

## Teaching Poetry to Undergraduates: Notes Towards A Pedagogy

### Abstract

This essay looks at the obstacles many undergraduates face when attempting to write poetry. It claims that due to the often limited amount of poetry undergraduates have read, many students are either intimidated by the prospect of writing poetry or tend to write in an excessively abstract or archaic manner. The essay investigates this problem by exploring ways of teaching students the importance of economy and concrete detail in poetry, as well as the value of reading other poets and of being more attentive to the world. The essay considers techniques for communicating the significance of rhythm in verse and its relationship to meaning and, lastly, what role self-expression and awareness of audience play in composition – the latter addressed with particular emphasis on the workshop. The aim of the essay is to provide teachers with some basic methods and ideas for teaching the writing of poetry to undergraduates, which will in turn enable students to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of poetry, and thereby facilitate an improvement in students' own compositions.

### Teaching Poetry at Undergraduate Level: Notes Towards A Pedagogy

Poetry is 'nearly as old as humanity itself'<sup>1</sup> and to the present day it continues to be written with enthusiasm and intellectual rigour. Yet, at undergraduate level, Creative Writing students have usually read much more prose than poetry. The poetry that students have read is often only what they have studied or will be of limited range, maybe some Sylvia Plath or Allen Ginsberg. This is symptomatic of larger trends in the modern literature readership: novels are by far more popular than verse. Nonetheless, because of this trend, when students are asked to compose poetry they often struggle (more so than with prose) to write it effectively. This essay aims to investigate this problem by exploring ways of teaching students the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wallace and Michelle Boisseau, *Writing Poems*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, (New York: Longman, 2000). p.1.

economy and concrete detail in poetry, as well as the value of reading other poets and of being more attentive to the world. Furthermore, the essay will consider the significance of rhythm in verse and its relationship to meaning and, lastly, what role self-expression and awareness of audience play in composition. It is intended that by looking at these areas students will develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of poetry, and that this will facilitate an improvement in their own creative work.

Some students find the prospect of writing poetry intimidating. They view poetry as something difficult and complicated that they do not fully understand. On the other hand, some students are very enthusiastic about writing poetry, but having read little, especially modern verse, write in an archaic, abstract and overly 'poetic' manner. Both these difficulties (being intimidated or writing in an overly 'poetic' style) can be tackled by looking at the haiku form. This is a haiku by Shiki (translated by R.H. Blyth):

Among the grasses  
A flower blooms white,  
Its name unknown.<sup>2</sup>

The haiku works by juxtaposing an observation and a response. The observation is of the white flower; the response is to consider that unlike some flowers it does not have a name (or the poet does not know what that name is). This leads the reader to reflect on how things exist outside the labels assigned them. This, Natalie Goldberg argues, creates a 'sensation of space' in the mind of the reader, a creative space where perception can be renewed.<sup>3</sup> The haiku is helpful in a teaching context due to its brevity and simplicity. For those intimidated by poetry, a three line poem comprised of an observation and response can seem more readily achievable than writing, for example, a sonnet. Furthermore, the prescription that '[o]nly plain language should be

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<sup>2</sup> Shiki (translated by R.H. Blyth), in Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1986). p.125.

<sup>3</sup> Goldberg, (Boston: 1986).p.125.

used, and gross metaphor and all similes should be avoided'<sup>4</sup> works as an effective counterpoint for the more enthusiastic beginner poets whose writing is often marred by unfocused abstraction. Although not all students warm to haiku (some find them light and insubstantial), as a writing exercise it is an enabling one. It teaches the beginner poet to write using concrete detail, in an economic, unadorned style. It also encourages students to start thinking (through the process of observation and response) about how they perceive the world.

To build on the skills learned from haiku the teacher could introduce some ideas derived from Imagism. Influenced by Oriental poetry (like haiku), as well as Classicism, Imagism sought to remedy what writers like Ezra Pound saw as the flaccid verse of the late Romantic period.<sup>5</sup> As many beginner poets overwrite Pound's advice to '[u]se no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something' can be helpful, as is, what is now a Creative Writing motto, '[g]o in fear of abstractions'.<sup>6</sup> However, some students may feel disheartened by this approach to poetry, feeling the verse is too plain. At this point the teacher could explain how too many abstract nouns can lead to vagueness in the verse, and how a florid use of adjectives often decreases rather than increases the power of a poem. As Hugo Williams says:

There is more, not less intensity in plainness, because simple stuff operates without the safety net of the poetical.<sup>7</sup>

Influenced by Imagism and Oriental poetry, Gary Snyder's poem 'Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout' can be instructive here. The poem shows the student how modern poetry can be written 'without the safety net of the poetical':

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<sup>4</sup> British Haiku Society, 'Towards a Consensus on the Nature of Haiku' ed. Brian Tasker, (seminar handout: no further details available).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Clark, 'Imagism', *The Literary Encyclopaedia*. Available at: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=542> [accessed 26/02/2008].

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. W.N. Herbert & Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002). p.19.

<sup>7</sup> Hugo Williams, 'Leaping Versus Blabbing', in *Strong Words*. p.232.

Down valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain  
Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
Swarms of new flies.<sup>8</sup>

The poem's simple, efficient detailing of the 'smoke haze', 'the fir-cones' and '[s]warms of new flies' can, if they feel that Snyder's poem is successful, be enlightening for the student attached to poetic overwriting. It can also be liberating for the writer who is overwhelmed by the idea that poetry must be concerned with some obscure philosophical stance or a foregrounding of its own learning and importance. Snyder's poem shows how observation of environment can be rendered into effective Imagist-style verse. As a class exercise students could write a poem in a similar style, trying to avoid too many metaphors and similes, letting the things themselves be enough.

Snyder's successful use of concrete detail in the poem reveals his acute attentiveness as a writer. As Flannery O'Connor says, 'learning to see is the basis for learning all the arts except music'.<sup>9</sup> In consideration of this, the Creative Writing teacher could encourage students to be attentive and mindful in their everyday lives. This can be prompted, as I observed one teacher doing, by setting a descriptive exercise outside. This consisted of ten minutes of written observation, which could at a later date be utilised in a piece of work. In order to continue this process outside of lessons, the teacher could offer advice on keeping a journal or notebook filled with observations and reflections. This could be written in every morning, evening or, as is the case with poet Alicia Stubbersfield, something they carry with them all the time. The notebook can be a spur to attentiveness and simultaneously become a resource of

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Snyder, 'Mid-August Sourdough Mountain Lookout', *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th edn, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton). p.1706.

<sup>9</sup> Flannery O'Connor, 'Writing Short Stories', *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). p.87.

detail to draw on for poetry. For Stubbersfield these notebooks allow her to ‘trawl back through my responses to experience and to make connections.’<sup>10</sup> As it is often from making connections between seemingly unrelated things that poems emerge, the notebook can be a crucial element in composition.

However, in order for the beginner poet to acquire the skills to transform these observations and connections into verse Elizabeth Bishop’s advice is to ‘[r]ead a lot of poetry – all the time’.<sup>11</sup> As stated previously, a significant obstacle to students writing effective poetry is that they have read so little of it. Although Bishop advises reading the older poets first (she recommends Pope, Tennyson, Coleridge) a teacher of mine and the editor of a publishing house have both advised reading lots of specifically modern poetry. I tend to agree with the latter advice as it shows students how the modern world is interrogated by the *modern* (post-1920s) language of poetry. Modern verse provides students with a context to work in and, as Pound says, ‘[n]o good poetry is ever written in a manner 20 years old’.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as the beginner writer often emulates consciously or unconsciously what they have read, reading Shakespeare and the Romantics in the early stages of poetic development could be counterproductive. It may lead the beginner poet to writing in an antiquated style that is at odds with the world in which they actually live and the way they actually speak. The poetry Bishop suggests obviously has a great deal to teach modern poets, but for the majority of undergraduates modern poetry is perhaps, initially, more helpful. Therefore, the teacher could recommend some good and – bearing in mind that students rarely have much money -- reasonably priced anthologies of modern poetry.<sup>13</sup>

However, as a lot of modern poetry is written in plain language using a nonmetrical verse the beginner poet may question what makes these collections of words a poem rather than just prose divided into lines. David Constantine responds by saying the words ‘become poetic by their rhythm, by how they consort.’<sup>14</sup> It is this emphasis on rhythm in the writing that separates poetry from prose. A sense of music

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<sup>10</sup> Alicia Stubbersfield, ‘Keeping Your Eyes Open’, *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, ed. Julia Bell & Paul Magrs, (London: Macmillan, 2001). p.29.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Letter to Miss Pierson’, *Strong Words*. p.105.

<sup>12</sup> Pound, *Strong Words*. p.23.

<sup>13</sup> I would recommend both *Staying Alive*, ed. Neil Astley (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2003) and *Being Alive*, ed. Neil Astley (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2004). However, there are many other good anthologies of contemporary verse currently available.

is essential to verse. If students are attempting to write free verse and are not adequately aware of how rhythm works in a poem there is a danger their poetry may slip into prose.<sup>15</sup> Free verse may be characterised by not conforming to an accentual-syllabic metre,<sup>16</sup> but the breaking of the line means the poem still has a measure. William Carlos Williams is emphatic about this:

[...] to my mind, there is no such thing as free verse. It is a contradiction in terms. The verse is measured. No measure can be free.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the best way to get a sense of what Williams means by ‘measure’ is to read free verse aloud. Basil Bunting says, ‘[p]oetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life’.<sup>18</sup> Students may be reminded that poetry was originally an oral tradition. Often, much of a poem’s rhythm is lost to the beginner poet when reading silently from the page. It is my experience that the rhythm of a poem is far more palpable when read aloud. To illustrate to students the importance of hearing poetry read aloud the teacher could point students toward internet sites that have audio recordings or podcasts of poets reading their work.<sup>19</sup> Further to this, it would be helpful if the teacher could organise visits to poetry readings, or, if possible, to arrange for a local poet to attend a class, to give a reading and perhaps offer some insight into their own writing process.

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<sup>14</sup> David Constantine, ‘Common and Peculiar’, *Strong Words*, p.227.

<sup>15</sup> There is of course the controversial area of the prose poem. Neil Astley defines the prose poem as ‘[a] short composition having features of the lyric poem but not using line-breaks, distinguished in particular by sonorous effects, imagery and density of expression.’ *Staying Alive*, ed. Neil Astley, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2003) p.468. Unless a student expresses a particular interest in prose poems, for beginner poets it is an area best avoided, especially if the teacher is trying to communicate the importance of rhythm in verse.

<sup>16</sup> ‘As the name implies, both the number of accents and the number of syllables are counted; and the *pattern* of unaccented and accented syllables form the meter.’ Robert Wallace and Michelle Boisseau. p.54.

<sup>17</sup> William Carlos Williams, in Wallace and Boisseau. p.84.

<sup>18</sup> Basil Bunting, ‘The Poet’s Point of View’, *Strong Words*, p.80.

<sup>19</sup> The internet is obviously a vast resource but *The Poetry Archive* (available at: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/home.do>) and *Poets.org* (available at: <http://www.poets.org/>) are good places to start; both sites have a wide range of contemporary poets reading their work.

However, a complementary solution to establishing rhythm in verse, suggested by Roshan Doug, is introducing popular music ‘as a diverse and, perhaps, familiar analogy.’

[F]or instance putting lyrics to a tune and using percussion to pound the beat, the class can then mark time and the movement of a piece of [...] poetry.<sup>20</sup>

By looking at how words work in popular song or by setting poems to simple instrumentals students can identify how certain groups of words create a sense of rhythm. This approach can be helpful because although few undergraduates read poetry, nearly all listen to songs. By asking students to select songs they like and bring them to class, the lesson can build on what they already know and have an interest in. Thus, both introducing music and reading aloud can act as prompts to a discussion about how stress patterns and the number of syllables effect rhythm, and how choosing where to break the line establishes how the verse is measured.

Growing out of these discussions, the teacher can hand out a poem that is written out as prose, without punctuation, and ask the class, considering what they’ve learned about rhythm (from reading aloud, setting words to music and discussion of stresses etc.) to add punctuation and line breaks. At undergraduate level I have seen this done effectively with W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée de Beaux Arts’ and ‘Proletarian Portrait’ by William Carlos Williams. Asking the student to do this engages them in the creation of a poem’s rhythm. Furthermore, by comparing student versions of the poem with the original, a dialogue can emerge about why the poet has chosen to punctuate or break the line in a certain place and what this does to the *meaning* of the poem. As Robert Creeley (famously quoted by Charles Olson) says, ‘form is never more than an extension of content.’<sup>21</sup> ‘Complete Destruction’ by William Carlos Williams can be used to further illustrate this point:

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<sup>20</sup> Roshan Doug, ‘Rhythm and Pace in Poetry’, *Poetryclass*. Available at: <http://www.poetryclass.net/lesson7.htm> [accessed 10/01/08] p.1.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Creeley, quoted by Charles Olson, in ‘Projective Verse’, *Strong Words*. p.92.

It was an icy day.  
We buried the cat,  
then took her box  
and set match to it  
  
in the back yard.  
Those fleas that escaped  
earth and fire  
died by the cold.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Wallace and Michelle Boisseau point out how the clipped, short lines reflect the grief of the scene.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, the only longer line ends with ‘escaped’, as if the line is trying to escape from the form of the poem. However, as indicated by the title neither the line nor the fleas escape; the form is brought back to short lines and the fleas die ‘by the cold’. This shows how form and meaning create each other. This is an invaluable lesson for the beginner poet to learn.

An alternative method of bringing rhythm into poetry is by studying and practising set forms. The metre ensures a degree of rhythm and pace, and forms such as the sonnet and the villanelle are still popular in modern poetry. Even so, for the beginner poet this has potential downsides. It could encourage unhelpful habits such as using inverted sentences in order to make the rhyme. Similarly, in a bid to achieve the correct syllable count or line length the inexperienced poet may struggle to ‘use no superfluous word’. However, Pound does say that ‘the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric’. Furthermore, the influence of free verse on modern

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<sup>22</sup> Williams, ‘Complete Destruction’, in Wallace and Boisseau. pp. 42-3. ll.1-8.

poetry is more than balanced by the plain speaking formalism employed by poets like Robert Frost.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is appropriate to look at set forms and this can be carried out in a way that develops some of the points looked at in the Williams poem above. For example, a good sonnet to look at might be 'Prayer' by Carol Ann Duffy:

Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer  
utters itself. So, a woman will lift  
her head from the sieve of her hands and stare  
at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.<sup>25</sup>

Many students may associate sonnets chiefly with Shakespeare, so it can be refreshing to read Duffy's sonnet written in modern, colloquial (with exception of the musical terminology of 'minims') language. Duffy's use of enjambement throughout the sonnet is instructive too. As only four of the first twelve lines are end stopped the rhyme never sounds forced or predictable. Furthermore, Linda France comments on the 'unexpected' use of the intransitive verb in 'utters itself' and how that verb is made 'even stronger' by being placed at the beginning of the line.<sup>26</sup> This shows how line endings are as crucial in formal verse as in the free verse practiced by Williams. The student can then see how meaning is always mediated by the form regardless of what poetic style they may choose to write in.

Besides the study of rhythm, Carol Rumens suggests another reason why set forms are useful in the teaching of undergraduates. Rumens claims they help to free the beginner poet from the misconception that poetry is all about self-expression:

Poets learn [...] that to concentrate on the self [...] is counterproductive as technique. This is not to banish the I but to emphasize that it is an 'I'. It is a

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<sup>23</sup> Wallace and Boisseau. p.43.

<sup>24</sup> Frost famously said that 'writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down'. Robert Frost, in Neil Astley, 'The Sound of Poetry', *Staying Alive*. p.461. There are many popular and critically lauded poets writing today that use metre and rhyme: Paul Muldoon and Tony Harrison being two prominent examples.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, 'Prayer', *Staying Alive*. p.43. ll.1-4.

construction, and its fables and reports must be re-made, reissued, fashioned in the image of language.<sup>27</sup>

Rumens believes that working within a strict set form can destabilise (what she sees as an unhelpful) preoccupation with the self, as set forms have ‘a multiplicity of possible connections and sub-symmetries [...] where the self submerges in the energy and delight of original creation’.<sup>28</sup> It is debatable whether set forms are more conducive to this Blakean transformation than free forms. Nonetheless, this challenge to the belief, often held by beginner poets, that poetry is all about self-expression is an interesting one. Of course, self-expression in writing does have its place and its value. The psychologist James W. Pennebaker has conducted substantial research on the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing.<sup>29</sup> Yet, whereas in a therapeutic context written self-expression may be an end in itself, in a Creative Writing context it is only the starting point.<sup>30</sup> As Phillip Gross points out, a poet may begin with self-expression but the success of a poem is measured by its ability to ‘take us into what we don’t, or don’t yet know, or don’t yet know we know’:<sup>31</sup>

Any poem that has stopped being just-me and has grown into *something-other* is full of questions, implications and possibilities.<sup>32</sup>

Whether explored in metered or unmetered forms, it is this sense of questioning and possibility that opens up the poem to a wider significance and interest beyond its personal value (therapeutic or otherwise) for the writer.

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<sup>26</sup> Lind France, ‘First Principles: the line’, in *Mslaxia*, March 2003.p.46.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Rumens, ‘Peaceful Symmetries: an account of teaching an undergraduate poetry module at Queen’s University Belfast’, *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. p.221.

<sup>28</sup> Rumens. p.222.

<sup>29</sup> See James W. Pennebaker, *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*, (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2004). p.1-16.

<sup>30</sup> Rumens, however, sees self-expression as ‘a side effect’ rather than a starting point. Rumens. p.221.

<sup>31</sup> Phillip Gross, ‘A Walk In The Abstract Garden: how Creative Writing might speak for itself in universities’, Inaugural Professorial Lecture, University of Glamorgan, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2006. p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Gross. p.6.

However, the teacher should be cautious when introducing these ideas. For, there are potential hazards to the progress of the student's writing. It is generally helpful and productive for the beginner poet to write from personal experience and pushing them to pursue '*something-other*' may lead to dry abstraction or to writing that is wilfully odd. This would be a misunderstanding of Gross's point. For this elusive '*something-other*' does not mean that the poem grows to exhibit a strangeness or exoticism but rather it questions and illuminates our perception of things, in much the same way as the haiku aims to. This elusive illuminating quality is probably not something that can be taught as a skill, but rather something to be cultivated in attitude. That is, not to encourage a negation of the personal, but rather an engagement with the personal in a wider, more exploratory context. Neil Astley argues that the best poetry being written today is 'neither personal nor impersonal',<sup>33</sup> but serves to reconnect the two. It is from this fusion of reconnection that this '*something-other*' can emerge. Yet, beyond Rumens assertion that set forms achieve this more easily than free forms, I have found no exercises that claim to enable this process. Therefore, it falls to the teacher, monitoring each student's performance, to decide when and how to introduce this important, but perplexing concept.

Nonetheless, whether the teacher chooses to introduce the idea of '*something-other*' or not, an effort should still be made to communicate to students that poems need to resonate with a reader. It is often the case that beginner poets lack this particular awareness of audience. In workshops when asked about the reader, undergraduates often respond by saying that they write for themselves. On the contrary, David Constantine says the poem is ultimately 'for someone else', it is:

[...] a sort of generosity, an unselfishness, a leaving behind of selfishness, a conversion of the biographical self into other people's lives [...]<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Neil Astley, *Staying Alive*. p.462.

<sup>34</sup> Constantine, *Strong Words*. p.228.

By this standard the success of a poem is not measured by how accurately it can express the emotions of its author, but whether it can stimulate empathy in a reader. The poem's task, unless being used for private or therapeutic purposes, is to communicate. Esther Morgan uses a helpful biblical analogy in teaching her students effective ways to achieve this:

I ask my students to imagine that Doubting Thomas is reading their poems. He is not prepared to take anything on faith; so what if you are happy or sad or angry, why should he believe you? The only way you can convince him of the truth of what you are saying is by making him feel it; with his eyes, his ears and, yes, his fingers.<sup>35</sup>

This emphasis on the senses is often a key factor in creating a world in the reader's imagination. A technique I used in class to this end was a guided visualisation.<sup>36</sup> The students were asked to close their eyes and bring to mind a place they knew well. They were asked to describe that place using five senses -- what they could see, hear, smell, touch and taste -- and to write a simple poem based on these descriptions. Students generally responded well to this exercise and given only ten minutes of writing time they produced work that was detailed and evocative. This is helpful because sensory detail is a device, like structure and rhythm, which allows the reader access to the world of the poem. For the poem may begin as a deeply felt, personal response to life, but the success of the finished work always rests on it being able to come alive in the imagination of the reader.

The class workshop -- where students read and offer comment on each others' submitted poems -- can provide a good indication for the beginner poet of how successfully their writing is connecting with a reader. In order for this process to be of maximum benefit, however, students should be encouraged to develop close readings of the texts being workshopped. The practice of interrogating the workings

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<sup>35</sup> Esther Morgan, 'Articles of Faith -- Using Objects in Poetry', *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, p.34.

<sup>36</sup> I learned this exercise from a fellow MA student, but I have also seen poet Kerry Hardie use a guided visualisation as a writing exercise (although without specifically concentrating on the senses).

of each others' poems – focusing particularly on areas previously mentioned, such as economy, musicality, line endings -- can sharpen students' critical skills, stimulating insightful discussions which all those who workshop their writing will hopefully profit from.<sup>37</sup> This critical input by the students means that a workshop is a more collaborative learning environment than a lecture. Even the most accomplished poet and seasoned teacher can be struck by the illuminating insight offered by a student. Therefore, in the context of the workshop, it is helpful if the teacher tries to cultivate in themselves an attitude of openness and receptivity. It would be judicious of the teacher to listen intently to all comments made in the class discussion and to consider them, before offering their own views on the poem being discussed.

However, workshops have their dangers, as well as their benefits. For instance, it is important for the teacher to be wary that in encouraging students' critical faculties, that those students do not, as Steve Kowitz warns, become 'so enamoured of the [critical] process that they want nothing more than to pick every phrase to death,' and lose their 'ability to appreciate anything'.<sup>38</sup> This is obviously a detrimental habit for the student-critic to develop, but it can have an even more adverse impact on the beginner poet whose work is being critiqued. It is difficult for any writer to put forward their work for such public dissection, and most writers feel very vulnerable doing so, especially at first. With poetry this feeling of vulnerability is sometimes accentuated as beginner poets (as previously mentioned) often draw on explicitly autobiographical material. The work may be of questionable literary merit, but that does not diminish the meaning the subject matter holds for the poet. Therefore, it might be prudent of the teacher to ask students analysing submitted work to temper their critical analysis with sensitivity and tact, particularly if students suspect that the subject matter is of a delicate autobiographical nature. Ultimately, the workshop environment should be friendly and encouraging; feedback should always include points of appreciation, as well as indicating what parts of the poem might be

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<sup>37</sup> Further to this, these critical skills can be applied when editing and redrafting the student's own work.

<sup>38</sup> Steve Kowitz, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, (Maine: Tilbury House, 1995). p.248.

improved. In this way the beginner poet has the opportunity to flourish in an environment that feels welcoming, as well as constructively critical.<sup>39</sup>

If the teaching ideas and exercises addressed in this essay are successful, students will, hopefully, begin to produce poetry that is vivid with concrete detail and sensory stimulus. Furthermore, whether using free verse or traditional forms, students will be writing with economy and musicality. This will be a sign that the student is developing the skills that will enable them to progress to writing truly effective verse. That is a verse that goes beyond self-expression to demonstrate a technical accomplishment (such as a dexterous use of form to express content) and a depth of perception that can disturb a reader's habitual response to life, and rejuvenate the way that reader experiences the world.

**Gavin Goodwin** is a poet and a Visiting Lecturer at Newport University. He has an MA in the Teaching and Practice of Creative Writing from Cardiff University, where he is currently studying for a doctorate. A selection of his poetry can be found in the Cinnamon Press anthology *Black Waves in Cardiff Bay* and in the forthcoming edition of *Fire*.

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<sup>39</sup> Of course, a workshop that only praises work (quite often the case in undergraduate workshops) is also, in the long term, unhelpful. But, in regard to the beginner poet's first workshop submissions, it is too hostile an environment that probably poses the greater threat to the student's poetic development.

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