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## POETRY AS SPECULATION

### Introduction

Paul Munden

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This issue of the *Axon* journal investigates ways in which contemporary poetry speculates about the world, modes of being, reality, creativity, writing itself and ways of understanding the quotidian.

The period in which these various articles and poems were written (or at least submitted) was one in which the quotidian itself had been anything but predictable. Things that we had long assumed to be part of everyday life were out of reach, new and strange familiarities taking their place. Perhaps, in this respect, our general experience of the world could be said to have verged, through this phase, towards the unusual perspectives that poetry has given us so compellingly through the ages. Many more of us, I suspect, have been pushed towards greater introspection — and reflection. It is fascinating how those two things go together, as Paul Venzo articulates so well here, firstly in relation to sonnets by Petrarch and Shakespeare, but by extension to many contemporary sonnets, which ‘continue to encourage us to speculate on our position in the world: not just our relationship to others, but also to ourselves’.

Some speculation here is not so different from scientific research, a comparison that Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli makes in his book *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (2014). Charlotte Higgins, interviewing Rovelli, writes: ‘There’s a moment in *Seven Lessons* when he compares physics and poetry: both try to describe the unseen. It might be added that physics, when departing from its native language of mathematical equations, relies strongly on metaphor and analogy’ (Higgins 2018: n.p.). It is appropriate, then, that science is explicitly present within this *Axon* issue, in the contributions from David Musgrave and Thor Magnus Tangerås. Tangerås, like Venzo, focuses on poetic form, but in relation to *natural* form, specifically the sestina and the number six, as in the structure of the snowflake. It is fascinating to ponder how poetic form, which we tend to think of as artifice, may reveal to us — through our own engagement with it as writers or readers — fundamental truths about the world we inhabit.

Tangerås — whose essay also begins with Petrarch — is careful to distinguish between awe and wonder: the former is a ‘feeling when faced with something amazing, incomprehensible, or sublime’; the latter ‘a reflective experience motivated when one is unable to put things into a familiar conceptual framework — leading to open questions rather than conclusions’ (Gallagher et al 2015: 22). As a verb, ‘wonder’ means both ‘to marvel’ and ‘to ponder’, and the interface between the two is where both poetic and scientific speculation is situated. The most advanced science makes full

acknowledgement of what it doesn't know, a seeming contradiction that surely sits well with Keats' concept of Negative Capability, 'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' (in Gittings 1970: 43). Keats' concept is strongly felt within the essays in this issue, notably in Amelia Walker's fascinating exploration of what, as poets, we might still create when words don't come.

The absence of words — at least, in recognisable form — is also explored by Emilie Collyer, writing about 'a wordless, animated notation opera' (Hope 2019: n.p.) and 'Catherine Clover's various performance and participatory projects that draw on birdsong' (and how fascinating that Dugald Williamson should also touch on the *scientific* interpretation of birdsong in this issue). Collyer focuses on the 'process of adaptation/translation', quoting Cole Swensen, who states: 'translation can afford to lose something, and in fact must lose something, for a translation that loses nothing will not gain anything either' (2011: 102). Perhaps this is yet another version of Negative Capability; and it's fitting that we include in this issue poetry by Niels Hav, in translation by PK Brask and Patrick Friesen, alongside other invited poetry, as ever.

Any call for papers is itself an act of speculation, and submissions are invariably surprising. In this case, not only have individual contributions focused on the theme in unexpected ways, they have also — unwittingly — made connections amongst themselves. Some of those connections I have outlined above. Another intriguing web of reference is to mirrors. Kelly Malone writes about Jean-Marie Gleize, who says of written language and typography: 'The surface of writings is like the mirror of lakes, rivers, streams. It seems to reflect the uppermost sky, but this uppermost sky is in truth only the reflection of the sky caught in water' (Gleize 2014a: 95). Dugald Williamson focuses on a work by Stephanie Green (whose poetry is also published here, separately), in which she writes: 'If this frame holds a mirror then I face a hundred masks', perfectly capturing the 'Zoom' experience. As Dugald explains it: 'I can't see myself in the screen for others, yet it is "only myself that I see" as the screen becomes a mirror-screen.' And Alyson Miller in her essay writes: 'As Suvin notes, within speculative fictions "the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also transforming"'. By holding a mirror up to nature, as Shakespeare has Hamlet do, things are not just reflected, but discovered; speculation, by any definition.

Yet another shared theme here relates to breath, that simple yet complex means by which we stay alive — and also give voice. Emilie Collyer relates how her own breathing was affected by watching poetic performances: 'I found [they] had a significant visceral impact, affecting my breathing and the way I was holding my body while watching. There was a sense of having inhaled, to contemplate and spend time with a particular sequence of sounds and images, and then exhaled.' Writing about the sonnet, Paul Venzo quotes Paul Fussell: 'The octave and sestet conduct actions that are analogous to the actions of inhaling and exhaling ... We may even suggest that one of the archetypes of the Petrarchan sonnet structure is the pattern of sexual pressure and release' (1979: 116). Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington, discussing the very different form of prose poetry, and their own prose poetry sequence, write: 'we wanted to include a range of references to breath and breathing in *The Weight of an Empty Room*, connected to the way pressure builds in the chest when deep breathing is not possible.' Their prose poems refer to 'dance routines [in which] there is very little opportunity for deep and relaxed breathing until a routine concludes'. They relate this to the

COVID-19 pandemic: ‘the virus often attacks the respiratory system, making breathing difficult’.

I feel there is significance in these overlapping interests and metaphors. I am put in mind once again of scientific research, where individuals, working entirely separately, move towards similar, simultaneous discoveries. My inference is that the poetic speculations gathered here, somewhat by chance, together express — through their various negative capabilities, even their introspection — a probing towards a shared understanding of human experience, enlightening both for the poetry community and those who would claim no knowledge of poetry, who even resist it. As Rovelli says of his science writing: ‘I think about the person who not only doesn’t know anything about physics but is also not interested ... I keep the person who knows nothing in my mind’ (in Higgins 2018: n.p.).

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**Paul Munden** is a poet, editor and screenwriter living in North Yorkshire, UK. A Gregory Award winner, he has published five poetry collections, including *Analogue/Digital: New & Selected Poems* (Smith|Doorstop, 2015) and *Chromatic* (UWA Publishing, 2017), and six prose poetry chapbooks. A new collection, *Amplitude*, will be published by Recent Work Press in 2022. He is editor (or co-editor) of various anthologies, including *Divining Dante* (RWP, 2021) and is the current poetry editor of *Westerly* magazine. For the British Council he has covered a number of scientific and humanitarian themes as conference poet and edited the anthology, *Feeling the Pressure: Poetry and science of climate change* (British Council, 2008). He was director of the

UK's National Association of Writers in Education, 1994-2018, and is now a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the University of Leeds. He is also an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Canberra, Australia, where he established the 'Poetry on the Move' festival. Having worked throughout the 1990s as reader for Stanley Kubrick, he has recently returned to the world of film as writer and co-developer of adapted and original screenplays.

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