

PRESSURE ON THE POETIC: the politics of the next reverie in the studio

Robert Nelson Monash University Art & Design

SYNOPSIS

Aspects of the poetic are discussed in relation to defining knowledge. Like humour—which cannot easily be explained and defies the organizational rigour of research—the poetic is a paradox in research. It is central to most art practice but inaccessible to systematic analysis. But also like humour, it can be highly contested. Esteem for the poetic can be frowned upon. Recognizing it or apologizing for it was often a stigma in art history. Since the 1970s there has been a certain aesthetic shyness, the terms of which are debated in this paper. Elements of the poetic are outlined on a psychological plane, in its metaphoric agency and through imagination. Definitions are attempted in the cross-discursive, relating to medium-consciousness and congruence of form and content.

—

PRESSURE ON THE POETIC: the politics of the next reverie in the studio

All discussion of the poetic is liable to fall into redundancy or futility, because it has already been handled by philosophers since Aristotle's *Poetics*, and I think to little avail.¹ It is an area both well explored and well exhausted:² much has been laboured upon and little achieved; and all of this frustration besides the ongoing relatively untheorized production of artists and writers who are striking a high poetic note in their creative productions. So what is the point of another disquisition on the topic which risks, in any case, the antithesis of the poetic, a baleful demonstration of the prosaic, which is so often the fate of scholarship in its intellectual attempts to enhance our consciousness of the creative?

For all that, I feel that past attempts at discussing the poetic are somewhat limited—almost anachronistic—and I am hoping to develop a new theory which seems more congruent with the times.

Though many aspects of the poetic (like most things aesthetic) are handled today with great shyness, there is in studio culture little hesitancy in using the term and invoking its historical lustre. Among artists and critics (whom I include in studio culture) the poetic is the inspirational element recognized in the best art. It is sought in your own, if you are an artist, if not self-consciously then at least unconsciously or in the oblique surreptitious way that old agendas survive in contrary times. But in all times, the poetic has been highly fugitive, hard to pin down or define, associated with many other things equally hard to define, the mysterious, the subjective, the unfathomable or the sublime. It seems resistant to logic, impossible to explain, almost like a joke (which is no longer funny if explained, perhaps in itself a recalcitrant sign of intellectual caprice), as if losing the point if in need of explanation.³

¹ And, as you might expect from the age of authority, also the subject of aesthetic regulation, e.g. Luzán, Ignacio de, *La poética: o, Reglas de la poesía en general, y de sus principales especies*, Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1977.

² e.g. Caillois, Roger, *Le champ des signes : récurrences dérobées : aperçu sur l'unité et la continuité du monde physique, intellectuel et imaginaire ou premiers éléments d'une poétique généralisée*, Paris: Hermann, 1978; García Berrio, Antonio, *Formación de la teoría literaria moderna*, Madrid: Cupsa, 1977-1980; Vuillemin, Jules, *Eléments de poétique*, Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1991; Staiger, Emil, *Les concepts fondamentaux de la poétique*, translated and annotated by Raphael Celis and Michele Gennert in collaboration with René Jongen, Bruxelles: Lebeer-Hossmann, 1990.

³ But ironically, the poetic is intimately tied to philosophical thought, which is brought out in numerous studies, e.g. Winkel, Maria Angela, *Denkerische und dichterische Erkenntnis als Einheit: eine*

It follows that it is an equally recalcitrant paradox in research, the kind of research that we conduct in studio.⁴ And in this, it is a symbol of many of our embarrassments in equating studio production with research. If the poetic is a key virtue in art, it is somehow inaccessible to research and unavailable, through modesty or logic, to inquiry. Artists who make statements of having a great aim of the poetic risk big-headedness: their claim may even be also embarrassing, because conceited, unfalsifiable, uncheckable, almost a form of intellectual arrogance. So while the poetic is pursued as one of the highest virtues in the studio it is duck-shoved even as the legitimate material of doctoral documentation, for fear that it will sound glib or obvious, vain or smug. This impenetrable avoidance of the most glamorous part of our projects rather makes mockery of research in studio art. So I have good reason to want to visit the theme afresh.

But before my own inquiry takes on too much studiocentric anxiety, I would like to observe that a dedication to the poetic is also a stigma in art history. The search for the poetic is seldom seen as scholarly, unless revealing the poetic theory of writer or artist. Thus, if an art historian can explain what Lomazzo or Bellori meant by the poetic, drawing upon the apparatus of classical philology, the theme is highly creditable. But if exploring what makes Poussin's pictures so poetic or Bernini's sculptures compelling in similar terms, the writing is likely to be somewhat devalued as 'connoisseurship', belletrist, indulgent, dilettantish. Alas, the idea has suffered through postmodernism. Inquiry into the poetic has the air of aristocratic values, 'art appreciation'; you instinctively feel that it is likely to be uncritical, bourgeois, anti-revolutionary, reactionary or neutral at best. It evokes satisfaction with other aesthetic conceits, as in the arbitrary measures of 'good taste': it is absolutist or anti-discourse guff, which cannot easily be made more defensible.

And to be fair, there is good cause for this aesthetic shyness. As with 'quality', the poetic can indeed be used in an arbitrary way, so that the author lacks curiosity and the term acts as a platitude. It is highly personal, subjective, unmediated, whence the poetic for one person is another person's kitsch. In this vein, the poetic is susceptible to supporting complacency, middle-of-the-roadness, a quaint charm identified with the sub-professional galleries.⁵

Unfair intolerance? I think so. It is especially unfair to marginalize the poetic from the political. The poetic operates equally through ideology. The great impetus of gender, class and ethnicity discourses can have a poetic point, a barb, a killer note. It seems to me quite illogical that the poetic might be confined in some way to complicity with dominant or mainstream ideology. If there is a valuable critique of this social practice or that, it is surely not dulled by having poetic expression. On the contrary, provided that the poetic thrust does not compromise the issue of social justice or whatever, the message is likely to have greater sustain if encapsulated in some poetic form.⁶

Untersuchung zur Symbolik in Hermann Brochs Tod des Vergil, Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Lang, 1980. But there is always the case that the poetic is allied to madness: Geyer, Horst, *Dichter des Wahnsinns: eine Untersuchung über die dichterische Darstellbarkeit seelischer Ausnahmezustände*, Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1955.

⁴ The link between the poetic and natural research has been observed for some time: Carini, Enrico, *La stagione delle riviste: la parola poetica come ricerca*, Milan: Nuova Omicron, 1997.

⁵ Really the opposite of the meaning that most scholars associate with the poetic, e.g. Meschonnic, Henri, *Les états de la poétique*, Paris: PUF, 1985.

⁶ Charnet, Yves, et al., *Critique de la théorie critique: langage et histoire: séminaire de poétique*, Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1985

I think that we always have to ask: why is it art? Surely not just because of content, not just because there is a worthy message of which the picture or film is but the convenient vessel. An artwork does not become an artwork solely because well-intentioned socially. Rather, the message—if I can speak unpoetically, because I think it is a feeling that suggests a message rather than a message as such—has found an imaginative voice, a form, an image, a peculiarly appropriate rhetoric to express the content.⁷

Content can disqualify an artwork from being poetic but can never guarantee the poetic character of an artwork. For example, a repugnant message cannot easily be poeticized: a sentiment which is unironically racist or misogynistic or anti-queer cannot be considered poetic. So, irrespective of the technique, the content disqualifies the work from the poetic. But it does not work in reverse. A good piece of content does not always result in a poetic work, because the voice, the framing, the chords, the tempo may all render the content pedantic, annoying, even a bit superior or supercilious. As a critic, I confess to finding this all too often, when noble intentions are confounded with some inappropriate zeal, whence the results are somewhat ruined and rendered unpoetic.

Typical of this discourse, I have only turned up negatives. I can say what does not work. And I am sure that I cannot define the poetic any more than the beautiful or the glorious or even the passionate. But perhaps it can be analysed somewhat, because I think that the poetic possibly has a number of elements. The elements of the poetic are the following. First, it is psychologically engaging. Second, it involves a degree of metaphoric loosening of meaning, a clever exploitation of ambiguity. Third, it is imaginative, perhaps dreamy, perhaps poignant, but in all events evocative. And fourth, the poetic is cross-discursive, *i.e.* it crosses or straddles thematic languages or methods. I would like to go through these in greater detail.

It is most obvious to begin with the claim that the poetic must first be identified on a psychological plane. By definition, the poetic cannot be cold or inhere in some purely intellectual argumentative proposition, if such were possible. By the poetic, we always understand that some emotional engagement is enacted. There is a psychological connexion suggested through the motif, the imagery or sequences or whatever, (as when a subjective state, such as longing, is activated for the spectator). The artwork will invite your psychological interest in an outcome, a hope, a pleasure, an embarrassment. Thus, the poetic agency intrudes in consciousness, lodges in desire or some other emotional centre, perhaps in shame or some sad part of a person's vanity. The spectator's attention is implied in archetypal situations, in which the psychological momentum of a treatment of a motif or event is transferred from the representation to the individual who witnesses. In this, the poetic undoubtedly touches on the unconscious, probably certain sexual investments, and brings to awareness the spectator's own motives for owning or rejecting attachments which are variously shared throughout culture.

Second, the poetic is identified with the agency of metaphor.⁸ Metaphor is itself

⁷ I am conscious that I am framing the poetic in terms of images and hence not abstraction, which I think errs to music, perhaps less poetic than rhapsodic, an equally valid aesthetic virtue but perhaps not quite poetic. I guess that with the visual, we easily slip into the realm of *ars rhetorica*; though all of this is subtle and without finality: Kearney, Richard, *Poétique du possible: phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1984; Fónagy, Ivan, *La ripetizione creativa: ridondanze espessive nell'opera poetica*, Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1982; Heuvel, Pierre van den, *Parole, mot, silence: pour une poétique de l'énonciation*, Paris: J. Corti, 1985.

⁸ Metaphor is impeccably ancient and recognized as an aesthetic entity in high pictorial periods. Conte, Giuseppe, *La metafora barocca: Saggio sulle poetiche del seicento*. Milan: U. Mursia, 1972.

psychological, for it is a psychological extension of the physical. We could define metaphor by its Greek roots (transferring, carrying across) as a way of expressing the psychological by means of the physical. Thus we speak of a cold character, a hard man, a thin argument, the inner person. A person is physically no colder than another person, for we are all approximately 36°. The coldness is a kind of image, a withdrawn and unyielding personality who issues little air of kindness (or warmth, to maintain the metaphor; but even the word 'air' in the phrase is metaphoric). Similarly, the hard man and so on; but I do not need to define metaphor, as it is well understood. A physical thing is a vehicle for a transport, making the vessel (pardon the inevitable metaphors) a bit transcendent, enigmatic and mysterious. Metaphor entails a certain elasticity of meaning, for the meaning always goes beyond the physical origin of the concept; and to understand the metaphoric involves a readiness to read beyond language. Hence, perhaps, the presence of ambiguity wherever the poetic is identified. For that reason, I am not sure that we need to go so far as allegory. Allegory may indeed be less ambiguous; it might consist in simple symbolism (whereas for the poetic, we want resonance unhemmed by an equation).

Third, the poetic necessarily entails imagination, first on the part of the creator and second the reciprocal reception in the spectator or reader.⁹ Metaphors abound but not all of them are very poetic. So often, they are nothing but clichés, hence of course not poetic, not felt afresh in the imagination of the artist or the viewer. Some claim for originality is possibly inherent in the poetic; but not everything original is poetic. Some innovations are prosaic. The imaginative element is first and foremost recognized through plumbing the original quality of experience. You can see the metaphoric potential in the image and it is not just fixed as an object or a space or a narration. Upon seeing, we extrapolate, evoke, enlarge, find hidden content, make connexions. And often the results are paradoxical, which is also a lynch-pin of the poetic.¹⁰

Fourth, the poetic is cross-discursive. An artwork or utterance cannot really be poetic if it cleaves solely to one discourse. It may not be boring: it may be flashy, well-written or well-painted and argumentatively engaging but it will not yet rise to the poetic unless it can cross from one set of ideas (or language) to another. A discourse I am defining as an identifiable theme or topic with intellectual conventions and assumptions attached. To some extent, all discourses are set up to be deconstructed, for they are ways of talking about topics that predispose you to a way of conceiving; and the potential to enlarge the perspective with conflicting emphases becomes conspicuous especially when times move on. The poetic always resists the confinement to a single discourse, not because it is philosophically superior or presupposes greater intellectual autonomy or perspicacity but because it is possessed of a maverick wandering spirit that wants to see connexions beyond the discourse.

To me, in looking at the works of poets and artists, it is natural to play with the terms of the discourse, not to respect entirely the purity or integrity of a given discourse but to seek the vitality of straddling them. It is normal while holding to the physical to engage the psychological. While expressing the psychological, however, we extend to the social. And while speaking of the social—as in class or gender or ethnicity—we return to sensory freedom, phenomenology, sexual or sensual experiment, as a cipher of the great parental paradigms of authority

⁹ Burgos, Jean, *Pour une poétique de l'imaginaire*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982.

¹⁰ Especially in certain sensibilities, such as Shakespeare's and Baudelaire's, which so much identified the contemporary world through its paradoxes. See Rincé, Dominique, *Baudelaire et la modernité poétique*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1984; Johnson, Barbara, *Défigurations du langage poétique: la seconde révolution baudelairienne*, Paris: Flammarion, 1979.

which are so far beyond our comprehension. While evoking history we touch on the contemporary. And above all, while embodying content we speak of the medium.

On this last point, let me add a fifth salient feature of the poetic, which I would like to call medium consciousness. I mean by that the idea of being thoroughly conscious of the medium while working ideas within it. The character of any given communication is never pure or untainted by the character of the medium which is its vehicle, natural or otherwise. The nature of the medium and the force of the content are highly interactive, mutually influencing, potentially symbiotic or explosive.¹¹ There is great potential for mutual enhancement, and for symmetrical reflection. I think that a poem is seldom very poetic if it does not say something about language or metre or versification; and so with paintings and photographs and so on: they all tend to be self-reflexive at the upper poetic end, for the handling of the medium is tweaked to such a degree that its harmony with the content yields some *tertium quid*, some *je ne sais quoi*, which is the pregnant synthesis of ideas and their communicative vessel. In this rather sublime condition, saying something about the medium does not deflect attention from the message but magically adds intensity and even adds to the integrity of the statement.

To some extent, this is another way of expressing something which classical aesthetics has always argued for, namely a congruence of form and content. In visual analysis in a good art history program or 'prac crit' in literature, you would always look for a magical link between form and iconography. The one tells the other how to be; they are so informed by one another that a peculiar harmony results which had never been thought of before, which is clearly very gratifying to create and behold.

It follows that when content is detached from the medium, the work is unpoetic. In all classical aesthetic discourse, an appropriateness of the medium for the material was deemed essential; and I think that this is prudent enough. I also think that 'genre' is an issue. It may be that some genres are not so well able to express certain discourses. For example, political content is not readily advanced by musical genres. There may be exceptions but generally the genius of music (in the sense of essential character) is about abstract arguments of sound, whence the particular keen circumstances of politics do not quite belong. Similarly, narrative genres are perhaps not ideal for the iconic and *vice versa*, in much the way that Lessing announced that painting is very good at describing how someone looks and literature is miserable at this task, whereas literature is well suited to explaining action and motives in just the way that painting cannot manage except with the greatest awkwardness and self-consciousness.

But of course you can break the mould: you might find a new unforeseen dimension in a given medium which has long been considered inhospitable to your discourse; and hence you could hatch a whole new poetic vein by making the previously intractable genre live a new life.¹² That could in fact be the king-hit of your whole studio career; but I myself would not depend on it for the next painting that I want to do. Mostly, we find the poetic in agreement with the consensus that some media are better than others for a given drama or reverie.

To me the greatest aesthetic marvel is that there is a poetic paradox inherent in my own medium, which is painting. I find it endlessly seductive that a

¹¹ Spire, André, *Plaisir poétique et plaisir musculaire: essai sur l'évolution des techniques poétiques*, Mayenne: Librairie José Corti, 1986.

¹² Todorov, Tzvetan, *Les genres du discours*, Paris: Seuil, 1978.

brushstroke can signify a dog's tail or a Doric column or a twinkle in a person's cheek. These are paradoxes of signification that somehow invite reverie too, for they are inherently suspended, where meaning is deferred and the medium is somehow slightly autonomous. In painting, I feel free to indulge this reverie in the knowledge that it puts my imagination at full stretch, where the logic comprehends a certain paradox. And so, yes, reverie has a politics,¹³ for we are not always free to conduct our minds toward it and the font of imagination has jealous guardians; but still, when you recognize that there is also a poetic legitimacy in where my mind wants to arrive with the brushstroke (your own or someone else's) you can tell that you are imaginatively empowered and growing.

¹³ A case can be made that even abstract artists are fundamentally political in this regard: see Carrier, David, 'Piet Mondrian and Sean Scully: two political artists' *Art Journal*, vol. 50. no. 1, Spring 1991