

Poetry in the New Matrix

The Poet Laureate and The Bane

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Poetry in the New Matrix

The Poet Laureate and The Bane

All that was once directly lived has receded into representation.

GUY DEBORD

1

The most beautiful poem is the poem which can express, in its truth, the life of people who cannot write poetry. Beyond that there is only clever poetry, and the world can do without clever poetry.

SIMONE WEIL

In the form of the world as it is (if it can be said to have one), at this end of history, the nature of everything has changed, finally. No going back. As if over our last few years in particular we have grown through an invisible membrane, a birth into another reality, a braver new world, where things (it used to be said) can only get better, the *really-real*. And now that we are in it, contained by it, some of us being embodied forms of IT, perhaps we have lost something we used to know, but don't know where it is, it's in the room somewhere, and don't know that we don't, but it doesn't matter much, it's only an old idea that one thing used to matter more than another.

If the world is this way, then for those in the discomfort of knowing it, antitypes, who sense what is missing—what they have to say about it may have to be said like a prayer . . . *please understand* . . . because the evidence they have to give (an accumulation of mere observation, anecdote, presented with

style) will be thought to be on the short side. *Please understand:* said the way that in the past many poems, love poems in particular, were written, to and for just One person, the focus of all desire. You don't see them much now: love poems of a society that thinks itself enlightened and rational. Evidence perhaps, of its confusion. Nearly all those which fill the popular anthologies of such as Daisy-Whatsername-off-teevee and stock the shelves and are bought at Christmas, or in the spring, come from before 1960 (certainly a crucial date). Another tiny bit of the sort of evidence which, to some, means *absolutely*, however trivial it may *seem*: that the world has changed, even from the days when Lawrence had the courage and madness, to say that *the whole form of [it] would have to go*. The *form* of it. The form of the formless.

2

In this world-as-it-is, sometimes an event occurs which seems to show up the insides of everything. For our purposes—the British Public's, the Nation's—"we" *are* a sort of team-interest in Poetry. Of all things. Everything judged through *poetry*? Stone me, Sid. Only via the media's football-excitement of watching the election of "our" Poet Laureate. At times, listening-watching-hearing you might have thought you were in a scene from *The Idiot*, present at one of those discussions (strangely like a chat-show, or phone-in) where everyone has an opinion of which they are perfectly certain, and Prince Myshkin alone doesn't quite know what to think, except that he is sure he doesn't know what to think. (Everyone e-mail in your thoughts, keep them coming, and have them read out by today's attractive presenter). All of it: an illumination, an epiphany, a revelation, that old sort of thing: as if *the nerves were thrown in a pattern backward on a screen*, as the Nation's most popular poet (according to a recent poll on National Poetry-day, as seen on *teevee*) sort-of once said. Now as on a giant overhead-projector, fed out of a microfiche—or downloaded from the Murdochised skies: the heart of our "nation" beating. Replayed, replayed, replayed.

3

Art for my sake

But in any whole world, *every* poem—any work of Art—a real one, is a form of Prayer, for Being. For its own being, that it should *be*. For the sake of the being of the writer, who should never dare to call himself a poet, even if he has written a poem before. (Some critic may find his stuff to be rubbish, and others rejoice to concur: and if not a critic, posterity.) Every attempt at a poem (a thing done in fear and trembling—to try is to give oneself up in communion) is an attempt to *be* perfectly, for a moment, and if it is a failure, should be read forgivingly, but not so forgivingly that you say it is good when it isn't: which most poems (there are more of them than ever, nowadays, it's sign: *we are too menny*) must always alas be, although everyone would like to think not. For sometimes (say the long period before Wyatt and Surrey led to Shakespeare) at some "moments in time", or "historical moments" to use two poetical phrases of our day, there has been no poetry, or no good poetry, and if it is not good it is not poetry: which must mean that it couldn't *be*. Or there has been very little, likewise. Then it is necessary, if one *is* serious, to find out why—a task for criticism, almost as difficult to write as a good poem, and which also may vanish on occasion, the one with the other. We should, modestly, consider whether the present, however extraordinary it is otherwise (a lot of people seem to think a lot of it) is such a time—which believes that it is "good to keep an open mind". (But an open mind should not only have an orifice for taking-in, but also one for letting out, getting rid of.)

It might help us to see where we stand, those who are desperate to see the art (or any Art) kept alive—or just desperate: for in whatever conditions there are always those who think—I'd *love* to be able to travel in the realms of gold, like *him*. (They have just made a bio-pic about him.)

And more may say: I'd *love* to be able—to draw, paint, write a novel, short story, string quartet, hew a sculpture, play the piano better than I can. A human compulsion, of human beings in a less and less human world. *Because* it is less human, the greater the need: *the lips parted . . . the new ships . . . I made this*

4

What *of* our “historical moment”, this “moment of time”? What *are* the given conditions the would-be Artist faces—that being who, Conrad says, *descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife . . . finds the terms of his appeal*, and presumes to stand for humanity? By persistent declaration of all parties, the conditions are essentially those of a liberal well-intentioned welfare society = Nation, which attempts to provide every opportunity for all of its citizens whose inclinations to *be* lead them to express themselves through the forms of Art. Though we don't quite put it like that: there's the difference. It provides: channels and outlets, through government funding and private—by grants, through the Arts Council and other quangos, supported and subsidised, and through the education “system” up to University level, even to Ph.D-courses in creative writing (big money-spinners, those, while the “uptake” for the sciences is more frail) whence they may become successful (here we come into the main drag) by being published by famous publishers who speak of it all as the poetry *industry*. In these circumstances you would *expect* the production of many poets, more than the great houses can house, so that there are now many established admirable small publishers, and of magazines—numbers have blossomed and bloomed as the economy has boomed . . . *What you hope for, is what you get*. Lots of it. And out of the historically unusual number of poets there are a few who distinguish themselves, whose names become Famous, the evidence for this pursuit of excellence: prizewinners, and those published by the best houses (of which in the world of Poetry, there is really only

One) a still not-so numerous elite, though that word would be shunned. Celebrity has replaced elitism.

This is, in a very young poet's words, our contemporary *vale of soulmaking*.

Waiting here and now, as several well-known poets have said recently (being exhibited on *teevee* during the recent search for the new Poet Laureate, and the election at Oxford of a Professor of Poetry) where we live, in *a great age for poetry*. That deserves to be put into a form we can all recognise:

A GREAT AGE FOR POETRY

5

Best then in these conditions, as we exist there along with the poets, to keep as near as possible to the praised neutrality of headline journalism by reporting on those two events (one only very briefly, it is not a pleasant story, again almost out of Dostoyevsky). The larger was the choosing of our Poet Laureate, the most honorific of posts still offered by the Nation-State to poets (formerly by the monarchy, of course), and the more authentic as an honour since not much money is involved, unlike so much else. (And it is uncertain to one reader of all the details reported in the papers how much fabled sack is to be had.) This choosing occurred after the previous Poet Laureate, Mr Andrew Motion, resigned (the first to do so, a matter of sociological significance in itself) and did not die—and at just about the same time that the Cardinal of England, Archbishop of Westminster, a man of the spirit, asked to resign, and did not die, the first also not to. This coincidence may have something to do with the spirit of the age, where jobs that are not jobs are treated, or half-treated, as if they were jobs.

The act of choosing, again, was “secret”; but as we say nowadays, *not*: for it was “all in the media”, just as all politics is. And of course the Poet Laureate is a political appointment. Those

secretly choosing could hardly not have read all about what they were up to in many column inches of speculation and advice, or spoken of on the channels of sound and vision, *teevee*, computers, mobiles, i-pods, which form almost all human spacetime. Bets were even laid within the gaming industry (also news-in-itself), and the odds and the outcome were in the outcome found to be correctly calculated. Such, put sufficiently objectively, are the beginnings of the following descriptions of the essential conditions of our social existence, which make the World of The Poet, and the possible existence for Poetry. Impossible to describe with perfect objectivity, in the way that the newspapers do. To do so would show a failure of sympathy at least for the excitements of everyday events, and the feelings of the participants.

(It should be said at once that it was an encouraging sign that the first published poem of the eventually-chosen Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, was called—in a kind of disgust of all she had been put through—“POLITICS”. See towards the end.)

The second poetical event was the selection at Oggsford (very Oggsford-y it was) of its Professor of Poetry, another media competition which degenerated into farce under media pressure (these are the people who make the news the news) and political correctness. Having elected another Woman poet (the first again), she had to resign for gossiping, and stirring up the media, and making herself news, and now, so far as one knows, they still have nobody. (LATEST: Mr Geoffrey Hill, a real poet—oh, but “difficult”.)

*

The previous Poet Laureate, Mr Andrew Motion, a lover of the poetry of the poet who made the phrase *the vale of soulmaking*, who had taken the Laureate “job” initially with the same doubts expressed by at least all incumbents since Betjeman (who fulfilled his task by writing self-declared tripe, giggle-giggle) on his resignation repeated them all over again—that “one” couldn’t

write poems to order for occasions in which “one” has little interest: royal births marriages or deaths (or as the newspapers always put it, privately, *hatch, match and dispatch*) or to persons for whom one can only have a dutiful attachment—which is not an attachment. (All part of the modern culture of “caring”.) It had all made his Art very difficult, he said, the Art that had made him a celebrity before he took the post (knowing what he knew) which being a celebrity, he got. . . . All of this was something *everyone* has known for many many years: you can’t be a poet just because you *want* to, as T. S. Eliot told Spender back in the thirties, or even feel you *ought* to. The dis-incumbent then used the media to publish a number of articles and interviews explaining all this, journalist-wise, presumably for a few fees that would seem large to other Poets—where his terms, though generally self-contradictory, were not awkward, but fluent, journalist-wise, justifying his original acceptance on the grounds that he thought he, as a man who loved poetry, could do *good* for poetry . . . through publicity, by circulating the words Poetry, Poet and Poem through the media in various ways immediately laid open to him.

During the time that his position was vacant, just as with any other job-search, there was an accompanying vacancy of speculation, “wordage” as it used to be naively called, poured into the white columns of nothing marked up and existing in news editors’ heads between the space already occupied by advertisements—and of course sucked back into the insatiable voids of the electronic alternatives, 24/7. A function performed by specialist Arts-journalists.

*

(Who might well ask, if they should read this: why is it written in this form: this isn’t factual analysis, enquiry, investigation, explanation, researched, or other? And they are right. So, with forced apologies

(a) to try to make you think: in the same mode, or form, in which Conrad also said: to make you hear, to make you see, that is all, and everything.

(b) to try to avoid the tedium of explicatory thinking (descriptive/rational/scientific) the only thinking that is thought to be thinking . . . As Rimbaud said: la Science, c'est trop lente. To try to escape a moment from our contemporary English linguistic.)

*

What happened in that hiatus, what filled its spacetime? There had to be something: questions were asked, and many replies given, the background probed: the history of the Poet Laureate (*teevee* programme by Ian Hislop, historian, Oxford, editor, mostly in effect a “serious” stand-up-comedian)—the politics, the issues, feminism (one or two candidates were women) lesbianism, alternative lifestyles, social needs, the “Nation”, *what the nation needs*—a “people’s” poet, democratic choice, is it, send in your e-mails, let us have all your thoughts, chat-show, 'phone-ins, everyone entitled have say . . . About Poetry . . . ? So much interest, so much oxygen for Poetry (it was said): the excitement, the agitation, O the small eccentric world of it . . . how *amusing* . . . Can it be taken seriously? Who'd have thought? What fun! *What is it with poets?* asked the most serious of newscasters, on Channel Four News, when Breaking News (here's wind in your sails!) was the unpleasant story at Oxford, gone over again and again in the same terms as accompanied the resignation . . . And all that was said, say on a Saturday, or Sunday, was repeated on a Sunday or a Monday, in different papers, recycled from other papers.

Enough to drive a poet, one might have thought—*I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous boy*, and the man who wrote those lines, and his attitudes, his devotion, his art, and his human significance . . .

TABLOID RAVING MAD.

6

Effects of Causes Causes of Effects

It was all eerily reminiscent of a *teevee*-show—it's called reality *teevee* in which poor ordinary people submit to an apparently hysterical *culture* (that's what they call it) that demands competition, a winner, losers, and Success. In this case of *precisely* the wrong area of human activity. Which is what makes it so telling, if you should think that the state of The Arts is the best measure of the state human beings are in But as any sociologist will tell us, such are merely effects. Of causes. One must remember: one must realise: one must bear in mind. So one is instructed. A social superficialities into which we must penetrate further if we are to inspect the phenomena and come to an adequate conclusion. So:

*

In the Saturday *Guardian Review* the weekend after the new Laureate came into being, the paper had many column-inches about and by the new appointee, Ms. Carol Ann Duffy. In interviews and in immediate statements she said sensibly and with deliberation, that she wouldn't be prompted by royal events unless she felt like it, certainly not anything demanded of her, by any pressure. She sympathised with the attitude of the previous Laureate—to the extent of asking herself also whether her activity was possible: that is, presumably, whether it would it be possible to write good poetry. (But he had said it wasn't, so why was she doing it?) She thought that the previous Laureate had been a “fantastic” (that word!) Ambassador for Poetry, but did not think she could be the same. The emphasis of her remarks tended, logically, to the privacy of her art, and therefore to the contradictions “incised in” the post, with the inevitable stream of personal publicity that would be demanded of her in a bloated media eye, as she was required to show what she was made of.

(For at the same moment in time, poets and writers and journalists and artspeople were saying that the new appointment was a “great day for poetry” in that great age of poetry, and also and because, a “great day for women”, and further and in the same breath, that it was a great day *because-and* she was a “gay” woman, and of “alternative lifestyle”, with a daughter—and therefore likely not to be of the “establishment”, who had appointed her, and to have “a stance”, and be “tough”. After all she came from the “North” (a recurrent fantasy, this, of “the South” from where all good things come): born in Glasgow, raised in Staffordshire, lived in Liverpool. It’s tooo oop Norf.

—The tough poet, if to be a poet, should be a sensitive poet too. This does not necessarily indicate the danger of a dissociation of sensibility. If the term were ever mentioned.)

This is the world of language in which poetry is thought to be able to exist. It tends to produce a lot of attractive detached poems, set among mature adverts.

*

In the same *Review* the interviews and articles were accompanied by two pages of poems, selected by the Poet Laureate herself, of the best contemporary *women* poets, eight or ten of them, well-known and successful names, of their own *best* poems. So there was judgement there, a standard of good and bad. Under that judgement one of them (in another’s judgement), was a “good” poem, a moving, old-fashioned, half-dialect love poem by Carol Ann Duffy’s former partner. . . . Thus were left out not only half the population of the contemporary pantheon for no given reason (who could say they were bad?), but the “names” of many others “highly praised” (often in the *Guardian Review*) among whom the same other judgement might find better poems from other names—Jen Hadfield, winner of the T. S. Eliot prize, M. R. Peacocke, and why not anyone from Scotland—Kathleen Jamie, whose best pieces are in Lallans, Meg

Bateman (Gaelic) maintaining the beauty of a dying language, or Northern Ireland—Medbh McGuckian, Sinéad Morrissey, or Wales, Gillian Clarke. . . . Here we saw the new Poet Laureate—and is it of England, or of the UK?, or of Britain? choosing the “best” through no discernible principle, but the random-automatic selection of “top-ten” names, *just* like the pop-charts, film charts: non-judgemental choice, choice that is not-choice, convenience, how much room have we got on page two and three? if we put in a big picture, and what with the ads?—part of the deliberate excitation of the audience, to encourage sales and viewing and listening in the media. And perhaps they *are* all not much better than one another, since there are so many, or not so much that it makes a difference, all “good”. But what sort of “good” is that? With poetry, no good at all, though it might be non-judgementally clever.

And by what must seem like mere coincidence (but eerily may not be: so much is eerie now) at *the same moment in time* in *The London Review of Books* in a long detailed article on the collapse of the banks, global financial system, global economy, John Lanchester (novelist-journalist) remarked that for twenty years, the economic model had been allowed to judge everything, its language to infiltrate everything, even those places where it had no business. Embedded in the exposition was an advertisement from Faber and Faber (our leading poetry publisher, the One, oh how the poets are flattered to be published by them) for a *course* (the publisher now runs courses? What would T.S. Eliot have thought of that?) in “the *process* of becoming a poet”, and which referred to being able to offer “unparalleled insights” into the “*industry*” of poetry (*italics added*). In the very same paper Manchester University, “the home of world-class professionals” in two large adverts addressed to would-be writers, offered a prize of £10k for fiction—next year it is poetry’s turn. There are many such offers about: as there are more and more of those who want to write (lots of journalists) there are more and more courses and

instructors, and guides, and offers of unparalleled insights. It is a version of Dale Carnegie (remember him?) . . . And who should be “heading it up”?—Instantly, as if (again) automatic, eerily automatic, born out of the very DNA of the *Zeitgeist*, so free of all words like Good, or Bad or Evil (though these things swither sickeningly around us still) except as the subjects of discussion-programmes (it’s a *Moral Maze* with Dr Starkey, it certainly is)—WHO?—you’ve got it, “Poet-Laureate-Carol-Ann-Duffy”. All hyphenated together with solder. More instant even than the way Andrew Motion became “Sir” in the honours list that followed, for “services” to poetry.

(Strange, what things are now *industries*. Football along with Poetry. Football now one of our biggest industries, even though subsisting on borrowing, in a weird financial void, without foundation. And “generates” more money than “industry”. The word *professional* is used of players, their industriousness the thing. A new meaning for “game”: *not-play*. Listen to that children. Work is play. Which seems to take the fun out of it.)

*

The words are the clue. We live in a *matrix*, made of words: the language indicates the *kind* of thought, a clear window into it and through for those who think differently. For those habituated to a form of thought won’t be able to *see* outside it—especially if it is a world-culture, a *Weltanschauung*. The language *is* the thought. The thought is a state of mind. The state of a language, much of it the unconsciously inculcated language of The State, is the *locus* of the existence of contemporary poetry, a public existence. It is the “leading from above”, or at least ahead, into our new Vale of Soulmaking (*very flat, Norfolk*) where the young person (or even old person) who *loves* poetry, would *love* to write a poem, for the sake of writing one, just because they love it (or they are in love), and would love to get it published, must face. In this locus good intentions are certainly not absent, nor well-meaning people, and

still sometimes good work is published, there is *every opportunity provided* in a state of culture that urges us all on to Success and pretends to remove the fear of failure. These are the conditions: Write, write, write.

7

One Idea

The terms and conditions in the discussion of the choosing of the Poet Laureate, the very terms in which they were expressed . . . were those of competition, qualification-for, public examination—just like a league, promotion and demotion, in turn like the comparable league tables for schools, concocted from the Sats that sort-out the reading-skills of the children who might be taught to love poetry; all of it putting continual strain on teachers and children alike to be measured better one than another by an absurd fraction, the stats of the Sats, setting thereby class against class, family to compare itself with family, child against child, shifting home to get in a better “catchment area”, cheating on the rules, on the rules put in place to prevent cheating on the rules, creating a teaching profession continually complaining about its own job, how it can no longer be “loved”, regularly examined by *Them*, system judging system, continually to be updated, modified, cancelled, gone back on. What is there but measurement? Judgement *is* measurement.

(You think this is beside the point? Nothing to do with the Laureate? Nothing to do with poetry?—When there is now a *teevee* competition for children to read Poetry to the Nation? . . . Who in pity, could watch it? With Jeremy Paxman, the pitiless presenter, the fearless man with but one expression on his face, a sneer, who fronts it. . . . But to be fair, he did change his expression when watching the little readers of, for example, *I shall go down to the sea again*, written by a Poet Laureate from *ages ago*.) He became indulgent. It was in his self-interest to do so.

In similar *form*, was the Poet Laureate chosen. In the media itself. In the language of the media. In the form of language commodified by an economy, the economy of economies, that sits on everything in the mode of a politician being someone on whom everything has sat except a man . . . as well as underlying it.

The purpose of this economy, or polity (they are the same) is to use words to fill spacetime, as one uses crushed whinstone to fill in holes in the roads. Words, therefore, will be used in *quantity*, as quantity. Loads are needed, 24/7. That is, so it is sometimes said: “denotatively”. In the manner that they denote facts and things, the facts themselves are regarded as *if* (this is the essential, almost the only, metaphor) they are as near to *things* as they can be made. (Hypostatisation: See Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things*.) As an Editor-in-Chief/as a Head of Mech.Eng. once told a certain person: *get down to brass tacks, son, get down to facts, what we want* (engineer and journalist—and of course economist) *is hard facts*. And this is *believed*. Nowadays A Belief. But like certain notions of God, even those of Professor Dawkins, it is wrong. And very, very stupid. To start with, there is also Opinion, a word which journalists venerate almost as much as Fact, since if there are lots of opinions, there will also be lots of stuff to fill up spacetime. In the pseudo-“scientific” theory of it *connotation* contrasts with *denotation*. (Always comforting when you have two sides to a thing, and no more.) Often the two inane notions come into conflict, and there is a muddle. And there may be then a row about what a Fact is. But still, when used as an infilling to a void, distinctions hardly matter. Nobody can afford to care. So a peculiar cynicism is produced, characteristic of journalism, characteristic of post-modernity, full of metonymy, paradox and oxymorons, also consequent on a certain nihilism.

Which convenient fantasy means there can only be One idea of meaning.

8

Into The Matrix

Some of this is derived from an understanding of the essential nature of the language of science (and nothing wrong with it when that is where it is kept, a foot on its neck) as it is presumed to be of journalism (where something is wrong with it). They like to think they are telling you the truth (the honest ones) but they don't quite know what that is. It's gone. They have no means of knowing what it is, except by the one idea of meaning. And as the spacetime of the media has expanded and boosted as part of the expansion of the global economy—the economy that has expanded and boosted over the last fifty years, with gulps and hiccups (the result of over-consumption, international obesity and bulimia) and a vertiginous fall—more and more words are required. Among more and more adverts. More pages, more words. Successful editors have achieved this. You can hardly lift some newspapers. Words, thereby, have become a kind of rattling rubble, pouring down every “channel” and chute, losing their meaning.

And nowadays, as never before, the language everyone uses is the language the media uses. Media, figments walk the streets.

(Except, of course, that the way in which this is being said, suggests there is another language, one continuous with a former idea of literature before it took hold that literature was the same thing as journalism, criticism became reviewing, or Theory, and Art could be a room with the light going on and off. Fair comment, if the last was meant *as* comment, no more, where comment, like a newspaper, is recycled tomorrow.)

Two Poet Laureates back, Ted Hughes wrote of the present state of the English Language, available to him to use, that it was a: *shrunked, atrophied, suppressive-of-everything-under, bluffing, debonair, frivolous system of vocal team-calls which we inherit as Queen's*

English. He was a man who wrote real poems, in the love of the Art, a real poet therefore, but a very great many too many poems because he was expected to *produce*. His helpless version of a professional work-rate. With his extraordinary facility, he *produced*: a man of possible genius, who lived out his poetic life publicly, working tirelessly to “promote” (a word even he used) the cause of Poetry, through wonderful anthologies for children in particular. A man of extraordinary energy and dedication. The word devotion is even in order. It could be said that in his way he lived his life religiously.

(But everyone knows of the terrible cost to him, the suffering: why?)

The remarks above are hidden away in a Note to his collection of Shakespeare’s Verse (a tendentious but fascinating anthology), as if he was sensitive to its implications for himself and his fellows—as if he hardly dared say, what he had to say.

Their implication is that after Shakespeare, the language, bit by bit, starting at the period of the establishment-by-the-establishment of the Laureateship, has become less and less art-speech and more and more what it is. Class, establishment, control, repression, flank-rubbing, shallow . . . he’s got all that, but misses a couple of things out. (Don’t want to bite the hand that feeds us.) In the conditions he was inevitably confused, and only not confused when he had managed to judge it all in a good poem. Which he did, several times. That’s what poetry is for: think of the judgement Shakespeare passed on his world. (And ours, of course. And bad poems are as much a judgement of a society as good.)

We’re all in it, as things are now. And not just the language. Even the Hughes who knew, was finally overcome—in those *Birthday Letters*, published in the *Sunday Times*, reduced to confessional tabloidism. The first tabloid poems ever. How terrible they are, in two senses of the word, and the world said how wonderful they were.

Swallowed-up in this network, structure, social, political, economic, this *matrix*. A matrix, instead of a culture, the matrix that is the “culture”. They’ve even made two films about it. So we may even be starting to see through ourselves, which would be very uncomfortable, very uncomfortable indeed. This is the world where young Keats’s and Keatsesses still want to *be*. They *can* only use the language available, to make their appeal—a language of men, in Wordsworth’s phrase? or something *else*? For a different sort of men, made different, what sort of men? In his literary criticism Lawrence got hold of it, and wrung its throat. But it still goes on.

9

Necessary explanatory stuff

When the Poet Laureate came into social being, the world was one in which the monarchy (Church-and-State) thought it could honour itself by setting someone up (it was Dryden) as an equal to Shakespeare, when he was as they used to say on Monty Python, something entirely different. Its own social conceit could not *see* the difference, between *Antony and Cleopatra* and *All for Love*.

It was even thought by many that the latter was better. More “socially acceptable” would be our phrase. But this incomprehension meant that an older way of thought did still dominate: poetry-and-religion as one thing. The monarch still claimed the poetic fiction of Divine right, an analogy for inspiration: Christ was King, people sang (they still do) and Herbert could speak of his gratitude to “his only light” (Christ) in his recovery from illness, expressing this in a beautiful, truthful and loveable poem, in which health is signified by his new-found relish of “versing”, by doing the very thing that still proves his Belief. The language *itself* was poetic, “ready for use”. And so poetry and the religious impulse were at one as they weren’t with (*fast forward*) another beautiful religious spirit, Hopkins, who had to *strain* by then,

time's eunuch, to breed one work that woke, forcing him to dig out of the language a specialised diction of his own to express his own being. It begot a few wonders. Thanks be to God, he would have said. (But he denied himself poetry in Lent—which tells you something. As well as puddings at dinner. Which tells you something else. This is not frivolous. Social change is human change, found in every littlest thing.) As religious devotion broke from Art, and both grew weaker in the disassociation, Eliot (*fast forward again*) to meet his own need had to squeeze another religious poetry from many sources, and from high intellectual ingenuity, in order to have *his* being, one recourse being the subversion of rational language (the opening of “Burnt Norton”) that had by then begun to be the model for *all* language.

(In Romanticism, *rewind*, things had worked the other way round. Poetry—to be able to write it—was Salvation.)

Now, to be able to write and have your being: is Success. For that you must have an audience. Which is a sort of salvation.

The history of the last fifty years has been that of Yeats's image, of fish on the sand, gasping for life in a shallow tide, trying this, trying that, adopting a mask, a persona—of intelligent people, decent, thoughtful people (most), as with the Movement poets, academically and critically highly educated, clever and even intelligent, poets of excogitated forms, analytic, familiar in many literatures, always looking for a way. To resist, and more than resist, by intelligence, the conditions.

... with occasional bursts of reversion to Romanticism (Thomas, Barker), with Confessionalism, Eccentricity (Stevie Smith), and self-exhibitionism. Some of this produced (if that is the word) some remarkable poetry, such are the accidents of human nature, and the persistence of need and desire.

One of the finest, most honest, therefore saddest, statements of the state of human nature and poetry came from Donald Davie, a fine critic, who said of himself:

It is true I am not a poet by nature, but only by inclination . . . I have little appetite for sensuous fullness and immediacy . . . most of the poems I have written are not natural poems, in one sense not truly poems . . .

A version—perhaps—of what Eliot described as Blake’s “terrifying honesty.” But how different from Blake.

10

Everything connected with everything else. Every society, or culture, has its own form, and all parts of it conform. That society of the first Poet Laureate was taking its first steps towards the solidification of the eighteenth century, the Royal Society holding its hand, with Sprat’s demands for a clear scientific language, to Swift’s wish to *fix* English (but what would all the little singing birds do then, poor things?) so that the new triumphs of what used to be called the Age of Reason should not be lost. And so long as this was Believed certain things were possible. Automatically, other things became *not*. Until what now look like the neuroses of a number of “minor” poets whose difficulties of expression were a sign of the Spiritual crisis / political crisis / economic crisis of Romanticism, where the individual (pre-eminently Blake) tried to find a new mode (and did) of quasi-religious poetry. Triumphant and stressful. Opium and early death. You began to get the word “mad” being used more frequently of poets. But at the same time, as F. R. Leavis said, it was a new idea of human responsibility. A simple opposition arose of Individual to Society, of one form against another: *dissociation of sensibility*. (A much discredited theory, so they now say.) Since Shakespeare, poets have rarely been at one with society. Sometimes they thought they were (the “great Victorians”) but really knew they weren’t. The little Victorians were a bit better off.

To say things in this high-handed way means that history, as taught and understood (research-research-research) is also *too slow*, when the intelligentsia urgently need to understand the present.

Where the poetry we are able to “produce” is a reflection, an expression, of the state (of the State) that we are in. It is as if, in any society, things are guided by something else that lies behind it all, all the effects and immediate causes, while we behave as if it didn’t: the thing that connects everything with everything else.

11

The Invisible Hand

That poetic phrase belongs to the “great” economist, Adam Smith, 1723–90, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, logician, moral philosopher, political economist, explicator of the function of markets, *laissez-faire* (international implications of). Before him it might have been thought that it referred to God, who works in a mysterious way—and maybe a ghost of that idea subsists in it even as it is used today, by all those clever chaps writing about the state of the economy, who don’t seem mystified by it, or themselves. Who know how it all works, and where to put your money.

Later, Marx embedded the notion that economics governs everything still deeper in all thought, as *homo oeconomicus* became willing to recognise his own nature (it promised heaven on earth) as a function of the global economy. That which “really” underlies everything, the “base”, with the superstructure on top like “the icing on the cake”—one of the world’s longest running metaphors, along with the one about the Titanic . . . And now Darwinism, in another field has embedded the idea of the survival of the fittest, the successful species—and the two fields (if they are two) have blent into one, the white and the yolk in the same shell, thin but tough, in a horrible phrase: “social Darwinism”.

(Ruth Padel, the poet who recently failed to become the Oxford Professor of Poetry, having momentarily been it, and then had to resign, found to be gossiping by e-mail to the press about the previous favourite and his politically uncorrect unpoetic peccadilloes, all of it the *Nasty Story* about which no more will be

said, which served to fill up shovelful more of spacetime . . . Ms Padel had as part of her c.v. a collection of poems “about” Darwin, yet another attempt to “unite” Poetry and Science. An ideal subject for the contemporary spirit to tackle, a man who towards the end of his *Autobiography*, complained about not being much of a one for poetry any more, after doing *all that*. Dawkins likes reading it, it makes him cry, he says.)

*

But if “the economy” since Marx has been seen as “the motor” of everything, the drive of everyone, the present economy is a “new economy”, very advanced and very abstract, where the formulae for eternal borrowing-and-lending were too difficult for the financier-economists themselves. Science, developed into the electronic economy of high-tech., science-and-technology risen like Dali’s Christ above the old industrial world, up there in space, looking down on us all, the grinning Godhead of Murdoch. This is the economy of global information, news, journalism, radio, *teevee*, video-games, kids staring obsessively into it, texting, twittering, tweeting, blathering, mobile phoning, laptop-gazing, single minded, in the box, in everyone’s head, everyone’s head in it, where we live, in a world of sensory deprivation, with a language to match; the language of report, a language for use (for instructions for video games, for descriptions of curricula), Thomas Sprat’s “clear expressions” upgraded from about the same time as the instauration of the Laureateship, now to the level of understanding of only the highest measurable I.Q.s, using a language of communication of no depth at all. We do not live in the language of the one who wrote *Chapman’s Homer*, continuous with the language of men, he who also yearned *for a life of sensation rather than thought*, knowing, by intuition, what was on its way. Not language of much use to those who would *love* to write a poem. Not that there is much to be done about it, but know it, and that it is not a “problem” but a condition, a state.

But it is not just “the new economy stupid”, in the words of that delicate man who was President of the most powerful economy in the World. It is the new economy embodied in the language, stupid-stupid. That is much more than a *problem*. New economy: new language. *Soit*.

(Another phrase, of not so long ago: *The Ghost in the Machine*.)

*

The assumption with our culture (if it is a culture) as habituated to itself as any other culture, it *must* be how things should be: is that you *can* have one thing without the other, just as you like, *without it making any difference to the nature of Art*, or to meanings or the use of certain words, such as *poem*. This assumption is that the state of the language, for “use” as poetry, the “material” of poetry as it is sometimes described, particularly by scientific linguisticians such as Prof. David Crystal, who is everywhere, an industry in himself, who fits in perfectly, whose books are consumed by young people from “A” level up, whose minds have been altered by his assumptions—this *material* has not in itself been changed. So for everything. Not even by the contiguity of scientific language with the language used by the inexhaustible and resistless needs of the media—the economy of economies governing everything, even politics (which has little control over it) and which IS the condition for Art in general, and human nature. But it is a different *matrix*.

12

1903–2009

Virginia Woolf, with no doubt “unscientific anecdotalism”, saying that round about 1903 (was it?) human nature was irrevocably altered.

This was about the time when *Heart of Darkness* was being written, a novel which is a poem, about a predatory, and

unscrupulous economy, an “Empire” going global and uncontrolled, with a big war breeding. Only a poem could bring all these things together, as one.

About the same time as *The Daily Mail* began the career of mass-circulation journalism.

When Prufrock was noting this or that in the newspapers, as the women came and went talking in a certain sort of way about Michelangelo.

And the horrible Loerke—*wissen-sie, gnädige frau*—was explaining the new forms of art to his audience in *Women in Love*.

Larkin writing later that after WWI things were *never the same again*. 1945, and never quite the same again, *again*. 1959, when Macmillan said we had never had it so good, and the never-never broke open the future to where we are sitting. Up up up we have gone, and down, down and up up, through total Finchley *embourgeoisement*, via the lady who saved us and then—a still newer type of human personality grown out of us all—Blair, 1997, and the “concept” or “project” (not a political party), saying things can only get better, called New Labour, now falling apart to quotations from Yeats from Polly Toynbee.

*

The poetry that went with this was outstandingly represented by that of the Hughes of *Crow*, which apparently he thought was his best thing (no), a “brilliant” poetry of predatoriness, where even thrushes on the suburban English lawn, are *terrible* (no again) and like he himself, *attent*, a much better word. In Thom Gunn’s poetry there are similar significations; and in America too, for conditions were now global, and everything was more connected with everything else . . . in coalescence through electronics. Confession and suicide, and Alvarez the psychoanalyst to the “system”. Some fine poetry, some very revealing poetry. But-and, with something else behind it. Larkin—who wrote some real poems, rising frequently out of poorish journal-

istic novel-stuff into another language altogether—was the fag-end of Donald Davie’s tradition of Hardy: English, differentiated from that of Eliot and modernism. Both “traditions” have collapsed.

Poetry still possible, in its affliction. By resistance, by ingenuity, by accident, out of eccentricity, or weakness, in sickness, or madness . . . one way or another. A need, so always wanted.

Hughes-and-Plath: an almost suicidal *devotion* (the quasi-religious word) to their own “success”.

Think how Hughes, the last-but-one Laureate, and his wife, *told* one another, over and over, that they were going to “make it”—and did, at terrible cost, writing real poems, *terrific* poems (some just “poems”) in a contemporary-conditioned *furor poeticus* which half-knew it was half-mad, and needed to be mad, perhaps the only way of doing it (as Larkin needed to be miserable); catching the eye with a style, the “extreme” that set a tone, the real thing, that many helplessly followed, got you published, won prizes, got jobs, got grant, got on a course, just got on, got a Name, a brand-name, become a Celebrity, all so that one might think oneself what one hopes to be, a real—even “great” poet. You *must* be a poet, when the media calls you, by habit, *great*. Once upon a time you didn’t write a poem with the slightest *primary* intention of making money, or being a Success. Not even Pope, or Byron, not even Tennyson.

Success has become the same thing as Good. And with a special intensity. Where goods have replaced The Good. They are the *proof*—by the invisible hand, that you must be Good. You are proved good by something *other than* the poetry itself, following a kind of sociological theorem.

13

Virtual Reality—Virtual Poetry

According to the papers the Laureate was chosen by a poetic and legal fiction which included the Monarchy (“the establishment”)

a poetic form in itself, which when it was “believed in”, used not to look as if it was a fiction. But now it does, one of the silly sorts, where inappropriate personages come into the House of Commons dressed in fustian, trying to look serious. And a very decent English bourgeois personage with servants lives in a great stone palace much too big for her. This look is begotten “in the eye” much under pressure from the predatory economy of economies, always seeking for something to laugh at—all of it (including the people laughing) constantly on the verge of collapsing into inanity. The stuffing seems to have gone out of it all.

But actually the Laureate was “chosen”, not chosen—it was not-chosen. Not-chosen by Them, you know, by Themselves, or: all of us with our heads in it, “the Nation” a committee where everyone has to have their say, and still expects to agree. Chosen by talk—by “talking up”—this or that, he or she, in the reality that is not quite Reality, one form of the nearly virtual reality consistently de-constructing itself, and re-assembling itself, of facts and information heaving with opinion like a maggot-farm, where nobody knows what is true or not. An aspect of the matrix.

Growing out as if from a kind of formula (which could no doubt be mathematically expressed by ingenious economists) and suddenly the projection of our hidden wishes is before us, like that ghost in the machine. But, like Ladbroke’s, we could all guess anyway. In the case of the “chosen” Laureate, Carol Anne Duffy, as predicted, she was already the author of “the Nation’s second most popular poem” (the other one was very old, probably *Cargoes*) called *Prayer*, which is not quite a prayer, but a “prayer”, but could be a real Prayer if it were more than an ingenious assembling of the connotations of the denotations of weather stations daily repeated in the fishing-forecasts on the radio. Clever, and revealing: essentially a piece of journalism, referring to what we all know already, appearing to gather a national sentiment into lyric form, but not: not a *bad* poem, but not good, so-so, so perhaps more of a “poem”, written in the accessible

language in which the *welt-an-sich* can recognise itself, and wishes to honour (itself). An ideally judged “entry”. But every real poet, however small his achievement, knows that the words he needs for his own human *being*, are not of that sort. Like Webster, who in Eliot’s words, knew there was no substitute for sense, to seize and clutch and penetrate, expert beyond experience. . . . The result, in short, was predictable because a “veritable brantub”—or as the stand-up comedians say nowadays (having moved from metaphors of infancy to metaphors from cosmopolitan tourism and international eating)—a veritable *smorgasbord*—of “issues” were “at issue”. *They* were what did the choosing.

*

Carol Ann Duffy’s first *Official* poem was called *POLITICS*, published “for the first time” by the *Guardian*. A **SCOOP**. With a headline designed to attach public interest to a concurrent scandal with which it had nothing to do: *Laureate leaps into expenses row with first official poem*. So careless, callous and inaccurate (in the language that the media generates) that it amounts to a lie. Everyday lying. The kind of lying that is the perpetual background to the decent attempts to live and write of most human beings, inculcated to the same economy through the produced language read every day, until the mind is worn down into it. The article written by an “Arts correspondent” who can’t read, and exhausts words.

For in the face of all, Ms Duffy’s poem stood out as a real attempt at a diction that *tries to* differentiate itself from the words that surround it. That alone was brave. The feeling of the poem is that of someone who has been dragged through an experience she wished she hadn’t had. Perhaps that of being made the Poet Laureate, by the System. Exhibited by the ghost in the machine. There is disgust, as if, like Pip in *Smithfield* in *Great Expectations*, with the dome of St Paul’s bulging at him, like an eye, watching, she wants to wash a “filthy” something

off herself. Westminster, Big Ben, or rather, what we all read-
hear-see of our “politics” in the en-compassing air of pollution.
Her poem has the tone of someone being driven to hysteria—
unfinished, inconclusive, and therefore not a great poem (though
the *Guardian* called it that) or even a very good one—but you
couldn’t call it bad, as the genuine revealing words of someone
struggling *against* the available diction of the age: strained, crude,
and clumsy. The shout of someone trapped: *How it (politics)
makes of your face a stone/ that aches to weep, of your heart a fist . . .
of your tongue/ an iron latch with no door . . .*

But a pity to keep repeating the word politics so much in the
course of it: the reader is not allowed to find out for himself what
is the real trouble: just like the newspapers where it appeared, it
wants to **SHOUT** the answer. But no wonder. Brave and a bit
desperate.

There were other signs too of struggling decency which
revealed at once the nature of the chalice full of poisoned sack. As
if she wanted to disencumber herself of a badly-fitting garment,
she insisted that her “stipend” of £5,750 goes to the Poetry
Society for a prize, and doesn’t intend to write *for* anybody but
herself. (But at the same time she wants to tackle “big” (i.e.
HEADLINE) subjects. But better than, like so many, just writing
all about **ME**.)

Her second poem was a list of items in Oxfam, entitled
OXFAM, and ending with the clincher *All Fairtrade*. Pity.

She could be the first Laureate satirist of the social structure,
(aka “society”, or “culture”) that gave her the job. The way the
Daily Groaniad put it with its “clever” characteristic alliterative
semi-literacy was:

“ . . . a powerful, passionate commentary on the corrosiveness of
politics on politicians and the ruinous effect on idealism”

Poetry as *commentary*. So we are all made stupid. What the
poem actually shows is the corrosion of art-speech, my speech,

your speech, by the ruinous effects of public “language”, every-day re-galvanised into the repetition of dead phrases. Genuine in its way. To be admired to the degree that she has registered the fact of her situation. She is looking for life. Swallowed up into journalism. So she may be able to do what she says she wants to do. *Fare well, voyager.*

The next time a certain person came upon a reference to Carol Ann Duffy was in an invitation to watch an Arts programme in which Lauren Laverne, perhaps her real name, was to discuss the place of the pub in English life. There was to be a specially written “pub poem” from the Laureate. Poetry as the bottom-of-a-column filler, pure journalism.

But then, in the *Observer*, the Poet Laureate’s response to a “festive commission”, *provocative, political, uncompromising, emotional, witty, controversial, passionate plea*, etc., full of *heartbreaking* subjects, and indeed heartbreaking, contained wholly in and by the economy of economies, branch of journalism, the bit that uses words most, poetry become journalism, without the recognition that journalism is not poetry (though once it might have been) and if it tries, there is an eerie sense that what it is, is not.

14

The Bane

All of this is The Bane and the product of it—as is what you have *here*, have just read, if you have. In its eerie light, poems become “poems”; novels “novels”, Art “Art”, real music hardly dares to breathe—painting and drawing become installations, videos repeating, lights going on and off, repeating, sculpture in stone becomes plastic, plastic statues then become people themselves, standing on an empty plinth in Trafalgar Square, a negation, the human negating its best expression by representing itself without a *medium*. To deal with it would require a horrifying resistance. Or Nietzsche. Enough to drive you to distraction, as one’s own grammar may sometimes declare . . . And the Laureateship is the (no “high point” no “low point”) inspissation of the Bane, casting its hysterically dull blight on “The Nation”. It is a wonder that any poet would want it, without being afraid, the Laureateship of the Matrix, the cash-nexus of Great Britain plc. as the sort of politicians we have got are perfectly happy to describe us.

The Author . . .

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He was once editor, with Duke Maskell, of the famous (circ. 400) *Haltwhistle Quarterly*, an annual of literary and social criticism.

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