



Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 278pp. \$90.00 (Hbk) ISBN 9781107000322

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In recent history, our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and poetry has been volatile. A little over a century ago, Benjamin Jowett could be confident his readers would perceive a 'strangeness... in opposing philosophy to poetry, which to us seem to have many elements in common'.¹ Not long after this, however, the development of analytical philosophy, with its firm allegiance to the sciences, served to suppress any obvious affinity between poetic and philosophical enterprise. Even the rise of analytical aesthetics in the latter half of the twentieth century saw not an increase but a decrease in the attention given to poetry.² Moreover, the ascendancy of the novel as the paradigm literary genre, amongst other

¹ *Select Passages from Introductions to Plato by Benjamin Jowett*, Campbell, L. (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1902, 125

² C.f. Christina Ribeiro, 'Towards a Philosophy of Poetry', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, French, P., Wettstein, H. (eds.), V. XXXIII, 2009 61-77.

considerations, has led to doubts as to whether poetry is of any independent philosophical interest.³

From a broader historical perspective however, the importance of poetry to philosophy appears to have been almost universally recognised. Nearly all the great philosophers of the western canon had something of significance to say about poetry. Moreover, in the last five years the anti-poetical trend within analytical philosophy appears to have shifted into reverse. 2009 saw *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* publish a substantial edition dedicated to ‘philosophy and poetry’.⁴ Oxford University Press has recently contracted a volume to be entitled *The Philosophy of Poetry* under the editorship of John Gibson. A number of philosophers have also begun undertaking individual long term projects concerning poetry as a subject of philosophical enquiry.⁵

Raymond Barfield’s *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) contributes a historical dimension to the revival of philosophical interest in poetry. Barfield offers a broad survey of philosophical responses to poetry from classical antiquity to the twentieth century. The titular citation, drawn from Plato’s *Republic* at 607b, frames a conflict that Barfield traces, in approximately chronological order, through Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, Giambattista Vico, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Wilhelm Dilthey, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Mikhail

³ See e.g. Alex Neill, ‘Poetry’, *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerold Levinson, Oxford University Press, 2003 p.605. ‘it is far from clear that there is a “philosophy of poetry” in anything like the sense in which there is a “philosophy of literature” and a “philosophy of criticism”.’

⁴ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, French, P., Wettstein, H. (eds.), Lepore, E. (guest ed.)V. XXXIII, 2009

⁵ E.g. Peter Lamarque’s project to characterise what is distinctive about poetry linguistically and as a mode of expression; Anna Christina Ribeiro’s work in progress, *Poetry: Philosophical Thoughts on an Ancient Practice*.

Bakhtin. In each case Barfield gives an outline of the ideas that he considers applicable to 'the quarrel' followed by his own concise commentary. Heterodox in its approach and at times wanting in exegetical clarity *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* offers an intriguing survey of historical work on a subject of great philosophical importance. This is an engaging and at times compelling work. However the volume also suffers from certain limitations which I will note.

Barfield's discussions are accurate and largely to the point: he succeeds in putting the material he has gathered into something approaching a coherent narrative, which gives emphasis to some of the debate's perennial themes. The range of thinkers Barfield discusses is admirable. Particularly insightful is the inclusion of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, whose works do not advertise themselves as concerning the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Barfield's thoughts on the relationship between Neo-Platonic discussion of the unspeakable and the philosophical role of poetry (57, 98) are also illuminating and merit further development.

Less felicitous however is the lengthy summary of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. This work contains much philosophy and much poetry. However it does little to relate the two. Since other philosopher-poets such as Lucretius and Parmenides do not receive mention, one cannot help wondering why relatively detailed explanation of the Boethius' arguments about happiness (88-93), chance (93-4) or free will (94-7) should have been deemed necessary. Neither does the author take pains to bring out the connection between these apparently irrelevant discussions and his subject matter. Here and elsewhere his explication is limited in that it is not sufficiently elucidatory to serve as an introduction to the

various texts considered. Moreover, Barfield's discussions usually are not original enough to be of scholarly interest independent of the history in which they appear.

Barfield speaks in his own voice relatively rarely. When he does so it is from a firmly theistic perspective. Many readers will find this unpalatable, and indeed some reviewers already have. One source of complaint has been an apparent attempt to rebut Dilthey's secularism.⁶ Dilthey makes much of the importance of religious experience but does not accept that the transcendent reality it appears to point to actually exists (221-2). Barfield objects that that '[i]f an amnesiac finds himself in the desert feeling great thirst... that he cannot recollect what water is does not diminish the connection between his thirst and the existence of something that satisfies his thirst' (214). If this passing allusion to C. S. Lewis' 'argument from desire' were truly offered as single-handedly refuting Dilthey's position this might indeed be cause for objection. However, in Barfield's defence, he is careful to make it clear that he intends only to articulate the *possibility* that, like the thirst of the amnesiac, our metaphysical moods may point towards an existent object. He does not pretend to demonstrate that this is in fact the case. It might be added that the theism of Barfield's language often serves merely to echo that of the writers he examines, the vast majority of whom identify a connection between poetry and the divine or, at least, the transcendent. On the other hand the tone of Barfield's work will certainly speak more to a theistically inclined readership. In this respect it differs from much mainstream academic scholarship.

⁶ The following objection was raised in Richard Eldridge's excellent and very useful assessment for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2011.

A further difference between Barfield's text and the standard philosophical history is the conspicuous omission of sustained criticism and assessment of the views that are discussed. From the piety of Augustine to the iconoclasm of Nietzsche the relevant texts are presented, briefly summarised, and left to the appraisal of the reader. This is perhaps a deliberate strategy on the part of the author (a point I shall return to below). Even so, readers of such histories will be used to finding more guidance and more criticism. At times the absence of such analysis leaves Barfield's discussion operating at what seems an unnecessarily superficial level. Moreover, the obscurity of the ideas discussed and of the terminology in play necessitates frequent referral to the source material. This might easily have been obviated.

An interesting difficulty which emerges from Barfield's discussion, though one which is only implicitly acknowledged, is the crucial difference between classical and present day conceptions of poetry, both in their popular reception, and amongst specialists. A prominent feature of 'the quarrel' is the tendency on the part of ancient philosophers to censure poems on grounds of theological implausibility. Criticisms of this kind are likely to seem foreign to the contemporary reader. For example whilst Plato takes it as perfectly natural to object to Hesiod's depiction of Titanomachy on grounds of falsity, a modern reader would be very unlikely to raise such objections to Keats' depiction of the same subject.⁷ That criticisms of this sort are somehow missing the point is a commonplace in contemporary philosophy of poetry. This has been explained in terms of 'norms for assertion'. The norms for assertion in poetry, it is said, differ from the norms for assertion in other contexts, in that the former do not require knowledge or

⁷ *Euthyphro* 6a, John Keats, *Hyperion* and *Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*.

belief.⁸ Hence to criticise a poem for stating a falsehood may be viewed as applying inappropriate norms for assertion. However, since the same criticisms which we think irrelevant come naturally to antique philosophers, it looks as though the norms for assertion in the poetry of classical antiquity may differ importantly from those of modern poetry.

Barfield touches upon this point when he notes that Socrates' attack on poetry, like Dilthey's on metaphysics, criticises its object for presenting untruths as the literal truth (219). He is right to call attention to this parallel; so right that we might wonder whether Socrates' views are really about poetry as we conceive it at all. They might be thought rather to concern what we would call prophecy or theology—or perhaps, as Alexander Nehames has suggested, the 'mass media'.⁹ This concern is not limited to Plato. It is in fact the case that many of the views discussed in Barfield's history, in particular those of Plato, Augustine, Boethius, and Vico, apply perfectly well to the prose works of a pagan theologian such as Varro (as Augustine and Vico themselves acknowledge) but for the most part fail to apply to Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe or Eliot, to name but a few. Given this difference between classical and modern conceptions of poetry, it seems reasonable to worry that what looks like a unified subject matter underlying Barfield's work is in fact a conjunction of two distinct areas. It seems that on the one hand there is the philosophy of ancient theology, prophesy, or mass media and on the other the philosophy of poetry as conceived today, and any connection between the two may be superficial. In order to rescue the unified narrative of Barfield's history it would be

⁸ See e.g. Koethe, J, 'Poetry and Truth', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XXXIII, (58)

⁹ 'Plato and the Mass Media', *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*, Princeton 1998.

necessary to identify a unitary understanding of poetry, common to the ancient and modern world, worthy of diachronic philosophical study. However whilst Barfield seems aware of this problem, he often deals with ancient and modern conceptions of poetry together under the unifying title of the ‘mythopoetic world’ (264) without explicitly justifying this approach.

Though the placement of the historical inception of ‘the quarrel’ is not of critical importance to Barfield’s work, it is somewhat surprising that he should represent Plato as the earliest offender.¹⁰ This is puzzling because at *Republic* 607b-c Plato himself describes the quarrel as being already ancient (παλαιᾶς) in his own time – a fact reflected in the title to Barfield’s history. It might be assumed on these grounds that the enmity described by Plato is supposed to reflect a genuine conflict between two cultural trends of classical antiquity, existing prior to the composition of his dialogues. Barfield implies on the contrary that the history of the quarrel prior to Plato is fictional claiming that ‘this story... begins with the *invention* of the “ancient” quarrel’ (my emphasis). (8)

This suggestion seems to conflict with evidence that Plato’s description of the quarrel is based on a real historical tension. Not only does Plato offer us specific examples of the quarrel prior to his time, but it is also easy to think of further examples which he doesn’t mention. At *Republic* 607b-c Plato offers quotations from a number of poems allegedly attacking philosophy.¹¹ At *Laws* 967c he tells us that this enmity on the side of the poets was aimed at the

¹⁰ It is clear from context that it is the work of Plato Barfield has in mind when he states that the ‘philosophers started the quarrel’ (2). No earlier philosophical work is mentioned.

¹¹ Though the sources of these quotations are unfortunately unknown, there is no evidence that they are invented.

materialist theories of Anaxagoras and other pre-Socratic cosmologists for removing the gods from nature. Even if Plato's examples are not to be taken seriously, Aristophanes' famous attack on Socrates in *Clouds*, constitutes a poet's attack on philosophy, and one which must have exercised some influence on Plato's own views about poetry. Moreover Plato's criticism of poetry on grounds of theological implausibility was anticipated by the pre-Socratic philosopher-poet Xenophanes.¹² Even earlier precedent might be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* where the muses declare 'we know how to speak many false things as though they were truths, but we also know, should we wish it, how to speak the truth'.¹³ It is possible that these examples are in some important respect discontinuous with those beginning with Plato, but Barfield does not explain why this we should think this.

Whether or not 'the quarrel' should be considered to begin with Plato, Barfield believes that it comes to an end of some sort with Mikhail Bakhtin. Broadly speaking Barfield's reason for concluding here is that Bakhtin represents the shift in attention from the poem to the novel as the paradigmatic literary genre. This gives some grounds for not engaging with the colossal body of literary theory which developed during twentieth century—something which would have necessitated a considerable and incommensurate addition to Barfield's history. More specifically Barfield suggests that 'novelistic consciousness', as understood by Bakhtin, may provide a space in which both poetic and philosophical voices can come together, replacing the quarrel with a virtuous polyphony (254). At

¹² Xenophanes fragments B11 and B12 complain of Homer and Hesiod representing the gods as engaging in vice.

¹³ Hesiod, *Theogony* 27-8 ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα / ἴδμεν δ', εἴτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι'.

the outset of the work Barfield suggests that the 'domain of the quarrel is one that longs for a certain fullness of thought that goes beyond... the boundaries of either poetry or philosophy' (I), and it is in the novel that he seems to think this fullness may be found. Whether the understanding of Bakhtin underlying this suggestion is entirely accurate may be questioned. On an alternative and perhaps more orthodox view, Bakhtin sees the relative 'monologicity' of the poem as being wholly replaced by rather than subsumed within the 'dialogicity' of the novel. However, Barfield's discussion of Bakhtin does serve to provide a useful lens through which to understand the work within which that discussion occurs. Barfield tells us that we find in novelistic consciousness something 'of great importance for understanding the multi-voiced character of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (254). What we find is a space in which different standpoints may be 'tried with conflict' like the variegated viewpoints of a novel (268). It is perhaps this idea which underpins the methodology of Barfield's book. Rather than analyse the arguments of the thinkers discussed, or develop a theory of his own, he instead presents with little interruption a dizzying array of philosophical responses to poetry over a vast interval of time and listens for the voice that wins out. The degree to which this approach is helpful I leave to the reader to judge. For Barfield the outcome of this trial may be safely identified as the recurrent theme indicated at the conclusion of his penultimate chapter: 'philosophy returns again and again to poetry because philosophy needs the gods.' (253)