

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 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 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 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: Stephen Edgar

Stephen Edgar lives in Sydney, where he was born, though for many years he lived in Hobart. He has published six collections of poetry, the most recent being *Other Summers* (Black Pepper 2006). His previous book, *Lost in the Foreground* (2003), won the Grace Leven Poetry Prize and William Baylebridge Memorial Prize for 2004. He won the inaugural Australian Book Review Poetry Prize in 2005, and in 2006 was awarded the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal for literature. He is a former poetry editor of the Tasmanian literary quarterly *Island*, for which he continues to work as subeditor. His other books are *Queuing for the Mudd Club* (1985), *Ancient Music* (1988), *Corrupted Treasures* (1995) and *Where the Trees Were* (1999). A new collection of poetry, *History of the Day*, is forthcoming in 2009.

Poet in Prose: William Carlos Williams

'*On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman 1954*'. In Herbert W.N. and Hollis, Matthew (eds) *Strong Words. Modern poets on modern poetry*. Bloodaxe, UK, 2000

We must invent new modes to take the place of those that are worn out. For want of this we have gone back to worn-out modes with our tongues hanging out and our mouths drooling after "beauty" which is not even in the same category under which we are seeking it. Whitman, great as he was in his instinctive drive, was also the cause of our going astray. I among the rest have much to answer for, No verse can be free, it must be governed by some measure, but not the same old measure. There Whitman was right, but there at the same time, his leadership failed him. The time was not ready for it. We have to return to some measure but a measure consonant with our time and not a mode so rotten that it stinks.

We have no measure by which to guide ourselves except a purely intuitive one which we feel but do not name. I am not speaking of verse which has long been frozen into a rigid mould signifying its death, but of verse which shows that it has been touched with some dissatisfaction with its present state. It is all over the page at the mere whim of the man who composed it. This will not do. Certainly an art which implies a discipline as the poem does, a rule, a measure, will not tolerate it. There is no measure to guide us, no recognisable measure.

Relativity gives us the cue. So, again, mathematics comes to the rescue of the arts. Measure, an ancient word in poetry, something we have forgotten in its literal significance as something measured, becomes related again with the poetic. We have today to do with the poetic, as always, but a relatively stable foot, not a rigid one. That is all the difference.

Stephen Edgar's Response

I remember in first year high school, when we had to make decisions about the subjects we would choose the following year, the Latin teacher made a pitch for our vote. One boy was rash enough to ask, "What is the use of studying a dead language?" The teacher, not surprisingly stung by the remark, replied with something along the lines of, "Any language is dead as long as there are deadheads like you speaking it." I am tempted to reply to William Carlos Williams that any mode is worn out as long as... but I shall refrain from that line of argument. I'm not interested in polemic.

The pre-eminent, indeed the only, law in art is that you can't lay down the law. Whatever rules or conditions you care to set forth, someone with sufficient talent and originality can break or disregard them and still produce excellent art. So alarm bells went off when I read this quotation from WCW with "must" as its second word. It turns out that the whole essay from which this quotation is drawn is considerably less dogmatic than these words would lead you to believe. Indeed it has an air of exasperation, of tether's end. The old measures are no longer valid. Free verse has led us astray. We need new measures of some kind but precisely what they are WCW is at a loss to say. That we need "a relatively stable foot, not a rigid one" is about as definite as he can be.

Poetry, as Housman reminded us in his lecture "The Name and Nature of Poetry", is not the thing said but a way of saying it. Presumably poetic "measures", as Williams calls them, metres, whether quantitative or accentual or syllabic, go back to a time before writing and constituted a mnemonic device for the poet or reciter. They also no doubt indicate the former presence of musical accompaniment and they remain one way of imparting musicality to poetry. Are they necessary once poetry is committed to the page rather than the memory and is spoken rather than sung? They are probably neither necessary nor unnecessary. They remain one possible mode. The advent of free verse has enlarged the range of possibilities in poetry, but to

argue that it has rendered earlier modes obsolete is reductive. Poetry resides in the way language is used—in striking, fresh, intense, moving language—whatever the framework. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that T S Eliot, that high priest of Modernist poetry, used both metre and rhyme at various times throughout his life and that Wallace Stevens too composed much of his poetry in a rigorous iambic pentameter. All art is artificial. All poetry shapes experience. Poetry which mimics casual conversation is not in fact casual conversation; it is in its own way as artificial as a villanelle.

WCW stresses the need for “verse of a new construction to conform with our age”, some measure “consonant with our time”. I remember Vikram Seth being interviewed some years ago about his verse novel *The Golden Gate*, which is written in the elaborately rhymed and metrical form of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. He was asked whether he didn’t think that such formality was inappropriate to a century as marked by violence and chaos as the twentieth. Human violence and chaos seem to me to be a constant throughout history. The twentieth century may have provided “advances” in scale and technology but the quality of violence and chaos is no different. Think of Tamburlaine with his walls built of living captives; think of the Thirty Years’ war. If Homer and Aeschylus, Virgil and Shakespeare could encompass them in “the old measures”, it may be asked how they abruptly became inadequate in the twentieth century. I also recall a poem being read at a workshop I attended many years ago; after all this time I can no longer remember who wrote it but it concerned a fight in a prison yard and one prisoner being stabbed to death. “Ah shit, fuck,” he groans as he collapses. “Now what could assonance or consonance or even rhyme do to a thing like that?” the poem concludes. This is the counsel of despair; a poet who feels that the resources of poetry are inadequate to the harshest realities of life is in the wrong game. Hasn’t he read *King Lear*? Well, the answer is that assonance and consonance and rhyme and metre could do a lot to a thing like that, if a formalist poet had a mind to tackle such a subject. Anthony Hecht’s “More Light! More Light!” is one reply to this poet’s question.

“No verse can be free, it must be governed by some measure...” Well, it must be governed by something, and it is the task of every poet to discover the governing principle of their work. Make up your own rules, said Wagner, and stick to them. “[B]ut not the same old measures.” Are they the same old measures? Can a man go down to the same measure twice? I’m reminded of Borges’s satirical story “*Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*”. Menard, a nineteenth-century Frenchman, sets himself the task of rewriting Cervantes’ work word for word, and succeeds. But, as Borges remarks with astonishment, “the contrast in style is...vivid.” In different centuries the same measures will have different characters. Frost’s blank verse is quite different in character from Wordsworth’s, which is different from Milton’s.

Make up your own rules, and stick to them. Stick to them, at least, unless and until you have good and well thought-out reasons to change them. Live and let live, I say, and I’m happy for other poets to write in whatever mode they like—as long, of course, as they don’t do it unthinkingly. It is important too that you find the mode that is suited to your own sensibilities and temperament. In my own case, I thought long and hard about these matters almost from the moment I began writing poetry at the age of fifteen. Almost from the moment, but not quite; I did in fact begin unthinkingly and poured out quantities of free verse for some months, poems without measure of any kind, until I began to hanker after some more disciplined way of composing. WCW at one point mentions Dylan Thomas “thrashing around somewhere in the wings but he is Welsh and acknowledges no rules—he cannot be of much help to us”. This is throwaway nonsense. Thomas acknowledged all manner of rules in his poetry, if not in his life, and he was of enormous help to me, although I admit he can be a dangerous influence and was possibly not the ideal model for a poet starting out in Australia in 1968, of all years.

By close imitation of Thomas in my adolescence I taught myself in a matter of months how to handle highly complex forms. He wrote mainly, though not exclusively, syllabic verse and for someone like me, who as yet had no skill in traditional metres but knew how to count, this was a good way into measures. After a few years, further thought led me to lose faith in syllabic verse; I began to doubt that it was suited to the character of English verse, not, at any rate, when combined with a strong sense of rhythm, because it had a tendency to turn into metrical verse by default. So after some consideration I turned to a kind of sprung rhythm, or accentual verse, in which only major stresses were counted in the determination of line length and the number of unstressed syllables could expand or contract to suit the rhythm. But this too in time seemed unsatisfactory, since there was no guarantee that the reader’s tally of stressed syllables would match mine. It was at this time, in the mid 1980s, that I committed myself finally to metrical verse, which, WCW sternly asserts, cannot any longer be made. I did not seriously consider abandoning closed forms because I knew enough about myself to realize that they were best suited to my particular talent.

WCW speaks rather bafflingly about “our mouths drooling after ‘beauty’”. Earlier in the piece he says: “poems cannot any longer be made following a Euclidean measure, ‘beautiful’ as this may make them.” The precise connotation of the quotation marks is unclear. There are different kinds of beauty. Sensuous beauty (“With jellies soother than the creamy curd,/ And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon”) is, of course, not always what poets are after; they may in fact want ugliness, at times. Mathematicians often speak of the beauty of a formula or a theory, and this seems to be to do with elegance, symmetry, aptness. WCW’s remarks about Euclid seem to disparage this kind of beauty too. But art must have aesthetic appeal of some kind or why would we bother with it? Art which is totally rebarbative, which is 360-degree ugly, will lose its audience.

Obviously poetry needs constant renewal. Each poet needs to strive for that with each new poem. Periodically revolutions on a larger scale are needed. But it often happens that when things settle down, some of the furniture that was thrown out of the windows is quietly retrieved through the door and put to further use.