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## Poetry and the Silence of Working Life

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### Abstract

Poetry and its use in the workplace has seen a growing interest in recent years, being used as a way to help those who work in organisational settings to explore and tell their stories. These can speak directly to individuals through the works of others or can emerge from organisational contexts to enable them to make sense of their own particular situations. Poetry has been used to explore, for example, organisational management practices, leadership, performance management, and to aid creative development and problem solving. It has also provided a means for individuals to understand how they interact with their organisational settings, or in some cases as a way to undertake research. Those who write poetry engage in the world as a way to allow their voice and those of others to be heard, as they explore and come to terms with their situated reality. This paper will therefore discuss the use of poetry in the workplace, before presenting three poems that use memory and metaphor to engage with organisational realities. It will then offer reflections and implications for organisational studies, before concluding that poetry provides a way to explore the hidden worlds of organisations that are often ignored or remain silent in the milieu of the taken for granted organisational rhetoric, and conversations.

### Introduction

Those who work in modern day “industrial factories” have to confront cultures of silence and imposed compliance that modify individuals’ behaviour so they can be “fitted” and indoctrinated into the taken for granted organisational rhetoric, and the power and pervasiveness of business practices (Windle, 2006). As Windle (2006, p.457) notes ‘For most of the twentieth century it [business] emphasized those human attributes thought relevant to executive success, especially competitive ambition and financial numeracy; and groomed many generations through business schools and corporate institutions, in the techniques and attitudes considered appropriate to this calling’. Added to this, organisational discourse and silence where politics and dramas are played out between those in power and those subject to power has been analysed through the metaphor of theatre (Mangham and Overington, 1987). This ranges from official organisational norms propagated by its customs, working practices, and behaviours, to unofficial cultures of silence that operate at the

margins and subterranean strata of organisational life. However It has been argued that if we are to unlock the hidden and silent realities of organisational life we need to explore management practices that go beyond the boundaries of traditional enquiry (see, for example, Hamel, 2000; Boje and Al Arkoubi, 2009; Adler, 2006; Dey and Steyaert, 2007; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009; Hughes, 2011).

### Poetics and organizational silence

Poetry has its etymological roots in the Greek word *poiein* (to make) being the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasurable, beautiful, imaginative, and elevated thoughts. It has been argued that poetry can be a useful starting point to help individuals to deal with the complexities of organisational life, elevating the self beyond the milieu and malaise of the “ordinary”, where it helps us think about the wider context in which we are located (David and McIntosh, 2004). Poetry has also been used to challenge traditionally held values of dominant management discourses and practices (see, for example, Oresick, 1991; Coles and Oresick, 1995; Leggo, 2008; Darmer and Grisoni, 2011). This is exemplified by Clare Morgan (2010), in her book *What Poetry Brings to Business*, where she explores the deep but unexpected connections between business and poetry. Morgan demonstrates how the creative energy, emotional power, and communicative complexity of poetry relates directly to the practical need for innovation and problem solving that confronts business managers. Morgan shows how poetry unpacks complexity and flexibility of thinking, together with the ability to empathise with, and better understand the thoughts and feelings of others. This she argues helps facilitate the entrepreneurial culture of an organisation, develop imaginative solutions, and gives a better understanding of chaotic environments (see, for example, Davis and McIntosh, 2004; Darmer and Grisoni, 2011). Poets see things as they are through sensuous experience rather than the constraints of objective reality (see, for example, Davis and McIntosh, 2004) and as Hirshfield (1997, p.vii) notes ‘Poetry’s work is the clarification and magnification of being’. Poetry provides a way for us to confront complex environments, reducing them to understandable ways of knowing. It helps to facilitate the development and a sense of empathy and understanding of, and with the world, the self, and others, and provides an alternative voice to dominant organizational discourses. As David and McIntosh (2004, p.84) note ‘Poetry is too important to be left to poets. It would be much better if it belonged to everyone, producers and consumers alike. In work and in business, poetry could be a powerful tool for deepening reason and logic through the use of emotion and imagination’.

Leavy (2009, p.63) reminds us that poems are ‘Sensory scenes created with skilfully placed words and purposeful pauses, poems push feelings to the forefront capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass’. Poems bring lived reality and imagination together and in this way ‘a poem can be understood as revealing a snippet of human experience that is artistically expressed as in a heightened state’ (Leavy, 2009, p.64) and provides insight through the use of metaphor and linguistic negotiation. This enables individual’s to express experiences through the self-referential use of language to create new understandings of the world, thoughts and feelings, this being an aesthetic process of cognitive and emotional insight (Hanauer, 2004; Leggo, 2008). Grant and Oswick (1996) in their edited edition *Metaphor and Organizations* advance debates how metaphor is used to study organizational settings. They consider how its role creates theories, and the reinterpretation of existing theories to explore organizational experience, discourse and language, and show how differently constructed metaphors provide powerful tools with which to manage and study organizations. Chia (1996, p.128) notes ‘To study the character of metaphor and to critically examine its applications is, therefore, to be confronted with the hidden aspects of one’s own presuppositions, one’s own culture, and one’s own language and logic of organization’. Furthermore the relevance of metaphors in organisational situations influence attitudes and behaviour within these contexts where, as Gareth Morgan (1997, p.348) states ‘All theories of organisation and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that persuade us to see, understand, and imagine situations in partial ways. Metaphors create insight’. Okri (1997, p.1) reminds us that the world in which the poet lives does not necessarily yield up the poetic, and that in ‘the hands of the poet, the world is resistant. It is only with the searching and the moulding that the unyielding world becomes transformed in a new medium of song and metaphor’

Inns and Jones (1996) also discuss the role metaphor in organizational theory, and its relationship to postmodernism, the latter being viewed from an epistemological perspective as opposed to an epoch. This they argue it is a way to challenge traditional scientific ways of knowing, and the binary concept of knowledge as being either rational or emotional. Rather it is concerned with situated and partial knowledge, the oppressed, and the decentring of author as they experience and confront the world with feelings of insecurity and instability, as Burrell and Cooper (1998, p.10) note ‘The world is not already there, waiting for us to reflect it’. These sentiments are echoed by Leavy (2009, p.65) where she notes

that discursive practices ‘shape experience and our articulation of human experience’. Laurel Richardson (1997) argues that there is a relationship between new theoretical insights, paradigm shifts, and turns towards scientific artistic expression when writing poetry, using the term “pleated text” ‘to ‘conceptualize the multiple layers of meanings that emerges in between what there is, and what is absent’ (Leavy, 2009, p.66). She notes that poetic writing and representation connect individuals to something deep within them where humanity may elude the social scientist. Poetry is therefore is a form of representation; one that takes its lead from the lyrical and the world, where ‘Poems, surrounded by space and weighted by silence, break through the noise to present an essence’ (Leavy, 2009, p.63).

Poems bring together images in an inexpressible collage of language that cannot be often found in everyday expressions of lexical conformity, and allows an individual to capture their emotional experiences and voice that says “this is my reality – this is my voice that you or no one else can privilege or deny me”. Richardson also draws a distinction between narrative poetry and lyrical poetry. Narrative poetry is a form of storytelling, where interviews are transcribed by the researcher, and transformed into a poem that tells the respondents story using their own language. Narrative poetry has also been labelled research poetry (Langer and Furman, 2004), investigative poetry (Hartnett, 2003), and ethnographic poetics (Brady, 2004, Denzin, 1997). Others have created poems from literature sources that Prendergast (2004) terms as “literature based poetry”. The focus of lyrical poetry is less concerned with a story but rather emphasises moments of emotion. This according to Richardson allows the writer to capture and express themselves in rhythm, totality, and patterns that comprise speech, and therefore extends our understanding of “giving voice” to our research collaborators. Richardson (1997) reminds us that poetry is a place where an individual develops their sense of being and of apprehending their ability to intervene in external reality. It allows people to express their ideas, feelings, perceptions and experiences of life in a free, open and expressive manner through verse, whereby they can share and exchange stories, which are often intimate and personal, and sometimes must remain private, especially when they refer directly or indirectly to professional life, as they can reveal the genuine concerns of individuals. Faulkner (2005) expresses similar sentiments, whereby poetry engages and evokes emotions, promotes human connection and understanding, and it may be politically charged. She goes on to say that poetry is used when prose is insufficient for an individual to communicate their message, suggesting that ‘many researchers use poetic representation as a means to evoke emotional responses in readers and listeners in an effort to produce some shared experience’. Poetry therefore offers a mode of engagement for the imagination to play, and where the senses meet the external world and freedom is attained to express the inexpressible, and to utter the unspoken; it is a place of aesthetic playfulness where the silence of our inner conscious feelings can be broken, where ‘Poets align themselves with the wretched and the voiceless of the planet’ (Okri, 1997, p.13).

The silence of inner conscious feelings have been explored by Islam and Zyphur (2006, p.44) who consider the ‘diverse meaning that work holds in daily lived experience’ in their exploration of Robert Frost’s poetics of work. Frost’s poetry addresses the unspoken and silent existential expression and significance of work, people and their organizational environments. Islam and Zyphur explore Frost’s work through the kaleidoscopic lens of: Work as self-realization this being the human as a creative, productive force of nature; work as a catharsis; Work as a way to solve the existential emptiness of humanity; Work as necessity and alienation; Work and the tyranny of management; Work as a necessity not as a love; Work as a compulsion that drives man to abuse nature; Work as unifying principle; Work as homage to the beauty of nature; The attempt to combine necessity and intrinsic satisfaction of work; Work as a metaphor for the movement of life. Islam and Zyphur (2006, p.534) conclude by advocating ‘that the exploration of poetry gives theoretical and epistemic insights of organizational life’ and how experience ‘condensed into poetic form can illustrate general truths’, and as Rich (1995, p.84) notes ‘Every poem breaks the silence that had to be overcome’. These sentiments are echoed by Leggo (2008, p.167) who observes that ‘As a poet I grow more and more enamored with the echoes of wonder, mystery, and silence that I hear when I attend to the words and world all around me’. Silence and voice are also important for Hiley (2006) who highlights and reveals the links between managers developing their reflective practice and the emergence of poetic expression in their writing. Hiley (2006, p.561) has posited the notion of “the great silencing” of the voices of the poetic’ where ‘every single participant has a wonderful “voice” with which to speak of their thoughts, feelings, personal and professional practice’ (Hiley, 2006, p.566). The exploration of feelings, thoughts, and intimate experiences also resonate with Bolton (2012, p.242) when referring to reflective practice and poetics noting:

Poetry’s consciousness enables it to reach the parts prose cannot, leaping straight to the heart of the matter. Poetry is an exploration of our deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts,

feelings, ideas and insights: distilled, pared to the succinctness in as few words as possible, and made music to the ear by lyricism.

Cooper and Burrell (1988) have previously drawn upon Foucault's work of discursive formation within the context of organisational silence in order to create new perspectives and to show how individuals are 'suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (Gertz, 1973, p.5). It is argued that discursive formations can intensify the conditioning of the silent employee based on the power aspect of the discourse itself. When speaking or writing takes place in certain contexts this can have an effect as to whether an employee remains silent or voice their opinions and concerns. Discourse is the product of the dominant power interests in organizations and these interests can perpetuate themselves based on the ideology that is represented through them. However it is only recently according to Edwards, Ashkansay, and Gardner (2009) that organizational silence has begun to attract the attention of several organizational scholars (see, for example, Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne, Soon Ang, and Botero, 2003; Detert and Edmondson, 2006; Edwards and Gardner, 2007; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, 2003; and Premeaux and Bedian, 2003). Whilst these studies foreground the fundamental decisions that people make in the workplace to express their ideas and concerns, or whether it is possible to even do so, they do not advance approaches and methods as to how individuals can break the status quo of organisational silence in order to challenge taken for granted discourses and rhetoric. This can have negative implications for 'organisational learning, decision making, error detection, and misconduct' (Edwards et al. 2009, p.86). Employees in organizations have to make decisions whether they should speak up or remain silent, and it has been argued that employee silence leads to situations where they withhold information that might be useful to the organization, whether this is intentional or unintentional or withholding 'their ideas, opinions, and concerns (Dyne, et al. 2003; Milliken and Morrison, 2003). As Milliken et al. (2003) note 'there is evidence from a variety of sources that employees often do not feel comfortable speaking to their bosses about organizational problems or issues that concern them'. Employees might therefore be afraid of the consequences of speaking up, feeling nothing will change, or feel intimidated with the subject matter that they wish to express, or by those they have to converse with. Organisational silence can be compounded by collective silence where people are not willing to speak up and present an opinion that differs from the majority, perceiving they do not possess enough power to voice their concerns; discourse being the means of how employees regard themselves in relation to the organization and relationships with other colleagues (Milliken, 2003). In response to the foregoing issues, what follows is the bringing together of 'insights into daily work experience' (Darmer and Grisoni, 2011, p.9) to capture through poetics the silence of the organization to explore the 'intersections between critical discourse and creative discourse' (Leggo, 2008, p.166), where poetry creates a space of knowing and becoming, and invites intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic responses.

### The silence of the organization: A journey of poetic discovery

Investigating the hidden realities in organisation life has been a personal journey of discovery, and central to this have been some fundamental questions: What is the connection between freedom, art, and the aesthetic condition? What in my terms does it mean to be human? What does it really mean to know thyself? (Armitage, 2012). In my attempts to answer these questions it was Gaston Bachelard's (1957) philosophical outlook in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, which is what he calls a "phenomenology of dwelling" that I drew my inspiration to think in a radical way about organisations, and my personal and professional life. Poetics is a realm for the imagining consciousness, what Bachelard (1957, p.xviii) termed a 'phenomenology of the imagination' where this should be understood as a study of the phenomenon of the poetic image when it emerges in to the consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul and being of man, apprehended in his actuality. The next part of this paper will present examples of poetry to show how I have explored and engaged with the hidden and silent data of organisational life. They attempt to illustrate how this mode of *being* locates *my-self* within the context of personal experiences, and capture, using metaphor, my mood of deep inner emotions and feelings of past and present day lived reality. The three poems presented are: Night Shifter, which is a poem of personal revelation and was an emotional undertaking to write; Corridor, is a poem of heartless and autocratic management practices; The Green Room, is an observation as to the way people are treated when their usefulness as employees is deemed to be at an end. All of these poems focus upon lyrical poetry being an emphasis upon moments of emotion, human connection, and understanding (Richardson, 1997). They are stories of struggle; mine in coming to terms with the world, and those who I have known and still know. As Ben Okri (1997, p.117) eloquently notes:

Where stories are, struggles have been lived out, triumphs have danced with failures, and human destinies have left their imprints and their stories of the land, in the air, even on the waters. Strangers to these lands can feel the vibrations of the people's forgotten histories and fates in the air.

## Night Shifter

Night Shifter is a poem that recalls childhood memories of those who toiled and sweated in the woollen mills of West Yorkshire. It is a poem of how organisations shaped the lives of the working classes. It recalls a time of deprivation, not of monetary or material things, but of departure and leaving. The poem has deep emotional attachment for me, and attempts to capture the voices of those who long gone through the eyes of a child, perhaps an oft overlooked aspect of organisational life. It recounts a story of working life on three levels. First it is my tribute to my father who sacrificed much for his family, but whose wisdom whilst not found in books of learning and philosophy, but in real life, guided and influenced a small boy. Second is my need to capture and share my experiences how metronomic manual labour was in the woollen industry of the 1960's, directed as it was by the sound of the mill buzzer. The experience of watching my father walk out the door each evening was a difficult experience to comprehend as a small boy. This was compounded further as I could see the anguish and anger on my mother's face, and in her voice as my father prepared for his nightly labours. Third is my need to share my personal experiences of waiting and silence, where upon waking every morning at half past six I would wait football in hand, for my father's return, and illustrates how organisational life imposes emotional patterns upon those outside its physical boundaries.

The first stanza describes a building that used to twinkle and sing and still stands at the bottom of road where I grew up, and where my mother still lives. The building is now used as a judo club, industrial units, and more latterly a general store. The building has been knocked down in places, but the loom shed still stands, where in the second stanza 'I stood amid a wondrous sight and the smell of wool grease'. However, this poem is also about a way of life, one that took its toll on my father, who spent 12 years working night shifts where 'twas hell as shuttles and wheels banged around', and 'You couldn't even think aloud above the hammering sounds' (Stanza 11 lines two and three). But there are other dimensions alluded to in this very personal poem. In stanzas 4 to 7, I remember the countless times of being reunited with the night tuners (the name given to a loom over-looker) plight. This was a joyful start to each morning, as I was now greeted with my 'fathers grey face' and a hand that gladly reached out with a 'gentle smile' (stanza 7, line 1). But there is also a poignant dimension that is often lost in accounts of working life; the wives of those who had to endure the departure of their husbands as they walked out the door just before six o'clock each evening. Stanzas 8 and 9 recall the countless times I observed and experienced my mother's distress and loneliness as she stood 'In the parlour at eve's sixth hour' (Stanza 8, line 1) before my father in stanza 9 would 'would pick up with bitter sigh a tuck box'. The poem goes on to note the boss's power over their workers in exchange for an extra 'ten quid a week!' before finishing with a testimonial to those who laboured in the woollen mills.

I pass a building that used to twinkle and sing,  
To the tunes and sounds of shuttles and looms,  
I didn't know it then when I was a lad,  
I'd still pass this shrine now buried and dead.

I'd be nine or ten, and will never forget my delight,  
As I stood with my father in awe amid a wondrous sight,  
Of looms and shuttles, and the smell of wool grease,  
His face beamed in adoration, and with pride it did gleam.

This was once a proud place of labours and strife,  
Where men and women obtained their pride  
In an honest weeks toil, and dignity gained,  
To keep kin and kith from poverty's strains.

In the presence of memories dimmed not by time,  
Stood a small boy at six in the morning,  
At the end of a path vexed and wringing of hands,  
For the glimpse of a night tuners far away glance.

At half past six a buzzer would sound another night end,  
And those on the night shift would drift silently home,  
To rid themselves of noxious odours, and filthy wool grease,  
And to beds of calm respite to thankfully rest.

I would see my father's grey face in the bright morn dawn,  
As he slowly dragged his aching body so wearily home,  
Hands calloused and bruised from a nights hard graft won,  
'neath a clattering loom to keep warp and weft cast.

His open hand would gladly reach out with a gentle smile,  
To meet his sons forlorn, and lonely furrowed brow,  
And with a gladdened heart through sad strewn eyes,  
He would eagerly behold a boy patiently waiting.

At kitchen sink at eve's sixth hour, stands a  
Lonely figure silently weeping, with cup in hand  
She watches a clock slowly ticking, and readies  
Herself for another night of loneliness and waiting,  
For she too must bear the night shifters burdens.

Her husband picks up a tuck box with bitter sigh,  
To greetings of regrets and anguished looks,  
He kisses his wife, and tenderly touches his son's head,  
Before taking his leave for a night shift of hard graft.

Then at half past six the night buzzer would sound,  
Calling those on the night shift to drift silently back,  
From dreams and tranquillities of restful slumbers,  
To re-join the deafening noise and filthy wool grease.

Working with cockroaches and mice 'neath noisy looms,  
T'was hell as shuttles and wheels banged all around,  
A twelve hour shift numbed all the senses and talk aloud,  
You couldn't even think above the hammering sounds.

And the rewards for his tuning of backbreaking keep,  
To do the night shift - an extra ten quid a week!  
The bosses knew they owned him and his like,  
And their destiny's path if they dared to speak.

Those night shifters exchanged their lives for a pitiful price,  
To keep those looms moving through dark lonely nights,  
And those punishing labours for faceless masters,  
Whose harsh work rates were not for the fainters.  
But now this dark building, once vibrant now stands,  
And whispers in silent pathos its testimonial tones,  
To those who labours and toils are long gone,  
Of a place of deadly noise and filthy wool grease.

So when I pass this old building once a shrine,  
I remember those who swallowed the bitter work pill,  
And a night tuners wisdom to a working class lad,  
I'll not allow you my son - to work in the mill.

I often think back at my father's perils and travails,  
And the night shifters who kept him company too,  
Through the nightly noise and filthy wool grease,  
And the plight of the ten quider's nightly hell

## Corridor

Corridor is a poem that describes organisational change, and the secretive and silent world of management practices, where each stanza represents a time frame of change taken over a single day. Okri (1997, p.2) notes ‘The great tidal crowds of everyday events pour in one direction, sometimes the poet has to move in the other – often moving directly against them, at other times cutting tangentially across the morning waves of humanity’. This poem shows how organisational silence works on two levels. The first is concerned with “in-group” dynamics, the second concerns organisational silence experienced from an onlooker’s sense of impotence as they witness the events of the day through the lens of powerlessness and resignation: ‘Poets seem to be set against the world because we need to them to show us the falseness of our limitations, the true extent of our kingdom’ (Okri, 1997, p.2). The poem uses colour as a metaphor to describe the moods the onlooker experiences in each phase of the day. For example, pink to depict love and compassion; yellow hope; turquoise enjoyment; black secrets; gold achievement; white purity and innocence; silver emotional and sensitivity; red ambition and survival; blue trust, honesty and loyalty; grey unemotional and detached; purple imagination and spirituality. The day starts calmly in Stanza one with an innocuous early morning walk down the corridor. But as the poem unfolds, intrigue unfolds in Stanza 4 when ‘a figure emerges, From the shadows, Makes a dash, Into room 101’. But things become darker as Stanza 6 notes ‘I watch intently, At red suites sitting, At the end of the table, With glum faces, Crimson heads, Waiting to burst’, before reaching a frenetic climax in Stanza 7. The final Stanza describes a clam and silent aura in the corridor that is broken by the sounds ‘Of piercing shrills, And Ghostly taunts, From hells ninth circle, Of faraway black suited laughter’.

### 8.47 Early morning coffee

Need a shot  
Of black nectar  
To start the day,  
In the corridor I passed  
A huddled mass  
Of pink suits,  
Hugging like lovers  
With intimate embraces  
Heads glued together  
Like conjoined twins,  
mmmm... I thought,  
Something seems strange  
About this public display.

### 10.34 A mid-morning stroll

Went to get some air,  
And walked down  
The corridor, and could see  
Yellow suits  
Pointing fingers  
At a cowering figure;  
Subdued and submissive,  
Receiving the last rites;  
But as I passed by  
And met their eyes,  
A wall of silence drew its veil.

### 12.17 Lunch

In melodious tones I walked,  
With turquoise mind  
This enclosed space,

The corridor,  
And met black suites  
Backslapping,  
Grinning, Laughing,  
With a gold suit,  
Sharing a joke, a secret,  
A coded message  
Only they understand.

### **13.09 Back to my office**

On my way back  
To my office,  
In the distant  
Vanishing point  
Of the corridor,  
I see blue suits confabbing  
With number one,  
I hear echoes,  
I feel heat reverberating,  
Bouncing from the walls,  
Then a figure emerges  
From the shadows,  
It makes a dash  
Into room 101,  
A perplexing sight I think.

### **14.30 A meeting to attend**

I enter the corridor  
And turn right,  
It looks familiar,  
But alien feelings  
Overcome me;  
A silver haze  
Seems to hang  
In the air, drawing, pulling  
The unsuspecting,  
A mysterious allure  
To nirvana waiting,  
I glance to my right  
And catch a reflection  
Of a gold suit  
In the shimmering glass,  
As he re-traces my steps,  
And moves towards  
The swing doors  
I'm about to open,  
The gold suit  
His face all contorted,  
Is full of thunder,  
Sends a shudder,  
A cold chill, down my spine,  
Like someone dancing  
On a dead man's grave.



**14.47 Agenda items now done**

I watch intently  
At red suits sitting  
At the end of the table,  
With glum faces,  
Crimson heads  
Waiting to burst,  
Like fully ripened  
Blood blisters,  
They hold papers  
In their hands,  
Waiting to lance like boils  
With deadly glance  
The tongues  
Of all who dare  
To object to their creed,  
And then one of them  
Starts to speak...

**16.19 End of Meeting**

Door firmly shut,  
Outside my office  
In the corridor  
I hear noises,  
It radiates grey,  
Fading echoes,  
Raised voices,  
Of red suits,  
The tapping of feet,  
Frenetic fervour,  
Best to keep low  
Out of harm's way  
Until it's calmer.

**17.08 Time to make a move**

I gingerly step  
Into the corridor,  
Once a place  
Of hatched plots,  
Underhand plans,  
And now....it's just me,  
Alone, silent,  
In purple meditation,  
Just me and the corridor,  
A friend, so calm,  
Harmony, peace,  
A white haze, so familiar,  
An empty space,  
So serene,  
But a stranger  
Walking this blue tract  
Wouldn't know the secrets  
It has hid, and then....  
I stop abruptly, with a jolt!!  
The silence is broken,  
And I can hear sounds

Of piercing shrills,  
And Ghostly taunts  
From hells ninth circle,  
Of faraway black suited laughter...

## The Green Room

The Green Room uses the metaphor of the Green Room as a place of departure as people await their fate; green indicating the signal to go. This poem has much poignancy for me, having witnessed and being part of numerous organizational restructurings, and redundancies. As Okri (1997, p.4) notes 'The acknowledged legislators of the world take the world as given... And so these legislators police the accepted frontiers of things'. The poem is in three parts. After an introduction in Stanza's 1 and 2, stanza's 4, 5 and 6 give way to 'the greater purpose', a metaphor for the invisible hand of organisational change. Today this is often articulated as organisational strategy, mission statements, performance management techniques and targets, where individuals are treated as chattels and units of monetary value (Stanza 4, line 3) being a prelude to 'Out with the old in with the new' (stanza 5, Line 1). The third part of the poem (Stanza's 7-11), is a response of defiance (Stanza 4, line 1), whilst the 'Greater purpose' might be in charge on a superficial level, deep down those in the 'Green Room' are determined not be stripped of their dignity, and reply in same to the 'Greater purposes' charge of 'This is waltz of your final romance' (stanza 6, line 3) reminding it that it will be accused of a miserable life (stanza 10, Line 6), entering the 'Green Room' 'Never to emerge or reappear' (stanza 11, Line 4).

On a hot long day they led them away,  
To a green room of memories to dim,  
Yesterday they were voices of destiny's promise,  
And dreams that silently whispered in waiting.

Today they are emblems of fortitude lived,  
But their lives once valued are now but surplus,  
To the ambitious designs of a greater purpose,  
And tomorrow will be smitten by its pitiless charms.

And the greater purpose did witheringly speak:

You must move with the times,  
Leave your past behind,  
The present only matters,  
So wipe out thoughts of glories past,  
Stop your neurotic rages and rants,  
Become creatures unfeeling just like me,  
All memories of you must disappear.

Out with the old in with the new,  
You've given your all but no longer fit,  
Of loyalty given it doesn't count,  
Now you've nothing more to give.

The time has come to end your strife,  
Your fate is sealed with my merry dance,  
This is the waltz of your final romance,  
And now it's time for you to go.

But those who knelt and prayed,  
And heard this violent tirade,  
Looked the greater purpose in the eye,  
And did issue a maxim of sacred tones,  
To rebut its despicable accusations,

Of ghastly reproaches and vile aspirations.

Dwell with care on the wisdom hard won,  
Of we the uncouneted, now cast unfit,  
You will never chain our minds and souls,  
Our spirits shall not be broken.

Our voices of hope still burn within,  
Of destinies ahead in silent waiting,  
Our dignity belongs to us alone,  
Eternally ours, never to be taken.

So heed these musings not in vain,  
The day draws near for your time to come,  
When your fate shall be sealed by a merry dance,  
It will be the waltz of your final romance,  
An end will come to all your strife,  
And you shall be accused of a miserable life.

Your life once valued will be surplus,  
It shall no longer have any purpose,  
And all memories of you will disappear,  
Never to emerge or reappear,  
And on a long hot day you shall be led away,  
To a green room to kneel and pray.

### My poetic journey: Reflections on and for practice

The poems presented belong to my selfhood; they are unique productions of my reality – my being. A place where my selfhood was given space to dwell, contemplate, conceive, and re-interpret personal, and organisational silence; a place that leaves organisational rhetoric behind, a place what I call “*rhetorical forgetfulness*” and they ‘are part of an ongoing journey and engagement of living in the world’ (Leggo, 2008, p.168). Okri (1997, p.5) reminds us that if the poet has restricted vision then they can ‘speak only of narrow things’, and that ‘Poets need to live where others don’t care to look, and they need to do this because if they don’t they can’t sing to us of all the secret and public domains of our lives’ (Okri, 1997, p.1). My poems attempted to project the silent voices of self and other into the world from a perspective of personal engagement, and emotional attachment (Leggo, 2008), and can be viewed as auto-biographical and self-confessional accounts, observations, and commentaries of how organisations shape lives, and silence voices. Leggo (2008, p.168) points out the poet seeks to ‘live attentively in the moment, to seek to enter lived experience with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings’. Poetry opens up new horizons of conceptualization, and alternative ways of thinking about the organisation, my poetic journey was a desire to do as Pelias (2004, p.2) says ‘write from the heart’, and to reveal my inner emotions and (poetic) voice: ‘Poetry begins in us as an inner dialogue. It suggests a private journey to one’s own truth’ (Okri, 2011, p.4). Leggo (2008, p.166) notes ‘Poetry reminds me that everything is constructed in language; our experiences are epistemologically and ontologically composed and understood in words’. It is only by dwelling and staying awhile in one place that an individual can see things differently from alternative perspectives. In this respect all three poems captured what Inns and Jones (1996, p.114) call the “gestalt”, this being a

fusion or accumulation of images, associations and emotions that constitutes a poem....a term that refers to the artist’s need to find a set of expressions, a situation or object which can capture, transmit or distil an experience of emotion that the writer has had or wishes to convey to the reader symbols and images become the “containers” of emotion.

Writing these poems allowed me to express what is important to me. I shared sometimes difficult episodes with the world (Night Shifter) and contemporary issues that I have to deal with in my daily professional life (The Green Room, and Corridor) because in speaking the heart’s discourse ‘the heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched’ (Pelias, 2004, p.7). Taylor and Ladkin (2009, p.56) have suggested arts based approaches give individuals access to different ways of sensuous knowing that can contribute to a

more holistic way of engaging with managerial contexts, eschewing dominant discourses and giving voice and access to tacit knowledge (Tsoukas, 2002), what Bollas (1987) terms the “unthought known” where Individuals are given a “time-space” for aesthetic freedom to explore and air their concerns.

However the foregoing raises questions as how we might undertake poetic practice if those who are silenced feel they cannot voice their concerns in fear of retribution by the organization, and as Boal (1974, p.xvi) reminds us ‘Dialogue is dangerous’. As such, I argue that the sharing of poetics (and other forms of discourse that challenge the given organisational rhetoric and norms) is dependent upon to what extent an organisation is willing to (a) foster a culture of open spaces to enable dialogue groups to flourish, and (b) foster a “culture of safety” where those who voice their concerns about perceived organisational “bad practice” can feel assured that there will be no come back on their views. However, despite notable exceptions that advocate a “culture of safety”, and collaboration (see, for example, Hamel, 2000; Zander and Zander, 20012; Davis and McIntosh, 2004; Alder, 2006; Darmer and Grisoni, 2011) several questions are still in need of address. First, how can leader’s access and work with those who have concerns and have valuable contributions to transform their own, fellow employees, and organizational culture? Second, how can trust be engendered within organizational settings given that their rhetoric, axiological assumptions and discourse objectifies those who work in contemporary work settings? Third, how can individuals attain their full potential for the benefit of their professional and personal fulfilment, and organizational community? In order to bring personal thoughts, feelings and emotions within the public forum we have to acknowledge this requires supportive and open cultural settings to explore organizational silence; the poet, in the gaze of the stranger, surrenders and reveals their authentic selfhood to the world, they lay themselves bare, and naked, and can be seen for who and what they are. I suggest that Zander and Zander (2000, p.174) who have coined the term “environments for possibility” where ‘We come to trust that these places are dedicated to the notion that no one will be made wrong, people will not be talked about behind their backs, and there will be no division between “us” and “them”’ provides promise where organizational forums can flourish to ‘produce astonishing results...inviting us to play in the meadows of the cooperative universe’ (p.175). As Groysberg and Slind (2012, p.4) note ‘Physical proximity between leaders and employees isn’t always feasible. But mental or emotional proximity is essential’. I have argued elsewhere that the dialogical process and concept of Conscientization (Freire, 1970 and 1972) can provide spaces for environments of possibility, using, for example, narratives, drawings, and poetics (see, for example, Keeble-Allen and Armitage, 2010; Armitage, 2011; Armitage, 2012; Armitage and Thornton, 2012). Conscientization is the process whereby oppressed individuals, those whose ‘Suffering drenches them in mystery [and who] Lack historical confidence’ (Okri, 1997, p.129-130) become active participants in the world as knowing subjects to achieve ‘a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality, which shapes their lives, and of their capacity to transform that reality’ (Freire, 1972, p.51). Montero (2000, p.134) notes ‘This allows individuals to problematize their lived reality within their dialogue groups’, what Freire called “reading circles”, so they can voice those issues that are silent and live in the shadows of organisational life: ‘In the silent world, in the shadow world, there are always people dreaming of changing the configuration’ says Okri (1997, p.53). This provides an “Interstitial space” that provides ‘the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation’ (Bhaba, 1994 quoted in Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p.225) thus creating environments for individuals to explore their emotional responses vis-à-vis their organisational settings, being a cognitive and creative space for individuals to articulate their inner dialogue with others (Jung, 1969). If poetic encounters are to be authentic, individuals (leaders and employees) need environments of possibility in order to engage with their surroundings to enable conversations that “voice” and overcome organisational silence. As Deetz and Simpson (2004, p.141) note ‘The struggle of our time is to build practices of working together, this is the hope of a dialogic theory of communication’.

## Conclusion

We are now living in a changing economic environment and radically need to define new ways of working with each other, and creating the next great thing demands constant innovation (Hamel, 2000), it is a design task ‘not merely an analytical or administrative function’ (Adler, 2006, p.491). As Adler (2006, p.486) notes ‘Given the dramatic changes taking place in society, the economy, and technology, 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations need to engage in new, more spontaneous, and more innovative ways of managing’. However, this is not a signal for organisations to capture the creative process of poetics to use solely for instrumental purposes. As Darmer and Grisoni (2011, p.7) note when discussing poetry and its application to improve organizational and management performance ‘this approach is basically

normative, as poetry becomes an instrument that competent leaders (consultants and others) can apply and improve performance and realise the goals of the organization'. Rather poetry I argue should be a response to acknowledge and deal with organizational silence that can have 'ramifications for knowing, learning and organizing (Blackburn and Sadler-Smith, 2009, p.570). This might give hope, and perhaps point to a future that more enlightened organisations to follow if they are to open spaces for arts based approaches to thrive for the betterment of those who manage and work in the workplace. Like Darmer and Grisoni, 2011, p.560) I support the view that 'Narratives are now accepted and partly integrated in organization and management' and see poetry as 'a special form of narratives', and argue that whilst creativity has been the primary competence of artists, not managers, organisations need to give a helping hand to anything, which can encourage reflection; you need to leave the comfort of routine, and surprise yourself (Hamel, 2000). I have therefore brought the intersectional boundaries of art and organisational silence together through poetics to illustrate this union. Whilst poetics and its use to study organisational life is 'still mis-credited and missing' (Darmer and Grisoni, 2011, p.9) it does provide a method to explore the silent and hidden worlds of organizations that might often go unsaid in the milieu of normal conversation. Furthermore we should also take solace and hope from Darmer and Grisoni (2011, p.10) who note that poetry has the necessity 'to sparkle creativity' and presents an opportunity for the poet to better understand organisations and the management of them; an opportunity for play. As Steffler (1995, p.47) notes:

What, ideally, can poetry offer that other types of writing cannot offer, or at least not so directly purely? It seems to me that at its best – and this is what we search for in poems all the time – poetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life's miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning.

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