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The Function of Criticism ca. 432 BC:

Texts and interpretations in Plato's *Protagoras*

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ABSTRACT: Plato's Protagoras is a unique text in the history of criticism, the only extended example of practical poetic criticism that we have from classical Greece. This long passage (338E-347C) shows a group of fifth-century intellectual luminaries debating the meaning of a dense lyric poem by Simonides: the text is quoted at length and its language examined closely and methodically—and wildly. My paper first attempts to pinpoint how this passage—often written off as a parody or a joke or misunderstood as a simplistic polemic against “sophistry”—fits into the work. I argue that Plato is more serious here than is usually supposed, and that the passage gives his best account of uses and limits of literary criticism, which is not a bad account after all. In a coda, I consider an analysis of the passage by Glenn Most, which suggests some reflections on recent academic literary criticism.

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ABSTRACT: *Plato's Protagoras is a unique text in the history of criticism, the only extended example of practical poetic criticism that we have from classical Greece. This long passage (338E-347C) shows a group of fifth-century intellectual luminaries debating the meaning of a dense lyric poem by Simonides: the text is quoted at length and its language examined closely and methodically—and wildly. My paper first attempts to pinpoint how this passage—often written off as a parody or a joke or misunderstood as a simplistic polemic against “sophistry”—fits into the work. I argue that Plato is more serious here than is usually supposed, and that the passage gives his best account of uses and limits of literary criticism. In a coda, I consider an analysis of the passage by Glenn Most, which suggests some reflections on recent developments in academic literary criticism.*

The time-stamp in my title—which refers to a plausible dramatic date for Plato's *Protagoras*—is meant to promise that I will not issue an Arnoldian pronouncement about what the function of criticism should be at the present time. This seems to me a question worth re-asking now and again, as it was when Arnold asked it and when Eliot asked it after him.¹ To see that now is such a time one need look no further than the Winter 2004 issue of *Critical Inquiry*: its symposium on “The Future of Criticism” shows critical theory pausing to take stock after a generation of energetic production (say, since 1968) and considering where one might go next. About this second question there appears to be

NB: This is work in progress and is not fully annotated.

Non vidi: E. E. Pender, "Sappho and Anacreon in Plato's Phaedrus", *Leeds International Classical Studies* 6.4 (2007), 1-56, "Poetic Allusion in Plato's Timaeus and Phaedrus", *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 10 (2007), 51-87

¹ Arnold's original (1864/5?) title was “Functions of criticism”: see *NAEL* 2.1514-28. T. S. Eliot “The Function of Criticism” appeared in *The Criterion* of 1923 and was republished in *Selected Essays* of 1933. Eliot wrote on Arnold also in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Faber 1933).

some anxiety, to judge from the title of a 2000 volume of Essays from the English Institute, *What's Left of Theory?*, or Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003).² Of course, both titles moderate their confessions of defeat with paronomasia—but the amphiboly suggests uncertainty: "what's left of theory" asks if there's any theory left to do, or is repeating the "left" the only thing left to do? "After theory" may seem to point to a kind of theory that comes after what we have so far known as theory, but the fact that *After Theory* had already been used as a title as recently as the 1990's may be another sign that a period of extraordinary critical innovation came to an end with the millennium.³

Classicists are usually inclined, when considering the paths ahead for criticism, to have a look at the paths behind, and of the many ancient texts that talk about criticism one seems to have special pertinence to our situation: the *Protagoras* also seems to have been written to take stock at the end of a great generation of critics, the so-called "sophists" of classical Greece. Although Plato's immediate readers would have lived in the 380's, he recreates a conversation Socrates had with Greece's most famous intellectuals about a generation earlier, in the heyday of Periclean Athens. In the course of this richly imagined drama—a sort of novella of ideas—the value of studying poetry comes up as a topic of discussion and is then pursued through a sustained close explication of a famous old lyric. For critics of the present time, the interest of *Protagoras* may lie less in what Plato thought the function of criticism to be—a point on

² *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* (Essays from the English Institute), edd. Judith Butler, John Guillory and Kendall Thomas (2000). T. Eagleton, *After Theory* (London 2003). Eagleton had remarked the decline of High Theory in the preface to the second edition of his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996). The most significant precursor posing the question may be Randall Jarrell's "The Age of Criticism," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), focusing on Van Wyck Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, Yvor Winters, Newton Arvin, Philip Rahv, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin.

³ Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/postmarxism* (Routledge, 1990), *After Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996/ Columbia University press 1997).

which he reaches no definite conclusion—than in following the method of these critics and asking what is the function of the literary critical excursus in the work. Attempting to answer these questions will draw attention to criticism's function as a mnemonic device, a use not much considered today. We repair to Plato, then, not for his views of what literary criticism should do, but for his insights into what it can do so as to get a broader idea of the functions literary criticism may serve.

Protagoras: its plot and its problems

Protagoras presents itself as Socrates' account, to an unnamed interlocutor, of how Hippocrates, a young man of good family (not connected with the doctor), woke him early that very morning in hopes of gaining entrée into one of the greatest gatherings of sages Athens had ever seen. The main attraction is the famous sophist Protagoras (c. 490-420), but a number of other itinerant professors for hire—which is a fairly neutral way of defining "sophists"—happen to have converged on Athens, giving lectures and recruiting students: Prodicus is there from the nearby island of Ceos and Hippias from Elis in the Peloponnesus; Protagoras himself is from Abdera in Thrace. If Plato were writing the *Protagoras* for our time, he would set it around 1970: young Hippocrates would be thinking about graduate study in literature, and would drag Socrates out of bed to get into the School of Criticism & Theory at Irvine, where Derrida, de Man and Jameson all happened to be passing through. We readers would be allowed to eavesdrop on the discussion, in which the savants would explain why our young man should study with them and along the way would illustrate their talents by analyzing a tough poem of—say—Mallarmé.

Plato's long, shifting discussion ultimately fails to answer the philosophic questions it raises—whether virtue is teachable and whether it is a form knowledge. But near its middle *Protagoras* affords us an extended example, really the only thing of its kind in ancient Greek literature, of how poetry was analyzed by the most sophisticated critics of the classical age. This precious evidence has naturally been much studied,⁴ but it has proved very hard to judge what point Plato is making here. On the one hand, it seems serious: one can recognize in the exegeses many of the assumptions and methods that still guide contemporary academic reading, as Glenn Most has shown; on the other, there are some wild, explicitly unserious claims blended in, and it is not clear if we are to regard even Socrates' contribution as any better than the rest. The episode ends by declaring itself a waste of time: Socrates says it is not worth discussing poetry when the poets are not at hand to be questioned about what they meant. Criticism, apparently, ought to aim at eliciting the poet's intent in composing the poem, and in the absence of direct testimony on this topic criticism of poetry becomes a form of social-climbing: "Conversing (*dialegesthai*) about poetry seems to me like the dinner parties of low and vulgar people who borrow the voices of poets because they are too ill-educated to converse properly with one another."⁵ True gentlemen "have no need to employ the extraneous voices of poets, whom it is not possible to interrogate about what they say. When people bring them up, some say that the poet means this and others that, and the

⁴ A bibliography can be assembled from Fabio M. Giuiliano, "Esegesi letteraria in Platone: La discussione sul carme Simonideo nel Protagora," *Studi Classici e Orientali* 41 (1991), pp. 105-190 and Grace M. Ledbetter, *Poetics before Plato: Interpretation and Authority in Early Greek Theories of Poetry* (Princeton, 2003) pp. 99-117. A monograph has been devoted to the topic: Marian Demos, *Lyric Quotation in Plato* (Lanham, MD, 1999), but it is of little use; see the review by Velvet Yates in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2000/2000-06-16.html>).

⁵ 347C: καὶ γὰρ δὲ κεί μιν τὸ περὶ ποιήσεως διαλέγεσθαι ὁμολογῶν ἵνα τῶν συμποσίων τῶν φαύλων καὶ ἀγροαίων ἀνθρώπων. καὶ γὰρ τῶν ποιητῶν, διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι ἀλλήλους δι' ἑαυτῶν συνεῖναι ἐν τῷ πότῳ μηδὲ διὰ τῆς ἑαυτῶν φωνῆς καὶ τῶν λόγων τῶν ἑαυτῶν ὑπὸ ἀπαιδευσίας

point in dispute can never be decided."⁶ Socrates recommends that the company decline this common sort of entertainment and put one another to the proof in conversation.⁷

The excessiveness of Socrates' assumption that only a poem's author knows its meaning and the fruitlessness of the discussion as a whole are among the reasons why the passage has been dismissed as a sort of joke.⁸ But this is unsatisfactory, for it leaves us without any sense of why Plato should have prolonged this episode to fill nearly a fifth of the work (338E-347C).⁹ Because Plato's point and purpose are so obscure, the *Protagoras* is usually neglected or at best given tangential mention in histories of Greek criticism (my own included).¹⁰ In my view a main reason for this is a larger problem with the scholarship on Plato's views of poetry, and this is that it is lopsidedly obsessed with metaphysics, putting too much stress on some arguments about *mimêsis* in *Republic* 10 to the exclusion of Plato's manifold other observations—some admiring, some neutral—about poetry and its uses. The usual view, which might be called the "ancient quarrel" approach, makes Plato's main concern in discussing poetry to deny its truth and value; any allusion to verse is analyzed as far as possible in terms of poetic ignorance, imitation, and deception so as to fit the passage into an extended and relentless war Plato is thought to have waged against poetry. But the Socrates of *Protagoras* is far from being an implacable enemy of poets: he is a well-educated, up-to-date and urbane consumer of

⁶ 347E-348A: ὕδεν δέ νται ἀλλ τρίας φωνῆς ὕδὲ π ιητῶν, ὕς ὕτε ἀνερέσθαι ἴον τ' ἐστὶν περὶ ὧν λέγ υσιν, ἐπαγόμεν ἰ τε αὐτ ὕς ἰ π λλ ἰ ἐν τ ἰς λόγ ις ἰ μὲν ταῦτά φασι τὸν π ιητὴν ν εἶν, ἰ δ' ἕτερα, περὶ πράγματ ς διαλεγόμεν ἰ ὁ ἀδυνατ ὕσι ἐξελέγξαι.

⁷ 347E: ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν τ ιαύτας συν υσίας ἐῶσιν χαίρειν, αὐτ ἰ δ' ἑαυτ ἰς σύνεισιον δι' ἑαυτῶν, ἐν τ ἰς ἑαυτῶν λόγ ις πείραν ἀλλήλων λαμβάν ντες καὶ διδόντες.

⁸ Ledbetter (n. 4 above) p. 100 n. 2 gives a long list of scholars. The few arguments for Plato's earnestness have not been plausible (cf. p. 101 n. 4); Ledbetter's attempt, the strongest, is discussed below.

⁹ Among those to address this question is Hans Baltussen, "Plato *Protagoras* 340–48: commentary in the making?," *BICS* 47 (2004): 21–35, arguing that the passage, despite falling short of "sensible philology," represents Plato's thought on how to "deal...with poetry as a carrier of moral thought" (21).

¹⁰ E.g. the too brief remarks in A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton 2002) 154, 202.

poetry, with quotations from Homer handy for any occasion (309B, 315B and C, 340A); he is able to quote from memory an old and complex ode by a poet no longer in fashion, and he can expound what he affirms is its subtle artistry (344A-B). In this dialogue at least, Socrates' attitude to poetic authority is not anxious mistrust: he is willing to entertain what poets have to say, the more so if they are reputed wise, but he reserves judgment until he can examine if what they mean to say is useful and likely to be true.¹¹ If so, he is perfectly willing to cite the poem as a piece of wisdom, as he does at 344E.¹²

The "ancient quarrel" approach to Plato is obviously not groundless, for whether poets, like any of Socrates' interlocutors, know what they are talking about is a question that Plato need to ask whenever their testimony comes up. But to frame the issue whenever it comes up in metaphysical terms about poetry's imitative nature distorts Plato by exaggerating and overdeveloping one aspect of his reflections, making him a far more implacable foe of poetry than his texts support. Plato's views on poetry are far richer than he is usually given credit for.¹³ The 'Plato on poetry' I see in *Protagoras* is a cultural anthropologist: a detached and keen-eyed observer of how his elite fellow citizens make use of poetry, what benefits they derive from it, and what claims they make for it. In *Protagoras* Plato focuses not on *mimesis* but on exegesis, and on the broader question of

¹¹ See R. Scodel, "Literary Interpretation in Plato's *Protagoras*," *Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1986): 25-37, pp. 34-35.

¹² See Theodora Hadjimichal, *Bacchylides and the Emergence of the Lyric Canon* (PhD Diss., ULC, 2011) Ch. 3 n. 18: "Plato cites poets as authorities on ethical matters, e.g. *R.1.331a3*, *331d5*, *334a-b*; *Men.95c-96a*; *Prt.339a-341e*, *343d-347a*; *Phd.94d7-95a2*, *111e6-112a5*." Cf. 142: "Lyric poets whose names accompany cited extracts from their poems (category ii) are Ibycus (*Phdr.242c8*), Stesichorus (*Phdr.243a5*), Simonides (*Prt.339a6-347a5*), and Pindar (*R.365b2*; *Grg.484b1-2*; *Men.81b1*)." For paraphrases or allusions to specific passages, she cites (p. 143): Ibycus (*Prm.136e9-137a4*), Archilochus (*R.365c3-6*), Stesichorus (*R.586b7-c5*), and Pindar (*Lg.690b7-c3*, *714e6-715a2*; *Tht.173e-174a2*; *Phdr.227b9-11*; *Euthd.304b3-4*; *Men.76d3*; *R.408b7-c1*).

¹³ An exception is Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). I have provided a synopsis in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2003/2003-07-27.html>).

whether and how poems can help us in ethical exploration. As such, it offers a Platonic reflection of the uses of literary criticism.

My discussion will start with the first half of the dialogue (309A-338E), the lead-in to the critical scene in question. Putting the literary conversation in context prepares us to that expert criticism, what Protagoras calls "being formidable about verse," was a particular and well-defined mode of discourse, one of several that the sophist has mastered. Then I will turn to Socrates' performance as literary critic, arguing that it is not wholly parodic: the first part (339B-342A) is less than serious, but when Socrates turns to show Protagoras "how I stand as far as your 'verses' go," we get a good-humored but serious demonstration of how Plato thinks we have to grapple with poetic and other provocative texts from the past in our ethical reflections. In support of taking this episode seriously, I add an analysis of the passage by Glenn Most, who argues that at the root Socrates' premises are the same as ours. Plato's position will lead me to give Most's interpretation another turn, to appreciate that *Protagoras* speaks about the necessity for as well as the limits of criticism.

Setting: time and place

The opening of *Protagoras* sets the scene some 40 or 50 years in the past, but at the same time mocks any idea that we might somehow overcome this distance by measuring it precisely. In its opening words an unnamed speaker catches sight of Socrates and surmises that he has been on the hunt for Alcibiades "the fair."¹⁴ When he adds parenthetically that he has noticed that the youth's beard is coming in, readers have

¹⁴ The epithet at 309A is a place-marker in the text, picked up by Socrates at 316A. See below.

a hint which (together with a few other indications and an anachronism) has led many to set the dramatic date around 432, when the historical Alcibiades (c. 450-404) would have been in his late teens and Socrates approaching 40.¹⁵ Now 432 is five years before Plato was born, and is I think one indication that this novella is not to be taken as eye-witness history. In addition, tying the text to the moment when Alcibiades lost his youthful bloom fixes the "original" event as an evanescent, unrecapturable moment in a glorious and vanished past. At the same time, however, the opening scenario points up the work's perennial relevance, for *Protagoras* is very much concerned with, I would maintain primarily addressed to, young men on the verge of manhood and independence. Such is Hippocrates, who mirrors the addressees of the text in many respects, including his mediated relation to the "real" Protagoras: Hippocrates mentions that he knows the sophist because of his tremendous reputation for wisdom and eloquence, but he has never had the chance to hear him speak or see him in person, having been too young when Protagoras was last in Athens.¹⁶

Socrates turns out to have seen Alcibiades this very day, and to have been supported by him in an argument. With this marker placed in the text—we will want to hear just what Alcibiades did, and we will at 336B—Socrates is induced to sit down and tell the whole story. He lays out the basic issues of the work by recounting a preliminary conversation he and Hippocrates had while waiting for a decent hour to call. The first question is what is a sophistic education for? Is it vocational training or a liberal art, like

¹⁵ See D. Nails' recent discussion in *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis, 2002) 309-310. We know it must be before 429 because Pericles' son are present, and died of the plague in that year. On the other hand, at 327D there is a reference to "last year's" production of "The Wild Men" (*Agrioi*) by Pherecrates, an anachronism, as Athenaeus notes (218D = Pherecrates *test.* i *PCG*) placing it in 420.

¹⁶ 310E: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἄμα μὲν καὶ νεώτερός εἰμι, ἄμα δὲ ὑδὲ ἐώρακα Πρωταγόραν πώπ τε ὑδ' ἀκήκ α ὑδέν· ἔτι γὰρ παῖς ἦ ὅτε τὸ πρότερον ἐπεδήμησε. . . . πάντες τὸν ἄνδρα ἐπαινῶσιν καὶ φασὶν σφώτατ' εἶναι λέγειν. Cf. Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles* in Xenophon

music or "literature" (*grammatikê*, 312B)? Well, what exactly does Protagoras know? He is widely termed a "sophist" (311E), a controversial title-insult he willingly accepts. But the well born Athenian citizen Hippocrates blushes at the suggestion that he aspires to become a sophist himself (312A). In trying to define the wise man's expertise Hippocrates ventures that Protagoras is expert in knowing how to make one "awe-inspiring" at speaking (*deinos legein*).¹⁷ Socrates accepts this as at least part of the truth, doubtless because he knows that *deinos* can mean "awful" as well as "awe-inspiring."¹⁸

A wonderful series of scenes (314C ff.) gets them inside Callicles' grand house where the sages are staying, and Plato marks the formal beginning of the encounter by having Socrates "break" the frame of his narrative and refer again to "fair" Alcibiades (316B). In reading from this point until the criticism scene begins at 338E, it is helpful to bracket the specific arguments raised and notice the variety of discursive modes that are on display. This part of *Protagoras* is a sustained experiment in the best way to conduct a discussion.¹⁹ The participants try out a number of modes of speech, explicitly debating "in what fashion are we to talk together."²⁰ The discussion shifts and halts and almost breaks down as ground-rules have to be set and then re-negotiated, with straw ballots taken and umpires nominated. The argument of *Protagoras* does not advance very far in this section, but its focus on modes of argumentation will help us see the literary discussion as yet another genre of discourse, a rule-bound language game whose purpose

¹⁷ 312D: ἡ ἐπιστάτην τ ὤ π ιῆσαι δεινὸν λέγειν; Cf. *Ion* 531A where *deinos* describes the expertise of Ion, a professional performer and explainer of Homeric poetry.

¹⁸ We find out later (341A-B) that Socrates has learned from Prodicus that *deinos* should properly mean "bad": Πρόδικός με ὑπὸ τὴν ὑθετεί ἐκάστ τε, ὅταν ἐπαινῶν ἐγὼ ἢ σὲ ἢ ἄλλ οὐ τινὰ λέγω ὅτι Πρωταγόρας σ φὸς καὶ δεινός ἐστιν ἀνὴρ, ἐρωτᾷ εἰ ἕκ αἰσχύν μαι τάγαθὰ δεινὰ καλῶν. τὸ γὰρ δεινόν, φησὶν, κακόν ἐστιν.

¹⁹ For which the operative word is *dialegesthai*, suggesting the ideal form of conversation is dialectic.

²⁰ 336B: τίς ὁ τρόπος ἔσται τῶν διαλόγων. Cf. 329AB, 331C, 333C, 334D, 336A-D, 347C-348A, 360E-361E.

we will try to divine.

The importance of choosing the right mode of speech comes out as soon as the pilgrims meet Protagoras. Upon being introduced, Protagoras asks whether they wish to converse with him alone or in company.²¹ Socrates leaves the choice up to him, but lets him know that Hippocrates aims to study with him to become a man of account in the city.²² Protagoras thanks Socrates for being considerate:²³ a foreign professor recruiting the sons of Athenian citizens is in a delicate position and has to be sure not to be thought to be seducing young men. He then goes into a speech (316C-317C) justifying his profession with the argument that sophists, experts in improving men, have been around for a very long time; this is a paradoxical thesis, since "sophist" was a neologism coined to name the new forms of higher education that Protagoras and his like promoted in the post-Persian War cultural boom.²⁴ Protagoras contends that early wise men were really sophists but, because controversy attended the title, pretended to exercise other arts: Homer, Hesiod and Simonides pretended to be poets; Orpheus and Musaeus to communicate religious lore and oracles; among the acknowledged teachers of the present day, Herodicus, expert in gymnastics, and Agathocles the musician are closet sophists since they improve men. Protagoras only differs from them in admitting he is a sophist, a professional educator, for he has concluded that he will not deceive the wise by hiding his teaching under another name. By this brilliant, ironic and charming fiction, Protagoras paradoxically represents his modern teaching as venerable tradition, and simultaneously insinuates to potential pupils that sophists are only rightly appreciated by the wise.

²¹ 316B: Πότερ ν, ἔφη, μόνω β υλόμεν ι διαλεχθῆναι ἢ καὶ μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων;

²² ἐπιθυμεῖν δέ μ ι δ κεῖ ἐλλόγιμ ς γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει

²³ Ὁρθῶς, ἔφη, **πρ μηθῆ**, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὑπὲρ ἐμ ὤ.

²⁴ The semantics of the word are studied in A. Ford, "Sophistic," *Common Knowledge* 1.5 (1993) 33-47.

Being the open sort that he is, Protagoras proposes to hold their discussion before "any and everybody who is in the house"²⁵ (This democratic pose is deflated by Socrates' opining that what Protagoras really wanted was to show off before his rivals Prodicus and Hippias).²⁶ Accordingly a sort of conference is convened and all sit down to converse "in session."²⁷ In this quasi-public context, Protagoras begins, like other sophists, by taking questions, for he "delights in answering questions that are well put."²⁸ Socrates' questions reveal that they disagree as to whether human excellence (*aretê*, traditionally translated "virtue") can be taught. Socrates holds it cannot for two reasons: the way democratic Athens runs her deliberative assemblies implies that expertise in politics is not the province of any particular group of people; secondly, when noble parents have wastrel children one sees excellence cannot be taught. He thus politely prevails on the sophist to be so kind as to "demonstrate" or "display" (*epideiknumi*) his wisdom on this matter.²⁹ Now the *epideixis*, the elaborate, often mythical or paradoxical display speech, was the main show piece of many a sophist, and Protagoras is such a master of the form that he can offer Socrates a choice of modes: "I consent, but first: shall I give my display in the form of a story (*muthos*), as an old man speaks to younger men, or shall I go

²⁵ 317C: ὥστε π λύ μ ι ἡδιστόν ἐστιν, εἴ τι β ὕλεσθε, περὶ τ ὕτων ἀπάντων ἐναντί ν τῶν ἔνδ ν ὄντων τὸν λόγ ν π ιεῖσθαι. Note that "those within" who get to listen in on this speech are "those without," the readers, a typical instance of the ironies of this text.

²⁶ τῶ τε Πρ δίκῳ καὶ τῶ Ἱππία ἐνδείξασθαι καὶ καλλωπίσασθαι ὅτι ἐρασταὶ αὐτ ὤ ἀφιγμέν ι εἶμεν.

²⁷ 317D: συνέδρι ν κατασκευάσωμεν, ἵνα καθεζόμεν ι διαλέγησθε. The word συνέδρι ν, literally a "sitting together" (the source, via Aramaic, of the Jewish Sanhedrin) appears both of formal and informal meetings in 4th-century Greek.

²⁸ 318D: Σύ τε καλῶς ἐρωτᾶς, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, καὶ ἐγώ τ ἴς καλῶς ἐρωτῶσι χαίρω ἀπ κρινόμεν ς. Hippias also stood for questions from the crowd (000). Cf. Gorgias in *Gorg.* 448A: "I haven't had a new question put to me in many years."

²⁹ 320B: εἰ ὤν ἔχεις ἐναργέστερ ν ἡμῖν ἐπιδείξαι ὡς διδακτόν ἐστιν ἡ ἀρετή, μὴ φθ νήσης ἀλλ' ἐπίδειξ ν.

through the argument (*logos*) in detail?"³⁰ The company leave this up to Protagoras, and he chooses to tell a myth because he finds it more "agreeable" or "graceful."³¹

Protagoras' capriciousness is meant to suggest that he could do either, and he ends up doing both: his great myth of how Prometheus and Epimetheus distributed political wisdom to everyone equally (320D-323C) explains that Athens is right to run assemblies as she does, and so answers Socrates' first argument: this he affirms (323C-324D) constitutes a sufficient "demonstration" that virtue is teachable.³² Then with further signposting he turns "from myth to logos"³³ to explain why excellent people do not always raise excellent children. This *logos* is an inference from observed facts, for the lessons and punishments that are dispensed in schools and in the laws imply that children can learn to be good. The display comes to a close with Protagoras' explicit declaration that he has answered both of Socrates' doubts through both myth and logos.³⁴

The cumulative effect is literally stunning to Socrates who confesses that he is now persuaded that there may be some human way of contriving to become good.³⁵ Alas, there's a little rub,³⁶ and to pursue this Socrates begs to change the mode of discussion: he asks Protagoras not to make a long speech, as he's shown he can do so well, but to

³⁰ 320C: ὕφθ νήσω· ἀλλὰ πότερ ν ὑμῖν, ὡς πρεσβύτερ ς νεωτέρ ις, μῦθ ν λέγων ἐπιδείξω ἢ λόγῳ διεξελθών;

³¹ 320C: Δ κεί τ ἴνυ μ ι, ἔφη, **χαριέστερ ν** εἶναι μῦθ ν ὑμῖν λέγειν

³² 324C: ὅτι διδακτὸν καὶ παρασκευαστὸν ἤγ ὕνται ἀρετῆν, **ἀπ δέδεικται σ ι**, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἱκανῶς, ὡς γέ μ ι φαίνεται.

³³ 324D: τ ὕτ υ δὴ πέρι, ὦ Σώκρατες, **ὕκέτι μῦθόν σ ι ἐρῶ ἀλλὰ λόγ ν.**

³⁴ 328C: ἐγὼ **καὶ μῦθ ν καὶ λόγ ν** εἶρηκα, ὡς διδακτὸν ἀρετῆ καὶ Ἀθηναῖ ι ὕτως ἤγ ὕνται, καὶ ὅτι ὕδεν θαυμαστὸν τῶν ἀγαθῶν πατέρων φαύλ υς ὕεις γίγνεσθαι καὶ τῶν φαύλων ἀγαθ ὕς.

³⁵ 328E: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐν μὲν τῷ ἔμπρ σθεν χρόνῳ ἤγ ὕμην ὕκ εἶναι ἀνθρωπίνην ἐπιμέλειαν ἢ ἀγαθ ἰ ἰ ἀγαθ ἰ γίγν νται· νῦν δὲ πέπεισμαι.

³⁶ πλὴν σμικρόν τί μ ι ἐμπ δών.

engage in the sophistic trick of "brief-talk" (*brakhulogia*).³⁷ In the short-answer mode Socrates quickly leads Protagoras down the garden path. His gross equivocations (e.g. 'justice must itself be just,' 330C ff.) make Protagoras contradict himself, and Socrates presses his advantage by cutting down Protagoras' rhetorical options still further when asks him not to take refuge in answers qualified by "if" (331C-D). Protagoras' temper soon begin to fray (332A) and his continually increasing irritation (333B, cf. 333D1) erupts in an applause-winning short speech to the effect that all Socrates' terms are relative (333E).

Things threaten to fall apart: Socrates repeats his request that Protagoras practice brachylogy (334E)³⁸ since long-speaking strains his feeble comprehension; Protagoras, being an avowed expert in both styles, should accommodate him.³⁹ Protagoras, for his part, refuses to abandon long speeches (335A); he didn't get to be Greece's champion debater by letting others set the terms. Socrates declares he has an errand to go on (335C) for he wants a dialogical conversation and not "demagogic" long speeches.⁴⁰ As he is about to leave, the others intervene and broker an agreement to let the "conversation" (*dialegesthai*) go on.⁴¹ Here we reach another section-marker in the dialogue, nodding

³⁷ 329B: Πρωταγόρας δὲ ὅδε ἰκανὸς μὲν μακρῶν λόγων καὶ καλῶν εἰπεῖν, ὡς αὐτὰ δηλοῖ, ἰκανὸς δὲ καὶ ἐρωτηθεὶς ἀποκρίνασθαι κατὰ βραχὺ καὶ ἐρόμενος περιμεῖναι τε καὶ ἀποδέξασθαι τὴν ἀπόκρισιν, ἃ ὀλίγως ἐστὶ παρεσκευασμένα. Socrates begins his attempt to supplant sophistic discourse with dialectic by derogating long speeches: "If a man were to go and consult Pericles or any of our great public orators about these matters, he might perhaps hear as fine a discourse; but then when one has a question to ask of any of them, like books, they can neither answer nor ask; and if any one challenges the least particular of their speech, they go ringing on in a long harangue, like brazen pots, which when they are struck continue to sound unless some one puts his hand upon them" (329A).

³⁸ 335A: ἐμὴ δὲ διαλέξεσθαι, τῶν ἐτέρων χωρὶς τρόπων πρὸς με, **τῆ βραχυλ γία.**

³⁹ 335B-C: σὺ μὲν γάρ, ὡς λέγεται περὶ σοφῶν, φησὶ δὲ καὶ αὐτός, καὶ ἐν μακροῦν γία καὶ ἐν βραχυλ γία ἴσος τ' εἶσιν ὑσίας πεισθαι--σὺ φὸς γὰρ εἶ--ἐγὼ δὲ τὰ μακρὰ ταῦτα ἀδύνατος.

⁴⁰ 336B: τίς ὁ τρόπος ἐστὶ τῶν διαλόγων; χωρὶς γὰρ ἕγωγ' ὥμην εἶναι τὸ συνέιναι τε ἀλλήλους διαλεγεῖν μὲν ὑς καὶ τὸ **δημηγρεῖν.**

⁴¹ Prodicus wants it to be an ideal feast of words, 336B-C: ὕτως ἂν **καλλίστη** ἡμῖν ἢ συνῆσθαι γίγνεται... ἡμεῖς τ' αὖτε ἰσχυρότεροι μάλιστα ἂν ὕτως **εὐφραίνεσθαι** ἢ ἰμεσθαι--

back once more to the opening frame, since it is the intervention of Alcibiades (at 336B ff.) that helps keep things going. The compromise that is worked out is that Protagoras will ask first, and then take his turn answering. It is in taking up the role of questioner that Protagoras introduces literary criticism. Once again we will be changing modes, with Protagoras setting questions.

Summing up this first half of the dialogue, we may call most of the modes of speech presented "sophistic" and recognize parallels in Plato's *Gorgias*. That work also pays a great deal of attention to how to conduct "the art of conversation" or dialogue (448D).⁴² *Gorgias* begins with the great sophist having just finished one of his display speeches (447A, B), topped off by a challenge to the audience to ask him any question whatever (447C). As in *Protagoras*, the sophist's modes of display are contrasted with the conversation (*dialegesthai*, 447A-B) that Socrates prefers to have. Gorgias' pupil Polus is ready to defend the art of rhetoric with a long speech on the origin and progress of the arts (448C, cf. 449B). Socrates interrupts this discourse, but it easily could have gone on along the lines of Protagoras' *muthos* on Prometheus and Epimetheus. Long-form disquisitions are rejected by Socrates who opposes them as "rhetoric" to "conversing" (*dialegesthai*, 448D). He entreats Gorgias to practice brachylogy (449B) and, as in *Protagoras*, flatters him as expert in speeches.⁴³ Finally, one may also think of sensitivity to social propriety displayed in *Protagoras* when Socrates deplores those occasions in which two people argue before bystanders but, feeling threatened by

εὐφραίνεσθαι μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν **μανθάν ντά** τικαὶ φρ νήσεως μεταλαμβάν ντα αὐτῇ τῇ διαν ἰα, ἡδεσθαι δὲ ἐσθί ντά τι ἢ ἄλλ ἡδὺ πάσχ ντα αὐτῷ τῷ σώματι.

⁴² E.g. 449B-C, 453B-C, 454C, 457C-458C, 461C-462A, 465E-466A, 471E-472D, 474A-B, 475E, 486D-487B, 505E-506A, 509A.

⁴³ 457C: Οἶμαι, ὦ Γ ργία, καὶ σὲ ἔμπειρ ν εἶναι π λλῶν λόγων καὶ καθεωρακέναι ἐν αὐτ ἰς τὸ τ ἰόνδε. Cf. *Prot.* 335A: ὦ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, ἐγὼ π λλ ἰς ἡδη εἰς ἀγῶνα λόγων ἀφικόμεν ἀνθρώπ ἰς

requests for clarification, fall into abusing each other so that the audience regrets attending the session (457C-D). Socrates' dialectic is, if nothing else, a civilized way to behave.⁴⁴

Socrates peri epôn deinos (342D)

So it is that when the reins are given him Protagoras modulates the discussion into poetic interpretation. He makes clear that he considers this to be a continuation of the previous conversation about virtue but now "transferred onto poetry."⁴⁵ "The most important part of education," he asserts, "is being clever concerning verse (*peri epôn deinos*); that is, to understand what is said by the poets, both well and ill, to be able to tell the difference and to give an account when challenged" (339A).⁴⁶ Unlike his previous sophistic performances, this game seems specifically Protagorean, and it is based on the special knowledge he sloganized as "correct verbal expression" or *orthoepia*.⁴⁷ It is a game played by nominating a phrase of poetry as good or bad and then being able to defend that judgment when challenged.

Protagoras illustrates by quoting the beginning of a song by Simonides: "Now for a man to become good truly is hard, /four-square in hands, and feet and mind, faultlessly

⁴⁴ Eliot would have sympathized; cf. "Function of Criticism" (1933) p. 13-14: "we perceive that criticism, far from being a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity, from which impostors can readily be ejected, is no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators, who have not even arrived at the articulation of their differences."

⁴⁵ 339A: περί τ ὦ αὐτ ὦ μὲν περί περ ἐγὼ τε καὶ σὺ νῦν διαλεγόμεθα, περί ἀρετῆς, **μετενηνεγμέν ν δ' εἰς π ἴησιν.**

⁴⁶ Ἦγ ὕμαι, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐγὼ ἀνδ ἰ παιδείας μέγιστ ν μέρ ς εἶναι **περὶ ἐπῶν δεινὸν** εἶναι· ἔστιν δὲ τ ὕτ τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν π ἴητων λεγόμενα ἴον τ' εἶναι συνιέναι ἅ τε ὀρθῶς πεπ ἴηται καὶ ἅ μή, καὶ ἐπίστασθαι διελεῖν τε καὶ ἐρωτῶμεν ν λόγ ν δ ὕναι.

⁴⁷ Cf. 339D9: ὕκ **ὀρθῶς** λέγει. On *orthoepia* see Pfeiffer 000.

fashioned."⁴⁸ Socrates knows the song, indeed he "happens" to have made a study of it,⁴⁹ and readily agrees with Protagoras that it is "well made and correct."⁵⁰ Protagoras then goes on to show that Simonides contradicts himself "as the song goes along"

(πρ ἴοντ ς τ ὕ ἄσματ ς, 339C): "Nor does that saying of Pittacus ring true to me, / though wise was the one who said it: 'to be noble is hard.'"⁵¹ Simonides cannot both lay it down as a maxim⁵² in his own person that it is hard to be good (πρῶτ ν αὐτὸς ὑπέθετ χαλεπὸν εἶναι ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι) and "a little while later" (339D) deny Pittacus' maxim that it is hard to be noble or good (χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι).

Protagoras finishes this display of "correct verbal-expression" with a flourish, drawing applause from the crowd. But it is hard to see what point he has scored in the debate about virtue, apart from pulling a rug from under Socrates. Perhaps it is simply to have shown that he is very clever, cleverer than Socrates and even than Simonides, whom he had enrolled along with Homer and Hesiod among his predecessors as teachers of excellence (316D).

To buy time Socrates turns to Prodicus, declaring that sophist's knowledge of

⁴⁸ Simonides 542.1-2 *PMG*: ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν, / χερσίν τε καὶ π σὶ καὶ νόφ τετράγων ν, ἄνευ ψόγ υ τετυγμέν ν.

⁴⁹ ἐπίσταμαί τε γάρ, καὶ πάνυ μ ι **τυγχάνει** μεμεληκὸς τ ὕ ἄσματ ς. In making Socrates' knowledge of the song a matter of chance Plato indicates that it was not a widely cited "chestnut" that 'everyone' could be expected to know (*pace* Ledbetter's "well known," p. 99). On Simonides' fading reputation at this time, see Ford (2002) 000 with references.

⁵⁰ 339B: καλῶς σ ι δ κεί πεπ ιῆσθαι καὶ ὀρθῶς.

⁵¹ 542.12-13 *PMG*: ὕδέ μ ι ἐμμελέως τὸ Πιττάκει ν νέμεται, / καίτ ι σ φ ὕ παρὰ φωτὸς εἰρημέν ν· χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν / ἔμμεναι.

⁵² On genre, the choice of verb 339D (αὐτὸς ὑπέθετ) has a discursive coloration, showing Protagoras takes Simonides to be moralizing, in the vein of such works as the *Kheironos hupothêkai*. Cf. 340C-D: ἐν μὲν τ ἴς πρώτ ις αὐτὸς ὁ Σιμωνίδης **τὴν ἑαυτ ὕ γνώμην ἀπεφήνατ** , ὅτι ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν ἀληθεῖα γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν εἶη. Bergk III 385-6 on Sim. Fr. 5 took it as parainetic poem, intended to free Scopas from blame for some great crime he had done, though the ancients probably classed it under Epinician; Blass assigned it to the genre *skolion*; similarly Most, with great probability, sees it as a sympotic lyric. Aristotle refers to the poem at *Met.* 1.2. Ar. *Eq.* 405 shows that a Simonidean line "Drink, drink at the turn of events" (= Sim. 14 Bk) was sung as a skolion in the 420's, at least by the knightly class.

verbal distinctions to be an "ancient and divine" art, one that began with Simonides or yet earlier (341A). They propose to reconcile the statements by distinguishing between the verb "be," used by Pittacus, and Simonides' "become": Simonides is right, for to "become" good is hard; so too is Pittacus, for "being" good is not hard.⁵³ In this way they reconcile the two sentences and bring them into conformity with traditional wisdom.⁵⁴ Protagoras retorts that this position entails the unacceptable claim that virtue is easy to possess when all agree that it is the most difficult thing (340E). "Great would be the poet's ignorance" if this were his thought. Socrates and Prodicus accept this and turn to a different word, Pittacus' "hard" (*khalepon*). They suggest that in the Cean dialect *khalepon* meant "bad," and so Cean Simonides was shocked to hear (Lesbian) Pittacus saying "it is bad to be good." Protagoras is completely unimpressed and dismisses the attempt, noting that it is ruled out by Simonides' following verse which says "god alone can have the privilege" of being good. Socrates gives up quite willingly and admits they were only joking.

This teaming up with Prodicus, explicitly a stall on Socrates' part, brings to bear on the poem the most advanced scientific semantics—this is what Prodicus represents, a figure Plato never mocks. It yields one positive result, for Socrates retains the distinction between being and becoming in his subsequent explication. But the burst trial balloon on "hard" seems to show that linguistic science may not solve all interpretative problems. This limitation is not a problem within the rules of *peri epôn deinos* as Protagoras defined it, for linguistics allowed Socrates to "tease you and test whether you could come to the

⁵³ Wilamowitz rejected the distinction as impossible for Simonides, but see Ledbetter p. 103 n. 6 and 104 n. 7.

⁵⁴ As e.g. in Hesiod *Works* 289 ff.

aid of your interpretation."⁵⁵ But things get more serious when, in his own name and without Prodicus' help, Socrates offers "what it seems to me Simonides intended in this song, so you can test me on, as you put it, verse."⁵⁶

This more serious and substantial explication of the poem (342A-348A) begins with a fabulous hypothesis about the background of Pittacus' saying. In a genial tour de force, Socrates matches (342B) Protagoras' fantasy of Greece's hallowed sages as sophists in disguise. Socrates maintains that Pittacus' saying belongs to an ancient but underappreciated mode of philosophizing practiced in Sparta and Crete. Again, we have a paradoxical thesis since these Doric areas had a reputation for being backward, inward-looking and deeply anti-intellectual in Plato's day. On the contrary, Socrates insists, they were actually very devoted to philosophy but practiced it in secret to hide the fact that their military success really derived from their wisdom rather than arms. Sparta's secret philosophical education produced "Laconic" philosophers, simple-appearing men and women who could yet let fall the briefest but pithiest utterances.⁵⁷ Indeed, it was from the Spartans that the Seven Sages learned those "short and memorable pronouncements" that are now repeated as proverbs.⁵⁸ And the only reason that this hermetic tradition leaked out was that one time the sages decided to make a thanksgiving offering to Apollo by inscribing a number of "brachylogistic laconisms" on the temple of Delphi, such as

⁵⁵ 341D: ἀλλὰ παίζειν καὶ σὺ δὲ κεῖν ἄπ' πειρᾶσθαι εἰ ἴός τ' ἔση τῶ σαυτὺ λόγῳ βῆθεϊν.

⁵⁶ 341D-342A: ἀλλ' ἅ μιν δὲ κεῖ διὰν εἶσθαι Σιμωνίδης ἐν τῷ ὑπὸ τῶ ἄσματος, ἐθέλω σὺ εἰπεῖν, εἰ βέλτε λαβεῖν μιν πεῖραν ὅπως ἔχω, **δὲ σὺ λέγεις τὸ ὕπ, περὶ ἐπῶν**. ἐὰν δὲ βέλτε, σὺ ἄκ' ὕσμαι. The bold-faced phrase indicates that Protagoras' use of *epos* in such expressions as *περὶ ἐπῶν* δεινὸν εἶναι (and perhaps too in *orthoepia*) was an affectation. The word was current in Ionic for "words" or "language" generally, but in Attic had been largely ousted by *logos* and was confined to poetic or other specialized expressions. It is natural that the exquisite sensitiveness to language that Protagoras claimed should be expressed in uncommon diction.

⁵⁷ 343E: ἐνέβαλεν ῥῆμα ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον ὡς περ δεινὸς ἀκνιστής.

⁵⁸ 343A: ῥήματα βραχέα ἀξιμνημόνευτα ἐκάστω εἰρημένα.

“know thyself” and “nothing in excess” (343B). Socrates’ point in all this is that it reveals Simonides’ intention in his ode: if he could overturn a saying by the Sage Pittacus, “which had circulated privately among the Sages with great approbation,”⁵⁹ he himself would get a name for wisdom.

Putting Simonides in this perfectly incredible context brings a great gain for interpretation because it establishes a single aim for the poem, Simonides’ desire to convict Sage Pittacus of error.⁶⁰ It follows that *every element* of Simonides’ ode is to be read as controverting the saying “to be noble is hard.”⁶¹ This more wide-angled approach to the poem replaces Protagoras’ captious picking at contradictions among individual words and may lead to a unified reading, one that is grounded in a consideration of the total contents and overall structure of the poem. To be sure, Socrates’ subsequent exegesis is not without dubious claims, and it is worrying when he discovers Simonides upholding a number of tenets of Socratic philosophy. For a detailed discussion of these points I refer to Ledbetter’s excellent analysis.⁶² But the point and purpose of this fantasy about Doric philosophy emerge more clearly if we realize that these memorable nuggets or moral wisdom represent another discursive mode. The dense-packed philosophical adages are the latest in a series of verbal modes or genres to which *Protagoras* calls attention: there was group conversation, myth telling, logical exposition, brachylogy, long-form speech, and Protagoras’ particular game of *deinos peri epôn*. Nor have genres

⁵⁹ 343C: τ ὁ Πιττακ ὁ ἰδίᾳ περιεφέρετ τ ὕτ τὸ ῥῆμα ἐγκωμιαζόμεν ν ὑπὸ τῶν σ φῶν.

⁶⁰ It is with some justification then that many ancient Platonists sought to define each dialogue’s *skopos*, the single target they were aiming at.

⁶¹ 344B: ἀλλὰ τὸν τύπ ν αὐτ ὁ τὸν ὄλ ν διεξέλθωμεν καὶ τὴν β ὕλησιν, ὅτι παντὸς μᾶλλ ν ἔλεγχός ἐστιν τ ὁ Πιττακεὶ ν ῥήματ ς διὰ παντὸς τ ὁ ἔσματ ς.

⁶² Ledbetter (n. 4) pp. 104-108. We differ in that she thinks Socrates’ forced readings show that he is still parodying “sophistic interpretation” (a monolithic notion, a straw-man that I think is a fabrication); whereas I think he is doing as well as he can with such an intractable thing as a poem with no author present.

of discourse been exhausted: after Socrates performs, Hippias offers a speech (*logos*) on Simonides he is eager to give (347B), and of course there is the dialectical exchange that fills the second half of the work.

Among these discursive forms, Pittacus' maxim and the "Laconic" Delphic inscriptions symbolize in condensed form the problems posed to moderns by the verbalized wisdom of the past. Moral philosophy needs some form of literary criticism because, as the case of Simonides shows, those seeking to distinguish themselves are confronted by provocative pieces of language preserved from the past and making moral claims that demand explication. Now Simonides' ode is of course hardly laconic, but just as Pittacus' pronouncement posed a challenge for one ambitious to make a name for wisdom, Simonides' own exposition in reply becomes, for Socrates and company, another problematic speech from the past to be wrestled with. Those like Protagoras who claim to be able to control the poetic tradition, Plato suggests, will be confronted by provocative, not fully self-explanatory pieces of language, whether in the form of Simonides' lyric or the adages of sages, and will have to make the best sense of these memorable remnants they can. For those in this situation, which is our own of course with regard to *Protagoras*, Socrates makes a serious proposal for a practical criticism: confronted with such texts, we should try to find a sense in which they can be meaningful and true; if no such sense is available, we conclude that whoever their authors may be they were not wise. How soon we give up depends on our view of the source. When the saying comes from an oracle, of course, piety forecloses the option of saying the source is mistaken and we try a new meaning. An example of this way of dealing with enigmatic pronouncements is given in the *Apology* where Socrates went to great lengths to

understand the apparently absurd Delphic utterance, "No one is wiser than Socrates."⁶³ A tag-line from Simonides gets somewhat less respect in the *Republic*. Attempting to define justice, Polemarchus offers Simonides' phrase, "giving each man what is owed him" (331D = Sim. 642a *PMG*) as something the poet said "correctly" (*orthôs*). In what has been called a "transparent misinterpretation"⁶⁴ of the line, Socrates is able to subvert this definition, but in this case he drops the attempt to discover what Simonides truly meant; with cautious or ironic reverence for Simonides, "that wise and godlike man" (331E), he confesses "though you may know what he means I don't." All one can say is that if a poetic text suggests an immoral or impossible meaning then whoever said it is not wise (335E-336A).

So when Socrates takes essentially this approach in *Protagoras*, we should allow him to be quite serious. This appears even in one of his more questionable interpretations. When he comes to Simonides' "I praise and love all who do nothing wrong willingly,"⁶⁵ Socrates proposes to detach "unwillingly" from "do" and take it "in hyperbaton" with the more distant verb "praise." The resultant interpretation nicely brings Simonides into conformity with the Socratic principle that no one does wrong willingly: "All who do no wrong I willingly praise and love." Now one can describe this as "forced" and even "a blatant perversion of the plain sense of the poem."⁶⁶ But bending the grammar to eliminate an unacceptable meaning is a conscious choice, as Socrates admits:

Simonides was not so ill-educated as to say that he praised whoever willingly never did wrong, as if there were people who did wrong willingly. I am fairly sure of this—that none of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs or

⁶³ Cf Ledbetter (n. 4) 114-116.

⁶⁴ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher Kings* (Princeton, 1988) 8.

⁶⁵ 344C: πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω / ἐκῶν ὅστις ἔρδη / μηδὲν αἰσχρόν.

⁶⁶ Ledbetter, p. 107, quoting Taylor.

willingly does base and evil deeds; they are well aware that all who do base and evil things do them unwillingly.⁶⁷

Socrates is often content, in the *Republic* and elsewhere, to remain uncommitted about what poets mean and to turn away from exegesis to dialectic.⁶⁸ But in *Protagoras*, having been involved in this poem and its "wise" author's discussion of excellence, he decides to press for a sense in which Simonides' words can yield a meaning that is wise.⁶⁹ Why? I do not think it is merely to show off or to parody new-fangled criticism. Socrates is technically informed, for rescuing Simonides' "willingly" is made possible by a technique of fifth-century new criticism. (This is the first time the technical term *huperbaton* occurs in Greek.) Technique, like Prodician expertise in semantics, is to be welcome in clarifying and articulating a moral claim. Socrates' move here has been compared with the modern philosophical principle of "charity" in exposition,⁷⁰ but he is really being charitable to his own dearly held principles, which he cannot imagine went unknown to all earlier sages. In *Protagoras*, then, interpretation relies on specialized linguistic knowledge but is ultimately a choice governed by considerations of moral philosophy. A slightly strained construal of Simonides (and of the dicta of the "other wise men" Socrates alludes to) is preferable to assuming that truth has been so poorly served

⁶⁷ 345D-E (trans. Lamb): ὁ γὰρ ὑπὸς ἀπαιδευτῆς ἦν Σιμωνίδης, ὥστε τὸ ὑποφάναι ἐπαινεῖν, ὅς ἄν ἐκὼν μηδὲν κακὸν ποιῇ, ὡς ὄντων τινῶν ἰέκόντες κακὰ ποιῶσιν. ἐγὼ γὰρ σχεδὸν τι ἴμαι τὸ ὑποφάναι, ὅτι ὑδεῖς τῶν σφῶν ἀνδρῶν ἡγεῖται ὑδένα ἀνθρώπων ἐκόντα ἐξαμαρτάνειν ὑδὲ αἰσχρὰ τε καὶ κακὰ ἐκόντα ἐργάζεσθαι, ἀλλ' εὖ ἴσασι ὅτι πάντες ἰτὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ τὰ κακὰ ποιῶντες ἄκνυτες ποιῶσιν.

⁶⁸ Ledbetter's suggests (n. 5) that this is a "sophistic" idea, but Socrates espouses the same view in *Hippias Minor* 365C-D: Socrates turn a discussion away from explicating Homer, "let's dismiss Homer since it is impossible to ask him what he meant when he composed these verses." Cf. *Theaetetus* 152A with Ford "Protagoras' Head: Interpreting Philosophic Fragments in *Theaetetus*," *American Journal of Philology* 115 (1994) 206-7.

⁶⁹ When Socrates says that Simonides is above making ignorant mistakes, or that his poem is "exquisitely well made" (344A-B), he says in effect he is willing to work to find a sound meaning in the verse.

⁷⁰ N. Pappas, "Socrates' Charitable Treatment of Poetry," *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989) 248-61.

by traditional wisdom. However, in the absence of having Simonides at hand to submit to dialectic, Socrates can only offer his interpretation as something of which he is "fairly sure." The ineliminable uncertainty of any attempt to interpret such "authorless" moral pronouncements from the past is the reason Socrates ends the discussion by urging that they drop talking about poetry and declare their own views directly.

The discussion of Simonides in *Protagoras*, then, is not a pastiche meant to ridicule attempts to find wisdom in poetry, as the "ancient quarrel" perspective suggests. Nor is it an attack on technical or "sophistic" approaches to poetry, as if they presented a unified front: Protagoras' "cleverness about verse" differs from Prodicus' semantics, and both would doubtless differ from Hippias if the latter were given permission to perform. If we drop the demand that this dialogue add another brick to that imaginary edifice called "the Platonic Attack of Poetry," the passage gives us insight into how Plato thought poetic and other texts from the past might be useful in the search for moral knowledge. His Socrates is open to the possibility that old pieces of language may contain valuable insights, and he is willing to borrow from the most up-to-date criticism in an effort to determine their meaning. But, as his myth of the old laconic style of philosophizing is meant to show, when certain speech acts leave their authors and circulate beyond their original, enclosed circles of performance, they become puzzles, needing reapplication but subject to attack, misinterpretation and misappropriation. The problem is temporal and existential rather than merely technical, for no amount of technique or philosophical charity can extract certain knowledge from these orphaned words. If Plato does not think that the latest literary techniques produce sure gains in the quest for human excellence, *Protagoras* goes out of its way to show that, in such a quest,

criticism not only has certain inevitable limits, but also that certain texts, nevertheless, make criticism necessary, make it necessary for us to adopt the best form of criticism we can to deal with them.

Coda: Socrates' principles of criticism and ours

My claim that Socrates is doing the best he can in *Protagoras*, indeed that he is doing the best that Plato thought anyone could, is supported by an analysis by Glenn Most that stands out among discussions of this text for its sustained attention to literary theoretical issues.⁷¹ Most's "Simonides' Ode to Scopas in Contexts" argues that all the critical problems on display in *Protagoras* are essentially matters of contextualization. Indeed, interpretation is, broadly speaking, nothing more than contextualization (132), and the differences between critical schools often amount to whether one prefers internal contextualizations (e.g. Derridean deconstruction) to external ones (e.g. Foucauldian genealogy).

On this view, Plato's excursus on Simonides rightly problematizes the role of contexts (134). The initial contradiction is imputed to Simonides by bringing together two uncontextualized lines, and Socrates' attempts to heal the poem involve projecting either internal contexts (e.g. what the poet goes on to say "as the poem goes on") or external (e.g. what the words might have meant in the poet's native dialect; what the poet was trying to gain from making the poem). Socrates' extended lecture on Doric philosophy, however unserious it may be, is an attempt to supply at least *the kind of* external context that would help decide Simonides' meaning. To be sure, Plato dismisses

⁷¹ Glenn W. Most, "Simonides' Ode to Scopas in Contexts," in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*, ed. I. F. de Jong and J. P. Sullivan (Leiden 1994), pp. 127-52.

the result, but Most well observes that Plato does not object to Socrates' interpretation because it has mistakes (which in principle might be remediable), but simply because it is an interpretation. And Plato has good reason to be suspicious of poetic interpretation for it is "ineluctably speculative" (132): external contexts are by definition hypothetical, and internal contexts are, as part of the poem to be explicated, not sufficiently independent or stable to ground the meaning of another part of the text.

Platonic philosophy, then, is suspicious of hermeneutics, but this does not prevent Plato from equipping his brilliant speakers with a firm grasp of its principles (133). To show how much we and Socrates agree about how to interpret literature Most articulates, with characteristic incisiveness and clarity, "the methodological assumptions that structure the discourse of philology." (He is speaking of classical philology in this essay, but his observations apply to interpretation of a wide range of disciplines.) Most enunciates three principles that tend to "guide interpretation and at least in appearance (if not in reality) limit its risks" (133):

1. ***economy of consumption***: we prefer the interpretation that "makes thriftier use of the material at hand" and leaves the smallest part unexplained.
2. ***economy of expense***: we prefer a minimum of ad hoc hypotheses (hypotheses for which the only evidence is the interpretation they are adduced to support).
3. ***economy of scope***: we prefer the interpretation that explains the most, that "can be applied to the wider range of texts or problems." This is the one that does not produce a series of anomalies in the history of literature.

Beside these principles, there are two canons of evidence:

1. **parallelism**: a hypothesis' plausibility is increased by adducing parallels (linguistic and other) to problematic elements in the text. Buttressing an interpretation with parallels is especially important when studying cultures that are dead or otherwise difficult of access.
2. **centripetality**: the explanatory power of parallels increases the closer it gets to the text itself. Short of exact iteration, parallels are ranked, with parallels in works by the same author and in the same genre ranked above, e.g., parallels from a different culture or in a different art form.

It is worth repeating that Most tends these merely as the disciplinary rules of philology, not as *the* method that produces certain interpretation (e.g. 134). In these terms, I find his analysis acute, both as a description of how philology interprets old texts (my own exposition of Plato accords with these principles) and as a general account of how we discourse as professionals and how we evaluate the discourse of our colleagues. Most's observations raise a further question, however, about what conclusions to draw.

For Most, the discussion of Simonides' poetry in *Protagoras* confirms the importance of contexts in interpreting texts on a double level (134). In the first place, the whole discussion proceeds by finding more or less adequate contexts in which to construe Simonides' words. But in addition, the history of its (mis)interpretations in the 19th- and 20th-centuries reveals, unexpectedly, that contextualization can proceed independently of the text. The earlier scholars came up with quite plausible interpretations of the poem

even though they had a comparatively inferior text. Twentieth-century philology did a better job of extracting Simonides' exact words from Plato, but implausibly tried to read the song in the context of a fanciful evolution in moral consciousness.⁷² This history of philological blindness leads Most to the paradoxical conclusion that "Just as the right text does not entail a plausible interpretation, so too a faulty text need not preclude one. Sometimes the text may be less important than the contexts against which it is set" (147).

My reading of *Protagoras* suggests that we may give another twist to Most's deconstructive thesis: contexts may be at times more important than texts in interpretation, but the best context will tend to resemble the original text very closely. If interpretation is a search for the most plausible context in which to construe a puzzling phrase, the methodical evaluation of possible contexts drives the critic ever more closely back to the very words she had supposedly departed from when she went out in search of contexts. To use Most's categories: *Parallels* have more force the more they resemble the words they are meant to explain, and *centripetality* make us prefer parallels that recall the poet's exact phrasing. Economy of *expense* urges interpretations to add the fewest extraneous words possible to the text that is being interpreted, and economy of *consumption* makes the optimal reading of a text tend toward recalling all its words. Finally, economy of *scope* situates the target text within a series of larger contexts, such as the author's corpus and the literary tradition, in the middle of which it sits like a sun in a solar system: the contexts—other texts—that are adduced orbit around the original, reflecting it ever more faintly the further away they are.

⁷² Most persuasively argues that the poem is about poetic *praise*, not the nature of excellence; it concerns what is "praiseworthy" more than what is virtuous.

When we interpret in the methodical way Most recommends (without, to be sure, promising that it infallibly leads to truth), the function of criticism appears to be less to give the most objective and well-founded account possible of a poem than to serve as a mnemonic for it: the supporting context or "evidence" is a picture or story we make up to hold all the parts of the original in an intelligible relation; it motivates their presence and determines their placement. The demand that a good interpretation recall the poem may help us understand why literary critics might adopt such principles in the first place. Most's use of the economic metaphor suggests that we thereby get a maximum of poetic meaning for a minimum expenditure of effort (e.g. 134). But I think it remains unclear why should we be economical in this sphere. Why not be a big spender in poetry? Why not be profligate and let interpretation spiral outside the narrow confines of centripetal criticism?

One possible reason for adopting the principle of economy is that it is the best way we have to bring the interpretation of poetry closer to the prestige enjoyed by the sciences: constantly reverting to the target poem is like going back to the data set and seeing if it supports a finding. This would be in line with what I consider to be the broadest and deepest ambition of criticism since the 19th century, to put the human sciences on a par with the natural sciences. There are many reasons that we may want to think of criticism as a branch of science, a discipline that produces a sort of knowledge appropriate to its peculiar objects. My reading of *Protagoras* suggests another benefit of methodical hermeneutics: one of the functions of criticism is to respond to something uncanny about these tenacious little texts, something that makes them memorable and keeps them flashing into view. Plato shows us criticism as such a practice in which

Most's principles and canons combine to make the "best" interpretation that which most closely calls back the details of the text, and calls back most of the details.

Thus Plato may be telling us to regard criticism rather as a social activity, an unending practice of pedagogy and literary culture. So defined, criticism aims not at truthful interpretation but at regulating the discussion of poetry, and regulating it in such a way that it reproduces the poems it must always fail to fully comprehend. An interpretation in theory provides us with a clearer and more exact account of a poem, but functionally it is a metonymy for the work: we evaluate interpretations only by recalling those words whose unintelligibility caused us to move beyond them in the first place. The more methodical the interpretation, the more the target poem will be called back to view.

Now, I do not wish to conclude with the naïve and fruitless battle cry, "Back to the Texts!" It has been hard to accept Arnold's definition of the task of the critic as "to see the object as it really is" ever since Wilde called on "The Critic as Artist" to "see the object as in itself it really is not." Nor would I issue a call *Against Interpretation*, to replace sterile theorizing with some more rewarding experience of the text. (I confess, however, that, after a heavy dose of theory-reading I feel sympathetic with Sontag's declaration: "Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all."⁷³) What I offer is the suggestion that we, also at the end of a great age of criticism, may find it useful to bear in mind that one function criticism always seems to be serving is to be a way of recalling, repeating, and

⁷³ "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and by analogy, our own experience—more rather than less, real to us." Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1964).

preserving a poet's words.⁷⁴ Theorized and methodized, criticism can serve as a sort of re-performance of the work, a reprise of the song in a condensed form that those equipped with critical tools can unpack. Permeating a discipline, critical language serve as a mnemonic of even a vast original, whether in global interpretations of individual critics or piecemeal among a collectivity of specialists. The point is not in either case that any work be recollected in its entirety or finally understood, for there is an advantage in interpretation's remaining only a metonymy, in not being the text itself. It allows the work to enter certain contexts (such as journals, classrooms, conversations) where it will be not simply a reminder of the text but the fullest possible performance of that text in that context. Criticism is the reperformance of art.

Plato's *Protagoras*, then, is not dedicated to bashing poets or parodying literary intellectuals; it models how wise men might make meaning out of pieces of language that have survived to them. The one thing interpretation infallibly achieves is to hold such texts together and re-circulate them in company. *Protagoras* also proves, indirectly, that criticism can in itself preserve a poem that would otherwise be forgotten. Simonides text, like his good man, aspired to solid endurance, to be "four-squared" like a marble statue.⁷⁵ But it was Plato who made Simonides' poem last, delivering most of it, along with his own *Protagoras*, to us. I find an un-parodic reading of *Protagoras* more useful in thinking about the function of criticism and one that gives us a better sense of Plato's

⁷⁴ This is literally true of Simonides' *Ode to Scopas*: for we would not have a word of that poem if Socrates had not chosen to comment on it: our text of Plato is the sole vehicle by which that song survived to later times.

⁷⁵ On the Pythagorean overtones on divinity of being "fashioned four-square," see the remarks of Svenbro (1984) 135: "Like Pindar, Simonides considered poetry superior to marble; the perfection of the four-square man resides thus, rather than in his marmoreal virtue, in the perennality suggested, but not realized, in sculpture. Only in the atemporal dimension of poetry does man join eternal perfection."

broad engagement with poetry. Interpreting poems is the way we hold them together and hold on to them.