

Poetic genesis

Notes for aspiring “poets” By Michael Holme

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Introduction

This is an essay that might help you to write poetry. Part one, outlines the broadest aspects of the craft, and encourages you to consider your motives for writing. It does not teach English or poetic forms, because they have been greatly covered by many others. Similarly, it will not lead you in specific ways, because frankly, if you aim to be led, and not to be unique, then again, it's already been covered. Instead, I offer for your assimilation, useful tips gained from two decades of my own extensive poetry writing, accepting advice, live reciting, and submitting for publication (often successfully), in the hope that your own thoughts and methods will be improved, not changed.

The appendix contains eleven of my own poems, that are directly or indirectly, mentioned below. In that section, they are shared without any explanations, in the hope that you have understood everything, and can recognise the tips, etc., in action so to speak. That way, I think this essay will be stronger, and it will implant with more potential utility.

Part one

Why do you want to write?

In the simplest terms, you need a motive for any action, or to embark on a new pursuit. Granted, some people are driven into action, because they think they'll feel good by directly doing so, or somehow through it. Others don't know their reasons. In fact, it could be that they look up to an individual or group, who is/are already similarly involved.

That previous and first paragraph, hints at identities that some people desire. For example, the "I am a writer", or "I am a poet", "I am creative"; maybe even "I am cool" or "I am trendy", in short, anything, except the unconnected **"I am"**.

I've written much about the avoidance of identities, labels, and group mentalities: see my book, "I am - Conforming by nonconformity". I find it clear, that some people start writing to be a writer, or a poet. They seem proud of the label; as if for its own sake it's an important goal. But if the writing is of the highest quality, it can speak for itself without needing a titled creator.

If you represent degrees of potential talent, against the number of people pursuing it, I think the population of "would-be" artists, will plot a normal distribution, because there'll always be general skills levels, but child prodigies, and those with great learning difficulties, have always been in minorities.

What is art?

Personally, I see the arts as being more like crafts, rather than “art” forms. That’s a semantics thing, but one that might become clearer in this essay. Please understand that definitions are irrelevant though.

I view “art” and other creative endeavours, as forms of communication. With any such mechanisms, people aim to connect. At one end it is pure communications: they share information, messages, and/or feelings, and for their own sake, and not a self-serving one. In short, it is truth telling. The opposite stance involves the ego’s domain, and it’s based at least initially, on a pride in what was created. Furthermore, all externally received appreciation works as a buff up, which adds to a sense, that it was right to self-proclaim as an “artist”, or a poet, or a pianist, or just good. Almost like dopamine hits, it wants more.

Personally, I don’t think any of us are writers, poets, musicians, painters, or artists in general. Instead, I think people channel creativity. Thus, creativity is a force, if you will, that is external. The more we engage in creative work, the more statistically likely we are, to allow greatness to happen when we’re channelling, or facilitating that external force. The position of there being writers or artists, etc., and other people who simply are not capable, is incredibly negative and unhelpful. No-one is artistic. Some people spend thousands of hours channelling creativity. Others have the stupid notion, that they’re not artistic, so they needn’t bother.

After studying only sciences, I began classical piano at the age of 21. In just under eight years, I passed grade eight with merit.

If creative energy is external, it might explain why people can suffer from writer's block. A flow of thoughts can't be forced. Even in bipolar disorder, some people think they become creative. What is more likely, is that the boost in energy and confidence stemming from mania or hypomania, can facilitate situations occurring where people stop thinking negatively, and statistically, their potential for work or production becomes much greater.

To clarify though; creativity can easily appear to be much more a part of one person, than another. It looks like it works, or channels, with a greater ease in some but not others. That's deceptive. Of course, we can't all be Michaelangelo. If we were, by such thinking, he'd be rubbish too, and at the same time brilliant. Our goal should be to tell the truth. Truth is absolute. It is not measured by any creative, visual, artistic, or other metric. To use a dreadful cliché, **"it is what it is"**.

Being unique

It's questionable if a writer of any sort wants to have a long-term goal of being like another creative. The academic route will involve this, but hopefully only as a transitional stage.

There are creative people who like to mimic their idols' lives, and that's whether they copy their work or not. It's very clear throughout the history of popular music, hence punks, goths, mods, heavies, etc. Some even think the mantra to "live fast, die young" is a clever one. It's not so hard to do that. It's just inane to do so.

In the 1970s, and perhaps especially the 80s, innovations were greater than now, making them harder to copy. For example, there was only one David Bowie or one Morrissey. In the 90s, the Manchester scene appeared, again with similarities. It looks like the styles to emerge from the 21st century, are rap, or mostly talentless commercialism; the latter being so contrived, it is hard to define it, such that one might live it.

Bringing separate disciplines together, whether painting and writing, or singing and sculpting, is always valid. Again, it is about the truth.

Exposure and connection

To carefully write your thoughts down; I mean the truth; and to find the courage to share them in an irrefragable manner, or alternatively; to write hundreds of pages, knowing full well no one will be likely to see them, is worth “meditating” on.

Who will read you? Will it be your family, friends, locals, or a much wider audience? By finding places to send your poems, whether via electronic or other means, (and for example, the places might be discovered by subscribing to duotrope.com, or experimenting with search-terms on google), you will be able to find some readers, but you should aim for some quality of craft first.

Try not to give in to the pandering of your lack of patience, and to indulge its desires for dopamine hits. Published thoughts can't be retracted, neither can your reputation. Much is hinted beyond the message of a poem, by considering its general quality, and “reading between its lines”.

By the way, you will be rejected for all manner of subjective reasons. Sometimes it's because you haven't researched an editor's preferences. That's your lack of patience fighting against you again.

I know the daughter of a poet. She shared some of her dad's work with me. It had always been private, and I even read him

posthumously. Many young writers in the 2020s brazenly read work in live settings, after few years spent writing. I think there is an obvious difference with that, and with writing for yourself, not knowing whether you'll be read after you pass. Simply put, if there is no audience, there are no opportunities for **deception**.

Whatever the extent of exposure you wish your work to receive; if your words are empty, such that you effectively say nothing, they're not really exposed. They're like John Cage's 4'33", that silent piece of music, in which the movements and coughs of the audience play the biggest aural part.

This takes us back to the start, **why do you want to write?** If you have no words, or they're obscure and/or convoluted, what is your point? It could be more sensical to write for yourself, in a clear and candid way, and like my friend's dad, to even be read posthumously but profitably by a handful.

I think that unnoticed sincerity, will always beat self-serving competitive, or overly academic work, which thrives on having an audience, and/or being read by people. To repeat a thought: **tell the truth because that's the essence.**

Do you have a fledgling song rather than a poem?

Initial attempts at writing poems usually involve choosing best rhymes, as if they are all important. What is worse than that, is how other aspects may be compromised for those rhymes, for example, when sentences are happily inverted. I'll call that the Yoda effect. Or sometimes when an archaic word, centuries out of fashion, is chosen as a last resort to aid a rhyme, rather than engaging in some reworking.

Rhyming can stifle writing because it lowers the bar to a dictatorial obsession. It's a tangible and objective aspect though, which is simple to spot, and therefore to begin eliminating. A more subjective approach gives better results. Creative writing ought to be fresh, like any artistically based communication; otherwise, it is at a risk of just copying and not involving creation.

Perhaps at heart you may inadvertent be a song writer. Many a good rhyme helped to move dancing feet. There's a great point to that.

Importance

If your message is important, it is quite likely that putting it across as nonfiction, or even via a song form, is better than utilising poetry, because realistically, there are few people who read or listen to the latter, and that number is gigantically less, compared to the number who are listening to songs. In fact, it's further hindered, because many of the people who write poems, are mostly interested in their own work, which provides a self-serving route to minor spotlights for them, for example, at local open-mic events. Having said that, people understand, or will nonetheless quickly grasp, that nonfiction offered to known publishers for publication, will need to be commercial. Regardless of how excellent your words are, publishers are businesses.

By choosing self-publishing, through for example, a website like lulu.com, you'll get your words out, and the marketing will be up to you. The simple truth of it can be illustrated as follows. If for example David Beckham, the ex-footballer, or one of his family members, wrote a book of poems, it might quickly sell thousands of copies. That's because fame, infamy, or to a lesser degree, academic reputation and/or qualifications, will sell. Being a "nobody", in view of the strength of our celebrity-oriented world and such like, does not sell, regardless of how brilliant your words are. Broader societal success is the metric understood by the majority.

The exception, or immunity to that rule, is through winning a major literary competition, for example the **Bridport prize** or **Forward prize**, which both run annually. Through them, works are considered only on their literary merits, because the judges have no way of knowing who wrote any of the entered pieces.

There is another important situation to consider. If you thoroughly and wholeheartedly believe in your message, you will want to keep spreading it. Maybe five years pass, then ten, but with courage in your convictions remaining, you enter a state of longevity.

People find it easier to believe in those who believe in themselves, and then they might begin to veer towards you, because timespans count; or maybe you're just eccentric. Even eccentricity is good though, people often like and fascinate about eccentrics.

I remember a man called Albert Silverman. In the earliest internet days, he practically "lived" in the online Usenet group `rec.music.theory`. His relentless mission was to convince everyone to drop standard notations of tonic-dominant musical compositions, as solidified by the centuries old "archaic theorists", such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, etc., and instead to apply his own versions.

A musical academic called Matthew maintained objections to Albert, and whilst not directly sharing personal information, over a few years, Matthew reasoned by tiny inadvertently shared hints,

that Albert was an old man. Therefore, when his posts abruptly stopped, it was a bit concerning. Over several active years Albert had collected precious few followers, but there was at least one person, whose name I forget, that you could call a disciple.

Bob Dylan and Roy Harper are two of my favourite singers and deserve to be called troubadours. They put their verse to music, spreading corresponding messages, more specific in nature than the default ones the majority gravitate towards. Those ones being invariably rooted in secular, selfish, and/or physical interpretations of love that are easily consumed by young people.

One-offs exist, for example, Dr John Cooper-Clarke. You won't gain a profound education or increase in wisdom very much by reading his poems, as John is always more of an entertainer: the original, modern-day performance poet, and he is, very entertaining. Ultimately, he became commercial, but why not?

I think this draws a two axes system, with these four corners:

valuable words coupled with fame, like Bob Dylan,
valuable words and less fame, like Roy Harper,
less important words coupled with fame, a "Dr Cooper-Clarke",
and valueless words lost in obscurity; we don't know who that is!

College/university

It's impossible for academic classes to produce multiple, equally opposite, unique artists. They wouldn't want to in the modern scenario because capitalist financial survival disallows it. This means a proverbial "**bums on seats**" scenario must exist.

They can guarantee a programming of foundations, which will primarily amount to objective roots, which will hopefully lead to the formation of a figurative primordial soup, from which brilliance may positively emerge. However, without a uniqueness stemming from life experiences being injected into such a mix, the overall subjectivity, that might usually warrant a label like "art", will be better described as "derivative".

Frankly, if academic objectivity proves to be of less value than any broad non-academic non-specifics you have acquired or experienced, then time spent in colleges or universities, might have been wasteful (but for your contacts, and how that closed shop accepted your subset of the chosen field, facilitated its adaptation within their scope of acceptable rules, and ultimately, promoted it internally.)

This next thought is simple. If academia accepts non-academic work as being not only valid, but perhaps even as much so, as its own, then ipso facto, having expensive art colleges and similar institutions to attend, has got to be questionable.

Do you still want to be a “poet”?

Singing will probably help to get words out, at least it ought to be easier than breaking into the literary establishment. You could try open-mic in cities and towns, which have greatly increased in popularity in the last decade, with many people sharing words backed with guitars; but many recite poems either from memory, or from the pages: so-called page-poets.

I think this pastime, or phenomenon even, has recently increased, due to the input from many Millennials. They differ from older generations, because they were made confident, rather than having to learn to be so through surviving life experiences. Many Gen Xs and Boomers never feel comfortable enough to stand in front of a room mostly of strangers, to perform words, music, or both.

It’s always a danger when art and capitalism overlap. Whether it’s about the “bums on seats” in art colleges and universities, the retail sector manipulating the price of fine art paintings, or the attitudes of people in open-mics.

Ambitious youthful writers, hold a more self-serving attitude than that found in older creative people. For example, these open evenings have become less supporting: platitudes are common, they’re less social, and many older performers will naturally be viewed as being “over the hill”; because that’s how young people have viewed older people, for time immemorial.

Other mediums

Speaking bluntly, paintings say little, even if their creators argue that the opposite is true. In their most direct styles, fine art paintings or pictures, struggle to explain concepts, particularly complex ones. Anyone with an important and specific message for the world, might betray the world by trying to express it through nebulous brush strokes. However, it's clear that much earlier in our history, we did engage in producing this, because of our communicating via cave drawings.

A difference occurs when a person uses painting to achieve fame, and then they write afterwards. That's not unlike the earlier David Beckham example, via sport; and there will be countless other ones. So, it can be profoundly true, that **“the pen is mightier than the sword”**, but sometimes it helps to give it a “leg-up”.

Words are specific, and the vocabulary of the English language is so rich, it's a pleasure to use it. Whilst instrumental music can effectively express feelings, and many people would argue that words fail to do the same thing, it would be an extremely brave and novel experiment, if in the future, we taught children **ONLY** with music rather than words. Modern societies would not incorporate such a generation.

Mechanics

The mechanics of poetry involve choosing and deploying a framework on which both subjective and objective words of poetry rest upon. That framework can be anything from the brief and strict, such as limericks or a haiku; or it could be more loose, perhaps even nebulous, as in free verse. But even within the latter example, there must be some expression of a form present, albeit a subtle one, or else there is a risk that the poem is in fact prose. Worse still, it might become labelled prose-poetry, which is surely a sort of oxymoron type contradiction, denied by some writers.

Of course, prose involves form and structures, but mostly they're of larger scales than those evident in verse; for example, the words you're reading, are a nonfiction divided into sections, paragraphs, and sentences, etc., all which aids the clarity, and eases the reader's ability to comprehend the whole. Without organisation there is greater intimidation, and a failure of communication.

Practise

It is said that 10,000 hours of practise and/or involvement in skill-based fields, are a requirement to reach mastery (not virtuosity). For example, that degree of dedication to an orchestral musical instrument, should certainly place you amongst the level of some college students. I'm not sure how this is relevant to writing, because, for example, the "pen" doesn't feature complex muscular training. But if you have words gained from life experiences, introspection, and cross-referencing, then that wisdom, which is not hours spent reading, might equate to your practise, but it certainly implies a use of different metrics.

Writing words in increasingly artistic ways, is the fruit of channelling verse. The longer it is pursued, the more likely styles can evolve. Computer neural networks quite closely model the brain in the same way. If you feed them data, whilst telling them what you're presenting to them, and on an enormous scale; then not unlike human learning, after sufficient training, either the brain, or computer software, may enter the unknown, or the uncharted: the unique. As in Darwinian evolution, a new species stems out of the mix, that primordial soup again?

True creativity and art begin in the "never been before", where there are no overlaps. Without an isolated life, that's near impossible. But Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone music, which begun the second Viennese school, was extremely close to it. Of

course, he did not invent rhythm, but otherwise, his music had little else in common with everything before it.

Part two

The following tips stem from a book I wrote which aimed to teach writing poems through hundreds of isolated examples. Its order was quite random, but you might say its fruits were highlighted individually, at the points in time when problems had been ironed out. It was based on correspondences which began very slowly, until a critical mass was hit, and then a more exponential path was embarked upon. Throughout that time, new aspects would always emerge, and be subsequently treated. All along, the most fundamental aspects of grammar, punctuation, subtleties of spelling, traditions, and other aspects improved in an iterative fashion. However, topics like those are covered by endless other treatise, and are out of the scope of this essay.

It is accurate to say that many of the following thoughts, would simply not have had a chance to surface within the time of a brief course of study. However, through great perseverance of the process, some of the rarer or more subtle points that are mentioned below, clearly did emerge alongside the more common ones.

That above mentioned book tries to distil the advice received over a 15-year period; including the inescapable colourings, trials, and tribulations, stemming from life, and given the industry and literary successes achieved.

To be clear, an outcome of protracted tutoring, is that not only broader and more common aspects will be polished, but some minutiae will be revealed. I dare say, that's how tutors become better at tutoring themselves.

Note: before beginning to attempt poem writing, I read notes covering the range of different poetic forms, such as sonnets, and less strict writing, etc.; and just as many books are available to cover usage of the English language. You can find many books and webpages that cover different structures of poems and their forms. For that reason, poetic form is not dealt with in this more basal essay either.

What I would encourage though, is that you eventually devise your own forms of poetry. I wrote a book of 49 poems all in the same extremely firm structure. Each one had four stanzas. The stanzas had four lines. The lines had ABCB rhyming schemes, of varying strengths, but mostly less strong. And each line had exactly seven syllables in it, with no coincidence that seven times seven is 49.

That collection is one of my favourites, and it was transitional in my conversion from being a writer of poems, to one of only prose. With such a rigid structure, the pieces had to be poetry, but they shared many psychological ideas, and ideas in general, whilst they painted images much less.

Tips to be mindful of

Language competency

You should reach a technical level of English language mastery, including grammar, etc., befitting other people's attention. Of course that assumes your readers choose English. A very popular more recent poet, was the late Russian, Boris Ryzhy, and naturally, if you are not going to share work, this paragraph is irrelevant.

By ultimately aiming to be published; not self-published, and achieving it, your publisher is intrinsically confirming that the level of English shown via your work, is good enough for them. The corollary of that, is that anybody reading your published works via paper or online publications, can assume the publisher's standards are manifestly illustrated by you.

Poor English **will** greatly hamper your publication chances. In my teens, it took me three, or even four attempts (if you include the fact I sat a CSE English exam) to achieve an Ordinary level English language pass. Even then I still couldn't write. I'd gotten better at sitting English language exams. However, you can greatly improve your writing with application.

Despite me finding reading difficult, other people can make improvements to their writing by reading, especially if they do so whilst looking for and stumbling on, the positive connections across all texts; and whether that be conscious or unconscious.

Considering the poem's actual subject and/or content

Populating your poem with imagery, phrases, and sayings, or the words that make it the world snapshot that it is (and assuming it's not a more epic), might have left you with feelings of bonding with your creation. However, the effects to its impact with readers, stemming from you stripping or sacrificing some weaker parts, can be a lessening of its message, but in such a small way, that given our brain's abilities to fill in for us, is worth it. That's because tightness is a singularly important feature of verse, and makes it stand out from prose.

Having said that, you will almost certainly find making those sorts of decisions, i.e., to perform figurative surgery on your "baby", much easier, by not reading it for at least a couple of weeks. (Perhaps start another piece in the meantime). By waiting, your "eyes" will tend towards being like reader's ones, and it will make all the difference.

The broader structure or format

As is often the case, a poem will be broken down into a number of sections, or stanzas. Leading on from the previous tip, there are times, when it may be sensible for a whole stanza to be moved to a different position; along with corresponding edits in or elsewhere from that stanza. You can even find yourself in situations, where you ultimately and radically, remove a whole stanza permanently: invariably a troublesome one of course; because it was somehow breaking the progress of your work by not *quite* fitting in, whilst having some amount of merit. You will often feel relieve after making such a cut.

Further to this point, I once wrote a poem that ended with a weak stanza, and found a solution, by connecting the meaning in it (to a degree) with the meaning at the beginning of the poem. I've used a method of ending by returning somehow to the start, several times, and it has been useful.

However, overworking anything in literature, not just in poetry, but prose too, gets a bit like using the latest fashionable clichés, “going forward...”

Choosing a title

It's common to be keen to get writing, and not be stuck on name choices. Conversely, one might have a brilliant title, then have an undeserved poem ensue from it.

One of my most successful poems, published in two separate university English departments' anthologies, was "Did Neil Armstrong wear thermals?" In its two short stanzas, it told a compelling story, ending with the answer to that curious question. Seeing a title like that in a table of contents will likely tempt.

It's said that Claude Debussy, chose the titles to his piano preludes, individually, and on finishing each one. In other words, he let the music suggest each name. For that reason, he requested that his publisher printed all the names *after* each piece. I play some of them, but know all of them, and frankly, it's sometimes difficult to believe he named each in this manner. Nevertheless, the point I want to make, is that however you formulate titles, please make them interesting.

Do not for example let your work be crowned with words like "Untitled", or "Unnamed". In fact, I once reworked that idea into this one.

I thought "Capriciousness" then "Untitled" then this

Those underlined words are my poem's actual title. Good verse deserves a good name. On the flip-slide, it can be spoiled with a poor one. Furthermore, perhaps consider this, you might have an initial idea, but it evaporates. However, having a meaningful title from the offset (let's consider the "Neil Armstrong" one again), helps to map out what needs to follow.

Finally, there will be times when you agonise over a title, but eventually realise it's already staring you in the face, because it's the first line of the body of the poem, and you can have it simply run directly into the others.

Whether to rhyme or not

As already said, when first writing poems, the rhyming approach tends to strongly default. It certainly provides a guard that prose isn't being written. As said though, when employing regular rhymes, there's always a risk of heading towards song-like writing. It can be a fuzzy border between verse and song, but one easily avoided by ceasing to rhyme.

Please ask, "what is my motive to rhyme?" If you don't have a good one, then you ought not to do it, because otherwise you'll be at a greater risk of appearing derivative, or even simplistic.

During the mid to late 2010s, I was regularly submitting my poetry in the hope that it would be published. In fact, I had a success rate of around 10%. I was reading lots of works that other poets had published, and considering the varying feedbacks my own poems attracted, I quickly found it clear, that editors didn't publish poetry that hinged on basic rhyming schemes.

Serious contemporary poets, are more likely to craft pieces in "free verse", i.e., in a style that doesn't rhyme, or have a regular and obvious rhythm.

Telling versus showing

As well as poetry expressing a tight or succinct message, and/or narrative, another central characteristic which makes it stand out from many prose pieces, is an ability to place mental pictures in the mind of its readers. That's why I employ the word "showing". I'm contrasting poetry with general text here, rather than words of story telling.

Having said that, you can write words that convey information, that are "telling" and triggering no mental images at all, but are strongly categorised as verse, because of their form, or structure. That has been stated earlier.

For example my "Completion square yet again" book holds 49 such poems. (Seven squared is 49). Again, each piece has four stanzas. The stanzas all have four lines ending in an ABCB rhyming scheme. Every line is seven syllables long. So it's categorically not prose, despite its predominance of words that "tell" rather than "show".

Perhaps finding a **balance** between these poles is pretty vital; because there's room for both of them. However, as already stated, poetry should be tight. Interestingly though, imagery can magically tighten a poem further, in an indirect fashion. The reason being, it can add to the actual words in the piece, through its implications.

For example, I was lucky enough to come across this fragment from the start of a poem, written by a famous British poet. The fact that the fragment I'm about to describe, and not the whole poem, or its creator's name, remained in my mind, is a huge accolade for this snippet.

The poem soon reached a scene, in which a hospital patient's relative was visiting by car. Without saying anything about the medical severity that led to the admission, or the actual relationship between the two people, you could guess a great deal; because the visitor arrived suddenly, left their car at a careless angle, and abandoned it without straightening it up. Of course, the text could have filled all that in, but then the reader's imagination is then left redundant.

Personally, I don't like most photorealistic paintings, for the same reason. I also don't go for highly abstracted ones either. That word comes to mind again: **balance**.

Inconsistent rhyming schemes. Also, avoiding ancient language

There are straightforward objective features of poetry that you can be mindful of, and avoiding them will give your work a better feel for its readers.

If you do want to rhyme, or as in the form of my book described in “Telling versus showing”, you specifically want to do so because you actually want to tell, rather than show, and think a poetic vehicle will suit your words best, then in that case, I think a regular rhyming structure works best, keeping in mind that randomly featured rhymes tend towards chaos.

The last statement overlaps with the use of archaic word, which has been mentioned already. So, as with rhyme, please aim for uniformity of their presentation. Suddenly using an archaic, or King James Bible-esque word, amongst only modern English, requires a good reason. Usually, they are found in sentences which look like the writer was seeking some form of convenience. They may have sought it as a rhyme, or perhaps because it's a syllable less than the modern equivalent word.

e.g. “poison” is two syllables long, but “bane” (archaic) is only one and has a totally different rhyming sound.

“Nothing” is also two syllables, but swapping it for “naught” (archaic) gives you one, and a different rhyme.

Does the third person standpoint lessen a personal emphasis?

I remember writing a poem in both past tense and the third person, and my tutor criticised it for being too distant. Perhaps I was sharing embarrassing or shocking truths about myself? I don't remember. However, the incorporation of that distance in the poem, was considered a potential detraction for most readers.

Personally, I've often written in the first person. However, British culture puts some writers off from doing the same. Unlike Americans, for example, Brits are more conditioned not to talk about themselves. It's partly about modesty, partly to do with being unselfish, but lastly, and certainly not least, it's also about fear; the fear of being open and putting parts of our lives in print.

Very early in this essay, I wrote the sections, "What is art?" and "Being unique". Therefore, I feel I can say "enough said", at this juncture.

Is there a good point to using overly short lines?

Sometimes you see works presented on the page, that appear very column like. Each effective line being made up of mostly, of just two words. It's understandable that some of their readers, automatically assume that there's an artistic significance to such layouts.

Having read one, if it clearly isn't a shape poem (i.e. a calligramme) due to there being no connection at all between the meaning of its words and the shape of them (a rectangle); and musically if the staccato way its rapidly punctuated brief lines seem confused and unconvincing, then you should be left wondering how it is to be read, and probably, what was the point of that column?

There is nothing profound about poems that people find tricky to vocalise, and such gimmicks could tarnish a writer's reputation.

Context led calligrammes

Calligrammes, in contrast to tall narrow column like works mentioned in the previous tip, are sets of words, poems, purposely laid out on the page, in a specific design to look like a particular shape. Usually, their forms aim to overlap context-wise, with the words of the poem that makes them up. Practically speaking, the formation from words, of shapes or pictures, will always hinge on the addition or subtraction of white-space, in and around such effective graphics.

Many years ago I wrote a poem in the shape of a banana. It chronicled a bizarre night I had in which after going to bed with trouser on, and a small pen-knife in one of their pockets, I woke in a semi-sleep, and started cutting open my pillow, to search for some bananas I thought it contained.

Beating all of the tall and narrow column-shaped ones in terms of imagination, this genuine calligramme of mine is called “Side-effects”. Its name added further mystery, because there is no direct connection between the meaning of those title words and the story conveyed by the body of the poem, but together you’re left guessing a possible interesting illness.

Finding an original approach to a poem

Sometime churning out the same format or structure to deliver your words, might not only get tiring, but can make you feel stagnant. Without fail I've always pursued the novel forms or subjects. For example, one of my poems was a perfectly formed, hypothetical email text, complete with a reasonable set of technical information in its header. It told a story of a failure to buy a winning UK National Lottery ticket. The email's date, and lottery ball results on that day, were historically accurate.

I also wrote a poem called "A difficult letter", which highlighted class differences between two friends, and the struggle to communicate them, write them down, and post them.

Lists can work well. Very early on, I wrote a poem as a quick fire list, that stated all the reasons someone felt alienated in the Health and Racquet club he'd joined.

Whilst not being a quick fire one; rather, much slower; one of my most successful published poems described the contents of a wallet, and their relevance. Its called, "Life in a backpocket".

I also wrote a poem, in which the words became a poem within the original poem. I titled it, "A portrait of Clare".

When all else fails, Rory's Story Cubes (TM), that are available online or in shops like Watertones, are a set of nine dice, each

with six imaginatively chosen pictures on their sides. By randomly rolling them, then ordering them, a silent movie story of up to nine frames emerges, for you to add words.

Of course both poetry and prose can stem from that “game”, and you have total freedom to generate your own set of alternative rules. In all honesty, there is only one poem in my “Complete Verse” collection that was generated like that, but I have used this product with huge success in community based poetry groups.

Clichés, adverbs, and overuse of specific words

A thread links all three of the components in this title; tightness and freshness. For example, it is almost unforgivable to place clichés in poems. Poems ought to be sources of innovation that lead to future clichés.

Adverbs placed in poems (or to be fair, in prose too), should be “carefully considered” or “scutinized”. The English language is “very rich” in options, “bountiful” even. You can usually change an adverb-verb pairing to just a verb.

Using a word too many repeated times will detract. The solution is like the one just stated above. Please find different synonyms of your word, because the vocabulary is an “abundant” one. And this way you’ll immediately add more colour and imagination to your piece. Not doing so can certainly glare to whoever is reading it, and additionally, if it’s read aloud, it will be like an equivlent aural problem in performed music, and quite obvious.

Cameos to potential stories or length in general

I've always enjoyed writing minitures. It's possibly a good way to embark on poem writing. With minitures, everything is vitally important, there is no scope for even a punctuation mark to be wrong. There are literary markets that specialise in miniature poems, and some are very difficult to break into. In fact, you find miniature prose forms as well. For example, where you're allowed exactly 100 words to tell a story. Whilst I've never tried, I'd stake a great deal, on an editor or judge, knowing the difference between a 100 word story, and a 99 word story with an adverb added. See the previous page!

If you write an extended poem, for example one that tells a long story, then necessarily, it has one, two, or perhaps even three dozen times the words in a typical miniature, and it is going to be taxing to present it with the quality you might more likely achieve in miniatures.

Whilst gigantic poems are found in the literature (and many have heard of the ancient poem "Beowulf", for example, which was made into a feature length cartoon-style film), the longer the length, perhaps unsurprisingly, the less examples there are with a similar size.

A longer modern poem, is for example Allen Ginsbergs very popular "Howl", which was critical of society; a so called "Beat" work. I think there's an obvious balance: too many words risk

quality not being achieved, whereas very few require forensic precision. Tony Connor, the writer of “The memoirs of Uncle Harry”, told me his extended poem took six years to complete. Whilst having many less lines than Beowulf, it’s much longer than Howl.

Personally, I think to maintain high standards of writing, the amount of required work exponentially increases as the size does. I very much doubt a linear relationship.

Stanza length

I had a habit in my own earliest poems, which was a baseless dictate. It was to make every stanza the same number of lines long. It is so liberating, when you personally accept, that there is no logical or artistic reason for doing that. Essentially, as in prose, you would never force paragraphs to be the same length. Why then should poems be any different?

Earlier on in this essay, I mentioned a very rigid set of syllabic poems that I wrote, with a display of mathematical precision. In those cases, their structure was a means of insisting the pieces were not prose.

Sometimes you might like to work in couplets. For example, they may help you present binary questions and answers, or something similar. Therefore, just as avoiding regular line counts in your stanzas might work well, doggedly abandoning regularity altogether is a dictate too. By succumbing to using a cliché, consider “horses for courses”.

Choosing an author's point of view

By this, I mean for example, that by referring to yourself as “I” in the poem, you are personally telling the narrative. That’s first person. In second person, it’s like someone else is telling the story and whilst doing so, they’re refer to you as “you”, as if talking to you. Finally, third person suggests someone is being talked about in their absence, and it’s not clear who it is, because they’re referred to with pronouns such as “he”, “she” or “they”.

Earlier in this essay I suggested that Brits are a bit awkward when directly referring themselves. Conversely, my own experience suggests that Americans are much less bothered in that manner, for example, they’re capitalistically more likely to self-promote.

Poets usually write in the first or third person. Much of my own poetry is personal, and I’ve used it in a personal manner, both in exploratory and revelatory ways. But sometimes I’ve wanted to place distance between me and my own words, for one or more reasons. Rewriting a piece from first person to the third person, can reduce impact so much as to destroy the poem, making it neither “this nor that”, because in fact, to shock, was the point.

When dilemmas arise like the one above, converting to the often ignored second person point of view might be an answer, and a way to avoid a bigger rewrite. Instinct rather than objectivity will tell you if it works, and you may even be able to test it out “on the fly” so to speak, as you read through the current version.

Punchlines and surprise

It is possible to lead a reader through curious but seemingly meaningless material, only to have the poem hit a paradigm shift in its content, right at the end.

For example, my piece “Transition” described what was occupying me, over a brief three-day period, whilst I was experiencing long-term unemployment, and the mourning of my first wife. Then the bombshell came. Those three days were the first days in eighteen months that I’d not been thinking about her, and they made me realise my mourning had ended.

I also penned a poem called “The story of my life”, which ended with an isolated word (in its original printing) that effectively had its own line and stanza, but not only that, it was on the page after, the one holding all the other words.

The word was “**madness**”.

After the main body of the poem, which was generally edgy, the two lines below the present paragraph preceded. “Madness” proved super tight, meaningful, and highlighting. It was spotlighting even.

realising that my concept of normal
was the same as everybody else’s:

Final thoughts

With greater confidence you might seek out a writing group; but before going to a face to face one, you could even investigate if there's a general Internet or social media one to try. Originally, I went to an established, face to face, city centre one.

I was a socially nervous person at that time in my life. However, I had been submitting poems to various markets, which I'd discovered via duotrope.com, and that led to feedback, both good and bad. However, as such, on my first visit to that group, I made sure I took previously successful poems with me. It worked well, because my work was respected, and I became a regular.

When we put time into any expressive forms, such as writing, painting and music, we ultimately ought to try to tell the world what our unique aspect is. By studying and practicing a reasonable amount, if only for technique, we can improve the chances of doing so, or at least solidifying what it even is. Experimenting, and reading other people's examples; looking at their pictures, and/or listening to their music, too, will make us better able to create, and thus generate a first impression in people, that is positive, but additionally, that instills a curious anticipation ahead of our further work to come.

Godspeed...

Appendix

Eleven of the illustrative poems that are mentioned in the essay.

Did Neil Armstrong wear thermals?

I saw the Moon today at early afternoon.
It was a cloud-like curve, hidden from all
but seekers. The sky was summertime blue,
and a police helicopter drowned out the sound
of gentle jazz in my car, but raised my eyes
to the sky.

At night the Moon was a breast, illuminated
like a cream neon in Soho. But with my naked eyes
I could see a cancer on it, a shadow from an impact
too long ago to comprehend? I stared at the Moon so long
it subtly moved in my window until it disappeared.
I asked myself, with all that light is it hot?
Then I thought, nonsense, Armstrong probably
wore thermals.

1/3/12

Heaven

I think it is energy,
with some waves in perfect phase.
Family and friends enhance
amplitudes for endless days.

A forever vibration:
not electromagnetic
or static or musical;
it would transcend the classic.

I would imagine sine waves,
but perhaps combination
of such bricks would not express
feelings in few dimensions.

Perhaps it is all over,
infinitely connecting,
endless communication,
helpless magnetic bonding.

1/11/15

I thought “Capriciousness” then “Untitled” then this

I knew my mood had changed,
because I visited the crematorium
for two consecutive days.
I'd been high for months.

She was the only one who understood.
Many liked the ups.
She preferred the downs.
I wanted to be me.

I spent my ISA.
I tried to date.
I spread my poems
and offered my house

I woke.
It was gone, pfft, just like that.
I surveyed the battleground:
the people I'd hurt and deceived; not least me.

It's just another day. It's my drama.
I asked, “what is my essence?”
That's carried through.
That's me.

31/7/14 @ Blackley Crematorium

I'd dissolve diamonds -

if I could, to restore
your love. My life
has left me behind now:
a stagecoach
with no driver, mail
addressed but lost en route.
My message is a silent
floating bottle.
What chance
have I nowadays? Blindfold me
and fire. I want to beach
yesterday.

21/7/13

Side-effects

I can

sense you,
yellow, one
inch thick, curved.

You're not alone,
though the others
are too obscure. They
don't visualise clearly.

I'm dozing but I'm
well aware of shape
under my head, hiding.
I'm fully clothed below
my quilt, and carrying
my Puma pen-knife.

I slash your blue
cover and white
cotton inner bit.

I even walk
downstairs
with you,
before I
realise
there is
no fruit
in my
pillow.

28/2/12

A difficult letter

Dear Dave,

I don't know how to start so, I'll just blurt it out. I loved you like a brother ...

- Hmmmm, leave the jugular alone.

Dear Dave,

I'm not great at writing letters at the best of times, and when I'm so marginalised and not given a shit of ...

- Hmmmm, offensive.

Dear Dave,

Would you do me a favour and ring me some time. I think we could be mates again. Did you see United last week? LOL what about that own-goal?

- No. Tangential, begging, strange.

Dear Dave,

I guess I'll make this the last letter that I write to you. It's a difference of class between us. I went to a comp and you went to a public school. We look at one another through fairground mirrors. I thought time was invested, but the shares crashed. Remember how I'd have taken the rap for you? You'll struggle to find that. Anyway, no greater love, as the Bible says. Remember me if you start to sink.

Your friend,
John

- Bingo.

4/2/14

One of the lads

He's not one of the lads, he
doesn't have a six pack;
doesn't have a hairy chest;
doesn't wear slip-ons,
nor tight trunks; dons shorts;
doesn't chat with the staff;
doesn't exercise in the gym or swim;
spares words in the spa,
in case they make him look a fool;
uses club shampoo
and doesn't dry his hair;
doesn't care
for after-shave or new man skin care products;
doesn't stand too long in front of the mirror;
drinks coke at the bar, he's
kind of not with the swing of things
but he's happy watching
the lads.

9/12/01 – 1/12/10

Life in a back pocket

Your passing is spanned by my wallet.
John Paul is nestled
behind your smiling face
cut out from your blue badge (1);
two Saints in waiting.
There's an older black-and-white photo
from when we first met.

A tatty card off a lawn
says 'All my love, Mike xx.'
It explained dying roses.

A new bank card, with money
to spread thinly, is unscratched.
Not many notes
thicken this German leather.
A credit card forms a clear imprint.
Conversely there's a receipt
for a sold, prestigious watch.

That CSO's (2) number's there
that we never considered
when it was needed,
and a Beefeater points card
filled to your arteries' peril.

Unison's presence reminds me
of the days I worked, and a Cex card
of days I sold to try and keep afloat
with your help.

Then there's my father's two prayers,
which made us weep
after the strewing.

25/4/13

- (1) Disabled person's parking badge
- (2) Community support officer

A portrait of Clare

She fingers 108 beads, sitting on her wheelchair.
Babaji's Kriya yoga provides her
with practical spirituality.
Where once the Rosary was her devotion,
her trust has travelled east.

I drink beer, facing her, poisoning my blood
with unconsecrated ethanol, and hiding
for what will be another morning malaise.
Her faith in mantras is unwavering, a belief
that we will be provided for.

We attempt conversation surrounded by dialogue.
I fade into practical white noise,
and her aids cannot separate me.
So, we sit like an old couple,
and I begin to write - "A portrait of Clare."

She is kind and undeserving of her ailments,
my soul mate for the last eighteen years.
Her modesty never cracks, and her charity is strong.
We're so different in some ways but we bond.
Time has sealed us with amber drops of tenderness.

5/7/11

Transition

Day one

Waking early, the first thing is to see
if I'm Facebooked or Tweeted.
I've got that newfangled Internet Addiction Disorder.
I don't work, so I drink coffee then walk.
I say hello to everybody.
Those who don't catch my eye haven't realised,
that we're all navigating this confusion called self.
The sooner we sense commonality,
the sooner we smile.

Day two

This is like day one, only I can't afford Costa.
The boating lake woman thinks my pepsi is beer.
I say, "I'm a tee-total nonsmoker."
Her husband asks if I'm a virgin. The remainder
is spent enjoying music and surfing the web.
I "meet" this new online poet.
I'm happy.

Day three

I visit town. Despite being broke,
I buy a box-set of AC/DC and listen all day.
I get excited and spam Facebook with track names.
My neighbours "rock" through a thin wall.

In the morning it clicks.
I haven't thought about her for three days.
I realise with guilt, then acceptance,
that I've stopped mourning.
I recognise that I've mourned
for the past eighteen months.

28/4/14

The story of my life

Did I mention confusion?

It chokes,
weeding its way
through the garden.

Summertime got shorter every year.
That was when the fruit
was most throttled.

It took a while to realise
that everything was seasonal.
Pain wasn't permanent.

It was too late though.
I'd hidden.

Confusion was multiplied
by the sexual imperative.
What was left
after all the best years had rotted
was recursive fertiliser.
So, did I tell you about confusion?

It embraced me after 45 years.
We signed a pact.
I sat at the head
at the Mad Hatter's tea party,
realising that my concept of normal
was the same as everybody else's:

madness.

9/5/14



Fine...