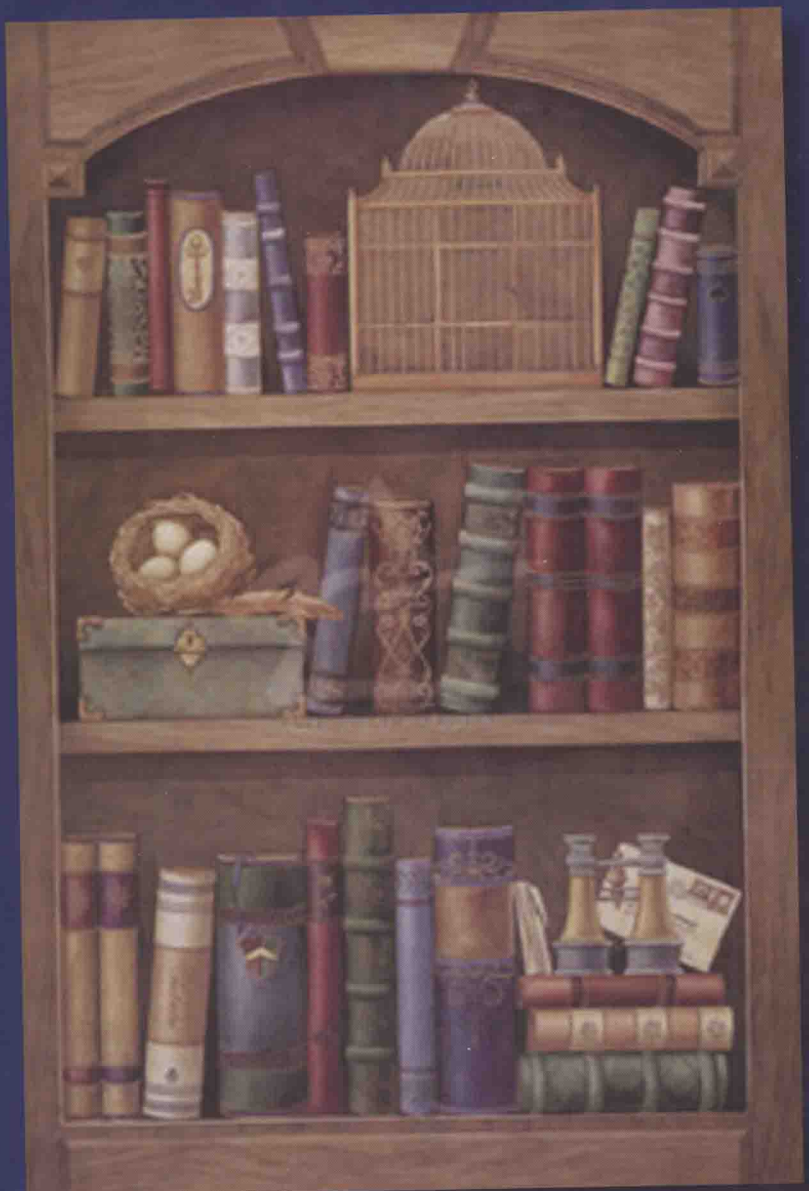
LITERARY CRITICISM

A NEW HISTORY



GARY DAY

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PREFACE

Read not to contradict, and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, some few to be chewed and digested. (Francis Bacon)

The opinions prevalent in one age, as truths above the reach of controversy, are confuted and rejected in another, and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progress. (Samuel Johnson)

To ascertain the master current in the literature of an epoch, and to distinguish this from all minor currents, is one of the critic's highest functions. (Matthew Arnold)

All books are divisible into two classes: the books of the hour and the books of all time. (John Ruskin)

I consider criticism merely a preliminary excitement, a statement of things a writer has to clear up in his own head sometime or other, probably antecedent to writing; of no value unless it come to fruit in the created work later. (Ezra Pound)

Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising ... We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion and nothing else. (D. H. Lawrence)

Criticism is as inevitable as breathing. (T. S. Eliot)

A critic is to be judged by his quotations. (J. Middleton Murray)

There has never been a statue erected to honour a critic. (Zig Ziglar)

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POLEMICAL INTRODUCTION

It's impossible to build a mountain out of melting ice and it's even harder to write a history of criticism. That's what René Welleck (1903–95), a brilliant linguist and one of the most accomplished scholars of the twentieth century concluded after his projected seven-volume history of modern criticism. *Seven* volumes. And they only stretch from 1750 to 1950. That makes the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, with mainly one volume per period, look almost frivolous.

It's not just the sheer amount of material that dooms the would-be chronicler to failure, it is also the fact that, in a sense, criticism has no history. And what I mean by that is that we can find the same concerns in Ancient Athens that we find in modern England. The worries that Plato had about the power of poetry to corrupt morals find their parallel in all those anxious articles about the bad effects of *Grand Theft Auto* on the young. The belief that literature can mould behaviour is an example of rhetorical criticism. It is one of the two strands that recur throughout the history of criticism: the other is grammatical criticism, which is mostly concerned with editing texts and establishing their authenticity.

Once we recognise this basic division, we can see that what appears to be diverse forms of criticism are merely different manifestations of these two principles. An immediate example is the supposed division between theory and traditional criticism. Those who felt it was bliss to be alive in the revolutionary 1970s and 1980s will recall the oft-repeated claim of theorists that they had a radically different view of literature to their predecessors, particularly F. R. Leavis, who was condemned for being elitist and for not justifying the assumptions underlying his criticism.[1]

But in fact there is little to choose between Leavis and, say, Terry Hawkes,

one of the pioneers of cultural materialism. No doubt some will find this an outrageous claim. They will splutter that Leavis judges a work while Hawkes historicises it; that Leavis believes in a hierarchy of literary values while Hawkes shows in whose interest such hierarchies are constructed. The purpose of criticism, they will argue, is not to praise literature for making experience irresistibly real but to expose it as an ideological clash between the dominant and subordinate groups in society. Such assertions are based on an ignorance of Leavis together with an inflated view of criticism's importance.

A closer inspection reveals that both men belong to the rhetorical tradition of criticism, for each maintains that literature should play a part in the wider culture. They may read Shakespeare in different ways, Leavis for the creative power of his language, Hawkes for how power appropriates his poetry, but each claims that the bard can shape our seeing and alter our actions. Their differences, then, are complementary rather than contradictory. They stress, each in their own way, the notion that literature is a form of emancipation, that past literature has its life in the present or not at all. We should therefore try to look for points of comparison between theorists and traditionalists if we wish to do justice to recent developments in criticism. If there is a history of criticism, it is an account of variations on a theme.

A definition of the term criticism is as impossible as the history of it, as Philip Smallwood has ably shown in his beautifully argued book, *Reconstructing Criticism* (2003). I use the term to cover the following: evaluation, explanation, self-expression and a way of organising the emotions. By evaluation, I mean how works are judged; by explanation, I mean how they are determined to be genuine, how they are interpreted, glossed and put into context; by self-expression, I mean criticism as a form of autobiography; and by organising the emotions I mean how critics from Aristotle to Freud have thought of literature as a way of channelling feeling and affect. These various descriptions, which are by no means exhaustive, fall under the headings of either rhetorical or grammatical criticism.

But criticism is also an account of conceptions of literature such as literature as inspiration, as imitation, as imagination, as impressionism, as a form of ideology and as a means of affirming identity. The last, which sees literature as a means of stepping into your own rather than someone else's shoes, underpins contemporary manifestations of criticism such as feminism, postcolonialism and queer theory. It is therefore sometimes hard to disentangle concepts of criticism from those of literature, so a history of one all too readily becomes a history of the other. But that may be no bad thing because it reminds us that there is no hard dividing line between literature and criticism. Many poets were also critics, for example, Sir Philip Sidney, Coleridge and T. S. Eliot. And then there are those, like Walter Bagehot and Cyril

Connolly, whose writings for their ease, elegance and beauty could easily be classed as literature. And if that sounds as if I am defining literature in those terms, I am, though only in part. We cannot define literature in the same way that we can define logarithms, but it would be a very odd definition indeed that took no account of a writer's style.

Nevertheless that's exactly what happened in the 1980s and 1990s.[2] If the aesthetic question arose at all it was dismissed as a form of mystification, a ruse 'through which the ruling bloc exercised its hegemony' (Easthope 1991: 70). And so theorists aimed to demystify literature; to show that, since it couldn't be defined, it didn't exist;[3] to show that it was no different to other forms of writing, for they could all be discussed in terms of 'institution, sign system, ideology, gender, identification and subject-position' (ibid.: 71). Why the 'ruling bloc' did not collapse as soon as people had this pointed out to them is a source of continuing wonder. Somehow, though, it struggled on. And today it is almost confident enough to manage without literature altogether. English language and media studies are elbowing it out of its space on the timetable and, in its present form, literature is due to disappear from the school curriculum by 2011.

If this does happen – and I am talking about literature as an object of study not as a mode of writing – then what will happen to criticism? Most likely it will become a part of cultural studies. This makes sense given that, throughout its history, criticism has touched on so many other issues. It draws on ideas of human nature and social organisation and contains elements of psychology, history, philosophy, sociology and politics, to name but a few. Writing a history of criticism, if one is not careful, morphs into a history of civilisation, which is yet another reason why it proves to be such an impossible undertaking.

So why bother to write something which can't be done? The short answer is that I didn't know it couldn't be done at the time. The longer answer lies in the theory wars of the 1980s. I was a student at Essex in the 1970s when French ideas first started to trickle into English departments and I attended a few of the famous sociology of literature conferences there. My overriding impression, apart from sheer bafflement, was that a good proportion of the proponents of the new theories, Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and so on, were fundamentalists for whom disagreement was tantamount to blasphemy.

Many years later I went to the School of Critical and Cultural Theory at Cardiff which boasted some of the biggest names in English theory, Catherine Belsey, Hawkes and Christopher Norris. This was an altogether more relaxed environment, although that impression may have been owing to the fact that I was much older and less easily intimidated. Yet even there I heard complaints that so and so wasn't 'a proper post-structuralist', an extraordinary

remark given that one of the tenets of post-structuralism was that there was no such thing as a 'pure' identity.

It was these sorts of inconsistencies that intrigued me. And there were others. Why were all texts granted multiple meanings, apart from those of Leavis, who could only be read in one particular way? Time to look at him again. Not surprisingly, there were tensions in his work. And then came a shock. Some of Leavis's ideas bore a passing resemblance to those expounded by English theorists.[4] How could this be? The history of modern criticism was not, it seemed, one of ruptures and radical breaks, but returns and revisions.

There was something else too. Leavis's criticism contained a number of references to money and, more puzzlingly, some of his terms echoed the idioms of scientific management. This made me think about the relations between the discourse of criticism and that of the market. I was particularly struck by the coincidence that theory came to prominence in England almost at the same time as Mrs Thatcher came to power. She was elected in 1979, Belsey's *Critical Practice* was published in 1980, Peter Widdowson's edited collection *Re-Reading English* came out in 1982 and Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932* appeared one year later. To put it crudely, changes in the conceptions of the economy, heralded by the conservative government, seemed to require changes in the conceptions of literature and criticism.

Another coincidence. The rise of management theory shadows the rise of literary theory.[5] What's more, management theorists dip into their Derrida to find new ways of motivating staff. And their tone is not dissimilar to that of some of the theorists from whom they borrowed, that of one who has seen the light and is on a mission to convert the unbeliever. Why this connection? Because in the 1980s and 1990s criticism and management were committed to change, not just in their respective fields but in society as a whole. Managerialism was – and indeed still is – identified with modernisation and it spearheaded the transformation of the workplace.

This made me question the conventional idea, stretching from Aristophanes to Arnold, that criticism is a form of social critique. It might very well be, but its association with economic discourse also makes it complicit with the very order it seeks to subvert. The alliance between criticism and economics begins in ancient Greece where we find some of the same assumptions that govern the thinking about money, also applied to the thinking about poetry. The affinities between criticism, money and, later, market and management theories lead to a problem of evaluation. Broadly speaking, there is a potential conflict between literary works, which see humans as ends in themselves, and a critical commentary which, because of its economic element, sees them as means to an end. What we witness in a critic like Leavis is a perpetual tension between the humanistic impulse of criticism and the instrumentalist tendencies of the

language of scientific management, but that tension disappears from contemporary criticism which shows little consciousness of its reliance on monetary and management metaphors.

The connection between the idioms and ideas of criticism, money, the market and management has had a further consequence: it has facilitated the incorporation of business practices into the universities. The attack on literature by theorists may have been inspired by a desire to democratise the term but it also had the effect of depleting one of the few rhetorical resources that could be deployed against the spread of market values. More than that, the demand that critics should be explicit about the theory of their practice chimed nicely with the requirement that academic life should be transparent. Most of all, though, theory has become a method of reading that insulates the student from the experience of literature. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* (1995) which contains a list of what a post-structuralist, a postmodern, a post-colonialist critic etc. does. The student applies the theory and, hey presto, the text reflects it back to them. Theory is the answer to the problem of assessment. It is easier to measure a student's understanding of new historicism than it is to measure the much more difficult art of them finding the words to describe their response to a work.

This history is in part an attempt to explain how this situation has come about. By doing so it suggests that criticism is a class-based discourse. This once familiar claim related to *social* not *economic* divisions though of course the two are inseparable. The finger would be pointed at those like Leavis who maintained that literature could only be appreciated by a few. Well, that's probably true; but good and especially inspiring teaching ensures it can be enjoyed by many more. To 'appreciate' literature, whatever that may mean, requires a level of interest in the subject that most students simply do not have. And that's fine. They find their calling elsewhere.

In any case, it's not literary appreciation which is the real issue, but the divided nature of the educational system. I can't be the only one to notice that those loudest in their condemnation of elitism worked in the Russell group of universities, a body that perpetuates the very inequalities against which radical theorists protested – too much methinks. That these same theorists rarely mention class is also instructive. The concept of class which refers fundamentally to a particular form of economic organisation, capitalism, vanishes from criticism at the very moment that critical vocabulary acquires an economic cast. In short, the language of criticism is implicated in capitalist economics which compromises its ability to articulate notions of human autonomy found in literature. The famed 'linguistic turn' was not from a correspondence theory of language to one which stressed its constitutive role in perception and action – that was merely a return to the rhetorical

tradition – but a turn away from the idea of class when, under various conservative governments, it was becoming an increasing reality.[6]

But this history is not just concerned with the relation between criticism and the language of economics. It also focuses, from the Renaissance onwards, on English criticism. And, to the inevitable charge of provincialism, I can only say that English criticism is an amalgam of largely European influences and to talk about it is therefore to pay homage to a much wider culture. Having said that, there are two advantages to concentrating on English criticism. The first is that it avoids the pattern in other histories[7] which is a summary of various schools of thought, with important individuals highlighted, and a bit of background thrown in for good measure. It allows for a more integrated approach, to show the complex relations between, for example, the vernacular, the market, Protestantism and reading, and to trace continuities such as a preference for the plain style over time. The second advantage is that, by examining a specifically English tradition, we are able to put the achievements of theory into proper perspective. More than that, the forgotten figures of English criticism, from John Bale to G. K. Chesterton, provide a rhetorical resource for combating the reductions of the human, whether in the ideology of the market or the latest literary theory.

So, then, this 'history' is, in part, a reaction to theory. It seeks to show continuities in the 'history' of criticism, particularly in respect of a rhetorical relation with economics. And it adopts a different approach to previous histories by the focus on England. Despite this 'history' taking its cue from theory, I am very aware that I do not cover the 'linguistic turn' and its consequences in detail. There are at least two reasons for this. First, there are already many introductions to theory on the market. Second, I am not so much interested in individual theories, feminism, postcolonialism etc. as in what these theories have in common with each other; in what 'theory' has in common with 'traditional criticism', and how it relates to wider developments, in particular, to developments in the economic organisation of society.

The longstanding connection between critical and financial discourse suggests that Marx was right: we cannot finally separate base and superstructure. Culture and commerce have been opposed since the late eighteenth century[8] but their relation is, in some sense, continuous and complementary. Samuel Johnson argued that 'if there are qualities in literature which are above price, these are also to be found in the world of manufacture and finance – in that huge pyramid of loyalty which is modern industry, and that vast network of fidelity which is modern commerce' (in Gordon 1946: 12). It would be hard to make such a claim today. The relationship between culture and commerce is not equal. In any conflict, the latter always triumphs. The day when commerce makes criticism practical and criticism makes commerce philosophical lies far in the future.

Pointing to the parallels between the two is part of a much greater endeavour to put criticism in context, something that critics pride themselves on doing with literature. And so I have tried to indicate some of the conditions in which criticism arose: the festival, the forum, the Church, the court, the market, the educational institution and so on. Having said that, I am mindful of Leavis's argument that context has its limits. We have the poem in front of us, but not the social, economic and political conditions in which it was written. How, then, can we explain the poem by what isn't there? All we have are bits and pieces, scraps we have to paste together and then pick apart as new fragments are found. The context, like the poem, is always provisional, a matter of ongoing construction, and so has no privileged power of interpretation. We shouldn't ignore context but neither should we prioritise it. The artist takes dross and turns it into precious metal. It's not the job of the critic to turn it into fool's gold.

The one topic this history does not deal with is perhaps the most important, the encounter with the individual work.[9] It is there we are paid the compliment, so rarely extended elsewhere in the culture, of being intelligent, feeling beings who are asked to be open to what is in front of us and to respond as fully and honestly as we can. It is rare, though, to find a genuine response in the acres of print that pass for contemporary criticism which, to be fair, has been distorted by the demands of the Research Assessment Exercise. At the same time, critics are professionals and, like others of their kind, do not get personally involved in their work. They are scholars who communicate in a shared language but one mostly devoid of what makes the subject fascinating, compelling and desirable. And they are scholars rather than critics because, in a democratic multicultural society, it seems to be an act of supreme hubris to expect others to defer to your judgement on what is and is not worth reading.

But a criticism that does not confront the problem of value, or else takes its own values as a given, plays into the hands of a political class that is forever refining the means without ever thinking about the ends. To be competitive in a global economy. Is that really our only goal? It's the one we hear about most. The one to which everything else is subordinated. Criticism should be an exploration of values as played out in literature, not a method of imposing them on it. What we need is a critical idiom that respects the claims of both personal response and scholarly requirement but the 'history' of criticism shows that we swing from one to the other.

The problem of value is one of many that I can only mention in passing. A history like this can only dwell on the outlines, point out an interesting feature or two before moving on. But if I have not managed to cover everything, which I most certainly haven't, I hope that I have at least shown that the concerns of criticism remain fairly constant over a long period of time.[10]

Yes they are phrased differently and may receive greater emphasis in one period than in another but they remain in view if not always in focus. Many students are under the impression that English begins and ends with theory. In a sense it does because there has never been a time without it, but the term acquires a special significance in the last quarter of the twentieth century and refers mainly to the impact French thinkers have had on our understanding of literature. I believe we are in danger of forgetting our past. This history is one version of it which, like all the others, disturbs and nourishes our present.

Notes

1. See Day 2006.
2. One notable exception is Eagleton 1990.
3. This was to take a very narrow view of what was meant by 'definition'. There are, after all, different ways of defining things. A descriptive definition, which gives the general meaning of a term, is different to a stipulative definition, where the speaker imposes a definition on the term for the purpose of a particular discussion. Then there are intensional, extensional, enumerative and ostensive definitions, to say nothing of definition by genus-differentia. In short, we need to be careful about what mode of definition we are using when we say that literature cannot be defined. Perhaps it can't, but the attempt clarifies our understanding of the concept. And the fact that literature cannot be defined means that it cannot be measured and the fact that it cannot be measured means that it cannot be controlled. It slips through the ideological mesh of managerial England to give us a glimpse of how else our lives may be lived.
4. See Day 1996: x–xi.
5. In the early 1990s, books on management theory were outselling those on sex and cookery.
6. See Day 2001: 187–204.
7. I am thinking not just of Wimsatt and Brooks 1957 but also of Habib 2005.
8. The classic work on this matter is Williams 1958.
9. Let me try to be clear about this: there are two ways we encounter a literary work, as critics and individuals. Since we are both critics and individuals, and since the critical account of a work may be quite different from the value it has for us as individuals, the reading of literature may be said to induce a mild form of schizophrenia, a complaint that students routinely make though not necessarily in these terms.

   We can write a critical history of a work, its various versions, how it has been interpreted, the influences that shaped it and so on. That will tell us something about the history of criticism but not much. The history of the reception of *Adam Bede*, for example, doesn't tell us about the approach to nineteenth century poetry, nor does it consider prior forms of criticism and how they may relate to

Eliot's novel. A history of criticism has to be general which is at once its strength and weakness.

And if we can't base the history of criticism on the treatment of single works, how much less can we base it on individual responses. They are too diverse and far reaching. Yet they can, like the critical account of a work, make some contribution to our ongoing understanding of literature. The rise of book clubs testifies to a continuing interest in, perhaps even need for, encounters with imaginative writing. One group, run by Jane Davis from the Reader Centre at the University of Liverpool, caters for those who have been ill, suffered a bereavement, or are in reduced circumstances. Recent research suggests that reading helps such people alleviate pain or mental distress though only if they read classic texts, those 'which address existential concerns, not anodyne pep-ups'. By attending to the cry of another, 'we articulate our own cries, frame them, contain them, and feel less stranded.' But great literature 'doesn't just echo our own experience, recognise, vindicate and validate it, takes us to places we hadn't imagined but which, once seen, we never forget.' These observations obviously apply to only one kind of reading group and hence illustrate how difficult it is to make generalisations about the value of reading. But at the same time they do suggest that some kinds of literature have a greater value than others which brings us back to the central problem of criticism: the determination of literary worth, and that is going to be different with each work, hence the impossibility of a history of criticism that rests on individual encounters with works. See Blake Morrison, 'The Reading Cure' *Guardian Review* 05. 01. 08 pp. 4–6, p. 6

10. I am very aware, for example, that I do not do justice to the diversity of 'theory'. My answer to this charge, and I hope Derrideans appreciate the irony of my answering it in a footnote, is to reiterate the general point that I am drawing out what various theories have in common to show how they have grown out of the various traditions of criticism. But I do regret that lack of space does not allow me to consider this issue in more detail; a conversation with a friend, for example, revealed that his idea of theory, derived from the French Marxists Louis Althusser (1918–90) and Pierre Macherey (1938–) was completely different from mine – except that we both agreed that criticism, of whatever kind, involves some sort of theory about literature. I also regret that lack of space does not allow me to analyse the different contributions of Frank Kermode and Terry Eagleton who, in their different ways, have mediated 'theory' to a wider audience and who have kept faith with the idea of criticism as part of the enlightenment project.

CHAPTER

1

GREEKS AND ROMANS

The words 'criticism' and'crisis' both spring from the Greek *krisis*, a feminine noun. The phrase 'criticism in crisis' enjoyed considerable vogue in the late twentieth century, mainly because of the impact of French theory. Now we see that the two terms are linked etymologically as well as circumstantially. *Krisis* has various meanings including 'separation', 'selection' and 'judgement' and refers to decisions taken in court or poetic contests. The need to decide a course of action is central to the idea of 'crisis' defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as 'a time of great danger, difficulty or confusion when problems must be solved or important decisions must be made'. In competitions there must be a winner, in court there must be a verdict. From the very beginning, the study of literature requires the reader to choose; this work or that? Until, that is, we reach the age of deconstruction where we encounter a new claim, namely, that reading always leads to a point where it becomes impossible to choose between two equally valid but mutually incompatible interpretations.

The Greeks did not have a word for 'literature'. In fact they didn't have a word for poetry until the fifth century BC. Song was the more usual term. But, in the fifth century, a new vocabulary appears. Singers were described as 'makers' or 'poets' and songs as 'made things' or 'poems' (Ford 2002: 93). In 507, an Athenian noble by the name of Cleisthenes (fl. c. 510 BC) invented democracy (Jones 1999: 27). Is it just coincidence that this form of government appears more or less at the same time as poetry? Cleisthenes' reform of the ancient constitution built on the earlier work of Solon (638–578[?] BC) who was a poet, philosopher and politician, so there is already a connection between verse and voting.

Previously, poets had validated their work by claiming it was inspired by the Muses, the Greek goddesses who presided over the arts and sciences.