

IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

Edited by Robyn Rowland

I find it exciting to read prose written by poets exploring their own processes in poetry, the value and purpose of poetry, its meaning – what poetry is to them, and sometimes what it should be to others! Often they creatively engage with issues of craft; sometimes with the mystery of the moments of creation. Understanding their own work and the work of others is part of their exploration of the poetic life.

I am often struck by their sense of surety in this, a kind of fearlessness of opinion. In the established poets, there seems no anxiety about ‘fitting in’ or being in ‘fashion’. They don’t see this positioning of their opinion as something they need to be careful with. Debate is seen as important, useful and engaging.

Zest is keen to bring its members some of that lively engagement with poetry from our own Australian poets. Each month we’ll be selecting a prose quotation from a poet and asking one of our own poets to respond. The selection will be eclectic and will cover a range of approaches to poetry.

The brief is as follows:

‘Please respond to the quotation in your own way. You are invited to agree or disagree with it, interpret it and explore. It can be an agreement/extension or a disagreement/argument or both. It can relate to your own work and processes or to the work of others you admire in what they have said on poetry. But I don’t want an essay on others, rather on what YOU think and believe about poetry in relation to the issues raised in the quotation given.’

The Poet: Esther Ottaway

Esther Ottaway’s book of award-winning poetry on pregnancy and parenthood is titled *Blood Universe* and was acclaimed on Radio National’s Book Show. Her poetry has been published in *The Australian* and leading literary journals over ten years. Esther was Australian Young Poet of the Year (Poets Union) 2006 and has won significant national poetry competitions, grants and residencies. She has regularly featured at festivals, including Sydney Writers Festival, Queensland Writers Festival and the inaugural Australian Poetry Centre Festival in April. Esther is a member of the Board of *Island* magazine. She is currently writing a second collection of poetry.

Poet in Prose: Carl Rakosi. Reflections on my medium. *Boxkite: A journal of poetry and poetics*, Number 1, 1997

What is one to make of this correspondence? Are the spaces between words and lines and the silence between notes really equivalents? I am not able to carry this further without becoming too abstract and diffuse, and there is not much point anyhow in claiming that they are. A better question is to ask what correspondences and connections are there between the intentions and effects of poetry and those of music, and how does the nature of their resources affect this. Not all kinds of poetry and music, naturally. I'd never be able to get out of such a jungle. Just lyric poetry, which seems to me closest to the original impulse (not to be confused with the impulse to write poetry, which everybody with an ego and a problem these days seems to have, or can be taught to simulate) and chamber music.

They both aim for the heart. Music travels straight to it and wrenches it. The effect is instantaneous. Not so poetry. Its lyrical impulse is tempered and modified at the very start by the nature of language, which places cognitive expectations on itself. To get to the heart, therefore, lyrical impulse has to sneak around them by a devious and complex route of word associations and timbres and cadences. Indirection is its very nature. Its effect, in fact, depends on it, and subtlety, and keeping under the cover, otherwise the poet will be blamed for manipulating the reader, a kind of game between impulse and language in which language allows impulse to go its own way but not openly and directly. In return, impulse gives up part of itself and takes on the burden of the cognitive demands of language.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that to the poet, the man (sic) of words, it is an endless wonder that music can achieve its effects without any words or visible devices of any kind: that its great power, in fact, comes from that fact

Esther Ottaway in Dialogue:

When I married jazz musician Kelly Ottaway in 2000, a friend wrote to us in a wedding card: "May your lives be filled with music and poetry." And they have been: for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, nothing could feel more natural. In the same way, poetry and music have always been things I experience as part of the same continuum.

There are so many overlaps and marriages between poetry and music that I've never thought it useful to try to delineate where the crossover point is, whether a written line or a performance is a 'poem' or 'spoken word' or a 'rap' or a 'song'; all these speak to me in languages of which I have some understanding. All these use the ear to reach the mind and the heart. And

indeed the body, since medicine has discovered that some forms of thinking are located physically in the gut and the heart.

Poets often refer to 'the music' of poetry when they are asked about the process of how they write. At the Australian Poetry Centre Festival in Castlemaine in April, I witnessed a fascinating conversation between Judith Beveridge and Lorna Crozier, where they repeatedly described the manner in which the poem comes to them as 'music' – the music of word-sound – meanwhile making gestures in the air with their hands. Their gestures were intriguingly conductor-like, both sweeping and halting; in trying to describe the arrival of a poem, they seemed to be at the limits of language, and their hands instinctively began describing in the air something of the body's experience of poetry.

What was heartening for me in hearing this was the validation of the essential strangeness of a poem's coming. For all our work on technique, which does directly benefit the quality of our poetry, these eminent poets were describing a kind of humility: their shadowy, felt knowledge of how to give themselves over to a poem's arrival. Robert Adamson spoke of being in the middle of a poetry reading, performing a finished poem, and "suddenly realising what the poem was about. It's as if despite all the conscious work on craft, we still need someone else to come and tell us what it is that we've just done", he said. This is also my own experience.

These astonishingly late realisations of the core subject or meaning of the poem, and Lorna's description of how word-sound – assonance, consonance, alliteration – "pulls me forward", makes me wonder whether poets experience language more as sound than as meaning. Sound seems to be the hook on which we draw the poem out of the depths of an intuitive, formless grasp of the subject.

Certainly the meaning of words and of an overall poem is crucially important to us. But I'm not sure it can be the primary driver. I spoke also at the festival with poets whose work has a political edge. They often described this element as having to be sublimated during the writing, to avoid the poem becoming an essay, and that often the political 'message' was not the primary reason they were writing anyway.

US poet Sam Hamill, a large, grizzled pacifist, said he had torn up the political speech he had written for the festival's opening night "because the business of poetry is poetry. So I'll just read the poems."

I have been working for six weeks on a poem commissioned for the Sydney Writers Festival which has a set theme, Nightwriting. Normally, in writing my own (spontaneously arising) poems, I will start from a line or fragment of language which arrives either as sound – the words sound evocative or delicious together – or as a vivid image, to which I begin to attach words but

not meaning. I find it infinitely harder to write a poem where I am given a subject or brief.

During this project I have written notes for, and discarded, five poems, which all articulated the theme differently; none of them achieved 'lift-off', that critical mass of emotional and sonic impact through which a drafted poem lives or dies. My final draft, I hope, does have that impact, but it's been a long process of bouncing through different messages – and in the end I surprised myself by writing a love poem, with no consciousness of what the message was during the writing.

Sue Woolfe's fascinating book *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: a writer looks at obsession, creativity and neuroscience* recounts her investigations of this necessary subconsciousness of the message (and in this way, it is a balm for the writerly soul; I recommend it!)

This brings me to a discussion of the role of craft in poetry and music. Carl Rakosi contends that to the poet, "it is an endless wonder that music can achieve its effects without any words or visible devices of any kind: that its great power, in fact, comes from that fact." I ask myself, though, aren't there 'devices' in the writing of music, just as there are in creative writing?

While some of the process is sonically and subconsciously driven, it seems to me that to be a skilled poet or musician, one has to be knowledgeable about the range of 'devices' and their possible effects on the ear and the heart and mind of the listener.

It is true that all listeners interpret art in different ways. But there is a great palette of relative certainty of devices (otherwise none of us could communicate anything), and a great deal of the skill of accomplished poets and musicians lies in the way they use and choose from them. This is described by poets as 'clarity'.

Clarity doesn't mean a literal communication; it means a communication which is certain of itself, uncluttered by things which could distract or confuse the hearer. It is intentional use of everything. For a poet this is words, lineation, phrasing, and as Rakosi identifies, the use of silence; for a musician it is instrumentation, arrangement, and also the use of silence.

I wondered how my husband Kel comes to his writing, and how he experiences the mix of sonic or subconscious ideas plus the use of conscious devices.

"I don't depend on formulas", he said. "It starts with a melodic fragment, or a chord progression. Sometimes it's an emotional thing. The emotion of loss, I suppose, kind of drives my writing a fair bit. I know what sounds are associated with that emotion, and that is what I play upon."

“I’ve come to an understanding of particular dissonant harmonies, thick chord voicings and clusters, that I relate to emotionally. I’ve always, since going to the Conservatorium, had the head knowledge of how jazz harmonies work. But I’m still discovering the sounds I can use to get me closer to the emotion.”

This process of ‘still discovering’ led me to ask about skill and its role in the choice of devices.

“There are some pretty ordinary musicians who try to move you but leave you feeling empty and cold”, he said.

Rakosi says the poet must sneak around the cognitive expectations of language in order to reach the heart, or be blamed for manipulating the reader. But I (we!) think it’s just the same for musicians. Whether we humans listen to poetry or music, we hate emotional manipulation and artifice; but we love a skilful, emotion-rich ‘leading’ through the experience by its writer.

So poetry and music both arise from a numinous place of emotion, but require a lot of skill – years of hard slog at the craft – to render this accurately to an audience. Let’s stop looking at language as a burden on lyrical impulse, as though music had all the ease and freedom. And let’s focus – as Rakosi says – on the rich, inspiring correspondences and connections between writing poetry and writing music: definitely a marriage to love and to cherish.

Sue Woolfe. *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: a writer looks at obsession, creativity and neuroscience*. UWA, 2007