

Writing As Reading in the Textual Tradition

By Jeremy Cohen

“Very well, my dear fellow,” Socrates says to his interlocutor Phaedrus, “but you must first show me what it is that you have in your left hand under your cloak, for I surmise that it is the actual discourse” (477). Very little could invalidate an argument more rapidly, in Plato’s terms, than reading it from paper. Centuries later, by the time Macrobius was personifying and fetishizing the worthy passage, an entire textual tradition of Greek and Latin had moved to the forefront of Hellenic and Roman culture. The ability to read – for authorial intent and concealed meaning alike – became vital. Plotinus optimistically yearned for beautiful emanations of universal truth throughout the world. Informed by Christian theology and acosmistic love, Augustine aspired to the salvation of souls. Compared to these lofty aims, the endeavors of Horace and Longinus – noble pagans both, direct heirs to the classical heritage – seem trivial. Effectively writing clever, self-fulfilling guides to composing good poetry and sublime oratory, their concern is in perfecting a craft (pragmatic *ars* and *techne*, respectively), yet the authors are far more playful and passionate than Aristotle in his detached treatises. For a poet and a rhetorician not obviously concerned with close readings, they find tremendous vitality in engagement with the literary tradition.

Fundamentally, Horace and Longinus both set good reading as a logical prerequisite to good composition. Much of the craft, they equally maintain, cannot be taught – shown in Longinus’ notion of “great thoughts” (138) and Horace’s humorous evasiveness regarding specific prescriptions.

Throughout their works, they default to literary legends with frequent allusion to Homer and the Greek dramatists; Longinus even devotes a significant portion to quoting and interpreting poetry: “Sappho’s excellence, as I have said, lies in her adoption and combination of the most striking details” (140). At the same time, Horace contends against inspiration from the Muse, emphasizing individual strivings: “Wisdom is the starting-point and source of correct writing. Socratic books will be able to point out to you your material, and once the material is provided the words will follow willingly enough” (129). The oxymoron “Socratic books”⁸ is microcosmic to Horace’s unique brand of tongue-in-cheek seriousness: the good poet really ought to read all the old masters, even Plato’s repudiations of poetry itself. Indeed with sardonic solemnity, he beseeches, “Study Greek models day and night” (128). Glimmers of a cultural inferiority complex – a common Roman sentiment – seep into his Greek-Roman comparisons:

Your ancestors praised Plautus’ metre and his humour. On both counts their admiration was too indulgent, not to say childish, if it’s true that you and I know how to distinguish a witless jest from a subtle one and if we’ve skill in our fingers and ears to know what sounds are permitted. (128)

Hidden beneath the jibe is his truth: the necessary skill of the good reader. Longinus is more overtly inspired in his readings: “These great figures, presented to us as objects of emulation and, as it were, shining before our gaze, will somehow elevate our minds to the greatness of which we

⁸ Latin: *Socraticae chartae*, literally “Socratic paper” and equally absurd.

form a mental image” (143).

Longinus’ statement is significant particularly for his use of *emulation*, a term he delineates earlier: “Plato, if we will read him with attention, illustrates yet another road to sublimity, besides those we have discussed. This is the way of imitation (*mimesis*) and emulation (*zelos*) of great writers of the past” (142). Imitation is the copy spurned by Plato and embraced by Aristotle. Emulation is an entirely different animal: *zelos* for Longinus and *aemulatio* for Horace; a zealous rewriting of vital cultural works; a literary appropriation with love. The conventional mimetic tradition involves the artful representation of real-life events⁹ accessible to a layperson audience. The emulator, far more esoterically, writes for *other readers*. Under this framework, it quickly becomes clear which Horace prefers: “My advice to the skilled imitator (*imitatorem*) will be to keep his eye on the model of life and manners, and draw his speech living from there” (129). (How limiting!) With a clever reworking of the *Odyssey*’s opening lines as his device, Horace entreats: “The common stock will become your private property if you don’t linger on the broad and vulgar round, or anxiously render word for word, a loyal interpreter, or again, in the process of imitation, find yourself in a tight corner from which shame, or the rule of craft, won’t let you move” (125). Emulation, counterintuitively, *liberates* the writer. Longinus compares reading to the transcendent, supernatural of the Pythia at Delphi:

Similarly, the genius of the ancients acts as a kind of oracular cavern, and effluences flow from it into the minds of their imitators. Even those previously not much inclined to prophesy

⁹ Aristotle’s notion of verisimilitude.

become inspired and share the enthusiasm which comes from the greatness of others.

It is a righteous burden, to read the greats and attempt to write as greatly: “Truly it is a noble contest and prize of honour, and one well worth winning, in which to be defeated by one’s elders is itself no disgrace” (142).

In one of the *Phaedrus*’ ultimate rejections of written texts, Socrates declares: “They seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever” (521). Plato’s argument rests upon the then-fundamental truth that a written work lacks the truth-seeking, engaging dynamism of the dialectic. He had no notion of the Greek and Latin textual tradition about to develop, leading scholars like Longinus to pose once unfathomable queries: “Even more stimulating is the further thought: ‘How will posterity take what I am writing?’” (143). To write sublimely, for Longinus, is to outlast a specific cultural milieu; for Horace, effective poetry which pleases and instructs is that which improves upon the most ubiquitous of extant works. Unlike the Platonists’ absolute truths, the learned pagans recognized a dynamic tradition influenced by varying circumstances – not relativism exactly, but certainly something appreciable for modernists. Learning to compose meant, above all, *reading* the greats: for inspiration, opportunity, and challenge.

References

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