Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Daniel Cowper and Emily Osborne

Bunkong Tuon · Tuesday, March 29th, 2022

For this sixty-seventh post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Daniel Cowper and Emily Osborne.

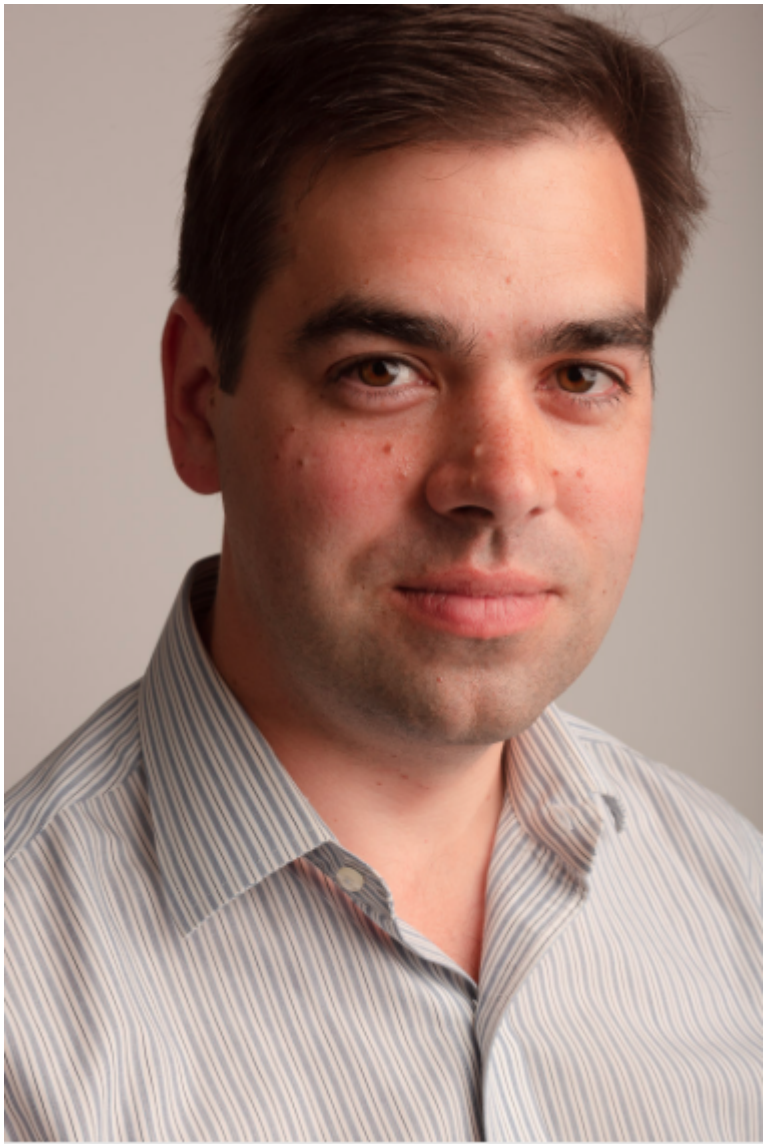
Poets on Craft is a cyberspace for contemporary poets to share their thoughts and ideas on the process of poetry and for students to discover new ways of approaching the writing of poetry. In the face of a pandemic that is both viral and political, it is a resource for strength and creativity, friendship and beauty, love and rejuvenation. It is thus a celebration of the beautiful and eclectic minds of contemporary poets.

The format is as follows. I emailed poets these questions: “Generally speaking, how do you build a poem? How do you start a poem? How do you move from one line to the next? How do you know when to end a poem?”

With the exception of length requirement, poets are free to respond in whatever manner they find appropriate to their styles and concerns.

Access to Poets on Craft is democratic. Generally speaking, anyone can have free access to these posts. With that said, please consider supporting our poets by clicking on the links in their bios and purchasing their work.

This series is intended for educational purposes only.



Daniel Cowper is the author of a book of poetry, *Grotesque Tenderness* (2019, McGill-Queens University Press), and a chapbook, *The God of Doors*, which was published as winner of Frog Hollow Press' chapbook contest. He lives on a small island off the coast of Canada.

I've recently been working on both short lyrics and a book-length poem. That's forced me to think about the contrast between how long and short poems are written, and function.

I find there are many ways to write short poems: they can be improvised like jazz, or assembled like clockwork. In the editing process, short poems (unless formally rigidified) are malleable, like plasticine. Major changes can be readily made and unmade.

Working on a long poem, however, feels like carving a monumental sculpture in the dark — any particular moment's labour has a minor effect on the whole, and when I'm working I cannot naturally see how the detail I'm working on fits into the whole. The more forethought is invested, the better. Dante not only knew where his *Comedy* would end when he started work on it, but knew the path he would take to get there and even what the last word of the poem would be.

A larger scale also implies a need for more complex content. A short poem can be mainly descriptive and declarative: it needs to offer enchantment, but the spell need not last long. To justify their length, the long poems I admire all deliver compelling narrative or analysis/meditation.

In other words, a long poem should try to attain the merits of memorable narrative or good philosophy — or both — while continuing to enchant.

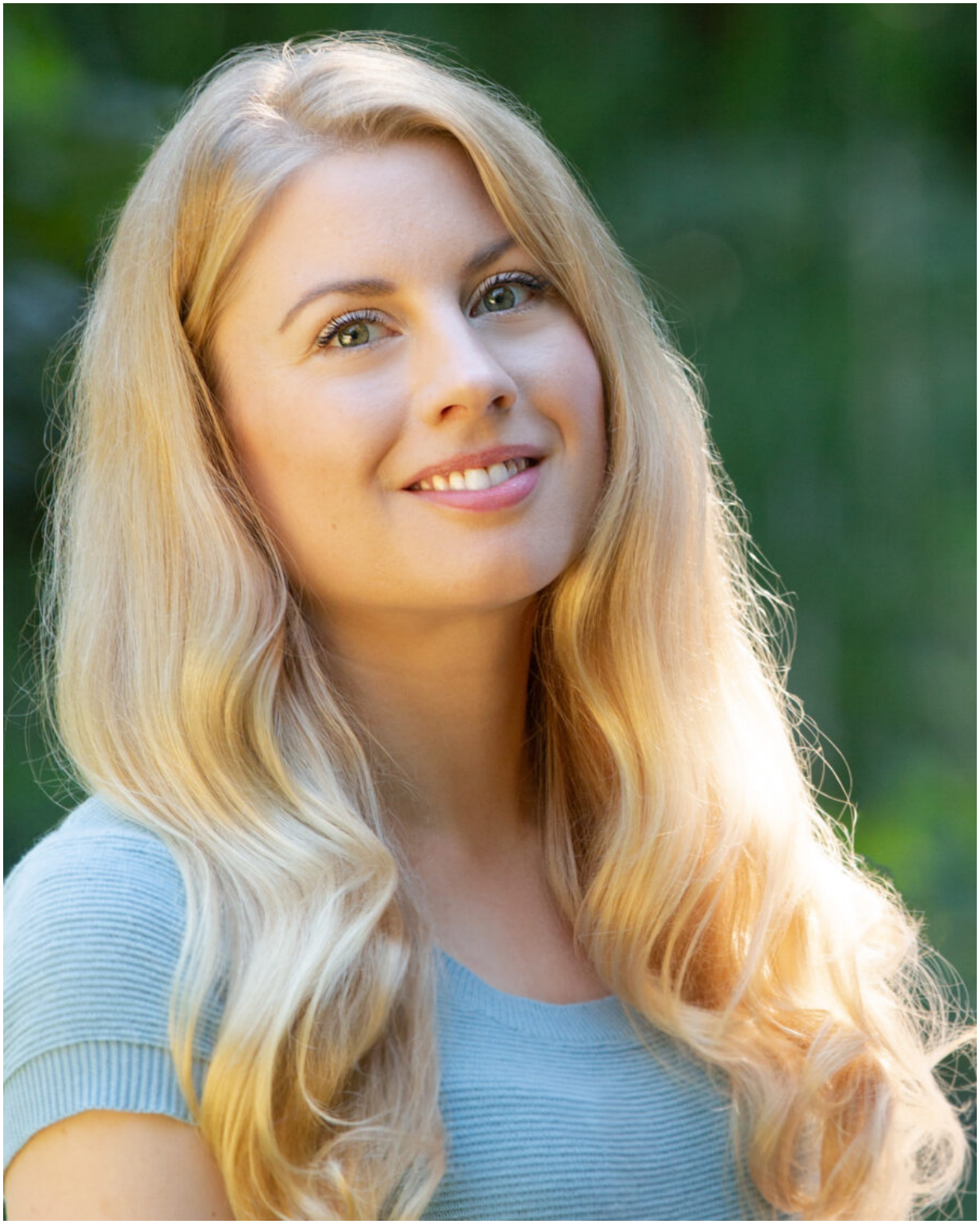
Because of scale and complexity, a long poem requires special preparation. The characters, scenes, and plot lines need to be researched and developed as if you were writing a novel. The ideas need to be researched and fleshed out as if you were writing an essay or a treatise on the topic.

Even in a short poem, accommodating a reader's limited attention span is a challenge. Composing a long poem requires a strategy to accommodate my own limited attention span.

The best way to do that, I find, is to design the poem so that it can be broken down into sections I can work on separately. This can be done sequentially, by breaking the poem up into chapters, or non-linearly, by weaving the poem from separable threads or figures. The sequential strategy is effective as long as the poem is primarily linear. But not all poems are primarily linear.

The sculptor Auguste Rodin used a non-linear process for his magnum opus *The Gates of Hell*: he designed the doors themselves; designed the general interplay of figures within that framework; then developed each figure in isolation until, perfected, it was ready to be inserted into the place assigned to it. I think this is a good model to follow.

For example, the long poem I have been working on lends itself to Rodin's approach, since it employs a frame narrative, and interpolates within it eight interconnected stories. The frame narrative naturally subdivides into over twenty sections, so the manuscript can be broken into manageable chunks.



Emily Osborne's debut collection of poetry, *Safety Razor*, is forthcoming from Gordon Hill Press in Spring 2023. Her poetry, Icelandic-to-English verse translations and short fiction have been published in *Vallum*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, *The Polyglot*, *Barren Magazine* and elsewhere. Emily earned a PhD in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature from the University of Cambridge, and is currently working on a full-length manuscript of translations of skaldic poetry.

Like many poets, the first inklings of a poem usually involve an arresting image, a haunting memory, or a curious subject. Then a shuffling of images into words begins, when small additions and changes lead to larger movements and form, like releasing a flip book under the thumb.

The next crucial step in writing a poem for me is R&R (reading and research). Whatever the subject that has initially inspired me to write – be it a memory of finding a can nearly bursting with botulism, or the experience of a thunderclap migraine – reading around the subject in the early stages improves the final poem immeasurably. If I have gathered written or mental notes on stimulating vocabulary and concepts, then I have this great store of treasure as I begin drafting. The poem mined out of this treasure moves in surprising directions while still containing the nuanced strands that pull it together.

Occasionally a lyric's form becomes apparent to me early on, for example, it is sonnet-length or requires short lines to best communicate its emotional content. More often I have less initial clarity on what form the finished poem will take. Therefore, I tend to write longer lines of twelve to fifteen syllables that are left-justified. Later I break these lines up in countless ways, playing with differing combinations of syllable counts, enjambment, end stops, stanza length and centering.

Recently I wrote a first draft that was entirely left-aligned with long lines, only to re-read it later and discover the poem worked best by moving across the page, its short lines barely touching. This lightness in the form played with the poem's shifts between weighty subjects and humour, revelation and concealment.

When are poems "finished?" At times I have thought a poem had a clever ending, or cohered well, only to have a reader say that the ending fell flat, that parts were opaque, that really this one poem is two poems. Feedback like this can be jarring when I've worked so carefully on a draft and it's difficult to "see" the poem differently.

However, the practice of translating verse from Old Norse-Icelandic into English has helped me accept criticism, for it has altered my perception of poems as uniquely closed-off creations of singular minds. Rather, poems move beyond their original authors and are recreated within limitless contexts and minds.

Writers in the ancient and medieval world sometimes included an *envoi* urging the work to "Go forth" through time and space. Once I've finished a draft of a poem, I remind myself that it will "go forth," and suddenly, it is no longer an unalterable entity.

(*Featured image is by Alexis Rhone Fancher*)

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