'The Poetic Organization' by Alexandra Pitsis, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 xiii + 197 pp

Alexandra Pitsis in her 'The Poetic Organization' begins with refreshing frankness. The very first page tells us that the 'poetic' is something difficult to gauge; it is a paradox that refers to some indefinable process. It is a term which is messy and slips away- without explanation. It offers only a tenuous and obscured path because of its protean nature. It cannot be "named, identified and spoken about in a direct sense". By about p xii one can tangibly sense a collection of Lex Donaldson fans quietly putting the book down. But Pitsis continues in her pro-Humanities vein where poetry and the poetic are thought to offer other insights into a world not remotely shared with utilitarian Lexus functionalists. This world of 'ficto-analysis' offers quiet power over understanding organizational life because of its sense of creation and transformation. Humans, argues Pitsis, share this creative ability and participate within it, consciously or not, especially within organizational life.

Time then surely for organization theory to consider it fully. Her argument for a more considered treatment relies upon the case of Rock & Roll Coaching, located in Australia wherein nine 'organizational coaches' were interviewed for up to two hours each, using semi-structured interviews. Additionally, Pitsis showed these coaches objects from her own home picked at random and interviewed her subjects in 'embedded workshops' in which spontaneous storytelling through the medium of these objects was encouraged. To analyse these sources of 'data' (NB her apostrophes), Pitsis uses a ficto-analytical approach 'which draws from philosophical/literary theory' (page 43) and sees organizations as 'fictive texts'. More than this, her approach seeks out a particular form of fictive text - a poetic one- and poses it in opposition to a scientific approach with a realist ontology. She draws support here from Aristotle writing about the functions of the poet when he says the view that what needs attention is that which has actually happened must be matched by the poet's interest in what *might* happen. This is a poetic version of truth where one has to be true to a fiction, yet one follows the rules of rationality.

This allows fictions to have ontological status in the world. Pitsis claims that "my research is fundamentally about how *humans make themselves present to themselves,* particularly in organizational space" (p51: italics in original).

So why choose 'organizational coaches' to research? Because, she says, they exhibit "profound aspects of existence, including being and authenticity" (p21). Since the coaching process "takes on a position of perpetuating temporary/obscured boundaries", professional coaches are plunged into the unknown terrain of their own being and that of their client. Her research therefore conceptualised each coach as 'a poetic being'. Through her 'ficto-analysis' of these coaches, Pitsis creates a 'poetic profile' of each interviewee and then moves on to "ephemeral and esoteric ways of reading the data and related subjectivities" (p100). The themes which arise from both interviews and workshops (in which 'automatic writing' took place) are the respondents' use of music, sports coaching, 'selling intangibles' and dramatic performance metaphors in developing 'scripts' by which to engage their clients. Unsurprisingly, these scripts are crucial in the case organization's task of 'selling intangibles'. Of course, Pitsis is reflective about her own biases here and the ways in which she leads her respondents through the workshop activities. She is well aware of her role in creating some of the poetic emphases that came from *their* 'automatic writing'. She maintains that 'they/I engage in this process' of exploring their creative expressions allowing a 'kind of unfoldment of the poetics in the interviews with the coaches' (p 172). Pitsis concludes that poetics is amorphous and eludes definitive explanation (p166) yet is 'infused within organization through its web of public and private reveries that flow back and forth'.

Let me just point briefly to a number of issues with the book's argument. First this concept of **reveries** is a powerful one but remains underexplored in 'The Poetic Organization'. For example, Coleridge's reverie being interrupted by the visitor from Porlock thus preventing the full poetic development of Kubla Khan is an obvious example of the use of reveries in poetic development. But this opportunity to relate reveries to poetry more closely is not taken. In a major sense, Pitsis was offering each of her respondents the opportunity to enter into a reverie- which may be related to some versions of psychoanalysis- in which the poetic might be seen as arising from the subconscious. Second, and

relatedly, she takes the poetic for granted as the *explanandum* –that which is to be explained- without giving equal consideration to the *explanans*- how it is to be explained. Her literature review does not offer either her nor us a clear explanation of the poetic. Third, I'm not sure because of this second point that Pitsis' research gives the poetic a full consideration? Her data source is certainly narrow and small but is somewhat 'bigged-up'. There is a giant leap taken from nine articulate organizational coaches to all members of that 'profession'. Indeed, all organizational members appear to be conceptualised as poetic for 'what we construct as a profession has at its base the vortex of fictions upholding valid representation'. But surely one must recognise that there is a class and gender bias in levels of appreciation and affection for the poetic. When aged 14, I wrote some poetry and told my mother so when she came home from work. She asked to see the poem, took the piece of paper, read it and then tore it up throwing it upon the open fire. Her usual mildness departing her for once, she spat out "Your dad would spin in his grave if he thought you were writing that sort of stuff". Poetry was not a fit 'masculine' activity for a boy without a father. Where might it lead? Still shocked at the thought of this admonishment, I never wrote (and have hardly read) poetry ever again. So am I a hostile reader of 'The Poetic Organization'? Far from it. Poetry is dangerous and brings on many changes as my mother was presumably only too well aware.

So the major issue for this reader is that 'The Poetic Organization' is not dangerous enough. Pitsis offers us, in her own words, amorphousness and difficulty, idiosyncracy and mystery, false expectations and tacit impracticality: in short, the undecidability and randomness of being. For organizations, her approach (p 179) suggests an engagement with existential questions about language and metaphor and, after so doing, the organization which 'whole-heartedly embraces the poetic' could properly consider 'organizational values' and 'meaningful engagements at work' (p181). This is a view that **does** 'sit nicely on the shelves of academia' despite Pitsis' fear that it will not. For it ignores politics, both organizational and national. The great opportunity to find danger in seeing the world as poetic is thus lost. The phrase 'the pen is mightier than the sword' reflects the fact that poetry is dangerous to the powerful if used cuttingly to undermine them. Pitsis has spurned the opportunity to present the poetic organization either as one capable of being

extremely dangerous to the powerful **or** as one in which this danger is only too well recognised by those in power. Thus it is worthy of remark that our corporate masters still employ their own Poet Laureates to annually sing their praises for the equivalent of a barrel of sweet sherry. Whilst 'The Poetics of Organization' is praiseworthy for its topic and its attempt to grapple with the poetic, this reader came away thinking I understood 'the poetry' of organizing less well, for its edginess has been blunted by specific research subjects who have to be diplomatic and politically quiescent to make a professional living.

Gibson Burrell

University of Leicester