



Poems for the Waiting Room

A Discussion paper

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This project takes place against a background in which poetry as an art form appears to have regained a popularity and acceptance it has lacked since Edwardian times.

Obviously this cannot be said without qualification. Publishers continue to find poetry books hard to sell. The Oxford University Press caused a stir recently by closing down its poetry list.

And yet some poetry sells enormously. Ted Hughes's poetry is neither easy nor comfortable. But his last publications before he died were bestsellers.

Other random indicators for poetry's renewed place in people's lives are : the evident popularity of the BBC programme "Poetry Please" ; the success and growing influence of "Poems on the Underground," now spreading to bus services and even to telephone booths, and being developed in cities across the world ; that astonishing issue of 'The Guardian' in the the middle of the Gulf War, when a photograph of a lorry driver burnt to death in the desert appeared in the news pages, with a long new poem by Tony Harrison underneath ; the research industry beginning to gather round poetry in more than one university, evaluating its "therapeutic" benefits, and from time to time attracting a flood of correspondence from social workers, counsellors and similar care workers, many of them already using poetry extensively in their work, unsung and on their own account ; and - more subjectively - the impression one has that an interest in reading and writing poetry no longer requires one to take cover in some "arty" coterie or secret isolated self - not just the wide range of organisations now taking on Poets in Residence, but everywhere, there seems a new openness to poetry, perhaps even a hunger for what it can offer. Only a few years ago, the very subject of poetry caused embarrassment almost everywhere outside the class-room. Not now. No longer does poetry need be mumbled. For some reason it has re-joined the language of the main-street.

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that even though the public appears largely unwilling to buy it in book form, in other media poetry has begun to live and flourish again. Perhaps it is looking for a new home, a new form of delivery.

The reasons for this resurgence of poetry as an art of the mainstream can only be guessed at.

I should like to present some of my own ideas here, since I think they are relevant to the Waiting Room project. Inevitably the ideas overlap, but I shall try to set them out as distinct items.

First, poetry is a way of making sense of our surroundings, our emotions and how we live. Not from the detached point of view of the laboratory technician. But from the perspective of the ordinary person in the human feeling middle of it all, struggling through. Our

ability to comprehend and find sufficiently meaningful our lives and environment is essential for health and well-being. But this has surely never been harder to achieve. For human beings everywhere the familiar is dissolving around us at faster and faster rate, and traditional frameworks and explanations no longer satisfy the vast majority. So, at some level, all of us are left detached and groping. And perhaps as a symptom of that lostness, people have turned again to poetry.

But this puts poetry in an impossible position. It cannot offer explanations as such. It cannot be a philosophy or religion. Nor, in my opinion, can it “heal” in the way a treatment heals a particular condition.

But what it can do is offer words from an ordinary human place that give shape and meaning to a common human experience. In this sense it can make sense of things, serving both to validate and to bridge, both to affirm and articulate a private emotional human experience and to create a link between people who can identify with that experience. Thus, not a cure as such, but an antidote. Not a prescription, but a tapping into an essential human process, holding us together in the human community.

Secondly, at the end of the second millennium, the average individual’s experience of self is radically different from that of any previous time. In our age as never before, we have to be continuously conscious of ourselves as members of the limitless multitude, the whole of fragile Earth’s population, the vast TV audience, the rush-hour hordes, the “Market,” the Electorate. Even while the adverts cajole us to “get away”, treat ourselves, celebrate and pamper our particularity and uniqueness, we live much of our lives and are addressed on all sides as objects *en masse*, recipients of one manipulative “spin” after another, customers, passengers, blank figures in the crowd. The human race has never loomed larger or more potent ; at the same time and even despite the Internet, the human individual has perhaps never felt smaller or more meaningless.

Again, this is surely relevant to poetry and its resurgence. For, of all the arts, poetry is perhaps the most purely individual, and in finding and marshalling public words and resonant meaning for inner and private experience, it reminds us of, and can sometimes perhaps restore us to, the largeness and centrality of the individual human self. Furthermore, if the poem’s any good, it talks direct and open-hearted, whole person to whole person, I to Thou. It’s not a slick sales-patter, some overhanging cloud you have to peer behind or defend yourself against. It talks a true language. It is naked and searching for you.

Which leads to the third and final suggestion. For the last few years politicians and philosophers have been talking much about Community, the need for mutual belonging, for the feeling and experience that there is a circle you belong to wider than your own. It can perhaps be said that the present Labour Government owes some of the strength of its position to the widespread yearning for a greater sense of social cohesiveness, in contrast to the furious materialism and anarchic self-interest of the previous two decades.

In some strange way I believe that here too poetry has found a role. For not only does a good poem add to a sense of individual significance, it adds to a sense of connection between people, and not just between writer and reader but between everyone ; in the very act of getting through and speaking to people, it affirms our commonality at the deepest emotional level. In this sense poetry renews community every time it is recited, breaking down our separateness and desolation. So here too the present renewed interest in poetry perhaps reflects a wider yearning, in this case for connectedness.

Other suggestions and explanations can be made and have been. What is common to the three offered here is that, assuming we are right that poetry is experiencing a renewed importance in our cultural and social life, it is doing so as a symptom of human neediness in times of enormous change and strain. It is tempting to think of poetry as some sort of cure. But this I think would be presumptuous. While I personally believe poetry actually can make things happen (*pace* WH Auden), at least in the sphere of the inner person, and certainly I think it can act helpfully and healingly, I hesitate to lay claims for poetry it cannot meet. Poetry can make waiting rooms more human. But it won't turn them into treatment rooms or rescue us from the predicaments of our time.

I would like to pass on and offer a few brief reflections on the waiting room.

It is a truism that the pace of modern life is frantic. The waiting room is one place in the world where all of us at some point are going to have to pause for a while, like it or not. Whatever use we find for our normal franticness, it will not help us here.

Another feature of the waiting room is that for many of us it is a place which reinforces our sense of essential powerlessness. It is the antechamber of a system we have resorted to, in whose hands we will be helpless, but whose powers we need. Our normal routines and defences have proved insufficient. We are here to some degree as supplicants.

Furthermore, it is an impersonal place. Not just a room full of strangers, it is a room representing an organisation and a discipline whose approach to the individual is likely to take little account of him/her as a whole person, with a familiar name and a unique history. The average health waiting room leads to a surgery where you are likely to be addressed and treated in terms of immediate presenting symptoms, of groupings, of categories.

So the waiting room is a profoundly democratic place. Like aging and death, it levels us. It is a place of tension and anxiety but also of human potential, in which people have a chance to reflect and be enriched. And it's a place that could do with the human touch.

I would now like to make a point or two about the Health services I work with and where this project has been piloted and where it mostly belongs. (On the other hand, what about railway and airport waiting rooms ? What about sitting rooms in old people's homes ? What about private sitting rooms ?). In my experience health services of all kinds are profoundly under stress, as a result not just of the demands on them - the quantity of those demands and often the intractable and scarcely bearable quality of those demands ; not just the inadequate resources, low pay, low morale, the "culture of blame" increasingly referred to by cautious politicians ; not just the unsure ethic of care which has not yet

recovered from Thatcherism and remains shaky and uncertain ground from which to work. All of these things and maybe more combine to make centres of social and health care often rather difficult to approach and difficult to work with on a new idea. This is not in any way an accusatory statement, not is it an attempt to create an alibi to explain the delays there have unquestionably been in this project. It is simply to record the fact that workers of all kinds dealing on a day to day basis with much distress, inundated at the same time with continuous changes of policy in a climate of top-down management directives, waiting for disaster and to be pounced on by disaster-hungry reporters, tend increasingly to look out on the world outside their walls with dread and suspicion. Defences are up and responses are slow. A project to do with putting poetry up and about may well come as a delightful relief and opportunity for generous action and a human touch, but it is unlikely to be put on the top of an overcrowded action priority list. And, just possibly, in touching on emotions that people - to get by - cannot allow themselves to feel, it may actually be unwelcome.

I would conclude the first section of this report with a brief personal statement. I believe my enthusiasm for the Waiting Room project is two-fold - that it truly democratises poetry, bringing it to a place where at some point every man, woman and child has to pause ; and that it can help to humanise an impersonal space in which people can feel particularly lost and at sea.

My chief concern for the project is that there's a danger we shall expect too much of it, that the yearning its initial success surely represents is for something greater than poetry can possibly satisfy. It is essential that we continue to choose the poems with great care for their accessibility and applicability. But even if we do, and manage to resist the temptation to put poetry up on every blank public wall, or use it to fill every possible moment of communal quiet, it is possible that the spiritual yearning from which poetry is presently benefiting, will soon move on. There is an opportunity here to make warm and honest human language count, perhaps as never before. But it is an opportunity not to be grabbed. We must grasp it, yes - but carefully, feelingly, sparingly.

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