

## Discovering Geographies

*The poem "Discovering Geographies" by Andrew Motion,  
followed by an interview with Andrew Motion by Phil Cohen*

Andrew Motion was Poet Laureate between 1999 and 2009 during which time he established the Poetry Archive and campaigned to boost the role of poetry in State education and public culture. He has published many collections of poetry, most recently *Peace Talks* (Faber 2015). His literary criticism includes *Ways of Life: on place, painters and poets* (Faber 2008), biographies of Philip Larkin and John Keats, and a memoir *In the Blood* (Faber 2006).

**Andrew Motion**  
**Phil Cohen**

If only the stories were not so tempting –  
but from day one I started to embroider,  
and in no time was suggesting a country  
far to the North  
where fish are as large as dragons,  
and even minor administrators  
eat off gold plates,  
and sleep on gold beds.

That is why I have packed in my birch canoe  
a robe  
made of the feathers  
of more than 100 different species of bird.

So that when I have finally crossed the Ocean  
I will have a ceremonial costume  
rich enough  
to impress in my encounter with the Great Khan.

\*

We have an excellent long boat with outriggers  
and therefore travel dozens of miles in a day.

Furthermore, and speaking as a navigator,  
I can predict every fickleness of weather  
and also the change in direction of currents,  
sometimes dipping my elbow into the water  
and sometimes my scrotum  
to feel the slightest change in temperature.

These are the reasons I shall die in peace  
and be considered a saviour by my people.  
In my own mind I am a simple man  
who threw his spear at the stars  
and landed there himself.

\*

Furthermore,  
I have in my possession a map:  
two handfuls of mud  
scraped from the bank of our sacred river,  
flattened into a tablet,  
baked,  
then pierced with the blunt point of my compass  
while I spun the other sharper leg  
to produce the edge of the world as I knew it,  
  
and beyond  
the salt sea on which I am now perfectly at home.

In this way I look down at myself.

I think: I am here.

\*

Astonishing, how many horizons are open to me:  
at one time mountainous heaps of smashed slate,  
at others a vast delta of green and crimson light.  
  
And every day a different shoreline ripples past  
bearing its cargo of white sand and dark palms.  
  
Very beguiling they appear, but all encumbered.  
All spoiled by the tantrums of their local gods.

Out here there are storms too,  
but in the religion I have now devised for myself,  
I am convinced  
the shaping hands have pulled away from us at last,  
so the earth hangs with no support at the centre of –  
what?  
That is the question I have in mind to answer.

\*

You might suppose better charts would help me,

but despite their much greater accuracy  
 in terms of coastlines and interiors,  
 and the intricate detail  
 guaranteed by developments in printing,  
 not to mention the understanding of perspective,  
 empires still lie about their extent and stability.

These are the simple deceptions.

More difficult,  
 as I continue north to my final encounter,  
 and wave-crests flicking my face grow colder  
 and daylight a more persistently dull dove-grey,  
 is how to manage my desire to live in the present  
 for all eternity,  
 as though I had never left my home.

\*

It transpires the last part of my journey  
 requires me to abandon everything I once knew,  
 even the gorgeous costume  
 made of the feathers of more than 100 different species of bird.

No matter, though.  
 It is delicious among the constellations,  
 as the planets begin to display their gas clouds  
 and the beautiful nebulae their first attempts at stars,

When I look over my shoulder  
 to see my own blue eye staring back at me,  
 I realise before I disappear  
 I still appreciate what it means to be lost.

## Interview

Phil Cohen: *In the London Review of Books* you reference Jerry Brotton's 'A History of the World in Twelve Maps' as a source of inspiration for this poem, so perhaps inevitably, the reader is tempted to use this book as a key to understanding it, almost like the legend of a map. Was this your intention in signalling this influence?

Andrew Motion: I'd been wanting to write about maps, exploring, and travelling, as a way of also writing about the diaspora, power and death - and when I read Brotton's book, and was encouraged by it to think in a more joined up way about the history of map-making, I thought I saw a way to do it. I took some facts from his book, and one or two encouragements to imagine in particular directions, which is why I have and will gladly acknowledge him. (I like the idea of poems having an element of collaboration about them.)

PC: *One of your most widely quoted remarks is that your wish to write a poem is inseparable from the wish to explain something to yourself. Does this apply in the case of 'Discovering Geographies' and if so what is it that the poem is trying to explain?*

AM: I have said that in the past, yes, but I increasingly like the idea of allowing the poem to preserve the mystery or puzzle of whatever it is that I'm thinking about, so that readers don't feel there's any degree of 'explanation' in the text.

PC: *Landscape and the countryside have been important for you, both as a child, and in your poetry from the very beginning. Did you remember using or making maps close to home when you were growing up in Essex, or of being fascinated by distant and unfamiliar geographies? Did the way you were taught geography at school inspire you or turn you off?*

AM: I loved studying geography at school, and very nearly decided to pursue it (and not English) at university. I sometimes think I might have had a happier life if I had done. But it was always physical geography that interested me most - and poring over maps was central to this. Looking for glacier-valleys and suchlike. Before that, as a young child, I'd always greatly enjoyed making maps - usually of invented countries and islands. Maybe that is a bit like making poems in my adult life.

PC: *The poem's narrator takes us on a journey across different cartographic imaginaries from the earliest times to the present, and it seems as if these moments of discovery have a reference back to a constant human drive to explore 'terra incognita' and to render it familiar and controllable in some way. Do you think there is a link here to poetry's ambition to map what is otherwise not mapped, and even unmappable by any other means?*

AM: Poets are mapmakers to the extent that they know what they're doing, and explorers to the extent that they don't know. About 50% of each I'd say.

PC: *From Ian Hamilton Finlay's New Sparta to the 'Winning Words' poems commissioned for the 2012 Olympics site specific poetry has been of growing importance in making poems more publicly accessible, by literally inscribing them in the landscape they are about. What do you see as the possibilities for taking poetry off the printed page, and, by implication, locating it outside the literary culture which traditionally has nurtured it?*

AM: I greatly like the idea of poems being situated in specific places - as a form of public art. Not to dominate the place, but to help release its spirit by one means or another. As Ian Hamilton Finlay's words generally do. I don't see any problems with taking poetry off the page and putting it in public places. On the contrary. I wish people thought more often of including poetry in public art schemes, and have particular pleasure in seeing my own poems used in this way.