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It’s always a good time for a book about kairos, rhetoric’s most time-oriented concept. But the present moment, as our shared world reorders itself in particularly drastic ways, is especially fine for Bernard Alan Miller’s Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm. Miller offers, via Gorgias and Heidegger, a world-view that underscores our caught-upness in language and accepts kairos as language’s transformation of the world in and as us. Readers will probably agree with Miller that, by contrast, Plato’s version of kairos scrabbles too desperately for mastery of language, or that other “right-timing” rhetorical readings of kairos overemphasize an idea of the rhetor as sovereign subject, swaying audiences with just-in-time delivery. Whether compositionists are prepared to open up to the trickster kairos that Miller discerns in Gorgias and Heidegger, however, is an open question.

On the whole, and despite real difficulties on the Heidegger side of things, they should. Miller asks us to accept a vision of the Gorgian kairos as marking the moment and mode of our being overcome by language, such that we in turn serve as conduits for language’s overcoming of others and itself (316-18). In this, the central insight motivating Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm is as crucial as ever, and deserving of the deep engagement Miller requests of us: language is both greater than and what we are. In tracing out what this means for rhetoric, returning always to kairos as a rhetorical term of art, Miller takes up a host of other key terms, Greek and otherwise: physis, mystery, xa, racial memory, doxa, Augenblick, and Dasein, not least of all. In succession, each comes to identify with some or all of the others before finding new definition in opposition to them; along the way, doxa re-emerges (not unproblematically) as glory, physis presents as the linguistic upsurge of being that allows Dasein and Being to be differentially together, and language reigns over and within all as dynastes: logos as the trickster personification of both word and reason, “the terrible secret of the irrational in the flesh” (243). Even—and perhaps especially—for compositionists wary of rhetorical theory without a clear pedagogical payoff, Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm is a valuable read.

Those only interested in the concept of kairos will be especially well-served by chapters 2 and 3, “The Platonic Kairos” and “The Gorgian Kairos.” These perform important conceptual work in situating kairos between philosophical and rhetorical traditions, suggesting that neither has yet come quite to terms with the kairotic implications of Gorgias’ vision of language as dynastes, as a ruler. To really grasp these implications, the unfurling of Miller’s entire text is perhaps as important as its conclusions, but the reader pressed
for time (or indifferent to Heidegger) might turn directly from chapter 3 to chapter 6 (“Paradox and the Power of the Possible: Kairos as the Mark of the Trickster”), the last in Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm. Where Miller is concerned in early chapters to draw out clearly, in more or less hermeneutic fashion, the thinking of Plato and Gorgias—with the result that the pacing of those chapters, while moderate, is rarely challenging—by the close of the text he has worked himself into something of a frenzy. So many terms are buzzing about, partially identified with and partially disjunct from or even logically antecedent to one another, that chapter 6 seems authentically to have submitted to language’s calling. In Heidegger’s idiom, which Miller follows throughout, the ekstatic frenzy of the text in this final chapter bears witness to the Saying of language. The result is a sense of or feeling for kairos as language’s appropriation of us, its supposed users. In opening and listening to this appropriation of us by a movement internal to language itself, we partake of a power as much magical as technical, a world-naming and world-changing power that moves us from the everydayness of given situations to the authenticity of new encounters with the linguistic limits of our being.

But what, the practical-minded will ask, does that mean? Miller himself is short on examples, though his readings of authors ranging from Heidegger and Paul Tillich, to N. Scott Momaday and his own student Carry Moccasin, are generally compelling. To take a timely instance of the basic point, consider the Occupy movement. Something today has changed, if we view this from the perspective Miller details, within the flows of language (the workings of financial capitalism certainly count as “language” in this capacious conception). It now makes sense to thousands of people, perhaps even millions, to hold strikes without union leadership, to occupy foreclosed homes and businesses, to demand new and revised constitutions; this making-sense is at once deeply linguistic and ineluctably physical—the forces of doxa are internally divided, such that doxa begets para-doxa of its own accord and in thus begetting calls forth new names for Being. “Occupy” is the name for kairos’ new making-sense, to which we submit more or less poetically, with greater or lesser piety regarding the name itself, but with a certain helplessness vis-a-vis the phenomenon inseparable and even indistinct from that name. More prosaically, in the composition classroom, Miller’s trickster kairos might be the everyday reordering of selfhood accomplished in students’ (and instructors’) listening in ever-novel ways to the always-yet-to-be-invented norms of academic writing and thought. Indeed, I can imagine an uptake of Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm that returns to and reinvigorates both the critical reading and expressive writing sides of the old Bartholomae-Elbow debate.

I mentioned, however, that Miller’s text has a Heidegger problem. What are any of us to do with Heidegger’s Nazism, now well established as to depth and significance (see, for instance, Rockmore or Faye)? It seems a quiet but broad consensus has emerged to treat Heidegger’s Nazism as distinct from his philosophy, and Miller is only too glad of this, devoting two light paragraphs to circumnavigating the matter at the close of the introduction to Rhetoric’s
Earthly Realm and concluding, “I will speak no more of Heidegger’s politics” (33). The opposing view, held by an ever smaller but still vocal minority, may be summed up in a single abrupt statement: “But he was a Nazi!” Neither stance is satisfactory, and though I would rather not need to speak here of Heidegger's Nazism, focusing instead only on Miller’s very fine—excellent, even—treatise on kairos, the strain of Heidegger’s philosophical thought most conducive to his Nazism presents a real difficulty for Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm. Chapters 4 and 5, “Das Sein, Dasein, and Doxa: Attending to the Way of Heidegger’s Thought” and “Heidegger and the Gorgian Kairos,” are thus on the one hand a useful primer to Heidegger’s thinking on language, with significant cross-cultural resonance and real payoff for our understanding of Gorgias; on the other hand, however, they also put forward uncritically a Heideggerian nativism that too readily sets the mystery of Being equivalent with language’s Saying to and for a given Volk or people.

One way to grasp the difficulty here is through Miller’s equation, following Heidegger and putatively Gorgias as well, of doxa with glory. As Miller has it, doxa is at once “the sheer presence of things believed” (55) and “the past as presence … events instilling reverence and awe from which we draw life in a process sufficiently intense to transfigure particular times and places” (188). As such, it can be read together with the Vietnamese notion of xa (the idea of a village as “village” both is and means life-world [149-150]) or the idea of “racial memory” as the simultaneous story and reality of Native American history in its undyingness—and Miller is to be commended for his cross-cultural aspirations. On this view, all doxa contains within itself the impetus toward its own overcoming, toward para-doxa. On the one hand, then, as Being itself structured as the language of a people, a Volk, doxa is at once the forceful and absolutely physical self-transcendence of physis, of Being, and the glory of a particular people’s listening to the authentically linguistic character of Being. On the other hand, doxa is necessarily also a trickster of sorts, and it is the very moment of its turning on itself that Miller calls kairos.

Thus far, well and good, if a little complex. But we must ask—as Miller ought to have done—what makes “a people” plausibly the anchor of language? (Walter Benjamin, for instance, sees the essence and anchor of language not in a Volk but in translation itself, in the relation between languages [70-82].) What defines “a people” in this schema? And by what right can doxa, even as the materiality of a people’s beliefs may provoke an encounter with the event of language as such, be equated with glory when it is equally the case that doxa often provokes no awareness at all of language’s status as dynastes? These are questions Miller does not answer, but we know well the phrase that hangs over Heidegger’s responses to all three: Blut und Boden (201).

All this points once more to the need, when engaging closely with Heidegger’s thought, to attend to the political possibilities carried in that thought. Indeed, Miller might have done just that had his emphasis on listen-
ing with Heidegger to Being brought him also to Krista Ratcliffe’s excellent *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. This particular lack of listening on Miller’s part should not, however, stop compositionists and other rhetorical theorists from turning to his wide-ranging text for a deeper and broader understanding of *kairos*. In short, though harboring a troubling political *doxa*, *Rhetoric’s Earthly Realm* remains an ambitious, consistently engaging, and useful text, deserving of a wide readership.

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**Works Cited**


