

Miriam Leonard, ed.

Derrida and Antiquity.

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‘In May 1968 as the Paris students mounted their assault on the Sorbonne, the young philosopher Jacques Derrida was to be found sitting in his own corner busy reading Plato’. Thus begins Miriam Leonard’s introduction to this volume. The story about May 1968 also appears in Derrida’s essay ‘We Other Greeks,’ which appears here in English translation for the first time. It is a fitting way to begin the book. In ‘We Other Greeks’, Derrida writes that the Greek concept of greatest concern to deconstruction is ‘nothing less than *logos*, and its Heideggerian interpretation, which always inclines it in direction of gathering [*Versammlung*], toward the One and the Same’... the Greek thing allows us to understand that ‘the general strategy of deconstruction is tirelessly to repeat the text while *altering* it, by “adding” to it, to the point of producing the genealogy of the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition’ (26). Derrida’s musings raise the complex question of how exactly we should relate to our Greek inheritance. Addressing this issue explicitly, he continues: ‘Perhaps we must resolutely resist this pure and simple alternative: *either* we are, “we ourselves”, “we others”, still Greeks, governed, whether we want it or not, by the law of inheritance... *or* we are, “we ourselves”, “we others”, wholly other than the Greeks, having broken with this origin, this language, this law, and so on. Who can take this alternative seriously?’ (27). Derrida then presents his own view: ‘we are certainly still Greek, but perhaps other Greeks, we were not born from just that Greek send-off; *we* are certainly still *other* Greeks, with the memory of events that are irreducible to the Greek genealogy, but to bear within us something wholly other *than* the Greek’ (27–28).

It is hard, in a brief review, to summarize a collection of essays that runs to 406 pages and is divided into five groups. Nevertheless, that is what I will attempt. The first group, ‘Derrida and the Classical Tradition’, begins with M. Naas’s reflections on the seminal Derridean text ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’. Naas’s thesis is that ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ is above all a critique of metaphysics, a text that enables Derrida ‘both to argue for a new hermeneutics and conception of meaning, *dissemination* rather than polysemy, and display a new *practice* of reading and writing in line with that hermeneutics’ (46). In ‘Derrida and Presocratic Philosophy’, E. O’Connell explores the role of Heraclitus and the pre-Socratics in Derrida’s work. She writes that these philosophers share a distinctive view of the relationship between knowledge and language. They simultaneously engage in philosophy and reject logocentrism, with the result that they sometimes appear anti-philosophical. S. Gersh’s essay calls attention to the link between Derrida and early Christian rewritings of Plato. Gersh also explores how Derrida inscribes the concept of negative theology within the syntax of difference. Tracing a line of thought that extends from Plato through pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart to Heidegger, Gersh maintains that Derrida is well aware of the parallels between negative theology and deconstruction’s notion of the trace. Finally, he comments briefly on *Circumfession*, a diary-cum-dialogue with Augustine that Derrida wrote while his mother lay dying. According to Gersh, *Circumfession* places ‘considerable emphasis on the notion of singularity, as pointed out in the complex interplay of Derrida’s readings of Augustine’s writings, of Derrida’s comments

on his own writing, and of Derrida's readings of Augustine's life, punctuated with many individual dates and locations' (119).

The second group of essays, 'Antiquity and Modernity', begins with M. Leonard's discussion of the relationship between Derrida's writing and the multiple ways of being Jewish. Her essay explores the themes of belonging, identity, origin, promise and hospitality, as well as the collisions of all these notions with the Enlightenment. In his essay 'Derrida's Impression of Gradiva', D. Orrells looks at Freud's influence on Derrida. He argues that Derrida's reading of Freud provides a profound meditation on the role of archives in preserving and disturbing the memory of the classical past.

The third group of essays, 'A Politics of Antiquity', deals with political and ethical themes. R. Bowlby's 'Derrida's Dying Oedipus' uses the figure of the wanderer to develop original views of hospitality, asylum, exile, and globalization. Also discussing Oedipus, A. Benjamin's essay 'Possible Returns' compares *Oedipus at Colonus* with Heidegger's ontology and relates *Dasein* to the question of hospitality. B. Rosenstock extends inquiries begun in Derrida's 'White Mythology' and *The Politics of Friendship*, two texts that contain Derrida's most sustained reflections on Aristotle. Rosenstock's essay, 'Derrida Polutropos', claims that human sailing in company with the sun means also the *nostos*, just like for Odysseus, 'the journey to a turning point where death and life, West (sunset) and East (sunrise), coincide' (236).

The fourth group of essays, 'The Question of Literature', begins with D. Kennedy's essay 'Aristotle's Metaphor'. This essay gives a historical analysis of the relations between rhetoric and philosophy, an issue Derrida explores in 'White Mythology'. It is well known that in Derrida's view, philosophy can be studied and practiced like literature, just as literature can be approached through philosophy. What often results from this view is a kind of writing that defies the conventions of philosophy, sometimes seeming wilfully obscure and paradoxical, while also exercising a playfulness and wit that can either amuse or dismay the reader. Mark Vessey's essay, 'Writing Before Literature', argues that our literary institutions are grounded in a distinctively Latin tradition. Recalling Derrida's longstanding concern with literary topics, Vessey claims that 'in a post-Cold-War era of European unification, looming American global hegemony, and rising religio-political tension, [Derrida] drew attention to the relations-past, present, and to come-between 'literature' and Rome (and Europe), 'literature' and Christianity... 'literature'... and the process that he untranslatably dubbed mondialatinisation' (292).

The last group consists of two essays: P. A. Miller's 'The Platonic Remainder' and Ika Willis's 'Eros in the age of Technical Reproducibility'. Miller offers an interpretation of *Khôra*, a fascinating and problematic Derridean text on Plato's *Timaeus*. The *Timaeus* describes the birth of the cosmos, presenting *khôra* as a pre-organization that reconciles the tensions among the sensible, the contingent, and the intelligible. Miller interprets *khôra* as 'the prephilosophical, prenarrative moment that makes the construction of both *muthos* and *logos* possible, even as it reveals their essential complicity' (327). Particularly important, in my view, is the fact that by means of *khôra*, Derrida takes up a thread also present in 'Plato's Pharmacy': namely, that *khôra* is something Plato cannot fully assimilate into his own thought. It is singularly unique, a radical antecedent that can be represented only negatively. Accordingly, the notion of *khôra* is linked to another key Derridean concern: the theme of otherness. Miller writes: 'The question of the

other, however, can never be posed in terms of that which reason defines as its opposite, because that would be the other as defined by and within reason. It must always be posed in terms of absolute other... The question of the absolute other is also of central importance because it is only the presence (or better, the non- presence) of the absolute other that makes difference possible, that keeps the world as world from collapsing into the stasis of an idealist and totalitarian unity' (331). Willis's essay reflects on Derrida's view of the relation between Socrates and Plato. In particular, it explores the erotic nature of this relationship, and its link to the notions of father and son.

This is an excellent collection of ambitious essays. The book might have had more impact if the editor had provided more of a theoretical framework in which to situate the individual essays. Granted, Derrida's 'We Other Greeks' provides some unification, since all the other essays are concerned with issues it raises. But the diversity of these other essays—substantive as well as methodological—makes further integration necessary.

Francesco Tampoia
Rome