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978-0-521-48532-6 - Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry

Mark Edmundson

Excerpt

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## *Prologue: an ancient quarrel*

Literary criticism in the West begins with the wish that literature disappear. Plato's chief objection to Homer is that he exists. For to Plato poetry is a deception: it proffers imitations of imitations when life's purpose is to seek eternal truth; poetry stirs up refractory emotions, challenging reason's rule, making men womanish; it induces us to manipulate language for effect rather than strive for accuracy. The poets deliver many fine speeches, but when you question them about what they've said, their answers are puerile: they don't know what they're talking about. Though Plato can be eloquent about the appeal of literary art, to him poetry has no real place in creating the well-balanced soul or the just state. When he conceives his Utopia, Plato banishes the poets outside its walls.

All this is well known, yet it remains salutary to stop and think how odd it is for literary criticism to begin as it does. Is there any other kind of intellectual inquiry that originates in a wish to do away with its object? Imagine art history beginning in puritan iconoclasm; sociology in a commitment to deep solipsism; history in a wish that we should live always in the present.

I begin this book with reference to the quarrel between the poets and philosophers, which Plato said was already ancient in his time, because I think that, though changed in some important ways, that quarrel continues on into the present.<sup>1</sup> But the balance

<sup>1</sup> On the contemporary relevance of the ancient quarrel Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum concur. Rorty reflects on the contention throughout his work, but especially in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 23–43 and 73–95; Nussbaum throughout *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially pp. 3–53.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

*Literature against philosophy*

of power has shifted considerably from the time when Plato, coming on as something of an upstart, protested Homer's godlike standing. Now the philosophical critique of poetry is ascendant. In the provinces of literary criticism, Plato's heirs have apparently won out.

In this book I will offer some speculations about how that victory has come to pass and do my best to defend poetry (with poetry understood here as shorthand for any revitalizing cultural activity) against some of the preeminent analytical methods that have been used, over the past thirty or so years, to discipline it. I will consider deconstruction in two very different guises, influence theory, ideological critique, New Historicism, and a number of other forms. My aim is not to discredit these developments, for most of them are potentially enlivening. This isn't a book in defence of sweet appreciation.

Rather I shall propose a dialectical mode of interpretation – interpretation as mental fight, to cite a phrase of William Blake's that will crop up often here – in which the critic answers back to theory on behalf of poetry. This answering style acknowledges where theory has scored its points, admitting the ways it circumscribes this or that piece of writing. But I mean also to take the side of a number of art works (which as Northrop Frye said are in a certain sense mute) and show how they pass beyond analytical vocabularies and paradigms in valuable ways.

The first chapter will measure Wordsworth's achievement in the "Intimations" ode against a de Manian critique, pointing out what may be a surprising genealogy for de Man's work. I will show how, rather than upending the modes of criticism he inherits from Coleridge and the New Critics, de Man affirmed and augmented them. This chapter will prepare the way for the contention, developed throughout the book, that despite his personal fall from grace, de Man continues to be one of the most influential literary critics in the Anglo-American academic world.

The next chapter will consider Derrida (a writer in many ways unlike de Man), and other polemicists against presence, in the context of the ancient quarrel. Here the argument will take place under the aegis of Emerson's great essay "Compensation": I admit the ascetic appeal of Derrida's hostility to the visual,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

3

but it is a matter of calculating costs. What is the price to the literary imagination for turning against presence and affirming the ethos of never-ending textuality? Against Derridean iconoclasm, I pose the Romantic drive to transform the verbal image from a facile to a demanding pleasure. But is anyone afraid of Jacques Derrida any more? Hasn't his form of thinking been displaced? Not, I shall argue, to the degree that uncritical embrace of "reading" and the "text" and a hostility to the visual continue to reign in Anglo-American literary study.

Wordsworth is a central figure in this volume: no poet who wrote in English has come under more negative criticism than he has over the last two decades. The third chapter will consider two critiques of Wordsworth, one informed by Althusserian Marxism, the other by feminism. The objective will be to show what in Wordsworth remains vital – and it is a great deal – after these critical modes have scored their points.

Perhaps the most influential form of criticism currently active descends from Michel Foucault, and chiefly from his great book, *Discipline and Punish*. The fourth chapter will show first how Foucault's way of thinking *can* form a critical background, a hyperbolic, Blakean vision of the worst in contemporary social life. Against Foucault's account of the disciplines, I believe, we can profitably measure the force of literary creations, and see why we need those creations as much as we do. But in work supposedly inspired by Foucault, that of Greenblatt's Berkeley School of New Historicists, Foucault's best possibilities have been largely left untouched.

Harold Bloom seems to me one of the major critics in the Western tradition, yet his best-known book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, turns from what is most valuable about his work overall. The fifth chapter will describe that turning, speculate on how it transpired, then show how useful Bloom has been and can be in the defence of poetry.

In sum, these pages will argue that theory is crucial for a culture of criticism, but that we are doing harm to ourselves and others if we theorize literature and leave it at that. For too long the study of literature has been divided between enthusiastic adherents to this or that theoretical method, and those who feel

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

*Literature against philosophy*

that any contact between the poetic and the theoretical mind is sacrilege, a fouling of the altars. In such an atmosphere a call for an exchange between poetry and theory can sound almost insurrectionary.

To begin making my case I need to spend some time describing the form that the philosophical critique of the poets has previously taken, and to suggest how in recent years it has gained added force.<sup>2</sup> Here in the prologue I attempt to make my arguments in accessible summary form. As the book develops, matters will necessarily grow more complex. But I try throughout to write so as to reach as large a readership as possible, among them, perhaps, the many practicing poets and fiction writers whom institutional literary criticism seems to have done all in its power to leave behind.

To Plato – to put it unceremoniously – the poets must lie, for they live among phantoms, at a third remove from reality. There exists, somewhere on high, the form of the bed; the craftsman building a bed draws on the form, imitating it, though imperfectly. Along comes the painter or poet, whose rendering merely imitates the craftsman’s imitation. Why can’t it be an imitation of the form of the bed? This question Plato handles adroitly. The bed made by the craftsman can be seen from a variety of perspectives: one learns more about what a bed is by looking at it from one side, then from above, then getting beneath it and examining the slat-work. But the painter gives you the bed from only one perspective (just as, presumably, the poet renders it from one point of view, his); thus you learn less about beds from artistic and poetic imitations than from the craftsman’s rendering.

The worldly reception of artistic knowledge – knowledge at the third remove from truth – bears out Plato’s judgment. Socrates asks Glaucon if he knows of any rulers who have enlisted poets as counselors, and Glaucon admits that he doesn’t. Then too, the poets attract no followers. “Well,” Socrates says (to his

<sup>2</sup> In *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), Margaret Ferguson offers an account of the ways that writers from Tasso to Sidney have defended poetry against various forms of attack. I know of no comparable volume for the modern period from, say, Sidney up through Blake, Shelley, Emerson, and T. S. Eliot.

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Mark Edmundson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

5

followers), “if there is no mention of public services, do we hear of Homer in his own lifetime presiding, like Pythagoras, over a band of intimate disciples who loved him for the inspiration of his society and handed down a Homeric way of life . . . ? If Homer had really possessed the knowledge qualifying him to educate people and make them better men, instead of merely giving us a poetical representation of such matters, would he not have attracted a host of disciples to love and revere him?”<sup>3</sup>

It’s not only the fact that poetry is of little epistemological worth that should make good men shun it, it also disrupts the soul’s balance. The best sort of people are wise and reserved: they aren’t easily ruffled; they often don’t have much to say. But such people are of little dramatic interest. Tragedies are full of overwrought characters who let their misfortunes push them into florid grief. About such grief they can be beautifully eloquent, and make surrender to passion – and turning from reason – look most attractive.

Plato believes that passion ought always to be controlled: “Instead of behaving like a child who goes on shrieking after a fall and hugging the wounded part, we should accustom the mind to set itself at once to raise up the fallen and cure the hurt, banishing lamentation with a healing touch” (p. 336). Poetic drama unhinges manly character: it makes one behave childishly, or, as Plato says later, like a woman (p. 338). Enjoying a tragedy means pitying the fallen character, identifying with him. But this identification has its costs: “to enter into another’s feelings must have an effect on our own: the emotions of pity our sympathy has strengthened will not be easy to restrain when we are suffering ourselves” (p. 338). Plato assumes that we become what we pleurably behold. He also believes – movingly and outrageously – that no one of truly noble character could suffer as tragic protagonists do, for you cannot harm a person whose soul is in a state of true harmony.

The indictment against the poets is simultaneously psychological and political. Believing that the soul and the commonwealth are mirror images of each other, Plato argues that poetry’s

<sup>3</sup> *The Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 330. Henceforth cited in the text. Other Platonic works that touch on the question of poetry include *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Laws*, and *Apology*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

appeal to the passions is also an appeal to the more passionate and thoughtless citizens. "So, we shall be justified in not admitting [the poet] into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason . . . The dramatic poet sets up a vicious form of government in the individual soul: he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regards the same thing as now one, now the other" (p. 337). The poet represents a form of government that Plato intensely dislikes, the one that affirms the rule of the passions, of the crowd. Poets – on this matter Walt Whitman and Plato superficially concur – are naturally on the side of democracy.

It's probably clear that besides deriding the poets, Plato is offering an implicit portrait of what a philosopher ought to be. For in almost every consequential matter, poets are on the other end of the scale from true philosophers. The two groups define each other reciprocally. The philosopher is a member of an elite; the poet a democrat, a man of the crowd. Unlike the philosopher, who might help a ruler to govern (and this was one of Plato's highest hopes), poets are of no use to heads of state. Philosophers gather many disciples (as Socrates and Plato both succeeded in doing), people who love them and spread their teachings; Homer's friends neglected him in old age. Poets dally with feelings, appealing to what's childish and feminine in their audience; maybe they're immature and womanish themselves. Philosophers eschew grief: they are restrained, judicious, manly. And perhaps most important, philosophers dwell with the truth, or at least move toward it through dialectic. Poets are at the third remove from reality, lost amid figments.

It's quite possible, as John Hollander remarks in an artful essay on the ancient quarrel, that *The Republic* offers a polemic not just against poets, but against the poet within the great myth-maker, Plato.<sup>4</sup> He's turning against the parts of his work that aren't consistent with the way he would like to be conceived. The most poetic of philosophers may be repudiating his own poetic prowess at the end of his major volume, and thus teaching

<sup>4</sup> "The Philosopher's Cat: Examples and Fictions," *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 207–32.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

7

us how to read it, retrospectively: as something reasonable and detached, concerned with eternal forms, masculine and mature, attractive to disciples, the province of an elite.

And this is where literary criticism begins in the West, with the conviction, expressed by the greatest of philosophers, the man who invented philosophy in something of the way Freud invented psychoanalysis, that poetry is a harmful diversion, best repudiated in the self and cast from the state. Effective literary criticism ever after attempts to defend poetry against this heaping Platonic insult.

Plato inaugurates what Arthur Danto, in a brilliant essay, calls “the philosophical disenfranchisement of art.”<sup>5</sup> Danto begins by describing a key paradox in Plato’s polemic against art and artists. Art is an imitation of an imitation, thus it is far removed from the real; it is ineffectual, impotent. Yet, too, art is dangerous in that it challenges reason’s supremacy. The fact that these two charges are, to say the least, inconsistent only makes the assault more telling. Plato has art coming and going. Danto clinches his argument with a shrewd sentence: “And ever since this complex aggression, as profound a victory as philosophy has ever known or ever will know, the history of philosophy has alternated between the analytical effort to ephemeralize and hence defuse art, or, to allow a degree of validity to art by treating it as doing what philosophy itself does, only uncouthly” (p. 7).

Kant, Danto says, participates in the former program. His central insistence about the aesthetic object is that it solicits disinterested appreciation from the observer. It takes us out of the sphere of human beliefs and desires into a still, tranquil world. The art object exhibits, in Kant’s famous formulation, “purposiveness without any specific purpose.” It gives us a detached sense of what human desire looks like from a godlike position. But that raising up of the subject is also a denigration: it transfers us from life to limbo. One may say that Kant saves art from vulgar appropriation: his theory would defend it from being used by ideologues of various sorts. But it does so at the cost of putting art beyond *any* human use. Kant’s aesthetics would,

<sup>5</sup> “The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art” appears in the volume of the same name (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 1–21. Henceforth cited in the text.



Cambridge University Press

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Mark Edmundson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

*Literature against philosophy*

at least theoretically speaking, license artists to render foreign and maybe threatening kinds of experience, but with the proviso that such renderings have no bearing whatever on day-to-day life. Art can teach us something about the *forms* of cognition and reason, but that is as close to life as it should come.<sup>6</sup>

More powerful still, Danto indicates, is the attempt, most influentially undertaken by Hegel, to demonstrate that art is philosophy in embryonic form. In the Hegelian philosophy of history, art is one stage in the unfolding of spirit and philosophy the next. Art paves the way for the philosophical, but once that conceptual discipline is possible, once, that is, it is possible for us to be self-conscious about what matters most in aesthetic experience, then art, something like Marx's post-revolutionary state, can simply wither away. "But," comments Danto, "this is a cosmic way of achieving the second stage of the platonic program, which has always been to substitute philosophy for art. And to dignify art, patronizingly, as philosophy in one of its self-alienated forms, thirsting for clarity as to its own nature as all of us thirst for clarity as to our own" (p. 16). From the Hegelian perspective, art must submit itself to a sort of philosophical therapy in which it overcomes its fixation on the merely particular and rises into the world of the evolving idea, the world of spirit. Where artistic id was there philosophical ego shall be.

Unmentioned by Danto is the more complex case of Aristotle. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle concurs with his teacher Plato about poetry's power to stimulate violent emotions, but the true result, if the work in question is a well-made tragedy like *Oedipus Rex*, will be that the feelings are discharged, and the spectators leave in a state of calm, all passions spent.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle also departs from Plato's view that art gives us mere imitations of imitations: "poetry," Aristotle famously observes, "is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (ch. 9). Aristotle's reflections counter his teacher's two main arguments, the epistemological,

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> My translation is that of Samuel H. Butcher in his *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, ed. John Gassner (New York: Dover Publications, 1951). *The Poetics* will be cited by chapter number in the text.



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Mark Edmundson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

9

and the spiritual or psychological. The emotions that Plato fears will corrupt spectators are actually expelled by the actions of the play; and drama, rather than leading away from truth, can give us access to general knowledge. But for such capable advocacy there is a price.

Aristotle, it has been said, is the first formalist. He breaks tragedy down into what he takes to be its constituent elements: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Song (ch. 6), then proceeds to anatomize them. For Aristotle, a work of dramatic art must be a coherent whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. On a few occasions, he gestures toward an analogy that will be central for literary criticism in the West, a comparison between the work of art and a living thing. Here the doctrine of literary organicism begins to develop.

The drawbacks of a criticism that limits itself to matters of form have been described by any number of twentieth-century writers. Using formal categories like Plot, Character, and Diction on a number of works tends to elide the ways they differ from each other. One begins to talk more about *the* novel, and less about *Bleak House*, *Lost Illusions*, and *Libra*. Summary terms interfere with our ability to perceive what is unique, and uniquely valuable in a given work. And stable critical categories, even when they designate poetic actions, tend to devalue dramatic movement and place one imaginatively outside of time. Formal terms are often distancing, rendering one immune to the emotional force in the work. Using the formal vocabulary, you may analyze a work, but it is unlikely that you will afford it the chance to read and interpret you.

Exclusive reliance on formal categories for criticism can lead one to do to literary experience what metaphysical philosophers are prone to do to experience overall: bring it under the control of concepts and so assume a godlike detachment and power. This is what Derrida is getting at when he says that “literary criticism has already been determined, knowingly or not, voluntarily or not, as the philosophy of literature.”<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, according to many, starts out trying to defend poetry against Plato, but he ends up engendering modes of formalism that

<sup>8</sup> *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 28.

Cambridge University Press

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Mark Edmundson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

undermine poetry's influence in more sophisticated ways than Plato ever conceived.<sup>9</sup> Plato, Kant, and Hegel with their more overt programs to banish or subdue art have been easier to resist than its apparent defender, who may have spawned the most subtle of philosophical disenfranchisements. For an exclusive emphasis on structure can give rise to the situation that Derrida writes so passionately against and that Harold Bloom evokes when he says that "Aristotle . . . ruined literary criticism almost from the beginning."<sup>10</sup>

Dismissal, subordination, tendentious celebration, costly defence: these are some of the forms in which, beginning with Plato, the ancient quarrel has been joined by philosophy. Danto goes so far as to say that the history of philosophy could be seen as a series of attempts to neutralize art. "And since Plato's theory of art *is* his philosophy, and since philosophy down the ages has consisted in placing codicils to the platonic testament, philosophy itself may just be the disenfranchisement of art – so the problem of separating art from philosophy may be matched by the problem of asking what philosophy would be without art" (p. 7). In this observation Danto seems to concur with Derrida, who says that "Philosophy, during its history, has been determined as the reflection of poetic inauguration."<sup>11</sup>

Both Danto and Derrida come out of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and its thesis that Socratic philosophy moves to suppress the Dionysian energies alive in early Greek tragedy. To Socrates, says Nietzsche, the Dionysian abyss was "something quite abstruse and irrational, full of causes without effects and effects seemingly without causes, the whole texture so checkered that it must be repugnant to a sober disposition, while it might act as dangerous

<sup>9</sup> For the argument that Aristotle answers his teacher, see William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), pp. 21–34. See also Gerald F. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, ed. Peter Burian (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). Else speculates as follows on the genesis of *The Poetics*:

Nothing in Aristotle's previous education or subsequent experience, outside the Academy, could have impelled him to take up the cudgels in defense of poetry. It was the immediate shock of Plato's attack on all that he held most holy – above all, Homer – that engendered the *Poetics*. He had the materials for a defense ready in his mind; it was only a question of organizing them. (p. 73)

<sup>10</sup> "The Art of Criticism," an interview with Antonio Weiss, *Paris Review*, 118 (Spring 1991), p. 187. <sup>11</sup> *Writing and Difference*, p. 28.