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## Criticism in *Theognidea*\*

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the criticism in *Theognidea*. The most visible form of criticism is rooted in the social and political domain and is discussed in the first part of the article. The following part analyses more subtle and sophisticated forms of criticism by identifying Theognis' use of irony and the peculiar message covered by his metaphors. The article concludes that the new poetical discourse of *Theognidea* contains a hidden but exact political message meant for a specific social community. This message was to be carefully considered, understood, and carried out. In this respect, Theognis is a philosophising poet using a high level of criticism and demanding the same from his audience.

**Keywords:** Theognis, criticism, polis, irony, justice, soundness of mind

The English word “criticism” — and similar words in probably all European languages — has its roots in the ancient Greek verb κρίνω (to separate, distinguish, choose, decide, and judge, among other things). The word covers many meanings. In philosophy, it is usually connected with a critical attitude to thinking and acting, occasionally related to scepticism.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we are going to identify criticism in a collection of verses ascribed to Megarian Theognis.

The collection, usually referred to as *Theognidea*, was edited by the lyric poets from the end of the Byzantine period. It consists of

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<sup>1</sup> A fruitful discussion on philosophical criticism can be found in D. KUBOK: “Comments on the Sources of Greek Philosophical Criticism.” *Folia Philosophica* 2015, Vol. 34, pp. 9—31.

shorter elegies (about 1400 verses) written in the form of elegiac distichs. We are not going to discuss the authorship and precise time of its origin. We will work with the collection and will take it as a synthesis of the Megarian poetic tradition written roughly at the beginning of the fifth century B.C., assuming that it will allow us to obtain a plausible picture of the problem of criticism.<sup>2</sup>

In *Theognidea*, there are only two instances of the verb κρινω (v. 381, 1038). However, this does not mean there is an absence of criticism. The most visible form of it can be found in the social and political domain, and this will be the starting point of our enquiry. Nevertheless, we will try to identify more subtle and sophisticated forms of criticism, too.

We should start with an elegy (v. 39—52) whose structure and diction is like Solon's well-known poem four, named *Eunomia*. Here Theognis puts forth his social criticism with the following opening quatrain: "Cyrnus, this city is pregnant and I am afraid she will give birth to a man who will set right our wicked insolence (κακῆς ὕβριος). These townsmen (ἄστοι) are still of sound mind (σαόφρονες), but their leaders (ἡγεμόνες) have changed and fallen into the depths of depravity" (v. 39—42).<sup>3</sup>

Both Solon and Theognis speak about townsmen (ἄστοι) and leaders (ἡγεμόνες), and both open their poem claiming that not everyone wants to harm the city. According to Solon, it is Zeus and Athena who hold their hands over the city. In contrast, those who want to destroy the great city are the townsmen themselves, with their foolishness and subservience to money, together with their leaders, who are possessed by an unjust mind (fr. 4, 1—8). Theognis chooses different "benefactors" for the city. These are the townsmen themselves, because they are (still) sound of mind. Those who are trying to destroy the city are at least the same as for Solon: the leaders.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the origin and authorship of *Theognidea*, see F. BUDELMANN (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 174—175; T. J. FIGUEIRA and G. NAGY (eds.): *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 1—3; R.K. BALOT: *Greek Political Thought*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, p. 17; L. PRATT: "The Seal of Theognis, Writing, and Oral Poetry." *The American Journal of Philology* 1995, Vol. 2, pp. 171—184; Z. PAPAConstantinou: "Justice of the kakoi: Law and Social Crisis in Theognis." *Dike* 2004, Vol. 7, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> For Theognis and Solon, I will be mostly following Gerber's edition and translation (exceptions will be pointed out). D.E. GERBER (ed. and tr.): *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. The Loeb Classical Library, LCL 258. Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Both authors have the same intention: to draw the listener's attention to the threat that is going to be faced by the city.<sup>4</sup>

It looks like a paradox when a convinced aristocrat, such as Theognis, chooses common citizens to be the city's benefactors. This has led some commentators to claim that the ἄστοί here refers to a select number of uncorrupted leaders. However, A. Rademaker convincingly argues that the Corpus gives no reason for this interpretation, because elsewhere in *Theognidea*, the ἄστοί are presented usually in negative light and refer either to parvenus (v. 61) or to the population of the city in general (v. 191).<sup>5</sup> To grasp why Theognis here chose the ἄστοί as a positive force, we have to consult the rest of the elegy.

In the following verses, Theognis amplifies the contrast between benefactors and foes by claiming that noble men (ἀγαθοί) had never yet destroyed a city; the base (κακοί) always did so. In the elegy, the base are not identified with some social class (as is usual elsewhere, for example, v. 53–56, 183–192, etc.). They are just those people who take delight in outrageous behaviour (ὕβριζεν) and give unjust judgements for the sake of their own profit and power. Profit comes along with public harm, warns the poet, and it cannot be expected that the city will remain stable under these conditions very long, even if for now it is totally calm (ἡσυχίη) (v. 43–48). On the contrary, concludes Theognis, “from this arise civil strife (στάσις), the spilling of kindred blood, and tyrants (μούναρχοι); may this city never delight in that” (v. 51–52).

The consequences of such unjust and violent acts are the same for both Theognis and Solon (fr. 4, 18–29) — civil strife, war, and tyranny. But why, instead of Solon's protective city gods, does Theognis choose the citizens as benefactors when they are usually presented as inferior? By choosing the citizens, Theognis emphasised the “upside down” situation in the city. It is the leaders who have to be of sound mind (and if they were so, the city would never be destroyed). But the leaders are far from this ideal and have no scruples to sacrifice justice for their own profit and power. In fact, there is a paradox here — peace and harmony in the city is preserved by those who are

<sup>4</sup> For detailed analyses of Solon's fragment, see F. BLAISE: “Poetics and politics: tradition re-worked in Solon's *Eunomia* (Poem 4).” In: *Solon of Athens: New Historical and Philological Approaches*. Ed. J.H. BLOK, A.P.M.H. LARDINOIS. Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2006, pp. 114–133.

<sup>5</sup> A. RADEMAKER: *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint*. Leiden, Brill, 2005, p. 84, n. 23.

usually inferior, and those who have to be superior lead the city to civil strife and tyranny.<sup>6</sup> If nothing changes, the city will be ruined.

While Solon sees the remedy of civil strife in Lawfulness (Εὐνομία), Theognis emphasises the soundness of mind; σωφροσύνη is presented as a factor of stability in the polis. The notion of *sōphrosynē* could also be found in the early Greek lyric poetry of Bacchylides (fr. 13, 182—189) and Pindar (*Paeanes* 1, 10). But Theognis “is the first of our sources to provide *sōphrosynē* with a political context.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Theognis’ critique of the political situation has a deeper sense. It leads to the identification of a *conditio sine qua non* of a good political order — the virtue of justice<sup>8</sup> and the virtue of soundness of mind.<sup>9</sup>

As we see above, one of the crucial sources of disorder in the city, besides lawlessness, is gain or profit (κέρδος). The critique of gain and excessive wealth (πλοῦτος) is another typical motif of early Greek lyric poetry, and Theognis mentions it many times. In one of his famous elegies, he complains that “wealth has mixed up blood (πλοῦτος ἔμειξε γένος)”; a noble man does not mind marrying the base daughter of a base father if the latter gives him a lot of money, and this is the root of social disorder. Hence “the townsmen’s stock is becoming enfeebled (ἀσπῶν μαυροῦσθαι), since what is noble is mixing with what is base” (v. 183—192). In another poem, he urges his friend to make wealth by just means, keeping his heart sensible (σώφρονα) and free of wickedness (v. 753—756). One of the main problems of wealth is that there is no limit of it revealed to men, since those who have the greatest livelihoods are eager to double it; “in truth possessions result in folly for mortals (χρήματά τοι θνητοῖς γίνεται ἀφροσύνη)” (v. 227—230, cf. Solon fr. 13, 71—76). In another part, Theognis holds an almost Socratic position when he realises

<sup>6</sup> See also G. Nagy’s interpretation of this elegy: G. NAGY: “Theognis and Megara: A Poet’s Vision of His City.” In: *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis*. Ed. T.J. FIGUEIRA, G. NAGY. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 42—46. The danger and pathology of tyranny and the tyrant, first discussed in Early Greek lyric poetry (Theognis v. 823, 1181, 1204; Solon fr. 33; cf. Herodotus *Historiae* 3, 80—82), becomes a significant topic of later philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> W. DONLAN: *The Aristocratic Ideal and Selected Papers*. Wauconda, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1999), p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> “For in justice there is the sum total of every excellence (ἐν δὲ δικαιοσύνηι συλλήβδην πᾶσ’ ἀρετῆ ‘στι), and every man who is just, Cynrus, is noble (ἀγαθός)” (Theognis v. 147—148).

<sup>9</sup> On *sōphrosynē* in early Greek poetry, see A. RADEMAKER: *The Rhetoric of Self-Restraint...*, pp. 75—98; *sōphrosynē* in *Theognidea* is also discussed in M. PORUBJAK: “Theognis a sófrosynē.” *Filosofický časopis* 2017, Vol. 5, pp. 659—672.

that he does not want to exchange wealth for virtue (ἀρετή), since virtue is always secure (ἔμπεδον αἰεὶ) while wealth belongs to one man but then to another (v. 315—318, cf. Solon fr. 15).

One of the most interesting elegies discussing wealth is the following one. Theognis starts it with a striking observation: “For the majority of people, this alone is best: wealth (ἀρετή μία γίνεται ἤδε, πλουτεῖν). Nothing else after all is of use” (v. 699—670). In the next sixteen verses, he gives arguments in favour of this claim. People do not praise those who have the good judgement of Rhadamantys or the clever wits of Sisyphus (who was able to escape from Hades) anymore;<sup>10</sup> nor do they praise anymore those with the eloquent tongue of the godlike Nestor or someone with the swiftness of the Harpies or Boreas. “No,” Theognis concludes his poem with a final distich, “everyone should store up this thought that for all people wealth has the greatest power (πλοῦτος πλείστην πᾶσιν ἔχει δύναμιν)” (v. 717—718).

We choose this elegy for two main reasons. (1) The first and last distichs are composed as an answer to a definitional question: “What is the best/greatest power (for all people)?” “Wealth.” The middle part of the elegy gives four key arguments for this “definition.” Thus, the elegy is designed as a short treatise. (2) There is an apparent irony used in the elegy. Someone with a lack of (critical) reasoning will miss the point. At first glance, the elegy looks like an exaltation of power and the usefulness of wealth. But the meaning is the opposite; every other mentioned faculty is in fact better and more useful than (extensive) wealth.<sup>11</sup>

However, in *Theognidea* we can find a much more sophisticated message connected with social criticism. In another elegy (v. 667—682), Theognis is singing: “If I had my possessions (χρήματα),

<sup>10</sup> A detailed analysis of this part of the elegy is offered by W.J. HENDERSON: “Theognis 702—712: The Sisyphus-exemplum.” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 1983, Vol. 3. For Theognis’ critique of wealth, see W. DONLAN: *The Aristocratic Ideal...*, pp. 80—85.

<sup>11</sup> A similar use of irony and definition can be found in Xenophanes’ poem (DK B 2). For more on Xenophanes’ scepticism, see D. KUBOK: “Xenophanes of Colophon and the Problem of Distinguishing between Skepticism and Negative Dogmatism.” *Electryone* 2016, Vol. 2, pp. 36—48. All references to works of the Presocratic philosophers are made to the text including the following edition: H. DIELS, W. KRANZ (eds.): *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Vols. 1—3. Trans. H. DIELS. Dublin, Zurich, Weidmann, 1964—1966). The format of reference will henceforth include the following elements: the name of the Presocratic, the abbreviation of the edition (“DK”), the capitalised letter denoting the section of the edition (“A” or “B”), the sequential number of the fragment, and, if needed, the number denoting the verse.

Simonides, I would not be distressed as I am now at being together with the noble (τοῖς ἀγαθοῖσι συνών). But now they [i.e., my possessions] have passed me by, even though I was aware (γινώσκοντα), and I am speechless because of my lack of possessions, though I would be better aware (γνοῦσαν) than many” (v. 667—670).<sup>12</sup> Theognis continues with the image of a ship facing the night and a storm. In this image, the ship is in danger because the noble pilot (κυβερνήτην ... ἐσθλόν), who was standing guard with expertise (ἐπισταμένως), was deposed by those who seize possessions (χρήματα) by force and destroy order. The carriers of merchandise rule, and the base (κακοί) are above the nobles (ἀγαθοί). In this situation, perhaps a wave could swallow the ship (v. 671—680) — Theognis worries before finishing the poem: “Let these things be allusive utterances hidden by me for the noble (ταῦτά μοι ἠνίχθω κεκρυμμένα τοῖς ἀγαθοῖσιν). One could be aware of even [future] misfortune, if one is skilled (γινώσκοι δ’ ἄν τις καὶ κακόν, ἄν σοφὸς ᾗ)” (v. 681—682).

In the Corpus, Theognis complains many times that he was betrayed by his friends, deprived of his property, and exiled from his hometown of Megara. In this elegy, he turns to the nobles (who may be from his hometown or any Greek city) and uses himself as an example. In spite of his nobility and awareness, he was deprived of his property and faced exile. Now he is much more skilled to see the coming threat. He hides his message in the image of a ship in danger (the ship—state analogy becomes proverbial in later philosophy). This is the message of a skilled poet to a skilled audience. The enigma of the analogy must be decoded. It cannot be done by the base (κακοί). This allusive message is intended for nobles (ἀγαθοί) — for the social community of the poet himself. When decoded, it can help them perceive the current situation and prevent future misfortune.<sup>13</sup>

This hidden message addressed to a specific social community could be the reasons why Theognis — in one of the most discussed

<sup>12</sup> I am following Nagy’s translation. G. NAGY: “Theognis and Megara...,” pp. 22—23.

<sup>13</sup> G. Nagy points out that the reading of the last distich of the elegy offered by him follows the manuscript tradition, which gives κακόν — as opposed to the emendation κακός adopted by most editors and yielding alternative interpretation: “even a base person could be aware [of what is hidden away for the noble], if he is *sophos*.” Besides many other arguments for not emending κακόν to κακός, Nagy supports his reading by referring to Solon’s verses (fr. 1, 55—56), where a man who understands the control of desirable *sophiē* is aware of misfortune even when it is coming from afar (G. NAGY: “Theognis and Megara...,” pp. 24—26). Nagy’s arguments appear plausible to us. Therefore, we have adopted his reading.

verses of Corpus — talks about the seal: “Cyrnus, let a seal (σφρηγίς) be placed by me as I practise my skill (σοφιζομένοι μὲν ἐμοί), upon these utterances (ἔπεσιν); that way they will never be stolen without detection, and no one will substitute something inferior for the genuine thing (κάκιον τοῦσθλοῦ παρεόντος) that is there” (v. 19—21).<sup>14</sup> The excellence of the verses/utterances should — in a typical poetic self-advertisement — guarantee Theognis’ fame among all men (v. 22—23). Albeit excellently elaborated, verses cannot please all the townsmen; this is not surprising, “since not even Zeus pleases everyone when he sends rain or holds back” (v. 24—26).<sup>15</sup> After this introduction, Theognis continues with his typical educational advice to his beloved Cyrnus, promising to teach him the same things he had learned from noble men himself when he was still a boy (v. 27—38).

The verses are fixed by the seal to not be changed, since their content is not trivial. If treated badly or without skill, they will be deformed; changes could lead to misunderstanding. Furthermore, as we have seen above, they are designed for a particular social community (and thus cannot please everyone) and bring certain solutions to (new) political issues. Gregory Nagy shows fruitful parallels between Theognis and lawgivers. The function of the lawgiver is to create social order. “Inside the ideology of narrative tradition about a given lawgiver, his code is static, unchangeable; outside this ideology and in reality, however, the code is dynamic, subject to modifications and accretions that are occasioned by an evolving social order.”<sup>16</sup> With his seal, Theognis aspires to this changelessness; however, his poetry becomes the subject of later modification and accretions.

Although Theognis promises Cyrnus that he will teach him what he himself had learned from tradition, he is not merely a “parrot” traditionalist. In another poem, he reveals what kind of knowledge he is handing over. The attendant and messenger of the Muses, who has exceptional knowledge (σοφίη), says Theognis cannot stint with his *sophiē* but has to seek out (μῶσθαι) and display (δεικνύεν) some things and compose (ποιεῖν) others; otherwise his *sophiē* will be worthless (v. 769—772). Though rooted in tradition, Theognis brings

<sup>14</sup> I am following A. L. Ford’s translation; A. L. FORD: “The Seal of Theognis: The Politics of Authorship in Archaic Greece.” In: *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis*. Ed. T.J. FIGUEIRA, G. NAGY. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 83—84.

<sup>15</sup> A detailed discussion on the purpose and meaning of Theognis’ seal can be found in L. PRATT: “The Seal of Theognis...,” pp. 171—184.

<sup>16</sup> G. NAGY: “Theognis and Megara...,” p. 32.

new poetic discourse; his *sophiē* is politically (and morally) designed to help analyse and solve current social problems.<sup>17</sup>

The poems should be treated as a prophecy or law. When Theognis is speaking about a man sent to consult the oracle (θεωρός), he warns that he must take care and “be straighter than a carpenter’s compass, rule, and square ... For you can no longer find any remedy if you add anything, nor can you avoid sinning in the eyes of the gods if you take anything away” (v. 805—810). L.A. Ford notes that for the Greeks of the archaic period there is no clear line of demarcation separating a “poetic” text from an oracular one and that such oracle texts were usually in meter.<sup>18</sup> Theognis is like the θεωρός; he carefully transmits his verses to the audience, and the audience cannot change them. If they change them, misunderstanding should be the punishment.

Such precision must be held in the case of judgement, too: “I must render (δικάσσαι) this judgement (δικήν) by rule and square, Cynus, and give an equal share to both sides” (v. 543—544). Neither prophecy nor law can be changed because they were set by a higher authority — the god or the lawgiver.<sup>19</sup> But they must be carefully considered, understood, and carried out. This rule should apply to Theognis’ poems too. His new poetical discourse contains a hidden but exact political message directed at a specific social community. Theognis expects his audience to carefully identify and recognise it. Our conclusion is that in this respect, Theognis is a philosophising poet using a high level of criticism and demanding the same kind of ability from his audience. After all, “cleverness is in truth superior to inflexibility” (v. 218).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A similar political dimension of *sophiē* could be found in Xenophanes’ fragment DK B 2.

<sup>18</sup> A.L. FORD: “The Seal of Theognis...,” p. 87. Furthermore, when Theognis is putting the seal on his utterances/verses for them not to be changed (see above), he uses for the utterances/verses the word ἔπη. “In fact, the Greeks of the sixth century had no special word for poetry but referred to poems and oracles alike with the word *epē*” (ibidem, p. 87).

<sup>19</sup> The laws in Ancient Greece were deposited in temples, and Zeus was the guarantor of justice. Thus, according to tradition, the words of oracle and law must be treated in a similar way.

<sup>20</sup> κρέσσων τοι σοφίη γίνεται ἀτροπίης.



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