

## BOOK REVIEW

*Parmenides, Plato, and Mortal Philosophy: Return from Transcendence.* By Vishwa ADLURI. Continuum Studies in Ancient Philosophy. London and New York: Continuum Books. Pp. xv + 212. Hardcover, £65.00/\$120.00. ISBN 978-0-8264-5753-0.

In this highly original study of Parmenides' poem and Plato's response in the *Phaedrus*, Vishwa Adluri identifies the leading problem for both thinkers as "how do we speak/write about the finite, fragile, irreplaceable, incarnate fate of specific mortals, when language is, in some sense, outside of time?" (94). The inspiration for this book came in part from Adluri's desire to pay homage, as Plato did to Socrates, to his mentor, Reiner Schürmann. One of Schürmann's themes was the radical individuality of the mortal singular, which metaphysics cannot capture. Philosophy trades in language and argument, *logos*, which are abstracted from the things that form their subject matter. Yet we its practitioners are born, thrive, and die in time, each of us weaving a unique web of experience that defines us as mortal singulars. Mortality, "individual-being-in-time" (55), is the great problematic of the human, the stark divide for the Greeks between human and god. Philosophy misses its mark if it does not help us "belong to [our] own death" and, thus knowing, bear "untransferable responsibility" for self and actions (20). Parmenides and Plato so help us by depicting, not theorizing, the journeys of the *kouros*, the "youth," and of Socrates, who return from *logos* about timeless being to self-knowledge in our home among fellow mortals, the world of nature, life and death.

This book is for readers with a background in ancient philosophy. After a Foreword by Luc Brisson there follow five sections: Introduction and Part I, setting out Adluri's thesis and key concepts; Part II, an exegesis of Parmenides' poem; Part III, Plato's response; Part IV, conclusion; Appendix, translation and brief commentary. A bibliography and index of things and names close the volume.

In Part I, a key concept for Adluri is the polarity *logos–muthos*. *Muthos* ("account" or "narrative") grasps individual mortal existence by foregrounding time

and thus, the individual. Adluri finds a tripartite mythical structure in Parmenides' poem: *proem* proper to the youth and his mortal journey; speech of the goddess about unchanging being; *muthos* of the poem as a whole, which articulates both (40). Parmenides' message is to be sought in the structure of the entire work. The goddess' second speech picks up important motifs already present in the *proem*, which is replete with action words that establish temporality, and nouns and prefixes that create multiplicity (mares, cities, maidens, paths, *polu*-compounds).

A second polarity is *thumos-psykhê*. Defining soul as self-awareness, Adluri distinguishes two souls as far back as Homer: *thumos*, the old "blood soul," seat of the mortal person, and *psykhê*, "breath soul." The latter gradually appropriates the functions of the former in Greek thought "except mortality" (25, Adluri's emphasis). Adluri makes *thumos* the "cornerstone of [his] philosophy of radical individuality" and the key to his interpretation of Parmenides (27). Adluri contends that *thumos*, time-bound, singular, and desiring to overcome its mortality (cf. Homeric *thumos*' woe at the prospect of death), marks the mortal as Parmenides' subject from the first line of the poem (fr. 1.1, "... carry me as far as *thumos* might reach," tr. Adluri). We attempt to "cure" mortal anxiety by immersing ourselves in intellection, or "timeless interpretation of *phusis* in *logos*" (28). We transcend time only in language, however, forgetting our still-present mortality. To make the birth-to-death trajectory of life central again, philosophy must recover the structure of journey, which Parmenides and Plato give us.

In Part II, Adluri devotes relatively little space to the goddess' arguments that Being is unitary. Borrowing from Charles Kahn, he stresses that the durative aspect and locative value of "to be" set up the goddess' realm as "merely grammatical" (76). Thinking and being can be the same (fr. 3) only in metaphysical *logoi*. Adluri emphasizes instead how the goddess brings the youth back to nature from metaphysics. He rightly points out that the goddess accords being to nature in fr. 1.31-32 ("... how it was inevitable for things seeming to be, *ta dokounta*, to be, *einai*, assuredly, *dokimôs*") and fr. 8.25 ("... for being approaches to being"). For Parmenides, "[t]hings that exist spatio-temporally do exist in a certain way, although not as fully as being" (143). Against dismissals of the second speech, as well as attempts to reconcile the speeches by reinterpreting the first's monism (e.g. Mourelatos, Curd, Thanassas), Adluri argues that in the second speech, the goddess deconstructs her first speech. Parmenides shows up the *conflict* between metaphysics (first speech) and our world of growth, change and decay (second speech), the proper object of mortal knowledge (84). Adluri in fact could have

contended even more forcefully that the text establishes the youth's return to the cosmos, for *komisai* (fr. 2.1) can mean "carry ... [sc. my word] away" (Kirk–Raven), not merely "keep well" or "take well to heart." Only regenerative nature (cf. daimoness who steers all things, fr. 12.3) remains as a hope. Readers will benefit from Adluri's many insights into connotations and cultural background of the poem. Not all may be persuaded, however, that Parmenides emphasizes the mortal singular to the degree that Adluri maintains, for even the second speech is about natural phenomena, not individual persons.

In Part III, Adluri locates Parmenides' deepest influence on Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Both works put soul at the center of a journey from men's ways through contemplation of eternal being to self-knowledge. Against Derrida's analysis of the *Phaedrus* as a critique of writing as *pharmakon*, drug/poison, Adluri maintains that all language, since it uses abstractions, is shown as a problem. Derrida neglects the individuality of characters (122), but Plato gives us, more importantly than the Forms, the mortal Socrates, who will become sacrificial victim, *pharmakos*. By accepting the death of Socrates as a philosophically worthy topic, we can hope to "restore Socratic philosophy as *anthropology*, that is, an account of the *anthropos*" (98). Philosophy's task is to know by linguistic categories *and* to recognize the singular person in love and death (124–5). More clarification of hermeneutical method was needed, however, for, although rejecting a "mouth-piece" interpretation of utterances of Plato's characters (100), Adluri says much about Plato's views without establishing how to go from "Socrates says" to "Plato means."

Schürmann was an expert on Martin Heidegger, who said much about Parmenides. In Part IV Adluri turns to Heidegger's claim that metaphysics reached its end in Nietzsche. Heidegger wanted to reach back to pre-Socratic thought, before, as he held, Plato separated essence from existing things. Adluri criticizes Heidegger's description of temporality for neglecting the concretely existent, mortal individual. Adluri traces this tendency to the influence of Luther, whom Heidegger was reading in the 1920s: the Christian attitude of waiting for the *parousia* prevented Heidegger from fully understanding "the Greek experience of time in its twofold aspect of fluxing becoming and eternal being" (133). Parmenides and Plato, using the language of initiation, better preserve individuality and our ultimate concern, our mortal life.

The Appendix provides an accurate translation of Parmenides' difficult language, and Adluri's literal rendering helps one see how he construes the Greek. The notes explain Adluri's editorial choices and give reasons when his

results differ from those of other scholars. Two passages needed comment: (1) the disputed text at fr. 8.19; (2) fr. 8.38, where “all these things that mortals believe true ... shall be a [mere] name,” ὄνομα ἔσται (DK, Kirk–Raven, Tarán, Coxon), has advantages over “all things ... have been named,” ὀνόμασται (also Woodbury, Curd), since the goddess has just said that “there is nothing apart from what is, and Fate has bound it down to be entire ...” One quibble: it is circular to use ἄσπτη, a conjecture adopted at fr. 1.3, as evidence that the *Phaedrus* borrows city imagery from Parmenides (97), and then to invoke ἄσπται at *Phdr.* 230d5 as evidence for that conjecture (138).

The volume is attractively prepared, with few typos and incorrect page numbers in cross-references. I did wish for an *index locorum*.

This book is not for those looking for focus on Parmenides’ purported monism, or for a comprehensive review of the scholarship. It is for those who want to think in a new way about familiar works. Students of Parmenides, Plato, and indeed, of other philosophers who write narrative, will not look at these thinkers the same again after this provocative reading.

Socrates was a mortal singular. Socrates the character is a pseudo-object, wholly constituted by the text. “The mortal singular” is an abstraction. Philosophical writing, like all language, is *logos*. I think Adluri would agree that even discourse about the mortal singular is implicated in the stasis that he finds in *logos*. We look forward to Adluri’s projected rethinking of transcendence beyond metaphysics (8, 135), for it promises important insights about how philosophical writing can be, not “a form of idolatry” (4), but authentically human.

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