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Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF POETRY: A SYMPOSIUM

Sociology and Poetry: An Introduction ¹

Michael R. Hill

POETRY IS A SOCIOLOGICAL REALITY. It has an institutional location within society, plays an important part in everyday social interaction, and promises very real results as a site for conceiving and explicating alternative social constellations. Simultaneously, poetry is sometimes difficult to grasp by those of decidedly a prosaic bent, and this includes too many sociologists. As poetry shapes — and is in turn shaped by — the active use of language in our culture on the respective parts of authors, speakers, hearers, readers, etc., the relevance and meaning of poetry can escape the sociological imagination when sociologists frame the social world too narrowly. “Every word and every sentence,” Alfred Schutz (1944: 504), reminds us (following William James), is connected to “fringes” of “past and future elements” and to “emotional values and irrational implications which themselves remain ineffable.” These “fringes,” wrote Schutz, “are the stuff poetry is made of; they are capable of being set to music, but they are not translatable.” The fact that poetry is not translatable means, at the least, that is not fundamentally measurable or quantifiable, leading, in turn, to the wrongheaded conclusion by some sociologists that sociology has little to do with poetry — and vice versa.

J.P. Ward (1981:ix) reified this faulty conclusion with his pessimistic observations: “that sociology could not account for poetry, and that it was in sociology’s nature that this was so,” and that there is an “inability of these two things greatly to concern each other.” “We must rewrite the traditional descriptions of poetry,” Ward continued, “in the light of the incompatibility we see between poetry and the sociological idea.” Finally, Ward (1981: 202) concluded: “sociological thought seems to press not merely sociologists but also ordinary people into a language which is the very reverse of poetic richness.”

J.P. Ward to the contrary, sociology necessarily accounts for all things social, including books such as Ward’s and sociological journals like this one, not to mention childhood, plumbing, poetry, and language itself. Howard Becker’s (1982) astute monograph on the sociology of art makes the full argument in convincing prose. That sociological writing is often didactic and aesthetically perverse, as Ward rightly charges, is not here at issue. The crucial point is that sociological writing at its best builds bridges toward reflexive, sometimes elegant and moving understandings of our corporate and communal lives. W.E.B. DuBois’ (1903) analyses of “the sorrow songs” and “the passing of the first born” are, to my mind, exquisite early exemplars. Erving Goffman’s (1974: 16-20) deceptively playful analysis of a string of six asterisks (“* * * * *”) in *Frame Analysis*, is a more recent and decidedly more modern example. To paraphrase Joe Survant’s admonition to poets (elsewhere in this issue), “People

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in general, but, certainly *sociologists*, need to be able to look clearly at the world and then say what they see in a plain way.” It is clearly the case that sociological writing, while rarely poetry, at times approaches the poetic — the untranslatable but nonetheless fundamental aspects of social life — in imagination, empathy, and understanding.

The sociologists featured in this special symposium demonstrate solid, early links between sociology and poetry. Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), a leading disciplinary founder, was a keen admirer of Shakespeare and authored numerous poems in her own right. The mutual admiration of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) and the first president of the American Sociological Association, Lester Frank Ward (1841-1913), is here expressed in sociological verse. William Clark Gordon’s (1865-1936) *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson As Related to His Time* (here reproduced in full on the accompanying CD Supplement) was an early sociological dissertation at the University of Chicago. Florian Znaniecki’s (1882-1958) account of the social role of poets provides a thorough preface for John Barron Mays’ (1914-1987) noble and insightful explication of the poetry of sociology. Suffice it to say that J.P. Ward did not consult these works, and thus tried (unsuccessfully) to reinvent the wheel from scratch while wearing blinders. We should learn from his mistake.

Our disciplinary record is, in fact, filled with many useful and insightful explorations of poetry and the poetic impulse. Among the references noted below, sociological readers will discern a variety of starting points, a selection of perspectives from which to reconsider poetry and poets. There is nothing more basic to human life as we know it than language, and to ignore poetry as a vital part of linguistic interaction is to cut off our ears to spite our tongues.

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