A History of Literary Criticism
For Yasmeen
A History of Literary Criticism
From Plato to the Present

M. A. R. Habib
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments viii
Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Works ix

Introduction 1

Part I  Ancient Greek Criticism 7
Classical Literary Criticism: Intellectual and Political Backgrounds 9
  1 Plato (428–ca. 347 BC) 19
  2 Aristotle (384–322 BC) 41

Part II  The Traditions of Rhetoric 63
  3 Greek Rhetoric 65
     Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle
  4 The Hellenistic Period and Roman Rhetoric 80
     Rhetorica, Cicero, Quintilian

Part III  Greek and Latin Criticism During the Roman Empire 103
  5 Horace (65–8 BC) 105
  6 Longinus (First Century AD) 118
  7 Neo-Platonism 129
     Plotinus, Macrobius, Boethius

Part IV  The Medieval Era 149
  8 The Early Middle Ages 151
     St. Augustine

v
CONTENTS

9 The Later Middle Ages 166
Hugh of St. Victor, John of Salisbury, Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey de
Vinsauf, Ibn Rushd (Averroës), St. Thomas Aquinas

10 Transitions: Medieval Humanism 215
Giovanni Boccaccio, Christine de Pisan

Part V The Early Modern Period to the Enlightenment 227

11 The Early Modern Period 229
Giambattista Giraldi, Lodovico Castelvetro, Giacopo Mazzoni,
Torquato Tasso, Joachim Du Bellay, Pierre de Ronsard, Sir Philip Sidney,
George Gascoigne, George Puttenham

12 Neoclassical Literary Criticism 273
Pierre Corneille, Nicolas Boileau, John Dryden, Alexander Pope,
Aphra Behn, Samuel Johnson

13 The Enlightenment 311
John Locke, Joseph Addison, Giambattista Vico, David Hume,
Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft

Part VI The Earlier Nineteenth Century and Romanticism 347
Introduction to the Modern Period 349

14 The Kantian System and Kant’s Aesthetics 357

15 G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) 382

16 Romanticism (I): Germany and France 408
Friedrich von Schiller, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Germaine de Staël

17 Romanticism (II): England and America 428
William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Edgar Allan Poe

Part VII The Later Nineteenth Century 467

18 Realism and Naturalism 469
George Eliot, Émile Zola, William Dean Howells, Henry James

19 Symbolism and Aestheticism 489
Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde

20 The Heterological Thinkers 502
Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson,
Matthew Arnold

21 Marxism 527
Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, György Lukács, Terry Eagleton
Part VIII  The Twentieth Century
The Twentieth Century: Backgrounds and Perspectives

22 Psychoanalytic Criticism
  *Freud and Lacan*

23 Formalisms
  *Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson, John Crowe Ransom, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, T. S. Eliot*

24 Structuralism
  *Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes*

25 Deconstruction
  *Jacques Derrida*

26 Feminist Criticism
  *Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Michèle Barrett, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous*

27 Reader-Response and Reception Theory
  *Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish*

28 Postcolonial Criticism
  *Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*

29 New Historicism
  *Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault*

Epilogue

Selective Bibliography

Index
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ABBREVIATIONS OF FREQUENTLY CITED WORKS


HWP  Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974).


MLC  Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974).


n our world it has become more important than ever that we learn to read critically. The events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have shown us – with a new urgency – the dangers of misunderstanding and inadequate education. It has become more important than ever that we understand the various voices crying from afar in other languages; and it is just as urgent that we understand the bewildering multitude of voices in our own culture. In order to make sense of our own present, we need to understand our own past. We need to look critically at the various documents, cultural, political, and religious, which furnish our identity, which tell us who we are, who we should be, and what we might become. As a black American scholar has recently said, “the challenge of mutual understanding among the world’s multifarious cultures will be the single greatest task that we face, after the failure of the world to feed itself.”

It has become indisputably clear that the study of the humanities in general is no longer a luxury but a necessity, vital to our very survival as an enlightened civilization. We cannot form an articulate vision of our own moral, educational, and political values without some knowledge of where those values come from, the struggles in which they were forged, and the historical contexts which generated those struggles. To study the Bible, Plato, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, or Roman Law, to study Jewish or African-American history, to examine the Qur’an and the long history of the Western world’s fraught engagement with Islam, is to study the sources of the conflicts and cultural tendencies which inform our present world. We cannot be good citizens – either of a particular country or of the world – by succumbing to the endless forces operating worldwide that encourage us to remain ignorant, to follow blindly, whether in the form of blind nationalism, blind religiosity, or blind chauvinism in all its manifold guises. One of the keys to counteracting those forces which would keep us in darkness lies in education, and in particular in the process which forms the core of education: the individual and institutional practice of reading, of close, careful, critical reading. Such reading entails a great deal more than merely close attention to the words on the page, or the text as it immediately confronts us. We need to know why a text was written, for whom it was written, what religious or moral or political
purposes motivated it, as well as its historical and cultural circumstances. Then, indeed, we can move on to the issues of its style, its language, its structure, and its deployment of rhetorical and literary techniques.

All disciplines in the humanities (and arguably those in the sciences) call for such close, critical, and comprehensive reading. There is one discipline which is defined by its insistence on such strategies: this is the discipline of literary criticism, as operating through both practice and theory. At the most basic level, we might say that the practice of literary criticism is applied to various given texts. The theory is devoted to examining the principles behind such practice. We might say that theory is a systematic explanation of practice or a situation of practice in broader framework; theory brings to light the motives behind our practice; it shows us the connection of practice to ideology, power structures, our own unconscious, our political and religious attitudes, our economic structures; above all, theory shows us that practice is not something natural but is a specific historical construct. Hence, to look over the history of literary criticism, a journey we are about to undertake in this book, is not only to revisit some of the profoundest sources of our identity but also to renew our connections with some of the deepest resources of our present and future sustenance.

**Methodology of this Book**

The methodology of this book rests on five basic principles. One of the central difficulties encountered by readers of modern literary criticism and theory derives from the fact that the latter often employs concepts and terminology that are rooted in philosophy and other disciplines. In addressing this difficulty, the first principle and purpose of this book is to provide not just an isolated history of literary criticism, but to locate this history within the context of the main currents of Western thought. This means, for example, not just examining what Plato and Kant say about poetry or aesthetics but situating their aesthetic views within the framework of their philosophical systems. Without those systems, we can have merely a haphazard understanding of their views on literature and art; moreover, those systems themselves are still with us in many guises, and they still inform the ways in which we think about the world.

The reaction of many literary scholars against modern literary and cultural theory is often underlain by a distrust of philosophy, of technical jargon, and a lack of familiarity with the great philosophical systems. I hope that this book goes some way toward making the works of great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel a little less daunting. The truth is that without some grasp of their major ideas, we simply cannot begin to understand thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva. A great deal of literary theory presupposes familiarity with a broad range of philosophical ideas. More importantly, the philosophical systems of these thinkers are crucial for any understanding of modern Western thought. For example, we cannot begin to understand the world that we have inherited without understanding liberalism as it was formulated by Locke, without understanding the main directions of Enlightenment thought such as rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism, as well as the attempts of Kant and Hegel to situate such trends within larger, more comprehensive accounts of the world. Again,
we cannot understand who we are without recognizing the diverse reactions against mainstream bourgeois thought, ranging from Romanticism through symbolism to Marxism, Freudianism, and existentialism. We need to recognize that today we are complex creatures who are the product of a long and complex historical development that embraces all of these movements and dispositions. We bear, in our own mentalities and our own broad outlooks toward the world, traces and vestiges of these often conflicting modes of thought. For example, we may live out our public lives on the basis of largely bourgeois values such as the use of reason, the reliance on experience and observation, and a commitment to competition, efficiency, practicality, and of course profit-making. Yet each of us, usually in our private lives, is also familiar with a set of values deriving sometimes from feudal Christianity or Judaism or Islam (loyalty, devotion, faith) or from Romantic attitudes (an emphasis on imagination, creativity, emotion, and a sense of the mystery of the world), as well as from Marxism (a belief in equality of opportunity, an openness to various modes of reconceiving history, and a redefinition of bourgeois values such as freedom in a comprehensive sense that applies to all people), not to mention certain radical ideas of the human psyche deriving from Freud and other pioneers in the fields of psychoanalysis. The history of literary criticism is profoundly imbricated in the history of thought in a broad range of spheres, philosophical, religious, social, economic, and psychological. Part of the purpose of this book, then, is to place modern literary theory within a historically broader context, to view it from a perspective that might evince its connections and lines of origin, descent, and reaction.

Secondly, given that this book proceeds by way of close textual analysis, it is necessarily selective, focusing on the most important and influential texts of some of the most important figures. There are certainly a number of major figures omitted: readers may object that there is no detailed treatment of Paul de Man and other deconstructionists, or of many feminist writers, or of Fredric Jameson or certain proponents of New Historicism. I must plead guilty to all of these omissions. My reason is simply that there is not enough room. The intent of this book is not to provide encyclopedic coverage, nor to offer a cursory treatment of all possible major figures. These valuable tasks have already been performed by several eminent authors. This book aims to redress a deficiency that students have repeatedly voiced to me: the need for a text that will guide them through the intricacies of many difficult literary-critical and theoretical works, by focusing on close readings of them. To illustrate the point: a one- or two-page summary of Plato or Kant will not help the student in her reading of the *Republic* or the *Critique of Judgment*. This book aims, rather, to undertake close readings of selected texts which represent or embody the principles of given literary-critical tendencies. What also appears to be needed is a clear but detailed account of the historical backgrounds of these texts. These two aims, then, have guided the present work which, I hope, might be used in conjunction with any of the excellent anthologies of literary criticism and theory now available.

Thirdly, while no section of this book is, strictly speaking, self-contained, I am hopeful that each section is independently intelligible inasmuch as it is situated within an intellectual and historical context. This strategy aims to answer a repeated practical concern that I have heard from students over the years: that their reading of one thinker always presupposes knowledge of other thinkers and the inevitable network of
cross-references tends to confuse students who confront a difficult thinker for the first time. I have attempted to follow this strategy while minimizing the need for repetition: the section on Coleridge, for example, or on Wordsworth, should provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the basic principles and themes of Romanticism, such as the connection between reason and imagination, the high status accorded to poetry, and the problematic nature of the notion of subjectivity. In other words, these sections should be intelligible without first reading the chapters on Plato, Kant, Hume, and other thinkers. Of course, the connections between these thinkers are formulated; but a knowledge of them is not debilitatingly presupposed on the part of the student.

A fourth principle of the present volume is the need to correct an imbalanced perception, prevalent through many graduate schools, of the originality and status of modern literary theory, an imbalance reflected in certain anthologies of theory and criticism. Often, the critical output of previous historical eras is implicitly treated as an inadequate and benighted prolegomenon to the dazzling insights of modern theory. The history of philosophy is sometimes seen, through the alleged lens of deconstruction, as a series of deconstructed domains: in this distorted projection, Plato, Kant, and Hegel are treated as minor thinkers, whose mistakes and blindnesses were acutely brought to the surface by major thinkers such as Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. Only an ignorance of the history of philosophy could sanction such an attitude. The truth is that, as all of these modern thinkers recognize, far deeper contributions to philosophy were made by Kant, by Hegel, and by Marx: without these thinkers, the work of modern theorists could not have arisen and in many ways it remains frozen within the problematics defined by the earlier figures. In general, modern theory – to its credit – is less original than is often imagined; I hope the following pages will show, among other things, that many of its insights were anticipated or made possible as counter-versions of positions and themes explored by earlier – sometimes far earlier – thinkers and literary scholars. It is natural that anthologies and modern accounts of criticism should exhibit a bias toward our own era; but this emphasis should not be allowed to obscure the true nature of our own contributions, which should be situated historically and assessed in the light of their far-reaching connections with the thought of previous ages.

The final principle informing this book is an aspiration toward clarity. Unfortunately, much of the theory that has enabled new modes of analysis and generated extraordinarily rich insights has isolated itself from public and political discourse by its difficult language and by its reliance on jargon. There is a difference between genuine complexity – which one finds in the great thinkers and in the major literary theorists – and confusion; between a command of language that can express truly difficult concepts and needlessly difficult language that offers a mere show or pretense of complexity, recycling worn ideas, and sacrificing in this process not only clarity but also subtlety and accuracy of expression.

Having said this, I am aware of some of the compelling reasons behind the refusal of some theorists to be dragged into an ideology of clarity. I am painfully aware that certain texts of poststructuralism and feminism are here expounded in a manner that somewhat betrays their aversion to theory and systematic thought based on the centuries-old categories of a male European (and Eurocentric) tradition. In the absence of the talent and creativity necessary to do justice to the stylistic import of
these texts, I have resigned myself to the task of attempting to make them, and their contexts, accessible to a relatively wide range of readers.

Note

PART I
ANCIENT GREEK CRITICISM
part i: ancient greek criticism
Our English word “criticism” derives from the ancient Greek term *krites*, meaning “judge.” Perhaps the first type of criticism was that which occurred in the process of poetic creation itself: in composing his poetry, a poet would have made certain “judgments” about the themes and techniques to be used in his verse, about what his audience was likely to approve, and about his own relationship to his predecessors in the oral or literary tradition. Hence, the creative act itself was also a critical act, involving not just inspiration but some kind of self-assessment, reflection, and judgment. Moreover, in ancient Greece, the art of the “rhapsode” or professional singer involved an element of interpretation: a rhapsode would usually perform verse that he himself had not composed, and his art must have been a highly self-conscious and interpretative one, just as the performance of a Shakespeare play is effectively an interpretation of it.\(^1\) In the written text of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the character of the Jewish moneylender Shylock has conventionally been seen as domineering, greedy, and vindictive. Yet our perception of his character and his situation can be transformed by a performance where we see him kneeling, surrounded by aggressively self-righteous Christian adversaries. In the same way, different performances of Homer’s *Iliad* or *Odyssey* might have had very different effects. One can imagine Achilles presented as the archetypal Greek hero, valiant and (almost) invincible; but also as cruel, childish, and selfish. There are many incidents and situations in Homer – such as King Priam’s entreaty to Achilles or Odysseus’ confronting of the suitors – which must have yielded a rich range of interpretative and performative possibilities. Even performances of lyric poetry must have shared this potential for diverse interpretation, a potential which has remained alive through the centuries. An ode of Sappho, a sonnet by Shakespeare, Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” Eliot’s “Prufrock,” or the verse of a contemporary Israeli or Palestinian poet can each be “performed” or read aloud in a variety of ways and with vastly differing effects. In each case, the performance must be somewhat self-conscious and informed by critical judgment.

In this broad sense, literary criticism goes at least as far back as archaic Greece, which begins around 800 years before the birth of Christ. This is the era of the epic
poets Homer and Hesiod, and of the lyric poets Archilochus, Ibycus, Alcaeus, and Sappho. What we call the “classical” period emerges around 500 BC, the period of the great dramatists Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the schools of rhetoric, and the rise of Athenian democracy and power. After this is the “Hellenistic” period, witnessing the diffusion of Greek culture through much of the Mediterranean and Middle East, a diffusion vastly accelerated by the conquests of Alexander the Great, and the various dynasties established by his generals after his death in 323 BC. Over the Hellenized domains there was a common ruling-class culture, using a common literary dialect and a common education system. The city of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander in 331 BC, became a center of scholarship and letters, housing an enormous library and museum, and hosting such renowned poets and grammarians as Callimachus, Apollonius Rhodius, Aristarchus, and Zenodotus. We know of these figures partly through the work of Suetonius (ca. 69–140 AD), who wrote the first histories of literature and criticism.

The Hellenistic period is usually said to end with the battle of Actium in 31 BC in which the last portion of Alexander’s empire, Egypt, was annexed by the increasingly powerful and expanding Roman republic. After his victory at Actium, the entire Roman world fell under the sole rulership of Julius Caesar’s nephew, Octavian, soon to become revered as the first Roman emperor, Augustus. During this span of almost a thousand years, poets, philosophers, rhetoricians, grammarians, and critics laid down many of the basic terms, concepts, and questions that were to shape the future of literary criticism as it evolved all the way through to our own century. These include the concept of “mimesis” or imitation; the concept of beauty and its connection with truth and goodness; the ideal of the organic unity of a literary work; the social, political, and moral functions of literature; the connection between literature, philosophy, and rhetoric; the nature and status of language; the impact of literary performance on an audience; the definition of figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, and symbol; the notion of a “canon” of the most important literary works; and the development of various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and song.

The first recorded instances of criticism go back to dramatic festivals in ancient Athens, which were organized as contests, requiring an official judgment as to which author had produced the best drama. A particularly striking literary-critical discussion occurs in Aristophanes’ play *The Frogs*, first performed in 405 BC, just before the ending of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC in the utter defeat of Athens at the hands of its rival, Sparta. It may seem odd, in our age of highly technical and specialized approaches to literature, that literary criticism should be used to entertain and amuse a large audience of several thousand people. This fact alone is testimony to the highly literate nature of the Athenian citizens, who were expected to recognize many allusions to previous literary works, and to understand the terms of a critical debate, as well as its broader political and social implications. In fact, the chorus in the play itself commends the erudition of the audience, claiming that the citizens are so “sharp” and “keen” that they will not miss “a single point.”

The plot of Aristophanes’ comedy is built around the idea that there are no good poets left in the world; the current living dramatists are “jabberers . . . degraders of their art” (*Frogs*, l. 93). The only way of obtaining the services of a good poet is to
bring a dead one back from Hades. In order to determine which of the dead tragedians, Euripides or Aeschylus, is the more suitable for this task, a trial is conducted before the court of Pluto, the god of the underworld. The judge of course will be Dionysus, the patron god of drama. Aristophanes portrays the comic adventures of Dionysus and his slave Xanthias, as they make their way to the court and hear the arguments offered by each of the two tragic poets.

This is not merely a contest between two literary theories, representing older and younger generations; it is a contest in poetic art (Frogs, ll. 786, 796). Aeschylus represents the more traditional virtues of a bygone generation, such as martial prowess, heroism, and respect for social hierarchy – all embodied in a lofty, decorous, and sublime style of speech – while Euripides is the voice of a more recent, democratic, secular, and plain-speaking generation. In talking of the general functions of poetry, Aeschylus explains that poets such as Orpheus have taught humankind religious rites, moral codes, and medicine; Hesiod gave instruction concerning farming; and Homer sang of valor, honor, and the execution of war (Frogs, ll. 1030–1036). Aeschylus places himself in this tradition, reminding the audience how his own dramas inspired manly passions for war (Frogs, ll. 1021, 1040). He cautions that “we, the poets, are teachers of men” and that the “sacred poet” should avoid depicting any kind of evil, especially the harlotry and incest that we can find in Euripides (Frogs, l. 1055).

Euripides agrees that in general the poet is valued for his “ready wit” and wise counsels, and because he trains the citizens to be “better townsmen and worthier men” (Frogs, l. 1009). But he claims that, in contrast with Aeschylus, he himself employs a “democratic” manner, allowing characters from all classes to speak, showing “scenes of common life,” and teaching the public to reason (Frogs, ll. 952, 959, 971–978). He insists that the poet should speak in “human fashion,” and accuses Aeschylus of using language that is “bombastiloquent,” obscure, and repetitious (Frogs, ll. 839, 1122, 1179). Aeschylus rejoins that a high style and lofty speech is appropriate for “mighty thoughts and heroic aims” (Frogs, ll. 1058–1060); and he upbraids Euripides for teaching the youth of the city to “prate, to harangue, to debate . . . to challenge, discuss, and refute,” as well as bringing to the stage “debauchery” and “scandal” (Frogs, ll. 1070–1073).

Ultimately, to great comic effect, a pair of scales is brought in, showing Aeschylus’ verse to be “weightier” (Frogs, ll. 1366, 1404–1410). Significantly, there are two factors involved in deciding the issue: Dionysus explains that not only does Athens need a true poet who will enable her to continue with her dramatic festivals and “choral games,” but this poet will be called upon to give the city some much-needed advice on a political problem, namely, what should be done about Alcibiades (a brilliant but selfish and indulgent general currently in exile and who had been a threat to the state and the democracy) (Frogs, ll. 1419–1422). Aeschylus basically repeats the advice offered at the beginning of the war by the Athenian statesman Pericles: that Athens’ true wealth lies in her fleet. Dionysus pronounces as victor Aeschylus in whom his “soul delights” (Frogs, ll. 1465–1467). Interestingly, the chorus sings the praises of Aeschylus as a “[k]een intelligent mind.” This intelligence, however, is of a peculiar kind; it embodies the wisdom required for the art of tragedy; and it is pointedly contrasted with the “[i]dle talk” and “[f]ine-drawn quibbles” of the philosopher Socrates (Frogs, ll. 1489–1497). This quarrel between poetry and philosophy will surface again and again in the history of literary criticism.
It is clear that Aristophanes’ play both embodies and enacts the civic duty of poetry and literary criticism. In fact, the play was uniquely honored by being acted a second time, since Aeschylus was deemed to have performed an important patriotic service to the city (Frogs, Introd., p. 293). Such an accolade may rest on his evident call for Athenians – about to suffer a humiliating military defeat – to return to the martial and “manly” values represented by Aeschylean drama. His play The Frogs stages the drama of Athens’ political and cultural dilemma as a literary-critical dilemma. This first recorded instance of a sustained literary-critical debate reveals a number of salient features of both poetry and criticism in the ancient Greek world. Firstly, our sometimes narrow focus on the “purely” aesthetic or literary dimension of a text would have been incomprehensible to the ancient Greeks; poetry for them was an important element in the educational process; its ramifications extended over morality, religion, and the entire sphere of civic responsibility; as such, poetry itself was a forum for the discussion of larger issues; it owed a large measure of its high esteem to its public and political nature, as well as to its technical or artistic dimension. In fact, these various dimensions of poetry and literature were not mutually separated as they sometimes appear to be for us. Hence, to understand the origins and nature of literary criticism in the Greek world – especially in the work of Plato and Aristotle, which we shall look at soon – we need to know something of the political, social, and intellectual forces that shaped their understanding of the world.

Political and Historical Contexts

“Classical” Athens in the fifth century BC – just prior to the time of Plato – was a thriving democratic city-state with a population estimated at about 300,000. However, this democracy differed considerably from our modern democracies: not only was it a direct rather than a representative democracy, it was also highly exclusive. Only the adult male citizens, numbering about 40–45,000, were eligible to participate in the decision-making process. The rest of the community, composed of women, resident aliens, and a vast number of slaves, formed a permanently excluded majority. Even most free men, whether working on the land or in the cities, were poor and had little hope of economic betterment (LWC, 32). This circumstance, widespread in the Greek world, was responsible in part not only for class conflict but also for a perennial struggle between different forms of government. The philosophies and literary theories of both Plato and Aristotle were integrally shaped by awareness of these political struggles.

By this stage of her history, Athens was not only a democracy but also an imperial power, head of the so-called Delian League of more than a hundred city-states, from whom she exacted tribute. Her rise to such predominance had been relatively recent and swift, though democracy itself had taken some centuries to evolve, displacing earlier systems such as oligarchy or tyranny and monarchy where power had resided in the hands of a small elite or one man. By 500 BC the tyrants had been overthrown in all the major Greek cities (LWC, 31). The ideals of social equality and democratic structure were furthered in Athens by leaders and lawgivers such as Solon, who made the
lawcourts democratic; Cleisthenes, who organized the political structure into ten tribes, each represented by 50 members in the Council of the Areopagus; and Pericles, who instituted pay for people to serve as state officials, so that such service might not be a privilege of the wealthy. In his funeral oration, Pericles defined democracy as a system in which power lies in the hands of “the whole people,” “everyone is equal before the law,” and public responsibility is determined not by class but by “actual ability.”

What propelled Athens into prominence was largely her leading role in repelling two invasions of Greece by Persia. In the first of these, the Athenians, without Spartan aid, defeated the Persian forces led by King Darius at Marathon in 490 BC. The second invasion was halted by Athens’ powerful navy at Salamis in 480 BC and on land at Plataea in 479 BC. Despite the fact that the land battle was won with the help of Sparta, it was Athens who assumed the leadership of the Greek allies, organizing them into a confederation, the Delian League, with the aim of liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor (now Turkey) from Persian rule. These postwar years were the years of Athens’ power, prosperity, and cultural centrality: Pericles dominated Athenian politics; the Parthenon and Propylaea were built; the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides were staged; the city was host to professional teachers of philosophy such as Protagoras, and to schools of rhetoric, which taught young men of the nobility the art of public speaking and debate (PV, 22–23). The city was alive with free political discussion and intellectual inquiry. Pericles called Athens the “school of Hellas” (LWC, 35).

In all of these historical circumstances, there were at least three developments that profoundly influenced the nature of literature and criticism, as well as of philosophy and rhetoric. The first was the evolution of the polis or city-state. The Greeks differentiated between themselves and the non-Greeks known as “barbarians” primarily by this political structure, the polis, which alone in their view could allow man to achieve his full potential as a human being. When Aristotle defined man as a “political animal,” it was this structure that he had in mind. As the scholar M. I. Finley puts it, the polis was comprised of “people acting in concert, a community,” where people could “assemble and deal with problems face to face” (LWC, 27–28). As later thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim reiterated, man’s very being is social and public in its essential orientation, and his own fulfillment lies in advancing, not sacrificing, the public interest. These assumptions are common to the otherwise differing literary theories of Plato and Aristotle, who are both obliged to consider literature as a public or state concern. Finley states that “religion and culture were as much public concerns as economics or politics . . . the great occasions for religious ceremonial, for music, drama, poetry and athletics, were the public festivals, local or pan-Hellenic. With the state thus the universal patron, Greek tragedy and comedy . . . were as much part of the process of face-to-face discussion as a debate in a legislative assembly” (LWC, 28).

Even the internal structure of drama was influenced by the ideal of the polis: the chorus (whether comprised of a group of dancers and singers, or a single speaking character) was the representative of the community or polis. As Gregory Nagy so eloquently puts it, the chorus was a “microcosm of social hierarchy,” and embodied “an educational collectivisation of experience” (CHLC, V.I, 50). It is clear that literature and poetry had a public, even political, function, which was largely educational. T. H. Irwin states that “Athenian dramatic festivals took the place of some of the mass media familiar to us.” No one was more deeply aware than Plato of the cultural impact of literature. In fact,
Irwin points out that the “moral outlook of the Homeric poems permanently influenced Greek thought,” in ways that conflicted with democratic attitudes. We might add that Plato – no democrat – also took great pains to counter the influence of Homer and the poets. Poetry had a primary role in education: children were taught letters for the purpose of memorizing poetry and ultimately of performing and interpreting it (CHLC, V.I, 74). In the ancient Greek world, poetry not only had a public nature but also served several functions which have been displaced in our world by news media, film, music, religious education, and the sciences. Ironically, as we shall see, the image of Plato himself looms behind some of these long-term displacements.

The second political development pertinent to literature and criticism lay in the fact that Athens’ predominance in the Greek world did not go unchallenged. The other major power in the Greek world was Sparta, who counterbalanced Athens’ leadership of the Delian League with her own system of defensive alliances known as the Peloponnesian League. The struggle between these two superpowers was not only military but also ideological: Athens everywhere attempted to foster her own style of democracy, whereas Sparta everywhere encouraged her own brand of oligarchy. This struggle convulsed the entire Greek world and eventually led to the Peloponnesian War, which lasted twenty-seven years, beginning in 431 BC and ending with the utter defeat of Athens in 404 BC. The first twenty-four years of Plato’s life were lived during this war, and the issues raised by the conflict affected many areas of his thought, including his literary theory. Even before Athens’ defeat, she had witnessed a brief coup at the hands of the oligarchical party in 411–410 BC (the regime of the “four hundred”). It was during this repressive period that Socrates was tried and executed in 399 BC on a charge of impiety. The Spartans imposed another oligarchy in 404 BC, the so-called regime of the “thirty,” which included two of Plato’s relatives, Critias and Charmides, who were also friends of Socrates. In 403, however, democracy was restored after a civil struggle. The struggle was effectively between two ways of life, between the “open-minded social and cultural atmosphere” of Athenian democracy, and the “rigidly controlled, militaristic” oligarchy of Sparta (CCP, 60–62). It was this struggle which underlay the opposition between Plato’s anti-democratic and somewhat authoritarian philosophical vision and the more fluid, skeptical, and relativistic visions expressed by poetry, sophistic, and rhetoric. It is in this struggle, as we shall see, that Western philosophy as we know it was born.

A third factor that shaped the evolution of literature in archaic and classical Greece was pan-Hellenism, or the development of certain literary ideals and standards among the elites of the various city-states of Greece (CHLC, V.I, 22). Gregory Nagy points out that pan-Hellenism was crucial in the process of the continuous modification and diffusion of the Homeric poems and of poetry generally. It is well known that the Iliad and the Odyssey were products of an oral tradition, cumulatively composed over a long period of time; a given poet would take a story whose basic content was already familiar and modify it in the process of his own retelling; in turn, he would pass these poetic skills and this poetic lore down through his own successors. Nagy’s point is that the process of “ongoing recomposition and diffusion” of the Homeric and other poems acquired a degree of stability in virtue of the development of pan-Hellenism. The standardization of literary ideals led to a process of decreasing novelty and “text-fixation” in “ever-widening circles of diffusion” (CHLC, V.I, 34). According to Nagy,
then, pan-Hellenism had a number of important consequences. Firstly, it provided a context in which poetry was no longer merely an expression or ritual reenactment of local myths. The traveling poet was obliged to select those aspects of myth common to the various locales he visited. The word that came to express this “convergence of features” drawn from myth was *aletheia* or truth. Hence the concept of “poet” or singer evolved into the concept of “the master of truth.” The poet becomes the purveyor of truth, which is general, as distinct from myth, which is local and particular. Interestingly, Nagy etymologically relates the word *mousa* or “muse” to *mne-* , which means “have the mind connected with.” In this reading, the muse “is one who connects the mind with what really happens in the past, present, and future” (*CHLC*, V.I, 29–31). Nagy’s perception is crucial for understanding subsequent Greek literary theory: the domain of truth becomes an arena of fierce contention between poetry and philosophy.

A second consequence of pan-Hellenism, furthering the process of standardization, was the evolution of a certain group or “canon” of texts into the status of classics (*CHLC*, V.I, 44). It was in the period of Alexandrian scholarship that the term “criticism” or “judgment” was used to differentiate between works that deserved to be included within a canon. Nagy points out that in this era, nine names comprised the “inherited canon of lyric poetry”: Alcman, Stesichorus, Alcaeus, Sappho, Ibycus, Anacreon, Simonides, Bacchylides, and Pindar. Hence, “a pre-existing multitude of local traditions in oral song” had evolved into “a finite tradition of fixed lyric compositions suited for all Hellenes” (*CHLC*, V.I, 44). The third, related, consequence was the development of the concept of imitation or *mimesis* into a “concept of authority.” Mimesis designates “the re-enactment, through ritual, of the events of myth” by the poet; it also designates “the present re-enacting of previous re-enactments,” as in the performer’s subsequent imitation of the poet. Mimesis becomes an authoritative concept inasmuch as the author speaks with the authority of myth which is accepted as not local but universal, timeless, and unchanging. It becomes an “implicit promise” that the performer will coin no changes to “accommodate the interests of any local audience,” and will give rise to “the pleasure of exact performance” (*CHLC*, V.I, 47–49). Even after such oral performance traditions were obsolete, this authoritative or authoritarian ethic of exact mimesis was preserved in education where the text “becomes simply a sample piece of writing, potentially there to be imitated by other sample pieces of writing” (*CHLC*, V.I, 73). All of these developments outlined by Nagy might be seen as pointing in one general direction: over the centuries, from Homeric times onward, poetry had acquired an increasing authority, established in its function as a repository of *universal* myth and truth, its fixation into a canon of privileged texts which were no longer open to recomposition but merely to exact imitation or performance, and the predominating educational role of poetry in this exalted status. A final point that we can take from Nagy’s splendid account of early Greek views of poetry is that by the time of Plato, the theater had become the primary medium of poetry, absorbing the repertoire of both epic and lyric. Tragedy had become the craft of poetry par excellence (*CHLC*, V.I, 66–67). The stage is almost set for our understanding of the literary theories of Plato and Aristotle; before considering these, we must say a few words about the intellectual currents through and against which these theories took form.
Intellectual Contexts

The single most important factor in understanding Plato’s conception of poetry is precisely the authority and status it had achieved by his time. As we have seen, the evolution of this authority had been multifaceted: poetry claimed to present a vision of the world, of the gods, of ethics and morality that was *true*. Poetry was not only the repository of collective wisdom, as accumulated over the ages, but was also the expression of universalized myth. It had a public function that was most evident in its supreme embodiment, tragedy, which assumed for the ancient Greeks the roles of our theologies and religious institutions, our histories, our modern mass media, our education system, and our various modes of ascertaining truth.

There are a number of intellectual currents which formed the background of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Interestingly, these currents merged in important ways with the main stream of culture that was comprised by poetry. The first of these was sophistic, which arose in fifth-century Athens, and whose major exponents such as Protagoras and Gorgias were contemporaries of Plato. The second was rhetoric, the art of public speaking, an art vital to the effective functioning of Athenian democracy. Both the Sophists and the rhetoricians offered training in public debate and speaking, often for very high fees; their curriculum aimed to prepare young men of the nobility for political life. While the two currents, sophistic and rhetoric, were so closely connected that the Sophists were indeed the first teachers of rhetoric, there was a distinction between them: rhetoric was, strictly speaking, restricted to the techniques of argument and persuasion; the more ambitious Sophists promised a more general education extending over the areas considered by philosophy: morality, politics, as well as the nature of reality and truth (CCP, 64, 66).

Plato was opposed to both sophistic and rhetoric. He objected to sophistic accounts of the world, which were essentially secular, humanistic, and relativistic. These accounts rejected the authority of religion and viewed truth as a human and pragmatic construct. In other words, there was no truth which ultimately stood above or beyond human perception. What Plato rejects in rhetoric is also based on its alleged exclusion of truth: rhetoric is concerned not with truth but merely with persuasion, often preying on the ignorance of an audience and merely pandering to its prejudices rather than seeking a moral and objective foundation. Clearly, the attitudes of sophistic and rhetorical arise in a democratic environment: just as in our modern-day democracies, the concept of truth as some kind of transcendent datum is extinguished; as in our lawcourts, we can argue only that one version of events is more probable and internally coherent than another. We do not claim that this superior version somehow expresses an infallible truth. Much of Plato’s philosophy is generated by a desire to impose order on chaos, to enclose change and temporality within a scheme of permanence, and to ground our thinking about morality, politics, and religion on timeless and universal truths that are independent of human cognition. So profound was Plato’s opposition to sophistical and rhetorical ways of thinking that his own philosophy is internally shaped and generated by negating their claims. His so-called dialectical method, which proceeds by systematic question and answer, arises largely in contradistinction to their methods. What is important for us is that Plato finds the same vision of the world in
literature. In fact, he sees tragedy as a form of rhetoric. T. H. Irwin states that “in attacking rhetoric, Plato also attacks a much older Athenian institution, tragic drama.” Like rhetoric, tragedy “makes particular moral views appear attractive to the ignorant and irrational audience” (CCP, 67–68). Jennifer T. Roberts reminds us of “the important role played in the education of Athenian citizens by attendance at tragedies. It was tragic drama that afforded Athenians an opportunity to ponder and debate many of the same issues that arose in Plato’s dialogues.” Hence, for Plato, sophistic and rhetoric effectively expressed a vision of the world that had long been advanced by the much older art of poetry. It is not only his dialectical method but also the content of his philosophy that arises in the sharpest opposition to that vision.

What was that poetic vision? It was a vision going all the way back to Homer: we may recall the squabbling between Zeus and his queen Hera, the laughable scene with Hephaestus, the disputes between various goddesses such as Athena and Aphrodite, and in general the often indecorous conduct of the gods. This is a vision of the world as ruled by chance, a world where “natural processes are basically irregular and unpredictable” where “gods can interfere with them or manipulate them as they please” (CCP, 52). Plato firmly rejects this undignified and unsystematic (and perhaps liberal) vision. As many scholars have pointed out, partly on Aristotle’s authority, Plato’s own ideas were indebted to a pre-Socratic tradition of naturalism, which attempts to offer an alternative account of the world, one that is not poetic or mythical or based on tradition but which appeals rather to natural processes in the service of a rational explanation. Irwin points out that in agreeing with the pre-Socratics, both Socrates and Plato were challenging “widespread and deep-seated religious assumptions of their contemporaries.” In rejecting the Homeric irregular picture of the universe, they, like the naturalists, were rejecting the view that we incur divine punishment by failing to make the appropriate sacrifices or by fighting on an ill-omened day or by securing a god’s favor by offering gifts. In Plato’s view, the gods are “entirely just and good, with no anger, jealousy, spite or lust.” Both of these views, says Irwin, existed in an unreconciled fashion in Greek tradition (CCP, 52–53). Moreover, like the naturalists, Socrates and Plato distinguished between mere evidence of the senses, which was “appearance,” and an underlying reality accessible only through reason (CCP, 54). Hence, Greek philosophy begins with the application of rational thinking to all areas of human life: “In the lifetime of Socrates reflection on morality and human society ceased to be the monopoly of Homer and the poets; it became another area for critical thinking” (CCP, 58). In other words, Greek philosophy begins as a challenge to the monopoly of poetry and the extension of its vision in more recent trends such as sophistic and rhetoric. Plato’s opposition of philosophy to poetry effectively sets the stage for more than two thousand years of literary theory and criticism.

Notes

1 In an excellent article, to which my account here is indebted, Gregory Nagy points out that even the word “rhapsode . . . is built on a concept of artistic self-reference.” “Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry,” in CHLC, V.I, 7.

3 Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*, ed. Francesco della Corte (Turin, 1968); *De poetis*, ed. Augusto Rostagni (Turin, 1944). The latter contains accounts of the lives of various poets, including Vergil, Horace, Lucan, and Terence.


6 T. H. Irwin, “Plato: The Intellectual Background,” in *CCP*, 68.