

John T. Hamilton (Cambridge, MA)

ELLIPSES OF WORLD LITERATURE

Recent reflections on the methods and scope of World Literature perpetuate a century-long discussion on the disciplinary and pedagogical aims of Comparative Literature – a discussion that specifically and persistently involves the multivalent figures of the ellipse and the ellipsis. In pressing the use of these ‘ellipses’ in the scholarship, a usage that oscillates between rhetoric and geometry, the present paper draws out the varied senses implicit in the ongoing history of defining both Comparative Literature and, consequently, World Literature.

In a recent, highly personal essay, “Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not” (2007), Jan Ziolkowski has occasion to reflect on the field’s perpetually troubling designation. He cites the case of Lane Cooper, professor at Cornell University, who, in the 1920s, as Comparative Literature departments spawned across North America, outright refused to surrender to fashion and instead insisted on giving his department what he believed was a far more accurate label: “The Comparative Study of Literature”. As Ziolkowski concedes, the name “Comparative Literature” indeed would appear to be intelligible only when the two components are construed as shorthand, with the term *comparative* “denoting ‘based on or involving comparison’ and *literature* as an ellipsis for ‘literary studies’”.¹ According to Ziolkowski, a formidable Latinist, Cooper’s all-too-literal mind neglected to appreciate the elliptical force of the discipline’s appellation. In Cooper’s own words, “comparative literature” is a “bogus term” that “makes neither sense nor syntax” – “You might as well permit yourself to say ‘comparative potatoes’ or ‘comparative husks.’”² If an ellipsis involves a stipulation, whereby the addressee agrees to supply what has been omitted, then Cooper irritably is in breach of contract, declining to provide mentally the parentheses that would fill out the verbal construction: “(The) Comparative (Study of) Literature”.

¹ Jan Ziolkowski, “Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not”, in: *The Global South* 1.2/2007, pp. 16-44, here p. 21.

² Lane Cooper, *Experiments in Education*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1942, p. 75; cited in Ziolkowski, “Incomparable” (see note 1), p. 21.

Ellipses of all kinds have long hounded Comparative Literature, beginning with this issue of the name's descriptive inadequacies. Although it now firmly holds its place as an institution, with most major universities across the globe boasting vibrant graduate programs and with a host of professional organizations contributing to the discipline's legitimacy and autonomy, the familiar moniker has always been a matter of contention. Roughly contemporaneous with Cooper, in 1931, now referring to the standard French designation, *la Littérature comparée*, Paul van Tieghem also admitted that "this term is not an accurate indication of the subject and there are other healthier and clearer terms than this one".³ To be sure, despite the name's shortcomings, there was ample justification to retain *Littérature comparée*: first, on the basis of sheer prevalence, having been in circulation since 1830, when Abel-François Villemain used it to title his Sorbonne lectures; and second, because it aligned the study of literature with the other "comparative" disciplines that emerged throughout the nineteenth century, including Comparative Zoology, Anthropology, Anatomy, and Linguistics. Still, van Tieghem regrets that the term is wanting, omitting important aspects of his academic field. A more discriminating name would be more substantial ("healthier", "clearer"). Like Cooper, he proposes 'The Comparative Study of Literature' or perhaps 'Comparative Literary History'. Thus, van Tieghem's gesture toward correction – however ill-advised at this point in the discipline's development – again implies that *comparative literature* is an ellipsis, eliding a word or words necessary for a fully 'accurate' construction.

The Greek noun *leipsis* (an 'omission', a 'minus'), derived from the verb *leipein* ('to leave, forsake, be wanting'), is used to form both *elleipsis* (a 'falling short', a 'defect') and *ekleipsis* (an 'abandonment', a 'failing to appear', an 'eclipse'). Modern rhetoricians, from the sixteenth century on, frequently conflated *ellipsis* and *eclipsis*, interpreting both as a 'leaving out', even though *ellipsis* is clearly formed with the prefix *en-*, thus denoting 'an omission in (the discourse, text, or construction)'. At any rate, in its syntactic sense, the term comes to signify any abbreviation, lacuna, or omission of words made consciously or not. Although Quintilian preferred to treat ellipsis as an artful figure, modeled on synecdoche, by which 'we understand something that is not said' ("quod tacetur accipimus"), he granted that many verbal omissions are little more than vicious barbarisms produced by thoughtless speech or

³ Paul van Tieghem, *La Littérature comparée*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1931; cited in Shamsuddin Salahuddin Mohd, "Originality of French School in 'Comparative Literature'", in: *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 6.2/2012, pp. 210-217, here p. 211.

grammatical idleness.⁴ For Cooper and van Tieghem, ‘comparative literature’ and ‘littérature comparée’ are ellipses in this latter sense: unfortunate accidents of language that are now deeply entrenched in popular usage, compelling scholars to broadcast their work deficiently for lack of ‘healthier and clearer terms’. Sadly, the current names put the discipline itself at risk, leaving it scantily clad out in the cold, letting it shiver while the sun of sufficient reason rests in total eclipse.

Benedetto Croce had already sounded a similar alarm back in 1903, when he disparaged *Letteratura comparata* as an utterly incomprehensible designation for what appears to be a meaningless practice. Goaded by a recent trip to New York, where he fell upon the freshly established *Journal of Comparative Literature*, Croce dismissed this type of scholarship as vain erudition at best. Ignorant of the essence of artistic creativity and lacking a defined field of study, Comparative Literature hardly counts as a discipline, content merely with exploring “le vicende, le alterazioni, le aggregazioni, gli svolgimenti e gli influssi reciproci” of literary themes.⁵ However, Croce was heartened by the editorial work of Max Koch who, having founded the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur* in 1887, eventually supplemented it with a second journal, *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*, established in 1901. Croce surmised that Koch came to realize that the concept of “comparative [compared or comparing] literature” obfuscated by omission the true character of the scholarship and therefore ultimately demanded a more fitting designation.⁶ To illustrate, Croce translates Koch’s own description of what “comparative literary history” should entail:

[It must pay special attention] all’intimo legame tra storia politica e storia letteraria, il quale, forse, di solito, non è messo in rilievo in tutta la sua importanza; e al legame tra storia della letteratura e storia dell’arte, svolgimento letterario e svolgimento filosofico, u.s.w.⁷

For Croce, it is especially Koch’s *und so weiter* that deserves comment, for this comparative historical approach moves tirelessly beyond the superficial collection of themes, recognizing that it must penetrate more deeply and con-

⁴ “Quidam synecdochen vocant et cum id in contextu sermonis quod tacetur accipimus: verbum enim ex verbis intellegi, quod inter vitia ellipsis vocatur [...]. Mihi hanc figuram esse magis placet [...].” Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 8.6.21.

⁵ Benedetto Croce, “La ‘Letteratura comparata’” [1903], in: Armando Gnisci/ Franca Sinopoli (eds.), *Manuale storico di letteratura comparata*, Rome: Meltemi, 1997, pp. 73-78, here p. 74.

⁶ On this point, see Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 2-3.

⁷ Croce, “La ‘Letteratura comparata’” (see note 5), p. 77.

sider ‘everything’ – “[...]‘tutti’ gli antecedenti dell’opera letteraria, vicini e lontani, pratici e ideali, filosofici e letterari, legati in parola o legati in forme plastiche e figurative: *und so weiter*.”⁸ Koch’s standard, casual clausula – *u.s.w.* – may appear semantically empty, funneling the paragraph out into silence, but it in fact betokens an infinite fullness, economically interrupting an accumulative list that thereby never ends. Whereas the name ‘comparative literature’ camouflages the nature of Koch’s real work – ‘comparative literary history’ – the latter term itself harbors an elliptical nature by necessarily referring to the plenum of transcultural and transhistorical material, *all* the antecedents, links, and forms that can only be expressed by the exhaustive and exhausted legerdemain of *and so forth*. By omitting further reference to finite fields, the ellipsis marked by *und so weiter* opens onto an infinite task. It is worth recalling that the abbreviating formula that Latin renders as *et cetera* is rendered in ancient Greek as *kai ta loipa* (‘and the rest’), which tellingly employs the adjectival substantive of our elliptical verb *leipein*...

This marked ellipsis, which poses as a minus but indicates a plus, is different from the ‘deficiency’ discerned in the name *comparative literature*, which is disparaged for confusing a body of work (‘literature’) and the interpretation of that work (‘literary studies’). Certainly, however, the conventions of English warrant using ‘literature’ as an ellipsis for ‘literary studies’. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests, the primary meaning of ‘literature’, dating back at least to the fifteenth century, is “familiarity with letters or books; knowledge acquired from reading or studying books”; the narrower sense of “printed matter” being but a later development of the nineteenth century.⁹ All the same, Lane Cooper *et alii* did raise an important point, which becomes ever more crucial when we turn to Comparative Literature’s longtime running mate, ‘World Literature’. Boasting an honored provenance from Goethe, who famously predicted the obsolescence of national literatures in favor of a grander, humanist *Weltliteratur*, and later receiving ratification in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, World Literature has of late come to the fore as a redeeming, cosmopolitan conception for a discipline perceived as fatally Eurocentric. In contrast to the institutional history of Comparative Literature, which was purportedly concerned with tracing and thus essentializing the cultural roots of national identities, World Literature would be emphatically transnational, introducing an expansion that would allow comparatists to realize their utopian dream of attaining encyclopedic breadth by means of ethically equitable, ecumenical scholar-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ S.v. “literature” in *OED Online, Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, <http://dictionary.oed.com/> (September 23, 2014).

ship. Yet, given the massive efforts to incorporate curricular changes and publish representative anthologies of primary sources, the meaning of World Literature tends to oscillate uncomfortably between material and mode of analysis, between a vast collection of work and a proposed methodology. What, indeed, is World Literature? Are we dealing with *noeses* (processes of thought) or with *noemata* (objects of thought)? Does the term refer to a delimited set of texts? Or does it imply rather a particular approach for studying these texts, an approach that entails a specific series of questions?¹⁰ Faced with the indistinctness of the *explanandum* and the *explanans*, one is tempted to rehearse the old frustration: Should ‘World Literature’ be read literally or elliptically?

It bears noting that, beyond the issue of nomenclature, both Comparative and World Literature frequently inspire elliptical formulations from their practitioners, signaling a fundamental uncertainty in those who are pressed to provide a clear definition of what in fact they do. In his official report for the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), composed in the early 1990s, when the field was beset by the growing demands of ‘multiculturalism’, Charles Bernheimer eloquently stammered forth a response:

Comparison is indeed the...what is it? – activity, function, practice? all of these? – that assures that our field will always be unstable, shifting, insecure, and self-critical.¹¹

Possessing neither a specific object of study nor a distinguishing methodology, never occupying a single field, belonging everywhere and hence nowhere, comparatists have long been accustomed to the harried nature of being in permanent crisis. In Bernheimer’s language, the ellipsis – graphically marked by the conventional three *points de suspension* and reinforced by the intervening questions, the asyndeta, and the long dashes – vividly conjures the feelings of haste, urgency, and anxiety that the literary scholar is wont to convey. That is to say, here the ellipsis is clearly being employed as a trope. Expressing a failure to express, it is a gesture of disruption or reticence, a nearly pious *Abbruchsformel*, akin to classical aposiopesis and its relation to conflicting emotions.

In a positive light, Bernheimer’s elided statement, coupled with groping queries, displays an open-endedness, albeit in a way that differs from the *und so weiter* singled out by Croce, for Bernheimer alludes to a radical indeter-

¹⁰ Cf. Xavier Landrin, “La sémantique historique de la *Weltliteratur*: genèse conceptuelle et usages savants,” in: Anna Boschetti (ed.), *L’espace culturel transnational*, Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2010, pp. 73-134, here p. 74.

¹¹ Charles Bernheimer, “Introduction: The Anxieties of Comparison”, in: id. (ed.), *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 1-17, here p. 2 (ellipsis in original text).

minacy, which is nothing other than the *fundamentum concussum* of comparative work. That said, he also appears to rely on the ellipsis-contract, whereby his immediate addressees – the members of the ACLA – implicitly agree to supply the sense of the lacunae, each according to his or her inclination. For, as rhetoricians have always known, the omission of a word or words invites the participation of the listener or reader, who is driven to fill in what is missing. The imposed lack leaves room for full, non-prescriptive potential. Bernheimer's stuttering description thereby becomes a call to action: Comparative Literature must uphold its definition as something indefinable; and comparatists must cultivate an ear for the deficiencies that other scholars might ignore. If, as Croce feared, Comparative Literature is elliptical – falling short of a definite methodology, field, or stable perspective – it is precisely these disciplinary shortcomings that enable it to uncover how well-defined approaches prove to be insufficient.

Especially for today's comparatists who have adopted a World Literature outlook, omissions are readily discernible in earlier studies, which were so informed by a nationalist paradigm that their authors failed to acknowledge any deficit whatsoever. In his essay *Toward a History of World Literature* (2008), David Damrosch indicates how the title of Ian Watt's overview *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) is an adequate representation of the book only when the reader takes 'the Novel' as an ellipsis for 'the British Novel'; for indeed, Watt restricts his analyses to Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, without any regard for the development of the genre in Cervantes or Madame de Lafayette, not to mention novelistic precedents in Heliodorus or Apuleius, in Norse saga or in *The Tale of Genji*. Similarly, as Damrosch goes on to cite, Gerald Graff's seminal institutional history, *Professing Literature* (1987), clearly employs the term 'Literature' as an ellipsis for 'English and American Literature in the United States', just as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* essentially takes 'Western Literature' as shorthand for 'French and Italian Literature', which comprises three-quarters of the texts analyzed. For Damrosch, the idea and ideal of 'Comparative Literature' has always been poised to supply what is excluded in other troublingly elliptical projects. With the global scope named by the rubric of World Literature, it is more than ever prepared to take into account "the varied processes and strategies through which writers have individually and collectively furthered the long negotiation between local cultures and the world beyond them."¹²

¹² David Damrosch, "Toward a History of World Literature", in: *New Literary History* 39.3/2008, pp. 481-495, here p. 485.

Damrosch consistently champions some idea of ‘negotiation’ whenever he attempts to elucidate the salutary effects and benefits of World Literature for the study of literature in general. To be sure, he is very much aware of how, in the past, what presented itself as World Literature was damningly narrow. Originally limited to a closed set of ancient yet timeless classics, which were said to transcend particular cultural and historical contexts, it subsequently came to denote a valued collection of masterpieces, a gallery of major achievements of art, ancient and modern alike, which were deemed capable of inspiring engagement in great ideas shared by all mankind. Only recently has it designated a vast repertoire of diverse, potentially alienating works, which stand available for the reader eager to encounter difference.¹³ According to Damrosch, every one of these versions – the ‘classic’, the ‘masterpiece’, and the ‘window onto otherness’ – bears the risk of attracting serious critiques, namely “[...] that the study of world literature can very readily become culturally deracinated, philologically bankrupt, and ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism.”¹⁴ Settling the ontological problem of the content of World Literature would hardly resolve the epistemological problem of how this content should be critically examined. Both issues are further exacerbated by the expansion of the globalized, electronic environment in which we now live, where the accessibility of materials has reached unprecedented proportions. How would anyone ever be capable of taking such an inordinate wealth of texts into consideration? What is to become of the hallowed trade of close reading? How many languages can be truly mastered? What role should translation play and would it not severely curtail the kind of philological work that has been the proud distinction of literary studies?

Given these questions and many others, it is no surprise that proponents of World Literature tend to spend a good deal of time defining and defending their *métier*, and not simply out of paranoia. Detractors are legion. In the early 1990s, while the journal *World Literature Today* flourished under the directorship of Djelal Kadir as the primary organ of postcolonial studies, Claudio Guillén rightfully balked at the very notion of ‘World Literature’:

What can one make of such an idea? [...] The sum total of all national literatures?
A wild idea, unattainable in practice, worthy not of an actual reader but of a de-

¹³ Cf. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 15.

¹⁴ “Comparative Literature/ World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch”, in: *Comparative Literary Studies* 48.4/2011, pp. 455-485, here p. 456.

luded keeper of archives who is also a multimillionaire. The most harebrained editor has never aspired to such a thing.¹⁵

Guillén's exasperated tone, variously modulated, continues to resonate to this day, from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's obituary, *Death of a Discipline* (2003), which laments the suppression of singularity and the "idiomaticity of nonhegemonic languages",¹⁶ to Emily Apter's most recent polemic, *Against World Literature* (2013), which denounces

[...] tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche-marketed as commercialized "identities".¹⁷

Striving to navigate between the Scylla of European exceptionalism and the Charybdis of vapid literary tourism, Damrosch focuses his attention on the movement of texts and their particular trajectories, taking World Literature to refer to "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language".¹⁸

Strikingly, Damrosch calls for "an elliptical approach", not in reference to the grammatical phenomenon, but rather to "the image of the geometric figure that is generated from two foci at once":

Contemporary America will logically be one focus of the ellipse for the contemporary American reader, but the literature of other times and eras always presents us with another focus as well, and we read in the field of force generated between these two foci. [...] If we can plot a series of partially overlapping ellipses on our literary globe, we can create a new and dynamic understanding of the world's multiform literatures, and of our own multivalent place among them.¹⁹

Here, the ellipses of World Literature are entirely recalibrated. Whereas earlier work in World Literature could be reprimanded for its elliptical deficiencies, Damrosch envisions a method that is ellipsoid, decentering a predominant Euro- or even Anglocentrism by including a second center from afar.

¹⁵ Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* [1985], trans. by Cola Franzen, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 38. Damrosch cites and discusses this remark in *What is World Literature?* (see note 13), p. 4.

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 10; see also pp. 21-22 and p. 44.

¹⁷ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, London: Verso, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁸ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (see note 13), p. 4.

¹⁹ David Damrosch, "World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World", in: *Symptome* 8.1-2/2000, pp. 7-19, here p. 18 f.

Like Johannes Kepler, who revolutionized the Copernican revolution by positing the Sun's 'fireplace' (*focus*) as one of two points determining planetary orbits, Damrosch wants to emphasize World Literature's eccentricity, allowing for a hermeneutic push and pull, between identity and difference, ipseity and alterity. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the oversized hearth of American influence will not ultimately outshine the gravity of otherness, imposing anew the heliocentric monolingualism that well-intentioned comparatists fear. How can anyone insure that processes of homogenization will not cast difference into the shadows? How can anyone prevent this *eclipse* of the foreign? In brief, how might Damrosch's ellipsoid ideal possibly escape the condemnation of being elliptical? After all, although English, unlike German and French, distinguishes between the rhetorical *ellipsis* and the geometrical *ellipse*, it is at least possible to think the two forms together. To borrow Gertrude Stein's syntax, an ellipsis is an ellipsis is an ellipsis...

It would be worthwhile to review briefly how we arrived at the opposing meanings between a rhetorical *ellipsis*, which expresses a *subtraction* of words, and a geometric *ellipse*, which denotes an *addition* of centers. According to Plutarch, it was Plato who assigned Menaechmus the mathematician with the task of solving the so-called "Delian Problem" of doubling the cube.²⁰ Upon consulting the Delphic oracle, the citizens of Delos learned that they must double the cuboid altar to Apollo in order to rid themselves of a horrific plague. Plato interpreted this message as the god's command to cultivate the science of geometry.²¹ However, the philosopher was displeased when Menaechmus abandoned number theory and instead turned to mechanical contrivances, namely by cutting a cone to produce the 'acute-angled section' that led to the mathematical solution.²² A century later, when Apollonius of Perga prepared his *Treatise on the Conic Sections*, he named this closed, oblong curve an *elleipsis*, a 'falling short', because the figure's 'eccentricity' (the ratio of distance between the focus and the directrix) is less than 1. Apollonius designated each of the conic sections with concrete precision: the *parabolē* (an 'even comparison or juxtaposition') with an eccentricity equal to 1; the *hyperbolē* (an 'overshooting') with an eccentric-

²⁰ Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 8, Q. 2.1.

²¹ Plutarch, *De E apud Delphos*, 6.

²² See Proclus's account in *Proclii Diadochi in primum Euclidis elementorum librum*, ed. by Gottfried Friedlein, Leipzig: Teubner, 1873, pp. 111-112; also Plutarch, *Vita Marcelli*, 14.5. For a comprehensive discussion of the extant sources, with ample bibliography, see George J. Allman, *Greek Geometry from Thales to Euclid*, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1889, pp. 155-179.

ity greater than 1; and the circle, which is perfectly centered, that is, without any eccentricity.²³

Independent of geometric analysis, ancient grammarians would come to apply the same terms to denote figurative devices and narrative forms: *hyperbole* ('overstatement'); the *parable* (an equally corresponding 'comparison' – in German, *Gleichnis*); and, of course, the *ellipsis*, which designated any verbal 'falling short', whether it occurred by contingency or by rhetorical design. Following Quintilian's suggestion to consider the ellipsis as a trope, modern rhetoricians pored over classical texts to locate examples of what George Puttenham characterized as "the Figure of default".²⁴ Together with other terms derived from *leipein* – primarily *syllipsis* and *prolepsis* – *ellipsis* (or *eclipsis*) was regarded as a highly effective device, entirely in accordance with 'nature'. As John Duncan Quackenbos explained in his *Practical Rhetoric* (1896), it could be understood as the very hallmark of genius:

Art everywhere deals in Ellipsis; the unseen is imagined from the visible. And so it is in nature. Many things in the universe we know only by inference from what is seen – notably, nearly one-half of the nearest heavenly body, our moon. "The artist", said Schiller, "is known by what he omits". Likewise in literature, the true artist is revealed by his tact of ellipsis.²⁵

Still, an ellipsis in scholarship may not be as valued as one in art. While Franco Moretti, with his trumpeted call for "distant reading",²⁶ may be criticized for dispatching philology to the dark side of the moon, David Damrosch could never be accused of any such lunacy. Damrosch is acquitted of this charge, because he consistently engages the geometric ellipse of bifocality and not the syntactic one of deficiency. In the conclusion to *What is World Literature?* he makes good on his title's Sartrean promise by offering a list of bullet points, beginning with the key figure:

²³ Apollonius of Perga, *Treatise on the Conic Sections*, Prop. 1.13. For a complete account, see Thomas Little Heath's introduction to Apollonius of Perga: *Treatise on the Conic Sections*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896, pp. xvii–xxx.

²⁴ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London: Richard Field, 1589, p. 136. See also Johannes Susenbrotus, *Epitome troporum ac schematum et grammaticorum & rhetoricum*, Zürich: C. Froschouer, 1540, p. 25; and Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, London: 1577, sect. 1.2.2.

²⁵ John Duncan Quackenbos, *Practical Rhetoric*, New York: American Book Co., 1896, p. 268.

²⁶ Moretti first broaches the concept of 'distant reading' in "Conjecture on World Literature", in: *New Left Review* 1/2000, pp. 54–68. His argument, which in fact aims to rectify the ellipses that threaten any attempt to deal with literature on a planetary scale, is elaborated in his latest book, *Distant Reading*, London: Verso, 2013.

1. World Literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.
2. World Literature is writing that gains in translation.
3. World Literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.²⁷

As Damrosch is quick to admit, among these three foci, which represent the context, the object, and the reception of literature, the first is the least self-evident, insofar as it employs a provocative description – ‘elliptical refraction’ – which itself demands explication. Building on the definition’s distinction between ‘world literature’ and ‘national literatures’, the subsequent explanation alights on the metaphor of travel, specifying the idea of “national” as relating to a work’s original cultural neighborhood before it goes on to circulate in the world at large. To be sure, the travel metaphor is only partially operative, given the fact that there is no suggestion, at least initially, of any return. The centrifugal is emphasized at the expense of the centripetal. Accordingly, the discussion presses on with accounts of growing divergence and diffusion. We are reminded that literary productions bear constitutive birthmarks that accompany the text’s journey abroad, “yet these traces are increasingly diffused and become ever more sharply refracted as a work travels farther from home”.²⁸ By cancelling the return flight, Damrosch allows the metaphor of travel to blend with an image from physics or even astronomy – a rhetorically sound move, to the extent that both voyage and refraction denote a change in direction. The shift from one location to another corresponds to the shift in a line’s angle when it passes from one medium to the next. Already with this image of refraction, it becomes clear how the initial definition’s three foci may relate to each other. The implied movement accounts for how the text ‘gains in translation’ as well as for how the reader finds the opportunity for ‘detached engagement’ with other worlds. With this last point, in addition to the obvious ethical ramifications, a faint hint of vicarious nostalgia creeps in, a longing to send the foreign text back home, to compensate for the work’s protracted stay away from its origin. From the reader’s perspective, world literature’s value depends on the round trip. Hence, the ‘refraction’ must be further qualified as ‘double’:

Even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures. [...] World literature is thus always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space

²⁷ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (see note 13), p. 281.

²⁸ P. 283.

within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone.²⁹

The figure of the ellipse expands or elongates the circle, which is put out of play ('circumscribed by neither'), and thus modifies the notion of refraction by allowing two shifts in direction, two bends – 'two foci'. Disregarding for now the curious slippage from the three foci of the initial definition to the two that round it out (albeit ovally), it would be worthwhile to analyze this final metaphorical shift. Having begun with a metaphor of travel, we wander into the field of optics, only to end up in the realm of geometry. Calling attention to these shifts should not suggest that the figures employed are not justified, both individually and collectively. Their descriptive power is undeniable, offering rich insight into what the concept of World Literature entails and how it functions in practical terms. Yet, metaphors are rarely as controllable as constructed concepts. Employing bold figures brings with it the risk of unintended meanings and connotations. For this reason, the rapid alteration of images that drives Damrosch's account may be ascribed, consciously or not, to a need for constant recalibration, so as to secure the discourse before it escapes critical management. By means of frequent scene changes, the author restricts the chance of any one metaphor drifting too far afield.

Perhaps the most famous usage of the figure of the ellipse to describe literature is found in Walter Benjamin's description of Franz Kafka's stories. In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin writes:

Kafkas Werk ist eine Ellipse, deren weit auseinander liegende Brennpunkte von der mystischen Erfahrung (die vor allem die Erfahrung von der Tradition ist) einerseits, von der Erfahrung des modernen Großstadtmenchen andererseits, bestimmt sind.³⁰

Benjamin embellishes his statement by means of a parenthetical remark, which graphically appears as a broken ellipse, filling in what was almost left out. In other words, Benjamin supplies what others – including, perhaps, Scholem himself – neglect, namely that mystical experience is constituted by tradition or, to use the Hebrew term, *kabbalah*. The impassioned debates over the proper interpretation of Kafka, which spans over five years of correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem essentially turns on Kafka's relation to theology. Although Scholem repeatedly faults his friend for dismissing the theological dimension, Benjamin insists that he fully accepts theological motives in Kafka's work, provided we fill in – even if only par-

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Benjamin to Scholem (Paris, June 12, 1938), in: Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, 2 vol., ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978, vol. 2, pp. 756-764, here p. 760.

enthetically – what is otherwise omitted. In a highly fanciful fashion, then, Benjamin responds to Scholem’s elliptical understanding of Kafka’s mysticism by reconfiguring the writer’s work as an ellipse. There is not one central determinant in Kafka’s work, but two. Again, the implicit question is whether, at least according to Benjamin, the two foci that determine Kafka’s work as an ellipse also cause it to be elliptical in some other sense.

Benjamin appears to answer precisely this question further on in the letter, when he explains that Kafka depicts the central experience of urban fragmentation by way of his familiarity with the mystical tradition, which he acquired not through direct participation but rather through the deficient means of ‘eavesdropping’. The stray sounds he was able to pick up were not intended for his ears. For this reason, Benjamin argues, “Kafka’s work represents tradition falling ill”.

Kafkas Werk stellt eine Erkrankung der Tradition dar. Man hat die Weisheit gelegentlich als die epische Seite der Wahrheit definieren wollen. Damit ist die Weisheit als ein Traditionsgut gekennzeichnet; sie ist die Wahrheit in ihrer hagadischen Konsistenz.

Diese Konsistenz der Wahrheit ist es, die verloren gegangen ist. Kafka war weit entfernt, der erste zu sein, der sich dieser Tatsache gegenüber sah. Viele hatten sich mit ihr eingerichtet, festhaltend an der Wahrheit oder an dem, was sie jeweils dafür gehalten haben; schweren oder auch leichteren Herzens verzichtleistend auf ihre Tradierbarkeit. Das eigentlich Geniale an Kafka war, daß er etwas ganz neues ausprobiert hat: er gab die Wahrheit preis, um an der Tradierbarkeit, an dem hagadischen Element festzuhalten.³¹

Far from being eternal or universal, truth and the tradition that upholds it are subject to time and deterioration. What is true is what is traditionally held to be true. Benjamin is referring specifically to Kafka’s retelling of Judaic parables whose truth Kafka himself cannot know for sure. Whereas others cling to a truth that is no longer viable, no longer transmissible, Kafka’s genius was to transmit the very failure or deficiency of truth. He engaged in transmitting a “telling” (*hagadah*) that no longer worked in the service of the religious law and wisdom – the *halakah* – that had always given tales their “consistency”. This notion of transmissibility reaches back to the friends’ earlier, joint study of the Marburg Neo-Kantian, Hermann Cohen, when Benjamin was a student in Bern in 1918. As Scholem notes in his diaries of the time, ‘transmissibility as such (*Tradierbarkeit schlechthin*)’ can replace the Kantian system insofar as it denotes the system’s relation to itself – that is, an utterly singular relation that cannot be encompassed by the tradition

³¹ P. 763.

itself.³² Transmissibility, therefore, is tradition's indigestible remnant, something that exceeds the very system it grounds, an excessiveness that Benjamin now brings to bear on his reading of Kafka:

Kafkas Dichtungen sind von Hause aus Gleichnisse. Aber das ist ihr Elend und ihre Schönheit, daß sie *mehr* als Gleichnisse werden mußten. Sie legen sich der Lehre nicht schlicht zu Füßen wie sich die Hagada der Halacha zu Füßen legt. Wenn sie sich gekuschelt haben, heben sie unversehens eine gewichtige Pranke gegen sie.³³

To say that Kafka's work is an ellipse is to imply that it does not consist straightforwardly in parables. Although here Benjamin uses the German term *Gleichnis* for 'parable', elsewhere he refers to *Parabel* – the name for yet another conic section, the parabola. As already remarked, the *parabolē* denotes a 'juxtaposition' or a 'comparison by moving from one side to the other', where both sides are equal, where both sides perfectly correspond, where the eccentricity is equal to one. Kafka's parables are excessive – 'more than parables' – miserably unable to give any adequate version of divine truth or law.³⁴ The Kafkan parable gives only itself, excessively and beautifully, falling short of veridical correspondence by falling before it. Kafka's work is an ellipse.

In his chapter devoted to Kafka's literary afterlife, "Kafka Comes Home", Damrosch implicitly adduces the ellipse, not as a figure internal to Kafka's work but rather as one that dynamically shapes its reception. To this end, Damrosch assesses the work of recent editors, translators, and critics, who respect today's emphasis on cultural context and therefore aim to reconnect Kafka's writing to its original Czech and Jewish conditions. Efforts are thereby made to eradicate the universalizing tendencies of an earlier *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, which, immediately after the Second World War, endeavored to turn Kafka into a lonely, existentially overwrought, non-localizable Everyman. Subsequently, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's seminal study, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975), set the stage for appreciating Kafka as "minor" figure, presented to an audience now ready to engage with cultural difference, to grapple with a body of work without cosmeticizing over its distracting birthmarks, and thus to experience regional specificity on its own terms. In literary scholarship, this interest corresponds to a shift in

³² Gershom Scholem, "Über Kant", in: *Modern Language Notes* 127.3/2012, pp. 440-442.

³³ Benjamin to Scholem, *Briefe* (see note 30), p. 763.

³⁴ For further analysis on the implications of Kafka's 'inadequacy' or 'failure', see Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan* [1998], trans. by Peter Fenves, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 294-336.

concern from textual hermeneutics to contextual encounter. Damrosch cites Mark Anderson's diagnosis:

Whether Freudian, existentialist, New Critical, structuralist, or poststructuralist, these interpretations have offered readings of individual texts in terms of a critical methodology that tended to eclipse the historical dimensions of Kafka's texts. Rooted in no particular culture or period, so ran the implicit assumption, his writings seemed to be meant for all cultures, thus providing an example of the hermetic, anonymous, *sui generis* modern artwork that apparently validated these very formalist, ahistorical methodologies.³⁵

In other words, the readings that "tended to eclipse the historical dimensions" are shown to be elliptical, eliding the radical foreignness that would break the vicious circle of formalism. Damrosch picks up on Anderson's trope, when he suggests that the new Kafka translations, which renounce earlier, domesticating criteria, is responsible for the fact that Kafka "now seems to be eclipsing Thomas Mann" in the field of literary studies,³⁶ with "historicist models now often eclipsing formalist models".³⁷

One eclipse or ellipsis deserves another. By revealing how Kafka falls short of assimilation, Damrosch demonstrates to what extent the writer's work can influence the ellipsoid orbit that is World Literature – until, of course, the eccentricity of the text is reduced to zero, falling short of falling short. A circle, including both hermeneutic and vicious ones, is not qualitatively different from an ellipse: the circle's foci simply coincide. As the ancient mathematicians have shown, a continuum obtains from one conic section to the next. Given that rhetoric has shared its terminology with geometry, it might be enlightening to apply the figures to the ongoing development of Comparative Literature's relation to the literatures it compares. We could begin with the circle at the cone's tip and decline through the ellipse, the parabola, the hyperbole, and then back again; that is, we could begin with the perfect coincidence between object and method and then move through elliptical deficiency, parabolic equality, and hyperbolic excess, before progressing or regressing through the process again, and so on, *und so weiter*... Alternatively, we could turn the cone on its head and give a poet the last word, soliciting Christian Morgenstern's incomparable funnel:

³⁵ Mark Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, pp. 9-10; cited in Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (see note 13), p. 189 f.

³⁶ P. 188.

³⁷ P. 190.

Zwei Trichter wandeln durch die Nacht.
Durch ihres Rumpfs verengten Schacht
fließt weißes Mondlicht
still und heiter
auf ihren
Waldweg
u. s.
w.³⁸

John T. Hamilton
Harvard University
16 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
jhamilt@fas.harvard.edu

³⁸ Christian Morgenstern, “Die Trichter”, in: *Galgenlieder nebst dem “Ginganz”* [1910], Paderborn: Salzwasser, 2013, here p. 18.

Andrew Ford (Princeton, NJ)

THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME (432 BC):
Text, interpretation and memory in Plato's *Protagoras*

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 the uses and limits of literary criticism. In a coda, I consider an analysis of the passage by Glenn Most and suggest that the role of memory in interpretation is overlooked in academic criticism.

The question raised in this paper is one that evidently needs to be periodically re-asked even without the expectation of arriving at a final, definitive answer. The formulation in my title is taken from an influential essay by Matthew Arnold in which the "present time" was 1865; Arnold's theme was revisited by T. S. Eliot in 1923 and again by Northrop Frye in 1949.¹ One indication that the present is another such time is the 2004 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, a leading journal of literary theory over recent decades: its symposium on "The Future of Criticism" shows critical theory pausing to take stock after a generation of energetic production and considering where one might go next. About this second point there appears to be some uncertainty, to judge from the title of a 2000 volume of Essays from the English Institute,

¹ Arnold first published "The Functions [sic] of Criticism at the Present Time" in *The National Review* in November 1864 and then "The Function ..." in id., *Essays in Criticism*, London/ Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1865. T. S. Eliot's "The Function of Criticism" appeared in *The Criterion* of 1923 and was republished in his *Selected Essays* of 1933 (Eliot also took up Arnold's theme in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* [1933]). Northrop Frye, "The Function of Criticism at the Present time", in: *University of Toronto Quarterly* 19/1949, pp. 1-16, was reprinted in Malcolm Ross (ed.), *Our Sense of Identity*, Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954, and then revised as the "Polemical Introduction" to Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957; on this important essay, see Angus Fletcher, "Northrop Frye: The Critical Passion", in: *Critical Inquiry* 1/1975, pp. 741-756.

What's Left of Theory?, or Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* of 2003.² Both titles mitigate confessions of exhaustion with paronomasia – but the amphiboly suggests uncertainty: *What's Left of Theory* asks if there's any theory left to do besides repeating 'leftist' perspectives; *After Theory* may seem to promise a kind of theory different from what we have known so far, but the fact that *After Theory* had already been used as a title less than a decade earlier, and indeed twice by the same author, may be another sign that a period of extraordinary critical innovation came to an end with the millennium.³

In such a time it is especially interesting to re-read Plato's *Protagoras*, for it too seems to have been written to take stock at the end of a great generation of critics. Probably written in the 380's, the *Protagoras* offered its first readers a richly imagined picture of poetic interpretation as practiced by the greatest minds in Periclean Athens nearly half a century before. The work begins with Socrates recounting how Hippocrates, a young man of good family, woke him that morning in hopes of gaining *entrée* into one of the greatest gatherings of sages Athens had ever seen. Hippocrates is mainly interested in Protagoras from Abdera, but Prodicus from Ceos and Hippias from Elis are also in town to give lectures and recruit students. Ultimately, these savants will fail to satisfy Socrates on the main philosophic questions he raises – whether human excellence (*aretê*) is teachable and whether it is a form of knowledge – but in the course of the discussion, near the middle of the *Protagoras*, we are given an extended scene showing how poetry was interpreted and analyzed by the most sophisticated critics of the age. No other Platonic work goes so deeply into literary criticism as a methodical attempt to interpret and evaluate poetry: the *Ion* tests the knowledge of the poet-performer and finds it wanting, but on the simplistic level of pointing out that Homer and his performers have no expert knowledge of what they talk about; the judging of poetry in the *Republic* and *Laws* is not literary in orientation but political, performed by state officials for political ends. By contrast, the *Protagoras* shows us Greece's leading experts on language and eloquence bringing to bear their technical knowledge, along with some new

² Judith Butler/ John Guillory/ Kendall Thomas (eds.), *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory (Essays from the English Institute)*, New York: Routledge, 2000. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Allen Lane, 2003. Eagleton had remarked on the decline of "pure" or "high" theory in the preface to the second edition of his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. viii-ix. Going a critical generation back, one finds the same stock-taking in Randall Jarrell's "The Age of Criticism", in: id., *Poetry and the Age*, New York: Knopf, 1953, focusing on such figures as John Crowe Ransom, F. R. Leavis, Frye, Yvor Winters, and Lionel Trilling.

³ Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism*, London: Routledge, 1990, and *After Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1996

technical terms, to analyze a poem in close detail, from matters of dialect (346d-e) and word-order (*hyperbaton*, 343e, 345e, 346e) down to punctuation (*dialabein* 346e) and the function of the particle *men* (343d). If Plato were writing the *Protagoras* for our time, he might set it in the 1970's, with young Hippocrates thinking about graduate study at the School of Criticism & Theory at Irvine, where Derrida, de Man and Jameson all happened to be passing through.

The precious evidence in the *Protagoras*, really the only thing of its kind in ancient literature, has been much studied, but it has proved very hard to judge what point Plato is making or even whether he has a serious point at all.⁴ On the one hand, it seems serious: one can recognize in the exegeses many of the assumptions and methods that still guide contemporary academic interpretation, as an analysis by Glenn Most will show; 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 seems to end by declaring itself a waste of time: Socrates brings the poetry discussion to a close by declaring that "it is not possible to interrogate the poets about what they mean; when people bring them up, some say that the poet means this and others that, and the point in dispute can never be decided" (347e-348a).⁵ He compares talking about poetry to pretentious dinner parties in which people "borrow the voices of poets because they are too ill-educated to converse properly with one another" (347c); he prefers a kind of discussion or "conversation" (347e: *διαλεγόμενοι*) that is more like dialectic, "dropping the extraneous voices of poets and putting one another and the truth itself to the test by exchanging *logoi* among ourselves" (347e-348a).

The naiveté of Socrates' assumption that only a poem's author knows its meaning⁶ and the fruitlessness of the discussion as a whole are among the

⁴ Richard B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato: Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation*, London: Duckworth, 1995, p. 122. For reviews of earlier studies see Fabio M. Giuiliano, "Esegesi letteraria in Platone: La discussione sul carne Simonideo nel *Protagora*", in: *Studi Classici e Orientali* 41/1991, pp. 105-190; Marian Demos, *Lyric Quotation in Plato*, Lanham et al: Roman & Littlefeld, 1999, pp. 1-18 (see the review by Velvet Yates in: *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, retrievable at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2000/2000-06-16.html>) and Grace M. Ledbetter, *Poetics Before Plato: Interpretation and Authority in Early Greek Theories of Poetry*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 99-117. Philosophers have tended to ignore the literary excursus until recently: see Jonathan Lavery, "Plato's Protagoras and the Frontier of Genre Research: A Reconnaissance Report from the Field", in: *Poetics Today* 28/2007, pp. 191-246, esp. p. 223.

⁵ All translations from the Greek are by the author.

⁶ Michael S. Silk, *Interaction in Poetic Imagery: With Special Reference to Early Greek Poetry*, Cambridge et al: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006, p. 234, sees intentionalism at the heart of Plato's approach to poetry, a "one in a million" attitude he as-

reasons why the passage has been written off as a sort of joke or under-interpreted as a polemic against a broad-brush caricature of ‘sophistry’.⁷ 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).⁸ Because Plato’s point and purpose are obscure, the *Protagoras* has often been neglected or given tangential mention in histories of Greek criticism.⁹ A main reason for this, in my view, is a larger problem with the scholarship on Plato’s views of poetry, which is that it has been lopsidedly obsessed with metaphysics, putting too much stress on the arguments about *mimesis* in *Republic* 10 to the exclusion of Plato’s manifold other observations – some admiring, some neutral – about poetry and its uses.¹⁰ The *Protagoras*, however, is focused not on *mimesis* but on exegesis and on the broader question of whether citing the poets and trying to understand them can help us in ethical exploration. In this dialogue at least, Socrates’ attitude to poetic authority is not anxious mistrust: he has quotations from Homer handy for any occasion (309b, 315b, c, 340a) and is able to quote from memory much of a complex ode by a poet no longer in fashion (344a-b); this Socrates

cribes to the philosopher’s rationalist hostility to poetry and suspicion of poetic form. During a recent conference on “Plato as Literary Critic” at the Ludwigs Maximilians Universität, Stephen Halliwell pointed out (in a paper entitled “Author, Text, and Meaning: Some Critical Problems in Plato”) that this is too flat as an account of Plato’s views, instancing, *inter alia*, *Apol.* 22, where poets are unable to say what their poems mean.

- ⁷ Ledbetter, *Poetics Before Plato* (see note 4), 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 and n. 11 below); I differ with Ledbetter’s attempt, the strongest, when she argues for a contrast between Socratic and “sophistic methodology” and sees the *Protagoras* as parodying “the relativist assumptions that typically inform sophistic interpretations of poetry” (p. 6); to my mind, this monolithic notion of sophistic criticism is a strawman that, among other defects, neglects the individuation of the sages in the dialogue; for all Socrates’ humor, I see his interpretative sallies not as parody but as doing as well as he can with such an intractable thing as a poem whose reputable author is not present to clarify uncertainties about his meaning.
- ⁸ Among those to address this question is Hans Baltussen, “Plato *Protagoras* 340-348: commentary in the making?”, in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47/2004, pp. 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” (p. 21).
- ⁹ So Ruth Scodel, “Literary Interpretation in Plato’s *Protagoras*”, in: *Ancient Philosophy* 6/1986, pp. 25-37, p. 25. To her examples in n. 2 add the too brief remarks in Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002, p. 154 and p. 202.
- ¹⁰ Among those who appreciate that Plato’s views on poetry are far richer than he is usually given credit for is Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002, Ch. 2.

responds to a poem by examining it to see if it is useful and likely to be true; if so, he is perfectly willing to cite the poem as a piece of wisdom.¹¹ The ‘Plato on poetry’ that can be discerned behind the *Protagoras* is not the relentless prosecutor of poets but more like a sociologist or cultural anthropologist, a detached and keen-eyed observer of how his elite fellow citizens make use of poetry and how they support the claims they make for it. For this reason, the usefulness of the *Protagoras* for critics of the present time extends beyond the provocation afforded by Socrates’ dismissive attitude to talk about poetry; Plato’s extended representation of high literary discourse also allows us to reflect on the function of criticism by comparing our practices with those in its formative stage 2,400 years ago.

I propose, therefore, first to bring out Plato’s implicit attitude toward poetic interpretation in the *Protagoras*, arguing that the work dramatizes not only the limits of criticism but also its inescapability. My discussion will begin with the first half of the dialogue (309a-338e) that sets the stage for the literary conversation and, with typical Platonic irony, makes Socrates’ wrangle with Protagoras address the present of Plato’s readers. Attending to context prepares us to see that expert criticism, what Protagoras calls “being formidable on the subject of verse” (δεινὸς περὶ ἐπῶν), was a rule-bound game, one among various genres of discourse on display, and in a second section I argue that Socrates’ performance as literary critic is not wholly parodic: its first part (339b-341e) is less than earnest and toys with the rules of the game; but when Socrates rises to Protagoras’ challenge and promises to show “my own position as far as your ‘verses’ go” (342a), 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.¹² Though his portrait has satiric touches, it tries to show critics doing about as well as

¹¹ See Scodel, “Literary Interpretation” (see note 9), pp. 34-35. For a rich inventory of examples in which “Plato cites poets as authorities on ethical matters” see Theodora Hadjimichal, *Bacchylides and the Emergence of the Lyric Canon*, PhD Diss., ULC, 2011, p. 137, n. 18, citing, e. g., *Rep.* 331a3, 331d5, 334a-b; *Men.* 95c-96a; *Phaedo* 94d7-95a2, 111e6-112a5.

¹² Dorothea Frede, “The Impossibility of Perfection: Socrates’ Criticism of Simonides’ Poem in the *Protagoras*”, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 39.4/1986, pp. 729-753, characterizes this section as “Socrates’ serious interpretation” not because it is a good-faith effort to extract Simonides’ meaning but because Socrates “imposes, consciously and forcefully, his own tenets on the poem” (p. 740). She is followed by Marina Berzins McCoy, “Socrates on Simonides: The Use of Poetry in Socratic and Platonic Rhetoric”, in: *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32.4/1999, pp. 349-367, who argues for a rhetorical, manipulative Socrates who “at the expense of honest hermeneutics” (p. 355) foists his own views on Simonides because “his hermeneutical aim is not poetic interpretation, but dialogue with the poet” (p. 359). Neither rather cynical reading imputed to Socrates seems worthy of the name dialogue.

they can with a difficult old poem. Finally, to support this reading, I will turn to Most's analysis, which shows not only that serious and defensible principles underlie Socrates' argument but that, on a number of basic points, Socrates' interpretative premises are the same as ours. Most's study will also allow me to compare, in a final section, the picture of criticism in 432 BC with our own practices. Taking his conclusions a step further suggests that one function that methodical criticism has served and continues to serve, though it is rarely acknowledged, is to aid us in remembering and preserving poems; conscientiously practiced criticism, despite its limitations and theoretical quandaries, serves as a mode of poetic re-performance and so ensures the preservation and transmission of the text, even when a full and final account of its meaning may continue to elude us.

Staging criticism

Although the *Protagoras* is set in a golden past, two ironic moments framing its prologue destabilize and undercut this temporal distancing and put the work into dialogue with audiences of later times. The first moment is found in the work's opening business: an unnamed speaker catches sight of Socrates and surmises that he has been on the hunt for Alcibiades "the fair" (309a); when he adds that he has noticed the youth's beard is coming in, there is a hint which – together with a few other indications and an anachronism – suggests a dramatic date around 432, when the historical Alcibiades would have been in his late teens and Socrates approaching 40.¹³ Now, 432 is five years before Plato was born, and pegging the text to the time when Alcibiades' youthful bloom had peaked stresses the past-ness of the story, setting it at an evanescent moment that can never be recaptured. At the same time, this vivid image invests the work with relevance for readers of later times, for the themes of the *Protagoras* crucially concern any young citizen on the verge of adulthood and independence. Such is Hippocrates, who presumably mirrored many of Plato's readers in his education and his openness to higher

¹³ See Debra Nails' discussion in *The People of Plato: a prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002, pp. 309-310. We know it must be before 429 because Pericles' sons are present, though they died in the plague of that year. This makes anachronistic the reference at 327d to "last year's" production of "The Wild Men" (*Agrioi*) by Pherecrates, as Athenaeus noticed (218d = Pherecrates Test. i PCG), that would place it in 420. See further Nikos Charalabopoulos, "The metatheatrical reader of Plato's *Protagoras*", in: Felix Budelmann/ Pantelis Michelakis (eds.), *Homer, Tragedy and Beyond. Essays in Honour of P. E. Easterling*, London: Soc. for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies 2001, pp. 149-178.

inquiry. Most importantly, Hippocrates shares with these readers a mediated relation to the ‘real’ Protagoras: he mentions that he knows of the sophist through 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 (310e). Readers of the text in the 380’s, when Protagoras had been dead for more than three decades, were in the same position and, it hardly needs to be added, so are readers of the work today; the *Protagoras* is a sort of novella set in the past, but is addressed to all young people on the verge of maturity and to those who care for them.

In reply to the unnamed speaker, Socrates says that he happened to have laid eyes on Alcibiades “this very day” and to have been supported by him in an argument. With this marker placed in the text (309b: we want to hear just what Alcibiades did to help Socrates, and we will at 336b), Socrates is induced to sit down and tell the whole story. The basic philosophic issues of the *Protagoras* come up as he recounts his conversation with Hippocrates while waiting for a decent hour to call: Socrates asks whether a sophistic education is vocational training or a liberal art, like the study of music or literature (*grammatikê*, 312b). Protagoras would seem to offer professional training, which is one implication of the controversial title “sophist” (311e) that he willingly accepts; the well born Athenian Hippocrates, however, blushes at the suggestion that he aspires to become a sophist himself (312a) and ventures that Protagoras’ expertise is in knowing how to make someone a “formidable” or “awe-inspiring” speaker (312d: ἐπιστάτην τοῦ ποιῆσαι δεινὸν λέγειν). Socrates accepts this as at least part of the truth, possibly because he knows that *deinos* can mean “awful” as well as “awe-inspiring”.¹⁴

A series of scenes much loved by literary commentators (314c-316a) gets them inside Callicles’ grand house where the sages are staying, and Plato marks the formal beginning of the encounter by having Socrates refer back to the frame of his narrative and “Alcibiades the fair” (316a). 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 the company adopts. Such a focus reveals that this part of *Protagoras* is a sustained experiment in the best way to conduct a discussion or conversation:¹⁵ the partici-

¹⁴ We find out later (341a-b) that whenever Socrates was inclined to praise a sophist as σοφὸς καὶ δεινός Prodicus corrected him, pointing out that *deinos* should properly mean “bad, terrible”. (Prodicus is being finicky; for *deinos* in a positive sense, cf. *Ion* 531a where it describes Ion’s professional skill as performer and explainer of Homeric poetry.)

¹⁵ On Plato’s use of *dialogesthai* for “conversation”, which does not necessarily entail formal dialectic, see Andrew Ford, “The Origins of Dialogue”, in: Simon Goldhill (ed.), *The End of Dialogue*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008, pp. 34-39.

pants try out a number of modes of debate, explicitly deliberating about “in what fashion are we to talk together” (336b: τίς ὁ τρόπος ἔσται τῶν διαλόγων).¹⁶ 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 selected. The philosophical argument does not advance very far in this section, but its focus on formats for exchanging views prepares us to see the literary discussion as yet another genre of discourse, a language game in need of rules.

The importance of choosing the right mode of speech comes out as soon as the pilgrims meet Protagoras: his first question when they are introduced is whether they wish to converse with him alone or in company (316b). Socrates leaves the choice up to him, and Protagoras thanks him for his consideration: 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 launches into a speech (316c-317c) justifying his profession with the provocative argument that “sophists” are nothing more than experts in improving men and have been around for a very long time; this is a paradox since “sophist” seems to have been a fifth-century neologism coined to name the purveyors of new and unsettling forms of higher education in the post-Persian War cultural boom.¹⁷ Protagoras contends that earlier wise men were actually sophists but pretended to exercise other arts because, then as now, the title was regarded with suspicion in some quarters: Homer, Hesiod and Simonides pretended to be poets; Orpheus and Musaeus to communicate religious lore; even acknowledged teachers of the present day, like Herodiscus the expert in gymnastics or Agathocles the musician, are closet sophists since they make men better. Protagoras only differs from them in admitting he is a sophist, a professional educator, for he considers it pointless to try to deceive the truly wise by hiding his teaching under another name. By this brilliant, ironic and charming discourse, Protagoras paradoxically depicts his modern teaching as the continuation of venerable tradition and insinuates to potential pupils that the ability to see the value in sophistry is a mark of discernment.

Being the open sort that he is, Protagoras proposes to hold their discussion before “any and everybody who is in the house” (ἀπάντων ἐναντίον τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων, 317c). Socrates opines, in a comic aside, that what Protagoras really wanted was to show off before his rivals Prodicus and Hippias, but this humorous moment opens up a second ironic appeal to the reader:

¹⁶ Cf. 329a-b, 331c, 333c, 334d, 336a-d, 347c-348a, 360e-361e.

¹⁷ On the semantics of the word see Andrew Ford, “Sophistic”, in: *Common Knowledge* 1.5/1993, pp. 33-47 with reference to earlier studies.

Protagoras' invitation to "those within" to listen in on the proceedings is, pragmatically, also an invitation to "those without", i. e., the readers of *Protagoras*, to follow the discussion as well. Plato's beguiling fantasy of the good old days offers readers of any time the alluring prospect of overhearing great talk.

Accordingly, a sort of conference is convened and all sit down to converse "in session".¹⁸ In this quasi-public format, Protagoras begins by taking questions, for, like other sophists, he "delights in answering questions that are well put" (318d).¹⁹ Socrates' questions reveal that they disagree as to whether *aretê* 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" his wisdom on this matter (320b: μή φθονήσης ἀλλ' ἐπίδειξον). Now the *epideixis*, the elaborate, often mythical or paradoxical display speech, was the main showpiece 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 (μῦθον), as an old man speaks to younger men, or shall I go through the argument (λόγῳ) in detail?" (320c). The company leave this up to Protagoras, and he chooses to tell a myth because he finds doing so more "agreeable" (320c: χαριέστερον). Protagoras' capriciousness suggests that he could do either, and he ends up doing both: his myth of how Prometheus and Epimetheus gave everyone an equal share of political wisdom (320d-323c) explains that Athens is right to run her political assemblies as she does and so answers Socrates' first argument (323c-324d). Then with further signposting he turns "from myth to logos" (324d: οὐκ ἐτι μῦθόν σοι ἐρῶ ἀλλὰ λόγον) to explain why excellent people do not always raise excellent children. This *logos* is an inference from observable facts, such as the rules and punishments prescribed in schools and in the laws which imply that children can learn to be good. Protagoras' display comes to a close with the declaration that he has answered both of Socrates' doubts through both myth and logos (328c: ἐγὼ καὶ μῦθον καὶ λόγον εἴρηκα).

Socrates finds the *epideixis* spellbinding and is persuaded, except for a little rub (328e: πλὴν σμικρόν τί μοι ἐμποδῶν). To pursue this he begs

¹⁸ 317d: συνέδριον κατασκευάσωμεν, ἵνα καθεζόμενοι διαλέγησθε. The word (the source, via Aramaic, of the Jewish Sanhedrin) is used both of formal and informal meetings in 4th-century Greek.

¹⁹ Hippias also stood for questions from the crowd (*Hippias minor* 363a-c). Cf. Gorgias in *Gorg.* 448a: "I haven't had a new question put to me in many years".

Protagoras to change his mode of discourse, leaving aside the long speeches he's shown he can do so well and switching to the sophistic trick of "brief-talk" or brachylogy (329b: ἀποκρίνασθαι κατὰ βραχύ). In the short-answer mode Protagoras is quickly led down the garden path: using gross equivocations (e. g. 'justice must itself be just', 330c ff.), Socrates makes him contradict himself and presses his advantage by cutting down Protagoras' rhetorical options further when he asks him not to take refuge in answers qualified by "if" (331c-d). Protagoras' temper soon begins 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), pleading that his comprehension is feeble and that Protagoras, an avowed expert in both styles, should accommodate him (335b-c). Protagoras, for his part, didn't get to be Greece's champion debater by letting others dictate the terms and refuses to abandon long speeches (335a). Socrates declares he has an errand to go on (335c) for he wants a dialogical conversation and not "demagogic" long speeches (336b: δημηγορεῖν). As he is about to leave, the others intervene and broker an agreement to let the conversation go on. Here we reach another section-marker in the dialogue, beckoning once more to the opening frame: it is the intervention of Alcibiades that helps keep things going (336b ff.; cf. 309a). The compromise that is worked out is that Protagoras will ask first, and then take his turn answering. Once again we will be changing discursive modes: with Protagoras now in a position to direct the inquiry, the conversation will turn to literary criticism.

Summing up this first portion of the dialogue, we may characterize most of the modes of speech on display as 'sophistic' specialties for which parallels can be found in Plato's *Gorgias*. That work also pays a great deal of attention to how to conduct "the art of conversation".²⁰ *Gorgias* begins with the great sophist having just finished one of his display speeches (447a-b) and having challenged to the audience to ask him any question whatever (447c). As in *Protagoras*, the sophist's modes of display are contrasted with the "conversation" (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 the tyro's discourse, but it easily could have gone on along the lines of Protagoras' μῦθος on Prometheus and Epimetheus. As in *Protagoras*, long-form disquisitions are rejected by Socrates, opposing them as "rhetoric" to "conversation" (448d). He entreats Gorgias to practice brachylogy (449b) and sugarcoats

²⁰ *Gorg.* 448d; cf. 449b-c, 453b-c, 454c, 457c-458c, 461c-462a, 465e-466a, 471e-472d, 474a-b, 475e, 486d-487b, 505e-506a, 509a.

the request, as in *Protagoras*, by citing his expertise in speaking (457c; cf. *Prot.* 335a). Most generally, one finds the same concern for civilized social intercourse as in *Protagoras* when Socrates deplors occasions in which people conducting a public debate feel threatened by honest requests for clarification and fall into abusing each other with the result that the audience regrets having attended the session (457c-d).²¹ Whatever advantages it may offer in prompting philosophic dialectic, conversation (*διαλέγεσθαι*) is recommended in both works as the format that best facilitates the even-tempered exchange and examination of views.²²

Socrates peri epôn deinos

So it is that when in *Protagoras* the reins are given to Protagoras, he shifts the conversation about virtue yet again, “transferring it onto poetry” (339a), one of his specialties. He begins by asserting that, “The most important part of education is being formidable on the subject of verse” (*περὶ ἐπῶν δεινὸν εἶναι*, 338e); this means “understanding what is said by the poets, both well and ill, being able to tell the difference and to defend one’s views if challenged” (339a). Unlike the earlier modes of discourse paralleled in Gorgias, this agonistic form of criticism seems to have been a Protagorean specialty; it was very likely connected with the linguistic expertise he advertised as “correct verbal expression” or *orthoepia* (339d).²³

The game of displaying sophistication about poetry usually began with someone quoting a bit of poetry and declaring it good or bad and then defending that judgment against all challengers.²⁴ Protagoras shows how it is done by quoting the opening of a song by Simonides, a poet whose last work was in the early 460’s: “Now for a man to become good truly is hard

²¹ Eliot sympathizes in his “Function of Criticism”: “[...] we perceive that criticism, far from being a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity, from which impostors can be readily ejected, is no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators, who have not even arrived at the articulation of their differences.” (in: *The Criterion* 2.5/1923, pp. 31-42, here p. 33).

²² Rutherford, *The Art of Plato* (see note 4), notices the many shifts in discussion and takes them to be at once illustrative of speakers’ personalities and a main unifying factor in the work “to illustrate [...] right and wrong ways of approaching a discussion of ethical or any other themes” (p. 132).

²³ See Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968, pp. 37-39 and pp. 280-281.

²⁴ See Detlev Fehling, “Zwei Untersuchungen zur griechischen Philosophie”, in: *Rheinisches Museum* 108/1965, pp. 212-229.