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The Missing Speech of the Absent Fourth: Reader Response and Plato’s *Timaeus-Critias*

*For Stanley Fish*

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent Plato scholarship has grown increasingly comfortable with the notion that Plato’s art of writing brings his readers into the dialogue, challenging them to respond to deliberate errors or lacunae in the text. Drawing inspiration from Stanley Fish’s seminal reading of Satan’s speeches in *Paradise Lost*, this paper considers the narrative of *Timaeus* as deliberately unreliable, and argues that the actively critical reader is “the missing fourth” with which the dialogue famously begins. By continuing *Timaeus* with *Critias*—a dialogue that ends with a missing speech—Plato points to the kind of reader he expects: one who can answer Critias’ question (*Critias* 107a4-6): ὡς μὲν γὰρ οὐκ εὖ τὰ παρὰ σοῦ λεχθέντα εἴρηται, τίς ἂν ἐπιχειρήσειν ἐμφρων λέγειν;

Despite Diskin Clay’s claim that “the great gaps in the universe of the Platonic dialogues… are beyond the reach of even speculation,” Mary Louise Gill has recently published a fascinating book on Plato’s missing *Philosopher*. In its Introduction she writes:

Plato did not write the *Philosopher* because he would have spoiled the exercise had he written it. In finding the philosopher through the exercise, the student becomes a philosopher by mastering his methods, and thus the target of the exercise is internally related to its pedagogical purpose.

At the heart of Gill’s attempt to fill in this “gap” is the three-fold claim that Plato deliberately created the puzzle of the missing *Philosopher* for a pedagogical purpose, and, moreover, that he created that puzzle for us:

Plato uses the devious strategy I have attributed to him [sc. he ‘hides the pieces of the puzzle and its solution in plain sight’] because, by making his audience work very hard to dig out his meaning, he fosters in them (and us, his modern readers) a skill in reading and a competence in using dialectical techniques and developing new ones.

Not only by leaving *Philosopher* unwritten, but also in any number of other ways, Gill’s Plato both “provokes” and “tests” his readers, i.e., us. Although Gill’s attempt to locate Plato’s missing *Philosopher* in the astute reader’s response to its absence is particularly germane to the subject of this paper, it is worth emphasizing that Gill’s is but the most recent addition to a growing body of literature reflecting a new trend in Plato’s reception: an increasing concern with the central role of *the*
reader’s response in interpreting the dialogues. Two recent books on Plato’s Republic are good examples; Francesco Ademollo’s magisterial commentary on Cratylus can also be cited as evidence. In fact, Ademollo astutely points out that this trend can be traced at least as far back as the nineteenth century. Finally, as David Sedley has documented, the commentary tradition on Theaetetus proves that this trend actually originated in antiquity.

Although it is well beyond the scope of this paper to offer anything like a reception-study of this important aspect of Platonic hermeneutics, I do need to introduce at the start a few distinctions relevant to my immediate purpose. To begin with, there is Gill’s attempt to use the reader’s response to a particular kind of Platonic provocation: e.g., why didn’t he write Philosopher, Hermocrates, and leave Critias unfinished? Leaving the problem of the Philosopher in Gill’s capable hands, I will here be applying a reader-response approach to Timaeus, and, more specifically, to the discourse of Timaeus. In doing so, I want to distinguish my approach both from that of Gill, and, on the other hand, from that of Ademollo, Grote, and the ancient commentators discussed by Sedley: it is not to Socrates, but specifically to Timaeus, another of “Plato’s Philosophers,” that I will be applying a reader-response approach. And I am doing so deliberately in the context of the paradigmatic representative of what is called “reader-response theory” in literary criticism: the great Milton scholar, Stanley Fish. Although I will be directly addressing the question of “the missing speech” of Zeus with which Critias conspicuously does not conclude—and making some remarks at the start about the missing Hermocrates—my principal claim is not that (1) we need to imagine for ourselves a missing dialogue, or (2) that we are being asked to respond to a Socratic provocation, but (3) that Plato intends us to read the discourse of Timaeus in much the same way that Fish claims we need to read the speeches of Satan.

To begin to substantiate this paradoxical claim, it is noteworthy that Fish explicitly connects his reading of Paradise Lost to Plato:

Paradise Lost is a dialectical experience which has the advantage traditionally claimed for dialectic of involving the respondent in his own edification. On one level at least the poem has the form of a Platonic dialogue, with the epic voice taking the role of Socrates, and the reader in the position of a Phaedrus or a Cratylus, continually forced to acknowledge his errors, and in this way moving toward a confirmation in the Truth.

But the Platonic parallel I see is not between Milton’s “epic voice” and Socrates, but rather between Timaeus and Fish’s Satan:

One begins by simultaneously admitting the effectiveness of Satan’s rhetoric and discounting it because it is Satan’s, but at some point a reader trained to analyze as he reads will allow admiration for a technical skill to push aside the imperative of Christian watchfulness.

Rather than imagining an extra-textual dialogue between the reader and a benignly provocative Socrates, my argument begins with the realization that Plato uses a variety of characters other than Socrates—including Timaeus, the Athenian, and Eleatic Strangers—whose effective rhetoric, and admirable “technical skill,” are sufficient to “push aside” a prior allegiance to Socrates, or rather to expose the weakness of that allegiance. According to Fish, Milton’s goal is not to make converts for