

# THE ANCIENT QUARREL BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

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George Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets* is the book that first set my mind going on the subject I wish to address today. Years have passed since I first read this little book, but I have read it many times since and whenever our subject occurs to me, I remember what Santayana had to say. His three philosophical poets are Lucretius, Dante and Goethe and in discussing them he had to distinguish what they had written from the works of non-philosophical poets—not with entire success, I think. Most importantly, he had to distinguish poetry and philosophy.

On the face of it, the second distinction would seem easy to make. After all, poets express themselves in verse—or, if we expand the conception of poet, as I think we must, beyond those who write in verse to all those writers who proceed imaginatively—whereas philosophers would seem to write. Not simply prose, but a particularly difficult kind of prose. Think of Kant, think of Hegel, think of just about any article in a current philosophical review. Not every reader would care to take any of them for bedtime reading, or if he does it would be for their soporific effect.

The question can be complicated if we introduce the category of poetic philosophers, thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Unamuno and Sartre, who are as likely to tell us a story as to provide us with an argument in what we would perhaps think of as the usual philosophical manner. We soon come to think that, throughout the history of western culture, the presumed distinction between poetry and philosophy has been honored as much in the breach as in the observance.

What I propose to do in the following is threefold.

First, I will draw your attention to some discussions that took place, if not at the dawn of philosophy, at least in its early morning.

Second, having on the basis of my appeal to the ancients provided a distinction between poetry and philosophy, I will turn to Santayana's—and everybody else's—point of reference, namely Dante, at the same time

saying a thing or two about the metaphysical poets of the 17th century, with particular reference to T. S. Eliot's lectures on the metaphysical poets.

Third, and finally, I shall offer some random thoughts on the issues that will have arisen.

## 1. The Ancient Quarrel

It was Plato, in the *Republic*, who spoke of the ancient quarrel between the philosopher and poet. On the face of it, this may seem to be a surprising claim. In its beginnings, philosophy expressed itself in verse. If you were to consult such a collection of the Pre-Socratic philosophers as Kirk and Raven's, you would find that, so soon as we have fragments of the works of this first generation of philosophers—we are speaking of the 6th century BC—those fragments are in verse. Parmenides comes down to us in three large fragments, all of them poetic, one of which serves as prologue, the next as providing us with the way of truth, and a third which presents the way of seeming or appearance. The prologue provides a dramatic setting for what follows. Parmenides is taken up in a chariot and given a revelation by the gods which he is commissioned to retail to us. The basic message is that being is and that non-being is not, which may not seem to be a claim requiring the authority of revelation, but the use to which Parmenides puts it would not immediately leap to many minds.

Empedocles is often credited with first putting forth the four elements, fire, air, earth and water. But if you look at his fragments you will not find those everyday words; rather the elements are given the names of mythical figures and their combining and disconnecting are spoken of in terms of a cosmic drama. When a compound is formed from the union of elements, a trespass has occurred, since each element has its allotted quadrant such that its mixing with another involves crossing the border into the other's territory. Illegal aliens, so to speak. The resulting compound is thus the product of injustice and this calls for its ultimate dissolution.

Hesiod is sometimes counted among the early philosophers, but Homer is not. It is of course Homer that Plato has in mind when he speaks of the ancient quarrel, and his main complaint is that Homer attributes to the gods actions that would be reprehensible in men. Yet Homer was the schoolmaster of Greece, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* forming a large part of education, with boys not only memorizing lines but enacting the stories. It is because the devices of the poet engage us so fully that Plato is intent on outlawing from his ideal republic poetry which inculcates falsehoods. He allows that the blandishments of poetry, when added to truth, may find admittance to his

ideal state, and allows further that such poetry is more powerful than mere prose.

All this is somewhat odd in that Plato is surely one of the most artful philosophers. His dialogues dramatize the mind's pursuit of truth in ways which have made them absolutely essential to philosophical literacy. Not to know Plato is to cut oneself off from one of the main sources of the culture in which we exist.

Aristotle, as you know, was a student in the Platonic Academy, remaining there for nearly twenty years. He is said to have left when Speusippus, a nephew of Plato's, was made head of the school on the death of its founder. Aristotle then founded the rival Lyceum. But it would be wrong to think that it was only then that Aristotle became critical of the key tenet of Platonism, the Ideas, or Forms. For one thing, it was a standard exercise in the Academy to formulate difficulties for the theory of Ideas, as the beginning of Plato's *Parmenides* shows. No need to rehearse the doctrine of Ideas, save to recall that Plato held that certain knowledge required changeless objects and this made it impossible think that knowledge was of the changeable things of this world. Those changeable things are and are what they are by participation in or imitation of ideal entities beyond space and time which are immune to change. Of all this Aristotle was dismissively to say that it amounted only to empty metaphors. In short, he was accusing his master of being more poet than philosopher.

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 poet's 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, the transportation provided by metaphor 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.

## 2. Dante as 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, but 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 *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 *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.

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? Consider these lines from different poems.

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 suggesting 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. E.g. 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 Carroll and the Impressionists.

### 3. Random Thoughts

It is surprising to read in one of the *Four Quartets* that, "the poetry does not matter,"—expressed of course in a poem. One of the distinctions Aristotle makes in the *Poetics* is between verse and poetry. He remarks that you could put Herodotus into verse and it would still be history, not poetry. The essence of poetry, for Aristotle, is imitation, the conveying through human behavior of some truth. What seems to be peculiar to such poetic conveyance is the prominence of the sensible, the imaginable, the concrete, which we dwell on but which lifts the mind to something beyond. This is to proportion it to the human level. We are animals who speak and there is a sense in which mind, though it is definitive of us, can draw us into a kind of thinking that does not involve us fully, appetitively, imaginatively. Indeed, one of the claims about theoretical thinking in its highest form is that it must transcend imagination. Undeniably, there has been a tendency among many philosophers to denigrate the kind of thought and language that characterize the poet. The poet addresses our mind, no doubt, but through our imagination, our sensibility, our feelings. As Eliot suggested about the metaphysical poet, thought and feeling become fused.

My earlier reference to Thomas and scriptural metaphors provides me with an exit strategy for this talk.

All men by nature desire to know, and this hunger for truth can only be assuaged by such knowledge as we can attain of God. Such knowledge

is the ultimate aim of philosophizing, and its successful attainment depends on knowledge of just about everything else. Any knowledge we have of God is gained by inference from our knowledge of the things around us. The classical proofs of the existence of God have premises which express truths about things other than God. As our knowledge is oblique and indirect, so is the language we use to speak of God. Hence the prominence of metaphor, not only in philosophical talk of God, but in the Bible. The Old Testament makes God known in a variety of ways, but they are all indirect. Adam and Eve may have walked with God in the garden of Eden in the cool of the evening, but ever afterward our God is a hidden God. This is so because He makes himself known by means which are accessible to us, and that means what can be sensed, imagined, felt. Not all talk of God is metaphorical, but it is all indirect. If analogy is distinguished from metaphor, as it can be, there is nonetheless involved in it the primacy of the sensible.

You will find books devoted to the origins of philosophy with titles like *From Religion to Philosophy* or *From Poetry to Philosophy*. Both Plato and Aristotle saw what they specifically did as an advance on and corrective of those they called Theological Poets. This may seem to relegate the poetic to an early and surpassable stage of human culture, such that those who retain an interest in poetry are retarded, philosophers manquéés. Should the philosopher be sheepish about his interest in poetry?

I have alluded to the paradox that Plato, that most artful of philosophers, is critical of art and that Aristotle criticizes Plato for lapsing into metaphor. We notice, however, that both men are steeped in the poets. Let me draw particular attention to the fact that Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*.

It would be absurd to think that this is an exercise in knowing thine enemy. No one can read that little work as if it were speaking of works unworthy of attention, or an appreciation we are meant to overcome. I suggest that the *Poetics* is a powerful sign of the continuing necessity of poetry for the philosopher.

The discussion of tragedy suggests that certain limit situations of human action make it clear that the intentions and wishes of the agents are not the final word on human life. Something else is at work in human affairs, call it Moira or Providence, call it God. Human life would be unintelligible without this reference. The poet invokes the transcendent, he does not prove it. But under his auspices we become reconciled to aspects of our lives which would otherwise be absurd and irrational. In the tragedy what must seem absurd and irrational to the agents, and to the audience, becomes finally suffused with a reasonableness and rightness that exceeds our own immediate criteria.

The philosopher, as metaphysician, seeks to formulate arguments for the

existence of God and for the establishment of some of his attributes. At the acme of Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle offers as the best description of God, who is Pure Actuality, Thought Thinking Itself. This phrase does not wear its meaning on its face, and the understanding of it depends on a host of earlier analyses and arguments. But it is nonetheless the highest achievement of Greek metaphysics.

Not everyone will be able to devote himself to such inquiries, but even the few who can will find their activity episodic. Contemplation of the divine cannot be a 24 hour occupation for a human being. Let me end with a word picture. Aristotle could not have written his *Poetics* without having been a devotee of the theater; his knowledge of Greek drama is vast. So imagine Aristotle, the quintessential philosopher, the master of those who know, his life defined by contemplation, there in the theater, if not in the front row, close to the stage, paying rapt attention to the deeds enacted before him. Like any other viewer, those deeds will invite him to reflect on the mystery of human existence, the role of change and providence in our lives. Surely this delight is not alien to contemplation. And perhaps for many in the audience it is the only way in which they participate in contemplation.