

# Literature, Criticism and Authority: The Experience of Antiquity<sup>[1]</sup>

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The classical Greeks had no sacred text, no Bible or Koran, whose meaning had to be fought over in struggles for ideological or religious dominance. This is the most important fact about them; together with their political fragmentation into independent city-states, separated from each other by inlets, seas and mountains, this lack created that atmosphere of open debate about ideas - political, religious and philosophical - which led after long delays and detours to the rise of modern civilization. No other culture in the history of the world has had such a talent for viewing ideas in their starkest simplicity, or for creating the language needed to discuss them; none has been so willing to believe that ignorance is sin, that to pluck the apple from the tree of knowledge is not mankind's first disobedience but essential to human nature. Some Greek philosophers defined man as a two-legged animal; but this may also describe the ostrich. Instead Aristotle, in his biological writings, defines us as 'the most intelligent of animals', 'the only animal that has reason',<sup>[2]</sup> but also, less predictably, 'the only animal that can count' and 'the only animal that laughs'.<sup>[3]</sup> If pressed, he would have added that we possess these attributes only potentially, not necessarily in actuality - especially a sense of humour, which depends on a fine interlocking of reason and emotion.

The nearest Greek equivalent to a sacred text was the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod. But even these poems were not created by a committee or checked for their coherence and acceptability by political or priestly authorities. The originally oral and unwritten tradition of narrative about gods and heroes had to supply the Greeks' need for an encyclopedia of what to believe about the world and its history. Homer's view of the gods, though generally reverent and respectful, emphasises in the last analysis that life on earth is all we mortals have, and we should make the best of it, within the limits of what the gods send us. The gods are what we might like to be, were we ourselves immortal; always enjoying power without responsibility, dismissive of humans as 'creatures of a day'. We, however, *are* responsible for our actions, because we can and will suffer and die; the ultimate insight of Homer's Achilles is that even our bitterest enemies, by virtue of their mortality, are human beings too. Yet Hesiod speaks with a quite different voice, of a world full of lurking disaster and hostile deities, of an earth stalked by 30,000 evil spirits of disease, of the fear of infringing the many taboos and superstitions by which life is defined and circumscribed.<sup>[4]</sup> These two voices stand opposed to each other at the origins of Greek civilization; the education of every ancient schoolboy began with these two poets. The need to live with, debate and puzzle out the contradictions between them was thus at the origin of Greek culture and persisted within it.

Down the centuries that followed, in the absence of a single, centralised political or religious authority, it was left to poets and thinkers to react in different ways to these different strands in Greek thought. Some, like Pindar,<sup>[5]</sup> proposed modifications to the grotesque old stories of gods dethroning their fathers or gods eating humans by mistake; a few, like Heraclitus,<sup>[6]</sup> said that poets like Homer who recounted such things should be flogged and expelled from the festivals where their poems were performed. The Greek in the street still believed that thunder was caused by Zeus and epilepsy by demonic possession, but, by the classical period, intellectuals were offering a vast range of largely uncontrolled speculations which dispensed with the gods, discussing topics like the behaviour of clouds during thunderstorms, the importance of the brain rather than the heart for thought, or the existence of atoms.

Few societies have proved able to tolerate speculations so subversive of religious and political order, so liable to offend those gods on whose goodwill the safety of the state depends. It was, the story goes, a court run by a jury of ordinary Athenians, whose democracy then lacked any real checks and balances to its authority, which ordered that Anaxagoras be put to death for his impiety in asserting that the sun was not a god but a lump of molten metal as big as half of Greece. Saved through the pleas of Pericles, who allegedly put his own life on the line for his intellectual protégé and friend, Anaxagoras was allowed to leave the city.<sup>[7]</sup> One recalls the trial of Galileo. A few years later, in his comedy the *Clouds*, Aristophanes mercilessly satirised the intellectuals' speculations. He ascribed to Socrates an absurd 'thinking-shop', the first academic institution. This, of course, is how universities were invented: by a Greek comedian, as a joke at the expense of scientific theorizing. Aristophanes' intentions *may* have been just as innocent as the caricatures of Richard Bentley's classical scholarship in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*<sup>[8]</sup> or of modern universities in David Lodge's *Small World*, but the indirect results were even less amusing: the butt of his humour, Socrates, was condemned for impiety in 399 B.C., and died a willing martyr to his own variety of *philosophia*, 'love of wisdom'.<sup>[9]</sup>

As has happened many times since, the violent repression of a free thinker led some of his followers to advocate the repression of others, with consequences that have had a powerful impact even on our own century: I refer to the invention of the first sophisticated ideology of authoritarianism, by Plato. Karl Popper<sup>[10]</sup> has traced the modern legacy of Plato's scheme for an ideal republic, run by philosophers and based on the 'noble falsehood' that one's status within the class system is genetically determined. There is no need to rehearse here either Plato's ideology or its youngest offspring, save to note the openness with which Plato grants that autocratic power must suppress the truth to maintain its grip; many despots have learned from that observation. What I wish to consider in this context is Plato's attitude to literature and education.

Plato was convinced that there could be no ideal society without a tight control on education, which in classical Greece traditionally meant music, athletics and poetry. It is the epic and tragic poets, for him, who depict gods and heroes in an improper light, as weeping, laughing and doing wrong. If literature can be purged of impropriety, the inhabitants will not imitate such behaviour; in modern parlance, they will have no bad 'role-models'.<sup>[11]</sup> Accordingly, the school curriculum must be subjected to strict political control; and a poet like Homer, who presents the gods in a frivolous light, or Hesiod, who narrates grotesque old myths of violence among the Olympians, must be crowned with garlands and . . . expelled from the city,<sup>[12]</sup> much as Heraclitus had advocated. In addition to such censorship, the inhabitants must also be kept from contact with foreigners, who might reintroduce such dangerous images and ideas.

You will have gathered that I am somewhat out of sympathy with Plato's approach. Fortunately, just as, at the dawn of Western civilization, Hesiod's primitivism was counterbalanced by Homer's humanism, so, four centuries later, Plato's insular dystopia was counterbalanced by the generous universalism of his pupil Aristotle, a perfect instance of how crucial it is that we teach our pupils (as Plato must have taught Aristotle) to react intelligently towards their teachers, rather than expect to be learn matter fit only to be regurgitated. Whereas Plato's philosophy is based on the metaphysical belief that there is a perfect world of the Forms, of which ours is but a changing and imperfect copy, Aristotle rejected Plato's metaphysics and therefore advocated the study of the world as it is rather than as the philosopher thinks it ought to be. His method is based on the eminently scientific attitude that we must try to explain the phenomena which we can observe, by comparing and analysing as

many examples as possible of whatever we are studying, and by building on the experience of ordinary people and of previous investigators. He applied this approach equally to biological specimens, logical arguments, the constitutions of states and the structures of tragic dramas, in fact to nearly every field of learning: for him, there was no distinction in method between science and the humanities, and other European cultures are fortunate that their languages still make no such distinction. Unlike Plato and his predecessors, he distinguished clearly between criticism of poetry as the servant of politico-religious concerns and criticism of poetry as studied in itself. Thus it is no coincidence that Aristotle was the first to write a systematic treatise on literary theory, the *Poetics*, which lies, via the Stoics, Horace, Renaissance theorists, Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, at the root of much of modern aesthetics, semiotics, linguistics and art-theory.

In the *Poetics*, a mere 10,000 words long (and in fact his lecture-notes rather than a finished product), Aristotle begins by drawing distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, and between verse and prose. Ridiculously obvious, one may think, even if obscure to M. Jourdain; but stating the obvious is typical of Aristotle, since what is obvious to us is only obvious because someone else once thought of it, in this case Aristotle. But he misses a trick when he complains that there is no word for the concept 'literature', and then omits to invent one.<sup>[13]</sup> Another obvious idea, one might think; but there remained no word for 'literature' for the next 2,200 years. ('Literature' acquires its modern sense in English and French shortly after the publication of the *Dictionnaire* of Diderot; Dr. Johnson seems to have been the first so to use it in English.) Aristotle identifies the concept of *mimesis*, imitation or representation, as central to art in general (for which he has no word), and to literature in particular. It is especially naughty of him to list, among examples of representation which happen to be in the medium of prose, dialogues about Socrates; these are of course precisely what Plato wrote, and yet Plato had inveighed against verbal *mimesis* as being an inferior imitation of reality. Aristotle stands this on its head: for him, human beings learn their first lessons from *mimesis*.<sup>[14]</sup> Worse yet, a fictive *mimesis* which represents an action represents it in a way more philosophically useful than history can.<sup>[15]</sup> Poetry represents not the actual, confused patterns of the many unconnected actions which we undertake in actuality, but universal patterns of a single action, with all the complexities stripped away so that we can comprehend the course of the action in and of itself.

Based on this principle, we can see why Aristotle regarded literature as worth studying; it represents, according to him, patterns of human action from which we can learn. Whereas Plato did not want poetry to show noble characters suffering misfortune, Aristotle regards this as perfectly acceptable, on two conditions: first, that the nexus of cause and effect is made plain by the representation,<sup>[16]</sup> and, second, that the misfortune originates in a mistake made by the character,<sup>[17]</sup> rather than in either his wickedness (for which he is totally responsible) or an accident that befalls him (for which he has no responsibility at all).<sup>[18]</sup> And whereas Plato disapproved of works of literature which affect our emotions, Aristotle thought that the best tragedy would be that which elicited from us the twin emotions of pity and fear,<sup>[19]</sup> just as the best comedy would be that which pleased us and made us laugh.<sup>[20]</sup> Obvious again, perhaps. But how could Aristotle hold such a position, which, as a Platonist would object, panders to our emotions rather than our reason, encouraging feelings which ought instead to be repressed?<sup>[21]</sup>

Aristotle's explanation of this view does not directly survive. It is in fact his famous but notoriously obscure theory of catharsis. The extant *Poetics* does not present this theory directly, but rather presupposes it; it was discussed in lost portions of his work.<sup>[22]</sup> Before I

explain what the theory is and why it is so important in the context of contemporary questions like violence in society, the purpose of art, artistic and academic freedom and political control over the content of education, I want to use Aristotle's theory of catharsis as an example of how knowledge is won, lost and recovered. The loss of the past and its rediscovery are both serendipitous processes; one never knows what one will find. But there was a past, some of which can often be recovered: nobody who has worked on ancient manuscripts or on an archaeological site will remotely believe Descartes' null hypothesis, based on ancient scepticism, that the past is an invention of an evil enchanter, who makes sure that everything about the present is consistent.[23] While we cannot know many things with *certainty*, I remain sure that we *can* know about the past, with varying degrees of probability; the most important corollary of such knowledge is to be able to assess how likely a given theory about the past actually is.

The accumulated literature and book-learning of antiquity is largely lost. We know that at least twice as much early epic poetry as we now possess formerly existed; we have some 20% of the plays of Euripides, only 5% of those of Sophocles, hardly any of the voluminous writings of Democritus, one of the inventors of atomic theory, and so on. Ancient books disappeared for a dismaying variety of reasons. Natural disasters played some part: fires in libraries, earthquakes, even volcanic eruptions like that of Vesuvius, to which I shall return. War, and its attendant catastrophes plague, famine and depopulation, played a very large role indeed: we know, for instance, when and where the last copy of much of Callimachus' poetry was destroyed - by Frankish knights when they sacked Athens during the Fourth Crusade of 1205.[24] Our own civilisation is even more fragile in this regard, when atavistic authoritarianism arms itself with modern weaponry: think only of the damage to libraries from Berlin to London during the last war, or the deliberate destruction of the National Library in Sarajevo.

Ideological reasons may also have played some part in the suppression of some Greek literature: Menander, the most popular dramatist of antiquity after Euripides, may perhaps have disappeared because of Christian disapproval of his portrayal of a secular bourgeois society in which boy marries girl, often, only *after* she is pregnant. Comedy was banned by canon law in A.D. 691 because dramatic festivals were indissolubly linked with the pagan god Dionysus.[25] On Christmas Day in A.D. 525, the orator Choricus of Gaza had had to plead before Justinian that dramatic performances be allowed;[26] over a century before, Augustine was already expressing disgust at how literature like Terence's comedies or Vergil's *Aeneid* could arouse in him emotions better kept under control[27] (one is reminded, not accidentally, of Plato). But suppression often failed, or had its own revenge: thus Celsus' arguments in his *Against the Christians* are preserved in Origen's refutation of them.[28]

The greatest culprits of all in the loss of ancient texts were certainly ignorance and its companion indifference. Educational horizons contracted with the economic decline of the third century A.D., increasing authoritarianism and the introduction of Christianity; the seventh and eighth centuries were especially calamitous. Above all, literacy declined and became a professional skill rather than one essential for craftsmen and citizens; higher education shrank almost to extinction, and the syllabus for use in schools became steadily more restricted and less ambitious. The proliferation of summaries and study guides to the classics presents a familiar appearance. This is why we have only seven plays by Sophocles, and without the chance survival of a section of the *Complete Works* of Euripides we would be almost as badly off in his case. Moreover, as new media for preserving knowledge were introduced, less popular works might well not be transferred into them. Once such moment

was the invention of what we call the book. Until about 350 A.D., most texts were written on scrolls which had to be unwound as one read, like a microfilm, not with pages like our books. The book with pages, the codex, was probably a Christian invention; [29] it could contain more text, and could be made very small so that it could be easily carried and hidden from the authorities in times of persecution. [30] Many works were never transferred from roll to codex, and so were lost. Much of our present knowledge faces a similar danger: books of the last century and much of this, printed on acid paper, are already disintegrating horribly in overheated libraries in North America, and the knowledge in them will inevitably be lost if they are not recorded in some less perishable medium (the sort of project UNESCO ought to be organising, along with the recording by digital camera of the world's manuscript materials). One fears that the knowledge in many books may soon go the same way, once the CD-Rom becomes the new medium for storing information: at least Classics is fortunate that all texts in ancient Greek were put onto CD-Rom through the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae project, years before even the Bible or Shakespeare became searchable in this manner.

The fate of Aristotle's *Poetics* illustrates several aspects of the process of loss and rediscovery. It lost its second book, which dealt with comedy and with catharsis, at some time in late antiquity, before the remainder was translated into Syriac and then into Arabic in Bagdad in the early tenth century. [31] Umberto Eco, in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, [32] invented the hypothesis (amusingly plausible in the light of the canon laws cited above) that the book on comedy was deliberately suppressed, because Jesus was supposed never to have laughed and a book on comedy by Aristotle would have been regarded by some clerics as especially dangerous. [33] The truth may be more prosaic: the *Poetics* was arranged as the last item in the collection of Aristotle's logical works (because poetry has a kind of logic, all of its own), and the last few pages in a volume were the most liable to fall out when the binding weakened. [34] Only one copy of the *Poetics*, or at the most two, survived from antiquity to be recopied in the Middle Ages; and neither contained the second book.

Now before the section on comedy and catharsis was lost, someone copied out short extracts from the theory of laughter into a manuscript of Aristophanes, whence it was eventually recopied into a number of Medieval manuscripts; and someone else made a brief, untitled, anonymous summary of the whole book, leaving out all the detail and all the jokes, onto leaves which were bound into a volume of extracts from commentators on Aristotle's logic, composed in the sixth century A.D. A copy of this summary, in a schematic format like a student's notes, survives in a tenth-century manuscript now in Paris, whence it was published in 1839. [35] This was the text for whose authenticity I argued in my notorious book, *Aristotle on Comedy*, published in 1984. My critics have since argued that parts of it are too like Aristotle to be by him - it must be an imposture, they suggest; whereas other parts are too unlike Aristotle to be attributable to him. I think they cannot have it both ways. When the book appeared I was astonished to see that, in *The Name of the Rose*,<sup>36</sup> Eco adapts parts of the same manuscript as the opening of his lost treatise, and still more astonished that, in the scene from the film based on his novel, where Sean Connery (alias William of Baskerville) finally tracks down the lost book on comedy as flames are devouring the library around him, the director used for that book a replica of the very same Parisian manuscript. I reflected, as I watched the flames licking the corner of folio 249 recto, that I must be the only person in the world fully able to appreciate the joke: here was a film based on a novel, both of them fictional, which reconstructed the fate of a manuscript which still existed, and for the authenticity of which I had just advanced what I still feel to be compelling arguments. Eco later told me [37] that, when he was writing his novel, a colleague of his, Benedetto Marzullo,



knowing of the publication of 1839, informed him that, if anything of the lost second book survived, the manuscript in Paris was likely to represent it, which was why he adapted it.

Another burned library, a real one this time, provided me with a second means of reconstructing Aristotle's theory of catharsis, and also illustrates the unpredictable nature of academic research. Soon after finishing *Aristotle on Comedy* I was embarrassed to learn, by accident, of an obscure study in which an Italian scholar, just deceased, alleged that a refutation of Aristotle's poetic theory appeared amongst the works of Philodemus, an Epicurean poet and philosopher who was the teacher of Vergil.[\[38\]](#) Philodemus lived at Herculaneum on the bay of Naples, under the shadow - then a benign one - of Mount Vesuvius. He, or his patron, possessed the largest, indeed the only, library to come down to us from classical antiquity. Unfortunately Herculaneum lay directly under the volcano. When Vesuvius suddenly exploded in the famous eruption of A.D. 79, Philodemus' library was covered by superheated mud and carbonised at a temperature calculated at 325 degrees Celsius; a little hotter, and it would have burned entirely, a little cooler and it would not have been carbonised and thereby preserved, being buried under 20 metres of the soft rock called tufa and a further 7 metres of volcanic lava. The library was rediscovered in 1752 during tunnelling for antiquities in the spacious and magnificent Villa of the Papyri, of which the J. Paul Getty Museum near Los Angeles is a skilful reconstruction.[\[39\]](#) The library consisted of perhaps a thousand book-rolls, many of which remain unopened. Conserving them and opening them are both tasks challenging even to modern technology. The texts are tremendously fragile, like burnt newspaper, with black ink on a black background. The middles of many of the rolls, however, were successfully unrolled by Father Piaggio, a priest employed by the enlightened King Charles III and supported financially by Sir William Hamilton and by George IV as Prince of Wales.[\[40\]](#) Two of the papyri in this library do indeed contain what are unmistakably attacks by Philodemus against Aristotle's literary theory, including his theory of catharsis.

However, one cannot simply sit down and read this material at sight, as I discovered when I first undertook to do so in 1986. In fact, recovering the knowledge in these texts is the most difficult thing I have ever attempted, which is one reason why I'm engaged in it. The papyri are kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples, in two large rooms full of specially designed steel cases, each of which contains many trays of material. One studies them in a large room with a glass ceiling, designed to let in the maximum light and no cross-currents of air, so that bits do not blow off the edges of the papyri. The summer heat in that room is beyond description. Reading the papyri is a slow process, painful to the eyes; indeed, it has made me think of 'reading' in an entirely new way. The papyri are not flat, but are often heavily creased, buckled and folded: they cannot easily be flattened and stored between glass, like papyri from Egypt, without unacceptable damage. Once unrolled, they were normally cut into sections, glued onto cardboard and mounted on small wooden boards. To read them, one has to tilt them this way and that, so that eventually the light falls on every facet of the surface at the correct angle and one has seen every speck of ink; otherwise the writing can be totally misread. The uneven surfaces mean that photographs like that reproduced here, even when taken in colour and with a Macrolite ring-flash, can give a very misleading impression: shadows and the crossing fibres of the papyrus can easily be misread as letters. Moreover, different layers of the papyrus often stick together, and one can suddenly be looking at a different layer, with just the tiniest crack, invisible on a photograph, to show where one layer ends and that below begins. Only sustained study of the original can avoid such mistakes (although digitised video images of the papyri might well solve the problem of photographing the buckled surface). The process of reading at different angles needs to be repeated several

times, as the ink is often at the limits of visibility. Enhancing photographs scanned into a computer with Adobe Photoshop, a programme which enables one to adjust the colours, brightness and contrast, is a valuable help; more useful yet, for the indispensable work of reading the originals, is a powerful new Nikon binocular microscope with superior lenses and a halogen bulb.

What has amazed me about this work is the need for patience, determination and total flexibility of mind about one's own perceptions and theories. Getting others to stare at the traces of letters and tell one what they can see, without of course telling them what it should be, is a valuable safeguard. Working with a partner to take notes also means that one need not take one's eyes away from the microscope; otherwise, it can take a whole minute to find one's place again. A hypothesis that the text contains a given word can totally distort what one sees, unless that hypothesis is correct, in which case it can help one to see it. One's brain has a terrible propensity to join up traces of ink that in fact are not connected. It is humbling to realise how prone we are to err, how often the papyrus says something quite different from what one had hypothesised while away from it.

Sometimes the same text exists in two copies with different lineations, which must be compared with each other. It also takes skill and self-control as one works to keep an eye on, but not to crib one's text from, the nineteenth-century drawings of the papyri which were made as they were unrolled. These usually turn out to be extraordinarily accurate, when careful work confirms what they show. The papyri must then have been more legible than they are now, even with the best microscopes; the drawings often show more letters than still survive, as the ink and the papyrus slowly but inexorably crumble away. We do not have forever to finish reading this library! But there is nothing more satisfying than the moment when, after hours of frustration, a damaged or excruciatingly faint line of writing finally yields up its sense, sometimes afterwards in the study, sometimes while one looks at it; or when, without being told what should be there, another scholar confirms what one has read oneself; or when one discovers in the papyrus a word which a scholar dead for a hundred years, who never went to Naples and saw only reprints of the old drawings, guessed must once have stood there. This happens so often, in the case of the best scholars like Theodor Gomperz, that it renews my confidence, at the end of an over-sceptical century, that the past can be recovered and that a degree of objectivity can be achieved by careful scholarship in the humanities.

Even when the papyrus is accurately read, with or without the aid of the old drawings, the interpreter's difficulties do not cease. Divining which letters are lost in the frequent holes or at the edges requires time and patience; having the published works of Philodemus, and indeed all of Greek literature, searchable on CD-Rom is an enormous help in filling in the broken words.<sup>[41]</sup> Often it is only by searching the entire known vocabulary of ancient Greek - easy for the computer - that one can eliminate all other possible readings, and then return to the papyrus to find that in fact it uses the word which one has at last hypothesised. Reconstructing the sense of a whole passage is even harder. Where is the verb? Where is the subject? The whole sense can seem the opposite of what is needed, because one has not realised that the word 'not' is lost in a hole, or that Philodemus began the sentence by saying 'it would be idiotic to suppose that . . .'. Here it is of enormous benefit to present damaged texts in seminars: the combined efforts of a dozen experts, all thinking at once and discussing each others' suggestions, can, like a computer using parallel processing, achieve in an afternoon what it would take an individual longer than a lifetime to puzzle out. Moreover, as in the case of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the scribes who copied these texts found them very difficult and made

mistakes, which can be hard to detect and rectify by conjecture. One reason why they found the material so hard is that the technical terminology of literary theory in antiquity became every bit as sophisticated and complex as its modern counterpart; apart from these texts, little of ancient literary theory survives. Different critics could use the same term for different concepts, or invent new ones. This summer I finally read a word found only once elsewhere in the fifty-million-word corpus of Ancient Greek, οJmozhliva. Paradoxically enough, until I found that this occurs in the Septuagint,[\[42\]](#) I had repeatedly failed to read the passage. There is also the problem of establishing whether a given statement belongs to Philodemus or to his opponent. When that is determined, we can begin to ask who the opponent is, since the name is rarely given. Most of the critics mentioned in these texts - Pausimachus, Heracleodorus, Andromenides - are otherwise unknown to history. But in this same passage I was able to restore a well-known name, that of Heraclides of Pontus, a pupil of Plato.[\[43\]](#) These texts fill in the big gap in the development of ancient literary theory between that period and Horace in the Augustan Age, a gap which we need to fill.

The last difficulty I would mention - and all these difficulties have to be tackled at once, not in any particular sequence - is that of establishing in what order many of the fragments belong. This last difficulty has recently been overcome by the Delattre-Obbink method, evolved independently in France and America; I have described this technique elsewhere,[\[44\]](#) and cannot do so here. This new method at last offers the prospect of reconstructing lengthy book-rolls almost in their entirety. New discoveries continue; following his finds of texts of Lucretius and Ennius, Knut Kleve has just recognised a papyrus of a lost Roman comedy, the *Money-lender* by Caecilius Statius.[\[45\]](#) Moreover, open-cast excavations have recommenced at Herculaneum: next year the Villa of the Papyri itself, which has now been relocated, will at last be brought to light, perhaps with even more texts than were recovered by the eighteenth-century tunnelling.[\[46\]](#) In this field of discovery, there is as much to hope for as there already is to be done.

So what light have these newly rediscovered sources already shed on the dispute between Plato and Aristotle over the nature and purpose of literature, with which I began? Let me briefly remind you of the issues involved. Plato censured epic, tragic and comic poetry for four main reasons. First, literature is an inaccurate guide to knowledge - you cannot learn about good generalship from Homer's *Iliad*. Secondly, Plato held that much literature presents poor role-models for human conduct - Achilles, for instance, ought to have shown more self-control over his anger. Thirdly, literature is an inferior imitation of reality, because of Plato's theory that there exists a transcendent world of Forms, of which our world is a shifting and unstable copy. Lastly, Plato argued that poetry, far from sustaining our intellects, encourages our emotions, which we ought rather to try to repress. Now Aristotle's attitude to the emotions was quite the opposite from that which we might have expected from someone who was the leading scientist of his day: for Aristotle regarded emotion as just as important as intellect in determining action.[\[47\]](#) Even a life devoted to research, which he deemed the type of life that best fulfils our specifically human potential, as animals capable of reason, is in his view a form of action, since happiness is an activity, not a state; and a correct balance in the emotions is essential to attaining the practical wisdom - *phronēsis* - essential to right action. His theory, presented in *Nicomachean Ethics* II-III, runs as follows.

According to Aristotle, human beings need to develop a disposition to feel emotion correctly, i.e. in the proper circumstances and to the right degree; our emotions, combined with our understanding, can then become a guide to right action. Take courage, for instance. Aristotle defines courage as feeling fear to the correct degree. If one felt too much fear, one would



never make it across Euston Road; but if one displayed too little respect for the traffic engineers' determination to be unfair to pedestrians, one would end up maimed or dead. Incidentally, this quality, courage, is essential even in scholarship. If we have too much courage, we end up claiming things which are demonstrably wrong; but if we have too little, we risk becoming able only to criticise the errors of others, too fearful of error to think or speak for ourselves.

How, then, do we acquire the ability to act rightly? For Aristotle, we learn to act courageously simply by acting courageously, again and again. Each action we take builds our character; by acting in that way on numerous occasions we acquire a settled disposition to act in that way, a *habit* of action. This circular pattern is, for him, the origin of character; and it involves both emotion and intellect. We need to use our intellects to judge the circumstances surrounding an action, and our judgement about these then shapes our emotional response to it; but our emotional response may then influence the action we decide upon, and the aggregate of our past emotional and intellectual decisions creates our character. Now Plato had held that poetry was not only useless, in terms of what it teaches about the world, but harmful, since it induces us to indulge emotions which should be suppressed.<sup>[48]</sup> For Aristotle, on the contrary, poetry can help to habituate us to feel the correct emotional responses, and thereby to approach the mid-point between the extremes; this mid-point is where virtue lies. Put differently, poetry can hold up to us patterns of human action, from which we can learn. Here Aristotle's theory of *mimesis* is crucial: by watching a representation of the actions and sufferings of *others*, we can benefit ourselves, in that we experience emotions which would be harmful if they were based on reality. This applies both to painful feelings like pity and fear in the case of serious genres like tragedy and epic, and to pleasant ones like laughter in the case of non-serious genres like comedy and satire.

We know this from a neglected passage in Aristotle's *Politics*, where he is discussing the place of *mousiké* in education. When Aristotle refers to *mousiké* and to 'songs', he means not 'music' only, but words set to music as well, and hence poetry as well as what we call 'music'; but it has taken a long time, and the discovery of parallels in Philodemus, for scholars to appreciate this essential fact. This is why the passage has been neglected by previous scholars trying to reconstruct Aristotle's literary theory. I quote:

When listening to representations (*mimeseis*), everyone comes to share in the emotion . . . Since *mousike* happens to belong among pleasant things, and virtue is concerned with feeling delight correctly and loving and hating correctly, clearly one should learn, and become habituated to, nothing so much as judging correctly, that is to feeling delight in decent characters and fine actions. Rhythms and songs contain especially close likenesses of the true natures of anger and mildness, bravery, self-restraint and all their opposites, and of the other character-traits: this is clear from the facts - we are moved in our soul when we listen to such things. Habituation to feeling both pain and delight in things that are like [reality] is close to being in the same state regarding reality.<sup>[49]</sup>

The word 'catharsis' does not appear in this passage. However, two pieces of another papyrus by Philodemus have enabled me to show that this is in fact what Aristotle meant by it. A new reading of the papyrus<sup>[50]</sup> provides a more reliable text of two fragments in which Philodemus reports Aristotle's theory of catharsis. In the first, he summarises three of Aristotle's tenets. First, "a poet is a representer of a complete action"; second, "poetry is useful with regard to virtue, purifying (*kaqairouça*), as we said, the related part <of the mind>"; and third, "each of the arts <aims at ?> the best of those things (?) which are naturally within it".<sup>[51]</sup> These are Aristotelian tenets, but the connection between poetry, virtue and 'purifying

the related part of the mind', that is catharsis, is made clear only here. Here is the second, adjacent fragment:

'Folly is present in the wisest of minds, and lack of self-control in the most moderate.

Similarly there are fears in brave minds and jealousies in magnanimous ones.'[\[52\]](#)

In Aristotle's moral theory, even those who are generally virtuous can fall into immoderation, and so need catharsis - which is what this fragment implies. Now the name of Aristotle does not appear in these fragments, and it would take courage for a scholar to allege that the theory is his rather than that of a close follower. However, we can with due caution make this claim: Occam's razor specifies that entities are not to be multiplied unnecessarily, and it seems unadventurous, to say the least, to allege that the theory is terribly like Aristotle's but is not his. One can say the same about the anonymous manuscript in Paris, the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which I argued to be a summary of the lost second book of the *Poetics*. Now this text mentions catharsis, as follows:

'Tragedy tends to reduce the mind's emotions of fear by means of pity and fear, and it tends to have a due proportion of fear . . . There is to be a due modicum of fear in tragedies, and of the laughable in comedies.'

This mysterious pair of statements is clarified by allusions to Aristotelian catharsis in the Neoplatonist philosophers Iamblichus and Proclus:

By observing others' emotions in both comedy and tragedy, we can check our own emotions, make them more moderate and purify them.[\[53\]](#) It has been objected that tragedy and comedy are expelled [from Plato's Republic] illogically, if by means of them one can satisfy the emotions *in due measure* and . . . keep them in a state suitable for education . . . It was this that gave Aristotle and the defenders of these kinds of poetry in his dialogue against Plato most of the grounds for their accusation against him.[\[54\]](#)

Terms like 'moderate' and 'in due measure' are references to the Aristotelian mean, that point at which virtue is attained.

By putting all these fragments together, we can see what Aristotle must have said. The representation in literature of universalised patterns of human action puts us through a process of reason and emotion which leads us towards the correct reaction, a reaction appropriate to the situation presented to us. We see Oedipus kill his father, marry his mother and find out about it. We are appalled, but, as E.R. Dodds showed,[\[55\]](#) we do not blame him in moral terms; understanding Sophocles correctly, we recognise that Oedipus did not know towards whom he was acting when he killed his father and married his mother - indeed, we see that he made every reasonable effort to avoid doing so. A Platonist critic might object that the play ought not to portray incest and parricide, in case watching it leads any of us to imitate those actions. The Aristotelian reply is that, whereas an eight-year-old, if foolishly allowed to handle a pistol, might indeed go off and shoot his father, no normal adult would do so. Instead, an adult is put through an emotional experience which would be extremely harmful if one underwent it in person; we sympathise with Oedipus and so identify with him, and can thereby understand his feelings without ourselves having to do what he did, while at the same time we can watch the play conscious, as spectators, that it is only a play, and that we are *not* Oedipus. This is actually useful: in serving on a jury, as Athenians often did, to judge the guilt of a man who had murdered a relative, someone who had seen the play would know how to discriminate between horror at the deed and the extent of the doer's culpability. Indeed, Aristotle would claim that we benefit from watching the play: our propensities to diverge from the mean in feeling emotions and judging actions are reduced, and our enhanced perceptions can help to improve our capacity for moral judgement and right action. The drama we watch is no fleeting experience; on the contrary, experiencing such appropriate emotional

reactions can accustom us to achieve and maintain the proper standard in our moral choices, leading towards the mean in emotional terms and hence to practical wisdom and virtue.

Obviously this theory of Aristotle's is of central importance in the debates about sex and violence on the screen, and about political control of the media and of the educational curriculum. In his remarks about obscenity in comedy (and Greek comedy could be very obscene), Aristotle declares that it should be kept from minors;[\[56\]](#) and he would have said the same about those depictions of violence commonly characterised as 'senseless'.[\[57\]](#) Seeing endless random deaths seems likely to brutalise many young people who find themselves in war-zones; seeing on television repeated representations of such actions, where there is no morally satisfying explanation of cause and effect, *must* by this theory have a similarly corrupting effect on people too young clearly to distinguish *mimesis* from reality.

I have spoken more today about the processes of finding out new knowledge than about that knowledge itself, because the basis on which we think we know something is more essential than what we know in itself. Gorgias, an older contemporary of Plato, wrote a book paradoxically entitled *On Nature, or On What is Not*, in which he argued three equally paradoxical propositions: first, that nothing exists; secondly, that if anything did exist, we could not understand it; and thirdly, that if we could understand it, we could not explain it to anyone else. Since he was a professional educator, I expect this was meant as a rhetorical *tour de force*; if he really believed any one of these propositions, it is hard to see how he could honestly have continued in his profession. For surely establishing what exists, understanding it and explaining it to others is precisely the essence of education. If we subscribe to any of Gorgias' propositions - and there *are* people in education, or influential upon it, who do accept one or other of them, albeit in some more elaborate, twentieth-century form - we leave open the field to those for whom education is politics by another means, people who think that history not only can, but also should, be rewritten by the victor, that research should produce only those results desired by, and effectively paid for, by its sponsors, and that truth is something to be defined to suit those in power, just as the rulers of Plato's republic are required to propagate a myth to maintain their power - the myth that they were born to be the masters and the others were born to be their servants. It is no coincidence that Plato's rulers are to expel from their state any poets who depict members of the elite in ways that might undermine their claims to power.

Fortunately, as we have seen, this was not the last word on these topics. For Aristotle, literature is a vicarious form of experience, from which we can learn, while at the same time we enjoy it. Like education, art should be an antidote to living only inside our own skin, stranded in our own place and confined to our own century; by voyaging to other lands, conversing in other tongues, and travelling to other centuries we are bound to bring back knowledge that cannot otherwise be found - above all, in the humanities, that knowledge of human nature at which the Greeks excelled. Our society still needs, in short, what classics can offer: the application of thought to civilisation.[\[58\]](#)

The past fifteen years have been difficult for higher education in this country - so much so that the word 'academic', which originated in the name of the first College, that founded by Plato, has come to mean, on the lips of too many journalists, 'irrelevant' rather than 'knowledge-based', and that a public service which already regulated itself with exceptional care has been subjected to further layers of external control and wasteful bureaucracy. These were good years to be teaching in America, and observing America's relative success in providing, for a large proportion of the population, a broad general education in which people

have the opportunity to realise their potential; in the two major American universities where I taught throughout this period, some knowledge of the ancient origins of modern civilisation is still valued as an essential basis for all fields of study, including medicine and engineering. Such a system of mass education, properly constructed to foster academic rather than political objectives, could of course still provide at the top the high standards for which British universities in general and classical studies here have been renowned since the war.

During my long absence from this country, classics in particular has been subjected to a ferocious attack by some of Britain's politicians and, alas, some of her educationalists too. My subject found itself between a hammer and an anvil. The hammer has been the so-called 'right' - a right that has conveniently forgotten that money and power are means to an end, not ends in themselves; a right that has forgotten that a country's cultural inheritance is not merely a waste of money, but should be a well-spring for the happiness and cohesion of its citizens; a right that has forgotten that education is the *only* way in which a civilisation enables human beings, as Aristotle would have said, to realise their highest potential as human beings, namely to develop and use their minds.

Among some politicians on the left, meanwhile, classics has suffered from a sadder error, arising from ignorance rather than from vice: the mistaken belief that classics is still a subject only for a narrow wealthy elite, perpetuating imperial nostalgia in the image of Rome and Athens, or inspiring Rupert Brooke to fight on the plains of Troy. Some on the left seem to have forgotten that Latin is the key to most of the languages of Europe, that Greek is the key to the language of science, and that the origins of modern democratic institutions, of freedom of thought and speech, and of higher education itself lie in classical Greece.[\[59\]](#)

All this can, must and *will* change. The resilience of classics, in the face of this attack, has been impressive and heartening. Education must never be the obedient servant of either left or right, or of any one single idea. Our first duty as educators is to form responsible citizens who are not docile followers of some party line, who can and do think for themselves, who are mentally and emotionally agile enough to surmount not merely those situations which some narrow training has led them to anticipate, but even life's totally unexpected challenges.

In a beautiful lyric song, a Greek chorus once expressed exactly the dilemma of civilisation:

'Strange things are many, and no thing is stranger than man . . .  
Man learned language; he learned thought fast as wind; he learned  
feelings that order civilisation; he learned to shun  
the open-skied frosts of sleeping rough, to shun rain's dismal shafts,  
all-ingenious man; with a genius for everything he approaches the future.  
Only from death will he find no avoidance. But he has worked out  
avoidance of diseases beyond resource.  
With resourcefulness of skill, shrewdness beyond expectation,  
he advances some time toward evil, else toward good.  
If he honours the laws of the earth  
and the gods' sworn justice  
he is high in his city; no city has he who  
in joy at boldness lives with evil.'

The words are from Sophocles' *Antigone*, a drama of resistance to authority, resistance to the notion that any arbitrary fiat can conjure out of existence standards of human behaviour handed down by the wisdom of the past. We should be grateful to our predecessors down the

millennia that Sophocles' play was still there when this century needed it, to inspire an Anouilh or a Brecht. For the sake of future generations, we must ensure that it will be there for them too.

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[1] This Inaugural Lecture was delivered at University College London in October 1996, by the kind invitation of the Provost.

[2] *Gen. Anim.* II 6.744a30; *Politics* I 2.1253a10.

[3] *Top.* VI 5.142b25; *Part. anim.* III 10.673a8.

[4] *Works and Days* 252ff., 706ff.

[5] *Olympian* I 36-53.

[6] D.L. IX 1, = 22 B42 D.-K.

[7] D.L. II 12-14.

[8] *The Dunciad Variorum, with the Prolegomena of Scriblerus*, London 1729 (repr. Leeds 1966), which contains a marvellous parody of a philological commentary of its time.

[9] There would have been another victim too, had the 'atheist' Diagoras of Melos, whose views are ascribed to Socrates at *Clouds* 830, not kept away from Athens when he was condemned in 414 B.C.; since he allegedly divulged not only the Eleusinian Mysteries but also the Orphic *logos*, he is a good candidate for the authorship of the Derveni papyrus (see 'The Physicist as Hierophant: Aristophanes, Socrates and the Authorship of the Derveni Papyrus', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, forthcoming 1997).

[10] K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. I, *The Spell of Plato*, London 1945.

[11] *Republic* II 377b-III 392a.

[12] *Republic* III 398a.

[13] *Poetics* 1.1447a29-b-15, where we must read  $\tau\omicron\iota\prime\zeta\ \lambda\omicron\upsilon\gamma\omicron\iota\zeta\ \gamma\iota\lambda\omicron\iota\prime\zeta\ \eta\ ]$   $\tau\omicron\iota\prime\zeta\ \mu\epsilon\upsilon\tau\rho\iota\zeta\ \dots <ajnwvnumo\zeta\ \text{suppl. Bernays}> \tau\upsilon\gamma\kappa\alpha\nu\epsilon\iota\ \omicron\upsilon\backslash\zeta\alpha$ , and not the text printed in R. Kassel's OCT (1965).

[14] *Poet.* 4.1448b8.

[15] *Poet.* 9.1451a35-b10.

[16] E.g. *Poet.* 7.1451a9-15.

[17] *Poet.* 13.1453a8-17.



[18] For this distinction see *Nicomachean Ethics* V 8.1135b1-25.

[19] *Poet.* 13.1452b30-2.

[20] This is implicit in *Poet.* 5.1449a31-3.

[21] Cf. *Republic* X 606d.

[22] *Poet.* fr. 5 Kassel (though these fragments more probably belong to the *On Poets*).

[23] *Meditations on First Philosophy* I 22-3.

[24] A.S. Hollis, *Callimachus: Hecale*, Oxford 1990, 38-40.

[25] The Ecumenical Synod of 691, meeting in Constantinople, banned drama in general, mainly for this reason. See *Acta Concil. in Trullo*, canon 62, in *Patrologia Graeca* 137 p. 728a Migne, which forbids, on pain of deposition for clergy and excommunication for laity, ta;ç tw'n gunaivwn ojrchvçeiç, kai; pollh;n luvmhn kai; blavbhn ejmpoiei'n dunamevnaç: e[ti mh;n kai; ta;ç ojnovmati tw'n par' "Ellhçi yeudw'ç ojnomaçgevntwn qew'n h] ejx ajndrw'n kai; gunaikw'n ginomevnaç ojrchvçeiç kai; teletavç, katav ti e[çoç palaio;n kai; ajllovtrion tou' tw'n Criçtianw'n bivou, ajpopevmpomeqa: oJrivzontev mhdevna a[ndra gunaikeivan çtolh;n ejndiduvçkeççai, h] gunai'ka to;n ajndravçin aJrmovdion: ajlla; mhvte proçwpei'a kwmika; h] çaturika; h] tragika; uJpoduveççai, mhvte tou' bdeluktou' tou' Dionuvçou o[noma th;n çtafuvlhn ajpoqlivbontaç ejn tai'ç lhnoi'ç ejpiboa'n, mhde; to;n oi\nnon ejn toi'ç pivqoiç ejpicevontaç gevlwta ejpikinei'n, ajgnoivaç trovpw/ h] mataiovthtoç ta; th'ç daimoniwvdouç plavnhç ejnergou'ntaç. (This is not noted by N.G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium*, London 1983, 12, 20.) Mime was banned in canon 51, p. 692c Migne: kaqovlou ajpagoreuvei hJ aJgiva au{th çuvnodeç tou;ç legomevnouç mivmouç kai; ta; touvtwn qevatra. The mystery is not the loss of Menander, but the survival of Aristophanes.

[26] *Oratio* 32, pp. 344-80 Foerster.

[27] *Conf.* I 16, III 2.

[28] H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge 1953, xvi-xxiv.

[29] C.H. Roberts, 'The Codex', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954).

[30] As witness the tiny codex of Mani in Cologne (*P. Colon.* inv. 4780); see L. Koenen and C. Römer, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex*, Bonn 1985, and E.G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*, ed. 2 by P.J. Parsons, *BICS Suppl.* 46 (London 1987), 129 with Pl. 83.

[31] On the history of this text see my *Aristotle on Comedy*, London 1984, 63-6.

[32] *Il Nome della rosa*, Rome 1980; trans. W. Weaver, New York 1983.

[33] See pp. 473-7 of the English translation.

[34] See *Aristotle on Comedy* 89.

[35] MS Parisinus Coislinianus graecus 120; the text was first published by J.A. Cramer, *Anecdota Graeca e codicibus manuscriptis Bibliothecae Regiae Parisiensis*, Oxford 1839, I 403-6.

[36] P. 468 of the English translation.

[37] In New York, October 1984.

[38] F. Sbordone, 'La poetica di Filodemo', *Maia* 36 (1984) 17-19, referring to *P. Herc.* 207, which he had edited in 'Il quarto libro del *peri; poiĥmavtw*n di Filodemo', *Ricerche sui papiri ercolanesi* I, Naples 1969 (the target of Philodemus' critique is in fact Aristotle's *On Poets*). I have since reedited this text (*Cronache Ercolanesi* 21 (1991) 5-65).

[39] See J.J. Deiss, *Herculaneum: Italy's Buried Treasure*, Malibu 1989, 60-82.

[40] Cf. M. Capasso, *Manuale di papirologia ercolanese*, Lecce 1991, 87-116; I. Jenkins and K. Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection*, London 1996, 42-6.

[41] I am grateful to T. Brunner and W. Johnson of the TLG Project for allowing my project to use the uncorrected texts of Philodemus, which have not yet been released on their CD-Rom.

[42] *Mac.* 4.13.25; the word is now also in Philodemus, *On Poems* I, *P. Herc.* 1074a fr. 5b col. ii 10-11.

[43] His name is also read at *P. Herc.* 1074a fr. 3b col. ii 4.

[44] See D. Obbink (ed.), *Philodemus and Poetry*, Oxford 1995, 69-73.

[45] Now published in *Cronache Ercolanesi* 26 (1996) 1-14.

[46] See M. Gigante, A. De Simone et al., 'Lo Scavo della Villa dei Papiri', to appear in *Cronache Ercolanesi* 27 (1997). It is hoped that the means will be found to prolong the excavations beyond December 1997.

[47] See W.W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle on Emotion*, London 1975.

[48] *Republic* X 605d-606d.

[49] *Politics* VIII.5.1339b42-1340a27. The translations which follow are from *Aristotle: Poetics*, Indianapolis 1987, where justifications for them will be found in the notes.

[50] *P. Herc.* 1581; this is from the start of Philodemus, *On Poems* V, as was shown in 'Philodemus' *On Poems* and Aristotle's *On Poets*', *Cronache Ercolanesi* 21 (1991) 5-65, at 59-63.



[51] Frag. I in M.L. Nardelli, 'La catarsi poetica nel *PHercl.* 1581', *Cronache Ercolanesi* 8 (1978) 96-103.

[52] Frag. II Nardelli.

[53] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* I 11.

[54] Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, p. 49 Kroll.

[55] 'On misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*', *Greece and Rome* 13 (1966) 37-49.

[56] *Politics* VII 7.1336b3-19.

[57] Cf. his condemnation of deliberate, knowing violence between *philoí* as *miarovn* (*Poet.* 13.1452b34-6).

[58] The allusion to Housman is intentional.

[59] In particular, the dangers to academic freedom resulting from the abolition in 1988 of tenure for established academic staff are amply proved by the climate of fear and intimidation which undoubtedly affects some British colleges and universities, and which is almost unheard of in the U.S. In such a situation, the only safeguards are courageous protest, collective solidarity and a Bill of Rights to protect freedom of expression.

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