

Peer Review Article

# Social Poetry:

## Introduction to Foundations and Tools

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### **Abstract**

The day-to-day intellectual consciousness perceives a world of independent phenomena (including social phenomena, as any evening news program will reveal) at stages of rest. In order to bring these same phenomena into dynamic relationship not only with one another but also with the time-scale of their own growth and development, one needs to have organs of perception which can perceive the fluid process of transformation itself. Working with and thinking in metaphors, and consciously striving to perceive the images working in social and other phenomena, can help to develop such organs of perception. This can be done individually and this can be done as individuals in a collective. In doing so, not only can one's own thinking and perceiving grow more aligned to the dimensions of life at work in social and natural phenomena, but so too can language, which can then in turn help others to experience and see the more complete reality working in natural or in this case social phenomena, and to choose, if one so wished, to take responsibility for their future development—the future development of, ultimately, civilization, the Earth, and ourselves.

## Keywords

social poetry, social arts, awareness-based system change, phenomenology, systems transformation

## Introduction

Social Poetry is a term which I have been using since 2010 to frame my work within what is now becoming known as awareness-based systems change. Fundamentally, Social Poetry, as I shall use the term here, involves the individual or collective creation of metaphors, images, or pictures in relation to social and systems phenomena. It seeks to bring the often ‘static’ or disconnected social observations perceived by the intellect into a more dynamic, fluid, and complete relationship through the use of the human capacity of imagination.

The term poetry derives from the Greek *poiesis*, which means to make or to create—to bring forth into the world something that did not exist before (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). As the German poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1994, 2004, 2008) and the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (2003)—and those who have followed their approaches—have emphasized in their work, *poiesis* need not be a purely subjective phenomenon. This article will explore how the imagination itself—individual and collective—can become an organ of perception for social realities, both ones that currently exist, as well as potential future forms that are waiting for human beings to make them (and that can reveal themselves, in part or at first, through images).

To make this shift towards perceiving current social reality in its interrelated wholeness, and creating—poeticizing—an objective social future that is ‘not yet’, requires a change of awareness. English philosopher and literary figure Owen Barfield has described such moments of changed awareness as “poetic” (1962, p. 48). For Barfield, this is the difference between poetic form and poetic effect; poetic form is, he argued, the appearance in verse form of black and white space on a piece of paper, while poetic effect involves, as experiential reality, a “felt change in consciousness” (1962, p. 48). While Barfield articulated such experiences primarily in relation to nature, Social Poetry focuses on social phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense the imagination and poetry—individual and collective—can be used as both a tool for (social) scientific investigation, as well as for artistic creation. In this way there exists a further method (together with other similar, emerging social art forms) by which social systems can “see and sense themselves” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 39); that is, through activating the imagination in social scientific and artistic processes. Social Poetry thereby sees itself not as a

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that one does not ‘lose oneself’ in some sort of vague mysticism in such processes, as we shall see through the practical examples below.

means in and of itself, but as part of the larger artwork of the transformation or renewal of society/civilization or, as the German artist Joseph Beuys puts it, as part of a larger “Social Sculpture,” in which the social organism is seen as a work of art, and within which every human being is seen as an artist (Beuys, 1993). In this sense, as I am using the terms here, it could also be said that the renewal of civilization is a creative—a poetic—act; a grand poem relying on poetic effect, in which every human being is a poet. Social Poetry, as outlined in brief below, has, I believe, much to offer in this direction.

This article therefore seeks to contribute to the languaging and conceptualizing—indeed, the imagining—of the work of Awareness-Based Systems Change in relation to the human capacity of imagination. It will do so by exploring the epistemological foundations for Social Poetry as I will be using the term here; it will trace the biography and evolution of Social Poetry as I and others have been practicing it; it will outline the archetypal process of Social Poetry and its application; it will give examples of Social Poetry methods and tools as applied in one systems change process; and it will offer a preliminary conclusion as well as some next steps to develop this work collaboratively. But first, a further word on what is meant here by Social Poetry.

## What Is Social Poetry?

To the general question ‘What is Social Poetry?’ it is possible to say that, from one direction, it is the attempt at a phenomenological process whereby the imagination (individual or collective) is able to perceive an image of an objective social reality (current and emerging) and then express this through the word, be it in written or oral form.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas philosophy aims at the perception of new ideas and thoughts, poetics has to do with the perception of new images. When perceived, these images/pictures can be expressed as metaphors through the word. Social Poetry has to do with this process in terms of individual imaginative perception but also collective imaginative perception. The imagination, in this way, is therefore treated as an “organ of perception” (von Goethe, 1988, p. 39).

By *painting with words* the images perceived, and by trusting and staying with the images themselves, one is better able to perceive and express the current social reality. The poetic images created can contain a great deal of perceived data—the phrase *an image contains a thousand words* is also true of poetic images. By then seeing where images wish to lead—or how they wish to continue—it is also possible to learn more about future, potential, or emerging reality.

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<sup>2</sup> In particular a Goethean phenomenological process. See, for instance, Seamon & Zajonc (1998).

In this way, Social Poetry can, as touched on above, be seen as a research methodology—one that is able to perceive as well as articulate social realities that are often difficult to observe and articulate in other ways, especially given the often overwhelming, and ‘scattered’ amount of data contained in social systems.



Figure 1. An example of Collective Poetics in the making during the Ecosystem Leadership Program (ELP), Berlin—More on this below. By workshop participants, 2019.

## Epistemological Foundations

This conscious application of the imagination and poetry in social contexts—where the imagination can act as an organ of perception for the essential nature of objective social realities (both current and emerging)—is what differentiates this application of the term Social Poetry from that used by others, whether they use the term Social Poetry, Social Poetics or similar. Regardless of the field of application—be it organizational management, therapy or elsewhere—these other approaches generally tend to see meaning as solely created between human beings, and/or are concerned with predetermined themes or conversational cues. Specifically, such approaches:

- situate the meaning-making process solely within the (inter)subjective (dialogic) space that exists in the speaking/writing process between human beings (Aldridge & Stevenson, 2001; Cunliffe, 2002; Katz & Shotter, 1996, 2012; Larsen & Madsen 2010, 2016; Ramsey, 2008, 2018; White & Epston, 1990; etc.);

- listen in dialogue for something considered to be “poetic” (Katz & Shotter, 1996, 2012);
- listen out for other predetermined dialogic signs and cues that appear in (usually therapeutic) conversations (White & Epston, 1990 [though they use the term “Narrative Therapy”], Katz & Shotter, 1996, 2012);<sup>3</sup>
- listen out for the use of dialect (seen to be “poetic”) in language (Wesling, 1993);
- are concerned with “the creative presentation of the individual self” in relation to a “formal image of a national or collective self” (Herzfeld, 2004);
- or else are concerned with other (predetermined) content, including political (Limón, 1992) and social ideologies such as socialism or themes related to social justice (Daydí-Tolson, 1983; Hughes, 1947; Nowak, 2020, 2021<sup>4</sup>).

Seeing the (socially) creative process as solely (inter)subjectively constructed—through “postmodern, poststructural and social constructionist ideas” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 129)—as many of the above approaches do, means that any such approach risks falling out of contact with an (often larger or more contextual) objective current social reality that is at the same time deeply related to the human being, as well as a future that waits for human beings to consciously put themselves in service of its creation. At the same time, entering any social process with predetermined cues and signs in mind has the inherent potential to limit the range and depth of social phenomena that can be perceived.

Essentially, Social Poetry, as I use the term here, not only attempts to put aside categorizations based on pre-existing or pre-determined political ideology or a listening out for other dialogic ‘cues,’ but also fundamentally seeks to find the middle space between treating social phenomena as if they were something purely external to human beings (solely objective and perceivable to the senses), and, on the other hand, treating social realities as if they were purely (co)created by

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<sup>3</sup> This approach perhaps comes close to one tool outlined below—Poetic Mirroring—though Katz and Shotter usually restrict their approach to therapy and with a single client, and practice it on constructionist foundations built with mostly [inter]subjective concepts of meaning making.

<sup>4</sup> For a look at the development of the term “Social Poetry” (especially from the perspective of social justice and socialism) see Nowak, 2021. This work includes references to usage of the term Social Poetry—by poets, publishers, writers and editors such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Horace Gregory and others – which predate those referenced on the ‘Social Poetry’ page on Wikipedia.

human beings themselves (solely [inter]subjective), including through dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the way that I use the term treats objective social phenomena (current and potential/emerging) as something observable to the individual or collective imagination (i.e. an objective reality appearing on the stage of the subjective self/selves—a kind of “objective [inter]subjectivity,” if you like). In so doing, a more complete or holistic understanding of the unity of social phenomena can be perceived (and created) by individuals as well as by individuals in collectives.

Fundamentally, therefore, Social Poetry has to do with a way of perceiving the phenomena of the world in such a way that the objective lawfulness/essential nature/theories of phenomena can become perceptible to the thinking/awareness/consciousness of the observing individual or collective. It therefore relates to the Goethean phenomenological worldview in which theories are not considered as something to be thought up in separation from or in addition to the actual phenomena under observation (or where theories are simply seen as agreed-upon social norms); instead, theories are perceived as the phenomena themselves when approached by a thinking consciousness that can 'perceive' these theories within phenomena: “There is a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory” (von Goethe, 1988, p. 307). In the sense that I am talking about it here, this level of thinking/awareness/consciousness (experienced as [at least the beginnings of] a “felt change” [Barfield, 1962, p. 48] thereof) can be described as imagination, or as imaginative awareness. In this sense, the imagination can be seen as an organ of perception for the essential nature of phenomena—which, in the case of poetics, expresses itself primarily in image form.<sup>6</sup>

As to how this essential poetic process is experienced by human consciousness, one would do well to recall Barfield’s distinction between poetic form and poetic effect (Barfield, 1962). That is, one is here not so much concerned with the final products or form of poetry, but rather with the process resulting in and relying upon experiences (poetic effects) in consciousness—and, in the case of Social Poetry, what these experiences (had by both individuals and individuals in groups) reveal about current social phenomena as well as their potential or emerging futures.

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<sup>5</sup> The Poetic Mirroring tool outlined below does attempt to listen out for poetic language with a kind of poetic listening. But this kind of listening should be understood in terms of Barfield’s “poetic effect,” experienced or observed first-hand in the moment and not based on any predetermined ideas of what poetry or poetic language might entail (or other predetermined ideas about anything else, including social or political ideologies).

<sup>6</sup> The danger, as in any art or science, is, of course, that purely personal, irrelevant subjective phenomena mix themselves up in the act of perceiving. We can therefore also get a sense for the ongoing path of development required to continually make “cleaner” our organs of poetic perception.

When looking for those who've pursued such ideas concretely in social life, especially as they relate to the artistic process more broadly, it is important to take note of the work of Joseph Beuys. As touched on above, Beuys argued for an "enlarged understanding of art' that has to do with the theory of Social Sculpture, the radical transformation of the world" (Beuys, 1993, p. 61):

I am searching for field character...Only on condition of a widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. (Beuys,1993, p. 21, emphasis in original)

Whereas Beuys was interested in an enlarged artistic effect relating especially to sculpture, the work outlined in this article is concerned with how this relates to poetry—that is, to images articulated in the written and spoken word.

Needless to say, this way of seeing and perceiving the world is not necessarily new. All Indigenous traditions are familiar with similar experiences. Even in the Western world such ways of experiencing reality have been clearly articulated on a systemic level all the way up to the Greeks who still perceived the world with an imaginative consciousness, as expressed in their mythology (Kornberger, 2008, 2017), and as articulated to them via their muse or, sometimes, goddess: "Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless falls upon the Achaeans" (Homer, 1952, p. 3); "Tell me, O muse, of the ingenious hero who travelled far and wide" (Homer, 1952, p. 183). The blindness of the physical eyes of the poet Homer was in sharp contrast to the penetrating vision of his inner eye and what was given to it. With the fading of this widespread vision amongst the Greeks, however, as their own myths foretold (Kornberger, 2006, 2008, 2017), and as was articulated in the decline of the myths and the rise of philosophy, one can see the beginnings of humanity's more thorough penetration into the physical world through sense perceptions coupled with intellectual consciousness, and the subsequent fading of the inherited imaginative faculty. One could also say that, as a gradual consequence of this process, science began to take the place of (what is now called) art.

What is therefore seen in Goethe is what one can perhaps call the bridge between the ancient and the new. He himself embodied this. Goethe had both an imaginative and intellectual consciousness. He was both artist and scientist (as well as statesman). He put the intellectual and imaginative levels of consciousness in service of understanding phenomena (see, for example, von Goethe, 2004, 2008). Though he made many important discoveries in the natural sciences (including the intermaxillary/premaxilla bone in human beings), it was his methodology that was most important. The most effective of his scientific instruments were, ultimately, his powers of observation combined with his

consciousness or inner life; and these were employed, as Bortoft (2018) and others have noted, as part of a multi-phase pattern: Observe phenomena thoroughly using all the senses using active seeing (Bortoft, 2018) or “exact sensorial perception” (Brook, 1998, p. 53); this was then followed by the employment of “exact sensory imagination” (von Goethe, 1988, p. 46) in which the different aspects of the phenomena under observation were recreated from memory as mental pictures and brought together in time and space through the mobility of the inner life of the human being. As part of their landscape studies, Colquhoun (1997) and Brook (1998), (connecting also to work by Bockemühl, 1992) have articulated further Goethean phases as “seeing in beholding” (Brook, 1998, p. 53), and then a “becoming one with” (Brook, 1998, p. 53) the phenomena, which essentially means that one is able to perceive and experience the “archetype” (von Goethe, 1988, p. 69), “idea” (Schiller in Goethe, 1988, p. 20), “law” (Bortoft, 2018, p. 21), or “theory” (von Goethe, 1988, p. 307) of the phenomena under observation, in a way, from the “inside”—that is, it is perceived inwardly.<sup>7</sup> Goethe thus laid out a direction for the modern path of investigation that calls upon both the scientist and the artist to perceive the full reality of phenomena. This is what has resonated in those who came after him, including Emerson, Novalis, Steiner, Barfield and Beuys, as well as Bockemühl, Bortoft, Colquhoun, Brook, Holdrege, and others.<sup>8</sup> Goethe applied this methodology primarily to the phenomena of the natural world. In Social Poetry, again, one is concerned with social phenomena, but the imagination is utilized in a similar way as it is in relation to nature. As Goethe perceived and articulated, the theory or archetype, it can be said that through Social Poetry, one can apprehend the images in which the essential ideas, beingness, lawfulness, theory, and archetypes of social phenomena (current and emerging) may clothe themselves, facilitating more holistic and complete understandings of such phenomena.

## The Biography and Evolution of Social Poetry

To trace the development of Social Poetry, I will necessarily need to weave in personal biographical elements.

My first experience of using creative writing/poetry in this way was through the work of Horst and Jennifer Kornberger. The phenomena under observation ranged from cultural epochs (Kornberger, 2008), to biographical writing, to the

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<sup>7</sup> These phases are articulated by biologist Craig Holdrege as “Into the Phenomena,” followed by “Exact Picture Building,” then “Seeing the Whole.” He prefaces these phases with what he calls “The Riddle” in which “I’ve met something in the world that I want to attend to” (2005, pp. 48–50).

<sup>8</sup> The first to thoroughly articulate a Goethean phenomenological epistemology was Rudolf Steiner, who was the first person to edit and introduce all of Goethe’s scientific works. Steiner in this way elaborated Goethe’s work, but also later articulated his own, original, epistemology in his work *Philosophy of Freedom* (2011), as well as other books and lectures.



natural world.<sup>9</sup> A thorough exploration of social phenomena was not approached directly, per se, at that time. I do recall one exercise as part of a biographical writing course in which we worked in pairs, with person A sharing a story/memory from their biography while person B first listened and then mirrored back an image that potentially related to a possible next step for (or reevaluation of) the particular story/memory that was shared. Looking back, I probably began to see the potential for working collectively/in a social manner with poetics at this point. The Kornbergers have since gone on to develop their creative writing and other work, including projects involving individual and collective creative writing research using the imagination (e.g. Kornberger, 2017).

At this time, I was completing a PhD in literature and creative writing in which I attempted to implement a phenomenological reflection on the process of writing a novel, which was itself a series of biographically-informed images (Stubley, 2008). I was also working with my now wife and others around this time co-creating events that strove for a renewal of social conditions through social-artistic activity. My wife and I encountered *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2009) during this time—a social technology developed by Otto Scharmer in which participants in social transformation processes are invited to work with an emerging future (rather than with a continuation of past conditions), primarily through personal transformation processes related to open mindedness, open heartedness and an open will (more on this below). We recognized this to be a socially-scientific articulation of systems transformation processes that we were also trying to put in place.

A year or so later, while working in a team that supported a global network of social entrepreneurs, I often introduced imaginative processes during our meetings, workshops, and events to aid us in achieving our goals. I aimed to integrate imaginative work and creative writing into our larger social projects. Our work being in the field of social enterprise or social and systems change necessarily meant that this was often the theme or phenomenon under observation. It also became clear that working collectively through the individual creation of images, the mirroring of images, the continuation of images, the co-creation of collective images and other methods (explained more below) helped us to better articulate the reality of what we were attempting to understand and to express. (It was also around this time that I started to use the term Social Poetry.) At that time, we often used aspects of what is now becoming known as “Awareness-Based Systems Change” (Senge cited in Schuyler, 2018; Scharmer,

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.horstkornberger.com/workshops-and-courses>

2018), but we also used any other processes that we believed would help us achieve our overall intentions and support the intentions of others.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence, all of my work that has intersected what is becoming known as Awareness-Based Systems Change has always been deeply rooted in imaginative and poetic processes. This has also been the case while working with those seeking to restore and regenerate ecosystems, both natural and social (including the Dutch-based NGO Commonland, which is working to regenerate landscapes around the world by using, in part, Awareness-Based Systems Change approaches).<sup>11</sup> Some of the general contexts in which Social Poetry has been employed include, but are not limited to, the following: systems education programs, organizational systems awareness, systems change projects, systems change events and conferences, systems labs and systems research. (Please see the end of this article for a table offering specific examples in each of these areas.) In all of these cases Social Poetry has been used in ways which have attempted to serve the bigger artwork of the systems transformation process as a whole. I will go into more detail about specific tools and methods in a moment. But first, an additional word on process.

## The Archetypal Socio-Poetic Process

Briefly, the archetypal foundational Social Poetry process I have been using creates the conditions by which a “felt change of consciousness” (Barfield, 1962, p. 48) can reveal a more holistic perception of social phenomena—a wholeness which is contained within all parts of a system—as well as how these same phenomena may wish to change/continue. The process is usually done in silence,<sup>12</sup> and involves actively observing the necessary primary (social) data, be it quantitative or qualitative.<sup>13</sup> This data can then be re-created as mental images in the mind from different viewpoints or perspectives. This step can be likened to a kind of thinking *with* (as opposed to *about*) the phenomena. The next step involves a letting go of this primary data, and seeing what can be perceived with one’s feeling through a kind of feeling *with* (rather than *about*) the

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<sup>10</sup> In 2010 I also started something called The Centre for Social Poetry, which has primarily served as a place where I can offer images/imaginings that emerge in contemplating global news events, especially those with themes of a social nature (see <https://socialpoetry.net>). These were initially expressed in the form of feature articles and essays, but later also morphed into more poetic (or prose-poetic) form, as well as videos.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://commonland.com/>

<sup>12</sup> This is slightly different in the Poetic Mirroring tool—see below—but the final act of writing is, usually, still created in, or out of, silence.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. reports, articles, conversations, stories, lectures, interviews, facts and figures, learning journeys, shadowing, finances, event plans, organizational observations, news items, mapping, artwork, etc.

phenomena. The next step is to let this feeling perception go and see if an image (or particular words and phrases) become perceptive to a willing *with*.<sup>14</sup> It is then possible either to speak or write the words and images, trusting the hands or mouth in doing so to the guidance of the image and not one's own abstract thoughts, until the poetic picture feels complete, or complete enough for the moment.

## Application

In terms of its application in social and systems change processes, Social Poetry can be used at any stage in a systems change process, or also more independently to achieve a particular purpose. Social Poetry can thereby help in the process of the system being able to observe and, importantly, have an objective feeling for itself as a system—a process which, essentially, involves an imaginative capacity of those within a social system to collectively observe the phenomenon of the system (within which they exist) from “the outside.”<sup>15</sup> This activity and experience corresponds to what Scharmer calls “see and sense” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 39), which he places schematically as follows:

1. You cannot understand a system unless you change it (Kurt Lewin).
2. You cannot change a system unless you transform consciousness.
3. You cannot transform consciousness unless you make a system see and sense itself.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> While these steps correspond more or less to steps contained in the language of “open mind, open heart and open will” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 4) in Scharmer’s work, the essential concepts of thinking, feeling and willing—especially the relating of the capacities of thinking, feeling, and willing to physiological areas of the human organism—can also be traced back to the work of Goethe, Steiner and others (see, for example, Goethe 1988; Steiner, 2002, 2008; Brook, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> This aspect of being outside of one’s own day-to-day story – of hearing it told back to you in order to own it, before being able to continue with and complete one’s journey – has been recognized by Kornberger (2006, pp. 2–7) as being an archetypal motif within stories themselves, especially grand stories and myths, such as, for example, but not at all limited to, *The Odyssey* and *Parsifal*. In a sense, the experience is of being “outside” our usual, day-to-day experience of a phenomenon (e.g. the system) —in that we can see (or hear) it more completely from the outside—but then also of being ‘inside’ the archetype/reality/beingness of the system as a whole—in that we can sense it from within.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, presentation by Otto Scharmer: [https://eupha.org/repository/conference/2019/Plenary\\_presentations/1\\_Otto\\_Scharmer\\_Presentation\\_1\\_002.pdf](https://eupha.org/repository/conference/2019/Plenary_presentations/1_Otto_Scharmer_Presentation_1_002.pdf)

To which I would add, *you cannot help a system to see and sense itself without imagination and the social arts.*<sup>17</sup>

Attempting to quantify and qualify all the data in a system can easily become overwhelming and lead to paralysis. Through imagination and the social arts it is possible to form a human connection to the data which can then generate an individual and collective confidence (and, perhaps, feeling of responsibility) to act.

## Social Poetry Methods and Tools<sup>18</sup>

A selection of some foundational tools as used within one particular context will be given below to help provide a more concrete idea of the processes involved, while keeping in mind such tools need to be individually tailored to specific situations. Likewise, new tools can also be developed that relate to the archetypal process of inquiry outlined above, while taking note of the specific context in which they take place.

### The Context

For ease of discussion and for continuity of context, all of the following examples of Social Poetry methods and tools provided below will be discussed in relation to the same program. This program was called the Ecosystem Leadership Program (ELP)—an advanced, year-long systems-education program based on Theory U for Awareness-Based Systems Change practitioners from around the world (many of whom spoke languages other than English as their first language). The program was run by the Presencing Institute, which is responsible for the development of the theory and practice of Theory U-related awareness-based systems change. The program took place over three in-person modules near Berlin in 2019.

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<sup>17</sup> To the objection that there are several ways to facilitate a system seeing and sensing itself, we can reply as follows: the way in which we are using the term ‘sensing’ here is similar to the way in which Scharmer employs it, and that is as a kind of “feeling with,” as mentioned above. It can be argued that anything which enables a feeling with (in addition to “thinking with” which can be more connected to the “seeing” part of “seeing and sensing”) has an artistic quality, aspect and process to it. To do this as part of a process with others, or in relation to social themes, requires social art.

<sup>18</sup> For those looking for a more step-by-step process of how to apply these methods and tools, this information will be found at <https://socialpoetry.net>. The section on tools here is, however, not intended to be so much of a how-to manual for the different tools but, rather, an introduction to the foundational methods of each tool in relation to the work of social poetry as a whole, and in the context of a specific example, in order that an understanding of each tool’s foundational (and contextual) application may become clearer.

## Social Picturing

This foundational Social Poetry tool has, essentially, to do with the observation of social phenomena in such a way that after observing these phenomena from multiple perspectives one is then able to reflect on these phenomena using the process mentioned above until a picture/image/metaphor emerges.

This process can be applied by individuals or by individuals within groups. The initial data for this process can be quantitative or qualitative; taken from conversations, interviews, learning journeys, news, figures, reports and so on, or even from other forms of social art such as Generative Scribing (a visual-arts-based methodology for social change developed by Kelvy Bird, [2018]), Social Presencing Theater (a movement- and theatre-based methodology for social change developed by Arawana Hayashi [2021] and Otto Scharmer), or other emerging forms.

The Social Picturing tool can be especially helpful in trying to see and sense—essentially, come to *know*—what can be otherwise complex or ‘distant’ (both spatially and temporally) phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

Example: The poem below was written after various lectures and other input sessions on social and awareness-based systems change, ecosystem leadership and global social phenomena (including news items) at that time. It was written towards the beginning of the ELP program. Participants were asked to reflect on the various sessions already experienced that day, as well as throughout the program as a whole. They were then invited into the archetypal process/methodology outlined above, including being open to any metaphor or metaphors that may emerge, and then, if so, to trust such images and write them down. That is, participants were not “asked to” write a “poem” per se, but were invited, if they so wished, to think, feel, and will with the previous input and explorations related to current global social phenomena and the theory of Awareness-Based Systems Change and ecosystem leadership, and then to see what pictures might emerge.

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<sup>19</sup> Such as the ‘biographical’ development of a social phenomenon.

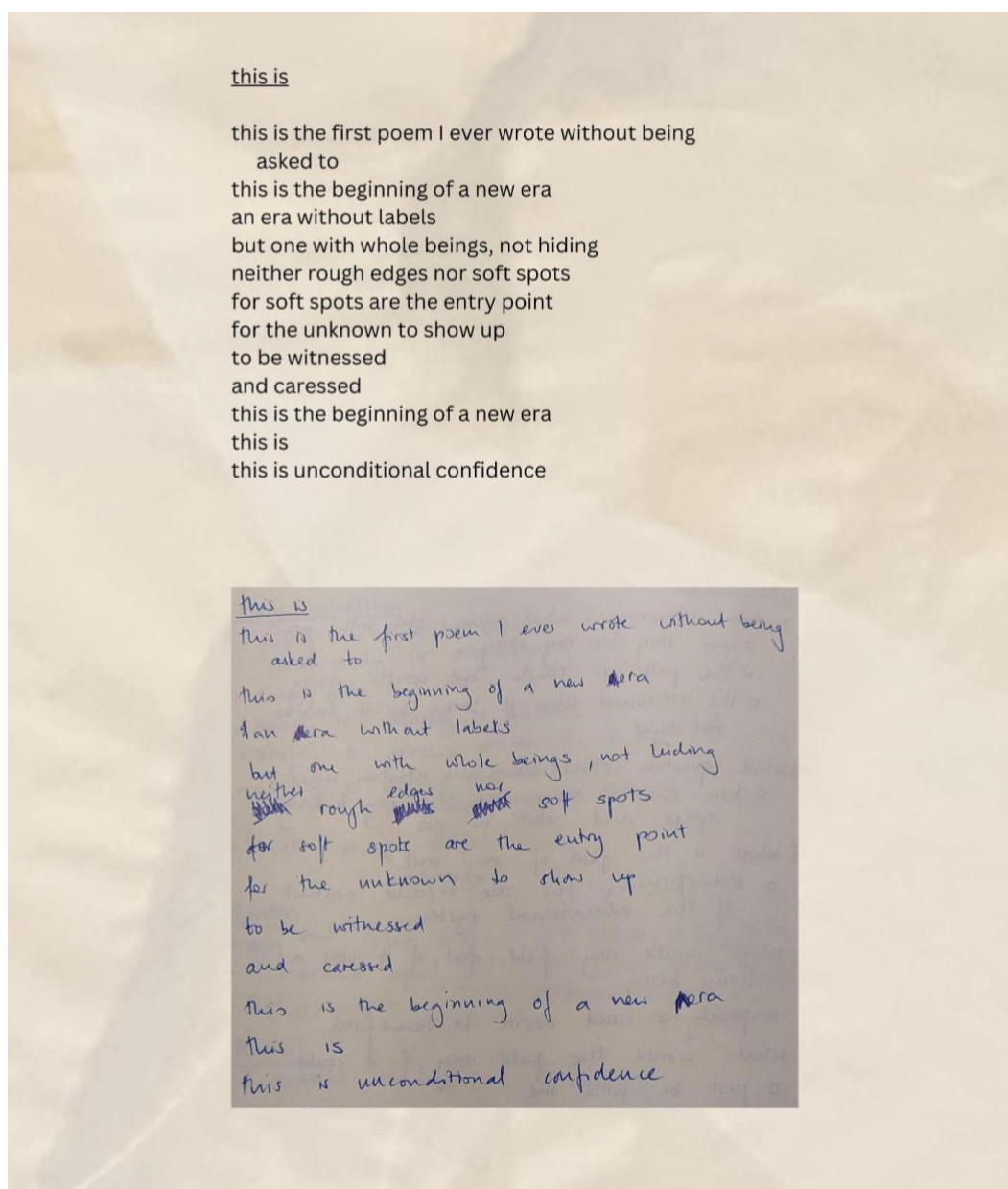


Figure 2. An example of a poem created using the Social Picturing method/tool.  
By ELP participant Babette Pfander, 2019.

On first reading of this piece, the use of the “I” in the first line makes it tempting to assume that the rest of the piece relates only to this same “I.” However, after another reading, one may ask oneself whether it is the individual “I” that the rest of the poem refers to, or some larger system or “era,” or both (or “unconditional confidence” itself). It is also possible to consider in what way these phenomena—the “I”, the larger system or “era,” and “unconditional confidence”—are related, which, as argued above, is the essential starting point for what has now become known as Awareness-Based Systems Change (as well as ecosystem leadership). This piece is therefore also reflective of the stage of the program journey at that time. The piece raises the question as to where the future, or the

as-yet “unknown” actually “shows up” (in the world, or ourselves, or both), and what may be necessary for this process to be perceived (“witnessed”) and developed (“caressed”)—i.e. “unconditional confidence.” But before “reading” too much into such a piece (I will look more at reading processes below), let us first continue our exploration of Social Poetry methodologies.

## Shifting Pictures

This is a process whereby an imagination of a current social situation is created as per the process above for Social Picturing. This initial image is itself then reflected upon by thinking with, feeling with, and willing with it. In this way, one can get a sense for how the picture itself may wish to continue; if one is able to stay with the picture itself and not force upon it one’s own will for how it *should* continue, the imagination itself can be the source from which next steps can appear.

Again, this process can be used by individuals or by individuals within groups. Initial imaginations of primary phenomena can be created by one individual and then read to the group as per the process above. These initial imaginations can be continued by the same ‘author’ who created them, or they can be passed on to others in the group for them to continue the image. If different parts of the group are focusing on slightly different primary data, it can be useful for those continuing the initial picture to have been also working from the same primary data, but this is not a hard and fast rule; indeed, there are no rigid rules in this work, and one can be creative in its application, as long as there remains a clear eye to the point of doing the work and to the archetypal methodology, as well as a groundedness in the primary phenomena.

This tool’s principal function is to live into the reality of social phenomena in order to perceive how they may wish to continue, and potentially do this also with others, who may be able to perceive phenomena from different directions. From this, a wealth of new data can appear.

Below there is an example(s) which is an adaptation of the foundational process, tailor made for the specific larger process the tool was in service of at that time. Again, many other adaptations are possible depending on the specific context.

Example: The below image is also from PI’s Ecosystem Leadership Program (ELP) Module 1, Berlin, March, 2019 (see program explanation above). The initial data was from a brief talk on the content, followed by a Social Presencing Theater demonstration of the concepts of “seeing,” “holding,” and “supporting,” combined with Generative Scribing following the same, as well as personal recollections of actual moments in people’s lives when they had felt seen, held, and supported. This process was an adaptation on the basic Shifting Pictures process. The poems that follow on “supporting/supported” are the result of Social Picturing created by individuals in a group of three, with each person then writing one resonant line from their individual poem at the top of their page. The pages were then handed

around the group, with each person building on the previous line(s). (As such, this process also moved towards the Collective Poetics process discussed below.) This form of process was chosen because of its close association with the subject matter/ social phenomenon: “supporting/supported.” A deepened observation and experience of the objective idea “supported” (grounded, again, in primary data that included actual experiences people had had in their lives of being supported)—enhanced through the perception of images by the imagination—then became possible for this workshop group and the larger program group as a whole, once it was shared with them.

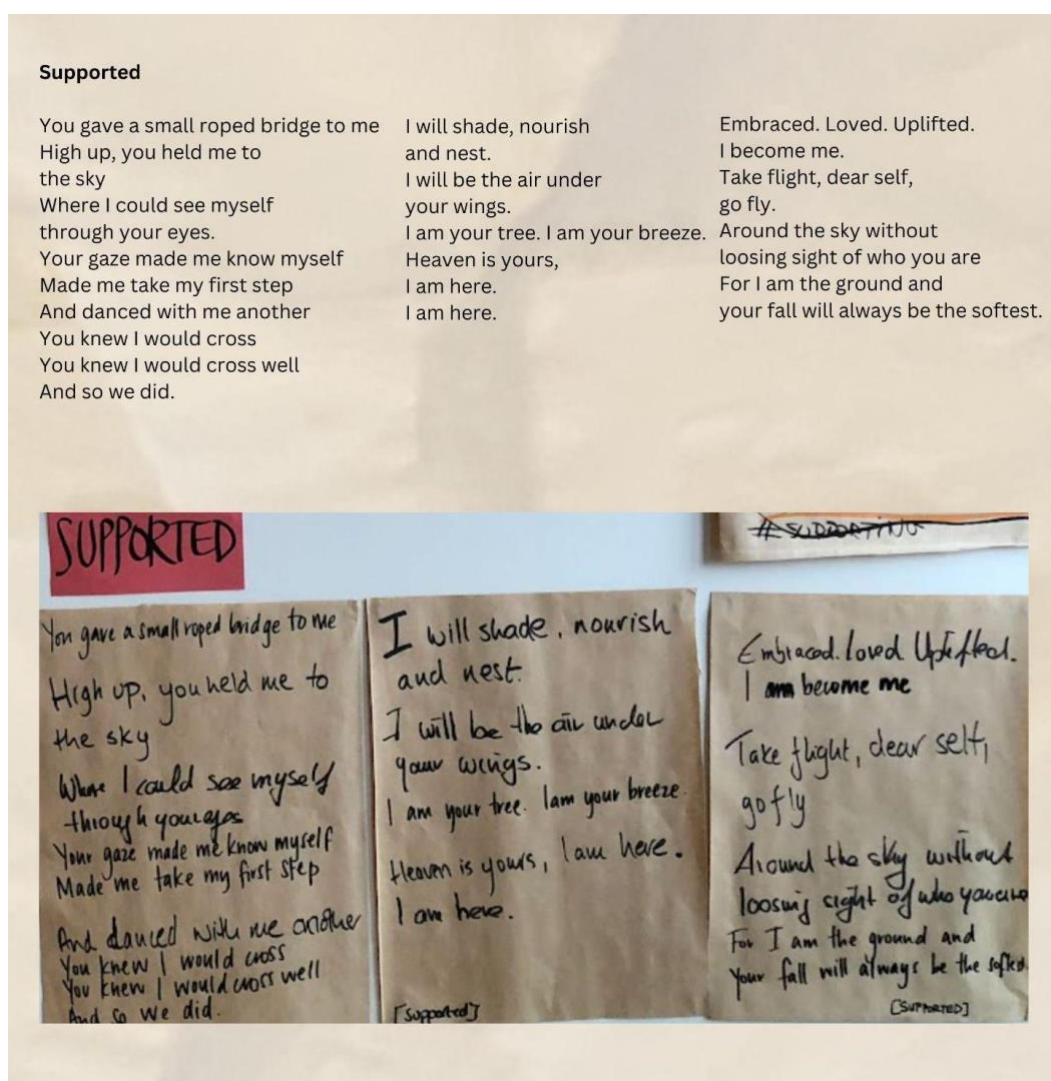


Figure 3. An example of a poem / poems created using the shifting pictures method/tool.  
By group participants of the ELP (see above), Berlin, 2019.

It may help at this stage to ask ourselves whether I feel I have a deeper understanding of the experience and idea of “supported” (than I might have had by just considering the concept in abstraction and isolation) through encountering these poems—images in which the line between the self and the other is crossed



(“Where I could see myself / through your eyes / your gaze made me know myself”); where the line between self and nature is crossed (“I will be the air under / your wings. I am your tree. I am your breeze) apparently all for the sake of the other (“heaven is yours”), but also where the self still remains present (“I am here. I am here”); and where the line between self and “self” is also crossed (“I become me”) but again, “without / losing sight of who you are.” Again, do such images open onto a more complete (supported?) understanding of the experience of “Supported”—a process of understanding in which the distinction between the supporter and the one supported also seems to blur, but where, again, the experience of self does not dissolve? That is, one can ask: “Do I/we now know the experience of ‘Supported’ by also crossing, through the images provided above, some kind of line (in similar ways as the content of the poems themselves reveal) between myself and the social reality of ‘Support/Supported?’”

Through raising such questions here it is possible to sense the necessity for a methodology for how one reads such pictures after the fact (more on this below), including how one can then use such images as further material for reflective processes by thinking, feeling, and willing with the images.

## Collective Poetics

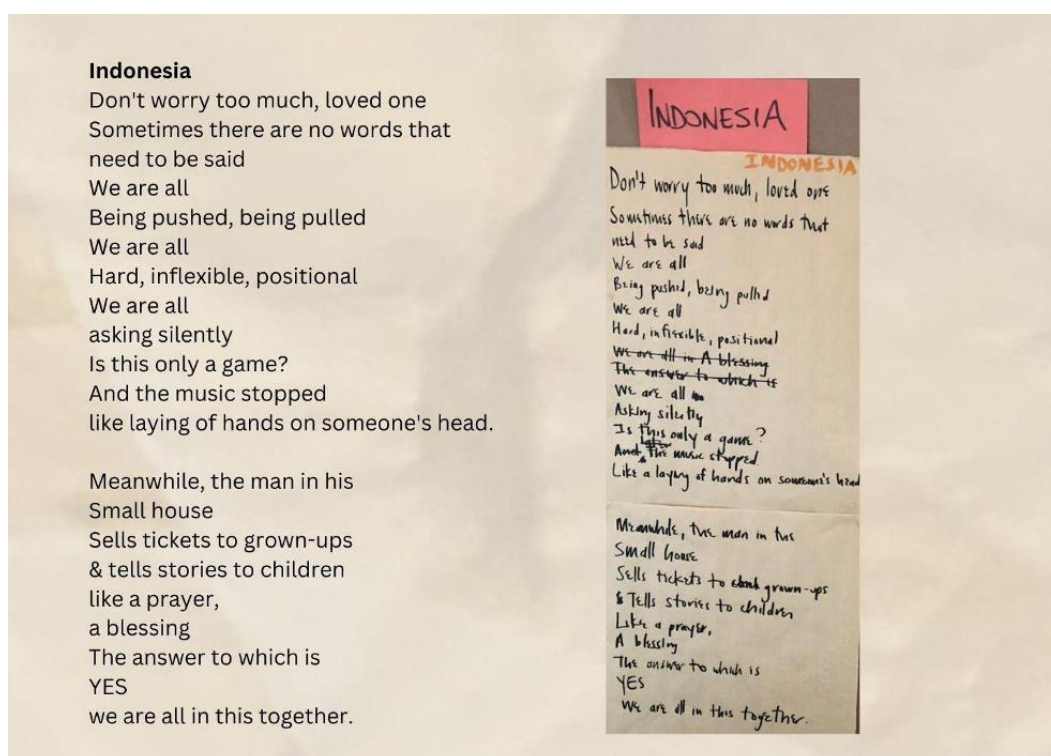
Individuals (or groups within the group focusing on separate primary data) may also wish to condense their images into one or two lines, and then arrange their collective lines (either randomly or deliberately) into a single piece/poem.

This kind of group poem is usually created from the initial imaginations of current reality (Social Picturing), but could also be created from the continuation of these images (Shifting Pictures).

One of the primary advantages of the Collective Poetics created in this way (but, essentially, all Social Poetry methods and tools make this possible) is that they provide data which can be relatively easily reflected upon by the whole group, as well as shared with other groups, including larger systems. This is especially helpful in terms of the system being able to observe and have an objective feeling for itself, as well as provide data that can help lead from current realities to preferred futures.

Examples: While the content of the previous poem looked at the experience of the social phenomenon of being supported, what follows looks at the social phenomena of nations and states. The four poems below are from ELP module one, Berlin, March, 2019. At this stage in the program, participants were sharing systems data from their own countries with others. The specific primary data was from an oral sharing of then current social (and natural) phenomena about four places by locals of those places: Indonesia, Switzerland, Western Australia, and Puerto Rico. This introduction was followed by a 4D mapping (a Social Presencing Theater tool involving movement and physical gesture in systems mapping) of key

stakeholders in these places.<sup>20</sup> The Social Poetry process that followed this stage was, essentially, as follows: using the data from the verbal introductions about social phenomena in these places, as well as the 4D mapping, individuals created their own poems as per the Social Picturing process. They then worked with others in small groups related to each particular place. In these groups, individuals underlined the most resonant lines from their individual poems and worked with/arranged these in their small groups to create a collective small-group poem. The collective nature of the content (nations and states) called for a more collective form of writing.



Figures 4a-d. Examples of poems created using the collective poetics method/tool.  
 By group participants of the ELP (see above), 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.u-school.org/4d-mapping>

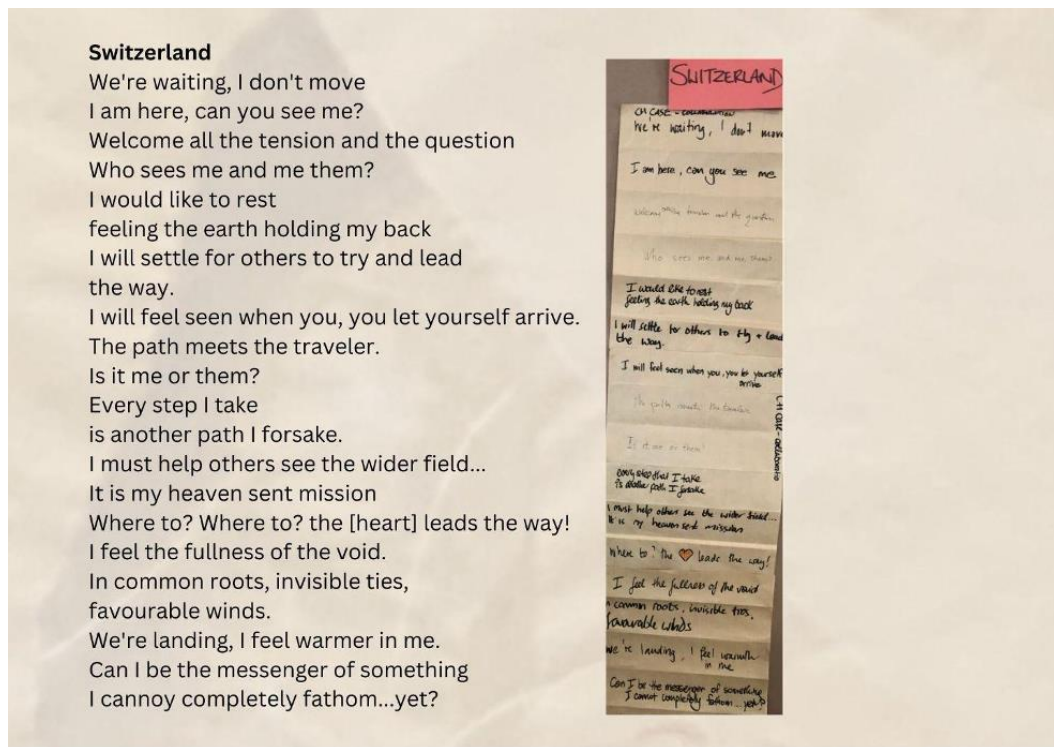


Figure 4b.

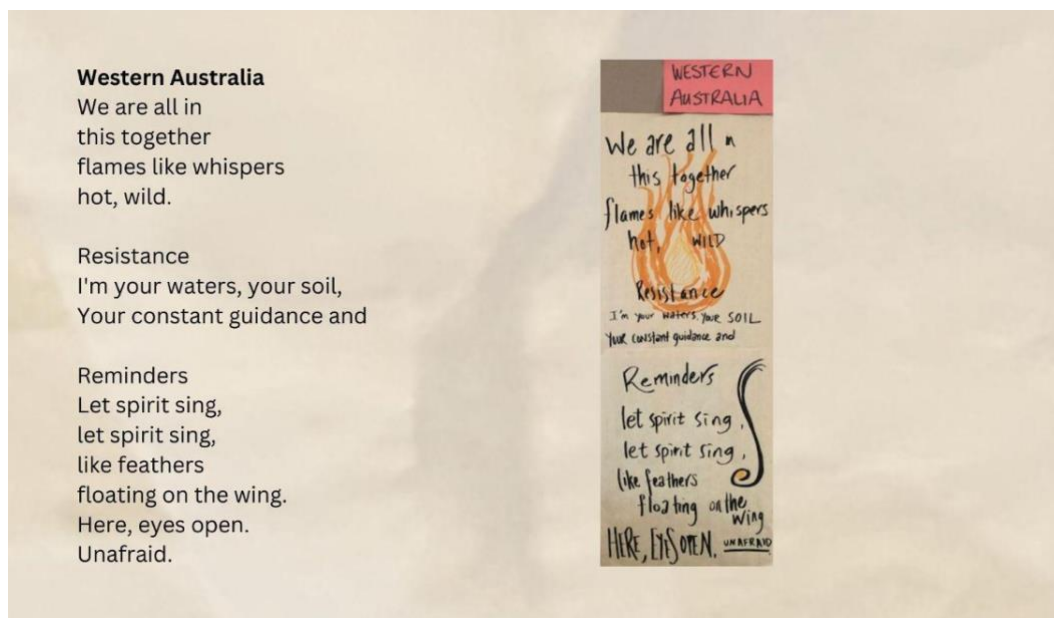


Figure 4c.

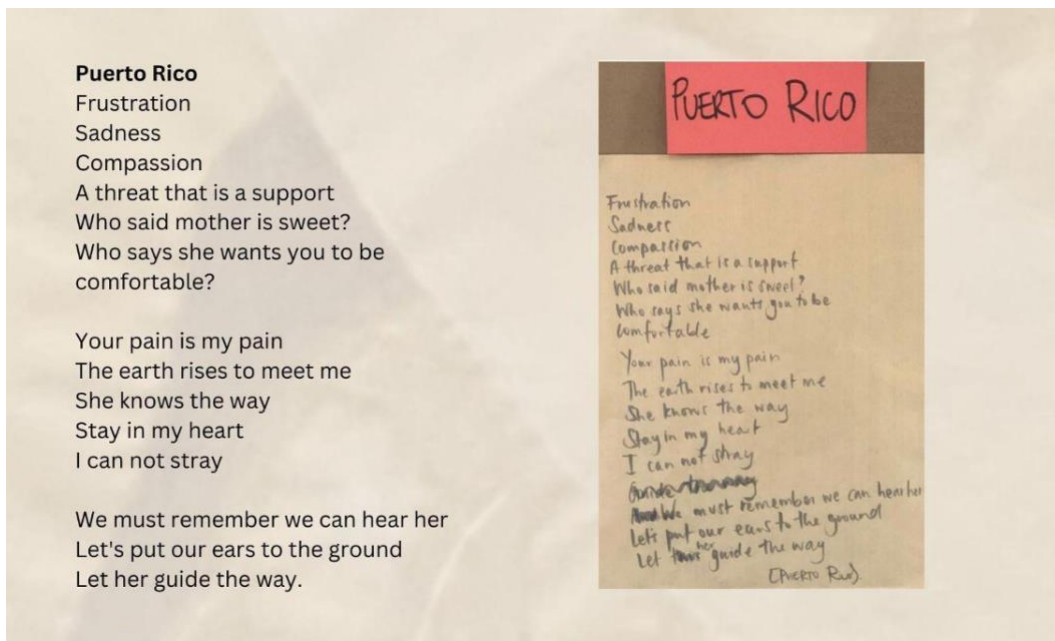


Figure 4d.

## Reading Pictures

It may be helpful to insert here a further word about methodology (also phenomenological in nature) for “reading” pictures, which is something that can be done if it is felt it might be useful as part of a larger process in which a group (or else just the holding group) is engaged in, and which I have begun to explore in relation to the pieces above. I have not often used this as a tool with participants in the processes we have done. But the fact that poems (as forms) remain as process artefacts requires that we say something about the subsequent reading of pictures that people might do following a process, including the way we are doing so within this article. If it is decided that it might be helpful to read further into the images that arise, they too can be treated as primary data and approached in the same/similar way used to perceive the images in the first place; that is, by observing and thinking with, feeling with, and willing with the images in order to see what further insights might emerge.<sup>21</sup> There is also scope to do this with the results of any Social Poetry tools. The dangers at this stage, as in all imaginative research, are that either one stays with images in such a way that one runs the risk of disconnecting from primary social phenomena and reality, or else one returns to a purely intellectual and potentially abstract and

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<sup>21</sup> The important point here is that the reading of pictures needs to be approached in a similar way in which they have been created. This is because whenever one approaches poetic form it needs to again be brought to poetic effect (Barfield, 1962, p. 48) in order to be seen and understood in its wholeness. (Here we also touch on a framing for the reading of the world as a whole.)

literal reading of the pictures, devoid of context or life.<sup>22</sup> Instead, one must follow slowly and carefully along *with* the images to see what further data they might wish to reveal.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of brevity, though it is possible to do so with all the pieces, an example of this process is provided here in relation to just one of the poems above.<sup>24</sup>

The Swiss piece goes immediately into the gesture of the space holder, the neutral place or platform (country) (“We’re waiting / I don’t move / I am here / Can you see me? / Welcome all the tension and the question / Who sees me and me them?”). The ground and earthly terrain of the country is referenced, its preparedness to allow others to lead the way, its nature as a host; as are pathways, which open up onto a questioning of the inner condition of the social encounter (“the path meets the traveller. / Is it me or them?”). This is followed by a sense of responsibility (“I must help others see the wider field...it is my heaven sent mission”) and the method for doing so (“Where to? Where to? The [heart] leads the way!”). This “lands” both in the nation and the body (“I feel warmer in me”) and (un)resolves into the overall primary questioning gesture of the poet, as well as the questioning gesture of the host of both others and the future: “Can I be the messenger of something / I cannot completely fathom...yet?”

In all of the above poems, the imagery (and reading thereof, including using these images for further contemplation by thinking, feeling, and willing with) can bring one closer to the beingness of the phenomena under observation—to a “seeing in beholding” (Brook, 1998, p. 53), a “becoming one with” (Brook, 1998, p. 53) or “seeing the whole” of (Holdrege, 2005, p. 50) these particular places on Earth, which all uniquely express something of a larger global social reality.

## Poetic Mirroring

This is the final tool I shall mention here. It is a slightly different tool from the ones mentioned above. Poetic Mirroring has to do with the capturing and reflecting back of language used by participants in a social process. This tool—as I have been using it—emerged following a request from Commonland’s Dieter Van den Broeck for a “slam poem” to come at the end of a day-long event<sup>25</sup>—but a poem which would summarize the essence of the day’s proceedings.

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<sup>22</sup> All imaginative findings should still, however, be understandable to the intellect.

<sup>23</sup> The difference here is also one of reading *with* rather than reading *about* or *of*.

<sup>24</sup> It may be helpful to move back and forward between the poem above and these observations.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Healthy Soils, Healthy Communities’, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2018. See, for example, <https://www.perthnrm.com/blog/2018/03/13/healthy-soils-healthy-communities/>

The tool has to do with the capturing of “resonant” words and phrases spoken by many participants throughout a social process, workshop or other event. Often, many of these words and phrases are metaphoric or imaginative. It is possible to draw here from different levels of listening—a kind of poetic or imaginative listening is required alongside a more prosaic or intellectual one. Towards the end of the social process, time is taken to sit with all the words and phrases that have been noted down. The primary level of reading/listening at this point switches completely to imaginative or poetic (through thinking, feeling and willing with, as mentioned above) in order to see if there is any organizing image or theory/archetype/law/wholeness/beingness within the words/phrases themselves that seeks to arrange them into a holistic and united poem/piece. (Attention to the inner musicality and lawfulness of the language itself can give rise to interesting arrangements of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance and so on, but this need not and should not be a primary goal, but more a consequence of listening/reading in the way mentioned.) Working chronologically in this way allows for a sharing experience which can trigger a collective “resonance” or *remembering* (in consciousness) process in the listening group, corresponding to the order in which these moments initially occurred. Experience has shown it is good for such a piece to contain not only the serious but also the playful moments of the social process—that it is representative of the initial data/experience. In this tool, generally no (or very few) additional words are necessary beyond those spoken/written/shared by participants within the social process itself. The piece is then usually read back to the group as a whole (or shared later in written form, or both).

This tool has a certain power when read at the end of a program, though it has also been used at the end of earlier days within a multi-day process (during Presencing Institute’s Research Summer School in Berlin in 2018; during the sensing phase of the inaugural IDEAS Asia Pacific program), as well at the beginning of following days (Cambodia Futures Lab). On several occasions it has also been used to communicate previous event proceedings to others who were not present at the initial event (events in Western Australia in 2021; the Bioregional Weaving Labs in the Netherlands in 2022). It has also been used to summarize events as part of documentation (IDEAS Asia Pacific, etc.). This process, like the ones previously mentioned, speaks directly to awareness-based systems change’s aspiration of allowing the system to see and sense (Scharmer, 2009, p. 39) / have an objective feeling of itself in order for consciousness and systems change to occur. This tool can be practiced by single or multiple practitioners in a group.

Example: the following example was created during module two of the ELP, and shared with participants at the end of that module. This was the first occasion the tool was used during the ELP program. It therefore reflects the

language and the situation of that time,<sup>26</sup> but also of what had come before and, perhaps, some of what was to come later, not only for the program group but for the world as a whole (the social systems of which the program group was exploring): “Did you see the / storms on the horizon? / Did you speak of ecosystem collapse?” (Note that this module took place in June of 2019; COVID was only to appear in November of that same year, and one can ask whether there is any connection between these images to what followed. One can also note that the poem asks the question / makes the statement: “What can telescopes see / from holding patterns between you and me? / This is not the end.”)

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<sup>26</sup> Some language was therefore used that was specific to that particular group at that time, but which we can attempt to move with (by thinking, feeling, and willing with) upon reading it, and thereby create an experience for ourselves of the process/moment, even if we were not present.



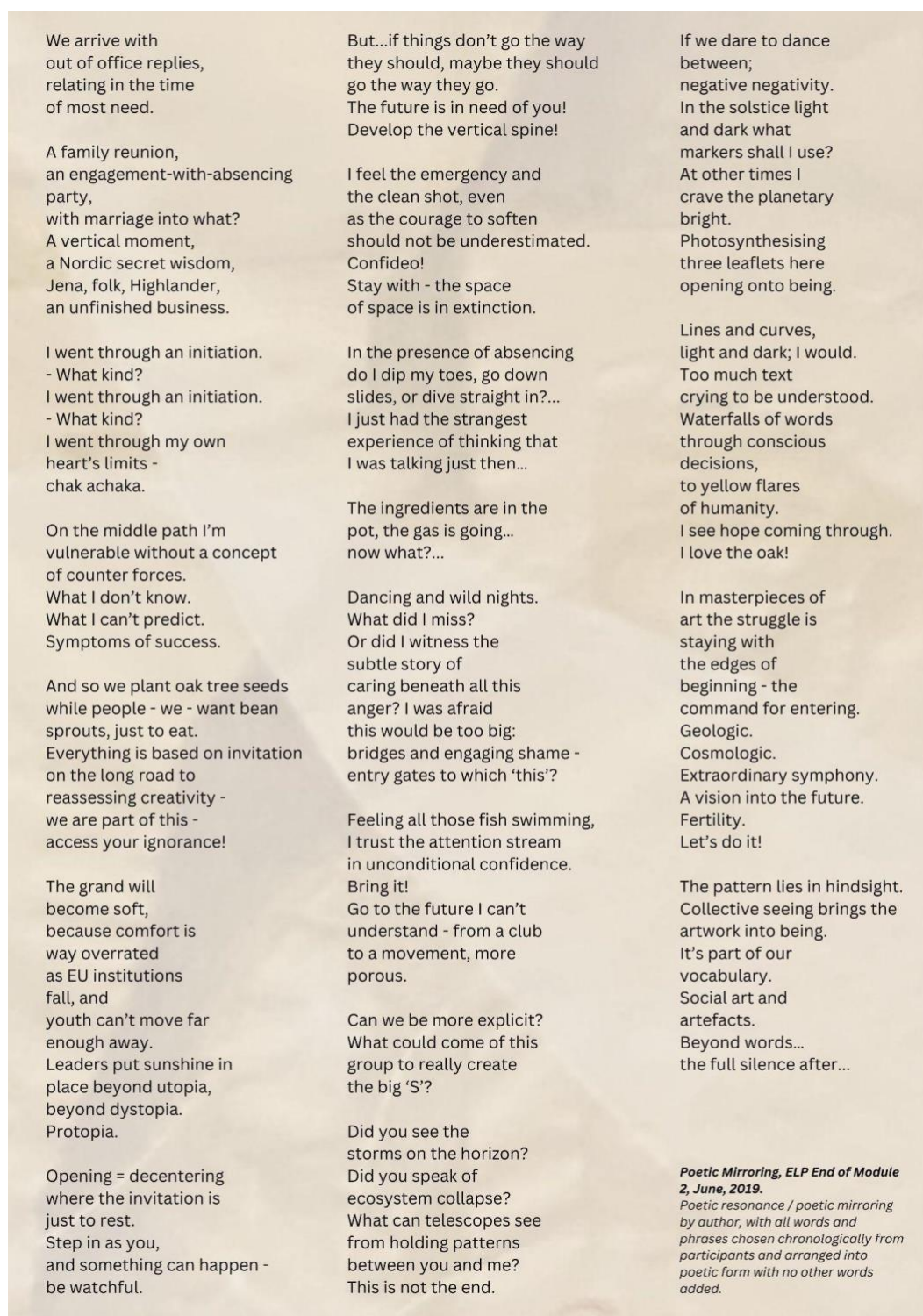


Figure 5. Poetic mirroring from end of ELP Module 2, June, 2019. All words and phrases chosen chronologically from participants and arranged into poetic form by author with no words added.

The final movement of this piece touches on social art as effect, experience and co-creation—as Barfield’s “felt change of consciousness” (1962, p. 48)—beginning with an imaginative awareness which can grow and develop further “Beyond words...” when images are also let go of and individuals or groups step



more deliberately into levels of consciousness beyond imagination—where it is possible to stand even more fully with or inside social phenomena in “the full silence after...”<sup>27</sup>

## Adaptions

There are other Social Poetry tools, and adaptations on existing tools. For instance, we have been using the chat feature in online video meetings to gather line and word entries from participants at the end of social processes in order to form Collective Poetics; similarly, some of my co-faculty are using rapid Poetic Mirroring processes to almost immediately reflect back words and phrases from closing circles or other sessions as part of tri-sector education programs. Additionally, on a few occasions, I have created Poetic Mirroring pieces by using global news headlines as the primary data. An ongoing and readily applicable adaptation to be used with all tools is to ask what the image would say if it could speak—this question and resulting activity can have the effect of drawing one closer to (as well as being able to articulate from) a place of “becoming one with” (Brook, 1998, p. 53) the social phenomenon under observation. Indeed, Social Poetry tools are constantly growing depending on the specific context in which imaginative processes may be useful as part of the larger social and systems transformation (art)work taking place.

## Preliminary Conclusion

This article has now offered a preliminary look at Social Poetry as I and colleagues have been using the term, its epistemological foundations, its biographical development, its archetypal process, and some methods and tools with examples provided from a specific context. In doing so, I have attempted to show in what way the use of the human faculty of individual (and collective) imagination can help to perceive and understand more complete social systems phenomena—allowing the system, thereby, to see and sense itself / have an objective feeling for itself. As a consequence, human beings can also increase their feeling of responsibility for how such social phenomena continue. A final word (for the moment) now on the interrelated nature of the processes of transformation, imagination, consciousness and language, based on actual experience, before offering an invitation towards next steps.

While co-facilitating a reflective stage of the inaugural MIT UID IDEAS program in Bali in November, 2022, I took part in a process of journaling and solo

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<sup>27</sup> See again, for instance, the phases of “seeing in beholding” (Brook, 1998, p. 53) and a “becoming one with” (Brook, 1998, p. 53), as well as Steiner’s articulation of the levels of Inspiration and Intuition (2002).

time in nature. During the solo time, the following words came to me in the form of what could be described as flaming golden letters: *The language of transformation is imagination.*

The day-to-day intellectual consciousness perceives a world of independent phenomena (including social phenomena, as any evening news program will reveal), at stages of rest.<sup>28</sup> In order to bring these same phenomena into dynamic relationship not only with one another but also with the time-scale of their own growth and development, one needs to have organs of perception which can perceive the fluid process of transformation itself. Working with and thinking in metaphors, and consciously striving to perceive the images working in social and other phenomena, can help to develop such organs of perception. (This can then help open up onto further levels of perception if one wished to listen further into what the images themselves wished to convey.) It is possible to do this individually and it is possible to do this as individuals in a collective. In doing so, not only can one's own thinking (and feeling and willing) and perceiving grow more aligned to the dimensions of life at work in social and natural phenomena, but so too can one's language, which can then in turn help others to also experience and see the more complete reality working in natural or in this case social phenomena, and to choose, if one so wished, to take responsibility for their future development—the future development of, ultimately, civilization, the Earth, and ourselves.

## Next Steps

This article is also intended to offer a starting point for those wishing to put this work into practice, and as a further discussion point for those already working with these or similar methods and tools. If you are interested in or have been applying some of the above or similar—including developing methods and tools further—and would like to discuss such work, you can reach me via my email at the top of this article.

## Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks must go to all the individuals mentioned above in relation to this work (as well as the many who have not been mentioned), without whom this work would not be possible.

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<sup>28</sup> By “stages of rest” we mean that phenomena (including social phenomena) are usually perceived by the intellect (via the physical senses) in such a way that they are removed from the larger context in which they find themselves, including the context of other phenomena, as well as their own development as a phenomenon over time.

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## Appendix

Some of the general contexts in which Social Poetry has been used:

<b>Systems education programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presencing Foundation Program, 2018<sup>29</sup></li> <li>• ELIAS Western Australia Program, 2018-19<sup>30</sup></li> <li>• MIT UID IDEAS Asia Pacific Program, 2022<sup>31</sup></li> <li>• u-lab Western Australia Hub, 2015<sup>32</sup></li> <li>• Ecosystem Leadership Program, 2019<sup>33</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Organisational systems awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Impact Team in the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia (UWA), 2018-21<sup>34</sup></li> <li>• YouthSection at the Goetheanum, 2008-10<sup>35</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Systems change projects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Projects bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia, 2018-21</li> <li>• Holistic landscape regeneration in the Asia Pacific 2018-current<sup>36</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Systems change events and conferences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Impact Festival at UWA, 2016-18<sup>37</sup></li> <li>• Presencing Institute's (PI's) GAIA Program, 2020-21<sup>38</sup></li> <li>• Presencing Institute's Global Forum, 2021-22<sup>39</sup></li> <li>• Bioregional Weaving Labs Learning Summit, 2022<sup>40</sup></li> <li>• Focus International Initiative Forum, 2010<sup>41</sup></li> <li>• Coming into Conversation Vconference, 2009<sup>42</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Systems labs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cambodia Futures Lab, 2022<sup>43</sup></li> <li>• United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Leadership Lab (Kenya), 2023<sup>44</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Systems research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presencing Institute's Research Summer School, 2019<sup>45</sup></li> <li>• Social Arts Studio Mexico, 2019<sup>46</sup></li> <li>• Research inherent in all the above<sup>47</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>29</sup> A capacity building program in the practices and methodology of Theory U, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> A tri-sector leadership lab co-hosted by the Presencing Institute (PI), the Academy for Systems Change and UWA, Western Australia, commencing 2018. See <https://www.eliasprogram.com/copy-of-western-australia-2>

<sup>31</sup> A year-long SDG Leadership Lab for 40 Asia Pacific leaders across business, government and civil society, commencing in 2022 and co-hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Indonesian NGO United in Diversity (UID). See <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/global-programs/ideas-asia-pacific>

<sup>32</sup> A global Theory U based capacity building program hosted on the MIT EdX online platform. See <https://www.edx.org/course/ulab-leading-from-the-emerging-future>

<sup>33</sup> An advanced year-long, Theory U-based program for awareness-based systems change practitioners from around the world, Berlin, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> A team which focused on community engagement in relation to social impact. I was involved from 2018-2021. See <https://www.uwa.edu.au/schools/research/UWA-Centre-for-Social-Impact>

<sup>35</sup> A place for younger (18-35 years) awareness-based systems changemakers and social entrepreneurs from around the world. I was involved from 2008-2010.

<sup>36</sup> Ongoing landscape regeneration as part of intersecting work between Commonland, UID and PI.

<sup>37</sup> The world's largest social impact festival; running until 2019.

<sup>38</sup> The Global Activation of Intention in Action program, taking place largely as a sense-making process during COVID times, 2020 & 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Online public global forums for people interested in awareness-based systems change, 2021 & 2022.

<sup>40</sup> A regional landscape learning summit for those working in landscape regeneration, co-hosted by PI, Commonland and Ashoka (an international changemaker network).

<sup>41</sup> An international changemaker and social enterprise initiative forum primarily for people under 36 years of age, Switzerland, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> An international social sculpture conference focusing on the role of conversation in social change, Switzerland, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> A UN-convened lab for tri-sector leaders in Cambodia, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> A tri-sector UN-convened lab in Kenya as part of the UN SDG Leadership Labs, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> PI's inaugural Research Summer School in Berlin, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> An interdisciplinary social arts studio in the Yucatan, Mexico, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> All of these usages of Social Poetry have contained, by virtue of the method inherent in it, research activity and insights.