

Poetry on BBC Television 1936 - 2009

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Abstract

Poetry on television entails words, sounds and images. The argument of this thesis is that poetry has been a problem for BBC television because it is an ancient oral and written art form re-presented in a new electronic, visual, time-bound medium. Nevertheless, it was an art form which the BBC was obliged to put on television. I organise this study around three of the challenges that arose: firstly, even when a television programme was about poetry, the poetry was also used to make television. Where the conflict became overt, television invariably took precedence. Secondly, in portraits and biographies of poets, which account for a substantial proportion of the poetry broadcast on television, the BBC has used poetry as a form of confessional testimony. In doing so, it blurred the distinction between general truths about the human condition expressed in poetry, and the particular facts of a poet's life. And thirdly, in using poetry to reflect the nation, BBC television has given particular prominence to a few memorable lines from well-known poems. Using evidence from the BBC archives, from the broadsheet and popular press, and from copies of what was broadcast, this study considers poetry on BBC television over a period of eighty years. The conclusion is that BBC television producers were necessarily troubled in their attempts to bring poetry to television, because to televise poetry is to change it.

Keywords: poetry, BBC television, United Kingdom, history

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1. Poetry and BBC television

Poetry should do two things, one of which is to be true, and that doesn't mean literal truth. It doesn't mean that your poem has to be about exactly the events of your life, but it has to succeed to a condition that is authentic within a life experience, that can be realised and touched and felt... And [the second is to be] the best way of saying the idea in question. **Matthew Hollis, poetry editor at Faber & Faber, interviewed in *Why Poetry Matters* (2009).**¹

Poetry is not a thing to keep locked away in books. Poetry can be seen – as well as heard. Goodnight. **Anonymous, undated script in the BBC Written Archive Centre; presumed to be by producer D.G. Bridson, 1960.**²

1. Introduction: poetry and television

In 2009 the BBC put on a season of poetry programming across all its formats. The television part of this season included documentaries about individual poems, celebrity anthologies, biographies of poets, favourites from the archives, histories of poetry, portraits of the nation through the words of poets and a national poetry recital competition. Its intention was to bring poetry to the nation, to celebrate the great traditions of British and Irish poetry, and to reaffirm a national narrative of poetic pre-eminence. It was representative of what the BBC had done over the course of seven decades of making television programmes about and with poets and poetry. It also illustrated the unresolved nature of debates about how best to put poetry on television.

One of the presenters in the 2009 season was the poet Owen Sheers.³

¹ Matthew Hollis, *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 37:50 – 38:04. [Time codes given in the text were sourced from a variety of playback technologies, and are for guidance only.]

² WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Poetry Pilot,' undated production script, 1960.

³ *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, BBC4, Mondays, 4 May – 8 June 2009, 20.30.

He was aware that there were two not necessarily compatible ambitions in play. One was to use television to bring poetry to the attention of the nation; the other was to use poetry to make television. 'We wanted to use the poems as a door into the stories that lay behind them,' Sheers said of his series *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, 'because obviously TV needs stories, it needs narrative.'⁴ The implication was that poems were not there, in T. S. Eliot's formulation, to 'communicate the poem,'⁵ but to act as a doorway to the stories that television tells – and indeed to the stories that television 'needs.' Sheers was acknowledging that there is a point at which the interests of poetry and the interests of television diverge. That divergence reveals itself in how poetry changes when it is televised: in essence, how, in a process of transmediation, it becomes subsumed into something else, and becomes one of many ingredients in the cultural form we call television. T. S. Eliot proposed that 'a poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader.'⁶ On television the poem's existence lies somewhere between the writer, the producer, the broadcaster, and the viewer, mediated by context and by the medium, and embellished, diminished, or otherwise altered by reading, by image, by editing and, frequently on television, by elision. A poem which is broadcast on television not to communicate 'the poem,' but 'to open the door to the stories that lie behind the poem,' becomes something other than the poem. It becomes 'poetry-on-television.' This thesis is an attempt to understand that process in the context of the particular role the BBC plays in the United Kingdom. It is also an attempt to understand what happens to the

⁴ Quoted in Natalie Whittle, 'A season of televised poetry on the BBC,' *Financial Times*, 2 May 2009, 10.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 30.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 30.

cultural form previously thought of as poetry when it is used in this way.

In this chapter I seek to define what I mean by ‘poetry-on-television.’ I then look at the available data, including a quantitative analysis of BBC programmes that have depended on poetry as a key ingredient. I divide these programmes into a typology of how poetry has been presented to the public during the seven decades covered by this study. I give a synoptic view of the range of programmes broadcast between 1936 and 2009 and which represent ‘poetry on BBC television’ and I consider how the former laureate, Cecil Day Lewis, is representative of how poets have negotiated with, appeared on, and been used by the BBC to make television – both while alive and after their deaths.⁷

2. What is poetry on television?

The official historian of the BBC, Asa Briggs, remarked that to study television is to study the society in which television occurs.⁸ It is difficult to limit the subject of study, because television is about everything. To study poetry on television is to compound the complexity of this challenge: as Mike Chasar said, ‘poetry travels more easily than any other art.’ It ‘often makes its way into novels, but rarely the other way round.’⁹ Newsreaders quote poetry, characters in films are defined by their poetic preferences, and documentary

⁷ In his memoirs (*The Buried Day*, 1969), in his posthumous BBC anthology (*A Lasting Joy*, 1973) and on his gravestone at Stinsford in Dorset, Cecil Day Lewis’s surname is not hyphenated. But in his biography of his father (*C. Day-Lewis: an English Literary Life* (1980)), Sean Day-Lewis hyphenated both his name and his father’s. I have hyphenated the son but not the father throughout, except where ‘Day-Lewis’ is used in a book title or quote.

⁸ Asa Briggs, ‘Problems and possibilities in the writing of broadcasting history,’ *Media, Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), 5-13.

⁹ Mike Chasar, *Poetry Unbound: Poems and New Media from the Magic Lantern to Instagram* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 4.

producers use poets and poetry to tell any number of stories. In doing so, they change how the poem is understood and remembered, and with what images it is associated. Poetry can easily be accommodated within a television programme, and it changes when it is televised; in the same moment television is not changed but created. The pre-existing art form becomes something else; the new art form comes into being. The variety of ways in which poetry appears on television makes it difficult to limit the field of study. What follows is an attempt to study television, but to limit the scope of the inquiry to a particular phenomenon: poetry on BBC television, beginning with the questions, what poetry has the BBC broadcast, and how? It is therefore also an attempt to study poetry, and to ask what happens when the cultural phenomenon we think of as poetry becomes an element in the creation and consumption of another cultural phenomenon which we call television? Chasar argues that while it is obvious that the medium of transmission impacts on how poetry is experienced and understood, it is less obvious, but worthy of inquiry, how poetry influences or changes the medium. I touch on this; there is evidence that poetry shapes the way in which broadcasters think about certain topics – England, for example, or sport. But for the most part, this is a study of what happened to poetry when it was put on television. If Eliot was right when he argued that ‘what poetry communicates is the poem itself,’¹⁰ what was it that was communicated when a poem was televised, with all that entails: the edits, the music, the voice, the images, the publicity and the subsequent discussion in the press, in the corridors and offices of the BBC, and in the homes of viewers? For a poem on television is no longer ‘just’ the poem. It is a new set of associations and meanings, a new juxtaposition of

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 30.

sound, image and word, and a new way of experiencing the words previously thought of as the poem. In 1998, for example, the BBC trailed a documentary about Ted Hughes with the claim that the programme included ‘specially-shot sequences [that] mirror the landscapes that shaped [his] powerful work.’¹¹ This may have been a sales pitch from a programme guide, but it was also an attempt to assert what a draft script for a BBC ‘poetry pilot’ claimed in 1960: that poetry can in some sense be ‘seen as well as heard,’ and that the images evoked by poetry can be mirrored or embellished by the images captured on camera.¹² It is an assertion that the poem one sees on television is not the same as the poem one reads in a book, or hears on radio, but is somehow enhanced by the act of broadcasting it.

The question of how best to present poetry in a form that could be seen as well as heard has troubled producers – and poets – since the television service began. The problem took many forms. Some of these were to do with the image on screen when a poem was being read or recited or quoted: whether to be literal, whether the timing of the words and the images should coincide, and how to put into images the ideas created by the poem. Some of it was to do with voice: who was the reader and how was it read? Was it in the voice of the poet or the voice of an actor? Was the reader on screen or off? And some of it was to do with the text: should it be on screen, and if so, over what? A blank screen? Other images? The poet? And what about the poem itself, the text as constructed and published by the poet, and as read

¹¹ *Close Up, Ted Hughes: Force of Nature*, BBC2, 25 December 1998, 20.15. <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c241846b47c0411db3886ae853d82f75>> accessed 23.07.2021.

¹² WAC, T32/1, 172/1, ‘Poetry Pilot,’ Anonymous production note, presumed to be by D.G. Bridson, undated circa February 1960.

and heard and remembered by readers? In some cases – e. e. cummings, for example – the text on the page is part of the art. In others – traditional ballads, for example – the text on the page is a means of recording and transmitting from generation to generation an otherwise oral art form. And what of the poem as a whole? Television is a time-constrained medium; rare is the poem broadcast in its entirety. Poems have been repeatedly edited, and even had lines reordered, to suit the demands of television.



Figure 1: *Ted Hughes: Force of Nature* (2009). Footage of a crow shown over a reading of 'Examination at the Womb' by Ted Hughes.¹³

In this study I examine many attempts to put poetry on television and ask what the poem becomes when televised. What happens when Auden's 'September 1, 1939' is cut on BBC television from nine to four stanzas, and when this is done more than once, but when it is never reduced to the same

¹³ *Ted Hughes: Force of Nature*, BBC4, 16 May 2009, 20:15; 'Examination at the Womb-door' from Ted Hughes, *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1970).

four stanzas? Or what happens to Ted Hughes's metaphorical crow when his words are broadcast over images of a real crow eating all-too-real flesh?

2.1. A new cultural phenomenon

Part of the challenge for such a study is that poetry is not only broadcast for itself; poetry's very mobility allows it to be the means through which television producers achieve other ends. Poems or lines of poetry appear in a wide variety of programming, from the feature film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* to *Carols from King's*. Politicians recite poetry on television, programme makers use poetic phrases as programme titles and children's programmes regularly include poetry. Yet poetry on television has been relatively little studied. Amy Holdsworth suggests this is in part because of the variety of those uses:

Beyond the study of Shakespeare adaptations, instances of poetry on television or film have received little critical attention. But poetry has been utilised by television in a variety of ways and for a range of purposes, from advertising campaigns for brands like McDonalds (sic) to the regular use of war poetry in documentaries and commemorative programmes. It can be banal, sentimental, comforting, painful and merits greater investigation.¹⁴

In this thesis I use examples of poetry which fit all these categories (the BBC may not advertise other brands, but it frequently uses poetry to promote itself and its services) to make an argument that television and poetry should not be understood as separate phenomena – not once a poem is televised.¹⁵ A poem on television is no longer only 'the poem;' it is an ingredient in the

¹⁴ Amy Holdsworth, 'Poetry and/on Television: Drinking for England (BBC, 1998),' *Critical Studies in Television* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 2.

¹⁵ As Holdsworth suggests, Shakespearean adaptation on film and television has been widely studied. I have limited myself to the work of poets *other* than Shakespeare.

audio-visual mix that is television. At the same time, it is not 'not poetry.' The lines, words, images, and emotions, although altered in the process of being televised, nevertheless remain as lines and words, as metrical units of meaning, and continue to evoke images, to sway emotions and to trigger memories. How it is experienced, shared and understood changes; elements of what was the poem before it was broadcast - the metre, rhythm, and meanings – remain. They continue to communicate *something*. Poetry on television is not 'just' television. It is also poetry. Something which is neither 'just television' nor 'just poetry' is, therefore, something else, a distinct category of cultural production and consumption which draws on two art forms to create something new.

The argument I make is that this new thing is 'poetry-on-television,' a cultural form which altered the way in which poems were read and consumed, and which on the BBC showed two characteristics: a desire to use television to bring poetry to the nation, and a reticence about what, and how much, poetry television could accommodate. This approach has its roots in a tradition in which academic interest in the media has long been concerned with what Paddy Scannell calls 'the shock of the new.'¹⁶ My questions are similar to those recognised by Scannell as endemic to the study of new technologies and culture – 'what is this new thing doing to us; what are we doing with it?'¹⁷ This fits in to a more general trend in which the consideration of poetry has tended to move from 'formal and theoretical analyses of individual poems towards social, cultural or economic contexts and

¹⁶ Paddy Scannell, 'The Dialectic of Time and Television,' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625, (September 2009): 219.

¹⁷ Scannell, 'The Dialectic of Time and Television,' 221.

consequences.¹⁸ Raymond Williams described how in what was once called new media the ‘technology always preceded its cultural forms.’¹⁹ For television programmes to be made, television technologies had first to exist. My aim is to examine what happened when an old art form met a new technology and a new medium, and became a new cultural phenomenon, curated by the BBC. Curation, however, was the consequence, not the purpose, of BBC television’s poetry broadcasts. Producers and programme managers did not set out to ‘curate’ poetry any more than producers set out to create an archive. Their purpose at any given moment was to make television. But using poetry in the making of television created a kind of canon. The poems chosen, the poets featured, the films made, and the responses of viewers entered the historical record, which in turn reflected a particular cultural history. It is this cultural record that I have set out to investigate.

2.2. A study over time

This is a historical study, in which I consider the events of the past. A conventional approach to writing such histories of the BBC is to see them as a narrative of decisions from the centre radiating out to the periphery, from director to channel controller to department head to executive producer to programme maker, and then via the transmission and publicity departments, and the press, finally, to the viewer.²⁰ A study of poetry on television diverges from this in two respects. The first is that in general, it would be a mistake to attribute ‘poetic intent’ to the higher decision-making echelons of the BBC.

¹⁸ Stephen Burt, ‘“September 1, 1939” Revisited: Or, Poetry, Politics and the Idea of the Public,’ *American Literary History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 533.

¹⁹ Scannell, ‘The Dialectic of Time and Television,’ 233.

²⁰ Briggs, ‘Problems and possibilities,’ 7-9.

The BBC always understood, in Jean Seaton's phrase, that 'it had to feed, as well as feed off, British culture,'²¹ but with the exception of the 2009 *Poetry Season*, the television service has never regarded poetry as a genre of programming.²² Poets were important cultural figures, certainly, and they and their works were a legitimate subject for television. Through the works of poets audiences could, in the familiar Reithian formulation, be entertained, informed and educated, but poetry *per se* was not considered a separate category requiring a production department for which the BBC might make budget allocations or hire staff. This has been the case for more than eight decades. When in January 1937 and again in June 1939 the BBC surveyed its television audience, the categories of programming they proposed were remarkably similar to those found on iPlayer today: Drama, News, Light Entertainment, Sport, Films, Talks. There were 19 categories in all. 'Operetta' and 'Ballet' were options for which audiences might express a preference, but 'Poetry' was not.²³ When, in 2008, the BBC produced a series of films on 'The Art of Arts TV,' the poetry programmes it discussed – *A TV Dante* and the poet Tony Harrison's *V* had both been commissioned and broadcast by Channel 4.²⁴ The BBC as a public institution did not set out to bring poetry to the screen, in the way that it set out to create television news, or to film sport, or to make dramas. Poetry was not a genre of programming planned from the centre. And yet from the beginning poetry was a feature of the television schedule,

²¹ Jean Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors: The BBC and the Nation, 1974-1987*, (London: Profile Books, 2017), 87.

²² In 2022 the BBC ran a mini-season of poetry with repeats of many of the programmes (or extracts thereof) discussed in this thesis.

²³ WAC, R9/9/1, 'Viewers and the Television Service,' 1937; WAC, R9/9/3 'Audience Research, Sound & General,' 1939.

²⁴ *The Art of Arts TV*, BBC4, 28 Sept – 1 October 2008, 22.00. The sequence is at *The Art of Arts TV: The Single Arts Film* (2008), 45:00 – 50:00.

as performance, as a programme ingredient and as subject. There were programmes about poets, programmes which used poetry for narrative or staging purposes, and programmes written in verse. Poetry was frequently on television, but its presence was contingent and unsystematic.

The second respect in which a study of poetry on BBC television diverges from the standard model is that it is also a study of the place of poetry in public life, and the waxing and waning of poetic reputations, with or without television, and with or without the BBC. The BBC was able to ‘transform the fortunes of artists and players, movements and repertoires, stars and ideas by thrusting them into public attention,’²⁵ but it also relied on other cultural indicators to decide whether someone was sufficiently known to be on television in the first place. When in 1958 a crew from the newly created arts magazine *Monitor* went to Italy to interview Ezra Pound, the editor and presenter Huw Wheldon is reported to have said that the trouble was that, ‘Nobody knows who Ezra Pound is. We need a better selling line – “Some say that he is a genius, some say that he is a Fascist, some say that he is mad” – that sort of thing.’²⁶ The following year Wheldon rejected a film on Hugh MacDiarmid, despite his team having gone to the trouble of making it, on the grounds that MacDiarmid might be a famous communist, but ‘who among the *Monitor* audience had heard of him *as a poet?*’²⁷ BBC television both made reputations, and relied on reputations already made. In this study I consider what it was that made certain poets of particular interest to television. Fame, either of the poem or the poet, was one consideration, as was their

²⁵ Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 87.

²⁶ D.G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel: the rise and fall of radio* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971), 251.

²⁷ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 253 (my emphasis).

willingness or otherwise to be filmed. Eliot, famously, refused almost all overtures from film and television producers. The existence of archive footage was another. Philip Larkin was filmed only once, in 1964, for *Monitor*; the archive created by that film has sustained several subsequent films on the BBC and elsewhere.²⁸

Whether poetry was the subject of television or the means by which programme makers made television, the choice of which poems they used, and which poets, and how they treated them, is revealing. What is revealed may simply be which poets were in favour at a given time, or which poets were thought to have written most cogently about a particular phenomenon, or which friendship or institutional networks were in play, but the choice of poems, and how they were filmed, also reveals changing attitudes to technology, or to social phenomena or to questions of truth and art. The subject of this study is not therefore a genre of programming, but a cultural phenomenon that recurs across genres, and across the BBC's television channels.

3. The available data

Mindful of these caveats, what is my corpus? The first constraint is that I limit my study to BBC television.²⁹ This is a study of the work of a particular broadcaster, which occupies a particular place in the cultural life of the United Kingdom. It is not a comparative study of competing media, nor a study of how rival broadcasters made films about poets or using poetry. I take note of

²⁸ *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road*, BBC2, 15 December 1964, 22.15.

²⁹ The BBC has at various times rebranded its television channels (BBC One etc.) For the sake of convenience, I use the designations **BBC1**, **BBC2**, **BBC3** and **BBC4** throughout, unless there is a specific reason to do otherwise. From 1936-1939 and 1946-1964 there was a single BBC channel, which I refer to as **BBC TV**.

them, but they are not my subject. It is also a time constrained study. The BBC's television service began in 1936, was interrupted by the onset of war in 1939, and began again in 1946. I include some material from the early days, but the bulk of my study concerns the period from 1958, when the BBC launched the arts strand *Monitor* under the editorship of Huw Wheldon, to 2009, when the BBC broadcast its cross-platform, multimedia *Poetry Season*. I consider some films which were broadcast after 2009, but the bulk of the study concerns the period 1936-2009.

Within this, certain periods are of greater interest than others. *Monitor*, which set out to 'do for the arts what the newly created *Panorama* had done for current affairs,'³⁰ and which was on air from 1958 to 1965, was a significant factor in the history of poetry on BBC television. It made and broadcast several films about poets which both created a template for such programming, and which provided a vital source of archive footage for programmes about those poets once they were no longer alive. Its judgements have been vindicated by subsequent fashions. *Monitor* identified and filmed poets whose work and popularity has endured, and who have come to be identified with post-war Britain, both on the BBC and elsewhere: Auden, Graves, Betjeman, Larkin, Smith. There were others whose work is less well-known (Lawrence Durrell, Roy Fuller), or who have fallen out of political favour (Ezra Pound), but to a large degree the history of poetry on BBC television is a history of the films *Monitor* made from 1958 to 1965. The one poet who stands aside from this is T. S. Eliot, who declined (with one notable exception; see Chapter Four), and despite many overtures, to be filmed by the BBC either reading or discussing

³⁰ Paul Ferris, *Sir Huge, the Life of Huw Wheldon* (London: M. Joseph, 1990), 455.

his poetry.

The work that follows is based on a consideration of three primary sets of data.

3.1. Programme records

The most important is the films that have been broadcast by the BBC. I have been fortunate to have access through the BBC and from other sources to a large number of films made and broadcast by the BBC from the 1950s onwards. These films are complemented by the *BBC Programme Index* (previously *The Genome Project*) which lists the programmes broadcast since 1936, and which includes a wealth of other data derived from *Radio Times* listings: production personnel, participants, programme listings and associated publicity materials, and an archive of more than 10,000 playable programmes or programme extracts.³¹ I was able to confirm these records by reference to other listings, notably the newspaper programme guides and reviews. This is my primary dataset: what programmes were actually broadcast? And what was in them? What was the audience watching and hearing when the programme was on air?

3.2. Archival sources

The second dataset is the records held by the BBC Written Archives Centre. These contain a wealth of detail about how executives and producers in the BBC thought about poetry and about poetry on television. They also contain records of how programmes were made, from negotiations with poets and publishers to itemised bills for hospitality, elaborate studio plans, prop lists

³¹ The full dataset is available at <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>>.

and shooting and editing scripts. They are partial, and there are gaps, but these records have proved invaluable to this study. I am often most interested in what producers saw as the challenges involved in bringing poetry to television – and what solutions they found. Typically, the challenges are found in the archive; the solutions are found on screen. Through these two sources I describe what was broadcast, and how it was made. Only occasionally do I concern myself with what was *not* broadcast. Two particular instances stand out – in the late 1950s and early 1960s there was much debate about how to get poetry on television; two pilot programmes were commissioned and made – and rejected for broadcast. But in general, the object of this study is films that were made and were seen, and which entered the public record as ‘poetry on BBC television.’ I also make occasional use of other archives (of political leaders, for example) and of the memoirs and biographies of key BBC personnel. Many programmes function both as instances of poetry on television and as archival sources, especially where the BBC has made films about its own history and interviewed key personnel on camera. *The Third Programme: High Culture for All* (2005) is one such example; the three-part series *The Art of Arts TV* (2008) is another.³² *Learning on Screen*, the online repository of the British Universities and Colleges Film and Video Council, which includes oral histories and copies of many films, is another.³³ Occasionally, when unable to find copies of films through these sources, I was able to find copies on YouTube or similar online sources, or in private hands. These are identified in the appropriate footnote.

³² *The Third Programme: High Culture for all*, BBC4, 25 October 2005, 22.40; *The Art of Arts TV*, BBC4, 28 Sept – 1 October 2008, 22.00.

³³ <<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/>>

3.3. Newspapers and periodicals

My third source is slightly more problematic. The underlying assumption of this study is that television matters – but it matters not because someone made it, but because people watch it, and talk about it, and are moved or entertained or informed by it. Unfortunately, the audience is often absent from the BBC records. Viewing figures are generally available, and the BBC often commissioned reports into how viewers experienced or judged particular programmes. And many programme files contain correspondence from viewers with individual producers about individual programmes. Occasionally there are other sources. When the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, read a poem by Rupert Brooke on BBC1 she received more than 200 letters, which allow a different kind of insight into how viewers experienced poetry on television.³⁴ But this kind of data – people who volunteer to be on programme review boards, or the letters of people who choose to write letters – is limited and self-selecting. I have more often relied on public debate through the literary and national press (previews, listings, letters, columns, reviews) as a kind of proxy voice which might allow me to assess how programmes have been viewed, and to what effect. This, as Asa Briggs and others have described, is a rich source of information about social attitudes and thoughts, even though it requires a sceptical reading, representing as it does a complex set of interests, including each newspaper's second-guessing of its audience's attitudes and the interests of owners, journalists and editors.³⁵

³⁴ *Favourite Things*, BBC2, 26 July 1987, 19:30; THCR 5/2/233, Thatcher Archive, Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge.

³⁵ See Asa Briggs on 'the mass of largely neglected social comment on sound broadcasting and on television, often buried away in newspaper and periodicals.' Briggs, 'Problems and

4. A typology of poetry programmes

It would be impossible for me to catalogue every line of poetry spoken or shown on BBC television, but to get a sense of the breadth and depth of my ‘corpus,’ I created a database of programmes that the *Radio Times* listings, catalogued in the BBC Programme Index, suggested were about or relied to a significant extent on poets or poetry.³⁶ I searched under four words: **POEM**, **POETRY**, **POET** and **VERSE**, but excluded results where, for example, characters in dramas or films were described as ‘poets’ or as ‘writing poetry.’ The data is largely, but not completely, confined to the broad category of ‘factual’ programming.³⁷ Scattered through the schedules were performances of poetry, plays written in verse, poetry for children, biographies of poets, poetry as history, poetry as a conveyer of status, poetry used in celebrations of national life and poetry recited in or as acts of remembrance. There is no science of who writes programmes guides, nor how, and the decision to mention ‘poet’ or ‘poetry’ in the listings is contingent and erratic. Nevertheless, although the database does not provide answers to questions of definition, it gives a surprisingly coherent and accessible account of the subject of this study.

4.1. Analysing the data

Firstly, it provides a sense of the volume of such programmes by year. There were periods (the late 1960s, for example) when producers used poetry more (or when those who write the listings were more likely to draw attention to poets or poetry), and when poets were more visible on television. The spike

possibilities,’ 6.

³⁶ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>>, accessed on various dates in October 2019.

³⁷ The database and statistical analysis is available [here](#).

(see Figure 2) in 2009 relates to the BBC's cross-platform *Poetry Season*.

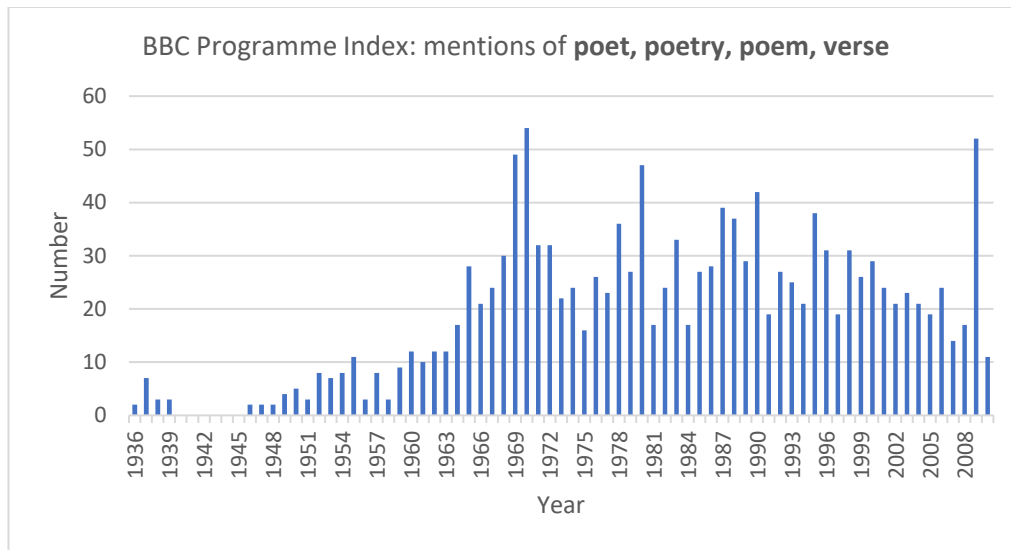


Figure 2: Poetry programmes by year.

Secondly, the data gives a sense of when such programmes were broadcast: which days of the week, and at what times. There is a slight bias towards Sundays, a traditional time for broadcasting 'highbrow' programming, but poetry programmes featured throughout the week:

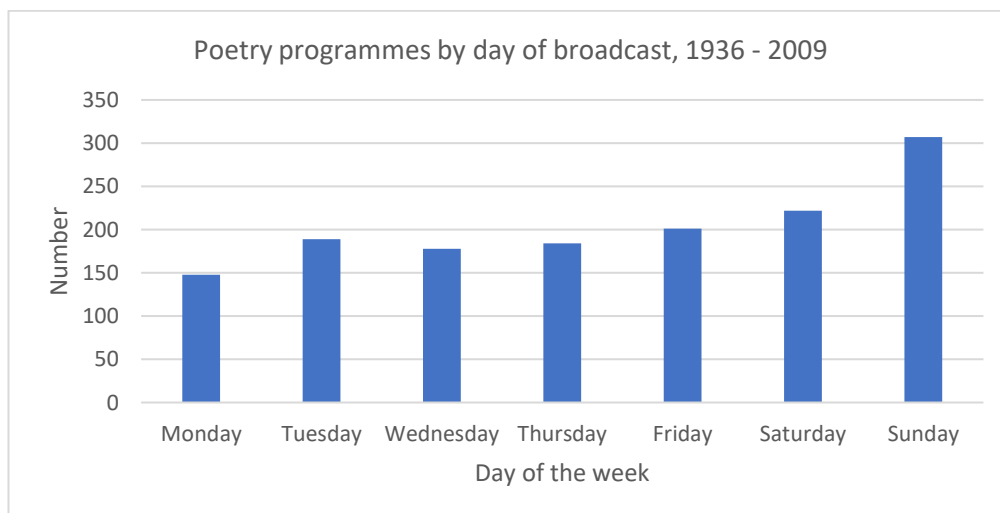


Figure 3: Poetry programmes by day of broadcast.

Similarly, there is a discernible bias towards poetry programmes being broadcast later in the schedules, also a traditional time for 'highbrow' programming (with a mid-morning bump for schools' programming):

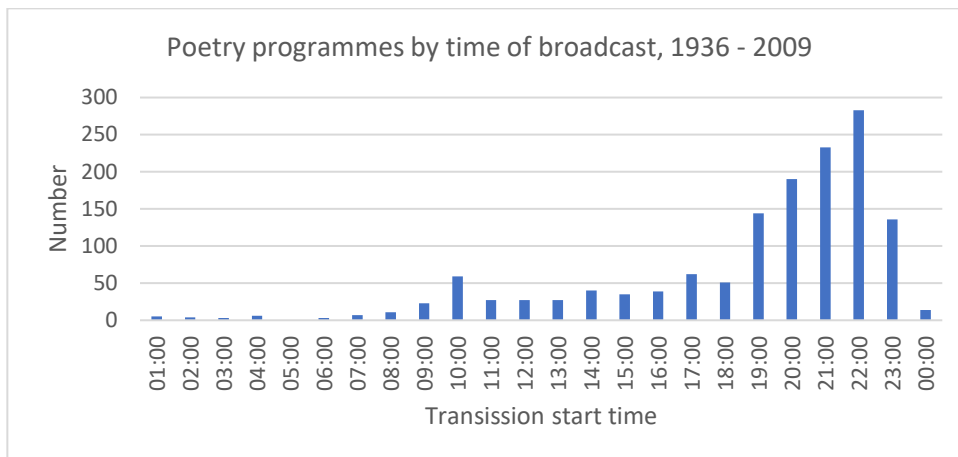


Figure 4: Poetry programmes by hour of transmission.

Poetry programmes could be of many lengths (5-minute shows for children, for example, or various experiments (*Five-to-Eleven* (1990); *Poets' News* (1993)) with shorter formats, but there is a bias towards 30-minute slots.

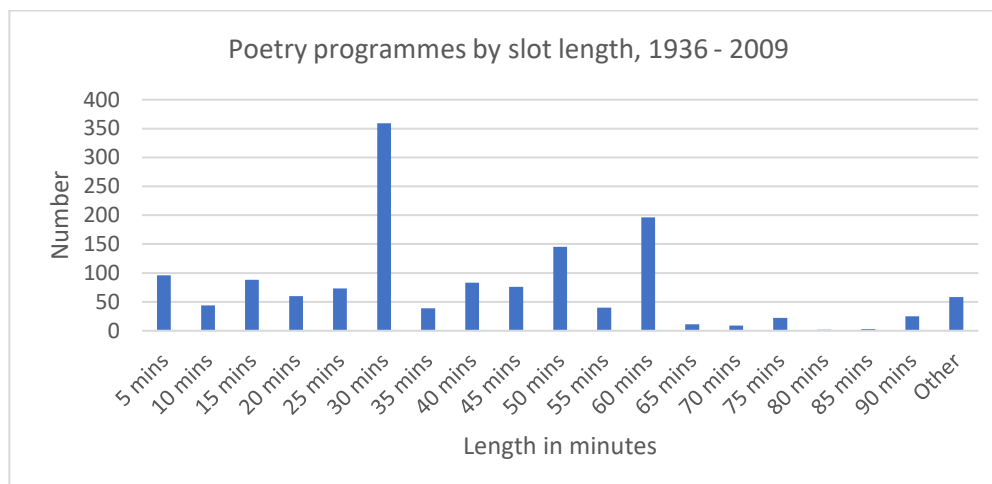


Figure 5: Poetry programmes by slot length.

The BBC's television service has changed shape over the years. Until mid-1964 (and not including the war years, 1939-1946) there was a single channel, BBC TV. From 1964 until the turn of the century, there were two BBC channels, BBC1 and BBC2. In the digital era, other channels come and go, especially CBBC, Knowledge, BBC3, BBC4, and Choice. But the home of poetry on television since 1964 has been BBC2:

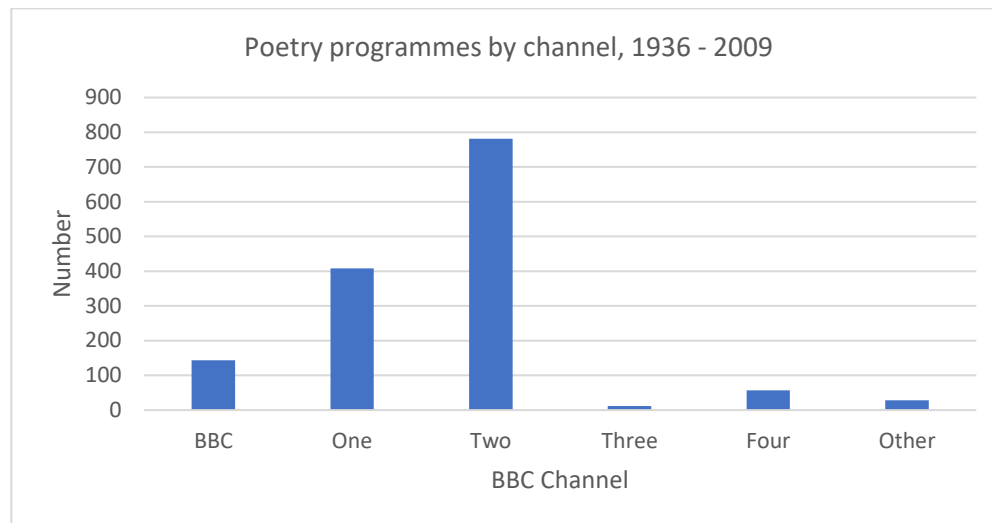
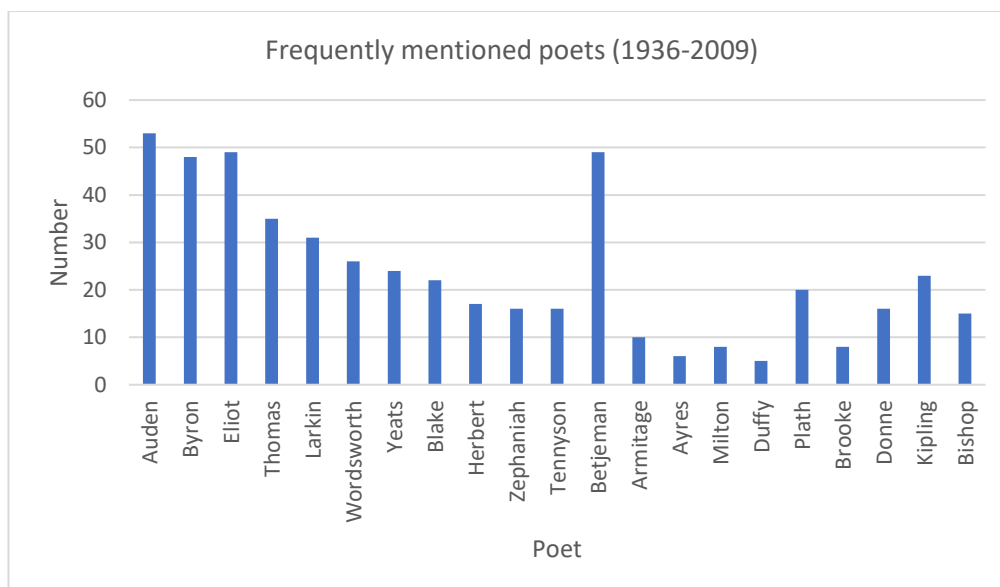


Figure 6: Poetry programmes by channel.

There is also a discernible and remarkably constant canon: certain poets feature more often on television than others:

Figure 7: Poets named in *The BBC Programme Index*.

That the poets feature in the listings, and therefore in the database, does not necessarily mean that they were in programmes featuring their poetry. Sir John Betjeman, for example, was known for his work as an architectural critic, as well as for his poetry. W. H. Auden was invited into the BBC studios to discuss religion and detective novels as well as his poetry. Benjamin Zephaniah does more than write poetry. Nevertheless, when poets are listed *as poets*, whether they are speaking about poetry, it was because they are

thought to have some status and expert knowledge which was attributable to their work (and success) as poets, and that their being poets was one reason the BBC was giving them airtime and attention.

4.2. A typology of poetry on television

The data confirms a pattern of ‘instances’ of poetry on television similar to that suggested by Amy Holdsworth, and a typology of such programmes emerges. I allocated each of the roughly 2,500 programmes in the database to one of seven categories. The categories are not definitive, and many programmes could have fitted into more than one category. The categories consider how the poetry was used and whether the purpose of the programme was to use poetry to make television or to use television to broadcast poetry. These purposes are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they often entail each other. A televised poetry performance may foreground the poetry and the performance, but to film and broadcast them is also to make television. I categorised the programmes as follows:

- **Music and verse:** programmes in which poems were performed live.
- **Personal anthology:** where a celebrity presents a selection of favourite poems, often together with music and prose readings.
- **Celebrating poetry:** programmes in which poetry was used because it was thought uniquely able to tell a local or national story.
- **For children:** poetry was a feature of much programming for children.
- **Based on a poetic work:** where a programme gives a television rendering of a poem.
- **Poets as experts:** programmes in which the term ‘poet’ gave status to those invited to be in a programme to discuss a range of questions.
- **Poetry performed:** programmes which were primarily a vehicle for poetry to be performed.
- **About poets:** programmes which were primarily biographical.
- **Written in verse:** programmes written in verse.

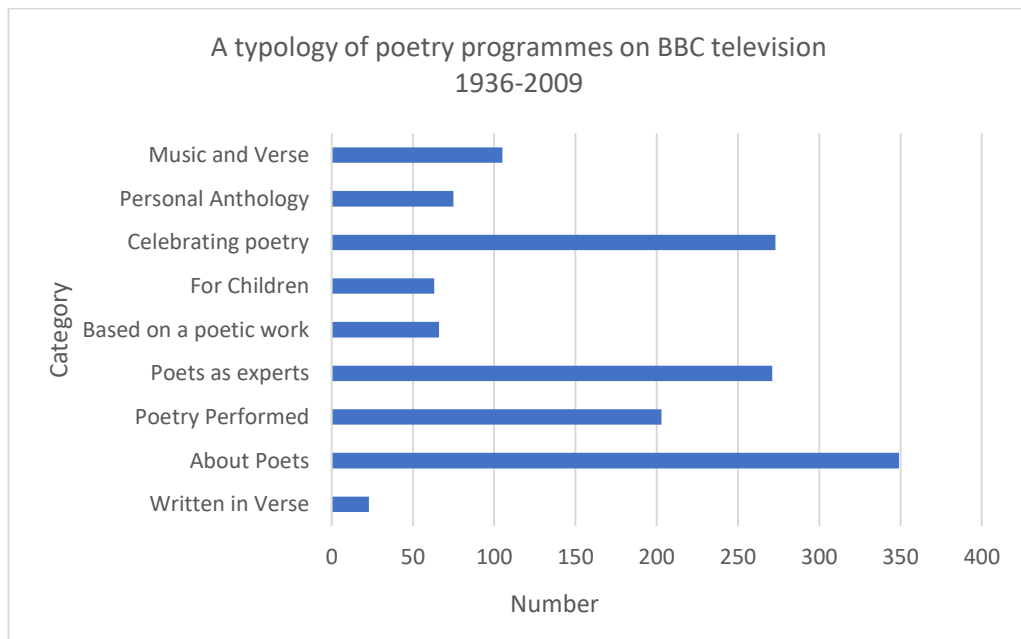


Figure 8: Poetry programmes by category.

What this demonstrates is that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ BBC poetry programme. The number and variety of programmes broadcast is too great, the range of uses too large. The uses range from readings of poetry to cover scene changes in live drama productions to using extracts from poetry for the purpose of promoting FIFA World Cups or rivalries between Wimbledon tennis players. What is clear is that the working lives of poets were an enduring interest for programme makers. The largest category in this typology is programmes ‘about poets.’

The typology described here emerges from this study; it was not something that concerned programme makers when they proposed or produced programmes about poetry. All these programmes were created because poetry was understood both to be a resource and a subject for a range of other genres of programming. Nor does calling it a ‘typology’ imply that at any point there was consensus that such categories existed. But what this analysis does show is that the BBC categories that did exist (sport, light entertainment, news and current affairs, talks and features and so on) created processes for commissioning and making programmes that allowed for, but did not necessarily cater to, the use of poetry on television. Poetry, in short,

was one of the resources the BBC used to make television. Sometimes – but less often – television was the means by which the BBC brought poetry to the viewers. But when it did so, it brought it was often not as poetry *per se*, but as one of many ingredients that made television.

4.3. Treatment of poetry on television

The televisual treatment of poetry, what BBC producers often called the ‘presentation,’ has also varied considerably. In some case the television treatment was simply to broadcast the white text on a black screen with or without a voice reading the poem. In many cases a poem would be performed on screen, either by an actor or the poet reading it, or by an actor or the poet performing it. Other programmes could be more elaborate; in one memorable production of the poems of e. e. cummings, the producer placed the actor Alec Guinness on a chair in a studio while posters of punctuation marks were suspended on strings around him.³⁸ More recently *Poems on the Box* focussed audience attention on the text – and on the fact that they were watching poetry on television.³⁹

The data shows that poetry has been a constant presence on BBC television, and while there is not a typical programme, programmes of certain types recur. The category with the largest number of programmes was those which were about poets – biographies, portraits, interviews – in which the poetry was seen as autobiographical and in which poetry was used primarily as a means to gain insights into the poets and their lives, inspirations, intentions and working practices. Almost as frequently occurring were those

³⁸ *Solo: Alec Guinness: a selection from e. e. cummings*, BBC2, 21 January 1970, 20.40.

³⁹ *Poems on the Box*, BBC2, various dates in November 1993.

programmes in which poetry (usually extracts from well-known poems) was used to say something about the nation or about the audience. These were programmes in which poetry was thought suited to telling a local or national story, and in which it was used both for what it said, and for the set of associations that using such poetry could bring to the programme. This could mean readings of the poetry that came out of the First World War, or the poetry of Auden and others associated with the 1930s, but it could also mean poetry used to explore the character of modern Britain, for example in Benjamin Zephaniah's *This OBE Is Not for Me* from 2004.⁴⁰

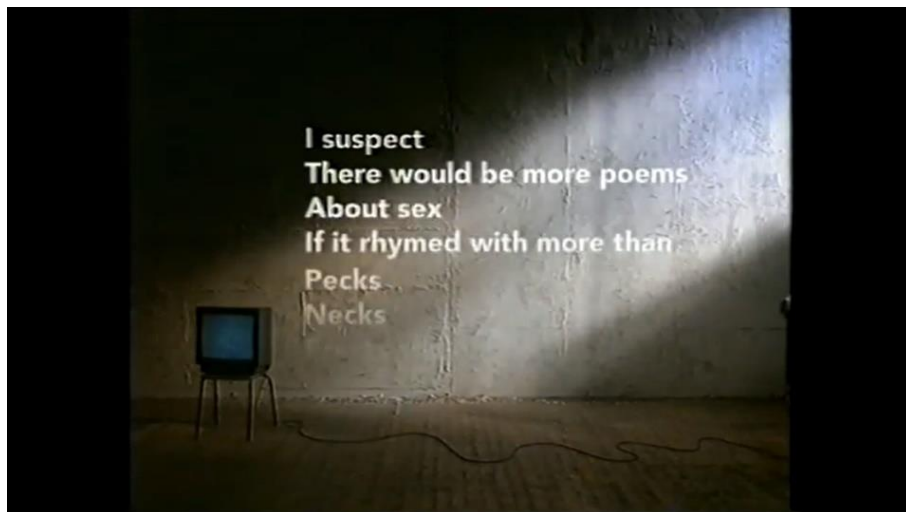


Figure 9: 'I Suspect' by Lynn Peters; *Poems on the Box* (1993).⁴¹

Analysis of the records also reveals that even where there was an intention to bring poetry to the screen, there was little consensus about how best to do this. Quite the opposite. What emerges from this survey is that while poetry was thought useful in the making of television, and while the BBC

⁴⁰ *This OBE is Not for Me*, BBC2, 19 December 2004, 19.00.

⁴¹ 'I Suspect' by Lynn Peters; *Poems on the Box*, BBC2, 5 November 1993, 21.30.

sensed an obligation to broadcast poetry on television, how best to do this was uncertain, contested, and subject to change. In part this reflected the varied ambitions and understandings of the programme makers. It also reflected an assumption, backed by experience, that poetry, while important, was difficult for television.

5. 80 years of poetry on BBC television

It is beyond the scope of this study to catalogue exhaustively all the television programmes which have included poetry. The following overview is intended only to give some context and shape to the analysis that follows.

5.1. The 1930s and 1940s

On 12 May 1937, six months after the first television broadcasts from Alexandra Palace, the then poet laureate, John Masefield read his 'Coronation Ode' live on the BBC.⁴² The following year producers used recitals of poems by Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and others to cover scene changes during its live broadcast of *The White Chateau* on Armistice Day, 1938.⁴³ And shortly after his death in January 1939, W.B. Yeats became the first poet to be the subject of a televised discussion.⁴⁴ At this point no poem had itself been the subject of television, other than dramas written in verse, notably T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.⁴⁵ When television returned after the war, the pattern was similar. Keats, Yeats, and Wordsworth were the subject of television biographies.⁴⁶ The poems of Robert Louis Stevenson were set to

⁴² *The Poet Laureate*, BBC TV, 12 May 1937, 21:00.

⁴³ *The White Chateau*, BBC TV, 11 November 1938, 21:00; the poems and lines used are recorded at WAC, T5 / 579, 'Copyright clearance request,' 20 October 1938.

⁴⁴ *W. B. Yeats*, BBC TV, 1 March 1939, 21:00; *Radio Times*, 24 February 1939, 16.

⁴⁵ *Murder in the Cathedral*, BBC TV, 7 December 1936, 15.30.

⁴⁶ *John Keats Lived Here*, BBC TV, 23 October 1949, 20.30; *Yeats, a Tribute*, BBC TV, 11

music;⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot's 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats' made an appearance on children's television⁴⁸ and there were a number of anthology programmes in which well-known personalities read poetry as a key part of their productions.

5.2. The 1950s and 1960s

It was not until the advent of *Monitor* in 1958 that television had a place to think about poets and poetry. Suddenly Auden, Durrell, Pound, Spender and Smith had a 'television home,' in which the poets were presented both as public intellectuals and as artisans, labouring with words to produce things for public consumption. Roy Fuller, later professor of poetry at Oxford, and a BBC Governor, was the first to have a whole episode of *Monitor* devoted to his role in society: 'Poems should be defensible like prose,' he said, 'Like blood, unclotted; even like a nose, not an inch too long.'⁴⁹

In August 1962, the BBC broadcast a four-part themed series called *Rhyme or Reason* in which each theme (men and women, war, births and death, the natural world) was the prompt for an anthology of 'prose and verse.'⁵⁰ The following year Cecil Day Lewis was asked by *Monitor* to give 'a personal view of Thomas Hardy;' a few weeks later the literary critic Martin Jarrett-Kerr was given an hour on screen to assess the works of 'the country's greatest living poet' – T. S. Eliot.⁵¹ It was a tight circle of poets and critics making these kinds of programmes. Presenters and producers of the time

September 1951, 21.45.

⁴⁷ *For the Children*, BBC TV, 11 January 1950, 15.00.

⁴⁸ *Children's Television*, BBC TV, 12 November 1952, 17.30.

⁴⁹ *Monitor: Roy Fuller*(1962), 20:00:20:10.

⁵⁰ *Rhyme or Reason*, BBC TV, Sundays 12 August – 2 September 1962, 22.10.

⁵¹ *Monitor: Footmarks in Time: Thomas Hardy*, BBC TV, 24 November 1963, 22.05;
Viewpoint: T. S. Eliot OM, BBC TV, 11 December 1963, 22.55.

included Anthony Thwaite, John Betjeman, Malcolm Muggeridge, Huw Wheldon, and Cecil Day Lewis. They all presented programmes on poets and explored ‘the influences and experiences that have contributed to their work.’⁵²

The ceremonial value of poetry was well understood. The Eisteddfod was broadcast each year from 1952, and Easter, Christmas and Remembrance Sunday were all marked by broadcasts of poetry. It was at this time too that BBC television started using its own archives as a programme resource. *Late Night Line Up*, an arts programme which began in 1965 and ran for two years, included ‘a weekly raid on the BBC archives.’⁵³ There were repeated items on Auden, Yeats, Sitwell and Betjeman.



⁵² *Intimations*, BBC2, 5 October 1965, 22.20;
<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/48b28b47caf64c6cb417ccfe8ee12a21>> accessed 20.2.2020.

⁵³ *Late Night Line-Up*, BBC2, 2 October 1965, 22.55.



Figure 10: W. H. Auden (and his cigarette) on BBC television in 1965 and 1972.⁵⁴

The split into two BBC television channels in 1964 was reflected in the way poetry was presented – and how often poets appeared on television. On BBC1 Sir Michael Redgrave, Judi Dench, Alistair Cooke, Alan Bennett, Cyril Connolly and even Glen Campbell hosted ‘An Evening With...’ and shared their favourite music, readings and poems. On BBC2, a range of poets were invited to host a series called *Something to Say*. Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Patrick Kavanagh, R. D. Smith and Vernon Scannell all took part. Some read their own work; others chose to read the poems of others: MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, Coleridge.

5.3. The 1970s

According to this database, during the 1970s the BBC broadcast more programmes about poetry than in any other period. The decade began with an experiment called *Solo*. ‘The work of e. e. cummings ranges from lyric romanticism to barbed political satire. Each poem is designed to please the

⁵⁴ *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment*, BBC1, 28 November 1965, 22.00; *Parkinson*, BBC1, 7 October 1972, 22.00.

eye as well as the ear. Alec Guinness and director James Cellan Jones have combined to present cummings's work in all its variety in a way that sharpens the understanding.⁵⁵ Poetry was ever-present, but not dominant in the schedules. When in 1972 Cecil Day Lewis was invited to present a six-part series of his favourite poetry, he still argued that the BBC had never, properly, done poetry on television. *A Lasting Joy* (1972) was, he said, the first time 'BBC1 had presented a series entirely devoted to poetry, as distinct from poems that were incorporated into other arts programmes.'⁵⁶ His choice of poems is remarkable as much for those who did not make the cut (Auden, Eliot, Smith) as those who did (Browning, Owen, Tennyson, Hardy, Coleridge, and Philip Larkin). And besides, poetry was appearing in a range of programmes. *Full House* (1972), a Saturday evening light entertainment show, hosted numerous younger, rowdier poets. A typical listing in the *Radio Times* might be, 'Recently elected by the Poets' Conference as their choice for Poet Laureate, tonight Adrian Mitchell reads a selection of his verse, including "The Oxford Hysteria of English Poetry."⁵⁷

The nations had their own versions: *Swyn y Glec* from BBC Wales was shown every Sunday afternoon on BBC2 and devoted the full 30 minutes to 'traditional Welsh poetry.'⁵⁸ Sunday mornings on BBC1 included the long running magazine show, *Nai Zindagi – Naya Jeevan*, which included extensive

⁵⁵ *Solo: Alec Guinness: a selection from e. e. cummings*, BBC1, 21 January 1970, 20.40. <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/76cce62ee51645fea8f5665c2642c14a>> accessed 12.02.2021.

⁵⁶ *A Lasting Joy*, BBC1, 18 July 1972, 22.45; Jill Balcon, 'Introduction,' in C. Day Lewis *A Lasting Joy* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1973), 9.

⁵⁷ *Full House*, BBC2, 16 December 1972, 22.00.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/3db1bef2ec9445a78bfff91d25ae3871>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁵⁸ *Swyn y Glec*, BBC1, Sundays, October 1970 – April 1971.

coverage of Hindi and Urdu poets and poetry.⁵⁹ In 1973 Patrick Garland fronted another major series, *Poets on Poetry*.⁶⁰ This focussed on newer, younger poets – Patricia Beer, Douglas Dunn, Marvin Cohen – before devoting the last two programmes to Auden and Yeats. ‘However sad poetry is,’ Auden told Garland, ‘your experience in reading it is one of joy.’⁶¹

One feature of BBC television during the 1970s, which marks it out from all other broadcast decades, was *Closedown*. From Monday 16 September 1974 to 8 April 1980, six nights a week, prior to shutting down for the night, BBC2 broadcast a poem read by one of a stable of 30 or so readers. A little over 1,000 poems were broadcast. The first was several poems from ‘1 x 1,’ the 1944 collection by e. e. cummings.⁶² Poetry was also used by television as a historical source. In August 1974, for example, René Cutforth gave ‘a highly personal recollection of the age of the Auden group and Shirley Temple, Art Deco and Ginger Rogers, the Depression and the excursion train, the rise of Adolf Hitler and of the Movies, the Spanish Civil War and the International Surrealist Exhibition.’ The poetry of the time was read by Tony Church.⁶³ Across the schedules programmes promoted poets and their work. *The Book Programme*, *Omnibus*, *Network*, and the *Open University* gave considerable airtime to poetry. In *The Book Programme* the presenter Robert Robinson marked ‘the publication of *Letters Home* - the correspondence of the American writer Sylvia Plath, whose auto-biographical novel *The Bell Jar* and

⁵⁹ *Nai Zindagi - Naya Jeevan*, BBC1, Sundays 1968-1982.

⁶⁰ *Poets on Poetry*, BBC1, Mondays, 8 October – 5 November 1973, 23.35.

⁶¹ *Poets on Poetry: Auden* (1973), 06:45 – 06:55.

⁶² *Closedown*, BBC2, 16 September 1974, 23.40.

⁶³ *The Thirties Revisited*, BBC2, 27 August 1974, 19.35,

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/95431e5c3d904d39bbd9bbe20acb140e>> accessed 22.5.2020.

books of poetry, *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, established her as one of the outstanding talents of her generation.⁶⁴

5.4. The 1980s

In the weeks before Margaret Thatcher's election victory in 1979, the arts strand *Omnibus* presented the TV premiere of the Italian filmmaker Franco Rosso's *Dread, Beat an' Blood*. The explanatory listing reveals the BBC's concern that audiences might find this unusual:

In Jamaica the poet is the voice of the people: 'toaster' poets chant improvised lines to a backing of reggae music at dance halls, parties, anywhere people go to enjoy themselves. Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in Jamaica but now resident in London, is a poet, writer, and musician whose style is rooted in the Jamaican tradition in which art, society, politics and music are inextricably bound together. This is a film not only about Linton Johnson but also about the community to which he addresses himself, the Black working-class community in London.⁶⁵

A few weeks later *Arena* went to South Africa to explore black consciousness in the wake of the murder of the political leader Steve Biko: 'At a secret performance in the backyard of a Soweto shop, a radical poet recites his banned work accompanied by drums and songs.'⁶⁶

From about 1980, the volume of poetry on television fell. Significant deaths and anniversaries were marked, (Robert Lowell, D.H. Lawrence, Pablo

⁶⁴ *The Book Programme*, BBC2, 20 April 1976, 19.45.
<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/11ed3a009b3445038290057067b4eb3f>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁶⁵ *Dread, Beat an' Blood*, BBC1, 5 April 1979, 22.15.
<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/999fd45823164bb7a1fe048d612a83e3>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁶⁶ *Arena: 'I talk about me - I am Africa'*, BBC2, 5 March 1980, 20.10.
<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/0b9d6fe0bc2b4f18b1fbb69c5c8a362e>> accessed 22.5.2020.

Neruda, Dylan Thomas, Samuel Taylor Coleridge – but also Rabindranath Tagore and Faid Ahmed Faiz). In 1980 Patrick Garland hosted *The Rattle Bag*, referencing Seamus Heaney’s anthology of the same name. The tone was defensive. The listing asked, ‘Poetry Dead or Alive? Does poetry seem to Heaney to be threatened as an art form by the conditions of modern life?’⁶⁷ It was easier to make films about older certainties: *Poems in their Place*, a six-part series tried to account for individual poems, including Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (Figure 11).’⁶⁸



Figure 11: The churchyard in Gray’s ‘Elegy,’ *Poems in Their Place* (1982).⁶⁹

There was still space for the new. Poets such as John Cooper Clarke and Linton Kwesi Johnson appeared both as poets and as cultural commentators,

⁶⁷ *The Rattle Bag*, BBC2, 22 October 1982, 23.45.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/daa5dbd0fa2544c1806627f4cb36c9e2>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁶⁸ *Poems in their Place*, BBC2, 16 March 1982, 22.35.

⁶⁹ Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,’ *Poems in their Place: Gray’s ‘Elegy,’* BBC2, 16 March 1982, 22.35.

and in 1984 Pam Ayres made her first appearance on television. The strand *Bookmark*, even as it was looking back to Shelley, Kipling, Wordsworth, and Eliot tried to keep its audience up to date: 'Contemporary British poetry is flourishing, but the poets themselves are known only to dedicated readers. James Fenton, Roger McGough, Peter Porter and Craig Raine explain their work and read their poems.'⁷⁰ Strands such as *Open Space* went further: 'Barbara Burford, Jackie Kaye, Deborah Levy and Berta Freistadt – the Angels of Fire poetry collective – discussed 'the directions they must take to counteract male dominance of their chosen art form.'⁷¹ Throughout there was a discernible diffidence about the national art. Michael Ignatieff, for example, thought it sufficiently important to ask his guests on one show, 'What Use is Poetry?'⁷²

5.5. The 1990s

The BBC television service was also experimenting with form. In 1988 BBC2 started transmitting *Five to Eleven*.⁷³ Similar to the *Closedown* readings of the 1970s, this involved an actor reading poetry, mostly from the established canon. Some were themed ('Miranda Foster reads poems concerning the rights of the child.') and some were by a single author ('Actor Richard Pasco reads some of Thomas Hardy 's poems.')⁷⁴ But perhaps the biggest innovation of this period was *Words on Film* (1992), a series of six personal

⁷⁰ *Bookmark: Contemporary Poetry*, BBC2, 20 March 1984, 20.10.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/b56a22a0c9644499a19f38657c94e767>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁷¹ *Open Space: Angels of Fire*, BBC2, 7 August 1985, 19.35.

⁷² *Thinking Aloud*, BBC2, 7 December 1986, 17.10.

⁷³ *Five to Eleven*, BBC1, 1988 - 1990, 10.55.

⁷⁴ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/9097e72ee60c4aba95fbd79bc49c238>> accessed 22.5.2020.

documentaries written by contemporary poets, including Simon Armitage, Adrian Mitchell, and Douglas Dunn. And in *War and Peace: The Gaze of Gorgon* (1992), ‘poet Tony Harrison offered a verse commentary on the unspeakable horrors of the 20th century.’⁷⁵ *Bookmark*, led by Nigel Williams, also introduced audiences to less well-known poets. In quick succession in the winter of 1992-1993 there was a programme on the *Epic of Pabuji*, a controversial film on Serbian epic poetry, on love poetry and a biography of Philip Larkin. The strand even sent Simon Armitage to San Francisco to see what he could learn about the life and death of his enigmatic hero, the poet Weldon Kees. There was more experimentation in 1993 when, as part of *Poetry Week*, a poet was asked each day to write and present *Poets’ News* in which a range of poets gave ‘their interpretation of the day’s news.’ The programmes combined actual news footage with special location reports.⁷⁶

As a ‘curtain-raiser’ to the 1993 National Poetry Day, Tracey MacLeod presented performances ‘from established names in British poetry such as James Fenton and Simon Armitage and rising young talents including Kathleen Jamie and Merle Collings.’⁷⁷ The day itself was marked by the announcement of the £10,000 Forward Poetry Prize. The BBC asked Roger McGough to ‘take the poetic pulse of the nation.’ He found it ‘beating everywhere from primary schools to prisons, and from ad agencies to ragga parties.’⁷⁸ Poetry also found

⁷⁵ *War and Peace: The Gaze of Gorgon*, BBC2, 3 October 1992, 20.20.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/ceb44459f30c4dd89bc2bbcece6bdfb1>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁷⁶ *Poets’ News*, BBC2, 11 - 15 October 1993 23.15;

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/277f8d5ad8bc4babb372281a6a9d759f>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁷⁷ *The Late Show Poetry Special*, BBC2, 5 October 1994, 23.15.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/10b3182566d64d65b04c75343a85367e>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁷⁸ *Poets Win Prizes*, BBC2, 6 October 1994, 21.20;

a place on television through formats such as *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, and *Unspeakable Verse*.⁷⁹ In the former, a variety of celebrities (the former athlete Kris Akabusi, the political journalist John Cole, the actor Felicity Kendall) read from the canon, while in the latter Miriam Margolyes, Leo McKern, Hugh Laurie, and Louise Lombard celebrated the best of British and American comic verse. To mark the fifth annual National Poetry Day in 1998, Griff Rhys Jones presented the results of the voting for the *Nation's Favourite Comic Poem*, with celebrities joining in to recite the winning poems.⁸⁰

5.6. The 2000s

The advent of new channels (Knowledge, Choice, BBC3, BBC4) opened up an opportunity for programme makers. One of the first broadcasts on BBC Knowledge was *Blake Night*, a celebration of the works of William Blake, starting with a preview of a major new exhibition of his work at the Tate Gallery.⁸¹ This was followed closely by *Bard on the Box*, in which Shakespeare devotees recited his verse.⁸² An early BBC4 commission, *Readers and Writers Roadshow* (2001), offered poets screentime to discuss their work; more controversial fare was provided by Tom Paulin who took a jaundiced view of Wordsworth in *The Secrets of Tintern Abbey*.⁸³ Some poets became familiar to television audiences, with regular appearances on *Wogan*, *The Late Show*, *Late Review*, *Newsnight Review*, and *Question Time*. Benjamin Zephaniah helped Alan Yentob investigate the 'bizarre history' of the Oxford English

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/24e8767178004fc6b2ba3140db37505e>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁷⁹ *Unspeakable Verse*, BBC2, various dates and times commencing 6 October 1995.

⁸⁰ *The Nation's Favourite Comic Poem*, BBC1, various times beginning 5 October 1998.

⁸¹ *Blake Night*, BBC Knowledge, 10 November 2000, 20.00.

⁸² *Bard on the Box*, BBC2, various times, from 5 October 1994.

⁸³ *Tom Paulin on Wordsworth: The Secrets of Tintern Abbey*, BBC4, 30 August 2002, 20.30.

Dictionary, before making his own show about why ‘This OBE is Not for Me.’⁸⁴

The early years of the new century saw many programmes on poets; perhaps the most remarkable was Peter Ackroyd’s three-part series on *The Romantics* which both extended the form (it was billed as ‘a drama-documentary’) and delivered an expensive and definitive account of the works and legacy of Shelley, Keats and Byron.⁸⁵ In 2006 there was a flurry of programmes to mark the 100th anniversary of John Betjeman’s birth and some of his films (*Summoned by Bells* (1976); *A Poet in London* (1959)) were aired again.⁸⁶ Griff Rhys Jones, who had by now established himself as one of the faces of BBC poetry, fronted a three-part series which took as its cue the thought that Betjeman was ‘the Bertie Wooster of light verse, but this sometimes means that his work isn’t taken too seriously.’⁸⁷ Rhys Jones also went to India to present *Kipling: a Remembrance Tale*, another ‘documentary drama’ which ‘traced’ Kipling’s colonial background in India.⁸⁸ It was a popular format. There were drama-documentaries too on C.S. Lewis, Laurie Lee and Robert Burns to mark the 250th anniversary of his birth. The journalist Andrew O’Hagan was one of several presenters who ‘celebrated the life of Scotland’s most famous poet’ and ‘explored why Burns remains such a cultural force.’⁸⁹

⁸⁴ *This OBE is Not for Me*, BBC2, 19 December 2004, 19.00.

⁸⁵ *The Romantics*, BBC2, 21 January – 4 February 2006, 20.10.

⁸⁶ *Monitor: A Poet in London*, BBC TV, 1 March 1959, 22.05; *Summoned by Bells*, BBC1, 29 August 1976, 22.10.

⁸⁷ *Betjeman and Me*, BBC2, 21 August 2006, 21.00.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/e2856984b6fe41e69088efac684bc19a>> accessed 22.5.2020.

⁸⁸ *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale*, BBC1, 12 November 2006, 18.35.

⁸⁹ *The World According to Robert Burns*, BBC2, 5 January 2009, 20.00.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/b00gny38>> accessed 22.5.2020.

6. Case study: Cecil Day Lewis and BBC television

To write the history in this way is to suggest that poetry on BBC television was the result of producers surveying a buffet of the entire poetry oeuvre and helping themselves to such parts of it as they thought would make good television. This was not necessarily the case. Which poets, and which poems were so favoured was in part a result of the same kinds of relationships, networks, actions, and ambitions that are at play in other fields of human endeavour. The efforts of the poet Cecil Day Lewis to get poetry on BBC television offers a useful study of the contingent factors at play. He also helpfully bookends this study: In 1936 Day Lewis was the first poet to engage seriously with the new medium's possibilities, when he submitted a proposal for a six-part series on poetry (which the BBC declined).⁹⁰ In December 2009 his poem, 'The Christmas Tree,' was broadcast by as part of the long-running series *Carols from King's*, neatly bringing to a close the period under consideration here.⁹¹

Although associated with the 'commercially collectivised'⁹² poets of the 1930s and his brief membership of the Communist Party (relinquished in 1938),⁹³ Day Lewis was a leading voice in British poetry for nearly fifty years. Along with other 1930s poets he had long accepted that he lived in the considerable shadows of both Eliot and Auden, and had long known that others, whether benign (Samuel Hynes) or hostile (Geoffrey Grigson), would

⁹⁰ WAC, 48864, 'C. Day Lewis 1934-1941,' Undated proposal, discussed in *Luker Memo*, 18 November 1936.

⁹¹ *Carols from King's*, BBC2, 24 December 2009, 16.45. The other poem used in this broadcast was Ted Hughes's 'Minstrel's Song'.

⁹² The deliberately insulting phrase comes from Roy Campbell's *Talking Bronco* (1946); quoted in Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day Lewis: An English Literary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1980), 164.

⁹³ National Archive KV-2-1385, 'Cecil Day Lewis'; vetting document, 1941.

write about him as ‘a failed Auden,’ rather than a poet of his own standing.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Day Lewis was a ranking member of the broadcast poetry establishment. His key roles as a public advocate of his art included the Oxford professorship of poetry (1951-55), the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard (1964-65), the poet laureateship (1968-72) and, finally, presenting a six-part BBC television series on poetry in which he curated an anthology of poems which he, Jill Balcon and selected guests read aloud in the living room of his house in Greenwich.⁹⁵ But that final honour was his swansong, given to him only as his life neared its end and was broadcast posthumously.⁹⁶ For decades television had, despite his every effort, largely ignored him. As he drily noted, the BBC gave more time to his choice of music for his 1968 appearance on *Desert Island Discs* than ever it gave to his poetry.⁹⁷ It was not for want of his trying. Day Lewis was one of the first to see that television could do something for poetry, but he also understood that the question was reciprocal; poetry had also to do something for television. This involved negotiation.

6.1. Day Lewis, the Communist Party, and the BBC

The launch of the television service in 1936 coincided with Day Lewis’s moment of deepest immersion in the activities of the Communist Party, then led by Harry Pollitt. The relationship between the BBC and the Communist Party under Pollitt is conventionally seen as ‘one of fierce and covert if unflappably courteous censorship on one side and low expectations on the

⁹⁴ Albert Gelpi, *Living in Time: The Poetry of C. Day Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5-6.

⁹⁵ *A Lasting Joy*, BBC1, Tuesdays 18 July – 22 August 1972, 22.45.

⁹⁶ Jill Balcon, ‘Introduction,’ C. Day Lewis, *A Lasting Joy*, 11.

⁹⁷ Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis*, 242.

other.⁹⁸ The relative weakness of the Party, the memory of the BBC's exclusion of workers' voices during the 1926 General Strike and the 'monopolisation of radio by the BBC' was seen to 'place the medium beyond meaningful intervention.'⁹⁹ In the 1930s this changed. There was a gradual rapprochement between revolutionaries and intellectuals, especially those grouped around the *Left Review*, the Left Book Club, and the politics of the Popular Front, which created conditions, if not yet an argument, for a different kind of engagement with the BBC.

It was never going to be easy for Day Lewis, not least because the security services had put him under surveillance him as early as 1933.¹⁰⁰ In the summer of 1934, the first edition of the *Left Review* appeared, with an article ('Revolutionaries and Poetry') by Day Lewis. The following year Hogarth Press published his *Revolution in Writing*,¹⁰¹ which – much to the interest of the security services – included talks Day Lewis gave in a BBC radio series called *Youth Looks Ahead*.¹⁰² From 1933 until he left the party in 1938, Day Lewis was a committed activist – much more committed and more active than W. H. Auden, and more likely to toe the party line than Stephen Spender. In September 1936, for example, he co-signed a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* condemning hostile coverage of the Moscow show trials of what he called 'terrorists... and agents of the German Fascists.'¹⁰³ He spoke at numerous meetings and conferences and – entertainingly in view of his later

⁹⁸ Ben Harker, "'The Trumpet of the Night": Interwar Communists on BBC Radio,' *History Workshop Journal* 75, (Spring 2013): 83.

⁹⁹ Ben Harker, 'The Trumpet of the Night,' 83.

¹⁰⁰ National Archives KV-2-1385, 'Cecil Day Lewis'.

¹⁰¹ Cecil Day Lewis, *Revolution in Writing* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935).

¹⁰² *The Listener*, 27 March 1937, 7-8 cont.30.

¹⁰³ Letters, *The Manchester Guardian*, 16 September 1936, 6.

work as poet laureate – he found time to pen an article for the *Daily Worker* condemning the 1937 coronation as ‘the frantic window-dressing of a shop on the verge of bankruptcy.’¹⁰⁴ It is not surprising, perhaps, that by 1938 the security services should conclude that, ‘Like his close associates Stephen Spender and W. H. Auden, [Day Lewis] is an intellectual communist but of the three he is definitely the most convinced and practical Party man, the others, as you know, being communists of a highly idealistic and literary brand.’¹⁰⁵

6.2. Initial assumptions about television and poetry

How then are we to understand the correspondence Day Lewis initiated with the fledgling BBC television service when he sent a proposal for six lectures on poetry in November 1936?¹⁰⁶ There was no ‘party line’ on the BBC (the Communist Party did not form cultural committees until 1947) but there was a ‘marked intensification of engagement.’¹⁰⁷ There was also a marked intensification of Day Lewis’s need to earn money. The previous year the governors of the school where he taught, had deemed his politics unsuitable and welcomed his resignation. Day Lewis was glad to go.¹⁰⁸ He set about writing with renewed vigour. He secured a three-year book deal for his detective novels, and 1936 and 1937 saw the publication of *Noah and the Waters*, an extended allegory on revolution (Edwin Muir called it ‘a poetic fiction in a Marxist idea’)¹⁰⁹ and *The Mind in Chains*, a polemical collection

¹⁰⁴ Letters, *Daily Worker*, 12 May 1937, 3.

¹⁰⁵ National Archives KV-2-1385, ‘C. Day Lewis,’ unsigned letter addressed to Major V. Vivian, S.I.S, dated 20 September 1938.

¹⁰⁶ WAC, 48864, ‘Day Lewis 1934-1941,’ undated proposal, discussed in ‘Memo’ N.G. Luker to D.T, 18 November 1936.

¹⁰⁷ Ben Harker, ‘The Trumpet of the Night,’ 84-85.

¹⁰⁸ C. Day Lewis, *The Buried Day* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), 206.

¹⁰⁹ Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day Lewis*, 94.

edited by Day Lewis. At this point Day Lewis had a difficult reputation at BBC radio, partly because of his politics and partly because he was thought to be hard to work with. He had caused disquiet when asked to present his talk for the series 'As It Strikes Me.' He 'delivered a powerful oration against Fascism, supporting it with a Wordsworth sonnet on Milton' but it 'wasn't what [the BBC] wanted of him and [they] found it all rather difficult.'¹¹⁰ That there was a clash of ideas is clear from an MI5 digest of his correspondence. Day Lewis thought he had 'got a lot past them, but just then Co. Dawnay woke up at the 11th hour and realised there was a viper in his bosom, there was a terrific shindig.'¹¹¹ Day Lewis 'stuck to his guns,' and within the BBC developed a reputation as 'Red Cecil.'¹¹²

The dilemma explored in *Noah and the Waters* was 'how to make poetry a form of political action,'¹¹³ but the poetry proposal Day Lewis sent to the new BBC television service in November 1936 was anything but revolutionary. It was received by the producer N.G. Luker in the talks department and forwarded to the Director of Television on 18 November 1936, shortly after the first television broadcast from Alexander Palace.¹¹⁴ Day Lewis suggested six lectures on these themes:¹¹⁵

- The Primitive Poet and His Public
- The Basic Materials of Poetry
- The Problem of Communication
- Types and Forms of Poetry

¹¹⁰ WAC, 48864, 'Day Lewis 1934-1941,' undated proposal.

¹¹¹ National Archives KV-2-1385, 'C. Day Lewis,' report dated 3 May 1935; at the time Colonel Dawnay functioned as BBC liaison with the security services: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-43754737>> accessed 4.08.2023.

¹¹² Peter Stanford, *C. Day-Lewis, A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 142.

¹¹³ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: Pimlico, 1976), 203.

¹¹⁴ WAC, 48864, 'Day Lewis 1934-1941,' undated proposal.

¹¹⁵ WAC, 48864, 'Day Lewis 1934-1941,' 'Memo' N.G. Luker to D.T, 18 November 1936.

- How the Poet Works
- The Modern Poet and His Public

At the time, the proposed format – essentially a lecture – was not uncommon. Around the same time (1937) Auden gave his celebrated radio lecture *In Defence of Gossip* and the following year he was paid six guineas for his contribution to the series *Speaking Personally*.¹¹⁶ The BBC Written Archive files contain three iterations of the same proposal by Day Lewis; none solved two of the problems which were to bedevil attempts to create ‘poetry programming’ for a generation:

- how to make popular programming from an art form that was known to be unpopular, and
- how to put poetry on television: was it a question of performance, of image or of creating a new cultural form?

Day Lewis did not have the answers. His primary concern was to sell poetry and ‘the poet’ to the public. He saw television as a way of boosting the standing of poetry as an art form. The producer N.G. Luker’s response had a slightly different spin: he understood immediately that lectures on poetry, no matter how well done, would not make good television. ‘As his scheme stands,’ he wrote, ‘I think it would do very well for six late evening talks for a fairly restricted audience, provided of course, that it can be given a broadcasting twist rather than a literary twist, which it has at present.’¹¹⁷ The difficulty was that no one yet knew what that ‘twist’ was, and the proposal was rejected.

The proposal was also an early victim of the manoeuvrings of different personalities and departments within the BBC. The archives reveal intense

¹¹⁶ WAC, ‘Auden Personal File,’ ‘Contract,’ 11 October 1938.

¹¹⁷ WAC, 48864, ‘Day Lewis 1934-1941,’ ‘Memo,’ N.G. Luker to D.Tel., 18 November 1936.

debate as to whether it should be handled by 'Talks' or 'Education'? Should there be six episodes or twelve? Should Day Lewis interview other poets: 'say, a Georgian poet (Lascelles Abercrombie), a modern poet of standing (T. S. Eliot), a young poet (I suppose Auden – no doubt we could find one less political, if necessary), and the common reader?' In any case, the idea was thought to be suitable only 'for the more intelligent and better-led (sic) type of Group,' and the programme was never made.¹¹⁸ Perhaps the last line (retained in each iteration of the proposal) guaranteed the proposed series would never get made: 'Language,' Day Lewis wrote, 'must always be revolutionary or dead.'¹¹⁹

6.3. After the war

The war put an end to the first great experiment in television. BBC broadcasts were suspended on 2 September 1939 and did not resume until June 1946, but initially Day Lewis focussed his attention on radio. In July 1946 he 'had a talk with Barnes [head of The Third Programme] about an unusual scheme for poetry broadcasts. Barnes jotted it down: "When there is a great national festival or disaster, why not invite three or four poets to write a special poem to an agreed length for it. This [...] would show listeners the use to which poetry can be put."¹²⁰ The problem was that selling poetry was one thing; making television was another. It was all very well to sell poetry to those who listen to the radio, but the problem of what viewers of television might watch while hearing poetry remained. For the next fifteen years there was little demand for Day Lewis or his poetry on BBC television. Apart from occasional

¹¹⁸ WAC, 48864, 'Day Lewis 1934-1941,' 'Memo,' N.G. Luker to D.Tel., 18 November 1936.

¹¹⁹ WAC, 48864, 'Day Lewis 1934-1941,' 'Poetry Proposal,' 1936.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Envy of the World: Fifty years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3, 1946-1996* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996), 20.

forays into long-running shows like *The Brains Trust* or *Perspectives*, his most notable appearance was ‘as himself’ in Terrence Rattigan’s first attempt to write for television,¹²¹ and in 1956 his poem ‘Christmas Eve’ was included in the service broadcast from Southwark Cathedral for *Christians be Joyful*.¹²²

Nevertheless, he continued to campaign for poetry on television; the difficulty was that his thinking had not changed much since he first proposed his series of lectures in 1936. When in 1962 he was invited to address the Royal Society of the Arts, his topic was ‘Poetry for the Public’ (1936 BBC proposal: ‘The Modern Poet and His Public’). His concern remained the same: poetry was difficult, and the wider public could not be expected to appreciate it properly: ‘We must accept it that poetry is a minority art in this country and has been so for some four centuries.’¹²³ Poetry was a route to neither fame nor fortune. He could, he said, walk down the street with Eliot, Frost and Graves – indeed he had done so – and no one turned a head.¹²⁴ What was to be done? Day Lewis’s solution was to find ways – on radio, on television, in public, in schools – to make poetry as widely *heard* as possible. A teacher, he argued, ‘will do more by reading a poem or two aloud every day in the classroom than his conscientious colleagues can do with hours of analysing poems. [...] It is by way of the voice and the ear that poetry can make its first appeal.’¹²⁵ It was not surprising that he praised BBC radio for its revival of spoken poetry, but that he regretted that poetry on television was at no more than the experimental stage. It was to be some years before he could conduct

¹²¹ Terrence Rattigan, ‘My First Television Play,’ *Radio Times*, 27 July 1951, 39.

¹²² *Christians Be Joyful*, BBC, 18 December 1956, 22.15.

¹²³ The talk was given on 21 March 1962 and published later at C. Day Lewis, ‘Poetry for the Public,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 110, no. 5073 (August 1962): 657.

¹²⁴ C. Day Lewis, ‘Poetry for the Public,’ 658.

¹²⁵ C. Day Lewis, ‘Poetry for the Public,’ 660.

his own experiment in bring spoken poetry to the screen.

While Day Lewis campaigned from outside the BBC for poetry on television, within the BBC there was a fiercely contested debate, especially between producers such as D. G. Bridson, David Jones and George MacBeth, about how best to put poetry on the screen. The demise of the *Third Programme* on radio, and the advent of the television arts strand *Monitor* in 1958 went some way to answering that question: the focus was to be not poems but poets (see Chapter Four). *Monitor* had been on air for four years by the time they asked Day Lewis to front a programme, to be produced by David Jones, on Thomas Hardy.¹²⁶ He was the natural choice. His Warton Lecture, 'The Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy,' given to the British Academy on 6 June 1951, established his credentials as a leading Hardy scholar, and Hardy's 'generative presence' had long been felt in Day Lewis's poetry, and he had presented other *Monitor* films.¹²⁷ The production had a farcical element; filming for *Monitor* coincided with a similar programme being made, also fronted by a poet (Henry Reed), for Southern Television. Over the years Day Lewis built this coincidence up into a favoured anecdote complete with Dorset lanes 'jammed with outside broadcast units and a sea of crossed wires and cross technicians, and the two poets shouting insults to each other, Cecil pontificating indoors and Reed holding forth in the garden.'¹²⁸

Day Lewis's 'pontification' included him speaking to camera about the importance to him of Hardy's sense of time, the power of his writing, and

¹²⁶ *Radio Times*, 21 November 1963, 17.

¹²⁷ C. Day Lewis, 'Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy in C. Day Lewis' in: *The Golden Bridle: Selected Prose*, eds. Albert Gelpi, Bernard O'Donoghue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 200; *Monitor: van Gogh*, BBC1, 25 May 1962, 22:10.

¹²⁸ Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day Lewis*, 254.

compassion for humanity and its frailties. He quoted from ‘The Self-Unseeing,’ in which, Day Lewis had previously written, Hardy showed ‘his sense of the transient haunting all scenes of present happiness.’¹²⁹ The programme was a judged only a qualified success. Qualified because, although it was a perfectly standard *Monitor* film, by this time *Monitor’s* approach to artists of whatever kind had become so established as to invite ridicule. ‘The Hardy item was almost a parody of *Monitor* style,’ Derek Hill wrote in the *Listener*. ‘The visual accompaniment to C. Day Lewis’s chat ranged from the over-literary to the over-casual without once amplifying what was being said.’¹³⁰ Viewers were more forgiving: ‘the poems were apt, and finely delivered,’ said one.¹³¹



Figure 12: *Thomas Hardy, Footmarks in Time* (1963). Cecil Day Lewis speaks to camera in front of Stonehenge, Wiltshire.¹³²

¹²⁹ C. Day Lewis, *The Golden Bridle*, 206.

¹³⁰ Derek Hill, ‘Critic on the Hearth,’ *The Listener*, 28 November 1963, 896.

¹³¹ WAC, T32/1,058/2, *Monitor: Footmarks in Time*, ‘Audience Research Report,’ 16 December 1963.

¹³² *Monitor: Footmarks in Time: Thomas Hardy* (1963), 02:22.

Day Lewis received better press reviews for *The Pity of War*, broadcast the following year to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the war to end all wars.¹³³ Day Lewis, together with Edward Blunden, was finalising the edit of Wilfred Owen's *Collected Works*, and he would have been an obvious person for *Monitor* to turn to when they needed someone to write the introduction to the 'life and poetry' of Wilfred Owen. He was, said Anthony Burgess in the *Listener*, the 'right man to present to us (on this same jubilee evening) *The Pity of War* (BBC2). Great war-poets only spring out of useless wars: it is their task to understand the myth that surrounds them.' To demonstrate Day Lewis's suitability for the job, Burgess quoted Day Lewis's signature poem, 'Where Are all the War Poets?'

It is the logic of our times
No subject for immortal verse –
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.¹³⁴

Mary Crozier in the *Guardian* agreed. It was, she said, 'an example... of a fully adult programme.'¹³⁵ Both critics liked the programme – but for different, and contradictory, reasons. For Crozier, both Edmund Blunden who spoke before the programme and Day Lewis who fronted it, 'spoke directly like people and like poets without any television gimmickry.' They did not allow images to distract from the poetry. But Burgess liked the gimmickry. In his review, he argued that the producers had solved the vexed question of word and image: 'The excellence of this tribute to [Owen] rested not merely in the fine readings [...] but in the wedding of word and film image to create a transcendental series of symbols which, as it were, showed war *sub specie*

¹³³ *The Pity of War*, BBC2, 4 August 1964, 20.05; *Radio Times*, 30 July 1964, 29.

¹³⁴ Anthony Burgess, 'Television of the Month,' *The Listener*, 20 August 1964, 283.

¹³⁵ Mary Crozier, 'Last Night's Television,' *Guardian*, 5 August 1964, 7.

aeternitatis.¹³⁶ There was no easy resolution. The question of what image to use to what poem, and how much to intervene in the presentation of that poem, was to haunt poetry programming for years to come.

6.4. A Lasting Joy (1972)

Cecil Day Lewis was appointed poet laureate in January 1968. He was an instant hit. The *Daily Mail* commissioned a poem – ‘for his first ever three-figure fee’ for a single poem. It was called ‘Then and Now.’ The *Daily Mail* ran it as part of their ‘I’m Backing Britain’ campaign, a ‘bizarre manifestation of middle-class patriotism then current.’¹³⁷ The poem was read out on both ITV and the BBC and received ‘the biggest instant exposure any poem has ever had.’¹³⁸ The *Observer* attributed this not to any public interest in poetry but to the communications industry ‘having one of its turns.’¹³⁹ The coverage – even the *Mirror* put his appointment on the front page – turned Day Lewis into a celebrity poet in a way his predecessor, John Masefield, had never managed. Day Lewis confessed he spent all his *Mail* advance on postage for his replies to the thousands of fan letters he received. He took his duties as laureate seriously, and even produced a poem of four six-line stanzas to mark Prince Charles’s investiture as Prince of Wales in 1969. His reputation as a poet, however, was contested. Auden supported him, but the *Times Literary Supplement* was relentlessly critical. When P. J. Kavanagh reviewed the ‘general opinion’ of the ‘MacSpaunday poets’ in 1968, he found that Day Lewis had ‘worn the least well.’¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Anthony Burgess, ‘Television of the Month,’ *The Listener*, 20 August 1964, 283.

¹³⁷ Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day Lewis*, 280.

¹³⁸ David Newell-Smith, ‘At Last! The Instant Laureate,’ *Observer*, 7 January 1968, 40.

¹³⁹ David Newell-Smith, ‘At Last! The Instant Laureate,’ 40.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day Lewis*, 288.

Nevertheless, he was poet laureate, and he had many friends in broadcasting. Day Lewis was nearing the end of his life, when Norman Swallow, head of Arts Features at BBC television, and a Greenwich ‘friend and neighbour,’ offered Day Lewis the opportunity to bring to fruition his decades-long campaign to find the right way to put ‘poetry on television.’¹⁴¹ It was, said Jill Balcon, ‘the first time that BBC1 had presented a series entirely devoted to poetry, as distinct from the poems that were incorporated into other arts programmes.’ Mindful of Day Lewis’s declining reputation and health, and with the memory of the long history of failed initiatives in bringing poetry to the screen, Balcon concluded that Swallow had taken ‘an enormous risk.’ She, Day Lewis and Swallow had discussed many times how best to do it; in the event severe production constraints (Day Lewis’s health – he was too ill to travel to Television centre – and power cuts) meant that the series was shot in the Day Lewis’s living room in Greenwich. The format was simple: Day Lewis said a few words of introduction, and then he and Balcon and guests (John Gielgud, Marius Goring) read his selection of poems. Day Lewis liked the ‘idea of using the latest means of communication to put over the oldest of the arts.’ For him it was ‘a momentous occasion...to be asked to give six readings of poetry on the BBC1 channel. I think nobody has been asked to do it before.’¹⁴²

The programmes were themed:

- Childhood
- Human heroism
- Satire and hatred
- Love and friendship
- Times and seasons

¹⁴¹ Jill Balcon, ‘Introduction’ in C. Day Lewis, *A Lasting Joy*, 9.

¹⁴² C. Day Lewis, *A Lasting Joy*, Episode 1, BBC1, 18 July 1972.

- Death and immortality

Although repeated the following year, the series was not a success. The BBC followed up the broadcast with extensive audience research. Viewing figures were small and attrition rates were high. Fewer than two thirds of viewers watched an entire programme; those that did preferred Day Lewis's commentaries to the actual readings of the poems (and they preferred Jill Balcon's readings to his).¹⁴³ It pleased neither the BBC nor its miniscule audience, and it seemed to prove conclusively that simply reading poetry was not television. In that same moment, Day Lewis's lifelong campaign to put poetry on television both succeeded and failed.

6.5. What Day Lewis tells us about poets and BBC television

The death of a poet is not the death of their poetry; after his death Day Lewis's poetry continued to appear on BBC television. During the 1970s, eighteen of his poems were read on *Closedown*, sometimes by his widow, Jill Balcon. When his son from his first marriage, Sean Day-Lewis, published his biography of his father the BBC used it to query whether authors had – or should have – 'qualms about how much they revealed of their subjects.'¹⁴⁴ In programmes like *The Thirties Revisited*¹⁴⁵ and *Writers in the 30s: Left of Centre*¹⁴⁶, he continued to be treated as an exemplar of a time and place, rather than as a poet who wrote poetry – his writings from the three subsequent decades were largely ignored. There was a certain poignancy, therefore, when 'The

¹⁴³ WAC, R9/7/118, 'Audience Research,' July and August 1972.

¹⁴⁴ *The Book Programme*, BBC2, 1 June 1980, 21.55.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/6f965dd168ba4d52a847f79259f80c8>>, accessed 12.5.2020.

¹⁴⁵ *The Thirties Revisited*, BBC2, 27 August 1974, 19.35.

¹⁴⁶ *Writers in the 30s*, BBC2, 27 April 1993, 00.00.

Christmas Tree’ was selected for *Carols from King’s* in 2009. The poem was read by a King’s student:

The vision dies now
 Candle by candle: the tree that embraced it
 Returns to its own kind,
 To be earthed again and weather as best it
 May the frost and the wind.
 Children, it too had its hour—you will not mind
 If it lives or dies now.¹⁴⁷

But Day Lewis never made it to *Great Poets in their Own Words*, which was broadcast in two parts on 13 and 20 August 2014. The first episode (*‘Making It New’*)¹⁴⁸ explored ‘the stylistic shifts in poetry as the 20th century dawned’ and included segments on Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, W. H. Auden, Stevie Smith, John Betjeman, R. S. Thomas, and Dylan Thomas. In the second episode (*‘Access All Areas’*) poetry became ‘more democratic as poets turn away from the obscurity of modernism.’¹⁴⁹ The ‘new generation’ were deemed to be Philip Larkin, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Roger McGough, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Seamus Heaney.¹⁵⁰ The title entailed both ‘greatness’ and ‘their own words’ and it seems clear that there were factors at work other than a strict hierarchy of poetic merit. One prerequisite for those chosen was that there should be sufficient archive of them talking about their poetry, and reciting their poetry, to allow the programme makers to honour the programme title. When the programme cuts first to Eliot (*‘April is the cruellest month’*) and then immediately to Auden (*‘When he laughed...’*) and Dylan Thomas (*‘The night above the dingle sky...’*) it is in part because the

¹⁴⁷ *Carols from Kings*, BBC1, 24 December 2009, 16.45.

¹⁴⁸ *Great Poets in their Own Words: Making it New 1908-1955*, BBC4, 10 August 2014, 21.00.

¹⁴⁹ *Great Poets in their Own Words: Access All Areas 1955-1982*, BBC4, 17 August 2014, 21.00.

¹⁵⁰ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04dznr>>, accessed 12.5.2020.

recordings existed, even if in the case of Eliot and Thomas this was only as an audio recording. These may well be the poets who ‘rewrote the rules of poetry for a new age.’¹⁵¹ They are also the poets who made themselves available to television producers and audiences, who successfully played the game and left their traces in the archives, not only on the page and in the minds of their readers, but on celluloid and tape. For all his efforts to get poetry on television, Day Lewis was never considered worthy of a programme about him or his work. He presented a *Monitor* film about Hardy; but *Monitor* never made a film about him. As a result – with the exception of his reading of ‘The Self-Unseeing’ in the 1963 *Monitor* about Thomas Hardy, and the footage from *A lasting Joy* (1972) – there was no film of Day Lewis ‘in his own words.’ What concerns this study is how and in what context the ‘own words’ of these fifteen poets were recorded. Why were some included but not others? The answer is that poetry on television was partly a question of the quality of the poetry; it was also about contingent factors, including the popularity of the poet, the friendship networks in play, the fashionable opinions of any given moment and whether poets were judged to have understood the medium. Day Lewis was an enthusiastic advocate for poetry, and he understood, to return to the word used by Owen Sheers, the ‘needs’ of television. He just did not know how to satisfy them.

7. The structure of this thesis

Several questions emerge from this quantitative and descriptive iteration of ‘what is poetry on BBC television’ and its division into a typology of

¹⁵¹ Narration, *Great Poets in Their Own Words: Making the New*, BBC4, 13 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXvYv6_kaps&list=PLM4S2hGZDSE6OtZ7UkWUlkhlQI3pSC>, accessed 02.06.2020.

programmes. I organise this thesis around four of them:

- why and how poetry was a problem for BBC television,
- what solutions BBC producers found for the problem of poetry on television,
- how a new problem arose as BBC television made poets, not poems, the subject, and
- how television exaggerated a narrow canon of poetry through which the nation defined itself.

The arguments in each chapter are summarised below.

7.1. Why poetry was a problem for BBC television

For more than a decade, following the resumption of television broadcasting in 1946, poetry was what the producer D.G. Bridson described as ‘an orphan’ on television.¹⁵² There was no natural home, in the sense of a strand, or time slot, and no one presenter or producer associated with poetry on television. Nor was there consensus about what Bridson called the ‘proper treatment’ of poetry on television. And yet there were enough voices arguing that poetry was a source of national pride, and that the BBC had an obligation to broadcast it. In Chapter Two, I argue that the clash between the images evoked or created by poetry, and the images entailed by television lay at the centre of the assertion that poetry was a problem. I use examples of films about the poetry of W. H. Auden to argue that in its desire to win audiences and deliver good television, the BBC learned to treat poetry, even when the programme was *about* poetry, as just one of many ingredients that make up a programme, and that in doing so it changed the role played by poetry in general, and some poems in particular, in public discourse.

¹⁵² WAC, T16/576, D.G. Bridson to C.Tel., 24 July 1958.

7.2. What solutions were tried to solve the problem of poetry

As producers in various BBC departments experimented with ways to bring poetry to the screen, it became clear that to put poetry on television was to do something more than to point a camera at poets and actors reading poems. It was to edit, to elide, to illustrate and to decontextualise. It was to introduce music and sounds and, crucially, images. But every intervention – an edit, a graphic, a voice, a reader's face, a clip from the archives – shaped the way the words were consumed and understood. In the late 1950s two solutions were found: the creation of the arts strand *Monitor* meant that the arts had a home on television. *Monitor*, however, found it easier to make programmes about poets than about poems, and between 1958 and 1965 it broadcast a series of portraits of poets. Some, like D.G. Bridson, felt poetry's continuing absence, and therefore argued that there needed to be further experimentation with how to 'present' poetry itself on television. A number of pilot programmes were made – but none was broadcast. Poetry it was agreed, was a problem because, as one internal memo rejecting a poetry pilot put it, 'television added little to the poetry.'¹⁵³ It was only in 1967 that the producer, Christopher Burstall found a solution: he made *Tyger, Tyger* (1967) which was not so much about a poem or a poet, as about the response of a wide variety of viewers to a poem.¹⁵⁴ The film stands as an unqualified success in poetry programming. One reason for its success was that it was the first BBC programme to realise that the real power of television was not so much to put poetry on screen, as to put the reactions of readers of poetry on screen. The film was billed as 'An Enquiry into the Power of a Familiar Poem,' which

¹⁵³ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, Rex Moorfoot to David Jones, 22 February 1960.

¹⁵⁴ *Omnibus presents: Tyger, Tyger*, BBC1, 10 November 1967, 22.35.

‘concern[ed] itself with people who have an intense and personal reaction to familiar words.’¹⁵⁵ Over the course of 50 minutes a range of people recited and responded to Blake’s poem. This shift in focus was seldom repeated, but it was often the case that the most ‘breath-taking telly’¹⁵⁶ involved pointing the camera not at poems or poets, but at those who read or hear them.

7.3. How making poets the subject created a new problem

A frequent claim made for poetry is that it matters because it is true. Poets, from Auden to Motion, have gone on BBC television and asserted the importance of ‘truth’ in poetry, and critics and commentators have done the same. In *Why Poetry Matters* (2008), Griff Rhys Jones argued that, ultimately, truth is the reason poetry matters, and so did several of those he interviewed or quoted. In response to a question from Rhys Jones about the relative difficulty of poetry, the then poet laureate Andrew Motion replied,

I would much rather be able to say that we live in a society, in a poetic society which is precisely as varied, precisely as diverse as society is, and I wouldn’t want to live in any other version of things, I must say. We just need the opportunities that poetry, that only poetry has, to move at a different speed, to see the general truth in a particular situation, to slow things down, to be concentrated, distilled, emotionally charged. We need that among all the other voices which make up our existence.¹⁵⁷

Other poets saw ‘the opportunity that only poetry has’ to see or express the truth as an antidote to other societal ills. In the same film the poet Wendy Cope said, ‘Advertisers, spin doctors and so on are often being economical with the truth and what a poet is doing, if he or she is any good, is seriously

¹⁵⁵ WAC, T53/98/1, ‘Promotional Material’ (draft), 10 November 1967.

¹⁵⁶ Simon Armitage, *Newsnight Review*, 29:30 – 29:55.

¹⁵⁷ Andrew Motion, *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 41:15 – 41:45.

attempting to find the words to describe things as accurately, as truthfully as possible.¹⁵⁸ In Chapter Four, I argue that in making biographies of poets, and in using poems as the central autobiographical source, which entailed bending poems to a purpose for which they had not been created, the BBC simultaneously brought poetry to a television audience and blurred the distinction between whether poets had written something factual about their lives, or had said ‘something that’s true’ in a more general sense about the human condition.¹⁵⁹

7.4. How BBC television exaggerates certain lines of poetry

Often the BBC had another purpose in using poetry: to say something about the nation. In Chapter Five, I examine how BBC television was active in the (re)packaging of two poems which occupy a central place in the nation’s cultural life: Kipling’s ‘If...’ and Blake’s ‘Jerusalem.’

Both poems are well-known; both include numerous phrases which have, in the words of Jason Whittaker, become ‘entrenched’ in British culture.¹⁶⁰ Both poems have received extensive coverage on BBC television. In their 1937 introduction to *The Poet’s Tongue*, W. H. Auden and John Garret defined poetry as ‘memorable speech.’ (They added that ‘only that which is moving or exciting is memorable.’)¹⁶¹ In this final chapter I argue that certain poems achieve a level of familiarity which allows them to be used on television as a reservoir of ‘memorable speech’ to be deployed as proxies in

¹⁵⁸ Wendy Cope, *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 04:18 – 04:46.

¹⁵⁹ W. H. Auden on *Parkinson*, BBC1, 7 October 1972 and repeated in *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 56:45 – 57:08.

¹⁶⁰ Jason Whittaker, ‘Blake and the New Jerusalem: Art and English Nationalism into the Twenty-First Century,’ *Visual Culture in Britain* 19, no. 3 (2018): 380.

¹⁶¹ W. H. Auden and John Garret, *The Poet’s Tongue* (London, G. Bell & Sons, 1935), v.

other battles. The repeated use of particular poems and lines from poems, and their contextualisation and juxtaposition with the other ingredients of television programmes, created a narrow pool of lines through which BBC television reflected the nation.

7.5. Conclusion

I conclude by arguing that the claim that poetry is true, and that it expresses its truth in a manner which is aesthetically pleasing and in language that is memorable, should also be made for the new cultural form of poetry-on-television: that when it is done well, it too will communicate something that is true.

2. Why poetry was a problem for BBC television

I know that experience in the TV poetry field has not been over-happy in the past. But it is surely time to write-off past failures and to tackle the problem seriously in new and original ways. Poetry remains the highest form of expression: it cannot be kept out of visual presentation indefinitely. **Proposal by D.G. Bridson to the Assistant Head, Television, 1959.**¹

1. Introduction: a national art form

In the United Kingdom, extravagant claims are routinely made on poetry's behalf. To choose but one example: in 2015 the BBC marked National Poetry Day with *We British*, a Radio 4 series broadcast over the course of a single day, presented by the journalist Andrew Marr.² In the accompanying BBC book, Marr wrote that 'We British' are heirs to 'the most remarkable tradition of poetry of any major culture' and that this tradition offered 'a new way of thinking about who we have been, and who we are now.'³ The untested hyperbole aside – what makes a culture 'major;' what comparisons justified the superlative? – such statements illustrate the weight that this view of poetry carries in public discourse. Those making the assertions do not expect to be contradicted. Poetry is, Andrew Marr said, 'at the heart of the British achievement – more important, I'd say, than empire or even the extraordinary British leaps forward in science.'⁴ An extraordinary claim, no doubt, but wholly in keeping with others routinely made in the press or even in parliament. It follows that the national broadcaster, the BBC, must broadcast the poetry of the nation. But how?

1.1. What is the audience looking at: the example of e. e. cummings

¹ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Memo,' D.G. Bridson to A.H. Tel., 6 May 1959.

² *We British*, BBC Radio 4, 8 October 2015; 09.00.

³ Andrew Marr, *We British: the Poetry of a People* (London: BBC / Fourth Estate, 2015), xiii.

⁴ Marr, *We British*, xi.

One film illustrates the point. In 1970 the BBC broadcast a series of programmes in which well-known actors ‘performed solo’ in the guise of famous artists. Several of those portrayed were poets: Ian McKellen as John Keats, Jeremy Brett as Byron, and Alec Guinness as e. e. cummings.⁵ The director, James Cellan Jones, was confronted with the challenge of how best to bring the poetry and typographical innovations of cummings to the screen. As the programme preview noted, the poetry of e. e. cummings is intended ‘to please the eye as well as the ear.’⁶ The programme opens on Guinness, seated in a chair in an empty studio:

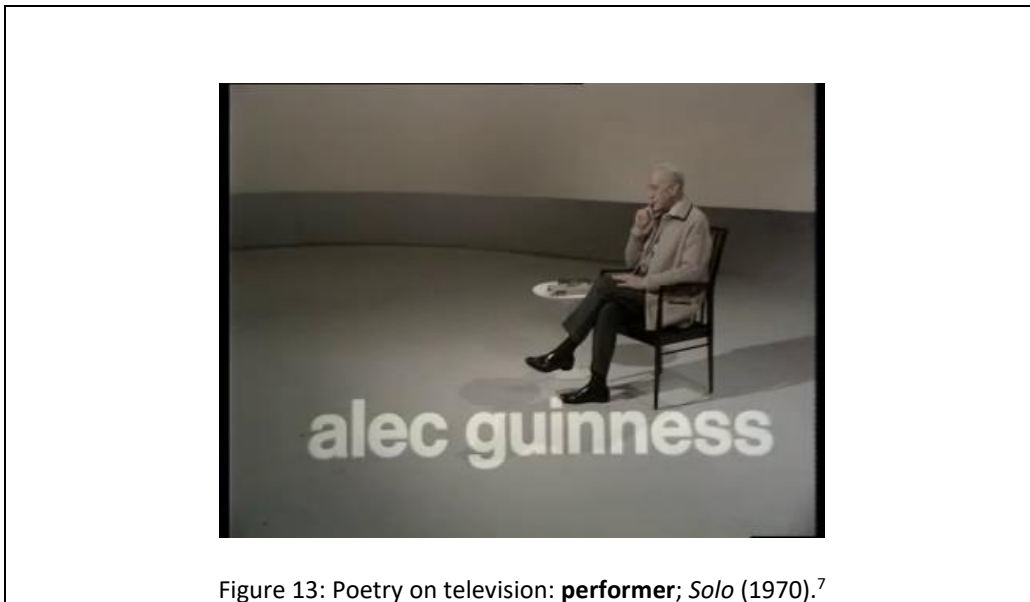


Figure 13: Poetry on television: **performer**; *Solo* (1970).⁷

Guinness is silent as the camera pulls back to reveal a reproduced poster of a well-known self-portrait by e. e. cummings, over which is imposed the programme title.

⁵ *Solo: Alec Guinness: a selection from e. e. cummings*, BBC2, 21 January 1970, 20.40.

⁶ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/76cce62ee51645fea8f5665c2642c14a>> accessed 12.02.2021.

⁷ *Solo: Alec Guinness: a selection from e. e. cummings* (1970), 00:00 – 01:00.

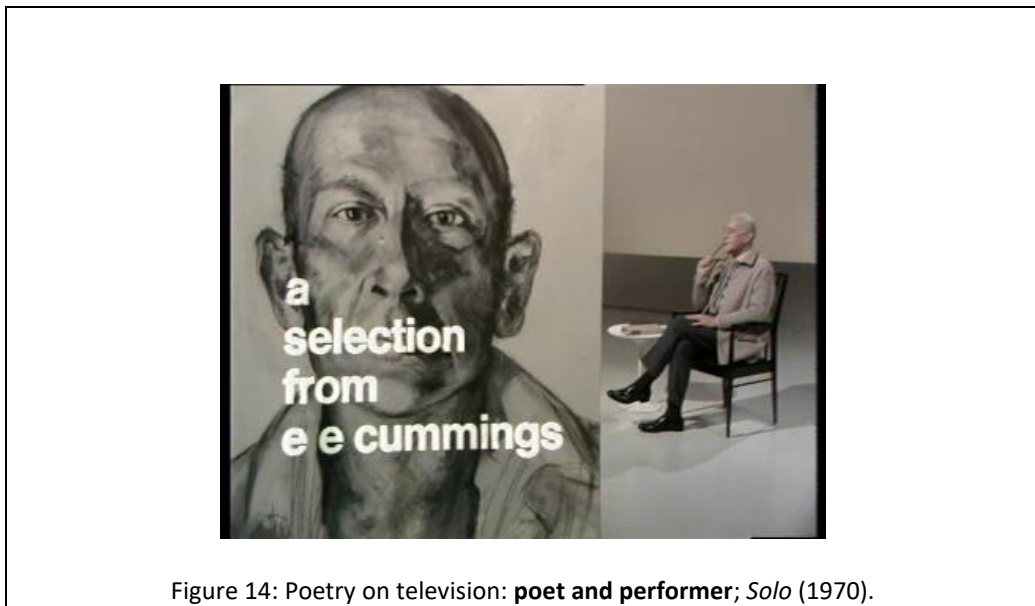


Figure 14: Poetry on television: **poet and performer**; *Solo* (1970).

The title fades and the camera pulls back further to reveal a second poster, this time showing a graphic reproduction of 'l(a,' the first in the 1958 collection *95 Poems* by e. e. cummings.⁸ It is (see Figure 15) a very short poem.



Figure 15: Poetry on television: **text, poet and performer**; *Solo* (1970).

Guinness begins to speak. His voice is elongated and slow, but even so the

⁸ e. e. cummings, *95 poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 17.

recital of 'l(a)' takes only a few seconds. The effect of the text on screen, and the elongated voice is to make the viewer focus on the text, to look at what it was that e. e. cummings wrote, and how he published it and to wonder at the intonation and modulation of Guinness's voice. The recital ends. Guinness smiles to himself, and picks up a book in preparation for reading the next poem. So far, so in keeping with the typography, metre and grammar of cummings's poetry. As well as hearing a performance of poetry, the viewer is watching poetry on television.

The next poem Guinness recites, however, is 'FOUR I,' an earlier work by cummings, which begins with these lines:

the moon looked into my window
it touched me with its small hands⁹

A few frames before Guinness's recital begins – the film cuts to footage of the moon, seen through clouds. Immediately, the poetic has been subsumed into television. The viewers are hearing poetry, but they are looking at television, at an image introduced not by the poet, nor by the words of the poem, but by the production team and the technological wonders of the medium. The viewers therefore have at least two images to hand: the poetic image of a 'moon looking into a window' and the television image of the moon and the clouds on the screen. And in this process, something is lost, for the line of the poem is 'the moon looked into my window' – but on television there was no window. Nor did the moon 'look;' rather it was something to look at, framed by moving clouds, white, against a dark sky, and framed in turn by the television set itself. Nor, as the camera cut back to Alec Guinness seated in a studio, did the moon 'touch' the reader or the viewer 'with small hands.' These two sets

⁹ e. e. cummings, *is 5* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1926), 89.

of images are not the same, and they compete for the viewer's attention. The words of the poem do not match the image on screen, and now the viewers, though they may still be hearing poetry, are watching television.



Figure 16: Poetry on television: **image**; *Solo* (1970).¹⁰

The history of poetry on BBC television is in part a history of the relative strengths of these two images, and of the consequent struggle to reconcile competing art forms. This was the problem of poetry on television.

2. The image of the poem or the image on screen?

Of the editorial choices involved in making programmes about or with poetry, the ones that presented the greatest challenge for programme makers were the images. In its presentation, or use, of poetry, BBC television has often introduced images which competed with or undermined or supplanted those provided, or elicited, or suggested by the poetry. In *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), for example, Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' was read over a time-lapse

¹⁰ *Solo: Alec Guinness: a selection from e. e. cummings* (1970), 01:05.

sequence of the sun moving across the modern London skyline; later in the programme a reading of the ‘Song of Solomon’ from the King James Bible was cut to a film sequence of couples at a 1950s wedding.¹¹ The lines over which these images (in black and white) were used were:

My beloved spake and said unto me
 Rise up my love my fair one and come away,
 For lo the winter is past the rain is over and gone.
 The flowers appear on the earth,
 The time of the singing of birds is come,
 And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.
 The fig tree puteth forth her green figs
 And the vines with the tender grape, give a good smell.¹²



Figure 17: ‘Song of Solomon,’ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009).¹³

Rhys Jones told the audience he had included this passage because of its ‘transporting poetic power,’ which power must surely derive in part from its images – but the images evoked in the lines (rain, flowers, singing birds, fig trees

¹¹ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 13:00-13:10 and 22:30-22:50.

¹² *King James Bible*, ‘Song of Solomon,’ 2:10 – 2:13.

¹³ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 22:34.

and the scent of vines) were lost to the viewer, overwhelmed by the images on screen of a smiling bride and groom, of jitterbugging couples, and of a spinning glitterball. Even when films were attempting to be literal, the power of the images on screen can exceed, rather than illuminate, the images created by the poetry. When discussing Eliot's *Four Quartets* in 1971 and 2009 the producers on both occasions, chose to film at the actual buildings at Burnt Norton and at the actual church at Little Gidding. The resulting sequences included the poem being read, the text being on screen, visual depictions of the poem's inspiration and added music and effects. In these examples, the poem was no longer 'the' poem, in part because only extracts of the poem were broadcast, but also because the experience of the poem for the viewer included the words of the poem, but also music, a reader's voice and, crucially, the images created by television.

2.1. Case study: 'Musée des Beaux Arts'

Some poems lent themselves to a more literal rendering. W. H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' is short (21 lines) and is therefore easier to broadcast in its entirety. The second stanza describes the poet's response to a painting, which can in turn be shown on screen. Versions of the poem have been broadcast on BBC television several times, most notably in 1973 and 2000.¹⁴ In the former it was part of a programme in which Auden discussed questions of poetry with the well-known presenter Patrick Garland. The latter was a biographical film about Auden called *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000). The poem followed an interview (an archive clip from another BBC film called *W. H. Auden, Poet of Disenchantment* (1965)) in which Auden said that art is 'rather small beer' and

¹⁴ *Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden*, BBC2, 5 November 1973, 22.40; *Tell Me the Truth about Love*, BBC2, 26 March 2000, 20.00.

that what matters in life is ‘loving one’s neighbour as oneself.’¹⁵

In both cases the reading of the second stanza of the poem was read over rostrum shots of Bruegel’s painting, cut to match the words. Writing to Patrick Garland before filming began in 1973, the producer Nancy Thomas, said, ‘We’ve got some beautiful illustrations for “Musée des Beaux Arts,” so I hope [Auden] doesn’t think that’s an anthologised old warhorse!’¹⁶ What she meant was that when the poem spoke of the ‘expensive, delicate ship’ the camera could show Bruegel’s painting of the expensive, delicate ship. When the ‘white legs disappear into the green | Water,’ the film could cut to a close up of the white legs and the green water. This is precisely what was broadcast, both in 1973 and in 2000.



¹⁵ *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 43:50 – 44:00.

¹⁶ WAC, T69/89/1, Nancy Thomas to Patrick Garland, 17 May 1973.



Figure 18: Bruegel's 'Icarus,' illustrating Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', 1973 and 2000.¹⁷

What is remarkable is how similarly this was done by two producers a quarter of a century apart. Next to a typed copy of the poem, Nancy Thomas's handwritten instruction to the editor read, 'whole picture tracking in to ploughman. Pan right to and pull out to frame ship and legs.'¹⁸ The aspect ratio may have changed from 4:3 to 16:9 and the black-and-white to colour, but the image and timing of the edits seem inevitable: the edits to the 'white legs' of Bruegel's 'Icarus' in *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000) almost exactly match those prescribed by Nancy Thomas a quarter of a century before.

The first stanza, however, offered programme makers a different challenge, for here the poem was discussing abstract ideas of suffering. In 1973, Nancy Thomas chose to cut the reading of this stanza (by the presenter Patrick Garland) to stills from other paintings. As the poem began with 'About suffering they were never wrong, | The Old Masters...' the film showed a series of portraits of Dutch painters ('the Old Masters'), starting with Rembrandt's self-portrait from 1669.

¹⁷ *Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden* (1973), 02:49 ; *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 44:57.

¹⁸ WAC, T69/89/1, 'W. H. Auden, Musée des Beaux Arts,' undated, (1973).

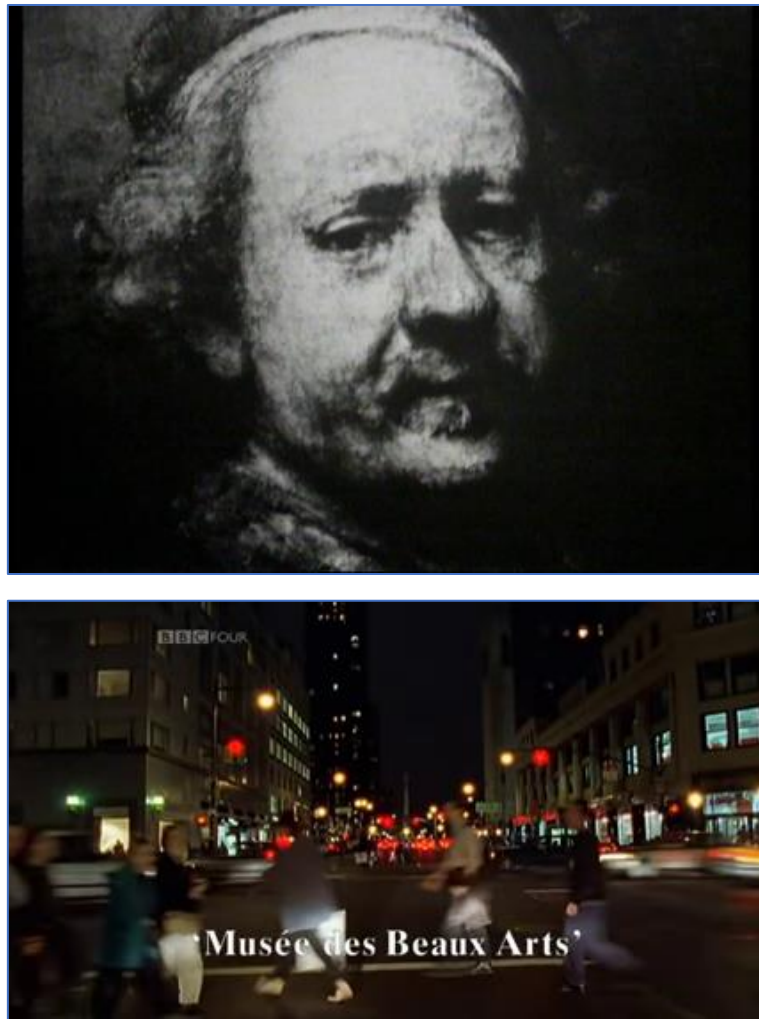


Figure 19: Illustrating the abstract in Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', from BBC films in 1973 and 2000.¹⁹

In 2000, the producer Susanna White did something quite different. The 13 lines of the first stanza were read (by Auden himself, in audio only) over a single slow-motion sequence filmed from inside a car as it drove down a Manhattan street.²⁰ In each case the producers were faced with the need for images for a

¹⁹ *Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden* (1973), 01:41; *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 44:05

²⁰ *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 44:05 – 45:10.

reading of a poem which is itself rich in imagery: although it is about the abstract ('suffering'), the first stanza calls many images to mind: someone eating, a window, a walk, a miraculous birth, children skating, the crucifixion, dogs, the torturer's horse. Both producers preferred not to use correspondingly literal images on screen.

The question arose, why these images? These films offer two answers. In *Poets on Poetry* (1973) it was, in effect, because they had to be watching *something*. Television entails images. Even a blank screen is an image. While the producer could argue that there were 'beautiful illustrations' to cut to the second stanza, the images cut to the first stanza though arguably beautiful, were hardly 'illustrative.' But nor were they completely at odds with the words of the poem, which took its inspiration from the works of the people now being shown on screen. The association of image and poem in *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000) was more subtle, but also conformed to an internal logic. The logic, however, had little to do with the words of the poem, and more to do with the narrative arc of a biographical film about Auden. Here the poem is being used to give the audience an insight into how Auden felt at a particular time in his life. In the context of the film, the poem is not 'about suffering,' but about Auden. In narrative terms, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' was written in 1938, before Auden moved to New York in January 1939. But in the chronology of *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), the poem was used in a discussion about love *after* Auden had moved to New York. The New York imagery therefore was chosen because it fitted the film narrative rather than because it was illustrative of the poem or of Auden's circumstances or thinking when he wrote the poem.

The experience of watching and hearing the second stanza in each iteration is remarkably similar; the voices are different (Patrick Garland in one case; Auden in the other), and the soundtracks are different, but the words, and the rhythms and the images are the same. The literal quality makes for comfortable viewing. The experience of watching and hearing the first stanza, however, is different. In 1973 the images focussed viewer attention on the 'old

masters'. In 2000, the images invited viewers to imagine themselves, as Auden must have once done, watching the skyscrapers and crowds and traffic of New York. In the one, viewers were invited to understand the poem; in the other to understand the poet. To broadcast poetry is to change how it was experienced by viewers. The question for BBC producers was, how could this best be done on television, and how did it change the way poetry was consumed and understood?

3. What will BBC television do for poetry?

3.1. Two assertions about poetry

A few months before the 1964 launch of BBC2, *The Times* ran a column from an anonymous correspondent. It made a double-assertion and asked a question, both of which serve to introduce two further problems considered here. First the double-assertion:

During the past 500 years most of the world's best poetry has been written in this country. For all that, poetry is our most neglected and undernourished art.²¹

The Times article argued that despite the United Kingdom's 'great, glorious tradition,' poetry remained 'undernourished,' a niche interest, uniquely important but starved of resources, and unable to sustain itself without succour from the public purse. 'Publishers,' *The Times* special correspondent wrote, 'with good reason, regard new poetry as bad box-office. No living poet can earn even the cost of his midnight oil by his verses.' Poetry needed subsidy, and since its launch in 1922, the BBC had become the main source of such support: 'Indeed, if the BBC had not assumed the function of

²¹ 'Notes on Broadcasting,' *The Times*, 20 July 1963, 4.

public trustee for modern poetry the prospect would be very bleak.’ But that trusteeship, which was both curatorial and financial, had been exercised on radio, most often through the BBC’s *Third Programme* and the BBC’s Poetry Committee. The previous week, the article said, BBC radio had presented ‘one of its occasional appraisals of contemporary poets. Six of them were weighed and measured with scrupulous care by Vernon Scannell, and examples of their work were read [...] the operative word is “read;” the poems were allowed to speak for themselves.’²² BBC radio had done its job well: it had informed and entertained the public and made a modest contribution to the livelihoods of poets.

What then, *The Times* asked, was to be the role of BBC television? If the ideal was that poems should be allowed ‘to speak for themselves,’ as was the case when they were read on radio, what could, or would, or should television do? It was true that that same week the arts strand, *Monitor*, had sent the presenter Robert Robinson to report on a poetry conference held at the Royal Court Theatre, London,²³ but such successes offered the writer no reassurance that the BBC would continue to direct its cameras at poets, nor to put their poetry on television. Rather, the article claimed, ‘one eminence’ in the BBC had sought to quash any idea that BBC2 would be filled with ‘Third Programme nonsense.’ Gone were the halcyon days of Lord Reith and his ‘missionaries’ with their desire to ‘cultivate public knowledge of the arts.’ Instead, the author wrote, ‘the BBC in vision, though not in sound, seems to be favouring the lowest common denominator of interest and taste.’²⁴ BBC2 would, inevitably, neglect

²² ‘Notes on Broadcasting,’ *The Times*, 20 July 1963, 4; the radio programme referred to is *New Poetry*, Third Programme, 14 July 1963.

²³ *Monitor: The Muse in SW1*, BBC TV, 17 July 1963, 22.20.

²⁴ ‘Notes on Broadcasting,’ *The Times*, 20 July 1963, 4.

poetry.

The evidence suggests otherwise. The catalogue of poetry programmes shows that during the period under consideration BBC television has consistently broadcast poetry and provided a platform for poets and their work. There have been periods of 'more poetry' on television (the 1960s) and periods of 'less poetry' (the 2000s), but the BBC's commitment to poetry on television, judged from the volume of programmes broadcast, has been measurable, consistent, and sustained (Figure 2). And most of the poetry programmes on television have been on BBC2 (Figure 5). The charge that poetry would be 'neglected' by BBC2 does not therefore stand scrutiny, but that it should suffer the accusation, and that the accusation should be made in advance of the launch of the new channel, emphasises the extent to which the BBC operates in the context of a fluid and demanding public discourse.

Histories of the BBC as an institution, often draw attention to the extent to which the BBC defines the nation. More recent scholarship has considered how this process of 'national definition' is, in Jean Seaton's word, a 'co-production,' as much 'bubbling up from the life people lived' as 'imposed' from above.²⁵ Just as the BBC has shown remarkable resilience in meeting the challenge of putting poetry on television, so politicians, the press and other proxies for the public have been consistent in their demand that it should. Policy makers, programme makers, the press and viewers feel they have the right to question the BBC, and to make demands of it. It is a process in which programmes as broadcast become part of the national conversation, which in turn has an influence on what other programmes are made, and how they are

²⁵ Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 2.

made and how they are received. This, Seaton wrote, is part of the ‘glory’ of the BBC: ‘we’ the audience could demand it try harder or be different because it was ‘ours.’²⁶ The BBC, in this conception, is like language itself, not a thing, but a process, ever changing and ever subject to the improvisations and demands of all its users. Those demands came from many quarters, not least the national press, whose job it was to ask questions of the national broadcaster.

4. Case study: Auden’s 100th anniversary

4.1. How interested parties lobby the BBC

One common demand made on the BBC is that it should recognise particular people or events as important. Poets were no exception. In the months preceding the 100th anniversary in 2007 of W. H. Auden’s birth and following an admission from BBC television that it had no plans to mark the occasion, there was a modest campaign in the broadsheet press to get the BBC to change its mind. ‘Woe to a Nation that idolises Beckham and ignores Auden,’ the commentator Michael Henderson warned in the *Daily Telegraph*.²⁷ If the BBC could do anniversary programming for John Betjeman,²⁸ then surely it could do the same for Auden, who, Henderson wrote, ‘was not some jobbing scribbler. He was, and remains, a towering literary figure, in a way that this year’s centenary boy, John Betjeman, despite his many virtues, never was.’ There was also a series of letters to the editors of various newspapers from John Smart,

²⁶ Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 3.

²⁷ Michael Henderson, ‘Woe to a Nation that idolises Beckham and ignores Auden,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 2006. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3634114/Woe-to-a-nation-that-idolises-Beckham-and-ignores-Auden.html>> accessed 12.4.2021.

²⁸ There was a mini-season of Betjeman programmes on BBC television in August 2006, including *John Betjeman - the Last Laugh*, BBC2, 14 August 2006, 23.20 and repeats of famous Betjeman programmes such as *A Poet in London* (1959) and *Summoned by Bells* (1976).

secretary of a group calling itself the 'In Praise of Auden Committee.' He wrote, 'It would indeed be a disgrace if the BBC failed to mark [Auden's] centenary in February but, alas, it would not be a surprise. Who can remember seeing on television a serious programme on Chaucer, Milton, Donne, Byron – or any great poet of the past? It is time for the corporation to begin to put this record right.'²⁹

4.2. The BBC's response

Again, the charge was easily rebutted. In the preceding few years, the television service had broadcast several high budget programmes on 'great poets of the past,' including an *Omnibus* on William Blake (2000) and another on Byron (2002), an *Arena* to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Dylan Thomas (2003), and Peter Ackroyd's three-part series, *The Romantics* (2006). Nevertheless, the BBC, aware that ITV was preparing a *South Bank Show* programme on Auden, bowed to the pressure.³⁰ It commissioned a new television biography of Auden, *The Addictions of Sin: W. H. Auden in his Own Words* (2007), which was broadcast a couple of days after the anniversary date (and after the rival show on ITV). This was followed immediately by a repeat of an earlier biographical film, *W. H. Auden: Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000).³¹

The programme the BBC commissioned illustrates the difficulties of putting poetry on television. In its title and in its opening caption, *The Addictions of Sin* made a coded claim to a particular kind of authority: the caption said that, 'Using interviews, letters, journals and poems, this film tells

²⁹ John Smart, 'Letters,' *The Independent*, 6 November 2006, and 'Letters,' *Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2006.

³⁰ See filmography for a fuller list; *The South Bank Show: W. H. Auden*, ITV, 18 February 2007.

³¹ *The Addictions of Sin: W. H. Auden in His Own Words*, BBC4, 22 February 2007; *W. H. Auden: Tell Me the Truth about Love*, BBC2, 26 March 2000, rpt BBC4, 22 February 2007.

the story of [Auden's] life – in his own words.' This echoed the ideal described by *The Times* special correspondent in 1963 – that when broadcasting poetry, the poems should be allowed to 'speak for themselves,' and reflected Auden's own view that biography was unnecessary: to know his life, all one had to do was read his poetry.³² But two questions arose: which poems – and how would they be broadcast? How, as it were, would they speak? In whose voice, and over what images?

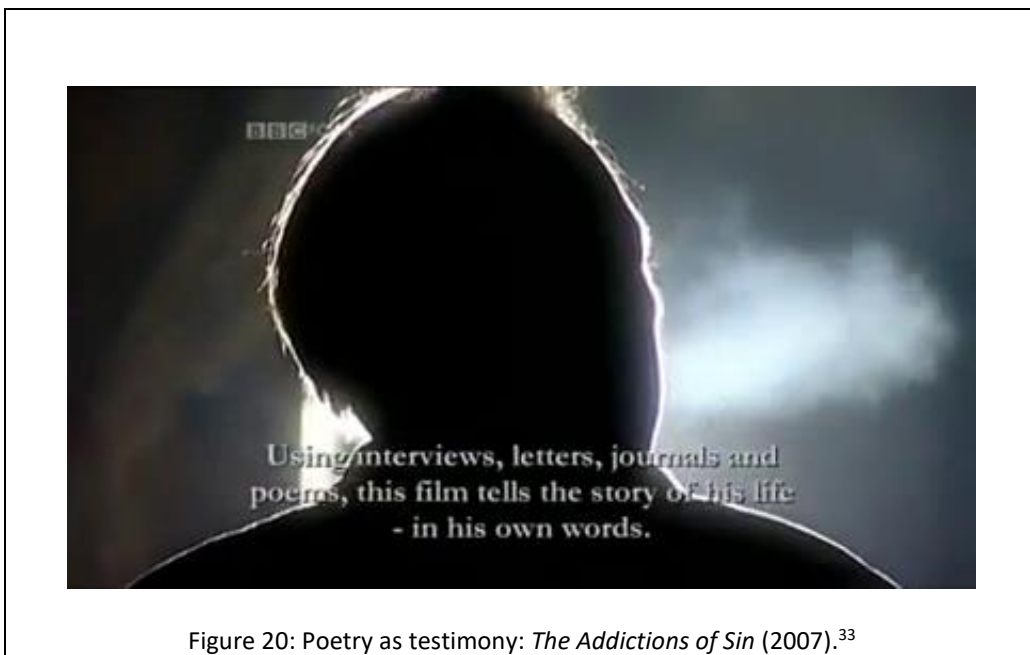


Figure 20: Poetry as testimony: *The Addictions of Sin* (2007).³³

4.3. Choosing the words

The producer of *The Addictions of Sin* was Adam Low, who had been making programmes for the BBC for more than 20 years. Low had also directed *The Auden Landscape* (1982), BBC television's first posthumous biography of Auden, who died in 1973. In both films Low used Auden's 'September 1, 1939'

³² Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden, a Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), xiii.

³³ *W. H. Auden: The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 00:36.

to tell the audience something about Auden's controversial move from England to New York in 1939 and about how he felt on the outbreak of war. In 1982 the narrator (Robert Robinson again) introduced the poem by saying, 'It may be possible to detect a somewhat defensive note in the poem [Auden] wrote on the outbreak of war.'³⁴ The poem was then read by Benjamin Whitrow – but not all of it. The second, third, fourth, sixth and seventh stanzas were omitted. The reading ends with the final stanza which begins 'Defenceless under the night' and ends 'Show an affirming flame.' And then the film cut to an interview with Auden's brother, John. His brother's defensive tone, John Auden said, was in part a response to criticism of his decision to move to the United States early in 1939. So far, so satisfactory: the narrative and the poem acting in concert.

In 2007, Low made a different set of choices. This time the poem was introduced by Auden's response to a challenge from Michael Parkinson in a famous BBC interview from 1972. Parkinson asked whether Auden was English or American, to which Auden replied, 'I wouldn't say I'm American. I can call myself a New Yorker, which is a rather special brand of character.'³⁵ The film then cut to the actor, Fraser James, in a New York Street, where he began to recite 'September 1, 1939.' This time the stanzas omitted were the second, third, fifth, sixth and ninth. As the reading ended with the last line of the eighth stanza ('We must love one another or die'), the film cut to another BBC archive segment in which the former MP Richard Crossman questioned Auden about his decision to repudiate the poem.³⁶ 'The rhetoric is too high-flown,' Auden

³⁴ *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 45:20 – 45:24. See Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*, p 78-88. Mendelson argues that 'September 1, 1939' and 'Law Like Love' are best read in tandem because 'whenever Auden wrote a poem he recognised as grand, emphatic and false, he immediately followed it with one that was quiet, tentative and truthful.'

³⁵ *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 32:34 – 32:37 from *Parkinson* (1972).

³⁶ The stanzas are numbered as in W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems (revised edition)*, ed. Edward

replied. 'To say we must love one another or die is untrue. We must love one another *and* die.'³⁷

What became of the poem? In each case the nine stanzas of the original became four – but not the same four. In neither film were any omissions acknowledged, and these were the poems as broadcast:

'September 1, 1939' As read in <i>The Auden Landscape</i> (1982).	'September 1, 1939' As recited in <i>The Addictions of Sin</i> (2007).
<p>I sit in one of the dives On Fifty-second Street Uncertain and afraid As the clever hopes expire Of a low dishonest decade: Waves of anger and fear Circulate over the bright And darkened lands of the earth, Obsessing our private lives; The unmentionable odour of death Offends the September night.</p> <p>Faces along the bar Cling to their average day: The lights must never go out, The music must always play, All the conventions conspire To make this fort assume The furniture of home; Lest we should see where we are, Lost in a haunted wood, Children afraid of the night Who have never been happy or good.</p> <p>All I have is a voice To undo the folded lie, The romantic lie in the brain</p>	<p>I sit in one of the dives On Fifty-second Street Uncertain and afraid As the clever hopes expire Of a low dishonest decade: Waves of anger and fear Circulate over the bright And darkened lands of the earth, Obsessing our private lives; The unmentionable odour of death Offends the September night.</p> <p>Into this neutral air Where blind skyscrapers use Their full height to proclaim The strength of Collective Man, Each language pours its vain Competitive excuse: But who can live for long In an euphoric dream; Out of the mirror they stare, Imperialism's face And the international wrong.</p> <p>From the conservative dark Into the ethical life The dense commuters come,</p>

Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 95-97.

³⁷ *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 35:00 – 35:07 from *Crosstalk: Politics and Poetry* (1973).

<p>Of the sensual man-in-the-street And the lie of Authority Whose buildings grope the sky: There is no such thing as the State And no one exists alone; Hunger allows no choice To the citizen or the police; We must love one another or die.</p> <p>Defenceless under the night Our world in stupor lies; Yet, dotted everywhere, Ironic points of light Flash out wherever the Just Exchange their messages: May I, composed like them Of Eros and of dust, Beleaguered by the same Negation and despair, Show an affirming flame.</p>	<p>Repeating their morning vow; "I will be true to the wife, I'll concentrate more on my work," And helpless governors wake To resume their compulsory game: Who can release them now, Who can reach the deaf, Who can speak for the dumb?</p> <p>All I have is a voice To undo the folded lie, The romantic lie in the brain Of the sensual man-in-the-street And the lie of Authority Whose buildings grope the sky: There is no such thing as the State And no one exists alone; Hunger allows no choice To the citizen or the police; We must love one another or die.</p>
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It is one of the technical achievements of the poem that each stanza is a single sentence. The 'thought unit corresponds exactly to the stanzaic unit, which corresponds also to the syntactic and grammatical unit.'³⁸ The stanzas are easily moved around or deleted. These are the fullest versions of the poem that have been broadcast on BBC television. To those not familiar with the original, each reading appeared to be entire unto itself. There was nothing on screen or in the soundtrack to suggest either reading was anything other than the poem the poet wrote, in, as it were, 'his own words.' But clearly, they were not the poem that appears in print; nor were they the work subsequently denied by Auden. Nor do they mean the same as each other. The first version concludes on the optimistic note of the 'affirming flame.' The latter version ends with the rhetorical flourish ('We must love one another or die.')

³⁸ Ian Sansom, *September 1, 1939: a Biography of a Poem* (London: 4th Estate, 2019), 102.

subsequently and repeatedly disowned by Auden. Some ideas are omitted entirely; others remain in one version but not the other. If Eliot's claim is correct, that 'what a poem communicates is the poem,'³⁹ then perhaps it is necessary also to say that what television communicates is the film; poetry on television is not the poem the poet wrote, but a part of the film, and it is the film that is communicated.

It is not necessary to critique these edits to suggest that a study of poetry on television entails a different way of thinking about what we mean by poetry, because it seems clear that putting poetry on television is never a neutral act. It has become part of something else. But it is not, as it were, 'not poetry.' Auden's work may have become an ingredient in the making of a film, and may have been subsumed into what we call television, but the idea that it was once, and remains, poetry, does not disappear. What has changed is how audiences experience it. It is no longer an island entire unto itself. To televise poetry was to change 'how a poem gets produced, consumed and incorporated into people's lives.'⁴⁰

4.4. Choosing the images

That poems broadcast on television become something different becomes clearer when we consider the other elements that made up the sequences in which the two reconfigured versions of 'September 1, 1939' were broadcast. In 1982 the reading was laid over present-day film footage of people in what a viewer might assume to be 'one of the dives on 52nd Street.' The sequences of shots – a man drinking, a woman laughing, a bartender serving, the 'faces along

³⁹ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 30.

⁴⁰ Sansom, *September 1, 1939*, 6.

the bar' as they 'cling to their average day' – draw the viewer in. The words seem to agree with the images. When the poem speaks of the 'man in the street,' the film shows people in the street. When the poem speaks of buildings that 'grope the sky,' the film shows New York buildings against a blue-grey sky.



Figure 21: 'Faces along the bar,' *The Auden Landscape* (1982).⁴¹

There are limits to this, however. The buildings of the poem (and the viewer's or reader's imagination) may 'grope' the sky; the buildings of the film do not. And when the poem speaks of the 'I' – what is the appropriate image? There is 'no reason,' says Ian Sansom, 'to assume that the "I" who is sitting here at the beginning of the poem is necessarily the poem's author, Wystan Hugh Auden, who was born in York on 21 February 1907.'⁴² If not Auden, then who? The actor reading the poem is not seen in screen. In the film the actual image that coincides with that first 'I' of 'I sit in one of the dives' is the interior of the

⁴¹ *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 45:56.

⁴² Sansom, *September 1, 1939*, 47.

presumed dive on 52nd Street; what the viewer sees is the backs of two people seated at a bar. In front of them is a pool table; behind them a window. There is a dark wooden bar and spots of light. Despite this being a biography of Auden, there appears to be no visual version of 'I.'

In the 2007 film there is a stronger presumption that the 'I' is Auden, for the audience has been told that this was 'the story of the life' of the poet 'in his own words.' Again, an actor read the chosen stanzas – but this time the actor was on screen. The image as he recited 'I sit in one of the dives' was a mix from a sequence of speeded up footage of a New York Street to a close up of the actor's nose and mouth. He was speaking on the soundtrack – but he was not speaking in the image. In fact, there are several other things he was not doing: he was not 'sitting,' he was not in a 'dive,' and he was not on 52nd Street. (The viewer familiar with New York knows this because visible in the background is the Manhattan Bridge, which is some five miles from 52nd Street.) The film was not trying to be literal – but it was trying to communicate something about Auden's experience and its relevance to the viewer. What images, then, would the producer use while the four chosen stanzas were being recited?

The film was made a few years after the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. It has been widely remarked that following the attack there was a renewed interest in the US and elsewhere in poetry; much of this interest focussed on 'September 1, 1939.'⁴³ In the weeks following the attacks, at least six US newspapers, including the *New York Times*, printed the poem in full on their front or editorial pages. It became 'the iconic poem of 9/11.'⁴⁴ By the time Low came to make *The Addictions of Sin*, the famous New

⁴³ Burt, "'September 1, 1939' Revisited,' 534.

⁴⁴ Peter Steinfels, 'Beliefs; After September. 11, a 62-year-old poem by Auden drew new

York skyscrapers that Auden once thought to ‘proclaim the strength of Collective man’ seemed in the popular imagination to do anything but. Skyscrapers carried with them a new image of frailty; they might at any moment crumble into dust.



Figure 22: ‘Love one another or die,’ *The Addictions of Sin* (2007).⁴⁵

To accompany the reading of ‘September 1, 1939,’ Low chose to use video footage from 11 September 2001 – but he went one step further. As the poem reached its rhetorical climax, as the actor recited the lines of the poem’s new ending (and the line that Auden most strongly disavowed) – ‘We must love one another or die.’ – the film (‘the story of his life – in his own words’) showed video footage of New York’s emergency responders on 11 September 2001 – *with the film run in reverse*. Firefighters jogged backwards. Ambulances reversed at speed down streets, dust which had fallen, rose; billowing flames were sucked into buildings, and an aeroplane flew backwards into the clear blue

attention. Not all of it was favorable,’ *New York Times*, 1 December 2001, A 13.

⁴⁵ W. H. Auden: *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 34:34.

sky.⁴⁶

It is hardly controversial to say there was something strange going on here: the familiar lines of a familiar poem cut to familiar images (run backwards) of an all-too-familiar disaster to create – well, to create what? This is one example of the cultural form which I call ‘poetry-on-television,’ a set of cultural artefacts and associations which are brought together in a visual, digital form, to create something new. It is not the poem as written, and it does not allow the poem – or the poet – to ‘speak for itself.’ It is not the story of Auden’s life ‘in his own words.’ But nor is it entirely free of the poem, its many associations and its famous and oft-repeated phrases. It becomes an emotionally gripping sequence in which what is communicated is the sequence itself.

4.5. A new cultural product

Neither those demanding that the BBC honour Auden in 2007, nor *The Times* special correspondent asking that television do something about poetry in 1963 could have imagined what was to come. In his article, the journalist Michael Henderson cited Adam Low’s previous television biography of Auden (*The Auden Landscape*, 1982) as an example of how such things should be done:

What does Alan Yentob, the head honcho in the arts department and a chap who seems to have held every post at the corporation except chief bottle-washer, actually do for his money? Perhaps he should fetch from the library a tape of Robert Robinson’s tribute to Auden that went out in September 1983, on the 10th anniversary of the poet’s death, to see the sort of thing that established the BBC’s reputation as an educator as well as a provider of popular entertainment.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 32:30 – 32:44 and 34:05 – 34:36.

⁴⁷ Michael Henderson, ‘Woe to the nation,’ 11 November 2006; Henderson doesn’t quite get the dates right; the film was first broadcast on 27 February 1982 (reviewed in *Daily Telegraph* on 1 March 1982, 11), but it was repeated on BBC2 on 16 October 1983. At the

Was he satisfied? We ignore the *ad hominem* attack on Alan Yentob and note the Reithian expectation of the BBC – that it should be an ‘educator’ and a ‘provider of popular entertainment’ – but we note also that no broadsheet newspaper or national weekly reviewed *The Addictions of Sin*, although some had previewed it and several wrote approving reviews of ITV’s *South Bank Show: W. H. Auden* a few days earlier.⁴⁸ The campaign to have Auden’s anniversary marked on BBC television had succeeded, but the success was fleeting and easily forgotten. The film joined so much of the ephemera that is television; here today and gone tomorrow, except that like many television programmes it has not quite gone. It has an ‘afterlife.’⁴⁹ It is part of the archive. It exists on *YouTube* where more than 70,000 people have viewed one of the versions uploaded since 2013.⁵⁰ The film took the poem, edited it, put it in a new voice, and cut it to images unimagined when Auden wrote the poem, and in doing so it changed, and continues to change, the way poetry is consumed and understood.

5. Auden’s choice: ‘read it or leave it’

The demand *The Times* columnist made in 1963 was simple: BBC television should take poetry seriously, recognise its achievement and its place in the life of the nation, and let it speak for itself. While the first two were well within the realms of the possible for BBC television, the third demand was to prove much more challenging. Could poetry on television speak for itself? As the television

time (2007) Alan Yentob was the BBC’s Creative Director, a post he held until 2015.

⁴⁸ For example, Andrew Billen in *The Spectator*, 26 February 2007: ‘[The film] may deprive ITV of its reputation as the stupid channel.’

⁴⁹ Amanda Wrigley, ‘Afterlives of BBC Radio Features,’ *Media History* 24, no. 2 (2018): 266-282.

⁵⁰ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUGVqup9ZGo>> accessed 1.2.2022.

service began to grapple with the question of what to do about poetry, it had also to grapple with the questions of which parts of which poems, and what images went with what words – and with what effect. The question became not ‘what will television do about poetry,’ but ‘what *could* television do about poetry?’ What constraints would determine how poetry was presented on television? And what would be the impact on the claim that poetry must, in some sense, be true?

In a 1972 interview with Michael Parkinson on BBC1, W. H. Auden said,

What one secretly hopes from a reader, is on reading a poem they say, ‘My God, I knew that all the time, but I never realised it before.’ That’s the ideal reaction, because then you know you’ve said something that’s true.⁵¹

His insistence that what mattered about poetry was that it was in some sense ‘true’ echoed the phrase Huw Wheldon, the founding editor of *Monitor*, had used a decade before when he said that *Monitor’s* ambition was to ‘say something true’ about art and artists or the words Matthew Hollis used when he said, ‘Poetry should do two things, one of which is to be true.’⁵² If the purpose of putting poetry on television was to bring its truth to a wider audience, this was a problem. For in what sense could a poem ‘say something true’ or ‘tell the story of Auden’s life in his own words’ when those words were used despite Auden’s subsequent disavowal of their truth, and when they were used in a television biography of a man who died in 1973, but were recited over video footage of an aeroplane flying backwards in 2001 from a (no longer) burning building? The conclusion must be that the truth is not the truth of the

⁵¹ W. H. Auden on *Parkinson*, BBC1, 7 October 1972 and repeated in *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 56:45 – 57:08.

⁵² Huw Wheldon, *Monitor* (London: MacDonald, 1962), 13; Matthew Hollis, *Why Poetry Matters* (2009): 37:50 – 38:04.

poem, nor the truth of its author or his life story, but the truth of the film. The emotional core of the sequence, the suggestion that to be human is to exist in a state of anxiety and fear, and that this anxiety is to do with the world we have created (a world of aeroplanes and buildings, of technologies harnessed for purposes of destruction) is in this sequence a truth expressed not by the poetry alone but in the visual-aural mix of the television programme whose existence is, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, somewhere between the programme and the viewer.

Interviewed on BBC television in 1965, W. H. Auden said of his profession as a poet that,

On the whole, I think one is rather proud to serve a medium which – in our time when the public has learned to consume almost everything like cans of soup – with poetry you cannot do it. You get a student who might put a Mozart symphony on his phonograph while he studies as a kind of background noise. People buy pictures that they hang up as status trophies to show they are making money. People go and ‘do’ Venice in two days. You can get abridged versions of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky which you read and forget. Poetry has remained somehow or other something that you either have to read it or leave it alone.⁵³

Poetry on BBC television has been a denial of this ideal. The audience was absolved of Auden’s choice – they had neither to read it, nor to leave it alone. It became subsumed into television, which in the process altered the poem, its meaning, its form, and its reception. The audience experienced it not as poetry, but as poetry-on-television, not as something to read or listen to, but as something to watch and hear, not as something that a poet once wished to communicate, but as something whose meanings, emotions and images had been subsumed into the meanings conferred by its use on television. This

⁵³ W. H. Auden: *Poet of Disillusionment* (1965), 40:50 – 41:45.

becomes a reciprocal process. The importance of the poem as written and published is diminished. The two versions of the poem broadcast in these films do not, of themselves, and in the context of the films, matter very much; they will not (with the possible exception of this thesis) be published elsewhere, nor repeated, nor taught nor read. And yet they were poetry on television. The films used the lines, some of which were famous, and made them more famous. It is this that characterises much of how poetry is used on television, and that is the reason television producers return to poetry – and the reason it is a problem. Poetry gives gravitas, meaning, and status. Television in return amplifies certain lines from certain poems and makes them more famous. And together they create new cultural form called poetry-on-television, which is a denial of Auden’s imperative: that poetry should be read or left alone.

5.1. When the poem no longer matters

The new cultural form of poetry-on-television occurs in many contexts, not only in biographies of poets. In 2022, for example, the long-running BBC arts strand, *Arena*, broadcast a film called *River*.⁵⁴ The pre-title sequence included a long aerial shot of a river at sunset, on which the text of a line from a poem by Auden was superimposed. It read:

THOUSANDS HAVE LIVED WITHOUT LOVE,
NOT ONE WITHOUT WATER
- W. H. AUDEN

The film, an ABC (Australia) – BBC co-production, used footage of various rivers to explore humanity’s relationship with water. Its publicity claimed to offer the audience ‘a journey through space and time spanning six continents.’⁵⁵ The film

⁵⁴ *Arena: River*, BBC4, 25 July 2022, 21:00.

⁵⁵ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/m0019mbl>>, accessed 31.7.2022.

opens with the Auden quote, which is the final line from ‘First Things First’ (1956), and which Edward Mendelson called ‘an impressive example of Auden’s ability simultaneously to conduct a complex argument about language and to write a love poem whose subtleties make it different from any other.’⁵⁶ It is typical of such uses of poetry on television that the complex argument about language and the love poem were of no consequence to the film; nor were the words used as poetry *per se*. The assertion was made, and neither the poem nor the poet was heard from again. Even the typography and layout (all upper case, two lines, no full stop) had been changed to suit the television image. The line was simply an assertion whose value, such as it was, came not from the complex argument advanced in the poetry, but from Auden’s fame as a poet.

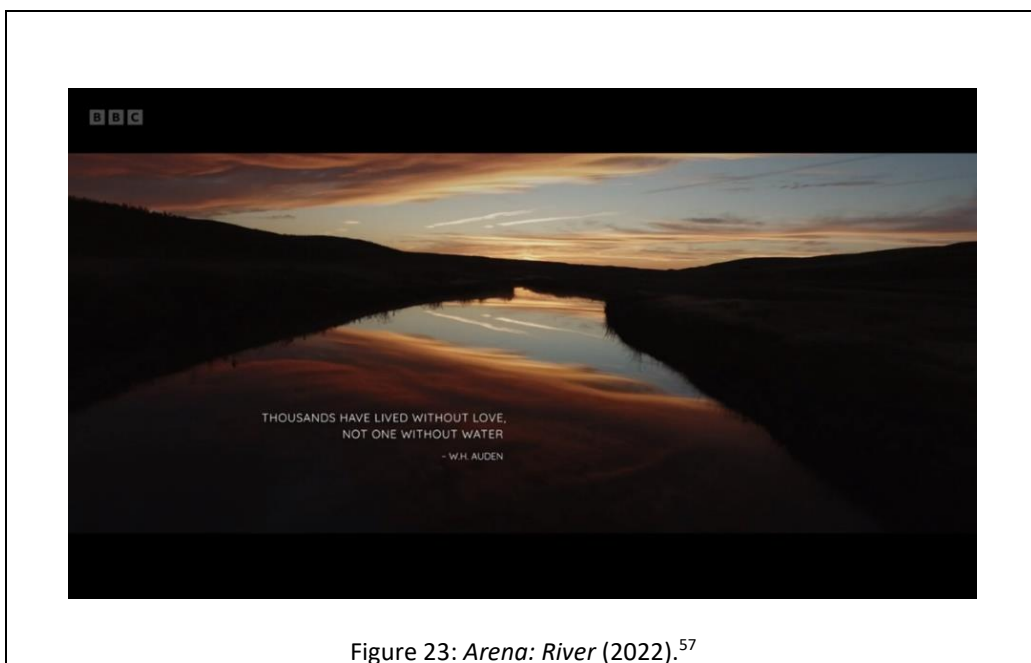


Figure 23: *Arena: River* (2022).⁵⁷

Auden, perhaps, would have been amused. When interviewed for *W. H. Auden, Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), he told an anecdote about ‘First Things

⁵⁶ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 409.

⁵⁷ *Arena: River* (2022), 00:20.

First.’ Having first disavowed the importance of poetry as a profession, he said,

Much the greatest compliment I ever received was – well, I had written a poem that had come out in the *New Yorker*, of which the last line happened to be, ‘Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.’ Well, a dear old friend of mine, a wonderful woman, Dorothy Day, was the editor of the *Catholic Worker*. She had been put in jail for protesting against air raid precautions and she was in the women’s jail in New York on 6th Avenue and 8th Street. And one of her co-inmates was a whore. Well, the prisoners there got a shower once a week. And this whore, going off to her shower for the week, quoted this line of mine. And I thought, well, I have not lived, I have not written, in vain.⁵⁸

He was joking, but he was also commenting on how poetry becomes part of popular culture, how, in Mike Chasar’s words, ‘easily it travels.’ The anecdotal prison inmate, like the producer of *River*, was unlikely to have been much concerned with Auden’s ‘complex argument about language,’ nor to have committed the entire poem to memory. But she had read or heard the line and she had remembered it. The point of Auden’s anecdote was that, over time, what was communicated was not the poem, but those lines of the poem that people remembered. Poetry on television took this a step further. The lines people remembered became a part of the range of tools and techniques and resources used to make programmes. That it was once poetry appeared to be unimportant. Rather, programme makers found refuge in Auden’s other definition of poetry: they thought of it as a reservoir of ‘memorable speech,’ a kind of lending library from which they could borrow phrases and lines or whole poems as required for the purpose of making television.⁵⁹ But the two versions of ‘September 1, 1939’ suggest there is more to it than that. The library metaphor fails because the lines, once borrowed, cannot be returned. The

⁵⁸ W. H. Auden, *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), 41:45 – 42:33.

⁵⁹ Auden and Garret, *The Poet’s Tongue*, v.

poem as broadcast enters the historical record not as ‘the poem,’ but as something new, something else – as poetry on BBC television, from which a new set of opportunities and challenges arise.

6. Why poetry matters on and to BBC television

This hinterland of archive and programme-making experience, although mediated by gaps in institutional memory and by an enduring absence of consensus about how best to bring poetry to the screen, formed the backdrop to the BBC’s definitive engagement with poetry, the 2009 *Poetry Season*. Apart from the *Closedown* broadcasts of the 1970s, this season, which ran through the summer of 2009, was the BBC’s most serious and sustained engagement with poetry, with the people who write it – and with the people who read it.

6.1. *Why Poetry Matters* (2009)

The programme chosen to launch the 2009 season on television was *Why Poetry Matters*, presented by Griff Rhys Jones, who had long been one of the ‘faces’ of poetry programming on BBC television.⁶⁰ His other credits include *The Heart of Thomas Hardy* (2008), *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006) and *The Nation’s Favourite Poem* (1995).⁶¹ His purpose was to argue that ‘far from being complicated or stuffy or difficult, [poetry is] one of the most powerful and enduring forms of art at large today. So, in this programme I want to try and show you why it affects us so deeply.’⁶² The defensive note in the title and in Rhys Jones’s opening remarks was not unusual. From the earliest days of

⁶⁰ *Why Poetry Matters*, BBC2, 20 May 2009, 21:00.

⁶¹ *The Heart of Thomas Hardy*, BBC1, 7 September 2008, 17.40, and *Kipling: a Remembrance Tale*, BBC1, 12 November 2006, 18.35; *The Nation’s Favourite Poems*, BBC1, 13 October 1995, 22.20.

⁶² *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 01:10 – 01:15.

television there was a discernible anxiety in the language used by producers and poets, who felt a need to persuade executives and their putative audience of the importance of their subject. From the time the television service began, producers had worked in the knowledge that regular BBC audience surveys revealed poetry, whether on radio or television, to be a minority interest. As far apart as 1943 and 1993 no more than one third of viewers or listeners surveyed by the BBC had any interest in poetry and only 5% declared themselves to be ‘very interested.’⁶³ The need to sell the poets (and their poetry) meant that superlatives were common currency in programme proposals and scripts. (This practice continues. When Sir Geoffrey Hill was interviewed on *Newsnight* in 2015, he was introduced as ‘the greatest living poet in the English language.’)⁶⁴ There was a similar register in programme scripts and proposals, in which it was assumed poetry had to fight for the right to be heard, and to justify its place on the airwaves. As early as 1936, Cecil Day Lewis’s first proposal for a series of televised talks on poetry included an entire episode in which he felt it necessary to argue ‘the value of poetry.’⁶⁵ A quarter of a century later the producer of *Poets on Poetry* (1973), Nancy Thomas, asked Auden to be prepared to discuss the ‘justification for poets.’⁶⁶ And some three and a half decades after that, the BBC kicked off the television part of its 2009 *Poetry Season* by revisiting the same question: does poetry matter? We have already seen (Chapter one; section 7.3) that Rhys Jones and others argued that poetry matters because it is true. In his introduction to *Why Poetry Matters*, he

⁶³ WAC, R51/302/1, ‘Literary Output Committee Report,’ 31 May 1943, June – July 1943; WAC, SP93/092, ‘1993 Special Report on Poetry on BBC2,’ October 1993.

⁶⁴ *Newsnight*, BBC2, 28 April 2015, 22.30.

⁶⁵ WAC, 48864, ‘Cecil Day Lewis,’ ‘Provisional Scheme for Six Talks on Poetry,’ undated from 1936.

⁶⁶ WAC, T69/89/1, Nancy Thomas to W. H. Auden, 8 May 1973; WAC, T69/89/1; ‘Production note,’ *Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden* (1973), undated.

gave two further reasons: the first was poetry's ability to move its audience. It is 'one of the most powerful and enduring forms of art at large today,' unrivalled in its capacity to move, to inform and (echoing the Reithian conception of the BBC) to entertain. 'I love its intensity,' Rhys Jones said. 'I love its music, its vision. But I also like it for its wickedness and its power to disturb me [...] and how [it] can get under our skin.'⁶⁷ The film immediately cut to two examples of poetry that can 'get under our skin.' Both were lines by Auden: four lines from 'Eyes Look into the Well' (1940) and two lines from John Hannah's famous reading of 'Funeral Blues' (1936) from the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

The second reason for Rhys Jones, as for Andrew Marr and many others, was the perceived eminence of the existing canon of British poetry: 'Now we don't have to be coy about this,' Rhys Jones said on screen. 'Here in Westminster Abbey, in Poets' Corner, the evidence is all around us. In terms of the great, glorious tradition of poetry, Britain fields the top team in the world.'⁶⁸ The awkward sporting metaphor and his use of this popular idiom to promote an art form which surveys revealed not to be popular, were an attempt to overcome the perennial problem for those who seek to promote poetry on television: how to persuade others that poetry was important for everyone. But the greater point was that poetry matters because Britain is thought to be good at it. And it matters on the BBC for the same reason. The BBC must 'feed and feed off' British culture.⁶⁹ It was therefore impossible not to do something with and about poetry. This was the problem for the BBC. It could not ignore a national art form on television, and yet this particular national art form had

⁶⁷ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 11:35 - 11:46.

⁶⁸ *Why Poetry Matters*, BBC2, 20 May 2009; 11:35 - 11:46.

⁶⁹ Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 87.

proved difficult to broadcast, because to broadcast it was to change it.

6.2. An argument on and about television

In his attempt to explain why poetry affects us so deeply, Rhys Jones used television techniques familiar to generations of BBC television producers and viewers. There were interviews with leaders in the poetry establishment (Wendy Cope, Andrew Motion, Simon Armitage, Ian MacMillan), excerpts of performances and interviews from the archives (Philip Larkin, Stevie Smith), dramatisations of poetry (Rhys Jones on a chaise longue in a faux-psychotherapy session reciting passages from *King Lear*) and performances of old and new poetry in public and in private. Rhys Jones took himself to daffodil meadows and the National Gallery, to football terraces and to Westminster Abbey. He even persuaded commuters at London's Euston Station to recite W. H. Auden's 'Night Mail' for the cameras. Despite this, the programme was criticised, in print and on BBC television, for having failed to do justice to poetry.

Critics disliked the apologetic tone. 'The starting point – "poetry is in decline" or "poetry needs saving" – is the wrong one,' wrote one critic,⁷⁰ but the primary accusation was that in its attempt to sell the importance of poetry the programme had tried to do for poetry what poetry should do for itself. It had communicated not 'the poems,' but television's idea of the poems. This was a general statement about mediated programming but also a response to a problem particular to television: the imposition of film images on an art form which had its own power to create images in the mind of the listener (or viewer). 'Poetry,' another critic wrote, 'doesn't need images of daffodils and

⁷⁰ Nathan Hamilton, 'The BBC's poetry season was let down by poor production,' *Guardian*, 15 July 2009. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/July/15/bbc-poetry-television-programmes#comment-4948161>> accessed 12.10.2021

babbling brooks; we create those images from the power of words. *Poetry Please* on Radio Four is as near as perfect an attempt by the broadcast media to give poetry life, because our imaginations work to conjure the images radio evokes.⁷¹ In other words, television is a problem because it gets in the way of the poetry. It does what poetry is supposed to do, and in so doing renders the poetry superfluous or, at best, diminished.



Figure 24: Griff Rhys Jones amidst 'a host' of daffodils: *Why Poetry Matters* (2009).⁷²

It was not only the critics. Poets also found *Why Poetry Matters* (2009) unsatisfactory, but for slightly different reasons. The rapper Akala and the poet Simon Armitage (the latter of whom had appeared in *Why Poetry Matters*) were invited to discuss the programme in a special edition of the BBC's *Newsnight Review*.⁷³ Their criticism was that the programme failed its viewers because

⁷¹ 'Pick of the Day,' *The Times*, 20 May 2009, 94; Tim Teeman, 'Last Night's TV,' *The Times*, 21 May 1994, 114.

⁷² *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 01:00.

⁷³ *Newsnight Review: Poetry Season Special*, BBC2, 29 May 2009, 23.00.

Rhys Jones was too intrusive – and (again) was trying too hard. Akala said ‘I felt a bit patronised by the Griff Rhys Jones programme. [...] Poetry does not need to make people like it so much.’ Armitage agreed. ‘I was in it and I felt patronised,’ he said. ‘I felt I hadn’t watched a programme about poetry. I had watched a programme about Griff Rhys Jones and how he does television.’⁷⁴ This tension – is this poetry or is this television – was a constant concern for those making programmes and for those watching them.

Armitage then went on to describe another film in the 2009 *Poetry Season* in which he thought that the BBC had got it right. This was *Armando Iannucci in Milton’s Heaven and Hell*,⁷⁵ which was, Armitage said ‘the most breath-taking piece of telly because it was a person reading a book, pointing at words, getting down amongst those words and explaining why what is sometimes described as the most boring piece of theological poetry in the English language, is one of the most gripping.’⁷⁶ This was the challenge. On the one hand critics wanted programmes in which poems were allowed to ‘speak for themselves,’ in which the images and emotions evoked by the poetry were untouched by anything television might add. On the other, they argued that there was a need for television to ‘get down amongst the words,’ to explain and elucidate them – in other words for the programme makers not to leave the poems to speak for themselves, but to intervene and mediate, in the manner of literary critics. The poem could not, in Eliot’s formulation, be left to exist ‘somewhere between the reader and the writer.’ It had to exist in the visual-aural space of television, in which other voices, and other images, would compete for the attention of the viewer, and alter their experience of the poem and what it sought to

⁷⁴ *Newsnight Review* (2009), 29:30 – 29:55.

⁷⁵ *Armando Iannucci in Milton’s Heaven and Hell*, BBC2, 27 May 2009, 21.00.

⁷⁶ *Newsnight Review* (2009), 29:30 – 29:55.

communicate.

3. Attempts to solve the problem of poetry

The television mystique was carefully inculcated [...] Pictures, it was insisted, were more important than mere words. **D.G. Bridson's recollection of his secondment from BBC radio to the BBC television arts department, 1958.**¹

[C.P. Tel said,] "Television added little to the poetry" – in fact, they felt at times the visuals distracted from the poetry's communication. **Response of the Controller of Programmes, Television to the poetry pilot, 'Words,' produced by David Jones, 1960.**²

For the first time in ages I have felt stimulated by television instead of lulled or stupefied. Poetry has come alive. **Letter after the broadcast of *Tyger, Tyger: an enquiry into a familiar poem*, 1967.**³

1. Introduction: four ideas about poetry on television

The BBC was obliged to broadcast poetry on television, but poetry came to be seen as problem. In this chapter I analyse how different approaches to poetry on television found favour (or disfavour) with executives and audiences alike, and show that the BBC never settled on a single approach to poetry on television.

The 'problem' revolved around questions of performance, of image, of voice and of text. These problems occur in microcosm in a 37 second sequence from *Why Poetry Matters*, one of the flagship programmes of the BBC's 2009 *Poetry Season*. To introduce his argument, the presenter Griff Rhys Jones began with a fast-cut collage from the canon of English language poetry and prose. In a variety of voices, the audience heard the following familiar lines:

Cry, God for Harry, England and Saint George!
Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from the girl and boy
They fuck you up, your mum and dad

¹ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 244.

² WAC, T32/1, 784/1, C.A. (Gen) Talks to David Jones, 22 February 1960.

³ WAC, T53/98/1, 'Tyger, Tyger, summary of correspondence,' November 1967.

Tyger, tyger burning bright
 It's Tommy this an' Tommy that, an' Tommy
 Ning Nang Ning Nang Nong
 Ae, fond kiss and then we sever
 What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in
 faculties! How like an angel in apprehension, how like a god!⁴

Shakespeare, Auden, Larkin, Blake, Kipling, Milligan, Burns and Shakespeare again. Eight works by seven poets, all male. The lines were read or performed by, amongst others, Laurence Olivier, W. H. Auden, three unidentified actors (including one woman), Spike Milligan and Richard E. Grant, in a famous scene from the film *Withnail & I* (1987).

1.1. A sequence of words and pictures or of words-and-pictures

This sequence serves to show why poetry was seen as a problem for television, for while the lines are instantly recognisable, they are not all that is happening within the programme during those 37 seconds. The poetry needed to become television. The words had to be associated with images. The question was, which images? Rhys Jones and the producer, Louise Hopper, put together a visual collage which showed a range of possible visual responses to, or illustrations of, the lines of poetry being recited. The lines from *Henry V* were spoken, on camera, by Laurence Olivier in the role of Henry V from his 1944 film of the play. The lines from Auden's 'Night Mail' were spoken by Auden, but the images on screen were taken from the GPO film of the same name and showed a locomotive steaming along a railway line. The lines from Larkin were read by an actor and cut to a graphic of the text of his most famous line, as were the lines from Kipling. Blake, by contrast, provided his own graphics: the lines from 'The Tyger' were cut to rostrum shots of the original 1794 printing of

⁴ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 01:38-02:15.

Songs of Experience. Spike Milligan recited his own line to camera. Burns was represented by a portrait of himself. And finally, in a scene from another film version of Shakespeare on screen, Richard E. Grant stood in the rain and recited his lines from *Hamlet* to camera. The sequence ended with a brief clip of a thunderstorm in both sound and vision. The visual equivalent (at least in stills) of the lines quoted above was:

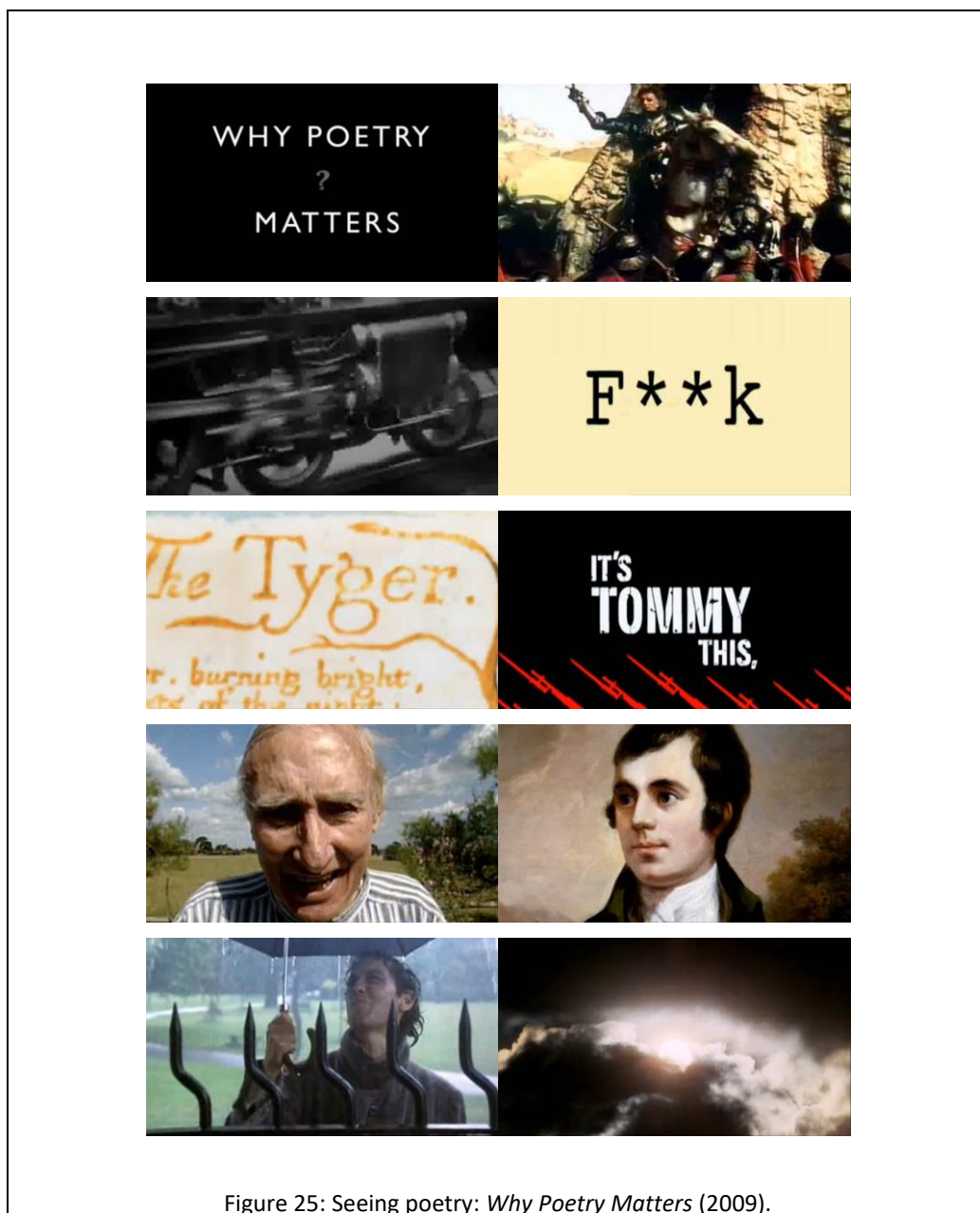


Figure 25: Seeing poetry: *Why Poetry Matters* (2009).

1.2. Four ideas about poetry on television

Several different ideas of what poetry is, and how audiences experience it, and

how it can be shown, are visible in this sequence. The first is the idea that poetry is both speech and text. The sequence implicitly acknowledges that poems begin, for many people, as text on a page, as words read in a book or off a classroom blackboard. In this segment from *Why Poetry Matters*, the poem appeared as text three times: the lines from Larkin, Blake and Kipling, but the method of graphic reproduction in each case (the typefaces, the means of production, the editorial intervention) was different. In the case of 'The Tyger,' the programme used the material already available through Blake's industry and skill. Here the poem had begun, in the sense of its first public appearance, as text-and-image when Blake included it and the illustrations in *Songs of Experience* (1794). Such visual riches were not available for the lines from Kipling's 'Tommy.' Here, as for Larkin, the producers created the text/graphic – but made a further set of editorial choices: the black background, the upper-case lettering and, crucially, the graphic representations of bayoneted rifles alongside the text. For the lines from Larkin, the producers chose a serif typeface on a creamy background. This time there was an editorial disconnect between the recital of Larkin's 'This be the Verse' and the accompanying images. Even as the voice on the soundtrack was saying 'fuck,' the graphic preferred the more modest, but unpronounceable, 'f**k.' Nevertheless, the idea that poetry is in some sense also text was strongly represented.

The second idea about poetry on television is that poetry must be spoken; on television poetry was never *only* a matter of text. But who was to do the speaking? In this segment, the two who recited their own lines were Auden and Milligan. Auden was not shown on screen; the scene from *Night Mail* may well be as famous as the lines of poetry and the producers stuck with the train footage from the original film. Milligan, by contrast, was speaking directly to camera. The treatment of the line from 'Ae Fond Kiss' by Burns offers a further insight into how television producers, while accepting that voice mattered, also allowed themselves a degree of freedom in choosing which voice. These choices were not always complementary. 'Ae Fond Kiss' was written by Burns in the first person and was cut in this film to a rostrum shot of Alexander

Nasmyth's portrait of the poet. Visually the first-person narrator of the poem was identified with the poet. But the line is read by a woman. The voice and the image do not match. In each case tensions and contradictions existed between what the words were doing and what the images and soundtrack were doing.

The sequence also shows how producers had at various times thought that poetry could be used for many purposes. Film makers used television to present poetry (as in Milligan's recital) but more often (both the makers of this film, and the makers of the films from which they used extracts) regarded poetry as a resource, as a kind of cultural reservoir from which they could freely draw to make television. Poetry was something which could be recited for itself, but it was also something which could be recited, or shown on screen, or performed, for other purposes. At the same time the producers found or created images, whether moving or still, to accompany the words of the poem. In the process the images, also drawing on a vast reservoir of cultural resources, changed the way the lines of poetry might be understood, or remembered, or experienced. The purpose of the words in this sequence in *Why Poetry Matters* was not that the audience should experience the shock of understanding that comes with hearing poetry, but that they should experience the shock of *recognition* of particular lines of poetry. The intention of including these lines was to demonstrate to audiences the range of poetry which they might have come across, and to demonstrate that it was memorable – and the evidence of its mnemonic quality was that they remembered it. What the lines said (that your parents fuck you up, say, or that man's faculties are infinite) was of no great consequence. Sometimes the images increased the sense of recognition (Milligan's face, for example) and at others it ran counter ('f**k' rather than 'fuck') to what was being heard. In doing so they changed how the lines were experienced and understood. But that was the words. The images were there to complete the sequence, to turn lines of poetry into television.

The fourth idea present in this sequence is that the meaning of the words of each poem does not really matter. In each instance, in the process of making

television, the poetry became incidental to itself. The lines from the poem, even when they were thought to be the end, were really only the means. They were there not because of what they expressed, but because of what they contributed to the making of a television programme. In the process, the lines of poetry became a cultural artefact, a set of associations far removed from their original composition, and significantly altered in the process of being televised. Blake's line from 'The Tyger' appears at first glance to be unaltered. The same words and a reproduction of the original image – but its impact is far removed from the original poem, for they are quoted in a sequence in which the words as spoken are 'your mum and dad tyger tyger burning bright it's Tommy this...' In this chapter I analyse this 'problem': that producers, conscious that poetry was a national art form, set out to use television to present poetry to the nation, but that in doing so they changed it and how it was understood and what made it memorable, and thus they made it subservient to the dominant art form, television. They did this through their choice of which poems to broadcast, through the edits they made to those poems, through the voices used to speak the poems, through the ways in which they filmed performances of the poem and, crucially, through the images with which they filled the screen while poems were being performed.

To understand these phenomena, I have used an approach which is both thematic and chronological. In the first section I analyse two programmes, one of which tried to present poetry and one which explicitly used poetry for other purposes. In the second section I discuss the outcome of a long-running debate within the BBC about how best to put poetry on television. Of the various solutions found, the one that got the best response from audiences was a film

called *Tyger, Tyger* (1967),⁵ in which the focus was not so much Blake's poem, as audience responses to the poem. The programme, as we shall see, succeeded because it showed that each reader brought something unique to the reading and appreciation of the poem, and that this was valid and valuable.

2. Presenting and using poetry on pre-war television

From the earliest days of television, producers at the BBC saw poetry as important, and as a cultural resource on which television could draw, or to which it should refer. The question was how? Many of the qualities thought to be important to television (character, narrative, visual impact) were also to be found in poetry. The belief that poetry was somehow difficult for television arose in part from this similarity: would the 'visuals' (a word that recurs in early BBC discussions) of television enhance or diminish the image created by the poem? But in part it arose from experience. Before the war, the BBC broadcast several programmes which depended on poetry. The first was the Armistice Day broadcast of 1936. *November 11: a Document of War and Peace* was written and narrated by Cecil Day Lewis, and used the poems of Archibald McLeish and Siegfried Sassoon.⁶ Its form and aesthetic would have surprised no one who had attended Remembrance Day services at churches or parade grounds across the country. But there were two programmes which were experimental, which did something new with poetry, and which cast a shadow over future attempts to bring poetry to the screen.

2.1. A first experiment: *The Pepler Masques* (1937-1939)

In 1937 the BBC broadcast a series of live television versions of the theatrical

⁵ *Omnibus presents: Tyger Tyger*, BBC1, 10 November 1967, 22.25.

⁶ *November 11: A Document of War and Peace*, BBC TV, 11 November 1937, 15.00.

masques pioneered by the impresario H. D. C. Pepler. The masques involved readings of well-known works (*Aesop's Fables*, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'), set to music, while the visuals were provided by actors who mimed the action of the poem or story. No copies of the programmes exist, but the production records give a sense of how the programmes were made, and what the audience would have seen. The external budget for one *Masque*, 'The Eve of St Agnes' by Keats, was £100, for which H.D.C. Pepler was to 'supply and pay cast and supply costumes and necessary masks and sketches for setting.' Music and scene construction were the responsibility of the BBC.⁷ The studio sketch for this production showed 6 camera positions and 4 dressed background sets, together with space for a live orchestra. The position of the reader and their microphone was 'to be decided during rehearsal.'⁸ The poems themselves were read off camera and the producer promised to ensure that 'all improper words and phrases' were excluded.⁹ Another sketch showed 12 backgrounds against which actors would mime the action of 'The Eve of St Agnes.'¹⁰ For another production, the art department was asked to make '10 masks of likeness of faces of the following radio critics.' The critics included those from 10 national newspapers, who were subsequently mimicked on screen.¹¹ The productions were broadcast live, and, as the producer Stephen Thomas noted, 'this form of mimed play... needs a very large amount of rehearsal.'¹²

The Pepler Masques, as they came to be known, were understood to be

⁷ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, 'Internal memo,' 31 August 1937.

⁸ WAC TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, 'Set 1: The Pardoner's Tale,' 5 March 1938.

⁹ WAC TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, Stephen Thomas, 'Memo: Pepler Masque: Pardoner's Tale,' 6 January 1938.

¹⁰ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, 'The Eve of St Agnes,' 8 October 1937.

¹¹ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, 'Internal memo,' 7 February 1938.

¹² WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, Stephen Thomas, 'Projected Programmes for the Autumn,' 15 July 1937.

an experiment. When the idea of filming the *Masques* for television was first mooted, in October 1936 – before the television service went on air – the Controller of Television confessed that he ‘knew nothing’ of them but that they ‘seem interesting’ and were ‘worth a try.’¹³ In the masque of ‘The Eve of St Agnes,’ the settings were faithful to the aesthetic of the poem: the production records describe a series of settings in ‘grottos’ and ‘Gothic doorways.’¹⁴ The action, however, in which actors were filmed in silhouette, and which were intended in some sense to convey the meanings or emotions or actions of the poetry, were the creation of Pepler and his team. They left audiences bemused. One early television critic responded: ‘Personally, as an habitual viewer, I was interested and moderately entertained. But I sympathise with the person who saw a few minutes of prancing and posturing by weird masked figures and went off wondering what on earth it was all about.’¹⁵ After the broadcast in January 1938 of ‘The Eve of St Agnes,’ two viewers called the BBC to complain: ‘A gentleman, named Mr Henri (Richmond 4285) and another, who would not give his name’ both ‘phoned up to-night protesting vehemently against the programme. Both said practically the same thing, to wit, that there was no entertainment for them, or their friends who were viewing with them, in “The Eve of St Agnes.”’¹⁶ But the BBC persisted. The experimental nature of the programme, and the knowledge that the audience would have been small and the viewing experience fleeting, meant that the *Masques*, despite some misgivings amongst staff, received a third, and in one case a fourth, airing.¹⁷

¹³ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, ‘Memo: H.D.C. Pepler,’ 27 October 1936.

¹⁴ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, ‘The Eve of St Agnes,’ 8 October 1937.

¹⁵ Marsland L. Gander, ‘Television Needs Live Programmes,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Feb. 1937, 6.

¹⁶ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, ‘Pepler Masques,’ ‘Internal memo,’ 21 January 1938.

¹⁷ WAC, TVARTS1, Pepler H.D.C. 1936-1938, ‘Pepler Masques,’ ‘Internal memo,’ 29 December 1937.

The *Pepler Masques* were BBC television's most imaginative approach to poetry for nearly half a century, but they did not resolve the central questions: what were audiences to be looking at while listening to poetry on television – and why were they looking at it? 'The 'weird prancing figures' that left audiences 'wondering what it was about' were a problem, not a solution.

2.2. A Second Experiment: *The White Chateau* (1938)

The second experiment was a production of Reginald Berkeley's play *The White Chateau*, first broadcast on Armistice Day 1938.¹⁸ Berkeley was a decorated war hero and former Liberal Party MP who went on to enjoy a career as a Hollywood scriptwriter. Originally a West End play, *The White Chateau* had also been produced for BBC radio in 1925, where it was considered ground-breaking, both because of its subject matter ('war is hell') and its scale. It told the story of the various characters passing through a single French chateau between 1914 and 1919. In that time the chateau served as castle, officers' billet and field hospital. It was the BBC's 'first full-length original, adult radio play.'¹⁹

The television production in 1938 was also broadcast live. It was a complex and expensive production. It lasted a full 90 minutes, cost more than £400, and involved a paid cast of more than 40 actors, supplemented by 'thirty men of the 53rd (London) Medium Brigade, R.A. and the 7th Bn. Middlesex regt.,' and two six-inch howitzers 'camouflaged as in war-time.'²⁰ The play was not about poetry. It did, however, use poetry, and use it in a way which influenced how subsequent generations of producers thought about what could be done

¹⁸ *The White Chateau*, BBC TV, 11 November 1938, 21.00.

¹⁹ Leslie Grace McMurtry, *Revolution in the Echo Chamber: Audio Drama's Past, Present and Future* (London: Intellect Books, 2019), 79.

²⁰ 'Territorials in a Television Play.' *Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 1938, 12.

with poetry. In the programme the poems were read in one studio while scene changes were made in the other. They were simultaneously used as a solution to a logistical problem, as a means to maintain the emotional register of the production and as an editorial intervention to comment on the action, narrative and meaning of the play. And they demonstrate what became a recurrent phenomenon: a willingness on the part of the producers to repurpose and edit poetry to suit their ends. In the case of *The White Chateau* the poetry achieved three objectives.

2.3. Sustaining an emotional register

The White Chateau was broadcast live from two studios at Alexandra Palace in London. Between each act, the set had to be changed. While this was taking place in Studio A, the actor Ivan Samson, read the poems in Studio B. There were six scenes – and therefore 5 scene changes. As the production notes record, each scene was ‘linked with montage shots consisting of (a) Extracts of verse read by Ivan Samson (out of vision) in Studio B. (b) Extracts of film. (c) Shots of model trenches. (d) Shot of Cenotaph drawing. (e) Shot of hands signing enlistment forms. (f) Shot of German Map showing retreating position of troops. (g) Gramophone records.’²¹ While the images described above were being shown in montage, the poetry being read consisted of:

- 16 lines from Cecil Day Lewis’s ‘A Time to Dance’ beginning ‘I’ve heard the lilting at look and belting.’
- 12 lines from Ezra Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Moberley’ (sic), beginning ‘Daring as never before.’

²¹ WAC, TVARTS1, T5/579, ‘TV PLAYS White Chateau,’ Shooting Script, *The White Chateau* (1938).

- 10 lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, beginning at 'What is that sound high in the air.'
- The entirety of Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth.'
- 8 lines from Wilfred Owen's 'The End,' beginning 'After the blast of lightning from the east,' and
- 14 lines from Auden and Isherwood's 'The Last Chorus' of *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, beginning 'Mourn not for these.'²²

No video copies of the production exist, but it is clear that the intention of the producers was to keep the audiences engaged with the sense and emotion of the play while the scene changes were taking place. The ten lines from *The Waste Land*, for example, were

What is that sound high in the air
 Murmur of maternal lamentation
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming
 Over endless plains, stumbled in cracked earth
 Ringed by the flat horizon only
 What is the city over the mountains
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal²³

The film images were similarly and simultaneously evocative and elusive: model trenches, anonymous hands signing draft cards, the Cenotaph. They were not literal. They did not, in the words of the *Radio Times* quoted above, 'attempt to mirror' anything. The imagery of the poetry and the images of the film extracts complemented each other, and they had a complementary

²² WAC, TVARTS1, T5/579, 'TV PLAYS White Chateau'; 'Copyright clearance request,' 20 October 1938.

²³ Transcripts of the programme are not available; this text is taken from T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, Facsimile and Transcript*, Ed. Valerie Eliot, Harcourt, Brace & Co., London, 1971, 145.

purpose. They were illustrative, rather than illustrations. Their purpose was to suggest possible imaginings of the text, rather than to demonstrate precisely what the words of the poems were saying. This was in part a result of technical limitations: in 1936 the BBC had neither the means, nor the inclination, literally to film 'laughter out of dead bellies' (from 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'), nor – though it might have been feasible – to film 'an old bitch gone in the teeth' (from 'The Last Chorus'). But it was also an early, if tacit, example of producers coming up against the problem of poetry on television: if the poetry itself brought images to mind, what was the purpose and what was the effect of television presenting images of its own? There are no records in the BBC archive to suggest that producers wrestled at any great length with this. In the case of the links used in *The White Chateau*, it was sufficient that the images and poetry shared a purpose. The production was an indictment of total war, set in the microcosm of the eponymous chateau. The lines of poetry and the images chosen were consistent with this. They were ingredients of audio-visual sequences which sustained the emotional register of the production. While production crews hastened to change the scene in studio A, the poetry coming from studio B, read to a collage of images of troops movements and trenches, of enlistment forms and graves, maintained the production's sense of fear, uncertainty, and loss, pending resumption of each stage of the narrative.

2.4. Poetry as editorial

The poetry was not only chosen because it added 'atmosphere.' It also had an editorial purpose: to make the production reflect contemporary sensibilities and to remind viewers of the horror of war. The play and the poems were, largely, responses to the destruction and horror of the First World War. But, while *The Waste Land* (1922), 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (1917) and 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' (1920) were written in the immediacy of the war and its aftermath, the poems of Day Lewis, Auden and Isherwood were written nearly two decades after the war ended. They were contemporary not to the war but to the production. Nor, in 1938, were they poems from an established canon.

The Waste Land occupied a particular place in the literary firmament. Recalling its impact and status, the 1971 BBC TV biography of Eliot, *The Mysterious Mr. Eliot*, compared Eliot's position to that of Picasso and Stravinsky. In the same film the critic I.A. Richards recalled that for several years after publication, 'There was a cult, an attachment, to *The Waste Land* which had irrational aspects. It came to a point where you couldn't raise questions about *The Waste Land*, which is always a dangerous thing.'²⁴ Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-35* had been published in 1936, whatever one's misgivings, the critic Conrad Aiken wrote, it was impossible to read Eliot 'without respect.'²⁵ Wilfred Owen was also well-known; his volume, *Poems*, was published in 1920 and *Collected Poems* in 1931, and were reviewed in the national press. But other poems used in the production of *The White Chateau* were the work of young poets making a name for themselves by making highly polemical points about a war in which they had been too young to fight. There can be little doubt that by situating the lines between each scene, the producers intended to offer a commentary on what the audience had just seen or was about to see. This can be heard in Day Lewis's grief in 'A Time to Dance,' in Pound's anger at the 'wastage as never before,' and Auden and Isherwood's closing lines: 'Mourn not for these.' The words did not advance the narrative, but they did offer a commentary on it.

2.5. Poetry as an ingredient in the making of television

There is one final point to make about how poetry was used and repurposed in the production of *The White Chateau*: it, as much as music, images or film could be cut, elided, changed, reordered, and disguised. The intention of the poet in

²⁴ *Omnibus presents: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 21:25 – 21:50

²⁵ Frank Kermode, 'Why didn't he commit suicide,' *London Review of Books* 26, No. 21, 4 November 2004. <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/n21/frank-kermode/why-didn-t-he-commit-suicide>> accessed. 21.2.2021.

writing the poem was seldom at issue; nor was there any suggestion that the poem as an artistic unity should be respected. What mattered was whether lines or phrases or stanzas worked as a part of the greater whole that was the television programme. The twelve lines from Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' are a case in point. The lines used were:

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.
 Young blood and high blood,
 Fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

frankness as never before,
 disillusion as never told in the old days,
 hysterias, trench confessions,
 laughter out of dead bellies.

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilization.²⁶

'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,' as originally published in 1920, was a portmanteau work consisting of eighteen separate poems.²⁷ The lines chosen to cover the scene changes in *The White Chateau* – and to offer a commentary on the themes of the play – were separated in the poems as published; the first eight lines came from the fourth of the eighteen poems that make up that work; the last four from the fifth. But in the broadcast, they were read as a single piece. No indication was given that they came from separate poems, nor that there had been any lines omitted. In effect, they represented a newly configured twelve-line piece of BBC television poetry. This is a recurrent

²⁶ WAC, TVARTS1, T5/579, 'TV PLAYS White Chateau'; 'Copyright clearance request,' 20 October 1938.

²⁷ Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (London: The Ovid Press, 1920).

phenomenon, and changes how poetry is consumed. Poetry has always reached its audience through a variety of channels, through readings, anthologies, magazines, and volumes of verse. What was different about television was that the viewer experience was transitory (there was no YouTube or iPlayer to hold programme makers to account or to allow second, third and fourth viewings), and that the poems were part of a greater whole. They were presented not 'for themselves' but for what they could add to something else. Of the six poems selected for transmission in *The White Chateau*, only Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' was broadcast in its entirety, and can be thought to have been read as 'the poem.' All the others were extracts which had been chosen because they served some purpose other than that intended by the poet when they wrote the poem. The intent was not to communicate the entirety of what the poet wrote; but at the same time the intent was to communicate *something* of what the poet wrote, although not for the reasons the poet wrote it. The polemical intent of using Pound's 'wastage as never before' or indeed of Owen's 'a drawing-down of blinds' within the programme was a commentary on the action and meaning of the play in the words of the poet, but cut to suit the editorial purposes of the programme maker. It made no concession to the integrity of the poem; what mattered was the television programme.

2.6. Two precedents

No recordings of *The Pepler Masques* or *The White Chateau* survive, and I have found no review of the latter in the broadsheet press.²⁸ The audiences were

²⁸ There is speculation that *The White Chateau* is included in a recording picked up in by RCA in New York in 1938 and rediscovered in 1999:
<https://lostmediawiki.com/RCA_recording_of_BBC_Television_Service_%28found_footage_of_pre-Second_World_War_BBC_television_broadcast;_1938%29> accessed 12.7.2021.

small, and, soon after broadcast, the television service ceased transmitting for the duration of the war. But the two made assumptions and set precedents which are discernible in the choices made by BBC producers in the decades to come.

The first is that from the outset producers and commentators were aware that putting poetry on television would change how it was consumed and how it would be understood or experienced. 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a long, narrative poem which tells the story of Porphyro and Madeline, lovers estranged by their families' feud. The poem, written in 1819, has 42 stanzas of nine lines each. The 'action' of the poem, played out by the 'prancing and posturing' figures of *The Pepler Masque*, was a complicated tale of seduction by subterfuge (there was a myth that on St Agnes's Eve young women could see their future husbands in their dreams) and its aftermath. The poem was familiar to audiences and had been much discussed in academic circles and in the popular press. Writing in 1999, Jack Stillinger identified 59 interpretations of the poem that had been put forward by literary critics since its publication in 1820.²⁹ Stillinger argued that this was not surprising; the text itself appeared in several variants and could not therefore be regarded as authoritative. Its meaning was not fixed, and should not be thought to exist 'in the author.' It must instead exist in the readers or – in the case of television – in the producer and in the viewers. The production brought a series of images to the screen which imposed a particular feeling and emotional context for Keats's lines, which need not (and sometimes could not) have any clear relationship to the intentions of the poet who wrote it. The viewer in turn watched those images,

²⁹ Jack Stillinger, *Reading "The Eve of St Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

and heard the sounds, and experienced the entirety *as television*, rather than as images or poems or music. But as the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer noted, it was what they had seen that remained with the audiences. It was the television images, not the words, that left them 'wondering what it was all about.'

The second assumption concealed within these two productions was that poetry on television was primarily a sound phenomenon. Bringing poetry to the screen was a question of the recitation of the words rather than the reproduction of the text on screen. The poems would be heard, not seen. Poetry on television was thought to be a question of someone reciting (where the actor has learned the lines and brings degree of performance to the recitation) or reading (where the actor holds the text and makes no attempt to interpret the poem through their actions) the poetry. The absence of the text gave rise to the challenge that is present throughout the history of poetry on television: if the viewers were not looking at the text, what were they looking at? The two examples here offered two possible templates. *The Masque of The Eve of St Agnes* attempted (through mime) to create a visual interpretation of the narrative of the poem, and in doing so created images that dominated the viewing experience. *The White Chateau* made no attempt to create a visual version of the poetry, but accepted that while hearing the poetry, the viewer had to be looking at something. The scene transitions in *The White Chateau* included a range of images relevant to the production, but not directly representative of the meanings of the poetry being read. In doing so, it allowed the words more space to be heard, and more opportunity for the words rather than the images to be what the audience remembered. But in doing so it also changed the nature of the words: they were not poems so much as poetry and their meanings were determined not as an interaction between poet and listener or reader and text, but by the cuts, edits, readings, and visual associations created by the producer and recreated by the viewer. As successive generations of producers attempted to bring poetry to the screen, or decided to use poetry for other televisual purposes, they faced these choices repeatedly: did the poem speak for itself, or did television interpret it? And

what was the audience looking at all the while?

3. *Monitor* and D.G. Bridson

In the BBC television service, following its relaunch in 1946, poetry was largely, as the producer D.G. Bridson called it, ‘an orphan.’³⁰ And a homeless orphan at that. Throughout the first decade after the war, there was no major arts strand able to accommodate poets or their poetry, and no systematic attempt to bring poets or their works to the growing television audience. There was no weekly or monthly slot into which poets could easily fit. And, despite the pre-war experiments, there was no standard formula for broadcasting poetry. To scan the schedules for most of the 1950s, when the BBC broadcast a single channel for only a few hours a day, is to look in vain for serious attempts to put poetry on television, with the exception of the *Eisteddfod*, broadcast annually from 1952. Typical examples were *Poetry and Music*,³¹ from 1954 or a programme simply entitled *Sir Alfred Munnings K.C.V.O. P.P.R.A., LL.D.* from 1957, in which the eponymous presenter ‘entertained his friends with some of his verses.’³² And many poets, while understanding the possible boost to their incomes, were suspicious of television, or did not understand how it might work. T. S. Eliot refused to be filmed and expressed a general distrust of what he called television’s ‘social effects.’³³ When negotiating with the BBC about a film project, W. H. Auden wrote of television as something that could be used to provide ‘background’ to his poems which would otherwise be allowed to ‘speak

³⁰ WAC, T16/576, D.G. Bridson to D. Tel., 24 July 1958.

³¹ *Poetry and Music*, BBC TV, 14 November 1954, 22.00.

³² *Sir Alfred Munnings K.C.V.O. R.A., LL.D.*, BBC TV, 7 July 1957, 22.00.

³³ Lawrence Black, ‘Whose finger on the button? British television and the politics of cultural control,’ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no. 4 (2005), 547-575.

for themselves,³⁴ and as late as 1972, Cecil Day Lewis – who first proposed ways to bring poetry to BBC television in 1936 – wrote about television as something strange and new.³⁵ It was, he said, ‘the latest means of communication’ through which he hoped to ‘put over’ the oldest of the arts.³⁶ The old-fashioned language reveals that even then there was no confidence about how poetry on television worked.

3.1. Poetry was associated with radio

This was in contrast to radio, where readings and discussion of poetry enjoyed success, and which had a variety of strands, programmes and producers dedicated to it. In the period 1950-1955, the BBC Programme Index database makes 685 mentions of ‘poetry’ on radio. The listings include long running strands such as *New Poetry* and *Book of Verse*. By contrast, the same search in the database for mentions of poetry on television yields only 20 results, of which 4 were children’s programmes.³⁷ On television, to the extent that poetry was a feature of the schedules, it was because it was used in ceremonial events such as the *St. David’s Day Festival Concert* from the Royal Albert Hall in London, or broadcasts of the Eisteddfod in *The Heart of the Nation*.³⁸ Poetry was a feature of children’s programming too, and of Remembrance Day broadcasts, but the television service had not yet begun to think more widely about how poetry should be presented on television.

There were two factors which weighed heavily in the relative absence of

³⁴ WAC, T/51/125/1, W. H. Auden to Christopher Burstall, 8 June 1965.

³⁵ WAC, 48864, ‘C. Day Lewis,’ ‘Proposed Series of Talks on Poetry,’ 18 November 1936.

³⁶ *A Lasting Joy*, BBC1, 6 x 30 mins, Tuesdays, 22.45, 18 July - 22 August 1972; reproduced in C. Day Lewis, *A Lasting Joy* (1973), 9.

³⁷ <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk>; search under ‘poetry’; accessed 12.08.2021.

³⁸ *St David’s Day Festival Concert*, BBC TV, 1 March 1952, 20.00; *The Heart of a Nation*, BBC TV, 16 August 1952, 22.00.

poetry from the television screens. The first was that while poetry was seen as important, it was not sufficiently important to be a television category. Unlike sport, drama or news, or literary adaptations, poetry did not attract budgets or departments, or groups of programme makers dedicated to bringing it to the screen. The second was that, while the BBC was thought to have an obligation to support poetry, this obligation was being met by radio. Reviewing the situation in 1943 the BBC found that,

There is evidence that the demand for broadcast poetry increases with the supply. And broadcasting is beginning to make the public realise that verse as speech has its own great strength and appeal, in contrast to verse written merely for the book. We would like to see the BBC recognised [...] 'as a platform' from which listeners expect to hear new verse, not, of course, only from Great Britain but from the Dominions and the Empire, and a platform for which poets would willingly write poetry designed to be broadcast and to be spoken aloud.³⁹

The identification of poetry with radio was to have an inhibitory effect on those who would bring it to television, both because of the volumes already being broadcast, and because it coincided with a view advanced by George MacBeth (editor of *New Poetry* on the Third Programme) and others that radio was where poetry belonged.⁴⁰ The Third Programme also meant that poetry, and poets, had access to and influence over a substantial portion of the radio schedules; and they had access to a stream of income. In 1957 the BBC established a 'Poetry Committee' to advise on which poets were suitable for broadcast on radio. The committee's original members were D.G. Bridson, Rayner Heppenstall, Louis MacNeice, Howard Newby and Terence Tiller (who was soon replaced by George MacBeth, when Tiller became controller of the

³⁹ WAC, R51/302/1, Geoffrey Grigson & Stephen Potter, 'First report,' May 1943, p 3-4.

⁴⁰ Carpenter, *The Envy of the World*, 218.

Third Programme).⁴¹ For many years, the BBC in general and the *Third Programme* in particular were the largest source of revenues for ‘jobbing poets.’ Not all poets had access; the committee was regarded as ‘cliquey’ and dominated by Oxford dons.⁴² As late as the mid-1960s some producers argued that the *Third Programme* and its Poetry Committee (which by then was made up of Roy Campbell, Geoffrey Grigson, Stephen Potter and Desmond McCarthy) actively inhibited any moves to ‘get poetry on television.’⁴³

This is not to say that poetry was completely ignored in the decade after the war, but there was neither certainty nor resolution to debates about how poetry might be presented. In a revealing internal memo written shortly after the end of the war, a senior executive argued that despite the popularity of poetry on radio, television was the best hope of enabling those who would not normally read or listen to poetry to enjoy it. This was explicitly a class-based analysis by Sir Stephen Tallents, who had been recruited to the post of Controller, Public Relations from the GPO in 1935. He argued that television had a particular liberating power in respect of poetry because it would enable new audiences to understand and appreciate otherwise inaccessible ‘highbrow’ poetry of the time. He wrote,

This appeal [of poetry on television] would be strongest among the less educated, who derived special advantage from the double support of sight and sound impressions. On that supposition, development would be controlled by factors of costs and technique and not by lack of public demand.⁴⁴

In trying to think through what poetry could do for television and what

⁴¹ Carpenter, *The Envy of the World*, 217.

⁴² Carpenter, *The Envy of the World*, 218.

⁴³ WAC, R51/302/1, George MacBeth, ‘Memo,’ 19 July 1966.

⁴⁴ WAC, R3/3/11, Sir Stephen Tallents, ‘Memo,’ undated, est. 1946.

television could do for poetry (and audiences), BBC executives found themselves hopping from one to another of the Reithian rocks: educate, entertain, inform. In the case of poetry, the pendulum swung most often to the first of these. If poetry was to succeed on television, it had first to educate the viewers. It had to turn them into consumers of poetry in general and of poetry on television in particular. They, especially those who were less educated, needed 'support,' and that support could be both visual and aural. Only in this way could an audience of those who did not read poetry be built.

The BBC files over the two decades following the war reveal on the one hand the determination of a small group of producers, mostly in Talks and Arts Features, to find ways of bringing poetry to the screen, and on the other a persistent feeling on the part its senior executives that poetry was already well-served by radio, and a doubt that poetry was even suitable for television. It was not until the late 1950s, with television now in the ascendancy though not yet dominant (the long-serving BBC executive Grace Wyndham Goldie declared television to be 'pre-eminent,' meaning more influential and in receipt of a larger proportion of BBC resources, only in 1972),⁴⁵ that a serious debate began within the BBC about how best to put poetry on screen.

3.2. The launch of *Monitor* in 1958

The impetus for this was both institutional and individual. One driver was the launch of the arts strand, *Monitor*; another was the personal passions, interests and contacts of the producers who came to work there. *Monitor* began broadcasting in 1958, under the editorship of Huw Wheldon. Wheldon was

⁴⁵ Grace Wyndham Goldie, *How the BBC Began* (2022), 15:50- 15:58.

known to like poetry, and to be particularly fond of the work of Philip Larkin.⁴⁶ (Some years after he left *Monitor*, he even presented a programme, *An Evening with Huw Wheldon* in which he chose to read poems by Dylan Thomas and Philip Larkin, amongst others.)⁴⁷

With *Monitor* on air, poets such as Betjeman, Graves, Auden, Durrell, Pound (and a few no longer living – Tennyson, Hardy, Brooke) had a television home. There was a production team, a budget and a broadcast time slot for films about poets. They and their works were the subjects of a series of profiles on *Monitor* between 1958 and 1965. Typically, such profiles were short, and made up only one segment in the magazine show format. In 1960 an interview with W. H. Auden followed a film on Hieronymus Bosch; a 1964 portrait of Philip Larkin was followed by a feature on the architect Philip Johnson. Roy Fuller, later a BBC governor, was the first poet to have a whole episode of *Monitor* devoted to ‘a poet in society.’⁴⁸

Once *Monitor* was established, films about the living (Graves, Auden, Amis) took the form of ‘interview and recital,’ in which the poets would be asked about their work and would then recite examples chosen for their relevance and their brevity. Films about those no longer alive were presented by a suitable intermediary. In 1963, for example, Cecil Day Lewis gave a ‘personal view’ of the poetry of Thomas Hardy, and in 1964 *Monitor* broadcast a film about Rupert Brooke to coincide with the publication of Christopher Hassall’s biography of the poet.⁴⁹ Audience responses to the latter were mixed;

⁴⁶ Ferris, *Sir Hume*, p 240.

⁴⁷ *An Evening with Huw Wheldon*, BBC2, 3 January 1969, 21.05.

⁴⁸ *Monitor: Poet in a Society*, BBC TV, 14 October 1962, 22.00.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/df1c838566284834a8d6cfc31cbdbb30>> accessed 22.2.2020.

⁴⁹ *Monitor: Footmarks in Time: Thomas Hardy*, BBC TV, 24 November 1963, 22:05; *Monitor: Rupert Brooke*, BBC1, 10 May 1964, 22.00.

one viewer remarked that '*Monitor* can present the life of a poet very well when it doesn't get too sentimental.'⁵⁰ The interview-and-recital approach developed out of debates and experiments within the *Monitor* production team and more widely within the talks, features and arts departments of the BBC. One of the earliest films on a poet was Ken Russell's portrait, *John Betjeman, A Poet in London* (1959), for which Betjeman recited and discussed his poetry while walking through a London still heavily scarred by war.⁵¹



Figure 26: *John Betjeman, A Poet in London* (1959).⁵²

3.1. D.G. Bridson

Of those who argued the case for poetry on television, one of the most persistent was the radio producer, D.G. Bridson, who had been seconded to television in 1958. He had enjoyed long success as a producer of poetry programmes on radio, beginning in the 1930s, during which he had formed

⁵⁰ WAC, T32/1,071/1, 'Audience Research Report,' 5 June 1964.

⁵¹ *Monitor: John Betjeman, A Poet in London*, 1 March 1959, 22.05.

⁵² *Monitor: John Betjeman, A Poet in London* (1959), 00:27.

friendships with Pound, Eliot and others. He, not surprisingly, wished to continue this on television.

Bridson's training in television began in April 1958 (in a course also attended by another BBC radio producer, Louis MacNeice) and was 'admirably conducted so far as it went.'⁵³ Bridson felt acutely the cultural divide between those who had grown up in radio, and those who had started in television. He later recollected that 'the television mystique was carefully inculcated. [...] Pictures, it was insisted, were more important than mere words.'⁵⁴ He realised that to get poetry onto television, and to do so in a manner which adequately acknowledged the importance of the words, would require a shift in attitudes towards poetry within BBC television. He set about making the case in person and through a succession of internal memoranda, for *why* poetry should be brought to the screen, and *how* this could best be done.

In 1958 he wrote to the Director of Programmes, Television to argue that while he understood that previous attempts to bring poetry to television had been discouraging, he was 'still convinced that proper selection of materials and a proper approach to it could pay off handsomely.'⁵⁵ The question was how to make television about poetry in which the images mattered, but in which they did not negate the power of the words to create images in the mind of the viewer. The 'proper selection' of materials meant getting the choice of poems right: as we shall see they required both the proper degree of familiarity for the audience, and a proper degree of dramatic or narrative appeal. The 'proper approach' meant deciding how the poem was produced: who would read it, in

⁵³ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 244.

⁵⁴ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 243-244.

⁵⁵ WAC, T16/576, D.G. Bridson to D. Tel, 'Poetry on Television,' 24 July 1958.

what setting, with what use of camera and cut to what images? Bridson later wrote that he 'was glad to be on record among the first who firmly denied that poetry should be seen and not heard. To me, poetry has always implied performance [...] It was not merely my strong belief that poetry gains by being heard; I knew that poetry loses immeasurably by *not* being heard.'⁵⁶

Bridson had been thinking along these lines for a long time. Writing in *Poetry Quarterly* as far back as 1950, he had argued that the invention of the printer had 'changed the style of poetic composition in this country.' He detected a rise in the kind of poetry (he cited Allen Ginsberg) which offered itself not for cerebral contemplation on the page, but which made 'its full impact at the first hearing.'⁵⁷ In his early iterations of his ideas on bringing poetry to the screen, Bridson recognised that poetry on the page may reward second and third readings; new meanings, images, and emotions can be discovered in discussion with others. But if poetry were to succeed on television, it had to accept that television was a passing experience. He argued therefore that poems had to be selected and the production staged in such a way that the impact was delivered in its entirety 'in the moment.' In his arguments, he addressed three questions: the selection of poetry, the presentation of poetry, and the expectations of the audience.

3.2. The proper selection

The first question was, which poetry would work best on television? Bridson, convinced of the need for 'performance' in the presentation of poetry, was in no doubt that 'it should be dramatic poetry, i.e. statements which can be

⁵⁶ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 202.

⁵⁷ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 204.

associated with the poet personally or with some character or “persona” who can be recreated by an actor.⁵⁸ There were other requirements (that the poetry should be ‘simple’ and ‘direct’ but not ‘banal’) but the most important characteristic was that the poem had to be *capable of association with a person* – either with the poets themselves, or with the persona of the narrator created by the poet and recreated by the actor performing the poem. Bridson listed those types of poetry that he thought would allow the desired degree of identification between performer and viewer:

- Dramatic monologues without action (e.g. ‘Mending Wall’ by Robert Frost);
- Dramatic monologues with action (e.g. ‘My Last Duchess,’ by Robert Browning),
- Narrative flashback (e.g. ‘The Burghers,’ by Thomas Hardy)
- Pure narrative (e.g. ‘Morte d’Arthur,’ by Alfred Tennyson)
- Pure narrative with dialogue (e.g. Almost any ‘Border Ballad’)
- Dramatic soliloquy without action (e.g. ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ by John Keats)
- Pure soliloquy, which he defined as ‘pure visual track to accompany an anonymous reading of the poem’ (e.g. Seascape to illustrate Swinburne, Roden Noel etc.)⁵⁹ and
- Atmosphere piece, which Bridson defined as ‘seasonal or other material to illustrate a theme by analogy or in a general (unspecific) way’ (e.g. ‘Ode to the West Wind’ or ‘The Cloud’ by P.B. Shelley.)⁶⁰

It took Bridson more than two years of corporate manoeuvring to get

⁵⁸ WAC, T16/576, D.G. Bridson to D.Tel, 24 July 1958.

⁵⁹ The idea that ‘pure’ images of water (‘e.g. seascapes’) could be safely used to illustrate readings of poetry without intruding on the artistic integrity of the poems had a surprisingly strong hold on filmmakers. Images of waves, rivers, sunlight reflected on water and so on was used in innumerable films when the producer wished not to distract too much from, or compete too much with, the meaning of the words.

⁶⁰ WAC, T16/576, D.G. Bridson to D.Tel, 24 July 1958.

approval to make a pilot programme in which he would test this theory about the proper selection and treatment of poetry on television. The proposal he put forward was to be called 'Men and Women.' His choice of poems went through several iterations, but those he came back to were dramatic monologues by Browning, Kipling, Hardy and Frost. It is surely not coincidence that these were the kinds of anthologised poems that might have been performed in private gatherings before and during the war. They were precisely the kind of poems that Lord Wavell, for example, in his surprise post-war bestseller *Other Men's Flowers*, included in the section he called 'Conversation Pieces.'⁶¹ Wavell, like Huw Wheldon, was representative of 'middlebrow taste.' It was while viceroy of India in 1944 that he published an anthology of poetry which, he claimed, he was able to recite 'entire or in great part' from memory.⁶² Browning and Kipling were favourite poets, and there is a high degree of overlap between Lord Wavell's 'Conversation Pieces' and those advanced by Bridson as suitable for television performance. Both were confident that these were poems that the majority of their respective audiences would know, and imagined these as poems that people might commit to memory, and poems that people might be accustomed to perform. A year later, in the course of an argument about whether there was a budget for costumes and make up, and whether actors should be in costume at all, Bridson extended the potential repertoire:

'I should welcome the chance to show what can be done – in a plain set – with such works as T. S. Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,' various of the monologues by Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg and Conrad Aitken – to say nothing of the works of the younger men. e.g. Auden, MacNeice, Spender and

⁶¹ A. P. Wavell, *Other Men's Flowers: fiftieth anniversary edition*, (London: Pimlico, 1994), 248 – 347; the first printing in 1944 sold out within hours, the anthology remains in print.

⁶² The quotes come from the preface to the original 1944 edition; Wavell, *Other Men's Flowers*, 248.

the new contemporaries, Christopher Logue, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn and the rest.’⁶³

This, however, was speculative. He remained convinced that the initial focus should be well-known dramatic monologues. The requirement for a successful television broadcast was that a poem should deliver ‘its full impact at the first hearing.’ When eventually he was given the go-ahead to film it, in the spring of 1960, the poems he chose were ‘My Last Duchess,’ and ‘The Confessional,’ both by Robert Browning, Hardy’s ‘The Burghers’ and ‘A Mother to her Dead Child,’ by Edith Sitwell.⁶⁴ The four poems shared the characteristic thought essential by Bridson: whoever spoke them on camera, the audience would be able to associate the words with a *persona*, and to respond accordingly.

3.3. The proper treatment

Once selected, the poems required the proper television treatment. They had to be staged, performed, and filmed in a way that would allow the audience to identify with the persona of the speaker of the poem. Bridson at this stage was not interested in images *per se*, except insofar as the performer was being filmed. And he was confident that he could do that. ‘I have years of experience in the handling of poetry-speaking actors on sound,’ he wrote. ‘And the critical reception of “The Bullet” would suggest I have an adequate camera-sense. I would welcome the opportunity to harness the two together.’⁶⁵

There was a degree of uncertainty about what exactly Bridson had in

⁶³ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959.

⁶⁴ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, ‘Poetry Pilot,’ undated production script, 1960.

⁶⁵ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959; *The Bullet* was a half hour war drama Bridson produced as part of his secondment; *The Bullet*, BBC TV, 20 August 1958, 21.30.

mind; as the debate went on, he adopted a variety of positions. To the extent that he thought about staging, his ideas ranged from having unadorned actors declaiming poetry on a bare stage to full-costume theatrical production with sets and multiple camera positions. In May 1959, he was arguing that, once the audience accepted the idea of poetry as performance, it would be possible to 'show a more ambitious approach to it.' He imagined 'costume performance, scenic sets, pre-filming etc.' which could 'be eased into the operation gradually, as facilities became available.' His point was that '*Monitor* should not merely be TV *about* creative work; it should present that work.'⁶⁶ At another point he suggested that the programmes should be introduced by a compere. Audiences would respond well to 'an informed compere who can impart a certain enthusiasm.' He offered to do it himself but was willing to entertain the idea of Huw Wheldon or 'some other personality' as an alternative.⁶⁷

He returned often to the need for 'performance.' Mere recitation would not be enough, and other forms of performance might also not suffice. He was, for example, critical of Dame Edith Sitwell, who made a celebrated appearance on *Face to Face* in 1959,⁶⁸ and who had been filmed performing her poetry for an audience at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival that same year.⁶⁹ Sitwell, like Ezra Pound, lived up to a certain image of a poet (aloof, eccentric, fiercely intelligent), and her rhythmic delivery and inventive use of metre and rhyme had a hypnotic quality. But she had not learned the poems by heart, preferring to read them from a script. Bridson could not imagine 'anything more calculated to turn people against poetry.' He wrote to Kenneth Adam, then

⁶⁶ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959.

⁶⁷ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), undated (February 1959).

⁶⁸ *Face to Face: Dame Edith Sitwell*, BBC TV, 6 May 1959, 20.45.

⁶⁹ *Dame Edith Sitwell*, BBC TV, 16 September 1959, 22.00.

Controller of Programmes, Television, to argue that the programme was a ‘gift to the “poetry simply can’t be done on TV school of thought”’ both because the choice of material was ‘awful’ and because the performance was ‘lamentable.’⁷⁰ The trouble was both the nature of some of Sitwell’s poetry (although we note that Bridson selected her ‘A Mother to her Dead Child’ for his own pilot), and the fact that she read it from a script on camera. Her ‘script-conning’ was ‘quite unforgiveable,’ he wrote. ‘Poetry needs to be performed (Bridson’s emphasis) in the same way as an acting role or a song; there is no place for a script in camera at all, outside of a News Bulletin.’⁷¹ What he meant was that at no stage would a television audience have thought they were looking at anything other than a person reading a poem. Sitwell did not inhabit the character of the narrator of her poems. The audience could not, and would not, have created the required degree of *association* with the persona of the narrator of the poem.

Bridson wanted to be clear that he did not mean treating television as the page of a book, in which the text would merely be transferred to the screen. What he meant was the poets, or suitable actors, should be seen performing poetry, rather than the poems appearing only on the screen. In 1959 he wrote,

As I see it, presentation of poetry in vision should be primarily a matter of performance. When John Gielgud can pack theatres all over the States with spoken performances of Shakespeare and when audiences gather at the Royal Court Theatre and elsewhere to hear Logue and Co., I am sure that a sizable TV audience remains to be tapped with poetry spoken in character. How many million copies of Kipling are in circulation, after all?⁷²

It was a curious inversion. Broadcast in this way, the poetry would

⁷⁰ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to Kenneth Adam, 22 September 1959.

⁷¹ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to D.Tel, 17 September 1958.

⁷² WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959.

continue only to be heard. What would be *seen* was the actor. What was required, therefore, for poetry to work on television, was a selection of poetry in which the audience would be able to identify the performer on screen with the narrator 'in' the poem. Successful broadcasts of poetry would require the actor to inhabit the character of the narrator of the poem, and would require this to be done with sufficient verisimilitude that the viewer would, if only in the moment, believe the actor to be the narrator.

3.4. The proper audience

Although presented as a solution, Bridson's memoranda in the period 1958-59 can also be read as a statement of the problem of poetry on television. What Bridson was expressing, without doing so explicitly, was a set of assumptions about the putative audience. He assumed that if they enjoyed poetry in theatre, if they bought records and 'put the LP disc business on such a profitable and successful footing,' they would surely enjoy them in the same way on television.⁷³ The role of television was to enable this through its selection and treatment of the poems. What Bridson was acknowledging, in effect, was that on television poetry could not be left to speak for itself. This was tacitly acknowledged in his assertion that not all poetry had the required levels of dramatic narrative. Imagist poems (Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro') or poetry which had multiple narrators and voices (Eliot's *The Waste Land*) would not work. It had to be the poetry which allowed, or encouraged, the viewer to 'associate' with the persona of the narrator. Bridson did not express this thought directly, but the implication is that poetry on television was as much about the audience as it was about the poetry, because even if such an

⁷³ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959.

association was possible, it was up to the audience to make it. For all the discussion of costumes and make up, of comperes, sets, rehearsal times and camera angles, the real question was the extent to which a poem would be able to deliver 'its full impact' during a live transmission from a television studio. But television's ability to deliver its impact depended just as much on who is watching it as on how it was presented. Only gradually did the implications become clear: poetry on television was as much about the audience as it was about the poetry.

4. Case studies: Pound, 'Words' and 'Men and Women'

Between 1958 and 1960, three films had an impact on how *Monitor* was to make films about poets.

4.1. Learning from Ezra Pound

Bridson's ideas were widely discussed, but the first successful proposal Bridson put to the editorial team at *Monitor* was that he should write and produce a profile of Ezra Pound, with whom he had corresponded for many years, and about whom he had produced several radio features for The Third Programme, including a series of poetry readings in 1958.⁷⁴ The proposal was not immediately accepted. BBC programme decisions were a function of personality as well as policy, and Bridson did not get on well with the editor of *Monitor*, Huw Wheldon, of whom he later wrote dismissively, 'his claim to represent the taste and knowledgeability of the average viewer was probably the only matter on which I agreed with him.'⁷⁵ It was only when Wheldon fell ill that Bridson was given his opportunity to bring the poet and his words to the

⁷⁴ Ezra Pound, *Third Programme*, 21 June 1959, 21.50.

⁷⁵ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 249.

screen. Peter Newington, who had taken charge during Wheldon's enforced absence, agreed that *Monitor* should do the film.⁷⁶ It, like many *Monitor* pieces, was short; it was directed by Newington himself and was shot at Pound's former home at a castle in Merano, Italy. Over the course of four days Pound allowed the production crew to film him talking, practising Chinese ideograms, and reciting his indictment of 'Usura.' The experience of making this film informed Bridson's thinking when he came, on his return, to propose a 'poetry pilot.' The film also reveals some of the concerns that animated BBC television producers who were troubled that poetry was being neglected by television.

Bridson advised Newington not to bother with a set-piece interview of the kind Huw Wheldon had done with Robert Graves in Majorca the same year:⁷⁷ Pound, he wrote 'was never a man to answer questions; he had far too many of his own to propound.'⁷⁸ Rather the film with 'commentary written by D.G. Bridson,' opened with a defining statement of how producers at *Monitor* thought about poets, and about how best to 'sell' poets to the viewing public.

Pound is not merely one of the greatest living poets. He is also an explosive, almost legendary figure, a man who has been variously described as a prophet, a mystic, a fascist, an eccentric and a genius.⁷⁹

Bridson later disclaimed this line, saying that he only agreed to include it in the programme script because it would satisfy Wheldon (who returned to his post before the film was broadcast), and would allow him to leave the rest of Pound's statements and readings alone.⁸⁰ It *did* satisfy Wheldon, who as editor

⁷⁶ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet*, BBC2, 24 May 1959, 21.00. The film is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCyihQ7Ynr4>> accessed 12.8.2021.

⁷⁷ *Monitor: Robert Graves in Majorca*, BBC TV, 26 April 1959, 21.30.

⁷⁸ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 250.

⁷⁹ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 01:20 – 01:35.

⁸⁰ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 251.

of *Monitor* was in the position to arbitrate on how poets were to be presented. In keeping with other *Monitor* films, it was the poet, not the poetry that was being sold, and the selling included a clear set of expectations of who a poet should be, and what the audience would expect the programme to deliver: a performer, indeed a ‘genius,’ unconstrained by convention.

In his memoranda on poetry, Bridson had argued that it was the selection of poetry, and the performance of poetry that matters. But in this film, as with other *Monitor* films, the focus was not the poetry, but the poet. Bridson found himself adapting his theory of performance to accommodate the *de facto* star of the show. He was fortunate that Pound was a willing accomplice and Peter Newington a sympathetic director. At Bridson’s suggestion, Pound was asked to perform in several ways. He performed his poems, but he also performed ‘as himself.’ He was, Bridson wrote later, ‘a natural born actor’ who ‘took direction as to the manner born.’⁸¹ What this meant was that in addition to reciting his poetry, Pound was willing to act the part that might be expected by *Monitor*’s audience (‘prophet, mystic, fascist, genius’) in the various places and in the manner proposed by Bridson and the director. The film showed him gazing across the ramparts of his castle, taking a book from shelf, settling down to practice his calligraphy – and ‘confronting Gaudier’s bust of him that dominated the garden.’⁸²

The gardens and ramparts of Pound’s castle, together with his willingness to perform for the camera, made it relatively easy to fill the screen with arresting images. There remained the question of how best to put poems on television. Again, it was a question of performance. Pound read two poems in

⁸¹ Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 249.

⁸² Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 250.

the film – or rather, lines from two poems: ‘Planners’ (Pound’s translation of the Chinese)⁸³ and ‘With Usura’ (Canto XLV). Both readings were performances, but they were not the same. The first was a staged sequence in which Pound’s family gathered to listen. (‘Pound’s son in law is an Italian prince, Boris de Rachevilles. His daughter is Princess Mary de Rachevilles. He has two grandchildren and his English wife, Dorothy Pound.’)⁸⁴ This was recognisable as a domestic, intimate variant of the *An Evening With...* format. While his family politely listened, Pound read:

Heaven’s worry, scurries to earth;
twisted planning, what’s to block it?
At sight of good plan, they turn to rotten again,
the sight of their planning
gives me a pain.

First say yes, then say no;
good plan, no go,
but a rotten they dress in flummery,
the sight of their planning worries me.⁸⁵

It is worth noting the disconnect between the intimacy of the setting (the family scene, the soft lighting from the lamp, the positioning of Pound at the centre and of the listeners to either side, with the boy seated on the floor) and Pound’s declamatory style and stentorian voice. It is worth noting also that the poem chosen (the records do not show whether it was chosen by Bridson or Pound) is different from the kind of narrative monologues that Bridson had previously argued would work best on television. No records exist of how viewers experienced this performance.⁸⁶ It seems unlikely that the poetry,

⁸³ Ezra Pound, *Shih Ching: The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 110.

⁸⁴ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 02:05 – 03:30.

⁸⁵ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 02:15 – 03:25.

⁸⁶ The comments below one YouTube copy suggest that later audiences were primarily

which after all is condensed, allusive and lacking in narrative, delivered its ‘full impact in the moment.’ It seems more likely that the audience would have registered the close domesticity of the scene, would have absorbed something of the grandeur and authority of Pound’s voice, and (unless they had previously read and remembered the lines) would largely have ignored the poetry.



Figure 27: Performing poetry: *Monitor: Ezra Pound* (1959).⁸⁷

This is less likely to have been the case for Pound’s second poetic performance, which was twelve lines from *Canto XV*, ‘With Usura,’ which, said one critic, the poet ‘declaimed with gloomy relish.’⁸⁸ Again, he did not read the whole poem, and this time he did not read to camera. Instead, his voice was used in audio only, while on screen the audience saw Pound walking through

concerned with either glossing over or condemning Pound’s antisemitism and his attitudes to usury, and that interest in his poetry came a distant second. The film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCyihQ7Ynr4> accessed 12.8.2021.

⁸⁷ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 02:35.

⁸⁸ K.W. Gransden, ‘Critic on the Hearth,’ *The Listener*, Volume: 61, Issue: 1575, 4 June 1959, 32.

the passages and stairways of the castle, and coming to rest at a wall overlooking the distant valley below.



Figure 28: Performing as poets: *Monitor: Ezra Pound* (1959).⁸⁹

The lines chosen from what Bridson's narration called 'the most famous Canto of them all' were:

With usura hath no man a house of good stone
 each block cut smooth and well fitting
 that design might cover their face,
 with usura
 hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall
 [...]
 with usura the line grows thick
 with usura is no clear demarcation
 and no man can find site for his dwelling.
 Stonecutter is kept from his stone
 weaver is kept from his loom
 WITH USURA
 wool comes not to market⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 13:42.

⁹⁰ *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 13:30 – 14:30; the lines are as quoted and as

Eleven lines from the printed edition were omitted (from 'harpes et luz' to 'with no mountain wheat, no strong flour'), but the elision went unremarked. There was nothing on screen or in the narration to suggest that the poem had been cut or altered, or that the lines were only an extract. Nevertheless, there was a dramatic quality to the reading and the accompanying imagery which would, more than the domestic family reading, have led the audience to think about the words. The images chosen by the director were, like the poetry, allusive, but they were also not impossibly distant from the images created by the poem. The ancient castle through which Pound walked was reminiscent of the 'block cut smooth' of the poem; the sense was that Pound, the artist who has chosen poetry as what Bridson's script called 'his medium,' has found 'a site for his dwelling.' The lines of poetry are more integral to the meaning of this scene and deliver a greater impact.

The problem of poetry on television remained. Both extracts were read or recited by Pound, but in neither instance was the poem broadcast in full, and crucially, there was no commentary or discussion on what the poems meant, or why they worked *as* poetry. Nor was the poetry in any sense 'seen.' What was seen was in the first instance a man reading poetry to his family, and in the second instance a man walking about the grounds of his castle. The expectation of the audience was not that they should remember the lines or even the words of the poem, but that they should remember the person who read or performed them. They were the soundtrack to the presentation of a man, rather than the presentation of an art form itself. After Pound recited the last line there was a pause, and then Bridson's script completed the story: 'The journey on which Pound set out with the 'Cantos' has already taken him forty

years of thinking, writing, and controversial living. A hundred of the ‘Cantos’ are written. The journey is drawing to a close.’⁹¹ The result, Bridson later claimed, was ‘a quite remarkable study in self-expression.’⁹²

Huw Wheldon was back in charge of *Monitor* when Bridson delivered the Pound film. Wheldon accepted the film, and it was transmitted on 24 May 1959. Prior to broadcast, Wheldon complained that the trouble was that ‘Nobody knows who Ezra Pound is. We need a better selling line – “some say that he is a genius some say that he is a Fascist, some say that he is mad” – that sort of thing.’⁹³ Bridson solved this conundrum by inserting the opening lines about Pound (‘a prophet, a mystic, a fascist, an eccentric and a genius’ etc.), which he later disowned. The programme was well received, and went on to win the prize for best documentary at the 1959 Bergamo Film Festival.⁹⁴

4.2. ‘Words’

In asking to be allowed to make a pilot poetry programme, Bridson had ended one memorandum with a heartfelt plea: ‘could one green light flash?’ It did – but not for him.⁹⁵ It is a curiosity of the BBC’s organisational structure that a separate poetry pilot to be produced by David Jones (a BBC producer, not the poet) was commissioned at almost the same time, and this one went into production first. It was called ‘Words’ and was shot a few weeks before Bridson’s rival pilot, which he called ‘Men and Women.’ The differences are revealing, both in how the two producers thought about poetry, and in the

⁹¹ Narration, *Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet* (1959), 14:30 – 15:53.

⁹² D.G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 250.

⁹³ D.G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 250-251.

⁹⁴ D.G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 250.

⁹⁵ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson to A.H.T. (Tel), 6 May 1959.

contingent institutional ways in which such programmes came about.

David Jones was an experienced *Monitor* producer. He too wanted to bring poetry to the screen, but his conception was less dramatic than that of D.G. Bridson. Jones believed, in essence, that television must be made to serve the poetry, and that the poetry was sufficient. The ‘visuals’ were relatively unimportant. The presentation should be ‘as simple as possible’ and ‘was not designed to “add” to the poetry but to communicate it as effectively as possible.’ Where Bridson intended the poem to become a world into which the audience could enter through identification with the persona of the narrator, for Jones the staging should create ‘as little distortion as possible.’⁹⁶ It was not necessary for the poetry to be ‘dramatic,’ nor for the audience to identify the performer with the words of the poem. Where Bridson’s files are filled with proposals for the kind of poetry and performer that could draw an audience to a performance, Jones’s production file is filled with studio designs, and lighting schemes. This meant that different kinds of poems could be presented.

Jones’s primary support came from Grace Wyndham Goldie, at that time Assistant Head of Talks in the television service, who had been in correspondence with Stevie Smith. Smith wanted to know how she could get her poetry onto television. Wyndham Goldie replied,

I talked to Huw Wheldon who, as you know, works on MONITOR, about your ideas when you first sent them in and he was much impressed by them, as I was. The trouble is that he could not think how to handle them. [...] I’d love to talk to you about them, if you can spare the time, and would like to bring with me a young man who works on MONITOR. He is interested in getting poetry into the programme and is doing some experiments and also getting poetry

⁹⁶ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, David Jones to C.A. General Talks, 2 March 1960.

into programmes other than MONITOR. His name is David Jones and he is a great admirer of your poetry.⁹⁷

Jones produced the pilot, called 'Words,' in February 1960 and the line-up included Tony White reading poems by Thom Gunn, Robert Graves, and James Wright and Gary Watson reading poems by Edwin Muir and Philip Larkin. John Wain narrated the links. Despite Wyndham Goldie's overtures, Jones did not include Stevie Smith. Jones was given only 90 minutes of studio time for filming (with the same again for rehearsals), and he was required to film the show in the newly refreshed *Panorama* studio, which he was asked to adapt 'with as little variation as possible.'⁹⁸ The programme was shot in a single afternoon. Although no copies exist, we can assume it was spare and minimalist. The budget was £150, and the set requisition included only an armchair (for Wain), a coffee table, two grey gauzes, a pair of nylon drapes and a pair of chained grey gauze legs. The studio diagrams show little more than a table, a chair, and a microphone.

The rejection was swift and brutal: Rex Moorfoot, then Chief Assistant (General) Talks, Television, wrote to Jones: 'This is to confirm our conversation last week when I passed on the decision about your pilot poetry programme. C.P. Tel. [the Controller of Programmes, Television] regretted that he could not accept the pilot because, as H.T. Tel. explained. "Television added little to the poetry" – in fact, they felt at times the visuals distracted from the poetry's communication.'⁹⁹ Jones argued back: 'The presentation was deliberately simple, and was not designed to "add" to the poetry but to communicate it effectively.' His efforts were in vain. The commissioners were disinclined to

⁹⁷ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, Grace Wyndham Goldie (A.HT. Tel) to Stevie Smith, 1 September 1959.

⁹⁸ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, Planning Asst., Television to David Jones, 27 January 1960.

⁹⁹ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, C.A. (Gen) Talks to David Jones, 22 February 1960.

discuss further the choice of poems nor whether they objected ‘in principle to seeing the speaker of the poems in visions, or even the linkages.’¹⁰⁰ An unidentified executive later wrote by hand on the memorandum rejecting the pilot, that when saying that ‘television added little to the poetry, this means the television treatment used in this pilot, rather than in general. The general problem remains to be solved.’¹⁰¹

The ‘general problem’ was how to put poetry on television in a way that did not distract from what the poem was trying to communicate and did not leave viewers asking whether the programme might not be better on radio. But how to solve it? The various iterations of D.G. Bridson’s thinking show that he moved not just towards performance, but towards *dramatic* performance. His pilot, originally scheduled for late 1959, was put on hold to allow the Controller of Television time to watch Jones’s ‘Words.’ It fell to Grace Wyndham Goldie to write to Bridson to say, ‘C.P. Tel. would prefer to see the David Jones pilot before going ahead with the Bridson one. Would you please bring this suggestion up again on my return, after C.P. Tel. has seen the Jones pilot.’¹⁰² The delay gave Bridson time to propose other ideas for how best to stage the film. The one that caused most concern was his suggestion that he might use actors ‘in costume,’ an idea which had few friends within the department. But the idea of further attempts to ‘address the problem’ did have support, and eventually Bridson was given the go-ahead.

4.3. Bridson’s Pilot

Bridson called his poetry pilot ‘Men and Women.’ To present it, he chose the

¹⁰⁰ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, David Jones to C.A. (Gen) Talks, 2 March 1960.

¹⁰¹ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, ‘Pilot Poetry Programme,’ 22 February 1960.

¹⁰² WAC, T32/1, 172/1, Grace Wyndham Goldie to D.G. Bridson, 11 February 1960.

actors Jill Balcon and Marius Goring, who were to perform four dramatic monologues. Marius Goring recited Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and Thomas Hardy's 'The Burghers'; Jill Balcon performed Browning's 'The Confessional' and Edith Sitwell's 'A Mother to her Dead Child.' Goring was also to act as compere. Budgetary constraints and the emphasis on how, rather than where, the actors performed, meant that Bridson's studio, like that of Jones, was minimalist; his props list included one leather armchair, two vases, two reels of fishing line and a blow-up photograph of a portrait of an unspecified 'last duchess,' to be suspended on the line.¹⁰³ He had '3 cameras and 3 hours rehearsal time,' but 'wardrobe requirements [were] minimum.'¹⁰⁴ With all the changes to schedule, the anticipated budget for a fifteen-minute programme rose from £100 to £200.¹⁰⁵ The soundtrack was further enhanced with extracts from Mussorgsky 'Pictures at an Exhibition,' Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' and Schumann's 'Symphony No. 1 in Bb major, Op. 38.'¹⁰⁶ Again, there was no studio audience.

The full script has not survived, but a handwritten draft exists. Goring introduces himself, and then says:

I'm fond of poetry. I have a theory that poetry can be lived as well as read in books. I'm wondering whether you will agree with me. So does Jill Balcon who is here with me to test this thing out. We shall be speaking not as ourselves, but with the voices of men and women who are poetry, who live only because poets created them. I want you to come back with me to an earlier age – Italy in the time of the Renaissance. One of the Dukes of Ferrara is once again thinking of taking a wife. He is entertaining the emissary from another great family, into which he hopes to marry. And while they stroll through

¹⁰³ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Requisition form,' undated.

¹⁰⁴ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, T.O. Tel. to S.A., 23 February 1960.

¹⁰⁵ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, Assistant Head (General) Talks to A.H.Tel., 9 February 1960.

¹⁰⁶ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Poetry Pilot,' BBC Gramophone Library request S1370, 12 July 1960.

the Castle together, he pauses before the portrait of a dead woman:
 'My Last Duchess.'¹⁰⁷

That it is an experiment ('test this thing out') is explicit, as is the assumption that the involvement of the audience ('come back with me') is an ingredient present in the making of the programme. The point was for the viewer to achieve the necessary level of identification with the 'characters who are poetry.' In the handwritten script the word 'are' as in 'are poetry' survived only after other iterations ('created poetry,' 'wrote poetry') had been scratched out. Goring's narration requires a greater leap of faith on the part of the audience than the willing suspension of disbelief that one might ask of a theatre audience. As he introduced each poem, the narration used the metaphor of travel to ask the viewers to imagine that they were in direct dialogue with the men and women who 'were' poetry. For the 'The Confessional,' performed by Jill Balcon, the audience were invited to imagine themselves 'in Spain, at the time of the Inquisition. A girl is in prison, alone in her cell & she is telling us why...' Thomas Hardy, another voice from the past, followed before Jill Balcon would 'bring us back to the present time with a poem written by Dame Edith Sitwell. She speaks with the voice of "A Mother to her Dead Child."'

Although Bridson had spent much time and energy arguing that the poetry was the essence of his endeavours, and that the proper selection and performance of the works of poetry was the key to successfully putting poetry on television, the script suggests that Bridson understood well that something else was in play: the audience. In his memoranda of July 1958 and May 1959, and in the script for *Monitor: Ezra Pound*, Bridson had argued that a successful broadcast of poetry required 'that the poem had to be capable of association

¹⁰⁷ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Poetry Pilot: Men & Women,' handwritten script; no date.

[by the audience] with a person.’ The person would be the poet, or the narrator, of the poem, as performed by the actor on television. But what the script for ‘Men and Women’ makes clear is that he imagined two levels of ‘association’: The actor had to inhabit the persona of the narrator of the poem; the audience then had to form an association with this character. And the dominant association was the latter, between viewer and the presumed narrator of the poem. What the two producers were learning, was that poetry on television entailed a set of assumptions about a group of people who were not present, and about whom the producers knew little.

From the point of view of BBC executives, the results were the same as for the previous pilot: it was unclear that television added anything to the poetry, and the poetry alone was judged to be insufficient to carry a television audience, most of whom would have ‘left school at 14 or 15 years of age.’¹⁰⁸ The two pilots were shelved. The conclusion, on the evidence of the output of *Monitor* over the next five years was that while poets made for good television; their works, as a rule, did not. This was not to rule it out completely. Poets continued to be invited to read and discuss their poetry on *Monitor*, and there were occasional films about live poetry events. *The Muse in S.W.1.*, a *Monitor* report produced by Patrick Garland about the Royal Court Theatre’s poetry festival received good reviews in the summer of 1963.¹⁰⁹ *The Times* wrote that, ‘The television version ... was compered by Robert Robinson, a versatile and sardonic master of ceremonies, and one of its highlights was John Betjeman reminding us of the durability of that ancient monument of English poetry,

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Hearst, then BBC Television Head of Arts Features, ‘discusses the record of the department and some criticisms that have been directed at it’ *The Listener*, 16 October 1969, 522.

¹⁰⁹ *The Muse in S.W.1.*, BBC, 17 July 1963, 22:20.

Tennyson.¹¹⁰ But in the two pilots of Jones and Bridson, the attempt to let poetry speak for itself, and for poetry to be ‘seen as well as heard’ had failed. A lesson, however, had been learned. For poetry to work on television, the viewer had to feel something more than that the poem ‘meant’ something. They had, somehow, to be allowed to identify with the poetic voice. How could this be done?

5. Making the viewer the subject

In January 1967, the producer Christopher Burstall wrote a brief letter to W. H. Auden in New York. ‘I am making a film about Blake’s “Tyger”,’ he wrote. ‘A bald announcement that, and I am wondering simply whether it would interest you to talk for a few minutes about some aspect of the poem?’¹¹¹ Auden did not reply, but Robert Graves, Kathleen Raine, Stuart Hall, R.D. Laing, and the critic Richard Hoggart did respond to similar overtures, and in so doing played a small part in broadcasting history. Burstall, whose previous credits included *Monitor* films on Brooke and Baudelaire, was working for the new arts programme, *Omnibus*, and was delighted (and a little surprised) when he was given the go-ahead to make a one-hour programme about William Blake’s ‘Tyger, Tyger’ (sic): ‘I suggested a programme here under the title, “How does it work? – Tyger, Tyger.” The idea was accepted,’ he wrote.¹¹² As was common in such productions, the idea, once accepted, began to change. It was, Burstall wrote in one iteration of his proposal, ‘one of the very, very few poems in the language that’s almost common property. Practically everyone can finish the first line, anyway.’¹¹³ The idea was to make a programme in which people from

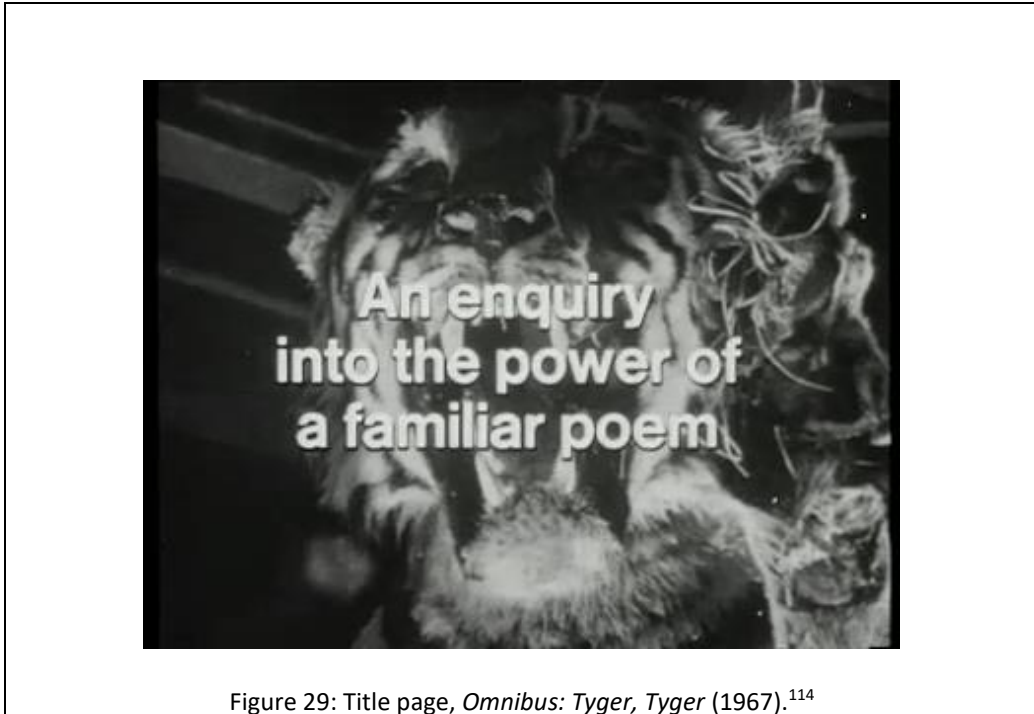
¹¹⁰ ‘Notes On Broadcasting,’ *The Times*, 20 July 1963, 4.

¹¹¹ WAC, T53/98/1 Christopher Burstall to W. H. Auden, 3 February 1967.

¹¹² WAC, T53/98/1 Christopher Burstall to Richard Hoggart, 25 January 1967.

¹¹³ WAC, T53/98/1, Christopher Burstall, undated proposal.

across the country would be asked to perform, critique, and respond to a single poem. It had never been done before.



Production was originally scheduled for April 1967, but the bulk of filming took place in June and July, by which time Burstall was describing the film as ‘a “workshop” on a poem rather than a piece of music and the poem we have selected is William Blake’s TYGER.’¹¹⁵ The question became not so much ‘how does it work’ as ‘how does it work for you?’ The film included contributions from academics (Hall, Hoggart), poets (Raine, Graves, Mitchell), a number of other adults (‘a housewife, a taxidermist, a head zookeeper’), and children from four schools in Birmingham and Manchester. Each contributor was asked to think about and comment on their reaction to the poem. It was billed as ‘An enquiry into the power of a familiar poem,’ but as the publicity material put it,

¹¹⁴ *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967), 02 :09.

¹¹⁵ WAC, T53/98/1, Shooting schedule notes, 10 May 1967.

'this film is not in any way an academic exercise since it concerns itself with people who have an intense and personal reaction to familiar words.'¹¹⁶ In an article in the *Radio Times*, Burstall sought to distance the film further from any academic tradition. It was, he wrote, 'a hunt, a serious and unsolemn, funny and strange chase through the attitudes of men and women in all walks of life who feel passionately about a poem.'¹¹⁷

The film included sequences in which experts and 'ordinary' viewers alike analyse why it is that the poem works, but both they and Burstall are clear that the real subject of the film was not so much the poem as the people who felt so strongly about it. Sheila Fraser, credited as 'a housewife,' said this most explicitly:

I don't think it is terribly important to know what a poem means – as long as it appeals. I don't mind what it means or what the poet meant, or what it says, as long as the words personally appeal to me. I think this is the important thing with a poem.¹¹⁸

In this view, the important thing was not what the poem communicated, but whether it evoked a response in the reader or the viewer, a view which Sean Day-Lewis, then television critic for the *Daily Telegraph* understood: 'Very little was actually proved,' he wrote, 'except to show that a good test of a great work of art is whether it enables people to reveal themselves in the way they respond to it. "Tyger, Tyger" emerges triumphantly from this test, producing any number of individual responses.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ WAC, T53/98/1, 'Promotional Material' (draft), 10 November 1967.

¹¹⁷ WAC, T53/98/1, Christopher Burstall to Russell Twisk, 17 October 1967; also 'Tyger, Tyger,' *Radio Times*, 2 November 1967, p 67.

¹¹⁸ *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967), 13:35 – 13: 58.

¹¹⁹ Sean Day-Lewis, 'Great Power of "Tyger Tyger" Poem,' *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 1967, 13.





Figure 30: Responding to poetry: *Tyger, Tyger* (1967). Two students, Kathleen Raine and Stuart Hall discuss their responses to Blake's poem.¹²⁰

This shift in focus from the failed attempts to 'see' poetry in the pilot programmes of David Jones and D.G. Bridson and from the use of poems to gain biographical insight into the lives of poets of so many *Monitor films* (see Chapter Four) had several consequences. Audiences were small. *Tyger, Tyger* was viewed by only 1.8% of the viewing population; *The Frost Programme* on ITV at the same time had a 20.1% audience share.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the film was thought to be successful. The BBC received hundreds of letters in praise from viewers who asked for 'more of the same.' Viewers on the BBC's audience panels were overwhelmingly impressed by the film, both because it was 'visually interesting and well photographed' and because they were 'fascinated by the wide range of opinions put forward.'¹²²

Senior executives at the BBC largely agreed. For them it was a triumph of *television*, and there was a sense that Burstall had found a solution to the problem of poetry on television:

¹²⁰ Still collage from *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967), various timings.

¹²¹ WAC, T53/98/1, 'Audience Research Report, *Tyger, Tyger*,' 10 November 1967.

¹²² WAC, T53/98/1, Audience Research Report, '*Tyger, Tyger*,' 10 November 1967.

C. BBC-2 (Controller, BBC2) was warm in his praise and... said it had been a new piece of television of riveting interest. C.P. Tel (Controller of Programmes, Television) agreed; he had been particularly struck by the contrasts in the different views and by the elements of separate truth which each contained. He had particularly felt how impossible it would have been to achieve the impact of the contrasts involved except by the medium of television; the programme was *sui generis*.¹²³

Such was the impact of the film within the BBC that a viewing was held for the BBC's board of governors. They too were impressed:

This programme in the 'Omnibus' series received high commendation from the board. Governors said that it offered something new in television. Much had been done to bring Music to the television audience; now perhaps the television service might do the same for memorable words.¹²⁴

The responses all agreed the Burstall and *Omnibus* had done something new, something '*sui generis*,' and something that only television could have done. The many letters to the BBC, and the Audience Research Report agreed: it was *seeing* the responses to the poem from people featured in the film that was so fascinating. They emerged with their understanding of the range and power of the poem enhanced, but they did this as a result of having watched not the poem, but having listened to and watched how others responded to the poem. It is true that the film gave some biographical details about Blake, and (in keeping with many presentations of poets) it stressed his reputation as otherworldly and mystical, but the letters on file and the *Audience Monitoring* report all attest that it was *seeing the faces* of the respondents that was so moving. Three in four of those who saw the programme said that they 'knew' the poem before they watched the programme. It was the range of responses

¹²³ WAC, T53/98/1; extract from Programme Review Minutes, 15 November 1967.

¹²⁴ WAC, T53/98/1, 'Minute,' Controller Meeting, 21 November 1967.

from other people that ‘set them thinking and rethinking about the poem and the writer, increasing their understanding, and revealing “new reactions” to add to their own findings.’ That many of these responses came from children was welcome because the photography had ‘caught the facial expressions of the children particularly well.’¹²⁵

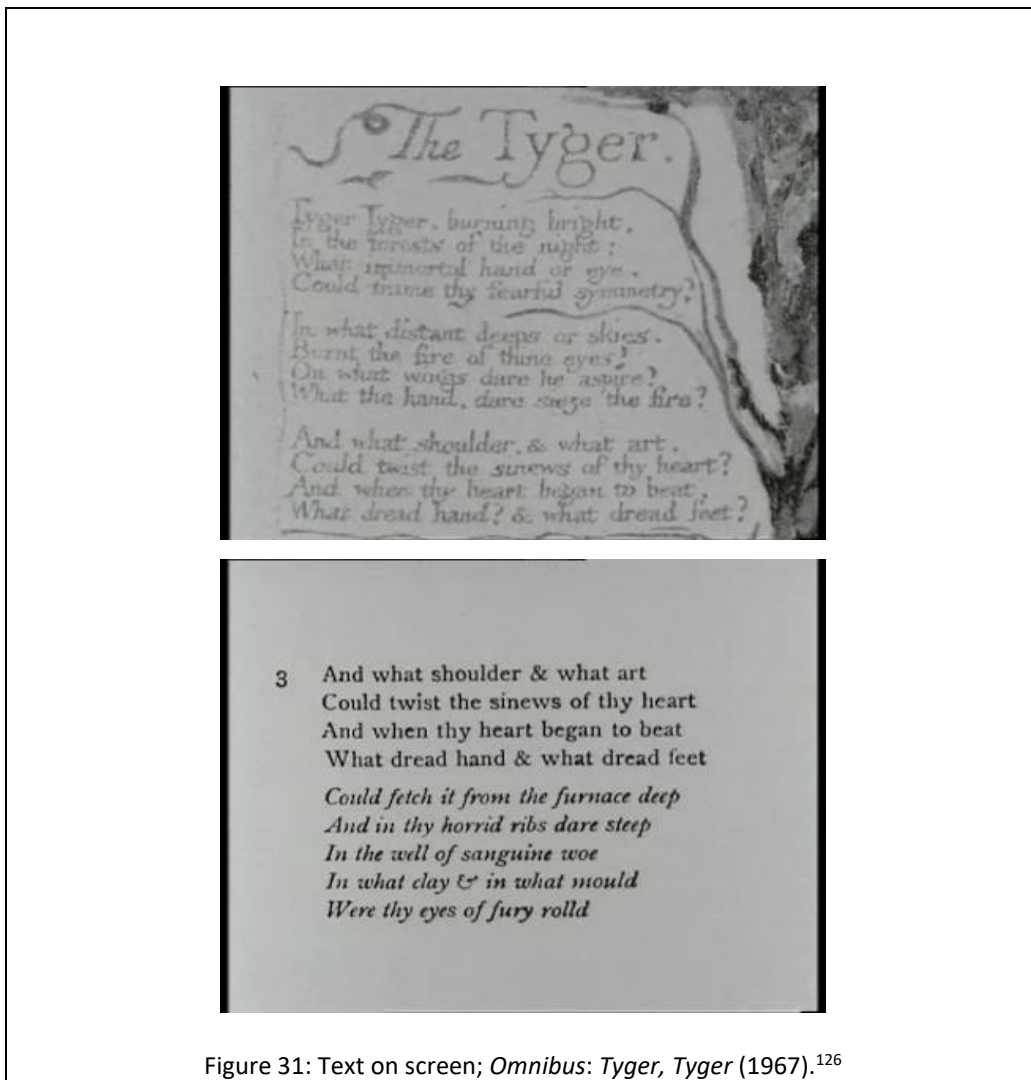


Figure 31: Text on screen; *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967).¹²⁶

Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger offered a way to understand both how people

¹²⁵ WAC, T53/98/1, Audience Research Report, ‘Tyger, Tyger,’ 10 November 1967.

¹²⁶ *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967), 03:05 and 19:24.

read poetry, and how they watch television. It acknowledged that the poem started life as text (and illustrations on a page), and that this was how it would be experienced by many viewers. But it also acknowledged that the meanings of a poem varied by reader, and by time. Interviewed for the programme, the academic Stuart Hall confessed that he had learned the poem at school and been taught it was ‘a poem about God’s grace and power.’ But in adulthood, he had taught it to many different students and ‘every time I have to teach it in a different way or read it in a different way, I see something that I’ve not seen before. So I think that must mean that I don’t quite understand it. I don’t understand it at all.’¹²⁷ Poems, in other words, mean different things depending on how they are read, and by whom, and to whom. The audience, the reader, the performer brings their own meanings to the poem and if television were successfully to broadcast poetry, it had to allow space for the audience to react repeatedly and variously.

Burstall’s film made no assumptions about what a poem meant, nor whether the text was fixed. It assumed rather that enjoying poetry was a process that was open to all, and that if television were to reflect this, it had to find a way to dwell on a poem. This was the problem that Christopher Burstall had, albeit it briefly and only for a single programme, solved: whereas poetry is an art form which can be enjoyed repeatedly, and which rewards repeated readings, television in 1965 was a medium that had no option but to deliver ‘its full impact’ in the moment. Television in 1960 or 1967 did not allowed for such immersive practices as second viewings or group discussions. There was no *iPlayer*, no video, no *YouTube* where audiences could experience second or third or fourth viewings. BBC television, with the exception of a privileged few

¹²⁷ *Tyger, Tyger* (1967), 25:40 – 26:40.

(D.G. Bridson offering to arrange a viewing of a *Monitor* film on Stravinsky for T. S. Eliot, for example), could only be viewed live. A single reading, therefore, was inadequate. Bridson's belief that there was poetry which 'created its full impact in the moment' was a forlorn one; this was the reason his poetry pilot failed. It was not that the 'selection' was inadequate or that the 'proper presentation' was not achieved; it was that it failed to understand how poetry was consumed, and enjoyed, and how it rewarded those who made the effort to read it, or hear or to watch it on television. What *Tyger, Tyger* in effect did, was to offer the audience multiple readings, and multiple responses to a single poem. Over the course of an hour, audiences heard, and re-heard, the familiar lines. As they did so, their response to the poem changed, and was made memorable. What it also did, was acknowledge the importance and legitimacy of each reading. No one understanding was said to be better than another. The poem meant what it meant to each contributor, and to each viewer. It was a vindication of Eliot: the poem's existence was 'somewhere between the writer and the reader.'¹²⁸

It was the children *and their responses* that most captivated audiences. Richard Hoggart, eminent critic and theorist, wrote that 'the older ones were very good and intelligent and well worth seeing. But for me the younger, more directly responding ones had the edge.'¹²⁹ Other correspondents had the same response: 'I was moved by the thoughts and remarks of the Manchester teenagers. Against them the effect of the poem upon the younger children was all the more forceful.' When the programme was rebroadcast in 1968 Stuart Hall wrote to say that many people had told him that 'it was one of the best TV

¹²⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 30.

¹²⁹ WAC, T53/98/1, 'Tyger, Tyger,' summary of correspondence, 12 November 1967.

programmes on the Arts they had seen.¹³⁰ Having heard such a variety of views in the programme, said another, the ‘poem now means more to me than ever.’¹³¹ And that was the point: the poem meant more to the viewer not because they had seen the poem on television, but because they had seen such a variety of responses to the poem on television. They had been offered poetry not as a passing phenomenon having an impact in the moment, but as an art form which rewards those who spend time thinking about the lines, listening to the lines, and sharing their responses with others.

6. A lesson unlearned

Until *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967), the audience had been elusive in poetry programmes. Often, they were seen only as passive recipients of the tastes and choices of others in such programmes as *An Evening with...* or Ezra Pound’s family in his Italian castle. *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger*, in this sense was a revolutionary film; it put the audience for poetry at the centre of the television experience. Even though the revolution was slow in coming, we see its echoes in modern formats such as Channel 4’s *Gogglebox*, but we also see its impact in how programme makers today think about putting poetry on television. In Chapter Two, I described how the poet laureate, Simon Armitage, identified as good television a sequence in *Armando Iannucci in Heaven and Hell* (2009). In the segment, Iannucci read a passage from Milton’s ‘Methought I Saw my Late Espoused Saint’ to Professor John Hill, who was blind. As the reading drew to an end, (‘I wak’d, she fled, and day brought back my night.’) the camera zoomed in on Hill’s face. He was visibly moved. While Iannucci struggles to find words to respond to what they have just heard, John Hill exhales. And then he says,

¹³⁰ WAC, T53/98/1, Stuart Hall to Christopher Burstall, 1 March 1968.

¹³¹ WAC, T53/98/1, ‘Tyger, Tyger,’ summary of correspondence, 12 November 1967.

'Every time I woke up, I was blind again.'¹³²



Figure 32: Responding to poetry: *Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell* (2009).¹³³

It was, Armitage said, the 'the most breath-taking piece of telly because it was a person reading a book. Pointing at words, getting down amongst those words and explaining why what is sometimes described as the most boring piece of theological poetry in the English language, is one of the most gripping.'¹³⁴ This particular sequence made for 'breath-taking telly' because it was about more than the poem itself. It was about how people respond to the poem. It was not only Bridson's audience being allowed in some way to identify with the narrator (although it was that too). It was poetry as a shared experience, poetry as something to read, to hear, and to discuss.

In the history of poetry on BBC television, from the pilot programmes of 1960 to the polished productions of 2009, there were many perceived failures

¹³² *Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell* (2009), 43:00 – 43:03.

¹³³ *Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell* (2009), 42:39

¹³⁴ *Newsnight Review* (2009), 29:30 – 29:55.

as well as successes. In the same year as *Tyger, Tyger*, the BBC broadcast a much-criticised series called *Six Bites of the Cherry*, produced by Leo Ayles, in which six stages of 'Man's life' (infancy, adolescence, youth, manhood, maturity, death) were explored 'in song, dance, and poetry.'¹³⁵ Each programme included a guest poet (Elizabeth Jennings for 'Infancy'; Brian Patten for 'Adolescence'; Stevie Smith for 'Death'), and a dance troupe who performed on screen while the poems were being read by the presenter, Michael Baldwin. The production was reminiscent of *The Pepler Masques* forty years before. Critic-in-chief was George Melly in the *Observer*, who cruelly, but precisely, identified the pitfalls awaiting the producer who wished to interpret poetry on television:

Patronising, pretentious, half-baked, [*Six Bites of the Cherry*] aims to 'sell' poetry but succeeds, I should have thought, in alienating any potential converts with the same efficiency that it must sicken the convinced. [...] As an idea there's nothing wrong with it, but they won't leave well alone. McNeice's (sic) 'Prayer Before Birth' was ruined by having to watch a dancer writhe about on the floor in black tights, a marvellously concentrated poem by Sylvia Plath was acted into the ground with a mixture of unimaginative literalness and meaningless capering about, and, worst and most unforgivable of all, Yeats's 'Prayer for My Daughter' was pointlessly mutilated.¹³⁶

In *Tyger, Tyger* the BBC had found one answer to the question of what television could do for poetry, but it did not repeat the experiment. Perhaps the most significant response to *Tyger, Tyger* came during the special viewing held for the Board of Governors in November 1967. As discussed, the Board were impressed. The programme 'offered something new in television' and suggested that the television service might do for 'memorable words' what it

¹³⁵ *Six Bites of the Cherry*, 6 x 30 mins, BBC2, Saturdays 22 July to 19 August 1967, 22:45.

¹³⁶ George Melly, 'Rounding up the global platitudes,' *Observer*, 23 July 1967, 19.

had done for music. Only the Director of Television issued a cautionary note. As the minute from the viewing records:

D. Tel. [Director of Television] said he would like to know the size of the audience and the R.I. for this programme. He himself felt the number of poems which could be treated in this way was limited.¹³⁷

The programme enhanced and extended the audience's enjoyment and understanding both of the poem and the medium through which they experienced it. That they did not immediately attempt to repeat the format, suggests that there was, within the higher echelons of the BBC, a belief that both the poem and the programme were, as recorded in the minute of the Programme Review Board following transmission, *sui generis*, and that there was a limited range of poems that could 'be treated in this way.' Immediately after it was first broadcast, many viewers requested the BBC 'do it again,' but for the time being, audiences had to be satisfied with the occasional repeat. *Tyger, Tyger* was broadcast again in February 1968, and was rerun for schools in December that year. When in 1976 the BBC put on 'a series of outstanding films to mark 40 years of BBC TV,' *Tyger, Tyger* was chosen, along with the 1966 World Cup Final, and Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home*. But would the BBC do it again? The answer in the short term was no. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a greater volume than ever of poetry programming on BBC television, but the trend was again to focus on the poems and the poets, and not on the audience. As the BBC did so, it moved further and further away from Bridson's theory of the proper selection and the proper treatment and from Burstall's success in foregrounding the audience. In order to broadcast poetry on television, producers sometimes even discounted the very quality that made it

¹³⁷ WAC, T53/98/1, Controller Meeting minute, 21 November 1967.

television.

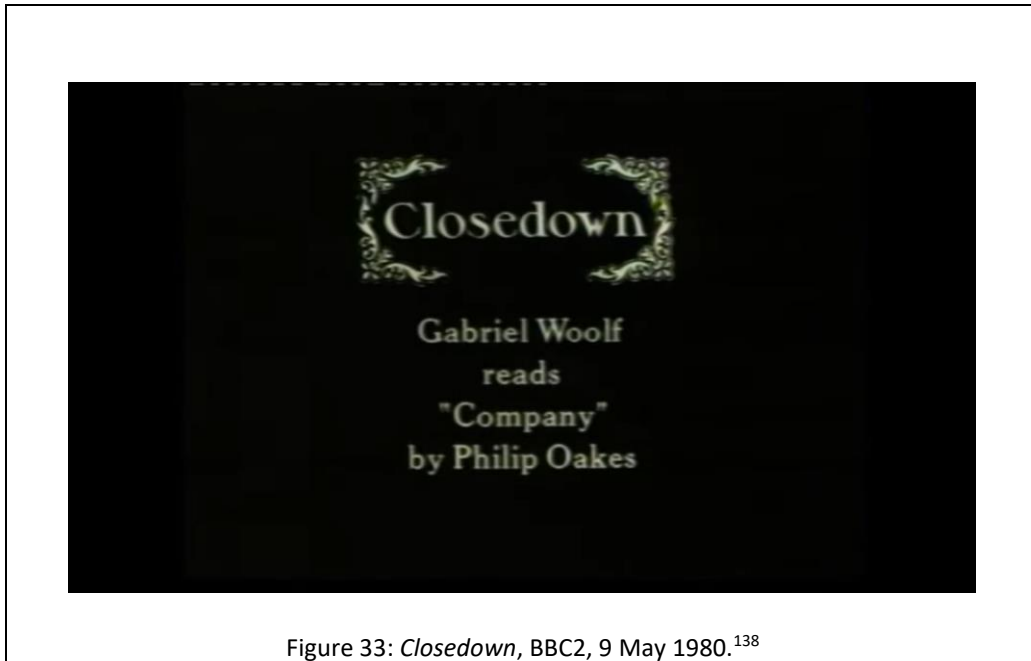


Figure 33: *Closedown*, BBC2, 9 May 1980.¹³⁸

Between 1974 and 1982, for example, BBC2 broadcast more than 2000 readings of poems as the last thing before the service closed down for the night. The *Closedown* broadcasts (1974-1981), by number of poems broadcast, constitute the largest commitment that BBC television ever made to poetry. But they were recorded ‘out of vision’ and broadcast as ‘sound only’ (although poems might be cut to appropriate footage, usually rostrum shots of pastoral scenes).¹³⁹ There were other examples. In 1993, the BBC broadcast *Poems on the Box*, a series in which poems were broadcast with the text on screen in a variety of graphical iterations, but with no other ‘images.’

The same season included *Re-verse*, a week during which poetry would make ‘impromptu appearances on BBC2, popping up unscheduled between

¹³⁸ The BBC holds no copies, but some are to be found on *YouTube* and other internet archives. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wG0yNxQgn6k>>accessed 26.4.2020.

¹³⁹ WAC, R34/585/5, ‘Closedown,’ Programme as completed form, 22 Feb 1976.

programmes.¹⁴⁰ Re-verse was to be an archive show. These would be ‘historic archive’ of poets previously filmed by the BBC (Eliot, Auden, Graves) and a new ingredient: ‘These clips will be linked and commented on by today’s poets... The living speaking to the dead.’¹⁴¹ The existence of archive of poets on film was a powerful driver in determining which poets and which poems were broadcast, but in specialist programmes like this, producers were willing to experiment. Roger McGough’s ‘40 Love,’ for example, was presented in text only, and without sound except for a carefully mixed backing track of tennis balls and crowd noise from Wimbledon.



Figure 34: Roger McGough's '40-Love' in *Poems on the Box* (1993).¹⁴²

The series was a denial of the arguments advanced by Bridson thirty years before. There was no performance, no staging, and the treatment was to lavish

¹⁴⁰ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c15742b250574b8d8f9b211a4a31f880>> accessed 7.3.2020.

¹⁴¹ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c15742b250574b8d8f9b211a4a31f880>>, accessed 7.3.2020

¹⁴² *Poems on the Box*, BBC2, 5 November 1993, 21.30. The still is by the design agency, BDH: <<https://www.bdh.net/creative/poems-on-the-box>>, accessed 23.3.2021.

production resources on new ways of putting text on screen.¹⁴³ ‘We’re bringing poetry to the screen in a new way,’ producer Tim May said in a press release to accompany *Poems on the Box: Re-Verse*.¹⁴⁴ ‘[We’re] treating poems for their value as words, rather than as an accompaniment to images of trees or flowers.’¹⁴⁵ In what other television programme would one find this distrust of its essence: the ability to transmit images?

For all Bridson’s argument that poetry on television was a matter of performance, and for all Burstall’s success in making the reader the focus, the problem of poetry remained. The claim Tim May made implied that there was little middle ground. Poetry either stood alone and was read (or possibly heard) only for ‘its value as words’ or, if broadcast with accompanying images, it was relegated to a second-class status as mere ‘accompaniment.’ Neither position necessarily reflected the experience or wishes of viewers. As one viewer wrote after the broadcast of *Tyger, Tyger*,

‘For the first time in ages I have felt stimulated by television instead of lulled or stupefied. Poetry has come alive.’¹⁴⁶

Poetry came alive on television when the focus of the programme was not the poem, but the audience experience of it. The grain of sand at the heart of ‘the general problem’ of poetry on television was not the poetry. It was the viewer.

¹⁴³ The graphics were designed by at the multi award-winning agency, BDH.
<<https://www.bdh.net/creative/poems-on-the-box>> accessed 2.3.2020

¹⁴⁴ *Poems on the Box: Re-Verse*, BBC2, 9 October 1993, 20.10.

¹⁴⁵ *Re-Verse*, BBC2, 9 October 1993, 20:20, Tim May, producer, in the *Radio Times*.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c15742b250574b8d8f9b211a4a31f880>> accessed 23.2.2020.

¹⁴⁶ WAC, T53/98/1, ‘Tyger, Tyger,’ summary of correspondence, November 1967.

4. How making poets the subject created a new problem

Such celebrity passes out of the range of critical approval or scorn, resting as it does on the opinion of many whose curiosity does not always depend on acquaintance with the sage's works but with his being at last a true celebrity, famous for being famous. **Frank Kermode reviews *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* by Jewel Spears Brooker, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26 No. 21, 4 November 2004.**

The phrase comes from a poem not an interview, so Larkin is telling the truth rather than the facts. **Alan Bennett reviews *Andrew Motion's Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15 No. 6, 25 March 1993.**

If you must have gods, as we create our own gods, you might at least create sort of reasonably agreeable ones. **Stevie Smith interviewed by Patrick Garland, *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances*, BBC2, 6 April 1965.¹**

1. Introduction: two assertions, two patterns

This chapter concerns the consequences on BBC television of two assertions that recur in scholarly and in general literature, but which tend to be assumed rather than stated on television: that an understanding of the lives of poets leads to a richer reading of their poems, and that the poetry, being in some sense necessarily autobiographical, allows readers better to understand the lives and times of those who wrote it. At first glance neither assertion seems controversial; it is the approach adopted by countless biographers. It is possible, as Colin MacCabe put it, 'to accept much of Eliot's theory of impersonality, the belief that experience should be stripped of its narcissistic carapace, similar to Barthes's call for the death of the author, and still hold that the poetry is a product of a life.'² Martin Amis was less forgiving: 'Biographers

¹ Stevie Smith *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 05:25 – 05:35.

² Colin MacCabe, *T. S. Eliot*, (London: Northcote House, 2006), 80.

may claim separation,' he wrote, 'but what they insist on is connection. They have to. Or what [...] the hell are they doing day after day, year after year (gossiping?) if the life somehow doesn't account for the art?'³ Amis was reviewing Andrew Motion's 1993 biography of Philip Larkin, but the question is relevant to television where biographies also repeatedly insist on this connection. The mechanics of that accountability may vary. Some tell the story of the poet's life 'in his own words;' others ascribe varying degrees of causality to biographical factors (parents, locality, education, friends and lovers) in the creation of the poetic oeuvre, but the essence of it remains the same: without the poet (having lived) there would be no poem, and the source material for all poems must in some sense be the lived experience of the poet. By understanding the life, therefore, one better understands the poem. Similarly, television and other biographies assume one can know, indeed can only properly know, the poet through the poetry. To do so is to emphasise a particular kind of lyric poetry, and to foreground first person expression of thoughts and feelings, but all kinds of poetry can be put to this use. As Lyndall Gordon, an early biographer of the famously 'impersonal' T. S. Eliot put it, 'The crucial problem is to discern the bonds between life and work in a way that will do justice to the poetry and plays which, after all, are central acts in his life... It is simple enough to collect facts, but to attempt to do justice to Eliot's immortal longings will mean that his own most subtle statements – his creative works – must be the central source.'⁴ Successive generations of BBC filmmakers, tasked to produce biographical accounts of the lives of poets, have agreed with both assertions. The question is, how was this central source used, and with what

³ Martin Amis, 'A Poetic Injustice,' *Guardian*, 21 August 1993, A6.

⁴ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

consequences for audience understandings of the poet and of the poetry?

Few poets were sufficiently recognised to become the subject of BBC television biographies. The list reflects the anthologised canon. From before the age of television, the poets whose lives have been most assiduously explored on television include Byron, Milton, Tennyson, Brooke, and Hardy. And from the 20th century: Eliot, Auden, Larkin, Smith. There were others, but Eliot and Auden in particular have been the subject of more than one BBC television biography. In all of these biographies producers used the poetry each poet had written to describe, or illuminate, or uncover aspects of the poet's life. This is, in itself, not unusual. Literary biographers of poets and other authors might do the same. But this study of poetic biographies over several decades reveals patterns which are particular to television. Two stand out. The first is that the choice of poems used in biographies was driven as much by the pre-existing visual record as by the need to understand the poet. This is a self-fulfilling process. Poems, or excerpts of poems, which had been recorded on film while the poet was alive, and those poems which the poet had been filmed reading themselves, became the poems – or rather, the archive footage – to which producers turned when they came to make biographies of poets no longer alive. The fact that it was these poems, and not others, that existed in the archive determined in part which poems were then used as biographical material. The production choices of the 1960s, in other words, had a profound impact on what poetry was broadcast in the 2000s.

The second pattern revealed in this study has its origins in the fact that television is a time-constrained medium. This significantly impacts on how poetry was used in biographies because mostly it was not poems that were used as testimony but *extracts* of poems. Although one purpose of making such biographies of poets was to increase public awareness of, and interest in, their poetry, the poems were not, in themselves, the subject of the films. Rather they were – as elsewhere – a televisual ingredient from which producers chose stanzas or lines or phrases which best suited their purpose – and their purpose

was always to make television. This was something of a conundrum. In Chapter One, I described how contributors to television programmes over many decades made repeated claims that what poetry communicates is a kind of truth, indeed that poetry matters because it is true, or because through poetry poets were able to express otherwise ineffable truths. But the nature of that truth, summed up by Matthew Hollis, the poetry editor at Faber & Faber, when he was interviewed for *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), was not that it was ‘literal truth’ but that it was ‘authentic within a life experience.’⁵ In other words, it was true not because it happened to the poet, but because it *might* plausibly have happened to, or might have been felt by, someone in a life that could be imagined and thought to be authentic. Biographies, however, come under the heading of ‘factual television.’ They claim to tell a truth that actually happened. As the frontispiece to one BBC television biography of W. H. Auden put it, this was ‘the story of his life – in his own words.’⁶ The words in this case were, mostly, lines of Auden’s poetry, edited and cut to images and music. They were no longer ‘the whole poem,’ and they were not necessarily describing real events, nor doing so in the order in which Auden either lived or wrote about them. The introduction to this 2007 television biography of Auden went further. His verse, the opening caption read, ‘combine[d] descriptions of his inner world with personal responses to the major events of the 20th Century.’ But biographies are not only concerned with the inner world of the subject and their response to major events. They purport to tell the facts of a life, as well as the truth of it. In this chapter I consider what happened to poetry when it was used on television as biographical testimony, and I investigate how producers

⁵ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 37:50 – 38:04.

⁶ *The Addictions of Sin: W. H. Auden in his own words* (2007), 00:40.

of poetic biographies (and to a lesser extent their audiences) navigated the distinction proposed by Alan Bennett in the epigraph above: that poetry can be ‘true,’ without being ‘factual.’

2. Reluctant heroes: poets or celebrities?

While all the subjects of the biographies considered here – Hardy, Eliot, Auden, Smith, Larkin – to some degree sought and accepted their role as public figures, all strongly decried the practice, and prospect, of posthumous biographies. Their reluctance to have their biographies broadcast was itself the subject of a BBC film. Much of *Bookmark: The End* (1990) concerned the desire and efforts of three poets – T. S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, and Thomas Hardy – to frustrate would-be biographers.⁷ Hardy famously wrote his own biography to pre-empt others doing the same. The film reported that ‘he designed his own house; he also wanted to design his own posterity.’⁸ Eliot occasionally acknowledged a legitimate interest in the lives of poets (‘We understand the poetry better when we know more about the man.’)⁹ but distrusted the genre and the medium:

I have just returned from a visit to the United States, where television (though not, I believe, more highly developed technically) has become an habitual form of entertainment in many more households than here. Among persons of my own acquaintance, I found only anxiety and apprehension.¹⁰

His wish not to have a biography written was honoured by his widow, Valerie Eliot. With one exception, a 1971 BBC television biography made to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the writing of *The Waste Land*, she

⁷ *Bookmark: The End*, BBC2, 10 October 1990, 20.15.

⁸ Narration, *Bookmark: The End* (1990), 25:10 – 25:15.

⁹ T. S. Eliot on E. Muir, BBC Home Service, 5 May 1959, quoted by Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 335.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter’, *The Times*, 20 December 1950, in T. S. Eliot, *Complete Prose* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), 574.

guarded Eliot's private papers from biographers and television producers, and received both praise and opprobrium for doing so. As the author and critic Francis King said in *Bookmark: The End* (1990), 'She has been very much criticised because she hasn't been able to stop people writing about T. S. Eliot, but she has said, "I'm not going to give you any help because he didn't want this." And I think she is absolutely right.'¹¹ Philip Larkin was similarly reluctant. In *Bookmark: The End*, Larkin's literary co-executor (and biographer-to-be) Andrew Motion travelled to Hull to discuss the 'lingering unease' that came with being both friend and biographer of a person who was of such public interest – and who wished his life to remain private.¹² Motion recounted two stories: that Larkin thought discussing wills was 'like talking to the person who is going to wash your corpse' and that Larkin said there wouldn't be much for Motion to do because 'when I see the Grim Reaper coming down the path I will, like Thomas Hardy, go to the end of the garden and make a bonfire and will then burn all the things that I don't want the world to see.'¹³

2.1. Biographies were a way to get poetry on television

What, then, was the point of a BBC television biography of a poet? One answer is that it was a way to get poetry, known to be of interest only to a minority of viewers, on television. Poetry, as the producer Christopher Burstall put it in 1965, had 'not had a very satisfactory deal on television.'¹⁴ Investigating the lives of the poets, in the manner pioneered by *Monitor*, became one means by which their poetry could be brought to a wider public – and the 'deal' made

¹¹ *Bookmark: The End* (1990), 21:30 – 21:49.

¹² Narration, *Bookmark: The End* (1990), 34:40.

¹³ *Bookmark: The End* (1990), 39:56 and repeated almost verbatim in Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, A Writer's Life*, Faber & Faber, London, 1993, xv.

¹⁴ WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall to Richard Hoggart, 19 November 1965.

more satisfactory. Even then, such films had to fight for their place in the schedules. For portraits and biographies of poets to be made, the importance of the poet had first to be established; it was crucial to the selling of a programme, both internally to commissioning executives and externally to newspapers, listings magazines and audiences. The superlative was the preferred register; extravagant claims the norm. T. S. Eliot was the 'most controversial, most influential and most original,' W. H. Auden the 'greatest living poet,' and Philip Larkin the 'most highly regarded.'¹⁵ And once made, selling the programmes to viewers required astute tactics and tenacity from programme makers and publicists. Prior to the broadcast of *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), for example, the BBC was careful to invite a number of what would now be called 'influencers' to a viewing of the film. The producer Christopher Burstall explained their thinking to the critic Richard Hoggart: 'I am inviting a number of writers whom I think might care to come and our Press department has also invited the Television critics.'¹⁶ The guest list included Philip Toynbee, Al Alvarez, Stuart Hood, and Kingsley Amis, all of whom, Burstall hoped, might 'say something favourable.'¹⁷ It worked. Burstall was able to report to Auden (who was not in England at the time of the broadcast, and who had not seen the film) that the programme was well received by critics.¹⁸ Burstall's film represented at that time the most attention BBC television had paid to the character and working practices of a living poet. There had been several portraits of poets, especially under the *Monitor* umbrella, but this was the first one-hour documentary about a poet. The film was new in form too; it

¹⁵ Radio Times listings for *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971); *Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden* (1973); Introduction to *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road*, (Rpt) (1986).

¹⁶ WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall to Richard Hoggart, 19 November 1965.

¹⁷ WAC, T/51/125/2, *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* preview invitation list, 1965.

¹⁸ WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall to W. H. Auden, 2 December 1965.

included observational sequences shot at Auden's home in Kirchstetten in Austria, interviews with Auden and others (Christopher Isherwood, Igor Stravinsky), and performances of Auden's poems by actors, including Ian Holm and Susannah York. The critics generally approved. In the *Daily Telegraph*, Sean Day-Lewis (one of those invited to the preview) called it 'excellent television,' while an anonymous critic in *The Times* thought it 'fascinating.'¹⁹ The fascination arose both from Auden's 'reticences and enthusiasms' and from the contrast between 'the tough, craggy hardness, the sharpness of wit and technical expertise manifested through so many intricate verse forms, of the poetry, and the burly, quiet, expatriate member of the church choir of an Austrian village writing beautifully of, among other things, his native north-country landscape out of self-imposed exile.'²⁰ Although opposed to the idea of a biography, Auden, gave every impression of having enjoyed being filmed in 1965, and on his return to England towards the end of the decade he continued to make himself available to the BBC. In appearances on both *Parkinson* (1972) and on *Crosstalk* (1973) he continued to argue that what made poetry important was that it was true, and what made poets of interest was their ability elegantly or memorably to speak these truths. But those truths become elusive when the voice within a poem is presumed to be the voice of the poet.

2.2. The presumption that the poem is a version of the poet speaking

In a revealing cameo of how television viewers, including BBC television executives, negotiate the line between literal truth and emotional truth in poetry, questions were raised when *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965) was

¹⁹ Sean Day-Lewis, 'No Pomp or Pretence in W. H. Auden,' *Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 1965, 14.

²⁰ 'Face to Face with W. H. Auden,' *The Times*, 29 November 1965, 14.

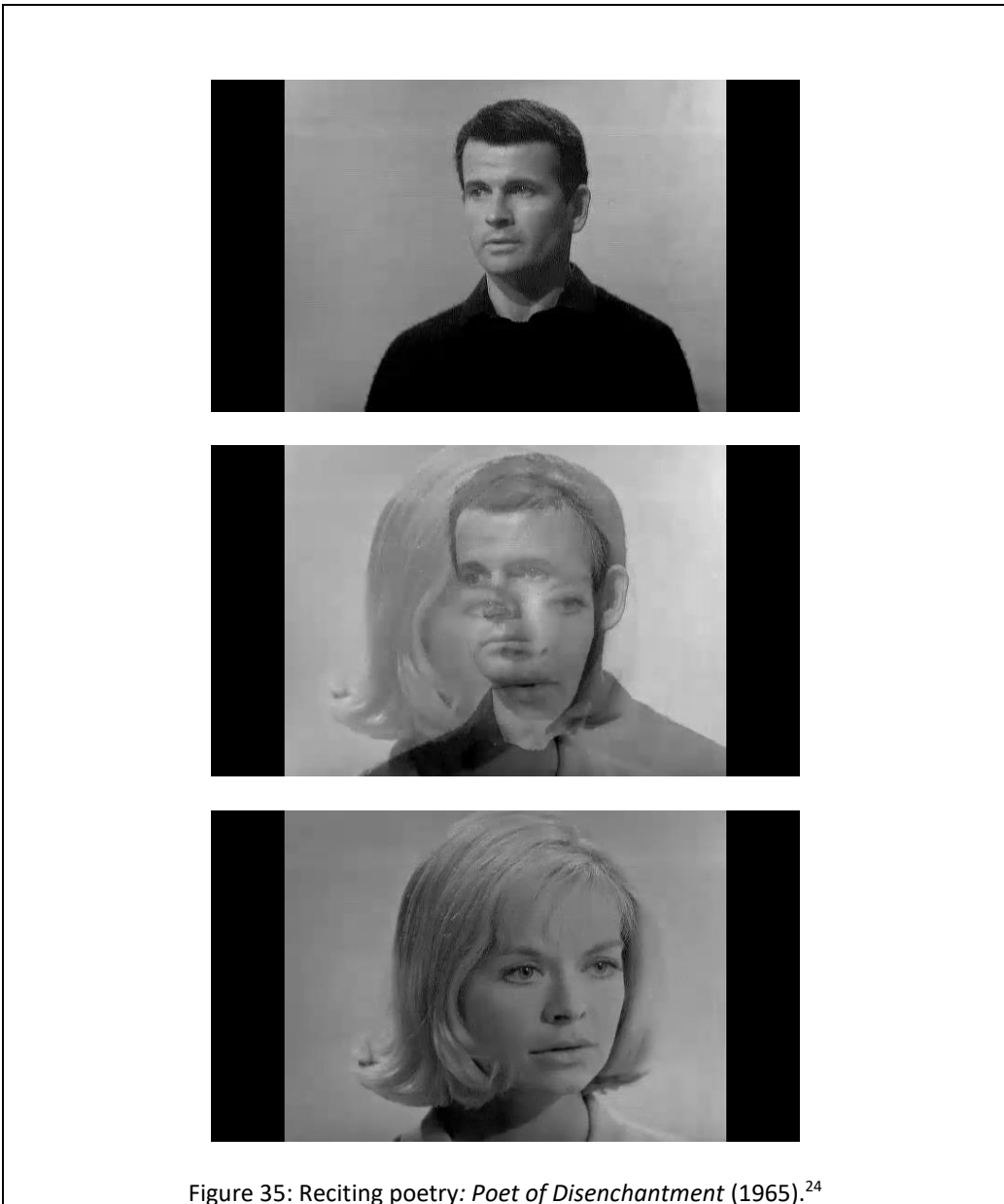
discussed at the BBC's weekly programme review meeting. Senior executives queried the use of actors to read the poems, and specifically the way in which Susannah York appeared to be the person to whom Holm addressed his reading of Auden's 'Lullaby' and 'Fish in the Unruffled Lake.' The sequence occurred some 37 minutes into the film. Following an interview with Auden about the craft and importance of poetry (or otherwise: Auden says that compared to the really important things in life writing poetry is 'small beer') Ian Holm and Susannah York recite a series of extracts from the poems.²¹ Burstall had proposed this sequence to Auden, and Auden raised no objection.²² The two actors read in turn, and the sequence is staged so as to create what feels like a dialogue between lovers. Although the two are not seen on screen together, Holm is not looking at the camera but to the right, and York to the left; it is as though they are talking to each other in a poetic *pas de deux*. First Holm recites from 'Lullaby,' omitting the second stanza of three. He begins:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children [...]²³

²¹ *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), 37:35.

²² WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall to W. H. Auden, 7 July 1965.

²³ The poems were untitled, but have come to be known by the titles used here. W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 53.



York 'responds' with two stanzas from 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' (again the middle stanza is omitted), ending on these lines:

²⁴ W. H. Auden, *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), 37:40 – 40:40.

All gifts that to the swan
Impulsive Nature gave,
The majesty and pride,
Last night should add
Your voluntary love.²⁵

The film then mixes through to Holm who ‘answers’ her with three stanzas from ‘Dear, though the night is gone.’²⁶ The sequence was unprecedented and unusual. Even with the unacknowledged elisions, it stands as a rare example of poetry – thought not entire poems – being performed during a documentary. Both the producer and the actors were pleased with their efforts – ‘you did them finely’ (sic), Burstall wrote to York – but he said he was nervous about how it might be received.²⁷

The BBC conducted audience research into how viewers regarded the film. Although some members of the audience review panel were uncertain what to think about the many close-ups Burstall used of Auden’s famously wrinkled face, the audience research report was generally favourable. ‘For the most part the programme obviously met with the sample’s approval,’ the report said.²⁸ In a warning to those who would bring more poetry to television, however, several members of the audience research panel for *Poet of Disenchantment* confessed that ‘the programme was of very limited appeal; one or two frankly admitting that it was ‘way above their heads.’ Respondents reported that their interest was piqued solely because it was ‘the biography of “a famous contemporary”’ and they felt it wise to ‘take the opportunity of becoming more aware of such people,’ although they ‘could not pretend to the

²⁵ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, 46-47.

²⁶ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, 46.

²⁷ WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall to Susannah York, 22 September 1965.

²⁸ WAC, T/51/125/2, ‘Audience Research Report VR/65/675’: *Sunday Night: W. H. Auden, Poet of Disenchantment*, 3 January 1966.

poetically inclined, still less to appreciate Mr Auden's brand of it.'²⁹ Those with a more commercial interest in Auden's public profile were more effusive. It was, Charles Monteith, a director at Auden's publishers, Faber & Faber, wrote, 'a complete and unqualified success.'³⁰

But the BBC Review Board, made up of senior executives, was ambivalent. Although the programme was generally 'excellent,' the committee thought the readings by Holm and York 'had not been successful.' The Head of Television Production asked, 'why had Auden's love poetry been read to Susannah York?'³¹ Although the minute of the meeting does not say what prompted the question, it seems reasonable to suppose that the committee members were aware of Auden's sexual orientation, and were expressing a confusion that was to recur in programmes about poets, and in responses to these programmes: did poems express a general truth about the human condition, or a particular truth about the life and experience of the poet? If the testimonial truth of each poem was particular to Auden, then the presumed object of his love poems would have been a man.

Nevertheless, this film, broadcast in November 1965, was the strongest assertion to that point on BBC television of the presumption that poets had a place in public life, and that those who were sufficiently famous were worthy subjects for television. It was a view that persisted. Over the ensuing decades the BBC broadcast many television biographies of poets. In each, producers, with varying degrees of success, sought to balance interest in the poet with interest in their poetry. Often, as was the case with *W. H. Auden, Poet of*

²⁹ WAC, T/51/125/2, 'Audience Research Report VR/65/675': *Sunday Night: W. H. Auden, Poet of Disenchantment*, 3 January 1966.

³⁰ WAC, T/51/125/2, Charles Monteith to Christopher Burstall, 30 November 1965.

³¹ WAC, 'Programme Review Board Minute,' 1 December 1965, 5.

Disenchantment, it was the fame of the poet, and not the poetry, that drew audiences to the film. In this chapter I analyse how the BBC responded to what was often audience interest in famous contemporaries, rather than audience interest in poetry, and how in the course of making films to meet this interest, poetry came under pressure to be something for which it was often ill-suited: biographical testimony.

3. The early days of *Monitor*

Where did this begin? Early BBC programmes about poets and their works most often took the form of a lecture to camera by a third party. One of the first BBC programmes to have introduced a poet as a subject for television was a lecture on the life and work of W.B. Yeats, broadcast a few weeks after the poet's death in 1939.³² More were to follow, and it was not until the late 1950s that the television service began in earnest to make programmes with and about poets and how they worked and to ask whether there was any connection between their lives and the poems they wrote. The catalyst for this was *Monitor*, under the leadership of Huw Wheldon.³³ Launched in February 1958, the BBC saw *Monitor* as being a *Panorama* for the arts (see page 19) which Wheldon took to mean that its task was 'to say something true, within the limits of our perception, about art and artists.'³⁴ Both the creator and the creation were the subject. The teams of producers at *Monitor* were keen to exploit the relatively new luxury of cameras that could travel beyond the studio, and if necessary,

³² *W. B. Yeats*, BBC TV, 1 March 1939, 21.00.

³³ There are four BBC strands which have produced most primetime portraits or biographies of poets: *Monitor* (1958 – 1965), *Omnibus* (1967 – 2003), *Bookmark* (1983-1999) and *Arena* (1975 – present). Strands aimed at minority audiences such as *Ebony* (1982 – 1990) and *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan* (1968 – 1982) often included feature items on, or interviews with, or performances by poets.

³⁴ Huw Wheldon, *Monitor*, 13.

beyond national borders. Writing in 1962, Wheldon described the process of making interview-based programmes for *Monitor*:

Filmed interviews of the kind we have developed in *Monitor*, and films in which artists' statements are used to counterpoint visual sequences... are altogether different [from studio interviews]. They involve anything from three to ten days filming; and further lengthy periods of cutting, assembling, reassembling and dubbing in our film studios. It is a laborious process, but it has certain advantages. The search (which begins before shooting starts, and sometimes long before) is for themes and subjects which carry overtones, which ideally are almost in the nature of parables, and which borrow meaning from their surroundings. This main search involves others. It involves a search for physical experience: for the movement of a hand, a piece of landscape, a note of music, or a footfall which will lend intimations to the themes, whether declared or implicit.³⁵

The objective was 'something true,' but truth in television was, as Wheldon acknowledged, not a single thing, but an accumulation of meanings – meanings which could be found as much in a gesture or a landscape as in a word, and as much in the background to an artist's workplace, as in the foreground of a studio. The meanings 'borrowed from their surroundings' and the understanding of each 'movement of a hand' or 'footfall' might not be the same for each filmmaker, or for each viewer.

It quickly became clear that poets were suitable subjects for *Monitor*, and that 'statement and visual counterpoint' was a reliable and relatively cheap format for arts programmes. It had taken some time to reach this point. As discussed in Chapter Two, there were many proposals on how best to bring poetry to television. In 1959, for example, the producer D.G. Bridson suggested that an audience for poetry on television could be built through 'performance,' either by actors or by the poets themselves. This could not, he wrote, be done

³⁵ Huw Wheldon, *Monitor*, 11.

in fifteen minutes, but it could ‘certainly be done in a short series of quarter-hours.’³⁶ The BBC never took up this suggestion; their interest was as much in the poets as their poetry, and it was *Monitor* that found a formula that worked: interview, recital, and a portrait of the poet at work. From 1958 to 1965, *Monitor* broadcast several interview-and-performance films about leading poets:³⁷

1959: Ezra Pound, John Betjeman, Robert Graves, Lawrence Durrell

1960: W. H. Auden

1962: Roy Fuller

1964: R.S. Thomas, Philip Larkin

1965: Robert Lowell, William Empson, Stevie Smith.

Each of these followed a recognisable template. Wheldon’s 1959 *Monitor* interview with Graves at his home in Majorca is representative:

Wheldon: Although you have been in Majorca for so long, I notice you have written very few poems about this island.

Graves: I think England is still the land from which poems come to me. Occasionally I have to put in an olive tree or something; things turn up that provoke a poem; but mainly the landscape of my poems is in England – for instance there was a cabbage white butterfly, and I wrote a poem about it called ‘Flying Crooked.’ It read something like this:

The butterfly, a cabbage-white
 (His honest idiocy of flight)
 Will never now, it is too late,
 Master the art of flying straight,
 Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
 A just sense of how not to fly:
 He lurches here and there by guess
 And God and hope and hopelessness.
 Even the aerobatic swift

³⁶ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, D.G. Bridson, ‘Memo,’ 6 May 1959.

³⁷ Other notable films included Edith Sitwell on *Face to Face* (1959) and Auden on *Bookstand* (1963). In 1966 Frank O’Connor’s lecture on Yeats, *Horseman, Pass By* was filmed for the *Sunday Night* strand on BBC1.

Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Graves, seated at his desk in his study, recites the entire poem to camera before concluding, 'But that's about me, not the butterfly.'³⁸



Figure 36: Reciting poetry: *Monitor: Robert Graves* (1959).³⁹

For the programme makers, this was an uncomplicated proposition – and a welcome release from the 'impersonality' of Eliot: the poem and the film were about the poet, and the importance of the poem to the film and the audience was its description of the poet's 'honest idiocy,' and the fact that it had been written, in Graves's words, 'for the sake of the poem itself... to insulate it against what is not poetry.'⁴⁰ And since the poet was reading the poem, it was not incumbent on the programme maker to find the appropriate image. The opening shot is of the text of the poem in a book; but the sequence is a poet

³⁸ *Monitor: Robert Graves* (1959), 12:16 – 13:20.

³⁹ *Monitor: Robert Graves* (1959), 12:40 – 13:00.

⁴⁰ *Monitor: Robert Graves* (1959), 15:30 – 15:52.

reciting his work to camera, and thence to the audience.

Another common approach was for *Monitor* to use one poet to interview or discuss another, both living and dead. In 1963 Cecil Day Lewis travelled to Dorset to make a film about Thomas Hardy.⁴¹

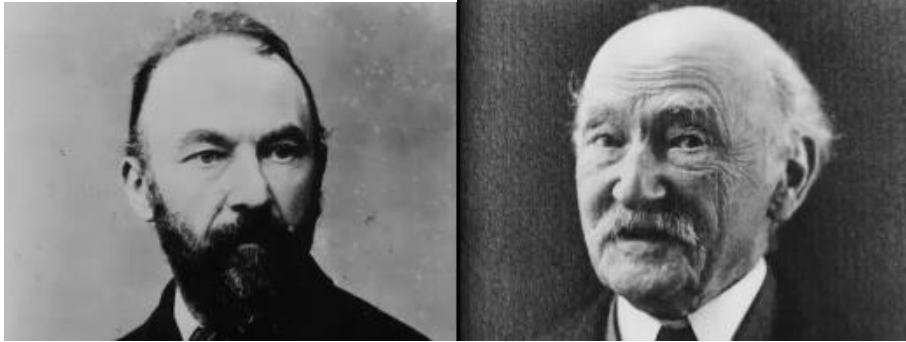


Figure 37: *Monitor: Thomas Hardy, Footmarks in Time* (1964).⁴²

The film is the earliest example I have found of a poet using BBC television to claim a poetic heritage. In a pre-title sequence the film opened with the living poet, Day Lewis, seeking to establish a form of kinship with the dead one. Over a series of still images of Hardy through the ages, Day Lewis read his own lines:

Dear poet, wherever you are, I greet you.
 Much irony, wrong,
 Innocence you'd find here to tease or entreat you,
 And many the fate-fires have tempered strong,
 But none that in ripeness of soul could meet you
 Or magic of song.⁴³

The poetic bond established, the film moved on to a discussion of *Tess of the*

⁴¹ *Monitor: Thomas Hardy, Footmarks in Time*, BBC TV, 24 November 1963, 22.05; the poem is 'Birthday Poem for Thomas Hardy', by Cecil Day Lewis from C. Day Lewis, *Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 183.

⁴² *Thomas Hardy, Footmarks in Time* (1964), 00:20 – 00:44.

⁴³ *Monitor: Thomas Hardy* (1963), 00:25 – 00:50.

D'Urbervilles, cut to dramatic reconstructions shot at Stonehenge. Only later does Day Lewis return to Hardy's poetry with a reading of 'The Self Unseeing' which, he said, revealed Hardy's 'genius for mixing up the great and the small in his poetry.'⁴⁴ The film also illustrated the extent to which the BBC was concerned as much with the profile of the presenter as with the poet. The programme review thought the film itself was 'quite exceptional,' although the director of television criticised the choice of Day Lewis to present it.⁴⁵

The following year *Monitor* asked John Betjeman to present a portrait of Philip Larkin.⁴⁶ Midway through the film Larkin and Betjeman were seen seated in Larkin's study at Pearson Park in Hull. Betjeman asked Larkin whether he resented some of the less well-informed comments of literary critics ('the Friday pharisee and the Sunday prig'), to which Larkin, in a clip which would be used and reused in films about him, responded:

Larkin: Well, I don't know if you feel this, but I feel very strongly that I read, um, you know, I'm a miserable sort of fellow, writing a kind of welfare state sub-poetry, um, doing it well, perhaps, but it isn't really what poetry is and it isn't really the sort of poetry we want. I wonder whether it ever occurs to the writer of such criticism that really one agrees with them – that what one writes is based so much on the kind of person one is and the kind of environment one's had and has now that, um, one doesn't really choose the poetry which one writes. One writes the kind of poetry one has to write, or can write.

Betjeman: That's what I think's so marvellous about your poetry. It exactly describes the surroundings in which you live and the feelings of a detached observer and it's easily understood by everyone – those great, strolling lines. I mean, when I look outside there and I see from this flat that dusty sycamore and those burnt-out chestnut

⁴⁴ *Monitor: Thomas Hardy* (1963), 08:10 – 08:20.

⁴⁵ WAC, 'Programme Review Board Minute,' 27 November 1963, 3.

⁴⁶ *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road*, BBC2, 15 December 1964, 22:15.

candles, sheltering the public park below us, I think of your poem
'Toads Revisited.'

Larkin: And well you may.⁴⁷

The film cuts to a recording of Larkin reading 'Toads Revisited.' Larkin, out of shot, reads the poem in full, over a sequence of images of people in Pearson Park in Hull and concluding with footage of Larkin at his desk, talking on the telephone. This was the only time Larkin allowed himself to be filmed. The eight sequences that made it to air are the only television archive of Larkin available to would-be-biographers. They recur, in different sequences, and with different cutaways, in subsequent biographies of Larkin, both on BBC television and elsewhere.⁴⁸



Figure 38: Larkin and Betjeman: *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964), 09:10 – 10:45.

⁴⁸ For example: *The South Bank Show: Philip Larkin* (ITV, 1990), *Bookmark: Philip Larkin* (BBC2, 1993), and *J'Accuse: Philip Larkin* (Channel 4, 1993).

⁴⁹ *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964), 09:15.

Their scarcity value lends these few sequences an historical importance disproportionate to their impact at the time. So much so, that when the writer and critic Terry Eagleton came to present a *J'accuse* programme on Larkin for Channel 4, and accused Larkin (over archive footage from *Down Cemetery Road* of Larkin riding his bicycle through a cemetery) of having 'set his face against just about every creative experiment the 20th century offered,' he then cut to the archive from *Monitor* in which Larkin agrees with him.⁵⁰ Critics were not impressed – at least not by Eagleton. The attack was 'all too predictable,' said the *Guardian*, while the *Daily Telegraph* noted that 'Eagleton made the mistake of including liberal doses of Larkin's poetry in the programme; and the power and directness of the writing made a nonsense of what he was saying.'⁵¹ The Channel 4 film, broadcast a week before the BBC's two-part biography, can be seen as little more than a spoiler from the BBC's still-new rival. The more substantive point is to note how difficult it would have been for Channel 4 to make that film, or for the BBC to make its 1993 television biography of Larkin, had the *Monitor* footage not existed.⁵² The BBC film was made 8 years after Larkin's death in 1985. Many of his friends were alive and gave interviews. But the only moving images of Larkin came from *Monitor*: Larkin in the cemetery, Larkin in the church, Larkin in the Hull University Library, Larkin and Betjeman on a boat on the Humber and – crucially – Larkin in his study talking to Betjeman, and giving the quote to which all television biographers returned: 'One writes the kind of poetry one has to write, or can write.' It is, after all, an endorsement of their art. Here, in the words of a great poet, was the approval

⁵⁰ *J'accuse: Philip Larkin*, Channel 4, 30 March 1993.

⁵¹ Paul Bailey, 'Television,' *Guardian*, 31 March 1993, A6., Max Davison, 'Why We're at a Loss for Words,' *Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 1993, 18.

⁵² *Bookmark: Philip Larkin*, BBC2, 9 and 10 April 1993, 21.40.

television producers could use to justify their approach to biography and poetry. Since poetry was written of necessity, based on 'on the kind of person one is and the kind of environment one's had,' it could be used as testimony. The life produced the poetry; the poetry must therefore faithfully reflect the life.

3.1. Portraits or Biographies?

These early *Monitor* films were portraits, however, rather than biographies. It is a slight, but important distinction. The different intentions of the programme makers led to different understanding of how poetry could be used. The distinction is threefold:

- the poems, as much as the poet, were the subject of the films
- the film makers were constrained by a degree of accountability to the poet with whom they worked to make the films, and
- *Monitor* portraits were of the moment; biographies followed a narrative arc which was linear and which began with the poets' births and ended with their deaths.

The portraits *Monitor* made in the 1950s and 1960s did not seek to explain the poets through their lives, nor to assert that the life necessarily gave rise to the poetry. The life was a context without which the poems might not have been written, but the relationship was contextual not causal. The purpose of these portraits was not to show where the poets had come from, but where they were now: working, writing, living. The films did, however, share an assumption later found in biographies: the aim was, in Wheldon's phrase, 'to say something true' about the artists and their art, and there was a belief that the greatest truth could be found in the words of the subject, and specifically in the case of poets, in the recital of their poetry. Typically, therefore, these programmes gave a prominence to the poems which is conspicuously lacking in later television biographies. *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964) lasted a little under twenty-five minutes, but the producer Patrick Garland made time for six poems to be read. The poems in order of appearance are 'Here,' 'The Large Cool Store,' 'A Study of Reading Habits,' 'Toads Revisited,' 'Church Going' and

'Wants.' The readings take up a little over half of the available screentime, and there are no elisions. Each poem is read in full, either by Larkin or by Betjeman. The poetry, as much as the poet, is the object of the portrait, and the aim was to 'let the poems stand for themselves.'⁵³ The same approach was evident in the portraits of Stevie Smith or Robert Graves: the chosen poems were read in full.

The second distinction is that the biographies I consider here were made after the death of the poet – and in some cases many years after. Portraits of the living have a different register, both to the overtures that precede production, and to the end product. In his discussions with the producer, Patrick Garland, prior to the filming of *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964), Philip Larkin was less concerned with time and place and more concerned that his personal life should be left well alone, and that any appearance should be certain to enhance his reputation – something he thought television unlikely to achieve: 'I am not a particularly impressive personality and I've always believed that it is best to leave oneself to the reader's imagination,' he wrote.⁵⁴ Garland reassured Larkin on both counts, and promised that the programme would have 'the same concentration' on Larkin's work, as previous *Monitor* programmes had done about 'Graves, Pound, R.S. Thomas, Roy Fuller and Lawrence Durrell.'⁵⁵ The form of such negotiations and of the final film were informed by the current ambitions of both the programme maker and the poet, the sensibilities of their friends and rivals, and the attentions of libel lawyers. Those made after the poet had died were free of some of these constraints (or

⁵³ WAC, T/51/125, Christopher Burstall, undated draft of an article for *The Radio Times* on *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965).

⁵⁴ Philip Larkin to Patrick Garland, 24 March 1964, quoted in Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 347.

⁵⁵ Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 347.

stimuluses).

The third distinction is that whereas portraits focussed on the present-day concerns of the poets, the biographies considered here adopted, with small variations, a linear cradle-to-grave narrative structure. The key 'facts and dates' of the poets' lives (born, educated, loved, wrote, published, died) are the frame for the discussion of their lives and works. Mindful of time-constraints, on occasion these were brief to the point of parody: 'Eliot grew up on the banks of the mighty Mississippi in the city of St Louis, the gateway to the West. His father, Henry, ran a successful brick-making business and his mother, Charlotte, was an amateur poet.'⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the dates-and-places iterations shared a narrative purpose: to provide the framework onto which chosen fragments of poetic testimony would be hung. This created a circular relationship between poetry and life story. If, as was generally assumed, the poetry was the best way to understand the poet, it followed that the episodes of most interest to programme makers in the life of the poet were those episodes that (again, in the judgement of the programme makers) were most directly recounted or described or drawn upon in their poetry. In 1984, for example, *Bookmark: T. S. Eliot* reconstructed in detail a single year in T. S. Eliot's life: 1921, the year in which he wrote *The Waste Land*.⁵⁷ The film was speculative; in the words of the presenter, Ian Hamilton, its ambition was no more than to present 'a plausible account' of the Eliot's life and state of mind in the year in which he completed *The Waste Land*. When Eliot visited Hampton Court with his mother in the summer of 1921 he may or may not have been actually writing the poem: 'It was on his mind though. And it seems reasonable to suppose that throughout

⁵⁶ Narration, *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 11:54 – 12:10.

⁵⁷ *Bookmark: T. S. Eliot: 1921*, BBC2, 19 September 1984, 20.10.

this year he was in a heightened state of, shall we say, accessibility, a state in which everything he saw or read or reacted to might or might not turn out to be material for verse.⁵⁸ The visit of Eliot's parents in the summer of 1921 caused him 'immense grief,' and the film suggests that this, and the extreme heat of the summer of 1921 led to the sequence in *The Waste Land* that begins 'If there were water | And no rock...'⁵⁹ When Eliot went, on doctor's advice, to Margate to recover from his emotional turmoil, he 'wrote to a friend, Sidney Schiff, that he had completed fifty new lines.' Over present-day (i.e. 1971) images of Margate beach, the film cuts to Dame Helen Gardner reading further lines from *The Waste Land*, which, the film suggested, Eliot might have written in Margate:

'My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet. After the event
He wept. He promised "a new start".
I made no comment. What should I resent?'
'On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with Nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.'⁶⁰

This is the pattern that is visible in biographies of poets. Since the poetry is the evidence, the periods of a poet's life which were visible in the poetry were given prominence. Episodes or periods of their lives about which poets did not write, or not obviously, or which were less easily understood through the available oeuvre of poetry, especially those parts of it which existed as audio or

⁵⁸ Ian Hamilton, *Bookmark: T. S. Eliot* (1984), 51:20 – 51:34.

⁵⁹ Narration and reading by Helen Gardner, *Bookmark: T. S. Eliot* (1984), 44:30 – 45:40; the text corresponds to T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed Valerie Eliot (1971), 143.

⁶⁰ *Bookmark: T. S. Eliot* (1984), 47:55 – 48:25.

film recordings, were less interesting for television biographers.

3.2. What did the poets think of *Monitor*?

Distrustful though they were of biographers, none of the poets filmed by *Monitor* seemed to regard the films the BBC made about them as particularly important. Television in the early 1960s was ephemeral; there were no video recorders, no *YouTube*. A film once broadcast would disappear into the archive, and be seen again only if the BBC chose to repeat it. Poets (and their agents and publishers) welcomed the publicity, and their consenting to appear in a programme or to be the subject of a portrait often coincided with the publication of a new collection of poems. *Down Cemetery Road* (1964) followed the publication in February of Larkin's *Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *W. H. Auden, Poet of Disenchantment* (1965) preceded the publication of Auden's *About the House* (1965) and a new British edition of his *Collected Poems* (1965). Stevie Smith's *Monitor* appearance in *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965) came between publications, but at a time when she had become increasingly visible, with appearances on George MacBeth's BBC radio series *The Living Poet* as well as on *Woman's Hour* and *The World of Books*.⁶¹ There were also starring roles at numerous festivals and poetry readings, and a memorable encounter, also filmed by the BBC, with W. H. Auden at the Edinburgh Festival.⁶² But neither Auden nor Smith appear to have been exercised by how they looked, or how the films were received. Auden, living in Austria, did not see the programme when broadcast; he had to rely on letters from the producer to learn how the programme had been received and to

⁶¹ Spalding, *Stevie Smith* (1988), 264.

⁶² Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, 278; I have not found a copy of the original *Monitor* episode, but the clip was used as the opening scene in *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965) and repeated in *Poets in their Own Words* (2014).

arrange for a viewing when he visited London.⁶³ Only Larkin appears to have been concerned about how he looked on television, and to have had one eye on posterity – but he did not even own a television set. On the night of the broadcast, he drove to the house of a friend to watch the film. But he declared himself satisfied: ‘The programme appears to have been a great success with most of those who saw it, and I’ve heard a lot of praise for the film work as opposed to the poems or my own fleeting appearances.’⁶⁴

The author’s biographers have mostly taken the same view, and make little or no mention of the programmes. Of the poets discussed here, only Larkin’s biographer, Andrew Motion, devotes more than a line to these television appearances. They were not seen as defining events – but in one sense the films were precisely that: the films made between 1959 and 1965 about Auden, Larkin and Smith became the primary source of archive footage for their posthumous television biographies and acted – and continue to act – as a kind of institutional memory and as a limit on that memory. This had consequences: television relies on the moving image, and posthumous biographies gave priority to interviews and poems which the authors had been filmed reading. The curatorial choices made in the 1960s therefore determined in part the documentary possibilities of the 1990s and 2000s. In making these films about leading poets of its time, the BBC, and especially *Monitor*, created the wherewithal for subsequent BBC (and other) biographies. Those selected for *Down Cemetery Road* (1964) and *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965) and other portraits became the poems to which television biographers, and other archive shows, returned – and therefore the poems which, on BBC

⁶³ WAC, T/51/125/2, Christopher Burstall letter to W. H. Auden, 2 December 1965.

⁶⁴ Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 349.

television, came to define the lives of the poets.

3.3. Interrogating the poet

Between 1965 and 1971 there was a discernible shift in how television producers regarded poetry. The 1960 pilot programmes by David Jones and D.G. Bridson, 'Words' and 'Men and Women' respectively, were deemed to have failed. *Monitor*, led by Huw Wheldon, found a formula of interview-and-recital which worked for its magazine format, and stuck with it. The purest expression of this came in a successor strand, *Sunday Night*, when Christopher Burstall made *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965). Two years later he had an even bigger triumph with *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967). But it was at this time that the BBC also produced *Six Bites of the Cherry*, which attempted to turn the focus back onto creating visual interpretations of poetry – and which, as George Melly so memorably put it, was 'patronising, pretentious [and] half-baked.'⁶⁵

It was the last of these which weighed on the producer Margaret McCall's mind when she tried to persuade Robert Graves to appear in another television profile, which was to be called *Poetic Unreason: Robert Graves on Robert Graves*.⁶⁶ She had earlier had some success with a similar programme on Lawrence Durrell,⁶⁷ and she believed she had found the key to poetry on television: the subject was the *poet*, and the poems were the means by which the audience could understand the subject. Poems, now the means not the end, were to be used in ways never intended by the poet. They were, in her phrase, to be used to 'interrogate the poet.'

⁶⁵ George Melly, 'Rounding up the global platitudes,' *Observer*, 23 July 1967, 19.

⁶⁶ *Poetic Unreason*, BBC2, 29 November 1967, 22.45.

⁶⁷ *Intimations... Lawrence Durrell*, BBC2, 19 October 1965, 22.20 and *Midday Dialogue*, BBC2, 1 November 1966, 22.20.

McCall outlined her ideas in a letter to the television critic, George Melly of the *Observer*. She had no wish for her programme on Graves to suffer the fate of *Six Bites of the Cherry*. ‘I notice from your review of ‘*Six Bites of the Cherry*’ that you have pretty strong views on TV presentation of poetry,’ she wrote to Melly. ‘May I therefore ask you to look at a programme on Robert Graves, called “*Poetic Unreason...*” I would very much value your opinion.’ Rather than attempt to ‘illustrate’ the poems with the writhing dancers and meaningless capering which Melly found so pretentious in *Six Bites of the Cherry*, McCall wanted Melly to understand that in her programme the poetry was not the point. Here the poems served only as the means through which the programme – and by extension its audience – could ask questions of and so understand the poet. ‘I’ve used this technique before,’ she wrote, ‘[...] on Lawrence Durrell’s poetry [...] and would like to continue with other poets in the same way if the approach seems valid.’⁶⁸

The question, as ever, was which poems would be used for the purposes of interrogation. Increasingly, the answer was *those that had already been filmed*. When, from 1971 onwards, BBC biographers came to make film about poets who were alive in the age of television, they had several sources of biographic testimony: letters, writings, interviews with friends and family (and sometimes enemies), and the poetry, both that which had been filmed and the rest of the poet’s work. There was a marked preference in the biographies that followed, for poems which existed on film. Constructing such stories out of the available oeuvres was easier for some poets than others. Auden, for example, decided to become a poet in 1922, when he was fifteen years old. When

⁶⁸ WAC, T53/192/1, Margaret McCall to George Melly, 25 July 1967 and 30 October 1967; Melly’s response, if any, is not recorded, and he did not review the programme that week.

walking one day in Norfolk his friend Robert Smedley asked him, ‘Do you write poetry?’ It was ‘at that moment,’ Auden said, that he knew ‘that was what I was going to do’ – and he wrote poetry from then until shortly before his death.⁶⁹ Auden left an oeuvre which matched the entire span of his adult life, and which, in his view at least, was in some sense necessarily autobiographical, wherever and whenever it was written. Writing to Christopher Burstall prior to the filming of *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), Auden suggested that ‘the holy places of my childhood really exist’ and that if Burstall wanted to create the right ‘background landscape’ he should use *Letters from Iceland* and ‘In Praise of Limestone.’ The first of these, he wrote ‘might be tied in with Italy as in my poem In Praise of Limestone (Auden’s emphasis), written in Florence, but with the Pennines at the back of my mind.’⁷⁰ Auden’s lifelong production of poetry and his assertion that the life of the poet was visible in the poetry made it easier for programme makers. T. S. Eliot was less prolific, more determinedly impersonal, and for large parts of his life wrote, or published, no poetry at all. The biographer for whom the poetry was the ‘central source’ was left, therefore, with large lacunae which had either to be filled in some other way, or to be ignored.

3.4. Stevie Smith: how a definitive recording came to exist in the archive

For *Monitor*’s films on living poets: the interview, another form of interrogation, was key. The last poet about whom *Monitor* made a film was

⁶⁹ Quoted, inter alia, in Michael Parkinson, *Parky’s People*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2012, 441. Auden told the story often, not least in *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965) and on *Parkinson* (1972); after his death it was retold in three Auden BBC television biographies: *The Auden Landscape* (1982), *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), and *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), either by Auden himself or by Smedley.

⁷⁰ WAC, T/51/125/1, W. H. Auden to Christopher Burstall, 8 June 1965.

Stevie Smith. The title, *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), comes from the opening interview with Smith. ‘People in rather odd circumstances are what most of my poems are about,’ she says, ‘mixed up with arguments, religious difficulties, ghosts, death, fairy stories and the general feeling of guilt for not writing more.’⁷¹ The focus was on these ‘people in rather odd circumstances’ and how they appeared in Smith’s poetry. Neither Smith nor what the programme called her ‘comically static life’ were the subject of inquiry except insofar as it was necessary to illuminate how, why and to what effect she had written her poems.⁷²

Shot in a single day by Patrick Garland (who also produced *Philip Larkin: Down Cemetery Road* (1964) for *Monitor*), and in keeping with the *Monitor* style, the film invited Smith to discuss and present her work – which she does cheerfully: ‘Here is a love poem,’ she says, ‘a happy love poem. It’s called “I Remember.”’ Seated in a wingback chair, Smith recites this and five other poems in full to camera. The poems chosen were ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock,’ ‘I Remember,’ ‘Not Waving but Drowning,’ ‘Look!,’ ‘I’ll Have Your Heart’ and ‘Pan Pad.’ This is intercut with an animated interview in which Smith laughs, jokes and displays the range of her erudition and reading. Garland tells the audience that she ‘has an exceptional memory, largely developed by the discipline of a classical education.’⁷³ Smith then recites from *Euripides* in Greek, discusses the ‘callousness of wretched Dionysus,’ the cruelty and superficiality of Greek gods and analyses the poetry of Coleridge. Only towards the end of the film does Smith recite the poem for which she is now best known: ‘Not

⁷¹ Stevie Smith, *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 00:00 – 00:15.

⁷² The phrase comes from the narration by Patrick Garland, quoting Stevie Smith herself; *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 02:50.

⁷³ Narration, *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 03:40 – 03:50.

Waving but Drowning.’



Figure 39: Stevie Smith: *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965). Smith’s ‘real’ and ‘adopted’ personas are visible on screen; the one an urbane, witty, educated conversationalist; the other a lonely figure contemplating death.⁷⁴

Her introduction to her recital is brief and to the point – and Smith takes

⁷⁴ Monitor: *People in Rather Odd Circumstances*, (1965), 06:50 and 07:04

a more sombre tone: 'In my poems the dead often speak,' she says. 'And the ghosts come back. Here is a poor man who got drowned. His friends thought he was waving to them from the sea, but really, he was drowning.'⁷⁵ In doing so, Smith is acting the part. Gone is the cheerful conversant of the earlier interview. There must also have been a degree of collusion with the camera crew. In contrast to the conversation with Garland, this sequence is shot from above; Smith looks smaller and more alone. She looks up at the camera, her face composed in a kind of pleading. There is no trace of the humour or worldliness she displayed when engaged in banter with Patrick Garland. Smith is a knowing performer; the viewers understand this because they have just seen her in conversation.

Anthony Burgess in the *Listener* wondered, 'whether it was really a very good idea to let Stevie Smith read her own poems.' She had 'a wonderful face' he wrote, 'and a presence that renders the medium almost stereoscopic; But her poems belong to that small corpus which demands to be seen on the page, not heard.'⁷⁶ It is possible to argue the opposite, that read by Smith with her mix of fey and harsh, brings the poems to the audience in a way that print never could. Smith has a strong voice, and a distinctive face and mode of delivery. It can both attract and repel. When in 1988 the literary strand *Bookmark* held a studio roundtable about the influence of Eliot on later poets, they used extracts from the 1965 *Monitor*. Patricia Beer said how sympathetic she found Smith's performances of her poetry, and was impressed and moved that Smith managed sometimes to read with a 'face of bottomless woe' and sometimes 'in fits of laughter.' Kingsley Amis, by contrast 'could not bear her' and argued that

⁷⁵ Stevie Smith, *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 07:40 – 07:50.

⁷⁶ Anthony Burgess, 'Television – The Arts,' *The Listener*, 22 April 1965, 611.

she ‘helped to push poetry into a most undesirable corner,’ by which he meant poets emoting in public performance. He was, he said, ‘a printed page man, myself.’⁷⁷ In this he was joined by Stephen Spender and Andrew Motion, neither of whom liked Smith’s performance.⁷⁸ On television, viewers could decide for themselves.

This recording of ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ became the definitive television version of the poem. It was used in several archives shows, including *Great Poets in their Own Words* (2014), and more importantly in this discussion, it was used in the BBC’s 1997 television biography of Stevie Smith (*Not Waving but Drowning*, 1997), but used, as we shall see, differently. When broadcast as a performance piece, the poem has one effect. When broadcast with biographical intent, the poem becomes something different, and means something other.

4. Case studies: Eliot, Auden, Smith, Larkin

Biography, in theory and in practice, is a subject of renewed interest from researchers, and in television it is sometimes difficult to disentangle biography from another newly popular area for inquiry: celebrity studies.⁷⁹ Both are thought at least in some degree to require an acceptance that they exist in what Virginia Woolf called an ‘ambiguous world, between fact and fiction.’⁸⁰ The ambiguity of this world is exacerbated, it seems, when poetry (which, in Alan Bennett’s formulation, can be ‘true without being factual’)⁸¹ is used as evidence

⁷⁷ *Bookmark: Eliot and After* (1988), 24:20 – 30:50.

⁷⁸ *Bookmark: Eliot and After*, BBC2, 23 September 1988, 23.20.

⁷⁹ *On Life Writing*. Ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 72–98; Wilhelm Hemecker & Edward Saunders, eds. *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

⁸⁰ Quoted by Edward Saunders in Hemecker et al, eds., *Biography in Theory*, 5.

⁸¹ Alan Bennett, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15 No. 6, 25 March 1993.

in a genre of programming which purports to be ‘factual.’ In television biographies, the poems consistently serve three purposes. They are the source of the poet’s fame, and therefore the reason the film is being made. Secondly, they are the objective: one purpose of such films is to provide audiences with a reason to engage with the poetry. And thirdly, they are biographical testimony, the most reliable source for what the programme will say about the poet, or what the poets will say about themselves.

In biographies of poets, the poems are the illustration of the justification for the film. There is no BBC measure of fame, but poets, as much as anyone else, have to pass an unstated threshold in order to be the subject of a television biography. As we have seen, this was a concern for Huw Wheldon who complained (see Chapter Three) that neither Ezra Pound nor Hugh MacDiarmid was sufficiently famous *as a poet* to merit being the subject of a *Monitor* film – although he conceded that they might be famous for other reasons (as a ‘mad fascist’ in the case of Pound; as a ‘communist’ in the case of MacDiarmid).⁸² And since it was the poet, not the poetry, who would become the subject of these films, and since in biographies the poetry itself was never critiqued, they had, in Frank Kermode’s words, to be famous to the point that their work had passed ‘out of the range of critical approval or scorn, resting as it does on the opinion of many whose curiosity does not always depend on acquaintance with the sage’s works but with his being at last a true celebrity.’⁸³ In television biographies a poet’s more famous lines therefore came to function

⁸² Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel*, 243.

⁸³ Frank Kermode, ‘Why didn’t he commit suicide?’ Review of *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* by Jewel Spears Brooker, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26 No. 21, 4 November 2004, final paragraph. <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/n21/frank-kermode/why-didn-t-he-commit-suicide>> accessed 12.6. 2021.

as a kind of autobiographical marginalia of a person famous for being famous: Eliot's 'cruellest month,' Auden's 'low-dishonest decade,' Larkin's parents who 'fuck you up,' and Smith, 'not waving, but drowning.' Their purpose is not so much to reveal the character or experiences of the poet, nor to assess the poetry, as to reassure the audience that they were watching the right programme, that the poet was indeed the one who wrote the line that they remembered, and that he or she was the public figure who justified the superlatives used in the programme listing.

The poetry in such programmes was also the objective: the ultimate, but usually unstated, purpose, in keeping with the BBC's public service mission, was to 'educate': to create in the audience a deeper interest in, and engagement with, and understanding of the poetry – and in so doing, to give poetry a better 'deal.' The centrepiece of the 2009 all-platform *Poetry Season* was a 90-minute television biography of T. S. Eliot, directed by Adam Low.⁸⁴ A little way into the film the narration made a threefold assertion which neatly illustrates the point: '*The Waste Land* is a revolutionary work, which astounded Eliot's contemporaries and whose meaning is still being debated to this day.'⁸⁵ Such statements of literary importance ('a revolutionary work'), biographical context ('astounded Eliot's contemporaries') and contemporary relevance ('is still being debated'), were the standard agenda. Behind them all was a discernible wish, through the life, to engage the audience in the output of the poet, and its continuing relevance in the present day. But this ongoing engagement was imagined as something that happened *after* the film had been broadcast. In *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009) the narration went on to say that *The Waste Land* 'is

⁸⁴ *Arena: T. S. Eliot*, BBC1, 6 June 2009, 21.00.

⁸⁵ Narration, *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 26:50 – 27:00.

divided into five seemingly unrelated sections and combines everyday speech, popular songs, Wagnerian legend and classical mythology with allusions to writers from Chaucer and Dante to Shakespeare and Dickens.⁸⁶ There followed a consideration of the process by which the poem reached its final form. Frank Kermode commented on the extent of Pound's interventions: 'not all were good; some were just perverse. But the really remarkable thing is that Eliot, who, after all, had published a volume of poems – he was not unknown – was willing to have it mauled, as it were, by Pound.'⁸⁷ The critic and publisher Craig Raine expressed his surprise at how much 'sex there is in this poem,'⁸⁸ and there were excerpts of Valerie Eliot discussing the previously unseen manuscripts of *The Waste Land* which she edited, and which were published in 1971. She again praised the contributions of Eliot's first wife, Vivien.⁸⁹ The sequence then moved from the poem to a description both of Vivien Eliot's character and of the difficulties in the Eliots' marriage. At no point did the narrator or any of the contributors to the film attempt to grapple with what made *The Waste Land* good poetry. This was a television biography: the poem had passed beyond that level of critical reach.

The third and most important function of the poems is as biographical testimony. It is the purest form, as the caption over the opening scenes of *The Addictions of Sin* (2017) put it, of the life of the poet 'in his own words.' Not all the poet's words – but a selection of them, a selection chosen not because the

⁸⁶ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 17:00 – 17:20.

⁸⁷ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 29:30 – 29:40.

⁸⁸ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 30:40.

⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, xxi; there appears to be no consensus about the correct spelling of 'Vivien'. Valerie Eliot (1971) and Robert Crawford (2015) use 'Vivien'; Lyndall Gordon (1988) uses 'Vivienne' and Peter Ackroyd's index (1984) lists her as 'Vivien (Vivienne)'. Except when quoting, I have used the shorter form.

poetry was necessarily good, or representative, but because it confirmed a biographical narrative. Where poetry was used as testimony, television biographers became, perforce, anthologists, choosing a few lines which they offered as insight into the poets in question, and what they thought, and who they loved and how they changed. In this process the poems became something other than poems. They became evidence – evidence of a poet's thinking, or evidence of a poet's emotional state, or evidence of a poet's debt to other poets, or evidence of contemporary or historical attitudes to poetry. Or even just as evidence that a poet went somewhere, and saw something and responded to it. Since these were then anthologies of evidence, rather than of poetry, they did not always correspond to the more conventional tension found in anthologies: the desire to reflect the 'literary values of a particular culture at a certain moment in history' and the desire to be 'sites for the definition and propounding of new values.'⁹⁰ Rather they were sites in which lines from poems, both familiar and less-known, were reworked, reread, reformatted, and re-presented to build the idea of the poet-as-a-person and the idea of the poet as a public figure.

Were the three functions of poetry in BBC television biographies compatible with each other? In the following sections I consider four examples of how biographies of poets have treated specific poems or sections of poems. I use them to make a broader argument that in using poems as the central autobiographical source, BBC television simultaneously brought poetry to a wider audience and often chose to ignore Alan Bennett's distinction between what in poetry is true, and what is factual.

⁹⁰ Andrew Michael Roberts, *Poetry And Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 101.

4.1. T. S. Eliot and the challenge of scarcity

T. S. Eliot made several audio recordings of his poetry, not least on BBC radio, but only once did he agree to be filmed reading it. In 1942 the producer William MacQuitty was asked ‘to rescue’ a British Council film called *The Bridge Builders* which was intended ‘to show that East and West had common ground and improve relations with India for the war effort.’⁹¹ As part of his revamp of the film, MacQuitty persuaded T. S. Eliot, known for his interest in India, to read, on camera, from the newly completed ‘Little Gidding.’⁹² The section chosen was 14 lines from Part IV, which is both a meditation on the Blitz, and on the nature of religious revelation and redemption. There are no records telling us why these lines were chosen, nor who chose them. There were at least two takes, for the surviving footage includes Eliot reading some lines in a wide shot and some in a medium close up. MacQuitty recognised that getting Eliot to agree to be filmed was his ‘greatest coup’ and he was canny enough to clear the underlying rights and to retain copyright in the film. It was, therefore, available to subsequent programme makers. Indeed, it was the only such footage available.

How did they use it? In the time period under consideration here, BBC television produced two major biographies of Eliot (1971, 2009). In 1984 it made a further biographical essay on his life in 1921, the year he wrote *The Waste Land*, and in 1988, to mark the centenary of Eliot’s birth, it brought together a panel of five poets to discuss his impact on 20th century poetry in a programme called *Poets on Poetry: Eliot and After*.⁹³ The extract from ‘Little

⁹¹ William MacQuitty, *A Life to Remember* (London: Quartet, 1991), 285-286.

⁹² At the time he was ‘putting together a selection of Kipling’s verse’; Gordon, *Eliot’s New Life*, 137.

⁹³ In 2022 the BBC commissioned Susanna White to make a film to mark the poem’s 100th

Gidding' does not feature in the *Bookmark: The Wasteland* (1984), (the poem was not written until two decades after the time under discussion) but it appears as part of the opening sequence of the other three films. *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971) sets the agenda with this narration:

Some compared him with Dante and Milton. To others his poetry was a joke. He was probably the most controversial, the most influential and the most original man of letters of the twentieth century. But as a human being, T. S. Eliot was a mystery. He was called cold and impersonal, but almost everything he wrote was wrung from him by the pressures of his life.⁹⁴

After this introduction, the film cuts to a scene from *Sweeney Agonistes*, after which the narration declares that Eliot 'like Dante saw humanity as lost in a dark wood of fears and desire.' The extract is from a BBC production of the play, after which the narration continues: 'And in a passage from *Four Quartets* [Eliot] suggests that we must burn either with desire or search for self-knowledge.' And then Eliot reads:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire

anniversary (*T. S. Eliot: Into The Waste Land*, BBC2, 13 October 2022, 21.00).

⁹⁴ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 00:21 – 01:40.

Consumed by either fire or fire.⁹⁵



Figure 40: T. S. Eliot reads from 'Little Gidding,' 1942.⁹⁶

The clip has an undeniably dramatic quality. Eliot stands in a panelled room, dressed in dark suit, collar slightly askew, before a BBC microphone. The lighting is harsh; the contrast high. Eliot reads from a book held in one hand. His reading is clipped, austere, severe. But – said the 1971 narration – ‘the severe exterior was misleading. Eliot was a man of great complexity.’⁹⁷ Friends and colleagues then testified to Eliot’s complexity. He had the ‘charm of a schoolboy’ said Hope Mirrlees. He had, said Robert Lowell, ‘the arrogance of an aristocrat and the good manners of a gentleman.’ It was ‘fun to be with him,’ said Frank Morley, managing director of Faber & Faber. ‘He made you aware that there was more in you than you sometimes thought.’ And yet, the film told

⁹⁵ The text as read agrees with that in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 221.

⁹⁶ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 02:22.

⁹⁷ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 01:44 – 02:37.

the audience, Eliot was ‘tantalised all his life by the idea of a perfect happiness.’⁹⁸

Poets on Poetry: Eliot and After (1988), made to mark the centenary of Eliot’s birth, also opens with Eliot’s reading of the lines from ‘Little Gidding’ – twice. The first four lines appear before the titles, and then the entire clip is played before the programme cuts to the Scottish poet, Douglas Dunn, who chaired the discussion. He called it a ‘celebrated extract,’⁹⁹ but immediately acknowledged that ‘Eliot’s most famous poem is of course *The Waste Land*, published in 1922; a revolutionary poem in which Eliot expressed the depressions and upheavals of his private life, embodied in what he saw as a decline and enervation of European culture and values.’¹⁰⁰ The film cuts to audio of Eliot reading from *The Waste Land* (‘Under the brown fog...’). In the hour-long discussion that followed, neither Eliot’s reading nor the ‘celebrated’ extract from ‘Little Gidding’ itself, was mentioned again.

In *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), the reading from ‘Little Gidding’ served as a self-contained pre-title sequence. No introduction was given. Apart from added music (Bob Dylan’s reference to Eliot in the song ‘Desolation Row’), and some cutaways of Burnt Norton (the actual place), of a cat, of a bracelet which Eliot gave to his second wife, and of a boy taking Holy Communion (all of which images would be ‘explained’ by the film that followed), Eliot’s reading stood alone. After the *Arena* title sequence, the next voice is that of Seamus Heaney. Like Douglas Dunn before him, he was seen reciting and discussing *The Waste Land*.¹⁰¹ When the film returned to ‘Little Gidding,’ it was to sections of the

⁹⁸ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 03:30 – 03:44.

⁹⁹ *Bookmark: Eliot and After* (1988), 03:03-03:05.

¹⁰⁰ *Bookmark: Eliot and After* (1988), 04:03-04:18.

¹⁰¹ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 00:00 – 00:52.

poem which were thought to be more clearly autobiographical, firstly in a reading by Alec Guinness from a 1970 BBC film, *Solo: Alec Guinness*, and later in an audio recording of a reading by Eliot.¹⁰²

It seems clear that all three films begin with this extract of this poem, simply because they are films about Eliot, and Eliot was a famous poet, and this is the only footage of Eliot reading his poetry. The meaning of the words of the poem are of consequence only in *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), where the narration makes a link to the extract, firstly in its suggestion that this reflects Eliot's view of the human condition, and secondly in its assertion that neither the poem, nor Eliot's reading of it, represented the 'real' person. That 'severe exterior' exemplified by Eliot's reading of the lines from 'Little Gidding' was misleading. The real Eliot was 'charming,' 'well-mannered' and 'fun to be with.' The extract itself was little more than a poetic straw man, there only so that the audience could see Eliot, and so that its evidence could be denied by those interviewed. But through scarcity value and repetition the 14 lines from 'Little Gidding' have become Eliot's definitive televisual-biographical-excerpt, definitive both because it is the only moving image of Eliot reading his poetry, and because this is television, and it is the images that matter.

This is so much the case that *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009) used the video footage a second time – but with different words. When, a full hour after the opening sequence, the film used a sound recording of Eliot reading Part II of 'Little Gidding' (the nine lines beginning 'And last, the rending pain of re-enactment...') the film used the audio recording over a slow-motion segment of the film footage of him reading the lines from Part IV ('The dove descending

¹⁰² *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 57:24 – 58:40 and 01:02:52 – 01:02:58; *Solo: Alec Guinness*, BBC2, 18 February 1970, 20.50.

breaks the air’).¹⁰³ Having established the image, the film then superimposes a moving rostrum shot of the text of the poem on the page. The resulting aural-visual mix creates a sense of dislocation, further compounded by the use made of the new extract from ‘Little Gidding’: the lines chosen are used in the film to describe how Eliot felt on the death of his first wife. This cannot in a factual sense be ‘true;’ at best they might be read as an anticipation of such emotions. Eliot completed the poem in 1942, but in the film the lines were used after a sequence which discussed events in 1947, the year Eliot’s wife died in the ‘hospital where she had been confined for the previous nine years.’¹⁰⁴

Following this narration, Eliot reads:

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools’ approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.¹⁰⁵

The image cuts from Eliot and the superimposed text to a rostrum shot of Vivien Eliot’s handwritten ‘WONDERFUL’ on the original manuscript of *The Waste Land*. The poem is not dated in the television broadcast, and the audience is left with the impression that these lines were Eliot’s last words on the death of his first wife.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 01:02:52 – 01:02:58.

¹⁰⁴ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 01:02: 45 – 01:02:50.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 218-219.

¹⁰⁶ Lyndall Gordon: ‘Maurice Haigh-Wood telephoned Eliot to tell him that Vivienne had died. “Oh, God! Oh, God!” Eliot said, and buried his face in his hands. He was shocked by the death, but also by its consequences. [...] He was free to marry Emily Hale. [...] Yet at once he realised he had no emotions or desires to share.’ (*Eliot’s New Life*, 147-148) Peter Ackroyd:

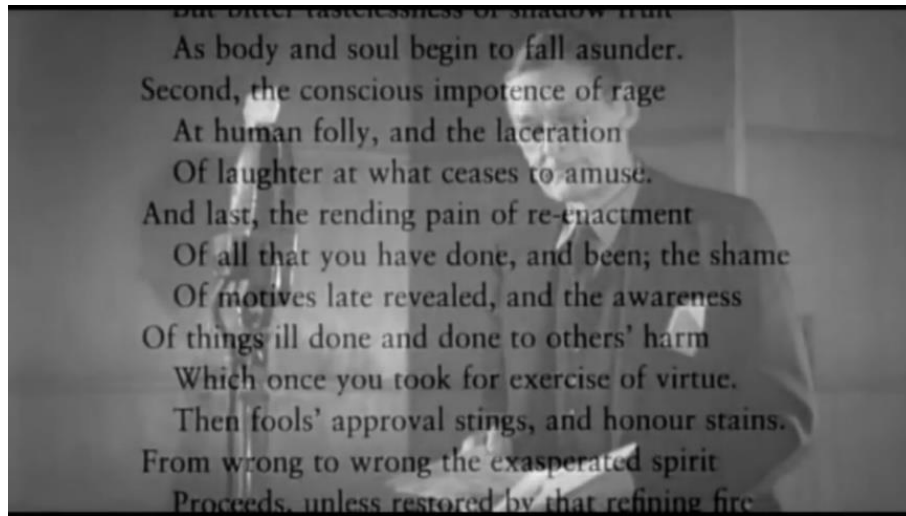


Figure 41: *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009). In the absence of archive of Eliot, the BBC used footage of Eliot reading one part of 'Little Gidding' to cover an audio recording of him reading another part, and superimposed the lines of the latter on screen.¹⁰⁷

The dominant imperative in choosing poems for inclusion in a television biography was not their literary merit, but a mix of two questions: whether a reading by the poet existed on film and whether the lines so recorded were able to confirm a narrative about the poet and the circumstances under which their poetry came to be written. Poems which do not fit the preferred narrative, are omitted. This leads to some surprising choices. In the two biographies of Eliot (1971, 2009), for example, there is no mention of much-anthologised works such as 'Gerontion,' or 'Preludes' or 'The Journey of the Magi,' but both films include an extended discussion of a little-known poem called 'Cows,' which Eliot wrote in 1937 when he was staying at the rural home of Frank Morley (his colleague at Faber & Faber). It had appeared in no authorised

'He was, by one account, "shattered by grief and almost despair" [...] One friend said that, in later life, Eliot could never bear to mention Vivien's name.' (*T. S. Eliot*, 284).

¹⁰⁷ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 01:02:44.

collections and in no poetry magazines. None of Peter Ackroyd, Lyndall Gordon and Robert Crawford mention it in their respective 1984, 1988 and 2015 biographies of Eliot, although it was finally included, under another title ('The Country Walk') in a new edition of Eliot's collected and uncollected poems in 2015.¹⁰⁸ At the time of two BBC television biographies of Eliot, the poem was 'published' only in the sense that it appeared in an edition of the Morley 'family newsletter.' And yet it is a key televisual-biographical text.

Why? In 1933 Eliot travelled alone to the United States; his purpose was, in part, to escape his wife from whom he was by then estranged. On his return to England in 1934, he refused to have any contact with her. Eliot retreated to a cottage next to Morley's farmhouse in Surrey, where he worked and kept to himself. Jack Eames, a neighbouring farmer, was interviewed. He said:

He was very quiet, and we understood from Mr Morley that he really needed quiet, and we gave it him. We could often hear him in his room, either walking up and down or using the typewriter. He was so engrossed in whatever he was doing that you could walk past him – almost touch him – but he wouldn't realise you were there. He was – he was a funny man, really.¹⁰⁹

Eliot slowly recovered from his travails with Vivien. The evidence for this, according to Frank Morley's interview in *The Mysterious Mr Eliot*, was the poem called 'Cows,' which he remembered 'with great pleasure,' and from which the programme quotes a few lines.¹¹⁰ In *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009) the poem is used to offer a fuller view of Eliot during this slow and painful parting from his wife. Eliot's goddaughter, Susanna Smithson (daughter of Frank Morley), says that as

¹⁰⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, Christopher Ricks, Jim McCue, eds. (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 215.

¹⁰⁹ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 33:03 – 34:05.

¹¹⁰ *Omnibus: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 34:05 – 34:25; repeated in *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 37:48 – 48:15.

far as she knows 'it has never been published anywhere else.'¹¹¹ For her the poem illustrates comfort and sense of family Eliot found on Morley's farm. 'He was like a brother to us,' she says, and then she reads the poem – or rather, most of the poem. The poem has 34 lines. In the 1971 film, sixteen of these are omitted. In the 2009 *Arena* two lines are omitted. Neither film acknowledges the edits. In the earlier film, the audience would not know that lines are omitted, nor what they were. In the 2009 film the camera hovers over the page showing the poem as 'published' in the family newsletter. The text of the poem is visible, but it is not possible in a single viewing to read it, nor to observe the omissions. Rather, the camera pauses on Eliot's signature. The intention is only to demonstrate its veracity, that this really was something Eliot wrote. In neither case is the poem included for the quality of its verse or its importance in the context of Eliot's oeuvre. It is there as evidence of Eliot's psychological condition (relatively good humour, being on the mend) at the time under discussion, an archival artefact that demonstrates a truth. Its presence in both films tells us more about the imperatives of television than it does about Eliot, or his poetry. It was only after the broadcast that the poem was published. In 2009 *The Times* reported the story of 'Cows,' and reprinted the poem, this time the whole composition of 34 lines.¹¹²

4.2. W. H. Auden and the challenge of abundance

Edward Mendelson identifies two periods when Auden's poems were particularly 'autobiographical': the mid-1930s, (especially 'Letter to Lord Byron' (1937) and 'New Year Letter' (1940)) and the mid-1960s when Auden had

¹¹¹ *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 49:30 – 50:45.

¹¹² Jack Malvern, 'A Townie's dread in rhyme and reason – why T. S. Eliot feared the Friesian,' *The Times*, 6 June 2009, 19; in a piece trailing the *Arena* film, *the Times* carried a full transcript of the poem.

established his new base at Kirchstetten in Austria.¹¹³ This assessment is reflected in the date of composition of the 44 Auden poems used in three television biographies (1982, 2000, 2007):¹¹⁴ The year of greatest interest to biographers is 1939 (and poems then published in 1940). This was the year in which Auden both made his move to the United States and in which he wrote several of his best-known poems. It was the year he met Chester Kallman (and answered his own questions about ‘the truth about love’) and the year of his most controversial public profile: his departure to the United States had even caused questions to be asked in the British parliament. His later years were similarly of interest but now there was an added ingredient: they existed on film through the archive created in the making of *Monitor* (1960), *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965) and *Poets on Poetry* (1973).

Auden had made several appearances on BBC television, beginning with *Monitor* in 1960. And, most importantly, Christopher Burstall had been to Kirchstetten, and filmed Auden there for *Sunday Night: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965). The footage from this film recurred in subsequent biographies – but it was not the only footage available. Auden, unlike Eliot, was a willing subject of television. He had given interviews and readings for *Monitor* (1960), *Bookstand* (1962), *Release* (1968), *Omnibus File* (1972), *Poets on Poetry* (1973) and had been on talk shows with Michael Parkinson (1972) and Richard Crossman (1973). He had also appeared on US network television and had been the subject of a 1965 film by ORF, the Austrian broadcaster.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Edward Mendelson, *W. H. Auden: Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), xxiii.

¹¹⁴ The publication dates those when the poems first appeared in book form, and are taken where available from *W. H. Auden: Selected Poems* (Revised Edition), Ed. Edward Mendelson, (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

¹¹⁵ WAC, T51/125/2, Christopher Burstall, undated correspondence with ORF (Austrian Television).

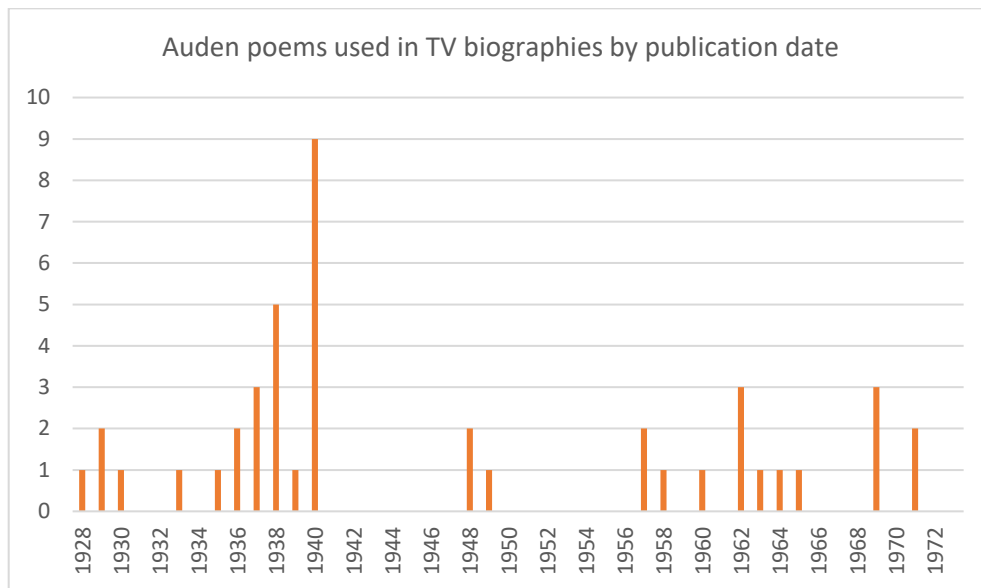


Figure 42: Auden's poems used in biographies – by publication date. The poems that were understood to be 'most' biographical were written in the late 1930s and during the last decade of Auden's life; these were therefore the periods of his life most discussed on screen.¹¹⁶

But *Poet of Disenchantment* was something more, not least because it was filmed over several days, and took the audience into spaces and subjects that might otherwise be regarded as private, notably Auden's home in Kirchstetten, and his working and personal relationship with Chester Kallman. Prior to filming, Auden expressed strong views on which poems – and which images – would best give television audiences the necessary background to his work. During the discussions that preceded filming, he wrote:

The Holy Places of my childhood, which played such an important role then, and still do, really exist and can therefore be photographed. The most important is the area specified in New Year Letter [Auden's emphasis], lines 1096-1152. The next, referred to in Letter to Lord Byron (Letters from Iceland) is the view from the train when one travels from Birmingham to Wolverhampton. The first of

¹¹⁶ The poems used are listed in the database [here](#).

these might be tied in with Italy as in my poem *In Praise of Limestone*, written in Florence, but with the Pennines at the back of my mind.¹¹⁷

Burstall's reply was non-committal; he had other ideas, including the use of actors to read Auden's poems from the late 1930s, but the final film includes extracts from both *In Praise of Limestone* and *Letter to Lord Byron*.¹¹⁸ The latter contained, in Edward Mendelson's view, Auden's most 'extended passages of autobiography',¹¹⁹ but it was not the poem to which the posthumous BBC Auden biographies most frequently turned: the only poem that occurs in all three BBC biographies of Auden (1982, 2000, 2007) was 'O Tell Me the Truth About Love,' first published in January 1938.

How was it used?

In *The Auden Landscape* (1982) the last two stanzas of 'O Tell Me the Truth About Love' were read between two interviews about Chester Kallman. In the first Christopher Isherwood tells the now well-known story of Kallman and Auden's first meeting and says that he 'rather encouraged the whole thing, because [he] felt that Auden didn't see enough young people. But he was rather on his own. As soon as [Kallman] got together with Auden, they started making a lot of sense.'¹²⁰ Then, over a series of black and white photographs of Auden, Benjamin Whitrow reads the final two stanzas:

Your feelings when you meet it, I
Am told you can't forget,
I've sought it since I was a child
But haven't found it yet;
I'm getting on for thirty-five,
And still I do not know

¹¹⁷ WAC, T/51/125/1, W. H. Auden to Christopher Burstall, 8 June 1965.

¹¹⁸ WAC, T/51/125/1, Christopher Burstall to W. H. Auden, 14 June 1965.

¹¹⁹ *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 48:55 – 49:33; Mendelson, *W. H. Auden: Selected Poems*, xxiii.

¹²⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 48:40 – 48:51.

What kind of creature it can be
That bothers people so.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose,
Will it knock on my door in the morning
Or tread in the bus on my toes,
Will it come like a change in the weather,
Will its greeting be courteous or bluff,
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.¹²¹

The film cuts from this to an interview with Golo Mann, whose sister Auden had married to help her escape the rise of Nazism. Mann says that the relationship with Kallman 'became on Auden's side a great love, the profoundest love and friendship in his life... he told me quite seriously, "I am a married man."' ¹²² Alas – as Robert Robinson's narration is quick to point out – 'the commitment was all on Auden's side. Kallman's relentless promiscuity was something Auden found unbearable, a burden of grief under which he would weep in public.'¹²³

Two decades later, in a film to which the poem provided the title, *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), the poem was not recited, but a stanza from the poem was used to introduce Auden – literally. It was sung by Cleo Laine in a clip taken from *Parkinson* (1972), a show in which Auden famously appeared.¹²⁴ Laine sings the second stanza (beginning 'Does it look like a pair of pyjamas'); and the film cuts to Parkinson who tells viewers that the song is a setting of a poem by Auden, and asks, 'What better way to introduce my first guest, W. H.

¹²¹ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, 53.

¹²² Matthew Hollis, *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 49:50 – 50:03.

¹²³ Narration, *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 50:05 – 50:13.

¹²⁴ *Parkinson*, BBC1, 7 October 1972, 22.00.

Auden?’¹²⁵



Figure 43: W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965).¹²⁶

In the third BBC television biography, *W. H. Auden: The Addictions of Sin* (2007), the poem follows a sequence in which ‘Memorial for the City’ (1949) was read over images of the destruction of Berlin. The film then cut to a caption imposed over a shot of the Statue of Liberty at dawn; it read, ‘In New York, Auden fell in love with the young poet Chester Kallman. For the remainder of Auden’s life, Kallman would be a companion and collaborator.’ The narrator reads Auden’s description of his meeting Kallman in a letter to his brother: ‘Mr Right has come into my life [...] Not only can I talk to him as an equal, but he understands sex like no one I’ve ever met.’¹²⁷ The film, over a pan across a scene of rural England, cuts to a reading of the final stanza: ‘When it comes, will it come without warning [...] Will it alter my life altogether? O tell me the truth about love.’ As the reading concludes, another caption appears: ‘In 1951,

¹²⁵ *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 02:00-02:42, from Parkinson (1972).

¹²⁶ *W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), 30:24.

¹²⁷ W. H. Auden quoted in *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 38:28 – 38:40.

Auden and Kallman wrote the libretto for Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*.'

The use of the poem in these films corresponds to some but not all of the three categories discussed earlier. The poem, like its author, is there in part because it is 'famous for being famous' – especially so in the eponymous programme from 2000. It was a poem that could be made into song, a poem which famous people sang on chat shows, a poem from which films and books could, and did, take their title. When *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) made such a sensational success of 'Funeral Blues,' Faber & Faber capitalised with a hastily compiled collection of fifteen of Auden's love poems. It chose *Tell me the Truth About Love* as the title.¹²⁸ The repeated series of questions, and the request, 'O tell me the truth about love,' like much of Auden's poetry, is disarmingly simple to read or hear. It seems to require little effort from the viewer. In none of the films, however, is it the objective. There is no discernible intent from the programme makers that the audience should engage more closely with the poem. Early in the 2000 film a caption says that Auden 'was always a seeker after truth – nowhere more so than in the area of love.'¹²⁹ The film follows a cradle-to-grave narrative structure but is further divided into a series of captions introducing types of love: 'Mother Love,' 'First Love,' 'The Vision of Eros,' 'The Language of Love,' 'Love and Marriage,' 'Divine Love,' 'Absent Love.' But the truth about this love is not to be found in the eponymous poem by Auden; the substance of the film is a series of interviews with friends, relatives, and experts (John Auden, Katherine Bucknell, Christopher Isherwood, Lady Natasha Spender, David Luke, Thekla Clark), intercut with poems from Auden.

¹²⁸ W. H. Auden, *Tell me the Truth About Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

¹²⁹ *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 01:30.

Both the 1982 and 2007 films use 'O Tell Me the Truth About Love' to tell the audience something else about Auden's relationship with Chester Kallman: that it was the confirmation of something inevitable. In much the same way as 'Little Gidding' in *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), the poem functions as a kind of anticipatory testimony – anticipatory because the poem was written more than a year before Auden and Kallman met in New York in April 1939, and testimony because it is used to describe the presumed nature of Auden's feelings once they had met.¹³⁰ In both films, however, the poem asking the questions which would in due course be answered is positioned after the event it anticipated, and no date is given for its composition. The story of Auden's meeting, and falling for, Kallman is presented as something that Auden knew would happen, and as something which would 'make a lot of sense' and 'alter his life forever.' The vision, as Edward Mendelson put it, 'had entered.'¹³¹ But this kind of treatment is confined to television. Written biographies tend to be more scrupulous about chronology. In an extended discussion of Auden's thinking and emotional state at the time he met Kallman, Mendelson makes no mention of 'O Tell Me the Truth About Love.' The most significant poem, rather, was 'Love Story,' which Mendelson describes as both the 'worst (and most straightforwardly self-revealing) he ever published.'¹³² More interestingly, perhaps, was the process Auden began, soon after meeting Kallman, of refuting or rewriting some of his earlier works, not least 'September 1, 1939.'¹³³ This was the subject of inquiry when Auden was alive; he is questioned at length about it on *Monitor* (1960), *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965), and on chat shows

¹³⁰ Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden, The life of a Poet* (London: Papermac, 1982), 190.

¹³¹ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 31.

¹³² Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 43.

¹³³ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 53–54.

such as *Parkinson* (1972) and *Crosstalk* (1973). But for television biographies after his death, the important story was that in New York Auden met the love of his life, and that this was the satisfactory (at least in narrative terms) conclusion of a chronicle foretold in 1938, when he wrote 'O Tell Me the Truth About Love.'

4.3. Stevie Smith: the challenge of the problematic "I"

Since so many BBC television biographies have used poems as testimony (Eliot in a field of cows, Auden in a New York dive, Larkin in a church) it is perhaps not surprising that the first person singular, the troublesome 'I' of poetry, sometimes leads the programme maker astray. When the *Monitor* producer Patrick Garland travelled to Stevie Smith's home in north London in 1965, his purpose was to allow the poet to present her work. The film, *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), begins with Smith introducing 'Thoughts on the Person from Porlock.' ('This is the person you know who is supposed to have interrupted Coleridge in the middle of writing Kubla Khan.') and then reciting two poems: 'Thoughts on the Person from Porlock,' and 'I Remember.' 'By her own definition her life has been almost comically static,' says Garland, 'During the war and after it, she worked in a London publishing house. But this has been her only job, and most of her life has been spent writing poetry, novels, and criticism. She belongs to no school, no movement, no cult of poetic writing. She has a basic dislike of all poetry, and never reads it if she can possibly help it. In her own poems, behind the façade of laughter, lies fear, and a sense of being abandoned... Stevie Smith has vast quantities of verse by heart and an exceptional memory, largely developed by the discipline of a classical

education.¹³⁴ His introduction leads to a discussion between Smith and Garland, in which they talk about ideas of gods – ‘if you must have gods, you might at least have agreeable ones,’ she says– and about poetry and the ‘enduring feeling of guilt at not writing enough.’¹³⁵

Patrick Garland and Stevie Smith were both part of the literary establishment; later that year (1965) they were both appointed to the new Arts Council Literary Committee, chaired by Cecil Day Lewis.¹³⁶ Interviewed by Garland, Smith reveals herself to be highly intelligent and very well read. She amuses herself – and the audience – with a story about Coleridge and de Quincy and their respective tolerances for opium, and with stories of Euripides, and the ‘sheer awfulness’ of Greek gods. Towards the end of the film – it lasts only eleven minutes – Smith introduces the poem which now defines her in the public imagination: ‘Not Waving, But Drowning.’ ‘In my poems,’ she says, ‘the dead often speak, and the ghosts come back. Here is a poor man who got drowned. His friends thought he was waving to them from the sea, but really, he was drowning.’¹³⁷ And then she recites the poem. The performance is filmed in a full head shot, with Smith looking either at the camera or to one side. For the penultimate line, her eyes are looking left. As she speaks the final iteration of ‘not waving, but drowning’ her eyes come back to the camera. As the last word ends, she looks down, and allows a small smile to cross her lips. It is a performance, no doubt, and a performance which Smith intended to be understood as part of the experience of the poem. It is poetry made for television, poetry as a visual and aural experience. Then she looks up again,

¹³⁴ *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 02:45 – 03:51.

¹³⁵ *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 05:33 – 05:37.

¹³⁶ ‘Literature post for C. Day-Lewis,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 December 1965, 13.

¹³⁷ *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 07:40 – 07:50.

takes a deep breath and moves on to 'Look!' which, she says, is 'another poem about being left in the sea, and nobody taking any notice.'¹³⁸

In her filmed introduction, Smith insists that the poem is about a drowning man, one of the 'dead who often speak' in her poetry. The 'I' is the drowning man. In both the first and the last stanzas it is he who lies moaning. The poem, according to Smith, is explicitly not about her. But for her television biographer, the temptation to conflate the speaker with the poet proved too strong, and in *Not Waving but Drowning* (1997) the poem is presented as being explicitly autobiographical.¹³⁹ *The Radio Times* reported that the 1997 biography was the first of a 'new five-part series [to look] at troubled lives that produced great 20th-century literature.'¹⁴⁰ Smith had been chosen to suit the series (the other authors were Alex Hayley, Richard Wright, Sam Shepherd and Albert Camus), and 'Not Waving, But Drowning' was repurposed to suit this characterisation: since her life was deemed to have been 'troubled,' the poems chosen must be evidence of it. 'Beneath the comic surface of her work,' the opening narration says, 'is an unsettling and fearful vision of life and a preoccupation with death.'¹⁴¹

About halfway through the film there is an extended discussion of a suicide attempt which Smith made in the 1950s, and of one incident where Smith attacked her boss, a man for whom she 'had a thing,' with a pair of scissors.¹⁴² The sequence involves testimony from several interviewees intercut

¹³⁸ *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 08:30 – 08:34.

¹³⁹ *Bookmark: Not Waving but Drowning*, BBC2, 6 September 1997.

¹⁴⁰ < <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/130af98b56e443909d1505eb1a8fe2a7>>; accessed 12.07.2021.

¹⁴¹ *Bookmark: Not Waving But Drowning* (1997), 00:50.

¹⁴² The phrase 'had a thing' comes from the author Kay Dick, *Not Waving but Drowning* (1997), 37:14.

with the recording of 'Not Waving, But Drowning' made by *Monitor* in 1965.

'She had a bad phase,' her friend Kay Dick says. Then Smith recites:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning.
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.¹⁴³

In the film the words have an added echo sound effect, and are laid over a sequence shot from the front of a London Underground train approaching a suburban (i.e. above ground) station. This is followed by an interview from Sally Chilver, who presents Smith's suicide attempt as explicitly to do with Smith's literary position: 'The suicide attempt was just an enormous... She got absolutely angry, I think, and couldn't cope with the anger in her, welling up inside her. And the frustration, really. She once said to me, "I feel as if I've not been allowed to speak. As if they put plaster over my mouth." And by "they" I think she means that the people who were publishing poetry who didn't listen to her voice.' And then Smith reads again:

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead.
It must have been too cold for him,
His heart gave way, they said.

Oh, no, no, no, it was too cold always.
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

The sequence concludes with further speculation – it is surely no more than that – about Smith's suicide attempts ('I don't know how seriously she tried to do it.' 'There's a great ambivalence in her attitude to death.') and moves on to

¹⁴³ *Bookmark: Not Waving But Drowning* (1997), 36:10 – 37:30.

a sequence concerning Smith's fascination for *Grimm's Fairy Tales* which, Sally Chilvers says, formed part of the 'mythological background of her poetry.'¹⁴⁴

Smith did attempt suicide. It 'happened on 1 July 1953.'¹⁴⁵ She was taken to hospital and prescribed rest. She told Kay Dick, 'I am a Nervous Wreck, it appears, and also anaemic.'¹⁴⁶ It led to her leaving her job at the publishing house, Newnes; from then on, she earned her living as author and reviewer – and member of the literary establishment. But is – was – 'Not Waving, but Drowning' a confession of suicidal intent? The poem was not written until some years after the attempted suicide – and only after a dramatic upturn in her literary fortunes.¹⁴⁷ In her 1965 reading for the BBC, Smith stressed the 'I' of the penultimate line; her illustrations – one of which was used for the title page of the 1997 BBC biography – show a woman floating on water. But, as Smith's literary biographer notes, 'though much in her work is biographical, she is not a confessional poet. Instead, she adopts a variety of personae, some of them animals, through which to voice her thoughts, fears, and feelings.'¹⁴⁸ Smith is said to have got the idea for the poem 'from a newspaper article' and her biographer's view is that it 'displays her ventriloquising talent: it alternates between commentary and speech, allowing the reader both to share the man's fate and to view it from the outside.'¹⁴⁹

It is not the purpose of this study to establish 'the truth' about Smith's life, nor whether there is some resolution to the debate, as Anthony Thwaite

¹⁴⁴ *Bookmark: Not Waving But Drowning* (1997), 42:03.

¹⁴⁵ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Biography* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1988), 213.

¹⁴⁶ Stevie Smith, *Me Again, Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago Press, 1983), 295.

¹⁴⁷ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, 220.

¹⁴⁸ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, xvii.

¹⁴⁹ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, 222.

put it, ‘whether she was a dotty spinster with a whimsical gift for droll verse [...] or a serious and in many ways profound literary artist.’¹⁵⁰ My purpose is to argue that at some point between the broadcast of *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* in 1965, and the broadcast of the biography *Not Waving But Drowning* in 1997, the dominant register in the television portrayal of Stevie Smith became fear and isolation, and this is reflected in how the 1997 television biography repurposed the recording of ‘Not Waving, But Drowning’ made in such good humour in 1965. As in previous biographies of poets, the poetry is used as testimony, but it testifies to a different kind of person. The laughing, witty, urbane and ‘highly educated’ Smith of *People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965) is lost; the Stevie Smith ‘who was interested in death [...] but who enjoyed life, and for that matter, her success,’ has disappeared.¹⁵¹ The ‘poet, critic and novelist’ of her obituary (in, say, the *Daily Telegraph*), a good poet and ‘effective broadcaster’ whose ‘platform manner radiated enjoyment in which her audiences could share’ is nowhere to be seen.¹⁵² Nor is there any admission that it might bring pleasure to its many fans. A year earlier the poem was voted the nation’s favour post-war poem in a poll organised by the BBC.¹⁵³ What remains in poetry-as-autobiography is the suicidal and isolated shadow of suburbia, and the centrepiece of the testimony is a performance of a poem

¹⁵⁰ Anthony Thwaite, ‘Waving,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol 10, No. 19. 27 October 1988; in *Bookmark: Eliot and After* (1988) Kingsley Amis and Stephen Spender are dismissive of Smith; only Patricia Beer defends her *as a poet*.

¹⁵¹ Penelope Fitzgerald, ‘Jerusalem,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol 3, Number 2, 3 December 1981.

¹⁵² David Holloway, ‘Obituary: Stevie Smith,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 March 1971, 8. By contrast the *Daily Telegraph* preview of *Not Waving But Drowning* in 1997 focussed on Stevie Smith as a ‘sexual predator’. Will Bennett, ‘Poet Smith had a “racier side”,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 1997, 4.

¹⁵³ Richard Brooks, ‘Lovers of verse put real poets top of the pops,’ *Observer*, 6 October 1996, 2.

about another, treated as a poem about herself. Auden denied the truth of ‘We must love one another or die.’ Smith asserted that her poem was not about herself but about ‘a man whose friends though he was waving to them from the sea, but really he was drowning.’¹⁵⁴ But in television biographies, the poem is always about the poet, and can only be understood as being about the poet – because otherwise it would not be there.

4.4. Philip Larkin: the challenge of ending it all

Posthumous television biographers were in a position to tell a story at least one detail of which was certain: Larkin died in Hull in December 1985. Auden died in a hotel in Vienna in 1973, Stevie Smith in Devon in 1971 and Eliot in London in January 1965. Television biographies did not dwell on the manner of their passing, and only Auden’s funeral appears on film in his television biographies (and Larkin’s in a still photograph). But all biographers faced the question of how best to end their narrative. Without exception they did it in the poets’ own words, and with only one exception they did it with the words from a poem.

Eliot made it almost too easy: it was as though he had written his own eulogy. Both biographies (1971, 2009) opted for the same extract from the same poem: a well-known passage from ‘East Coker,’ in an audio recording read by Eliot himself:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,

¹⁵⁴ *Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances* (1965), 07:42 – 07:47.

A time for the evening under lamplight
 (The evening with the photograph album).
 Love is most nearly itself
 When here and now cease to matter.
 Old men ought to be explorers
 Here or there does not matter
 We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
 The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
 Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.¹⁵⁵

In both films Eliot's reading of the poem is cut over a collage of images which are simultaneously literal – young Eliot, petrels, porpoises, the actual Dry Salvages, photographs of Eliot in his later years, Mississippi river boats and churches – and reminiscent of a chronological life narrative. The films, the poem and the poet have come full circle.¹⁵⁶

Stevie Smith's last words – at least in her BBC biography – came from 'Thoughts About the Person from Porlock,' and echoed her supposed welcoming of death: 'I am hungry to be interrupted | For ever and ever, amen. | Person from Porlock, come quickly | And bring my thoughts to an end.'¹⁵⁷ Writer's block and death are conflated, as are the thoughts of the author and the thoughts of her character.

Larkin, too, offered the filmmakers a wide range of choices, but it was to the melancholy optimism of 'Coming' from *The Less Deceived* (1955) that his BBC biography turned. Larkin reads it (audio only) over a long pan across the graveyard where he was laid to rest. The pan comes finally to a stop on his

¹⁵⁵ Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, 203-204.

¹⁵⁶ *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), 57:34- 58:38; *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009), 1:25:10-1:26:20

¹⁵⁷ *Bookmark: Not Waving But Drowning* (1997), 58:50 – 58:55.

gravestone, inscribed: 'Philip Larkin, 1922-1985, Writer.'

And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter,
And starts to be happy.¹⁵⁸

It was this suggestion of Larkin's childhood of 'forgotten boredom' that so animated Alan Bennett (see epigraph, above) when he came to review Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin. To describe a childhood with Larkin's 'grotesque' Nazi-loving father at the centre of it as 'a forgotten boredom,' he wrote, 'seems ungrateful of Larkin, if not untypical, even though the phrase comes from a poem not an interview, so Larkin is telling the truth rather than the facts [...] Still, to anyone (I mean me) whose childhood was more sparsely accoutred with characters, Larkin's insistence on its dullness is galling.'¹⁵⁹ In the film the choice of poem is clearly meant to bring a redemptive note to the programme, and to Larkin's troubled life.

All the films considered here follow a cradle-to-grave narrative arc. This, therefore, was the choice facing biographers: what was the poet's attitude to death? Literary biographers faced the same dilemma – but books are less constrained than television – less constrained by time, and less constrained by the need to wrap up the story before the schedules and the viewers move on. In this chapter I have referred to several literary biographies. Of those discussed, only Frances Spalding concludes her biography of Stevie Smith with

¹⁵⁸ Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1955), 8.

¹⁵⁹ Alan Bennett, 'Alas! Deceived: Philip Larkin,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15 No. 6, 25 March 1993.

a poem. It follows a discussion of Smith's attitude to death. It could be bleak, Spalding says, with death imagined as a disappointing lover, for example, but it there are 'instances in which [Smith's] concept of death is positively buoyant,' death 'bringing extreme happiness, opening gates, setting us free.'¹⁶⁰ Spalding ends her book with another poem by Smith: 'The Ass,' in which Smith reflects on the fate of an ass 'long since combed' out by the seas and which she hears

...singing still with joy as if
She had won some great prize, as if
All her best wish had come to pass.¹⁶¹

Peter Ackroyd ends his biography of Eliot not with a poem (he was famously forbidden from quoting the poems), but with another quote from Eliot (from a BBC radio broadcast in 1947). It contains a note of exculpation for the author, whose biography of Eliot was unauthorised: 'We also understand the poetry better when we know more about the man.'¹⁶² Lyndall Gordon also eschews the temptation to reach for a poem: 'Eliot's career circled back,' she writes, 'so that the sources of his own life, the Mississippi and Cape Ann, became the sources of all life [...] his poetry led him back to the source of the longest river, and to the silence the child heard between two waves of the sea.'¹⁶³ Andrew Motion ends his biography with thoughts on Larkin's funeral, and a hint of the grasp, sometimes compelling, sometimes tenuous, that poetry has on human imagination:

some remembered whole poems. Some thought of individual lines:
'the one about mum and dad,' 'Nothing, like something, happens
anywhere,' 'What will survive of us is love.' The procession

¹⁶⁰ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, 302, quoting Stevie Smith in *Let the Poet Choose*, ed. James Gibson (London: Harrap, 1973), 147.

¹⁶¹ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, 304.

¹⁶² Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, 335.

¹⁶³ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life*, 273.

thickened, flooding into the cold, blustery afternoon. It was Valentine's Day.¹⁶⁴

In *Later Auden*, Edward Mendelson too prefers to maintain the chronology. He tells how one of Auden's last commissions was from the US edition of *Vogue* whose editors, 'not knowing what they were letting themselves in for' commissioned a series of columns headed 'On My Mind.' What was on Auden's mind was arguments about prayer and ritual and 'unfashionable thoughts on liturgy.'¹⁶⁵

BBC television biographies preferred to use poetry, and in seeking the final word, programme makers completed the curation of their anthologies. Auden, as always, offered his biographers the greatest choice. 'Dear,' he wrote in 'In Praise of Limestone,' 'I know nothing of | Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love | Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur | Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.'¹⁶⁶ *The Auden Landscape* (1982) concluded with these lines, read by Auden over shots of the limestone moors of north Yorkshire. *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000) opened with footage from Auden's funeral, cut to John Hannah's famous reading of 'Funeral Blues' from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). Rather than reprise this at the end, the director Susanna White chose to use as Auden's eulogy the first three stanzas of the poem he had written for another: 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' (1939):

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 524.

¹⁶⁵ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 519.

¹⁶⁶ *The Auden Landscape* (1982), 01:06:20 – 01:06:35.

The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
 The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
 The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
 By mourning tongues
 The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
 An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
 The provinces of his body revolted,
 The squares of his mind were empty,
 Silence invaded the suburbs,
 The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.¹⁶⁷

4.5. Auden's ending

Of those considered here, the only television biography that does not end – at least not quite – with an extract from a poem is *The Addictions of Sin* (2007). The programme opens with 'Lullaby' (1937) in which 'the grave | Proves the child ephemeral,' and proceeds, at a steady pace, through seven ages of Auden: childhood, Oxford, Berlin, Spain, New York, Oxford again and – finally – his home and death in Austria.

The film ends with this sequence: Over a rostrum pan of a photograph of late vintage Auden (the lined face, the eyes creased in thought, the mouth poised to pronounce) a caption comes up: 'On 28th September 1973, at a hotel in Vienna, Auden died in his sleep. He was 66 years old.' And then the film begins a reading of 'Funeral Blues.'¹⁶⁸

Violin music yields to piano (the music is 'Vladimir's Blues' by Max Richter), and over footage of cumulonimbus clouds against a dramatically blue

¹⁶⁷ *Tell Me the Truth about Love* (2000), 56:50 – 58:00; W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, 88.

¹⁶⁸ *W. H. Auden: The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 55:15 – 56:40.

sky, Kenneth Cranham, starts to recite:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos...



Figure 44: Auden's 'Funeral Blues,' *The Addictions of Sin* (2007).¹⁶⁹

But in the television programme the piano remains unsilenced. It carries right on through – or as the television jargon has it – beneath the poem. As Cranham speaks, the piano plays and the clouds in vision give way to archive footage of Auden leaving his cottage in Kirchstetten. The black-and-white archive shots come from *Poet of Disenchantment* (1965).¹⁷⁰ While the

... aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,

the viewer watches a vast flock of birds rise and scatter from white cliffs. This time the clouds, on which the camera lingers once the birds are gone, are cirrus. For the 'policeman's black cotton gloves,' the film cuts back to the garden at

¹⁶⁹ W. H. Auden: *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 55:20.

¹⁷⁰ W. H. Auden: *Poet of Disenchantment*, BBC1, 7 November 1965, 22.00

Kirchstetten. Auden closes the gate and walks out of shot. A suitably metaphorical end, one might think, except that the poem has some way to go. We see Auden on the other side of the gate, approaching a car, a Volkswagen Beetle. Over Auden's 'my North, my South, my East and West,' there is a long time-lapse shot of the low winter sun, moving left to right across a frozen landscape. Weak light glints off the cold earth. And still the piano plays.

He was my noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever; I was wrong.

Now the images come at the viewer in a rush. Melting icicles drip from a washing line. Auden climbs into his car (again from *Poet of Disenchantment*, 1965). There is footage of sunlight on water. There are reeds in water in the moonlight.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,

The VW Beetle moves down a long farm track. It turns right, and goes out of shot.

Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The recitation ends. The piano, finally, is silenced. But television has little tolerance for silence, and the film cuts immediately to Auden making his claim about poets saying 'something that's true' on *Parkinson* (1972).¹⁷¹

5. Questions about the truth value of poetry

In its desire to 'reflect, represent and serve'¹⁷² the nation, it would be surprising

¹⁷¹ *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 56:42 – 56:55; the original anecdote is transcribed in Michael Parkinson, *Parky's People*, 442.

¹⁷² The wording in the current BBC Charter (2016) is, 'To reflect, represent and serve the

had the BBC not made films about poets. But it has made few biographies of poets – and even fewer poets have been deemed worthy of such biographies. Those that were made, repeat the same argument: from the life emerges the poetry, which then becomes the most intimate and true communication. But communication of what? Running through each biography of a poet is a concern for a variety of truths: a truth about the poets and who they were and what they did and with whom they did it, and the truths they expressed in their poetry: Larkin's ability to move in a single line from his experience to the universal; Eliot's 'mad' poem about his personal anguish and a world on the edge of catastrophe; Auden's truth about love.¹⁷³ For television producers there is another truth, the truth described by Huw Wheldon and 'found' in the image or the sound or the gesture made possible by television (see page 178). In a poem published posthumously in 2021, Auden cautioned that sometimes 'truths are forced on poets by a rhyme.'¹⁷⁴ In television, biographical truths may be forced by programme makers on their subjects, through their choice of poem or their elisions, or the available archive (which is to say the curatorial choices of those who have gone before) or their images.

By the time the BBC television produced biographies of poets, they were already 'famous for being famous.' That fame often rested on a tiny number of lines: 'Not waving, but drowning,' 'Stop all the clocks,' 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad,' 'April is the cruellest month' – phrases which had 'passed

diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations.' ('BBC Charter,' December 2016, Para 6 (4), <<https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/charter>> accessed 3.2.2021).

¹⁷³ In several BBC television interviews Stephen Spender described *The Waste Land* as 'mad': See for example, *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971): 17:58 and further comments in *Poets on Poetry: Eliot and After* (1988) and *Arena: T. S. Eliot* (2009).

¹⁷⁴ 'We Get the Dialectic Fairly Well,' written by Auden in 1941, but first published in the *New York Review of Books*, LXVIII / 20, 16 December 2021, 16.

beyond the range of critical approval or scorn.’ Auden wrote and rewrote ‘September 1, 1939’ – and then disowned it on the grounds that it was ‘not true when [he] wrote it,’ and that the ‘rhetoric was too high blown.’¹⁷⁵ According to Edward Mendelson, Auden’s ‘private response to the advent on war was entirely unlike the public bravado of the final stanza of ‘September 1, 1939,’ and so different from anything he had experienced before that he did not know how to put it into verse.’¹⁷⁶ In 1939 Auden may or may not have sat, uncertain and afraid, in a dive on 52nd Street. Undoubtedly the poem had the capacity to provoke powerful responses. In *Bookmark: Eliot and After* (1988), Kingsley Amis – deliberately provocative, no doubt – dismissed the idea. The poem ‘filled him with contempt’ and he said that the only thing Auden had to be afraid of was ‘whether to go to the lavatory or not.’¹⁷⁷ None of the panel assembled for the programme (Stephen Spender, Patricia Beer, Andrew Motion) thought the poem was autobiographical *per se*. But when the BBC came to make biographies of Auden, in 1982 and 2007, when it came to tell ‘the story of his life in his own words,’ the implication was that he did sit in a dive, and that he was uncertain and afraid. In his review for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Humphrey Carpenter called *The Auden Landscape* (1982) ‘television biography at its best: plenty of new titbits to offer those who already know the outline of Auden’s life, and a lucid and visually well-documented account of the man and his environment for those coming to the story for the first time.’¹⁷⁸ Perhaps this is the necessary limit of ambition for television biographies of poets: a visually

¹⁷⁵ *Crosstalk* (1973), 17:05.

¹⁷⁶ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 77.

¹⁷⁷ *Bookmark; Eliot and After* (1988), 22:10 – 22:20.

¹⁷⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, ‘Leading a Generation,’ *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4119, 12 March 1982, 280; the entire transcript of the film was reprinted in *The Listener* on 4 March 1982 (Robert Robinson, ‘The Auden landscape,’ *The Listener*, 4 March. 1982, 9).

well-documented account of more-or-less 'agreeable gods,' and a few special anecdotes for those in the know. To make and broadcast such programmes may have given a satisfactory account of the poet's life, but they left only partial echoes of their poetry, which future television biographers might find, repurpose, and edit to new images and sounds, and which viewers need never read.

5. Reflecting the nation through poetry

The history of 'Jerusalem' reflects the changing face of England during the 20th century. *Narration, Jerusalem, An Anthem for England, BBC4, 2005.*¹

1. Introduction

This final chapter concerns the BBC's use on television of poetry in general and two poems in particular to 'represent and reflect' the nation in the period 1990-2009. To understand this, I first analyse how certain kinds of poems come to be on television at all and in what form they appear. I then examine how, through repetition of just a few lines from the entire canon of poetry in English, BBC television created a powerful feedback loop in which the broadcast of certain lines, together with a limited set of images, made them more famous, and thus more likely to be broadcast in this way again.

In previous chapters I examined poetry that was on television as a result of decisions by BBC producers, especially those who sought either to put poetry on television, or sought to use poetry to interrogate the poets and to tell the stories of their lives 'in their own words.' I begin this chapter with the recognition that it is not only producers and executives who determine what poems appear on television. Often poems were broadcast because people who are on television, often but not exclusively politicians, use poetry to rhetorical or polemical effect. Since the politician's speech is being broadcast, so is the poetry they recite. Certain poems were more suited to this purpose than others, and the use and re-use of particular poems meant that they became ever more famous. The process of acquiring fame had the effect of further decontextualising the poems, and of emphasising certain lines and phrases to the exclusion of others. Few poems, as we have seen, are broadcast in full. Two

¹ *Jerusalem, An Anthem for England* (2005), 02:10 – 02:18.

phrases from 'Jerusalem' make the point: 'green and pleasant land' and 'dark satanic mills' have become shorthand versions of two visions of Britain. This has been the case more widely than on BBC television; but when such phrases are broadcast repeatedly, and broadcast in alliance with a specific and limited range of images, they acquire a power which is associated not only with the message but also with the medium. They become poetry-on-television, and in the process become, ever more 'famous for being famous,' which in turn puts them ever further 'beyond critical reach.' Such use of the poems in turn becomes the subject of debate – also on television – and in that process the poem's meanings, associations, and cultural echoes change. Through an examination of how BBC television has used particular lines of poetry it is possible to analyse some of the ways in which cumulative broadcasts of certain poems shape a particular vision of the nation.

My assumption in taking this approach is that the television programmes in which such poems occur are of their time, and that they reflect the concerns, interests, and beliefs of those making the programmes at that time. As historical documents they are, in Paddy Scannell's word, 'innocent;' they make 'no gesture toward the future.'² They accurately reflect modes of being and ways of thinking at a particular moment. But there is (as Scannell warns) a danger: television does not just happen. Television 'never simply reflects the character of social life at any time. It is active in its making.'³ In the case of poetry on television this is visible in the ways in which programmes use and re-

² Paddy Scannell, 'Television and History: Questioning the Archive,' *The Communication Review* 13, (2010): 40.

³ Scannell, 'Television and History,' 40.

use the images and sequences and associations created by previous broadcasts. There is a cumulative effect to each iteration of a poem or a line of poetry. My argument is that BBC television has subjected only a limited range of poetry to this process of ‘cumulative iteration,’ and where it has done so, it has used a limited range of visual metaphors to accompany the lines: sport and war for Kipling’s ‘If—,’ hedgerows and smokestacks for Blake’s ‘Jerusalem.’ An oft-stated ambition within the production notes of BBC television producers has been to ‘bring poetry to the viewers.’ Repeating certain lines in this way has a contrary effect. The emphasis on some lines and not others is at the expense of a more general awareness of the nation’s poetic heritage.

That poems should be subject to such repetitive iteration, and the manner in which this is done, is in part a consequence of the BBC’s extensive use of its own archive. Recordings of poems made in the 1950s and 1960s recur in programmes in subsequent decades. That the archive exists was not the result of any plan or strategy (other than a duty to preserve what had been broadcast); the recordings of poets and poetry that have come to be stored in the archive, came to be through the decisions of a great variety of producers and executives. The existence of the archive, however, bestows authority on a limited range of poets. In Chapter One, I suggested that Cecil Day Lewis would not have been surprised to find himself omitted from the series *Great Poets in their Own Words* (2014). Those who were included, were there in part because the archive permitted it. The quality of their poetry was only one factor; the existence of suitable footage from which a television programme could be made, was another. How and why these were later re-used are further evidence of how people within the BBC thought at different times, and what their expectations were of their audience. There is a second archive which contributes to the use and fame of certain poems: this is those clips, often but not only newsreel, in which people on television use poetry for some other purpose. It may be a politician making a point; it may be a filmmaker adding to

the emotional intensity of a scene (John Hannah's recital of 'Funeral Blues' in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) is perhaps the most famous example.) Or it may be schoolchildren on a trip to Poets' Corner. Within that archive certain poems, through use and familiarity, and simply because they were the poems of which recordings existed, have become the archival source used in other programmes. Eliot's fourteen lines from 'Little Gidding' are a case in point (see Chapter Four), but so are repeated broadcasts of, say, a famous archive recording of Clement Attlee reciting lines from 'Jerusalem' or the BBC using 'If...' to promote a certain view of the virtues of sporting endeavour.

The broadcast of a poem represents and re-presents not only the nation at any given moment, but the nation as it has been. The BBC's use of poetry to re-present the nation involves a complex interplay of time. The poetry, the performance and the recording are necessarily representative of the past, but the broadcast is necessarily of the present. Adam Low's edit of 'September 1, 1939' in *W. H. Auden: The Addictions of Sin* (2007) to footage from the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York City is one example, but so is the use of 'If...' (written in response to events in 1896) to describe in 2006 how Kipling must have felt on hearing about the death of his son in France in 1915. In this final chapter I examine how BBC television was active in the (re)packaging of two poems which occupy a central place in the nation's understanding of itself: Kipling's 'If—' and Blake's 'Jerusalem.' I ask how these poems were presented on television, and with what consequences for the poetry. In doing so I return to several of the themes of this thesis:

- that the imagery entailed in poetry and the images used to make television inevitably compete,
- that the 'truth' of a poem is not fixed, and
- that the priority has been to make good television rather than to present the poem as written on television.

2. Further understanding the canon of poetry on television

In Chapter One, I presented a quantitative analysis of which poets and which of

their poems have been broadcast on the BBC. This analysis shows that for the most part – though not exclusively – poetry on BBC television drew on a narrow canon of poetry, of the kind defined by the works of those honoured by a plaque or a grave in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.⁴ These are the voices that, in Andrew Marr's memorable-but-contestable phrase, constitute the BBC's televisual version of 'the most remarkable tradition of poetry of any major culture.'⁵ The statistics present in summarised form the catalogue created by a long and varied process by which the BBC has, in effect, become an anthology of a body of works. The process is made up of hundreds of different decisions and choices of producers and directors, each of whom, when beginning to make a programme about, or using poetry, had to ask not only whether the words of the poem served the purpose of the programme maker, but also whether the poem and the poet were sufficiently famous or intelligible to be on television. The BBC archives have many back-of-the-envelope lists which record producers' thoughts on which poets and which poems might be suitable for a particular programme idea. Each list (see Figure 45) is in itself a kind of miscellany, reflecting not only the particular aims of the programme, but also the preferences, biases, networks, and range of knowledge of those involved in making the programme. Running through this, however, is a mostly unspoken question about the audience: what poets and poems might they reasonably be expected to know? When in 1969 the founding editor of *Monitor*, Huw Wheldon (by then Managing Director,

⁴ <<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/about-the-abbey/history/poets-corner>> accessed 22.2.2022.

⁵ Marr, *We British*. xiii.

Television)⁶ presented a one-off selection of his favourite poetry and prose, his choices (like Day Lewis's in 1972) included the infrequently televised 'Waiting for the Barbarians' by C. P. Cavafy, but (albeit with a slight Welsh bias) they were mostly from the same list as that chosen for *The Book Quiz Poetry Special* forty years later: R. S. Thomas, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Robert Herrick, Robert Graves, Philip Larkin, Henry Reed.⁷

Edwin Muir.
 Lewis Thomas. [Owen]
 Robert Graves
 Larkin / Wain / Amis
 Quinn / Hughes / Logue / Moraes.
 Auden.
 Lawrence.
 R.S. Thomas.
 S. Patti.
 Lerner
 R.S. Thomas
 Dulles

Quinn
 Larkin
 Amis
 Wain
 Hughes
 Logue
 Moraes.
 [Graves]
 MacBeth
 Redgrave.
 Frost.

Figure 45: Production note – on the back of an envelope - for David Jones's poetry pilot 'Words', 1960.⁸

⁶ Ferris, *Sir Hume*, 229.

⁷ *An Evening with Huw Wheldon*, BBC2, 3 January 1969, 21.05.

⁸ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, 'Words'; unsigned note.

Each initial back-of-the-envelope list of poets created by each producer hides an implied set of questions: were the poets good enough? Would they make good television? Were the poets famous enough? The last question always weighed heavily, and clearly influenced the choices of producers. When in 1959 the producer David Jones was asked to make the poetry pilot 'Words,' he drew up a provisional list which reflected the prominence at that time of so-called 'Movement' poets of the 1950s. But when he went into production, he had narrowed the list to include the more famous of the poets – and they were names that would have been familiar to producers half a century later, notably Philip Larkin and Robert Graves.⁹

To put a poem on television is to make it better known. To repeat this process is to make certain poems more famous, while others remain relatively unknown. And since poems were seldom broadcast in their entirety, this process entailed further edits: it was not poems that became famous, but certain lines of certain poems. By the turn of the century there was a television canon of known phrases from poems that needed no introduction. When Griff Rhys Jones began to argue 'why poetry matters' in 2009, he used a fast-cut collage of such recognisable lines from Shakespeare, Auden, Larkin, Blake, Kipling, Milligan, Burns and Shakespeare again (see pages 102-105).¹⁰ Rhys Jones's list can be seen as the culmination of more than half a century of such choices: on television, the 'remarkable poetic tradition of any major culture' had come to be represented by fewer than one hundred works by fifty poets, most of whom were dead, and of whom roughly one in ten were women. These

⁹ WAC, T32/1, 172/1, 'Poetry Pilot,' undated copyright clearance form.

¹⁰ *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), 01:38 – 02:15.

are the poets whose works make up the greater part of ‘poetry on BBC television,’ and theirs have for the most part been the poems onto which the BBC turned its cameras when it chose to make poetry programming.

The BBC’s 2009 *Poetry Season*, which took place over several months and across all its media, represented the largest commitment the broadcaster had made to bringing poetry to the television screen. The season, perhaps inadvertently, also provided a comprehensive definition of the poetry canon on BBC television. It can be deduced from the questions and answers in a special poetry edition of *The Book Quiz*, presented by Kirsty Wark as part of the season.¹¹ Over the course of an hour, four teams of contestants were quizzed on their knowledge of poets and poetry.¹² The questions and their answers serve as an effective definition of which poets belonged in the accepted canon at that time, and of what poets and poetry producers thought a late-night viewer of BBC4 might reasonably be expected to know. The inclusion of living poets means that the list was slightly broader than the list of poets honoured in Westminster Abbey – but not by much. In order of first appearance (some were the answer to more than one question), the poets who featured were:

Robert Frost, Rupert Brooke, Dorothy Parker, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Basil Bunting, Felix Dennis, Sylvia Plath, Helen Dunmore, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, G.K. Chesterton, W. H. Auden, Robert Burns, T. S. Eliot, George, Lord Byron, Rudyard Kipling, Philip Larkin, Edward Thomas, Wendy Cope, John Keats, Edward Lear, Virgil, Alexander Pope, John Donne, e. e. cummings, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Southey, Christopher Marlowe, Walter Raleigh, W. B. Yeats, John Betjeman, Simon Armitage, Andrew Marvell, Richard Lovelace, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Grey, Wilfred Owen, Spenser, A. E.

¹¹ *The Book Quiz: Poetry Special*, BBC4, 12 June 2009, 22.00.

¹² Andrew Motion, Bonnie Greer, Alice Eve, John Sutherland, Brian Patten, Liz Howell, Natalie Haynes, George Szirtes.

Housman, Ruth Padel, Louis MacNeice, William Blake, Chaucer, John Milton, Henry Vaughan, Carol Ann Duffy, Cecil Day Lewis, John Masefield, Ben Johnson, John Dryden, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dante, Catullus and Robert Herrick.

There could have been more. For example, contestants were asked how many poets laureate they could name – and fell short of naming all of them. The list of poets and poems that recur on television is highly resistant to change. Only 6 of the 54 poets named were alive at the time of broadcast. There is a strong overlap between the names on this list and the names of poets that most frequently appeared in *Radio Times* listings, and those that populate the working papers of producers over the years.¹³ The poets and poems chosen for the *Closedown* broadcasts of 1974 – 1981 are remarkably similar to those in the list above, as were the choices Cecil Day Lewis made for his 6-part swansong series on poetry, *A Lasting Joy*, in 1972.¹⁴ It was not only that certain poets recurred, but it was also that producers consistently chose the same poems, and the same lines from the same poems. In this process of repetition, which occurs in other media too, but which is exaggerated by the reach and power of television, some lines become so well-known that they were put beyond critical reach, even to the point that they became the subject of parody or of parlour games.

2.1. Poems that have moved beyond critical reach

The line of Philip Larkin chosen for the fast-cut introduction to *Why Poetry Matters* (2009) was, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad,' which is

¹³ See Figure 7.

¹⁴ *A Lasting Joy*, BBC1, 18 July – 22 August 1972, 22.50.

memorable, both for the sentiment and for the expletive – but also for the simplicity of its iambic tetrameters and ABAB rhyme structure of the stanzas that followed. On the evidence of *The Book Quiz Poetry Special* (2009) it seems that the first line may be so memorable that it had the effect of obscuring the poem's actual title. In *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), Griff Rhys Jones used the line without further comment. Its fame was sufficient to the moment. But in a segment in *The Book Quiz* contestants were asked to identify works of poetry from a mildly humorous paraphrasing of their titles or of their contents. In the case of Larkin's poem the given clue was, 'The Malign Influence of Parents, Post-watershed.' The contestant (a distinguished professor of literature) recognised the poem that the producers had in mind but could not remember its title. All that came to his mind was the first line, which, by his own admission, he could not bring himself to say on television. It was left to Andrew Motion to supply the answer: Philip Larkin's 'This Be The Verse.'¹⁵ Similarly, 'Address to a Haggis' by Robert Burns was clued as 'Speech to a Stuffed Sheep's Stomach' and the answer 'Pied Piper of Hamelin' had to be deduced from the clue, 'The Particoloured Flautist of Lower Saxony.' In two cases the panels needed further prompting to get the answer, notably for the clue: 'Worthy List of Improbable Scenarios.' Only once the presenter Kirsty Wark said the poem was by Rudyard Kipling, did the contestants guess that the required answer was 'If—.' These are lines of poetry which have acquired a degree of familiarity in popular culture which allows them to be the subject of parlour games. Phrases of poetry came to be a plaything on television, in which the quality sought is not that they should be meaningful, nor that they should stir emotions or create images or

¹⁵ *The Book Quiz Poetry Special* (2009): 22.15 – 22:35.

stimulate thoughts, but that they should be memorable and be remembered for being memorable.

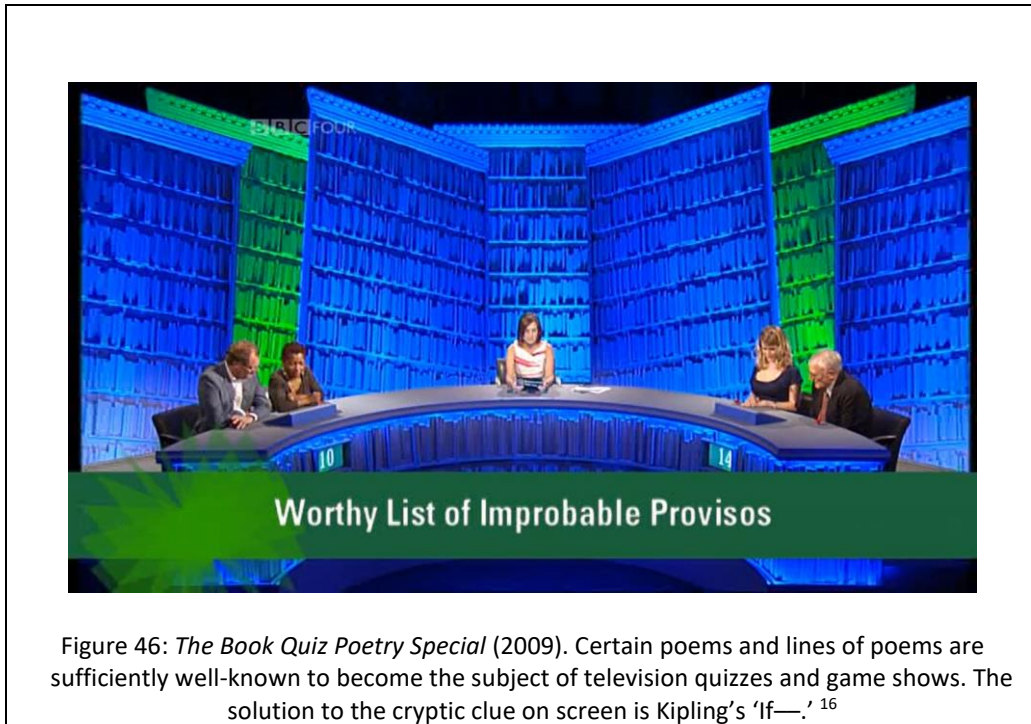


Figure 46: *The Book Quiz Poetry Special* (2009). Certain poems and lines of poems are sufficiently well-known to become the subject of television quizzes and game shows. The solution to the cryptic clue on screen is Kipling's 'If—.'¹⁶

Television contributed to and drew on this fame. A poem may have been famous before it was broadcast on television; it would be more famous afterwards. What follows is a study of two poems that have changed as a result of their use on television. Both were well-known before 1990, but both were the subject of an accelerated public exposure as a result of television treatments in the last years of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries. The particular treatments of Kipling's 'If—' and Blake's 'Jerusalem' reveal two contrasting processes by which television shapes and changes the way poems are read and understood. In the case of 'Jerusalem,' this was mostly

¹⁶ *The Book Quiz: Poetry Special* (2009), 22:06.

a result of television's ability to frame the terms of debate about national identity. 'Jerusalem' combined the pastoral and the prophetic, the aspirational and the nostalgic. It, and the hymn version set to William Parry's music, became a shorthand on television for discussions about identity in general and English identity in particular. Interpretations of the poem became the frame through which such identities could be broken down, discussed, reassembled and affirmed.

In the case of 'If—', producers went further. The poem was not about the nation, but about the values that were thought to have defined a particular version of the nation as custodian and promoter of a kind of gendered self-belief. As public sensibilities changed, BBC television's iterations of this poem, or of versions of it, changed too. Some sentiments remained: the emphasis on the individual as agent, for example. But others were removed – the explicit masculinity of the author and the intended audience, for example, were excised. To achieve these reworked versions of the poem, the BBC edited, elided, rewrote and otherwise altered the poem – but, as I shall argue, in doing so it deliberately did not set out to create something entirely 'new.' The outcomes of the edits suggest a desire to create a hybrid of old and new. Even as it sought to change it, and to disassociate it from aspects of British history, the BBC sought to keep at least some of the associations of the original poem, which it then presented as 'reimagined.'¹⁷ In different iterations of the poem, the virtues of self-reliance and ambition remained. Similarly, the aspirational conditionality of the repeated 'if' remained, but the edits, which were done in

¹⁷ 'If' reimagined for woman by 'spoken word artists Deanna Rodger'.
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/48112411>>. Accessed 3.5.2020.

different ways and by different people, suggest a desire to downplay associations with empire, and with a kind of masculinity. The result was a poem 'reimagined' to reflect current priorities and sensibilities. This chapter examines how these two contrasting processes took place, and with what consequences.

3. When others use poetry on television

Before considering the two poems in question it is helpful to consider the various routes by which such poems – the poems that concern national identity – come to be on television at all. BBC television includes live broadcasts, and many unscripted contributions, often from politicians. The BBC is not always in control of how and when poems are used.

3.1. What poetry is 'about': the case of Kipling's 'Mandalay'

Much was made of an incident in 2017 when the then foreign secretary, Boris Johnson MP, whilst on a visit to Myanmar, was discouraged from reciting a few half-remembered lines from Kipling's 'Mandalay.' 'Not a good idea,' murmured the British ambassador, 'not appropriate.'¹⁸ Why the poem (and its recitation by that person in that place and at that time) were 'not appropriate' became the subject for much debate on television and radio, and in the newspapers. Broadcasters, including the BBC, and newspapers competed to interpret the poem. BBC News described it as a 'pro-colonial classic,' but did not provide examples from the text of the poem of either its status as a classic or its pro-colonial sentiment. *The Daily Mail* wrote that it was 'about a British soldier

¹⁸ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-41453375>> accessed 3.2.2021.

kissing a Burmese girl.¹⁹ *The Sun* reported that the poem ‘mocks the religion of Buddhism and belittles the country’s women.’²⁰ Several reports agreed that the poem contained two phrases which were objectionable: that the narrator speaks of ‘a-wastin’ Christian kisses on an ‘eathen idol’s foot’ and that in the lands east of Suez ‘there ain’t no ten commandments,’ neither of which Johnson said, but it is more likely that the real objection to the poem was not what it said, but by whom it was recited (the foreign secretary and Conservative MP, Boris Johnson). For it is clear that there were other times and places where no objections – not to the poem, not to the reader, the author or the place – would be raised in these same media outlets. Nothing, for example, had been made of it two years earlier when BBC1 broadcast the actor Charles Dance reciting the entire poem at a ceremony in London to mark the 70th anniversary of VJ Day. His audience included the Queen, the Prince of Wales, the Duchess of Cornwall, the leaders of all major political parties, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and it formed the centrepiece of a four-hour live broadcast on BBC1.²¹ A recital of a poem seen as ‘not appropriate’ in one context was celebrated in another.

As Christopher Burstall’s film *Tyger, Tyger* showed in 1967, multiple readings of an individual poem are the norm, not the exception, and that these

¹⁹ <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4937502/Boris-Johnson-recites-insensitive-Kipling-poem.html>> accessed 3.2.2021.

²⁰ <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4580651/boris-johnson-colonial-gaffe-burma/>> accessed 3.2.2021.

²¹ *VJ Day 70: The Nation Remembers*, BBC1, 15 Aug 2015, 01:11:30 – 01:16:58; <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-33936830>> accessed 3.2.2021; Dance’s recital can be viewed at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mRt50wyaLg>> accessed 14.06.2020; Dance repeats the performance in the Netflix series *The Crown* – the contrast in accents is remarkable. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgeEQ1dDtRQ>> accessed 14.06.2020.

readings are varied because readers bring a range of experience and association to bear. In the case of 'Mandalay,' it was, largely, a question of context. When Boris Johnson recited the poem on a diplomatic visit, it was deemed inappropriate because it would act as a reminder of a time when British visitors to Burma were accompanied by the full might of the British armed forces. When Charles Dance recited the poem on Horse Guards Parade it was deemed a fitting tribute to the many soldiers who suffered in what was seen as a righteous cause – the defeat of the Axis powers. The choice of 'Mandalay' for the VJ Day celebrations illustrates just how malleable poetry becomes when deployed to such ends. This was a poem written about a different conflict and in a different time. But read on that day, and in that accent, on the national broadcaster it could not but be read as a tribute – an authentic tribute – to those who fought and died in the war with Japan.

3.2. Poems as proxies in other battles

Boris Johnson was not the only politician on BBC television to reach for the canon of English poetry. Others have done the same; in doing so they have clearly intended to bring to bear a set of associations in the minds and hearts of viewers, and to benefit from this. In this section I analyse how poetry in general and two poems in particular have been used as a form of proxy (but usually diplomatic) warfare on BBC television. I argue that the repeated use of certain lines of poetry 'to make a point' reinforces the idea that the English canon is little more than a reservoir of 'memorable speech,' and creates a feedback loop in which certain phrases are used repeatedly because they are already known. Very few lines from very few poems have sufficient status to become effective proxies on television. Those that do are often used not for their poetic qualities, but for a presumed set of associations that will motivate the audience in the desired manner.

Two brief case studies make the point:

3.3. Thatcher's choice

Any politician may reach for the anthology to bolster credibility with a particular audience; it is in the nature of modern politics that for a politician to do so, is to do so on television, and for a British politician to do so, is to do it on the BBC. Many recall Margaret Thatcher, newly elected prime minister, misquoting the prayer of St Francis before entering Downing Street in May 1979.²² In office, Thatcher frequently quoted lines of poetry, especially Kipling's poetry, if only because so often 'Kipling said it better than I ever could.'²³ What Kipling said better than she ever could varied; it included articulating the English sense of fair play (from the poem 'Norman and Saxon'), the virtues and limits of technology ('The Secret of Machines'), and her dislike of retreat ('The Heritage'). And, in perhaps her most famous speech, given to the Conservative Party Conference in Brighton in 1984, and broadcast live on the BBC, the morning after the Provisional IRA tried to murder her, Thatcher again quoted Kipling. This time the poem she chose was the defiant nationalism of 'Dane-Geld':

We never pay any-one Dane-geld,
No matter how trifling the cost;
For the end of that game is oppression and shame,
And the nation that plays it is lost!

'Who,' she asked again, 'could put it better?'²⁴ She might as well have asked, 'who might I better quote to reinforce my standing as the leader of a

²² <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104078>> accessed 12.07.20.

²³ Speech to Conservative Party rally, Edinburgh, 25 April 1975; quoted at <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104043>> accessed 26.5.2020.

²⁴ Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 12 October 1984, <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105763>> accessed 26.5.2020.

proud nation?’ for the purpose was not to talk about ‘Dane-geld,’ but to say, ‘we are the nation of Kipling, of empire, of dominion beyond the seas, unbowed and implacable in the face of the atrocity of the night before.’ It was not so much the poem that she was quoting, as a presumed shared memory of national greatness.

Kipling was not the only poet so favoured. There were others whom Thatcher liked to quote. Tennyson, Keats, and Wordsworth – even Shelley was welcome. The nation, according to Thatcher, was the land of ‘Bunyan, of Milton, of Wordsworth, of Byron, of Shelley and Tennyson.’²⁵ Not surprisingly, perhaps, she had a distaste for the modern. Larkin, she said, was ‘just about the most modern to which I go.’²⁶ But when asked on BBC1, to name her favourite poem, she chose a different representative of the canon altogether.

The presumption of personal anthologies was that the choice of poems – or in the case of radio shows like *Desert Island Discs*, the choice of songs – both brought pleasure to the viewers and listeners, and offered them a window to the soul of the interviewee. It also occasioned bouts of cynicism about the choices made. Were they sincere? Did the choice of poem reveal that soul – or did they merely reveal the calculations on the part of the interviewee about which song, or which poem, would portray them in best light? When in 2006 David Cameron revealed his unlikely affection for both Bob Dylan and The Smiths he was widely mocked. Kirsty Young thought Ed Miliband’s choices in

²⁵ Speech at Royal Academy Banquet, 27 May 1980, <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104370>> accessed 26.5.2020.

²⁶ Transcript of an interview with Chris Ogden, *Time Magazine* correspondent, 16 January 1989, quoted at <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107438>> accessed 26.5.2020.

2015 were ‘a 50/50 decision between his own tastes and savvy political decision.’²⁷ We can take, then, with a pinch of salt Margaret Thatcher’s decision in 1987 to do an interview with Russell Harty and her choice of a favourite poem when she agreed to appear on an occasional BBC2 anthology series called *Favourite Things*.²⁸

Thatcher had prepared a list. Her hero was Faraday, her favourite place to visit was the Taj Mahal. And her favourite poem? It was an extract from Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Great Lover.’²⁹ This is what she read:

These I have loved:

White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
 Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
 Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
 Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
 Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
 And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
 And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
 Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
 Then, the cool kindness of sheets, that soon
 Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
 Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
 Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
 Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
 The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
 The good smell of old clothes; and other such—
 The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
 Hair’s fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
 About dead leaves and last year’s ferns—³⁰

It was not, Thatcher said, ‘about what you think it is about.’ But it was ‘about’

²⁷ <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/11163056/Desert-Island-Discs-What-the-leaders-played.html>> accessed 15.5.2020.

²⁸ *Favourite Things*, BBC2, 26 July 1987, 19:30.

²⁹ *Favourite Things* (1987), 22:14 – 24:45.

³⁰ Rupert Brooke, *Collected Poems* (London: Oleander Press, 2013), 125.

something – it was about how Thatcher imagined her viewers. The Thatcher files reveal the debate between the prime minister and her staff about the choice of poem. ‘Isn’t it perfect,’ Thatcher asked, ‘for your programme?’ Harty had no time to respond, for Thatcher was indulging in a little cod-psychology, and went on to say that the poem appealed to her because it ‘is a very powerful list, the language, and everyone who sees this says: “Yes, I love those things!”’

But did they? Other responses to ‘The Great Lover’ are possible. One conventional reading is that the poem is ‘humorous,’ hovering somewhere between satire and doggerel. It is poking fun at the tradition of the ‘ardent poetic lover familiar to readers of Byron.’³¹ How best then to interpret Thatcher’s choice – and her insistence that it is ‘not about what you might think it is about’? If Auden’s ‘Funeral Blues’ can move seamlessly from satire to film’s best-known eulogy, then for Brooke’s ‘Great Lover’ it is but a short walk from satire to propaganda. When broadcast on the BBC, the poem was not about the poem at all; rather it projected a view of how Thatcher wished to be seen – and how she imagined she might be seen. *The Listener* probably got it right in its review of the programme when it reminded readers of Ambrose Pierce’s definition of ‘admiration’: ‘our polite recognition of another man’s resemblance to ourselves.’³² It is difficult not to sympathise with the conclusion that ‘to set oneself up as a great lover – one who has delusions about cheating death – reveals a materialistic mindset that cannot understand that the pleasure it takes in worldly goods will go with it to the grave.’³³ Only once did

³¹ Joseph Bristow, ‘Rupert Brooke’s Poetic Deaths,’ *ELH* 81, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 681.

³² ‘Out Takes,’ *The Listener*, 30 July 1987, 12.

³³ Joseph Bristow, ‘Rupert Brooke’s Poetic Deaths,’ 681.

the camera cut away from Thatcher reading the poem, and that was to show a hand-held shot of the page in the anthology from which she read. There was no need to illustrate it (beyond the carefully framed domestic setting in which Thatcher was interviewed), for the purpose was not to present a poem. On television – and this is the only time the poem has been televised by the BBC – ‘The Great Lover’ was presented as a ‘favourite thing,’ an artefact through which the interviewee might better be understood. From Margaret Thatcher’s point of view, poetry-on-television was a rhetorical device used in the game of politics.

3.4. Attlee’s Eden

An ecumenical taste for poets of varied political persuasions was not unique to Thatcher. Another prime minister, Clement Attlee, once claimed that his mind was ‘stored with poetry,’ The store came from the same canon that populated *The Poetry Quiz* (2009) half a century later. Like Thatcher, he eschewed the modern, and said that he had not got ‘much past Masefield’ and that he couldn’t ‘remember a word of what these modern chaps write.’³⁴ He, like Lord Reith, believed in a ‘compensatory cultural redistribution’ in part to counter the ‘spectre of those ideologies threatening more material expropriations.’³⁵ The spiritual, as well as the material, resources of the Western nations had been more equitably shared. ‘And had this not been so, we should have not had that unity in the struggle against totalitarianism.’³⁶ This belief underpinned the

³⁴ Philip Henderson, ‘Critic on the Hearth,’ *The Listener*, 28 August 1958, p 320; reviewing Attlee’s interview on *Frankly Speaking*, Home Service, 19 August 1958.

³⁵ Ben Harker, ‘Trumpet of the Night,’ 82

³⁶ Narration and archive of Attlee speaking in 1946, *The Third Programme: High Culture for All* (2008), 06:10 – 06:53.

creation during the Attlee government of 1945-1951 of several organisations which represented Britain's new commitment to culture for all: the Edinburgh Festival, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Arts Council and on the BBC, *The Third Programme*, 'a radio programme devoted to high culture.'³⁷

Attlee's idea of culture was that of a certain kind of Englishness: he liked cricket and Jane Austen, and he used to read Kipling to his children.³⁸ He wrote and published a few poems himself and confessed that as a child he had dreamed of being a poet. He was proud of his own limerick in which he listed his achievements, and which has been read several times on BBC television:

There were few who thought him a starter,
Many who thought themselves smarter,
But he ended PM,
CH and OM,
An Earl and a Knight of the Garter.³⁹

For Attlee, the rebuilding of Britain after 1945 was not only a matter of culture. It was also a question of economic strength, of military power, of social security and the NHS. Like Thatcher, Attlee sometimes expressed his vision of the future in the words of someone who 'said it better,' and he found them in Blake, and specifically in the words of 'Jerusalem.' Addressing the pre-election Labour Party conference in Scarborough on St George's Day, 1951, he said 'Remember, we are a campaigning organisation. Let us go forward into this fight in the spirit of William Blake: "I will not cease from mental strife | Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand | Till we have built Jerusalem | In England's green

³⁷ *The Third Programme: High Culture for All* (2008), 01:00 – 01:30.

³⁸ Lady Felicity Harwood, *The Improbable Mr Attlee* (2005), 16:05.

³⁹ Frequently quoted in films about Attlee, including being read by his son in *Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary* (1983), 48:20.

and pleasant land.”⁴⁰ More importantly for this study, perhaps, he was filmed doing so.



Figure 47: Clement Attlee recites 'Jerusalem,' 1951.

In much the same way as Eliot's 14 lines from 'Little Gidding,' this piece of archive has come to define Attlee on BBC television: films using this same clip include *Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary* (1983), *The Improbable Mr Attlee* (2005), *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2006), Andrew Marr's *History of Modern Britain: Advance Britannia* (2007), Christopher Meyer's *Mortgaged to the Yanks* (2007), and *Outsiders: Tory! Tory! Tory!* (2008). Again and again, Attlee stands on the podium and recites the lines. Again and again, Attlee begins to sit down before he has finished the final phrase. Again and again, the audience claps. But the effect on the poetry is that these select lines become

⁴⁰ The full Pathé News clip can be seen here : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNcX_t_AuVA accessed 12.11.2021.

associated with a particular political outlook, and a particular part of the national story. In the history of post-war Britain, as told and retold on BBC television, it was Blake's appeal to build paradise that dominated, and it was Blake who 'said it better' than any politician could.

3.5. Poems as proxies

Why did later programme makers return to this clip? The British Pathé archive is not short of Attlee material,⁴¹ but this is the clip producers consistently chose in preference to others to demonstrate, as concisely as possible, Attlee's political vision. The richness of the piece comes not from Attlee's oratory (which was famously muted), but from the resonance of Blake's words, and their concise delineation of a view of England, of Attlee's reforming government and of its intentions. But what did they mean? What – in Margaret Thatcher's word – were they 'about'? This is the essential tension at play when politicians deploy poetry on television: the use of the poem is not intended to communicate 'the poem,' but rather to communicate a set of associations and echoes. It must 'mean' something, but as with Thatcher's list ('radiant raindrops'? 'flowers that sway through sunny hours'?) the meaning of the lines lies only partly in the words themselves; their meaning is also in a presumed set of associations with the author and the work, with as it were, the echoes thought to come from the lines being part of the national reservoir of memorable speech.

After her appearance with Russell Harty, Margaret Thatcher received more than 200 letters from viewers who enjoyed her rendition of the lines from

⁴¹ <<https://www.britishpathe.com>>.

‘The Great Lover.’ One wrote that the poem was ‘read with deep emotion and dignity.’ ‘You read it,’ wrote another, ‘without pride and with humility.’ ‘It had,’ wrote another, ‘brought [Mrs Thatcher] nearer to every day (sic) people.’⁴² Such responses were a measure, perhaps, of poetry’s ability to strike a chord. But what chord? Some enjoyed the list – they too made lists. Some remembered Brooke’s good looks and sad death. Some responded to Thatcher’s reading and her ‘sincerity,’ and others wondered whether so much that made England *England* was now being lost? Many of Thatcher’s correspondents asked the prime minister to forward them a copy of Brooke’s poem, and many chose to send her their favourite poems, which they thought she might like. One of these was Kipling’s ‘If—.’ ‘The details of your life were fascinating,’ one correspondent wrote, ‘and took me back to Kipling’s ‘If—.’ – which they then quoted (‘from memory, so please excuse any misquotes’) – up to and including the final lines: ‘Yours is the earth & everything that’s in it, & what is more, You’ll be a man my son.’⁴³

In both cases the poetry found the desired response. They had done so by drawing on what Jason Whitaker calls the ‘entrenchment’ of certain lines of poetry in British public discourse. The form this entrenchment takes on television reveals both a national confidence, and national diffidence, and is inextricably bound up with a metropolitan view of England as the nation *primus inter pares*; the seductive greenness of Blake’s pleasant land does not extend west or north of any border, where the landscapes are harsher, and the

⁴² Thatcher Archive, Churchill College, Cambridge, letters dated 26 and 28 July and 3 August 1987; the quotes are used by kind permission of the Thatcher estate and on condition of anonymity for the authors.

⁴³ Thatcher Archive, Churchill College, Cambridge, undated letter (‘received 28/7’).

mountains higher. Most poetry has only fleeting moments in the television spotlight: 'Jerusalem' and 'If—' are different because of their ubiquity and their longevity, and because BBC television has treated them as representative of the nation – or a part of it. (The conditional and redemptive masculinity of Kipling's 'If—,' after all, was available only to a proportion of the population.) But the chord that the poetry strikes depended also on the speaker and the viewers. Thatcher and Attlee knew that poetry recital on television is a reciprocal process: the speaker associates him- or herself with the lines, but the viewers choose what to hear.

4. Identifying England

Towards the end of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, a phrase that had hitherto barely troubled those writing for Britain's broadsheet and literary press began to appear with remarkable regularity as journalists and commentators asked, 'what it means to be English?'

BBC television both led and followed the debate, and the question recurred on the news, in talks shows and in documentaries. As early as 1986, the about to be self-exiled author Jonathan Raban attempted an answer to the question of what it means to be English by reference to his memories of growing up in Norfolk.⁴⁴ A few years later the author (and biographer of Eliot and Blake) Peter Ackroyd could be heard discussing 'what it means to be English' with Andrew Marr on BBC1 and a decade later Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, discussed what it means to be English in a three-part series with

⁴⁴ *Bookmark: Jonathan Raban*, BBC2, 30 October 1986, 22.00.

the mildly provocative title, *How God Made the English* (2012).⁴⁵

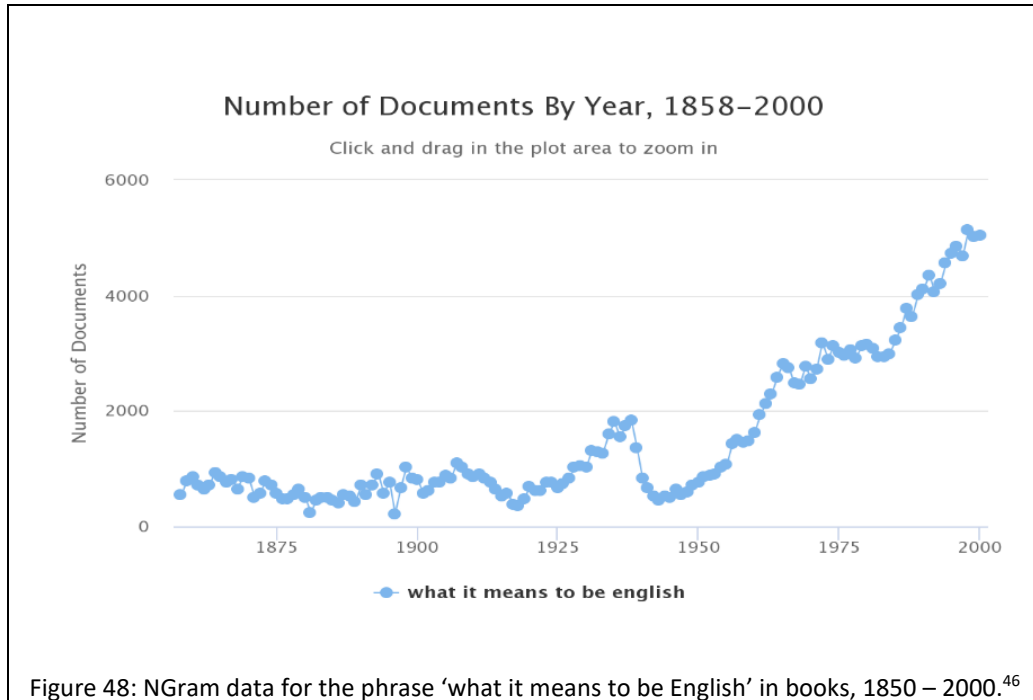


Figure 48: NGram data for the phrase ‘what it means to be English’ in books, 1850 – 2000.⁴⁶

As we shall see, a more general interest in books and in the press on the question of what it means to be English coincided with renewed interest on BBC television in Blake’s ‘Jerusalem,’ both as a poem and as the song set to Parry’s music, and in Kipling’s ‘If—.’ The answer to the question, and to the question of why it had now become a question, varied, but in the build-up to devolution in Scotland and Wales, and the 1997 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, it had traction. As Andrew Marr put it in his 2015 telling of the national story through poetry: ‘many contemporary historians now focus unashamedly on the story of England, when perhaps even a decade or two ago they would

⁴⁵*The Talk Show with Andrew Marr*, BBC2, 14 October 2002, 20.30; *How God Made the English*, BBC2, Fridays 21 March – 4 April 2012, 20.00.

⁴⁶In recent years the phrase appeared in the *Guardian* in 1986, in *The Times* in 1990, and *Daily Mail* in 1995; Source: Google <nGram> accessed 22.2.2021.

have automatically reached for Britain.⁴⁷

4.1. Blake and 'Jerusalem' on BBC television

Both poems proved challenging for television, in part because their creators were also known for works other than their poetry. Blake was an artist; Kipling was a writer of children's prose, and it was often in these capacities that they and their works had, until the last decade of the 20th century, been presented or seen on BBC television. BBC television coverage of Blake's work often coincided with new exhibitions of his art. His drawings and prints, after all, were easy to show on television.⁴⁸ The major television examination of his poetry was Christopher Burstall's *Tyger, Tyger*, first broadcast in 1967.⁴⁹ But in 2000, the debates about relevance of Blake's 'Jerusalem' to ideas of Englishness made it to the screen with a programme called *William Blake: Singing for England*. A second, more substantial investigation of the meanings of the poem followed in 2005 when the BBC tried to answer two questions which had been gaining currency: 'should England have its own national anthem, and should that song be Jerusalem?'⁵⁰ Its answer came in *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005).⁵¹

The backstory to 'Jerusalem' is well known. It continues to be a part of public discourse.⁵² When he wrote it, in or about 1804, Blake could hardly have

⁴⁷ Marr, *We British*, p xi.

⁴⁸ For example, *William Blake*, BBC TV, 19 August 1947, 21.15.

⁴⁹ *Omnibus presents: Tyger Tyger*, BBC One, 10 November 1967, 22.25. See Chapter Three.

⁵⁰ *William Blake: Singing for England*, BBC1, 6 November 2000, 22.35.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/m0014j4j>>accessed 12.09.2020.

⁵¹ *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England*, BBC4, 8 September 2005, 21.10.

⁵² For example, Áine Kim Kennedy, 'Jerusalem — how William Blake's poem became an anthem for all causes,' *Financial Times*, 1 May 2023, <<https://ig.ft.com/life-of-a->

imagined that the poem ‘would become one of the most important of English poems,’⁵³ still less that there would one day be public campaigns to raise funds to buy ‘for the nation’ the cottage in which he wrote it.⁵⁴ For much of the 19th century, the poem was little known. But in 1915 Robert Bridges, then the poet laureate, included ‘Jerusalem’ as a stand-alone poem in his anthology *The Spirit of Man*.⁵⁵ The collection – dedicated to the King – is unusual in several respects; the extracts are presented without translation in English and French, and with ‘no titles nor names or authors’ because ‘they would distract the attention and lead away the thought and even overrule consideration.’ The reader was ‘invited to bathe rather than fish in these waters.’⁵⁶ The reader had to swim a long way to reach ‘Jerusalem.’ It was buried – *sans* author or title – as extract number 411, between poems by Milton and Sir Walter Scott (on the virtues of England and Scotland respectively). This anticipated the way poetry would be treated in many television programmes – where poems are often read without titles and without acknowledgement of edits. It was only when Bridges invited Hubert Parry to set the lines to music that they came to widespread public attention. Much has been made of Bridges’ intention to use the poem to rally patriotic fervour for the organisation Fight for Right after the introduction of conscription in 1916, but this does him a disservice. His purpose was more subtle. Speaking before the first performance of ‘Jerusalem’ (at the Queen’s

[song/Jerusalem.html](#)>, accessed 11.5.2023.

⁵³ Jason Whittaker ‘Blake and the New Jerusalem: Art and English Nationalism into the Twenty-First Century,’ *Visual Culture in Britain*, 2018, 19:3, 380-392, DOI: 10.1080/14714787.2018.1524312, p 380.

⁵⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/sep/23/campaigners-buy-william-blakes-cottage-and-his-vegetable-patch>, accessed 12.08.2020.

⁵⁵ Robert Bridges, *The Spirit of Man*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1916).

⁵⁶ Bridges, *The Spirit of Man*, 1.

Hall in London on 28 March 1916) Bridges quoted a French pacifist to the effect that a nation under conditions of war must ‘protect its good sense from the hallucinations, injustices and follies that the plague lets loose.’⁵⁷ The point of the poem-anthem was not to rally the troops, nor to rouse the public, but to enable the nation to maintain a sense of proportion in a time of war. Parry, quickly disillusioned by the jingoism that became attached to the song, withdrew support from Fight for Right.⁵⁸ He was happier when it was performed at Suffrage demonstrations at the Albert Hall in 1917 and 1919. Parry wrote to Millicent Garrett Fawcett that he hoped that it would become ‘the Women’s Suffrage hymn,’ and later he assigned copywrite in the work to Fawcett and the Women’s Suffragette Movement.⁵⁹ Over time it became enjoyed as the anthem for an existing England and as an anthem for those aspiring to a different England. As Andrew Marr notes, ‘Jerusalem’ is one of Blake’s two ‘special poems,’ and he calls Blake’s phrases ‘loaded.’ So, they proved to be, as the poem ‘has, hilariously, become the official theme – via the Suffragettes – of Conservative England.’⁶⁰

Neither Blake nor ‘Jerusalem’ received any exposure on BBC television prior to 1939. The poem – in the form of the song – was first mentioned in the listings as part of *Last Night of the Proms* in 1953 – repeated in 1954 and 1955. As television, the screenings of *Last Night of the Proms* did not impose images

⁵⁷ Bridges’s speech is reproduced in *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 April 1916, 162.

⁵⁸ Keri Davies, ‘Blake Set to Music,’ in *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture*, Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly, and Jason Whittaker eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 192-193.

⁵⁹ Charles Graves, *Hubert Parry, His Life and Works, Volume 2*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), 92.

⁶⁰ Marr, *We British*, 249-250.

on the song; other than to linger on shots of the Union flags being waved by the audience. The moment at which the images of the poem became a part of the imagery of television was the summer of 1969 when the BBC – under producer Edward Mirzoeff – took advantage of the new cameras of colour television and devoted a full programme to images of the changing landscape of Britain filmed from the air. The resulting programme was called *Bird's Eye View – Green and Pleasant Land*, in which John Betjeman matched a selection of poems to a series of aerial shots of England.⁶¹ The tone was apocalyptic: the 'passion of the English for the countryside is equalled only by their skill at destroying it.'⁶² For forty-five minutes the programme listed the many bleak ways in which what has come to be called the Anthropocene was destroying England's 'green and pleasant land.' The association between the aerial shots of the landscape, and the title of the programme was firmly established. Subsequently the tension between nostalgia and optimism, between pride and lament endured. When in 1973, as an initiative of the European Broadcasting Union, seven countries collaborated on 'seven films about aspects of their past,' the BBC chose to consider the impact of the industrial revolution – seen through the prism of 'Jerusalem.' Did, the programme wondered, 'the idea of Jerusalem, Blake's promised city, still hold a meaning?'⁶³ Was what was lost, lost forever? Similarly, in a 'dramatised essay' broadcast in 1969, the public intellectual Jacob Bronowski argued that Blake believed that, 'man's

⁶¹ *Bird's Eye View – Green and Pleasant Land*, BBC2, 22 June 1969, 19.15, available at <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/birds-eye-view--green-and-pleasant-land/zdcpwty>> accessed 12.09.2020.

⁶² *Radio Times* listing; <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/p013yr34>> accessed 22.2.2021.

⁶³ *European Heritage: Towards Jerusalem: a revolution and its aftermath*, BBC2, 15 September 1973, 20.15.

imagination would enable him to rise free. He believed Jerusalem could be built among the satanic mills.⁶⁴ Earlier that year the television service commissioned the architectural critic, Ian Nairn, to consider the ‘face of changing Britain.’ He too framed his quest in terms of Blake: the programme was called *Nairn at Large*, and the first episode was subtitled *Dark Satanic Mills?* – but his ‘take’ was a little different: ‘For the past hundred years the British have looked on their industrial landscape as something devoid of beauty. Ian Nairn believes that because of this attitude we are missing some of the most spectacular grandeur in Britain.’⁶⁵

On television, therefore, ‘Jerusalem’ could be and was used for either of two purposes: to lament what was lost, or to anticipate a paradise to come. Its purpose was not to communicate Blake’s vision, nor to ask his famous four questions, but to act as a stand-in for an ongoing debate about what the country had or could become. Whether discussing paradise lost or paradise desired, the poetic shorthand applied. It was always broadcast in reference to some other set of desires or ambitions. Backed by frequent appearances on *Desert Island Discs*, *Last Night at the Proms*, and *Praise Be!* and in *Songs of Praise*,⁶⁶ the words of the poem acquired a degree of ‘television momentum.’ When in 1970 the broadcaster James Cameron gathered the leaders of the British left to discuss the successes and failures of British socialism (in yet another programme to take its title from ‘Jerusalem’), Keir Hardie’s dream was

⁶⁴ *William Blake 1757-1827: As A Man Is - So He Sees*, BBC2, 6 February 1969, 21.05.

⁶⁵ *Nairn at Large: Dark Satanic Mills*, BBC1, 7 January 1969, 22.50.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/8952cf5db2ac465a87949aa373cb60a0>> accessed 21.10.2021.

⁶⁶ For example, *Songs of Praise for Battle of Britain Sunday*, BBC1, 19 September 1965, 18.55.

captured by the loaded meanings of that single word: 'Jerusalem has been a long time coming.'⁶⁷ Similarly, a single reference to the poem-song could adequately capture a popular view of a particular kind of woman: 'People say all we do is make jam and sing 'Jerusalem,' and that's nonsense,' a character protested in a 1975 episode of the magazine programme *Look, Stranger*.⁶⁸ The person then went on to explain how she sold £1m worth of jam every year through the Women's Institute.

These broadcasts conflated the poem and the song. Parry (47 hits) is listed far more often than Blake (15) in the BBC Programme Index archive, but it is the words, not the music that carried the significance. Edward Mirzoeff was the first, but by no means the last, to use 'green and pleasant land' in a film title, and it was difficult to make (or advertise) programmes about the English landscape without a reference to the threat to its 'green and pleasant land' from real or imagined 'dark satanic mills.'⁶⁹ For example, Edward Mirzoeff's 1969 series, *Bird's Eye View* in which John Betjeman and others took a helicopter tour of Great Britain to show the damage wrought by 'progress' on 'England's green and pleasant land,' and Danny Boyle's 'green and pleasant land' in the 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony.⁷⁰ By the 1990s, when 'what it means to be English' had become a frequently asked question, the poem had become one of the phrases frequently used by those who would say

⁶⁷ *Cameron Country: the Sleeping Sword*, BBC2, 14 February 1970, 20.15.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/9e147710fea145fd8a3ab91cd8732321>> accessed 22.1.2020.

⁶⁸ *Look, Stranger: Who Is Sylvia?* BBC2, 20 January 1975, 19.45.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c086dd7cef474586b24f50f1cfd5b9ee>> accessed 22.1.2020.

⁶⁹ <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/887aeda2eb064cf8808b964924a87845> accessed 3.2.2020.

⁷⁰ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36903975>> accessed 28.6.2021.

something about England.

4.2. Kipling's 'If—'

'Jerusalem,' though contested, was seldom the subject of parody or satire. Kipling's 'If—,' by contrast, has been re-worked, edited, imitated, and parodied on television and elsewhere. In a BBC poll in 1995, the nation voted 'If—' its favourite poem.⁷¹ The poem topped further BBC polls in 2005 and 2009.⁷² 'What we expected, I do not know,' Griff Rhys Jones wrote in his introduction to the anthology that followed the 1995 vote. 'Possibly that no one who watched television would have the slightest interest in poetry, that dirty limericks would dominate, that Shakespeare or Wordsworth would romp home.'⁷³ In the event a little over 12,000 people voted – and 'If—' was a clear winner, with twice as many votes as its nearest rival. ('Jerusalem' did not feature; of Blake's works, only 'The Tyger' made the top 100.) The poll, and the accompanying publicity, thrust 'If—' into the public eye. It quickly was taken up by a variety of organisations. In 1997 the All-England Lawn Tennis Club, so closely associated with the BBC through its coverage of Wimbledon, had the lines about the twin impostors of 'triumph' and 'disaster' inscribed above the door through which players walk on their way to Centre Court. In a celebrated segment from 1998, the presenter Des Lynam used 'If—' to introduce coverage

⁷¹ 'If—was the favourite poem; TS Eliot the favourite poet.'
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/vote_results.shtml> accessed 3.5.2020. Independent, 13 October 1995, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/rudyard-kiplings-if-voted-nations-favourite-poem-1577258.html>> accessed 14.05.2020

⁷² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/26/robert-frost-radio-4-favourite-poem>, accessed 21.8.2021.

⁷³ Griff Rhys Jones, *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, (London: BBC Books, 1996), 5.

of the FIFA World Cup football tournament.⁷⁴ In 2008 the BBC persuaded Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal to record a reading of an abridged version of the poem prior to their clash in that year's Wimbledon Men's Singles final.⁷⁵ The boxer Chris Eubank read it in 2014⁷⁶ and in 2019 it was 'reimagined for women' by 'spoken word artist Deanna Rodger.'⁷⁷ In 2020 the BBC used the poem to promote the Six Nations rugby tournament.⁷⁸ The poem's prominence on television is in contrast to the relative (televisual) anonymity of the rest of Kipling's poetry. This was in contrast to his prose works. There were regular remakes of *The Jungle Book*, the *Just-So Stories*, *Kim*, and *Stalky & Co*. But there were few films about Kipling. For much of the television age, unlike, say Eliot, Kipling, the poet, was little known on BBC television.

There appear to be three reasons for this. The first is that Kipling, lived long enough to see the launch of the BBC. He neither liked, nor supported it. He saw the broadcaster as both cheap and cheapening, and, except for special occasions (Empire Day, Remembrance Sunday), he was reluctant to allow his works to be broadcast, certainly not for the kind of money on offer. 'At present,' he wrote to the publisher Frank Doubleday in 1925, 'the fatal defect of the B.B.C. here is that they think the honour of being broad-casted (sic) is almost

⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjuihw2q_Ts> accessed 3.5.2020.

⁷⁵ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=is-JCJCUy18>> accessed 5.5.2020.

⁷⁶ Eubank recited the poem during an interview about his son. The BBC called it 'surreal'. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/av/boxing/30208505>> accessed 3.5.2020.

⁷⁷ If reimagined for woman by 'spoken word artists Deanna Rodger'. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/48112411>> accessed 3.5.2020.

⁷⁸ 'Kipling's IF Inspiration for Six Nations,' BBC website, 28 Jan 2020, 'To help you get in the mood for the 2020 Six Nations enjoy Star Wars and Pirates of the Caribbean actor Steve Spiers' narration of Rudyard Kipling's poem IF,' <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/av/rugby-union/51278281>> accessed 8.3.2020.

sufficient fee in itself.⁷⁹ The second reason is to do with timing. Kipling died in January 1936, a few months before the television service began. As we have seen elsewhere, it took many years for the BBC to find an accommodation with poetry – how to use it, how to show it, how to make it television. By the time it did, in the 1960s, Kipling’s reputation as the voice of empire was out of keeping with the times, and within the tight circles of the Arts, Features and Talks departments of BBC television he had few champions. When, finally, programme makers began to turn their gaze on poets, in the years of *Monitor*, Kipling was not one of the first names that came to producers’ minds. And the third reason is that Kipling’s poetry was not held in high regard. Although his reputation as a poet, beginning with Eliot’s partial defence in 1941⁸⁰, grew in the post war period, he was primarily known for his prose works. It was these that featured on BBC television.

It was only in 1973 that BBC television grappled with Kipling the poet, when it sent Kingsley Amis, by then well-established as literary provocateur, to Kipling’s old house at Batemans in Sussex to discuss the author and his work.⁸¹ Amis had recently completed a modest biography of Kipling.⁸² In its listing, the *Radio Times*, identifies the sin of which it is as guilty as anyone else: ‘Rudyard Kipling has given more memorable phrases to the English language than almost any 20th-century writer. But because they’re so often quoted out of context, he’s been more often misunderstood than almost any English writer.’⁸³ (Griff

⁷⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling: 1920-30* (Des Moines: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 252.

⁸⁰ T. S. Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941).

⁸¹ *Rudyard Kipling Lived Here*, BBC2, 19 July 1973, 22.45.

⁸² Kingsley Amis, *Rudyard Kipling* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

⁸³ <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c8524170147746fd9cdacb5a2e7390ee>>, accessed 3.5.2020.

Rhys Jones made the same point when presenting *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006): ‘Kipling,’ he said, ‘brought the real empire into the living room. He created its language.’⁸⁴ The question – which Amis asked, and to which he offered an answer – was why he was peeking over the wall of Batemans in 1974? Why then?

His answer was that it was only then that Kipling’s critical reputation, both literary and political, had recovered sufficiently to allow his thoughts, as opposed to his stories, back into the mainstream of television. This rehabilitation struggle, in Amis’s telling of it, had been going on from as early as 1900, when its tone was set by Richard Le Gallienne’s *Rudyard Kipling: a criticism*. The book is ‘full of penetrating critical remarks, true and false predictions, and a mild liberal panic.’⁸⁵ It is the last that endures, and the default starting point for most criticism since is that Kipling was ‘nothing if not reactionary,’ but the most damning accusation of all was ‘not the current vogue for epithets like “racist” or “imperialist,” but that those who looked back on the agonies of 1914-18 felt that “what Kipling stood for” helped to bring them about.’⁸⁶ But the poems remained elusive and difficult for television. It was not until 1997, following the 1995 vote, that Kipling was the subject of a full arts documentary. But *Omnibus: If – a Film about Rudyard Kipling* (1997) is a kind of literary detective story in which actor Mace Richards embarks on ‘a quest’ to find Kipling’s first, and unpublished novel.⁸⁷ The programme was not well received – the review in the *Independent* was particularly scathing – and

⁸⁴ Griff Rhys Jones, *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006), 03:45 – 04:00.

⁸⁵ Kingsley Amis, *Rudyard Kipling*, 110.

⁸⁶ Kingsley Amis, *Rudyard Kipling*, 112.

⁸⁷ *Omnibus: If – a Film about Rudyard Kipling*, BBC1, 10 August 1997, 22.45.

was at best a failed attempt to broaden the range of possible arts programmes.⁸⁸ A similar quest was underway in *Timewatch: The Boer War: The First Media War* (1997), which used ‘diaries, memoirs, photographs and films [in an] examination of the media’s role in a conflict that saw young journalists Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling and writer Edgar Wallace make their names.’⁸⁹ The repeats of the *Just So Stories* continued, and his works remained in the public eye. When the BBC decided to seek the public’s views of who or what belonged in *The People’s Museum* in 2006, Kipling was voted in, alongside Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Apollo 10. Griff Rhys Jones appears to have a point. ‘We speak Kipling’s words,’ he says in *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale*, ‘almost without being aware of it. He is the most quoted writer since Shakespeare.’⁹⁰

5. How did BBC television re-create the poems?

In using these two poems to reflect and represent the nations of the United Kingdom the BBC associated the words with particular kinds of images. The edits meant also that certain lines and phrases became entrenched to the exclusion of others. They also showed how poetry can effectively be used to make television, and were a vindication of the vision of Christopher Burstall in 1967 in his *Omnibus* film *Tyger, Tyger* (see Chapter Three) when he realised that the best way to present poetry on television was not to present performances of it, but to present viewers’ responses to readings and other

⁸⁸ Thomas Sutcliffe, ‘Last Night’ in *The Independent*, 11 August 1997, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/last-night-5555113.html>> accessed 22.3.2023.

⁸⁹ *Timewatch: The Boer War: the first media war*, BBC2, 18 March 1997, 21.00.

⁹⁰ *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006), 04:25 – 04:37.

performances of poetry.

5.1. 'If—' repurposed as biography

Once chosen as the nation's favourite poem, the familiar lines of 'If—,' its 'worthy list of improbable provisos,' was firmly embedded in a national reservoir of memorable speech, but certain phrases had proven more memorable than others. Two iterations of the poem illustrate this clearly. In neither case was the entire poem broadcast; in neither case was the *same* poem broadcast. But both were a significant intervention into how a poem would be read, consumed, imagined, understood, and remembered.

In 2006, the BBC made a film called *Kipling, a Remembrance Tale*, one in a series of films designed to be broadcast on 11 November each year. In a reprise of the Amis programme from 1973, the presenter Griff Rhys Jones went to Kipling's old house, Bateman's in Sussex, to tell the story of the loss of Kipling's son, Jack, in the Battle of Loos in September 1915. Not for the first time, producers chose to treat a poem as being in some sense autobiographical. Again, the filmmakers turned to 'If—,' but this time the question implied by the conditional was turned on Kipling. The opening sequence of the film shows a postal worker coming to the door at Bateman's while Kipling – the actor playing Kipling – labours at his desk upstairs. His wife takes the telegram and carries it up to Kipling. The words – or rather selected lines – of 'If—' are read as the tragedy of the death of John Kipling in France in 1915 is revealed. But which lines? As in other biographies, the poem is not named and the elisions are not admitted, but in this film Kipling's four stanzas of eight lines each have become a concise untitled poem of eight lines. The greyed-out lines were omitted:

If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
 If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
 But make allowance for their doubting too;
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
 Or being hated, don't give way to hating,

And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
 And treat those two impostors just the same;
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings
 And never breathe a word about your loss;
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you, but none too much;
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!⁹¹

On screen Kipling opens the telegram, and the written message reveals the terrible truth of his son's death in battle. The actor playing Caroline Kipling screams; Kipling looks distraught but remains silent – and the film cuts to Rhys Jones in the garden at Bateman's, where he says, 'That telegram that was delivered here to Rudyard Kipling was perhaps the worst news that any parent could want to hear. Their beloved only son John was reported missing in

⁹¹ Text as broadcast; full poem from T. S. Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, 273.

action.⁹² He goes on to link the death of John Kipling to the death of Kipling's vision of empire. And then the film moved on. 'If—' was neither heard nor seen again.



Figure 49: Poetry written: *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006).⁹³

So what was it doing in the film? As in other biographies, the poem is de-contextualised, edited, undated and stripped of its title. The difference is that this film did not treat the poem as testimony. It was not Kipling (or the producer) telling the audience how he felt (or would feel), nor does it describe what he had seen, nor what he had been. Nor are the questions the poem poses resolved. There is no final line, no redeeming 'You'll be a man, my son.' There was no need, for the point of the lines in the film is not to be the poem that Kipling had written, but to remind audiences that Kipling was the man who

⁹² *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006), 02:44 – 03:00.

⁹³ *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006), 01:05.

wrote lines they remembered, and that he was, therefore, a legitimate subject for television. At best, the use of the lines at this point might suggest that they had helped Kipling deal with the trauma of losing his son, but there is nothing Kipling wrote to suggest this was the case, and nor does the film belabour the point. Although the poem takes the form of a letter to Kipling's son, it was actually written as a tribute to Leander Starr Jameson, who led an unsuccessful and widely criticised mercenary raid on the Transvaal in 1895-96. To analyse the meaning of the actual words – to 'get down amongst them,' in Simon Armitage's phrase – would be to invite ridicule. When portraying the anguish of the Kipling family, the rhetoric of 'Triumph and Disaster' must pale beside the grim reality of death. The disaster which confronts the Kipling family at that moment is all too real – as Griff Rhys Jones acknowledges, the 'worst news that any parent could want to hear' – and is hardly an 'impostor.' And yet these are the lines read as the actor playing Kipling is confronted by the personal cost of war.

5.2. 'If—' repurposed as sporting metaphor

When BBC television invited Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal to read the poem two years later, prior to their meeting in the Wimbledon Men's Final of 2008, a similar editing process occurred. This time twelve lines were omitted (in grey, below). Federer, who spoke English with greater ease than Nadal, read 16 of the 20 lines that remained; Nadal read the other four.

If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
 If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
 But make allowance for their doubting too;
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
 Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
 And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same;
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:
 If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings
 And never breathe a word about your loss;
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you, but none too much;
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

5.3. Poetry as a buffet of memorable lines

The two editions agree that the most important lines of the poems, the ones most firmly 'entrenched' (in Jason Whittaker's phrase) in the national reservoir of memorable speech, are the first four lines, which embody characteristics thought to be particularly British: self-belief, the moderation of self-belief through doubt, the implied superiority ('—while others—') and the knowledge that this superiority entails a kind of loneliness ('—are blaming it on you—'). What the two editions also agree is that for the rest the poem acts as a kind of all-you-can-eat buffet, in which no one line is so important that it must be included, but that all are available to be picked at as required, until the producers' or viewers' appetites for conditional speculation is satisfied.

They also demonstrate just how malleable poetry has been when turned into television: in *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale*, the poem acts in concert with the visual sequence to drive forward the narrative. The visual sequence (the letter arriving, the letter being carried up the stairs, the exchange of glances

between the actors playing Kipling and his wife) is matched by the emotional narrative entailed in the conditional 'if.' 'If' implies something will happen; an unopened letter being carried upstairs does the same. But the actual meaning of the rest of the words is relatively unimportant. It would hardly have affected the emotional or narrative power of the sequence had the producers chosen a different four lines from 'If—' (the four beginning 'If you can dream, for example). For it was not the poem, nor its actual words that mattered; what mattered was the association with its author and his fame, and with a set of presumed and desired national characteristics (stoicism, self-belief, doubt), and their relevance to each viewer at the moment (whatever that moment may be) of their greatest trial or tribulation.



Figure 50: Roger Federer reads Kipling's 'If—,' BBC Sport, 2008.⁹⁴

When presented as sporting metaphor the sequence was cut to images

⁹⁴ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=is-JCJCUy18>>, accessed 5.5.2020.

of the two players performing: winning, losing, resting, breathing. But did the words matter? The answer is that only the conditional ‘if’ and the final line are important for what the words say. For here, again, the poem has been edited. Lines which may be thought relevant to sporting endeavour – those of the third stanza for example (‘If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew | To serve your turn long after they are gone, | And so hold on when there is nothing in you | Except the Will’) – are omitted. Others with less obvious immediate relevance (‘don’t look too good, nor talk too wise’) are retained. The poem, in this version, is more clearly than ever only one of several elements that make up the entire televisual sequence. The rivalry between Federer and Nadal, their accented English, the slow-motion cuts of action from the tennis court and the added music – the soundtrack from the motion picture *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* – all contribute. But nor were the two tennis players reading just any poem. The poem means something: transmediation does not strip it of all meaning. It was, after all, the nation’s favourite poem. One interpretation might be that used in this way, read by these global superstars, cut to these images and to this music, and broadcast on the BBC, the poem can be taken to mean that (for men at least) there is redemption in sport (‘you’ll be a man, my son’), and by implication that there is redemption in being part of the nation that created not only Kipling and his poetry, but also Wimbledon and the BBC.

5.4. ‘If—’ reimagined

Within a decade, however, the BBC found itself ‘re-imagining’ the poem. The explicit masculinity of Kipling’s redemption excluded half the population. The BBC invited the poet Deanna Rodger to write a new version of – or homage to – Kipling’s ‘If—.’ This version, first broadcast by the BBC to promote its ‘summer of sport’ in 2019, had 28 lines:

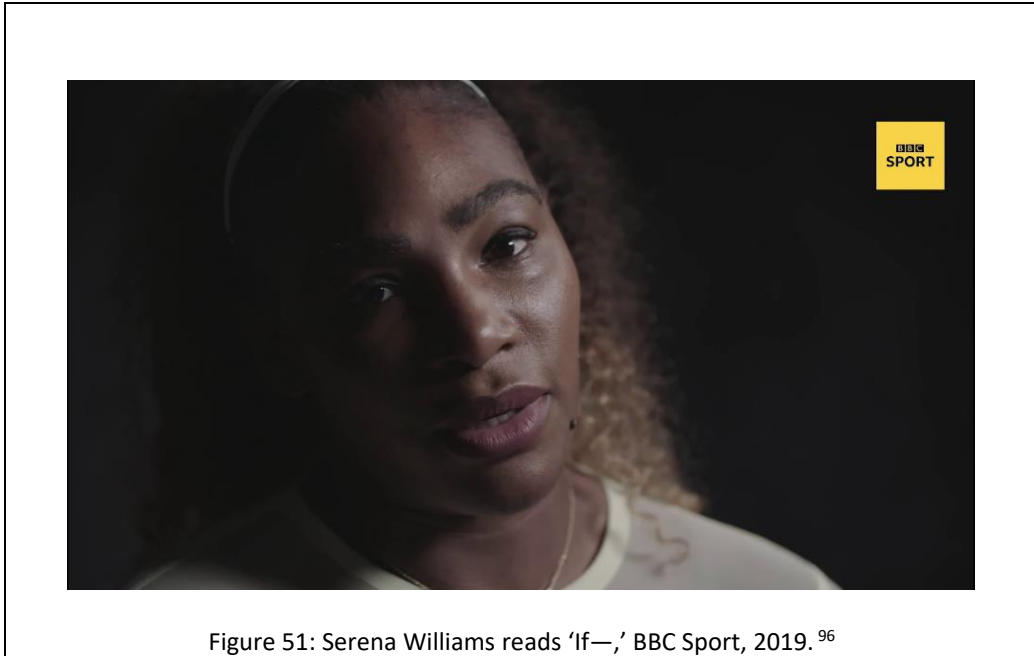
Deanna Rodger's If (2019)⁹⁵

If you can keep your head when those around you
Don't notice what you do;
If you can trust yourself when others doubt you,
Because the only trust you need comes from you;
If you believe in more than you have ever seen;
If you dream big every time you train;
If you've ever learned about winning and losing,
And how to treat those feelings both the same;
If you stand against trolls and gossip
That twist your words into clickbait headlines;
If you've been hated and kept on chasing champion status,
Taking any backlash in your stride;
If you can chase the wins despite injuries
Which have sat you out from selection,
And all alone face your recovery,
Refusing to let it bench ambition;
If you can force your focus and your muscles,
When they've nothing left to give,
To keep on working and, despite the struggle,
Dig deep and say... "I can do this!"
If your heart beats loud at stadium support,
And if you leave it all in the ring, on the track, the pitch or court,
You'll know that greatness is greater than gold,
It's inspiring change from what's gone before;
If you've ever felt unstoppable,
Or felt that together is what makes you strong,
Yours will be the world to take by storm,
And you'll be a woman - who's won!

For the BBC broadcast, it was cut to a series of images of British and international sporting stars at their training and in competition, with a few flash frames of women marching in political demonstrations. A few weeks later, the BBC invited Serena Williams, one of the greatest tennis players of all time, to

⁹⁵ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/48112411>>. The page includes a full transcript of the re-imagined poem. Accessed 12.1.2023.

read it.



This time the reading was cut to a series of images of Williams herself as a child, in training, with her sister, and in action on the court. In this version, six lines of the re-imagined poem were omitted. Does it matter which ones? They were the 6 lines that most closely echoed the sentiments of Kipling's 'If—'

If you can trust yourself when others doubt you,
 Because the only trust you need comes from you;
 If you believe in more than you have ever seen;
 If you dream big every time you train;
 If you've ever learned about winning and losing,
 And how to treat those feelings both the same;

But it seems that it does not matter. The poem was promoted as a 're-imagining' of Kipling's poem; it is better understood as a new work that was

⁹⁶ <<https://www.bbc.com/sport/av/56294852>>. Accessed 12.1.2023.

similar to Kipling's poem only in that it used the rhetorical device of the repeated conditional, and crucially, challenging his gendered conclusion. It has fewer lines than 'If—,' uses a different scansion and, to the extent that it is one, a different rhyme pattern. In the reading by Williams, the key phrases remain: the repeated 'if,' and the final line (which, incidentally, is a denial of the sentiment of Kipling's exhortation to treat the impostors of 'triumph' and 'disaster' just the same): 'you'll be a woman who's won.'

The effect of the piece, as was the case in *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale*, and as was the case for Federer and Nadal's reading of 'If—,' is the same irrespective of which lines are omitted. For with few exceptions, poetry on television works most powerfully or in the words of D.G. Bridson, 'delivers its entire impact' not through the words, but through a set of external associations, brought by viewers to the experience of viewing. The few exceptions are those lines so memorable that they are more powerful than television: 'they fuck you up your mum and dad,' 'green and pleasant land,' 'dark satanic mills,' and 'you'll be a man my son.' Other than this very narrow anthology, the words from poems broadcast on television are fleeting and gone; it is the associated television image that remains, more memorable, and more powerful. 'If—' proved to be the perfect television poem; a simple title, a much-quoted final line, a poem written in the second person, and a cultural milieu in which its 'worthy list of unlikely scenarios' can be bent by any viewer to any purpose. In using 'If—' to reflect and represent the nation, the BBC has learned the lesson of seventy years of broadcasting poetry: that poetry on television works best when the subject is you.

5.5. Filming England's anthem

In Chapter Four, I examined how poems on television are often repurposed as testimony; the story of 'Jerusalem' on television is a story of how a poem acquired a momentum in which what was communicated was not the whole poem, but its associated images. The four questions with which the poem

begins, and to all of which the answer is ‘no,’ provoke occasional humour, but the power of the poem on television comes from the accumulated set of associations with three phrases: ‘Jerusalem,’ ‘green and pleasant land’ and ‘dark, satanic mills,’ all of which became a shorthand for something else, and all of which were repeated in programme titles, in reviews in the press, in electronic programme guides, in listings and in the comments of countless people interviewed on television.

The television critic Nancy Banks-Smith had a phrase to which she returned when reviewing programmes that used poetry or were about poets. In a review of Christopher Burstall’s *Tyger, Tyger!* (1967) she wrote that ‘you see God and a poem best with your eyes shut.’⁹⁷ Reviewing *Poems in their Place* (1982) a few years later, she wrote, ‘Poems like kisses are hard to transfer to television because the tendency with both is to close your eyes.’⁹⁸ The point is taken, and generations of BBC producers tasked to put poetry on television would agree. The images of television and the words of poetry do not always sit easily together. An effective antidote to the poisoned chalice of television images is to close one’s eyes. And yet there seem at times to be an inevitability to the sequences constructed around certain poems, to the point that audiences might imagine them, even with their eyes closed. The second stanza of Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts* (see Chapter One) is one example. Since the poem describes a famous painting, the film about the poem uses images of the painting to cover the reading of the poem. There are other poems, whose evocative power is such that one imagines an audience with its eyes shut would

⁹⁷ Nancy Banks-Smith, ‘Television,’ *Guardian*, 4 Jan 1978, 8.

⁹⁸ Nancy Banks-Smith, ‘Television,’ *Guardian*, 12 March 1982, 8.

‘see’ with a high degree of fidelity what the producers had chosen to put on screen. ‘Jerusalem’ is one such poem.



Figure 52: Dominant images; *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005).⁹⁹

Ever since John Betjeman took to the sky in a helicopter to record the first colour film of *Bird's Eye View: A Green and Pleasant Land* (1969), the twin images of England's 'green and pleasant land' despoiled by 'dark, satanic mills' are commonly used. The introductory sequences of two films, *William Blake – Singing for England* (2000) and *Jerusalem – An Anthem for England* (2005) both use choral versions of 'Jerusalem' set to Hubert Parry's music. And both cut to images that are strikingly similar and familiar. They are images of rolling green hills and of industrial blights on that landscape.

The first of these two programmes was made to coincide with a new exhibition of Blake's works at the Tate Gallery in London. It began with striking

⁹⁹ *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005), 00:59.

image of the earth from space, cut to a reading of another famous line from Blake: 'To see the world in a grain of sand, and eternity in an hour.'¹⁰⁰ The subsequent introduction told audiences that: 'The man who wrote those lines was an 18th century poet and painter who set out to change our very perception of reality, to see beyond time and space to the eternal world of the spirit [...] His vision of England was of a promised land with himself as its national poet and prophet.'¹⁰¹ The word 'prophet' was key. The next two interviews in the film were with the critic Tom Paulin and the poet Kathleen Raine both of whom used the same word. Blake, said Paulin, was 'one of the guardians of an island people and he carries that weight like an Old Testament prophet.'¹⁰² 'It could not be said of any other English writer that he was our national prophet,' said Raine. 'He is the most important influence in transforming national consciousness which we have.'¹⁰³

This is the difference: 'Jerusalem' more than any other poem discussed in this thesis was about the collective, the nation. The importance of 'Jerusalem' to the nation rather than (as, say, in the case of Auden) a poet's importance to each individual member of the nation, meant that there is a discernible difference in how the poem was presented and discussed on television. Where the poem means something different to each individual, discussions of its meaning are difficult for television, which is time limited, and which depends as much on images as words. Where, however, the presumption is that a poem means something to different constituencies within the nation, and where that

¹⁰⁰ *William Blake: Singing for England* (2000), 00:40 – 00:50.

¹⁰¹ *William Blake: Singing for England* (2000), 00:50 – 01:10.

¹⁰² *William Blake: Singing for England* (2000), 02:25 – 03:00.

¹⁰³ *William Blake: Singing for England* (2000), 03:05 – 03:20.

meaning is embraced, albeit in different terms, by people of all shades of political opinion, the poem opens up new opportunities for television. The poem, as both films point out, appealed to all shades of the political spectrum. *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005) asked, 'how that song struck a chord at the core of the English establishment— and yet remained a song of protest?'¹⁰⁴ To answer this question the programme marshalled a selection of voices from across the spectrum (the politician Ann Widdecombe for the right; the musician Billy Bragg for the left.) Each offered views on what the poem was about, expressed as what it meant for them. It is 'the one time I feel pride in being English' (Bragg); 'it represents my feeling about what I want England to become' (Roy Hattersley), 'it's about how we perceive England and would like England to be' (anonymous nudist), and 'about rural England' (Antonia Byatt). Even the far-right British National Party was allowed its say.

And yet for all that the terms of debate (it's about 'us,' not 'me') are different, the treatment of the poem is remarkably similar. Throughout the film, except over the final credit sequence when it was sung by members of a gospel choir, the poem was never performed in full. Extracts were sung, quoted, and shown on screen, but only over the final credit sequence is the full poem heard. Again and again, contributors discuss what the film means to them, and why they love it. But only twice do those interviewed 'get down amongst the words.' The poet and critic Blake Morrison notes that the poem is 'quintessential Blake. You've got ideas of England. I mean, the word "England" tolls through the poem three times,' and the activist-musician Billy Bragg argues

¹⁰⁴ *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005), 00:59 – 01:05.

that, 'The most important lines are the final couple of lines. Having said, "bring Me my spear", "bring ME my chariot of fire", there's this final, collective ideal that WE, together, shall build Jerusalem.'¹⁰⁵ But for most, the meanings of 'Jerusalem,' the emotions it stirs, the ideas it promulgates, the scansion and metre and rhyme it uses, all matter less than a set of associations that exist outside of the poem, and with which BBC television is much more at ease. For this is the fate of such poetry on television: to be recognised as important, to be discussed in abstract, to be edited, elided, and reordered, to be cut to images different from those created by the words, and then to have its origins as a composition of words largely ignored.

¹⁰⁵ *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005), 29:29 – 29:41.

6. Conclusion

For much of the period under discussion, poetry was thought of as a problem for BBC television. The idea that poetry was somehow problematic had its roots in how the discussion was framed. Influential producers such as D.G. Bridson, and poets such as Cecil Day Lewis, started from the view that the project must be to use television to present poetry, rather than to use poetry to make television. They added that this was something of an obligation. The BBC was not just a broadcaster; it was the national broadcaster and poetry was a national art form, which the BBC was obliged to televise. The problem was that to put poetry on television was not a neutral act. To broadcast poetry was an act of transmediation; it was to make it something other than the work that the poet, in another time and place, had created. It was to choose which lines of which poems were broadcast, and it was to change how poetry was experienced, how it was understood, how it was remembered, and with what images it was associated. How then could the national broadcaster present the national art form on television when to do so was also to alter it?

There were other possible ways to frame the discussion. The dominant refrain was that the BBC should 'get poetry on television,' not that the BBC should 'exploit poetry to make television.' But the dominant *practice* has been the latter. From the first experiments with the *Pepler Masques* (1938) and *The White Chateau* (1938) to *Why Poetry Matters* (2009), the BBC has used poetry as an ingredient in the making of television. Often this has been done with great success. In Chapter Three I highlighted *Omnibus: Tyger, Tyger* (1967). I could have chosen many others. The *Monitor* films of 1958-65 have stood the test of time. The BBC's first biography of Eliot, *The Mysterious Mr Eliot* (1971), stands out both (as the BBC acknowledged at the time), as a 'work of art in its own

right' and 'of serious merit as a genuine work of scholarship.'¹⁰⁶ Peter Ackroyd's investigation of the lives and impact of *The Romantics* (2006) brought very high production values to putting poetry on television, and in *Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell* (2009), the eponymous presenter brought *Paradise Lost* to the screen with empathy, intelligence and visual flair. Making such programmes, and using poetry in this way, is wholly in keeping with the BBC's Charter. The need to provide a news service, or to educate the nation or to reflect British culture are not all that the BBC is enjoined to do. The current Charter's definition of the Corporation's 'public purposes' offers a further aim:

To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services: the BBC should provide high-quality output in many different genres and across a range of services and platforms which sets the standard in the United Kingdom and internationally. Its services should be distinctive from those provided elsewhere and should take creative risks, even if not all succeed, in order to develop fresh approaches and innovative content.¹⁰⁷

Previous iterations of the charter were less prescriptive, but the intention was always that the BBC should, in the words of the 1937 Charter, have a broad remit to 'develop and exploit' cultural and technological resources to provide a television service.¹⁰⁸ Poetry, as with music, or art, or literature, was one of those resources.

The problem of poetry on television, in this sense, was self-inflicted, but it reflected two further concerns which recur in discussions of the BBC: that the

¹⁰⁶ WAC, T42/118/1, Norman Swallow to H.F.G. Tel., 'Television Arts Policy,' 24 April 1973.

¹⁰⁷ 'BBC Charter,' December 2016, Para 6 (3),
<<https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/charter>> accessed 3.2.2021.

¹⁰⁸ 'BBC Charter,' December 1936, Paras 3 (a) and 3 (b), available at
<<https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/research/royal-charter>> accessed 3.2.2021.

BBC must 'inform, educate and entertain' its audience and that it must 'reflect, serve and represent' the nations of the United Kingdom. The desire to educate and inform through poetry was hampered by the belief, backed by repeated surveys and by market data, that poetry was a minority interest: unpopular, obscure, unprofitable. Producers found that it was difficult to present the national art form, while compensating for its unpopularity either through hyperbole, or by adopting a defensive or apologetic tone for using poetry at all. The need for BBC programmes to 'reflect and represent' the nation had a similarly constraining effect. It became clear that if the nation were to recognise itself in the poems presented on television, if the 'full impact' (in the words of D.G. Bridson) was to be felt in the moment of broadcast, it would be easier if the poems were already known. For the most part, therefore, the poetry that was broadcast on BBC television was already famous. Television served to make it more so, and in doing so favoured a narrow anthology of well-known poems, and favoured its own archive of recordings of poets, on which subsequent television programmes drew. And yet poetry recurs throughout the schedules. As a resource which could be used and re-used to create new cultural forms and products, or as the BBC Charter puts it, 'innovative content,' the poetic tradition of the United Kingdom proved to be both rich and resilient. And it is the consequent oeuvre of 'poetry-on-television' that has been the subject of this thesis.

1. Five arguments

I have used the evidence of eighty years of poetry broadcasts to advance five arguments. In Chapter One, I presented a narrative account and quantitative analysis of the body of work that I call 'poetry-on-television.' By searching the BBC Programme Index, I identified roughly 2,500 programmes, broadcast over a period of 75 years, which presented, concerned or relied upon poets and poetry as key ingredient. I constructed a typology of these programmes, and presented a chronological synopsis of them. I used the case of the former poet

laureate, Cecil Day Lewis, to argue that while producers successfully used poetry to make television, poets and producers were less successful in using television to present their art.

In Chapter Two I considered how and why poetry came to be thought of as a problem on television, and showed that television producers were uncertain how best to bring poetry to the television screen. From the beginnings of the television service, poetry was not thought to be a genre of programming in its own right; nor was it something to which budget lines or departments were allocated. Nor was there consensus about what the D.G. Bridson called the 'proper selection' and the 'proper treatment' of poetry on television. And there was a growing awareness that to broadcast a poem was to change it. I examined how poetry was used to make television before 1939, and I analysed two post-war broadcasts (from 1982 and 2007) of W. H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939.' I argued that these are best understood not as 'versions' of the poem, but as examples of a new cultural form, which I called 'poetry-on-television.' I argued that these television sequences must be understood to communicate not the words of the poem, but the entirety of the television sequence in which the lines of poetry appear.

In Chapter Three, I examined debates within the BBC and programmes broadcast in the period 1958-68, during which BBC producers began to grapple in earnest with the question of how best to solve the problem of poetry. The upshot of early debates was that in 1960 two pilot 'poetry programmes' were commissioned to test ideas about which poems and what presentation worked best on television. Both pilot programmes were rejected for broadcast because,

as one internal memo put it, ‘television added little to the poetry.’¹⁰⁹ It was only in 1967 that the producer, Christopher Burstall found a solution: in *Tyger, Tyger* (1967), billed as ‘An Enquiry into the Power of a Familiar Poem,’ he made a programme which was not so much about a poem, as about the responses of a wide variety of people to a poem.¹¹⁰ A lesson was learned: poetry on television worked well when the subject of the film was not the poem, but its audience.

Often, however, the BBC preferred to turn its cameras on poets. In Chapter Four I argued that in making films about poets, programme makers used poetry in ways which gave rise to a series of contradictions. In these programmes, the poetry was the reason for the poet’s fame, and was therefore the reason the programmes were being made. It was also the objective. The purpose of making a film about a poet was, in part, to bring their poetry to a television audience. But to tell the story of a poet’s life, such films also used poetry as evidence of how a poet felt or lived, and what they had done. I accepted Alan Bennett’s assertion that a poem can be ‘true’ (to the human experience) without being ‘factual,’ and I argued that in using poetry biographical testimony about particular events in a factual genre, the BBC used poetry in ways which limited its claim to express universal truths.

These chapters, for the most part, consider cases where producers have made a specific decision to include a poem or lines of a poem in their programmes. In Chapter Five I argued that much poetry on BBC television occurs because people use, and quote, poetry in everyday life. Introducing a 2006 film on Rudyard Kipling, the presenter Griff Rhys Jones created an audio

¹⁰⁹ WAC, T32/1, 784/1, Rex Moorfoot to David Jones, 22 February 1960.

¹¹⁰ *Omnibus presents: Tyger, Tyger*, BBC1, 10 November 1967, 22.35.

jumble (to the point that some lines cannot quite be heard) to remind audiences how often we quote Kipling without realising it:

‘east is east and west is west... England is a garden... ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best... take up the white man’s burden... great, grey, green, greasy Limpopo... on the road to Mandalay... a good cigar... a neater, sweeter maiden... the unforgiving minute... he travels fastest... what know they of England, who only England know... better man than I am, Gunga Din... and, which is more... O best beloved... you’ll be a man, my son.’¹¹¹

In doing so he accurately reflected how poetry becomes distilled on television (and in other fields) to a few phrases which through use and re-use acquire a status separated from their author and their time, and which become part of how the nation talks about itself. I argued that BBC television has had a magnifying (though paradoxically also constraining) effect: certain lines of poetry, when repeatedly broadcast over a limited range of images, attain a power as television to a point where the words of individual poems seem to decrease in importance. What matters is a set of associations in which the poetry as written by the poet is only one ingredient.

2. Poetry-on-television: a national art form

The primary data for this study is the programmes as broadcast by the BBC. Throughout, I kept in mind a corruption of another famous line from Kipling: in ‘The English Flag,’ he asked, ‘And what should they know of England who only England know?’¹¹² I found it helpful throughout to ask, ‘what would they know of poetry, who only BBC television know?’ An imaginary viewer who knew

¹¹¹ *Kipling: A Remembrance Tale* (2006), 04:00 – 04:10.

¹¹² Rudyard Kipling, *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), 233.

poetry only through BBC television, would be familiar with a considerable body of work, and would have seen and heard poetry not only from the United Kingdom, but from across the world. They would have heard from Rimbaud and Akhmatova, from Virgil and Neruda, and they would know much about the lives and thinking of the poets whose works they heard. They would, mostly, have been familiar with poetry that, on BBC television at least, was 'beyond critical reach.' They would have understood poetry as something whose meanings are not fixed, and as something that is open to the interpretations of all its users. They would have seen poetry associated with a variety of images. Often these images would be literal (Wordsworth's daffodils) but as often they would be strikingly original (Auden and the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York). They would, often, have found the power of poetry to create images in the minds of readers swamped by the power of television to impose images. But they would not, as in the case of John Hill and Milton (see page 159), have been in doubt about the power of poetry to move people, and to express the human experience in ways which are exciting and worthy of attention. They would have known less about how poetry does this, or about the technical aspects of poetry. Nor, except in schools' programmes, would they have found much guidance on how poetry comes to be thought of as good or bad. They might, however, through the experience of poetry on BBC television, have thought differently about people and places with which they might not have been familiar. One example is the poems of Osip Mandelstam used as counterpoint to an interview with his widow, Nadezhda Mandelstam, in *Arena: Here they Kill People for It* (1982), the 'it' of the programme title being poetry.¹¹³ This was in

¹¹³ *Arena: Here They Kill People for It*, BBC2, 2 February 1982, 22.05.

stark contrast to Paul Pawlikowski's controversial *Serbian Epics* (1992), broadcast a decade later, in which the Serbian leader (and subsequently convicted war criminal) Radovan Karadzic and others used Serbian epic poetry to explain their assault on Bosnia.¹¹⁴ Other programmes were closer to home: celebrating the life of Hugh MacDiarmid in *Rebel Poet* (1972), for example, or asking the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, to consider the life and work of Wordsworth while on a visit to Dove Cottage in *William Wordsworth Lived Here* (1974).¹¹⁵

In Chapter One, I quoted the approach advised by Paddy Scannell when considering new technologies and new cultural forms. He asked, 'what is this new thing doing to us; what are we doing with it?'¹¹⁶ The conclusion of this study is that 'we' – by which I mean the BBC – are making television programmes which attract an audience and by which that audience is, in various measures, informed, educated, and entertained. The answer is also that television is changing the way viewers experience poetry. It gives prominence to some poets and excludes others. It makes celebrities out of some poets – though often posthumously. It creates anthologies and miscellanies. It changes what audiences think of as poetry, and what images they associate with poetry. And it consistently advances an implicit argument that poetry is something that can be used to make, or understand, or discuss other things.

In making television, producers have not always displayed a concern for

¹¹⁴ *Bookmark: Serbian Epics*, BBC2, 16 December 1992, 20:10.

¹¹⁵ *Rebel Poet*, BBC2, 9 August 1972, 22.05; *William Wordsworth Lived Here*, BBC2, 28 November 1974, 22.45.

¹¹⁶ Scannell, 'The Dialectic of Time and Television,' 221.

the integrity of poems as complete or fixed works of art, but sometimes they have. When three poetry lovers – Patrick Garland, Philip Larkin and John Betjeman – collaborated to make *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* in 1964, they included six poems by Larkin. All were read in full, and to the extent that they ‘added visuals,’ the visuals were literal. When John Betjeman read of ‘the large cool store | selling cheap clothes’ from ‘The Cool Dark Store,’ the film showed tracking shots from inside a department store in Hull, and when he read ‘Once I am sure there's nothing going on | I step inside’ from ‘Church Going,’ the film showed Larkin pausing outside a church, before stepping inside.



Figure 53: Philip Larkin in *Down Cemetery Road* (1964).¹¹⁷

Other programme makers showed no such compunction, either about the integrity of the whole poem, or about the juxtaposition of images. For

¹¹⁷ *Monitor: Down Cemetery Road* (1964), 20:25.

them, poetry has been something to revise and change in the process of making television. Often, this took the form of elision; poems have been shortened to suit the time constraints of the broadcast schedule or of a particular programme. Very occasionally poems have been rewritten (or 'reimagined') for polemical effect. I have even found a few instances where lines of poems have been reordered, either for narrative effect or to make them more closely coincide with the images to hand. Does it matter? My conclusion is that it does not. As Mike Chasar argued, poetry is 'mobile.' It transfers easily to other artforms. It creates possibilities within television that would not otherwise exist. Poetry, as much as any cultural artefact, should be open to the imaginations and (re)interpretations of all its users. Television is a relatively new, but hugely popular art form. It seems to me legitimate that old art forms, and pre-existing art should (with due reverence for copyright and the sensitivities of poets still living) be repurposed to make new art; over the past eight decades BBC television has done this exceptionally well. It has made poetry-on-television a national art form, for which it has consistently found an audience. It is television's power, and the variety of uses to which poetry can be put in the making of television that appears to confuse the issue. When the television service rejected the pilot programmes made by David Jones and D.G. Bridson in 1960, it did so because 'television added little to the poetry.' At no point, however, did anyone suggest that poetry added little to television. On the contrary. It was assumed throughout, that poetry could be used in the making of television.

What is this contribution? I have considered examples of how poetry has been used for all the BBC's Reithian aims: to inform, to educate, to entertain. I think, however, that poetry has a further role. Throughout this study I have cited poets and critics who have appeared on television to argue that poetry matters because it moves its audience, and that poetry matters because it is uniquely able to say something true about the human experience. Auden went

further, arguing that poetry matters because it guards the integrity of language. The poet 'has a tremendous responsibility to language,' he said. 'When the language goes to pieces, morals go to pieces, because what do we think with? We think with words.'¹¹⁸ But all agree: poetry matters because, and when, it is true. My conclusion is that this is, and should be, what poetry contributes to television. Poetry-on-television matters most because, and when, it says something true.

When Philip Larkin died, in December 1985, the BBC asked several leading voices in the world of poetry to make brief tributes to their late colleague. Those who contributed were Andrew Motion, Craig Raine, D.J. Enright, Douglas Dunn, Gavin Ewart, Harold Pinter, Kingsley Amis, Peter Porter, R.S. Thomas, and Seamus Heaney. Ted Hughes, then poet laureate, was asked and had agreed to read Larkin's 'Aubade.' In an amusing cameo of how the images of poetry and of television are understood to compete, he refused at the last minute to take part on the grounds that he had recently suffered a fall. His face was swathed in bandages which, he feared, presented an image that 'would compete with any poem of Philip's.'¹¹⁹ Each of the other contributors read one or two Larkin poems on camera, and told the audience why they chose them. The poems they chose came from Larkin's three collections, *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). The films were broadcast at various times over the course of a week in January 1986. Produced in haste, poetry-on-BBC-television was stripped to its minimum: poem, performer and text. Each film began with a still of Larkin. The poet introduced their chosen

¹¹⁸ *Monitor: W. H. Auden* (1960), 17:00-17:20.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Wilson, 'Arts Diary: Too Distracting', *The Times*, 11 January 1986, 36.

poem, and read it to camera. During the reading the image mixed through to the text on the page; the final image was of the cover of the book from which the poem was taken.

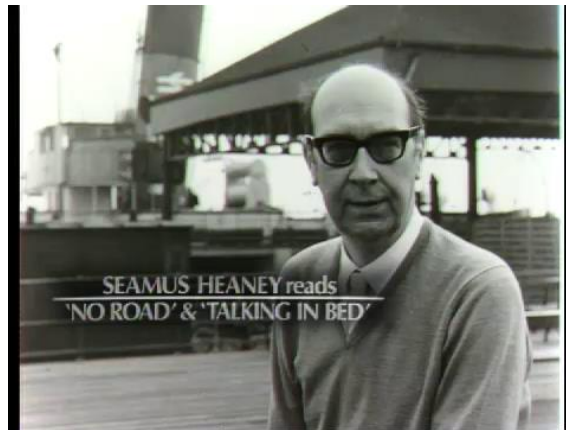




Figure 54: Seamus Heaney's Larkin tribute (1986).¹²⁰

Seamus Heaney chose to read 'No Road' from *The Less Deceived* and 'Talking in Bed' from *The Whitsun Weddings*. But first he said,

One of the reasons why Philip Larkin's poems were so popular, I think, was that they were approachable. People could read them and understand them immediately. And therefore, his audience felt that the poet was on their side: if we understand him, he must understand us. The logic went something like that. But as well as being approachable, of course, the poems were deeply heartfelt and contained what Dr Johnson would have called 'general truth.' The subjects were common – like, for example, the end of a relationship,

¹²⁰ Still collage from *Philip Larkin Tribute (Seamus Heaney)*, BBC2, 11 January 1986, 10.55.

which is the subject of the first poem I want to read, a poem called 'No Road.' It's about that feeling a person has after they have ended a relationship of having done the right thing, and yet feeling at the same time regret about what was done. [...] The other poem I want to read is called 'Talking in Bed.' And it's a poem that's completely clear, and completely, ah, true emotionally.¹²¹

In his comments, Heaney paused before the phrase 'true emotionally.' He was about to qualify the idea of 'truth' with the word 'emotionally,' but he seemed aware that truth should perhaps be universal, and that to qualify it was to make the truth it expressed particular rather than 'general.' In his Nobel acceptance lecture a decade later, and echoing the refrain running through this thesis, Heaney praised the truth of poetry, and accepted Bennett's distinction between what is 'factual' and what is 'true.' He argued that, 'poetry can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being [...] I credit it because credit is due to it, in our time and in all time, for its truth to life, in every sense of that phrase.'¹²² Again and again on BBC television, poets – and those who read their works – have stressed that this is why people come back to poetry: because it says something that is true to the human experience, and because it expresses that truth in a way which is memorable, and which stays with the reader. When, in *W. H. Auden: The Addictions of Sin* (2007), the BBC broadcast an edited version of Auden's 'September 1, 1939' cut to footage of emergency responders in New York on 11 September 2001 with the footage run backwards (see pages 79-89), it would be difficult to argue that it was showing a sequence which was 'factually

¹²¹ Seamus Heaney in *Philip Larkin Tribute*, (1985), 00:25 – 00:57 and 02:35 – 02:50; listed *inter alia* in Ronald Hastings, 'Television,' *Daily Telegraph*, 11 January 1986, 32.

¹²² Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, 7 December 1995. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>> accessed, 12.2.2021.

correct.’ Nor, despite the programme’s promise, was it ‘telling the story of Auden’s life in his own words.’ I would argue, however, that the BBC was using poetry and using television to say something which was true to the human experience at the time Auden wrote the poem (the outbreak of war in 1939), and true to the human experience in the years following the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the subsequent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. For generations, the BBC has put poetry on television and in the process has contributed to the development of a new cultural form. When done well, the new thing that was poetry-on-television created Auden’s coveted shock of recognition in the viewer. It did this not only when it was memorable and moving, but when, in Auden’s words, it ‘said something that’s true.’¹²³

¹²³ W. H. Auden on *Parkinson*, BBC1, 7 October 1972 and repeated in *The Addictions of Sin* (2007), 56:45 – 57:08.

Filmography

The programme database compiled for this study, together with the statistical analysis discussed in Chapter One, is available [here](#). Those programmes mentioned in this study are listed in the filmography below. I was able to source copies of the films from the BBC and elsewhere. YouTube links are given in the appropriate footnote. Time codes given in the text were sourced from a variety of playback technologies, and are for guidance only.

1. BBC programmes

Each hyperlink is to the [BBC Programme Index](#), listed by date of first broadcast.

Pre-war

Murder in the Cathedral, BBC TV, 7 December 1936. [Link](#)

The Poet Laureate, BBC TV, 12 May 1937. [Link](#)

November 11: A Document of War and Peace, BBC TV, 11 November 1937. [Link](#)

A Pepler Masque of Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes, BBC TV, 18 October 1937. [Link](#)

The White Chateau, BBC TV, 11 November 1938. [Link](#)

W. B. Yeats, BBC TV, 1 March 1939. [Link](#)

1940s

William Blake, BBC TV, 19 August 1947. [Link](#)

John Keats Lived Here, BBC TV, 23 October 1949. [Link](#)

1950s

W. B. Yeats - A Tribute, BBC TV, 11 September 1951. [Link](#)

St David's Day Festival Concert, BBC TV, 1 March 1952. [Link](#)

Monitor: John Betjeman - A Poet in London, BBCTV, 1 March 1959. [Link](#)

Monitor: Robert Graves in Majorca, BBC TV, 26 April 1959. [Link](#)

Face to Face: Dame Edith Sitwell, BBC TV, 6 May 1959. [Link](#)

Monitor: Ezra Pound, Study of a Poet, BBC2, 24 May 1959. [Link](#)

Dame Edith Sitwell, BBC TV, 16 September 1959. [Link](#)

1960s

Monitor: W. H. Auden, BBC TV, 24 April 1960. [Link](#)

Rhyme or Reason, BBC TV, Sundays 12 August – 2 September 1962. [Link](#)

Monitor: Roy Fuller – a Poet in Society, BBC TV, 22 October 1962. [Link](#)

Monitor: The Muse in SW1, BBC TV, 17 July 1963. [Link](#)

Monitor: Footmarks in Time: Thomas Hardy, BBC2, 24 November 1963. [Link](#)

Viewpoint: T. S. Eliot OM, BBC TV, 11 December 1963. [Link](#)

The Pity of War, BBC2, 4 August 1964. [Link](#)

Monitor: Down Cemetery Road, BBC2, 15 December 1964. [Link](#)

Not so Much a Programme, More a Way of Life, BBC1, 1964 – 1965 [Link](#)

Muses with Milligan, Fridays, BBC2 (1964) and BBC1 (1965). [Link](#)

Footprints: Byron and Shelley at Geneva, BBC2, 19 July 1964. [Link](#)

Monitor: Rupert Brooke, BBC1, 10 May 1964. [Link](#)

Monitor: Philip Larkin - Down Cemetery Road, BBC1, 15 December 1964. [Link](#)

Monitor: People in Rather Odd Circumstances, BBC1, 6 April 1965. [Link](#)

Intimations... Lawrence Durrell, BBC2, 19 October 1965. [Link](#)

W. H. Auden: Poet of Disenchantment, BBC1, 28 November 1965. [Link](#)

George Herbert: Preacher and Poet, BBC1, 4 – 8 April 1966. [Link](#)

New Release: A Working Poet, BBC2, 2 March 1967. [Link](#)

Six Bites of the Cherry, BBC2, Saturdays 16 July – 19 August 1967. [Link](#)

Omnibus presents: Tyger, Tyger, BBC1, 10 November 1967. [Link](#)

Poetic Unreason, BBC2, 29 November 1967. [Link](#)

Nai Zindagi - Naya Jeevan, BBC1, Sundays 1968-1982. [Link](#)

An Evening with Huw Wheldon, BBC2, 3 January 1969. [Link](#)

Nairn at Large: Dark Satanic Mills, BBC1, 7 January 1969. [Link](#)

William Blake 1757-1827: As A Man Is - So He Sees, BBC2, 6 February 1969. [Link](#)

Bird's Eye View – Green and Pleasant Land, BBC2, 22 June 1969. [Link](#)

Omnibus: Christopher Isherwood - A Born Foreigner, BBC1, 2 November 1969.

[Link](#)

1970s

Solo: Alex Guinness: e. e. cummings, BBC2, 21 January 1970. [Link](#)

Solo: Alec Guinness: 'Little Gidding', BBC2, 18 February 1970. [Link](#)

Cameron Country: the Sleeping Sword, BBC2, 14 February 1970. [Link](#)

Swyn y Glec, BBC1, Sundays, October 1970 – April 1971. [Link](#)

Omnibus presents: The Mysterious Mr Eliot, BBC1, 3 January 1971. [Link](#)

A Lasting Joy, BBC1, Wednesdays 18 July - 22 August 1972. [Link](#)

Rebel Poet, BBC1, 9 August 1972, 22:30. [Link](#)

Parkinson, BBC1, 7 October 1972. [Link](#)

Full House on Tyneside, BBC2, 16 December 1972. [Link](#)

Poems and Pints, BBC1, 2 October 1972. [Link](#)

Crosstalk: Politics and Poetry, BBC1, 28 January 1973. [Link](#)

Rudyard Kipling Lived Here, BBC2, 19 July 1973. [Link](#)

Poets on Poetry: Seamus Heaney, BBC1, 8 October 1973. [Link](#)

Poets on Poetry: W. H. Auden, BBC1, 5 November 1973. [Link](#)

Closedown, BBC2, 1974 – 1982. [Link](#)

The Thirties Revisited, BBC2, 27 August 1974. [Link](#)

Look, Stranger: Who Is Sylvia? BBC2, 20 January 1975. [Link](#)

The Book Programme: Sylvia Plath, BBC2, 20 April 1976. [Link](#)

The Lively Arts: Like Poetry! BBC2, 16 October 1977. [Link](#)

Dread, Beat an' Blood, BBC1, 5 April 1979. [Link](#)

The Book Programme: Yevgeny Yevtushenko, 14 April 1979. [Link](#)

1980s

Arena: 'I talk about me - I am Africa,' BBC2, 5 March 1980. [Link](#)

Arena: Brixton to Barbados, BBC2, 15 December 1981. [Link](#)

Poems in their Place: Gray's 'Elegy,' BBC2, 16 March 1982. [Link](#)

Arena: Here They Kill People for It, BBC2, 2 February 1982. [Link](#)

Arena: Desert Island Discs, BBC1, 23 February 1982. [Link](#)

Arena: The Auden Landscape, BBC2, 27 February 1982. [Link](#)

The Rattle Bag, BBC2, 22 October 1982. [Link](#)

Arena: Upon Westminster Bridge, BBC2, 23 November 1982. [Link](#)

Omnibus: Writers on the Right, BBC1, 6 March 1983. [Link](#)

Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary, BBC2, 19 September 1983. [Link](#)

Arena: True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, BBC2, 3 April 1984. [Link](#)

Bookmark: T. S. Eliot: 1921, BBC2, 19 September 1984. [Link](#)

Open Space: Angels of Fire, BBC2, 3 April 1985. [Link](#)

Philip Larkin Tributes, BBC2, various times, 6 – 14 January 1986.

Bookmark: Joseph Brodsky, BBC2, 2 October 1986. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Jonathan Raban – Coasting, BBC2, 30 October 1986. [Link](#)

Thinking Aloud, BBC2, 7 December 1986. [Link](#)

Bookmark: African Voices, BBC2, 5 February 1987. [Link](#)

Loving Memory, BBC2, 16 July 1987. [Link](#)

Favourite Things: Margaret Thatcher, BBC2, 26 July 1987. [Link](#)

Five to Eleven, BBC2, 1986-1990. [Link](#)

Arena: Invisible Ink, BBC2 4 December 1987. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Eliot and After, BBC2, 23 September 1988. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Octavio Paz, BBC2, 26 October 1988. [Link](#)

1990s

Bookmark: The End, BBC2, 10 October 1990. [Link](#)

Five to Eleven, BBC2, January-July 1990. [Link](#)

Words on Film, BBC2, 5 June 1992 – 10 July 1992. [Link](#)

Think of England Episode 2: A Green and Pleasant Land, BBC2, 22 Oct 1991. [Link](#)

War and Peace: The Gaze of Gorgon, BBC2, 3 October 1992. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Serbian Epics, BBC2, 16 December 1992. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Philip Larkin, BBC2, 9 & 10 April 1993. [Link](#)

Writers in the 30s, BBC2, 27 April 1993. [Link](#)

A Sahib in South Africa – Rudyard Kipling, BBC2, 3 August 1993. [Link](#)

Poems on the Box: Re-Verse, BBC2, 9 October 1993. [Link](#)

Poets' News, BBC2, 11 - 15 October 1993. [Link](#)

Poems on the Box, BBC2, 5 November 1993. [Link](#)

The Late Show Poetry Special, BBC2, 5 October 1994. [Link](#)

Bard on the Box, BBC2, from 16 October 1994. [Link](#)

Unspeakable Verse, BBC2, from 6 October 1995. [Link](#)

The Nation's Favourite Poems, BBC1, 12 October 1995. [Link](#)

Black Daisies for the Bride, BBC2, 11 August 1996. [Link](#)

Omnibus: If-- a Film about Rudyard Kipling, BBC1, 10 August 1997. [Link](#)

Bookmark: Stevie Smith, Not Waving But Drowning, BBC2, 6 September 1997.

[Link](#)

Timewatch: The Boer War: The First Media War, BBC2, 17 January 1998. [Link](#)

England's Green and Pleasant Land, BBC2, 27 September 1998. [Link](#)

The Nation's Favourite Comic Poem, BBC1, 9 October 1998. [Link](#)

Close Up: Ted Hughes: Force of Nature, BBC2, 25 December 1998. [Link](#)

2000s

W. H. Auden: Tell Me the Truth about Love, BBC2, 26 March 2000. [Link](#)

Omnibus: William Blake - Singing for England, BBC1, 6 November 2000. [Link](#)

Blake Night, BBC Knowledge, 10 November 2000. [Link](#)

Wordsworth: The Secrets of Tintern Abbey, BBC4, 30 August 2002. [Link](#)

Omnibus: Lord Byron: Exile on Fame Street, 6 November 2002. [Link](#)

Essential Poems (to Fall in Love With), BBC2, 15 February 2003. [Link](#)

Whine Gums, BBC3, 6 July 2003. [Link](#)

Arena: Dylan Thomas: From Grave to Cradle, BBC2, 22 November 2003. [Link](#)

Byron: The Summer of a Dormouse, BBC2, 27 September 2003. [Link](#)

This OBE is not for Me, BBC4, 19 December 2004. [Link](#)

Jerusalem: An Anthem for England, 8 September 2005. [Link](#)

The Improbable Mr. Attlee, BBC4, Saturday, 1 October 2005. [Link](#)

The Third Programme: High Culture for all, BBC4, 13 November 2005. [Link](#)

The Romantics, BBC2, 21 January – 4 February 2006. [Link](#)

Betjeman and Me, (3 x 30 minutes), BBC2, 14 – 28 August 2006. [Link](#)

Kipling, a Remembrance Tale, BBC1, 12 November 2006. [Link](#)

The Addictions of Sin: W. H. Auden in His Own Words, BBC4, 22 February 2007.

[Link](#)

Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain: Advance Britannia, BBC4, 20 July 2007. [Link](#)

A Picture of Britain: Highlands and Glens, BBC2, 14 May 2008. [Link](#)

The Heart of Thomas Hardy, BBC1, 7 September 2008. [Link](#)

The Art of Arts TV, BBC4, 28 September – 1 October 2008. [Link](#)

The World According to Robert Burns, BBC2, 5 – 19 January 2009. [Link](#)

Robert Burns: The People's Poet, BBC1, 25 January 2009. [Link](#)

A Poet's Guide to Britain, BBC4, Mondays, 4 May – 8 June 2009. [Link](#)

Carol Ann Duffy: Secular Prayers, BBC4, 16 May 2009. [Link](#)

Ian Hislop's Changing of the Bard, BBC4, 16 May 2009. [Link](#)

Why Poetry Matters, BBC2, 20 May 2009. [Link](#)

Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell, BBC2, 27 May 2009. [Link](#)

Newsnight Review: Poetry Season Special, BBC2, 29 May 2009. [Link](#)

Simon Schama's John Donne, BBC4, 3 June 2009. [Link](#)

Arena: T. S. Eliot, BBC2, 6 June 2009. [Link](#)

My Life in Verse: Sheila Hancock, BBC2, 29 May 2009. [Link](#)

My Life in Verse: Cerys Matthews, BBC2, 12 June 2009. [Link](#)

My Life in Verse: Malorie Blackman, BBC2, 19 June 2009. [Link](#)

The Book Quiz: Poetry Special, BBC4, 24 June 2009. [Link](#)

Carols from King's, BBC2, 24 December 2009. [Link](#)

2010s

Philip Larkin and the Third Woman, BBC1, 5 December 2010. [Link](#)

Melvyn Bragg on Class and Culture, BBC2, 24 February 2012. [Link](#)

How God Made the English, BBC2, 21 March – 4 April 2012. [Link](#)

The Review Show, BBC2, 8 February 2013. [Link](#)

How God made the English, BBC2, 17 March 2012. [Link](#)

Great Poets in their Own Words: Making it New, BBC4, 10 August 2014. [Link](#)

Great Poets in their Own Words: Access All Areas, BBC4, 17 August 2014. [Link](#)

Newsnight, BBC2, 28 April 2015. 22.30 [Link](#)

VJ Day 70: The Nation Remembers, BBC1, 15 August 2015. [Link](#)

Poets at the BBC, BBC4, 1 October 2016. [Link](#)

Stop All the Clocks: WH Auden in an Age of Anxiety, BBC2, 30 September 2017.

[Link](#)

2020s

Arena: River, BBC4, 25 July 2022. [Link](#)

How the BBC Began, BBC1, 22 October 2022. [Link](#)

2. Other films

V, Channel 4, 4 November 1987.

A TV Dante, Channel 4, 27 July 1990.

Without Walls: J'accuse Philip Larkin, Channel 4, 30 March 1993.

The South Bank Show: W. H. Auden, ITV, 18 February 2007.

Archival Sources

My primary archival source was the BBC Written Archives Centre, Peppard Road, Caversham Park, Reading, RG4 8TZ, UK. I also used records from The Thatcher Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge CB3 0DS and the National Archives, Kew, Richmond, TW9 4DU. Specific files and references are listed below.

1. BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC)

1.1. Policy and Audience Research

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
REPORTS	SPECIAL REPORT - POETRY ON BBC2	1	October 1993	SP93/092
TV POLICY	PROGRAMME POLICY, POETRY	1	1959	T16/576/1
	POLICY, POETRY 1965-1969	1	1965-1969	R34/1446/1
	POLICY, POETRY 1968-1976	1	1968-1976	R34/1446/2
	POETRY COMMITTEE 1952-1954	1	1952-1954	R19/1,822/1
	PROGRAMME POLICY, RADIO	1	1946	R3/3/11
	VIEWERS AND THE TELEVISION SERVICE	1	1937	R9/9/1
	POLICY ARTS FEATURES	1	1973	T42/118/1
	POLICY, PRESENTATION	5	1957-1959	R34/585/5
	LITERARY OUTPUT	1	June 1943	R51/302/1
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	Audience Research July & August 1972	1	July 1972	R9/7/118
	Audience Research	1	1939	R9/9/3
	Audience Response	1	1968	VR68/698
	Audience Research	1	1973	R9/7/125
	Audience Research	1	1973	R9/7/126
	Audience Research	1	1968	R9/6/203
	Audience Research	1	1966	R9/7/80
MUSIC AND ARTS	DEPARTMENTAL MEETINGS	1		T42/142/1

1.2. Personnel Files

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
AUDEN W. H.	PERSONAL FILE	1	1937-1961	TV ARTS 1
BALCON, JILL	CONTRACTS & CORRESPONDENCE	1	1971-1980	TV ARTS 5
DAY LEWIS, CECIL	PERSONAL FILE	1	1936-1972	48864

1.3. 1936-1939

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
PEPLER, H.D.C	PEPLER MASQUES	2	1936- 1938	TVARTS 1
WHITE CHATEAU	PRODUCTION FILES	1	1938	T5/579/1

1.4. Arts Features (T53)

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
CIVILISATON	Progs O1: Correspondence & General	1	1967- 1969	T53/39/1
	Correspondence and press reviews	1	1969- 1969	T53/325/1
CONTRASTS	TENNYSON - A BEGINNING AND AN END	1	68.12.17	T53/62/1
	BETJEMAN - MARBLE ARCH TO EDGWARE	1	68.01.31	T53/47/1
	VOLTAIRE IN ENGLAND	1	68.06.19	T53/54/1
AN EVENING WITH...	PROGRAMMES AND GENERAL	12	1967- 1970	T53/1-12
	HUW WHELDON	1	69.01.03	T53/12/1
FOUR WITH BETJEMAN	GENERAL	1	1968- 1971	T53/68/1
	JOHN BETJEMAN	3	70.06.29	T53/69/1-3
NO MAN'S LAND	THE WAR POETS	1	68.11.10	T53/93/1
OMNIBUS	ALL MY LOVING	2	68.11.03	T53/113/1-2

	A BORN FOREIGNER - ISHERWOOD	1	69.11.02	T53/143/1
	JOHN CLARE	1	70.02.08	T53/158/1
	A COUPLE OF BRIANS	1	69.03.29	T53/130/1
	EXILE (THE) - SEAN O'CASEY	1	68.02.06	T53/102/1
	LAWRENCE DURRELL'S PARIS	2	69.05.11	T53/139/1-2
	TO LENINGRAD WITH LOVE	1	70.04.26	T53/188/1
	TYGER, TYGER	2	67.11.10	T53/98/1-2
	WOMAN FROM THE SHADOWS: WORDSWORTH	1	69.01.19	T53/128/1
POETIC UNREASON	POETIC UNREASON	1	67.11.29	T53/192/1
RELEASE	ARTHUR RIMBAUD	1	68.09.07	T53/234/1
	W. H. AUDEN	1	68.10.12	T53/239/1
	JOHN BETJEMAN	1	68.10.26	T53/241/1
	GUILLAUME APPOLINAIRE	1	68.11.09	T53/243/1
	THE POETRY IS THE PITY	1	68.11.16	T53/244/1
	BASIL BUNTING	1	68.11.23	T53/245/1
	THE POETRY SOCIETY	1	69.01.18	T53/252/1
	WALT WHITMAN	1	69.05.31	T53/268/1
	POETRY SOCIETY AT 50	1	69.01.18	T53/252/1
REVIEW	George MacBeth	1	69.10.18	T53/277/1
	W H Auden	1	69.10.25	T53/278/1
	WH Auden, Marianne Moore	1	69.11.15	T53/280/1
	W. H. Auden on Anthony Rossiter	1	70.05.09	T53/301/1
TALKS	ROBERT LOWELL & V. S. NAIPAUL	1	69.08.19	T53/310/1
TWO AMERICANS	ALL-AMERICAN VOLTAIRE (THE) - H L MENCKEN		67.10.01	T53/320/1
	ROBERT FROST: A LOVER'S QUARREL		67.09.24	T53/318/1

1.5. Music and Arts (T51)

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
ARENA	GENERAL FILES	1	1976	T51/319/1
	BORGES AND I	1	83.10.26	T51/443/1

	HUGH MACDIARMID	1	76.11.17	T51/325/1
BELONGING	AVRAM STENCIL	1	67.06.04	T51/11/1
BETJEMAN IN AUSTRALIA	BETJEMAN IN AUSTRALIA	1	1972	T51/280/1
CHRONICLE	TWILIGHT OF THE ENGLISH CELTS	1	77.10.27	T51/379/1
	SCRIPTS & CORRESPONDENCE	1	1977	T51/380/1
FULL HOUSE	PILOT, PRODUCTION	7	1972-1973	T51/188 – 191
	TYNESIDE POETS	1	72.12.09	T51/271/1
	CRIME THRILLERS (AUDEN)	1	72.10.14	T51/270/1
NEW RELEASE	CORRESPONDENCE	2	1965-1967	T51/164-165
	PRODUCTION FILES	23	1966-1967	T51/86-104
	NEW RELEASE	1	66.02.03	T51/90/1
	NEW RELEASE	1	65.11.10	T51/86/1
	NEW RELEASE	1	66.03.17	T51/93/1
	NEW RELEASE (Tyneside)	1	66.03.02	T51/91/1
	NEW RELEASE (Melly/ Henri)	1	66.06.09	T51/95/1
	NEW RELEASE (Jenny Lee)	1	66.07.21	T51/97/1
OMNIBUS	GENERAL PRODUCTION FILE	1	1976	T51/342/1
	BORN BLACK, BORN BRITISH	1	72.06.11	T51/285/1
	MYSTERIOUS MR ELIOT, THE	1	71.01.03	T51/232/1
	ON POETRY	1	72.11.05	T51/278/1
	OMNIBUS FILE: POETRY	1	72.11.05	T51/278/1
	TO LENINGRAD WITH LOVE	1	70.04.26	T53/188/1
	JOHN CLARE	1	70.02.08	T53/158/1
SECOND HOUSE	PRODUCTION FILES	18	1975-1976	T51/290-352
	WITNESSES	1	76.07.17	T51/344/1
	WORD OF MOUTH	1	75.01.04	T51/305/1
	ROGER McGOUGH	1	75.04.05	T51/290/1
SUNDAY NIGHT	AUDEN, W.H.	3	65.11.28	T51/125/1-3
	KIPLING SAHIB	2	65.12.19	T51/124/1-2
	WHO CARES ABOUT THE ARTS?	1	66.01.02	T51/126/1

1.6. Bookmark

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
BOOKMARK	BOOKMARK - NURUDDIN FARAH - DON MATTERA	1	87.02.05	1/LMA/N200K
	BOOKMARK - R.S. THOMAS - MARGARET FORSTER - JM O'NEILL	1	86.02.13	I/LMA/M295X
	BOOKMARK PART 1	1		CO13

Monitor

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
MONITOR	W. H. AUDEN	1	60.04.23	T32/970/1
	DAY LEWIS ON HARDY	2	63.11.24	T32/1/058
	AUDIENCE RESEARCH REPORT: HARDY	1	1963	VR/63/671
	RUPERT BROOKE	1	64.05.10	T32/1,071/1
	PHILIP LARKIN	2	64.12.15	T32/1,083/1

1.7. Other programmes

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
POETS ON POETRY	SEAMUS HEANEY	1	73.10.08	T69/88/1
	W. H. AUDEN	2	73.11.05	T69/89/1
POETRY PILOT	WORDS	1	1960	T32/1,784/1
	MEN AND WOMEN	1	1960	T32/1,171/1
POETIC UNREASON	ROBERT GRAVES	1	69.11.29	T53/192/1
BOOKSTAND	W. H. AUDEN	1	62.10.21	T32/463/1
BIRD'S EYE VIEW	GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND	3	69.06.22	T14/1,892/1-3
VIEWPOINT	ALEKSANDER BLOK	1	69.06.12	T24/110/1
CLOSEDOWN	PRODUCTION FILES	1	1974-1982	T60/4/1

2. Other Archives

Main Title	Subtitle	No.	Date / TX	File
THATCHER ARCHIVE	CORRESPONDENCE FILES	1	1987	THCR 5/2/233
NATIONAL ARCHIVES	DAY LEWIS, CECIL: SECURITY SERVICE FILES	1	1935- 1965	KV-2-1385

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