The
Hudson
Review
Volume LXI, Number 3 (Autumn 2008). *Copyright © 2008 by The Hudson Review, Inc.*

DAVID MASON

The Wounded Laureate

As Britain's poet laureate since 1999, Andrew Motion has been an activist presence. He is reportedly well suited to the post, an effective drummer for poetry, and has even published a volume, *Public Property*, comprising laureate verses far less clumsy than Ted Hughes's lumbering "Rain-Charm for the Duchy." If Motion was already a literary eminence before rising to the laureateship, it was due not to his poems but his controversial biography of (or biography of the controversial) Philip Larkin. He has, in brief, been a man of letters, editor of anthologies of British poetry and poets of the First World War, biographer of Keats and the Lamberts, novelist and literary journalist of the sort still possible in Britain, where newspapers take an interest in books. His poems, at least on this side of the big pond, have made little impression.

On the whole, Motion has been a writer who disappears into his subjects. He does not create a fully-fleshed persona like Larkin, but is more like Edward Thomas, on whom he once wrote a thesis—quintessentially English, devotedly pastoral, not quite the hero of his own life. Though he has written autobiographical poems, he has usually transmuted such material into dramatic monologues and narratives of other lives. One example of this is his early poem "The Letter," creating the voice of a young woman during World War II who witnesses the death of a German pilot. Motion can be mordantly witty, also, in a poem like "The Wall," which I quote here in full:

I have forgotten whatever
it was I wanted to say,
also the way I wanted
to say it. Form and music.

I should just look at things
that are, and fix myself
to the earth. This wall,
facing me over the street,

smooth as a shaven chin
but pocked with holes
that scaffolders left,
and flicked with an over-

flow flag. Which still
leaves pigeon-shit,
rain-streaks, washing.
Or maybe it's really

a board where tiny
singing meteors strike?
I rest my case. I rest
my case and cannot imagine

hunger greater than this.
For marks.
For messages sent by hand.
For signs of life

This is one of the *Public Property* poems, where Motion has benefited from having to become a character in his own work. The hunger for poetry, for some sort of connection, has apparently been with him for a very long time. This guardedly sensitive writer is wounded too, like so many others, and his work appears to be peeling back some of the protection overlaying personal feeling without quite succumbing to full-blown confessionalism.

Motion's wound is the subject of his memoir, *In the Blood*.[1] Ostensibly about childhood and its end when his mother is fatally injured in a horseback riding accident, Motion's book turns out to be a complex evocation of sensibility. In some ways a clue to the mind of the poet, it is most moving as an elegy for his parents, who seem to have been very fine people. Their efforts to provide for and understand their sons have about them the heroism of all good parenting, and they prove to be interesting characters in themselves, soldiering on despite small disappointments.

Motion is a superb prose writer, his sentences often freshly detailed, as in this account of a teenage kiss:

> We walk side by side for a bit, then drop into single file on a headland round the plough. The hedges have all been ripped out, and the sky feels enormous—much taller than at home, and not so many birds. I stop in a gateway saying we should go back, it's freezing, and that's when Julia takes a step closer. The cold has made dark blotches on her cheeks, like pennies in milk, but her skin is warm when we kiss each other. It's so simple. She's wearing the same scent as her mother—she must have borrowed it—and when we hug, the heat squeezes up inside our coats and fans across our faces.

[1] IN THE BLOOD: A Memoir of My Childhood, by *Andrew Motion*. David R. Godine. $24.95.

The specificity here is marvelous—those pennies in milk, that body heat rising from their coats—and virtually every page of the book contains such moments of remembered or re-imagined experience.

This happens early in the book, but in the emotional chronology it is late in the story. It is the day Motion's mother falls from her horse and hits her head, ending up in a coma from which she never emerges. He concludes the first chapter with a dawning awareness of how much has changed: "A lumpy thought is stuck in my head and I can't find space for it: I need a minute alone. I'm thinking that for most people childhood ends slowly, so nobody can see where one part of life finishes and the next bit starts. But my childhood has ended suddenly. In a day." It's not just his mother's accident, of course, but also the kiss and his own sexual awakening. Motion's book contains a sensitive portrayal of Oedipal confusion ending in unresolvable grief.

The storyteller's mind at work here is a preservationist's mind. He ends the same passage, "I want to lock into my head everything that's happened in my life up to now, and make sure it never changes. If I can keep it safe, I'll be able to look back and feel safe myself. I don't want to explain it. I don't want to talk about it in the grown-up language I haven't learned yet. Maybe I don't even want to understand it. I just want everything as it was, when I saw the world for the first time." These are the ruminations of a boy who has discovered poetry, where voices of the dead, or of living people at some remove, speak to us with a kind of intimacy. He has begun to discover that poets read differently—for a texture of feeling more than information. His reading is both remaking and affirming him as a person. But he seems able to know that literature's affront to universal change is never entirely successful, that life and death reach their own conclusions, regardless of what we say about them.

Still, Motion's memory project results in some exquisite sensory detail and a delightful approximation of the childhood mind, a hint of synesthetic euphoria tinged with fear. At times, and perhaps for too many of its pages, the book feels beautifully inert, as if it has nowhere to go. At such moments I wondered whether Motion really had a story to tell, whether he could give the story any *motion.* By beginning at the end with his mother's accident, he attempts to create suspense, and in the final chapters, where his parents become more painfully alive as characters, Motion succeeds in making me feel terrible about their impending loss. But until that point the book's story is rather commonplace. Andrew is a boy without any particular problems. His life is extraordinary only in the detail with which his older incarnation recollects it.

What a curious genre autobiography turns out to be. Memoirists have to believe their lives are in some way especially dramatic, and in many cases this throws the emphasis upon melodramatic elements such as drug-addicted parents, abusive uncles or pederastic priests. For a writer like Charles Dickens the shame of the debtor's prison and his own brief

stint at manual labor were enough to create a lifelong obsession with childhood wounds. He attempted an autobiography, but in the end had to fictionalize it as *David Copperfield.* When Dickens wrote about schools he was not just proselytizing about England's social iniquities but theorizing about what made a person. What was innate in our selves and what was formed by class, money, education and politics? When George Orwell wrote of his school days it was with outrage at the hypocrisy of the English class system and punitive modes of learning. For Robert Graves, the English public school with its violence and mendacity led straight to the absurdity of military behavior in the trenches of World War I. These writers spoke for whole generations in their way, but Motion's chapters about school days rarely take on that kind of power.

Motion was born in 1952. His father was an army officer and brewery executive whose life was radically divided between work, about which he felt ambivalent, and the pleasures of home life, including a wife he adored and the sport of fox hunting, which gave him a taste of foregone physical adventures. While the family was not exactly rich, they do not appear to have had major money problems. Indeed, they had very few problems at all. Motion's mother was a spirited woman who contracted brucellosis (a disease usually associated with cattle) after the birth of her second son, Kit, and was as a consequence often tired. Her husband was a bit buttoned-up emotionally, but both parents were loving, and I would describe this childhood as a happy one, overlaid with melancholy only because we know how it ended. If Motion had grown up in America, these years might have been consumed by civil strife, Vietnam, assassinations, the near-schism of a nation. While young Motion did enjoy Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix and eventually decided to be different from his parents, his gestures hardly constituted a rebellion. His 1960s happened with relative placidity, and as a result portions of his memoir feel charming but static.

Why would anyone feel his or her life important enough to warrant a book? It's a curious egotism bound up with the nature of all literary ambition—the sense that one's own impressions of life must not end with one's death. Writers are people who can set aside doubts about their own importance long enough to invest the years of hard labor required to produce any sort of book at all. In Andrew Motion's case, too, he is Britain's poet laureate, an arguably important position suggesting *someone* ought to care what he has to say. That alone could have occasioned this book.

But as I mentioned earlier, I think there is another, more laudable motive for *In the Blood.* Motion's book is an elegy for his parents. He and Kit are not the lone centerpieces of the story. Indeed, Motion himself is at times an abstraction as he sometimes is in his poems—a sort of filament colored by the chemistry of other peoples' lives. The interest of his chapters on education largely derives from the contrast they provide to the deepening richness of life at home—something felt more powerfully as we approach the end.

While the Motions were not wealthy, they still had ties to the old family brewery fortune. His father was a colonel in the army with a touch of the aristocrat about him. The family employed a gardener (though not a cook or a maid) and kept horses. And, most importantly, they were fox-hunters.

> On hunting mornings dad was different again. These were the days he enjoyed most, getting up early and padding downstairs in his slippers to find the breakfast things mum had set out the night before: the egg cup in its saucer, the tea leaves in the teapot. I was too young to go too, but I could hear him clearing his throat in the kitchen below me, then the scrape when he took his hard hat and riding crop from the bench in the hall. After that, I rolled over and thought how different he'd be when he got home. "A changed man," mum always said. He smiled at her across the kitchen table with the mark of his hat brim still creasing his hair, and freckles of dried mud on his face and hands. He talked more easily than usual, reeling off the names of woods he'd jumped into, farmers he'd met and farmers' wives who'd given him mugs of tea. After he finished, mum told me I'd see all of this for myself in a few years. "Can't wait," I said, and because it didn't sound convincing, she added, "If you want to." "Of course he'll want to," dad butted in. "It's in the blood."

Motion's title, then, comes from this history of active ritual in the now-outlawed fox hunts. But his title also comes from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," quoted in the book's epigraph: "I have owed to them, / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart." At its best, Motion's memoir is a Wordsworthian effort to "see into the life of things." It works by resonances more than plot. Blood is more than a metaphor, and when Andrew finally does join in a fox hunt in one of the most gripping passages, his father makes sure the boy is "blooded," a primitive ritual familiar to most hunting cultures. The Master of the Hunt cuts off the dead fox's paw and brings it to the boy:

> I took off my hat, and bowed like I'd done for the Bishop of Colombo at confirmation. There was a pause. Should I say something? The Master's hand leapt toward me, so quick the fox's pad was only a blur between his fingers. But cold, definitely cold, with a strange breeze which chilled my skin before it actually touched. Then I felt three freezing stripes: one across my forehead, one on my left cheek, one on my right. And after that, warmth. Gluey heat, which meant I knew exactly where the blood lay on my face, even though I couldn't see it. "I expect you'd like to keep this?" the Master said, and before the question was finished he flipped open my coat pocket, the one where I had my sandwiches, and pressed the pad inside. As soon as it was done, he turned away busily, to show he

> didn't want to say anything. Dad took his place, holding his top hat by the brim, which made him look as though he'd just thrown it in the air, and caught it again. He squeezed my knee and said, "Well done." When I turned round, Kit said "Well done" too, then "Urgh." Mum kept quiet, and when I smiled at her she wiped her cheek with one finger, knocking the dried mud-spot onto her coat.

Never mind the mother getting teary-eyed at her bloodied son. This is no Greek tragedy, but a ritual of belonging complicated by the fact that Andrew will soon decide he wants nothing to do with fox hunting or even riding. He wants the life of the mind. Still, in this moment he has been approved of, and the luckiest children are those who at some time in their lives experience real approbation.

Motion's account is especially moving because when his boyhood self does finally change, progressing toward individualized desire, his parents try to understand him. His mother is better able to make the leap, encouraging her son's book buying and even giving him a poet's autobiography, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man.* The simple perfection of this gesture is that it acknowledges what both mother and son value. Motion's interest in World War I poets was fostered by his mother, which meant she was able to find a way to encourage his difference from the family.

Some parents can only express love for children who succeed at what the parents themselves love. Great parents are those who discern what their children are interested in and grow by learning about it themselves. Motion's father was a bit more befuddled by his son's literary tastes, but no less loving in his way. It is all young writers can really ask of their parents—some acknowledgement that they are not monsters for choosing their own path in life, that they are loved as persons even when their devotions differ from those dictated by convention.

Having been restless in reading some of Motion's book, wishing it engaged me more, I became toward the end of it intensely moved by this drama of understanding between very different people who happened to be related through blood: his beautiful, intelligent and often-ailing mother, his active father, and even his satirical little brother, who sees through so many of Andrew's pretensions. This deepening really begins in a chapter called "Beauty," partly about a family dog with that name, but also about Andrew's infatuation with his mother, his awareness of her frailty and desire for another life. Sympathy for his father's reluctance to change happens in the next chapter:

> I thought we didn't go further afield because Maidenwell was so expensive, dad didn't have any money to spare. But when I asked mum about this, she surprised me. "It's not about money," she said, emptying her tea dregs into the plastic bucket under the kitchen sink. "Dad takes me here and there. We went to Corsica. And Amalfi. Remember?" I didn't. "And then there's the war," she went on, as if

> talking to herself. "Dad had such a foul time after D-Day, he's not all that keen on abroad." I watched the water ricocheting off her mug under the tap, and remembered the falling-down bodies in my comics, and the jagged shapes with BOOM and KERPOW inside them. I'd always known about dad and the war, but I'd never quite been able to imagine him fighting. No wonder he talked about Krauts not Germans, and sometimes said "Heil Hitler" when we overtook a VW Beetle.

I come away feeling that Motion's parents were simply wonderful people. My own distaste for the killing of foxes, among my favorite wild animals to watch, disappears in the face of their humor.

As the book nears its close, chapters on home life become more poignant, while the bits about school are enlivened by Andrew's sense of vocation. Earlier he was good at getting the isolation of boys at lights out:

> All the same, I didn't hear boys crying in their beds so often, once the first few weeks of term were over. But there was still a struggling sound, and I knew what it was, even though it was difficult to explain. It was the sound of boys thinking about time. . . . Counting the days until the end of the week, or half-term, or the end of the term. Hurrying up the clock.

With such moments of verbal precision Motion transcends the thinness of his story. Later, when a good teacher turns young Andrew on to Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin, it's as if all the preoccupations with intimacy, time and the forces of nature finally come into focus. This is a poet's book, after all, and poetry is an integrative art, an attempt to connect oneself to more than one's self. Hearing his teacher read Hardy, Andrew understands how his own experience enlarges: "The meaning was still there, but something else too—something like sadness for the old man. Sadness for everything, in fact."

Excused from athletics by knee trouble, he is free to indulge his love of reading, and here again the connection with his mother strengthens:

> We had our chats indoors, so it was more like school. But now summer was starting, I did most of my reading and writing outdoors. In the garden first, lying on one of the folding sun-beds dad kept in the garage, which had spiders living in their legs. As the metal heated up, the spiders escaped and crawled over my hands: pale sandy-brown and light as a tickle. I brushed them off and went back to the poems of Andrew Marvell, which I'd bought second-hand in Stephen's shop. While I was reading his poems about gardens, I gazed down the lawn towards mum's herbaceous border and saw the words zoom off the white page like flies, vanishing into the laurel bush. It made me wonder how much I was understanding, if words kept turning into things.

These insights are important the way poetry is important. They are apprehensions of what cannot be held even when beautifully expressed. Just as Andrew Motion's parents tried to understand their creative son, the son has tried to understand his parents. Surely Motion's public poem about the death of Princess Diana, "Mythology," is at some private level echoing feelings about his mother:

> Earth's axle creaks, the year jolts on; the trees
> begin to slip their brittle leaves, their flakes of rust;
> and darkness takes the edge off daylight, not
> because it wants to—never that. Because it must.
>
> And you? Your life was not your own to keep
> or lose. Beside the river, swerving underground,
> the future tracked you, snapping at your heels:
> Diana, breathless, hunted by your own quick hounds.

I said earlier that this book was an evocation of sensibility. I should add that the wounded laureate has become a civilized person, able to let others be who they are. Despite its slow pace, or perhaps because of it, Motion's book eventually gets under the skin. It touches at the level of blood.