

# Poems for...

## Background Paper

by Rogan Wolf

*adapted from a report written for  
the Poetry Society in January 1999*

The “Poems for...” project has been operating since 1997, funded mostly by the Arts Council and the NHS. It has prospered 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. With some obvious exceptions, publishers continue to find poetry books hard to sell.

But in other areas and forms of publication, there seem to be new room and appetite for communication through language turned somehow into poetry. In the UK, the exemplary “Poems on the Underground” is an obvious case in point. The significant numbers of “Poets in Residence” in all sorts of settings, is another. The “Poet in the City” initiative is flourishing. The well-established Arts/Health “movement” in the NHS has poetry firmly on board.

I should like to present some of my own ideas for how this has come about, since I think they are relevant to the “Poems for...” project and its place in hospitals and health centres and in other community settings. But the subject also has a wider interest and significance.

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 middle and muddle of it all, struggling through. Our need to experience our lives and place in the world as sufficiently valid and meaningful is a necessary component of our good health. But this experience has in some ways 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 searching. And perhaps as a symptom of that lostness, people have turned again to poetry.

But this puts the medium 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, 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 beginning of the third 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, with Cameron's "Big Society" merely the latest and least convincing version. And that talk much reflects a 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 Blair's New Labour Government owed some of its initial strength to the widespread yearning for a greater sense of social cohesiveness, following the furious materialism and anarchic self-interest of the preceding two decades. But somehow, during New Labour's decade in power, that cohesiveness never materialised.

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 they suggest that poetry's renewed importance in our cultural and social life is 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 displayed in waiting rooms can make those places 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 now and offer some reflections on the waiting room itself.

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.

Here is a poem on the waiting room I wrote as my contribution to the "Poems for...Waiting" collection. It was heavily and brilliantly edited by the poet David Hart. We should imagine the poem is displayed on a sitting room wall. It addresses the patient sitting in that room. They have a conversation

## Across the way

*Welcome, wanderer,  
shadow-companion  
fellow-refugee*

*I have seen you  
across the way  
and salute you*

waiting in sorrow  
to place myself  
in someone else's hands

to place myself  
in hands trained  
to relieve me

hands to retrieve me  
myself at sea.  
I am sending

an SOS signal  
from the eye  
of my tempest

pausing here  
across the way

*Welcome, wanderer,  
shadow-companion  
fellow-refugee.*

*From across the way  
I salute you.*

*Rogan Wolf*

Finally, I would suggest that poetry in healthcare settings does not just belong with people at the receiving end of the doctor's scalpel. Poetry speaks to and feeds the soul. The doctor has a soul as well.

Not only that rather obvious fact, but healthcare workers of every discipline and at all levels are dealing on a day to day basis with all kinds of human distress, some of it unspeakable, 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.

So the doctor's soul is under pressure and often in question, operating day after day at human fault-lines and trouble-spots. I use the phrase "fraught frontiers" for such places. It is human nature to put up frontiers to keep the unwanted stranger out, nightmare and death, the threatening Other, the barbarian force. It is the healer's task to re-open those frontiers all the time in order to make good the damage.

I think poetry can help healthcare workers maintain open frontiers. It can help them to bear the essential but difficult and often agonising reality of their work on our behalf, without resorting to fundamentalist simplifications or unhealthy human detachment.

So surely the poem-posters of the "Poemsfor... project belong in staff sitting rooms as well as healthcare waiting rooms. But also I want to offer my own poems to healthcare staff or to any one else standing especially close to those fraught places. I want to read not to the literary audience but to stressed the NHS Managers, the doctors, the ground level practitioners, the students in training. Poems of old age, dying, mental health, etc, all seeking to validate and make real the human "I" in those stigmatised experiences, but also the human "I" in, and the pressures upon, and the unsung skills required of, the professional who attends to our fellow-citizens as helper.

*Rogan Wolf*