

Maureen Almond, Poet

in interview with Lorna Hardwick

Oxford, 13th September 2006.

- LH Thanks very much Maureen for agreeing to talk with us today. We discussed, just now, the main guiding questions that we're going to use to see the way you worked with classical poetry and we'll be mainly referring to your two published collections, *Oyster Baby* and *The Works*, but you might want to refer to earlier work, or work in progress, as well if you want to. Can I start off by asking you how and why you first started writing poetry?
- MA I started writing poetry probably about fifteen years ago and it came about by accident in a way. I had spent my previous life working in Personnel for the Probation Service, and took early retirement from there. I wanted to do something different and IT was just coming in then and so I went and took an IT course at the University of Teeside. At the end of that my tutor said 'Have you enjoyed the course?' which was a very loaded question actually because I hadn't enjoyed the course at all. So I said no, I hadn't enjoyed the course – I'm glad I did the course, but I hadn't enjoyed the course. She was quite shocked and said 'why what was the matter?' And I said well I was always bad and maths and technology at school and she said 'Well what were you good at?' And I said well the only subject I was reasonable at when I was at school was English and writing. And she said 'oh, we have a competition at the moment' and it was a competition to write for this body that was to do with higher and further education, and carrying on education throughout your life. I wrote an article and won second prize in a national competition, and that sort of reawakened the interest. Then, coincidentally, I was coming out of my daughter's school – she was 7 or 8 at the time – and I saw there was a local writing group and went and joined that at the time just intending to write articles for journals and magazines and so on. But then one day the tutor said we are going to be looking at poetry next week, and I wasn't enamoured of the idea at all to be honest – I didn't know much about poetry. But it was all contemporary poetry and I absolutely loved it. I then carried on studying and so on and did a course with Leeds University – the diploma in Creative Writing and Literature. And that was where I was first introduced to mythology and Ovid and lots of other sources of inspiration, which is where this has led me to now.
- LH So, being aware of classical mythology and classical poetry was really there with you right from the very beginning when you started your own writing.
- MA Not, well, not initially because when I first joined the women's writing group we were looking at one or two contemporary poets but none of them that had particularly engaged with the classics. I think I'd been writing a couple of years between joining that women's writing group and going to do the course at Leeds – that was when I was introduced to it, so not initially, no.
- LH You've mentioned Ovid – has he continued to be a favourite poet... do you have favourites among the classical poets?
- MA I think because I've been so late coming to this that I haven't had the chance to develop a favourite. I suppose if I was to say I had a favourite it would have to be Horace which is the one I'm working on now. I'm just loving the engagement with Horace. I did love Ovid and the *Metamorphoses* ... but do I know enough to say I have a favourite poet? No, I don't. And I've simply loved being engaged with Horace and with Ovid – and the main thing that aroused my interest was ... when I was initially reading Ovid I found myself saying yes, yes.... This is so relevant, this is so today, this is so much a part of my life. The same has happened again with Horace but I'm feeling as if I'm engaging with the man here as well which is a fascination. We seem to have little things in common, if that's not a silly thing to say. But he was writing in his mid life, so am I; he had this connection with the law, he was a court clerk, I worked for the probation service; he had a very self-deprecating approach and I'm forever saying, well, no I can't do that, ... no, no, I haven't got that sort of background. So I can relate to all of that. And the fact that he has these sort of.... jealousies, I suppose, of other poets. He'll make comments about Virgil and say of course I'm not a big epic writer, I'm just a poor poet trying to make a living, and that really appeals to me, that sort of tongue-in-cheek approach to things.

- LH Tell me about how you set about working with the texts or with the translations, and do you focus in on a particular poem, or read a sequence... How do you go about it?
- MA Well if I start with the ones contained in *The Works* which is where I've recontextualised the 17 epodes of Horace. I initially chose that because, not having come across classical poetry before, I wanted to have a manageable chunk of work to look at – and 17 poems seemed to me to be a manageable chunk. So I started reading the *Epodes* and I just read them in the order they were presented. I was using the West translation for these, and what was wonderful for me with these was, for a long time I had in the back of my mind the idea to write some poems about the place where I was brought up in Thornaby on Teeside, about my childhood and so on, and I had deliberately shied away from that idea because I didn't want to be doing too much autobiographical writing, I was shying away from it, there were poems I wanted to write and I wouldn't allow myself to write until I read Horace's *Epodes*. And I know that there's this big debate among academics – some people say that he's autobiographical in his writing and some say that he isn't. Coming at it from the point of view of a practising poet who doesn't know whether they're autobiographical or not, I just went with my own gut reaction, and my own gut reaction is – this man is in these poems. I was picking up his sense of humour, I was picking up just the human-ness of the man and the human-ness of the situations about which he was writing. I thought, I don't care what anyone else says to me, these smack of autobiographical work. And somehow that freed me, I felt very freed then to write the epodes and reset them into a world I'd experienced. And some of the characters in there are fictional, some are a mixture of several, if you like morphed characters, I've morphed two or three people together to make one character and some of them are very much based on facts.
- LH What about the formal elements? I mean, Horace's approach in the *Epodes* has been very distinctive in formal terms. How consciously do you work with that?
- MA I took the trouble to read a bit about an epode and how it was that they were used as part of performance poetry, in a way, and about the longer and shorter lines. I must confess I set myself, apart from trying to recontextualise all the epodes I set myself an additional task I the writing of the epodes. I haven't done that in what I'm working on now and I'll come back to that later, but when I was looking at the *Epodes*, I deliberately took the David West translation and, by and large, you will find if you look at the West translation, each *epode* as represented by mine, has the same line lengths, the same number of lines, the same stanza breaks, and in the main the same syllable counts per line. That was a deliberate, that was quite a deliberate ploy, it was a discipline that I imposed upon myself to see if I could do it. So I quite enjoyed doing that.
- LH And did you find it hard?
- MA I did find it hard. I did find it hard initially. But in a way, it's like if you come to write a sonnet or any other poetic form, writing to a form does introduce a discipline, and introducing a discipline makes you choose your words very carefully. So I think the fact that you then choose your words very carefully helps the process because you're making the word, each word, earn its living as it were.
- LH In the *Oyster Baby* collection you made quite a lot of use of the sonnet form, for instance I'm thinking of the poem 'Love to Death' – was that the same kind of challenge? I mean, why did you decide to use the sonnet?
- MA Right, why did I decide to use the sonnet form? Primarily because it's my favourite poetic form, I love sonnet form. And I hadn't.... when I was looking at the poems to write for *Oyster Baby* I was using the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as inspiration but I was reading.... to all intents and purposes it was prose I was reading. And simply because I love the sonnet form so many of them turned into sonnets.... And I love the discipline of sonnet. And I like the rhythm and the tune of the sonnet. So that.... for no other reason, really, than I like the sonnet form.
- LH While we're on this general issue about how you set about working with the text, I also wanted to ask you about the visual arts as a source of inspiration. In *Oyster Baby* for example you refer a couple of times to classically derived images. There's actually one in response to a woodcut and there's another one in response to something in the Hatton Gallery. Is that a fairly constant source of inspiration to you? Or did it so happen that they were depicting mythological episodes you were interested in anyway?
- MA I don't think I could say it's a constant source of inspiration. I'm more likely to be inspired by something I've read or heard, I think. They can act, I do like to be stimulated by visual images as

well, and co-incidentally while I was writing the *Oyster Baby* collection I was actually running a workshop in Hatton Gallery ... a poetry workshop ... and they had their mythological collection on display at the time, and when I saw the two woodcuts that were Daphnis and Chloë... they were such simple woodcuts... such single line drawings almost. I just stood and studied those two for ages and looked at the positioning of the figures on them and so on and those two woodcuts really did come a lot into the four Daphnis and Chloë poems as well as the stuff I'd read outside of those

LH Both collections have got such a strong classical connection that I was wondering about how you see your classical work in relation to your work as a whole. Is it taking over a bigger part of it, or is it very much an interaction with other approaches you're interested in?

MA At the moment it is taking over quite a lot. And in fact I'm starting a PhD soon, at Newcastle University and I'm going to be looking at the role of poets and poetry then, in Horace's time, and comparing it with my own. I have had little distractions from it. I've just finished an 18-month residency for North Lodge Park in Darlington which was to embrace and make the communities around the park make them feel as if they own the park. And so completely side-tracked from that I did a little collection all about the trees, the trees that were condemned during the residency. So it isn't exclusively... my work isn't exclusively attached to classics, but I would say that because Horace is such a big subject and because I'm finding him so engaging at the moment I am looking at Horace and I'm looking at it as being a continual process too. The creative writing part of the PhD, apart from the research and looking at the theory of translation and so on, the creative writing part I've managed to negotiate is that I'm recontextualising, re-setting the whole of *Odes Book I*. Whereas I set *The Works* into working class Teeside below the railway just after the second world war I'm resetting *Odes Book I* into poetry the contemporary poetry world as I know it today. So, for example, you'll find titles in there, when it comes out, such as 'Ode to a possible future Laureate and his current hot girlfriend'. There'll be things in there to reflect the modern poetry scene as I understand it today, but purely and simply because I don't want to do just the recontextualisation of the Horace *Odes*. I had this idea recently, when I was reading the background of Horace, that he doesn't mention women very much, and even his mother isn't mentioned very much, so I've decided, to give me a bit more creative outlet, that I'm going to write a little sequence of poems along with this, that would put the women back in Horace's life that he hasn't allowed in. Now, whether I'll include that in *Odes Book I*, or whether it will stand alone, I'm not sure yet. But I've made a little start on this, so I've done things like ... so I've done a letter, or conversation from whom I perceive to be Horace's mother, to Horace; from his nursemaid, and I'm going to move onto some of the women, some of the less reputable women, he mentions in his *Odes*. And there's nothing about those women, so I've got free reign, I can make them anything I want. They'll certainly be connected to him – but creatively, outside of Horace in a way.

LH I wanted to ask you, and this again is something that, I suppose engages, with what you'll be doing in the Doctorate, about the extent to which working with the classical poems have changed your perceptions of what the ancient world was like, or opened up new avenues that you want to explore...?

MA In all honesty, I don't know, I don't know whether I had any perceptions – anymore than the ordinary man in the street would have. What has absolutely gripped me, when I read Horace.... because the other thing, apart from doing *Odes Book I* as part of this PhD I've also undertaken to do the two books of *Satires* as well, so the written, the creative writing bit, will be on *Odes Book I* and the two books on *Satires*. When I read the *Satires* and the *Odes* the thing that absolutely grips me, over and over again, are the fact that there's nothing new in life. And I suppose if you say, well, was that a preconception ... maybe it was a preconception, maybe it was just something I hadn't thought of, I'm not really sure. It came as such a wonderful surprise. When I'm reading Horace, or I'm reading the *Satires* I'm saying to myself, Yes, oh yes, that so applies to today, oh yes, I've met those sort of poets, yes, I've come across those – and that will set me off, you know, so they're in a completely different world but the issues are still there, the issues are still the same... you know. Was he slightly jealous of Virgil? Yes, I think he was. Was he wanting to leave a legacy after he died? Yes, of course he was. Did he have lots of doubts about himself? Yes, I think he did. So, you know, I think although if you interview most contemporary poets, and you said to them, do you want this legacy left? Well, we'd probably all say, no not really [laughter] I just write because I love it... But you've got to ask yourself a basic question about any writing: why does any writer write? Because they wanted something read, something

they've thought of they want to be shared. They want them to say, oh yes, that's how I feel. And do they want their words to live on after them? Yes, yes I think they do.

LH So, what do you want your poetry to be remembered for?

MA I think I would want my poetry to be remembered for being... it's an emotive word this, and I'm being very careful before I say it... but being accessible in a way. And one of the things I did as a quite deliberate ploy when I was writing the *Epode* poems was that I wanted deliberately to be able to appeal to those people who are classicists, so that they would be able to say, oh, she's got a wonderful representation there of *Epode* 5, that's wonderful, and of course I enjoy that. But I also wanted to be able to take it to people who not only aren't classicists but aren't poets either. And I did get an Arts Council grant to tour with *The Works*, and took it to – I can remember one particular group – I took it to a group called the Nifty Fifties in Washington in County Durham. There was a room of about sixty people, and all of the of mature years let's say, none of whom I'm sure had ever been to a poetry reading in their lives. All of them came out saying... oh yes that was exactly.... oh, I remember those days...and can you remember....? And that was wonderful because those people had never heard of Horace and I managed to make something real for them. The other side of that, there was also somebody, a fellow poet, who came up to me at the end and said, I read Horace when I was young and you've made me want to go back and read him again. And when I read from *The Works* at Durham Uni for Edith Hall back there earlier this year and one of the undergrads said, I wish I'd heard you reading Horace when I did Horace in the second year of my degree because I found him dead and you've made him alive. And so, to me, that's the kick, you know?

LH That raises another point I wanted to ask you about, which is about the relationship between comparability and situation between the ancient and modern –, as you said there's nothing new etc. But the way you're actually communicating that i.e. in terms of not just the overtly formal elements, but also the rhythm, the language, the vernacular, which, you know, communicates to your nifty fifties but that's also communicating to your classicists.

MA That did surprise me, because I was worried about this colloquial speech. I was worried. I knew I'd have no problem using colloquial speech in connecting with my nifty fifty types, but I did worry.... It was only when I had Stephen Harrison's response that this is really speaking in the way that I can relate to. And what I hadn't realised – that perhaps that's how Horace was speaking, only in its own time. Do you know what I mean? And so, maybe what I was doing through ignorance, in a way, was what he was doing anyway.

LH Is it something to do with poetic energy, freshness ...I mean honesty if you like? The classicists who are responding to that particular collection are not necessarily, or probably not, people who share your particular upbringing, sense of place and the kind of language and idiom and so on, and yet it's coming across to them, which indicates that it's got a dynamics of its own.

MA I think it's got an authenticity, I think that's what people are clicking in to... is its authenticity. And in a way, it's quite difficult to avoid...it because you can do this colloquial speak too much, you've got to be careful to watch it doesn't slip into cliché, that's the other thing that I'm constantly aware of is that of cliché now, and that would ruin the poem then. But I like the idea of words. For example I've been working on *Ode* 1.34 for the last couple of days, and in the West translation, West uses a phrase called 'crazy wisdom'. Now, one of the things I did was to look up the Latin for crazy. And the Latin for 'crazy' was 'demens' ... so 'demented' was the first word that came into my mind. So, I'm looking up the Latin root, as it were, and I come up with demented. Now, when I come to write 1.34, I didn't actually write 'demented' when I referred to myself, but I chose a word that hinted at demented, so I used the word 'obsessive', obsessed, because obsessed smacked, to me, of being slightly mad, but also completely taken up with, and so I will go back.... The process is, I will take a poem and read it through briefly, once, then I will read the translator's notes, briefly, once. By that time a situation is beginning to suggest itself to me as to how I would put that into my world, in which I'm putting the new poems. And then I'll go back and read them again and look at them in more detail at a certain words ...Why? Why did the Latin use this word, and why did West translate it like this?. And how does that relate to what I really want to say? Now, I didn't want to say 'crazy wisdom' but I wanted to show that this was a poet obsessed – which also smacks of madness.

LH T In one of your poems in *The Works*, I'm thinking particularly of the one 'Always Alien' and also perhaps 'Ms' you're actually very poetically conscious of the question of distance from cultural

roots, family background, upbringing and so on. Has that been a big feature in the poetic journey you've taken over the last few years?

MA It's been a very big journey, because I've realised And in actual fact that was something else wonderful that came from the writing of *The Works*, and 'Always Alien', I think I remember rightly, that was originally from an Irish poet... inspired by John Hewitt ... I looked at a bit of his poetry when I was doing the MA and when I came to write that and put it into *The Works* context, what I realised was... and had been feeling this for some time... that OK my background was a working class background, below the railway on Teesside as I said, where my mother and father never owned their own house, they never owned their own car – and yet – for some reason or other, I passed the 11plus and went of to Grammar School. And I think that's where the alienation began. On the one hand that was marvellous and I was glad I passed the scholarship ... but I really didn't have the skills to cope with it , so when I went to Grammar School I didn't really make the best of that opportunity., and actually left early before I got any qualifications. But because I'd had that whole experience this distance had grown, between those girls that later appear in *The Works*, and where I was I was neither fish nor fowl, if you like. Now, when I came to write *The Works*, I realised that was my real roots that what I had been thinking had been holding me back, was, perhaps, not holding me back but had been a strength after all. One of the lovely things that happened when we launched *The Works*, some of the girls in there, that appear through *The Works*, they appear as little girls with me, they appear as witches and so on. Before I published those poems I called together three of the girls – who are not girls anymore they are women of my age - and read them some of the poems in which they appear and they approved. And so I thought if they approve, well I'm not going to be upsetting anybody. But that made me suddenly made me feel as if I belonged again, it put me back into a situation again where I thought I'd grown out of. Does that make sense? For I had felt alienated for quite a long time.

LH And actually the journey helped you to reconnect again.

MA it did indeed yes.

LH We talked a little bit earlier about plans for the future. Did you want to say anything more about those... or are you working on Horace at the moment?

MA I'm working on Horace at the moment, and hopefully, in the not too distant future, will have completed Book I, and then of course it will be the usual battle for publication because, as you know, I'm with a small Tyneside publisher.

LH Is it important to you to publish on Tyneside if you can?

MA No. It's not actually, no. I mean I'm grateful to this Tyneside publisher and will be eternally grateful because without him we wouldn't have had *Oyster Baby*, or *The Works*. I'm doing *odes Book I* now, but hopefully I will have completed that and the two books of *Satires*, or my versions of them. What do I want to do next? Probably have a look at *Odes Book 2*. And I don't think I'll ever finish this body of work to be honest, because I just find him so engaging.

LH Could we perhaps now look in a little bit more detail at a couple of poems. I'd thought of a couple, but do say if there are others that you'd rather The first one – which links a little bit with what you were saying about autobiography and so on – is in the *Oyster Baby* collection and is the poem called 'New Year' where you allude to the Cyclops image. Do you want to say a little bit about what that poem means to you?

MA I will. You're quite right, it is partly autobiographical. This goes back, as I say in the poem, to New Year 2002 when my husband, my daughter and I were travelling towards Pickering on the North Yorkshire moors, to spend New Year's Eve in a rather nice hotel to have a nice meal and so on. This hotel was called 'The Forest and Bear'. And halfway across the moors I looked in the car mirror and found one of my eyes, my right eye, was just a block of blood. And I couldn't remember hurting it, or injuring it, or anything else. It was just getting fuller and fuller of blood. So we eventually got to Pickering went into the hotel and the first thing I have to do is say 'have you a doctor?'. Fortunately there was a doctor a little way down the street. I was terrified by this time, I hadn't a clue what was going on.. And he looked at it and took my blood pressure and said it's a conjunctival haemorrhage, which I'd never heard of so I said what does that mean? And he said oh well the pressure has built up and you've had a in haemorrhage your eye. I said 'what will the outcome be?' and he said 'Oh nothing, it'll take many weeks for the blood to die away but you'll be fine'. So that was fine. So I had gone with all my lovely black.... all my finery ... feeling

wonderful – and I looked at myself and thought ‘Well you look just like a monster – a one-eyed monster’ and I no more felt like having this New Year’s eve event than jumping over the moon. So, by the time I’d got back to the hotel some friends had got there too and they were sitting there eating these wonderful little triangular sandwiches and I thought I’m just like a Cyclops here... Anyway I did make an effort in the evening got changed into my finery, looked pretty hideous and part way through the night went to have a lie down. I said to Brian I’m going to have to have a lie down and re-group myself as it were, while the rest of them carried on having their new year drinks and things and then after a little while I went back down.. And the whole thing just put me in mind of the Cyclops – we’d passed sheep on the moor road and so on. So this is what it put into my mind, how I came across the idea. Do you want me to read this poem for you?.

LH Yes, that would be lovely, thank you.

MA [reads poem]

MA When I was talking to you earlier about the play on words this is the sort of thing I love to do with poetry ‘kill the rest of their party’ I mean obviously the Cyclops was killing the party, but for my friends it was a New Year’s party they were frightened was going to be killed.

LH I love the closing lines of that...

MA ‘tied to the bellies of sheep’

[laughter]

LH The other one I wanted to ask you about, which is from *The Works* – so we have one from each of the collections – is ‘Billy puts his cards on the table’, which is a strong tough poem isn’t it? Its got this – almost a misogynist streak in it hasn’t it? How did you handle that?

MA It’s very interesting that thing about the misogynistic streak because one of Stephen Harrison’s students ... well, he’s graduated now ... one of the questions he put to me by email interview was, ‘how have you managed to relate to this man?’ and I said, well you know I’m relating to him as a poet, not relating to him as man to woman. And yet, the Billy character in the poem, he sort of emerged as I was writing. And it’s a mixture of several characters rolled into one. Plus, the other thing I said to Stephen’s student, is you’ve got to remember that these poems were set, sort of, in my mind anyway, they were set sort of [19]50s early 60s and, ok, it’s not all that long ago, but nonetheless the attitudes were very different. And yes, in those days the men still did go to the pub, and the women didn’t go into the bar. So it was just a fact of life, you know? Women who did go into the bar were not particularly well regarded back then, whereas women wouldn’t think twice about it now. Women wouldn’t think twice about going up to the bar and ordering their own drinks, but that wasn’t how it was. Not in my memory anyway. And so as I said Billy emerged, and yes he is as you say that sort of character, and yes it’s quite a tough poem. And one of the things I found quite tough when I was writing some of the Horace ones – or rewriting some of the Horace ones – was the sexual connotations because I don’t find those issues easy to handle. But it was made easier for me because Horace had done it, so I found I was able to say it’s alright because I’m only redoing it – what’s already been done in a way. So this is Billy who... he’s managed to get a mistress in *The Works* and as you know *The Works* reads as a narrative and so there are other poems where his mistress speaks and his wife speaks and so on. But this particular one this is where he’s had this mistress but now he’s talking to his wife here, he’s talking to Aggie his wife and he’s wondering why she ... She’s been questioning ‘well you don’t love me any more’ And so this is Billy saying ‘is there any wonder I don’t love you’ and this is the reason, so Billy puts his cards on the table.

[MA reads poem]

LH Thank you.

MA I did find those ones difficult to write, and I found that the other one in there where he has a conversation with his mistress I found those quite difficult to write.

LH Why do you think that is – do you think it’s because of the conventions of that environment or a particular religious upbringing or ...?

MA I think it’s all of those things I think it’s certainly part of a religious background. I mean I’m a practising Catholic, it’s very special to me, and we do guilt as second nature. So that’s part of it. I don’t find it particularly easy and I think if I’m honest too a lot of contemporary poets write a lot of

sexual poems because they know sex sells and that concerns me. I think if you're writing a poem and it's in context and necessary I have no problem with that but I don't think all poets do that. I think maybe some people will write because it's got a shock element and it'll sell. And so I think for all of those reasons I shy away from that sort of expression.

LH Now, we've talked about your upbringing and your sense of place and the way in which you started to engage with classical poetry. What about other aspects of the poetic tradition in which you might situate yourself. I mean which poets do you think have influenced you most – I'm talking about English language poets – which do you admire?

MA The ones I truly admire... I came across, some time ago, Patrick Kavanagh and was attracted to him because he was originally from County Monaghan and although I've not been to Ireland yet, it's on my to-do list, my relatives original came from County Monaghan. and I read a couple of novels by Patrick Kavanagh - *The Green Fool*, for example, and he has somebody mentioned in there who has a family name which was the same family name as mine, which was Hamill, and so I somehow had a relationship with Kavanagh and loved poems like 'The Great Hunger' and all of that. And then I started moving on and reading Heaney. Heaney very much sees himself in the tradition of Kavanagh, and so I love Heaney, love Kavanagh. But I also love very contemporary poets like Selima Hill who is off the wall, and Carol Ann Duffy of course. I mostly start with Kavanagh and Heaney and Tony Harrison – I love Tony Harrison – and people like that.

LH It seems to me there are various intersections, I mean the North of England, Ireland, feminist poetry, in the sense they destabilise and fill the gaps

MA Yes I very much like people who destabilise I really do. That's probably why I like Duffy and Hill.

LH Now, I've asked you about all sorts of things that I've been particularly following up in terms of the project as a whole, but are there things I haven't asked you that you've been dying to talk about and that you'd like to put into the discussion?

MA Not particularly – and I'm going to kill myself aren't I when you've gone and the recorder's turned off and I'm going to think of lots of things. Because I did wonder about if you did ask me what else I want to talk about what is it I would want to talk about? No ... yes, one thing. And that is, having ... strange way to put it I suppose ... but having discovered poetry quite late on in life one of the things I have found for me is it gives me a different way to see the world. The other thing I've found, because I do a lot of community residencies and I've taken poetry to the most unlikely places and done quite long community residencies, and had people engaging with poetry that had never read poetry in their lives. And what I've found from that is that it can be very enabling for them. I would love to see poetry placed in this society as I imagine it might have been years ago – as not exclusive. I would love to feel that lots of people don't feel excluded by it and don't feel that it doesn't apply to them. I think it was... didn't Adrian Mitchell say the reason that most people have nothing to do with poetry is that most poetry has nothing to do with people. I think that was pretty profound and I think that if you said to me what is your ambition, what would you like ... dead and gone what would you like people to have said about you and your poetry Maureen? I think it would be she made poetry part of our lives and it hadn't been before. Because I think that the poetry is in our lives but people have become excluded from it.

LH so you're one of the people who have taken the lid off, as it were and allowed people to...

MA I'd like to think so, yes. But having said that, I'm thoroughly enjoying the academic journey I'm taking too. And ok I'm doing everything in reverse – I'm doing the academic stuff now when I should have done it years ago and so on. In a way that almost adds to the enjoyment because I've got the feet on the ground bit as well.

LH And who is to say, as we were saying earlier in the discussion, being academic ... learning as it were, is not necessarily congruent with a poetic sensibility is it, but if you can bring those things together...

MA Yes, and I think it's interesting, I'm going to be very aware ... when I'm doing the PhD ... I'm going to be much more aware of the danger, because there was a point in time when I was doing the MA that because I was so involved in the academic side, for a little while I lost my voice, and I knew I'd lost my voice and I wasn't confident I could get it back – and it came back. *The Works* did so much for me, apart from what I've already explained, it gave me the confidence of my own voice back when I realised people liked it. Well I thought never mind how everyone else writes, never mind that it isn't a clever poem, never mind that it doesn't refer to things that are

obscure – the fact is that's my voice back again and it was lovely to have it back again because I did lose it for a while. So I'm going to be looking out for that when I do the writing...

LH which is a marvellous note on which to end this discussion because it brings us back to what you were saying about authenticity – it was your voice that came back again.

MA Yes, you've got to be ... it's a journey I don't regret. You know, the fact that I went through a journey and did for a time lose the voice made me realise what the voice was. I had been wondering what it was and I think I know now what it is.

LH Maureen, thank you very much indeed.

MA Thank you.