

Poet edits poet edits...

or

You Show me Yours and I'll Show you Mine.

Poets Steve Evans and Mike Ladd get out their first drafts and have a dialogue on the sensitive business of editing poetry.

SE: My exposure to the process of editing with comments from others has varied from one-on-one relationships to working in small groups. The experiences have sometimes been beneficial, sometimes not, but I have to say, even when the comments were not in themselves so useful, the whole business of spending time revisiting what I have written often gives me more courage to make bigger changes than I might on my own.

ML: True. By being in writers' groups and individual editing relationships I've probably taken bigger leaps than I might have done on my own; cutting whole stanzas, changing point of view in the poem etc, or at least making those decisions earlier. While I haven't always taken the editorial advice, it's sometimes helped me identify weak points in poems and realise what was clear to me, wasn't clear to others. It also speeds-up my own editing process by giving me a deadline.

SE: Before we get into specifics, let's look at some of the general issues around editing poetry.

***Don't Let Me Be Understood* – What about the need for a sympathetic but not overly kind edit? In other words, is there understanding and respect? How does the edited poet determine that - both at the tentative beginning stage and as things go along? What are the signs to look for?**

ML: It's a very personal relationship. I've been involved with enough one-on-one consultations, workshops and writers' groups to have seen the process fail, both from too aggressive or unsympathetic editing, and also through

people being too wary of treading on each other's corns, so that everything is "nice" and weaknesses are glossed over. The best exchanges are forthright but good-humoured. The participants say what they think, but respect each other's abilities, and the right of each poet to take or leave advice.

There are several warning signs to look out for when editing with someone else. Firstly, do they understand you at all? I don't mean small things that may be a weakness in your work because they lack clarity, but overall – do they get where you are coming from? If they miss things constantly, I'd give them a miss. Secondly, beware the ignorant opinion. Does the editor know much about poetry? Do they have experience? They may have different favourites and poetic preferences, but they should at least know as much about the field as you do. Thirdly, beware of the dogmatist who says "must" or "can't" instead of asking questions and suggesting alternatives. You want collaboration, not co-option. Ideally, in a one-to-one relationship, you want an informed, careful, honest editor whose writing you respect. You don't have to write exactly like each other, but you should fundamentally like each other's work.

SE: If I am considering someone as my editor for the first time, it would usually be because I know their writing and maybe their published comments/interviews about writing. If I like their work a lot, great, and if I like their outlook on writing and their process of writing, even better. Their style and sensibility don't have to be really close to mine, though, as long as their way of writing and of looking at the world suggests they will understand what I am trying to do with my own work. I don't mind some differences; it can produce unexpected and fruitful results. In fact, sometimes, it's good to specifically look for someone with an approach that will stimulate you to produce something new. A poet I admire once said to a mutual friend that they would love to get their hands on some of my poems so they could get me to extend myself, but it never happened, and I often think about a missed opportunity there.

Unfortunately, even good poets don't necessarily make good editors. I would prefer a forthright and useful comment that challenged me to rethink a poem than some pleasant but too timid feedback. I once had a manuscript edited by someone whose work I respected but who only made a handful of suggestions.

I left feeling like I had essentially wasted my time. From that time on I made sure that whichever side of the deal I was on, we began with just a sample of writing to see how well we worked together. If both people are still happy, we tackle a more substantial lot of writing. I think that staged process is very useful since both people get a better idea of the writing, the depth and nature of comments, and the personal approaches employed. If you feel uncertain, you can defer or agree not to proceed.

The feedback should always be about the poem, not the poet. I think it helps to say that at the start, even if it would seem obvious to many people involved. It's a ground rules thing. Offer a positive comment first, then ask questions. *Why did you use this word here? Why is this line broken at this point?* It's going to provoke some thought, and it's more tactful than delivering a report card. In the end, it is not whether the poem is deeply meaningful to the poet but whether it will work with a new reader who does not have that attachment. An editor has to respect the origins but steer comments back to the poem as a poem, not as a sentimental marker.

***Ego is Not a Dirty Word* - [yes, we are channeling pop lyrics for some reason]**
How do you feel about the need to assert ownership, and being able to say No? It can be a sensitive matter. Reluctance by the editor to be too hard? Is the latter of any concern when you know the ball is coming back into your own court shortly? What about self-confidence?

ML: Both of you should definitely be confident enough to say "No! I'm not changing a syllable of that line!" You don't even have to justify it with rational argument. "It feels right", or "It's got to be that way" is sufficient. However, there's no point being in an editing relationship if you ALWAYS say this. You have to be open to the possibility of changing something based on honest feedback. My worst dealings as an editor or workshop leader have been with issues of confidence. Sometimes people show a huge amount of confidence in bad writing, sometimes they have no confidence in potentially very good writing. Both types can be tricky to give feedback.

SE: Agreeing to disagree is also part of the ground rules. One should definitely

feel able to say No, but not be overly stubborn about it. Sometimes we might say No with a firm conviction plus an argument to back that up. At other times, it could be more intuitive (liking the sound or rhythm or something else); a sense that this is what works best. However, I have had too many students simply refuse to tamper with their divine words once uttered. Usually, their feedback to others in a writing workshop shows a lack of depth and understanding, so there is some symmetry there. Lots of exposure to workshopping tends to cure that approach, but some people never get over it. Maybe they don't look for editors later in their writing life either, preferring to stick to their own counsel.

A willingness to consider changes is not the same as simply rolling over. The editor won't respect that, anyway. A good dialogue is based around disagreement, or chasing something like agreement – even if you don't get there (yet). As a writer, I like to get comments that make me think, and perhaps see things in a poem that I hadn't seen consciously before. A suggestion or challenge should never be dismissed too quickly. It could be a good opportunity to see your own work in a new way. And the editor needs to accept that the work is not their own, so the last say is not theirs either.

***Do You Believe in Magic?* – There is the very public aspect of 'airing dirty linen'. Editors and writers sometimes talk about how they operate but seldom about individual pieces in any detail. Does showing how you work risk exposing your foibles, uncertainties, and revealing the more ordinary (mechanical) side of writing as a craft?**

ML: Yes, it does expose you – but in my own case I don't mind revealing a bit of the mechanics. Jerome Rothenberg called poets “Technicians of the Sacred” – which always seemed a bit high-flown and new-age to me. The old-fashioned term “Word Smiths” seems heavy handed, clunky and sweaty. How about “Thought Plumbers”, “Syllable Tilers”, “Emotional Cable-layers”?

I don't mind showing drafts in a venue like this, but I wouldn't make a habit of it. Publishing drafts is of academic interest, but I think ultimately boring to most readers. My high school edition of Wilfred Owen's poems shows a lot of his drafts that Siegfried Sassoon edited. It's interesting for a while, but then you just want to go to those magnificent finished works and read them in clean

copy, forgetting about which bits came that way in the first draft, and which bits had to be worked on.

I know poets who would hate to have their (less than successful) drafts of poems shown – poets who burn their drafts to get rid of the evidence! That's a personal choice. There are poets who work totally alone and never ask for editing help – another personal and valid choice. There are plenty of brilliant loners. For me, I enjoy being a bit more social about how I work, with the proviso that there are poems I've put on paper which I know to be total duds, and I'll quietly edit or dispose of them all by myself.

SE: That side of it does give me pause. Part of me says that I will be shown up for the simple tradesman I really am - nothing inspired here, folks. Why would I want to show anyone the raw and clunky prototype stuff I have been bolting together in the shed at the bottom of the yard? Why draw attention to the clatter and the sparks of some crude and unfinished arc-welding, when eventually I could, instead, slide the sheet off a polished poem as if it were always such a complete design? On the other hand, some of that strange preliminary word work does seem magical to me too. Behind all the considerations and refinement of line breaks, sounds and the rest, is a part of the brain that works faster than I can follow. Yes, it may just be the body's weird electricity, but I am often astounded at the beauty it can produce. Magic? Sometimes it seems like it, and that's a good feeling.

We know everyone edits, and that there is, to a point, curiosity about how others 'do it'. As you say, it's interesting to get into a book of drafts by a famous poet, but after a while you tend to skip, looking for a poem you like – or for a sign that the poet knows that these are necessary efforts but essentially steps along the way and not the end itself.

I wouldn't discuss all my work publicly. A lot depends on the context.

ML: Well, we're going to do it here, aren't we? So, who's going first?

SE: Okay, I will. Here's the first draft of a poem of mine, plus the editing exchange between the two of us, followed by the poem as it finished up.

A Hope in Hell

Heaven is awful
all paperwork and chinless clerks
righteously bored and superior
preening their wings behind marble desks
while towering over them are the Songs of Joy
in files that soar like tall buildings

actually the files are all applications for holiday visas to Hell
to relieve the horrible day-in day-out predictable pleasures
the endless yoga lessons and choir practice
for just a while

my own request is half way up the biggest stack
and I don't know who to bribe
even pasting this poor complaint
onto a cloud
won't get me exiled
just forgiven and rehabilitated—
already you'll see its first words starting to fade
replaced by stately praise for Him
for God's sake!

ML: This one works well. Reminds me of Peter Goldsworthy in tone and his “Mass for the Middle Aged.” I think it just needs a little tightening. The title “A Hope in Hell” is misleading. What about “A Hope for Hell”? Or just “Hell” might be better? The first line “Heaven is awful” is good and grabs attention. The whole first stanza is good – heaven as some kind of boring patent office. Likewise, the first line of the second stanza grabs attention with a new tack – however, the next line is too prosy. It slows the poem too much. How about cutting it and just going for:

“to escape the endless yoga lessons and choir practice
for just a while.”

Pasting his complaint onto a cloud is a bit cliché - sorry, but I’m a cliché Nazi, and clouds and harps are just too obvious for heaven. Could you paste your complaint onto something else? Perhaps make it “only forgiven” because you’ve used “just” already in the stanza above? How about cutting the last line? It feels stronger to me if you finish on “praise for Him.”

SE: Thanks for those comments. I have clipped the title, as suggested, and refrained from inserting the word ‘hope’ into the body of the poem; just left it implied. Now the complaint has gone ‘onto the ether’ (should it be ‘into the ether’?) with that usual notion of being lost? Better ending now, thanks.

Hell

Heaven is awful;
all paperwork and chinless clerks,
righteously bored and superior,
preening their wings behind marble desks,
while towering over them are the Songs of Joy
in files that soar like tall buildings.

Actually, the files are all applications for holiday visas to Hell,

to escape the endless yoga lessons and choir practice
for just a while.

My own request is half way up the biggest stack
and I don't know who to bribe.

Even pasting this poor complaint
onto the ether

won't get me exiled,

only forgiven and rehabilitated.

Already you'll see its first words starting to fade,
replaced by stately praise for Him.

ML: This poem now has a nicely balanced 2-part structure. It feels tighter, even a bit more claustrophobic, which suits the idea of people being trapped in a tedious world they'd love to get out of – even if it's into a darker place. I'm still not sure about the pasting line – how about “pasting up this poor complaint” and dropping the next line?

SE: I'll think about it, but we better get on with one of yours. [Steve later dropped the 'pasting' and 'ether' references altogether, sticking with the simple fact of the complaint being made.]

Tide

Longing for alteration tonight

as the Richmond River

laps the foot of my bed and trawlers

blazing light come muttering home,

radios arcing from wheel-house to pillow.

Old Ballina oystermen know the way

to work these tides into luminous gain,

but how do I, thoughts closed tight

around my father's loss?

Life. Time. Love. Words –

something whispers from the shore

and in the curtains' dance.

A tide washes over his rippled sand brain,

makes an estuary without him tomorrow.

SE: There are some lovely images – best, I think, is the sea lapping the bed (Dylan Thomas). 'Longing for alteration' is too vague for me, though. I would think about letting the rest of the poem say what is happening and so begin at 'The Richmond River...'. "Life. Time. Love. Words" – consider deleting this line: it's too overt. The gravity of the poem is effectively contained in 'my father's loss' and I would make the suggested deletions confident that the idea in the poem is conveyed well without them.

ML: "Tide" has evolved a bit. When I first wrote it my father was still alive, and the poem was more a meditation on possible loss. In the meantime my father has died so the focus has moved more to that fact. I agree with the editing of the first line, but I don't want to lose the "tonight" sound, as it rhymes with "light" and "tight" later in the poem. It is, after all, a sonnet. So I also want to keep it at 14 lines by maintaining the "Life. Time. Love. Words" line. True, it's overt, but it's also speculative - in that it's meditating on what is lost, what can be held onto, when someone dies. Besides, I don't agree that poetry should avoid being overt at all costs - this is an orthodoxy among contemporary poets,

not necessarily something an audience would agree with. Sometimes I think poetry tries too hard to avoid being direct.

SE: Funny how later readings reveal new aspects of a poem - things you missed or new flavours and subtleties to things you had seen. I think there is a resonant sense of being lost or helpless associated with some of the specific images in the poem, and for me it represents its central theme. For instance, the conjunction of bed and river at the beginning allows the reader to infer that the bed can be seen as something like a boat (dinghy?) yet also a shore (that is, maybe on the water; maybe at its edge.) It's a nice doubling of ways to perceive the narrator's position.

The phrase 'my father's loss' is ambiguous. It can suggest something the father himself has lost, which is a less useful notion here than focusing on the idea of losing the father. Could it be 'closed tight / around my father?' or some other aspect of the father? Even his face or voice?

Okay, I'll go with the list, 'Life. Time. Love. Words -'. I was cautious because when I encounter a poem that uses the word 'eternity' I blanch. It's that recourse to bigger ideas than we can grasp that sometimes worries me, as if their very largeness will somehow elevate a poem that is otherwise lacking (abstract concepts as cargo cult?) and this poem didn't need that. This line in your poem offers large and slippery concepts, though they point in the real and understandable direction of the narrator's thoughts at that time. What would Neruda write, I wonder? There is that Latin thing about being more forthright? (More forthright than I can often bring myself to be.) On balance, stick with it.

You do need the idea of emptiness at the end, but the final line is a bit unwieldy. Can you rephrase/shorten slightly but keep the message?

ML: Thanks, Steve. Neruda certainly wasn't afraid of abstract nouns, but he rarely used them in a row like this! I hear your note of caution, but I want to risk it. Being overt can be effective coming as a sudden switch amid imagery. Originally the ambiguity of the loss was because my father had dementia – it was about what he was losing as well as us losing him and hence the “rippled sand brain” image at the end. Now I've made my father's death explicit in the new version and changed the end. Is it better or not?

Tide

Tonight the Richmond River
laps the foot of my bed
and trawlers blazing light
come muttering home,
radios arcing from wheel-house to pillow.
Old Ballina oystermen know the way
to work these tides into luminous gain,
but how do I, thoughts closed tight
around my father's death?
Life. Time. Love. Words –
something whispers from the shore
and in the curtains' dance.
A tide washes over the rippled sand,
makes the estuary without him tomorrow.

SE: Yes, the 'father' line has more punch now. Nothing like a well delivered 'death' in a poem, and so many are not. This, of course, is certainly not to demean the real events on which it is based, but I am trying to argue the poem as a poem. A little niggle - would you consider changing the order of 'Life. Time. Love. Words'? I just read it as if it were 'life-time' and I'm not sure that doubleness works. But 'Time-Life' is a magazine. Even delete 'Life'? Not sure you'd go for that, though!

ML: I think I'll leave "Tide" as is - I really want 4 stresses in that "Life. Time. Love. Words." line. Don't know why. But thanks for your work on this. I feel like the poem has improved in the process.

Postscript -

SE: And so we went on, eventually calling a necessary but temporary halt to the editing and discussion so we knew what versions of the poems we would be discussing in public. It was equivalent to taking a snapshot; you know that the action is still rolling. My revision hasn't stopped, but I wanted to add that I found Mike's comments very useful. Sometimes I hesitate over a line and feel like he is still looking over my shoulder, and I reckon that's a good thing. Want to do it again, Mike?

Steve Evans

Flinders University

Steve.Evans@flinders.edu.au

Mike Ladd

ABC Radio

Ladd.Michael@abc.net.au