

*mis*Reading Plato

Continental and Psychoanalytic Glimpses Beyond the Mask

Edited by MATTHEW CLEMENTE, BRYAN J. COCCHIARA and WILLIAM J. HENDEL



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There are indeed, as those concerned with the mysteries say, many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchants are few.

Phaedo, 69d

7 “Halt!”: Socrates, Levinas, and the Divine Sign	115
ERIC R. SEVERSON	
8 Ignorance, Flattery, and Dialectic: Philosophical Rhetoric in Plato’s <i>Gorgias</i>	133
CHRISTINE ROJCEWICZ	
 PART III	
The Desire of Ethics	149
 9 Being and Seeming: On Socrates’ Ontological Humiliation of the Sophists	151
WILLIAM J. HENDEL	
 10 The Noble Taboo: Homoerotic Desire and Philosophic Inquiry	173
ANDREW J. ZEPPA	
 11 Division and Proto-Racialism in the <i>Statesman</i>	188
JOHN D. PROIOS	
 12 Hunting in Plato: On Noticing	207
DONALD N. BOYCE	
 PART IV	
Aesthetics as Final Philosophy	227
 13 The Philosophical Poet and the Poetic Philosopher	229
M. SAVERIO CLEMENTE IN DIALOGUE WITH RICHARD KEARNEY	
 14 In Search of the Natural Beginning	240
A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN MENDELSON AND JOHN SALLIS	

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Part IV

Aesthetics as Final Philosophy

The Philosophical Poet and the Poetic Philosopher

M. Saverio Clemente in Dialogue with Richard Kearney

The main point was that Socrates was trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet.

—*Symposium*, 209c–d

I went down to the Kearney residence from Boston College—the university that the eminent philosopher Richard Kearney and his wife, Anne, have called home for over two decades—on a gray fall afternoon. The autumnal leaves were unbinding themselves from their branches and fluttering skyward before spinning down in circles and settling on the sod. When I approached the door of their cozy New England house, I was greeted by a note directing me to walk around back. There, it said, I would find the philosopher reading and writing in the leisure of his garden. As I made my way around and let myself through a small wooden gate, I saw that the yard was enshadowed by an enormous tree. Not a plane tree, I thought. Perhaps a yew. Then I saw Richard before he saw me. He was making one final pass at his forthcoming novel, *Salvage*, before sending it off to the press. Anne was back on campus teaching art to undergrads. Her sketches and paintings, I observed through an open window, adorned every wall of the house. There was a bowl of clementines on the table next to Richard, and when he looked up, he lifted the bowl and offered me one. At first I refused, but, with his typical Irish hospitality, he insisted—“Eat.” And, as we peeled back the skins of the sweet, ripe fruit—he joined me in devouring one too—I found that there was something in the sharing of that simple meal that opened us both to the conversation that unfolds in the pages ahead.

of crossed over, books like *On Stories* and such, which bring in quite a bit of literature and examples from literature and film. But never experimental writing like Derrida's "Circonfession." Unreadable. It's a brilliant experiment, but, you know, it actually kind of schizophrenic because you have Geoffrey Bennington on the top of the page, trying to capture Derrida in systematic, speculative academic language, logistical, as serious as, you know, sort of computer code language. And then on the bottom, you've got Derrida's diaries and journal entries and that's confessional, experimental. But the two never really meet. And so I've always been fascinated by how Derrida experiments with speculative philosophy. But there are two parts of his brain—left brain, right brain—and I'm not sure they ever successfully come together. And this is true of a lot of philosophers. There was Heidegger the speculative philosopher and Heidegger the poet. But his poetry is awful. You know, Sartre did his philosophy and his novels, but they were separate. De Beauvoir, likewise. Separate. Merleau-Ponty always wanted to write a novel, wrote a novel, never published it, but it was there. That doesn't mean there isn't a certain literary quality in their work. You know, ditto for Irigaray and Lacan and even in Levinas there's a certain literary quality. But it is still, strictly speaking, relatively rigorous speculative philosophy throughout the continental tradition, from Husserl on. The analytics—they don't even try. The aesthetic, the religious, the ethical is dismissed. As Wittgenstein says, on those topics—*just silence*. Whereas continental philosophy does try to muddy the waters while keeping the two missionaries relatively parallel. But they are distinct, if not totally so. Hence my predilection for continental philosophy, because it does have a leaning toward the poetic and the literary, particularly when it comes to saying what you can't say. And that really is the inheritance from the nineteenth century, from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. But really this sort of literary philosophy begins with Plato. Maybe even Heraclitus, I don't know. But certainly with Plato there's already the mixing up of the literary and philosophical. And that's his genius. You only have to compare him to Aristotle, who on one level I'm much more partial to in terms of his conclusions—the primacy of touch over sight, for instance—compare him to Plato and you'll see the difference in artistic merit. You know, Plato in his conclusions is more spectral. The human being is the one who stands up, who looks up.

RK: There are two things I would say about this. One is the distinction between Platonic Dialogues and, for example, works of unambiguous fiction—say, Aristophanes and Sophocles, the comic and tragic. The difference is that dramatists make no truth claims. They're writing "as if" it were the case. And that "as if" makes all the difference. Nobody says, "Oh, Oedipus is right, Jocasta is wrong! Iphigenia has a better argument than Agamemnon." That doesn't matter. So clearly there *mythos* trumps *logos*. Not that there isn't a particular truth specific to or proper to *mythos*. As Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, *mythos* can get to some truths better than facts can. And in a sense, the *mythos* in Plato gets to the essential truths Aristotle is talking about. Plato's Dialogues, I think, don't make a claim to historical factual veracity. I mean, we don't know whether Socrates existed or any of these characters existed for that matter.

MC: Some of their names are just too on the nose to believe they did. Antiphon, for instance. Or Polemarchus. It would be like if a thief in real life was named "Steele."

RK: Right. But even if they did, no one is going to bring a libel case against Plato for saying that they said these things because we know we're entering into a dramatic dialogue. That said, while there is *mythos* as opposed to historical chronicle, there is still within the Dialogues a gesture at the primacy of *logos*. In other words, if you compare Sophocles to Socrates, there's *logos* and *mythos* in both, but in Sophocles the "as if" trumps the argument whereas in the Dialogues, I think, the opposite is true. *Mythos* is there. *Mythos* contaminates, to use Derrida's words—paradoxes and ironies and all that come and go—but nonetheless there are persuasive arguments being put forth. The reader is being asked to weigh the arguments and see whose are stronger. They are philosophical Dialogues; they are not fictional Dialogues. In Sophocles, it's "as if" we know. Oedipus, who is the hero and the protagonist, is living in ignorance. But Socrates is not living in ignorance and we as readers are not meant to believe that we know better than Socrates. The fatal flaws of the tragic actors are apparent in drama. But it seems to me that when we're reading Socrates, we don't say, "Ha! We know Socrates is wrong here and he doesn't know what's going on, but we know what's happened." No, with Socrates we kind of feel, well, if you say these things and make these claims then you're

totalitarian philosopher. Now, we're not the first to say that. Karl Popper, for instance, denounced Plato as a tyrant. So in a way that seems to me quite a dangerous route to go, to make the *polis* your work of art. You know, Hitler wanted to be a painter. He was thrown out of art school because he was terrible. So he actually created a terrible painting called the Third Reich and imposed it on an unsuspecting populace. Bad art. He got rid of all good art and replaced it with his vision and it was monstrous. So I think that's kind of dangerous at one level. At another level, where I would be sympathetic to that reading, would be that there is a *technē*, an art of making in politics—that can't be denied. I'd be interested to know the word Plato used in Greek. You see if he's saying that law too is a creation of the human mind and imagination, I'm with him. I think he's right—that's Kant. Everything is the result of the productive imagination, according to Kant, because it's a mixing of the sensible and the intelligible. And so in that sense, you could say, well, Plato is already, in that extraordinary little passage, anticipating the productive imagination. You know, there's the rational imagination and then there's the artistic imagination, the logical and aesthetic. In that way, it's a bit like deconstruction. Derrida says deconstruction doesn't begin with *Writing and Difference*. It begins with Plato and Aristotle. It's already there in the text. By the same token, the productive imagination doesn't begin with Kant and Shelley and Wordsworth and Coleridge, it's already there in Plato. So it would make sense to find traces of that in the Dialogues, traces which deconstruct the traditional, Platonic, metaphysical reading, the hierarchical reading.

MC: It's interesting to go back to where you started in your response—an idea we touched on a bit earlier as well—which is how many philosophers and politicians are failed artists. Plato, of course, burned all his dramas after meeting Socrates. And so, I'm interested to push a little further on this—

RK: Churchill painted 100 paintings.

MC: Yes. There's so many examples. Nietzsche composed music and envied Wagner, wanted to be Wagner. Boethius couldn't stop writing poetry even when Lady Philosophy denounced the muses as whores. The *Confessions* is Augustine's *Aeneid*. So we see this in philosophers and political leaders alike—in the statesman, in the tyrant—we see the artistic impulse, which is incapable maybe of living up to what the

ideas accessible. You and I teach philosophy to undergrads. You begin the semester with the Dialogues, you don't begin with Aristotle. Even teaching the *Poetics*—it's impossible. You can't read the *Poetics*. It's just dead on the page. It's dry. The dry rocks of mathematics, as Joyce says in *Ulysses*. So we need Plato and Plato's use of the rhetorical, the imaginative for philosophical purposes. It's true of Pascal. It's true of Montaigne. It's true of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. It's true of Sartre, even though he kept his novels, strictly speaking, separate. When he writes in *Being and Nothingness* about bad faith, those descriptions are quasi literary.

MC: Sartre's always telling stories. He's describing the waiter. He's searching for Pierre in the café.

RK: Yes, exactly. So, that's the point I want to make about communication and accessibility. If you want to be read, write philosophy in a literary way. Not as literature, because if you're trying to do that then you become a novelist.

MC: Or a bad poet.

RK: Or a bad poet and a bad philosopher. Now, back to the other thing. How does one distinguish between a philosophical poet and a poetic philosopher? I want to come back to my distinction again between telling it as true and telling it *as if* it were true. In philosophy, no matter how poetic, there is a philosophical claim. In poetry . . . I mean, if you go to Dostoevsky and say, "You're wrong! Ivan's arguments are false!" he'd say, "I agree. I'm not Ivan." "No, but Alyosha's arguments are false and Dmitri's too." "I agree. I'm Alyosha. I'm not Dmitri." But a philosopher, for the most part—maybe Plato is kind of at the edge here—does not say, "I didn't write that. That's not me." A philosopher who makes an argument and signs his name to it is responsible for what he says. A philosopher has a responsibility to say what he or she means. Now, some philosophers will try to get away with it. Lacan, for instance, says things like "Well, it's not me speaking but my unconscious speaking through me." But Lacan developed a whole system—the symbolic, the real, the imaginary—which he signed his name to. Just as Barthes signed *Death of the Author*. If you said to him, "Hey, Roland, what do you mean death of the author?" and he said, "Well, that's not me who wrote that but my character"—you'd feel cheated. Because, you know, you signed your name to that and made an argument. So stand by it.

from philosophy, at least minimally, that we don't expect from literature. Now, Plato, to go back to your original point, by mixing up the poetic and philosophical, allows for more gray area—but it's not anything goes. Not every character is equal in their truth claims. Even if Alcibiades—you know, the poetic, the Bacchic, the drunkard, the artist—even if he bursts into the *Symposium* and interrupts the philosophical dialogue and upends the entire conversation, well, the text doesn't end with him.

MC: It ends with Socrates.

RK: It ends with Socrates. Socrates is the only one who's still awake. The poets have fallen off to a drunken sleep. The philosopher outlasts his rivals. Socrates alone is left.

As the conversation wound down, Anne entered the garden. She was done teaching for the day and asked Richard if he might fetch us a little wine. He excused himself to grab a bottle from the kitchen, and Anne and I began discussing the works of one of her favorite writers, Marcel Pagnol. As we spoke, she reached across the table and helped herself to a clementine.