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The Function of Criticism *ca.* 432 BC:

Texts and interpretations in Plato's *Protagoras*

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Andrew Ford

Princeton University

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 Function of Criticism *ca.* 432 BC:Texts and interpretations in Plato's *Protagoras*

My title—which refers to the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*—is meant to indicate that I will not attempt to say what the function of criticism is, let alone 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 some anxiety, to judge from the title of a recent volume of Essays from the English Institute, *What's Left of Theory?*, or Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003).² Of course, both titles are intended as puns rather than confessions of defeat—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

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

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).

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).

as the 1990's may be another sign that a period of extraordinary critical innovation has come to an end.³

Classicists are usually inclined, when considering the paths ahead for criticism, to have a look at the paths behind, and one of the texts of ancient criticism 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 set his recreation of conversation between Socrates and 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 pursued through a close and sustained explication of a famous old lyric. Although Plato is not so clear about what the function of this passage—and so, the function of literary criticism—may be, I offer my interpretation of this text because I think it is not very well understood at present and because I hope that at least attempting to clarify Plato's point may be helpful in considering the functions of criticism at the present time.

Protagoras: its plot and its problems

The *Protagoras* gets under way when Socrates recounts, to an unnamed interlocutor, how Hippocrates, a young man of good family (not connected with the doctor), woke him early that very morning in hopes that Socrates could provide him with entrée to one of the greatest gatherings of sages that Athens had ever seen. The main

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

attraction is the great 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, as is 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 would illustrate their claims by analyzing a tough poem of—say—Mallarmé along the way.

Plato's drama is a long, shifting discussion that ultimately fails to answer its main questions—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 guide contemporary academic reading; on the other, there are also some wild, explicitly unserious claims blended in, and it is not clear if we are to regard even Socrates'

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>).

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 most 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 question about what they say. When most people bring them up some say that the poet means this and others something else, and the 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' demand for historicizing criticism, and the fruitlessness of the whole discussion, 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 detailed discussion for nearly a fifth of the work (338E-347C). 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

⁵ 347C: καὶ γὰρ δοκεῖ μοι τὸ περὶ ποιήσεως διαλέγεσθαι ὁμοιότατον εἶναι τοῖς συμποσίοις τοῖς τῶν φαύλων καὶ ἀγοραίων ἀνθρώπων. καὶ γὰρ οἱ τοῖ, διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι ἀλλήλοις δι' ἑαυτῶν συνεῖναι ἐν τῷ πότῳ μηδὲ διὰ τῆς ἑαυτῶν φωνῆς καὶ τῶν λόγων τῶν ἑαυτῶν ὑπὸ ἀπαιδευσίας

⁶ 347E-348A: οὐδὲν δέοντα ἀλλοτρίας φωνῆς οὐδὲ ποιητῶν, οὐς οὔτε ἀνερέσθαι οἷόν τ' ἐστὶν περὶ ὧν λέγουσιν, ἐπαγόμενοι τε αὐτοὺς οἱ πολλοὶ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις οἱ μὲν ταῦτά φασιν τὸν ποιητὴν νοεῖν, οἱ δ' ἕτερα, περὶ πράγματος διαλεγόμενοι ὁ ἀδυνατοῦσι ἐξελέγξαι.

⁷ 347E: ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν τοιαύτας συνουσίας ἐῷσιν χαίρειν, αὐτοὶ δ' ἑαυτοῖς σύνεισιν δι' ἑαυτῶν, ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῶν λόγοις πείραν ἀλλήλων λαμβάνοντες 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.

own included).⁹ 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 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 Plato's extended and relentless war on 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 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.¹⁰ If so, he is perfectly willing to cite the poem as a piece of wisdom, as he does at 344E.

The "ancient quarrel" approach to Plato is obviously not groundless, for whether poetry is true is always a question that needs to be asked. But it does distort the philosopher by exaggerating and overdeveloping one aspect of his reflections. Plato's

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ See Scodel, pp. 34-35.

views on poetry are far richer than he is usually given credit for.¹¹ The 'Plato on poetry' I see in *Protagoras* is a cultural anthropologist: a detached and keen-eyed observer of how his fellow citizens make use of poetry, what benefits they derive from it, and what claims they make for it. *Protagoras* is focused not on *mimesis* but on exegesis, and on the broader question of whether and how poems can help us in ethical exploration.

My discussion will first consider the first half of the dialogue (309A-338E) which leads up to the critical scene in question. Putting the literary criticism in context prepares us to understand technical criticism, what Protagoras calls "being formidable about verse," as a particular 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 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

¹¹ 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>).

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."¹² When he adds parenthetically that he has noticed that the youth's beard is coming in, readers have 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 40.¹³ Now 432 is five years before Plato was born, and is I think one indication that this work does not promise eye-witness history. In addition, tying the text to the moment when Alcibiades lost his youthful bloom fixes the work in time only as an evanescent, unrecapturable moment in the glorious past. At the same time, however, the opening image points up the work's perennial relevance, for *Protagoras* is very much concerned with, and I 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.¹⁴

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

¹² The epithet at 309A is a place-marker in the text, picked up by Socrates at 316A. See below.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 310E: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἅμα μὲν καὶ νεώτερός εἰμι, ἅμα δὲ οὐδὲ ἐώρακα Πρωταγόραν πώποτε οὐδ' ἀκήκοα οὐδέν· ἔτι γὰρ παῖς ἦ ὅτε τὸ πρότερον ἐπεδήμησε. . . . πάντες τὸν ἄνδρα ἐπαινοῦσιν καὶ φασιν σοφώτατον εἶναι λέγειν. Cf. Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles* in Xenophon

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 go visiting. The first question is what is a sophistic education for? Is it vocational training or a liberal art, like 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 mere suggestion that he aspires to become a sophist himself (312A).¹⁵ In trying to define the wise man’s expertise Hippocrates ventures that he is expert in knowing how to make one “awe-inspiring” at speaking (*deinos legein*);¹⁶ Socrates accepts this as at least part of the truth, doubtless because he knows that *deinos* can mean “awful” as well as “awe-inspiring.”¹⁷

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 back to “fair” Alcibiades at the opening (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 styles that are on display. This part of *Protagoras* exhibits a sustained and explicit interest in the different ways to conduct a conversation.¹⁸ The participants try out a number of modes of discourse, explicitly debating “in what fashion are we to talk

¹⁵ The semantics of the word are studied in A. Ford, "Sophistic," *Common Knowledge* 1.5 (1993) 33-47.

¹⁶ 312D: ἡ ἐπιστάτην τοῦ ποιῆσαι δεινὸν λέγειν;

¹⁷ We find out later (341A-B) that Socrates has learned from Prodicus that *deinos* should properly mean “bad”: Πρόδικός με οὔτοσὶ νουθετεῖ ἐκάστοτε, ὅταν ἐπαινῶν ἐγὼ ἢ σὲ ἢ ἄλλον τινὰ λέγω ὅτι Πρωταγόρας σοφὸς καὶ δεινὸς ἐστὶν ἀνὴρ, ἐρωτᾷ εἰ οὐκ αἰσχύνομαι τάγαθὰ δεινὰ καλῶν. τὸ γὰρ δεινὸν, φησὶν, **κακόν** ἐστὶν.

¹⁸ For which the operative word is *dialegesthai*, suggesting the ideal form of conversation is dialectic.

together."¹⁹ 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 the *Protagoras* does not get 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.

The importance of choosing the right style of address comes out as soon as the pilgrims meet Protagoras. Upon being introduced to the young man, Protagoras asks whether they wish to converse with him alone or in company.²⁰ 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.²¹ Protagoras thanks Socrates for being considerate:²² a foreign professor recruiting the sons of Athenian citizens is in a delicate position and has to be wary of arousing resentment in his public performances. He then goes into a speech (316C-317C) justifying his profession on the grounds that sophistry, the art of improving men, is a very old art, but that its earlier practitioners avoided the name from caution and 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 might as well be sophists, since they improve men. Protagoras only differs in that he has concluded that those who are wise men will not be deceived if he hides his teaching under another name, so he might as well admit he is a sophist and professional educator. By this brilliant, ironic and charming fiction, Protagoras

¹⁹ 336B: τίς ὁ τρόπος ἔσται τῶν διαλόγων. Cf. 329AB, 331C, 333C, 334D, 336A-D, 347C-348A, 360E-361E.

²⁰ 316B: Πότερον, ἔφη, μόνῳ βουλόμενοι διαλεχθῆναι ἢ καὶ μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων;

²¹ ἐπιθυμεῖν δέ μοι δοκεῖ ἐλλόγιμος γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει

²² Ὁρθῶς, ἔφη, **προμηθεῖ**, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ.

paradoxically represents his modern teaching as venerable tradition, and insinuates to potential pupils that some insights are available only to the truly wise.

Being the open sort that he is, Protagoras proposes to hold their discussion before "any and everybody who is in the house"²³ (though Socrates judges that what he really wants is to show off before his rivals Prodicus and Hippias).²⁴ Accordingly a sort of "conference" is convened and all sit down to converse "in session."²⁵ In this special context, Protagoras begins, like other sophists, by taking on questions, for he "delights in answering questions that are well put."²⁶ Socrates' questions reveal that they disagree as to whether human excellence (*arête*, traditionally translated "virtue") can be taught. Socrates thinks it cannot and gives 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.²⁷ 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

²³ 317C: ὥστε πολὺ μοι ἡδιστόν ἐστιν, εἴ τι βούλεσθε, περὶ τούτων **ἀπάντων ἐναντίον τῶν ἔνδον** ὄντων τὸν λόγον ποιῆσθαι. 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.

²⁴ τῶ τε Προδίκῳ καὶ τῶ Ἰππία ἐνδείξασθαι καὶ καλλωπίσασθαι ὅτι ἐρασταὶ αὐτοῦ ἀφιγμένοι εἴμεν.

²⁵ 317D: συνέδριον κατασκευάσωμεν, ἵνα καθεζόμενοι διαλέγησθε. The word συνέδριον, literally a "sitting together" (the source, via Aramaic, of the Jewish Sanhedrin) appears both of formal and informal meetings in 4th-century Greek.

²⁶ 318D: Σὺ τε καλῶς ἐρωτᾷς, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, καὶ ἐγὼ τοῖς καλῶς ἐρωτῶσι χαίρω ἀποκρινόμενος. 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."

²⁷ 320B: εἰ οὖν ἔχεις ἐναργέστερον ἡμῖν **ἐπιδείξαι** ὡς διδακτὸν ἐστιν ἢ ἀρετῆ, **μὴ φθονήσης** ἀλλ' **ἐπίδειξον**.

(*muthos*), as an old man speaks to younger men, or shall I go through the argument (*logos*) in detail?"²⁸ The company leave this up to Protagoras, and he chooses to tell a myth because he finds it more "agreeable" or "graceful."²⁹ 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.³⁰ Then with further signposting he turns "from myth to logos"³¹ to explain why excellent people do not always raise excellent children. The *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.³²

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.³³ Alas, there's a little rub,³⁴ and to pursue this Socrates begs to change the mode of discussion yet again: he asks Protagoras not to make a long speech, as he's shown he can do so well,

²⁸ 320C: οὐ φθονήσω· ἀλλὰ πότερον ὑμῖν, ὡς πρεσβύτερος νεωτέροις, μῦθον λέγων ἐπιδείξω ἢ λόγῳ διεξιελθῶν;

²⁹ 320C: Δοκεῖ τοίνυν μοι, ἔφη, **χαριέστερον** εἶναι μῦθον ὑμῖν λέγειν

³⁰ 324C: ὅτι διδακτὸν καὶ παρασκευαστὸν ἡγοῦνται ἀρετὴν, **ἀποδέδεικται** σοι, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἱκανῶς, ὡς γέ μοι φαίνεται.

³¹ 324D: τούτου δὴ περί, ὦ Σώκρατες, **οὐκέτι μῦθόν σοι ἐρῶ ἀλλὰ λόγον.**

³² 328C: ἐγὼ **καὶ μῦθον καὶ λόγον** εἶρηκα, ὡς διδακτὸν ἀρετὴ καὶ Ἀθηναῖοι οὕτως ἡγοῦνται, καὶ ὅτι οὐδὲν θαυμαστὸν τῶν ἀγαθῶν πατέρων φαύλους υἱεῖς γίγνεσθαι καὶ τῶν φαύλων ἀγαθοῦς.

³³ 328E: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐν μὲν τῷ ἔμπροσθεν χρόνῳ ἡγούμην οὐκ εἶναι ἀνθρωπίνην ἐπιμέλειαν ἢ ἀγαθοὶ οἱ ἀγαθοὶ γίγνονται· νῦν δὲ πέπεισμαι.

³⁴ πλὴν σμικρόν τί μοι ἐμποδῶν.

but to engage in the sophistic trick of "brief-talk" (*brakhulogia*).³⁵ 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 still further on Protasgoras' rhetorical options 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),³⁶ since he is not wise enough to understand long-speaking; Protagoras, being an avowed expert in both styles, should accommodate him.³⁷ Protagoras, for his part, didn't get to be a champion debater by letting others set the terms (335A) and will not abandon long speeches. Socrates declares he has an errand to go on (335C) for he wants a dialogical conversation and not "demagogic" long speeches.³⁸ As he is about to leave the others intervene and broker an agreement to let the "conversation" (*dialegesthai*) go on.³⁹ Here we reach another marked pause in the

³⁵ 329B: Πρωταγόρας δὲ ὅδε ἰκανὸς μὲν μακροὺς λόγους καὶ καλοὺς εἰπεῖν, ὡς αὐτὰ δηλοῖ, ἰκανὸς δὲ καὶ ἐρωτηθεὶς ἀποκρίνασθαι κατὰ βραχὺ καὶ ἐρόμενος περιμεῖναι τε καὶ ἀποδέξασθαι τὴν ἀπόκρισιν, ἃ ὀλίγοις 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).

³⁶ 335A: ἐμοὶ διαλέξεσθαι, τῷ ἐτέρῳ χρῶ τρόπῳ πρὸς με, **τῇ βραχυλογίᾳ**.

³⁷ 335B-C: σὺ μὲν γάρ, ὡς λέγεται περὶ σοῦ, φῆς δὲ καὶ αὐτός, καὶ ἐν μακρολογίᾳ καὶ ἐν βραχυλογίᾳ οἶός τ' εἶ συνουσίας ποιῆσθαι--σοφὸς γὰρ εἶ--ἐγὼ δὲ τὰ μακρὰ ταῦτα ἀδύνατος.

³⁸ 336B: τίς ὁ τρόπος ἐστὶ τῶν διαλόγων; χωρὶς γὰρ ἔγωγ' ὤμην εἶναι τὸ συνεῖναι τε ἀλλήλοις διαλεγόμενους καὶ τὸ **δημηγορεῖν**.

³⁹ Prodicus wants it to be an ideal feast of words, 336B-C: οὕτως ἂν **καλλίστη** ἡμῖν ἡ συνουσία γίγνοιτο . . . ἡμεῖς τ' αὖ οἱ ἀκούοντες μάλιστ' ἂν οὕτως **εὐφραινόμεθα** ἠδοίμεσθα--

dialogue, nodding back once more to the opening frame, since it is the intervention of Alcibiades (at 336B ff.) that Socrates referred to in the opening conversation 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 again in the lead.

Summing up this first half of the dialogue, we may call most of the modes of speech presented "sophistic" and adduce the *Gorgias*. For that work also pays a great deal of attention to how to conduct "the art of conversation" or dialogue (448D).⁴⁰ *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 (cf. 449B) on the origin and progress of the arts (448C). 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*, praises him as experienced in speeches.⁴¹ Finally, one may also think of *Protagoras* when Socrates deplors those occasions in which two people set out

εὐφραίνεσθαι μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν **μανθάνοντά** τικαὶ φρονήσεως μεταλαμβάνοντα αὐτῇ τῇ διανοίᾳ, ἡδεσθαι δὲ ἐσθιοντά τι ἢ ἄλλο ἢδὺ πάσχοντα αὐτῷ τῷ σώματι.

⁴⁰ E.g. 449B-C, 453B-C, 454C, 457C-458C, 461C-462A, 465E-466A, 471E-472D, 474A-B, 475E, 486D-487B, 505E-506A, 509A.

⁴¹ 457C: Οἶμαι, ὦ Γοργία, καὶ σὲ ἔμπειρον εἶναι πολλῶν λόγων καὶ καθεωρακέναι ἐν αὐτοῖς τὸ τοιόνδε. Cf. *Prot.* 335A: ὦ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, ἐγὼ πολλοῖς ἤδη εἰς ἀγῶνα λόγων ἀφικόμην ἀνθρώποις

to argue before bystanders but become threatened by demands for clarification and degenerate into vile abuse that makes the audience regret having attended the session (457C-D). Socrates' dialectic is, above all other things, a civilized way to behave.⁴²

Socrates peri epôn deinos (342D)

So it is that when the reins are given to him that 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."⁴³ "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, and to be able to tell the difference and to give an account when challenged" (339A).⁴⁴ Unlike the previous sophistic performances, this game seems specifically Protagorean, and it is based on the special knowledge he called "correct verbal expression" or *orthoepia*.⁴⁵ It is a game played by nominating a phrase of poetry as good or bad and then being able to sustain 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, /with hands, and feet and mind squared-off,

⁴² 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."

⁴³ 339A: περί τοῦ αὐτοῦ μὲν περί οἱ περ ἐγὼ τε καὶ σὺ νῦν διαλεγόμεθα, περί ἀρετῆς, **μετενηνεγμένον δ' εἰς ποίησιν.**

⁴⁴ Ἡγοῦμαι, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐγὼ ἀνδοῖ παιδείας μέγιστον μέρος εἶναι **περὶ ἐπῶν δεινὸν** εἶναι· ἔστιν δὲ τοῦτο τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν ποιητῶν λεγόμενα οἷόν τ' εἶναι συνιέναι ἅ τε ὀρθῶς πεποίηται καὶ ἅ μὴ, καὶ ἐπίστασθαι διελεῖν τε καὶ ἐρωτώμενον λόγον δοῦναι.

⁴⁵ Cf. 339D9: οὐκ **ὀρθῶς** λέγει. On *orthoepia* see Pfeiffer 000.

faultlessly fashioned."⁴⁶ Socrates knows the song and indeed "happens" to have made a study of it⁴⁷ and so readily agrees with Protagoras that it is "well made and correct."⁴⁸ Protagoras then goes on to show that Simonides contradicts himself "as the song goes along," (προϊόντος τοῦ ᾄσματος, 339C): "Nor does that saying of Pittacus ring true to me, / though wise was the one who said it: 'to be noble is hard.'"⁴⁹ Simonides cannot both lay it down as a maxim⁵⁰ in his own person that it is hard to be good (πρῶτον αὐτὸς ὑπέθετο 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, apart from pulling a rug from under Socrates. Perhaps it is simply that he is very clever about words, cleverer than Socrates and even than Simonides, whom he had enrolled among those sophists like Homer and Hesiod who hid their wisdom under another profession (316D).

⁴⁶ Simonides 542.1-2 *PMG*: ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν, / χερσίν τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόῳ τετραγώνον, ἄνευ ψόγου τετυγμένον.

⁴⁷ ἐπίσταμαί τε γάρ, καὶ πάνυ μοι **τυγχάνει** μεμεληκὸς τοῦ ᾄσματος. 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.

⁴⁸ 339B: καλῶς σοι δοκεῖ πεποιῆσθαι καὶ **ὀρθῶς**.

⁴⁹ 542.12-13 *PMG*: οὐδέ μοι ἔμμελέως τὸ Πιττάκειον νέμεται, / καίτοι σοφοῦ παρὰ φωτὸς εἰρημένον· χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν / ἔμμεναι.

⁵⁰ On genre, the choice of verb 339D (αὐτὸς ὑπέθετο) 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 τοῖς πρώτοις αὐτὸς ὁ Σιμωνίδης **τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γνώμην ἀπεφήνατο**, ὅτι ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν ἀληθείᾳ 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.

To buy time Socrates turns to Prodicus whose skill in verbal distinctions he declares to be an "ancient and divine" art that began with Simonides or yet earlier (341A). They propose to reconcile the statements by distinguishing strongly 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.⁵¹ In this way they reconcile the two sentences and bring them into conformity with traditional wisdom.⁵² But Protagoras says 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 the word "hard," *khalepon*. They try to 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 the following verse which says "god alone can have this privilege." Socrates gives up quite willingly and admits they were only joking.

This teaming up with Prodicus, explicitly a stall on Socrates' part, puts to work the most significant linguistic science of the day—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 it can also be erroneous. Such unseriousness nonetheless falls within the rules of *peri epôn deinos* as Protagoras defined it, for Socrates says he advanced the untenable claim about *khalepon*, "teasing you and testing whether you could come to the aid of your interpretation."⁵³ But things

⁵¹ Wilamowitz rejected the distinction as impossible for Simonides, but see Ledbetter p. 103 n. 6 and 104 n. 7.

⁵² As e.g. in Hesiod *Works* 289 ff.

⁵³ 341D: ἀλλὰ παίζειν καὶ σοῦ δοκεῖν ἀποπειρᾶσθαι εἰ οἷός τ' ἔση τῷ σαυτοῦ λόγῳ βοηθεῖν.

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."⁵⁴

This more serious and substantial explication of the poem (342A-348A) begins with a fabulous story giving the putative background of Pittacus' saying. In a genial tour de force, designed to match (342B) Protagoras' re-description of Greece's hallowed sages as sophists in disguise, Socrates maintains that Pittacus' saying belongs to an ancient but underappreciated mode of philosophizing. Socrates claims that Sparta and Crete, Doric areas with a reputation for being backward, inward-looking and deeply anti-intellectual in Plato's day, were actually very devoted to philosophy but practiced it in secret to hide the fact that their military successes really derived from wisdom. In Sparta, a secret but superb philosophical education produced "Laconic" philosophers, simple-appearing men and women who could yet let fall the briefest, pithiest and most memorable utterances.⁵⁵ Indeed, it was from the Spartans that the Seven Sages learned to utter those "short and memorable pronouncements" that are cited as proverbs.⁵⁶ Because of Spartan secrecy, we would not normally know this, Socrates continues; but 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 "know thyself" and "nothing in excess" (343B).

Socrates' point in all this is that it reveals Simonides' true intention in his ode: if he could

⁵⁴ 341D-342A: ἀλλ' ἄ μοι δοκεῖ διανοεῖσθαι Σιμωνίδης ἐν τούτῳ τῷ ᾄσματι, ἐθέλω σοι εἰπεῖν, εἰ βούλει λαβεῖν μου πείραν ὅπως ἔχω, **ὃ σὺ λέγεις τοῦτο, περὶ ἐπῶν**. ἐὰν δὲ βούλη, σοῦ ἀκούσομαι. 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.

⁵⁵ 343E: ἐνέβαλεν ῥῆμα ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον ὥσπερ δεινὸς ἀκοντιστής.

⁵⁶ 343A: ῥήματα βραχέα ἀξιομνημόνευτα ἐκάστω εἰρημένα.

overturn one of Pittacus' sayings, "which had circulated privately among the sages with great approbation,"⁵⁷ he himself would get a name for wisdom.

This perfectly incredible premise nevertheless brings a great gain for interpretation because Socrates insists that *every element* of Simonides' ode is to be read as controverting the saying "to be noble is hard."⁵⁸ This replaces Protagoras' captious picking at contradictions with a unified reading, and one that is grounded in a consideration of the overall structure of the poem. To be sure, Socrates' new 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.⁵⁹ But Socrates' point and purpose here emerge more clearly if we realize that that all his talk of Doric philosophy is really another story of discursive modes. The dense-packed philosophical adages are the latest in the series of verbal genres or styles to which *Protagoras* calls attention: there was conversation, myth, logical demonstration, brachylogy, long-form speech and Protagoras' particular game of *deinos peri epôn*. Even when Socrates has finished, Hippias offers another mode of analysis, 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 anonymous Delphic sayings represent a particular phenomenon that will be relevant to poetic interpretation. Philosophy needs a form of literary criticism because those seeking to distinguish themselves for wisdom have

⁵⁷ 343C: τοῦ Πιττακοῦ ἰδίᾳ περιεφέρετο τοῦτο τὸ ῥῆμα ἐγκωμιαζόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν σοφῶν.

⁵⁸ 344B: ἀλλὰ τὸν τύπον αὐτοῦ τὸν ὅλον διεξέλθωμεν καὶ τὴν βούλησιν, ὅτι παντὸς μᾶλλον ἔλεγχός ἐστιν τοῦ Πιττακείου ῥήματος διὰ παντὸς τοῦ ἔσματος.

⁵⁹ 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.

always been confronted by provocative and not immediately intelligible pieces of language bubbling up from the past and demanding explicaiton.

Now Simonides' ode is not the same genre at all, but just as Pittacus' saying somehow came to his attention and needed exegesis, his own exposition becomes, for Socrates and company, another problematic speech from the past to be wrestled with. Those who canvass every possible source of moral wisdom, Plato suggests, will "happen" upon provocative, somehow incomplete pieces of language, whether in the form of Simonides' wisdom or the graffiti of sages, and will have to make the best sense of they can. For this situation Socrates proposes 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 were not wise. 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 was given in the *Apology* where Socrates went to great lengths to understand the apparently absurd Delphic utterance, "No one is wiser than Socrates."⁶⁰

Plato's Socrates takes essentially the same approach to another tag-line from Simonides in the opening of the *Republic*. In attempting to define justice, Polemarchus adduces Simonides' phrase, "giving each man what is owed him" (331D = 642a *PMG*) as something the poet said "correctly" (*orthôs*). In what has been called a "transparent misinterpretation"⁶¹ 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

⁶⁰ Cf Ledbetter (n. 4) 114-116.

⁶¹ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher Kings* (Princeton, 1988) 8.

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).

In taking this approach *Protagoras* Socrates is quite serious, as appears even in one of his more questionable interpretations. When he comes to Simonides' "I praise and love all who do nothing wrong willingly,"⁶² 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."⁶³ But bending the grammar to eliminate an unappealing 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 willingly does base and evil deeds; they are well aware that all who do base and evil things do them unwillingly.⁶⁴

Socrates is often content, in the *Republic* and elsewhere, to remain uncommitted about what poets mean and to turn away from exegesis to dialectic.⁶⁵ But in *Protagoras*, having been involved in this poem and its discussion of excellence, he decides to press for a

⁶² 344C: πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω / ἐκὼν ὅστις ἔρδη / μηδὲν αἰσχρόν.

⁶³ Ledbetter, p. 107, quoting Taylor.

⁶⁴ 345D-E (trans. Lamb): οὐ γὰρ οὕτως ἀπαιδευτος ἦν Σιμωνίδης, ὥστε τούτους φάναι ἐπαινεῖν, ὅς ἂν ἐκὼν μηδὲν κακὸν ποιῆ, ὡς ὄντων τινῶν οἱ ἐκόντες κακὰ ποιοῦσιν. ἐγὼ γὰρ σχεδόν τι οἶμαι τοῦτο, ὅτι οὐδεὶς τῶν σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν ἡγεῖται οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων ἐκόντα ἐξαμαρτάνειν οὐδὲ αἰσχρὰ τε καὶ κακὰ ἐκόντα ἐργάζεσθαι, ἀλλ' εὖ ἴσασι ὅτι πάντες οἱ τὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ τὰ κακὰ ποιοῦντες ἄκοντες ποιοῦσιν.

⁶⁵ 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.

sense in which Simonides' words can yield a meaning that is wise.⁶⁶ Why? I do not think it is 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 *hyperbaton* occurs in Greek.) But technique is in the service of clarifying and articulating a moral claim. Socrates' move here has been compared with the modern philosophical principle of "charity" in exposition.⁶⁷ But he is really being charitable to his own dearly held principles, which he cannot imagine went unknown to all earlier sages. Interpretation relies on technical knowledge of language but is ultimately a moral choice. Here, 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 by traditional wisdom. However, in the absence of having Simonides at hand to submit to dialectic, Socrates can only submit this interpretation as something of which he is "fairly sure." The ineliminable uncertainty of any attempt to interpret such "authorless" texts 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 any attempt to interpret poetry, as the "ancient quarrel" perspective might suggest. Nor is it an attack on technical or "sophistic" approaches to poetry, as if they presented a unified front as champions of poetry: 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

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ N. Pappas, "Socrates' Charitable Treatment of Poetry," *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989) 248-61.

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 research in an effort to determine their meaning. But, as the myth of the original form of philosophy is meant to show, when certain speech acts leave their authors and circulate beyond their original, enclosed circles of performance, they become puzzles, 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 literary reading can produce sure results 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.

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.⁶⁸ 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),

⁶⁸ 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.

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 and texts (134). The initial contradiction is imputed to Simonides by bringing together two completely 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 the result, but Most well observes that he 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 hostile to hermeneutics, but this does not prevent Plato's 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 seem to me to apply to the interpretation of a very wide range of texts.) 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 tenders these merely as the ground rules of philology as a discipline, not *the* method that produces certain interpretations (e.g. 134). In these terms, I find this 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 evaluate the discourse of our colleagues. This raises 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 of Simonides' poem proceeds by finding more or less adequate contexts in which to construe its meaning. But in addition, the history of (mis)interpretations of that poem 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.⁶⁹ This history of philological blindness leads 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 turns out to resemble the original text very closely. If

⁶⁹ 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.

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 to repeat 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 to the extent that 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 repeating all of 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.

When we interpret in the methodical way Most recommends (without, to be sure, promising that it infallibly yielded 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 sort of mnemonic device: the supporting "evidence" is a picture or story we make up to hold all the parts of the original in an intelligible relation, motivating their presence and determining their placement. This may help us better 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 might suggest,

alternatively, that methodical hermeneutics 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 an interpretation. This would be in line with the very broad and deep ambition of criticism since the 19th century to put the human sciences on a par the natural sciences. But my reading of *Protagoras* also suggests that one of the benefits of method, one of the functions of criticism, is that it responds to something uncanny about these tenacious little texts, something that makes them memorable and keeps them flashing into view. In practice, Most's principles and canons combine to say that the best interpretation is that which most closely calls back the details of the text, and calls back most of the details. 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; but Plato may be telling us to regard criticism rather as a practice, an unending one belonging pedagogy and literary culture; so defined, criticism aims not at the truth of 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 is notionally a clearer and more intelligible account of a poem, but functionally it is a metonymy for the work: we evaluate interpretations only by repeating those words whose unintelligibility in the first place caused us to move beyond them. 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 is hard to accept Arnold's definition of the task of the critic as "to see the object as it really is" 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 futile 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."⁷⁰) 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 preserving the poet's words.⁷¹ Theorized and methodized, criticism can serve as a sort of re-performance of the work, a reprise of the song for those equipped with an understanding of the critical vocabulary in play. Professionalized and disciplined, critical language serve as a mnemonic of even a vast original, which is preserved by being coded economically among the texts of individual critics or piecemeal among a collectivity of specialists. From this point of view, it is not to be thought that any work will be recollected in its entirety, or ever finally understood. But there is an advantage in being only a metonymy, in not being the text itself. It allows interpretation in certain contexts (in journals, in classrooms, in conversations) not simply to remind one of a text but to be the fullest possible replacement for that text, to be, in that context, the proper re-performance of the song. The words will be reapplied in a new situation, they will seem to promise a way, but upon examination they will open up uncertainties about exactly what they do say and in the end will afford at best provisional guidance.

⁷⁰ "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).

⁷¹ 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.

Plato's *Protagoras*, then, shows the process of making meaning out of pieces of language that have so far survived oblivion. Interpretation is an attempt to hold such texts together and to re-circulate them in company. It also shows, indirectly, criticism preserving a poem that was on the verge of being forgotten, a poem that just chanced to be preserved, and not in full. Interpretation is the best way we have to hold things together. The text, like the good man, aspires to solid endurance, to be "four-squared,"⁷² and Plato shows how Simonides' poem was lasting at the time, and he has delivered it, along with his own *Protagoras* to us. I submit that my un-parodic reading of *Protagoras* is more useful in thinking about the function of criticism and that it gives us a better picture of Plato's broad engagement with poetry.

⁷² 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."