# Poetry in Public

President, ladies and gentlemen: thank you for coming to listen to me this evening. My title, as you've heard, is Poetry in Public, but I want to begin by saying that whatever value my talk might have will depend to a great extent on our sense of poetry in private. Poetry is vitally, though not uniquely, an art which depends on solitary reflection – solitary in the way that it is meditated and created, and also solitary in the way that it is mediated and received.

That's to say, the relationship between a poem and its reader is always one-to-one, even when that poem is being recited to a room full of people. We receive it individually, interpret it through the filter of our own individual memories and expectations, and recognise its power as being inseparable from our deep feelings. Indeed, this sense of how a poem connects with our emotional selves is the crucial validating element in our response. Poems are a hot-line to our hearts, and even when we pass on our reading-pleasure to others in the familiar language of appreciation, or in the more rarified language of academic discourse, we forget this emotional power at our peril. Poetry is always a primitive and visceral thing, however it might be surrounded with various kinds of sophistication.

I remember being very impressed by this in the days after Princess Diana was killed. Like many of you, no doubt, I went to gaze at that lake of flowers outside Kensington Palace, and also like many of you, I was struck by how many thousands of the bouquets had little verses attached to them. The same thing happened some time later, when flowers given in memory of those killed in the Soho bomb were laid out in Soho Square. Almost all those flowers were also accompanied by a poem. Most, to be frank, were not really literature at all – but that isn't

the point. The point is: in their various kinds of distress, people had turned to poetry because they felt that it allowed them to express their feelings in a way that prose could not. And in case you think I'm trying to make an exclusive link between poetry and suffering, I should immediately say that the same thing happens at moments of intense pleasure and celebration as well – when we fall in love, when we get married, and so on.

The implications of what I'm saying amount to a high claim, but it's one that I have no hesitation in making. Poetry is sanctified by a sense that it helps us to enjoy and endure our existence. It is a language set a little apart from ordinary life, which allows us to communicate with ordinary life more directly: to enter and to some extent organise the chaotic world, and to show ourselves to ourselves, even if it cannot be relied upon to make us live 'better' in any quantifiable way. More than that, it stretches our humanity – not just in the sense that it tells truth to power, and deepens our knowledge of the human condition, but in the sense that it can have an actually liberalising effect on our natures.

Liberalising how? Think of Shakespeare. Shakespeare never comes to the front of the stage and wags his finger at us, telling us what to think. His characters dramatise various kinds of good and evil, folly and wisdom, foresight and expediency, in ways which constantly require us to make moral judgements about them. We are always being put on the spot, invited to make decisions and distinctions, having to choose between what is sensible and what is unworkable. This is why Keats loved him so much, and what Keats referred to when he said in one of his letters: 'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms unless they are proved upon our pulses'. He meant that writers can tell us what is right and what is wrong until they are blue in the face; we will

only believe them when we feel it. When we experience that primitive and private force I mentioned a moment ago.

Only someone who attaches no importance to the life of our feelings would dispute this. And therefore only someone intent on restricting our humanity would discourage thoughts about how to make poetry more widely available. Hence my title, and hence the range of approaches that my lecture will encompass – a range which is intended to question what is public and what is private in a poem, and to ask how these things reveal themselves, and also to explore the ways in which poetry is already brought to the public, and to suggest how these might be diversified.

The question 'what is public poetry?' is at once very easy to answer and maddeningly difficult. Public poetry is poetry about an event or a person (or people) of general interest. Famous examples would be Tennyson's Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, which I'll say more about in a moment, or his Charge of the Light Brigade, written to commemorate that celebrated action during the Crimean War:

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
    All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
    Noble six hundred!

So far so straightforward. But when we ask ourselves what makes these poems public, and whether their public element has something to do with the fact that Tennyson wrote them when he was Poet Laureate, things immediately get more complicated. After all, Tennyson wrote a great deal of other kinds of poetry when he was Laureate – love poetry, narrative poetry, dramatic poetry – and many of these other kinds are not public in anything like the same sense. In other words, it is the language of the Ode and of the Charge which defines their publicness as much as their subject. Something in the language which has to do with their being written for a largely sympathetic audience; something to do with their apprehension of national values; and something to do with their sense of what is heroic and fine.

We can see this more clearly still if we say: the Charge is in a way a war poem, but one with very different aims from war poems by Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon. Where the language of Tennyson's poem is consensual, and feels confident that it shares the thoughts and attitudes of the vast majority of its readers, the language of Owen's and Sassoon's work is not. While their poems do most certainly express a generally-held loathing of war and suffering, they do so in ways which are hostile to authority (the generals and politicians and profiteers that Owen and Sassoon thought were prolonging the war needlessly), and which seek to tear the veils of ignorance from the eyes of those who had no idea about the reality of life in the trenches. Their refusal to make large rhetorical gestures and simply ringing statements is a part of this adversarial spirit. They deliberately avoid using a language which smacks of broadly-based public discourse, because that language has been tainted by the generals and others who use it to deceive the public. Listen to the chastening modesties of Owen's The Send Off, for instance:

Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding-shed,
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were struck all white with wreath and spray
As men's are, dead.

Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp
Stood staring hard,
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.

Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp
Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed up they went.
They were not ours:
We never heard to which front these were sent.

Nor there if they yet mock what women meant
Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beatings of great bells
In wild train-loads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,

May creep back, silent, to still village wells,
Up half-known roads.

The great poets of the First World War effectively destroyed hard-core Victorian public poetry, sealing it in its own world, and making it difficult for later offshoots, like Kipling's If, to lead a secure life. (The popularity of that poem can hardly be said to have put it beyond criticism.) But in the present context it's worth remembering that their strategies were not entirely new. Their satires and polemics owed a great deal to previous satirists and polemicists – to members of the Victorian awkward-squad, to the Augustans before them, and so on back through history. And as we notice this, we immediately want to say the same thing about successful satires which have been produced in our own time. About Tony Harrison's V, for example, or certain poems by Wendy Cope, or others by Philip Larkin. Although Larkin shunned public life so thoroughly he was nicknamed 'The Hermit of Hull', a poem such as his Homage to a Government clearly works within an honourably adversarial tradition – even if it contains ideas which strike liberals as being crude and unsympathetic:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.
We want the money for ourselves at home
Instead of working. And this is all right.

Satire, in its way, creates as clear-cut a relationship with its audience as Tennyson does in a poem like the Charge of the Light Brigade. But while I need to mention it here in order to celebrate the coercive as well as the corrective energy it gives to

making poetry public, I am conscious that its various rules of engagement don't require much in the way of recommendation from me today. Instead, and before I say any more about the more obvious kinds of public poetry, I want to investigate some of the ways in which poets engage with their public, and especially with the public world of politics, in ways that are oblique or even covert.

A moment ago, I said that Owen and Sassoon helped to create a kind of public writing we still recognise today, and that this involved a vitally adversarial spirit. But this spirit can and must express itself within poems by doing more than openly attacking enemies and disbelievers. The example of John Keats will help show what I mean. We're accustomed to the idea that the young Wordsworth and the young Coleridge were radically dissenting figures – so much so, in fact, that at one time they were suspected of being spies working for the French. We know too that Shelley was a firebrand all the days of his short life. We know about William Blake, as well. But generally speaking we've been brought up to think of Keats as an odd-man-out. While his famous contemporaries struggled to turn themselves into unacknowledged legislators in the liberal cause, he flopped around on beds of lillies, panting luxuriously, dreaming about sex or death or both together.

But as I hope I made clear in my biography of Keats, it has always seemed to me that while the time-honoured views of his genius did indeed have valuable things to say about the high temperature of his language and imagination, they completely missed the point about how his work engages with the real world of politics and public affairs.

In a sense it's easy to see why. If we think of Shelley's great poem The Mask of Anarchy, with its unforgettable and unforgotten attack on Castlereagh, we see at once that we are dealing with a public poem of the most passionate and overt kind:

I met Murder on the way –
He had a mask like Castlereagh –
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two,
He tossed them human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

This poem was written in 1819. One year later, Keats wrote his ode To Autumn, a poem which has often been taken as proof of how escapist its author was – how he refused to have anything to do with the various oppressions and cruelties that Shelley savages in the Mask. But if we trace Keats's involvement with liberal politics through his early friendship with radicals like Leigh Hunt, and remember that To Autumn was written in the immediate aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre, shortly after Keats had seen the dissenting orator Henry Hunt making his triumphant entry into London from Manchester, we might be more willing to look for signs of its public sympathies and involvements. Sympathies which were triggered, as Shelley's had been, not just by outbursts of repressive violence like the massacre itself, but by the long-serving Tory government's

campaign to secure a regime of prejudice and disastrous inequality – one which included the repeated suspension of *habeus corpus*. Here's the last verse:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too –
While barred clouds bloom the soft dying day,
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue:
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives and dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourne;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

In the previous two stanzas of the poem we've been shown a landscape which is so tense and bulging with fruitfulness, it's only a fraction short of becoming rotten. And also one in which certain living things have to keep up a ferocious workrate (I'm thinking of the bees and those 'more /And still more, later flowers'). In the same way, what we have in the ten lines I've just read is a picture of abundance which is nevertheless profoundly troubled and troubling: the day is 'soft-dying', admittedly, but it is dying; the gnats are 'mournful'; the lambs and the robin are only days away from winter, and the swallows – well, the swallows are about to leave the country, just as Keats's brother George had recently emigrated to America to

escape what Keats himself referred to in one of his letters as the 'burden' of contemporary politics.

In other words, what we have in To Autumn is a poem which is self-evidently unlike the kind we find Shelley writing in The Mask of Anarchy. It is a poem which registers the pressure and shock of its contemporary moment, and is full of anxiety and foreboding – but which transmutes those feelings into organic and pastoral terms. It is, in its refractions and assimilations, profoundly conscious of public life, and we do it a great disservice if we are not alive to this ingredient and intention.

I want to give one more example of this kind of double-level writing – one which takes me back to the First World War. Edward Thomas, who incidentally wrote a very good book about Keats, was killed at the Battle of Arras in April 1917, but virtually all his poems were written during the time he spent in England between enlisting and crossing the Channel. When we read him, therefore, we should not expect to find descriptions of trenches and mud and slaughter – and nor do we find them. But does this make him any less of a war poet than Owen or Sassoon?

Not in my book it doesn't. It means that we are conscious of the war in his work in much the same way that we are conscious of contemporary politics in Keats. As an example of what I mean, here is the beginning of the poem The Sun Used to Shine, written in May 1916, in which Thomas remembers a walk that he took with his friend the American poet Robert Frost through the fields near Ledbury in Gloucestershire:

The sun used to shine while we two walked
Slowly together, paused and started
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
As either pleased, and, cheerfully parted

Each night. We never disagreed
Which gate to rest on. The to be
And the late past we gave small heed.
We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of the war remote
Only till both stood disinclined
For aught but the yellow flavorous coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined;

Or a sentry of dark betonies,
The stateliest of small flowers on earth,
At the forest verge; or crocuses
Pale purple as if they had their birth

In sunless Hades fields.

The war, though 'remote', shows up more clearly here than the Peterloo Massacre does in Keats's To Autumn. But the same imaginative principle applies in both poems. Like Keats, Thomas feels the weight of a particular public moment, and rather than addressing it directly, he responds in a way which is resolutely personal, transformative and sensuous. He rises to the challenge of the instant, but seeks out general truths and durable

verities. For these reasons, we would do well to think of Keats and Thomas, and of other poets who work in the same way, as 'active' poets rather than 'reactive' ones. The words come from a remark that Philip Larkin made in a review he wrote of a biography of Owen, and they're helpful in summarising what I've been saying for the last few minutes. 'No matter how much the war happened and ought to be written about,' Larkin says, 'We cannot help withholding our highest praise on the grounds that a poet's choice of subject should seem an action not a reaction. The Wreck of the Deutschland, we feel, would be markedly inferior if Hopkins had been a survivor from the passenger list.'

This has brought us a long way from The Charge of the Light Brigade, as I meant it to do. Instead of a direct assault on a subject, we have a layered approach; instead of heroic types, we have wary individuals; instead of a ringingly centered language, we have highly personalised voices, trying to reconcile themselves to what is happening around them. What is public in Thomas has nothing to do with plinths and trumpets. It is to do with him receiving information from the world while at the same time looking around, beneath and beyond it.

I wrote my graduate thesis on Edward Thomas 25 years ago, and ever since then he has remained an exemplary figure for me. As, of course, has Keats. But while it would be true to say that they are in my mind most days, they have lived in me even more vividly and vigorously for me since I was appointed Poet Laureate, and have deeply influenced the ways that I have thought about writing public poems. I mention this, and want to spend the next few minutes discussing Laureate-matters in more detail, because I think it will illuminate some of the things I have been discussing in more general terms. And I'll begin by

going back to Tennyson, the Laureate I most admire. The Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington opens like this:

Bury the Great Duke
With an empire's lamentation,
Let us bury the Great Duke
To the noise of the mourning of a mighty nation,
Mourning when their leaders fall,
Warriors carry the warrior's pall,
And sorrow darkens hamlet and hall.

Tennyson had a sure sense of what was established and inviolable in his world. Grieving for what he calls elsewhere in the poem the 'foremost captain of his time' he hears the sound of not just a 'nation weeping' but of a whole empire, and does his best to articulate mass-sorrow in an appropriately booming language. The authority of the poem depends on his having no doubts about the rightness of this. It leaves no cracks in its structure through which questions about Wellington's politics might appear, or scepticism about the state's motives when it sent him on his various campaigns, or anxiety about the existence and operation of empire itself. Far from it. Wellington is a straight up and down hero – the latest in a distinguished line. 'Truth-teller was our England's Alfred named', the poem says later, 'Truth-lover was our English Duke;/ Whatever record leap to light/ He never shall be shamed'. In the final lines, indeed, Wellington is raised to an even higher level. He is said to embody an ideal which is preferred by Heaven itself. God, we deduce, really must be an Englishman if he can see Wellington's worth so accurately:

He is gone who seem'd so great –
Gone; but nothing can bereave him
Of the force he made his own
Being here, and we believe him
Something far advanced in State,
And that he wears a truer crown
Than any wreath that man can weave him.
Speak no more of his renown,
Lay your earthly fancies down,
And in the vast cathedral leave him.
God accept him, Christ receive him.

It's easy for us to mock this kind of thing, and in a sense we're right to do so. Its rhetoric drowns out most of the questions we would like to raise, and its assumptions are simplistic. This is why I referred to it earlier, along with the Charge of the Light Brigade, as a hardcore public poem. Even if Tennyson knew that he lived in a society made up of different societies – and we can see that he did, just by looking at his poems in dialect – he didn't have any hesitation in speaking 'for the nation' when the occasion demanded it.

But what is a poet to do today when invited to respond to a 'national occasion'? It is a commonplace, but one worth repeating endlessly, to say that much of the delight we take in our contemporary society has to do with its diversity. This is absolutely not to say 'there is no such thing as society', but to insist on its many facets, faiths, components and interests. There was a good deal of discussion about this last May, around the time of my appointment as Laureate – quite rightly. How can

any one poet, a person who inevitably has a certain sort of background, attitude, and take on the world, be expected to speak for everybody in their country? How can they avoid missing out on large sections of the community? Can they escape becoming a stooge of Royalty or the government? How can they seem properly inclusive without becoming bland?

I hope that I have made my position clear about these things over the past few months – but here, briefly, is a sketch of the principles which have guided me. At the outset, I asked myself whether I should develop a kind of poetic esperanto, and quickly rejected the idea. I decided that it would have realised all the worst possibilities of any situation – all the blandnesses and so on. (Though I have to say that on the one previous occasion when I mentioned this I immediately got a cross letter from the Esperanto Society telling me that I'd missed a trick.) Instead, I told myself that I had been appointed because I had written what I had written – and that I should resist any pressures to turn myself into a different kind of writer. That's to say: I knew that I was a personal kind of poet, and felt that I should therefore respond to occasions in a personal way. As a private citizen, putting my work into a public space without any illusions that I would necessarily echo universally-held thoughts and opinions.

So far as I'm aware, this decision has had at least three consequences. One, obviously, is to do with tone – my determination to continue using the same sort of speaking voice that I have always used. One is to do with the subjects themselves – my decision to honour the tradition of writing poems about events in the Royal calendar as and when I can, but to make such poems part of a larger pattern of writing about

other kinds of public event. And one is to do with approach – with that willingness I admire in Keats and Thomas to look around or beyond a specific event.

I'm not trying to suggest that I want to shy away from the reality of these events, rather that I want to engage with them while at the same time remaining alert to their general, symbolic or even allegorical values. The poem I wrote for the wedding of Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys Jones, for example, is one which wants to remind its readers of the questions which preoccupy all people in love and getting married: will the things we say today last into the future, how will we cope with our changing selves, etc etc? In the same spirit, the poem I wrote for the TUC, in spite of their good-natured suggestion that I should concentrate on International Trade Relations, was about individual liberty, and not about any one motion they debated at their conference. Equally, the poem I wrote about the Paddington rail disaster focuses on that particular tragedy, but also tried to refer to other kinds of bereavements and brutal severings. So too, in the poem I wrote about the millennium I was concerned with the unceasing flow of time rather than the jerk of a minute-hand at one specific moment. And again, in the poem about bullying that I wrote for the charity Childline, I tried to draw broad conclusions from a specific instance. If I had written any of these poems in another way, I'm certain that I would have been lured into writing to order, into dittying, or into thinking too precisely on the event for the good of the poem. In every case I had a phrase from Keats's letters resonating in my head: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us'.

At this point, I want to turn aside from matters of sensibility and literary criticism, and concentrate instead on the practical

matters I mentioned in my introduction. And I'll begin by continuing with Laureate business. As far as I'm concerned, writing is only a part of what being Laureate involves. The other part of the job is 'doing'. In my mind's eye, I've divided this doing into two sections – a foreground and a background. In the foreground lie things which can be dealt with comparatively easily. Things like the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry – a very prestigious award (though not at all a financially remunerative one) that has hitherto been given with almost no publicity whatsoever for either the recipient or for poetry itself. To remedy this, I have rejuvenated the committee, of which I am *de facto* chair, agreed that the award should become an annual event (which it has never regularly been in the past), and arranged through the good offices of James Boyle, the outgoing controller of Radio 4, for the recipient to give a radio lecture in which he or she will speak about their own work, and about poetry in general, and also introduce two or three younger writers so that there is the sense of the baton being seized and passed on.

There are a couple of other foreground things I'd like to mention. One is the conversation I've been having with the Arvon Foundation about the need for writers to have quiet places, away from their homes and businesses and other distractions, where they can devote themselves entirely to their writing for a while. At the moment, Arvon does a magnificent job organising weekly encounters between beginning writers and established writers. It also creates a comparatively small amount of time for concentrated and – as it were – unsupervised writing: to have this opportunity expanded, and run in parallel with the taught courses, seems a precious and natural development. This focus on space in which to work features also in a recent Arts

Council consultation document on the Lottery Capital Programme Two. I was heartened to read of the emphasis on 'investment in artists' workplaces, and spaces where artists make and create new art, whether as individuals or collectively.' Potentially excellent news for writers.

The third foreground initiative is very different. For years, it has seemed to me peculiar (to put it mildly) that so many British writers' manuscripts end up in libraries overseas – the papers of Ted Hughes, which are now in America, are just one recent example. I don't mean to imply that American libraries neglect their collections and responsibilities – far from it – and neither do I mean to say that they make it difficult for readers around the world to get copies of their holdings, or information about them. It is simply to say that at some fundamental level I feel there is something right and comprehensible about papers remaining close to where they were produced. So how about the creation of some incentive to encourage this? How about the government, for instance, deciding that if British writers choose to sell their papers to a British library, they won't have to pay tax on them as they do at the moment? The loss to the Treasury under such a scheme would be negligible (papers are so much cheaper than paintings), but the gain to writers would be significant – and so would the addition to the heritage.

I shall be trying to drive this idea forward over the next few months – but I'll leave it there for the time being, and turn briefly to what I think of as the background to the doing side of my job. I don't mean background in the sense of less important, or even further off. I mean background in the sense of what is behind everything – what gives it an overall shape and context. And this, of course, is education.

The existing Literacy Hour is one of the bravest and most valuable initiatives taken by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE): an absolutely essential thing. But as the department is the first to realise, literacy is the beginning of a process, as well as a self-sufficient virtue, and beyond it lies the huge country of free and unhindered reading, and of culture in general. So what place does poetry occupy in all this – within the Literacy Hour itself, and in what it leads towards? There's no question that in some respects poetry in schools, and in all sorts of other academies, has been damaged during my lifetime: almost no one, for instance, has the courage to recommend that we might continue to learn it by heart. But during this same period there has also been a terrific effort to demystify and humanise all sorts of writing. I'm thinking especially of poetry on the internet, of the regular visits poets make to schools, and of residencies within schools by poets, which have been imaginatively orchestrated by the Poetry Society and in many cases funded by the Arts Council and Regional Arts Boards. I'm thinking of the various excellent anthologies now available. I'm thinking of the programmes devised by the DfEE and others to address particular issues and (though I'm loath to use the word) problems associated with the teaching of poetry – its reputation for being difficult and irrelevant.

Over the past few months, I've had meetings with the DfEE to discuss these things, and a number of interested parties – in particular, once again, the Poetry Society – have been involved in setting up new schemes to define and defend the profile of poetry within the national curriculum. Among these new schemes, I'm particularly interested in the idea of establishing a regular series of weekend conferences for teachers, at which they can share thoughts about their various aims and difficulties as teachers of

poetry, and meet invited poets as well. I'm also keen to develop and diversify the Writers in Schools initiative that was set up during the National Year of Reading. Hitherto, there's been a tendency to concentrate on organising competitions and suchlike to encourage writing – and there's nothing wrong with this. But the impact of competitions would be all the greater if it was reinforced by a permanent, properly funded and properly national Writers in Schools scheme, so that reading and/or listening, and writing, can be more closely entwined. This correspondence is something I spend a great deal of time encouraging at a later stage, at the University of East Anglia, where I run the Creative Writing MA course, and where I have daily evidence of the mutual benefit. And while I'm mentioning that course, can I also put in a plea for the DfEE and other interested parties to look at the present situation whereby Creative Writing MA students are ineligible for funding. It is an absurd situation, and blatantly unfair. The aim of all these schemes – existing and prospective – is not to devise a gigantic scheme of poetry 'force-feeding'. The aim is to make sure that as many people as possible – as many children, and the adults they become – have the chance to decide whether or not poetry is for them. It's a question of freedom and of choice – and my aim is to make sure that the freedom and the choice are as widely available as possible.

And as a rider to this: it seems vital to me that the range of poetry on offer is also as broad as possible. I well understand the pressure on teachers to attract children to poetry by presenting them with work which speaks directly to their experience. A poem about football is likely to be more appealing to a football-obsessed boy than a poem about Tithonus. But at the same time what is 'contemporary' and

'relevant' must be given an adequate definition. Last year I heard an educationalist saying on the radio that it was 'time we took the difficult decision and dropped Tennyson from the syllabus'. Better, surely much better, to say: keep Tennyson on the syllabus but put him there alongside more recent writers – and even earlier writers than Tennyson, too, come to that. Better to make the past hold hands with the present than cancel the past. Better to show correspondences than suppose everything is *sui generis*. Better to live in the flow of history than be locked in the transient present.

So far, in this nuts-and-bolts part of my talk, I've concentrated on my role as Laureate. I now want to complement what I have been saying by looking briefly at the work of the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Boards: this is, after all, the Arts Council Annual RSA Lecture. I mean, I want to look at the work of the Arts Council's Literature Department – and not just because it expands and intensifies what I have been trying to do off my own bat. I realise that it is unusual for this lecture to be devoted to one aspect of the Council's operations, but I make no apology for doing so. Why not? Because it is the fate of literature always to show up very faintly during discussions about arts funding. And the reason is a simple one. It isn't that nobody cares about literature, or that nobody is employed in its creation and promotion. On the contrary. Our literature is one of the things we mention first when we consider matters of national self-definition, and there are thousands of people involved in it – writers, of course, but also readers, library-goers, festival visitors, and so on, all making sure that it continually finds new ways of becoming a central part of civic life. We should remember too that literature underpins all the art forms. Think of theatre without playwrights; think of opera without librettists; think of

television, radio and film without scriptwriters. Let me give you an example. English National Opera recently premiered Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera, The Silver Tassie. The Silver Tassie; a poem by Robert Burns, a play by Sean O'Casey; and now a libretto by Amanda Holden. At every turn the writer.

No, it isn't that nobody cares about literature. It's simply that literature is cheap. Or to put it another way: literature has always been the poor relation in the family of the arts. Before the lottery came along, a mere point eight per cent of the Treasury grant to the Arts Council went to literature. A point eight per cent which has remained substantially unchanged since the mid-eighties.

And after the lottery? Well, after the first Capital Programme was introduced in 1994 not much changed as far as literature was concerned. The rules and regulations directed the flow of new money towards buildings and plant, which meant that opera houses, theatres, dance schools and art galleries were often able to grow in spectacular and impressive ways. Of course the lottery has given literature occasional days in the sun, most notably through the Arvon Foundation developments at Lumb Bank and in Shropshire and the Poetry Society's Poetry Place in Betterton Street. But literature is not something which depends entirely on plant and buildings – or not in the same ways as its sister forms, at any rate. Which meant, and to a great extent still means, that it was not able to take much advantage of the altered situation. In the brave new world of the lottery, literature remained the poor relation, wearing the same old shabby dress as ever. Here's the science bit: of a total of £200 million distributed in lottery awards in 1997/98, literature grants numbered just six, which amounted to a little over £200,000.

This compares with 200 grants to music, which came to a total of over £33 million.

Admittedly things have improved since then. Under the Arts for Everyone and Arts for Everyone Express pilot schemes, which were introduced in 1997 in the wake of the government's White Paper on the Future of the National Lottery, literature made a number of successful applications. For example, in 1997/98, literature grants from Arts for Everyone totalled £2 million out of £28 million, and under the Express scheme, £1 million out of £21 million. All the same, the figures make dispiriting reading – especially, as I've already implied, when we consider the inventiveness of the Literature Department and the regional literature officers, and the size and appetite of the audience they serve.

Before I say anything about the work of the department, I want to tell you something about the spirit which drives it. 'Our premise', according to the Literature Director, Gary McKeone, 'is that literature is essentially equipment for living. It uncovers the world we all inhabit. It digs beneath the top-soil to get at the roots of our existence; it helps us make sense of what it means to be alive, and what it is to be a part of civilisation. Literature is the narrative of life and it is a narrative driven by language. Through this narrative we can begin to make sense of ourselves and through language we experience a sense of our own freedom'. If anyone has any doubts about the rightness of this, they should immediately say to themselves 'Poems on the Underground'. The success of this scheme, which has been copied around the world, is a heartening and daily reminder of everything Gary means.

Education is a priority: education which starts at the earliest stage. Hence the national BookStart scheme, for instance, which is run by Book Trust, itself funded by the Council, and which ensures that parents share books with their very young children; a far-sighted initiative imaginatively sponsored by Sainsbury's. Hence also the Writers in Schools programme, which I've already mentioned. Hence also the support given by the Council to the National Year of Reading, to the Poetry Society's and the Poetry Book Society's education packs, to the Arvon Foundation's special courses for schools. Hence too the idea still in its infancy – of running a series of masterclasses for children's writers, which will raise the profile of children's writing; the first will be led by Quentin Blake, the Children's Laureate and it is my hope that this marks the start of a commitment to children's literature generally.

These start-up schemes, if I can call them that, are only the beginning of a process, like the Literacy Hour itself. And they are informed by the same principles that drive the initiatives funded by the Council and the Regional Arts Boards at later stages – within schools and colleges, and within the workplace. Librarians in Oxfordshire, for instance, operated a scheme which brought contemporary literature into a range of workplaces and the Poetry Society's Poetry Places initiative has been even more ambitious – funding poets to work in supermarkets, zoos, law firms, banks, health centres, hospices, with football teams. There is a school of thought which says that this scheme trivialised poetry, and was nothing more than a triumph of gimmickry over substance. Maybe it was in some instances – but overall it was a success, employing poets, encouraging readers, and attracting substantial media attention for poetry. In the Poetry Places scheme, and in all such cases, the aim is not necessarily to discover new poets, though that might happen, but simply to

encourage people to realise that poetry can be a valuable part of their lives. To give people choice, as I said earlier – a choice which we have the opportunity to increase significantly by involving ourselves with new technologies as much as possible. By creating, for instance, live webcasts of interviews with writers, by promoting live readings on the net, by establishing virtual readers groups and virtual writers groups.

Libraries, as the Oxfordshire experiment showed, have a key role in all this, since they are so well-placed to demonstrate that reading is not an inevitably passive act, but a creative enterprise. (They would be even better placed if every trainee librarian were to be given access to a module on literature promotion and reader development as part of their training.) A poem is not a poem, a novel is not a novel, a short story is not a short story until it has been read: the reader completes the creative circle. Organisations like Well Worth Reading, Launch Pad, the Reading Partnership and Opening the Book all help this process. And we are, of course, just across the river from the wonderful resource that is the Poetry Library in the Royal Festival Hall. All these organisations help to keep readers and reading at the heart of the agenda. Given this range of activity it is particularly encouraging to see the Department for Culture, Media and Sport take an active role in supporting reading development and literature promotion in libraries not just through the advocacy of the Minister, Alan Howarth, but through actual financial support as in the case of the DCMS/Wolfson fund.

I mentioned above some organisations but I'd also like to tell you briefly about five specific projects which demonstrate how poetry can be brought imaginatively and effectively into people's

daily lives. One is the Passion for Poetry project – a guide to contemporary poetry for library users that came out of a partnership between the Arts Council, a Regional Arts Board, Faber and Faber, and the library service. Another is Branching Out, funded to the tune of £300,000 by the Council – a reading development initiative with a strong focus on training for librarians. Another is the Poetry on Loan project run in the West Midlands, which offers library service points the opportunity to experiment with creative ways of promoting poetry. Readings, reading groups, the internet, local radio and a mobile poetry library outside supermarkets are all part of this excellent scheme. Then there is Derby's Multicultural Poetry Mosaic – one example among many of the region's promotion of poetry in public places. It was organised by Derby City's Literature Development Officer, and involved four schools in the creation of a beautiful piece of public art in Normanton Park. The head of one of the participating schools said: 'We are left in school with a genuine love of poetry – wonderful'. The last public poetry project I want to tell you about is Reading Borough Council's Oscar Wilde Memorial Walk. This initiative combines the talents of Bruce Williams and the poet Paul Muldoon to create a contemporary epitaph for the unique cultural force that was Oscar Wilde. It draws together poetry, new technology, history and art. Wilde was, as you know, imprisoned in Reading because of his homosexuality. The Memorial Walk, with its public poetry and public art now celebrates Wilde's creativity, influence, sexuality and humanity.

Partnership is crucial in all these projects – partnership between the Council and the Regional Boards, with local business and local government, and also with interested parties of other kinds. I'm thinking especially as I say this of William Seighart's brilliant

brainchild, National Poetry Day, which does an immense amount to promote poetry on the now well-established day itself, but also resonates throughout the entire calendar. Its emphasis on education, its encouragement of people all over the country to get involved with poetry by organising events, or via the internet, its healthy relationship with the BBC – all these things are intensely sympathetic to the Council's principles and work.

And as a part of this co-operative spirit, it also feels important for me to mention the commitment the Council has to literature in translation. In the past, our literature has too often prided itself on stubborn insularity – I'm thinking of Larkin's famous answer to the question 'Do you read foreign poetry?': '*Foreign* poetry! No!' And too often translators themselves are regarded, in Patrick Kavanagh's phrase, 'as thrushes singing their plagiarised version of the blackbird's song'. But translations and translators deserve better than this – which is why the Council gives its support to the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, why the Translation Fund supports some 30 books in translation each year, and why the Literature Department is closely involved with several translation prizes. It does so because it does not feel complacent about English literature. Because it understands that a part of its job is to act as a giant listening device, and hear the other songs being sung in other languages around the world.

And then there's the work that the Council does for individual writers. I'm well aware that there are people who think this sort of intervention is simply wrong – who believe that if a thing wants to get written, it will get written whatever the odds: garrets are good for you! And I'm equally well-aware that there are people who think market forces should rule, and that if certain

kinds of uncommercial writing cannot survive, that's their bad luck. I've never had any patience with these so-called arguments. The first seems just inverted sentimentality, and the second a sure-fire way of privileging work that is middle of the road. On the contrary, I believe that it is essential for the Council to defend the principle that literature, like every other art form, needs support for what is difficult, untried and challenging – no matter how much abuse it gets as a result.

For these reasons, among others, I'd like to see the existing scheme of Writers' Awards significantly expanded. At the moment, the Council is able to offer fifteen grants a year, each one of which is worth £7,000. It's an amount which certainly creates necessary space and time – but frankly only a little time, and only a little space. Since the Council has said that it wants to make 'the individual artist' one of its 'strategic priorities', why not offer twice the number of grants, and three times the amount of money (let's call that £25,000). This would not only allow writers to make a beginning, a middle, or an end to their work, but to undertake whole works-in-themselves. Once again, compared to the monies available to other art forms, it would still be modest – so having said that, why not link the Awards scheme to others involving residences abroad, partnerships between established and emerging writers in a kind of tutorial arrangement, and a high-profile programme of literary prizes? All these arrangements would properly mix daring with responsibility.

They would also be entirely compatible with the new opportunities presently opening up for literature. Opportunities like the new National Touring Programme for instance. Two years ago the Writers on Tour budget amounted to £50,000;

under the new programme some £400,000 will be available to promote live literature, and will make innovative work much more widely available – work which will allow literature to collaborate with music, with dance, and with new technologies. Or opportunities like the Publications, Recordings and Distribution scheme, which will be beginning later this year. Like the Touring Programme, this represents a new dawn for all kinds of literatures – not simply in the sense that it will help create new outlets for new writers, and new shop-windows for new readers, but because it will inevitably boost the potential audience for those publications already supported by the Council: books from Carcanet and Anvil, for instance, or magazines like the London Magazine, Wasafiri, the Devil, and Poetry Review. Though I must add: this difference in audience-size will be especially marked if we can also do something about helping the distribution of these publications – not just by trying to improve what happens on the high street, but by exploring alternative methods such as direct mail and internet-buying.

All the schemes I've mentioned here, and all the hopes for expansion that I've sketched, are predicated on the beliefs I stated at the beginning of my lecture, and on those shared by Gary McKeone and others who work for the Council. And I want to end by returning to those beliefs in their most significant and valuable form – I mean: by talking about poetry itself. Or rather, by concentrating on one particular poem: Andrew Marvell's Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland. Because it goes about its public business in ways that seem to me exemplary, I hope that it will draw together the various things I have been saying about public writing. And although not in any sense a publicly-funded poem, its rare qualities nevertheless vitalise those issues of freedom and choice which have been my

constant refrain. Although greatly admired for his pastoral lyric poetry – The Garden, the mower poems, and so on – Marvell has been given a certain amount of stick for seeming in two minds about almost everything. T S Eliot, famously, called him a 'lukewarm partisan' and various others have attacked him for sitting on the fence, even while respecting his commitment to the Commonwealth, and his friendship with John Milton. And it's certainly true that there is something elusive about Marvell's character, and something in his work that we slide off, however much we admire it. Think of all those little sealed entities he gives us in his lyric poems – the drops of dew and the thrush's eyes. Their high polish makes it difficult for us to get a purchase, in the same way that their circularity seems to exclude us.

In the Horatian Ode, we are not so much held at arm's length as impelled to share a balanced opinion. The poem was probably written in 1650, shortly after Cromwell had returned from his campaign in Ireland and before he began his campaign in Scotland – a campaign which his Lieutenant-General, Fairfax, refused to lead. Because Marvell later worked as the tutor to Fairfax's daughter at Nun Appleton House in Yorkshire, it's often supposed that the poem's point of view is not really Marvell's at all, but his future employer's. In fact there is no evidence to suggest that Marvell even knew Fairfax when he wrote the poem. Its balance is entirely his own, and entirely characteristic.

As a matter of hard fact, Marvell in 1650 regarded Cromwell as someone whose private life was beyond reproach but whose policies were Machiavellian. In the poem, he offers us Cromwell as a man without personal ambition who is bent on upholding an ideal of impartial justice.

Though justice against fate complain,
And plead the ancient rights in vain:
    But those do hold or break
    As men are strong or weak.

There is, of course, a way of reading this which would make Marvell seem credulous. But in truth the power of the poem lies in its detachment – detachment which is most clearly on show in the celebrated lines describing the execution of Charles I:

He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene:
    But with his keener eye
    The axe's edge did try:
Nor called the Gods with vulgar spite
To vindicate his helpless Right,
    But bowed his comely head
    Down as upon a bed.

This is not the place for a lengthy critical appreciation of the poem. But it is the place – given what I've been saying about Keats, Edward Thomas and others – to emphasise that as Cromwell's unofficial Laureate, Marvell deals brilliantly with the question of how to address public issues in a way which is at once general and specific, engaged and independent. Living through a time of revolutionary change, he does not respond as a propagandist for one side or another, but as someone bearing witness to interior realities.

This is the quality I have been most anxious to defend in my remarks about public writing – the ability to stand outside an event, even to transform it, while registering its pressures and importance. As you heard me say, it is the quality I especially admire in Keats – and not only Keats. Matthew Arnold, who thought more deeply about the nature and role of public art than most, also reminds us of Marvellian virtues when he tells us that during periods of turbulence and rapid change, artists should avoid the temptation to 'lend a hand at uprooting certain definite evils'. The point, to be perfectly clear, is not that writers or artists of any kind should hide their heads in the sand, but that they have the opportunity to take a longer and larger view. A view of events within time, and within the flux of the self.

To end with, I'll give one final example of what I mean – an example brought about by chance, but beautifully telling all the same. Early in 1961 the elderly Robert Frost, in a kind of official-unofficial Laureate capacity, was invited to write a poem for the inauguration of President Kennedy. He did so, but when the day came for him to recite it, there was a cold, blinding glare coming off the snow which had recently fallen. After stumbling through a few lines of his commissioned poem, Frost said hopelessly: 'I'm not having a good light here at all. I can't see in this light.' Lyndon Johnson came to his side, and tried to shield Frost's eyes with his tall silk hat. This made matters worse, whereupon Frost brushed the hat aside and threw back his head to recite from memory his much earlier poem The Gift Outright. In having nothing and yet everything to do with the inauguration itself, it perfectly illustrates the argument I have been having with you and myself this evening:

The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land still vaguely realising westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

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Design Ideology, London
Photograph of Andrew Motion by Antonio Amos

RSA

This is the text of the sixth Arts Council of England Annual Lecture, delivered by Professor Andrew Motion at RSA, London, and chaired by Claire Armitstead, Literary Editor of The Guardian. It was organised in conjunction with the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

The Lecture takes place as part of the Arts Council of England's public accountability programme.

It is available in Braille, large print and on audio tape from the Arts Council Press and Public Relations Department on 0207 973 6565.

The full text is available on the Arts Council's website at:
www.artscouncil.org.uk

ISBN 0-7287-0801-9

Published by the Arts Council of England,
14 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 3NQ
Tel: 0207 333 0100 Fax: 0207 973 6590