

Poetry and Philosophy

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Of the three branches of literary studies, theory traditionally has been given the most attention by scholars since the time of Aristarchus, with philosophy playing an instrumental role in theory's development and growth.¹ However, philosophy itself has been influenced by literature, and specifically by poetry, since its inception.² Although some thinkers, such as Dilthey and Nietzsche, praise the wisdom of poets and see poetry and philosophy as mutually beneficial pursuits, most philosophers and theorists resent, diminish, or eliminate the importance of poetry in philosophy and theory.

This quarrel between philosophy and poetry begins with Socrates where he criticizes poetry in Plato's dialogues: as a form of imitation, poetry is removed from the truth and has the power to corrupt people by appealing to the irrational parts of their souls.³ Yet, in spite of this danger, Socrates does permit certain forms of poetry in his *polis* as long as they do not distract a person from righteousness, excellence, and truth. While poetry cannot make people wise, it can lead them to wisdom. Thus, poetry can exist in Socrates' *polis* as long as it is capable of serving philosophy's ends.

Whereas Socrates calls for the censorship of poetry because of its power, Aristotle argues that poetry is less of a threat to philosophy than Socrates believes. Aristotle finds similarities between poetry and ethics and consequently offers practical advice to poets of how to compose their works.⁴ For example, tragic reversals are not only emotionally and aesthetically powerful but can be ethically illuminating.⁵ But, for Aristotle, poetry ultimately is subordinate to philosophy: he recognizes the value that poetry provides to people but limits the range of forms and claims the poets can make. In this sense, Aristotle agrees with Socrates that poetry needs to be supervised by philosophers.

Plotinus, Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas also acknowledge poetry's potency and therefore believe that it must be superseded or censored. While Plotinus sees poetry as a step on the ladder of the mind towards its journey to fuse with the divine, Boethius disregards poetry completely.⁶

Augustine also condemns poetry (and philosophy) as sources of depraved and pagan opinions which must be eradicated in favor of Christian truth.⁷ This position is later modified by Aquinas, who, like Aristotle, sees a potentially positive role that poetry can play in making people appreciate beauty, albeit it (along with philosophy) subordinate to Christian revelation.⁸

Unlike his Christian predecessors, Vico has a more favorable view to poetry. According to Vico, all societies undergo a cycle of historical change from the divine to the heroic and finally to the human with poetry providing wisdom at the beginning and philosophy giving knowledge at the end.⁹ But the historical event of Christ's Incarnation makes the philosopher's hope reside not in earthly wisdom but in the recognition of divine providence, which transcends what both the poet and philosopher can offer.¹⁰ Although poetry and philosophy are ultimately subordinate to philosophy, at various moments in time (i.e., the divine and heroic ages) they are acceptable sources for human knowledge and meaning.

This rehabilitation of poetry continues in the works of Kant and Hegel, with the former associating poetry with genius and the latter tolerating it as long as it is under philosophical guidance. For Kant, it is human genius that allows individuals to move from nature to poetry, which, as the highest art form, permits access to the phenomenal world and ultimately to God Itself via one's moral feelings.¹¹ By contrast, Hegel sees poetry below philosophy: a required step for self-conscious to be fully realized.¹²

Reacting against Hegel's philosophical systemization of poetry, Kierkegaard values it as providing humans a sense of longing that can lead them to seek truth.¹³ But, for Kierkegaard, this is the most that poetry can accomplish, for it can corrupt people to be ironic, thereby preventing any genuine ethical or religious experience.¹⁴ Poetry cannot make the leap of faith that Kierkegaard calls for where individuals cross the chasm between their actual lives and the reality of God.

It is only in the writings of Dilthey and Nietzsche where poetry becomes fully rehabilitated. Both thinkers reject philosophy and revelation as sources of knowledge and instead place poetry as preeminent among the arts. For Dilthey, philosophy is not able to substantiate its claims about metaphysical moods—the intersection between finite existence and an eternal, untouchable world—whereas poetry can,¹⁵ while, for Nietzsche, poetry, particularly classical Greek tragedy, affirms life and offers signposts for the future of great and beautiful souls in the “ever increasing elevation of man.”¹⁶ By contrast, philosophy and revelation only offer artificiality, a removal from human instincts and thereby weaken humans to become “slaves of morality.”¹⁷

Heidegger continues in the steps of Dilthey and Nietzsche by praising poetry. Heidegger contends that poetry is the most purely spoken language, something to which people must return in order to escape scientific attempts to understand, control, and manipulate reality.¹⁸ Like Nietzsche, Heidegger believes that poetry illuminates (un-conceals) reality as it truly exists, wiping away the layers that scientific and other artificial modes of language have imposed upon it.

Postmodern philosophers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida continue to argue for poetry's rightful place as a source of truth.¹⁹ These postmodern thinkers search for inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions in the text to show that philosophical claims exist not because of any metaphysical or ontological truth but rather because of arbitrary power relations. The role of these thinkers is to invert these power relations and paint alternative power structures around which people can organize their lives.

Thus, after more than after two millennia, we have returned to the same place: both poetry and philosophy quarrel with one another in their claims of being the exclusive source of human knowledge and meaning. With this in mind, we have decided to return back to the beginning of this dispute. In this symposium, we explore the relationship between poetry and philosophy in Plato's dialogues. By returning to the start of this quarrel, we hope that we will not only be able to clarify Socrates' views about poetry, philosophy, and politics but also help us understand the history of this debate in a new light.

Lee Trepanier starts the symposium with an examination of how Socrates refers to Homer in the *Republic*. In "Socrates' Homer in the *Republic*: Retaining the Poetic Past and Preparing for the Philosophic Future," Trepanier argues that Socrates rehabilitates Homer by selectively citing those poetic passages which support his philosophy and modifying or censoring others that are contrary to it. Instead of repudiating Homeric poetry altogether, Socrates recognizes its foundational role in Greek civilization and therefore knows it cannot be completely eradicated; otherwise, chaos would result. Because of this, philosophy must accommodate poetry but only under its supervision in order for Greek civilization to evolve into something better, retaining part of its poetical past while preparing itself for a more philosophic future.

"In Diagnosing the Dissonance of Achilles," Alan I. Baily investigates Socrates' criticism of Achilles in the *Republic* as someone who is afflicted with two contradictory maladies: greed and arrogance. The former is beneath human dignity while the latter smacks of hubris. The question is, How did these two incommensurable vices arise in the same soul? Baily contends that this

dissonance in Achilles' soul is not a symptom of poetry's influence as such but the result of a broader confusion between the orders of values arising from the displacement of heroic civilization with a new political order of monetization. Socrates' criticism of Homer's poetry consequently is more a reflection of this civilizational change than a disparagement of poetry itself.

Moving away from Homer to the tragedians, Marlene Sokolon defends poetry in her article, "An Apology of Euripides: Defending the Poets." Reviewing the two charges that Socrates makes against the poets—the poets' inspiration lacks knowledge and poetry should be replaced with noble, useful lies—Sokolon turns to two of Euripides' tragedies to rebut these charges. Against the first charge, Sokolon looks to *Suppliant Women* where she argues that Euripides is engaged in a serious investigation of political questions about the best regime, an investigation that resembles a type of reasoning (*dianoia*) that philosophers employ. Against the second charge, Sokolon shows how Euripides' *Ion* tells a similar "pleasant lie" that is politically useful, similar to the one that Socrates adopts. However, Sokolon acknowledges that poetry, particularly tragedy, has a more difficult task than philosophy because it transpires in a public place with a diverse group of people, whereas philosophy does not. Poetry therefore will always be distinct from philosophy but, for democratic societies, it may be the most important form of education for its citizens.

Nalin Ranasinghe examines Socrates' views of poetry in the *Republic* and *Apology* in his article, "Socrates' *Apology* and Plato's Poetry: A Speculative Exegesis." In his analysis of both dialogues, Ranasinghe argues that the poets' inspired teaching should not be read literally or rejected entirely. Poetry provides wisdom to the philosophers and this wisdom is needed; otherwise, philosophy becomes nothing more than a pseudo-science. Socrates' animus towards poetry therefore is not directed at the poets *per se* but to those poets who participate in politics or, worse yet, those who imitate the poets by creating images to manipulate people.

The next article, "'We Are the Champions': *Mousikē* and Cultural Chauvinism in Plato's *Republic*," Rebecca LeMoine explores the paradox of Socrates' expressed approval of foreign music at the beginning of the dialogue with his later hostility when discussing the Kallipolis. However, upon closer examination, the music of the Kallipolis incorporates both Greek and non-Greek elements in contrast to the Athenian segregation of Athenian and Thracian music during the Bendideia. Unlike the cultural chauvinism of Athens, Socrates recommends a musical education that promotes a harmony of cultures that culminates in his Myth of Er, where a perfect harmony

of both music and different cultures is found. Such music represents the peak of philosophical education rather than its beginning.

Finally, in “The Imitative Arts Will Tear Us Apart in the *Republic*,” Kirk Fitzpatrick rejects the canonical interpretation that all constitutions described in the *Republic* have the same number of parts and instead argues that the number of parts in a constitution is contingent. The imitative arts cause the degeneration of the ideal constitution with corrupted forms having many parts. For instance, the ideal constitution only has two parts—reason ruling the appetites—while the tyrannical constitution has five parts—the appetites ruling reason, spirit, and the necessary and unnecessary appetites. The imitative arts play a critical role in tearing constitutions apart as they devolve into more parts.

The quarrel between philosophy and poetry has its origins in antiquity and continues today. By examining the origins of this debate, we hope that we offer new ways of thinking about some of the contemporary issues that confront us, like censorship, changing civilizational values, and the treatment of foreigners.²⁰ We do not pretend to resolve these issues but rather contribute our thoughts to the continuous conversation since the Greeks about poetry, philosophy, and politics.

Notes

1. Wellek; Eagleton; Culler.
2. *Ibid.*; also Burns and Petraki.
3. Plato 597e; 601a; 607b.
4. Aristotle 1451b1–10.
5. Aristotle 1552a11–1453b1; also see Rapp.
6. Plotinus I.6.3; I.72; Boethius I.1.
7. Augustine VII, X.27.
8. Aquinas I-I, 9ad1; III, 66, 4c.
9. Vico 497–99.
10. *Ibid.* 1095.
11. Kant 262–308, 326–27, 344–53.

12. Hegel 523, 1035.
13. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part One I*, 50.
14. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* 248.
15. Dilthey 197–205, 237.
16. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* 99.
17. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* I.9.
18. Heidegger 72–76, 170.
19. Saussure; Derrida; de Man.
20. For example, refer to Allen.

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