



## Why I Write

---

Cliff Forshaw

**W**HY DO I WRITE? — it's a question I tend not to ask and to which there is no easy answer. Like many people I started writing poems as a teenager; I grew fascinated with the art of verse and never stopped. I studied various classical and modern literatures, and the more I learned about how verse works the more I wanted to experiment with it, working at translations to see if I could incorporate foreign effects and strategies into English. I became a bit of a verse nerd: for more than a decade I was prosody consultant for the *OED*. I love seeing how the mechanism operates. I'm not too concerned with self-expression: *how* something is said, rather than *what*, seems the interesting bit. This also encourages an exploration of personae, how people have responded to their world, perhaps one historically and culturally remote from mine.

Poetry provides some unique satisfactions: the epigrammatic click of a word locking a couplet; the exact phrase that nails a sound, texture, colour or movement. It's more satisfaction than simple pleasure: a little like completing a crossword. Actually, I don't do crosswords; why would I when I can work on a sonnet? The sense of achievement is usually in direct proportion to the preceding frustration. There's a formal difficulty — mimesis, words describing or imitating something quite physical is one thing, but then they also have to engage with form, perhaps be corralled into a metre or slip inside a rhyme scheme. Almost all my first drafts are trying to find a metre or sketch a sound pattern. Having set that up, the next formal difficulty is to break that progression in an unexpected but apt way, exchanging, say, metronomic metre for looser or jazzier syncopation.



Often my initial structure is tentative, perhaps a few lines that seem to be moving towards couplets or a terza rima narrative. Maybe I have most of the lines but not in the right order, or need a fourteenth rhyme to shut a sonnet tight. Just as likely, as I tend to write poems in sequences, there's a poem missing to complete the structure.

So, one of the great, minor, reasons I write is this filling in a negative space, something missing. Or a sense of scratching an itch, of satisfying something that has been bothering me. Like something on the tip of your tongue, or trying to remember a dream. It's a way of returning to a sort of balance.

A more positive sense of achievement is seeing the printed page. This rarely lasts long, and often shades into a more acute version of the first sense. The page coming out of the printer will soon reveal some deficiency. Almost before I've picked it up it's inviting scribbles.

This continues with proofs: a weirdness *always* sneaks past. I've thought about deliberately leaving a typo, as a sort of apotropaic magic, a sacrifice to ward off further errors, but I know others would still get through and I'd have one typo I *could* have corrected. That said, there is a satisfaction about the completed book on the shelf, though it doesn't seem to last long. It's done and there's another messy project on the desk.

There's the satisfaction of seeing your name next to a poem in a journal. There are also the infuriating times your name is misspelled, or just drops off the page. This is even more irritating when a reviewer gets it wrong, though not quite as irritating as when the book is not reviewed. As Wilde said, the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.

I've been avoiding the real *why*. I write because it just seems that that's what I do; there's something missing if I haven't got a sequence on the boil. I just can't imagine not writing. I feel it's the best thing I do, and want



to do my absolute best at it. There's also what we leave behind. It would be great if my poems were remembered. It probably won't happen, but I know it certainly won't if I don't write them.