“What is the Poetic Experience?” –
An Argument in the Philosophy of Poetry

Introduction

In this paper I seek to articulate the potential basis for a “philosophy of poetry,” placing it on a par with other “philosophies,” such as the “philosophy of language,” the “philosophy of mind,” and the “philosophy of art,” or aesthetics. To be sure, we already engage in philosophising, or generally thinking and debating, about the nature of poetry, in the way of criticism and theory, even in the way of pedagogy and poetry workshops that seek to convey the art to others on a more practical level. Each of these poetic practices is a form of philosophy, because in each case they seek to understand, or make known or convey an understanding of, poetry; not just poetry as a practical art, but the meaning-making processes that underpin poetry and our poetic understanding.

This will be a broad-ranging paper intended to prompt further discussion, offering a series of contentious propositions about the nature of the philosophy of poetry, and in particular about the poetic experience as the “proper subject” of the philosophy of poetry. I will draw on the writings of a number of modern poets (broadly construed) to illustrate the significance of “philosophising” as a legitimate dimension of poetic practice. The question “what is poetry?” for instance, which lies at the heart of T. S. Eliot’s critical discourse on poetry, lends itself naturally to the question “what is the poetic experience?” This will be my point of entry for the purposes of this paper, but it is by no means the only possible one.

Answering the questions “what is poetry?” “what is poetry for?” “what is the poetic experience?” are questions with which poets and thinkers have long grappled. Plato’s answer to the second question led him to banish poets from his ideal society; Aristotle was, perhaps,
more measured in his analysis of poetry, the content of which still resonates today. Philip Sidney, while accepting Aristotle’s definition of poetry as an essentially mimetic, or imitative art, argues that poetry is the most important and original form of knowing, on which both philosophy and history, poetry’s “chief competitors,” are dependent. Shelley, rather audaciously, argues that poets have been, and remain, the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” imputing a social importance to poetry; a sentiment reflected in the comments of modern luminaries such as Eliot, Robert Frost, and Joseph Brodsky.

All of these poets and thinkers have attempted to understand and explain poetry and its significance to the wider community, and many have ventured to elucidate the dynamic of experience that underpins the poetic experience. In most cases, these are patchwork theories, which require further analyses, even syntheses of knowledge from other areas of study, both proximate and remote. It is the role of the philosophy of poetry to make sense of the ideas and theories of poets and other poetic theorists. This may entail traveling beyond the immediate purview of poetry and poetic theory, into the realm of cognitive science, for instance, even perhaps, neuroscience. This is where it may become most contentious of all.

For my part, this paper marks a broadening of the focus of my post-graduate research, a more thoroughly articulated conception of the philosophy of poetry is one the loftier goals of this new focus. More immediately, however, I believe we are due for a renascence in poetry and poetic thinking; moreover, there is a wider community of poets and poetic theorists, within Writing and Society and beyond, that are well-placed to contribute to that renascence. This paper, as such, is the precursor to a poetry and poetics symposium scheduled for November 8th, and it is hoped that this paper will provide enough controversy to generate critical thought and discussion.
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Talking Points:

- Poetry engages a fundamental meaning-making process that underpins our understanding of the world more broadly. This meaning-making process is metaphoric; that is, we understand the world through metaphor.

- Poetry is simultaneously the creation and investigation of meaning. Creation entails something new, never before considered, but investigation entails something that already exists to be investigated. Poetry sits on the precipice of a paradox, threatening us with a relative state of weightlessness and quickened meaning.

- Poetry is not abstract, but grounded in our bodies: the “metaphors we live by” extend from our physical experience with each other and the world around us, while our expressive capacity is only possible because of the unique organisation of our bodies, in particular our vocal organs.

- The poetic experience is a surrogate of human experience; the same embodied processes that make human experience meaningful make the poetic experience meaningful. Our understanding of the poetic experience, then, bears an important corollary to our understanding of human experience more broadly.

- The philosophy of poetry must bring to bear upon the poetic experience the accumulated knowledge of human experience more broadly. The poetic experience is, after all, a vital surrogate for human experience as it is predicated on the activation of the same meaning-making processes by which we make sense of the world.

- A natural starting point for the philosophy of poetry are the words of poets themselves, reflecting on their, and each other’s, craft; more broadly, poetic criticism.
Poetic criticism already contains the seeds in germ for philosophising. There is a rich history of poets reflecting on poetry, from various early “defences” of poetry, Philip Sidney’s or Percy Shelley’s for instance, to Eliot’s eminent critical works of the mid-20th century, to more contemporary critical works by the likes of Joseph Brodsky.

- The poetic experience has moral and social value; most poets know this, and many have attempted to explain, or justify, the social importance of poetry. Understanding the poetic experience is the proper object of the philosophy of poetry; moreover, understanding the social and moral value of poetry is also the proper object of the philosophy of poetry. Indeed, understanding the dynamic of meaning-making that underpins the poetic experience – attempting to answer the question “what is poetry?” – helps us to understand the social and moral value of poetry. The question that must be asked is how does the poetic experience achieve any such “education” to make it of any social or moral value?

- The meaning-making process at the heart of the poetic experience is embodied and mimetic; as such, it is intersubjective, meaning that it is universal to all humans. We feel the expansion of our faculties as a dimension of our natural mimetic instinct, or drive. The pleasure of exercising the imagination, the poetical faculty, the mind in general, is pleasurable because of this mimetic drive. Aristotle recognises the centrality of mimesis, or imitation, while Plato identified as a threat to his ideal Republic. It is a concept which returns again and again, not only in discussions surrounding poetry, but art more broadly.

- If the poetic experience is an embodied experience then it is also a neurophysiological experience. Our growing understanding of the brain, how we perceive and understand language and speech, for instance; how we respond to emotional stimuli; how we imagine or visual events abstractly and are able to experience pleasure and pain as
such; are all areas in which scientific research opens up new avenues for understanding poetry and poetic experience. Such research can help to affirm the earlier observations of philosophers and poets. The importance of mimesis and empathy can understood, for instance, through the prism of mirror neuron theory, which has impacted significantly on our understanding of the evolution of language, as the way in which we understand and interact with others.