




Pelagia Goulimari



LITERARY CRITICISM and THEORY

From Plato to postcolonialism

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Literary Criticism and Theory

This incredibly useful volume offers an introduction to the history of literary criticism and theory from ancient Greece to the present. Grounded in the close reading of landmark theoretical texts, while seeking to encourage the reader's critical response, Pelagia Goulimari examines:

- major thinkers and critics from Plato and Aristotle to Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Said and Butler;
- key concepts, themes and schools in the history of literary theory: mimesis, inspiration, reason and emotion, the self, the relation of literature to history, society, culture and ethics; feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, queer theory;
- genres and movements in literary history: epic, tragedy, comedy, the novel; Romanticism, realism, modernism and postmodernism.

Historical connections between theorists and theories are traced and the book is generously cross-referenced. With useful features such as key-point conclusions, further reading sections, descriptive text boxes, detailed headings, and a comprehensive index, this book is the ideal introduction to anyone approaching literary theory for the first time or unfamiliar with the scope of its history.

Pelagia Goulimari is a member of the English Faculty of the University of Oxford, where she lectures on literary theory, and a former convenor of Oxford's graduate programme in Women's Studies. She is general editor of *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*. Her publications include *Postmodernism: What Moment?* (2007) and *Toni Morrison* (2009).

"Pelagia Goulimari sets a new standard for reading theory in context, introducing and summarizing theories and theorists without being reductive, contextualizing the broad intellectual and aesthetic movements from which theory emerges, while constantly keeping the focus on deep literary critical understanding. The critical readings are wonderfully fresh and insightful, with constant illumination of the theory through reference to literary authors such as Beckett, Woolf, and Morrison. This truly is a fresh and lively reading of the theoretical scene, offering inspirational insight for beginners and more experienced critics alike."

Richard Lane, Vancouver Island University, Canada

"Incredibly useful, and a miracle of concision. A one volume account of over 2,500 years of literary criticism that manages to be both informative and readable. I will recommend it to all my students."

*John McGowan, University of North Carolina, USA, co-editor of the
Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*

"Amongst the many texts seeking to introduce readers to literary theory, Pelagia Goulimari's *Literary Criticism and Theory* stands out for its careful and patient reading of critical texts, admirably weaving together older and more recent traditions in a way that helps make coherent sense of the lines of filiation that run through Western and postcolonial understandings of the literary."

John Frow, University of Sydney, Australia

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for Gerard

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Introduction

"Literary theory" has a contemporary or recent ring about it, evoking developments in literary studies in the English-speaking world that gathered momentum in higher education in the 1970s. But of course literary theory and criticism are as old as their object of study, literature, and a vital, multidisciplinary and international current in intellectual history, open to the world and to the broad course of culture and society. To move outside the contemporary critical canon and explore this field, in its historical depth and geographical breadth, is a salutary counter to the orthodoxies of the present, revitalizing our enjoyment of literature and our critical language. One of the discoveries I have made is how literary and critical innovation has been inextricable from revisiting and reanimating the past, and this book is intended as an introduction to resources for future innovation.

As I approached the writing of the book, the initial daunting challenge was how 2,500 years of thinking and writing could be adequately represented in the available space. Textbooks are introductory outlines of their subject, but there is a danger, especially in this case with so much to cover, that discussion will summarize in too headlong and cursory a way, and the reader learn little. I therefore decided to ground the book in close readings of selected texts, readings that are good to think with, that stimulate discussion and entice readers to visit the texts themselves. In this way, the book is itself a literary-theoretical exercise, and I have endeavoured to remain alert and to include some critical discussion. In selecting texts I have striven to pay attention to marginalized voices (e.g. Plotinus, Wole Soyinka, Zora Neale Hurston).

The order of the chapters is broadly chronological, but each chapter focuses on specific themes and moves backwards and forwards historically. So each chapter is, to a degree, a free-standing history of an area of literary theory, complementing close readings with historical and biographical contextualization. Particular weight is accorded to the twentieth century's extraordinary and often neglected variety and geographical spread of movements. Chapters include biographical boxes, a key-point conclusion, long chapter titles, subtitles and section titles listing main critics, movements, themes and concepts covered, and cross-references to other chapters. Cross-references have been generously created to highlight connections and correspondences.

1 *Mimēsis*

Plato and the poet

Plato and modern Platonic variations: Rousseau, Wordsworth, Arnold, Nietzsche, Pater, Huxley, Brecht, Benjamin, Marcuse, Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Plath, Kristeva

Plato is one of the great fountainheads of the Western intellectual tradition and is considered by many to be its greatest philosopher. His *Republic* is the most famous book of philosophy and the founding text of Western political thought. With his teacher Socrates, Plato is the great champion of philosophy as the way to wisdom and as a way of life. Nobody wishing to develop a broad understanding, or a broad critique, of the history of Western thought can avoid serious attention to Plato. Three thinkers of recent times who have sought to develop such a critique and who have also been major influences on literary studies and theory are Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. All of them engaged intensively with Plato in their work, seeing the Western intellectual tradition as significantly Plato's legacy. But Plato was also a founder of literary theory in his own right; his views on literature and the arts intimately related to the rest of his philosophy, with the *Republic*, once again, being the most famous source of his ideas. In addition, Plato as visionary thinker and as literary artist has had a greater influence on literary writers than any other philosopher. To mention just a few names, from among those that feature in this book, he was a source of inspiration to writers as diverse as Sir Philip Sidney, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde. In order to examine Plato's ideas about literature we will be concentrating on his dialogues *Ion*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*.

Plato (c. 427–347 BC) was born to a prominent Athenian family and lived in the city-state of Athens. He composed dialogues, a new genre he invented as the instrument of his dialogical or *dialectical* method (*dialektikē*). The dialogues feature the character of Socrates interrogating interlocutors who hold unexamined beliefs (*doxa*) on subjects such as the nature of poetic inspiration, wisdom, knowledge, truth, virtue, reason, the emotions or pleasure, and then attempting to advance a better definition or encouraging *them* to do so. Plato's Socrates is fictive and bears a tenuous relation to the historical Socrates, certainly as Plato begins to develop his own ideas. The prose of

the dialogues is exquisite and, to many, Plato is not only the first major theorist of literature, he is also a supreme stylist of the ancient Greek language. Creator of the dialogue as a genre, superb stylist and poet in his youth, Plato is both a great philosopher and a great literary artist. Perhaps he was the original "Critic as Artist", to use Oscar Wilde's memorable phrase.

Longinus, in the first century AD, analyses Plato's texts as literature, for example in terms of the metaphors Plato uses. In his *On the Sublime*, which became a crucial document for the late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century movement of Romanticism and its own notion of the sublime, Longinus views Plato as a sublime (i.e. "high", "lofty") writer and a literary genius. Longinus is writing in a tradition within which Plato was being read as literature rather than philosophy, and being criticized for his literary qualities. Longinus defends Plato against previous critics who "pull Plato to pieces, on the ground that he is often carried away by a sort of Bacchic possession in his writing into harsh and intemperate metaphor and allegorical bombast" (Longinus 1995, 265); for his critics, Plato's is "the language of a poet who is far from sober" (267). Ironically, these harsh critics' figurative language of possession and intoxication is borrowed from Plato, who uses it himself against poets, as will become clear shortly. Against such critics, Longinus claims that Plato uses metaphors and other literary tropes "still more divinely" than other magnificent writers (263). Giving many examples of Plato's use of figurative language, he praises his style for its "natural grandeur" and "sublimity" (265). (See *On the Sublime* [32.5–8].) Longinus concludes that Plato is one of a few "writers of genius", "greatness" and "true excellence" (277–8).

Plato himself saw things differently. He uses his dialogues to establish a new opposition between poetry ("poetry" is the closest equivalent to "literature" in the classical world) and the way of life and path to knowledge of which he is the spokesman: *philosophia*, literally the love of wisdom, or the pursuit of wisdom through reason or the intellect. Poetry preoccupied Plato. He didn't compose an *ars poetica*, but he returns to the question of poetry in several dialogues. For the Athenians of Plato's time, the pre-eminent literary figure was Homer, and the pre-eminent works were his epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They were composed without the aid of writing and were performed orally by rhapsodes, who were professional storytellers. Poetry, especially Homer, was central to Athenian life and education. Homer was admired by everyone, including Plato, and was viewed as a great authority on all manner of subjects. Second in importance, after Homer and epic poetry, was tragic poetry (drama): the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. The performance of tragedy was very popular, attracting large audiences. So what constituted literature in Plato's time was epic and tragic poetry; and poetry's role, its function, was that of a great authority, a source of wisdom for life, playing a central role in the education of children.

The argument between poetry and philosophy is most famously staged in the *Republic*, where Plato is shockingly negative in his assessment of poets and poetry. Why would he want to attack such an important cultural institution?

In Plato's time, not all was well with Athenian democracy, the great invention of which Aeschylus was so proud a few decades earlier. (See, for example, Aeschylus's tragedy, *Persians*, juxtaposing Persian despotism and Athenian democracy.) Plato was born and spent his formative years during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), a savage war between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta, and the other Greek city-states under their respective influence. Probably brought on by the circumstances of war, certainly worsened by them, a devastating plague in Athens claimed the great statesman Pericles's life in 429 BC. Plato witnessed the defeat of Athens, the crisis of Athenian democracy and its oscillation between ochlocracy and populist leaders on the one hand, oligarchic coups on the other. The political persecution and execution, by a democratic government, of Socrates, Plato's teacher, in 399 BC – depicted by Plato in the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* – was a sign of the times. So was Plato's turn away from politics, his expected path given his family background, towards philosophy. To understand the strength of Plato's criticism of poetry, it is important to bear in mind that Plato was writing after the ancient Greek equivalent of World War I or World War II.

Plato lived in traumatic times and his response to them was to question everything and to search for new foundations. He saw the authority of poetry in Athenian culture as resting on shaky grounds. Poetry was an important old rival to be confronted: a survivor from the golden age of Athenian democracy, the Pentecontaetia (50 years) between the defeat of the second Persian invasion by a broad alliance of Greek city-states in 479 BC and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. But in the light of the traumatic history he had lived through, Plato had serious doubts as to the role that poetry should play in a well-ordered and secure city-state.

Plato's literary theory: *Ion*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*

We will begin our reading of Plato's dialogues with *Ion*, an early dialogue written in approximately 390 BC. *Ion* outlines the theory of poetry as *inspiration* – it is a dialogue especially important to Sidney as well as to Shelley and the Romantics. Plato brings onto the stage Ion, a rhapsode specializing in the performance of Homer. Ion has just won first prize in an important Pan-Hellenic competition of rhapsodes. Socrates questions him to discover his thoughts on Homer and on the art of poetry. Ion's initial answers suggest an unthinking man, obsessed with Homer to the exclusion of other poetry: "when someone converses about any another poet I ... can't make any worthwhile contribution at all, but just doze off – whereas when anyone

mentions Homer, I am awake in a flash" [532b–c] (Plato 2005). But Ion soon presents Socrates with a puzzle and becomes a puzzle himself: "on Homer I am the finest speaker of mankind ... and everybody else agrees what a good speaker I am – but not on the other poets. Now then, see what that amounts to!" [533c].

To solve this enigma Socrates outlines for Ion a theory of poetry as divine possession, which recasts Ion as unreflecting but inspired, possessed by Homer rather than mastering him. To build his hypothesis Plato uses literary tropes, beginning with the simile of the poetic Muse as divine magnet. Socrates tells Ion: "What moves you is a divine power", like a magnetic stone that moves iron rings; this stone "not only attracts" those rings, it also "confers on them a power", so that they in turn can "attract other rings" – and there is "sometimes quite a long chain". In the same way, "the Muse herself makes" the poets "inspired", and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is "strung out". Good epic poets are not masters of their subject, "but in a state of inspiration and possession" [533d–e throughout]. This passage allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. A contemporary of Plato might think that Plato is a conventionally pious man who reaffirms the moral authority of Homer. Are not the poets inspired by the gods themselves? Yet to many philosophers and critics it has seemed very clear that the purpose of this dialogue is to contrast the poet's possession with true mastery and true knowledge as pursued by the philosophical intellect.

Plato then shifts his frame of reference. Socrates now puts it to Ion that poets are "out of their senses" and "possessed" by "Bacchic frenzy" – possessed by the god of wine, Dionysus, also called Bacchus [534a]. Dionysus, though a son of Zeus, is not one of the ruling twelve Olympian gods, but his power and the visionary intensity and potential destructiveness of Bacchic possession were definitively depicted in Euripides's *Bacchae* (or *Bacchanals*), first performed posthumously in 405 bc. In the *Bacchae*, Pentheus, king of Thebes, receives reports of the "wondrous deeds" of the bacchantes, the female devotees of the god, led by Pentheus's mother, Agave: they made water, milk and wine gush "forth unstinted" out of the earth while (fairly flagrant in its erotic connotation) "dripped the while/Sweet streams of honey from their ivy-staves" (Euripides 1988a, 59, 61). But Pentheus opposes Dionysus. To show his power Dionysus uses the bacchantes against Pentheus: in deep possession the bacchantes dismember him, and Agave tears off her own son's head. Out of the honey-making of the terrifying bacchantes, Plato develops a gentler simile of the poet as bee in a pastoral idyll. Socrates tells Ion of poets in "gardens and glades of the Muses", "gathering" their songs "from honey-springs" and "flying through the air like bees", bearing songs to us as bees carry pollen; a poet is an airy thing, "a light thing ... winged and holy, and cannot compose before he gets inspiration and loses control of his senses and his reason has deserted him" [534b] (Plato 2005).

Perhaps it is tempting to read this passage as a lyrical defence of artistic inspiration enthralling the reader with its beauty. However, its links to the

Bacchae cannot be ignored. The gentle bee-poet is one whose productions depend on the flight from reason and the ordinary senses into inspiration, in a way that is in continuity with the delirium of the Bacchic women; and if the bee is a symbol of gentle, social and industrious nature, in the context of Bacchic excess we might recall that bees can show another nature, swarming and suicidally stinging. Sylvia Plath's bee poems in *Ariel* evoke this other nature of the bee as a metaphor for a (female) desire to escape social conventionality, in poems with more than a hint of a primitive nature cult. Plath's bees are not the sedulous workers of pastoral idyll or of the perfectly ordered society that Plato envisions in the *Republic*, but "a box of maniacs" ("The Arrival of the Bee Box", Plath 2010b, 63) who will swarm and attack a male "scapegoat" ("Stings", Plath 2010a, 66). Or if the hive is imagined as a well-ordered society, a honey engine full of "unmiraculous women,/honey drudges" – just as the poet feels herself to have become in her proper social role as wife and mother – she searches the hive for a transfigured identity, her true identity as poetess: "I/Have a self to recover, a queen" ("Stings", 65–66). The poem ends with the Bacchic flight of the queen beyond the social "wax house", the hive, "More terrible than she ever was, red/Scar in the sky, red comet/from the engine that killed her–/The mausoleum, the wax house" (67). This little flight of my own at least serves to introduce Plato's fundamental political anxiety in regard to poetry: that it is dangerous to social order. No doubt Plato would have felt that Sylvia Plath's powerful poetry was a case in point.

We might see *Ion* as a first attempt to master poetry and stand outside its chain of possession. *Ion* can be viewed as the birthplace of the literary critic and of literary theory, in that it offers the outline of a first poetics, poetry mastered as a whole by the intellect, a pursuit of which Plato sees his contemporary poets, performers and audience as incapable. Let us make Plato's anxieties about poetry and art a bit more concrete. Ion, the featherbrained rhapsode, seems incapable of rational reflection on those subjects closest to him, the poetry of Homer and his profession as rhapsode. Very well, he is a creature of inspiration. But why is this such a cause for concern? Ion himself seems inoffensive enough. But inspiration is very closely allied to something that is a major concern for philosophy and which poetry (art more generally) holds as one of its highest values: emotion and passion. Inspiration is a state of heightened emotion, producing poetry of heightened emotion. The rhapsode, entranced channeller of the muse, brings to life the words of the poet with the fullest emotional power he or she can achieve. The more pathetic, the more terrible, the more thrilling, the more appalling, the better we like it. The more vivid and transporting the evocations of battle, lust, cruelty, pride, humiliation, the more spine tingling, the more heart stopping, the more hair raising, the more we like it, the more our eyes widen, our cheeks flush, our throats parch. Excitement, passion is what we desire. To feel, to be aroused, to be moved is what we constantly *desire*. And we know as well as Plato that the value of emotion and passion exists independently of rationality and

ethics and that they are very often enemies. We know well from our experience of literature and the arts, and other modern-day entertainments or infotainments, that we are often not too concerned about the ethical aspect of what we are being presented with. Or we are aware that we are indulging something rather objectionable in ourselves and that we really shouldn't be watching or reading or clicking, but we watch and read on, we click on. Indeed even when the moral, rational and emotional are properly connected (see Aristotle on tragedy, Chapter 2), the emotions have a value, a pleasure, independent of the ethical.

Ion himself, well qualified for his job, is a creature of strong emotion, as he intimates to Socrates: "I'll tell you in all frankness. When I say something piteous, my eyes fill with tears. When it's something frightening or terrible, my hair stands on end with fear" [535c]. He likes Homer the best of all the poets, yet so unreflective is he that he cannot say why. It seems pretty clear to us: Homer is the most exciting to him. Glancing through Homer's epics we can see what Ion saw in them: tales of passion to the point of madness, insane pride, blood feud, nations plunged into years of war because of personal jealousy or slight, the thrill of battle, the glory of slaughter, trickery and cunning, unbounded passions for bodies, riches, honour, fame. Do we start to see Plato's point? Emotion, passion is of the body, of the body's desire for suffusion, tension, pleasure, connecting with the most primitive and fearsome part of our nature, independent of and often dramatically opposed to reason and sound ethics. Poetry and art are the unashamed champions of emotion, passion, feeling, seeking to provoke it at every turn, and valued and sought out to the degree that they do so. They seem a legitimate concern for a thinker about to develop his vision of the rational *polis* and individual.

Ion has characterized poetry as the product of irrational inspiration and not of practical or rational knowledge. We must remember the central importance of poetry in the Greece of Plato's time as an authority on all aspects of life and behaviour, and its place at the heart of Greek education. The dialogue can be seen as an initial move by Plato to undermine the authority of Homer (and poetry generally). Plato had serious doubts about the appropriateness of Bronze Age heroes, of warriors and adventurers like Odysseus and Achilles, and the activities of Zeus and the other gods in Homer's epics and elsewhere in popular poetry, being held up as examples of virtue in classical urban Athens. Of course, that something is the result of divine inspiration does not undermine its authority, quite the opposite: the divine is a *source* of authority. But what we see Plato attempting to effect is exactly a change of the source of authority, from tradition, the divine, the prophetic and inspired to knowledge grounded in rational and critical thought about matters as they present themselves here and now to reasonable people. Philosophy is to be the new source of authority on values and how to live one's life. Indeed philosophy, before it starts philosophizing, is already an ethics, already an alternative value system to what Socrates and Plato saw prevailing in Athens. For the virtues required for rational philosophical dialogue in search of the truth – calm, control of emotion, non-assertiveness (not

seeking to dominate for egotistical or dogmatic reasons), tolerance of others and their views, impartiality, honesty, etc. – are not merely intellectual virtues, they are general moral and political virtues, at least for a society like Athens. And the opposites of these intellectual virtues – egotism, dogmatism, lack of respect for others, partiality, uncontrolled passion, emotion, bodily pleasure and materialism, rhetorical and logical trickery, etc. – are the stuff of our complaints about our societies' moral, political and economic life just as they were for Socrates and Plato nearly 2,500 years ago. Socrates and Plato add the argument that only the pursuit of intellectual virtues leads to a truly fulfilling life, aligning the pursuits of knowledge, virtue and happiness. Socrates and Plato are thus able to put forward an extremely powerful claim for the authority of philosophy as the rational pursuit of truth that is also the practice of personal and political virtue and, in itself, the way of life that brings true human happiness.

In the *Republic* (c. 375 BC), written during Plato's middle period, Plato imagines an ideal *polis*, city-state. However, the dialogue is a striking mixture of the utopian and the dystopian, at least for those of us who think of literature and the arts as an integral part of the good life. On the one hand, Plato is exhilaratingly visionary. For example, he dares to think that women might have the intellectual and moral potential to be among the rulers of the ideal city, that there would be philosopher-queens as well as philosopher-kings, even though Plato's own society refused women even citizenship. (On the equality of women see Plato 1992b [449a–471e].) On the other hand, the *Republic*, one of the most famous and influential books ever written, contains perhaps the most famous attack on literature and the arts, with Plato's pronouncements aimed squarely at the great artists of the age: Homer, Hesiod and the tragedians.

Socrates, Plato's mouthpiece in the *Republic*, claims that poetry does not have knowledge, that it is full of bad example, that poetry and the other arts, with their power to provoke emotion and passion, to whip up feeling, and their tendency to innovation and novelty, are forces that are highly dangerous to the just city and the well-ordered and truly happy individual. Finally the claim is made that poetry and visual art are (metaphysically) lost in the realm of illusion and becoming that is this world, in contrast to the spiritual realm of the Forms. All those who have argued down the centuries for the danger of literature and art, their tendency to irrationality and immorality, to licentiousness, their tendency to turn heads and disorder personalities, their threat to public order, have Plato as their great forebear. Yet in Plato's ideal city poetry and art will continue to play a central role, as they had done. But they must be unfailingly controlled in order to support and inculcate the virtues of calm, order, stability. It is notable just how much importance Plato attaches to literature and the arts, as Socrates says:

those in charge must cling to education and see that it isn't corrupted without their noticing it, guarding it against everything. Above all, they must