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'THE SOUND OF VIOLETS: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC POTENCY OF POETRY?'

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Abstract

This paper takes the form of a dialogue between the two authors, and is in two halves, the first half discursive and propositional, and the second half exemplifying the rhetorical, epistemological and metaphysical affordances of poetry in critically scrutinising the rhetoric, epistemology and metaphysics of educational management discourse.

Phipps and Saunders explore, through ideas and poems, how poetry can interrupt and/or illuminate dominant values in education and in educational research methods, such as:

- alternatives to the military metaphors – targets, strategies and the like – that dominate the soundscape of education;
- the kinds and qualities of the cognitive and feeling spaces that might be opened up by the shifting of methodological boundaries;
- the considerable work done in ethnography on the use of the poetic: anthropologists have long used poetry as a medium for expressing their sense of empathic connection to their field and their subjects, particularly in considering the creativity and meaning-making that characterise all human societies in different ways;
- the particular rhetorical affordances of poetry, as a discipline, as a practice, as an art, as patterned breath; its capacity to shift phonemic, and therewith methodological, authority; its offering of redress to linear and reductive attempts at scripting social life, as always already given and without alternative.

Keywords:

poetry, ethnography, educational research, education policy, violets

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PART I.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC POTENCY OF POETRY?

Dear Friend,

My methods are in pieces. Decreated, says Simone Weil. What must I do to create?

You say that its always a dialogue, poetry. You suggested that: *Civil Rebellion is always rebellion against phonemic authority (Appelbaum)* and I replied with a snatch from a dialogue I was having of my own. 'A University is one of those precious things which can be destroyed' (Scarry 2001:8)

Can poetry release us from the snares of the world of methodological problems that are entirely of our own creating? In conversation a colleague reminds me that you cannot solve a problem using the same methods as were used to create it. I am moving already from poetic fragment and the hand holds of the ever suggestive phrase which follows me round like a melody that will not stop humming on my lips, into proposition. Do you mind? I have some questions and some answers firming into the paragraphs and prose that are the dues we pay to the gods of academic publication.

What is ethnography for in education?

Violence

When social science and educational methodologies are focused on evidence, and application, carefully polarised into the quantitative and qualitative domains and then cleaned up, post hoc, into 'design' and rationale, then methodology is given considerable space and considerable power. It gets to contest, defend, arm itself with a battery of arguments, stake out its territory, clear the ground of all opposing elements. It gets to determine how the work will be done, to develop a whole army of words and concepts with which to lay siege to work previously undertaken, so that, it may find a chink in the armour and thus demolish the existing defences, erecting, in their place, its own. (My violent metaphors, dear friend, are deliberate here, as you know).

What if our question was not how do they live and learn but *when did our walk begin (Ingold & Vergunst 2008)*

What if we went in search of air of dreams? (Bachelard 1988)

In an age of militarism it is no surprise that we might have recourse to military metaphors. They dominate the soundscape of our methodological literatures and the research methods courses we are obliged to put on for our students, so that they may be able to conduct ESRC legitimated research. What are your targets? What will be your strategy? They have come to us somewhat second hand via the planning discourse of MBA programmes and management theory. Research is a military campaign; its messiness sanitized into 'reflective practice' its victims given the protection of 'ethical approval and data anonymity', its policies now entirely colonized by a dominant politics of consumer capitalism. We have to know in advance exactly what our targets will be and how they will be met. Under such imperial demands it is clear that our language too must be pleasing to the King. No strategy, no money. No money, no power. Not the symbolic or the cultural or the social or the economic type. Williams puts it thus:

Part of the frustration of our contemporary position is that political language

becomes increasingly dominated by the marketing of slogans, sound bites, and the calculation of short-term advantage, in a way that effectively removes politics from considerations about the transformation of human culture; while a fair amount of what passes for cultural studies relies on fundamentally anti-political accounts of desire and imagination.

(Williams 2000a: 10)

Some may argue that such a situation requires precisely such violent and military metaphors; that attack requires counter-attack. Such has been the reasoning of 'just war' theory for centuries. We do not accept that this has to be the only way, for, surely in ethnography and education, processes where we simply go for a walk together, then such language makes a travesty of the walk. Any work towards a non-violent way of pursuing an ethnography and education which is founded on carefully, collectively considered principles of justice, can only begin when the weapons are still and language is allowed to sing again. This makes a poetic project in such a context a political act with words; working to rebel phonemically; to change the air. This is not just knee-jerk 'protest poetry', but a struggle to speak of the hidden, unjust things felt in the depths, bodying forth, despite itself, all kinds of emotion, shapes and patterns which are fundamentally disrespectful of what is given, of boundaries. It is in this way that poetry is one potential mode of commitment to changing the violence of a methodological research management; of 'shifting the boundaries'. This isn't poetry for poetry's sake; this isn't poetry as therapy in this context; this is poetry for thinking in new shapes and sounds of those things we half know and hope; this is poetry for the sake of gentling the space where violence is writ large and ugly.

We must also remember that the boundaries have always been shifting in ethnographic methodology because human beings, who are the subjects of ethnographic research, are remarkably good at making things up as they go along, navigating by a whole range of sensory means, not just the relatively recent map and compass. You and I are doing this nowbricolage, Levi Strauss called it – pulling things together out of what lies to hand.

What does lie to hand?

Well, a moving train would be the first thing. A blissful 6 hours where the email can't drop into my box and where I can read a book again after weeks of intensive marking, and let my mind wander back to those books I read in previous years – the good ones, those with scribbles and notes all over the margins. In my bag, Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, and Gaston Bachelard's *A Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1994). And in my mind a book not yet read: *Voice*, by David Appelbaum. Ringing in my ears are your words, my friend, words and the poetry exchanges of last summer, and the tiredness of the passing months of illness and struggle and as my fingers move over the familiar keys, touch typing my mind back into the familiar play of writing I am as always surprised by the return of the muse:

Word Shapes

Sometimes it is poetry

More often it is prose
The sharp incision
Of idea on word
Begging for time.

“These, then are issues of *ontological methodology*. [...] Enactment, multiplicity, fluidity, allegory, resonance, enchantment, these have been some of my keywords as I have explored what I have called method assemblage.” (Law 2004: 154)

Ethnographer-Poets;

There has been considerable work done in ethnography on the use of the poetic. *Don Juan in Melanesia* gives satirical trace to an ethnographer anti-hero, caught up in the trickeries of the field and the discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists have long used poetry as a medium for expressing their sentiments and their sense of empathic connection to their field and their subjects. The linguistic and hermeneutic turns of the last 30 years, through Geertz (Geertz 1973) and Clifford and Marcus (Clifford & Marcus 1986) in particular, through the development of ethnographic poetics and the exploration of new artistic media for expressing anthropological and educational insight has brought a rich vein of writing and expression into play. Hymes was a poet. So were/are so many other anthropologists. Of course they are – the thinkers and thankers, there are more ways than paragraphs and prose for the correspondences that ethnographic life and learning bring into encounters, for the Baudelairean synaesthesia to enter into our powers of expression. Theatre, film, visual media, art, artefacts, museums, archives, exhibitions, music – all can be called upon to walk us towards other truths about the experience of collecting, cataloguing and clarifying so-called data.

Perhaps of real significance among recent projects in Anthropology – ethnography's parent discipline – has been the work of Hallam and Ingold (Hallam & Ingold 2007), which emerged out of an AHRC funded project exploring creativity as feature of human-animal behaviour, an exhibition – in Aberdeen Art Gallery – of art work by anthropologist reflecting on their methodological practices, and the annual ASA conference in 2005, which focused directly on Creativity and Cultural Innovation.

We've been talking about anthropology and creativity and cultural improvisation for hours, shut up inside old rooms, talking, talking, talking. And then there is a walk down the road into town to the museum to the opening of a relatively modest exhibition on notebooks and ethnography. I'm remembering this so there will not be great accuracy but I remember fragments of string, and a diagram of a dissection, and I remember weaving, lots of baskets, weaving in place of words, weaving in place of text, Texture, weaving; threads, and with this a profound sense of relief, relief from the wording, relief that we can wander round and let impressions be just that. Relief from the proposition, the cognitive, relief in the affective. And I remember talking to one of the ethnographer-artists and giggling irreverently but also the conversation being one about her relief, her surprise that this was something she'd been allowed and enabled to do. Creating, making, weaving, wording, back and forth – the shuttle moving across the loom of our ethnographic framing and bring in colour, texture, wool and warmth.

The Hallam and Ingold ASA volume takes human creativity as its site for anthropological investigation. It was published collecting together insights about the way in which human being learn to create and are makers and creators begins, perhaps rather startlingly, as follows: “There is no script for social life. We make it up as we go along.” As well as a conference theme the work in the volume, conference and

exhibition was also straining towards considering the place of creativity in ethnographic methodology anew. Since *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and the cultural turn in anthropology there has been a considerable focus on representation with poetry as one form among many the focus of field work and also of experiments in different ways of representing the work done in the field. What Hallam and Ingold and other contributors were opening out in their endeavours was a space for dwelling in the processes of making and creating rather than turning to representation as the first resort. Their turn is a methodological turn as a turn to making, craft and creating. Our work, is, correct me if I'm wrong, my friend, also about making, crafting and creating languaging spaces through poetry in education.

Methods of 'redress'

From such languaging work comes symbolic thinking about how arts and humanities might serve ethnographers in expressing and representing their 'data' and dwelling, or on examining the poetic aspects of life, with an equal attempt at poetry. Art represents art; a poem stands in for a dance and so on. The political 'redress' of poetry (and the arts – but our concern here is poetry) has not been the subject. Yes, how the arts of persuasion might serve in the linear lines of argument that win the day, but 'no' to the more tentative, mother-tongue lullabies that lull us into rest with words and shaped breathe. 'Yes', to its place in the games of constructing varieties of phonemic authority, its place in giving greater colour to other words, but 'no' to the greyscale, the clouding of reason, the gasp that is the first animal cry to shock or awe. And an equal no to 'indifference' Woolf's great way of stopping repeating the words that make war and Bergson's characteristic for laughter, for the place where the fabric language and carefully learned rhetorical power gives way entirely, in infinite variety to something which is not of empathy, or aesthetics or irony but which is the poem which draws out a smile, and the poem which we skip, leafing through the anthology or book for a fragment that will arrest the questing gaze.

We walk on, wounded. For whilst it is clearly important that we believe military campaigns are always meticulously planned and executed and with minimum casualties, such that it makes for an excellent model for our research, precision bombing – always right on target; goals achieved, targets met, success evaluated – it is more important to remember otherwise. Other Wise.

If boundaries are shifting in ethnographic methodology then this suggests that more, less or different amounts of space may be available. More talk? Less talk? More of certain kinds of talk? Ah Ha. Less of the trusted talk. The informal talk. The rebellious talk. The talk for which there is no consent? Less talk which is trust talk. Ethics committees cut down and carve out the kinds of spaces available for ethnographers to work in. Self censorship prevails. Difficult and controversial subjects avoided 'to be on the safe side'

That's whose side I'm on
The safe side.

You asked
whose side are you on
are their guns in your hands or
violets?

And if there are guns
that's okay as long as
you have been

trained in their
use (there
is funding available)
and know where
to find
the safety catch.

And if violets
then they must
first give
written permission
and you must be aware
of the great dangers
involved
in looking
on beauty,
lest
you forget yourself
and become just.

This work and the poetry exchanges contained here, are part of a dialogue which has come out of a common concern with the way poetry can say things and mock things, and create things which other ways of working with words cannot. Poetry is persuasive, it is patterned breath, it both redresses through its many metaphors and meanings, and through the way it shifts phonemic authority. Poetry can also sate terrific indifference at the words which rule and maim and send soldiers into killing fields, and researchers chasing after dubiously constructed funded research. As such, it offers *a* potential redress (not *the* – there are no great claims to be made here, that would not be poetry's redress) to methodological authority as well as to discursive attempts at scripting social life, as given, real, without alternative. At once inductive, intuitive, spiralling in approach, poetic methods – if we may speak of assembling words and the wide white spaces around them and using them in such a way as to create a 'how' – may provide a choreography, something of the spin, and grace of dance, something of the stamp of anger, the learning to defy gravity with the whole of being – that, perhaps – is research methodology, educational ethnography. For who, indeed, 'can tell the dancer, from the dance' (Yeats).

The ethics committee
was not convinced
that the data
gathered
will conform
to the requirements
of the funding
councils
The research design
must be expressed

in language appropriate
to the outcomes

There must be outcomes
for there to be ethics.
for there to be any,

any

approval.

What you call

poetry

we call jargon.

It is our
strategic priority
that all applications
must conform to plain English.

You may not say that you wish
to go, and look on beauty
and linger in her presence,
and listen to her song.

That, you may not say.

There is no economic imperative.

Beauty does not
conform to ethics.
Beauty is simply just.

Oh where to go
when where
to go is
no longer
anywhere.

What can be sanctioned when the
censor cuts

and trust is left
bleeding now

and the ground shifts beneath

bare feet, dabbling in
the damp dew of the morning
on a June day.

When where is
out of bounds?

Poetry's Methods

Of course, entitling a special issue, on education and ethnography, 'Shifting Boundaries' gives licence to use a wonderful, exciting literature in anthropology. The liminal literature. It gives us a chance to go back to Van Gennep (van Gennep 1909) and Turner (Turner 1995) and consider, yet again, how great it would be for poetry to be the rebel, the jester, the joker, the thing, to catch the conscience of the king. It would let us draw parallels between Lear's heath and the siren sounds of poetry speaking back to policy. Structure (all that dominates, all that manages, all that is military, all that is bad) Anti-structure – women, wolves, phases of the moon. Us. But its not quite that simple or even, if we may use the word, true. Gillian Rose tells of the diremption between Law and Ethics. I love her book, *The Broken Middle* – though try as I might I am not yet sure what the middle is or how it got broken, only that the redress she provides through an elegant and rhetorical and oft times parodic philosophy calls us to avoid short cuts, easy solutions, the belief that destroying great institutions (universities; methodologies) might somehow allow us to put something better in their place.

'Diremption' Rose sees as the forcible or even violent separation of law from ethics. She is concerned, against the grain of some aspects of postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking to resist attempts to tidy up the mess of relating social structures and institutions to everyday life. She sees at every turn in poststructuralist and post-holocaust thinking a determination to elevate death and justice and to imbue these with the power to 'mend the broken middle, to create a holy middle' (Rose 1992: 57). through force and fantasy, to create through separation and dualistic thinking what William's terms 'communities of the perfect' (Williams 2000b).

As our common institutions and political action crumble under the pressures of neoliberalism and globalization, as the nation state comes to make less sense to us as citizens then law and ethics are dirempted, to use Rose's terms. Morality becomes a fluid, personal business and law is the work of the state:

It has become easy to describe trade unions, local government, civil service, the learned professions: the arts, law, education, the universities, architecture and medicine as 'powers'. And then renouncing knowledge as power, too, to demand total expiation for domination, without investigation into the dynamics of configuration, of the triune relation which is our predicament - and which, either resolutely or unwittingly, we fix in some form, or with which we struggle, to know, and still to misknow and yet to growBecause the middle is broken – because these institutions are systematically flawed – does not mean they should be eliminated or mended.

(Rose 1992: 285)

Here, in this difficult passage, Rose is pointing to the way in which, by demanding the end to all domination and by refusing to associate with the institutions of society and of political power, we try and cover over the mess of life rather than working together to find ways of living together which will include, even embrace the brokenness and the impossibilities.

Surely this is poetry's method, and therefore poetry's potential methodological redress. Neither structure nor anti-structure, but working away with words and their spaces to embrace – in these sense of gathering in and in the sense of loving – the fragility and messiness of worlds, half known, misknown, but attempted nonetheless, attempted.

What is to hand? My computer gives me a way (a method perhaps) for checking the typescript (the script that I make up as I go along). A Spell check. A grammar check. I run it. It makes me smile. All poetry is a 'fragment (consider revising).'

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(LS)

Dear Alison, I think you are exemplifying how a new kind of space can be opened up, by dispensing with the scripted thoughts that usually occupy the territory we call methodology. Truth to tell, I was initially daunted by the task we set ourselves – or rather, that I set up and you kindly assented to! On the one hand, I was glad that writing this paper meant there was an opportunity for me to resolve the division, disjunction, discontinuity, that I have long felt between my research-writing and my poetry-writing, between these different personal/professional identifications of myself. On the other hand... on the other hand, I find I think and write most intensely in these small interstices, on some threshold between here and there, roaming wilfully over a patch of border territory, living not just with but within these modest contradictions.

What is the problem, exactly? What are my assumptions and beliefs about research, about poetry?

The trouble with doing research in the social sciences – one of its troubles – is my consciousness that I am expropriating – by investigating, representing, interpreting, making public – the lived experience, the uttered word, of others: a personal ethical conundrum that eludes the procedural hygiene of codes of conduct, ethics committees and so forth.

And a further problem is that when I write within the usual conventions of a research journal or report I am unwittingly but ineluctably creating boundaries and barriers which cut readers (and myself) off from engaging holistically with unstable data and its vivid meanings. Thus I prevent readers from acquiring insights into the particular socio-cultural cosmos which I am in the very act of attempting to reveal to them.

My professional and civic integrity is continually in question; I am in danger of becoming a stranger to myself.

These and other difficulties of the social science research paradigm are economically set out by Bagley (2008) in his article on educational ethnography as performance art, as a prelude to offering a striking example of alternative, arts-based and inter-actionist modes of representation and engagement. Bagley also provides an overview of the arguments made on behalf of the latter by exponents like Denzin, Barone and Eisner, Geertz, McCall, van Maanen, in the service of revis(ion)ing social research. Recent articles by, for example, Leitch (2006 – on creative narratives), McIntosh (2008 – on active imagination) and Toncy (2008 – on dance) have added to the repertoire of vivid and often emotionally moving instances of in-depth arts-based inquiry in which reflexivity is integral to the participants' and researchers' process.

In struggling with my half of this paper, I shall not spend anything like as much time on this literature as it deserves. Purely for my own purposes, I've grouped together the kinds of argument that have been urged in favour of arts-based, or arts-like, inquiry as follows:

ethics: the researcher finally gives up claims to objectivity and the particular kind of expropriation of others' identity and experiences to which that leads (e.g. Atkinson 2000, Trotman 2006); and lays claim instead to imaginative sensuousness (e.g. Smith 2008) or to passion (e.g. Halpin 2006) as more plausible

forms of authenticity

life-likeness: narrative, images, evocations, recollected memories, dance, group drama and so forth are much more like the lives people lead than are purely rational prose accounts or numerical data (e.g. Leitch 2006, Sullivan 2000)

epistemology: we need representations of knowledge which themselves enact and make manifest – through ‘bricoleurship’ – the provisionality and ‘fuzziness’ of knowledge in the social sciences (e.g. de Beer 2003, Luce-Kapler 2005); and we also need to recognise that the arts create a different kind of knowledge – ‘not the goal of curiosity but the fruit of experience’[1] perhaps – with which we can enrich social, particularly educational, research (e.g. Gitlin and Peck 2008, Humphreys and Hyland 2002)

expression: the language of academic research should divest itself of the ‘managerialist’ and ‘performative’ discourse which has infected it, and be more like poetry in its sensuousness and felt emotion (Abbs 2003, Cahnmann 2003)

the unconscious: the gifts of the non-rational mind – memories, dreams, reflections – should be welcomed as part of the cognitive project of inquiry for understanding (e.g. McIntosh 2008)

education: these modes of engaging in inquiry are in themselves educative, artistically and socially (e.g. Eisner 1993)

Well, this is a pretty perfunctory list, but perhaps it gives a sense of the scale and nature of the claims that are made on behalf of arts-based inquiry. But the real reason for my cursory treatment of this rich material is because what I want to do with my share of our text is to understand better – the personal being the methodological – how the poet-I has tried to engage with (be understood by? get the better of? become one and the same as?) the researcher-me, and *vice versa*. Of course I’d hope that in the process some of that literature will have rubbed off on me.

In a previous article (Saunders 2003) I suggested that poetry seeks to:

- present rather than argue;
- offer insights rather than build theory;
- add to the sense of the world’s variety rather than negotiate and refine a consensus;
- play (with ideas) rather than work towards a closure;
- ‘make new’ rather than seek to replicate or systematically build on what has gone before;
- proceed by association and image rather than evidence and logical consequence;
- engage, surprise, attract, shock, delight, connect the unconnected, stir the memory and fertilise the unconscious;
- communicate something ultimately unsayable (the paradox of poetry) because uniquely arising from the poet’s personal vision and interpretation.

Although I would probably word these notions differently now (and of course they do not comprise a definition of all poetry), I hope they offer some provocations to colleagues to

meet us in conversation about such comparisons and contrasts. The questions I went on to pose in that paper were:

- in what circumstances could or should these be the aims of educational research?
- for what set of reasons, connected with the nature of educational research, is it legitimate to seek to engage directly with the reader rather than, say, present an argument which can be debated and subjected to falsification?
- what do writers who write in what might be called a poetic mode hope to gain for educational research, which presumably they believe is not possible through propositional discourse?

I sidestepped, danced with, rather than answered, those questions, because I could not find a way to imagine the circumstances in which the aims of educational research and poetry could really be identical. (This does not mean I have not argued strongly for the work of the imagination to be valued more highly in both research and teaching – see, for example, Saunders 2004.)

The trouble with poetry – one of its troubles – is that it is not biddable. The conventional metaphor is the elusive figure of the Muse who comes and goes as she wills, not as the poet wishes. Poetry is not the product of reason, though a poem may make passing use of the art of reasoning: ‘Yes, I remember Adlestrop – / The name, because one afternoon / Of heat the express-train drew up there / Unwontedly. It was late June.’[2] Pressing a poem into service of anything other than itself, its passage from silence into language and back into silence, risks producing an artefact that is too willed, too conscious, with extrinsic – and therefore ultimately resistible – designs on the reader, an indiscreet desire to demonstrate or prove something.

This means that, as a poet, I have innumerable half-begun poems, single lines or phrases, half-glimpsed possibilities for poems, scattered through notebooks, on my computer, in my head, on paper napkins and till receipts and even, if no writing implements are to hand, spoken into my own voicemail. This is the price I pay for the few that reach some kind of ontic state, their fragile capacity to exist apart from my desire. But as a researcher I have always needed to know that I will finish my paper, publish the report, give the presentation, come to a conclusion however minor and provisional. I do not think that this is only because no-one is waiting expectantly for my poems, whereas the grant-funders and commissioners of my research are absolutely certain to make a fuss if it fails to appear. It’s because research bravely sets off into the field or bush and always comes back with swag in its bag – even nothing found is a finding. Poetry on the other hand often just shrugs its shoulders, says to the crestfallen poet ‘You’re not up to this’ and walks out the door. Maybe it will come back tomorrow. Or next week. Next year. Meantime, of course, the poet must keep writing and reading, must practise, practise, keep the faith. But it isn’t poetry she’s making.

A recent book (Sennett, 2008) claims that to become an expert craftsperson takes at least 10,000 hours of practice whether you’re a master-carpenter or a concert pianist.

When we look to poetry (or art, or music, or dance) to re-present data, are we meant to be assessing the poem, the performance, in terms of some superordinate research criteria – which must perforce remain implicit and unexamined in such a context – or in terms of the practised, expert, painstaking art with its burden (= repeated song) of skill, traditions and disciplines made good through lifetimes of devotion? Or can we keep the cake we're intent on eating?

Worse, from the point of view of research as a mode of creating knowledge – 'partial, plural, incomplete and contingent' though that knowledge may be (Denzin 2003, cited in Bagley 2008 op.cit., page 56) – we cannot be sure what kind of knowledge a poem is offering us. It may look empirical – 'I wander'd lonely as a cloud[3]' – or propositional – 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper'[4] – but appearances are usually deceptive: 'Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.'[5]

What, then, does poetry do? In another paper obsessed with such issues (Saunders 2006) I proposed that poetry is a kind of gift-object whose characteristic is its 'gratuitousness'. It is *useless* in the fullest and best sense of the word – non-instrumental, the antithesis of utilitarian, possessing neither use- nor exchange-value.

Paradoxically, however (I went on to argue), poetry has long been a touchstone for and an expression of society's deeply-held values and beliefs, it has wielded moral agency way beyond its scale – think of the shaman-poets of ancient Ireland executing wrongdoers with the moral force of their satires; or Irina Ratushinskaya's world-famous 'No, I Am Not Afraid' riposte to her 20th century Soviet gaolers.

In trying to reconcile the notion of the gratuitousness of poetry with the idea that poetry can and does make profound ethical claims on both poet and reader, I cited Seamus Heaney on what he has called (citing Wallace Stevens' 1951 essay 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words') the 'redress' of poetry:

[The redress of poetry] is the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality... This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances. And sometimes, of course, it happens that such a revelation, once enshrined in the poem, remains as a standard for the poet, so that he or she must then submit to the strain of bearing witness in his or her own life to the plane of consciousness established in the poem. (Heaney 1995, page 1 *sqq.*)

In expounding the ethical proposition of 'poet as witness', Heaney emphasised 'poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimised, the under-privileged', and he went on to note that 'it has been the tragic destiny of several writers in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries to feel this call to witness more extremely than most others'. But then, taking Mandelstam as exemplar, he followed this train of thought through to a place that makes enormous space for poetry nonetheless to be fully itself:

The essential thing about lyric poetry, Mandelstam maintained, was its unlooked-for

joy in being itself... Mandelstam implied that it was the poet's responsibility to allow poems to form in language inside him, the way crystals formed in a chemical solution... Mandelstam's witness [was] ... to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act. (Heaney 1988, page xix.)

And all those negatives – the 'uns' and 'nons' – are themselves, perhaps, an echo of Keats' 'negative capability'; they give us a delicate sense of the pulsating, receptive silence that always surrounds on all sides, as it were, the thing that is made of, in, through, by, spoken-written words.

So for me, dear friend, the role of poetry as a mode of knowing-the-world is not – except by accident – representational. Rather, it is phenomenological, in the sense that Bachelard (1994) uses the term: 'independent of causality' (page xvii). The poem is both wholly unexpected and an immediate appeal to the evoked senses, including the mind. So the act of writing poetry must encompass and permit '*dreamwork as well as photography*' (Heaney 1995, page 71). The work of poetry is the discipline of the imagination working in an ultimately unknowable body. It is expressed on the literally-metaphorically exhaled breath, with the multiply-voiced rhetorics of rhyme – the precisions of half-rhyme, assonance, alliteration – and of rhythm, the heartbeat andante or accelerando or standing-on-its-head. It knows how the airiness of vowels makes consonants sing. It reacts with the white space/silence around it, it drops meaning into the held breath of the line-break and the stopped breath of the stanza-break.

So as a researcher I have to question the capacity of, indeed the need for, poetry to 'represent' 'data' truthfully and trustworthily.

Stevens (1951) goes further: '*...I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political obligation of the poet. He has none...*' I'm not sure I would be so adamant as that; I'm more with Heaney when he says '*there is a certain jubilation and **truancy** at the heart of an inspiration*' (Heaney 1988, page xviii; my emphasis): I take him to mean the spirit of transgression that 'rebels against phonemic authority' (Appelbaum 1990, page 44), that joyfully critiques and resists a sullen and diminished reality, that is evocative, emotive, empathic, emancipatory. Arts-based research approaches clearly share in such educative desires. But truancy is also self-exclusion: it is the prerogative of poetry to absent itself from the action, to fall silent. In a tender, provocative article making the case for a 'romantic' perspective on education, Smith (2008) invokes 'the ability to create a kind of silence' (page 195) as antidote to 'knowingness' and 'the racket of evidence, data, research findings...'

I've argued myself to a standstill, and very far from a resolution. Perhaps what I think is simply that poetry's role in research – as distinct from in education more generally – is best thought of as creative companion to, not substitute for, expository discourse. I could point to an extended example of this in my own work (Saunders 2007), where I responded to a colleagues' paper on narrative in action research with a series of short poems.

Let me recall why we made the poetry that appears below. The dialogue we concocted (= cooked, as in an alembic) through our poems was created in joyful surprise at encountering each other, in our words a long time before we met in person. Do you remember how we started and finished the entire sequence over the course of a single summer? What we were trying out were ways of interrupting, disrupting, pressing back

against, the economic, managerialist and instrumentalist tropes of education, a form of language which, in this period in the UK and elsewhere, occupies and pre-occupies the agent as much as the phonemic space we have, and insults education while it exults over teachers and learners. For us, poetry was and is the obvious medium in which to address/redress this colonisation; and so we had tried in the process of composition to realise the ethical as well as rhetorical affordances of poetry. We celebrated a sense of playful relationship between self and other, of embodiment and emotions, of real (rather than abstract) places wherein constructively critical thinking can flourish – the stuff of which pedagogy is made.

It may be that the discourse of educational research is equally and comprehensively oppressive as that of education management, in need of the same kind of resistance and redress, that is, in need of the ‘nobility’ of poetry, the ‘violence from within that protects us from a violence without’, as Stevens (*op.cit.*) put it. Nonetheless, having (as a member of the Education sub-panel for the Research Assessment Exercise 2008) read a great many articles and reports across a wide field, I am in some doubt about the wholesale truth of such a supposition: I did not, for example, identify in my own reading or in the discussions of others’ reading a predominance of quantitative, so-called (wrongly-called) ‘positivist’ research.

Be that as it may, poets have the great good fortune to live ‘in a vast echo-chamber of multiple cadences, an entire symbolic world, which gives them freedom from fashion’s oppression and from particular cults and allegiances’ (noted, but not necessarily precisely quoted, from a lecture by Abbs, 2005). The question I am still unable to resolve completely is whether a poet can use this freedom to discharge large and important responsibilities – for example, to strengthen ethnographic research in education – in the process of fulfilling her/his duties to poetry. But my gentle scepticism about this in principle must surely be tempered by your own eloquent practice...

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PART II. THE SOUND OF VIOLETS

Table of Contents (AP)

She asked me
whose side are you on
are there guns
in your hands
or violets?

Her eyes wrote words
on a throat containing
languages from round
the corner of her
English worlds.

She asked me to
speak of what is
good, what is medicinal
what is true.

Speak of silence
she said.

Is it blue?

The flesh was angry
the spirit weakened
by the campaigns of
the strategists. Their
arrows were not
random, there

was nothing of Cupid
when the bow string hummed.

I picked up a bag,
a pipe and a bellow
and with my right arm
it was a tune I blew.

A dance tune, though not the
first time, or the second,
but as my fingers moved
and the pressure grew
I understood what they
might be, those
indicators
of soft that get
us nowhere
because nowhere
is the only place
for love
to be.

Blue Jewels (LS)

You wore them when we met in the museum's new café
where the lights were blaring, the acoustic way too bright,
but we sashayed with our trays to the plastic chairs
and began the exchange of dangerous gifts, words

as beads, like the inlaid eyes of an ivory effigy fiery and
blue as a Bactrian sky. They call it lapis lazuli. Mujaheddin
emptied the mines made by invaders, spent the earth
exacting dollars and mortars from its difficult rock.

The lapidary phrase is the art of plain speaking, the skill
of chiselling your meaning straight on your listener's heart.
The stone of friendship and truth, the dangerous exchange
in a mountain-pass under a star-chilled night, is dynamite

of such delicate power, it may be ground down to flour
for eye-paint the royal shade of Roxana's gown. So we met,
and sometimes my gaze would stray from the hill-spate
of your words, where my clouded sentences had begun

to come clean, towards the flesh of your throat and earlobes,

the blue beads revelling in their queenliness, medicinal and true.

P_O (AP)

Policy
politics
police
o
lice
ice
see
c
y
why?

It is no accident
polis
polity
people
together
thought control
control
thought

I don't need no [...]

o
head
lice
apply
ice
creeping
crawling

Poetry
poetics
poets
o
etics
i
c
r
y

Poems are why

Po
o
o
o
o
circlesandlines
circles
lines
| + O = P

The first two signs are the same
P
O
Policy
Poetry

The plosive
from tongue tips
on teeth
and breath
pushing out
between muscular
funneling
lips to be air.
Policy
Poetry
Prayer.
And then the
roundness of sounds
which are slow.

O

Classical in root
Hoot.

Muse.

Mute.

And violets.

Whose Side Are We On (LS)

when every policy must have its strategy
[meaning
skill in planning and conducting a military campaign]

and every strategy must have its targets
[meaning
any object or area fired at]

and every strategy must have an impact
[meaning
the act of an object hitting or colliding with another object]

and the front line
[meaning
the area where soldiers are closest to the enemy]

must be fully mobilised
[meaning
assembled and made ready for war]

in the interests of education
[meaning

not yet ripe for death or destruction

needing one another
to be ourselves

how to live well in a place

ways to name the world

the rhythm of withdrawal
and return

and violets...]?

(with thanks to, among others, the DfES website 2007, Chambers on-line dictionary, Professor Michael Fielding and Distinguished Professor David Orr, none of whom is to blame for this poem)

Policy to Poetry (AP)

Transfer the knowledge.
Bank the education.

Roll it out,
roll it out I tell you
across China.

Fill the seven seas
with these words
these my words
and these ways
these my ways.

May all be
competent
efficient
competent
professional
efficient
competent
Yes. I repeat. Professional
competent.

It is our settled will
that having settled
our will
we settle for
competence
efficiency
professionalism.

This is the policy.

Ours.

Our policy.
This will deliver.
This will deliver up

a curriculum for excellence,
standards for success.

And across the Seven Seas,
across seven,
there will be
competence between
us. And excellence
and ceaseless
efficiency and
professional success.

And between us
there will be success, I say.

Standards.

Quality.

And of the rolling out
there will be no end.

In place of rest:
efficiency.

In place of beauty:
excellence.

In place of diversity:
national standards.

In place of brokenness
and the tenderness
(which is learning's due):
quality's roar.

In place of dancing:
rolling out.

And there, look, in the
path of the excellent rollers:

violets.

there were [...]

crushed [...]

now [...]

violets.

Indicators of Soft (LS)

'You need to be able to compile hard, objective data to measure the Key Performance Indicators... without hard data it is difficult to get a clear picture of what's really going on... Also hard data enables more fruitful and objective discussions during performance reviews...'

Something is the matter
something matters
that is hard to get clear
to get clear of
hard to picture the difficult
difficult but very needful
data being compiled
piles & piles of it
looking rather important
altogether objective
& measurable &
you may think objectionable
no what I meant was it is
hard to be difficult
without being real
difficult to be hard
or do I mean heard
but really
what's going on?

Begin again:
something is the matter
that much is clear
but where or what is the key
& its lock to be unlocked
with the magic wand or digit
the gift of numbers
do dare dedi datum –
& what or where is the sum
of the squares on the other
the square root of minus
& what will you have to do
to square things
with the powers, what is

your hypotenuse hypothesis
equalling the sum of the value
that has been added
compared with the value
that has been taken away?

Sorry, won't do.
I'm trying to think instead
think of fruit
and how it performs
in the warmth
under glass or braving
late frosts, espaliered
or propped by braces
under its branches
its generosity like cling-peaches
or the blue-green spread hands
of a backyard fig tree
softly & fatly figging
through the glad lit-up days.

This is getting us nowhere.
Well perhaps
if I put it
like this I could say
I'm stuttering
teetering on
the brink of
on the tip of
tripping over
the hard fact that
something matters
& is difficult
& real.

Ah.
Proceed.

This is my matter
mater martyr metre
this is my measure
my pleasure
my motive
this is my clarity
charity rarity

You're making no sense
at all nonsense
really in all conscience

In all conscience really
just sense.
& breathe. This
is my matter
my object:
to cherish
the soft & perishable
their magic which is given
& may be difficult
& not much to go on
being insubstantial
as spring-light
seeping like milk
through still-winter
twigs or glints
flashing off the flood-brook
where something live & quivering
& lithe & silvery
might be pulling & heaving
with only its instinct & gristle
against the full measure
of water.

Start over:
such things as are soft
& perishable
changeable cherishable
because the damaged
magenta of hollyhocks
in the tall winds of August
or
because mother-of-pearl
its nailbed of seaspray & rainbow
quite other than diamonds
or
because the wood or world
sometimes anxiously dreaming
itself under the data of snow
the drift of all its fogs & cobwebs
or
because the grey weft
of hairs in a plastic hairbrush

long after she's gone
&
then again perhaps a pair
of earthenware bowls filled
to their brims
with fading afternoons
& the airy papery dust
of industrious conversations
that have reverted almost
to birdsong
ghosts of sonatas
sestinas andante
sostenuto
rhyming pieces
of mirror & sky
the merest breath
on a petal of glass
until the mist clears

is as near as
I can get to the matter
the metre
the metric
the magic such as it is
do you have
the measure of it
now
I hope
the difficult real of it
the clearing picture
the need for the hard
& healing soft of it
the hope & sorrow & loft of it
so we can go on?

A Sea Change in Policy (AP)

I am drawn to the tideline.

Once, the policy here was the industry of peace.
Monks worked the vellum with blue and gold.
But policies change
and martyred
they lay, red blood
on the white northern road.

Poetry grew in peace times,
with the policy.

The bells rang,
and the sea
swung, in and out. words

said

listened

heard

said

silenced

said

words.

Your responses can be found....

That is how the tide
grows and goes.

Policies change.

I think that it is the silence I miss most,
and the press of words which are not friends.
I dislike the bullets, the hierarchy, the numbering down from top to bottom,
with closed bracket, and colon and dot.
I dislike the roman numerals which tell of imperial strength,
decimated,
shot.

I fear snatch and grab raids on my shores,
the demand that I kneel and speak this coarse and confident tongue.
The demand that I be sure.
Imperatives silencing my word-martyred self.

I fear rape from the shrill and penetrating sounds.

I fear the stone in the sling of my angry blood.

I miss too the ebb and the flow,

the ringing bell of punctuation which opens
brackets and then closes
them again. (Brackets, I know, can be
exciting, can enclose
a smile,
a lover's kiss,
the gentlest eye lid's wink)

like this

[...]

and this

(...)

and this

{...}

Space at last for a crack
to open in the words
when they press.
A chink of light,
of welcome,
of the warmth
of a resting house.
Space to be unsure. to breathe in

(...)

and out

(...)

Space to listen.

Full stop.

And then to speak.

Space to break.

Bread.

A nourishing table heavy

with good words.

A square meal [...] squared off.

Oh how I am drawn to the tideline.

There are bright stones,
the seeds of prayer,
waiting for me to sow them,
to cast them arcing into the green air,
to grow them
in the tide again.

Policies change.

I finger the sea stone.

May silence lengthen.

{... ...}

May hierarchy curve. (...)

May we seedcorn policy by pouring water over words.

May we undo what does not serve.

Poem Found in My In-box (LS)

You say:

I've listened to the dead
and deadening language
of no ideas and fear,
the anger of it feels like fire
burning the oil off water:

without it I have little
by way of grit
for working out pearls

You say:

still spinning

to the tune of your words
I'm taking time
to get back into the shafts of light
that come from the south

You say:
it all just spilled over

You say:
calm water

You say:
violets...

to be read out loud in places

a set of Northumbrian small pipes

words [that]
have been sleeping

and violets...

These head- and heart-lines are
our provisional script for living
on the edge, a book sewn
from the sea, a piper's prayer
for breath enough and nimble feet,

a new way of playing
things, *a sense of someone*
knowing what it means,

bring[ing] deep blue
words

restoration

and dancing

Violets (AP)

In a different tongue
the educator renders your
velvet zygomorphic,
times
actinomorphic
times
cleistogamous.

He differentiates your perianth
into five imbricated sepals.
The lower most which
is commonly
spurred.

And there are
nectariferous appendages
that project backward into the spur
of the petal

[...] that one
yes....

the one that is
lowermost.

There.

Oh spare me the
lecture and show me
where they grow when
the april's in her eye.

“Most violet seeds
need a cooling
period to trigger
growth” he says.

I need not draw
the analogy. I don't
believe in the growth
trigger.

They grow well
if you grind the bones
of dead words to dust
and sprinkle the earth
with their morbid power.

This is not a metaphor.
Culture comes
from cutting back,
rotting matter, from
matted matter.

Culture comes from raking
over the living

with the dead.

*Lay her in the earth,
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring.*

There, look,
a clump, under the oak,
against the fading winter of the
grassy bank.
Purpling into the darks
of blue, paling as
soft as apricot.

Like Patience
on a monument.
Smiling
at grief.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES:

Alison Phipps Alison Phipps is Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies, and Director of the *Centre for Studies in Faith, Culture and Education* at the University of Glasgow where she teaches modern languages, comparative literature, anthropology and intercultural education. Her books include *Acting Identities* (Lang: 2000), *Contemporary German Cultural Studies* (ed. Arnold: 2002), *Modern Languages: Learning and Teaching in an Intercultural Field* (Sage: 2004) with Mike Gonzalez, *Critical Pedagogy: Political Approaches to Languages and Intercultural Communication* (ed. Multilingual Matters: 2004) with Manuela Guilherme and *Tourism and Intercultural Exchange* (Channel View: 2005) with Gavin Jack and *Learning the Arts of Linguistic Survival: Tourism, Languaging, Life* (Channel View: 2007). Her poetry has been published in many anthologies and her first collection of poetry, *Through Wood*, is forthcoming in 2008 with *Wild Goose Publications*.

Lesley Saunders is an award-winning poet, and has published two collections as well as in many journals and magazines. Her poem 'The Uses of Greek' was shortlisted for the Best Single Poem in the Forward Prize 1999, and she won joint first prize in the prestigious Manchester Poetry Competition for short portfolios of work in 2008. She was poet in residence at a three-day international health and social care conference in 2006: the resultant collection, *Islands into a Continent*, can be viewed at: <http://www.health-disciplines.ubc.ca/intered/>. She collaborated with Malcolm Rigg, photographer, on *Castings*, a sequence of poems to commemorate the centennial exhibition of the Royal British Society of Sculptors at Abbey House Gardens, Malmesbury, in 2007. In 2008–09, she is a Visiting Scholar at New Hall, Cambridge, undertaking a poetry project on the college gardens. Lesley has appeared at the Voicebox, South Bank Centre, and broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Her third book of poetry, *Her Leafy Eye*, a collaboration with the artist and horticulturalist Geoff Carr, is published by Two Rivers Press in 2009.

Lesley has also had a life-long career in education: she worked at the National Foundation for Educational Research for many years and most recently was Senior Policy Adviser for Research at the General Teaching Council for England. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the Institute of Education, London, a Research Fellow at the Department of Education, Oxford, and an Associate of the Leadership for Learning Network in the Education Faculty, Cambridge. She works with teachers and headteachers to encourage self-expression through poetry.

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