

Poetry and Philosophy: Towards a Comparative Analysis

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Within the extant domain of humanities, both poetry and philosophy are accorded almost an equal amount of veneration. Since Socrates in Plato's Republic expelled the imitative tragic poets from his ideal state laying grounds for reformed ethical poetry, there have been numerous debates in this regard. Poetry and philosophy have remained at loggerheads since then. However, there are various approaches to read the binary of poetry and philosophy. A comparative analysis of any two ideas must aspire to estimate the recognisable differences as well as similarities between the two of them. Are poetry and philosophy similar to each other? Is there a dichotomy between the two? This essay attempts to contrast and compare the two fields critically. (Jansen 5)

Poetry and Philosophy

Observed as two states of mind, the philosophical mind transcends the puerile barriers of senses in order to perceive the immediate reality, as Krishnamurti claims throughout the three volumes of his *Commentaries on Living*. The philosophical mind strives to exorcise the poetic mind of its inherent romantic element which is continuously racing towards the sublime. The poetic mind, on the other hand, strives to expunge the rigid labels that the philosophical mind has always grown up with. Philosophy has a serious problem with poetry's call for a "willing suspension of disbelief." Even, romantic poet Coleridge admitted that a certain sense of cognitive estrangement is required to engage in "poetic faith."

Kathartic poetry in Aristotelian terms revels in the incredulity of language, while philosophy reprimands the truancy of language. Often, philosophy endeavours to demolish the lofty scaffolding of the tactile and palpable experiences perceived by poetry, and reaches out to reality rationally, rather than conjuring up a fancy world of its own. While philosophy cautiously carries the future in its stretched-out arms, poetry whimsically carries all of the past, present, and future in it. Time and space become mere narratives in the bittersweet battle between the two. However, with the passage of time, the exhaustive weight of this binary might become unbearable for the spatial pillars of history.

Poets as Philosophers

The bedrock of the ocean of Indian literatures is strewn across with countless poetic gems who were philosophers in their own right. Their skill and insight on life lifted philosophy to an exalted state and facilitated it to take flight into the free sky of poetry. To name a few, intense works like Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, Tulsidas' *Ramacharitmanas*, Buddha's *Dhammapada*, Bhartrhari's *Sataktraya*, Kabir's couplets, Kalidasa's plays, and Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, have undoubtedly lent gigantic waves to this ocean.

In spite of the above, as Osho elucidates in *Yoga: The Science of the Soul*, Patanjali's 196 *Yoga Sutras*, though an extensive discourse on the Yoga philosophy, do not employ the poetic form. He calls Patanjali a "rigorous mathematician", since he does not dance along with poetic verses the way Jesus, Krishna, and Buddha in their respective philosophical discourses do. (Osho 12) Similarly, Sri Ramana Maharishi's *Who am I* takes a conscious leap of faith into the domain of self-inquiry through the rigorous form of questions and answers. The questions and answers are straightforward and so not employ any poetic devices. Therefore, it can be deduced that poetry may be a sufficient, but not always a necessary condition to approach the Truth.

Poetry – A Convenient Device to Escape from Reality

Though philosophy confronts knowledge of reality head-on, poetry lazily employs a convenient device to escape from reality, though the artistic escape may only be another path to indulge into reality later. Fortunately, some poets find a way to the 'inward eye' hence manifesting the subjective into the universal, without discounting the charm of the fine art. In the 1802 poem "Daffodils", William Wordsworth is able to relocate his emotive centre owing to pensive mood and solitude as described in the poem. (Bergren 21)

Two Ways of Reading the Same Text

Tweaking this perspective a little beyond the domain of writing, poetry and philosophy can also be looked upon as simply two lenses of reading the same text. This may enable the reader, instead of the writer, to turn into a poet or a philosopher by choice, hence effectuating, in essence, 'the death of the author' as talked about by poststructuralist literary critic Roland Barthes in his celebrated essay of the same name. In such a scenario, freedom is given to the mind that reads. As an instance, in the poetic piece *A Walk by Moonlight*, Henry Vivian Louis Derozio beautifully weaves his past night's experience capturing the essence of romanticism, spirituality, metaphysics, and mysticism, but the poem nonetheless may also be

read as a philosophical text. Aesthetics, mysticism, spirituality, metaphysics, romanticism, symbolism, myth, tropes, figures, and other such elements excavated frequently from ambitious poetry, often do enough to rip it off from the epistemological notions of logic and rationality.

Position of Art as an Inspiration for Life

However, even as epistemology may showcase the helplessness of knowledge of meaning derived from poetry, and though the laces and frills of poetry provide enough ambiguity to drive it far away from reality, a philosophical mind drenched in the insurmountable sea of logic, while underestimating poetry, may be heading towards dying a Derrida's death. At this moment, would it be inappropriate to call philosophy cultured, and poetry natural? In his essay "The Decay of Lying" published in 1891, Oscar Wilde elevates the position of art to an inspiration for life itself saying,

"Life imitates art far more than art imitates life."

Curious Rebels

Nevertheless, poetry and philosophy perhaps reach a consensus on a cause both of them unapologetically support: that of inquiry. Both are curious rebels questioning the precarious notion of Truth. Whereas some of the times, both of them tend to look at Truth in different lights, at others, they politely agree to join hands and work together. Quite interestingly, even the core of the teachings of philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti is,

"Truth is a pathless land."

Icing and the Cake

Poetry and philosophy may veritably be compared to icing and the cake. One cannot exist without the other. At the same time, it would be cruel to place one on a higher pedestal than the other. One indeed lends beauty to another. Profundity, if at all, considered as a criterion to clinically separate philosophy from poetry, also fails miserably at doing so, when philosophical poets like Rumi are found negotiating between poetry and philosophy through thoughts like,

"We believe that God sees us from above. But He actually sees us from the inside."

Perhaps, not all versification is poetry, not all poetry philosophy, neither all philosophy devoid of poetry. In that case, why not take a walk through life with thinker Rabindranath Tagore as he guides us along,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:10 October 2017

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“Let your life lightly dance on the edges of Time like dew on the tip of a leaf.”

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