

Research, Assiduous Dedication and Self-Expression

An edited transcription, excluding the poems read, of what I said, in stages, at a Creative Writing Seminar at University of Bedfordshire at Luton in May 2007. The original breaks and related activities have been taken out to produce a more or less continuous text.

Good afternoon.

I am a poet.

I am an artist.

I am a sound artist.

I am a graphic artist.

I vary my description to suit the situation... but all these descriptions are accurate.

For our purposes here, what I do, day by day, long days often, is to make poetry and, sometimes, write about poetry. I try to avoid repeating myself formally; and, for that reason alone, I shan't be able to share all of my projects with you, even if you wanted me to, there being too many although that is neither good nor bad in itself.

Trying not to repeat involves a mode of research. Sometimes it is clearly research. For example, an ongoing critical project sometimes used to take me into the Royal Academy Library where I read and made notes. Other times you might often have found me going through one of two private archives, for specific purposes e.g. trying to put it in better order, and learning as a practitioner at the same time from others.

Making poetry, directly, as research might be less recognisable as research because the research involved is somewhat inadvertent for much of what I write. I rarely plan my poetry that way, even though I reflect upon each draft. Much of the work goes on in my head, where I try out ideas, rejecting most of them before I have even written them down.

The actress Maureen Lipman has spoken of her late husband, Jack Rosenthal, the playwright, saying it was difficult to know, if for instance he was looking out of the window, whether he could be said to be writing or not; but that he was writing most of the time, whatever he was doing ostensibly.

When I have decided that something might work and put it on paper, my preferred medium for testing is *Writers Forum Workshop* which was founded by Bob Cobbing and which I have co-convened since his death. I won't say much more about that now – basically it offers the opportunity to present work to one's peers without any fear of abuse from those who are dogmatic. You are all welcome to attend.

Another major test of a poem is to submit the work to editors. I have been doing that for about 40 years; and I have a few observations.

Observation 1. Being accepted by an editor is no proof the work is any good.

Observation 2. Being rejected by an editor is no proof the work is bad.

From that, I suggest that it matters which editor one chooses.

Poetry editors tend to be self-appointed. Some of them are rather bad at their job. Many have little idea about poetry. It has been said that there is no poem – and for poem read “painting”, “piece of music” etc – which is so bad that it cannot be published. I got that from Bob Cobbing; but he may have been repeating it.

There is no final authority. There is no absolute objectivity apart from the test of time; and that, by definition, takes time. And there is much more to be said about that.

I have a great respect for the scientific method, but the degree of uncertainty involved in judging poetry requires a much greater degree of what Keats called “negative capability” than would be acceptable to most physical scientists.

In this *evidence-based* culture, that is not a welcome observation, but that does not make it untrue. There are those who say they must have reliable criteria; and that is often an admission that they lack the necessary judgement.

On three or four occasions during the last few years, I have been asked by editors wishing to publish me for permission to reprint work which has already been published. Wouldn't they like to see other work? No thank you, they have said.

In each case, I have ruled out the possibility that they are experts on my work. Those who do have an overview of my writing are usually open to seeing new work.

My guess is that maybe they are hoping to attain some certainty by following another's judgement; and, as I have said, one shouldn't put that much reliance on an acceptance without knowing about the editor making the acceptance.

On one occasion, not long ago, a piece of work of mine was seemingly accepted because previously it had been accepted for publication by *Writers Forum*...

I am an editor of *Writers Forum*.

Let me be clear about the level of ineptitude and ignorance that artists may have to deal with. Some years ago, this century, an art gallery curator kept asking for the loan of an original of a particular computer-generated graphic I had made. He had seen it in a book. He wanted to include the original in a forthcoming exhibition as that is generally understood.

Of course, there was no original. Repeatedly, I explained that it had been made in software and offered a signed print; and each time he declined, insisting upon the original! In the course of that correspondence, I asked 9 separate times what other work of mine he had seen, but he kept evading the question, until that ninth time when I got the grudging answer: I have read just this poem but I know your reputation.

I found out that, seemingly, he wanted that poem because he wanted to demonstrate the importance of the alphabet in visual poetry and the poem concerned clearly used the alphabet. Most of my visual poetry uses the alphabet; but I suppose that he was keen to ensure that he didn't receive any evidence which conflicted with the theory he wished to demonstrate.

Of course, the quality of a piece of writing is notoriously difficult to determine; and even Shakespeare has been edited and supposedly improved.

I come to you as one who has in the past been labelled "avant garde". Let's stop there. *Avant garde* is a military term and I abhor it. Next time someone refers to an artist as avant-garde, ask them what they mean by the term.

One day, perhaps, the question may produce an answer that is defensible. In my experience, the answer will be something like "well,

you know.”

In response to that, one might say: “Yes, I know, but do you?”; but it would be better perhaps to say “Not really, no. I never know what that means. What do you mean by it?”

See if they can actually put it in other words. That is, are they speaking as human beings or as parrots?

This is not being awkward. It is central to the task of the poet if only in paying attention to what people say and, more importantly, how they say it – the raw material that we use.

I suggest that, most of the time, “avant garde” is a label too often applied to what the speaker finds unfamiliar, and no more than that. Yet it is presented as an objective categorisation.

On any day of the week, you can hear people misusing words; and perhaps it doesn’t greatly matter because often the tenor is so trivial. There are, however, occasions when it does matter beyond reasonable doubt. Poetry is one of those occasions, because this misuse, possibly abuse, distorts and misrepresents the language and its content which is the basis of the very art that we profess to enjoy.

The abuse of words such as “freedom” and “choice” are equally serious in the political sphere; and the political is not, I believe, to be separated from the aesthetic.

“Experimental” is a similar word. What does it mean to apply the word “experimental” as widely as it is? What poet worth her salt would not be experimenting all the time?

Towards the end of February this year, The Guardian began an article “Now that art is increasingly experimental...” What is being said? If one tries to infer it from the text, frustration awaits. The meaning of the word is taken to be self-evident; but it isn’t. In what sense is a work of art experimental? What is the experiment? (In this case, a whole extensive article is built upon an assertion apparently devoid of meaning.)

In the late 90s, I wrote an essay called **Finding another word for "experimental"**. Here’s a story from it:

A while ago I declined to publish an unsolicited submission to *RWC* magazine. Unexpectedly, the author wrote back,

demanding to know my reasons, sending a further i.r.c. with the demand.

I explained, briefly, that I had read the work, contrary to the expressed opinion of the angry poet; I had read it several times, without being able to make anything of it or find any merit in it.

This brought a further letter, without a further i.r.c.. If its brevity and concision mean anything, I had made the poet really angry. Of course, he told me, I had found his poem difficult; of course I did not understand; the work was experimental.

I am inclined to adopt a rhetorical device of Douglas Adams' character Arthur Dent and say that this is a meaning of the word "experimental" with which I was previously unacquainted'

The dictionary will tell us that an experiment is "a test, trial, or tentative procedure; an act or operation for the purpose of discovering something unknown or of testing a principle, supposition, etc. The word comes from the Latin for *to experience*.

That may begin to describe an improvisation. Tentativeness is an undervalued quality. But there are improvisers who, at least after some years, are apparently not trying to discover anything, even if their work might commonly be called *avant garde*.

Often, what is called an experiment, as conducted in the school laboratory, for example, is not attempting to discover anything, but to demonstrate the truth of a discovery already made.

Most scientists conducting experiments are actually conducting standard tests to ensure the safety and reliability of something.

Do we want safe art? Do we want reliable art?

Another definition: "To experiment – to try something new, especially in order to gain experience"

How often would the semi-mythical experimental artist really try something new?

A true experiment is commenced after the researcher has studied what is already known. It's easier that way. This is true of real-world

researchers and those in fiction. You learn all there is to know and then you go on and make your own discoveries. This is the scientists' version of working in the tradition.

I have a bit of trouble getting my head round the idea of experimenting only, and from the start of a career, though there's a lot of it going on. What is called "content" is too often a rehash of what has already been produced. It reminds me of the odd experience I had when I first began teaching, though my colleagues assured me it was quite normal. I would be saying "for the next 20 minutes or so, I would like you to write -" and then I would realise that the children had started writing though I hadn't yet told them what I wanted them to write about. In the case of the artist, it is the word "content" which is at fault. It is conceptually flawed, implying that one may separate form from content.

Too often the term "experimental" is used to appear to describe what we do not have a name for, perhaps because we haven't quite got hold of what the artist is doing.

These things matter to a poet, to any artist working with language.

And how do we work with language?

I see myself as working in traditions. In the plural. There is no one tradition any more. Was there really ever? We have too much knowledge-in-detail for that to be tenable. The archaeologist Charles Thomas suggests that, in what we might call the folk memory, facts over 200 years old become mythic. That might be 8 generations or a bit more.

He refers, of course, to an oral society or a predominantly oral society. In a somewhat literate prosperous society such as ours, one can reach back further, much further. I have Chaucer on my bookshelves and Gerald of Wales, and Langland and the Gawain poet; and many between then and now. I read Ovid, largely (necessarily for me, despite school Latin) in translation. That's more than twice the distance back to the beginning of English Literature; and there is a chunk of another thousand years or so still to go before the written language gives way to supposition.

We are hardly the first generations to travel widely. English Literature is what it is because of the things we have learned from many other countries and their languages; but now countries and languages

interpenetrate each other.

And I haven't yet mentioned the internet.

Shelley, in his *Defence*, proposes that all the poets of all time, good and bad, are all writing one great poem. That's a bit too Platonic for me; but I don't dismiss it wholly.

One understands Shelley much better for seeing how he refers to and adapts Dante. For example. There are many such examples.

The late Eric Mottram remarked in 1990 that if a work of art were totally innovative, then it would be unrecognisable to everyone but its maker. From that, I would remark that we only know what a poem is by reference to other poems.

I suggest, therefore, all things considered, that to set out to be an avant garde poet is a non-idea.

It isn't easy to write poetry others might find it worth experiencing at the best of times. Setting the main aim as being different to all else is unlikely to produce much worth hearing because it distracts energy.

Experiment will not necessarily produce an "experimental poem" as it is usually understood, whatever that understanding is. Often I think it is little more than a caricature of modernism, perhaps made by those who do not understand modernism.

A danger of trying to produce something that looks nothing like what has been seen before is that one will finish up being gimmicky.

Of course, I have said that I do not want to repeat myself. So it could be said that I am trying to be different to myself in the way I have described.

Not quite. I have been myself to the best of my ability. I shall say: That is my personal tradition. Out of that, I try always to introduce new material, ideas and techniques.

I have been doing that a few years and am slowly coming to the conclusion that I am probably repeating myself anyway...

In **Alice through the Looking Glass**, the more you walk towards your destination, the further away you go. To get to where you want to be, you must walk in the opposite direction. And to make any progress at all, walking will not do it – one must run as fast as one can.

I shan't develop this any more here because I hope that we can discuss it now or later, if you have the energy. I hope you do.

From when I was 18, I was employed for nearly five years before leaving to be a full-time poet. After 16 months of that, I realised that I had to choose between being an honest poet and being an entertainer.

I was employed again for a couple of years at a job which gave me much freedom to make poetry; and then I went, as a student, to what is now Kingston University.

After the degree, I did a post-graduate teaching certificate at Kingston; and then did an M A in English and American Language and Literature at Kings College London. I had to pay the fees for that myself and so worked at the same time as a supply teacher for two and a half days a week.

In 1982 or 1983, I became a full time English teacher - I had a family by then - which went on to 1987, when I was seconded by the Department of Trade & Industry to a year's full time at Kings, studying computing. By then, I was *Head of Media Studies*, which included teaching video film making, and Photography and dark room skills.

From Autumn 1988 until December 1991, I was a lecturer in Computer Studies. From January 1992 I was a Head of Department, *Head of Academic Computing*. I retired as of December 1996 to become a consultant and freelance artist. I am now a freelance artist full time.

This account leaves out immense amounts of detail; but it isn't untrue.

Be suspicious of chronologies which work. Anyone who can say that their life is one thing after another is either faking it or is a very dull person. We are our own networks with much happening simultaneously.

Start again.

I am a poet. Always have been.

As a child I also drew; but I didn't think of myself as an artist.

When I was about 10 or 11, I was given a reel to reel tape-recorder with which I made what would now be called sound art. I didn't know that having such a machine might make me a musician. I wrote

poetry.

I picked up the idea of **being a poet** and made my own version, despite my ignorance of what was involved.

I became a poet on my fourteenth birthday. I didn't tell anyone. I just decided some time before, giving myself the time to get used to it. It meant that I wrote poetry every day instead of, or rather in addition to, when I felt like it. That is a practice I still live by and I recommend it to you, whatever your discipline: if you wish to be an artist, work with your materials every day and at length.

When I was about 20, late 1960s, I threw away almost everything that I had made. I started again and shortly thereafter repeated the destruction...

I had learned enough to know I had written nothing of any use; it wasn't good enough in particular ways which determined that, whatever I did, the writing never would be good enough. I needed to change what I was doing and fundamentally.

So I changed my style. I had been writing in a verbally excessive way. I had also been trying to do things that technically I wasn't yet able to achieve however floridly I threw words at them.

I didn't know enough. Early in the 1970s, I took advice that had been offered repeatedly – to write about what I knew. It took me a long time to understand that such advice is not so straight-forward as it may seem.

Meanwhile, because my slash and burn change meant a great deal of mental discomfort, I thought I had changed at a deep level. I hadn't. When I realised that, I threw it all up and started yet again.

What I began doing then was rather popular. I had frequent readings and got good audiences in a number of places... Several times a week, I would be getting the first train back in the morning, straight back to work. Unfortunately, soon, I hit the same realisation again.

So, around late 1973, I stopped performing for a couple of years. At a date I have now lost, I gave a single London reading in that period, and was extremely dissatisfied with my performance, though I think the audience was not.

I offer this as a parable. Obviously, what I needed to do was to learn to be more critical; but that takes time and knowledge and there is no

quick route. From some points of view, I might be seen to be describing failure; and it is a truth universally acknowledged that failure must be avoided.

But that, avoiding failure in these circumstances, would be a false goal because there are other ways of (apparently) avoiding failure than that which I employed; and all of them involve pretence. Pretence is far more dangerous to the artist than failure. The way to avoid failure in the future is to accept it when it has clearly already happened and learn from it.

This is a hard lesson to learn. I struggle with it still.

When I started writing the notes for this section, without thinking much about it, I scrawled a heading “assiduous dedication”.

Assiduous dedication

That’s what it takes, if you want to be any good. I don’t mean if you want someone else to say you are good. That depends upon what criteria they are using; and to a greater extent it relies upon luck. I mean only when you are being really honest with yourself, can you sanely hope that you are any good. That’s what it takes. If you are not being honest with yourself, it will be noticed eventually.

It takes time and patience and a waste paper basket.

Over the weekend, I heard Elaine Feinstein speaking of her latest book. She is a fine technician as a poet; and a respected translator. She spoke of “honesty”, of trying to tell the truth as well as she possibly can, whilst trying to accommodate her emotion to the formality of the poem being made. She said that the process is a way of “making the emotion bearable”. And that reminds me of something T S Eliot said, that making poetry is a way of escaping emotion. But it is an escape achieved by facing up to it, not by suppressing it.

Feinstein said something else very interesting. Before the 1990s, in the Soviet Union and the other states of the Warsaw Pact, Poetry was immensely popular. Many poets filled football stadia for their readings. The received wisdom is that people turned to poets because they spoke out where others could not.

Feinstein expressed it somewhat differently. She said people turned to poets because they trusted them to tell the truth.

Truth, here, is not necessarily a factual matter. A poem may be

factually 100% true and still untruthful, dishonest. I am talking about the degree to which the poet is faking it or is just running on auto.

Is the language clichéd? Is it boiler-plated? The two often go together. Do the figures of speech fit? Is it metrically sound? And please...

I took a poetry workshop in an arts centre a while back; and a young poet told me he didn't need to worry about metrics because he writes free verse. Please, don't say that. Write free verse, of course, if you wish; but not if you think you are thereby freed from metrics.

I remember from the many years when I shared my home with a tidy woman that keeping things tidy and clean is an endless task. The only way to avoid that task is to stop it. It's something like that with writing poetry. Even while you are writing clearly, clichés and nonsense stick to it. Even while you are writing honestly, your brain sometimes seems incontinent; look down and find that you're knee deep in your own emotional faeces.

There are reasons for this, linguistic reasons. Poetry is an artifice and it's also quite a lot like a living creature while it is being made – and a living creature requires enormous amounts of energy to maintain its temperature and its integrity. A poem takes energy. I can talk more about this with you, if you choose

What is it we are doing when we make poetry? I prefer to avoid dogmatism and so avoid any kind of statement beginning "Poetry is...", certainly as a way of excluding other formal approaches than mine.

And please note that, although I have used the term *formal approaches*, it's not that I am saying: There has to be a formal approach to the making. I leave that discovery to you. It's just that I shall have nothing to say about formlessness.

I want to suggest that it were better that poetry is not about direct self-expression.

In the first issue of a magazine called words worth, many years ago now, the editors reviewed a book in which they attacked quite savagely the production of a pamphlet under review.

The poet and publisher Allen Fisher, though neither the poet nor the publisher concerned, asked to respond and was given the right of

reply. In the second issue of **words worth**, he explained that the poor production was an intentional decision, that both the poet (P C Fencott) and the publisher (Bob Cobbing) knew exactly what they were doing.

In that reply, he addressed the two editors of **words worth** and said “You have made the mistake of thinking that your opinion matters”; and that might well be my theme for this part of my presentation if we adapt it to read “You have made the mistake of thinking that your experience matters.” I address that to anyone tempted to become too directly autobiographical in their poetry.

There is nothing wrong with the anecdotal, as such, but to rely on it too much is nearly always a reliance upon self-regard. Personally, I find it rather tiring to read a poem which says, for example, and to quote another's caricature, “Got up, scratched myself, voided my bowels, had breakfast...”.

There's nothing wrong with it; but there's not much to commend it. I can engross myself in two way exchange of such material with close friends or lovers; but that's because of my regard for those people and theirs for me.

In public writing, I don't have much time for the autobiographical. That needs to be qualified, of course. Wordsworth is, for me, a major exception; but the level of artifice in **The Prelude** is high. John Clare is an exception of a different kind.

It is something with which I have experimented at length myself in 3 books **Messages to silence**, **Unsent letters** and **Letters to Eric**. In those books, I explored what happened when I foregrounded details of my own life... except when I made it up, which I did sometimes.

Then there is what Robert Sheppard has called the post-war English lyric - go somewhere, preferably on a bike, look, have an experience, go back, write it up.

Here, too, one doesn't wish to issue a prohibition. I am sure that there are examples of such poems which are successful, somewhere.

It may be that Sheppard made this mockery because of the partisan endorsement of the approach Charles Bernstein has called “official verse”. Other features include a deep suspicion of anything not English, especially if that means it is American. That was certainly the situation when I began to publish at the end of the sixties and the

beginning of the seventies.

It's a bit suspicious of the modern – note the bicycle involved, then a symbol of the past – and of change – note that nothing actually happens.

One thinks of Shakespeare's Malvolio: "I had an experience once!"

On the other hand, one reads or one experiences directly. What other source is there?

It is how one uses the material of one's direct and indirect experience which matters supremely. Keats is a rather bookish poet who transforms his reading material with flair. Study him and see how he transforms his direct experience.

Our personal experiences are all we have. But in themselves they are of interest only to us and those close to us. Poetry is more than recounting stories. It is certainly more than just telling the world how we feel.

Thank you.

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