The Activity of Language: An Interview with Richard Deming

The first time I heard of Richard Deming was not at a poetry reading or a lecture on American literature. It was rather on the fifty-fourth floor of a condominium complex in Chicago, on Valentine’s Day, at a late-night gathering of poets, artists, professors, and literati. Snow was falling in crystalline drifts onto the river far below the balcony; from where I stood braced against the railing, I could hear the excited talk and easy laughter of the guests inside. Worn out from the day’s round of events at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs annual conference, which I was attending for the first time to present a pedagogy paper, I was more than content to just listen. I spent part of my evening talking with Nancy Kuhl, an exceptionally talented poet and the wife of Richard Deming. In the course of our conversation, Richard’s name came up; I recalled then that I, in fact, owned a book of his poetry, bought for a poetry class I was taking that semester. Nancy’s Wife of the Left Hand is among my favorite books of poetry, so learning that Let’s Not Call It Consequence was written by her husband sparked a new interest in the volume. We parted ways as the party wound down to a close, set to meet again later in the spring when Richard and she would be reading at Chapman University. Richard Deming, I soon learned, is a singularly intriguing individual. His poetry is raw and explosive, evocative and beautiful; it surprises you by turns into fits of laughter, thick clouds of thought, or the fleeting ghost of a somber smile. His poems in Let’s Not Call It Consequence are never expected, never ordinary; yet for all that he is doing something new and delightful, he is tremendously aware of the poetic past upon which he is building. Richard Deming visited
by Annie Freshwater

Chapman University on April 14, 2009, shortly after he’d been named as the winner of the Norma Farber First Book Award. In the wake of his visit, I had the opportunity to interview Richard, who holds his PhD in American literature and poetics from the University of Buffalo and currently teaches in the English department at Yale University. His words here, as well as his writing, made me rethink much of what I thought I knew about poetry.

Annie Freshwater: Big question first: What is poetry to you?

Richard Deming: I have to say that it is, more or less, an impossible question to answer in a way that doesn’t strike one as being either reductive or pretentious or both. In a very real sense it is certainly something much bigger than I am, and were I to answer, I would need to somehow account for hundreds of years of tradition. I’m reminded of that moment in Euthyphro when Socrates asks Euthyphro what piety is. Euthyphro gives various examples of piety, and Socrates points out that giving examples does not offer the essence of what piety is. The issue is, of course, that Euthyphro is decidedly self-righteous about piety. So, I can’t give a specific definition that would cover it all, that would give a representation of the so-called essence of poetry. I work a lot on poetics, which is different altogether. There, I’m looking at (and for) the aesthetic values and ethical and existential implications evident in a given poet’s poems and his or her claims about poetry. The best I can offer is that poetry is language awake to itself as constructed, composed—language awake to itself as language, as language itself being an experience of the world and a way of experiencing the world. Poetry’s self-consciousness then communicates a sense that we are at all points ourselves made of words. Emily Dickinson writes, “exultation is the going / of the inland
soul to sea,” which seems to me a way of beginning to talk about the experience of poetry. I like also to think that poetry isn’t done—in that way, we’re still in the process of discovering what it is or what it may be. This is very parallel to developments in visual art. There, the question is how does one offer a definition of art that accounts for Chris Burden crawling across broken glass, Duchamp’s ready-mades, Monet’s water lilies, and Caravaggio’s saints? However, all this isn’t something one thinks about when sitting down to write. Yet, somewhere in the back of the mind this sits so as to keep one—that is to say, me—honest. It is a way of keeping in view the fact that a poet is responsible to and for language. All of us are responsible in this way, but we forget. Thus, poetry has something to do with turning back towards that responsibility—which is both a duty as well as an ability, an ability to respond. These seem a bit abstract, but the question was as well, so I guess that’s fair.

Freshwater: I love the idea of poetry being somehow alive, in a different way than we think about other literature: it’s aware of itself as language and it’s still in the process of becoming. And I agree that, when trying to define poetry, we often come off as either pretentious or too simplistic. You mention that you work a lot on poetics. What exactly is poetics? What led you to that field of study?

Deming: In terms of the poetry I’m engaged in, there is no overarching, received form. In that way, each word is discovering and articulating the possibilities of its form. In that way, each poem is specific to itself, to its concerns. It needs to discover and reveal what constitutes its idea of form. These premises lead to (and from) my interest in poetics. In the wake of modernism, there is no single orthodoxy of poetry—no one way that it must be. Because of that, one
cannot point to simply one shared body of knowledge about what constitutes a poem or what the function for poetry may be. At the same time—or because of that—the responsibility for being aware of why and how one makes the choices one makes is vitally necessary. But to offer a general definition, poetics is a form of inquiry into the theories and ideas of poetry. It moves beyond just the question of how one writes a sonnet to issues about the ethical, epistemological, historical, and cultural conditions that inform poetry. It might be thought of as a form of aesthetics in philosophical terms. I was reading Harold Rosenberg the other day. Rosenberg was one of the two most important art writers of the post-war period (along with Clement Greenberg). In his important essay “Criticism and Its Premises,” I found a very poignant and succinct articulation of the arts in the Modern and now contemporary period. We can easily substitute (or merely include) poetry every time he says art: Modern art is saturated with issues and ideologies that reflect the technological, political, social, and cultural revolutions of the past one hundred years. Regardless of the degree to which the individual artist is conscious of these issues, he in fact responds to them in choosing among aesthetic and technical alternatives. By choosing a certain mode of handling line, form, and color he will have affiliated himself with an aesthetic grounded on the obligation of art to communicate judgments of the artist’s environment, while a different choice will have identified him with the concept that for art reality is that which comes into being through the act of painting. Thus, choices having to do with method in art become in practice attitudes regarding the future of man. Hence, art in our time cannot escape having a political content and moral implications. In many ways, I am not overly interested in simply expressing my emotional life in the sense of representing it or
presenting it—at least not in any way that is sentimental in the ways that it tries to elicit some sympathetic response. Instead, the poem should enact and make possible the experience of being alive—that experience is funny, surprising, complex, frustrating. But I don’t want the poem to describe that experience, but enact it and to enable a reader to have an experience as well. Wallace Stevens writes, “To read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act.”

**Freshwater:** You hold a PhD in American literature and poetics. What led you to that particular literary genre and, along with that, to poetics and poetry?

**Deming:** How I came to poetics was in small part through Ralph Waldo Emerson—an early and abiding influence—who was a philosopher deeply aware of how the making of texts and the making of our selves are analogous and linked, in that both are negotiations of language. Also, my own interest in poetry leans to the philosophical, with poems being acts of thinking one’s way in the world and into a world. This may seem grandiloquent, but that sense of there being stakes is very important to me. “Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world,” writes Stevens. I would say it is the enactment of that relation. I knew that I wanted to teach and be a researcher and that is what one does in order to teach literature. Though, I also wanted that intense intellectual experience that is a doctoral program, especially as it was at University of Buffalo. Annie

**Freshwater:** From reading your collection Let’s Not Call It Consequence, I can definitely see how each poem discovers its own form as it is being written. Students new to poetry writing who work primarily in free verse seem to have difficulty with this concept, at least in my experience. Upon encountering a free verse poem, they
say that the poem simply has no form or structure and cannot seem to readily grasp the concept that it has its own unique structure. How do you think this problem can best be overcome? Or, to put the question differently: How do we as poets, students of writing, and readers bridge the gap between more formal poetry (sonnets, etc.) and free verse?

**Deming:** Part of my response will sound metaphysical: everything that exists has form. Poetry, no matter its tradition, explores language as form. In that way, I don’t think of there being a gap that needs to be bridged. I can’t shake the feeling that the term free verse is somehow pejorative, or at least is meant to indicate that a poet is not attending to form. I do think that there are such poets, perhaps, that write in that way; they might be appropriately called free verse poets. In any event, I don’t feel that free verse is what I write. Partly this is because I don’t feel a sense of freedom when I write. I realize that this might be a self-consciousness that I have inherited. Williams turned to his idea of the “variable foot” as a way of dealing with the charges that his poetry wasn’t poetry or that what he wrote lacked discipline and rigor. The variable foot never quite cohered as an idea, but Williams was still needing to make the case that there were legitimate alternatives to traditional forms and he tried to do so using terms similar to those used by more traditional poets. For me, the most important, most galvanizing statement of poetics comes from Williams’s “Introduction to The Wedge.” There, he makes the claim that “all sonnets say the same thing.” In rhetorical terms—and a sonnet is more than just a certain amount of lines and feet—a sonnet does adhere to a certain predictability. The traditional form allows for that and depends on that recurring form because it becomes easier to evaluate the success of a poem based on how it both conforms to and
plays with expectations built into the form. If students think that a traditional poem has a form and a poem such as mine or lots of other people’s doesn’t, it is because they haven’t learned to recognize a form on its own terms. Williams’s argument was that a traditional form is so laden with history that it does not express the contemporary experience. What we need is form that reflects and is shaped by one’s immediate context. Otherwise, one’s thinking strains to fit the verse that it is given, rather than finding a measure that speaks the present tense. But much of this seems not so radical, since the modernists were the ones that began this conversation. It is a bit like someone suggesting that nonrepresentational painting isn’t art. Thus, for students the issue might simply be the need to read more poetry written in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**Freshwater**: Your approach to form needing to speak the present tense seems an extension of your earlier comments. Did you start writing poetry with this wonderful concept in mind of the poem being alive?

**Deming**: This is something that I came to largely after being frustrated with traditional forms and finding many poets who had felt the same way. I ended up replicating the process of American poetry in the sense that poets like Adrienne Rich, James Wright, and others went through. Even prior to them, Williams, for instance, wrote a very traditional verse at the very beginning. There was no moment of clear enlightenment and hopefully I’m still figuring it all out. One’s relationship to form evolves, hopefully, as one continues to read, learn, and experience new things. For instance, as I get older (I’m 39) my own relationship to my own bodily form keeps changing. But in terms of my own development, what happened was that I became
frustrated that form pulled people away from the tensions within a line and even between two words. But at first, I wrote sonnets and the like. Moreover, there are iambic lines all through my poems. People who are interested in poetry should know those things, I think. One needs to know the tradition.

**Freshwater:** The idea of a poem being alive itself, rather than simply expressing your emotional life, is extremely important, I believe—and it’s important to fiction as well as to poetry. We have the constant mantra in my fiction workshops of “show don’t tell,” but you don’t hear that so much in a poetry workshop. Yet the poems that most impact the reader are those which have a sense of their own experience, rather than those that relate the author’s experience.

**Deming:** Poetry workshops have their own truisms, of course. There doesn’t tend to be the same problem with exposition that prose writers contend with. But then there are poets who try to give some seemingly profound maxim and yet not give a context that gives rise to that insight. For me, Robert Frost all too often falls into that trap.

**Freshwater:** Along with Emerson, who have some of your other important poetic influences been?

**Deming:** The range of influences goes from the obvious such as Walt Whitman and Dickinson to Stevens and Williams. These are safe answers, but they are true. Stevens and Williams are inexhaustible for me. Every time, reading Stevens is like the first time. For the generation after that: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn. These are all Black Mountain writers (loosely determined) and I am deeply invested in the form of aesthetic thinking engendered at and by Black Mountain College, both the
writers and the visual artists that came from there. I’d say that Robert Rauschenberg, for example, has been hugely important to the way I think about poems. John Ashbery has been very influential. James Schuyler more and more, lately. Then let me go roughly by generations: Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, Paul Auster, Joe Brainard, Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop. Then, Peter Gizzi, Elizabeth Willis, Cole Swenson, Andrew Joron, Forrest Gander. Finally, my own generation: Nancy Kuhl, Julie Carr, Roberto Tejada, Joel Bettridge, Cathy Eisenhower, Graham Foust, Mike Kelleher, Anna Leahy, Logan Esdale, Matthew Cooperman, Dan Bouchard, Anna Moschovakis, and lots more. As Phylum Press, we have published most of the poets who are most important to me from our generation. And these are just the Americans!

**Freshwater**: How have your studies in American literature informed your writing? You mentioned a lot of American poets who influence you; did you come across these writers in your doctoral program, or since then?

**Deming**: Some of the poets I did come upon while getting my doctorate, of course. My studies deepened my reading and allowed me the time to make the connections I wanted or needed to make. I also was around teachers who were intense and thoughtful and made me want to follow up connections and thoughts. Given that my thinking stands at the crossroads of poetry, poetics, and philosophy, the doctorate gave me the opportunity to read seriously in what constitutes a tradition of language and interpretation. Studying American literature and philosophy gave me a sense of thinking about where ideas come from and what constitutes my own poetics. One needn’t have a PhD to do that, however. Perhaps just as importantly, I
went to a program (University of Buffalo) where the most contemporary of poetry was taken seriously. So I learned a great deal about what serious poets of my generation and those slightly older were doing. You asked about movements that non-established poets might not be aware of and my feeling is that those non-established poets ought to be the ones most aware of what is going at any given time as they are still sorting through their poetic investments and discovering things. That process hopefully never ends but the student needs to be moving around with all senses open to pick things up, especially the newest things, as that is what they are part of.

**Freshwater:** Earlier you said that free verse has become a kind of pejorative term; I’d add that it has also become, for some, a catch-all term that allows anything to be called poetry. You suggest that one remedy for lack of understanding is to read more poetry from the latter half of the twentieth century. Do you have any particular recommendations, perhaps some of those you’ve mentioned, or others?

**Deming:** Actually, reading poetics would be one way to learn about the developments in poetry, particularly in terms of form. One thing that has influenced me is the work of the objectivists—Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, and others. William Carlos Williams was claimed by this group, as well. There was also Olson’s description of projectivist verse and the Black Mountain poets—Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, Dorn, Jonathan Williams, and others. It isn’t too often that these poets are referred to as free verse, since they conceive of form in very particular ways that indicate their poetics carry a thinking about poetic making beyond whether a poem is free of traditional forms. Free verse tends to refer to poems’ comprised of lines that
have no principle (usually an a priori one) of composition that guides their construction. Many of the poets I mentioned are not systematic but still have a clear idea about form that opens up options for poems; it is not merely chopped prose or is somehow wholly free. The same can be said of Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Palmer, and others who are more contemporary—these writers are obsessed with from even if that rarely engage traditional forms. Free verse just isn’t an apt term in these cases. In terms of my own development, a key book was the anthology New American Poetry. This book, published in 1960, is a major statement in putting together a tradition of poetry that challenged certain traditions or at least provided an alternative. What is most telling about that book is that it includes poetics essays that help create conversations about what poetic form might include. It was a setting out of possible new directions—not necessarily for the sake of being new (though Ezra Pound’s directive was to “make it new,” and Pound was a central branch, or galvanizing, progenitive force, in this burgeoning tradition)—but for creating flexible forms that could speak from and for an individual’s perspective and moment. There was, of course, great controversy at the time about this kind of radical shift in poetics. In fact, that period constitutes a famous anthology war, between that collection (edited by Donald Allen) and a collection edited by Donald Hall, Louis Simpson, and Robert Pack that was far more conservative in its stance towards receiving history. This set up different camps, but, interestingly, there were many who defected and crossed lines. In fact, poetry is, to a large extent, determined or constituted by its self-conscious exploration of form as it ties to meaning and the possibility of meaningfulness. It can do other things, of course, but whatever it does (from elegy to playfulness), poetry as a genre maintains the awareness that it is an activity of language and
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Freshwater: What other solutions exist specifically for the re-education of readers and students, especially for those who want to write poetry themselves? In other words, can you give student poets like myself some sort of corrective lens prescription with which to properly view free verse?

Deming: I’m reluctant to see anyone as being in need of correction. I don’t mean to say that free verse doesn’t exist; indeed, there are poets who seem to be aptly described as writing it. However, if what I said about poetry being deeply invested in discovering the possibilities of form—traditional or otherwise—is valid, then poetry without an attention to form, to sonic and semantic tension and resolution, may not be poetry. The lens need not be corrective so much as cleaned. One way to do this is to find strong poets writing today and work backwards. If one likes the work of a given contemporary poet, one should find out the poets he or she read when that poet was beginning. Most importantly is to read closely, to acknowledge that form is part of meaning, especially in poetry.

Freshwater: I’m a fiction writer primarily, so poetry (as a very personal definition) is a way of abandoning all the rules of writing that have been so deeply ingrained in me and allowing language to guide me in place of my rational mind. I can play with language in an entirely different way in poetry than I can with fiction—without narrative obligations, anything goes, provided it furthers the poem. What’s your takes on this?

Deming: Poetry has a much longer history than fiction. In many ways, any poet who sits down to write needs to address that history.
Moreover, poetry is concentrated in terms of specific attention to each word. In that way, there is actually more pressure, less flexibility. For a fiction writer, narrative flow can move the text along so not every word needs to hold its own. There is a certain need for exposition, and the forward motion takes the weight off the local and put its on the overall structure. These generalities about fiction and poetry break down some, since any poet also has to think of the general structure of the poem. And of course, fiction writers don’t always neglect the words themselves. I don’t write fiction, so it is hard for me to compare or contrast, but still I know the idea of that many words as most novels are comprised would overwhelm many poets. Though, of course, there are people who write both.

**Freshwater:** Where do you see the similarities and the differences between poetry and fiction? From the standpoint of a writer and a reader, how do you see the two connected (or disconnected)?

**Deming:** The most important difference is that fiction is primarily driven by an invented narrative. There can be attention to musicality, but without that invented narrative, it isn’t fiction. A lyric poem is driven by musical and semantic tension arranged usually by lines, sometimes by sentences. It can have a narrative, but without the musicality and attention to form, it isn’t a poem.

**Freshwater:** Do you see any points where fiction and poetry intersect? I’m always fascinated by the interaction of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, visual art, etc.

**Deming:** In reality, I tend to be more interested in the differences between poetry and prose because it is by seeing those distinctions that one comes to have a sense of what poetry is and what it is
capable of doing. I tend to be interested in fiction writers (Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Auster, Don Delilo) who upset narrative conventions and move close to poetry’s attention to its own form—though I’m less interested in the other direction because narrative tends to be something that I find too limiting, too much something that insists on shaping experience over and above an attention to specific aspects of language and form. That said, I agree that the interactions of poetry and film and art are fascinating. My earlier quoting of Rosenberg or Arthur Danto bears out, I hope, that studying the development of visual art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—particularly abstractionism—sheds light on how to read contemporary poetry because of art’s own breaking from a mimetic form of representation to a kind of art that discovers itself in the act of being formed (to put things a bit baroquely).

**Freshwater:** You’ve sketched your poetic development for us, in terms of what led you to writing poetry the way that you do now. Where do you see your poetry going in the future? We’ve seen the movements from formalism to free verse in poetic aesthetics; what (if any) developments are there on the poetic horizon?

**Deming:** Well, we come back to the earlier problem. Free verse is, for me, an inapt and no longer wholly relevant term. It has been dominant for so long that one can just say poetry, and this is simply one of the possibilities open to a poet. The poets who strike me as writing free verse are poets who are writing poems guided primarily by narrative or specific ideas and who are not working with form as part of how a poem means. So I don’t think that free verse is new—at least not since Whitman. Even now people are working with Flarf or with conceptual poetry. OULIPO keeps inventing new forms that become, ideally, new
traditions or at least that are liable for distribution. There are poets and artists who are bringing visual art, performance, and language/poetry into close contact. In many ways, the edgiest work blurs generic distinctions between kinds of art. Yet, none of this is new either. In many ways, I am drawn to the ideas of the philosopher Danto and his belief that we are at the end of history, at least when it comes to art. This doesn’t mean that things stop happening. Rather, it means that there cannot be said to exist a narrative of artistic development that is continuing to open outward. There is now no one way that art has to be, must be, in order to be art. Thus, Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes are art and so is straight representational portraiture of the kind done by Andrew Wythe or even Eric Fishl. These modes exist side by side and can be called art; though we can still argue over the aesthetic value of instances of art, the definition of art as a category widens to incorporate vast differences. So the idea of development of the art is paradoxical to me. I see that with poetry as well. In poetry, we have Christian Bök, J. D. McClatchy, and Leslie Scalapino all at once coexisting and all are poetry. Their genealogies are vastly different and even incompatible in terms of value—but they all exist and are legitimately poetry. My general insistence about poetry is that it focuses one’s attention on the here and now. Poetry makes possible opportunities for personally encountering and wrestling with language at the level of the word. This requires attention to the word and to how we make sense of words. It is the mind tracing its motions and discovering them. The future will take care of itself. It is hard enough for any poet or artist to work on what he or she is doing at the moment. With hope, the piece that one is working on is preparing him or her for the next thing. But if I could see the next
thing, I’d be doing the next thing. The present is, in this way, the future.