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“SUCH CLOSETS TO SEARCH”: ANDREW MOTION’S LOVE IN A LIFE

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MASTER OF ARTS

Lisa Marie Haarlander

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Henry Hart, Chair

J. R. Willis, Jr.

Thomas Heacox
For those
without whose enduring faith
this may not have been
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ABSTRACT

Andrew Motion is one of the most well-regarded and influential of contemporary English poets, whose critical and poetic work has been central to recent debates concerning the construction and validity of a distinctly “English” tradition. Motion’s three major critical statements, The Poetry of Edward Thomas (1978), Philip Larkin (1981), and his introduction to The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (1982), show him formulating such a tradition and preparing the ground for the reading and reception of his own poetry as he links together an “ancestry” which forms, what he calls, the “English line.” By so doing, he not only locates his poetic influences and himself within what he posits as the central, national tradition, but also reveals his ambition to position himself within it, as its inheritor and new leader. His latest book, Love in a Life, is the culmination of the issues explored in these writings and a summation of his career and life to date. Indeed, both the internal narrative that structures the volume, and his constant reference to his previous work, make it clear that Motion intends the volume to be read as such.

By constructing the collection around this narrative between the poems, Motion is able to unite what critics have often seen as the two incommensurate sides of his talent: the elegiac and the narrative. The elegiac communicates the yearning for what has been lost, for what is past, and articulates the desire for something to replace the emptiness it has engendered; the narrative force links and entwines the fragments (and questions) within and between the poems and propels the quest(er) onward. Beginning by examining the critical and aesthetic agenda Motion gradually formulates in his literary criticism then, this essay will show how Love in a Life both investigates and fulfills this agenda as Motion reworks his familiar themes into an intricately composed collection which gradually reveals the story of a complex and overlapping private and public search in which Motion attempts to come to grips with all the “loves” in his life.
“SUCH CLOSETS TO SEARCH”: ANDREW MOTION’S LOVE IN A LIFE
Andrew Motion has acquired a considerable reputation since his first book of poetry, *The Pleasure Steamers*, was released in 1978. In 1981 he won the Arvon/Observer Poetry Prize and in 1983 was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. For *Dangerous Play*, a selection of his poetry from 1974-1984, he was awarded the prestigious John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize for 1984, the first time in 22 years that it has gone to a collection of poetry. His most recent achievement, however, *Love in a Life*, published in 1991, was greeted by the critics with mixed reviews. Though they recognized Motion’s re-employment of familiar themes, these critics shared a certain perplexity as to what Motion was trying to accomplish. Terry Eagleton, for example, attempts to explain the complexity of voices in *Love in a Life* by dividing the poet into the “serious Motion” and his “new-found verbal laidback” alter ego, accounting for the “curious tonal dissonance” in “the volume as a whole” (21). Fred Beake refers to the poems in *Love in a Life* as “obtuse structures” and initially suggests that Motion embodies an unresolved “quarrel” between two poetic traditions before finally pronouncing him “merely disconnected” (45). All the critics were agreed in seeing *Love in a Life* as representing a surprising and dramatic shift from his earlier work and their unease with this change is apparent. Part of their discomfort may stem from the fact that Motion gained his reputation as a narrative poet and is primarily known as such, whereas the poems in *Love in a Life* seem to be composed of fragmented, disconnected, impressions. However, the cohesion they despair of finding *within* the poems, is instead rendered by a loosely structured quest-narrative *between* them as each poem builds upon previous ones to produce a coherent volume.

Eagleton and Beake’s reviews also point to Motion’s confrontation with the dilemma of how to synthesize elements of both the Modernist and Movement poetic traditions to which he is heir; indeed, Motion’s struggle to do so represents a large part of the book’s quest. This dilemma has been a central, perhaps the central issue of post-war English poetry for both poets and critics. Like other figures such as Donald Davie, Ted Hughes, and Geoffrey Hill, Motion is confronted not only by his loyalty (unlike the Modernists) to his “Englishness” and his native English past, but also by the need to move
beyond the restrictive boundaries exemplified by the Movement. As both Blake Morrison in *The Movement* and C. K. Stead in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* point out, the Movement was “the first new post-war school of poets in Britain” (Stead, 328). It was, in Stead’s words, “conservative, anti-Romantic, neo-Augustan in tendency, given to wit, morals, tight rhyme schemes and the iambic pentameter” (328). Part of the reason for the development of this new school was a fear, articulated by Davie in 1952 in *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, that Modernism had “gone too far” and “alienated” the common reader (97). This critical work gained Davie the reputation as the spokesman and theorist of the Movement, vehemently attacking Modernist poems as examples of the “breakdown in law and order,” of the “failure of the poet’s nerve” (*Purity*, 95) and of, as he wrote in his 1955 book *Articulate Energy*, the “loss of confidence in the intelligible structure of the conscious mind” (129). However, as the years passed, and he completed studies of the work of Boris Pasternak and Ezra Pound, Davie began to have doubts about the doctrines he had so fiercely promoted. The staunch support of the Movement found in *Purity of Diction in English Verse* and *Articulate Energy* began to be replaced by an anxiety for the Movement’s and his own future should they resist taking into account the Modernists. Indeed by the mid-60’s Davie had become the foremost spokesman and defender of Pound in Britain, and in his latest book, *Under Briggflatts* published in 1989, he charts the influence and continuation of Modernist poetics in post-war British poetry and argues that all the most vital work has been influenced by, and indebted to, Modernism.

Although Davie’s career is perhaps too extreme in its position-shift to be paradigmatic, nevertheless, it is exemplary in its attempt to be both modernist and national, to retain its place within an English tradition, while at the same time connected to the international scene. Davie, like many others, realized what Stead has written of Larkin: that though there were “strengths and even beauty” in the best work of the Movement poets, its “lack of range, its perennial note of defeat, the narrow field of experience it drew upon and the corresponding failure to extend quite simply the art of poetry in any direction at all -- these were qualities which . . . made [it] seem a poor foundation for the future of British poetry” (341). Motion, too, confronts the same dilemma and his three major critical statements, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*, *Philip Larkin*, and the introduction to *The
Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry, reveal an attempt to construct an aesthetic which remains English, but also cognizant of other traditions, an aesthetic which forms the foundation to Love in a Life.

I

Although Love in a Life then, is a very different work for Motion; it can be regarded in many ways as the culmination of the issues explored in these critical writings. All three works reveal his acute awareness and concern with defining a specifically English poetic tradition, especially as he sees it embodied in the work of Edward Thomas and Philip Larkin, and they make clear his ambition to position himself within it as an inheritor, a successor, and, ultimately, a new leader. In an essay entitled “On the Plain of Holderness,” Motion makes explicit the link between his criticism and his poetry: “After finishing my degree I started writing a thesis on the poetry of Edward Thomas. I liked Thomas very much (and still do), and I thought that coming to grips with him would increase my understanding of subsequent writers who have worked in the same tradition. [Philip] Larkin was never very far from my mind.” Motion goes on to compare the two poets as having “certain resemblances between their sensibilities” and being “scrupulous, reserved, fastidious, fine-grained writers, acutely conscious of their position as isolated onlookers, and preoccupied by the passages of time.” Sounding very much like Davie in his early work written to justify the Movement, he also credits them with “articulating a sense of Englishness” in keeping with the tradition of the “‘English line’” whose members include William Cowper, William Wordsworth, John Clare, and later, Thomas Hardy. Motion suggests that these poets, including Thomas, are among those who make up Larkin’s “poetic ancestry,” but proceeds to detail ways in which Larkin’s work “differs dramatically” (66). Motion then attaches himself to Thomas and Larkin as the next one in this tradition: “It’s hard to say how deeply Larkin’s poems have influenced my own. No doubt very . . . he’s certainly helped me more than anyone else to clarify the kind of poetry I want to write” (68). This essay supplies, in brief, Motion’s critical and aesthetic agenda. It links together an “ancestry” which forms the “line” of English poets and leads to his own particular brand of contemporary English poetry, and it locates his poetic influences and himself within what he regards as the central, national tradition.
What constitutes this tradition is made clearer in his first critical work, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* published in 1978. Motion positions Thomas "slightly left of centre" in the struggle which dominated English poetry during the first quarter of this century between the "imperialists," clinging to Victorian values, and the "experimenters," spearheaded by Pound and Eliot, later to be known, of course, as the Modernists (2, 1). Although Thomas is usually termed a Georgian, the "bland" group which stood in the middle of these, Motion argues that Thomas's work "anticipated[ed]" the Modernists and, as a consequence, "effect[ed] a quiet and unaggressive poetic evolution as important as the more publicized coup d'etat of Pound and Eliot" (2). Accordingly, Motion sets up a number of oppositions between Eliot and Thomas, all of which are intended to emphasize Thomas's "poetic evolution" as rational and English in contrast to Eliot's irrational and international revolution. Eliot, for example, is said to "toy . . . with incoherence" to express his view of society, while Thomas "records moods and intuitions hovering at the limit of articulation" (4). Whereas Eliot includes foreign languages and references to foreign poets in his work, Thomas's borrowings are less frequent and associated with a specifically English rather than an international context (5). Motion asserts that Thomas's poems reveal a sense of the "responsibility" and "indebtedness" he felt towards his "native English past" and exemplify a desire to bring forward into the present his nation's "admirable qualities" (7). The fact that, as Stan Smith points out, Thomas was born in Wales and his "Englishness" therefore a point of some contention, reveals the polemical nature of Motion's book. Echoing Philip Larkin's introduction to his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Poetry*, but using Thomas instead of Hardy, Motion redraws the literary map of British poetry, and by so doing, sidesteps the Modernists to claim Thomas as a central poet in this newly charted true "English line," a line which leads on to Larkin, and, by analogy, Motion himself.

In his next critical work, *Philip Larkin*, Motion elaborates, and indeed to a certain extent revises, this tradition. Although Larkin is seen as continuing Thomas's evolutionary poetics in opposition to the revolutionary ones of Eliot and Pound, there is a significant shift in Motion's argument. In his earlier work he suggested that because Thomas anticipated the Modernists contemporary English writers can leap over them; he
now argues that the Modernists can be avoided through Larkin’s influence because the later poet incorporated them. Accordingly, Motion’s first aim is to locate a specifically Yeatsian Symbolist “and therefore by association Modernist” presence throughout Larkin’s career, despite Larkin’s repeated assertion that he replaced Yeats with Hardy after The North Ship (17). In other words, Motion revises Larkin’s own narrative of his career, claiming that his “best work” is a “dialectic between the attitudes and qualities of his two mentors” and, consequently, further articulates and defines his own particular “English tradition” (15). He lauds Larkin as a great negotiator, the man who has done “more than any other living poet to solve the crisis that beset British poetry after the modernists had entered its bloodstream.” He credits him with “revitalizing” the English tradition by “introducing them to elements of the poetic revolution by which they were challenged” (20). Larkin has, according to Motion, successfully “welded together” two “previously antagonistic” traditions, enabling “several young poets” to write without taking sides, and he goes on to claim that, through Larkin’s example, much of recent English poetry has managed a similar “synthesis” of Modernism and the “English line.” It becomes clear that Motion is once again using his interpretation of another poet to argue for the value of his own writing since he argues that this synthesis is exemplified in the narrative poems being written by contemporary poets (i.e. Motion himself) which combine the “time-honoured” post- Wordsworthian mode of English storytelling with the “literary self-awareness” and “self-irony” of the Modernists (21).

In the same year, 1982, Motion edited with Blake Morrison The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry and this volume can be seen as a companion piece to the Larkin book. In it he explicitly locates and isolates the contemporary manifestations of the tradition he has previously charted both by anthologizing certain poets (of whom he himself is one), and by the explicitly polemical nature of the co-written introduction. The collection, it declares, is intended to be “didactic” as well as “representative” and asserts that the small selection of poets are those whom the editors “believe” to represent the most “important achievements and developments” in British poetry in “recent years” (10). The introduction talks of a “decisive shift in sensibility” in British poetry as the “new” British poet of this anthology has “exchanged the received idea” of the poet as “knowing insider”
for that of the "anthropologist" or "alien invader" or "exile" (12). It argues that there is now a "body of work" which "a number of close observers" have come to regard as "the new British poetry," the characteristics of which are either similar to the literary synthesis laid out in Motion's Philip Larkin, or strikingly prefigure the poetry of Love in a Life. Indeed not only does this introduction crystallize the ideas of poetic tradition that he works toward in his two works of literary criticism, but is also the best introduction yet written to his latest volume of poetry.

Motion and Morrison argue that the new British poetry can be identified by its combination of the "literary self-consciousness" of the Modernists, with the "re-emphasis" of the more traditional narrative, or storytelling, element of post-Wordsworthian poetics (18, 12). The poetry displays a "preoccupation with relativism": it is often "open-ended" and "reluctant" to come to a conclusion or "point to the moral" in the situations it confronts. The use of the narrative in this "new" poetry differs from its Wordsworthian ancestry because "the fact of fictionalizing is relished as it is performed." In other words, there is a consciousness of the "process" involved in the creation of a poem and the "degree to which" a poem is an "invention" which points to its "artifice and autonomy" (19). The "young narrative poets" are involved with the problems of perception. Stories are "incomplete" or the reader is "denied... essential information." which leaves him puzzling over the identity of the speaker, his "circumstances and motives," and credibility (19). The "common purpose" said to be found among this anthology's poets is "to extend the imaginative franchise" as their poetry "reasserts the primacy of the imagination," not as the "dark force" of the previous World War II generation but as a "potential source of tenderness and renewal" (19, 12). The language emphasizes once again the evolutionary rather than revolutionary nature of the poetic change Motion admires; the editors underscore the idea of the continuity of British poetry by ending the introduction with a quotation from Keats which, despite it being a hundred and sixty-five years old, they say represents the "view" taken by "young poets today" (19):

Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and where images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found in a second Reading...? (19)

This image of strolling through an abundant garden, which must be repeatedly visited in
order to fully appreciate its beauty and claim familiarity with all its nuances, is the way Motion would suggest the reader approach his *Love in a Life* since there he would encounter recurring words and images that slowly increase in resonance, creating a sense of temporal progression and spatial range.

II

*Love in a Life* represents Motion's personal quest to locate a coherent meaning for his life's story both as a man and a poet. Evaluating his poetic career and beliefs, in particular whether the imagination's "potential" as a "source of tenderness and renewal" can ever become actual, it seeks to deal with the problem of death, especially with the issue of how to fill the void left by the tragic death of his mother (1982b, 19). Michael Hulse emphasizes the elegiac nature of Motion's poetry in contrast to critics' usual concentration on his narrative skill, and it is, in fact, the combination of these two modes that provides the structure for the dual quest in *Love in a Life*. The elegiac or lyric voice communicates the yearning for what has been lost, for what is past, and articulates the search for something to replace the emptiness it has engendered; the narrative force links and entwines the fragments (and questions) within and between the poems themselves and propels the quest(er) onward. Motion highlights the fact that human experience resists the narrative form ("Look" registers the terror of the unpredictable randomness of life, in which things happen for "no reason at all"), and yet acknowledges the fact that such a form is necessary and inevitable to make it meaningful. Consequently, the book is *structured* around the idea of disconnections and divisions.

A crucial example of this idea is the "split" position of the speaker in Motion's poems which can be best observed in Part I of the volume. The frequent inclusion of autobiographical material in Motion's poems suggests that the speaker is often Motion himself. The speaker in "The Great Globe", for example, refers to a woman called "Joanna" and Motion dedicated his first effort, *The Pleasure Steamers*, to his first wife, Joanna Jane. The speaker in *Love in a Life*’s "Bad Dreams" calls his wife "Jannie", and Motion's penultimate book, *Natural Causes*, is "For Jan", his present wife. The experience of Motion's mother's accident and subsequent coma is frequently imaged in *Love in a Life* and his father appears in "The Bone Elephant." The dedication of *Love in a
Life reads: “For my children” and indeed Motion is very aware in this book of his role as a father and what his and the world’s legacy to his children will be. His children represent the future and it is their voices in “Run” which rouse the speaker to “Wake up” from his comatose despair and continue the quest. The poems, in other words, are frequently based on Motion’s own experience yet the speaker in these poems takes the position of disconnected observer or ghost, sometimes the “alien invader” or “double,” emotionally involved yet unable to help, an ineffective agent in the tragedy of his own life. He is simultaneously there and not there: for example, in “The One Who Disappeared” while keeping the vigil with his wife during their son’s serious illness, he thinks:

Why do I feel that I’ve died
and am lingering here to haunt you?
Why don’t I say your name?
Why don’t I touch you?

I don’t even feel I’m alive . . .

The poet peers in on his own life, critically observing and evaluating it; he is the unknowing insider and baffled alien, both the storyteller of his own experience and a character in his own life story.

This baffled alienation in poem after poem is seen as a consequence of the inadequacy of language itself, not only splitting the speaker from himself, but also from everyone else in his life. The speaker repeatedly mourns the silence, the failure of language, and the breakdown of communication. In “Judgement” the speaker finds himself: “waiting for light/and what it shows/of someone else/who lies awake/all night beside me/and never speaks.” In “Toot Baldon,” the couple are: “undressing for bed like strangers/who haven’t a clue what to say,/but already imagine a morning/when they will awake alone,/with sunlight splitting the curtains/to pour its fatuous heat/in the vacant space beside them;/the perfect undimpled pillow;/the blank sheet.” In “Kanpur,” a wall forms in “the space between” their “separate beds.” In “Hull,” the inhabitants visit “the plant-house” which is “full of strangers who flounder/aimlessly round and round in its tropical bubble,” and “nod to each other through floppy-tongued leaves.” In “The Bone Elephant,” the father and son are “used to talking in circles/(my generation, my father’s) -/We cannot take a straight line/or rise on each other’s shoulders.” This failure of language to breach the
spaces between people is reflected by the seemingly fragmented, disconnected structure of the poems in *Love in a Life* which accentuate the exemplary distances between the poet, poem, and reader. The poet’s inaccessibility for the reader and vice versa, and the poem’s inaccessibility for both of them, mirrors the split between the poet as participant in his life and as a reader, an interpreter, a poet, of that life. The poems then, exemplify the “new British poetry” delineated in Motion and Morrison’s introduction (12). They emphasize the poetic “process” (19): the poem’s “invention” (an invention which is as much the reader’s as the poet’s), and the “search” for meaning rather than meaning itself.

The idea of the “search” or quest not only provides the theoretical structure to *Love in a Life*, but also supplies one of the book’s thematic organizing principles. The theme is encountered immediately in the Robert Browning poem which both prefaces the book and gives Motion his title. The excerpt begins: “Heart, fear nothing, for, heart thou shalt find her -/Next time, herself! - not the trouble behind her” and it continues: “[I] /Range the wide house from the wing to the centre./Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter./Spend my whole day in the quest/ . . . /Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!” The first poem of *Love in a Life*, “Bad Dreams,” begins the meditation on these images of separation from a loved one, of loss, of searching, of the difficulty of *knowing* even those closest to you, of knowing oneself, of home, and of the fear of failure which become crucial to the personality and structure of Motion’s book. Like many of the others in the book, much of the poem is comprised of a speaker relating a dream, memory, or vision. In this case, he is abruptly awakened from a terrifying nightmare in which he “saw/ last century’s man/ in a down train from Derby.” The Victorian Age man in his dream carries to London a “gift” inside a “bubble of glass” which “his sovereign” had “ordered.” Queen Victoria’s “gift” is “the first and the only/ bloom of a lily/ to flower in the island/ since time began.” In his dream, the speaker notices, however, that the “bloom” inside its “misty bubble” is “dead as a stone.” The precious and fragile flower, so carefully encased in its glass “bubble” is, in fact, smothered to death. In attempting possession of the lily as an objet d’ art, the monarch has in effect “ordered” its destruction, and the man will have failed in his mission, his promise, his quest will be unfulfilled.

The second section, “Colombia Road,” parallels a personal recollection with the
more public, historical context of the dream in “Derby to St Pancras.” The poet begins, “I just happened to be thinking,” a frequently employed storytelling device in many a Motion stanza and poem, signifying that a memory, story, or vision is about to be related and giving the reader the impression that s/he is following the almost-random path of the speaker’s thoughts as he actually thinks them. Here, it is a memory of a “girl” he had “barely met” who “lay” with him “day after day” on a “white, unpeopled beach” or “tucked in a crevice of wheat.” The memory, however, is, in fact, the memory of an old fantasy as the speaker parenthetically informs us: “(lay in my head, I mean).” We discover, as the speaker “just happened to say her name/aloud,” that she is called “Bryony.” The speaker’s wife who “just happened to hear,” remembers a Bryony she once knew:

Bryony? Did you say Bryony?
I knew a Bryony once -
black eyes, her father farmed.
She died in a car, I think -

Since bryony may also refer to “tendril-bearing vines of the gourd family with large leaves and . . . black fruit” and in the poem Bryony is associated with fruit, wheat, farming, water and the sea (“beach” and brine), and with sex itself, she also represents an image of fertility, creation, and renewal (Webster, 183). Yet, with the invocation of her name, the fantasy is given up and over to the possession of the speaker’s wife and with that, destroyed. The Bryony of the speaker’s imagination offers no potential source for renewal and dies together with the tragic death of the Bryony of his wife’s story. The suggestion is that, by releasing Bryony out of his “head” and into language and the poem, she too is transformed into an art object. She has been cut off in her prime, for the sake of the poem, like the cut flowers he and his wife walk by, “stall after stall,” on Colombia Road and like the plucked lily of “Derby to St Pancras.”

Both these ideas are combined in the last part of the poem in another vision that the speaker “Just then . . . happened to see.” A man voyages in a “Victorian ship” to an island “somewhere near the equator” having learned “from others before him” that “here and nowhere else” he can find “the most beautiful flower/ever to spring in the world” which has a “colour to drive you mad/and scent to steal your heart.” The speaker “see[s]” the man “leap” into the water and climb the cliffs only to find “nothing/but glittering flakes of rock.”
The flower is again elevated to an art object: it is the "only" one, the "most beautiful" "ever to spring in the world." It is of a "colour to drive you mad," a "scent" to "steal your heart." With these legendary poetic attributes, the flower becomes the traditional Romantic aesthetic ideal of the Beautiful. In the end, again, there is disappointment, the promise of "others before" unrealized. Motion suggests that the flower may never have existed at all except in the imaginations of the "others before" and that it has no existence outside such imaging.

In "Bad Dreams," Motion's succeeding and related descriptions of the lily, Bryony, and the flower suggest they are connected to the Muse; they are all in effect idealized by the poetic imagination, and by so doing they are objectified, made into things. The inherent violence and destructiveness of this objectifying is shown in the images of sexual violation and sexual possession that haunt the flora/women in the poem. The lily, also a woman's name, in the "bubble of glass" is "poised in . . . [the] lap" of the man whose "hands . . . [are] laced" around it. The description: "splayed purple hand/and puce second thumb," serves to personify the lily and suggests violation of its purity (lily-white). It is a hand helpless to fend off its captor, an image of bruised female genitalia, a beaten woman "splayed" in the aftermath of assault or rape. So possessed, the "bloom" will become as "dead" and as worthless as "a stone." Bryony, the creative muse of the speaker's imagination is, when invoked by him into language and poetry, "murder[ed]" as a result. She becomes the linguistic property of the speaker's wife and the reader of the poem. Moreover, his wife ends even her poetic life; she becomes a faded memory of someone she "once knew" who "died in a car . . . or something or other." She is both the innocent victim of the speaker's sexual fantasy and the "other woman" who represents the conflict between the speaker and his wife. The pursuit of the "most beautiful flower/ever to spring in the world," said to be found on the "island/somewhere near the equator," is clearly described in terms of greedy sexual conquest. The boat with the man "crouched in the prow" "wriggle[s] into a bay" of "silky turquoise water." He "leap[s] smartly" and "scale[s]" a cliff to get to her. These images are of sexual eagerness and the desire to overpower and possess. The flower here is described in terms of traditional poetic passion: "a colour to drive you mad" and a "scent to steal your heart"; it is also depicted as the temptress. The
barren landscape that the man finds, however, is one of sexual disappointment, impotence, infertility. The island is “nothing/but glittering flakes of rock, like a white unpeopled beach, or a desert of dead grain.” The images of the Bryony sexual fantasy are reversed: the hidden and fertile “white, unpeopled beach” and “crevice of wheat” images associated with the love-making are transformed into the wintery, vast and desolate “white unpeopled beach” and “desert of dead grain.”

These images of the “white unpeopled beach” and “desert of dead grain” in the last lines of “Bad Dreams” also suggest the impotent writer who cannot produce, whose mind and imagination are barren and whose paper is a blank white sheaf. Thus Motion in this poem is commenting on the the nature of “art” and the act of writing poetry, in particular. The suggestion in “Bad Dreams” is that the object of desire, something which is so highly valued that one wishes to preserve it for eternity, is by its very nature unable to be possessed or preserved. The attempt to do so results in disappointment, destruction, and the death of the desired object. Immortalization in art does not offer a satisfactory solution because the very essence of the attraction of the love object are its sensual, temporal qualities -- to see, to touch, to smell, to hear, to taste. The transformation of flower or woman into sexual or art object, and thence a possession for one’s own ambition and satisfaction, requires her removal from her natural habitat: shorn of her essential aliveness, “dead as a stone,” she loses those qualities which originally recommended her. As soon as Bryony becomes part of the poem she is “murder[ed]”. While she remained in the poet’s “head” as a sexual fantasy, she functioned as a figure of imagination, fertility, and life. Motion suggests that the forcing of the precious contents of the mind into language, into the form needed for poetry or narrative, in a sense, kills or corrupts the thing that lives in the mind just as the flower is smothered when encased inside the glass “bubble” as showpiece.

Furthermore, poetry, like the lily, cannot be “ordered” up, written on demand, but must be bestowed as a “gift.” The closest we can come to possession of the beloved -- the lover, the flower, for the poet, the poem -- is in our imaginations. Bryony, after all, is safe for “twenty-one years” in the speaker’s “head”. The problematical relationship with poetry and language expressed in “Bad Dreams” helps explain Motion’s virtual abandonment of any traditional form and the embrace instead of fragmented impressions in
the poems of *Love in a Life*. The poem has demonstrated how traditional poetic quests of the beloved elevated to poetic ideal have failed. Motion journeys instead “down” into the “tunnels” of the Underworld in quest of his unconscious mind and the short lines of simple phrasing in “Bad Dreams” give the reader the sense of this downward movement. In “Bad Dreams,” Motion converges his thoughts, impressions, memories, dreams, and visions in hopes of capturing, as it “bloom[s],” the purity of the imaginative unconscious, thereby giving a life of their own to the pages of his poetry untainted by the corruption into its traditional, restrictive forms (1988, 612-3).

“Bad Dreams,” then, serves as a prologue and invocation to the volume. Like the traditional epic quester (Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, Dante in the *Inferno* and countless figures since) the speaker is entering the underworld of the past, both the past of his country and his own unconscious, but unlike those earlier figures he is without any supernatural protection: he has no golden bough; his plant, his bryony, is black and dead. Aspects of his country’s history, the Victorian Age’s corruption and imperialism highlighted in “Bad Dreams,” for example, are painful for an Englishman who takes pride in his “Englishness,” as Motion obviously does. This raises the question of how Motion can follow Thomas’s example of accepting the “responsibility” for his “native English past” and still bring forward its “admirable qualities,” especially since those qualities might be inextricably linked with other, destructive ones (1980, 7). Motion’s personal past is also difficult to contemplate. That his mother’s accident while he was still an adolescent, her 10-year coma and, finally, death cause him great pain is revealed time and time again in Motion’s work. “Bad Dreams” and subsequently the rest of *Love in a Life* also explore the poetic past and its limitations. Yet there are elements from all these pasts that Motion wants to preserve. Motion’s difficulty is how to take the past -- historical, personal, and, poetic -- with its legacy of pain and death, into the frightening future towards which he sees himself inevitably hurtling, “the beat of [his] heart in time with his journey.”

**III**

In the next poem, “Look,” Motion takes the first step in examining his own personal past to “look” at, take stock of, his own life. Part I, in general, will be concerned ultimately with Motion’s coming to terms with the loss of his mother; Hulse’s claim that
“[t]he tragedy that stopped his mother’s life is in every way at the core of Andrew Motion’s work” (72) is reinforced by Love in a Life. An allusion to his mother appears in at least eight of the poems and it becomes clear that Motion’s violent and early loss of her is what drives his search for a kind of internal, emotional glue for the painful, fragmented memories and impressions she has left behind. In an earlier poem, “Anniversaries,” which documents the anniversaries of his mother’s accident, Motion writes, “Whatever time might bring,/all my journeys take me/back to this dazzling dark:/I watch my shadow ahead/plane across open fields,/out of my reach for ever,/but setting towards your bed/to find itself waiting there” (1985, 77). In the Doppelganger split of the speaker, Motion reveals that part of himself will always be with his mother. The line “out of my reach for ever” suggests both his inability to “reach” his mother and his resulting internal split, the severing wound that cannot be healed. In “Look”, Motion portrays this moment as his darkly ironic primal scene, both as a person and as a poet: for him, the scene is not his mother and father copulating, but rather the premature loss of his mother.

In “Look,” Motion focuses on the core areas of his life while maintaining his distance like a photographer or member of an audience: the images appear like “snapshots” or flashes of scenes from a play. The autobiographical piece, “Skating,” proves revealing here:

The few actual memories which stand out refuse to form themselves into the impressionistic rush which seems to be the usual experience of childhood. They survive, instead, as random snapshots, separated by long blanks. I was made vague, alternately, by beauty and fear... The only abiding thing, linking these isolated moments and suffusing the nothings between them, was the sense of my mother. (1985, 64)

Each stanza of “Look,” begins with, “I pull back the curtain/and what do I see/but... .” The repetition, rhythm, and phrasing is reminiscent of childhood stories or games and, indeed, the poem reveals a strange combination of a grim but childlike imagination. The oxygen tube, for instance, is inside “the wrinkled hole” in his mother’s throat as she lies in the hospital, but the poet imagines her as an astronaut, “as though any day now/she might lift into space/and never return/to breathe our air.” In another image, the poet sees his children’s “legs/kicking through silence/... revolve like the earth/which will bring them to grief/or into their own.” Each image has a double vision; there is the possibility,
however small, of future hope but simultaneously a deep awareness of the pain and hardship that is to accompany any outcome. In the last sequence, the speaker is “jab[bed] . . . awake” from a dream that “time/will last long enough/to let me die happy, not yearning for more/like a man lost in space.” The speaker is again revealed as an “exile,” “look[ing]” in on, but disconnected from the drama of his own experience. This stance reinforces the idea that the poet maintains a deep anxiety and fear about his perceived lack of control over his own life and the lives of those he loves. The fear he confronts in “Look” is his own powerlessness to protect his children from “grief,” to effect his mother’s recovery or even communicate with her, to quell the “yearn[ing] for more” that he feels in himself, or to be sure that he will die satisfied and “happy.”

The terror aroused in Motion by this feeling of helplessness which ends “Look” is dramatized and commented on in the next poem, “One Who Disappeared.” It juxtaposes two stories, the first about a mother whose son fell off a cliff and “immediately dropped away/as if he was young Mr. Punch/whipped from a bare stage/and falling a hundred feet/on sheets of black rock” and the second about parents, presumably the Motions, tending their fever-stricken infant son. The speaker-father in the second part of the poem bemoans his ineffectual role in protecting the son or comforting the mother: “Why do I feel that I am lingering here to haunt you? /Why don’t I say your name? /Why don’t I touch you? /I don’t even feel I’m alive.” The lines echo an earlier poem by Motion, “The House Through,” in which he imagines his mother returning to her home as a ghost, unable to touch anyone. Along with Motion’s previous linking of himself with his mother in “Look” (he feels as trapped and powerless as he imagines she felt in her coma), this carries the suggestion of a connection between his mother in her coma, the son who fell off the cliff and just “dropped away,” and the infant son unconscious with fever who is trying to hang on to life, like the son who fell off the cliff, “snatching a handful/of splintery grass/from the chalk fringe.” The “parents” in the poem, much as Motion, his father, and his brother must have done, “gaze down” at the patient “in silence,/like nervous spies/in an enemy country,/marooned on a beach/waiting for rescue,/scanning the sea /for the wink of a light/which is hours overdue.” The experience of his mother’s accident, coma, and death has obsessed Motion with the knowledge that the worst he could have imagined -- losing
his mother -- can and does “just happen;” that, at any time, you or any of your loved ones may just “[d]isappear” without warning and knowing, and furthermore, that there is nothing you can do to prevent or prepare for it.

Having acknowledged and portrayed the anxious powerlessness he feels in these poems, in the next three poems (“Judgement,” “Cutting,” and “Run”) the speaker sinks into a grim despair and the images become those of entrapment, paralysis, and imagined death. He cannot reconcile to himself the seemingly senseless and unpredictable violence and loss that haunt him, which he sees as lurking around every corner. In “Judgement,” the speaker is reminded of his own insignificance and utter helplessness when he sees “a helicopter witter . . . overhead” and “a fish in a clear lake/when a waterbug paddles the far light.” His “happiness disappear[s]” as he thinks of himself trapped, like the fish, in such a limited realm, at the mercy of so many opposing forces. Motion reaches his moment of deepest personal despair in this section of the book as the poem begins to reach towards a vision of apocalypse. The speaker imagines “death/and . . . everything that sails above the earth/brought low.” He “watche[s] the blood of . . . his] children/spill, and the hard stones at . . . [his] feet crack open.” He feels himself fall through the cracks, “slither[ing] . . . far into the underlying mud.” He is “underground,” worn down to “the sort of bone/a scavenger dog/picks out of the muck/and buries for later/but clean forgets.” The self is annihilated as the bone turns into “nothing at all/like bone, or me, or a single thing/waiting for light.” The “light” sought here is seen, in the next sequence, not to be forthcoming from God: “The hand of God/is a burst of sunlight/torn through the head/ of a windowsaint.” God’s “[j]udgement” is violent and unjust, the “blood of . . . children” is “spill[ed],” and Motion cannot “forget” how when he was a child his mother was suddenly struck down and then cruelly preserved in a comatose state for ten years, never waking before her death. Instead, the speaker closes his eyes and imagines “the best thing on earth.” It is himself on his deathbed “overlooking a garden,” to call his wife and “ask/ for a drink of water . . . to taste and be sure/ . . . [he is] dying at home.” The speaker’s state of mind is so worn down, he is so sunk under with despair that his greatest hope is to realize his ideal way of dying. Even if this is not the imagination as a “dark force,” it certainly does not offer the possibility of “renewal” (1982, 12).
The deep despair encountered in "Judgement" leads, once again, to Motion's mother as the next poem recounts the terror and shock of a remembered hospital visit to a patient, presumably meant to be his mother, who was not able to die "at home." During the young "boy[']s" visit the patient experiences a "fit," her head turns into a "gorgon" who had "swallowed its tongue/but was begging to speak." The boy is not told what is happening but is instead "hurried away." In the next sequence the speaker describes himself as "[a] hundred years old/at four in the morning" like a "clamber[ing] and slid[ing] . . . seal on the ice." A "senseless hand" is "squeezing . . . [his] heart" and "will not die." Then the "ice floes collapse" and in rushes the sea. He is "dead to the world." The image of paralysis and utter helplessness returns, but now with the image of being swallowed up, this time by the sea. In "Run," the speaker is "[s]unk on the bed/of a parched lake" and "star[ing] overhead" to "brace" himself for his children's entrance. His children complain: "We travelled for ever/to reach your door/and in the end/we found it locked./Wake up, damn you!/Wish us good luck!" His children seek to make him leave the underworld of sleep, of the unconscious, of the past. "Cutting" and "Run" show signs of the speaker's own wish to disentangle himself from the painful past, to "cut" and "run", to escape, but his terror of the future keeps him bound, stuck in the mud, unable to rouse himself to move on. In "Judgement," he remains buried underground, in "Cutting," drowned by the sea, in "Run," a dried-out sunken ship. The self-identity he questions in "Cutting", "[w]hat became of the boy . . . ?" and "[w]here am I now?" finds its answer only in death: "I am dead to the world./It is all as I thought./And who might you be?" The colloquial expression, "dead to the world" indicates a sleep so deep it is impossible to wake from and recalls the comatose state of his mother. It is as if he has ceased to be the quester in the underworld and instead become one of the figures the quester encounters.

The children, like their father, venture to understand their past, their lives, their parents. It is not their turn yet, however, and prompted by their admonishing voices in "Run," Motion attempts in the next two poems to envision a positive outcome from the experience of death and to reveal the imagination's potential for renewal. "Cleaned Out" begins with an angry and bitter image of having been violated, of "all the family things," his father's "life," being stolen by "a vanload of pricks." But this is immediately followed
by a “dream of falling” backwards in time to a primal, pre-Edenic state: “the only life/a glacier stream/a sapphire ledge/ a fruiting tree,” an inversion of the apocalyptic vision of “Judgement.” Although this, in its nostalgic desire for the world before the violence and greed of human beings, is backward-looking, the very fact that it can be imagined means that the last sequence begins to intimate the possibility of joyful and confident renewal. The speaker in this sequence is meant to be a human being transformed after death into part of an idyllic landscape. The transformed speaker promises a “home” after death, and strength to survive life’s many trials: “blaze, bereavement, battle, [and] blow.”

I am your home, if you ever arrive;
I am dead; I am also alive.
I have lost my heart to the marsh
and my skin to ailing light and the wind’s lash.
I am seeding grass in my muscular hands and feet;
I am fire and fleet.
I have carved my newfangled bones from a solid oak
no blaze, bereavement, battle or blow ever broke.
I am twigs in my fingers and hair;
I am curdled air.
Best of all is my voice from the springing south:
brilliant, particular leaves come rioting out of my mouth.

This is a comforting vision of Motion’s mother, reclaiming her place on the earth in a different form. By melting back into Nature, she has not lost life but gained, Motion imagines, a greater power, not least the gift of communication, for she is now a natural artist: the “brilliant, particular leaves” that a poet struggles for simply “come rioting out of [her] mouth.” Death here brings renewal, indomitable strength, talents, and tenderness. The next poem “Close” shows that even if it is only through death that a renewal is possible, such a possibility is, paradoxically, available to the living. The speaker in “Close” undergoes a kind of baptismal transformation by imagining his own drowning during a seaside picnic with this family. “The afternoon [he] was killed” he “had never seen the country/looking so beautiful.” He sees the world through the fresh lens of renewed innocence: his wife, changing into her swimming costume is: “as shy as she was
The fear of death, especially one’s own death, can revivify one’s life.

The limitations of this extremely personal, indeed solipsistic idea, are shown in the following poem which concludes Part I as Motion is “slapped” back into confronting his old fears. The restorative imaginative visions of “Cleaned Out” and “Close” are shattered as he comes into contact once again with the “pricks” of real life. In “A Blow to the Head,” a family has traveled out of England into France and the speaker’s wife is hit on the head by a “gang of kids” on the metro for “moving her bag/from the seat to her lap”; she “wept through every station into Paris.” The incident triggers the speaker’s memory of a newspaper article he had read about a man who was hit, “not a serious blow,/but it drove him mad.” It “finally killed him/as well as his father,/who two years later/surrendered his heart with a definite crack.” He then remembers an experience of his own, when he “was a kid.” A “man called Morris/slapped my face/so crazily hard/it opened a room/inside my head/where plates of light/skittered and slid/and wouldn’t quite/fit, as they were/meant to, together.” These lines suggest the not fitting together: the phrases are deliberately disconnected, the rhythm jolting and hesitant, reinforcing the idea that the blows have radically and irreversibly changed things inside the heads of these victims forever. The image of the “blow” to the “head” is inextricably linked to Motion’s mother whose fall from her horse resulted in the fatal head injury. Once again Motion is forced to contemplate his mother after her injury: “I ... find my mother/returns to me/... ginger with bruises,/hair shaved off,/her spongy crown/is ripe with blood.”

In this poem, then, Motion is concerned with the long-term effects of such an experience, not only on the victim but on those who experience a different kind of “blow.” The last image in the poem speaks to the deeply embedded distrust associated with such an experience, and the division and misunderstanding it engenders which, in turn, reinforces its own fear and suspicion. Motion remembers a “dog /in a reeking yard” that he tried to persuade to take a piece of candy. “I was holding a choc/in a folded fist,/but the dog couldn’t tell/and twitched away-/its snivelling whine/like human fear,/its threadbare head/too crankily sunk/to meet my eye/or see what I meant/by my opening hand.” Motion is, in a sense, acknowledging that his dread of the future and fear of losing his loved ones,
caused by the unhealable wounding he experienced in losing his mother, has “cut” him off from experiencing happiness.

The fragmented nature of the individual poems then, their intratextual echoing and overlapping, creates the effect of impressions following on impressions, each enriching and building on the other. The fear of the journey and what it might lead to in “Bad Dreams” is followed by “Look,” in which the poet snapshots the most vital areas of his life and acknowledges his powerlessness to preserve and protect them. “The One Who Disappeared” dramatizes his fear: the violent and senseless loss of life, how a loved one can disappear, “drop” out, “fall” off the “edge” with no warning and for “no reason at all.” “Judgement” reveals the effects of this overwhelming terror. The speaker is worn down to the “bone,” flings out a desperate “hand” for help from God but, in the end, finds the only hope in a vision of death. In “Cutting” we begin to see how Motion’s mother fits into the story: the traumatic experience that “squeez[es] . . . [his] heart,” and “will not die.” “Run” intends his escape but finds him trapped once more by an inability to “forget” his mother’s death, by an intolerance for the option of suicide (“To hell with out of place!/That’s the fucking Thames dribbling down your face!”) and by his responsibilities as a father whose children need him to “Wake up” and “Wish [them]) good luck!” By “Cleaned Out” and “Close” he manages to turn his fear and pessimism toward imaginative visions of renewal. In “Cleaned Out” a “fall” back into an idyllic pre-Edenic state, and a vision of his mother becoming part of the earth, stronger and happier than before and promising a “home” for him should he “ever arrive.” In “Close,” Motion begins to consider the renewed vision that the experience of death and its changes can foster. After being “killed” his perspective is transformed: he comes to view things through a rosy lens: “I had never seen the country/looking so beautiful -/furnace red in the poppies . . . /a darker red in the rocks/ . . . and pink in the western sky/which bode us well for tomorrow.” For the first time, Motion begins to imagine a promising “tomorrow” and realizes that his drowning occurred not because he was “too far out” but “too close.” With “A Blow to the Head,” however, the poet’s brief optimism vanishes as he is confronted by the reality of experience.

The violent incident on the metro restores his conviction of the unpredictable and uncontrollable violence of life learned through his own experience, his preoccupation with
the permanent damage and effects of this violence, and a gruesome vision of his mother's injuries. Motion seems to be saying all of this is, indeed, "too close," too much a part of his consciousness for him ever to forget. With his mother's accident, her head "ginger with bruises, hair shaved off, her spongy crown/... ripe with blood," something inside his own head has "skittered and slid" and he is changed forever. In "Look," Motion compares himself to a "dog" who "howl[s]... for the moon." In "A Blow to the Head," he is both the "kid" offering the "choc" and the dog with the "threadbare head" who is too fearful and distrustful, too vulnerable, to accept the kindness, the something sweet, whose head has become "too crankily sunk" to raise his "eye" to even his own brief visions of renewed innocence and hope. In short, in Part I Motion sets out the fragmented shards of his personal life that he needs to put in order. The type of epiphanic moments found in "Close" are by their very nature tentative and temporal, inexorably and inevitably succeeded by violence, by "blow[s] to the head," from outside such moments. "A Blow to the Head" leads the narrative out of England and Motion's personal experience into the public realm: all its blows, divisions, borders, and fatalities need to be confronted if any domestic security can be secured.

IV

Consequently, in Part II Motion moves into a public, historical arena and considers both his own and poetry's role in the light of these realities. In "The Prague Milk Bottle," written in Spring 1989 and dedicated to the Czech poet Ivo Smoldas, Motion's earlier themes of paralysis and entrapment in Part I are recognized in a new context: in the experience of a visit to Eastern Europe. The living conditions in Prague are uncomfortable: the "bathplug won't fill the hole," the water is cold, his "phone call home doesn't go through" and the "milk of kindness, our mother's milk... leaks like a sieve" and "keeps us screaming most of the time." One has a "headache" but there aren't any drugs available. Your "wildest dreams" are just that; you always awake "alone in [the] dark." Motion's refrain in this poem is: "It's not suppression, it's humiliation." In the end, the speaker's visit ends and he leaves, but Ivo, waving his farewell from his side of the border, is "pinned/on a block of light/the size of a stamp,/his mechanical arm glumly aloft,/his mouth ajar/to show he is screaming/if I could just hear." Communication by language is seen to
fail once again, free speech is not tolerated; instead of producing poetry, Ivo is silently “screaming” like Edward Munch’s painting because “[t]he men they put in power/(they aren’t stupid) - some of them/can hardly speak a sentence.” The poet’s “nod good-bye” to Ivo in front of the border police is wordless: it is “like seeing the ghost/of a friend whose death/made you say everything/there was to say.” In “The Prague Milk Bottle,” Motion expresses the powerlessness of language and poetry. Here the physical border of Czechoslovakia beyond which Ivo cannot go suggests other separations and boundaries: between “suppression” and poetry, between silence and speech, between human “kindness” and “humiliation.” The ideas of separation, entrapment, loss, pain, and home which Part I deals with recur here in a more public forum, with a world scope. The image of the parents who watch their son, stricken with fever, “like nervous spies/in an enemy country” in Part I’s “One Who Disappeared,” compares the unconscious state of the sick child to being in dangerous, unwelcome territory in which one is trapped and “waiting for light.” In other words, “One Who Disappeared” anticipates this poem which in turn contextualizes Motion’s personal and poetic concerns within a larger, universal view. The difference being that, at the end of this poem, Motion is aware of being allowed to guiltily “slither” away, grateful for escape, while Ivo is left behind, silent, “pinned.”

“It is an Offence,” the second and middle poem of Part II, confronts the reverse issue of “suppression” of language and communication introduced in “The Prague Milk Bottle.” In Prague, the expression of ideas is greatly limited and controlled by the government; “it is” a punishable criminal “offence.” Ivo Smoldas’ expression is “suppress[ed].” By following “The Prague Milk Bottle” with this poem, Motion contrasts the offensiveness of the “shit” now being mass-produced in the contemporary English literary world, perhaps as he encountered it as editor at Chatto & Windus and Faber and Faber, with the importance of words and “art” in Prague by using the image of a dog which frequently “craps” on his doorstep, leaving “sloped, weary turds/like a single file of slugs” that he and his family often step in and track through the flat in “bobbles or flakes or hanks or outrageous slithery smears.” The “sad old dog”, “once a racer”, doesn’t know what he’s doing,” says the poet, and yet he’d “still like to cover his arsehole with quick-set cement.” Towards the end of the poem, however, Motion implicates himself as he
sympathizes with the dog’s “yearn[ing] to leave . . . [his] mark on society,/and not see machines or people trample it foolishly” reasoning that “[o]n the one hand it’s only shit,” but “on the other, shit’s shit,/and what we desire in the world is less, not more, of it.” “It is an Offence” considers the other side of the coin, a different kind of “offence” to which our “free” Western societies are vulnerable. This poem also speaks, on a more personal level, to Motion’s own doubts about his poetic talent and, specifically, his own desire to break new ground with his own work. In “Look” and “A Blow to the Head” Motion compares himself to the dogs in the poems, and here too, he identifies himself as the “sad old dog”: once a star “racer,” now a producer of “shit” in various forms, who “doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Motion has the freedom that Ivo Smoldas yearns for but carries the responsibility of using that freedom to create something worthy of it. This anxiety and self-doubt as to his own poetic abilities represents the dark low point of Part II, as “Judgement” did in Part I, and forms a main ingredient of Part III, where Motion contemplates his poetic “fathers,” the “English line” to which he has striven to be made successor.

Just as in Part I’s “A Blow to the Head” Motion came back full circle to reassess the ideas previously introduced and to propel the narrative into the next section, so the last poem in Part II recalls this section’s previous ideas and also prepares the ground for Part III. “The Bone Elephant” deals with the war experience of the speaker’s father, with their father and son relationship, and with the freedom of Eastern Europe from Moscow’s rule in late 1989. In the first sequence, the theme of entrapment returns as the speaker describes his father: “Like a toy in a box/my father’s tank/crouched in the hold/of a flat-bottomed boat,/ . . . and my father inside/a leaden soldier.” Unlike Motion, who in Part I must be goaded by his family, “Make up your mind!”, “Wake up, damn you!”, his father has no choice but to act, even if it means he must move into an even more dangerous situation. He is a “leaden soldier” who is “thrown into [the] fire.” The “Channel” was “still too deep” so that “the first tank off/stalled and sank” which meant that his father “reached dry land/by crushing the head/of a man who drowned/and was also his friend.” Motion acknowledges the brutal reality of war in which his father is part of a destructive force: in a distorted fishing image, “the road he cast/over towns and woods/like a floating line/which was heavy
as lead/and smashed them apart.” Yet his father has “made [his] mark on society” as a part of this force -- by saving the world from a Nazi victory.

The second sequence of “The Bone Elephant” concerns the difficulty of communication in the father-son relationship. As they enter into a “snicket off Wenceslas Square,” the speaker is “thinking of buying a hat.” His father disapproves of the one his son chooses: “‘A hat? It’s not very green -/it is fox - a Muscovite hat:/admire it here, in the silver,/and here, in the bronze.’” The speaker explains in an aside to the reader: “We are used to talking in circles/(my generation, my father’s) -/We cannot take a straight line/or rise on each other’s shoulders.” The son ends up buying the hat he likes even though it is “too tight” and will give him a “migraine” just to make the point to this father that he could not make in words. The last sequence deals with the TV news of the removal of the Berlin Wall and includes a scene of “someone . . . rising/on everyone’s shoulders,/hugging the sky/which roars his name/ . . . then spreading his arms/above Wenceslas Square/like a fisherman showing/the largest fish/his heart could desire.” The boundaries and limitations, the walls of silence and entrapment, “suppression” and “humiliation” that were seen in “The Prague Milk Bottle” are broken through and a newly released Eastern Europe realizes its first freedoms in expressions of joy. The “fisherman” here is a creative, rather than a destructive force. Motion may even mean him to be the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel as a kind of rejuvenated Fisher King who will now lead his people in their renewed hope for a fruitful and fertile existence. The search, the fishing, is over and the “fisherman” has caught “the largest fish/his heart could desire.” The doomed art object of “desire” from “Bad Dreams,” here becomes the ideal of freedom and human rights, a force for life. The artist, here, Motion seems to be saying, “leave[s] his mark on society” by employing his talents in speaking and fighting for human freedoms, not limited to but including that of artistic expression. In doing so, he has regained his “home” for not just himself but his country. Poetry here is seen to have a revitalizing power. At any rate, Motion suggests, both his father’s and the “fisherman[‘s]” quests have left far greater “mark[s]” on society than has Motion himself.

The three poems in Part II have served to propel the narrative of Love in a Life onward by introducing a public, world scope which incorporates, contextualizes, and puts
into perspective the personal struggles of the first part of the book while hinting at those of Part III. Motion employs this political, historical awareness of the difficult relationships between governments and countries as a backdrop for the problematic husband and wife relationships of Part III. In Part II the father and son disagree because of their different historical and political experiences, a generation gap which fosters a communication breakdown. Part III hints at the history of injuries between England and India and England and Ireland which are at the root of the divisive walls of misunderstanding and anger built up between these countries and transposes these deeply embedded painful pasts onto the marriage relationships within the poems. Part II also further examines, in a public sphere, the role of the artist, especially the writer, introduced in “Bad Dreams.” In “Bad Dreams,” the speaker hints at a competition between the poetic muse, Bryony, and his wife as she admonishes him to “Make up your mind!” The suggestion is that the poet's relationship with poetry and his role as husband in some way conflict. Ironically, the poet, master wordsmith, cannot find the right words in Part III to save his marriage. As a consequence of the examinations of Part II, Part III represents a return to England which will include recognizable echoes of and direct references to Shakespeare, Thomas, and Larkin as Motion reassesses his relationship with his poetic forefathers on whose “shoulders” he has attempted to “ris[e].”

V

The title of the first poem of Part III, “The Great Globe,” with its deliberate allusion to The Tempest recalls Shakespeare and his Globe Theatre. The theater was designed to be capable of depicting the universe so that the stage was meant to be the earth, there was a trap-door for the Underworld or Hell, and a high balcony for Heaven. The circular shape of the theatre walls and the spheric “globe” it represented suggests the convergence and the closure, the coming full circle that this part of the book will lead us to. As Motion nears the end of his quest in Part III, having analyzed his self in Part I and his historical position in Part II, Prospero’s famous speech about “the great globe,” resonates and helps explain how Motion finally reconciles the pain that goes hand in hand with loving and with life, with loving in a life.

Despite its suggestive title, “The Great Globe” is probably the most oblique and
mysterious poem in the book. This is a particularly illustrative example of the kind of poetry Motion described in his introduction to The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry. The poem denies readers “essential information,” its story is “incomplete” leaving them “uncertain,” forcing them to make their own connections, to invent themselves (19). The first stanza deals with what seems to be an excavation, presumably the recent archeological dig for the Globe Theatre: “The border was neither wide nor deep, but it took a day/to sieve it.” The border idea from Part I returns, this time as the separation or boundary within a marriage. The excavation represents a search or quest to find something valuable, some artifact worth digging from “sprays of gravel, . . . and the bonfire wrecks left by people before us:/sheets of sick iron, charred bottles, batteries leaking pus.” The second stanza concerns, presumably Motion’s first wife, “Joanna” and a “brittle white china body” that the poet “smashed” and that Joanna “smashed and hid” but which, he tells us, “still cuts” him “out of the deep solid earth wrestling and fretting like the sea.” For a marriage to succeed both husband and wife must “work . . . through” the “wrecks left by people before us,” to heal the emotional wounds and “cuts” left by past relationships or experiences. Motion commented on this sense he had of the centrality of early experiences in later life: “Increasingly I marvel at how obdurately the unconscious seems to complete itself at a very early stage in our composition. All neuroses, dreads, hopes -- everything -- are primal. Or mine seem to be” (1988, 612). Here Motion alludes once again to the shattering effects of his mother’s accident. Though these experiences, he seems to say, are buried in the “deep solid earth,” in the unconscious underworld, they still wound him and, as a consequence, wound his later relationships.

The image of the china doll suggests the innocence of childhood as well as returning to the aesthetic ideas of “Bad Dreams.” Motion’s journey to the Underworld, his unconscious mind, has unearthed an artifact which has “cut” the couple off from each other. The “smashed” china doll suggests that the art object of “Bad Dreams,” the notion of that traditional structure of static, timeless perfection, has been “smashed” by Motion and his former wife, Joanna, in divorce. Motion and his new wife must search for a different kind of structure to replace it; consequently the poet feels the “solid earth” beneath his feet transformed into a “sea” moving and unbalancing him, threatening, as in “Judgement,” to
swallow him up as he “wrestl[es]” with this new fluidity. This first poem of the volume’s final section introduces the last major theme of the book as the poems in Part III all deal principally with the marriage relationship and the vast distance, the paradoxical separation and border, that “cuts” between two people who have chosen to share their lives. It is about the end of innocence (it is clear that all of Motion’s characters have in some way “fall[en]”) and the failure of tradition and of language to bridge the gap, making the need to forge ahead, to develop new structures, an obvious necessity. Nevertheless, all of the poems in Part III show indications of clinging desperately to the past. Edward Thomas, especially, is resurrected again and again in these poems and is even mentioned by name as the poet identifies himself, “when I was Edward Thomas.” Indeed the poems hint at a longing for a past that is no more, a heroic past for England without the guilt of Ireland and India, a past in which Philip Larkin still writes poetry and plays his jazz records, a past before adultery and betrayal of the innocent dreams of newlyweds. In Part III the poet in effect takes himself on a journey of the past to consider all the loves of his life.

All of the poems in Part III have place name titles. “Toot Baldon,” the second poem in Part III, with its Anglo-Saxon name recalls the early history of England, and the first known English written poem, “Beowulf.” “Toot Baldon” itself also contains a kind of journey within the history of a marriage. Using several pastoral images that Edward Thomas was fond of, Motion tells us that when “first... [they] were married” the couple “rented an attic flat/like a boat (hunched ceilings/and lopsided walls)/on course for open country.” Looking out the “sitting-room bow” they saw “a green drop through sky/and a crinkled wave of elms/to a field where a herd of Friesians/drifted like cumulus shadows-/fields dotted and dashed with nettle/dreamily rolling and lifting/as if they were canvas flapped out.” Their marriage seems idyllic; they were “Adam and Eve in love.” Yet by the second half of the poem, they have moved to the city of Oxford and their adventures fade into “the darkened home” they “are trying to make together,/undressing for bed like strangers/who haven’t a clue what to say.” In the first half, with another favorite Thomas image of the path or road, the poet assures us that they “never” took “that trampled patch/where the path split up like veins/wriggling away from a heart.” By the end, however, the poet thinks that “[i]t might be happening now, as they both “imagine a
morning/when they will awake alone/with sunlight splitting the curtains/to pour its fatuous
heat/in the vacant space beside them.” This “vacant space” pertains both to his marriage
and to his imagination. Earlier the speaker called himself “Edward Thomas” and his image
of “the blank sheet” echoes Thomas’ image in his poem “The Long Small Room” of the
“clean white page,” the writer without words.

The association with Joanna and the innocence alluded to in “The Great Globe,” is
repeated as the “Toot Baldon” couple’s walk in the city is interrupted by a small girl who
has been hit by a car on the road. The speaker “cradles her head” while “her eyes keep
glaring/angrily into mine/as if I was all she loved,/and . . . they lose their light/like stones
picked out of water/and left to dry in the sun.” The suggestion is that the poet and the
obsessions that drive and activate his poetry have somehow betrayed and destroyed the
innocent love of the first years of their marriage. The “sun” here and in the bed image
suggests a divisive, destructive force perhaps suggesting also that Motion’s obsession with
his mother’s death, and his role as son, has had some hand in “splitting” the couple apart.

In the next poem, “Kanpur,” the “split” between the couple is figured by “wet white
plaster” drops which fall during the night from the roof on the “space between” the couple’s
“separate beds.” A wall is building up between the two, an image Motion emphasizes by
constructing the first two stanzas as questions and the last two as answers and by
separating the halves with the word, “No” followed by a period. Motion also continues to
analyze his own poetic past since many of his earlier poems, including “Independence,” the
poem which gained him wide recognition, dealt with the British in India. Perhaps in
response to Hulse’s attack on his “nostalgic” politics, “Kanpur” registers his awareness of
the insurmountable divisions between himself, as an Englishman, writing about a country,
India, whose history includes an English invasion and conquest.

The next poem, “Belfast,” continues the examination of historical guilt, of his
poetic past, and of marriage guilt, as it employs the idea of betrayal in the splitting up of a
marriage due to adultery. Motion alludes to a trip to Belfast he presumably made for
research on the biography of Philip Larkin he was then writing. The speaker goes to
Belfast to “root up . . . [his] man” but finds that there is nothing left: even “the marvellous
records which made him cry/are smashed and buried . . . /in that dump you pass on the
airport road/where everyone’s rubbish goes when they die.” The speaker’s wife has an affair, or he imagines her having an affair, while he is gone and he ends up in a “blank, stripped-pine hotel/... lonely as hell.” Motion links both of these betrayals of loyalty with the ancient England-Ireland conflict which has split Ireland in violence against itself. The Irish taxidriver offers Larkinesque advice: “It’s no good. No matter how/desperately you man A loves your B they forget them, or start/lying about them eventually” and remarks that “At this late stage in history/the past is one flat field of shit.” The taxidriver highlights the terrifying suspicion that once someone is dead, “No matter how/desperately” s/he is loved, s/he is quickly forgotten or lied about, and all the vestiges of their life, everything s/he ever cared about ends up on the garbage “dump”. Motion confronts the betrayal of a great poet after his death; a betrayal his biography of Larkin with its disturbing revelations might be guilty of, while at the same time in its assertion of the importance and greatness of Larkin’s poetry it seeks to keep him and his work “alive” for the future. Motion realizes as well that however accurate his biography may be it cannot replace the brutal fact of his friend and mentor’s death, as he has Larkin say in his earlier elegy, “[t]his is someone’s subject speaking” (1987, 54). This poem also raises the issue of Motion’s anxiety over his own career and how his own reputation will fare after death.

These issues are dealt with directly in the Larkinesque “Hull,” the place in England where Larkin and Motion first met, where Motion began to develop his reputation as a poet, and where Larkin lived up until his death. In the poem, a couple “grapple[s] for nearly/an hour/... gasping and gritting [their]... teeth” as the speaker attempts to “persuade” his lover that their “life could go on.” The lovers try to fight their way back into love but their attempts are useless; love must, as in the precious flower of “Bad Dreams,” be bestowed as a “gift” not “ordered” on demand. Finally they “just give ... up” and she “plunge[s] into her jersey again/and pick[s]) up a book” while he, “pretending nothing unusual has happened,” looks out the window. The poem ends with the speaker's vision of the toad-like inhabitants of Hull, “the shat-upon dump,” who stand at their darkening windows and think if they hurry there’s time to get dressed and go out and begin the day over again - with a visit, perhaps, to the plant-house
which glistens below, full of strangers who flounder
aimlessly round and round in its tropical bubble,
and nod to each other through floppy-tongued leaves,
and once in a while

stop at the cage where a moth-eaten minah bird
squelts on its metal bough and says nothing at all
except - if you scare him badly enough -
his name.

This quote provides yet another image of the desperate lack of communication
between people, their isolation from one another. Like the father and son in "The Bone
Elephant," who talk in "circles" and "cannot take a straight line /or rise on each other's
shoulders," the "strangers . . . flounder/round and round" in the "tropical bubble." The
"bubble" refers back to "Bad Dreams" and suggests the smothering stagnation of the
enclosed group of Hull inhabitants who have nothing better to do but "start the day over
with a visit to the plant-house," where they stare silently at each other like fish in a tiny
bowl. The power of language for Motion as for Edward Thomas belongs to the "leaves."
They have the "tongue[s]" and, as we saw in "Cleaned Out" with the tree image, form the
words: "brilliant prolific leaves come rioting out of my mouth." The minah bird, a great
mimic of human voices, has had no voices to listen to and remains silent. Only when
forced at the end of this poem composed of one entire sentence does it, in the last line, "say
. . . his name." The bird represents Motion’s doubts about his capacity to make use of
language, especially when compared to those great poets of the "English line" he so
admires and with whom he has positioned himself. Motion recalls also in this poem, the
now silent voice of Philip Larkin and his fear that if Larkin represents, as Motion has
written, the synthesizing moment in the poetic tradition in which Motion is working, what
is there then left for him to accomplish? Larkin’s "name" is at the end of a long English
line, perhaps Motion cannot "ris[e]" on his "shoulders." In "Hull", the "leaves" may stand
for what has already been written in the pages, or leaves in the books, of "others before
him" that he cannot hope to transcend.

The characters of Part III remain separate, isolated, and alienated even from those
with whom they most desire a connection and Motion illustrates this repeatedly as a
problem in marriages, always setting it against the background of Part I and the frustrations
of communication with his mother during her ten-year coma and Part II’s world scope and public emphasis on the difficulties between countries. His mother was there, alive and close enough to touch, but, in effect, “dead to the world” just as the married couple in “Toot Baldon” have become “like strangers” who “haven’t a clue what to say” even though once, early in their marriage, they were “Adam and Eve in love.” Part III denies language, because of its inadequacies, the power to break through and break down the past injuries and resentments built up between partners. Although many contemporary artists’ work can be understood as a reflection of a fragmented and largely incomprehensible universe, the driving force behind Love in a Life is a quest that strains against this acceptance of the futility of union and understanding. In Love in a Life, Motion has followed the paths of his mind, in dreams, memories, and imaginative visions, examining and reassessing all the loves of his life, his mother, poetry and the poets he loves -- Thomas, and Larkin -- his family, and England, in a quest to reconcile his past and move on to a new future. He has sought to come to terms with his mother whose life and death exerts such a powerful force in his life, with the poets he claims as poetic “fathers” although he perpetually doubts his ability to state such a claim, and with the country he both loves and laments. It is only in reaching the final poem, “Tamworth,” and the end of the quest that Motion is able to make his peace and that peace, he finds, must be achieved with an embrace, rather than an abandonment, of his past, painful though it may be.

VI

“Tamworth” appropriately recapitulates the rest of the book, as it echoes and refers back to previous poems, raises similar issues, repeats in its single text the quest of the book. As Love in a Life has examined Motion’s history, personal, public, and poetic, “Tamworth” comes full circle to an understanding and acceptance of his role as part of a cycle and the necessity of separation before union. The poem begins with fragments -- short, disconnected sentences which stand alone, resisting any linkage to the rest of the poem. Although these fragments are meant, one suspects, to be deliberately mysterious and oblique, their images suggest certain antithetical interpretations. The first line, “Red brick on red brick” conjures up a structure, perhaps a wall or border to create a separation or division, or, on the other hand, a building, perhaps a home or meeting place, an
enclosure to foster unity under a common shelter. “Lilac smoking in sere gutters and crevices” may signify the destructive force of a fire, or may recall the scent of a beautiful flower or woman. “A pigtailed head on lamp-post after lamp-post” may suggest the primitive violence that strikes the naive innocence of an unsuspecting family home or, alternatively, recalls the guiding and welcome light for the weary returning traveler. By using these fragments, Motion is mirroring in his poetry the idea that life can seem, for anyone who has experienced pain or tragedy, frighteningly incomprehensible and impossible to explain in traditional language structures.

The next sequence reveals that the speaker is on yet another journey, but this time the journey is that of a couple, “we.” They drive off “into the blue” in the speaker’s mother’s “estate,” referring both to a model of automobile and also suggesting that property which is distributed in a will after death. “Estate” also carries the connotation of “home.” Motion tells us, his mother “was in hospital then/and didn’t care.” In other words, his mother can’t use the car, being in hospital, but also, being in a coma, she isn’t even aware that either her car or her son is gone. It also implies that the car has now become the couple’s home since his parents are at the hospital and don’t “care”. They are suspended in time and place: “Out of nowhere, nowhere else to go,/stuck in the dead afternoon, collapsed.” They had “zigzagged over the map/.../any excuse had done/to get us a week alone.” But they find only death and violence: in Southwell, “men . . . poked long rods/in voluptuous hedgerows, streams, rush-clumps,” presumably searching for a corpse, perhaps a rape victim or a murdered child. Even though the men return “empty-handed,” the couple decide Southwell is “not for us./It was death.” They decide to leave, in their “last hour of day,” “squeezed by a storm fuming from Nottingham way.” The couple notice, as they cross the border out of Southwell, that the “dusty country . . . [they] entered/braced and opened itself - leaf-hands splayed and grasping,/toads pushing up stones, mercury ponds blinking.” The sexual imagery here both recalls and reverses the images in the opening poem of Love in a Life, “Bad Dreams.” While there the “purple hand” of the lily lay bruised and “splayed,” enclosed in its bubble, here the thirsty “leaf-hands” are “splayed and grasping” for the “fuming” storm, which is “champing till ready.”

Although Motion still retains his repugnance for human violence and violation,
“Tamworth” seems also to demonstrate an acceptance of the violence that exists in Nature herself as the storm brings “squall after squall/of brickdust, nail, hair, and Christ knows what/shrieks and implorings we never caught even a word of.” Motion suggests that the ways of Nature are beyond human comprehension; there is no language or if there is, we can’t hear “a word of” it. So the couple “find . . . [themselves] lost and . . . [are] glad of it.” Lost in a “lane-labyrinth,” they “Therefore . . . went no further. Therefore . . . simply sat/and watched the sky perform.” The storm provides a spectacle which they view through the “curtain” from the “mattress” they have set up in the back of the car:

    elephant clouds at first
    with their distant wobble and bulge like ink underwater,
    then splits of thunder, then the sour flash of light

    glancing off metal, then clouds with their hair slicked back,
    edgy, crouching to sprint, and when sprinting at last
    fanned flat, guttering, flicking out ochre tongues
    before losing their heads altogether, boiled down

to a Spanish skirt cartwheeling through woods.

This, however, is quickly “squelch[ed] amid “shrieks and implorings” by “a heavy boot.” The destruction, however, is balanced by renewal. The couple in the back of their car “burrow . . . against each other” in an image of close human contact (“burrow” also suggesting the rabbit, an image of fertility). The storm has quenched the thirst of the “the dusty country.” The “sky” has provided the couple with a glorious “perform[ance]” and the “silence” the storm leaves in its wake is “such” that they can hear “the moon/creak as it enter[s] the sky, and the stubble field around . . . [them]/breathing earth-smell through its bristles.” Motion’s storm in “Tamworth” recalls Nature’s ancient cycle of birth and death. Through the storm image, Motion suggests the awesome and terrible glory of life, the beauty and magic which inevitably goes hand in hand with its destruction and death. Our “squalls” and “shrieks and implorings” are useless against “the heavy boot” so we must look to the journey itself and gain solace in braving the storms of life together. “We” must “burrow against each other,” taking shelter where we can, enjoy the moment, and understand and accept that our “little life” is but a small part in the vastness of time and space, in the long history of “the great globe” (Tempest. IV.i. 155, 152).

Here at last in “Tamworth,” Motion comes to terms with his mother’s death.
Motion refers to his mother's shaved head as having grown a "stubble" in his autobiographical essay, "Skating," and often returns to this word elsewhere when he wishes to recall her. In the earlier poem, "Bloodlines," for instance, the speaker and his brother look for a "god" but instead find a "patch/of stubbly reed where water/convulsed." They watch "the water swallow its tails" and the speaker recalls images of "gargoyles." This is reminiscent of Love in a Life's "Cutting" which recalls his mother's "fit" while in hospital when she "swallow[s] her tongue" and her head looks, to the young boy, like a "gorgon." In "One Who Disappeared," the "wind" which causes the "son" to suddenly "drop . . . away" off the cliff is compared to "stubble-fire through a hedge." In Natural Causes' "You Do, I Do," the speaker "stroke[s]" his lover's hair into a "silky, spiky crown" and "knows at once that he belongs . . . and he's home" (36). In "Cleaned Out," the renewal image combines Motion's mother with the earth and with "home." Finally, in "Tamworth," the "centre" of the "lane-labyrinth" where the couple stop and watch the storm is "a stubble bank" at the "head" of a "valley." The "stubble-field" in "Tamworth," then, taken together with these examples, is an allusion to Motion's mother, fertile Mother Earth, and "the great globe," which is, alive and "breathing" after the tempestuous havoc of the storm, once again renewed, reborn, as part of her ancient cycle of birth and death.

It is often said that Prospero in The Tempest represents the voice of Shakespeare looking back over his career. Motion's Love in a Life is a similar attempt to "fit" the puzzle pieces of his life which have been "cut[ting] . . . [him]/out of the deep solid earth wrestling and fretting like the sea." In "Tamworth," Motion reaches the end of his quest with a return to Edward Thomas, the man and poet who is at the center of the English poetic tradition he has defined and claimed as his ancestry. Like Thomas, he finds the communion he seeks through Nature. Thomas, a sometime mystic, believed it was possible to commune with Nature; it was possible, if someone was truly devoted, to change form, to melt into the surroundings by "feeling out with infinite soul to earth and stars and sea and remote time and recognizing his oneness with them" (1980, 33). With Thomas, Motion comes to agree that wholeness "is not achieved by ignorance or concealment of division, but by a fully conscious acknowledgement of its presence" (1980, 45). Motion's journey throughout Love in a Life culminating in "Tamworth" reveals that he
has realized the same need to “relish his moment of integrated completeness in full recognition of the frustration upon which moments are founded” (1980, 45). In short, the journey Motion has embarked on in Love in a Life has made him realize the “potential for gain in the certainty of loss.” The quests for wholeness and “contentment” in all the areas of his life will be only “intermittently rewarded,” yet he must “continue to pursue it despite the difficulties which will beset the journey,” “committing himself to the long search” (49).

Although “Tamworth” represents the end of Motion’s quest in Love in a Life, he comes to agree that, as he believed Edward Thomas ultimately realized, it is the “journey not the arrival” which will “provide him with the wholeness he seeks,” while at the same time “ensuring that his imaginative . . . inventiveness stays undiminished” (1980, 51). Motion also believes with Thomas, who echoes T. S. Eliot here, that “wholeness depends on contact with tradition.” It is only through his journey from Edward Thomas and his other poetic influences, from his own personal past, from England’s past, and his return to them that has enabled Motion to understand these pasts, and to embrace them in “Tamworth,” at the same time producing a book which moves beyond yet envelopes them. We also, as readers, must comprehend the “process” of our reading of Love in a Life. Rather than viewing each poem as a separate structure, an objet d’art from which it is possible to isolate and extract Beauty or Truth, rather than searching for closure and cohesion, we must surrender ourselves to the journey, the journey of Motion’s mind.

Motion has stated his belief in the power of the imagination and the poetic goal to “extend the imaginative franchise” and the final resolution that “Tamworth” offers is an imaginative one orchestrated by a Prospero-like artist and his magical “art”. Yet the poem also contains perhaps the most deliberately recognizable autobiographical material in the book and is written largely as a relatively straightforward recounting of the events of a travel experience. As the fragments at the beginning suggest, the poem, like Shakespeare’s play, is meant to combine both the terrible and wonderful elements of life -- beauty, imagination, love, birth, death, danger, fear, violence, pain, and suffering. Although in “Tamworth” the merciless “heavy boot” stamps down “shrieks and implorings” in an image of the cruelty and annihilation of war, Motion’s lovers don’t hear “a word of” them but instead see the innocent’s fairytale vision of “lightening over the valley/on its nimble
silver legs -/one minute round our car,/the next high up in heaven/kicking splinters off stars-/then skipping away to somewhere/with the thunder-dog behind it/grumbling but exhausted.” Motion hints at the balance of the two sides, of each as an essential part of a universal wholeness.

At the end of “Tamworth” Motion has finally buried his mother. She has become part of the earth, yet the vision seems a comforting one for him. She becomes part of the ancient “great globe,” Nature, and is still very much alive and “breathing.” Motion’s future clearly now rests with his lover. His “home” is now with her and it is a home not rooted in the ground but mobile and free: they have “driven off into the blue” with “any excuse . . . to get . . . a week alone.” They send a “card” to his parents and are, in fact, “glad” to “find themselves lost” so long as they are together. Unlike Thomas’s perpetually solitary walker, Motion’s sense of wholeness includes, indeed depends upon, the union to be found in being a couple. Love, life, and art are drawn together, synthesized with the awareness that all three are interrelated processes, necessarily unstable and inherently changeable. Like Thomas’s wife, Helen, he recognizes what Thomas himself seems to have dismissed in his quest for artistic fulfillment. Though in no way immune to its pain, Motion, like Helen, finally comes to celebrate the loves in his life for all that they are: “Our life together was a restless sea, tide in tide out, calm and storm, despair and ecstasy; never still, never easy, but always vivid and moving wave upon wave a wide deep glorious sea, our life was terrible and glorious but always life” (1980, 27).


VITA

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