

# IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

*Edited by Robyn Rowland*

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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.

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## **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.’

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Our third *Zest* dialogue is from **Bronwyn Lea**. Bronwyn is Series Editor, with Martin Duwell, of University of Queensland Press’s annual *Best Australian Poetry* anthology and the author of *Flight Animals* (UQP 2001), which won the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for Poetry, the Fellowship of Australian Writers Anne Elder Award, and was shortlisted for a number of other major prizes. Since 2003 she has served as Poetry Editor at the University of Queensland Press. She lives in Brisbane and lectures in Poetics and Narrative at the University of Queensland.

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**Poet in Prose: Adrienne Rich on ‘something happening.’**

From 'Poetry and experience: statement at a poetry reading'. In Adrienne Rich's *Poetry and Prose* (Norton Critical Editions) Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (Eds.). Norton: New York, 1993, pp 165-66.

*Like the novelist who finds that his characters begin to have a life of their own and to demand certain experiences, I find that I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan: the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses. Without for one moment turning my back on conscious choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea. Perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it. In my earlier poems I told you, as precisely and eloquently as I knew how, about something; in the more recent poems something is happening, something has happened to me and if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it.*

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## THE POETIC EXPERIENCE

*by Bronwyn Lea*

The opening sentence to this paragraph, if we visit its source, says: 'Today, I have to say that what I know I know through making poems.' I'm not sure I could stand behind such a strong statement without qualifying it, but I do think Adrienne Rich points to something important. For myself, the poem is the prime means through which I think. And indeed discover things. Things I didn't know I knew. As Montaigne observed: 'I don't know what I think until I've written it.' Without the poem I tend to stumble through days. I say the wrong things. Draw the incomplete conclusion. The poem's ability to awaken me to the world helps me to grasp the secret hidden in things. And it helps me to grasp, however dimly, the secret in myself.

The poem is one of the best ways I know to access the poetic experience. I think this is what Rich is alluding to when she describes the act of writing a poem as 'an experience' that contributes both to her knowledge and emotional life. Perhaps easier to recognise than to define, the poetic experience seems to be that strange state in which we are occupied by a curiously keen but delicate attention to sense and place and we open to perspectives wider than our own. Les Murray's conception of 'narrowpeak' and 'wholespeak', despite our reticence in admitting to such mystical concepts, highlights an important difference between purely rational activity on the one hand and, on the other, a state of awareness in which rationality as well as the emotions and gestures of the body - most directly seen in the patterns of the breath - come together in an inclusive and powerful harmony.

‘There is no poem without poetic experience,’ Jacques Maritain writes. Not all would agree - highly intellectualised schools of poetry reject such ideas as superstitious or as attempts to glamorise the art - but I do. While all good poems engage the intellect, the poems I like best eventually disengage it, making space for something beyond the rational.

In this view, a poem is not simply an object but an event in time. It is an encounter, a coming together, an engagement. I love to think of the poem lying supine on the page until the reader comes along and breathes it into life through the act of reading and reacting. The poem offers not simply the bond of empathy between poet and reader, but attempts the bond of mutuality. In this way, the poem provides a passageway to a new relationship between poet and reader in which both can coexist in the poem. It offers us words that speak to ways of being that we can use to refresh our sense of self and our position in the world. We profit from the poet’s willingness to revisit moments of consequence, to settle into sites of extreme emotion - love, pain, loss, joy - for as long as is necessary to shape them into language. What the poet returns with, when he or she does the job well, is often startling, and simply by repeating the words our reality is changed. It is in these moments that the writing transcends self-expression and enters the realm of communication.

For my part, I hope that my poems might give to their reader some of what my favourite poets have given to me: an upturned secret, a wider view, a shot at freedom and the pleasure that such an unfettering offers. I also hope they might provide access to the thoughts and feelings I had when writing them. I’m happy to sit - or walk or drive as the case may be - and contemplate things that may turn out to be useful to others who are busy contemplating other things that might be useful to me. Poetic contemplation might not get people to the moon, as Newton’s contemplation of the falling of the apple eventually did, but it might help us to live life fuller, or deeper, or brighter than otherwise experienced. It offers a different kind of knowledge. Of course such outward, effect-directed intention risks being self-defeating in the writing process, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen from time to time.

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### Works referenced

Maritain, Jacques. ‘Poetic Experience’. *The Review of Politics* 6. 4 (October, 1944): 387-402.

Murray, Les. ‘Embodiment and Incarnation.’ *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*. Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997. 309-25.