

R. KNAB, *Platons Siebter Brief. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar*. Spoudasmata, Band 110, Hildesheim: Olms, 2006, 337 pp., ISBN 3-487-13168-4.

This volume – an essentially unaltered doctoral dissertation – is, or claims to be (or include), a commentary on, an important text: a text, indeed, that for some readers of Plato is absolutely fundamental, because it is the one place – if we disregard any other letters that might, just possibly, but most improbably, be genuine – where Plato talks *in propria persona*, and certainly the one place where he talks *in propria persona* about his own writing. Not only that: the *Seventh Letter*, if genuine, contains what will be Plato's own direct statement of what the readers in question – members of the Tübingen-Milan *hairesis* – regard as *the* key to a proper interpretation of his writing as a whole, namely that (I paraphrase) 'there exists no written account [*sungramma*] of mine about the things in relation to which I am in earnest' (*Letter VII*, 341B-C). For such things are not expressible in writing like other things (341C again), but can be grasped only after 'much *sunousia*' (341C6), in an oral context, when understanding comes about 'like light kindled from the leap of a flame', and 'then nourishes itself from its own resources' (341C7-D2, with slight over-translation). Much remains obscure about this passage, for example about with what or with whom the *sunousia* is supposed to take place, but the *tubinghesi-milanesi* have their own preferred ways of filling out the text; which, when thus filled out, may – from the point of view of these interpreters – be used (in conjunction especially with the passage on the shortcomings of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus*, which is the main source of the filling-out in question) as the chief basis, or a key part of the basis, on which we are to read the whole of Plato's written output. Thus, for example, one of the most significant aspects of Platonic writing is the author's tendency to *hold back*: he always has resources in reserve, things

that he could say (but cannot write, as his failed Syracusan pupil, Dionysius, had, according to the *Seventh Letter*, scandalously claimed to be able to do): especially about the first principles of everything, on which – as everyone will agree – Plato's Socrates, in the dialogues, mixes tantalising suggestion with frustrating, or irritating, reticence.

So the stakes are high; and from this point of view Knab's commentary is in principle to be thoroughly applauded. It is an essential condition of a proper and full assessment of the 'esotericists' case that the letter be studied and understood as an object in its own right, in the way that Knab's volume seems from its title to promise to do. The seventh stands out from the general run of the collection of thirteen 'Platonic' letters, most of which are mere curiosities, worth hardly more than a glance, and obviously *un*Platonic; nevertheless the collection has by and large been treated as a whole – or else historians have checked the seventh for its historical reliability (so e. g. P. A. Brunt, in an essay apparently unknown to Knab, who is generally more familiar with German sources than those in other languages [I refer to Brunt's 'Plato's Academy and politics', in P. A. Brunt, *Studies in Greek History and Thought*, Oxford 1993, 282–342), while Platonists and philosophers have checked it for the reliability of its Platonism. It was, then, with some anticipation that I first approached Knab, supposing that his volume would provide us, at last, with a rounded view of the letter and the issues surrounding it. Sadly, however, I have to report that the book does nothing of the sort. The Introduction begins with a bare six pages on the question of the letter's authenticity, followed by nine pages of 'Ereignisgeschichte', two of chronological tables, then 26 of 'paraphrasierende Interpretation des Briefes', Knab's preferred division of its contents (p. 44), and finally six pages which address what Knab seems finally to take as the chief objection to our taking the letter as genuinely Plato's: that it is, as Hackforth put it (Knab, p. 45), apparently so 'perplexingly discursive and abounding in digressions'.

Not so, replies Knab, in a sentence that sums up his own interpretation (I cite him without one footnote, and paraphrasing/summarizing two others): 'Die klare Strukturierung des Briefes . . . , das Bestreben des "Gesprächsführers", d.h. Platons,

die “Gesprächspartner”, d.h. die Adressaten, auf die eigene Verständnisebene zu bringen, und deshalb auch vom Thema abzuweichen [sc. but only apparently so: Knab refers us to *Laws* 891D7-E3], gemahnen in hohem Grade an Merkmale platonischer Dialoge’ (50) – even though, of course, a letter is not a dialogue; but why, Knab asks, should we not expect a letter, too, to conform to the rules of an art of *logoi* (*Phaedo* 90B7)? In sum, the content of the Introduction – paraphrasing apart – resembles what one might have expected from a substantial journal article, with a title like ‘The Argument and Structure of Plato’s *Seventh Letter*’. The problem, however, in my judgment, is that even from this point of view what we are offered is not substantial enough. Knab for the most part is content merely to state that the letter has a particular structure rather than to demonstrate that it has it. The consequence of his approach is that the reader may begin to understand how the letter *might* be read in the way that Knab proposes, but is not likely to acquire any new motivation actually to read it that way; for what underpins Knab’s reading of the *Seventh Letter* is hardly anything more than the assumption that the *tübingese-milanese* reading of Plato overall is correct. For anyone who happens to belong to a different school of interpretation, or to no school at all, the pickings from Knab’s first fifty pages are likely to be fairly slim.

Part of the problem, for Knab, is that he seems to suppose (or in any case to suggest) that he only has to get rid of the objections to the letter’s authenticity in order to leave the field to Tübingen’s squadrons. But plenty of scholars have been content to accept that the letter is Plato’s without feeling the need to accept any version of the ‘esotericist’ reading; and the *onus probandi*, despite what Thomas Szlezák claims (with Knab’s approval: 50), is no more on those who deny than on those who assert the genuineness of the letter. Why should there be any *presumption* that any part of the traditional corpus is authentic, when some parts of it are universally agreed not to be; and why, especially, should there be any *presumption* that any of the letters is authentic, when at least some of them are dismissed by everyone as spurious? Szlezák’s claim is essentially that he can meet all currently available objections, while seeing little possibility of any new ones. (Knab also cites on p.6 Giovanni

Reale's extraordinary proposal, in 1993, that the authenticity of the letter is 'nowadays ... *communis opinio*': even the most cursory survey of literature in English in the last two decades – perhaps starting with Cooper's Hackett *Plato: Complete Works*, a *sine qua non* for English-speaking students since 1997 [see p. 1635] – would be enough to show this to be untrue. See also, more recently, Malcolm Schofield's *Plato: Political Philosophy, Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought*, Oxford 2006, on which see further below. But while he, Knab and others may think it possible to pick off objections one by one, at least three of Knab's five listed types of objection will keep on coming back – namely 1. stylistic peculiarities: Knab, curiously, is rather more interested, in his commentary, in pointing out similarities than dissimilarities in relation to the language of the dialogues; 2. philosophical peculiarities: Knab seems happy not to provide any analysis of his own, preferring merely to point out that while some have regarded the philosophical 'Exkurz' as a kind of foreign body in the whole, others have treated it as integral to the whole; and 3. the apparent lack of coherence in its contents, on which Knab is more forthcoming (see above), but hardly more successful because of his preference for statement over argument. Moreover there is one kind of objection to which Knab – so far as I have been able to detect – pays no attention, and which is potentially more lethal than any other: to the extent that the letter is, *inter alia*, a justification for Plato's having devoted so much time and attention to improving the philosophical health of a foreign tyrant, while turning his back on politics at home, how compatible is *this* picture, of a defensive if not apologetic Plato, with the voice that seems to emerge from the dialogues, of utter contempt and scorn for all contemporary and practically all preceding 'statesmen', and all contemporary forms of government bar none? Of course it could be that Dionysius was less bad than Moses Finley, for one, thought him to be ('Plato and practical politics', reprinted in *Aspects of Antiquity: Discoveries and Controversies*, Harmondsworth 1972, esp. 78), and it could also be that Plato really did think that Syracuse offered opportunities, of a sort envisaged by the Socrates of *Republic VI*, that contemporary Athens did not. (Really? No potential young tyrants there? Plato's Socrates

seems to talk to a good few.) But against whom would Plato be defending himself and his behaviour? Against which particular part of the Athenian public, or any other public, would he think he *needed* to defend himself? Not the unphilosophical part, for sure. But that, evidently, will cover practically everyone.

If this kind of objection registers at all with the defenders of the *Seventh Letter*, they will presumably play down the letter's defensive aims in favour of others. Indeed for Knab they ultimately seem not to be *defensive* at all: when the author of the letter, in the closing lines, says 'I thought it necessary to explain my having made Syracuse my destination for a second time, because of the oddness and unreasonableness of what happened' (352A2-4), this is understood as referring to the contrast between Dion's state of mind and Dionysius'. Or so I understand Knab; his remarks at this point in the Introduction (p. 49) strike me as too brief to be helpful, and when I turn to the commentary no further help is to be found. As things stand, what he proposes looks more ingenious than persuasive – and I remain of the view that the ending of the letter in fact serves to confirm, if not that the tone of the letter is apologetic (defensive), at least that there is the kind of confusion of aims in the letter that Hackforth and others have detected. So the letter is, on this (and my view), a pastiche: a term also used by Schofield in his new book, on different and possibly even more compelling grounds: *Plato: Political Philosophy*, 16-9.

This brings me to the final disappointment: the commentary itself. As a commentator myself, I have tended to take it as read that it is the commentator's role, first and foremost, to assemble as much information as possible about each part and aspect of the target text, either (a) with a view to giving his or her reasoned interpretation of each part and aspect, and so, ideally, of the whole, or (b) in order to enable the reader to reach his or her own such interpretation (or a combination of (a) and (b)). Knab's commentary, sadly, does neither. The deficiencies are most visible in relation to the central passages (roughly, from Stephanus pages 341 to 345), where Knab's strangely staccato comments mostly offer a *tubinghese*-type line on the 'Schriftkritik', and do nothing or virtually nothing to help the reader with the philosophical aspects and problems of the 'Exkurs'. Two small examples: 1.

‘*sunousia* [in 341C6-7] bezeichnet hier das Zusammensein mit einem Lehrenden ...’: why so? Neither supposed parallel is persuasive; there is no mention of a teacher in the *Letter* passage, nor is there any obvious reason why we should import one (indeed, insofar as we then have to ask where the teacher got his understanding from, and where his teacher got his, ..., there is probably good reason not to import him). Thus only Knab’s hermeneutic allegiance is visible, and that is by this stage in any case a given. 2. On 342E2 *epistêmês tou pemptou* (*metochos*) Knab comments ‘Mit der Formulierung ... bezeichnet Platon hier den “Übergang zwischen dialektischer und dianoetischer Grunderfahrung”, den “entscheidende(n) Punkt des platonischen Systems” (H.J.Krämer [1964] 85 ...)’. Again, why should we believe that that is what Plato (if he is the author) has in mind; or, to put it another way, why should we believe H.-J.Krämer? It is useful to have the reference, but it is less than useful for a reader – perhaps a tiro – to be misled into thinking that what Knab says (and Krämer says) is just *true*, without the need for further discussion. I should also add that Knab’s alleged parallels for the language and thought of the letter often have an effect opposite to the one intended; that is, the parallels often serve to raise again the possibility that the author is someone who knows Plato very well indeed, and is able to reproduce his language – but without being able to produce quite the right sorts of outcomes. Here, however, Knab is at least in part simply continuing an old habit of commentators, of referring to passages which seem to use the same kind of language but without indicating how such apparent similarities should be put to use by the interpreter. Here, at any rate, despite himself (because his aim *seems* always to be to try to show that this or that aspect of the language/thought of the letter is genuinely Platonic), Knab does a really useful job, sparing us much time-consuming use of our search engines; and it may be that this is enough to justify recommending the book for purchase to institutional libraries. However, for the reasons given, I believe that it almost wholly fails to live up to its description of itself as a ‘commentary’. I regret to pass quite so negative a judgement on the whole volume, but things for sale ought to do what they claim to do on the label. (Burnet’s Oxford text is printed with some changes, again mostly insufficiently

argued for; this is not, either, by any stretch of the imagination a new edition.)

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