
Banishing the Poets

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THE MAIN ARGUMENT OF THIS MONOGRAPH,* if I understand it rightly (something its rather cloudy writing makes me uncertain of), is that the body of works often (and traditionally) grouped together under the rubric ‘ancient literary criticism’ should be understood not as contributions to aesthetics or criticism of literature as these terms are commonly understood today but rather as political interventions. The aim was to distinguish texts that were acceptable from those which were not, acceptability being defined in terms of the good of the elite citizen body. Yun Lee Too starts her discussion with an ingenious allegorization of the myth of Typhon from Hesiod’s *Theogony*: Typhon with his myriad voices is figured as the dangerous text that requires censorship, Zeus as the critic who controls what may be said, by imposing exclusions and inclusions.

In one respect *The Idea of Ancient Literary Criticism*, presented as revisionary and from a ‘left-wing’ position, is conservative in outcome, namely that discussion concentrates on the usual suspects, from Plato to St. Augustine; in that sense the book could be said to reinforce traditional canonical arrangements. Too’s defence of this emphasis is, reasonably enough, that these particular texts have been accorded especial authority within the Western tradition as a whole (12–13). This might suggest a reception-oriented approach, an examination of this group of writings through their interpretation in subsequent centuries. But in practice Too’s discussion continually wobbles between such a reading from the present and an approach that is much more redolent of the sort of historical positivism still dominant in classics. In her conclusion she writes that “My subtexts have been the *idea* of

*Yun Lee Too, *The Idea of Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ix + 326 pages, \$80.00.

ancient criticism as constituted in part by material from antiquity and in part by the scholarship which has characterized it as ‘ancient literary criticism’” (281); but it is quite unclear to me how she envisions the relationship between these two parts. It would have been possible for her to argue that a ‘political’ reading of her texts has validity, but she seems, at times at least, to want to make the far stronger claim that *only* such a reading is valid. For example, when she writes that “criticism in antiquity, far from being a disinterested, aestheticizing, or evaluative project, is central to the production of political identity and the structures which produce political community” (282), the reifying force of the ‘is’ seems clear and appears to register a definite historical claim about the purpose and function of the texts within their own historical moment.

But to make that historical claim creates a problem in terms of Too’s own argument, in relation to the status of the texts she is discussing. She points out that the assembling of certain texts or parts of texts in such collections as Russell and Winterbottom’s influential *Ancient Literary Criticism*¹ is to impose on them a retrospective taxonomy and teleology.² When, for example, parts of Plato’s *Republic* are excerpted as being about ‘art,’ we can argue that by their recontextualization their meaning is changed (I would say, from a non-historicist perspective, that this recontextualization is perfectly legitimate in its own terms). Within the *Republic* as a whole discussion of poetry is, we may say, clearly subordinated to discussion of a just politics; the issue concerns what the state should do about certain influential poems. Plato’s interest is focussed on politics, ethics, and epistemology, not on aesthetics or literary criticism. But if Too is arguing that only a historicist account of these texts is acceptable, and that post-Kantian categories should not be applied to antiquity, then why does she want to treat this group of texts at all whose only coherence as a group derives precisely from such categories? And why treat the period from Plato to Augustine as constituting a coherent whole? (We are encouraged to interrogate the words ‘literary’ and ‘criticism’ but never the

word ‘ancient.’) The wobbling between reception and positivistic historicism, history and theory, thus turns out to be no accident; rather Too’s argument, if it is to get off the ground, depends upon it. Unfortunately there is no sign that she recognizes this discursive double-bind.

Like Terry Eagleton,³ and indeed the majority of modern theorists, Too collapses aesthetics into politics. This is the characteristic stance of almost all progressive classicists, whose hostility to the aesthetic seems however knocking at an open door, given the virtual absence of aesthetic criticism in classics, particularly from among the younger generation of scholars (the discipline divides itself mainly between a weak version of New Historicism and traditional philology).⁴ Indeed it is unclear whether Too knows much about the aesthetic discourses she rejects (an ignorance which these days is fairly widely shared, to our collective detriment). It is anyway much easier to talk about politics than aesthetics, because language is to a large degree instrumental, whereas an aesthetic judgement (on a Kantian view) is non-instrumental (without “an interest” as Kant puts it). The only explicit argument that Too adduces against the aesthetic is the conventional but unexamined claim that it is an essentializing, timeless discourse that denies historical contingency (5–6). I would say that the charge could be laid more convincingly against her own master category of the political. In fact the Kantian judgement of taste is always specific and singular; it takes the classic form “this rose that I am looking at is beautiful” (the claim that all roses are beautiful is not for Kant an aesthetic judgement). Too may well also think—the majority do—that the aesthetic is *inherently* a ‘conservative’ discourse. My answer to that would be that the political associations of the aesthetic are variable and changing. In the nineteenth century most people would, I suspect, have thought that aesthetics, for worse or for better, was a progressive discourse. William Morris argued that beauty was an essential component of an egalitarian society; Schiller regarded an aesthetic education as a propaedeutic towards a transfigured community; similarly radical political stances were adopted by

Gautier, Baudelaire, and Wilde.⁵ Eagleton himself recognizes the basis for a left-wing defence of the aesthetic, when he writes: “The goal of Marxism is to restore to the body its plundered powers; but only with the supersession of private property will the senses be able to come into their own. If communism is necessary, it is because we are unable to feel, taste, smell and touch as fully as we might” (201). Likewise the common claim that the aesthetic is elitist can also easily be countered; on a Kantian view “the judgement of taste” is the only judgement that requires no prior knowledge, since such judgements do not depend on concepts (if they did we could predict a priori that an object was beautiful). Moreover, aside from the judgement of taste itself, aesthetics, within a Kantian system, does not involve any hierarchy. As Benedetto Croce puts it: “A short poem is aesthetically equal to a long poem; a tiny little picture or sketch, to an altar picture or a fresco. A letter may be no less artistic than a novel. Even a beautiful translation is as original as an original work!”⁶ Hierarchy belongs not with the aesthetic, but with history and pedagogy, with politics and ethics. In general one of the mistakes of the left, in my view, is to have conceded control of the aesthetic to their opponents.

Implicit in Too’s approach is the commonly made argument that the aesthetic (a word first given its modern sense, we are told, by Baumgarten in his MA thesis of 1735)⁷ is, like art or literature, an anachronistic category, for which terms did not exist in antiquity.⁸ This raises the issue of translatability between one culture and another. The argument that some terms are untranslatable is hard to get off the ground since to claim that *ars* does not mean the same as ‘art’ implies that you have already translated it. I would prefer to say that, given the differences both between words and within words, translation of anything is always and never possible—any translation will have elements of difference from and similarity to what is being translated. In general Too in Manichaean vein tries to force us to make a choice between politics and aesthetics, on the supposition (surely incorrect) that if a ‘thing’ has a political function, it cannot have an aesthetic

function. At the very least it should be acknowledged that many philosophers, critics, and theorists down the centuries have supposed that 'art' could partake of both categories. Indeed the claim that aesthetic judgements are occluded and mystified political judgements can easily be reversed. For example the favorable ethical account of Manet's *Olympia* (as a politically radical and honest representation of a naked prostitute) might be portrayed as just such a mystified aesthetic judgement. The aesthetic appeal of the radical political life is, it may be, a compelling one, and academic radicals could be seen as modern dandies. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham puts it, "If the aesthetic is always already ideological, so, too, is ideology always already aesthetic."⁹

Too's politicizing account works best with Plato and Augustine, both of whom explicitly link reading and citizenship (respectively of the ideal polis and the City of God). Too, however, risks making Plato seem more conventional than he is; his banishing of the poets constitutes a radical, perhaps shocking, challenge to what would later become the *enkyklios paideia* of the Greco-Roman world which used Homer and other texts as a basis for education. Certainly for the Augustine of the *Confessions* one is what and how one reads. Just as our lives can be represented as texts which we make, so our selves are inseparable from the texts we read and make our own; thus Augustine begins by telling his story (one in which various books play a leading role), and ends by expounding part of a book, the first chapter of *Genesis*. But the complex attitude Augustine displays towards pagan literature in general, and Virgil, his particular favorite, in especial suggests that he felt torn between the literary power of the classic texts and reservations about their content.¹⁰ Thus he can express regret for the youthful tears he wept for Dido, while modeling himself as in part a modern Aeneas in rejecting his Carthaginian pleasures.

Too has more problems in making Aristotle's *Poetics* a text about good citizenship.¹¹ (I would describe it as a work of literary theory rather than literary criticism.) She subordinates Aristotle's *Poetics* to his *Politics*, and thereby confines and

restricts its meaning by establishing a hierarchy within the oeuvre. Of course it is possible to find a political subtext in particular passages. For example, when Aristotle argues that tragedy, unlike comedy, is a ‘serious’ genre dealing with people who are ‘good’ and ‘noble’ (i.e., kings and heroes), one could posit a social as well as a literary agenda. But to interpret the whole of the *Poetics* in this way would require considerable ingenuity. For example, most people would see a remarkable *literary* insight in Aristotle’s analysis of the superiority of the plots of the Homeric poems to those of the numerous *Thebais* and *Heracleids*: where most epic poets tell episodes from the story of a single hero, Homer gives unity of action to the *Iliad* by telling of the wrath of Achilles, not his whole life. Now a political reading of this passage might just be possible (though Too does not offer one): for example, one might argue that the elite male citizen requires an ability to extrapolate an organic unity out of a mass of data (John Barrell does something rather similar with Joshua Reynolds’s theory of painting).¹² Such an interpretation, however, might seem unduly strained. Too would no doubt defend her approach as reading “against the grain” (preface, v). It is worth reflecting a little on the genesis of this phrase. In the seventh of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin calls on the historian “to brush history against the grain.”¹³ In this way we can avoid being locked into the story of history’s winners, and may be able to release the voices of other groups, including those of the disempowered. Too’s readings by contrast merely, yet again, confirm the usual suspects—elite white males—exercising power over the community. And in general the idea of reading against the grain seems in itself an inadequate defense for interpretative perversity.

The interesting chapter on Hellenistic scholarship raises other problems. It is in commentaries that we find the nearest thing to the sort of close reading we would today call literary criticism. Again, Too sees such scholarship as exercising a critical censoring function to separate out the textual sheep and goats. It is true that some of the athetizing of the

Homeric poems might be seen as cleansing the text for social rather than purely literary reasons, removing the improper or morally corrupting. But in general the Alexandrian scholars seem as interested in accumulation as in exclusion (moreover the athetized lines remained in the text). It is significant that the only example of successful large-scale censorship that Too provides is a mythological one, the Hesiodic defeat of Typhon. Plato may have wanted to banish Homer and the rest (though he quotes them often enough in his own works), but he could not do so. Too makes much of the construction of canons of writers in the Hellenistic period (where she takes the word *engkrino* used of inclusion in the canon to imply critical separation), but in practice these canons were pretty capacious.

As epigraph to her introduction Too quotes some words of Frank Kermode evincing his characteristic weary urbanity: “. . . the forces of censorship do not invariably operate by crude prohibitions, and . . . oppression may adopt the demeanor of rationality, even of cooperation.” Unsurprisingly two pervasive presences in this book are those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the first of them *me judice* one of the century’s greatest thinkers (however little one may agree with them, his writings are a spur to thought), the second severely overrated by students of literature (though not, I understand, by most sociologists). Bourdieu’s argument in *Distinction* that aesthetic preferences are merely mystifications of social exclusion and class hegemony is of very considerable crudity.¹⁴ His attempt to refute Kant by means of a barrage of misleading statistics (misleading because Bourdieu in circular fashion decides which works of art are middle-brow, etc., and then triumphantly claims that the results exactly fit his class analysis) fails even to engage with Kant’s major propositions. One of these is that an aesthetic judgement is disinterested; the fact (if fact it is) that some, even the great majority of supposedly aesthetic judgements are occluded judgements of other kinds leaves the theory completely unaffected. Kant’s point that there is a kind of knowledge which is neither rational nor ethical remains unrefuted.

(Kant of course thought that pure judgements of this kind were easier to make about such things as flowers and shells, presumably because complete disinterest in the case of a work of literature was unlikely and probably undesirable.) In the case of Foucault Too offers what I would call, in the terms of Harold Bloom, “a weak misprision.” What is so troubling about Foucault is the way he unsettles our notion of where power lies. Thus discourses that we tend to think of as enlightened and emancipatory—like medicine, psychiatry, or sexology—become forms of control and discipline the effects of which go far beyond particular human agency. Too by contrast merely finds power where we already knew it lay.¹⁵ And certainly she could make a much stronger case than she does that ancient scholarship constitutes a subtle and pervasive regulatory mechanism of a Foucauldian kind.

Two stories about the history of aesthetics are commonly encountered, both of them to my thinking unsatisfactory. The first is a story of seamless continuity from the concerns of Plato and Aristotle down to those of modern philosophers and critics. The second insists on rupture, usually located in the eighteenth century, coinciding approximately with the rise of capitalism, the bourgeoisification of society, the industrial revolution, or any combination of these (i.e., some version of modernity). Of this rupture Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is regarded as a symptom or cause. Most leftish theorists like Eagleton espouse this second story. Too interestingly favors the first, seeing a continuity between the work performed by the ancient texts she discusses and mechanisms of censorship in the modern world. Too, while not sharing Plato’s politics, shares his view—against both soft liberals and conservative libertarians—that we need to decide between those texts and discourses we can accept into our city and those we cannot. Thus she is sympathetic to the view of certain feminists that demeaning images of women should be banned, not because of any results they may cause but because they embody discursively the debased valuation of women within patriarchy, not then for what they may do (always a problematic issue) but for what they are. This is a

bold stance, though for myself I side with the liberals. The true argument against censorship is not that literature and art cannot corrupt but that we must be free to choose corruption if we will, that a society in which different opinions are promulgated is healthier than one where such differences are suppressed, even that virtue must have something to test itself against if it is not to be “fugitive and cloistered.” Milton was no liberal, and he clearly held that literature could affect men’s morals, but *Areopagitica* remains the classic defense of freedom from censorship. Too’s idea of censorship also implies an essentializing view of the ‘text’ presumed to have inherent meaning; to a student of reception one objection to censorship is that it precludes texts from receiving new meanings which might be politically and ethically beneficial. Too does not tell us who is to do the censoring in her ideal state but presumably it is the enlightened critics with whom she associates herself, the “multiculturalists and opponents of pornography” who “identify with the disempowered” and “engage in the discrimination of discourse precisely to assist those who are not empowered in society” (279). I may not be alone in finding this both familiar and slightly scary (Foucault precisely helps us to see through this kind of discourse). Too was trained in Cambridge, England, and now teaches at Columbia. Like Plato then she is one of the elite, and I am never happy at the prospect of any elite, however well thinking, telling me what I may read or listen to or see.

It is sad that this book is not more successful. Writings about “ancient literary criticism” are on the whole unexciting, and Too tries to say new and sophisticated things about the ancient texts. She is right to insist that these texts should be read with the same detailed attention and the same recognition of complexity as the works of ancient ‘literature’ (283). Unfortunately her own writing shows a lack of precision and clarity which reflects an unclarity in her thinking. Moreover the discussion is too often conducted at a level of abstractness¹⁶ and generality which homogenizes the texts she discusses in a way that is ultimately too reductive to help us either with those texts or with ancient literature in general.

Though she constantly desiderates a contextualized criticism (e.g., 283), she never offers the kind of thick cultural descriptions which might be illuminating from a historical perspective.¹⁷ There are challenging things here, but they would have been better presented in a short polemical essay than in this rather relentless march through the Great Men whose work she discusses (the same might be said of Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*).

I would argue against Too and the majority of classicists, whether they style themselves 'traditional' or 'radical,' that it is high time aesthetics had its turn. Since 1968—following in the wake of other disciplines in the humanities—classics has experienced a shift away from aesthetic towards cultural, political, and neo-historical approaches to literature and visual art (this is sometimes called the 'cultural' or 'theoretical' turn). The questions asked of a 'text' are epistemological and ideological ones ("what and how does it mean?," "what cultural work does it perform?") rather than aesthetic ones ("is it beautiful, and if so why?" or "what pleasure does it give and how?"). It is indeed a bold critic today who dares publicly to call an ancient poem 'beautiful.'¹⁸ There are, however, faint signs now of a certain dissatisfaction with an impoverished aesthetic vocabulary, and I certainly believe that there is both a need for an 'aesthetic turn' and the possibility of it in the decades to come.¹⁹ This is not to say that politics can be taken out of art, nor should it be simply an attempt to put the clock back (though it would be necessary to review the emergence and development of aesthetics from the 18th century), but rather to see how an aesthetic language might be employed today, and what it might look like after the theoretical developments of the last fifty years. Certainly the view (worryingly ubiquitous and deeply complacent) that the critic's task is done once he has unmasked the undesirable ideologies lurking for the unsuspecting reader within canonical texts must be vigorously contested. One result of this is the creation of what one might call, following Fredric Jameson, the "aesthetic unconscious"—the reasons why one work is preferred to another are left unexplored, though still power-

fully operative. In these enquiries Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the most sophisticated account of these matters I have read, will need to be central. A traditional historicist will say that the appropriate place to ground such a discussion is in the writings of ancient philosophers, rhetoricians, and commentators; but a modern student of aesthetics is no more bound to confine herself to ancient writings on art than is a modern historian to ancient conceptions of history-writing.

Too, in support of her general case, cites the *Contest Between Homer and Hesiod*, perhaps of Hadrianic date. In this poem King Paneides gives judgement in favor of Hesiod because his poetry serves civic virtue where Homer writes about war and destruction (by contrast the people preferred Homer). What is missing from the king's judgement, and Too's book, though not from the ancient texts she discusses, is precisely the pleasure we can take in poetry. The rhetoricians of antiquity produced a rich body of discourse to help explain why certain combinations of sounds and rhythms and words were so effective with listeners and readers, where others were not. They never forgot, even if Too seemingly does, that it was Homer, not Hesiod who dominated the imagination of antiquity and who afforded an intensity of pleasure which left all spellbound.²⁰

NOTES

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1. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford 1972).

2. For a forceful expression of this view see Simon Goldhill, "Literary History without Literature: Reading Practices in the Ancient World," *Substance* 88 (1999), 57-89.

3. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford 1990). Eagleton has more of a sense than most such critics of the trivialization of political praxis that can easily co-exist with such attitudes.

4. E.g., T. N. Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature: Writing, Identity, and Empire in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ 1998). Habinek accuses Latinists of "nostalgia for a realm of the aesthetic untainted by the vulgar concerns of social and material existence" (167). Who these aesthetes are in a profession dominated by vulgar historicism is unclear to me.

5. For the politics of the aesthetic see Duncan F. Kennedy, review of T. D. Papanghelis, *Propertius: A Hellenistic Poet on Love and Death*, *Liverpool Classical Monthly* 14.9 (November 1989), 141–44.

6. Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, trans. Patrick Romanelli (Indianapolis 1965), 46.

7. See Hans Reiss, “The ‘Naturalization’ of the Term ‘Ästhetik’ in Eighteenth-Century German: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and his Impact,” *Modern Language Review* 89 (1994), 645–58.

8. So Goldhill (note 2) 57–59. However that some ancients had something like our concept of fine art is suggested by the elder Pliny’s view that the artistry of a work of art is more valuable than the material from which it is made (NH 34.5; 35.50). On this see Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London 1999), 70–80. Aristotle may not have had a concept of literature, but it is interesting that all the works he discusses in the *Poetics* fall easily into our category.

9. “Aesthetics and Modernity” in George Levine, ed., *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick, NJ 1994), 138.

10. See Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley 1998).

11. Her approach is of course in line with the current fashion for reading Greek tragedies primarily as expressions of civic ideology; these readings too differ from the apparent emphases of the *Poetics*.

12. John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and London 1986).

13. *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (London 1970), 248.

14. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London 1984).

15. Foucault explicitly attacks the view attributed to him by many of his followers in “The Repressive Hypothesis” in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (London 1979).

16. This abstraction appears also in her preference for a virtual over a more concrete and sensuous world: “perhaps one might argue that the electronic community is more constitutive of community for the very reason that it exists largely through discourse rather than in terms of geography, ethnicity, or racial identity” (287)—to some this will seem a scarifying brave new world indeed.

17. For a good example of her cloudiness about ‘history’ see the vague and second-hand remarks on the aesthetic in the eighteenth century on page 7.

18. See Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ 1999) for a refreshing exception.

19. It is significant that several new introductions to aesthetics and new aesthetics readers have been appearing in the last few years. These include: Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (London and New York 1997); Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard, eds., *Aesthetics*, Oxford Readers series (Oxford 1997); Colin Lyas, *Aesthetics*,

Fundamentals of Philosophy series (London 1997). Another sign of the times may be George Levine's collection (note 9). The contributors to this volume include several writers whom one would not readily associate with the aesthetic, including Derek Attridge and Peter Brooks. Collectively they call, though without much detail or specification, for a rethinking of the aesthetic and a re-imagination of the formal in critical practice—after a period in which 'formalism' was a particularly deadly political charge.

20. So Alexander Pope in the Preface to his version of the *Iliad* praises the "unequaled fire and rapture which is so forcible in Homer that no man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads him" (*The Iliad of Homer Translated by Alexander Pope*, ed. Steven Shankman, [London 1996], 4).