Poetry and Investment Banking: It's All about Risk

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When John Barr speaks about risk, it's natural to assume he's talking about finance. After all, Barr's been active in investment banking for more than 30 years -- first as a director at Morgan Stanley, now as managing director and chairman of SG Barr Devlin (SGBD), a unit of Société Générale (SG). But when Barr sat down to speak with Wharton's Michael Useem, director of the school's Center for Leadership and Change Management, the topic was risk but the context was poetry -- particularly about the way that art can influence business.

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Michael Useem

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Knowledge at Wharton Staff

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Earlier this year Barr, whose poems have been published in six collections, was named president of the Poetry Foundation, which was itself re-named the Modern Poetry Association after receiving a $100 million gift from philanthropist Ruth Lilly. The Foundation recently celebrated its 50th Poetry Day public reading in Chicago, where the newly-appointed U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser read some works. On February 2, 2005, Barr will be a featured speaker at Wharton West's Leadership Conference in San Francisco. As a businessman-poet Barr may be unique, but he's not unusual. Other such Renaissance people have included the international banker T.S. Eliot, insurance executive Wallace Stevens and Kooser himself, who is also a retired insurance executive.

Useem: There's a long tradition of people in business, including T.S. Elliot, writing poetry. You went a step further through your involvement in the Poetry Foundation and your recent appointment as president. Why did you take on these roles in addition to your very busy life as an investment banker?

Barr: To me this is the culmination of the two rivers of my life that have run in parallel courses and that never before converged. A career in business that now includes about 32 years on Wall Street has always been a source of joy to me. Unlike my father, who worked for a railroad, I love my work and was really delighted to find a career that involved people I respected and clients I could serve. The other river has been poetry and I really couldn't imagine my life without that. It's been central to me ever since

high school. I have been writing for 40 years and publishing for the last 20 years and I've had a number of books brought out by various people — but I never thought I would get the chance to put the two together. So when the opportunity rose just a year ago to be the first president of the foundation where the money and the poetry come together, I thought, "Wow, this is worth moving to Chicago for."

Useem: You have used the phrase "tickling the dragon's tail" and told the story of physicists who were fooling around with two pieces of uranium and managed to bring them too close together, resulting in a brief burst of radiation. So it's a question of how you see business and poetry complementing and informing one another, and is there a danger of getting too close — with a result that is explosively not what you want?

Barr: I think it is reasonable for us to ask that the Poetry Foundation run itself as efficiently as a small, well-run, for-profit enterprise. There's no reason poets can't tie their shoelaces just like everybody else. Members of the Foundation staff all have a passion for poetry, but they bring something else as well. We are going to have a website editor who knows all about the Internet, and we have a magazine editor who runs Poetry magazine and knows the business of publishing. The point is I think we are internalizing, in our employee group, that same phenomenon of two globes of uranium that we're trying to bring together for energy but not for destruction. So far, so good. But I think the way it could go wrong is if we had a heavy-handed approach where we treated this art like any other business, without sensitivity to what's special and different about art generally and poetry in particular. That can be destructive. But there's plenty of poetry-heads around here, including my own, that don't want this to happen.

Useem: How can business learn from the arts, from Shakespeare, from poetry, from creative writing of all kinds? You have obviously had to think about that, unlike Wallace Stevens [a vice-president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. whose poems were published in 1914 in a special wartime issue of Poetry] who was known in the business community. But it was like he was leading two separate lives. His two worlds did not meet. In your case, however, I think you are known within the business world as a poet in addition to an investment banker. How do the ideas of poetry inform what you do as an investment banker, and how could these ideas inform others in the business world as well?

Barr: I think that a life of poetry — as a reader or a writer — gives one an appreciation of the fullness and complexity of things. The process of writing a poem is really one of synthesis and inclusion. T.S. Eliot has written about that very well. You basically find a group of words in a certain sequence that have the magic within them of capturing and containing a moment of external reality. There's a mystery to that, and there's also an inclusion that goes beyond anything that we might be able to simply put in a rational sentence.

That sense of art expanding to the limits of the human experience makes for a better decision-maker in the business world, because it tends to offset the tendency to reduce every business question to a simple algorithm or a simple proposition that we can boil down and make a decision about. I think all of us are constantly managing two contending forces: one is to simplify so as to understand and decide, which is much of what a businessman does, in my experience; [and the other is to] not injure the complexity of the full fabric. My life in poetry has kept me alert to that. In serving clients, I have done a better job because I have appreciated that there is more in the room than just a voice on the telephone.

So that's what it has done for me. I would hope it did that for other people. I don't think there's a simple transposition where I could go to Macbeth, read the morality tales of how he came to power and then transport it to the board room. It hasn't worked that way for me. But I think that art [can inspire] an approach to a broader business mind.

Useem: Many people in all walks of life, not just business, say, 'I just don't have the talent or training to appreciate the subtleties of Shakespearian literature or the meaning of great poetry.' What would you say to a person who is a little bit hesitant to turn to poetry or to creative arts more generally? Could you describe it in terms of your own decision making?

Barr: I think it has to do with risk and comfort. I have spent long periods of my life not understanding the poems in the New Yorker magazine. In fact I'm still not sure I understand them even though I live and breathe poetry. Some poems are elusive on purpose and some are dealing with subjects that are hard to talk about. But my encouragement to people with [a similar] opinion about poetry is that effort is rewarded, and there's always some kinds of poetry that are going to be obtainable on the first hearing. Billy Collins has done a great service to poetry because he writes wonderfully, but people can understand him on the first hearing.

So there's no 'one kind' of poetry any more than there is one kind of business. I would greatly encourage — for what it does for your life — the effort of finding some part that you're comfortable with. It's also partly a matter of being comfortable with ambiguity — and I think that makes for a better person, a better-functioning person. Certainly poems never come to rest; they often deal with things that are inherently contradictory, and they're trying to find a resolution in the way they work through the art. I remember my father, who was not a literary man, asking, 'Why do we need to go to a play, why don't we just read what it's about?' There was that point of view, that attitude. And I think the point is that the complexity of the play itself puts us into the fullness of it but remains at the same time ambiguous. If we're comfortable with the ambiguity that's inherent in art we'll probably be comfortable with the ambiguities that we're bound to encounter in business.

Useem: If a reader is attracted to the kind of thinking you just expressed, drawing upon poetry, Shakespeare, or other areas to become more effective in what they're doing — whatever their walk of life — where would you have them start?

Barr: If it's a matter of poetry, I would start with art that you can enjoy. The teaser, the side door into art, is through pleasure, amusement or entertainment. Samuel Johnson once said the end of art is to instruct through pleasing, and that has stuck with me all my life. It means you shouldn't go to the Museum of Modern Art and stand there puzzling in front of art that you find forbidding or cold or inscrutable. You should find some art that you enjoy, and it could be, well, Huckleberry Finn. There's art that I love, and I go back to those things again and again. And if you're not getting it, I sure wouldn't beat yourself over the head with it. Specifically, I'd mention a couple of poets who I think are accessible to anyone: Billy Collins and Mary Oliver are both wonderful poets living and writing today with large audiences; their books are best sellers within the poetry world. And if you like them, there's plenty more where that came from.

Knowledge at Wharton: You spoke generally about approachability, but we're also talking about how poetry has influenced your understanding of ambiguity and complexity and their connection to business. Given that Knowledge at Wharton is targeted at business readers, are there particular authors whom

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you found particularly compelling in understanding that complexity, while still having some application to the business decisions that you face?

Barr: I might start with William Butler Yeats, who many believe to be the greatest English-language poet of the 20th century. He had a poem that was published as he was approaching middle age called The Fascination of What's Difficult. The point of my story is that Yeats had a life outside of poetry. He was a founder of the Irish National Theater in Dublin, for example, and the poem talks about the aggravations of trying to put on a play, with actors quitting and budgets overrun — all the stuff that we all deal with in running a business — and how he reconciles that. And he doesn't really reconcile it. He understands that poetry is like a horse in a shed — a reference to Pegasus — waiting to break through the doors and run off, literally fly off as a winged horse. Any poet who has spent a life out there trying to do things in the external world, like Yeats with the Irish Theater, is likely to capture things that you just asked about. So I tend to go with poets like that.

Knowledge at Wharton: In an interview you did with Poets & Writers magazine some time ago you talked about how poetry needs to be about communication, not just self-expression. And in your role with the Poetry Foundation you would like to take a more activist, a more reach-out approach. Have you seen such an activist approach to communication in your experience in the business world?

Barr: To me, this is a point where poetry and business are probably different in the following sense: In the business world, anybody who is going to start a business, or come up with a business plan or pursue a profit-making enterprise, has to reach out, be aggressive and deal with the external environment with the intention of shaping it to a set of objectives. The hidden trap in poetry is that it's really about the internal experiences of the poet and therefore you could get great lyric poetry written by people who never leave their living room. Emily Dickinson spent her entire life in the same house and never left Amherst, Mass., as far as her biographers know. Having said that, she wrote great poems about the human condition.

My point is that I think if we could get more lyric poets to think about walking out the front door and reaching out to encounter fresh experience, it would benefit their work. It's not automatic; a lot of poets don't do it. There is a passive mentality that I perceive in poets today about that subject. They wait for the muse to come to them … wait to be 'struck by the muse.' It's the poet as passive witness. And I'd like to push back on that and encourage poets to think about traveling to say, Japan, and come back with a set of poems or a book of poems about what it's like for an American in the Orient. Just to push this one step further, I would like to actually create some controversy about this question in the poetry world. I would even go so far as to say that I think poets should be imperialists; I think they should be importers; I think they should be exploiters of external experience, without apology. I don't see that kind of thinking very often in the poetry world.

Knowledge at Wharton: Is the kind of mindset you're expressing in any way connected with Ruth Lilly's gift? Did she include any directions when she named the gift to the Poetry Foundation?

Barr: There was no connection that I know. In fact Ruth Lilly, who is still alive and well and 88 years old, really works through her advisers. We know that she's sent this magnificent gift, and we know that she attached no strings whatsoever to it, which for any tax-exempt foundation or enterprise is the gift from God. Sometimes great gifts are made but with rather quirky conditions, but Ruth Lilly was the complete opposite of that, and we love her for it.

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Useem: You have spent your career in investment banking. Simultaneously you have been a practicing poet. Has your investment banking experience informed your poetry?

Barr: Not until late in my writing career. I remember when I was a graduate student in business school, I was standing in a room — it was like a boardroom with walnut paneling — and I tried to write a poem about that instead of studying, and it was dreadful. I threw it away, as I had thrown away a lot of poems. So I couldn't transport the literal business experience, the trappings and furnishings of a business experience, into my poetry, and really didn't write about it in a direct way.

But to my surprise, when I wrote a book called Grace that was published in 1999, there is a fictional character that is a takeoff on Donald Trump, who is my take on a hustler-businessman-promoter. It came spilling out in that book in the form of a fictional character who gave me an opportunity to say everything that I wanted to say. In my life experience there's no predicting where or when the real experience will pop up in a poem. It could be many decades later or it could be on the spot. You know some great poems have been written on the death of a father, or mother or son. So it's not to say that it all has to incubate down there for 40 years, but I do think you have to wait for the poem to tell you when it's ready.

Knowledge at Wharton: How do you encourage the development of creativity and conviction both in poets — in your leadership role in the Poetry Foundation — as well as in private sector business?

Barr: I would say in both the key is to develop an appetite for risk. There is an essential difference between business and art or poetry in terms of the attitude towards risk. I think businessmen seek as much return for as little risk as possible. Quite logically, they look for situations that offer asymmetrical returns — a lot of return with as low a risk as possible. Artists, to the contrary, have to embrace risk to succeed. I think they instinctively realize that if you don't look for risk and seek it out in the way you write your poetry and in what you are exploring you're probably not going to produce anything of interest for the future and for your readers. So I think my answer to your question, to prompt creative behavior in both business and arts, would be to encourage people to take as much risk as they are comfortable with.

Knowledge at Wharton: And how would you help people gain that comfort?

Barr: I think through success stories. In my case I played it safe for many years. I was with Morgan Stanley for 18 years. I loved the fact that I was in the warm embrace of a big firm with a world-class franchise. When I stepped out March 19, 1990, onto a windy street corner and said goodbye to my bosses — the only job I'd ever had — that was risk. I was a partner in good standing; I wasn't chased out. I think they were shocked that I left, but I needed to do that. It was my declaration of independence as a businessman, to go out on my own and do a kind of business that I thought the clients wanted and I really wanted to pursue. Two of my partners joined me in that effort, and it was successful. But I couldn't imagine more risk for me as a company man; it was like stepping out of an airplane at 30,000 feet and then checking to see if you have a parachute. I lived on adrenalin for six months and it was the greatest thing I ever did in the business world. At the same time, at age 47, I was just starting to write this book. If you have a life mate with you who's willing to believe in you, that helps you to take that risk, too.

Useem: John, you have a capacity to combine, in a remarkable way, a successful career in investment banking and at the same time a very successful career as a poet. Could you go back a bit and talk about an influential person who helped you appreciate the fact that you wanted to work on both of these terrains?

Barr: In some ways my life lacked models. I grew up in rural Illinois. I thought well of my parents, but my dad was no poet. In fact when I was a senior in high school I walked into the kitchen and announced to the family that I was going to be a poet; he took that in and said, 'Well at least go to college so they'll think you're an eccentric and not a beach bum.' He was a very practical man, and that practicality informed my realization that I wasn't going to pay the rent and support a family with my sale of poems. So he was a model in that way, but he wasn't a model in encouraging me to have a life in the arts.

I think it wasn't until I got to college and started to taste good poetry that I fell in love with it. Some of my teachers were probably good examples that way. But what I'm really trying to say is that I had models in both business and in poetry, but I don't think I had many models about combining the two. I actually never planned to combine the two. I did the poetry because it just kept coming out and it just kept being there. I made a series of conscious decisions about business; going to business school, going to Wall Street and having a wonderful 30 years there. But poetry never asked me. I just did it.

Knowledge at Wharton: The theme of ambiguity seems to recur a lot in poetry. But we're at a time in America at least, where it seems that regulators and investors in particular don't want ambiguity — they want transparency. Is there any tension there?

Barr: Yes, I think even with 100% transparency in a poem — say that each word in a hypothetical short poem is easily understandable as words that we have lived with all our lives — the subject of that poem may be inherently ambiguous. Poetry spends a lot of time talking about things that are hard to talk about in terms that help you resolve it by articulating it. It would be tragic if a poet was to write in a complicated manner on purpose, and some have done so. People like to pick on the New Yorker poems because they are so obtuse. But I think that, in fact, back in the middle of the 20th century there was a tendency on the part of some schools of poetry to write stuff that was intentionally difficult — not because it had to be, and not because it couldn't avoid being difficult — but because that was a way to intimidate the audience. I think the only justifiable reason to write a poem is to share a sense of wonder, to include and persuade the reader. If you're writing to impress your reader you shouldn't be writing poetry.

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