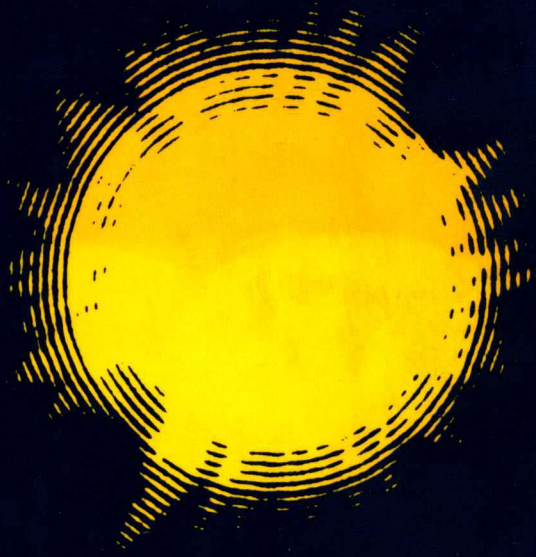


Harold Bloom  
Editor

# THE ART OF THE CRITIC



Literary Theory and Criticism  
From the Greeks to the Present

Volume Eleven

*Contemporary (conclusion)  
Glossary and Index*

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

Volume 11

~~Contemporary (conclusion)~~  
~~Glossary and Index~~

~~EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY~~

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# *The Future of Literary Criticism as an Art*

Harold Bloom

Western literary criticism, as Bruno Snell first emphasized, originated in the context of satiric comedy. Aristophanes fathered criticism as a literary art essential to every other mode of literature, whether dramatic, epic, lyric, or narrative. Plato and Aristotle, in very different ways, sought to make criticism a part of philosophy, which was still the enterprise of such recent and current Gallic mystagogues as Foucault, de Man, and Derrida, all of them heirs of Nietzsche. Longinus, when he subtly renewed the contest between Plato and Homer, returned criticism to its agonistic origins in Aristophanes' vision of the strife between his admired Aeschylus and his despised Euripides. As a disciple of Longinus, I prophesy that the future of criticism will see its return from philosophy and social science and politics, its current morasses, to its ancient function as the branch of the literary art that judges and enables the rest of literature.

The art of criticism in English, which reached a first culmination in the Christian neoclassicism of Dr. Samuel Johnson, achieved a second height in such Romantic readers as William Hazlitt and John Ruskin, and Ralph Waldo Emerson in America. Romantic criticism exalted the Imagination, an apotheosis that could survive only through transformation in what remains the Age of Freud, half a century after the death of the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud affirmed the pragmatic primacy of fantasy over biology, even while extending an almost transcendental fealty to reality testing, or the equation of the biological necessity of dying with the Reality Principle. Kenneth Burke, still foremost among living critics, keeps his central position because he has been able to reaffirm imaginative values even in a Freudian context.

The art of criticism, to survive, will escape the nets of Marx and Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, but still must accommodate itself to the prophecies of Nietzsche and of Freud. Nietzsche's ultimate teaching may be the paradox that human existence can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, even though the aesthetic always depends upon our capacity to believe our own lies to ourselves. Truth would destroy us; art protects us. This Nietzschean formulation cannot, I think, be reconciled with Freud's worship of the Reality Principle, but that may mean that Freud retained, despite himself, a vestige of Platonism, while Nietzsche indeed had rejected the last transcendentalism.

The function of criticism, in any age, is to protect art against belief, whether that belief be societal or transcendental, or something in between. The literary critic, qua critic, is not primarily an agent of social change. Her work fundamentally is to build a hedge about the aesthetic, and to raise up disciples to it, because the social vision of any single generation cannot legislate human possibilities for the generations to come. Feminist literary criticism will remain in its infancy until it can become a lens for a new aesthetic perceptiveness rather than a mirror for protest and for social progress, however

admirable. Until then, feminist criticism will suffer all the disabilities of every moral mode of literary criticism, be it Christian, Marxist, African-American, or most of what passes for Freudian criticism. Perhaps the only Western belief that escapes the stifling consequences of belief is a faith in the aesthetic, since the believer in imaginative literature, like Nietzsche and Pater, Emerson and Wallace Stevens, believes as William James the Pragmatist believed, knowing that what one believes in is a fiction, true only insofar as it is memorable, and as it enhances the possibilities of human surmise or human existence.

Criticism is necessarily a mixed mode, since it is both a branch of literature and an overt instrument of education. Homer was the schoolbook for the Greeks, despite Plato's opposition, but the allegorists of Homer, his critics, ultimately made Dante possible even though Dante never read Homer. Is that not a paradigm for all criticism? Doing its job, it will prepare the way for an art it cannot necessarily anticipate. Perhaps the only art it must be able to prophesy is its own future, which returns me to the burden of this introduction. How can literary criticism continue to be a central component in Western education, in an age that incessantly becomes ever more ideological? What is the role of the aesthetic in an era that seems to compel flight from, or repression of, the aesthetic? My own students of a previous generation, who once seemed to me as possessed by aesthetic fervor as I remain, all too often march now under the banners of what Nietzsche might have called the School of Resentment. This parade away from aesthetic values is a sixfold movement: Marxists, feminists, semioticians, deconstructors, Lacanians, and Foucault-inspired, self-dubbed New Historicists. But ultimately all these mix together as moral historicisms or philosophical reductions, while literary fictions continue to take place *between* philosophy and history. If literature is, as the late Paul de Man insisted it must be, identical with rhetoric, then this rhetoric cannot be conceived of as synchronic, which means that what our age considers to be irony is not likely to be the literary irony of any other era. Another way of saying this is that our criticism can legislate neither its own past nor its own future, which returns me to all the paradoxes of the educational function of criticism, particularly at the present time.

Ultimately the critic can only teach herself when she teaches, because critical experience invariably will show her, given enough time, that there is no method except herself. In an ideological age, the self always is put into question, with method embraced instead, and such flight from the self inevitably becomes also a flight from the aesthetic. The growth of Western literature, whether you take it as progressive or regressive, is the story of the ever-expanding inner self, until this expansion touches its limits in Freud's speculations. An inner self that will not cease in its extensions had to seek representation in order to survive, and, whether that representation was Shakespeare's Hamlet, Milton's Satan, Wordsworth's own individual mind, or Freud's narcissistic and largely unconscious ego, the function of such mimesis was to ally inextricably the self and the pleasures of imaging the self. Criticism can turn Sublime, as it did in Longinus or Shelley or Emerson or Pater, and so can urge us to surrender pleasure, but only in order to open us to more difficult

pleasures, to chronicles of even more inward selves. What criticism cannot do is to urge us to yield up aesthetic pleasures in order to hasten or to guarantee social change, however admirable such change might prove to be.

Method in literature is always a trope, and changes in method, in criticism, always reveal themselves to be changes in critical vocabulary. I wish to worry once more the educational dilemma of criticism: how can the aesthetic itself be saved from becoming an ideology? Those contemporaries against whom I write would insist that it cannot, so that my own defense of literary originality, of critical authority, of the authorial self, of literary character, is to be regarded as patriarchal, elitist, socially exploitative and so only as another mask for Western capitalism, with all of its notorious record that tropes greed as self-reliance, solipsism as imagination. Against this one must observe, in all mildness, that a poem or a story, a drama or a novel, must establish its own identity within a tradition of utterance before it is able to please us, and to instruct us by and through pleasing. The most exemplary and politically correct ideas of social redemption, as outlined by such current sages as Doris Lessing and Alice Walker, will fail their ideological purpose precisely to the extent that they manifestly lack art, or substitute moral virtue for the aesthetic experience. The disorders of society, like the disorders of the human, are proper candidates for the role of *materia poetica*, but so is very nearly everything else. Eloquence depends upon the hard work that is art, and not upon moral indignation, however sincere. Daily I receive in the mail volumes of the most sincere verse, and novels of admirable social sincerity. More than ever, all our bad verse and weak fiction is passionately sincere, encouraged by sincere Professors of Resentment. A part, at least, of the educational function of criticism at this time is to remind us that sincerity cannot substitute itself for the labor of representation. The sins of the ages may be a proper subject for a great Bard of Resentment to come, but alas she is not yet with us. And when she arrives, she will be recognized only because her usurpation of the aesthetic itself will be a major manifestation of aesthetic values.

But what *are* aesthetic values? The question is hardly to be asked, let alone answered, by any critic who possesses a depth of aesthetic awareness, but I learn daily to come to terms with it, since my students will not stop asking it. The aesthetic is now what always it has been, a mode of cognitive perception, and of cognitive sensation, rather than a pathway to supposed cognitive truth. Parmenides first attacked the aesthetic, on behalf of thought, and we can recall that Heraclitus, with his fabled darkness, asserted that the only reality to be found in the aesthetic is change as such, an assertion developed rather negatively by Plato. Aristotle tried for a more balanced view, but his balance seems to me more medical than anything else. Epicurus, ultimate ancestor of Pater, Wilde, and Wallace Stevens, seems to have been the first Western speculator who would acknowledge perception and sensation as valid quests for truth. The art of literary criticism must follow Epicurus in defending perception and sensation (hardly societal modes) as endeavors that rival cognition, because perception and sensation together constitute the essence of the aesthetic. To educate in perception and sensation is to follow Epicurus, and so

to advocate no ideology except the Epicurean, which in the context of our moment is not an ideology at all. A literary critic qua critic, in my judgment, cannot be a Christian or a normative Jew, cannot be a Marxist or a feminist or any other apostle of an extra-aesthetic light. But she can be, indeed should be, an Epicurean before she is anything else. Her function is to compare and judge perceptions and sensations, the perceptions and sensations not only represented by imaginative literature, but themselves the product of poetry and prose fictions. Resentment will not take one far into the realms of perception and of sensation.

What is now called "theory" in literary criticism is not what I could accept as literary theory because it is anything but literary. Most of it is a reworking of a handful of tropes that ensue from French misreadings of German texts during the last quarter century. Literary theory, to be literary, will have to speculate upon the perceptions and sensations we have of poems, and also experiences through poems. There is no common denominator of poetic perception or of poetic sensation. We scarcely have begun to study perception and sensation in Shakespeare, even now. Literary criticism will not be adequate to Shakespeare's originality until it becomes aesthetic again, for the aesthetic founds itself upon originality of perception and origination of sensation. Criticism educates when it defines poetry against ideology, which means against what is sanctimonious in the reader. Perhaps there is the center that I seek. The function of criticism (and its future) is to purge us not of selfhood but of self-righteousness, of moral virtue, of what Blake referred to as "the selfish virtues of the natural heart."

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# The Art of the Critic



# Raymond Williams

1921–1988

Raymond Henry Williams was born on August 31, 1921, in Monmouthshire, Wales, and was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. After service in the British army during World War II, he began a forty-year teaching career, first at Oxford as staff tutor in literature from 1946 to 1961, then as a member of the faculty of Jesus College, Cambridge, with which he remained associated until his death on January 26, 1988, in London.

As a sociological critic of literature, Williams is recognized as a significant figure in postwar English letters. Long interested in the relationship between literature and society, influenced by both Marxism and the cultural radicalism of F. R. Leavis, Williams's first publishing venture was the short-lived journal of opinion *Politics and Letters* (1946–47), which he launched with two associates about the time he joined the Oxford faculty. His first book, *Reading and Criticism*, was published in 1950, and over the next four decades he wrote thirteen additional critical works, including *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952; rev. 1968); *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958); *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970); *The Country and the City* (1973); and *Marxism and Literature* (1977).

Perhaps his best-known book, *Culture and Society* examines the relationship between artistic and social development in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, and offers a sympathetic appraisal of the work and thought of Coleridge, Mill, Ruskin, and Lawrence. Inherent in Williams's presentation is a plea for the working-class notion of a collective society and a rejection of the bourgeois concept of an individualistic society. He argues that the major elements of the national culture should not remain the province a select few, but should be disseminated throughout society.

*The Country and the City*, perhaps equally well-known among Williams's oeuvre, surveys English literature in terms of changing attitudes toward both the countryside and the developing urban landscape throughout much of English history, as in *Culture and Society* relating literary works to the societal conditions that engendered them, and again emphasizing the idea of community, expressing hope for "new forms of cooperative effort."

Williams was also the author of a critical biography of George Orwell, and wrote four novels which explore the ideas of community discussed in his criticism. His fiction, Williams always maintained, was just as important as his criticism, and in the following passage from the essay "Realism and the Contemporary Novel" (published in the collection *The Long Revolution*, 1961) he seems to have brought together his ideas on literature and community: "The experience of isolation, of alienation, and of self-exile is an important

part of the contemporary structure of feeling, and any contemporary realist novel would have come to real terms with it. . . . The truly creative effort of our time is the struggle for relationships, of a whole kind, and it is possible to see this as both personal and social: the practical learning of *extending* relationships."

FROM  
THE LONG REVOLUTION

THE CREATIVE MIND

No word in English carries a more consistently positive reference than 'creative', and obviously we should be glad of this, when we think of the values it seeks to express and the activities it offers to describe. Yet, clearly, the very width of the reference involves not only difficulties of meaning, but also, through habit, a kind of unthinking repetition which at times makes the word seem useless. I propose to examine the significance of the 'creative' idea: first, by reviewing its history; second, by comparing its development as a term in the arts with some important recent scientific work on perception and communication; third, by looking at it as a possible key term in our contemporary discussion of culture—a discussion which centres on the relations between art and learning and the whole complex of our activities that we call our society.

I

The history of the 'creative' idea is in many ways difficult to trace. It seems to me to begin, essentially, in the thought of the Renaissance, but, when we look at these sources, we find its originators referring the idea to classical thought, as if unaware of the new emphasis they seem to be making. In any past writing, only part of the original meaning is recoverable, for the meaning as a whole has come to us through many minds, and even when we have distinguished their influence we find that the original significance is, with its context, still partly withheld. Yet as I read the authors, in particular Aristotle and Plato, on whom these Renaissance thinkers relied, I see a distinction, an altered significance, which seems of fundamental importance. The activity being described is a common activity, but its description, essentially, has altered.

We speak now of the artist's activity as 'creation', but the word used by Plato and Aristotle is the very different 'imitation'. The general meaning of the Greek word *mimesis* is either 'doing what another has done', or 'making something like something else'. In actual use it included the activities of the dancer, the singer, the musician, the painter, the sculptor, the actor, the dramatist, and the common quality in these activities was seen as 'the representation of something else': 'imitation'. Aristotle wrote:

The general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves

may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things.

It seems clear from this, as from the whole of his main argument, that Aristotle considers art primarily as a representation of some hitherto-existing reality. The artist imitates this, and by his imitation, which is akin to our first process of learning, we gather the meaning of the thing that is imitated.

Plato, similarly, described the artist as an 'imitator' of a pre-existing reality. God was the creator of things; workmen the artificers of things; artists the imitators of things. Thus, Plato and Aristotle agree on the fact of imitation, but go on to draw different conclusions from it. For Plato, although in the *Ion* he describes the poet as divinely inspired, the act of imitation is at two removes from reality (the Idea, then the material thing, then the imitation) and the famous discussion in the *Republic*, proposing the censorship of poets, emphasizes the dangers of the influence of these 'mere imitators' on the weaker parts of the mind.

The art of imitation is the worthless mistress of a worthless friend, and the parent of a worthless progeny. . . . The imitative poet . . . resembles the painter in producing things that are worthless when tried by the standard of truth, and he resembles him also in this, that he holds intercourse with a part of the soul which is like himself, and not with the best part. . . . He excites and feeds this worthless part of the soul, and thus destroys the rational part.

Aristotle, on the other hand, not only emphasizes imitation as part of the normal learning process, but introduces a new principle, that of 'the universal':

The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. . . . Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.

Thus while Plato emphasizes the dangers of fiction, as the imitation not even of ultimate reality but of mere appearances, Aristotle develops his concept of imitation as a form of learning towards its definition as the highest form of learning, in that it shows, through its universal statements, the permanent and the necessary.

The immense intellectual tradition which flowed from Plato and Aristotle came to include not only these two opposing valuations, but an extraordinary series of modifications, transvaluations, developments, and interpretations. Thus Platonism came to include a theory of art directly opposed to that of the *Republic*, arguing that the divinely inspired poet was able to teach the highest reality because he penetrated mere appearance, and embodied in his work the divine Idea. Aristotle's idea of universals, which in context reads primarily as the embodiment of general truths about human nature, became identified, in many minds, as the same doctrine: the universals were the divine Ideas, and the poet embodied them. Still, however, even after these developments, the process of art was 'imitation' and not 'creation'.

From the excitement and confusion of Renaissance theory four doctrines of art emerged. The first defined art as an imitation of the hidden reality, thus making it a form of revelation; this was particularly useful to some Christian thinkers, who could then see art as an allegory of the mind of God. This developed into the idea of art as an esoteric activity, and a high valuation of works of an allegorical or symbolic kind. The second doctrine, from much the same source but less affected by Christian thinking, saw art as a perpetual imitation and embodiment of the 'Idea of Beauty'. This came to include, in practice, the idea of imitating, not slavishly yet seriously, earlier works of art in which this Idea of Beauty was embodied (this is the major tradition which became known as classicism). The third doctrine, developing some of the emphases of Aristotle, saw art as the 'idealization of nature'; that is to say, showing things not as they are but as they ought to be. This, while based on the same source as allegiance to the 'Idea of Beauty', moved not towards classicism, but towards an important tradition of exemplary, moralizing and didactic works. The fourth doctrine, from which the 'creative' emphasis primarily springs, saw nature as God's art (Tasso) and saw art as a form of energy which vies with nature. As Castelvetro put it:

Art is not a thing different from nature, nor can it pass beyond the limits of nature; it sets out with the same purpose as that of nature.

This purpose is a distinct form of creation. Nature is God's creation; art is man's creation. 'There are two creators', Tasso wrote, 'God and the poet.'

In any particular Renaissance work one is likely to find the four doctrines that I have here distinguished, not as alternatives, but frequently involved with each other, as the extreme ambiguity and vagueness of the terms make easily possible. But in the more important writers the tendency towards a distinctly humanist theory of art is quite marked. For some centuries yet, the idea of art as creation, in a kind of rivalry with God, would seem blasphemous. Yet, entangled as it was with both actual and false reliance on Plato and Aristotle, complicated as it was by different kinds of Christian tradition, the emergence of this idea can be seen as part of the new thinking of the Renaissance, and at the head of a line which leads down to our day. In the English tradition, its classical statement is that of Sidney. All other 'arts' and 'sciences' (astronomy,



mathematics, music, philosophy, law, history, grammar, rhetoric, medicine, metaphysics) are, Sidney argues, tied to nature.

Onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his owne invention, dooth growe in effect another nature, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or, quite a newe, formes such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as hee goeth hand in hand with Nature, not inclosed within the narrow warrant of her guifts, but freely ranging onely within the Zodiack of his owne wit.

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapistry as divers poets have done, neither with plesant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden. But let those things alone and goe to man, for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost cunning is imployed, and knowe whether shee have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a Prince as Xenophon's Cyrus, so excellent a man every way as Virgils Aeneas. Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essentiall, the other, in imitation or fiction; for any understanding knoweth the skil of the Artificer standeth in that Idea or foreconceite of the work, and not in the work it selfe. And that the Poet hath that Idea is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellencie as hee hath imagined them. Which delivering forth also is not wholie imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build Castles in the ayre; but so farre substantially it worketh, not onely to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellencie, as Nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the worlde, to make many Cyrus's, if they wil learne aright why and how that Maker made him.

Neyther let it be deemed too sawcie a comparision to ballance the highest poynt of mans wit with the efficacie of Nature: but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to his owne likenes, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature, which in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, sith our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching it.

The strands of many traditions can be seen in this, but the decisive novelty (it is not Sidney's, but of his period) is clear. This is the doctrine of man the creator, who 'with the force of a divine breath' brings forth 'things far surpassing' nature. Sidney glances back at one part of Plato's teaching, to find this force given by God to one kind of man, the poet. But the claim occurs within