
Ezekiel's Epistemology of Poetry: Knowledge, Experience, and the Truth of Poetic Form

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Abstract

This paper comprehensively examines Nissim Ezekiel's theory of poetry as a distinctive mode of knowledge, as articulated in his seminal essay "Poetry as Knowledge" and developed throughout his critical prose. Ezekiel contends that poetry offers genuine cognitive content irreducible to propositional truth, sensory pleasure, or the "pseudo-statements" identified by I. A. Richards. Drawing on Ezekiel's systematic critique of C. Day-Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Richards, this analysis demonstrates that Ezekiel positions poetry as an autonomous cognitive enterprise in which thought and emotion achieve fusion through linguistic form. This paper argues that Ezekiel's epistemology, while deliberately under-theorised regarding the operational definition of "knowledge", offers a compelling defence of poetry's cognitive value against positivist dismissal. By insisting that "poetry is true or nothing" and that poetic truth emerges through lived engagement rather than analytical extraction, Ezekiel provides a framework for understanding poetic cognition that anticipates contemporary debates in literary cognitivism. The paper also addresses criticisms of Ezekiel's position, particularly the charge that he fails to specify what he means by knowledge, and suggests that this ambiguity may be strategically necessary to preserve the distinctive mode of address of poetry. Ultimately, Ezekiel's epistemology of poetry affirms that genuine poetic knowledge requires what he calls "living with poetry" - a sustained, transformative engagement that resists reduction to paraphrase or propositional summary.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Poetry as Knowledge, epistemology of literature, Indian English poetry, poetic truth, literary cognitivism

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel, an Indian English poet, is widely recognised as a pivotal figure who helped shape the canon of post-Independence Indian writing in English. As Bijay Kumar Das observes, “Ezekiel’s name is almost synonymous with post-Independence Indian English poetry,” and it was Ezekiel who “gave a new direction and a name, as it were, to Indian English poetry”. Beyond his substantial poetic oeuvre, Ezekiel produced a significant body of critical prose that has received considerably less attention than his verse. Among these critical writings, the essay “Poetry as Knowledge” stands as his most ambitious theoretical statement, directly engaging with fundamental questions about poetry’s cognitive status, its claim to truth, and its value as a mode of understanding that cannot be reduced to other forms of knowledge.

The essay opens with what can only be described as a deliberate provocation: Ezekiel announces two assumptions that we know what poetry is and that we know what knowledge is before proceeding to engage with philosophical and critical interlocutors without adopting the technical vocabulary of epistemology or aesthetics. This opening gesture signals Ezekiel’s refusal to ground his argument in disciplinary frameworks external to poetry. Instead, he declares his intention “to remain within the sphere of poetry and to speak of anything outside it only in terms of apparent relationships,” adding that this approach “is always felt to be necessary and important by poets and critics of poetry”. For a writer addressing the Bombay Philosophical Society, this stance is strategically self-aware: Ezekiel positions himself not as a philosopher making claims about poetry but as a “literary man” whose authority derives from poetic practice rather than philosophical training. He admits to appearing before the Society “with qualms of conscience and many apprehensions”, acknowledging that he is “not only not at home in the company of philosophers, he is positively afraid of them as representatives of some superior class of human beings” (Ezekiel 50-51).

The central problem Ezekiel addresses is whether poetry can legitimately claim to produce knowledge, and if so, what kind of knowledge it might be. This question has profound implications for teaching poetry, evaluating it, and justifying it within educational institutions and cultural discourse. If poetry provides only pleasure or emotional catharsis, its place in the curriculum and cultural life becomes vulnerable to demands for more “useful” forms of knowledge. If, on the other hand, poetry offers genuine cognitive content though of a kind different from scientific or philosophical truth then its defenders have a stronger basis for claiming its enduring value. Ezekiel’s answer is unequivocal: poetry does provide

genuine knowledge, although it is irreducible to scientific verification or philosophical demonstration. This study examines the architecture of Ezekiel's argument, his engagement with competing theories, the strengths and limitations of his position, and the contemporary relevance of his epistemology of poetry.

The Experiential Foundation of Poetic Knowledge

To read a poem and understand what it says, to grasp its propositions, follow its narrative, and appreciate its images is not yet to possess poetic knowledge. Ezekiel insists that something more is required, something that transforms the reader's relationship with the poem and, through that transformation, with the world. Discussing Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper", he writes: We know of this experience when we read the poem, to the extent that we respond to poetry. But we still do not know the experience till such time as we appear to have passed through a process resembling that implied in Wordsworth's poem" (Ezekiel 32). The crucial phrase here is "passed through a process": poetic knowledge is not a static possession but a dynamic achievement, something that happens to the reader over time and through repeated engagement.

Ezekiel elaborates this point by emphasising the gap between reading and knowing: "When we do, it seems that our experience of Wordsworth's poem is complete. In reality, degrees of intensity, dimensions of feeling, potency of thought, and quality of inner change are revealed as vistas only, with further potentialities clearly hinted at, so that between the beginning and the unseen, perhaps unseeable end is our life itself in the knowledge of poetry" (Ezekiel 32). This formulation is remarkable for several reasons: First, it explicitly rejects the notion that poetic knowledge can be fully captured at any single moment. Knowledge of poetry is not an event but a process that unfolds across a lifetime of reading and rereading. Second, it suggests that poetic knowledge is transformative, involving a "quality of inner change" that alters the reader's mode of being in the world. Third, it implies that the poem itself is inexhaustible, offering "further potentialities" that become available only through sustained engagement with it.

This emphasis on process and transformation explains why Ezekiel places such importance on what might be called the phenomenology of reading. He writes: "There is a sudden heightening of awareness without which the Highland Lass is not the Highland Lass of the poem but any lass in any landscape. To behold her is to behold her for the first time" (Ezekiel 32). The "sudden heightening of awareness" is not something that can be produced at will or captured in a critical paraphrase. It is an event that occurs when the reader

surrenders to the poem's mode of attention, allowing the poem's way of seeing to become, for a moment, the reader's own. This is why Ezekiel can say that "the metaphors, images, comparisons, and speculations form a cerebral aura around the immediacy and totality of the experience" (Ezekiel 32). The cognitive content of the poem is inseparable from the formal means by which it is conveyed; to extract the "knowledge" from the poem would be to destroy what makes it knowledge in the first place.

Ezekiel's position here bears comparison with the tradition of British Romanticism, particularly Wordsworth's own theory of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." However, Ezekiel departs from Wordsworth in crucial ways. For Wordsworth, the poetic process involves recollection, reflection, and transformation of raw emotion into shaped expression. For Ezekiel, the emphasis is less on the poet's process than on the reader's transformation. Poetic knowledge is not something the poet possesses and then transmits; it is something that emerges in the encounter between reader and poem, an encounter that requires time, patience, and what Ezekiel calls "living with poetry." As Das summarises Ezekiel's position, "one has to live with poetry and not merely read it occasionally". This "living with" is precisely what distinguishes genuine poetic knowledge from a mere acquaintance with poetic texts.

The Critique of Reductionist Theories

Ezekiel constructs his epistemology through systematic engagement with competing theories, rejecting those that diminish poetry's cognitive claims. His first target is C. Day-Lewis, who had argued in a 1956 lecture that Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" provides "knowledge of a certain mood" and that the poet's task is "to show the uniqueness immanent in a commonplace experience". Ezekiel dismisses this position with characteristic bluntness: "Knowledge of a mood is no knowledge at all" (Ezekiel 31). For Ezekiel, reducing poetic cognition to affective states mistakes the poem's effect for its epistemological content. The poem does not merely transmit a feeling or produce a mood; it structures a distinctive mode of apprehending reality that cannot be captured by the language of psychology or emotion. If all that poetry offered was "knowledge of a mood," then the anthropologist studying a highland region would clearly win the contest for genuine knowledge. Ezekiel refuses to accept this conclusion, insisting that poetry provides something more substantial though he deliberately avoids specifying exactly what that "more" consists in.

The critique of Day-Lewis leads naturally to a broader rejection of any theory that subordinates poetry to other forms of knowledge production. Ezekiel is particularly severe

on attempts to link poetry with scientific discovery or psychological insight. He quotes Charles Madge's claim that "poets have contributed to the formation of sensibilities and imageries favourable to scientific work, especially in the early, inventive phase of a science," but responds: "It is arguable but not provable; besides, science would surely have developed even if there had been no poetry to prepare the human sensibility for it" (Ezekiel 33). This response is telling: Ezekiel does not deny that poetry might have instrumental value for science, but he insists that such value is incidental to poetry's proper function. To justify poetry by its utility to other disciplines is to misunderstand what poetry is and what it offers. Ezekiel's catalogue of failed poetic modes is comprehensive and uncompromising: "Versified knowledge is rightly denigrated, superfluous as knowledge and superficial as verse. Poetry as propaganda is equally suspect. The surrealist movement in poetry, claiming to arrive at the truth by using automatic modes of writing derived from the alleged workings of the unconscious, failed miserably to produce much poetry with staying power. Marxist poetry is more Marxist than poetry. Drug-induced states of mind in which the consciousness is temporarily expanded and intensified have so far not produced any notable poetry. Poets who have mystical experiences and project them in verse have occasionally been successful, but mystics who write poetry do it badly. Religious hymns, however notable the religious sentiment they express, are not notably poetic. Great religious poetry undoubtedly exists but the greatness is unequally divided between the poetry and the religion, while perfect integration between the two is rare. To be good, poetry has to be an independent art" (Ezekiel 34).

This passage reveals several key features of Ezekiel's position. First, he rejects any form of instrumentalism that would make poetry a vehicle for something external to itself whether that something is religious doctrine, political ideology, scientific knowledge, or mystical experience. Second, he insists that poetry's independence is not a matter of aesthetic purity or withdrawal from worldly concerns but a condition for its proper functioning. Poetry that serves propaganda ceases to be poetry; it becomes something else that merely wears the mask of verse. Third, Ezekiel's rejection of automatic writing, drug-induced states, and mystical projection indicates his commitment to craft and conscious control. The poet is not a passive medium through which transcendent forces speak; the poet is a worker in language who shapes, revises, and refines.

Ezekiel's most provocative engagement is with I. A. Richards, whose theory of "pseudo-statements" had dominated literary criticism for decades. Richards distinguished between scientific statements (verifiable as true or false through empirical procedures) and poetic statements (which function emotively rather than referentially, providing satisfaction

for attitudes rather than claims about the world). Ezekiel finds this distinction “deplorable because poetry is true or nothing, though its mode of approaching, grasping, and expressing the truth may be different from that of science” (Ezekiel 34). He insists that “poetic truth is not pseudo-truth, if such a term is permissible,” and that a poem’s truth “is revealed in the quality of the statement, in the coherence, consistency, tone, and resonance of the poem as a whole” (Ezekiel 34).

This response to Richards is significant because it refuses the terms of the debate that Richards established. Rather than arguing that poetic statements can be verified in something like the scientific sense which would be obviously false Ezekiel shifts the ground of discussion. The truth of a poem is not a matter of individual propositions but of the poem’s total structure of meaning. A poem may contain statements that are factually false (“The moon is made of green cheese”) without thereby being poetically false, provided those statements serve the poem’s larger purposes. Conversely, a poem may consist entirely of factually true statements and yet be poetically false dead, mechanical, uninspired. Ezekiel’s criterion is holistic: the poem’s truth emerges from the coherence, consistency, tone, and resonance of the whole. This is not a criterion that yields simple yes-or-no judgments, but Ezekiel would likely respond that genuine knowledge rarely does.

The Question of Poetic Thinking

One of the most striking passages in Ezekiel’s essay is his engagement with T. S. Eliot’s claim that “neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking”. Ezekiel finds this assertion “extraordinary” and symptomatic of a deeper confusion about the nature of poetic cognition. He writes: “What is more plausible is that the thinking is done, in poetry as in philosophy or literary criticism, and then projected in a form which conceals its conceptual character. The form is not a dress, manner or style but an organic, integrated growth, a basic mode of expression in which thinking is not separate from all the other elements that go into its making” (Ezekiel 35-36). This formulation is crucial for understanding Ezekiel’s epistemology. He does not deny that poetry involves thinking; rather, he insists that poetic thinking takes a form different from philosophical or scientific thinking. The concealment of conceptual character is not evasion or obscurantism but the condition of poetry’s distinctive cognitive mode.

Ezekiel elaborates: “When the thinking is separable, the form is inferior, and when the thinking is then examined for evaluation by the normal standards of thinking it appears inferior. Poetry that is broken up into thinking on the one hand and all the other elements on

the other, which are then further broken up into individual units or qualities, is no longer poetry” (Ezekiel 36). Here Ezekiel makes a claim about the relationship between form and content that has profound epistemological implications. If the thinking in a poem can be extracted and summarized as a set of propositions, then the poem has failed as poetry. The poem’s cognitive content is not something that exists independently of its formal embodiment; it is constituted by that embodiment. To paraphrase a poem is not to capture its knowledge but to destroy it.

This position has sometimes been misunderstood as a form of aestheticism or formalism the view that only the formal properties of poetry matter and that content is secondary. But Ezekiel explicitly rejects this interpretation. He insists that “the ends of poetry are meaning, knowledge, and truth” and that metre, metaphor, image, symbol, structure, texture, and tension are “the means of poetry, not its ends” (Ezekiel 40). The point is not that content doesn’t matter but that content cannot be separated from form. The knowledge that poetry provides is not a set of propositions that could be stated more clearly in prose; it is knowledge that only the poem in its specific arrangements of words, rhythms, images, and sounds can convey.

Ezekiel’s disagreement with Eliot is therefore not merely terminological but substantive. Eliot seems to have believed that real thinking requires conceptual abstraction and logical argument; poetry, lacking these, cannot be said to think. Ezekiel responds by expanding the notion of thinking to include the kind of cognitive activity that occurs in and through poetic form. He writes: “We can only insist that Plato has all the vital authority which the analytical intellect gives him, and Shakespeare does all the real thinking which the poetic imagination requires. Without real thinking, his poetic imagination would be powerless” (Ezekiel 36-37). This is not to claim that Shakespeare’s thinking is the same as Plato’s; it is to claim that it is thinking nonetheless, and that it is essential to the power of his work.

Poetry as Autonomous Art

A recurring theme in Ezekiel’s critical prose is the insistence on poetry’s autonomy from other disciplines and practices. This autonomy is not a matter of aesthetic purity or withdrawal from the world; it is a condition for poetry’s proper functioning as a mode of knowledge. Ezekiel writes: “To be good, poetry has to be an independent art” (Ezekiel 34). This independence means that poetry cannot be judged by the standards of philosophy, science, religion, or politics. Its truth is not the truth of empirical verification, logical

demonstration, doctrinal correctness, or ideological alignment. It is the truth of the poem itself, a truth that emerges from the poem's internal coherence, its resonance, its power to transform perception.

This insistence on autonomy places Ezekiel in opposition to several influential trends in twentieth-century poetics. He rejects the surrealist claim that automatic writing can access unconscious truths, the Marxist claim that poetry should serve revolutionary ends, the religious claim that poetry should express or inspire faith, and the mystical claim that poetry can transmit transcendent experiences. In each case, Ezekiel's objection is not that these goals are unworthy but that they subordinate poetry to something outside itself. When poetry becomes a vehicle for something else, it ceases to be poetry and becomes something else propaganda, doctrine, therapy that merely wears the mask of verse.

Ezekiel's position here might seem to align him with the "art for art's sake" movement of the late nineteenth century, but there are crucial differences. The aestheticists held that art's only purpose was beauty, that art should be judged solely by formal criteria, and that art had no moral or cognitive function. Ezekiel explicitly rejects this view. He writes: "Such pleasure cannot be of a high order unless poetry goes beyond appearance, including the appearance of knowledge, to the deepest truths. The constant company of these truths which is required of the serious poet makes him strive to fuse thought and emotion in images that have moral and philosophical implications" (Ezekiel 38). Poetry does have moral and philosophical implications; it does engage with "deepest truths." But it does so on its own terms, through its own means, not by becoming philosophy or morality in verse form.

The distinction Ezekiel draws is between poetry that thinks and poetry that merely versifies thinking. When a poet has philosophical ideas and simply puts them into metrical form, the result is "versified knowledge" superfluous as knowledge and superficial as verse" (Ezekiel 34). Such poetry fails both as knowledge (because it adds nothing to the philosophical ideas it versifies) and as verse (because the form is merely decorative). Genuine poetic knowledge, by contrast, cannot be separated from its formal embodiment. The thinking is done in and through the poem, not prior to it and then dressed up in poetic language.

The Trinity of Meaning, Knowledge, and Truth

Ezekiel's most systematic statement of his position appears near the essay's conclusion, where he declares: "Metre, metaphor, image, symbol, structure, texture, tension,

and so on. These are the means of poetry, not its ends, which are meaning, knowledge, and truth. I place knowledge at the centre of the trinity. It is the source of strength for the other two. You can have meaning and truth in a poem without knowledge or with a minimum of it, but to that extent the poem lacks weight” (Ezekiel 40). This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First, it explicitly subordinates formal devices to cognitive ends. Second, it distinguishes between meaning, knowledge, and truth, treating them as related but distinct. Third, it places knowledge at the center, suggesting that knowledge is what gives meaning and truth their power.

What does Ezekiel mean by “knowledge” in this context? He does not provide a definition, and Das has noted this as a limitation of the essay: Ezekiel “has not explained what he meant by knowledge. Is it the knowledge of the poet that the poem expresses? Or is it the knowledge derived out of experience that the poem expresses? Should we take knowledge in the sense of power?” . Das suggests that Ezekiel “cleverly avoids this problem by stating in the beginning of the essay that ‘we know what poetry is and that we know what knowledge is’“ . This observation is accurate but perhaps misses Ezekiel’s strategic purpose. Ezekiel is not writing as a philosopher; he is writing as a poet-critic who insists that poetry’s mode of knowledge cannot be captured in philosophical definitions. To define “knowledge” in the way that philosophy demands would be to translate poetic knowledge into something else to destroy it in the act of analysis.

This refusal to define may be frustrating to readers seeking theoretical clarity, but it is consistent with Ezekiel’s larger argument. If poetic knowledge is irreducible to propositional form, then any attempt to state it in propositional form will necessarily fail. The best one can do is to point toward it, to describe its effects, to indicate the conditions under which it arises. Ezekiel does all of these things. He tells us that poetic knowledge requires “living with poetry,” that it involves “sudden heightening of awareness,” that it transforms the reader’s mode of being in the world. These are not definitions but indications ways of directing attention toward something that cannot be captured in a formula.

Ezekiel’s trinity of meaning, knowledge, and truth also has implications for how we read and teach poetry. If knowledge is the center, then our primary goal as readers and teachers is not to extract meanings or verify truths but to enter into the poem’s mode of knowing. This requires a different kind of attention than the usual critical practices of paraphrase, analysis, and evaluation. It requires what Ezekiel calls “living with poetry” a sustained, patient, open-ended engagement that allows the poem to work on us over time.

This is not a rejection of criticism but a reorientation of its priorities. The critic's task is not to stand outside the poem and judge it but to facilitate the reader's encounter with the poem, to help create the conditions under which poetic knowledge can arise.

Contemporary Relevance and Criticisms

Ezekiel's epistemology of poetry anticipates several developments in contemporary literary theory, particularly the movement known as literary cognitivism. Cognitivists argue that literature provides genuine knowledge that cannot be reduced to propositional content, and that this knowledge is essential to understanding human experience. Ezekiel's insistence on the irreducibility of poetic knowledge, his emphasis on the reader's transformation, and his refusal to separate form from content all resonate with cognitivist positions. His work also anticipates more recent defenses of "aesthetic cognition" that reject the form/content dichotomy as a relic of outdated philosophical assumptions.

However, Ezekiel's position is not without its limitations. Das's criticism that Ezekiel fails to define "knowledge" is a genuine weakness if the essay is evaluated as philosophy. A philosophical defense of poetry as knowledge would need to specify what kind of knowledge is at issue, how it differs from other kinds, and by what criteria it can be evaluated. Ezekiel provides none of these specifications, and his opening gambit "we know what knowledge is" seems more like a rhetorical dodge than a serious philosophical claim. One might respond that Ezekiel is not attempting philosophy but something else a kind of meta-critical reflection that remains within the sphere of poetry. But this response only raises further questions: Can one defend poetry's cognitive claims without stepping outside poetry's sphere? Is such a defense possible, or does it inevitably involve the kind of conceptual analysis that Ezekiel wishes to avoid?

A second limitation concerns the verification of poetic truth. Ezekiel claims that a poem's truth "is revealed in the quality of the statement, in the coherence, consistency, tone, and resonance of the poem as a whole" (Ezekiel 34). But these criteria are notoriously vague. What counts as coherence or consistency in a poem? How do we measure resonance? Different readers may reach different conclusions about the same poem, and there is no external standard by which to adjudicate their disagreements. Ezekiel might respond that this is precisely the point: poetic truth is not the kind of thing that can be settled by appeal to external standards. But then the question becomes: In what sense is it "truth" at all? If truth claims cannot be verified or falsified, if they do not bind the assent of rational observers, then they seem to have lost the feature that makes truth a valuable concept.

A third limitation concerns Ezekiel's rejection of "knowledge of a mood" as "no knowledge at all" (Ezekiel 31). Contemporary affective science recognizes that emotional knowledge knowing what a particular feeling is, how it differs from other feelings, what situations evoke it, how it changes over time constitutes genuine, if non-propositional, understanding. To dismiss affective knowledge as "no knowledge at all" is to adopt an unnecessarily restrictive conception of cognition. Ezekiel might respond that he is not dismissing affective knowledge but insisting that poetry offers something more something that cannot be captured by the language of moods and feelings. But his argument would be stronger if he acknowledged the cognitive value of affective experience while distinguishing it from the kind of knowledge that poetry provides.

Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel's "Poetry as Knowledge" offers a robust defense of poetry's epistemological claims while refusing the vocabularies of both scientific positivism and romantic transcendence. Ezekiel argues that poetry provides genuine knowledge through the fusion of thought and emotion in linguistic form, that this knowledge is accessible only through lived engagement with poems rather than analytical extraction, and that poetry must maintain its autonomy as an independent art to fulfill its cognitive function. His critiques of Day-Lewis, Richards, and Eliot are incisive and persuasive, exposing the reductionism that underlies attempts to measure poetry by external standards. His insistence on "living with poetry" as the condition for poetic knowledge challenges the instrumentalism that pervades much contemporary discourse about the value of literature.

The essay's limitations particularly its under-theorization of "knowledge" and its unresolved tension between internal coherence and external reference do not invalidate its central insights. Rather, they mark the boundaries of what a poet-critic can legitimately claim without abandoning poetry's distinctive mode of address. Ezekiel's refusal to translate poetic knowledge into philosophical terms is not evasion but integrity: to render poetic truth fully propositional would be to destroy what makes it knowledge in the first place. As Das notes, despite its ambiguities, the essay remains "a very illuminating essay on poetry seen as knowledge in a specified context".

For scholars of Indian English literature and of literary epistemology more broadly, Ezekiel's essay remains valuable as both a historical document and a theoretical provocation. It challenges us to take seriously the cognitive claims of poetry without reducing poetry to philosophy or science. In an academic climate increasingly oriented toward quantifiable

outcomes and verifiable knowledge, Ezekiel's defense of poetry's distinctive cognitive value has lost none of its urgency. His call to "live with poetry" rather than merely to read it occasionally is a call to resist the instrumentalization of literary study, to remember that the value of poetry cannot be measured by the same metrics that apply to other forms of knowledge production. Whether one ultimately accepts or rejects Ezekiel's claims, his essay demands that we confront the question of what poetry knows and how it knows it questions that lie at the heart of any serious engagement with literature as a mode of understanding.

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