Poetic Knowledge
and Cultural Renewal

It has been over a decade since the appearance of John Haldane’s essay, “Thomistic Ethics in America,” first delivered as a lecture at the University of Notre Dame and subsequently published in the pages of Logos. Haldane’s essay is in part an encomium to those thinkers and institutions that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, reinvigorated academic moral debate in the United States with arguments inspired by the thought of Aquinas. But Haldane’s essay is also a plea for greater promotion of Thomism beyond the walls of academia. The essay urges what Haldane calls the “restoration of serious moral thinking in American public life and in the culture more widely.” Haldane diagnoses a cultural degeneracy in American life, rooted in a pervasive and crippling moral skepticism. How to combat it? “With the truth,” is Haldane’s reply, “and not just any truth but that which matters most; the set of general truths about the structure of reality and about the human condition.” It is not that such truths had not been re-proposed and defended in the Thomistic revival Haldane praises. But even this revival was not immune from controversy. Debate throughout the 1980s and 1990s between the so-called “new” natural-law theorists and “classical” natural-law
theorists drew attention to the question of how the facts of human nature may or may not be related to our moral obligations. The old debates about fact’s relation to moral value returned in a dispiriting Thomistic reprise. In his essay Haldane offers his own reasons why we should reject the disassociation of fact and value, yet he does so not merely to score an academic point. For Haldane, the recovery of the idea of moral value’s dependency upon the facts of human nature is the key to the restoration of a truly serious moral culture.

By identifying the roots of modern skepticism in the divorce of moral value from fact, Haldane indicates that the cure for our cultural ills lies in resources other than the ones commonly available in our postmodern world. What is needed is a revival of forms of premodern moral understanding. The general strategy Haldane offers is that of presenting “ethical claims in terms that show their ground in commonly known facts about human nature.” Yet he concedes: “It is part of the cultural problem that those facts have themselves become somewhat obscured.” So what to do? Haldane submits: “I think the effort to render [facts about human nature] vivid in phenomenological consciousness is best pursued by those possessed of literary and artistic imagination, rather than by philosophers.” Haldane’s suggestion is that works of literary and artistic imagination are the most persuasive means of showing a degenerate culture the grounding of a Thomistic ethics in the facts of human nature. In short, Haldane proposes a retrieval of what Jacques Maritain calls “poetic knowledge.”

By poetic knowledge, we should understand a kind of knowledge that comes about via engagement with “poetic” imitations of reality. The term “poetry” is here used in the Aristotelian sense, as including all narrative art and lyric, though we might extend it even further to include music, painting, and dance, understanding with Aristotle that all of these arts are in their various modes mimetic of human character. The promise of poetic knowledge is that it makes a claim to real knowledge, a knowledge that cannot be substituted for by more purely conceptual, analytic modes of knowing. In this
article, I would like to explore the rich relationship poetic knowledge enjoys with moral philosophy in the Thomistic tradition—how it first makes possible and even, in a sense, helps complete our moral understanding. I also want to explore the ways in which poetic knowledge can help make Thomistic ethics an even more potent force of cultural renewal in our time. The poetry I will consider in what follows is the poetry I know best: works of narrative fiction. Nonetheless, what I argue has, I believe, intriguing implications also for drama in all its forms, lyric poetry, music, painting, and dance.

I. “Poetry” as Moral Philosophy

Let’s begin with an essay written in the 1980s by Alasdair MacIntyre, entitled “Poetry as Political Philosophy: Notes on Burke and Yeats.” MacIntyre’s essay discusses the way in which the poetry Yeats wrote in the decade between 1927 and 1937 makes the argument that “politics as understood by Edmund Burke could no longer achieve imagined and embodied reality in the Ireland of that period”—and furthermore, that the Irish case is symbolic of the more general claim that “no coherent political imagination” is possible for those living in “the modernity of the twentieth-century nation-state.” My concern here is not so much with MacIntyre’s particular thesis about Yeats, but with his more general understanding of poetry’s ability to express, in Yeats’s case, a political truth. How can a poem make a political argument?

The reason why the question puzzles us so, MacIntyre contends, is because in the compartmentalizations of modern culture, “questions about truth and falsity, rational justification, and the like are allocated to philosophy and the sciences and more generally to the provinces of theoretical inquiry, while poetry is conceived of as an exercise of quite a different order.” To combat such an attitude, MacIntyre suggests that “a poem qua poem might itself be a theory,” and might even “provide for some particular subject matter the most adequate expression of some particular theoretical claim.” Mac-
cIntyre’s idea is not simply that a poem might through its imagery express a thought which, translated into prose, makes a theoretical claim. Nor is he talking about poetry like that which Aristotle in the *Poetics* attributes to Empedocles, which is simply philosophical statements in verse, that is, without any use of metaphor, and thus not really poetry.⁷ MacIntyre’s point goes deeper than this. It is that poetic imagery itself makes arguments, and sometimes the most adequate arguments.

Before we can assess whether poetry might be the most adequate expression of political or moral truth, we must first ascertain whether poetry enjoys any relationship to truth. MacIntyre asserts that images can be true or false, but not in the same way that statements are. “Statements say or fail to say how things are; images show or fail to show how things are. Images are true insofar as they are revelatory, false insofar as they obscure, disguise or distort.” But the reality manifested more or less adequately by the image, MacIntyre argues, “is not one to which we have access independently of any exercise of the imagination. Our perceptions are organized in and through images, and a more adequate imagination is one that enables us to see or envisage what we could not otherwise see or envisage.”⁸

Latent in this set of claims is a distinction between two senses of imagination. On the one hand, there is imagination understood as that power of the soul that prepares phantasms for the illuminating work of the agent intellect. Such phantasms are necessary both as the stuff from which concepts, and subsequently judgments and arguments, are articulated, and then as the instrument or foundation for the possible intellect’s “reflection” of its concepts, judgments, and arguments back onto sensible reality.⁹ Thus the phantasm, as well as the external and internal senses on which it depends, serves as a sine qua non of human understanding. And for this reason, MacIntyre is right to say that we do not have access to reality independently of the imagination, and that the richer our imaginative experience, the richer our contact with reality.
On the other hand, no phantasm, not even a set of phantasms, by itself makes up a work of art. When we speak of “artistic imagination,” we are speaking of something far more complex, far more human, than the production of phantasms. In *Poetics* 9 Aristotle speaks of poetry as more universal, and thus more philosophical, than history.\(^\text{10}\) Yet poetry is not wholly conceptual, as philosophy is. Poetry is universal knowledge embodied in imagined particulars. What distinguishes poetry from the brute phantasm is that the universals that characterize works of art have as their basis concepts, judgments, and arguments that have already been abstracted from brute phantasms. The form of the work of art is more or less adequate conceptual knowledge articulated through images.

When it comes to works of fiction, form, as Aristotle says, is plot.\(^\text{11}\) And plot is an imitation of action—the actions of human beings. But a work of fiction does not merely report what some actual, historical person has done and said. As Aristotle elaborates, a work of fiction shows what such-and-such sort of person would do in such-and-such circumstances.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, fiction is concerned with what the critic James Wood calls “hypothetical plausibility,” seeing it as a “defense of the credible *imagination* against the incredible.” The burden of plot is placed, according to Wood, “not on simple verisimilitude or reference (since Aristotle concedes that an artist may represent something that is physically impossible), but on mimetic *persuasion*: it is the artist’s task to convince us that this could have happened. . . . And this task will of course involve much fictive artifice and not mere reportage.”\(^\text{13}\)

Wood’s use of the phrase “mimetic persuasion” is interesting. Perhaps he is thinking of Aristotle’s remark in *Poetics* 9 that the reason tragic poets cling to actual, historical names is because the possible is persuasive, and what really has been is ipso facto possible.\(^\text{14}\) But then Aristotle goes on to say that poets concoct persuasive possibilities also out of events and characters that are entirely made up. This is because mimetic persuasion hinges upon the plausible and not the actual. The plausible is sufficient for persuasion.
Thus in fiction what we have is most essentially a plot, an imitation of human action consisting of a plausible, and therefore persuasive, sequence of actions undertaken by a character or set of characters. In this light, consider the definition of tragedy from *Poetics* 6: tragedy “is not an imitation of men but of actions and of life. For both happiness and unhappiness consist in action, and the [ultimate] end is a kind of action, not a quality.” Here Aristotle stresses that it is in being imitations of human action that tragedies—and, we might extend, all works of fiction—offer persuasive pictures of the ethical life, that is, of the quest for happiness.

The poet, accordingly, is in some sense a moral philosopher. He has a truth about which he wants to persuade us, some “universal,” as Aristotle would put it, to convey through his imitation of human action. This does not mean that the poet must possess full-blown conceptual knowledge of moral reality in order to pursue his art. Dante in the *Commedia* did not meet Aquinas’s sublime standard of moral knowledge. But as any reader of the *Commedia* knows, Dante knew quite a bit about the human quest for happiness—enough to refer to his poem, in his famous letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, as a work of moral philosophy. But even in less exalted works, a more or less explicit moral philosophy is operative—even, I would agree with G. K. Chesterton, in the “penny dreadful.” Chesterton argues that the ultimate reason why we like to read about Dick Deadshot and the Avenging Nine, Robin Hood and Rob Roy, is because such stories “express the sanguine and heroic truisms on which civilization is built”—truisms such as that “courage is splendid, that fidelity is noble, that distressed ladies should be rescued, and vanquished enemies spared.” For clearly, says Chesterton, “unless civilization is built on truisms, it is not built at all.”

The risk in taking this line about poetry is that one might be understood as promoting baldly didactic, oppressively well-meaning (hence boring) works of art. My praise of both Dante and the penny dreadful should put to rest any such thoughts. But it is also well to
keep in mind a distinction made by Mortimer Adler in his marvelous book *Art and Prudence*. A work of artistic imitation, says Adler, is not an *id quo*, a mere means by which we come to know something else. If this were the case, poetry could simply be replaced by philosophy. Rather, poetry is an *id quod*, an object of knowledge in its own right. As an object of knowledge, however, it is a similitude—a similitude between the characters on the page or on the stage and characters in real life. For this reason the poet must have some grasp of human action and character in order to pull off the similitude. But this doesn’t take away from the fact that what is known is the similitude—again, the ethical universal embodied in the fiction—and not just the ethical universal itself.

Yet even if it is granted that poetic knowledge is in some sense moral philosophy, that it can give us revealing pictures of moral reality, it is another thing altogether to say that poetry is the best, the most adequate, expression of moral reality. Do works of fiction provide not merely rich depictions of the virtues and vices, or of the necessities of the natural law, but the most appropriate—and presumably persuasive—expression of such ethical concepts?

II. Is “Poetry” the Most Adequate Expression of Moral Truth?

Consider the way in which the phenomenon of self-deception occurs in Jane Austen novels. Think of *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, where Catherine Moreland’s judgment is seduced by her taste for Gothic romances. Or how in *Emma* the eponymous heroine does not realize until it is almost too late that her own heart is caught up in the web of her scheming. Or how, finally, in *Pride and Prejudice* it takes the shock of Mr. Darcy’s letter to make Elizabeth Bennet see that she had not hitherto known herself. Now, for help in understanding such self-deception, we could go to the texts of Aquinas. His discussion of the integral parts of prudence in the *Secunda secundae*, for example, can teach us much about what keeps each of the three Austen heroines from understanding herself. And yet, there is
a sense that in turning solely to the treatise on prudence we would lose much that is present in Austen’s novels.

It’s like the well-known passage in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, when the monstrous schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind asks student number 20, a poor little child named Sissy Jupe, to tell the class about herself. She begins to relate that her father trains horses at the circus, but Gradgrind interrupts to demand of her the definition of a horse. She stammers in reply, so Gradgrind calls on another student, a boy named Bitzer. Bitzer obediently defines horse as “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.” “Now girl number twenty,” declares Gradgrind triumphantly, “you know what a horse is.” Sissy does indeed, but not from Bitzer. Bitzer has memorized some vital statistics, but he doesn’t really know what a horse is, not in the way Sissy does at any rate, who has actually spent time with them. How are we to describe Sissy’s more adequate mode of knowing?

We must distinguish two ways in which we know particulars. One way is purely conceptually, by seeing a particular as instantiating a certain nature. In articulating in the *Prima pars* the relationship of imagination to such understanding, Aquinas argues: “The nature of a stone, or any material thing, cannot be known completely and truly, except in as much as it is known as existing in this particular. Now we apprehend the particular through sense and imagination. And therefore it is necessary, if the intellect is actually to understand its proper object, that it turn itself back upon the phantasms, in order to explore the universal nature existing in the individual.” Aquinas says here that the proper, not to say exclusive, object of the intellect is a universal nature existing in an individual. What we know, in this sense, are things, but according to the immaterial mode of the intellect reflecting its concepts back upon the phantasm.

But another way in which we know particulars is by loving them. Indeed, Aquinas teaches that the union shared by the lover
and the object of his love is closer (magis unitivus) than the union between the knower and the object known (a union effected exclusively through concepts). Now our loves are expressed through our appetites—namely, the will and the passions—by which we are conformed to the beloved object. This appetitive conformity is a real knowing, not of a purely conceptual kind, but of a kind Maritain follows Aquinas in calling connatural. Connatural knowledge is “knowledge through union or inclination,” where “the intellect is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and as guided and shaped by them.” It is the kind of knowing that Sissy Jupe has of horses by being familiar with them at the circus. It is the kind of “knack” that some people have for discerning the best course of action in complex situations—a knack which may have nothing to do with formal training in moral philosophy, but rather is the result of rightly formed appetite inclining such a person in the right direction.

Yet we must press the question: in what sense is poetic knowledge real knowledge, even of the connatural kind? Is this claim of knowledge on poetry’s part a poetic metaphor of its own?

In order to understand better the way in which poetic knowledge is real knowledge, recall, first, Adler’s distinction regarding poetry as an id quod, an object of knowledge in its own right, as opposed to its being an id quo, a means by which we come to know something else. But recall, too, that as an object of knowledge poetry involves imitation, a similitude between the human action depicted in the poetry and the human action that we ourselves and others are engaged in all the time. This mention of poetry’s mimetic connection to human action does not reduce poetry to a mere sign of that action, but it does remind us that in appreciating poetry we are constantly assessing the work against our understanding of human beings—their thoughts, their choices, their feelings, their foibles—such that we can say that a given poem manifests, or fails to manifest, something truthful about the human condition. Even when the work expands our sense of what it means to be a hu-
man being in quest of happiness—when, for example, a work such as Dante’s *Commedia* deepens our sense of the ultimate springs of human love—what it expands upon is something in Dante’s case, something about love—that we already know.

The reason we can trace similitudes between poetic action and real human action is, again, because poetry shows us what plausibly could happen to a character of a given type placed in a certain sort of situation. To recognize a poetic depiction as plausible, we must recognize that there are such characters, situations, experiences, really out there in the world; and moreover that, in a crucial sense, I am such a character, or have been in a similar situation, or had a comparable experience. Like philosophy, poetic knowledge always involves, at its deepest level, self-knowledge.

None of which is to say that poetic knowledge is certain and evident knowledge through causes. Nonetheless, poetic knowledge is the fruit of a certain sort of “argument” about the nature of human action and character. In the proemium to his commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, Aquinas distinguishes the poetic as a branch of logic, a type of inventive argumentation along with dialectic, rhetoric, and sophistic.\textsuperscript{23} The inclusion is based upon the recognition that poetry functions as a mode of persuasion, which compels, not because causes have been articulated with absolute certitude, but because of the pleasantness or fittingness of the imitation. Aquinas explains poetic persuasion with a rather rough analogy: just as we recoil from a certain food if it is pictured to us in a disgusting way, so too in the appreciation of poetry, through the compelling nature of the images, we incline toward “something virtuous” (*aliquod virtuosum*). (For Aquinas, poetry is an inherently moral enterprise).

The disgusting food analogy limps somewhat in that it suggests that poetic appreciation is a mere visceral experience. But here Aquinas’s various discussions of beauty are an important supplement. These discussions remind us that a great work of poetry, as a beautiful work, compels us by the splendor of its form, which is to
say, by the splendor of its intelligibility. Though this intelligibility is not discerned and credited in a purely conceptual way, neither is it devoid of concepts, however at first vaguely and confusedly grasped. At the same time, the mind’s grasp of the intelligibility of a poem’s formal splendor is always accompanied by a movement of the appetite. In general, as said above, the appetite’s movement is toward assimilation to the other insofar as it is other, in the hope of becoming connatural to it. But this can happen in two ways. Under the aspect of something good to be desired, sub ratione boni, the appetite moves toward the thing simply as it is in itself, as the lover of wine seeks to assimilate himself to the wine by tasting and drinking it. But under the aspect of something beautiful, sub ratione pulchri, the appetite takes joy in the beautiful by mediation of the intellect’s adequation to the beautiful object through concepts (as the lover of Dante’s Commedia seeks to assimilate himself to the poem by understanding its form in all its aspects). So in appreciation of beautiful works of poetry, the appetite is united with an object through the intellect’s grasp of form, and the joy that is the fruit of this experience is the appetite’s joy in this good of the intellect.

In distinguishing the roles of intellect and appetite in poetic appreciation, we shouldn’t neglect the fact that these powers only come into play via our attention to the sensual dimension of the work of art, a dimension found in the work’s verbal or nonverbal imagery, the melody and rhythm of its language or music, and, in the case of drama and dance and song, the use of the body itself as an instrument. In poetry the beautiful form understood and delighted in is always a form energizing matter. And while the delight of poetic knowledge is essentially an action of the will, the senses and sense appetites are also very much in play—so much so that with dramatic imitations we may, even from our armchair, incline toward or away from whatever sensible good or evil is imaged. Maritain describes the dynamic interplay of reason, appetite, and sense in poetic appreciation as follows: “Caught up in the intuition of sense, [the intelligence] is irradiated by an intelligible light that is suddenly
given to it, in the very sensible in which it glitters, and which it does not seize \textit{sub ratione veri}, but rather \textit{sub ratione delectabilis}, through the happy release procured for the intelligence and through the delight ensuing in the appetite, which leaps at every good of the soul as at its proper object."\textsuperscript{26}

As T. S. Eliot argues in his famous essay on \textit{Hamlet}, it is the poet’s task to find for his work an \textit{objective correlative}, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events” that serves as the “formula” of the response he seeks to evoke in his audience.\textsuperscript{27} We have been considering the way in which the objective correlative Eliot speaks of is a set of objects, situation, or chain of events inspired by the poet’s reflection upon the nature of human action and character. Moreover, we have considered how our response to this formula consists primarily in the will’s delight in the intelligibility of the poetic imitation, a delight that enfolds within itself the pleasure taken by the senses and sense appetites in the sensuous features of the work. The poetic knowledge resulting from aesthetic experience is not itself moral action. But because it concentrates the intellect, will, and passions on a similitude of human action, poetic knowledge hugs closer than abstract theorizing to the contours of moral reality.

But even if we grant that poetic knowledge in some sense grasps moral reality, there is still the problem of whether it is the most adequate grasp of that reality. When it comes to knowing moral reality, why shouldn’t we aim exclusively for the formal and essential? Isn’t this where the most truth is to be found? After all, we should note that Aquinas places poetry on the lowest step in the hierarchy of knowledge. It is, as he says in article 9 of question 1 of the \textit{Prima secundae}, the \textit{infima doctrina}, the least doctrine. And elsewhere in the \textit{Summa} he remarks upon its \textit{defectum veritatis}, its defect of truth.\textsuperscript{28}

And yet, because when it comes to moral reality our ultimate aim is not speculation but action, that which enables us to understand how to deliberate and act well in the particular circumstances of our lives is always the more adequate knowledge. Moral philoso-
Phy is a speculative exercise that, even at its best, is only indirectly related to action. Moral philosophy enriches the speculative intellect’s grasp of what essentially is good for human beings. But matters do not end there. This speculative grasp must then be extended into deliberation and judgment. Interestingly, Aquinas speaks of the extension of speculative reason as including deliberation and judgment. Hence deliberation and judgment are not, strictly speaking, practical reason. I suppose Aquinas’s point is to emphasize that in deliberating and judging, the mind must remain in a mode of receptivity, rather than assume too quickly the mode of commanding. Yet deliberation, while making use of ethical universals, is foremost concerned with particulars. So, we might speak of a kind of “speculation of particulars,” and when this speculation is perfected in the virtue of prudence, which involves that connatural attunement to good ends that is moral virtue, then we have the most adequate knowledge of moral reality. Nothing allows us to communicate more intimately with moral reality than this loving knowing of the good and how it is to be embodied for us here and now. Poetic knowledge—though more universal, more related to the plausible than to the actual—approaches this perfect adequacy of love’s knowledge insofar as it helps us consider particulars in a speculative mode analogous to that of practical deliberation.

In sum: when it comes to articulating the essential, moral philosophy is obviously superior to works of the imagination. But when it comes to a loving appreciation of how the essentials of happiness might plausibly be lived out, then poetry is the more adequate mode of expression.

But if poetry is not more adequate to moral reality than prudence, why shouldn’t we go for moral guidance directly to prudent examination of particulars—if not ours, then that of moral exemplars? In considering whether moral philosophy should bother making use of literature, Bernard Williams observed: “What philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature.”

Williams’s quip
highlights the fact that, even for the consummately prudent, the inherently narrative shape of human experience still needs organization if it is going to be made intelligible. This is why, even as we prepare to act prudently, we often find ourselves packaging experience into (not always very artful) illustrations, anecdotes, stories. Not that we shouldn’t go to look and learn from real human beings and their actions, past and present—far from it. But our looking and learning can be facilitated by poetry. A work of literature is analogous to the phantasms the mind returns to, or reflects upon, when it knows material things. Poetry’s formal structure allows us to see those particulars in ways we otherwise could not. “My task,” Josef Conrad said, “is, before all, to make you see.”

Still, it needs be stressed that poetic knowledge is far less adequate to moral reality than love’s knowledge, the connatural knowing, not of a character in a story, a mere imitation of a person, but of this actual person, as he is in himself. Human action is ordered above all to this amor amicitiae, this friendship love, friendship with God above all, and secondly with our neighbor for the sake of God. In comparison to this love, poetry is so much straw. And when it comes to our cultural crisis, we need experts in friendship far more than poetry. A cultural crisis is always, primarily, a crisis of saints.

III. Whose Imagination? Which “Poetry”?

But to return to poetry, we are now, finally, in a better position to make sense of Haldane’s suggestion that works of poetry are the best means of persuading the current culture of the truth of Thomistic ethics. I have argued that when it comes to knowing what to do in the concrete, poetic knowledge is a more adequate expression of moral truth than moral philosophy. What makes poetic knowledge adequate is that it enables us to imagine how actually to live out the decisions we have to make, the roles we have to play, the culture we have to rebuild. In the same essay on Burke and Yeats that we considered at the outset, MacIntyre goes on to say:
One cannot be a monk or a member of a café society without being able to imagine oneself as such; living the role of either is a form of imaginative acting out. And so too with the community of a nation: to be Irish or English, I must be able to imagine myself as an Irishman or an Englishman, something achievable in part by participating in the shared poetic utterance of the nation. Take away shared songs and poetry, shared monuments and architecture, shared imaginative conceptions of what is for this nation sacred ground and you at very least weaken the bonds of nationality.

This passage reminds us that the poetic image is no mere snapshot of a present scene. It can be a rich vision of an ideal, a future possibility, a hope to be fulfilled. And along with friends, teachers, and guides, such poetic images can teach us how to bring the ethical universal—a universal ideally made more precise in our minds by the study of moral philosophy, and more attractive to our hearts by the skill of the artist—to bear upon our lived situation.

But whose imagination? And which poetry? So far I’ve indicated little of what specific works will do the cultural job. But in what I have said there are certain principles that can be teased out, with the noting of which I will end.

The first and most obvious is that our culture most needs a poetry that, as Haldane says, pictures ethics as grounded in human nature. This will be a poetry that shows what Robert Sokolowski calls “the ontological priority of ends over purposes." Ends belong to things according to natural necessity, purposes by the contingency of human choice. Because ends belong to things according to their natures, they enjoy an ontological priority, a priority in being, to the purposes that human beings intend. “Natural law,” Sokolowski continues, “is shown to us when we recognize that there are ends in things and that our purposes and choices must respect their priority.” How is poetry to image this priority of ends over purposes? In one way, by revealing the attempt to live in a world without ends—which increasingly characterizes Western culture—as what Francis
Slade calls “fiasco.” Such a poetry—the supreme model of which we find in Dante’s *Commedia*, but also in more recent works such as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and Evelyn Waugh’s comic novel *Vile Bodies*—will depict fiasco, not as heroic or romantic, but as violent, enslaving chaos. Such a poetry will show that certain precepts cannot be trespassed against without breaking, not so much the law, as human nature itself. Yet at its best, such a poetry will also show human agents, even when surrounded by fiasco, distortedly yet courageously pursuing the happiness their natures are made for—an oblique form of heroism that we find portrayed, for example, in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*. Thus it will be a poetry that confirms Horace’s dictum that while we can throw nature out with a pitchfork, it will always come running back.

The achievement of such a poetry will also evoke an appreciation of how the life of practices—those communities of the common good that serve as the seedbeds of the virtues, such as universities and religious houses, corporations and families—needs to be regenerated in our time. Thomistic ethics, MacIntyre has often argued, is not primarily a theory; it is a set of practices in which the virtues flourish. But because we live in a culture replete with dysfunctional practices, we require a poetry to help us imagine what a nation, a family, a corporation, or any other practice ought to be. We cannot rebuild the practices of our culture if we cannot first picture in our imaginations how they must be changed.

Notes

2. Ibid., 158.
3. Ibid., 165.
5. Ibid., 160–61.
6. Ibid., 161.
9. Thomas Aquinas, Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum II, dist. III, q. 3, a. 3. See also Summa theologiae I, q. 84, a. 7, discussed below.
10. Aristotle, Poetics 9, 1451b5–6.
11. Aristotle, Poetics 6, 1450a38–1450b1.
12. This is the argument of Poetics 9.
16. Dante could say of the Commedia that it was a doctrinal, philosophical work, coming under the heading morale negotium, sive ethica, "morals or ethics." For Dante, the Commedia just is moral philosophy. See Dantis Alaghierii Epistolae, emended text with introduction, translation, notes, and indices and appendix on the Cursus by Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 178 and 202.
quod ipsa res quae amatur, amanti aliquot modo uniatur. Unde amor est magis unitivus quam cognitio” (ed. Leonine).


34. Ibid., 521.