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PLATONIC BEGINNINGS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

THEORY

Protagoras which Diogenes Laertius says had a second title *On Sophists* (although it could just as well be called *On Virtue* or *Can Virtue Be Taught?*) contains a rather exceptional fragment. It concerns the interpretation of a poetic work. From the point of view of its subject, this fragment only seems to be strictly immersed in the context surrounding it. It is also there that the sophists, virtue and the teaching of virtue are discussed. In actual fact, however, the fragment is clearly separated from the whole dialogue, especially from the point of view of composition. It creates a whole which has a strictly defined beginning and end. They make up the compositional framework and grant a great deal of independence—what one could actually call autonomy within the dialogue. Also literally, the whole is extremely varied and rich, even dramatized. This is why it reminds us of a construction of independent Platonic dialogues.[1] Here it is a miniature dialogue in a much wider, though loosely built, dialogue. Looking at it more closely, it turns out that it also possesses a thematic discriminant which will be the already mentioned matter of interpretation, presented in a multi-storeyed way and seemingly in a very clear manner. The presentation also appears to be different than in Plato's other dialogues: it resembles a treatise more than a dialogue (although in spirit it is deeply anti-treatise).

The whole dialogue (*Protagoras*), in which this miniature either emerges or has been cleverly hidden, gives not so much real content as the pretext of a situation, of speakers, etc. Its function does not even reach what we usually call the groundwork or substratum. Although this little dialogue treatise is entwined so strongly and in so many different ways, this function certainly gives it a rather worrying ambiguity, multiformity, and makes it multidimensional.

Where does this dazzling, blinding clarity come from then? The answer is simple: it comes primarily from clearly formulated assumptions and aims, and secondly, from the great functionalizations of elements, based on them being highly subordinated to those aims. As far as the former is concerned, our miniature reminds us of *Phaedrus* while from the latter point of view, it is nearer

[1] In literature on the subject of the artistic form of Plato's dialogues, one talks even about their similarity to tragedy. In Polish literature see T. Sinko, *Zarys literatury greckiej*, t. I (*An Outline of Greek Literature*, vol. I), Warszawa 1959, pp. 893—894.

Symposium. From the theoretical and literary point of view, maybe it is a Symposium.

The assumptions and aims are not only clearly formulated but are also simple. The same applies to the situation (consituation) from which they originate. It (the situation) can be presented briefly in the following manner: Protagoras, a pupil of Democritus, a great rhetorician, famous writer and scholar, finding himself in trouble during a public discussion with the then still young but already "impossible" Socrates, challenges him to participate in a competition on the interpretation of poetry (in actual fact, it concerned one of Gimonides' odes). In summoning Socrates to what was formed mainly by him himself, Protagoras presents the principles and meaning of the competition in a few points:

1. Protagoras wishes to check how Socrates manages when he is faced with a literary work. This is very important: not how much knowledge one has on literature in general, on information concerning who knows more works, writers, historical and literary facts or even who has obtained more theoretical and literary knowledge, but to check how such a competitor (in this case Socrates) manages when he comes face to face with a literary work.

2. Such activity, explains Platonic Protagoras extremely professionally, leads to being able

a) "to apprehend, in the utterances of the poets, what has been rightly and what wrongly composed" (339a)[2]

b) "to know how to distinguish them" (*ibid*)

c) "to account for them when questioned." (*ibid*)

In other words, the ability, not to say the art, of interpretation seems to embrace mainly three things: 1) understanding the content (meaning) of the work ("the utterances of the poets"—339a), 2) evaluation—let us not go into what type yet, but what is in the work: the content, meaning, 3) an analysis of the work that is to show what is within and serves to prove interpretative theses. In Protagoras' enumeration, the two first aspects, differentiated by us, are combined (cf. a) while the third aspect (cf. b) holds a separate place. The most ambiguous and complex element is that of interpretation which discusses the ability to answer questions. It seems to appear in a threefold role: it is 1) the way of understanding (to understand is to answer), 2) the degree of achieved ability (to know is to answer any question with ease), 3) a method of interpretation (to interpret means in the given case not to write something but to speak, to answer questions).

3. It is necessary to stress here that according to Protagoras, being able to interpret a work is "the greatest part of a man's education" (338e). He who can interpret a poetic work better and more competently is the more educated, possesses his own deeper education.

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[2] Plato's *Protagoras* is quoted here by W. R. M. Lamb, vol. IV, 1924.

Spiritual education here is neither the knowledge of social etiquette nor of good manners, nor erudition (knowledge) nor even rhetoric ability, esteemed later so highly by the Greeks (especially in Sophist circles) and Romans, nor the ability to write poetry, which, in the future, Diogenes Laertius will be so proud of, not to mention Petronius' famous character, Eumolpus. What is more, it will not be the knowledge of masterpieces or what we call literary sensitivity, which is a way of being in a more direct and less linguistic contact with literature. Thus, it does not require discussions on literary works but only to feel and experience them. Therefore, in our opinion, it is not a literary education at all, although it has been prescribed such properties in more modern times. It is mainly based on interpretation as an oral answer to the work and about the work, an answer founded on understanding and being the opinion, resulting from the axiological and cognitive attitude of the interpreter.

4. In his challenge, Protagoras does not limit himself to defining the tasks, the subject and aims but also describes the subject or problem in a very precise manner, interpreting the work in this way and giving the subject a certain direction. Thus the interpretation is not to be global, full, etc., but according to its subject and problem.

Protagoras is convinced that a problem taken from life can be transferred, without changing its actual status, to poetry and there discussed. He says "That will be the only difference" (339a). This does not mean, however, that he has something more in mind than this "one difference". Maybe, he believes that it will be better for the solving of problems because, e.g. artists know more; or there is more wisdom and subtlety in poetry; or in using other people's voices, i. e. poets', we can embrace the matter from different angles, with insight and more objectively than when we talk from our own point of view, in our own name and when we get personally involved.

5. The beginning of the competition, as if in the prologue, immediately shows what Protagoras understood by the notion "rightly composed" (cf. 2a). It means that the ode "is finely and correctly composed" (339b). Its (nesessary? sufficient? main?) condition will be the absence of a work of inner contradictions in the stratum of thought and intellect. A poetic work must be onsistent because it is not "finely composed if the poet contradicts himself" (339b). A logical test turns out to be the first criterion of evaluating a work. This is necessary in order to define its artistic value. If it withstands this test, it can become the subject of further qualification.

Actually, the whole interpretative competition will take place in accordance with Protagoras' suggestion—around the issue whether Simonides' poem (ode) in matters concerning bravery (virtue) reveals an inner contradiction of a logical nature, or not. Protagoras' thesis is that such a contradiction exists. Socrates, on the other hand, believes otherwise. We shall return later to the course of the interpretation.

It is natural that Socrates' assumptions and aims were different, just as his position in the competition was different. Socrates was the one who was directly

concerned with Protagoras' doubts as well as of those of many other learned men when the topic was spiritual education. It is well known that he never wrote anything. For him this was a public examination. During the competition, he was to reveal his interpretative abilities in order to prove that he was an educated man, worthy of holding his own in a discussion with such men as: Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias. That is why Socrates decides to meet the challenge and reveal his interpretative abilities, accepting the rules of interpretation acknowledged by others although he likes neither the rules nor the weight that is attached in this circle to one's interpretative powers, nor to the understanding of "spiritual education" which is based on such fragile foundations as that of the above mentioned ability to interpret a poetical work. Thus he accepts the rules of literary interpretation but, at the same time, tries to reveal their weak points. Here he includes primarily freedom of interpretation. Concerning interpreters, Socrates says that "we are generally told by some that the poet thought so and so and by others, something different, and they go on arguing about a matter which they are powerless to determine" (347e). They are powerless not through lack of knowledge or ability but due to the subject of interpretation. A poetic work is no good as material proof as it does not possess anything that is certain, it has no stable foundation. A poetic text is like plasticine—it has no form of its own. But because it is like that, a clever interpreter may form anything he wants from it: any figure or decoy-duck; he can "prove" everything that comes to his mind. During the competition, Socrates showed without a shadow of a doubt, that that is how matters actually stood. [3]

By no means is the matter limited to the natural flexibility of a poetic work. Freedom of interpretation resulting from the flexibility of the text comes also from the fact that especially in a written work there is no living author, that there is no speaking person present. A work, like any written word in comparison with the spoken word (cf. e.g. *Phaedrus*, 275d—276a) is objectified. It becomes something that rolls in every direction and can be handled by everyone. The author is powerless. It lives the independent life of dead objects. This is what differentiates the language of a poetic work from that "living language of man that is full of spirit" (Ph. 276a) which the master directly inscribes in his pupil's soul. Thus phrases like: what did the author have in mind, wish to say or says, that are an open or hidden interpretative attitude, lose any sense of being. A work (written) is an objectified and conserved "extraneous voice" (P. 347d—e) behind which there is no living man any more. An extraneous voice, made up in this way and deprived of its author, on the one hand—as we have already mentioned—makes the work flexible while on the other, is the reason why the work is deaf to all questions. It is also dead because it cannot give appropriate answers, choose its addressee and turn to definite people. It is not able to think. It creates only appearances of life and thought. In actual fact, though, it repe-

[3] P. Vicaire stresses the role of pastiche in the Platonic criticism of rhetorics in *Protagoras*, cf. P. Vicaire, *Platon critique littéraire*, Paris 1960, pp. 295—301.

ats only one and the same thing over and over again like a scratched record. This is discussed widely and directly in *Phaedrus*. Here, in *Protagoras*, the characteristics of the extraneous voice are superficial and even casual to a certain extent. However, it unearths its most important objective and instrumental features which exclude understanding interpretation as a dialogue (conversation) with the work. And what is even more important, it strongly stresses the opposition of two voices: the extraneous voice and one's own.

Even if we were to overthrow the thesis of the author's absence in the work, not much good would come of it. What do we gain if we find the poet? He will not explain anything to us as he does not know himself what he says or writes in moments of inspiration. Plato often repeats these views in his dialogues (cf. *Ion*, *The Apology of Socrates* and others). In *Protagoras* as if to complete his argument, he states that such a gathering "requires no extraneous voices, not even of the poets, whom one cannot question on the sense of what they say" (347c). From the very beginning, at the source of their creativity, poets do not talk from themselves but speak in an "extraneous voice" of inspiration, as it were from nature. They do not have a voice of their own.

The interpreter of a poetic work is, in actual fact, dealing here with an extraneous voice that is of a second degree. The matter can be presented more or less in the following way: if art is the imitation of imitation, a poetic work is, if one may say so, strangeness of strangeness. The second degree results from the fact that the author (of a poetic work) is the poet who is the personification of the "extraneous voice" as he is, according to "Ion", the interpreter of the gods (cf. I., 534e). This definitely and finally eliminates the possibility of conducting a conversation with a poetic work during its interpretation.

There is yet one more aspect of the matter that both interests and annoys Plato to a great extent in *Protagoras*. It does not concern either poetry or the poet but interpretation and the interpreter. A literary interpretation, which can never be a conversation between the interpreter and the work, takes place on a completely different plane—on the social plane. It is an element of contact between people, a part of the inter-human dialogue. The interpreter speaks not with the work (it would be a dialogue with the deaf) and not with the poet (it would be a dialogue with somebody who does not know what he is saying) or with the ghosts of poets (as poets do not have their own voice, it may be that they do not have their own ghosts either) but with other people similar to themselves. Interpretation solely serves his conversation. It means that it makes use of somebody else's voice when it does not get its own. The speaker uses a strange voice only when he is not capable of using his own, when he has not got his own thoughts and words. Thus, literary interpretation is the result and, at the same time, the symptom of a) intellectual helplessness and passivity, b) an individal's immaturity to live in society, c) a lack of culture.

This is how we receive a rather unexpected comparison between interpretation and inelegant enteratinment involving the bottle when low class company must hire dancers and flute-players in order to have a good time. It cannot speak

with itself without the help of the borrowed voice of the flute. The inauthenticity and indirectness of the inter-human contacts are the same in both cases. Both here and there nobody is able to 1) "use their own way of speech", 2) say what he really thinks, speak directly to another person (cf. P. 348a). Both here and there this does not concern truth. But as Platonic Socrates says, the feature of all contacts should be authenticity. The aim, on the other hand, is learning the deepest truth about man: "to use their own way of speech in putting one another by turns to the test. [...] making trial of the truth and of ourselves." (P. 348a)

I suggest we lay aside our consideration about which of the presented statements actually comes from Plato, what he is against and what he is only reporting after the real Protagoras and the true Socrates. Enough has already been said about this, forgetting about the thesis on the absence of the author of the work. It is necessary to look at the opinions presented in *Protagoras* as at two universal poles, at poles bordering one and the same problem—the problem of literary (poetic) interpretation. This problem is not stuck on one of the poles, like that of medieval devils at the end of a pin, but is stretched between them. The poles are needed not so much to see the borders but rather to reach down, to the very foundations, and to discuss those foundations. The Platonic "small theoretical and literary treatise" is a discussion on the foundations of literary interpretation: its aims, assumptions, methods and sense. Discussion here means not only the form of the conversation but, to a much larger degree: debating, consider ing, thinking, investigating, meditating, i.e. the main forms of cognitive thought. This also concerns not only the artistic image of theory and concept but also presents them in action in the most scientific manner. The nature of discussion has many aspects: It is both a discussion on the problems of interpretation as well as problems and issues being discussed between themselves. Theories, opinions and even individual theses are presented during the discussion which clearly reminds us of the experience mentioned by Plato and his Socrates. They are undertaken in a dialectal manner.

The discussed fragment of *Protagoras* is a dialectal treatise about the bases of interpretation. In other words, it is the first methodological treatise about the bases of interpretation as a branch of scientific reflection on literature (poetry). This treatise is founded (constituated) by this branch of scientific reflection, and places it very specifically—as if on the border of scientific and artistic thought. It has remained in this place till our times. [4] Plato's great interest in the interpretation of poetry differentiates Platonic reflection on literature from the concept of Aristotle. The latter undertook, and developed, other trends of Platonic (and pre-Platonic) thought on literature. He primarily reshaped poetics and rhetorics making them, in his own way, more scientific. He did away with interpretation, though, not finding a place for it, even in the form of an analysis of the work, in his system of sciences,

[4] I write in more detail on this subject in *What Is Happening to Critical Analysis?*, trans. by A. Korzeniowska, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich", 1986, XXVIII, 1(55).

although some of Aristotle's titles, given by Diogenes Laertius, do not exclude dealing with these matters. Aristotle's decision, taking into consideration the influence the Stagirite had on the development of European thought on literature, was great in its consequences as it defined the scientific status of interpretation. In its own trend it made it into unofficial "knowledge", sometimes even pushing it underground.

PRACTICE

In *Protagoras*, the demonstration of interpretative practice is of great importance although from that point of view, it is difficult to acknowledge this dialogue as being exceptional or unusual. The interpretation of rhetoric works appears in full force on the pages of *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. The interpretation—if one may say so—of dialectic works appears very often: it is possible to find it in nearly all of Plato's dialogues. The interpretation of poetic works can also be found not only in *Protagoras* but also in, for example, *Hippias Minor*. However, the interpretation in *Protagoras* varies greatly from that of *Hippias Minor*. Among other things, this is due to the fact that it is part of a theoretical and methodological treatise. Such a treatise exposes the interpretation's exemplifying and ostentatious nature, that is also not deprived of ambivalence and ambiguity.

The ambivalence of the Socrates interpretations means that two standpoints and programmes are voiced at the same time: that of Protagoras and Socrates. These two very different attitudes and opinions appear together—in actual fact, they meet in the form of dialogues. The effect is such that interpretation seems to show its most important ways and methods to everybody and, at the same time, makes them the topic of discussion. It tests, studies their possible consequences, mercilessly disclosing their negative aspects. Such means as jokes, parody and irony are relevant here. The last mentioned can be found both in the old Socrates version as well as in what is often believed to be quite modern. [5]

Let us put aside the matter of irony, though. A more important question is: Which elements of literary interpretation were stressed more in *Protagoras* and became the subject of this type of research? The following components of interpretation, presented for study by Plato, draw our special attention:

1. A semantic analysis of the text is the main character and most important witness of both parties during the discussion preceding Socrates' actual interpretation of Simonides' ode. It becomes the most frequent task also later—during the interpretation itself. This is what fascinates the interpreter most and supplies most of the proof for his theses.

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[5] Greatly inspiring, and at the same time not made use of in full in theoretical and literary works on irony, are A. F. Losev's articles: *Ирония античная и романтическая* [in:] *Эстетика и искусство*, ed. P. S. Trofimov, Moscow 1966, pp. 54—84., and the description of irony as an aesthetic category in the book *История эстетических категорий*, Moscow 1965 (already translated into Slovac, Bratislava 1978, and into Hungarian, Budapest 1982). Also relevant parts of his excellent *История античной эстетики* (e. g. vol. II, pp. 73—82, 519—528).

The semantics of a poetic text is, as if, the area for the duel appointed by Protagoras at the very beginning of the dispute. But also the later interpretation has no wish to overstep it. It feels free and good there, as it appears to be an area, like no others, suitable for everything, where everything is possible and nothing is certain.

The semantic analysis of a text primarily concerns words, e.g. the meaning of the synonyms "stay" and "be" or the word "hard". It is not only that: it embraces also the level of sentences. The lexical level probably draws more attention in the text, especially due to Prodicus' suggestive summoning of semantic theory which referred to words. However, the semantic function of the word "indeed" or "truly" does not fit into the lexical plane but is most clearly played out on the level of a sentence. Longer digression concerning where the stress lies in a sentence, or where to place a given word—at the beginning or end of a sentence (cf. 343d—344a)—do not leave a shadow of a doubt that this concerns the syntactic level.

Both are slippery and uncertain to the same degree. This uncertainty is best illustrated by Protagoras' cry (in answer to Prodicus): "I am quite sure that Simonides meant by «hard» the same as we generally do [...]" (341d). No argument accompanies this cry of protest. The argumentation will be presented in a moment by Socrates (341e) although its certainty in the light of interpretation, which he will present later, is far from obvious.

2. The semantic analysis of a text often profits from the help of philological analysis. The questions then concern the origin of a given word or phrase in order to establish its true meaning (use) in the text. An example may be the widely discussed word "hard": «So perhaps "hard" also was intended by the Ceans and Simonides as either "bad" or something else that you do not understand» (341b). In these considerations, of importance is the dialect used in the place where the speaker (hero) was born, and in which dialect he was brought up (341c). Despite these philological subtleties, whose scientific rigour and objectivism tend to be rather frightening, the true result of what was settled is laughable. To be more exact: irony—the phrase εἰρωνεία (eironeia) does not appear here but there is the word παίζω (paidzo) which it can replace sufficiently well (341d).

3. The interpretation we are dealing with in *Protagoras* can, in certain places, be called contextual. Contexts are called forth, analyzed and used as the main argument in the contention. The contexts are varied and, for a short text, plentiful. One of them has already been mentioned (in the first footnote). Another is the nearest context (within a given text): once it happens to be what is said "as the ode proceeds" (339c), the second time "in the next phrase" (341e) or "proceeding a little way on" (344b) or finally "all that comes after" (344a) in the work. Another one is the context outside the text, exterior towards the work but, at the same time, closely connected with it: an example is the saying of Pittacus from Mytilene: "Hard, quoth he, to be good" (339c), quoted in Simonedes' text, but like many other sayings of the same author (i.e. Pittacus), if we are to believe Diogenes Laertius (cf. I, 4), it was widely circulated earlier.

In Platonic Socrates' interpretation, the relation of Simonides' ode towards this last context is of major importance. It names what could be called the global meaning and, in this way, directs the understanding (and interpretation) as, in a way, it defines in advance "the general outline" (of the work—E. Cz.) and "intention", which "is assuredly to refute Pittacus' saying throughout the ode" (P. 344b).

In using the context, we get the impression of standing in interpretation on solid ground, that we have at our disposal empirically verifiable material and rational arguments. Plato shows, though, how easily this can be abused. It has turned out that the contextual method as such is not, in actual fact, any more reliable than others. It arouses faith and trust, though, presents itself well, thus giving that impression. The way it is used depends, to a great extent, on the interpreter's attitude and that is why it is of an instrumental nature and definitely not objective.

Although to the very end it does not seem so simple, even if the contextual method, in its very nature, is not a "trick", it clearly possesses a tendency towards it and, at the same time, its ability at pretence is quite expert. The result is that he who uses it plays all the more unfairly the more honourable his intentions happen to be. The method that is apparently instrumental escapes him and he himself falls victim to his own illusions. The contextual method becomes a really good and precise instrument in the hands of such an interpreter who does not submit to illusions but expresses a certain amount of cynicism, e.g. Socrates in *Protagoras* who does not interpret so much as plays the interpretation. In other words, he interprets the interpretation.

4. Interpretation very often makes use of the reconstruction of the historical, cultural, intellectual background, i. e. the reconstruction of the vast area of consituation. The aim of such an operation is clear: such a background lets us understand the meaning of the phenomenon better, especially its origins—where it came from and why it appeared, etc. The reconstruction of the background (consituation) often takes on the shape, in an open or hidden manner, of the reconstruction of genesis. It is sometimes the opposite: genesis serves to define the wide background. In Socrates' interpretation of Simonides such a reconstruction takes up a great deal of (maybe proportonally far too much) being a built up introduction (the last mentioned does not actually begin till 343c and lasts till 347a).

The manner of behaviour as far as this reconstruction is concerned is well known also from later practice. It means that a given phenomenon (actually the way it is understood) should be worked out logically from what preceded or surrounded it. Socrates' introduction here is comparable to acrobatics. Every now and again the interpreter surprises us with something new. Once it will be the conviction that Greek wisdom has achieved its climax on Crete and in Sparta although the Cretans and the Laconians themselves carefully hide this fact from the inhabitants of other countries. Another time it will be the statement that the climax of Greek wisdom appears in the Laconian element (i.e. Spartan),

so eagerly practised by philosophers, and especially by Pittacus, whose saying was quoted by Simonides: "Hard, quoth he, to be good". Finally, the interpreter surprises us with: Simonides writes a polemic song to Pittacus. Thus Simonides' work carries on a discussion with Greek culture marked by the Laconian element that has been in existence so far. This was how the work originated and that is its meaning.

The argumentation seems to be logical although each element of reconstruction is either in the form of a joke, is ironic or is quite unrestricted. The whole of the introduction reveals the cognitive value of this type of interpretative operations, their most deeply hidden and secretive aspects. The reconstructed, or rather consituated background, as an important part of the consituation, turns out to be the most doubtful «context», and the genetic argumentation an empty, though effective from the point of view of rhetorics, interpretative trick.

Protagoras brings into the open the holes, patches and seams of the theory of meaning, that is still vital today, according to which to understand a work means to recreate or construct those exterior conditions, circumstances, contexts, consituations which led to its coming into being or had an influence on its origins.

5. One more theory of understanding, and the method of interpretation based on it, became the subject of demonstration and discussion in *Protagoras*. It was the theory that believed that to understand a work or any statement meant: to learn the intentions of the author and the speaker in general. The method of interpretation depends then on discovering and learning about the intentions whose function is the text. Sometimes this concerns the real author, sometimes only a hypothetic or imaginary one. Some other time, it may concern the author's various projections in the text or his images: one or other subject, the narrator, etc., then again, speaking characters. One way or another, on the basis of the text, the authors (speakers) are credited for various goals, intentions, attitudes, opinions and convictions (or simply thoughts) which in turn, explain certain features of the text (work, statement). Such an interpretative argumentation is usually a discussion on what the person, who is speaking, had in mind, or what he had not, and what he really thought when he said this or that although it may seem to us to be something quite different.

In his interpretation of the work, Socrates shows such a method not only with the help of an objective description of the intentions of Simonides and Pittacus but also greatly shortens the distance towards the presented attitudes. Like an actor, he tries to enter and understand the characters, their opinions, and speaks as if in their voice. If we were to say that Socrates' interpretation was highly dramatized, it would be a one-sided and incomplete statement. Socrates' speech sparkles from the speaker's constant jumping from one form to another: from oratio oblique to oratio recta. On his way, he also naturally takes into consideration many indirect forms among which it is easy to differentiate both speech that is apparently indirect and apparently direct.

This is what makes the text of this speech, that is not very long, similar to

that of a condenser—it is highly charged, rich and, at the same time, active. This activity probably paralyses the debaters. But this richness, specific economy in the text, results in it gathering within itself the whole basic problem of interpretation. This does not apply only to pre-Platonic interpretation but also to what took place later. Being basic, it is also universal.

At the same time, the Socrates interpretation places and multiplies question marks, hesitations and doubts. It makes a problem out of nearly every point of such a theory of interpretation and of such a method. It comments, and, of course, it is a commentary as complicated, relevant to its subject as it is elegant, according to the thoughts of its subject.

Is this maybe why our contemporary theories of interpretation are not able to take it into consideration at all?

6. Of course, making a dialogue of a text in this way is possible thanks to a certain technique of explanation, comment and the giving of meanings on which, like on a tower of strength, every activity of literary interpretation is founded. It accepts, if not for theoretical aims, at least for practical, operational ones, that it is possible to explain the meaning of (a work, text, fragment) only in one way: by giving a paraphrase (of this work, text, fragment). To understand is to be able to paraphrase, to say it differently: with your own words, in your own way. In this situation, to interpret is to paraphrase, very often to paraphrase endlessly. The more paraphrases, the better it was understood and interpreted.

This is the hidden assumption of every literary interpretation, no matter to which philosophical traditions it refers and to which type of semantics we are directed. It seems to be an interesting fact that Plato noticed this phenomenon and drew our attention to it. In the Socrates interpretation, that is characteristic of Simonides, we can observe from a certain moment a gradual increase and growth of paraphrases. At the end, the interpretation simply changes into a built up paraphrase compiled from smaller sequences.

There is no doubt that this paraphrasing lives a life of its own, i. e. that it lives how it wishes, and governs according to its own laws which are impossible to control from outside. There is one more possibility of abuse here as while paraphrasing paraphrases a great transformation of meaning takes place in the direction desired by the interpreter but, at the same time, in a way that is hardly visible, in small steps. Paraphrasing is not subordinated to strict logical rules. The relations between paraphrases are loose. In this situation, abuse guarantees the interpreter total impunity. In the face of paraphrases that endlessly and unexpectedly appear, blossoming, blooming and increasing in number, it is impossible to catch the thief redhanded. Prowling and stealing while interpreting a work is his right. Much is forgiven him especially when, while thieving, he behaves like legendary highwaymen: he does not seize but adds, bringing riches obtained somewhere else and from somebody else. The interpreter is praised for such tricks and this is what Socrates expects at the end.

The reaction of the scholars seems to be educational. Hippias praises, others

acknowledge Socrates' ability as an interpreter although probably nobody agrees with his opinion. But silence falls where usually there are whole swarms of arguments in the air. There is not even one. Argumentation turns out to be not only helpless but even inappropriate. One can at most, overthrow this interpretation, one can confront it with another that would be equally full, but it is difficult to seriously discuss with it. In actual fact, it is not discussable.

7. As we remember, in challenging Socrates Protagoras promised: "Accordingly my question now will be on the same subject that you and I are now debating, namely virtue [...]" (339a). Is it really possible? Socrates' interpretation shows that it is but it has not got much sense. Socrates flippantly places into the work a thesis that, at the given moment, happens to be either close to him or necessary to him and then, after many interpretative ups and downs, takes it out again triumphantly, showing urbi et orbi that it was the true conviction of the author of the interpreted text, that it belongs to its (the text's) deep structure. A question arises here whether the thesis is richer from the cognitive point of view at the entrance or at the exit. If it were so, it would have been worth the trouble. The answer seems to be complex: it is richer but not thanks to the work but due to the considerations that have taken place. It is not richer, however, to the extent of moving discussion on the matter of virtue forward in any essential way. Socrates believes that the whole interpretative episode was a break in the discussion and suggests a return to the issue interrupted in the middle (cf. 348b, 347c).

The cognitive value of literary interpretation as a way of philosophising on Truth, Good and Beauty is primarily put to the test. The Platonic problem in this matter may be formulated in a totally negative manner—this was the way usually chosen by researchers. There is no doubt, however, that interpretation is, to a certain degree, a way of philosophising. The question which comes to mind, though, is whether this type of philosophising is the best from the cognitive point of view. Then the problem cannot be omitted in any literary studies. [6]

As a focal point of discussion were certain basic questions on the aim of dealing with literature that shed light on many trends and theories of literary research throughout the ages, being very actual also today. The following questtions sound especially dramatic: Why deal with literature? Why try to discover what it is talking about, what it has in mind, what it means? Shall we find out anything of importance about the world in that way? Is it possible to solve any problem worrying man with the help of literature?

In *Protagoras*, the cognitive value of literary interpretation was raised in yet another meaning: this time referring to the possibilities of becoming acquainted with a literary work. Here modern questions appear: Can a work be made known? How can this be achieved, etc.? Finally, there appears a problem that was later

[6] I wrote about this in various parts of the book *Wstęp do poetyki pragmatycznej* (*Introduction to Pragmatic Poetics*), Warszawa 1977, especially in ch. II, III and IV.

called a hermeneutic circle. It is possible that it was in Plato's *Protagoras* that the matter of the hermeneutic circle in reference to literary interpretation was formulated for the first time.

MEANING

If even some of the quoted observations on the subject of literary interpretation in *Protagoras* are true, it is possible to come to the conclusion that it is here, in literary interpretation, that one should look for the sources of scientific reflection on literature. From *Protagoras* we discover that interpretation reached Plato, having already travelled a long way in its development; that it had a rich and complex tradition. However, from the practical, theoretical and also methodological point of view, it achieved such a high degree of crystallization and such independence that it is possible to acknowledge it as a formed branch of humanistic study (today we would probably call it a scientific discipline). It is not even certain whether this state was ever later surpassed in a manner of any importance. In any case, it seems unlikely that the status of literary interpretation in cultural awareness was ever greater than at that time. The degree of development had to meet this status. One can hardly presume that such a high status could be ascribed to anything primitive and imperfect. In *Protagoras*, literary interpretation is not just any amorphous and smooth literary criticism, but a branch of studies that, from many points of view, is only too well defined, mature, independent and even refined.

What is *Protagoras* in its development other than a resumé and the crowning point of an earlier stage? The answer that comes to mind is that if its meaning does not constitute literary interpretation in the scientific sense, this interpretation is, at least, enriched methodologically. This answer, though, may only be hypothetical due to the small amount of earlier material available. More appropriate would be a more general question, not forejudging in detail the relationship of Plato's works to his predecessors but rather dealing with what took place later. Looking at it from this angle, *Protagoras* would be one of the most fundamental works in the tradition of studies on literature, and especially that of the theory of literature.

Although there is no doubt involved here whatsoever, it does not wholly settle the matter. More and more worrying questions arise: Why did literary interpretation (of poetry) not achieve a similar scientific status to poetics or later to the history of literature? Why have suggestions on the subject of poetic inspiration and the effect of poetry from *Ion*, the numerous theses from *Republic* and *Laws* been popularized and have remained in circulation, while *Protagoras* seems to have been forgotten? Why does contemporary scientific reflection on literature, whose interpretation seems to be regaining its lost position, still very seldom reach its basis, i.e. *Protagoras*, even it when does turn to Plato? It is interesting that even in the Heideggerean circle of thought, making intensive use

of Plato's inspirations and constantly practising literary interpretation (of poetry), *Protagoras* plays such a minor role that there is so little of it in the poetics of Staiger and Gadamer or, for example, in the interpretations of the last mentioned in *Kleine Schriften*.

Here we touch upon a central issue: To what degree are Plato's thoughts and teaching familiar to European culture, civilization and especially science? It seems certain that in modern science, the notion of erudition originates rather from Aristotle than from Plato. The shadow of sophistry, which is said to always accompany philosophy (Gadamer), relies mainly on today's continuations of Aristotle's ideas, on modern scientific thought, on what we understand by science. Thus we can accept the fact that especially for some time, scientific thought has begun to depart more and more consistently from Plato. It is not so much Plato who becomes foreign to European science as European science becomes foreign to Plato. It comes to the same: Plato in the face of our contemporary world takes on, among others, features that are more and more Egyptian (is Egypt not a symbol of foreign cultures according to Plato?). In the feeling of modern science, he becomes a mysterious thinker, exotic and clearly pre-scientific as if he were primitive in the far from noble meaning that till not long ago, European colonizers used in reference to all subjugated cultures, including Chinese, Hindu and Arabic.

At the same time, Plato has been highly appreciated for centures by critics of European science and civilization. The deeper criticism delves down, the larger role it seems to play, although it is slightly different each time. It was like that at one time according to the Romantics, in the philosophy of F. Nietzsche and L. Tolstoy. It is the same today (or nearly today) in Heidegger's school, especially in Gadamer, in the theories of M. Buber and M. Bakhtin to which it is necessary to add the following Polish scholars and artists: Stanislaw Vincenz, Witold Gombrowicz and Jerzy Grotowski. As can be seen from the quoted names, this also refers to the critics of European studies on literature.

As far as Aristotle is the source of everything that is "stable", "normal" and "familiar" in our culture and in our whole manner of thinking, Plato is personified with what is "rebellious", "subversive", "foreign", although so much is said about his conservatism. As far as Aristotle builds phenomena that are rather lasting, what we accept and stabilize, Plato paradoxically appears as if from nowhere, drops into the house of European science like an uninvited guest, turns his nose up at everything, wants to demolish and start all over again. In our culture, Plato is the patron of rebels. There is something quite barbaric in what he does. The results of his actions, though, do not live long: they appear in epochs or at turning-points and burn themselves out in the wind like the sculptures of Wladyslaw Hasior. Then again, after some time, they raise from the dead and return. Neoplatonism is reborn with such force and so often in European thought on art and in art that it seems to us to be always present.

The fact that in European culture, rebels, being followers of Plato, were held in esteem remains a mystery. This happened, though, usually ex post as in the case of Socrates among the Greeks.

A separate set of questions resulting from considerations on Plato and his *Protagoras* refers to the beginnings and shape of reflection on literature in various cultures of the East and West. To start from the simplest: If and in which cultures did mature reflection on literature begin also from the interpretation (in one or other form) of a literary (poetic) work? In other words: Was European thought on literature an exception here or the rule? Further, it would be extremely interesting and important to find out in which way this initial shape of reflection on literature decided about its (reflection) further development. Finally, it would be necessary to stop a little longer at the matter in which way the initial studies on literature result from the characteristics and development of literature itself. The same applies to the opposite: How does the beginning and further development of studies on literature influence the shape of the given literature?

If I am not mistaken, these questions at present require research rather than answers. They are a programme of studies and not the request for categorical statements like "yes" or "no".

Translated by *Aniela Korzeniowska*

PLATOŃSKIE POCZĄTKI NAUKI O LITERATURZE

STRESZCZENIE

Jednym z fundamentalnych dzieł w dziejach nauki o literaturze, zwłaszcza zaś teorii literatury, jest Platoński *Protagoras*. Dialog ten zawiera niezykle istotny, a przy tym stosunkowo autonomiczny, fragment, który godzi się nazwać małym traktatem teoretycznoliterackim Platona. Jest to dialektyczny „traktat" o metodologicznych podstawach interpretacji jako samodzielnej (ma się rozumieć: relatywnie) gałęzi naukowej refleksji o literaturze. Zostały w nim sformułowane i przedyskutowane krytycznie wszystkie zasadnicze pytania na temat celu, założeń, metod i sensu interpretacji literackiej jako pewnego typu wiedzy o literaturze (poezji). Większość z nich należy do repertuaru pytań tzw. nowoczesnych. Tekst zatytułowany *Platońskie początki nauki o literaturze* próbuje zdać sprawę zarówno z tych pytań, jak też sposobu ich stawiania i rozwijania.

Roboczo wolno przyjąć, że „mały traktat teoretycznoliteracki' Platona nadaje naukową rangę pewnej umiejętności, ściślej, refleksji nie tylko „praktykowanej" bardzo szeroko, ale też rozwiniętej poznawczo. Obraz interpretacji literackiej, jaki się stąd wyłania, pozwala wnosić, iż interpretacja literacka była jednym z najważniejszych źródeł całej naukowej refleksji o literaturze, w każdym razie należy do tych dziedzin, które rozwinęły się bodaj najwcześniej i najwcześniej zyskały status naukowy. Dopiero później pod wpływem Artystotelesa znalazła się na planie drugim, status naukowości zyskały natomiast poetyka i retoryka. Przesunięcie to pozostawiło trwały ślad w późniejszym rozwoju naukowej refleksji o literaturze. *Protagoras* dla tak pomyślanej refleksji stracił swe pierwotne znaczenie, stał się właściwie bezużyteczny.

Nikła rola, jaką odgrywa propozycja metodologiczna Platona (sformułowana w *Protagorasie*) w nowszej świadomości teoretycznoliterackiej, która przejawia spore zainteresowanie interpretacją literacką, może wynikać z paradoksalnego statusu Platona w myśli europejskiej. Paradoks pierwszy: Platon, któremu zarzuca się konserwatyzm, jest patronem krytyków europejskiej nauki i kultury. Paradoks drugi: choć kultura i myśl europejska pozostaje w cieniu sofistyki, jednak buntownicy spod znaku Platona cieszą się z czasem niemałym wzięciem.

Pracę kończą pytania dotyczące powstania i kształtu refleksji o literaturze w różnych kulturach Wschodu i Zachodu ze względu na rolę interpretacji utworu literackiego.