

On Poetry and Philosophy: Healing an Ancient Quarrel

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The title of our conference panel today is ‘Classical Rhetoric and the Decisions We Make.’ The title of my paper is ‘On Poetry and Philosophy: Healing an Ancient Quarrel.’ It was written to be a reflection on Plato’s famous line in the tenth book of the *Republic*, where he says, “there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.”

The truth is that it is only by accident that I am on this panel. I submitted my proposal late and this was the only panel that still had space. I was asked if I might try to tailor my paper to the panel topic. In thinking of how I might do so it occurred to me that poetry and philosophy might indeed be envisioned as forms of rhetoric, especially if we look at both with Platonic eyes. If we define rhetoric as ‘persuasive speech,’ or ‘speech intended to persuade,’ then we might well recognize both poetry and philosophy as having, if not always persuasive intent, then certainly persuasive power.

And, of course, this is just Plato’s worry. He worries that the undisciplined nature of poetry, its appeal to what he calls “the appetitive part of the soul,” i.e., our feelings and desires, has the power to turn us away from the sober judgments of reason, and have us mistake appetitive gratification for the true good of the soul. As Plato puts it, “In the case of sexual desires, anger, and all the appetites, pains, and pleasures of the soul. . .the effect of poetic imitation on us is the same. I mean, it nurtures and waters them when they should be dried up, and establishes them as rulers in us when – if we are to become better and happier rather than worse and more wretched – they should be ruled” (606d). He thus concludes: “If you admit the honeyed Muse [into the

city]. . . pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law and the thing that has always been generally believed to be best – reason” (607a).

Philosophy, for Plato, is the corrective to this. As Plato envisions it, the philosophic task is to understand the ‘forms of the good,’ and through doing so to come to know the soul’s own true good. To make sense of this we must recall that by ‘forms’ Plato means ideal complexes or structures essential to our fundamental well-being. Among the principle forms of which Plato speaks in this regard are ‘friendship,’ ‘justice,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘virtue,’ etc., although every positive reality might be said to have an ideal structure, or form, through which some aspect of the good may be realized in a particular context. To understand these forms of the good and to know how to relate them to the lives we lead is to have wisdom. The attainment of such wisdom is the philosophic quest.

The quarrel between poetry and philosophy, then, might be said to be a quarrel over which is best suited to provide a guide for life, a quarrel over which ‘power of persuasion,’ so to speak, we should most trust. This is a question of particular relevance to Core Curriculum programs, for such programs employ both philosophic and poetic literature to achieve their pedagogical aims.

It might be helpful to illustrate the nature of this quarrel through the reading of a classic text that is at once poetic and philosophic. It happens, conveniently, to be the text we are presently reading in my own Core program at Boston University: Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In the story of Francesca and Paolo that Dante relates in the fifth Canto of the *Inferno*, we get a clear illustration of what Plato might regard as the danger of poetic seduction.

Dante-Pilgrim has descended to the first circle of hell, where the lustful are driven relentlessly by gale-force winds. He writes: “The hellish hurricane, which never rests, drives on the spirits with its violence: wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.” In this torrent Dante encounters the

spirits of Francesca and her illicit lover – and brother-in-law – Paola, bound to each other in misery, condemned forever to the torrential winds for the sin, in Dante’s words, of “subjecting reason to the rule of lust.” Francesca tells Dante of how they came to this pass. She begins:

Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me – how that was done still wounds me.

Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.

Love led the two of us unto one death.

Dante, who, we later learn, was no stranger to temptations of the flesh, responds with sympathy:

Francesca, your afflictions
move me to tears of sorrow and pity.

But tell me, in the time of gentle sighs,
with what and in what way did Love allow you
to recognize your still uncertain longings?

Francesca tells her story:

There is no greater sorrow
than thinking back upon a happy time in misery. . .

Yet if you long so much to understand
the first root of our love, then I shall tell
my tale to you as one who weeps and speaks.

One day, to pass the time away, we read
of Lancelot – how love had overcome him.

We were alone, and we suspected nothing.
And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
and yet one point alone defeated us.

When we had read how the desired smile
 was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
 this one, who never shall be parted from me,
 while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.

A Gallahault indeed, that book and he
 who wrote it, too; that day we read no more.

Plato might well point to this passage as a perfect illustration of how imitative poetry itself induces imitation and, through casting every form of appetitive desire in the ‘honeyed’ language of the poetic muse, induces a misapprehension, at times catastrophic, of the true good. But what makes this a particularly apt illustration for our purposes is the irony of Dante’s repeated use of the word ‘love’ to describe the feelings that led Francesca and Paolo to their hellish fate. Love is just that which all the souls in Dante’s *paradise* most desire and most enjoy. Love, in Dante’s vision, is the very quintessence of the divine. Indeed, when Dante-Pilgrim reaches the apex of Paradise, he describes his vision of God in these words:

O grace abounding, through which I presumed
 to set my eyes on the Eternal Light
 so long that I spent all my sight on it!

In its profundity I saw – ingathered
 and bound by *love* into one single volume –
 what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered.

Here it is love – divine love – that binds the universe together; harmonizes, unites, makes one of many – somewhat as love has coupled Francesca and Paolo. Why then do they suffer? Why are they punished for their participation in what is most holy, most to be revered?

To answer this question we must now employ our minds to untangle the ambiguities of our hearts. What *is* love? The irony of Dante’s use of the word love to characterize both God’s essential nature and Francesca’s and Paolo’s transgression *against* that nature forces us to move

from the poetic to the philosophic. To put the question in Platonic language: What is the true *form* of love? How may we know that we are living our lives in accordance with that true form? How may we guard ourselves against the faulty imitations of love, counterfeits of love, that, though they stir us, can so easily, so gently and sweetly, lead us down – in Dante’s words – “the agonizing pass.” Poetry, which takes its matter from those very stirrings, can never answer this question; indeed, can scarcely ask it. For this we need another mode of discourse.

It is philosophy – at least philosophy as Plato envisions it – through which we seek to understand the whole of what is good, and each good in relation to that whole. It is philosophic reason that seeks to understand how the universe, though seemingly composed of things “separate and scattered,” may be bound together in a single volume. From this vantage point we may come to see that Francesca’s and Paolo’s adulterous love, entailing, as it does, the betrayal of love, the betrayal of the trust that cements the family bond, can never be a true instance of the all-embracing love that belongs to God. It is distorted love, fragmented love, love that, in its destructive power, even if only inadvertently, is akin to hate. But to see this we must see beyond the enticing language of the ‘honeyed muse.’ We must reflect upon the whole of good, and upon each good as it relates to the whole. This is the task of philosophic reason.

To protect the Francescas and Paolos from the dangers of poetic seduction, Plato would banish the poets from his ideal city. Should we banish them from our classrooms? What has poetry to say in its defense? Poetry might well point out that philosophy, taken straight, considered strictly in itself, is without a subject matter – and it is perhaps for this reason that philosophic discourse so easily and often turns in upon itself, devolving into empty wordplay, inert abstractions with no relation to the guts and blood – the heart – of real life. It is just this *heart* of life that poetry has the power to present to us in all its rawness, all its horror, and all its strange, conflicted, beauty.

So the philosopher needs the poet to provide the matter upon which philosophy must reflect.

Love as a mere abstraction, love not felt, not longed for or consummated, love merely contemplated, is also not true love.

If, then, we envision both philosophy and poetry as modes of rhetoric – that is, as modes of persuasive speech – we arrive at the conclusion that each realizes its own truest good, its own true ‘form’ so to speak, in concert with the other. The poetic mode of discourse presents for us the matter upon which the philosophic mode reflects. The philosophic mode, in turn, allows us to probe this poetic matter for its universal sense. Each completes the other to create a greater whole. The truest ‘form’ of rhetoric, then, involves the coupling of the two. And it is we, as Core professors, who are in the unique pedagogical position of being able to effect this coupling – this bond of love, if you will – between these old contenders, and in so doing, heal this ancient quarrel.