

BOOK REVIEW

Derrida and Antiquity. Edited by Miriam LEONARD. Classical Presences Series. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 406. £79.00/\$130.00. ISBN 978-0-19-954554-4.

Thank God for *Derrida and Antiquity*, which does an immense amount of work in bringing together two great forces in the history of ideas. It is tiring even to think about how much one has to know in order to evaluate Derrida's encounter with antiquity, which is perhaps one of the reasons that Classicists have rarely had much truck with it, but with the essays in this volume we gain an interesting and knowledgeable perspective on the subject. Together they provide the reader with a broad but also deep overview of the relationship of Derridean thought to ancient philosophy and literature; its genealogy; and its implications for the way we think about contemporary philosophical, political and ethical problems.

Miriam Leonard's introduction deftly sketches the major issues that Derrida addresses in "We Other Greeks," the previously untranslated essay with which the collection begins. This is useful, because the essay constitutes Derrida's response to the question of his affinities with several other philosophers on the subject of their relationship to ancient Greek thought. It therefore incorporates not only Derrida's own complex thoughts but others' as well, and Derrida's complex responses to their thoughts. While important as an introduction to the other essays in the volume, without Leonard's road map it would obfuscate as much as it illuminates—particularly as the other essays seldom refer to it. With her guidance, Derrida's essay becomes an invaluable synopsis of the genealogy of philosophical attitudes toward Greece and Rome.

The book categorizes its contributions by major themes that pertain to Derrida's engagement with Greece: first, his direct confrontation with ancient philosophy; second, the way in which the conception of antiquity shapes that of modernity in Derrida's thinking; third, the political aspect of Derrida's philosophy as shaped by his encounter with the Greek and Roman political landscape; fourth, his interventions into the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy; fifth, his reading of the age-old problem of Platonic idealism and materialism. The essays vary widely in focus. For a synopsis of each I direct the reader to

Leonard's introduction; here, I will sketch some of the volume's representative moments and speak briefly about my own reactions to its main attitudes.

Many of the essays delineate major Derridean concepts such as *pharmakon*, *différance*, *khora*, and the neighbor/stranger, before undertaking their own evaluation of them. Michael Naas' "Earmarks," the first contribution to follow Derrida's own, takes us through the behemoth "Plato's Pharmacy" in a series of steps that (apologetically) make its main points much more accessible. The essay also acts as an apologia for what many take to be Derrida's opacity and deliberate linguistic contortion. Naas argues through his exposition of "Plato's Pharmacy" that the message is in the medium. There could be no other way for Derrida to write, given the contours of his thought. Reversing the direction, Andrew Benjamin's essay follows Derridean style but takes issue with Derrida's ideas about hospitality and the notion of the foreigner. These two essays together raise the question of framing the engagement with Derrida: in his language, or one's own? Benjamin's essay, while it makes an interesting critique of Derrida's position, does not argue well for the attempt to speak his language. His final footnote, a citation from Hannah Arendt, makes the point more lucidly than the body of the essay.

Erin O'Connell's "Derrida and Pre-Socratic Philosophy" and Rachel Bowlby's "Derrida's Dying Oedipus" both illustrate the enormous debt that Derrida owes ancient Greek thought. O'Connell succinctly explains some of the major tenets of Pre-Socratic thought, particularly those of Heraclitus, that prompted the Derridean concept of *différance*. Through her exposition, however—in which Derrida doesn't make much of an appearance—Derrida comes across more as a careful and perceptive commentator on the Pre-Socratics than an innovative thinker in his own right. Perhaps that is an evaluation that he himself would not mind, given that he often stressed his debt to antiquity. O'Connell gives a new dimension to Derrida's insistence on our own "Greekness": why not go back to the source and study Heraclitus more carefully for ourselves? Bowlby similarly gives *Oedipus at Colonus* a good reading with an eye on Derrida's, but Derrida again rather disappears against the backdrop of Sophocles' themes and language.

While acknowledging my gratitude to the contributors for the glaring gap in intellectual history that they fill, as well as for the amount of learning this volume represents, I will take issue with its mostly uncritical stance toward Derrida. Ironically for a reader who was all about interrogating the boundaries of language, Derrida takes Plato remarkably straight. As a result he dubs Plato the father of Western logocentrism, but it seems to me a gesture of remarkable arrogance not to proceed instead from the assumption that Plato *himself* was

interrogating the notion of logocentrism—particularly given Socrates’ account in the *Phaedo* of his “second sailing,” in which he explicitly describes his turn away from searching for final causes and toward the speeches of men. In this volume, Paul Allen Miller (“The Platonic Remainder: Derrida’s *Khora* and the *Corpus Platonium*”) is the only contributor to underline Plato’s own sense of *différance*, of the unnamed leftover after language. His essay demonstrates not just the anticipation of Derridean philosophy in Plato, but a whole philosophical universe in which Derrida’s perceptive and provocative commentaries uncover a few—important—planets.

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