

The Manchester Sermon 2011:
Art and Life

Andrew Motion

The Manchester Sermon was co-commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Cathedral, and was delivered by Andrew Motion at Manchester Cathedral on 11th October 2011 as part of Manchester Literature Festival.

Manchester Literature Festival
Beehive Mill, Jersey Street
Manchester M4 6JG
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Copyright © Andrew Motion

Manchester Literature Festival would like to thank Arts Council England, Manchester City Council, HSBC Premier and the Granada Foundation for their generous support.



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL**

**The Granada
Foundation**

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to talk to you today. I'm delighted to be in this beautiful place, and honoured to stand in this august position – but I want to assure you at the outset that I'm not going to give you an orthodox sort of sermon. Not a sermonising sermon. More like an enquiring talk, in fact. More like what the artist Paul Klee meant when he spoke about his drawings, and said that when he made them he felt he was taking a line for a walk. In fact that very well describes what I'm going to do. I'm going to take a thought for a walk, in such a manner as I hope will allow me to avoid hectoring, or wagging my finger, but will nevertheless embody some sort of moral foundation and intellectual purpose. I want you to think of it as a determined doodle.

But even a doodle has to start somewhere. Mine starts with a famous passage in the Book of Ruth – with verses I have known all my thinking life, and have loved all that time. Indeed, I think they are some of the most beautiful words ever written – ever translated, I should say – and in a profound sense this means they can speak for themselves. For all that, I'll remind you of how they come to be said.

It is a time of famine in the land of Israel, and Naomi, her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion have been forced to flee to Moab. After they've settled there, the two boys get married, one to a woman called Orpah, and one to Ruth. Then tragedies strike. All the men die – Naomi's husband, and her two sons. At the same time, news comes through that the famine has ended in Israel, and Naomi decides she wants to go home. She also decides that rather than simply ordering her two daughters-in-law to accompany her, as the custom of the time would have allowed, she'll give them a choice. Do they want to stay or leave. Orpah says stay, which is fair enough: she doesn't want to live in exile. Ruth, on the other hand, says this:

'Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more so, if aught but death part thee and me.'

There are so many possible ways into these words, it's difficult to know where to start. So I might as well begin by stating the obvious. Out of context, but even in context, they sound more like the words of a lover speaking to their lover, than those

of a daughter-in-law speaking to her mother-in-law. The importance of this is not to be gainsaid. The wish, the need, the compulsion to show affection is an important element in the Book of Ruth – affection between men and women, between women and women, between men and men – and the book would itself make a very interesting subject for a sermon on sexual politics, sexual proclivities and so on. But today I want to look at one particular aspect of what Ruth says, and let it begin the progress of my doodle. That's to say, I want to remember the phrase 'thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God'.

What we hear in these eleven words is someone offering to subsume their own culture and society and religion in the culture and society and religion of another. It's an extraordinary act of generosity and identification, but it can't help also describing the classic dilemma of the emigrant. In a strange land, how do you reconcile what is fundamentally *your own* with what you have chosen or been required to adopt? To what extent does *fitting in* involve *letting go*? Phrased as Ruth phrases it here, the remark sounds like a request for total self-immersion, and I imagine a lot of us might think, as I do myself, that while this has an obvious large-heartedness, it also has elements of naïve idealism, and even of a reprobable acquiescence. It is at once magnificent and unguarded.

Now I want to dramatise this sense of tension, of paradox, by thinking about the phrase in a wholly different context. Specifically, I want to think not about *migration and religion*, but about *art* (and so my doodle begins). In several of his marvellous letters, John Keats chases down an idea about the poetical character that feels essentially similar to what Ruth seems to be saying. Not just similar to its surface truth, but to the paradoxes it implies. And this idea is: poets are in a profound sense chameleons. (It's really not too surprising to think of Keats and Ruth in the same paragraph – after all, he sees her 'in tears amidst the alien corn' in his great *Ode To Autumn*.) We understand this notion of the 'chameleon poet' when we listen to Keats praising Shakespeare as the poet supremely well able to 'fill and inform some other body'. We hear it when we hear him saying 'if a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.'

And so on. The effort all the time is to escape ego, to withhold express opinion, with a view to creating a dramatic/physical/actual embodiment of whatever the poem's subject happens to be, and thereby to produce a moral universe in which we the

audience are implicated, and have as observers to make their own assessments and judgements. This is why Keats also says: ‘We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us’ – because the palpable design bursts the bubble of the self-sufficient imaginary universe. It is also why Keats says: ‘Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses’ – because to prove them in our brain cells would be to rely too much on our heads (where we understand things ‘merely’ rationally) rather than in our guts (where we understand things deeply as experience).

And the paradox that I said was also something Keats shared with Ruth? The paradox is that self-sacrifice (or better still ego-sacrifice) is as much a sort of self-survival as it is a form of self-denial. By continually ‘filling and informing some other body’ Keats does not do away with himself entirely. He creates a world in which we are left to draw our own conclusions, but are never likely to do so in a way that is frankly far removed from those Keats intended.

But having said that (and to twirl my doodling stick again) what *does* a writer *intend* when they write something? If you’re a journalist, or a historian, or a maker of text-books, your intentions are clear. You intend to spell an exact proposition (the phrase is Seamus Heaney’s). If you’re writing poems (although I suppose satirists might not feel the same as a lyric poet such as myself), you intend no such thing. In fact the whole business of writing lyric poetry is – in my experience – a pretty confused affair from the beginning. Something starts to ache in the far-back, unlit part of the mind. (Robert Frost calls it ‘a lump in the throat, a love sickness a homesickness’, which nicely catches the degree of unpleasantness that it occasions, as well as its seeping unignorability.) You drag this ache forward, to a better-lit part of your mind, where words and ideas and memories start attaching themselves in order to explain what it is that you’re feeling. In my case, usually something about love, or death, or another kind of loss, or landscape, or all these things together.

Only when these coagulations have started to occur do you begin to make decisions about what language to use, what forms to use, how to open the subject. Then you write down your combination of decisions (or I write it down, anyway) in a state of mind that is part trance, part red alert. If you have too much red alert, you spell things out too much and ruin the poem (because you’ve denied its right to become a chameleon). If you have too much trance, you end up writing something that might

mean a lot to you, but is probably baffling to most other people. Then you revise and revise, trying always to maintain this balance between the knowing and the not-knowing side of your mind. And in the end you have your poem.

You look at it. You think: I know you. But you also think: Who are you? And that's just how it should be. Clear and a mystery at the same time. A mystery because the language, even very simple language, in a well-made poem always seems to be running off over the horizon with its dozens of different meanings. And also a mystery because the figurative life of the language, and the relationships between the different parts of the poem (however short), will always seem to be shifting to show the reader its kaleidoscope of possibilities.

I suppose this is why some people say they don't like poetry – because they want to live in a world where language does what it's told to do, and stays where it's put, weighing down a set of precise intentions. I have to admit I feel sorry for anyone in that state of deprivation. Not because I want every variety of discourse that I read to be equally playful (I don't: I want my newspapers, for instance, to make sense and tell me a reliable truth about what's happening in the world). No, I feel sorry for these people because I devoutly believe that the human animal needs playfulness – the serious playfulness of serious poetry, and grave music, and heart-wrenching pictures, as well as the heels-kicked-up playfulness of comedies and high jinks.

Saying this should be a statement of the bloomin' obvious. Perhaps it is. But if so, why do so many of our school children leave school thinking poetry is not for them? They don't think other forms of play are not for them: on the contrary. The explanation has something to do with what the curriculum asks of children in the classroom of course, and in particular with the way that assessments of various kinds require them to tick boxes rather than enjoy the poetry of the poems they study.

I could easily spend the rest of my doodling time by talking about such things. But as it turns out, and once again, I want to say just one thing – which this time is about the primitiveness of poetry. We might happen to grow up speaking a complicated language about poetry. We might study it at A level, at university, and even go on to teach it somewhere or other – as I have for most of my adult life. But if we learn this complicated language and forget the primitive appeal of poetry, we've forgotten the thing that brought us to read it in the first place.

Human beings, by their nature, take a fundamental pleasure in like sounds, in the rhythms of language, in the music of words – which carry the meanings as surely as the definitions we find in the dictionary. It's basic. It goes back to the cave, I've no doubt. It certainly goes back to the dawn of our own lives. What are the first sounds that most of us hear when we're born? 'Goo-goo.' A two-word rhyming poem. Our parents make this sound because they know (they know because at some level they remember) it's a sure way to communicate. It goes straight to our hearts. It is emotional noise.

And that's what all poetry makes manifest. Emotional noise. I said a moment ago that the sounds carry the meanings as surely as the dictionary definitions. What I mean is: the two ways of thinking about meaning in a poem – the acoustic way and the dictionary way – can't sensibly be separated. They are equal and inextricable. It was thinking about this that led me to set up the Poetry Archive with my friend Richard Carrington – because we wanted to re-connect poetry with its roots in sound. (I have to say we've been delighted and frankly rather amazed by the effect: we now have 200,000 people using the site every month, listening to over a million pages of poetry. Clearly, the primitive appeal I've been mentioning isn't just a figure of speech.)

The Archive is another thing I could doodle on about for hours. But once again I want to set off at an angle, and take a cue from what I've just been saying about what Frost called 'the sound of sense'. I want to talk for a moment about nonsense. If in ordinary conversation I were to say something you thought didn't make sense, or was silly, or manifestly wrong, you'd say it was nonsense and you'd mean it was rubbish. But when we marry the word nonsense to the word poetry we don't mean that. We don't mean Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll wrote rubbish. We mean they pursued the truth of their experience, and gave us our pleasure, by using or creating language that lies outside our customary boundaries. They establish their directions by peculiar and particular indirections.

Think about *Jabberwocky*. The poem is almost entirely filled with words that are not in the dictionary – words that, when we hear them for the first time, we have never heard before because they do not form a part of our familiar discourse. Yet as they buzz and sing and frolic and – yes – jabber around in our ears, they still mean

something to us. They mean fun, and exuberance, and astonishment, but they also allow us to think that these forms of playfulness might in fact be a mask. They make us wonder whether the ‘subject’ of *Jabberwocky* might not be fun after all, but disguised loneliness. The language might be the peculiar call of someone who considers himself to be at least an outsider, or an example of an endangered species, or possibly a kind of freak.

I don’t think you have to ponder very long to imagine what it might be, in the sexual personalities of both Lear and Carroll, that might have prompted their passion for nonsense. But once again I don’t want to loiter with conclusions, but doodle on again to wonder how content we can ever feel with the conclusion we reach when we’re thinking about poems. I’ve already said that we most nearly understand the essentially ambiguous, contrary and paradoxical nature of a poem when we accept that its dozens of meanings are always fleeing away from us. Now I want to say that whatever conclusions we might reach when we try to define poetry *itself* are probably best left in the same state of exciting variety. The best words in the best order? Absolutely, because it implies something vital about the concentration and distillation of thought and language. Something written in lines that don’t reach the edge of the page? Well, usually, yes, but not always. Something that exists at the point where a language that makes sense as we ordinarily expect language to make sense meets a different sort of language that makes sense according to our senses, our guts and our instinct? Yes absolutely. Like a green thought in a green shade.

I’m approaching the end of my time now, running out of sand to doodle in. But I can’t leave things there. I can’t begin making a definition of poetry without also saying something about the value of whatever poetry is. I’ve already implied a good many of the things I want to say. Now let me be explicit. The value of poetry is that its effects and occasions are never precisely to do with use. It is the written form that provides a challenge and correction to all the instrumentalist forms of writing that exist in the world. It tells us the truth by opposite or at least surprising means. Does this mean it can’t be serious, even when it’s grave? Of course not. Poetry exists in the precisely suggestive language that allows us to glimpse – and sometimes even to grasp – the truth of experience in a way that reason alone cannot do. It is where we play in language in order to grow wise in language. It is where we find comfort and consolation by creating a framework for our confusions.

In all these respects, and many more besides, poetry both closely resembles and speaks for the qualities that every one of the arts and humanities more generally brings to us. It is the beautiful and true reminder of what it means to be properly human. Am I staying the obvious again? I don't mind if I am, since we find ourselves living in a time when government is carelessly or callously hacking away at the means by which the arts and humanities are sustained. Washing their hands of libraries and passing the buck to local authorities, they then deny the money to sustain them. Abolishing the Film Council and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. Slashing at the Arts Council...

I could go on. But before my doodling-stick turns into a switch, or a rod, let me end by saying this. Or not 'saying' this. But asking this. Once we've accepted that we're living through difficult economic times, we're still left with the overwhelming question: How do we want to live? How do we want to spend what money we have? Do we want to live in a country which rushes off to fight unwinnable wars for unadmitted reasons (usually when America invites us) and still maintains the sixth largest defence budget in the world? Do we want to let bankers – I don't mean all bankers; I mean the reprehensible ones – escape the consequences of their own venality and allow the rest of the population to struggle? Do we want to see our higher education system turned into a semi-privatised scam (Geoffrey Hill's word) that favours the wealthy? Do we want people in power over us who have never uttered a single audible sentence about the role of the humanities and the arts within our culture and its communities?

I won't speak for you. But I know what my answer is. And it's one that depends on the belief I've been circling in all my doodlings of the last twenty minutes. The arts, the humanities, *poetry* allow us to sympathise with and understand others as they deepen our knowledge of our individual selves. Whether they are embodied by Ruth, or John Keats, or you, or me, they allow us to know who we are, while freeing us to say 'thy people are my people'. On a planet so troubled by the question of how to stay true to ourselves while welcoming diversity, it's difficult to think of a more vital and vitalising kind of reconciliation.