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## REVIEW

**Paul Allen Miller, *Postmodern Spiritual Practices: The Construction of the Subject and the Reception of Plato in Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), ISBN: 978-0814210703**

Paul Allen Miller argues for two original and important claims in *Postmodern Spiritual Practices*. First that French postmodern thought cannot be fully comprehended without taking account of its deep and continuing engagement with the texts of classical antiquity, and in particular those of Plato. Second, that this engagement is not simply a matter of producing postmodern "readings" of Plato but rather is what Miller calls a "spiritual practice." In order to make his case Miller presents careful explications of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, who each turned to the works of Plato in an effort to formulate a way of thinking adequate to the problems of modernity.

Miller borrows the language of "spiritual practice" from Michel Foucault and argues that the work of Foucault himself, as well as that of Lacan and Derrida, is best described in those terms. Foucault's final books and lectures make the case that the primary aim of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy was not to produce and transmit systematic knowledge of nature and the self; instead, it was an *askésis* or spiritual exercise that aimed at transforming and taking care of the self. Foucault stated that his own goal in studying the ancients was not first and foremost to discover new knowledge and create new theories, but rather to carry out his own spiritual practice.<sup>1</sup> So, while there is precedent in Foucault's work for using the notion of spiritual practice to characterize his thought, it might seem more controversial to characterize the work of Lacan and Derrida in such terms. But Miller makes a persuasive case that Lacan and Derrida turn to Plato as part of an attempt to "rethink the self and its limits."<sup>2</sup> According to Miller, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the frequently quoted passage from the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, volume 2*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 8-12.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Allen Miller, *Postmodern Spiritual Practices: The Construction of the Subject and the*

use the work of Plato “simultaneously as a genealogical point from which to observe the creation of the present and as a mode of access to what Foucault labels *la pensée du dehors*, or ‘thought from the outside’.”<sup>3</sup> Accessing this thought from the outside opens up the possibility of taking a different relation to oneself and to one’s present. Miller writes that at a time when

religious fundamentalism has become increasingly the ideological correlate of a world seen purely as a collection of instruments for advantage, in which ecological disaster threatens, and in which the commodification of daily life has become the answer to the problem of desire, the question of the self’s relation to itself, and thence to the good, has never been more urgent.<sup>4</sup>

Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault turn to Plato in order to question and transform the self’s relation to itself. Thus, contrary to the way it is sometimes portrayed, postmodernism “represents not the rejection of the classical tradition but precisely its revitalization as a living means of thought.”<sup>5</sup>

In his introductory chapter, Miller sheds light on the question of why the postmodern reflection on Plato has been largely unappreciated in the American academy. He attributes this fact to a cultural division in American life that has not been felt to the same extent in French culture.<sup>6</sup> Namely, French culture, and not just the academy, defines itself in relation to classical antiquity, whereas Americans are more likely to see the classics as little more than “an effete curiosity.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, our rigidly disciplinary academic institutions inhibit dialogue among classicists, philosophers, modern language scholars, and literary theorists. Few American scholars, then, are properly trained or constitutionally inclined to pursue the complex interpretations of Plato that inform postmodern thought. Consequently, in American universities the works of these thinkers “are taught as “theory”: that is, as a body of abstract concepts that students can use to produce “readings” of texts.”<sup>8</sup> But such a view of postmodernism is, as Miller writes, “a disciplinary fiction.”<sup>9</sup> One of Miller’s tasks in this book is to demonstrate that what “we call theory is a series of ongoing debates about the nature of meaning, texts, knowledge, and subjectivity

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*Reception of Plato in Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5.

that extend from the Platonic dialogues, through Aristotle and Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, and so on to the present.”<sup>10</sup>

Chapter two establishes another thread in Miller’s genealogy of the postmodern appropriation of Plato: the postmoderns turn to Plato as part of their critical dialogue with the modernist thinkers who preceded them. During the first decades of the twentieth century the “commodification of culture and the rise of market- and media-based democracies gave rise to a widespread sense of disenchantment among the writers, thinkers, and artists of the early twentieth century.”<sup>11</sup> Classical texts served “as timeless myths or universal monuments” for a generation of thinkers and artists whose role had been displaced and who looked at a world seemingly devoid of any real, objective values.<sup>12</sup> Miller’s gripping commentaries on Sartre’s, *The Flies*, Camus’s, *Caligula*, and Anouilh’s, *Antigone* – three texts he takes as exemplary of the modernist use of classical antiquity – are full of insights and rich contextualization. Each of these proto-typical modernist works uses classical antiquity as an allegory through which it can portray the ethical and political dilemmas of their present as timeless existential truths of the condition of humankind. Consequently, these adaptations of classical works are deliberately anachronistic. For example, their characters express views and attitudes that would be unrecognizable to ancient Greeks or Romans. Sartre’s Orestes, Camus’s Caligula, and Anouilh’s Antigone, are depicted in modern existential terms as individuals confronting the dreadful solitude of freedom in a world devoid of objective values or rational laws. The concrete historical details of the original stories and of the cultures that produced them – myth, fate, politics, familial bonds – are removed or reworked to suit the allegorical aims of the modernist authors.

In Miller’s genealogy, Sophocles’ *Antigone* is the hinge between the modernist and postmodernist encounter with the classical tradition. Anouilh’s controversial modernist adaptation – attacked in the resistance press as a proto-fascist work – raised the questions of existentialist ethics in the starkest terms: how can one distinguish an ethical act of resistance from a fascist act of revolt? Is genuine human action and community possible in the modern world? In Anouilh’s version Creon is depicted as a calculating, utilitarian politician. He lives in a world of bourgeois contentment and order and is resigned to the sad fact of political and moral compromise needed to maintain the bourgeois regime. Antigone is heroic in that her desire remains pure; she wishes to affirm something of higher meaning that remains uncorrupted by the dirty exigencies of politics or the base satisfactions of bourgeois materialism. The act she chooses, then, has nothing to do with the awesome fate of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the house of Oedipus, or even with fraternal love. Rather, she chooses it simply to reject the inauthentic order embodied by Creon. In effect, Antigone's choice entails a rejection of history, politics, of utilitarian ethics and pleasures, of everything Other than the pure self. In the end, Antigone chooses to act "for no one, for herself."<sup>13</sup> But if this is all one can aspire to then ethics and politics become impossible because futile. It is in part as a response to Anouilh that Lacan turns to Antigone in his attempt to articulate an ethics of psychoanalysis.<sup>14</sup>

For Lacan, just as for Anouilh, Antigone is the tragic hero who refuses to give up on her desire in all of its purity. As such she embodies Lacan's ethical imperative of psychoanalysis: do not give up on your desire. But Miller shows that Lacan departs from Anouilh's ahistorical and apolitical depiction of desire. Furthermore, Lacan rejects the modernist's allegorical use of the tragedy and instead argues that Antigone's choice to contradict the law of Creon and Thebes

is not made in the name of abstract purity or empty self-assertion, as in the case of Anouilh, but in the name of specific and determined claims of flesh and blood that are rooted in the grammatical and ideological structures of fifth-century Athens. The affirmation of her desire cannot be separated from the tragic fate of the Labdacids.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Antigone's desire is constituted by the Other: namely, the law, Creon, the tragic fate of her lineage, her familial bonds. The Symbolic order is precisely that which constitutes Antigone's unique identity by denying her of it; Creon's law is Antigone's symbolic death. To remain true to her desire, her fate, she must pursue it to her actual death. But, according to Miller, Antigone "represents only the first movement" of the psychoanalytic ethics of desire.<sup>16</sup> Lacan's reading of *Antigone* leads him to Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates' relation to Alcibiades is seen as a sort of proto-type of analyst-analysand relation in psychoanalysis: "The analysand desires the analyst's desire, as Alcibiades does Socrates'. He wishes both to be the object of the analyst's desire and to desire what the analyst desires."<sup>17</sup>

Socrates, for Lacan, establishes the place – or the "no place" – of the analyst in society. It is this disquieting no-place, "the thought from the outside", that is necessary for a critical comprehension of the present and the possibility of a different relation to oneself. Socrates "is the intimate other that reveals both what the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

community is and what it wants to be, without his ever being fully assimilable to the dominant Symbolic structures that define the polis."<sup>18</sup> Where Antigone's refusal of the Symbolic order of society could lead only to her own death, Socrates, as proto-analyst, opens up the possibility of a creative ethical and political articulation of that desire.

Lacan's use of the *Symposium* launches a series of postmodern confrontations with the works of Plato. Miller argues that Derrida and Foucault turn to Plato in part in order to respond both to Lacan and to each other. Derrida calls into question the attempt to fix a meaning in the text of Plato, claiming that Lacan has fallen prey to "Platonism" – the belief that a transcendent source of meaning, even if it is a primal lack, can be rationally established. Derrida's readings reveal how Plato's texts undermine all attempts to do so through the critique of writing, the experiences of *aporia*, and the self-perpetuating, constantly mutating "method" of collection and division presented in the *Philebus* and *Phaedrus*.<sup>19</sup> It is in mediating debates such as these that Miller's training as a classicist is especially valuable. He is able to show that both the psychoanalytic and philosophic positions are portrayed in the figure of Socrates, who is able to shift from one to the other depending on the needs and capacities of his interlocutor.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault, on the other hand, challenges the appeal to a core of desire that originates history, arguing that the genealogy of "desiring man" leads to an experience that is fundamentally Other, even if it is at the root of our present. The ancient Greek experience is less focused on desire than on the mastery and use of pleasure, argues Foucault. Further, Foucault is critical of Derrida for essentializing the texts of philosophy. He argues that philosophy itself must be understood through an archaeology and genealogy of the discursive practices that constitute it. Finally, of course, it is through his reflection on classical philosophy that Foucault came to see his own work as a spiritual practice. Miller's reading provides another response to those who remain perplexed by what they continue to see as a sudden break in Foucault's work. If we are sensitive to the central role of Plato in French postmodern thought, Miller argues, then we will understand that "Foucault's final turn to ancient philosophy in general, and Plato in particular, is neither surprising nor announces a major break. It is rather part of an ongoing productive dialogue."<sup>21</sup>

Miller makes an important contribution to our understanding of the development of postmodern thought in France in the twentieth century and provides a model for

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 141-142, 151-166.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 164-165.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 229.

postmodern scholarship. He shows that the texts of Plato serve as a focal point for a spiritual practice through which Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault engage their modernist predecessors, each other, and their contemporary situation, a spiritual practice that aims at fashioning a critical relation to oneself and one's present. In the end, I read Miller's book just as Miller reads Foucault's study of Plato, as "an example of how such a critical practice of the self's relation to itself, and thence to the other, might be undertaken with the requisite rigor, diligence, and care."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 230.