Resuscitation of Culture:

Understanding Culture as Knowledge

This paper sets out to explore and examine the relationship between philosophy and literature and the transmission of knowledge, through culture, from one generation to the next. In particular the paper aims to uncover an understanding of culture as providing knowledge to those that possess an understanding of its importance. The paper begins by exploring, in brief, Plato’s critique of literature. It then moves to explore a conception of cultural knowledge that puts literature at the fore. It concludes by turning to examples of poetry that balance a spiritual combination of words with historical and cultural meaning to great effect.

I am an undergraduate student at Creighton University in Omaha, NE completing a Bachelors of Arts degree in Philosophy. After graduating in May I plan on attending graduate school to complete an M.A. in Philosophy before eventually moving on to complete a Doctorate in Philosophy.
Aristotle famously opened his metaphysics by claiming that “All human beings by nature desire to know”\(^1\), a fact to which history will attest. Humanity has continually built upon the foundations of intellectual pursuits laid before it by generations past and while the methods of gleaning understanding of new sources of knowledge and the subjects of study have evolved and progressed, not much has changed since the days of Aristotle. Philosophical inquiry, scientific research, literary reflection, and many other avenues of exploration are the tools of the trade today. However, there exists tension between the different intellectual camps. Specifically, there exists, and has existed prior to the ruminations of Plato, a conflict between Philosophy and Literature. Philosophy continually accuses literature of being too emotive, and literature accuses philosophy as being too dry and lifeless. In this paper I will argue that literature must be considered as a source of true knowledge; in particular the knowledge of culture.

I must begin by outlining an understanding of what I believe philosophy to be. The Greek term φιλοσοφία (philosophia) is the combination of two words that translate as ‘the love of wisdom’. Defining the pursuit of philosophy as such leaves open a broad and far reaching definition of the subject. Many have attempted to define philosophy in terms that revolve around a purely academic understanding of philosophy. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, for instance, defines philosophy as “rational critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world…, the justification of belief…, and the conduct of life”\(^2\). However, philosophy must not to be limited to the purely academic arenas of metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics and epistemology. Rather, philosophy must be viewed as a way of life, as the pursuit of knowledge in all its forms, a method of education in which one explores all the facets of the human condition to advance one’s own understanding of oneself and the world. Therefore, the purest of philosophical studies would not limit itself to philosophy.\(^3\) Knowledge
does not limit itself in presentation, and accordingly philosophy must guard itself against limiting the forms of knowledge it pursues.

Many within the academic circles surrounding philosophy are far too quick to limit the scope of philosophical inquiry to fields of study where rigorous tests of logic may be applied and systematic reason clearly acts as the driving force behind scrutiny. However, in doing so a great deal of knowledge is tossed to the wayside. In particular, when literature is deemed as too emotive to warrant serious philosophical examination the troves of knowledge that can be gleaned from works of literature are time and again either discounted as second-rate and are ignored or are regarded as not possessing knowledge of any kind.

The tradition that largely ignores literature as a form of knowledge can be traced back to Plato’s *Republic*. In book ten Plato outlines a three tiered argument against art and the literary form of poetry in particular. For Plato, truth resides in universal forms. As such, material goods are said to be imitations of the forms themselves and accordingly art becomes an imitation of an imitation and is thus furthest removed from truth, the first of Plato’s arguments against art.\(^4\) Plato then asks what kind of knowledge, if any, poetry has provided the philosopher. Of the poet he writes,

> It seems, then, that we are fairly well agreed that an imitator has no worthwhile knowledge of the things he imitates that imitation is a kind of game and not something to be taken seriously, at that all the tragic poets, whether they write in iambics or hexameters, are as imitative as the could possibly be.\(^5\)

Plato then launches his last attack on poetry, arguing that poetry depicts inner strife and thus corrupts individuals. Poetry, he writes, dwells not on the universal forms, the only source of knowledge, but instead dwells on appearances and particulars. This line of thought has greatly
influenced generations of philosophers who deem literature as being too emotive—a pale imitation of real, philosophical knowledge—and thus not warranting acknowledgment in the pursuit of knowledge.

It is here that philosophers have made a grievous error in judgment; literature is to be valued as a source of knowledge for the way in which it transmits culture from one generation to the next. The culture which literature has the fortune of transmitting must be viewed “not just as a matter of tastes and preferences, but—far more importantly—[as] a source of knowledge.” The knowledge that culture has the privilege of transmitting is the thoughts, feelings, and sentiments that have been experienced by previous generations. These thoughts, feelings, and sentiments teach each passing generation lessons that must be learned in pursuit of an understanding of the world and the meaning of the knowledge being transmitted.

Roger Scruton, in his article *The Two Virtues of Western Culture*, writes of his studies at Cambridge and the influence this had upon his conception of knowledge, and thus education, as a whole. He begins his discussion on culture with the statement that “if [one] want[s] to know the meaning of life…[one] should explore [ones] cultural inheritance with a critical eye, so as to repossess the meaning that has been distilled in it.” During his years at Cambridge, Scruton developed an understanding of knowledge as more than traditionally understood by the realm of academia. This understanding was largely cultivated by his tutor who “did not believe that the purpose of knowledge was to help the student. On the contrary… the purpose of the student was to help knowledge.” What Scruton’s tutor meant by ‘helping knowledge’, was more than just a purely scientific advancement of the understanding of the world. The ‘help’ of which he spoke was centred on the notion that a student’s role in education is to give of himself for the sake of furthering humanity’s understanding in an area of knowledge.
However, while scientific advancement plays a role in the advancement of knowledge, what was more important to Scruton’s tutor, and likewise Scruton himself, was the transmission of knowledge from one person to the next. The transmission occurs, not through simple absorption of facts and trivia, but through the study of culture. Of this transmission Scruton writes the following:

He looked at us students sceptically, but always with that underlying hope that, in this or that undisciplined young face, there was yet the outward sign of a brain large enough and dispassionate enough to capture some of the accumulated knowledge of mankind, and which could carry that knowledge through life without spilling it, until finding another brain into which it might be discharged.9

The purpose of education is thus to be understood not as striving to “flatter the student but to rescue the curriculum, by pouring it into heads that might pass it on.”10 The rescue of the curriculum occurs when the student begins to value the culture being offered him through literature, and this is critical to the study of philosophy since, as Scruton argues, “culture…is a form of knowledge.”11

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his short essay entitled History, makes reference to this understanding of how knowledge is transmitted throughout history. The history that Emerson writes of is not the history of textbooks and lecture halls, it is not the history of battle fields and archaeological dig sites, even though they may be included in the bigger picture, they do not form the whole image of history. History is the story of mankind, the day to day ruminations of the great minds of each generation; it is a history of culture. History transmits itself through every person, and in that way every person perpetuates the existence of all the knowledge gleaned throughout the whole of history. Emerson writes that “of the universal mind each
individual man is one more incarnation. All its properties consist in him. Each new fact in his private experience flashes a light on what great bodies of men have done, and the crises of his life refer to national crises.”

History is experienced differently by every person, and thus means something different to every person. It is in this way that

All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly no history, only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know.

However, one must ask, can one truly ‘live’ all things in order to know them? Is humanity doomed to repeating the same cycle of history over and over again? Of course not!

Observe the sources of our information in respect to the Greek genius. We have the civil history of that people, as Heodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plutarch have given it; a very sufficient account of what manner of persons they were and what they did. We have the same national mind expressed for us again in their literature, in epic and lyric poems, drama, and philosophy; a very complete form.

History is the means by which one is able to come to an understanding of the knowledge of mankind; a knowledge of culture. In turn, culture must be transmitted from one generation to the next in order to preserve the accumulated knowledge gleaned by all mankind. One must at this point discover the method in which this knowledge of culture can be best transmitted. Emerson thinks that “the advancing man discovers how deep a property he has in literature—in all fable…He finds that the poet was no odd fellow who described strange and impossible situations, but that universal man wrote by his pen a confession true for one and true for all.”
With its transcendent qualities, literature can serve as the medium for the transmission of culture from one generation to the next.

Through transmission of culture one gains access to knowledge otherwise unknowable, and is able to discover that “what Plato thought, he may think; what a saint felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen man, he can understand.” Without this transmission, society loses a great deal of the progress it has made. The history of mankind and society is more than the culmination of the scientific discoveries made. Davinci’s Mona Lisa, Michelangelo’s Pieta, and Picasso’s Guernica, Melville’s Moby Dick, Milton’s Paradise Lost, and Eliot’s Four Quartet’s are all examples of how a culture that predates the current one has been transmitted into the present day and carries with it the knowledge of that time. It needs to be understood that “world exists for the education of each man. There is no age or state of society or mode of action in history…which [does] not somewhat correspond…[to ones] life…[One] should see that he can live all history in his own person.”

Literature provides each generation with the ability to obtain immortality through the works produced by that generation, and thus enter the great historical and cultural tradition of mankind. The ability to write concerning the culture one finds oneself surrounded by allows the author to permanently capture that moment and to allow it to last forever. Of those skilled in the art of literature, the poet stands above the rest in his ability to transmit culture. Of the poet Emerson wrote, “…the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth.”

However, the poet “is isolated among his contemporaries by truth and by his art, but with this consolation in his pursuits, that they will draw all men sooner or later. For all men live by truth and stand in need of expression…man is only half himself, the other half is his
The expression of a man, however, is a delicate task. What words can truly express the intricacies of a human being? Where are we to turn for a window into the soul and true nature of mankind? Words are considered by many as mere symbols, representing abstract concepts and thoughts. However, when strung together they undergo a metamorphosis and carry with them an innate sense of a deeper virtue, a deeper knowledge. It is poetry that as a whole possesses the unique ability to transmit knowledge, for it is in the spiritual combination of word, metre, and rhyme that man connects most thoroughly with the culture of generations past. As society progresses it becomes all the more evident that “the experience of each new age requires a new confession.” Yet, such a confession of the gleaned knowledge of the age is hard to come by, and the poet stands alone in his ability to usher forth such a confession.

This ability of poetry to capture the emotions, thoughts, and intellect of a generation is excellently demonstrated in the works of the transcendentalist, Walt Whitman. Whitman produced works of poetry that clearly reflect the day and age in which he lived. Through his works, readers are able to glean knowledge of generations past; their thoughts, feelings, and intellectual discoveries become the thoughts, feelings, and discoveries of those that read the works. The poem “O Captain! My Captain!” stands as one of his more recognizable works and a prime example of how poetry transmits culture. The opening lines progress as follows:

O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done,/The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,/The port is near, the bells I hear, all the people exulting,/While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;/ But O heart! heart! heart!/ O the bleeding drops of red,/ Where on the deck my Captain lies,/ Fallen cold and dead.
Speaking of the death of President Lincoln, Whitman transmits the pain of loss that permeated the culture of that day. It is in reading the words penned by Whitman, that the melancholy, pain and deep seeded anguish of an entire generation becomes the pain and anguish of the reader. It is when one recognizes the transmission of such emotion, that the knowledge of that culture becomes accessible.

Yet another poet that stands alone in his ability to grasp the heart of culture and pass it in his written works was the great poet T.S. Eliot. During the time Eliot spent in England, he gained a unique perspective on literature, that, when coupled with his already evident mastery of language, paved the road toward making him a literary master. No more evident is this mastery than in his pinnacle work, the *Four Quartets*. While this work is comprised of four separate poems, they work together to transmit a complete picture of Eliot’s culture. The first and third quartets, in particular, speak to the notion of the transmission of knowledge in the form of culture.

“Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable./ What might have been is an abstraction/ Remaining a perpetual possibility/ Only in a world of speculation.”

With these words Eliot opens his work, establishing a ‘sense of unending’ that lingers over the whole of his work. The words speak to a sense that what is, has always been and will always be in existence. Time is transcended by culture for culture has, is, and always will be present.

“There is no end, but addition” writes Eliot. Culture never ceases to exist—the culture of 18th century America is present in the culture of 21st century America—rather it grows and becomes a new creation to each passing generation. It is here that one returns to the arguments presented above. Culture is an expression of history, and literature alone possesses the ability to transcend
the limitations of the continual progression of time. Literature captures a still frame of culture and preserves it, giving culture the gift of immortality. It is important to heed the knowledge transmitted in culture even though it is not the knowledge of the scientific method. It is a deeper knowledge, not mysterious but as Scruton puts it, “deep, in the way that the face of a mother is deep to the eyes of her child.”

Eliot was well aware of the necessity to listen to cultures past and to glean knowledge from one’s forefathers. The necessity stems from the fact that one cannot experience everything, but with “such permanence as time has. We appreciate this better/ In the agony of others, nearly experienced./ Involving ourselves, than in our own.” “Time the destroyer is time the preserver” and literature allows the lessons of previous generations to become the lessons of the current one through the transmission of culture. It is after one has gleaned such knowledge that one can lie “awake, calculating the future,/ Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel/ And piece together the past and the future”.

Of course the knowledge existing in culture, and transmitted through literature, does not give itself freely to all. The knowledge is buried and hidden deep within the text and as such requires a sincere pursuit to be revealed. However, few are willing to give themselves to pursue such exploration and, likewise, few are willing to provide the dedication necessary to truly grasp the knowledge that literature offers each generation; knowledge grounded not in “tastes and preferences, but…in…emotional knowledge”; a knowledge of character, of refinement, that allows one to comprehend the continuity of all of history and not only one’s place in it, but also the contributions available to be made to the great tradition of culture. Philosophy must be aware of the reality that emotional knowledge can prove more crucial to the pursuit of a “life worth living” than any empirical knowledge. Emotional knowledge provides the possessor with
the “lessons in the difficult art of giving [oneself], and giving [oneself] completely”\textsuperscript{28} to a cause greater than any individual; that of transmitting culture and the reservoir of knowledge it contains to each passing generation. Literature provides the true ‘philosopher’ the ability to do so.

The ‘ancient quarrel’ that is spoken of by Plato sees philosophy tossing to the wayside literature, demanding a position that views literature as a wasted endeavour in the pursuit of knowledge. However, literature alone possesses the ability to connect the whole of history in a transcendence of culture that carries with it the qualities to instil emotional knowledge in those that dedicate themselves to gleaning the knowledge inherent in literature. Therefore, philosophy must begin to increase the value it places on literature in it’s the pursuit of knowledge. Literature enables one to enter the ‘cathedral’ of culture “with a critical as well as a wondering eye.”\textsuperscript{29} T.S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson all write of their culture in a manner that transcends the mere moment and instead carries with it the knowledge possessed by their culture. It is for this reason that literature must continually be viewed as a source of knowledge.
Works Cited


3 Comment suppressed for purposes of anonymous review.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.


14 Ibid. p. 118.

15 Ibid. p. 126.

16 Ibid. p. 113.

17 Ibid. p. 115.

18 Ibid. p. 228.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. p. 291.


26 Ibid. p. 37.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.