



Homage to the Place(lessness) of Poetry and the Poetic Life of Carl Leggo

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Abstract:

This address was written for Carl Leggo and presented June 1, 2019, at the CACS preconference “The Many Faces of Love: Celebrating the Life Work of Carl Leggo”, at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. It draws upon Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the three human activities—labour, work and action—that form part of her thesis in *The Human Condition*. Specifically, I aim to provide a brief description of the role that such activities play in constituting the *vita activa* (or life of action). This overview then circles around to the ways in which works of art, particularly poetry, help establish a sense of permanence in the world that the activities of labour and action do not. I then identify an intersection between Arendt’s writings on poetry with Carl Leggo’s as relayed in his own writings on the subject. This intersection highlights poetry’s infinite value.

Keywords: Carl Leggo; Hannah Arendt; poetry; poetic inquiry; art education

Hommage à la poésie sans-lieu et la vie poétique de Carl Leggo

Résumé :

Ce discours a été écrit en honneur de Carl Leggo et présenté en prélude de la conférence de CACS 2019 « Les multiples facettes de l'amour : célébration des œuvres de la vie de Carl Leggo » à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique, de Vancouver, du Canada. Il s'inspire de l'analyse d'Hannah Arendt sur les trois activités humaines – le travail, l'œuvre et l'action – qui constitue une partie de sa thèse sur la condition humaine. Précisément, mon but est de fournir une brève description du rôle que de telles activités jouent dans la constitution de la *vita activa* (ou vie active). Ainsi, ce survol couvre les différentes contributions des œuvres d'arts, particulièrement la poésie, dans l'établissement d'un sentiment de permanence dans le monde, contrairement aux activités de travail et d'action. J'identifie donc une similarité entre les écrits poétiques de Arendt et ceux de Carl Leggo, comme s'est révélé dans ses propres écrits sur le sujet. Cette similarité met en évidence la valeur inestimable de la poésie.

Mots clés : Carl Leggo; Hannah Arendt; poésie ; investigation poétique; éducation artistique

We are all here today to celebrate the life and work of our friend, and a mentor to many of us, including me, Carl Leggo. Not only was Carl an accomplished poet and scholar, he led a poetic life that was full of hope and inspiration. To honour Carl's life as a poet, I would like to situate where poetry is said to reside in the world according to another one of my other intellectual mentors, Hannah Arendt. I will then identify an intersection between Arendt's writings on poetry, as discussed in *The Human Condition* (1958), with Carl's, as relayed in his own writings. This intersection highlights poetry's infinite value.

The Human Condition is, in part, a phenomenological analysis of three distinct human activities that make up what Arendt calls the *vita activa* (or active life). These outward-oriented activities are divided into *labour*, *work* and *action*. Arendt draws another, broader distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* (or the life of contemplation), which is described in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). While poetry springs from thinking (see Arendt, 1978, p. 8), the poem, as "a living spoken word" (Arendt, 1958, p. 170) that is listened to by others, is eventually written down, thereby becoming part of the durable world. As such, poetry is located in the *vita activa*.

According to Arendt (1958), labour is characterized by the efforts that humankind puts forth, which provide the necessities of daily life living. Labour is said to correspond to the life of animals because it does not "produce" anything other than the maintenance of life itself (p. 88). Arendt recounts that in antiquity, labour was relegated to the institution of slavery. Slave owners could then be freed from having to do the purported slavish necessities that constitute "bare life", in order to engage in more "elevated" activities. It was only in the modern world, particularly within the writings of "the greatest of modern labor theorists" Karl Marx, where labour was no longer perceived as a contemptuous activity but one to be glorified (p. 93). The division of labour, the exploitation of the labourer and automation have provided seemingly limitless abundance of things that have coincided with the development of consumer society.

If the life of labour produces and reproduces things immediately consumed and re-consumed, then the life of work, as "seen through the eyes of *homo faber*, [is] the builder of the world" (p. 135). What *homo faber* fabricates is meant to stand the test of time. However, the objects that the craftsperson makes may or may not be absolutely durable. Shoes, tables, bridges and works of art (i.e., those objects which help to create civilizations) have varying lifespans, some of which are remembered and others which are not. While some of these objects corrode due to human use and natural processes, others can achieve near immortality because they are not used so much as they are seen, heard or read (see p. 168). These latter objects, which we call art, help to establish a sense of stability in, and permanence of, the world. As such, they also counteract consumer society. To put it another way, the life of work, according to Arendt, creates both objects of use and objects that are of no use. The uniqueness of art objects—in contrast to mass produced items—coincides with their uselessness. And if art objects do "enter the exchange market they can only be arbitrarily priced" (p. 167). Of all the art objects, poetry is one of "the least 'materialistic'" (p. 169) because it lives in language. In a world where most everything has been swallowed up by the marketplace, poetry, as a

raw authentic human expression, is still quite removed from economic transaction and the auction block. Indeed, part of poetry's splendour is its capacity to evade crass commodification.

In one of my last correspondences with Carl, in January 2019, and not long before his passing, he sent me a manuscript that he had recently written, called "In Defence of the Quotidian: Poetry and Life Writing". In this piece, where poetry and prose are interwoven, he writes lovingly and longingly upon his younger brother whose recent death, he says, "seemed sudden, and much too soon" (p. 2). Carl writes poems about his brother in this defence as a way to honour him, and Carl hopes that others will listen to the stories that he tells, too. In the poem entitled "The Pen", Carl writes: "my brother sometimes complained / I made money by writing poetry about / his mishaps and calamities (I always / explained, poets don't make any money)" (p. 6). Carl's sense of humour here is but one place where his commentary on poetry intersects with Arendt's in what might be called unproductive productiveness.

And it is here at the 2019 CACS preconference, "The Many Faces of Love: Celebrating the Life Work of Carl Leggo", that we remember Carl's lovely lifework. This living conference might be understood as an example of action, which is the third and last activity that constitutes the *vita activa*. Different from fabrication, action is done in the space of appearances and in the company of others. It is different from fabrication yet again because its end cannot be predicted in advance. With the example of this preconference in mind, we know that it takes place today, with an order of speakers and events, but we do not know what will become of it, other than to know that the words spoken and heard end at a certain time. In this sense, it is unreliable and unpredictable, which is a fundamental hallmark of action. If something from the living conference should be fabricated from it, to be seen or read by others in the future, it becomes part of the memorialized world that *homo faber* is said to build. However, the durability of memorabilia can only be judged by the backwards-looking glance of the storyteller or historian who "always knows better what it was all about than the participants" (Arendt, 1958, p. 192).

I'll end this address with some of Carl's reflections on poetry. "As a poet, I often wonder if anybody besides other poets really care about poetry. . . I no longer ask, is this a good poem? I ask, what is this poem good for?" (Leggo, 2012, p. 3). In life and in love, let us take up and take on the goodness of poetry in the many ways that Carl imbues in his lifework.

References

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