

IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

Edited by Robyn Rowland

Our second *Zest* dialogue is by Jill Jones. Jill's latest books include her fifth full length work *Broken/Open* (Salt, 2005), which was short-listed for The Age Book of the Year 2005, and three chapbooks: *Fold Unfold* (Vagabond, 2005), *Where the Sea Burns* (Picaro, 2004) and *Struggle and Radiance: Ten Commentaries* (Wild Honey Press, 2004). In 2003 her fourth book *Screens, Jets, Heaven: New and Selected Poems* won the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize. She has collaborated with photographer Annette Willis on a number of projects, including c-side and also *Sea Shadow Land Light*, a multimedia presentation first delivered at the 'On the Beach' conference held by Edith Cowan University at Fremantle in February 2004. She was a co-founder, with Laurin McKinnon, of BlackWattle Press, and in 1995 she co-edited (with Judith Beveridge and Louise Wakeling) *A Parachute of Blue*, an anthology of contemporary Australian poetry. With Michael Farrell, she co-edited a selection of Australian erotic poetry for a 2003 edition of *Slope* online magazine. Jill maintains a weblog at <http://rubystreet.blogspot.com>

The Poet in Prose: Ezra Pound on 'Rhythm'.

Our second abstract comes from 'A Retrospect', first published in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T.S.Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954). This extract is selected in Herbert, W.N. and Matthew Hollis (eds.) *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*. (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000).

"Don't chop your stuff into separate iambs. Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause.

.....

Naturally, your rhythmic structure should not destroy the shape of your words, or their natural sound, or their meaning. It is improbable that, at the start, you will be able to get a rhythm-structure strong enough to affect them very much, though you may fall a victim to all sorts of false stopping due to line ends and caesurae.

The musician can rely on pitch and the volume of the orchestra. You cannot. The term harmony is misapplied in poetry; it refers to simultaneous sounds of different pitch. There is, however, in the best verse a sort of residue of sound which remains in the ear of the hearer and acts more or less as an organ-base.

.....

I believe in an 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's [sic] rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable."

TALKING RHYTHM, WALKING RHYTHM

by Jill Jones

The music/poetry nexus is a common and attractive idea. But poems are not music. Ezra Pound is right to push away from that notion when talking about harmony: 'The term harmony is misapplied in poetry; it refers to simultaneous sounds of different pitch.' Yet, for him to then talk of 'absolute rhythm', seems to contradict the idea of an 'interpretative' rhythm. And what that could possibly mean? Although in English poetries you could make something of musicality in rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and the relation of one line to another, there is no notation that can accurately render that. Nor is there a notation to measure the rhythm of a poem in English. Scansion just does not do it accurately. There are too many Englishes, accents, dialects, creoles, with different stresses, different vowel elisions, different sounds for that to work. And one man's dactyl + iamb could well be another woman's trochee + anapaest.

However, there is rhythm. Let me talk of my own making. I write about, as well as out of, the senses and the rhythms of the body. I am my body and it's what I do, it's how I think. So I may say I have a techne of the body. I mention breath a lot in my poems. As well as obvious connections to 'breath unit', it also links to an occasional breathlessness. I also have a form of vertigo and experience a state of between-ness when I've had an episode. Therefore, the interstitial and the uncertainty in immanence are part of my process. Just as I don't have a continuous stream of thoughts. They have complex patterns that occur through disruptions, through beats and changes, pulses and stresses. Heartbeat and breath work like this. Sense data arrives on moments. Bodily syntax isn't smooth – walking isn't, sex isn't. The body has its digressions that the thinking body theorises. A heart has its arrhythmias. As do words, so hard consonants disrupt mellifluous vowels. Thus, rhythm.

Walking is a key for some poets. There's that famous quote from Mayakovsky about the importance of walking and mumbling, of sounded rhythm getting to the word of the poem. Coleridge and Wordsworth talked about their different styles of walking as part of their composing a certain kind of poem. Let alone Baudelaire and his *flaneurie*. I don't drive, so I walk and also use public transport a lot, which has its own rhythms - how you see as things pass, what you hear and don't hear due to noise factors, as well as the actual physical feeling of the train or bus. It may explain why some of my poems,

especially more recent ones, have a kind of broken or collaged kind of narrative movement. It was no accident that my last book was titled *Broken/Open*. To work with sound and metre does not mean necessarily that you're wedded to strict metre or rhyme, or even song-i-ness. This may seem obvious but I still want to state it.

I have written the occasional poem using a traditional rhyme and metric scheme. Some of the sonnets in a 2005-6 sequence 'Traverse' published in *The Drunken Boat* online journal approach that. The stresses and rhythms are obvious in metrical verse, of course, but irregular stress is also rhythmic or tends to rhythms that aren't iambic. I don't know how much I get it right but I am conscious of a wish to get a poem to 'swing' somehow. Timing is important (and turning), the swing between the binaries, the alternations, however irregular they may be, how the poem moves, how it becomes. I sometimes write poems to songs or pieces of music, (ah yes, back to music). For instance, the poem 'The Skim' from *Broken/Open* is based on the rhythm of a song, 'The Spark', by The Roots. The end result is hardly ever something you'd pick, though I know where it started. Or I might write an abstract lyric but it still has a ground, in the ruins of language, say. We understand fracture and discontinuity, these are real experiences, they have energy and movement.

Pound in other writings was greatly interested in visual possibilities of the poem, particularly in his famous idea of the ideogram, derived through his (mis)understanding of Fenellosa's (mis)understanding of Chinese characters. Notwithstanding Pound's dodgy linguistics and anthropology, the visual poem is central to modernist and post-modernist poetries, our poetries. The written poem exists in space and time. It is more than a phonic pattern through which a reader makes ways to meanings. For the poem to work as a poem it has to be seen as such, that is, it is a visual experience,* as much as heard through its sound and rhythm as either read aloud or subvocalised by the reader. Jack Kerouac said, 'Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better'.

Kerouac also said, 'Something that you feel will find its own form'. To seemingly argue against what I said earlier and in particular the notion of breath dictating the line, there is no point in using a form if you're not trying to do something with it. Each poem is an experiment, possibly in that you pose a 'question', and find a new solution for it, as well as in the sense that you never necessarily know at the beginning how a piece of writing will turn out. Of course, that is how we work. And, surely, we want to be surprised.

And there are so many resources for surprise in attending to the semiotics of the poem (eg line, which a theorist like Giorgio Agamben sees as the sign of a poem) and how that works with the semantics of the poem. Perhaps this doesn't seem new. We've all heard the Form/Content binary bandied about but there has, to me, been a whiff of lip service as well as nebulosity in

this, and leads me to wonder what is actually at stake. My guess is that in certain circles it's about Form being cast as 'mere stylistics' or, even worse, 'play', as contra to Content, which is the 'serious' business. In that scenario, I find a widespread form of vers libre that seems somewhat slack and self-indulgent, with little attention to the line, the look or the sound of the work produced.

Poems are made of language and their poetic meanings arise out of all the ways their language works including vocabulary, diction, lineation and stanza groupings, grammar, syntax and phrasal density, sound and patterning, the choice of where and how the poem appears, ie. printed book, screen, stage.

Presences and absences are enacted in the poem on the page through the use of lineation. The break, the enjambment, interrupts meaning. Of course, a non-enjambed line can interrupt meaning in a different way. Making a line break is a decision nowadays and this places it potentially in an ethical realm, of responsibility. 'Go on your nerve', sure, but these are decisions.

And how important the ending is, the last line. Is it how we see 'ending' as space dropping under, falling below the poem? Is there tension or release in that space? Because it is not 'empty' space, it has a material presence, usually white paper, and an implication far from empty, just as the other white space on the page is not empty but nor is it just background, it is where the end of the line acts.

For me, even the making of poetry begins in a space, though it's not one I can easily define. It's often apparent when I'm walking. But even before that, it's in the body's space, and pace, its energy. Getting older means being ever more aware of your materiality, your 'stuff', of how the body's history makes the selves that you are. The past really does become a longer past, where meanings are ambiguous as is memory and mutual recall. And dissatisfaction must also sit high in this. Using the same procedures to the same end can get exhausting. To change, in Pound's old modernist dictum of 'make it new', with an emphasis on 'make' as much as 'new', is generative rather than degenerative, and allows you to place yourself in a different space (well, of course, never into the same river twice) and to look back at different traditions (as all poetic movement forward involves looking through the rear view mirror).

I want change, ground and air, in a poem's thingness, as well as the poem's aboutness, to which I sometimes give a peripatetic meaning, of 'round and about'. I'm talking about a poem's ecology, if you will, its own dynamics, its topography, and maybe that is what is 'uncounterfeitable'. There's that 'I' that's present in some way, but I as a relation, to others, to othernesses, to the work of poetry and bodily thinking. No I but in the world.

NOTES:

* This forms a central thesis of Sydney poet and academic Rosemary Huisman's book, *The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English* (London & New York: Cassell, 1998).

Parts of this article are reworkings of an interview of Jill's, available online at [e-x-c-h-a-n-g-e-v-a-l-u-e-s](#) and an article, 'I want to be available to the moment' published in the journal *Ilumina*, PULP, 2007.

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