

A Duncan Gregory Poetry Primer

I have to be motivated to write poetry. By that, I don't simply mean that I need to feel up for it on a certain day - it's more than that - there needs to be an emotional drive (positive or negative) to enable me to think and write effectively on a singular topic. This motivation, this emotional involvement, comes in many ways and from various directions ... and sometimes from profound changes to myself or my surroundings.

Travelling has been a great motivator for many poems, but also, a serious illness in the 1990s caused me to think much more deeply about life. Many of the poems have a positive feel: contemplating love for people and environments that have surrounded me at certain points in time. At the other extreme, are darker compositions, usually brought about by some trauma or challenge, such as growing older or getting sick.

In addition to these main stimulators there's another type of poem which has more to do with unpicking an issue or philosophy that has impacted on my mind. These are probably the works I love most - both in terms of writing them and later, when reading them - because they often contain the most original thoughts, ideas and concepts.

The initial thoughts were scribbled with pen on paper, lots of crossing out, deletions and change, before the final form was committed to a small hard-backed, rather unassuming A5 booklet. For about 30 years I did it this way, forming a compendium of almost 100 poems, some of which I am now more pleased with than others. But I value them all in their own way: each tells a story which reminds me of a part of my life. The little book is still with me now and in fact was invaluable when I lost the digital version in a robbery.

So, let's examine excerpts from a few of the poems to see how they fit the patterns described above.

1. The travel poems try to convey a positive view of a new world, as seen through a train window, or from the deck of a boat; or a café seat:

***Secrets of Sydney* (1979)**

*Off-hand look of the workers
Surely hides an inner pride,
While the tourist tries
To merge with the throng, but alas,
He sits outside.*

***Train to Pisa* (1999)**

*Train speeds across the plain,
Close scene blurring distant mountain view.
Beige-washed structures from centuries past
Clinging to hillocks like magnetized glue.*

2. In the mid-90s I was approaching 50 and also undergoing surgery to tackle cancer, so it was a time for dark thoughts and inward exploration:

***Mind Waves* (1995)**

*Bliss is turning and burning,
Like waves in turmoil in my head.
What once seemed so clearly
Defined as tracks on firm wet sand,
Have been swept away; submerged,
Or left as unclear prints in fading light.*

***Back in Time* (1996)**

*Back in time to unite with family
Back to see familiar sites.
Back in time to past endeavors
And back again to thought-filled nights.*

3. Poems which transmit positive or negative thoughts, stem from those innermost feelings during specific periods of my life:

POSITIVE: A child is born (1986)

*A child has emerged
The world to view,
A joy to behold,
That shared is ten-fold.*

NEGATIVE: How would you feel? (2005)

*How would you feel?
Twenty-six years old
And able to learn the truth
That most people know
When they begin to walk!*

4. Philosophical poems that challenge ideas, or develop a new concept on 'the meaning of life':

Whittling our Niche (2003)

*Imagine what one doesn't see,
Or hear, or feel, or experience,
Through any one life
On this blue-green globe.*

Trusting in Greed (2018)

*Greed is the upmost value
As trust descends the abyss.
The lords of greed
Are the ones on high,
Admired by others way down below.*

5. Poems which combines two or more of the above categories, e.g.: travel and love; dark thoughts and philosophy, etc.:

***Mumbai Mad* (1998)**

*No cease to endless motion.
Is peace just a Gandhian Notion
That Mumbaikars adhere to
When they go to sleep at night?
Or is this mad cacophony
The prologue for a symphony
That starts, as people say,
When you've trod the path that's right!*

***Venice* (2006)**

*The body of my life has passed
Since last we met
On winter's day in January,
So many years ago.
You smile at my ageing frame
And I marvel your resilience
Against the range of elements,
That threaten your demise.*

So what's so good about poetry?

Poetry is such an effective medium, because it can squeeze a myriad of thoughts, ideas, concepts, expressions, into just a few lines. The same can be said about song, which is poetry with a musical underscore, perhaps not better defined than in the works of Nobel Laureate, Bob Dylan.

On reading prose alongside verse, it's often the case that while prose can explain and clarify some of the detail, it can fail to relay some of the nuances, underlying meanings and inner feelings that can be transmitted using verse. At times poetry could be viewed as the fine art, while prose often seems a much more cumbersome form of expression. Prose can tell the same story, but its form will usually be much longer than the equivalent poem and even then, some of the finer detail will be missing.

Let's examine two exerts to test this theory:

1. Ode to Tone

A vitriolic set of verses with alternating 'Lead Voice' and 'Chorus', which because of different rhythms carry the effect of ramping up the verbal assault on the subject. The poetic rhythm and syntax carries meaning that would be difficult to duplicate in prose.

(lead voice – narrated at normal speed)

*This plastic man called Blair,
Looking old in his gold rimmed specs,
Now faces a younger foe
Across the Commons floor.*

(chorus – narrated at a fast past)

*It's been 'Tony this' and 'Tony that'
For what seems like eternity.
Shored up by his New Proletariat:
The essence of slick modernity.*

2. Misty for Me

A simple poem of nine short verses that is quite complex in terms of inferred meaning. It extrapolates from one-off misfortune to all things going wrong. It would be difficult to convey the dejected feeling of 'Why always me?' along with those double-meanings and self-effacing humour using prose ... and all within the space of less than 200 words.

*It was the only one you see,
On this train
Reserved for me.
All others had an unobstructed view.*

*Was this my lot, to be mistreated?
Should I become
A little heated;
Just as I did when traffic lights turn red?*

IF THAT'S ALL AS CLEAR AS MUD, I HOPE YOU CAN STILL ENJOY.