

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 poet’s 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: Tracy Ryan

Tracy Ryan was born and grew up in Western Australia. She has published five full-length collections of poetry in Australia, all with Fremantle Press, as well as two in Britain, with Bloodaxe and Arc. Her most recent book of poems is *Scar Revision* (2008). She spent several years living in England, where in 1998 she was a Judith E. Wilson Junior Visiting Fellow in writing at Robinson College, Cambridge University, and where she was a joint winner of the Poems on the Underground competition. In Australia her awards include the Mattara Poetry Prize (1987) and the Western Australian Premier’s Prize for Poetry (2000), as well as the Trudy Graham Award for memoir (2007). She is also the author of three novels, the latest of which, *Sweet*, will be launched in late 2008. She is currently on a two-year writing grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and completing a new book of poems.

Poet in Prose: Mebh McGuckian

‘There is no feminine in eternity....’

Mebh McGuckian, in *Delighting the heart. A notebook by Women Writers*, ed Susan Sellers, The Womens' Press, London, 1989

*Poetry concerns taboos. Poetry is what we are not allowed to talk about. A poem boils out of a specific occasion, a state of mind, a poem is an occasion of sin. When I look at the trickle of women's poetry, I am drowned in the immensity and grandeur of male surnames. I prefer to hold on to Virginia setting *The Waste Land* in type, absorbing and disgorging Joyce. That is more satisfying than deifying Plath and Dickinson, it's like Alice James choosing to die in England. I touch the foetal body of women's poetry like a tear in the human ocean. Did any of them in their time sufficiently surmount their gender to make a single universal poetic statement? Whereas when Eliot said, 'We are the hollow men', women were automatically included, or when Yeats said, 'A man must choose / Perfection of the life or of the work', women were automatically excluded. I have to live under this mountain and try to belong to it without becoming narrow or jealous, to be eternally grateful to Milton without being deluged into silence, to continue what women have begun without succumbing to the inevitable real or ritual self-immolation. Far from being comfortable, it is hazardous, the woman artist because of her ambition, treads a lonely and treacherous path. I have only to quote Isadora Duncan, in her autobiography:*

My life has known but two motives – Love and Art – often Love destroyed Art, and often the imperious call of Art put a tragic end to Love. For those two have no accord but only constant battle.

Tracy Ryan's Response

Medbh McGuckian's piece, whose wider context I haven't read, is so full of spurs to both sympathy and irritation that I hardly know where to begin a dialogue. So I'll pick one comment at random.

She's talking about earlier stereotypes of the 19th-century bluestocking, or in the 20th century, the single woman or lesbian poet, and how they seem limiting or less accurate as representative images now:

"Motherhood, as it has become less of a risk in general, seems to me not only not incompatible with poetry, but the necessary prelude to it."

Where could we begin to untangle this astonishing assertion? "Not only not incompatible"... This maze of mutually cancelling negatives exists because of a long tradition, of course, insisting that one's responsibilities as a mother come into direct conflict with writing. We think of Sylvia Plath alone after her rupture with Ted Hughes, sitting up at night to get the poems written: we spin myths about the tension between babies and "Art", when the luxuries of art production are actually in conflict with most ordinary aspects of life, such as the need to get a living, unless one is already wealthy or so fortunate as to make an adequate living from the art itself...

If we reverse the gender of the statement, we see just how overstated it is: *fatherhood* as the necessary prelude to writing poetry? It's hard to imagine anyone ever setting parenthood as a qualification for "male poets"... And what about women who don't have children; does that mean they can't ever "make the grade" as poets? McGuckian here goes too far for me, in her attempt to valorise what has been looked down on.

There's conflict on every level of life, whatever your gender, between the wish to sit down and write, or daydream toward writing – and the duties you owe others in your personal or public life. But we tend to play this conflict down when it's men, and to emphasise it when it's women, as if art were that much “harder” for women... The problem for women, to my mind, is not so much in what “motherhood”, or other responsible roles, take from their writing, as in *people's attitudes to it*. For women, motherhood or otherwise will be seen as a defining characteristic, where for men the equivalent is not the case.

When I write, the actual physical facts of motherhood *do* affect my time, my headspace, my clarity. If the children are sick, for example, I am so anxious and paranoid that I don't bother trying to write. Poetry goes on hold, even if they are sleeping. I need to be 100% on deck. That's my particular temperamental style of parenting. But this might be true for a father, too – only not so expected of him, of course, in the wider culture. It isn't because I'm female.

However, if a female writer put poetry before her children's health or welfare, she would probably be judged more severely for this than the *many* male writers who have done just that... Rousseau dumping his children in an orphanage, or Rilke leaving his baby daughter after only a few months; and these are only two examples. “Posterity” seems not to qualify their greatness or interpret their writings through this, as would probably happen if they were women.

But we shouldn't take some sort of lead from their neglect, as if that produced their great work. And who cares what “posterity” thinks anyway? Women have spent altogether too much time and energy worrying about that – there are bigger issues facing us all. And if we want to write, we have to do it for ourselves, make the opportunities, defy the restrictive standards, and not squabble about whether some larger idea of a canon allows us to squeeze in or not – it plays the games it chooses.

Motherhood affects the content of my writing – but not excessively so, and no more than other aspects of my life. Yet I've noticed that for the poet who happens to be a woman, critics will often try to narrow her work down to aspects that seem to reiterate her femaleness. In a book of say, sixty poems, there might be only three about personal relationships (so readily classed as feminine!); or maybe five short poems about her children, her mothering, in a book of eighty other pages – but a reviewer or critic will say, “This is a confessional work” or “This is a book about motherhood” and so on.

Even where the reviewer might mean these terms as a nice little acknowledgement, they are used to *reduce*. It's as if there's a predetermined gender-grid through which to read you. If a man writes poems about flowers, it might be assumed, for instance, he's invoking Baudelaire and a whole discourse arising since *Les Fleurs du mal*. But if a woman does, it must be because she likes gardening, and probably wears floral dresses. She's just twee. She can't help it.

Okay, I'm deliberately and sarcastically overstating (like McGuckian?) to make a point.

“Did any of them in their time,” McGuckian muses, of women, “sufficiently surmount their gender to make a single universal poetic statement?”

Did any men? Who decides what’s universal? Isn’t the problem here the whole idea that we have to “surmount” our gender? Why can’t we write from within the specifics that constitute (and unmake) us? What is a gender anyway, and how many of them are there?

So my problem as a woman writer, if I have one, is more to do with people’s attitudes than to do with my immediate, at-hand “female” experience. I happen to have a supportive male partner who is also a poet – I am sure this must be the case for at least *some* other women too – and we are not competitive or mutually destructive with regard to our writing. (Yes, there have been poet-marriages or partnerships that were time-bombs – but why do these cases define the norm? Why do we set ourselves the lowest standard as our expectation?)

It’s become a cringe-inducing cliché for people socially, and in interviews, to ask women who write poetry, and especially perhaps those who have children, “... and are you getting time for your writing?” – usually said in a low voice as if “in confidence”.

This may be sincere, but I suspect it has become phatic, on a level with “how are you?” – we don’t really want to hear about the person’s health! In the past, of course, women *have* had to fight to be seen as entitled to writing space, writing time. I have inherited an assumption of that entitlement. I don’t wish to diminish what the fight entailed, and I consider myself strongly feminist. (I wrote a short book of experimental poems, *bloc notes*, published by Equipage in Britain, that looks at all these issues.)

But when McGuckian mentions wanting to avoid “succumbing to the inevitable real or ritual self-immolation”, something in me balks: why is it inevitable? What’s this self-immolation business? I didn’t sign on for that. The infamous suicides of some of the best English-language poets of the twentieth century, who also happened to be women, did not happen because of some tension between Love and Art for the female artist, but because of the tragic illnesses and circumstances of those individuals. Many don’t “self-immolate”, but we take no notice.

What a female poet faces these days – at least in places where, as McGuckian puts it, motherhood is “less of a risk in general”, and where women are less constrained to enter marriage out of economic dependency – is mostly the reader “taking no notice”. This might be because of the prejudicial reading patterns I indicated above – the predetermined grid, the male or male-brained reader who simply doesn’t “hear” what a woman might be saying, or discounts it if they do hear it (think of Joanna Russ’s wonderful encapsulations of how women’s writing is explained away: “She didn’t write it... She wrote it, but she shouldn’t have... She wrote it, but look what she wrote about... She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it... She wrote it, but she isn’t really an artist, and it isn’t really art... She wrote it, but she had help...” and so on).

The “isn’t really art” category returns me to what McGuckian says about taboo, and to how women’s poetry has often been decried for looking at female realities (Dickey, himself not immune to writing about disgusting, things, condemning Sexton: “It

would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience” – and yet one of the poems at issue [pardon the pun], “Menstruation at Forty”, seems incredibly tame by contemporary standards; wait till we get to Sharon Olds!

McGuckian notes: “I’d like to see honest, genuine, moving, memorable, quotable, accurate poems in English about women’s pleasure and pain.” Critical understanding of women’s poetry might still have a long way to go, but it’s certainly no longer hard to find those poems, either in Australia or elsewhere.