

Schur, David

Plato's Wayward Path. Literary Form and the Republic. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014; \$22.50.

Questions concerning literary form constitute one of the major challenges for modern readers of Plato: why did Plato choose to write dialogues? Or, why did he choose to write this or that work in the form of a dialogue? How do the literary features of his writings relate to his philosophical project? How is form related to content? In *Plato's Wayward Path*, David Schur takes a fresh look at these issues, questioning recent views on Plato's use of dialogue. He rejects the idea that there is a single thesis behind the dialectical meanders, an approach which he describes as "philosophical" or "teleological" and traces back to Friedrich Schleiermacher. He opts instead for an approach that gives priority to themes and literary features.

The book consists of two parts, each of which is subdivided into three chapters. The chapters are preceded by a short preface and followed by a glossary of transliterated Greek words, a bibliography, and a general index. The glossary is a useful supplement meant to make the book more accessible to Greekless readers. I have noticed, however, a few typos in the glossary (for example *ananke*, instead of *anankei* on p. 117; *eisodon* instead of *eisodos* on p. 118).

The first part of the book reassesses the problem of literary form in Plato. Chapters one and two argue that literary form is not subservient to content, as the view that Plato used classical rhetoric devices to present a unitary didactic agenda may imply. Taking a radical departure from the traditional interpretation, in chapter three, Schur proposes to approach the Platonic dialogues, seen as literary rather than philosophical, works, through twentieth-century literary-rhetorical analysis, an enterprise which, he argues, demonstrates the absence of "a single argumentative agenda" (p. xi).

The second part of the book focuses on the *Republic* as a work of narrative fiction, offering a new perspective on the dialogue as a whole. Chapter 4 deals with the very beginning of the dialogue as well as with the myth of Er in book x. Schur endeavours to trace "the wayward" path of Plato's argumentation from the first line of the *Republic* to its "elliptical conclusion" through the non-linear progression of the discussion. He claims that "one of the primary functions of the *Republic's* conceptual and perceptual infrastructure is to express uncertainty" through the "renunciation of authorial authority", the "repudiation of human complacency" and "the refusal to settle for and on an (inadequate) telos." (p. 59) There are some fascinating twists in Schur's reading of the myth of Er, but it is hardly possible to see how a work which closes with the certainty of salvation, if one is persuaded by the author's words

(καὶ ἤμας ἂν σώσειεν, ἂν πειθώμεθα αὐτῷ [...] ἂν ἐμοὶ πειθώμεθα), could be taken to express uncertainty and to undermine authorial authority. Schur attempts to solve this difficulty by claiming that “although Socrates here seems unusually and personally committed to something he is saying, the attitude expressed by his words is nevertheless far from certainty. He is making a noble prediction, relying heavily on the power of uplifting imagery and visionary sentiment as well as the appeal of future returns.” (p. 79). Yet, there is no incompatibility between certainty and prediction; on the contrary, a prediction can be more or less certain and, in the case of the myth of Er, certainty grounded on authorial authority clearly prevails.

Further to demonstrate the validity of his point, in chapters five and six, Schur deals with two specific sequences of argument, namely, first the inquiry into the ideal regime and, secondly, the images of the Sun, Line, and Cave, through which Socrates accounts for the Good. Interestingly, Schur argues that the image (εἰκῶν) of the Cave should be seen as a “hypothetical scenario” and not as an “allegory, myth, or literary simile” (p. 99). The latter approach—the traditional one—is said to seduce the reader “into the fixed confines of allegorical interpretation, in which the procedure of making likeness leaves nowhere else to go” (p. 99). Yet, it is difficult to see what else could a narrative Plato qualifies as εἰκῶν be other than a simile. The fact that this narrative is presented “in a context where likenesses and *mimesis* are subjected to radical criticism” (p. 100) does not entail that it is not to be understood as an image. After all, Plato’s criticism of *mimesis* is far from being univocal and unconditional: there are kinds of *mimesis* that are beneficial to the soul, but only the dialectician is able to create such similes; Socrates indeed does so by producing the image of the Cave.

The overall conclusion is that the *Republic* is not only a dialogue on virtue, justice, and the *polis* but, first and foremost, a dialogue on dialogue: it is a self-reflecting conversation: “Many of the major problems posed by the *Republic* can be understood as impasses, navigated by means of rhetorical tropes that allow the book to keep going. The journey to reach ideals is thus one of asymptotic approximation; a journey of perpetual approach. In a conversation that sets out with the end goal of perfection in mind, endings dissolve into beginnings, while verbal displacements proliferate whereby the ideal world becomes the reality, theory becomes practice, method (path) becomes topic (place), and conversation becomes philosophy.” (p. 116) Within this framework, the conversation and the relevant methodological questions become the most accessible part of the content itself, while the topics traditionally considered as being at the heart of the philosophical debate appear to be surprisingly remote.

A radically different *Republic* emerges from Schur’s analysis. His Plato does not assume “the position of knower”, but “considers many different points from