The old quarrel

Article

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ATTUNING POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY

Maximilian de Gaynesford on the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy

Analytic philosophers may find nothing untoward about the following snippet of autobiography:

> I stopped writing in the fashion of a poet who puts down what sounds good to him and who needn't defend his lines (either they resonate with a reader or they don't). Instead, I tried to ask myself, when writing: precisely *what* does this sentence contribute to the developing exposition or argument, and is it true? You become analytical when you practise that sort of (frequently painful) self-criticism.

The author captures what drew many of us towards this way of doing philosophy, what keeps us at it. Quote this to a wider audience however, and you may find people react with a mixture of recognition and horror. Recognition, because the author captures exactly what keeps them away from analytic philosophy. Horror at the apparent smugness and condescension, the casual disdain for others (especially, but not exclusively, poets). One side thinks the point essentially well put but, if anything, a little obvious. The other side thinks the point is essentially outrageous, but, if anything, all too typical.

We might analyze these positions more closely, but for present purposes it is the space separating them that is worth pondering, the gulf of incomprehension between those who would say 'Did a philosopher really *need* to say that?' and those who would say 'Did a philosopher really *say* that?' This chasm can appear so vast as to extinguish hope that either side could ever really appreciate the other.

We might tell ourselves that things are not as bad as this. And it is true that recent years have produced a handful of conferences and collections that strive to bring analytic philosophy and poetry together. Indeed, it has become a trend to speak from a future where the gulf between poetry and analytic philosophy is past, regrettable and to be politely overlooked. This is courageous, but I think we should be more audacious still: to speak from our actual situation, where the gulf is present, illuminating and to be confronted. Partly because sound therapeutic practice requires that we confront antipathy at the depths (if we do not, the underlying hurt will remain and burst out in yet uglier forms). But mainly because there is an opportunity here for a deeper, more positive response. Rather than turn aside from antipathy, we should use it to the advantage of both poetry and analytic philosophy. If we ignore the deep animosities between them, we will be dealing in superficial forms of exchange and bland gestures of mutual respect. Joint ventures will remain condemned to carefully controlled fringe events of the sub-genres. Better to confront the animosities so as to harness the energies that drive them.

How might this approach work? Answering that question has been the focus of my work in the past two decades. I try to show that when analytic philosophers deny that poetry is or could be serious, they overlook what is genuinely troubling about this attitude. And equally, when poets and literary critics respond to this attitude, they exaggerate what is disturbing about it, treating as professional aversion what is no worse than odious group levity. So they reinforce a parallel disinclination to treat philosophy seriously. The stand-off excuses and sustains a defective communicative environment in which much that is philosophically

significant in poetic utterance is ignored, and much in philosophy that is relevant to the appreciation of poetry goes unrecognized. This by turns deprives poetry of its full expressive capacity and philosophy of its full critical potential. These are the depths we must understand and confront before anything truly constructive can be accomplished.

The situation is the result of deeper misunderstandings, on both sides. What philosophers intend in their remarks on poetry is generally better than is usually assumed. What they offer, however, is usually much worse. What poets protect about their vocation is relatively superficial. What they are prepared to concede, however, is ruinous. Both effect this reverse, however unwittingly, when they agree that poetry is incapable of performing certain sorts of action. I think this is the really deep error that forces acceptance of the defective communicative environment, with all its subsequent misunderstandings. But the key to hope also lies here. For what philosophically-attuned analysis of poetry shows is that poetry is indeed capable of the relevant sorts of action.

This is something poets realize in their work, whatever their reflections imply. It is also something philosophy can readily endorse. Consider a couple of small examples. First, some lines from Tennyson's poem 'Crossing the Bar':

> But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
> Too full for sound or foam,
> When that which drew from out the boundless deep
> Turns again home.

There is a sudden turn in the metre on the word 'turns', from the long run of *ti-tum ti-tum* iambics to the trochaic *tum-ti*, and a turn again on the word 'again' back to the iambic. The utterance uses metre not only to describe but to perform its turns.

Second, some lines from Donne's poem 'The Good-morrow':

> I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
> Did, till we loved?

There is a wondering after the words 'I wonder' with the line-break 'I | Did'. The utterance uses this line-break—the syntax of enjambment—not only to describe the act of wondering but to perform it. Indeed, the enjambment helps determine sense on this occasion of use, for the sentence might otherwise mean not 'I hereby wonder…' but 'I tend to wonder, am given to wondering...'.

What we find here is not just that certain acts that are named in utterances are performed in and by uttering them. That much is familiar from speech act theory in the analytic philosophy of language. We learn that there are at least two ways peculiar to poetry in which the utterance of sentences can be made performative: by metre and by the syntax of enjambment. Speech act theory could not discover this from non-poetic uses of language alone. These are small but telling examples of the very large opportunities that exist when we attune poetry and analytic philosophy to each other: a suitably sensitive study of poetry enables us to add something to analytic philosophy, which in turn heightens our ability to be critically attentive to the poetry.

We can attune poetry and analytic philosophy in different ways. Many concentrate on the small number of privileged places where poetry takes on philosophical form or where philosophy takes on poetic form. Many others restrict their angle of insight, taking what we

appreciate about poetry as a given and using it to develop analytic philosophy, or taking what we know about analytic philosophy as a given and using it to develop appreciation of poetry. I don't think there is necessarily anything bad about being highly selective or lop-sided in these ways. But these options may blind us to the value of taking on the *expanse* of both poetry and analytic philosophy, and of genuinely *pairing* them as forms of insight. And there are dangers in reducing poetry to a samples-collection for philosophy to plunder for its own illustration, or in reducing analytic philosophy to a crude assemblage of intellectual materials to be worked up into significant form. However unintentionally, these ventures bolster a more general tendency to undervalue the one or the other.

What we should be pursuing, I think, is a wide-angled and strongly interdependent or mutually shaping approach, in which we really *do* analytic philosophy (analysing material in genuinely philosophical ways, with the prospect of changing the way we think about things in general) in really *appreciating* poetry (adopting a genuinely literary critical approach, with the prospect of changing the way we respond to poems). This attuning of poetry and analytic philosophy is single and unified, but we need not blur the boundaries between disciplines to practise it. When done properly, attunement is as natural as walking. Just as one can exercise each leg independently, one can do analytic philosophy or appreciate poetry independently. But to walk and to attune is to unify these movements so as to progress together, making the motion of one part constantly and intimately adjust to and correct for the motion of the other.

Such attunement is liberating. It releases poets and philosophers from frustrations and constraints that are partly self-imposed. In particular, it enables each to recognize the other's capacity for integrity, on which their claims to seriousness depend. The literary critic Charles Altieri once made a most perceptive and disarming admission: 'analytic philosophy is a discipline we fear and resent because it seems to waste powers we lack on subjects we like to think require our love of speculative vagueness'. This is a sad situation, but it is in our hands to redress it. We can make these powers serve something useful and worth loving if we work to attune poetry and analytic philosophy.

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