

The Occasions of Poetry

For a long time now social scientists have been intensely interested in all kinds of language and discourse, but not in poetry. We want to know about the everyday usages of language, how this shapes experience, influences behaviour, reproduces social divisions of every kind ; we study how power becomes articulate in particular universes of discourse, and the way 'master narratives' go about shaping the smaller stories we tell about our own lives, and yet we remain uninterested in the role of poets and poetry as advocates of language's possibilities to re-imagine the world .

One reason must be that our attitude to language as both object of study and medium of our own writing, remains strictly functional, and not aesthetic. For example, many still view with suspicion any academic paper that employs literary devices to convey its argument. They say disparagingly – 'yes it is well written, but...'

For poets, language is a source of music, as well as meaning and the two are intimately linked. As for how the poem tells its story, concrete imagery - 'don't tell, show' - is the *mot d'ordre* of every creative writing course. In terms of diction, if the poem works with vernacular speech, the aim is to push it beyond its everyday usage, to shift the shape of its syntax and liberate it from clichés and common sense. If the poem employs a more esoteric or abstract language, it must still be with an ear to its lyrical and not purely conceptual properties.

Given this great difference in attitude to language , it is perhaps not surprising that there has been so little direct traffic between poetry and the social sciences.(1) This does not explain why poetry, considered as a textual practice, should have been so ignored by the new body of literary theory that has emerged from the human sciences over the last thirty years with just this pre-occupation, especially as so much of this work has exercised an important influence on many contemporary poets. The fact is that, while all manner of literary and sub-literary genres have been subjected to fresh critical analysis, often from the perspective of feminist and post colonial studies, poetry- or rather poems - have remained largely 'un-deconstructed'. This exemption partly may be put down to squeamishness. The kind of theoretical apparatus designed to detect post imperial angst in the macho antics of James Bond seems just too clumsy when applied to , say, a poem by Seamus Heaney. The neglect may also be due to the fact that poetry constitutes a small, semi-autonomous province within the federal republic of letters, and, as such, has attracted little attention from the ideological heavyweights. Finally poetry has generated its own specialised critical apparatus – poetics – that poets themselves – with a little help from literary critics and their friends in linguistics – have developed for their own purposes (2).

For all these reasons poetry hardly features in the contemporary sociology of literature (3). There have, for example, been no social surveys of the British poetry scene; no-one even seems to know how many professional poets there are, and maybe nobody,

except possibly the taxman, cares. We might though be missing out on some interesting research questions.

In what follows I discuss some possible areas for further research that might involve collaboration between poets and social scientists.

The first concerns the business of poetry and how it is currently conducted, mostly within a UK context. I will attempt to identify some characteristic features of different communities of practice, and how they relate to particular styles of reading and writing. This is followed by brief discussions of poetry movements and the issue of 'professionalism'.

The second area concerns poetics – poetry's version of social science's methodology course. What kind of truth can we expect from a poem, and under what conditions does it become something other than just verse? Does poetry have a special duty of care towards vernacular language and is there latent poetry to be found in the rhythms of everyday speech, as some ethnographers insist? If so what does this tell us about the boundaries between poetry and prose?

Finally, what are the occasions in which use is made of poetry, whether for public or private purposes and how has this changed in our culture over the past century? In a postscript I consider whether recent developments within sociology itself, in particular the actor network theory of Bruno Latour, might help us approach poetry with more insight and understanding.

Musings

I want to start, though, by going back to my initial point about the status – or lack of status - of Poetry within the world of Social Sciences. Should it be regarded as an amusing divertissement or as a serious business? In search of answers I went, to the dictionary and began by looking up the word 'amusement'. It turned out to have a more complicated and interesting range of meanings than I had anticipated:

1. To amuse: to keep somebody happily occupied by providing entertainment or an absorbing task. To distract them, usually in order to deceive or trick them. From the French amuser to cause to stare stupidly.
2. Muse as a verb: to think about something in a deep and serious or dreamy and abstracted way. To gaze at something or say something in a serious or questioning way.

Muse as a noun: someone or something which serves as a source of inspiration for an artist, especially a poet – an artist's particular gift or talent, which is fickle and may come or go.

Here is a rich semantic field that moves rapidly from mindless frivolity to deep meditation, from trickery to the pursuit of truth. Both poles of meaning lead to the same underlying proposition: to engage with the world in a serious and questioning manner, implies a single minded focus of attention on a highly specific part of it. Failing that, the mind either becomes hopelessly immersed in mundane trivialities or else completely lost in contemplation of its own fanciful imaginings. Social scientists

are familiar with this message from their methodology courses: the only way to avoid falling back into common sense understanding, or being caught up in the toils of endless self reflexivity, is to concentrate on the immediate object of enquiry, to the exclusion of everything else. Poetry adds an important rider. To muse in a serious and questioning way also requires an element of what Keats called 'negative capability': the ability to be in 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' He is not preaching scepticism or mysticism; rather the need to cultivate an attitude of poetic curiosity that is both imaginatively focussed on its object *and* openly attentive to whatever emergent form and meaning the poem wants to give to it. He warns against foreclosing what can be a difficult and frustrating process, by prematurely establishing the poem's rationale or evidential claims (4).

Nevertheless poems do not write themselves. This inspirational moment has to be counterbalanced with a more 'rational' or technical one, in which the poem is worked through, and pared down to the essentials of what it has to say. Different schools of thought within poetry give greater or lesser emphasis to these two aspects of the writing – and also the reading - process. For a poem to come fully to fruition, it could be argued that both need to be in play. If poetry's muses are regarded as so fickle and treacherous, not only suggesting ideas but stealing them away again, perhaps it is because that balance is so difficult to sustain. Too much whittling down and the poem becomes brittle and lifeless, too much 'musing' and it loses focus.

As for 'amusement', the dictionary says the word has shifted from the original notion of leading the mind astray to the more positive sense of entertainment – the earlier negative connotations having been entirely lost. I am not so sure. When we say that someone is good at amusing themselves, we still tend to imply that they are keeping their mind occupied with relatively trivial pursuits, such as working on a crossword or a jigsaw puzzle.

The problem has as much to do with what counts as 'serious', as with what is regarded as entertaining. We are still living in the long aftermath of the distinction between 'High Culture' – which is supposed to be 'heavy' and deals seriously with the serious business of life, and 'Popular Culture', alias 'Light Entertainment', which is primarily an escape from it. Social science is certainly part of High Culture on this count. It deals primarily with serious issues, and it does so in a serious, academic way because it wants its evidence and conclusions to be taken seriously by policy makers in order that they take action. Unfortunately, for fear of not being taken seriously, any attempt at humour or wit or indeed any other device to convey the information and argument in entertaining way is ruled 'out of order'. When was the last time a piece of academic writing by a social scientist made you laugh – except perhaps at its po-faced pomposity?

Poetry would seem better placed to ignore the distinction, and to be as seriously entertaining as it is entertainingly serious. Nevertheless it has its high priests and its populists, its scholar poets and its department of light and comic verse. With the notable exception of performance poets, there are not many contemporary writers of verse who would describe themselves as entertainers. They also want to be taken seriously. That certainly does not preclude the use of irony, wit and other verbal fun

and games, but reputations still tend to suffer if there is no more to the poem or the poet than that.

The argument so far has moved tentatively in two directions: into the creative process that makes the poem and into the wider cultural enterprise of poetry, but how are the two related?

Consider poetry readings. In their present form they are a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the 1960's a few of the most highly regarded poets might have given the occasional public reading or broadcast, and issued gramophone recordings, but they had little direct contact with their public. The majority of published poets remained just that. The advent of the beat poets with their insistence on staging poetry as a live event, changed everything. Today even and especially with the advent of poetry on the Internet, readings remain the principal way poets communicate directly with their audience (5).

Readings vary enormously in scope and scale. Famous poets may read to a packed house of several thousand at a literary festival and these become major events in the poetry calendar, but most readings are much more modest affairs. The audience is made up of fellow poets, both professional and amateur, their friends and followers; there may be an 'open mike' slot, where people come up and read from the floor. These are social events that bring people with similar interests together, facilitate networking and relay gossip but of course what makes them different from, say, a Rotary Luncheon Club is the fact that people stand up and read their poems aloud. This reading aloud enters into the poem's composition, often in subtle and unacknowledged ways. How the poem sounds when performed in the poet's own voice, has come to be as crucial an index of its value as its written form. This is not good news for poets who read their verse badly but there is an equal danger that the poem is put over in such a declamatory style that its own diction is lost. The voice of the poem and the poet can get so elided that it is impossible to disentangle them (6).

One effect of the shift from the poem to the poet's voice has been to marginalise poetry whose presence is primarily textual or graphic-like concrete or conceptual poetry - or 'difficult', in that the poem does not yield up its meaning at its first hearing or sight. Nevertheless the effect can be exaggerated. After every reading comes the signing of books. Many poets regard readings as little more than tasters – whetting the audience's appetite to study their poems in greater depth on the page. In this way they exploit the fact that poetry is a uniquely hybrid medium: at once textual form and live speech event.

Communities of practice

This example suggests that the business of poetry, however individualistic or idiosyncratic its conduct appears at first glance, is nevertheless largely carried out through what sociologists call 'communities of practice'. The term refers to the way a domain of collective interest and commitment is formed around a preferred practice of writing – and reading – poetry (7). It implies three things: a) the formation of a group or looser social network; b) the development of technical skill and competence through the sharing of expertise; and c), a creative ethos or milieu,

characterised by certain ‘elective affinities’ in terms of the poetry and poets, past and present, that are liked or disliked.

Communities of practice come in many shapes and sizes. They often form around journals, readers groups, writing courses, manifestoes and more occasionally an inspirational figure; they may be nurtured by bookshops or University Literature departments; they may put down roots and become part of a local poetry ‘scene’, or lead freer floating and virtual existence, sharing information and expertise via the Internet. They may be relatively transient, or become a firmly established feature on the cultural landscape. They may codify their stylistic practice by elaborating distinctive poetics and seek to form a distinctive ‘school’. Some communities are very specialised, being committed to particular verse forms, as in haiku, poetic genres, narrative verse, or projects such as poetry in translation. At their simplest and most informal, they consist of small groups whose members meet regularly in one another’s homes to read and discuss their work. Larger and more complex communities have their divisions of poetic labour: their journal editors and keepers of subscription lists, their cultural entrepreneurs and social networkers. In this case there may also be marked differences in membership status, with beginners being initially confined to positions of peripheral participation whence they can observe and learn how the ‘old hands’ – alias ‘the committee’ run the show .

Communities also vary greatly in terms of their demographics – which get to be enrolled - their implicit poetics - what type or range of practice is endorsed, and the amount of symbolic capital – or reputational resource - they accumulate. Again these factors are inter-related. (8). Contemporary poetry in Britain is a broad church; it’s ‘congregations’ differ in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and age; for example the audience at most literary festivals tends to be overwhelmingly upper middle class, predominantly white, and over 50, with women far outnumbering men. Participants in a poetry slam are likely to have a somewhat different profile. Equally poetry has its fundamentalists and its evangelical sects as well it’s more ecumenical (or eclectic) tendencies. Some continue to strongly advocate poetry as textual practice, with an emphasis on its formal properties, whilst others vociferously champion the cause of poetry as a live speech event with a stress on improvisatory technique. Most seek to find some point of balance between the two.

Traditionally , where community has been formed around textual practice, access to full membership has been limited to those who have undergone a more or less lengthy process of initiation or apprenticeship into the ‘mysteries’ of the craft under the guidance of experienced mentors. Entry may also be conditional on possessing certain credentials. Poetry and its proper appreciation is regarded as a special vocation, where many are called but few chosen, and this often doubles as a distinction between amateur and professional. Pedagogically there is an emphasis on mastering prosody and on learning from a literary canon of ‘Greats’. Poetic technique will include, but is not necessarily limited by; traditional verse forms- stylistic experimentation may also be encouraged. The preferred idiom of writing tends to combine a deep but not too ‘flashy’ display of cultural erudition with formal virtuosity - few concessions are made to the non specialist reader. The poem on the page is usually considered paramount, while reading aloud may require the adoption of an elevated poetic diction:

A Poetic Voice so hushed,
yet sonorous and made to sound
like precious petals falling, crushed
on holy, unrecovered, ground.

is how I described one such public reading. (9)

As 'apprentices' grow in competence and confidence, they are able to take advantage of the community's opportunity structures and so gain access to its reputational resources which are often considerable: public readings alongside well known poets, publication in relatively prestigious journals, contact with leading figures in the poetry world. Some graduate to 'protégé' status and receive continued guidance and support from mentors as they embark on a literary career. Underpinning this whole process is the fact that poetry posts in universities and prestigious cultural bodies, editorships in literary journals and publishing houses have tended to go to people formed in this way. Not only do these plum positions confer considerable powers of patronage, but they provide a platform from which to speak for Poetry to the wider world and thus help consolidate national and international reputations.

In the last three decades in Britain the hegemony of these established literary networks has been increasingly challenged by the emergence of new communities of practice, committed to opening up access to groups hitherto excluded or marginalized by the poetry scene. They have gone about the task in various ways. A few remain rooted in textual practice but seek to broaden its appeal, establishing a reputational niche for themselves within the existing literary scene. The majority emphasise performance over text, expressive authenticity over prosody, albeit to differing degrees. Writing in vernacular speech, including regional and ethnic dialects is widely encouraged to help bring poetry closer to everyday experience and reach out to new audiences. Traditions of oral testimony are invoked for the same purpose. There is sometimes a search for new idioms of expression, although not usually much enthusiasm for formal experimentation. The public performance aspect of the poem is at a premium but the striking of 'precious poses' is definitely out. Membership is through informal affiliation and the distinction between amateur and professional either becomes blurred or subsumed under that of beginner and old hand. Mentoring is equally informal. Poetry and its appreciation is regarded as a common birthright, with the poet acting as a cultural animator, rather than gatekeeper.

The main distinction is between those communities with a relaxed poetics, designed to encourage stylistic diversity and those claiming to represent the poetic voice of a particular minority group, who tend to restrict their idioms accordingly. Whether clustered around self produced magazines, small presses, community outreach projects or live events, these groupings play a leading role in local poetry scenes, although direct collaboration between them is limited by the fact that reputational resources are scarce, and competition for public recognition and support, correspondingly great.

There is a third type of community that combines some features of the other two but adds something distinctively its own: poetic inspiration, with drugs, meditation techniques or poetry itself being used to attain heightened states of consciousness.

Poets are cast in a charismatic role, as bards, prophets, or visionaries, and their style of delivery is expected to be appropriately oracular. The romantic figure of the 'poete maudit', the poet as quintessential bohemian outsider, belongs within this frame. The 'scene' surrounding these figures is organised hieratically, rather than hierarchically, becoming polarised around rival groups of disciples, each claiming to represent the authentic voice of Poetry. As self-proclaimed avant-gardes their membership may be just as exclusive in its way as the poetry establishments they attack. Nevertheless their followings can extend well beyond the poetry scene itself, and serve to open up wider channels of access.

So there may be some degree of fit between the aesthetic strategies employed in making a poem and the social strategies that operate in creating a real and/or imagined community around this way of doing it. It is easy to see how 'charismatic' poets tend to propagate an inspirational poetics which in turn helps attract and bind together cultic followings. In contrast a more parsimonious poetics tend to validate a restricted canon of poems or poets regarded as honouring some essential tradition, and the Academy is often best placed to safeguard and transmit this heritage. By the same token, poets strongly committed to democratising the community of practice are unlikely to write verse that is incomprehensible to anyone without a higher degree in linguistics, philology or English literature. There is no surprise that where identity politics prevail, a certain kind of confessional poetry emerges around the elaboration of victimologies.

As a general rule, the more stylistic affinities and social affiliations converge, the stronger and more cohesive the community of practice, but of course this also tends to stifle creative innovation. Many contemporary poets are deliberately eclectic in their range of influences, and refuse to position their work in relation to any poetic school or trend. They may be as much, if not more inspired by broader intellectual and aesthetic movements (in other words, minimalism, post modernism, conceptualism), together with developments in other art forms, especially painting, music, the cinema, the advent of new communication technologies, not to mention the impingement of political events. All this helps to loosen the fit between the act of writing and its shared protocols and so opens up a potential space for new approaches.

Poetry Movements

Poetry has its transformative moments, when the whole field of practice is re-aligned in response to broader developments, but the fact is, most of its 'movements' have had much more modest ambitions; they emerge in response to something that is happening – or not happening – within the poetry scene itself, and seek to establish a new reputational niche for a particular style of writing. There is a generational dynamic to this. Poets suffer more than most from 'anxiety of influence'. All of them, whatever their orientation, learn their craft by studying at close quarters how other poets –past and present- go about their work. As each generation emerges from its apprenticeship, it also needs to make its own mark on the poetry scene, and proclaim its independence of approach. Most, if not all, movements are thus formed by young poets as a reaction to the style and influences of an older generation of practitioners. In Britain for example the so-called 'Movement' poets of the 1950's, led by Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, stressed the value of traditional verse forms, rational language and simple sensuous content, in reaction against the bardic excesses of the Dylan Thomas school of poetry so popular during the immediate

post war . In the late 1960's the Movement Poets were succeeded by The Group – a younger generation of Cambridge and Belfast based poets, more interested in formal experimentation, while in Liverpool, the Mersey Poets were determined to make poetry dance to other, more popular, tunes. In the 1970's there was a reaction against populism and a sudden vogue for 'concrete poetry', following Guillaume Apollinaire in exploring the poetic imagery that could be created through special typographical forms. Then in the 1980s the Martian poets, lead by Craig Raine and Martin Amis, and influenced by surrealism, science fiction and nonsense verse, sought to inject a vein of more exotic visual imagery into what was regarded as the overly prosaic and parochial language of much mainstream poetry at the time.

Poetry movements are revisionary. They may reject one set of influences only to reinstate another. In the process poetry's imagined community is changed. Dead poets are revived, those still alive but long ignored find their reputations suddenly restored, and their poems added to the canon of great works. There is often a pendulum effect at work, an oscillation from one poetic pole to the other. For example in the 1960's the emotional excesses of 'confessional poetry' associated with the work of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and others, provoked the austerity measures of the 'Language Poets' who were influenced by structural linguistics and proclaimed, if not the death of the author, then at the least the demise of her pervasive autobiographical presence in and behind the text. This attempt to revive modernist experimentalism (back to Eliot, Pound and Zukovski) led in turn to the New Formalists, who called for a return to traditional rhymed and metered verse.

Movements are called into being in numerous ways and forms. They may simply be the contrivance of literary critics or anthologists, seeking to establish a brand name for a trend in what might otherwise be a pretty disparate bunch of writers. That is how 'The Movement' was born but it never really was one. More realistically Movements are based on a particular institution or community of practice (The Black Mountain College) or local poetry scene (the San Francisco Renaissance that launched the Beat Poets or the so called 'New York School'). 'Schools' can be found grouped around an influential journal (Tel Quel) or manifesto (Charles Olson's call for an improvisational 'open field' poetics). They may amount to no more than a small group of close friends sharing similar poetic tastes and writing in the same magazine; but can also become embedded within a wider milieu of cultural experimentation as occurred in Bloomsbury in the 1920's and 30's , or in Soho during the 1940's and 50's.

Cynically (or sociologically , which is arguably the same thing), many of the more successful poetry movements which start out as a way of sharing ideas and enjoying the company of like minded spirits, seem to end up being more about creating a platform from which to enhance individual literary reputations, and advance professional careers. There is a good reason for this. Traditionally the younger, up and coming poets depended for their advancement on the approbation and patronage of their older, more established colleagues. As we've seen, erstwhile protégés may have also wanted and indeed needed to reject just these influences in which to ceate space for their own voices to develop and be heard. It can be a difficult course to steer. Launching a movement, or at least a manifesto, is often the best way for newcomers to reduce dependence on the 'old guard' and make the most symbolic capital out of being new faces on the poetry block.

Poetic Licenses

So far I have treated 'poet' as an unproblematic, common sense category, applying to anyone who writes verse (however bad) and/or just decides to use it as a self styled soubriquet, but what does it mean to 'be a poet'? Is it an existential choice or a reputational identity? An occupational category or a cultural role? Is it a special creative status achieved through a long and lonely struggle to attain a unique vision and voice? Or is it an ascription, based on association with a particular school or movement, a real or imagined community of practice? It would be interesting to know how a representative sample of contemporary poets defines their position.

For most of its recent history, poetry has been regarded as a special vocation – something that people feel called to practice by virtue of possessing an exceptional gift – their poetry being the outward expression of an inner muse. The title 'poet' has also functioned as a public accolade, something you are called, by virtue of your gift being recognised and admired by others. This double sense of calling is conserved in many dictionary definitions: 'a maker of verse possessing great imagination and expressive capability; someone with a special sensitivity to beauty and language; a person, who has the gift of poetic thought together with eloquent expression,' to name but three.

To apply such a description to oneself, might be regarded as a less than modest act - perhaps this is why, even much praised poets tend to be squeamish about using it on their business cards. It is also interesting to note that a distinction is made between the poet, who is possessed of a peculiar inspiration or 'genius' and the mere maker of verse, who has technical competence and nothing else.

The exceptionalist definition does not carry much official weight. Anyone can set up as a poet. No licence to practice is required. Nowadays the title is liberally bestowed on people who have never written a line. A popular TV naturalist is described as 'the bard of the bird feeder' and footballers, exponents of the 'beautiful game' are said to be practising 'poetry in motion'. In this populist definition, everyone is potentially a poet, even if they don't know it.

The fact is that people may profess poetry, but poetry is not a profession in the same way that medicine, law, teaching or chartered accountancy are professions. There is no system of mandatory qualifications. No editor asks for your CV before considering whether to publish your work. Nor are there any corporate bodies regulating how the business of poetry is conducted. If a poet were to plagiarise someone else's verse, seek to discredit a colleague, or just write a very bad poem – the nearest to 'professional misconduct' they could get – their reputation would suffer accordingly; they might find it difficult to get anything published for a while, but there are no formal sanctions as such. Indeed an important aspect of 'poetic license' is freedom from all such bureaucratic controls.

There is, of course, another common sense definition in which poets may come to be regarded as professionals – if they are full time practitioners and successful enough to make a living at it. If their sole occupational activity and source of income is publishing verse and undertaking activities directly related to poetry

(i.e. readings, educational work, residencies, media work and journalism) then they might well feel inclined to write 'poet' on their passports. The category might, with some justification, be extended to include all those who supplement their earnings from poetry, with a portfolio of part time jobs in publishing, advertising, or the media; and the many more who are employed full or part time in teaching literature or creative writing in schools and universities, but this is a slippery slope. What about the 'semi-professionals' - people for whom poetry is still a major pre-occupation and a secondary source of income but who for a variety of reasons, often due to personal circumstances, are never quite able to give up the day job? They work away in the evenings, weekends, and holidays, perhaps edit a small magazine, give occasional readings, win minor poetry prizes, and from time to time have poems published in one of the more prestigious journals, culminating in a slim volume of verse. Is their attitude to their work or its outcome, any less 'professional' than that of their more avowedly successful colleagues?

The problem with all such definitions is that they make economic status the sole criterion of the poet's worth and ignore the fact that reputation has its quite independent measure of value, as all too many 'poet's poets' can testify. It is the same logic that encourages poets to go on business management courses to learn how to market their 'product' - and just possibly themselves.

Officially poetry, like the other arts, is supposed to function as a creative meritocracy. It is 'open to the talents' and the best, as judged by their peers, rise to the top. This is less a description of what actually happens, than an aspiration or if you prefer a myth. For example in principle it should be possible to 'professionalise' the poetry scene - to construct a proper career structure and increase the number of full time practitioners - and also to democratize it - to widen access to its communities of practice, so that the number of amateurs or beginners also grows. Indeed unless there is a wider base of wannabe poets, to attend the writing courses, readings, and festivals, as well as to enhance book and journal sales, and hence generate increased income for the professionals, the whole project is economically unsustainable - it would require levels of public funding that are quite unrealistic for the foreseeable future, but the real issue is, how many of these beginners would progress to more advanced levels?

If meritocracy prevailed, new talent would be more quickly and clearly identified and newcomers find it easier to consolidate their reputations, whilst the already established would have their status enhanced as adjudicators of prizes, fellowships, and grants. In practice, however, although a few exceptional talents from minority groups would progress further up the professional ladder, and even occupy top positions, they would leave behind them a much larger number of people whose new found ambitions had been defeated by the increased competition, and by the fact that those networks with the greatest reputational resources are still best placed to take advantage of the new opportunity structures. These frustrated professionals would remain confined to the democratized (but less professionalized) part of the poetry scene, where symbolic capital is more evenly, if thinly, spread around. In other words they would find themselves trapped in a highly unstable field of local reputation where you are only as good as your last good review. Insecurity about professional status would in turn tend to fuel petty rivalries, undermining the ethos of mutual support these communities of practice are supposed to provide. The risk might then be

that in order to shore up their credentials, such communities would attempt to be even more egalitarian and inclusive, for example by removing all distinctions between different levels of competence, although this is likely to hasten rather than prevent a collapse into internal factionalism (10).

A somewhat similar scenario arises if we consider the role of Universities, even though they would seem better placed to resolve this issue and deliver both objectives. The expansion of higher education has recruited a whole new generation of students from non-traditional backgrounds; but they are overwhelmingly concentrated in the so called modern universities (ex-polytechnics), where creative writing programmes, although often good, and plugged into local poetry scenes simply lack the cultural prestige and big names that adorn the Literature departments of the elite universities. The latter provide niches for established poets, who in return for a minimum of teaching, are allowed plenty of time to pursue their own creative work. Through their journals and extended networks of alumni, these departments exert a large and often hidden influence across the whole field of practice, both nationally and internationally. As a result they provide platforms for launching professional literary careers in a way that the modern universities simply cannot match.

And Poetic License

It is popularly believed that poets are allowed to take liberties with language – and sometimes social norms - in a way that lesser mortals are not. They are expected to heighten reality (though not to falsify it) by the use of certain kinds of imagery to create special effects of meaning denied more ‘prosaic’ forms of writing.

What standards of truth can then be applied to a poem? Keats warned poets not to be trapped by the lure of verisimilitude. Poems may contain statements of social fact, but they cannot be judged in terms of their social facticity. They may propose to provide the reader with a picture of a bit of the social world that has been directly observed, but this does not amount to the kind of warranty issued by, say, an ethnographic study on the same topic. The reason is simple. The poem’s truth is imaginative not empirical. It is an experiment with language that either succeeds or fails and is expressly designed *not* to be repeated. It may be compared to other poems on a similar subject but only on aesthetic, not epistemological grounds. What the poem may well do is produce an effect of recognition in the reader of ‘yes that’s it’ - the poet has identified the central issue. This may be a direct corroboration of experience or a sense that something vaguely felt or intuited but never put into words, has now been explored and rendered articulate. Yet in many other cases, the poem offers no such easy point of purchase. It inhabits an unfamiliar world – or a familiar world made strange - and invites us to enter it on its own terms.

Is poetic licence then, simply permission to play a certain type of language game with the reader? If so, it is a game with rules. Most obvious of these, are verse forms and the rules of prosody, particular metrics, rhyming schemes and their organization into stanzas, whether for the purposes of blank, sprung or free verse. As a budding poet, you must learn to distinguish your amphibrachs from your anapaests, your dactyls from your trochees, not forgetting your iambs; you must study where to put caesuras, you must master techniques of lineage such as enjambment, end stopping (male and female), the special effects achieved by internal rhymes and para rhymes, alliteration, assonance, the use of syllabics and tropes and so on. Thus

emboldened you can try your hand at Petrarchean or Shakespearean sonnets, Spenserian stanzas, sestinas, terza rima, villanelles, pantoum... .

The skilful observation and playful breaking of these rules, is what marks out good verse from bad. Bad verse merely struggles to conform to the schematics of its chosen metre; good verse breathes new life into it. At its worst, versification turns into doggerel, at best it delights us with its word and sound play. Verse does not have to be light – it can deal with dark themes, tell a tragic or an epic tale, but whatever its tone, the enjoyment we get from reading or reciting it comes primarily from the versification itself. The question then is - what makes good verse into a poem, and distinguishes the true poet from the skilful versifier?

The methodology of poetry is poetics – the theory of the practice of turning what might otherwise be just another verse, into memorable poetry and in the process putting truth back into words. The American poet Wallace Stevens was clear about the distinction:

Pitiless verse? A few words tuned
And tuned and tuned and tuned
And the poem?
From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves.

The shift from verse to poem is thus somewhat akin to the distinction made earlier between the parsimonious and inspirational moments of writing, but what or where is this other place, this temporary habitation that makes the transition to the poem possible? Every poet has their own definition and the uniqueness of their voice and vision comes from the way they go about constructing it. For some it is Nature; for other's God. For Wallace Stevens it is the object itself, existing with its own obdurate integrity, quite independently of what the poem might want to make of it. He was insistent that poesis must not only respect, but be part of the 'out there-ness' of its subject matter, and that even if

The words of things entangle and confuse.
The plum survives its poems.

He warned then, against letting the poem become so entangled in its own language game, so carried out by its own craft or cleverness that it was not allowed to find its true idiom in the emergent properties of the thing itself. How, methodologically, is this to be guaranteed? Stevens goes on to suggest:

As for the poet she
tries by a peculiar speech to speak
The peculiar potency of the general...

The aim then, is to render the generic into an understandable aspect of the world which the poem itself is made from. This seems quite close to Blake's desire to see the universe in a grain of sand. Stevens was no mystic. He saw poetry as offering a science of the concrete, using language – or 'peculiar speech'- to offer an

experimental correlative, or perhaps a corrective, to the kind of precise observation that the molecular biologist or physicist brings to bear.

When it comes to the social world, this agenda is more difficult to sustain. The poet is dealing with something much messier – we are always enmeshed in it – it is as much ‘in here’ as ‘out there’. When the ‘place’ that is ‘not ourselves’ consists of other people, then a peculiar kind of tact is needed to enable the poem to inhabit their world, without either evicting them as a real presence, or turning them into a facsimile of the writer’s alter ego, yet it was by combining this ‘sociological’ imagination with a poetic one that Stevens wrote some of his finest poetry.

Principles of precision

Alessandro Portelli who works across social history, anthropology and literary studies in understanding the dynamics of popular memory, certainly seems to think such an approach is both possible and necessary. He quoted a poem by William Carlos Williams – a doctor as well as a famous poet - as the epigraph to his study of the politics of war memory:

So much depends
Upon
A red wheel
Barrow
Glazed with rain
Water
Beside the white
Chickens

Portelli continued: “The Djakovica – Pec – Podgorica express [was] an old red bus.” As it traveled between Kosovo and Montenegro on May 1, 1999, it was hit by a NATO missile and about forty passengers were burned alive inside. Its bright color did not suffice to make the bus visible to NATO pilots. A spokesperson said from the altitude the pilots were at, if they concentrated on a bus they would have lost sight of their targets.

Portelli’s target is not just that omniscient top down view of the world which the more objectivating social scientist tends to adopt, or the bottom up view which poets and ethnographers are more likely to espouse, but to argue that from either vantage point, the failure to recognize the gap between map and territory can have lethal consequences. The metaphorical can become all too material when world history is dropped on a local bus in the shape of a missile. Metaphors can kill, unless they are embedded in a different principle of precision.

The search for such a principle is hindered by a culture dominated by various kind of verbal tricksterism, epitomised by advertising, media hype and political spin. We are daily bombarded by clever slogans, catchphrases, and buzz words. Ariel is probably better known today as the name for a well known soap detergent or an Israeli ex prime minister, or even possibly as a multinational corporation making reciprocal and rotary gas compressors, than as Shakespeare’s hidden muse.

There is a large sense within all its communities of practice, that poetry has a special mission to expose this counterfeit currency, putting the truth back into precise and memorable speech. Ezra Pound in/famously said that when the language goes rotten, the rest goes rotten. The conservative response, to purge language of its corruption by going back to some imagined purity of source, is upheld today most cogently by Geoffrey Hill. In *Speech, Speech* he surveys the calamitous effect of political rhetoric and media hype on the idioms of public speech and explores the extent to which his or any poetics might provide a spark of resistance:

rudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great
Unavoidable work; although: heroic verse a non starter says PEOPLE.
So few among the true arbiters: that much
Is already knowledge.

Be stiffened by rectitude} kept
Rigid by indecision. Say: coherence
Though not at any price

You are wantonly obscure, man sagt ACCESSIBLE
Traded as democratic, he answers
As he answers most things these days {easily

Self made
Corruption ravaged {inexhaustible
FURORS own purity. English, you clown

At least pass me the oxygen. Too late
AMOR, MAN IN COMA, MA'AM MENO AMEN

The furious attempt to purify the English language degenerates at the end into meaningless world play, a babble of anagrams speaking in foreign tongues. An alternative strategy might be to return to the notion of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. The emotion in question may be anger, sadness, joy or contentment, but the aim is to offer a contemplative, even therapeutic space in which language slows down and allows writer and reader to communicate in a more thoughtful mode.

However the duty of care can also involve speeding up, drawing upon and responding to, the poetics of everyday speech, attempting to make poetry part of the lingua franca of popular culture. In the 1960s and 70's Adrian Henri, Roger Mc Gough and Brian Patten tried to do just this by hitching a ride on the Rock'nroll bandwagon that was then the Mersey Beat, blending the vernacular rhythms of Scouse, with some of the Whitmanesque cadences of the their American counterparts, Ginsberg, Corso and Ferlinghetti. The Performance Poetry Movement today works in the same genre, going back to the African American oral tradition of sounding, signifying and talking the dozen, as well as their contemporary manifestations in hip hop, free styling and rap. With the advent of the poetry slam, the techniques of versification have been transformed into a new form of verbal athleticism or extreme sport.

Ethno-poetics

These initiatives find a ready ally amongst those ethnographers and oral historians who have developed what they call ethno-poetics. The basic proposition is that most people (with the notable exception of academics reading papers at conferences) don't talk in prose. The features of everyday speech, its patterns of stress, pitch and intonation follow schemes that are best transcribable and analysed as if they were poetry, rather than as if they were prose. So the interview is broken into lines and organised into stanzas, to reflect what are seen to be the internal rhythms of its meaning. The principle of organisation is neither purely semantic nor syntactic but prosodic. Where there is a change in pitch or stress or a pause, the line is broken.

Dell Hymes, who pioneered this approach, worked largely with examples of African American vernacular speech, whose accentuated prosody is very close to rap. So it was not too difficult to show that a narrative like this, if written as a prose paragraph, would make less sense if it was transcribed in a poetical style.

But what about this, from a white English middle class student whose language is rather prosaic:

I turned up with my parents, well my mother and step-father; we went in and just dumped my stuff in there. They took me out for a Chinese meal in the High street. It was a bit weird because by the time I got back and they left, everybody had disappeared already and was down at the bar.'

Does it make any more sense or yield greater interest if it is rendered as:

I turned up with my parents
well my mother and step-father,
we went in and just dumped my stuff in there.
They took me out for a Chinese meal
In the high street .
It was a bit weird
because by the time I got back
and they left,
everybody had disappeared already
and was down at the bar.

This raises the broader question of the relationship between poetry and prose. Quite a few experimental poets have abandoned lineage. Their work looks, and sometimes even reads more like prose, even if it avails itself of certain poetic devices. The prose poem is also gaining in popularity and poets frequently introduce prose sections into what is otherwise a conventionally lined and scanned collection of verse.

Is it possible to be a great poet without ever having written a line of verse? Certainly there are writers of prose, for example philosophers (Foucault) and historians (Michel Serres), even the occasional social scientist (Norbert Elias) who is capable of writing passages of great lyrical power. Is it right to call Rachel Carson, the marine biologist, a great poet of the seashore? Or Marx the poet of commodities? If the accolade helps to celebrate their writing then why not? And then there are the great orators, those pioneers of performance poetry.....

Purists will object that all this is to nonsensically mix up genres, but perhaps the difficulty lies elsewhere. It is to lose sight of the fact that something is lost as well as gained, when poetry is uncoupled from any kind of versification, however loose. A special magic happens when technique and ‘musing’ come together in a single work.

Made to Order? The Occasions of Poetry in Public and Private Life.

Ethno-poetics is part of a wider movement to discover a poetics of everyday life – to create a ‘poesie faite par tous’ as the surrealists would say. Before considering whether such a project is feasible, it might be worth looking at the actual uses to which poetry - or verse - is put, as both a public and private resource.

Poetry has always had its wider arenas, occasions when it emerges from the literary margins and takes centre stage in the nation’s cultural life. Sometimes- rarely- this occurs spontaneously. The death of Lady Diana was probably the last time this happened in Britain when professional poets joined thousands of amateurs up and down the country in writing verse to express their sorrow. More usually, of course, it is a matter of commission from some public body or branch of government.

Poetry is supposed to be memorable speech, so it not surprising that poets should be called upon when some important event or circumstance has to be officially celebrated or memorialized. From the 18th century until quite recently the Poet Laureate was charged with writing verse to commemorate the Queen’s Coronation and Birthday, not to mention the births, marriages and deaths of other members of the Royal household. Visits from heads of state or other dignitaries might also have to be marked, along with famous victories in war. Not surprisingly many of the best poets have refused to take on such an onerous and ill paid job.

The practice of commissioning poems to mark some special event has however continued and widened in scope as the calendar of official celebration and commemoration has enlarged. The bi-centenary of the founding of the Post Office, the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin’s *Origins of the Species*, the 50th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War, have all been occasions for the commissioning of work on these themes. Now there are suggestions that poems might be commissioned in connection with special weeks or days designed to publicize and raise money for Good Causes: A Poem for AIDS Week, or Famine Relief.

And then of course, in more celebratory mode, there are the Olympics. Mark O’Connor, the Sydney Olympics Laureate got paid 80,000 dollars for penning the following unforgettably regrettable lines:

Never has so much jog and slog
gone into maintaining a metaphor.
something you pass on, don't keep for long,
but make sure someone else has got it, sort of.

Followed by the ‘immortal’

Ah SOCOG, you conclave of poets,
you've made the invisible

visible. Ideals shine and burn.
No matter how often the flame goes out.

If William McGonagall had got to translate Pindar's Ode to Asopichus, it would probably be better than this.

To be fair, there are other, more hopeful, examples of the way the commissioning process has been negotiated. Titos Patrikios, who is indeed a major poet in his own right, was briefly director of the Greek Cultural Olympiad (mainly because he was leading a campaign for the return of the Elgin marbles) but soon retired hurt to concentrate on his true vocation, which as he wrote left him:

with his caustic, inconsequential truths,
with odd words and manners,
with bunches of bats hidden
in the empty dome of his heart.

In fact commissioned poetry, verse 'made to order' has a bad reputation amongst the poetry community. This is mainly because, with a few honourable exceptions, so much of it has been bad. The paradoxical desire to find 'memorable speech' has resulted in so much distinctly unmemorable verse. Who can remember a line of the poem commissioned to mark the inauguration of President Obama?

In addition there is a widely held belief that the occasions of poetry should be spontaneous, not contrived, freely chosen, and not commanded. There is an element of bad faith in this. Many poetry competitions dictate topic, verse form and even length, and poets enter them in great numbers, for the sake of the challenge they represent. There are also justified fears that extending the practice of commissioning, could lead to poetry becoming just another arm of the advertising industry or political spin machine: poets embedded by the Ministry of Defence with our troops in Afghanistan may no longer have to face direct censorship in what they write, but they are under more subtle pressures to shift their angle of vision to that of a British soldier looking down a gun sight at 'the enemy'. It is difficult to see how poems commissioned to launch a new line of beauty treatments, open a corporate HQ or publicise a casino, not to mention poems featuring 'product placement', could be said to be advancing the cause of putting the truth back into words.

When we turn to look at the uses of poetry in more personal settings, we can see that its function as memorable speech is again paramount. Let's begin with the occasions in which poetry – or at least verse - might actually be quoted, either in the context of everyday conversation, or in special but still non poetic settings..

In the 1950s, my father used to come into my bedroom every morning at about 7 am, fling the curtains wide and declaim the opening lines of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam:

AWAKE ! For morning in the bowl of night
Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight

And lo! The hunter of the east has caught
The sultan's turret in a noose of light.

His intention no doubt was to instill in me his own love of poetry (he could quote large chunks of Shakespeare and was never without a quote from Burns to suit almost any family occasion). No doubt he hoped that these wonderful words would sugar the pill of having to get out of bed on a cold winter's morning and go to school, but somehow the attempt to kill these two birds with a single poetic stone didn't quite work. If my already well developed dislike of school got transferred to poetry, it was because one of the more exquisite tortures inflicted on us as ten and eleven year old prep school boys was having to memorise quite long poems by Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Longfellow and Tennyson for our homework, and then get up and recite them in front of the whole class. You can imagine the delight when one of us faltered, got a word wrong, or just dried up, not to mention what the boys with speech impediments went through, for they were not spared this exercise in collective sadism.

No doubt the whole thing was designed more as an exercise in public speaking and memory building than poetry appreciation, and the fact that it had such a negative effect on so many of us is probably to do with the school's peculiar ethos. Perhaps it was also a throwback to a time when poetry had more of a walk-on part in the culture of the English educated elite – the ability to turn out a half decent sonnet, translate Tennyson into Greek iambic hexameters, or introduce an appropriate quotation from Shakespeare, Milton or Keats into the conversation, being an important part of a young gentleman's social equipment.

Today, the ability to quote, let alone recite whole poems, is increasingly confined to graduates of English departments and professional poets - and quite a few of them have a surprising inability to remember poems other than their own. The idea that poetry should be part of every well stocked mind does of course survive; it is a continual refrain of poetry's public evangelists. For example the Poetry Aloud group recently launched a national recitation project in an attempt to revive the practice. If such initiatives seem to be falling on so many deaf ears, it is largely because they are listening – and chanting aloud - to the deafening lyrics of pop songs. Moreover the internet offers an instant collective memory with sites listing quotations from poets on any subject under the sun, ready to be cut and pasted into your latest essay or talk.

Against this background, it is important to remember that in 18th and 19th century Britain, the capacity to recite or quote quite long passages of verse, was a widely disseminated skill in both town and countryside. In Elisabeth Gaskell's novel Cranford, a yeoman farmer is described as having his cottage crammed with books of verse, and quoting at length from them as he walked his woods. Artisans could also quote chapter and verse, and not only from the bible. In a more secular age, with the arrival of first the music hall and then steam radio, the recitation of light verse in the form of comic or dramatic monologues was a regular feature of the bill. Stanley Holloway did the rounds with his famous rendition of Albert and the Lion and would have the audience reciting along with him as he tells the cautionary tale of Mr and Mrs Ramsbottom's visit to the zoo in Blackpool and their son's unfortunate encounter with a lion called Wallace....

Now Albert had heard about lions
How they was ferocious and wild
To see Wallace lying so peaceful
Well, it didn't seem right to the child.

So straight 'way the brave little feller
Not showing a morsel of fear
Took his stick with its 'orse's 'ead 'andle
And shoved it in Wallace's ear.

You could see the lion didn't like it
For giving a kind of a roll
He pulled Albert inside the cage with 'im
And swallowed the little lad 'ole

Then Pa, who had seen the occurrence
And didn't know what to do next
Said "Mother! Yon lions 'et Albert"
And Mother said "Well, I am vexed!"

The manager had to be sent for

He came and he said "What's to do?"
Pa said "Yon lion's 'et Albert
And 'im in his Sunday clothes, too."

Nowadays when Wendy Cope or UA Fanthorpe read work which draws upon this tradition they perform to small audiences, largely made up of fellow poets and friends at these strange gatherings that are called 'poetry readings'.

Wendy Cope might read a poem called a Policeman's Lot, which refers to a comment by the then Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, to the effect that the progress of any poet is marked by the extent to which she outwits the internal police patrols. It starts like this: (Repeat refrain of last three syllables)

O once I was a policeman young and merry (young and merry)
Controlling crowds and fighting petty crime (petty crime)
But now I work on matters literary (litererry)
And I am growing old before my time ('for my time)
No the imagination of a writer (of a writer)
Is not the sort of beat a chap would choose (chap would choose)
And they've assigned me a prolific blighter (prolific blighter)
I'm patrolling the unconscious of Ted Hughes.

However funny and memorable her poems, they are unlikely to be form part of the repertoire of everyday quotations. Poets have responded to this in a number of ways. Some, like Geoffrey Hill, have, as we've seen, retreated to 'Mount Olympus' and re-asserted the 'hermetic' tradition, writing in a way that can only be appreciated by fellow poets or philologists. Others have tried to beat pop culture at its own game and produce sound bite verse. Most steer a middle course between these two extremes, trying to write in a way that is reasonably accessible but still demanding the readers concentrated attention.

One of the problems here is that contemporary poets want to be poets rather than mere versifiers. They tend to avoid the bolder, more repetitive rhyming schemes that made Coleridge, Kipling, or Longfellow so easy to remember and recite. So although more good poetry is being written by more good poets than ever before (and of course more bad), less and less of it leaks out to enter the wider culture.

This is partly because in a secularised society, the occasions for poetry are increasingly few and far between. Outside the poetry scene itself poems are mostly recited to mark rites and sites of passage – births, birthdays, marriages, deaths, coming of age, falling in love, Christmas and other special events. These are special moments that are still deemed to require, if not a spiritual, then at least a less profane language to mark them. The 'poetry' that is produced, whether on cards or in speeches, usually consists of sugary sentiments, expressed in clumsy clichés. For want of a proper praise song or epithalamion, how many happy events are consummated with the utterance of banalities? For lack of someone to try their hand at an 'In Memoriam' stanza, how many sanctimonious couplets are inscribed on tombstones of the dearly departed?

There is here I believe a great missed opportunity. We have poets in residence in hospitals, prisons, schools, and even universities, almost anywhere there is a captive audience, but we don't have poets in residence in registry offices or funeral parlours, who might work to produce some words that really are a fitting to the person and the occasion, and why shouldn't the manufacturers of greetings cards draw on the golden treasury of the great poetry that is available for this purpose, or even commission new work?

What this example tells us, is that Poetry continues to play a social function as a way of marking off the distinction between important moments in our lives and the social routines, the coffee spoons and emails through which we measure out so much of our waking existence. As an anthropologist might put it, poetry retains a ritual function, by creating a 'liminal' space. It does this precisely because its strategies of meaning cannot be reduced to the immediate - political, cultural, or psychological - conditions or contexts in which they were produced and because its music is integral to the occasion of its making. As Wallace Stevens put it:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the thing itself and not about it.

That is why, it seems to me, poetry will always resist conventional sociological analysis and why the techniques of deconstruction can no more capture the movement

of thought that brings the poem into being, than dead butterflies in a museum showcase can bring the natural world they come from back to life.

Re-assembling the social.

I suggested at the beginning that one of the reasons why sociologists of literature tend to steer clear of poetry is because they recognise their methods are too clumsy, but perhaps the problem is not so much the lack of methodological refinement, as their concept of sociology and the social. That at least is the conclusion to be drawn from a recent critique the French sociologist Bruno Latour has made of traditional social theories. Although his approach has been developed in studying the sciences, it has just as great a relevance to the arts.

In the introduction to 'Reassembling the Social' Latour wrote:

Even though most social scientists would prefer to call 'social' a homogeneous thing, it's perfectly acceptable to designate by the same word a trail of *associations* between heterogeneous elements.

Since in both cases the word retains the same origin - from the Latin root *socius* - it is possible to remain faithful to the original intuitions of the social sciences by redefining sociology not as the 'science of the social', but as the *tracing of associations*. In this meaning of the adjective, social does not designate a thing among other things, like a black sheep among other white sheep, or a special domain, but a *type of connection* between things or domains that are not themselves social.

The social in this view is not a kind of glue or cement that sticks people together, nor a set of ties that reveal the presence of hidden social forces working behind their backs, it is *what* is stuck or tied together, or rather re-assembled, by many other kinds of connecting device. This conception of the social is much wider than the conventional definition, since it involves elements that are not themselves social, but also more specific in that it is limited to the actual process of making new connections between them. Another way of making this distinction, derived from complexity theory, is to say that in conventional sociology the social is treated as an instance of auto-poiesis - it organises and reproduces itself from itself, and can therefore only be explained in terms of itself. In the alternative definition Latour proposes the social is 'allopoetic' - it depends for its existence on entities and domains outside itself, in so far as these too produce something besides themselves requiring that type of connection. This is a useful distinction, except that it seems to me that we might actually be dealing with two different forms or moments of the social: one that has become routinized and the other not.

What are the implications of this approach for sociology of poetry? Firstly the social is no longer treated as something always and already there, outside or behind the poem, prodding the poet to refer to it; so it is not about finding some (latent or manifest) social content/context for the poem in order to 'explain' it. Poetry may sometimes function as a form of social therapy or as a medium of social protest - but the adjective 'social' is what has to be explained - it is not itself an explanation. If we

follow Latour, the social is a type of connection the poem itself creates through the occasion of its writing and reading.

We have already noted this principle at work in our discussion of poetry movements: how they serve as a conduit for constant acts of revisioning, both small and large: from the re-reading of particular poems, their re-positioning within a wider corpus of texts, to the regeneration of a whole repertoire of poetic devices and techniques. This continual reshuffling of the poetic pack makes new connections – and disconnections – between young and old guards, amateurs and professionals, up and comers and established, the living and the dead, but for the most part this is an example of auto-poiesis. Poetry is a largely self organizing, self replicating domain and explains itself to itself in its own terms that are what poetics is about. Yet as we have seen poetry is also occasioned by events outside itself, some public and some private, it also, occasionally produces something other than itself: new types of connection between entities and domains that have nothing to do with Poetry as such, but which in the process become, however temporarily, ‘poeticized’.

It is by tracing the genesis of these different moments of transformation across schools, movements, projects and scenes, that a new sociology of poetry could be established, one that at last has something intelligent to say about the poems themselves (11).

What is Poetry?

One contemporary poet whose work shows some interesting points of connection with Latourian perspectives is John Ashbery (12). For Ashbery the poem is a special kind of conduit, connecting all the circumstances attendant on its making to the eventual form it takes. These circumstances might include the immediate environment of its composition, the room where the writer is working, the objects around the desk, the weather outside, the computer. For example a poem partly composed on a train might for a couple of its lines allow itself to be inflected in its rhythm by that fact. Events that most poets would regard as ‘noise’, interrupting the creative process are so much grist to this poetic mill. A telephone call, an item on the news, a visit from a friend could all find themselves being worked into the poem, not necessarily directly but through the mood or tonalities of meaning they evoke, not that the process is haphazard, it remains poetically controlled, and can result in very pared down, highly elliptical verse.

Each poem is thus an experiment in the form of its assemblage. It may look and even sound improvisatory but its disjointedness is calculated. This technique demands that the poet remains for much longer than usual, open and receptive to the world about them but also that a rigorous attitude of concentration is maintained in the face of the polysemic material gathered in. The process involved is less like collage, where disparate elements are simply blended together to harmonise, than a form of montage, with various sources (voices, performative registers, discourses) being sampled from many different domains (for example: bio-science, popular culture, linguistics), and juxtaposed in a way that is often bizarre, and disruptive of the conventional associations linking them.

In the following poem John Ashbery looks at various well know poetic strategies and then outlines his own:

What is Poetry?

The medieval town, with frieze
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow

That came when we wanted it to snow?
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid

Ideas, as in this poem? But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

The mistress we desire? Now they
Will have to believe it

As we believed it. In school
All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?

The poem is rumination on poetics constructed around a series of replies to its central question, 'This is no ordinary 'Q and A' session. The 'answers' come not in the form of assertions but interrogatives, throwing the question back whence it came - in this case the community of practice to which Ashbery belongs'. This is Ashbery in dialogue not only with himself, but his peers, the 'we' who are the poem's steady focus of address (13).

Perhaps as a result this is not a poem that lets the reader in easily. Ashbery uses it to demonstrate his poetics, not tell us about them. It's very 'difficulty' also encourages us to question and answer the poem back and this is what I have done in the reading that follows.

From the very outset we are presented with a conundrum in the shape of 'The mediaeval town with frieze of boy scouts from Nagoya'? The more prosaic reader is immediately provoked to wonder why a group of children from modern Japan's third largest conurbation should be assembled for the poem's purposes in a mediaeval city and why they should form a 'frieze' around it? Where does the poetry come in? Is it in the surreal juxtaposition of the two place images? Or in the compositional device of the frieze linking them together? In either case the construction reads more like something out of a dream – but without the associations that would provide a key to its interpretation. So perhaps this is a deliberate wind up, designed to provoke our curiosity, but not to satisfy it? In which case poetry is being defined as a special kind of brain tease, at once inviting critical exposition and

playfully subverting it. This is certainly one major way Ashbery's work has been understood.

Dreams often make dreadful puns on words and Ashbery proceeds to do just that with frieze/freeze. A frieze may show a series of figures in frozen motion, taking part in a dance or hunt for example. Courtesy of this word play the poem's interrogation jumps rapidly from 'boy scouts' to 'The snow that came when we wanted it to snow'. This would seem to be a somewhat tongue in cheek reference to the popular notion that the poem should provide a place of happy coincidence between the poet's intention and mood (I feel a wintry poem coming on) and external happenstance (it snows). Do the contingencies of a poem have to depend on that? This line made me think about contemporary nature poetry and how the best of it proceeds more serendipitously, waiting for the poem to be surprised into being, when and where it is least expected.

The next stanza continues this rapid unguided tour of poetics:

Beautiful images? Trying to avoid

Ideas, as in this poem?

The lines neatly encapsulate Poetry's central dilemma. Is its primary purpose to compose the world into pleasurable images for the reader? If so, does this mean that uglier and more painful realities are ignored or somehow rendered beautiful? A nuclear bomb is a horrific device, but what about the mushroom cloud it makes when dropped? Much of the best 20th century poetry has been about the search for an aesthetic that is not a moral anaesthetic. So how, given its philosophical and political resonance, does this quest relate, if at all, to an avoidance of Ideas?

The short answer (although there is a long back story to it) is via Modernism (14). It is all there in Pound's triple injunction: to free up the verse – the music not the metronome-strip out all romantic embellishment, and avoid abstract or conceptual language in favour of concrete images. Show doesn't tell the story of the modern world.

Ashbery duly signs up. This must be the only poem on ideas about poetry that succeeds in not directly mentioning any of them. Then, as if mindful of how much of a brain tease his work can be - he may not be a 'cerebral' poet, but he is a very knowing one- he suddenly backtracks, and issues a wry disclaimer:

But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

The mistress we desire?

This 'conceit' – it is an appropriately conceptual trope - is unlikely to endear him to feminists, even if he does put a question mark after it. Only a male poet could compare the intellectual baggage he carries around with the wife to whom he performs returns, but is he also implying that the modernist project has failed? The desire to write verse in praise of Mistress Beauty, and the obligation to consort with ideas, if only ideas about poetry, was just too great? This was very much the predicament of

poets of Ashbery's generation; they had to grapple with a return of what modernism had tried to repress, and find a way of sublimating, if not satisfying, their lyrical or philosophical impulses, while remaining within a broadly modernist aesthetic. Not all succeeded. Some reverted to a late romantic or more conceptual mode. Is this who he has in mind when he continues?

Now they/Will have to believe it/As we believed it.

Logically and grammatically, 'they' refer back to the mistress/wife couple or rather to those people who support the poetics they represent, but the relationship between 'them' and 'us' is tensed in a disconcerting way. Is he talking about a generational thing? It is difficult to decide. Perhaps this is one of those in/famous Ashbery moments of indeterminacy, where he throws a spanner in the works of anyone trying to pin down his referents? What, in any case, is 'it' that 'they' will 'now' have to believe? The poem tells us with sudden and brutal directness:

In school/All the thought got combed out:

Some people may go to school in the belief or hope that their tangled ideas about life will get smoothed or straightened out, but for Ashbery and his peers it seems a much more drastic process was involved: all the thought, the whole superstructure of ideas that poetics has erected around the poem, was to be got rid of, slowly and carefully 'combed out' as a prelude to opening up the world in a new and more poetic way:

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Charles Olson's 'open field' poetics, an early influence on Ashbery, insisted that the poem should be treated like a soundscape, with the poet literally breathing syllabic life into the line. Ashbery's field, like Wallace Stevens' is much more 'out there', a potential space for a poem, whose imaginative reach is waiting to be discovered, although only through bringing a sixth creative sense to bear.

The poem has now turned suddenly didactic as it apparently instructs readers how to get their heads into that space. The style of punctuation changes too. Up till now caesura and enjambment have been used insistently to impart a restless, almost breathless momentum to the argument. Now as the poet sets out his stall; the lines are end stopped, as if to give them a more settled stride.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?

The final stanza describes the vertiginous trajectory of the poem itself, as it takes its thin line for a walk to reach – what? Not a conclusive answer to its question but the source of its persistent vision. What might otherwise be a banal enough image of hope, just another worn out cliché, is transformed here into a lyrical statement of Poetry's true possibility - its capacity to renew itself on even the most difficult terrain and perhaps discover, although there is no final guarantee of it, some flowers growing soon?

I chose this poem not only because it is one of the few occasions in which Ashbery attempts to explicitly position his work in the field of poetics, but because of the way he goes about doing it. From a Latoureaan perspective the poem's main interest lies in its mode of address: the interrogative voice that continually throws it outside itself back into the community of practice whence it came, and how the reader is enrolled as a 'relay' in this process. If poetry is a mode of enquiry into the entities and domains it is assembled from, then in this poem it is the world of poetry itself and in particular its auto-poetic forms of reflexivity that is put in question.

It is partly because practices of reading and writing are potentially so idiosyncratic that there is so much pressure to codify them. Poetics tries to ensure some continuity of purpose, some conversation between readers and writers. That is why it is so often treated as a conceptual toolkit. Go with these ideas, observe these rules, follow this advice and you will write good stuff. Read the poem using these methods and ideas and you will get its meanings. Of course that is not the way of it and to that extent Ashbery's scepticism about poetics is fully justified. He offers us a minimalist statement that is indicative, not prescriptive. The possibility that hundreds of ambitious Ashberries, having read the last two stanzas head out for the prairies and spend large amounts of time standing in the middle of fields, with their eyes shut waiting for inspiration, does not bear thinking about. Still such a phenomenon is not unknown. Just think of all those young people in the 1960's following in the tracks of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, hitchhiking across America with a copy of Howl in their back pockets, not to mention those who followed Gary Snyder on the trail to India and Japan. There are many examples of a poem producing something outside itself, making new types of connection between people and things that we might call social rather than poetic, and what we have to do in every case is to trace them back to the specifics of the poem itself.

Footnotes

1)One exception is Charles Madge, founder of Mass Observation and a well known 'Georgian' poet during the interwar period. Madge was unusual in having a pioneering interest in popular culture and what he called the surrealism of everyday life. He was as concerned with the dreams people had as with what they had to eat for supper. He has had few successors.

2)See for example the work of Adrienne Rich and E.R.Brathwaite.

3)The sociology of literature comprises a vast and disparate field, focussing on the conditions of production, distribution and consumption of non ephemeral texts of every kind, from novels and children's books, to instruction manuals, and scientific treatises, in both print and digital formats. How these various conditions – not only social and cultural, but political, economic and ideological - influence textual forms and content, and/or shape practices of writing and reading, is the main object of study. The unit of textual analysis may vary from a single work, or the oeuvre of a single author, to a corpus of texts produced by groups belonging to a particular school or tradition, or who share distinctive literary styles and genres. In most cases aesthetic (though not always moral) judgement is suspended. At its crudest and most reductive, a thematic or content analysis is carried out to illustrate the author's main preoccupations; these are then related back to the social context – the writer's biography, social influences and cultural milieu, and/or to the wider conjuncture in which they are working. More subtle analyses, influenced by linguistics and narratology, look at the mediations between form, content and context in terms of characteristic usages of language and syntax, strategies of plotment or argumentation and the use of special rhetorical effects to reach particular audiences.

4) Such an attitude is quite close, it seems to me, to how scientists, including social scientists turn things over in their mind as they are formulating a research question.

5) It is no coincidence that readings as we now know them were first popularised by the beat poets inspired by the 'projective' poetics of Charles Olson. For Olson made a new connection – or reconnection- between the written and the spoken word, the diction of the poem and the poet's voice. That association is summed up in his famous dictum "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE." He wanted poets to literally breathe life back into their verse by making it dance not to metre, but to a more embodied rhythm. It was but a step from there to the insistence that the poem on the page should be heard on another more public stage.

6) Many people of my generation cannot read *The Waste Land* without hearing it in the thin dry high Anglican tones of T.S. Eliot. Yet when the poem is performed by Fiona Shaw a whole new range of vocal registers emerges from the text; the poem takes on a quite different and much more interesting life in a way that makes you want to go back and read it again.

7) The term 'communities of practice' was first coined by E Wenger and J Lave to describes learning processes that were not necessarily embedded in formal educational settings but involved peer groups. I have slightly modified the term so that it includes more differentiated and hierarchical forms of community. Practice, as used here refers both to the actual act of writing or reading, and to the exercises that might accompany it. For example you might want to write a poem to practice a particular verse form.

8) In this section I have drawn on some of the concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his cultural sociology – most notably his notion of symbolic capital.

9) It is amusing in this context to note that the french verb 'muser' means to 'go around with one's nose in the air'. This referred originally to the 18th century french 'precieuses', young aristocrats who spent their time writing flowery couplets to one another and did not much else.

10) Many of the tensions inside and between poetry organisations arise from these tendencies, surely a useful focus for further research in which poets and social scientists might usefully collaborate.

11) There is also a specific contribution that poetry itself can make. Latour himself has argued that one of its functions is to return the freedom of agency to things, to enable them to speak in a new way and tell their own stories. Contemporary poetry now has a rich syntax and vocabulary - in a way the social sciences do not - for describing the world of objects, and for observing the natural world on as much of its own terms as it allows, without having to fall back on pathetic fallacies..

12) Ashbery divides – and defines- critical opinion as no other contemporary poet in the USA. For Harold Bloom he is a modernist revisionist writing in the great American tradition inaugurated by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. For another well known critic he is 'the passive bard of a period in which the insipid has turned into the heavily toxic'. He certainly seems to be a poet for all seasons. He is praised as a formalist by the formalists, on account of his skill with traditional verse forms. He is also claimed as a 'radical deconstructivist' because of the language games he sometimes plays. His work has been described as both late romantic and post modern. He is 'an apostle of indeterminacy' and 'the great lyricist of the colloquial and the cliché.' Some readers find his work quite impenetrable because of the density of its connotations and sometimes wilful obscurantism; others argue that once you get on his wavelength it is like being in a trance, and that he is essentially a populist poet. He has consistently refused to take sides in the periodic debates that erupt between different schools of American poetry.

13) The poem first appeared in an anthology of Modern American Poetry published in 2000.

14) It is impossible to understand broad aesthetic movements in Poetry without understanding related developments in philosophy and the natural sciences. Sometimes these ideas are imported directly into the poem's content – Alexander Pope, for example, writes what are essentially little philosophical essays in verse. More often they are translated into some appropriate poetic device –for example the extended conceptual metaphors used by the 17th century metaphysical poets to make

often bizarre or witty connections between the material and non-material worlds were heavily influenced by the Cambridge neo-Platonists and by developments in natural philosophy.

Similarly it was Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime that led the early romantics to take to the mountains and lakes to 'pursue truth in beauty and in beauty truth'; the ideas of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer provided an aesthetic rationale for the late romantics, the French symbolists and decadents, encouraging them to reject the vulgar materialism of the bourgeois world in favour of a hermetic 'poesie maudite'. In the 20th century literary critics have played a key role in translating developments in linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy into a poetics suitable for consumption by poets. The translation process has however been largely one way. The paradox of modernism is that although the movement largely succeeded in expelling abstract conceptual idioms from contemporary verse, the ideas returned by the back door in the rationales that were given for this move. The poetics of Eliot and Pound are crammed with ideas from philosophy, aesthetics, deployed to justify their formal experimentalism and cultural conservatism.

Footnote

Conceptual poetry is an interesting example of an attempt to create open access poetry as textual - or rather inter-textual practice. Drawing on experiments in digital sampling and network exchange on the Internet, this is a cut and paste poetry that prides itself on having eliminated the individual poetic voice and often involves forms of collective authorship and/or deliberate plagiarism. As the term implies it has a very developed poetics, drawing largely of post structuralist theory