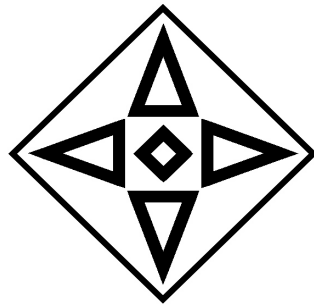


# *Poetry's Secret Truth*



From the Beauty of Words  
to the Knowledge of Spirit

by Mark F. Sharlow

*Poetry's Secret Truth*

Revised Edition

Copyright © 2004 Mark F. Sharlow. All rights reserved. Updated 2010.

# Table of Contents



<b>1. Prelude</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. A Different Kind of Fact</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3. A Secret and a Wider View</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. In the Mind, or in the Tree?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5. Art, Science, or Both?</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6. A Key to the Spirit</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7. A Surprising Conclusion</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Credits and Notes</b>	<b>14</b>

# 1. Prelude



Poetry, it is said, can reveal truth. Yet despite the best efforts of philosophers and poets to describe this truth, very few understand what *kinds* of truth poetry can convey.\*

One fact seems clear: only a few of the truths of poetry can be captured equally well in prose. Poetry also conveys truths of a different kind — truths that seem to exist on a level entirely different level from that of ordinary, factual truth.

Some poems try to teach moral or practical lessons that also could be stated in prose.\* But this is not the kind of truth that puzzles philosophers and critics. Poetry also can tell another kind of truth — a truth that may be mystifying to scholars, but that is well known to anyone who becomes acquainted with poetry in an intimate way. This kind of truth cannot be spoken of or contemplated on the same terms as ordinary fact.

What is the nature of this strange, yet familiar kind of knowledge that poetry can bring to the human mind?

---

\* \* *Important Note:* In this book I discuss a number of ideas originated or discussed by other authors, plus some ideas of my own that are close to other authors' ideas. I have cited these items (and others) by placing asterisks near them and listing them by page number in the "Credits and Notes" section. This lessens the distracting effect of the notes.

## 2. A Different Kind of Fact



The special knowledge that poetry brings has many aspects. One of these aspects — perhaps the most basic — is the knowledge of *subjective facts*.

What is a subjective fact?

A subjective fact is a fact about how things *seem* to some conscious being.\* These facts are different from the ordinary, objective facts that we usually recognize as "facts." When you encounter a flowering apple tree in spring, the fact that the tree is a certain number of feet tall is an objective fact. But the way the tree seems to you — the look of its leaves and flowers, the rustling noises it makes in the wind, the feelings and thoughts it brings to mind — all this is a matter of *subjective fact*. Subjective facts are facts about how things seem to a particular observer at a particular moment. They are facts about how the world seems in a certain momentary instance of conscious experience.

Poetry, with its known power to evoke experiences and associations,\* is able to express *subjective facts* about a thing or situation. Poetry, at its best, can evoke *a new realm of subjective facts* for its reader. This realm may involve feelings, thoughts, and sensations that are new to the reader, along with others that are more familiar.\* In either case, this realm of subjective fact is new, because it differs from the domain of subjective facts that came with the more routine experiences that the reader was having before reading the poem. Some people regard poetry as a record of experiences or feelings. This belief can be the case if the poem creates for the reader subjective facts like those that the poet has experienced, or like those that the poet wanted to evoke. (The same is true of other arts besides poetry. Much of what I will say here also holds true for the other arts.)

The subjective facts that poetry can evoke are inner facts of sensation, feeling, and

perception. These facts can encompass a wide spectrum of contents, ranging from familiar emotions (happiness, longing, concern) and sensations (colors, sounds, scents), to content of a far subtler and more enigmatic sort. These subtler contents include such things as the elusive, almost indescribable sensations that fill one's awareness when one encounters a flowering apple tree in spring.

Anyone who has fully and deeply experienced an apple tree in full flower in a rolling, rustling spring meadow will know what I mean by this.

Anyone who has become fully aware of the mysterious looming of the clouds in the hours before rain, or of the charged, green freshness after the rain, or of the almost audible silence of some warm summer afternoons, will know whereof I speak.

The best poetry evokes not only the coarser sensations and emotions, but these subtle feelings and sensations as well.\* The subtle impressions that poetry can communicate could be described as feelings, but they have little in common with the noisy and simplistic emotions of everyday life. Often, these feelings seem more like sensations or perceptions than feelings — but perhaps they can be all of these at once.

Poetry, at its best, is capable of evoking subtle experiences of this kind. It is capable of putting the reader in a frame of mind from which he or she may become more aware of the fullness of subjective experience, and hence of subjective fact.

### 3. A Secret and a Wider View



It is no secret that in ordinary life, we tend to experience only a few of the impressions that we can receive from the world.\* We pass by the apple tree inattentively, thinking of something else. We may note its more obvious features — that it is tall, has leaves on it, and so forth — but we miss the full inflowing of experience.

Poetry makes possible the experience of a *much fuller* range of subjective facts — of subjectively beheld characteristics of things and of the world around us.\*

The evocation of a widened range of subjective facts is not the only possible function of poetry. However, it is this function that most concerns me personally. In my view, this is the most important function of poetry. The other functions of poetry depend on this function, in the sense that the other impacts of poetry can occur best (or only) when subjective facts are effectively evoked.

In some instances, a poem actually may communicate subjective facts from the poet to the reader. This is what happens when a poem succeeds in communicating feelings and experiences as the poet intended.\* In other instances, a poem simply reminds the reader of subjective facts of which he or she already is subliminally aware, but has not given proper attention.\* The successful evocation of subjective facts requires an effort on the reader's part as well as skill on the part of the poet. The poem must be read, not just mechanically traced over with the mind. It is well known that the reading of a poem requires the active use of the imagination.\*

The realm of subjective fact that a good poem brings to light includes things of which we normally fail to be aware. Thus, poetry does not only tell the truth; it also tells a secret. The secret is the new realm of experience and feeling that poetry reveals. No one

is hiding this "secret" from us. Usually we hide it from ourselves.

One can ask several philosophical questions about subjective facts. Some of these questions have a bearing on what I am saying about poetry.

The first of these questions is whether subjective facts belong to the real world, as objective facts supposedly do, or whether they are imaginary, unreal, or "all in the mind." The answer to this question is not obvious, but is simple: yes, subjective facts belong to reality. When you experience a certain impression while contemplating an apple tree in spring, it is a fact that this impression occurred. This fact, though subjective, is objectively true — it really is true that things seemed *just that way at that moment*. A subjective fact, though truly subjective, also is as objective as any so-called "objective" fact.

Normally we do not understand the relationship between the subjective and the real.\* We regard the realm of the subjective as merely imaginary and not real — whereas actually, facts about how things seem are as true as any other facts in the world. This is the case whether the subjective facts result from sense experiences or from pure imagination. Strangely enough, subjective facts are objective!\* Of course, there is no real contradiction in this. It is one of those paradoxes that flouts our assumptions but nevertheless happens to be true.

Of course, this *objectivity of subjective fact* does not imply that everything which seems to be the case really is the case in the physical world. By saying that subjective facts are objective, I am not saying that because someone sees a unicorn in a dream, there really is a one-horned, physically existent animal. Instead, I am saying that there is a fact that that there *seemed* to be a unicorn — and that fact is totally objective. The facts about how things seem are the subjective facts of the world. (Whether there ever were unicorns in the past is a zoological question that I won't take up here!)



## 4. In the Mind, or in the Tree?



Another, related, philosophical problem is the question of whether the subjective facts can be said to be facts about the external world at all. Think about the flowering apple tree again. Don't the subjective facts evoked by the tree come from processes in the observer's mind or brain, instead of from anything in the apple tree? My answer to this question is twofold. First, the existence of subjective facts does indeed depend upon the state and presence of the observer. Second, the subjective facts are not just features of the observer's mind or brain. They are real features of *the observer plus the object being observed*. The whole system, observer plus object (in other words, you plus apple tree), is the source or seat of the subjective fact. The experience is an experience *of* the object, not only an experience *in* the observer.

Subjective facts are not "only in the mind." They are characteristics of the observer-object couple. They are relative, but only in the same way that certain measurable features of the physical world are relative. According to modern physics, the size and mass of an object depend upon the state of the observer (specifically, the observer's state of motion) as well as upon properties of the object in itself. But this relativity of size and mass does not mean that an object's size and mass are unreal or are "all in the mind." Subjective facts, like facts of size and mass, are simply relative to the state of the observer. However, in the case of subjective facts, it is the observer's state of mind, not state of motion, which matters. In spite of their dependence on the observer's mental state, the subjective facts about the apple tree are every bit as real — or as unreal — as the tree's size or mass.

This relativity of subjective facts also encompasses what happens when people experience very different things during encounters with the same object. A particular

scene may seem happy to one person, sad to another — perhaps due to the observers' past experiences, mental associations, and the like. This only means that the subjective facts depend on the state of the observer as well as upon the state of the object. It does not mean that the subjective facts are unreal.

One can think of the many possible subjective appearances of an object as *possibilities* inherent in the object\* — all of them equally real features of the object, or perhaps of the world. Some possibilities may be more crucial, or more important to our understanding, than others. Yet all of the possibilities are there, and all of them are parts of reality. (Philosophers belonging to the school of thought called *phenomenology* have argued that we should take into account the multiple possible ways of perceiving things. What I am proposing is different, with a different range of possibilities, and involves something more — an additional element or factor.)

Some people believe that poetry can help the mind to grasp the true nature of things — that poetic experience can produce a deeper contact with reality, and a more complete view of reality, than can ordinary experience.\* When we consider poetry in the light of the objective reality of subjective fact, we begin to see that this must be the case.

Poetry, then, can speak the truth — a truth different from the truths of intellect. Poetry is capable of revealing, or pointing to, the rich stratum of subjective fact that permeates the world in which we live, and that often goes almost entirely unnoticed during our routine, unobservant existence.

## 5. Art, Science, or Both?



Another philosophical question about poetry concerns the relationship between poetry and science. It has been said that poetry and science make use of different ranges of experience, and that poetry can treat of any subject matter.\* Is the truth that poetry can speak related to scientific truth? Is there any common ground?

To address this question, we must face up to an important fact about science: that scientific knowledge, like poetic knowledge, *is based on subjective facts*. Scientific conclusions are supposed to stand or fall according to the evidence provided by experiment and observation. The data of experiment and observation ultimately grow from the soil of someone's experience. A physicist sees a meter pointing to a certain number. A biologist observes a particular bird engaging in a particular mating ritual. A chemist hears a hissing noise when chemicals are mixed, and sees a certain color change. All scientific knowledge, if it is indeed scientific, is judged by means of experience — and hence by means of subjective facts.

This is not to say that science is based only on subjective facts. But science does require subjective facts and cannot exist without them. Science rests upon experience, and hence upon subjective facts.

It is interesting to realize that the subjective facts which science requires form a very narrow subset of the total fullness of subjective facts available to human consciousness.\* The sensation of a meter reading — of a needle pointing to the number 2, for example — provides a subjective fact that science might need. The fact that a flowering apple tree in spring looks a certain way — *a certain unique, indescribable way* — involves a subjective fact that science overlooks, but that is equally real and true. (A scientist who is a

psychologist instead of a physicist might even use someone's report about the apple tree as data for a theory about human experience. But even this does not amount to the use of the subjective fact itself as data.)

Poetry, unlike science, can take the way the apple tree seems as "data." Poetry also could take as "data" the way the physicist's meter looks — if some poet cared to take the meter as a subject of a poem. Poetry has no restrictions on the range of subjective facts it can explore. Science deliberately restricts its attention to a narrow set of subjective facts.

## 6. A Key to the Spirit



The deep relationship between poetry and subjective facts brings us to a crucial observation about poetry. This is that poetry, through its power to reveal subjective facts, *actually reveals the realm of the spirit to the human mind.*

What is the spirit? This is an ancient and persistent question. We do not have to have a complete answer to this question to see where poetry can lead us. Different religions and philosophies have different ideas about the exact nature of the human spirit. Many teachings, both religious and philosophical, hold that the spirit is something besides the body. Some philosophies teach that the spirit is simply an aspect of the activity of the human body, especially of the brain. Some people feel that the spirit is the same as the personality or mind. Others believe that the spirit is something more than, and deeper than, what we usually call the mind or personality. Yet all of these systems of belief have something in common. All of them connect the concept of spirit with the concept of *consciousness*. And all of these belief systems are right about this.

A being with spirit can only be a *conscious* being. It cannot be an unconscious, dead lump devoid of any awareness. Such a lump would be lacking in spirit. (I am not claiming that such a lump really could exist. Some people, including the noted philosopher Leibniz, have even thought that everything contains spirit or consciousness.\* But that is a separate question that I will not try to answer here.) Spirit, whatever it may be, involves consciousness. Even the unconscious mind, which some people regard as having spiritual qualities, is not truly "unconscious"; it is mental in character, is connected to the conscious mind, and may well be a kind of consciousness itself.\*

Spirit involves consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, always involves *subjective fact*.

Philosophers have long noted that the most distinctive feature of consciousness is its subjective side — the inner experience or "feel" of being conscious. A being that lacks this subjective side would not be truly conscious, even if it appeared to act at times like a conscious being. At best, it would be a mere robot.\* Without subjective facts, there is no real consciousness at all.

Because spirit involves consciousness and consciousness involves subjective fact, we must conclude that spirit, whatever it may actually be, involves subjective fact in an essential way. At least some of the subjective facts that conscious beings can encounter are spiritual facts. But are not all subjective facts ultimately spiritual in character? Subjective facts are facts of a special kind. They are not like facts about the visible behavior of the human body, or about the outward physical characteristics of conscious beings or of physical objects. Subjective facts pertain to the subjective "feel" of conscious experience — the aspect of conscious experience that makes experience truly conscious, truly personal, truly "alive," and truly *inner*.

Thus, all subjective facts belong to the spiritual side of conscious experience. This is the case even though only some subjective facts have to do with what we normally call "spirituality." The realm of subjective facts is a spiritual realm.

Depending on one's personal beliefs about the spirit, one might want to regard the realm of subjective facts as only a part of spiritual reality, instead of as the whole. But whatever one's view on this question, subjective facts still are facts of spirit. All conscious experience reveals subjective facts, and hence contains a spiritual element. The more that we notice the world around us with all its qualities and possibilities, the greater this spiritual element in experience will be.

Anything that lets the mind encompass a larger realm of subjective fact is a key to a broader knowledge of the spirit. Poetry, which is the key to new worlds of subjective fact, can perform that function.

## 7. A Surprising Conclusion



The ideas that I have presented here imply a rather dramatic conclusion: that *poetry can reveal many actual facts about the world, and some of those facts are beyond the scope of science.*\* What is more, those facts tell us something about the world of spirit.

This conclusion does not make science any less true, objective, or important. In its own sphere of operation, science sets the standard and calls the tune. But there are areas of reality, and not only of reality but of *fact*, into which scientific theory and observation simply cannot enter. What is found in these areas — in the greater parts of the realm of subjective fact — can be expressed and evoked by means of poetry. And these areas lie within the realm that we call the spiritual.

This conclusion will remain true even if science someday manages to explain how the human mind experiences things. Some people — who, for reasons of their own, choose to regard the meter readings more highly than the tree — will argue that the experience of seeing an apple tree can be explained completely in terms of the activity of the brain. I will not comment on this argument here, except to point out that such a complete explanation does not exist and may, for all we know today, be impossible. But even if a physical cause for subjective facts were found, the realm of subjective facts would continue to be real, and the *truth and meaning* of subjective facts would remain unchanged. Poetry indeed conveys truth — and this truth remains true, regardless of whether its roots lie partly in the earth or entirely in some other world.

## About the Author



**Mark F. Sharlow** is both a philosopher and a scientist. He holds a Ph.D. degree in chemistry, and has worked as a chemistry professor and as a scientific computer programmer in the space field. His philosophical work has been published in the philosophy journals *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, *Analysis*, and *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*. His scientific work (done alone or with coauthors) has appeared in *Annals of Physics*, *Journal of Physical Chemistry*, and other journals. He has written a full-length philosophical book, *From Brain to Cosmos* (Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers / uPUBLISH.com, 2001), which is the source for some of the ideas used in the book you are now reading.

Dr. Sharlow's e-mail address (at time of this publication) is **msharlow@usermail.com**.



## Credits and Notes



In this book I have discussed several ideas and questions about the truth and meaning of poetry, and have tried to assess these ideas and questions in terms of my own concept of subjective fact. I am not, by any means, the first to write about these topics concerning poetry, or to argue for the reality of poetic truth. I have learned much from those who came before. I wish to acknowledge particularly the work of Clyde S. Kilby, who, in his book *Poetry and Life* (reprint ed.; Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1975), has given an able presentation of many key questions and ideas about poetry. Several of the page-numbered notes below point out specific instances in which I have discussed ideas and problems mentioned in Kilby's book, or in which I have come to conclusions similar to Kilby's views or to other ideas mentioned in Kilby's book. Also, I am grateful to Kilby for his clear overall treatment of the problems of poetic truth and meaning and of the nature of poetry. (See especially Chapters 1-2 and pp. 325-328 of *Poetry and Life*.)

The idea of subjective fact is developed in my earlier (and much longer) book, *From Brain to Cosmos* (Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers / uPUBLISH.com, 2001). In that book, I introduced the notion of subjective fact in a more technical way, and explored the relationship of subjective facts to philosophical knowledge. Some of the philosophical ideas used in the book you are now reading — including the objectivity of subjective fact and the conscious character of the unconscious mind — are developed and explained more fully in *From Brain to Cosmos*. (However, *From Brain to Cosmos* is not a book about poetry.)

**Specific Notes:**

Page 1 (and elsewhere): The idea that poetry can reveal truth and convey knowledge is a very old idea. Kilby accepts this view (see Kilby, Chs. 1-2, pp. 325-328, and especially pp. 70-77).

Page 1, "Some poems ... in prose": I am thinking particularly of didactic poetry (on which see Kilby, pp. 328-331).

Page 2: The notion of subjective fact is developed in *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Pages 2 and 3: Kilby discusses the power of poetry to evoke experiences, including familiar ones (see Kilby, Ch. 2).

Page 3, "... subtle feelings and sensations ...": Compare Kilby, pp. 326-328.

Page 4, first two paragraphs (especially the sentence "It is no secret ... from the world"): Kilby, pp. 56-57.

Page 4, "This is what happens ... the poet intended.": On the capacity of poetry to communicate feelings and experiences, see Kilby, pp. 65-69.

Page 4, "In other instances ... proper attention.": See Kilby, p. 64.

Page 4, "It is well known ... of the imagination.": See Kilby, p. 24.

Page 5, last two paragraphs: Presumably this is part of the reason why imagination can reveal reality. (See Kilby, pp. 325-327.) Note also that the idea of the objectivity of subjective fact is developed in *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Page 7, "One can think of ... inherent in the object": The possibilities I have in mind here may include, but are not restricted to, the imaginative possibilities noted by Kilby (pp. 57-59).

Page 7, "Some people believe ... than can ordinary experience.": This idea (which has a long lineage) is discussed, and relevant references are cited, in Kilby's book (Chs. 1-2, especially pp. 8-11, and pp. 325-328).

Page 8, "It has been said that poetry and science make use of different ranges of experience, ...": Kilby, pp. 70-75, and references therein.

Page 8, "... and that poetry can treat of any subject matter.": Kilby, p. 3

Page 8, last paragraph, and Page 9, first paragraph: Some ideas like these are explored in Kilby, pp. 71-73, and references therein.

Page 10: On G.W. von Leibniz's idea mentioned here, see his book *Monadology* (which exists in various editions).

Page 10: The idea that the unconscious mind has a kind of consciousness is discussed in *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Page 11, "At best, it would be a mere robot.": Various philosophers have speculated on the possibility of a being that acts just like a human being but has no experiences. They call this imaginary being a "zombie" — though it isn't much like the zombies of Haitian occultism!

Page 12, first and second paragraphs: The notes for Page 1 (first note) and for Pages 8-9 are applicable here as well.