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PERFORMANCE, TEXT, AND THE HISTORY OF CRITICISM

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I argue that the study of ancient criticism is unduly narrow unless it combines an awareness of the materiality of culture—of the forms in which literary texts were produced, circulated, stored up, and accessed—with an appreciation for how strongly performance traditions could shape the reception and valuation of such texts. To illustrate, I analyze the 25th chapter of Aristotle’s *Poetics* to show that the theory behind “Problems and Solutions” was less significant culturally than the many-formed game of adducing and critiquing poets in ethical debate. Also included is a brief overview of recent work—since Vol. 1 of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* edited by George Kennedy in 1989—that fruitfully confronts the idea of the work of art as text with the reality of the work of art as performance.

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[*Forthcoming in*: THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF HELLENIC STUDIES, George Boys-Stones, Barbara Graziosi, and Phiroze Vasunia eds., Oxford University Press]

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As an academic subject ancient literary criticism can be traced back to 1846 and the first edition of Émile Egger's *Essai sur l'histoire de la critique chez les Grecs*. Egger named no precursors, but the topic cannot in any case be very much older since "literary criticism" is an essentially eighteenth-century concept: "literature" is not an ancient way of classing art but an innovation, connected with the eighteenth-century idea of "fine arts"; and while the ancients did recognize "expert judging" (*kritikê*), they did not, with rare exceptions, think that poetry was to be "judged" any differently from any other form of speech, its metrical form being superficial adornment.¹ Criticism was not literary, then, in the ancient world, and Egger justified his topic for its practical utility: his ample and surprisingly imaginative survey was intended to provide the context for understanding Aristotle's *Poetics*, itself recommended as the best general introduction to the study of Greek literature. Egger is the main source for ancient criticism in the first of Saintsbury's three-volume on the *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, which he compiled to prepare himself "to undertake the duty of a critic" (Saintsbury 1908: v). Since Saintsbury, work in the field has moved away from the implication that the ancients understood their literature "better" in some way than moderns can; these days,

¹ On the pivotal, and much-studied eighteenth century, see volume 4 of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, eds., especially the contributions of Douglas Lane Patey and Glenn W Most.

the glaring inadequacy of ancient criticism to its objects is more likely to be stressed and moderns have come to realize that we cannot escape doing “modern” criticism, whatever parts of the ancient inheritance we adopt (Feeney 1995). The scholarly trend has, accordingly, been away from “judicial” criticism and toward treating Greco-Roman criticism as a topic in the history of ideas, as in Grube’s trenchant 1965 survey. But to reduce the subject to intellectual history is to miss understanding the many ways in which “the critical engagement with language production and consumption functions in the ancient world,” a critique Simon Goldhill leveled against the 1989 *Classical Criticism*, edited by George Kennedy as the first volume of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticisms* (Goldhill 1999: 84). This work, the standard overview, appeared at the end of two decades in which modern and postmodern theory so dominated the academy that it is hardly surprising if at times it gives the impression that the most interesting thing the ancients did with their literature was to concoct theories about it.² But Kennedy’s richly informed and wide-ranging collection also suggests another reason for studying ancient criticism: not as the source of timeless literary standards or as a narrowly circumscribed philosophical problem, but as a central part of Greco-Roman literary culture, one offering unique insight into the many vital roles that verbal art played in classical civilization.

More recent studies of ancient criticism have gone in the direction of social history,

² A notable exception is Nagy’s 77-page anthropological and linguistic account of the evolution from archaic to classical criticism. In Nagy’s bird’s-eye view (epitomizing his 1990 book), criticism evolves, like language itself, on a supra-individual level. Arresting prospects arise—such as the thesis that poetic traditions come first and only later generate fictional prototypes or “authors” as they become progressively fixed—suggesting language is man’s master. A complementary approach is offered in Ford (2002), studying how individual critics used the critical vocabularies available to them and reshaped them in handing them on to us.

considering not just ancient theories but also the practices and institutions that surrounded the creation, evaluation and preservation of ancient literature.

The history of criticism now is thus most fruitfully pursued by sifting ancient writings about writing for more than their theories of poetry. This is not simply because histories of ideas tend to leave out so much (as any discipline must), but because what they leave out can very often help in assessing their “ideas” properly. An example is afforded by one of the most intelligent of the mid-century surveys, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* by W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks. These great New Critics begin their story by zeroing in on the word *prepon* in Plato’s *Ion*. This curious short work of uncertain date and genre has the honor to lead off the history of criticism because it contains the first clear articulation of the idea of “the appropriate,” some notion of specially literary propriety being a *sine qua non* for any concept of literature. All this is quite true so far as *prepon* is concerned, and Wimsatt and Brooks are right to point out that in one form or another an idea of decorum is the cornerstone of all classical aesthetics. Yet even as a “short history” this leaves out rather a lot (as indeed the New Critical approach to poems as autotelic universes left out rather a lot about them). A more widely focused reading would appreciate that Plato’s *Ion* is much more than a record of concepts (as all Plato’s works are); in his artful, ironic way, he provides a priceless sketch of an entire world of practices by which literary concepts were sustained. In estimating the force and importance of the interlocutors’ ideas of epic propriety, for example, it can hardly be irrelevant that, as Plato attests, the throngs of professional reciters of Homeric poetry who converged on Athens at festival time might use the same word for their resplendent costumes (*kosmos*) and for the “glorification” (*kosmeō*) they heaped on the

poet in the lectures on Homeric excellence with which they supplemented their recitations.

In such a vein, much suggestive work since Kennedy follows recent literary study away from thinking of texts as autonomous objects and places them in a nest of social contexts that decisively shaped their meaning (pioneering studies by Rösler 1980; Gentili 1984); it also profits from cultural studies and its interest in how texts interact with non-verbal symbolic systems. Such perspectives can, for example, richly extend the excellent musicological history of Barker (1984-1989) by considering how performative modes such as kitharody or aulody were in themselves imbued with cultural significance (P. Murray & Wilson 2004; Power 2006); other practices that impinged powerfully, if indirectly, on poetic production have been given renewed attention, such as the Athenian *chorêgeia* (Wilson 2000) or the management of the dramatic stage (Csapo and Slater 1995). Standard topics such as the role of literature in pedagogy have been revisited (Too, ed., 2001; Cribiore 2001), and the importance of reception, even in very early periods, can no longer be ignored (Graziosi 2002). The rhetorical tradition (reevaluated by Cole 1991) and its once-neglected exercises (Kennedy 2003) have proven to teach much more than how to make a speech (Gleason 1995). And topics like allegory, which the philosophical tradition derogated but which had long-lasting importance, return to the research agenda (Boys-Stones 2003; Struck 2004). Finally, there is a greater appreciation of the depth and importance of later phases in the critical tradition, not only the “second sophistic” (Whitmarsh 2001) but late antiquity too (Kaster 1988, Brown 1992). It need hardly be added that there remains a role for the history of ideas, since it is important to construe ancient theories aright when placing them in context. The revival of interest in

specifically ancient criticism that Kennedy's book marked can be attributed to a decade of intense work explicating the *Poetics* (most of which is accessible through Rorty 1992). Since then Philodemus has emerged as a wide-open field of research, as new techniques for reading the Herculaneum papyri revolutionize our understanding of a central witness to the forging of Greco-Roman aesthetics. Reading this eclectic Epicurean (as in Janko 2000) is like being plunked down at the crossroads of Hellenistic criticism and being handed a road map pointing to all major destinations.

These few noteworthy books that have appeared since Kennedy only begin to indicate the range of studies that can contribute to a full view of ancient literary criticism. Beneath their different agendas, I suggest what marks this kind of work as an advance in Greek literary history is the determination to confront theory with practice, to see how ideas work not only in philosophic texts but throughout the society, from ostraca to tapestries. In the case of archaic and classical Greece, this perspective often means confronting the idea of the work of art as text with the reality of the work of art as performance. As philologists, we are avatars of Hellenistic scholars and so perhaps are too prone to impose on earlier contexts the conditions of the Alexandrian library—with its glossaries, commentaries and critical editions of major authors. But we risk profoundly misconceiving the musical culture of archaic and even classical Greeks if we ignore the ubiquitous and frequent occasions for “musical” performance and forget that the meaning of even the most perfectly finished text depended crucially on the context in which it was performed. Students of ancient literature, then, stand to gain if its masterpieces are presented not so much as self-contained, timeless and univocal works of art, but as scripts sponsoring performances in various contexts—whether in schoolroom

or Odeon—that kept the work fully in existence and made it meaningful to audience after audience.

The difference that these social and material perspectives can make to the history of criticism can be seen by contrasting two accounts of the early history of criticism. The usual version presents it as an ongoing struggle for authority, going back to archaic Greece when Xenophanes and Heraclitus attacked Homer and Hesiod for error and impiety. This seems to fit in with what Plato calls an “ancient war” (*Republic* 607B) between poetry and philosophy, and scholars have been fond of staging the titanic battle in this war by pitting the *Republic* against Aristotle’s *Poetics*—the former being read unironically as a demand that poetry’s harmful lies be banished from the state, and the latter being construed as a defense of the morally educative value of art. In my view, both interpretations are distortions, except to the extent that they point out that fourth-century poetics and rhetoric bequeathed to Hellenistic and later philosophy two fundamentally antithetical attitudes toward poetry: one view was to indulge in it as one of life’s pleasures (which was judged allowable even if poetry be nonsense, provided it be taken in moderation); the other was to revere poetry as the repository of profound wisdom (very often a hidden wisdom that propounders of this view were able to disclose). Despite occasional surfacings of more holistic conceptions of poetry (as in the exceptional early chapters of *On the Sublime*, but not—so far—in Philodemus), later Roman and Christian literary culture remain irreducibly, though often fruitfully conflicted about whether poetry is sound or sense, whether it claims our attention as a pleasing *form* of words or as their improving *content*. Attempts to mend this rift in one way or another are of course

manifold from Hellenistic times on, and indeed might most conveniently be summed up by the term Neoclassical criticism.

Plato's war story is altogether too neat and should be regarded as at best a partisan interpretation of literary history, if not as an outright fiction. It is dramatic (as we might expect from Plato), and it is a history of ideas (as we might expect from a philosopher). Here Historians of criticism who do not wish to be marooned on a philosophical reduction can profit from changing the terms of analysis: instead of a conflict between philosophic truth and poetic lies, an alternate account of what provoked the *Republic*—and the entire explosion in ideas about poetry that we can see from the fifth-century sophists through Aristotle's *Poetics*—might consider the radical shift in the balance of power from performance to text in classical Greece (cf. Rösler in this volume). Even at Athens at the end of the fifth century, a person who read (rather than went to hear) poetry was exceptional, not to say eccentric; so much is implied in our earliest portrayal of reading Greek literature, the foppish, *moderniste* Dionysus who mentions reading Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs* of 405 BC; and yet, toward 350 BC Aristotle could casually remark in *Poetics* that a well constructed tragedy ought to be as affecting when it is read as when produced in the theatre. Eric Havelock argued (in the matchless rhapsody that concludes his *Preface to Plato*) that Plato was attacking not so much the poets' ideas as the performative modes by which poetry was infiltrated through the citizenry (cf. Robb 1994). His argument became reductive when he described this as the defeat of "orality" by Plato's "literacy," but it stands to reason that criticism will change when new "intentional objects" arise, and Havelock was the first to show that in Plato's day what had been scripts for performance were increasingly being scrutinized as self-standing

artifacts. Such an historical context may help explain why the *Poetics* is so admired by moderns, for its method allows us discern value in ancient works which have had the distractions—and enhancements—of performative context shorn away (Ford 2003).

I have argued that the study of ancient criticism is unduly narrow unless it combines an awareness of the materiality of culture—of the forms in which literary texts were produced, circulated, stored up, and accessed—with an appreciation for how strongly performance traditions could shape the reception and valuation of such texts. In the balance of this essay I should like to add a further point: that thinking of ancient criticism as a dialectic between text and performance makes a qualitative and not just quantitative difference: it not only expands the kinds of practices we can consider criticism but also is indispensable to appreciate the full range of functions that discourses on poetry could fill in Greek culture. To do so I propose to excavate a little of the practices underlying a little piece of Aristotelian literary theory.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is rightly esteemed for its approach to poetry as representation (*mimêsis*), which has been the fountainhead of Western literary theory. (His conception of "*mimêsis* in language" is virtually equivalent to "literature," but Aristotle excludes prose in practice.) Most of the treatise is devoted to defining the genres of *mimêsis* and specifying the *telos* or "end" of each, the particular emotional response each genre is best equipped to arouse. But toward the end of the work (in the penultimate chapter of the apparently truncated version we have) Aristotle inserts a chapter that points away from theory to practical criticism. Chapter 25 "On Problems and Solutions" attempts to "theorize" (1460b7) what might best be described as a poetry game in which one player posed a "challenge" (*problêma*) to another by citing a poet of high reputation and

claiming that the poet had “made an error” (*hamartanein*, e.g. 1454b17); the respondent tried to “dissolve” the objection, usually by proposing an interpretation in which the cited passage was composed “correctly” (*orthôs*, 1460b24, cf. *orthotês* in 1460b13). Now this discussion is tied in to the theoretical burden of *Poetics*, for Aristotle urges keeping the *telos* of the work in view when considering whether an alleged fault is blameworthy. But the philosopher is also intervening in a popular poetic pastime, one that can be detected behind the scene in *Frogs* in which Aeschylus and Euripides use such terms (*hamartanein* 1135, 1137, 1147; *orthotês* 1181, 1131) to attack each other’s verse.

For all that such objections could be petty and naïve, their cultural importance is suggested by their impressive staying power. A scene from *Iliad* 1 affords an example: when a vengeful Apollo descends to visit plague on the Greeks, Homer specifies that he first slayed the mules and dogs, and then the soldiers (1.50-51). Some ancient readers were troubled by the fact that the god exacted revenge on senseless beasts, and among those who commented on this passage was Zoilos of Amphipolis, a notorious problem-poseur known to Aristotle. This is the background to Aristotle’s own suggestion in *Poetics* 25 that the word “mules” (*ourêas*) might be construed as a dialectical variant of “guards” (*ouros*, 1461a9), at least partly “solving” the problem. However, Aristotle’s younger associate, Aristoxenus, pointed out a problem with this solution, for the gloss will not fit the context. The game went on, and by Roman times a cosmic explanation, involving the role of Apollo as the sun as the cause of plague, was promulgated in a book called *Homeric Allegories* (Ch. 13). Even today the somewhat silly “problem” continues to provoke responses from Homer’s teachers: the most recent commentary on the *Iliad* takes a moment at verse 51 to refer to medical-historical studies explaining that domesticated

animals are commonly at risk during times of plague (Latacz et al., 2000: 45).

The game of disputing the correctness of poets also extends backward to the first half of the fifth century, for sophists were also concerned with linguistic *orthotês*, and the great Protagoras claimed to find two blunders in the first line of the *Iliad* alone! Plato represents him as teaching “correct expression” (*orthoepia*, 339A) and finding fault with poets. In the *Protagoras* the sophist initiates a long scene of criticism by claiming that a poem on human excellence (*aretê*) by the sage Simonides was neither “correctly” nor “finely” expressed (*ouk orthôs*, 339D, *kalôs kai orthôs* 339B). Historians of ideas have attempted to extract from such indirect evidence what precisely Protagoras meant by *orthoepia* (and how his “correctness” differed from that of other sophists like Prodicus). But considering that criticism itself had to be a performance suggests that it is less important to nail down how this agile debater might have defined the term than to note that *orthoepia* was displayed in a dialectical game: “The most important part of education,” Plato’s Protagoras asserts, “is being exceptionally shrewd about poetry (*peri epôn deinos*); that is, to be able to perceive what in poetry is said correctly (*orthôs*) and what not, to know how to distinguish between the two (*epistasthai dielein*), and be able to give an account of oneself (*logon dounai*) when questioned” (339A). *Orthoepia* may remain shadowy as a doctrine—though a high degree of scrupulousness in making verbal distinctions was clearly involved, a good way of arrogating distinction to oneself (Bourdieu 1984)—but we can appreciate it as practice in standing up under verbal attack. As in the game of problems and solutions, the putative object of blame—the “wise” poet—was a stalking horse: the one being tested for wisdom was the performer who had to defend a threatened “correctness.”

Before summing up, we can briefly take one further step back in this history to see that in debating the correctness of poems the sophists were, as so often, revising and adapting practices for which sixth-century poets had provided different sorts of scripts. Poets like Simonides were themselves fond of debating received wisdom; indeed in the poem Protagoras critiqued Simonides criticized a moral pronouncement by the sage Pittacus as “spoken out of tune” (*ouk emmeleôs* 542.10 *PMG*; see Most 1994). The point is not that things go further back than one thinks, but that, viewed together, these different modes of “literary criticism” are revealed as ways of playing at reciprocity: whether one is challenger or respondent, one must show courtesy and self-control, but also *parrhesia*, self-assertive, manly free-speaking in disagreeing with an authoritative opinion. (The wisdom popularly conceded to Homer explains the vast ancient literature on “Homeric Problems”—to which Aristotle contributed half a dozen books.) There was justice in taking turns, and moderation in not attacking too fiercely. Hence even in its later phases the blame game exhibited ethical virtues as much as aesthetic ones: in the poem quoted in *Protagoras* Simonides insists, “I am no lover of blame,” (*philopsogos*, 346C), and for Pindar the blame-poet Archilochus typified the perils of captiousness (*Pythian Odes*, 2.55); the same role was filled in Aristotle’s day by Zoilos, his sobriquet “scourge of Homer” hinting at his hubris in treating the great poet as if he were a slave.

To conclude, let us return to the *Poetics* and consider Aristotle’s contribution to the game. Apart from the numerous specific strategies he suggests to responders, Aristotle lays down the general rule that an errant poetic passage that contributes to the *telos* of the work should not be blamed unless it was possible to achieve its effect without committing the fault in question. The implicit theory operating here is that poets have license to

violate normal usage if that is the only way to effect their *telos*. Indeed, Aristotle is explicit that, “correctness in the poetic art is not the same as that in other arts” (1460b13-15). This rule of limited application is as close as Aristotle, and ancient criticism generally, gets to claiming that literature can only be rightly judged by its own “appropriate” standards, i.e. *literary* standards. But, as mentioned above, his aim in *Poetics* 25 is to put the game on a sound technical, i.e. philosophical basis. Yet there is also an ethical dimension to his teaching, for this rule in practice serves to overrule excessive fault-finding. One might seek a philosophical basis for this in the *Ethics*, but a dislike of pettifogging judgments and captious behavior was a widespread view, and in fact Aristotle’s most “literary” rule is synonymous with an ethical principle enunciated by Simonides: “I praise and love every one who does nothing disgraceful on purpose” (*Protagoras* 344C). Even as it achieves its highest philosophic form, Greek criticism remains an exercise in displaying *areté*.

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SUGGESTED READING:

The basis for any study of ancient criticism remains the ancient texts, many of which were shrewdly selected and translated by D. Russell and M. Winterbottom, *Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). A valuable companion thereto is *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume I: Classical Criticism*, ed. G. Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989). The collection of essays

Ancient Literary Criticism, edited by A. Laird (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2006) is an excellent guide to further research, not only for the 20 “classic” essays he reprints but for his judicious and up-to-date appendices listing further reading.