

DANTE AND AQUINAS

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Poetry and Philosophy

When Dante asks to which part of philosophy the Comedy should be assigned, we are surprised. That this great poem should be described as an instance of moral philosophy seems an obvious transgression of genera. It is as if one said that poetry is prose. What is perhaps most surprising to us is that Dante clearly does not expect any surprised reaction to what he is saying. Have the meanings of “poetry” and “philosophy” changed from his time to ours. Well, what do we think is the relation between poetry and philosophy?

1. Philosophy in its Origins

The great Spanish philosopher Julian Marias (in *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory*) reminds us of something so obvious it most often goes unnoticed, like the mailman in Chesterton. Such fragments as we have of the first men to be called philosophers are in verse. The greatest and most influential pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, is available to us in large fragments of a poetic work. If you were a professional philosopher, a graduate student in that discipline, or an undergraduate major, or simply the well-rounded individual you are, you might, when you think of philosophical writing have in mind a dense article in *Mind* or in some other current philosophical quarterly. Nothing poetic there. Sometimes nothing quite readable. If that were your reaction, Marias will remind you that philosophy, not only in its beginnings, but throughout its checkered history, has expressed itself in a wide variety of genres: poems, dialogues, meditations, disputed questions, pensées, prayers, treatises, and in articles like those in *Mind* or *The Review of Metaphysics*.

We might be tempted by the thought that, on the usual model of progress, philosophy groped for centuries in its search for its appropriate and distinc-

tive genre, that Marias's list merely recalls those dear dark days almost beyond recall when men were less wise than we and didn't know a iamb from a syllogism. But then what are we to make of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Unamuno, Wittgenstein (who may be thought to mimic pre-Socratic fragments in his enigmatic and aphoristic writings), Heidegger (with his studied opacity), etc.? Wittgenstein and Heidegger, for better or worse, are the two most influential twentieth century philosophers, their influence extending into the third millennium. It is difficult to think of much if anything of what they wrote appearing in your standard philosophical journal. Throwbacks? Perhaps.

a. The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry

The question of the relation between philosophy and poetry is as old as philosophy itself. Plato, in the *Republic*, speaks of an ancient quarrel between the philosopher and the poet. The poet he has in mind chiefly is Homer, the schoolmaster of Greece, whose epics formed the spine of education, Schoolboys memorized and reenacted the great scenes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Plato disapproves.

Now this is surprising. Plato is the most artful of philosophers. In his *Poetics*, when he is listing types of poetry, Aristotle mentions the Platonic dialogues. So which side of the quarrel is Plato on? The quarrel Plato discusses concerns the ultimate telos of thought, such knowledge as we can acquire of the divine, theology. What annoys him in Homer is the bard's attribution to the gods of traits which are reprehensible in human beings or simply the ascription of human characteristics, good or bad, to the gods. It is not simply that the poets do this, but they do it in a way that is seductive and memorable. Dramatic, sticking to the mind and imagination. Few writers have had as keen an appreciation of the impact that poetry has on us. For this reason, Plato's ban on poetry in his ideal republic is selective: it is Homer he would forbid. What he would like is poetry that would inculcate, in the powerful way poetry has, correct views of the human and divine.

In short, the quarrel is between philosophy and a certain kind of poetry, not between philosophy and poetry as such.

b. Aristotle and Poetry

While Plato held a kind of division of philosophy—for example, distinguishing between mathematics and what he called dialectics—it is to Aristotle

that we turn for crisp and formal distinctions of the various disciplines that make up philosophy. Logic is not mathematics, and neither is natural philosophy, all three are distinct from moral philosophy, and the terminal inquiry of philosophy, called First Philosophy or Wisdom and, later, Metaphysics, is distinct from them all. Nor are such distinctions based on hunches, e.g. that we just know that a mathematical proof differs from discussion of time and motion. Aristotle provides us with criteria on the basis of which such distinctions are formally made. Thomas Aquinas has made all this explicit in such discussions as that found in his commentary on the *De trinitate* of Boethius, questions five and six (put into English by Armand Maurer). You will also find such precisions in the discussion of the divisions of natural philosophy in the readings gathered together in Section 19 of the Penguin Classic, *Selected Writings of Thomas Aquinas*. And Aristotle wrote a little work called *The Poetics* that has come down to us in incomplete form (but which Thomas did not know).

Aristotle was also a more systematic conveyor of what his predecessors had to say of any topic he embarked upon, making him in a sense the first historian of philosophy. If you consulted Kirk and Raven's collection of the pre-Socratic philosophers, you would see how heavily they rely on what Aristotle has said about them. We would even know of them otherwise? At the beginning of the *Physics*, in the first book of *On the Soul*, in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle lays out what has been previously said on the subject he is about to discuss. He doesn't mention that many of his predecessors expressed themselves in verse. But he does contrast what he is doing with the works of those he calls theological poets among whom he would list Hesiod but not Homer.

Sometimes Aristotle like Plato is objecting to what they said: "bards tell many a lie." But it is the way they say it that emerges as the difference between philosophy and poetry. Indeed, Aristotle's withering dismissal of the Platonic Ideas as "empty metaphors" provides the clue. It is as if Aristotle occupies the standpoint I imagined you occupying at the outset of this discussion. Philosophers write prose, their language is literal; poets employ metaphors. And what is a metaphor? For that matter, what is literal language? But first metaphor.

And what did Aristotle mean by poetry? All we need do is consult his *Poetics* to find out. The poet provides imitations of human action; the drama puts before us human beings in a dilemma who must act to extricate themselves from it. The *Poetics* as it has come down to us is incomplete. We have Aristotle's discussion of tragedy and comedy, but those on the epic and other kinds of poetry that he lists at the outset are lost to us. When

Aristotle enumerated instances of poetry that he hoped to analyze, we find on the list the dialogues of Plato. Imitation is the key to poetry in the broadest sense, Aristotle maintained, and as for poetic diction, the heart of it is metaphor. A metaphor involves speaking of something by speaking of something else that is thought to cast light on it. This makes it discursive. My love is like a red red rose. This is a simile, of course, which is close kin to metaphor, and the comparison is meant to tell us something of the poets beloved by reference to roses.

To make a long and complicated story short, Aristotle saw poetry as being located at one end of a spectrum of discourse at the opposite end of which was philosophical discourse. A note of the latter is that it avoids equivocation and seeks to speak of things in their own terms. For all that, poetic discourse teaches, leading us from one thing to the other, much as more austere arguments lead us from premises to conclusion. On this view, poetry is a poor cousin, but nonetheless related, to philosophical discourse. Thomas Aquinas, himself a poet, adopted this view, speaking of poetry as *infima doctrina*, the least of teaching tools.

To speak of something metaphorically is to speak of it improperly, that is, not in terms of the name that picks out what it is, but by using another name which can be applied to it only obliquely. The philosopher is at once the foe and the beneficiary of equivocation. He knows that most of our words bear an enormous number of meanings, most of them unrelated. So it will be a necessary preliminary to any discussion to clarify which of those meanings we have in mind, and then stick to it. If in an argument I use “bit” both in the sense of not much, a small amount, and in the sense of what a horse has in its mouth, my argument will fail. We are talking about money or perhaps lint. I say, “I have a bit in my pocket.” And you reply “My horse has a bit in his mouth.” If I sought to apply what is true of a small amount to what is in the horse’s mouth I would be guilty of the fallacy of equivocation.

Sometimes however the plurality of meanings attached to a given word form an ordered set, and when they do this will provide an essential philosophical tool. But more of that anon.

The philosopher—this seems Aristotle’s suggestion—deals with words in a literal or prosaic meaning, and one meaning at a time if, as is usually the case, the word has many meanings. Poetic discourse has the mark of the transfer of a word from its proper application to a thing to which it does not literally apply. That is more or less the meaning of “metaphor.” The word has its origin in transport, carrying from one place to another like a moving van (you will find METAPHORA emblazoned on certain trucks in Athens.)

Is “metaphor” a metaphor, carrying the word from its USVan Lines meaning into language? It would seem so. Or is this only etymology? How can it be only that when you can be run down by a truck with Metaphor painted on its side?

Now a devotee of the *Poetics* like yourself will find this an odd approach. When Aristotle assigns what he takes to be essential to poetry he speaks of imitation. Actions on a stage mimic the kind of deed we were engaged in before we took our seats. They stand for them in some way. They are like them. The *Poetics* as it has come down to us contains only what Aristotle had to say of drama (or almost only that), and drama is a doing, an enactment, a series of actions which, thanks to a plot, have a beginning, a middle and an end. Metaphor comes up only when Aristotle is discussing the speech of the characters, but drama shows more than it says. Its meaning lies in the logic of the events, in Aristotle’s phrase, the causal and sometimes casual connection (though not casual to the audience) of the deeds enacted before us on the stage. And the audience learns something from what it sees; there is a meaning conveyed. There is a truth in poetry, something we acknowledge in what Edmund Wilson called the shock of recognition. More importantly, this kind of learning essentially involves our emotions; we feel the pain and joys of the characters. They are like us. Pity and fear are the tragic emotions and they are purged by the play: we are reconciled to human doings, with their tragic downs and comic ups, as we watch.

Let this suffice for now; we will be returning to related problems in a couple of weeks. No one mistakes the *Medea* or the Orestes trilogy for such discourse as we find in Aristotle’s *Physics*. In the latter, what is being conveyed is not conveyed by telling stories about what human beings do. It is because poetry teaches, though in its own way bringing us from one thing to another in such a way that the former casts light on the latter, that it is a *doctrina*, albeit *infima doctrina*, the least of doctrines, the bottom rung on a scale.

2. The Philosophical Poet

The Aristotelian account of the relation between poetry and philosophy must not be misunderstood. Like Plato, he will say that “bards tell many a lie,” quoting a poet as he does so, but he also argues that poetry is, however fragile, a vehicle for conveying the truth, something it does in its own peculiar way. A hierarchy is the recognition of order, not a putdown of things low on its scale. This is far distant from some contemporary philosophical dismissals of poetry as nonsense, as not susceptible of truth or

falsity, merely an emotive effusion.

Most of the writers whom I have found helpful on this matter come sooner or later—usually sooner—to Dante. This is true not only of Santayana, but of his student T. S. Eliot who, in his lectures on the metaphysical poets, is guided by his old professor and gives pride of place to Dante. The same is true of Jacques Maritain in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Critics like Harold Bloom, for example in *The Western Canon*, give similar pride of place to Dante, no matter how high they wish to rank Shakespeare and Milton. From the perspective of our interest now, Dante is of maximum interest.

I take his letter to Can Grande della Scala, in which he dedicates the *Paradiso* to that patron, to be authentic, but even without it one can make the points I wish to make. They are, however, made unequivocally in that letter. Dante tells us that his greatest poem is an exercise in moral philosophy. At the end of *La vita nuova*, a suite of poems which are followed by prose reflections on them, Dante expresses his discontent with what he has accomplished. His ultimate intention is to write of Beatrice as no woman has ever been written of. This is rightly taken to point to the *Divine Comedy*. In preparation for that task, Dante undertakes an extended study of philosophy and theology, in Florence, where among his Dominican teachers were some who had studied under Thomas Aquinas at the University of Paris. The *Comedy* is set in the year 1300, the lifetime of Dante slightly overlaps that of Aquinas, and in the *Comedy*, as in the Circle of Light in the *Paradiso*, he exhibits knowledge of controversies in Paris he seems to have become acquainted with during his time of preparatory study. How can the 100 cantos of the *Divine Comedy* be read as philosophy? That is the problem Dante's self-description poses.

There is the commonplace that the *Comedy* is the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas cast into verse. It is best to take that as nonsense. That the thought of Thomas exercised a tremendous influence on Dante the poet is undeniable, but to speak of that influence as a mere translating of prose into poetry does disservice to both sides of the comparison. Santayana is of help here. In reflecting on his three philosophical poets, Santayana suggests that standing behind each of them is a profound philosophical account of the way things are. Thus, Lucretius is taken to be the poet of naturalism, Dante the poet of supernaturalism, and Goethe of romanticism.

The first thing this requires of us is to surmount our tendency to think of poetry in terms of the lyric. We have perhaps lost the sense that the poet can take on vast subjects and treat them at length. As Santayana suggested, in our times, it is almost a condition of being a poet to be brief.

Dante was anything but diffident about his accomplishment in the *Divine Comedy*. Unlike *La vita nuova* and *Il Convivio*, we are not presented with a mixture of poetry and prose, the latter explicating the former. But Dante applies to his great poem the technique that had been developed for interpreting Sacred Scripture, distinguishing between the literal and the allegorical meaning of the *Divine Comedy*. The literal meaning is the state of souls after death. The allegorical meaning is the way in which human beings, by the exercise of their freedom, by the lives they live, determine their eternal reward or punishment.

It may seem hubristic for Dante to apply the senses of Scripture to his own poem, but it does suggest something else. Thomas, as I have mentioned, speaks of poetry as the least of doctrines and he follows Aristotle in seeing metaphor as the mark of poetic diction. At the outset of the *Summa theologiae*, when he is clarifying the subject matter of his great summary and points to revealed truths as providing the principles of theology, he asks an interesting question. Is it fitting that Scripture should employ metaphors and figures.

In discussing this, Thomas distinguishes between metaphors which raise the inanimate or subhuman to a higher level by attributing to them human characteristics—the smiling meadow, the raging sea, the serene sky, etc.—from metaphors which proportion higher things to us by speaking of them in our terms. It is because God so exceeds our human capacity to understand that he speaks to us in our language, with all the associations and implications of that language which has been fashioned to know what we know best, the things of this world. God is a burning bush, a pillar of cloud, a lion, and in these appearances as in the application of such terms to him, we learn to ask what, given their literal meanings, such terms can mean when applied to Him. All thinking, and therefore all talking, about God involves a movement from sensible things to that which lies beyond, and can only be imagined as beyond. To speak of God as angry is like speaking of one's beloved as a rose.

I will be returning to this in a moment.

The designation of certain 17th century English poets as metaphysical would seem to pose our question in an acute form. Of course, calling these poets metaphysical was not at first to praise them—the term comes from John Dryden and is used by Samuel Johnson, the latter in a very critical way. He thinks those he called metaphysical are show-offs, parading their erudition, deliberately seeking to be difficult, and so on. John Donne is preeminent among the metaphysicals. What does it mean in his case.

At the round earth's imagined corners. . . .

I am a little world made cunningly
Of elements, and an angellike sprite,
but black sin had betraid to endlesse night my worlds both parts,
and (oh) both parts must die.

What if the present were the worlds last night?
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,
the picture of Christ crucified, and tell
whether that countenance can thee afright. . . .

Perhaps we are used to this sort of thing. It may not be Wordsworth or Longfellow, but cerebral poetry came roaring back in the 20th century. There were even new metaphysical poets, like Richard Wilbur. In his lectures on the 17th century metaphysicals, Eliot began by suggestng a peculiar affinity between them and 20th century poets.

Eliot, in addressing the problem, sees it as a particular form of asking the relationship between thought and poetry. Perhaps at one extreme would be the attempt to make poetry simply the music of language—les sanglots longs des violins—sound over meaning. Metaphysical poetry would be at the other extreme. It is the poetry of thinking.

There are three principal forms in which thought can invest itself and become poetry. Eliot suggests. One is when a thought, which may be and most often is a commonplace, is expressed in poetic form though in the language of thought.

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither,
Ripeness is all. [Lear, v.ii]

He calls these gnomic utterances.

Second, is the discursive exposition of an argument. Pope's *Essay on Man*, and passages in the *Purgatorio* expounding the origin of the soul. "Immense technical skill is necessary to make such discourse fly, and great emotional intensity to make it soar."

Third, when an idea ordinarily only apprehensible as an intellectual statement is translated into sensible form. Donne's ability to elevate sexual love into a mingling of souls.

What Santayana and Eliot give us is fascinating but remains somehow dissatisfying. If philosophical or metaphysical poetry is going to be defined

in terms of the role of thought, it seems difficult to exclude much, perhaps only Lewis Carrol and the Impressionists. . . .