

## Poets and Painters 2013

*How shall the artist raise his hands  
against the weight of time and use?  
One must be still to see the way  
light comes into a room. There stands  
an empty canvas primed with grey.  
The colours of the world fly loose...*

In the European tradition there has always been this to-ing and fro-ing between poet and painter, word and image, singing and thinging. From Homer's precise, exhaustive description in the 18th Book of *The Iliad* of the shield that Hephaestus made for Achilles, through John Keats' aesthetic meditation on an idealised 'Grecian Urn', to W.H. Auden's modernist perspective on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, ekphrasis – writing about, towards or around a specimen of the plastic arts – has been a popular tactic of western poetics. Of course, it works the other way as well, as can be seen in Sandro Botticelli's drawings of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or William Blake's watercolours of Dante and of Milton, or Gustave Doré's engravings of Dante, of Milton and of Coleridge.... Sometimes influence even bounces back, as when Pablo Picasso's painting *The Old Guitarist* inspired Wallace Stevens' poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, which in turn generated a folio of etchings by David Hockney.

In fact, against Walter Pater's famous dictum that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music', poetry and painting often seem to aspire to the condition of each other. John Brack originally wanted to be a poet; Jasper

**Johns, too. Nobel literary laureate Derek Walcott originally trained as a painter. Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood dedicated several works to her good friend, the Hydro engineer, painter and occasional versifier, Edwin Tanner.**

**It would appear that poetry and painting are somehow fundamentally connected. Both art forms are concerned with distillation, with drawing from the world – from the blooming, buzzing confusion of sense-perception; from the infinite scope of space and time, of cartography and history; from the shuffling, rotating kaleidoscope of human culture; from the baffling, staggering gamut of human relations felt and observed; even from the time taken and processes enacted in their own creation – something of intense meaningfulness, something wonderful in its clarity, or at least clear in its wonder.**

**Both often have a point of origin in a small epiphany, a fugitive intuition of significance. The thing zen-immediately perceived – a figure, an incident, an accidental conjunction of colours or a flickering patch of sunlight; a beginning word or turning phrase; a half-felt emotion or blurrily-inferred narrative – provides the artist with the key or hinge which opens the hopeful box of metaphorical expression. So much depends on this, just as so much depends on William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow standing in the rain.**

**Then comes the craft: the discipline of foot and rhyme and strophe, of tone and line and stroke, the laborious process of continuous correction, of calibration against an as-yet uncertain ultimate vision. Slowly, a pattern, a rhythm, a hypothetical artistic physics begins to build, arising from and extending the connection of part to part. Slowly, slowly, a formal structure, a matrix for meaning, is adopted or adapted or invented. Slowly, slowly, slowly, superfluity is scraped back, redundancy removed, excess excised.**

**But the hardest and the best thing of all is managing to sustain – through all this cultural labour, all the necessary lapidary refinements, all the polishing and the glazing – that original, momentary instinct of *poesis* or *pictura*. If you are good, and if you are lucky, the sensual and conceptual vibrations of your work will hold the reader or viewer for a moment outside of place and time, at the slippery edge of verbal or visual meaning, and will convey that tantalizing, essential matter that first caught your eye or ear, and through which you felt the plangent beating of the human heart.**

*... I'll set this tongue of cadmium red  
down on the dove-grey canvas, here.  
The heaviness of time will fall  
away; all is not done or said  
or painted yet. It glows. Now all  
the colours of the earth draw near.*

**Gwen Harwood, from *The Red Leaf (to Edwin Tanner)***