

Why Publish Poetry?

by Ian A Ferguson

*“I’m taking the time for a number of things
That weren’t important yesterday”* – Paul McCartney

Along with the poems published on this website, I wanted to set down a few notes about why I’m publishing them at all, including some remarks about the history of my poetry-writing as well as some thoughts on what I’m trying to do with this kind of writing.

My History as a Poet

I actually hesitated a little before using the word “*poet*” in the above title – once, I would certainly have claimed the name without reservation, but for the past decade or so I’ve been heavily involved in developing computer software, and poetry has taken a back seat. Since retiring from my business life, however, I’ve been making a return to poetry and producing some wholly new material, as well as revising old pieces. Nonetheless, I’m still more inclined these days to think of myself as a “person who writes poetry” among other things.

However, more on this anon: I began writing poetry in my teenage years, a period when it’s a not uncommon activity for those with a particular cast of mind. I had been brought up in non-conformist church circles, and so had been absorbing the magnificent cadences of the King James Bible, as well as the numinous versifying of many traditional hymns, so that this background certainly gave me that necessary cast of mind. Add to this the strong influence of the exposure to English literature (including a heavy dose of Shakespeare) which I soaked up at school, as well as my deep attachment to pop music on the radio, and it was I suppose almost inevitable that I would begin scribbling.

Much of these early efforts I now look on as rehearsals for what I managed to write later. However, I did improve somewhat over several years from my first fumbling excursions. Towards the end of my time at school in Scotland, I took to pinning some of my favourite pieces on various noticeboards. At university, I continued to write now and then, although a rather demanding mathematics course left relatively little mental energy. I did publish one piece in my college’s magazine, and continued on a few occasions with my noticeboard strategy.

On graduating, I returned for a brief period to Aylesbury, where my parents lived at that time, and was lucky enough to make contact with an interesting group of people brought together by someone who, as well as being one of the best poets I’ve known, probably counts as one of my best friends (although we later lost

contact – that’s how the world works these days). These people seemed to appreciate my work, which I had begun to read to the group, and we soon produced a free local literary magazine, in which I continued to publish work. My aforementioned good friend Norman and I subsequently put out a joint publication containing only our own work, and we staged an exhibition of our poetry with self-produced illustrations.

I subsequently moved to London, where, fresh from the fun I had had in Aylesbury, I plunged into the varied but fundamentally marginal London “poetry scene”. Groups of poets met up all over the city, with quite a bit of interaction and cross-fertilisation. I even started one such group of my own, which lasted for a time as these things do, then faded away, as these things also do. I got together a small group of poets from this group to read our work in public – we even performed back in Aylesbury once.

I moved among these groups for a few years – some were tedious ego-trips for the founders or cliquey and exclusive covens, while others (a few others) proved really enjoyable experiences, full of fascinating individuals. I also published some collections of work myself during my early years in London – a small booklet entitled “*One*”, and two leaflet-style publications: “*Morning’s Here*” and “*The London Psalm*”, with which I was actually quite pleased. A couple of these items were even reviewed in *Time Out* magazine

It was at one such poetry group, in Camden Town, where Nyki (yes, it’s a male name) – who was to become a long-time collaborator - and I first performed together accompanied by some electronic music I had created.

A digression on electronic music is called for here. I had become very interested in computing since arriving in London, and was by now teaching computer science in an FE college. I had long been interested in the idea of reading poetry with musical accompaniment, and the best way to do it seemed to produce my own music. I quickly developed an interest in digital sound synthesis, and began experimenting with some of the tools which were available at the time. I made a tape of some fairly primitive stuff and used it in a performance at the Thames Polytechnic Students’ Union, which actually went quite well (people came up afterwards and made a lot of positive comments, even seeking me out in the nearby Woolwich Wimpy Bar, where I had retreated for an after-show snack).

I then set out to create my own digital synthesiser in the form of a computer program driving a simple digital-to-analogue converter. This project absorbed me completely as I made use of the equipment and opportunities offered by my college, and culminated in some software which, though primitive by modern

standards, quite delighted me. I used this as well as an old analogue synth (an SCI Pro One) to produce music for Nyki and I to perform with, and off we went.

We rehearsed regularly and performed many times, all over London – in a wide range of venues, also making an appearance on local radio, and performed on a few later occasions along with a dancer. This was great fun, but in some ways the writing (irony noted) was on the wall. First, I was becoming rather tired of the limitations on structure and content imposed by writing for an audience; and second, I was finding it much more enjoyable to go round various groups of teachers and lecturers demonstrating my synthesiser software as an example of what was then a rather new application for the old 8-bit microcomputers we had available. With the addition of a more demanding job at another college, and eventually my departure to set up my own software business, I had to withdraw almost completely from performance; and in any case, the poetry scene had rather lost its appeal over the years.

There followed several decades of hard work in my own software startup, great fun in itself – at least in the early years – and hugely satisfying, especially when my magnificent partner Carmel joined me in the business and we worked together for the remaining years during which I traded. Of course, this took up virtually my whole time. I did still write intermittently, often while travelling on holiday, but without much systematic plan or intent.

Some years ago, however, we managed to retire from our business, and with a renewed sense of freedom, I set about reviving a number of creative pursuits which I had foregone while toiling at my software business. As part of this, I began collecting together and revising some work I had produced during the business years, and I also began some new projects. The material published on this site is a mixture of newer and older work.

What I'm Trying To Do

What I attempt to do when writing poetry is to express perceptions, experiences or emotions which are not readily expressible in their fullness using prose. Poetry should also occupy a middle position between prose narrative and music, so that rhythm or the use of contrasting or similar sounds ought to be important. This doesn't, however, mean that I want to use rhyme or even traditional metre; just as there is less urgency that visual art should be as closely representative as it once was now that photography has become available, there seems much less to be said for forcing poetry into the straitjacket of metrical rhyme when plenty of people are writing songs, where metre is required to fit the tune, and rhyme might be viewed as itself a part of the music. The rhythms of poetry are at once deeper,

residing in the structure of words themselves and more evanescent, changing from one line to the next: this perhaps points towards an abstract approach to the idea of rhythm.

Poetry at its best should inspire and stimulate the reader's imagination with the intensity of its imagery. Images, visual or otherwise – that is, evoked visualisations, perceptual phenomena or constructions of emotion – should be the medium through which poetry communicates. Of course, this does mean that the reader may not necessarily evoke exactly the same experience as the writer is trying to express (it is imperfect as a form of direct communication) – but the reader should at least feel something.

Of course, it is possible to raise philosophical questions as to the existence of these experiences which cannot be expressed using “ordinary” language. To this objection, I can only answer that actually I do seem to have such experiences; their inexpressibility may either demonstrate my inadequate descriptive skills or signal a more genuine limitation of language. I've always had an interest in what is described as “mystical” experience, which is usually said to be in one sense or another “inexpressible”, so that an imaginative sensitivity to events, places or emotions might easily expose me to experiences which could be regarded as preliminaries or intimations of the mystical experiences which have always interested me.

This brings me back to the influence of the childhood in a heavily religious environment which has given me an interest in these “inexpressible” experiences. It's possible that my poetry-writing has always been a kind of spiritual activity, a way of attempting connection with the numinous in a wide range of contexts. I have certainly often expressed the opinion that theology is itself a kind of poetry – which is why it is often considered to fail the criteria for being deemed a science. Certainly it has become in modern times more and more allusive and roundabout, perhaps demonstrating increasing appreciation of what the Pseudo-Dionysius wrote 1400 years or so ago in *The Mystical Theology* to the effect that it was possible to make more negative statements about God than positive assertions. To quote the *Upanishads*, when talking about the divine, all we can say is: “*Not this, not this*”.

There is quite a lot of writing which is popularly called poetry. but which certainly doesn't do the kind of thing I've tried to describe above. This would include writing which seems rather like prose cut up into lines – a description which, sadly, suits a great deal of contemporary “poetry”. One might also mention the huge quantity of rhyming doggerel (many rappers and ranters seem content to churn this kind of stuff out) as well as the recently fashionable “comedy poetry”,

purveyed by a number of nationally known performers, which was usually more effective as comedy than poetry.

Some Favourite Poets

To return to the positive, I'll try to shed more light on my interests in writing poetry by mentioning some published poets whose work I admire and who have been a constant inspiration over the years. Many of these poets were introduced to me by my old friend Norman, mentioned above; some of them I discovered for myself.

I must first mention the great Rainer Maria Rilke – in particular his *Duino Elegies* – a beautifully mystical set of poems, full of the slightly unorthodox spirituality which has always appealed to me. These poems are rich with symbolism as well as being full of a kind of otherworldly passion. I've never entertained any hope of entering this territory myself, but Rilke certainly shows how it's done. I was really happy some years ago to be able to walk the clifftop path close to Duino Castle near Trieste, where these poems were written, on a morning when a wonderful mysterious mist hung over the sea below.

Next must come Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose use of assonance, clever rhythms and imagery have all inspired my own lesser efforts. Once again, here is a poet with a mystical turn of mind, and the writer of many quite short poems which are like small jewels in their luminous beauty.

I discovered TS Eliot – in particular, *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, while browsing the poetry section of Motherwell Library at the end of my Scottish schooldays. I read both of these poems again and again, and felt I was seeing how modern poetry ought to look and feel. Both poems also spoke to my teenage anxieties, and seemed to hint at the possibility of creating beauty out of angst and everyday discomposure. Some of the images from *The Waste Land* so encapsulated my experience of industrial Scotland that I almost felt Eliot was speaking directly to my own feelings. Discovering work like this, which seemed so different from the more traditional poetry studied in my English lessons, also made me feel I had glimpsed through a narrow crack a whole new poetic universe.

Having mentioned my school English lessons in an unfavourable light, it's only fair to mention one lesson in particular, conducted by a student teacher with an obvious feeling for poetry. The teacher gave out copies of *Fern Hill* by Dylan Thomas, and as I began to read it through, I was transfixed by the singing, rejoicing quality of the poem, its hymn-like repetitions and rearrangements and its gradual build-up of an almost unbearable beauty by piling images on top of images,. I readily admit that this poem can still move me to tears. Naturally, I

delved further into Dylan Thomas' work, and soon discovered other magnificent pieces, such as *A Winter's Tale*, which can make me feel physically cold, or *In Country Sleep*, with its flavour of the feelings produced by bedtime stories when I was a small child. All of these, and the additional poems of Thomas' which I still discover for the first time, are deeply reminiscent for me of my early childhood in a small Scottish border village.

And now I must come to the incomparable Pablo Neruda, a Chilean poet whose translated work has become available over the past few decades. My old friend Norman introduced me to a selection of Neruda's poetry published by Penguin, and I was immediately captivated. There's almost nothing I can say to do justice to this man's poetry: reading it kicked my own work forward in a step-change. His bold and startling similes, his strange, fresh juxtapositions, and the sheer confidence with which he writes are all quite remarkable and almost unique. His collection *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* is a huge favourite of mine, although I can enjoy almost anything he wrote. Whenever I read Neruda, I want to sit down and write something new myself. I can only say: read his poetry, as the experience of discovering it is almost indescribable.

Another poet introduced to me by Norman is Saint-John Perse, who wrote in French but whose work is available but rare in English translation. I discovered his work when I began to be interested in writing about the experience of travel, something which has always been very dear to me. His *Anabasis* is a furious concatenation of images of foreign places and cultures, and it seems to capture the experience of travel abroad – it's a real assault on the imagination which is almost dizzying in its effect. His other work is characterised by startling metaphors and the application of unexpected and incongruous adjectives to everyday things. I borrowed a collection of his work once from the London Poetry Library and kept renewing it repeatedly until after about six months I decided I really couldn't carry on doing so – it's compelling stuff, and quite addictive once you first discover it.

My final mention here goes not to one single poet, but the anthology of Imagist poetry published by Penguin several decades ago. Reading this at the time was like a breath of fresh air, depicting as it did a lapidary, concrete style of poetry where the detailed description of one single image was everything. I immediately launched into an Imagist period of my own, though I never really observed the entire Imagist manifesto. While I eventually fell under other influences, the impact of discovering this Imagist collection has stayed with me ever since I first encountered it, and it remains one of my very favourite books of poetry.

So Why Publish Poetry?

Why, then, am I publishing poems on this website? Well, first of all, I am always keen to put my material before an audience (although I don't write with that at the forefront of my mind). However, poetry is rarely published these days, and publication in a book by a publisher seems to be a completely arbitrary matter – take all the poetry being written which makes any kind of impact on the reader and then just pick some poets at random; this is how it seems to work. There is also a huge component of elitism without consideration of merit: perhaps you get published because of who you know, and who you're willing to schmooze. For goodness' sake – life's too short.

Furthermore, in common with much creativity for its own sake, poetry tends to be undervalued in contemporary society. It isn't, after all, good for making money, and it's often a bit too hard work for the seeker of speedy gratification. Certainly, simple and memorable jungles or *bons mots* are often popular, but I'm really not interested in writing that kind of stuff – as I've pointed out, I quickly tired of the limitations imposed by writing for an audience.

An old friend once told me that he wrote poetry simply for his own personal satisfaction, and I increasingly feel that writing because you feel compelled to express yourself this way, and to satisfy that desire alone, may well lead to the very best poetry. You may judge for yourself. If you enjoy what you see here, I will be delighted. If you don't, there are plenty of other websites to visit, and I commend them to you instead.

I conclude with a supporting quotation from Goethe – this comes from a letter he wrote to a German friend during his own journey through Italy:

“But you, my dear brother, must go on meditating, discovering, reading, and writing poetry, without caring what other people say. One has to write as one lives, first for one's own sake, and then for the sake of a few congenial souls.”