

## Poetry in the Workplace: Bill Murray's Public Reading as An Applied Art Form

Novelist Clare Morgan, in cooperation with the world-famous Boston Consulting Group (BCG), studied the possibilities of correlating poetry and office/workplace life, which she also popularized in lectures and workshops. The outcomes and considerations of this project were documented in the book *What Poetry Brings to Business* (2010), written by Morgan and two representatives of BCG. This publication reveals the ways in which the mind-forming effects of poetry reading can be utilized in the areas of business activities or workplace life. Previously, even Morgan herself had struggled with the dilemma whether poetry was still able to create interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She confessed that even her literary mind had been paralyzed by the widely acknowledged opposition of art and business. Yet, finally, she has found the argument that proves the power and function of poetry appropriately: poetic works – by being “little engines of complex meanings” (Morgan et al. 12) – are able to help formulate complex answers demanded by our complicated world. This insight had been partly discovered by the business world or corporate life, too. For example, as Morgan writes,

[F]light attendants at American Airlines hand out a poetry anthology. DaimlerChrysler sponsored poetry readings in five cities, AT&T, Deloitte & Touche, Blue Cross, and others have poets speak to their marketing teams. Doubletree Hotel, Volkswagen, Lanc and Target distribute poetry anthologies to customers. (Morgan et al. 14)

And just very recently, Coca-Cola has used a poem in its Super Bowl commercial (in 2018), which was written by a poet who works for the Wieden+Kennedy advertising agency (Moye 2018; see also <http://www.wk.com/>).

In addition to Morgan's initiations cited above, she drafts a literary theoretical or cultural anthropological background context for the relationship of poetry and business. On the basis of Wolfgang Iser's insights about the act of reading (Morgan refers to Iser 1972, but see also Iser 1994), Morgan argues that the reception of literary works can become a role model for the acts of world perception or system reconstruction. She elegantly illustrates her argument with a classic literary example, a citation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Duke Theseus is obliged to face the power of poetry overwhelming his leader position (Morgan et al. 15-16):

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.  
One sees more devils than vast hell he can hold.  
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (Shakespeare 107)

In this Shakespearean passage, the formal-rational leader at first condemned poetry because of its irrationality and erratic nature, then he recognized its world-creating and mind-forming role. The closing of Theseus's monologue can actually be read as an acknowledgement of the fact that without the poetic language's figurative-metaphoric performance we would not be able to

get new perspectives and insights that are outside our own limited world (“gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name”). On the basis of this, participants of business and workplace life may, in the form of interdiscursive transgression, think of literary reading as a playground which provides them with various possibilities, outside the rules of their own areas, for mind-liberation or connection between different world views (Morgan et al. 14-17). Not incidentally, in Theseus’s monologue a leader – even if not a business leader, but a political one – gives evidence of the poetic imagination’s world-forming effects.

The argument drafted above can be closely connected to the most important dilemmas of the contemporary discourse about management and corporate culture since the main task of today’s leaders and employees in many cases is interpretation (that is, management of meanings) in their economic-business activities. Poetry can help them – as Clare Morgan states directly referring to Iván Fónagy’s works on the theory of poetry – in suspending the usual mechanisms of perception, and drawing attention to various details and processes of meaning production (Morgan et al. 23). Though the supposedly rational-pragmatic logic together with the language of business and workplace spheres seem to be exactly antithetical to the ambiguity of the literary discourse, in the practice of management and organizational life the strife of diverse interpretations can be as common as in the field of literature. Thus literary texts, even in business and workplaces, can as well teach tolerance of ambiguities, uncertainties, and conflicts, or develop the skill of managing different (sometimes contradicting) meanings. As the business people, participants of Morgan’s literary workshops affirmed: poetry creates possibilities for viewing the world from other people’s perspectives (Morgan et al. 2-3). Thus, literature, and in this case, mainly poetry, provides readers with wonderful and subversive experiences of liberation from their own comfort zones, by opening the discovery of liminal situations and identification with imaginary perspectives. Through this, the whole process of reading produces sharable platforms for different minds (that is, readers or listeners), and thus the possibility for developing the skills of joining together, empathy, dialogue, and cooperative thinking.

Confirming Morgan’s argument, I will illustrate the view-changing potentials of poetic works in the workplace with an example, which can be a truly mesmerizing precedent due to its unexpectedness, improbability, and lyrical inspiration. The audiovisual and publicly accessible case of “Gathering Paradise: Bill Murray Reads to Construction Workers at Poets House” (10 April 2010) was a relatively popular and highly shared video sensation a few years ago: in this video the Internet public’s favorite ever-present performance artist, Bill Murray was reading poems to the workers on a construction site.

This poetic performance would not necessarily be surprising regarding the fact that Bill Murray, as is widely-known, loves poetry and has long been the sponsor of a literary institute, Poets House in New York. Recently he has taken part in more and more poetry readings and literary events with a varied repertoire that has included, among other thing, not only the works of the modernist poet Wallace Stevens and that of contemporary Billy Collins, but also – and with an ironic tone, as a delicate provocation of poetry – also the songs and lyrics of songwriter Cole Porter, for example that of *Kiss Me, Kate* (Elliott 2010; Rush 2010; Marshall 2013; Mabe 2010). The construction site in the above-mentioned video is but the would-be new building of the Poets House. From this perspective, Murray’s performance is quite authentic and can be interpreted as a lyrical greeting, or rather **the** sanctification of poetry’s new home in New York.

The particularity of this situation lies in the fact that the audience of Murray's poetry reading are construction workers, so the scene of the literary event is also an active (and what is more important: physical) workplace in this case. The tension between the two different spheres – poetry and physical work – is quite perceptible at the beginning of the performance. Neither party seems to be a willing participant—at least at the beginning. The faces of construction workers show, at times, confusion, dullness, or at best, the humble discomfort of the school students attending a formal ceremony as they are listening to Murray's instant poetry reading. The performer himself is also quite blasé while he is reading the first two texts, occasionally adding ironic comments, gestures, and facial expressions during the transition time between poems, moreover, self-ironically, makes fun of his own performance, the act of poetry reading and literary culture in general. In addition to the deadpan performing style which is Bill Murray's first and outmost trademark, there is a recurrent gesture in the performance by which the actor, himself a great baseball fan, licks his fingertips when he turns a page in the short breaks between poems, just as baseball pitchers do while they are preparing for a curveball throw. Through this act, Murray – referring to the popular American sport and body culture which is probably more familiar to the physical workers than the lines he reads out – in a way, disfigures literary culture, making several ironic, distancing comments:

It'll get worse. [...] So, if you wanna lie down or get sick, take a sick day, do it now. [...] O.K., this is for the short attention span crowd. [...] I'm gonna read a corny one for you, for those of you who really wanna walk out. What's this gal's name again? Oh yeah, E-mily Di-ckinson. (Murray 2018)

Both these verbal and nonverbal tools are used to parody the lyric elevation of literary events, and they hit the spot by the humor and irony it induces: the tension manifestly starts to decrease in the audience. However, distance and incomprehension still persist between the star-actor-performer and the construction workers.

Quite unexpectedly, at a given point, Murray pauses for a longer period, then takes a deep breath before he recites the next poem ("Gathering Paradise" 2:45-2:52). Through this act, the performer changes in his intonation and facial expression totally devoting himself – in all his spirit, voice, and body – to Emily Dickinson's poem "I dwell in Possibility." Murray attunes to Dickinson's solid, plain, yet sublime verse lines. Parallel to the transformation of the performer, some members of the audience also become inspired – although not all of them (Mabe 2018). Among the bored and confused looks, some workers show visible signs of comprehension and attunement in the form of a smile, thoughtful gaze, or a simple nod. There is a unique moment in the video when one of the workers, who has been recording the whole performance watching the monitor of his device all the way during the first two poems ("Gathering Paradise" 1:19-1:22 and 1:42-1:46), lifts his gaze towards Murray and cannot take his look away while he is listening to Dickinson's poem, then continues to record the performance ("Gathering Paradise" 3:23-3:26). The spiritual transformation of poetry reading mesmerizes him, and – at least this is what the video shows – he becomes overwhelmed by devotion, too. When Murray finishes reading Dickinson's poem, we can hear clapping from the audience—an act that was not typical after the previous poems. At this point, the performer and his audience identify with each other for a few seconds; they join together in a transformation, and parallel to this, the sphere of the workplace becomes the scene of an authentic cultural-spiritual experience.

However, this denouement is not quite spontaneous or accidental. It may ensue from the content of the poem, which was chosen quite consciously, intelligently, and empathically for this

occasion. The Dickinson poem read aloud by Murray to the construction workers is but a literary text which, through its building-metaphors and images of inhabitation, is able to illustrate plastically for the workers the ways in which humans can imagine the completion of their existence, their earthly life's openness toward the sky, and also the power of poetry, which creates the possibility of these experiences. As Dickinson writes,

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –  
  
Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of Eye –  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –  
  
Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise – (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 506-07)

This classic poem is able to interrupt the process of work with its subversive spiritual experience, and, at the same time, develop the pride of professional work and its achievements. However, in Murray's performance this moment of inspiration does not dissolve with the ending of poetry reading. The actor, by making an applicative act, provides a good example of how poetry can be pragmatically present in the workplace; and in an interpretative transition he draws the parallel between the power of poetic inspiration and everyday practices of life and work. Finally, he says goodbye to the construction workers in the following:

Lastly, I want to say thank you for building this and putting yourselves into it, the way the poets put themselves into their words and the way all New Yorkers put themselves into what they really, really – gravitate to, what really makes them a man or a woman. ("Gathering Paradise" 3:54-4:13)

The entire performance of poetry reading aims not only to spiritually transform the workplace for a few seconds, but to reveal the truth: the building power of work itself (or struggling life, in general terms) equals poetic elevation. To emphasize this equation, Murray, by closing his performance at the end of the video, puts some members of the audience into his own (performing) position asking them to tell their names and giving them various tasks ("Gathering Paradise" 4:50-6:16). Thus this public reading becomes an interactive event with the video scenically inserting physical workers into the space of the poetic diction, actually into the frame in which Bill Murray has previously read the poetic texts. As a result, the discourse of poetry and that of everyday work becomes unified in a more affective and convincing way than any other way can.

So, if poetry possesses such significant effects, what is more, it is confirmed by the best practices of certain companies and feedbacks of businesspeople participating in literary workshops, the question arises: why do not business schools focus more intensely on this area? According to Clare Morgan, literary studies could easily have a secure place in the curriculum

of MBA schools because literature is one of the most appropriate mediums for nurturing spiritual life by developing ethical sensitivity (Morgan et al. 185-187).

As an illustration, I refer here to the example of Sidney Harman (in Rubin 2007), the founder of Harman Industries, a company producing audio systems for luxury cars, airports, and conference rooms. Harman, by his own account, always told his colleagues in the management that they should bring poets into the company. According to him, people of *belles-lettres* are the real system thinkers, who try to make the complexity of the surrounding environments and systems more comprehensible to us, to those working in other areas than theirs. However, Harman did not succeed in hiring any poet-managers, so he himself imported poetry into his own corporation's culture and everyday operation through citations; from a multitude of writers such as Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, and Camus, for example, he formulated the sublimity of work and industrious life for his colleagues. In another example (Rubin 2007), Shelly Lazarus, president and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather, praised literary reading because for her this type of activity was the best platform for facing diversity of worldviews and the problem-solving methods of our everyday life.

Literature, and especially poetry are the main areas for practicing our skills of coping with complexities, with the ability of organizing chaos into unity in creative and innovative way(s). This ability, as Nadja Hermann and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht claim, is the "risky thinking" of humanities, which is the best method for us to make our societies open to self-reflection and change (Gumbrecht 6; Hermann 2015). Writing and reading poetry, true to the original meaning of *poiesis*, is the education of world-conceptualization. So, as the Murray example above has shown, literary-poetic works can and do provide specific examples of management thinking in connection with the latter's greatest contemporary challenge involving various kinds of inspirational energies and diverse competencies necessary to develop the ability of sustaining the so-called spiritual wonder, faith, and assorted intentions in ourselves—and in others (Coleman 2011). As in poetic language, where every word gains a special emphasis and also new meaning when diverted from the usual use, so should managers be able to assign new perspectives, hopes, and objectives rising above everyday life use from works of lyric art.

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