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Book Review

Reading Plato, by Thomas Szlezák. Translated by Graham Zanker. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. ix-xii +137 pp., \$26.95 (Paperback edition), ISBN 0-415-18984-5.

Thomas A. Szlezák's *Reading Plato* originally appeared in 1993. Graham Zanker's recent (1999) translation makes Szlezák's work more broadly accessible to the English reading audience. This book is a concise and generally persuasive account of the pedagogical nature of Plato's written work and its relationship with Plato's unwritten teachings. As one would expect from a prominent member of the Tübingen school, Szlezák takes the dramatic and dialogic dimensions of the dialogues as central to any philosophical interpretation of their meaning, but this meaning is not found solely within the textual domain of the dialogues themselves. Rather, the dialogues must also be read esoterically. We must read them with an eye toward uncovering Plato's orally transmitted philosophy. This oral teaching was promulgated within the confines of the Academy. Within this interpretive frame of reference, Szlezák hopes "to reach an interpretation of Plato's philosophical writing which can endure in the face of Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*" (xii). He argues that only when we understand Plato's sense of both written and spoken philosophical discourse can we ascertain the true philosophical meaning Plato intended to convey.

Given the broad scope, the vast implications, and the polarized views in the abundant secondary literature, the brevity of this study is remarkable. The book has a preface, twenty-seven short chapters, a brief set of notes, a concise bibliography which helpfully directs the reader to important sources, particularly in the German and Italian scholarship, an extensive index of passages cited, and a biographical note about the author. There are no line drawings.

Szlezák begins by describing the multi-faceted process of reading Plato. He discusses the joy of reading Plato, a Plato "who has never lacked for readers" (xi). He also evocatively describes how the reader participates in a living relationship with the dialogues and receives insight from them as a result. Indeed, Szlezák believes that "we should react to Plato's dramas with our entire being and not only with our analytical reasoning" (5). He nicely conveys both the philosophical and the aesthetic delight of reading Plato: "For with no other thinker is the form of the representation so directly relevant to the subject-matter as with him; the correct understanding of the dialogue-form and the correct understanding of the Platonic conception of philosophy are interdependent" (4). Szlezák elaborates further: "Plato tells us with all clarity that his philosophy demands the whole human being. Intellectual capability alone is insufficient; what is required is an inner relationship between the thing which is to be conveyed and the soul to which it is to be conveyed. Anybody who is not prepared to enter upon a process of inner transformation is not entitled to know the full solution either" (7). Unfortunately, the importance of this inner transformation of soul that reading

Plato demands of us is often overlooked in our modern secular academic world. Szlezák's insistence upon its centrality offers an important contribution to contemporary discussions about how to read Plato. Since so much is at stake in the process of reading Plato, "[t]he question is therefore what form the active participation of the reader should take and what part his spontaneous contribution may have in the construction of meaning" (5).

Szlezák then briefly discusses how the process of reading Plato becomes subverted by the reader's mistaken attitudes about the process of reading these ancient texts. Szlezák's treatment of the problem of historicism and interpretation is another real strength of the book. Often, contemporary interpreters of Plato primarily focus on the nuances of the Platonic texts, either the dramatic details of the text or the arguments contained within them. Often, one overlooks the obvious fact that what a text itself is has undergone radical change. Many contemporary readers of Plato forget that textual interpretation and the process of reading has changed enormously since the time that Plato so artfully constructed these texts. Szlezák's book forces contemporary readers to confront their preconceived assumptions about the process of reading and about the nature of philosophy itself. Szlezák asks us to acknowledge Plato's "concept of philosophy which is fundamentally different from twentieth-century values, but for that very reason capable of complementing and enriching them" (10).

Szlezák's treatment of the prevalence of the "motif of concealment and the intentional withholding of knowledge" in the Platonic dialogues is very helpful (12). His reading is persuasive both on the textual level, where he analyzes the dramatic interplay between Socrates and his various interlocutors, and on the extra-textual level as he articulates the manner in which the dialogues point beyond what they themselves reveal. His use of this theme balances the historicist claims about perspective and interpretation and the universal dimensions of Platonic philosophy. Similarly, his emphasis on the importance of the narrative frame in dialogues like the *Euthydemus* and the *Phaedo* and the importance of imaginary conversational partners like Diotima reveals a careful attention to the deep dramatic structure of the texts. His attention brings to light aspects of this structure that are often overlooked in the secondary literature. Interpretive insights like these make *Reading Plato* a very worthwhile study even if one does not want to follow Szlezák in his insistence that we move beyond the confines of the Platonic text to ascertain Plato's true meaning.

To help illuminate the nature of the Platonic texts and the Platonic conception of philosophy toward which they gesture, Szlezák next offers a list of seven characteristics that are found in Plato's dialogues. First, the dialogues depict conversations. Second, the conversations are historically situated. Third, someone leads the discussion. Fourth, the discussion leader speaks with one person at a time and fifth, can answer any and all objections. Sixth, the intensity of the conversation increases "almost jerkily onto a qualitatively higher stage." Seventh, the discussion leader "refers to future themes" rather than making an "organic conclusion" (18-19). He argues that "taken together, these characteristics are the expression of a particular approach to communicating philosophical knowledge and thus also indirectly of a particular concept of philosophy" (18). He argues further that the anti-esoteric interpreters "can offer only a partial explanation for these characteristics" (18). These characteristics are important because they link the philosophical process of reading the dialogues with the process of moving beyond them philosophically. Szlezák argues that these characteristics of the dialogues help us recognize that the texts lead beyond themselves to the thoughts of Plato that he promulgated within the confines of the Academy. These characteristics

shape Szlezák's treatment of the dialogues throughout the book.

Szlezák gives a concise accounting of the anti-esoteric view and the esoteric position. He is correct to argue that these ways of reading the text should not be viewed as polar opposites, rather one really needs to choose “between two forms of esotericism: in opposition to esotericism inherent within the text- it could also be called ‘hermeneutic’ esotericism- we have the esotericism which points beyond the dialogue, or the ‘historical’ esotericism: it is based on the historical reality of a doctrine of principles which was never set down in writing- the doctrine of principles which Aristotle prefers to cite in his criticism of Plato in the *Metaphysics*” (31). Within this context, Szlezák addresses the important question of Plato's intended audience. Here, one might hope that Szlezák would take into account ancient reading and publication practices. Nonetheless, surely he is right to say that different dialogues were written for different rhetorical purposes, and that in the end “Plato writes for everyone” (27). Szlezák turns from this modern perspective on textual hermeneutics to discuss ancient theories of textual interpretation in Chapter Ten. Szlezák refers to both Euripides and Isocrates to establish that a text can be read on multiple levels in the ancient mindset as well. He also argues that Plato alludes to this possibility himself in both the *Charmides* and the *Protagoras*.

Despite the brevity of the book, Szlezák covers a broad range of dialogues. The wide-ranging treatment of Plato's work illustrates Szlezák's view that it is necessary to have a comprehensive reading of the dialogues. However, this broad treatment of Plato does not come at the expense of detailed interpretation of individual passages in the dialogues. For example, in Chapter Eleven, he attends to the interpretation of Simonides in the *Protagoras* to illustrate how Socrates alters or improves upon Simonides' meaning in the very act of interpreting the poem; “It is as if Plato, by means of this first detailed literary interpretation in European intellectual history, wished to say that interpretation is necessarily misinterpretation, at least partially” (37). Szlezák rightly sees that this is not Plato's primary argument about the process of interpretation. Rather, he sees Plato as making a “contrast between the intermediary nature of all writing and the directness of oral philosophical inquiry” (38). Chapter Eighteen offers a detailed reading of the importance of anamnesis in the *Euthydemus* and Chapter Twenty provides a challenging account of Alcibiades' failure to understand the higher levels of Socratic teaching about virtue (91-93). While one could cite *Symposium* 215b-216b, 218d, and 219b-e to challenge Szlezák's claim that Alcibiades “knows nothing of the more constructive philosophical logoi which lead higher up on the way to the *archai*” (92-93), it is true that Alcibiades' soul remains untouched by Socrates' instruction on some fundamental level. At least in this sense, Szlezák correctly views Alcibiades as “Plato's example for showing that ‘opening’ cannot be successful without explicit instruction on the decisive philosophical issues” (93).

Within this comprehensive framework, certain passages take on special prominence for Szlezák's overall project, for example *Phaedrus* 274b-278e. Szlezák explains the importance of the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*: “Only this clue of Plato's own can give us the guarantee that we are not privileging modern habits of thought and prejudices over Plato's own intentions” (103). In Chapters Twelve through Fourteen, he attends to the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Szlezák focuses our attention on the comparison that Socrates makes between the ritual practice of planting an Adonis garden and serious farming (41-44). His attention to the dramatic detail and the implications he draws out of this comparison is masterful. He uncovers the tacit knowledge that the original

audience of a Platonic dialogue would have possessed. He explains: “Planting in the Adonis garden always meant ringing out only a part of the seed. It is only because the ritual is no longer familiar to us and because we, as children of the bookish twentieth century, have irrational prejudices against Plato’s esoteric position, that we get on the wrong path of interpretation” (43). Szlezák concludes: “Plato never thought of entrusting his entire philosophy to writing” (43). He reiterates the point later in the book: “The existence of an oral philosophy behind the dialogues is thus above all a deduction which results conclusively from the application of the critique of writing to Plato’s own written works” (103).

Given this view, a natural question arises about the relationship between the philosopher and his writings. Szlezák takes up this question in Chapter Thirteen. He describes the nature of the philosopher: “What marks out the philosopher is a completely altered attitude to reality- only he is capable of a knowledge of the Ideas” (49). With this transformed knowledge, the philosopher also knows that teaching these ideas to others requires the greatest care. He argues that this care cannot be achieved with written discourse. To assume that Plato would solely depend on written discourse as his primary mode of transmission “overlooks the fact that selecting the ‘appropriate soul,’ which for Plato is the prerequisite of significant philosophical instruction—in another circumstance the philosopher will remain silent—is fundamentally impossible when writing is used” (83). Szlezák argues that it is “only if we accept that Plato’s author must indeed behave like the sensible farmer can we interpret the definition of the philosopher in the critique of writing in a way which is free of contradictions” (50).

In the following two chapters, Szlezák discuss the meaning of *timiôtera*, the more valuable things, and how the dialogues offer support for each other. In discussing the meaning of *timiôtera*, he turns to passages in the *Politicus*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and to Aristotle. He asserts that “no member of the Early Academy or the Peripatos would have had any doubt that the Platonic ‘things of higher value’ (*timiôtera*) are to be related to philosophical subject matter and that they owe their status to the way the arguments for them are traced back to the arche, the source of all status and value” (53). Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen explore the limits of philosophical communication and how the dialogues indicate their inability to transmit the highest forms of truth, “the more complex the subject, the greater the probability that uncomprehending people will unjustifiably dismiss it, a situation which the author cannot ward off in his absence” (62). Here, Szlezák returns to the importance of understanding Aristotle’s view of Plato’s teachings. He argues that Aristotle’s lengthy study with Plato and his historical proximity to him “cannot be ignored and that attempts to get rid of Aristotle’s evidence of Plato’s ‘unwritten teachings’ are doomed to failure” (63). To strengthen his account of the importance of Aristotle’s evidence, he redirects our attention to deliberate “gaps” in Plato’s accounting of the highest principles in the dialogues. Some of these gaps are indications of the unwritten teachings that we can adequately understand “only if the tradition outside Plato provides us with a key to it” (66). However, we are not completely dependent on Aristotle. Other gaps “refer in a concrete way to sharply defined theories and that they are not essentially puzzles to be solved from within the text, but refer directly to philosophical conclusions presented elsewhere” (67). Szlezák explains that many of these gaps and allusions involve Plato’s understanding of the nature of the soul. Chapters 18 and 19 explore the complex intertextual relationship between the different accounts of soul offered in the *Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Euthydemus*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Timaeus*.

Szlezák then briefly describes many of the dramatic techniques prevalent in the dialogues. He makes no claim to be comprehensive in his treatment. Nonetheless, his discussion of continuous plot, interruptions in the narrative, change of discussion-partner, irony, myth, monologue and dialogue with imaginary characteristics in the dialogues is excellent and leaves the reader wanting more. For example, his awareness of the importance of the narrative frame and its interruption as a dramatic device has not been sufficiently noted in the Platonic literature. Similarly, the contemporary reader does well to heed his cautionary remarks about irony: “As versatile as Plato’s use of irony may be, it is none the less a method of presentation which is of limited range for him. It is of decisive importance that we do not confuse Platonic irony with the all-pervasive Romantic irony, which is a specifically modern phenomenon. Romantic irony is not directed towards a specific opponent, but against everything and anything; it penetrates the point of view of the ironist himself, in fact the ironist in particular; in essence, it is self-irony, and its most important function is to leave nothing, absolutely nothing, untouched which might escape ironic treatment” (94). Many contemporary readers have lost the ability to believe that anything escapes the ironic perspective. Szlezák is correct to remind us that for Plato, “it is evident that irony stops short of what he calls the ‘divine’ realm of the eternally existent, and of the ‘divine philosophia’ as the attempt to grasp the realm of the eternally existent noetically” (94).

The final chapters explore the difference between esotericism and secrecy and Plato’s concept of philosophy and the overall objectives of the dialogues. He draws a very helpful distinction between secrecy and esoteric reserve. The fate of banishment and the symbolic death that Hippasus met for revealing the Pythagorean teachings exemplifies an attitude of secrecy, which “is based on compulsion” (114). Simply put, “secrecy means keeping any knowledge which privileges the group in the group’s possession in order to maintain its strength: knowledge kept in secret is thus a means to an end. Esotericism is a requirement of reason, not the result of compulsion by a group” (114). Rather, the subject matter, philosophy itself, demands it. Szlezák acknowledges that this restriction of knowledge unsettles many people with modern egalitarian leanings. However, he implores us to transcend our limited historical perspective. His book does help the modern reader overcome the historical prejudices that can hinder an appreciation of the insights of the Tübingen school. One might wish for more development of these provocative themes. Again, *Reading Plato* text leaves this reader wanting more. Perhaps though, that is part of its rhetorical function. *Reading Plato* illustrates its argument about the ultimate insufficiency of any text, even Plato’s own.

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