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Ancient Philosophy and Poetry: Good Cop, Bad Cop

c r i t i c s :
Malcolm Heath, *Interpreting
Classical Texts*, Londyn 2002

Classical poetics is an area rich in traditions. It has been practiced by many outstanding scholars, yet whose voices are rarely to be heard outside the bounds of classical philology, boundaries maintained by the tradition of poetics itself. Of course there are superstars of academia who have emerged from that tradition to become recognizable names in the wider world: Heidegger, Derrida, de Man and so on, but those are, generally speaking, rather exegeses of chosen concepts from ancient culture (such as Heidegger's *eidolon* or Derrida's *pharmakon*), drawing inspiration from ancient poetics and loosely fitted to contemporary life, than actual philological analyses.

Malcolm Heath certainly does not follow in those footsteps – his book does not “use” classical poetics in order to create a theory of the (contemporary) text. Nor is he the type of scholar who would treat such efforts with airy disregard, unbecoming of a classical philologist. For Heath, as is evident from the quasi-autobiographical introduction to *Interpreting Classical Texts*, tries to place his penetrating analyses somewhere in between these two poles:

When I started working on a doctoral thesis on Greek tragedy in 1980, it seemed obvious to me that I should devote a significant portion of my time and effort to thinking systematically about what I was trying to do. The eccentricity of this idea (at the time, Classics at Oxford was not a hotbed of literary theory) carried through into my conclusions: an interpretative project that was intentionalist (but not like Hirsch) and reception-theoretical (but not like Jauss), set in the context of a larger framework that viewed the diversity of interpretative projects in a critically (but not syncretistically) pluralist light, and underpinned by an approach to enquiry that was hermeneutic (but not like Gadamer) and pragmatist (but not like Rorty), and by an approach to language that did not see Saussure as a fruitful starting-point, and therefore had no interest in the games that could be played with his deconstructed remains.¹

¹ Heath, Malcolm. *Interpreting Classical Texts*. London: Duckworth, 2002, p. 7.

These words evince a desire to speak about ancient poetics in a way far removed from the hermeneutic exegeses of philologists, but which also keeps its distance from the anachronistic approach to the subject taken by contemporary theory. Heath's stance toward the latter is, as we see, sceptical but not entirely hostile (except, perhaps, his barely veiled antipathy toward deconstruction). As a result, both the book quoted above and the greater part of Heath's writings represent an attempt to extract from the ancient tradition aspects that enable us to understand its influence on our contemporaneity, but undertaken in such a way as not to violate its original context.

One of Heath's more recent books, *Ancient Philosophical Poetics*,² was published within a series called "Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy," intended by the publishers to present "a discussion of... debates of real philosophical interest, placed within their historical context, "designed for use in a teaching context," but also meant to "appeal to anyone interested in the enduring influence and significance of ancient philosophy."³ Heath's program thus fits beautifully with the publishers' designated aim. And in fact, in his incisive analysis of the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Maximus of Tyre, Plotinus, Longinus, and others, Heath attempts to show the reader the logic of the ancients' reasoning about what poetry and literature mean without venturing beyond the horizon of ancient philosophy (so as to be "reception-theoretical, but not like Jauss"). In Heath's book, we therefore do not find a single reference to the presence of epistemological or gnoseological currents from Greek philosophy in contemporary literary theory – though the book features an abundance of passages in which such associations thrust themselves at the reader. For example, it is hard not to think about the formalist categories of *fabula* and *siuzhet* (and Derrida's subsequent refutation of them) when Heath explains the intricacies of the too-often oversimplified concept of unity of action in Aristotle ("The beginning happens *after* other things, but it must not be a necessary or probable *consequen-*

ce of anything else"⁴). To invoke those categories would surely rend easier the task of proceeding through an argument over some dozen-odd pages based on the concept of probability in nature, free choice of the will (*phrohairesis*), and so on, but would not satisfy a) the "Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy" series' important criterion of being accessible to the general public, and b) would infuse Heath's discourse with anachronism. As a result, we find in his argumentation not only few of the references to present-day theory that are typical in such a context (if nothing else in the form of footnotes clarifying that "we now refer to this concept as [x]..."), but even remarkably few metaphors drawn from the modern age (and given the book's propaedeutical purpose – "designed for use in a teaching context" – it is easy to imagine an explanation of Plato's Cave that would incorporate references to television or virtual reality).

The author himself makes the following declaration at the outset:

This is a book about ancient philosophical poetics. It is not concerned with ancient literary theory, criticism or scholarship in general. Those are interesting topics with important implications for our understanding of ancient poetry. Here, however, our concern is with ancient attempts to answer specifically philosophical questions about poetry.⁵

In practice this means that Heath has more to tell us about why Plato (or Socrates, on whose behalf Plato writes) regarded poets as one of the lowest castes of his ideal state ("They rank below philosophers (of course), but also below constitutional monarchs and military leaders; politicians, household managers and businessmen; athletic trainers and doctors; and prophets and practitioners of religious rites. They come just above sophists and farmers; craftsmen and demagogues; and tyrants"⁶) or how the views of Aristotle, unlike those of Plato/Socrates, result from his inclinations toward natural science ("Plato's taxonomy of poetic modes was

² Heath, Malcolm. *Ancient Philosophical Poetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

³ *Ibid.*, p. i.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

a static map of the possibility space; Aristotle's reconfiguration fits his developmental approach. The nature of poetry, **as of any natural phenomenon**, is shown in its fully developed form⁷), than in offering us a methodical lecture on the concept of the "literary work" elaborated by any of them. And though along the way the reader becomes acquainted with the basic concepts of poetics that constitute each philosopher's views on poetry, the accent in these considerations falls, in the end, more on the ontology of art as an epistemological tool, or how it appears in the eyes of the philosophers (though in the context of an analytical exposition of even the most difficult philosophical threads, we may still be astonished by rather detailed explanations of Plato's above-mentioned Cave,⁸ the Socratic method,⁹ and other such widely-known phenomena, undoubtedly due to the pedagogical aspect of the work, referred to earlier). And since the book begins with Plato, poetry must naturally, viewed through the prism of his philosophy, find itself on the bench of the accused.

Plato, as we know, purged poets from his ideal state, because their ability to make evil alluring, their tendency to make the gods quarrelsome, indeed, their tendency to make labours still more laborious and the ridiculous even more absurd, could demoralize youth, who should be formed in virtue, not in delinquency, quarrels or vain hilarity. What the state needs more than anything are watchmen and philosophers; the latter, rather than poets, will explain life to the young, for it is their wisdom, and not the vanity of artists, that ensures good knowledge about life. What is such knowledge based upon? If it is based on following exalted models, comments Heath,¹⁰ then it would suffice to ban only a certain portion of poetry (such as the Homeric epics, which would not exist without the quarrelsome gods, who constitute the motor of plot intrigue), leaving the noble poetry that boosts good examples. Plato

⁷ Ibid., p. 82 (emphasis mine). See also pp. 94-95 on the difference between Plato and Aristotle's views on the propriety of comedy, which result from the fact that the latter believed the genre to possess a natural ability to soothe psychological tensions.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 44ff.

(or Socrates), Heath observes, actually refers to such a possible solution (sparing a few "correct" poets); but such procedures cannot form the basis of poetry's rehabilitation, which Heath claims can nonetheless be effected using Plato and other Platonists. The basis of knowledge is not imitation, or the ability to present in a beautiful form something not intrinsically beautiful, but truth:

Since imitation is of appearances, it is not necessary to understand (or even have true beliefs about) what something really is to produce an imitation of it. That is why it is possible to imitate many things. If imitation required understanding, imitators would have to be specialists; an indiscriminate imitator is necessarily an ignorant imitator [...].¹¹

Poets can thus reveal what is true and good, but in the end frequently do not know what truth and goodness are. They not only do not perceive these values in their own songs, but can also err in not knowing what they seek. That is why the state needs philosophers – they are intent on seeking the good (rather than applause, like poets), and so only they are capable of doing so. However, Heath continues, that still does not settle the question. If we read Plato in the broadest possible context, meaning also through later Platonists, then his/Socrates' charges against Homer are in fact reservations about his claims to know truth. Those claims are, it is true, unjustified philosophically, but fit entirely within the concept of poetry (and, in a sense, knowledge) as divine power. The prophet and the poet have, in short, the right to speak of things they do not understand, and their lack of understanding in no way contradicts the truth of those things. Socrates, as Heath demonstrates, was by no means absolutely opposed to prophets. The accusation made by Platonists (and thus certainly to some degree by Plato and Socrates as well) against Homer can therefore be reduced to the fact that like a prophet, a poet speaks truth, but firstly and as noted above, without understanding it, and secondly, he does so in a complicated way:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 45.

Plato frequently examines ideas from the poets, and in doing so often exposes poetry's inadequacy as a source of wisdom. Polemarchus quotes Simonides in *Republic* I, but when Socrates tests the quotation, it turns out to be either false, or else a typically poetic riddle (I, 332b–c: see §2.2). (...) Socrates concludes that [proponents of a poetic quotation] are talking in riddles. The fact that poetry often seems to be either wrong or riddling poses a problem, since we cannot ask dead poets what they mean, and we cannot reach agreement on their meaning (Prt. 347e; Hi.Min. 365c–d).¹²

The meaning referred to in the last sentence is not, however, semasiological and teleological meaning understood as the deliberate creation of a quality. In order to explain what it is, Heath engages Aristotle, who within the structure of the book represents a kind of mediator between Plato, a foe of poets (on the surface only, as we know, or at any rate, not fundamentally), who opens the book, and the continuators of his tradition (in fact, as Heath admits, highly selective in their use of the master's thought¹³ and, as a result, much less nuanced in their condemnation of poets¹⁴). Aristotle, whom Heath presents projecting his experiences as a biologist onto his understanding of poetics – illustrates perfectly the area where poetry approaches philosophy; though he, too, values poetry less highly, he deems both to be simply seeking the beautiful and the good for the sake of beauty and goodness themselves: "Listening to fine music or watching drama or athletics are activities less worthwhile than philosophy, but still worth choosing for their own sake."¹⁵ The fusion of this position with the views of Plato and Platonists significantly changes their criticism of Homer (and other poets, but Homer is the main defendant here); now the charges against him are reduced to the idea that to grasp the truth of his songs, an enormous interpretative effort must be invested in understanding them, as with interpreting the prophecies of the oracle of Delphi:

¹²Ibid., p. 143.

¹³"That seems to be a long way from Plato's Homer. But Porphyry and the many other later Platonists who took this view thought that they were in agreement with Plato on this point" (Ibid., s. 137).

¹⁴Ibid., p. 104ff.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 103.

By confronting us with the shocking consequences of reading Homer as an [uncomprehending] imitator, Plato aims to jolt us into recognising for ourselves that we must abandon a superficial approach to Homer that prevents us from discovering the deeper truths.¹⁶

(...)

The hypothesis, then, is that Plato's aim in confronting us so forcefully with the implications of a superficial reading of Homer is to shock us out of that superficiality. The conclusion we should draw is that Homer's poetry expresses deep philosophical truths in a symbolic mode. This does not necessarily mean that Homer himself had reached insight into those truths through philosophical thinking, or that he could have explained or justified them in the face of a Socratic interrogation. Rather, those truths came to him from outside, through divine inspiration—as, indeed, Plato has told us explicitly elsewhere.¹⁷

From this examination of the gist of Heath's argument (presented here in extremely simplified form), I draw the following conclusion: using language that minimizes the risk of muddying up a philosophical discussion dating back several millennia, this scholar has succeeded in showing us an astonishingly contemporary group of philosopher-poets and poet-philosophers. The first effect of this explanatory reading of those ancient praises and (more often) indictments of poetry by philosophers is, obviously, to make them now appear to be contemporary literary theorists who plainly or quietly declare that without them literature would be incomprehensible (for after all, nowadays even theses of the decline of grand narratives – including theoretical ones – or postulates of loving, non-overtheorizing communion with the text have, as we know, themselves become grand narratives or grand theories of everything). A second, less obvious effect, however, is that since the philosopher has thus become a "poet of interpretation," the poet, for his part,

¹⁶Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 146.

begins to look like a philosopher: if Homer knew a truth but did not understand it, then his error consisted not in being a poet, but in being a philosopher; he was simply a bad one.

Jonathan Culler, defending the position of literature in times when the boundaries of literariness have moved so far that its identity is thrown into doubt, wrote the following:

“Literature may have lost its centrality as a specific object of study, but its modes have conquered: in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences everything is literary. Indeed, if literature is, as we used to say, that form of discourse which knows its own fictionality, then, insofar as the effect of theory has been to inform disciplines of both the fictionality and performative efficacy of their constructions, there seems a good deal to be said in favour of Simpson’s account of the situation of disciplines. Insofar as disciplinary discourses have come to engage with the problem of their positionality, their situatedness, and the constructedness of their schemes, they participate in the literary.”¹⁸

As I have tried to show, Heath succeeded in doing something similar for the position of poetry in the context of ancient philosophy, where it was often looked on with disfavour. And in any case he was naturally starting out from the reverse position, i.e., the view that “everything in the humanities is philosophical,” so that in his book poetry acquires some of that philosophical lustre. Most importantly, though: he managed to do it without resorting to help from the minds he mentioned with distrust at the outset: Hirsh, Gadamer, Jauss, Rorty. Or, for that matter, Culler.

¹⁸J. Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 41.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The author discusses Malcolm Heath's book *Ancient Philosophical Poetics*, in which Heath attempts to present ancient Greek philosophical views on poetry to both an academic audience and non-specialists. Leading with the warning that the essay is not concerned with what literary theory looked like in ancient Greece, but rather how philosophy looked at poetry, Heath reveals the views of the philosophers on truth and goodness in poetry. Though most often these views relegate poetry to a lower status than philosophy (Heath's focus is on the philosophy of Plato and the Platonists, with some consideration given to Aristotle), *Ancient Philosophical Poetics* demonstrates conclusively that, for example, the famous Platonic dictum that poets should be exiled from the ideal state is really a call to read their work with greater insight. The author of this essay presents and commends Heath's book as an example of a highly contemporary approach to ancient philosophy and poetics, and simultaneously one refreshingly free of anachronism.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Paweł Wolski, a member of the faculty at the Department of Theory and Anthropology of Literature in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Szczecin, he completed his PhD at the University Of Szczecin and also received a degree from Università degli Studi di Genova. Wolski was the 2014 Fulbright Visiting Professor at Brandeis University (USA), and is co-editor of the scholarly periodicals *Autobiografia* and *Narracje o Zagładzie*. He is the head of the Polish Language and Culture School at the University of Szczecin. Journals in which he has published work include *Teksty Drugie*, *Storia della Storiografia*, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, *Porównania* and other Polish and foreign periodicals. His translations from English, French, Italian and German have also been published.