

Letters To The Editor

Dear Editor:

Deborah Tannen's stimulating and provocative essay in a recent issue of *forum* started me thinking about why Plato disliked poetry (and by "poetry" he means imaginative literature). Her thesis is that he objects to the subjective elements which are so characteristic of spoken language. I find myself in disagreement.

First, Plato's philosophic idol, model, and chief spokesman never wrote anything. His entire philosophic method consisted in a mode of spoken discourse: The dialectic. Second, Plato never wrote anything that was not presented in the form of dialogue. If this is the case, why *does* Plato object to poetry?

To answer this question, we must look at not only Plato's attitude toward language, but at the assumptions which determine that attitude. First, and most fundamental, the world as we perceive it is not fully real (allegory of the cave). This is shown by the fact that objects which are clearly related to each other (chairs) are yet different from each other (overstuffed chairs, dining room chairs, etc.). If this is the case, there must be some transcendent reality which informs these disparate objects and enables us to see them as belonging to a single kind. One would think at this point that Plato would have adopted the same schema as St. Thomas Aquinas was to adopt later, that objects are at a first remove from reality since they symbolize that reality, and that words, which symbolize objects are, thus, at a second remove. But Plato sees language as having a special function.

Through its powers of abstraction, language, for Plato, is actually closer to reality than objects since it can discard the accidental characteristics of objects and concentrate on the essential. Thus, language is seen as the special human tool whereby man can come into the closest contact with the real.

Throughout his writings, Plato plays with the idea that there is a special connection between language and reality not fully dependent upon human perception. This is most apparent in the *Cratylus* which takes the relationship between language and reality as its subject. It is true that the tone of the dialogue is wry, but we might expect this from a thinker of Plato's stature trying to support a thesis which has so many difficulties. The dialogue does not shy away from the difficulties (why are there so many words in different languages to symbolize one feature of reality?), but it treats them with a kind of semi-humor. Socrates even argues that there must be some direct connection between sounds (syllables) and reality. He also denies that there can be such a

thing as a lie, since language has a direct connection with reality.

Finally, Plato argues that form and function are co-terminous: A thing's form *is* its function and vice versa. The function of language is accidental and not essential.

Now, let us see if we can put all this together. Since imaginative literature is language not used in the service of truth, but in imitating objects as we perceive them, it is at a third remove from the real and therefore an *eidolon* with the same ontological status as a reflection or a dream. Unlike language which is used in a philosophical way, therefore, language used in a literary way actually obscures truth (reality) and may very well mislead all those who "believe" in the reality of its embodiments.

Interestingly enough, there are still many religious groups which forbid the reading or viewing of literature on these same grounds. Literature, therefore, to them, is a "lie."

Aristotle deals with the matter in a much different way; he divides language function into three kinds: philosophical (in the *Metaphysics*), rhetorical (in the *Rhetoric*), and poetic (in the *Poetics*). Unlike Plato, who believes that poetry has no function of its own, distorting the normal function of language, Aristotle assigns to poetry the function of catharsis. He also gives it a respectable ontological status, proclaiming it "more philosophical than history" since it deals with types rather than with specific persons.

Sincerely,
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