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Poetry and knowing

Abstract:

'Poetry is a word that is unaware, as if fallen from the sky' (Agamben 1993: xvii)

Is it possible that Giorgio Agamben has never written a poem? But he is not alone in this attitude: many commentators seem to think that poetry is a gift, that poetry is beyond or above the poor demands of reason, that poetry 'just happens' without the effort of practice and technique that comes to play in other modes of writing.

At first blush this seems to elevate poetry above the common herd of human activity, but like every placement on a pedestal, it comes at a cost: elevated, poetry is left (largely) outside everyday life. It misses out, in the grand scheme of things. Who queues for poetry? Where are the urgent readers waiting for the next release, as they do for *Harry Potter* or Dan Brown? Which are the university courses that focus entirely on poetry and its meanings, rather than just sliding it in to a prose-oriented literary studies or creative writing course? Of course poetry has its place: there are the poetry slams, pub poetry, street corner poetry. There's guerrilla poetry on city walls, there are the collectives of pastoralists and lyricists, the language poets appear as a breed apart, and there are always the bush poets and other traditionalists. But, by and large, poetry is a matter of preaching to the choir, a marginal mode of writing.

Is poetry just the middle child of writing? Perhaps: but, as Agamben goes on to note: 'every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge'. In this paper I want to re-envisage poetry and its place in the grand scheme of (writing) things: What does poetry know? Towards what knowledge is it directed? And how can we tell?

Biographical note:

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1. The ancient quarrel

Poetry is a strange beast in the zoo of language forms. It is rarely just itself – at least, rarely just 'itself' in its literary form. Bush poetry, rap lyrics, sentimental stanzas printed on greetings cards: these seem at home with themselves and within society. But the thing that poets call *poetry* has perplexed writers (and readers) for millennia.

It is Plato, and quite correctly, who is usually invoked as the father of the problem of poetry. Certainly he was, as far as we know, the first aggressive commentator on the role of poetry in society. He wrote about this across a number of his works, though people tend to recall only his rejection of poetry, expressed in the *Republic*, on the grounds of its capacity to lure citizens away from rational thought. In other works he wrote of the pleasures of poetry, of its contributions to society. In the *Phaedrus*, for instance, Plato notes that the 'kind of possession and madness' that 'comes from the Muses' not only inspires us to great deeds, but also 'by adorning countless deeds of the ancients educates later generations' (*Phaedrus* 469).[1] It is, of course, the 'divine madness' of its origin that causes what Plato terms the 'old quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (*Republic* 607b5-6), and that places him firmly on the side of philosophy. In the ideal city, emotions and mimesis simply clutter the works: what he wants is reason, and direct access to the thing itself, rather than mere ideas about the thing – and for Plato, poetry delivers neither reason nor access to the material world.

Plato sparked lines of thought that have generated libraries of writings, including a mass of volumes on the question of the relationship between poetry and philosophy, or what poetry can contribute to knowledge. Through the ages, people seem to have ranked themselves on one or other side of that 'ancient quarrel', but in some important cases, poetry is asserted as having claims to both sides of the fence. In the 16th century, for example, Philip Sidney stated that poetry was 'the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges' (1922: 2): a view of poetry that combines inspiration and knowledge (though his *Defence* does not provide much evidence for how, or whether, it achieves this). In the final years of the 18th century, the early romantics discussed philosophy as an incomplete form, and Friedrich Schlegel imagined a brave new world of collaboration between the arts and sciences, 'if symphilosophy and sympoetry become so universal and heartfelt that it would no longer be anything extraordinary for several complementary minds to create communal works' (Schlegel 1971: 34). Ralph Waldo Emerson, a continent away and a century later, engaged not so much with Plato's 'old quarrel' as with his own conception of the 'old divorce' between poetry and nature – also phrased as 'Nature and the mind' (Emerson 1903: 8.66), the harmony of which would support his imperative to achieve Intuitive Reason. In the 20th century, Australian poet Les Murray trod a similar path in his lecture, 'The suspect captivity of the Fisher King', where he asserted that 'Any true poem is greater than the whole Enlightenment, more important and more sustaining of human life' (Murray 1997: 187). And finally, in the 21st century, cultural historian Nicholas Zurbrugg spreads his net wider than poetry, and in what can seem something of an echo of Schlegel's notion of incomplete philosophy, suggests that we can see in creative works the presence of what Roland Barthes called 'prophetic technocreativity' (Barthes 1977: 67). That is to say,

innovations emerge first in (avant garde) art works, and only subsequently emerge in philosophy (Zurbrugg 2004).

The poets, then, insist that poetry is a knowledge discourse, though they rarely explain or provide evidence for this assertion. Typically, their view of knowledge is one that at best trembles on the edge of transcendentalism, fellow travelers with Romantic naïveté. Wallace Stevens, that superbly philosophical poet, wrote that 'After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence that takes its place as life's redemption' (1990: 185), and this exchange of one form of magical thinking for another can be seen in much of the writing of poetry and/as knowledge. Stevens, of course, was not interested in magic but in close observation: in his perception, poets must not go into transcendentalism, but rather look to things as they are, and achieve:

> the imaginative transfiguration of the real through poetic saying, a language that does not take flight from the real, but which both adheres to the real most closely and resists it in the supreme fictions that it writes. (Critchley 2004: 119)

This is a poetry that closely examines 'what is'; which is also, of course, the task of philosophy, knowledge, science. This is a poetry that I suspect is capable of delivering something more than emotion or mimesis: a poetry that might resolve the ancient quarrel.

2. What is poetry?

Often poetry is described as the *heightened* use of language; sometimes the *affected* use of language; it frequently privileges the aural or the visual; it rarely attempts to pin words to a particular denotation, but allows the flow of connotations. For writers, poetry often means breaking with the narrative impulse; for readers it means being open to different ways of accessing the content – being comfortable with a paucity of propositional statements, with a plethora of connotations, with affect rather than exposition (Bartel 2006: 369-70).

And poetic discourse is rarely associated with 'knowledge' in the generally accepted sense. Plato won that battle a long time ago, and there remains a great gulf between poetic and propositional discourse. This need not be a problem; for centuries poets have managed perfectly well, publishing their works and participating in literary culture. But now, when so many poets are employed in universities, and required by the terms of their employment to do what universities are designed to do – generate knowledge – a poem *qua* poem is no longer enough. We need to produce texts that are recognised as knowledge objects. In our poetry we may indeed have produced a new way of seeing or thinking or knowing, but we also need to find a way to include contributions to knowledge in a way that suits formal research reporting.

Knowledge is, of course, not a singular object. What constitutes knowledge is determined more by the context in which it is initiated and circulated, and the methods used to collect and analyse data, than by its content. Valid knowledge in science is not the same as valid knowledge in the humanities, and art-originated knowledge is different again. In each field, the modes, terms and the very paradigms of knowledge are quite distinct, and not readily transferable. This is not the place to

develop a discussion of the distinctions between modes of knowing, or the terms under which knowledge claims are made; there is scope only to point out that it is a matter both of politics and of practice, and that the traditions of knowledge tend to be jealously guarded.

However, poets employed in tertiary education are generally obliged to produce something that can be defined, administratively or even legislatively, as *knowledge*. Because of this bureaucratic imperative, many poets and other artists have turned their attention to showing how creative practice is in fact, or can be, a mode of research practice. In the past few years alone a number of books have been published on the topic of art as research,[2] a number of journals or special issues have focused their attention on the same issue,[3] and conferences and research groups around the world are dedicating attention to what it means to generate knowledge through art. Because, after all, there is nothing neutral about knowledge; it is intrinsic to relations of power:

> Knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true'. (Foucault 1977: 27)

Thanks to the long shadow cast by Plato, power/knowledge is ascribed to philosophy – in the broadest sense – and not to poetry. It is philosophy – knowledge-oriented discourse – that 'has the power to make itself true', and 'has effects' that are measurable or, at least, reportable. Poetry remains obfuscatory, strange, in the domain of the private and the affectual, or the transcendental. Though it may offer an hypothesis about the nature of being, it typically does so not through the traditional modes of proposition and argument that are part of philosophy, but through allusion, allegory, suggestion or a sensory representation.

But there is more to poetry than magical evocation or affect. Poetry is, as the etymology of the word 'stanza' implies, associated with a 'standing place' or 'stopping point',[4] and thus affords a sort of viewing platform, a perspective from which to view what lies ahead before plunging down into it. And in poem after poem we find this: a pause in the flow of life, a perspective from which to view the world, and a position offered on that view. John Ashbery's 'What is poetry' (Ashbery 1977: 47) does just this, I suggest:

> The medieval town, with frieze
> Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow
>
> That came when we wanted it to snow?
> Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
>
> Ideas, as in this poem? But we
> Go back to them as to a wife, leaving
>
> The mistress we desire? Now they
> Will have to believe it
>
> As we believed it. In school
> All the thought got combed out:
>
> What was left was like a field.
> Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.
>
> Now open them on a thin vertical path.

It might give us – what? – some flowers soon?

This poem can be read as a thoughtful encounter with social and personal politics, with identity, with institutional effects. It offers imagery, of course, but not only imagery; it offers ideas too, if only in the process of 'trying to avoid' them. It asserts the power of assertion ('Now they / Will have to believe it / As we believed it') but critically, recalling the numbing effects of education, the 'combing out' of ideas, the reduction of youthful intellectual energy to 'a field'. And it posits that the 'thin vertical path' (of a poetic line? of thought?) may offer a way out of this institutionalized vacancy. It presents a connected set of statements that add up to a proposition, and satisfies the conditions for argument – the issue is not self-evident, there is space for common ground between interlocutors, and there is an openness to other positions (as seen in the fact that the argument is mounted in the form of questions rather than assertions). And it sets out a hypothesis about reality – in this instance, it is the materiality of the experienced world that is under consideration. Of course it is possible to experience this poem purely at the level of sound and pattern, rather than of thought. But it does tease out the relationship between reality and imagination, or materiality and the signs we use to describe concrete objects. To this extent, I'd suggest, it is philosophy as much as it is poetry, and thus classifiable under the rubric of 'knowledge' rather than 'inspiration'.

The double identity of poetry and philosophy is considered in the opening pages of Giorgio Agamben's *Stanzas* (1993), which is something of a treatise on that ancient quarrel Plato identified sometime around 360BCE. Agamben notes that language suffered a scission between 'the poetic word' and 'the word of thought' and explains it as follows:

> In the West, the word is thus divided between a word that is unaware, as if fallen from the sky, and enjoys the object of knowledge by representing it in beautiful form, and a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself but does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it. The split between poetry and philosophy testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language). (1993: xvi-xvii)

So there is language that represents an object, and language that is unable to represent its object; language that enjoys the object, and language that fails to enjoy; language that is based on ignorance (or luck, or inspiration), and language that is based on knowledge (self consciousness, knowledge). And the terms for enjoyment are a combination of representational capacity, and the absence of awareness. This sets out the terms of that old quarrel: divine madness ('a word that is unaware') is set in opposition or contradistinction to the 'seriousness' of knowledge discourse. In gaining knowledge we lose both beauty and pleasure; in gaining beauty and pleasure we forswear knowledge. And both pleasure and knowledge are associated with possession: possession without enjoyment, for knowledge, and enjoyment without possession, for poetry.

This scission and its effects are, for Agamben, flawed. There is more to 'the word' than 'the object of knowledge', or 'beautiful representation'. There is more to philosophy than incompetent use of language, and more to poetry than lack of thought. He continues: 'What is thus overlooked is the fact that every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy' (1993: xvi-xvii). While I bridle at his non-delimited use of the word 'authentic' (which, like 'excellent', 'beautiful' or 'valuable', seems to me a term used in order to lay out an evaluative landscape but not define its evaluative bases), I am taken with the notion that the rift can be sutured: that philosophy and poetry are not polar opposites or natural enemies but rather are instances of discourse, and that poetry is directed, as is philosophy, to knowledge.

Unfortunately, it doesn't get us much further along the road of working out what the relationship is between poetry and knowledge – what sort of knowledge it generates, in what terms it might constitute knowledge, and who is authorised to identify it as such. I am not referring here to the use of poetic discourse to convey knowledge: even with the tremendous rise of scientific thought, experiment and writing in the ancient world, the Greeks 'continued to write in verse, perhaps because the strength of the convictions needed poetry to express it' (Thompson 1978: 102). Nor do I refer to the use of literary criticism to generate knowledge: literary and cultural critics have long worked over the field of poetry, and extracted knowledge and meaning ('combing it out', as Ashbery writes, leaving it a field). No: what interests me here is whether, how or in what terms the crafting of a poem can constitute the crafting of knowledge.

3. Poetry as knowledge

Ronald Pelias suggests, 'Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree' (Pelias 2004: 9). While this can be seen as somewhat facile, it does sum up much of what is said about the work of poetry: its focus (*pace* Plato) on the thingliness of things; its capacity to deliver phenomenological understandings and insights, which may emerge out of close observation (something key to both poetry and science) and out of acts of writing that defamiliarise the familiar, and thus force the reader's attention on the thing itself, rather than on rehearsed ways of encountering that thing (see Morley 2007: 9). A poem that delivers this is not only a means of communicating knowledge; the work of making the poem can be seen as a research practice as well, because it involves selection, observation, consideration, analysis, reflection …

I have just and inadvertently offered a definition of research. To make this more authoritative, let me cite the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, which states that research happens when: a research question is identified; a research context is defined; appropriate research methods are specified; and when, for creative practice, there is evident 'the exercise of appropriate skills in the creation of an original work in the fields of creative and performing arts and design' (UK Council 2001: 10). What this suggests is that not every poem is a research act, but many poems may be. Zbigniew Herbert's poem 'Pebble' (2007: 197; translated by Czeslaw Milosz) is one I would certainly define as research:

the pebble
is a perfect creature

equal to itself
mindful of its limits

with a scent that does not remind one of anything
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardour and coldness
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse
when I hold it in my hand

and its noble body
is permeated by false warmth

—Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye

Without interviewing Herbert, I can only guess at the extent to which he identified a research question, defined a research context or specified appropriate research methods; though I can certainly confirm 'the exercise of appropriate skills'. But it is possible to make some assumptions about the research question, context and methods on the basis of the context and form. 'Pebble' is the title, and sets up the context – the natural world, observed. The methods are manifestly phenomenological: the poet holds, smells, touches, senses and otherwise observes the pebble, and reflects on its phenomenological properties and on his research engagement with this. The research question is less clear, though in my reading it is most likely the question of how the human and natural worlds relate. This depiction of pebbles forces both poet and reader to reconsider not only the properties of stone, but also human encounters with stones and, by extension, the natural world. Next, by recontextualising what we already know of human relationships, especially in, for instance, courtly or love poetry, it draws in thought about the meaning of love, the meaning of dignity, the possibility or impossibility of genuinely connecting with an-other. In any event, it does more than beautifully represent the object of knowledge; it works over that object, and works over the subjects too (writer; reader), and provides a way into reconsidering the meaning and the ethics of being. And finally, it puts us, meaning-makers, in our place: we may 'know' and hold and own, we may transmit (false) warmth; but we are never 'equal to our limits' and the natural world will not be tamed, but will look (back) at us with that 'clear eye' – the eye, I assume, of judgment.

The point I want to make is that poetry draws attention to that other scission – the one that has pushed apart the real and the signified. Of course this work can be read simply as a poem, and not as a research activity or output. But still, I would argue – from the perspective of one who is required by my role in the university system to report on research – that it can readily meet the criteria of knowledge. In finding words to describe and define (here) a pebble, and in finding new perspectives from

which to view that pebble, poetry renews and reframes our understanding not only of the real, but also of how the real is mediated through language. Philosopher Simon Critchley writes:

> Poetry permits us to see fiction as fiction, to see the fictiveness or contingency of the world. It reveals the idea of order which we imaginatively impose on reality. Plainly stated, the world is what you make of it. The fact of the world is a *factum*: a deed, an act, an artifice. (2005: 58)

Both the making and the reading of a poem can thus be an experiment into 'the fact of the world'. This is, I would suggest, the strongest contribution to research/knowledge that a poem can make.

Endnotes

1. I note that this 'education' is the transmission, rather than the generation, of knowledge.

2. To name a few: Arnold (2007); Balkema and Slager (2004); Barrett and Bolt (2007); Carter (2004); Gray and Malins (2004); Hannula, Suoranta and Vadén (2005); Irwin and de Cosson (eds) (2004); Macleod and Holdridge (2006); Rasperry (2001); and Sullivan (2005)

3. Including *Design issues*; *Working Papers in Art and Design; TEXT: journal of writing and writing courses; the Media International Australia Special Issue of 2006*; and proceedings and other publications associated with PARIP, the British AHRB, and the UTS-based Creativity and Cognition Studios

4. From the Vulgate Latin, *stantia*, 'a stanza of verse', identified by the stop at the end of a set of lines (from the Latin, *stans*, 'to stand')

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