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Book review of *What Poetry Brings to Business* by Morgan, Clare, with Kirsten Lange and Ted Buswick. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010.

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Although at first glance they would be regarded as strange bedfellows, poetry and business have been brought together on a regular basis since at least the early twentieth century, certainly since Ezra Pound's deliberate exploration of financial matters in his *Cantos*. He could be ramblingly bellicose, espousing

little except an anti-Semitic disposition, but he could also be spot-on, like in *Canto XLV*, in which usury is attacked not on racist grounds but as an indication of intellectual and imaginative demise. Money can, it seems, make the poetry world go round as well, or as Wallace Stevens claims in one of his aphorisms, ‘money is a kind of poetry’ (Stevens, 1997, p. 905). While it would be disingenuous to insist that business is resistant to poetic exploration in any special way, the idea that poetry can help business become more successful in surmounting obstacles and, ultimately, reaching the projected annual aims is rarely given careful consideration. And yet, it is this issue that lies at the core of Clare Morgan’s *What Poetry Brings to Business*, in which she proposes that business people of all levels of corporate hierarchy could and indeed should be exposed to poems in order to maximize their professional potential.

Morgan’s claim is, roughly speaking, threefold. Firstly, she observes that teaching (although the word assumes a master-apprentice context, which is hardly amenable to spurring personal growth, especially among highly skilled professionals of whatever occupation, a point that Morgan does not address) business people to read poetry “may provide [them] not only with a new view of something [they] were considering: it may provide [them] with new skills in approaching that consideration” (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 13). This idea will be investigated in its various guises, all of which point to the importance of fostering creativity, a trait that by common agreement is essential to becoming successful in any branch of business. And so, poems impel one to think outside the box in order to be able to ‘envision what is not-yet’ (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 17, emphasis in original) and can “impede the easy reliance that turs facts into assumptions and so closes down the different ways we might look at things” (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 93). Secondly, given its open-endedness, its refusal to lead to conclusive outcomes, its downright ambiguity, poetry can help business people operate under conditions of uncertainty. The familiar point of reference is Keats’s notion of negative capability, one’s capacity to abide “in uncertainty, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (qtd. in Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 37). Specifically, in the executive environment, this translates into being better able to 1. “postpone the requirements for ‘results’

and closure;” 2. “Include downtime in its definition of productive;” 3. “Modify its expectation of the logical progression of a project” (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 139). While results, productivity and goal-oriented thinking have come to be recognized as yardsticks of a successful entrepreneur, Morgan goes to some lengths to showcase that too narrow a view of those ideas is bound to cripple their implementation.

Lastly, poetry not only allows you to imagine other individuals and their travails, which would otherwise be inaccessible to you (for a variety of reasons like gender, racial or status difference), it also “invites you to enter the mind-sets opposed to your own” (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 166, emphasis in original), which can sharpen your emotional perception of otherness. This, in turn, leads to an enhanced ‘social sensibilities’ (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010, p. 174) that enable one to form more nuanced ethical judgements. What poetry offers is an exercise in empathy understood as other-oriented perspective-taking (Coplan, 2014, p. 5), which is seen as one of preconditions for being ethically-aware social actors. Morgan refers to Martha Nussbaum’s influential view of literature as a mode of sharpening our ethical sensibilities (see Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 89–90) but the view of empathy as a key capacity in increasing one’s ethical keenness has been discussed at length by such thinkers as Peter Goldie, Jesse Prinz or Adam Morton.

To bolster her argument, Morgan proffers a generous selection of poems that she discusses from the point of view of how they can help a particular facet of business operations, from client-handling to creating a socially responsible image of a company. While little is said about those poems that would not already have been established by criticism, Morgan’s goal is to reach business professionals, at the same time enlisting the literati in her project of brining poetry on the syllabi of MBA courses and the actual agendas of corporate training schemes. To this end, she gives up on dry academic discourse in favour of partly a memoir, partly a record of meetings with business people and partly an introduction to understanding poetry outside the hermetic realm of the literary scholar. Her ideas may not be new but neither are they meant to be, for Morgan wishes to show the way for poetry to become relevant in the modern world, to the mutual benefit of all parties concerned. And in this she no doubt

displays much merit, her readings of poems solid, her records of business people's reactions encouragingly positive, albeit not sugary. However, there is an underlying assumption behind the book and, I fear, behind trying to sell poetry to the salespeople in general; for on the one hand, only a certain kind of poetry is susceptible of being offered to the financial sector and, on the other, this offer must, I suspect, at one point impinge on the hard-core principles of successful entrepreneurship.

Morgan does not exclude poets and poems that are openly critical of business; one finds a discussion of W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Kenneth Fearing's *Dirge*. Nor does she shy away from some more abstract and demanding works like Ted Hughes's *The Thought-Fox*, which is one of her central texts for inciting creativity (though one wonders how her use of the poem would square with Hughes's trenchant criticism of modernity's profit-obsession). What Morgan's selection and her idea of poetry are predicated on, though, is an assumption that poetry conjures order out of chaos, that uncertainty must prevail but there is enough evidence in the text to form workable hypotheses, that there are ways of acting implicit in poetry, or as Derek Mahon (a poet Morgan does not discuss but whose work might very well fit the bill) put it in a different context, "a good poem is a paradigm of good politics" (Mahon, 1970, p. 93). A poem needn't address issues in politics but its admission of contrasting points of view, which are worked into a balanced utterance, however wobbly this balance should be, becomes a model for how debate ought to be carried out. Similarly, a poem needn't praise entrepreneurial skill or lambast corporate mendacity to prove useful in teaching one to think beyond the formulaic. Still, there are poems, as there are poets, that set out to interrupt our customary modes of thinking to the degree that trying to retain ideas such as creativity or empathic engagement with otherness from them would not only appear a stilted venture but would contravene the internal operations of the text. One thinks of poets such as J. H. Prynne and the constellation of radically experimental poets gathered around him at one time or another. I can see how a Prynne poem could be made useful in Morgan's practice but I also can't help but think that, if successful, the poem would cause the corporation to close down or to adopt

a business model so at odds with the current trends that in no time the board would have to declare insolvency.

Morgan is fond of exercises, so let us try one here. Consider the opening of Prynne's 2003 long poem *Blue Slides at Rest*: "Pacify rag hands attachment in for muted / counter-march or locked up going to drainage / offer some, give, none ravine platter; tied up / to kin you would desire that [...]" (Prynne, 2005, p. 553). The poem resists translation into ideas, unless one revises one's reading modes. The image of 'rag hands' suggests destitution and lack of agency, the imperative 'Pacify' implies an oppressive attitude but it is unclear whose attitude that is. One way of looking at it is to say that the very language in which clear-cut utterances are cherished becomes the oppressor, through its observance of cause-and-effect logic, through its insistence on relevance, through the implicit necessity that it conform to the Gricean maxims. Prynne has suggested that "poetic thought is brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language" (Prynne, 2010, p. 598). If then poems get you to think, this is likely going to oppose the way you conceive of language in the first place. If we rely on syntax as the crucial tool of ensuring that our sentences are actually going to convey ideas that other might decipher, then we fall for the trap of reification (in Adorno's sense). Therefore, in reference to my second point, to think outside the box would be to think outside the extant system of language, to challenge its ostensible essentialism: words can mean without being fitted into the SVO framework, although for the sake of expediency, vital in the business environment, 'you would desire that'. Examples of similar radicalism in their approach to language could be found in the work of poets such as Keston Sutherland, Drew Milne, Tom Raworth, Maurice Scully or the US Language poets.

These remarks are not aimed to belittle Morgan's project but rather to suggest that rather than ancillary to business, poetry is its other. For poems can only serve business to the extent that they help the balance sheet, which is no attack on business, merely a statement of the blindingly obvious, that business people are responsible for their ventures' and their shareholders' profits. And as long as poems can prove useful in completing that task, they are happy to bring them on board but to presume that along the way a more



sensitive and fairer business model can be propitiated is wishful thinking. If anything, though, I would be curious to see how Morgan utilizes poems which demand a radical break with notions of expediency, all the way to dismissing goal-oriented thinking, not only its postponement.

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