Preface

This book is based on Sather Lectures that I gave at the University of California at Berkeley in spring 1989. The practice is that lectures in this series are given by extremely distinguished classical scholars, and I owe it to the reader, and also to the Sather Committee who did me the honour of inviting me, an honour that I particularly appreciate, to make it clear that I am not primarily a classical scholar. I am someone who received what used to be called a classical education, became a philosopher, and has kept in touch with Greek studies primarily through work in ancient philosophy.

I must mention this, all the more, because this study does not stay within the limits that this experience might advise. I do discuss some ancient philosophy (most extensively, in chapter 5, some views of Aristotle's), but for much of the book the writers I discuss are not philosophers but poets, and I try to discuss them as poets, not as providing rhythmic examples for philosophy. I say something about my reasons for this in the first chapter. It is true that I am particularly concerned with Greek ideas from periods in which there were no philosophical writers, or from which few and fragmentary philosophical writings survive; but that is not my main reason for turning to poetry.

Philosophers who are guilty of bad scholarship should rightly
be reproached for it. It must be said at the same time that there are some literary scholars who seem closed to the idea that their reflections might involve some bad philosophy. They should perhaps at least be conscious of the risk. That is not to say that they do wrong to run the risk—while there are standards of scholarly orthodoxy, philosophy (in the words of an old joke) is anybody’s doxy. But it does mean that scholarship, at least when it tries to say anything interesting, cannot travel entirely on its own credentials. The truth is that we all have to do more things than we can rightly do, if we are to do anything at all. As T. S. Eliot put it, “of course one can ‘go too far’ and except in directions in which we can go too far there is no interest in going at all; and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

Eliot’s admirable remark, however, carries not just an encouragement, but, to someone in my situation, a warning as well. If those who are unused to working with literary texts may sometimes be too rash to satisfy the demands of scholarship, they also run the risk of not going far enough, of seeming feeble or superficial, by the standards of imaginative criticism. An insight that is robustly unaffected by contemporary writing about literature may turn out merely to represent some unforgotten prejudice. One can only accept that there is no reliable way of converting the disadvantages of amateurism into the rewards of heroism.

In admitting that the instrument for much of my recital is the violon d’Ingres, I am cheered by the fact that at least I was introduced to it by some excellent teachers. When I was an undergraduate at Oxford I had the good fortune to be taught by two of the most remarkable classical scholars of this century, Eduard Fraenkel and Eric Dodds. They set quite different, but equally demanding, standards for understanding the ancient world. Neither, incidentally, was unqualifiedly admired in Oxford. Fraenkel was represented by the malice of the common
rooms as a monster of Teutonic arrogance. He could certainly be alarming when presented with rash or pretentious error, but the quality he conveyed in his teaching and taught one to respect was humility in the face of dense and complex philological fact; and while he possessed classical learning on a scale that I suppose is not matched by anyone now living, he saw himself as poorly informed when compared, for instance, with the master whom he called "the great Leo".

If Fraenkel was sometimes derided by amateurs, Dodds was undervalued by pedants (the pedants and the amateurs were in some cases, needless to say, the same people). Extremely liberal in his political sentiments, interested in the social sciences, a poet and a friend of poets, he was also a deeply imaginative scholar. The Sather Lectures that he gave in 1949-50 yielded one of the most helpful and enduring books in the series, and it is one of the closest in subject matter to the concerns of this study. Since he was also extremely kind to me when I was a student, I should like to feel that my undertaking, even though it is imperfectly related to the kind of scholarship he practised, might count as a homage to him.

I have many people and institutions to thank. I am grateful to la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, and its administrator, Clemens Heller, for a productive period of time spent there in 1981. In the same year, I presented an early version of some of the material in this book in the Eliot Lectures that I gave at the University of Kent; I appreciated this invitation, and I am sorry that by turning into their present and very different form the lectures I gave disqualified themselves from appearing among the books that bear the name of that series. An invitation from the Classics Faculty at Cambridge to give the J. H. Gray Lectures in 1986 moved some of my ideas nearer to their present form. More recently, I have had the opportunity to present versions of some of the chapters in lectures or papers given at Yale, UCLA, Haverford College, the University of Michigan,
Warwick University, and New York University. I have benefited from discussions and comments on all these occasions.

Between the time when I was invited to give the Sather Lectures and my giving them, I had become a member of the Berkeley faculty. The members of the classics department, undiscouraged by this unprecedented and strictly irregular situation, extended the same hospitable and warm welcome to a visitor from the philosophy department as they customarily do to Sather lecturers from other institutions. Tony Long, in particular, not only did everything that could be asked of a chairman, but also showed himself a good friend and a generous colleague in giving me the benefit of his own work on subjects related to the lectures, especially to chapter 2. Other members of the classics department to whom I have special reasons for gratitude are Giovanni Ferrari, Mark Griffith, Don Mastronarde, and Tom Rosenmeyer. I thank David Engel and Chris Siciliani for their work as research assistants. Two helpful seminars on the lectures were held in the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, for which I am specially grateful to Paul Alpers, Samuel Scheffler, and Hans Sluga.

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