

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:

Our fourth *Zest* dialogue is from Adrienne Eberhard. Adrienne has published two collections of poetry, *Agamemnon’s Poppies* (Black Pepper, 2003), which was awarded second place in the Anne Elder Prize, and *Jane, Lady Franklin* (Black Pepper, 2004). She has a small selection of poetry, *Phosphorescence* (Picaro Press, 2005), published in the Wagtail series. Adrienne’s work has been shortlisted in the Newcastle Poetry Prize (2005 and 2007) and the ACT Alec Boulton Award (2006) for a manuscript of poetry, and she was runner-up in the 2003 Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize and the 2005 Wildcare/Island Nature Writing Prize. Adrienne has taught English and Creative Writing in schools for many years, but is currently writing full-time with the assistance of an Australia Council Grant. She lives on the D’Entrecasteaux Channel, south of Hobart with her husband and three young sons. Adrienne is a breast cancer survivor.

Poet in Prose: Sarah Maguire on the nature of poetry's 'labour'.

The 'self's concentration of itself into words' is achieved through metaphor. Using metaphor, the poet can transform elements which, in ordinary life, are kept apart, thus melding incidents and details together, ignoring ... as all good poets do - the logic of metonymical progression, the logic of separation. As John Berger puts it:

"Every authentic poem contributes to the labour of poetry ... to bring together what life has separated or violence torn apart ... Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labour of reassembling what has been scattered."

This, then, is poetry's labour: to bring together, carry, transfer pieces of language that have been torn apart, decontextualised and placed in different categories (subjective/objective; personal/political). And it does this through the figure of the intimate self (the invisible mender). A way of happening. A mouth.

'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen' in Herbert W.N. and Hollis, Matthew (eds) *Strong Words. Modern poets on modern poetry.* Bloodaxe, UK, 2000.

The Intimate Self/the Invisible Mender

by Adrienne Eberhard.

Sarah Maguire's descriptors, 'the intimate self' and 'the invisible mender' with which her quotation concludes, are terms that resonate strongly for me, building multiple images in my head. She uses them as metaphors for the processes at work in a successful poem, one of Berger's 'authentic poems'. I am immediately an eight year old child, embroidering a piece of blue cloth that I have carefully hemmed, with different coloured threads, to produce a picture of rabbits and flowers that will win first prize in the children's section of the local Show. While I enjoyed embroidery, I never developed the skill of my mother's nimble fingers, nor her mother's. They could both be described as 'invisible menders', but never me. I remember sewing a skirt in Year 8, not once referring to the pattern, producing a skirt that was a square with no waist.

When I started writing later, (something I also did as a child), I was a visible rather than an 'invisible mender'. Sometimes I still am; when the 'intimate self' is not transcended and so those polarities Maguire speaks of - subjective/objective or personal/political - cannot be transcended either. The problem for me, though, is I know I am not a mender at all; I don't think any poet is. In our writing, we can only ever attempt to mend our experience and understanding of the world. And if we are very lucky - perhaps the word

should be talented! - the poems we write will briefly repair the holes, the tears, the scatterings, the separations, so that for an instant, as the transaction between reader and poem takes place, the reader will inhabit a world made whole. Perhaps, this is a kind of epiphany.

My mother was my embroidery teacher and in some ways she was my first poetry teacher, reciting bits from Shakespeare and half-remembered poems from her childhood. I remember being transfixed by language, by the sound of the words, the rhythms, and the images that grew in my head. Much later, when I began to write seriously, Seamus Heaney was my teacher through my reading of his poems. Although I couldn't articulate why at the time, looking back I think it had to do with a number of vital things: his ability to invoke childhood from the great distance of adulthood without sentimentalising the former, to attempt to mend the gap; his ability to use language and metaphor in such ways that made the poems inhabit my body as I read them; and his way of anchoring his poems in the natural world, the landscapes of his childhood. For me, Heaney was a poet of place; the political and historical dimensions of his poetry simply played around the edges of my consciousness.

Poems like 'Personal Helicon' and 'Anahorish' spoke to me of a childhood defined by watery and green places, and they allowed an honouring of our personal pasts because of Heaney's ability to yoke the personal to something much greater than self. 'Personal Helicon' is unashamedly about the self; an exploration of the things that prompted the poet in Heaney; it's a recognition of the excitement to be found in hearing your own music, your own voice ('I rhyme/to see myself'), but its final words move beyond the personal to that which all poets and artists aspire: 'to set the darkness echoing'. Another way of attempting perhaps, to reassemble 'what has been scattered'.

Poetry is, I think, (and here I agree with both Berger and Maguire), an attempt to pull together the things life forces apart, but the poet has to achieve this unconsciously rather than consciously. Poets cannot set out to solve the problems of the world, we have to listen to the sound of language itself, to our own bodies, to our pasts, not just the dictates of the mind. Berger puts this very aptly when he says 'Poetry can repair no loss but it defines the space which separates'. (Hence, I think Maguire's term 'mender', while wonderful, is a mistaken one). This is the capacity of a poem to haunt while providing no answers; to say this is how things are without offering solutions: poems that attempt to mend, as well as show the unending inherent in the world. In one of Heaney's well-known poems, the recurrent joy and anticipation of blackberry picking is coupled with the attendant loss once the 'cache' starts to age - innocence and experience are inextricably linked. There is an attempt to mend and a tearing down happening simultaneously, and this is part of the poem's power. In Kathryn Lomer's 'I was once wood', the fragmentation of a woman's life after a broken relationship is emphasized by the image of the triptych that ends the poem: 'to the left a man/to the right

a woman/and between a child'. The broken is mended for a brief moment, and what is created is the prospect of wholeness, of possibility. The reason poems like this achieve such a fragile balance is as Maguire suggests, partly to do with the 'intimate self', but much more, I think, to do with metaphor and language. To paraphrase Glyn Maxwell, wisdom is not located in the self, but in the language. We should never underestimate the power of language, the power of metaphor; the song itself.

Adrienne Rich claims 'the divided condition of mind/sensation, flesh/spirit, sense splintered from sense is inimical to poetry . . .' and she speaks of being seduced from the writing of a lecture by the sound of a particular line of poetry: 'The light foot hears you and the brightness begins'. What Rich does as she listens over and over to this line in her head is 'not intellectualize . . . not explicate (but) listen to the liquidity of language' and she underscores this with, 'a poem emerges as language . . .'

In poems that work, 'authentic poems', things separate are brought together, the attempt to mend is underway, but the reader is made aware of how tenuous this moment is, the miraculous nature of the moment, and it is language that leads us there: the music of language, the way vowels wind their breath in and out of our hearing, the way consonants stand straight, the way sibilance bends, sways and slides in our heads and in our sight, and how these patterns play in our bodies and heads simultaneously. Thought cannot be separated from feeling.

At the beginning of her quotation, Maguire speaks of the self's 'concentration of itself into words' - a Roald Dahl image pops into my head of a machine squeezing the body and the head into a thin, toothpaste-stream of language - and claims this is achieved through metaphor. I believe Maguire is right. That in the beginning was metaphor. This is what enables us to see the potential of the world, to make the imaginative leaps necessary to know what it is to be truly human.

The poet's eye and ear are 'the mouth' that Maguire refers to at the very end of her quotation. By listening acutely, and by seeing one thing as something else, we start to bridge the chasm, to make connections, to move from separateness to wholeness. This is why Maguire refutes the 'logic of metonymical progression'; the use of something already closely related to the thing being described, cannot achieve the same results. What metaphor does is rewire the universe, or our experience of it, through the unexpected or electric connections it creates.

My little boy keeps interrupting me as I write this, wanting to 'caddle me' as he pronounces it. As he does so, the wind picks up and he notices big waves with white caps surging past outside the window. 'See the white horses galloping past,' I say to him. He responds, 'No Mummy, they not horses, they bridges in the water,' and I suddenly see the white foam and crests entirely

differently, as paths across the turbulent water, connecting rather than dividing.

This is the potential of metaphor. This is the potential of poetry: ‘ . . . a questing towards what might otherwise be’ (Rich), ‘ a glimpsed alternative, a world to which we turn incessantly and with out knowing it’ (Heaney).

Sources:

Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (Faber & Faber, 1995)

Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems 1965 - 1975* (Faber& Faber, 1980)

Kathryn Lomer, *Extraction of Arrows* (Uni of Queensland Press, 2003)

Glyn Maxwell in Neil Astley (ed.) *Staying Alive* (Bloodaxe, 2002)

Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There* (W.W. Norton, 2003)