

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Organising Conversations

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 5th, 2015

When I worked at a trade union it was made very clear to me that conversations were utilitarian dialogic performances. Conversations, we organisers were instructed, were not idle. The intention was to recruit people using charm, guile and threat. We were to 'build density', meaning an increase in union members at any particular worksite. With density we could demand tangible changes in working conditions. The aim though was not simply to have nominal members, people who paid their dues and left us to carry the can. The aim was to create activists amongst our rank and file. What was interesting was the divide between organiser and worker, something commented upon in the longer history of Marxism, particularly by Lenin.

Of course there were organisers who themselves had been workers in the industries we represented – I myself had been a union member as a working waiter. And there were university educated – like myself – predominantly arts/law graduates, who were ostensibly ideologically motivated albeit often on their way to careers in formal politics or at Left wing law firms.

As much as university people espoused paradigmatic Leftist concerns these often jarred with the class interests of workers as the workers perceived it. Not least among these were the issues of gay marriage and refugee rights. What emerged was an inability to reconcile the intellectual moment (various posts) common to a tertiary education now with the practical drives of unions. It is hard to demand bread and land when minimum wage gets you a whole lot of false consciousness and you live on Indigenous land. What is one to do when utopian thinking and totalising narrative has been so thoroughly dismantled while one is promoting the 'light on the hill' every day? And what does this have to do with poetics?

The most common tool in the kit of an organiser was the 'seven step organising conversation'. Every conversation we had with a worker was meant to follow the proscribed steps:

1. Introduction
2. Build Rapport
3. Find Issues
4. Educate, Agitate, Build Hope, Plan
5. Action/Ask
6. Inoculation
7. Wrap Up

Poetry, as critique, calls into question utilitarian language such as this. By having an awareness of and engaging with the surface of language itself we become aware, as readers, writers and

listeners, of its constructedness. As common as this is, poetry matters though when juxtaposed with everyday political speech (and not the mediated soundbite kind but the Monday to Friday boots on ground union organising kind). This is precisely because of their mutual defamiliarisation.

Former Australian senator Bob Brown may pen verse but his symptomatic exceptionalism reinforces the lack of politicians who care about the poetics of speaking. This is not so much an observation in the George Orwell vein – that politics is a manipulation of truth, that we need to re-find depth – but that the surface of play by a whole host of powerful actors is so mundane and didactic as to be easily ignored. And that is precisely the point of political speech – to make one want to not act, to pacify and anaesthetise beyond a certain degree.

I do not, by any means, want to suggest that we see ‘seven steps’ in how people organise conversations around poetry. The rewards in poetry, as I have written elsewhere, concern themselves for the most part with ‘honour’. What I would suggest though, using Marjorie Perloff’s observations on poetry workshops at the Obama White House, is that we oppose poetry being seen by politicians as a stage one passes through during adolescence on one’s way to serious, market worthy pursuits.

Poetry though is exemplary of what can be done with language and hence thinking in words. It is a space for re-combination, re-articulation, repetition, plagiarism, contention, contingency, context, play that ultimately reframes what counts as work. If we took such poetry seriously, workers in need of unions might find different organisers. Rather than leading them through a series of steps that ultimately end with a momentarily satisfying compromise with their bosses and hence engaging in an odd dialogue about autonomy and heteronomy, organisers might instead enlighten workers as to their circumstances as they currently think of them. This is not necessarily conservative but it might circumvent the gradualism and priorities so preferred by these calcified institutions. It might indeed be nothing short of revolutionary.

We might all strike for lack of centos.

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