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The Validity of Poetic Knowledge

Now what I want is Facts.
—Professor Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens

That there is such a thing as poetic knowledge, and consequently, that there is a mode of learning that can be called "poetic," there can be no doubt. Among the philosophers and poets of ancient, classical, and medieval times, this way of knowing was virtually a given as part of the human being's ability to know reality. Only after the Renaissance and the Cartesian revolution in philosophy does a less intuitive, less integrated view of man emerge. By the twentieth century, the idea of objective reality—and man's various responses to it—has been eclipsed, for the most part, by subjectivism and a less certain, more lonely and mechanistic model of the human being and the universe.

As a result, the tradition of poetic knowledge is now all but forgotten, usually dismissed as "romantic," and otherwise misunderstood if considered at all. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to certain definitions that surround its proper understanding and return them to their original and precise meanings.

First of all, poetic knowledge is not necessarily a knowledge of poetry but rather a poetic (a sensory-emotional) experience of reality. That the ancient Greeks considered all education a matter of learning certain arts through imitation—that is, through the poetic impulse to reflect what is already there—is a point to be clarified in the next chapter. What must be at the beginning of this understanding is the phenomenon of *poetic experience*. Poetic experience indicates an encounter with reality that is nonanalytical, something that is

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perceived as beautiful, awful (awefull), spontaneous, mysterious. It is true that poetic experience has that same surprise of metaphor found in poetry, but also found in common experience, when the mind, through the senses and emotions, *sees* in delight, or even in terror, the significance of what is really there.

This entire study rests on these admittedly difficult points. But one point that must be clear right away is that this matter of poetic knowledge is not one that belongs exclusively to the Romantics or to any realm of *feelings*, or to mystical vision. In fact, in its philosophic explanation, the basis of poetic knowledge, as we shall see, is more at home with the tradition of the Realists.

So, whatever poetic knowledge is, it is not strictly speaking a knowledge of poems, but a spontaneous act of the external and internal senses with the intellect, integrated and whole, rather than an act associated with the powers of analytic reasoning. It is, according to a tradition from Homer to Robert Frost, from Socrates to Maritain, a natural human act, synthetic and penetrating, that gets us *inside* the thing experienced. It is, we might say, knowledge from the inside out, radically different in this regard from a knowledge *about* things. In other words, it is the opposite of scientific knowledge. Concerning scientific knowledge and its predominant spirit in all aspects of modern education, by the end of the nineteenth century Charles Dickens gave us Professor Thomas Gradgrind as its great champion.

> Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.[1]

From the point of view of an ancient tradition, actually from an immemorial view of the nature of the human being as knower, this position of Gradgrind's is a radically shallow idea of knowledge. Something very strange has taken place in the Western world when we keep in mind this tradition. To assist in contrasting this change it should be recalled that in the same decade of Dickens's *Hard Times*, there also appeared two of the greatest scientific and materialist statements on man, *Das Kapital* and *The Origin of Species*. How deeply Dickens understood the encroachment of the mechanistic view of man and the universe, how profoundly modern science, adrift from the metaphysical tradition of the West, had restricted the limits of

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knowledge to "facts," is portrayed in the opening chapter of his book. Gradgrind has called on "student number twenty," Sissy Jupe, to tell the class something of her background. She is shy, modest, and understandably quite terrified of Gradgrind. She manages to reveal that her father is a horse trainer for the local circus, an occupation far below the standards of our enlightened Gradgrind. In an attempt to expose her ignorance, he demands that Sissy tell the class what a horse is, that is, to give a brief, *factual* definition. Just as she begins an answer, he scolds her for not having any "facts" about a horse. Bitzer, a boy in the same class who has clearly excelled in the Gradgrind method of knowledge, provides the correct answer:

> Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.[2]

"Now girl number twenty," said Gradgrind, "you know what a horse is."[3]

The cruel irony is of course, that no one in the class *except* Sissy knows what a horse is, least of all Gradgrind and Bitzer.

This little scene at the beginning of *Hard Times* is offered under the theme of chapter 1, titled, "The One Thing Needful," that is, the kind of knowledge that derives from the *love* of a thing, a person, or place—a horse—and the loss of such knowledge, and its replacement by the superficial facts demanded by a Gradgrind, is precisely what has made these times "hard," harder than they should be. What is needed, Dickens says, the one thing, is what Sissy could have told the class about horses. That would have been her intimate knowledge of their habits and personalities, the do's and don'ts of their care and training, and her love. Her knowledge would be something closer to the essence of horses because of her simple familiarity with their wholeness as an animal, rather than Bitzer's facts most likely memorized from a textbook.

Given the burden of explaining to a modern audience influenced by an education closer to Gradgrind than to the principles of intuitive and poetic knowledge, it is fortunate that there is a remarkable advantage in having the concrete example of a college-level program in the humanities that was taught and explained in this mode.

The Pearson Integrated Humanities Program at the University

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of Kansas existed for nearly fifteen years from the 1970s into the 1980s. It was a college within a university founded and taught by three professors, two from English and one from Classics, who were deeply aware of and dedicated to the philosophical tradition of knowledge and education in the poetic mode. The IHP, as it came to be called, will be considered more fully in chapter 6, but for now one of the professors from that program, John Senior, can assist in defining and distinguishing the modes of knowledge:

> The ancients distinguished four degrees of knowledge: the poetic, where truths are grasped intuitively as when you trust another's love; the rhetorical, when we are persuaded by evidence, but without conclusive proof that we might be wrong, as when we vote for a political candidate; next the dialectical mode in which we conclude to one of two opposing arguments beyond a reasonable doubt, with the kind of evidence sufficient for conviction in a laboratory testing to certify a drug for human use; and, finally, in the scientific mode—science in the ancient and not the modern sense which is dialectical and rhetorical, but science as *epistemai*—we reach to absolute certitude as when we know the whole is greater than the part, that motion presupposes agency.[4]

Unlike the various modern schools of thought on knowledge, largely skeptical, these four modes spoken of by Senior were all informed by self-evident truth, first principles founded on objective reality impossible to be "proved" by argument because they exist as givens, intuitively known by all. As Jacques Maritain observed, "the natural inclination was so strong in them (the ancients and medievals) that their proofs of God could take the form of the most conceptualized and rationalized demonstrations, and be offered as an unrolling of logical necessities, without losing the inner energy of that intuition."[5]

But it is not just the ancients or the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages or their small group of modern apologists who knew and appreciated these degrees of knowledge. The twentieth century has had its share of philosophers who have recognized at least two of these degrees. Karl Stern, from his book *The Flight from Woman*, says in the chapter titled "Scientific and Poetic Knowledge":

> Simple self-observation shows that there exist two modes of knowing. One might be called "externalization," in which the

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> knowable is experienced as *ob-ject*, a *Gegen-stand*, something which stands opposed to me; the other might be called "internalization," a form of knowledge by sympathy, a "*feeling with*,"—a union with the knowable.[6]

Stern, quoting Henri Bergson, helps clarify the term *intuition* for the context here, excluding the popular associations with the idea of a "hunch," but, rather, Bergson says, "By intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within the object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible."[7]

Karl Stern continues to show throughout this chapter that modern philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Herbert Feigl, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Wilhelm Dithey, while at odds with much in the traditional Realist philosophy of knowledge, have all allowed for this "other way" of knowing that Stern and Senior have called "poetic" and which modern education, for the most part, has rejected.

How this tension and misunderstanding between the modes of knowledge have actually played out in our day can be partially illustrated by a brief look at the greatly debated areas of how children learn to read and, accordingly, how best to teach them to read. For example, modern scientific theories of learning have given us the battle over look-say, phonics, basal readers, with all manner of audio-visual machines, graphics, and "high-tech" aides and methods. Frank Smith, from his book *Insult to Intelligence*, offers what may seem an oldfashioned and simplistic alternative:

> One of the leaders in research on how children learn to read, Margaret (Meek) Spencer of London University, says that it is authors who teach children to read. Not just any authors, but the authors of the stories that children love to read, that children often know by heart before they begin to read the story. This prior knowledge or strong expectation of how the story will develop is the key to learning to read, says Professor Spencer.[8]

This is simply an example of poetic learning, in the sense that the child is left alone, undistracted by methods and systems, so that the senses and emotions come naturally into play when being read to, where wonder and delight gradually lead the child's imagination and memory toward the imitative act of reading. Smith continues to say that the same approach can be used for the child learning to

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write, that is, by first simply listening to stories. Poetic experience and knowledge is essentially passive, and listening is above all the gateway, along with looking, to the poetic mode.

The problem, according to Smith, with what he calls the "drill and kill" method of language arts programs is not that they fail to give skills to decode words and write correct sentences but that they destroy the delight of learning in the process; and, as it is an axiom that learning requires, especially in the child, a high interest level, the scientific system of reading and writing threatens to defeat the very goals promoted by such systems.

> Teacher researchers Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart examined how children were taught to read and write all over the United States. . . . Like many observers, Graves and Stuart conclude that kindergarten and first-grade children love to write, but "it doesn't take too many years of filling in the blanks, copying words and diagraming sentences before children decide writing is no fun at all."[9]

Given that the scientific idea of education is a mechanical model that manifests itself in some form of the "drill and kill" system, and given, in contrast, that the human being is not a machine and has not, for centuries, responded to learning by such methods, the conflict produced by the imposition of the scientific idea of learning will also have its negative effect on the emotional life of the learner. "We don't just learn about something," Smith says, "we simultaneously learn how we feel as we learn."[10] It is in this way that we hear more and more that young students have come to "hate" math or English, or, slightly worse, that it is all "boring."

It is the firm position of this study that some essential perception about the human being, about the world, and how we learn about our world, has been dumped from the modern educational experience. That which has been abandoned is the poetic mode of knowledge, even though its existence and importance has been referred to and assumed to be in place for centuries. It is the history of this largely forgotten tradition of knowledge that now must be examined.

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