Classical Memories/Modern Identities
Paul Allen Miller and Richard H. Armstrong, Series Editors
Postmodern Spiritual Practices

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBJECT
AND THE RECEPTION OF PLATO
IN LACAN, DERRIDA, AND FOUCAULT

Paul Allen Miller
For Carl Rubino and Wendy McCredie
and the summer we read Hegel.

“The true human body is the bones and marrow of the realm beyond consciousness and unconsciousness. Just raising this up is the study of the way.”

Dogen (1200–1253 CE)
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Like all books this one has many beginnings. One of its most important, however, took place in the office of Professor Wolfgang Haase at Boston University in the winter of 1998. Professor Haase generously invited me to be a plenary speaker at that summer’s meeting of the International Society for the Classical Tradition in Tübingen. He then asked what I would like to speak on. I said “the classical roots of post-structuralism.” I remember thinking to myself as I left his office, “boy you’ve really done it this time. Now you’ve got to write this thing. You don’t know a thing about it.” There followed several months of feverish work. The resulting address and later article, “The Classical roots of Poststructuralism: Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault” (International Journal of the Classical Tradition 5.2 [1998]: 204–25), was in many ways the first draft of a book I might have never written otherwise. I thus owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor Haase for the confidence he showed in a newly minted associate professor from a modest university in west Texas.

In the ensuing years, numerous friends and colleagues have provided emotional, intellectual, and moral support for this project. Sharon Nell and Micaela Janan both read the entire book in draft form and provided crucial help with clarifying obscure formulations, eliminating errors, and unknotting tangled webs of argument. Victoria Wohl read and offered sound advice on chapters 3 and 4. Jill Frank did the same for chapters 3 and 6. Mary Ann Friese Witt provided invaluable advice on chapter 2, as did Peter Burian on chapter 3, and Chuck Platter on chapter 6. David Wray, who identified himself as one of the readers for The Ohio State University Press, gave the manuscript a detailed and acute reading, and the final result is inestimably improved by his
extraordinary care. The other anonymous reader provided additional sound advice, and Eugene O’Connor was a wonderfully supportive editor. All remaining errors and infelicities are thus stubbornly my own.

This book could not have been written without the generous support of a sabbatical provided by the University of South Carolina and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I owe a debt of gratitude to both. The year I was able to devote to research and writing was one I will always cherish.

Finally, I must thank my teachers, in particular Carl Rubino, who first showed me that the greatest classicists were not those who had simply accumulated the most information, but those who also reflected on their practice in a sustained and sophisticated manner. I also owe an unpayable debt of thanks to my long-suffering wife, Ann Poling. Really, honey, someday I’ll slow down. And to you, Sam, the boy with the Mohawk who asks about Plato, all I do is really dedicated to you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Remaking the Soul

Antiquity, Postmodernism, and Genealogies of the Self

The soul, such as we still manipulate it and such as we are still encumbered by it, the notion, the image of the soul that we have—and which was not stirred up out of the succession of all the waves of our traditional heritage—the soul that is our concern in the Christian tradition, this soul has as an apparatus, as an armature, as a metallic stem in its interior, the by-product of Socrates’ madness for immortality. We live with it still. (Lacan 1991: 125)

At a minimum, you know what I am talking about and put yourself in accord with it as best as you are able, with this economy I mean, from Socrates to Freud and beyond, all the way to us (understood and not). (Derrida 1980: 45)

The “essay”—which must be understood as the attempt to modify oneself in the game of truth and not as a simple appropriation of others for purposes of communication—is the living body of philosophy, if at least it is still now what it was in the past, that is to say an “askesis,” an exercise of the self, in thought. (Foucault 1984a: 15)

This book argues that a key element of postmodern French intellectual life has been the understanding of classical antiquity and its relationship to postmodern philosophical inquiry. In it I concentrate on the works of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. It would, of course, have been possible to choose others. The extent of the influence of antiquity on such luminaries of French postmodern thought as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres, and Emmanuel Levinas remains all but unexplored, while more work remains to be done on the feminists: Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Yet

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. I had originally planned to include the works of Irigaray and Kristeva. The constraints of space and time would not permit this, but I hope to return to them and Cixous in the future. See, however, Miriam Leonard’s important articles on Irigaray’s reading of Plato (1999), Cixous (2000a), and Levinas (2006). Her Athens in Paris (2005), although I have some narrow disagreements with it, is absolutely fundamental reading for anyone interested in classics and the classical tradition in postwar France.
Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault remain not only three of the most influential exponents of French postmodern thought in the Anglo-American world, but also, as our three opening quotations indicate, they demonstrate a substantial continuity of concern in their approach to the ancient world in general and to Platonic philosophy in particular.\(^3\)

As we shall see, despite their well-known philosophical and theoretical differences, they all three turn to the ancient world not only to examine what Charles Taylor terms “the sources of the self” (1989), but also to find ways to historicize and modify it. This genealogy of modern forms of subjectivation in all three cases aims at the potential deconstruction and hence transformation of the structures of power, desire, and inscription out of which the modern subject is fashioned. And thus, while Foucault alone makes explicit use of the terminology, I will argue that all three present the encounter with antiquity as a form of “spiritual practice,” and that the Platonic dialogues come to serve as the foremost emblem of that psychic labor. Moreover, inasmuch as all three conceive the subject, not as a freestanding entity, but as a knot or fold in a complex web of language, power, writing, and the law, then the ethical and spiritual work that begins under the aegis of Plato is for all three of necessity, though to different degrees and with different emphases, always already political. They demand a rethinking of the subject’s relation to power, pleasure, and the institutions that seek to regulate and produce them: a genealogy of the subject of democracy, law, and the market so that a new politics, a new ethics, a new economy of desire, a new relation to the body and pleasure may be thought (Derrida 1994: 127–29; Foucault 1976: 208–10; Žižek 1991: 154–69). The stakes, then, of these three thinkers’ encounter with the Platonic dialogues and the issues that surround them, I would submit, are of central importance not only to an understanding of postwar French intellectual culture and the interpretation of Plato, but also to the most basic ethical and political concerns facing us today. In a world in which 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.

The classical, and specifically Platonic, foundations of French postmodern thought have been underappreciated especially in the Anglo-

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phone world in part because of a fundamental division in culture that has yet to be felt to the same degree in France. In the United States and the United Kingdom, until very recently, the concerns of academic philosophy and philology have had little in common. On the one hand, this is due to analytic philosophy’s self-confinement to technical questions of epistemology, speech act theory, and the philosophy of science. As such, it has had little to say about the relation between antique and contemporary modes of thought. There have been, it is true, a number of attempts to read Plato from an analytic perspective (see notably Vlastos 1970; 1991; Irwin 1977; Fine 1992; and Kraut 1992) in which the Platonic text is reduced to its propositional content, but no efforts to read Platonic philosophy as a critique of modernity or as a moment in the construction of the very reason that makes analytic thought possible. Rare is the philosophy department in the Anglophone world where continental thinkers are taken seriously, and rarer still those where contemporary French readings of ancient texts would be considered matters worthy of serious philosophical consideration. On the other hand, blindness to the merits of postmodern thought is also due to Anglo-American philology’s own parochial instincts. Ensnosed within a nineteenth-century German model of Altertumswissenschaft that continues to exercise a surprisingly strong influence, only the bravest of classicists have made forays into philosophical, psychoanalytic, and other speculative modes of inquiry.

The result has been that postmodern French thought has largely been the province, neither of philosophers nor philologists, but of scholars of the modern languages and particularly those interested in modern and postmodern literature. These thinkers have produced important readings of contemporary French theory. Unfortunately, scholars whose specialties are in the modern languages typically lack the training or the interest necessary to appreciate what is at stake in these thinkers’ engagement with the philosophy and literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. As we shall see, the works of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault are often only truly understandable in terms of the complex dialogue that exists between these theorists. That dialogue, moreover, forms part of the larger cultural context in which these thinkers are situated, a context that assumes detailed knowledge of a tradition of literary and philosophical understanding unavailable to most Anglo-American scholars. The kind of profound classical culture that makes a figure like the great Comparative Indo-European scholar Georges Dumézil

easily cited and appreciated by figures as diverse as Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva is simply not available to most Anglophone scholars. The notion of Jonathan Culler, Richard Rorty, or Hillis Miller having the same easy familiarity with the works of such American Indo-Europeanists as Calvert Watkins or Jaan Puhvel is all but inconceivable. Consequently, an entire idiom of thought, which these French thinkers simply assume, often remains opaque even to their most ardent enthusiasts.

Indeed, when these thinkers are taught in most American universities, it is normally in a course on critical methodology. They are taught as “theory”\(^5\): that is, as a body of abstract concepts that students can use to produce “readings” of texts. The result is a series of ahistorical abstractions that are directly “applied” to texts to which they have no explicitly articulated discursive or dialogic relation. We receive a Bakhtinian reading of Plato, a Jaussian response to Horace, a Derridean—followed by a de Manian—deconstruction of Catullus, and an Irigarayan interpretation of Propertius, as if the theories were so many interchangeable parts. In this fashion, concrete historical interventions into specific critical and philosophical debates too often become timeless truths that can simply be appropriated. The result is a perversion of these theorists’ intentions since postmodern theory in general and poststructuralist theory in particular aims to criticize precisely the kind of transhistorical metanarratives into which their works have been transformed (Lyotard 1984). The deconstruction of the closure of western metaphysics thus becomes the reification of *différance* as a textual property (Derrida 1980: 536). The critique of the patriarchal subject comes to function as an abstract universal fully as phallic as the Symbolic structures it was designed to fight (Weed 1994: 101–2; Irigaray 1977a: 173, 178).\(^6\)

Obviously, I am not saying that we cannot offer a Derridean, Bakhtinian, or Lacanian reading of a given text. I have been guilty of this on numerous occasions and will no doubt recidivate. What I am saying is that when we do so or when we teach our students to do so, we must act in full cognizance of the context of the conversation we have entered. We do not only apply a theory, we re-ply to it and to its interlocutors. To do so implies a knowledge not only of its intellectual presuppositions, but also of its historical and linguistic specificity.

\(^5\) For the analogous fate of Lacan’s reception by the American psychoanalytic and psychological establishment as “theory—not as the articulation of a clinical praxis,” see Malone (2000: 6).

\(^6\) For a good, if ultimately formalistic critique of this trend in recent literary studies, see Aviram (2001).
The problem in a nutshell is that theory per se does not exist. It is a disciplinary fiction. Having begun life in the American university system as “literary theory,” it represented an attempt to come to terms with the rapid developments in linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, the social sciences, and the formal study of literary and rhetorical technique that were known as structuralism and poststructuralism. In turn, these theoretical interventions, mostly centered in France, but drawing on traditions of linguistic and literary scholarship that originated in the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Denmark, were often combined with the Hegelian Marxism of Frankfurt school critical theory, Georg Lukács, and Bertold Brecht. The result, in the late sixties and early seventies, was a heady mixture of diverse traditions and focused debates. Comparative and general literature programs were at the center of this intellectual ferment in the United States. They combined a traditional interest in the definitional problems of literary form with the cosmopolitan and multilingual perspective necessary to engage these issues.

By the early 1980s, when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, my Comparative Literature classes were often filled with English and philosophy students coming to study what they could not read in their own departments. Yet, by this point, the change had already begun. Jonathan Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) had translated the difficult insights of Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Derrida into a utilitarian American idiom that made these abstruse works approachable. As Frank Lentricchia chronicled in *After the New Criticism* (1980), the potentially radical insights of Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes were during this same period rendered in terms that were cognate with the legacy of American New Criticism by the likes of Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and, to a lesser extent, Harold Bloom and Paul de Man. By the end of the eighties, one no longer needed to know French to read Derrida, nor even know much about French intellectual history. One could remain equally ignorant of the role of Alexandre Kojève in the dissemination of Hegel and of the concrete contributions of Jean-Paul Sartre, surrealism, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot to French philosophy, while being serenely uninformed about the traditions of French classicism.

7. See Jameson’s still seminal *Prisonhouse of Language* (1972) and *Marxism and Form* (1971) as well as such collections as Lucid’s *Soviet Semiotics* (1977) and Kristeva’s early *Σημειωτική* (1969).

Derrida’s readings of Plato, Saussure, Freud, and Rousseau were so many examples of deconstruction, which could be reduced to a method. All discourse is structured around binary oppositions, we were told. These oppositions are hierarchical. The deconstructive reader demonstrates the reversibility and hence contingent nature of that opposition: *et voilà*, an article, a seminar paper, and in some cases even a career is born.\(^9\) Of course, Derrida advocates nothing of the sort and is at pains to distance himself precisely from such facile appropriations (1980: 48; 1993a: 141, 151). The problem is that once literary theory has been reduced to a method, such appropriations are not only natural but necessary.

This book is a call not for a return to a time before theory, but for a recognition of what theory is. It is not a set of truth-producing methods that can be simply applied to texts to produce results, preferably publishable. What we call theory is a series of ongoing debates about the nature of meaning, texts, knowledge, and subjectivity that extend from the Platonic dialogues, through Aristotle to Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, and so on to the present. It is an ongoing set of conversations that can be entered at a variety of points. There are huge discontinuities, lacunae, and ruptures. Threads are dropped, picked back up, snapped, and woven into tapestries their spinners could have never anticipated. They are relativized by encounters with the warps and wefts of alien traditions and concepts. Nonetheless, each entry point in these conversations only has meaning to the extent that it is a response to a set of ongoing dialogues (Todorov 1984: 19; Voloshinov 1986: 11–12; Morson and Emerson 1990: 309; Holquist 1990: 167) and the moment we take a segment of that conversation out of context and elevate it to a timeless conceptual truth, the moment we crown it as “theory,” we have robbed it of that which makes it most authentic.

Take a text such as Julia Kristeva’s *Tales of Love*. If we merely extract from her readings of Plato, Plotinus, the *Song of Songs*, *Romeo and Juliet*, Baudelaire and Bataille a general theory of love that we can then apply willy nilly to other texts, we would do this rich book a vast disservice. We would completely miss that her reading of the *Symposium* not only complements Lacan’s own (1991), but also includes direct replies to Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus* (1972a) as well as to Foucault’s final volumes of the *History of Sexuality* (1984a and 1984b), which featured \(^9\) One of the most egregious examples of this kind of one size fits all deconstructive approach can be found in Hillis Miller’s “Vast Gaps and Parting Hours” (1981) in which Aristotle, Sophocles, and Crabbe are reduced to an undifferentiated mass of deconstructive goo.
their own interpretation of these same texts (Kristeva 1983: 67–69). By the same token, her choice to include a substantial reading of Plotinus is a clear answer to Irigaray’s *Speculum*, which also in the context of a psychoanalytically grounded feminist critique of occidental philosophies of the subject offers both a substantial engagement with Plotinus and a lengthy reading of Plato. To do justice to the Kristevan text, it must be interpreted, then, not only in terms of its own theoretical assumptions but also in terms of how it positions itself relative to the larger debates in psychoanalysis, feminism, and philosophy then underway in France. At the same time, it demands of the reader a detailed knowledge of the Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition and of their central importance in modern French intellectual life. It is not enough, therefore, to know theory; one must be able to enter into the frame of reference that makes these texts vital responses to pressing questions.

Now, as noted above, the classical subtext of these debates has gone all but unappreciated as theory has become a deracinated set of methodologies. This is a challenge that neither classics nor philosophy departments have been prepared to meet. Thus, we are left with a situation in which Anglo-American classicists and ancient philosophers do not know the theory, and so cannot appreciate the scope and depth of the French poststructuralists’ contribution to our understanding of the genealogy of Western thought, while the Anglo-American theorists do not know the classics and the role they play in French academic life. The result is a pernicious situation in which the study of antiquity reinforces its image of irrelevant antiquarianism by neglecting the very texts that argue most strongly for its continued importance, even as scholars of postmodernism fail to recognize the cultural context that produced their own models of thought; as a result, they often offer clichéd and obsolete opinions regarding literary texts from antiquity. This book begins to bridge this gap by offering detailed and theoretically informed readings of three of French postmodernism’s chief thinkers, and their engagement with Platonic philosophy and the classics.

As my argument unfolds, it will become clear not only that Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault’s knowledge of ancient literature is broad and detailed, but also that their understanding of Platonic philosophy is central to their theoretical projects and the debates that animated them (Wolff 1992: 234–35). Where conservative ideologues from Bloom (1987) and Bennett (1992) to Hanson and Heath (1998) have argued

10. The French original of *Tales of Love* (*Histoires d’amour*, 1983) was published before the last two volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, but Foucault was already lecturing on this material at the Collège de France. See for example Foucault (1994c).
that postmodernism represents a repudiation of classical culture and the humanist tradition that flows from it, this book will contend that such claims are a vast oversimplification. Indeed, the study of antiquity in France remains central to the culture’s self-definition and to the theoretical and political debates that animate it to an extent almost unimaginable in the United States or the United Kingdom. It is invoked and contested equally by the right and the left, by members of the neo-fascist Front National, those of the Parti Communiste, and those of the center-right and center-left parties in between (Leonard 2000b: 69–74; 2004; Loraux 1996: 204–16). In addition, philosophy remains the defining discipline of the French academy, and Plato is at the center of the syllabus of its highest church, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, from which Foucault and Derrida both graduated (Leonard 1999: 162; 2005: 17; Bernstein 1990: 265, 270–72).

Thus, what in American life is often treated as an effete curiosity remains of burning interest to a significant portion of the French populace. When the center-right government of Jacques Chirac in 2004 proposed cutting the number of Latin and Greek classes offered at those secondary schools where demand was slipping, allowing ancient languages to become one educational option among others, there was an immediate uproar. The classical heritage of the nation, access to which, it was argued, was at the heart of the French republic’s egalitarian ethos, was being sacrificed on the altar of “la rentabilité” (“profitability”) (Romilly 2004: 15–16; Neveu 2004: 85; Schmidt 2004: 87, 92; Robert 2004: 100; Bayrou 2004: 116). A petition was circulated that gathered 70,000 signatures.¹¹ Political and academic foes, Jacqueline de Romilly and Jean-Pierre Vernant, two of the foremost living Hellenists in France, joined forces to demand that the minister of education withdraw the proposal. A rally was held at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales at which academicians and intellectuals from across the political and disciplinary spectrum spoke against this unconscionable assault on what former center-right minister of education and recent presidential candidate François Bayrou termed “the spinal column of French and European culture” (2004: 118). The project was annulled for the coming school year, although at this writing it remains unclear what the final fate of the proposal will be (Appel pour le latin et le grec 2005; Informations Diverses 2005).

¹¹. The text of the petition, sponsored by a number of different groups but most notably by the C.N.A.R.E.L.A (Coordination nationale des associations régionales des enseignants de langues anciennes) can be found in a publication compiling the speeches given at the May 15, 2004 rally, Appel pour le latin et le grec 2004: 70,000 signataires (2004: 7–9).
Most scholars of the ancient world in the United States, while sympathetic to their French colleagues’ position, can only shake their heads in envious disbelief at the prospect of Greek being taught at the secondary level, of Latin classes not being required to have minimum enrollments, and of being able to mobilize thousands of outraged citizens to defend the centrality of the study of antiquity to republican education. Classics for large parts of the American public, for reasons of race, class, religion, and geographical isolation, has never been central to its self-definition. By the same token, in the United Kingdom, while classics has had greater prestige, it has been deeply associated with the public schools, the ancient universities, and thus with traditional class divisions. It is no wonder, then, that in Anglo-American culture the reception of French postmodern thought has all but completely ignored its grounding in the ancient world, since for many Anglophone scholars of postmodern theory, the study of the ancient world is at best an irrelevancy and at worst a reactionary attempt to quash diversity through the imposition of a white, male, imperialist canon, which it sometimes is (Scholes 1992; Gates 1992; P. G. Allen 1992).

The one exception to this general rule is the case of Foucault and queer theory. Here the work of David Halperin has shown both sensitivity to the ancient texts and an important ability to relate Foucault’s engagement with antiquity to contemporary political struggles. Halperin’s work has been important in bringing Foucault to the attention of the classics community and in convincing the readers of queer theory to think again about Plato and the Stoics. Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate in the appendix, Halperin fails to do justice to both Foucault’s concept of “spiritual practice” and the ancient texts on which it is based.

12. Thus when I grew up in Kansas City, the North Kansas City school district not only did not offer either Latin or Greek, but there was also no public outrage at this. Many questioned the need for foreign language instruction at all.


14. See Richlin on the presentism that characterizes the reception of Foucault’s work on antiquity by American feminists (1998: 138–39, 165–69). A search of the MLA International Bibliography (2005) reveals that in the last thirty years, while a vast bibliography has accumulated on Irigaray’s reading of Freud in Speculum, only four articles have been published on her equally extensive reading of the “myth of the cave.” Not a single book or article has been devoted to Derrida’s reading of the Philebus in La carte postale and only two make substantial mention of his reading of the Timaeus in Khora. This is despite 2,266 entries overall. Out of 1,631 entries overall, there are only six published books or articles that make substantial mention of Lacan’s relation to Plato, and out of 1,602 total entries, there are none on Foucault’s reading of the Alcibiades and only two published books or articles that make substantial mention of his relation to Plato.
Moreover, the case of Halperin and Foucault are much more the exception than the rule in the English-speaking world.

The story is very different in France. Here, in the hands of intellectuals such as Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Nicole Loraux, the study of the ancient world is not opposed or even ancillary to, but part and parcel of a radical intellectual practice.\textsuperscript{15} As Loraux, Nagy, and Slatkin write:

Many of today’s leading figures in French Classical scholarship are paragons of modernity and or even “postmodernity” in the eyes of some fellow Classicists in other academic cultures. Such impressions can mislead, however, if they are tied to the assumptions that modern or “postmodern” perspectives in Classics are mere symptoms of an overall intellectual capitulation to ephemeral trends. It is clear that these same French Classicists consider themselves leaders, not followers, in modern and “postmodern” thinking. More important, they have been acknowledged as leading thinkers by such non-Classicist counterparts as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. (2001: 2)

Far from representing an irrelevancy or a reactionary exercise in nostalgia, the study of the ancient world in France is often a form of radical estrangement and hence political critique. “The intellectual ambition of French Classics writ large is to define and redefine the whole world by resituating all of it historically within its past as well as its present” (Loraux, Nagy, Slatkin 2001: 2). Thus the very postmodern thinkers who many in Anglo-American classics would see as occupying the antipodes to the study of antiquity are the friends, colleagues, interlocutors, and dialectical antagonists of France’s leading classicists.\textsuperscript{16} The ancient world and Platonic philosophy, rather than being at the margins of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault’s projects, are, as we shall see, at their center. Postmodernism represents not the rejection of the classical tradition but precisely its revitalization as a living means of thought.

The postmoderns use classical models as a way to rethink the self and its limits, as a form of profound historicization of the subject and its modes of formation. For the postmoderns, we are never simply the heirs of a univalent antiquity, which nonetheless also bequeaths to us the very concept of thought as a formal exercise, i.e., as theory or philosophy


Introduction: Remaking the Soul

(Derrida 1992: 262–69, 274). The postmodern encounter with antiquity is committed to history and indeed to objectivity to the precise degree that it is committed to difference, to seeing the ancient world not as our reflection or legitimization, but as the intimate other who is also always already part of the same, both different from and yet formative of our identity, and hence able to serve as a means of refashioning it. For Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault antiquity is a chance to think differently, to historicize and thus potentially recreate what it means to be a subject, to be human. It serves 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.”

The concept of “la pensée du dehors” was first formulated by Foucault in 1966 in an article by the same name for a special issue of the journal *Critique* devoted to Maurice Blanchot. It was later reissued as a small book (1986). *La pensée du dehors* not only gives a perceptive and laudatory close reading of Blanchot’s fiction and criticism, it also, on that basis, offers its own definition of the literary field as that which escapes the limits of the dominant mode of representation in a given culture. The value of that field is not born of philosophical interiority. It is not the product of the depths of the self-reflexive Cartesian consciousness:

It is a matter rather of a passage to the “outside”: language escapes from the mode of being discourse—that is from the dynasty of representation—literary speech develops from itself, forming a network in which each point, distinct from the others, at a distance from even the closest, is situated in relation to all in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them. (1986: 12–13)

For the early Foucault, then, literature is not the depiction of a pre-existing reality, nor the revelation of an already constituted consciousness, but the construction of a network of surfaces, of exteriorities, that concretize the void, the negative space that constitutes the very possibility of the enunciation of enunciation. Language is marshaled in such a way as to reveal, through the very density of its surfaces, the conditions of possibility of the speaking subject, and hence an outside of representation that is prior to the subject’s birth at the moment of

18. This is Blanchot’s concept of “l’espace littéraire” (1955).
the enunciation of its own existence. “The speech of speech leads us through literature . . . to that outside where the subject who speaks disappears” (1986: 13–14).

The “I” of the “I think” or the “I speak,” which is thus posited through this enunciation, exists only within a constituted world of signs, of a socially operative and historically constituted system of representation. The literary event, however, is not a plumbing of this interiority, but the constitution through language of a thought of the “outside”:

This thought that holds itself outside of all subjectivity in order to reveal its limits as though from the exterior, in order to announce its end, to make its dispersion glitter, and to recuperate only its unconquerable absence; this thought that simultaneously holds itself at the threshold of any positivity, not so much so as to seize its foundation or justification but to find the space where it deploys itself, the void which serves as its place, the distance in which it constitutes itself and in which, as soon as one turns one’s gaze there, its immediate certitudes are sketched—this thought, in relation to the positivity of our knowledge constitutes what one could call in a word “the thought from the outside.” (1986: 16)

This thought from the outside, which early on Foucault conceived as a function of the aesthetic, is precisely what he programmatically seeks in the turn to antiquity as announced in the opening pages of volume 2 of the History of Sexuality: “the wager was to know in what measure the work of thought on its own history could free thought from what it thinks silently and permit it to think differently” (1984a: 15). The turn to antiquity has as its aim to seize momentarily the void in which thought constitutes itself, the glitter of that which lurks beyond our immediate certitudes, a true pensée du dehors.

As we shall see, to think the possibility of such a “thought” is the overarching motivation behind the turn to antiquity of all three thinkers. Each, of course, expresses it in his own idiom. For Lacan, it is the ethical pursuit of a good beyond all recognized goods, beyond the pleasure principle, which is sought in his readings of the Antigone and the Symposium in his seventh and eighth seminars. For Derrida, it is the deconstruction of the closure of western metaphysics, as pursued in his encounters with the Phaedrus and the Philebus. And for Foucault,

it is the possibility of a new ethic of self-relation as outlined in his commentaries on the *Alcibiades*, Plato’s letters, and the Stoics.

It is worth our time to pause for a moment and examine more precisely how this philosopheme of “thought from the outside” manifests itself within the specific structures of Lacanian and Derridean thought. Such an examination will make clearer the political and ethical stakes of our project. It will also help us further define the specificity of the postmodern encounter with the ancient.

We turn first to Lacan, whose ethics, as elaborated in his seventh seminar, have been criticized by Miriam Leonard for being apolitical, overly aestheticized, and for seeking to replace the previous generation’s existential philosophy of the authentic act with an “unconscious ethics of the ‘real’” (Leonard 2005: 221, compare 13, 114–15, 124–25). While Leonard’s work is extraordinarily useful and has had an important impact on my own, I would argue that such a characterization shortchanges Lacan. As will be seen in chapters 3 and 4, the good beyond all recognized goods, which is the object of Antigone’s desire and of the ethics of psychoanalysis, is indeed located in what Lacan terms the Real. This is the realm beyond the contingent forms of our socially constituted Symbolic norms and our individual Imaginary projections. Yet, it is the concept of the Real, I would contend, that gives Lacan’s thought its political and ethical edge by permitting the radical relativization of any given Imaginary or Symbolic ideological formation, and hence opening the possibility of a fundamental rethinking of one’s relation with one’s self (ethics) and with others (politics). \(^{20}\) As Fredric Jameson notes:

> It is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself; and if for psychoanalysis the history in question here is obviously enough the history of the subject, the

\(^{20}\) For the concept that philosophy inscribes itself in the Real through altering the relation of the self to the self, see Foucault’s course, “Le gouvernement de soi et des autres” (1983a) and my account thereof (P. A. Miller 2006b). It is not without significance to the present book that this course at the Collège de France centered on Foucault’s reading of Euripides’ *Ion* and of a series of Platonic texts. It was also a continuation of his 1981–82 course, *L’herméneutique du sujet* (2001), in which Foucault was seen by his audience as using a set of specifically Lacanian operators. For more on these courses and their relation to Derrida and Lacan, see chapter 6. What is important to note for now is that while these thinkers are often viewed as operating in mutually exclusive universes by their most ardent supporters, and while that view is reinforced by some of their own more polemical utterances—especially in the case of Foucault and Derrida—nonetheless the basic thesis of this book is that these thinkers are engaged in a constant, intense, and mutually conditioning dialogue and that an essential part of this dialogue is their relation to antiquity.
resonance of the word suggests that a confrontation between this particular materialism and the historical materialism of Marx can no longer be postponed. It is a confrontation whose first example has been set by Lacan himself, with his suggestion that the very notion of the Symbolic as he uses it is compatible with Marxism. . . . (1988: 104)

Today, of course, the urgency of the confrontation between Marxism and psychoanalysis is less strongly felt than it was in 1977 when Jameson’s essay was first published. Nonetheless, few would accuse Jameson of apolitical quietism, and however dated its terminology, what this passage does make clear is that there is no prima facie case for assuming that Lacan’s turn to ethics and the Real precludes an effective theoretical engagement with history and politics (Leonard 2005: 124, 182). Moreover, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, it is precisely the turn to ethics, and hence to the Antigone and the Symposium, that makes real change—i.e., change that does not simply reproduce the structures of the given—thinkable, first on the ethical level (chapter 3), and then on the intersubjective and collective level (chapter 4).

Indeed, I would contend, the Real is indispensable to any concept of philosophy or of theory as critique, inasmuch as the Real is that which is unassimilable to the ideological norms of a given cultural formation. As such, the concept of the Real, and its ethical correlate of “a good beyond all recognized goods,” is that which logically makes the historical succession of cultural and linguistic as well as political forms and institutions thinkable, and hence renders their transformation possible. The Real marks the point at which the Symbolic meets its own systemic negation (Copjec 1994: 9, 121), its principle of finitude or limit. This moment of negation is necessary to any meaningful concept of historical change, since it is precisely this moment that figures the possibility of otherness within the reigning positive system.

22. For a fuller discussion, see P. A. Miller (2004a: 6–16).
23. See Lacan (1975: 32–33) on Marx’s insight that history is the possibility of completely subverting the function of discourse, hence history is that which demonstrates the contingency of a given Symbolic system and its consequent inadequacy vis-à-vis the Real. On Althusser’s concept of history being based on Lacan, see Jameson (1981: 34–35).

Indeed, as Derrida has written, the concept of the future, of the yet-to-come (à-venir), depends on the existence of an opening within the Symbolic that cannot be reduced to the categories of either knowledge or ignorance, but must be seen as a systematic heterogeneity, an absolute otherness that exceeds the reigning positive system. “This opening must preserve this heterogeneity as the sole chance of an affirmed, or rather re-affirmed, future. It is the future itself, it comes from the future. The future is its memory” (1993a: 68). From this perspective, then, the concept of the Real, of an absolute “outside,” is far from representing a denial of history, or politics (Rabinovich 2003: 208; Armstrong 2005: 20, 132–34). It is rather what makes them thinkable in the most radical sense. The refusal of the given is a predicate for fundamental ethical and political change.

Moreover, it is because of this radical potential that Lacan, as Leonard notes, serves “as a fundamental frame for understanding the dialogue between psychoanalysis and the revolutionary politics of the post-'68 Parisian intellectual scene” (2005: 88; see also Schneiderman 1983: 28–29). And it is for this same reason that Lacanian psychoanalysis has provided the main theoretical impetus for the neo-Marxist politics of Slavoj Žižek and those associated with him. Likewise, as Toril Moi notes, Lacan represents the starting point for the feminisms of such important thinkers as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Cathérine Clément (Moi 2002: 99).25 None of this is to deny the reality either of Lacan’s own personal political quietism (Lacan 1986: 214–15; Roudinesco 1997: 103, 114–15, 158–59)26 or of his complex and often conflicted relationships with the French feminisms that took their basic terminology from him.27 Rather it is to argue that there is nothing intrinsically anti-political or ahistorical in Lacan’s theoretical formulations, and that a wide range of political thinkers have found them enabling, even if they have also sought to go beyond, answer, revise, and reinterpret them.

26. Nonetheless in May 1968 he signed a letter published in Le Monde along with Sartre, Blanchot, and others in support of the student uprising. He was subsequently forced to move his seminar from the Ecole Normale Supérieure to the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études (Schneiderman 1983: 29; Cohen-Solal 1987: 459).
In sum, central to the radical political potential of Lacanian thought is his concept of the Real, which on the level of individual desire is, as we shall see in chapter 3, instantiated in Antigone’s search for a good beyond those approved by the dominant Symbolic formation, metonymically identified with Creon and the *polis*. The formulation of this good, which constitutes a Lacanian version of the *pensée du dehors*, is precisely what is sought in Seminar 7, *L’éthique de la psychanalyse* (1986). By the same token, it is the resocialization of that good in terms of intersubjective desire that is explored in the following year’s seminar on Socratic *atopia, Le transfert*. In each case, what the turn to antiquity makes possible is a radical historicization and estrangement of the subject’s relation to itself and others.28 And it is for this reason that Lacan’s readings of Sophocles and Plato became not only cornerstones of French thought throughout the postwar period, but, as will be shown in the chapters that follow, they were texts that demanded specific and detailed responses from Derrida and Foucault as they too turned to problems of ethics, desire, and the subject.

In the case of Derrida, this response to Lacan will come in the form of close readings of both the *Phaedrus*, with its careful mapping of the relations between writing, the subject and desire, and the *Philebus*, with its complex interrogation of the nature of the good life in relation to fundamental epistemological and metaphysical categories. More specifically, Derrida pursues his own “thought from the outside” through what he terms a radical “genealogy.” Deconstruction for him is not primarily an apolitical textual methodology but a fundamental critique of democracy as currently practiced.29 It is pursued

28. See, however, Leonard’s acute remarks on Lacan’s failure fully to historicize his reading of the *Antigone* and the *Symposium*, particularly as concerns matters of sexuality and gender (Leonard 2005: 129, 172–73). It should be noted, nonetheless, that she is more forgiving of the misogynist and homophobic caricatures found in the work of Lacan’s contemporary, Sartre (Leonard 2005: 3–4), owing to the more explicit political commitment of his later work. I am very supportive of her efforts to rehabilitate Sartre as an important intellectual force. See, however, the portraits of the self-loathing homosexual Daniel in *L’âge de raison* (Sartre 1981a) and the sadistic Lucien in “L’enfance d’un chef” (Sartre 1981b) as well as almost all the female characters in his novels, and the vivid evocations of softness, liquidity, and viscosity in *L'être et le néant* (Sartre 1943). Moi’s reading of Sartre’s relationship with Simone de Beauvoir is particularly enlightening from this perspective (1994). Both these monumental figures in the final analysis, despite the manifest importance of their work and the changes in their respective positions over long careers, reflect many of the most deeply ingrained biases of the France of the 1920s and 30s in which they came to maturity. This should not surprise us. In the end, however, we are looking not for saints but for thinkers who can provide us with usable tools.

29. Derrida feels very much that the charges of being apolitical that have been leveled at him are unfair (1980: 48).
by tracing the intellectual roots of modern democratic societies to certain concepts of origins, purity, kinship, the citizen, and the centered, self-present subject (Derrida 1994: 127–28). He seeks not only to provide a demystifying genealogy of these terms, and thus open up the possibility of a radically different future, but also to offer a genealogy of the possibility of his own inquiry, a genealogy of the question of the future’s relation to the past (Derrida 1993a: 68, 151). One primary way in which this genealogy is traced, Derrida argues, is precisely through a return to the Greeks, to the first chapter of the dominant occidental discourse that has sought to define the subject and its relation to itself and the other, i.e., philosophy (Derrida 1992: 260–67; Wolff 1992: 235; Loraux 1996: 169; Leonard 2006). That first chapter is, of course, nothing other than the body of texts transmitted to us under the name of Plato. As in the case of Foucault and Lacan, the turn to antiquity for Derrida is at once a political and an ethical act. It seeks through the estrangement of the present to create a space in which we can imagine a new future by means of a precise and focused exhumation of the past. It seeks to open a space of difference that only an archeology of antiquity in general, and Plato in particular, makes possible, opening new forms of the self’s relation to itself, others, and power.

Finally, it is precisely this pursuit of a thought from the outside that separates the postmoderns and their use of antiquity from that of their great modernist predecessors. While classical themes are a common and important part of the literature of the thirties and forties, as we shall see in an initial examination of dramas by Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh, these writers in their appropriation of the ancient past do not seek to historicize the present. The neoclassicism that characterizes much of the theater from this period is widely acknowledged. Yet these dramatists do not aim to produce a genealogy of morals that would simultaneously posit a distinct and historically situated beyond. For them, classical themes serve to produce allegories of the present through framing it in terms of a timeless classical horizon. This is as true of those who can trace their intellectual pedigree to the aesthetic assumptions of European fascism as of those who embrace the politics of the socialist left. To be schematic, where the moderns seek to identify

31. I use this term for the generation of thinkers preceding the postmoderns. It is not generally used in this sense in French, but is common when speaking of Anglo-American literature of the same period and is useful for describing an analogous period of formal innovation and neoclassicism on the continent.
the present with the past, the postmoderns seek to rethink the present through an encounter with the otherness of the past (Hartog 2004: 53–54).

This is not to say that the postmoderns have a more developed concept of historicism *tout court* than do the moderns. As one of the readers of an earlier draft of this work observed, it would be absurd to argue that Lacan’s philosophy of history is more articulated and systematic than Sartre’s in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Nor is this my intention. My first concern in making this distinction between the modernist writers of the thirties and forties and their postmodern successors is with the modernist writers’ use of antiquity. My contention is that the way antiquity is used in the theater of Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh differs fundamentally from the way in which it is used in Lacan’s seminars, Derrida’s readings of Plato, and Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France. Second, Sartre’s later Marxist philosophy, to which the *Critique* belongs, differs sufficiently from his earlier existential theatrical and philosophical work that one cannot simply read back from the former to the latter (Aronson 1980: 183–84). Third, even when Sartre returns to antiquity at the end of his theatrical career in his 1960s version of the *Trojan Women*, he proceeds not in the mode of estranging the present from itself through an encounter with the past, but in that of representing the present to itself through allegory. The *Trojan Women* is, in fact, an articulate and pointed denunciation of the Algerian War (Leonard 2005: 224–26). Fourth, in a very real sense historicism is not what is at issue, but History, as Jameson defines it. Traditional historicism sees an organic continuity between the present and the past, with the one evolving directly out of the other. It assumes we can trace a history of democracy, of the subject, of the homosexual, because we know what these things are and can therefore trace lines of descent, grand narratives, that move from the distant past to its inevitable culmination in the present or the future. This teleological style of narrative (in the mode of orthodox Soviet Marxism), which sees an essential identity between present and past, is precisely what the postmoderns reject as ultimately ahistorical in its fundamental refusal of difference, of an encounter with the outside, the Real (Lyotard 1984; Foucault 1994bb: 136–37; Shepherdson 1995: ¶ 4, 9; Leonard 2005:


33. I am not at this point going to venture into the debate over whether these two aspects of Sartre’s work are contradictory or complementary. But it is clear that they are different. See Stoekl (1992: 84–142).
Traditional historicism, then, sees history as a form whose relation to time is closed, whose end is contained in its beginning (Frow 1986: 292–93; Morson and Emerson 1990: 292–93). It is for this reason, in part, that Althusser singles out Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* for rebuke in the final chapter of volume one of *Lire le capital*: “Le marxisme n’est pas un historicisme” (1968: 150–84). And, it is precisely this same historicist reduction of difference that we see in the modernists’ allegorical equation of present and past on the theatrical stage of the thirties and forties, as opposed to the more critical use of antiquity found in the lecture halls and seminar rooms of the postmoderns (Miller 2006b; Sharpe 2005).

It is this critical use, in turn, that Foucault evokes in the figure of Montaigne and his invention of the essay, which he cites as his philosophical paradigm for volume 2 of the *History of Sexuality*. Indeed, it is Montaigne’s species of Renaissance self-fashioning that comes closest to capturing the postmodern relation to antiquity. The *essai*, as Foucault notes, is precisely the “attempt” to think differently, an open-ended experiment of thought on itself through a sustained investigation of its own history (1984a: 15). Lest Foucault’s allusion to the form of the *essai* be thought too slight to support such a reading of his relation to Montaigne, in his lectures at the Collège de France from the same period, he makes it clear that Montaigne’s focus on the “care of the self” was a direct product of the latter’s encounter with antiquity, and that this encounter should be read in parallel with the topics of his own late work:

> Of course, you find in the sixteenth century an ethic of the self, as well as an entire aesthetic of the self, which is otherwise very explicitly related to what one finds in the Greek and Latin authors about whom I am speaking. I think that it would be necessary to reread Montaigne from this perspective as an attempt to reconstitute an ethics and aesthetics of the self. (2001: 240)

Foucault is not alone in this reading of Montaigne and his relation to ancient philosophy and to the “care of the self.” His interpretation

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34. The elaboration of a theory of “emergence” that could explain how new modes of personal or social organization could arise out of pre-existing forms, without being seen as already contained by those forms, and so effectively subsuming the emergence of the new within a vision of the given, was seen by Althusser as one of the central problems of both Marxism and psychoanalysis if they were to overcome their idealist roots. In this struggle, he saw Lacan as one of his principle allies (1996: 59–60).
reflects Pierre Hadot’s position as well (1995b: 395, 413), while Derrida in *La politique de l’amitié* opens with Montaigne’s citation of Aristotle’s supposed dictum, “O mes amis, il n’y a nul amy,” as the exergue under which he will pursue his readings of these thinkers as well as Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schmit (1994: 18).

Indeed, for Montaigne the encounter with the ancient other constitutes a form of self-discipline or shaping whereby, through the practices of reading, self-observation, and writing, a “new nature” is formed (Nehamas 1998: 117–18, 123–24). There are numerous examples of this throughout the *Essais*, yet one need read no further than the sweeping opening period of Book 1, chapter 8, “On Idleness”:

As we see from lands left idle, that if they are rich and fertile, they abound in a hundred sorts of wild and useless grasses, and that if they are to be brought to good use, they must be subjected to, and certain seeds must be used for, our service; and as we see that women produce very well on their own lumps and pieces of formless flesh, but that in order to produce a good and natural generation one must work into them some other seed: it is the same way with our minds. If one does not occupy them with a certain subject that harnesses and constrains them, they toss about wildly here and there in the ill-defined field of their imaginings.

Sicut aquae tremulum labris ubi lumen ahenis
Sole repercussum, aut radiantis imagine Lunae
Omnia pervolitat late loca, jamque sub auras
Erigitur, summique ferit laquearia tecti.

Just like when a tremulous light from the Sun or the image of the radiant Moon, reflected in bronze basins of water, darts wildly here and there, and then beneath the sky is carried up and strikes the paneled ceiling at the roof’s top. (Montaigne 1972: 61, citing *Aeneid* 8. 22–25)

Montaigne’s message here is clear. Lest the ministrations of the mind miscarly, the proper seed, a salutary otherness, must be implanted to give its rich fertility focus and to subject it to our use. The passage itself enacts this process of mental culture. The opening syntax is lush and meandering, at first evoking the untended prairie’s riot of wild grasses, but as the sentence continues to uncoil its serpentine folds the prospect of unfettered generation gives rise to monstrosities, before suddenly
coming into sharp focus just before the quotation from Vergil that distills into a single image the instability of the restless mind. It is the *Aeneid*, then, that provides the seed that turns the wild gyrations of the agitated spirit into a limpid aesthetic object, and that implicitly subjects Montaigne’s spirit to the discipline of masculine use.\(^{35}\) The self is cultivated through its encounter with the other, and the paradigmatic other for Montaigne, as for Foucault and the other postmoderns, is the intimate other of antiquity.\(^{36}\)

Postmodernism is, then, not a rejection of humanism *tout court*, but of a particular nineteenth-century formation of humanist thought (Foucault 1966: 314–98), finding itself far closer to the humanism of the Renaissance than to that of the Romantics. It is, in fact, Montaigne’s use of classical models and their historical limitations as a way to rethink the self and its limits that most directly anticipates the postmodern encounter with antiquity.\(^{37}\) That encounter represents a renunciation neither of the classical tradition nor of history, but rather a profoundly historical relativization of the subject and its modes of self-formation. It is also perhaps this shift to a humanism of self-fashioning, as opposed to the existential humanism of the fully constituted Cartesian cogito, that explains the postmodern focus on Plato. For where modernist appropriations of antiquity focus on the tragic stage and present already formed characters for our inspection and potential identification, the postmodern focuses increasingly on Plato’s dialectical process of question and answer, self-testing and reproof, desire and lack. The postmodern turn to a thought from the outside, to a refusal to accept the categories of the given even in the guise of the antique, therefore, recapitulates on a new level Plato’s own critique of the seductive spectacle of the tragic stage: its power to overwhelm the critical faculty and so thwart a genuine care for the self. The importance of Plato, thus, represents a fundamental distinction between the postmodern appropriation of antiquity and the modernist appropriation as represented

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35. Montaigne’s gendering of this process could easily be the topic of a separate essay.

36. In a similar fashion, the *essai* “Our Affections Carry Themselves beyond Us” marshals Plato and Cicero to lead to the ultimately Socratic conclusion that “he who knows himself no longer takes another’s affair for his own”; rather he loves and cultivates himself before anything else (Montaigne 1972: 38). This image of self-cultivation is precisely the opposite of that of the untamed field gone to seed. See also Zalloua’s exemplary article on Montaigne’s exploration of the concept of the intimate other in his essay “Of Friendship” (2002), in relation to Foucault’s concept of the “care of the self” as well as Aristotle’s and Cicero’s writings on friendship.

37. See Greene’s concept of “dialectical imitation” (1982: 45–47) and Auerbach’s still seminal essay (1953).
by the neoclassical theatrical practice of the thirties and forties. Thus, even when the postmoderns turn their attention to ancient tragedy, as in the case of Lacan’s reading of the Antigone, they do not present a modernized recreation of the dramatic experience, but a careful and methodical reading of the text from a defined perspective.

*Postmodern Spiritual Practices* begins with an examination of modernist uses of antiquity to establish the unique nature of the postmodern intervention. The remainder of the book is organized around a series of dialogic interactions framed by Lacan’s seminars on the Antigone and the Symposium and Foucault’s final turn to antiquity. There follows a chapter-by-chapter outline.

Chapter 2, “The Modernist Revolt: History, Politics, and Allegory, or Classicism in Occupied France” sets the stage for the later investigations. The postmodern turn to antiquity, as we shall see, is also a return to the territory of Sartre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (Leonard 2005: 5, 223). After a brief introduction to the philosophical and historical context of France in the 1940s, this chapter will look at three emblematic uses of antiquity in French modernist literature. As noted above, these examples are drawn from the realm of spectacle and performance rather than philosophical commentary and philological investigation. Antiquity for these writers represents an open field of imaginative and allegorical possibilities, of ideal identifications with characters as diverse as Orestes, Electra, Antigone, and Caligula. It is a way of representing a present that, as we shall see, is simultaneously defined by the ideological impetus of fascism and yet beyond good and evil.

The first piece under consideration is Sartre’s *Les mouches*. In this version of Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, the existential philosopher combines a variety of different versions of the Electra-and-Orestes myths, including those of Sophocles and Euripides, to create a meditation on the costs of freedom and responsibility. The political resonances of the portrayal of the people of Argos as complicit in their subjection to the tyranny of Aegisthus are particularly strong. The play was first performed in 1942 in occupied Paris and is self-consciously anachronistic. It refers to Zeus and Jupiter as separate entities, portrays Orestes as under the care of a Skeptic *paedogogus*, and compares the former’s learning to that of the travel writer Pausanias. Through these devices, the playwright makes clear his allegorical intent.

By the same token, Camus’s *Caligula* combines allusions to Suetonius with deliberate distortions of Roman history to present his own
dramatization of the relation between freedom, tyranny, and the eroticization of power. Having debuted in 1945, *Caligula* not only reflects the introspection of postwar France, but is a clear meditation on what Mary-Ann Friese Witt (2001) has termed the “aesthetics of fascism” and the pursuit of the absolute.

It is this very problematic pursuit of an absolute that is beyond the compromises of bourgeois life that is at heart of Anouilh’s *Antigone*. This last play will have the most direct influence on the postmodernist thinkers who are the subject of the current work. It also presents the most direct challenge to them, for the play problematizes the difficulty of separating the earlier fascist pursuit of an absolute beyond the bounds of bourgeois subjectivity from the later postmodernist pursuit of a “pensée du dehors.” The latter concern becomes all the more troubling in light of the complicities, flirtations, and collaborations with fascism of other postmodern icons like Blanchot, de Man, and Heidegger.

Chapter 3, “Historicizing Transcendence: *Antigone*, the Good, and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” examines Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone* in his 1959 seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992). It argues that his interpretation of Sophocles lays the groundwork for his reading of the *Symposium* the following year. The result is a unified theory of the ethical subject of desire as the subject of psychoanalysis. These two seminars form a single movement in which the possibility of an ethics of pure desire is first posited, and then reimagined in terms of the analytic situation as modeled in the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades. Lacan’s conception of psychoanalysis, as we shall see, is inseparable from his profound engagement with the language, history, and interpretation of the founding texts of western thought (Lacan 1986: 21). Nonetheless, antiquity in Lacan’s texts, unlike in the dramas of the great modernists, functions not as an allegory of, but as a critique and challenge to, the present. It demands that we account for the historicity of both our science and our selves.

For Lacan, Antigone represents a model of subject formation precisely to the degree that she is one who rejects the good as understood by the dominant mode of the Symbolic embodied in Creon’s decrees. Antigone’s choice, her desire, is pure insofar as it rejects all claims of the Other to dictate its objects or form, and to that extent offers no positive model to be emulated, no pregnant past that can simply issue into the present. This chapter examines both Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone* and provides a close reading of key passages from the tragedy itself, demonstrating not only the function of the play in Lacan’s discourse
but also the positive contribution that discourse makes to our understanding of the play.

Chapter 4, “Lacan, the Symposium, and Transference” argues that Socrates, like Antigone, represents for Lacan a kind of purity that exceeds the bounds of communally acknowledged goods. Socrates’ atopia, as Alcibiades terms it (215a2), places him beyond the bounds of the order defined by the Athenian polis, and that singularity in turn is the basis of his purity. In the wake of his encounter in the Antigone with an ethics of self-creation that sought an authentic beauty and monumentality beyond all conventional representations, Lacan turned to Socrates and the Symposium. There, he sought a model for elaborating a theory of love as a response to the fundamental lack in our being that Freudian theory sees as the root of human desire.

Yet whereas in the Antigone, Lacan presents what is ultimately a tragic and highly individualistic analysis of the pursuit of a jouissance that is beyond the pleasure principle, the Socratic elenchus is a profoundly intersubjective process, which like analysis itself is dependent upon the social mediation of language. In this chapter, then, we examine not only Lacan’s reading of the Symposium, but also the relation between that reading and the Antigone, and between the ethics of psychoanalysis and the problem of transference. Transference is the metaphorical process whereby, in the course of coming to understand the nature and origin of the patient’s desire, the desire of the analysand becomes the desire of the analyst. This is exactly the process described in the Symposium by Alcibiades, when he discusses the seductive power of Socrates’ elenctic discourse. Chapter 4 will examine this phenomenon not only by tracing Lacan’s reading of the Symposium, but also by examining the seductive power of elenctic discourse as Socrates purports to demonstrate it in the Lysis. In the process, we shall see not only how a Lacanian reading illuminates this dialogue, but also how it can shed light on the analyst’s reading of his primary text.

Chapter 5. “Writing the Subject: Derrida Asks Plato to Take a Letter,” shows how the Platonic corpus, particularly those texts that interrogate the relation between desire and truth, and between love and transcendence, are a central concern for all the major figures in postmodernity (Zuckert 1996). The Phaedrus is a crucial text for Derrida, himself a frequent audience member at Lacan’s seminars. With Derrida, though, the lens through which Plato is read is no longer psychoanalysis per se but philosophy. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” the ambiguous figure of the pharmakos/pharmakon functions as the instantiation of the problematic status of writing, intentionality, and meaning that Derrida sees
as structuring the subsequent western metaphysical tradition. Plato’s aversion to writing is interpreted as symptomatic of a more general tendency in philosophy to banish the external and the material from the essence of meaning and value, or the logos. This Platonic attempt at metaphysical closure, at the creation of a finite system of fixed meanings beyond the contingencies of the merely material letter, can in turn be seen as parallel to the system of preexisting interpretations and conventionally recognized goods that Lacan views as the antithesis of what constitutes the ethics of psychoanalysis. Both the attempt to establish a closed logocentric universe and the potted analytic interpretation assume that meaning is finite and preexists the acts of interpretation and enunciation that make signification possible. In the last analysis, both are designed more to police the realm of possible meanings than to create new possibilities of self-creation and understanding.

While Lacan is not specifically mentioned in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” he is explicitly engaged in Derrida’s next extended meditation on Platonic philosophy, *La carte postale*. In this text, it is precisely the formation of the subject and the question of origins that are at stake. Here Derrida interrogates both Freud’s unacknowledged debt to the *Philebus*, and Plato’s debt to Freud, in terms of both the act of writing and the set of relays and mediations of the written that he ironically dubs the “postal system.” The addresser and addressee of communication in this system represent posts in an infinitely disseminated web of significations, whose very constitution under the images of law and limit was first consolidated in the same Platonic corpus that also envisioned its beyond. It is Lacan’s decision to continue to operate within this system of hierarchical meanings that constitutes the burden of Derrida’s indictment of him in the now famous essay from the same book, “Le facteur de la verité,” or “The Postman of Truth.” This chapter will ultimately argue that the *Philebus* offers us the possibility of mediating between the Lacanian and the Derridean positions, while also laying the groundwork for a moving tribute to Foucault in *La politique de l’amitié*, which sketches a particularly Derridean response to the problematic of power.

Among the postmoderns, it is Foucault’s turn to antiquity that has received the most notice. In chapter 6, “The Art of Self-Fashioning, or Foucault on the *Alcibiades*: Caring for the Self and Others,” we see his turn to the Stoics, which begins in 1970 with his praise of Gilles Deleuze’s *La logique du sens* and which deepens with his subsequent engagement with Hadot’s understanding of ancient *philosophia* as a mode of life rather than an abstract conceptual system. During the
last years of his life, Foucault was primarily interested in the problems of ethical self-fashioning as Plato and the philosophers of the Roman Empire explored them. He thus began his 1982 course at the Collège de France, L’herméneutique du sujet, with a meticulous reading of the Alcibiades (2001).

For Foucault, the Alcibiades constituted, to paraphrase Olympiodorus, “the gateway of the temple.” He saw in it the first and fullest theorization of an ethic of self-relation that was to constitute his primary object of interest in the last years of his life (2001: 46). For Foucault, the Alcibiades represented a model of self-relation that made possible the Stoic ethic of the care of the self in the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period (2001: 65). It was this latter form of self-constitution and cultivation that Foucault would directly contrast with the Christian model of confession and self-renunciation that he saw at the heart of modern technologies of disciplining and normalizing the self (2001: 242, 247). The Stoics, starting from Plato’s initial model, offered an alternative form of self-relation both to the Christian archetype and to that described later and implicitly denounced in Foucault’s middle works such as Surveiller et punir and La volonté de savoir. It was this alternative model on which Foucault concentrated during the final years of his life.

In this chapter, we examine Foucault’s reading of the Alcibiades as part of his wider understanding of Plato and ancient philosophy as a whole. We do so first as part of his continuing dialogue with Deleuze, Derrida, and Lacan on the importance and interpretation of Plato in contemporary philosophy. We then look in more detail at the relation between his reading of the Alcibiades and his overall political and ethical project, before examining the dialogue itself.

We close with an appendix in which we compare Foucault’s reading of the dialogue to that of the Roman satirist Persius. Persius’ fourth satire provides an apt means of examining the limitations of Foucault’s reading of ancient philosophy. It also provides a valuable way of testing the value of Foucault’s appropriation by the advocates of queer theory, while allowing us to concretize his reading of the relation of Plato to the Stoics.
You handle the people’s business?” Picture the bearded master, whom a grim dose of hemlock carried off, saying these things. “With what qualification? Speak up then, ward of great Pericles. . . .

Socrates: But if all oiled up you should be relaxing and fixing the rays of the sun in your skin, there is a stranger nearby who touches you with his elbow and bitterly spits out, “What morals! To show the people both how you weed round your cock and the hidden part of your groin, your shriveled asshole. But when you comb the balsamed wool on your cheeks, why does a shaven little worm stand out from your groin. Though five official oilers and depilators should pluck those seedlings and shake your boiled buttocks with hooked tweezers, nonetheless that hedge would not be tamed by any plow.” ¹ (Persius 4.1–3, 33–41)

The fourth satire of Persius, itself a creative rereading of the Alcibiades (Miller 2005; Ramage 1974: 121–25), provides a particularly useful comparandum to Foucault’s interpretation of the Alcibiades. First, Persius himself was a Stoic as his ancient vita attests. Second, Foucault clearly indicates that he has read him (2001: 74). More significantly, Persius is a poet, a category of writer that, as Konstan notes, Foucault self-consciously excludes from his archive (Foucault 1984a: 18). Foucault privileges philosophic and scientific discourse in his reading of the ancient world just as he had in his early work on seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Europe. His reasoning, Konstan points out, is that these forms constitute the primary normalizing and orthopedic discourses that have produced the modern disciplinary subject. It stands to reason, therefore, that if one wishes to investigate whether similar forms of subjectivation existed in the ancient world, one would turn to similar forms of discourse. Yet, as Konstan observes, this may well have been a mistake: poetry played a much stronger socially regulative role in the ancient world than it does today and was

¹. On the attribution of this passage to Socrates, see P. A. Miller (2005a).
arguably more important than medicine or philosophy in its impact on the lives of all but a small minority (2002). Persius’ reading of the *Alcibiades* is thus particularly important because it allows us to test both what Foucault says about ancient regimes of subjectivation and ethics, and perhaps more importantly, the philosophical and political conclusions drawn by theorists from his work.

Beyond doubt one of the most influential aspects of Foucault’s interest in the care of the self has been its impact on queer theory. His tracing of different modalities of self-relation is, as we have seen, explicitly aimed at providing new possibilities of resistance to the normalized, disciplinary subject of late capitalism and exposing the roots of that subject in a specific mode of self-relation that can be traced to the Christian confessional (1994c). The Stoic and Platonic models of the care of self offer crucial resources to all marginal groups that seek to fashion new forms of subjectivity, experience, and resistance to the dominant forms of governmentality. Nonetheless, Foucault’s claims have been subject to two forms of falsification. On the one hand, his own arguments about ancient sexual norms have been called into question. On the other, some of his most vocal advocates have drawn distorted and illegitimate claims from his work.

Foucault’s major claims, on which subsequent extrapolations have been based, are as follows. First, ancient moral philosophy contains “no trace of normalization.” It is based not upon obedience to a pre-existing law or code, but upon a self-conscious mode of shaping oneself. Consequently, the ancient mode of *khrēsis* *aphrodisiōn*, or the “use of pleasure,” escapes the repressive hypothesis that Foucault had attacked in volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* (1994c: 610; 1994i: 215). If we grant the accuracy of this hypothesis, then it is clear that sexual identities such as homo- and heterosexual did not exist as such in the ancient world, but are the product of the modern sexual dispositif and the invention of sex per se as a unitary phenomenon (see our discussion of Foucault’s relation to Lacan). Foucault’s claim is not that there was no same-sex eroticism, but rather that people’s personal identities were not determined by the gender of their sexual object choice. In short, Socrates may have loved Alcibiades, but it would be absurd to say that Socrates was “gay.”

Although the details of Foucault’s reading of the ancient evidence

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3. See also Hocquenghem (1978: 36).
have been contested, its general thrust has given rise to a broad and important body of work. In *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990b) David Halperin provides a detailed exposition of Foucault’s theories and uses them for wide-ranging discussions of Greek sexual and discursive practices, as well as for a series of hard-hitting polemics against Boswell (1980) and other historians of homosexuality who do not share his strict constructionist line.

John J. Winkler’s highly regarded *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (1990) likewise starts from the position that sexuality (including homosexuality) is a social construction, rather than an essence. The volume of essays, *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World* (1990), edited by Halperin, Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, discusses a variety of aspects of ancient erotic culture against a broadly Foucauldian horizon. All these works, as well as those more indirectly inspired by Foucault, such as Hallett and Skinner’s *Roman Sexualities* (1997), have made important contributions to our understanding of ancient erotic culture and modern sexual identities.

Nonetheless, it is largely in Halperin’s later work that Foucault’s ethics have been read as a specific program for the creation of a queer identity (Dean 2003: 239; Halperin 1995: 107). In his *Saint Foucault*, Halperin argues that the destabilization of normative sexual identities leads to the possibility of a utopian politics based on the invention of new modes of self-relation founded upon radical sexual practices such as sado-masochism and fistfucking. “The shattering force of intense bodily pleasure, detached from its exclusive localization in the genitals and regionalized throughout various zones of the body, decenters the subject and disarticulates the psychic and bodily integrity of the self to which a sexual identity has become attached” (1995: 96–97).

Self-transformation and self-fashioning are political acts in which the most intimate of personal practices strikes a blow against an oppressive heteronormative culture. On this view, the care of the self is seen to

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6. Constructionism argues that gender and sexual identities are social constructs rather than natural and universal. The Foucauldian position that sees sex itself as a discursive construct clearly falls within this camp.

7. As Eribon notes, Halperin seems to accept all of J. Miller’s most sensationalistic depictions of Foucault’s private life but changes the valences from negative to positive. The problem, he observes, is not whether or not Foucault performed this or that sex act, but what happens when his vast and complex life’s work is reduced to an allegory of those acts (Eribon 1994: 49–54).
underwrite everything, from piercing, to gay body builders, to “shopping for the right outfit” (1995: 32, 115–18). It is hard to argue that drag queens and leather bars do not represent a transgression of, and hence a challenge to, the dominant culture of compulsive heterosexuality, but it is quite another to see these phenomena as the necessary, or even desirable, consequences of Foucault’s reading of the *Alcibiades* and its *Nachleben.*

While Foucault certainly viewed a return to the culture of the self as a means of resistance to the normalizing disciplinary culture he saw at the heart of modernity (Kremer-Marietti 1985: 278–79), it is at best reductive to reduce Foucault’s complex and variegated reading of the Platonic enterprise to a fashion statement (“shopping for the right outfit”), however politically charged that statement may be. Such an interpretation fails to do justice to the specificity and nuance of his reading, to his engagement with the Socratic dialectic as a means of shaping the soul. It also fails to acknowledge the overdetermined dialogic situation in which that reading transpired. If Foucault’s study of ancient philosophy was in part inspired by a desire to provide a new set of tools to fashion queer and other resistant forms of identity, it was also equally designed as a response to the work of Deleuze, Derrida, and Lacan, and as an archeology of the subject per se.

Finally, as the passages from Persius quoted above makes clear, Foucault overstated the case when he declared that there was no trace of normalization in ancient philosophical discourse. We know that sexual encounters between males at Rome, while certainly permitted in some cases and not regulated along the same axes as they would be in modern societies, were nonetheless subject to both legal and moral restrictions, and that the penalties for soldiers who violated those strictures and fraternized with one another, could include death (Grimal 1986: 103–6; Edwards 1993: 75, 188–89; Nippel 1995: 11; Corbeill 1996: 145; Walters 1997; Parker 1997). Indeed, in our second quoted excerpt from Persius, we have Socrates, or a figure meant to recall him, attacking Alcibiades for precisely the kind of fashion statement that Halperin seems to read Foucault and the Stoics as underwriting. Alcibiades in this poem is portrayed as a young effeminate who exposes himself to the public both politically and erotically, and thus effectively disqualifies himself from any claim to political power. His practice of anal depilation is stigmatized precisely as inviting penetration and degradation. It represents not the care for the self, but a care for one’s possessions. Alcibiades in Persius’ poem has clearly not learned the distinction between the leather cutter and his tools. He is neglecting his
soul, and thus as the opening lines of the poem make clear, just like the opening of the Platonic dialogue, has no right to presume to handle the affairs of the state. Nor, despite his caustic wit, was Persius an isolated crank. Neither for the Socrates of the *Alcibiades* nor for the Stoic Persius could the care of the self be found in shopping for the right outfit or fistfucking.

Of course, Foucault’s position is more complex than it is often given credit to be, even by (or especially by) his most ardent admirers. Despite the occasional incautious statement, he clearly rejected any simplistic contrast between ancient tolerance and modern repression (Gros 2001: 503; Nehamas 1998: 178). He explicitly recognized that in the imperial period the sexual act was viewed as a time of profound danger, not freedom (1984b: 135), and that Greek sexual ethics, far from constituting a model, were fraught with anxiety (witness Socrates’ *daimôn* forbidding him to approach Alcibiades until he was on the cusp of maturity) and predicated on necessary asymmetries of power between the pursuer and pursued, the lover and the beloved, the penetrator and the penetrated (Foucault 1994c: 614; 1984a: 56; Gros 2001: 512–13; Konstan 1994: 116, 121; Macey 1993: 458, 468; Kremer-Marietti 1985: 256). The genealogy of the modern subject may well have created new possibilities of resistance to our dominant forms of subjectivation, but neither did it create models to be emulated nor did it authorize (let alone mandate) specific behaviors (Veyne 1997: 226). Only the tough work of self-reflection and the rigors of philosophical dialogue, undertaken in the context of profound affection, could lead to the discovery of the soul and the fashioning of a self that one found beautiful and authentic. It is in this labor of unflinching examination that the real nucleus of resistance and the real urgency of Foucault’s reading of ancient philosophy can be found.
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