



Preface to Plato (History of the Greek Mind)

By Eric Havelock

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Plato's frontal attack on poetry has always been a problem for sympathetic students, who have often minimized or avoided it. Beginning with the premise that the attack must be taken seriously, Mr. Havelock shows that Plato's hostility is explained by the continued domination of the poetic tradition in contemporary Greek thought.

The reason for the dominance of this tradition was technological. In a nonliterate culture, stored experience necessary to cultural stability had to be preserved as poetry in order to be memorized. Plato attacks poets, particularly Homer, as the sole source of Greek moral and technical instruction--Mr. Havelock shows how the Illiad acted as an oral encyclopedia. Under the label of mimesis, Plato condemns the poetic process of emotional identification and the necessity of presenting content as a series of specific images in a continued narrative.

The second part of the book discusses the Platonic Forms as an aspect of an increasingly rational culture. Literate Greece demanded, instead of poetic discourse, a vocabulary and a sentence structure both abstract and explicit in which experience could be described normatively and analytically: in short a language of ethics and science.

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Preface to Plato (History of the Greek Mind) By Eric Havelock Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #227451 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
- Published on: 1963
- Released on: 1982-05-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x 5.50" w x 1.25" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 342 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

The frontiers of several fields of research meet in this rich and germinal study. Professor Havelock is concerned with Greek epic poetry and Plato's attack on it, with the whole of the Greek *paideia* as it existed before and after Plato, with the technological problems of communication, and, finally, with the emergence of Plato's doctrine of "forms," in its total cultural setting...In brief, Havelock's point is that Plato's attack on poetry is integral to his philosophy as such if we see poetry as what it really was in his day...Havelock's thesis is a sweeping one, and, on the whole, utterly convincing, tying in with the findings of an increasing number of recent psychological, historical, philosophical, and cultural studies. (Walter J. Ong)

A book bursting with new ideas, all of them exciting. It may well turn out to be a landmark in the study of Greek thought and literature. (B. M. W. Knox)

This book makes a major contribution...will offer the reader many hours of stimulating thought and a powerful challenge to reexamine some basic assumptions about the early Greek mind. (*The Classical Bulletin*)

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About the Author

Eric A. Havelock was Sterling Professor of Classics, Emeritus, Yale University.

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