

XXII. Metathesis as an Instrument in the Criticism of Poetry

NATHAN A. GREENBERG

OBERLIN COLLEGE

The main purpose of this discussion of metathesis is to demonstrate within the confines of a limited topic how the study of Philodemus' work *On Poems* can clarify hitherto neglected areas of ancient poetic criticism.¹ The best known examples of poetic metathesis, i.e., changing the order of words in poetry,² occur in chapter 4 of the *De compositione verborum* where Dionysius rearranges *Iliad* 12.433–5 and 13.392–3 and draws certain conclusions from so doing. Comparison of relevant passages from Philodemus' treatise shows that the device of metathesis has not been employed with full rigor by Dionysius, that metathesis was employed more often by ancient critics than might be supposed from Dionysius' account, and that these critics derived conclusions from the device which were more sweeping than those of Dionysius.

A review of the reasoning which prompts Dionysius to the use of metathesis is instructive, for it is our most complete account and may serve as an approximate model of the ancient critical approach to the device. At the outset, Dionysius makes the division between content and form which was universal in ancient literary criticism. He divides all *logoi*, i.e., literature, into the spheres of subject matter (*pragmatikos topos*) and of expression (*lektikos topos*).³ Then he takes pains to demonstrate that the *lektikos topos* encompasses certain literary values which are quite independent of the *pragmatikos topos*. The basis of this proof is his assertion

¹ I am obliged to Professors Z. Stewart, C. T. Murphy, and A. C. Schlesinger for advice concerning several aspects of this paper. The opinions given, of course, are my responsibility.

The following abbreviations are used in the notes: Roberts=W. Rhys Roberts, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus On Literary Composition* (London 1910), text and translation on facing pages. Heidmann=J. Heidmann, *Der Papyrus 1676 der herculanesischen Bibliothek* (Bonn Dissertation 1937), referred to by column (Roman numerals) and line (Arabic numeral). Jensen=C. Jensen, *Philodemos über die Gedichte, fünftes Buch* (Berlin 1923), by page or by column and line.

The translations of Dionysius are Roberts'. All others are mine.

² Philodemus uses the term in this sense. Heidmann VII.19; VIII.50; XII.3.

³ Roberts 66.

that young people are unable to evaluate the *pragmatikos topos*, but that they can and do appreciate the *lektikos topos*.⁴ It is then shown that the *lektikos topos* consists of two major parts: the choice or selection of words (*eklogê*) and the composition or arrangement of the words (*synthesis*).⁵ He asserts, further, that "it is upon arrangement, far more than upon selection, that persuasion, charm, and literary power depend."⁶ He demonstrates to his own satisfaction the validity of this last statement by the employment of two devices.

The first is a process of elimination. He quotes *Odyssey* 16.1-16, first having dismissed the content as "trifling incidents of everyday life."⁷ His comment follows:

Everybody would, I am sure, testify that these lines cast a spell of enchantment on the ear and rank second to no poetry whatsoever, however exquisite it may be. But what is the secret of their fascination, and what causes them to be what they are? Is it the selection of the words, or the composition? No one will say "the selection": of that I am convinced. For the diction consists, warp and woof, of the most ordinary, the humblest words, such as might have been used offhand by a farmer, a seaman, an artisan, or anybody else who takes no account of elegant speech. You have only to break up the meter, and these very same lines will seem commonplace and unworthy of admiration. For they contain neither noble metaphors nor *hypsallages* nor *catachreses* nor any other figurative language; nor yet many unusual terms, nor foreign or new coined words. What alternative, then, is left but to attribute the beauty of the style to the composition?⁸

⁴ "But the science which guides us to selection of matter, and to judgment in handling it, is hampered with difficulties for the young; . . . But the love of literary beauty flourishes naturally in the days of youth as much as in later life. For elegance of expression has a fascination for all young minds, making them feel impulses that are instinctive and akin to inspiration." Roberts 67 f. Implications of this text are discussed below, p. 268.

⁵ ". . . this treatise on literary composition. . . . If I find leisure, I will produce another book for you—one on the choice of words, in order that you may have the subject of expression exhaustively treated." Roberts 69.

⁶ Roberts 73.

⁷ Roberts 77.

⁸ Roberts 79 f. This passage is discussed in S. F. Bonner, *The Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, A Study in the Development of Critical Method* (Cambridge 1939) 72 f. It can well be argued, as Bonner does, that this method by elimination of alternatives will not do. The content cannot be dismissed lightly, for it is a charming rustic scene which contains, after all, the first encounter of Telemachus and Odysseus after twenty long years. Moreover, these humble words exercise a simple charm, and they too must be the result of a process of selection.

The second device is metathesis, which he introduces as follows:

To show yet more conclusively the great force wielded by the faculty of composition both in poetry and prose, I will quote some passages which are universally regarded as fine, and show what a different air is imparted to both verse and prose by a mere change in their arrangement.⁹

Then he transposes *Iliad* 12.433–5 into what he calls prosodiac tetrameters, and *Iliad* 13.392–3 into “the so-called Ionic tetrameter,” and comes to the following conclusion:

. . . when the choice of words remains unaltered and only the arrangement is changed, the verses invariably lose their rhythm, while their formation is ruined, together with the complexion, the character, the feeling, and the whole effectiveness of the lines.¹⁰

This completes the outline of the reasoning which leads Dionysius to employ poetic metathesis. However, there are two important observations to be made. First, Dionysius’ purpose has not been to create or explain a critical method. He has used metathesis only as a means toward proving that *synthesis* is an important subject worthy of having a treatise written about it. Yet his treatment contains implications which could be and were of great importance to ancient criticism, for his comment on the passage from the *Odyssey* states quite explicitly that *synthesis* alone can make an otherwise unimpressive poetic passage good, while the use of metathesis implies that *synthesis* alone can make a poetic passage bad. In other words, once having accepted the discrete categories of content, *eklogê*, and *synthesis*, it would seem possible to construct a critical theory wherein *synthesis* is of prime importance in evaluating poetry.

Secondly, Dionysius has equated poetic metathesis with change of meter, for he has made the adverse verdict upon his examples of metathesis directly dependent upon the change of meter. This is clearly implied by a sentence which has already been cited in his comment on the *Odyssey* passage: “You have only to break up the meter, and these very same lines will seem commonplace and unworthy of admiration.” This implication is made explicit by

⁹ Roberts 85.

¹⁰ Roberts 89. Roberts’ translation is too free. The Greek text is cited and discussed below on page 265.

a close inspection of the text of the conclusion he draws from his use of metathesis:

... ὥστε τῆς μὲν ἐκλογῆς τῶν ὀνομάτων τῆς αὐτῆς μενούσης, τῆς δὲ συνθέσεως μόνης μεταπεσοῦσης τὰ τε μέτρα μεταρρυθμίζεσθαι, καὶ συμ- μεταπίπτειν αὐτοῖς τὰ σχήματα, τὰ χρώματα, τὰ ἦθη, τὰ πάθη, τὴν ὅλην τῶν ποιημάτων ἀξίωσιν.

The reading of the crucial words *symmetapiptein autois* is not in doubt, and the antecedent of *autois* is clearly *ta metra*. Hence, the meaning can only be that the metathesis of poetry changes the meter, and that the transformation of all the other features accompanies this change. It should also be noted that both of Dionysius' metatheses incorporate explicit and intentional changes of meter. The conclusion seems inescapable. In his examples of poetic metatheses, Dionysius is demonstrating in effect the efficacy of the meter rather than the primacy of *synthesis*.¹¹ For the embarrassing question can be posed: What would Dionysius have said if confronted by a metathesis which preserved the meter of the original? There can be no answer, for Dionysius does not seem to have envisaged that possibility. And yet, metatheses which apparently did attempt to preserve the meter of the original were known to antiquity. An example of such is preserved in a fragment of Philodemus' work *On Poems*,¹² where the clause ". . . although the content and the words remain" precedes a metathesis of *Iliad* 16.112-4 as follows:

ἔσπετε Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματα νῦν μοι ἔχουσαι
ὅππως πρῶτον δὴ νηυσὶν πῦρ ἔμπεσ' Ἀχαιῶν
Αἴαντος δόρυ μείλινον Ἐκτωρ ἄγχι παραστάς.

¹¹ The conclusion is strengthened by the observation that changing the meter of a verse is to destroy its effect completely in Dionysius' eyes, for in chapter 17 (compare the summary in Roberts 6) he says that various metrical feet have differing qualities, irrespective of the content they express. Thus, the pyrrhic is "wanting in seriousness and dignity"; the dactyl "contributes greatly to beauty of the style"; the amphibrach "is effeminate and unattractive." Again, a most interesting contrast is found in Dionysius' metatheses of prose (Roberts 91). Whereas it is clearly inferred that the metathesis of a given line of poetry is ruinous, Dionysius finds that he can transpose the "spacious narrative" of Herodotus into a phrasing which is "tense" and "forensic," and which strikes him as rather Thucydidean. Unlike poetic metathesis, not all prosaic metatheses are bad.

¹² A. Hausrath, "Philodemi *Peri poiēmatōn libri II* quae videntur fragmenta," *Jahrbücher für Philologie*, Suppl. 17 (1889) 211-76, frag. 64. . . . τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων μενόντων, οἷον οὕτως, ἔσπετε Μοῦσαι, κτλ.

This metathesis is subject to severe criticism, to be sure, but one thing is certain: it preserves the dactylic hexameter of the original.¹³

The fragment cited also has an historical significance, for the practice of metathesis can have only one purpose: to isolate the composition of a piece of writing so as to make it the object of specific inquiry. Hence, it is curious to find Dionysius stating in chapter 4 that he is the first to deal systematically with composition.¹⁴ For we know from the fragment cited and from other parts of Philodemus' work *On Poems* that the subject of composition, of poetry at least, had indeed been of prime importance to theoreticians considerably predating Philodemus and hence also Dionysius.

It is certain that a discussion of these theoreticians would involve at least three names: the Stoic Crates of Mallos, an otherwise unknown Heracleodorus, and a rather mysterious group whom Philodemus calls the *kritikoi*. Rather than enter into the complex and perhaps insoluble problem of assigning specific theories to each of these names,¹⁵ I shall try to lay bare a general complex of theories, all of which have great dependence upon the practice of metathesis. It is in this connection that the following citations from Philodemus are relevant.

However, the statement that if the same thoughts and vocabulary are present, and if even so the poems have some individuality, then the poems will be good or bad because of their composition—this is the most persuasive of all the statements.¹⁶

This passage is quite clear in positing a comparison of poems wherein the only differentiator is the composition. As we have

¹³ Many friends and colleagues have pointed out serious flaws in the metathesis. Perhaps most striking is the absence of caesura in both the third and fourth foot of lines 1 and 3. Also, the interruption of the formulaic phrasing of line 1 is very disturbing. At the very least, however, the second line is technically dactylic hexameter.

¹⁴ Roberts 93, 95; also see 69.

¹⁵ But see F. Sbordone, "Filodemo e la teorica dell' eufonia," *RendNap* 30 (1955) 25–51. An earlier discussion, H. Gomoll, "Herakleodoros und die *kritikoi* bei Philodem," *Philologus* 91 (1936–7) 373–84, is unsatisfactory, especially since it does not have the benefit of Heidmann's edition of Papyrus 1676.

¹⁶ Heidmann, cols. vi.27–vii.7. τὸ δὲ τῆς αὐτῆς διανοίας καὶ τῆς λέξεως ὑπαρχουσῶν, ἰδίων δὲ τῶν ποιημάτων, παρὰ τὴν σύνθεσιν ἢ καλὸν ἢ μοχθηρὸν ἀποτελεῖσθαι τὸ πῶμα πάντων μὲν ἔστιν πιθανώτατον τῶν λεγομένων.

seen, metathesis is a powerful instrument for the isolation of composition, and these theoreticians were well aware of it.

They are accustomed to present innumerable verses, such as those of Homer and of the other epics, which differ according to the variations. However, we must assert that the thought becomes better or worse through the metatheses.¹⁷

Clearly the practice of metathesis was well known, even though the fragments of Philodemus have preserved only the one example cited. This passage also sounds the tonic note of Philodemus' objections to the practice. In his opinion, metathesis does not isolate the composition but rather invariably has some effect upon the content.

We can now restate the problem a little more succinctly. Given a passage from Homer and a metathesis of that passage, the basic postulate of the ancient critics was that the original must be better poetry than the transposition. The question was why. The answer took various forms. Dionysius, for example, said that the metathesis changed the meter. This answer could be and, as we have seen, was controverted by examples of metathesis where the meter was not changed.

The primary answer given by Philodemus is that the transposition changes the content or meaning of the passage, and hence we are given a wider basis for comparative judgment of the passages. However, there were ancient critics who did not care whether the content suffered change or not. From our consideration of the implications of Dionysius' procedure, we have already indicated the possibility of such a school. Concrete evidence for its existence is supplied by a fragment from Philodemus' work:

. . . for it is not the crude but the finished that has effect, but these are also thoughts, although Heracleodorus is of the opinion that not only crude thought, but thought in general has no effect, so that he considers ridiculous . . .¹⁸

We shall conclude our survey of ancient replies to the enigma posed by metathesis by considering two answers supplied by

¹⁷ Heidmann, cols. vii.25-viii.5. ἅπλατα γὰρ ὅσα καὶ τῶν Ὀμήρου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐπῶν εἰώθασιν διαφέροντα κατὰ τὰς ἐναλλαγὰς παραφέρειν. ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦτο ἀξιοῦν ἡμᾶς δεῖσθαι τὸ νόημα βέλτιον ἢ χεῖρον γίνεσθαι διὰ τὰς μεταθέσεις.

¹⁸ Text and translation in Jensen, 147.

critics who could have shared the theoretical position of Heracleodorus. These answers may be called the irrational and the euphonic.

It has already been noted that Dionysius justifies the separation of the *pragmatikos topos* and the *lektikos topos* on the grounds that young people cannot evaluate the former but can appreciate the latter. In the course of this justification, he makes the following statement: "For elegance of expression has a fascination for all young minds, making them feel impulses that are instinctive and akin to inspiration."¹⁹ It is not excessive to see here a faint indication of a critical stand which relies upon the irrational in arriving at its evaluations. This indication becomes somewhat clearer if the following fragments from Philodemus are considered:

Further, the statement falters when it says that it is unclear how it comes about that we are pleasantly or unpleasantly affected by metathesis.²⁰

. . . the statement that the irrational perception itself delights in the composition, or that the delight comes about without the content . . .²¹

While we do not have any real context for these statements, it is at least possible to see a hint of a school which has explicitly cast aside rational criteria. Critical schools based upon an experienced and highly developed aesthetic sense were not lacking in antiquity,²² and heightened sensitivity of this sort can be made the touchstone of a school of critics. What is more, if they reject the use of reason, then reason cannot be employed against them. One can only protest, as Philodemus does in the following passage: "The assumption that the composition alone effects psychagogy without the aid of any other good is not convincing."²³ This statement is a simple denial and no more. For if in the case of a specific original and its metathesis a critic says that there is no difference in meaning, or that the content, even if changed, does not affect him

¹⁹ See note 4 above.

²⁰ Heidmann, col. vii.17–21. λοιπὸν ἄπορον λέγων προπίπτει, τίνος συμβαίνοντος ἐκ τῆς μεταθέσεως οἰκείουμθ' ἢ δυσχεραίνομεν.

²¹ My translation of iv.176 as printed in T. Gomperz, "Philodem und die aesthetischen Schriften der herculanesischen Bibliothek," *SBWien* 123 (1890) Abh. 6, page 16, note 1. τὸ δὲ τὴν ἄλογον αὐτὴν αἰσθησιν τῇ συνθέσει γαργαλίζειν ἢ τὴν τέρψιν ὑπάρχειν ἀνευ διανοήματος ἢ καθ' ἕτερόν τινα τρόπον ψυχαγωγούσαν ἀφίημι . . .

²² See M. Pohlenz, "To prepon," *Gött.Nachr* (1933) 76 ff.

²³ Heidmann, col. vii.12–17. τὸ δ' αὐτὴν ψυχαγωγεῖν σύνθεσιν καθ' αὐτὴν, ἕτερον οὐδὲν εἰσφερομένην ἀγαθόν, ἀπιθανόν ἐστι.

one way or the other, and if he still insists that the original gives him a certain irrational delight which is not forthcoming from its metathesis, then there is no more to be said.

The final solution to be considered is the euphonic. While it may be argued quite soundly that the selection of words has far more to do with the sounds of a line of poetry than the order of the words, there is no doubt that metathesis, by differing juxtapositions of the same words, must form sound combinations which are not the same as those of the original. This sort of approach may be represented by two citations from Philodemus:

He (Crates) differs from the opinion of Heracleodorus and his associates, for he praises not the composition, but rather the sound which results from it. . . .²⁴

It is ridiculous when he (Ariston) adds that good composition can be perceived not by reason but by the trained hearing. It is bad when he introduces the euphony which results from the composition of the *lexis* and assigns the judgment of this euphony to the trained hearing, but it is even worse when he assigns the composition itself, whose good or bad qualities are perceived by the reason, to the irrational hearing which is not concerned with good or bad qualities, and when he says that one does not perceive through the reason all the properties of language.²⁵

Theories of sound in ancient criticism form a field of inquiry which, for the present purpose, need not be pursued in detail. Suffice it to say that they all reduce, and must by their nature reduce to some euphonic calculus, i.e., some system wherein sounds or combinations of sounds are assigned a specific value within an aesthetic scale. The calculus may be set up in various ways and by differing systems, but it really does not matter very much. We find an example of such a calculus in chapters 14–16 of Dionysius' work. They are also found in various parts of Philodemus' work *On Poems*.²⁶ The whole complex of euphonic theory may be dismissed by the following reasoning, again based on metathesis. If it be granted that the metathesis of good poetry is never as good as the original (and this is the basic tenet of ancient criticism), it is nevertheless conceivable that there are

²⁴ Jensen, col. xxi. 27–32.

²⁵ Jensen, cols. xx.21–xxi.11.

²⁶ See F. Sbordone, "Udito e intelletto in un nuovo testo filodemeo," *La parola del passato* 44 (1955) 390–403 and the same author's article cited in note 15 *supra*.

metatheses which are superior to their originals according to any specific calculus.

Now, I do not know whether this last bit of reasoning ever occurred to any of the ancients. It is certainly not beyond their casuistic capacities. In any case, it is clear that if we allow ourselves to be carried away by the seductive reasoning of Dionysius that the order of words in poetry can be isolated and evaluated within this isolation, then metathesis will lead us into insoluble difficulties. One might rather echo the following dictum of Philodemus: ". . . whenever we praise the composition, we ought not to separate it from the content."²⁷ It is apposite to find reassurance from I. A. Richards on the subject of poetic rhythm: "It can easily make what might be a good poem into a bad one. But it cannot be judged apart from the sense and feeling of the words out of which it is composed nor apart from the precise order in which that whole of sense and feeling builds itself up."²⁸

It appears, then, that the best known examples of the use of metathesis, those of Dionysius, barely indicate the zeal with which the device was wielded in antiquity. Metathesis was not used simply to demonstrate the importance of *synthesis*; rather, it was employed as a critical instrument which made *synthesis* a prime criterion of literary value. Moreover, it seems clear from Philodemus' treatise that metathesis was the object of considerable theoretical debate. The critics recognized its power, but they could not agree on an explanation of this power. This strikes a familiar note, and, indeed, much of ancient literary criticism has a contemporary quality. This is quite comprehensible, for we too have not yet found definite solutions to the literary problems which have plagued and intrigued us for so many centuries. It is an area in which the ancients still have much to tell us, but aside from the shining lights of Aristotle and Horace, the bulk lies in the shade if not in complete obscurity. A case in point, among many others which badly need and deserve the concerted attention of modern scholarship, is the treatise of Philodemus.

²⁷ Jensen, col. xxvi.4-7.

²⁸ I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York 1929) 230.