

Classicists eventually grow accustomed to the reactions that an admission of our occupation sometimes produces: curiosity, puzzlement, derision, occasionally pity that we otherwise apparently sane people study something so irrelevant to the modern world. 'What are you going to do with *that* degree?', 'Why Classics?', and even 'What's Classics?' are questions to which every classicist must formulate answers, and these answers must make sense to those who do not share our interest; 'I'm simply enthralled by Homer (or the history of the Roman Republic, or the ruins at Delphi, or the ablative absolute)' will not be an adequate response in many cases.

One way of coping with this difficulty is to emphasize that students of Classics will be perfectly well prepared to enter the 'New Economy' (or whatever phrase may be fashionable). Last year, in an address to an Ontario high-tech company, Premier Mike Harris derided the economically unprofitable study of 'Greek and Latin and all these things' as failing to provide the 'skill sets' needed in today's world. This drew a response from University of Toronto classicist Emmet Robbins: 'David Packard of electronics giant Hewlett-Packard was trained as a classicist', he pointed out in an article reminding Harris and his high-tech business audience that classical languages and literature are by no means useless in the economy of this (or any other) age.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to take a slightly different approach here. Harris's dismissal of 'Greek and Latin and all these things' is vaguely reminiscent of a famous condemnation in classical literature: in the *Ion* of Plato, it is said that poets work by mysterious divine inspiration, not by true expertise; they have no *technē* or (to borrow Harris's terminology) 'skill set' that may be useful to their fellow-citizens. And in the *Republic*, Plato says that poetry is not only

not 'serious' or useful but actually dangerous to society, since it appeals to emotion rather than reason; in fact, says Plato, it should be banned.

But despite his condemnation of the poetic art in the *Republic* and other works, Plato's dialogues are full of references to most of the ancient poetic genres: epic, lyric, tragedy, and even (the least 'serious' of all) comedy. Poetic quotations are often put in the mouths of secondary characters; in other cases, Plato's hero Sokrates himself utters them, sometimes citing them with approval, sometimes criticizing their content. In a few instances, Sokrates engages in detailed analysis of a work of poetry in order to make a philosophical point, and such discussions illustrate how a work of literature can be used as a kind of road-map pointing our thoughts in many directions. Even Plato, for all his suspicion of poets and professed desire to banish them, acknowledged the value of literary criticism in educating his fellow-citizens.

In Plato's *Protagoras*, the eponymous character is one of a group of men known as 'sophists'; they were professors of rhetoric in classical Athens, and were criticized by some who believed that they did little more than teach people how to win an argument by fancy and persuasive use of language, without regard to the true justice of a case – breeding the ancestors, it might be said, of characters like *The Simpsons'* shyster solicitor Lionel Hutz. In Plato's dialogue, which incidentally includes an important account of the myth of Prometheus, Protagoras boasts that he can actually teach people the virtue of 'excellence' (Greek *aretē*), and the philosopher Sokrates decides to question him on this claim.

Protagoras considers himself an expert on 'excellence', and to show that he knows better than anyone else, he quotes some lines from the poet Simonides. This poet (argues Protagoras) didn't know what he was talking about, since he wrote in one line that 'it is hard to become truly good' but a few lines later contradicted himself, saying that he *didn't* agree with a wise man who once said that 'it is hard to be noble'. But Sokrates is not convinced by this; he points out that a poet would be aware, for example, of the distinction in meaning between the verbs 'become' and 'be', and argues for a different interpretation of the first line: 'it is truly hard to become good'. Sokrates also cites (as Protagoras did not) some of the rest of Simonides' poem, including such sentiments as 'only a god can have this honour [i.e. *being* good, rather than striving for goodness]', 'I praise anyone who does nothing shameful willingly', and 'it is enough for me if

---

<sup>1</sup>E. Robbins, 'Dead Languages Speak Out', *University of Toronto Bulletin*, 28 Feb. 2000; on-line at [www.newsandevents.utoronto.ca/bin/thoughts/comment000228.asp](http://www.newsandevents.utoronto.ca/bin/thoughts/comment000228.asp).

someone is not bad or utterly wicked, but at least understands justice which benefits the city’.

Sokrates thus shows that the poet’s words, when taken as a whole rather than in Protagoras’ ‘sound-bite’ approach, do indeed produce a coherent thought: that it is impossible (not just ‘hard’) for anyone to be utterly blameless, but that it is possible (though very ‘hard’) to approach ‘goodness’ by not willingly committing injustice. Through Sokrates’ application of literary criticism, the sophist Protagoras has been beaten on his home turf, so to speak: Sokrates can claim both to have rescued Simonides from the sophist’s misinterpretation, by reading the poem more carefully than Protagoras has done, and to have made a philosophical point about the nature of ‘excellence’, a subject in which Protagoras declared himself an expert.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Sokrates’ particular reading of this poem (and there are many who think that even Sokrates doesn’t take his own interpretation very seriously), the important point is that the careful study of poetry is presented here as a medium through which a philosophical discussion of society’s values can be conducted. In the dialogue, Sokrates’ criticism of Protagoras’ understanding of literature runs parallel to a questioning of the sophist’s whole notion of ‘excellence’ and whether it can be taught, which is what he and his colleagues claim to do. One does not have to ‘agree’ with everything said in a work of literature (or written by its interpreters) to appreciate its value: the very multiplicity of possible readings alerts the reader to a variety of perspectives on its subjects and themes, and (as even the poet-banishing Plato recognized) this is especially true of poetry, with its marked and unusual deployment of language.

The Greek orator Demosthenes pointed out that the whole *politeia* (‘constitution’, or system by which people live together in a *polis*) of Athens was based on words, speeches, and arguments (the Greek *logoi* can denote all of these), and this does not apply only to classical Athens. Without *logoi*, there is no communication, no community; this is why Sokrates thought it worthwhile to examine Simonides’ poem so closely, and why Plato’s account of Sokrates’ examination of the poem – a combination of two exceptional modes of communication, poetry and philosophy – continues to exercise our minds.

In another of Plato’s works, the *Gorgias* (named after another famous sophist), the tough-talking politician Kallikles urges Sokrates: ‘Don’t be one of those people who examine trivial matters [i.e. philosophers]; you should follow the example of those who have a livelihood, are held in high esteem, and possess many other good things’ – in other words, philosophy is a waste of time if you want to ‘get ahead’ in the world. But as Northrop Frye argued in his 1962 Massey lectures for CBC Radio, the study of things like poetry and philosophy, far from being a useless leisure activity, is a vital component in the education of responsible citizens<sup>2</sup>. Analyzing the works of Simonides and Plato, separately or in combination, helps us appreciate the power of language and be aware of the uses to which it can be put. Similarly, when faced with utterances from advertisers, bureaucrats, and politicians who intend to persuade or instruct us (as Protagoras claimed to instruct the Athenians in ‘excellence’), we ‘decode’ them, peeling back layers of cant, obfuscation, and hype. This is essentially a form of literary criticism much like that practised by Sokrates in the *Protagoras* (and by all who study literature in general); perhaps Mike Harris’ antipathy to the study of ‘Greek and Latin and all these things’ should come as no surprise.

---

<sup>2</sup>N. Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto, 1963; reprinted 1993), esp. chapter 6, ‘The Vocation of Eloquence’.