

The Working Life of a Poet

Michael Symmons Roberts - video interview transcript for The Write Kit KS3

Biographical note: Whitbread Poetry Award Winner 2004/5 for his most recent collection *Corpus*, also shortlisted for the Griffin International Poetry Prize. Previous poetry collections *Soft Keys*, *Raising Sparks*, and *Burning Babylon* attracted nominations for The TS Eliot Prize and The Forward Prize. His first novel, *Patrick's Alphabet*, was published by Cape in March 2006. As a librettist he is a frequent collaborator with the composer James Macmillan with whom he is currently preparing an opera, *The Sacrifice*, for production by Welsh National Opera 2007. As broadcaster he was Series Producer of the BBC's Everyman strand and later Head of Development for BBC Religion. He is a founder-director of 186 Media.

(01) Interviewer – First of all, let me ask you about your recent book of poems, 'Corpus.' How did you come to choose the subject?

MSR – It all began with the sense that I was writing a book of poems about the body, about bodies in all forms, and the book was called 'Corpus,' which means body. And I had this idea that I'd clung onto since I was a child. I remember reading it in a book somewhere, that medieval banquets were huge affairs - if you're a king or something, you might have a pig, a whole pig, and then it had a lamb inside the pig, and then inside the lamb was a goose, and then inside the goose was a salmon or something, so animals inside animals, inside animals, all cooked into this giant sort of slightly disgusting sounding banquet. But I loved the idea of finding these animals inside other animals at a meal, so I decided I

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I thought 'I'm gonna write a poem called 'Carnivorous' about a meal at which they keep discovering another piece of meat inside the one that they're eating.' And

wanted to write a poem about that, and the title came to me quite early. Carnivorous - it's all meat, it's all meat eating, every layer is about a different kind of meat. So

then I had this idea that I would write it as if it was the first night of the next world, so in other words it was an afterlife, it was the first meal on the first night of an afterlife – the afterlife after people had died, they'd risen again or come into the next world and they were having a

meal. I spent a long time thinking about it and trying to imagine what this meal would be like and what would be said.

And then I thought, well it would make sense if the cook introduced each course, and then

they all ate that course, and then there was this great discovery at the end of the poem, at the end of that section of the poem as to what was the next layer of meat. So I wrote a poem like that and I tried to put it in the book, and it was called 'Carnivorous.' And it had a pattern to it, and the pattern was that the cook would say something. So at the start of the poem the cook said 'let this be a feast for those who hungered all their lives,' and then they all tuck in. 'So the skinny ones stripped the sow and found stretched out inside her like her soul, like herself, a lamb with it's head in the place of her heart, with it's hind legs tucked to leap.'

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And then I had another stanza, another section where the cook came up and started to introduce the lamb to them, 'the cook said this lamb is for those who gave their lives for others, so the martyrs took the lamb. It tasted rich, steeped in essence of anchovy, they picked it clean, and found within a goose, its pink beak in the lamb's mouth like a tongue.' And the poem went on like this, layer after layer, until finally I got to the stage where it was a salmon, and inside the salmon, just when you thought you'd had your last course - the cook held the snail on a fork, there was a snail inside the salmon. 'No-one replied, so he swallowed it. Later rumours spread that one man slipped away out into the driving rain leaving a clean plate in his place.' But it wasn't working, I wasn't happy with the poem. I had this poem called 'Carnivorous'

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in which there was a layer of food under a layer, under a layer, under a layer, and it ended up with this snail, and I decided not to put it in the

book because I just couldn't make it work. And then finally I was looking at it again having not looked at it for weeks, and I realised it wasn't one poem at all, it was a series of very small poems. So I just numbered them 'Carnivorous I,' and then it broke up into five poems each of which starts with a two line stanza and it's followed by a five line stanza. And the reason it works like that is each poem of the five represents a different layer of the meat in this meal. So it enabled me to thread them through the book and make them work as a sequence of poems rather than one poem. And as soon as I'd broken it up like that I knew it would work, and it ended up in the book.

They don't all end up like that. I have quite a few poems that I feel they're not working and they end up in the bin. But that one, I realized when I broke it up that it would work much better as shorter poems.

(02) Interviewer – So Michael, as a poet, how do you decide what to write about?

MSR – I find sometimes the subject chooses me, I know what I want to write about, I'm struggling to find how to write about it. Sometimes if I can't think of something to write about but I feel the need to write, or I want to write something I'll just set myself a challenge – write about the tree across the road, write about my next door neighbour, write about the car I've just been shown, anything really can get you started and then you can try and make a poem of it. The one thing I am really careful about is writing about something I've got very strong feelings for at the time when I've got those feelings. The great poet William Wordsworth said 'Poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity,' and

"...if you write in the rush of the emotion itself it tends not to make a very good poem..."

what he meant was, if you write in the rush of the emotion itself it tends not to make a very good poem, you're just tripping over your own feelings. But if you let them settle for a while, make some note when you've got the strong feeling, and then let them settle for a while, you've got a better chance of writing a great love poem or a sad poem or an excited poem than you have in the full flush of that feeling.

(03) Interviewer – How do you get from an original idea to a finished poem on the page?

MSR – It can be a very long process. Sometimes it can be mercifully short, but it's about making something. I have never had the experience of finding an idea for a poem, sitting down, writing it, typing it up, and sending it out to someone. It's never like that. You can have ideas and the beginnings of a poem, you can have a title, you can have the first and second lines; and

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then I find I get stuck halfway through, or I write the whole thing and then I look at it the next day and only half of it works and the rest is rubbish. So the answer as to how you get from the original idea to the

finished poem is by re-drafting. I've got a little notice to myself that I keep by the door of the study so every time I come out of here I see this sign that I've written saying 'writing is re-writing' – and it is. If you think that writing a poem is about sitting down, and noting down your first thoughts, and then arranging them neatly on the page, it really isn't at all. Some poets I know would write 70 or 80 drafts of a poem. Now some of those might be minor changes, some of those might be 'that rhyme doesn't quite work,' or 'I need a different title,' or 'that comma should be a full stop.' But you keep coming back to it and back to it and back to it until you've made it as strong a poem as you possibly can. It's like making anything. It's like making a piece of furniture or making

something out of clay or making a painting. The more you do it, the more you have a sense of whether it's working or not and whether you can do better, and if you can do better you go back to it and work harder at it.

(04) Interviewer – What is the difference between a poem that works and a poem that doesn't work so well?

MSR – The poet Ted Hughes said that a real poem, a poem that works, it's as if it has an animal in it, a living thing in it, and every time you read it something comes to life, and moves – snakes it's way through the poem. Obviously if that's a poem about an animal it really is true. Ted Hughes has a great poem about a fox - you can almost smell it, you can see it, you can see the way it moves because of the way he describes it. But all poems have something like that, all poems that work have a life inside them, and when you read it something happens and you really feel that the spirit of something is captured in the poem.

(05) Interviewer – Lets go down to the detailed questions now. How do you know when the lines should end?

MSR – It depends on the kind of poem you're writing. If you're writing a rhymed poem you know how the lines should end because you know it's got to rhyme with

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the last line or the next line, so the rhyme determines the line ending. If you're not writing rhymed poetry, if you're writing free verse, you have a choice as to where the line ends, and that's more difficult. I would say there are certain things I would look for, I try and avoid in my own work words

like 'of' or 'and' or 'to' at the end of the line. The reason is, not that you can't carry on a thought across the line – because you can, it's more it makes that line somehow weaker at the end of it. I like to think of each line as like a mini-poem in itself, I like to be able to read that line and think 'that makes sense and it sounds good, and it sounds right as a line,' and if it ends with 'to,' and then you have to take a gulp and read down to the next line to carry on, I feel I could do better than that.

(06) Interviewer – That's nice and concise. So how do you then punctuate a poem if you've already got a line ending where you want it? Is punctuation important in poetry or not?

MSR – Punctuation's important in poetry because rhythm and music are important in

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poetry, and the sound of the poem, the way it sounds when it's read out loud or when you read it to yourself inside your head is partly paced out by

the commas and the full stops, and the semi-colons and the dashes. So punctuation is as important in poetry as it is in any other kind of writing, the difference is of course, you can play games with it. If you're writing a poem you can bend the rules a bit, you can put a comma in because you think you want a break, you think you want a bit of a break in the middle of a line, you want the reader to take a breath there before they move on to the next bit of the line. So you have choices to make, and punctuation is part of the tool kit that you have as a poet when you're making a poem.

(07) Interviewer – How do you decide when to have a particular rhyme?

MSR – Some poets like to write full rhymed poems, 'cat,' 'sat,' and 'mat,' real full strong rhymes. Other poets like to play with rhymes a bit more, so you'd rhyme 'cat' and 'Kate,' a half rhyme or something that just has an echo of the other word in it but isn't a full on rhyme. I like to play about with both, and I usually don't know

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whether it's going to rhyme or how much it's going to rhyme until I start writing the poem. Sometimes it will only come out in the second or third draft that I begin to see a pattern in the words and some of them are sounding like each other, and I think 'maybe if I nudge them in that direction and make it all work I could have a rhyme scheme here,' so it emerges out of the process of making the poem for me rather than sitting down and thinking 'I'm going to rhyme this one in couplets on the page so each 2 line stanza has a hard rhyme at the end of it.' I tend not to start out with that thought, it just comes out in the process of making the poem.

(08) Interviewer – How do you decide whether you want a particular rhythm?

MSR – Rhythm, like rhyme, is part of the tool kit that a

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poet has when he or she sits down to make a poem. For me, I would very rarely sit down and think 'I am going to have a

particular rhythm.' There are some rhythms

that are traditional in English poetry. There's one called iambic pentameter which sounds like de da de da de da de da de da, de da de da de da de da de da. I tend not to write in a set pattern, a set rhythm like that. I like the rhythms of speech, so I try to make the poems sound like the way that I talk, or the way that somebody's talked to me if I'm writing and playing with the idea of somebody else's voice, but the rhythm is up to you. All I would say is it's really important to think about it and to read it aloud to yourself, get other people to read it to you as well so that you know that the sound, the beat, the music of it is working in the way that you want it to.

(09) Interviewer – Michael, some poets set their work out in different blocks of lines - can you explain how you decide what to do with a stanza?

MSR – A stanza is like a verse in a song. It's one of the many ways in which poems are like songs, and like verses in songs, a stanza, a block of lines, can contain a thought in itself or a character. You might be writing a poem with six different people in it so you have six stanzas, and each one maybe had four lines in or five lines in and each one is a mini-portrait of a person. Or perhaps you're describing something, a

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place, and you want six different angles on it, six different things to say about it, so you have six stanzas. But it could be ten, it could be fifteen stanzas. The stanzas could be two lines long, in which case it's called a couplet, there could be three lines, four lines, five lines, the choice is endless. But stanzas allow you to break up the pace of a poem and to contain different thoughts within the same poem. It's yet another way in which a poet has an exciting array of

choices to make when you sit down and start building this thing on a page.

(10) Interviewer – We're going to move on now to attacking problems of writing in a strict form like a sonnet or a ballad. Why would you write in a strict form and what are strict forms and what are the problems associated with them?

MSR – There are lots of traditional quite strict forms in poetry, and that means something like a sonnet or a ballad where there are rules, where there are a particular arrangement of rhymes, and a particular arrangement

sometimes of the sound in a poem, so a pattern, a rhythm. These are as exciting and as liberating as they are tough and constricting. They don't necessarily narrow your options when

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you're sitting down to write. Sometimes they present opportunities that you didn't know were there because you've got to find a rhyme or because you know you've only got to have ten syllables in a particular line it makes you say something in a different way, and by making you say something in a different way it can sometimes take your poem to a place that you didn't know existed. So it's not all bad, it's not all tough and limiting to work with strict forms. The great American poet Robert Frost said that writing without any kind of form was like playing tennis without the net, it's not really playing tennis at all. So to have some kind of form to kick against when you're writing a poem can produce a better poem from you.

(11) Interviewer – How do you use imagery? Is it a better poem if you stuff it full of metaphors and similes?

MSR – When people talk about imagery in poems, what they mean is the pictures that it leaves in your head. What kind of pictures are you making, do you want to give to the reader? Using similes and metaphors is a part of that. When I'm making a poem I don't usually think 'I could do with a simile here' or 'I need to think of another metaphor' - it kind of comes with the process.

Poetry is about metaphor. It's all about finding new and different ways of saying things, and connecting

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things that you wouldn't always connect. You compare a person to an animal, or a building to a car, and through these connections new ways of looking at things are created. So metaphor is absolutely at the heart of what poems are doing. Sometimes similes work wonderfully, saying something is like something else, but you don't have to do that, again there are no rules, but it's all about making those beautiful pictures with sound, with language, that create an image in the readers head.

(12) Interviewer – Can we talk about some of the 'special effects' poets use? What precisely is a metaphor?

MSR - A metaphor is, at its broadest, describing something by comparing it to something else. Having said that, the language is so full of metaphors they're all over it, we all spout metaphors all the time without knowing it. If you describe somebody as bright, it doesn't mean they're lit up like a candle, but you're drawing a comparison between that image of light and

their intelligence. The same with sharp, if you say someone is really sharp, he's cool. You're saying something about that person by using a word that describes something else, and through that comparison you're making a metaphor, and the English language, like all languages is absolutely littered with metaphors and most of them we don't even know we're falling over. So almost whether you want it to or not, your poetry will be filled with metaphors.

(13) Interviewer – How is it different from a simile?

MSR – A simile is like a metaphor in that it draws a comparison, a similarity, between one thing and another to say something about that object, to change the way that you look at that object. The difference with a simile is that it does it very clearly, very obviously. For example, if you leave all the lights on in your house someone might say 'it was lit up like a Christmas tree,' and by saying 'it was lit up *like* a Christmas tree' you're drawing an obvious comparison and you want people to think about the Christmas tree, think about the house, and to work out what you're saying about it. You're saying it was too bright, it was dazzling, it was garish, all the lights were on, there were too many lights on, and that's the comparison that's being made, and it's being made very clearly by a simile.

(14) Interviewer – What is personification?

MSR – Personification is describing something that isn't a person as if it was a person. So if you see some trees on the street and they're old trees and they're a bit twisted and they're blowing towards each other in the wind, you might describe these old arthritic trees leaning towards each other whispering their woes. But they're not really doing that - what you're doing is giving them human characteristics

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to say something about what the trees are doing, what the trees look like; and it doesn't have to be living things like trees. You can use personification for any idea really. You could describe a character who

was the personification of anger. Everything they did, what they wore, just reflected anger - they were in a constant rage. You could have a personification of a country or a place, or any kind of idea. So it's about describing something by making them a person, and describing a person.

(15) Interviewer – How about alliteration?

MSR – Alliteration is one of the special effects that a poet can call on to make the music of a poem come alive; and it's a kind of rhyme, but it's not a rhyme with vowel sounds, it's a rhyme with the consonants in a poem. For

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example, loose limbed Labradors love licking lemon lollipops. All these 'l' sounds, that is alliteration. But it needn't be 'l,' it could be 't' or 'd,' 'k,' but it's about taking those consonant sounds and making a pattern in the poem where they chime against each other.

(16) Interviewer – Let's go on to assonance.

MSR – Assonance is about using vowel sounds to chime or rub against each other within the lines of a poem. The loud proud sow picked a row with the cow. All those 'ow' sounds, that is assonance, but it could be 'o' or 'e' or 'ah.' It's about making those sounds work together to create a particular effect in the poem.

(17) Interviewer – Onomatopoeia?

MSR - Onomatopoeia is a very long word with a very short meaning. It means a word that sounds like what it says. 'Crash,' 'zoom,' 'bong.' Of course you can always argue whether a 'zoom' really sounds like the word zoom, or a crash really sounds like the word crash, but there's enough similarity that most people would agree those are onomatopoeic words.

(18) Interviewer – You talked earlier about free verse. What exactly is it?

MSR – Free verse means poetry that is not rhymed in a strict rhyming pattern and doesn't use a traditional or strict form of meter or rhythm. So free verse is not writing in a Shakespearian line like 'No more be grieved at that which thou hast done' and then writing another line that rhymes with it. Free verse is often seen as more modern. It often uses the rhythms and patterns of everyday speech, rather than the rhythms and patterns of a song or music. But it's not any less difficult and it shouldn't require any less from you as a poet to make it. Every word still counts, and the line endings still count, but you're not following those traditional musical rules.

(19) Interviewer - Do you have any special tricks you find useful?

MSR – There’s a technique which helps you to make a poem that I learnt from friends who are painters, and they call it the mirror trick. If you take a painting like this one, which was done by a friend of mine, and he would reach the point where he was so sick of it, he’d seen so much of it, and had been working on it for days, and days, and days, that he couldn’t see whether it was any good any more – it was just too familiar. And at that point he would hold it up in front of a mirror and for about twenty seconds until your eyes get used to it you see it like new. You see it like you haven’t seen it before, and in that twenty seconds

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you can suddenly see what’s wrong with it. What’s failing and what’s working. Now you can’t, that doesn’t work with a poem to hold it up in front of the mirror, it looks like gobbledygook, but what you can do is keep looking at it as if it was new with each

draft. The way I do that is by alternating between handwriting and a computer and printer. So for example, this is a poem that I’ve been working on, and in the process of working on it I’ve printed out a nice neat copy as if it was in a book, but then I’ve

scribbled all over it, so you get all these notes and things I didn’t think were working and things that I wanted to change. At that

... “it was always said there was no rhyme for orange...”

point I’ll put it all back into the computer and print out a pristine copy that again looks like it’s brand new, and then I’ll go back to that, and I’ll

scribble all over that. And then I’ll do successive drafts of printing out a new copy on the printer and scribbling all over it. And by that process gradually I can begin to make the thing work in the way I want it. Sometimes you have to do a further trick on the mirror trick, which is to put it away in a drawer somewhere and not look at it for a week, or two weeks. And then again you can see it new. You get it out after a time of not looking at the poem at all, and your first read through you can sometimes think ‘why didn’t I see that last line’s so awful?’ Suddenly things are obvious to you. So the mirror trick is a trick borrowed from painters about how to make you see your own work as if it was new, and therefore see what’s wrong with it.

(20) Interviewer – You’ve already talked about rhyme, but do you have any more practical hints?

MSR – Rhymes are great, you can have so much fun playing with rhymes. Famously it was always said there was no rhyme for ‘orange,’ there’s no rhyme for the word ‘orange,’ but there are all sorts of half-rhymes and ways of playing with it. ‘Lozenge’ is a kind of half-rhyme for ‘orange,’ it sounds a bit like it but isn’t a proper matching rhyme. ‘Forage’ is a kind of half-rhyme for ‘orange’ as well. So there are all sorts of ways of rhyming and half-rhyming, and lots of fun you can have with it. The worst possible thing though is when you’re prevented from writing the poem

that you should be writing because you're hunting around for a rhyme to match this perfect line that you've got with a word at the end and you just can't think of something that rhymes with it. Well, one way of getting round that is to start the process of making

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a rhymed poem slightly differently. Rather than starting writing it, reaching the end of the line, and then going to the end of the next line and wondering what your rhyme should be, why not look for rhymes in pairs? It tends to be the way that they come out on the page, and if you look for words that sound good together, and then try and write the lines that are going to lead up to them, you can find all sorts of surprising things being drawn out of your imagination. So don't always end a line and then go hunting for the next rhyme, sometimes think of them as twins and go out looking for them like that.

(21) Interviewer – Is writing poetry a solitary, silent experience for you?

MSR – Writing a poem is not a silent process. I find, and I know most of the poets that I've talked to about the way

“...writing a poem is not a silent process...”

that they work find, it actually can be quite a noisy process in the privacy of your own room, because you're constantly reading it out to yourself, you're reading out the lines as they come to you, or you're reading the whole poem through to see if it works. And that's right - you wouldn't write a song without singing it to see if it's working, without playing it on the piano. Poetry is

more like music than any other kind of writing, so the sound matters, it's not just incidental, it's not trying to make it sound nice but the real point is what it means. The sound and what it means are completely inseparable. So I find the making of a poem is a process in which I'm constantly reading over to myself again, and

“...you have to hear the music of the words to know whether it's working or not...”

again, and again, the poem. Read it aloud and you'll understand your poem better, and make a stronger poem. And if you get sick of the sound of your own voice get someone else to read it to you. But you have to hear the music of the words to know whether it's working or not.

(22) Interviewer – What would be the single most important piece of advice to a young poet?

MSR – One of the most important things for any young writer to do is to read. The reading is at least as important as the writing. Not just reading your own work again and again, and trying to make it stronger, but reading the work of other people, reading the work of your contemporaries. Reading the work of people who lived a hundred years ago, or five hundred years ago, reading and reading and reading, and knowing what's been done, and what's yet to be done, and what you like and what you don't like, and why you like it and why you don't like it – just to be steeped in other people's writing is a really valuable thing for anyone who wants to make a poem.