

READING AND WRITING PLATO

by CHARLES L. GRISWOLD

WHY DID PLATO WRITE *dialogues*? How should his dialogues be read (does the literary form matter, for example, to our getting at the heart of what Plato is saying)? These questions are now familiar in contemporary Plato scholarship, and their answers—which undoubtedly are interconnected—are the subject of lively and fascinating exploration. Any doubt that Platonic studies flourishes would quickly be put to rest by the four books under review here.

It was once thought that attention to the “dramatic dimension” of Plato’s literary-philosophical productions was the province of two much despised schools of thought: “the Straussians,” and “the Continentals.” The first of these was viewed as advocating a dangerous combination of esotericism (the idea that somehow Plato’s meaning is not on the surface of the dialogues, but concealed in them, as though they were a cryptogram), elitism (the idea that the true Plato is only available to

The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues, by Ruby Blondell; 452 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, \$55.00; *Plato’s Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and Myth in the Symposium*, by Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan; 266 pp. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004, \$25.00; *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* by Drew Hyland; ix & 202 pp. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, \$44.00; *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*, by Debra Nails; 414 pp. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002, \$75.00.

“the few”—such as the Straussians, according to themselves anyhow), and unphilosophical and dilettantish meanderings about this or that literarily cast “teaching.” Straussian hermeneutics was thought to open the way to unprincipled appeals to irony whenever it suited the interpreter, so that any text could end up saying pretty much whatever the interpreter wished for it to say, including the opposite of what the surface of the dialogue appeared to say. And further, it was thought (perhaps in a manner at odds with the “unprincipled interpretation” charge) that the Straussians’ mode of “taking into account” the dramatic context—and in particular their contextualization of claims made in the dialogues such that this or that claim gets “explained” as a rhetorical gesture addressed by character X to character Y in context Z, a gesture whose content and validity, so to speak, are limited to that exchange—robs the dialogue of its philosophical content. Hence the worry that Straussian hermeneutics leads to skepticism about the possibility of philosophy itself—philosophy understood precisely in the way that it is regularly spoken of in the Platonic dialogues, namely as the effort to transcend perspective and partiality and to grasp through argument the essence of the matter as such. To cap it off, there is the background suspicion that Straussians are politically conservative, in a way that is somehow connected with their interpretation of Plato.

There is more than a kernel of truth in the view that Straussians have insisted on the hermeneutic importance of the dialogue form, taking their cue from Strauss’s own remarks in such texts as *The City and Man*. He did argue that Plato’s meaning is not on the surface (and thus in some sense is esoteric), that it was intended by Plato to be available to “the few” while not debunking the beliefs of “the many,” and that Plato is an ironist. There is also warrant for the worries about unprincipled interpretation, as well as about the reduction of philosophy to a sort of literary sensibility substituting for genuine philosophical argument (where, after all, are Strauss’s arguments for any philosophical position, whether or not about a Platonic “teaching”?). And it is by and large true, so far as I can tell, that his self-identified followers are politically conservative (in the contemporary American sense), and in a way somehow tied to their interpretation of Plato.

I myself find Strauss’s interpretation of Plato to be deeply problematic both in its substance and its method (I put aside the issue of the political conservatism of Strauss’s followers, a “teaching” I also find objectionable). And while I join the authors of the four books under review in thinking that in *some* sense it is true that we cannot understand

Plato's work by separating its "form" from its "content," polemical uses of crude labels such as "Straussian" obscure careful critique rather than further it. It is a hammer used to silence, and an effective one at that, most often (though not always) deployed in contexts where nobody has actually read Strauss's work. Most importantly for present purposes, the interpretive importance of the dialogue form has many advocates, both ancient and modern, most of whom have nothing at all to do with Strauss. The unlinking of the label "Straussian" from the emphasis on the importance of the dialogue form when interpreting Plato—which unlinking is now complete or nearly complete—is a welcome development in Anglo-American Plato research. This is not to deny, of course, that one could seek to interpret Plato in a way that is inspired by Strauss or by self-identified Straussians, or for that matter, to analyze Strauss's approach with normal scholarly objectivity.¹

As already mentioned, a second group advocating the interpretive importance of the dialogue form was thought to find its home in "Continental philosophy." Why? Presumably because "the Continentals" are supposed to be more attuned to the rhetorical and literary self-presentation of philosophy, and because they are (the view goes) insufficiently analytical and focused on argument. The ill repute in which such figures as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer—not to mention Derrida, French feminists such as Irigaray, and the almost unknown (in Anglo-American philosophical circles) Cavarero—are still held in Anglo-American philosophical circles seems based in part on the strong suspicion that they just are not doing philosophy. The famous, tired, and ever more discredited contrast and conflict between "analytic" and "Continental" modes of doing philosophy underwrites this sweeping association of the "literary" approach to Plato with Continental philosophy, as well as the denigration of both. It has rarely occurred to the accusers to investigate what these much maligned Continental figures actually said about Plato, and the results are, as Hyland's ground-breaking *Questioning Platonism* shows, quite a surprise. At the same time, there is more than a kernel of truth in the view that the just mentioned thinkers *are* attuned to what one might call the rhetorical, "dramatic," dialogical or dialectical, and at times historical context of philosophy. In some cases, there is reason for the worry that such concerns culminate in a deep skepticism about, if not overt attack on, philosophy. But to repeat a point made above, recognition of the hermeneutic and indeed philosophical importance of Plato's use of the dialogue form also derives from sources both ancient and modern that have no intrinsic or historical ties to Continental

philosophy. The disassociation of the label “Continental” from the emphasis on the importance of the dialogue form to understanding Plato—which so far as I can tell is now complete or nearly complete—is a constructive development in Anglo-American Platonic studies.

Freed from the worry that attempting to understand why Plato wrote dialogues and how they ought to be interpreted immediately places one under one of the two suspect labels just examined, whether or not one wishes to be thus categorized, we may turn to what really matters here: a careful, philosophical examination of Plato’s texts, as well as an impartial assessment of the approaches that scholars have taken to the issues at hand.

The baffling complexity of the “drama” or “literary form” (not that these terms are necessarily equivalent) of the Platonic dialogues is obvious: the array of figures, imagined characters, settings, historical allusions and contexts, is very broad. It is impossible to read a Platonic dialogue intelligently without informing oneself as to the relevant details on all these counts. The great contribution of Debra Nails’s *The People of Plato* is to work through the data in an impressively detailed and systematic way. It is not her purpose to interpret the significance of Plato’s choice of his characters, or of literary forms and genres, so much as to offer a comprehensive catalogue of these aspects of Plato’s dramaturgy. Hers will surely be a standard reference book for interpreters henceforth.

Drew Hyland’s *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* is the first study to answer the rarely posed question mentioned above: how *do* philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Cavarero, and Gadamer actually approach Plato? Hyland’s book not only offers insightful and instructive analyses of all five thinkers, but also puts forward an alternative view of its own about the philosophical significance of Plato’s use of the dialogue form.

Understandably, Hyland does not seek “to give an exhaustive account of the continental interpretations of Plato” (p. 14), though his analysis of Nietzsche’s interpretation of Plato would undoubtedly have been fascinating. The unexpected punch line of his study is that

most of these continental writers, including the ones I just mentioned [Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Cavarero], make almost exactly the same assumptions as their analytic counterparts, although the judgments they make on that basis may be quite different. For the most part paying scant attention to the literary and dramatic dimensions of the dialogue form. . . ,

they find in the dialogues what their analytic counterparts find: Plato's metaphysics, Plato's theory of forms, etc. (p. 12)

Of the five thinkers Hyland examines, only Gadamer evinces a genuine appreciation of the significance of the dialogue form.² Hyland shows that time and again, the other four interpreters arbitrarily snatch this or that statement out of context, without further ado identify this or that speaker with Plato, and in general use bits and pieces of Plato to further some other agenda. The ironies are many, as Hyland points out: not only is the indifference to the dialogue form on the part of these thinkers out of keeping with "their guiding convictions about the nature of philosophy" (p. 13), it blinds them to a potential ally in some of their own particular concerns. For example, the late Heidegger emphasizes a mode of thought that is in some ways dialogical—indeed, Heidegger wrote several dialogues. Had Heidegger not been blinded to the dialogical character of Plato's work, Hyland argues, he might have been able to see that "in the complexity of the drama of his dialogues Plato was trying to allow to happen what cannot be explicitly theorized" (p. 82). Unfortunately, space does not permit me to summarize Hyland's excellent analyses of the five thinkers in question; I will simply record my judgment that they are accurate, fair, and very instructive. No advocate of a "continental" reading of Plato (and I have especially in mind feminist readings inspired by Derrida, Irigaray, and Cavarero) can possibly go through without responding first to Hyland's book. In that, as in other ways, he has accomplished his stated purpose (p. 183) successfully.

Hyland uses his critical reading of these Continental philosophers to sketch his own views about both how to read Plato and the philosophical significance of the Platonic dialogue form. I say "sketch" because he has more fully developed his views elsewhere, and it is not the primary purpose of the study under review to defend them.³ But as he repeatedly expresses them here, let me summarize: to begin with, "the discourse of Socratic/Platonic philosophy is fundamentally interrogative" (p. 145; cf. 92), and "its fundamental standpoint must be one of questioning" (p. 144). Hyland does not espouse "the extreme esoteric interpretive position that Plato's views are entirely absent from the dialogues he wrote"; and yet, "I am saying that the expression of his views could not have been the guiding intention of his writing dialogues" (p. 90; cf. p. 2). Hyland is "not suggesting that the teaching of the dialogue is that any view is limited to the existential situation out of which it arises But the dialogues, by their very form, do seem to suggest that the situation

out of which a given position arises must be considered in any adequate understanding of it" (p. 9). As Hyland immediately notes, it is more than a matter of the situation being "considered," for he sees a fundamental Platonic philosophical conviction at work here: "the implicit teaching of the dialogues is a notion of finite transcendence" (p. 9), which is to say that every philosophical view not only arises out of its existential situation, but is limited to it in the sense that *no* views claiming "universal" application are compatible with that teaching. As Hyland puts it, "that set of views that constitute Platonism—and quite especially the so-called theory of forms—are all paradigmatically top down theories, abstract, totalizing theories that we are presumably supposed to impose on any possible human situation" (p. 9). The shared fault of the four Continental figures mentioned above is that they—like their "analytic" counterparts—see Plato as setting out just such theories.

As I cannot here engage Hyland's provocative views in the detail they deserve, let me simply raise several questions. Some of the statements just quoted make it clear that for Hyland, Plato does propose what Hyland himself calls a "teaching." The question is obvious enough: is not "finite transcendence" itself a top down theory that is to apply to the human condition as such? Hyland certainly writes of it in a way that suggests an affirmative answer. I can imagine at least two answers to this sort of challenge. First, Hyland could respond that [his view of] Plato's "teaching" is not "totalizing" because it is itself the product of and limited to the particular exchanges Plato depicts or invites. To follow that path, however, is to risk gainsaying Hyland's explicit statement to the contrary (p. 9, quoted above), not to mention reducing Plato's conception of philosophy to a kind of skepticism, which itself would be painfully at odds with what Plato has Socrates, among others, implicitly and explicitly claim—repeatedly—about the nature of philosophy. Second, Hyland could respond that his view of Plato's philosophical position is itself interrogatively held. But many "analytic" interpreters, and perhaps some of the Continental interpreters Hyland examines, could say the very same thing about *their* view of what Plato is saying: "certainly, it's open for debate, and here for discussion is *my* view of what Plato is saying about X: Plato's theory of X (say, Forms) is as follows . . ." We are not, then, so much prohibited from eliciting "theories" from the dialogues, or attributing them to Plato (after due hermeneutic diligence), but only doing so in a way impervious to questioning.

Analogous lines of questioning could be directed to Hyland's inference from Plato's use of the dialogue form (which includes the absence

of a character called “Plato” who espouses views, and the fact that no character who does espouse views is uncontroversibly identifiable as Plato’s mouthpiece) to the thesis that Plato did not write the dialogues “primarily” to propose his own views (pp. 2, 9). I am not certain how much rides on “primarily,” but in any case it does seem that Hyland takes himself to have identified at least some of Plato’s views, and equally important, that in principle there is nothing in the context-sensitive reading of the dialogues that precludes the interpreter from attributing to Plato all sorts of views—not just about, say, the nature and value of philosophy, but also about the nature of reality (a theory of Forms, for example). Such conclusions would result from just the sort of all-things-considered interpretive approach Hyland espouses, excluding any dogmatism that precludes querying them—“totalizing” though those conclusions might seem in the absence of that approach.

One of the texts with reference to which such lines of questioning could be discussed is, of course, the *Symposium*. Hyland argues that dialogue’s “ascent passage contains a teaching very different from the metaphysical transcendence usually attributed to it” (p. 152). His argument is appropriately contextual: Diotima never explicitly says that we should leave behind the earlier stages of the ascent, though she does say (as Hyland points out) that we should “look down” upon the lesser instantiations of beauty as “something small” (p. 153). Such statements, however, combined with the image of the ladder or stairs (in ascending one *does* take one’s foot off the lower rung, and moves on to the next), along with Diotima’s exuberant praise of a life spent contemplating the transcendent Forms, do push against Hyland’s assertion that “the whole point of making the ascent in the first place, the whole point of gaining insight into anything like Beauty Itself, is to deepen our appreciation and understanding of beauty as it appears to us, certainly including its bodily appearances” (p. 153). It is not obvious what warrants this as an inference from his examination of the text; it cannot be the question as to whether the ascent could in fact be undertaken successfully. The critic might also push from another direction: if Hyland’s assertion *is* defensible, then it seems that in this dialogue—and quite plausibly in the other dialogues that put forward the Forms with equal fervor—Plato really is positing such a “theory,” precisely to accomplish the ends Hyland attributes to it.

Obviously an adequate discussion of Hyland’s extremely rich and interesting views would require a detailed treatment of the *Symposium*, among other dialogues. *Plato’s Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and*

Myth in the Symposium certainly offers us hope of just such a treatment (though the Corrigan's do not, unfortunately, cite any of Hyland's work, in spite of its relevance to their argument), for the book claims to provide a step by step interpretation of the dialogue that simultaneously insists upon the importance of the dramatic context, elicits its philosophical themes and "theories," and is informed by certain Continental thinkers (Bakhtin in particular; see pp. 3, 6, and large parts of chap. 8). Their thesis is that "to be in search of the question of the other is therefore a leitmotif fundamental to understanding the dialogue as a whole" (p. 189). This is to say that the dialogue "is evidently a drama of many voices and many different characters . . ." The *Symposium* is "of many different genres, each free and playful in its own way, and yet all of them brought together into what is essentially a new artistic and philosophical form, that is, an experimental form of dialogues and characters nestling within one another, and not only this, but addressing, commenting, criticizing, reshaping, testing, and trying each other" (p. 189).

The sentence is characteristic of the frustrating imprecision of the book. The idea seems to be that if we see every part of the dialogue as being in a sort of dialectical "play" with the other, not only is no part simply unphilosophical (p. 42), but the whole constitutes a *novel*; "on these strict Bakhtinian criteria, the *Symposium* is demonstrably the first novel in history" (p. 6; cf. p. 196). In saying this, they commit themselves to a dating of the dialogue, and indeed to a view of the chronology of Plato's composition of the dialogues (for example, see the second paragraph on p. 1, and p. 22), none of which is justified in the book, even though it is now much contested in the secondary literature. Indeed, they offer no argument that other works of Greek literature lack the structural characteristics they detect in the *Symposium*. In any case, the idea is that the various speeches and discourses in the dialogues exemplify different "genres" (a term they do not define clearly) which call each other into question, the result being a thoroughly dialectical interplay that extends even to the text itself: the *Symposium* calls itself into question. It is in need of *its* other, which turns out to be "the silent Good" (p. 196), which is beyond the "capacity of language, character, or genre to represent it." The authors say nothing to justify the phrase just quoted, but it evidently falls out of their Bakhtinian assumptions to the effect that there is always, in any attempt to tell it like it is, a surplus of meaning, of further referential context, and ultimately an inarticulable subject of the *logos* (every articulation generating another

inter-generic web of references that in some sense are in dialogue with each other; p. 202).

Remarkably, they want to argue for a special relationship between the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, using as the fulcrum the latter's critique of imitation and the former's obvious "artful, literary qualities" (p. 1), and even more, what they take to be "a positive theory of art" offered by the *Symposium* (p. 2). Hence, the dialogue is "intended to be read as a companion piece" to the *Republic*. They admit that the just mentioned positive theory is "artfully concealed" in the *Symposium*, as it surely must be since nobody (by their own accounting) has hitherto detected it. I remain unclear as to what exactly this "positive theory" comes to, perhaps because it is expressed "by forms of *indirection*, that is, by an unexpressed argument, on the one hand, and by the *gap* between the actual power of the poets' speeches and their dialectical potential on the ladder of ascent, on the other hand" (p. 217). In reading such pronouncements, one longs for clarity and precision.

The Corrigan's offer some valuable insights about passages of the *Symposium*, as when they remark that "if Aristophanes' literary muse is that of *Need*, Agathon's muse is very much that of *Plenty*" (p. 91; though their stylistic habit of starting such sentences with "if" encourages unclarity about the force of the point in question). They are surely right that Diotima's speech is meant to be questioned (p. 108), and the way in which they interrelate the pre-Diotiman speeches with the steps on Diotima's ladder of ascent is interesting (p. 159). Other parts seem forced, such as the effort to connect the method of division and collection with Aristophanes' talk of Zeus cutting the "globular" creatures into two (pp. 80–81). And while that dialogue may usefully be compared to the *Republic*, so may other Platonic dialogues, precisely on the question of art or *mimesis*. The strong claim that the one is "intended to be read as a companion piece" (p. 2) to the other is simply not borne out. At other times, their hermeneutic tact deserts them, as when they ask of Diotima's remarks about the identity of creatures through time: "is this extraordinary theory really Platonic? Yes, for it can also be found in earlier and later dialogues, the *Gorgias* and *Theaetetus*, for instance" (p. 143). That is the sort of easy inference Hyland's book aims to impede.

Ruby Blondell's *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* too insists on the importance of drama and dialogue in Plato, and seeks to connect several Platonic dialogues—specifically the *Hippias Minor*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. Blondell's book sparkles with insights.

The term that comes to mind is “fresh”: this beautifully written (and lengthy) book offers fresh thoughts about what it means to take the dramatic context into account, fresh interpretations of these dialogues, fresh insights into not only them but also into the philosophical issues she thinks are at stake. It is a most impressive achievement that advances Platonic scholarship significantly, and established Blondell as an important voice in Platonic studies. The axis on which the book’s reflections and interpretations turn concerns the “tension” between particular and universal, which she examines from different angles. There is Plato’s ambivalence “regarding the value of human individuality as such, its philosophical and ethical significance” (p. 2); the well-known metaphysical dimensions, including the problem of whether or how individuals could transcend their circumstances; and the pedagogical dimension, also about the possibility of transcendence of the particular.

And “above all, Plato is concerned with the possibility of Socratic self-reproduction” (p. 3). Socrates is painted by Plato as unique, and yet as failing to turn any one else into a philosopher. Is Plato’s message, then, that philosophy lived and died with Socrates? This would be a “tragic” upshot (pp. 87, 127). And it is the one Plato faced. Plato’s “ambivalence” (p. 67) is reflected in his choice of the dialogue form, which medium grounds philosophy in the particular (just as Hyland claimed) while also attempting to move to the universal. “The glimpses of eternity that are offered to us are always embodied in time. The form in itself is thus an acknowledgement of the impossibility of that to which its central characters so often seem to aspire—a condition transcending the multiplicity of the material world. . . . the most notorious defining feature of Platonism is expressed by Plato in a self-defeating form” (p. 50). As she also puts it in the context of examining the *Theaetetus*’ “digression,” Socrates there expresses “the insoluble paradox of our place at the crossroads of particularity and abstraction” (p. 303; cf. p. 302). Blondell brilliantly explains how Plato’s Socrates “embodies” just these sorts of tensions (p. 75).

Blondell explores all of these aspects of the problem, and especially the last, with subtlety. I found her discussion of the different “Socrates”—the elenctic or aporetic, the maieutic, the teacher or dogmatist—especially helpful. She uses these Socratic personae, and their contrast with the Eleatic Stranger, to organize her analysis (thereby rejecting the ordering of the dialogues by presumed date of composition; p. 11). Her arguments are far too complex to examine in this short review, and I shall limit

myself to raising a question about her original and fascinating claim that the Eleatic Stranger, while reflecting in subtle ways the “ambiguous and troubled relationship” between particularity and universality (p. 326), is also meant by Plato as a sort of solution to the problems just adumbrated. In substituting the Stranger for Socrates, Plato is “challenging Sokrates’ survivors to leave him behind, by adopting his own perspective regarding the insignificance of his [Socrates’] death” (p. 389). For “only by displacing Sokrates could he offer a model of the philosopher that might transcend the individual”; the real drama of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* is, from this perspective, the “struggle for such transcendence” (p. 391). It’s not just that “the marginalization of Sokrates in these dialogues conveys, at least in part, the idea that Sokrates is no longer enough” (p. 390), but that the Stranger “repositions various aspects of Plato’s various Sokrateses in a larger methodological picture where both their strengths and their limitations can be recognized” (p. 378). This line of interpretation requires Blondell both to see the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* as dramatically linked—as part of a “triad” (p. 314) over which Socrates’ impending death casts its shadow (pp. 317, 392)—and to deny that “the dramatic date of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*” are “key to their interpretation” (p. 387). Here Blondell’s interpretation is not altogether coherent; and it also deprives her of the chance to illuminate the literary fact that the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* follow in dramatic time upon her “triad,” once again representing the same Socrates in classic form and in full swing—even though he had been mostly silent in the second two members of her “triad” (but not the first thereof).

And also, we might ask, what of the promised but absent dialogue, the *Philosopher*? Blondell does not delve into that still unresolved puzzle, and so avoids a related and intriguing question: is philosophical dialogue between outstanding and (intellectually) mature philosophers (say, the Eleatic Stranger and Socrates) possible, for Plato? Or for us? The history of philosophy offers remarkably few instances of any such dialogue. And the history of philosophical writing—including Plato’s dialogues—does not encourage an affirmative answer. Perhaps this amounts to another permutation of the “tragic” character of the human condition.

1. For a stellar example of the latter see J. Ferrari's "Strauss' Plato," *Arion* 5 (1997): 36–65.
2. For some further discussion, see my "Gadamer and the Interpretation of Plato," *Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1981): 171–78. Disclaimer: I studied philosophy with Hyland when I was an undergraduate. That was in the 1970s BCE.
3. In particular, see his *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).