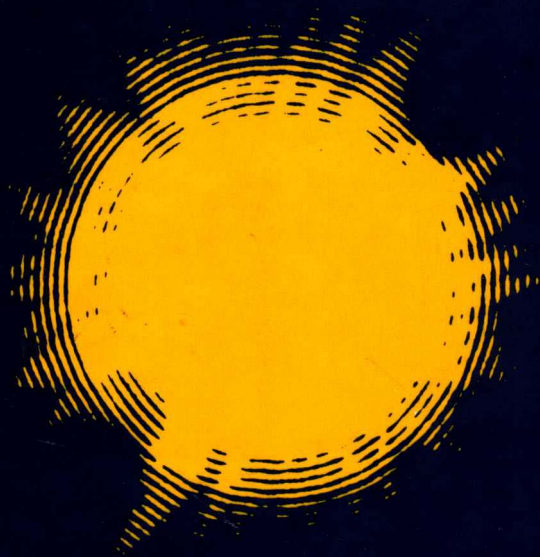


Harold Bloom
Editor

THE ART OF THE CRITIC



Literary Theory and Criticism
From the Greeks to the Present

Volume One

Classical and Medieval

The Art of the Critic

*Literary Theory and Criticism
from the Greeks to the Present*

*Volume 1
Classical and Medieval*

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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Classical Literary Criticism: *Mimesis and the Sublime*

Harold Bloom

1

A CONTEMPORARY STUDENT of literature, and of literary interpretation, knows that the Greeks invented literary theory and criticism. But if the modern critic is compared to any ancient forerunner, considerable bafflement can afflict the student. D. A. Russell, the author of a valuable recent study, *Criticism in Antiquity*, remarks that we are trapped in a paradox when we read ancient criticism.

It is the recorded critical judgements that are puzzling. We find them often inadequate and unsatisfactory, if we compare them with our own responses to the same texts. But at the same time we cannot help reasoning that the Greeks and Romans must after all know what is best, since the language and the culture were their own.

This paradox testifies to our great distance from the ancients, a distance that prolonged study never quite overcomes. What we call “classicism,” whether as a literary tradition, a critical stance, or a scholarly profession, is a particular interpretation of ancient Greek culture—an interpretation frequently called into question by Friedrich Nietzsche, classical philologist, genealogist of morals, and the crucial philosopher of the modern art of interpretation. Nietzsche never ceased to speculate upon the Greeks, and his restless later insights help illuminate not just our estrangement from and puzzlement at Greek aesthetic judgements but the ancients’ progressive estrangement from and puzzlement at themselves.

Gradually everything genuinely Hellenic is made responsible for the state of decay (and Plato is just as ungrateful to Pericles, Homer, tragedy, rhetoric, as the prophets were to David and Saul). The decline of Greece is understood as an objection to the foundations of Hellenic culture: basic error of philosophers—. Conclusion: the Greek world perishes. Cause: Homer, myth, the ancient morality, etc. [*The Will to Power*, Bk. 2, no. 427, trans. W. Kaufmann]

Implicit here as elsewhere in Nietzsche is his vision of Greek culture as essentially agonistic, as contrasted to Hebraic culture, with its central piety of honoring one’s father and one’s mother. Nietzsche probably owed his sense of Greek agon to his colleague and good acquaintance Jakob Burckhardt, but in his

development of the insight Nietzsche surpassed Burckhardt by centering upon the enormous struggle between Plato and Homer (or Socrates and Homer) for the mind of Athens. What Nietzsche found wanting in the classical philologists of his day seems still lacking in many of the more recent scholars: a keen sense that the Greek spirit unfolded itself only in fighting, only in the contest for the foremost place, whether in civic matters, in poetry, or in cognitive achievement. So, Nietzsche praises Goethe for taking possession of the ancient world “always with a competitive soul.” Our failure to compete with the ancients comes from our weakness, since we are not Goethe (or Nietzsche), and yet is it a weakness that we know more about the Greeks than Goethe and Nietzsche did? Is this knowledge purchased by the loss of power?

In some sense, all ancient literary criticism stems from the Platonic agon with Homer, and can be regarded therefore as a critique of Homer, whose poems formed the educational texts upon which all of Greece founded what Rome later called “culture,” in itself not a Greek idea, strictly considered. The *Iliad* in particular is the fundamental classical text, analogous in status and function to what we now call Genesis, Exodus and Numbers in the Hebrew Bible. Ancient Greek and Hebrew literature share very little, but they possess in common the fact of an overwhelming precursor—the author or final author of the *Iliad*, named Homer by Greek tradition, and the writer called J or the Yahwist by modern biblical criticism. The *Iliad* and the oldest narrative strand in the Hebrew Bible constitute the texts of authority, the stories that augment and dominate societies. This analogue between Homer and the Yahwist is a very limited one, as no greater human and moral contrast exists, in literature, than that between Achilles and Jacob, between the heroic slayer of Hector and the superbly canny wrestler who fights a nameless one among the Elohim until the new name, Israel, is awarded as a blessing. The author of the *Iliad* and the teller of the tales of Jacob are as irreconcilable as the traditions they fostered. There is no mode of cognition available in the Western world that is not ultimately Greek, yet the morality of the West remains in some sense Christian, and Christianity, in its origins, was a Jewish heresy. The greatness of Western literature has something to do with this enormous split in Western consciousness, this endless sense that the mind goes one way, while the spirit moves in a contrary direction.

Western literary speculation, however, had only Greek antecedents until St. Augustine began to formulate a Christian rhetoric. I suspect that this is our central difficulty in understanding classical literary theory and criticism, which oddly seems more difficult to us than does ancient epic, tragedy, and lyric. Plato’s banishment of the poets, Aristotle’s subtle notions of *mimesis*, or “imitation,” and the broodings of “Longinus” on the Sublime seem further away from Dr. Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt than Homer seems from Milton, or Aeschylus from Shakespeare. An ode by Pindar and an ode by Wordsworth are majestic leagues apart, yet such distance appears to shrink when compared to the light-years that separate Horace and Kenneth Burke on the art of poetry, or Aristotle and Walter Benjamin on tragedy. There is a “dumbfounding abyss” between ancient and modern criticism, a void that compels us to posit a similar gap between ancient poetry and the criticism it provoked. Nothing would seem

odder than to search for ancient Hebrew literary criticism and theory. Yet it may be more curious than we know to quest for the origins of Western literary thought in Plato and Aristotle. Partly this is because the actual origin of aesthetic criticism was not in philosophy but in poetry itself, the ferocious poetry of farce and extravagant satire written by Aristophanes in his astonishing comedies.

I rely here upon Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, which may be the most profound account of Greek thought processes since Burckhardt and Nietzsche. Snell portrays a Homer whose standard of judgement is "quantity, not intensity," and who does not yet know ambivalence, but whose mind, however archaic, is not just "a battleground of arbitrary forces and uncanny powers," because of the coherence bestowed by the Olympian mythology. That coherence, profoundly altered, is preserved in the tragedies of Aeschylus, who centers upon the will and the decision of individuals yet continues to honor the Olympians, though his Zeus is far more abstract and withdrawn than the Zeus of Homer. Euripides, under the shadow of Aeschylus, swerves away into a rationalistic and realistic art, in which the Olympian mythology has ceased to be something possible to be believed, however abstracted. Aesthetic criticism, in our sense, begins with the violent reaction of Aristophanes to this Euripidean modernism. Snell locates the essence of literary criticism by isolating what Aristophanes could not abide in Euripides (and in Socrates).

... the fundamental purpose or the chief function of the poets [is] that they make men better. This version of the idea is coined by Aristophanes: the poets were teachers—Orpheus of the mysteries and rites, Musaeus of medicine and oracles, Hesiod of agriculture, the divine Homer of honor and glory—and for adults they still play the same role as the schoolmaster does for the children. Even today Aristophanes is the key witness of those who hold that education is the basic concern of the arts, and of all culture in general. Plato makes this moral precept his own; his appointment of Socrates to be the judge of what is good would no doubt have startled Aristophanes. Against this philosophical axiom Plato, in the *Gorgias*, sets the empirical finding that tragedy merely appeals to the pleasure of the senses (*hedone*); with that he opens the doors to endless discussions which via Horace continue well into the eighteenth century: the debate whether the proper task of poetry is *prodesse* or *delectare*, to profit or to please.

Snell's crucial insight here is that Plato (like Aristotle after him) overlooks the antithetical origin of a specifically aesthetic criticism, in the strong preference expressed by Aristophanes for Aeschylus over the "decadent" Euripides. The satirist's preference for an ideal, religious, moral art was turned upside down by the long line of aesthetes from the Alexandrian Callimachus to Oscar Wilde. It is a Wildean irony, and not an Aristophanic one, that the stance of aesthetic criticism, the vision of Walter Pater, was invented by Aristophanes as a villain's position, as the attitude towards poetic language of Aristophanes'

outrageous "Euripides" of *The Frogs*. This paradox is so peculiar, indeed so dialectical, that one wonders if so subtle a consciousness as Aristophanes' did not somehow anticipate it.

Snell, who sides with Euripides, makes a complex judgement against Aristophanes, seeing him as one who studied the nostalgias and so was a kind of first Last Romantic.

The humanization of myth which runs its course from Aeschylus to the late Euripides proves to us that the inherited myth is increasingly rejected as unnatural. The questions of the day are no longer solved by reference to the distant personages of a half-divine world, to their exceptional situations and quarrels which are on the whole foreign to the natural problems of human life. Socrates who progresses, or returns, to the domain of natural man, documents his speculations with examples from ordinary human affairs. With the tools of natural reasoning and common sense he proceeds to answer any questions that may arise. As a result, of course, the questions themselves are tinged with a philosophical shade. "We know the good, but we do not perform it," says the Phaedra of Euripides. Socrates seeks to fortify this knowledge of the good, and to have men yield to its authority. He takes thinking seriously because it is the unique and natural gift of man, and because it adds new strength to the feeble resources of the individual.

It is, of course, difficult to see how this theoretical interest in the good could have sustained the creation of tragedies or any other poetry. Attic tragedy breathed its last with Euripides, and Socrates bears the blame for its death. But at the same time he brought about the birth of something new: Attic philosophy. The judgement of Aristophanes is correct, but let us not be mistaken about him. He is a romantic reactionary who refuses to give up what is already best, and, instead of welcoming the new, mourns the passing of the old.

This is persuasive, yet Snell himself brings to the side of Aristophanes the formidable critical tradition that goes from August Wilhelm Schlegel, in 1800, through Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, a tradition that makes Socrates and Euripides responsible for the death of ancient tragedy, which is to say, for the death of myth and mythmaking. What Snell ultimately establishes is a double heritage that literary criticism owes to Aristophanes. Criticism rises from the defense of myth against rationalism, and criticism becomes truly aesthetic or perceptive when it reverses a moral stance in the name of the idiosyncratic, as Callimachus and those who came after him have reversed Aristophanes.

2

Plato's attitude towards Aristophanes must have been complex, partly because of the unfair and pragmatically destructive portrait of Socrates in *The Clouds*; in any case the Socratic irony pervades the answering portrait of Aristophanes in

the *Symposium*. Yet there is a common element of moral criticism in the attitudes towards poetry of Aristophanes and Plato. The difference is that Plato appears to reject even Aeschylus—indeed, even Homer—in his fierce attack upon poetry as imitation twice removed from reality. We ought never to underestimate the vehemence and seriousness of Plato's polemic. There is a formidable Platonic irony, perhaps apart from the Socratic irony, but there seems nothing ironic about Plato's absolute rejection of the great tradition of Greek poetry from Homer to Euripides. Morality and truth, Plato stubbornly insists, demand that poetry be cast out of the educational process. At all but the very origin of Western literary theory, we are confronted by a theorist who urges us to choose him over Homer as a guide to right thinking and right action.

The severity of Plato's judgements could hardly be surpassed. Poetry is an illness, a cognitive laming, and an immoral stimulant, akin to fame, power, money. Nothing could be further from this Platonic view than Shelley's equally fierce idealization of poetry in his supposedly Platonic *Defence of Poetry*: "Poetry, and the principle of self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of this world." We are at home with Shelley's formulation, and we simply do not know what to make of Plato's, when he says of poetry, "We have to protect our city of the soul against her." Such a rhetoric of defense emphasizes the power and beauty of Homer, yet emphasizes even more strongly that such beauty is destructive, such power immoral. The *Iliad*, Hesiod, Aeschylus, are cast out with a fervor and moral intensity worthy of the prophet Elijah's expulsion of Baal and his idols.

What are we to do with this overwhelming rejection of epic and tragedy? The leading scholars of Plato give us very mixed guidance, perhaps out of reluctance to see their philosopher as rejecting his only true rivals in Greek culture. Paul Friedlander asserts that Plato's polemic was not so much intended against Homer and Aeschylus, but rather against Euripides and, in some sense, even against the earlier Plato himself, since he had begun with the desire to be a tragic poet.

Plato wages his struggle against Homer as the founder of all imitative art, although Plato himself is praised, in the most significant Greek work of aesthetic criticism (*De Sublimite*, ch. 13) as the "most Homeric of all authors." And this judgement seems justified; for do not the Platonic dialogues contain a stream of artistic presentation, that is, of "Homeric" elements, far beyond anything created by earlier forms of mimetic art: Socrates taking a walk with Phaidros, Socrates at the banquet, in the gymnasium, in prison? Thus the struggle with mimesis is, after all and primarily, also a struggle of the philosopher against the poet, and therefore a form of watchfulness constantly exercised against himself and others. Again and again Plato's written work is mimesis; but it struggles against being nothing but mimesis.

This defense is hardly persuasive, since it understates Plato's condemnation of Homer and the tragedians, though it engagingly reminds us that Plato paradoxically is an aesthetic as well as a cognitive alternative to Homer. What

Friedlander partly evades is that Plato's polemic urges upon us a *spiritual* preference for the cognitive over the mimetic or aesthetic. G. M. A. Grube still more evasively asserts that Plato casts out "not all poets indeed . . . but such as are given to excessive impersonation, for these are dangerous." I find it difficult not to be more persuaded by Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, which insists that Plato was "committed to a passionate warfare upon the poetic experience as such," a warfare founded on Plato's attempt to revise Greek education. This revision would have substituted the "supreme music" of Socratic philosophy for Homer's encyclopaedic texts. Havelock centers his argument on the "technological" functions of Homeric epic in Greek culture: poetry as preserved communication, and the performance of poetry as the dissemination of the social encyclopaedia that held Greece together as a single culture. The strongest effect of Havelock's emphasis is to tell us that the Greeks, and Plato in particular, simply did not mean by "poetry" what nevertheless they created and bequeathed to us.

Plato writes as though he had never heard of aesthetics, or even of art. Instead he insists on discussing the poets as though their job was to supply metrical encyclopaedias. The poet is a source on the one hand of essential information and on the other of essential moral training. Historically speaking, his claims even extend to giving technical instruction. It is as though Plato expected poetry to perform all those functions which we relegate on the one hand to religious instruction or moral training and on the other to classroom texts, to histories and handbooks, to encyclopaedias and reference manuals. This is a way of looking at poetry which in effect refuses to discuss it as poetry in our sense at all. It refuses to allow that it may be an art with its own rules rather than a source of information and a system of indoctrination.

The limitation of Havelock's insight comes not so much in his reading of Plato as in his reading of Homer. Is the *Iliad* really a vision of a unified culture? Could it have served as a manual of traditional behavior, a handbook giving knowledge of heroes? After all, its hero is not Hector but Achilles, who is hardly a model for indoctrination. Achilles will not go forth to battle, despite societal codes, until he views the naked corpse of his companion, Patroklos—which is not quite a paradigm for "essential moral training" in traditional Greek culture. Perhaps again it is Nietzsche who gives essential guidance here, correcting Havelock by restoring the image of agon to its full intensity.

The agonistic element is also the danger in every development; it overstimulates the creative impulse. . . .

The greatest fact remains always the preconsciously panhellenic HOMER. All good things derive from him; yet at the same time he remained the mightiest obstacle of all. He made everyone else superficial, and this is why the really serious spirits struggled against him. But to no avail. Homer always won. [Trans. W. Arrowsmith]

Nietzsche's understanding of the agonistic culture of Greece remains unsurpassed. It also remains relatively unrecognized by contemporary classi-

cists and literary theorists. A posthumously published fragment, "Homer's Contest" of 1872, may be his most powerful statement of the agon, and is in my judgement the best explanation for Plato's repudiation of mimetic art.

The greater and more sublime a Greek is, the brighter the flame of ambition that flares out of him, consuming everybody who runs on the same course. Aristotle once made a list of such hostile contests in the grand manner; the most striking of all the examples is that even a dead man can still spur a live one to consuming jealousy. That is how Aristotle describes the relationship of Xenophanes of Colophon to Homer. We do not understand the full strength of Xenophanes' attack on the national hero of poetry, unless—as again later with Plato—we see that at its root lay an overwhelming craving to assume the place of the overthrown poet and to inherit his fame. . . .

. . . That is the core of the Hellenic notion of the contest: it abominates the rule of one and fears its dangers; it desires, as a *protection* against the genius, another genius.

Every talent must unfold itself in fighting: that is the command of the Hellenic popular pedagogy, whereas modern educators dread nothing more than the unleashing of so-called ambition. . . . And just as the youths were educated through contests, their educators were also engaged in contests with each other. The great musical masters, Pindar and Simonides, stood side by side, mistrustful and jealous; in the spirit of contest, the sophist, the advanced teacher of antiquity, meets another sophist; even the most universal type of instruction, through the drama, was meted out to the people only in the form of a tremendous wrestling among the great musical and dramatic artists. How wonderful! "Even the artist hates the artist." Whereas modern man fears nothing in an artist more than the emotion of any personal fight, the Greek knows the artist *only as engaged in a personal fight*. Precisely where modern man senses the weakness of a work of art, the Hellene seeks the source of its greatest strength. What, for example, is of special artistic significance in Plato's dialogues is for the most part the result of a contest with the art of the orators, the sophists, and the dramatists of his time, invented for the purpose of enabling him to say in the end: "Look, I too can do what my great rivals can do; indeed, I can do it better than they. No Protagoras has invented myths as beautiful as mine; no dramatist such a vivid and captivating whole as my *Symposium*; no orator has written orations like those in my *Gorgias*—and now I repudiate all this entirely and condemn all imitative art. Only the contest made me a poet, a sophist, an orator . . ." [*The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann]

Nietzsche's power as an interpreter confirms the most valid aspect of Havelock's critique of such Platonic scholars as Friedlander and Grube: it is indeed Homer who is being rejected, and it is as an educator that he is most vehemently denied. The agon is for the mind of Athens, and so for the spiritual authority of all Greece. Yet Homer lived (probably) at least three hundred and

fifty years before Plato, and Homer has the authority of originality, the strength of the beginning. Hannah Arendt observes that in ancient Greece “to begin” meant also to lead and to rule and so to be truly free. In his last work, the *Laws*, Plato remarked, “The beginning is like a god which as long as it dwells among men saves all things” (725). In some sense, Plato’s contest with Homer is for the prize of usurping the foremost place, and thus becoming that beginning.

In what way, then, can Plato be considered a literary theorist? Possibly only as Freud, rather despite himself, must be considered the foremost modern literary theorist, for Plato and Freud are universal theorists, and their maps of the spirit necessarily map literature also. Plato, however, is more precisely the great theorist of *paideia*, the Greek word that the scholar Werner Jaeger expounded in three remarkable volumes of commentary. *Paideia*, according to Jaeger, at once signifies civilization, culture, tradition, literature, and education. The clearest moral accusation that Plato levels against Homer as educator is when he questions whether Homer should be called a “leader of *paideia*” of the stature of Pythagoras or, by implication, Socrates. That questioning seems to me literary theorizing at its most profound, because it compels us to weigh poetry against shamanism and against dialectic, or more generally against religion and against philosophy.

3

Most academic literary criticism rightly finds its ultimate ancestor in Aristotle, who in a formal sense is certainly a literary theorist, unlike Aristophanes or even Plato. A major modern theorist, W. K. Wimsatt, definitively observed that Aristotle answered his teacher Plato’s rejection of poetry as inadequate imitation by putting forward a theory of poetry as *structure*. Wimsatt saw an essentially empirical purpose in Aristotle, correcting the “rational severity” of Plato by “looking at poetry in its own perspective as a thing having its own peculiar character.” If Wimsatt was correct, then Aristotle is the valid paradigm for all Western literary criticism, which “must be rational and aim at definitions, whether it can or cannot quite achieve them. But what is left over and above definition . . . is still an objective quality of poems, knowable if indefinable, and distinguishable from that other realm, the dark realm of mystery and inspiration—which is the poet’s alone.” Thus Wimsatt exalted Aristotle as the standard for a *cognitive* criticism, as against the *affective* criticism with which Wimsatt associated the tradition that began with *On the Sublime*.

Wimsatt was hardly unique in his high estimate of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which enjoys all but universal esteem in our time. Yet the treatise had almost no reputation among the Greeks and the Romans, and first achieved fame in the Renaissance. It remains a puzzling book, marked strongly by its agon with Plato, and perhaps its modern and indeed contemporary influence upon literary theory and criticism is not altogether a fortunate one. This is (to me) the refreshing stance taken up in a recent book, *The Reach of Criticism*, by Paul Fry:

Aristotle's formulation not only averts the attention of criticism from much that is valuable in literature but also hinders a just estimate of what remains. . . .

There is no passage opened in the *Poetics* from the temporal medium of representation to the ideal space of mythmaking which Aristotle calls the *psuche*, or soul, of tragedy. He distinguishes among the objects, the manner, and the medium of imitation but he does not explain how the only palpable dimension of art, the medium, can incorporate an object in any manner. . . .

I have been trying to make good the assertion that Aristotle's formalism is tenuous and fragile yet rigid: brittle, in short. I have also suggested that it is "intellectual" and far closer to the formalism of the master he is trying to refute than is commonly recognized. His bias in favor of structure considered as the soul of a thing undermines the rational dichotomy between form and matter that he is normally said to maintain. Either the form is intuitive and everything material is extraneous to it, including performance and even the lexical basis of reading, or else the form is embodied within material, and the material in its turn is either wholly somatic or wholly semiotic, with no implicit principle of intentionality. . . .

On this reading, which I find persuasive, Aristotle becomes a formalist version of Plato rather than a defender of poetry against Plato. Plato's deep distrust of the affective element in the performance of poetry is essentially repeated in Aristotle's notion of the catharsis or purging of fear and pity in auditors, since a moral distrust of strong emotions is shared by both philosophers. Aristotle too sees Homer as a liar, or at least as a seducer, teaching other poets the art of lying. If poetry, for Plato, was an inadequate copy of a copy, it is at least a kind of estrangement from reality for Aristotle, almost indeed a defense, as Paul Fry remarks. Such a judgement has its own authentic power, whether in Aristotle or in Freud, but we ought to be clear that Aristotle, not unlike Freud, prefers his version of the reality principle to any imaginative vision whatsoever.

Wimsatt's reverence for Aristotle is a celebration of the mimetic or "realistic" that makes possible a metaphoric theory of poetry "which does justice to the world of things and real values and keeps our criticism from being merely idealistic." This formulation in turn depends upon a praise of metaphor as the poetic trope proper; as Wimsatt says, "Let us observe that metaphor combines the element of necessity or universality (the prime poetic quality which Aristotle noted) with that other element of concreteness or specificity which was implicit in Aristotle's requirement of the mimetic object." This is Wimsatt at his most Johnsonian, and is worthy of Johnson; it is admirable criticism, morally and cognitively precise and powerful. But hidden in it, as in Aristotle and Johnson, is an extracritical belief that can be termed a belief in metaphor as substitute for or sublimation of the whole range of human drives. Nietzsche taught us to realize that the prestige of metaphor and the prestige of sublimation tend to rise and fall

together as any culture goes through its various phases. Aristotle's "realistic" defense of mimesis, against Plato, still relies upon a Platonic valorization of the necessity for sublimation. Such a stance defends culture against its own discontents but cannot hope to choose Homer over Plato, if indeed such a choice finally requires to be made.

4

Criticism, which found three separate beginnings in Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle, emerges fully as an art only with the writer whom tradition has chosen to call "Longinus." We know that the work usually called "Longinus on the Sublime" was composed no later than the third century of the Common Era, but it had no influence until the sixteenth century, when the first modern edition appeared. Boileau translated it into French in 1674, and from then until the High Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, no other work of ancient criticism had anything like its intellectual effect and its literary popularity. Indeed the European literary period that goes from the last quarter of the seventeenth century all through the eighteenth century and on into the first quarter of the nineteenth might well be called "the Age of the Sublime," for the Sublime may be the category that most unites the Enlightenment and Romanticism. But what then was and is "the Sublime"?

To Alexander Pope, Longinus was "himself the great sublime he draws," a judgement confirmed by the historian Gibbon and by many after him. Emerson spoke of "the reader's Sublime," another emphasis upon the Sublime not so much as an affective as opposed to a cognitive phenomenon, but rather as an experience in which cognitive limits appear to be surpassed. (Strictly speaking, the Sublime, or *hypsos*, of the treatise's title should be translated as "greatness" or "the height or heights" or even "great writing" or, as I would say, "strong poetry." The English word "sublime," however inappropriate for *hypsos*, is now traditional, and can even be rendered useful if approached properly, under the guidance of Cohn and Miles in their remarkable article "The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis" (*Modern Philology*, February 1977).

...the modern meanings of *sublime* developed... from its more spiritual and metaphysical sense, as used in the seventeenth century. From the alchemical meanings of purification and from the idea, again from alchemy, of elevation, came religious and secular meanings of purity and loftiness. . . .

Beyond the religious uses of the word and the general seventeenth century meaning of the lofty and the purified, we find in this period the first relation between *sublime* and the art of rhetoric: the expression of lofty ideas in an elevated manner. The *OED* cites the first rhetorical use of the word in 1586, the point at which *sublime* enters the realm of aesthetics in English. By the eighteenth century the uses of *sublime* in aesthetics revealed the same confusion that the theological applications had shown in the seventeenth. While the *sublime* resided first in the

style in which elevated ideas were expressed, it eventually came to mean the elevated ideas themselves. This shift accomplished, it was not difficult to find the source of such loftiness not only in art but in nature. The most important alteration of meaning, however, occurs when the *sublime* is used by English critics in the Longinian sense to describe not the eternal cause of a particular aesthetic state in the beholder, but that state itself; the sublime has moved from the object to the subject.)

That shift in meaning indeed is Longinian, but in a complex sense that seeks to overcome what Wallace Stevens termed "the dumbfounding abyss" between subject and object. *Contra* Wimsatt, who consistently condemns Longinus for critical subjectivity, it can be affirmed of Longinus that he inaugurates the true agon of criticism with philosophy, of poetry with Plato and even with Aristotle. Aristotle, like all his descendants down to Wimsatt, wishes to convince himself that a poem possesses a structure intrinsic to it. Longinus knows better; he had the implicit realization, still shocking to many scholars, that the true poem is the reader's mind, or as Emerson once remarked, that the student had to take herself or himself for text and then had to regard all received texts as commentaries upon the self. I do not find it useful, though, to regard Longinus (or Emerson) as an antiformalist or affectivist; more simply I would say that Longinus was the very first *experiential* critic, the first critic to bring forward his own pathos or personality. There is after all no truth of the poem apart from the actual experience of reading it, and the reader's Sublime is therefore the only pragmatic Sublime, the only literary difference that can make a difference.

Longinus rightly begins by insisting that *hypsos* is an attribute only of the very greatest writers, whether of poetry or prose. Paul Fry, certainly his most sympathetic contemporary champion, finds this emphasis upon greatness the one weakness of Longinus, because "it authorizes the Superman at certain moments." Yes, but the Longinian (or Nietzschean) Superman is precisely the person without a superego, or rather that aesthetic aspect of a person that can escape the sadistic sway of the superego. Freud's "above-I," or superego, demands that the ego surrender its aggressivity, and then goes on tormenting the hapless ego even more for every sacrifice of aggressivity. But Longinus, like the Greek poets, knows only the agon, which is the aesthetic transformation of aggressivity. His call to greatness truly is a denial of the superego, and so does call us to what Blake later was to term Intellectual Warfare. The dismissal of the superego is at one with the dismissal of pity and fear, affects that structure reading for Aristotle but that Longinus rightly dismisses as being antithetical to sublimity or aesthetic greatness, the proper transport or ecstasy of reading.

Homer, rather than Plato, is the hero of *On the Sublime*, the Homer of the *Iliad*, which Longinus praises as being always on the heights of the bard's power. Homer's noble mind echoes in the *Iliad*, and reading the poem, Longinus comes to be filled with joy and pride, until he believes he has created what he has heard, which is precisely what Plato most deprecated. But this may be the point where Longinus manifests the first "modern" sort of critical anxiety of influence, in regard to Plato. Aristotle's anxiety about Plato, like that of Eu-

ripides towards Aeschylus, is authentic enough, but neither relationship seems as central as the shadowing effect of Plato upon Longinus or, say, that of Dante upon Petrarch in another time. As Paul Fry accurately notes, Longinus has a far less impoverished view of literary allusion than most scholars now enjoy. Allusion, Longinus says, causes a lustre to bloom upon our words, as our minds are troped or colored by the power of our precursors' language. Fry observes that Longinus "cannot praise his literary ancestor Plato without some word of qualification," because the great style and the agonistic concepts of Plato pervade *On the Sublime*.

Is psychic ambivalence then not the center of the Longinian Sublime, and perhaps of every Romantic theory of criticism following it? The contemporary rhetorical school headed by Jacques Derrida and the late Paul de Man would argue otherwise, an argument that has been elaborated by Neil Hertz in the subtlest essay yet published upon Longinus. Hertz associates Longinus with the modern critic Walter Benjamin and deconstructs the method of both critics as

. . . the more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies into "quotations," in the interests of building up a discourse of one's own, a discourse which, in its turn, directs attention to passages that come to serve as emblems of the critic's most acute, least nostalgic sense of what he is about.

To Hertz, this figurative movement of disintegration and subsequent reconstitution is essentially a rhetorical problematic masking itself as psychic ambivalence or as cultural history. But the ambivalence towards Plato in Longinus seems clear, and is grounded in literary inheritance rather than in literary language alone. Longinus understood implicitly what Nietzsche taught us to know explicitly, which is the agonistic nature of the literary experience, and so of all literary interpretation also. To achieve the reader's Sublime is to gain power over a text through interpretation, and to know greatness the reader needs to confront greatness. Longinus prophesied all the great personalist critics, even the neoclassical Dr. Samuel Johnson, even the Christian Romantic Coleridge, but more particularly Longinus fathered the Oedipal line of critics that includes Hazlitt, Carlyle, Ruskin, Emerson, Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Kenneth Burke, as well as certain contemporary figures who emphasize Nietzschean and Freudian approaches to interpretation. It is from Longinus that we continue to learn a vision in which the Sublime and the agonistic merge into one.

Plato's moral legacy to the subsequent history of criticism cannot be understood without reference to what W. K. Wimsatt named "the Neoplatonic conclusion" to classical literary theory. Six and a half centuries intervened between Plato and Plotinus, and perhaps they provided enough critical distance to make

plausible so extraordinary a departure from Plato that yet continued to assert its essential Platonism. Here is Plotinus actually contraverting Plato on mimesis, while relying wholly upon Plato's vision of the Ideas as a final reality.

Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which nature derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are molders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight. [*Ennead* 5. 8. 1]

It remained for the later Neoplatonists to confront this extraordinary reversal of Plato, but they chose to evade the stance of Plotinus in favor of a remarkable interpretation of the relation of Plato to Homer. For a theorist like Proclus, there had to be a way of reconciling Plato and Homer, and this way surprisingly turned out to be an insistence that Plato was the disciple of Homer: in myth, in style, and even in argument. Here is Proclus boldly seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable:

. . . If Plato correctly set out to refute Homer and show that he is out of harmony with the truth concerning reality, how is it still possible to include this poet among those who possess true knowledge, true knowledge moreover, of doctrines concerning the divine peoples and eternal beings? But if, on the other hand, these and other matters as well have been deemed worthy by Homer of a suitable treatment, how can we still allow that Plato is acting intelligently and with irrefutable knowledge? . . . Plato himself is self-contradictory in what he says about Homer. For how can there be any agreement between the "divine poet" of the *Phaedo* (95a) and the poet of the *Republic* (10. 597e), who is shown to be at three removes from the truth?

Proclus sets himself the quest of resolving this dilemma so that

. . . both Homer and Plato may be revealed to us as contemplating the divine world with understanding and knowledge, to be teaching, both of them, the same doctrines about identical matters, to have proceeded from one God and to be participating in the same chain of being, both of them expounders of the same truth concerning reality.

James A. Coulter, in his crucial monograph *The Literary Microcosm*, is deeply sympathetic to Proclus but argues that the Neoplatonic defense of Plato "radically misinterpreted the substance of Plato's qualifications" in his attack on Homer. What Proclus sees as qualified assertions are not, after all, asserted qualifications; they remain profound moral objections to the civic and psychological consequences of listening to Homer read aloud. Coulter emphasizes the

opportunities for interpretation left open by Plato's complex ironies and by the ambiguities of Plato's style, and the ambivalences of the Platonic stance towards poetry.

... it is not surprising that Proclus should have been able to "rescue" Homer. Exploiting Plato's remarks about the "divine" and "inspired" Homer, as well as his failure explicitly to deny the existence of allegorical meanings, Proclus read back into Homer's text the metaphysical universe of late Neoplatonism and, in the process, endowed with an abundant reality that ill-defined and only negatively implied species of poetry which for Plato belonged to the category of the non-mimetic.

It is true that Socrates, in *Republic* 10, rejects poetry that is *imitation*, but nowhere does Plato discourse explicitly as to what the nature of a nonmimetic or visionary poetry might be. Still, it was the tradition of Plotinus and Proclus that made possible the long development of Christian Neoplatonism, with its emphasis upon the moral redemptiveness of visionary and allegorical poetry. The greatest of neoclassical poets, Alexander Pope, writing in 1715, may be permitted the last word in this Introduction to a comprehensive collection of classical and medieval literary theory and criticism.

A strict Verisimilitude . . . is not requir'd in the Descriptions of this visionary and allegorical kind of Poetry, which admits of every wild Object that Fancy may present in a Dream, and where it is Sufficient if the moral meaning atone for the Improbability.