

**Revisiting the Gap between Words and Reality:
Critical Reflections on the Symposium “Poetry as Social Action”**

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“Painting relates to both art and life... (I try to act
in the gap between the two.)”
—Robert Rauschenberg (21)

“It seems you are objecting to more than just my presentation,” was the astute comment with which Ali Alizadeh concluded what had been an energetic exchange in question time between the two of us, after his provocatively free-form exposition titled ‘The People of the Poem.’ Reflecting on his comment as the afternoon continued and beyond, I concluded he was correct, although his presentation had been what ignited my objections. What follows here can be read as a response of the kind that might have been made had the Symposium’s panels had formal respondents; in effect, the intimate nature of the Symposium allowed everyone present to be a potential respondent. I have written this to be a dialogical engagement from my personal perspectives with what became for me the salient directions of thought-prior-to-action stimulated by the Symposium. Despite what may be perceived as combativeness in the opinions I express and the issues I raise here, I want to help keep going what I experienced, from being in the audience, as a very constructive conversation.

Regrettably I didn’t get back to Auckland from out of town till the Friday afternoon sessions. So I missed the presentations and consequent discussion by Adam Aitken on Asian Australian poets and anthology selections, and Ann Vickery on New Zealand Gay and Lesbian voices. Their perspectives on how acts of inclusion (and exclusion) alter our perceptions of reality, and even of what gets considered as part of reality, would no doubt have been germane to my comments here. I also missed Ya-Wen Ho’s theorizing around her own practice experimenting with the social composition of texts.

The first afternoon session was comprised of two writers considering where the boundaries relevant to poetry as social action might be. Jen Crawford presented an intricate reading of

Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's collection *Hello, The Roses* as an expansion of the social to include plant ecologies as well. On the day that discussion felt too constrained by what seemed a rather strict empiricism hampering this American poet's purposes. But the subtleties of her re-conceiving of her own perceptual processes eluded me at the time. Further contemplation has got me wondering whether her 'holographic' approach to both composition and perception, as explicated in Jen's paper, perhaps proposes possibilities close to my own concerns being raised here. I will return to this likelihood, which if true amounts to much less constriction than I first thought, in my closing comments.. Constraint was hardly the issue in Ali Alizadeh's presentation, which was a freeform exposition tossing out surprising and glittering assertions like fireworks. He might have been proposing that we can jettison any reality in the idea of 'society' so as to make space for a notion of poetry that can be a synthesis, as he put it, of "mysticism and pornography." For myself, I see some types of pop and rock music to be much better suited to the synthesis of "mysticism and pornography," and was far too unconvinced by his choices of theory to be persuaded about what possibilities it creates for a poetry of social action. The second session brought two poets, New Zealander David Howard and Hawaii-based American Susan Schultz, talking directly about their own poetic practice, and I will have more to say about Susan's challenging explorations.

While all the talks were thought-provoking and opened up territory for further exploration, when it came to seeing poetry as (a form of) social action, I was most of all surprised by a reticence that seemed to imply defeatism – even Ali's presentation, though not at all reticent, was arguably defeatist – or else by the self-imposed constraints and narrow horizons of expectation evident in the presentations I heard. By defeatism I mean a signaling in advance that poetry is capable of very little significant social action, if any at all – and if the 'poetry' of the title is taken to refer to writing that can be called avant-garde, the chances of changing actual things for the better any time soon are really nil. So it is better to make minimal claims for poetry's efficacy in the world.

This Symposium most particularly emphasized to me that poetry that wants to take theory seriously as one frame of reference or part of its arena of engagement with the world must also recognize that the theory you choose as your frame of reference will predetermine what you conceive as possible, as social action, as political stance, as agent for change. And for some time now many of the most popular theories (of interpretation, and of language) that have dominated literary criticism, and certainly the ones that seem to attract students in post-

graduate courses, have an in-built resignation that language *cannot* (or should not) significantly change the world.

Since I do not share a desire for language to be its own total world, or that it somehow could excuse me from engaging in a world beyond thought and writing, I take issue both with this implied defeatism, and with the premises that I detect as giving rise to it. I want to argue for a more robust and engaged set of principles for relating poetry to social action than I heard in this Symposium, although by my reckoning the Symposium itself set up the terms for such a robust theory, and practice, from the outset.

Unpacking the Symposium title

When I look at the title phrase, “Poetry As Social Action,” I find myself taking those words in reverse order, because their connotations are more straightforward in that order. An ‘action’, especially in the context “social action,” is something done to achieve an effect, to create change, to bring about some desired end – therefore it is much more teleological than a simple ‘activity.’ I related that to the baking-*mitzvot* as described in the Symposium materials and comments. When someone bakes a bunch of yummy stuff to while away a weekend afternoon and have something good to eat later, that is an ‘activity’; whereas when they do exactly the same acts and work, but in order to *share* with those coming to the Symposium so as to save them money and effort, and to share *kai* as an expression of *arohanui* in the academic-communal setting, and to demonstrate a certain kind of purpose in bringing people together in a Symposium context – that transforms the act and work into an ‘action.’ (Baxter and I would also call it something ‘sacramental’ when framed like that, giving the work religious as well as political valence as social action.) Action as social action changes the world we share with others.

‘Social’ could be quite a bit more tricky to pin down. I didn’t find Ali Alizadeh’s attempts to nullify it, or even sweep it away altogether, in the least bit satisfactory (as I no doubt conveyed during question time!). But he did place it in a lexical set that includes the ‘communal’, the ‘egoistic’, the ‘cultural’, the ‘sub-cultural’, dominant and minority groups within a ‘collective’ (a word he might usefully have given more attention), and so on – thus causing us to ponder its particular weight. Nevertheless, at a general level the term is straightforward: it refers to a sizable number of individuals working and living together in ways that share collective purposes, means and ends. Language in this sense (to sound

Wittgenstinian and Derridean at once) is always already social, and a set of codes or ‘games’ that enable ‘social action’ – i.e. acts performed along the lines sketched above, described one way or another through linguistic practices, in the interests of some collection of like-minded people. Despite Jen Crawford’s provocative extension of the category ‘social’ that was opened up by her presentation, for now I am going with this general presumption, that ‘social’ is about the human, rather than about the ecological.

The interesting complication in the title, then, is “Poetry”, or perhaps “Poetry as ...” Here we come up against the *efficacy* of poetry, in order to have any reason to contemplate it “as Social Action.” And this is what gets at the nub of the issue I have with Ali’s presentation, as well as most of the theorist-philosophers who got name-checked through the afternoon.

Because for me, I am absolutely on the side of poetry having, being asked to have, asserting itself and claiming, the efficacy in the world that I associate with the term “Social Action.”

For me, poetry *does* make a difference, it *does* make changes in the world, and it should be asked (not always, but in principle) to do that, to have that role. It changes minds,

perceptions, attitudes, and thus behaviors, modes of expression, ways of communicating.

Things in the world are different after a Shakespeare or Eliot, a Hyde or Baxter, a Creeley or either Curnow.

Cards on the table: my own presuppositions

I came to this Symposium much as Ann Vickery admitted during discussion time, tending to equate “social ...” with “*political* action” – a conflation that may well be noticed threading through my contribution here. I will come first at responses to “Poetry as Social Action” more in that political sense, designed to create change in the world, preferably change for some perceptibly better state of affairs. Then I shall turn to the more broadly conceived sense of the Symposium’s title, to consider “Poetry as Social ...,” especially in the way some poets test the boundaries of who gets included, and what qualifies as social.

Poetry as impotent, or effective, in the world

To give Ali his due, he set the Symposium alight with a presentation that was as risk-taking in its improvisatory performance as it was bold in its provocative declarations. Using only a few scribbled notes and a couple of projected slides, he rapidly sketched out a contrarian view of poetry’s suitability for social action. He zeroed in on the category of “Social” in the

Symposium's theme, declaring it no longer coherent. In particular he averred that since no particularly successful radical-progressive social change had happened since 1968, there was little point in trying to keep "the Social" alive. Instead (perhaps) he proposed a notion that poetry aspire to a scintillating melding of "mysticism and pornography," a prospect I might have found oddly appealing but for two problems. Rather than poetry, when it comes to being exhilarating to the point of evoking transcendence, and being at once sensual, sensuous and spectacular, both live rock concerts and electronic dance music clubs seem to me far better candidates for such a paradoxical mix. Part of my reason for saying that is that Ali seemed to be alluding to an immediacy of experience at work in both mysticism and in pornography. Such immediacy and immersive exhilaration, I suggest, is far more typical of a rocking dance floor experience than attentive listening to or reading of poems.

Ali did not seem to be recognizing the degree also to which pornography is contrived, ritualized, constructed. He seemed to imply that, as with mysticism, pornography involves experience that is as real as it is representational – what you see is what you get. Perhaps that is almost true of a small segment of pornographic activity (for instance real-time film), but all pornography by definition is mediated in some way and thus socially constructed. He seemed not to be distinguishing between real life libertinism as distinct from pornographic representations (e.g. an actual orgy versus a movie of an orgy) – as though pornography gives direct experience of sexual exhilaration. That confusion of representations with reality became an index of what I found was a poorly thought-through view of the relationship between language and life.

I have already referred to the ubiquity of theories of language and interpretation that predetermine the inability of language to affect the world. The predominant theories that make this claim have arisen in the wake of G.W.F. Hegel's supposed edict that only that which is expressed in language has meaning. Language in this context is taken to mean human language, and while it may be extended to imply all sign systems devised by humans, in literary contexts language is accorded unique power to make meaning, and to create 'the world.'

A chasm is thus seen to exist between the world of language, of contrived and conventional codes and sign-systems articulating human consciousness understood as distinct from the inchoate material-physical world, and the world 'out there,' not yet constructed by language. It becomes then a short step to Jacques Derrida's declaration that there is nothing "*hors-*

texte,” outside texts and textuality (158-59), and to Jean Baudrillard’s insistence that we live in worlds that are nothing but representations, a stupefying hall of multi-media mirrors. Once we are enticed down this rabbithole of linguistic totalism, any substantial notion of social action, and indeed any kind of determinative action in the material-physical world, is rendered either as one more play of dissociated signifiers, or else as a downright impossibility.

What I heard Ali falling back on was a repetition of this theoretical position which sounds radical, yet effectively is impotent. During the roundtable discussion Murray Edmond put his finger on a comparable source often taken to express poetic impotence, quoting W. H. Auden’s line that “Poetry makes nothing happen.” There are a couple of things to say sympathetically about this claim, before dispatching it as manifestly untrue. The first is that when quoted out of context it sounds more clear-cut and definitive than it appears in context: poetry, Auden goes on to say, “survives/In the valley of its making ... it survives,/A way of *happening*, a mouth” [my italics]. The context is a poem, Auden’s elegy for the Irish poet and senator W.B. Yeats. Given that Auden also declared “Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings,” it should be no surprise to find that the full context expresses considerable ambiguity about how poetry relates to events that happen, and why. In contrast to how that four-word phrase is usually quoted, it should not be taken to be, in any simplistic sense, a resigned shrug to say poems are impotent in the world.

Second, Auden’s assertion alludes to High Modernism’s desire to identify a field of endeavor or perception that could be magisterial, authoritative, discrete. Philosophers like Husserl and the Logical Positivists, all manner of artists and art movements, poets like Pound, Wyndham Lewis and Eliot, psychologists like Carl Jung, religious studies scholars like Mircea Eliade, and many others, sought out some site that – in the absence of faith in a Divine Transcendent Mind – might now afford humanity a comparable place of refuge for Truth, insulated and dissociated from the relativising effects of historical change and contingencies, scientific discoveries, Darwinian evolution, Freudian psychology, and technological inventions and speed. If “Poetry makes nothing happen,” then it is safe from all that other dreck and change. Such High Modernist endeavours might also be seen as attempts to make *aesthetic* the Platonic drive to establish eternity-beyond-change. (That would entail a distinct paradox, however, since Plato himself *loathed* aesthetic language – something Ali consistently failed to acknowledge when enthusing about the father of Western philosophy. Plato expressly privileged mathematics over sophistic language as a source for reliable Truth, consigning

poets to permanent expulsion from his authoritarian Republic, in Book 7). Perhaps one can deem Auden's (apparent) declaration to have had this lofty intent: for poetry to be an aesthetic remedy for the ravages of (modern) existence.

With all that said, the real problem with the statement "Poetry makes nothing happen" is that it is categorically *untrue*, both ontologically and empirically. Language, even aesthetic instances of language, cannot ultimately give us refuge from life, from the real world and social action, because it is not an Other – *all* human language codes and uses are mortal constructs, and thus contingent, relative, differential, and as Buddhist philosophy has long been eager to teach us, very much part of this 'conditioned existence.' There is no 'outside of life' that language inhabits where it can be blissfully unaffected by life, by the world, by social action.

Language, poetry and the world (i.e. social action)

I no longer remember which of the presenters stated as a foregone premise some essential dichotomy between language and life – as though language has *any* existence apart from (intelligent) life. I understand that in a certain context, language can be regarded as epiphenomenal to lived embodied life, but it is important to acknowledge that this distinction is itself a language game (called 'fiction') dependent entirely on its lived context.

Ontologically speaking, language (by which one means linguistic acts, languages and language uses) actually exists nowhere other than the *real* world. That real world must include real producers and real receivers of language, plus the material codes and media by which language passes from one real person to another, otherwise no actual communication can occur – this is elementary semiotics, surely. While it is a fact that language is marvelously capable of spinning into our minds and emotions the possibilities of umpteen fanciful worlds, from the gothic horrors of Bram Stoker and pornographic atrocities of de Sade to the spectacular epics of Tolkein and goofiness of Edward Lear, all of those language products are as much part of the real world as jet aircraft and domestic plumbing – and the nuts and rivets of them, as writing and grammar, are just as technical and 'thingy' as wing-flaps and U-bends.

Poetry as Social, more than Political, Action

Which brings me to the couple of things I want to say about “Poetry as Social...” The Symposium also got me thinking about who or what *constitutes* ‘the social,’ who does and does not get included within that collective web of actors, agents, and those acted-upon. This line of inquiry comes at ‘Social Action’ not so much as political effects in the world, but more in terms of forms and methods of composition, and thus communication with others. (That distinction, admittedly, cannot be too strict, since inclusion and exclusion are always political acts.) When being drawn towards that theme, I found myself not so much objecting to faulty premises and attitudes of impotence, as struck by lines of thinking or creative enterprise that need perhaps sharper development.

The speaker I heard most willing to push the envelope for social change through poetry was Susan Schultz, in her explication of texts generated in part by her mother’s verbal disorientation because of Alzheimer’s disease. Perhaps appropriately, she presented a serious challenge to me-as-audience or reader. By appropriating scrambled sayings and disjointed speech patterns from her mother and others with that debilitating disease, Susan was certainly expanding the range of what ordinarily gets included in poetry, and in regular language use, so she was again questioning the boundaries of ‘the social’ and what constitutes social action in communication. I found myself made uncomfortable by this source of practice, without being sure I should be. The problem had to do, I thought at the time, with whether her mother could and would truly choose to *consent* to her mis-speaking being used like this.

On reflection, I think it may really have to do with appropriating *unintentionally impaired* speech from someone else. I am myself a fan of appropriation strategies and have indeed used found speech and language, and I readily concede that in most if not all instances we writers use such found language without the consent of the initial utterer or writer. But usually the utterer has a choice whether to have said or written what we appropriate, no matter how discombobulated their utterance might have been.

In the case of an Alzheimer’s victim – or, I reflected, of my own mother who has survived a bad stroke but has serious though not total aphasia and at times gets words very scrambled – we can see brain impairment causing them to say something which is not what they would want or mean to say, were they not impaired. Yes, such utterances are thus language in the world. But poetry as art is (by definition) a form of display. So does one honour the person whose scrambled speech, caused by brain impairment, one displays in texts presented as poetry? Or, since they may not truly identify themselves with what is coming out of their

mouths, is something less than honourable going on in this appropriation? I am raising this as a genuine question, definitely not as an accusation, since I see a number of variables involved in getting an accurate picture of what the practice is, including seeking consent. Happily too, I know I am raising issues that arise in the avant-garde, a context that exists as much as anything to highlight discomforting matters, especially about boundaries and acceptable or admirable practices. Susan's work takes its cues in this regard from those like the Dadaists – both in the derangement of language and its ways of making sense, and in terms of what experiences we humans have and pay attention to, in order to be aware of our capabilities for awareness. My own anxiety is that the issues Susan raises for me are moral ones, more than aesthetic – but then, that would surely come with the territory of 'social action.'

Concluding Thoughts

So what does all this amount to? The Symposium reaffirmed for me again that any poetic, for that matter any artistic practice, bears within it what Charles Altieri has called a "logical geography" and what I prefer to describe as a "map of reality." Once that set of premises is teased out and articulated, it will be seen to determine the degree to which any poet's work participates in social action.

Particular poets will have their views about audience, action in the world, the relationship of language to reality and unreality, the ability of words to effect change, what is important to write about and what not, and what they believe language shaped in various ways allows them to do as well as say. Any body of work will also at least imply if not outright state not just a poetic, but also notions about what anything is (ontology), how we know what we know or don't know (epistemology), the values of actions and ideas (morality), the goals that are desirable or not (teleology), what is pleasurable or harmonious and what is not (aesthetics), and how things are related and dependent on each other (ecology). To be effective at writing poetry capable – as I have argued poetry certainly is – of acting in the world and effecting change, a poet needs to have thought such issues through, in ways that empower and usefully guide their work.

This Symposium raised good questions about Poetry, and Social Action. What I missed was a sense of ways in which avant-garde poetry and poetics can partake in social action. To have gotten that, I maintain, would have required little more than much more *realist* philosophical, or if you prefer, theoretical analyses of possible relations between language, the world, and

human desires, motivations and interrelationships. That is why I proposed, at the late afternoon roundtable, as the book I recommend in this context, Gary Snyder's most recent and wonderful collection of poem-texts, *danger on peaks*. He may be in his mid-80s, and unfortunately still gets associated most with the Beats and the hippie days of the West Coast, but in his ecological thought and immersion in Buddhist and Chinese philosophies he has drawn on thought that addresses all the matters I have described above.

Perhaps in fact there is not too great a distance between Snyder's perceptual and compositional orientation and Berssenbrugge's holographic engagements with her environment. The older poet's oeuvre certainly anticipates her inclusion of plants (be they redwoods, kelp, or a Kyoto pine tree) in delineating his senses of 'society.' I will welcome a chance to revisit in this issue Jen Crawford's exposition of Berssenbrugge's compositional strategies to see how she engages with her lived experienced world through language, suggesting poetic possibilities for changed experience that can be understood as social action.

There's a Chinese saying that to move a mountain begins with moving one bucket of earth at a time. Poems are buckets. It's not usually just one poem, or one poet, or even one movement that creates significant change. For every Snyder or Baxter or Rich, there are 60 or even 600 poets and poems that are there with them, helping to move those mountains. And they all add up. The poems you teach in class, include in an anthology, say aloud in pubs, put on a poster in an office, spray on a wall somewhere or display on a bus ... they all have the opportunity to be changing minds. And when minds are changed, people act and behave differently. Poems are buckets for moving mountains. So we need to take them seriously as such, because that is Poetry as Social Action.

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