

DE-LYRICISING THE LYRIC?

A response to David McCooley's 'new lyricism'.

Robyn Rowland (c)

published in **Blue Dog. Australian Poetry Vol 4 No 8 pp 69-78.**

'the poet asserts'

*(all indented quotes from Alison Croggon's poem, 'On lyric')**

In his analysis of contemporary Australian poetry, Grant Caldwell wrote of the richness, the range, the complexity and diversity of this body of work. 'It seems to me,' he wrote, that 'in Australia - the youngest and the oldest continent, the most ethnically diverse - the diversity, the eclecticism is partly the most remarkable distinction.' (2004:55) David McCooley's article in **Blue Dog (vol4, no.7)** on the 'new lyricism' in Australian poetry (2005) seemed, in contrast, to constrict that range in its attempt to include a limited number of diverse poets under the one banner of a 'new lyricism'. I found this construction confusing and artificial. As it was simultaneously published in the Australian issue of **Agenda Poetry** in England, I wanted to respond to this because as Martin Harrison writes: 'The working languages of criticism remain now no less than previously the meta-languages which define what writing is, including what a poetry and its poetics are'. (2004: 20)

McCooley argues that 'contemporary poetry' demonstrates how it renews itself by 'writing against "the habits and visions" of poetry itself while seeking effects central to the poetic' (64), which I think echoes a statement of John Kinsella's (1999) that 'innovation has mainly come within the traditions of the "lyrical I" poem - working within or against the lyrical and/or narrative structure'. Discussing Martin Harrison's analysis that self and place continue to preoccupy Australian poets, McCooley argues that this can be seen rather as a 'worldliness', i.e. in my understanding of it, a poetry that references or refers to other cultures and/or concerns itself with translation. McCooley argues that there 'could be other, less thematic, elements that could be equally illustrative of current Australian poetry. Two tropes that are not thematic and might not even seem to be about Australian Poetry at all (sic) come to mind: the uncanny and a form of lyricism that is simultaneously a reinvigoration of the lyric mode and a critique of it. Together these three tropes - 'worldliness, the uncanny and lyricism - comprise what I will term, perhaps portentously, "the new lyricism"'.(66) I did not find the uncanny' to be a very useful category, as McCooley notes that it lacks definition: 'the uncanny has to do with strangeness, eeriness. But to define it is paradoxical, since it is also about a troubling of definitions.' (67) This confusion is exacerbated by the lack of clarity or usefulness of terms such as a 'post-poetic condition' and a 'post-revolutionary' condition in poetry.

Mc Cooley gathers together under this 'new lyricism' poets as diverse as Judith Beveridge, Michael Farrell, Emma Lew, Kate Fagan, Kate Lilley, and Jordie Albiston, yet a number of the poets listed emerge from/ relate to, language or avant garde poetry. Thus the 'new lyricism' both ignores their contribution to their own form of resistance to established lyric poetry, while at the same time making current lyric poetry invisible. If lyric poetry's intention is to strike towards the heart, using the transformative power of metaphor with the cadence of musicality; and the resistance to this creates a poetry that often distances the reader with its abstractions and language play, then neither forms are well served by being lumped together. He lays stress on poets drawn from an anthology that represented poets writing from the 1990's - *Calyx: 30 contemporary Australian poets*: 'It is interesting' he writes, 'to see how many of the Calyx poets are currently central to contemporary Australian poetry', yet not all the poets listed have work in the current *Best Australian Poetry 2005* and *Best Australian Poems 2004*. Its representation might also be skewed, as Michael Sharkey asked in his review of this book: 'is it an accident that almost two-thirds of the poets in *Calyx* (subtitled *30 Contemporary Australian Poets*) happen to live in its state of origin.' (2002:69) 'Central' is a difficult and perhaps not a useful concept.

Confusion over the terminology used by McCooley might act politically to diffuse/deny current lyrical work, redefining lyricism away from the lyric impulse and towards language poetry. Martin Harrison has disagreed with this single-category approach before, arguing against McCooley's essay in the Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature, which, Harrison says, states 'the necessity to invent a new "generation" to explain what has happened in recent poetry publishing.' Harrison makes the point that it is easy to categorise poets as a 'new generation' burying them in a contemporariness 'which knows only that each generation is the latest generation' losing the possibility of relationship to other ways of grouping poets in relation to Australia's particular poetic history (rather than American or British borrowings). This sort of "single level explanation" ... 'narrows the possible field of connections in which poetry can be seen to operate ...' (2004:71)

I felt this also applied to the 'new lyricism' categorisation. Contrary to this comfortable amalgam of poets, it seems to me that a primary issue arising consistently in Australia is an attack on lyricism, particularly the work that is accessible. The most contentious aspect is what is often referred to as the 'lyrical I', though in practice this 'I' is often confessional, political, spiritual, and domestic as well. There is within this, a disagreement about the value of lyric poetry versus language poetry and those debates revolve around the form used, its political intent, and its relation to the audience/reader as well as the academic canon. They relate also to differences of opinion about what is 'good' poetry.

'lyric is the same question as "i am"'

Douglas Barbour in Jacket reviewing the poets in the Calyx anthology, noted the dominance of their revolving relationship to the 'I': 'If there are conversations, there are also arguments, & I applaud the editors for allowing an eclectic blend of differing poetics to play across these pages. Some of these poets ... use the 'I' in what appear to be fairly conventional lyric or narrative ways. Others ... seem to hold the 'I' in their poems up to question. Other, still ... almost seem to ignore it, at least as a sign of identity assumed or dropped. Readers may find themselves connecting poems, sans reference to the names of the poets, in terms of how stable or slippery their voiced 'I's appear.'(2001) Quite a preoccupation it seems.

'it is attacked for its glorification of the self although lyric doesn't have a self'

I want to consider briefly the terms that McCooley has laid down. If we are looking at a 'new lyricism' we need to understand what the 'old' one was. I do not want to go back to its origin as song, written for the 'lyre', or trouble the Greeks for definitions. More recently an issue of Five Bells. Australian Poetry (2004) had the theme of 'Lyric Poetry'. There, Phyllis Perlstone writes that what often makes a lyric poet is a 'combination of the autobiographical and the meditative' which creates an 'openness to emotions and the dilemmas endemic in reality'.(7) It is interesting that she also comments on the fragility of its status: 'the state of the lyric would be somewhere between an essential form and one continually at risk'. (8) And it might be at risk also because of its openness to feeling: emotional honesty is confronting. It calls us to be vulnerable and responsible for our own search for identity; for the life of the heart and the soul, for a deep moral purpose, for the everyday struggle. It tries to make sense of these. Lyric poetry is a search for coherence within the fragility of wholeness. It recalls John Berger: 'Every authentic poem contributes to the labour of poetry ... to bring together where life has separated or violence has 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'.(1993:251)

Again in Five Bells, Sheryl Persson summarises the lyric intention well: 'although subjective, lyric poems can deal with personal and universal themes: love, death, war, nature, religion, loss of identity, loneliness, friendship or even domestic, social or political issues, but what they offer is the poet's direct response to the experiences. The essence of the lyric is an attempt to confront or understand some aspect of our complex experience of life. The poet imposes an order on feelings and intangibles, providing insights rather than lengthy arguments or descriptions of dramatic events.'(9)

But she adds that there are also 'certain intangible qualities' in lyric form across many of the arts. And I think this is true. As Gary Catalano wrote: 'This sense of enchantment, of utter absorption in a moment, is fundamental to the lyric and lies at the heart of what it has to offer.'(2002) There is a difficulty in naming quite what that deep impulse is which we respond to in a lyric work. To my mind

its intention is to enter into the reader, to travel under the skin towards the heart: into sadness, despair, ecstasy. It is not about distance or the intellect, though intelligence is essential to its understanding. It requires the 'muse moment': the inner still cesura of silence, of selflessness in order to recreate the ignition of the heart/soul, an overwhelming of the mind and its objective structures. It travels the borderland between the conscious and the unconscious. It sings these into being. It is then, energetic and quite directive.

'lyric might be thought of as the field of force of a poem'

Because it comes originally from an association with music, it carries within it the cadences, rhythms, silences of music. Edward Hirsch writes in his quite ecstatic book on reading poetry, that it gives us 'greater access to ourselves', stressing the relationship with the reader that is central to this thesis. It is 'the most intimate form of literary discourse', and takes us to Emily Dickinson's 'soul country'. (1999: 157) He comments that it is always about renewal, and quotes from Marina Tsvetaeva's essay 'Poets with history and poets without history':

The same water – a different wave.

What matters is that it is a wave.

What matters is that the wave will return.

What matters is that it will always return different.

What matters most of all: however different the returning wave,

it will always return as a wave of the sea.

What is a wave? Composition and muscle.

The same goes for lyric poetry.

Lyricism is about identity, and not all poets are interested in exploring that territory. Content will then have an impact on decisions about form. The accessibility of lyric work is important in entering the poem. Textual games can present themselves to the reader as deliberate barriers; as exclusion.

The poet Sarah Maguire discusses American critic Helen Vendler's comment that the lyric poem 'must start as the self's concentration of itself into words'. 'Of all literary genres,' Maguire asserts, 'lyric poetry is the most subjective, personal and private.' (2000:251) Yet the journey of the self is also a social and political one. The self does not operate outside history and has social consequences. Because the personal is political, lyric poetry too can be intensely political and radical in the way that poetry can 'pertain to the root' of things, as the definition of radical informs us, transforming individual experience into that which is shared. And it is radical in what it can access too. As Maguire writes: 'It's precisely because the poem can render the most intimate and elusive of subjective experiences in language that it's able to bear witness to what's excluded from dominant discourses.' (250) But it is the very subjective nature of lyric content and form that the language poets and avant garde resisted.

'the assertion of power in a lyric is the assertion of the power of feeling'

Some of the poets McCooey tries to define as 'new lyricists' follow other, anti-lyric/non-lyric traditions emerging out of the post-modern challenge to lyricism (particularly Michael Farrell, Kate Lilley and Kate Fagan). In post-modern theory, language is prioritised and the centred self de-centred. The form of poetry reflects this resistance to wholeness, claiming previous forms to be rigid, conforming and solipsistic. As the 'poet is dead' the reader is prioritised, or, some argue, thrown into confusion. In her critical summary of post-modernism in Poetry Canada Review, Susan Ioannou wrote against the trend: 'This constant focus on the poem's evolving form (its process of being written), prevents the reader's traditional emotional involvement with a content. Yet the distanced reader is

expected to participate nonetheless in decoding the (lack of) meaning. Puzzle solving, not feeling, not experiencing, becomes the impoverished reader's role.' (1989)

Literary critics writing within the post-modern tradition use a language that reflects the poetry itself. Writing in Jacket 2 in 1998, on This L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Kate Lilley (one of the poets McCooley places inside the 'new lyricism') explores the origins of language poetry in the 70s and 80s. She quotes Perelman, an originator of language poetry, as saying this form of writing shows a 'deep disinterest in poetics of identity', contrary, I would argue, to the deep interest lyricism has in entering, understanding and finding meaning through identity: the search of the 'lyrical I.'

Writing of the association between language poets and new technologies including the web, Lilley explains : 'It produces precisely that sense of vividness and immediacy, of surplus and praxis, which Bruce Andrews, like many advocates of the "non-imperial", "deterritorializing" productivity of experimental poetics, sees as significantly counteracting the alienation of subjects from their nomadic "home" in the materiality of language-events'. Quoting Andrews, the piece continues: 'Andrews writes of poetry as "an art of constitution. Not only plastic 'composition'.... Not the all-or-nothing eschatology of exploitation or its absenceThere are constant compromises and acquiescences and almost chemical mixtures and coalitions that lead to different forms of hegemony"' (30)

Lilley continues: 'On this model, language poetry offers an alternative to both the "isolate wiles" of "explication, criticism, theory" and the narcissistic drama of bourgeois self-expression and identity'. And perception of the lyrical I as 'bourgeois' is a strong part of the resistance to the lyrical enterprise of self-expression, which lyric poets see as an insightful exploration that strives to make personal experience more than merely personal, though the term 'universal' is almost impossible to use now, fabricating a synthetic sense of unity, as opposed to a reality of a shared community of experience.

'lyric is the desire towards the invisibility of the self'

In her work, "Experiments" the poet Bernadette Mayer gave advice to those wanting to write language poetry . The emphasis is on generating discontinuities, fragmentation, scattering:

'Systematically derange the language, for example, write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, add a gerundive to every line of an already existing piece of prose or poetry, etc.

Get a group of words (make a list or select at random); then form these words (only) into a piece of writing—whatever the words allow. Let them demand their own form, and/or: Use certain words in a set way, like, the same word in every line, or in a certain place in every paragraph, etc. Design words.

Consider word & letter as forms—the concretistic distortion of a text, for example, too many o's or a multiplicity of thin letters (illftiii, etc.)'

To take one example, McCooley's pairing of Michael Farrell and Judith Beveridge as representative of the 'uncanny' stream in his new lyricism, seems to ignore their considerable differences. The association of Farrell with lyricism itself is problematic. Reviewing papertiger #3 in Cordite, Komninos Zervos writes of Farrell as one of the poets who write 'in the style of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets.'(2003) Reviews of his book Ode Ode place his work firmly in the Language poets' tradition. Gig Ryan, entering into the attack on lyricism, wrote in her review of his book : 'Farrell often writes under imposed constrictions in an attempt to expunge that dreaded virus, the "lyrical I" that replicates through so much poetry.'(2004)

Teacher of semiotics in literary studies, Liz Parsons in her interesting review brought a close post-modern reading to the book. She called it 'erudite chic', and the work 'experimental', 'avant grade' but not lyrical, writing that 'the permutations and combinations of pop culture, high-art and philosophical ruminations ricochet across urban landscapes, lives, and relationships in ways that intersect with the objectives of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry ... The almost compulsive references shape the vision of the poetic consciousness, and because Farrell's slices of life are cut mandolin fine, the poems are translucent, fragmentary, often devoid of narrative and always without the luxury (or the cobwebs) of

grammar. ... The use of equally a-grammatical French, Italian and invention move language beyond meaning and toward texture..... Such resistance to the logic of expectations is part of the disjunctive montage but also readable as a stammer, an obsessive repetition. It is unsurprising then that many of these poems glitch like a Yasunao Tone record.'

Reading these reviews and Ode Ode itself, I could not see how Farrell could come under a 'new lyricism' umbrella. This applies to Kate Lilley's work too, as Pam Brown comments it is 'often pithy', with 'a kind of jaunty optimism that undoes any possibility of lyrical wallowing.' Here is another criticism of lyrical work: that its concern with the world of feeling is self-indulgent.

'lyric is metaphor for feeling'

McCooley himself has seemed confused about his allocation of poets Kate Lilley and Kate Fagan to the new lyricism. In an earlier review of their books along with Jill Jones and Alison Croggon, he defined Croggon as 'one of the most powerful lyric poets writing today', and Fagan as 'in fact an eroticist of the abstract', but not 'lyrical'. But he concluded: 'If these fine poets can be facilely categorised as postmodern, it is because of their attention to language and to the unreliability of their medium..,' continuing 'when people complain about "postmodernism" in poetry, they are usually, for all their talk of form and technique, strangely indifferent to its intense aestheticism. The disruptions of syntax, use of indeterminacy, tonal disjunctions, obtruse formalism, and intertextuality are types of decorativeness, instruments of ornamentation.'(2002) To decorate is to 'beautify'. Beauty then is an objective of post-modernism? I thought it was the breaking of these constructs.

'when we are touched by lyric we wake to the intolerable beauty of

our world'

Kevin Gillam reviewed Ode Ode for Five Bells with a totally different appreciation of the book: 'Difficult to read. Difficult to review'. He found it to be 'incomprehensible pieces of text ... These poems are akin to black holes in the universe of word, they are linguistical and syntactical "prangs", deliberate in their exalted obscurity'. Spliced with foreign language they 'alienate the reader'. These poems 'are anti-traditional, anti-commentary, anti-thematic, anti-sense'. (2004)

Here the issue of the quality of poetry emerges in a subtle form. How does a reader assess the quality of language poetry? Because of its emphasis on brokenness, splicing, textual acrobatics, where does the method lie for evaluation of the poetry? Isn't there a risk that simply deconstructing words and naming them poetry replaces the intention of poetry to communicate meaning? Martin Harrison commented on the results of this in the 1990s when, rather than new forms creating innovation in poetry 'a surrogate form of literature was being produced where differences between writers disappeared in a broadly based activity of "textuality", a practice of writing beyond recognisable genre, of writing for expression alone, of writing according to a formula, whether dictated by an experimental procedure or by the commercial requirements of niche marketing.' (12)

Here form becomes the content, and if that form is indecipherable, it can create a tyranny of form that excludes many readers; a tyranny of structurelessness where the reader risks being lost in the maze of broken words, scattered among fractured content. Denise Levertov was driving at this when she wrote: 'I believe content determines form, and yet the content is discovered only in form .. 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.'(1960)

Yet presenting these two differing approaches to poetry - lyrical and non-lyrical - still fails to represent an accurate picture of writing poetry in Australia with its extensive range of form. What seems more important to me is the development of poets within their own work, rather than in comparison with others or within limiting classifications. Otherwise their deliberate intent in their art becomes lost. Wayne Miller in his analysis of American poetry for the 25th Anniversary issue of American Review of Books wrote: 'But more broadly, I find polarisation between aesthetic schools troubling, because good writers, no matter their aesthetic affiliations, are attempting in one way or another to engage

“reality,” which Milosz wisely said in his Nobel lecture is “so often misused but always deserving of esteem.” (2003)

And these categorisations are not left standing without value judgements attached to them. So, currently poetry which is accessible is often seen as simplistic, old-fashioned and not as ‘good’ as post-modernist work. I wondered if Mc Cooney was attempting to avoid this by creating one category for all? But categorisation in any sense remains problematic. Wayne Miller discussed the polarisation caused by post-modernism, listing critics and reviewers struggling with terminology such as ‘elliptical poetry’ and ‘New Iowanism. ‘Regardless of these labels’, he wrote, ‘what strikes me is how often these days I hear terms like “avant-garde,” “new,” “experimental,” and “outside the mainstream” being used – and often being used as indicators of what’s good or interesting in today’s poetry... Rather than discuss how poets are engaging a range of intellectual and aesthetic projects, we’re too often simply concerning ourselves with how poets can and can’t be described in terms of today’s neomodernist trend.’ (2003)

He made an important point when he remonstrated that ‘it wouldn’t hurt to remember that poetry exists in a web of multiple trajectories’. True, and as Berndt Selheim points out, if we think lyric poetry is related to music, what is the music of our time.: ‘if music can now be produced from garbage bin lids and the sounds of coffee percolation, where does that leave our sense of lyricism?’ So if some modern music is melody interrupted by the repeated scratch of a stylus across vinyl, can this be legitimately mirrored in the staccato broken words of language poetry? ‘Lyric and the avant-garde’ he continues, ‘are not opposite ends of a spectrum, but striking a balance between experimentation and the need to speak is central to poetic enquiry. ... Surely the lyric poem must seek to engage the zeitgeist in all possible ways if it is to maintain its relevance, resisting easy categorisation.’(2005) But isn’t it already doing just that? Lyrically influenced poets are not forgoing the challenge of manipulating form, it is the intensity of the lyric intention that is continuous.

‘lyric is not a category but a dimension of a poem’

The choices poets make about their form are related to their intention; related to their content. If the drive is to play with words, the lyric is not much use. If the intention is more metaphysical, to explore the meaning of being, language poetry it seems can only give one message - fragmentation. These are important political choices. In lyric poetry, feeling gives rise to thought which hopefully leads to clarity, understanding, communion with others. These are not always comfortable feelings, but the sharing of experience seen newly, often is

‘lyric is neither rational nor irrational as the rational had no abil-

ity to explain the incorrigibility of feeling’

I think the writing of poetry is lived. It begins with a way of being in the world: it is not something we do, but something we be. It requires a life of observation; an openness to experience; an ability to empathise, an engagement with the transforming power of image and metaphor. It requires in its writing, a moment of selflessness akin to mediation: an absencing of the self, so that the self may appear. Then it requires craft and the skills of self-editing and what Seamus Heaney called technique: ‘Technique... involves not only a poet’s way with words, his(sic) management of metre, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his(sic) stance towards life, a definition of his own reality.’ (1974, 2002:19) He continues : ‘Robert Frost put it this way: “a poem begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It finds the thought and the thought finds the words”. As far as I am concerned, technique is more vitally and sensitively connected with that first activity where the “lump in the throat” finds “the thought” than with “the thought” finding “the words”’. (21)

‘the I of a lyric is neither self nor a not-self’

I find critical articles on poetry are, like all critical work, value-laden but often presented with an ‘objective’ sheen. Preferences are declared as assessments; exclusion determines status. To declare myself here, my personal preference is for a poetry that makes me feel, and then think. I want it to arouse emotion, to shock with insight, to make itself felt physically, emotionally, through eroticism,

sensuality, anger, a sense of injustice. I want it to go deep and to have been generated out of the genuine poetic impulse, that almost indescribable thing which many writers have struggled to name and which Picasso called 'magic'. For this reason, my preference is for lyrical work, though I appreciate and respect an experimental use of form that still drives towards the lyrical impulse. I am also fond of surreal poetry, that drives image aslant, an oblique way into meaning. In saying this I am well aware of Martin Harrison's warning that ignoring 'the contemporary idea of writing which has occurred over the last 20 years or so 'may well condemn your work to be seen as reactionary or archaic, unable to release itself from sentimentalised, already known styles of feeling.' (1997,2004:21)

Poetry can animate everything, so that life itself breathes through the line. It remembers passion. As Edward Hirsch says: 'poetry is a way of inscribing (the) feeling of awe. I don't think we should underestimate the capacity for tenderness that poetry opens within us.'(1999:3) It can make us alive to something new or remembered. Coming out of the ordinary or the mystical, it calls us to ourselves; drawing into view the inner working relationships between the conscious and the unconscious; the passionate intensity of the feeling life as well as the corrugated pathways of thought. Using image to speak, it inspires awe at the way the poet can condense experience on the page. In these poems then, the conscious general listener/reader, hears themselves and everything they know and do not know of living. Poetry can inform, renew, move, uncover understanding, create change.

I value a poetry of connection and communication. Seamus Heaney put it so well in his essay 'the government of the tongue'. Speaking of Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'At the fishhouses', he wrote that the lines at the end of the poem have a 'dream truth as well as a daylight truth about them. They also possess that sine qua non of all lyric utterance, a completely persuasive inner cadence which is deeply intimate with the laden water of full tide. The lines are inhabited by certain profoundly true tones, which as Robert Frost put it, "were before words were, living in the cave of the mouth", and they do what poetry most essentially does: they fortify our inclination to credit promptings of our intuitive being. They help us to say in the first recesses of ourselves, in the shyest, pre-social part of our nature, "yes, I know something like that too. Yes, that's right: thank you for putting words on it ..." (1986, 2002:188)

For me, also, the choice of form says what the poet values, what they want the reader to know about themselves and what they think is important to say; in fact, the very meaning of what they do. It involves the finding of 'voice', that note that can be heard that means no other poet would say it quite like that. Heaney again: 'Finding your own voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them; and I believe that it may not even be metaphor, for a poetic voice is probably very intimately connected with the poet's natural voice, the voice that he hears as the ideal speaker of the lines he is making up.' (1964:2002:16)

The choices we make have risks. For lyric poetry, indulgence in sentiment might undervalue the transforming power of metaphor; the search for connection become stuck in cliché; the yearning for the capturing of feeling, result in overwriting and a negligence of form. Peter Porter, editing *The Best Australian Poetry 2005* (2005) notes that he has always 'wished for poetry to escape, if not the fact, then the editorial dominance, of the lyric, whether pastoral, anecdotal or cryptic' because he wants to 'claim back for poetry from prose some of its empowering scope and dramatic force, and 'revive' 'verse structure'. In language poetry the risk is that it disappears into obscurity, words meaning little, the game becoming empty; what Miller wrote happens with many younger poets trying language poetry: 'a "soft-core avant-gardism"— a poetry in which what was once a serious project becomes the stylistic echo of that project.' (2003)

In his powerful anthologies, *Staying Alive* and *Being Alive*, Neil Astley, editor of Bloodaxe books, selected poetry that is accessible but presented in a variety of form. He wrote that he looked for 'poems which the poet needed (Astley's emphasis) to write, poems whose integrity derives from an honest and truthful engagement with living language and with living in the world. ... These poems make the reader less settled yet more whole, more alert to the world, more alive, more in touch with being human.' (2004:18)

But what does it matter what I think? It matters because I am a reader of poetry, not just a writer of it. And because of that I have something in common with others who read. In fact, the reader is a crucial part of poetry. Basically what each poet wants to know is, 'is anybody listening?' – why else write? Communication, I contend, is and should be the aim of the poet. And someone has to be listening.

Recognising the limits of categorisation, I do not want language poets presented as lyricists when the forms and content are so very different. I do not want the differences of opinion around the 'lyric I' made invisible. I think it is an important point of difference. If that happens, the reading public begin to think there is only one 'good' poetry and it is a hybrid of confusion. I want broader groups to include those who write dramatic poetry, narrative poetry, surrealist poetry, formal poetry.

Consistently, critics write about the lack of audiences and readers for poetry, but it depends on which audience you speak of. There is, arguably I think, a division between an 'academic' and 'general' appreciation of poetry. For the former, there is a network of known poets and teachers who communicate and support each other; who organise readings within an academic circuit, whose work receives critical attention in journals and possibly a spot on student book lists. This work may tend to engage more often with the changing theories of writing itself, in poetry and in prose. The work may tend to appeal to those more interested in the construction of poetry as a made thing; a work to be analysed; perhaps requiring close attention because of its difficulty; a difficulty that can enrich but can also become a process of exclusion for the reader.

A more general reader often appears at literary festivals and readings, articulate about what they are looking for in poetry. Sometimes they say they have developed a resistance to poetry because they 'can't understand it'. Yet when poetry is read to them, they are surprised by their own responsiveness; their own enjoyment of the work. To these audiences, less accessible work is not attractive.

Neil Astley's *Staying Alive* became Britain's most popular poetry book within a fortnight of publication in 2002, so it must have appealed to someone. Notably, *The Best Australian Poems 2004* (Black Inc) sold over 4,000 copies here last year. There are buyers out there - and readers. Astley had carried out a survey of readers before he published his first anthology. 'This presented a damning picture of how poetry was viewed by the general public: how people whose knowledge of modern poetry was limited would dismiss it as obscure, difficult, dull, boring or pretentious. Modern poetry, according to their comments, was irrelevant and incomprehensible. ... only 5% of the poetry books sold in British bookshops were by living poets.' (2004:19)

Mike Ladd who produces *PoeticA* on the ABC's Radio National has written in a similar vein: 'my experience in the last twenty years of making poetry programmes for the ABC is that the general audience wants poetry that speaks to them not only intellectually but personally and from the heart. Firstly, they want to understand the poem. They want ideas, stories, and feelings communicated to them. ... On top of this, but not instead of it, they want clever brilliant skilful use of language; a celebration and revitalisation of our common tongue.' (2003:5)

The Irish poet Eavan Boland has addressed this issue of poetry readers in her piece 'The Wrong Way' (Herbert and Hollis, 2000). Criticising the university system in Ireland for imprisoning poetry in 'high modernism' during the 70's, she noted how academic definitions became the mainstream culture of poetry but at the same time 'readers were haemorrhaging away from poetry... those readers – with their lives, with their ordinary actions that I could see from my house and enact within it - were ceasing to matter to poetry. Poetry was learning a new, infinitely more exclusive speech. And therefore a more thoroughly toxic one.' (2000,2002:216)

The project of modernism was twofold, she continues. First and 'incontestable' was the drive to change form so that poetry related more to the world it came from, moving it away from traditional constraints of form. But the second and 'catastrophic' project, was to remake the reader. 'In trying to pre-judge, re-make, re-train the poetry reader away from the old joys of memory and sentiment and song, the secondary modernist project cut deep into the root and sap of art.' (217)

So 'a centuries-old, bright partnership between poet and reader has been injured. An ancient trust has been hurt. Poetry which once followed a man or woman through life, whispering in their ear from their first infatuation to their final sickness, which was at the centre of a society's self-definition, is now defensive and on the margins. Any comparison between the currency of poetry today and that of a hundred years ago shows a staggering loss of purpose and centrality.'(217) And if modernism created this split, I think that post-modernism with its love of disjuncture, silences, broken language to the point of codifying babble; its mantra of 'the poet is dead', has prolonged this split. It is one thing to write poetry that is thrilling in its experimental play with language and that requires effort to open ourselves to its meaning, but another to write it in order to cloak oneself easily as poet in an arbitrary assemblage of words, or for the purpose of impression, or confusion, requiring so difficult a deciphering that the reader feels stupid, intimidated, cut off, discarded.

Often the idea of a popular audience is seen to be 'debasement' poetry. To be widely read, to be understood and accessible, is seen as a failure of craft and skill in the work. But I don't see it that way, probably because of my own opinion of what makes for successful poetry. As Neil Astley wrote: 'There's no conflict between "access" and excellence.' (2004:19)

Talking of audiences necessitates touching on the issue of 'good' poetry, though another article is needed to cover this wide ground. In 1996, John Kinsella published in Poetry Magazine UK a very useful analysis of contemporary Australian poetry until 1995. He wrote: 'The way one reads a poem is significantly affected by what one thinks a poem should do. ... From the point of view of 1996, as a reader of this generation, one is not so conscious of the concerns of what constitutes a "good" poem as, say, one would have been in the 1950s, 60s or even 70s. "Good" is a variable that is highly dependent on context, and may have hidden presuppositions behind it. One looks to the words "effective" and "relevant"'. (1995)

I think the terms 'effective' and 'relevant' are useful, and I take them to mean effective in communicating and relevant to the people reading them. 'Reasonably enough,' Martin Harrison wrote, 'readers give up reading poetry when they feel that poems can no longer address the significant big and significant small questions of their lives.' (2004:.5)

As to the constant determination of critics to classify, I think the concept of a 'new lyricism' was not effective or relevant. But perhaps that speaks most of the difficulty in pinning Australian poets to the wall for inspection. It necessarily excluded many fine writers, and showed a narrow vision of the richness of current writing. It confirmed for me the need for literary critics to concentrate more on the poetry itself, to get in close and consider the nature of development in individual poets' work, rather than delineate from a distance. Most poets are making deliberate decisions on how they write and many re-form their work over subsequent books, making interesting changes and developments in style. Miller might perhaps have the last word here when he wrote of the difficulties of groupings and the dangers of polarisation: 'writers involved in similar projects can find themselves landing on different sides of an unpredictably shifting fence, largely because we keep describing the fence itself rather than investigating the topography beneath it.'

* I found Alison Croggon's statement poem, 'On lyric', interesting and apt so have interspersed some quotations as thoughtful points of reference.

Works cited

- Astley, Neil (ed) *Staying Alive. Real poems for unreal times.* UK, Bloodaxe Books, 2002
- Astley, Neil. *Being Alive.* UK, Bloodaxe Books, 2004
- Barbour, Douglas. 'An Alphabetical Appreciation of the latest Australian Anthology', *Jacket* 15, December 2001.
- Berger, John, 'The hour of Poetry', in *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*, New York, Vintage, 1993. ed Lloyd Spencer.
- Boland, Eavan, 'The Wrong Way', in eds W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, *Strong Words. Modern poets on modern poetry*, UK, Bloodaxe Books, 2000.
- Brennan, Michael and Minter, Peter (eds), *Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets*, Paperbark Press, 2000.
- Caldwell, Grant, 'Australian poetry - publication, diversity, support and promotion', in *Blue Dog. Australian Poetry*, Vol 3, no 6, Nov 2004.
- Catalano, Gary, 'The picture in the poem', *Quadrant*, vol. XLVI no 3, March 2002.
- Croggon, Alison, *Attempts at Being*, UK, Salt, 2002.
- Gillam, Kevin, Review of *Ode Ode, Five Bells.* *Australian Poetry*, vol. 11, no 3, 2004.
- Harrison, Martin. *Who wants to create Australia? Essays on poetry and ideas in contemporary Australia*, Broadway, NSW, Halstead Press, 2004.
- Heaney, Seamus, *Finders Keepers. Selected prose 1971-2001*, London, Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Ioannou, Susan, 'Against Postmodernism: Tradition's Dead End', *Poetry Canada Review*, Vol.9, No.4, 1989.
- Kinsella, John, 'Towards a contemporary Australian poetics', *Poetry Magazine UK*, vol. 166, August 1995.
- Kinsella, John (ed) intro. *Landbridge. Contemporary Australian Poetry*, FACP, 1999.
- Ladd, Mike, *Letters*, *Blue Dog Australian Poetry*, vol. 2, no 3, June 2003.
- Lilley, Kate, 'This L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E', *Jacket* 2, 1998.
- Maguire, Sarah, 'Poetry makes nothing happen', in *Strong Words*, op.cit.
- McCooey, David, review, 'Salty Pleasures', *Australian Book Review*, September 2002.
- McCooey, David, 'Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism', *Blue Dog Australian Poetry*, vol. 4 no 7, June 2005. Also in *Agenda. Australian Issue. Poems essays reviews*, UK vol. 41, nos 1-2, Summer 2005.

Miller, Wayne, 'History, Lyricism, and "Avant-Gardism"', Focus Editor, 25th anniversary American Book Review, Vol. 24, Issue 4, May/June 2003.

Murray, Les (ed), The Best Australian Poems 2004, Melbourne, Black Inc., 2004.

Parsons, Liz, Review of Ode Ode, Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Vol.3 2004.

Perlstone, Phyllis, 'The Lyric', Five Bells, Winter, vol. 11, no 3, 2004

Persson, Sheryl, 'The Lyric Eye', Five Bells, Winter, vol. 11, no 3, 2004.

Porter, Peter (ed) The Best Australian Poetry 2005, Brisbane, UQP, 2005.

Ryan, Gig, 'Metres of wit, without explanation', review The Age newspaper, Saturday 31st of January 2004.

Selheim, Berndt, in editorial to "Verse: Lyric Poetry & The Unquiet Muse", c-side online 1 (www.c-side.com.au), 2005.

Zervos, Komninos, 'Komninos Zervos reviews Papertiger #3', Cordite, May 1