



SOCIOLOGY OF THE ARTS

Class and the Uses of Poetry Symbolic Enclosures

Andrew Smith

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Sociology of the Arts

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PREFACE

This book has been a shamefully long time coming. I first began to contemplate the possibility of a project exploring the cultural politics of poetry nearly a decade ago and it is a number of years since I completed the last formal interviews and reading groups. A concatenation of different events over that period and since—illness and bereavement in my close family; a four-year stint as Head of Subject; the various impacts of COVID-19—have meant that it's taken me far longer than it ought to have done to properly reflect on those conversations and to find a way of articulating some of the things which they taught me. That there is anything to show at all is thanks to the very many ways in which I have benefitted from the support of others.

In the first place, I am enormously grateful to those who gave up their time in order to take part in this research, as well as to the many people working for local authority, third sector and community organisations, who generously shared details about the project with their networks or who put me in touch with potential participants. Many of those who did end up taking part were enthusiastic at the prospect of reading and discussing poetry. Others were perhaps less so and it was clear that, for some of those involved, the idea of participating was felt to entail a certain kind of symbolic risk—something which I've described below as a trip into occupied terrain. This book simply would not exist were it not for the fact that so many women and men were willing to take that risk. More than that, however, the lines of analysis which I develop in the following

chapters are heavily indebted to the ways in which participants themselves reflected on, and made critical sense of, their encounter with these poems. The same goes for the poets who were also willing to talk to me, and whose accounts gave such a vivid sense of why poetic craft might matter, as well as of the ways in which access to those creative possibilities can be circumscribed along the lines of class.

I am fortunate to be surrounded by colleagues and students who are a seemingly inexhaustible source of insight, advice, encouragement and critical good sense. I owe too much to too many of them to be able to mention everyone by name but I want to acknowledge particular debts to Bridget Fowler—whose work *The Alienated Reader* has been, in many ways, the inspiration for this research, and who offered typically incisive and helpful reflections on the first drafts of my empirical chapters—and to Les Back who, with characteristic intellectual generosity, gifted me a copy of Orwell’s essay on the significance of poetry in a world of mass communication. Many other colleagues and students, at the University of Glasgow and beyond, have also given me rich food for thought in the course of conversations, in response to the presentation of early drafts of this work at seminars and conferences or have pointed me towards very useful sources and studies. Together with my colleagues, Lucy Pickering and Giovanni Picker, I had the good fortune to convene a weekly *Sociology Café* for our students through the course of the pandemic, and in that context, I had the particular privilege of moderating an occasional series of sessions entitled ‘Bring Your Own Poem’, later expanded to ‘Bring Your Own Creativity’. Those interactions were, in themselves, a compelling demonstration of how the reading, writing and sharing of poetry—as well as other kinds of creative practice—can create the grounds for sociality and can offer us a particular kind of sustenance when we most need it. Thanks are also due, then, to all those who took part so generously, and so supportively, in those sessions.

I am grateful also to colleagues in the Audio-Visual Service at the University of Glasgow, and to a former doctoral student—now a colleague at the University of Dundee—Michael Morris. The former provided skilled oversight of the process of making recordings of the poems that were used in this research; the latter gave a compelling reading of some of those poems as part of that recording. I benefited, also, from the generous support of my institution—specifically the College of Social Sciences, and the School of Social and Political Sciences—in the form of a number of small awards which helped cover various research costs.

I need also to acknowledge some more personal and long-standing debts. I was very fortunate, in the course of my secondary school education, now the better part of forty years ago, to be taught by two deeply committed English teachers—I knew them as Mrs. Craig and Mrs. Norris—in two different state secondary schools in Scotland, both of whom had a heartfelt love of poetry and who found ways of communicating that love to those in their classes despite the many institutional and other distractions which might easily have prevented them from doing so. More importantly, perhaps, they encouraged us to think of poetry as something valuable in its own right, doing all they could to guard it against the killing instrumentalism of assessment processes. Like many others, I suspect, it was only many years later, in guilty retrospect, that I realised what a precious gift they were holding out to us.

Lastly, none of this and little of anything else would be possible without the love and support of my family, especially my two beautiful sons—Sam and Laurie—and my entirely wonderful partner Emma. I also have the profound good luck to be in a position where I can disagree with Philip Larkin's bleak assessment of what our parents do for us. Accordingly, I want to dedicate this book to my Dad. Although poetry has not mattered quite as much in his cultural life as music, football and art—roughly in that order?—I vividly recall once hearing him read aloud T.S. Eliot's *Journey of Magi*. I still remember something of the sense of that experience, the feeling that one was in the presence, for a moment, of what might be called—to borrow a phrase from Willa Cather—something entire.

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CONTENTS

1	A Late Return to Form: Reflections on Sociology and Poetry	1
2	Reading Poetry Now: A Short Methodological Overview	33
3	Where Are We Going With This?: Poetry and Symbolic Exclusion	45
4	Not Within Us, But Between Us: Making Sense of Poetry	87
5	We've All Got an Inner Being: Poetic Labour in an Unequal Field	127
6	A Long Conclusion: On the Uses of Poetry	153
	Appendix: Poems	179
	Bibliography	189
	Index	201



CHAPTER 1

A Late Return to Form: Reflections on Sociology and Poetry

This is a study of some of the ways in which people engage with poetry. More specifically, it explores how readers—for the most part, working-class readers—engaged with and made sense of a selection of contemporary Scottish poems. That engagement was not necessarily a straightforward one and some of those with whom I worked felt that the poems which I had shared with them were written in a way that was restrictive or opaque. To the extent that this was the case, what follows can be understood as an exploration of one kind of cultural exclusion. By the same token, however, it is equally an exploration of how women and men responded to that experience, and of the resourcefulness, the creativity and the critical awareness, which was often evident in those responses. This is also, albeit in a less developed way, a study of the writing of poetry and more particularly of the experiences of a small number of poets, of their relationship to their own poetic labour and of their efforts to secure symbolic recognition in what many found to be a literary field skewed heavily against them. Given this, and as might be expected, much of what follows reflects on how the relationship to a cultural form such as poetry is constitutively entangled with the formation of social relations, how inequalities structuring access to particular kinds of privileged cultural texts and practices continue to both reflect and reproduce the lived reality of class.

Recent years have seen a certain degree of scepticism in cultural sociology as regards these kinds of questions. As various writers such as Elizabeth Long (2003: 22–23) and Tia DeNora (2004) have argued, focussing only on the ways in which our relationships with different kinds of culture serve to mediate wider social relations leaves unasked important questions about the character of aesthetic experience itself. Questions, for instance, about what draws people to particular creative practices or phenomena in the first place and about the generative possibilities of our relationship with specific kinds of art, music, literature and so forth. Questions, moreover, about the potentialities of the objects of aesthetic interest in their own right. Such objects, as Antoine Hennion argues in an influential essay, have distinctive properties, which are themselves a constitutive part of how taste is made. A painting, a bottle of wine, a piece of music, do things to the person who does things with them. They are not just ‘already there, inert’, ready to be picked up and played as ‘tokens’ in the games of culture (Hennion 2007: 105; see also Oclese and Savage 2015).

In many ways, it seems to me, these claims are salutary and important ones. It would indeed be insufficient to treat poetry, for example, as if it were nothing more than the symbolic equivalent of fiat money, something which enriches those who ‘own’ it and impoverishes those who do not, but which is as practically useless in itself as a paper banknote. As a historically constituted aesthetic practice poetry comes with its own potentialities and its own affordances. It makes things possible and things can be done with it. This being so, any attempt to think sociologically about poetry requires us to reflect seriously on poetry’s qualitative distinctiveness as a cultural practice, and to look closely at what happens, at what is made possible, in the reading, sharing and writing of poems.

Unlike some commentators, however, I am not persuaded that attention to the affordances of aesthetic practices or objects requires us to move beyond the account of cultural inequality so powerfully provided by Pierre Bourdieu (see Born 2010). Aside from anything else, Bourdieu’s work begins from a stubborn and necessary acknowledgement that cultural practices and objects are not equally available to all. ‘Taste’, Hennion argues, ‘is a making’, something which takes shape from the moment in which individuals turn a particular attention to the object at hand, ‘on the lookout for what it does to them, attentive to traces of what it does to others’ (2007: 104). There is something seductive about this vision of how aesthetic encounters can ‘hail’ us, and can take shape in our lives. Yet there is also something too easily assuaging about an

account which skips so quickly over the fact that aesthetic experiences are not simply there for the asking. What many of my respondents described, in reflecting on their sustained effort to attend to the poems at hand, was a sense of denial, refusal or rejection. Access to the affordances of distinctive cultural practices remain, in crucial ways, contingent on opportunities and encounters which are not equally distributed. Simone Varriale reminds us of this fact in his helpful attempt to imagine an ‘unlikely marriage’ between a Bourdieusian framework, on the one hand, and this more recent, more phenomenologically minded cultural sociology, on the other. That former perspective remains necessary, he notes, because even as we might explore the formative quality of aesthetic encounters, we cannot lose sight of the ways in which those encounters are socially situated and are shaped by the positionality of the actors involved. We cannot forgo, in other words, the question of ‘who these actors are, that is, their trajectories and degree of engagement (or position) with existing social fields’ (Varriale 2016: 173).

Or, to put it slightly differently: another way of conceiving of that ‘unlikely marriage’ is to recognise that a concern with the affordances of aesthetic practices has the potential to ‘flesh out’ a Bourdieusian account of cultural inequality. It can only help us arrive at a *more* complete reckoning with the nature of that inequality if we ask what creative and experiential possibilities are brought within reach—or are placed beyond reach—in the access to—or exclusion from—particular cultural forms and traditions. Whilst it remains true that taste ‘classifies the classifier’, cultural dispossession is not just a matter of how a person’s relationship to a given kind of cultural practice positions them vis-à-vis others or even how it shapes their own interior sense of their own social position; it is also a question of what historical materialist accounts have long called the use-values of the cultural stuff with which people either do, or do not, get the chance to engage (see, for example, Fowler 1991: 30–48).

* * *

Sociologists, it has to be said, do not appear to have been especially eager to ask any of these questions with regard to poetry. Anyone scouring the contents of the major British sociology journals could be forgiven if they came away with the impression that, for much of its history, the discipline has cast poetry out of mind just as decisively as Plato once cast poets outside the walls of his republic. A systematic search of abstracts within

Sociology, *The Sociological Review*, *The British Journal of Sociology* and *Cultural Sociology* reveals a handful of articles in which poetry is addressed as a relevant feature of particular social contexts (for example: Branford 1925; Frannsen 2015; Hunter et al. 2016). It also reveals the occasional article which seeks to use poetry as an innovative means of presenting research findings (Bloor 2013; Edkins 2022). But across these, the most widely read journals in British sociology, there is only one article—of which more, below—which is specifically dedicated to a consideration of poetry *as such*, as a distinctive kind of aesthetic practice. Nor are there obvious equivalents to the book-length studies of the novel as a particular literary form developed by Ian Watt (1957), Lucien Goldmann (1975) or various others.¹ Even in what we might think of as the heyday of the sociology of art and literature in the 1970s and 80s individual poems and poets were present as examples or as case-studies but there was no sustained attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to develop a sociology of poetry in its own right (see, for example: Laurenson and Swingewood 1971; Routh and Wolff 1977; Swingewood 1986).

Why might this be the case? In part, at least, it is due to an understandable wariness in the face of any question taking a form such as: ‘what is poetry?’ From a sociological perspective, questions framed that way are always likely to appear either tendentious—insofar as they invite an answer in normative rather than historical terms—or simplistic, insofar as they encourage us to think of poetry as some species of cultural butterfly which can be pinned down through a sufficiently exhaustive description of its typological features. But it is also true that there are grounds for treading cautiously, in this respect, when it comes to poetry in particular. In European cultural traditions, at least, it is poetry, certainly more than any other literary practice, which has been clothed in the colours of eternity, which has been conceived of as an aesthetic space outside of history where enduring truths or values continue to shine bright despite the wrackful siege of battering days. Hence, as one example, Ezra Pound’s insistence that the greatest poetry endures by its own right, that poetic value inevitably reasserts itself over time without the intervention of secular institutions, and without any relationship to the self-interest of those who recognise it for what it is: ‘you don’t NEED schools and colleges to keep [great poems] alive [...] once in every so often a chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up again, put them in the light again, without asking any favours’ (1961: 45). Hence, also,

as Wolf Lepenies shows us in his remarkable historical study, the vehement response of the *Georgekreis*—the artistic movement-cum-cult that cohered about the figure of the German poet Stefan George—to the pretensions of sociology as an emergent discipline in the early twentieth century. For them, as for others before and since, sociology's greatest temerity was to extend its relativising hand towards poetry, to imagine that the significance or meaning of a treasured poem could be historically accounted for. Lepenies quotes the later words of another poet, Friedrich Gundolf, which offer us a powerful example of the assertion that art in general—and poetry in particular—transcends any such contingent or contextualising interpretation: 'A work of art is something self-enclosed and self-sufficient, a centre out of which the paths lead to the historical peripheries and not the reverse' (1988: 325).

Yet, not every poet is allowed to free themselves from the mire of the historical in this way and nor is every poem accorded this condition of self-sufficiency. In fact, the question of whether a given text or author is taken to have universal or 'merely' historical significance runs like a fissure through the body of poetry; it is, itself, a pivotal part of how struggles over poetic value have been articulated and how control over the ascription of such value has been asserted. Take, as one particularly telling example, Robert Southey's *Lives and Works of the Uneducated Poets*, a text which is pertinent here given that it is sometimes described as the first study of British working poets. Southey's essay—published in 1831, at a point when he had held the position of Poet Laureate for the better part of two decades—began life as an introduction to a collection of poems which had been sent to him by John Jones. Jones was employed as a butler and, by his own account, often had to carry his 'little pieces' in his mind for days before he could find the freedom to commit them to paper. Southey offers a reflection on Jones' writing, as well as a critical survey of a number of other 'uneducated' poets—John Taylor, John Fredrick Bryant, James Woodhouse, etc.—all of whom faced similar struggles in finding space for poetic creativity amidst the demands of their working lives. He discusses almost all of these writers in the same tone of paternalistic indulgence, clearly finding something admirable in their commitment to their craft but also quashing any claim on their part to lasting literary significance. Thus, for instance, of the so-called 'milk-maid poet' Ann Yearsley, his conclusion is that she had 'extraordinary talents, strong feelings, and an ardent mind', yet also that 'very few passages can be extracted from her writings which would have any other

value than as indicating powers which the possessor knew not how to employ' (1925: 133). Thus, of Stephen Duck, whose *Thresher's Labour* gives a detailed account of the rigours of rural work, Southey says: 'his talents for poetry were imitative rather than inventive'. He goes on to praise Duck for possessing a humility which prevented him from getting ideas above his aesthetic station and which granted him the good grace to realise that 'he was incapable of imitating what he clearly saw was best' (113).

Southey, to be fair to him, rejects the idea that the writing of poetry should only be encouraged if it is 'of the very best'. To assume so, he says, would reduce poems to a 'luxury' for 'sickly intellectuals' (164). At the same time, however, he dismisses equally the possibility that any of these working poets might join the exalted ranks of 'the very best', a dismissal which is most pointedly articulated in the judgement that their poetry has a strictly historical, rather than enduringly aesthetic, significance: 'There is nothing of John Taylor's which deserves preservation for its intrinsic merits alone, but in the collection of his pieces which I have perused there is a great deal to illustrate the manners of his age' (86).

Wielding that discriminatory power, needless to say, serves as an aggrandising enactment of Southey's own symbolic authority. It is perhaps thus unsurprising that a subsequent edition of the book, published during his lifetime, reversed the order of the text so that Jones' 'Attempts in Verse' became a mere supplement to the Poet Laureate's essay. By the time of the twentieth-century reprint, edited by the American scholar James Saxon Childers, Jones' poems have been evicted altogether. 'Today', Childers concludes in his introduction, '[Jones'] poems are remembered from no merits of their own but solely because of "the embalming power of Mr. Southey's pen"' (1925: xi). In saying so, perhaps, Childers lets slip a little more than he intends. At the very least, it becomes clear that literary merit does not straightforwardly 'speak for itself', but is rather something which does, or does not, come to be bestowed upon given poems. Whilst his comment is made in the tone of a regretful and retrospective observation it describes, of course, a forgetfulness which he is, himself, in the process of ensuring through his own editorial decision. Moreover, the refusal to 'embalm' Jones' poetry is, at one and the same time, the ascription of that eternalising power to Southey and his pen. The latter's aesthetic transcendence is affirmed in and through the very act that condemns these other poets to languish in the 'historical peripheries'.

* * *

To be clear: neither every poet nor every protagonist of poetry has shared the assumption that poems are works which exist, or should exist, apart from the currents of history. As Raymond Williams (1990 [1958]) reminded us, even at the high-water mark of Romanticism, which has often been taken as enshrining this world-unto-itself conception of poetry, there were many dissenting voices. We might think, for instance, of William Hazlitt's democratising insistence that poetry is 'impatient of all limit', that it acts in harmony with what he took to be a common desire for seeing things in their interrelationship, rather than in a deadening isolation: 'Poetry represents forms chiefly as they suggest other forms or other feelings' (1991: 311). It is an insistence which, in many ways, recalls Antonio Gramsci's assertion that 'everybody is already cultured because everybody [...] connects causes and effects' (1985: 25). Nonetheless, I hope the preceding discussion helps make clear why the question of poetry's distinctiveness as an aesthetic practice might be an especially slippery one so far as sociology is concerned. It is slippery, in the first place, because those same questions are so deeply implicated in the constructions by which certain voices have been allowed in, whilst others have been excluded from, the poetic field. Given this, the idea of trying to grasp the qualitative specificity of poetry might well seem like a move that plays into the hands of these processes of symbolic enclosure. As I have argued, I believe that we *do* need to attend to these questions if we wish to think seriously about why the presence or absence of different kinds of culture might matter, substantively, in people's lives. Yet, we cannot forget that these are also questions which themselves constitute—as Bourdieu had it—stakes in the game (1995: 166–173). We cannot overlook the fact, in other words, that categorical statements about what constitutes poetry and about the peculiar potentialities of poetry have been, frequently, part of how the boundaries of poetry itself have come to be 'classed' in the ways that they have.

In the second place, the issue is made trickier still by the fact that the relationship between sociology and poetry, specifically, is fraught to a degree that is not quite the case when it comes to sociology's relationship with—for instance—novels or photography or basketball. There are two sides to any antagonism, of course, and two sides to this relationship, as I will go on to explore. For the moment, suffice it to note

that, at least from the perspective of a particular aesthetic orthodoxy, sociology is in many ways the ‘other’ of poetry proper, or at least what lies beyond its walls. As we saw with Southey, a sociological or historicising reading is where supposedly ‘failed’ poetry is sent to die. Auden’s advice, from 1946, was not addressed only to aspiring poets, but he surely had them partly in mind when he warned his listeners ‘never to commit a social science’. Resistance to the very idea of a ‘sociology of poetry’ thus involves something more than the usual border skirmishing between disciplines. It entails a heightened sense that ‘the thing itself’ might be at stake, that any effort to historicise the question of poetic value or the significance of poetic texts constitutes an assault on what poetry is at its core, and thus on what it sustains or makes possible.

How, then, to respond? My view, for what it is worth, is that the best way of avoiding the prospect of being gored on the horns of this dilemma is to approach the whole question in as dialectical a fashion as possible. Hence, on the one hand, I have worked on the assumption that our most practicable sociological guide to the use-values of poetry is likely to be close attention to the ways in which people actually use, or seek to use, or might be prevented from using, poems. In the chapters that follow, as I reflect on the encounters between different readers and poetries, and on the discussions I had with a small number of poets about their work and what that work means to them, I try to keep one eye on what it is that people seek to do with poetic writing; on what specific experiential or epistemological horizons might—or might not—be opened up through engagement with poetry; on what kinds of aesthetic or other resources men and women might find at play in the reading or writing of poems. In short, although I offer some general reflections on poetry in this chapter, across the study as a whole I have tried to approach the question of the creative affordances of poetry in a largely inductive manner, building from the empirical ground up. Apart from anything else, as I hope to show, attending to how people actually grapple with poetry, or seek to engage with poetry, or put poetry to use in the situated reality of their lives, often calls into question the hegemonic ways in which poetry has come to be described, defined or delimited.

On the other hand, however, the flip side of that dialectical question is the recognition that, like all cultural forms, poetry as a practice and individual poetic texts themselves, are determinate. The historically constituted ‘shapes’ of poetry, if I can put it like that, necessarily shape, in turn, the ways in which poetry can be used or responded to and,

indeed, can often help explain why some readers might find themselves excluded from a meaningful engagement with poetry. Put more plainly: when people pick up a poem they are picking up something which is a particular kind of utterance, which speaks in a particular kind of way, and which is not simply exchangeable for one of the many other ways in which people use language in order to communicate or express themselves. We can and should be sceptical of attempts to impose an absolutist definition of poetry whilst still acknowledging, and reckoning with, the historically established conventions, expectations or traditions, which constitute poetry as a particular aesthetic practice. Or, to put things slightly less plainly and rather more technically: in thinking about forms of creativity such as poetry we might be well advised to avoid the endless squaring off between a full-throttle relativism—for which anything can count as poetry; for which the designation ‘poem’ is a matter of symbolic struggle seemingly unconstrained by any of the qualitative features of the text or practice in question—and the continuous conservative effort to bring cultural struggles to a dead-halt, to carve the boundaries of ‘poetry’, and the canon of true poets, once-and-for-all in tablets of imperishable stone. Both of these moves, in their different ways, have the effect of denying poetry its historical existence, the latter by imagining a kind of aesthetic ascension out of history altogether, and the former by imagining that the ways in which poetry has come to be understood, practised and used, are entirely ephemeral or arbitrary.

Poetry, in short, has a social reality. Like all such realities it is open to challenge and contestation, but is also deeply compelling; it is compelling precisely because it emerges out of, and bears upon itself, the imprimatur of historically situated aesthetic struggles and acts of aesthetic labour which cannot be simply wished away or over-ridden. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

In any culture, there are certain complex sets of criteria as to what counts as good or bad poetry; and although there can be an enormous amount of disagreement over how these criteria are to be applied, or whether they are valid in the first place, their application is far from a subjective affair. People may wrangle over whether a particular patch of colour counts as green, but this does not mean that ‘green’ is a purely subjective judgement. (2007: 111)

Another way of saying this is simply to acknowledge that anyone who wishes to write or read a poem cannot somehow ‘step around’ the socially constituted reality of what poetry is understood to be. By the same token, our only path to understanding poetry sociologically—and our only path to grasping its entailment in forms of social inequality—lies through a reckoning with that reality in its own terms.

It is worth adding here, as a final comment, that it also seems important to me to think dialectically about what is revealed, more widely, in these symbolic struggles over the designation or description of ‘poetry’ as a cultural object. In that sense, I want to do something more than simply critique the kinds of claims that I have briefly mentioned above—e.g. those which invest poetry with an idea of universality, or which construe it as the safehouse for a precious kind of freedom. A critical sociology of culture has always tried to keep open a two-sided awareness, in this regard, has always involved a willingness to bring to light the complicity of cultural practices with relations of social domination whilst *also* recognising that the ways in which those practices are used and understood may articulate longings and demands which are, in themselves, an indictment of a world defined by such relations. I have, so far as I am able, sought to retain that double-edged awareness in thinking about poetry in what follows. In the final chapter of the study, I return to these questions and try to offer some general reflections with respect to them.

* * *

Thus far, these opening reflections have cast a sociological gaze towards poetry. How might things appear the other way about? If, from the perspective of a particular kind of aesthetic orthodoxy, the very idea of sociology of poetry might seem dangerously corrosive, a threat to the ‘thing itself’, what should we learn from the fact that sociology as a discipline seems to have found poetry strangely hard to handle?

A. H. Halsey, in his history of British sociology, makes a somewhat poignant reference to Charles Madge—co-founder of the Mass Observation Project—as the last sociologist who was also a recognised poet, as if to demonstrate the impossibility of poetry flourishing or reproducing itself in the sociological ecosystem (2004: 15). Halsey, in fact, overlooks a more recent case, that of John Powell Ward. Ward is, as Madge was, a poet of considerable standing—having published numerous collections of

poetry, and having served for some years as the editor of *Poetry Wales*—but is also the author of a number of sociological studies and texts. And it is Ward who gives us that solitary essay, mentioned above, which was published in *Sociology* in 1979 and which took poetry as its focussed concern. What is striking about Ward’s argument in that context—an argument which he elaborated more fully in a subsequent monograph—is that, far from making the case for a détente between sociology and poetry, he insists that the two disciplines do indeed exist in a relationship of deep-seated and implacable incompatibility. If Ward might be said to turn a poet’s gaze back on sociology, his conclusion from having done so is that poetry, as a practice, stands ‘defiant’ of the very way in which sociologists habitually approach, understand and write about the world.

The reasons why Ward takes this view are worth elaborating upon. In the first place, he distinguishes poetry from everyday speech, but also from the formalised language of philosophy, on the grounds that it neither addresses an audience nor anticipates an answer. Its existence is rather, he argues, a consequence of our need to find a way of bespeaking those realities—death, nature, love, etc.—which bring us closest to what he calls the ‘non-social thing’ (1981: 206). It does this by reaching for a form of utterance in which language becomes ‘sufficient to itself’ (1979: 91). ‘Poetry’ is thus:

some event of an order not recapturable into the social order at all; it is untranslatable, permanently itself, an incessant reminder of the empty spaces outside the pattern of merely social interaction and institutions; a hint that the empty spaces may not be so empty after all. (86)

Perhaps we might feel, here, that the baker has slightly overegged the cake. After all, the sensitively contextualised readings that Ward offers of a series of poets in his monograph would seem to suggest that poetry is rather more implicated in the ‘social order’ than he otherwise allows. Nonetheless, his helpfully provocative argument is that poetry, by calling attention to those aspects of our experiences which are in some sense ‘given’, by making those things present for us, confronts sociology as a ‘black hole’ or a ‘piece of anti-matter’ (1981: 211). Anti-matter, not least, because in so doing poems call into question a founding article of sociological faith: i.e. the view that reality is socially constituted and thus that ‘society’ is the only necessary point of reference—the only necessary *explanans*—for all that happens to us in our lives.

By the same token Ward argues, sociology and poetry necessarily approach and handle language in fundamentally divergent ways. For the former, he suggests, language is nothing more than the means by which society ‘thinks itself aloud’:

It is as though all we have is this one metaphysic of sociality, a blank cheque or a conception like the similarly irreducible ‘all’, ‘thing’, ‘Being’ or ‘reality’, so simply that it approach nothingness [...] [P]recisely because we have therefore no obdurate outside authority such as God, kings or nature to guide us, we must always articulate this thing, ‘society’, to ourselves as best we can in order to remain close to one another. (209)

Language thus appears to the sociological imagination as the means of this constant self-articulation: the conduit of social relationships; the vehicle of ideology or discourse; a system which serves to mediate social reality. Poetry, by contrast, works to form language precisely in ways that disrupt or impede this relentless nexus of social communication. The poet tries to turn the language around, to point it the other way about, to give us what Hans-Georg Gadamer called the word ‘detached from all intending’ (1986: 107). Or, as Ward has it: poetry is born in the effort to use ‘language, that most social of all phenomena, [to] achieve the expression or quiddity of the non-social’ (1979: 101).

It follows, therefore, that poetry is, for Ward, ‘defiant’ of sociological understanding in one further sense. Whereas sociological analysis typically depends on placing things in explicative connection to other things, disclosing what they reveal about a wider social context whether as cause, consequence, evidence or whatever it happens to be, poetry strives to grant us an apprehension of things in themselves; it strives to find a way of stripping away the pre-packaged quality of what Rainer Maria Rilke called ‘this interpreted world’. It does this not by seeking to provide a more accurate account of that world, not by submission to some standard of mimetic precision, but rather by instantiating for us, in and through the kind of aesthetic object that it is, a sense of self-justified presence, an encounter with that which is not beholden to some other, explanatory purpose but whose meaning is itself. Thus, to use Gadamer’s words again: ‘what appears in the mirror [of poetry] is not the world, nor this thing or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while’ (1986: 115). On this account, then, however much they might twist and turn sociology and poetry will always find