**The Occasions of Poetry**

Some reflections on the ‘social’ in poetry

by

**Phil Cohen**

*For Jean*

*whose paintings showed me what was missing from my own work.*

*Note*

*What follows is a shortened version of a text that originally took the form of an intervention in a conference of social scientists about methods of dialogue within and across the various disciplines of the arts and humanities.*

 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 as the unacknowledged legislators of language’s most creative possibilities for change.

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

 With poets it is the other way round. 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. But this does not explain why poetry, considered as a textual practice, should have been virtually 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 the writing of 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’..

Partly this exemption 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.

For all these reasons contemporary poetry hardly features in the sociology of literature. The conditions of its production, distribution and consumption remain a mystery, beyond a vague sense that a lot of the stuff is written and not much of it read. As for how far these conditions – social and cultural, political and economic - influence poetic forms and content, and/or shape practices of writing and reading, again little is known. Now this may not much matter, especially to poets who just want to be left alone to get on with it; many poets anyway regard their poems as butterflies on the wing, alive perhaps only briefly in the instant of their writing or reading, and are deeply supicious of any form of textual analysis that attempts to pin them down on the page, to be dissected and classified according to some critical taxonomy, by people who are not themselves poets.

The sociology of literature mainly concerns itself with broad historical trends: the rise of the bourgeois novel, popular fiction and the emergence of new reading publics, the impact of globalisation on contemporary publishing.The approach tends to treat literature primarily as a commodity rather than as works of art; it is at its crudest and most reductive when applied to individual texts which are treated as mere exemplifications of broader socio-economic processes. Even where a text is discussed in detail, in most cases this amounts to little more than a thematic or content analysis illustrating the author’s preoccupations and intentions; these are then related back to the writers biography, literary influences and socio-cultural milieu, and/or to the wider political conjuncture in which s/he is working. En route the text is reduced to the social or ideological messages it conveys about itself, its author and that bit of the world it is about.

There are also more subtle, fine grained analyses, influenced by linguistics and narratology, which look at the relations between between literary form, content and context in terms of certain characteristic usages of language and syntax, their rhetorical strategies and modes of address and then trace these singularities of style or voice back to their processes of formation within (and sometimes against) specific communities of aesthetic practice. Such readings start close up to the text and then as it were track back to situate it within a wider perspective, that of a particular school or tradition of writing, a local, regional or national culture, at a particular moment in time.

A good example of this approach, and the insights it can yield, can be found in the work of John Barrell on 18th century English pastoral verse. He looks in detail at the devices through which this verse form constructs the landscape it observes, initially by drawing on the pictorial strategies developed by painters such as Poussin and Claude, and then by developing its own poetics around notions of the picturesque and the sublime. He looks at how the social pressure to produce more realistic or actualised portrayals of the countryside come up against the aesthetic constraints imposed by the requirement to produce a harmonised image of both its natural and social landscape, especially in the way the rural poor are depicted. And he shows how changing attitudes to the land and those who worked it, on the part of both the aristocracy and what he calls the rural professional class, the drive to create a more productive form of agriculture, was echoed in the poetic desire to actively manipulate nature and re-arrange its composition according to certain aesthetic principles.

A third approach, associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, is to treat literature as a distinctive domain of cultural production, with its own mode of professional formation and organisation, its institutional networks of patronage and support, its apparatus of dissemination and appraisal. The focus here is on how literary tastes or dispositions are acquired, as part of a wider process through which cultural and intellectual capital is reproduced and certain social cum aesthetic distinctions maintained. So for example, how are lines drawn between the ‘literary novel’, supposedly accessible and appreciable only to an educated elite and popular or genre fiction, considered as suitable reading matter for the ‘masses’? Or again how are literary reputations made and sustained, and what role do agents, publishers, critics, reading publics and fellow writers play in the making or unmaking of ‘names’.

The unease which many people feel about these attempts to understand what is going on in literature partly stems from the fact that they all, in their different ways, challenge the priveged status traditionally accorded to the work of art and the creative process, as somehow operating above, or beyond social constraint; and behind this, of course, there lies the romantic notion of the artist as an exceptional being to whom the normal rules of society do not apply. Such special pleading side we have to recognise that to treat literature purely in terms of its externalities is to fail to understand an important dimension of the pleasure it affords, whether it be its imaginative power to transport us into another world or to renew our delight in language itself. If poetry exercises a form of sociological imagination, it may simply consist in this capacity to offer us a gimpse into another, but still possible, world, in which the cliches of common sense, and the media hype of spin doctors and marketeers have given way to an idiom of counter-factual truth where so much that otherwise remains on the tip of our tongue is at last put into memorable words.

**Rethinking the social**

One of the problems in constructing a sociology of poetry that does justice to the delicate complexity of its subject matter may well be the very concept of the ‘social’ which sociologists use. That at least is the conclusion to be drawn from a recent critique that Bruno Latour has made of traditional social theories. And 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 writes:

‘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- poesis - 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 routinised or institutionalised and the other not.

What are the implications of this approach for a 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[[1]](#endnote-1). Although these in nd that means that poetry – or rather the act of writing and reading it – on account of its predisposition, at least in Western cultures, towards highly privatised and individualised, requires a distinctive form of sociability, which is created through specific communities of practice.

 Take, for example, poetry readings. Today they are probably the main way that poetry is communicated, but in their present form they are a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the 1960’s well known poets might give the occasional public reading, or broadcast, and issue gramophone recordings, but they had little direct contact with their audience. The majority of published poets remained just that. The advent of public readings as a central feature of the poetry scene has changed the situation dramatically and with it the way a lot of poetry is written and read.

Readings vary enormously in scope and scale. Famous poets may read to a packed house of several thousand at a literary festival - but most events are much more modest affairs. The audience is made up of fellow poets, professional and amateur, there may be an ‘open mic’ slot, where people come up and read from the floor before the main attraction. At first glance these are social occasions much like any other. They bring people with similar interests together, facilitate networking, relay gossip and generally enact the community of practice. But of course what make them different from, say, a businessmen’s luncheon club, is the fact that people stand up and read their poems aloud!

 And increasingly this reading aloud enters into the poem’s composition, from the very beginning, and 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 bad 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 poem and the poet can get so elided that it is impossible to disentangle them. 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 a talented actor such as 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.

So although 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 first hearing or sight, it is possible to over-egg the pudding. 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: it is both textual form and live speech event.

 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.

From a Latourean perspective what is interesting about this example is how a new mode of social expression is first made possible by a purely formal development internal to poetry and then serves as a conduit for constant acts of revisioning, both small and large: from the rewriting of particular poems, to their re-reading or re-positioning within a wider corpus of texts, to the regeneration of a whole repertoire of poetic devices and techniques. For example, the advent of the Beat poets renewed public interest in the work of William Blake and Walt Whitman, which until then had been out of critical fashion. It is this continual reshuffling of the poetic pack that makes new connections – and disconnections - between young and old guards, up and comers and established, the living and the dead. In and through this process new movements or schools of poetry are born, usually in reaction to existing ones, and as a means by which a younger generation can assert its independence from the patronage of their elders and deal with the anxiety of influence which their erstwhile mentors still exert over their work.

 For the most part these shifts are examples of auto-poesis. Poetry is a largely self organising, self replicating domain and explains itself to itself in its own terms That is what poetics, the codification of poetic practice.is all about. Yet poetry can also be occasioned by events outside itself, some public and some private. It may be specially commissioned to celebrate the anniversary of some famous public figure’s birth or death; or the opening of a bank. Some poems are, of course, written as a direct response to the happenstance of political events; others to warn of dire things to come unless political action is taken. Equally people turn to poetry in moments of special joy or sorrow in their personal lives, where ordinary everyday language seems inadequate to convey the depth of feeling and meaning they want to communicate. In so far as it can still claim to be defined as ‘memorable speech’ poetry lends itself to these large and small acts of commemoration.

Yet apart from these exceptional moments, poetry is no longer an active part of the collective memory in the way it was for earlier generations. There was a time when a repertoire of apt quotation from the major poets was regarded as an important cultural accomplishment and one not necessarily restricted to the elite. In her novel, Cranford, set in the 1820’s Mrs Gaskell records a farmer with a passion for poetry and a large library of both classics and contemporary work, who strode about his fields quoting from Goethe or Byron whenever he came across a feature in the landscape which reminded him of their lines. Today, apart from those professionally interested in poetry, quotation is no longer regarded as a conversational skill. This has a lot to do with the fact that children no longer have to learn poetry by heart at school , although the ordeal of having to stand up and recite in front of the rest of the class probably did more than anything to turn young people off the subject for life. Fortunately this was also a period in which the recitation of comic or narrative verse was part of popular entertainment, a regular feature of ‘variety’ shows and concert parties, so that poetry of a kind remained an integral part of many people’s everyday experience. Nevertheless the art of remembering and reciting has not disappeared, only migrated to a different medium; rap with its repetitive phrasing, assonance and strong end rhymes is nowadays where young people learn to quote.

 Poetry 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, ‘poeticised’. The samizdat poetry produced in the Soviet Union, through its mode of clandestine circulation, connected up otherwise isolated sources of opposition to the regime and strengthened them. In the USA during the 1960’s and 70’s, the beat poets, Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti, and Snyder, associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and the City Lights Bookshop, launched a movement that made connections between political resistance to the Vietnam war, the student movement, and the emergence of a bohemian culture dedicated to a hedonistic life style. As a result they influenced hundreds of thousands of young people across the Western world, many of whom never read a word of their poetry, but who identified with what it came to represent: a rejection of the competitive work ethic and materialism associated with pursuit of the American dream; an interest in the use of certain drugs and techniques of eastern mysticism to attain heightened states of consciousness; and a desire to experiment with new communal and environmentally friendly styles of living. Poetry thus became the medium of messages other than its own, whilst , at the same time poeticising them, enabling them to express their more imaginative possibilities in a way that would otherwise have been lacking.

The Beats also profoundly influenced the poetry scene, with their insistence on the primacy of the spoken word, and the importance of poetry getting in closer touch with vernacular speech communities. The Merseyside poet, Roger McGough, one of a number of English poets influenced by the American beats, uttered the famous dictum: Most people ignore most poetry / Because most poetry ignores most people’.The Merseyside poets, in particular, made strenuous efforts to address common everyday experiences in a language that emulated the brevity and catchiness of the pop lyric. In this way a path was opened up for the advent of performance poetry in the 1980’s, emerging from the rap scene to embed poetic diction in the insistent rhythms and improvisatory rhetoric’s of street culture. But there was also a strong reaction from within the Academy to these developments, a new emphasis on the formal properties of verse, and the importance of poets mastering traditional techniques of composition before they push at the boundaries or experiment with new idioms.

As this example suggests, poetry makes itself social in many different ways. An inspirational poetics, that casts poets in a charismatic role, as bards, prophets, or visionaries, requires an appropriately oracular style of language and delivery, creating an aura around the work in a way that tends to attract cultic followings. In contrast an academic poetics that sees itself as the guardian of a national literary tradition, enshrined in a canon of ‘great poets’, will demand displays of technical virtuosity and cultural erudition from those who aspire to join their ranks; entry into the community of poetic practice, whether as readers or writers, is thus restricted to those who have the appropriate qualifications. Finally, poetry that sees itself as the direct voice of broader social movements, usually aims to be both accessible and egalitarian, for example opening up the poetry scene by blurring the distinction between professional and amateur; authenticity of expression and collective consciousness are here the qualities most prized in poets, not charismatic authority or formal skill.

 **What is Poetry?**

One contemporary poet whose work shows some interesting points of connection with Latourean perspectives is John Ashbery[[2]](#endnote-2). 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 regards 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 her 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 (e.g 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 he looks at various well know poetic strategies and then outlines his own, entitled ‘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 a rumination on poetics constructed around a series of replies to its central question ‘But 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 ( ).

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. But its 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 poets intention or mood (I feel a wintry poem coming on) and external happenstance (it snows). But 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(12 ). 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, don’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 ! But 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 perforce returns! But is he also implying that the modernist project has failed? Perhaps, after all, 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’ refers 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 infamous Ashbery moments of indeterminacy, where he throws a spanner in the works of anyone trying to pin down his referents? But 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. But Ashbery’s field, like Wallace Stevens’, is much more ‘out there’, a potential space for a poem, waiting to be discovered, although only through bringing a sixth, imaginative, sense to bear.

The poem has now turned suddenly didactic as it apparently instructs readers how to get their heads into that creative 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 but 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 Latourean 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 continuity of 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. But 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 wannabe 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. But what we have to do in every case is to trace them back to the specifics of the poem itself.

1. Latour himself has argued that one of the functions of poetry 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, without having to fall back on pathetic fallacies. And also for observing the natural world on as much of its own terms as it allows. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 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. But 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 about his work between different schools of American poetry.

**Books cited**

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John Barrell The Dark Side of the landscape (1972)

Pierre Bourdieu Distinction ( 1975)

Bruno Latour Re-assembling the social (2006)

Phil Cohen’s website : [**http://www.philcohenworks.com**](http://www.philcohenworks.com/) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)