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**Miriam Leonard**, *Athens in Paris: Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-War French Thought*. Classical Presences. Oxford and New-York: Oxford University Press, 2005. viii + 264 pp. Notes, references and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-927725-7.

Review by Béatrice Blanchet, University of Bath.

“Tragedy is an unfashionable subject these days...For leftists in general, it has an unsavoury aura of gods, myths and blood cults, metaphysical guilt and inexorable destiny.”[1] Through a concise and rigorous book, classicist Miriam Leonard sets herself the task to undermine this assertion: she recovers the strands of reception of the antique tragic moment in post-war France which “made an example of the Greeks” (p. 145) and forced theorists to confront the issues of historicism as well as the relevance of Classics.

Published under the aegis of Oxford University Press’ “Classical Presences”, *Athens in Paris* highlights the dynamic relationship between modern critical theory and ancient models of subjectivity and agency. It may be worth recalling that Leonard’s project of remapping the appropriation of antiquity constitutes an ambitious contribution to the current debates on the politics of reception initiated by Charles Martindale’s manifesto, *Redeeming the Text*. [2] Indeed, Classics cannot be understood in their (alleged) pristine bareness without acknowledging the layers of meaning deposited by the genealogy of our critical judgements.

Miriam Leonard points out the dangers involved in separating the history of classical scholarship and the emendation of textual evidence from a wider history of ideas which encompasses the seminal dialogues about the political, across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. She analyses the politics of appropriation beyond the academy *stricto sensu* in an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing forth “forgotten political agendas” (p. 71) intertwined with radical epistemological projects. Leonard endeavours to challenge the frequent qualification of (post) structuralism as apolitical and dominated by quietism, “for although it is the apoliticism of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida which has become a *topos* of recent scholarship, it is paradoxically in their encounters with the Greeks that their politics come to the fore” (p. 12). In this respect, Miriam Leonard dissociates “the political” from “hard political engagement” (p. 20): emancipated from determinism, reception is characterized by its political obliquity. Consequently, Miriam Leonard does not regard the encounter with the Greek text as a mere reflection of the contemporary construct of the political.

Uniting the diverse commitments and trajectories of post-war theorists under the banner of structuralism, Leonard takes the bold step of putting into perspective their respective challenge to “the orthodoxies of structuralism and its investment in the political” (p. 12), underscoring the resonance of a re-politicized classical thought. Indeed, in the wake of the Occupation, epistemological as well as ideological revolutions emerged from the questioning of prevailing orthodoxies (namely Freudism, Marxism, and Hegelianism) while the enduring dialogue with antiquity generated “a new interrogation of the political” (p. 3). Through the prism of paradigmatic figures such as Oedipus, Antigone and Socrates, the debates regarding the identity of a modern Subject caught between structural determination and existential freedom framed the concepts of political agency and abstinence. The philosophical texts analysed by Leonard range from 1959 to 1974, and they include (among others) readings of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, these readings being illustrated by Jacques Lacan’s seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959), Jacques Derrida’s manifesto

“La Pharmacie de Platon” (1968), a deconstructionist reading of Platonism still ignored by many classicists, Jean-Pierre Vernant’s celebrated essay “Oedipe sans Complexe” (1972), and Michel Foucault’s forgotten lecture “La Vérité et les Formes Juridiques” (1973).

*Athens in Paris* is divided into three distinct chapters which focus on the following figures: Oedipus as problematic subject of philosophy (the most detailed contribution of the book), Antigone’s ethical consciousness and Socrates’ ambiguous positioning in the democratic *polis*.

Split at the core of his identity by an incomplete consciousness and accommodating extreme difference within this fragmented identity, post-war Oedipus has occupied the centre stage of the structuralist and post-structuralist debates on the Subject. In this respect, Miriam Leonard provides an illuminating analysis of the complex genealogy of the Vernantian Oedipus. Barred from self-knowledge by the competing social orders of fifth-century Athens, Oedipus appears as a hybrid figure of ambiguity and reversal, occupying the pivotal positions of *pharmakos* (scapegoat) and *tyrannos*, between kingship and democracy. Leonard recognizes that there is no “simple version” (p. 66) of the encounter between Vernant’s Hellenism and structuralism. Questioning the nature of agency and the deeds of the subject, Vernant has made “structuralism speak Greek” (p. 40), owing to a theoretical framework inspired by the Lévi-Straussian linguistic turn, while acknowledging his debt to Louis Gernet’s historical anthropology.

Miriam Leonard reveals that Vernant’s hostility to a universalistic psychoanalytic outlook of antiquity has decisively influenced Foucault’s forgotten text, “La Vérité et les Formes Juridiques”, a genealogy of self-knowledge where the rupture from Homeric Greece is characterized “as a point of emergence of the inquiry.” [3] Vernant’s political grasp of the Greeks in their own culture is obviously an extension of his anti-totalitarian commitment from Athens to Algiers. Following the works of French classicist Nicole Loraux, Leonard pertinently points out that Vernant’s relativist “othering of the Greeks” has been decisively determined by the context of decolonization, as a renewed questioning of the margins of citizenship. Strikingly failing to mention the advent of the *polis* and underplaying the power of rhetoric, Foucault’s narrative of power and knowledge highlights, in marked contrast, the political and democratic readings of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, a democratic outlook associated with the “absent presence” of Nietzsche, one of the masters of suspicion who deeply inspired anti-democratic nihilism.

Relying on the historicity of Classics, Miriam Leonard emphasizes the uses and abuses of nineteenth and twentieth century German Philhellenism in the context of the post-Enlightenment debates on the limits of subjectivity and democracy. Oedipus as a political subject became an object of suspicion across “the fractured political landscape of the post-war era” (p. 223), as philosophers and political theorists asserted the contingency of agency as well as the gap between ethics and politics. Indeed, the deconstruction of the will and fragmentation of subjectivity embedded in the suspicious French post-war thought led to the negotiation of a “precarious path” (p. 231), as ethics “emerged triumphant in the post-war critique of the knowing political subject” (pp. 124-125).

Miriam Leonard analyses the prominence of Antigone, Oedipus’ sister, against the backdrop of the post-war debates on the ethical life of the community. The solitary and stubborn figure of Antigone, which embodies the difficult relationship between ethics and the political life, shows the crucial legacy of Hegelianism as well as the perilous exemplification of otherness. Stranger to the realm of the conscious and the civic, Lacan’s Antigone reveals how “the classical tradition becomes a way of negotiating a place in the traditions of psychoanalysis” (p. 105): emancipated from Freud’s moralism, she takes refuge in a self-referential ethics of pure desire, away from the dictates of the positive law. Leonard unveils the presence of patriarchal misogyny at the core of the Lacanian ethical programme: she grants a prominent place to Luce Irigaray’s repolitization of Antigone exiled by patriarchal tyrants, ancient and modern. Examining Lacan’s deeply anti-civic valorisation of *atopia* borrowed from the Nietzschean Socrates, Miriam Leonard focuses on Derrida’s difficulty in reconciling the fragmented post-war subject with the

modern citizen, an impasse exemplified by the in-between space of the *khora* ("Plato's Pharmacy").

In a thought-provoking passage of the book, Miriam Leonard provides an insightful reading of S. Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1988) in which the focal figure of Antigone, regarded as a metaphor of Judaism, is predicated on the abyssal absence of God. Refuting Žižek's performative narrative, Leonard argues that Antigone's Hebraization confirms and legitimates her exclusion from the realm of the conscious and the political: "Placing Antigone and the Jews on the side of the ethical only serves to further isolate them from the life of the community which is all too happy to exclude them" (p. 155). Leonard skilfully analyses the issue of the pervading exemplification of Hegelian anti-Semitism encapsulated in the enduring Greek/Jew antithesis, pointing out the simultaneous appropriation and disavowal of his own Jewish identity by Jacques Derrida, "fascinated by Antigone",<sup>[4]</sup> who cannot "escape this dangerous politics of the example" (p. 144). Yet, the genealogy of appropriation as well as the complex process of mediation among "nous autres Grecs" are acknowledged and criticized in *La Carte Postale* (1980), a later essay where Derrida explores the differential structure of reception: grounded on Platonism, Western metaphysics are dismantled, through the challenging assumption that Socrates was the genuine origin of an overturning which Plato passively received. The "porous" construct of Platonism, "another name for the practice of exemplification of the Greeks" (p. 202) is emphasized by the process of translation/transliteration at the very core of reception: as a result, according to Miriam Leonard's militant analysis, acknowledging the sinews of appropriation may prove a decisive weapon against what Emmanuel Levinas calls "a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the other".<sup>[5]</sup>

At this point, Miriam Leonard raises a crucial question regarding the exemplification of Greekness: she wonders how to ensure an enduring emancipation from the most dubious genealogies of German Philhellenism which rejected otherness (mainly represented by the absent figure of women and Jews) at the confines of society and thought. Indeed, French post-war thinkers have frequently failed to confront "the politics of German Idealism and its obsessive return to the Greeks" (p.147) in the name of bare textuality, letting Plato and Sophocles speak for themselves. Acknowledging our complicity with the complex chain of reception and appropriation, Miriam Leonard links the issues of agency and historicity of the past with contemporary political engagement: "...the question of historicism is intimately bound up with the problem of agency and political identity. The interrogation of the historical could not be more integral to the French post-war interrogation of the political. This is why Lacan and Foucault's disagreement about how to read the *Symposium*, their disagreement about how to understand the historicity of the past, is at the same time a disagreement about the nature of political activism in the present" (p. 182).

Reading (post) structuralist involvement in antiquity as a crucial moment for addressing issues regarding the nature of ethical choice and political agency in democracies, Miriam Leonard's conclusion highlights the forgotten contribution of Sartre who endeavoured to seal the gap between ethics and politics: in his wartime reworking of the *Oresteia*, into his play *Les Mouches* (1943), Sartre was wishing to elucidate the contemporary preoccupation with conflicting "situation" and existential choice ("J'ai fait mon acte, Electre, et cet acte était bon").<sup>[6]</sup> Through a detailed analysis of the chasm between the power of reception and the reception of power, Miriam Leonard decisively reveals the hidden political agenda which lies at the core of the appropriation of Classics, ultimately conjuring up the crucial figure of the French committed intellectual: "the questions about the political which the post-war analyses of Oedipus, Antigone, and Socrates, brought into a new focus served the search for an alternative model of the *intellectuel engagé*" (p. 223) whose agency and identity determine the relationship between the citizen and the State.<sup>[7]</sup>

It could be argued that *Athens in Paris* does not do full justice to Riccardo di Donato's pioneering work, *Per una Antropologia Storica del Mondo Antico*,<sup>[8]</sup> an in-depth prosopographical analysis of the "Paris School" where twentieth-century encounters between ancient Greece and social studies are analysed as a

decisive moment in the intellectual history of Classics. Likewise, one may be tempted to re-evaluate her account of Greece and Rome acting as “a simple political model” and a mere “blueprint for the new world order” during the French Revolution (p. 13) in the light of Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s reflections on “la place de la Grèce dans l’imaginaire des hommes de la Révolution”.<sup>[9]</sup> However, these reservations are far surpassed by the book’s achievement as a richly researched contribution to the intellectual history of post-war France, through the exploration of the complex dialectic between classical scholarship and the political

## NOTES

[1] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 2003), ix.

[2] Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[3] Michel Foucault, “La Vérité et les Formes Juridiques”, in Daniel Defert and François Ewald, eds., *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988, ii 1970-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 542.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris : Galilée, 1974), p. 187.

[5] Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense”, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 91.

[6] Epilogue: “Reception and the Political”, p. 216

[7] On French and British classicists committed as intellectuals within the public arena, see Béatrice Blanchet, *La Toge et la Tribune: Engagements publics des classicistes français et britanniques au vingtième siècle* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004).

[8] Riccardo di Donato, *Per una Antropologia Storica del Mondo Antico* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1990).

[9] According to Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Si on lit les principaux orateurs de la Constituante, on constatera rapidement que l’Antiquité grecque est essentiellement un recueil d’exempla qui pouvaient parfaitement s’associer avec des exempla modernes” (*La Démocratie Grecque vue d’Ailleurs. Essais d’Historiographie Ancienne et Moderne*. Paris: Flammarion, 1990, p. 222). Trans. Janet Lloyd, *Politics Ancient and Modern* (Cambridge, UK : Polity Press and Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell, 1995), p. 151.

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