

Editorial

CONTEMPLATION OF THE LARGE stack of new short story submissions in this review's in-box often prompts me to muse on why so many people are so interested in writing (and reading) fiction. What's in it for them? It can't be merely that it provides an alternative world. While fantasy is affecting, nobody sane mistakes it for reality; and anyway fictional worlds are often not nice places—very often worse places to be than reality.

The other day a submitted essay—a good one which, unfortunately, we had to reject because of space shortage—on Plato reminded me of what the grandfather of literary functionalism had to say on this topic. (Yes, Plato was talking about poetry and drama, but.) Pointing out the bad character and evil deeds represented in Homer—murder, incest, treachery, cruelty, uncontrolled passions, weakness, cowardice and malice—he argued that fictional characters are frequently terrible role-models, so fiction is morally dangerous. Nowadays, of course, fictional characters are more Willy Loman than Oedipus Rex, and inertia, regret, petty nastiness, misunderstanding, self-deception, and relational disfunction have largely replaced murder, incest, etc.; but Plato seems to be correct in seeing the “disordered soul” as a permanent theme in fiction. His assumption that imitation of fictional characters is the chief morally relevant effect on readers is, however, dubitable.

Plato's overall approach—seeing the function of literature as educative—leads to his more general criticism, this one epistemological rather than moral. Writers, Plato claimed, have only an intuitive feeling for life and character, not the rational understanding that only a philosopher could achieve, that constitutes genuine knowledge. And literature appeals to the irrational and intuitive in its audience; the understanding we seek from it is counterfeit—unreliable, mere opinion.

Again, Plato's account does contain a core of truth. Of course the discursive essay and the short story communicate differently—the former through linear analysis and explanation, and the latter through, as it were, painting a picture. Even the best fiction writers seem surprisingly often to be utterly incompetent at producing a clear discursive analysis of what their fiction is about, or of how it works. (Even fiction writers who are part-phi-

osopher have this problem. A startling illustration of this is the preface for *L'Étranger* in which Camus attempts to explain what the novel is about, and clearly gets it all wrong.) But this difference is a virtue of fiction, not a defect: beginning fiction writers are commonly urged to concentrate on showing, not telling. What's entirely implausible about Plato's argument is his insistence that intuitive grasp is necessarily epistemologically inferior to discursive analysis. But even so: why suppose that the function of literature is primarily educative? Anyway, Plato's account is unsatisfying in that it fails to account for the appeal of literature. If we approach it seeking knowledge, but it fails to provide the real thing, why do we keep coming back to it?

Blithely ignoring two thousand years of aesthetic theory, I turn now from the oldest in our tradition to one of the youngest—a family of theories which approach human activities with biological evolution in mind. The idea here is that something built deep (universally, ineradicably) into human culture may well have evolved into our genetic structure because it is helpful for survival in our environment. What sort of concrete biological advantage might be provided by literature and its cousin imagination? Recent answers come from Stephen Pinker (*How the Mind Works*, 1997) and Joseph Carroll (*Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, 2004). Pinker speculates that imagining the unreal—even the impossible—might prepare us mentally for situations we do encounter. You'll never face combat with a one-eyed giant, but you will be in conflicts of various sorts, and reading the *Odyssey* may help you cope with them by organizing your thinking in advance about general structures of problem and response. Carroll adds that literature in particular can prepare us for social interaction by giving us practice in entering empathetically into the minds of a great variety of other people.

I like these ideas because they (unlike Plato's) plausibly suppose genuine uses, and important ones, for fiction. They explain why we enjoy writing, reading, and imagining stories about what's terrible or twisted—a built-in propensity to find pleasure in what's good for us. They make fiction and the imagination in general not only a good thing, but a very basically and typically *human* good thing. For among the human features that make us unusual in the animal kingdom certainly are our ability to think about what is not present—even about what never was or will be—and our recognition and understanding of other minds on a par with our own. Literature, then, is very closely connected to what makes us, at core, what we are.