

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 **Paul Hetherington**. Paul lives in Canberra. He has published eight volumes of poetry, most recently *It Feels Like Disbelief* (Salt, 2007). His poems have been widely published in a variety of countries, including the USA, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Japan, and have been recognised with a number of awards. He was a finalist in the 1993 Antipodes Poetry Contest (USA), has twice been shortlisted for both the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Australian Capital Territory’s Poetry Award and was winner of the 1996 ACT Book of the Year Award (for *Shadow Swimmer*) and the 1997 ANUTECH Poetry Prize. He was awarded a Chief Minister’s ACT Creative Arts Fellowship in 2002 and shortlisted for the 2003 Western Australian Premier’s Book Awards, the 2003 Colin Roderick Award and the Manning Clark House 2006 National Cultural Awards.

Paul is a member of the Board of *Australian Book Review* and is a former member of the Editorial Board of *Conversations*, published by the Australian National University. Paul has been director of publishing at the National Library since 1994. Currently Chair of the ACT Cultural Council and the ACT Public Art Expert Advisory Panel, he was one of the founders and is former Chair of the ACT Writers' Centre and is a former Deputy Chair of the ACT's Word Festival. He has twice been a member of the ACT Cultural Council's Literature Committee and has four times chaired the ACT Festival Fund Committee.

Poet in Prose: Denise Levertov on form, and on poets as 'instruments'.

I believe poets are instruments on which the power of poetry plays. But they are also makers, craftsmen ...I believe every space and comma is a living part of the poem and has its function, just as every muscle and pore of the body has its function. And the way the lines are broken is a functioning part essential to the poem's life.

I believe content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only in form. Like everything living, it is a mystery. The revelation of form itself can be a deep joy; yet I think form as means should never obtrude, whether from intention or carelessness, between the reader and the essential force of the poem, it must be so fused with that force.

Denise Levertov, 'I believe poets are instruments' (1960). Extract from Herbert W.N. and Hollis, Matthew (eds.) *Strong Words: Modern poets on modern poetry*. Bloodaxe: Northumberland, 2000.

LEVERTOV AND FORM

by Paul Hetherington

Levertov's comments — in particular, her assertions that 'content is discovered only in form' and that 'Like everything living, it is a mystery' — go to the heart of an issue crucial to the writing of poetry: the nature and importance of form. Form in poetry is still often discussed in terms of the dichotomy between so-called formalism and so-called free verse. Yet such matters, interesting and important as they are, can sometimes obscure the deep significance of poetic form by focusing on various — and sometimes fairly superficial — aspects of poetic technique rather than on the complex issue of how individual poems function as unique embodiments of poetic expression.

In considering poetic form, people often concentrate on whether a particular poem uses metre or rhyme, or is broken into stanzas, or employs

enjambment. These are fascinating and instructive issues. They are ways of working out key aspects of what a poet is doing in his or her writing and how he or she constructs and understands the superstructure of any given poem. Yet these, and a host of related issues, do not in themselves have a great deal to say about the nature of poetry. Poems which are apparently 'free' can achieve an impressive sense of architecture while apparently 'formal' poems can seem light, casual, throwaway, even blithe. This is because particular, easily recognisable poetic techniques are only a part of any poem's overall effect.

The fact is that all poems have form, even those that try to make a virtue of a kind of meandering across the page (indeed, such poems can be more self-consciously engaged with formal issues than many poems written in conventional metre). The successful poem is one in which content and form — to the extent that these elements can ever be separated — unite in achieving whatever can be said to be 'poetic'; when the message and means of a poem are fully integrated. Such poems are almost always something of a surprise and they tend to provoke from a reader some version of the statement: 'that is extraordinary', or some question such as 'how did he or she do that?' Yet the answer to such a question can never be fully articulated because there is no stable analytical ground on which to deconstruct a successful poem.

All attempts to isolate or specify a successful poem's meanings reduce the resonant tunefulness that characterises the interplay of poetic language. Poems are continually reinventing themselves as they simultaneously interact with the subjectivity of individual readers and the ever-evolving forces of the *Zeitgeist*. Successful poems — like other successful works of art — are defiant of analysis because they do not exist as single, stable and definable entities. Pick apart a successful poem and it is no longer that poem; no longer tuned in to the flow and flux of the language (and associated layers of meaning) which allowed its creation and which continue to allow its poetic character. Translate or rewrite a poem and its intrinsic majesty and mystery are compromised.

Levertov's own approach to poetic form tended to combine a sinuous and engaging line with careful control over line length and line breaks. Her poems seem carefully made, even hard won, despite the sometimes casual airs that they adopt. I like this about her work; a sense that what is spontaneous and what is crafted are working hand in hand; that she cares both about the way a poem flows and the way it is controlled; that she is able to produce formally satisfying works that speak immediately to her readers, achieving a natural-seeming cogency. Levertov was a fine artist partly because she understood that apparent informality in poetry frees the reader from that sometimes disabling sense that a poem is a self-conscious work of art. Her apparent relaxation in her work helps to create a sense of dynamism and openness.

Which brings me to her comment that ‘poets are instruments on which the power of poetry plays’. This remark is reminiscent of Keats’ famous observation about Negative Capability — which is, as he wrote, ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Keats’ formulation begs as many questions as it answers, but both Keats and Levertov emphasise a crucial aspect of poetic creation. Poems often seem to happen to, or on, or about the poet, as if the poet were a receptacle for the poem’s self-creation. Our culture may no longer believe that poems are dictated by a Muse but we know that rational and analytical modes of writing are often an impediment to poetry. Rather, poems frequently come from somewhere outside of the poet’s ken; they can be as mysterious as the arrival of manna after dew. I think it is true to suggest that the more conscious work of poets is often a tuning-in or tuning-up; a way of preparing themselves for the state of being-played-upon that is poetry’s arrival.

Levertov adds that poets ‘are also makers’ and here she invokes an idea that is part of the meaning of the word ‘poetry’: poems are made things; their raw material is fashioned, shaped, crafted, forged, massaged or re-configured. Whatever the metaphor might be, it says that the material resulting from the mysterious process of being-played-upon is subsequently consciously crafted and communicated. The metaphor here might be of the poet as midwife or, perhaps more appropriately, of the poet as parent, nurturing and finishing the raw nascency of art. This is the process where each comma and space, and each semantic gesture, matters.

Poetry is a continuous dialogue between what is yet to come into being and what has arrived and needs shaping. In terms of poetic activity, the finished (or abandoned) poem matters much less, because it has escaped the process of waiting for poetry and the process of making poetry. But, at its best, it is the finished poem that says most about the poet’s art for the reasons that Levertov articulates. Such a poem has played upon, and in turn been played upon by, the poet. It is tuned-in, resonant and attentive.