Carrot Cake

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It's not often that students in a required class, much less a dry and abstract one like the History of Literary Criticism, retain a sense of humour, but Aiyana Graham has done so in playfully comparing the creative process to making a carrot cake. The assignment was to explain how three of the critics we were studying used the term "nature," a notoriously labile term in critical thought. Plato casually uses it in reference to perfection when he makes nature a synonym for his realm of ideal forms. For Wordsworth, it is "all the mighty world of eye and ear" where sunsets and fields of daffodils soothe his heart. Focusing on Aristotle, Longinus, and Sidney, however, Aiyana draws attention to other senses of the word and their roles in a recipe for constructing a poem. Her key idea is "the nature around us and within us." Beginning with Aristotle's idea that mimesis is act of poesis; she explains the artist's struggle to blend the ingredients of "nature around us" into a meaningful whole. Turing to Longinus, she shows how the verbal energies of "nature within us" whip the mix to perfection. Finally Sidney praises the poet for transforming the raw material world into a fully baked confection. This is a mouth-watering metaphor indeed – let's eat!

—Dr. Ron Tetrault

Nature is everywhere. She surrounds us in everything we do all the time. We, as people, sleep and take breaks—but nature never stops. She is a constant cycle of new and old, birth and death, light and dark. We are inspired by nature, yet often daunted or terrified by her. The reactions she produces in us are comparable to

the effects of good poetry. Nature is poetry in its original state. Aristotle, Longinus, and Philip Sidney all have views on the uses of nature in poetry. Aristotle shows how nature is a base for all poetry, while Longinus shows how nature can be used to elevate the senses and reach the sublime. Sidney brings these two ideas together to create something new. These three literary critics show that both the nature around us and the nature within us are what make a true literary masterpiece.

Aristotle tried to take apart and understand the art of poetry. His *Poetics* explains the elements that make up a good poem or play. Poetry, like all art, is mimetic and

> since imitation is given to us by nature [...] men, having been naturally endowed with these gifts from the beginning and then developing them gradually, for the most part, finally created the art of poetry from their early improvisations. (Aristotle 61)

We are engrained with the act of mimesis from childhood and "[m]an is differentiated from other animals because he is the most imitative of them" (61). We learn from imitation and we teach in the same way. Similarly, poets mimic nature to move the reader to some emotion or action.

In *On the Sublime,* Longinus shows us how to inspire emotion in a reader. The sublime is a form of poetry that is hard to achieve; it is supposed to show things that cannot be seen or readily imagined. To succeed in the sublime we must raise "our own capacities to a certain pitch of elevation" (97). Longinus urges his readers to reach within their own natures to understand his argument. The

writer's nature lifts the reader to the sublime and it takes a natural writer to know when to either unleash his genius on the page or rein it in. According to Longinus, there are five sources of the sublime. The first is "the power of forming great conceptions," and the second is "vehement and inspired passion" (100). These both refer to the natural artistic flair born within a poet. The next three – thought and expression, noble diction, and dignified and elevated composition – pertain to the stylistic and rhetorical skills of the artist (100). We must build on nature, then, to create high art, but Longinus is firm that "nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases" (98). Our internal natures are the seeds from which good literary art grows.

Philip Sidney, who imitates and adds to the works of classical writers, unites internal and external natures in his own work. In *An Apology for Poetry,* Sidney defends poetry and emphasizes the powers it holds. He agrees that nature is the basis for all art: "[t]here is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend" (138). Sidney points out that we can never escape nature; every profession or area of study somehow involves nature. Philosophers, grammarians, rhetoricians, logicians, physicians and so on all operate within the laws of nature (138) – that is, every profession except that of a poet. Sidney elaborates,

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth

> forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature. (138)

The poet is the only artist who can transform nature into something completely new, which can then be imitated in the future. Sidney argues that mimesis of external nature and reflection of internal nature can be combined with rhetoric to produce literary art able to move the readers to their very soul.

From each literary critic we learn something new. In Aristotle we see nature as a basis for everything we create. In Longinus we see how internal nature can be amplified with the use of rhetoric skills. Lastly, in Sidney we see that when we bring external and internal natures together we can make something entirely new and moving. A poem is like building a carrot cake. One must have the base to start with, or the first layer: we start with the ingredients provided to us by nature to create poetry. Next we add our internal natures, the next layer of cake. Finally we add our skills of rhetoric – the frosting. From the oven comes a moving piece of literary work and a delicious cake. I'm so hungry for both, I'm not sure which I want more.

Works Cited

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