

"The reason, however, why the philosopher may be likened to the poet is this: both are concerned with the marvelous."—Thomas Aquinas

# A New Vision of Education: On the Nature of Poetic Knowledge and Form

Thomas Foster

One of the dangers of life is to go about something in the same way for so long that when there is a problem it is hard to conceive of a different way. Even when failure is all around, people often keep trying the same trick, a little to the right now or harder with a good kick, thinking that soon they will get it right. In America in general and in education in particular, science is considered the sole solution to the tremendous number of problems. In fact what else is there? Perhaps to find that alternate vision that many intuit is needed, it will be necessary to return the notion of "soul" to science.

The average public school administrator who is genuinely concerned about effecting some change is aware of a problem, but does no more than throw out another teaching/classroom model (e.g. Mastery Learning) or another system of evaluation (e.g. Outcomes Based Education). The hope is that we have at last found the Golden Key. Although outcomes and objectives could be stated poetically, there is a scientific bias against it. After all, what good is a non-measurable objective? What good indeed!

There is a popular conception, among both the common man and the common specialist, that poetry is about matters of passing or little substance. A person might say that poetry is fine, as far as it goes, that is to say not very far. Further, he will perhaps admit that there is indeed some very fine poetry that should be taught in schools as long as the thing itself is not taken too seriously. Poetry above being not useful is, well, vague. Science, on the other hand, is

precise, exact, and therefore — useful. In the popular mind poetry is entertainment, or to the intellectual, poetry is sentiment. One may admit that this seems to be true for many in the modern world and that these characterizations are even more pronounced in the industrialized democracies. If poetry expresses truths, they are truths of the heart. Modern philosophies over the last few hundred years have had a significant impact on this understanding. The major thrust of many of these philosophies tends to either deny transcendent reality or objective existence and have resulted in a growing reliance upon empirical validation and analytical perception.

Another popular idea is that poetry is primarily an expression of the poet's own internal conflict or self. While we may derive some pleasure from the poem, it is entirely relative to the writer; its extension is inward. This is the idea of art as therapy; its good comes from the relief it provides.

Both of these ideas are not wholly false but represent a suppression of real poetic knowledge. Poetry does entertain and give pleasure, and at times "surcease of sorrow". Granted there are poems that treat only the temporary and poets whose motivation is psychoanalytical, but there also abound bad scientific research and scientists with personal problems that affect their work. We cannot condemn the pursuit of knowledge because of the pursuers or because many lose their way. A distrust of the vagueness and a disdain for the method is not a strictly modern phenomena though the growing cult of the scientist has certainly brought about a fixation upon the discursive analytical approach to knowing and a rejection of the poetic intuitive mode.

Although the current worship of science has an irrationality, it is certainly true that in a very real way science and poetry stand contraposed.

Poetry . . . is always the antagonist to science. As science makes progress in any subject-matter, poetry recedes from it. The two cannot stand together; they belong respectively to two modes of viewing things, which are contradictory of each other. Reason investigates, analyzes, numbers, weighs, measures, ascertains, locates the objects of its contemplation and thus gains a scientific knowledge of them. (10, 253)

This is to use the word science in a limited sense as of method, not in the traditional sense of science which is "a certain knowledge of causes". (7, 102) In the traditional sense it would not at all be clear that these two modes of knowing were opposed. However, the point of science is to bring things into itself, to control and comprehend them. Man rises above nature as its rightful master. Poetry's thrust is quite different. John Henry Newman, himself a school administrator, explains the difference:

But as to the poetical, very different is the frame of mind which is necessary for its perception. It demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects in which it resides, but at their feet; that we should feel them to be above and beyond us, that we should look up to them, and that, instead of fancying that we can comprehend them, we should take for granted that we are surrounded and comprehended by them ourselves. (10, 254)

Poetry and science stand opposed as to method and technique and particular purpose. In a larger sense however, they stand opposed only as the two sides of an arch stand opposed, each with the same goal, each bearing a load and pushing that which is the "key" upward. The keystone is knowledge; each seek it, that is to say men using both methods seek it. Aristotle maintained that all men

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seek knowledge (1, 499), yet perhaps not all can or should seek it in the same way. Like an arch that needs both supports to bare a load, a school requires both perspectives to function well. In an age when scientific inquiry reigns supreme, we seem to be no closer to grasping the ultimate reality or understanding the mystery of existence. We need that which turns the light of reason upon the unmeasurable as much as the measurable, the timeless as well as the temporal.

Part of the problem for the school administrator is one of balance. The curriculum requires not one or the other but both in a dynamic dialectic. The teachers also must understand the nature of the poetic as a way of being and not just doing. They must be part of the dialectic of reflection. (The reflective teacher concept is a major part of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards' current paradigm.)

In order to understand poetic knowledge or poetic knowing, the contrast with science can prove useful. First, poetic does not mean only poetry itself. Although poetry will be used in this paper for examples, it is not the only means by which poetic knowledge is attained. Other possibilities include all of the arts, especially music, but also in much more common ways—those that juxtapose natural events with the mind, providing the condition of knowing by the natural light of reason, *lumen sub quo*. (7, 103) Though not scientific, this is the same manner by which science knows its objects. The goal of both modes of knowledge is the same as the goal of philosophy in general—truth. (9, 86–87) This has been affirmed since Socrates, and its denial by some philosophies is self-contradictory. (Poetic knowledge clearly shows this, and that is why they must deny its efficacy.)

While their end is the same, the means are different. Science is discursive and active. Poetry is contemplative and receptive. It is contemplative because it "re-cognizes" the object of its knowing. In the case of poetry, the words themselves signify their content; the content is immanent in its form. The words are at the same time the objects and signs (object-images). (8, 2) While the words are objects they are still signs which achieve a transcendent quality that is contemplated, received and recognized. This is also true of the other arts, the notes in music, the color in painting etc., which function in the same way. This is not true of science which uses words to talk about things. The words themselves are unimportant. The extreme of logical positivism disconnects the object/word from its sign/image producing what some may interpret to be non/sense.

Science is concerned with universals which are extracted from the particulars. Poetic is concerned with the mystery of the individual. Science does not analyze only one flower but the properties that are common to all flowers. Poetic contemplation centers on the uniqueness of a single blossom. Although there may be a thousand like it on the tree, the focus is on the one. Science speaks volumes on horsehood but little of one horse, and in this lies the great strength of science. Poetry celebrates one horse and transcends horseness. In this way the poet seeks reality, the common experiences of life, by imitation. This imitation is not of the video camera or the tape recorder but by the *lumen sub quo* of the poetic:

The poet is the most uncompromising of realists, but his poem is reality transfigured . . . Poetry, then is life purified. Not purified, indeed, of sorrow or even of shame, but purified of insignificance. Some central power and purpose in the poet projects him into a region of undistracted vision, and there he sees truth

with an absolute clarity that is beyond the reach of thought. (4, 9)

The great poet (artist) re-presents a condensation, a distillation of reality to the mind from which the mind extracts truths. This representation is a sense experience that is produced by the object of consideration. The form signifies its content (object/image). Obviously bad poets cannot do this, although everyone has some potential determined by the particular limitation of their intellect which we might call the "gift" or lack thereof. This is true of philosophy in general, that few are truly great.

Poetic knowledge is extracted from the representation of particulars as a sense experience by which are known higher order universals, e.g. love, courage, virtue, for which examples exist but for which particular objects do not. Poetic knowledge, therefore, is knowing through the senses first, like science. "*Nihil in intellect nisi prius in sensu.*" The mind extracts essences from particulars, but then from these essences, like particulars, it extracts essences more universal than these primary levels (common experience) to form greater, more unified (simpler) concepts at higher and more sublime levels.

A question arises as to the nature of the existence of these universals, and a brief examination will be necessary to more fully develop the transcendent nature of the poetic. Matter according to Aristotle is potential, but it does not exist prior to union with form. Mere matter would exist only as an abstraction, not as a thing. To be at all, matter must be something, and that is to possess form. The material limits the form, since it is the material that differentiates particulars, while the form is the same for both:

Since the same concept or universal can stand indifferently for any number of individuals sharing the same likeness then it cannot share in whatever it is that makes those individuals separate and distinct. (15, 26)

The horses are individuated by their matter; they share the common form of horsehood. It is form that possesses an existence outside of the union with matter since horsehood remains unchanged while particular horses change and pass out of existence.

Aristotle and Plato both agree metaphysically that these forms conceived by the mind are universal and eternal, but they are in conflict over the ontological state of form. Plato holds that we know the essences that particulars share. We know triangularity even though each triangle is different. This form must then possess a separate reality. This is commonly known as the theory of Platonic Ideal Forms. Aristotle attacks this idea on two grounds. (2, 509) First, Plato is creating a second system of reality where the forms are like sensible objects, only not subject to change. In the second place, these forms are no help to knowing because if they exist outside the sensible and limited object, then the mind can never know the universal. The conclusion cannot be broader than the premise. (15, 126)

It is not clear to me that Plato held the ideal form to be separate from its object in the same way that one sensible thing is separate from another. Perhaps he is only guilty of metaphoric hyperbole. In any case he saw the necessity to establish a transcendent foundation for the universal form. The essence must transcend matter or science is not possible. Aristotle admits the universal nature of science. He rightly states that form is in the thing and not separate from matter except as a concept. (2, 509) If, however, the universal has no transcendental reality but is only a construct of the mind, a type of nominalism develops.

A particular object exists because of its relationship to the universal. The universal is a condition of existence of

the thing; therefore, the universal is an a priori condition of the knowledge of the thing. There is no knowledge of the universal separate from the particular, but we know the universal by abstraction. The relationship between the particular and the universal is the formula or basis for qualifying the individual. The individual qualities do not exist separate from that of which they are a part. These qualifications are a condition of form. Individual horses are distinguishable only because they share the same conditions of horsehood. The basis for the distinction lies with the universal. As horses are members of horsehood, horsehood is but a member of a more general class of being, e.g. mammals. In each case the basis of distinction lies within that from which the distinction is possible. There is a transcendent progression to what must necessarily be unlimited essence or God.

We come to know the universal element of things through our analysis of the particular, for in its limitation as a particular is contained its relation to the unlimited. But if the principle of limitation cannot be found in that which is limited, then it can only be found in that which in its being is unlimited. Thus it is in God existing as necessary and unlimited being that the principle or cause of limited being exists. This principle I identify as the eternal possibilities of contingent existences existing in the essence of God. (6, 36-37)

This transcendent ground for the universal quality of forms is important because it is the mode of knowing through which the poetic operates. At least it is the way the mind is able to transcend the object presented to it as an external form that is a sign of the internal or invisible essence. Scientific knowing in the more restricted sense is more concerned with the external and visible characteristics. That is why there is a contrariety in the operation of the poetic and the scientific. The scientific forces things to present their external characterization so they can be weighed and measured. Even internal qualities are externalized, and the invisible is stripped until it can be seen. The poetic internalizes the external and often makes vague and mysterious that which is otherwise obvious. To the extent that "science progresses as poetry retreats," this becomes a logical understanding of the position. (10, 253)

The scientific is argumentative in that it searches for causes. The poetic is representative and searches for the unity of essences. Because of this, the poetic is a knowledge of the moment, the now, but science is of the duration of time. Science moves, poetry is still and contemplative. Science is somewhat like an Easter egg hunt, to use a homey example. The children run about from one egg (idea) to another collecting the real things, stopping to look only long enough to spy the next object. Sometimes our parents would inform us that there were still more eggs to be found and back we would go, looking this way and that, trying different methods, analyzing likely places. A shout of discovery would draw our attention, and we would run to that spot. Sometimes an egg would not be found for months only to be discovered later by accident. The poet considers the hunt and the children and the simple joy. The scientist collects; The poet recollects.

It should be remembered that both seek the truth. The scientific seeks the universal that is in the particular while the poetic seeks the particular that is universal. By a representation of reality, the poet reproduces the relationship between the knowing intellect and the event. The mind transcends the particular resulting in an apprehension of the universal. This process is controllable only in part. In fact, Maritain shows that the experience of the artist is substantially different than the effect upon the audience. (8, 71-75)

These visions or images that the poet (from the Greek for "maker") produces are apprehended differently by the audience. That is why science translates into another language easily and poetry does not.

The poetic deals with the effect of the transformed and purified reality upon the mind. When the mind extends through, that is transcends, essences of the object/image, the result is a "quantum jump" (to use a scientific term), a vertical ascent to a higher plane of understanding. (1, 5) This is a great part of the essence of poetic knowledge, that it facilitates the leap of understanding. With most kinds of education, but especially with the Liberal Arts, this ascent is critical, as Senior explains:

... these liberal arts differ from one another vertically; ... you rise from one to the other, not by a horizontal extension, but a vertical ascent to a different level of understanding which includes the lower ones, analogous to the relation of part to whole. (1, 6)

The sciences, on the other hand, represent the great ability of man to progress horizontally along a continuum. The amazing development of scientific knowledge is a witness to this tendency. In fact the scientific has some advantage over the poetic in that it is more certain in some ways, more repeatable with the same results, more measurable. The greater the extent of our reliance upon the scientific, the more likely we are to reject the poetic possibilities. The great virtue of individual administrators or teachers is that they interact with individual students. The chief problem of scientific models is that they react only to that part of the individual that conforms to the group (or those defined characteristics that constitute the group). Even in the application of scientific methodology we often destroy what we seek. Wordsworth said, "Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:/We murder to dissect" (11, 589)

What poetry can do is bring together common experiences in a way that contrasts or connects significant qualities. The mind is inspired by this and sees an essential link between different levels of being. Here is an example of how Shakespeare uses several common objects to produce meaning that goes beyond the objects of their own essences. "I can suck/melancholy out of song as a well as a weasel sucks eggs/More, I prithee more." (14, 69) If a person were given these items, melancholy, eggs, weasel, song and suck, and asked to extract a more universal concept, the task would be difficult. The object, in this case three lines from a play, is itself an element of the process. Without this structure the effect is destroyed. This is an extremely simple example. An anonymous lyric provides a deeper reflection:

Western wind when will thou blow,  
Small rain down came rain.  
Christ that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again.

Trying to explain the poetic insight of this poem reminds me of the character in a college biology lab who was shown a microscope. When he peered into the eye piece, he could see nothing. Although the instructor adjusted the instrument, it was to no avail; the student was only able to see white light. No one knew just what to do. It is just something that must be seen. If the object is taken apart, it is no longer the same. The microscope will not work the same way in pieces. The onlooker's vision can only be guided. In the example above the "Western wind" refers to spring. Knowing this may help see the point or not. Explaining the tremendous use of alliteration may be interesting, but none of this can make a person see. The object can only be presented with hope.

Part of the problem is that the poetic with its jumps and starts is somewhat unpredictable. Science is much more steady. Science is like the tortoise in the old fable. The poetic hare is faster but gets distracted. Slow and steady wins the race. In reality though the hare must move so quickly that to the tortoise he seems invisible. The fable makes an assumption that winning the race is more worthwhile than enjoying the flowers.

The tortoise with his nose to the ground does not look up at the unique or the mysterious. If he does, he does not stop but keeps moving. Poetic knowledge is about stopping and being still.

A still greater problem is that when a poet transforms reality, he fashions an extremely sharp knife. Like the sophists of old or the unscrupulous researcher of today, the goal of the agent must be truth, or the end will be a lie.

Aristotle and Plato both saw the danger of poetry. They knew it must be controlled. They did not, however, live in our age, after a time when poetry has developed and come to know itself:

We have just spoken of a second aspect or moment in the coming to consciousness of poetry as poetry, and which concerns above all the poetic state. I think that one could, at least by abstraction, discern a third, deeper still than the other two, and which would be related rather to poetic knowledge, I mean to the knowledge of reality, and of the interior of things, or their reverse side, proper to poetry or to the spirit of poetry. The more deeply poetry becomes conscious of itself, the more deeply it becomes conscious of its power of know, and of the mysterious movement by which, as Jules Supervielle put it one day, it approaches the sources of being. (8, 46-47)

Also Aristotle and Plato may not have considered poetry too deeply because they were, after all, scientists and prone to dismiss that which is nebulous in favor of that which is concrete.

St. Thomas Aquinas thought that truth was neither impossible nor easy to attain but (only) difficult. (7, 183) Since truth is neither equally nor easily given, it seems reasonable to consider some of the advantages that poetic knowledge offers not only to an administrator but any professional or intellectual. First of all, it is one of the ways that the mind can know truth. This, of course, is crucial, but further, the poetic can inspire love. Many men received their first glimpse of the transcendent reality of truth through poetry or art and continued to pursue wisdom out of love which is the meaning of philosophy. The poetic can also validate truth that is achieved through a scientific method. A writer often analyzes some point in a very logical and discursive manner but ends with a very poetic turn to add emphasis to their words and memorable quality to their argument.

With an already understood truth, poetry can be most remarkable. It can deepen and expand understanding by a vertical leap. On the other hand, poetry can also reveal error when we have strayed too far from the path. We must be suspicious of a position that obviously contradicts our poetic experience. This is one of the great common proofs against both the subjective realists and the skeptics. "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason". (3, 19)

Finally, the poetic accomplishes two important tasks. It can lead to a higher order experience of pleasure. This pleasure is not of the glands but an ascent of the mind. If man by nature desires to know, then the highest order of knowing is the greatest fulfillment. This would be Aristotle's actualization of potential. The poetic also leads us to an understanding of the human condition. The more we un-

derstand our own essence, the more we become human. The more we become, the closer we get to the mystery of existence. Both of these elements of poetic knowledge deserve more treatment than is possible to give them here.

Although truth is difficult to attain, it is not equally difficult. The great poets and great thinkers seem to have had a "gift". A common misconception is that "either you have it or you don't". To some extent this is true in that a person has more or less potential. Unrealized potential is of little value. If Aristotle had been born and died a common slave, he would not have been a great philosopher. The person who does not understand the language of the poetic cannot experience it. This language is culture, and the school must inculcate this vocabulary as much as a scientific one. In our case the language is the sum total of myths, stories, ideas, great works and accomplishments of Western Civilization. This alone would be reason to teach the subject. Many students are unable to experience a great work because they know so little of the language of culture. It seems meaningless or trivial or "dumb". For those, reading a great poem is like taking a blind man to an art gallery.

Poetic knowledge, like scientific knowledge, can be taught either as a subject or as a technique. A teacher/administrator could present, to either young children or educated adults, experience in a poetic way. Our educational system, on the whole, is not doing it, and we are losing the very language of our poetic existence. Where do the blind lead the blind?

As a short summary, I will restate the main points of my discussion. There is an idea that poetry is either trivial or subjective. This tendency is increased by our absorption with scientific method. This absorption inhibits the ability of school officials to conceive of change in a poetic model. The poetic and scientific can be understood in part by their opposition. Poetic knowledge is contemplative, receptive, still, imitative, now, representative, mysterious, particular, invisible, internal, individual and vertical. Scientific knowledge is discursive, active, in motion, argumentative, certain, universal, visible external, general and horizontal. The poetic takes on forms where the object signifies their content. Through these forms the poetic transcends to higher levels by means of the universality of essences that are limited by their particulars until the mind reaches (possibly) the ultimate essence. The transcendent ground for the universality of essence was established in discussion of the conflict between Aristotle and Plato over the ontological nature of forms. The epistemological nature of poetic knowledge was explained in relation to its transcendent ability. The poetic is rather more a vertical ascent to a higher plane of understanding than a horizontal extension of knowledge. An examination of the virtue and defects of the poetic and the scientific proceeded a series of advantages of the poetic as follows:

1. Leads the mind to the truth.
2. Inspires love of knowing.
3. Validates scientifically attained truth.
4. Deepens knowledge already held.
5. Reveals error.
6. Results in pleasure (knowing) of a higher experience.
7. Leads to greater understanding of the human condition.

Finally there was a short axiological digression on the need for poetic education.

Poetic knowledge does not contradict common sense and experience but validates the pre-philosophic ability of the mythic to come to truth. It elevates the mind until it stops in wonder at that which is beyond all understanding.

This wonder is not the end but a beginning:

That shows that Theodorus was not wrong in his estimate of your nature. This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin. (13, 806)

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