as simultaneously silly and profound, subversive and moral, liberating and harassing.

A more distanced view would emphasize the struggles over political correctness that challenge the movement as it staggers toward a consensual theology. One illuminating instance is the problematic usage of American Indian lore in Neo-Paganism. Do these white, middle-class, well-educated Americans have the *right* to appropriate native traditions? Do these beliefs belong to their tribes or do they belong to the divine? As Magliocco explains, West Coast Pagans are more prudent in avoiding tribal complaints, whereas East Coast Pagans, less attuned to American Indian politics (or at least to the objections of tribal leaders) are more willing to embrace these cross-cultural borrowings. If European Americans cannot borrow Indian traditions, can Italian Americans borrow Celtic traditions, can Sicilians borrow traditions from Lombardy? Put another way, are traditions linked to an ethnic identity that springs from the soil? This is a matter that reverberates with the concerns of Johann Herder as well as with those troubling Nordic Pagans who demand a purity of Aryan magic.

While Neo-Paganism may be a religion aborning, no single authority has yet emerged. Numerous strains of Neo-Paganism—Wicca, the Golden Dawn, the Reclaiming tradition—compete for adherents in a creedal marketplace. Within each of these traditions, one's own worship group matters deeply. In a faith that lacks set dogma and ritual authority, actors set the

terms of their own faith. This may be legitimate spiritually, but it accords great power to local practice. Each group establishes its own divinity, creating an idioculture of belief.

As an account of the folkloric practices of a burgeoning social scene, *Witching Culture* deserves high praise. Yet, this is a volume whose goal is to apply folkloristics to explain Neo-Paganism. In sharp contrast to Tanya Luhrmann's treatise on cognitive anthropology, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Harvard University Press, 1989), that uses a similar (British) scene to explain the ambiguity of belief under conditions of modernity, Magliocco's volume does not include a theory of traditional practice. While one sympathizes with Magliocco's desire to get Neo-Paganism right, she might have thought more deeply about concepts such as group, gender, cultural politics, and faith to better understand how the insistent striving for authenticity and ecstatic imagining of Neo-Pagans apply beyond their circles of magic. How, we might ask, does the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn enlighten the traditions of Pentecostals, pensioners, and pencil pushers alike?

**The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism.** By Ernesto De Martino. Trans. and ann. by Dorothy Louise Zinn. (London: Free Association Books, 2005. Pp. xxiii + 332, foreword, translator's note, preface, introduction, photographs and illustrations, table, epilogue, appendices, bibliography, indices.)

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"*Traduttore, traditore*" (Translator, betrayer): in English, this Italian proverb illustrates its own meaning. In a bare two words, assonance, alliteration, accent pattern, and nearly perfect symmetry are partially lost, although much is retained. Dorothy Zinn, translator of Ernesto De Martino's *La terra del rimorso* (The land of remorse), faced a more severe problem with the mere four words of the title because "rimorso" means "re-bite" as well as "remorse." Indeed, to be "bitten again" is the root metaphor of

“remorse.” Although “biting” is an essential element of tarantism—a cultural institution that revolves around the bite of the tarantula—I cannot think of one word or phrase in English that would convey both “remorse” and “re-bite.” The title is only the beginning of the translator’s dilemmas.

But where would we be without translators/betrayers? Starting with the Bible, remove all translations from your bookshelves. You may find that your personal, intellectual edifice crumbles without such betrayals. I began by talking about the ill-acknowledged, creative scholarly art of translation because I want to emphasize the efforts and determination of Zinn and Free Association Books. They deserve our thanks for publishing perhaps the most important work of Italian ethnography to date, unavailable to the English reader until now, although it was originally published in 1961.

Many people have heard of the tarantella and may think of it as an exotic Italian dance believed to cure the poisonous bite of the tarantula. They may also think of it as the product of ignorance, poverty, superstition, and passion—in short, stereotypical attributes of Southern Italians. De Martino shows, however, that the tarantula’s bite, within the institution of tarantism, was a *symbolic* bite and that most victims had never actually been bitten. Victims’ annual reoccurrence of symptoms (“re-bite”) evades biological explanation, as does the fact that most of the afflicted were young women, not agricultural workers, who had more contact with spiders.

Symptoms did imitate those of a spider bite in some ways—fever, nausea, vomiting, muscular pains, and stomach cramps—but the *tarantate* (those afflicted) also felt tired, depressed, even anguished. De Martino argues that these feelings expressed a crisis in the life of the victim, typically the crisis of sexual maturation, spurned or impossible love, a difficult home life, or poverty. The cure—a traditional musical therapy involving dance, colors, the community’s attention, and more—provided a catharsis. De Martino calls tarantism “an entire symbolic system ready to enter into action and operate its efficacy as resolution, with the society’s consensus and assistance” (p. 114).

Tarantism “was not a ‘disease.’ Rather, it was an instrument of reintegration” (p. 32).

There are three major sections in the book. In part 1, “Salento 1959,” De Martino describes fieldwork in the summer of 1959 in the Salento (Apulia), the heartland of the tradition in Southern Italy. The ethnographic team included an anthropologist, a historian of religions, an ethnomusicologist, a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a photographer. They timed their fieldwork to coincide with the annual period when the tarantate reexperienced their symptoms—that is, when they were “re-bitten.” This happened in late June, preceding the Saints Peter’s and Paul’s feast day, when the afflicted not only danced at home but also gathered at the Church of St. Paul in the town of Galantina for a ritual performance that had become part of the cure.

In part 2, “The Land of Remorse,” De Martino examines the surprisingly extensive literature on the subject of tarantism, written by clergymen, doctors, travelers, and others, from the sixteenth century on. The fieldwork results described in part 1 gain in significance as De Martino compares them with historical, semi-ethnographic accounts of tarantism. These accounts have obvious biases, but they also contain observations consistent with what De Martino saw in 1959, even though he felt that he was viewing “an episode in the death throes of tarantism” (p. 78). The fuller, earlier descriptions help make sense of the fragmented tradition of 1959. In this, De Martino is like the evolutionary folklorists who explained contemporary customs, or “survivals,” by reconstructing their fuller, richer historical reality, when they enjoyed mainstream status.

Part 3, “Historical Commentary,” identifies parallels to tarantism in the then-contemporary Mediterranean world (Sardinia and Spain) and beyond (Africa and the Caribbean). Even more compelling are the historical sources, beginning with ancient Greek religion. De Martino believes that tarantism proper crystallized in the medieval period, out of the conflict between Christianity and pagan traditions. In this section, De Martino goes beyond cultural evolution to show how the literate world’s explanations of tarantism from the sixteenth to the

twentieth centuries reflected changing paradigms in European thought, which in turn affected the tradition itself.

This unsurpassed classic explores a profound folk creation. Anyone interested in folklore and religion, or in medicine and belief, will want to read it.

**Bluegrass: A History**, 20th anniversary ed. By Neil V. Rosenberg. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. Pp. xvi + 454, preface to the 20th anniversary ed., acknowledgments, bibliography, discography, aural history, interviews, index, song title index, 40 photographs.)

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Within the span of slightly more than a year, the University of Illinois Press in the 1980s published what arguably remain the two most substantial scholarly works on bluegrass music. Robert Cantwell's *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* appeared in 1984. Neil Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* followed in 1985. In 2003, the press issued a reprint edition of *Bluegrass Breakdown* with a new preface by Cantwell. Now, Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* is available in a twentieth-anniversary edition that, likewise, consists of a reprinting of the original text with a new preface by the author. Several fine surveys of bluegrass intended for general audiences, as well as noteworthy monographs and anthologies devoted to bluegrass-related topics, have appeared since Rosenberg's and Cantwell's volumes were originally published (or, in a few cases, predated them). Nonetheless, *Bluegrass: A History* and *Bluegrass Breakdown* remain the most significant comprehensive scholarly examinations of their subject. Given the chronological proximity of the two books, it seems fitting to approach Rosenberg's by way of brief comparison with Cantwell's.

Cantwell characterizes bluegrass as a mimetic representation of vernacular musical traditions that flourished in the rural South prior to that region's socioeconomic transfor-

mation in the early to mid-twentieth century. He credits bluegrass patriarch Bill Monroe with reformulating those largely participatory, aurally transmitted traditions into a largely performative, media-transmitted idiom, thus translating the ethos of "the old Southern sound" for audiences whose milieu increasingly differed from that in which Monroe's musical development occurred. *Bluegrass Breakdown* imaginatively identifies antecedents of bluegrass aesthetics in several centuries' worth of the histories of expressive culture originating from three continents, but it does not emphasize hard historical data regarding the music and musicians themselves.

In contrast, Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* certainly does. Indeed, the large number of citations to it at the September 2005 Bluegrass Music Symposium at Western Kentucky University, where Rosenberg himself was the keynote speaker, indicates its historiographic preeminence. One might initially be tempted to interpret the straightforwardly factual orientation and the comparatively austere prose of Rosenberg's monograph as a mild disparagement of such lofty sentiments as those expressed in *Bluegrass Breakdown*. However, those who were privileged to hear Rosenberg's keynote speech know that nothing could be more uncharacteristic of him. *Bluegrass: A History* reads as the work of an epistemologically rigorous scholar who has sought out the most reliable documentary evidence and has applied Occam's razor to it in order to isolate the most proximate causes of the phenomena he studies. Having arrived at the most direct explanations, Rosenberg articulates them in an uncomplicated style intended to be both accessible to a general audience and acceptable to scholars in multiple disciplines.

Though Rosenberg is an accomplished folklorist and musician, *Bluegrass: A History* is not primarily a work of either folklore or musicology. Rather, it belongs principally to the field of history, treating bluegrass as a component of American popular culture. Rosenberg attributes the emergence of bluegrass to decisions made by Monroe and others on the basis of a combination of personal preferences and financial considerations. Some scholars interpret the