

# Notes for Broadsheet Poets

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### On the Nature of Poetry and the Creative Process

There are as many ways of describing poetry and the poetic process as there are poets. Among the definitions of poetry that come to mind are William Wordsworth's 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.' For T.S. Eliot, 'poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.' In the words of Emily Dickinson: 'To see the Summer Sky/ Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie.' Wallace Stevens confirms 'poetry is the supreme fiction,' while Gustave Flaubert reckons 'poetry is as precise as geometry.' 'Imaginary gardens with real toads in them,' is Marianne Moore's verdict. For Percy Shelley, 'poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.' Stéphane Mallarmé thinks, 'It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things.' For Frost, 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation.' God is the perfect poet in the view of Robert Browning, while for Philip Larkin, 'Poetry is nobody's business except the poet's, and everybody else can fuck off.'

All of the above reflections on poetry are valid; all represent 'a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:/.../ Leaving one still with the intolerable struggle/ With words and meaning.'<sup>1</sup> Besides, there are several forms of poetic expression, from epics – such as *Mahabharata* (Ganesha is attributed to have written the words uttered by Vyasa) or *Ramayana* (Valmiki), *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude or the Cantos* – to haikus, a form of Japanese poetry composed of seventeen syllables. Matsuo Basho established the rules for writing haikus, though modern poets have interpreted it in their own way. As Roger McGough wrote: 'The only problem/ with Haiku is that you just/ get started and then.'

The difficulty of capturing the essence of poetry is its inherent characteristic; its unwillingness to be measured, defined, pigeon-holed. Poems are words that 'strain,/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden' of definition, 'Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/ Will not stay still.'<sup>2</sup> Poetic self-consciousness has been defined in various ways, sometimes via negatives, not unlike the Sanskrit definition of divinity, '*neti, neti*' (*not this, not this*). Keats provides an excellent definition when he refers to a poet's 'Negative Capability,' 'when a man is capable of

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker,' *Four Quartets*

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton,' *Four Quartets*

being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’

For Housman: ‘Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out... Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.’ There are two essential aspects of poetry being referred to here – its ability to give pleasure and that such pleasure can be derived without fully understanding its meaning. Some emphasize the ‘giving of pleasure’ in poetry as being its primary objective. Understanding what a poem ‘means or is’, should be secondary preoccupation. As Eliot said with reference to Dante’s poetry, ‘Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.’ In fact, perfect understanding may extinguish pleasure. ‘Our meddling intellect/ Misshapes the beauteous forms of things –/ We murder to dissect’ warns Wordsworth, who also wrote: ‘The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.’

Dylan Thomas said something similar but added another attribute: ‘You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it tick.... You’re back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps... so that something that is *not* in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in.’ In addition to giving pleasure, for Dylan Thomas the mystery of a poem emerges from something that is not explicitly stated in the poem, as it were. The emphasis is not on understanding, but on instinct, mystery, or the chemistry of words. ‘A poem should not mean, but be.’

Thus poetry, like love, gives most pleasure in the discovery, when you are first ‘hooked’, and then discover the levels of hidden treasures in the fullness of time. A poem ‘begins in delight and ends in wisdom’ Robert Frost said. The best poems are those you keep returning to, finding resonances you had missed, which yield themselves only after several visitations. It is the same with any great work of art; it never ceases to give you pleasure in its ability to open new ways of seeing things. A good reader is one who has the diligence to undertake such a treasure hunt, allowing the poem to reveal itself, without diminishing the pleasure taken in such pursuit. I am inclined to agree with Robert Penn Warren when he states, “The poet is in the end probably more afraid of the dogmatist who wants to extract the message from the poem and throw the poem away than he is of the sentimentalist who says, “Oh, just let me enjoy the poem.”

Whether one is reading Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* or his *Beastly Tales*, ghazals by Rumi or Mimi Khalvati, Shakespeare’s sonnets, or poetry of E.E. Cummings, epics, lyrics, or haikus, the pleasure one derives from the words, from the arrangement of words, being moved by the words, is the lasting legacy of poetry. This is not to suggest that the content is irrelevant or unimportant. No, I would not endorse such a

stance for even when reading nonsense poetry, you can glean the poets' intent. Like most things in life, the golden rule is the happy marriage between style and subject matter.

'Poetry ... should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance,' said Keats. When I first read Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* some of the poems in it struck such a chord – as if I was reading my own thoughts expressed in a language which explored my own amazement. As Emily Dickinson offers us contradictory, evolving perspectives on the nature of God, Glück's poems in this collection spoke in many voices about the nature of God. Whatever godliness may be, Glück 'honours the silence at the core of things, even as her poems push brilliantly against the limits of the knowable,' notes Mark Doty, a poet of considerable mastery himself. Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his or her own.

Tolstoy wrote, 'Art is not a handicraft, it is the transmission of feeling the artist has experienced.' The greatest of poems are the best examples of the delicate balance between the expression of our highest thoughts and the manner of their expression. 'The distinction between historian and poet,' wrote Aristotle, 'is not in the one writing prose and the other verse... the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.'<sup>3</sup> It is that 'god's eye view of things' when poetry rises from the personal to the universal.

Poetry is not only universal, it is eternal. Great poetry has that quality. In *The Path of Poetry*, Grevel Lindop refers to such a quality. Speaking of 'poetry and philosophy' he quotes the twelfth-century Japanese poet Saigyō, who was a Buddhist monk: 'Although all things in this world undergo change, the Way of Poetry extends unaltered even to the last age.' Saigyō knew well the Buddha's teaching that all things in this world undergo change. Yet, he tells us, the way of poetry does *not*. 'Two things follow from this,' says Lindop. 'First, that poetry as understood by Saigyō is not merely a part of the impermanent phenomenal world, that which is unstable and falls away. Rather, the poetic way is in some sense a manifestation of the spiritual path which leads beyond phenomena, to the Deathless. It persists unchanged, whether anyone follows it or not – like the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha's teaching, which remain true whether Buddhas arise in the world or whether they do not.'

In an era when the influential critics deny the possibility of a timeless element in poetry – the current dogma being that its origins, its reference, its materials and its interpretation are time-bound and historically determined –

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *On Poetics*

the notion that there might be 'a timeless poetic path' would be greeted with amused contempt as a piece of philosophical naivety, a bourgeois mystification, a fragment of that Romantic ideology we are all supposed to have grown out of. The timelessness of the poetic path that Lindop describes would have been perfectly clear to Plato, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Blake, Keats, Yeats or Tagore, among others.

As far as critical exposition is concerned, the poet may be seen as having an advantage, but only partially. A discussion of poetry, as Eliot said, 'takes us far outside the limits within which a poet may speak with authority.' The other reason, as Eliot adds, and with which I am inclined to agree, is 'that the poet does many things upon instinct, for which he can give no better account than anybody else. A poet can try, of course, to give an honest report of the way in which he himself writes: the result may, if he is a good observer, be illuminating. And, in one sense, but a very limited one, he knows better what his poems "mean" than can anyone else; he may know the history of their composition, the material which has gone in and come out in an unrecognisable form, and he knows what he was trying to do and what he was meaning to mean. But what a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his original meaning – or without forgetting, merely changing.'<sup>4</sup>

Critical writing seeking to explore what poetry is, what its use is, what a good poem is, or exploring the creative writing process itself, fulfils the need of every generation to address such issues afresh. But these may not be the sort of issues that necessarily concern poets, nor are all poets willing to engage in such analysis. When asked what a 'good' poem is, Seamus Heaney is said to have replied in the words of Louis Armstrong who once told a reporter when asked what jazz is: 'Lady, if you have to ask, you'll never know.' There exists a commonality of experience which suggests that the peoples of the world seem to share an astonishingly detailed universal psychology. Hence no need to explain a 'good' poem!

This is not to advocate a return to a deliberate mystification of the poetic process or of the nature of poetry; no, only a restoration to its domain that was rightfully its own always – its inextricable link with the development of human consciousness and imagination. The demystification of the nature of poetry and the poetic process began centuries ago. Poets today are no longer 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'; they are not philosophers dealing with eternal truths – like Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Blake, Keats, Shelley or Hopkins. Critics, editors, publishers, professors of poetry, readers of poetry – all of us are culpable in this development. To quote Eliot again, 'people are always ready to grasp at any guide which will help them to recognize the best

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<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*

poetry without having to depend upon their own sensibility and taste.' We have so little confidence in our own selves or so little ability to explore our selves that we find it easier to be some body else and have our sensibilities and tastes guided by others.

As none of us are free of biases when describing the nature of poetry, what we ascribe to poetry speaks more of us than of Poetry itself. Every poet knows 'to be a poet is a condition, not a profession' (Robert Frost), though the rise of poetry as a profession is widely evident today. It may be worth reminding ourselves at this point that poetry is not the handmaiden of a select few. It may also be worth remembering how various are the kinds of poetry being written today, and how wide its appeal is to different generations equally qualified to appreciate it.

I recall one editor's comment in his rejection slip to me: 'But do you write like Geoffrey Hill?' I had recently arrived in Oxford; it was 1980. I never quite understood then or now why I should write like any one; no disrespect meant to GH, of course. If the editor had written: 'Have you read Geoffrey Hill? I really like his work,' it would have made a lot of sense to me and explained to me his bias as an editor.

But what about plurality, difference? Surviving as an 'Indian' poet in the UK has not been easy. Editors find it difficult to deal with your work unless they put you in a pigeon-hole; any pigeon-hole will do for them. And, once they have found their own 'ethnic' poets, they feel they have covered the ground. Nor does the Arts Council ensure that public funding is distributed more equitably. After all, the Arts Council exists to support all poets, not just a few poets. A high degree of open-mindedness is important not only for the survival of poetry, but also for the better appreciation of our universe. It is essential not only for the great mystic poets of the past or for that matter poets today, but especially for those poets we do not know how to appreciate and whose poetic standards we do not share.

What else is Wordsworth referring to when, in 'Tintern Abbey,' he speaks of the recollected landscape as conferring 'Another gift/.../ In which the burthen of the mystery,/ In which the heavy and the weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world, Is lightened.' The purpose of these lines, when 'we see into the life of things', is surely not only to commemorate such moments, nor even to remind us of their possibility, but to offer us the chance to participate in them. The experience that Wordsworth describes is an example of the 'moments' Blake refers to in a famous passage of *Milton*: 'There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find.' Reading a poem, like listening to music, or appreciating a landscape or painting, is like connecting to something that is universal and timeless. It is not surprising that originally these activities were associated with religion. Having fought so hard to get rid of the shackles of religion and politics, it is ironical if we submit to the hegemony of editors, publishers and arts administrators.

It is undeniably true that each generation needs to define that consciousness

individually; poets see things afresh, establishing a new relationship with the universe. Poets can be regarded as soldiers who liberate words from the steadfast possession of definition. Every generation of poets feels the need to break free of the prevalent dogmas of the day and define a new imperative. But, the denial of the possibility of a timeless element in poetry is denying its essence, its power to influence generations unborn. Each generation will need to produce its own poetic language, but to deny the role of poetry in shaping our imagination, the way we think and interpret the past, is limiting our understanding of the present.

It is this timeless aspect of poetry that makes it both elusive (for those who do not have the means to accommodate uncertainties and contradictions) or appears to be didactic (for those who try to describe too much or have a mission). Yes, every true poet is born with a vision of the universe, 'an original relation to the universe,' as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it. The challenge lies in how it is achieved. This poetic transcendence from the individual to the universal 'proceeds not from a selfish but a generous instinct,' Don Paterson reminds us. He goes on to add 'whatever inner tensions have been assuaged in our writing, we want to give these things away in the end. To have someone else want your poem for themselves, it must be desirable.'<sup>5</sup> To have someone discover themselves in your poem is the ultimate act of creation; it is indeed godlike.

So what does poetry mean? Like love, friendship and compassion, poetry is the highest altruistic response to the world. Through poetry we aspire to live more fully in our imagination; and in doing so we share a sense of belonging to the universe, not alienation. Robert Penn Warren put it thus: 'The poem ... is a little myth of man's capacity of making life meaningful. And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see – it is, rather, a light by which we may see – and what we see is life.' And our ability to see Life enhances our understanding of who we are. Poetry is the means by which I explore fundamental questions like: *Who am I?*

'I don't create poetry, I create myself, for me my poems are a way to me,' writes the Finland-Swedish poet Edith Södergran. It is this act of self-exploration that has been shared by poets through the ages. Art seems to be the only place we can liberate our many selves. Poetry is not only the way home to our many selves, it is also a way of healing. In the process of this self-definition, we also define tradition. If the ordinary man is a man shut in a world, the poet is a world shut in a man – then the world within the poet has to come out so that the poet's inner world can communicate with the world of other men.

The development of poetry through the ages is a symptom of change in society; defining the creative process is as individual as poets. The challenges for poets writing in the beginning of the twenty-first century are complex,

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<sup>5</sup> Don Paterson 'The Lyric Principle' (*Poetry Review*, Autumn 2007)

reflecting the complex nature of our society. While Mrs Margaret Thatcher may have gone so far as to assert that 'there is no such thing as society', without society – i.e. human communication, understanding, reaching out to the Other – there can be no poetry; or for that matter business, commerce, industry and forms of human activity that Mrs Thatcher endorsed.

Having worked in the field of business/ finance, I would like to argue that business and science like artistic creativity spring from the same human impulses. Money is not the chief motivation; what drives artists, scientists and wealth creators is the generative instinct, the compulsion to create something – be it a poem, a novel, a cathedral, a symphony, a cure for cancer, a faster computer – which did not exist before, and to have your creative claim acknowledged by the world. Poetry may be mysterious, but a poet when all is said and done is not much more mysterious than an investment banker, an astrophysicist, a molecular biologist, a geneticist or a brilliant software programmer.

As our means of communication has grown exponentially, so has the way in which we live and relate to each other. Thus, questions like – what is poetry for, what do I have to say, how and to whom am I addressing it – have become potentially more complex. Is it better for the poet to define his/her niche market and write for that particular market, or is it better to discover one's voice and remain indifferent to passing fashions of the day? The answer obviously depends on the person asking the question. If poetry is a form of communication, a means of entertaining, giving pleasure, then the availability of mass media makes it easier for poetry to be enjoyed by as large and various numbers of people as possible worldwide.

A search for the word 'Poetry' brings up over 170 million references on Google, and [www.alltheweb.com](http://www.alltheweb.com) with 350 million references! A search for 'Art' and 'Music' generates 2,525 million and 4,780 million references respectively in [www.alltheweb.com](http://www.alltheweb.com). These numbers keep changing, but trends remain the same. Poetry is being more widely disseminated today – and is more in the public domain be it radio, newspapers, TV, films, Poems on the Underground (in London); we even had poems on the buses and airports, yet the appeal of poetry to a mass audience remains limited in the UK. When will a poet fill the Wembley Stadium for a reading, though readings by poets have packed the Royal Albert Hall (Michael Horovitz and his Poetry Olympics).

The internet has made access easier and in the world of music more sales are being made via this medium. In poetry, it can be difficult to establish intellectual property rights. In his book, *The Prodigal Tongue: Dispatches from the Future of English*, Mark Abley quotes two of my poems 'Dear Tech Support,' and 'Dear Customer' (both poems appear in *Looking In, Looking Out*, Headland Publications, UK: 2005) as part of a chapter on language and computers. Abley asked for my permission. Although a search in Google for 'Dear Tech Support' generates 590,000 results, most sites show variations of my poem without any reference to me, the poet! In cyberspace, there are

black holes where poets disappear. The power of global media, the sway of big business, politics, marketing, branding and PR dominates our celebrity culture. Marketing strategies find it difficult to promote more than a few names at a time.

Despite the explosion in the dissemination of poetry, it is difficult to know if the pleasure taken in the reading of poetry has risen commensurately! As Walt Whitman said, 'To have great poets there must be great audiences too.' While the numbers have indeed gone up, after all there are more of us today inhabiting the earth than ever before in the history of our planet, whether there are more 'great audiences' remains unclear. The appreciation or the global dissemination of poetry has little to do with the writing of it.

Steven Pinker writes that 'the faculty with which we ponder the world has no ability to peer inside itself or our other faculties to see what makes them tick.'<sup>6</sup> Yet a significant number of people possess an innate ability to appreciate, what for lack of a better term I refer to as, *good* poetry. The use of 'good' immediately begs the question 'good' for whom; who decides what is 'good'? 'Good' has been decided by the Establishment for centuries now; not just in poetry but in every discipline. 'If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the inquisition might have let him alone,' said Thomas Hardy. Perhaps because nobody reads poetry, that poetry does not matter and is not taken seriously?

Returning to the premise that many of us can agree, without coercion, on what is good in poetry and art; that for example Shakespeare is a great master of language, Mozart a great composer, and Michelangelo a great painter – the fact that we understand someone's 'creation' though we never met that person, never lived in those times, never experienced their culture or background, suggests that some poetry like some music, art and other forms of creativity has some thing to do with connecting with the universal, a kind of 'yoga' with the universal consciousness. It is not surprising that originally these activities were associated with religion.

To refer again to Emerson's phrase, 'an original relation to the universe,' the individual is finally free to work things out for himself, albeit with help from others, if required. The act of poetic creation involves the imagination and the evolution of a consciousness that transcends the personal. Poetry may not always be able to save us; but like all great art, or science for that matter, it has the power to move us, even change the way we see things for ever. To that extent poetry like scientific discoveries is a kind of consciousness-raising, and all forms of such activity are transformational.

Quantum physics teaches us that energy can be broken down into – nothing. A cubic centimetre of empty space, the pure void of cold blackness, contains more virtual energy than a blazing star. If we can grasp this fact, make an

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*

imaginative leap from something to nothing, from solid to intangible, from energy to potential, from action to possibility, we have grasped the concept of the soul. And, if there is poetry that is eternal and timeless, like the cosmos which is a vast, churning machine for turning one level of reality into another, then so are poets. The most creative act anyone can perform is the act of creating reality. A poem is as real as a shaft of lightning or energy trapped in a fossil.

As no one poet and of no one age can be expected to embrace the whole nature of poetry, no two readers will approach poetry with the same expectations. What we see in a poem varies from reader to reader; but there exists a commonality of experience that the peoples of the world share. Hence no need to explain a 'good' poem or a piece of jazz music. 'A poem is true if it hangs together. Information points to something else. A poem points to nothing but itself,' said E.M. Forster.<sup>7</sup>

Among the reasons that attracted me to the writing of poetry are its indirectness, its suggestiveness, its ability to be interpreted severally. It is like a secret code that only the initiate understands. Poetry involves a high degree of precision in the use of language that surpasses other forms of writing. A poem may use intricate rhymes, may scan perfectly, it may be written in free verse or it may be nonsense verse – what ultimately makes a good poem is its ability to communicate. Every great poem like a great actor on stage makes that connection; great poetry has that spark.

Emily Dickinson says it in her own inimitable manner: 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –/ Success in Circuit lies/ Too bright for our infirm Delight/ The Truth's superb surprise.' Thus, unlike Logic (Lewis Carroll's 'What the Tortoise Said to Achilles,') poetry must not take you by the throat, and force you. Yet, we love poems that move us, touch us and sometimes force us to see things differently while not bludgeoning us into submission. Tipping the balance in favour of poetry is its 'unobtrusive' quality, even when stating something profound. As Keats said: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us ... Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.' The poems that appeal most are the ones with this quality of transcendence, shock of recognition, the 'aha' factor, the power to transform, a kind of a revelation, often of quite elemental aspects of life such as truth and beauty.

Poetry is an intense exploration of the human condition through language by which we seek to uncover new ways of seeing and interpreting the world. What we see and marvel at may vary infinitely. For Confucius, 'a common man marvels at uncommon things; a wise man marvels at the commonplace.' Great poetry too marvels at the commonplace, but uses words uniquely. Poetry, like other creative art forms, is a 'construct', however natural it may

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<sup>7</sup> E.M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*

come like leaves to a tree. Organization is as necessary as inspiration in fashioning any thing great; a poem is no exception. Poetry is not an outburst of words, an involuntary process like a natural secretion. Such an efflux of poetry, like automatic writing, may happen from time to time; but even then it can be argued that the poem had been incubating in the writer for some time. It is difficult to imagine Shakespeare or Donne being dependent upon such capricious releases.

This is very different from what we refer to as inspiration, vision or mystical illumination of the kind that Blake experienced. For some, poems are mini epiphanies. And in any epiphany, the whole person is engaged; it is no longer just a mental activity, it becomes physical. It is also possible that the poet in such a state recognizes his or her inability to communicate it to anyone else. As the moment passes, it is impossible to recapture it. Several poets have referred to this passing, ephemeral quality of the poetic Muse; one has a flash of inspiration and decides to write in a state of excitement; but any number of things can happen to neutralize the intensity of that experience. That is why some people write regularly, in a disciplined manner, with or without the blessing of the Muse. But sparks fly when the anvil is hot.

There are times when a poem is born perfect, demanding little revision. Most of the time, poems need a lot of work. The original impulse for a poem may be a passing thought, a sentence overheard, an image, a conversation, a news item – virtually anything can trigger a poem. Developing that original inspiration, making it as perfect as possible, may take years. ‘A poem is never finished, only abandoned,’ says Paul Valéry. The vast majority of poems improve under the craftsmanship of a skilled and experienced editor. Poetry may be an emotion which has found its thought and the thought has found words; but it is the drawing down of the right words that characterize good poetry. Poets aspire for that quality of freshness in their writing, the best poetry is language subjected to the rigors of emotional intensity, formal composition and the richness of the human experience – the best words in the best order, in Coleridge’s famously sharp definition.

According to Yeats, ‘the true poet is all the time a visionary and whether with friends or not, as much alone as a man on his death bed.’ This idea of the poetic act as being essentially solitary meets its corollary in its need to ‘connect’ with another. What Yeats is referring to is the intensity and the focused character of the poetic act. Alice Oswald’s advice to aspiring poets is: ‘You should never write a poem till you can feel it in your bones: because poetry is your whole body’s response to the whole world, not just your head’s response to a thought or a glimpse.’ This is her way of describing that intense moment of creation, or epiphany. For Frost, ‘a poem begins with a lump in the throat.’

You know when you start a project, you have a rush of energy, a downpour of ideas and you write your lines without thinking. John Ashbery said it is ‘rather like riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your feet.’ This automatic process, of being driven effortlessly to writing, is a deep

internalization of the poetic experience, which is essential. Having had that rush of words, one typically spends months, if not years, polishing the poem (Horace would famously sit on a poem for seven years). Every now and then a poem arrives more or less complete. That is rare simply because poetry is language raised to the N<sup>th</sup> power.

'In writing a poem,' says Peter Abbs, 'an emerging reality is begging to be let in. Offer me a home, it whispers, or else the world will be deprived and your own life will be eternally forlorn.' It is interesting to note that Charles Simic echoes such a sentiment: 'A poem is a place where one invites someone in. You build a little house, fix it all up real nice. Inside, you've got some interesting things you want to show them.' It is this sharing, this communication between people, that enriches the poetic experience. The reader is a participant in the very process of the poem, active rather than passive. You may be the best reader of your own work, but without someone else sharing that experience, the poem is incomplete, and without a buyer it is not published.

The quality of a poem may not be diminished if it remains unpublished, unread, unseen; after all, Emily Dickinson was virtually unpublished in her lifetime. The role of editors, publishers, critics and professors is critical in supporting the 'new voices' of their time. It is worth remembering with Wordsworth that 'every great and original writer ... must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.' In our hugely competitive world, writing to please powerful editors may seem like a rational strategy except there is no guarantee such a strategy will succeed. As the powers that be do not have any superior resources for 'picking' winners, there is an element of randomness in such selection. And without the power of marketing, 'publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose-petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo' (Don Marquis).