

THE UNNOTICED PERSPECTIVE

POEMS ABOUT

LIFE WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME

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ABSTRACT

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The Unnoticed Perspective – Poems about Life with Asperger Syndrome

Asperger syndrome (AS) is a form of autism, a condition which affects communication, imagination and social interaction abilities. As a person with AS, my perspectives on life and its meaning, relationships and the social world are different from those of other people. This project is designed to be twofold – firstly to provide insights into life with AS in a form of literature which people can relate to; and secondly to allow the AS person to be able to see their own condition reflected in an accessible form. This document is intended to be used by those with Asperger syndrome, their parents and families, and professionals who work with them. It reflects on autism in general, the triad of impairments from an Asperger perspective and complications resulting from this condition. It is also an exploration of the world of poetry, the use of form, a variety of metres which were popular at different times, and involving poetic challenges of expressing emotion and feeling. This work goes into themes such as relationships and friendships, sense of time and space, sensory difficulties, growing up as an AS person, obsessional behaviour patterns, communication problems and other AS issues. It is designed to raise awareness of the AS condition and provide support to those who have it, while at the same time being entertaining and accessible to the general population.

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List of Abbreviations

AS.....Asperger Syndrome

DCD.....Developmental Co-ordination Disorder

NAS.....National Autistic Society

NT.....Neuro-typical

OCD.....Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

SEN..... Special Educational Needs

WCC.....Weak Central Coherence Theory

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Rewriting the Rules – Poetry and Asperger syndrome

To a person with Asperger syndrome, many aspects of the fictional written word can be incomprehensible. The use of imagination, the abstract view and the subjective material can render some fiction inaccessible. As a person with Asperger syndrome, I found English literature, including poetry, beyond comprehension at school, leaving with no qualifications and not passing English GCSE till 2007, at the grand old age of 39, before I was diagnosed Aspergers the following year.

Since I began studying the Asperger condition, I have discovered not only why the world of poetry and most of the world of fiction were inaccessible to me, but also ways in which this inaccessibility can be overcome. This is because the autism spectrum – of which Asperger syndrome is a part – has the triad of impairments of social interaction, communication, and imagination difficulties, the details of which are covered more extensively in the commentary. The sequence of the poems reflects this triad, and the listing of the poems is also reflected in the structure of the commentary to help eliminate confusion by Asperger readers. To be able to counterbalance these conditions, poems need to be written in a way we can understand and also for us to identify with the content. In creative writing, sometimes this means rewriting the rules.

Elmore Leonard's *10 Rules of Writing* includes two 'rules' (numbers 8 and 9 on his list) which will need to be broken for readers with Asperger syndrome to understand the content:

Avoid detailed descriptions of characters

Don't go into detail describing places and things.

(Leonard, 2007)

This use of detail he asks writers to avoid is, for reasons explained below, essential in order that the material be accessible to people with Asperger syndrome.

The need for detail in people with Asperger syndrome is at present explained by the weak central coherence theory which was proposed by Professor Uta Frith in 1989.

‘Uta Frith (1989) was one of the first to propose that a strong bias towards detail could constitute a core deficit in autism...most people focus on overall form and meaning...individuals on the autism spectrum are said to attend to detail at the expense of overall form and meaning’ (Roth, 2010, p.123). This means that instead of seeing something as a whole, Asperger people view things in sections and in great detail. An illustration of this is in the poem ‘The Unnoticed Perspective’ about the detail seen when looking at a leaf. ‘First, I’d see the angle of leaves to stem; and | In each leaf, the veins inside alternating | Start to end; then, noticing how the angles | Change towards the tip.’ This poem takes the positive Asperger stance of being able to see things others cannot see, and regards the weak central coherence theory (WCC) as a positive experience rather than a negative. ‘Frith suggested that, depending on the task, WCC may be either beneficial or detrimental to an individual’s performance (Roth, 2010, p. 123).

The benefits of WCC are shown in ‘The Unnoticed Perspective.’ However, the disadvantages of WCC are often seen in the comprehending of other poetic works. Apart from my discoveries about myself and others, and the research into autism and the application of form and metre, my poetic journey also took me into the world of other poets. Most of the poets I found seem to me, on reading their works, to see the world in very distinctive and individual ways. Carol Ann Duffy, for example, has the ability to use imagination to convey emotion. The Asperger person needs more detail in order to understand, as communicative imagination skills in us are limited. This can be illustrated as walking across stepping stones – the stones represent the content which is read, but between the stones imagination is needed to fill in the gaps. The Asperger person needs a bridge – since they do not have the required skills of imagination, stepping stones in most cases are not enough, leaving us ‘lost’ as to the meaning of a poem.

Poetic imagination can be illustrated by the example of an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. To me, poets appear to have the ability to use imagination to the level where they can visualise the complete picture of a puzzle only a quarter completed, and without a copy of the final picture being present. I, on the other hand, can see the detail in one single piece but am unable to visualise the completed puzzle, even if it is a quarter done and no complete picture is present.

Because of this variation, I would naturally shape the poems I write into a different style from typical poems. The amount of detail in my work is greater, since the imagination of the Asperger person is limited as part of the condition, and implicit language is not clearly understood; while the WCC in Aspergers will also lead to more detail in a poem than most poets would need. And yet the Asperger person, due to the imagination constraints of the condition, has problems interpreting much poetry due to its use of figurative language to convey emotion. This need for imagination alienates many on the autistic spectrum. Poetry for us requires more detail for it to be understood, and this detail can convey emotion without the need for imagination. This is because, according to Uta Frith's theory, 'People with autism...can immediately focus on the individual components' (Roth, 2010, p. 123) which means they focus on the detail in order to understand the whole.

I then considered how best this could be illustrated, and decided on using a single poem for comparison in a unique way. I would attempt to 'translate' a poem into Asperger language. To the best of my knowledge, this has never been done and is breaking new boundaries. The 'translated version' will, I hope, not only be accessible to Asperger people but also, alongside the original version, help demonstrate the imaginative and communicative challenges Asperger people routinely experience as well as to help them understand and appreciate the original poem.

Choosing the poetic example presented a challenge, since I knew that the translation process would involve research as to what the original poem meant precisely. Also to take into account was the fact that the inserting of detail would at least double the length of the poem. The example I chose was Carol Ann Duffy's 'Valentine' (from *Mean Time*, Duffy, 1993, p.30). This was especially fitting, due to the fact it was February when 'translating' took place.

Valentine by Carol Ann Duffy

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears
like a lover.
It will make your reflection
a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,
if you like.

Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife

I decided, when writing the translated version, to put the format and stanzas in the same form as the original, since it was the content which needed 'translating' and not the poetic form. This meant each stanza of the original was done in turn, with the same stanza breaks as the original separating one statement from the next. The form of the original 'Valentine' allowed for changes to be made without altering the form;

however, if the original was in a formal metre and this could not be duplicated in translating, another form would have to be used. But the work on the content would be by far the more time-consuming, to make it readable and understandable to an Asperger syndrome person.

The content of the poem needs to be made literal, with turns-of-phrase and metaphor removed. It would need to have extra detail added for structure and definition purposes and the imaginative link between one subject and another would need to be made explicit. Anything illogical would perhaps have to be changed for reasons of clarity. The relationships between one party and another would need to be clearly explained. Also, any representative symbols used in the poem would require comment on the reasons why they were used. This is because many with Aspergers cannot understand or see the point of symbolism.

For example, to illustrate clarity, linking and time factors: 'I give you an onion' (from line 2) (Duffy, 1993) would become with translation 'Instead, what I give you will be an onion.' 'Instead' refers here to a gift instead of the 'red rose' or 'satin heart' mentioned in line 1 (Duffy, 1993, p. 30). This word at the start will bridge the imagination gap left between lines 1 and 2. The phrase 'I give you' becomes 'what you will receive from me,' putting it into the future tense for time perspective, and mentioning both parties to bridge the imagination gap. The phrase 'I give you an onion' occurs also in line 13, and the translation is identical ('Instead, what you receive from me will be an onion') due to the fact the word 'instead' refers to the mention of the 'cute card or a kissogram' in line 12 (Duffy, 1993, p. 30).

An example, to illustrate literal language, logic, and bridging imagination gaps:

Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
Possessive and faithful
As we are
For as long as we are (Duffy, 1993, p.30)

becomes with translation

The strong taste on the tongue will remain with you
Possessing you and being faithful to you

For as long as we shall possess each other
And as long as we shall be faithful.

The 'kiss on the lips' would be reworded as 'taste on the tongue,' since in reality the lips cannot taste, and the tongue would be the logical option. Because some of the original imagery was therefore lost in the translation, more wording would here be used for detail. This detail would be useful both for clarity and for building up emotion in the poem. The detail is here used in altering the phrase 'As we are | For as long as we are' (a phrase which would confuse many with Aspergers) to 'Representing how we are together | And for as long as we both shall be faithful.' This puts the present and future tenses into the lines and takes the imagination out of the phrasing. This use of imagination to understand the phrase 'As we are | For as long as we are' is lost on the Asperger person since the sense of time and space is not clearly defined, and detail is needed for clarity in this case.

'Translating' involved breaking two of Elmore Leonard's rules of creative writing. This was done deliberately to take into account the weak central coherence problems found in Asperger people. Since we perceive creative writing in detail, to the extent that we lose concept of the whole, the detail in the 'translated' version had to be designed to lead us to the whole. The goals were firstly, that if a neuro-typical person was to read the original 'Valentine,' and if a person with Asperger syndrome was to read the translated version, both would be able to understand the ideas of the poet reflected in the work; and secondly, that the Asperger person would be able to appreciate and understand the original poem better

The 'translated' version of the original 'Valentine' reads as follows –

I will not give you a red rose or a satin heart.

Instead, what I give you will be an onion.

Round and white like the moon, a representative symbol of true love,

In a skin like brown paper which shields this meaning,

Disguising the love from view.

However, the love is still present beneath.

Love is like a light, with covering such as clothing,
And will need careful undressing for it to be found.

I give this to you.

You know how an onion will make your eyes water,
When cut through; love too can make you cry.
You will cry as lovers do when apart,
When love is lost, or when all you have left
Is your own reflection in the mirror
And the only photo is of yourself
As you recall the happy years gone by.

I am attempting here to reveal the truth to you
About what love truly is.

You will not receive from me, this Valentine's Day,
A cute card or a kissogram.
(These items do not show love's true meaning.)

Instead, what you will receive from me will be an onion.
The strong taste on the tongue will remain with you
Possessing you and being faithful to you
For as long as we shall possess each other
And as long as we shall be faithful.

Take this onion on Valentine's Day.

You will notice that, if you cut it,
It will have rings inside just as a tree does,
Becoming smaller and whiter towards the centre
Like a platinum wedding ring,
Which, if you wish, could seal our love.

Love can be lethal.
Just as the scent of the onion clings to you,
And to the knife which cut it,
So will the feeling cling to you
And stay with you.

This ‘translation’ of poetry, to include more detail rather than to use imagination to help convey the emotion in a poem, can help the text have meaning to AS people. This has the potential to open a world to us that has previously been closed due to imagination and communication difficulties. The poems I have written in this collection have been designed to contain the detail an Asperger person needs to be able to understand and identify with the ideas in the poems, and therefore open the world of poetry by using language we understand and situations we can identify with.

At the same time, the content is based on human life scenarios. It includes themes such as learning new skills, loneliness and loss, which are experiences common to all humans, but seen from our own perspectives. The poems reflect our fears, misunderstandings, frustrations. They show others the problems we have – our triad of impairments, repetitive behaviour and other traits – and the result of those problems, including suicide and self-harm. In this way, these poems open our world up to others. They can, through these poems, empathise with us as we go through life, seeing situations through our eyes and feeling it through our minds.

May these poems deepen the understanding of Aspergers for all who read them.

Perspectives on Self - A Clown

I see myself a clown - just like those days
When entertainment value was our worth,
And sideshows were where people came to look
On those like me; so many, in the past,
Were thought as clowns and those who played the fool.
Today, I know that I still entertain,
For many people have made fun of me
But I can't understand the reason why.
There might be something serious I say,
But I hear laughter being the reply;
I cannot see the funny thing I've said.
I analyse this, but cannot conclude
Why others smile - this leaves me far behind.
For why would someone make a friend of me
If not to see the act that I perform,
If not to laugh at one who entertains?
But entertainment value was my past,
When people came to look on those like me;
Just like the past, I see myself a clown.

The Squash Lesson

The racket first is in the handshake grip,
Then raised to forty-five degrees away
From vertical, wrist level with my eyes.
My coach leads, and I follow every move
Exactly as he does; I check again
And copy from the elbow through the arm.
He sets the pattern, and I synchronise,
Right up to shoulder level, thinking hard
And telling him I'm sorry - please keep still
For just a little more so I can see.
When arms are set, we move on to the feet.
One foot inside the serving box and hold;
The second, half a metre from that point.
I concentrate again to get it right,
The angle's sharp, precision is the key,
The use of detail helps me get it right.
So now the neck – I turn now to the side
And face the back wall, where the ball will go.
The pattern once again, he sets for me,
What I can trace and follow; he stays still
Just like an artist's model, showing me.

I feel a tremble in the knee from stress,
But I dare not look down, for if I do
I'll sacrifice the pattern, break the mould,
And all that work I've done would then be lost.
When this position's set, my coach walks round,
Correcting minor points so patiently,
I find his patient words encourage me,
Because he knows I cannot self-reflect.
Then this becomes a thing I can recall,
The pattern get imprinted in my mind
So now I can repeat it all again.
And now, with patterns deeply set in place,
He smiles at me, and then gives me the ball.

Perspectives on Self – A Hunter's Prey

A used dinner plate lies on the cafe table before me.

Its smell is nauseating to me after the meal,

Permeating the air – I can focus on nothing,

The smell demands my full attention.

I need to move this plate from the table,

To do this, I must be as silent as a hunter's prey.

I look around as the gazelle does for the tiger.

Where is everyone, and where is the nearest free table?

Could I move the plate without rousing attention?

The waitresses and customers are as hunters,

With eyes and ears that search, scan and seek.

That empty table is my safety and my goal.

Armed only with a napkin, I prepare myself.

I position it round the outside of the plate,

Silently and unseen; another check around

For anyone behind me. Am I being hunted?

Is that table still unoccupied? I breathe out slowly,

Moving back my chair so not a sound is heard.

I rise noiselessly, breathing softly through my nose.

My eyes and ears confirm no changes around me.

The hunters are engaged in their meals, heads down;

No eyes are upon me and no ears are listening.

I gently take up the napkin and the plate,

And slowly turn towards the free table.

Now I begin to walk, soft shoes on the stone floor,

I scarcely breathe, feeling the weight in my hand

And I concentrate – Don't drop it, don't drop it!

The cutlery on the plate begins to rattle.

I focus on my hands, which are hot and tremble

As they take the weight; I inch along, step by step!

I reach the empty table, slowly turn my wrist

To position the plate and set it down without a sound.

I check again. Who is hunting me, anyone behind me

As I gently release the plate, the napkin and the sweat;

And all of these must be left in the centre of the table -

They must not be knocked or fall if a hunter passes by!

A final check. Who is watching and waiting?

Same slow steps as I return to my own table.

There are no creaks from the chair as I sit down

And no scraping sound from the floor as I pull it in.

A deep breath. I'm back at my table, peace at last,

And now with that plate gone, it's time for pudding.

The Sleeve

Where the moon shines through the night of my past
And the goddess of the dawn lights the present's way
You can see the future in the light of the sun.

Where the ships of the past sail in darkened skies
And the North Star guides them to safety,
There you will find my family long gone.

Where the butterflies flit through coloured cloud,
Reminders of travel through different towns,
There you will find a shadow of me.

Where the pharaoh's mask and the great pyramids
Are overseen by Horus' watchful eye,
The ancient writings spell out my name.

Where the sign of ambition from old Japan
Meets the bravery of my tribal ancestors,
You will see the sign representing my life's wounds.

For tomorrow's sun and yesterday's moon,

Are worn on my skin, the marks of my life,
Daring others to discover who I really am.

Confusion

Confusion learning turns-of-phrase

Will follow me through all my days

Because of what I see;

And though I know the grammar laws

Of similes and metaphors,

They make no sense to me.

Such as – a dead nail in a door.

Something I've never seen before,

No matter how I wish;

And, if I saw a kettle, I'd

Take off the lid and look inside

But never find a fish.

I see no storm in my tea-cup,

And when I lift a bonnet up

I'm looking for a bee;

And if I see it start to rain

I'll look for cats and dogs again –

That's how it is for me.

I've not seen any growing pains

Nor found a barrel which contains

A bad apple inside;

I've seen no swan that sang a song..

I'd panic if I'd lost my tongue

Or if I found it tied!

You spend a penny for the loo,

And thoughts – they cost a penny too,

But why, I cannot see;

And why should I pick up my feet

Right in the middle of the street?

All eyes will be on me!

How can a dozen be made round?

For twelve is twelve – that's what I found

Last time I went to school.

Though these expressions are the norm

For others, I cannot conform –

I feel like such a fool!

To me, this is a foreign land,

With language I can't understand,

.Of that I have no doubt.

So if I'm angry, or upset,

That's how I'm showing my regret

That I'm the odd one out.

No Role To Play

My presentation's finished, so I go;

I cannot stay, I feel so full of gloom.

I close the door behind the crowded room

And leave the rest to all enjoy the show.

I close the door and walk across the hall.

I see a window and it welcomes me.

The outside world appears beyond the glass

As I stand here behind this solid wall.

The window shows the outside world is real.

The autumn colours linger on the trees

And through the window comes a constant breeze;

I'm lost in time, and this is how I feel.

The window shows that time has been and gone,

The sun is lower than it was before;

But I find, when indoors, time moves no more -

It stops while time outside still carries on.

But I'll be whole again, as when I leave

I know the world exists outside for me,
No longer bound indoors, I will be free -
I find that gives me something to believe.

The window helps alleviate my fear,
For I can see the passing of the day;
I know that I will have a role to play
When those grey walls no longer bind me here.

Hugs from Beyond the Screen

My friends on social sites online,
Are present on a screen.
I count those friends as being mine
Despite the gap between.

These are the friends who I can see
Though can't hear what they say,
But messages they give to me,
We chatter every day.

Friendship is hard for those like me.
For hours I'm left alone.
But once online I find I'm free,
Not silence on my own.

They've been more friendly – I can't lie –
Than family have been.
I give no physical reply
But hug them through the screen.

Apart, we hold each other dear.

I touch the screen and say,

‘No matter what you need I’m here.’

I’ll help them every day.

So when I find I’m feeling sad

I speak through the machine,

To the best friends I ever had

Who hug me on the screen.

The Invisible Control

What is it, this force which controls their behaviour?

This invisible on-off switch

Making them all respond, a single voice for all?

They cheer and they cheer as one,

They all laugh in unison;

Something they can't deny, however hard they try.

What force compels them, when a joke's told to them,

To react as one, with one voice?

Collective laughter, no willpower required.

Somebody scores a goal,

And all respond as a whole –

One roar, one sound, the sound of the crowd.

How come this force which causes such compulsion

Has no effect on me at all?

Such strong control using this invisible button

I evidently do not share;

Nothing's installed in there

So I stand here alone, my mind solely my own.

Are each of them part of a large master brain

Which makes them react together?

Is it a god, who forces them all to obey?

Or a program in the brain

Set to respond again

At recognition of a sign, a preset in the mind?

All I know is that whatever it is they have,

I have no trace of it.

Yet I am the one thought of as being strange.

Because I never follow

Or go blindly where they go,

They may laugh at me, but at least I am free.

Old Sinatra Songs

You used to love to play those songs to me;

I wish that I could still look up at you

And ask, 'Play them again!'

And I'd return to that past point in time

And let the music drain the years away.

I'd sit by your reel-to-reel machine

And watch you play your old Sinatra songs,

Then ask, 'Play them again!'

I'd watch you list them in your old green book,

Not knowing they recorded in my mind.

But when you died, the reel-to-reel machine

Went to the jumble sale; in tears I watched:

No songs ever again!

For, with the tapes in one sad pile, I saw

That on the top was placed your old green book.

How clever is it then, to use my mind

Because you knew how much I loved those songs!

I ask, 'Play them again!'

And though there are no tapes which I can play,
My mind can play those old Sinatra songs.

I'm back there, by your reel-to-reel machine;
I see those listings in your old green book.

I ask, 'Play them again!'

And then I hear those old Sinatra songs,
Which you recorded specially for me.

Flower of the Mind

I would never imagine that a mind so strong
Would fade away, as a flower does in the autumn
And leave an empty husk behind.

Full of colour in the past,
Able to brighten up the coldest room
But today like winter, like an old photo

In black and white, no colour, faded
As the petals of a flower wither away
And the leaves fall from the tree in autumn.

It is pitiful to see the decay
Wrought by disease, by age and by time
When you remember in the past how it used to be.

I will never be able to understand
How this, my mother's own mind, once so sharp,
Has almost turned to grains of sand

Falling through my fingers. I know that one day

She will not remember me again, so faded her mind

Will be, never returning to how it used to be.

The Garden of Heaven

The Lord was walking in his garden one day,
Admiring his flowers in bright array.
But he said 'No – it still looks drear –
Another pair of hands is needed here.'
So he said to the angels –
'Go into the world, across every ocean,
And find me a man who tends his garden with devotion,
Using wisely the gifts which he's been given –
I need him to tend my garden in heaven.'

So the angels set out across the lands
Looking to find this new pair of hands.
One saw a man tending his ground with care –
Masses of flowers blooming everywhere.
And he said to the Lord –
'I've travelled far and wide, across every shore,
And I've found you the man you're looking for.
He uses wisely the gifts which he's been given –
He's ideal for tending your garden of heaven.'

It was my father whom the angel saw

On an early summer's day through the greenhouse door.

The Lord saw the way he tilled his ground

And the beautiful blooms flowering around.

And the Lord said to him –

‘Come with me and fulfil your mission,

For you have been given a responsible position.

You've used wisely the gifts which you've been given –

I want you to tend my garden in heaven.’

Chips on the Table

Is my own health not worth more than my money?

And my alcohol not worth less than my life?

Then why do I gamble with all my possessions

And sacrifice even the love of my wife?

The drink is so easy, my problems just leave me,

I find myself free of the worries I own;

But I know that, long-term, it is not the solution,

If I lose my wife, I'll be left all alone.

My marriage becomes just like chips on the table,

The deal has been done and I've levelled the score –

I must not forget that if I were to lose it

I'd have no life left as I'd walk out the door.

May I still see worth in the love which surrounds me

And that I may work out the right path to choose.

May I not forsake all the love I have with me –

My wife is someone who I could never lose.

For is my own health not worth more than my money

And what of my drink – is it more than my wife?

I will not let this be as chips on the table,

And gamble through hell with the love of my life.

Faded to Grey

His face held a frown

as it faded to grey;

‘What is wrong with you?’

Such words spoken at me

Were cold as grey stone

and inscribed in my soul,

Which made a memento

of all my mistakes.

The name I was known by

was just ‘Good-for-nothing’ –

The family failure

without any friends.

If I had a wish,

I would want to awaken

This dad by adoption

long dead in his grave

And to bring him back here,

as a real human being.

I’d prove that the present

has things which I’m proud of,

Then tell him to totally

take back his words.

For gone is that girl

whom he called ungrateful,

That teen who he told

could not take a degree,

The no-one whose wedding

was not even news.

Just dismal, discarded,

deleted and saddened,

That pathetic person

belongs to the past.

Then I'd show my father

I'm far from a failure;

He'd see my diplomas,

degrees I have done,

With my Royal Warrant,

shining white on my wall,

And placed next, my picture

with visible proof

Of the magical moment

when meeting The Queen.

I would stand in that room

And stare at him, saying,
‘Just look at me now.
Please listen and learn –
Remember your words –
you said, “What is wrong with you?”
Now see what I’ve done
through the days of your darkness.’
I know he’d say nothing.
There’s nothing to say.
His soul would be steel
And his heart would be stony;
I would frown at his face
as it faded to grey.

Traffic Jam In My Nose

When I was small and taken ill

They sent me up to bed;

The doctor took a look at me

And this is what he said:

‘Bronchitis is what this child has.

This medicine will ease

Congestion in the nose and lungs

And clear away the sneeze.’

So, kept indoors, I watched the news

And this is what I saw:

‘Congestion on the motorway

Right down to junction 4.’

Congestion? I had heard that word

Before. But where? From whom?

Of course – that’s what the doctor said

Right in this very room.

This puzzled me, for on TV

Some lines of traffic showed:

Three lanes of cars stopped, nose to tail,

For miles along the road.

But I remembered what was said –

Congestion's what I had –

And I became afraid and so

I yelled to Mum and Dad:

‘A traffic jam! It's in my nose!’

As loud as I could shout.

‘What's wrong?’ they both asked, running in.

‘What are you on about?’

‘That's what the doctor said, when he

Was looking over me.

I've got some traffic in my nose

Just like that on TV!’

But they both started laughing loud,

Which scared me all the more.

‘What is so funny?’ I yelled out,

Although my throat was sore.

‘Congestion’s something blocking up,

Not traffic! Not by far,

But fluid build-up in your nose,

Just mucus and catarrh!’

It took some time to work this out

But I began to see

That just a build-up of catarrh

Was what was wrong with me.

So now each time I have a cold,

Which is once in a while,

I think of traffic in my nose –

But then it makes me smile!

Know Your Place

Your place is outside, isolated,
Watching the world react, interact,
As natural as putting on your shoes.
You stop, stare, try to concentrate,
But you know your place, so turn
And hide your face away.

To survive you must know your place.
You are waiting, like the humble dog,
For the crumbs to fall from the master's table.
You're not at that table, you're below it,
Seated on the floor, waiting for your turn,
Knowing your place as you should be.

Sheet of Glass

A sheet of glass separates my world from yours,
An invisible panel masking the sounds between them
But members of both worlds can still see each other.

It is as if you were calling from the other side of a window.
I focus on your lips, since sounds are inaudible
And I struggle to understand you,

Trying to follow your words; I motion you to slow down
So I can concentrate harder. The effort and energy
Drain from my mind and from my body.

All I have is eyes. Eyes concentrate on lips,
Not on your eyes, for then information is lost;
Such is the gap between our worlds.

I sometimes have to ask you, say that again,
Say that again; then try to ignore everything else
To concentrate fully upon you.

Sometimes I feel I need to apologise, over and over again

Because information is lost, lost in translation,

Lost behind the sheet of glass.

And I blame myself – my fault, my fault again,

Mine for not being able to understand first time

Like everyone else can.

I'm left in silence and stillness, permanent,

And unyielding, as is the sheet of glass

Dividing my world from yours.

Inside and Outside

I hear my mummy call my name.

‘Here’s something you can do.’

She’s standing by the kitchen sink –

‘I’ve got a job for you.’

I watch her reach into the bowl

And pull a teapot out.

It’s steaming hot and shiny, with

Five bubbles round the spout.

‘You’ve washed the pots before,’ she says,

‘And now it’s time to dry.’

She passes me an old tea-towel –

‘Let’s see you have a try.’

I look down at my shiny pot

Unsure of what to do.

She didn’t say which bit was first –

I have to think it through.

I slowly wipe round the inside,

But Mummy then says, 'No,
The outside, not the inside, think,
And have another go.'

I really want to get it right,
This common kitchen chore.
It must be dried on the outside -
So I walk out the door!

'Where are you going!' Mummy cries,
Watching me disappear.
'But you said outside,' I reply -
'I'm drying it out here!'

'Outside the teapot's what I meant,
Not outside in the yard!'
I'm puzzled, and I wonder why
I find this task so hard.

'Look here, I'll show you.' Mummy takes
My towel away from me back,
Then wipes the outside of the pot

Which I can plainly see.

‘That’s what I meant,’ and I smile back

Because I understand.

I know now what to do when I’ve

A teapot in my hand!

The Tomorrow Trap

Yesterday we can remember,
Strong as fire and clear as water
And for years and years thereafter.
But tomorrow lies beyond us –
Mists we cannot see around us,
Unknown depths we dare not enter.
Like a trap, tomorrow's waiting,
Not a place of our own choosing
And against our best decisions,
Where we'd never go on purpose.

What is lurking past the present?
What is waiting past this second?
Fear is the resulting feeling
Of this world which lies before us
Called tomorrow; we can't fathom
What's beneath its dreadful surface.
We screw up our eyes in terror,
Trying hard to block the hazard
So it is where we can't see it.

Who would willingly go forward
To an unknown place of darkness?
Like a monster, it lies waiting
For the time of its attacking –
Sucking us into its quicksand,
Pulling us into its whirlpool.
It is strong and has no mercy.
It has power to devour us.

We are helpless, we can't stop it,
No reversing, turning backwards,
Nothing we can do can slow it.
Sands of time go on relentless;
We are carried, taken with them,
Borne along against our choosing
To that great unknown – tomorrow.

All we have is now, the present;
We can't see into tomorrow.
With the autism condition,
Our imagination limits
Give us problems with reflection

And our plans for our tomorrow.

We can't see the next hour's weather

Let alone into the future.

Some of us have trouble seeing

Consequences of our actions;

Fear is how we see tomorrow.

We try hard to make sense of it:

This today, this now, this present -

It will soon be gone forever

To this place we have to enter.

We recall the past we lived in,

Happy times are now contrasted

With bleak visions of the future.

As it closes in, we start to

Sense the fact that we, with others,

Are in fact tomorrow's prisoners.

Escaping the Tomorrow Trap

For a problem, a solution...

Using logic, we can learn that

Change is part of our existence.

We can never turn time backwards –

Therefore use this logically –

Past is past, and cannot hurt us.

Help us to recall our feelings –

Fear, frustration, hate and terror –

Then remind us that what caused them

Is locked up and gone forever.

Using feelings at this level

Can be now backed up with questions.

We look for our scary monster.

Is it forward or behind us,

In our past or in our future?

We remember our past troubles,

And the future's clear before us,
While our past contained the monster.
And we cannot turn the clock back;
Therefore monsters won't resurface,
Nor can they return to haunt us.

Thinking like this really helps us
See that we're no longer prisoners,
And tomorrow doesn't trap us.
Now the past has been our prison,
In the present we've escaped it
And tomorrow brings us freedom.

Looking at the past in this way
Will relieve our inside pressure,
But we could have further questions.
We can ask – What of the future?
Could it have another monster?
We don't know, we cannot see it
Waiting in tomorrow's darkness.

If we know there could be something,

Maybe nasty, out there waiting,
What can we do to be ready
And to stop it from attacking?
We need to be soldiers ready,
Fully armed to fight a battle .
Treat our fear as our opponent,
Plan ahead with getting ready.

We expect the worst to happen,
This is our brain's default setting,
Acting like a life preserver.
This you cannot try to change in
The majority of cases.
To us, this world is frustrating,
Too haphazard, never constant –
That is why we dread tomorrow
And the future, with its changes.

We are soldiers in an army.
We need armour and some weapons
As we wait to fight a battle.
Advance planning is our armour,

Our routines provide a shelter.

Warn us changes will be coming

In good time, then when we're ready

Make our changes slow and subtle.

When we're ready, like real soldiers,

We will walk into tomorrow.

Dishwashing

I cannot leave the unwashed plates alone.
They wait there, by the bowl, filthy and stained.
Some people I know leave them there for hours
Until the filth and stains fuse into them,
Or so it seems to me; I always put them
Straight into water, quickly while it's hot.

The bubbles fascinate me – they appear
As prisms, separating the white light
To its component colours deep inside.
They float in water, also fly on air,
And two together always puzzle me -
Did they evolve, or were they made that way?

The smell of the green liquid chokes me now,
And so I cough and turn my face away.
And rinsing has a problem of its own.
The water's cold, straight out the tap, and so
It chills my fingers white, and causes pain.
It's hard to rinse and not to drop a thing.

My fingers by this time may be quite numb,
So numb, in fact, I can't take up a pen,
Let alone a cloth; so I must wait
For them to warm before I start to dry.
The pink returns and when they start to thaw
The pain will lessen; then it's time to dry.

Each item has a different shape and size.
I need to take each one around the cloth
And alter the position of my hands
As well as find a space which isn't wet;
I turn the towel, praying nothing falls.
And now it's done, until another meal.

The Cancellation Bombshell

A cancellation is just a mental bomb,
Which decimates the routines I've set in place.
The plans I've carefully built have been destroyed;
All this in just a few seconds of your time.

Each cancellation can cancel out my world,
And if I'm told without warning, it's far worse;
On top of this, if I have to cope alone,
I'll run for cover as if the bomb were real.

The sudden change has just stopped me in my tracks.
I'm helpless; I cannot change what has been done;
I look around and I find myself alone,
No-one to help me – the silence fills my world.

What can I do? I'm confused, I start to run,
I race around just to find a hiding place
To get away from the change imposed on me
And hide in darkness away from all the stress.

How can I cope? I'm afraid, I'm rushing round;

I'm up and down stairs and run from room to room.

With fear and hate intertwined, I start to cry

As pain of changes invades my structured life.

And then, exhausted, I sit alone, upset.

No matter how many others say to me

'I'm sorry,' it can't repair the damage done.

There's no apology which will help me cope.

Afterwards I rebuild my shattered plans

Alone, with no-one to help me think them through.

Afraid, frustrated, confused, all routines lost –

What would I give just to glimpse a friendly face!

I do warn everyone – if they need to change

A date or time when they're going to see me,

To give me notice, as much time as they can –

For if they do, it won't cancel out my world.

The Unnoticed Perspective

If I was looking for plants of some kind
For my garden, others would go by colour,
Size and scent of flowers; and they would see it
In its position.

But I see detail that's found within it.
I scan the stem, from bottom to top,
Counting the leaves, marking them out,
One to another.

The angle of leaves to stem would alternate
From start to end, and the veins within leaves
Would regularly spread, one left, next right,
From one in the centre.

The petals of flowers then follow a pattern,
Uniform shapes, ellipses and ovals,
And every pointed end I would check
For uniformity.

Each variation in size of the buds

Shows each step in growth on the stem;

The ascending pattern from bottom to top

Like a small staircase.

Each colour change, from one to the next,

From bud to grown bloom, could be seen

As each one down is deeper, brighter

And more intense.

If someone asked me to describe a plant

I would be engrossed in detail, each part

Of the whole, and everything I saw

Would be remembered.

That is when they'd likely tell me to hurry.

'Stop daydreaming! Pick one and let's get going!'

I'd be forced to leave my detailed world

For their reality.

Pattern Tracing

I lie alone, confused, restless and tired.
Frustrations of the day besiege my mind.
I look for calmness, anywhere it's found;
Subconsciously, unknowingly I search;
For patterns bring me peace as they recur.
The curtains have a pattern in the folds.
It stops and starts unevenly; the lack
Of continuity bewilders me.
I trace the patterned ceiling up above,
To try and find some uniformity.
A picture's upside-down from where I lie,
And with a finger I trace the design
Just in the air; the colours synchronise,
And then, for harmony, I check again
To look for constancy, consistency,
The pattern there within, relaxing me.
It brings into my mind a sense of peace,
That things are well and all as they should be.
This calms me after each confusing day
And takes away frustration from my mind.

The Immortal William

Four hundred years ago, thou walked this land.

Behold thy grave: thy bones lieth herein,

Yet, by the grace of God's almighty hand,

Thy soul, alive, arose from deep within.

For Death could not thy spirit here constrain,

Since here it dwelt inside the words thou wrote

And, when we read, thy soul liveth again

To breathe new life into thy ev'ry note.

At death thy life eternal thou has earned.

No power did thy spirit overwhelm;

Though Death himself to dust thy bones had turned,

Thy soul departed to its heav'nly realm.

Thy soul lives on today, for it is said,

Yet shall a man live, though he was once dead.

Winter Solstice

They gather in the circle of the stones,
Those ancient ones from many years gone by,
To see the Sun born from the darkest night
And hail its rising in the Eastern sky.

How would these people ever come to know
That thousands of years later, there would be
Some celebrations still upon this day
But changed in ways they never could foresee?

A fat man with a white beard and a sack
Comes down a chimney in a suit of red;
A virgin in a stable's giving birth
While red-nosed reindeer pull a flying sled.

The peace of their stone circle's been replaced
By frenzied crowds; large queues and bags abound.
No ancient drums to welcome in the Sun –
The ringing of the tills is their new sound.

No bardic songs, but carols in a church;

No peaceful dawn, but shouts of drunken fun:

The Yule Tree would be all they'd recognise

As their Sun God is known as 'God the Son.'

Yet this day, in the circle of the stones,

No matter if the weather's wet or dry,

You'll hear them hail the Sun born from the east,

And watch it rise into the dawning sky.

Repeat and Repeat

In this world of frustration and confusion,
Often we need to hide, to run, to get away
And disappear into a place of seclusion

With a special game or film, or a favourite song,
Which takes us into ourselves, takes us away
To a world in which we feel we belong.

After a hard day, a battle, fighting a war
With others and ourselves, we must break away
For sometimes we can take no more;

Then we find a safe place to regroup, to retreat,
With that film or song: this takes the stress away
As we play it again and again, repeat and repeat,

Three, four, five times, like a broken record,
A broken record, until we can feel it fall away
And tranquillity has been restored

Inside our minds. Then things can resume,

Bring it on! Let the world take our peace away

Until once again we need to retreat to that room,

Where the process will begin all over again.

Some think repeating takes life's enjoyment away,

But this is how we relieve pressure in the brain.

Pass Me By

You may have seen me before,
Another face in the crowd as your world goes by,
When you look at me, I may turn away
And the reason's so you can't see me cry.
If that is what you see
In the street when you look at me,
Please don't ask me how I am,
Just look away, walk on, pass me by.

You may have thought me strange in summer
Wearing long sleeves all the time.
It doesn't matter to me what season it is
Or if there's rain or bright sunshine.
But if that is what you see
In the summer when you see me,
Please don't ask if I'm too warm –
Just look away again, pass me by.

Because until you know me well
You won't know of the way things are.
You can't see how I kill life's pain

And then try afterwards to hide the scar.

But one day I'll let you see

And I'll tell you how it is with me –

You'll know how I get through every day

And you never again will pass me by.

Lying in Wait

I lie outside for days and wait for you.

I wait to mock and taunt you as you rise,

For you think – who am I, compared to you,

Much larger sized and guided by a brain,

While I, so small, just spiral through the air?

But it is I who has the greatest power.

My tiny units seem so frail, but I

Have strength in many, even as you do.

For with no guidance whatsoever, I

Proceed to take apart your entire world;

Now let me prove to you what I can do.

First, your logistics and technology

Are frozen to a halt because of me;

I grind your education system down,

I steal your light and heat away from you.

I ruin your livelihood and industry;

I treat farmers and motorists the worst.

But I am not to be content with that,

For I then break your older people's bones

And, thanks to me, your cities are laid waste.

I know I can seize everything you have,
And turn it all to ice within a day.

Darkness

The future's black, with nothing there for me,
Unbroken darkness is all I can see,
A large black hole without an end in sight,
A tunnel deep, without a guiding light.

Who will be there to guide me through the hole?
Is someone there to help me reach my goal?
Or will I still continue on my own
Just like the past, will I be left alone?

I often wonder what the world can see
Of their tomorrows; how good will they be?
Do others know, so that they can prepare
For all the circumstances waiting there?

Imagination is a skill I lack,
To me the world is only white and black;
The pit in which I live is dark and cold -
Will this be all there is when I grow old?

For life to me's a pit, no getting out

Once you're inside, of that I have no doubt;

Unbroken darkness is all I can see,

The future's black, with nothing there for me.

Who Will Say "Stop"?

The traffic flows freely below me
As high on a bridge I now stand.
The future has nothing to show me,
There's no place for me in this land.
I'm conscious of my own failings,
I'm sure I know where I must go,
But as I start to climb the railings
Who will say "Stop"? Who will say "No"?

The cars all speed on to tomorrow,
But yesterday's all that I own.
The present holds nothing but sorrow -
A sad future spent all alone.
The cars speed to their destination,
And as my tears start to flow,
I look round me in desperation -
Who will say "Stop"? Who will say "No"?

My whole life has been a disaster,
Just failing again and again.
The traffic appears to drive faster,

I look forward to peace after pain;

It's the last time I'll use the motorway

And this road I so well know -

As the last seconds tick away,

Who will say "Stop"? Who will say "No"?

Distraction!

Repeated lines, repeated signs in red
And signals flash, the amber lights ahead;
With sounds and colours changing around me,
Many distractions on the road I see.

I try to focus, concentrating hard;
Against these hazards I am on my guard.
My fingers grasp the wheel; I feel the sweat
Of palm against the rubber, hot and wet.

The sunlight, wipers, and a buzzing bee
Can count among the things distracting me;
The layout of the road markings and cones,
The patterns in the walls of bricks and stones,

The railings which repeat along the road,
The hazards which aren't in the Highway Code,
Like men on ladders painting window frames
And 'For Sale' signs with different agents' names

And numbers, all of these distracting me.

A safe driver is all I wish to be,
But I find it so hard to concentrate
On road, where these distractions dominate.

Hard work it takes, such effort forced from me
To manage these distractions constantly.
To be aware, anticipate ahead,
To know that amber light could change to red,

To recognise the signs well in advance
And plan so I would know I have a chance
To see, react and then to slow my speed
And check that it is safe to then proceed.

With practice, if there is cause for alarm,
I can control my panic and stay calm;
But advance planning is the way for me,
A safe driver is all I wish to be.

A Learner Driver with Dyspraxia Starts the Car

I know it's time to start the engine now.

My seatbelt's on and everything's prepared,

But I'm afraid it will go wrong somehow –

I've not done this before and I am scared.

Show me the way that I must hold the key,

For I dare not just try it on my own.

To use instinct's not natural for me –

I must be taught when facing what's unknown.

To me, the key's unnatural, so light!

Ease off the pressure and I'll let it fall.

I need to be told how to hold it right:

It's hard for me to grip something so small.

The key's between my thumb and finger tip.

Without your help I'd never get this far.

So now, with shaking hand, I keep this grip

And look for the ignition of the car.

I know it now must go all the way in.

I push it step by step – it feels so weird.
And now I feel sweat breaking on my skin,
For now has come the moment I have feared.

It's fully in – it won't move any more –
So here's the next thing that I need to learn;
To concentrate I look down at the floor
As you tell me the way the key must turn.

I hold a pen to practise, I then twist
Away from me at slow speed, doing mime.
It's hard to know how far to turn the wrist
While counting seconds, giving me the time.

But when it comes to trying it for real,
I hear the engine turn over and run!
I can't express the happiness I feel
At this amazing thing which I've just done.

Our Greatest Worth

Just minuscule and weak we seem to be,
Because we hardly contribute at all
Towards the social life we only see.
Our own opinion of our worth is small.
It may be true, we cannot socialise;
We cannot understand some when they speak
Sometimes; and so they do not realise
Our worth and therefore think of us as weak.
But take your integers, factors and primes,
The numbers which you place on all our worth,
And multiply them by a thousand times
To find out what we can achieve on earth.
Cast prejudice aside, and you will find
Our greatest worth is that inside our mind.

Reflective Commentary

Introduction

This work is designed to be twofold – firstly to provide insights into life with Asperger syndrome (AS) in a form of literature which people can relate to; and secondly to allow the AS person to be able to see their own condition reflected in an accessible form.

These poems are designed to enable people outside the autism spectrum (or neuro-typical as known in common AS language, NT for short) to identify the traits of AS and to be able to recognise and understand the behaviour patterns commonly associated with the condition. The poems are designed to reflect the AS world to the extent where people can imagine the difficulties that AS people have in living with this condition, and trying to belong and find a place in the world. At present, the condition of AS has been discussed and examined in many essays and academic books; however, most people would be unable to access and/or understand these documents. Therefore to put the condition into an art form to which they can relate would make understanding this condition more available to them. This could have the effect of transforming relationships, family life and many other factors, through awareness of the condition being raised in this way.

The poems are also designed to inform people of how ‘human’ AS people really are, even though they may often seem aloof, tactless, ignorant and anti-social due to their condition. Like all humans, they experience everyday activities, such as washing dishes, and also feel from life’s events, such as family illness and death, although these feelings are not always easily detected in their body language.

The AS person, on the other hand, may not understand their condition or how it affects them; they also may not be able to perceive other people as also being AS, due to the isolation which AS can cause as a result of the lack of social interaction (Roth, 2010, p.82). Therefore they would require their condition to be represented to them in a way that involves their identification of their own behaviour patterns and experiences of life. The poems are designed to help them understand themselves

better as a result, and at the same time be able to identify with the fact that they are not the only ones with this condition.

I am a person with Asperger syndrome who has lived for years with this condition, and has also taken courses on it with The Open University. Ilona Roth, in her book *The Autism Spectrum in the 21st Century*, acknowledges that people such as me are in ‘the minority of people on the autism spectrum who can describe their own symptoms’ (Roth, 2010, p.83). This puts me in the ideal position of being able to write this material, since firstly few on the spectrum can do it; secondly, my module at The Open University gave me the academic background on the autism condition; and thirdly my MA at the University of Leicester, which included creative work, gave me the essential poetic skills and an excellent foundation for the work to begin.

The journey which these poems took me, through three years of writing, was not just a journey into my own mind and those of others like me but also a journey into the poetic world – a journey of form, metrical structure, emotions, contrasts, expression and turbulence. The use of form was, to me, the ‘third dimension’ of this work. Recalling the emotions, feelings and actions of a person on the autistic spectrum when faced with certain challenges and situations was to me the first dimension, while the composition and styling to make a story flow, and the detail and description to make it work, was a second dimension. But the third dimension was the use of poetic form. This dimension was not constant – each poem needed a different form to convey detail, emotion, expression, speed, viewpoints and substance. I approached the poetry as a result from more of the viewpoint of a builder than a writer – constructing something three dimensional, rather than two dimensional – while the writing in different forms corresponded to constructing different types of building.

As mentioned in the preface, the poems in the above collection appear in the same order as they are referred to in this commentary. This is to provide continuation for ease of following and understanding, especially to readers with Asperger syndrome who may become confused if the poem and commentary layouts were not identical. The poems and commentary are designed to be two halves to work together as a whole.

In this commentary, there are different categories of poems. After this introduction to the poetic work, there will follow a discussion of the subject of ‘Autism – A Sense of Self,’ which goes into the history and etymology of the term ‘autism,’ and the perspectives on the concept of ‘self’ which relates to how the person sees themselves in the world. Then follow three categories addressing the ‘triad of impairments’ – difficulties with social interaction, communication and imagination – which forms the basis of the diagnostic criteria for the autism spectrum and Asperger syndrome (Wing, 2002, p.25). Each part of the ‘triad’ is covered separately. Then there is a category on the social and psychological issues some people with Asperger syndrome can face, together with complications such as concentration issues and the presence of additional special educational needs (SEN). Finally there will be a conclusion to this work, reflecting on the outcomes of this project, both planned and unexpected; and on the effects, for myself and others, of using poetry to represent life with Asperger syndrome.

Autism – A Sense of Self

The word ‘autism’ was coined by Swiss psychiatrist Paul Bleuler (1857-1939), the word being derived from the Greek *autos* meaning ‘self’ added to *ismos* meaning action or state (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2014). ‘Self-absorption’ is the literal interpretation of the phrase, which relates to the autistic perception of self – not in any way selfish, but their concept of self related to surroundings. This concept of self related to surroundings is present in all life situations – relationship to history, reality, environment, time and space, the body and spatial awareness, and relationships with other people, animals and technology. The following poems are related to this concept of self with regard to autism and in particular Asperger syndrome.

The historical background of mental disabilities from a sociological perspective is first identified in the poem ‘Perspectives on Self – a Clown.’ Although autism itself was not properly identified until the twentieth century, there is evidence that mentally as well as physically disabled people were used as entertainment in circuses and freak shows from long past. ‘Since the beginning, there have been a few humans who...mentally and/or physically...are different from the majority’ – these Barnum

and Bailey exhibited under the term ‘Prodigies’ (Monstrous.com, 2011). In autism this manifests itself as ‘clumsy attempts at approaching others [that] will usually put other children off, so they remain friendless and frequently teased and bullied’ (Roth, 2010, p. m79). This results in ‘low self-esteem and sadness due to being different; they perceive themselves as having low status and value within their peer group’ (Attwood, 2007, p. 187). So consequentially many would have been thought of as having entertainment value. ‘Perspectives on Self – a Clown’ shows that the problems of the past still linger today. My own inability to see a joke while the rest of a group can – which is covered in ‘The Invisible Control’ – has resulted in low self-esteem, leaving me to think I am a fool, like a clown. Even now, with much counselling and psychological training, I can still say things which others think funny – even though I cannot see the humour. The poem starts and ends with the past, to the extent of using the same words at the start of the first line and end of the last line, which symbolises the circular continuity of the circus ring.

‘Perspectives on Self – a Clown’ was the first poem I composed for this PhD, and was written in blank verse. The iambs, and pentameter, were forms I had discovered during my MA, and the flow of the form appeared to come to me in a way which could describe situations as well as feelings. I was able to use iambic pentameter in this poem to express the difference between the historical world of the circus and freak show and the situations today, where people still find me – and others like me – amusing though we are not being physically shown on stage. This was the first time I had used iambic pentameter for comparing and contrasting in a poem.

In ‘The Squash Lesson,’ I discovered that I was able to use blank verse in a different way. Rather than compare and contrast different situations, as ‘Perspectives on Self – a Clown’ was doing between the past and present, ‘The Squash Lesson’ concentrates on one situation only – the start of a lesson in squash – and uses detail to convey all the actions, positions and sequences which were needed before a ball is handed to the player. It goes through the physical actions and angles, the watching and concentration, and the emotional thoughts of the Asperger syndrome learner, described in the fine detail which the Asperger person sees. I found this form to be accepting of detail, and that I could use this metre to express the clarity and precision of the movements needed at the start of a game of squash. There are many problems

in life which an Asperger person faces, and many Asperger people have problems learning sports and games.

Asperger syndrome (AS) was discovered by Hans Asperger in 1944 (Coates, 2011), and was established as being ‘a form of autism, which is a lifelong disability that affects how the person makes sense of the world’ (NAS, 2012). One of these difficulties Asperger people have regarding the sense of self, and concept of self, is being self-aware as regards the position and action of their bodies. ‘Children and sometimes adults with Asperger syndrome can have difficulty knowing where their body is in space, which may cause them to trip, bump into objects or spill drinks’ (Attwood, 2007, p. 259). This problem is the subject of ‘The Squash Lesson,’ which is from a real situation on Sunday March 25, 2012. The poem is intended to highlight the precision of movement and the concentration needed on the part of an Asperger person to perform these complex body actions. ‘The child with AS can be immature in the development of the ability to catch, throw and kick a ball’ (Tantam, D., 1991 from Attwood, 2007, p. 259). Therefore, accuracy is needed for a person with AS to perform such an activity: ‘Accuracy and attention to detail are Asperger traits’ (Attwood, 2007, p. 295). ‘The Squash Lesson’ shows the precision of the angles and the concentration and stress resulting from the energy needed from an AS person in order to play a sport such as squash.

‘Perspectives on Self - A Hunter’s Prey’ was an attempt at free verse, and it inadvertently evolved into seven stanzas of six lines each. This was not an original intention, but I found that the subdivisions of the story being told were each needing six lines to get across all the actions and emotions, the bodily responses and thoughts involved for each part of the story. This experience of poetic ‘evolution’ is described as Richard Wilbur when he says in ‘Conversations with Richard Wilbur:’ ‘Often the forms I arrive at...are chosen intuitively or by luck...according to the way the words want to fall’ (Butt, 1990, p.4).

The scene is set in a typical cafe and focuses on a person with sensory difficulties, coupled with Asperger syndrome and dyspraxia. First, the sensory issues here mean that the smell from the finished meal is amplified, overwhelming the person to the extent that carrying on the conversation at the table becomes impossible. This is a

common feature of the autism spectrum – the National Autistic Society state that ‘having sensory integration difficulties, or sensory sensitivity...can have a profound effect on a person’s life’ (NAS, 2013). The sense and perception of self here are the overwhelming information overload from the smell of the plate distorting the concept of the self in reality, and the desire for the person almost to be able to disguise the self to prevent other people – the ‘hunters’ – from noticing the complex thoughts and actions needed in order to regain a state of mental balance and composure.

Then follows the physical actions to move the plate away – a simple issue such as moving away an empty plate in a cafe, without being noticed, would be seen by many as just a mundane task. However this requires effort, thought, timing and control for a person on the autistic spectrum to execute, given the social interaction impairments of Asperger syndrome. When coupled with fine motor control dyspraxia, more effort and concentration is needed for such a task. This is because dyspraxia ‘refers to those people who have additional problems planning, organising and carrying out movements in the right order in everyday situations’ (Dyspraxia Foundation, 2014). Because the Asperger syndrome produces sensory sensitivity, and the dyspraxia causes problems with the motor control regarding body movements, the task now becomes a very complex problem.

‘Perspectives on Self - A Hunter’s Prey’ expresses this from the point of view of the Asperger person in the situation where, the meal over, the plate has to be moved first to calm sensory overload and second for concentration purposes, which are covered in the first stanza. The psychological preparations are covered next, beginning with the questions the person asks regarding safety and security, and setting of goals in the second stanza. The third stanza covers the physical preparations, and the next stanzas cover the actual movement, feelings, anxiety, stresses and observations while this manoeuvre is carried out. The final stanza follows our person back to the table, then describes the relief felt at the task finally being successfully over.

The Asperger person can fall into an ‘active but odd’ category - meaning they actively approach others ‘but do so in a peculiar one-sided fashion to make demands or go on and on about their own concerns’ (Wing, 2002, p. 37). This sense of self,

and the importance of self, is reflected in the poem ‘The Sleeve.’ It reflects the person which is me, the history which is mine and my special interests also. ‘The Sleeve’ celebrates the tattoo – in this case a ‘full sleeve’ tattoo covering the whole of my right arm. The term ‘sleeve’ is used by tattooed people and tattooists to describe a full arm which is completely tattooed, with no bare skin showing, from shoulder to wrist, regardless of whether it is of one design or several blended into one. The sleeve in question was carefully designed and inked over the course of a year to reflect my life story using myths, legends and symbols from different cultures and time periods. It was laid out in a cryptic way so only a person with knowledge of these cultures would be able to gain insight into the person which is me, the person beneath the designs. The first stanza, for example, refers to ancient Egyptian legends, in this case representing the god Khepri as a scarab beetle, who is the god of the dawn who ‘pushes the sun across the sky.’ In the tattoo, Khepri is set between the image of the moon and that of Ra, god of the sun; this represents the transition between the darkness of the past and the brightness of the future (Hill, 2010). This is a reference to religion being one of my special interests, as well as being a reference to one of my great-grandfathers who was stationed in Egypt during World War I.

There are other historical references in the poem. Some of these include ‘tribal ancestors’ which relate to one of my great-great grandmothers who was a member of the Native American Comanche tribe. The ‘sign of my wounds in life’ refer to a feather half-stained in red, which was worn by braves who had been wounded in battle, and is worn as part of the ‘sleeve’ as proof of my wounds in life’s battles.

The poem itself follows the pattern of three lines per stanza, or tercets, showing the detail in the tattoo as far as possible, which accentuates the self. Having three lines per stanza also has the effect of slowing down a poem, with more pauses between stanzas than quatrains would involve. Reducing the speed was important because of the need for the reader to get a sense of the detail involved in both the tattoo design and the meaning behind each part of the tattoo. It also puts more emphasis on the person behind the tattoo, elaborating the sense of self.

A person on the autistic spectrum has three pointers which underpin a diagnosis criterion of autism – absence or impairments of social interaction, communication

and development of imagination (Wing, 2002, p.25). These are known as the ‘triad of impairments’ which are present to some degree in all people on the autistic spectrum, coupled with ‘a narrow, rigid, repetitive pattern of activities and interests’ (Wing, 2002, p.25). The following poems describe these traits of autism with particular regard to people with AS, and how these traits affect the person’s perspective and understanding of life.

The Triad of Impairments – 1. Social Interaction

Social interaction difficulties with Asperger syndrome relate to problems understanding words, phrases and meanings, and the comprehension and application of these in various situations.

‘Confusion’ illustrates the social interaction problem with respect to language. It is a ‘tail rhyme’ poem, which was originally a French poetic form described as ‘rime couee,’ but was domesticated in English and later used by many English poets, becoming particularly popular in the eighteenth century in which the ballad started finding favour with serious poets. The tail-rhyming stanza is described as consisting of two separate rhyming couplets with a ‘tail’ rhyme embracing both couplets which gives the rhyming scheme AABCCB (Joly, 2010, Harvard University). This is the technical description of the form; but from my viewpoint as a person on the autism spectrum I see it differently.

To me, this is a ballad form with two extra lines added on; the first, third, fourth and sixth make a form similar to a ballad, and two more lines, the second and fifth, are added to produce rhyming couplets. ‘Confusion’ is used to tell the story of one of the greatest communication problems faced by a person on the autistic spectrum – understanding similes and metaphors.

The first turn of phrase described in the poem is the simile, ‘dead as a door-nail.’ This one was chosen deliberately as the first, because Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) mentions this phrase as hard to understand and goes into logical analysis of it. His narrator states that ‘Marley was as dead as a door-nail,’ before continuing:

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail (Dickens, 1843, from Stormfax.com, 2013).

It is unknown as to whether Charles Dickens was on the autistic spectrum himself; but the description about the door-nail, and the logical analysis as he makes sense of the simile, is the same process in which a person on the autism spectrum would use in fathoming out a similar problem with language or communication. He cannot find anything 'dead' about the door-nail, then compares it to a term such as 'coffin-nail' before eventually accepting the term is from the past which he cannot change.

Those on the spectrum, and especially those with Asperger syndrome, will look for a literal dead nail in a door upon hearing the simile for the first time. This literal interpretation is mentioned by the National Autistic Society on their small leaflet which accompanies their 'Autism Alert' card. The leaflet says that an autistic person 'takes similes and metaphors literally (so thinks 'daft as a brush' and 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' are about brushes and babies)' (NAS, 2005).

However, that is only part of the story; the literal response is just part of the reaction of the Asperger person to a simile or metaphor which, to them, is incomprehensible. The poem therefore goes further; it has the intention of showing the reader how the Asperger person first looks for something literal, and then begins to ask questions as to why this cannot be done. The types of question often begins with 'how or 'why' as in line one of stanza six ('How can a dozen be made round?') when a person is looking for a 'round dozen' and wondering why the number twelve cannot be represented by a circle. Finally, stanza seven picks up on the result of the frustration that an Asperger person cannot comprehend the phrases while others can – the anger at being the only one who is puzzled when others around them understand.

Social interaction difficulties affect people with Asperger syndrome in other ways apart from comprehension of language; one of those ways is the isolation and lack of reciprocal responses caused by the condition. The loss and alienation from the world so often experienced by AS people is reflected in 'No Role To Play.' The poem was based on a real experience at a meeting in Blackburn in November 2011. After presenting, I could no longer engage with anyone else in the room and therefore the role I played at that meeting was over. '[Those] on the autistic spectrum tend to remain isolated, unable to engage reciprocally with others' (Roth, 2010, p. 82), and such was the case with me after the meeting was over as I left the room alone. I then illustrate the gap AS people have between them and others in society by comparing it to my reality of being alone in a room while the world goes on apart from me. In the poem, I look out of a window and realise that the world has not changed, or stopped, but has still continued in my absence. This is how the everyday world affects us – we cannot engage with it and we leave it. But, apart from that, AS people 're-energise by isolating themselves from their peers' (Attwood, 2007, p.99). Therefore this act of leaving the crowd has a refreshing effect. Just as the world through the window has remained the same, so has that crowd of people in the meeting room – and as soon as AS people are revitalised, they will be able to return again.

'Hugs from Beyond the Screen' was intended to show the relationship between many AS people and social media. On Facebook, the word 'Hug' or 'Hugs,' usually in three parentheses (which is usually represented as (((Hugs))) on a comment), can be 'a great way of showing affection for a friend, as well as to provide support' (Vandersteen, 2012). Social interaction is very difficult for someone with Aspergers, since many cannot 'see the point' of many interaction exercises common in neuro-typical life. A natural 'hug' is a gesture which sometimes is rejected by Asperger people due to its high level of physical contact, yet a 'beyond the screen' approach to affection comes easier to us since physical contact is not required. This is related to typical Asperger problems such as body postures, social cues and interruptions as well as other social issues, such as talking on the phone, none of which can occur on social media. This 'takes the stress out of the social interaction' which makes this a good means of expressing friendship (Golden, 2011). The poem is written in ballad

form, which I find tells the story of the virtual ‘hug,’ and takes the viewpoint of the person sending it on social media.

The ballad form portrays events as being shown to the reader rather than being told. In ‘Hugs From Beyond the Screen,’ this is appropriate because there are no spoken words on a screen when on social media, and everything is shown visually. However, it contains emotion similar to a song, which, when read, will ‘show’ the audience what is occurring through words. As Erik Simpson says, in his ‘Connections’ hypertext online resource, ‘Ballads emphasize strong rhythms, repetition of key phrases, and rhymes; if you hear a traditional ballad, you will know that you are hearing a poem. Ballads are meant to be song-like and to remind readers of oral poetry--of parents singing to children, for instance, or of ancient poets reciting their verse to a live audience’ (Simpson, 2014).

‘The Invisible Control’ describes the collective reactive behaviour of the neuro-typical group, in response to a single factor, such as a joke being told or a goal scored at football, seen from the perspective of an Asperger or high-functioning autistic person who is part of the group. People with autism ‘lack the inbuilt social instinct’ present in neuro-typical people (Wing, 2002, p. 93). This can mean that if a group reacts together, as fans cheer when their team scores points, the autistic person can easily miss out on the collective reaction from the spectators, and as a consequence wonder what is going on; depression can result also from alienation – awareness of being the only one who does not instantly react, out of a whole crowd of fans. This is caused by the social interaction impairment of autism, which can be described as the difficulty that causes ‘the most heartache and feelings of inadequacy and guilt’ (Wing, 2002, p. 92). From this point, the person can see the simultaneousness of the others’ behaviour and try and draw conclusions as to why this happens, which can be anything from logic to the supernatural. Sometimes it can be taken as a conspiracy – done on purpose to show the autistic person that they can never belong in the neuro-typical world.

From the perspective of psychologists and other professionals, this is caused by ‘significant difficulties with the social aspects of language, which seriously affects...ability to form social relationships’ (Terrell and Passenger, 2010, p. 50). This

problem with language is also shared by those with classic autism, but these are more involved in their own actions so cannot see this collective behaviour in the same way as someone with Aspergers. The world is a frightening, strange place to all with autism because of the difficulties in social language (Roth, 2010, p. 73). But, to someone with Aspergers witnessing this social scene, where hundreds of people react in the same way at the same moment, it may seem as if these people run on a pre-set program or are under the influence of a common, invisible, external means of control.

‘The Invisible Control’ expresses this in the form of questions, almost from the viewpoint of an outsider looking in, even as an alien from another planet would observe human behaviour. On observing, rather than simply accepting what is seen as being ‘human nature’ or ‘the way things are,’ the questions are of a more scientific nature, questioning what is seen and looking for possible causes. The possible causes considered include those of a logical and scientific nature (‘Are each of them part of a large master brain | Which makes them react together?’) and those which could explain it as more supernatural in origin (‘Is it a god, who forces them all to obey?’). This covers the immensity of the scope of this phenomenon, then covers the fact that most Asperger people do not share in it (‘How come this force which causes such compulsion | Has no effect on me at all?’) which covers the isolation part of Asperger syndrome, coupled with the difficulty in the comprehension of social language.

Relationships are a constant part of human society, with emotions playing a large role; both of these can cause problems in an AS person due to social interaction difficulties. The forming and maintaining of relationships and friendships is sustained to a great deal by emotion, and this can cause problems with both permanent relationships, such as family, and other relationships such as the ability to make friends and to keep friendships going.

One of the main difficulties with being an AS person myself is showing emotion – I have problems with this in everyday life, so therefore trying to convey emotion in poetry presents a really tough challenge. AS people do not have the same emotional capacities as NT people, with both poor recognition and poor processing of basic and complex emotions being characteristic of autistic people (Roth, 2010, p. 80-81; Katona et al, 2011, p. 47). Many AS people, including myself, view emotion as an

inconvenience. However, in my studies I had to learn and understand the high significance of emotions and their central role in poetry. Expressing emotion was difficult for me due to my condition; I read several poems by Carol Ann Duffy to familiarise myself with the use of emotion. For me, being able to convey emotion in a poem was almost impossible until 7 April 2012 when ‘Old Sinatra Songs’ became the first poem I had written which had the main purpose of being able to move the reader by giving expression to deep feelings of my own.

Three aspects of the autistic spectrum with respect to an AS person are expressed in the poem ‘Old Sinatra Songs.’ This is based on real childhood and adult memories of my adoptive father. It illustrates a very strong rote memory capacity present in some autistic people (Roth, 2010, p.18), and secondly, regarding the repetition factor of AS, ‘music can be the focus of a repetitive routine’ (Wing, 2002, p. 47). Thirdly it shows the strength of the bond between a child on the spectrum and the parent – ‘children on the autism spectrum...may become...strongly attached to their parents’ (Roth, 2010, p. 79). This poem was written in the early hours of the morning of 7 April 2012 when a word puzzle featuring Frank Sinatra brought back very strong memory and feeling recall of the songs played to me nearly forty years before. The poem itself at first glance appears to be iambic pentameter with three iambs in the third line of the stanza instead of five; however it has been designed to coincide with the structure of the lyrics of the Sinatra song, ‘Something Stupid.’ This song was pouring through my head as the poem was written; I was completely unable to close it down; such can be the power of the AS memory.

The bond of autistic people to parents is also shown in ‘Flower of the Mind.’ The poetic form used was based on Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘The Cliché Kid’ from her book *Mean Time* (Duffy, 1993). I found this form suited the pace and versatility of the poem as well as the ability to bring about a sombre mood, as it speaks of the reality of my adoptive mother’s dementia. Because she had always loved flowers, I used the image of a flower, which fades away with age, as a metaphor representing the fading mind. ‘Flower of the Mind’ was the second poem I had written using metaphors, the first being ‘Darkness.’ The use of metaphors and similes is a very common part of the spoken and written word, which adds colour to everyday language but causes confusion to the AS person.

‘The Garden of Heaven’ was originally written as a eulogy at my adoptive father’s funeral in 1998, of which only scrap notes survive. Consequently it was rewritten in 2013 at the time of what would have been his 84th birthday. Analysis of the poem shows that religion – one of my special interests, as I have said – coincides with gardening, my adoptive father’s passion. I was not diagnosed with AS at the time the original was written, but analysis shows traces of the AS in the poem.

I was asked by the family to write a poem for his funeral; to me, this had to fulfil two criteria. It had firstly to have a theme that would be accepted and acknowledged by everyone at the service regardless of their relationship to him, and secondly it was important that sadness not feature too heavily, as everyone attending would already be sad. Knowing that all present would be aware of the fact he was a keen gardener, coupled with the fact he had died while doing the hobby he loved, I adopted the theme of the garden. Flowers in bloom were mentioned several times so a reader some time later could visualise the season of his death. This fulfilled the first criterion. Also he was a Christian (as was the law in the 1960s for adoptive parents) and he would have a Christian funeral, with many Christians in attendance. This inspired me to use a religious theme linked to belief in heaven, therefore easing the sadness of the occasion. This fulfilled the second criterion.

The last stanza was intended to reveal the circumstances of his death. The first two lines, ‘It was my father whom the angel saw | on an early summer’s day through the greenhouse door,’ refer to the fact that he died of a heart attack in his greenhouse at around midday on June 17, 1998. When it was written, I wanted this expressed in such a way that people listening would be aware of the circumstances of his death, which reflects the AS passion for including facts; some AS people can memorise and recall facts in very large quantities and clarity of detail (Wing, 2002, p. 55). However using religion and gardening as the key themes, I intended to soften the seriousness of the occasion and provide a sense of relief to those present at the service.

‘Chips on the Table’ is a poem resulting from a domestic problem – my husband had taken to alcohol in order to try and combat his depression; unfortunately it caused problems in February 2013 at a conference, which led to measures being taken including counselling and a visit to the GP. Following more problems, I had the

idea for this poem, seeing things from his viewpoint. It takes the theme of gambling since he did at one stage play online Roulette, and taken from the perspective that by using alcohol he would be gambling with his marriage. It was written deliberately by me in an effort to convince him to give up alcohol, which after four months of help he has now successfully done, and he has a copy of this on his workshop wall to remind him how important relationships are.

‘Faded to Grey’ is written in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, which I found to be definitely the most challenging of the poetic forms studied and undertaken for this PhD. First it took some time to find a subject to fit the form. This is maybe because of the way each line of four beats merges into the next, which can give a feeling of acceleration as the poem goes on, and the fact it is continuous and not broken into stanzas meant it was not really suitable for telling a story, since it did not allow the reader regular breaks between changes of subject and scene.

The model poem I used for this composition was ‘Junk’ by Richard Wilbur. Wilbur had studied Anglo-Saxon at Harvard Graduate School, and says of the form in an interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald and William Heyen in 1970: ‘I loved the Anglo-Saxon language and find the rhythms of the alliterative lines very catchy...the form compels, or at least enables you, to write a certain kind of poem’ (Fitz Gerald and Heyen, 1970, from Butt, 1990, p.56). Here, Wilbur describes the same experience as I was having myself – that the challenging form of this poem meant that not every subject was suitable and for best effect he had to use the alliterative rhythm in a ‘catchy’ kind of way.

‘Faded to Grey’ was the third poem I had written with my adoptive father as the subject, the previous two being ‘The Garden of Heaven,’ which described the account of his death from a Christian viewpoint, and ‘Old Sinatra Songs,’ which described time with him when I was a small child, at approximately between three and six years of age. ‘Faded to Grey’ was set in a different time, with the first six lines being a descriptive account of life with him from the age of around eleven through to adulthood. By this time it was apparent that, in his eyes, I could never achieve anything, including a university degree (‘the teen who he told could not take a degree’), and the phrases quoted, ‘What is wrong with you?’ and ‘Good-for-

nothing’ were said after I had attended a music competition and not won. My adoptive sister, four years my junior, was successful in all she did and having won a music competition merited praise from our father while I received the comments above. The reference to the wedding not being ‘news’ was from 1992; when my husband-to-be and I told him our wedding date, he did not turn towards us, let alone reply. This was because my adoptive sister had won a music competition the same day and he was proudly admiring the small cup she had won. My relationship with my adoptive father, as a result, deteriorated rapidly from the age of around eleven and was never fully restored again. In one sense, it was as if that joyful life as a small child with him had ‘faded to grey,’ which inspired the poem’s title.

Even though an autistic or Aspergers child may be undiagnosed, family life can be a problem on all sides – as the Autism Society in Maryland states, ‘The needs of a child with ASD [autism spectrum disorder] complicates familial relationships’ (Autism Society, 2006). On top of this, one survey states that 88% of mothers treat their siblings differently (Mail Online, 2013) while another states that 34% of mums and 28% of dads favour one child over another (Parentdish, 2013). But ‘Faded to Grey’ concerns solely the relationship between my adoptive father and I, and whether or not that relationship could ever be repaired sixteen years after his death.

The Triad of Impairments – 2. Communication

From not being able to make friends to not being able to understand a joke, communication problems affect every Asperger person to some degree and can lead to problems such as depression and frustration.

‘Traffic Jam in my Nose’ illustrates a misinterpretation of terms and literal meanings, which are very common in Asperger syndrome. The poem’s content was taken from a real incident at the age of four which was retold by my adoptive mother years later. All young children say things which can be interpreted as humorous by adults, which this poem illustrates by my adoptive parents’ reaction of laughter to my initial statement. However, the poem is intended first of all to show the literal way in which the Asperger brain thinks – congestion only having one meaning, and that

being real traffic – and secondly the fear associated with such literal interpretations. The only way an AS person could alleviate the fear would be to analyse any terms used, in this case the word ‘congestion.’ ‘One has to beware of using sayings such as ‘crying your eyes out’ or ‘have you lost your tongue’ because they can be taken at face value and can cause distress or even terror’ (Wing, 2002, p.41).

Because ‘Traffic Jam In My Nose’ was written as a narrative taken from a real story, the ballad was chosen as the most appropriate poetic form for this poem. I was able to use this form to convey the story, as a ‘trail of events,’ – for example, in the first and sixth stanzas I used the last lines to lead into the following stanzas by building up a sense of anticipation of one of the characters about to speak. Erik Simpson also mentions ballads as stories often incorporating multiple characters, and the narrator usually not speaking in the first person (Simpson, 2014). In ‘Traffic Jam In My Nose,’ there are indeed multiple characters - the child, parents, the doctor and the person reading the traffic news – but it has a first person narrative. This is done to enable readers to see and understand what happened from the child’s viewpoint, which is intended to amplify the sense of fear when the child misinterprets the word ‘congestion’ and actually believes there’s a jam of traffic in the nose.

A typical communication problem in society is small talk, which many Asperger people cannot understand and which leaves us frustrated and isolated as a result. The alienation from other people, which is commonly seen in those with AS, is reflected in the poem ‘Know Your Place.’ Our place – to sit and watch the world act and interact while having no part in it – is often seen by us as a default option – almost ‘the way things are’. Many Asperger people ‘may want to engage with others but lack the skills to do so’ and also ‘find it difficult to maintain contacts due to a lack of understanding of small talk and other conventions of social behaviour’ (NAS, 2013). I am using my ‘special interest’ in religion to best illustrate this, by using the ‘Canaanite Woman’ story from Matthew 15:21-28, in which a woman has to compare herself to a dog to get help from Jesus by saying, ‘even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table’ (The Bible, Matt. 15:27, New Century Version, 2009). This example of ‘knowing one’s place’ was adapted in the poem to show the ‘crumbs’ as being the knowledge, skills and opportunities for interaction, the ‘master’

as being the neuro-typical person possessing these items, and the ‘dog’ being the Asperger person.

‘Sheet of Glass’ is descriptive of the communication difficulty between the neuro-typical person and the Asperger person, which is often perceived as a hearing difficulty. This is one of the early indications of a possible link to autism and Asperger syndrome, since it is found in the child’s early years. If a baby with autism is facing the wall and someone is to clap their hands while standing behind them, there is a high possibility of the baby not turning round, because the sound is simply something else to add to the incoming information from the baby’s surroundings. The National Autistic Society (NAS) page, ‘Communication and interaction,’ says, regarding children, ‘The child may appear not to hear what is said to them, fail to respond to their name and/or be indifferent to any attempts of communication that are made’ (NAS 2013). The poem uses the metaphor of a sheet of glass to illustrate this communication difficulty, since most people would be aware of the communication difficulties between a person one side of a closed window and another on the other side. The NAS mentions the cause of this problem by saying, ‘Many children with an ASD [autistic spectrum disorder] are delayed in their use of language and shy away from using speech’ (NAS, 2013). This ‘shying away’ can continue into adulthood.

‘Sheet of Glass’ was never intentionally written to be a three-line-stanza poem but an attempt at free verse which ended up finding its own form (which is still free verse). This experience with writing is similar to that described by Richard Wilbur, in ‘Conversations with Richard Wilbur’ – ‘Often the forms I choose (the stanza forms, say) are arrived at rather intuitively, or by luck. The line lengths will be chosen much as a free verse writer chooses his line lengths, according to the way the words want to fall’ (Butt, 1990, p.4).

‘Inside the Outside’ is a ballad written to illustrate the perspective of the child with autism’s literal interpretation of phrases. This is based on a real incident when I was about four years of age, and the poem deliberately uses the children’s language I would have used myself at the time. This was done in order to set the scene – a very young child learning to do a task for the first time, and misinterpreting what was asked. Misinterpreting is very common with autism. Dr. Lorna Wing actually

mentions the same incident I went through in this poem when speaking about the literal interpretation of language, when she states, ‘A major characteristic of people with autistic disorders, however good their language seems to be, is their literal interpretation. One boy was told to ‘Dry the teapot on the outside, not the inside’ and promptly took it out into the garden to wipe it dry’ (Wing, 2002, p.41).

Once again, the ballad form was used here because the poem tells a story, using the technique of showing the reader what is happening rather than telling, as well as going through emotions, feelings, and desire to complete the task. No questions are being asked by the child here, since at the age of four the cognitive brain would not have properly developed; but feelings such as being unsure are mentioned, and thinking and wondering, as a child would do when curious about something which was new to them. It is also deliberately set in the present tense, since at the age of four I couldn’t even read, and would have been unable to use the past tense in language.

A communication problem which is shared by many AS people is in comprehension of literature. This often shows itself as having advanced reading skills but slow reading comprehension, especially with non-fiction and poetry. These difficulties include understanding of ‘human relationships, human dynamics and inferences based on emotion...more trouble in analysis of literature for metaphor, irony, and in following a theme. They understand the action of the plot but not the nuances of character’ (Lovecky, 2014). The imagination needed to understand poetic language prevents the poem communicating meaning to the AS reader.

The Triad of Impairments – 3. Imagination

From difficulties with understanding the consequences of actions to problems with planning for the future, imagination difficulties are common on the autism spectrum. But coupled with this difficulty there is a very strong attention to detail – people on the autism spectrum can often see many things other people cannot, simply through a default setting in the brain. Routines are often part of an Asperger person’s way of coping with what is to them a very haphazard world. Also, if vague instructions are

given to Asperger people, especially vague directions (such as, ‘it’s over there’), many become confused; this is due to many of us being unable to use the skill of imagination in order to read between the lines. Therefore instructions need to be very specific (‘it’s on the kitchen floor next to the back door’). The following poems explain further the imagination difficulties we face, and the attention to detail which colours our lives.

‘The Tomorrow Trap’ was written in trochaic tetrameter and was intended to show fear of the future – something which is often frightening due to the imagination difficulty in Asperger syndrome. For inspiration I used the famous 1855 poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ‘The Song of Hiawatha.’ The natural rhythm of the form has the ability, from my perspective, to develop and sustain emotion. The most famous lines of Longfellow’s poem, from part 3, demonstrate the power of this form to capture and hold attention.

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water (Longfellow, 2006, p. 19).

It seems to build up a sense of anticipation, which I was able to use in ‘The Tomorrow Trap.’ I added to the drama of the poem by arranging the stanzas in a ‘countdown’ running from ten lines down to one, illustrating the fear of tomorrow as it becomes closer.

Much of the problem connected to the fear of the next day is, with autism, linked to the understanding of space and time. Because of the logical approach that people with autism have, especially those with Asperger syndrome, items which cannot be seen or felt, such as time, cannot be comprehended as well as visible and tangible

items. It is for this reason that it is harder for an Asperger person to learn literature or philosophy than science, or to acknowledge that religious people have the concept of an invisible god or gods. Dr Lorna Wing describes the Asperger problem with defining time, saying: 'Most people are born with the ability to understand it in everyday terms. People with autistic disorders seem to lack this understanding to a degree which is markedly discrepant with their level of intelligence' (Wing, 2002, p.89). She points to the problems understanding the concept of a 'today' and a 'tomorrow,' saying, 'There is a real difficulty in understanding that the future will eventually become the present' (Wing, 2002, p. 88). This confusion naturally leads the person to want to ask for help, both with comprehension of the time pattern itself and the events connected to it – events which cannot yet be seen and for which they are unprepared. Regarding autistic people in general, Dr. Wing says, 'One of the most obvious examples of the confusion with time is the way in which those with enough speech continually ask for reassurance about future events and when they will happen' (Wing, 2002, p.88). Because of the strong fears and anxieties of the Asperger person, fear of the future is the emotion which eventually can lead them into believing that they, and all others, are in a 'tomorrow trap' – forced to go from one day to an unseen and unknown next against their will, and therefore to become prisoners of time itself.

With this fear for the day to come being described in 'The Tomorrow Trap,' the next poem, 'Escaping the Tomorrow Trap,' was designed to present solutions to this problem. It also uses trochaic tetrameter, since they represent a pair of poems – one illustrating the problem and the other, the solution. However, because it is designed to be encouraging, it has its stanzas 'counting upwards' by containing one line for the first through to ten for the last. In this way it can almost be seen as ten steps leading up out of the 'tomorrow trap.' It talks about the importance of discussing fears, and the essential skill of planning ahead to avoid or reduce future fears. Dr. Wing mentions practical and visual representations of time, such as timetables, to help with planning and the need to tell of the end of events as well as the beginnings (Wing, 2002, p.89). The poem takes the viewpoint of soldiers preparing to fight a battle, which people with Asperger syndrome would understand well as many of us see ourselves as soldiers fighting every day through a world we do not understand. This

puts more feeling into the poem than if the content were solely a dry description of practical solutions.

‘Dishwashing’ was an in-depth rendering of an everyday activity, as told from the AS person’s point of view. It illustrates repeated routines and high attention to detail as well as sensory overload which are present in most AS people. The repeated activity is the result of the limited imagination present in Asperger syndrome. ‘Repetition may take the form of strict routines and rituals’ (Roth, 2010, p. 83), meaning that each time the dishes are washed they are done in the same way and if, for example, an AS person is told when young that the dishes should go straight into hot water as soon as possible, this routine will not be changed or departed from. This is another result of the imagination difficulty, meaning that routines formed early in life are very hard to change later on. The high sensitivity to smell present on some on the spectrum could cause problems with such an everyday task. ‘Olfactory sensitivity can result in the person becoming nauseous’ (Attwood, 2007, p. 284). So such items as washing-up liquid can cause problems. This poem was simply to illustrate how complex this task is when broken down into its component parts, as well as to perceive the difficulties involved in it from the point of view of a person on the spectrum.

Imagination problems come into play when the careful routines that an Asperger person has built up come crashing down through no fault of their own. ‘The Cancellation Bombshell’ explores the world of the Asperger person as it is thrown into chaos following a change of routine which is beyond the person’s control. Far from being treated as a welcome break, a cancellation can mean intense fear due to the resulting decimation of routines, plans and patterns. The frustration from such changes is the mental equivalent of a bomb, together with the devastation of the person’s world. Fear and panic are the usual responses to unexpected changes around the AS person. This is expressed well in an article in the National Autistic Society’s magazine, ‘Communication’, when an AS person says, ‘There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent trying to work out the patterns behind everything. Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. Trying to keep everything the same reduces some of the terrible fear’ (Jolliffe *et al*, 1992). The poem itself was

written in response to a challenge by my supervisor to use hendecasyllabic meter, which was indeed challenging when starting out, but grew easier once I became used to working with this form. It is not the easiest of forms, and I found that if I wasn't careful, it could inadvertently change into iambic pentameter because of the five stresses per line. Throughout the construction of this poem I had to split each line into two halves to help me make sense of it, as I viewed each line in two separate parts. Some of these lines as a result read in two separate halves, such as in line 10 – 'I'm helpless; I cannot change what has been done' and in line 12 – 'No-one to help me – the silence fills my world.'

'The Unnoticed Perspective' is a poem showing the difference in the amount of detail seen by the Asperger person when compared to others. It is written in the Sapphic form which was another poetic challenge given to me by my supervisor. Sapphic poetry has been commented on by some poets as being almost impossible to write due to the difficulties with getting the English language and the Ancient Greek form to run together. For example, John Kinsella mentions in his book *Disclosed Poetics: Beyond Landscape and Lyricism* of the difficulties Australian poet John Tranter had with the Sapphic in English, quoting his poem, 'Writing in the Manner of Sapphics' -

Writing Sapphics well is a tricky business.
Lines begin and end with a pair of trochees;
in between them dozes a dactyl, rhythm
 rising and falling,

like a drunk asleep at a party. Ancient
Greek — the language seemed to be made for Sapphics,
not a worry; anyone used to English
 finds it a bastard (Kinsella, 2007, p.84).

This therefore was going to be difficult and it did take me a while to find a subject matter suitable for creating a poem in this form. I eventually settled on the distractions, of patterns and detail, an Asperger person faces when confronted with the ordinary, everyday task of selecting a plant for the garden. The Sapphic form has

both patterns and distractions during its writing, from my perspective, so a subject containing these typical Asperger problems was ideal for this form.

Repeated activities are the result of the imagination difficulties present in the autism spectrum. Dr Lorna Wing expresses repetitive activities in autism, and their relationship to imagination, by saying: 'If the person with autism cannot enjoy...exchanging ideas with other people, has no understanding of...other people and cannot integrate past and present experiences to make plans for the future, the only thing left is the reassurance of repeating those activities that do give some pleasure (Wing, 2002, p.45). This reassurance produces relaxation; this is the reason people with Asperger syndrome repeat over and over things which give them pleasure.

An AS person describes the reason why this relaxation is essential, saying: 'Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights' (Jolliffe et al, 1992.) An AS person finds pleasure in such activities: 'For the person with Asperger syndrome, there can be intense pleasure in examples of visual symmetry' (Attwood, 2007, p. 286). This is illustrated in the poem, 'Pattern Tracing.'

The poem itself describes the locating of patterns from the viewpoint of someone on the spectrum, showing the need for calm as well as the detail in which patterns can be seen by the AS person, to the extent that any slight difference will be noticed. The need for consistency and uniformity is very important because it 'grounds' the mind, bringing the sense of peace at the end of a stressful day. This part of the AS mind is also set to default –Mark Haddon's book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) mentions several instances of patterns seen by Christopher, the story's protagonist, and also the book contains some diagrams of the designs seen (Haddon, 2004, pp. 156-157, 181 and others). Haddon uses Christopher's perspective to accurately describe individual patterns; one example is a pattern on Christopher's new pyjamas, which is described as '5-pointed blue stars on a purple background' together with a diagram showing a small square of the design (Haddon, 2004, p. 246). At another point the book describes the way Christopher sees the constellations, taken from a logical viewpoint – 'People say that Orion is called

Orion because Orion was a hunter with a club and a bow and arrow...but this is really silly because it is just stars, and you could join up the dots in any way you wanted' (Haddon, 2004, p. 156-157). This differs from 'Pattern Tracing' since *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* uses the logical Asperger perspective, and describes individual patterns; 'Pattern Tracing' looks at the Asperger mind from an emotional perspective, describing the feelings produced when finding both a pattern with a constant design (the patterned ceiling) and one which has inconsistency in the pattern (the curtain folds). 'Pattern Tracing' also looks at the need for conformity in the pattern, and the peace of mind that the conformity of the pattern produces.

AS people have special interests, which can be understood as 'repetitive activities' (psychiatrists call them 'obsessions,' a term some Asperger people find offensive) and these can be described as items or subjects which people 'will often learn a lot about...be interested in [them] for a long time and feel strongly about' (NAS, 2013). One of my personal interests is religion, as stated above. 'The Immortal William' was written during a Christmas 2012 hotel break in Stratford-upon-Avon, and I wanted to incorporate religion to relate this 'immortality' to reflect both Shakespeare the man and also his works. I wanted a Christian perspective to reflect the biblical perspectives and the hidden religious tensions many claim are found in Shakespeare's plays (Schoenbaum, 1987, p.61). With Christmas being the principal Christian festival, and my Christmas of 2012 being spent in Stratford-upon-Avon, it was an ideal opportunity to capture Christianity and Shakespeare together. The first two lines of 'The Immortal William' were written on notepaper while I was actually standing by the grave of William Shakespeare, on Christmas Eve 2012, while the rest was completed on Christmas Day in the hotel room. It was actually read out to the hotel guests after Boxing Day dinner and was well received by them. I first heard the term 'immortal' describing Shakespeare many years ago, in a short story called 'The Immortal Bard,' by Isaac Asimov, published in 1954.

I attempted to use both language and form which Shakespeare would have recognised, in 'The Immortal William,' using the Shakespearean sonnet after studying several sonnets which he wrote (Shakespeare, from Collector's Library, 2009) and adapting the poem from contemporary English to the English of Shakespeare's day.

‘Winter Solstice’ was written to contrast two aspects of Asperger repetitive activities. First, repeated activities lead to set routines, which they love because of their regularity, and Christmas often causes problems since the household routine is changed. Secondly, it picks up on my own recurring special interest in religion. In ‘Winter Solstice’ we see the logical system of Asperger thinking and how this can be applied to a well-known religious season. The Asperger person will very likely have problems relating to the stress of the Christmas season if it is celebrated in their family – both during the long, laborious build-up and then again actually during the day itself. This is because new activities and routine changes are occurring in the household which can cause confusion and distress in a person with autism (NAS, 2013). In many cases the person applies their logical thinking to the situation, trying to make sense of it; in the case of religious customs, finding out the history of the occasion can cause them to question the beliefs as taught. My own analysis of Christmas as a child led me into investigating the Druid religion, where the Winter Solstice celebrates the rebirth of the sun from the darkest night of the year which, arguably, Christians changed to the birth of the son of their own God (OBOD, 2013).

The onset of the logical sense of reality can lead to previous beliefs being discarded. I was brought up as a devout Christian – this was the tradition at the time, since adoptive parents in my county in the 1960s had to be practising Christians before they could adopt children – and when I reached 18 I left my local church due to lack of comprehension of the hymns, readings and activities. Through the years I followed everything from Catholicism to Jehovah’s Witnesses, and learned Buddhism, Druidry and Wicca in my travels. This has deepened my understanding of the social world.

I have always found religion fascinating, which is why many poems I have written have religious connotations. Though many people on the autism spectrum are atheists, they can still have an interest in religion. A study from the University of Boston found that people with high-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome were more likely to be atheists, resulting from ‘a preference for logical beliefs’ and the results of a survey found that there was an average of 26% of Asperger people who were atheists in comparison to the neuro-typical average of 16% (Mail Online, 2011). My interest in religion is reflected in ‘Winter Solstice,’ which reflects the Druidic

perspective, and ‘The Garden of Heaven,’ reflecting the Christian perspective, and in ‘The Sleeve’ there is mention of the religious traditions of ancient Egypt and Japan.

I wrote ‘Repeat and Repeat’ to describe the Asperger way of calming down after stress – to repeat activities which give us the most pleasure. For those with low-functioning autism and some with high-functioning autism, this can be manifested in repetitive body actions such as spinning, hand flapping and rocking (Roth, 2010, p. 83). An autistic person in Roth’s book talks about the spinning action in a poem, and in the poem he mentions how it ‘brings harmony to my thoughts...the faster I spin, the faster I drive away the black,’ using ‘the black’ to refer to negative thoughts, pressure and frustration being driven away by the spinning sensation (Mukhopadhyay, 2000, from Roth, 2010, p. 83).

With Asperger syndrome, this repetitive behaviour is more often seen in repeated routines and rituals including listening to the same songs and watching the same films again and again – ‘A person with an obsessive interest in *Star Wars*, for instance, will be engaging repeatedly, and for long periods of time, with the same themes, leaving less time and scope to develop a wider, more varied repertoire of interests’ (Roth, 2010, p. 83). The line in the poem in the last stanza, ‘Some think repeating takes life’s enjoyment away,’ is an Asperger acknowledgement of Roth’s comment above regarding time for more varied interests being reduced as a result of this repetitive activity, which is reflected in the response some neuro-typical people would give to this behaviour. Even my husband today says to me, ‘Watch something different for a change!’ without knowledge of the need for the calming down the repeated film does for my brain. It’s as if it is recharging itself, which Roth states as an inconclusive possibility: ‘Some activities...may have a calming effect’ (Roth, 2010, p. 83). The reason why the repeated activity is so important to us is then given in the last line of the last stanza, saying, ‘But this is how we relieve pressure in the brain,’ stating that this repeated activity is essential to us, and making people aware that it should not be stopped for this reason. This agrees with Mukhopadhyay, who describes ‘the stress’ in my poem as ‘the black’ in his poem, and says: ‘When I am sure that even the last speck of black | Has gone away from me | Then I spin back in the opposite direction’ (Mukhopadhyay, 2000, from Roth, 2010, p. 83).

The poetic form used in ‘Repeat and Repeat’ was deliberately designed to make use of three-line stanzas, which were created to contain various repetitions. These were intended to accentuate the repetition story being told. The stanzas have the rhyming scheme ABA, and line B ends with the same word in every stanza. That word was purposely chosen as the word ‘away,’ because it identified with the meaning of the repeated exercise, to banish away ‘the stress’ – the frustration, pressure and negative thoughts in our minds. Also it contains deliberately repeated wording. This included wording such as ‘again and again, repeat and repeat’ which would be understood by the Asperger reader, and also a repetition of one metaphor for a repeated activity – ‘a broken record’ – which most readers would be able to identify with.

Social and Psychological Problems and Complications resulting from Asperger syndrome

Social and psychological problems which can result from Asperger syndrome include anxiety, depression, lack of concentration, sensory overload, fears and phobias, self-harm and associated issues, and suicide attempts. The following poems are intended to show these difficulties to the readers to enable them to understand some of these problems.

‘Pass Me By’ was written about self-harm, which many Asperger people engage in, especially those with ‘concurrent learning difficulties’ such as dyslexia; the self-harm traits can be very destructive and include head banging against surfaces, scratching, biting, eye gouging and forceful head shaking (NAS, 2013). ‘Pass Me By’ was written in a similar way to ‘Old Sinatra Songs,’ based on the rhythm and form of a real song. In this case, the poetic style and rhythm was set to Suzanne Vega’s ‘Luka,’ a song from 1987 about child abuse and domestic violence which fitted into the self-harm theme: ‘If you hear something late at night | Some kind of trouble, some kind of fight | please don’t ask me what it was’ (Vega, from AZLyrics.com, 2014). The attitude faced by Luka in this song is the same as many self-harmers have, which is the attitude of – ‘I’d rather not talk about it, walk on, please don’t ask me how I am,’ and that was the inspiration for the poem’s title, ‘Pass Me By.’ As an ex-

self-harmer myself, and having known other Asperger people who self-injure, this issue is of importance to all those in contact with people on the spectrum and can be thought of as ‘one of the most distressing and difficult behaviours that parents, carers, family members and people with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) themselves may be faced with’ (NAS, 2013).

The poem’s rhythm matches the one in Vega’s ‘Luka’ but the stanza layout was changed slightly which had the intention of conveying to the reader that it was a poem rather than a song; the original ‘Luka,’ in Appendix 2, has the layout of a song. The way in which Vega describes the abuse that Luka is going through in the song is taken from the point of view of a stranger witnessing unusual things and then wanting to ask questions: ‘If you hear something late at night | Some kind of trouble, some kind of fight | Just don’t ask me what it was’ (Vega, 1987). I was able to use this viewpoint for ‘Pass Me By:’ ‘If that is what you see | In the street when you look at me | Please don’t ask me how I am.’ This follows the same rhythm as the original song, and takes the same viewpoint of the outsider witnessing something unusual and wanting to ask about it.

AS people are known to suffer more with phobias than everyday people – ‘5% of typically developing children display intense fears and phobias’ (Turner and Romanczyk, 2009) while ‘phobias have been reported in 64% of children with an ASD [autistic spectrum disorder]’ (Muris *et al*, 1998).

The theme of phobias and intense fear is explored in ‘Lying in Wait.’ After being thrown down on ice at the age of eight by a bullying gang and breaking an arm as a result, I developed a powerful fear of snow which I still have today. ‘Lying in Wait’ explores snow from the point of view of the snow itself, as if it were a living thing, with a character and personality. This viewpoint personifies the snow as an enemy, with the traits of an enemy conveying fear and power together with an attitude of mockery towards its victims. Rather than seeing things from the victim’s standpoint, the poem takes the viewpoint of the antagonist, the villain, the subject of the phobia. This has the intention of conveying to the reader how strong and bullying this antagonist is, which helps the reader understand how this villain is seen by the victim and therefore the depths and strengths of the phobia. The poem also takes the point of

a ‘power struggle’ between snow and human civilisation as a base, and uses logical facts to illustrate the power of the snow itself. Fears and phobias have root in a power struggle, since they are invasive and permeate people’s lives to the point where the fear is ‘exaggerated or unrealistic’ and a person ‘will often organise [their] life around the thing that is causing [them] anxiety’ (Mind, 2013).

‘Darkness’ was a poem based on a personal fear I have, and that many adults with AS whom I have met share – the fear of being alone in the future with nobody there to help you. AS children become AS adults, and ‘there is a lack of such adult-focused services for people on the spectrum’ (Roth, 2010, p. 260). This was set to the same poetic style and rhythm as ‘Abide with Me,’ which to me reflected the finality of the future – the elegy perhaps, as the future is our funeral.

‘Darkness’ proved to be a milestone for me regarding the use of similes and metaphors. Darkness to the AS person symbolises the future, which made a fitting title for this poem; this is the first simile used in a poem for this collection. Similes present confusion for the AS person, but metaphors far more so. ‘Many people on the autism spectrum have trouble understanding metaphors’ (Roth, 2010, p.73). The images of the tunnel, hole and pit in this poem were the first metaphors used in the poetry for this collection. Prior to writing the poems for the MA, using images such as metaphors and similes as representations was unknown to me completely (as it is unknown to many on the spectrum). Examples of metaphors used in these poems include in ‘The Cancellation Bombshell,’ where a cancellation in my schedule is described as a mental bomb, since it destroys the world around me; and in ‘The Tomorrow Trap,’ ‘tomorrow’ is described as a foggy mist and murky depths, while similes include ‘tomorrow’ being compared to a trap and a monster.

‘Who Will Say Stop?’ was written at staggered times, with the first stanza written on the August Bank Holiday Monday during a suicidal episode in 1999; the second stanza was added in 2003 (during a second suicidal episode) and the third in 2013. Suicide attempts are often the result of depression, which is one of the most common AS problems. The suicide rate amongst autistic children is 28 times higher than the NT rate (Dvorsky, 2013). They are led to the well, but [are] unable to drink from it,’ says an autistic person who had suicidal tendencies (Channel 4 News, August 2010).

In 'Who Will Say Stop?' the idea of a cry for help is explored. 'Most suicide attempts do not result in death. Many of these attempts are done in a way that makes rescue possible. These attempts are often a cry for help' (Medline Plus, 2013). In many cases, we are looking for the person who will 'say stop' – convince us that life is worth living for.

'Who Will Say Stop?' was written from the viewpoint of a person suffering from depression and wanting to fall from a bridge onto the motorway traffic below. This idea was taken initially from an experience I had on a motorway myself, when all lanes were closed due to police having to talk someone down from a bridge. The poem is designed to build up tension during each stanza; the scene is set, then the feelings are worked in and all the final lines end with the cry for help, 'Who will say 'Stop?' Who will say 'No?' This poem is deliberately left open-ended without a definite conclusion (no mention of whether the person jumps or not) since the problem itself has no technically defined end and is an ongoing thing.

There are several complications resulting from Asperger syndrome. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), hypersensitivity to external stimuli and anxiety syndrome are very common. Concentration, confidence and self-esteem are affected also (Stoppler, 2014). Because of the problems AS people have with communication and concentration, there is difficulty in teaching them to drive. As a driving instructor myself, and one who specialises in Asperger pupils, I have written poems which can both illustrate the problems we face on-road and help other instructors and their Asperger pupils.

'Distraction!' illustrates the distractions found on-road from the viewpoint of an Asperger learner driver. It illustrates the difficulty in concentration, the physical and psychological responses to information and sensory overload, together with the importance of planning and anticipation as vital to avoiding distractions. The poem is written in iambic pentameter 4-line stanzas with the rhyming pattern AABB, which could be interpreted as two rhyming couplets per stanza. I found this to be illustrative of the autism spectrum need for constancy when distracted, and the rhythm of the form works well by reflecting the rhythm of the car in motion while being flexible

enough to describe in detail the sensations and thoughts of the person behind the wheel.

Information overload on the senses is a very common problem in Asperger syndrome, leading to sensory integration difficulties – one anonymous person with autism on the National Autistic Society (NAS) page ‘The sensory world of autism’ says, ‘If I get sensory overload I just shut down...it’s weird, like being tuned into 40 TV channels’ (NAS, 2013). Therefore the impact on the autistic person from the ever-changing scene on-road can very easily cause sensory overload.

There are many types of special educational needs (SEN), of which AS is just one. People on the autism spectrum, including those with AS, are more likely to have an additional SEN, such as dyslexia. Dyspraxia – often called ‘Developmental Co-ordination Disorder’ or DCD, is also commonly known as ‘clumsy child syndrome.’ It affects gross and fine motor control, and short term memory and, just like AS, the severity and effects of the condition vary between one person and another. It is a condition which affects many people on the autistic spectrum, more than neuro-typical people, and just like autism there are more boys affected than girls and it is thought to be genetic in origin as cases have been found running in families (NAS, 2013). Many people with dyspraxia do not bother learning to drive (Dyspraxia Foundation, 2013) and their difficulties with the task are expressed in ‘A Learner Driver With Dyspraxia Starts the Car.’ This poem goes into the two commonest fine and gross motor control problems with dyspraxia which affect driving ability. These are ‘inadequate grasp’ which is ‘difficulty in using tools and domestic implements, locks and keys,’ and the gross motor control problem ‘clumsy gait and movement’ linked with ‘stopping and starting actions’ (Dyspraxia Foundation, 2013). Both of these are combined in starting a car, and this poem is intended to show the problems, and the effort and concentration needed, for a dyspraxic person to perform a task which so many people in the world carry out every day.

‘A Learner Driver With Dyspraxia Starts the Car’ is in iambic pentameter, and follows the rhyming pattern, ABAB, of the elegiac quatrain. The controlled pattern of this metre fits the issue of control with dyspraxia. Also, I used a rhyming pattern which was stricter than blank verse which was intended to suggest restriction of flow

and movement, which matches the subject matter of dyspraxia with its motor control issues. Separating it into quatrains enabled the pace to be slowed which would give time for the reader to absorb the feelings and emotions the person was going through when starting the car for the first time.

‘Our Greatest Worth’ was a sonnet designed primarily to inspire confidence and self-esteem in an AS person. Low self-esteem and lack of confidence are especially a problem when dealing with social situations, since ‘limited social success...can contribute to the development of a clinical depression’ (Attwood, 2003, p. 123). Driving can be a social task, since being on-road means dealing with other road users, and there is constant communication going on in the learning environment between the instructor and pupil.

This poem was read out on 19 April 2012 to an NT driving instructor and her AS pupil, who had trouble understanding each other due to communication issues. On hearing it, the pupil immediately burst into tears; the instructor, looking overwhelmingly surprised, asked her whether this was indeed how it was for her; between sobs, she said it was. This shows the ability of AS people to see themselves in this work and for gaps in communication and understanding to be bridged as a result. This was due to the pupil being able to identify her emotions and feelings from the description in the poem of how low self-esteem affected the Asperger person. She could see in herself the communication difficulties, the social difficulties and the comprehension problems she was experiencing on a daily basis. Until this poem was read, the instructor had no knowledge of what her pupil was experiencing. This poem laid bare the difficulties which the pupil was experiencing in front of her instructor, and as a result communication improved between them, and the pupil was able to learn to drive and pass her driving test sooner and with less difficulty than before.

Conclusion

Altogether these poems have the intention of providing a wide-ranging if not a comprehensive introduction to the world as seen and lived in by the AS person, with feelings, experiences and difficulties posed by the condition being shown in ways

which as many people as possible, Aspergers or not, will be able to relate to and understand.

This work had two original purposes when the idea of writing it was first conceived. These were firstly to give the everyday person the life perspective of an AS person, so they could better engage with and understand those around them with this condition; and secondly to enable AS people to see themselves in this work, for them to recognise their strengths as well as weaknesses, and to be assured that they are not alone in having this condition. However as this collection developed, it became apparent to me that it was succeeding in other ways, above and beyond the original two intentions. I began to notice AS people around me and on Facebook groups reacting to some of these poems, and responding by attempting poetic works of their own. I began to realise what these poems were doing – firstly, they were introducing AS people to the world of poetry, which in many AS cases is a closed book since with this condition imagination is impaired to some extent – and secondly they were also expressing their own AS experiences in poetic form. People were being introduced to a means of self-expression, and maybe for the first time were attempting to both understand themselves and understand the poetic world. I am considering starting a Facebook group for AS people to post their own poetic work; such is the level of interest.

Apart from the fulfilment of its original objectives, and also opening worlds to other AS people, this work has been for me a personal journey – a challenging journey into myself; it has challenged everything I knew, or thought I knew. It has been an emotional roller-coaster ride. It has found me in the middle of the night reliving the trauma of the past in order to capture the feelings caught in memories, to be used in poems such as ‘Old Sinatra Songs.’ It has brought fears and phobias to the fore, such as having to relive my fear of snow and afterwards to blend the emotion with logical facts to produce ‘Lying in Wait.’ At the same time, my mind had to find new ways of imagining and visualising the future, then to be able to reproduce this imaginative vision in a poetic way, as in ‘The Tomorrow Trap.’ This work has increased my ability to perceive and reproduce detail, as seen by the AS person, to produce poems such as ‘The Squash Lesson.’ But overall it has made me look deeper into AS as a whole, and the effect it has on our lives – from small issues such as

moving an empty plate from a cafe table (in 'Perspectives on Self – A Hunter's Prey') through to contemplating suicide ('Who Will Say Stop?').

The poetic world is a challenging one, especially for someone like me on the autistic spectrum. This is a world of emotion and feeling, which are not easily expressed in those with AS. It is a world involving imagination, which many with AS have difficulty with, especially in understanding works by other poets. It is a world involving expression, which is another difficulty for many with AS who, due to problems with communication, have problems expressing feelings and emotions. This world is one which keeps me awake at night, writing in the small hours, every ounce of emotion channelled into notes by my bedside. It is a world which can be easily entered, but when there I find it impossible to leave; and that is why I will continue my poetic writing for a long, long time after this work is done.

14,016 words.

Appendix – Luka by Suzanne Vega

"Luka"

My name is Luka

I live on the second floor

I live upstairs from you

Yes I think you've seen me before

If you hear something late at night

Some kind of trouble. some kind of fight

Just don't ask me what it was

Just don't ask me what it was

Just don't ask me what it was

I think it's because I'm clumsy

I try not to talk too loud

Maybe it's because I'm crazy

I try not to act too proud

They only hit until you cry

After that you don't ask why

You just don't argue anymore

You just don't argue anymore

You just don't argue anymore

Yes I think I'm okay

I walked into the door again

Well, if you ask that's what I'll say

And it's not your business anyway

I guess I'd like to be alone

With nothing broken, nothing thrown

Just don't ask me how I am [X3]

My name is Luka

I live on the second floor

I live upstairs from you

Yes I think you've seen me before

If you hear something late at night

Some kind of trouble, some kind of fight

Just don't ask me what it was

Just don't ask me what it was

Just don't ask me what it was

And they only hit until you cry

After that, you don't ask why

You just don't argue anymore

You just don't argue anymore

You just don't argue anymore

Song - Vega, S. (1987) A&M/Polydor, California, USA.

Lyrics - <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/suzannevega/luka.html> Accessed 31/03/14.

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