

Afterword: Work and Silence

Tom Wayman

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What is poetry for? Should reading or listening to poetry serve the same function as hearing music does: to provide a mood-creating, -enhancing or -altering experience? Should poetry be an intellectual exercise, an opportunity for readers to sharpen or flaunt their wits by deciphering or guessing at obscurities, allusions, ambiguities, ironies, or omissions in the text? Are there other possible uses for the art?

Those of us who came of age in the 1960s remember when poetry in North America was an influential cultural force, an integral part of the way people, that is to say, society, grappled with the issues of the day: the U.S. struggle for black civil rights (poets Ishmael Reed, Etheridge Knight); opposition to the Vietnam War (Denise Levertov, Robert Bly); feminism (Adrienne Rich, Marge Piercy); and emergent Canadian nationalism (Al Purdy, Dennis Lee). Such *engagé* poetry was featured in newspapers, journals and other publications devoted to these movements, and was often quoted or recited from behind microphones at rallies, meetings, teach-ins, be-ins. Here in Canada a new book of poems by Irving Layton or Dorothy Livesay or Earle Birney was a public occasion—sparking coverage in the public media, including even television, because the assumption was that poets could speak articulately to the nation at large about matters that affect our collective life.

The longtime U.S. folksinger Pete Seeger in a 2006 *New Yorker* profile mentions that his father—a folklorist—used to state that he was less interested in whether a song was good than in what a song was good *for*. With regard to poetry's function, I agree with the elder Seeger. I have tried to create art that is useful to people engaged in striving for beneficial social change.

I believe my contribution to poetry arises from my poems focused on my work experiences, augmented by my anthologies of, and critical writing about, poems by people depicting the effects on and off the job of their own daily employment. I find the new, insider's, work writing an exciting development in the history of poetry—and by extension, literature: people accurately articulating in poems for the very first time in English what it is like to live a particular job, from cleaning houses to functioning as a corporate executive. Or people broadening and deepening a poetic response to occupations such as logging or the various fields of medicine—jobs concerning which a body of poetry already exists.

I have argued that daily work—how it is organized, and its effects on both individuals and communities—is central to our lives. Work determines or strongly influences where we live, our standard of living, how much time and energy we have during our hours *away* from the job, who our friends are, and a vast range of attitudes to personal and social issues, including the three themes often touted as poetry's preserve: love, nature and death. No human emotion is absent from the worksite, since a place of employment is where human beings not only gather, but where they contribute for good or ill to the daily re-creation of the community.

In my essays I describe why a literature—why an artistic culture—that does not regard and depict work as central to the human story is immature. Children and adolescents are in large part unable to consider work and its import: these young people regard work as at best a peripheral, not a governing concern. My argument is that poetry should not contribute to an infantilization of society.

Where work is not understood to govern human activity, we have the tragedy of nations or peoples who after a bitter struggle to attain a measure of political democracy find that the freedom in daily life that the revolution promised proves to be an illusion: the workplace hierarchies, with their accompanying daily humiliations and oppressions, remain unchanged. Citizens who feel blindsided by their earlier failure to think about economic emancipation often lash out by adopting or supporting political extremism, plunging their society into civil war and/or dictatorship. Also, where work is not understood to be central to human life, a society can declare directly or by implication

that people who do no productive work—entertainers of every stripe, for instance, including politicians, actors, athletes who participate in corporatized sporting events—are the community’s significant individuals. In contrast, those women and men whose employment results in the provision of food, health, housing, transportation, education and clothing for the community are regarded as faceless, ignorable, unimportant.

And no resolution of the planetary environmental crisis is possible without first considering how society structures labour. Seahorses could not begin to be saved from extinction until alternative employment was provided for people whose livelihood depended on stripping the ocean of these creatures for sale to pet shop brokers. The Canadian work poet Al Grierson, in his “It’s All Our Fault,” lists the environmental degradation that is a consequence of the jobs he and his fellow employees have accepted “so our kids could eat oatmeal / and day old bread” and for which “we’re ready to take the blame”:

we killed the whales, the seals,
the buffalo and each other,
we poisoned the air, polluted the water,
and made this a planet
fit only for insects

we did it for wages;
it's all our fault—
we did it because we didn't know
there was anyone else to go to work for.

The absence in literature up to the present of an accurate insider’s account of the experiences and consequences of daily employment echoes the silence in literature for centuries about women’s lives. The contemporary women’s movement rightly maintains that a literature that ignores or minimizes women's experiences not only implies that such experiences have no value. This literature also cannot claim to be representative of the human story. Since work involves both genders, how much more does the enormous silence around jobs—those anthologies of Canadian poetry, for instance, that present a portrait of a country in which nobody works—give the lie to the claim that our art has value in showing us who we are.

I believe that poetry is ideally suited to break the taboo around a depiction of daily employment. Poetry at the moment is one of the few free spaces in society: that is, poetry is entirely outside the money economy. Even a poet as widely known as the U.S. beat phenomenon Allen Ginsberg made his money by selling his personal papers to a university, not from selling his books of poems. Being outside the money economy gives poets an opportunity to speak the truth without having to give thought to image, branding, polls, the bottom line—considerations that hobble even churches, unions, NGOs and other ventures supposedly dedicated to speaking about discomfiting or inspirational facets of our common life.

One reason why poetry has shied away from an unblinking look at daily work is that a majority of us are not free on the job. Even in North America, the moment we cross through the office door or the factory gate we enter a sector of society not yet colonized by democracy. During the hours in which we contribute to the community through our labours with body and mind, we are at the beck and call of unelected authorities, who control not only our work processes but also the uses to which the wealth generated by our work are put: how much goes for salaries and bonuses of executives, how much for research and development, how much for maintenance and expansion of physical plant, how much for purchase of raw materials, how much for a return to investors, how much allotted to wages, and so on. We have no say on the impact our job might have on the surrounding biological and human communities.

The schizophrenic existence of daily shuttling between the status of an obedient unquestioning employee and that of a critically thinking, free citizen of a democracy—essentially, between being regarded as a child and as an adult—influences our behaviors toward every relationship we have: family, intimate, peer, workmate, community. Navigating the subtleties of this terrain is to me a crucial task for poetry.

Even people aware of the incompatibility of capitalism and democracy, however, often avoid considering the potential of the new work writing in one of two ways. The first is to view contemporary work poetry through the lens of 1930s-style socialist realism. In this approach, work is equated with blue-collar jobs, although very little 30s poetry portrays an accurate, insider's view of even blue-collar employment. Socialist

realism poetry is instead exhortative, often in vague terms, or deals with instances of social oppression or resistance rather than the details of the workplace and the latter's effect on daily life off the job.

The second route to avoidance of work writing involves focusing on class. This frequently shifts attention from the specifics of a jobsite to family stories—see, for instance, M.L. Liebler's anthology *Working Words* (Minneapolis, Coffee House P, 2010). Veering from an unblinking look at employment to considerations of class also means a writer can distance himself or herself from an examination of his or her own work, the lack of freedom found in his or her own daily existence. In academic circles, such gestures toward class often substitute, in my experience, for thinking about work: class is trotted out along with race and gender (and/or sex) as a nontraditional, supposedly fresh way to look at literature. Yet Eric Schocket argues, in *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006), that these alternative critical approaches are far from parallel:

Whereas race, gender and sexuality can, arguably, name social relationships that are not structured by an unequal distribution of power (this is the dream of pluralism, after all), class—by any definition—can only name a structure, process or position of inequality. John Guillory [in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993)] writes:

[W]hile it is easy enough to conceive of a self-affirmative racial or sexual identity, it makes very little sense to posit an affirmative lower-class identity, as such an identity would have to be grounded in the experience of deprivation per se. Acknowledging the existence of admirable and even heroic elements of working-class culture, the *affirmation* of lower-class identity is hardly compatible with a program for the abolition of want.

Schocket goes on to show how discussion of social mobility (a family's ability to escape certain kinds of waged labour) masks the actual conditions of a job that others must endure once certain individuals or their descendants have found different employment.

Despite the vitality and manifold dimensions of the theme of work, I have no illusions about the absence of an audience for art that considers this predominant human experience. Without a vibrant and widespread women's movement, those writers who articulated an accurate insider's account of women's lives found few

readers or advocates. Such authors' work was considered marginal, if not forgettable, before a social movement for women's emancipation arose that looked to earlier writers about women's experiences for vindication and inspiration. With the collapse of social change unionism in North America, as a consequence of the Cold War, any interest in emancipation from an economy where work invariably is equated with undemocratic conditions has vanished from the public agenda. Three times in the 20th Century attempts were made to democratize work—the Mahknovist insurrection in Ukraine 1918-1921, the rural and industrial anarchist communities in Aragon and Catalonia in Spain 1936-1939, and the rise of the Solidarity free trade union movement in Poland 1980-1981. But in each instance, the context was civil war, and all three times successes in workplace self-management were decisively overturned by the armed forces of reaction. Without a North American broad social movement that embraces the extension of democracy to the workplace, the audience for the new work writing will remain tiny.

In the academy, where some sustained interest in poetry remains, much of the thinking about literature is driven by the needs of graduate students, who must find an original topic in order to produce a thesis. As apprentices, graduate students must continually defer to authority: ideas must be defended by reference to certain approved critics, thesis supervisors must be obeyed or mollified, and go-through-the-motion conference papers must be presented to bulk up resumes in the hope of eventually landing a job, acquiring graduate students of one's own, and repeating the authoritarian cycle. This pattern hardly trains women and men capable of thinking about the democratization of employment. Ironically, however, activist faculty unionism has led in at least one jurisdiction to the ending of the practice followed by so many universities of stringing along new or prospective faculty for decades with a series of temporary contracts (sessional work). In the B.C. community college system, two hard-fought faculty strikes won the regularization first of positions, then individuals, to successfully halt the increasing use of sessionals by college administrations (in imitation of their university administration colleagues). Yet in other jurisdictions, Alberta for example, post-secondary faculty accept that by legislation they are forbidden to function as members of a normal trade union (i.e., strikes are illegal), with consequences such as

faculty collective agreements (the University of Calgary's, for instance) that do not specify conditions of employment, meaning that some departments have a heavier teaching load than others for the same remuneration.

Whatever the lack of a contemporary audience for work poetry, however, the potential for a wider readership has influenced my choices with regard to poetic form. In an essay I wrote about quotidian poets for Vol. II of David Carpenter's *The Literary History of Saskatchewan* (Regina: Coteau, 2014) I describe these poets' compositional strategies, strategies that my own writing has largely adopted:

Where a poet's role is seen as contributing to a community's self-awareness, and hence self-confidence (including an accompanying belief in the right to self-govern), the task of the writer is to speak of and to his or her community: to observe and record how the members of the community cope with their individual, and common, economic, social and political lives. The poet is not viewed as a possessor of special, esoteric (frequently jargonized) wisdom about either social organization or language. Therefore direct plain speech is the operative mode for poetry: the poet adopts free verse, a conversational tone and diction, and stanzas and line indents employed like paragraphs to indicate shifts in thought, mood or subject. Where a poet regards herself or himself as a member of the community described, ironic distance is eschewed, and the poet's attention to her or his own reactions to objects, events, individuals, others' emotions, etc. is held to be one more example of how we as a people are coping with the economic, social, political and personal vagaries of our existences.

In order for the poet to communicate clearly his or her own strong *emotional* responses to objects, events and individuals, or the responses of fellow community members, the poet will embrace the lyric mode. To *detail* the significant moments that illustrate the historical or geographical situation, the poet adopts the narrative or anecdotal mode. Because community exists in a specific time and place, in poetry the quotidian is emphasized over abstruse philosophy. Wisdom is regarded as located in our reflected-upon personal experiences or those of our fellow citizens as much or more as it is found in the thinking of Great Men or Women.

That said, I view my poems as scores for oral delivery. No poem of mine is considered finished unless I decide it is effective when spoken aloud as well as when read silently. This attention to how the poem sounds influences my choices of diction, pacing, grammatical construction, and much more.

And of course my poems encompass a wider spectrum than the workplace. My first collection was published in 1973, so over forty years and more I have responded to natural and constructed environments, the vicissitudes of love, the pleasures of the road. And, in the long tradition, *timor mortis conturbat me*. I have tried in my poems whatever their topic to deploy precision of observation, humor, and honesty to help convey what I mean to say. But I do not feel my poems on other themes rototill new poetic ground in the way my poems do that arise from the work experience—except where I have been able to insinuate into the former type of poem an awareness of the labour that, acknowledged or not, infuses the world.

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