The question of modernity, and a fortiori of postmodernity, cannot be posed except in an explicit relation to the past it creates. Apollinaire in his 1912 ode to the triumph of the future, “Zone,” cannot sing the glories of the modern except by envisioning Paris as a vast pastoral landscape with the Eiffel Tower as a shepherdess and the bridges across the Seine as her bawling flock. Even this futurist profession of faith is not intelligible without reference to the conventions of pastoral, to Vergil and Theocritus, to Hellenistic sophistication. We may have had enough of living in the past, but as Sartre recognizes, there is no future that does not project its own past, and no past that does not imply a relation to the present and the future.

Given the inescapability of the past, given the necessary antiquity that pervades even our modern machines, as Apollinaire himself reminds us, the question remains of how we should be oriented to the past. Is the past the authorization of the present? Should we seek in it the models of our behavior? In Victorian England, schoolboys read Cicero and Horace to prepare them to administer the empire. In the antebellum American South, the sons of South Carolina planters read Thucydides at the newly opened Carolina College (later the University of South Carolina, my home institution) while their slaves bearing names such
as Brutus, Cassius, and Caesar died in the rice and indigo plantations
of the tidewaters round Charleston. In Napoleonic France, the first con-
sul of the newly established French republic crowned himself emperor
in explicit imitation of Augustus. The models of antiquity do not neces-
sarily, in and of themselves, always have a lot to recommend them.

It is important, therefore, that we not delude ourselves about the
inherently liberatory nature of the classical tradition. The allegory of
the present in terms of the past that produced such powerful pieces of
Resistance drama as Sartre’s Les mouches also produced the far more
ambivalent, if not directly “fascist,” Antigone of Anouilh, as well as
Mussolini’s experiments with both tragic form and with rewriting the
Roman empire in blood. Yet the power that these appropriations tap
into is undeniable. They recognize that the past not only defines us, but
is defined by us. And mere ignorance cannot free us from its grip—in
spite of many of my fellow citizens’ best efforts.

The postmodern turn to antiquity, then, is an effort to find a past
that is usable for the needs of the present. It does not seek legitimation,
but difference. Lacan’s reading of the Antigone asks us not to become
like her, not to die in the tomb, but to pursue an ethics that, in going
beyond the pleasure principle, also goes beyond good and evil, beyond
the self-satisfied relation to the present that sees it as the fulfillment of
the past (Shepherdson 1995: 127). It asks us to recognize and not cede
on our desire through a deliberate investigation of that desire’s neces-
sary relation to the Other by means of a Socratic engagement with
its ontological grounds.

The Other and the past it incarnates, then, are not in opposition to
our subjectivity, nor are they a mirror that forever reflects ourselves
back to ourselves. They represent neither the object that must be over-
come, eliminated, or sublimated, nor—what amounts to the same
thing—the mere reflection and confirmation of our self-identity. Rather
the Other is always the intimate other, that which makes us who we are
without ever being assimilable to our identity. The Other thus becomes
a way ultimately of refashioning the self through a recognition of the
self’s own constitutive emptiness, its primal lack, the Aristophanic
cut that drives it to seek an ever absent completion.

The past of postmodernism is, then, the past of the Derridean
trace: the mark or incision that both institutes the ontic, the entity on
which identity is predicated, and forever separates it from itself. The
first and in many ways fullest theorization of that mark, and at the
same time the first and fullest theorization of the desire to efface, con-
tain, and master it, can be found, according to Derrida, in the dialectic
of Plato and Platonism. *Philo-sophia*, the desire for wisdom, is precisely the self-conscious desire to master the trace, to place a limit on division, and thus to insure that the letter always arrives at its destination, in the full realization that such a desire can never reach fulfillment except in its own self-extinction. The practice of *philia*, for Derrida, i.e., the pursuit of friendship and shared being, is dependent upon this practice of *philo-sophia*: the self-conscious practice of both collection and division; the refusal to accept the decreed range of the ontic as the limits of our political, economic, and erotic life, and the simultaneous refusal to annihilate difference in the name of a more primal unity whose very existence and articulation must assume the marks, cuts, and divisions it would seek to deny.

In this light, Foucault’s final turn to ancient philosophy in general, and Plato in particular, is neither surprising nor announces a major break. It is rather part of an ongoing and productive dialogue. This is a dialogue that is pursued on a variety of levels and is extraordinarily rich. On the first level, it is the dialogue that defines itself as the ongoing dialectical interchange that constitutes philosophy in the West, which regardless of national tradition sees its origins in Greece and in the figures of Socrates and Plato. On a second level, it is a dialogue with the whole of French culture, which defines itself to this day explicitly in terms of its classical heritage and which in its highest formal educational institution, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, still features a Plato-centered syllabus. On a third level, it is a dialogue with the previous generation of modernist philosophers and writers, who not only couched their theatrical work in terms of the models of antiquity, but who also explicitly sought to define an ethics and practice of the subject, which, like Foucault’s, was post-Nietzschean and so beyond good and evil. Finally, and this is the most intense level, but one which is not fully comprehensible without the other three, it is a focused and precise dialogue with Lacan and Derrida about specific Platonic texts and their relation to the earliest manifestations of our contemporary understandings of thought, philosophy, ethics, and the subject.

This book has been an effort both to uncover this dialogue and to think, in a sustained fashion, its implications. The study of classics and the classical tradition has a choice to make (which is not exactly new) and an examination of the postmoderns’ relation to classical antiquity can help us think through that choice. Will the study of the ancient world be hagiographic and self-congratulatory or will it be genealogical and self-critical? The Platonic model adopted by the postmoderns clearly points to the latter.
An authentic spiritual practice, as Plato tells us, will never consist in a strictly imitative relation, which ultimately seeks to domesticate the other by rendering it a model of the same, but will use the testing and the probing of the other to engage in a sustained and protracted *elenchus* with the self. The obligations we have to self and other will then be seen not only as the products of our desire, as Diotima tells us, but also as that which is not to be ceded. Foucault’s reading of the *Alcibiades*, as a response to Plato and to Lacan’s and Derrida’s own powerful readings of the Platonic text, is an example of how such a critical practice of the self’s relation to itself, and thence to the other, might be undertaken with the requisite rigor, diligence, and care.