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# Introduction

Western philosophy, from early in its history, has characterized itself in part by distinguishing how its statements and methods were different from those of the poets and, having made this distinction, what role the work of poetry was to have in philosophy. This book examines some of the philosophical writers who have participated in this effort. At the beginning of this story, Plato defined the relationship between poetry and philosophy as a quarrel, indeed, as an ancient quarrel. One theme in this book is that the so-called ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy is itself neither poetry nor philosophy. Rather, it is an image portraying the interaction of poetry and philosophy as important for the pursuit of insight into the truth of things human and divine, a truth less accessible both to poets devoid of philosophy and to philosophers devoid of poetry. The domain of the quarrel is one that longs for a certain fullness of thought that goes beyond the exigencies of inquiry confined to the boundaries of either poetry or philosophy. Whether reluctantly or not, the philosophers addressed here acknowledge the importance of poetry to philosophy by acknowledging the peculiarity and value of the poets' insights, by using the tools of the poets in their own work, or by struggling to put the poets in their proper place.

Plato fretted over the poets' claims to wisdom and, in particular, their claims to sometimes be speaking for the gods. He likewise fretted over the way in which the poets and poetry controlled the Greek mind and culture. His answer was to do battle with the poets using the philosophical question, testing the claims of the poets, and so freeing Greek consciousness from the control and power of poetry. His solution was to exile the poets from the Republic, or at least to severely restrict their activity while he replaced their work with something new. But there comes a point when the exile of the poets leaves the freed consciousness



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mute: human consciousness, as many thinkers in this history assert, lives most fully among the poetical limits of life – portents, history, stories, the gods – and to these the philosophers repeatedly, and sometimes grudgingly, return. Just as philosophy can become a technical profession devoid of wonder, so poetry without philosophy can become a linguistic sideshow, fascinating in the way a contortionist is fascinating for being able to stretch so as to gaze directly at her own back. The philosophers started the quarrel, and so their voice is heard most vehemently at the beginning when they are defining their own endeavor against the work of the poets. The poets will have their say in time.

Aristotle said that both poetry and philosophy are grounded in wonder: both explore, both transform our vision of the world. It is precisely the similarities between poetry and philosophy that lend energy to the quarrelsome relationship between the two. But many of the thinkers in this book also argue that, however important it is to distinguish poetry and philosophy, both are diminished in the absence of the other, especially in regard to the human effort to uncover the truth of things about the world, about ourselves, and about the divine. Regarding the last truth, the question how we might approach and explore the divine is an especially common theme in the course of the quarrel.

I pursue the history of this quarrel against the background assumption that the human search for truth about the world, ourselves, and the divine is worthwhile. I do not, however, argue that our grasp of truth is ever infallible. In other words, as I consider the history of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, I am also maintaining the position that we can remain realists in regard to truth while acknowledging our capacity for error: this humility is crucial for both poetry and philosophy (and for the sort of writing that occurs through what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "novelistic consciousness"), but it in no way reduces itself to relativism. Accompanying this modest posture is the further background assumption that while the domain of speculative inquiry such as this is neither warranted nor testable in the usual sense of the word, it is nonetheless the means available to us to ask certain kinds of questions and to pursue answers to those questions meaningfully even in the face of well-justified doubt that the questions can ever be fully answered. From the very beginning in the work of Plato, this is the kind of effort that relies on surprising clues, hints that to the skeptical eye might seem merely accidental. Sometimes they will be merely accidental, of course, but that is a risk we take, for sometimes they are not. One must be willing at the outset to accept help from any quarter, as Socrates does, never limiting

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who can sit at the table, but allowing no participant to go unquestioned. Even the voices of fools and madmen have played their part in the history of this topic.

That said, in some ways this book is straightforwardly epistemic in its concerns. At many points in the story, poetry seems to offer a peculiar and important kind of starting point for discovery that registers in the mythopoeic mind most completely, but which continues in various forms to be an artifact of growing human consciousness in a way that no other artifact is. For example, sometimes the poets seem to take themselves as speaking in the voice of a god. Far from simply dismissing such claims, many of the philosophers in this history acknowledge at the very least that something important may be going on among these poets and, indeed, that the gods or God may be making use of these human voices in ways that are of interest to the philosopher. It may be that some things must be believed to be seen, and for things that fall into this category, the odd condition for their being known does not, a priori, count against their reality. Speculative inquiry demands a wide range of tools simply because the questions that are asked are often of the following sort: What is the importance of the possibility of transcendent reality to philosophical and poetic inquiry? Might the activities of poetry and philosophy be sustained by the longing for something transcendent, eternal, divine? Where would one look for clues if the answer is yes? Questions about humanity's relationship to the divine are pervasive in the quarrel.

In the course of telling a story, one is necessarily selective in details and episodes. That is certainly true of this story, which comprises thinkers from the ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern worlds. The roughly two dozen thinkers addressed in this book, some more deeply than others, provide a range of opportunities for attending to the ways in which the quarrel manifests itself and to the lessons that can be learned from these various manifestations. This is also an example of one illuminating way of reading philosophy that can be applied to many other thinkers: no doubt most readers could quickly write a long list of philosophers beyond those considered here who might profitably be studied in this way. Some of the thinkers I chose to address because they are foundational for understanding this approach to thinking about the tasks of philosophy and philosophy's relation to poetry – Plato and Aristotle, for example. Others were chosen because, though they have many interesting things to say related to this subject, they do not always appear on short lists of philosophers who show some new aspect of the

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quarrel between philosophy and poetry – Aquinas and Kant come to mind. While the thinkers who were chosen do form a coherent and interconnected story, I can see enormous room for developing a much more thorough account of the quarrel in the history of philosophical thought, though as Aristotle said of the attempt to rehearse the whole history of form leading up to that of Greek tragedy, "it would probably be a long piece of work to go through the details."[1]

The story as I offer it here begins with Plato, whose portrayal of Socrates reveals deep concerns about the claims of the poets, the influence of the poets over the Greek mind, and the ways in which such unfounded claims coupled to considerable influence interfere with the search for true wisdom. At the hands of Socrates, the poets are questioned, sometimes ridiculed, and ultimately excluded from the Republic. Plato himself began as a poet, and it was under the influence of Socrates that he turned to philosophy. But he knew the power and potential danger of the poets from the inside. Nevertheless, he was quick to seize upon the tools of the poets and put them at the service of philosophy, or at least at the service of portraying an image of what philosophy is.

Plato's student Aristotle approaches the poets in a very different way. He never directly addresses his teacher's position on poetry. His approach is rather to ask what is valuable in the work of the poets and how the poets can best do their work. Thus, for example, he makes use of tragic poetry as a cauldron in which important human characteristics and vulnerabilities are usefully portrayed, a portrayal that is of great service in ethical inquiry. Indeed, even the tragic poetry that shows how humanity ought not to be, how people should not choose, is useful in forming the virtuous citizen. His answer to the poets is not to exclude them but to produce a manual that shows how great poetry ought to be written. That manual is still of astonishing use.

Plato and Aristotle provide the backdrop for the remainder of the book, so great their influence has been. The next thinkers in the history are Plotinus and Augustine. Plotinus was a Neo-Platonist who had tremendous impact on poets such as Dante, Goethe, and Coleridge. His incorporation of Platonic ideas into his own philosophy turns on his use of metaphor to help the seeker make the leap from the world of images to the world of the forms, and this movement from metaphor and image to the inward "seeing" of eternal forms is a common

[1] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1449a30.

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theme in the quarrel between poetry and philosophy. But perhaps the most important reason for including Plotinus in this discussion is the influence he had on Augustine. As with many of the philosophers in this history, Augustine was also a poet. When he read Plotinus after his conversion to Christianity, he claims to have experienced there the very voice that appears in the Gospel of John, and so he brings together Platonic thought and Christian thought in a way that changed theology. In the course of his life and thought, though, Augustine became concerned about the potentially dangerous aspects of poetry, and indeed, far from denying that "the gods" might be speaking through the poets, he considers the possibility that the poets do indeed speak for spirits, namely, the demonic. It is from this perspective that he uses philosophy to correct the errors of the poets.

Boethius and Dionysius likewise build upon a Platonic foundation but with very different results. Boethius is facing execution as he writes, and so his circumstance provides considerable urgency to his search for the truth of things. At the beginning he, like so many others, is lured by the poetic Muses to a false and harmful understanding of life, virtue, and God. However, Lady Philosophy soon shows up in his prison cell and, dispatching the Muses, takes over his education herself. In instructing Boethius, Lady Philosophy uses poetry as a way of soothing him as he undergoes the harsh but necessary remedies she has to give him in order for him to be whole. Dionysius, like Plotinus, makes fascinating use of metaphor in presenting ideas and produces a poetry that, when tempered by philosophy, becomes hymnody. Along the way, the Forms of Plato that became ideas in the Divine Mind in Plotinus become, in the work of Dionysius, angels. Augustine, Boethius, and Dionysius along with Aristotle all have profound effect on the work of the next thinker, Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas was trained as a poet. He acknowledges that in ancient times the divine may well have spoken through the theological poets predating Plato and Aristotle and referenced in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. As a trained poet, however, he has a very different view of poetry in his time. Far from being "out of their minds" or "beside themselves," as Socrates said they were when they express their poetic utterances, Aquinas says the poets know exactly what they are doing and, indeed, that the quality of their poems depends on the extent to which they know what they are doing. From his perspective on imagination, language, and poetry grows a Thomistic poetics in which expression of the divine voice is nowhere to be found. The expression of the divine, inviting similar

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questions raised by poets claiming to speak for God, is found elsewhere in Aquinas, namely, among the prophets.

Giambatista Vico covers much of the same ground as Augustine did in *City of God*. But he makes a crucial move that allows him to develop a new vision of "poetic wisdom": he argues that there are two histories in the world – that of the Hebrew people and that of the Gentiles. The former is sacred history. Vico turns his attention to Gentile history, which unfolds, he says, under the influence of an immanent providence. He then traces the course of human culture and ideas from the first people who spoke in poetry, and from whom language grew, through the arrival of the philosophers, who, through irony and the critical question, transformed our relationship to human institutions and to the divine. Arriving at the central insights in his great work, *The New Science*, required twenty years of labor, he claims. Despite the strange and difficult form of the work, it influenced many writers who came after him, in particular James Joyce in his writing of *Finnegans Wake*.

In the work of Immanuel Kant, poetry takes center stage in the last of his three critiques, *The Critique of Judgment*. No longer does the divine speak through the poets. But the poets do have a surprising oracular function. The gift of the poet is genius. But the poets cannot give an account of their own genius. They do not know whence it comes or how it works. It is part of their nature, and so it is part of nature. But the very fact that the work of the poets arises from genius as a part of nature allows the work of the poets to carry a weight that other writing does not, for it is nature speaking. In poetry and in aesthetic judgment generally, Kant says that we access insight about the supersensible world that we cannot reach through critical reason, the topic of his first critique. Though such a conclusion opens up the realm of human experience in fascinating ways, it was not enough for Kant's students and critics Hamann and Herder. Hamann, like Vico, viewed poetry as the mother tongue of the human race, from which grew all human knowledge. For Hamann, most of the philosophical problems that occupied Kant his entire life were nothing more than the results of a misuse of language and a failure to recognize the language of the poets and the prophets as God's gift to us, as the currency of God's speech to us, complemented by God's revelations through nature. Herder, again like Vico, was repelled by the efforts of philosophers such as Kant to isolate human faculties one from another, and he considers our ability to speak to God and each other to be the fundamental human activity. Like Hamann and Vico, he thinks that the very language we use to explore the highest philosophy

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is inextricably rooted in poetry, calling the poet the creator of a people who gives us a world to contemplate.

Hegel calls poetry the most universal and widespread teacher of the human race and says that the realm of poetry includes human ideas, deeds, actions, fates, and the divine rule of the universe. At first glance, there does not seem to be much left to occupy the realm of philosophy uniquely, and indeed, given this list, the content of the realm of poetry is the content of the realm of philosophy. But there is an important difference between poetry and philosophy that emerges at the heart of his work. Hegel is "the philosopher of consciousness" As such, he follows a pattern that appears throughout the quarrel, namely, that of finding two moments in the experience of the seeker: encounter with the content of the poetic (ideas, fates, the divine), and consciousness of this content that results from philosophical questioning. These are the two moments, and the movement between the two involves conflict and expands consciousness. The process of philosophical advance is an invasion of consciousness in the realm of the mythopoeic, and Hegel charts this battle in his great work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Kierkegaard, the great critic of Hegel, says of himself, "I'm a poet – alas, just a poet." When he speaks of philosophy he is generally referring to the Hegelians and their "system." He opposes the totalizing approach of such a system and says that we are out not to get some answer right but, rather, to get a life right – and the stakes are eternal. He therefore approaches his work through pseudonyms, individual characters who are themselves struggling with some idea and piece of reality. In the course of his work, the quarrel that emerges is not between poetry and philosophy but between poetry and religion, with the former, because it is so glorious, being a threat to those who would follow the way of poetry and miss the greater glory found in true faith. As to what lies between these poles of true religion and poetry, he says that it is all silly talk.

Dilthey understands the pull of metaphysics that so attracted Kant and Hegel, as well as the pull of religion that so attracted Kierkegaard and Luther. But he claims that such things can no longer be held as tenable. Nonetheless, he still feels the longing that led people to be attracted to these things. He calls this pull "the metaphysical mood." Even though, according to Dilthey, metaphysics is silenced, this mood that creates a sense of wonder at the stars, a sense of the meaningfulness of things, will never leave. This impulse is distilled and transferred into the realm of poetry, which is best suited of all human endeavors to

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deliver the vividness of our experience of the meaning of life, though it remains with philosophy to see that this is so.

Nietzsche and Heidegger both continue the struggle with metaphysics, each in his own way. Nietzsche's portrayal of the quarrel is quite different from any that preceded his work, and he laments the loss of Greek tragic poetry, which was destroyed by the influence of Socrates. There is nothing to be done about this rupture in tragic poetry – it is accomplished once and for all. But there is a way forward, he says, and it will come not through philosophy but rather through art. Now that the solution of the Greek tragedians is no longer tenable, he takes it upon himself to find a new solution, one he calls "the gay science," a joyful and intoxicating embrace of the world as it is and of our place in the world as people who belong. Heidegger is one of the most important interpreters of Nietzsche in the twentieth century, and he says that his own way forward is made possible because of the "consummation of metaphysics" wrought by Nietzsche, allowing us to move beyond it. Humans have forgotten how to question Being, and this is a central crisis for Heidegger, as such questioning is the highest task of philosophy. Without such questioning, we cannot be fully human. The hints that philosophy requires to set it on this way are found in poetry. The clues come from the poets who are the mortals tracing the "fugitive gods." If we are going to find our way back to the most important questions in philosophy, and the most important tasks in humanity, we begin by listening to the poets whose work is a kind of light illuminating the truth of being.

The last thinker addressed is Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in his work on novelistic consciousness in the art of Dostoevsky, shows a new way that the quarrel is portrayed in a form of literature that grew out of the Socratic dialogues, namely, the novel. It is an idealized history that actually conceives of poetry as arising within a single language, voicing the gods or erupting in the privileged naming of things by Adam. Nonetheless, there is a tendency in poetry to speak with a single voice. Throughout this history, philosophy has interrupted such monologic utterances with a question, or critique, or doubt, or even ridicule. When this happens, there are two voices encountering each other. The novel – especially in the hands of Dostoevsky – is a place where such encounters are portrayed without reducing either consciousness to the other. It is the arena in which many languages and ideas meet.

And so this story ends with a literary form that arose from its starting point, the Socratic dialogues. But it begins with the invention of the "ancient" quarrel. The journey from the invention of the quarrel

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to its current form encompasses the history of Western philosophy and literature. Again, there are many other thinkers who could justifiably be included in this book, and the length of the book could easily be doubled or tripled. The steps along the way are therefore necessarily selective but also, I hope, suggestive. The pilgrimage starts at the temple of Apollo in Delphi.

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# Socrates, Plato, and the Invention of the Ancient Quarrel

The quarrel between poetry and philosophy finds its first footing where most of Western philosophy originates, in the work of Plato, and it still reverberates from the assaults of Socrates on the poets when he exiled them from the Republic and claimed that the supreme music was no longer poetry but rather philosophy.[1] There is a nearly journalistic thrill that comes from noting one further fact: the starting point of wisdom for that titanic human being, Socrates, instigator of the philosophical question, source of a new kind of human self-consciousness and critique, founder of true dialectical challenge to the status quo, and chief propagator of the assault on poetry, is accomplished at the temple of Apollo, god of poetry, when the oracle forgoes favoring of the poets and sophists and pronounces Socrates the wisest of men. Even more worthy of journalistic note is his own admission that the sum of his wisdom is that he knows that he does not know, that he is merely a seeker of wisdom. This admission is the very heart of what is most attractive about his engagement in the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, a quarrel and struggle that has a rich history and that constitutes one of the finest examples of humanity exploring the world through every means available to it, including attention to prophecy, oracular utterance, systematic questioning, and even truth uncovered through the instability of madness. Perhaps the poets do speak for the gods, and they may indeed cocoon in their utterances the deepest truths of the world, human and divine. Indeed, Socrates would rejoice if this turned out to be true. But before embracing this entirely, he says, just because he is not yet wise, a few questions are in order. The poets speak. Socrates questions. The

[1] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 305.



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