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POETIC WISDOM

“The most sublime labor of poetry,” says Giambattista Vico, “is to give sense and passion to insensate things.” Such labor is driven by what Vico calls “poetic wisdom,” “the first wisdom of the gentile world, [which] must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of the learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination.” Hence the origin of poetry: “It was deficiency of human reasoning power that gave rise to poetry so sublime that the philosophies which came later, the arts of poetry and of criticism, have produced none equal or better.” Although in *The New Science*, a founding text for Western modernity, Vico sees rationality as the cornerstone for a better human society, he at least recognizes the extent to which poetic imagination has participated in the institutions of human society, institutions that include religion, philosophy, science, and law. Therefore, “all barbarian histories have fabulous beginnings.”

Hank Lazer’s “Law-Poems,” however, suggest that what began fabulously continues fabulously. In his poetic investigation of the Alabama Legal Code, Lazer questions the law and its desire for precision and clarity, its pretense to rationality. Vico says that “the true in the laws is a certain light and splendor with which natural reason illuminates them” and that rational wisdom, as opposed to poetic wisdom, is “the science of making use of things as their nature dictates.” To see things as they are, as the “Law-Poems” show us, may be a shared desire of law and poetry. In the case of law,

. . . the legal mind
defends persists precision and not artistry is
the lawmaker’s goal clarity and a sense of fairness
so that the reader of a law shall immediately see
its necessity the point which was not previously
covered . . .

In the case of poetry, although the primary target of Lazer’s critique is a highly romanticized view of poetry as authentic personal expression, his investigation of the use of language in law and in poetry brings to bear a critique of another poetic dream. If the model of personal expres-

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