

A Historiographical Review of Andrew Motion's Poetic Vision

- Dora Thompson

Abstract: Andrew Motion, as a poet, came to limelight in the mid-seventies with oblique and tight-lipped narratives that for a time looked like the beginning of a new school. His poetic influence in the world of literature grew by leaps and bounds even as he seemed to situate himself in the Hardy-Larkin mainstream line of English poetry. This paper is a study of the new historic perspective of his poems.

Keywords: New Historicism, Panoptic Surveillance, absurd anomalies, co-texts.

New Historicism offers tremendous scope to analyze the poetic output of Andrew Motion from varied angles facilitated by parallel readings of related literary and non-literary texts. As a post modernist approach, New Historicism objects to the privileging of the literary texts, and the subalterning of non-literary texts. All related historical, socio-political documents, diaries, related articles, commentaries, feedback, cyber literature, related interface, media coverage all validate any scholastic exercise not just as contexts but as co-texts. This 'equal weighting' is suggested in the definition of New Historicism offered by the American critic Louis Montrose: he defines it as a combined interest in the textuality of history, the historicity of texts." (Barry, 172) New Historicism is also more specifically concerned with questions of power and culture (especially the messy commingling of the social and the cultural or of the supposedly autonomous self and the cultural/ political institutions that in fact produce that self). Michel Foucault is quite possibly the most influential practitioner of New Historicism discourse. His interest in issues of power, epistemology, subjectivity, and ideology has influenced critics not only in literary studies but also political science, history, and anthropology. Andrew Motion's creativity from the New Historicism angle is a study in absurdist inversions. A Historicist review of Motion begins its quest by denying that any social world is stable and that art works are separated from the power struggles of social reality. A literary work is a player in the competition among various groups to gain their ends, a competition that takes place at many levels. From a Historicist's angle, Motion's Poeticity when exposed to Foucault's Panoptic Surveillance yields a very intriguing discourse. 'Panoptic' evaluation of Motion's poems reveal a 'discursive' angle of 'thought control' rather than politic. Lapping up controversies early in his poetic career, the most discursive and surprisingly appeasing phase of his poetic output was during his Laureate days. His stance as a commoner eulogizing the Royalty, a Royal designee penning his concerns about the commoners, a Court Poet daring to 'term' his appointment, a Poet

Laureate secretly nursing the hope of extension of his Laureateship, and a Court Poet earnestly pleasing simultaneously the Labor and Conservative party folds are remarkable Juxtaposing his poems with non-literary texts and contemporary writing, much heat and controversies have sprung from his fascinatingly tilting ideology. Motion's poems were structured by new historicists, as they see the literary work as a vessel tossed in the social sea of competing interests, antagonistic values and contradictions. The controversies that haunted Motion were on account of these discourses which were openly tallied with. In 2003, Motion wrote a poem in protest at invasion of Iraq called "Regime Change;" the poem is told from the third person point of view, showing a speech made by Death in the streets of Iraq.

Advancing down the road from Nineveh
 Death paused a while and said 'Now listen here.
 You see the names of places roundabout?
 They're mine now, and I've turned them inside out.
 Take Eden, further south: At dawn today
 I ordered up my troops to tear away.

Calling it 'Regime Change', presumably the change from life's to death's realm, from standing monuments of history to fading memory, is bleakly ironic commentary on the political beginnings and propaganda of this war. The comment 'You see the names of places round about?' reflects the extra awe and horror of modern warfare's havoc wreaked on place shallowed by millennia of history. He said the poem was a political statement against the war." It's saying there is an absolutely appalling situation here," he said. "The irony is that many of these places that these battles are taking place in are places that have strong associations with terrific cultural achievements." While his opposition to the war was "very vehement", Motion wanted to wish well to the troops themselves. He also he did not agree that a Poet Laureate should not voice political views, and that his latest work was not unpatriotic. He wrote a 30-word poem in January that year questioning George Bush's basis for war. It suggested money, greed, oil and his father influenced the US president.

Causa Belli – By Andrew Motion

They read good books, and quote, but never learn,
 a language other than the scream of rocket-burn.
 Our straighter talk is drowned but ironclad,
 Elections, money, empire, oil and Dad.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2912557.htm>)

Among the slurs against Motion, innocuousness is high on the charge sheet. And there is, at first, a marshmallow quality about him; not blandness, exactly, but the instant chumminess of a man who is able to charm and wishes to be liked. He phoned several times before our interview to revise timing and venue (my house, because his was full of literary types meeting his wife, the literary editor Jan Dalley). "It's Andrew," he announced on the first call. By the end he would simply say "Hi, it's me," as if we had been friends for years. <http://www.newstatesman.com>

The genuinely nice manner and mellifluous voice disguise, I suspect, a harder character. He has an odd way of staring out of the corner of his

eyes which both evokes his past as a cowed and bullied prep-school boy and suggests that he learnt, long ago, to hit back. There are hints that, in the snake-pit of poetry, Motion can be as snaky as the rest. Certainly he is unexpectedly acerbic about some fellow-slitherers in the literary world. When Andrew Motion was appointed poet laureate in 1999, there was much Blairite talk of the institution needing to be reformed, like the NHS and the House of Lords, to make it fit for a modern democratic Britain. Some of this talk came from Motion himself, who doubted, in an introductory essay for a volume of *Verses of the Poets Laureate* published shortly after his appointment, whether the post could "survive in any meaningful way, within our diverse culture and diffused society" without certain "realignments", it being "no longer possible or desirable to speak for a centred and simplified version of the 'nation'." www.guardian.co.uk/books/andrew-motion.featuresreviews The nature and effects of public status are a constant concern of this collection. But the very topicality, the sheer relevance, of that concern brings with it, for a poet, certain dangers. Motion has repeatedly invoked as a watchword of his own verse Keats's aversion to poetry which has "a palpable design" on its readers. However, the poorer poems contained in this volume - and it is drastically variable in quality - ignore this warning, and trespass into the territory of opinion-forming journalism. He wrote the following verses for a service held at Westminster Abbey to remember British victims of the New York attacks:

The voices live which the voices are lost:
we hear them and we answer, or we try,
but words are nervous when you need them most
and shatter, stop or dully slide away
so everything they mean to summon up
is always just too far, just out of reach,
(guardian.co.uk, Friday 30 November 2001)

The Poet Laureate had gone out of his way to pen these lines in memory of the 26/11 victims of the New York Tragedy. His first collection, *The Pleasure Steamers*, is largely made up of Motion's award-winning poem, "Inland," which depicts its seventeenth-century narrator's forced move to a new village after a flood. Feelings of fear, insecurity, and helplessness are explored as the narrator and other villagers are cast out of their homeland. "Inland", according to *Times Literary Supplement* critic John Mole, "is a considerable achievement in itself, but it becomes increasingly interesting as one reads and rereads the poems grouped around it in the collection's first and third sections. It can be seen as an historical paradigm of Andrew Motion's own acute sense of isolation. He too seems to be a stranger in his own land, and poem after poem finds him becoming the ghost of himself." The second of Motion's critical studies focuses on the work of England's much-loved poet Philip Larkin, about whom Motion also published a biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. Motion's insight on Larkin, who died in 1985, was gained by his friendship with the colorful poet, a rotund, balding character who, in his last years, wrote and spoke prolifically about his unsuccessful attempts at love, his obsession with pornography, and his personal prejudices. In a lengthy New Yorker critique of *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, Martin Amis

found the biography "confidently managed, and chasteningly thorough; it is also an anthology of the contemporary tendencies toward the literal, the conformist, and the amnesiac. Future historians of taste wishing to study the Larkin fluctuation will not have to look very much further." www.richmondreview.co.uk/books/keats.html - Most poetry in the modern age has retreated to the private sphere, turning its back on the political realm. The two intersect only in such absurd anomalies as the poet laureateship. But Andrew Motion does his bit to keep the monarchy as business whereas one of the greatest of English poets played his part in subverting it. John Milton, published a political tract two weeks after the beheading of Charles I, arguing that all sovereignty lay with the people, who could depose and even execute a monarch if he betrayed their trust. Terry Eagleton a student of Raymond Williams argues that literature concerns not simply beauty and spiritual uplift but the social control of the middle and working classes. Eagleton bluntly asserts that the discipline of literature like formal religion is deeply involved in the reproduction of the dominant social order. Andrew Motion does fit into the stream of thoughts here with the kinds of social leanings he has come up with in his poems. Motion's predicament as a poet is precisely this, how to balance the social constructs of being an arm of monarchy and the voice of the common populace.

Raymond Williams, an authority in Cultural Studies, is a committed socialist political activist and productive scholar. He examines the development of 'National' literatures and demonstrates how society, culture and art interconnect and how literature serves the dominant order—interesting to explore through culture studies –“literariness” and poeticity of Andrew Motion. For Williams literature is not a transcendent entity but a shifting historical product Literature is a complex mutating human product linked with concepts inflected by socio-historical conditions. William's approach on 'cultural materialism' invokes Marxist focus emphasizing the role of culture. From this perspective Motion's very idea of accepting Poet Laureateship, though under the tutelage of Labour Party, can be construed as under Culture pressure in the possible multiplicity of discourses in Motion operating from his Personal, Social, Political and National spheres. Motion had compiled a new anthology of poetry on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. In doing so, he allows us to experience again the immense volume of concerns that War Poetry constitutes and addresses, directly and indirectly, a series of issues that have demanded critical attention in recent years. These include the roles poems play in the processes of cultural memory, the functions of canonicity in different historical contexts, the intricate relations between literature and those historical contexts, and, of course, the insights that theoretical approaches – cultural materialist, historicist, psychoanalytical, gender-based – may bring to bear on the literature of war. Since becoming Poet Laureate in 1999, Andrew Motion has been tireless in his efforts to raise the profile of poetry at a humanistic level exemplifying his belief that, if we let it, poetry has a unique power to enrich our lives as it diversifies them. The poems in this Anthology are arranged in a series of ten concentric rings:

Self, Home, Town, Work, Land, Love, Travel, War, Belief and Space. Each section is distinct but seeks out resemblances and echoes elsewhere, creating the impression of an endlessly expanding universe. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Here-Eternity-Anthology-Andrew-Motion/dp/0571215653> This is one of the most imaginative and stimulating poetry anthologies available at the moment: the organization of the poems selected is intriguing - the range of poems is splendid, with a well-nigh perfect balance struck between the conflicting claims of familiarity and freshness, tradition and contemporariness. Like much talk of the special complexity of modern experience, this depends on a centered and simplified version of the past. The first official laureate, Dryden, took up the post in the aftermath of the civil war, when deep political and religious fault lines ran through individual English households, never mind the nation at large; as for one of his predecessors whom Motion particularly singled out as having enjoyed the luxury of addressing a cosily compact and coherent England - Tennyson - it was on behalf of "Saxon or Dane or Norman we/Teuton or Celt, or whatever we be" that he welcomed Princess Alexandra of Denmark to England in 1863 for her marriage to the Prince of Wales. www.guardian.co.uk/books/andrewmotion... In fact, one might argue that, far from being outmoded, the post of Poet Laureate is one whose time has come; that the problems which have perennially beset the "public poet" are peculiarly topical at present.

References :

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