

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 13 number 2

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## Book Reviews

**Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks.** By Ofelia Schutte. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. xvi + 216 pp.: \$22.00.)

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### I

Much of nineteenth-century philosophy takes as its theme the drama of consciousness, the movement of spirit from alienation to wholeness, from the child-like to the mature. The most influential of nineteenth-century philosophers saw theirs as the age of triumph, rational spirit made manifest. It remained for a few to see the drama very differently and to understand that under the much vaunted Reason of the age, something terribly unresolved and, indeed, explosive was lurking. Thus when we look back at the nineteenth century from our vantage point, few portrayals of the movement of spirit are as compelling as Nietzsche's. It is unfortunate, then, that the force of his critique is often eclipsed by the "immoralism" of his solutions, which, in his later work, pushes away even the sympathetic reader.

In light of this, we can appreciate Schutte's *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks*. Schutte sets herself the task of rescuing those elements of Nietzsche's thought that speak to the healing of nihilism from his more questionable social and political views. She presents Nietzsche as an ontologist whose basic categories—the will to power, the eternal recurrence, the innocence of becoming, and the Übermensch—exhibit an overarching unity, although with ambiguities serious enough to warrant a thorough critique. While providing this critique, Schutte gives us a lucid, balanced, and dialectically subtle account of Nietzsche's work, which is a pleasure to read.

The central notion to examine in the critique of Nietzsche is the will to power. For an adequate understanding of the will to power, Schutte requires that we take as central Nietzsche's view that all truth is metaphorical. Indeed, the notion of truth as metaphor is so fundamental to Schutte's reading of Nietzsche that she interprets Zarathustra's most famous words in an explicitly epistemological way. "God is dead—the Übermensch shall live" means, in Schutte's reading of Nietzsche, that "Metaphysical truth is dead—from now on metaphorical truth shall live" (p. 92). Just as Nietzsche rejects the reifications of Western metaphysics as doing violence to the protean nature of reality as process and becoming, so too he discards a view of truth as univocal and static. Thus the notion that reality is the

will to power is a truth that must be understood contextually to be part of Nietzsche's overall critique of Western metaphysics as essentially dualistic.

For Nietzsche, the dualism that haunts Western thinking is the expression of a nihilistic spirit, a spirit which bitterly resents what it cannot control. These resenters, in the name of wisdom, have reduced time, earth, body, the sensuous to the level of "mere appearance" and have posited a "higher" reality whose only real purpose is to negate life itself.

In the conflict of the Dionysian, the Apollonian, and the Socratic which precedes this positing, the Dionysian carries the greatest ontological weight being identified with instinctual force, universal energy, the dynamic continuity of life itself. The Dionysian is also the source of human transcendence. For while we are connected to the "primal" unity of nature through the unconscious, the ego, by its demand for security and control, catches us in the "agony of individuation." The breaking down of individuated consciousness, the return to the totality of what is, what Nietzsche calls the "joy of self-forgetfulness," is thus expressed by the Dionysian as well.

The Dionysian, however, is only one pole of our deepest unconscious life, for opposed to the sheer swell of unindividuated existence is the beauty of individuated form, the Apollonian. The tension between the two is, for Nietzsche, the source of our greatest creative activity, but it is also rife with danger. For the Apollonian, identified with the dream image and hence with illusion, seeks to delude the individual into forgetting the universal ground of life. And because the Apollonian can enchant with the beauty of individuated form, it succeeds. Illusion triumphs over truth although some aspect of nature's creativity, the unconscious, is preserved.

But yet a new principle emerges to usurp the triumph of the Apollonian. This principle is not born out of the drive for creativity but speaks for the desire to purify life of those elements that the ego cannot control. Schutte understands this Socratic principle of abstract reason as overpowering the Dionysian from within and without. It is a principle extrinsic to art, yet "as a formal principle it succeeds the Apollonian impulse from within" (p. 19). Conceptual form dislodges sensuous form and is even more successful in overpowering the Dionysian. For the Socratic principle replaces the liberating but frightening loss of self with its polar opposite, a reality made into *fixed object*, a world for consciousness to manipulate and control. The cost, however, is great—the fragmentation of human being and the ensuing nihilism of the culture as a whole.

Just as, for Nietzsche, the overcoming of dualism means the return to the Dionysian, so Schutte takes this principle as the key to the interpretation of Nietzsche's own categories. She wishes to replace a strictly logical understanding of his categories with a more fluid, metaphorical one. Such a reading, she claims, will reveal the ways in which Nietzsche's thought overcomes nihilism and shows us where he himself loses this Dionysian perspective and falls into the rigid im-

peratives of categorical thinking. This will also clarify some of the paradoxes that plague Nietzsche's philosophy.

The notion of the will to power, Schutte tells us, avails itself of two readings and Nietzsche himself vacillates between them. On the one hand, the will to power should be the basis of an ontology that allows us to overcome dualism, and Nietzsche treats it as such. When he speaks from this metaphorical standpoint, the will to power is compatible with the notion of the eternal recurrence, the innocence of becoming, and the vision of Zarathustra, all of which have as their central message the overcoming of dualism. But Nietzsche also views the will to power along the lines of a model of domination:

Under the recurrence model, there is no sense of separation between cause and effect, no dualism, no ego, no will, and everything is in flux and flowing. Under the domination model, the fundamental structure is the dualism between the strong and the weak, the active and the reactive, and there is much rhetoric about dividing the strong from the weak through great acts of willing and commanding regardless of statements made elsewhere about the nonexistence of the will (p. 59).

Schutte argues, convincingly, that this second interpretation cannot be reconciled with the Dionysian perspective. For when the will to power is interpreted as domination, it sets up a new dualism—the strong *vs.* the weak, the active *vs.* the reactive, the doer *v.* the deed. This last duality is particularly problematic since Nietzsche also rejects traditional concepts of self as false abstractions from the dynamic processes of life. So too the domination view would be incompatible with Nietzsche's critique of causality, requiring as it does "will" as a compelling or coercive force—a view explicitly rejected by Nietzsche in many places including *Twilight of the Idols*.

Schutte claims that the will to power as domination is a literal understanding and not a metaphorical one. Yet it must be understood metaphorically, as she persuasively argues:

From the writings of the period of the transvaluation of all values (1883 through 1888), one may deduce that metaphors represent the most truthful form of knowledge because as relations of likeness between various forms of appearances they are perfectly in harmony with the ontological understanding of reality as a world of appearances and change. Metaphors express the truth of appearances as metaphysics had expressed the truth of the thing-in-itself which is no longer credible to us. . . . Metaphorical relationships are pluralistic and open-ended. Any aspect of reality may be metaphorically related to an innumerable variety of other aspects and each metaphorical relation may be interpreted in multifaceted ways (pp. 100–1).

Thus the will to power as metaphor is the

only interpretation which "combines Nietzsche's critique of logic with his Dionysian affirmation of truth, life, and art (p. 100).

Why then, Schutte must ask, does Nietzsche lapse into this uncritical and even self-contradictory view? Her answer here is rather surprising, pointing as it does to a hitherto unrecognized coincidence of feminist and Dionysian perspectives. For Schutte, the dualisms of Western metaphysics, stemming as they do from the desire to control, manifest the values of a patriarchal authoritarianism inherent not only in our religious tradition but in our philosophical tradition as well. While Nietzsche's philosophy may liberate us from the judgmental Father of the Garden, Nietzsche does not go so far as to free himself from the masculine consciousness inherent in the philosophical tradition, hence his glorification of virtue as "manly" excellence and power. And in so far as Nietzsche's thought is constrained by these deeper psychic prejudices, he cannot realize his project fully and returns to the category of the will to power as domination. In so far as he extols this notion, he is not, Schutte tells us, a healer of nihilism but a harbinger of it in a more virulent form.

I will come back to Schutte's implicit equation of the Dionysian with the feminine since this reading of Nietzsche yields other interesting points, but first I want to continue the outline of her work. In one chapter, Schutte takes up traditional interpretations of Nietzsche, in particular, those of Stern, Kaufman, Deleuze, and Heidegger. She sees these other interpretations as problematic precisely because they fail to distinguish between the metaphorical and literal interpretations of the will to power, and hence the paradigm of the will to power as domination at least in part controls these other readings. For example, in the case of Kaufman who does argue against a "crude" reading of the will to power, the failure to understand it as the overcoming of dualism leads him to a mere affirmation of what Schutte calls an "alienated moral standpoint," namely reason vs. passion, duty vs. pleasure, and similar dualisms. And in so far as interpreters like Kaufman do not see Nietzsche maintaining the will to power as domination, they make the further error of not taking his social and political views seriously. For Schutte, Nietzsche's immoralism is not to be interpreted as Danto does. It is not an immorality only in the sense of not conforming to traditional Christian ethics. Rather, the will to power, when taken literally by Nietzsche, issues in authoritarian political views that must be addressed.

Schutte begins her own discussion of Nietzsche's politics with the notion of the *Übermensch*. She points out that again, Nietzsche's thinking operates within two distinct frameworks, the literal and the metaphorical. Schutte extends her previous criticisms of Kaufman and Danto. Each, she tells us, fails to see the *Übermensch* as a "symbolic idea" and claims that it has actual historical referents. For Schutte, the notion of the *Übermensch* must be viewed metaphorically if it is to be compatible with Zarathustra's own words. She denies the term any ontic significance; as metaphor it tells us what it means to transcend the dualism and alienation of the human condition:

The *Übermensch* transcends the present possibilities of human beings. It is the child and creation of human beings . . . one must learn about life's spontaneity from chil-

dren whose consciousness will not have been as impaired with nihilistic values as ours has. The superior man is someone who becomes a master of dualism, whereas the *Übermensch* stands for the transcendence of dualism. There could be no more telling difference between the two types (p. 123).

Thus, given the will to power as the overcoming of dualism, the *Übermensch* symbolizes the possibility of self-integration. Yet while we can agree with this latter point, it seems questionable to hold that the term has *no* historical referent. Certainly in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche speaks of Goethe as having “disciplined himself into wholeness” and having a faith that he (Nietzsche) has baptized as Dionysian. Nevertheless, Schutte goes on to make a distinction between the *Übermensch* and the “superior one,” the “higher man,” which do refer to a concrete historical type. For Schutte, these latter notions are the result of the will to power taken literally. And in so far as they come to dominate Nietzsche’s thought, an elitist morality and an authoritarian politics ensue.

Schutte argues against the “master” morality not from a perspective external to Nietzsche but from his own Dionysian standpoint. The *Rangordnung* represents a set of static categories that violates life as process and overcoming. Indeed, there is a direct line between Nietzsche’s ordering and the class categories of the *Republic*. Nietzsche erects a new absolute on the metaphysical fictions of individuality and causation; human existence is subsumed under a dualistic ontology of fixed types. Apologists might argue that the rank order serves life as a means of preservation but any stability thus gained is by way of subordination. Whether we say higher—lower, life affirming—life denying, ascending—descending, a dualism, by definition, sneaks back in. This is, of course, a problem for all those philosophers, Schutte among them, who see the present task of thinking as the overcoming of dualism but who want to maintain the moral as an irreducible category. It is Nietzsche who is most consistent here in that he maintains that the aesthetic and not the moral is the fundamental drive and proper end of human life.

Schutte, in the course of her discussion of Nietzsche’s politics, returns to the question of why he abandons the Dionysian viewpoint and posits a set of categories inimical to his original critique. Her answer here is more humanly suggestive and less strictly feminist. She sees particular significance in a passage from *Ecce Homo*:

In every respect . . . you will find (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) the same *deliberate* turning away from the instincts that had made possible a Zarathustra.

All this is a recuperation: who would guess after *all what* sort of recuperation such a squandering of good-naturedness as Zarathustra represents makes necessary? (p. 144).

According to Schutte (I am amplifying her position here) Nietzsche felt the need to repress his own Dionysian instincts, his generous outpouring of spirit having been met only by increasing isolation and depletion. Nietzsche’s personal

suffering is extraordinary. He failed to secure even the most ordinary emotional nourishment and hence his thinking took a “violent turn in the opposite direction.” It did, in fact, become authoritarian.

Schutte, contrary to other interpreters, holds that Nietzsche’s politics are strongly and seriously antidemocratic:

Kaufman has argued that Nietzsche opposed the state because it restricts the development of individuals. He portrays Nietzsche as a champion of the rights of “superior” individuals to self-realization, still using the “self” in a traditional sense. A different approach is taken by Tracey Strong, who emphasizes Nietzsche’s interest in the transfiguration of the individual and ultimately of society. But both Kaufman’s notion of self-realization and Strong’s notion of transfiguration tend to depict Nietzsche’s goals too altruistically. In his politics, Nietzsche was not as concerned with the transfiguration or self-realization of individuals as he was with the conditions whereby a special class of artist-philosopher would acquire power over society. The main issue for Nietzsche remained, *Who would rule?* (p. 175).

Although I think Schutte herself may be guilty of the literalism of which she accuses others in her discussion of “breeding,” “the herd,” “master vs. slave,” “the sacrifice of the weak,” she is quite right in raising the political question as fully as she does for reasons both intrinsic and extrinsic to Nietzsche’s work. Schutte reminds us that in the context of his own work—*The Genealogy of Morals*—Nietzsche argues that all systems of value are inherently political. Nietzsche saw his own work as a crucial *historical* task, the end of which was to affect *actual* social change. And aside from Nietzsche’s own intentions, even if individual life could be regenerated by embracing the Dionysian, we would still have to ask what kind of political life this would entail. In short, who would rule?

For Schutte, Nietzsche’s answer to this question is clear. Although the proclaimed death of a patriarchal God would remove the source of other-worldly authority, Nietzsche would have a this-worldly substitute. For the notion of patriarchal domination marks not only his politics but his social views as well, his views of family, marriage, and women. A feminist perspective does inform Schutte’s discussion here but it works in an intelligent rather than an ideological way. Schutte is sensitive to those aspects of Nietzsche’s thought that ignore or even disparage the “gentler” aspects of human experience. She has a keen eye for the somewhat uncritical acceptance of power as the ground of being, which often marks Nietzsche’s thought. And in light of her examination of his political and social views, Schutte concludes that Nietzsche’s struggle against nihilism is incomplete. Indeed, if one followed his social and political views to the end, we would have to see Nietzsche ultimately as an immoralist. In Kant, the moral answer to the ordering of practical affairs is the categorical imperative—to will for others what we would have willed universally—but for Nietzsche, the answer is quite the opposite. Placing one’s will on a par with others may be “good manners” but it is, in the end, decadence.

II

“God is dead . . . The Übermensch shall live.” We have seen that Schutte interprets these words epistemologically; the phrase becomes a dialectical tool for the “critical” reading of Nietzsche’s work. While this approach yields much that is valuable, particularly in the way of conceptual rigor, the book does leave one unsatisfied in another way. While Schutte is right in not wanting to see Nietzsche’s ideas as psychic effluences of a brilliant but unbalanced mind, we would also have to say that it is problematic to treat Nietzsche’s work wholly apart from the man himself. For if his work is meant to heal, if he stands with those rare thinkers who talk to the whole person and not the detached intellect, a charge of “ad hominem” is existentially irrelevant, though it may be logically correct.

Schutte’s discussion of the will to power would benefit, I think, if we did in fact “behold the man.” In her analysis, the concept of the will to power is to be understood in light of the healing of dualism. This leads her to look upon the will to power as domination as contrary to Nietzsche’s own project. Yet there are also problems with the will to power interpreted as the Dionysian assent to the eternal recurrence of all things. As Schutte correctly points out there is no necessary connection between saying “yes” to life unconditionally and having a sense of inner integrity. Nietzsche, Schutte says,

does not acknowledge the possibility of a person loving life to the fullest and yet rejecting the idea of the recurrence for reasons that may perhaps be valid in that person’s life. One may reject the exact repetition of the great years of becoming not because one hates life but because one hates injustice or cruelty. . . . If one is directly implicated in seriously injuring innocent persons it would seem a sign of one’s love of life not to wish to repeat one’s existence (p. 70).

And we might add that even beyond the question of personal responsibility for suffering, we must say no to many things that do occur. Moral outrage may itself be a wholesome response. Because of these problems Schutte offers an alternative “model of existential continuity,” the will to power interpreted from what she calls “the standpoint of inner balance”:

The standpoint of inner balance grounds one’s continuity in time and the continuity between the self and the world in a structure different from either the recurrence or the domination views of order. . . .

The structure of inner balance begins with positing a sense of wholeness within one’s self. This wholeness is attributable to the capacity of the organism to stabilize itself based on the energy it has available to itself at any particular stage of its life. Wholeness does not mean that one is a totality unto oneself. On the contrary, one is aware that the energy available to oneself is a result of the specific types of interaction one chooses to have with one’s environment. But the interaction is not conducted as a way of losing oneself in something larger than oneself (the recurrence model) or as a way of exploiting the environment to enhance one’s power over it (the domination model). The continuity between self and world is based on the need of each organism

to seek its own balance in light of its constitutional needs and the possibilities available in its environment.

One finds the new meaning of balance in the practice of eliciting a sense of wholeness within oneself without doing violence to any of one's centers of consciousness. Thus a practice of internal honesty and directness is called for instead of the average state of distraction and self-deceit. The ego, relaxing its control, assumes a relationship of gentle receptivity toward the total organism. With the ego-mechanism of censorship lifted, the organism may create its own balance if conditions of health are present (pp. 61–62).

What can we make of Schutte's view here? At best she seems to be stretching the will to power in the direction of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, although she speaks of the surrender to becoming rather than to being. Indeed Schutte does claim in her critique of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, that these two philosophers are quite close in this respect:

Nietzsche's theory of reality as flux, or becoming, is not a forgetting of being in the Heideggerian sense. On the contrary, it is a recalling of the human consciousness to its origins in temporality. In other words, ontologically, the differences between Nietzsche and Heidegger are not too striking, except that Nietzsche's primary category is becoming, while Heidegger's is being" (p. 85).

At worst, she veers in the direction of the neutral abstractions of popular psychology from which Nietzsche himself would be the first to flee.

Neither of these two possible readings is satisfactory. They stretch Nietzsche far beyond his own intentions. Schutte seems to be making a tacit identification of the Dionysian with a more feminine sensibility, as connoting acceptance, openness; self-transcendence as merger, the ability to let be. There may be some ground for this; as Schutte points out, Nietzsche does speak, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, of the duality of the Dionysian–Apollonian as being like that of the sexes. But this occurs in an early work and even there does not entail the view that the Dionysian connotes only those gentler qualities, as Schutte presumes. In an analogous point, Schutte commends Nietzsche for making us aware of the hidden ground of Western morality—resentment—with its coincident desires to judge, control, and even to hurt, and for wanting to free us from the patriarchal authority of the Judeo-Christian God. But, again, even if we argue that the lifting of Christian prohibitions would do away with some forms of human perversity, why would it not release others? Because of the very nature of self-consciousness, our instincts are complex with unexpected knots and twists. Certainly the Greek myths attribute much cruelty to the celebrants of Dionysius in their frenzies of merger while the Homeric heroes, undivided and naïve, launch into fits of vengeful fury. Achilles's slaying of the Trojan children on Patroclus's pyre and his cruelly disrespectful treatment of Hector's body may be the other side of Dionysian expression. We could, perhaps, argue that there is yet another ambiguity in Nietzsche's thought, the Dionysian understood as an actual historical stage

through which spirit has passed and the Dionysian as a metaphor for something radically new. But again, to argue that this new and higher stage of spirit would contain only those expressions of feeling Schutte considers to be life-affirming or legitimate, introduces a moral standard outside the will to power and one which involves a dualism quite remote from Nietzsche's philosophy.

How then are we to understand the will to power in Nietzsche? It seems to me that Schutte has some remarks in her concluding chapters that are much more to the point. It is clear that if we take Nietzsche's political and social views seriously, his is not, to borrow Camus's phrase, "the path of sympathy." Indeed his remarks on marriage and women contain an important distinction, that between instinct and feeling. Instinct is synonymous with the universal ground of being, the drives of will, strength, gravity, and authority. Feeling, on the other hand, is seen as subjective, idiosyncratic, unstable, momentary. It is also viewed as soft, weak, unserious, in a word, feminine.

For Nietzsche feeling then must be dominated by the will to power. Yet if feeling is not as Nietzsche describes, if it has a more stable, "worldly" aspect binding us to others and the world as a whole, then the repression of ordinary feeling by the will does not issue in wholesomeness but in a new form of fragmentation. As Schutte points out, the term "common" has, for Nietzsche, the connotation of "base." Hence what we have in common must be superseded by the loneliness of the "superior ones" in whom precisely those things that bind us to life—marriage, family, common and ordinary human needs—are suppressed.

It is for this reason that Nietzsche's own conflicts are a key to understanding the fuller cultural significance of the will to power. Literature usually has the advantage over philosophy in that its characters play out the consequences of their thought. Thus we have Raskolnikov for whom the philosophy of the "superior one" justifies murder only to have that philosophy wither under the power of ordinary remorse and horror over the deed done. But in the case of Nietzsche we also have the character acting out the consequences of his thought. Nietzsche speaks of a regeneration of spirit couched in very dramatic terms, while his own destiny bears an uncanny resemblance to Kafka's "Hunger Artist." Nietzsche's was the path, if we can coin such a phrase, of grandiose self-denial. He willed the void and saw this as heroic. When the admiring crowds failed to appear he became his own audience until the neurotic egotism passed into the darkness of psychosis.

Schutte begins to explore these issues in her closing chapters but doesn't go as far as she might. She argues against the will to power as social and political domination but does not point to the fuller significance of the will to power in Nietzsche, that is, the will to power over one's own ordinary feelings. And yet this is enormously important since the primacy of will over feeling and the consequent subjectivizing of human feeling are two of the defining tenets of modernism. The roots of these phenomena are, of course, in both Descartes and Luther, so that, in

a very real sense, the errant son of a Protestant minister played out one of the possibilities of his own denied faith.

This point brings us to one final consideration. At the center of Nietzsche's life and thought is a religious question, and it is surprising that the proclamation of the death of God is all but absent from Schutte's book. (It appears only in an epistemological guise.) The problem may lie, in part, in an unwise tendency to subsume Western religion too easily under the category of patriarchal authoritarianism. While it is clear that this tradition lacks a compelling reality for Schutte, it is certainly a mistake to pass over Nietzsche's complex and intense struggle. For the price he paid for the rejection of God is a key to the more enduring meaning of his work.

In speaking of Nietzsche's warning against the repression of the Dionysian by Socratic dialectic, Schutte makes the converse warning. Although she does not elaborate on this idea, she is certainly right. Although Socratic dialectic cannot replace the artistic impulse, whatever intuitions or meanings we create need to be "tethered." One lesson of the *Meno* is that reason is not just a dissolving faculty but can fix and refine intuitions. By rejecting dialectical reason, ordinary feeling, and religious faith, Nietzsche left himself with no source of stability or connectedness. Yet despite this, Schutte is sanguine about the power of Nietzsche's work to heal the nihilism of our culture:

Breaking through the chains of command through which human experience is generally understood, dissected, and evaluated is the most liberating act and yet the most threatening act against the values presently controlling the self-understanding of human beings. Despite the setbacks affecting Nietzsche's theory of values, such a fixture is nevertheless promised in Nietzsche's image of the child's "sacred Yes" to life and in the symbol of the *Übermensch* (p. 193).

Without mitigating Schutte's laudable contribution to the canon of Nietzsche scholarship, I think we must part company with her here. For whether we interpret the Dionysian along more feminine lines as Schutte does or as the heroic will to power of Nietzsche himself, it remains a problematic prescription for everyday life. In thinking about the role of the aesthetic in the healing of nihilism, we might do well to take Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, as another guide:

It is, therefore, one of the most important tasks of culture to subject Man to form even in his purely physical life, and to make him aesthetic as far as ever the realm of Beauty can extend, since the moral condition can be developed only from the aesthetic, not from the physical condition. If Man is to possess in each individual case the faculty to make his judgment and his will the judgment of the human species, if from every limited existence he is to find the way through to an infinite one, out of every dependent condition to be able to make the leap forward to self-dependence and freedom, he must take care not to be at any moment merely individual, serving merely the natural law. If he is to be ready and able to rise out of the narrow circle of natural ends to rational

ends, he must already have practiced himself for the latter while he was within the former, and have already realized his physical determination with a certain freedom that belongs to spiritual nature—that is, according to laws of Beauty.<sup>1</sup>

**Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato.** By Hans-Georg Gadamer. Translated with an introduction by P. Christopher Smith. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. xv + 221 pp.: \$16.95.)

RICHARD VELKLEY

Plato and hermeneutics—what is the connection? We are led to this question by Gadamer, the foremost philosopher of the hermeneutical school, whose life-long occupation was the study of Plato. One wonders if the recent explosion of attention paid to Gadamer and hermeneutics has been sufficiently interested in the connection between this apparently most modern and advanced of philosophical attitudes, and ancient thought. The translated essays in this volume throw much light on this problem. They show that to understand this connection, one must not only possess a theory of reading, but the art of reading as well. The writing of the essays spans four decades (the earliest was published in 1934), but they display a remarkable unity of concern.

By way of approach to these concerns, a remark on hermeneutics is in order. Hermeneutical theory is reflection on the character of all forms of understanding, but it is particularly concerned with understanding an other where common premises cannot be taken for granted; with such cases where what we seek to understand is alien because of temporal or cultural distance. Hence the problem of translation is paradigmatic for the account of *Verstehen*. Something like hermeneutical theory, as a theory of how to recover the sources of an aging tradition, can occur in any tradition, but as a theory of the method of textual interpretation, it is modern in origin. “. . . Hermeneutics came to flower in the Romantic era as a consequence of the modern dissolution of firm bonds with tradition,” that is, when modern man became fully conscious of his distance from antiquity (“On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, p. 21). The specific historical situation of hermeneutics does not, however, exhaust its meaning, but helps to bring that meaning into full view. Hermeneutical thinking is not limited to textual understanding, but is present in all human efforts to make “the unfamiliar into the familiar,” wherever such efforts are self-conscious. This can occur in conversation or anywhere language is operative in communication.

1. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 110.