

The Poetics of Norbert Elias's Fantasy and Reality

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This article has been accepted for publication, but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record.

Please cite this article as:

Goodwin J. (2026), *The Poetics of Norbert Elias's Fantasy and Reality*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», doi: 10.36253/cambio-20231.

The Poetics of Norbert Elias's Fantasy and Reality

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Abstract. This paper uses the techniques of poetic inquiry and data reanimation to reexamine the themes of fantasy and reality captured in Norbert Elias's failed young worker project. The discussion anchors the approach in Norbert Elias's arguments that poetry constitutes a different way of conveying scientific knowledge. While data from the young worker project has been presented more traditionally through a combination of data and narrative, it is argued that poetry offers a differently rewarding analytic process. The paper contains seven poems.

Keywords. Norbert Elias, Fantasy and Reality, Data Reanimation, Poetry.

INTRODUCTION

The role of fantasy in everyday life may not at first sight be an obvious concern for sociological inquiry. While other disciplines, such as psychology (see, for example, Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016; Wagoner et al., 2016; Webster, et al. 2025), psychosocial studies and psychoanalysis (see, for example, Grossman 1982; Giustino 2017), literary and media studies (see Pang et al. 2026), religious studies (see Driggers 2022; Dey and Baruah 2026) and philosophy (see Carr 1980; Turner 2022; Lawson and Thompson 2024), have all dealt with fantasy to varying degrees, in sociology fantasy remains underdeveloped and ill-defined. My own direct engagement with fantasy, or more specifically "fantasy and reality", stems from the writings of Norbert Elias, largely in the context of his previously unpublished work on youth and the adjustment of young workers to work roles and adult situations. As reported elsewhere (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2006), Elias was awarded research funding by the UK's Department for Scientific and Industrial Research in the early 1960s to examine young people's experiences of transitioning to work and becoming adults. In this research, Elias examined an apparent disconnect between young people's perceptions of the future and the benefits and freedoms of adulthood (fantasy) versus the annoyances, limitations, and constraints of adult life (reality). What elsewhere Mills (1959) would describe as the often imperceptible «series of traps» that constitute everyday life. For Elias,

Somehow the experience of many youngsters when they grow up in our society seem to me similar. They perceive more the wider choices of adulthood than its restraints and frustrations (Elias 1962a: 2).

This is rooted, Elias suggests, in the fact that young people have largely selective and unrealistic perceptions of adulthood. Encountering other adults, particularly having to work with adults who are not family or friends, enforces a reorganisation of perception. This adjustment can be painful as it necessitates learning a new social reality, and the gap between adult reality and their perceptions and

new experiences leads to a “shock experience” or “reality-shock”. At the core the transition to work necessitates the acquisition of adult and workplace behavioural standards as «without acquiring the norms and behaviours of the adult workers around them young workers cannot fully participate in adult working life» (Goodwin and O’Connor 2006:168). However, until they enter work young people, would have little idea of the realities of work, have indirect knowledge of the adult world, do not communicate with non-familial adults, are in a role that is liminal and ill-defined and experience a social childhood that extends beyond biological maturity all of which lead to “idealised” notions work and adulthood. Fantasy is a coping mechanism for dealing with the uncertainties of a new life phase (Goodwin and O’Connor 2006). As Elias (2001) writes:

They are less able to deal adequately in thought and deed with the problems facing them the more their lives are threatened...by uncontrollable dangers, tensions and conflicts, and dominated by the resultant fears, hopes and wishes. And they are less able to withstand the dangers, conflicts and threats to which they are exposed, the less objective they are in their thoughts and actions, the more susceptible to feeling and fantasy. (Elias 2001: 81)

Despite the early promise of the research and a significant period of data collection, intellectual disputes between Elias and the research team led to the project’s failure and eventual abandonment (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2006). In the early 1990s, I rediscovered the data, in the form of interview booklets, in a dusty, dark attic office where I had been given a desk as an early-career researcher. What followed was a journey of discovery into the genesis of the research, the experiences of those collecting the data, the analysis of the 1960s interviews, and learning more about Elias’s orientation to sociology and his sociological practice (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2006)¹. While my colleagues and I have written extensively on this material, resurrected this lost research, and offered conventional accounts of this legacy research, my sociological interests have moved in a variety of directions over the intervening thirty years or so since we originally found the data. For example, beyond the interview data itself, I became interested in the associated “paradata” and research ephemera (see Edwards et al. 2017), letters and correspondence (see Goodwin and Hughes 2011), walking the field (see O’Connor and Goodwin 2012), the history of sociology via biographical research practices (see Author A) and, more recently, creative research practices such as autoethnography, data reanimation and poetic inquiry (see Goodwin 2026; Goodwin 2026a). The latter emerged from a desire to engage with data differently, present findings more imaginatively and make the connections between history and biography rooted in a creative practice-based sociology rather than “standard” theory, method, and data reportage. Poetic inquiry and data reanimation are interesting and valuable techniques for highlighting research participants’ lives, experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Poetic inquiry is a unique set of qualitative methods that forms a surprising nexus between the subjective perception producing this intimate meaning bestowed by poets, and (more) objective observation. (Hockett and Walter 2025: 332)

Despite the various and ever-changing contours of my interests and research practice, the “young worker project” has never been far from view, and the materials remain a significant source of

¹ Although the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was originally designed as a one-off cross-sectional study of young people’s experiences of the transition from school to work, the rediscovery of 851 of the original interview schedules, containing biographical data, presented a unique opportunity to undertake a re-study of this cohort of young workers from the 1960s. The data for the original 1960s study were collected between 1962 and 1964 based on a sample of young people, born between 1943 and 1947, and drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of all Leicester school leavers from 1960 to 1962.

fascination. The data was already chronologically old when I rediscovered it. It is over twenty years since my co-author and I first published our significant work on this data. However, while the research has remained ever-present in the background, this temporal distance has also afforded me the opportunity to think differently about the original research and the then-young worker responses. As outlined above, one facet of the research that still fascinates me is the data and associated interview questions on Elias's approach to fantasy and reality in young people's lives. Indeed, I have always felt that this data had more to offer if reworked, reanimated and retold differently. Offer something that moves beyond a usual retelling of what the 1960s respondents said or felt about their lives and futures – fantastical or otherwise.

This desire to reimagine the data also coincides with my re-reading of Norbert Elias's poetry. Elias wrote poetry alongside (or co-located with) his sociological writing, not as a separate set of practices but as a way of explaining and understanding differently. To be clear, for me, that value in Elias's poetry is not at all embedded in notions of literary appreciation, but rather in the fact that he used this form of writing as part of his approach to consider and communicate his ideas. This paper aims to further combine these intertwined interests and rework the young-worker fantasy-and-reality data into poetry. The discussion begins with a brief overview of Elias's poetry and its overlap with his sociology, then presents five poems developed through data reanimation. The paper concludes by reflecting on the process and the analytical benefits of presenting data as reanimated poetry.

ELIAS AND POETRY AS *MENSCHENWISSENSCHAFT*

The importance of poetry to Elias is clear in his writings and his biographical interviews. For example, in *reflections on a life*, he talks about his interest in the avant-garde magazines from around 1914, such as *Der Sturm* and his interest in artistic movements, particularly expressionist poetry. The most authoritative account of Elias's poetry is offered by Dörfelt-Mathey (2015), who considers in detail all aspects of Elias's poetic endeavours. This text is currently only available in German, and it is beyond the scope of this article to cover Dörfelt-Mathey's comprehensive and intricate arguments in full. As such, what is offered here is a brief overview. First, a central argument in Dörfelt-Mathey (2015) is that Elias's poetry is directly related to his sociological writings and practice, and that it should also be considered a form of "human science" or *menschenwissenschaft*. This is crucial in that it is important not to differentiate between Elias's poetry and his other works as both form part of the same "whole". Elias's poetry also serves as an equally effective mode of understanding human existence and society and cannot or should not be separated from his sociological work. Poetry *is* a scientific inquiry. Likewise, for van Voss and van Stolk (1998), Elias did not lead the life of an "old man" but instead worked actively and with urgency, including writing poetry. The poetry was not a side issue or a diversion, but rather a meaningful contribution to understanding interdependencies, social configurations, and long-term social processes. For example, his poem *Forsaken* (Elias 1987) links to his writings on shame, love and longing, while *How Strange* (Elias 2013), for me, offers alternative and personal insights into his writings on involvement and detachment, the established and the outsiders, as well as the experience of being an outsider himself, and the relational cues that undergird interaction. Elias broke new ground with his poetry. Indeed, although the sociological role of poetry as a way of conveying meaning has an extensive lineage, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s and becoming well established in the 1990s and 2000s (see, for example, Prendergast 2009), Elias's poetry predates this "trend" (see also John Barron Mays 1940).

Second, an argument that resonates fully with current discussions of poetic inquiry and “making data” (see, for example, Ellingson and Sotirin 2020) is the idea that “making poetry” or *dichtung* as a valid and authentic form of human science (Dörfelt-Mathey 2015). It is a creative, imaginative, and exploratory social science that can examine fundamental questions. This also aligns with the creative processes underlying poetic social scientific enquiry (see Wetton 2025). The poems can also emerge from the interplay between conscious and unconscious thinking. In this regard, Dörfelt-Mathey (2015) also suggests that the source of inspiration links Elias’s reflections on fantasy and daydreaming to Freud’s (1908) work on *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*. For Elias, the writing process need not be a conscious or physical act of deliberately sitting down to write poetry. Extending this further, it also overlaps with Mills (1959) and how the sociological imagination can foster more systematic thinking by playing with words and themes and by observing, recording, and reflecting on everything from overheard conversations to dreams.

Third, Dörfelt-Mathey (2015) demonstrates how Elias’s poetry also explores humans through literary means. Central to this is the dialogic exchange between the poet and the reader, or between Elias and others. Elias’s hope is that the poet can harness the unique features of poetry to communicate to others the full gamut of human experiences and emotions (see Elias 1987; Dörfelt-Mathey 2015: 131). In line with more contemporary urban poets, bloggers and vloggers, these poems are not one-directional but require «imaginative and empathetic engagement from the audience» (see for example, Goodwin 2026a). Poetry is necessarily omnidirectional.

Finally, despite the importance Elias attached to poetry and its analytical and sociological value, it appears that his poetry remains underexplored, underutilised, and perhaps misunderstood. As Dörfelt-Mathey (2015) suggests:

Considering the emphasis with which Elias fought for his poetry in his later years, the self-confidence with which he appeared as a poet, and the role he assigned to poetry in his own work, the prevailing lack of interest in his lyric poetry can only be surprising. (Dörfelt-Mathey 2015:9)

A central challenge here is the “idea of poetry” itself. Poetry has associated rules of strict meter and rhyme schemes, rhythms, lines and lengths, and, as such, can imply “established” “elite” and restrictive forms of knowledge expression only accessible to those who “understand”. Poetry almost inevitably prompts questions around aesthetic value, literary merits and artistic qualities – «is it any good?». Yet, in many respects, these are the wrong starting points. Instead, we should ask what analytical utility the poetry offers in terms of understanding social processes. What does it tell us about interdependencies, social configurations, emotions and interactions? Applying only the rules-based aesthetic criteria misses the point entirely. As such, this is not about artistic merit *per se*, but about the sociological insights in all of Elias’s writings, regardless of form. If we understand that, then perhaps more interest would be afforded to Elias’s poetry in a way that further promotes the role of poetry in the social sciences.

DICHTUNG: MAKING POEMS OF TRANSITION, FANTASY AND REALITY

The main source of data used in this paper are derived from interviews with young people who participated in the adjustment of young workers to work roles and adult situations between 1962 and 1964, which was restudied as part of a later research project (see ESRC project “Redacted”). The

process of making the poems follows the “data reanimation model” (Thomson and McGeeney 2025). I read and reread the interviews from the 1960s, selecting words and phrases that interested me, responses that stood out, and answers that seemed typical or representative. These were then combined with my own ideas and supplemented with words and phrases on “fantasy” and “reality” adapted from Elias’s unpublished writings 1961, 1962a, 1962b and 1964 (see Author A). All the text, words and phrases were then reworked and repositioned to create poems of transition - *Fantasy and Adult Dreamscapes*, *Reality Gaps*, *Liminal Spaces: Acting Like an Adult*, *Reality Gaps II* and *Self Awareness*. Two additional poems are also included that build upon the themes of the earlier poems – *Fantasies for a Later Life* and *Lost Generation*.

[1] *Fantasy and Adult Dreamscapes*

The gap between childhood and adulthood means
Bringing them up with illusions and ideals
So that high dream expectations that clash with reality
An adult world full of promise and opportunity
The promise of satisfaction and fulfilment
I will have a very good, well-paid job
I have always liked making things with equipment
I wanted to get away and earn the money.
I will have specialised in something
More freedom, I didn’t like school at all
...we did dumb things
When I go into business on my own, I will make it original
Be freer, give your own opinions and talk when you want.
I want to be treated like an individual
... and have a large income
Will these dreams ever occur?
 The quest for meaningfulness with no impediment
...Endless opportunity, promise and betterment
A straight, unbroken lifeline from school into a prefabricated job
 and a ready-made family
I should think I’ll be married, have kiddies, my own house and a fast car
Be happy and sorted, well off financially
I just like Fridays when I get the money, that’s all I like about it
It will be spent by Monday
 Steady prospects on the reality continuum
 While the life destinations remain ambiguous

[2] *Reality Gaps*

An undreamed reality of the adult world
The need for learning foresight
Doing what the job demands, not what you feel
Working hard until the July fortnight
No holidays until then, not like school
Learning new codes of behaviour to avoid looking like a fool
I was a little bit frightened of leaving school
Leaving home early and going to town on the work bus
At first, I wasn't too pleased at getting up at 6:30
The hours are too long
I dislike the hours I work
Coming home late, filthy, and dirty.

A realisation that the supervisor is not like the teacher
I thought I was going to do everything wrong
No longer directly under the eye of an adult, but
One amongst the throng
The crowds make me nervous
New behaviours hard learned
All this for the money I have earned
I worry about doing a disservice, so
All the boys stand up when the men stand up
The rebellious, brutal scenes redolent of Arthur Seaton²
Always knocking me about, giving me a punch, that sort of thing.
I heard about blokes who get you and knock around
Stuck between a rock and a hard place, behave or
The blokes might get onto you.

Didn't expect it to be very good
But it was worse than school
I just think it's boring
No time to fool around
Even when we start early in the morning
I miss the tricks we used to pull when we were at school.
[that] need for a steady control of instinctive and emotional impulses
Work rules are non-negotiable

² Arthur Seaton is the main character in Sillitoe's (1958) book *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. A boorish, hard-drinking, womanising, violent young working-class male from Nottingham in the English Midlands. As Walker (2018:1) writes: «Seaton is a product of his environment. He is not an “angry young man” but someone trapped in a world where violence is just a part of everyday life».

[3] *Liminal Spaces: Acting Like an Adult*

What makes a boy or girl an adult?

I've given up comics

I'm more serious now

I don't do childish things

Not fooling around and being cheeky

[mother] he's a slight cheekier

I must get up earlier

I don't lark about at work

I changed my style, taper me trousers and that

I get to dress up nicely and do my hair differently

I make a special night of washing my hair and things like that

Responsibility - the main thing

I've lost a lot of my shyness and am not so self-conscious.

I don't hang around on street corners

[Grandad] You're not so bad-tempered!

My eyes opened by work and the people at work

I listen to other people more now

I respect people, learning their ways

I have learned to save money

I have become a little harder

I was a bit shy and a bit scared of girls, but not now

Not like holiday - school is play - work is real life

But

Adults are straight-faced

I just don't look like an adult somehow.

[mother] his voice has only just broken.

I have fits of giggles

Work makes you think you have grown up when you haven't

I still don't understand women

boy's working in factories still behave like schoolboys

I do so many silly things, probably

I am still a boy. I feel like one.

[mother] He's got to wait until he grows up

I'm too small, really

I don't have enough responsibility to make me an adult

I'm still out for a laugh

I've got a great deal to learn.

I'm in between

I prefer to think of myself as a teenager

I don't want to become old

[4] *Reality Gaps II*

They swear a lot, and it's a shock when you hear it
They moan about money
They never seem to like anything
...Now 't is right
Some are standing by the machine, talking, not working
They have false pride in what they do

The boss doesn't talk to me
The foreman is a big head
...He thinks he knows it all
He yells, «Slow down, don't work too fast»
You'll make us look bad, lad.
More than enough work on the line to be had.
A painful reorganisation of perceptions
I don't enjoy sitting at a machine all day
Cooped up in a school since I was five,
....an office wasn't much different
School is now a distant recollection
Dirty, damp, noisy machinery
Little kids doing man's work, getting low wages
All the same, second nature, the job is done routinely
Stop and stare at the pressure gauges
All a shock... more or less.

[5] *Self Awareness*

A sudden awareness of the reality gap between capability and desire
I didn't pass the test
I was just labour for hire
I was scared to death
...when I started
I wanted to be a mechanic
...But this was all I could get
I never had the brains to do anything else
I wanted a trade in my hands
I ended up in a factory, constrained
I felt like a baby
I didn't understand
I was overpowered
I had a boss who always bellowed, «Listen to me!»
Is *this* it? Like *this* every day?

EXTENSIONS

As suggested above, the fantasy-reality relationship is outlined in some detail in Elias's unpublished writings on the young workers and elsewhere in his works (see, for example, Elias 1962a; Elias 1970). This formulation of fantasy and reality has also been used to examine religion and civilisation (Linklater 2023), conceptual imagery (Hughes et al. 2022), violence (Wood 2012; Clement and Mennell 2022) and sport (Dunning 1989; Malcolm 2015; Hague and Law 2021). Such applications also suggest an interesting range of analytical possibilities for using fantasy and reality to understand and problematise changing figurations across temporalities and within life courses. Regarding work and employment, authors such as Freeman (2010) may also be instructive (see also Mason 2018). Using poetry may enable us to put «the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present» (Freeman 2010:17), so as to understand that futures were/are not predetermined, undergirded by a linear logic, or, as Elias would suggest, determined by billiard-ball causality. Instead, the poems point to lives in which pasts and possible futures are complex, not neatly linear, and where the aims, hopes, and aspirations of those 1960s young workers may or may not have come to fruition (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2005).

There are two “extension poems” I would like to offer here to explore these ideas further, albeit briefly. First, within the same life course, the young workers were reinterviewed in their mid-to-late 50s to examine their ideas about their futures. Goodwin and O'Connor (2014) then adapted Elias's unpublished writings on fantasy and reality and applied them to transitions to retirement. For example, Elias identified eight specific problems for youth (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2006; Goodwin and O'Connor 2014), including fantasy-reality being rooted in «the prolonged separation of young people from adults». Linking this to Elias's work on death sequestration (Elias 1985), one can rework the problem as being “the increased separation of the retired from other adults” as a frame to understand the fantasy-reality relationship in later life. Poem 6 *Fantasies for a Later Life* points towards the challenges of retirement and the uncertainties of the further «retemporalization of bodies» away from waged labour (Freeman 2010:32).

[6] *Fantasies for a Later Life*

When working life is finished
[They have] a limited understanding of what retirement will be
Fantasies help individuals cope with what they can't foresee
A contribution diminished
Endless free time, paid obligations gone
A new dawn to come
I see the freedom of it as a big benefit
My wife wants to go to Australia
Mainland Spain or Majorca
Search the internet for a home abroad
Travel all round the world
I need to be busy, don't want to be bored.

We worked all our lives, so
I might get a little job
I think I would have to do something

Just do something part-time
I need to avoid a decline
I'm not too bothered about getting older
It depends on how fit you are
To keep things in order
Hopefully keeping my health and enjoying it
I will probably carry on doing the same thing
I can't be a complete slob and just sit

Make sure you're ready to retire
The uncertainty of the future concerns me
What will it require
A cultural shock to work no longer
So much time to reconquer
If you're going to retire, you need to be ready
A lot of folks can't afford it
You still need money, don't you?
That's the problem, financial security to remain steady
We've got pension...
but it's not going to be enough to fund our intentions
A house too big, and a family gone
The dwindling prehension.

We could also consider the changing figurations of young people as they transition to work across different historical periods. Indeed, combining the 1960s data with data from the 1980s and 2010s, Author A examined reality congruence among more recent generations of young people regarding work and employment. The argument developed was that, given labour market transformations, contemporary youth have *more* reality-congruent expectations of work and careers. Yet this contrasts with the fantastical “golden age of employment” notions that continue to underpin policy-making and governmental concerns. Put simply, many young people now *expect* to work multiple jobs, do not expect “careers”, and are happy to work in non-standard ways, while governments and policymakers opine for a labour market of single-step transitions, careers, and high-skilled lifelong employment that no longer exists. Young people have no other experiences of work and, as such, current employment forms constitute their “new reality” (see Furlong et al. 2018). It is also the case that how *we* perceive work and employment in the 1960s – as a single step, career-oriented, skills-based, permanent, etc – is also somewhat fantastical. This was not the reality for many young people leaving work in the 1960s (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2005), with the Leicester labour market being characterised by gig work, part-time work, non-standard work, out-work and complicated transitions. These changes accelerated in the 1980s, but the genesis of contemporary labour market issues stretches back much further than previously thought. Poem 7, *Lost Generation*, explores this further.

[7] *Lost Generation*

Generation Z in an economic wilderness
“A lost generation” the common concern
But, lost to what?

A similar refrain every 10 years
No young person left behind, they say
NEET³ not neat means economic pain
What happened to those who went before?
...the recessions of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s?
But no youth vale of tears
An adult fantastical view of past working lives
Driving future fears
Stuck in an outmoded view
Labour needs have changed
Traditional employment is no longer the social glue
Job for life. No.
Cradle to grave. No.
High quality work. No.

But was it ever so?
Past and present interlinked
Rose tints cloud our perceptions
That “golden age” of linear transitions
Jobs for life, unemployment the exception
A perfect labour market
That never really existed
Baby Boomers, Generation X and Gen Z
All differently similar
But school-to-work transitions were never universally linear.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

“...the sociologist as the destroyer of myths”. That put it in a nutshell. *Have you never thought people need myths?* Yes, but then they ought to write poetry, as I have done. I need myths too – and paintings.
(Elias 1994: 40)

While poetry, via poetic enquiry or data re-animation, may not be new in sociological practice, it remains relatively uncommon in analysis and data presentation. However, combining these approaches with Norbert Elias’s assertion that poetry is science and that poetry represents a dialogue between people that enables the writer to convey sociological meaning in a different way offers sociology a great deal. Not least, it provides writers with an alternative way to present and use data and, in the case of this paper, to revisit data from legacy research studies to derive new meaning and understanding. The poems presented here hopefully convey something of this approach’s potential. I suggested at the outset of the paper that a key concern for Elias in the “young worker project” was the problems young people experienced in the transition from school to work, and the role of fantasy

³ Not in education, training or employment.

elements in managing the reality of the workplace versus the sudden realisation of what adulthood was like. The poems variously reveal, through the responses of the young people from the 1960s, their feelings and experiences regarding leaving school and entering Work for the first time. The poems indicate the gap between youth and adulthood, between work and school, and between childish ways of behaving and the level of foresight required in adulthood. We can read how uncomfortable those early periods of working life were for the young people, how they didn't feel like they were adults, or at best they were in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood where, as Elias suggests, their roles are ill-defined. We can also read about their fears and anxieties relating to not doing things correctly or even experiencing physical and verbal violence from the established adult workers around them. Presenting this data in a traditional quotation-based format could reveal these themes. Poetry offers multidirectional insights that emphasise the relational, temporal and layered complexities of transitions beyond simple discussions of reality or impact. Finally, engaging with data differently, whether through poetry, data reanimation, collaging, or some other interpretive act, is not only meaningful but also an incredibly rewarding process that offers a level of engagement and immersion beyond traditional, stale analytical approaches.

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