

Homage to the New Laureate

Leslie Pearsall

After an unprecedented 6 months of media frenzy, an official government 'leak' to *The Times* on May 19th last year named Andrew Motion as the new Poet Laureate to the British Crown. The post had fallen vacant on the death of Ted Hughes (29th October 1998), but the government, needing time to consult 'expert opinion' and introduce needed reforms, had been in no particular hurry to name a successor. The resulting vacuum was filled with months of idle speculation and media gossip, and what in different circumstances might have led to a constructive public debate, rapidly descended into bathos. By December 1998, the *Observer* had drawn up a list of possible runners in the Laureate Stakes, laying bookmakers' odds on their chances with, at 6/4, Andrew Motion already being touted as the clear favourite and Sir Paul McCartney, at 50/1, running as a rank outsider. The inclusion of the ex-Beatle's name in the *Observer's* list may be surprising but was obviously a response to the demand being widely voiced in the popular press for a 'people's poet', the phrase echoing the unofficial title 'people's princess' awarded the late Princess of Wales, and reflecting the changing climate of opinion towards the monarchy and its offices in the wake of her death.

In January, the *Guardian* gave out that a meeting attended by members of 'some of the bodies involved in the consultations over the new Poet Laureate' had come up with a short-list of Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Carol Ann Duffy and Andrew Motion. Whether the list was an

official one was not clarified. Similarly unclear was whether the poets themselves had been consulted before being short-listed. The presence of the first name on the list was puzzling, for though the most distinguished of the four poets, a Nobel prize winner, and (reportedly) Tony Blair's 'dream choice', Heaney, a Roman Catholic born in Northern Ireland, had never made secret his Irish republican sympathies. Had he since had a change of heart and was now willing to pen panegyrics lauding the British monarch? Harrison (author of the provocative 'A Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III') was also a well-known republican, and there was similar incredulity about his willingness to serve as the Queen's official eulogist. In contrast, Carol Ann Duffy's was by far the most popular name on the list, while the prospect of a first female laureate had an egalitarian appeal that went beyond the widening circle of her readership. However, Duffy had a reputation for outspokenness (she had told the *Guardian* that the laureateship was badly in need of reform, and given as her opinion that 'no self-respecting poet should have to write a poem' for the upcoming marriage of Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones), and it was also doubtful how the establishment might react to her self-acknowledged lesbianism. Which left only Andrew Motion, who was seen to have made an early bid for the laureateship with 'Mythology', his 1997 elegy for the Princess of Wales, followed in 1998 by his much maligned tribute to his predecessor, 'In Memory of Ted Hughes'.

That the list was unofficial became clear a few days later when Harrison faxed the *Guardian* a 94 line poem ominously entitled 'Laureate's Block: For Queen Elizabeth', which the newspaper dutifully published. In it Harrison expressed his approval of the beheading of Charles I but also his disappointment that the 350th anniversary of his execution had recently passed 'with not a line/ from toadies like Di-

deifying Motion'. He then chastised the *Guardian* for its unwarranted use of his name in its short-list:

I'm appalled to see newspapers use my name
as 'widely-tipped' for a job I'd never seek.
Swans come in Domestic, Mute and Tame
and no swan-upper's going to nick my beak.

Rumours then emerged that Derek Walcott (included among the *Observer's* runners at 20/ 1) was quite keen to get the job, and journalists from the *Observer* and its rival the *Sunday Times* were flown to his home on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia to talk to the Nobel prize-winner. Both papers then carried lengthy interviews in which Walcott stressed how much an honour he would consider it to receive a call from the queen, but though, as it turned out, his name was present on the government's final list of candidates (along with those of Motion, Duffy, Simon Armitage, Geoffrey Hill, and Benjamin Zephaniah), his nudges and winks were all to no avail. A few days later, Andrew Motion, the poet most strongly tipped from the outset, was confirmed as the laureate-elect, and in the heady days that followed, from poets and fellow contenders, from the public and the press came howls of incredulity at the appointment of an 'establishment poet' with all the right 'establishment credentials'.

Certainly, establishment poets have been the norm in the long history of the laureateship, and why on earth should a reigning monarch be tempted to choose a non-establishment figure? Ben Jonson (who served, 1619–1637, under James I and the ill-fated Charles I) is usually cited as Britain's first poet laureate, though the post did not become an official royal office until 1668, when Dryden began his twenty year stint.

Since then the laureateship has been held for life though, under a measure introduced by the present government, Motion's tenure will be limited to ten years. As for the duties incumbent on the holder, the laureate is appointed by the reigning British sovereign to write verses on important national and royal occasions (though since Wordsworth's time, the verses have not been obligatory), in payment for which he receives a small, virtually nominal, stipend. Dryden was paid an annual fee of £100 plus a butt (570 litres or about 1.5 litres a day!) of 'the best Canary wyne', but by the time Ted Hughes took office in 1984 this had been reduced to £70 plus a single case of claret. Under the terms of the new laureateship, Motion will receive an annual salary of £5000 (about ¥1 million) plus the usual case of wine. No wonder the sour grapes from his fellow contenders!

When Dryden refused the oath of allegiance to King William and Queen Mary after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the office passed to his sworn enemy, Thomas Shadwell (viciously attacked in 'MacFlecknoe'), who is chiefly remembered for introducing the tradition of writing New Year and birthday odes for the monarch. He was followed by a line of minor poets with connections in high places — Nahum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Laurence Eusden, Colley Cibber (awarded a dubious immortality as 'Bays' in Pope's 'Dunciad'), William Whitehead, Thomas Wharton and Henry James Pye — down to the nineteenth century, during which the laureateship was held in turn by Southey (1813–43), Wordsworth (1843–50), Tennyson (1850–92) and Alfred Austin (1896–1913). Wordsworth accepted the title only after an assurance from Sir Robert Peel that he 'would have nothing required of' him, and he accordingly chose not to write a single official line for the whole of his tenure. In contrast, the laureateship gained its greatest prestige under his successor Tennyson, whose 42 years in the post make him the longest serving incumbent in its

history to date. Austin was succeeded by Robert Bridges (1913–30) and then John Masefield (1930–67), the first of (so far) five poets to have served under the present queen. The others are Cecil Day Lewis (1968–72), Sir John Betjeman (1972–84), Ted Hughes (1984–98) and, carrying the office into a fifth century and a new millennium, the present incumbent Andrew Motion.

Though Motion can hardly be cast in the role of the reluctant laureate, the brouhaha in the press in the days following his appointment can have left him with no illusions about what he has taken on. In an interview published in the *Poetry Review* last July, he conceded that the laureateship was a completely no-win situation: 'I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't....I've thought about that and the flak-taking'¹. He also admitted that 'for a poet like me, it is quite a test to write about public things. I have to find a private way to tackle them.' Nevertheless, he had accepted the post because 'I decided that there was something so interesting and creative to do for the whole community of poets that I'd take the risk', and his stated ambitions include raising money to provide places where poets can work uninterrupted, promoting literacy and education, and editing a poetry anthology for use in schools.

Now in his fiftieth year, Motion brings to the laureateship an impressive record of literary achievement with eight volumes of poetry (*The Pleasure Steamers* (1978), *Independence* (1981), *Secret Narratives* (1983), *Dangerous Play* (1984), *Natural Causes* (1987), *Love in a Life* (1991), *The Price of Everything* (1994), *Salt Water* (1997)) and his new *Selected Poems* (1998), two novels (*A Pale Companion* (1989), *Famous for the Creatures* (1991)), two critical studies (*The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (1980) and *Philip Larkin* (1982)), three biographies (*The Lamberts: George, Constant and Kit* (1986), *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), and *Keats* (1997)), co-editorship with Blake Morrison of *The Penguin Book of*

Contemporary British Poetry (1982), numerous literary prizes, and with all this a reputation as one of the most talented poets of his generation.

On his background and the childhood experiences that continue to exert a powerful influence on his poetry, Motion has provided a short memoir, 'Skating: Memories of Childhood', published first in *Poetry Review*, and then in shorter form in *Dangerous Play*. He was born in London in 1952 but, while he was still young, moved with his family to a new house in Oxfordshire which gave access to unspoiled open country, and there, according to his memoir, 'led a typical landed life. It was extremely horsey. Hunting dominated the winter, and in the summer my mother, Kit [his younger brother] and I went for a long ride each morning.' His father, a brewer by profession, appears only as a peripheral figure in the memoir, which is dominated by his mother, a beautiful, loving, though 'mysterious' presence, to whom the young Andrew was devoted. He describes the trials of leaving home for prep school, then for Radley public school, the incessant bullying and the beginnings of his literary orientation, but the focus is on the holidays at home, the morning rides and the 'idyll' of his mother's company. Motion spent much of his last school year at home because of arthritis, and it was on one of his rare absences from home (he was staying at a friend's house on a first quest for sexual experience) that he learned that his mother had been seriously injured in a riding accident. She underwent brain surgery and it took her three years to come out of the ensuing coma, and another seven to die, without ever leaving the hospital. This incident dominates the memoir and each successive volume of his poetry, and continues to resurface in different forms in his most recently published work. (Motion commented in an *Observer* interview in 1984 that whatever he was writing about 'by the end of the poem I'm writing about my mother again.')

Motion read English at University College, Oxford, and gained a Class 1 B.A. He then stayed on to write a B.Litt. dissertation, under John Fuller's supervision, on Edward Thomas. This was the germ of his later critical work on Edward Thomas's poetry, but the influence of the Georgian poet can also be powerfully felt throughout his own poetry. Another major influence is Philip Larkin, whose presence there as university librarian, was, according to Motion, one of his main reasons for taking up a lectureship in English at the University of Hull (1976-80). His critical study of the poet, *Philip Larkin*, followed in 1982, and he was later commissioned to write the official biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993). Larkin's influence, though pervasive, is most distinctively felt in the low-keyed falling cadences of Motion's endings, but it is also directly acknowledged in muted recollections and reworkings of his poetry, most notably in his tender, restrained elegy, "This is your subject speaking":

East of Hull, past the fishdocks
 the mile after mile of raw terraces,
 the bulbous rubbery-looking prison,

 fields begin scrappily — the first few
 spotted with derelict cars and sheds,
 but settling gradually into a pattern...

Motion's first collection of poetry, *The Pleasure Steamers*, published while at Hull, gives an anguished first expression to his grief over his mother in 'Anniversaries', a sequence of poems which revisits her hospital ward on four successive anniversaries of her riding accident. The clinical hush of these poems, as the son in only half-belief scans her comatose face, is the context for extended musing on the paradoxes of her

death-in-life state:

you are your own survivor,

bringing me back the world

I knew, without the time

we lost; until I forget

whatever it can't provide

I'll always arrive like this,

having no death to mourn,

but rather the life we share,

nowhere beyond your room.

These spill over into other elegiac pieces in the collection like 'A Dying Race' or 'In the Attic', and also, less expectedly, into poems not directly concerned with his mother, like 'The Pleasure Steamers', where Motion assumes a dual persona incorporating both his mother and himself²⁾:

...a lost, inexhaustible century

Where I may sometimes visit

but never stay, although

I discover at every return

I could have outlived myself there.

The plangency here is familiar, for both 'The Pleasure Steamers', with its recollection of the part played by such vessels in the 1940 evacuation of

the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk, and 'Inside and Outside', with its ghostly evocation of 'the lost lines' of troops who fought and died at 'Vimy, Arras, Bapaume', stand in a specific elegiac tradition rooted in the sense of loss and dispossession which is our heritage from two world wars and the dismantling of empire. Though almost invariably, in Motion's case, the sense of loss at a national level is informed and deepened by what has been irretrievably lost in his own life with the death of his mother.

Motion gave up his lectureship in 1980 and returned to Oxford, where he took over the editorship of the quarterly journal of the Poetry Society, *Poetry Review*, and gave lectures in literature at St. Anne's College. In 1982 he brought out the controversial *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (edited jointly with Blake Morrison), and argued in its introduction that one aspect of 'the new spirit' of British poetry was

evident in a renewed interest in narrative — that is, in describing the details and complexities of (often dramatic) incidents, as well as in registering the difficulties and strategies involved in retailing them. It manifests, in other words, a preoccupation with relativism....[and is] antipathetic to the production of a candidly personal poetry.

Though this is in part a reaction against Al Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry* (1962), with its trendy focus on 'confessional' poetry, it also reflects Motion's own interest in narrative as a means of drawing on strong personal feelings while simultaneously releasing oneself from them, which had been the strategy of the long narrative poem, 'Independence', he had brought out in 1981. A retrospective narrative related by a young

British colonialist in a series of discrete, sharply defined scenes, centring on his courtship, marriage, and his wife's death after a miscarriage, and set against a panorama of turbulence and change as India achieves independence, the poem is clearly a self-therapeutic reworking of the painful circumstances of his mother's death. 'Independence' shows greater maturity and control than the poems in his earlier volume, not only in technique — the long syntactic units flexibly enjambed across fluent verse paragraphs, the fast cinematic cutting, and flawless deployment of ellipses to pare down a scene to its narrative core — but also in the delicacy and tact with which he brings to life the lovers' furtive meetings, their fleeting happiness, and the numbing shock and disbelief on the husband's return from a business trip to find her dead. The narrative intersects at key moments with memories of a different return, a different trauma:

A scar of yellow clods.
 The scratchmark of something
 vanished. A dry scuttle.
You will wake up,
 I was thinking, *Wake up,*

crouched with my head tilted
 sideways as if I might
 just make out your voice,

and Motion's recognition of the need to mitigate the pain of such memories by objectifying them through narrative can be seen here as mutually beneficial to both poet and poem.

Less successful is the achievement of a meaningful dialogue between the action centre-stage and the events unfolding on the vast Indian

backdrop beyond, between the loss of a wife and child and the painful and bloody birth of a new nation. Motion frequently demonstrates an ability to conjure up settings in a sharp particularity, as in this description of the Ganges in flood:

...and the trees
 had grown astonishing packages —
 carpets rolled and strung above water,
 their dark sacks a roost
 for files of sodden ridiculous birds.

But despite this, India never succeeds in becoming much more than a colourful setting for his expatriate drama. The historical turmoil tearing the sub-continent apart (figured obliquely in the menace of hastily painted slogans or a glimpse of the packed faces of refugees in a passing train) lends poignancy to the husband's sense of dispossession but gains no reciprocal clarification from the domestic tragedy that overtakes the poem's protagonists. The poet has nothing meaningful to say about the historical processes he describes, and his India serves merely as a focus for a ready-made brand of nostalgia for a lost empire.

In 1983, Motion was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and moved to London to take up the posts of poetry editor and editorial director for the publishing house, Chatto and Windus. In the same year he brought out a collection of shorter narrative poems under the title *Secret Narratives*, of which the first, 'Open Secrets', offers a convenient paradigm both in its stark elliptical economy and its intimations of some dark or guilty secret lurking beneath the narrative surface. The apparent secret in this case is the boy narrator's furtive meetings with a young woman, perhaps the family servant, who vents her

antagonism towards his father by exposing his role in the botched killing of a stag. This other secret lies almost within arm's reach behind a pinewood wall in the barn where they are about to make love and, in the gaps in their conversation, the stag's corpse can be heard 'dribbling and pinging blood into a metal bucket'. At this point, another person, ostensibly the poet, takes over the narrative and the 'secret' takes another turn:

Just now, prolonging my journey home to you, I killed
 an hour where the road lay over a moor, and made this up.
 Florrie I sat on a grass-grown crumbling stack of peat
 with the boy by her side, and as soon as she whispered
Come on. We've done it before, I made him imagine
 his father garotting the stag, slitting the stomach
 and sliding his hands inside for warmth.

The boy's mental reenactment of the killing of the stag (possibly as an erotogenic stimulus) results in a grotesque conjunction of sexual excitement with death that is made the more complex by the exchange of roles with his father. However, poems linking sexual adventure and death recur with almost compulsive force throughout the *oeuvre* (see, for instance, 'Inside and Out', 'Independence', 'The Letter', 'Bathing at Glymenopoulo', 'Firing Practice', and a host more), and it is hard to avoid connecting the persistence of this theme with the traumatic impact, spelt out in 'Skating', of the young poet's perceived failure to prevent his mother's riding accident because he was away from home on an initiatory quest for sexual experience. Apropos of which, 'Open Secrets' does not stop there, but in its closing lines issues the following disclaimer:

He was never
 myself, this boy, but I know if I tell you his story
 you'll think we are one and the same: both of us hiding
 in fictions which say what we cannot admit to ourselves.

This may be in line with the interest in narrative strategies and preoccupation with relativism that he identified as tendencies of the new narrative poets, but with such an adamant denial that the poem is anything more than a fiction, Motion couldn't do more to alert us to its sub-textual truth.

Other important poems in the collection are 'Writing' (about the exchange of fictions between an inmate of an insane asylum, who is anxious for a letter from the wife, we presume, he has killed, and the woman who has bought his house and seems all too ready to step into his wife's shoes), 'The Letter', 'Ann Frank Huis', 'Wooding' and 'The House Through' (about a revenant's ghostly visit to her former home and husband). However, the longest piece in the volume and the most ambitious is 'Bathing at Glymenopoulo', the reconstruction of a tragic incident from the disastrous 1915 allied campaign in the Dardanelles. If, as we have seen, Motion's frequently recurring scenes from Britain's military and imperial past serve often as a transcript for a fruitless quest to repossess his mother and the security she represented, they also exhibit a nostalgia for a vanished age of former greatness, whose premises usually go unquestioned. At the heart of 'Bathing at Glymenopoulo' there is again a guilty secret, but now one whose disclosure involves exposing the sunlit dream of the past as a meretricious illusion and debunking the cherished myth of British military valour and might.

The sensitive yet inexperienced young officer who narrates the tale is alert to the dangers about him from the start:

Lotophagi. I can believe it:
first moment ashore the heat
stunned us — a lavish blast
and the stink of horses.

Then it was *Mister. Mister.*

Captain McKenzie — bathing girls
round from the beach, white
towels and parasols weaving
through gun-carriages, crates
and saddlery lined on the quay
to pelt us with flowers. *Want
Captain McKenzie? I give you
good times.* But we rode away,
eyes-front and smiling, pursued
until the Majestic gates.

But soon he has fallen victim to the luxurious inertia of this Lotos land ('time was our own — / no orders, no news from France, / but delicious boredom: polo/ some evenings, and long afternoons/ bathing at Glymenopoulo'). The lazy days stretch into months, and his heart becomes ensnared by one of the slender sirens from the beach. Out on their morning ride, the narrator's light brigade is then ambushed by a small band of Senussi and enticed into a charge that seems straight out of Tennyson. Though without the glory. In a mental freeze-frame the young officer catches himself drawing his sword 'with a stupid high-pitched yelp', and as the cavalry breasts a rise, it finds itself suddenly riding on air:

The end of the world. A sheer

wall falling hundreds of feet
 to a haze of yellow scrub.
 I wrenched myself round, sword
 dropped, head low, to a dead
 teetering halt as our line
 staggered, and buckled and broke
 in a clattering slide. I can
 hear it again — the panicking
 whinneys, shouts, and the rush
 of scree where they shambled off
 into space.

The narrator survives but only to learn to live with his guilt (he writes from a tent in the School of Instruction grounds) and the sleeplessness caused by the sirens of the ships from Gallipoli unloading their trail of stretchers to his former quarters in the Majestic Hotel, where his former lover waits, repeating her ‘tender sluttish call, *Want/ Captain McKenzie? I give you good times.*’

A selection from Motion’s first three volumes was published in 1984 under the title *Dangerous Play: Poems 1974–1984*, along with some half dozen new poems. These are largely of a piece with his work in *Secret Narratives*, but new departures can be seen in the addition of a new member to the family gallery (his second wife, Jan Dalley) and, especially in ‘Explaining France’ and the title poem, the first steps towards the more expansive style that has characterised much of his recent work.

This was followed in 1987 by *Natural Causes*, which reveals the poet gradually moving away from the graceful fictions he was so good at and taking the risk of venturing into completely new modes and subject areas. Motion has sometimes been criticised for the deadpan seriousness of his

narratives and the dearth of wit and humour in his work. The new volume provides a riposte with 'The Dancing Hippo', the engaging piece that serves as prologue:

...night after night, we'd hear
 the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy (with whip
 obbligato) twittering out of his tent, and *Move!*
Move! while he hopped around on the straw
 as if it were burning his feet. A hippo able to judge
 would have certainly thought he was mad: so it may,
 I suppose, have been pity that led her to copy him.

However, the mingled pathos and absurdity of her dance single her out for only the briefest of reigns as circus queen, and dying in a fire that sweeps through her pen, the hippo becomes the focus of a sombre reflection on the pointlessness of everything we do. And it is this gloomy fatalism, rather than anything else in the work, which qualifies it to serve as prologue to the main body of poems, a series of recollections of childhood, family and friendships (plus a small group of poems celebrating the birth of a son) all written in a new semi-confessional mode, and which find a disturbing unity in a recurring pattern of terror imposing itself on happiness.

In the ominously titled 'Natural Causes', a father's 'stupor of joy' at the birth of a son is placed in startling juxtaposition with an amnesiac's experience of total disorientation and despair. Their linkage is purely coincidental (he happens to read about the amnesiac in a newspaper on his return home from the hospital) but quickly assumes the proportions of a full-scale obsession that leaves him

trying to compensate one with the other,
yet never quite able to bring them together.

One of the most persuasive things in the poem is its rendering of the way obsessions slink up into the mind at moments of unguarded happiness (the amnesiac is clearly a stand-in for the poet's own comatose mother, and the obsession the taboo he has imposed upon happiness as the survivor, and self-indicted accessory, of loss), but it is conversely at its weakest when it attempts to formulate the irrational into visual form:

...the stranger on one side
stuck in a room with a single dazzling bulb,
who sees death laying its hand on his head
over and over again; in the centre, our boy,
a bundle shoved out to sea in one of those
hopeless wickerwork coracles under a furious sky;
and lastly ourselves — intelligent, petrified,
no way out of a cupboard of shiny steel with walls
which steadily squeeze together until we die.

This is reminiscent of the kind of naive art produced by patients undergoing psychotherapy, and though Motion, doubling as analyst and analysand, is obviously trying to express the inexpressible, the reader may be excused for finding this artistically crude and, frankly, self-indulgent.

Similar problems beset 'Firing Practice', where the poet recalls childhood visits to a tank firing range with his father (a commander in the Territorial Army) and his first baffled attempts to make connections:

Nothing connected with anything,
even then — not thoughts

with things, or you with him
(so what did it mean
to be lucky?)
no matter how hard you tried.

The poem then moves forward twenty years to a weekly car journey across the range to stay with the woman he loves. Her house is within earshot of the range, and the muffled thumps of the tanks' firing not only inhibits their morning lovemaking but prompts too the sudden, if somewhat banal, realization

that what you are hearing as practice
is what will come true —

that soon you will die
and not only you but this person
you love, her children, everyone else.

The reader may be left with the impression that words have again proved insufficient to express the menacing vision that the poet is trying to share, and the two poems examined are paradigmatic in marking a transitional stage in the documenting of the psychology of loss, where 'secret narrative' has given way to an open exploration of emotions that the poet's persona can hardly comprehend but which leave him unnerved, waiting for pain, and preoccupied with the imminence and omnipresence of suffering and death. Unfortunately, the dark intensity of its

preoccupations makes *Natural Causes* one of Motion's least satisfying volumes, and it is interesting to note that, apart from 'The Dancing Hippo', it is unrepresented in the recent *Selected Poems*.

Motion gave up his position at Chatto and Windus in 1988 and for the next few years worked freelance (including a spell with the Arts Council). He was now fully occupied with his biography of Philip Larkin, but found time for two further collections of poetry, *Love in a Life* (1991) and *The Price of Everything* (1994). *Love in a Life* (its title taken from one of Browning's love poems) is dominated by two groups of poems about Motion's married life. Part One is concerned with his second marriage (to Jan Dalley, literary editor of the *Financial Times* and author of the recent highly acclaimed biography of Diana Mosley) with its blessing of three children, while Part Three recalls his disastrous first marriage. Not surprisingly, his perspectives on the idyll of his present marriage are drawn from a series of oneiric or death-like states which place him at a terrifying remove from happiness:

Why do I feel that I've died
and am lingering here to haunt you?
(‘One Who Disappeared’)

I am dead to the world.
It is all as I thought.
And who might you be?
(‘Cutting’)

I am your home, if you ever arrive;
I am dead; I am also alive.
(‘Cleaned Out’)

The afternoon I was killed
 I strolled up the beach from the sea
 where the big wave had hit me...
 ('Close')

Such poems may be seen as premature elegies written, like similar poems in *Natural Causes*, out of the irresolvable guilt of the survivor, not only of his mother's untimely death, but that too of a friend, Ruth Haddon, drowned in the 'Marchioness' pleasure boat disaster, of a violent break-in at his father's house, of his child's potentially fatal fever and, in 'A Blow to the Head', the most disturbing poem in the section, of an unprovoked assault on his wife in the Paris metro. Schooled by the loss that drained his early life of meaning, it is as if he were now the witness to life's terrifying instability and, like the man in his poem, 'The Vision of that Ancient Man', who escapes a sinking pleasure boat, has made a frightening transition from bereavement to guilt:

I lost everyone, everyone —
 Which makes me a murderer.
 I must be a murderer, surely?
 I know I wanted to die,

Motion relies heavily on the simple juxtaposition of dreams, childhood memories, and domestic scenes in an attempt to coax the poems in this section into a deeper significance. Unfortunately, the effect (as seen in 'Judgement' and 'Cutting') is more often that of baffling the reader as he/she attempts to make sense of images of a seemingly private import or to find coherence in the fragmented structure. More successful are the six poems in Part Three with their tighter organization

about specific places and more concretely rendered scenes from a doomed marriage. Among these, the most impressive are 'The Great Globe', where the digging of a border stands in convincingly for the excavation of the psyche ('I thought of Joanna; the brittle white china body/ I smashed, she smashed and hid, but which still cuts me/ out of the deep solid earth...'), and the whimsically Larkinesque 'Hull', in which the shadowy likeness of his mentor is seen from the window after a fruitless attempt by the couple to save their faltering marriage. Larkin's walk-on part here (and again in 'Belfast') is a reminder that however unfashionable his poetry may now seem to practitioners of the art, his influence on the young Motion was by and large a positive one, contributing to the tight formalism of his structure and his rather more fitful ability to address a wide audience in their own language and about their own concerns. Larkin's presence in this final painful cluster of poems is thus a reassuring one: it is a guarantee that the particular strengths of the earlier work have not been abandoned.

The Price of Everything, Motion's most ambitious volume to date, comprises two long poem sequences, 'Lines of Desire' and 'Joe Soap', interspersed with chunks of prose narrative. The former has its starting point in another episode of random violence, a mugging in broad daylight which, though it occasioned only slight injury to the poet, confirmed his sense of the precariousness of his hold on life:

There was a tooth-flash, black leather, the smile of a knife and I saw
the terrified puffed-out bird of my life
fly from my hand — so for a long second I knew I was dead even
though I was still fighting him off...

The trauma of this violent incident gives an unsettling edge to the four

meditations (on peace, money, parenthood and desire) that follow, in which successive images of security are violated by terrifying eruptions from the world beyond and a 'price' exacted for 'everything' that the poet values. The furtive lyricism of his earlier work reemerges here in a new context of menace, made the more sinister by the repeated use of nursery rhyme jingles:

What language to speak
 In a world apart?
 How to describe peace
 In a heart?

My tongue woke up
 But could not speak.
 I opened my mouth:
clink clinkety clink.

The poet roughly maps out the parameters of a life and *oeuvre* in his loose linking of domestic scenes from his present marriage with dreams, memories, incidents from his own childhood, his parents' lives, and the war journals of his poetic 'first love', Edward Thomas. The sequence contains some fine individual pieces — the lyric that opens 'My mother and father / were Adam and Eve' and the moving vignette of his father bending over his son's bed (both in 'Money Singing'), his portrait of his parents as young lovers 'There are my mother and father' and the tender love poem 'Home—/Shaking office smoke from your hair' (both in 'Lines of Desire') — but taken as a whole, it can be seen as failing at a fundamental level to address the experiences out of which it is wrought. Thus, beyond expressing a certain generalized anxiety, 'A Dream of

Peace' has no new insight to offer about war's impact on our lives, while 'Money Singing', with its gracious nod to Philip Larkin, is less a vision of the way money dominates our lives than a private airing of resentment at his father's defection to the world of work:

His one eye is a cigarette
reddening furiously as he steps
right up to me, bends close,
and leaks smoke into my hair;
there is a quick stir of bristles,
a saliva-smack, a half-grunt,
and I lie completely still
pressing one hand to my cheek,

about to wipe his kiss off
or rub it in, I cannot decide,
and think that beyond his smoke
I catch the unhappy smell of work...

Indeed, the most powerful moments in the sequence are all rooted in private obsessions with the past, and it finds a predictable resolution ('the price of everything' finally agreed) in a vision of the poet's mother

at liberty in the clear water of your own life,
with oxygen slithering from your mouth and nose
and water-ropes twisting from your fingers and toes,
rising steadily towards me through the reflection of my face.

In February 1995 Motion was appointed Professor of Creative

Writing (succeeding Malcolm Bradbury) at the University of East Anglia. This part-time position, within commuting distance from London, gave him the time and financial security to complete his biography of Keats (1997) and also to bring out his most recent collection of poetry, *Salt Water* (1997). From 'The Pleasure Steamers' through to 'The Bone Elephant', rivers and seas and the vessels that ply them have been prominent in his poetry, but in this latest volume water in all its manifold states, liquid or solid, fresh or salt, moving or still, provides a series of meditations on the transience and terror of life. Although the collection is one of his most diverse in content, it is decidedly uneven in quality and makes predictable returns to earlier images and preoccupations ('The Spoilt Child', 'Does that Hurt?', 'A Severe Absence of Fish' and 'Dead March' are all refracted permutations on the poet's relationship with his dead mother). The long opening ('Fresh Water') and closing ('Salt Water') pieces grow out of daring juxtapositions of seemingly disparate materials (a technique already employed with varying degrees of success in such poems as 'Independence', 'Beginning the Move' and 'Lines of Desire'), but whereas, in 'Salt Water', the coupling of narratives related to the Suffolk village of Orford — one, a very dubious medieval record about the capture of a merman, the other, the village's proximity to a site recently used for atomic weapon research — is simply too awkward to lift the poem into a larger event, the four Thames vistas of 'Fresh Water', each drawn from a different phase of the poet's own life, achieve a striking associative coherence as they shape into an elegiac tribute to Ruth Haddon, the friend drowned in the Thames pleasure boat disaster. Indeed, Motion is almost invariably at his most assured when writing about times or people he has lost and, in contrast with much else that feels strained, self-indulgent or simply lacking in resonance in the collection, the best poems are those in which an overpowering sense of grief, held in

an icy formal control, issues in unpretentious and precise statement:

Then this: your slack-stringed hand which cannot lift
 is grey with cancer, bones all eaten through,
 and crumples on your pillow with the sleeve
 of that stiff nightdress they have given you...

(‘In Memory of Zoe Yalland’)

I feel I’m standing on a frozen pond
 entranced by someone else below the ice,
 a someone who has found out how to breathe
 the water and endure the cold and dark.

I know I ought to turn my back. I can’t.

I also know that if I just stay put
 and watch the wax-white fingers flop about
 I’ll start to think they must be beckoning...

(‘Dead March’)

This last quotation again images the way the early trauma of his mother’s death seems to have sunk a deep shaft into Motion’s psyche and left him incapable of fully inhabiting his own life. Not unexpectedly, poems addressing this personal tragedy are prominent in his recent *Selected Poems* (1998), and it is also the subject of several of the uncollected poems and prose pieces which appeared in the months just before and since his election to the laureateship.

It is still too early to assess what influence Motion’s new public role may exert on his work as a whole, but at least his first ‘official’ verses (tributes to Nelson Mandela and Anne Frank) showed a return to a stylistic economy that has not been much in evidence in recent work³.

However, the acid test from the start was what he would write on that most daunting of literary subjects, a royal wedding, and to confess the truth, his 'Epithalamium' celebrating the nuptials of Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones, drew rather tepid praise ('cunningly conventional'; 'quite a decent poem') from those critics who dared to comment, while wiser souls remained silent. Nevertheless, the poem seems to have produced a sympathetic, and in some quarters, repentant mood in the British poetry world. Here, finally, is the poem for readers to judge for themselves:

Epithalamium

St. George's Chapel, Windsor

One day, the tissue-light through stained glass falls
on vacant stone, on gaping pews, on air
made up of nothing more than atom storms
which whiten silently, then disappear.

The next, all this is charged with brimming life.
A people-river floods those empty pews,
and music-torrents break – but then stop dead
to let two human voices make their vows:
to work — so what is true today remains the truth;
to hope — for privacy and what its secrets show;
to trust — that all the world can offer it will give;
to love — and what it has to understand to grow.

Notes:

- 1) 'Andrew Motion interviewed by Jane Hardy', *Poetry Review*, vol. 89, no. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 3–4.
- 2) This point is explored more fully by Michael Hulse in 'I could have outlived myself there' : the poetry of Andrew Motion', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1986), p. 73.
- 3) However, 'Cost of Life', his recent poem on the Paddington train disaster, runs to 75 lines and was described by one critic as 'baggy and garrulous'.