

INTERPRETING THE PLATONIC TEXT IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

To better assess the state of methodological endeavors in the field of Platonic studies today, one would need to undertake an overview of major philosophic trends. Every era has read the Platonic text, in part, according to its preoccupations and anxieties. This is no less true of our time, although it might be more difficult to establish. It is certainly impossible to offer a general overview here, but a more limited objective can be attained: It is feasible to examine the methodological and philosophic contributions of the late epigones of western philosophy and ascertain the impact their legacy continues to exercise on contemporary students of Plato's philosophy. The two paramount philosophical influences I discern stem from the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Two major hermeneutic approaches of our times that are indebted to Nietzsche's and Heidegger's work are, what I call, textual deconstructivism and natural law esotericism. In what follows, I bring attention to the work, and working assumptions, of representatives of these two approaches.

1. It is impossible to delineate here Heidegger's complex account of Plato's philosophy and of Platonism, but the following observations are crucial for my purposes: Heidegger argued that Plato's theory of Ideas or Forms, with its postulation of a disjunction between truth and actuality, is the first ominous step in a long sojourn that passes through the inception, culmination and crisis of western metaphysics to terminate in the contemporary nihilistic crisis. According to Heidegger, by defining truth as correctness - gauged by reference to immutable eidetic criteria - Plato launches the historical destiny of western thought: systematic reflection, measurement according to set criteria - and, hence, technology and scientific endeavor - become the fateful trademarks of western history and traditions¹.

There are further implications that follow from Heidegger's interpretation of

1. Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit; Mit einem Brief über den Humanismus*, Bern, Francke, 1947; also in *Wegmarken* (1919 - 1958) *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt, Klostermann, Band 9. See further his *Parmenides* (1942), *ibid.*, Bd. 54.



Platonism: If Heidegger's understanding of Platonism - as the threshold of systematic reflection, made possible through a separation of true [eidetic] from actual - is plausible, then we can say that the Platonic text is, similarly, the first systematically conceived text. Plato's text is the first document that can serve as an original that invites interpretations; unlike the Homeric matrix that seduces the poet to recantation, the Platonic text points to a truth that is separate from its actuality - a truth whose appreciation is not guaranteed from simple recitation. This is also consistent with Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Moreover, for Plato, the actual must prove its degree of truth (its connection with the original or eidetic, the Form or Idea). Therefore, the connection between interpretation and text becomes one that can further proliferate into, and foster, all sorts of systemic arrangements (ranging from philosophic debate to formalistic and authoritative academic enclosures). In other words, the text becomes alive and active: it invites comment, interpretation, exegesis, reaction and furtherance - and it, in fact, demands all these responses as integral part of itself. It is not a coincidence that Plato was the first to spawn an Academe - although, to be sure, schools of rhetoric existed before. In spite of his aversion to the ossified facticity of the written text, Plato was ironically the first to bequeath a text in our sense of the word.

So, we see that ramifications of Heidegger's critique of Plato obviously require that we re-visit the Platonic text itself. Heidegger, however, propounds a rather unexpected rule for textual interpretation: A thinker's teaching consists primarily in «what is left unsaid»². Heidegger's interest in the Platonic text is thin. In spite of his philological acumen, Heidegger did not read the Platonic text with adequate care³. So, we see that Heidegger's diagnosis of the significance of Platonism both requires and fails to provide a set of methodological standards for textual interpretation.

Before Heidegger, Nietzsche had astutely diagnosed a characteristic pathology which, he claimed, underpins all *philosophizing*. Unlike Heidegger, Nietzsche often privileged the task of textual interpretation as an indispensable endeavor for the diagnostician of metaphysical crisis⁴. As a philologist by training, Nietzsche placed his hopes for a resounding unmasking of hitherto

2. For another instance from roughly the same period, in which the same principle is articulated, cf. also M. HEIDEGGER, *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1927, *Gesamtausgabe*, 1977, Bd. 25, p. 33. Cf. Fr. NIETZSCHE, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, aph. 23.

3. Plato's thought, deliberately conveyed by means of a complex dialogical and dramatic format, cannot be reduced to a collection of doctrines or teachings. Heidegger comes close to stipulating a doctrinaire Plato. For a critique of Heidegger on this score, cf. DREW HYLAND, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 139-163. Cf. CATHERINE ZUCKERT, *Postmodern Platos*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 33-34.

4. What comes before, and determines, interpretations of life is not the act of writing but a *lifestyle* (that of the ascetic or priestly nature, of resentment, etc.); cf. *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, aph. 353.

philosophizing in the use of sound philological methods⁵. This promises that Nietzsche, and his influence, might after all achieve a reconciliation of a diagnosis of crisis (inevitable after Hegel, and in a sense identical with the crisis of Platonism broadly understood) with a method for reading the originary text (hermeneutics). This is the task in which Heidegger would not succeed - or would not be interested.

The iconoclastic Nietzsche was not a philologist who rests on his laurels. Nietzsche is interested in the task of textual interpretation but he also radicalizes the scope of this task. Consistently with his philosophy of perspectivism, Nietzsche denies that a text can be read in only one correct way, or that an objective method of interpretation can ever be accessible⁶. Thus, Nietzsche has left modern exegetes in the lurch: On the one hand he has pointed the way to the text as to a revolutionary banner that holds truths that need to be «taken by surprise»⁷; on the other hand, he showed that, given the nature of his own project, he could not be expected to provide interpretative methods that can be readily accessed or applied by everyone⁸.

Two cardinal trends of contemporary Platonic interpretation follow from the Nietzschean revolution - clinging, as it were, to the horns of the Nietzschean antimony: Some have elected to emphasize Nietzschean perspectivism: this entails a realization that no privileged method is available. Since being *is* interpretation, according to Nietzsche⁹, it further follows that a text re-interprets itself every single moment of its «existence» - the text self-destructs, or rather *is* self-destruction. Certain hermeneutic and deconstructive schools define themselves on the ground of the above propositions.

On the other hand, Nietzsche's privileging of «philological» study as a force of unearthing, undermining, exposing, sublating and overcoming has sent many students of philosophy back to the fundamental texts themselves, there to discover esoteric meanings whose author presumably concealed them with heightened circumspection.

2. In this essay I confine myself to a brief examination of a representative from each of the fundamental alternatives that have become available after the Nietzschean «revolution»: Roland Barthes follows, and radicalizes, the first direction - of, what I call, textual deconstructivism - while Leo Strauss returns

5. Cf. *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, p. 270; *Morgenröthe*, pp. 52 and 84; *Antichrist*, p. 47; *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, I, p. 17 (note).

6. For a different approach to this aspect of Nietzsche's thought that arrives at the same conclusions, cf. JEAN GRANIER, *Perspectivism and Interpretation*, in *Le problème de la vérité dans la philosophie de Nietzsche*, Paris, Seuil, 1966.

7. *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 381; cf. p. 374: All existence is interpretation.

8. After all, Nietzsche opines that most philologists and text interpreters cannot help lacking in originality. Cf. *Ecce Homo*, II, p. 8.

9. *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 374.

to the Platonic text to distill hidden meanings - let us call his approach one of natural law esotericism.

3. Roland Barthes writings are interesting in that they radicalize the premises of heuristic deconstruction¹⁰. Barthes defines a reader as someone who derives pleasure from the reading of a text. A reader is a reader when, and only insofar as he or she, «takes pleasure» from reading a text¹¹. This position sounds paradoxical and would hardly be conceivable before Nietzsche, or Freud for that matter.

Late in his prolific career, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud returned to a metaphysical dualism. There he supplements the libidinal drive with an even more powerful and primordial inclination of animate matter to conserve vital energy by lapsing into simpler forms of existence. This can actually be construed as Freud's belated and treasonous embrace of political conservatism: an instinct for simpler existence and conservation of energy means preservation of vitality even at the cost of sacrificing progress toward more rational states of individual and collective being. Freud thus shows how a lapse into the prerational phase of the Rousseauan state of nature is not inconceivable at the instinctual level; human perfectibility, which ever since the writings of Rousseau had raised a hope for amelioration of political malaise, now appears as a fictitious or even suspicious premise. The return to an earlier stage also corresponds to an implosion of the text. The human animal secretes meaning - text - only necessitously; at the core of its existence there lies a tendency toward regressive silence. It is easy to understand why the late Freud is conspicuously absent from the work of deconstructionists, and of Barthes in particular. This is not all, however. Even Nietzsche, who is not known for leftist sympathies, could have denounced Freud's lapse into dualism: Although, according to Nietzsche, nihilistic tendencies inescapably characterize, and define, our shared modernity, there are two sorts of nihilism - a nihilism of strength (an overabundance of energy that is frustrated for internal reasons), and a nihilism of weakness and enervation (a «hunger» which, instead of leading to nourishment, causes flight and cowering for the sake of conserving rapidly waning energy)¹². One could say that Freud acknowledged, acquiesced, did not resist the latter, «bad», kind of nihilism from which modern humanity suffers.

That Barthes does not take the late Freud's vitiation of the libidinal principle into account is hardly surprising. What is truly unexpected is the Nietzschean Barthes' readiness to reduce interpretative issues to «questions of pleasure and displeasure», which for Nietzsche falls under a «decadent» type of nihilism¹³.

10. All subsequent references are to R. BARTHE'S *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1973.

11. *Ibid.*, section 2.

12. *Wille zur Macht*, p. 59.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Barthes' paraphernalia that are demanded by pleasure - even by whimsical pleasure - are now legitimated and accepted as textual, and interpretative, instrumentalities: Unpredictability, indecision, logical contradiction, inconsistency, obsessive fascination, fatuous omission, ritualistic repetition, fetishistic attachment. One might say that the revered texts have always been, unwittingly, approached in this spirit. Barthes makes the stronger point that it is in the very nature of the text to be approached in accordance with one's subjective sense of pleasure. What is more important still, the text appears intrinsically indeterminate: The text has no meaning prior to what the reader confers on it, according to his pleasure¹⁴. Originally, a text is a demand on the reader; it is «frigid», a boulder blocking the path from the unconscious to consciousness, until desire, which means «neurosis», moves it to make room for pleasure¹⁵.

Barthes has no distinction to make between immediate and compensatory pleasures. Is the transformation of the text-as-demand to text-as-pleasure direct or is it more like a formula for the conversion of one pleasure to another? Barthes is not clear on this. If the text-as-pleasure depends on complex processes of conversion etc., a pattern might emerge in the broader picture; the text might not be indeterminate after all, although its determining factors might indeed be concealed from the author's consciousness. A danger of this interpretative approach is that it might «psychologize» the author by claiming to know the inner workings of his psyche better than he suspected. To his credit, Barthes is not willing to follow this direction. One suspects, however, that the reason for this is that Barthes wishes to remain non-judgmental even in the face of pleasure that results from psychological derailment rather than from a spontaneous attraction to the text. Yet, it is on this spontaneity that Barthes' argument (that the text is a secretion of pleasure) rests.

Barthes' comparison of the relationship between text and reader to neurosis has an ancient antecedent in Plato himself. In the *Phaedrus* we find the well-known aside that «the greatest of goods befall us through madness (*mania*), indeed a madness bestowed by means of divine apportionment...» (244a5-7). In the same breath, Socrates associates madness (*mania*) with the art of divining (*mantiké*). The core of «neurosis» which one finds in the foundation of intellectual processes, and which modernity has learned to associate with devious ways for the manufacturing of pleasure, makes it possible to be a diviner (*mantis*) - one who has insights into the remote human past and unknown future. As Freud also knew, neurotics, like children, recapitulate the phylogenetic inheritance of humankind. Far from terminating the tasks of interpretation, or decomposing the text from within, a truly Freudian approach

14. Cf. R. BARTHES, *op. cit.*, sect. 4, iv.

15. *Ibid.*, sect. 3.

to text-as-neurosis actually demands a more exacting interpretative rigor. The classic Freudian analysis of dream textures is a good example of this. Freud systematized his interpretation of dreams by pointing to extra-textual, *non-arbitrary*, standards or symbols. Although the deployment of such symbols in dream language testifies to the unbounded hedonic inclinations of the subconscious, the symbols themselves are ideal archetypes that can, in theory, be deductively applied to interpret the texture of any dream.

Barthes sees his restoration of the rights of eros as a vindication of sensuous reality, which has been ravaged by the idealist onslaught. Barthes' direct ancestor is Nietzsche whose reversal of idealism promises to liberate humankind from the curse idealism cast on sensuous reality. «I would prefer to be even a satyr to being a saint» proclaims Nietzsche. In the same passage, however, Nietzsche resurrects Plato's association of erotic madness with divination or oracular prophesy by stating that the liberation from idealism «creates health, future, [a] lofty right to the future»¹⁶. Unlike Barthes' relativist and self-referential pleasure principle, divination points to an independent, extra-textual and objectively higher standard. Barthes is painfully aware of the fact that his approach - and his affiliation with Nietzsche rather than with Marx - can cause embarrassment. To define the relationship to a text as pleasure is not only to expose the circuitous voluptuousness of the contemplative hermit; it is also to embrace the politically reactionary Marquis de Sade and jeer at the scores of revolutionaries who foolishly perished because they thought they could interpret (misinterpret?) a pamphlet as a sober call to arms. Barthes is unrepentant. Ideology, he says, passes like a blush over a face. «Some take pleasure in this particular color»¹⁷. At the same time, however, Barthes varies his metaphor and compares ideology to a shadow. Ideology is to a text what its shadow is to an object¹⁸. Of course, the shadow presupposes a source of illumination that is independent of the text itself; Barthes is silent about this. The shadow cannot be abstracted from its original. If ideology is like a blush how can it be like a shadow? No one is without a shadow. Can we not imagine people who never blush? Are not the best readers those who forgo the indulgences of blushing for the sake of delving deep into unspeakable and profane recesses?

Barthes reconciles the two aspects - subjective erotic blush with objective Marxist shadow - in an admittedly ingenious way: It is impossible, he says, for a writer to be free of *both* ideological and erotic repression at the same time¹⁹. Those who read texts with a view to promoting a political struggle have a price

16. *Ecce Homo*, Pref., p. 2.

17. BARTHES, *op. cit.*, sect. 20, vii.

18. *Ibid.*, sect. 20, viii.

19. *Ibid.*, sect. 21, ii.

to pay to unforgiving eros. Revolutionaries are libidinally suppressed as sensualists are politically suppressed - a single economy runs through, and explicates, both psychological states. Barthes does not furnish examples, but certain unfortunate attributes of stiff ideological literature easily spring to mind: unattractive style, boorish seriousness, monomaniacal (regressive) repetition of shibboleths (symbols), stiff awkwardness, and stilted, desiccated, unerotic forms we associate with the writings of a pamphlet. The perversion that finds arousal in a reading of the *Communist Manifesto* has not been invented yet. In the opposite case of the seductive text, according to Barthes' formula, there is no erotic but only ideological repression. Truly seductive writers tend to be reactionary. This sounds counter-intuitive. It finds limited confirmation in the case of the effete oligarchy of the years preceding the French Revolutionary; the hedonist preoccupations of this group soon turned into maudlin novels about the fate of Marie Antoinette and her son. In that case, political suppression produced not the pleasant, as Barthes would have it, but the mawkish text.

Barthes' formula is helpful in accounting for the present state of interpretative endeavors. Students of texts indeed often behave *as if* Barthes' formula of a relationship between erotic and ideological repression were true. Barthes captured, and his influence abetted, a segment of the contemporary phenomenology of interpretative travail. Textual interpretations that strive to bring out ideological blueprints, or, guided by ideological preconceptions, seek to dissect texts and expose their ideological underpinnings fail to pay attention to the text as an aesthetic product. It is true that the meanings of the text - and of the Platonic text as the archetypical text - are deposited in its seductive qualities to some extent. Plato's text is Socrates become youthful and beautiful, as Plato intimated in his Second Epistle. On the other hand, interpreters who stubbornly apply canons of literary criticism - conceived to maximize arbitrary pleasure - are less likely to reach the ideological presuppositions of the text they examine; their ideological projections into the text are dictated by contemporary notions and are most likely to uncritically iterate the jargon of, for instance, Marxist historicism, feminist theory, or linguistic philosophy.

Barthes' trade-off between ideological repression and erotic repression is not a general law; it reflects a predicament of our time. To the extent that a relativist appreciation of texts, and of textual meanings, is sanctioned, this trade-off becomes inevitable: If one pursues pleasure, one cannot at the same time elevate this pleasure to a universal law; it is one's subjective pleasure that is at stake. No consistent ideology can emerge from this, at least until someone articulates a consistent philosophy of hedonism. If, on the other hand, one expects to study a text in a «scientific» fashion with a view to its ideological and political underpinnings, one should not derive private pleasures from this enterprise. Pleasures are private and arbitrary whereas study should be

dispassionate. Pleasure is a matter of judgment, while study is a matter of interrogating the «facts».

Barthes frankly states that one reason for defining readership as pleasure is the following: If the text is to be demystified, the text ought to become an object of pleasure for others. Barthes does not say this, but it is rather a vulgar pleasure that is required for this. Generations of mystified students of Plato, for instance, might have experienced unspeakable raptures by submerging themselves in, or soaring toward, the text. This is certainly true of certain readers of the Bible. If the pleasure of the text is to serve as an instrument for demystification, it must be a pleasure of destruction and pillory, a pleasure that is no kin to higher or creative sensations. If, in line with modern democratic sentiment, private pleasures are to be available to everyone, they should not be prohibitive - they should be (defined in such a way as to be) within easy reach. Certain pleasures are more popular than others. Barthes is aware he is departing from his teacher Nietzsche who erected his critique of all values on the aristocratic distinction between noble and base²⁰.

The text is not a veil, says Barthes, thus rejecting esotericist hermeneutics; it is a tissue (*hyphos* in Greek) that can generate itself, can diminish and wax again, can fold and unfold itself²¹. From this follow certain methodological implications about interpreting: Cleavages, abrasions, seams, points of friction become important. When reading one should skip, read on, look up, return, dip in again - all according to pleasure. Ironically, the approach fits well the task of studying the Platonic text which demands attention to ruptures of organic continuity, interlocutors re-appearances, recurrences of themes, parallel constructions and thinly disguised narcissistic reflections, abrupt fluidity of speech and violent arrests of peripeteia. With one crucial difference - that the pleasure that serves as a locomotive for the movement of action in the Platonic text is not meant to be arbitrary; it is not meant to be the reader's pleasure insofar as he is simply the reader. As the patient student of Diotima's speech (*Symposium* 211e5-212c3) learns, the higher stages, or rungs up the ladder of eros - including philosophical endeavors - are objectively given. Ascending through the stages in a source - the only genuine source - of progressively higher pleasures. It is not a subjective - Barthean - sense of pleasure that can serve even as the incentive for undertaking the erotic travails: one cannot even imagine, far less anticipate, the higher pleasures while one is still at the bottom of the ladder. There is no place for Barthean whim in Platonic eros-psychology.

For Plato, structured speech (*logos*) is like a living animal that is put together so that all its parts are duly proportionate to each other and with a view to their

20. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, p. 45; *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, pp. 257-296; *Genealogie der Moral*, I. 2.

21. R. BARTHES, *op. cit.*, sect. 44. i.

appointed functions (cf. *Phaedrus* 264 c). Barthes rejects the purpose and structure of the whole of the Platonic animal. Barthes remains arbitrarily fixated on just one part of the organic whole - and the part, according to pleasure, presents the view of a tissue. One hesitates to guess what tissues, what parts of the body, Barthes had in mind. Thus, the arbitrary hermeneutic pleasure, to which Barthes appeals, turns out to be the epiphenomenon of a fixation on one part of the archetypical Platonic textual whole. Textual deconstructivism is truncated Platonism, at best.

4. Leo Strauss tried to revive in our century a variant of natural law philosophy. His initial standpoint was furnished by his examination of the tension between philosophy and religion, a subject that occupied Strauss ever since his early writings on Spinoza²².

Leo Strauss case is especially interesting as it presents a dramatic reaction against the ominous relativist tendencies of modernity: Strauss asserts that Platonic teaching can be understood in terms of its place in a continuous natural law tradition²³. More strongly, natural law itself, and the recurrent secular striving for a coherent articulation of natural law teachings, can be best grasped through a study of the classical philosophical discovery of natural law - a discovery that questioned and sought to replace traditional religion, as evidenced by Socrates' confrontation with traditional Athenian religious proprieties. Unlike the Scottish and French Enlightenment, the classical philosophic reaction against traditional religion did not lead to a proclamation of natural rights²⁴.

That the part ought to be understood in terms of the whole, that the whole can be discovered by (unassisted) reason, and that the whole (like human reason itself) is meaningful and self-sufficient - these components of natural law are all thoroughly Platonic. One of Strauss' most eminent methodological principles draws attention to the fear of persecution of writers who challenged authority in a radical fashion²⁵. Insofar as Plato presumably rejected traditional religiosity, he must have written in an opaque fashion, so as to avoid the fate of his erstwhile mentor Socrates who was put to death for not accepting the city's canonical deities.

Another reason for Plato's taciturnity is presumably to be found in Plato's aristocratic disdain for the egalitarian claim to natural rights for all. Plato's

22. Cf. LEO STRAUSS, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1930.

23. Cf. IDEM, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953, namely pp. 120-165.

24. This streak of his thinking places Strauss to the right of the ideological mainstream. Strauss further compounds this by denying the importance of Plato's teaching on communism of property and abolition of the family.

25. L. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Glencoe, Free Press, 1952.

radical aristocratism is not a reflection of his time or entourage; it shows a profound mistrust of, and pessimism about, human nature. Since Plato did not believe in natural equality, he was reluctant to communicate the same insights to all of his readers, and potential readers²⁶. Nevertheless, in response to Strauss, it can be claimed that Plato's aristocratic radicalism does not lead irrevocably to a preference for esotericism any more than Plato's hierarchical politics leads to subordination of the public good. In fact, Plato presents his hierarchical scheme as a precondition for the attainment of the common good; rather than conceal his political project - in the obvious sense of concealment - Plato might actually publicize. Unlike Strauss, who appears to «credit» Plato with a belief in the philosopher's right to power²⁷, I think that Plato intended his political writings to *prove* themselves to certain select readers, rather than serve as unquestioning millenarian announcements of a philosophic rulership.

Strauss' interest in Plato's natural law teachings is a reaction to Heidegger's indictment of Plato as the originator of nihilistic metaphysics. Heidegger suffers the thrust of Strauss' animus against German historicism. Although historicism, ushered by Herder and brought to systematic completion by Hegel, antedated Heidegger's writings, Heidegger brought historicism to an impressive denouement. If a main axiom of historicism is that meaning can come to be or be understood only at the right time, Heidegger applied this proposition not to the revelation but to the concealment of meaning. According to Heidegger's oracular saying, the more the source of all things reveals itself in actual beings, the more this source withdraws²⁸. What makes things meaningful is ultimately ineffable; the more of meaning is invested in a thing, the more its true meaning remains unexpressed. Plato's heresy, according to Heidegger, is that he sought to understand things in terms of that which is concealed - what Plato called the Form of the Good. Nevertheless, Plato also cautioned that the Good itself, which makes existence and understanding of things possible, is «beyond being itself» (*Republic* 509b9). Heidegger is not as different from Plato as it at first appears²⁹. Heidegger is in many ways kin to Plato, and Plato

26. Cf. *Phaedrus*, 276 e: «[the art of dialectic allows one to] avail himself of a suitable nature, and there sow the seed of speeches (*logous*) accompanied by reasoned awareness (*episteme*)...».

27. The influence of Nietzsche's will-to-power is indisputable. Strauss is not the only one to espouse the view that all philosophers sought to tyrannize. See HANNAH ARENDT, *Martin Heidegger at Eighty*, in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, M. MURRAY ed., New Haven, Conn., Yale Univ. Press, 1978. Nietzsche's influence on Arendt's essay is evident, even in her use of Nietzsche's favorite imagery of the subterranean philosophic mole. Cf. *Morgenröthe*, Pref.; Cf. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 289. Surprisingly, however, Arendt makes a single exception for Kant, whom Nietzsche never spared.

28. Cf. HEIDEGGER, *Der Spruch des Anaximanders*, (1946) in *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 5, 1996.

29. For the late Heidegger's approximation to Platonism, see STANLEY ROSEN, *Is Metaphysics Possible?*, *Review of Metaphysics*, 45, 1991, pp. 256-257. It has also been argued that, even during the period of *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, Heidegger was quite close to Plato: cf. H.G. WOLZ, *Plato's Doctrine of Truth: Orthotes or Aletheia*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 27, 1966, pp. 157-182. More recently, cf. IDEM., *Plato and Heidegger*, Lewisburg, Penn., Bucknell Univ. Press, 1981.

anticipates Heidegger. The methodological implications of this are enormous. A sworn adversary of Heidegger like Strauss is liable to miss many Platonic strands which might, to him, anticipate Heideggerianism; or, to make things worse, the task of refuting Heidegger by means of a return to Plato can tempt one into foisting on the Platonic text external meanings and convenient distortions. Thus, esotericism can easily devolve into a heuristic panacea for the projection of derivative and arbitrary meanings onto an oracular text. Strauss' return to the text, originally meant to combat Heideggerian historicism, risks a subversion of the text itself. Strauss' return to the text, originally meant to combat Heideggerian historicism, risks a subversion of the text itself. Strauss' return to the text, originally meant to combat Heideggerian historicism, risks a subversion of the text itself. Strauss' esotericism retains Heidegger's preoccupation with the unspoken; except that Strauss' notion of the unspoken is one that is derived directly from its textual manifestations. (According to Strauss, it is Plato's conscious choice to conceal meanings - a choice that can be ascertained and illuminated by the cautious reader). Strauss' method confronts the risk of lapsing into deconstructivist relativism - a prospect that would terrify Strauss more than anything else: If the text furnishes the ultimate criteria for a determination of its meanings, the text becomes self-referential in a strong sense. Moreover, if the criterion is one of absence-within-the-text (concealment), then textual self-referentiality becomes not only arbitrary but the very essence of the text. Strauss' esoteric reading is the frigid, unerotic, equivalent of Barthean «pleasure».

In spite of his reaction against Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss' natural law esotericism owes a great deal to both. Nietzsche was a critic of classical natural law: The Stoics, he wrote, were wrong in believing that they had discovered an independent, transcendent, fixed set of standards on which events and valuations ultimately depend; the Stoics only projected their own drive to create consistent meaning on the universe³⁰. Nietzsche replaces classical natural law with a different set of standards: A philosophy of will-to-power is Nietzsche's own variant of metaphysics. This is the main reason that Heidegger «accused» Nietzsche of being still a Platonist in reverse - which means a Platonist proper, insofar as the reversal of Platonism still requires the same standards by reference to which one thing can be said to be the reverse of another. Insofar as he postulates an understanding of the will-to-power as the philosopher's highest privilege, Nietzsche restores classical natural law. As Plato's philosopher was to be a lawgiver by virtue of his privileged familiarity with the realm of the Forms, Nietzsche's future legislator - adumbrated in his *Zarathustra* - has access to a higher standpoint (even if this standpoint threatens to dissolve to an awareness of groundlessness). If anything, Nietzsche moves

30. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 9.

closer to nature than Plato ever did: although it is not a vulgar biologicistic principle, the will-to-power is a more directly natural principle than the transcendent Platonic Forms.

Esotericism was also revived in modernity by Nietzsche. Nietzsche had reason for opting for an esoteric and oracular style as he intended to criticize and create at the same time: Nietzsche intended to keep the targets of his criticism unaware of his hopes of creation; and, conversely, he meant to insulate his attempts to create from the offended objects of his deconstructive ire. Nietzsche claimed that all major thinkers, including Plato, have always known, and drawn on, the differences between esoteric and exoteric writing.³¹ In the same work, Nietzsche urges that «noble natures» should respect the masks of esotericism worn by past thinkers; serious students should also interpret esoterically³². Apparently, Leo Strauss took this advice to heart in writing markedly esoteric interpretative essays on Plato's political philosophy. Ostensibly, Strauss denies that Nietzsche, or his «followers», could have revived classical esotericism. The reason for this inability is attributed to Strauss' major nemesis - the specter of German historicism; Nietzsche and his close descendants were presumably under the grip of historicist assumptions that make assume airs of superiority toward the wisdom of classical texts³³.

Ironically, Strauss discovers Nietzsche's historicist tendencies in an early work Nietzsche wrote precisely to combat the hyperbole and hypertrophy of historical education - an education that threatens not only modern life but also the classical texts Nietzsche admired. Nietzsche wrote there that «the most wretched animals can (by incessantly gnawing at the bark topple) even the mightiest oak»³⁴. It is true that by the end of this essay Nietzsche admits that he has himself often slipped into the errors and snares which historicist training fosters: conceited sense of superiority toward the past, a mood of inert cynicism, maudlin optimism about the human future that is out of touch with the possibilities of the present. Still, the essay sincerely excoriates historicism and pillories its proud heirs.

Nietzsche links his preference for esotericism with what amounts to a revival of classical natural law: if Plato asserted that truth resides beyond the sensuously and immediately available, Nietzsche also - strangely - identifies truth with its distant traces and elusive attributes. Truth is elusive for Nietzsche, as it was ontologically transcendent for Plato. Truth is hard to pin down because «untruth» is equally necessary - one should be able to escape into lies and

31. *Ibid.*, p. 30, cf. p. 40.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 270; 278; 289.

33. L. STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 26. See W. DANNHAUSER, Friedrich Nietzsche, in L. STRAUSS, J. CROUSEY, eds., *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago, McNally, 1972, pp. 782-803.

34. Cf. Fr. NIETZSCHE, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, II: *Von Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*.

untruths to preserve life (and this is the necessary pre-condition of truthfulness)³⁵. Deadly truths could lead weak natures to paralysis. A dialectic between truth and untruth is required, so that truth remains hidden to the right degree. Like Heidegger after him, Nietzsche saw that Plato's emphasis on the truth as something revealed is misplaced; the hiding that makes «revealing» possible (the necessary untruth) is more fundamental. The animal that came eye to eye with the deadly truth that nothing abides, that all is in flux, would be paralyzed; it would be overpowered by the first beast of prey that came by³⁶. Lies are actually more greatly needed than truths for the preservation of life. The right combination of truth and untruth - of esoteric and exoteric - is the privilege of those who can endure the deadly truths. Nietzsche frankly asked for only such courageous readers.

Truth often wants to be surprised, says Nietzsche³⁷. From this it follows that one should select one's audience. The fewer the initiates, the less the noise and movement and commotion, the better the chances that truth shall not flee. Of course, the writer wishes to be understood, and to this effect he is compelled to stir the commotion he abjures. Noise is exacerbated when writings fall into the wrong hands – hands that fidget uncontrollably, or tremble with misplaced wrath, or grope where they should desist, or dictate with force. So, every cautious writer has little choice but to prevent being «understood» by the wrong readers. In Nietzsche's words, «every profound reader is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood»³⁸. Leo Strauss' hermeneutic procedures echo this Nietzschean approach, and the cautious student of Strauss' work cannot help detecting Nietzsche's influence also in Strauss' radical aristocratic political philosophy. Yet, at the same time, Strauss finds in Nietzsche not merely a diagnostician but a herald of the modern crisis. In other words, there is in Strauss' work a rift between (Nietzschean) method, or textual hermeneutics, on the one hand, and (anti-Nietzschean) understanding of the contemporary philosophic predicaments which a reading of Plato's text is supposed to illuminate. Let us notice that this rift is like the gap noticed earlier in this essay - the one between diagnosis or pathology, on the one hand, and means for gauging and overcoming this crisis, on the other.

Nietzsche returns to the ancient admonition of Hermes Trismegistus who forbade disclosure of truths to protect the «weak»³⁹: What serves certain natures as nourishment is poison for weaker constitutions⁴⁰. This statement captures Nietzsche's reaction against the epistemic optimism of the

35. Cf. *Morgenröthe*, pp. 507; 511.

36. Cf. *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 111.

37. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

38. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 290.

39. Cf. EDOUARD SCHURÉ, *Hermes and Plato*, London, 1919, namely pp. 13; 54.

40. Cf. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 30.

Enlightenment. Yet, so many students and interpreters of Plato, both of the right and the left, inflict on the Platonic text assumptions – both substantive and methodological assumptions – that combine the heritage of the Enlightenment with Nietzsche's obscure recommendations in incongruous embraces: Deconstruction flatters the individual right to creativity by privileging the independent, self-subsisting and self-sustaining text; its emphasis on creativity derives from Nietzsche but the recognition of an individual (even if ultimately self-defeating) right to this creativity stems from the egalitarian tradition of the Enlightenment. Natural law esotericism, on the other hand, represented in this essay by Leo Strauss, combats both Enlightenment and Nietzscheanism *as if* the two were compatible and could be confronted in one frontal and sustained assault.

Strauss cannot reclaim the genuine Platonic text – a text that is unencumbered by the critical and diagnostic eye modernity has cast on everything past. Strauss cannot reclaim the authentic text any more than Barthes can appreciate the genuine pleasure associated with the reading of the Platonic text. The lingering legacy left by Nietzsche and Heidegger is nearly impossible to shake today, and Barthes and Strauss exemplify this haunting predicament. Barthes reacts to Nietzsche's and Heidegger's diagnoses of metaphysical pathology and alienation in a traumatic way – by denying that any crisis can steal our pleasure and by asserting that, on the contrary, crisis and decline unleash radical opportunities for the experience of textual pleasure. In this, Barthes misunderstands Nietzsche's critique of decadent hedonism by exaggerating Nietzsche's aversion to Socratic rationalism – the rationalism behind doctrinaire readings of texts. Strauss, on the other hand, aspires to a calm confidence that a return to the pristine Platonic text is within grasp in our times, but his moderate optimism – like his method – owes a great deal to the malady he mostly fears (Nietzsche's resurrection of natural law esotericism in our times). Like Barthes' hedonist immersion, Strauss' return to the Platonic text ultimately rejects the significance of extra-textual criteria.

Ultimately, the most crucial question for textual interpretation is the following: To what extent is the text self-referential? The task of interpreting Plato's text casts this fundamental question into bold relief. We can say that not only is the Platonic text self-referential, but, also, that the relationship of this text with other contexts (historic, cultural, economic, ideological) is also a «text». In this way we are certainly defining the «text» broadly, but, I think, this broadening of the definition of the text yields many benefits in interpretation. In the case of the canon of texts we find in Western philosophy, a broad argument about textuality can be made more easily. We notice, however, that excesses, distortions, and misunderstandings lurk everywhere: As an intrinsic property of the text itself-referentiality has a significant diagnostic value. Does this mean that we should be allowed to use a text as a diagnostic test of the pathology of a

given era? Or, again, the text's relationship to its relevant contexts is one that can be approached through other texts and by means of methods in textual interpretation. Does this mean that we should feel free to refer the text to extra-textual criteria? Answers to these questions are not easy to come by. Deconstructionists like Barthes exemplify the peculiar excess that follows from radicalizing and exaggerating the text's self-referential character. On the other hand, natural law esotericists like Leo Strauss bear testimony to the other significant excess - the one that follows from reifying the text's relationship to a broader source - in this case, «natural law» as a distinct philosophy, which Strauss discovers (in its entirety?) within the Platonic text. Textual interpretation, as can be shown by the specific task of interpreting Plato, requires study of both moments: (a) the autonomous text (or the text as self-referential), and (b) textualization of the loss of this autonomy (i.e. approaching the text's dependence on its environment as a distinct text). Neither Barthes nor Strauss succeed in creating a fertile synthesis between the Platonic text and its relationship to its philosophic sources - which is a synthesis between diagnosis and methodology. Therefore, neither author can systematically extrapolate from the Platonic text with a view to understanding and overcoming the predicaments of our era.

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