

Foreword

What follows is the senior thesis written by Ken Kronberg in March 1968 as part of his fulfillment of the requirements for graduating from St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM.

Although St. John's College, based in Annapolis, MD, is the third oldest college in the United States (after Harvard and William and Mary), the college's second campus, in Santa Fe campus, was opened only in 1964, and the first class at that new campus—Ken's class—graduated in 1968.

When Ken wrote this thesis, he was 19 years old, although he would turn 20 in the following month: April. He had entered St. John's at barely 16.

For this essay, he won the senior thesis prize for Santa Fe's first graduating class.

Two years later, his soon-to-be wife, Molly Hammett, won the senior thesis prize for the graduating class of 1970 in Annapolis.

Shortly before his death in 2007, in a discussion of poetry Ken described this thesis as an instance of Socratic irony.

AN EXERCISE IN ANALOGY AND THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

**Ken Kronberg
Senior Thesis
March, 1968**

'Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.'

T. S. Eliot,
FOUR QUARTETS

PREFACE

This paper was written in lieu of a paper entitled "Pascal and the Science of God," which, if it had been completed, would have developed a Pascalian argument similar to the Platonic one here encountered. I have in any case read into the sources, both mentioned and unmentioned, whatever it was I wished to find in them; and with the utmost impunity.

INTRODUCTORY

The question of the Ion, the only non-superfluous question that can be directed to poetry, is whether or not the illusory can be educational in a direct sense, whether or not it can help the process of maturing and the growth of wisdom (since clearly it cannot yield speculative knowledge or certainty). Once this question has been decided, no matter to which side the argument falls, philosophy can with clear conscience allow the poets to continue in their madness. No further philosophical investigation will be necessary or possible, for the simple reason that outside of the question, Does poetry strive after the creation of a state of mind more transcendent than that of poetry itself, one is left merely with poems and the writing of poems, and these have already been admitted to be illusory. This decision, at least, has the aura of something knowable.

Socrates realizes that poetry cannot be the same as the arts it records and must therefore be a kind of imitation of these arts. The poet's purpose is to create a believable semblance of reality; and, as in the case of perspective in the graphic arts, it is not the accurate image that seems accurate to our eye. Thus the poet's art consists in molding disproportionate pieces into seemingly proportionate wholes, in infusing into the imaginary some element that makes it real. We cannot discard the imaginary when, by virtue of its importance to us and the effect it has on our understanding, it takes on a reality apart from the arts it imitates. Poetry is justified by our acceptance of its actual existence. This is mere empirical fact: for whatever reasons, people like Ion, Socrates, and Plato are quick to ascribe divinity to poetry. Unfortunately this is opinion. Perhaps the effect of poetry is to cloud our understanding and obscure, by improper facsimile, the true aspect of our world. Perhaps poetry stands in the way of human wisdom.

Convinced then of the speculative stigma of this question, how are we to go about answering it? What would be the terms of such an answer? Poetry would beg the question. A poetic answer would presuppose its own worth and therefore could not be accepted as scientific. How then shall we recognize the philosophic, non-poetic answer, the answer that will for all time free philosophers from poetry, or perhaps, free poetry from philosophers? We must recognize the philosophic answer, and to do this we must clearly distinguish philosophy from poetry.*

Thus the subject of this essay is essentially itself: is it possible for it to have been written as a speculative work? If so, then the opening question, Can poetry lead to wisdom?, will have been shown to be a meaningful speculative consideration. If not, then we may conclude that the question is superfluous and could begin to question how and why it was set up, if other possible questions exist, and what answers other than speculative could be attempted.

* But again, such a distinction could be made either philosophically or poetically, and to assume one would be to beg the question.

To decide this question, we would have to get a clear idea of what we mean first by poetry; second, by leading to; and third, by wisdom. Of the three parts of this question, this paper is concerned primarily with the first. The meaning of the second part of this question is really itself the question of education: how can anything lead to wisdom or maturity? At the end of the essay I assume we share a common understanding of wisdom in order to propose a description of it that will help us decide the fates of the opening question, of the essay itself, and of poetry.

We have then to get a clear idea of what poetry is, and to do so it will be necessary to distinguish poetry from philosophy.

PART I

In order to contrast poetry and philosophy we must first show that they are capable of being distinguished. This is not to say that we must produce the distinction, but instead that we must find the common element through which they can be compared. Although we tend to make the distinction immediately, by assumption, force of habit, and generality, we ought for a moment to consider how this relation is possible.

The word poetry is derived from the Greek word *ποιησις*, defined as first, a making, fabrication, or creation, and second, poetry, a poem. *Ποιησις* is derived from the root verb *ποιεω*, a common verb meaning to do or to make. *Ποιησις* carries the verb's connotations of active creation; the primary meaning, however, is "the result of activity," a finished product, and as such the Lexicon lists it as opposite to *πραξις* (action). Thus the Greek word combines in its meaning the opposite notions of completion and creation.

Φιλοσοφία, the etymological root of "philosophy," is a compound of *φιλος*, friend or lover, and *σοφία*, wisdom: first, love of wisdom, second, systematic treatment. Plato injects the active sense of a search for wisdom into the word by suggesting that one who loves is one who desires, and one who desires is one who seeks. Like *ποιησις*, *φιλοσοφία* can be seen to combine connotations of an activity, in this case a search, and of something fixed, wisdom, what is found.

Now, what does creation have in common with the love of wisdom? As these words came to refer to what we call poetry and philosophy, they took on more specific meanings. They meant a creation in words or a search in words. Man's speech, his language, was recognized as the situation of such activities or accomplishments. After all, language was a very favored spot: it symbolized man's rationality, his divinity.

Apart from fanciful stories like this last we can, in a common sense way, place both poetry and philosophy in language. Our experience makes us aware first of words, of symbols for ideas or objects; later, we call some formulations poetic, others philosophical. These two depend upon language as tables and chairs depend upon wood: language is their stuff. I doubt that we could conceive of philosophy or poetry existing outside language (where would they be?). (This does not mean, however, that they might not be images of things existing outside of language. As a matter of fact, the thesis of this paper is that they are linguistic phenomena which reflect two abstract tendencies or world views; but this will be discussed toward the end of the essay.) Let us then consider poetry and philosophy as two aspects or uses of language. We will look to language in general, as we have done in particular by use of etymologies, for a means of distinguishing them.

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All we have said about poetry and philosophy is that they occur in words. We do not know if, as use of language, they merit equal consideration: for instance, philosophy would seem, at first glance, to be the expression or formulation in words of a speculative content. It is this content with which we are concerned, and not particularly with the way it is expressed as long as the language used is clear enough to convey the thought. But poetry often appears as little more than a particular way to express an idea or ideas. As speculative thinkers we try to get past the poetic form and reach the true content. Poetry in this case would be a technique of expression whose study would properly be the domain of specialists, of fine, and not liberal, artists.

This description of poetry lies behind the classical theory of rhetoric advanced by Lucretius:

My art is not without a purpose. Physicians, when they wish to treat children with a nasty dose of wormwood, first smear the rim of the cup with a coat of yellow homey. The children, as yet too young for foresight, are lured by the sweetness at their lips, tricked but not trapped; for the treatment restores them to health. In the same way our doctrine often seems unpalatable to those who have not sampled it and the multitude shrink from it. That is why I have tried to administer it to you in the dulcet strains of poetry, coated with the sweet honey of the Muses. My object has been to engage your mind with my verses while you gain insight into the nature of the universe and learn to appreciate the profit you are reaping.

—*On the Nature of Things*,
opening of Book Four

This understanding reduces poetry to surface charm and our opening question to irrelevance. If poetry is merely an attractive package then we are left questioning its effectiveness and not its effect on the inherent nature of the contents. This characterization of poetry as cosmetic also appears in the Republic: because poetry is engaging and highly persuasive the polis must permit only right opinion to be espoused in poetic form.

The classical theory of rhetoric treats poetry as a vehicle for abstract thought. The most important consequence of the theory is that the particular expression of an idea is not considered to affect the idea itself. If this were the case, then all but technical discussions of prosody, like that of musical modes found in the Republic, would be superfluous. But our experience of poetry suggests that it is of more consequence than a mere technique. We must then find a way to describe poetry which will reflect its entire effect upon both language and thought. (It should be noted that such a description has not yet been attempted for philosophy, either.) One way to understand this problem is simply that how philosophy or poetry takes shape or uses language ought to reflect something basic in the thought expressed. There ought to be some correspondence between what you say and how you say it.

Let us look at how a modern thinker and poet tried to respond to the classical theory of rhetoric.

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The problem Paul Valery faces in his essay *Poetry and Abstract Thought*, is to provide descriptions of poetry and philosophy which will correspond to the different effects they have on us. In order to do this Valery sets out to show that they use language in different ways for different ends. From this it follows that poetry might be coincidentally philosophical, and vice versa, but that it could not be used as a sweetener to abstract thought, as Lucretius suggests.

Valery develops a distinction between poetry and philosophy based on two differing uses and effects of language. The first use of language, discursive or abstract, aims at the comprehension of a speaker's thought. In this realm words function as intermediary signs or representatives to a listener of the speaker's idea. Once the thought has been understood, the words used to convey it lose the purpose, and consequently the significance, for which they were spoken. "If you have understood, it means that the words have vanished from your minds and are replaced by their counterpart, by images, relationships, impulses; so that you have within you the means to retransmit these ideas and images in a language that may be very different from the one you received ... the perfection of a discourse whose sole aim is comprehension obviously consists in the ease with which the words forming it are transformed into something quite different: the language is transformed first into non-language and then, if we wish, into a form differing from the original form."

Poetry, the second use of language, aims at "giving us the feeling of an intimate union between the word [that is, the sound of the word] and the mind [that is, the sense of the word]." If the discursive use of language is a means to the end of comprehension, then the poetic use of language is an end in itself. "It is ... not a question of carrying out a limited operation whose end is situated somewhere in our surroundings, but rather of creating, maintaining, and exalting a certain state." This marriage of sound and sense is magical because there is clearly no intelligible abstract relationship between the sound and meaning of words, and the poet must therefore create this relationship for us. Thus each poetic statement stands uniquely by itself, and "can be recognized by this property, that it tends to get itself reproduced in its own form: it stimulates us to reconstruct it identically."

Valery argues from experience: particular abstract formulations are forgotten when they have been understood, poetic formulations are not forgotten, even though, as conveyors of thought, they are superfluous once understood. It should be noted that, far from being the last word on poetry, this passage was introduced to give us a start on considering poetry and philosophy as "separate but equal" accomplishments; there are problems in the distinction which we should consider.

At another point in the essay Valery proposes the proportion walking: dancing::abstract thought: poetry.[†] Both dancing and poetry are ends in themselves, done for the sheer joy of their doing; abstract

[†] Valery actually says prose for abstract thought; it is to my purpose to propose this substitution.

thought, like walking, is “a limited operation whose end is situated somewhere in our surroundings,” a means to the end of comprehension. Those of us who are Greeks find this utilitarian approach to philosophy somewhat foreign, if not downright barbaric.

(For example, to quote Aristotle on the relationship between the mind (the first mover) and the human intellect in the activity of contemplation,

On such a principle, accordingly, the heavens and nature depend. It is a life such as ours is in its best moments. It is always at its best, though for us this is impossible. The first mover’s action is enjoyable, even as we, too, most enjoy being awake, conscious, and thinking, whence come the joys of hope and memory. Thus, knowing, by its very nature, concerns what is inherently best; and knowing in the truest sense concerns what is best in the truest sense. So intellect finds its fulfillment in being aware of the intelligible: ... and it is the activity of intellectual vision that is most pleasant and best. If the divine, then, is always in that good state in which we are at times, this is wonderful.

—*Metaphysics* 1072b

Aristotle’s identification of contemplation with the divine suggests that abstract thought leads to the creation of a state describable in terms similar to those used by Valery to talk about the end of poetry. We begin to get the feeling that Valery’s acquaintance with philosophy was limited to modern speculative work, or else he understood philosophy within very narrow bounds. In the next section I try to show that Valery’s description of philosophy is to some extent consonant with the views of Hobbes.)

Valery uses conversational statements like “put the box on the table” as examples of abstract thought communicated in language. Clearly it is prose. But can we assume that we understand philosophical statements like “all men by nature desire to know” in the same way we understand “put the box on the table”? (Let us assume that “all men by nature desire to know” is a philosophical statement. Later in the essay we will **indicate** whether any isolated or unique statement could be called philosophy.) The problem with Valery’s examples is that they are utilitarian uses of language to convey essentially utilitarian ideas. But need this be the case: even if philosophy is a utilitarian use of language, would its content necessarily be utilitarian?

We have already characterized philosophy as a search. If we consider the knowledge after which we are searching to be the end of philosophy, then the whole philosophic enterprise would be utilitarian in a simple way: one would use philosophy to get knowledge, to get the truth. But we said that it was wisdom, and not knowledge (and here we spoke through Plato) that is the true end of the search. It’s not so easy to see how one would use philosophy to achieve wisdom in the same way one uses conversation to get boxes put on tables.

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Digression: The Meaning of Words, Plato & Hobbes

Either words symbolize ideas which have some sort of existence outside of our recognition of them, or words do not, in which case they refer only to objects in our experience and derive their meaning from habit and customary use. If the latter is the case then we may substitute what we think a word should mean, on the basis of our experience, for the meaning in general mis-use (that is, we remind everyone of what they know but forget to practice). If the former is the case then we may attempt to determine the true meanings of the words in general mis-use (that is, we try to get people to recollect what they know but forget to practice). In the Platonic situation we find the hope that language does in fact reflect reasonableness in the way things are; in the Hobbesian, no longer concerned with the wish for such reasonableness, we give up on the possibility of knowledge of “the way things are” coming to us through language or the study of language. In fact, we deny that anything is “the way things are” in a Platonic sense.

Now, if we accept the Hobbesian hypothesis, then we must begin our speculation by defining the meaning of the words we will use. If these definitions seem reasonable we might choose to say they correspond accurately to the objects of our experience, which is a way of saying they are true without implying the existence of any Truth. We might then begin to form these definitions into combinations with one another, checking on the one hand, the new defined words created by this process of combination, and on the other, their relevance to the more complex aspects of our experience to which they should correspond. Since our primary definitions corresponded accurately to the simple objects of our experience, this method of combination, by joining defined words to create more complex definitions, provides a useful analytic tool in determining the underlying makeup of the complex aspects of our experience. As used in the Leviathan this method has the end of analyzing the complex relations within society into smaller already defined relationships. In this sense the Hobbesian method is scientific and utilitarian.

At no time can this method of combination produce anything not already implicit in the primary definitions. (As a matter of fact, an interesting study might be Hobbes’ success with this method. It appears that it was necessary for him to actually change the meaning of his primary definitions in order to get his complex definitions to correspond to society as we experience it.)

If, on the other hand, we accept the Platonic hypothesis, then we would begin our speculation by trying to determine what words like “justice,” “virtue,” or “courage,” actually mean. In this endeavor we would most likely discard a number of possible alternative definitions, thus inducing an emotional or intellectual or psychological state of uncertainty called *aporia* in the participants of our discussion. Although we might in the end still be ignorant of the precise meaning of the word we had chosen to consider, we would be nevertheless closer to understanding it and would have furthered the education, and thus the emancipation, of the members of our group. In this sense the Platonic method is essentially synthetic.

If we dismiss the Hobbesian hypothesis then we must substitute another understanding of philosophy into Valery's distinction. It should be clear that my sympathies lie with the Greeks, and that the attempt to draw out of language itself a more complete distinction between philosophy and poetry is already contained implicitly in the above Platonic paragraph.

(Plato was clearly aware of this alternative to his way of understanding words. We find in the Cratylus, a dialogue concerning language, the following Hobbesian formulation: "Hermogenes: For there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users." Socrates quickly convinces Hermogenes of the opposite assertion that, "if things are not relative to individuals, and all things do equally belong to all at the same moment and always, they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence; they are not in relation to us, or influenced by us, fluctuating according to our fancy, but they are independent, and maintain to their own essence the relation prescribed by nature.")

The point of the Digression was to exemplify two different philosophical methods in order to offer a Greek alternative to Valery's idea of philosophy. Let us keep at the back of our minds the general notion we have of dialectical speculation as presented in the Dialogues; this will of course turn out to be a paradigm of philosophy.

The important feature of Valery's description of poetry is the idea of poetic uniqueness. He answers the classical theory of rhetoric by asserting that a poetic statement is untranslatable; that it is poetry precisely because form and content are wedded to one another. Philosophy lacks this kind of particularity. We must remember, however, that by philosophy Valery means philosophic works like the Leviathan; later in the essay we will discuss what happens to philosophic particularity when we consider philosophy to be a dialectical activity.

In regard to the question of ends and means, let us, as speculative thinkers and as poets, agree with both Aristotle and Valery. We experience transcendent states of mind through both poetry and philosophy, although this does not mean that these states are the same. As we continue this essay it will become clear that they are quite different ends, even though neither one is utilitarian.

PART II

We find in the Cratylus continual reference to the Heraclitean flux. As summarized by Socrates, “Heraclitus is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing at rest.” Throughout the argument Socrates draws a correspondence between words and the fluid world pictured by Heraclitus. “Perhaps you did not observe that in the names which have just been cited the motion or flux or generation of things is most surely indicated”; Socrates then produces etymologies which incorporate dynamic images or ideas for the words he is discussing.

At the end of the dialogue, however, Socrates reverses his apparent position. “And anyone, I believe, who would take the trouble might find many other examples in which the giver of names indicates, not that things are in motion or process, but that they are at rest, which is the opposite of motion.” His study of words reveals that some correspond to a dynamic world view, others to a static. We will consider how to read these metaphorical etymologies after a few other points in the dialogue have been sketched out.

Socrates then raises the problem of the study of language: if words are names, and names, images of the things to which they refer, then “which is likely to be the nobler and clearer way—to learn of the image, whether the image, and the truth of which the image is the expression, have been rightly conceived, or to learn of the truth, whether the truth and the image of it have been duly executed?” In other words, shall we accept the image as our standard in reference to the thing itself; or shall we use the thing itself to check the accuracy of the image? Clearly the latter, and so Socrates concludes, “How real existence is to be studied is, I suspect, beyond you and me. But we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No, they must be studied and investigated in themselves.” This casts serious doubt on the whole enterprise of both this dialogue and dialogue in general. How are we to go beyond words in order to get at the thing in itself?

At the dialogue’s end, Socrates ties up these two points by asserting that “we cannot reasonably say that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding.” We see that the Heraclitean view excludes the possibility that there are fixed things in themselves to which names are images and of which we can become aware. How can we reconcile this consequence with the recognition that some aspects of language do seem to correspond to a fluid world view?

Let us first consider the meaning of the static and dynamic etymologies presented by Socrates. These etymologies are extremely whimsical: he often offers three or four alternative derivations for a given word. The etymologies are similar to the kind we proposed for poetry and philosophy at the beginning of this paper; we, for instance, found that although the word *ποίησις* meant a “finished product” it was derived from the verb that meant “to make.” We proposed that the dynamic sense of making or doing was implicit in the word, even though it was not present explicitly. The Socratic etymologies do the same sort of thing, only in extreme: derivations of seemingly unrelated words turn out to be all related to images of motion and flux. It is as fanciful as my proposing that the word extreme was formed from the words east and stream, which came to mean extreme because they marked a far-off boundary.

Since the derivatives are presented in so lighthearted a manner, and since so many alternative ones are proposed, and lastly, since Socrates eventually calls into question the worth of the whole endeavor, let us assume that they are not intended to be taken seriously at face value. What then are they doing in a serious discussion of language?

The existence of dynamic or static derivations for particular words is perhaps itself a metaphorical description of two abstract tendencies in all words: to be definitive, to be ambiguous. (More precisely, all substantives. Unfortunately this paper is too sketchy to go into images of the philosophy-poetry distinction on a grammatical level.) As names, words define specific objects or ideas. In a simple sense words give these objects or ideas a kind of permanent status in our understanding: they become pigeon-holed, set off from everything they are not. For example, by calling something a table I indicate it is neither a desk, nor a lamp, nor a bed. On the other hand, words are notoriously ambiguous. They imply and connote all sorts of things lying outside their own cubicles. To use the same example, when I call something a table I may also mean it is a lectern; what's more, I may expect you to know it has four legs, or is rectangular. All words share these two senses and we might even say we become aware of them simultaneously, that is, the existence of one points up the existence of the other. Thus, ambiguity worries us only when we are concerned with a clear, precise definition; precise definitions seem to get in the way when we try to communicate as much as possible through implication. It should be clear that this is a distinction in thought; words are neither ambiguous nor definite; they just are. We could perhaps capture the twofold sense by thinking of words as loci of meanings, the center point representing the precise definition of a word and a sort of halo of connotation surrounding the center, representing the ambiguity. This metaphor is helpful because, as a model, it organically unites the definite and the ambiguous within each word.

Now I think we can understand the dynamic and static derivations to be metaphors for this dual nature of words. The dynamic element in language is ambiguity, the static element definition. Ambiguity can be undersold to be dynamic in the sense that it introduces multiple possibilities into the meaning of a word. The definite center of each locus of meaning, on the other hand, remains fixed at a point, is a point, and as such allows of no possible alternative meaning or haze of connotations. (This is of course an argument from analogy, as is the entire essay.)

What significance does this twofold model of words hold for our attempt to derive, from language itself, a clear idea of the distinction between poetry and philosophy? I mean to assert that the dynamic aspect of words symbolized by ambiguity corresponds to a philosophical use of language, and that their static aspect, symbolized by definition, corresponds to poetic use.[‡] This proposition will be discussed in the next section; after which I will deal with the problems of going beyond words and reconciling the possibility of knowledge with a Heraclitean world view.

[‡] A great deal has been said about the ambiguous nature of poetry; I question what is actually meant and suggest that the kind of ambiguity pointed to by such literary criticism is epiphenomenal and not poetry itself. Likewise I extract a Platonic understanding of philosophy from the ambiguity in language; a Hobbesian understanding of philosophy follows the definitive character of words and can be shown to arise out of an essentially poetic model.

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How can we understand philosophy to flow from the ambiguity of words and poetry from their specificity? At the beginning of this paper we allowed Plato to characterize philosophy as a search in words. Although the goal of this dialectical search is some certain knowledge, the search itself depends upon the multiple possibilities of meaning introduced into words by ambiguity. To explicate this we must return for a moment to the Digression.

We said that the Hobbesian method provides a useful analytic tool but could not yield anything not already contained in the primary definitions. (It follows that this method is not so much scientific as technological.) The Platonic method, on the other hand, is synthetic. If in practice it does not achieve the knowledge it sets out after, it nevertheless does remove faulty opinions from our understanding, an accomplishment which must be admitted to bring us closer to the truth. Furthermore, by forcing us to examine and reduce questions to their bases, the Platonic method enables us to gain insight into the terms in which possible answers, and hence knowledge, would appear to us. Thus, although answers rarely result from dialectic, the search does bring about a rejection of misconceptions and a recognition of the ways in which philosophical questions can be answered meaningfully. How can we account for the synthesis that occurs in dialectic?

The method of deductive logic cannot produce such a synthetic result; deduction, like Hobbesian analysis, yields consequences by combining a set of preliminary givens. But we set out on the search for knowledge precisely because such givens are unavailable to us, because we are in a state of uncertainty. What, then, provides the medium through which this process can be actualized? (In other words, "How do we think?" or, "How is a priori synthetic knowledge possible?") One possible answer is that the ambiguity in words, the halo of connotations, implies or suggests meanings and relationships that are neither explicitly stated nor logically connected. We cannot go beyond this answer to ask how such implication takes place, however, and to this extent it remains more of a description than an explanation. It follows from the description that the process of thought is a kind of magical, a-rational process of implication through ambiguity. A more reasonable answer might suggest that the form of logical statements provides the medium through which synthesis is possible (Kant).⁵ Nevertheless, the answer I have proposed, an image of dynamism and the Heraclitean world view, provides a description of how synthetic philosophy is possible, and as such can be accepted as a meaningful model of speculative thought.

Rather than the dynamic sense of synthesis found in philosophy, poetry is reflected in the immediate or simultaneous perception of relationships. We can understand this in terms of Valery's notion of poetic uniqueness: poetry is unique because it ultimately implies itself, ultimately returns to its own marriage of form and content. The definitive aspect of words can be seen to partake of an analogous marriage of form and content, for, since a given word is completely unambiguous, its particular form is equivalent to its content, they are neither more nor less than each other. Since there is only one possible meaning for

⁵ Thus, although dialectic proves by example that a priori synthetic knowledge is possible, Kant was unwilling to accept an argument by experience.

a word, a one-to-one correspondence between sound and meaning has been set up, and this one-to-one correspondence makes word and meaning synonymous. We now see that the aspect of language Hobbes regarded as philosophical actually corresponds to the static center of words' loci of meaning, and can therefore be regarded by us as essentially poetical.

Other images of the relationship between poetry and the definite element in language can be recognized, for instance, the specificity of poetic symbols. Symbols like Beatrice, Gargantua, Don Quixote, and Justice, remain, even after a speculative inquiry, very much themselves, untranslatable and greater than any results of critical effort to define what they mean or represent. This is an exciting game to play: the third part of the essay discusses a second level on which we can see the poetry-philosophy distinction functioning in language. Having indicated how the dual nature of words corresponds to the distinction between poetry and philosophy, however, we have now to address ourselves to the questions of how philosophy gets beyond words and how knowledge can be reconciled with a Heraclitean world view.

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At the height of the Republic Plato proposes the image of the divided line as a symbol of the visible and intelligible worlds. The fourth part of the line refers to the highest portion of the intelligible:

Understand, then, said I, that by the other section of the intelligible I mean that which the reason itself lays hold of by the power of dialectic, treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, and springboards so to speak, to enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all, and after attaining to that again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so to proceed downward to the conclusions, making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas and ending with ideas.

Let us assume this passage to be a description of what happens when we go beyond names. Ideas, the objects symbolized by words, participate in an absolute dialectic in which we move by a kind of necessary implication. This absolute dialectic is the perfect form of motion imitated by the human activity of dialectical examination; we suggested that it occurs through a medium provided by ambiguity. But this realm of the intelligible has escaped language altogether, freed itself from the last shred of the static, definite aspect of words. Thus linguistic ambiguity can be understood as an image of the total fluid situation of this dialectic of ideas.

Thus, the method of philosophy corresponds to this dialectic of the mind. This dialectic is an activity; and seen as activity it can be described metaphorically as a kind of Heraclitean flux. In this sense we see that the fluid world view corresponds not to the goals of philosophical speculation (knowledge), but instead to the activity of speculation itself.

We ended Part One by wondering what would happen to Valéry's distinction between poetry and abstract thought if we substituted a Platonic understanding of philosophy for his Hobbesian one. We can conclude that the Platonic understanding furthers Valéry's essential idea by offering us a real pole of opposition to his notion of poetic uniqueness. This last part offered us one level on which we could relate aspects of language to the distinction between philosophy and poetry. In the next part a second level of the analogy is considered briefly before the conclusions of the essay are summarized.

PART III

By considering philosophy as an activity, a search in words, we insert the element of time into it. When Valery uses conversational statements as examples of abstract thought, he inadvertently inserts the temporal into philosophy. But if we accept dialectical examination to be true philosophizing, then we immediately admit that conversation is the sort of language suited to philosophic activity and is consequently the medium of speculation. We can, by considering the effect of time upon language, construct another distinction analogous to the distinction between ambiguity and definition.

We tend to think of speech and written language as mere forms of one another. They differ essentially, however, because speech is a temporal activity and written language is not. Spoken language is open-ended, unstructured, organic, because it evolved through the activity of speech. Written language, on the other hand, is formed, static, and laid out. This distinction has nothing to do with the sound or graphic symbols associated with spoken and written language; it has to do with whether or not language is used in a formal or organic way.

A written work must have some definite structure, if only because it has a beginning, middle, and end. Poetry, for instances, appears to us in the form of poems, written works we judge to be complete wholes, things in themselves. The poem's structure defines certain fixed relationships that contribute to its uniqueness. Thus we can understand poetry to be an image of fixed patterns in a way similar to the way we understood philosophy to be an image of the Heraclitean flux. ** In the case of philosophy, however, formalization cannot be a part of the speculative activity proper, and therefore must be something else, a concession to the desire or need for temporal permanence. Thus speculative works are epiphenomena of philosophy which correspond to the poetic model. Plato realized this and wrote philosophy in imitation of spoken discourse; nevertheless, as the results of dialectical examination are translated from spoken to written language for the sake of permanence, they become static, unique poetic statements.

Likewise, we should note that, as an aural phenomenon, poetry partakes of the dialectical tendency to lead away from itself and toward other ideas and images. As a poem is read aloud, the series of thoughts fall out of the pattern in which they were formed as written language and affect us as though they were dialectical. Our sight-reading of poetry takes place in time too, however, and to this extent even sight-reading poetry is a dialectical activity; we cannot escape temporality in our lives. Just as abstract thought attempts to escape language and become a dialectic of the mind, so poetry struggles to free itself from language and become instantaneous, outside of time, pure structure or relation perceived as such. At this point the analogy to the graphic arts takes on increased significance: an entire poem, if perceived absolutely, would be heard simultaneously, as a painting can be seen at one glance.^{††}

** Thus we can see how all great systems, those of Dante, Aquinas, Plotinus, and Milton, can be understood as poetic models of eternal patterns.

^{††} Of course, the eye is itself a scanning device and we do not really see simultaneously either; perhaps simultaneity exists only in the mind's eye.

To sum up, the true music in poetry is the harmony between sound and sense, not the sound itself. This harmony or proportion is necessarily fixed, and for this reason our consideration tends always to return to the poem itself, to the unique work of art. Dialectical examination has no such proportions; it is a beauty of a different order, a contemplation of harmonies, and as such a search whose terms shift continually and whose point of reference lies always directly ahead.

* * *

Having briefly examined some aspects of the nature of language we are now able to conclude that both the dialectical movement of ideas and images and the formal pattern of ideas and images must be encountered by us in words, in language; and language is hybrid, sharing in both ambiguity and definition, in the temporality of one and the permanence of the other of these two extremes. Thus we have characterized philosophy and poetry as contrary tendencies symbolizing through language the opposites of movement and pattern, the opposition of changing and unchanging. Both poles remove us from the midpoint at which, as men, we necessarily find ourselves.

Each tendency struggles to free itself of the other; we have discovered that no matter how speculative a thought I might write down it will be to some extent tainted by poetry. No matter how we attempt to answer the first question, Can poetry lead to wisdom?, we cannot answer it absolutely: some poetic element will creep onto the scales, some unique element in the answer will make a purely speculative answer impossible.

We ought, however, to take courage. We must see the enterprise out to its end, and to do so we must decide whether or not poetry is educational.

* * *

If we consider wisdom to be concomitant with dialectical examination, then we can conclude, on the basis of the distinction between poetry and philosophy, that it will not be reached by way of poetry. Wisdom in some way arises from participation in a fluid world view; poetry, on the other hand, is an image of the world as static and unchanging. Toward the end of Part II, however, we implied that the knowledge sought after in speculation corresponds to an essentially poetic model: the unchanging and eternal. Thus we can link knowledge and poetry as images of the same thing or of one another, in which case it would be meaningful to say that poetry leads to knowledge.

This knowledge is not the real result of philosophy; that is wisdom. Even to call it knowledge indicates a kind of philosophical standing, and for this reason let us call it belief. Belief is absolutely certain. Certainty, however, cannot be taken as equivalent to wisdom, even though the wise seem always to have some insights which the student must be made to understand. "Whoever is fundamentally a teacher takes things—including himself—seriously only as they affect his students." And in this sense even the wise might be willing to resort to poetry if it were the only way they could communicate or express a vision of the timeless and whole; if it were necessary that their students be persuaded.

The opening question has been answered, negatively: poetry does not lead to wisdom. The paper itself has been shown to be a necessary failure as a philosophic work. Poetry itself has survived, however; as we all knew deep in our understanding that it must.

EPILOGUE

Both philosophy and poetry use language to approximate purer forms of experience. This is still Greece; it is still Plato. Even the myth of the World Beast, the various reconciliations and mediations between these extremes, remain, as it were, couched in the language of philosophy. We find always the desire to explain, integrate, and justify these poles of opposition, to place man at the midpoint by force if necessary. We avoid the paradox by omitting it, speak at all times of man's fulfillment in society while implying at all times the ironies and impossibilities of his existence. We will neither let go nor sit still, even mocking our own assertive insight and pride. We participate in the most sublime, indifferent, and stately madness. Our hope is to spread this madness of responsibility: we find men political, bound to one another by the love of teaching and learning. Human society becomes a vast educational endeavor.

There is a second school, and that is God. This school attempts no such reconciliation. It instead finds in the paradox itself a source of conquest and integrity. This school is devoid of mythology, needing no external justification, no scientific explication. What appears as a digression is no digression, what seems superfluous cannot be cast aside, the nets of fishermen and soured milk in the morning, all these recognitions and reorganizations of fact require nourishment and refinement also. It makes little difference that they appear to us as insignificant trickling or isolated directions. Christianity is the imitation of all human actions; and Christ is their point of intersection.