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<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Hopkins: Poetry and Philosophy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
<td>Casey, Gerard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>1995-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication information</strong></td>
<td>Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, 84 (334): 160-167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Irish Province of the Society of Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to online version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.ucd.ie/philosophy/staff/gerardcasey/casey/Hopkinsfinal.pdf">http://www.ucd.ie/philosophy/staff/gerardcasey/casey/Hopkinsfinal.pdf</a>; <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/30091997">http://www.jstor.org/stable/30091997</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5455">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5455</a></td>
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Introduction

I am going to begin, as all philosophers do, by going back to the ancient Greeks, and then taking a quick tour of the present day, before returning to the ancient Greeks again. Let us begin with the so-called quarrel between philosophy and poetry – what was the reason for this? Well, philosophy was invented at a particular point in time, and in relation to poetry, it was a newcomer. When philosophy was invented it found another intellectual enterprise already in possession of the field, and that enterprise was poetry, primarily Homer and Hesiod. Plato, in trying to make intellectual space for philosophy, made so much space that he risked pushing poetry out of the field altogether as an intellectual enterprise. Plato assumes that poetry and philosophy are competitors in the same business; he can then be seen as attempting to make a hostile take-over bid.

For Plato poetry is an art, and the key concept in Plato’s philosophy of Art is MIMESIS, which is one of these irritatingly vague concepts, a word taken from ordinary discourse, and used in a semi-technical way, and whose meaning varies from context to context. Plato’s pleasant technique is to use such words until they begin to harden into technical terms - he then abandons them and goes on to use something else! The arts in general for Plato are severely criticised, because from his perspective, artistic activity is simply an imitation of an imitation, it is a third level reality. As second level realities, the things of this world are bad enough, but artistic activity, as a third level reality, is not worth a lot for Plato, particularly when it comes to the order of knowing. Plato thinks that artistic activity is really nothing more than a flourish, a flourish which, however, is dangerously attractive. It has some implications, mainly negative for education, but apart from that it appears to have little or no cognitive status. The function of poetry, then, is one of decoration, and it is interesting that the only form of poetry that Plato appears to be willing to allow into his ideal state is lyric poetry, which is, of course, poetry sung to
the accompaniment of the lyre. So, the poets lack knowledge, and the reason they lack knowledge is that they cannot give an account (λόγος) of what they are doing.

Aristotle has a very different view. In contrast to Plato, he does regard poets as making a contribution to thought, to knowledge, and doesn’t regard poetry simply as a dangerously attractive form of entertainment. He claims that poetry is philosophical in that it portrays the nature of men in general, by representing particular individual men in such a way that it throws light on other individuals, just as a biologist studies a species in and through the examination and study of particular specimens. There is a famous passage in the *Poetics* where Aristotle remarks that poetry is more philosophical than history because history deals essentially with the singular, and the singular is by its very nature unrepeatable, whereas poetry has a quasi-universality in that it deals with types of human being.

The poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse... it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals whereas those of history are singulars.¹

Both Plato and Aristotle agree that POETRY and PHILOSOPHY overlap. Plato believes that Poetry is a mere pretender as a cognitive enterprise while Aristotle accepts that Poetry is partly successful in this. The account I am going to give today is broadly Aristotelian. The reason for my dusty expedition into the archives of ancient Athens is to show that both Plato and Aristotle share an assumption regarding the pretensions of POETRY, namely that it is a (would-be) rival cognitive enterprise to PHILOSOPHY.

*Poetry and Knowledge*

It is a common and enduring belief of all ages that art is not simply icing on the rough cake of life but is, rather, concerned with the expression of significant form. Jacques Maritain puts it well:

> Perception of the beautiful is accompanied by that curious feeling of intellectual fullness through which we seem to be swollen with a superior knowledge of the object contemplated, and which nevertheless leaves us powerless to express it and to possess it by our ideas and make it the object of scientific analysis."²

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¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a36-b12.
The feeling that in art we are, as it were, cognitively replete is very common and I think Maritain has expressed it exceptionally well. Either poetry has a cognitive dimension, and hence deals with universals rather than singulars, or else it deals with individuals and singularities in which case it cannot be properly cognitive. We seem to be stuck on the horns of a dilemma. If we require of the arts in general, and poetry in particular, that it have meaning or be expressive of significant form, then we seem to be required to move it away from singularities, from individuals things, the things which make up the substance of our ordinary experience, and towards generalities; on the other hand, if we hold that it deals with individual singular things, then art may have to give up any pretensions to being a cognitive enterprise.

This dilemma, which I believe is false, is based on a very specific conception of what knowledge is, a conception according to which an individual is properly knowable only as an instance of a type or kind, not in itself. The Platonic antecedents of this conception of knowledge are obvious - Plato holds that what is really knowable is not this cat, or this tree, but the form of Cat and the form of Tree. Even Aristotle, who differs from Plato in so many respects, is more concerned with what it is for something to be a cat, or to be a shellfish, than with any particular tabby or Siamese, or your own special pet oyster.

Given all this, we can see the appeal that the philosopher Duns Scotus had for Hopkins, an appeal that might otherwise appear somewhat mysterious. For Scotus contradicts the assumptions underlying the dilemma I have just presented. Scotus holds that being is univocal, which is to say that whether we talk of God, or angels, or rocks, or trees we are talking of beings that exist in exactly the same way. The principal distinction between the being of God and the being of everything else is that God’s being is infinite, whereas the being of all else is finite. Scotus also holds that to know or to understand any particular being is, to some extent, to know something of all, including God; not everything about God, of course, for God is infinite, and creation is finite. Furthermore, Scotus holds that the individual is immediately intelligible. Aquinas, on the other hand, believes that individual things are not immediately intelligible, but only, as it were, reflectively through conceptual abstraction and the reapplication to the flux of sensibility of the conceptual schemes thus abstracted.

Now artists make individual distinct things. No carpenter makes a chair in general, nor do painters paint pictures in general nor poets write poems in general; the products of art are always particulars. Artists, by the nature of their calling, are then concerned with the
concrete and the particular, at least in the product of their artistic activities. The thesis then of the immediate intelligibility of individuals cuts through the assumption at the base of the dilemma at one stroke but it has its own problems. Now Little believes that:

There is some evidence to show that Hopkins had forced upon his knowledge... the falsity of the scholastic principles that he openly avowed and desired to accept... In his inmost conviction Hopkins knew that he could not find a perfect, though diminished, replica of God’s being and beauty in nature...[the things of nature], things so thoroughly maimed and marred in their being, and most of all in their inscape, the unwashed condition of their being... certainly portrayed to Hopkins, in his calmer moments, no aspect of divinity.3

Inscape, Haecceitas and Species Specialissima

One of the central concepts in Hopkins’ thought is that of inscape. There may be some dispute as to what precisely it signifies but that it is important nobody denies. What, then, is the connection between Hopkins’ inscape and the thought of Duns Scotus. Devlin again remarks that ‘the knowledge that both Scotus and Hopkins attached importance to “individuality” has led some critics to identify inscape with haecceitas’. What is haecceitas?

Gardner says that ‘haecceitas is the last formal determination which restricts the specific form and completes it’. Allan Wolter says:

The similarity or aspect in which one individual resembles another [Scotus] called its common nature... The common nature is individualized concretely by...its thinness (haecceity) which is a formality other than the nature; a unique property that can characterize one, and only one, subject... The requirement of haecceitas is a logical [rather than a practical] one, for in practice we do not differentiate [individuals] because we know their respective haecceity... but because of accidental differences.4

So its haecceity is the last formal determination which makes an individual to be precisely this individual and not anything else; it is that which distinguishes Fido from Rex and makes Fido to be precisely Fido and Rex to be Rex; which gives Fido his Fidicity and Rex his Rexiticy.

Is haecceitas linked in some way to Hopkins inscape? Is inscape the poetic version of the philosopher’s haecceitas? Some, such as the Hopkins’ scholar, Peters, think that it is; others, however, do not. Christopher Devlin remarks that while the identification of inscape with haecceitas is ‘a possible shortcut’ to understanding Hopkins, ‘it has pitfalls. Hopkins makes it quite clear that he identifies inscape with nature or essence, and

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haecceitas with arbitrariness or ‘moral’ pitch. And he was well aware that the distinction between nature and haecceitas is fundamental in Scotus’. 5

According to Gardner, Hopkins’ inscape corresponds more closely to the notions of species specialissima than it does to the notion of haecceitas. What is this species specialissima?

Scotus allows, in addition to the abstract and universal knowledge which is distinct, a preliminary intuitive knowledge representing a concrete and singular thing in a confused manner (species Specialissima). This concept of the singular arises at the first contact of the intelligence with that outside it, and is formed simultaneously with the sense knowledge of the object... Thanks to this concept of the singular, the understanding enters into direct relation with the extramental world, and perceives existing in their particular state those elements of reality represented in a universal state by ‘distinct’ knowledge. 6

Regarding inscape, Gardner says: ‘To Hopkins, an inscape was something more than a delightful sensory impression: it was an insight, by divine grace, into the ultimate spiritual reality, seeing the pattern, air, melody, in things from, as it were, God’s side’. 7 So we have in this species specialissima something which is not, say, what the essence is for someone like Aquinas, something attainable only via abstraction (or what Scotus calls ‘distinct’ knowledge); on the other hand, it is not the last formal determination of the existing subject, as is haecceitas. If inscape relates to the species specialissima rather than to the haecceitas, then it has a certain degree of generality which haecceitas of necessity lacks. As we have seen, de Wulf regards the species specialissima as a confused, inchoate, conception, something more than a grasp of the absolutely unique, individuating features of a thing, and something rather less than a complete conceptual grasp. By the way, Scotus thinks that really God is the only one who knows the haecceity of a thing, as it were, inside out. For nothing is more internal to a thing than its haecceitas, and we have to be content with a knowledge of a thing’s more accidental features.

Poetry as Intuitive Knowledge

Now, this intuitive knowledge of an entity in a confused manner is in my opinion not very far away from one of the key notions of one of the most celebrated 20th century Thomists, Jacques Maritain. Maritain’s notion which is similar to that of the Scotistic species specialissima is of what he calls ‘knowledge by connaturalit’. This coincidence will be surprising to many, since Scotism and Thomism, as philosophical systems, are meant

to be deadly rivals. What is going on here? Is Maritain betraying Aquinas? Has he sold out to the enemy? One might summarise Maritain’s overall position in this way: first of all, he believes that Art is creation. It is not creation ex nihilo, for that is peculiar to God, but it is rather a transformation of pre-existing material. None of this will come as a surprise to artists who work all the time with their chosen materials: paint, wood, stone, sound, and so on, spending a lot of time in search of suitable materials, and a lot more time complaining of the obstinate recalcitrance of the materials which they have been allotted. Secondly, Art becomes sterile, according to Maritain, if it becomes separated from reality; the reality of God, of man, and of nature. An Art hermetically sealed from these dimensions of reality would be sterile and antiseptic. Thirdly, and this is the point that concerns us most, Maritain believes that poetry is actually a quasi-cognitive art but, and this is important, it is not conceptual. It is, rather, a kind of conative knowledge which is non-conceptual and non-rational (not irrational). Poetic knowledge is, he says:

an obscure revelation both of the subjectivity of the poet and of some flash of reality coming together out of sleep in one single awakening. The instrumentality of poetic knowledge is emotion, which becomes in the preconscious life of the intellect, intentional and intuitive. It is intentional in that it reaches out (intendo) towards a reality which is made one in the poetry with the poet, and it is intuitive in its sensible and expressed insight into the reality which is known.

The following passage from Maritain is reminiscent of what de Wulf, Gardner, and Devlin took Scotus’s species specialissima to be, and which has been taken by some to be the philosophical equivalent to Hopkins’ inscape.

The splendour or radiance of the form glittering in the beautiful object is not presented to the mind by a concept or idea, but rather by the sensible object intuitively grasped - in which there is transmitted as through an instrumental cause, this radiance of a form... in the perception of the beautiful the intellect is, through the means of the sensible intuition itself, placed in the presence of a radiant intelligibility... which insofar as it produces the joy of the beautiful cannot be disengaged or separated from its sense matrix and consequently does not procure an intellectual knowledge expressible in a concept. Contemplating the object in the intuition which sense has of it, the intellect enjoys a presence, the radiant presence of an intelligible which does not reveal itself to its eyes such as it is. If it turns away from sense to abstract and reason, it turns away from its joy and loses contact with this radiance. It is therefore clear that the intellect does not, except after the event and reflexively, think of abstracting from the sensible singular in the contemplation of which is fixed the intelligible reasons of its joy.⁸

Art is not conceptual abstractive knowledge; it is rooted in the sensible intuition and it stays in it. What then, more specifically, is poetry for Maritain? ‘Poetry is’, he says ‘the divination of the spiritual in the things of sense, which expresses itself in the things of sense’. He then goes on to compare philosophy to metaphysics, which, in this context, we can take as being equivalent to philosophy as a whole.

Metaphysics, too, pursues a spiritual prey, but in a very different manner, and with a very different formal object. Whereas metaphysics stands in the line of knowledge and of the contemplation of truth, poetry stands in the line of making, and of the delight procured by beauty. The difference is an all-important one, and one that it would be harmful to disregard. Metaphysics snatches at the spiritual in an idea by the most abstract intellection; poetry reaches it in the flesh, by the very point of the sense sharpened through intelligence. Metaphysics enjoys its possession only in the retreats of the eternal regions, while poetry finds its own at every crossroad in the wanderings of the contingent and the singular. The more than reality which both seek, metaphysics must obtain in the nature of things, while it suffices to poetry to touch it in any sign whatever. Metaphysics gives chase to essences and definition, poetry to any flash of existence glittering by the way, and any reflection of an invisible order. Metaphysics isolates mystery in order to know it; poetry, thanks to the balance it constructs, handles and utilizes mystery as an unknown force.9

Joseph Evans, the well-known Maritain scholar, suggests that, unlike language, which expresses our conceptual knowledge, the work of art as a whole forms a unique, particular, quasi-concept, which expresses the meaning that the artist wishes to convey. That cannot be expressed in any other form of words for that concept is unique and peculiar to that particular work of art.

In such knowledge [poetic knowledge], it is the object created - the poem, the painting, the symphony - in its own existence as a world of its own that plays the part played in ordinary knowledge by the concepts and judgements produced within the mind. Poetic knowledge, then, is not directed towards essences, for essences are disengaged from concrete reality in a concept, a universal idea, and are an object for speculative knowledge. Poetic knowledge is directed towards concrete existence, as connatural to the soul pierced by a given emotion.10

Conclusion

Which brings us back to Plato and Aristotle and to our dilemma. Poetry is either cognitive but universal and not particular; or particular and not cognitive. If Hopkins’ inscape is indeed related to Scotus’s species specialissima, the quarrel between the poets and the philosophers seems to have no great significance. The cognitive though non-

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conceptual nature of poetry is preserved, and with that, poetry’s claim, in the face of Plato’s criticism, and that of his many latter-day followers, to be a serious intellectual enterprise is vindicated. In a universe of bewildering multiplicity and staggering richness, there is plenty of work for both philosophy and poetry, and no necessity for one to covet the proper preserves of the other. United by their status as intellectual enterprises, differentiated by their distinct but complementary approaches to singularity, philosophy and poetry have no real quarrel.