



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



On poetics, astrology and chiromancy with Irish poet and art therapist Gene Barry

Sunil Sharma

Gene Barry refuses to be pigeon-holed, labelled or restricted. A person with impressive academic and literary attainments, the restive Irishman from Cork continues to leave footprints across nations – by his public readings and promotion of poetry through festivals and publication of books and visits to schools and colleges.

Gene, in his own words, is a man of various talents. Look at his brief bio in third person singular:

Art therapist and a practicing psychotherapist. Born in Cork, Ireland, Barry changed his direction in life dramatically in 1998 when he returned to his studies graduating five years later as a psychotherapist. He initially worked as a biomedical engineer, chiefly in the Operating Room and paediatrics, eventually advancing to medical equipment design. In tandem with this life change, Gene began to take his poetry more seriously by attending poetry workshops and submitting his poems. He has been published in many upmarket Irish anthologies and periodicals including Cyphers, The Stoney Thursday Book, Abridged, Revival and the Irish Examiner. Internationally his work has been published widely, appearing in Visions International, Under the Radar, Poetry Salzburg Review, Euphony (University of Chicago) and the Ranfurly Review and many other anthologies and periodicals. His poems have been translated into Portuguese, Arabic, Irish and Italian. Barry has read in Australia, the US, the Caribbean, Holland, England, Scotland, France and Belgium and as the guest poet at numerous Irish poetry venues.

He adds further:

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Gene is founder of the Blackwater International Poetry Festival and administers the world famous poetry group of the same name on Facebook. He is also a publisher and runs the publishing house Rebel Poetry. As an art therapist using the medium of poetry, Gene has worked in hospitals, primary and secondary schools, NA, Youthreach, with retired people's groups, AA, asylum seekers and with numerous poetry groups.

Gene's book Stones in their Shoes was published in 2008 and in 2013 his collection Unfinished Business was published. He is presently editing his third collection. In 2010 Gene was editor of the anthology Silent Voices, a collection of poems written by asylum seekers living in Ireland.

Sunil Sharma catches up with the poet activist in an email interview in which the latter talks of things poetic, real and metaphysical.

Q: Gene Barry, the famous Irish poet, welcome to this long conversation with you on wide-ranging issues that include, among others, astrology, chiromancy and poetry. It is a formidable combination and might sound dubious to some post-Enlightenment followers often dubbed as sceptics in today's IT-driven world. For starters, would you care to explain any connections, hidden or otherwise, among these three fascinating areas of human interest?

A: **The connection, for me is the self. I began to people watch as a very young child and took great interest in people's hands, faces, feet, ears etc. I then began to notice similarities in personalities of people with similar hands etc. and this led me to study people's hands in more detail. I was always puzzled and intrigued at the similarities in abilities and inabilities of people who in a way were profoundly different.**

In my early teens I started categorising people and at fifteen discovered that the categories I had created were almost identical to the 12 astrology signs. Thus began my astrology studies which in time led to my discovery of chiromancy and once again my awareness that I had similar categories of hands. As a biomedical engineer, I began to look at the similarities of the hands of patients with the same illness. And when I began to study psychotherapy a whole new world opened up that in some way linked all of this awareness. The combination of all of this enabled me to get inside a person(s) or a situation and to write about it as it truly was. That same year I took my poetry writing and indeed reading to a more serious level and a few years later I began to submit some of my work.

Q: What made you – in your own words – dive into astrology in the first place at an early age of 15? Was it something to do with the local milieu of native Cork, Ireland? Or, some family history?

A: **It was my very low self-esteem. What I discovered during my 5 years of psychotherapy studies was that I was unconsciously fault-finding people which in turn would make me feel better. I would feel better about myself because I had discovered their flaws and inabilities and misinterpreted this for happiness. It was in fact relief that I was experiencing.**

Q: Astrology is a study of stars and planets and their impact on human life and types. How did it help you in reading stars and human beings as a poet from the age of 22 in London and then later on, in Ireland?

A: **I went to London on my own at a time when soccer violence peaked, punk arrived, IRA violence and anti-Irish attitudes were prevalent. It was a wake up moment for me. I now had to adapt to an**

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enormously multi-ethnic and multi-cultured city of 12 million people and to readjust what I had previously learned. I then began writing poetry to express what I could not do otherwise. Poetry gave me the ability to say and express what I otherwise could not without enormous elaboration. I could finally and successfully consolidate in a way that was relieving for me. I had discovered the ability to deliver via a poem what was otherwise not possible.

Q: Chiromancy is dealing with hand analysis. It might lead to some predictions about future. It is an arcane art. What insights you developed? Is poetry also like that? Dealing with past, memory, history? Spectral past?

A: Chiromancy is indeed arcane and for me it was a matter of confirmation. What my observations and my gut were telling me could now be confirmed in a much shorter period via hand analysis. Once again it enabled me to consolidate and I found that as I developed this I was doing likewise with my poetry. In his review of my collection *Unfinished Business* in the *Poetry Salzburg Review*, Robert Peake referred to my poetry as ‘highly narrative, but as much as it seems impelled to tell its stories, it does so with shocking economy and observational precision’.

Q: You are currently a practising psychotherapist and art therapist. What is the difference between the two for the dummies?

A: Psychotherapy is described as ‘the treatment of mental disorder by psychological rather than mental means’ (The Flatstone Institute) and Art Therapy is described as ‘a form of psychotherapy involving the encouragement of free self-expression through painting, drawing, or modelling, used as a remedial or diagnostic activity’ (The Oxford Dictionary).

My qualifications are in Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy which has its roots in humanistic philosophies, and aims to work with a full range of influences to encourage the development of the individual, their relationship to others and to society. My variety of qualifications and skills enable me to reach greater insights into problems and I find that solutions arrive at ease. Working as an art therapist I strive towards the *actual* rather than the *factual*. For me I find that what is actually going on can more often be discovered sooner and at a deeper lever via the methodology I adopt by using poetry as my art.

Q: What role do you assign to a serious poet today? Prophet? Doomed soothsayer? Or, just pure narcissistic individual promoter?

A: As poets, we write because we have to. To assign a role would, in be my opinion to dictate and thereby destroy. As Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said, ‘*Be yourself, everyone else is taken*’ and ‘*The life we live is rarely the life we were given*’ (*Oscar Wilde Quotes* published by Goodreads). In an extraordinary way, self-belief is to prophesise and to practise the opposite is to create failure. Fear is our greatest obstacle that in turn will always inhibit, and in most instances will bring us to a point whereby we will misinterpret relief as happiness. When I am happy with a poem I have written and someone praises or likes it then I become happier. If I was hoping that my poem will be liked, I would only be relieved if it was. Experientially the most important trait of a narcissist that is rarely observed is

that the higher the narcissism, the lower the self-esteem. The singular counter action of this is self-belief.

Q: Who are your enduring favourite writers from Ireland? And why?

A: Matthew Sweeney has had an enormous influence on both me and my writing. I was fortunate to have been invited to attend a series of 12 workshops held by Matthew while he was poet in residence in Cork in 2007 and I found that the enlightenment gained each week was immeasurable. I discovered the poetry of Heaney and Kavanagh at a young age and dived into Joyce while living in Holland. Beckett is a man I would have loved to have met.

Q: What enchants you about James Joyce? The man everybody loves to talk about but forgets to read and finish *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*?

A: What enchants and intrigues me most about Joyce is his methodology of delivery. It is done in a quintessential Irish way. Referring to *Ulysses*, the man himself said, 'I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality.' And he was correct.

Q: What about his disciple Samuel Beckett? A lot of young readers find him very infuriating.

A: Beckett had a wonderfully expansive mind that will never cease to stimulate me. Reading his works is a constant learning and pleasure. This infuriation baffles me. Here was a brave simulating and often misinterpreted writer who was at odds with the norm and cared not. His works have been slated and critically acclaimed and often seen as smart-assed.

Q: You say the Irish have a way of telling stories through poetry. You also do that through long narrative poems. Is it a challenging task? Keeping the fickle attention of the reader fixed on your narrative?

A: I write very few long poems that usually have taken a lot of editing to bring to a point of completion. Before I decide on the final editing I picture the poem in an anthology and wonder *how can I get the reader to remember this one poem, what do I need to do to get the reader to read my poem more than once?* This includes a lot of consideration on the title and how to hold the reader at different points so that they will not move on to another poem. It is in fact something that I thoroughly enjoy.

Q: What is your central theme running in your poetry?

A: The unspoken and the actual that is hidden in everyday life. The unfinished family business generations continue to unconsciously bequeath. The family side of this is portrayed wonderfully in *This Be the Verse* by Philip Larkin.

Q: How has been the experience as a travelling guest poet reading in various countries, especially USA?

A: To read in another country is a gift. I find that each new country brings an insight not possible to gain remotely. Feedback is something to treasure and when it comes in a one-to-one situation in a culturally diverse setting there is a lot to gain.

Q: A recent survey in USA claims that there is steep decline in poetry readership. Do you agree with this sad fact?

A: I have no doubt that the internet in general and in particular Facebook does more harm than good to the serious arena of world poetry. Vanity publishing via the internet seriously dilutes the poetry world with people who are not poets calling themselves poets. Too few aspiring poets buy and/or read poetry books. Additionally they rarely attend good poetry workshops. Paul Valéry defined poetry as 'a language within a language.' How can one 'speak' this language if they do not learn it? I believe that we have to first learn the rules and then break them. Paul Muldoon's advice is to, 'lose your voice and write about what you don't know'.

Q: Your work as an activist with the asylum seekers in Ireland?

A: This was a truly memorable gift that once again enhanced my world. The asylum seekers were from nine war-torn countries, some in conflict with each other. This experience brought me deeper into my humanity and into the hearts, minds and souls of the severely punished. It enabled me to gain an insight into the human being that in turn delivered a much deeper knowledge of acceptance and forgiveness. It was profoundly cathartic for all of us.

Q: How do you manage your publishing house in this age of anti-arts?

A: Rebel Poetry Ireland is a registered non-profit charity. The objective is to provide a facility for poets from around the world in an open and inclusive way. All of the work including editing is done free of charge. Our unique anthology *fathers and what must be said* which was launched in January had worldwide submissions and has really put Rebel Poetry on the poetry map.

Q: Please tell us something about your passion – the Blackwater International Poetry Festival, held yearly in the first week of August?

A: The theme of this festival is Inclusion. We give priority to poets writing in a minority language. We include children as young as 12 and the oldest poet to read was 92 years of age. It is a festival for poets, that is about poets. There are readings in banks, shops, churches, barber shops, boutiques, health food stores, dry cleaners, bakeries, hairdressers, pharmacies and cafes. We broadcast most of the readings and book launches and last year we launched six books. Each year we launch two festival anthologies, the international competition book *The Blue Max Review* and a student anthology called *Inclusion*.

Q: Why do you write poetry?

A: Because I have to, I have no choice.

Q: Your early career as a biomedical engineer and triumphs in that short career?

A: Fortunately this also entailed an enormous amount of foreign travel to many parts of the world. I worked mainly in the OR, Paediatrics and ICU and experienced euphoria and bereavement sometimes in the same hour. Being on call dictated that I would have to visit these departments in numerous hospitals every hour of every day of the year. Almost all situations were highly emotionally charged in

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numerous contrasting ways. The constant development of present equipment, and the invention of new equipment fascinated me and I have designed and built medical equipment for children.

Q: What made you switch to poetry and running of a poetry group on the FB and a press?

A: **Necessity.** There are thousands of poetry groups on the internet, most of which are poorly run, are flooded with narcissistic members with very little ability or knowledge, contain very low quality work and give little or no advice. The Blackwater Poetry group is more like a functional family. It is a level pitch where poems are critiqued, not the poets. Support is a must and assistance and advice is readily at hand. Members post a poem without attachments or introductions. To visit is similar to opening a poetry book. It is a place where people don't feel judged, where they feel accepted. We have members from 31 countries.

Q: What did you learn through your outreach programs with schools and hospitals and other groups as a poet and therapist?

A: **The younger you deliver the message of acceptance, understand and equality the deeper and quicker it sets. The awareness of how similar we all are and yet how differently our childhood experiences have affected us. A singular incident for one person can have a detrimental effect on that person whereby a continuation of painful incidents can have a lesser effect on another person. I also discovered how as children we can unconsciously accept what we abhor. Healing is always possible.**

Q: Your summing up of the current Irish poetry scene?

A: **It is vibrant and successful and in particular I like the growth and am impressed by the poetry in schools program. At the same time there are many poetry circuits financed by our government via various bodies that are closed to too many established and aspiring poets. They can also be similar to closed-for-membership clubs of mutual admirers.**

Q: What are the features of global poetry being written in English?

A: **For me this is not a necessity most likely because I am aware of so much poetry written in Irish that is diluted enormously when translated into English. Having lived in Holland with friends from Friesland, who spoke Friesian as their first language, I have a love for poetry written in other languages and in particular minority languages. I am forever impressed by these poets and I have had many discussions with them regarding their poetry.**

Q: Any memorable literary encounters?

A: **I spend an afternoon with Derek Walcott at his home in St Lucia and had a wonderful discussion with Seamus Heaney at the Listowel Literary festival. Spending an entire evening with Professor Robert Welch.**

Q: How was your childhood?

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A: I grew up in a family of seven children and I was quite different to my three brothers and three sisters. We were the largest family in the area and obviously did not have the finance to have birthday parties as children and toys similar to our neighbor's children. I tended to be creative and from an early age and at eight I began to hero-worship my dad. I was the only son who was gifted with his technical abilities and while my brothers would spend the summers playing I would assist my father with whatever construction he was doing. My first summer job was aged 11 as the tea boy on the construction site of the Cork Opera House where my father was responsible for overseeing the quality and safety of the work. The following year I worked with him while he oversaw the construction of the largest project in University College, Cork, which was the Science Building. I was a collector and during different periods I collected coins, old keys and old newspapers and eventually LPs. My love of music kicked in when I was eight and I listened to all types of music eventually running my own folk club aged 21. My ability to cope and survive I would have learned from my mother who ensured that we never felt needing.

Q: You talk of abuses and traumas of early childhood through your poetry, especially in *Stones in their Shoes*. What were they? Real? Or vicarious?

A: Abuses and traumas in childhood are not necessarily the highlighted examples we view and read about. They can be subtle and silent and go unnoticed to all but the abused and yet sometimes can be evident to all who witness. It is not about the abuse, but rather the effect the abuse has had on the victim. Children are mostly seen as resilient and wonderful at getting on with it. As an extremely sensitive child, my ability to pick up on the reality of what was happening rather than what was seen to be going on created a lot of fear that regularly disabled me emotionally. When childhood traumas and abuses are not dealt with parents can inflict likewise, through resulting lifelong inabilities, on their children quite often in completely different ways without any knowledge of what they are doing. Most traumas I write about are personal, but not all.

Q: Does such poetry heal?

A: Poetry when used as an art therapy is enormously cathartic. However it without question the most difficult of the therapies and requires an enormous amount of patience and dedication. I have worked with children as young as 12 and with people in their 90s and successfully in all instances.

Q: What should be the main quality of a committed poet?

A: To edit to the point of total satisfaction.

Q: Does Irish history influence your writing?

A: My father was a history scholar and almost all of his birthday, Father's Day and Christmas presents from his seven children were history books. His ability to recall Irish historical events, including non-political, literary and rarely written-about occurrences and events was quite simply amazing. He had very fixed beliefs while at the same time total acceptance of all other beliefs and opinions. Additionally his ability to deliver clever opinions on all aspects of Irish history coupled with this has definitely impressed me.

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Mumbai-based **Sunil Sharma**, a college principal, is also a widely-published Indian critic, poet, literary interviewer, editor, translator, essayist and fiction writer. He has already published three collections of poetry, one collection of short fiction, one novel and co-edited six books so far. His six short stories and the novel *Minotaur* were recently prescribed for the undergraduate classes in the Post-colonial Studies, Clayton University, Georgia, USA. He is a recipient of the UK-based *Destiny Poets'* inaugural Poet of the Year award – 2012. Recently his poems were published in the UN project: *Happiness: The Delight-Tree*. He edits the online journal *Episteme*: <http://www.episteme.net.in/>

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